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The Quality of Mercy

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THE QUALITY OF MERCY

by

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ABSTRACT

THE QUALITY OF MERCY

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Old Dominion University, 2018
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The Quality of Mercy is a hybrid of memoir and reportage, the story of a daughter's love and her father's journey through his vocation to the Catholic Church, his entry in the priesthood and his years of missionary work. Not many people discover in their teenage years that their father had been a celibate Catholic priest. Not many have the opportunity to trace their father's story through diaries, interviews, and recollections. *The Quality of Mercy* is both a window into the world and a mirror into the soul, a daughter's attempt to tell her father's unique tale.

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This thesis is dedicated to my father, Joseph McNamara
and the extraordinary life he led.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many people who have contributed to the successful completion of this thesis. I extend many thanks to my committee members for their patience and guidance throughout the many years of this project. I want to thank my husband and children for their cooperation and support while I spent many hours away from them working on this project; to my mother, Margaret whose love and compassion has given me the strength to carry on, despite an impossibly busy life; and finally, I would like to thank my father, Joseph, for having the courage to tell his story and for giving me the gift of storytelling.

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THE BUTTON

“Are you ready?” he asked.

My sore, watery eyes glanced up as Nathan, the crematorium director, appeared in the doorway. The noiseless room remained silent as I looked around hoping for someone to make the decision— someone to decide to be ready.

My mother pulled the thick blanket up to my father’s neck.

“I’m tucking you in, Joe,” she said. “Just like you like it.”

I stood motionless at the foot of the coffin as my brother Mike, sharing my apprehension, put his arm around my shoulder.

“Take your time. Whenever you’re ready,” Nathan said and disappeared from the room.

I placed my hand on the box desperate to feel my father again, but knew, of course, that he was already gone. His spirit had been slowly drifting away from him for months, slowly sucking his prolific life away one wheezy breath at a time. Time had withered his robust, strong frame and left him with a frail shell; gratefully, however, it had left his wit alone, a blessing he had carried with him until the end. He would probably smile now at my attachment to this old, decrepit vessel and remind me that this wasn’t him anymore.

“It’s time,” my mother announced.

I dragged myself to the head of the coffin and leaned over to kiss his cold head. I pressed my cheek against the side of his face, and closed my eyes. I longed to feel the warmth of his face against mine. Yearned to slip back in time to when I was a little girl and used to curl myself into him and burrow into the safety of his neck. My small body rose and fell with the rhythm of his breath serenading me into a deep, calm sleep. It was hard to imagine how I would continue to live in this world without him in it.

“I love you, dad,” I whispered.

As if on cue, Nathan returned, and walked over to where the lid rested against the wall. We had written messages, words of hope, of love, of thanks, and even some quotes from his favorite writers on the wooden cover. These final words marked our relationship with our father and professed our last revelations of deep love for him.

Nathan lifted the wooden plank and aligned it with the sides. He fastened it with two small screws and unlatched the lock releasing the cart that held the coffin. Nathan motioned for us to stand on either side, as he wheeled my father’s body across the hall into a small, white room—a room so bright it felt as if it were prepared for surgery.

By Canadian law, only six people are allowed to stand inside the crematorium. Knowing this beforehand, my mother had made her selections: me, my brothers Mike and John, my husband Michael, and my dad’s sister, Marie. My aunt and uncle, sister-in-law, and friend huddled in the doorway.

There were two other figures in the room, a petite, dark-haired girl and a large tattooed man with a red beard and bald head. Both wore white canvas aprons and nodded and smiled as Nathan introduced them. We tried to do the same. Nathan pointed to the incinerator and explained the process. There are three buttons on the side of the oven; the two grey ones turn on and heat up the furnace; the red one starts the incineration. The oven will heat to approximately 1,700 degrees Fahrenheit and the full cremation process usually takes about three hours. The body becomes what is called bone ash, a gray granular substance which is placed in a cooling chamber for about ten hours and then is poured in the selected receptacle.

I tried to steady my teetering body as the reality of the words melted over me. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

The aproned figures raised up the cart to match the height of the opening, as the groan of the small mechanical door invited the coffin inside. My mother's hand clamped the end of the box desperate to save it from its imminent destruction.

"Are you ready, Margaret?" Nathan asked, gently touching her shoulder. She stared into the dark furnace.

My mother nodded, released her grip and said goodbye.

I held my breath and watched as the coffin slid into the long, dark tomb. The echo of the heavy door reverberated throughout the small room as the lock clicked into place. The large, red button sat patiently beside the door. Its colorful presence infected the uniformity of the white room.

"Does anyone want to press the button?" asked the tall, bearded man.

No one responded.

He looked through the line of us, ensuring a consensus before turning back.

"Wait," my mother said, as a quiet calm encompassed her. She had watched him suffer for months. She had fought hard for all his wishes to be met. She begged the doctors to let him come home, listened to the endless hacking in the middle of the night, pasted a smile of positivity to stave off his own depression and swallowed her own tears while he slowly died in the upstairs bedroom. She would not let him go now without a hand in it.

"When I met Joe," she said. "I promised I would be there from beginning to end. This is the end. I'll push the button."

She shuffled over to the side of the door, raised her right hand and pushed the large, red button.

I closed my eyes and let out a long, terrible breath, as the room filled with the sound of flames.

CREATIVE THUNDER

June is a month of birthdays in my family. My mom's birthday starts the month on the 2nd, my dad's is on the 22nd and I was born on the 28th. Every year I drove up from Virginia with my husband, Mike, and two kids, Aurora and Michael in order to celebrate our birthdays together. We usually celebrated with a small party at my parent's house and then went to the horse races—a family tradition. On this birthday we sat close together on the deck and sipped red wine as the kids took turns winning the spotlight of our attention. My dad's cardiologist had told him to limit his drinking; alcohol was too hard on the heart, so he was rationed to one drink a day—this was his third.

"You only turn 88 once," he said, smiling, as I filled up his glass.

My daughter Aurora was getting ready to recite her lines from her spring play, "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof". It was hardly a play for a child, but she was so excited to be Big Daddy's dutiful granddaughter, that when she was offered the part, Mike and I reluctantly agreed. Today, however, her solo performance was interrupted by her own scream.

"Mom, look at Papa, something's wrong!"

I looked at my father beside me. His face turned purple: his eyes bulged; his pursed lips struggled to sip in the motionless air that refused to enter his lungs.

"Oh my God, dad, are you all right?" I cried, grabbing his hand. "Breathe!"

Mike immediately took action. He slid behind my father's chair, held him by the shoulders and calmly told him to take a breath. The kids hopped around on the deck ignited with excitement, while my mother sat frozen in the chair. I grabbed Aurora's hand and told her to get all the kids inside.

“Joe, you need to open your mouth and take a deep breath,” Mike demanded, preparing to lay him on the deck.

In a moment it was over. My father’s eyes closed and he gasped as the air sank down into his lung. We watched in silence as the purple drained from his face, and the stony grey pallor returned. The sightless gaze evaporated as his awareness returned. He hacked and coughed anxious to repopulate his lungs with air; as if on cue, the sky changed and light drops of rain fell upon us, breaking our trance.

“Let’s get you inside, Joe,” Mike said guiding his frail body through the patio doors into the living room.

As I held the edge of the wooden railing, desperate to settle the rush of adrenaline that consumed my body, the cool rain increased its pace. I took several deep breaths, raised my face to the wet sky and thanked God he didn’t die. The moment was interrupted by the stifled sobs of my mother, crumpled in the corner of the small patio.

“Mum,” I said, walking up. “He’s okay.”

“I thought he was gone.” She erupted into sobs as her face fell into her hands.

“I know, but he’s not. He’s okay,” I assured, kneeling before her. “Should I call 911?”

“No,” she insisted. “Don’t call. I promised him I wouldn’t.”

“Are you sure? I really think we should.”

“Kerry, don’t call. I promised him he could die at home.”

My father has had terminal heart disease and congestive heart failure; he had been in rough shape in the past two years of his life. At night his lungs filled with fluid despite his raised bed, and he coughs continually. His heart fluttered back and forth between atrial fibrillation and

ventricular tachycardia, and caused him to lose his breath and sometimes pass out. He had been carrying nitroglycerin around with him since his triple bypass surgery sixteen years ago. When he would lose his breath, he sprayed the nitro onto his tongue which caused his arteries to dilate and breathe again. He had only used it a few times, the last time while walking into the movies and by the time he reached the theater he was so out of breath that he had to find the closest bench, sit down and take a spray. Instead of making the prescribed 911 call, my dad insisted they watch the movie, which, apparently, wasn't very good.

My mother began my father's birthday celebration with traditional British fare: poached eggs, Canadian bacon, sausages and toast, followed by a variety of baked goods, and tarts served with coffee and tea. She waited on us continuously, wanting everything to be perfect. In the late afternoon, after my father's nap, my brothers arrived with their wives and children eager to join in the celebration. In an effort to manage the six grandchildren (ranging from 6 months to 13 years), my mother decided to serve dinner outside on the deck, where the adults could eat and drink and the kids could come and go as they wanted.

My parents had lived in their brick, suburban house for forty-two years. They'd moved there in 1974, the year I was born; it is the only childhood house I have ever known. The backyard is a place filled with memories: from annual pumpkin carvings and ice skating rinks, to landmark birthday bashes and wedding receptions. It is not a particularly large area, surrounded by a simple chain link fence lined with a few small cedar trees, a modest patio and a raised wooden deck.

My parents were once avid gardeners and my father always prided himself on his thick carpet-like lawn. Whenever I was home he would take me out to the backyard to admire his green masterpiece. It was a tough day when his breathing and age took away his ability to care

for the grass—according to him the damn lawn service never does a good job. They didn't love it like he did. My mother's flowers also suffered. The once blooming multitude of colors had succumbed to a few bushes of deep crimson and yellow, stretched out in attempt to fill the empty flower beds. It's hard for an older woman to manage a house on her own, let alone take care of an immobile, ailing husband—there is no time for flowers.

The morning after his birthday episode I worried that my dad wouldn't wake up. I knew that day would eventually come, and I also knew it would be helpful for my mom if I was there when it happened, but I still wasn't ready and supposed I never would be. I was relieved when I heard the sound of his door open and saw the wave of his dark green and white robe pass across from his room to the bathroom. He always prided himself on looking sharp, and although age had whitened his hair and sunken his rosy Irish cheeks, he still cared about his appearance. He relished telling the airport story when a woman mistook him for Sean Connery. It was a heartening day for him.

As I sat in reflection, my dad, with his cane on one side and the support of the railing on the other, shuffled into the kitchen.

"Morning kid," he said as I rose to give him a hug.

"Morning dad, how are you feeling?"

"Well, I woke up, so that's good," he said, gently patting me on the shoulder.

"Sure is, Joe," Mike responded. "I was worried we were gonna lose you yesterday."

"Oh no, that just sometimes happens, but I'm fine. What time do you want to go to the races?"

“Well, given yesterday, I figured that it might be too much,” I said, trying to sound diplomatic.

“Oh goodness kid, I’ve been waiting all week to go to the races,” he said. “I’m fine.”

“It was pretty scary.”

“I know,” he said, “I’m sorry for scaring everyone, especially the kids.”

“We could go another time.” I lied, knowing that may not be true.

“Look, the doctor said that this is going to be how it is so I’d rather go down on my feet.”

Six months earlier my father had another episode. The same thing happened, except this time he was in the living room with my brother, John’s boys, Jack and Joe. They were playing a game of cards when suddenly he lost his breath, slumped in his chair, slid to the floor and passed out. My mother immediately called 911 and he was taken to the hospital where he stayed for two weeks. We raced up from Virginia leaving early from our teaching jobs, fearful he wouldn’t survive. He was mad that he was stuck in the hospital for so long and made us all promise the next time not to call 911 and leave him at peace at home. I understood this request, even though I feared for my mother in having to carry it out.

“Well, hopefully you don’t go down at the track,” I said trying to be playful. “Because I’m not sure I can drag you out of there on my own.”

“Who knows, it might be the perfect place to go. At least it would be memorable.”

“A little too memorable,” I replied.

“Remember what our old friend Bill Shakespeare used to say: “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player who struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more.”

“I guess I’m just not ready for you to be a walking shadow.” I knew better than to look at him as I blinked away the tears.

“I know,” he said, grabbing my hand. “Come on, kid, let’s go have fun at the races.”

My dad always loved going to the horse races; it was in his blood. His grandfather was a famous steeplechaser in Ireland and passed the riding gene on to his own son, John. When John moved to Canada he didn’t have time or money for riding but spent several weeks in the summer helping a family friend compete at The Royal Winter Fair at Exhibition Place in Toronto. As a young child, my dad loved to help his father at the fair and throughout the years learned a lot about horses. When his father retired he took a part-time job at the Woodbine racetrack, where he could be around horses once again.

My dad was never a big spender at the racetrack; he simply loved watching the riders race past the finish line. There is a small track in Fort Erie, about one hour from our house, close to the U.S. border near Buffalo. When we were younger, we went to the races almost every weekend. It was great fun and a cheap way to entertain three young kids. We delighted in racing back and forth from the paddock to the track, trying to determine the best looking horses in hopes of choosing a winner. When the horses came through the finish line we yelled and cheered and when by some stroke of luck picked the winners we gleefully ran to the window with my dad to collect our modest winnings from his two-dollar bet.

Mike and I had already agreed the night before that if my dad still wanted to go, that he would come with us; I worried about taking him on my own. Mike had grown very close to my parents over the years. He had become a trustworthy son-in-law, and his size, strength, and coach’s training made him an excellent candidate for emergency situations. He remains calm and cool in a crisis, so I insisted he come with us, worried about another episode.

We arrived at the track just before the first race, and I dropped Mike and my dad off at the front gate to save my dad the long walk from the parking lot. I arrived just in time to see the

horses prance around the walking ring before they headed down to the track. This was always the best time for making our picks. My dad and I discussed the condition of each horse, gauging how much they were sweating; we evaluated their size and saw who was riding them. My dad had all the stats on the jockeys and knew all the best bets. We watched the jockeys leap up onto their horses and enter through the large, white gates down at the end of the track and listened to the announcer list the updated odds. I went inside to make the bets, while Mike and my dad walked through the beverage area, up the short steep incline out to the track. I worried about my dad doing so much walking and offered to run back and forth to report on the horses and save him a trip, but he insisted on going, claiming his designer walker made it easy.

Mike was a diligent observer over my father and entertained us both by complimenting the luxurious walker. He even flipped the designer seat down and sat in it, while enjoying his beer and hotdog. It made us all laugh and made for a great picture. I told Mike I would have to get him this in a few years when his running-worn knees finally gave out.

By the end of the sixth race we had won every single bet we made that day. I had never in my life had such a successful day at the races.

“This is unbelievable!” my dad exclaimed, holding the next winning ticket high in the air.

It was such a relief to see such joyfulness eclipse the wrinkled scowl of pain that had carved itself on my father’s face over the past two years. The ache in his lower back had bent him into an old man and the few shots of cortisone didn’t touch his pain. It was hard not to feel miserable.

“We’ve never been so lucky.” I admitted, sharing in his disbelief.

“We even won all of our exacta bets on those long shots,” he said.

“I know, it’s incredible,” I said. “It’s like we can’t lose.”

After each race I took the winning tickets to the teller's window and happily witnessed the incredulity of the woman working the counter at my continued success.

"Must be your lucky day," she said smiling, as I handed her the ticket.

"Absolutely," I said. "It's been an amazing day."

At the front gate I waited for them and finally saw Mike's tall shadow followed by the slow moving shadow of my father. He eagerly shuffled his walker over to the white fence and, with cheerful anticipation, waited for the next horses to arrive. I wanted us to stay in this moment forever.

"Who's our winner this time, kid?" he said, wrapping his frail arm around my sturdy shoulder. We watched as the trainers led the sleek horses into the circular ring.

"I like that big grey one," I said pointing to the third one from the front. "He's big and beautiful and isn't too sweaty."

"Number 3," my dad said, checking the program. "Creative Thunder and Krista Carignan's riding him—a good choice."

"Well, let's see if he gives you 'the look'," I said, gently patting his hand. My dad was convinced that horses sometimes gave him a certain look as they walked by, as if to say, pick me, I'm the winner.

As the large horse passed us, I kept my gaze on my father. He stared intently at the dark beast, waiting for his sign.

Nodding, he declared, "He's our boy."

I smiled, enveloped by the brilliance of the moment. Arm in arm we watched the powerful, prancing legs dance through the gate, down to the race track.

IRISH CATHOLIC LIFE

Michael McNamara, a prosperous businessman and famous steeple chaser in Southwestern Ireland died in 1891, several months before his son John was born, during a gruesome steeple chase accident. Although not physically present throughout his son's life, his father's horse riding skills percolated into John's blood. He too became a skilled horseman in Ireland. John's mother died of tuberculosis before his second birthday, leaving him and his five siblings in the custody of his maternal grandfather, Patrick Kennedy, a wealthy farmer, magistrate and landowner.

John was raised in a life of affluence and indulgence. The youngest of six children, he grew up in the little town of Loughrea, just a few miles from Galway city. He spent his younger days hunting, steeple chasing and taking trips from Dublin to London to purchase livestock and conduct business with his grandfather. It was a life of good times, parties and enjoyment and, unfortunately, a life which spawned a serious drinking problem, a burden he carried throughout his entire life.

When Patrick died in 1911, he left his grandchildren all of his money. John was said to have blown the whole inheritance on partying in less than a year. The family decided something needed to be done; John could no longer be allowed to continue to tarnish and embarrass the family name. Having connections in Canada to Bishop O'Brien, who, presumably would keep an episcopal eye on him, the family decided to send John there. Perhaps this would give him a fresh start, and, more importantly, provide the family with some much needed distance.

John's Canadian career started with a job in Oshawa at Schwartz's butcher shop where he met and married my grandmother, Alice Adams. They had three children and moved to Toronto in 1928 where John worked as a butcher at Canada Packers, a job he held for over thirty years.

During the week, he got up every morning at 5:30 am, travelled on the bus to work, finished at 4 pm, spent an hour or so in the pub, and arrived home between 6 or 7pm, not usually falling down drunk, but always well lubricated. Saturdays, he finished work by noon and devoted the afternoon to serious drinking. No one ever knew when he would arrive home, but they always knew that when he did arrive, he would be drunk.

This was the pattern for most of his working life. Every so often John took the “Pledge,” the Irish Catholic equivalent of Alcoholic Anonymous. The sinner, motivated by some catastrophic event, like the loss of a job or pressured by his fed up wife, went before a priest and solemnly, on bent knee, promised never again to drink. For Alice and the kids this always marked a time of renewed hopes: “Your father is going to take the Pledge.” Good times were coming.

The pledge never enjoyed a high rate of success in the parish, nor in the McNamara household. At best, John’s sobriety lasted maybe a month, and then he was drawn back to the pubs. Alice suffered in silence, never complaining to anyone about her dissatisfaction. She strongly believed that childhood was the only innocent and happy time of life, so she tried to spare her children the miseries of adulthood. She remained in constant hope of some miraculous change and prayed to Almighty God that her sons would never drink.

Joseph Anthony was born on June 22, 1927. He was the middle child with two years separating him from his older brother, Patrick and younger sister, Marie. He was a rambunctious, sensitive child with an obstinate will.

“I’m not going to that stupid baby class!” he yelled as his mother dragged him out the door to his first day at St. John’s Catholic school.

“It’s only for a few hours, Joseph, you must go,” she pleaded.

“Why do I have to go Ma? Can’t I just stay with you? I’ll be good, I promise.”

Alice left him in a screaming pile, fists pounding the floor while the understanding Sister Mary Rita assured her, “It’s all right, just go, leave him with me.”

St. John’s Catholic school was on Kingston Road, a long walk from home especially for a slow, day-dreaming five year old. Pat and Marie hated being late, so instead of pleading with Joe to pick up the pace, they left him. Fearing the wrath of Sister Mary Rita, he decided to skip across the road to Glen Manor bush and play there until noon, when it was time to go home. The bush had a deep ravine with many trees and a wide stream to float stick boats in—a wonderful alternative to baby class.

Joe spent a week of happiness in Glen Manor bush but when Sister Mary Rita inquired about his absence, ever-truthful Pat told her he wasn’t sure why he wasn’t there, but no need to worry, he would take care of it.

“Joe, you must go to school,” Pat demanded. “I’m gonna tell Ma and then you’re gonna be in big trouble.”

