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That Strange Darkness

Matthew Boedy

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THAT STRANGE DARKNESS

by

Matthew Boedy

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Accepted by:

Janette Turner Hospital, Director of Thesis

David Cowart, Reader

James Barilla, Reader

Robert Brinkmeyer, Reader

James Buggy, Dean of the Graduate School

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To those who love me and forgive me

ABSTRACT

This novel is about the past. It is a novel about how the past always encroaches on the present and the future. Even for those who are saved from it.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Father Michael Donner fainted just behind the altar. He slumped to the floor unconscious and for a few seconds the black centers of his eyes grew as if they were dilated. A newly ordained priest rushed to kneel beside him. He stared as Father Michael's pupils slowly contracted and white appeared again.

“Are you all right, Father?”

Father Michael nodded as he was helped from the floor. “It is my thorn in the flesh. What my mother had and those before her, I'm sure. And no explanation from any doctor I have ever seen.”

“Is it dangerous?”

The aging, gray-haired priest smiled. “For some. The surgeon taking out my appendix when I was seven said it was so terrifying that he nearly stopped cutting, afraid I was dead.”

“Is it something that happens often?”

“On and off, sometimes during sickness. Sometimes like this – out of the blue.” He remembered at that moment a joke he played on one of his seminary classmates almost four decades earlier. “I can even make it come all on my own, if you would like.”

The young cleric grabbed Father Michael's arm and laughed as if he was embarrassed. “No, no, Father. I do not need....”

He turned away but then stopped and asked: “What do you see in that strange darkness?”

“I see God. What else would a priest see?”

Five years later, on a dying Saturday with an empty road ahead of him, Father Michael Donner drove alone – unaccompanied, except for the presence of the Blessed Mother, whose face hung from the rearview mirror. For a moment, he found comfort in the possibility of freedom along the winding coastal highway that for now was running south in and out of marshland between Charleston and Beaufort. The two-lane road could take him as far as he wanted to go – anywhere he wanted to go, for as long as he wanted to go. He could visit that priest, off to his own parish somewhere in Florida. He could, but then Father Michael recalled the question and his lie. There was no God in the darkness. There was only darkness.

Since becoming a priest, Father Michael had loved long drives along roads like these. Often with a fellow cleric, he would pause to take something in – a daytime moon faint in the horizon or a broken, aged oak just off the shoulder. And because he grew up near the sea, whenever he found himself driving near the coast, he loved slowing his car so that with the window open he could smell the honeysuckle and perhaps if he were close enough, the salt water.

The priest felt his mouth crack into a small smile. But then he heard himself say the lie once more and then as usual his head twitched and the face of the embarrassed

seminary classmate appeared in his consciousness. It was the way memory worked. The good memory tugs at the mind, propelled by a smell or a word or a yearning prayer, and draws the soul to itself slowly, enchanting it. When the wooing ends, the memory fades and the soul exhales its pleasure. The memory, though, of sadness, of shame, of sin, of evil done begins like an unexpected hand on the arm. And such a memory sweeps the soul into a funnel and beats it round and round.

Who controlled memory? Was it God? Was it Beelzebub? Was it the soul itself? Father Michael had told himself in the early years all memories were involuntary, entering in without consent. It was a lie like so many others concerning memories and shame he had forced himself to believe. And Father Michael knew his lies – including those about forgiveness and others about God – had taken their toll, as lies do. So much that now trying to be someone new, someone better, he had promised the Virgin a mile ago that he was through with all lies. He did not want to lie again, though not for virtuous reasons. He refused to lie anymore because his lie, the lie of his priesthood, the lie of who he was, had, in the end, done no good.

But as he turned the wheel to match the curve in the road Father Michael knew he would have to tell himself new lies to survive now. And he sighed, unsure, then, what effect they might have. What he was certain of was that he was running. But to where? And as who? Was he Jonah, retreating, or was he Cain, merely wandering? Or Judas, only poorer, looking for a tree?

When the bishop had called two days ago, Father Michael's hands did not quiver as he had long feared. When the bishop began to speak, Father Michael's heart beat faster and he did not hear full sentences coming from the receiver, only sounds that collided into a requiem. A funeral mass sung by a priest.

In a few days you will be asked to make another confession.

To you, your Grace?

No, Father, not to me.

After it ended, after his resignation was accepted, Father Michael placed the receiver back like it was a priceless vase, afraid he would break it. Then he sobbed into his hands.

Michael pulled at the power window panel to tighten the already closed glass. He hunched his shoulders and tapped a button to start the radio. Loud, crashing noise filled the cabin and he turned it off quickly. Eyeing the road behind him in the mirror, he touched the starched collar and the black fabric around his neck. It was a costume now, all empty cloth.

He curled his lips and blinked, the road coming back into focus. The silence came alive. This particular kind of silence smothered with its emptiness, with what wasn't there.

When Father Michael kneeled at his ordination more than 35 years ago, the consecrating priest had said he would be a priest forever, a comforting thought then. But from this point, his life would be unfamiliar, alien. It was now his own and Father Michael despised that freedom. At that moment, as if punishment for the selfishness of

ownership, the awfulness of what he had done delivered itself again with its clear message: there was another who lived off lies. There was another who had felt strange.

His hands loosened from the wheel and his fingers vibrated as trauma ran through them.

Two words of contrition slipped from his lips in a whisper. Then he felt his soul. Still heavy. He said the words again and paused. No change. He added another apology and then another. The three syllables became a chant. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

The evening after the bishop's call Father Michael kneeled before the votives in his empty church. The candles were warm against his face. There were so many promises of prayer in front of him, promises of which he had made more than a few, promises for people in need, people who needed a priest. He smiled, thinking of his parish.

Saint Mary's was small but growing, like Ashburn itself, nestled in a flowery flatland about ninety minutes north of Beaufort, west from Columbia. It was his third parish, and when he took the post, he knew it would be his last. He had been told upon arrival two decades ago that the city was an old "company town" whose first residents worked at a slowly disregarded and now dismantled nuclear bomb plant about ten miles south of the city center. In its current state, the town was a home for Northern retirees, mainly Protestant but secular in so many ways. New homes, new cars, new stores, consumers consuming much. He found it hard to pastor the comforted – those who enjoyed a sense of goodness in their ways of living. He had tried to teach them in his

years there about the poor, the weak, the wounded - those who lived just miles away from the brick homes with two-car garages.

He thought sometimes he spoke to the faithless and other times he thought he presided over the faithful. What now of them? What of George and Teresa, retired from New Hampshire? They were there when the school opened. They were always there, left side, second row. She had to stop genuflecting at the end of the pew because her knees were so bad. He had a heart attack last year. Father Michael lit a candle for them. What about the scrawny, bearded philosophy major? He had no name yet – even after a month’s worth of appearances on the other side of the confessional screen. Mocking and sometimes utterly unholy, still he came. To hear a priest forgive him. Father Michael lit a candle for him.

Outside his church he had good relationships with other ministers – the ones who oversaw the First and Second Baptists, the Lutherans, the Methodists, and the growing group of people who worshipped in an unlabeled manner. They reported similar qualms about lukewarm congregations. And despite being a Catholic and a priest, Father Michael was not an outsider to the town – he was one of them. He sounded like one of them. He ate like one of them, though they didn’t drink like him. He was a follower, like them, who still searched, who still sinned. Could they preach forgiveness for him? Would they? On his knees, the priest lit several more small white candles and placed them in the middle of the collection of hazy blue glass containers.

And what of the faces he saw in town? The grocery clerks – mostly teens – always seemed to tense up when they saw him in line. And the ones who worked the

counter at the movies - they looked confused when he bought a ticket for a James Bond movie. He lit a row of candles for them all.

Then Father Michael eyed the top left corner of the votive stand. The flame there flickered stronger for a moment than the others. "I'm sorry," he whispered, watching the wax burn. The priest lit a new candle and placed the two side by side. Pray for me when I am gone, Blessed Mother.

In a small room inside the county jail, from where Father Michael could still hear the pleading yelps from an inmate, his fingers were pressed onto a metal plate by a short woman in a green uniform with a cross on the lapel. His hand tightened on the cool surface. He heard her voice – "Relax your wrist" – and obeyed. She finished with one hand and grabbed the other wrist. "Thank you, Father, now again, the same way." There was sadness in her voice and he turned to look at her and he saw it in her eyes, too.

Someone photographed him against a gray cinderblock wall and then deputies led him to another room where they handcuffed him to a table. He glanced at the stark emptiness around him. Beside two chairs and the table, he sat underneath a fluorescent panel of light that hurt his eyes. The walls reminded him of the basement in the church he had repainted a year ago. He knew what would come next. This was not a proper confessional, but it was his. He interlocked his hands as best he could and prayed.

O Virgin of virgins, my mother; to thee do I come; before thee I stand, sinful and sorrowful.

O Jesus, my good shepherd, in my folly I have wandered far away from Thee into forbidden places.

The bishop had told him they wanted to know everything. What was everything? What would be a true confession? Would they ask about how it started? Did they want to know about the tingle in his groin – a moment of sin a good, young priest suffered through. Did they want to hear how he had heard stories about others? That it was something all young priests at least wonder about? Did they want to hear that? Did they want him to explain why? Did they want to hear about life since that day? Did they want to hear how his father fought in the war and came home ravaged - how he sat in his leather chair all evening and screamed as he swore a hammer was a rifle? How he spent the remaining years in two times, two places, two worlds? Would they understand a life, a memory like that? Would they want him to say he had a sickness? The word copied itself a thousand times in his mind. The sickening sick of sin. Sin that sickens God. God is sick with the sickness of man's heart. He visualized the word written in the neon cursive he had seen in New York. It became drawn by an unknown hand in the feathered calligraphy from his letter of ordination. Toy logs he played with as a child moved themselves to spell it against the cream carpet in his bedroom. And it formed in red letters, the red of Christ's own word.

The revolving world lost time then as it always does in succumbing to memory. The door that always opens to that room did then and the wooden floors that were always there appeared then along with the books that filled the shelves. The books began to shout their words to Father Michael as usual, a cacophony of truths. And as he had always done, he trudged across the room, deaf. Mute, too, but not blind, eying the child whose

hand now appeared against the black fabric of the priest's pants. A moment of uncertainty and a polite request followed by obedience. Then the edge of insanity (or was it ecstasy?) at the point of...

The smell of salt wafted in and time was dynamic again. The door to the interrogation room opened and a bullish man, hefty like the priest though his chubby face was not hidden by a beard, entered and unlocked the priest from the table. The priest began to rub his wrists as he watched the man sit down and lay down a yellow notepad.

"It's just procedure, Father, the cuffs," the detective said gruffly as he flipped a few pages onto the table. "Whenever someone is alone in here, we have to."

Father Michael met the detective's eyes past the half lenses that rested on the tip of his nose.

"Do you have any questions right away – about what's happened, what's next, that sort of thing?"

"Am I going to...?"

"To a cell? No. We can sit here and talk for a while and then we can let you go."

The priest nodded.

The detective took a pen from his pocket and set it on the pad and then pushed his torso back from the table. "You and me, we're a lot alike," he said in a voice that reminded Father Michael of his own.

The priest turned his head a bit to acknowledge the words.

“We hear confessions. After hearing them you do what you do and I do what I do. But we’re the same. You agree?”

The priest nodded.

“Good. We’re in the confession business, as they say, so we both know about it. I’m a religious man, not from your branch, but God is God. I say all that so you know I’m not going to lie to you. The question is: are you going to lie to me?”

The priest shook his head.

“Okay, then. Tell me about how you came across the boy.”

“He was one of the boys who helped out during Mass.”

“And so you thought about him?”

The priest tilted his head in confusion.

“Thought about him in ways you shouldn’t?”

The priest nodded.

“And then one day you took him upstairs to your room?”

“Yes.”

“And there you touched him?”

“Yes.”

“And he touched you?”

After it was over, the boy’s cheeks were wet. He showed Father Michael his sticky hands. There was a spot of what was on his hands on his nose. And then, like he always did, the boy ran his fingertips down the tip of his nose. He rubbed them together and looked at the priest.

Can it go back in? the boy asked.

It was then that room began to crush against Father Michael, as if the elements in it – the chair, the bed, the mattress, the desk, the door - were balloons. They swelled and he felt them pushing on him. He coughed deep and it sucked vomit up to his mouth. The priest stood, hoping not to throw up on the boy. But as he made his first step, he fell to the floor, his pants entangled by his feet. The boy rushed to his side and the priest dry heaved.

“Yes.”

“He didn’t leave then, right?”

The priest shook his head.

“When he tried, you stopped him, right?”

The priest nodded.

“And you took him by the arm and told him it was a secret?”

You must promise.

I promise, Father.

“Yes, I told him it was a sin to lie to a priest and he should not promise to keep this secret if he was going to lie.”

“And he promised?”

“Yes.”

“Then you let him go?”

The priest closed his eyes and nodded again.

The boy’s feet echoed down the hall. When the sound was gone, the priest vomited on the floor, his beard and shirt wet and heavy. The smell overtook the room.

Father Michael watched as the detective wrote short notes in the middle of the pad. His confession was there in blue ink, his sin on a yellow page. He inhaled and then let the air leave. His soul was slightly lighter. Then as he inhaled again, he noticed the weight return. He had said only a few words. And yet those few words – “yes” and “yes” again – that was his confession. He inhaled again and held his lungs open before pushing out the air once more. His soul weighed against him again. This is how the boy must have felt, the priest knew, when he told what had happened.

“I was wondering if you could... I don’t know if you can... but I was thinking maybe you could tell me how is he?” Father Michael asked.

The detective looked up at the priest.

“Have you talked to him much since... since this all started?” the priest asked.

“I really can’t say, Father. It would be.... improper. You understand.”

“Yes, of course.”

The detective put down his pen and pulled back the pages of the pad.

“One more question, Father. Then you can go.”

Father Michael nodded.

“Was he your first?”

As the car hugged the shoulder of the road and a short summer storm began to cover the windshield, Father Michael dug two fingers between his throat and his collar. He pulled it away and tossed it on the other seat. Then, after a curve, he held his neck

with his palm and took in a deep breath. Before exhaling he tightened his grip, holding the wheel with the other hand.

When he let go Father Michael watched his hand tremble as he took it away.

Like a ravaged smoker addicted to his next draw, Father Michael switched on the wipers to wash away the water. The car came into the late afternoon light – its heat making steam on the asphalt ahead of him – as it split between the Southern pines and Spanish mosses that lined the highway.

He smiled for a moment, remembering he was not far from home. He was just north of Beaufort - that spit of land whose tip was Parris Island. There his father, now long dead, had been a drill sergeant after World War II. He came from the base most days like he had come home from that war. He found a comfortable chair and only left it to punish or piss.

His father hated what his mother so loved: the land, the ocean, especially the edges where the water seeps into the dirt, where toes and feet and whole souls can be sucked in. He hated it all, all that had come to be bound to his son. He hated complaints about the heat and he hated the half-cold that came in February because it never was strong enough. And he hated the young boys who came from places like Walhalla and Edgefield because they too were like the winter.

Michael's father never called his mother beautiful, as far as he knew, and sometimes with a tear she told the children their father was right. She was not a beauty queen, she told them, because she finished second in the Hampton County Watermelon Festival. She did not get to kiss the astronaut after he crowned the winner.

Michael's father hated, too, the strange darkness his son shared with his mother. She cried as she watched it happen to him that first time. His father merely sighed and told her she was to blame.

As explanation for their optic anomaly Michael's mother told him they shared it with others in her family and no one ever thought it was a curse like his father said. He felt comforted, but when she rose to leave his bed, he stopped her with a question.

“Do you... see anything... in there?”

She held his hand and told him that she did. He acknowledged he saw things, too. A rock he had brought home, a drawing he had made. She said she saw different things but recently she saw herself as a child. One of her memories was following a small crab as it burrowed into a hole. She had stuck her toes into its home and in a fit of panic, the creature snapped and she pulled her foot away.

“Will I always see things in there?” Michael asked.

“God saves memories for us. That's what he does.”

The next Easter, when he and his sister Mae turned seven, his mother took them to the sunrise service at the Sheldon ruins. A few miles north of the city, the ruins were the skeleton of a burned church that sat among two centuries of graves. The structure had four walls with large, empty arches, and in front, disconnected now from the rest of the building, were four large brick towers.

That morning as their car pulled up, Michael followed the towers with his eyes as they grew out of the forest, part of a giant castle. His mother led Michael and his sister through iron gates into the open expanse of the church yard. As soon as they were safely inside the fence, Michael burst from his mother's grip. She ordered him to return but he

kept running until he reached the columns. His feet sputtered at the base of one and he began to rub it slowly and deliberately like a boy runs his hands across his father's stubble. Then in a spurt of glee he tried to climb it. He slipped and tried again. His mother's hand pulled him from a third attempt.

Michael began to see those towers in his darkness for a time and he enjoyed slipping off into it. He had begged to return, and when he saw his first sunset there, he asked to be taken there every evening. From then on, he loved to watch the day refuse to be taken over by the night, to not give sway until the last possible moment. Full of that memory, Father Michael decided to keep an eye out for those bricked shafts that shot into the sky. He knew they were near and felt sure even with orange and yellow and red filling the horizon he could make it before dark.

A boy appeared on the inside shoulder of a coming curve. He raised a mallet in his hand and pounded it into the top of a sign that came to his waist. Its blue, hand-drawn letters read "Peaches Ahead." The boy looked up, aware of the coming car, and Father Michael stared for a second and then looked awkwardly to the other shoulder. He drove past the boy and adjusted his rearview mirror to look once more at the lanky, brown-haired frame. The priest held his lungs open as he stared at the bowl line in the boy's hair.

The trees at the curve moved quickly toward the priest and the yellow line marking the edge of the road now was underneath the car. Father Michael recognized his drift and swerved into the oncoming lane and then back again. After an overzealous correction the priest felt smoothness give way to roughness. He pushed hard on the

brakes and slammed the car into park. An empty swallow forced pain down his throat. He sat fixed in his fear for a moment more, trying to slow his breath.

He went to adjust his glasses and realized they were missing. He looked in his lap and then gingerly raised his feet. He found the broad-nosed, rounded spectacles upside down on the floorboard. After returning them to the bridge of his nose, he looked into his side mirror.

The boy had begun to run up the shoulder toward the car. Father Michael eyed the road ahead where he saw the large square grill of a semi truck still hidden by the curve. The boy had entered the highway but skidded to a stop due to what seemed to Father Michael to be a too-large shoe. Out of the car, Father Michael began to wave his hands and shout. The boy saw the priest as the truck roared around the curve.

A horn came as the priest ran toward the boy. Father Michael grabbed him by the arms as he ran onto the sloping shoulder of red clay and grass. The touch became a bear hug as the boy's momentum pulled the pair off the road more. When they stopped, the priest opened his mouth but said nothing.

“You okay, mister?”

Father Michael lost his balance and tightened his grip on the boy to keep his feet. Father Michael then glanced at the puddle of dark water just below them. “Looks like now we have both saved each other,” the priest said.

“I thought you hit something,” the boy said. “That’s why I started running.”

Father Michael wiped his forehead with his sleeve and then saw the makeshift shanty that was the reason for the signs.

“You need something? We got drinks.”

The priest turned to his car. “I need something out of there first.”

The boy followed the lumbering cleric along the edge of the road. When they reached the car, Father Michael pulled out his collar and snapped it on.

“I’ve seen people like you,” the boy said. “But they don’t take theirs off.”

Father Michael looked over the boy’s head to a man loading a small basket into a sedan. The man looked up and shouted for the boy.

“He wants something to drink,” the boy said as he began to dash again across the highway. Father Michael grabbed the boy’s arm, looked for traffic, and then let the boy go.

The man across the highway had a few gray hairs on his temple and wore jeans and a orange t-shirt that had a cartoon turtle on it with green letters above announcing a “Fifth Annual Cooter Festival.” He ordered the boy to get a glass of water.

“We don’t get many of ya’ll around here,” the man said, the voice more tempered and baritone than the boy’s. “Where you headed?”

“I was looking for Sheldon, the ruins.”

“They just another mile or two – you turn left at the church ahead.”

The boy came back with a plastic cup.

“You doing church up there?” the boy asked.

The man sneered at the boy and then took the cup and gave it to the priest. Washing down his nervousness, he drank all of it and returned the cup.

“Like I said, we don’t get many of your kind around here, let alone a priest,” the man said.

“He just come off the road...” The boy was silenced then by the man who moved his head to look at the car. The boy opened his mouth but the man looked at him sternly again.

The priest smiled and dug into his pocket for a ten dollar bill.

“That’s all right, Father...”

“It’s for his shoes. I think they’re a little too big. Nearly got caught by a semi because he came out of one. I shouted and he saw me and ran like a rabbit then.”

The man looked back at the boy. The boy’s head hung heavy while it nodded.

The man took the cash and then shook the priest’s hand again. “Nice of you, Father.”

Father Michael nodded and then started back across the highway. He spun his head back and said: “God bless you.”

“You, too, Father,” the man replied.

After Father Michael made the turn described, an opening in the tree line revealed to him four shafts of red brick pointing into the sky. He came upon the small, rusted gate with the sprawling yard beyond it filled with thin, ankle-high grass that rose from the ground in tufts. Pines swayed and a massive lone oak in the front hung to one side, it seemed, pointing to the empty brick structure that had no front. Father Michael eyed the Spanish moss dangling from another tree. He had heard a Charleston guide once call them southern icicles.

Father Michael looked to either side and saw no one. He peered across the highway and heard nothing. It was that moment before a mass begins – the instant as the chimes on the hour approach. It was all of those moments he had ever been in – all such peacefulness gathered here inside a deeper, stiller silence than he had ever experienced.

He came to a headstone and bent down to wipe the dirt from the inscription. He ran his fingers along the stone like a blind man feeling his way through a Braille version of the Psalms. The words came into shape as he read them: “What is my hope? O, Lord, it is Thee.” He ran his fingers once more over that last word, each letter building his faith. Thee: the Other, Him who had come to bring mercy. He was here.

Continuing toward the columns Father Michael found his gait undisturbed. He had walked a thousand aisles as a priest. And yet he knew there was never a step like the ones he was taking.

He stopped at the first column and rubbed it. The worn brick was rough against his hand, its majesty growing even as it crumbled. He touched the others, drawing from each its own spirit. He came through the entrance and saw the empty arches set inside the walls. He imagined them filled with stained glass images he had known: Jesus walking, his arms open and an angelic light streaming from behind him or perhaps the shepherd sitting among his sheep. Also the lamb on the cross, the crown of thorns piercing his head.

Plaster seemed to grow out from the farthest corner like cement ivy, giving visitors ample room to scratch their names. Freddie and Holly had come in 1992. Donnie and Mattie in 1997. Father Michael saw in his mind weddings where young women

walked the short aisle and grooms peered into the fading sun, trying to find their bride in the glow. Then he saw mourners and a priest celebrating a rite for the dead.

To the right of the names, an anonymous visitor asked in a crude carving: “Where are you, God?” A cynic replied underneath with a long arrow pointing to the graves.

By now the only remnant of light was in thin vapors that washed through the air like silk sheets. The priest turned back to the inside of the skeleton and stood at the brick altar. It had an opening in the rear that surprisingly fit his portly body. On cue from a caw from a bird, he raised his arms high, opening them wide as to make an invitation to the faithful to rise. He breathed in a scent of unnamed flowers and proclaimed: “The Lord be with you.”

Silence remained.

He held his hands around an invisible chalice. But when he looked skyward to offer it to the heavens, a rain drop hit his face. Then another. After the third, the priest lowered his hands and smirked into the sky. The clouds were much lower and darker than before. Thunder came from one side. He felt another drop hit just above an eyebrow.

The rain burst on his face like pricks of a needle. He threw up his arms in anger. He would not be forced away from this place.

The priest opened his mouth to speak but his gullet quickly filled. He tried to defiantly gargle but choked.

As the storm came harder, his beard grew heavy and wet and his glasses were now unable to give him sight. He tore them from his face and eyed the sky. The drops stung his pupils. He wiped the lenses with his shirt, but they only smeared.

With no let up from the sky, Father Michael dashed to a nearby corner and turned his large, broad body into the bricks for protection, staring at the wall. Hoping to somehow abate the drenching, he bent down. He squatted as the bombardment continued and finally fell on his knees, like a child being punished for disobedience. He held his hands together in front of his face and pulled his arms close to his chest and began to softly pray as the water that seeped through his fingers wetted his words. His prayer turned into an apology.

There he waited like Noah for a clearing, a stoppage of the deluge, something of the merciful god who had flooded the land for only forty days. He waited for the whisper in the storm, the whisper that told him, like it did Noah, that this water was a cleansing. When lightning struck nearby and small rivers formed in the grass, Father Michael concluded he was not being washed, but drowned, that this was his judgment, another part of his ruin. The rain mixed with his tears as a thought came to him: why not die here? Why not step into the afterlife from this place where so many souls had done the same? Would anyone pray for him then? He looked around and saw no way to do it. He wondered whether it was mercy or justice.

He pushed a hand against the ground to anchor his rise. When he got to his feet, Father Michael looked at the altar. The white mortar had turned gray. Like a war memorial, the etchings on the wall had disappeared in the rain as well. His parish had vanished and his church was flooded. He would never again be a priest, only a penitent, always a penitent.

He took his glasses from his face – they were no use to him anyway – and folded them in his hands. Then he began to run. His pace was awkwardly slow and his bulky

belly jostled so much his shirt came out from his pants. He grabbed his belt as he ran, the sagging weight hampering his retreat. He sidestepped a headstone to make it under one of the large oak trees. Lightning belted the ground again and he knew the tree was not safe. He sucked in a long breath and scampered from under it. He was blind – a rumbling, sightless obese animal running into the wet darkness. He ran as if he was being chased – chased away by the great hound of heaven.

He felt gravel underneath his feet and Father Michael knew he had come through the gate. He stumbled the few feet in mud to his car, still a target for the harsh storm. Inside the dry cabin, he discovered his broken glasses. He cursed himself as he tossed them into the passenger seat.

His now wet beard irritated him and in his frustration he dug his hand as a claw into his right cheek. Then he did the same with his left hand. His rage against his face matched the rain as it beat the car.

After exhausting himself, Father Michael started the car. The gas gauge was half full. Where to? He couldn't show up in Ashburn in the middle of the night. Savannah? Surely a priest there would help. With that small ray of hope, Father Michael gunned the car from the shoulder into the tempest.