Promising immediate reform, the next day Joe and Pat entered the school yard together; however, when Pat went off with his friends, Joe, beckoned by the bush, reverted to truancy. When Pat found out, he had no choice but to inform his mother of the situation. She wasn’t angry with Pat, applauding his sibling loyalty, nor was she angry with Joe. Clearly, he was having trouble adjusting to his new school.

A school conference was held and Alice, Pat and Sister Mary Rita created a simple incentive system.

“Joe, it is unacceptable for you not to come to school.” Sister Mary Rita was a tough, but fair woman who demanded adherence to the rules. “Why don’t you want to come here?”

Young Joe could not think of a good answer, so he said nothing.

“Joseph,” his mother demanded, “Sister Mary Rita asked you a question. Why don’t you come to school?”

“I don’t know,” he replied in a small voice. His mother took his little hand in hers.

“Well Joe, I spoke with your mother and brother and we came up with an idea,” Sister Mary Rita said. “I know that you walk to school with your brother Patrick, correct?” Little Joe nodded his head in agreement. “Well, if you can beat him to school every day for the next week, you will win a special prize.” Young Joe’s face brightened; he loved special prizes.

The plan worked and the following week, young Joe returned to school. At the end of the week he was given his prize: a framed picture of the Sacred Heart. This became a cherished possession and gave Joe the confidence to remain at school for the rest of the year.

The McNamara family life had always been deeply grounded in religious belief and practice; there was no distinction between religion and everyday life. Grace before and after meals, the family rosary after supper, night prayers before going to sleep, regular weekly attendance at Mass. Discussion of sermons, celebration of holy days, and the great feasts of Christmas and Easter made religion a natural part of life. The Bible was the common source reference and God was always the answer to young Joe’s endless array of questions.

When Joe was eight years old a family friend’s daughter died of meningitis. Twelve-year-old Patricia lived up the street from them, on the corner of Enderby and Gerrard in the suburbs of Toronto. Joe’s mother, Alice, took her three children to the wake at Patricia’s house. Young Joe was captivated by the girl’s body laid out on a narrow table in the middle of the living room. It was his first experience with death and he was fascinated. He was consumed with questions. His mother quietly promised to answer all of them, but later, on their walk home.

“Mum, why did Patricia die?”

“Well, Joe, because she contracted meningitis.” Alice led her children briskly down the road, knowing the walk would feel especially long after such a difficult day.

“Why did she get meningitis?” he asked.

“Because she just did and the doctor couldn’t help her.”

“Why couldn’t the doctor save her?”

“Patricia got very sick, very quickly.” Alice’s patience was wearing thin; she needed to get her children home.

“Does everyone die who gets it?”

“No, not everyone.”

“Well, why did she get it and not me?”

Alice had to stop the endless chain of questions.

“Joe, we don’t have the answers to these questions. We don’t know why Patricia got sick and died and you didn’t. All we know is that somehow these things are in God’s plan for us.”

This, of course, opened a whole new field of inquiry for Joe, but it was a line which was quickly cut off by Alice’s unwavering faith: “We never question what God does.”

Even questions about Fred Barlow’s car eventually ended up being referred to God. Mr. Barlow was a salesman at Canada Packers, where Joe’s father worked. As a friendly favor each year he drove the McNamara’s to a cottage at Lake Simcoe for their summer holidays. They didn’t have a car and so, naturally, Joe asked, “How come Mr. Barlow has a car and we don’t?”

This seemingly simple question ended up by natural progression in the realm of Divine Mystery. Mr. Barlow had a car because he had more money. He had more money because he had a better job. He had a better job because he had a better education. At this point Joe’s father,

John, usually exploded and yelled, “because that’s just the way it is, Joe!” Alice, ever patient with her inquisitive middle son, kept explaining until “the way it is” was transformed to God’s plan.

She arrived at God much more quickly when Joe asked about the number of children in their family. “How come we only have three children, when the Stephens have five?” The Stephens were their closest friends, so it was a natural enough question, but, unwittingly, Joe had ventured into forbidden territory. The answer came quickly: “God decides these matters.” The matter was closed.

And so, for years Joe thought that God must be kept very busy planning and deciding how many children each and every family in the whole world was to have. His own mind was also kept quite busy pondering just what went into *His* decision that his family should have three children, the Stephen’s five, and, for example, Helen and Bill Riley, none.

At the age of 10, Joe became an altar boy. Nearly all of the boys he knew became altar boys and if someone didn’t, they wondered what was wrong with him and his family. This was an exciting time and added a new dimension to his religious life. Instead of sitting in the body of the church with his family, he stood in the sanctuary with the priest and more intimately took part in the sacred and solemn mysteries of the Catholic ritual.

Becoming an altar boy was no easy task. First the boys had to undergo a period of instruction in order to learn how to serve the Mass, which involved learning all of the Latin responses to the priest’s prayers. Then they had to memorize all of these prayers and pass a test showing they could handle them. They also had to learn the ceremonies of the Mass: when and how to move around the altar, when and where to move the Missal, when to bring up the water and wine and how to pour them into the chalice, when to ring the bells, how to accompany the

priest with the paten he gave out communion, and how to do all of these things with smoothness and grace.

Joe proudly worked his way up to serving Mass on Sundays and served diligently until the age of nineteen; it became an integral part of his life. He loved the sense of the sacred and mysterious it offered him and loved being on stage in full view of an attentive audience. An added bonus was that he was sometimes called out of class to serve at funeral masses in the church. Religious service always took precedence over mathematics and spelling, and this recognition added to his special status in parish life. How could he not trust in God's plan for him?

CATHOLIC LESSONS

Religion was not only deeply ingrained in Joe's family traditions; but also it was a way to allow adults to control the thoughts and actions of children. God was a particularly useful tool for the nuns and priests at St. John's Catholic school to keep unruly children in order. The strap was the natural way of discipline, seemingly ordained by God Himself. Any boy worth his salt could expect this punishment occasionally; it was a mark of honor to accept the strap without flinching or at least without crying.

Joe's first experience with the strap was in 1st grade. Sister Mary Rita let the class out early with the express command to go straight home and specifically said *not* to go around the side of the building, lest they disturb other classes. Naturally, some of the kids went astray, including young Joe, as he was prone to do. The young sinners were recalled immediately and struck hard with the strap for disobeying orders.

Sometimes even the girls were strapped along with the boys. In 8th grade Sister Beatrice was teaching Joe's class when she was called out of the classroom on some administrative business. She left the room with a strict warning:

"I want you all to read the first section in your grammar exercise book in silence. There is to be absolutely no talking."

After about ten minutes of silence, gradually someone started to talk. Others joined in and eventually the whole class was talking, then laughing, and then playing. Finally, the door swung open, Sister Beatrice had returned.

"What on earth do you think you are doing?" she yelled. The kids froze in silence, but it was too late. She was furious.

"Everyone who was talking, stand up in the aisle beside your desk," she ordered.

Nearly everyone in the class stood up. Only a few remained seated; perhaps they weren't talking or were too frightened to stand. Either way it was noted (particularly among the boys) who remained seated, as they would endure a great deal of taunting for the rest of the year.

Sister Beatrice went to her desk, took out the strap, and walked up and down the aisles strapping all of the standing students. She started on the girls' side of the room, which Joe figured might benefit him, as she might be exhausted by the time she reached him. However, she seemed to gather strength as the strapping proceeded, and she finished quite strongly.

During the Great Strapping, however, Joe was to learn a lesson from Patricia Harvey, a lovely looking girl with long blonde hair and great tap dancing skills. Joe had always liked and admired her, but this admiration dramatically increased when she outright refused to accept the strap.

"My father doesn't allow me to be strapped," she stated.

Sister hesitated, then skipped Patricia and went on to the next victim. Joe was in awe and learned on that day that you could stand up for yourself against authority, if you had the ammunition—a lesson that was to be tested later that same year.

It began with a written a note saying certain things about Mike Stephens, one of Joe's best friends. The students were never told what was written, but given the gravity of the situation they figured it must have had sexual overtones. This note was intercepted by Sister Beatrice and, just as naturally, no one would admit to having written it.

"Well, we'll see about this," she said. "Everyone take out a piece of paper, write the name Mike Stephens on it, and hand it to me."

Joe felt confident. First, he knew he hadn't written the note, and secondly, because he was one of the few kids who knew that Stephens was spelled with 'ph' and not a 'v.' All of the

students dutifully wrote the name and handed it in to the strict nun. A few minutes later the verdict was revealed.

“The guilty person has shown himself,” announced Sister Beatrice. “Joe McNamara, you are ordered to stay after class and we will discuss your punishment.”

Joe was shocked. He hated the thought of being accused of something he didn’t do, but knew he couldn’t win the battle against Sister Beatrice. He brewed in his seat for the remainder of the day, trying to quell his growing fury. Then, recalling the example of Pat Harvey and the strapping incident, he prepared accordingly for his after school defense. He was ready to preserve himself, no matter what the cost.

When asked why he wrote the notes he simply declared: “Sister, I don’t care what you think the note proved. I didn’t write it, and I’m not going to say that I did. *And* I am not going to accept any punishment. You can do whatever you like.”

With that, he marched out of the classroom and never heard a thing about this from Sister Beatrice again.

High school brought with it more important lessons for Joe—luckily, he was a quick learner and within the first week of ninth grade he learned a valuable one. He made the mistake of making noise while the teacher was talking, and was rapped swiftly on the side of the head by a heavy, metal-edged ruler.

“Don’t ever fool around in my class again, McNamara, cause that’s just a sample of what you’ll get!”

This lesson was further reinforced by Joe’s close friend, Frank, and what became for Joe the infamous snow ball incident. The boys were playing outside during free time near the

basement door, close to their indoor recreation area. It was wintertime and a fresh bed of snow had covered the ground, a tempting proposition to any fourteen-year-old boy. A large priest with a scornful temperament was standing inside by the edge of the door when a snow ball came perilously close to him.

“Who threw that?” he demanded, peering up from underneath the hood of his thick, black overcoat.

No one responded.

“You boys know better than to throw snowballs, it’s dangerous,” he snarled.

Frank laughed and whispered something to Joe.

Crack—a powerful straight arm to the face was swiftly delivered by the angry priest. Frank was laid out on the ground, nose gushing with blood. Joe stood in disbelief and as he bent down to help his friend, he kept a watchful eye on the hateful priest.

“Don’t you ever laugh at me,” the large man said, shaking his bulky hand.

Rising slowly from the cold ground, the two boys said nothing; they had learned their lesson—never laugh at a priest.

As a teenager, Joe fell into the tumultuous trap of adolescence and became more and more disillusioned with his life at school, at church and at home. Having always prided himself on being smart, he had stopped caring about academics and fell to the lower part of his class. He knew he should be studying harder, but just couldn’t find the motivation to do it. And, although he had some good friends and was involved in some club sports, overall, he was consumed with feelings of disinterest and boredom and couldn’t help but feel that something was missing from his life.

Joe tried to find comfort in the religion that had given him such magic and joy in his childhood, but now he only found anguish and despair. He began to obsess over philosophical questions: what is the purpose of life? What purpose do I serve? He also became deathly afraid of going to hell.

Although completely without any sexual experience, and not even understanding “the facts of life,” Joe had developed a preoccupation with sex and was introduced to masturbation by one of his friends, who extolled its harmless pleasures, and had assured Joe that “everyone did it.” This view was not in harmony with the teaching of the church, and the priests continually warned of its dangers and threatened unrepentant masturbators with the fires of hell. As a result, the delightful, protecting God of his childhood now gave way to a threatening God of vengeance—a God to be placated and feared, who waited to catch and punish him. Joe’s previous religious life of comfort became a constant pleading for forgiveness, in which there was little room for joy or discovery.

His relationship with his father, although never very strong, had worsened in the past year and added to his feelings of confusion and depression. An incident when they nearly came to blows solidified the truth about his father, forcing him to learn another hard life lesson.

His father, John, had been drinking heavily that afternoon and wanted to be left alone. He staggered into the small living room searching for his well-worn dark green chair, and was interrupted by his wife’s flittering body as she busily cleaned the house around him.

“You’re always buggin’ me, Alice,” he slurred, trying to remain on his feet.

“It’s too early for this,” she said.

“Don’t look at me like that.” He stumbled towards her, teetering over her small figure.

“I’m not dealing with you today.” Alice turned away from him, sick and tired of the familiar scene.

“Oh ya!” he yelled, grabbing her arm, “Well, I’ll make you deal with me.”

“Dad, stop.” Joe said, rising from the worn out sofa.

“Don’t you walk away from me!” He grabbed his wife’s hair, causing her head to whip around towards him, and with the other hand swung at her face. Joe raced over, grabbed the flailing fist, and pushed him backward.

“How dare you raise your hand against your father, you fucking bastard!” his father screamed, stumbling backward.

Still restraining him, Joe yelled, “Don’t you touch her again!”

Desperate to regain his footing, John braced himself against the stone edge of the fireplace and slowly gathered the strength to get on his feet and move towards his son.

“Oh, you think you’re a tough guy now? Well I’ll show you who’s in charge.”

With his mother safely behind him, Joe approached his father, grabbed him by the shirt and gave him a final warning: “If you ever touch my mother again, I will kill you.”

His father gasped, dramatically clutched his hand on his chest and collapsed onto the living room sofa. Everyone thought he was having a heart attack. He wasn’t. He was so angry he started hyperventilating and once he caught his breath, he was able to calm down. Dutifully Alice quickly attended to him and told him to lie down and relax. He stretched out his tired body across the sofa and promptly fell asleep.

That day was a turning point for Joe. He had always resented his father’s drinking and his poor treatment of his mother, but that day changed his attitude forever. He no longer saw him as the humorous and charming Irishman who, despite his drinking and emotional neglect of his

family, worked hard to support them. Joe now saw the truth: his father was selfish, irresponsible and abusive.

In those days, adults never spoke to kids about their problems; they were too busy trying to put food on the table and recover from the war. Guidance counselors did not exist, so no one seemed to notice Joe's sinking grades, or notice his swelling depression; instead he was forced to deal with it on his own.

High school was coming to an end and Joe needed to figure out a viable plan for his future. After many hours of torment, he came up with a solution: become a priest. Not just any kind of priest, but a missionary priest. He would become a missionary priest in some faraway country, dying, if not by martyrdom, at least from some disease, pestilence, misadventure, or from simply wearing himself out in the service of Christ.

In many ways, Joe's entire life was geared towards this decision. The strong religious orientation of his family life, his mother's piety, his brother Pat's decision to enter the foreign missions after returning from the war, and the reverence surrounding the Catholic priesthood. These all led up to his decision and belief that this was his calling.

When Joe told his mother about his decision she was surprised, but happy.

"I had no idea that you were even thinking about the priesthood," she admitted.

"Well, I've thought about it a lot and I've decided it will be good for me."

"I always felt that Pat was destined to be a priest, but never thought of you. I'm happy, though." She smiled at her son, genuinely pleased with this decision.

"Why Pat and not me?" Joe couldn't help but feel a little offended by her response.

“Pat was always quieter and more serious than you. Everyone expected him to be a priest. Do you remember when he answered all the catechism questions correctly at Confirmation? Father O’Connor predicted then he would make a great priest.”

The story of Pat’s performance at Confirmation was legendary. Confirmation is the sacrament which strengthens Catholics to take a more adult role in the life of the Church. It is a sign of maturing faith, so the questions are designed to demonstrate this more mature grasp of Catholic doctrine. Pat astounded everyone with his profound responses, causing Father O’Connor’s prophetic utterance. From that point on there was almost a universal understanding that Pat was destined to be a priest.

Joe had no such success at confirmation, nor had his behavior ever been an indication of a priestly calling.

“Now you’ll have to tell your father,” she warned. The tone of his mother’s statement sounded rather ominous to him. Joe had very little to do with his dad, especially since their last big fight, so he hadn’t really even thought about telling him. He was going, no matter what.

His dad was sitting in his chair in the living room, relaxing in his chair reading the paper when his son told him the news.

“So, my name is to die out, is it?” he said, lighting his pipe.

Not knowing what to say, Joe mumbled, “I suppose.”

Joe nervously moved back towards the stone fireplace.

“I guess that I always thought that Pat would be a priest, and you would get a good job at Canada Packers. I know a lot of big shots there, I could have helped you. Then you could marry and have my grandchildren.”

Joe turned to leave the small room, figuring this discussion was going nowhere; however, his defensiveness got the better of him. “So, you don’t think I’d make a good priest?”

“Well, you’re quick tempered and mouthy, not quiet and pious like your brother.”

“So, that means I can’t be a good priest?” Joe’s anger rose. He braced himself against the stone wall behind him. He should’ve left the room.

“I just thought you liked girls and liked to have fun, like me.”

Joe wanted to yell back at him, tell him how un-fun he was, tell him what a mean drunk he was, and what an abusive dad and husband he was, but instead he leaned against the stone wall and said nothing.

“Priests don’t have much fun, you know.”

“Dad, I realize that I’m not like Pat but this is something that I must do. I hope you can accept it.” He pulled himself from the safety of the stone corner and walked towards the kitchen.

“Well, if you must go, then go,” his father said. “I just hope you know what you’re doing.” He lit his pipe and went back to reading the paper.

Father O’Connor’s blessing and recommendation was required for entrance to the seminary. He encouraged Joe to study at St. Augustine’s instead of going to the China Missions. St. Augustine’s was the seminary which trained priests for the Archdiocese of Toronto, as well as some other dioceses in Canada. “China Missions” was the popular name for Scarboro Foreign Mission seminary, St. Francis Xavier, which trained priests for the missions. It was called “China Missions” because it was originally founded to send missionaries to China, but now included any priest who wanted to go on missions to any country.

Father O’Connor was inclined to favor the diocese of Toronto; however, Joe was determined to go away and knew how to end this discussion.

“Father, I believe God is calling me to go to the foreign missions.”

In September 1947, at nineteen years old, Joe left his home and entered the seminary at St. Mary’s to begin studies for the missionary priesthood with the Scarboro Foreign Mission Society.

FORGIVENESS OF SINS

My parents raised us Catholic. My older brothers and I went to Catholic school for fourteen years, from kindergarten through grade twelve. Religion was a big part of our lives. We went to mass every Sunday and learned the stories of Jesus Christ through the scriptures at Assumption Elementary school. In the second grade, we joyfully participated in Holy Communion with our classmates and celebrated this special day with our family and friends, where we received various religious gifts and usually lots of money. Our religious instruction continued at Holy Cross High School, and once a month, the parish priest would come to our school to hear our confessions. Normally this is done in the confessional box at the church; however, because our school was not close to the parish church, priests would come to the school to hear our confessions. I preferred the privacy of the confessional box at church—you could hide in there without having to look directly at the priest. On stage, the pressure was on.

Each class in turn was dismissed to the auditorium, where two priests sat on either side of the stage behind the heavy black curtain, waiting to hear our sins. We would nervously wait in the auditorium seats for the next student to appear from behind the billowing dividers and, with head bowed, walk down the narrow stage stairs back to their seat to do their penance. These days always made me nervous because I never knew what to say. I worried my sins wouldn't be good enough, so I sometimes made them up in order to meet my quota.

When it was my turn I slowly dragged myself up the narrow stairs and sat down in the small chair placed in front of the large, cloaked figure. I was relieved to see it was Father Vladimir. He was a large, thick man with a deep voice and a heavy Croatian accent, but he smiled a lot, and was usually nice to us. I was always somehow comforted by his foreignness,

feeling that perhaps he didn't really understand what I was saying, and perhaps didn't judge me as harshly.

"Bless me father for I have sinned, it has been a month since my last confession." My voice was barely above a whisper, careful to keep my sins discrete from my teenaged audience.

"Yes, my child," he said. "And what are your sins?" He sat directly in front of me head bowed, and eyes closed.

"Well," I said hesitantly, "I yelled at my brother and I probably lied to my parents."

"Go on," he instructed

"Well, I guess I sometimes think bad thoughts about my friend, Marcy, but it's only because she's so mean to everyone."

"Yes, go on," he said. Staring intently into his thick mass of blond hair, I took a deep breath and figured if I just kept talking it would soon be over.

"I mean she is usually nice to me, but sometimes she isn't very nice to other girls and this makes me uncomfortable, so that makes me think bad thoughts about her, but really I do like her and I don't actually want anything bad to happen to her, I just wish sometimes she would shut her big mouth, and not put me in that position, to have to defend the other girls, because then they talk about her and then I do but don't want to, so-- " I stopped myself, convinced I had at least met my time quota.