He tried to keep his eyes on the two painted lines in the road. Crossing the yellow was not his concern. That could be corrected when he felt the road give way. But crossing the white had little room for error when he could not see what was coming. He continued to wipe at a spot on the windshield.

A large light appeared ahead and it quickly separated into the headlights of a semi. The truck sent a wave of water onto the priest's car and momentarily overpowered the wipers. The car skidded. A flashing overhead yellow light appeared in the distance, announcing an intersection. Father Michael scanned the shoulder for a stop sign but did not see one. He slowed the car to a crawl as he tried to peer into the oncoming highway. Right and then left only to see a large light coming toward him. He floored the car through the intersection as a horn blared behind him. The car began to hydroplane. He twisted the wheel from side to side and slowly pushed down on the brakes until he came to a stop on the shoulder.

Steady but breathing hard, the priest pulled the car onto the road again. A highway sign came and announced forty two miles to Savannah. A small tingle came from his left cheek and the priest took one hand off the wheel to scratch it. As his hand reached his face, the car lost contact with the road. The priest swerved hard into the other lane. Feeling gravel he swerved back into his lane. The car fishtailed and spun until the front was just feet from a large tree. The priest slammed the brakes but it was no use. The impact crushed the front of the car around his legs and sent his head into the dash.

CHAPTER II: THE HOSPITAL

The night filled with a siren as a patrol car came to a stop behind the accident scene. A hand jostled Michael awake and he saw the thin brim hat on the head before him. Michael squirmed a bit and felt the seat belt dig into his torso. The deputy cut the belt with a knife. Michael inhaled and then slowly released his breath until an ache stopped him. Soon one pair of rubber gloves stuck gauze on Michael's bleeding head while another pair tried to pull at his shoes in an effort to move him from the seat. They stopped when he grimaced and shouted.

Through the open passenger door, the deputy comforted the priest. "It'll be all right, Father."

Fingers forced Michael's eyes open and he followed a bright light. He felt a small change in his pupils as another hand pushed at his stomach. He contorted in pain.

"Just another pull, Father," a voice said. The three men finally pulled the overweight priest from the car onto a stretcher. Inside the cabin of the ambulance Michael's mouth and nose were covered with a mask. He pulled his hand to his throat to adjust his collar and went unconscious.

When he awoke again Michael was lying in a hospital bed. He looked down his body to see his left ankle in a cast. A needle attached to a drip was stuck in his right hand, machine sensors were pasted to his chest, and a tube ran across his face just below his nose. A nurse stood next to his bed looking at a thermometer. He reached out to her and his hand was met by another he hadn't noticed. He blinked and heard his name from a face-shaped orb. He heard it again – his name from that mix of softness and light and a Savannah spring. That same hand that held his now lay on his cheek.

“It’s me, Michael. It’s me,” the voice said.

“I know,” he replied. “It just felt like Momma.”

Mae – whose face was now drawn clearer with wrinkles and glasses and a broad nose – smiled. “Yes, I got her skin, didn’t I?”

“And I got her eyes,” Michael replied.

“Let me see those eyes.” Mae took a strong grip on Michael’s chin and then slid her glasses on his face and kissed him. “We always had the same prescription.”

Michael felt the warmth of her kiss spread through his skin and tried to lift his arm to hold her. But the IV offered tension and he put his arm back down.

“You ought to know by now that what they say about twins is true,” she said.

“What?” he asked.

“You’re the reason my leg hurts and I got this knot on my head.”

“Sorry I did that to you.”

“You been doing it to me all my life, Michael.”

“You were born first.”

“Right and then I was born again.” Mae’s laugh widened her smile.

“You look like a million dollars.”

“You look terrible, even for an old man, and especially for a priest.”

“How long have you been here? And where is here?”

“Since the morning. In Beaufort.”

The nurse stuffed her hand behind Michael’s pillow and helped him to sit up better. After checking the drip, she left, keeping the door ajar.

“How did you hit that tree?” Mae asked when the nurse left.

“Hard.”

“Funny. It’s a miracle you did not break anything else. Did you feel the car skid on the road?”

Michael shrugged.

“Were you coming to see me?” she asked. “You could have called.”

Mae sat on the edge of the bed and again placed her hand on her brother’s cheek.

“When were you going to tell me?”

“They called you didn’t they? You’re my next of...”

“Not this,” she replied, waving her arm toward the door. “I had to read about it in the paper.”

“The paper?”

“I’m sure it’s in all the papers. I read it on the way in.”

Michael groaned and covered his face with his hands.

“It said you might go to prison. Would they really do that – after all this time?”

She removed his hands from his face. “Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“It happened once and then...I just...”

Mae huffed a little.

“What was that for?” Michael asked.

“Let’s not get...”

“You think I’m lying?”

She slid off the bed and back into her chair.

“I am not a monster, Mae,” Michael said sternly.

Mae picked up a magazine from the floor and began to read. “It’s not something that happens just once,” she said into the magazine.

“So you don’t believe me?”

Mae put the magazine back on the floor and held up a finger. “Once? Michael, once. That’s what you’re going say? To me, of all people, that it only happened once? We can get into it now, if you want. But you say that like it supposed to make it better. Like as if you killed someone and so then we should be glad you’re not a serial killer.”

“This is why I didn’t tell you,” Michael said.

The two watched each other simmer. Mae picked up the magazine yet again.

Michael looked at the door. “You’re no better than them.”

“Who?”

“The police. They didn’t believe me either.”

“Why should they? They know what I...”

“You’re my sister.”

“Tell me then. Tell me the truth. I deserve it, for that reason alone.”

“That’s why they said – the police, the detective. He said that I was hurting the others by not telling. He said they deserve to hear the truth.”

“They do.”

“There is no they, Mae.”

She looked at her magazine again.

“The bishop believed me,” Michael said after a brief silence.

“Of course he did. He doesn’t expect a priest would lie to him.”

“And you do?”

“You know what I would say.”

“So I’m one of them now?”

“One of who then?”

“The ones you have heard.”

Mae ignored him and kept reading.

Michael sighed and then crossed his arms on his chest. “I was telling...”

“Don’t.”

“It was the tru...”

“Just drop it,” Mae said as she turned a page. Then after another short silence, she added: “You should have told me.”

“Why? So you can be empathetic just like this?”

“No,” Mae said. “Because I’m the only one...”

“What? You’re the only one...?”

She flipped a page in the magazine on her lap and answered as her eyes scanned the page. “You should have told me.”

Michael removed his glasses and rubbed his bridge.

Mae rose from the chair.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

Mae dug through her purse to retrieve a phone. “I promised Gary I would call him when you were awake.”

“He knows?”

“He answered the phone.”

“Not about this,” the priest said as he tugged at the IV again.

Mae took from her purse the front section of the Savannah Morning News and laid it on her brother’s lap.

The headline filled two columns at the right edge: “Priest admits abuse, charged by police.” Michael scanned the picture. Yes, someone (was he kneeling? was there a flash?) had snapped it in the hallway. He was told there might be something like that. Yes, in the parking lot of the bishop’s office by the man carrying a blue blazer on a hanger. They will take us, the man said, pointing to the police cruiser. The church asked me to see you through this, the man said. Then the man with the jacket reached for Michael’s neck. He lurched back. “Let me take that off... I have a shirt, too, and a tie.” The man took the jacket from the hanger and opened it. Michael put on the clothing and walked to the idling car with the two deputies inside.

When Mae returned to the room, Michael was eating mashed potatoes from a tray. She picked up the newspaper Michael had tossed to the floor and put it in her purse.

“Gary wanted you to know he’s going to Mass this evening,” Mae said.

“For what?”

“For you. For all of it.”

Michael looked away, toward a blackened television secured to the wall above the bathroom door. “You know it wouldn’t hurt for you to go sometime with him,” he said, eyeing the fork into his mouth.

Mae glanced at her magazine.

“What about the kids?” Michael asked.

“Stephen called. Lucy called, too, right after him. She’s the sweetest thing he ever divorced. And Louisa and Geoffrey called. They wanted to come but I told them to stay put.”

“And you told them about...?”

“Only told them what I know from the paper.”

“Is that some sort of hint?”

“You tell me.”

“What do you want to know? How I chose him? How he became my object? How I planned and stalked and sweated in my dreams?” Michael leaned forward in the bed.

“Is that what you want to hear? My sister the therapist: the one who has heard a thousand men describe how they touched wants to hear how her brother the priest touched. Is that what you want? Why? So you can feel good about telling God to go to hell years ago?”

“What do *you* want to hear, Michael?” Mae said louder, her back arching out from the chair. “You want someone to agree that once is a lesser evil? Do you want to hear that because of your great restraint, your great holiness after the fact, some mother wouldn’t turn her back on you? They will, Michael. I would, if I wasn’t your sister. You touched a boy. You did it. That’s all I could think about driving over here – how my brother could do that. I... I... You know what I want to hear? To start, I want to hear you say you’re sorry. That’s what I want.”

“You don’t think I am? You don’t think I’ve said it? I have. For years. I’ve said it a million times.”

“To yourself, Michael. I know, I know. And to God. Yes, I know. But to who else? Who else did you tell? Confession to real people is what...”

Mae fit herself back into the chair and picked up the magazine that had fallen on the floor. After turning another page, she spoke in a soft voice without looking at Michael.

“This doesn’t have to be all you are. Not to me.”

“What does that mean? You know what, it doesn’t matter. I resigned.”

“I was trying to tell you I love... trying for a moment to.... and you went to that again. Oh, ok. Then, if you want to go there, you know exactly what that means.”

“A priest, right? It doesn’t have to be all I am. I can have a life and spend time outside the church. All that, right? I have heard that for thirty five years. I get so mad when you...”

“Do you hear yourself? Do you? Have you said one thing – have you thought one moment about him? You touched a boy and *you’re* angry? I have sat and listened to a lot

of people tell me how they felt after they did it. They felt sorry. They felt *sorry*, Michael. Did you hear me? They felt sorry. And here you are, going on and on about a fight that ended a long time ago. You may be a priest but you're no saint."

Michael threw himself back against the bed and listened to the slowing of the heart rate machine. Mae looked at the man standing in the door.

He was a thin man dressed in jeans and a t-shirt whose letters (Catholic Youth Council) circled a yellow sun. The toes of his sneakers stuck out from the jeans. A hat came down in his hand and revealed a thin buzz of white hair. He hugged Mae and then stepped between her chair and the bed and hugged Michael as much as he could.

"I see you still think a beard in the summer is a good idea," the man said as he fluffed the underside of Michael's chin. "I'm surprised they didn't shave it while you were unconscious." Then the man turned to Mae. "Has he been giving you grief?"

Mae nodded with a half-smile.

"She's giving it right back, too, Harry," Michael said.

"I'm not surprised," Harry said as he looked at Mae. "It's been too long. When was the last time you were in the mountains? It is the summer you know."

"The summer's the best time in Savannah," Mae said. "At least until August."

"Maybe then."

"Yes, maybe then."

Michael nudged Harry in the rear. "I'm the one in the hospital."

“Talking to you Mike, sometimes, is like talking to a wall,” Harry said. “I suppose she’s already asked, but when were you going to tell us?”

Michael remained silent.

“Can’t even do it now – like a good Southern man,” Harry patted Michael’s cast. “But we’re here, loving you anyway. Like good Catholics.”

Mae’s purse vibrated and she took out the phone. “It’s Louisa. I’ll be right back.”

Harry took the empty chair and leaned over and put his hands on his thighs. “How you holding up, Mike?”

Michael pointed to his cast. “They got me on some pain...”

“Not that, Mike. How *you* holding up?”

Michael looked away.

“I see. Maybe later,” Harry said. “Tell me, though, what were you doing around Beaufort? Heading toward Savannah?”

The brick columns and headstones flashed in Michael’s mind. He heard the rain beat against the car.

“Not now. I get it.” Harry leaned into Michael. “Nothing is bad as it seems. It’s not the end of the world, you know. Retirement isn’t that awful.”

“You’re retired, Harry. I won’t be a priest anymore. I’m not just suspended, I’m done. I told them what happened. How it never happened again. How I made penance. All that and he said – the bishop said – since I confessed, there was nothing he could do. ‘The new rules,’ he said. He said they would start the process of.... He forced me to resign. Look at me – I’ll probably have to work as a night clerk at some hotel to make money.”

“I heard that happened somewhere to one priest.”

“A guy hanged himself. Another shot himself.”

“Is that what you have been doing with your time – looking up stories about dead priests? You could have been on the phone with me. Come and seen me.”

“And what would you have said? Or done? Kept it from happening?”

“I would have listened.”

“That’s more than Mae did.”

“Don’t be so hard on her,” Harry said as he moved to the chair Mae left empty.

“How’s she handling it?”

“She’s angry and hurt I didn’t tell.... And she’s right. I should have told her. Should have told you.”

Harry patted him on the hand.

“She’s still angry I spent all my time there and missed out on her.”

“I’ve told you that.”

“You know, before I went with the deputies, the bishop had me go into confession with him. Like I was a schoolboy. He slid open the window and then I sat there. But no ‘how long since...’ None of that. We talked like we were at dinner. He told me how he became a priest – how he almost left seminary to get married.” Michael paused. “Then he told me about Ropswood.”

“That was ten years ago.”

“Yeah – he told me how it was his first big test as bishop. How the boys just kept coming forward. He told me how he talked with Ropswood and how he looked. ‘He had lost the spirit,’ he said.”

Harry followed the line on a machine with his eye. “Your heart rate is getting better. At least I think it is.”

“They stabbed him.”

“Who?”

“Ropswood. In prison. Last year.”

“I read that, I think.”

“You know, the bishop said the strangest thing to me in that confessional. He said there is no out to the church. I sat there and he was quoting Harold Frederic to me.

‘Everything that’s in, stays in.’ You think he said that to Ropswood?”

“I don’t think Ropswood was ever in, Mike,” Harry said. “In his mind. In his soul – he never had a space for mercy.”

“A priest for never, huh?”

“Yeah – it’s sad. Did the bishop say anything else?”

“The lawyer tried to get me to change clothes before we left to go to the jail. Harry, it didn’t occur to me then, but I think now – do you think the bishop was the one who told the lawyer to ask me to take off the collar? I mean – he asked about the media. Is he that image conscious?”

“We’re all image conscious now, I think, Mike.”

“Then he went through the process and how long it was going to be but that in the end it would take. It would happen. Then he brings out AA. He says, ‘Mike, we are sick as our secrets.’ At least I think it’s AA.”

“You know he’s in AA?”

“That explains it.”

“He told me once during all that with Ropswood that he wanted a drink.”

“So I leave and come back and then just sit in the car. In the parking lot. Just sitting there, trying to figure out where to go.”

“He told you not to go back to Ashburn?”

“He said right now it would be a distraction.”

“Is that why you were driving on that road? Nowhere to go?”

Michael nodded.

“You can come live with me,” Harry said.

Michael shrugged.

“I got an extra room and it’s all paid for.”

Michael opened his mouth a little but Harry beat him to speak. “Nobody will say a thing.”

Michael looked at the ceiling and then back at Harry. “You know we almost lived together once?”

“How’s that?” Harry asked.

“I was pretty close to being put in your parish. About twenty years ago. I was moved just before the papal visit to Columbia. What was that? 87?”

“I remember that day.”

“It’s odd we never met before that.”

“Well I wasn’t in South Carolina all my life.”

“You could fool me with that way you talk.”

“It’s not childhood, Mike. It’s aging. I talk slower because I just can’t think any faster.”

Michael leaned toward Harry and whispered. "Do you think I'm one of..."

"Would I ask you to live with me if I did?"

Michael leaned back and sighed. "No, probably not."

Harry shook his head.

Mae returned a few moments later and stood on the opposite side of the bed from Harry.

"Louisa wanted you to know she's thinking of you," Mae said.

"Anything else?" Michael said.

"She said you could come to live with her, if you wanted."

"I got that covered already."

"How's that?"

"Harry said I could stay with him."

Harry looked at Mae. "If that's all right with you, of course."

Mae smoothed the bed sheet. "You two had a good talk then while I was out?"

"Maybe you can come up when he's leaves here. Does that sound good, Michael?" Harry asked.

"It's up to her," Michael replied.

"Do you want me to come?" Mae said.

Michael scratched his hand where the needle was stuck. "If you want."

"Should I stop in Ashburn and pick some stuff up?"

"Whatever you can get."

“It shouldn’t take that long to get there if you follow us for a while,” Harry said.

“How long did you want me to stay, Michael?” Mae said.

The nurse came in and asked Mae and Harry to step into the hall.

Mae stood against a wall and sighed. “He doesn’t want me there, Harry.”

“Of course he does. You’re both just mad.”

“I have a right to be.”

“Of course you do. We all do. But come and maybe the long drive will get him talking.”

“He’s just so...self-absorbed.”

“He wants you to come.”

The nurse put a pillow underneath Michael’s leg. He noticed a crucifix dangling from her neck.

“I was wondering: How much longer will it be?” Michael asked.

“Probably tomorrow, Father.”

He sighed, hoping that she might call him that in the morning. He closed his eyes when she left and saw the beautiful ruins flooding again.

CHAPTER III: THE PRIEST

A loud yawp from the television attached to the wall awakened Michael. An afternoon talk show host had put her crowd into frenzy. Michael found the remote lodged between his body and the bed and turned off the set.

The monitors next to his bed emitted a blue glow. He noticed light filling the space between the door and the floor. Suddenly it was overtaken by black. Then, just as suddenly, the light broke in again. More steps came, stopped in front of the door, and then left again, some moving slower than others, allowing the light to come through the crack like a sunrise, beginning at one side and spreading to the other.

A priest, but not a saint, Michael thought. Mae's got me on that.

He softly caressed his throat. I used to know a priest, though, like that, Michael thought. I could never lie to him. That's what made him a saint.

A monitor beeped then and Michael rolled to it. His heart rate jumped for a moment and then the jagged line descended again. The power of memory.

Michael scratched his beard with his left hand and then flattened his fingers, running them smooth on his cheek. His mother was right, however unmerciful it was: God saved memories. He looked back over at the door and watched as the light cut in and out.

Father Wells, the fragile priest with the last strands of his blonde hair stuck to his perspiring scalp, sat cross-legged in his office chair, wiping his glasses with a cloth from his pocket. It had only been a month since they were paired by the seminary, but Michael knew what the appearance of the handkerchief meant. After Michael's absolution, they often talked in this room because it was near the confessional and Father Wells did not like the long walk over the concrete paths and then the hard marble floor into the small cafeteria where the other priests seemed to like to advise their charges. Father Wells said he liked the soft fabric beneath his seat. And when he held his frames up to the thin light and moan at their thickness, he expected Michael to say something.

This afternoon the priest eyed Michael's slender frame bent over, his eyes at his shoes. At their initial introduction, Father Wells recognized Michael as a son of a military man. Michael sat straight in his chair, feet firmly on the floor, and the priest pointed at him in the middle of speaking and told Michael he surely was reared by a man with order. Michael acknowledged the keenness of the observation with a nod. Father Wells had been an Air Force chaplain and Michael found his plane metaphors during spiritual counsel a door to memories of his father.

The priest groaned. "Pull up, my son. Hands on the stick."

Michael pushed himself out of the slouch and nodded. But his eyes faded to the floor.

"Is there something on your mind?"

At that Michael gave a half-smile.

“Does it concern Mr. Dumaci?”

A tall and gangly Irish third son from Ohio, Thomas Dumaci had come to St. Anselm’s in Chicago after a post-college journey through California and Oregon and then some weeks communing with an Arizona desert clan who shared their wisdom through a pipe. He had told Michael he was looking for something else than what his siblings did. One brother worked for their father and the other joined the military. Yesterday, Michael had watched Thomas pack from across the hall.

“You got a girl you going back home to?”

“Not really. Maybe. Not going to find one here.”

Michael gently laughed.

Thomas pulled the zipper on his bag and sat on the bed. “After all this, man...” He swept his arm across the events of the year – the assassinations, the war. “I thought here would be the place.”

Michael looked down at his black pants.

“It’s different from what I expected, I guess,” Thomas said.

His mouth stayed open for a moment, as if more words would come. But they did not. He looked around the room one more time, picked up his hefty luggage and said goodbye.

“Had you two become close?” Father Wells asked.

The question itself was a polite warning. Not wanting to give evidence on himself, Michael merely replayed for the priest that last conversation, describing it as one of the few times he and Thomas had spoken. Which wasn’t a lie. They didn’t speak much and he did not have any *particular* feelings for Thomas, as the warning went. They did

not have much in common. When they were together, Michael mostly listened to Thomas talk about playing second base in high school, getting the impression he was not as good as he let on. He talked about California a lot and why he left (ran out of money) and what led him to come to seminary (in the desert he had seen something of the God he knew as a boy in Ohio and he thought he might see it here). He never talked about someone like Michael's childhood priest, Father Frank, and any priest who helped him grow or his mother being religious or anything akin to Michael's experience at a Lowcountry monastery during college where he heard his calling to be a priest. When Michael told him that part of his biography, Thomas said: "That's really something, man."

Mostly they stood behind the dorm and watched the sun fall between the tall buildings that surrounded the campus and smoked. Michael had spotted Thomas there once, blowing the "godless gray air" from his mouth, as Thomas called it. The most religion they got into was when Thomas talked about Ohio Catholics. And once Thomas told Michael how he had always wanted to go to Charleston to see the old churches there.

"He seemed to know he was in the wrong place, I think," Father Wells said.

Michael nodded.

"Was there something else?"

"I guess I have my own expectations, Father."

"And what are those?"

"I thought I would be... different. Better in a way. More... holy."

Father Wells held his frames in one hand and put the cloth back into his pocket with the other. "Do not expect too much from a few theology classes. It will come."

"Yes, Father."

Michael expected to be able to throw out the love letter. When it was delivered a week before he left for seminary, Michael sat on the edge of his bed and read it very slowly. He moved his eyes ever so slightly along the feminine penmanship and from time to time lifted his head to sigh when the words were too much. *I do not understand*, she wrote. *I said I did before, when it was something I thought you wanted me to say. But now I do not. I do not understand why God would take you from me.*

She had left Clemson and moved back home to Greenville and started working in an office with a small plant with tiny, pink flowers on her desk. She was happy, she said. *Of course it is only on the outside.* She had not been to Mass since the spring, since they had last talked. *Not even a note at graduation? I had a gift for you.* It was a book about the role of priests. *It says priests heal, pray, and offer sacrifice. I guess I am what you sacrificed for God.*

Pray for me, she wrote, *pray for me.*

He read the letter again every night that week and when he packed for seminary, he slid it into the leg of a pair of brown pants for the journey. When he arrived in Chicago, he pulled those pants from his suitcase and let the paper slip from them. He stopped unpacking and read it again. It ended with a request: *I do not know why I am writing. Perhaps I shouldn't be writing to a boy who wants to be a priest. But would it get you into trouble if you wrote back and we wrote each other every now and then?*

That first day Michael held the letter over the small trash can in the corner of his room. He would not reply. But he couldn't throw it away, either. He brushed his hand

across the paper and then slid it into the only drawer of his desk. Then he put all the things he would need for classes - pens in a cup, notebooks stacked underneath the cup – on top of his desk.

Thomas always had a story about a girl when he smoked. At a certain point in the stories, Thomas would smile and look off in the distance and say something about girls and memories and how they stay on. He would return to see Michael gazing at his feet. After nearly every story, Michael sat at his desk with one hand just inches from the drawer but never opened it.

When he returned from Father Wells this time, Michael held the letter as he stood beside the desk. He heard a door close in the hall. Others were leaving for dinner. Someone would come for him soon.

Her words were full of doubt.

I know you wanted me to go there, and we had both said it was where I was being called to, but I chickened out. Well, that's what I told my family. They were relieved. But of course I knew I could not go.

She had stopped there, Michael knew, and took the pen from the paper. Her face was wet with tears.

Michael heard another door close and then a knock on his own. He looked at the note. He had kept her from God. Because he had told her he had loved her, she did not go to God and be a nun. And when he told her it was over, he couldn't say he didn't love her anymore. And so she never quit believing he did. That love – the love he refused to kill himself by keeping it in a drawer - held her from taking her vows. He had sacrificed her, she was right. But not to give her to God, instead to keep her away.

He wanted his words back. He wanted the two months they shared to fall out of his mind. He wanted to stay here in this place and give God what God wanted. He wanted to become a priest and offer sacrifice. He wanted to heal. And so, too, he wanted to heal her. He wanted to tell her all this. He wanted to love her.

A second knock at his door.

Michael knew he could not do anything more, could not do anything as a priest if he did not do this now. He looked at the letter again. Obedience is the peace of assent he reminded himself. If he began anew, not double-minded, then God would erase from his mind what he had done.

He tossed the paper into the trash and answered the door.

After dinner, Michael went out for a smoke. Thomas had left him half a pack. As Michael lit his cigarette he remembered how his mother discovered he had started. When he was home from college that first Christmas, he'd stay up late reading with the window slightly open and a cigarette in his fingers. She found a butt outside and came to him in tears. "Don't you know... don't you care that these make it worse?"

Her face, her eyes were tired. She had lost another husband. She was alone now that he and Mae left. He thought about promising to stop, but before he could, she stepped away.

His mother had been right. The darkness had come more often and lasted longer. But he did not tell her. It was only a few seconds. Nothing to worry about.

He looked inside the pack and counted what remained. He lit the end of one and held the cigarette sideways and watched the fire move across it. The miniature flames pressed on, wildly burning along a line, closer and closer to his hand.

He saw some men returning from the gym. Michael quickly stomped out the cigarette and pitched it into a trash can. He tossed away the rest and walked inside.

At their next confession Michael told Father Wells about the letter and the girl. He started from the beginning, describing how she looked that night they met at the parish dinners for students. How they ended up as the last two people to leave. How he walked her home. He described the moon and the sun the next day and the stars they saw after that. He told the priest how they kissed for the slightest moment outside the theatre where they had seen *The Love Bug*.

Michael slumped forward and held his hands between his knees. He waited for Father Wells to speak. He did not.

“I see her sometimes in...” Michael said.

“In your darkness?”

“Yes. And she is crying.”

“Why is she crying?”

“Because I hurt her.”

Michael sat upright against the confessional. He could hear the priest’s labored breath and his body move against the seat. “Father?”

“We often have secret sacrifices of which no one knows.”

“Yes, Father.”

Father Wells began a prayer and Michael joined. When they finished the priest closed the window in the box and Michael met him outside.

“Have you replied to the letter?”

“No, Father.”

“Where is it now?”

“In my garbage can.”

“Bring it to me. I will destroy it.”

“Yes, Father.”

Michael had learned during the first years to dread the fourth year exams. They were the toughest, the older students had told him. The priests had this last chance, really, to test you because there were no fifth year assessments. The prophecy was proving true. Michael found his hand pulsing with pain as he dropped his pencil. He rubbed his knuckles and looked at the white paper on his desk half filled with words, a sentence in mid-thought dangling and unfinished. Michael saw the hunched backs and curled shoulders of his classmates in front of him.

He had plans when this was over. He would sit against the brick wall and listen to the world bellow its sirens, horns, alarms, and bells and think about the peace of a good smoke.

When time was called, Michael stood and lurched behind Gerald, the chubby kid from Michigan, as he pulled at his pants until they were high enough for his satisfaction. Others headed to the dorm but Michael and Gerald took the worn path to the wall.

Michael quickly threw himself to the ground and watched Gerald slowly slump and then bump his body next to Michael. Gerald dug into his pocket for a crumbled pack of Winstons and Michael took a book of matches from his shoe.

“This is it, I suppose, for a while,” Gerald said. “I always seem to give it up for the summer. At home I can’t get any. ”

“I get my summer stash from Father Donovan. He did two packs a day last summer. But he smokes Pall Malls.”

“You want what’s left then?”

“Can’t. Have to give it up for the summer, too.”

“Why?”

“No smoking in front of the youth.”

“You know that’s how Charlie is getting started. St. Bernard’s. In Cincinnati. No. Wait. Akron. He has to give up cursing, too.”

“Don’t we all.”

Michael watched his smoke merge with Gerald’s and then fade into the quad.

“Another Chicago summer,” Michael said. “Easier than a Southern one.”

“I guess that’s all I know about the South: the weather. What else you got there?”

Michael pulled the cigarette from his mouth and held it as a circus announcer took over his voice. “We got crosses the sizes of oaks alongside the highway, draped with someone’s best purple sheet. Crosses everywhere, but Jesus...” - he put emphasis on the

name by stringing out the first vowel - "is risen today. He's all over. Like he got off all those crosses and took jobs landscaping or dry cleaning. And we got gospel tracks, gospel singers, and gospel by road sign: 'Are You Saved?' in multiple colors along dying roads that lead into long forgotten towns."

Michael paused to suck in a long draw. Then he flicked away the cigarette.

"What did you do that for?" Gerald asked.

"Had to make a clean break. Needed one last draw, though."

Gerald inhaled and then blew smoke into Michael's face. "It ain't a woman, Mike. You can't just go...what's the word? Celibate."

"That's the other thing we got in the South. Queers dressed as priests or is it priests dressed as queers?"

"You shouldn't say that too loud."

Michael picked up a small stick from the ground and tossed it in front of him.

"Anyone talked to you about McDonald?" Gerald asked.

Michael shook his head.

"Me, neither. I guess... it's all trying to be kept secret. Not secret, but I guess we're not supposed to know."

Michael stretched his slim legs fully and then reached to the tips of his shoes with his fingers.

"I wish I could do that," Gerald said.

"Stop smoking and you will."

Gerald puffed out another exhale. "Did you think they knew? They had to have known. I mean, they let him in."

“I guess they didn’t know.”

“Maybe he... you know... and they told someone?”

“What?”

“You know what I’m saying.”

Michael didn’t respond.

“I hear that’s what happened.”

“You sound like you’re in junior high.”

“Just wondering if that’s what you heard, too?”

“Maybe McDonald – can we at least call him by his first name? Give him a little humanity - Maybe Walter isn’t what we think he is.”

“You would know better than me.”

“He was here for less than a year. He left like what – four weeks ago? This is the longest non-theological conversation I have had with you or anyone.”

“You worked with him in the kitchen.”

“For what, a few months? We washed pots and pans. It’s not like me and him were close.”

“You lived across the hall from him. And he was from...”

“Louisiana.”

“So you do know a little.”

“You can tell where I was from by merely listening to me. So I – or anyone - could with him. But other than that I don’t know much. It’s not like I was his friend.”

“But you know...”

“I don’t know his favorite meal. I don’t know what his shoe size was. And I don’t know why he left.”

Michael picked up another stick and broke it in half. He spun the shorter half from his hand like a Frisbee. “Just give me another, will you?”

“I thought you quit.”

“I did.”

Gerald didn’t move.

Michael motioned his hand to spur Gerald. “I will. I will.”

“For the kids?”

“Of course, for the kids.”

Gerald consented and Michael lit another.

“There’s only two left now,” Gerald said.

“Perhaps we should finish them here, then.”

“Don’t you have to be somewhere?”

“Yeah. But I got time. You leaving today?”

“It’s a short drive to Ann Arbor.”

“You stopping in South Bend?”

“It’s a little out of the way.”

“What’s a few miles for Touchdown Jesus?”

“You would think that some school in the South would have beaten them to it, you know? Carolina or Georgia?”

“We’re not into art. And plus football is its own religion. It’s got its own icons.”

“Do you get the Notre Dame itch being from....what part of South Carolina are you from again?”

“Beaufort. Rhymes with you. Though I was never into football. My mother never let me play much. She thought I might get hurt.”

“You mean your eyes?”

“Yeah. She told me once smoking made it worse.”

“Was she right?”

Michael nodded.

“So why don’t you quit?”

Michael pointed his cigarette at Gerald. “Why don’t you?”

“How long were you out last time?”

“It was a few weeks ago. Right around when all this happened with... I don’t know really how long. It was late. I guess before eight, before lights out. I had my door open a bit to listen to Francis’ radio. Then all I remember is Wally – Walter – above me, pulling me off the floor. I was lucky I didn’t hit my head on something. My room light was on, so I think maybe he saw it and came to check on me.”

“Why would he do that?”

Michael shrugged, knowing he had revealed Walter’s breach of dormitory protocol.

Gerald dropped his cigarette and then swiftly pulled his left hand from the ground and shook it. “Ant or something got me.” He looked at his palm and examined an area of redness near his thumb. “Look at that.”

After glancing at the bite, Michael stood and pulled his chin to the top of the wall. Across the road a car slammed to a stop at a light. Others lined up behind it. Michael ran his eyes up along the tall building and watched the afternoon sun shine off the glass windows.

His cigarette fell into a low bush. The cars sped away and Michael slumped onto the ground again.

“You lose it over the wall?”

Michael nodded.

“Do you think you’ll get to go back to South Carolina?”

“I would think so. The church doesn’t get many from there. Why not send me back, you know?”

“You said before that maybe McDonald isn’t what we think he is. What did you mean?”

“I was just saying that maybe he wasn’t...isn’t totally like that, what you said... that he’s like us.”

“I don’t think...”

“You said yourself. You think he’s...homosexual.”

“And you don’t?”

“I think... This isn’t an easy life. And we - you and me - haven’t yet taken it all on, officially, you know. We still have vows to say. And we’re not going to change overnight. And he was only a first-year.”

“What are you saying?”

“Maybe he’s queer. Maybe he was sent here so he could be a mole. Supposed to infiltrate... that sort of thing. Make us all that way. Or maybe he is homosexual or gay or whatever we should call it and what better place to hide it, to be around... That’s what my sister says. And she would know: she’s a psychologist who listens to stuff like this all day. But maybe he’s like us, one of us. Maybe he’s trying to figure out how to take on... Look, we don’t know what he did. We don’t know what he said. Think about it. When was the last time you told anyone anything.... really said something about dealing with all this?” Michael ran his hands, palms up, down his body to his knees to accentuate the subject matter. “I bet if we talked to him – maybe we should have talked more to him, maybe *we* should talk more – I’m saying if we did, we might hear him say things we all have thought. Things we’ve never said.”

For a moment Gerald was silent. Then he tossed the remaining two cigarettes and his lit one to the ground and dug his heel into them. He stood and offered his hand to Michael.

Michael looked at the pile. “I was going to smoke those.”

“Yeah. Shouldn’t be smoking anyway.”

“I guess in the fall we’ll have to find something else to do than sit here and...”

“Yeah. Maybe starting on some weights or running or something.”

Michael nodded.

“I can stop in South Bend if I leave now, you think?”

“Yeah.”

Michael watched Gerald cross the quad until he could not be seen anymore.

Michael convinced himself Gerald would forget his words. But the self-assurance was only a partial relief. Michael had articulated it – the big it, *the* it that remained only a pronoun - more than he ever had. There was something noble about the attempt, even if it was clearly a failure.

One always made jokes about it, as Gerald had. The humor was part of the defense all the students had and how the subject disappeared. It was really no subject at all. It was an object hurled into space on the first day. Tumbling further away from this plot of land walled off from the secular city, never to be mentioned again.

Michael had another subject like that: his mother. He didn't want to know and slowly Mae got him to see the truth. Once Michael admitted the reality, they watched her slow withering while she refused to talk about it. Michael tried to bring her up to Chicago. He requested the whole family come for Christmas. He made his wish known early, sometime in October, and waited. On Thanksgiving he listened to an apologetic Mae say their mother was not up to it. He asked they come in the spring. His mother agreed after pestering, but after a plane crashed coming into Midway in February she refused.

On the phone with Mae two weeks ago, after they had gotten past the news of Mae's pregnancy and hunches of what Michael might do with his summer, Mae said their mother might die there, in the house. "She really wanted to come, you know, before."

"I know."

"She wants to see how you have grown."

Michael wanted to be home with them. His mother was drifting in a fog, alone with a lifetime's worth of memories that appeared in her darkness. His sister was bearing another child, another target, she said, for those demons she knew so intimately.

But Michael knew, too, if he was there, they would have noticed what was unnoticeable in letters and over the phone. They would have seen past his words, past his recitation of Aquinas, past his black cloth. He was not different. He had not grown. He was lost, too, living the schedule, but not the life.

As Michael eyed Father Wells coming to him, memories began to spin. The taut string of time, where events lay divinely separated as to have the least impact on each other, began to curl inward. Last week's discussion on the trinity where he caught and then chastised himself for daydreaming brought on his first night at St. Anselm's reading alone trying to meditate on the stations of the cross all the while thinking of her. All the moments of carelessness, of selfishness, of ungodliness – the distant and recent collided and massed together and began to press on him. As a child when this happened, when he made his mother sad or enraged his father, he escaped into his darkness. Then it was empty. But now, rubbing his eye, Michael knew it was a place he did not want to see. He stood and met Father Wells on a bench under a large tree.

Michael mentioned he had found a summer job.

“Do you like working with the children?”

Michael nodded.

“Perhaps that will be your calling after ordination.”

Still a year off, the rite had played itself out many times in Michael's mind. The words he would speak, the words the bishop would, all the words were already scripted by years of tradition. And the vow of celibacy he would make had been made by thousands before him. This was supposed to comfort him.

The day had crept closer without his recognition. Four years, three years, two, now one. He had agreed but didn't want to acknowledge to Walter that what he said was true. Standing there in Michael's room - same brown hair, same slight curl, same height, same bony elbows - Michael heard his twin say: "I don't think I can do this anymore."

Father Wells was silent. This was not new, but different in a way. A subtle shift had occurred in these meetings. There would always be the small chit-chat. In the beginning, though, Michael had always been the one to answer, never the person to ask questions. He was the probed. The transfer had put him in the other role, more often into both roles.

Michael knew the movement to be true, the movement from disciple to one able to teach others. Yet, at the moment, the silence was suffocating.

"How are your prayers?" Father Wells asked.

"Slightly well."

"And your priestly conscience - is it developing?"

"Very much."

"Do you find the summer solitary difficult?"

"No. I look forward to it, now after three times."

"Solitude causes one to be more intimate with Christ. Some people have an exaggerated fear of it, but most fear it too little."

Solitude was code for celibacy. Yet this code was all there was. The rare line of wisdom or perhaps even the rarer metaphor obscuring its true subject was the only aid Michael and the others got. No course of sexuality, a course on what to do with your thoughts, what to do when people want to be closer to you than Christ, what to say to yourself, how to hold the thought of it when you're thirty, when you're forty, when fifty years later you still remember a woman on a bus the day you went across town - none of that was given. The code was a kind of language used by no other tribe of people except those on the cusp of this chosen, yet burdensome seclusion and the priests who oversaw them. Theirs was an exchange that explained the definition of the sacrifice but not the depth, gave seed to the symbolic power of it, but not its physical influence.

“And I, Father?” Michael asked.

“Perhaps this morning, it is the former, I think.”

“Yes, Father.”

“But tomorrow will be better.”

That's what he had told Walter. It was good advice, Michael knew, but as it traveled across the space between them, Michael felt it turned into something shallow, a dust-off, a “cheer up, pal,” a “get over yourself.” In response, Walter covered his face with his hands. Michael led Walter by his shoulders into a chair then. It was the first time Michael had touched someone like that since he left Clemson.

“You don't understand... I... I... think about...”

Michael pulled his hands away. He had something to say, something quick and sterile, something from a book he had read, something dead. But he waited in the silence as Father Wells had taught him.

“I think about... things. Not just think about them, but I want to do...”

Walter looked at Michael then, his eyes filled with lonesomeness. Yet there was also hope; an expectation for the sharing of intimate motions of the soul.

Michael touched Walter’s shoulder with a single palm.

“I know, Wally. I know. I want to do them, too.”

Father Wells called it cabin pressure. When the weight of sin, the weight of the past, the weight of holiness, and the weight of priesthood were together, your mind became like a cockpit. And at some point, Father Wells said, the pressure gets too much. Something happens, something in the present, outside your head, and because you were so stressed, that event rips a hole in your wall, and your air is sucked out. It is then you reach for anything, anyone.

Now that Walter was gone, Michael thought he should say something to Father Wells. He should explain that night. He shouldn’t wait for the priest to ask, like he did in the beginning. But Gerald’s stupid rumors were not altogether ridiculous. When Walter told Michael he’d better get back to his own room there was a look. Walter wanted something from Michael more than his confession. And it was something he thought Michael had.

Michael shook his head. That’s not what I saw. I didn’t even look at his eyes that closely. Yes, I had lowered my head. But why? Why didn’t I want to look him in the eye?

“Would you like me to hear your confession before we go?” Father Wells asked.

Had he anything to confess? He was not the one to cross the hall. He was not the one who stayed. He was not the one...

“Yes, Father.”

“Good, then.”

The priest pulled his purple stole from his jacket and laid it across his neck. He crossed himself and Michael closed his eyes.

“Forgive me, Father for I have sinned. It has been two weeks since my last confession.”

“Yes, my son.”

“I have had many impure thoughts.”

“Have they been prolonged in your mind?”

“Yes.”

“Have they been directed toward anyone in particular?”

“Yes.”

“Are you repentant for these thoughts?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Have you taken steps to strengthen the bulwark of your mind?”

“Yes.”

“Lord, have mercy on us.”

“Lord, have mercy on us.”

“Christ, hear us.”

“Christ, hear us.”

In his darkness, Michael saw the lamb bleeding and the crowd gathered around the cross. He saw the savior looking at him. Michael began to confess then. His thoughts about Gerald. His spiritual drought. His doubt. His desires. The desires that made him

doubt. The desires that took him from Christ. The desires he wanted again. The desires that wanted him.

Then everything was silent except for the sound of Father Wells exhaling through his nose. It was a silence for Michael to enter into, his to claim, his to fill with his own words, like a true priest. And so he did.

“Be thou, most blessed and adorable Heart, the sole object of my love, the protector of my life.”

Michael felt his soul lighten.

“Be thou my advocate at the throne, and screen me from the wrath which my sins deserve.”

Michael led the repetition then.

“All ye men and women, saints of God, make intercession for us.”

“All ye men and women, saints of God, make intercession for us.”

“Hear us, Lord.”

“Hear us, Lord.”

CHAPTER IV: THE FATHER

Failing to sleep deep into the night, Michael watched infomercials selling kitchen gadgets on the television across the room. A dehydrator then a multi-talented chopper and finally a vacuum sealer that could press clothes so thin one could buy more and more.

Frustrated, he turned the set to a sports channel. More commercials came. A batting practice aid where a ball is sewn to a string and the string to a pole. When a young boy hits the ball the cord curls around the rod. There was also for sale an instructional video that displayed a row of boys raising their arms, pulling their elbows, and tossing balls all alike. He tried another sports channel, hoping for a West Coast game, but it had ended. More commercials. Fathers and sons in a yard, practicing, smiling, dreaming.

Memories came to Michael then like from a movie with scenes filled with costumes and sets of his youth. He was there with Mae and their mother. And his father, too. And as always, cameos of his strange darkness. He saw others, too - everyone who played a part in his life, in his calling. God was there, in character, moving the pieces about the board. Michael closed his eyes once more, trying to resist the lie – was it one? – that the divine had left his role long ago.

Michael's young, thin hands could not keep steady the oversized glove his father had brought him. The leather strings hanging from the end of the last finger trembled as Michael pulled the massive mitt away from the front of his face. Across the yard in front of the metal shed which sat under a towering pine tree his father held a ball.

“Ready?”

Michael moved the glove from his face and nodded.

“Okay.”

When his father released the ball, Michael noticed it was a lob, not a high pop, and smiled slightly. He had caught one of those at school. It was after that miracle he asked for a glove of his own. Michael pulled the leather fingers of the glove and opened its soft middle pouch. The ball moved down off the highest part of the rainbow path and grew bigger and bigger.

When it crossed between him and the sun, Michael closed both eyes and waited.

A few seconds later, he felt a solid thump on his forehead and stumbled to the ground. When he sat up Michael saw his father reaching for his face. His father's hands had coarse fingers and the right palm had a scar that had badly healed which ran from the bottom of the middle finger and angled to his thumb. When Michael felt that line of roughness like dried glue on his cheek, he smiled.

“You go out?”

Michael shook his head.

“You sure, even for a second?”

“It didn’t even hurt.”

“Good. Then we can do it again.”

As his father walked away, Michael noticed how his father delicately pushed on his left ankle.

“Your foot hurt?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“I stepped on a shoe.”

“When?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Last night?”

His father did not answer. Michael knew about his father’s nightmares.

Sometimes they happened when he was awake.

When his father reached the tree, Michael pounded the middle of his glove like he saw on television. “Can we try hitting next?”

“One thing at a time.”

His father lobbed the ball again. Michael kept the glove below his face, rubbing his fingers against the worn leather. At the last second he pushed his glove in front of his face, sprung open the mitt, and felt the soft pain of the ball against his palm.

He grabbed the ball and tossed it back to his father in a wild sling. It landed halfway between them.

His father smiled and started toward the ball. “I’ll get it.”

Michael listened with his mother and sister from his bed as their father tacked back and forth in the hallway. His voice beyond their closed door was loud and crisp, especially when he ordered his invisible unit of soldiers to retreat from the cascade of bullets that had begun to whip through some of them.

God, too, saved memories for your father, Michael's mother said to him after he asked what was wrong with his father. "Sometimes he remembers what he did and thinks he is still doing it."

"What did he do?"

"Whatever it was, it can't be undone."

Eventually they heard their exhausted father go to bed. Their mother followed him across the hall. The weary twins fell asleep quickly. But Michael heard his father stirring hours later. When he turned the knob on the children's bedroom, Michael feigned sleep as best he could. But curious, he peeked to see his father between the beds making a cross on his chest.

After his father left, Michael heard the hallway groan as his father headed to the kitchen. A chair scrapped across the floor and Michael knew his father had sat at the circular table that had a salt shaker in the middle and an empty napkin carousel.

Michael knew the next sound, as his father has taught him. When it came, Michael pressed his eyelids further closed and hoped for more darkness. He waited and waited, trying to make it come. When his mother called out his name, Michael opened his eyes to see her standing before him. She ordered him and Mae to remain. They obeyed

until her scream thrust them from their beds. They found her hugging their father's corpse and patting the top of its head.

Three days later, Michael and his sister followed their mother into the front row of the church. Their mother sat between them, her rosary woven tightly around her hand. The small dying Jesus hung from her wrist as Mae pulled at the beads.

Michael shut his left eye and looked up at his mother, his cheek crunched slightly. She smiled at him and patted him on his leg. He switched eyes and turned to her again and watched her rub the silver crucifix. Bells rang then and the priest – a tall, lanky man with wide-rimmed glasses - appeared from behind the altar. Michael began to stare at the angel statue that stood on the left edge of the altar. They did not usually sit this close on Sundays and he had hardly ever noticed exactly what was at the front. The sculpture set in a soapy colored stone had its hands folded and head bowed. Michael squinted at it for a few seconds before his mother turned to see him. She grabbed his face and shook her head.

“I'm not...” Michael whispered.

He had frightened Mae a few months ago with a new-found power to self-start his eye problem. He poked her as she sat on her bed one afternoon combing the mangled hair of a small blonde doll.

“Do you want to see something?” he asked with a grin.

She shrugged and returned to the doll. His head began to sway just a bit and then he grabbed her. His pupils had expanded, whiteness overcome by black up to the very

edges of his eye. His head wobbled on his neck and he fell sideways on the bed. Mae dropped her doll and screamed. Their mother arrived moments later to find Michael back up and rubbing his eyes with his fist.

“He did it to me,” Mae told her mother.

“Did what?”

Mae pulled at her own eye lids. “That thing.”

As the funeral rite continued, Michael began to blink quickly, as if his eyes were sending code. The left eyelid fast, then the right faster. Then a pause, closing both. His mother looked at him and hastily pulled down at the flimsy skin below his eyes, just inside and under his glasses, with two fingers. He tried to resist.

“Don’t.” She tightened her grip.

When he yielded, she took her fingers away and then repeated the priest’s refrain: Lord, have mercy.

When a time of silent prayer was announced, Michael watched his sister close her eyes. His mother turned to him and took his chin in her hand.

“Look at me,” she said.

He blinked and complied, seeing her eyes begin to water. He tried to free himself.

“Here,” she said again, holding Michael until the priest began to sing the amen.

Michael continued to court the darkness the following week. His mother stopped him at the breakfast table, but he performed the trick at school. The principal called home and he was sent to his room. His mother came in to find him under the spell again.

Exasperated, the next Saturday she pulled him from bed and drove him to the church. She shoved the car into park and then told him if he did not stay with the priest until she came back, he would not eat dinner that night. He looked through his window and then back at her.

“I’m not mad,” she said. “Just go inside.”

He stepped onto the sidewalk. She pushed her hand forward toward the building. He looked to it and then to her. “Go,” she said. “I’ll watch you in.” Michael solemnly turned toward the church’s large, dark wooden door. He knocked on it and when it opened, he stepped inside, listening to the engine fade as it moved away.

Father Frank, who had presided over his father’s funeral, awaited him on the other side. They walked to an office where Michael sat in a leather chair with his feet barely touching the floor. Michael eyed the red rug that ran underneath his chair to Father Frank behind his desk. He was framed by a small window covered by brown drapes. Father Frank looked too long at Michael and so Michael scanned the shelves to his right filled with books – thick books with broken bindings and small paperbacks that were stacked at an angle.

Father Frank followed Michael’s glances. “Do you like to read?”

Michael blinked at the oscillating ceiling fan.

“Is it too cold in here, Michael?”

Michael stared at his shoes.

“Do you not like to look at me, Michael?”

Michael's chin rose and noticed Father Frank's ears were small – nearly the size of his own. Father Frank smiled and then removed his specs and rubbed his nose.

Michael did the same with his.

“Does your nose hurt like mine?” the priest asked.

Michael nodded.

“Now there, that's something – a nod. Good.”

Michael tossed his tie in his hand. He hated ties and pulled at them every Sunday. His leather shoes sticking out from his pants came to a sharp point in the front and as the silence continued he kicked one end of a shoe at the bottom of the other. Finally Father Frank got up from his chair and walked over to him. Father Frank looked old, Michael had always thought, older than his father. But he remembered what the priest said at the funeral: it saddened him to eulogize someone his own age.

The priest stood over Michael's chair, tall like his father. But Michael concluded the priest's shoulders looked too weak to be those of a father.

“I suppose you do not want to talk to me?” Father Frank asked.

Michael slowly shook his head.

“Ok, then we will not talk. Come with me.”

Father Frank led Michael into the sanctuary from behind the altar. The priest knelt before it and Michael copied him. Then the one turned to the empty pews and the other followed.

“Have you ever seen it from here?” the priest asked. “It's peaceful, isn't?”

They walked the length of the pews along the hard stone floor and then turned around. Michael gazed at the great arches that made the curve of the ceiling.

“Did you know your father came to see me once?” Father Frank asked.

Michael looked at the priest.

“The morning you were born. He stood here like we are. He put some holy water on himself.” The priest gestured to the pedestal bath. “Then he stood there looking at the empty pews like we are now.”

Michael surveyed them and smiled.

“I was kneeling up there in front and heard the door open. I turned around and saw him. He saw me but he just stood there. That was... how old are you now?”

“Ten.”

“Right. Ten. Confirmation in a few years.”

Michael bent his neck down to pull at his tie.

“He had on those green fatigues and those big, black boots. And when he took off his cap, his hair was shaved close. He looked worried.”

“What was he worried about?”

“About you, of course. And your sister and your mother. I think he came over here just before you were born – just before he had to take your mother...”

“To the hospital?”

“That’s right. And so he stood here and watched me. I watched him for a few seconds and then turned back to my prayers. After a few moments, he left.”

The gunshot sounded again in Michael’s mind and then he remembered seeing his mother hold his father’s floppy brain in her hands. It was hard to tell where her fingers ended and his hair began. They were blended together by the awful red that stained the kitchen floor. She screamed for him and Mae to leave so they ran into the hallway. But

there Michael stopped his sister with a tug. He led her as they crept back along the wall toward the kitchen. Mae nudged him from behind as they listened to their mother whimper their father's name again and again.

“Do you know what a priest does, Michael?” Father Frank asked.

Michael shrugged.

“A priest speaks to God for you.”

Father Frank then squatted to Michael's eye level. “Is there anything you want to say – anything you want me to ask God?”

Michael looked at his shoes. “Does God hear me pray, Father?”

The priest used his palm to raise the boy's chin. “Of course.”

Michael blinked.

“Your mother told me about your eyes,” the priest said.

Michael nodded.

“Do you want to ask God about your eyes? Do you want him to fix them?”

Michael sunk his head.

“We can certainly put in a word for it – if that's what you want. Do you want your eyes healed?”

Michael shrugged again.

“Why not?” Father Frank dropped from his squat to kneel and grabbed Michael's arms at the biceps. “Why not Michael?”

“Then I won't be able to see...”

The priest loosened his grip on Michael.

“I can't see him unless I... unless my eyes...”

The priest sighed. “I understand, then.”

Michael sniffed and ran his finger under his nose.