The priest gazed down at me, with one eye brow cocked like a question mark, perhaps doubting the validity of my story or just wishing for the nonsense to end. I closed my eyes tightly desperate for it to be over, and thankfully, he put his hand on my head, gave me a few blessings and assigned me my penance. I knew if I got a lot of "Hail Marys'" and "Our Fathers" then my

sinful stories were authentic enough to be believed. I always felt relieved afterwards, glad to have my slate wiped clean and thankful to be released from the pressure of the stage.

We all judged each other based on the length of our penance. Boys like Bobby Buccillini would be praying for decades to make up for all of his sins—if he was even holy enough to confess them. The worst, however, were the criers—the kids who were so worried about confessing their sins that they burst into tears mid-confession. They must have been really bad, as they were often sent to the chapel for the rest of the day. I wasn't sure what happened to them there, but I was happy not to be one of them.

I sometimes worried about my fate, especially after hearing the various Biblical stories about judgment and the fiery pits of hell. I particularly hated the thought of limbo and had visions of those poor unbaptized babies endlessly floating around. I didn't understand why God would choose that fate for anyone, let alone innocent babies. I guess it was all part of His big plan. I was taught that God always watched us and could take us at any time; it was His will. When we died we would be judged at presumably the pearly gates guarded by St. Peter whom I envisioned as an old guy with a long beard and shiny glowing robe. I pictured him holding a clipboard with a long list of my life's actions, checking them off one by one determining which way I would go—up or down. I remember after a particularly dramatic religion lesson, I arrived home from school sick with worry. Unable to eat my dinner, I asked my father about it.

The dinner table at our house was often a place of philosophical discussion. There were many Sunday evening meals that extended well beyond two hours where my dad, seated at the head of the table, would be quoting Kant, Merton, or the Bible (depending on the topic). We all had our roles: Mike would be yelling, John was usually spurring on Mike, my mother would be trying to contain the debate and appease the building tension and I usually listened quietly.

Today I would be spared the audience, as my mother was out at her grad class, and John was at his friend's house.

"What's wrong, Kerry" my dad asked, noticing my untouched meal.

"How bad is bad?" I didn't waste any time.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean to not get into heaven; do you have to do something really bad? Like murder someone?"

My father shifted in his seat, as if preparing for a lesson. "Kerry, what are you talking about?"

"Like when we die. Is it hard to get into heaven?"

"Of course you're going to heaven," he assured. "Why are you even thinking about this?"

"I'm just worried. I haven't always been that good, so I'm worried I won't make the cut." I looked down at my untouched plate, hoping to avoid my brother's mockery.

"This is crazy," my dad said. "You're so good. You never have to worry about that."

"But ..." I said anxiously, "He said we are all judged and God knows everything."

"Who said?"

"Father Balinski. He said everyone will be judged."

"Kerry, he says that's because he's the principal of the school and he needs to keep everyone in line." He reached his hand across the table to meet mine. "You will never have to worry about anything like that."

"But what about the Bible? Isn't it true what it says?"

“Sure the teachings are, but they are set up as stories in order to keep you thinking and acting in the right way.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, disbelievingly.

“Come here,” he said. He took my hands and guided me over to sit on his lap. “You are the best girl I know, and you never have to worry about anyone judging you.”

“Thanks dad,” I said skeptically. “But do you think Father Balinski knows that?”

He laughed.

“Well, God certainly does,” he said.

“But how do you know that He even exists?” I knew the night was getting late, but I was desperate to have my doubts answered. Sensing this urgency, my father quickly dismissed Mike from the table sending him upstairs to finish his homework. I moved to the seat beside him, so I could view him more directly.

“Listen, Kerry, do you love mom?” he asked.

“Of course.”

“Can you see that love? Can you show it to me?”

“No, but I can show her by the way I behave towards her.”

“But can you prove to me right now what love is?”

“I can describe it.”

“But can you prove it?”

I stared out into the blank space where deep contemplation resides, searching my mind for evidence.

“I guess I can’t prove it, but I feel it,” I said.

“Exactly. It’s the same with faith. You can’t prove it, but you know it because you feel it.”

“Do you believe this about God? You believe in Him because you can feel it?” I asked.

“I believe in God because of the goodness and the love I see around me. Look at you and your brothers, you exist because of the love your mother and I share. You are the proof.”

I sat in silent contemplation trying to fully digest this concept: I was the personification of their love. I stared intently at my father and, for seemingly the first time I understood him, and more so understood his deep affection for my mother. It was the love of a young girl’s dreams.

Taking my young hands in his, he smiled into my eyes. “You’re a good thinker, Kerry, and I have no doubt that someday you will write down your ideas with that thoughtful mind.”

“Thanks, dad,” I said, grateful to have such a wise teacher. “Perhaps someday I will write about you.”

He stood up and carried his empty dish from the table over to the sink. It was getting late and my mother would be home soon.

THE NOVITIATE AT ST. MARYS

The Scarboro Foreign Missions was founded in 1918 by Father John Mary Fraser. It began as the China Mission Seminary, and its initial purpose was to train and send missionaries to China; however, with the advent of the Communist revolution in China in 1948, the missions were forced to leave the country and look elsewhere for its missionary activity. Gradually missionaries dispersed to countries in Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America.

The society's headquarters were located in Scarborough, a large suburb just north of Toronto. They condensed the spelling for their missions, cutting off the 'ugh': Scarboro. First year students were sent to the Novitiate in St. Mary's, a quaint town located one hundred miles west of the headquarters, at the junction of the Thames and Trout River and is known for its abundance of natural resources and limestone structures. The Novitiate is a year of formation, training and mission orientation, and one to be spent in isolation from the world where young men live in a close community of prayer, study, discipline and hard manual labor.

In 1946, at the age of nineteen Joe began his studies for the priesthood with twenty-two other young men at the Novitiate at St. Mary's. The residence was an ancient, brick Victorian house with high pointed ceilings and extensive framed archways lining the entrances. The second floor balconies encased the old arched windows and wrapped around both sides of the grand estate. It sat on the highest point of twenty-three acres and looked out onto extensive sloping lawns and hundreds of maple trees. On the far left side was a small, rundown stable where two large draught horses and one riding horse lived, and behind the estate was a cultivated area of potatoes and other vegetables followed by a large area of thick, coarse bush. Inside, it had an enormous dining room, an extensive kitchen, a conservatory encased in glass and three floors of bedrooms.

Joe's class was the biggest in Scarborough's history and marked the beginning of the post war boom in vocations to the priesthood. Although the residence at St. Mary's was large, it could not accommodate the class of twenty-three young men, so an alternate one was being built. In the meantime, the novitiates were stuffed in there together for the first part of the year. The first eleven novitiates to arrive were sent upstairs on the third floor. Two were placed in a small room built for one, five were sent to live in the center room built for three, and my father along with three other men: Bud Ryan, John Bolger and Austin Malone, shared a standard sized room. The cramped quarters made the Rule of silence difficult and was honored more in the breach than in the observance until the spring when the new residence was finished and the young men all had their own room. One unique form of entertainment was the farting contests which didn't technically break "The rule," but certainly played havoc with its spirit and intention.

The Rule dominated all aspects of daily life. It was bred from the concept that there was a time for everything—a time for rising, praying, eating, attending class, studying, manual labor, leisure, recreation and going to bed. Every moment was covered by *The Rule*. Silence was key to *The Rule* and was required at all times except during manual labor and recreation. Silence was also demanded in rooms, except in the case of emergencies. The intention was to give the men privacy and time for undisturbed prayer, recollection, study, and of course, the sleep required after a long, busy day.

On the second day, Father Amyot, the Master of Novices at St. Mary's, addressed the young men and had shaken my father's confidence in being there. "Big Bill" as he was affectionately called by his friends (and behind his back by the novices) was built like a truck. He stood well over 6 feet tall, was bald and had a glass eye. It was an expectation in those days that a priest always wore the white Roman collar marking his priestly status; however, Big Bill's

collar was often hidden under his black scarf and tight black leather jacket, as he roared down the highway on his Harley motorcycle. He was a man made to be noticed and certainly made a lasting impression on the novices.

“You are here to begin your training for the missionary priesthood,” he boomed. “The question is not whether you want to be a priest, but whether God wants you to be a priest. This is the only question you should ask—it’s the only thing that matters.” His voice bounced against the old walls filling the quiet, stagnant room.

Joe was nervous. He had chosen God, but had God really chosen him? Certainly, He had way better candidates than a sinful Catholic boy from the streets of Toronto.

“It doesn’t matter what brought you here,” Father Amyot continued. “God works in strange and wonderful ways. In His providence, you are here and that is the first sign that you are called to His Priesthood.”

Joe’s hopes rose. Maybe it didn’t matter how or why he got there, what mattered was that he was there now and ready to take this seriously.

“You will know if you are called by giving yourself without reservation to your new life. If you give yourself fully to prayer, study, and the work assigned to you here, are open and honest with your spiritual director, and you follow the Rule of the Novitiate, then you will know.” The massive priest methodically scanned the room, meeting each hopeful stare of the young novices.

“At the end of this first year at St. Mary’s,” he warned, “you will be assessed and recommended either to go to the seminary in Scarborough to continue your studies for the priesthood or you will be asked to leave. This assessment will be ongoing throughout the year,

and if, at any time during this year, we conclude that you are not suitable for the priesthood, we will inform you of our decision and you will be immediately dismissed.”

The tension in the room heightened as the young men tried to remain still in their seats and contain their rising nerves. The weight of the unfamiliar black clock sat heavily on Joe’s shoulders. He was desperate to fit it—desperate to be successful.

“The process will be the same in the seminary,” he explained. “Work and pray hard, be open and honest with yourself and others, and each year will bring you closer to your goal. The sure and absolute sign that God has chosen you will be when you are called to ordination by the Church. For in the call of the Church is the voice of God.”

Joe felt obligated to confess his sins, thinking that perhaps if he confessed them, then he might have a better chance at being successful.

During the opening day retreat he decided to come clean. When he met with Father Amyot, he decided to be honest. He explained his life, his sins, his sexual preoccupations, and his reasons for coming to study for the priesthood.

“Father,” he confessed. “I’m afraid that I’m here for the wrong reasons, selfish reasons. I don’t love God, I’m afraid of him. I’m afraid of going to hell.”

“Joe,” he said, “perhaps you did come here for the wrong reasons, but you can stay for the right ones.” His authoritative voice demanded Joe’s nervous attention. “Fear of God is often the beginning of love of God. Your confession is an admission of your need. Ask God to accept you, to forgive your sins and change your fear into love. Give yourself to this life, work hard, pray hard and leave your life in God’s hands.”

Joe could not help but feel better. The confidence of these words brought him a peace which he had not felt since his childhood. It didn’t completely liberate him from every past

bondage, but it seemed to give him the ability to take the first steps on the long road to freedom. Joe would commit himself fully to this life and trust that God would lead him down his destined path.

Father Amyot had spent ten years in China until he had to return with the outbreak of the war. He loved China and every Tuesday evening he gave wonderful accounts of his days there. His dramatic story telling skills added to his wonderfully detailed accounts of the land and the people. He made Joe long for the day when he could go there.

High school was essentially an aimless, formless existence for Joe, but here his life was constantly filled with purpose and importance. Every hour of every day was an encounter with God. It was no longer a fearful, frightening encounter, but a liberating and joyful one. In this atmosphere, Joe rediscovered his academic abilities, developed his athletic talents, and even uncovered latent gifts for public speaking and presentation of ideas.

Every day the young men got up at 5:30 am (except in Sundays when they slept until 6:30am). The day started at the Chapel at 6:00 for morning prayers and meditation, followed by Mass. Breakfast was eaten in silence at 7:30 am. This was the case for all meals-however at lunch and dinner one of the men read aloud while the others ate. Reading was a breeze for some and a torture for others; it depended on the difficulty of the selected readings and the level of literacy of the reader. Father Amyot made corrections throughout the course of the readings, sometimes correcting pronunciation, or suggesting a more appropriate emphasis or inflection, and at others times giving explanations or editorials on topics related to the reading material. He served as a kind of color commentator. By 8:00 am the work day began, divided between class, study and manual labor.

Father Bill Cox was the Bursar of the house and in charge of all the work details. He was an intense, hard-driving man from Glace Bay, Nova Scotia, who had spent a few years in the Dominican Republic. He demanded perfection.

“Boys, if you can’t clean a toilet properly, how will you ever be able to clean your chalices at Mass?”

This sounded pretty irreverent to Joe and also pretty illogical. What possible connection was there between cleaning the chalice at Mass and cleaning toilets? He asked Father Amyot.

“Well boys,” he said, “there is a close connection. Life can be beautiful, but it can also be pretty shitty. The chalice is a symbol of the beautiful, the clean and the holy; the toilet bowl is a symbol of the ugly, the unwanted, the shit in life. As priests you will have to deal with both. If you can’t deal with the shit in your own lives and in the lives of others, then when you stand before the altar dressed in beautiful vestments, you will be nothing but hypocrites.”

This metaphor gave new significance to toilet cleaning, and with almost thirty men in the residence, there was great opportunity to realize the full meaning of the metaphor!

In addition to toilet cleaning, there were many other jobs to do around the house and the property. They cleaned and maintained the house, assisted in the kitchen by preparing vegetables and doing dishes, raked the leaves from hundreds of trees, cut the lawns, picked and planted the potato crop, cleaned the barn and looked after the horses, collected and made the maple syrup, and, when needed, they helped local farmers with their planting and harvesting.

Although not particularly hardy, Joe was assigned the job of driving the team of horses while John Bolger handled the plough. He liked this job because he loved being around horses, however when they worked till dusk they were often attacked by hundreds of desperate mosquitoes.

“It’s not fit for man nor beast,” growled Father Chuck MacDonald, who encountered Joe and John on one of his evening walks. For him to say this meant the bugs must have been terrible because “Chook” as he was called, was one tough guy. He stood about five feet nine, with sloping shoulders, powerful arms, and had the barrel chest of a former athlete. Father MacDonald was from Windsor, Nova Scotia and was also a veteran of the China Mission, but left to spend his last five years overseas as a chaplain with the Canadian Army. He served in the Italian campaign in WWII and was well acquainted with the “shitty” aspects of life.

Father Amyot had told the boys about the time in China when “Chook” single handedly took care of a few bandits who attacked the mission station. He knocked both of them out. Another well-known story was the time Chook performed an exorcism on a Chinese woman in his parish in Kinwha. One day during Mass she began to scream and shout obscenities. Her eyes were gleaming maniacally; her mouth was foaming. No one could calm or restrain her, and when several of the men attempted to remove her, she fought them off with seemingly superhuman strength. When Chook attempted to speak with her, she laughed and cursed him in Chinese, English and Latin. She ran from the church and everyone was terrified. Devil worship was common enough in the area and all of the parishioners felt that she was possessed.

The church is always skeptical of stories of devil possession and Chook shared this skepticism. There were many documented cases of people demonstrating superhuman strength and there could have been a natural explanation for some knowledge of Latin, so Chook attributed her behavior to natural causes.

The woman returned to Mass several days later and repeated her performance.

“You simple man, how dare you think you can deal with the devil!” she screamed. “Who do you think you are you fucking bastard!”

“I will not tolerate such blasphemy in the house of God!” Chook said, trying to remain calm.

“You have no power over me! Fuck you, you fucking bastard!”

Chook walked forward towards her readying himself for an attack.

“Don’t you come near me!” she shrieked and ran from the church screaming and cursing.

Chook dismissed the case as one of insanity. However, the following day while in a neighboring village, Chook saw this woman. He tried to speak with her, but she only stared at him blankly. He returned home on his motorcycle and while driving back to his residence he saw this same woman. Astounded, he stopped and confronted her directly. She laughed at him and said, “I have transportation you know nothing about.”

That was enough for Chook –the devil was alive in Kinwha.

He spent one week in prayer and fasting to prepare himself for the confrontation with Evil. He then placed his life in God’s hands and brought the woman into the church. She entered the church quiet and compliant; however, as the exorcism progressed she grew more and more agitated and violent. Curses and blasphemies streamed from her mouth. The men holding her in restraints, although selected for their strength and strong religious faith, were terrified, but desperately held her fast. Several hours later, the exorcism was over. Chook was exhausted and the woman was quiet and peaceful. She returned to her normal village life and never again exhibited any unusual behavior.

Not all novices believed this story, but they believed that Chook believed it, and that was enough for most. Joe always believed in the world of spirits, good and evil, so this story simply confirmed his views.

Recreation at the Novitiate was taken seriously. During this period, the boys played touch football, hockey and softball. Reg Collins from Newfoundland was a good athlete and a great organizer, so he made the teams, kept track of the scoring and posted the weekly team standings and individual scoring positions. This was serious business and was the only forum in which the spirit of competition was allowed to thrive.

Winters at St. Mary's were long and hard, and so were the hockey seasons. The men had their share of cut lips, loosened teeth and bruised bodies. There is a lifelong scar exists on Joe's left knee from when he failed to cut a corner, smashed into a steel post and sliced his knee open. Rather than take him for the necessary stitches, Father Amyot treated him with an old Chinese procedure involving salve and special wax paper he had brought home from China.

Father Amyot enjoyed the art of boxing and somehow Saturday nights evolved as boxing nights. This was intended to be an exhibition of the manly art of self-defense, refereed by Big Bill himself. The toughness of the men emerged and middleweights like Lou Quinn, Jack Hazel and Gerry ("The Tiger") Costello became novitiate champs. Unfortunately, the Saturday night experiment ended when a brawl got out of control and Gerry's roundhouse kick missed his opponent and nailed Bill in the jaw. He decided to cancel the program.

Wednesday afternoons were reserved for hiking. This mandatory outing was always anticipated with much excitement, as it permitted the men to walk through the small town of St. Mary's and make necessary purchases. As they walked past the shirt factory the girls working there made various suggestions to the young novices and whistled and called out the windows. Of course the men were not permitted to respond and pretended not to even notice in fear that any slight gesture would get back to their superiors. News travelled quickly in such a small town.

The year at St. Mary's passed quickly and in the spring of 1947 the men moved into the new residence. Some were relieved, but others missed the closeness and camaraderie of the cramped quarters. Joe preferred the new living arrangements because he could follow the Rule with greater zeal—a goal that became more and more important to him as he deepened his commitment to his priestly vocation.

The year ended with all twenty-three of the men finishing, which was unusual, especially for such a large class in such cramped quarters. Perhaps it was these very conditions that led to a bonding and solidarity which carried them all through the program.

Six men did not go on to the seminary, including some of Joe's roommates, Bud Ryan, Austin Malone, and Gerry "Tiger" Costello. No one knew whether this was their own decision or whether they were advised to discontinue by Father Amyot. Nevertheless, it was a sad departure, as the friendship between the men would soon dissolve when they were required to say their final goodbyes and go home for the summer.

SISTER JOAN

My grandmother, Alice Adams converted to Catholicism at 16 years old and entered the convent at 18. She was born in 1900 and raised in a London suburb by Methodist parents, and though not church-going, they had a strong aversion to anything “Papist”. Becoming a Catholic, and later a nun, meant severing all connections with her home and family—the one exception was her father. Her parents separated and her father maintained relations with Alice, his favorite child. He supported her decision to become a Catholic when all the others rejected it.

During the war, Alice’s mother and older sister, Nell, were swept up in the excitement and chaos of a wartime world and both became involved with various soldiers. Her father left in anger and disgust. Her sister, Nell, married a soldier who was later killed in action, leaving her with a new-born son. Nell then became involved with a Canadian soldier, whom she later married.

Heartbroken by her father’s departure and disgusted by her family’s active sex life, Alice left home. She worked in London as a secretary, became a Catholic, and entered the convent where she became Sister Joan. After six months she left the convent, reconciled with her mother and family and in 1920, moved with them to Canada. Her father remained in England and she never saw him again.

When my father was 15 years old he discovered a prayer book in his mother’s room with Sister Joan written on the flyleaf. When he asked her about it, Alice was evasive. “It’s a book that a nun gave me.” This reply satisfied Joe’s curiosity and, not being a lie, Alice’s conscience. She came clean about her convent life about a year later when her oldest son, Pat decided to leave St. Augustine’s seminary and join the army to go overseas during WW II.

“Patrick,” she begged. “Please don’t go. You’ve already decided to be a priest.”

“I know, Ma, but people are dying over there. I need to go help.”

“You’ve already put in two years at the seminary.” Alice was desperate to save her son.

“I can go back when I return,” he promised.

“I’ve seen what a war like this can do.” Alice fought back her tears. She couldn’t help but relive her childhood days, remembering the troops marching through her English village on their way to the front—too many did not return.

“I cannot stay here to study while they risk their lives. It’s not fair,” Pat insisted.