“Is there anything else?”

Michael looked away and then back at the priest. “Will she get married again?”

“That’s a tough one.” The priest pushed Michael toward the door. “May take some time to answer.”

“I think she misses him.”

“I think she does, too.”

For the next few weeks, whenever they ate, the twins made sure not to clink their forks or spoons against their plates. When they had finished, they gently put their dirty glasses into the sink. They were quiet after dinner, though some nights, as they lay in bed, instead of a book read to them they were allowed to ask questions of their mother. There were mostly hugs in place of answers.

After their mother left them, Michael often heard the television in the living room. Mae fell asleep quicker because her bed lay opposite the thin wall that separated the bedroom from the living room. The man on the television – a priest, Michael could tell from his words – spoke soft yet directly into the camera.

One evening, after a fitful struggle to sleep, Michael crept out of his room to stand just around the corner in the hallway. He pressed his face against the paint and nudged his chin, nose, and finally eyes out enough to see the grainy black and white screen. A gaunt, clean shaven man with a stole over his clerical outfit stood in front of a

chalkboard. He wrote something there and then turned to the camera. It zoomed in on his face. He held his hands on his chest, just above a wide belt that sat above his waist, and spoke somberly and slowly.

Michael looked at his mother asleep on the couch. Feeling secure he would not wake her he walked to the edge of the couch. He watched as the priest bent his knees and continued to address the camera.

“It is not hard and if it hurts a little, that is good, too.”

The priest touched the carpet at his feet.

“See? It is only down here you can understand up there.” The priest pointed to the ceiling. “Why don’t you join me?”

Michael looked to the floor confused.

“It is all right. Wherever you are.”

Michael felt the back of his knees push in and he grabbed the edge of the couch. The camera did not pull away as Michael watched the man’s stare.

“Take a moment with me.”

Michael looked at his mother. She remained asleep, a blanket wrapped between her legs and pulled around her arms. Michael’s knees broke and he came down to the floor. He took in his new line of vision. The ceiling was further away, the wooden floors he could touch with his hand, and the priest’s face seemed bigger.

“If you do not know the prayers it’s all right. Echo my words.”

The priest bowed his head and said a line and then looked at the camera. Michael closed his eyes, locked his fingers together and repeated the words in whisper. When the prayer was finished, Michael eyed the priest again.

“Remember, God listens.”

Michael switched off the set and watched the priest vanish into the electronic dark. He held onto the dial a moment then crept past his mother to his room.

On the morning of their last first day of high school, Mae woke up to find Michael still sleeping and so she crept softly to his bed and snatched the blanket off his body. When he didn't move, she scanned his body. His legs were side by side and his arms were stretched like he was set to be crucified. The familiar blackness had come to his eyes.

She nudged his foot with her hand. A small one had always worked. Yet nothing happened. She gently rubbed his warm face. When that did not work, she moved away in panic and ran to her mother's door. She stopped there, remembering the new rule of knocking first. She hesitated a moment and then pushed the door open slowly and light from the hallway followed inside. Her mother was curled in a sheet and the man beside her - the new man, the new father, the new husband, the new solidier, the one who made the new rules - turned over as the hint of morning annoyed him. He poked her with his elbow and she looked toward the door.

“He's not awake...” Mae said. “He's not coming awake.”

Mae and her mother found Michael as Mae had left him, his eyes wide and black as the night sea. As her mother put her hand on Michael's forehead, Mae lay next to him on the other side like a doll. Her legs snuggled up so that she fit beneath his long arm.

She watched his lungs rise and then empty. Her mother reached over and soothed Mae with a hand to her face.

Mae's new father entered and then pulled at Michael's feet. "He looks like he's drugged."

"He'll come around soon," their mother said.

The man shook his head and left.

Mae slid her hand onto her brother's chest and let it take on his rhythm.

Her mother looked at the clock on the bedside table. "Go get dressed for school."

"I want to stay."

"For a minute, then." She leaned over and blew air into his eyes. Nothing changed.

"Is he going to wake up?" Mae asked.

Her mother nodded.

"But he's never been like this before."

"It gets worse as you get older."

"Have you ever been out for this long?"

"They had the priest come. He sat next to me and laid his hand on my forehead, and then without telling my grandmother he wiggled my eye with his finger. She apparently tried to grab his hand before he could and he held her off."

"Did you wake up?"

"Right then."

"How did he know to do that?"

"He said God told him."

“Did Grandma say anything?”

“She went straight to confession.”

Mae’s mother straightened her finger and slowly moved it toward Michael’s left eye. Mae gasped and covered her mouth with her hands as the finger continued closer. After joggling it, she quickly moved away.

“Don’t tell him,” Mae’s mother whispered to her.

Michael turned over and blinked a few times and rubbed his eyes. He finally sat up.

“He looks fine, now. Off with you,” Mae’s mother walked to the door and pointed at the clock. She turned and pointed at Michael. “You’re going, too.”

As Mae and Michael walked to school Mae kept bending forward to peer into her brother’s eyes. “How come I don’t get like that?”

“Just cause. I got that. You got... something else.”

“He thought you were on drugs.”

“I think he’s on some. You ever see his eyes? And he looks like a clown with those ears.”

“Momma likes him.”

“Momma liked Daddy.”

“Do you still see him there – in your darkness?”

Michael looked at her. “Not today. This time I was walking through the marshes. I was chasing crabs. But they kept disappearing and I kept running after them.”

“We did that a week ago. Maybe that’s why...”

“But then he called out for me. I wasn’t sure where his voice was coming from. I looked around but I couldn’t see over the reeds. I couldn’t find him. It was the first time he wasn’t there.”

“Maybe you came out too early.”

“Maybe.” Michael rubbed his eye with a finger. “How long was I out?”

Mae shrugged.

“What?”

Mae shrugged again.

“Tell me.”

“Half an hour.”

Michael looked at the sidewalk.

“She didn’t want you to know.” Mae took her brother’s hand. “She thought you might be scared if you knew...”

“If I knew what?”

“That she did it. She got your eyes back.”

Michael stepped away.

“She jiggled your eyeball with her finger. Like this.” Mae stuck her pointer at her eye. “She thought you would worry if you couldn’t get out on your own.”

“How did she know it would work?”

“She said a priest did it to her.”

Michael took a few steps ahead but Mae stood still. “Did it scare you?” she asked.

“A little.”

The next Sunday, their mother, sick with the flu, wandered the house in a bathrobe and couldn't bring herself to go to Mass. But she sent the twins and told them the new priest, Father De' Angelo, would be looking for them.

The twins walked through the last days of the Southern summer. When they got to the church their clothes stuck to the wooden pew. They sat just behind the front row to make sure they were noticed.

When the bell sounded, Father De' Angelo appeared from behind the altar. His head stuck out of the vestments and Michael whispered he looked like a door knob. He was a small Caucasian skeleton whose loose skin had dark splotches. When he coughed, which he seemed to do every few steps, his whole body rattled.

"Look, there." Mae pointed at the priest's eyebrows which ran over the top of his thick brimmed glasses like another mustache.

The twins stood for the call to Mass and Michael looked around at the half-empty sanctuary. When the priest began to sing the opening lines, Michael noticed a weak melody spread through the crowd. But as song continued, the tremble in the priest's voice ceased and the new sound echoed strongly off the high ceilings.

When their part came, Mae sung half-heartedly, covering her mouth as she yawned. But Michael opened his throat and tried to match the tenor at the altar.

When they walked to the altar to receive the sacrament, Michael felt guilt for his criticism of the priest. He did not smile when he saw Mae grab her nose with two fingers at their seats.

On the way home, they retraced their steps past a row of stately homes.

“Gretchen – she lives there,” Mae said, pointing to a colonial brick house with a wrap-around porch.

“Mae I don’t need another of your...”

“She told me that we drank blood. She said she was glad the pope died. I told her that she had a pimple. More than once, actually.” Mae brushed a fly from her face.

“They’re always saying stuff like that. It’s not what it is, is it? At least it’s not what it means to us, I think. Do you know what I’m saying?”

Michael nodded.

“You know sometimes I can see you out of the corner of my eye. You’re real quiet and sometimes you just listen. You look serious and all. More than me.”

Michael stopped at the end of the sidewalk. “Just praying, I guess, for it to mean what it’s supposed to mean.”

When they got home, their mother told them they could not change their clothes because the priest was coming over. A fresh cough and wheeze exited her while she leaned over the stove, letting the steam from a boiling pot waft onto her face.

“You’re getting worse,” Mae said.

“And look at you,” Michael added.

“I feel well enough and I’ll be dressed by the time he gets here.”

“When is that?” Mae asked.

“Around two,” her mother said. “And perhaps stay for dinner.”

“I have to wear this all afternoon?” Michael loosened his tie. “And where is...?”

“You know where he is.”

“Is he going to be there all afternoon?”

She responded with a stare.

When the priest arrived, Michael led him in and Mae asked him about all the places he had been. He said he loved to travel here and there, wherever he was needed.

“It is not the usual retirement.”

“So you are retired then?” Mae asked.

“Priests do not ever retire. They may stop doing this and that, but they are bound to be found doing something of God even as they can do less of it.” Father De’Angelo turned to Michael. “I know just from seeing you this morning at Mass you would make a fine priest.”

Mae nudged her brother. “Why is that, Father?”

“I have seen them – the men who go into the seminaries. They have something about them. Something earnest about them, something solemn. Something he has.”

Michael took a cracker from the plate his mother had set out. He had never paid much attention to “the speech.” A male in a Catholic family – especially in a place where few are Catholics and even fewer become priests - got it. Michael’s first experience with it came when he told a boy about the talk he had with Father Frank after his father died. The boy smirked and asked in disbelief, “You got the speech, too?” To Michael “the speech” wasn’t just one event – it had become a process, like getting a girl to like you, he once told Mae. From others, he had devised it began at the end of confirmation – a slight nudge in the form of an explanation of what a priest does or how serving the church is a

noble calling. Then perhaps a homily – all generalized and such – but directed nonetheless at “the promising youth.” If that does not set off a spark, the priest then starts in on a parent and it becomes “God’s will almost.”

“Michael, thank the priest for his words,” his mother said.

Michael held the cracker up and nodded. “Yes, Father, something solemn. Thank you.”

Michael knew all he wanted to know about priests – how they lived alone and how they never did anything fun, except for Father Frank who seemed to be able to throw a ball and catch it in a glove, and when it was tossed at just the right speed, hit it with a bat.

“It is such a blessing to see so many young men – good Catholic boys – here,” Father De’ Angelo said.

Michael never had more than one friend at a time that was also Catholic. They came and went, taken by the military to different places. And if they were not military brats, they stayed only long enough to find Savannah more suitable. And for the other friends he had religion was not a subject talked about. They all assumed each other was somewhere on Sunday listening to a preacher or singing out of the Baptist (or if by their parent’s choice, Methodist) hymnal. The first time Michael’s friends knew he was not like them was when they learned he didn’t know what a deacon was. “It’s like a priest, then?” he said. They laughed and asked if he was Catholic. He nodded and then they taught Michael a lesson on priests – they did not like girls, and if they had, they would not know what to do with them.

“I think it’s a fine calling –a great vocation,” the priest said to Michael. “Have you ever considered it?”

Michael thought he was preparing for what all boys in the South were: to become gentlemen. They saw their fathers and their grandfathers and their uncles and their older cousins go off to Clemson or somewhere else and come back with fraternity letters or law school degrees that gave them membership in a club where blacks served in white coats and poor whites looked for mercy. And they wanted to go off to the same places and come back with the same things as the ones before them. There was a code, too, they wanted to live by. They wanted to protect the weak and the ignorant (whatever woman they would marry); they wanted to provide for the poor and the needy (a good church collection sent off somewhere); they wanted to fight against outsiders and agitators (they worried more about the first but knew there were some of the latter hidden among them).

But Michael knew, too, that he would never fully get to be what the others were. The obstacle he could never overcome was that the Southern man-in-training had to mix some brand of Protestantism with the very easy to show Americanism to find friends. If you vowed to fight against invaders who knew nothing about what it meant to live where you live and if you pledged to struggle, if called, against the enemies of America and God (the former being the home for the latter, therefore the same foes for both), then you found many friends and were allowed to date their sisters. If however you were different – if your father had shot himself when you were a boy and that had made you insecure, if you did not celebrate communion but did something to do with whatever cannibalism was (and in some unknown language), or if you found yourself one day so stunned by drink your eyes darkened enough to where those with you dunked your head into the

nearby creek until it became clear that was not working and left you there – if you were any of these things then you were suspicious. If you said nothing to alleviate that, if you didn't smoke or drink (except that one time), if you played possum to questions about the Pope and about your father in hell (as the other boys said), if you did not want any of them to date your sister, then you found yourself alone – alone with God most of the time, in your room, studying. Then by that definition, you were pretty much a priest already. You weren't sure you hated it, but it wasn't a career. But if you thought about, it seemed something you were already good at.

Michael loosened his tie. "I can't stand collars, Father," he said. "I guess I'm out."

Their mother rose to go into the kitchen then but faltered and Mae caught her arm. The priest asked in concern and the mother dismissed it, telling him she was recovering quickly from her sickness. "It seems your prayers are already working, Father."

Mae walked her mother into the kitchen and the priest continued with Michael. "Did you know Father Frank?"

Michael nodded.

"He told me about your father. I know it has been some years, but if I may..."

"It's all right, Father. My mother's remarried."

"He was a well loved man in the parish. He did so many things. I suspect it was his age – his youth, that energy."

"I think you are confusing him with someone else, Father."

"Father Frank? I thought you knew him well."

Michael sighed. "I thought you were talking about my father."

“He told me about all the young men in the parish. He spoke highly of you. He said he would throw...”

Then a loud scream came from the kitchen. Michael ran there and the priest followed. Their mother was lying on the floor. Her face was red and her eyes were filled with black.

“She was just standing there... over the stove and then.... she fainted,” Mae said, sitting beside her mother’s face. Michael fell to the floor and the priest slowly took a knee. Michael ran his hand across his mother’s face and felt her cheeks.

“Perhaps we should get a doctor,” Father De’Angelo said.

“It’ll be all right, Father,” Michael said.

“She looks.... in need. That strange blackness, that strange darkness there in her eyes – perhaps we should call someone.”

The priest pushed his hand toward her face but Michael stopped it. “It’ll be all right, Father.”

Michael slowly moved his finger to her face and joggled his mother’s eyeball. The darkness began to recede and Michael put his hand behind his mother’s head as she started to sit up. The priest looked at Mae. “It looks fine, see there,” he said. “Your brother here has the touch of a priest.”

The priest walked their mother back into the living room and Mae began to finish what had been started in the kitchen. Michael stood for a few moments in the middle of the kitchen looking at his hands. “I think I was rude to Father... what’s his name?”

“Father De’Angelo,” Mae said.

“I think I was rude.”

“No. I think he was impressed. The touch of a priest and all that.”

Michael poured water into a glass. “I’m going to take this to her.”

Mae turned toward him. “Hey, Mike, do you want to be a priest?”

“I don’t know. I guess. Maybe.”

CHAPTER V: THE VISIT

As Mae drove into Savannah, over the cabled Talmadge, she watched the sun slowly sink into the water as though it were stepping into a hot bath. She began to imagine the colors spreading on the surface as steam. She had always wondered how the weathermen could pinpoint the time for such an event to the minute. It seemed to happen as if there were no time, no way to measure its length – how does one know when the light is gone? She fought another thought for a moment and then let it blossom: there was a time when she and Michael told each other everything. A week after their father died, Mae admitted to her brother she too had opened her eyes when the gun fired. She confessed, too, eventually that she tasted some god-awful whiskey at Dorothy's house when she was sixteen. And he told her how his darkness sometimes stayed longer than their mother knew.

Yet there was a time when that stopped. She had history she never told and she was sure there were things still left unsaid by him. She sighed and admitted there was no certain date, no precise moment of this change, no particular event that was birthed as a secret and remained so by some conscious choice. It was a matter of growing apart, growing up, moving on, the present unhitched from the past. As if there were no past. As if.

Home, the rooms quiet and empty with Gary gone, Mae wandered upstairs to the frames that lined the hall. She stepped along the progression of her children, each portrait a reminder of an instant of their earlier lives – a past and a future collected in the present. Between each frame, secrets born and kept from their mother. On the other wall, a sequence with Gary. Just the two of them, through his plaid sweaters and big, brown glasses to his petite German frames, through her appalling curls that stayed too long to the sassy flip in the last picture. Not a new one since the children moved out, though. They were not unhappy, but between the flashes were secrets, too.

She stopped at the end of the hall and turned to see where she had come from. She rebuked another thought. She hated how she was letting all this swaying into the past rehabilitate her brother the pedophile priest. One side was sympathy: we all have our secrets. Another was anger: he was not yet ready to be restored. There were still things he had to, he must say. There were more boys. He was hiding them, hiding himself from them. They were waiting for someone to find them, to bring them together, at least on paper, in some manner of record. Someone should, someone had to do it, someone like her. But of course she couldn't do it; she would not be that cruel, even if she was right. And, too, she had failed at that once before with one of her subjects. He had refused to admit the truth about all his victims, their truth, and so she spread their pictures out like a fan – smiling school shots with groomed hair, boys in uniforms with bats or gloves or a soccer ball – and waited for the brute force of the faces to do their work.

After coming into the kitchen, she scrubbed and rinsed a bowl and a cup stained with the morning's milk and then dried her hands with a towel that was on the pale

granite counter. She ran the rag along the stained butcher block that topped the island and wiped a smudge from the door of the stainless steel stove hood. She stood against the sink and eyed the changes from a spring remodel. The wall between the kitchen and the dining room had been demolished. A window now sat above the faucet and every place the eye could go had new tile or paint.

The whole idea began nowhere near the kitchen. She had a slight yearning, a small need for something new. A week later there was a new cut and color on her head. Then new curtains on the bay window, an updated mirror on the guest bathroom. And yet those small changes were not enough. She started tearing examples from magazines and watching cable home decorating shows. Once the kitchen was done, she had plans for other rooms. A different house by the time she was seventy. Gary was into it, she knew, because he had a touch for the work, but as the kitchen enveloped her in its luxury, Mae acknowledged at least to herself she never wanted it per se. She wanted something new.

Where had the old gone? Where did the scratch marks from measuring heights, the scuffs on the linoleum from moving in, the wall where she hung the childhood picture of Michael and herself eating Christmas ham with their hands – where had any of it gone? Tucked away with Harold Franks, the boy she first kissed. Stored in a fold of the brain with Jeremy, the boy from Walhalla. My god, she thought, surprised by the ability to recall the names. They were forty years ago. Another boy, another mistake came to her then. She turned to the window, trying to force her mind to refocus. There was nothing particularly alluring but a large trash can on the deck and a covered grill.

She could hear herself much younger telling Gary how eventually in old age she would forget the stories she heard and she would no longer be able to match them with

faces, any faces. The truth of course was the opposite. She would always have memories she did not want. Stuffed inside her, looking for that one emotion or synaptic bridge to come forward. She never really understood the people who wanted drunk drivers and murders to be forced to watch home movies of their victims. The past really doesn't need a lot of coaxing. It plays like a film most of the time so that even the one who refuses to admit his sins knows them.

That's what she had told her client when the pictures didn't move him. Michael had suggested the line. Try a little fear of God, he said. And when she said it, the face gave off a little smile. As if he relished in what he knew. As if someone else knew, it would take away the pleasure. That's when she began to think sin was not a strong enough word for what she saw, that hell took too long in coming as did God. All she could do after the smile was collect the photos quickly like a jumbled deck of cards and carry them off to cry in a bathroom stall.

And she lied to Michael when he asked afterwards if his plan worked.

It was late by the clock on the microwave. She made a turkey sandwich for dinner and then lounged on the couch through a movie until the late news. A crew had gone to Ashburn where Michael had his parish and asked for reaction. An old lady said she was praying for everyone. A young mother held her girl to her chest and asked how the church let this happen. Then Michael's junior priest came on. She recognized him. Still so fresh-faced, Mae thought. The young priest nodded when asked if her brother was a good priest.

"So then why did he do this?" The reporter's tone had hardened.

The priest looked down slightly and then raised his head. “I don’t know. I haven’t had a chance...”

“Any there any other victims that you are aware of?”

“No.”

“How can you be sure?”

“We take him at his word.”

“Why?”

“He is a good priest.”

Mae shut off the set and then tossed herself into her bed. The ceiling fan slowly spun and Mae counted the years since she had been to Ashburn. It had been five. A Wednesday, four days before Easter. She ate dinner with Michael, an unusual event. He invited her to stay through the weekend. She laughed. Just this once, he said. She grinned. You made that same promise the last time. It worked then, he said. She lowered her chin and nodded. And yet again, she whispered.

Her brother was a good priest. Not pushy. Not judging. He sent books at Christmas and wrote special prayers for birthdays. And they came with no orders, no demanding priestly authority. He was a bull when he spoke in front of a crowd, though. In that Easter service, she knew as he did that the pews were filled with annual visitors, the one-timers who even in a small town like Ashburn were pulled to Mass by a dead relative’s wishes or the need for another spiritual high like the one they got at Christmas. At least she was honest, Mae thought as she looked around. She was honestly faithless.

He stood before them, weighty and bearded and covered in royal cloth. And he led them along the path from Gethsemane to Golgotha and in and out of the empty tomb in a brisk twelve minutes. He paused at the end and pointed to the crowd.

“You’re here because you know there is something in this rite we do.” His other fingers curled open and his palm was extended. “You’re here because you know God is waiting.”

As the memory faded, she closed her eyes, too tired to be angry anymore.

After a short patch of interstate the drive to Ashburn was all small towns. The slow summer morning was already turning hot. She passed produce trucks with their windows down and Hispanic laborers sweating in the back. Her night had been hot and exhausting. She had dreamed an angry scene. She had walked into the daycare center run by the church in Ashburn and demanded to know who Michael had touched. She tugged at a little boy playing with logs and asked him. She shook another boy taking a nap and ordered him to answer. Father Michael is nice, Father Michael is funny, they said sheepishly. When all the boys refused, she moved on to the girls and her anger turned from urgent pleas to exhausted yearning. It seemed strange now that in her dream none of the adults stopped her. They joined her brute tactics. She came and then they came behind her, even more irate. Tell her, tell her what he did, they yelled. All of them knowing there was nothing to say.

They had to be angry in Ashburn. They were, if the lady on the news was not alone. They were waiting for the other shoe to drop. Like all the others from Boston to Louisiana to Los Angeles. No one does this just once.

Yet Easter came to Mae again. Children ran to him after that service. They pulled at the end of his vestments like her children had often done. A cluster of three boys and two girls all begged him to carry them. He chose a girl with red curls and a pink dress and lifted her to his chest and bounced her on his arm.

The light ahead turned yellow and Mae stopped the car quickly. Varnville, then Hampton, now Allendale. A water tower rose above an old brick office building to the left. A man in a suit stood on its second-floor balcony and smoked. A wooden sign to the right named the Baptist church behind. Ahead Mae could see the Methodist one. Always two. They were missionary fields to the Catholics and Michael wanted such a place. He was a small-town priest. Or at least he had grown into one. In Charleston, she could see he was imperfectly cast. You don't fit here, she told him a month after he began. You are not being used right. He did not reply. He did not get angry. He was a good priest. She recalled that moment to him when she first visited him in Ashburn. It had been a few months and she saw the difference. It is because you are top collar here, she said with a slight smile.

“It is because I am a better priest,” he said after blowing smoke from a cigar.

“You have not stopped smoking.”

“I am not a saint.”

“I suppose we have to wait for you to die for that.”

“Three miracles, you know. I already have done one.”

“What’s that?”

“Getting you here.”

The light changed and Mae pulled forward. A priest was not any kind of miracle worker, but merely a worker. And Michael was that, if nothing else. He missed Gary’s retirement to drive a man to the airport. He missed birthdays and never left Ashburn on Christmas or Easter. Yet, thinking back on it, he never seemed to wear down. He didn’t complain in Charleston or during that two-year stop in Georgetown where no one else wanted to go. He was a good priest.

Though there were gaps when they didn’t see each other or talk for weeks. That was how it was in seminary, too. Even at the hospital she couldn’t hold back on that. It didn’t make him a better priest to work all the time, she had always said. It was the only topic between them that made him irrationally angry. And so when she really got to him, he stopped calling.

Mae realized then that they had not spoken in the month leading up to his crime. When they met next, a few weeks gone by, she had brought him an old photo of them splashing in a pool. He called before Mass the next Sunday – something he had never done – and told her the picture was taped to the underside of his stole.

“Did I make you cry? I can hear you sniveling a little,” he said after some silence.

She whimpered an affirmative.

When he was with you, he was nowhere else, though, she thought. No calls, no distractions. Doctors had bedside manner; priests had graveside manner and Michael never turned it off. But time away was never really time away. They live their lives behind a screen, behind the collar, even the good ones. He wasn’t there a lot but when he

was – when he would stay up and listen to her vent from the week, when he would answer the phone during one of her sleepless nights – he was a priest. A brother, a friend, too, but always a priest.

Mae pulled through another town, the diminishing speed matching her sluggish sigh. If he had been something else, anything else, anything less holy, he would have been able to tell her and all of it would have been different. And if he had just told her, if he had just taken off the veil and been like all the rest of us, then he too would be different. And if she had known, she would have been better, too.

She remembered then the handful of men she saw over the years who were victims as boys. They'd come in after it all, after the court case or perhaps in preparation for it, and come to the same point: I could have been so different, been something else, been this or that if he hadn't done what he did. She would sit in her chair ten feet away and agree. But near the end of the session she would ask if she could give them a piece of advice. They always accepted the offer and pulled up to the edge of their seat, expecting *the answer, the remedy*, the one trick of the mind, the one eraser that could do what they desperately wanted. Might-have-beens, she said, are the way the past keeps itself alive; they are the way we keep the past alive.

They always seemed then to nod and sink back ever so slightly in the cushions.

Mae lifted her head to see the rear view mirror then and changed lanes. She shook her head at all the places her mind had taken her.

Coming into Ashburn, she drove past a new strip mall and the city park and the dirt roads that led to the horse farms. She went around two stone traffic circles filled with yellow sunflowers. Then she slowly sputtered down a street where the lanes were separated by a large green space home to blossoming magnolia trees that hung over the road. It was Savannah on a smaller scale. Courthouse square, churches dotting the corners, and plenty of historical markers. But no port and no beach.

She turned left toward the church and saw cars on both sides and checked her watch nervously. It was the end of Mass. She pulled behind the last car and waited.

She wondered how many people she would have to talk to before she could leave. She wondered how many times she should have to hear their apologies.

After a few minutes small groups of people began funneling out into the road. When it seemed the crowd had dispersed, Mae went inside. She thought of just walking through a side door to Michael's office and then to the living quarters, but she knew she had to face people. Inside the office, she noticed no one was sitting at the set of three desks. A young woman with short brown hair came through the door behind her.

"Hello, are you looking for someone?"

Mae fumbled her words. "I'm Father Michael's..."

"You must be Mae."

Mae nodded.

Without approval the woman stepped in and hugged Mae. Mae worked her hands up the woman's back and squeezed politely.

The woman backed away and Mae could see that she was even younger than she had first thought. Mae tried to remember the woman's name.

“I’m new here. Kelly.”

Mae nodded.

“I am just coming from Mass. Our first without Father Michael,” Kelly said.

“Have you talked to him? How is he?”

“He was in the hospital.”

Kelly brought her hand near her mouth. “Is he all right?”

“He was involved in a car accident.”

“When?”

“Saturday evening.”

Kelly caught her breath. “Where is he now?”

“On his way to stay with a friend.”

Another woman, older with white flat hair, came through the door then. When she saw Mae she embraced her.

“How are you doing?” the woman asked.

Mae shrugged her shoulders and gave a faint smile. “Deb, it’s been tough.”

Debra held Mae by the shoulders. “I bet. Did he send you?”

Mae nodded.

“How is he?”

“He was in the hospital. He ran his car off...” Debra gasped slightly.

Mae looked down and then her eyes came back to Deb. “At least that’s what I think happened.”

“Where is he now?”

“I was just telling Kelly he staying with a friend. You know Father Harold?”

“Yes of course.”

“They’re driving up past Greenville this morning. I wanted to come by here and maybe get some things.”

“Sure, sure. Father Tom is still cleaning up from Mass. He’ll be here in a few minutes. He can help you.”

“I don’t want to take up his time.”

“He’ll be glad you’re here. We all are. No one has told us anything – no one from the bishop’s office. We all read it in the paper.”

He did it to them, also, Mae thought. “Me, too.”

“Father Tom told me all he knows – which was the same as what was in the paper. And then yesterday we had TV trucks in the road. I was just saying before Mass to Kelly how I wished there was something we could do.”

“I saw lots of cars here.”

“Well, with it all, I think they expected Father Tom to say something. But all he could say was that someone from the diocese was coming for a meeting tonight. How are Gary and the kids?”

“Like you – wishing they could do something.”

They listened from a couch as Kelly answered the phone and then when she hung up, they shared a silence built on years of calls. Deb had been at the church for as long as Michael. She answered the phones and did his schedule and was Mae’s lieutenant in the battle to get him to do something, anything but parish business.

“I don’t think we’ll ever get to see him again,” Deb said.

“He’ll want you at some point. You’re the people who...”

Mae's thought faded as she noticed Deb's tone. She wasn't angry and Mae felt a little indignation rising. She wanted them all to be mad. You're the people who believe in him, she had wanted to say. And look what he did. You're the people who believe him and he's lying. Mae nodded, hoping her thoughts were not obvious. Awkwardly, she tried to rehabilitate her stalled sentence. "He needs people who care about him now."

Deb patted Mae on the leg. Mae looked to the door and then at her watch. "I don't want to keep Father Tom from anything."

"He was up most of the night, he said. It's been the toughest on him. You know how much they've meant to each other."

Father Tom was one of the reasons Mae wanted to duck in the back door. He was the parish's second junior priest. The first moved on quickly and then four years ago Father Tom came fresh from ordination. He became the son a priest never has. When Michael came to Savannah, most times he brought Tom. In Ashburn, they visited shut-ins together. You have a new twin, Mae said once to Michael. Perhaps I do, he replied. Of all the people Father Tom would be the one least likely to be angry.

Another silence developed as Mae watched Kelly answer the phone. *Yes, ma'am. No ma'am, we don't. No, we'll hear tonight.*

"How long do you think before they put a new priest in?" Mae asked Debra.

"It will be quick. They'll want a new face to smooth things over, to get people back." Deb looked blankly at the opposite wall and her tone changed faintly to irritation.

"Did he ever give you...maybe sort of try to say something?"

"Not that I could tell. I was going to ask you the same question."

“He said nothing to me. What is strange I suppose to me is I can’t figure out why I feel like it happened here, like it happened to us. I guess it did in a way, but it didn’t. It happened thirty five years ago, in another town, in another place. But I feel like he did this to us.”

“I didn’t expect you to be angry.”

“Oh I’m not. I guess I don’t know what I am. I guess I could be angry, if that is what you want to call it. I just feel like this place is where it happened. You know since all this - all the stories and the priests and all that – has started I thought we were safe. Now every place is...I don’t know the right word. Every place now is stained. Every church.”

“I didn’t expect you to be angry, but I wanted you to be. So I wouldn’t be the only one.”

“Well I guess if anyone has the right, you do. It may not be good or merciful, but I’m okay with you being the representative for the rest of us who have to hold it in.”

Mae smiled.

“I think we all are angry. Kelly called me Sunday morning and I had to convince her to come to work. I had to convince her to work here. And she’s the one answering the phones, you see?”

“She seems to be keeping it together.”

“She feels like she has to defend him. I guess I do, too. But it’s not that I don’t want to, you understand?”

“I saw Father Tom on the news. He did good, I think.”

“We were here and he didn’t say anything when he came back inside after it. When I saw it, I just felt worse. I don’t know what to think.”

“About whether there are more?”

“Yeah. I mean people like you – we’ve had a little training on it – tell us no one does this once. Is that what you think?”

Mae held her head still a moment and then nodded. “I don’t see how it can’t be true.”

“If it is, if that is true, if it is like some disease, some unstoppable urge, then I don’t know how he lived with it. How he was a priest with it. How he did anything with it. That’s what I said about the last one, too, wherever it was, Florida, Illinois. I mean how do any of them do it? How do they do this and then do all what a priest does and do it in the sight of God?”

Kelly answered another phone call. They listened to the short answers and the polite tone and when she put the receiver down, Kelly looked over at them and mouthed, “Another one.”

Deb sighed again. “I keep telling myself I don’t know how he did it, yet he did. He was a good priest. I mean he was good with the whole church from the kids to the sick and dying. People came just for him. They saw him hold up the host and they believed. And I’m one of them.”

“I suppose I am one, too,” Mae replied. I was never actually agnostic, Mae said to herself then. I am faithless, though drifting in and out. And what pulls me back - the only thing really – is him. Having a priest as a brother has its moments of mystery and therefore the need for moments of something like faith.

Father Tom came through the door. He was a tall, thin man with fine-rimmed glasses and wavy hair that seemed mismatched to his bony face. The women stood and Mae took in another hug, this one shorter. Then Father Tom held Mae's hand.

"I'm so sorry. How is he?" the priest asked.

"He has a broken foot from an accident, but other than that he seems well."

"He's with someone now?"

"Father Harold. Up where he lives north of Greenville."

"Good then."

The priest excused himself and walked over to Kelly with whom he talked softly.

"I bet he's less than well with that foot," Deb said.

"The car ride might kill him. Or his driver."

"Absolutely."

Michael's office had large frames filled with glossy photos. Mae had bought him one year for Christmas a picture of John Paul II waving from his balcony. It was hanging next to one of Michael kneeling at his ordination on the wall left of the door. Past the door on the right was a large book shelf. The desk had its own lamp and supplies but the center was clean except for a single book.

"I am afraid there is not much here except pictures and books. Do you think he would like any of that? I can have Kelly put them in your car while we go over to the rooms."

"Yes," Mae said. "I think he would like that."

In the sanctuary, Mae listened as their shoes clapped against the stone in the aisle. She always disliked that sound, especially when the place was empty. God (and his priest inside the box) knew you were coming and you couldn't back out. Mae remembered all the times she refused to even walk in the sanctuary on visits. Just a look, Michael would ask, as if a mere glance might turn into a gaze and she would become transfixed by the awe that was supposed to come from the sight of the altar. Sometimes she would stand her ground and sometimes she would not put up a fight.

This time the arches and the floor and the windows inspired something else than awe in her: another memory. After Michael finally figured out her secret, that she had given up on God, after she told him what he already knew, after all that, he never once complained she kept it from him. He never once brought it up. She scanned the empty pews. This was what she was most afraid of: God using his church to rehabilitate his priest.

When they got to Michael's room, Mae sat on the made bed while Father Tom sat in the chair tucked into the desk.

"Have you been in here since...?" she asked.

"I don't usually come in here, but last night I was up and wandering around."

"He usually doesn't make the bed."

"I came in here and sat in that chair and just... You know when I got here he gave me his old room. It was not much bigger, but it was his room. I tried to not take it, not allow it, but..."

"I never knew that."

“So I came in here and just sat. I was down in the sanctuary for a long time, praying and thinking. I guess I came up here because it is private. Bedrooms are private. People are alone at night. But the room tells us something. Do they make their bed? Do they straighten their books? What pictures do they keep? I guess I came to see what I didn’t know. Like there would be some mysterious thing here that might... and then before I left I made the bed, trying to put things in order.”

“Some people do that in a time of crisis.”

“I joined the priesthood.”

“I suppose you get the question all the time.”

“My answer is always the same. I became a priest because God wouldn’t let me be anything else.”

“My brother has had his influence.”

“He told me he didn’t want me to become another him, though. He told me you and he had your disagreements over a lot of that. He made me see my family, physically drove me there once.”

Mae smiled. Father Tom went to the shelf and ran his fingers along the spines. “I was trying to think if there was just one book I could send him – much like the desert island thing – what would it be?” He pulled out a book and opened the front cover and then put it back.

“I don’t think they write books on this sort of thing,” Mae said.

Father Tom turned to her. “Oh, they do.”

“Did he tell you that I had – or have – become a lost sheep?”

“You were never lost to him.”

“He told you that?”

“He didn’t have to.”

“He did a lot of things without saying.” Mae rubbed her sleeve. “I’m sorry, Father. That was spiteful. I was hoping to get through the day without saying something like that.”

“But you’ve been thinking it?”

“What do you recommend for such a state?”

“Did you know two years ago he was put in charge of continuing education for priests?”

“I didn’t.”

“He was the priest who taught the younger priests in the diocese like me to be better priests.”

“Was he good at that?”

“He was. Very good. He didn’t sugarcoat anything. He talked about anger and fear and doubt. How they weren’t obstacles to his priesthood. They were the conditions for it, the ground for it. His past was never far from him, I don’t think. Does that help?”

“He thought it a curse for the longest time.”

“His past?”

“No, his darkness. But to him they were the same.”

CHAPTER VI: THE CONFESSION

Michael woke up from his second night in the hospital to find a breakfast tray beside him. That was the only sign of the morning as the heavy curtains were drawn and the sole light was the artificial hue coming from the monitors. He guessed he had slept a few hours.

A nurse walked in and the brightness from the hallway dazed Michael a little. The overhead fluorescents came on with a buzz. The nurse - a short, paunchy woman in flower-patterned scrubs - spread the curtains with a swift hand and Michael squinted at the new day.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

Michael removed the cover from the food. “Better.”

“You should eat, then.”

There were eggs and grits, though with no butter, and a piece of toast. The orange juice sat in a plastic container with foil for a top.

“Is the pain gone?”

Michael nodded.

“You should be able to go home today.”

Another nod.

“You’re looking much better. Eat up, Father.”

Michael pressed the eggs and toast together into a small sandwich and sipped the juice. He was hungrier than he thought he would be. As he ate, he noticed how the hospital window sat even with the horizon though a few trees shaded the space between him and the rising sun. The strong natural light emphasized the starkness of the room. White dominated the walls, sheets, and ceiling. Even the small chair Mae and Harry used had a white leather cushion. Soon it would be hot, he thought. His cast was already sweating. Soon Harry would be here. He would want to talk. And Mae. Who could tell when she would simmer? She wanted to know everything, wanted to relive every moment, wanted to chastise him and berate God in the process.

Michael banged his head against the soft pillow. He had created this mess. Sins of commission and omission. Mae was right. But she also didn't know the half of it.

He smiled slightly, remembering that he always seemed to do his best work in hospital rooms. He comforted and listened. The memory of a room like this, a memory as persistent as the unforgettable boy, came then.

The flight from Charleston to Chicago was turbulent. Nearly a red-eye, a takeoff just late enough for Michael to get a few hours sleep. And a return allowing for him to help preside over evening Mass. A quick sit and a remembrance of times past. It was not so long ago, though, that Michael and Father Wells had seen each other. A few months. But so much had happened. So much.

The hospital – a bricked square that could pass for an apartment building except for the red emergency room lights on the corner – was the same as it was when Father Wells had taken Michael along on visits. Its hallways were pastel blue, with Catholic icons and paintings of Mary every few yards. It was part surgical center and part hospice, part keeping them alive, part letting them die in peace.

The elevator shuttled Michael to the fifth floor and he walked a few doors until he found the priest's room. Michael paused at the entrance and shook his head, making his cheeks move like a dog's. It was a small evasive maneuver developed since his war against the past began - rattle the brain blind and the first thing that you see when you come to, focus on that. It will push everything else away.

He shoved inside and saw an emaciated body with its mouth covered by an oxygen mask. A heavy blanket was up to its chin. Michael saw the outline of arms and legs underneath. The curtains were partly closed and the sun came through the space between them to shine directly on the stomach. Michael watched it rise and fall slowly.

Father Wells did not seem to notice Michael sit in a chair near the bed. But when Michael reached out his hand, Father Wells met it with his own.

Father Wells tugged at the straps of the breathing cup. Michael stood and leaned toward the bed. "Are you sure?" he mouthed. The priest nodded and Michael cleared the priest's face.

"I only need..." Father Wells coughed. "I only need it when I am short...of breath."

Michael took the priest's hand again. "I'm sorry I could not make it sooner."

"They say I have a few more minutes."

Michael smiled and watched Father Wells reach for some water on a nearby tray. Michael shadowed the large container as it moved to the priest's mouth. Father Wells sucked the straw and let the cup pass into Michael's hand.

"How is..."

"Charleston's fine, Father."

"And your parish..."

"Very busy, Father. Just rest, Father. I'll do all the talking."

The priest reached for the oxygen. Michael got to the mask first and placed it back over his mentor's face. The mask fogged up and then was cleaned by an inhale.

"I can you tell all about Charleston. I don't believe you have ever been."

Father Wells shook his head.

"I am in charge of the youth."

Michael could see the edge of Father Wells' smile break free from the mask.

"Just like you said. It is my calling. At least for now. There are a handful of kids, mostly girls. They all go to the parish school. Up to junior high."

A monitor beeped and Michael glanced at it. He stared at it so long Father Wells reached out for Michael's hand.

"Yes, yes. The school. Up to sixth grade, they go. We're trying to add more years, but... That is what I am doing, though. Father Deone and the others - they handled the youth many years ago - they all say how it's different. Just in the last few years or so. It is not just confirmation classes. We - me and the boys and the girls - we do a lot together."

Michael felt his sentence awkwardly stop. He scanned the room. “And I direct just the little ones. There is another priest in charge of the teenagers. He’s got a hundred in our parish alone. Though, that’s just on paper. He really knows twenty to thirty. I have ten. Out of who knows how many.”

Father Wells coughed violently into the plastic cup and removed it. He struggled to breath with it off. When he reached for the water, Michael pushed the jug to his mouth. As Michael held the straw close, he watched how the old man focused on the place where the straw met his lips. The black in his eyes seemed lighter, gray even and the white around his pupils seemed sallow.

When their eyes met, Michael quickly blinked and looked away. When he turned back, Father Wells was gazing at a picture of the Virgin Mary on the opposite wall. “The holy mother is a comfort,” he said.

Michael nodded. “As I hope am I.” He leaned over the priest’s head and kissed him on his wrinkled and clammy forehead.

“Tell me more.”

“Rest for a while, Father.”

Father Wells squeezed Michael’s hand and let go to cover his mouth. He hacked and paused and then with a deeper hack, urged something in his lungs to come out. He grabbed a wide, thin plastic basin and spit into it. The sound of his next cough seemed clearer to Michael.

“How long have you known about the cancer?” he asked.

“A few months.”

“And how long did they...”

“The same.”

“Is there nothing...”

“Nothing I want.” Father Wells looked over at the IV drip. “They give me that for the pain. And some pill or something for... I just take it. But they let me ride around and see the other patients. I hold confession for some of the nurses, too.”

Michael smiled. “From this bed?”

The priest nodded.

“Have you had many come from the seminary?”

“A few. Some I don’t remember.” Father Wells grinned. “I fly through the clouds on the way to my grave.”

“A line from Lowell?”

“No. Just a line.”

Michael ran his hand through his hair. He curled some strands in his fingers for a moment and then looked at Father Wells.

“It has been too long, hasn’t it?” Michael asked.

“Only a few months.”

“So much has happened.”

“But not so much has changed.”

Michael glanced at the flesh-colored blanket on the bed and to the dying priest.

“No, Father.”

Michael was startled by the door opening. A nurse walked in and switched on the lights. A hiss was followed by a glow and when she opened the curtains, the morning sun loosened Michael's tense back. The nurse laid her palm on Father Wells' forehead.

“You have some chills, Father.”

She drew another blanket from the top of a closet and laid it over him. Michael stood against the window as she worked. He looked down to the street, following a yellow cab as it maneuvered around a large bus. People began to fill the outlines of an intersection, anonymous to each other. They wore suits in standardized colors, going to work at the customary time. They had presented themselves to the world as something, he thought, but underneath those clothes, they were someone else.

Holding up his hand to the sun, Michael noticed the small inch-sized scar near his thumb. The day after he touched the boy, he had rammed a putty knife into his hand trying to open a can of paint. He did not want to work that day. He did not want to leave his room. But the church basement needed new life to become a catechism classroom, Father Deone had told him that morning. Michael had smiled when the priest told him he did not have to wear his clerical black. No collar, either, only a loose shirt. When the knife sliced into his skin he cursed in pain. He kicked the wall and cursed again, this time louder in the empty room. Still stinging, he beat the concrete block wall with the pinky side of his uninjured fist. He raged on the wall until out of energy and dropped to his knees. He hit the wall one last time, his skin barely pressing it against, and cursed himself just above a whisper. He eventually finished painting and found his mind secure, anchored in the strokes his brush made.

“Michael?”

The sound of his name – a word Father Wells hardly had ever used – drew Michael back to the bed. The nurse had left.

“Yes, Father?”

“So much has happened?”

“Yes, Father so much has.”

“Where does it begin?”

Michael’s mind began to drift, searching for that first moment he saw the boy. A Sunday, after Mass. People passed before him and Father Deone. Michael remembered ruffling the boy’s hair. Brown. Soft and thick.

Michael spoke into the window. “With Christopher.” Michael sighed and took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. He had seen the boy again the next Sunday and two more after that passed until Michael invited him to be a part of the group of other children that the priest would play games with. The boy’s mother sent him off with a kiss and thanked Michael.

“How can it begin there?”

Michael felt the sting of his lie.

“Yes, Father. You are right.” Michael turned from the sun. “It begins before that. It begins with me.”

“Start there then.”

“Yes, Father.”

Michael sat in the chair and drew his hands together and held them just under his nose with his elbows close to his chest. “I touched myself.”

“When?”

“Many times.”

“And after each time was there shame?”

“Yes, Father.” Michael held his face in his hands. “But each time I wanted it more. Each time lasted shorter and shorter. And each time I wanted it to last longer.”

The room stayed silent for a few moments. Michael rubbed his wet palms on his pant legs and returned to the window.

“And did you confess these sins?”

Michael shook his head.

“And what dissuaded you?”

“There are people... who do this. But not priests.”

The door opened again and the nurse entered with a tray. Michael offered a small smile to her as she stopped near the bed. “We got some good eggs here, a sort of omelet, and some oatmeal.”

The nurse pulled out a large bib from her pocket and placed it around Father Wells’ neck.

Michael stepped to the bed. “If the father does not mind...”

The nurse handed Michael a spoon. He filled it with pieces of egg and held his other hand underneath to catch crumbs.

“You got the hang of it,” the nurse noted. “I’ll be back for the tray later.”

When the nurse left, Michael lifted some oatmeal to Father Wells' mouth. Then Michael wiped the priest's lips and chin with the bib. Father Wells reached out his hand and Michael pulled his hand away. "My hands are dirty."

Father Wells squeezed.

"I have betrayed... There is more."

"I know."

Michael fed Father Wells again. He struggled with his swallow, coughing harshly.

"Were there times before this, before these few months?" Father Wells asked.

Michael put down the spoon and stepped away from the bed. "Yes. I was angry at myself. Even as I kept doing it, I got angrier. I told myself I would not do it and then did it again. I prayed and prayed and promised and promised and lifted my hand to be cut from me. I washed and washed and..."

Michael paused to watch Father Wells try to feed himself. He dropped most of the eggs on his bib and smiled. A strong cough overtook him. It forced his torso forward and his body rattled as the hacking continued. When he reached for the oxygen, Michael drew closer. "Am I... Is what I am saying..."

Father Wells put the mask to his face and breathed deeply. Then he removed it and whispered, "No."

Michael slumped into the chair.

"Michael?"

He looked at the bed.

"Go on."

“It was a vicious cycle: pleasure and guilt all day. I wanted nothing more at times and at other times I wanted nothing less. One against the other.”

“And in the end, you chose one?”

“I had to find more of it. What I was doing – just myself – wasn’t enough.”

“And the boy?”

“Christopher?”

“Yes.”

“He was shy and his mother said he needed someone like me. I took him on boats, to Fort Sumter, to all the sites – he had just moved there. All this with others at first, but it was just me and him many times.”

“Did he have siblings?”

“No.” Michael held his hand close to his lips. “In my mind, I can see him right now. I can see his face. His hair. His sneakers. His smile. He told me once he wanted to be a priest... And all the while at night, in the mornings, in the back bathroom, in the... I was... He made me feel like a good person. He made me feel like I was a good priest.”

“You did not?”

Michael lowered his head and shook it slightly. “It was just so... I was just so... I wanted to believe. I guess I never did. I never trusted my vocation.”

“And now?”

“No.” Michael sighed. “It was never him – I never was attracted to him. I just liked how it – what he said, what he did, how he looked at me – how all of it made me feel. Like what I did when I was alone. The same feeling.”

“And the same effect?”

“Both were wrong. Both were faithless, idolizing. Both were... gratifying in different ways. Both were so heavy, too. Both pushed me to my knees. But I never really wanted them to go away.”

“And now?”

“I took it – took them, took my need, my desire – took all of it too far. I crossed... I realized how far I had gone after... After I touched him. After I touched Christopher.”

“How did it happen?”

Michael stood over the back of the chair. He lifted his pointer. “I wanted this thing – this desire – and I knew it had to be more, it had to give me more, and that drove me. And part of it was the secret danger of it, the chance of people finding out. I kept deliberately doing it someplace they would. So I wanted people to know. I wanted someone to know.” He pushed aside the chair and sat on the bed. “But someone else – someone doing it – that was alluring, too.”

“Christopher?”

“He was that, yes, Father.”

“Did all this in your mind happen instantly?”

“No.”

“How long did thinking like this go on?”

“Days. But it wasn’t just that, though. It was other things, other people, other memories that made me think – that allowed me... that gave me excuse to let it come to this.”

“Who were they?”

Michael did not respond.

“Were some of them the boys at seminary?”

Michael nodded. “And there was someone I knew. In Crepton. He was a victim.”

“A priest?”

“Yes. Father George. He grew up around Belleville – you know about that place?”

Father Michael nodded.

“I had noticed there were not a lot of kids in the parish. He told me why. Crepton wasn’t too far from Belleville. In the same diocese. He said there may have been hundreds of victims, hundreds of boys over the years. All since the fifties. And he said he was one of them.” Michael pushed the chair away. “Father George loved those people. I saw how he prayed, how he was so faithful... and in those moments when I wanted... I thought about him. I started to twist him, bend his hope. He had made it. I thought I could do this and he – Christopher - would not remember it. He would become a great priest. I could do this and he would grow out of it.”

Michael walked to the window and looked out from it stoically. He found the sun hidden by a tall building, its towering floors backlit by the rays. He did not dry the tears as they wetted his cheeks. “I was deceived. I lied to myself. I lied to...” He listened to Father Wells’ weak lungs bang out another series of thrashing breaths. The dying priest grabbed the hospital pan and leaned over as far as he could and let whatever could drip from his lips.

“You need to rest, Father,” Michael said.

Father Wells wiped his chin with his bib. “So do you.”

Michael walked over to the monitors. “Your pulse is weak.”

“I can listen, still.”

Michael sat in the chair again and pushed his back straight against it. “We had spent a Saturday afternoon together. And when we got back, we were the only ones in the rectory. I knew for a few days it would be like that. All that time I was sick with what I was doing at night and with what I was thinking of doing. I had willed myself to desist during the day but that only made it worse at night. I woke up multiple times and... I got so pale Father Deone inquired about me. I told him it was the flu.

“That day, I kept hoping something would deter me, something would take him away, someone would call. But as we went on I kept watching him, looking at him, looking at his hands, imagining them on me.”

Michael stared at the back of his hands in his lap and rubbed one on his leg.

“We drove across the bridges and he stared out the window like he always did. We went down to the battery and watched the waves chop. We ate and hiked back through King Street.

“I squeezed his hand crossing the street and it felt...”

Michael rubbed one palm into the other.

“When we got back, I took him up to my room and he sat on the bed. I knelt in front of him and told him we were going to play a game. I smiled and told him to lie down. I told him to close his eyes. I told him all this and... all I saw in the room was my hand. All I saw – all I see now is my hand moving over his legs and stomach and then rubbing between his legs.”

Michael stared at his fingers.

“All I could think about was my hand and what it was touching. Nothing else entered my mind. Nothing but what I was doing. After a few moments, he looked at me... And I put my finger to my mouth. ‘This is part of the game,’ I said.

“Then it was my turn. I took his place on the bed and I led his hands to where I wanted them to go. I had mine on top of his and they moved together, one on top of the other, one enveloped by the other as if it were not even there. I could see my hand and feel his.”

Michael began to cry again and he removed his glasses and muffled the sound with his hands. After a few moments, he looked at Father Wells without his specs. “I can see it now. Still. I know I will always be able to see it.”

Michael wiped his face and returned his frames to his face. He sniffled and then breathed deeply.

“And what of the next day?” Father Wells asked.

“I worked. In the basement.”