Frantic to spare her eldest son, Alice pulled out the big guns: “Listen, both of you. I know you don’t know this, but I was in the convent at your age, Pat, and I’ve always regretted leaving. I don’t want you to live with the same regret.”

The true identify of Sister Joan was finally revealed.

THE SEMINARY

Seminary life lasted from September until early June with the summer months free for working and spending time with family. Summer holidays were an integral part of priesthood training, as it gave young men an opportunity to experience working life and explore the difficulties that come with daily life. It gave them time to develop skills in relating to others and opportunities to experience every-day, real world problems. This time was also used as a testing ground for commitment to daily Mass, prayer, and celibacy outside the rigid structure of seminary life. Sometimes the test proved too much and young men left because of their summertime experiences.

Joe spent all his summers working at Canada Packers, a large meat packing company in Toronto. His father was a long-time employee of the company, and his reputation for hard work won his two sons summer time employment. Joe earned an excellent salary and this enabled him to defray most of the seminary expenses and contribute to his family. He worked long hours, usually leaving for work at 3:30 in the afternoon and returning home at 3:30 in the morning. This gave him just enough time to make a visit to the church for meditation and the rosary in the late morning, and then race home to get ready for work. This was a dull, mundane existence, one that Joe knew would get him through the summer months. It did, however, give him a new appreciation for his father and the work he had to endure. Although thankful for the money, Joe often felt sorry for the workers at the plant, and worried that this seemingly soul-destroying job would lead them to an early grave.

Joe's brother Patrick also worked at Canada Packers. Everyone there knew the brothers were both studying to be priests, but they didn't treat them any differently—they still cursed and

swore and told the same unimaginative dirty jokes. The boys were accepted because they shared their father's work ethic and were quiet.

The only arguments they ever got into were on the subject of communism. However, Joe and Pat were prepared for this because they had listened attentively to the radio broadcasts of Monsignor (soon to be Bishop) Fulton Sheen during Catholic Hour on Sunday nights. Fulton Sheen spoke about communism, and, in their minds, had single handedly demolished communism, both as a philosophy and as a practical way of life.

Sheen's arguments served the boys well in the Cook Room debates at the Packers, particularly with a fellow named Jim. He was a stout, middle aged guy who had embraced various philosophies during his life, and was, at this time, in the socialist phase. When Jim found out the boys were studying for the priesthood, he was delighted. He viewed them as an intellectual godsend and looked forward to arguing and debating with them at lunch and break times. Jim even gave Joe a book of short stories by Leo Tolstoy, which Joe kept on his home library for many years.

Joe Schauer, another Cook room communist, was not a reader of Tolstoy, or a fan of the aspiring priests. He was a pragmatist who hated religion and particularly hated the Catholic Church. Fulton Sheen didn't cut much ice with Schauer, who wasn't interested in philosophical argument or intellectual freedom. He saw the church and the clergy as supporters of the oppressive capitalist system who exploited the misery of the poor and the dispossessed. He saw the boys as representatives of that system, and therefore, treated them with contempt. It was a sort of Cold War in the Cook Room. Schauer was eventually put back on the early morning shift and the war ended.

Joe began his studies at St. Francis Xavier Mission Seminary in September of 1947. Located at 2685 Kingston Road in a large suburb north of Toronto, Ontario, it was named after a Jesuit missionary who spent his short life dedicated to improving life for people in the Far East. St. Francis Xavier was officially named the Patron Saint of Catholic foreign missions by Pope Pius XI in 1927—the year Joe was born.

Joe's parents were happy to have him closer to home and now they could visit him once a month and enjoy two weeks' vacation with him at Christmas. St. Augustine's seminary was adjacent to St. Francis Xavier and was filled with students from the Archdiocese of Toronto. Business was booming as both seminaries were full of young men studying for the priesthood.

Although like the novitiate in many ways, the seminary differed in that the major emphasis was on studies. On school days, the young men rose at 5:30 a.m., went to the Chapel at six for morning prayers, meditation, and Mass. They ate breakfast at 7:30 a.m. then made their beds, cleaned their rooms and prepared for classes. Everyone had his own room and it was a very serious offense to enter another student's room without permission.

Sports were an integral part of life in the seminary. The hockey leagues were fiercely competitive as several students had played Junior A and Junior B in high school. Another huge sporting event was the annual track and field day at St. Augustine's. It was held every Thanksgiving and always began with Roddy MacNeil playing his bagpipes. All the men participated in some way, and Joe usually led the field in the 400 dash, obstacle race and was a solid contender in the baseball throws.

Recreation was followed by spiritual conference given by one of the priests on the seminary staff, followed by supper at six. It was often a rush from recreation to the spiritual

lecture and a shower wasn't always possible, layering the lecture hall with a strong stench of sweat.

Unlike in the novitiate, talking was permitted at meal times except on Retreat or Recollection Sunday, which were once a month. After supper, there was one hour for recreation often spent playing cards, table tennis, snooker or just chatting. Sometimes movies were shown, followed by study until 9 p.m., evening prayers and bed by 10 p.m. It was a life of schedule and discipline, one that Joe learned to revere.

He spent the first two years studying philosophy: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, the Neo-Platonists, and Augustine. Philosophy was determined to be the "handmaid of theology" and served theology by providing a reasonable basis for faith. Catholic philosophers were very optimistic about the natural powers of man to demonstrate the existence of God and to arrive at some knowledge of His attributes. Joe learned that this natural knowledge was insufficient, but could lead one to the doorstep of faith. From there, God's revelation had to take over and impart the fullness of the knowledge and love of God.

This time passed quickly and Joe became more and more confident in his decision to become a priest. At the end of the first two years he proudly took the oath of obedience, signifying his intention to dedicate his life to God through the Scarboro Missions. Each year students were given the opportunity to reconsider their intention to enter the seminary and took the oath of obedience as a symbol of their renewed commitment. They made this decision with the help of their spiritual director, a priest mentor selected within their first year. Students were also assessed by the seminary faculty and were promoted or advised to leave. Spiritual directors were excluded from the external forum and had no input into staff assessments or decisions about suitability, thus freeing them to guarantee absolute confidentiality to their students.

Father John Gault was Joe's spiritual director. After ordination, Gault had done post-graduate studies in Canon Law and was then assigned to the Dominican Republic. He had serious difficulties reconciling the apparent support, or at least acceptance, by the church of the cruel and repressive regime of the then dictator Rafael Trujillo Molina, and thus suffered great personal anguish. When teaching, he never attempted to excuse or gloss over the sometimes-repressive role the church had played in history, and Joe had great respect for his honesty and integrity. Perhaps it was this fact that enabled Joe to be open and honest with him, and was his reason for selecting him as his advisor.

John Gault helped Joe develop his own self-knowledge and self-acceptance. At one of his first meetings with him, he assessed Joe honestly and accurately.

"Things seem to bother you much more than you let on," he noted. "You present as light-hearted and easy going, but I can see strong darker undertones." Joe sat speechless in the small office. No one had ever called him out so directly.

"What is your family like?" he asked. The lightness of the walls enveloped Joe as he sunk lower in the hard leather backed chair. There was no softness to sink into; the truth waited like a rock teetering on a mountain—it would fall and split into a million fragmented pieces, exposing the weak underbelly of the rigid structure.

"I have good parents," he said staring into the heavy desk that divided him from the priest. He did have good parents, they did the best they could, gave him a solid Catholic education.

"Are you close with them?" he asked.

"Of course," he hesitated. "Well, I'm close with my mum."

The thick silence layered the room.

“Look Joe, we don’t get to pick our families, so I won’t hold you responsible for that. But pretending that our lives are perfect never helped anyone.”

Gripping the sturdy arms of the chair, Joe admitted that there had been some tough times. His dad drank too much and he was often the target of his father’s drunken rage. But times were tough; he was doing the best he could.

“Joe, clearly you are a very intelligent young man. You’re the top of all your classes and your peers really look up to you, but idealizing your past will only work against you. We all have our demons.”

John Gault helped Joe embrace his past and use it to become a better priest. Life was hard for everyone in a different way, and it was understanding and empathy that would allow him to effectively help others and serve the Lord. Joe valued this advice and learned to trust Gault with his deepest thoughts and gravest concerns. A clear example of this occurred several months later when he came to Gault with letters from a young married woman; Gault responded swiftly and firmly.

“I hardly even know this woman,” Joe said, as he watched Gault sift through the small stack of letters.

“Where did you meet her?” he asked.

“I spent a week at a friend’s cottage with several other seminarians and she was vacationing with her children in the cottage next door. She was a friend of the family whose cottage we were staying in.”

Gault said nothing as he methodically skimmed over the incriminating letters.

“We had foolishly stayed out in the sun too long and got sunburned and she brought over lotion. She insisted on applying it herself to my back and shoulders. I figured she was just being nice.”

Gault tried hard to smother the small smile that tugged at the sides of his mouth.

“When I returned to the seminary she started writing letters to me,” Joe admitted.

“Did you respond?” Gault asked.

“Yes, of course. What was I supposed to do?” Joe’s nervous tension rose. “I mean I didn’t think anything of it. She’s married with kids.”

“When did you receive this letter?” he asked holding up the last, most implicating letter.

“Two days ago.” Joe couldn’t help but feel sick, and wondered what he had done to promote these affectionate feelings. “What am I supposed to do?”

“Well, clearly she’s in love with you. This is obvious from the first letter.”

Joe was embarrassed. He felt foolish for not realizing this from the beginning.

“What are your feelings for her?”

“None,” he said. Joe didn’t feel the slightest attraction to her, although he did confess to feeling a little flattered by her attraction to him. He couldn’t help but wonder, however, how a woman with a husband and young children could act in this way.

“It’s simple then, don’t write back to her,” replied Gault. “And in the future, beware of women who want to put lotion on your back.”

Celibacy was the stumbling block for many seminarians, and the desire to be married and have children was the reason many left the seminary. For Joe, celibacy was a challenge he readily accepted to become a missionary priest. Although his sexual drive was strong and present

daily, it was something he controlled through his strong desire to dedicate his life to a higher purpose.

In the Catholic Church, it is a sin for priests to engage in any form of sexual activity, including masturbation. Given that there was no legitimate way for the conscious release of seminal fluid and sexual tension, the unconscious, or possibly semi-conscious, took over in the form of nocturnal seminal emissions or “wet dreams.” Part of any healthy male celibate’s life, these unavoidable occurrences were free of sin, were often jokingly referred to as “freebies.” However, if you happened to waken during this occurrence, there was always a possibility of having given consent to the accompanying pleasure; therefore, seminarians often confessed, just in case.

In addition to following the rules of celibacy the young men were expected to follow the dogmatic theology of the Bible. This was well defined in their rigorous studies. They studied God: His existence and attributes, the Trinity and the relationships in the Godhead, Creation and the knowledge and power of God, Divine Providence, the Incarnation, the Divine and Human natures of Christ, Redemption through the Death and Resurrection of Christ, the Church and its mission, the Sacraments, and the Last Things (Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell). This was the belief and teaching of the Catholic Church, and it was what these young men were expected to preach and teach all their lives.

The Catholic doctrine was presented to the young men in an unvarying format. A statement and explanation of the doctrine, followed by its basis in Scripture, the tradition of the Church as seen in the teaching of the early Fathers of the Church, the belief of the early Christians, and then the rational support of the doctrine developed by the theologians of the Church. This was the God revealed in the scriptures, the God whom Joe believed was a personal

God, a passionately interested and intervening God. A God who continually speaks to men, who expresses regret, is pleased, is angry and punishing, but above all is a Father, who watches over His creation with loving care, a care which extends even to the birds in the sky.

Joe figured perhaps that God couldn't really be sorry, angry or upset with the way the universe was unfolding, but it was easier to use human concepts and words to describe a reality beyond description; words to express the inexpressible. The scriptures speak of God in a way humans can understand and appreciate. Joe didn't think too much about the difficulties of relating God of the philosophers and theologians to the God of revelation, because at the time it didn't seem important. After all they were not in the seminary to become theologians, they were there to prepare to preach the Gospel of the Lord.

Major emphasis was placed on the teaching authority of the Church and the infallibility of the Pope as Head of the Church. God spoke through the Church, and although He spoke through the Scriptures, the Church was the definitive interpreter of what He said in the Scriptures. Faith and morals were to be learned, not debated and certainly not questioned by some young, inexperienced seminarian.

Harold Oxley, one of the Scarboro students, found this out when he rashly dared to suggest a possible good use for condoms. The Moral Theology professor, Monsignor William T. Davis, known to the seminarians as "Dixi," had just declared that the use of condoms was intrinsically evil and could never be used for a good purpose. Harold boldly suggested that a condom might be used as receptacle for something, perhaps for fertility tests for a married couple wanting a child; therefore, technically, the condom itself wasn't intrinsically evil.

"Roma locuta est, causa finite est!" thundered Dixi invoking the full authority of Rome. "When Rome speaks, the matter is settled." The conversation was over.

This was one of Dixi's favorite sayings, and was always pronounced grandly, promptly ending all further discussion and argument. Invoking the authority of Rome ended all arguments and was accepted by the young seminarians, and became the source of all confidence and security, especially in their uncertain and often confusing worlds.

Moral theology was geared to sin and the hearing of confessions. Perhaps this was because the commandments themselves were expressed in what someone should not do, and the avoidance of sin seemed to be the purpose of life. Assessing sins based on their gravity and assigning punishment was an important process, one studied and taken very seriously.

"Gentlemen," declared Dixi, "the confessional is a tribunal. Just as in our courts the gravity and the number of offenses is always a consideration for proper sentencing, so it is in the confessional. The sinner appears, confesses his sins, receives forgiveness and is given a suitable penance. The priest is the judge acting in the name of God's Church, binding and imposing penance."

Joe enjoyed Dixi's classes and always looked forward to them. He was a dramatic and skilled lecturer who moved quickly through the material offering little opportunity for questions or discussion, while his students dutifully copied notes and tried to keep up. They learned information rapidly and unthinkingly, and seemed to learn many easy answers for difficult problems. Dixi was a man of his times, and they were students of their times, and Joe thought he was one of the best teachers he'd ever had in the seminary.

Joe studied hard and excelled in all his classes. His academic success also served to increase his self-confidence and sense of well-being. He easily moved through each successive seminary year without ever doubting his faith or his calling to the priesthood. While others

experienced difficulties and left to pursue other things, Joe stayed; their leaving confirmed his certainty.

During these years, Joe felt no need for close and loving human relationships. Thoughts of a nagging spouse, crying children, and the drudgery of a daily job were no competition for a life of prayer and study. God and the Church were more than enough for him.

Life at the McNamara home went on as usual. Joe's father, Ken, continued to work at Canada Packers and spent his off hours drinking in the pubs, while his mother Alice found her satisfaction in work and religion. She returned to business school to regain her typing and secretarial skills, and then went to work for Office Assistance, a career she maintained into her early seventies. She also volunteered with the ladies Auxiliary at the Scarboro Foreign Mission Society.

In September of 1948, Joe's sister Marie entered St. Joseph's convent and so now all three of the children were in religious life. Alice was quite happy and proud of this, while Ken was proud, but not as happy. He wanted grandchildren.

On June 25th, 1949, Ken and Alice celebrated their twenty fifth wedding anniversary. The family decided to celebrate the special occasion with a renewal of vows at St. John's, their parish church, followed by a party afterwards with some close friends. The pastor, Father O'Connor, wasn't available, so Doctor Pelow, the Rector from Joe's seminary, kindly accepted the invitation and came from Scarboro to celebrate the Mass.

“Jesus, dad, it's not even noon and you're already drunk.”

Joe was furious.

“How can you do this to mum?”

Alice had bought some liquor and wine for the party that evening and hid it behind the cleaning supplies under the kitchen sink, fearful its appearance would be too enticing. Ken found it and was drunk before the Mass began.

He stumbled through some excuse, explaining how stressed he was, how it was not his fault. Joe tried hard not to let his fury rise. This was no great surprise. He knew that faced with the bottle, his father had no capacity to say no—the time of day or occasion was irrelevant.

Dutifully, he straightened his father's disheveled tie, directed him toward the front of the church, and prayed for him to make it successfully through the service. Afterwards when Joe attempted to apologize for his dad's condition, Doctor Pelow simply smiled and thanked him for allowing him to be part of such an important celebration.

This day was somewhat representative of their marriage. While Alice worked hard to make sure everything and everyone was taken care of and all appeared well, Ken thought only of himself and drank anything he could find. Alice's only hope rested in her children and was thankful that they didn't suffer from the same sins as her husband.

Joe hoped his commitment to the church made her proud and gave her comfort knowing that she successfully led all of her children to a life of great faith and piety.

THE SECRET

I was thirteen years old when I discovered my father had been a Catholic priest. Father Balinski, the principal of my Catholic School, made a reference to my father, claiming 'he'd understand because, after all, he too was a priest.' A clear look of panic invaded my face, but I quickly replaced it with a meek embarrassed smile.

Anxiety plagued me for the rest of the day as I tried to comprehend the full implications of such a statement. My mind scanned back over my entire life trying to find moments of truth, moments when my dad acted like a priest. I tried to imagine him in a large robe standing at the altar saying Mass. I tried to imagine him pouring blessed water over babies' heads and welcoming them into the church; teaching catechism to kids like me and hearing confessions of nervous students and assigning them penance. It all just seemed impossible. My God, he didn't even pay attention during Sunday Masses! So many times, my brother Mike and I laughed as we watched him sit in the pew with his eyes closed and made bets about when he would start snoring; he never did. Sometimes we even nudged him awake, to save him from my mother's stern stare—a look my brother endlessly received as he popped around like a jumping bean in the pew. An hour in a Catholic Mass can seem like a lifetime for a rambunctious boy.

My dad was the Niagara regional manager of probation and parole—a job he never liked, claiming it was too steeped in negativity. Those late-night calls were never good—someone either broke parole or was rearrested. He always advised us to be something positive like teachers, claiming teaching was the most rewarding job in the world. I always wondered why he wasn't a teacher because he seemed to know everything about everything.

Sunday dinners at our house were always held in the dining room and became a forum of intellectual discussions. My father often rose from the table mid-dinner, marched upstairs to his

library and returned with the book needed for his lesson, and in a calm, clear voice he'd read quotes, emphasizing the parts which highlighted his argument. Sometimes he asked us questions about our own thoughts and then a lively debate ensued. Mike and my mother always ended up arguing, and I delighted in watching the animated discussion. Religion and politics dominated the table and strangely my father often argued against the Catholic teachings we learned about in school. It was a wonder why he even sent us to Catholic school.

When I returned home that fateful day, I was too scared to confront my parents, so I asked my brother Mike instead.

"This must be a mistake, Kerry," he claimed. "They would have told us."

That following Sunday Mike agreed to bring it up at the table for discussion. He didn't waste any time.

"So, is it true, dad, were you a Catholic priest?"

My parents exchanged quick glances across the formal table, as if knowing the inevitable question would eventually emerge.

"Yes, he was," my mother responded. My father stared down into his untouched plate.

"Why didn't you tell us?"

"We didn't tell you because some people around here have limited perspectives and we didn't want them to make a big deal about it."

"Well Father Balinski knows, he said it to Kerry last week." My parents both looked over at me as my face flushed with heat.

"We know him well," my mom said, "and he's a priest, so we trusted him."

"Why do you only tell people you know well and trust? Is being a priest bad?"

“No, Mike, it’s not. It was just a part of your father’s life that was long ago and sometimes it’s hard to talk about. People don’t understand it.”

“Well I think it’s cool,” he said teetering off the side of the teak chair.

I stared at my father waiting for him to say something, but he didn’t, instead he leaned back in his chair and took a deep breath. My mother reached out her hand to him and as he cradled her hand in his she smiled, and the tension melted from his face.

I wanted to say something but was too nervous, and as my mind flooded with thoughts, I pushed the cold mashed potatoes around my plate, feeling too shaken to eat them.

ORDINATION

Joe was ordained on December 20, 1952, in the middle of his final year of studies. This early ordination, a deviation from the usual practice of ordination in June of the final year, was granted to Scarboro by Rome because of the missions. It allowed the young men to spend more time with their families as priests before they left for their assigned countries.

The anticipation and celebration surrounding an ordination is similar to that surrounding a marriage. Preparations are made by the family, invitations are sent out to friends and dignitaries, a banquet is prepared, speeches are made, and gifts are gratefully acknowledged. It is a day of importance and happiness.

Eleven out of the twenty-three young men who entered St. Mary's together became ordained as Scarboro missionaries. Joe with five other men were ordained together by James Cardinal McGuigan in St. Michael's Cathedral in Toronto. It was a day of great joy and celebration, the culmination of seven years of intensive training and hard work—the beginning of a new life.