“And in the evening – did you...”

Michael shook his head.

“And since then?”

Another shake.

“And God?”

“Of course, yes, Father. Every night I have confessed. Every morning. Every time the memory... yes. Every moment of the day. I have made my own penance. I have done...” Michael paused and sighed. “Though is there any penance worthy of my sins?”

“Some penance.... is not done alone.”

Michael sighed and walked to the window with his hands in his pockets and watched the tranquil city. “I have seen too many things, Father. Too many evils in too strange of a darkness.”

“A line of St. John of the Cross?”

“No, just a line.”

Michael turned from the window. “My admission, Father?”

“Yes.”

“What do you think?”

Father Wells did not respond.

“I have lost my priesthood. I have broken a trust. I have ruined a...”

“You expect too much...” Father Wells grabbed the oxygen and inhaled. “Too much from a short few months. It will come.”

“What do I do now?”

Father Wells leaned forward and Michael sat on the bed.

“What happened that day to the boy, to Christopher?”

“He ran away, into the hallway. I heard him in a closet. I called his mother to come get him.”

“And what did you tell her?”

Michael sunk his head. “He had a nightmare during a nap.”

“And since then – have you seen...”

“They have moved.”

Father Wells slumped back into his bed. He took gulps of air from the mask and spoke between them. "You must make.... a proper.... confession. To... "

"To Father Deone?"

"Yes."

"And the boy? Should I see him now?"

Father Wells shook his head.

"When?"

"God will know. Serve him as he allows 'til then."

CHAPTER VII: THE RIDE

Once inside Harry's two-door coupe for the three-hour drive north from Beaufort to his home in the mountains, Michael stretched out in the backseat. As development gave way to trees, Michael tossed his right leg on the seat with the one with the cast. He kept lifting and pushing the soft cast against the back seat as far as he could to give the other leg more room. But even a small bump on the road jolted the good leg to the floor and sent pain through the injured one.

He looked through the space between the passenger seat and the car frame to see both lanes filled by two large semi trailers. Harry jerked the car into the inside lane to follow the seemingly faster one, but neither truck sped past the other. Harry switched back to the outside lane and braked to keep the car from nudging too close. Cars slowly began to file in line behind the trailers. Michael pushed his head a little above the back seat to see the cars behind. When his wrists could no longer take the weight of his body, he sank and his eyes fell into the frame of the small window that opened to the inside lane.

At the bottom of the back window of a car running even with Harry's, the two small arms of young boy sat folded on each other. A small neck craned its head into the sky. Slowly a chin lowered until the eyes met Michael's. The boy lifted his hand.

Michael pulled his hand up but stopped it. His fingers trembled.

The boy's smile diminished slightly and he looked confused. Realizing the effect, Michael waved his hand slightly. The boy waved back as his car pulled ahead in the other lane.

Removing his glasses, Michael began to cough and yanked his shirt into his face to cover his mouth. Years of cigarettes and cigars and sweet incense blew from his lips.

Finally he exhaled without interruption and lay against the window exhausted. He slid his hand down the plastic jumpsuit Harry had bought him. It was gray with a purple stripe along the side. He pulled the zipper from just underneath his throat to his belly and left his hand on his lungs. He was fat. He was old. He was more than likely diseased in more than one organ. And he was going to limp for the rest of his life.

And yet even as the certainty entered his mind, another pushed it aside. He was not Father Michael anymore. He was a nameless, faceless monster. He rebuked the thought. He was not that to those who wanted to love him, those he had loved. His people. But after a sigh, he admitted in time them, too. They would turn.

Harry changed lanes to pass a slower car. Michael could not see anything but a red blur. He covered his eyes with his hands and blinked quickly again and again, trying to bring on whatever kind of darkness he could. But it did not come.

“You’re pretty quiet back there. You okay?” Harry asked.

“I could use a cigarette.”

“I gave it up years ago.”

“I’m fine then. Just taking it in. Well, at least taking in what I can. I hate interstates. I like roads.”

“You want to listen to the radio?”

“No.”

“You want to listen to me?”

Michael laughed.

“I am in this duplex, you know. The other side is empty for the moment. It’s behind this strip mall that had a tax service until about two months ago. Now it’s a Hispanic church. We’re in the foothills, but we don’t get many tourists. We got trails and state parks all nearby but no hotels. It’s pretty far from any parish though it does have the usual crowd of Protestants.”

“Do you walk much?”

“Yeah, all the time.”

“You know we used to walk to Mass sometimes. My mother made us even when she didn’t go.”

“Your father didn’t go?”

“No. Father Frank told me he saw him a few times, though. Do you remember me ever telling you about Father Frank?”

“The one that was there when your father died?”

“He kept coming over and helping us. Eventually you know my mother remarried but he was there for a while.”

“What did he do?”

“He just talked to us. Mae liked to play with her dolls and he watched her. He threw catch with me. That kind of thing.”

“Sounds like a good man.”

“It was weird though, now that I think about it. My mother made me go see him after Dad died. He talked to me about God and prayer – all good stuff. First time I really ever talked to a priest. Later, I asked him if he ever got lonely and he told me about this secret place he went to when he was lonely.”

“I went to the library. Always saw people at the library.”

The car hit a bump and Michael’s leg ached and he grimaced. “Maybe it was nothing... but do you think he ever... you know?”

“Because of a secret place? For throwing catch with you? Do I think he was a pedophile because of that?”

“Did you know I was one when you met me?”

“I had a secret place. Does that make me one?”

“Did you ever tell any boys about it?”

“Let me ask this, Mike, did you have a secret place?”

“No.”

“So?”

“So what?”

“Why didn’t you? If that is what they have, why didn’t you?”

A large truck passed.

“Did you read the paper?” Michael asked.

“I did.”

“You know she doesn’t believe me.”

“Who? Doesn’t believe what?”

“Mae. That it only happened once.”

Harry did not say anything.

“Do you believe me?”

“Of course, but you know it doesn’t matter.”

“Whether you believe me? Of course it does.”

“I know it matters to you, but you can’t argue for mercy based on quantity. Not anymore. Really not ever.”

“I don’t want mercy.”

“What do you want then?”

After a mini-van passed, Michael lowered his chin to his stomach and tossed his hand into the air to wave off conversation. “Just forget it. Forget I asked.”

“You should talk about it.”

“Talk about what I want? No one wants me to go on and on about me. Mae tore into me for that back at the hospital. You as angry as her?”

“Everyone’s mad, Mike. And confused and disappointed and all that. And eventually if no one says much, we’re going to do what you want us to do – leave you alone. That’s what you wanted for thirty-five years. But I think – right now, right here in the car – you should try talking about it.”

“What do you want me to say?”

Harry pushed down the blinker and changed lanes. He let the silence sit for a moment and then peered again into the rearview mirror. “Tell me about the detective some more.”

“I’m in there with him. I told him what happened and he was shuffling his papers together like he was about to leave and then he asks me: Was he your first? I told him it was the only time. He said, ‘No one does this just once.’ Just like Mae did. I told him again. And then he made a reference, not really an obvious reference to Ropswood, but he said he had talked to people like me. He said they hadn’t lied, they had told the truth. He said that I was hurting the other boys when I lied.”

“So what did you do?”

“Nothing. I just sat there, trying to look honest.”

“Did he just give up?”

“He gave me a ‘you’re a priest’ talk.”

“I have given that to myself a thousand times.”

“So you know then how it goes: You’re supposed to be God’s voice and you lie. You’re supposed to be holy and then you... fill in with whatever. That sort of thing.”

“I guess that was his trump card, then. And it didn’t work?”

“I just started to apologize. And kept telling him it was only once.”

Harry patted Michael on the leg with his hand.

“I thought you were angry and confused and disappointed and all that,” Michael said.

“It’s not all I am.”

Michael grinned a little.

“I never really saw all this affecting you until now. But I guess nothing you do fades out completely. I think Edwin O’Connor said that.”

“Edwin O’Connor?”

“It was in *The Edge of Sadness*, I believe.”

“Yes I know.”

“Have you read it?”

“Sure. I think it came out when I went to seminary.”

“It did. Do you remember what it was about?”

“A priest who had a drinking problem and lost the big parish.”

“And?”

“And what else?”

“What do you mean ‘what else’?”

“He had that one mistake. He had that set of years he wanted back. Like we all do.”

“O’Connor never envisioned a priest like me.”

“I bet you’ve been giving yourself that ‘you’re a priest’ talk for years.”

Michael shrugged. “So?”

“I bet you drowned yourself in it. And so you worked harder. To be a better priest. And I don’t have to tell you it didn’t work. But that’s what we do, Mike.”

“I touched a boy, Harry.”

“I know that.”

“But you don’t know what it’s like to have that on you. It’s not something that goes away. It’s not something you stop.... I have this one period in my life – this one

moment I want back. And I can't get it." He stopped and rubbed the backside of his hand. "I know I've kept it all hidden and no one – Mae, the police, maybe you, too – believes me. But I am telling you the truth now. I did it once but it's not something that has stopped in my mind, Harry. I've walked into that room a million times. I've sat on that bed. I have done it over and over. And then there's what's actually happened to him, what he's like now. I obsess over that. And you're right. I tried to outdo it, outwork, undo it, something, anything. And that mirror tells you all you need to know about how successful I was. I was seventy five pounds lighter before that day."

"I can see you as a thin man."

Michael smiled.

"He may have gotten the details different, Mike, but I think O'Connor hit it right on the head. We are still here."

"I always wondered why O'Connor allowed his priest to stay."

Harry looked into the mirror. "Maybe it's so he could be our priest, Mike."

The car moved along the interstate, passing two exits each with blue signs pointing the way to gas and food. Michael saw the second one flash by and then watched its metal back fade behind him.

"You want to stop?" Harry asked. "You need to get out of the car, get some air?"

"Maybe for something to drink."

They pulled into a spacious truck stop. After he parked, Harry opened his door and pulled back his seat.

Michael sighed. “I want to get out but I don’t want to get in again.”

“Walking might help, you know.”

“I know. I know. Just get me a drink and leave the door open.”

Harry left and Michael felt a small breeze blow into the car.

The past began to dig as it had always done into the present. It burrowed with small details. The boy’s tiny nose, his bowl haircut, his skinny legs and elbows, and ears that stuck close to his head. He was not athletic or creative, gifted or directed. He was manners and shyness and a need for affection. But when he got to stand next to the priest, there in front of everyone, he smiled. He smiled especially at Michael.

Michael had pushed back against the past with the hope of time. Time was his weapon. He had all the time in the world to do penance. He had a lifetime. At the end of the first year following his sin, on a yellow legal pad he hid in the back of a drawer in his room he made a list of each time he had prayed for the boy. He wrote down the times and dates he had prayed for his parents, for his teachers, for his bus driver, for the women who would care for him after school, for anyone who would know him. He added to the bottom of the list experiences the young boy would have had that year – getting a baseball glove or a new bicycle, going on summer vacation to the beach, his father hugging him after fishing - and prayed for them, prayed for their role as healers. The first year the list ran six pages. The next year, five more pages were added, then seven, then ten, and another until one year, Father Michael sat down to write his list and realized the boy had gotten a driver’s license.

At that moment, Michael had drawn his own identification from his wallet and tried to place the boy’s face in the small square. Suddenly he realized there was no boy

anymore. Time was not a weapon, but an enemy. It had hidden the details of youth, erased the past slowly but surely, into maturity. The boy was no longer merely a memory. No longer merely a boy. He was out there, walking down a street, driving a car, running for class president. He would graduate from high school, college, and find a job at a bank. He would go to law school. He would begin to understand who he was and how he had become that.

Michael acknowledged then his sin was not just a moment in time, but ongoing. He repented for thinking his penance was to be nothing more than prayer and meaningless lists. So in the midnight cool, he walked with the pads to the sanctuary. He laid them before the altar. His offense was a sin of commission and omission: thinking the boy was merely in his own imagination. He had watched the boy grow up in his mind, giving him memories his own childhood had lacked. But he failed to see him as he was. Scanning the list, Michael realized he had left off other events, events Mae told him about. He had not prayed for those. He had not shared those moments with the boy. He had not been a priest for the boy in those times.

And who was the boy? The manners and the shyness and bowl haircut and skinny limbs had all disappeared. His smile was something else now, something unrecognizable. He was no one, anyone, a stranger.

Exposure had been always been a fear. But Michael imagined it as a formal exposure, a revealing in subdued tones, in a courtroom, in a bishop's office. Now he could be exposed wherever he went, was exposed everywhere. The boy would never forget his face. He would never forget his voice. Michael's frantic solution at that moment was simple as it was selfish: he would change. Eat and drink and grow a beard.

They could cover any details the boy once knew. He would beat time by hiding from it. There would be a future in that, a future as a priest.

But time found a way. God, the originator of time and the one who numbers days and defines what happens in them, found a way. He took the priest's heart and used it against him. God brought a hurricane to the coast, Michael's coast, and devastated it. And the priest could not sit in comfort. He went to help.

Since that day Michael tested everyone everywhere. If there was something – perhaps even the tiniest likeness to what he saw that day – Michael stuck his head behind a plant or a corner, pulled up on his coat collar or lowered his chin. Ashburn was safe, but it was these kinds of places - a parking lot off a well traveled highway, a subway, an airport – that were most likely for a meeting to happen again.

A middle aged man in a suit walked into the store. He briefly glanced over at Harry's car and its open door. Michael gauged the man's face. Not enough of an oval. And yet, Michael could not be sure. He turned his head into the seat and waited for Harry.

CHAPTER VIII: THE HURRICANE

The hurricane had come in the middle of the night, lashing wind and water against what was left standing by those who fled, spinning and spinning until it began to break apart from its own centrifugal force. In the light of the morning, Michael drove Monsignor Fallon back south from an Orangeburg hotel where they and other priests from the city evacuated. Michael wore what he had slept in: a tourist shirt from a shop near the Navy yard donated to the church and some gray jogging pants. I look nothing like a priest, he thought.

The storm had veered from the peninsula late in the night and came on shore between two barrier islands. While others were saved from a direct hit, the monsignor's church would be devastated, both priests knew.

They drove through North Charleston and then over the causeway to Mt. Pleasant and through the town, hoping to get to Sullivan's Island. As the marshes appeared, the monsignor pointed ahead and gasped. The swinging bridge that turned to allow boats thru, like a welcoming arm of the people, was torn from its axis, one end dipped into the ocean. It was the only route to the island. They turned back and drove through neighborhoods looking for people in need. They quickly were emptied of their collection of water and granola bars.

In the streets they saw large oaks that had been jerked from the ground and spat out by the wind. Boats had been tossed around as if they were in a child's bathtub. And walls from homes were jagged splinters without their roofs.

The town hall had lost its top and the water line on the police station was at Michael's head. They made it to Pitt Street at the breakers and Michael saw a door caught in the waves. He dragged it out as far as he could and then saw the reeds choking in sand.

The reeds were always what survived. Three storms in his childhood, two he was old enough to remember. Their mother told him and Mae the only inconvenience the first one caused was she had to move their first birthday party inside. Another came five years later and Michael always remembered holding onto his father as they listened to the storm in their bathroom. A third came when Michael was twelve. He wanted to go outside and stand in the yard to see the eye. When his mother pulled him back from the door he had opened, he ran into his room. There he knelt on his bed, close to the window, and tried to see the opening in the clouds. He sat in front of the television and watched a weatherman on Coffin Point say he had seen calm for more than half an hour.

"I could have gone there," he told his mother.

She explained then the paradox of the eye: the bigger the center, the larger the storm, the more power it had, the more it destroyed.

Michael asked the monsignor if he knew how large the eye was. The monsignor shrugged.

"Must have been big," Michael said.

At a Catholic church off Russell Street, the priest showed them altar chairs that had floated to the middle of the sanctuary. People were wandering the street outside, gathering in twos and fours and fives, looking for and sharing information. Someone said he had heard a school filled with evacuees had flooded unexpectedly. Where, another asked? North, the first responded. A sigh and a shake of the head. Even that far, another asked. A man wearing a Fishhook's Marina cap said Sullivan's Island was bleak. Had he been, the monsignor asked. No, the man replied, the news helicopter flew over it. Are there people there? A shrug. The Russell Street priest said some residents from there slept on his second floor last night.

A National Guard caravan came to the church and the soldiers said a Red Cross truck was coming behind them. They pulled water coolers from the back of their truck and someone found paper cups that were hidden away, dry and high, in the church's kitchen. More people came, following the Red Cross truck on foot. The truck was filled with sandwiches and blankets. Michael jumped into the back of the container and became part of the supply line that already had two in it. He turned left into the darkened truck and right into the sea of people gathering around its opening. Faces flashed along the semicircular line his head took. They were indistinguishable, a line of hunger and need, the five thousand who appeared before Jesus. They needed a priest.

When the truck was emptied, Michael wandered through the crowd as people began to eat in the street or on fallen tree trunks. They were individuals now. Blonde hair, slender noses, and smiles that showed teeth and food. Someone had brought folding chairs from the flooded kitchen but only a few were dry. Michael bought someone's grandmother to one. Children stuck close to their parents, holding onto legs with one

hand and their new blankets with another. A young couple stopped him to ask if he knew anything about the next island over. He shook his head. The man said they had left Isle of Palms two days ago and thought they saw their house on television.

“And he keeps saying he saw...,” The man pointed to his son then to his wife.

“What is it, again, Em?”

“His kangaroo.”

“He keeps saying he saw it on TV. And he’s been like this ever since.”

Michael squatted down to the boy’s height and then raised his sagging chin with a finger, tickling it just a little. Michael smiled but the boy’s expression did not change. Michael borrowed a marker and drew a small circle with two dots and a curve for a mouth on one corner of the blanket. Then he pushed his fist underneath the face and nuzzled it up to the boy’s eyes. He smiled.

In the afternoon, a barge had been offered to take residents to Sullivan’s Island. The Russell Street priest offered his church’s bus and the monsignor volunteered to drive it up and down the island’s main road to get people as close as he could to their homes. Michael promised to stay with the monsignor so he would not have to face seeing his parish alone.

The monsignor smiled. “When you get your own, I’ll be there, then, too.”

Before going to the barge, the bus stopped at the local hotels to find anyone else from the island. After going inside to check with a clerk, Michael sat behind the

monsignor, leaving a few open seats next to him. He heard the chatter behind him – people asking others what might be left, where they might look first for things.

A family emerged from the hotel door: a woman carrying a small girl who looked about three and her husband. They led a group of people who all seemed to have someone with them. As a line formed at the bus a lanky young man stepped into it carrying a small suitcase. He wore a red hat that sat low on his head, a faded blue t-shirt that had a loose collar and white slacks with tan boots. He had thin glasses with square lenses. He must be thinking the worst, Michael thought.

After the bus got underway, Michael asked the man in the red hat if he had been able to take anything with him before the storm.

The man looked away. “Some.”

They rode south toward the marshes as Michael and the monsignor had done that morning. From the road they could see again the bridge in the water.

At the marina, Michael stepped out of the door to help the monsignor pull the bus onto the narrow plank that had been made ready for it. Slowly the large wheels pushed forward and the wood began to creak. The first set of tires passed on and Michael could see the young man through his window. His head hung slightly. Michael smiled as he signaled with his arm for the monsignor to keep going, but the man did not smile back. Instead he drew two fingers from his left hand down his nose and onto his lips.

Michael held his breath in his chest and the arm he had been moving began to slow. His eyes began to blink quickly and he reached for his glasses at the temples and held them as he exhaled. The bus stuttered a little. Realizing his signal was needed still

Michael took a few steps forward and motioned to the monsignor through the bus doors to keep going. Michael stared into that first window. The man had put his back against it.

The first window moved further and further away until the bus stopped and the doors opened again. Michael stepped onto the bus and the monsignor gave him a wave. “Looks like we did it. The hard part is over.”

Michael saw the red hat in the second seat. He stared at it for a moment. A white N and Y.

“Grab a seat. They said it might be rocky.” The monsignor closed the doors behind Michael.

Michael eyed the man against the window more. His eyes were closed and his suitcase sat on his lap. Michael’s mind began to replay what he had seen. Two fingers. A nose like a springboard with a diver on its edge, then the tips onto the philtrum. He had always remembered that. It came from Greek. It meant kiss. Michael touched his face and his fingers were jolted off as the barge shook. He glanced at the man in the red hat, who was still asleep. Michael dragged his fingers down his nose and felt the springboard of its edge. Then he rubbed the curve above his lips.

Then he heard a child crying. Conversations on the bus muddled together. He looked across the aisle and out the windows. Thinning black smoke from the barge wafted through the seascape. Michael’s hand was wet from the sweat on his palm. He wiped his thigh and then froze his hand there. Energy like fear ran through his fingers. He held them inches above his body and straightened them, strengthening them against the tremble.

The monsignor turned around. “Thought we might lose her back there at the marina.”

Michael nodded.

The monsignor pointed to the rear of the bus. “I think that’s... maybe it’s not, but I think back there those are the Franklins. I saw them at a wedding last summer.”

Michael’s gaze paused on the man with the red hat. The monsignor noticed. “He must be exhausted. To sleep that soundly with all this.”

Michael nodded. “I bet he is. I bet he is.”

Michael ran his fingers through his hair. As a younger priest he kept his hair short. Now it was bushy and thick. He looked at the ceiling and prayed against the panic: O, Lord, of unspeakable providence, this is the day you have made.

Michael scanned the man’s clothes. His boots were scuffed around the edges and the definitions in the sole were flattened. The pants had a spot of dried ketchup on the left thigh. The shirt seemed like it was from a garage sale, something one wears to paint, or when one has nothing else to wear.

There was no trace of youth in the face, nothing of the child. Everything that was, everything that made him in Michael’s memory was gone. He was someone else now. Someone real.

The man’s fingers rubbed his nose again. Michael held his breath to see if he would wake. The man continued his sleep.

When they met years ago, Michael noticed how bashfully the boy stood at his mother's side. A silly priest, Michael liked getting such children to mirror him. You blink, they blink. You shut an eye, they shut the same. You purse your lips, they copy it. If they don't smile, make a face. Pull your cheek taut with both hands. Push up your nose with two fingers. The shy ones always smile at that. And this boy was all shyness. He didn't like group games. He didn't like being chosen, didn't like attention. Standing outside Mass, he would cling to his mother and answer with nods and shakes of his head. It was there the mirroring between he and Michael began. Michael would copy the boy when he drew his fingers down his nose. Noticing the emulation, the boy would turn his face into his mother's dress and Michael would turn his face into his sleeve.

There was a field later on, brown and dusty with holes of dried mud where the bases were. Michael had some of the other boys scattered in the outfield, a few of the better ones at positions right behind him. A bag of balls sat at his feet. The boy came to the plate with the bat on his shoulder. He watched the first go by. Then the second. Take a swing, Michael said, just to try. Another pitch. The boy's arms moved but nothing else; the ball hit another ball waiting at the backstop. Michael put down his glove and walked toward the boy. Michael raised the boy's face and then ran two fingers down the boy's nose. The boy's glasses wobbled slightly and he smiled. Michael called out for another of the boys to pitch. The ball came and the pair at the plate – the thin, lanky man in black helping the boy who was gripping the bat – swung. They felt the connection together and the bat fell from their hands. Then Michael took the boy's hand and ran him down the line.

Michael nodded as the bus floated on. I moved his feet. I turned his shoulders. I drew back the bat. I pulled it forward, again and again, until he found he could do it himself.

Michael held his forehead in his left hand. He felt his skin rough and dry. He stared at his hand. I showed him how. I moved his fingers. I pushed him closer. Because he wouldn't do it himself.

Michael looked up again at the boy who was now a man. This is the day the Lord has made. When he wakes up, he will raise his head and notice. He will see me and I will see him. My hideous hiding will be shown for what it is and God will expose me. He will conduct his justice upon me.

Once the bus was off the barge, Monsignor Fallon told the passengers he would drive along Middle Street to the other end of the island, stopping at Fort Moultrie and the 703. "Get off where it's best for you and we'll come back in two hours to take you back."

From the rear of the bus someone shouted thanks and two others echoed it.

The man in the red hat awoke. The monsignor noticed. "Looks like you needed that." The man smiled slightly.

The man in the red hat exited the bus for a stretch with some others. Michael, too, got off and watched the man stare out into the water and yawn. Michael felt empty and naked. He felt opened and on display. When the yawn was complete, the man turned to Michael. This would be the moment. But no. The man only yawned again.

Michael wondered why God had not yet given him over.

The road to Fort Moultrie was filled with downed trees and debris. Lawns still had a layer of water on top of them. A sign for a shopping center had shattered and an awning over a drive-thru had been planted in the middle of an intersection. At the fort a handful of passengers got off, but the man remained. He sat forward in his seat, his arms handing over the leather divider.

When the bus reached the 703, the man was the first of more than half the riders to get off. He yanked his suitcase from the aisle and scampered in front of the bus along the road and then turned down another where Michael could not follow. Michael sat listlessly staring at nothing.

Michael took his glasses from his face and rubbed his closed eyes with a thumb. A deep massage, pushing the pupils firmly into their socket. The next two hours would be like those first two afterwards nearly fifteen years ago, waiting, wondering, fearing, hoping. The boy had run away, then, too, down a hall and turned a corner. Michael waited for God to expose him then, too.

Someone tapped Michael's shoulder. "Sir..."

"Call me Father. Father Michael Donner."

"Father, do you think he could stay here with you on the bus?"

Michael put on his glasses and turned to see a woman pointing over to a young boy sitting in the seat across from her. The boy, thin and bony, sat close to the window watching the street go by. He held the straps of his backpack tightly.

"He's my brother's kid. And my brother, he's... hasn't been around lately. The boy doesn't really know us either. And we just don't, you know, want the boy to have

to...their house and all. And ours, too. There's going to be nothing left and we thought you could let him stay with you as you drive around."

The woman brought up a small bag from her lap and moved it over the top of the seat. "We took some stuff from the hotel. He eats well. Maybe that will distract him a little."

They both were silent for a moment and watched the boy fidget in his seat.

O Lord of unspeakable mercy, this is the day you have made. His years had been filled with such boys and girls and lost teens and misdirected college students and they were always given over by someone to him. And he thought each time about the penance God seemed to give him. It was not a monastic seclusion or fanatical self-punishment, but an emptying, a kenosis. There would be judgment, too, and it was coming, but this life offered only one way to the priesthood. "Yes, of course," Michael said to the woman. "Of course."

The bus pulled into its final stop near the other end of the island and the boy watched his relatives cross in front of his window. They waved and he copied them.

Michael whispered to the monsignor: "I can't go to the church with you." Michael tossed his head in the boy's direction. "They didn't want him to see... so how can we take him there?"

"You have a point. But there is nowhere that is not swamped. It might be best if you stayed on the bus with him."

Michael agreed.

The bus ran along Middle Street until it curved north into the 703 again and the monsignor turned west. They passed a Presbyterian church and the monsignor stopped the bus in front. “They said the surge was fifteen feet. This never had a chance.”

As the bus lurched forward, Michael sat next to the boy. “I’m Father Michael. Your uncle told me your name was Stephen.”

The boy nodded.

“How old are you, Stephen?”

“Nine.”

“Your aunt gave me this bag of...” Michael leaned over the aisle and grabbed the bag from his seat. “It looks like an apple, a banana, and a sandwich. And a bottle of water. Would you like something to eat?”

The boy nodded.

“What would you like?”

“An apple.”

Michael gave the boy the fruit and he bit into it.

“What do you have in your backpack?”

“My glove. And a ball.”

“I used to play baseball, too.”

They watched the ruined houses pass together. Michael recalled the look on the other riders as they had passed the first houses. The faces had a strange mix of sadness and optimism. Even the man in the red hat. He was no different than everyone else. Waiting, trying, wanting to hope.

“Do you have a home anymore?” Stephen asked.

“I don’t know.”

The boy held the apple in his lap and then looked at the passing destruction. “Me either.”

When the bus pulled up to the monsignor’s church, he could see fallen trees crossed on the lawn and deep holes where the trunks used to stand. He slowly stepped off the bus and walked to the sanctuary door. Michael stood on the last step of the bus, watching. The monsignor looked back at him and then pushed open the sluggish and warped door. “I’ll be back soon.”

Michael stepped back inside the bus. Stephen had risen from his seat to the aisle. “Is this where your house is at?” he asked.

“No. I live across the harbor.”

“Does the other man live here?”

“Yes. He has for a long time.”

“He doesn’t have a home anymore, does he?”

Michael shook his head. He asked Stephen if he wanted to walk a bit. Stephen stepped onto the sidewalk with his bag and placed the tip of his shoe into the wet, muddy grass and removed it quickly. He looked across the street at a house where it seemed some giant had stepped on its left corner. A large tree sat to the side.

Michael and the boy watched water run down the street into a blocked gutter. They heard sirens wail in the distance and then a helicopter flew overhead.

Michael squatted in front of the boy on the concrete. “Sometimes when I am sad, I like to make faces. Like this.” Michael brought his teeth together and widened his smile as far it could go. Then he stuck his pointer fingers into each bearded cheek and pulled them up.

The boy smiled fleetingly.

“Why don’t we play catch?” Michael suggested.

The boy shrugged. “Come on, out here in the street. Nothing will get in our way.”

After Michael stepped a few yards away, Stephen threw a ball at his chest.

“Pretty good. Can you do it again?”

“I’ll try.”

“You got some arm.”

They tossed the ball back and forth silently. When Michael tried to throw with his other hand, the ball went over the boy’s head and bounced down the street. Stephen ran after it until it stopped. When he picked it up, he saw the line of damaged homes and sand in the street like a misplaced beach. He could see from where he was the ruin as he had not seen it on the bus. He was somewhere else now, somewhere he did not know.

Michael walked toward Stephen and watched as he threw his glove angrily to the street and ran at Michael. His arms were flailing and Michael caught him even as he tried to veer away at the last moment. Michael held him and listened to his muffled sobs.

Michael sighed, thinking of all the boys he knew and how they were real and living and grown and still being pulled to God, still being moved and awed, still happy. He kept holding Stephen, certain the boy did not want to let go either. O great and mysterious Lord, this is the day you have made.

Then he heard a voice and turned to see the monsignor come out of the church. He waved, telling them to come. Michael gathered the boy's glove and ball and they walked side by side to the bus and sat in the same seat. The boy leaned back and stared out the window.

The bus went down Middle Street again and stopped to gather people waiting along the road with the same empty bags and plastic containers they had left with. Stephen's relatives and others got on solemnly and fell into seats and gazed out of the window, sipping from bottles of water.

At the last stop, the man in the red hat was waiting. He was not carrying his suitcase. His shoes and pants were muddy. He followed the line of riders onto the bus and slumped into a seat well past Michael.

The bus rode toward the dock, cutting through large pools of water and crunching over the sand in the street. Michael tapped the monsignor. "Was there anything left?"

The monsignor shook his head. "A total loss."

Michael fell back into his seat. He turned and saw Stephen looking out the window. There, too, nearby, was the man in the red hat, running his hand through his hair, staring blankly ahead at the destruction. His eyes met Michael's for a moment. The man's mouth pursed open slightly and Michael held his lungs at their fullest. But the man looked away.

CHAPTER IX: THE INVITATION

The faded green coupe came through Greenville and then beyond, into the foothills, past the large Victorian rooming house that hardly ever housed anyone, past what was once a tire and lube place, past the still vacant big-box store, past the school, and finally stopped in front of Harry's home. It was just as Harry had described. One side of a brown duplex, with the other side symmetric from the outside: three bushes below a large window next to the front door. Michael scooted out of the car and then leaned on Harry's shoulder as the two walked up the short concrete path that split into two directions near the building.

As Harry struggled to get the key into the door, Michael rested on the door frame. He could see the street then. Across the road were small brick houses, each with a squared-off yard. He looked to his left and saw a mother push her son in a plastic car from an open garage.

When Harry got the door open, Michael stumbled to the couch. In front of the plaid sofa sat a square coffee table and beyond that was a television resting on a small cabinet with no doors. The floor was covered by beige carpet. Michael jostled his healthy leg to remove the hospital flip flop and rubbed his foot on the carpet. As he eyed the vacuum lines, he smiled like a dog relishing in a good scratch. Catholic churches were all stone, where heels clicked on the marble and the sounds filled a cavernous sanctuary. He could always hear someone coming. It was the Protestants, God bless them, who loved their carpets, mostly in dark crimsons. So soft one might sleep before the altar.

Harry grinned on his way to the kitchen at Michael who now was digging his big toe into the fabric.

“Looks nice. What, you’ve been here three years?”

“About that. You want to see your room?”

“Not now.”

Harry dug out a remote from a recliner and tossed it on Michael’s lap. “It’s got to be past lunch. You want some food? Did you have anything before you left the hospital?”

“Just whatever stuff they had. You got something here?”

“I got sandwich meat and fruit punch. You want that?”

Michael eyed the remote on his lap. It was one of those long ones that had a row of buttons at the top that seemed to control many things. “I see you got some perks from retirement.”

Harry turned from the counter with a bag of ham in his hand. “Not really. Just hit the one to the left. That’s the cable. I don’t have the other stuff.”

The screen electrified into the muted weather report. It was going to be hot for days to come. Harry’s sandwiches came with a side of chips speckled with chives and a glass nearly full of punch. Michael tore his sandwich away from his mouth and held it in his hand as he chewed. “Thanks for letting me come here. It’s a nice place.”

“You like the carpet?” Michael nodded.

They listened to each other gulp the liquid. Then a car rode past the front door with music thumping from it. Michael looked at the window.

An errant crumb fell from Harry's mouth and he put down his sandwich to pluck it from the carpet. "It's different than where you've been."

"The carpet's something."

"Other ways, too. The silence is different. This type of silence, though..." Harry put his elbow on his knee and then pointed to nothing particular. "It's something you have to get used to. I don't know how to say it, I guess."

Michael nodded.

"We were always alone. But here eating a sandwich by myself with the television off, with the only sound really the air conditioner – it's the alone that's different. It's something that doesn't fill you like the other kinds."

Michael had a spot of mustard on his lip. Harry ran his finger over his own lip and Michael noticed the signal and did the same.

"How long do you think it will take Mae to get up here?" Michael asked.

"Two hours or so. How much did you and she talk at the hospital?"

"A little."

"I could see she's angry."

Michael took a sip from his glass and spoke softly. "How mad are you?"

Harry shrugged. "It's not that I'm more or even less mad. I think she's mad for a different reason."

"Why are you?"

"I think I am most mad because I should have been there. I suppose if you had told me years ago, I may have reacted differently. Now, I think I'm mad at myself more. I don't want to ignore it and maybe I should be angrier at you. But I see you and now I see

me, absent, all those times you could of... Maybe you did try to tell me and I didn't give you a chance." He paused and looked at Michael. "Did you try to tell... me?"

"The last time we ate together."

"That was six months ago. Seven, even. Why then?"

Michael slumped in the couch and pushed out his cast to straighten his leg. "One of the lay priests – he's our age – had come into the office that day and he showed me a video clip of that priest – what was his name? – that priest when we were kids who was on television? He was just so eager to show me, that they had put this guy into digital memory. Now everyone could... Anyway he was showing me this video and I remember how important he had been to me. It has been years since I had even thought about that show. After my father died, my mother would stay up and watch him after we went to bed. She would fall asleep with it on. I guess whatever that memory was to me back then, at that moment it wanted me to try to tell you."

"Did I just talk so much that night?"

"Oh, no. Nothing like that. It wasn't you. I just didn't say it."

"Were there other times?"

"Yeah. Over the years, different times."

"Did you ever try to tell anyone else?"

"I tried with Mae a few times. And others."

"Did you ever.... go to a priest?"

Michael bit into his sandwich again and tasted the spicy mustard Harry had put on the bread. "You always liked this stuff."

“It might have done some good.” Harry took a sip from his drink. “He would have listened.”

“He did.”

“Who?”

“The priest I talked to.”

“When?”

“A few months after what I did, I went to see Father Wells, my seminary mentor. In Chicago. He was dying. By this point he was a wafer of a body, tubes running in and out. I come in and he smiles and makes some joke about dying. And then I say something about having been a long time since we last saw each other and do you know what he says? ‘And yet I can still tell you have something to say.’ Here he was dying, his cancer somewhere, everywhere in his body, and his heart was still working. He had heard my confessions for five years, my half-hearted, ego-hiding confessions and he hadn’t missed a thing.”

“Did you go there intending to tell him?”

Michael shook his head. “He saw it on my face. Maybe I put it there a little, too.”

“What did you say?”

“How it all started. How the boy – his name was Christopher, if you want to know – was someone I spent a lot of time with. I told Father Wells how I struggled with being alone and how I let my thoughts, my desires turn into action, into what I did.”

“What did he say?”

“Not much. He was so weak – even that day. About an hour after I left he died.”

“He must’ve been far worse off than...”

“He said I didn’t have to leave the priesthood. He said I would find my vocation through it.”

“And you did, it seems.”

“I think so. I guess that is why I never did it again. Really then after that I started to work on my priesthood. Keeping my vows then became a matter of principle. Like it should have been.”

“That sounds like something I could agree with. Did Father Wells say anything else?”

“Something about penance not being done alone. He told me to tell my superiors.”

“I see.”

“I wanted to tell them. I wanted to tell the boy’s parents, too. In the beginning, I did. But I was afraid, you know, and also you replay it like I said in the car. Then if you do that enough and at the same time see the collar around your own neck, then you start arguing with yourself and you never do.”

“That’s everybody, Mike, not just priests.”

Michael drank from his glass and heard himself swallow.

“You know, I don’t think I’ve had someone eat here with me since I moved in,” Harry said.

Michael nodded.

“I used to eat with people all the time. Mrs. Pericope, who came by to clean. Lay priests. People would have me over. Hardly ever a night alone. Now... you know reading

aloud in your bed is weird. I do that sometimes. It was strange too when Mae called me Father. I had almost gotten used to not being called it.”

“Is it hard not being in a parish?”

“About the same as being in one. It’s something you get used to.”

“There were times when I was like that. Went on about the business. How cruel that sounds. But you do. And then it sneaks up and comes back. About four months after it, one afternoon I had gone to the jail to talk to someone. He was an uncle of a girl.... his brother’s daughter, he did horrible things to her, long period of time too.... They put him on suicide watch and I don’t think he asked for me but there I was. As he talked I could see that room, that moment again. I leaned over in my chair a bit, like I wasn’t paying attention, and he looked at me and said, ‘Father, you listening....?’ I straightened my back and by instinct or maybe it just needed an adjustment but I tugged at my collar.”

“I tug sometimes at it, too. And realize it isn’t there anymore.”

Michael picked up his sandwich and laid it in his palm and turned the other up. He kept them at the same level as if he were balancing two objects. “I have been a priest but I’m this other thing as well. Ever since it happened. I’m that and I’m this.”

“Who am I, Mike?” Harry said in a soft tone.

“What do you mean?”

“Who am I, Mike?” Harry’s voice became a bit stronger. “Tell me.”

“You’re... You are... Father Harold Gaston...”

“No.” Harry’s finger waved the denial and then he poked his chest. “Who am *I*?”

“You’re Father Harold Gaston, former pastor of St. Dom...”

“No, Mike, I’m not. I’m not Father Harold Gaston. I’m Harry. The bagboy at the grocery store doesn’t call me Father. The mailman doesn’t call me Father. No one does anymore.”

Michael shrugged. “So?”

“They won’t call you that either. We’re not that anymore. We are...” Harry moved his arm to show the room. “We are this. I am this. I like to watch the Braves. I like yogurt with a little granola. And sometimes I like to stay up late and watch Leno. I’m 69 years old and if I am lucky I will get up in the morning without any pain. I’m just an old man now. So I guess what I am saying is that here, in this town, no one knows any different. No one knows you as this or that. You’re not that thing you think you are. The only thing that tells you right now who you are is that leg. You are an old man with a broken leg.”

“It’s not that easy for me. I am a 63-year-old man whose face has been on every television and on every front page. At least in this state. If I am lucky no one will recognize me here. If I am lucky, for the rest of my life, no one will recognize me. You can say I’m not that thing but I am. I am a pedophile priest. Well, not even that. I’m not a priest anymore. You’re right about that. And about another thing. I’m an old man with a broken leg who is so overweight it hurts.” Michael reached down and grabbed his cast and then coughed. “Who smoked too much also.”

“Didn’t they give you some aspirin before you left – the stuff that’s really good?”

Michael dug a handful of gauze from his pocket and uncovered two small white pills. He swallowed them dry. When they finished eating, Harry took the empty plates

and glasses back to the kitchen. “We got some more of this for lunch tomorrow. How does that sound?”

When he got no response, Harry returned to the couch and patted Michael on the leg. “Where did you go?”

“What do you mean?”

“I asked what you wanted to do for lunch tomorrow.”

“I was thinking about this picture in my office. Of St. Anselm. You had one, I’m sure. Twenty five faces standing in a semi-circle, twenty five heads bobbing on top of a black sea. Black from neck to shoe.”

“One body, one fabric, all that.”

“I hope Mae can get it.”

“Why do you want that particular picture?”

“It’s part of the past I actually want to remember.”

“How many of them made it?”

“Five.”

“Good odds. What was that? 67? 68? Hundreds went in then. A few years after me. That whole era. All the excitement – Vatican II had just ended. And do you remember how people were just looking - the spiritual hunger in the world, the death of the Kennedys and all. Hundreds came in like a wave. And only a few came out – ‘the few and the proud.’ They never told us what it would be like – never told us enough, did they?”

Michael shook his head. “Not at St. Anselm’s.”

“All in God’s way,” Harry said.

The air conditioned hummed to break the new quiet. Harry picked up the remote and pressed on the set.

“I didn’t really....” Michael said.

“Oprah’s on.”

Is that what you do with your time now?”

“Every now and then. Sometimes she teaches me how to make dinner.”

The station moved to commercials. Liquid soap. Life insurance. What’s coming up at six.

They watched the screen’s left corner as Michael’s picture appeared next to the young, blond female anchor. Harry reached for the remote.

“It’s okay, just a tease for the news,” Michael said.

Harry turned the set off. “It’s not going to be like this all time, Mike. It will die down.”

“Do you think they know?”

“Who?”

“The others, the other four from St. Anselm’s.”

“Probably. Like you said. News, especially like this, gets around quicker nowadays. Maybe something will come along and knock it off the front page.”

Harry walked to the window near the door. His fingers separated two of the blinds to reveal the placid veneer that covered the empty driveways, empty streets, and empty houses. He knew little of his neighbors but saw when and how they cut their lawns. He saw only what they let him, let anyone see.

“I can’t offer you much, Mike. I guess you have to want it for yourself or else this...” He pointed his head toward the window. “All this will deaden you if you let it.”

“You think I’ll ever see the inside of a church again?”

“We can go to Greenville for mass, if you want sometimes,” Harry said to the window.

“You go often?”

Harry shook his head. Then he turned to the room. “Mike, you know we might hit 80 or 90. When your leg heals we’re going to take long walks in the woods and then come back and lie on the couch and watch the Braves. That’s what we’ll do. That’s what we’ve been left to do. We are exiles.”

He took a few steps toward Michael.

“I’m not going to ask you to stop thinking about what you did or who you are. I want you here...”

“I appreciate...” Michael looked up confused.

“I want you here and I think you deserve to know why. I don’t think horrible things about you. I don’t hold what you did... I want you to know I need you. I’m lonely, Mike, and I am afraid. A few from the parish called in the early months. But that slowed. I’m not their priest anymore. And you think I’ve hiked since I left? I could. Doctors okay it. If I had someone. I know you got a thousand scenes in your head. They come in every day. Some bad, but some good. Me, too. The good ones, the ones I want to keep, are starting to go dim. There’s too little future and the past, the past is fading, too. I’ve got to keep the present. And you’re here to keep me there. That’s what I need and what I think you need. All this other stuff is...well... stuff. Stuff we can talk about and pray with and

live with. I'm not here to be your psychologist or your counselor or even your priest. I don't want to do that anymore. I just need somebody to make sure I don't choke on my dinner.'"

Michael smiled. "I need someone to take me to the bathroom."

When they came back from the bathroom, Michael lay down on the couch. Harry took a pillow from the floor where Michael had kicked it and placed it under his cast. Then Harry put himself in the recliner.

"There was another time I tried," Michael said.

"Tried what?"

"To talk, to confess, to apologize."

"To me?"

Michael shook his head.

"To who then?"

"To him. Christopher."

Harry sat up. "He was ten when it happened, wasn't he?"

"I saw him when he was older, an adult. It was after Hugo. He apparently was living on Sullivan's Island. I was on a bus helping people get back there."

"And he saw you?"

"He saw me but I don't think he recognized me. Maybe he did. I was a hundred – maybe a hundred and fifty pounds heavier. And I had a beard and different glasses and wasn't wearing the usual priest black."

“How did you know who he was?”

“He did this little thing with his finger and then I knew. I wanted to say something. I wanted to confess, seek some sort of forgiveness – who knows where he was at with it. But when I saw him come back to the bus from his house with nothing - nothing he could salvage, not a frame, not anything - I saw him and I... my heart was broken. It sounds so selfish, so hypocritical, I know. I can hear Mae now. But I didn’t want to add to his suffering. And plus, we never were really alone, either. No right time.”

“Is that why you never told Mae?”

“In the beginning, she was in it rough – the first years were hard on her. She worked both sides – interviewing victims and abusers. This was when she still had some faith, though I guess now I could see it withering.”

“With all her background, she might’ve...”

“Just to keep her head above water, I suppose, she started telling me these stories. She wanted me, I guess, to pray for the ones she was listening to. So I knew about all the effects and the depression and the changes – all the difference it makes to them, you know, from Mae. But I didn’t want to *really* know. I didn’t want to know how he was – he had to be - like the ones Mae was listening to. That’s why I never told her.” Michael shut his eyes for a moment. “But I prayed for them. I did.”

“I know you did.”

“I prayed... I begged God to heal... but God forgive me again and again, I didn’t want to know.” Michael stared at Harry. “Did you ever hear a priest say that? ‘I didn’t want to know.’”

Michael fell back to the couch and began to run his fingers along the carpet. “And after a while... you know the schedule. I headed so many things, was on so many committees for so many issues. Like you said – a thousand scenes. But there has always been that particular one for me. I see his face after it’s all over. I see how he looked at me. How... sad he was. How disappointed he was.” Michael clenched his hand into a fist just above the carpet and it hung there for a few moments before breaking apart. “My momma used to say God saved memories. And I guess this is the one he saved for me.”

Michael sat up and straightened his back, arching it so much that his face contorted in slight pain. He set his glasses on the cushion and looked at Harry. “I used to play this game when I was a kid. When I made my mother sad, I would try to make the darkness come by poking my eyeballs with my fingertips.” Michael drew his right hand to his face and spread his fingers so that his pointer went into one eye and the next finger went into the other. He rubbed his eyeballs for a second and then put his frames back on his face. “When he left that room, I tried. I begged God... I wanted it to go dark then. I wanted it to stay dark. But nothing happened.”

“And you think God kept you alive just so he could keep bringing you back to that memory?”

Michael nodded.

“That’s not God. That’s the farthest thing from him. That’s what a priest would have said.”

“Is that what Ropswood would’ve said?”

“Why do you keep thinking about him?”

“Don’t you ever wonder how he became a priest?”

“What do you mean how?”

“How no one knew. How he slipped through the cracks.”

“I suppose there are many things that failed. But the church isn’t the only place that lets in people like that.”

“Why do you think he did it?”

“He was sick.”

“So you think it’s a sickness?”

“People may start to drink for different reasons. But they only keep drinking because they are drunks. They like being drunks. But alcoholics can stop drinking. And they stop when they don’t want to be drunks anymore.”

“Do you believe my reason – my reason why?”

Harry nodded.

“Do you think Mae will?”

“I don’t know. Yeah. Maybe not right away.”

“There are other reasons, I suppose. Like my father committed suicide when I was young, my mother died shortly before the event, that sort of thing.”

“It’s not that simple, and you know that.”

“I was glad I didn’t have to explain it to my mother.”

“Was her death hard on you?”

“She had lost her color, lost weight, lost parts of her memory. And Mae and I fought about it all the time. She hated to be the one to watch it all. She wanted me there more and she thought all I did was pray. And all her stuff started then with those boys. She started to hate God. And she hated me because...”

“She was just an hour away.”

“I knew that.”

“And so what were you doing that was more important?”

“I was the new guy. You know how that is.”

“I do. But that’s not a reason to leave your sister like that. And it certainly isn’t a reason to molest a boy.”

“I know.”

“And then there’s... when did you start thinking God was here to punish you?”

Michael looked at his leg and then slowly raised his head to see Harry across the room. “What you said before makes sense. We aren’t that anymore. But that is what scares me. Do you think that now that it’s been taken away, now that we aren’t priests anymore, now that we aren’t anything to anybody – did you ever think that now you were never one to begin with?”

Harry leaned toward the couch. “What does that mean?”

“I’ve got enough on why I did it. But why did God allow it? And the only reason... the only thing left for me is Ropswood. And all the others. Me and them - we’re all the same. Priests for never. After all those masses, all those prayers and rites, I never had it. I never was...”

“You spent more than thirty five years being a great priest. You worked so hard...”

“You want to know why I worked so hard?” Michael pointed at his chest. “Why Mae never saw me? Why you hardly saw me?”

Harry hunched and turned up his palms. “Why?”

“I was the baseball player with no talent. He isn’t meant to be in the majors but if he works hard enough he can. I did it all to show people I was meant to be their priest... And so after what I did, after what I did to Christopher, I went back to the work because I had to show myself that what I did to him isn’t me. I know everyone says when people do this they do it more than once. I thought that. I thought that for a long time. Why not just admit it, you think. But I knew all my time working, in all the places I was in, would convince them – convince me – that I was good, that I was a priest. There were the noble reasons, like I said before. Commitment to my vows. But there were less than righteous reasons I was the type of priest I was. Though like you said in the car, it didn’t work.”

“You think you wasted all these years?”

Michael tapped his chest. “I know I wasted it.”

“I don’t think you have.”

“How can someone like me be a priest? Why would God call someone who does something like this? If you say Ropswood was never in, then why not me?”

“All you got is one memory. This one memory you think God is punishing you with. But that’s a lie. You force it on yourself. You’re just beating yourself up. It’s the speech again.”

“I’ve got many memories and I’ve been reliving basically my whole life these last few days. My whole road to becoming a priest. Father Frank, all of it. It was all fake. And I’m not coming to this just now – it’s been tormenting me since that day.”

“Those things weren’t phony, Mike.”

“I’m the phony, Harry.”

Harry and Michael both sunk their heads. Another broad stillness came and settled on them and between them. Michael threw himself back onto the couch.

Harry walked to the edge of the couch and Michael sat up to open a seat.

Harry drew his hands down his cheeks and then pointed to his room. "I have a picture of Saint Francis on the wall back there. I've always liked him."

"Why is that?"

"Because when this village priest was living with a woman and everyone knew it and they started to say his Mass was tainted, that it was unholy, Francis went to that priest, knelt before him in the mud, and kissed his hand."

"He also talked a wolf into not killing people again."

"So you've heard my story? Then you know what Francis said. He told everyone that the hand he kissed had held God."

Michael sighed.

"None of us are saints anymore, Mike. And you know what's harder than believing God keeps you alive to punish you?"

"What?"

Harry patted Michael's leg. "Believing he has not abandoned you, even though you feel he should."

"Maybe I just need some rest."

"Maybe."

Harry helped Michael to his feet. Michael pointed to the carpet. "This is real nice stuff, you know?"

"I know."

They walked into the small bedroom behind the living room and Harry helped Michael lay flat on top of the sheet. Michael pulled a pillow over his face, muffling his voice. “Wake me up when Mae gets here.”

“Sure.”

Feeling smothered after a few minutes, Michael stuffed the pillow back under his head and looked around the room. A thick curtain blocked the afternoon sun and the brown paint made the room dark. He covered his face with his hands and closed his eyes.

None of it mattered. Not one blessing, not one prayer, not one moment. Nothing he had done was done as a priest. Marriages. Baptisms. Counseling. Confessions. And the thousands of Masses.

The counterfeit moments – going back even to childhood, back to when he had told everyone he felt the call to the priesthood - spun through his mind like a rewinding film reel, flashes so fast they appeared as one long event, one long meaningless moment. Everything he could recall became then a lifetime of nothingness.

When he looked to the room again, he moved his pupils back and forth, studying the quiet. He tried to gauge its dimensions. It was not merely a library hush, a sort of thin layer that might be thrust away with a small sound. It was thick and heavy and its breadth was indeterminable. It seemed to float in the room, unhitched from a true axis of any kind, growing. It was not then, he knew, a monastery peace or meditative tranquility – one that remains grounded. This was another kind of silence, altogether different from any he had identified before. Harry had tried to explain it to him. Harry was living it.