The ceremony began with a solemn procession of all the attending clergy through the cathedral, the ordinands (those to be ordained) carrying their priestly vestments on their arm, followed by the Bishop with all his attendants. After the long litany of prayers, each ordinal knelt, one by one, before the Cardinal Archbishop as he lay his hands on their heads. As the ordinands remained kneeling in the sanctuary, all the priests came forward and placed their hands on each of them as witness to the solidarity of the priesthood, a joining together of God's chosen ones. Their hands were then anointed with holy oils, and they were invested with the chasuble, (the priestly vestment worn at Mass). The ordination concluded with the ancient hymn of praise, "Te Deum Laudamus," *We praise You Oh God.*

Joe was overjoyed, and, despite his previous feelings of weakness and insecurity, on that day, he was elated, because God had chosen him to be His priest. He felt as if his entire life was now fixed on a certain path, and wherever he was sent or whatever duties he was assigned, he was a priest, and would be one forever.

The following day, Joe celebrated High Mass in St. John's, his home parish. His family and friends attended and celebrated afterwards with him at the reception held in the cafeteria of Notre Dame High School, adjacent to the Church. It was similar to a wedding reception---there was good food, speeches and an address by the newly ordained; however, the tone was notably different, as joyous but more reverent with no drinking or dancing, no advice given and certainly, no jokes about sex.

After the Christmas holidays Joe returned to the seminary to complete his fourth year of theology and await his mission assignment. It was a time filled with anticipation, suspense and considerable speculation. There were four possibilities: Japan, Dominican Republic, mission promotion (a public relations position) at home in Canada, or the new mission in British Guiana. As June drew near, Joe's excitement mounted. The student polls, the guessing game at matching the personality of the student with the mission, added to his anxiety.

"Joe, you're going to Japan, I'm sure of it. You always wanted to go to the Orient and you're a good student. You'll learn the language quickly and adapt to the culture," guessed Lou.

"No way, his brother is already there. I bet it's Dominican. You're in good health and can deal with the harsh physical demands," insisted John.

"I vote promotions for McNamara. He's a good speaker, and it will be a break for his family, with his brother in Japan and his sister in the convent," voted Will.

"Where do you want to go?" Lou asked.

“It’s not up to me; my preference has nothing to do with it.”

“I know, but if you could pick, where would you choose?”

Joe would not respond. God’s will would be made known to him through the decision of his superiors. This was the foundation of his commitment, and he didn’t want to weaken it with his own preferences.

The day finally arrived. The young men gathered in the second-floor conference room, and waited as their Superior General, Father Tom McQuaid, entered the room.

“Welcome missionaries, I know this is a big day for you, a day you’ve been waiting for with great anticipation.”

The men nestled around each other teeming with excitement.

“I hope you will be happy with these decisions, and accept them with dignity and work hard to be successful in your assigned country. Without further ado, here are your appointments: To Japan- John Bolger, Maurice Coady, William Schultz.”

The names raced through Joe’s mind. Bolger and Schultz expected, Coady a surprise; no Japan for him. He caught glances with the others nodding in acknowledgment, as his suspense rose.

“To the Dominican Republic – Joseph Curcio and Louis Quinn.”

Joe was not surprised. He knew Lou had wanted to go there, so he was happy for him. He just couldn’t help but feel a little disappointed. He was sure he would be next, sent to the Missions Promotions. He was not surprised; the missions would come later.

“To the Promotion Department – Paul Ouellette and Ralph Williams.”

Too surprised to react, Joe held his breath, waiting for the final declaration.

“And finally, to British Guiana – Joseph McNamara. You will be leaving in September with Fathers Ed Moriarty, Alex McIntosh and Basil Kirby to open our new mission.”

Joe’s surprise quickly turned to excitement as elaborate visions flashed through his mind. Father Guilly, the Superior of the English Jesuits working in Guiana, had visited the seminary a few months ago, and had returned describing the country as the land of the waters, the site of the search for the legendary El Dorado. He described a land of sunshine, of rainy seasons, of coastline, of savannahs, dense jungle and mountains. A land of East Indians, Portuguese, Chinese, Africans, English, Creoles; a land of political unrest, a land of lots of hard work. Joe couldn’t wait!

Joe spent June at home with his parents. They didn’t say much. He knew they were happy for him and probably relieved that he wasn’t going to Japan, as Pat was already there, and priests in Japan returned home only every ten years. He figured if Guiana followed the practice of the Dominican Republic, Joe would be home every three years for a visit. Taken up in his own excitement, he gave no thought to his parents’ impending loss or sadness.

In August, Joe and Lou Quinn were sent to New York City to help in the local parishes. They were both anxious to leave on their missions, but decided to try and enjoy the big city before they left. Joe was sent to St. Francis Xavier and Lou was sent to Blessed Sacrament; both parishes were in Brooklyn.

Joe and Lou were both amazed by New York. They were overwhelmed by its size, the multitude of skyscrapers, the complex subway system, the crowds and fast-paced life. They were also shocked by the slums, and the percolating stench of garbage that covered the streets. It was a stark contrast to the quiet, restrained life they knew in Toronto.

The young seminarians, however, quickly learned to appreciate the openness and generosity of Americans, particularly Catholic Americans, and their unrestrained love and respect for the church. They were both surprised by the limited perspectives of the clergy. They seemed to have no interest in the rest of the world, and certainly knew nothing about Canada, other than that it was somewhere north of the States. The priests at St. Francis never asked Joe one single question about Canada, the Scarboro missions, or British Guiana. New York seemed to be their entire world.

The great exception to this was a woman named Mary Milazzo. Joe first met Mary when she came to the parish office with her six-year-old son, Philip, to obtain a Mass card for her father who had recently died. She was married to Phil Milazzo, a Brooklyn firefighter, who had been an air gunner in the U.S. Army Air Force during World War II. They had one son, Philip, a precocious six-year-old; two sisters, Ruth and Catherine Quigley, and several brothers, one in the Marines and another in the Navy.

The Milazzos and the Quigley's virtually adopted Joe while he lived in New York. He shared his first of many pizzas looking out their apartment window at an Italian street festival and when they went to see their beloved Brooklyn Dodgers play at Ebbets Field, they took Father McNamara with them. Mary even sent him with her husband to Manhattan to buy a light weight summer suit for the oppressive August heat. Joe became part of their family, and when he left for British Guiana, the family gave him a chalice in memory of their father and followed him to the airport to say their farewells.

New York gave Joe a first taste of life in a big city parish. His days were consumed with church functions: baptisms, funerals, sick calls, office calls, and confessions. Brooklynites were loud and friendly and had a fierce devotion to the Brooklyn Dodgers. Sunday Masses often

included prayers for players, specifically for Gil Hodges—the congregation prayed for an end to his batting slump.

The power of the Roman collar even extended to the streets.

One evening while Joe was walking back home to his parish a drunken woman accosted him. She seemed to come out of nowhere.

“Hey fader, where you goin’!” She clutched the front of his shirt, like a desperate cat, her claws digging through his shirt into his skin.

Joe yelped with surprise falling backward to absorb the assault. He raised his arms up to dislodge the strange figure. Several young men standing on the corner noticed the commotion and, without hesitation, intervened.

“Get off him you whore! He’s got nothin’ for ya.” A large Italian ripped the woman from Joe’s chest while yelling more obscenities at her. He pushed her hard, sending her scrambling back into the dark corners.

“Sorry for the bad language, Father, but you shouldn’t be walking here.”

Joe scrambled to regain his composure, “My God,” he said, “she came out of nowhere.” He straightened his collar and looked up at the large man who saved him. “Thanks a lot,” he said extending his hand towards the large, hooded figure.

“No problem, Father. Where you headed?”

“Back to my parish on President and Fourth.”

“C’mon, then, we’ll walk you home.” The New York natives walked the shaken priest four blocks back to the safety of his parish. At the door step they wished him well, and advised him to stay off the streets at night. He blessed them and entered the security of St. Xavier. Three months later Joe was sent to British Guiana, a destination he waited for his whole life.

BRITISH GUIANA

The loud Toronto traffic faded into the background, as the immensity of Union Station consumed the small family. The recessed entrance was marked by four limestone columns and was further accentuated by two blind arches on either side. Large windows filled the archways and welcomed passengers into the two-story building. As Joe processed through the extravagant entryway, he found it hard to contain his growing excitement; his solemn parents seemed to be swallowed by the intricate patterns of the marble floor.

“Well son, I hope this is everything you thought it to be.” Joe’s father shook his head, convinced his son would regret this decision.

Joe’s mother struggled to remain composed; she knew it would be at least three years before she would see her son again. Joe leaned down to hug her, as the heaviness of guilt grabbed at his heart. He hated the thought of leaving her.

“God bless you, son,” she whispered. “Take good care of yourself, Joseph.”

Joe went to British Guiana in 1953 with three experienced missionary priests: Ed Moriarty, Alex McIntosh, and Basil Kirby. Ed and Alex were originally stationed in China; however, after being interned by the Japanese, released and then put on house arrest by the government, they left China for good and were ready to begin a new life in more settled circumstances. Bas Kirby had worked in Dominican Republic for ten years, and was from Joe’s own parish (St. John’s) in Toronto. Joe didn’t know him well, but knew his family and had been friends with his younger brother, Pete.

The four priests took the overnight train to New York, then flew to the Dominican Republic where they spent a few days before continuing to British Guiana. Joe’s classmates, Lou

Quinn and Joe Curcio were busy studying Spanish at the Scarboro headquarters in Haina, a small town on the southern coast of the Dominican Republic. He was excited to see them again.

Landing in the Dominican Republic was a kind of homecoming for Bas Kirby; he was warmly and enthusiastically received by both the Scarboro priests and the Dominicans. He was given the “abrazo” (embrace) –the warm Hispanic greeting among friends—a far cry from the formal North American handshakes. Joe couldn’t help but sense a longing by Bas to stay in the place he had called home for so many years.

Three days later, Joe and his companions left Santo Domingo for Puerto Rico and from there flew southward to Georgetown, the capital of British Guiana.

“How long will you be stationed there?” asked an American businessman on the plane.

“Our appointments are for life,” replied Joe.

“Or until they send us elsewhere,” corrected Bas.

“You just need to get used to the heat and bugs, and all will be well.”

British Guiana (now called Guyana) is on the North-East coast of South America, bordered by Suriname, Brazil and Venezuela. It is the fourth smallest country in South America and was first discovered by the English explorer, Sir Walter Raleigh; however, the Dutch were the first to inhabit the land until it was taken over by the British. Guyana gained independence in 1966, and officially changed its name to Guyana. Because its main resource is sugarcane, the British imported many African slaves to work on these plantations, eventually creating a diverse Guyanese culture. There were blacks, who were descendants of Caribbean slaves; East Indians who had been indentured laborers to work in the sugar plantations; Portuguese and Chinese who had come for trade and business purposes; and English who were administrating the colony or

representing British sugarcane and rice interests. The Guyanese born descendants of the English and Europeans were called Creoles and were the dominant race.

Geographically, Guyana is many different countries. The bulk of the population (about 500,000 people) live along the two-hundred-mile coastline. The unpopulated inlands are consumed by swamps, dense jungle, sandstone shelves, mountains, and savannas. Guyana is laced with great rivers formed in the mountains running down to the sea—the Essequibo, the Mazaruni, the Berbice, and the Corentyne. Most of the Guyanese knew only the coastal Guyana. The interior was known only to the Amerindians who lived there, and to a few traders who did business with the natives.

Missionaries from Scarboro were invited to work in Guyana by the English Jesuits who had been there for almost a century. They asked for the missionaries because of Father Patrick Moore, a Scarboro priest who for many years preached the Fatima crusade. This crusade took him to Guyana in 1951.

The Fatima crusades were extremely popular in the Catholic world of the forties and fifties. They were based on the widely accepted belief in the appearances of the Blessed Virgin Mary to three children in Fatima, Portugal in 1917. The Virgin commanded repentance and the praying of the rosary in order to save the world from great disaster. Several secrets were committed to the children, one secret, always called the ‘Third Secret,’ was so terrifying that it could not be revealed to the world, and so was entrusted to the Pope’s care to be revealed at some appropriate time in the future.

Two Scarboro priests, Monsignor Bill McGrath, and Father Pat Moore took up preaching the Fatima message, and with considerable success. McGrath preached mainly in the United States, while Moore preached in Canada and the Caribbean.

The Monsignor's message had a distinctly anti-communist flavor and was well received in the U.S. The impending disaster predicted at Fatima was easily identified as a Communist victory over the Western World. The Monsignor also espoused a position against the fluoridation of drinking water, and somehow linked this with the Communist conspiracy. Sometimes the Monsignor's articles were published in the Scarboro Mission magazine, much to the dismay of those who didn't link the missions with the anti-fluoridation lobby.

Father Pat Moore preached without the fluoridation content, and was not as vehemently anti-communist; however, he did reach Guyana, and because of the enthusiastic welcome and the apparent receptiveness of the East Indian population to his preaching, saw Guyana as ripe for conversion to Catholicism. He enthusiastically arranged a request that Scarboro join the Jesuits in their missionary activity. "Stumps" Evelyn (the name comes from his talent in cricket), a Creole businessman in Georgetown, became a friend of Pat Moore and an influential supporter of Scarboro's presence in Guyana. This Fatima connection was acknowledged the following year when the new parish, 'Our Lady of Fatima,' was created.

The four priests arrived in British Guiana at six in the evening, but by the time they left the terminal, it was pitch black. Being only six degrees north of the Equator, British Guiana has twelve hours of daylight and twelve hours of darkness with little variation throughout the year— instant dark and instant dawn.

Dinner awaited them at the Brickdam Cathedral presbytery in Georgetown. That evening plans were discussed concerning the taking over of parishes in the area. Berbice was about seventy miles southeast down the coast from Georgetown, across the Berbice river. The Canadian missionaries were taking over the parishes of New Amsterdam and Port Mourant immediately, and the third parish in Springlands, on the Corentyne River, would be assumed at a

later date. Ed Moriarty and Alex McIntosh were going to Berbice immediately to affect the transition from the Jesuits in Berbice, and Bas Kirby and Joe would stay in Georgetown for one month. There were two parishes in Georgetown—Bas would be in the Cathedral parish, and Joe in Sacred Heart parish. After a month, Joe would be sent to a new parish further down the coast in New Amsterdam.

Rum swizzles traditionally proceeded supper at the Sacred Heart parish, ceremoniously made by the pastor, Father Goodwin. This drink marked the end of the day. After supper, the priests usually retired to their rooms to read and pray before going to bed. Everyone went to bed early because the days began just before sunrise.

One night, Joe and Father Goodman sat talking about the cultures in Guyana. Religion was very diverse, ranging from all forms of Christianity (Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist), to Hinduism and Islam. However, despite the great diversity, there was very little religious bigotry.

“We have just about every religion under the sun here,” said Father Goodwin. “But everyone seems to be pretty tolerant of each other.”

“Why do you think that is?” Joe wanted to find out as much as possible about the place where he would live for the rest of his life.

“Oh, I don’t know. Perhaps tolerance is a tropical virtue. It’s hard to be combative in a place where the sun is always shining.”

“Well, that could be true,” Joe agreed. “I’ve heard harsh climates produce harsh people.”

Joe reminisced about the couple down the street from his house in Toronto who hated Catholics and about Dr. Shields and his anti-Catholic tirades at Jarvis Street Baptist Church. He discussed the Orange Order, an organization of fraternal protestants and described the parades

they held every year in Toronto on the 12th of July to commemorate the victory of William III at the Battle of the Boyne, a battle fought in Ireland in 1690, ensuring the continued protestant ascendancy.

“I think it’s the same in England,” replied Father Goodwin. “Religious differences don’t seem to matter as much here. British Guiana doesn’t have the long European history of religious war and intolerance. When people come here they tend to leave the old traditions and prejudices behind. Or if they brought them, they seem to dissolve over the year. Perhaps that’s what the tropics do to people.”

“Tell me about the East Indians. Before I came here I heard they were very receptive to Christianity. They showed interest in Father Moore’s Fatima crusade?”

Father Goodwin smiled. “Ah, the East Indians. The majority are Hindu, although there are some Muslims. We haven’t had much success converting them.”

“Why not?” asked Joe. “Father Moore felt that they were very religious. I guess he was quite overwhelmed by their response to his preaching.”

“Well,” he said slurping the last of his second rum swizzle, “they are religious; however, their religion is thousands of years older than Christianity. I think they have no problem accepting Christ or Father Moore’s Lady of Fatima as manifestations of God—there is plenty of room for that in the Indian pantheon. But it’s a totally different thing to tell them that Christianity is the one true religion and that they must submit to the authority of the Pope.”

He rose from the comfort of his lounge, went to his room and returned with a book. He read aloud a quote by Gandhi: “I can describe my feelings for Hinduism no more than for my wife. Not that she has no faults, but the feeling of an indissoluble bond is there. Hinduism, as I know it, entirely satisfies my soul, fills my whole being. When I see not one ray of light on the

horizon I turn to the Bhagavad Gita and find a verse to comfort me and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming sorrow.”

The priests sat in silence as the meaning of the words filled the room.

“It’s hard to want to convert a man whose religious belief entirely satisfies his soul,” said Father Goodwin.

Joe felt deflated. How would he ever satisfy his role as parish priest and convert such gratified people?

Sensing Joe’s concern, Father Goodwin continued. “There are many East Indians where you are going in Berbice, particularly in the Port Mourant and Corentyne areas. You’ll have plenty of opportunity to get to know them.”

Joe arrived in British Guiana in October of 1953, a time of political turmoil. Britain had granted a form of limited independence to the colony and elections were held for the first time in 1953. The people’s Progressive Party (PPP) were elected, led by Cheddi Jagan, an East Indian dentist from Berbice, and his Chicago-born wife Janet Forbes Burnham, a black, Oxford educated lawyer.

This government proved too leftist for England’s taste and when it began to make moves towards nationalization of the sugar, rice and mining industries and provoke labor unrest, England moved quickly. Under the cover of darkness, the Argyle and Sutherland Highland Regiment landed, and Britain suspended the new constitution and restored full power to the Governor General. The country was placed under a limited form of martial law, permits were required for assemblies, and the Highlanders were on permanent display.

The daily changing of the guard at the Government House was the occasion of much awe and delight. Most of the Guyanese had never seen men in kilts nor had they heard the skirl of the

pipes, the rhythm of the snare or the roll of the kettle drums. The Argyle and Sutherlands (an infantry line of the British Army) remained for one year in British Guiana, until they were replaced by the Black Watch (an infantry battalion of the Royal Regiment of Scotland), who remained for many years until the granting of full independence on May 26, 1966.

English is the official language of Guyana; however, during his first month in Georgetown, Joe struggled to learn the difficult Guyanese dialect. The idioms, syllable stress and cadence were so strange that it sounded like an entirely different language, and Joe often needed Father Goodwin to translate for him. Those who had gone to school spoke British English, but easily slipped in and out of dialect depending on whom they spoke to. Joe also learned that everyone's first name wasn't Juan, as he first thought. "One" was a preface the Guyanese used for personal names; "Shewon" was used for the feminine. Having a good knack for languages, Joe quickly attuned his ear to the dialect and grasped an understanding of it. He even tried to incorporate some of the expression into his sermons in order to connect better with the people.

Joe also learned that wearing a Roman collar did not necessarily exclude one from sexual advances of Guyanese women. A few weeks after he arrived, a woman offered to show him around the city. She had recently separated from her husband and wouldn't take no for an answer.

"Look Father, I'm offering you a free tour with a lovely Guyanese woman."

She wasn't particularly beautiful but her bright smile and her crimson wrap dress added to her allure. Joe couldn't help but feel a strong sexual attraction to her.

"Oh, thank you, but I wouldn't want to be a bother," he said.

"No bother, Father, come on, my car is running." She took his hand and led him outside to her small rattling car.

Joe focused hard on the road ahead, ignoring the billowing breasts that poured from the top of her tight dress. After driving him around the city she drove to the edge of the seawall and parked. Dusk quickly swept over the sky as the soft red sun sunk into the sea.

“This is the place where lovers come to be alone with each other,” she whispered as she reached over and took his hand.

Joe’s heart leapt into his throat as adrenaline raced through his body. He kept his eyes glued to the window and tried to think of something clever to say.

“Yes, I can see that it would be a good place for that sort of thing.”

He refused to look at her.

Finally, after several moments of silence, she laughed, slipped the car into gear and drove back to the presbytery.

That night, Joe couldn’t sleep. His mind was consumed by this woman; he couldn’t stop thinking about having sex with her, even though he knew he never could. He was torn between his sexual attraction to her and the guilt for having these feelings. He was a newly ordained priest, for God’s sake, not even a month in the missions, and here he was already desiring women! He decided to confess his guilty thoughts to Father Goodwin.

“I don’t know what is wrong with me,” Joe admitted. “I’m so ashamed.”

“Welcome to the club, Father McNamara.” He laughed. “Do you really think this has never happened to anyone else?”

“So, it’s normal?”

“Of course. We’re only human.” Joe felt relieved.

“But I do suggest you decline any future sightseeing offers by attractive women. Better not poke the bear, if you know what I mean.”

They both laughed as the tension in the room dissipated.

“I think it’s time for a rum swizzler,” he said, walking over to the small cart in the corner. He poured a little extra rum into the short glasses and mixed in a splash of the tropical juice.

The two priests relaxed into the deep leather loungers and shared their drinks together. The rest of the month quickly floated by and Joe prepared for his travels to New Amsterdam.

NEW AMSTERDAM

New Amsterdam, about seventy miles southeast down the coast from Georgetown is one of the largest cities in Guyana and stretches along the mouth of the Berbice River. In 1953, the only way to reach New Amsterdam was by ferry.

The dusty drive from Georgetown to the ferry crossing was long, and the crowded road bustled with trucks, bicycles, walkers, and animals. Brown, sun-kissed women carefully balanced fruits and vegetables on their heads, while donkeys brayed at wandering cows and mangey dogs chased squawking chickens.

“For God’s sake, Father, you’re far too tentative. At this rate, we’ll never get there!”

Stumps Evelyn generously offered to take Joe to New Amsterdam and suggested that Joe drive in order to gain experience driving in Guyana.

“How can I be anything but tentative on this road?” Joe asked.

“That’s the problem, you can’t be tentative. You’ll confuse everybody, including the damn chickens. They aren’t used to such consideration.”

“What am I supposed to do, run them over?”

“Father, people have spent their lives on these roads. They know how to take care of themselves, so stop confusing them and drive head on, with confidence!”

“I understand about the people, but what about the animals? The dogs and chickens. How can I have confidence in them?”

“There are too many damn dogs in Guyana, so don’t worry about them, and the chickens, if you hit any of them people will just eat them for dinner. Donkeys are a little trickier—they can really damage your vehicle.”

Inspired by Stump's suggestions, Joe pressed his foot to the floor and sped swiftly down the road, and sure enough, people moved, dogs yelped, donkeys galloped, and chickens squawked and flew in every direction. Stumps smiled; all was well again.

New Amsterdam was a town of about ten thousand people, predominantly black, with a mixture of other Guyanese races. In the surrounding countryside, all the way down to the coast was sugarcane country, and the cane cutters were chiefly East Indian.

The Church of the Ascension was an intricate wooden structure built by the Portuguese community. It was a well-established parish with all the usual parish societies: the St. Vincent De Paul Society, the Ladies of Charity, the Legion of Mary and the Catholic Nurses Guild. There was also a convent of English Ursuline nuns who ran the Catholic primary school and the High Schools for girls.

Joe's parish responsibilities included chaplaincy service at the General Hospital, the mental hospital, and at the county jail. There were also three out-mission stations attached to the parish in the three local villages. Hopetown and Belladrum were back across the Berbice River on the Georgetown Road. They were only about ten miles apart and Joe visited them on the weekends. Kwakwani, a small place carved out of the jungle, was one hundred miles up the Berbice River, and Joe visited there once every second month.

Every Saturday Joe left New Amsterdam in the parish van, crossed the Berbice River and drove down to the village of Hopetown. Although small, it was the largest of the nearby villages and therefore became the commercial and social center of the district. Cedric and Mae DeSouza owned and operated a small country store in the village. They lived in a modest apartment above the store—the place where Joe slept, ate, heard confessions and said Mass around the kitchen table on Sunday mornings.

Cedric and Mae were kind and hospitable people, and Joe always enjoyed his weekends with them. In the afternoon, he visited in the village, anointed the sick, baptized new babies, taught catechism to the local children, and then returned to the DeSouza's house for dinner. After supper, he sat on the verandah overlooking the street, enjoyed coffee, smoked cigarettes and engaged in friendly conversation.

Joe slept in a small spare room beside the kitchen, a place where he stored his few items. He was also given a threadbare mosquito net. Guyanese mosquitos are different than North American insects—they are intelligent, relentless and enormous. Joe seldom slept well because the unremitting mosquitos seemed to seek out his foreign flesh and were masters at finding the holes in the used net. Eventually Joe learned to bring newspaper with him to stuff the holes, but always put it away in the morning, careful not to offend his generous friends. He knew it was the best, if not the only net in the house.

There was no electricity in Hopetown so trips to the outhouse at night were a hazardous undertaking—visions of snakes, lizards, spiders and scorpions danced in Joe's head, but because of his inhibitions, he never dared to make use of the chamber pot provided for him. Instead he modified his elimination schedule stopping his need for trips in the night.

After performing morning Mass and confessions in the comfort of the DeSouza's kitchen, Joe packed his bags and set off for Belladrum, a smaller village ten miles down the Georgetown road. He picked up parishioners in his van along the way and returned them after Mass. Joe performed the same functions here: heard confessions, taught catechism, visited sick and baptized babies.

Jonas and Albina, an affluent couple in Belladrum, opened their house to Joe for Sunday Mass and generously provided him with a weekly breakfast. They were well known in the little

village and their busy house bustled with many children. People gathered in the open kitchen to hear Father McNamara deliver his weekly sermons and took turns afterwards to confess and be absolved from their sins.

Although well respected in the community, Joe soon discovered that Jonas and Albina were never married; they had lived together for years, but never had occasion to marry. In Guyana many children were born out of wedlock. Weddings proved very expensive, and involved many guests and a huge wedding feast; consequently, people lived together for many years, having children, while they diligently saved for their wedding ceremony. They attached no shame or stigma to these situations—no need for conspiracies of silence. However, the Catholic rules explicitly stated that to live unwed with another person and have children was a sin, forbidding them from receiving communion. Joe knew this, of course, and felt compelled to fix the problem. He addressed Albina in the comfort of her large kitchen.

“Albina, you faithfully attend religious instruction classes after Mass every Sunday. Don’t you want to receive Holy communion with your children?”

“Of course, Father. But we are not legally married.”

“I know this, but I can readily marry you right here in your house.” Their open-air house was one of the largest in the village and was lined with thick green vines and an abundance of fruit trees—a perfect setting for a small wedding.

“Marriage always brings trouble,” Jonas blurted out, crossing his thick, brown arms.

“But look,” Joe pleaded, “You’ve been with Albina for more than twenty years. You have many beautiful children. You clearly willingly support and love them. What’s the problem?”

“The problem is that married women become too comfortable and secure. They become difficult and troubled. I’ve seen a lot of good relationships ruined by marriage.” His large stature dominated the room.

“But Albina wants to be married. She wants to receive communion at Mass.” Joe tried hard to appeal to the large man’s sense of justice. “Perhaps you’re not being fair to her.”

Jonas uncrossed his arms, and turned to face the priest directly. “Maybe you’re the one not being fair.” His large voice grew louder. “Albina is a good woman, a good mother. She lives a responsible life. Why shouldn’t she be able to take communion? Because of a piece of paper?”

Joe paused—perhaps Jonas had a point. Albina was a good woman. She was a loyal partner and a loving mother, and was clearly in a situation she couldn’t control. He looked around the loving home they had created over their many years together, and heard the chatter of their happy children. Albina walked closer to him.

“We are married in our own heart, Father. Isn’t that enough?” she pleaded.

Joe stared into the dark endearing eyes as he struggled for the right answer. Was it enough? He didn’t know.

Joe had spent what seemed like a lifetime studying the Catholic doctrine, he knew the rules and yet here he was, not even six months in the middle of a small Guyanese village, ready to surrender them up to some cultural circumstance? He was supposed to be the example of the church, represent their rules.

For the next week, Joe wrestled with his conscience; he reexamined the doctrine looking for loopholes in its ideology while Albina’s kind eyes continued to unravel his logic. She was a loyal, dedicated mother and embraced Catholicism more than many people he studied with in Canada. She and her husband willingly offered up their house in order to celebrate Mass with a

foreign priest whom they hardly knew. Surely God witnessed their devotion to each other and to the Church—surely even He would overlook a minor doctrinal rule.

Joe convinced himself of this truth and returned the following week with the good news.

“Given your loyalty to your family and the church,” he announced to the couple, “I’m quite convinced that even though you don’t have the piece of paper, you’re married in God’s heart.” Looking over at Albina he said, “I’d be happy for you to receive communion with your children.”

Tears sprung to her dark eyes, as she let out a small cry.

“We are so blessed to have you, Father.” She bowed her head and knelt before him. Embarrassed by the show of gratitude, Joe quickly escorted her back up; she embraced him with the warmth of a grateful child and the uneasiness that infested his chest for the past week, quickly dissolved.

Joe usually returned to New Amsterdam in time for a shower before dinner. Rain water was collected in a large cistern beside the house and pumped up to a barrel located at the top of the shower. If he showered quickly, he could enjoy some warmth, as the hot afternoon sun heated the top of the cistern water, however, as soon as this top layer was filtered, the cool rain water returned.

The weighty priestly vestments weren’t designed with Guyana in mind, so showers were a necessity. After services Joe could almost wring the water from his heavy robes. He laughed thinking about his mother suggesting he bring his topcoat—just in case it got cool. There weren’t any cool days in Guyana. There were, however, many rainy days, especially at Christmas time. There were no sounds of sleigh bells, sights of reindeer or dreams of white Christmases; instead,

Christmas was associated with lush green foliage and rain. It was also a time of grand preparation and serious devotion.

The Christmas Novena, a Portuguese tradition, began nine days before Christmas day. The Novena was a time for repentance, a time for sinners to atone and get back on track, a time for those who never attended Mass throughout the year to come, confess their sins and promise change. Confessions were heard at four-thirty every morning, and Mass was celebrated at five. Despite the heavy rains, church was packed every day and lines for the confessional were always long.

Joe was excited to celebrate Mass on the first day. He prepared a short sermon, thinking this would help him get through the long line of confessions. He preached about God's great, everlasting love and the Incarnation of Christ. He thought he'd succeeded until Patrick, a regular churchgoer and member of several parish organizations, approached him.

"Father, if you don't mind, I'd like to speak with you about an important matter."

"Sure, Patrick," said Joe. "Have a seat."

"No, Father," he said. "I'd rather stand." The small room in the front of the church filled with a nervous tension.

"What can I help you with?"

"Well Father, I know you're young and new to this country, but I don't think you understand Christmas Novena."

"Okay, what do you think I don't understand?"

"There are two things wrong. First off, your sermon was too short."

"Too short? I thought people would be happy with a short sermon."

“Well, we aren’t. Look, we get up early, we get dressed in our best clothes, we come fasting and hungry, and we come in the rain. We go through a lot of trouble to get here so we don’t expect to get short changed. We want our money’s worth.”

“Well, how long are we talking about?”

“At least a good half hour. I mean, it’s only fair that you do your part, if we’re going to do ours.”

“I see.” Joe tried not to be offended. “Do you think everyone feels this way?”

“I think so, and if they don’t, they should.”

Joe took a deep breath.

“All right,” he said. “What’s the second thing?”

Patrick sat down, pulled his chair closer to Joe and spoke with increasing confidence and conviction. “Well Father, it’s about your sermon—it’s too pleasant, too nice.”

“Too pleasant? What do you mean?” The frustration in his voice sifted through, as he shifted in his seat.

“The Bible says that there is a season for everything under heaven. A time for tears, a time for laughter, a time for mourning and for dancing.”

“Yes, Patrick, Ecclesiastes, I know the passage. Please get to the point.”

Patrick raised himself up, as if preparing for a performance. He inhaled deeply and began: “My point is that Christmas novena is not the time for being nice, it’s the time for preaching hell and damnation. It’s a time for calling sinners to repent. There are many sinners in the congregation, and don’t think I exclude myself, because, I don’t. I am a sinner! Therefore, we all need to hear a strong call to repentance!” The loud words poured into the small room, filling

it with intensity. When he reached the end, Patrick sat down, fatigued by his theatrical performance.

Joe needed time to reflect. He arose quickly, thanked Patrick for his suggestions and escorted him to the door at the front of the church.

“I appreciate you coming to see me, Patrick, I’ll give your words some thought.”

Joe had spent seven years trying to free himself from his own personal visions of Hell and punishment, so he certainly wasn’t prepared to abandon his hard-won freedom just because Patrick wanted the devil gleefully heaping coals on the fires of hell.

He decided to go and see Mother Magdalene, the superior of the Ursuline convent. She had won the confidence of her pupils and their parents over the past ten years; therefore, Joe was sure she would know what to do.

“Father, I think Patrick was just a little disappointed,” she advised. “The Christmas Novena is a one of the great events of the year in New Amsterdam. The people look forward to it for months, much in the same way you might look forward to a play or a concert. If it was too short, you’d be disappointed too. Perhaps, you should see it as a compliment—he wanted more of you.”

“Okay Mother, I can accept that, but what about the fire and brimstone?”

“Well I know you’re not going to preach that—which I’m glad about.”

“Patrick isn’t,” Joe said. “I think he wants me to scare people, especially those who don’t come to Mass very often.”

“I’m sure he does,” she agreed. “His intentions are noble. He really is a good man, he just sees the Novena as an opportunity to reach those people and bring them back to their religion.”

“So do I, but not with pitchforks, burning fires and the screams of the damned.”

“With what, then?” she asked.

“With the hell that we create for ourselves and for others by our sins, and the consequent loss of God and those we love.”

“Go preach that then,” said Mother Magdalene.

Joe took the nun’s advice and the next morning felt great satisfaction as he watched Patrick nod in affirmation while he delivered his sermon—a speech that lasted half an hour.

Unfortunately, Joe did not finish celebrating the Novena in New Amsterdam because he was ordered to go to Kwakwani for Christmas. He was a little disappointed, as the Novena had geared him up to celebrate with the people there, and he wanted to celebrate Christmas dinner with the three other priests who were getting together; however, Father Moriarity, the pastor and Scarboro superior, had visited Kwakwani during the first month and promised Nick Hurley, the American mine manager, that a priest would be there for Christmas.

KWAKWANI

Kwakwani was a company town complete with a hospital and a resident doctor and nurses, a school, a non-denominational chapel, a staff compound and club house, and a well laid-out section with recreational facilities for local workers, spread out on the site of the bauxite mining operations owned by the Reynolds Metal Company. The housing, pay and benefits rose above the usual Guyanese standards; it was a very desirable job.

The drawback was the isolation. Kwakwani was a hundred miles upriver from New Amsterdam. Twice a week a company tug picked up bauxite and transported it on a large barge downriver. For most people, this was their only means of transportation.

The trip upriver was slow, taking almost twenty hours. Coming downstream was always a little faster, even though the tug was pushing a barge loaded with bauxite. Joe's first Christmas trip upriver was crowded. There were about fifteen passengers including school children joining their parents for holidays, American wives returning from shopping in Georgetown, and Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders. During the day the passengers talked, played cards and suntanned, and in the evening, they sang Christmas carols. There was a small room for sleeping but only six people could fit, so these were offered to the children and elderly.

It was Joe's first Christmas away from home and was so entirely different from what he knew. He sat by himself on the drifting boat surrounded by the sounds of the jungle. Screeching cicadas and howling monkeys filled the warm air, as an endless array of stars sparkled in the vast sky. As he drifted in the darkness, Joe's memories pulled him back in time to his childhood Christmases, a time when pillowcases waited patiently at the foot of his bed for Santa Claus, while his small body, consumed with excitement, flitted around under the restless sheets. He thought about his parents and wondered how they would spend this Christmas without their

children. He also thought about his own journey and reflected on all the events that led him to this floating barge in the middle of the jungle.

Joe arrived in Kwakwani mid-morning on Christmas Eve. He was exhausted, so after a tour of the town and the mining operation, he ate a quick lunch and went to sleep for a few hours in preparation for confessions and midnight Mass. By the time he arrived that evening there was a long line of people winding around the small, open air chapel, waiting to confess their sins.

Hearing confessions is hard work. After several hours it becomes tedious, as one confession blurs into the next. A priest must struggle to stay attentive and concentrate. Joe worked hard to remind himself of his own difficulties with confession—his own shyness and embarrassment predisposed him to empathy. He remembered that people weren't confessing to him, they were confessing to God, and he was God's instrument—a huge responsibility.

Joe finished hearing the last confession just before midnight Mass, and entered the main part of the chapel that was packed with people. All of the American staff, the miners, their families were there, along with local Catholics, Protestants and Hindus. This Mass was a grand celebration that continued well into the night. The following day, Joe celebrated Mass in the late morning and then visited the local hospitals to anoint the sick. It was there that he first met Sukmattee, a young girl who would impact his life forever.

Sukmattee was a twelve-year-old Hindu girl, who was in the hospital suffering from typhoid fever. One of the nurses, Elizabeth de Freitas, a member of the parish and the Catholic Nurses guild, introduced Joe to the sick girl. She had spent a lot of time with Sukmattee, providing her with medical care and answering her endless questions about the Christian religion. Joe instantly became endeared to the young girl, and spent many hours with her during

his monthly visits to Kwakwani. She was smart and inquisitive and very interested in Catholicism.

After several months, it became clear that Sukmattee might not recover. Joe realized this, but he couldn't find the words to tell her. Instead, he spoke with her about God and life after death.

“Father,” she declared. “I want to become a Christian.”

Joe was surprised and knew that this was no simple matter. She was only twelve and lived with her family across the river. She depended on them until her marriage, which would presumably be to a young Hindu boy. He knew he had to respect the wishes of her family.

“I think your family would have great difficulty with this, Sukmattee.”

“It doesn't matter, Father. I will always want to be a Christian.”

“You're so young. Perhaps wait till you're older to make this decision.”

“Fine, but I know that I won't change my mind. I will become a Christian.”

Within another month the fever completely ravaged Sukmattee's young body.

“Father, I know I'm not going to get better, and will soon die. I've accepted this, but please—I want to die a Christian. I want to be with God forever,” she pleaded.

Joe was heartbroken and knew he couldn't deny this young girl her dying wish.

“Of course, Sukmattee. I will give you a blessing and bring water to baptize you in the morning.”

She smiled weakly as he blessed her and kissed her forehead.

“Goodnight my sweet girl,” he whispered. “Get some rest.” He quietly left the room as she drifted off into a deep sleep.

The next morning Elizabeth de Freitas came to see Joe—something was wrong.

“Father, she is gone. Our sweet Sukmattee died during the night.”

Joe swallowed hard, trying to keep the knot from escaping his throat.

“But don’t worry, Father, I baptized her before she died, and gave her the Christian name, Elizabeth. She was so happy, so at peace.”

Joe tried to find comfort in these words, but the pang of regret sunk deep into the pit of his stomach.

“She did have a final request from you, Father. She wants you to bury her.”

Regret was quickly replaced by panic.

“Her family came early to take her body across the river back to their small village. You will have to travel there immediately, as the funeral is this afternoon.”

Same day burial was usual in Guyana. Embalming was not the practice and the heat demanded prompt burial. When a person died during the night or in the early morning, the church bell rang, people gathered to find out who died, and the funeral was held in the afternoon. If the death was later in the day, the funeral was the next morning and the body was preserved by placing ice blocks on the corpse which was laid in a wooden box. In the morning the ice was removed, the body dressed and placed in a coffin.

“Miss De Freitas, does her family know that Sukmattee was baptized?”

“Oh yes Father, I told them. But I don’t think they understood.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure they understand the meaning of baptism. They are Hindu, of course, and have limited understanding of Christian practices.”

“Well do they know I’m coming to the burial?”

“I think so, Father. I mean I told them, but again, I’m not sure they understood.”

Joe became tentative. It would be a time-consuming trip, especially with the ferry crossing on the river and he didn't have any clear directions as to where she actually lived, other than "Village #2" –meaning the second village northwest of the Berbice river. Joe didn't even know the family name, and, if they rejected him, it could be a complete waste of time.

"You must go, Father," Elizabeth said, sensing his apprehension. "It was her last wish."

Joe drove to the wharf, boarded the ferry, and drove to the second village down the river. He inquired at the local rum shop and was told that the funeral was already in progress at the graveyard across the rice fields. It was being conducted by the local Hindu priest. Joe resisted the urge to turn around and forced himself forward through the field to the large gathering of people. Sukmattee died a Christian and deserved a Christian funeral.