This silence was a true silence, the long silence he had been warned about, the one that fathered all other silences. It was the silence the saints spoke about after they were abandoned to it. He closed his eyes and gave in to his weariness.

CHAPTER X: THE DENIAL

Mae pulled up to the sidewalk in front of Harry's house and sat in her car for ten minutes before Harry noticed through the window she was there. He walked out and got in the passenger side.

On his seat was a box of framed pictures from Michael's office. He held them in his lap.

Mae wiped underneath her left eye. "How did his leg hold up during the trip?"

"He stretched out in the back. When we got here we ate a little and he's been sleeping since then. He asked me to wake him when you got here."

Mae pulled out a buzzing phone from her purse. She glanced at the number and then put it away.

"I've gotten a few calls already. I'm in the book club, the knitting circle - all that retired women stuff and they really don't know what to say. On the voicemail, they sigh and say how sorry they are. I haven't been ready to talk to any of them. And there are the ones who don't call because they don't know what to say. But they see it on the news."

"There was a tease for another report at six."

"Did he see it?"

Harry nodded. "How did it go down there?"

"I got that box."

Harry picked up a frame which held a picture of Michael and Mae as children on swings.

Mae looked over at it. “Why does he keep this one? I’m not even looking at the camera. And he’s got his eyes closed.”

“Did you talk to anyone?”

“Deb, his secretary and the other priest there. Every time I see him he still seems so young.”

“Sometimes they are.”

“He’s all they got for now. He wanted to know how Michael was doing, where I was going. That sort of thing. He said people came by and offered support. He said they were having a prayer meeting tonight.”

“Mike will be glad to hear that.”

“He asked me to pray with him and I sat there and listened and I guess I just...”
Mae picked up a frame from the box. “This one I understand. Ordination and all. Do you think he’ll want this one?”

“I put mine in a box to move up here and haven’t taken them out since. I just couldn’t look at it anymore. I guess that’s why I asked him here. I just wanted someone here who was trying to do the same thing I am.”

“You don’t have to explain to me, Father. I don’t dislike you for taking him in. I rather like it, him being here.”

“It’s really not the end of the world, as they say. It’s horrible, Mae, I know, what he did. I think that’s the word, the adjective we have come to. But he’s still here. I mean there are others who...”

Mae took off her glasses and rubbed her nose.

“How’s the family?” Harry asked.

“I talked to Gary before pulling in and he wanted to come up. I told him I might stay a while. If Michael wants me to. And you of course.”

“I would love it as long as you like. Him, I don’t know, though. He said you got a little angry before at the hospital.”

“He’s just stubborn.”

“He is apologetic, Mae. Deeply.”

“I know. I am just... I was so angry. Angry at it, angry he didn’t tell anybody. Didn’t trust me enough or care enough or...Angry about it all.”

“He said he tried a few times over the years with me and with you. He said he tried with me just a few months ago. I just sat there oblivious. I think he never told us because at some point he just wanted to be a priest.”

“He lied.”

Harry nodded.

“He lied. He did this and hid it from you. From us. I love him because he’s my brother. But this makes it like I never really knew him. Don’t you feel that way? Aren’t you angry? We’re supposed to be the people who know him best and after all these years he’s not who we think he is.”

“I am...”

“How do you know he hasn’t had some feelings throughout the years? How do you know that he isn’t... gay? How do you know he won’t do it again, that he didn’t do it again, even if he says he only did it once? How do you know anything?”

Mae eyed Michael standing in the window, the blinds drawn up.

“Looks like he’s up,” Harry said.

When they came inside, Mae took a seat on the opposite end of the couch from Michael. Harry sat on the recliner. “Have a good nap?”

Michael reached down to hold his cast. “You got any aspirin? I’m all out of the stuff the hospital gave me.”

Harry wandered into the kitchen.

Mae turned to her brother. “How you holding up?”

Michael rubbed his eyes.

“They hurting you?”

Michael shook his head. Harry brought a half-full glass and two pills to Michael.

Mae watched him drink. “Did you ever have a broken bone before? I thought I remember perhaps a summer you being grumpy and not allowed outside.”

“Must have been one of yours,” Michael said. “This is my first.”

“You slept all afternoon,” Harry said. “You want to get some dinner? Maybe we should get take out. Great Chinese down the street.”

When Michael did not answer, Mae patted the cushion between her and her brother. “I don’t want to fight again. I thought I might stay...”

Michael turned away.

“I was angry before. You were, too. We were both angry.” Mae’s voice softened as she laid her palms open on the cushion. “Driving up here, I just kept trying to figure out...trying to get a handle on...”

Michael took off his glasses and rubbed his nose. “Either you believe me or you don’t Mae.”

“I don’t care about that.”

“What do you want then, Mae? You want me to say I’m sorry again?”

“I want to know why.”

“I don’t know why.”

Harry leaned forward in his recliner. “Now, Mike, we talked about this in the car.”

“Let him be this way, Harry,” Mae said.

“What do you want to hear?” Michael said. “Do you want me to say I’m a pedophile? You want me to say I’m sick and I need help? You want me to admit I’ve had thoughts for three decades? You want...”

“What I want is for you to say *something* about why. I know Mom died then and you had a bad opening round there in Charleston. I thought you might throw down some loneliness and sexual frustration. But this – this ‘I don’t know’ is worse. It’s a lie, first of all. And second, it’s so stubborn.”

“I can’t say it was this or that. I can’t say it was some mental illness, some psychotic break. I can’t say it was just me wanting... I don’t know. I don’t know why I did... I don’t know why someone in my position... how someone like me... I don’t

know. I've had years with it, and still I don't know. But you don't know either. You don't know how hard it's been."

"How hard it's been? On you?" She straightened her back on the couch. "Here's what I do know. For years – probably well into college, well into adulthood - he asked himself if it were real, if it actually happened. Whoever he was with, whoever he tried to love, there was always that thing in the back of his mind telling him what he was doing was not real, that what you did was real, that what you did was normal. Then once he got past that, once he found the audacity to admit what happened was wrong, he started to think about anything he did to make you do it. Then when he was done castigating himself for that with no success and he finally had the courage to tell someone - who knows when he actually did? - I bet it probably took two or three people, two or three times of people not believing him, of them dismissing it. And each took years to recover from."

"I know all..."

"No, you don't. Then when he found that right person, that person who knew what they had before them, that someone told him the truth: it wasn't him, it was you." She pointed at him. "It was you, Mike. That's what he was told, thankfully. He was told why. You were sick; you were messed up. But in the end, they didn't spend a lot of time on reasons and whys. They just said it was you, that you were responsible."

"Is that what you..."

"There's more. After he was told that, after he was granted that so-called peace, I am sure he's spent some time – maybe still is – thinking about it, all inching back toward it being his fault. He's never really convinced himself that it wasn't his fault. He's never

really known a life without it. That is his pain.” She dug the tip of her finger in the couch.

“And it’s magnitudes above yours.”

The tension in her shoulders released and she sank slightly in the couch.

“I know all that,” Michael said.

“No, you don’t.”

“I’ve had it for years, Mae.” Michael pointed at his head. “I’ve had it in here.”

“I don’t believe you. Nothing you have done or said... You can’t have it there when you don’t even have it here.” Mae pointed to her chest. “It’s his pain you never wanted to know.”

“Yes, I did. I hate it all...”

“Why didn’t you confess early on then? If you really wanted to know, if you really cared about what you did, you would have confessed. But you didn’t. You didn’t confess because... then you would have known for sure.”

“Known what?”

“You would have known... a priest would never do that. You would have known you weren’t meant to be priest. And you would have quit. Instead you played the part for all these years. And for what? Harry said you just wanted to be a priest. That’s right. You just wanted to be a priest. God didn’t...”

“Don’t bring God into this.”

“I got a question for your god. The one made you a priest. Answer this, mouthpiece of the Lord: Why would God call someone like you to be a priest? Why would God call a pedophile to be a priest?”

Michael drew his hands up to cover his face.

Mae pointed at him and her voice grew louder. “Is that what you did when it was over, Mike? When you were done with him? You tried to make the darkness come? Go ahead then. Do it now. Like you always did when you did something wrong. Do what you’ve been doing all your life. Hide. Go into that darkness.”

Harry came to Mae’s end of the couch and held her by the shoulder. “Mae, can we...”

Mae pulled her shoulders from his grip and yelled. “You knew what I was going through, listening to those boys. It was... unspeakable. And I called you and we talked about it and you were...”

She ripped her brother’s hands from his face and saw his clear eyes.

“You were never a priest, Mike. Never. You only dressed like one.”

Michael tried to stand up but fell back into the couch. He pounded his non-casted foot into the carpet and grunted.

“Mae, he’s sor...” Harry said.

Mae stood up to face him. “He’s not really sorry, Harry. He’s only sorry he got caught and can’t hide anymore.”

Michael hobbled to the door. He opened it and stood next to it.

“Where are you going?” Mae asked.

“Nowhere. But you are.”

“Mike, let’s be...” Harry said.

“No, she’s unforgiving.”

“I have a right to be...” Mae said, poking herself in the chest. Harry took her by the arm.

“But you’re not doing it here anymore,” Michael yelled.

“I can leave whenever...”

Michael took in a deep breath and exhaled in a loud yawp. “Get out!”

Harry let Mae go and she started toward the door. When she got to the welcome mat, she turned. “You were never a priest. This proves it.”

Michael slammed the door in her face. Harry followed Mae to her car.

“Where are you going to go?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Go down to Greenville, get some dinner, find a room, and I’ll call you tomorrow after he wakes up.”

“I can’t believe I said all that. I was the one who thought he should be a priest. He wasn’t so sure there in the beginning.”

“Neither was I. God knew what he was doing though.”

“What was he thinking, then?” Mae sighed. “I just sometimes get so angry.”

“Just don’t give up on him. God didn’t.”

Mae smiled and Harry went back inside and sank into the recliner. “She’s going to a hotel.”

Michael continued to stare at the television he had tuned to a sitcom.

“Give her a call, Mike. Apologize.”

Michael changed the channel and added two bars to the volume.

Harry walked to the couch.

“Call her.”

“Her first.”

Harry shook his head and walked to the kitchen. They watched CNN in silence for an hour until Harry announced he was going to get some Chinese. "You want to go?" Michael declined.

When Harry returned, they ate without words and watched the Braves. Michael took two aspirin with his food. Harry was on his way to stuffing more than half his food back into the refrigerator when Michael finally spoke.

"I'll finish it," he said, waving Harry back from the kitchen.

After the game ended in extra innings, past eleven, Harry helped Michael to bed. They exchanged no words as Harry left him flat on the bed without pillows. A street light's glow crept through the small space between the curtains, lighting one side of Michael's face. He turned to the light and began to wink slowly, one eye then the other. He sped up, trying to make himself dizzy. When that didn't work, he cupped his eyes with their matching hand, pulling them away and then covering them again, moving his hands so quickly that he began to slap himself. The sting became too much.

Mae was right. He tried to escape, to bring on the darkness whenever he didn't want to see. Like a boy who hides in the corner. This strange darkness was a debilitating disease and yet also a merciful sanctuary. He knew why it had not worked this time. God had not ordained it, not allowed it. God would not let him leave one darkness for another.

Michael rose from the bed with his glasses and threw aside the curtains. Shirtless and in boxer briefs, he began to scratch his head. He looked down both ends of the street, counting the lamps. It was a street that matched the street behind it and the streets across town, he knew. Mile after mile of sidewalks, mile after mile of bent grass mowed by young fathers or old boys, mile after mile of wooden fencing that created pockets of

sameness people called their own. And inside those copycat houses identical lies: We can save ourselves. We are good enough. There are some things we would never do.

A stray, silk cloud hovered in front of the full moon and the firmament of heaven glimmered in every direction. The stars were the glory of the divine work, to be seen by man in his time of need. They were the sign of a loving creator. But they told us, too, of the distance between man and God.

Michael sat for a moment on the edge of the bed. He cupped his hands to his face and breathed into his palms. He felt the warmth of his breath and whispered a prayerful plea to the Virgin Mother. Then he crawled into the sheet and fell asleep.

The dream began as it always had done with a detection of the same yellow sheet that covered him in a bed. He recognized as usual the same small room and saw the same wooden desk with a wooden chair and a tiny window that framed the moon. It was always the moonlight and how it sat on his skin that came in the dream then. He was young and thin, as always. The dream moved forward like a movie, calming his soul.

He saw clothes on the back of the chair and put them on and then knelt to tie his shoes. Once ready, he went to the large wood door and opened it. He stepped into the dark hallway and as he walked, he heard the early morning bell echo through the cavernous path that led to where it always led: the chapel. There, the monks were bent in meditation. He sat in a row far from the front and stood when they stood to chant the psalm for the day. He felt the rhythm of the words, his voice a part of theirs. As he had always done.

When they rose to leave he followed. He walked with certainty, without distraction, following the line. But this time, something changed. The monk ahead of him in line turned around. His face was partly covered by the reach of the hood and he put up his hand. Michael stopped so he would not walk into it. Confused, he wanted to speak but knew no one could break the grand silence. He took a step forward and the monk pushed his hand into Michael's chest. Michael persisted ahead and the monk pushed a little more. Michael took a step to the side and then one forward, but another monk had come to block him like the first.

“Please, I must.” The words reverberated in the small, empty chamber.

The monk shook his head and another one appeared and then another and then the entire group that led him in song had come to form a wall, each with one hand out. They began to shake their head and chant words Michael did not understand.

I must, he whispered as they shouted him down. I must.

When he stopped, they did as well. Then they pulled the covering from their heads and looked at Michael. They walked toward him, each with a hand out, crowding him, closing their circle on him. Michael cowered and tried to cover his face with his hands. He heard shrieks and saw their hands descend. They touched him, all at once, their faces all the same.

The nightmare shocked Michael awake. He felt the bed in the dark and grabbed the sheet that lay over him. It had become twisted around his leg and when he snatched it

pain pulsed through his leg. He stopped a scream by gritting his teeth. His breathing slowed and eventually he fell asleep again.

The next morning he slowly stirred awake. He opened his eyes to find he had left the curtains open. He brought up his hand to block the sunrise and grimaced. He massaged his tingling knees. He could never kneel for the first hour or so unless he rubbed lotion on them. These were all taxes added onto the price of getting old, he thought. He turned his head and saw the pain medication on the nightstand.

As he shook the bottle to force pills into his palm, he grinned slightly. This is what they want. They: the general, homogenized group in this nation who are not quoted but merely numbered every day. The ones who still favor capital punishment, the ones who are traffic, who are crowds, who are the average of everything and everyone. They: the ones who turned and will turn away. They want me in pain. *Well, good then, you bastard.* Would they call a priest that? I am no longer a priest. I was never a priest.

He swallowed three pills.

He felt the weight of the cast as he tried to pull it closer. Pain sprinted through his leg as he cried out. When he did not hear a response, he looked at the closed door and realized Harry was gone. He remembered more from last night. Not to worry if he woke up alone, Harry said. He walks. Good for him, Michael had said. You can make it to the door, the living room, the bathroom, and the kitchen and, Harry added, if you need it when you get to it, there is a bottle of scotch in the cabinet next to the refrigerator.

Michael looked at his path off the bed: around two edges and a few steps more. It was treacherous especially with all the morning pain. He moved to the door using the edge of the bed as a crutch. His weight was heavy on his wrists, but at least, he thought, it

was not on his legs. After a few scoots, he made it around one bed corner to the one nearest the door.

He had hopped a few steps into the room last night, but now he doubted if he could hop at all. And if he tripped, hit the floor wrong, he might hit the mirror on the back of the door. He looked at his cast and watched it as he took a step. Even the soft carpet did not abate the strike that traveled through his leg, straight up his bones. He looked at the mirror and watched the pain move – its trace a tightening of muscles along his thigh, then his stomach and finally his teeth grinding out the excess. This must be what it feels like to be in the electric chair, he thought. *Well, good then, you bastard*, he said gruffly. He lifted the good leg and set it down, trying to lean on it.

He looked at the mirror again. He remembered his reflection from the mirror on the back of the door when he was with Christopher that day. When it was over, Michael stood there, kicking his leg down into his pants. He saw the boy on the bed rubbing his shirt with his hand, looking confused at the sticky wet on both. Michael saw water surround the boy's eyes like they were two islands.

Michael walked toward the mirror. *Father, Father...* Michael stopped and his stomach caved in and his knees quivered and he fell. The boy's call became louder.

Father, Father...

Shaking his head, Michael blinked and eyed Harry's mirror.

You bastard.

Mae was angry. Harry, too, even though he hid it. Harry hated it more. But I hate it the most. I hate the sickening sick that is sin. I hate it. I hate it because I am a priest, a holy man set apart.

But hatred of sin, he knew, was only hiding self-hatred. And self-hatred is selfishness. And a true priest is never selfish. I am not willing to let go of hate. I am not willing to be a victim. I am not willing to suffer as the other.

He stumbled from the room and spotted a crucifix on the farthest wall of the kitchen. There he flung open a cabinet door and when he found nothing inside he shut it hard. He moved down the counter, opening and slamming doors. Finally he found the scotch. He quickly poured some into his mouth. He repeated Mae's angry refrain: *I was never a priest*. He drowned some more pills with a gulp from the bottle. *I was never a priest*. He tossed back more scotch but did not swallow. Instead he swirled it in his mouth and spat at the crucifix. *I am not your priest...*

He staggered into the bedroom and flopped on the mattress. He washed down with a long swig three more pills. Then another three and a longer swig. He swigged and swallowed whispering his truth: *I was never...* He swigged and swallowed until he emptied both bottles.

CHAPTER XI: CONCLUSION

A nurse led Harry and Mae into Michael's room. He was bent over and coughing.

"Still clearing it out?" Harry asked.

Michael wiped his blackened mouth.

"You scared your sister a good bit. Me, too. You remember I need you, don't you? We got tennis and hiking and the Braves."

Michael gave a half-smile.

Mae leaned into the bed and touched her brother's cheek. "The doctors said your weight slowed the overdose enough to save you."

Michael turned away.

"But you didn't want to be saved, did you?"

Michael coughed again and cleaned his mouth with the bed sheet. Then he stared at the television hanging above the wall in front of him.

"So this is how it's going to be?" Mae asked. When he did not respond, she turned to leave.

"You were right, Mae," Michael said. "I was never a priest."

Mae came back to the bed and wrapped her arms around Michael the best she could.

"You were," she whispered. "All your life. A good priest. God knows you were."

Michael stroked her cheek.

“Promise me this will be the last time,” she said.

Michael nodded.

After they left the hospital, Michael wanted to stop for food. They ate at a Wendy’s in a nearby mall and strolled into a small store filled with hats, jerseys, and jackets of every professional and college team.

“I could add to your wardrobe.” Harry said as he put a Braves hat on Michael’s head.

“It’s a little tight.”

From a black couch in the middle of the store, Mae scanned the counter and eyed the lone employee – a thin, middle-aged man with light brown hair and small, round glasses.

“How about this one?” Michael pulled a blue hat from the wall.

“Looks fine,” Mae said as she turned to the sound of a door shutting off a rear office.

“Where’d the salesman go?” Michael asked as he lumbered to the counter with his choice.

“I guess in the back,” Harry said.

Mae leaned to Harry’s ear. “That’s him.”

“Who?”

“I think that is...” She tipped her head toward the office. “The man at the counter... that’s Christopher.”

“Are you sure?”

Mae reached out for her brother’s shirt, but he pulled away to knock on the door.

“He’s on the phone or something, Mike,” Harry said.

Michael knocked again and Harry grabbed Michael’s arm. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Michael jiggled the knob. Harry pulled on Michael. “It’s.... Mae thinks that’s... She thinks that’s Christopher.”

Michael looked at Harry and Mae confused.

“He’s not going to come out of that office until you leave,” Mae said. “And he’ll probably call security if we don’t go soon. That is, if he can even dial. I mean on the other side of the door – he’s back in with you. He’s ten again. Closing his eyes, hoping it will go away.”

“We should go,” Harry said.

“I just want to...” Michael said and then turned to the door. “I don’t know if you can hear me...”

A faint yet mature voice came from behind the door. “Go away.”

“Christopher?”

The voice repeated its request in the same tone.

“I know you won’t open the door. I know you want me and my sister and my friend here to go away.”

“Please. Just leave.”

“When I saw you on the bus I... If you knew it was me, I understand why you didn’t...”

“You don’t know anything. Go to hell.”

“Chris...”

“Stop saying my name. Just get out of here.”

Michael’s head sank. Harry looked at Mae and held out his hands, unsure what to do.

“Give him what he wants, okay?” Mae whispered.

“Maybe this won’t mean much because I should have said it a long time ago. I know it doesn’t change anything. But I am sor...” Michael put a cheek against the door.

“Christopher, I am sorry.”

“Will you not just leave? Leave me alone. Leave me alone. Please.”

“I wanted to say I have always regretted it.”

“It? That’s what you... It was more than.... I am like this because of you.” The door banged loudly. “Just go.”

“Of all the places and times God has created...”

“Get the hell away from...”

The door shook until Michael raised his voice over the sound. “All right. All right. I’ll leave. I’m going. I just wanted to say that... I am sorry. Very sorry. If I could go back...”

The man began to yell. “Thirty five years have passed, you selfish bastard. There’s no going back, there’s no changing it.” The door was jolted harder. “It’ll be here when you leave and your apology vanishes. What happened to me – what you did -

doesn't belong to just you. It'll be here when you go off to prison. It'll be here..." The door moved again. "It'll be here..." And again. "I'll be here..." The door thundered with a heavy thud. "Damn it," the man said softly.

Michael heard him slump to the floor and moan softly. "You disgust me, you son of a..." Christopher said.

"I just wanted..."

"You wanted. You wanted... That's all it ever was. And listen to you. You got me where you want me. And for what? To ask me to forgive..."

The door opened then and Christopher stood tall and lanky with a pock-marked chin. His green eyes did not move off Michael.

"Go ahead. Ask me. Ask me to forgive you. Ask me so I can beat the hell out of you."

Michael dropped his head and Christopher eyed the cast.

"Looks like someone beat me to it." Christopher pointed to the front of the store. "That's the way out, old man. Use it."

Harry pulled on Michael but he hung his head.

"Look at you," Christopher said. "I'm the one who is supposed to be dumbstruck. I'm supposed to be mortified and ashamed. But I'm not. I'm 46 today. Did you know that? I'm 46 and I am going to go home after work and sit in my house and watch whatever mindless movie is on television and eat Chinese food. Bad Chinese food."

Michael looked at Christopher confused.

"You don't get it, do you? I opened the door because I'm not ten years old anymore. I heard what she was saying..." He pointed to Mae. "She was right. For a few

minutes I was in there in that chair with my hands over my eyes trying to get it to go away, trying to not be there again. And then listening to you got me so angry. I kicked and kicked at the door... Then I got so mad I rammed my shoulder into it. Sitting on the floor I realized I didn't like that particular form of pain. I was thinking about what was on the other side – like when you found me in the closet - and I knew I didn't want that pain anymore. I am tired of being a victim. I'm tired of eating take-out with a plastic fork. I'm tired of working... I'm tired of losing women. I'm tired of thinking I can't get any. I'm tired of punching walls and lifting weights and throwing small rackets at blue balls. That's why I finally told someone. I wanted to be.... I just wanted to feel something else... I am... I am so tired of being mad. I'm mad that I still see that day.”

“I see it all the time.”

Christopher stomped on Michael's cast and he cried out in pain. “You are a piece of work, you know that?” Christopher turned to Harry. “Why don't you take your sick friend - if that is what he is to you – and get him out of here?”

He turned into the office and closed the door. “If you're still out there in five minutes, I'm calling the cops.”

Harry and Mae grabbed Michael and led him out hobbling.

Mae sat with Michael on a bench near the curb as Harry walked quickly to get the car.

“Should we take you to get your foot looked at?” she asked.

Michael shook his head.

“He might have made it worse.”

“He did.”

“So we should...”

“What are they going to do – put on another cast?”

“Just wish there was....”

“I’ll be all right.”

Harry helped Michael to the back seat. In the passenger side, Mae looked blankly at the entrance to the food court.

As they drove to Harry’s, Michael watched the buildings pass. People on the street were blurs and cars were blobs of shiny color. Michael closed his eyes.

“I’m so sorry, Mae. I never thought....” Harry said.

“How could you know? It was a coincidence.” Mae turned to the window. “What do we do with him?”

“I don’t know.”

Into the evening, they ate sandwiches and watched the Braves and the Astros in silence. After the Braves batted in the sixth inning, Mae stood to leave. “I’ll come by in the morning, if that is okay?”

Michael nodded. When Mae opened the door, Michael muted the television.

“Hey, Mae.”

“Yeah?”

“I wanted to say I am sorry. For today. It didn’t have to happen. I should have listened...”

“It’s okay.”

“You were trying to get me to leave and I...”

“I just wanted to save you from...”

“I know. And I am sorry, too, for the rest of it. All of it. You didn’t deserve...”

“I know.”

“I should have told...”

“It’s all right. It doesn’t matter now. It’s in the past like everything else.”

Harry and Michael watched the Braves endure an extra-inning loss. After Harry blackened the set, he helped Michael to bed. He looked at Harry from the mattress.

“Sometimes I wonder if I had not become a priest, would I have still done it? Would I still become a pedophile?”

“It was a moment of weakness, a horrible, selfish moment. But you make it out to be the sum of all your life, the one thing that defines you, the unforgiveable sin. And they’re all forgivable, Mike. Breadth and depth and width and all that. Just depends on who you ask.”

“I know.”

Harry stepped into the door.

“Harry.”

“Yeah.”

“Thanks again. For everything.”

“It’s all the vocation I got left to do.”

“Tomorrow will be better.”

“Hey, Mike.”

“Yeah.”

“Were you going to ask?”

“You mean, Christopher?”

“Yes, but then I realized I haven’t done... I haven’t earned my chance.”

“Probably not.”

When Harry left, Michael fell asleep quickly without pain in his leg.

Ex-Ashburn Priest Found Dead

The Chronicle-Herald

July 13, 2009

Michael Donner, the longtime Ashburn priest who resigned this week after confessing to a decades-old sexual assault of a boy, was found dead Wednesday in an Upstate home. He was 63.

The death was ruled accidental, caused when Mr. Donner hit his head on a toilet while shaving, according to the coroner’s report. The coroner noted the former priest suffered from an unknown eye condition that sometimes caused fainting. A friend he was staying with found him, the coroner said.

Prosecutors in Charleston, where Mr. Donner was arrested Saturday, said the victim was notified.