Joe eased his way through the crowd to the gravesite where the Hindu priest said rites and placed the symbolic offerings of food into the grave to sustain Sukmattee on her journey through death to her new life. Joining his hands together in the traditional Indian greeting, Joe bowed deeply and explained his presence. He told them of his time spent with Sukmattee and asked if he could pray and give his blessing at the grave.

"We are honored that you have come to join us." The Hindu priest swept his hand towards the grave. "Please give your blessing."

Joe read the Catholic prayers for the deceased and, making the sign of the cross over the small dirt plot, blessed her grave. Then he stepped back and listened as the Hindu priest finished his own prayers. When the ceremony finished, Joe bowed silently, breathed a sigh of relief, and turned towards the rice field.

"Father," said the priest. "Don't leave. I have some questions for you."

Joe turned back around to see the dark face of the Hindu priest, staring into his own. His anxiety returned.

“I want to know why you encouraged Sukmattee to change her religion and become a Christian?”

“Please let me explain.” Joe said, prepared for the inquisition. “I did not encourage Sukmattee to change her religion. She asked me to explain our Christian religion and when she got really sick. She insisted on becoming a Christian. It was her wish.”

“But she was only twelve and still in her parents’ house. Still under their guidance and control. How could she know what she wanted?”

“I agree and told her this. I insisted she wait until she was older to see if this was really what she wanted. But when she knew she was dying she decided she couldn’t wait. Surely you would not deny the dying girl her wish.”

“Perhaps not,” he said, “but I know that you Christians believe and teach that your religion is the true religion and that all others are false. Think of what this does to her family. Having her deny her own customs, deny all she has ever known.”

“I assure you, I had no intentions of her rejecting her family. I simply gave her what she asked for.”

“You told that little girl that it was necessary for her to be baptized in order to enter heaven, so you must have wanted to baptize her.”

Joe took a deep breath, realizing he was entering the realm of theological discussion—something he had spent his lifetime studying.

“No, I don’t think that it was necessary that Sukmattee be baptized in order to enter heaven. She was a good person who loved God, the name doesn’t matter—the reality of God is what matters.”

“What about Christ? She doesn’t need to accept Christ to enter heaven?” asked the well-informed priest.

“Yes, we believe that she needs Christ to enter heaven. Everyone enters heaven because of His redemption. Not everyone knows Christ, but they reach salvation only because of Him.”

“Do you think other religions are wrong then?”

“Not wrong. Incomplete. God speaks and reveals Himself through all creation and through all religions which seek Him. But we believe that God has spoken definitively and fully through Christ and His Church.”

“Where do you think Sukmattee is right now?” the priest asked.

“She is beyond time and space, united with God.” Joe responded. “Where do *you* think she is?”

“I don’t know. We believe the soul is governed by karma. Sukmattee will be continually reborn until she reaches salvation and is released from rebirth.”

Joe thought about the Christian doctrine of purgatory, where the soul is purified until it is ready to see God—essentially not so different from the doctrine of rebirth. The crowd listened intently to the theological discussion, signaling their agreement and disagreement with conventional nodding and shaking of heads. Finally, the Indian priest brought the dialogue to an end: “I appreciate you coming to Sukmattee’s burial and for sharing your views. Although you acknowledge some truths and goodness in our religion, you believe that God really wants all Hindus to become Christian. We do not claim such exclusive rights to the mind of God.”

As Joe drove back to New Amsterdam, he thought over the events of the day. He was relieved that he was accepted so openly by the Hindu community and was permitted to perform his own Christian burial rites and was somewhat amazed that he was received with such kindness and civility. If the situation were reversed, he doubted that a Hindu priest would have received such an accommodating welcome.

Joe also thought about the priest's summation. It was true, he was there to convert people to Christianity, and he couldn't pretend otherwise. However, he didn't believe this prevented one from believing that God worked differently in various religions. It didn't mandate that he cram this religion down anyone's throat or force this belief on others. But was the threat of eternal damnation force? Joe wasn't certain. He thought about the statement that made him want to be a missionary: "Your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven." Preaching was this light and surely there is no force in that; God disposes, changes, converts. Joe held fast to this belief—he was God's instrument and would do what it took to convert these people.

CONGESTIVE HEART FAILURE

I arrived at the hospital by 6:30 am and raced to Emergency. Seeing my desperation, the nurse at the front desk quickly buzzed me through the heavy mechanical doors and directed me to my father. His tired chest rose and fell and rattled with fluid.

“He’s stabilized,” she said. “Much better than he was. I told your brother to take your mom home to sleep for a bit. I’d call if anything changes.”

“Thanks,” I said and dragged the heavy chair over to the side of his bed. I leaned forward and rested my head on the cool white sheet.

“Hey kid,” he whispered. “You came.”

“It’s good to see you, dad.” I let out a long sigh of relief. I wasn’t too late. I had made it.

“Did you come up for the surgery?” he asked.

I was confused. I was told he had suffered a mild heart attack, but knew that no one would perform surgery on an 89-year-old man in his frail condition.

“What do you mean?”

“My heart surgery. You came up for that?”

My father had had open-heart surgery twenty years ago, a successful procedure that almost killed him. During the surgery, his body reacted to the frozen plasma, causing the surgeon to rapidly reopen his chest and massage his heart to stop it from erupting. Once stabilized, however, he bought himself another eighteen years of fine living.

“Dad, are you on pain meds?” His watery eyes glazed over, as he stared into the blank curtain ahead of him. He pursed his gray lips and motioned with his skinny hand for me to come closer.

“You see those guys out there?” he whispered. “They are putting stuff in this,” he said pointing to his IV. “They think I don’t notice, but I know.” I looked around the dividing curtain that created the illusion of rooms and saw two nurses talking at a small vitals cart across the hall.

“Dad, I’m sure they just gave you some pain meds for your chest.”

“No!” he insisted. “I hear them talking all night. They keep me drugged, so I don’t know what’s happening.”

“Listen, dad, I’m sure it’s just to manage your pain, so it doesn’t hurt so much.”

A strange look captured his face. He glared intensely at me thinking perhaps I was part of the conspiracy.

“Seriously, dad, you are safe here.” His eyes shifted back to the blank space ahead of him spellbound by the billowing curtain.

“I’ll be right back, okay?”

I slipped from the small room, turned the corner and sobbed into the unyielding white wall.

My father was diagnosed with terminal heart disease and congestive heart failure three years earlier and had visibly suffered for the past two years. His once robust frame quickly dissolved into frailty as his old loose skin hung on his tired bones. His heart fluttered back and forth between atrial fibrillation and ventricular tachycardia, causing him to lose his breath and sometimes pass out. He carried nitroglycerin in his pocket: he sprayed the nitro onto his tongue and it instantly caused his arteries to dilate and restore his breath. At night, his lungs filled with fluid despite his raised bed, and he coughed continually. My father hacked so intensely that his

face turned purple, causing him to panic. Inevitably his esophagus relaxed allowing the air to seep back into his lungs and bring back his color. Then, finally, he would slip into an exhausted sleep.

The impending death of a parent is a strange thing to get used to, especially when you live far away. I moved to Virginia from Niagara Falls, Canada, ten years ago, and when my father got sick, I had to live with the consequences. I never got used to the dramatic calls from my brother, relaying the details of my father's latest episode. The severity of his condition was often dictated by the time of day—a call in the middle of the night was always bad news.

My father had passed out at home on a Sunday afternoon. My mom broke her promise to him and called 911. The ambulance rushed him to the hospital where they thought he had suffered a mild heart attack. Given his already weak condition, things did not look good.

Within two days, my father's condition had rapidly declined. His skeletal body had filled completely with fluid, and he was consumed with morphine. My mother, brothers and I took vigil around his bed, and when the length between his shallow breaths became insufferably prolonged, we would hold our own, sure this one was his last.

On Wednesday afternoon, the doctor announced that he would not make it through the day. His medications were stopped, tubes were removed and people were called. Family friends came in droves to say farewell and offer us support. Songs were played, tears were shed and the last rites were performed. All that was left now was to wait.

Throughout the night, my father's body began shuddering and his legs seemed to march steadily beneath the clean white sheets, as if he were climbing steps to the afterlife. Abruptly, at three in the morning, with his palms facing outward and arms raised my father spoke.

“Panem nostrum cotidianum da nobis nodie; et dimitte nobis debita nostra.”

I was awestruck. Frozen. Unable to process what was happening, I thought I must be captured in a dream. But then, it continued:

“Sicut et mos dimittimus debitoribus nostris; sed libera nos a malo.” His clear voice echoed throughout the small room.

“What the hell is going on?” My brother rose from the heavy chair as if ready to fight a demon.

“It’s the Lord’s prayer,” my mother explained. “He’s saying Mass.” She was old enough to remember when the Catholic services were said in Latin.

We stared down at the frail body from which the strange words had erupted and watched as the blue eyes searched for sight, as if fighting to come back to life.

“Am I dead?” A look of panic invaded his face, as he waved his head back and forth, trying to see.

“No, Dad, you’re not dead.” Tracking the direction of the sound, he moved his head towards my voice.

“Are you dead?” he asked.

“No, Dad, no one is dead,” I answered.

“Where are you, Kerry? I can’t see you.” He reached out his hand.

“I’m here, Dad, sitting beside you.” I clutched his hand leading him to my direction.

“Joe,” my mother interrupted. “You’re okay. We’re all here with you.”

“Margaret, where are you? I can’t find you.”

“Joe, I’m right here. I’ve been here the whole time.”

“Oh, thank God, thank God you’re here.” She wrapped herself around his bony shoulders, as he clung to her like a small child.

“It’s okay, Joe. You can go. We’re all ready.”

“I’m trying,” he whispered, “but I just can’t get home.”

In a moment, my father slipped back into a deep sleep and didn’t wake for several hours.

When his eyes opened again, he glanced directly over at my and smiled warmly, as if he had finally found his way through an elaborate labyrinth.

“Do you still love Shakespeare, Kerry?”

A smile broke through my tears, “Yes, Dad, I still love Shakespeare.” I couldn’t believe he had returned to us again.

“Where’s that damn Mike?” he questioned with a harsher tone.

“Dad, I’m here,” Mike said moving closer to the bed.

“It’s 3 am?”

“Oh, my God, dad, how do you know this?” Mike asked, believing perhaps he possessed some mystical power.

“Cause it says it right there on the wall.” He pointed a skinny arm to the clock that hung high on the wall directly across from his bed. We all laughed, breaking the terrible silence that had occupied the room for the past two days.

“How long have I been here?”

“You’ve been in the hospital for three days,” Mike said. “We thought you were gone.”

“No wonder you all look so rough.” He smiled as he reached out for my mom’s hand.

“We thought you were gone,” she whispered, trying to keep her composure.

“I know,” he smiled at her. “Thanks for going through this with me. I know it’s been rough.”

We all moved closer to the bed, wrapping ourselves together, huddled in our familial unit feeling as though this closeness would give us the continued strength to endure.

The only explanation offered by the doctors the next day was that sometimes patients can rally the day before they die. They instructed us to enjoy our time with him, because it certainly wouldn't last long.

By Saturday, my father was up and walking around, and eating food that we brought in from his favorite Italian restaurant. He hadn't taken any of his medication; however, his legs were without fluid for the first time in months, and his vitals were all within the normal range. It was incomprehensible. By Sunday, my mother had convinced enough people at the hospital that she had the proper home care available and he was discharged.

His final wish was granted— he would die at home.

THE PALMS

With the arrival of more Canadian priests in Guyana, the Scarboro missions began building a new church in Georgetown dedicated to Our Lady of Fatima—a new parish carved out from the Cathedral and the Sacred Heart. Interrupting the chaotic driving routes of the old, ramshackle cars, the large site was planted in the middle of the city, squeezed among the crowded city dwellings. A thin layer of dust covered the colorful canopies of the market vendors and locals loudly bartered over the noisy machines in hopes of attaining a fair price. The construction was projected to take five to six months.

In the spring of 1955, Joe and Ed Moriarty were ordered to leave New Amsterdam and join another priest, Ken MacAulay, to help with the development of the new parish in Georgetown. They were stationed in a large house near the building site. The main room sat on the bottom floor of the house and served as the interim chapel while the new church was built. Locals stuffed themselves into the airless room for Mass while the priests attempted to create a sacred place of worship. Joe regarded the stifling heat as an incentive for a life of piety—a warning of what life was like in the fiery pits of hell.

Having spent two years in New Amsterdam, particularly in the remote villages of Hopetown and Kwakwani, Joe was reluctant to return to the fast pace of the city and wondered why he was continually moved. His relationships with the villagers had blossomed into meaningful friendships and his visions of the missionary life were finally a reality. He found acceptance and intimacy among the people and felt that they finally appreciated and trusted him—he worried about starting all over again.

The parish at Georgetown bustled with people who eagerly became active members of the Fatima community. Joe became invigorated by the busyness and found comfort in living with

his Canadian comrades. Ken and Joe worked closely together and, because there was little recreation outside of the parish, they found solace in cribbage games and discussing the ever-present community members.

Like the city itself, the parish was divided along city lines and the three priests distributed their duties accordingly; Joe oversaw the Queenstown and Albertown sections. The parish became central to their lives. Celebrating many weddings, saying funerals masses, going on sick calls and teaching religious instruction classes, Joe happily threw himself into his work. Visits to The Palms, a dilapidated building in the middle of the city that housed the poor and destitute, and filled with residents were often physically and mentally disabled and unable to look after themselves, were rotated, as the priests couldn't bear the weight of the dreaded place on their own. Run by the government, with very little funding, The Palms had few resources. In a poor country, the poorhouse is unimaginably poor.

Joe's first trip to The Palms was haunting. The old building teetered on its tired limbs, and the stench of sweat dripped from its dirty walls. The makeshift rooms were divided by sheets and behind them half naked-residents sat rocking back and forth on flat, tattered mattresses. Other residents wandered around murmuring to themselves, while others huddled on the ground, swallowed by the dark corners. The smell of urine and feces infected the air.

When Joe arrived holding his gleaming gold urn of communion, he entered slowly, fearful of what he might find. He held his breath, as sweat dripped steadily underneath his heavy black robe, and prayed that it wouldn't be as bad as the priests' warnings had promised. He navigated around the naked bodies that were scattered about the floor and tried to smile at the few staff members who cleaned up after the helpless residents. The putrid smell invaded his senses with such vengeance, that he continually fought to keep from vomiting.

In a small room at the end of the main hallway, two young men resided. One was crippled and slowly dying of a degenerative disease. The other was classified an 'idiot' and lived on the floor chained to the crippled boy's bed. The only sounds he made were those resembling an animal, and, like an animal, he ate from a bowl on the floor. The crippled boy looked after his friend as best he could, making sure that he ate, and cleaned up his urine and feces. Joe was tormented by this situation, making the only reconciliation that he could: love was possible even in the worst of situations.

Desperate to find some reprieve from the despair that crept over him, Joe focused on a tiny woman sitting in the main room seated under a small, clouded window. He walked over to meet her.

"You're new," she said as her lifeless legs sat crumpled under her stool as her sightless eyes stared blankly ahead of her. "I'm glad you came."

Joe fought the nausea that sat in his throat and searched for words of comfort to make this dreadful place better.

"Do you believe in God?" he asked.

"Of course, Father."

"That's wonderful. He's our savior...even in tough times."

"He gave me my life, so I'm thankful to Him."

Joe wondered how Mary could possibly be thankful for her tortured life? How could she not feel forgotten or abandoned? But he knew better than to ask such questions, after all, he was supposed to be God's representative—he was supposed to give solace to the sorrowful, hope to the weak, but instead he just felt sick; all he wanted was leave and never return.

He stared down at the frail woman, held the palm of his hand over her head and whispered a short prayer. Then he placed the Communion wafer into her hand.

“May Christ be with you.”

“And also with you,” she said and placed the clean white wafer into her mouth while she folded her head into her sunken chest.

Mary had been a resident of The Palms for years. She always received Communion and was pleasant to anyone who bothered to speak to her. She believed her blindness and inability to walk were God’s plan for her and she was content to wait patiently to be called home to His kingdom. Mary never sought theological explanations or reassurances from Joe, as he seemed powerless to offer her any.

Joe never got used to visiting The Palms, and when it was his turn to deliver communion, even though he looked forward to seeing Mary, he wished, for her sake, that she was swiftly delivered into God’s home. The Palms forced him to confront his faith and required him to re-evaluate his view of God’s mercy. He often wondered, had these poor people brought their condition on themselves? Was it the result of a previous life? Or was it simply, as he had been taught from childhood, a mystery? A mystery for which there was no human explanation?

Joe found no explanation for such a Godless place, but his experiences had certainly shaken his belief system and uprooted his faith at its very core, causing him to question everything he had ever known.

Within six months, Joe was transferred out of the city to a small village at the end of the Guyanese coast line, and although he never returned to The Palms, the images of Mary and the two young men branded themselves into his mind forever.

SPRINGLANDS

In January 1956, Joe was appointed pastor of the new parish in Springlands, the third parish in Berbice that Scarboro missions had assumed. It was south-east from New Amsterdam, on the mouth of the Corentyne River, which separated Guyana from Suriname and Dutch Guiana. To him, it seemed like the end of the world.

Having spent the last six months in Georgetown, racing around trying to keep up with the demands of the city folk, Springlands was an adjustment for Joe. The population was almost exclusively East Indian. They farmed and worked as cane-cutters on the local sugar estate. Most of the residents were Hindu or Muslim, knew little about Christianity, and didn't seem too interested in it at all. There were few parishioners, just a few of the managers on the sugar estates, the Portuguese Royal Bank manager and his family, and a handful of locals. They made few demands; in fact, during his first week in Springlands not one person came to the parish house. With no other priest to discuss his options, he concluded that in order for this parish to thrive, he needed to become a true missionary. He had to sift among the locals and work hard to convert them and grow the parish.

Joe succeeded a tall, raw-boned man named Father Wilson-Browne. He was an intellectually brilliant, hard as nails, chain-smoking, whiskey-appreciating botanist who preferred to spend his time upriver in the jungle among the aboriginal Indians than in the confines of the parish. After leaving Springlands, Wilson-Browne happily went into the dense interior of Guyana near the Brazilian border.

When Joe arrived, there were no parish organizations and no catechism class; therefore the only orientation needed came from a house boy Wilson-Browne left behind. This boy came in once a day to prepare dinner and do a little cleaning. The rest of the time Joe was alone.

Neither the seminary nor his previous parish experience in New Amsterdam prepared him for the isolation and solitude of Springlands. On Saturdays he heard a few confessions and on Sundays he celebrated Mass but had nothing to do the rest of the week. He figured perhaps this was God's next test for him—an opportunity for him to function without praise, reception or companionship. He knew he must rise to the occasion and prove himself able to meet any demand.

In Springlands, the church and the house were in a large compound. The church was a small wooden structure with a modest house attached to the back. Like most buildings in the village, it sat on high ground to avoid flooding and to capture the cool trade-winds. At night wandering donkeys found their way into the compound, despite the closed gate. They huddled together for company and comfort right under Joe's bedroom floor. If they were quiet, he wouldn't have cared much, but they grunted and brayed all night. Initially Joe got up, got dressed and herded them out of the compound—not an easy task. However, despite his nightly ejections, the donkeys returned every single night. Desperate for a solution, he encountered a young Muslim who lived across the road from the church.

“How are you doing with the donkeys, Father?” Mohammad asked, noticing the dark circles under the priest's weary eyes.

“Not well.”

“I see you're becoming a skilled donkey herder.”

Joe laughed. “But apparently to no avail,” he said. “They keep returning. Any suggestions?”

“I think you should just accept them.”

“But they're so loud.”

“But weren’t there donkeys present at the birth of Jesus in the stable? Didn’t Jesus enter Jerusalem riding on the back of a donkey?”

“Are you a Christian?”

“No,” Mohammad replied, “I just know some things about your stories.”

“Well, you make a good point.”

“Actually, if you were really a holy person,” Mohammad continued, “you’d allow the local people to graze their donkeys in the church compound.”

“Really?” Joe replied, “Why so?”

“This would encourage them to look favorably upon your Church.”

Joe thought about the suggestion and faced with the sound logical and biblical argument, he conceded and learned to live with the noisy animals under his bedroom floor; they wooed him to sleep with their rhythmic braying. He also considered hiring Mohammad as his public relations consultant, as Joe instantly gained favor by the community, particularly with the local donkey owners.

Mohammad was a young man in his twenties. His father worked on the sugar estates and his mother, assisted by her son and daughter, operated a dry good shop in the front section of their house. After he helped Joe solve the donkey dilemma, Mohammad started hanging around the church, and, although satisfied with his own Islamic religion, he was curious and wanted to learn more about Christianity. Joe was delighted to have someone to talk to, so he happily agreed to attend the gathering.

One day Mohammad invited Joe to his house to share in one of the family celebrations. Joe readily accepted, seeing it as a great opportunity to meet some of the villagers and welcomed the delicacy of an elaborate meal—his stomach had acclimatized to the hot Indian curried dishes.

There were many family members there and a few local friends; they readily welcomed the priest into their festivities. Near the end of dinner an older woman positioned herself close to Joe, as if she'd been waiting the whole night to ask the question so many wondered about.

“So, why aren't you married? Don't you like women?”

A hush fell over the lively room as they all waited for the answer.

“Ha, yes, yes... I like women,” he responded.

“Well then, why aren't you married? There are plenty of young women in this village to choose from. Many would be happy to marry you.”

“No, no it's not like that. You see, I'm a Catholic priest and Catholic priests don't marry. We give up marriage, so we can devote ourselves entirely to God.”

“That's very strange,” she said. “God created men and women to be together. You seem to be going against God.”

Like any good missionary, Joe seized the chance to explain the Catholic ideology. He spoke about Christ, the Church, the priesthood and the sacraments. He explained how celibacy was following in Christ's footsteps, a sign of true devotion to God.

“That's foolishness!” she exclaimed. “I understand what you say about your church, but not to marry, that is against nature.”

“But look,” Joe said, “India has holy men. Look at the Saddus. They don't marry.”

“The Saddus are crazy men. It's good they don't marry. Look at the holy Prophet Mohammed. He was married. You're not crazy. You should marry.”

Joe had momentarily forgotten that these people were Muslim not Hindu, but he couldn't think of any Muslim examples to make his point.

Then the woman motioned the daughter of the household, Mohammad's sister, over to her.

"Look at this lovely young woman. She likes you. She would make a good wife. She would look after you and your household. She would comfort you and give you many beautiful children. She would even become a Christian and then many of us would come to your church."

The girl smiled and bowed her head demurely. The rest of the company smiled and murmured their agreement.

Joe took a deep breath; this was not going the way he'd expected.

"Yes," he said. "She's lovely and I'm sure she will make a wonderful wife, but as I already explained, I cannot marry. I hope you understand."

"We do," said Mohammed's father, intercepting the older woman's speech. "Sorry Father, let's move on and enjoy the feast." He waved the old woman away from the priest and stayed close to him for the rest of the night.

When he returned to his home across the street, Joe couldn't help but feel deflated. He felt that his missionary efforts were failing as he seemed unable to connect with the people.

On his next visit, Mohammed apologized.

"You know what older women are like," he said. "They feel they can say anything they want and love to be match makers, but everyone enjoyed your visit. They like you, think you're a good person."

"Thanks," replied Joe. "I just wish I'd explained myself more clearly."

"You explained yourself well, Father. You just need to remember that it is difficult for any Muslim to understand a life without women and children. For us a man without a woman is incomplete. Your kind of life is difficult to accept."

“I know, it is for me too sometimes.” Mohammad could feel the dejection in his friend’s voice.

“You know, Father, it’s not a bad suggestion. If you were to marry, not necessarily my sister—even though she does like you—you might make many more converts in the village.”

Joe had looked for ways to reach out to the people but knew that Mohammad’s way wouldn’t go over well with Bishop or Scarboro missions; he’d have to find other ways to make connections.

SIPARATU

Joe developed a life of prayer and study. In the afternoons he ventured into the town to visit the few parishioners and establish some visibility in the community. He hoped that in time he would get to know the community needs and develop some parish programs. A break in this routine came once a month when Joe visited Siparuta, the Indian mission Wilson-Brown established some sixty miles up the Corentyne River.

Siparuta was a primitive Indian village deep in the jungle of Guyana. Wilson-Browne discovered the place while tooling around the jungle in his motor-boat and created a Catholic mission there to help bridge the gap between the Native and European cultures. The village was just up from the bank of the river and remained virtually untouched by the modern world. There was no electricity or plumbing and housing consisted of thatched huts, earthen floors and hammock beds. The Indians wore traditional clothing—a little more than a swath of material covering their genitals. Colorful beads dangled from their necks, complementing the length of their long, dark hair. Babies clung safely to their mother's bare chests and nursed whenever their stomachs grew hungry.

Thin layers of woven palms thatched the roof of the open-air church which also served as a school and as the sleeping quarters for the priest when he visited. The government supplied a teacher, a widower who, due to her love of the aboriginals and her Christian commitment, had come to live on the mission. She served as a catechist as well as a teacher when the priest was gone and looked after the church and the school. The mission and the school received government funding and the Arawak Indians received small subsidies to augment their hunting and fishing. Like many aboriginals, the Arawaks were caught between cultures. Exposed to European influence and progress, they no longer had the strength or stability to sustain their own

culture. The Indians needed the Catholic subsidies, so they adopted some Catholic beliefs blended with their own native ones to bridge the gap between their own world and the wealthy world of the white people.

Lacking both navigational and mechanical skills, Joe travelled to Siparuta as a passenger with a Portuguese trader named Crispin Gonsalves. He was a well-known trader with the Indians and brought European novelties like condensed milk and candies. As the new priest assigned to the mission, Joe was responsible for handling all conflicts and complaints.

On one particular trip to the Indian village, he was approached by one of the largest Indians of the group. Dark feathered hair covered his bare chest. A bright yellow sash wrapped around his waist. The three black slashes painted on his cheeks moved as he spoke.

“I want to speak about the trader.”

“Okay, how can I help?” Joe was excited to be involved with the natives.

“It’s not fair,” complained the Indian. “He brings these things and charges too much for them.”

Joe recognized the monopoly Crispin held on the Indians.

“Okay, I will talk to him about the prices.”

“Thank you.”

“But,” Joe advised, “if the prices are too high then why do you buy the items?”

The large Indian furrowed his brow in contemplation, as he considered the question.

“Your people have existed for a long time without these items surely condensed milk and candies aren’t essential to your life.”

Shaking his head, the Indian agreed and seemed satisfied with the priest’s suggestion. Joe felt good about fixing the easy conflict.

On the way back to Springlands, Joe noticed that Crispin wouldn't even look at him and when he attempted to speak with him, he wouldn't respond, a sharp contrast to the jovial, outgoing man he was used to.

"Is everything okay?" Joe asked.

Crispin glared at Joe.

"What's wrong?"

"Just so you know," he said, glaring at the priest. "I make my living off of trading with these Indians."

"Oh," Joe paused, "I see you've already heard about my conversation with them."

Indeed, he had heard that Father McNamara had directed the Indians not to buy from him. He was furious, but, knowing he needed the priest's permission to set foot on the mission, he didn't dare say anything.

"I think there has been a misunderstanding, Crispin. Perhaps we can all meet, and everyone's position can be heard."

"Fine," he grumbled, without looking back. Instead he stared ahead into the raging waters of the wide river.

Crispin was a passionate and resourceful man and Joe knew that he needed to fix this problem, or he might be 'accidentally' left somewhere deep in the jungle.

Joe left this problem to his successor, Father Frank Thornly, who arrived one month later. Frank later told Joe that Crispin never forgave him and always spoke about the Canadian priest who tried to ruin him.

Father Tom McQuaid, the Superior General of Scarboro Missions, sent a telegram to Georgetown which was forwarded to Joe in Springlands:

FATHER MCNAMARA RECALLED FROM BRITISH GUIANA.
ASSIGNED TO POST-GRADUATE STUDIES IN THEOLOGY IN
ROME. PLEASE ARRANGE FOR RETURN TO CANADA IN JUNE.

Joe was in shock. He was leaving Guyana in two weeks. Although he always knew that a priest could be reassigned, he never imagined this would happen to him so soon. He also knew that no Scarboro missionary priest had ever been sent to study in Rome, especially to study Theology. Scarboro didn't even have a Theology faculty—students were always sent to St. Augustine's, the diocesan seminary in Toronto for their studies.

Joe packed his few belongings and travelled back to Georgetown where he expressed his shock to the other priests. Ed Moriarty admitted that he always knew Joe was going to Rome.

“It was the plan from the beginning,” Ed said. “Send you to Guyana for three years where no language was required and then off to Rome. You were identified as an intellectual early on in your studies, but they knew that you had your heart set on going to the missions, so they sent you here to fill that need but always intended on making you a scholar.”

“So, you knew the whole time?” Joe asked.

“I did, but both McQuaid and I agreed that it would be better for you not to know. It would affect your work here too much.”

“Really?” Trying not to feel betrayed, Joe stared into the eyes of his friend. “I can't believe you didn't tell me.”

“Joe,” Ed said, “we both figured it was better for you.”

“Well it wasn't your decision to make.”

“Someone had to make it, so when McQuaid suggested it, I agreed. We worried you'd never settle in anywhere if you knew you were leaving.”

“How could I feel settled when I was moved continuously?”

“They wanted you to have the Guyanese experience without making too many roots anywhere—make leaving easier.”

“Joe,” Ed said, “Don’t be offended, we really had your best interests in mind. And just think about it... you’re going to Rome.”

Joe tried to believe the good intentions of the priests. Perhaps it would be hard to commit whole heartedly if he knew he was leaving. Undeniably, it was incredible to think he was going from Springlands to Rome, the center of the Catholic Church, one of the greatest cities in the world. His life was about to change radically and probably irrevocably, and he knew he should feel excited.

Joe said goodbye to Guyana with mixed emotions. He was sad to leave his priest companions and the many friends he made, particularly in New Amsterdam. He came to Guyana a completely inexperienced priest ignorant of life in many ways. Guyana challenged his beliefs and attitudes with a culture that contradicted his own. It showed him poverty and suffering that unraveled his traditional preaching of God’s goodness and justice and replaced it with questions of love, courage and compassion. Guyana humbled and changed Joe more than he ever realized and its valuable lessons remained fastened in his enduring memories. He revisited the stories of Guyana with affection on his deathbed.

SAYING GOODBYE

Saying goodbye was impossible. I knew I had to return to my life, as this could go on for months, but I also knew that there was a good chance that I might never see my father alive again. There is no consolation for that possibility, and despite the encouraging words from my family, when I hugged and kissed him for the last time, fear consumed me. What if I never saw him again? How would the world be without him in it?

I hardly even remember the flight back to Virginia. The surreal events replayed continuously in my head like a carousel spinning around and around in haunted, endless rotation. A sickness sunk deep into my stomach and dislodged my understanding of death. It forced me to confront and question all things that I thought to be true. Why did my father survive? How can a person be so close to death and climb his way back? Do we really have this much control?

My father suffered at home for six more weeks. Even the hospice nurses were amazed by his ability to keep going. My cell phone became glued to my side, as I waited for the dreaded call. It was hard to concentrate on anything else. I became obsessed with my last words and made sure during my nightly phone conversation to always end with my professions of love to him. I already felt guilty enough for being so far away—final words were all I had.

Some days he could talk on the phone, but his limited ability to hold on to ideas, made this difficult. The best subjects revolved around the simple things like Blue Jays baseball or Notre Dame football games. In fact, my mother is convinced the Blue Jay's incredible comeback season is responsible for his prolonged life.

A hospital bed followed my father home and was stationed in the dining room area, so he could look out through the sliding glass windows and see his beautiful yard. My mother

transformed the room and brought his night table and books down from his room to make him comfortable. She figured on good days he could shuffle his walker outside onto their new three-tiered deck and enjoy some fresh air. From the moment that bed arrived, however, he wanted it gone. He was so determined to sleep in his own bed that when he was found crumpled at the bottom of the three stairs leading to his bedroom, my mother knew that the fight was hopeless.

For the next six weeks, my father shuffled back and forth between his room upstairs and the den across the hall. He spent most days in the large high-backed leather chair watching sports, HGTV (when my mother was with him), and sleeping, while various nurses gave him the necessary medications. Dutifully, my mother served small meals to him in this room when he felt like eating, and each night she sat with him in the little room while they enjoyed a single glass of fine red wine.

My brothers took turns coming over to sit with him during the day and often spent the night, so my mother could get a little sleep. It was a tough existence, but everyone knew it would not last forever.

On Friday, November 4th, my father called me excited to hear my picks for the Breeder's Cup World Championship in Del Mar, California. It was the biggest horse race of the year with a winner's purse of six million dollars and draws the top 3-year-old thoroughbreds in the world.

"California Chrome is a great choice," he claimed, "winning so many big races including the Kentucky Derby and the Preakness."

I was surprised to hear him speaking so clearly because he hadn't been able to speak to at all for the past few days. My mother had told me he had hardly eaten or even spoken for almost a week.

"I'm sure he's the favorite," I said, happily relishing every word.

“But we shouldn’t underestimate Mike Smith. He’s an old pro.”

Mike Smith was a veteran jockey who had raced for decades and won many big titles. He was nicknamed “Big Money Mike” as he had won the Breeders Cup 24 times, making him the greatest jockey in the Cup’s history. He also dated Chantel Sutherland for years, a Canadian jockey, whom my father loved.

“He’s riding Bob Baffert’s horse, Arrogate. He’s a young horse, only three, but has won his last four races. He’s a Kentucky bred horse, son of Unbridled’s Song.”

He enthusiastically outlined the stats of this impressive sire, remembering all the exact dates of his past wins. I was always amazed at my dad’s ability to remember things with such detail. He told me once he had a photographic memory, so it was easy; all he had to do was access the file in his brain, and the information was always there—a gift I was sorry not to inherit. I figured this clarity had been stolen by sickness, because he hadn’t even been able to form simple sentences lately, but today his memory was remarkably sharp as ever.

“Okay, well you pick him,” I said, “And I’ll stick with California Chrome.”

“Sounds good. You got your wine?”

“Of course, you?”

“Of course. Well, good luck and I’ll talk to you after the race.”

California Chrome took the lead right out of the gate and remained unchallenged for most of the race. Incredibly in the last turn, Mike Smith who remained on the outside for most of the race, cut to the inside and began his chase. He closed late, caught Chrome and won the race by half a length. It was a beautifully run race.

My phone dutifully rang with shouts of glee from my father.

“What did I tell you, kid! Never underestimate Smith. He rode that perfectly.”

“He sure did, dad. It was amazing.”

We relived the race again and again over the phone, noting Smith’s risk of waiting too long to make his move—his experience allowed him to be this risky. It was great to have my dad back again; I never wanted the conversation to end.

“Well kid, it was great talking to you. And glad we got to see such a great race.”

“Me too, Dad. It was awesome.”

“Love to Mike and kids.”

“Will do. Love you, Dad.”

“Love you too. Night.”

“Good night.”

That night my dad slipped into a deep sleep and never fully gained consciousness again. He struggled to get through the day, and the nurses advised my mother that his shallow breathing and molding grey skin indicated that he would soon die. The next day, on Sunday, November 6th my sister-in-law Ania called in tears indicating his breathing was so shallow, it would not be long; I should be prepared. At 11:30 a.m. in the comfort of his own bed, holding the hand of his grandson Joe, my father took his last breath.

My brother called me to relay the news, and although I knew it was coming, I wasn’t ready. No one can prepare for the death of parent. I couldn’t help but think about my last words to my father. I had obsessed about them, wanting them to be meaningful, perhaps to absolve some of the guilt I felt for not being there. As I sat folded in tears on my bedroom floor, I couldn’t help but smile at the thought they were of Mike Smith and racing and horses.

Over two hundred people attended his service. Priests from Scarboro, old missionaries, friends from Guyana, former co-workers, and family friends trailed around the large building,

and waited patiently to enter the banquet hall. My father had not wanted a traditional funeral, so a “Celebration of Life” ceremony was held at Coppola’s Italian Bistro and Banquet Hall. The ceremony began with drinks served in the front foyer of the hall, while guests arrived. A service was held in the main banquet hall, followed by a grand Italian buffet with a full-service bar.

My mother and I stood together in a receiving line welcoming guests as they entered the large hall. I was overwhelmed to hear all the professions of love and admiration for my father. I met priests from Scarboro who shared stories with me about his younger days in the seminary; they professed their love for him as a teacher and mentor. A Guyanese family with whom my dad kept in contact, professed their love for him, retelling stories about how kind he was to them as young children in Guyana. I met co-workers from Niagara probation and parole who praised him as a boss. One man told me about how my dad had given him a chance when no one else would and how that changed his whole life. Old friends who I grew up with shared stories about backyard memories and funny stories about my dad’s calming force amid our teenage drama. Neighbors and family friends relived the good times: the backyard birthday parties, the trips, the kitchen time stories. It was truly a celebration—he would have loved it.

Certainly, I knew the impact my dad had on my own life, and by researching his life for the past two years, I had learned so much about his own family and his decisions for going in the seminary, his life as a missionary, his struggles as a student in Rome, and a priest in Scarboro. I had learned all about the impossible choices he had to make—decisions that brought me into existence and led me to the life I have now. But that day, when I looked around the huge banquet hall teeming with hundreds of people laughing, hugging and reminiscing about his life, I realized the widespread impact he had on the lives of so many people. That day, my father’s two worlds sifted together in celebration, as testament to the magnitude of his extraordinary life.

Mike O’Kane, a former Scarboro missionary and close friend of my father, began the service reminiscing about their days in the seminary together. My brothers and I spoke about fond memories of our childhood, and four of his grandchildren read petitions that they wrote for him. Before he died, my father selected the reading that he wanted us to use at his service. My brother John read The Prayer of St. Francis, Mike read Psalm 23 from the Bible, and I read Portia’s speech from “The Merchant of Venice.” From all of Shakespeare’s plays, these words of mercy and compassion were his favorite: “The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven, upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed: It blesseth him that gives and him that takes. ’Tis mightiest in the mightiest.”

The service ended with my husband, Michael, reading a final farewell written by my father—profound words found in the night table beside his bed:

I would like this to be a day of thanksgiving in which you, my family and friends join together in gratitude for the many blessings and gifts of my life! I am thankful first, for the gift of life, given to me by the loving creator of life through my parents and my ancestors. This is in itself a great miracle of survival.

I am thankful for a long and happy life, including the last years of difficulty. This has given me the opportunity to come to terms with my life, to be honest and open, and to accept myself with all of my strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures; I have learned to accept myself as I am, and to accept and love myself as I am.

In accepting and loving myself I have been able to understand, accept and love all of you, all those I have lived and worked with during my life: as a Scarboro missionary priest, a probation and parole officer, a husband, father and friend. I realize that we are all one, with the same hopes and desires, fears and struggles. We are all doing the best we can to live good lives.

I would like to thank my loving and supportive children, their partners and their children for the constant care and love they have always shown me. I love you more than words can say.

Finally, to my darling Margaret, my love, my joy, my happiness, my support, my strength, my refuge and comforter. You are the greatest gift and blessing of my life –a gift of pure grace. I am sure that as I drew my last breath, my last thoughts were of you. And so, goodbye, may God be with you all and grant you eternal peace and happiness.

There is a woodland area by my childhood home that lies along the Welland Canal: a lock system that connects Lake Erie and Lake Ontario, the lowest of the two great lakes. This wooded area is filled with many winding paths, and a shallow pond filled with birds, frogs and small fish at the center. My brothers and I grew up in those woods; we spent endless hours running the familiar paths, riding bikes and searching for frogs in the murky waters. These paths are saturated with memories and held the laughter of our happy childhood.

My father loved the woods, so when he lost his mobility, my mother drove him to the entrance and helped shuffle him and his walker to the lip of the path, where he could sit and soak in the comfort of nature.

A few months after my father's funeral, I tucked a handful of my father's ashes in my running jacket and carried them over to the woods. I thought he'd be happy to return to the place he loved so dearly. As I sprinkled his ashes on the paths, I felt the heaviness that sat deep in my chest slowly lift and float upwards into the lightness of the tall trees. With every step, I felt a release and the sorrow I had felt for so long seemed to sink into the ground and dissolve.

Small patches of green peeked out from the decayed ground and I felt a whisper of spring in the air. My ears filled with the twittering of birds and the rustling of the leaves, and I heard the faint sound of a child's voice. As I rounded the edge of the path, I saw a small, fair haired girl working hard to create a tree fort with the fallen winter branches. Her soft song filled the air and the flood of nostalgia enveloped me. I smiled at her and thought of my own daughter, and

then I thought about my father as a boy playing in Glen Manor bush. His youthful spirit danced in the breeze as I picked up my pace and ran freely through the winding paths.

VITA

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