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A PARTICULAR PROVIDENCE: LINKED TALES OF STORMS FINDING DISTRESSED FAMILY TREES

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DISTRESSED FAMILY TREES

JAMES J. MAGEE

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*I say that we are wound
With mercy round and round
As if with air.*

-Gerard Manley Hopkins

In memory of my grandparents

Patrick Joseph Hickey and
Mary Mitchell Bunce

James Joseph Magee and
Mary Elizabeth Driscoll

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A Keeper

Our caravan reached Feakle in great form. My grandparents, parents, and I approached from Shannon Airport, while my British beau Clive ferried to Dublin and was driving west to join us. Since my family had regularly visited our homestead, this last leg of our journey was a jaunty excursion. Clive, however, was traversing Ireland for the first time, and became resolutely lost. It was 1989, and he did not have a GPS.

In Limerick City he found himself on O'Connell Avenue for the third time. The two pervious times he had exited this four lane thoroughfare by turning right. Now, at that cloven intersection, he was determined to turn left. Focused on the traffic light, Clive was oblivious to the elderly woman who started speaking to him through the open window,

“Your signal shows you are turning left, young man.”

“I certainly am!”

“Ah, that would be a terrible shame, since this is a one-way street against you.”

“Thank you, mam. Can you help me? I am desperatè to get to Feakle, and I am so lost.”

“Oh, we can manage that handily. Simply follow these directions. First, stay calm. You are at a bus stop right now, and one is about to pull in. We'll only take a moment. Second, at this very intersection you do need to turn right, then proceed straight for three blocks, and finally turn left on to the road to Ennis.”

“But I’m in the extreme left lane with three busy lanes to my right.”

“That’s exactly the case. So, put on your right signal, honk three times, and be sure to make eye contact with the other drivers. They’ll let you cut across before they start.”

“He shouted his thanks, and pulled out to the right, waving to the other drivers and tooting away without incident. All the while, Clive reports he was thinking,

“In London traffic she could never give that advice about crossing lanes.”

After negotiating Ennis, he entered upon hedge haunted roads that brought him, in his words, “to the back of beyond somewhere near the Hartnett home.” He had no idea how to proceed until he spotted a native,

“Can you help me; I’m looking for the Hartnett family?”

To which he replied,

“And why would you be wanting to visit them?”

Clive explained that the family was gathering to celebrate my graduation from university.

“Sure then, there’s a nest of Hartnetts on the left down the road.”

“Nest?”

When Clive finally arrived, we were having tea with an empty chair at the table reserved for him. First, of course, I made the rounds, beginning with our hosts, and introduced him to all the family. He had arrived exhausted, and the unbounded conversations with each of us in turn collapsed him at his place. He dealt swiftly with the home

made apple pie with heavy cream and with the poached salmon, and then lingered with the brown bread and cold cuts. He did not rise until hours later, though, since my grandmother raised many genealogical questions about his family, the Irish wanted the details of his cross-country travails, and everyone wanted to tease him about making medical appointments once he had his degree.

My graduation was far from my first visit to the Hartnett homestead. Every seven years my parents received sabbaticals for two semesters to conduct their research about the Irish Travellers. (A second “l” is used in Ireland). During those sabbaticals I lived with my half-uncle Patrick and aunt Margaret here, and attended local schools. Uncle Patrick was our grandfather Colum’s last child, born with an under-bite that lent him a tough guy grimace wholly at odds with his gentle personality, a dissonance that endeared him to me all the more.

My experiences in Irish schools were similar to those I expect my class would have provided for an Irish student in our school. In Ireland classmates referred to me most often as “the Yank,” and belittled me for my American pronunciation, my ignorance of the current slang, and the heightened volume of my voice. Then, during my second stay, one clique of boys in my class spoke to me in snide and raunchy asides, while others acted in a kind, helpful manner that incited the envy of the other girls. I kept remembering that mine was a time limited stay, and tried to be a good friend and an attentive student.

During each visit I reluctantly honored my father's insistence that I not bring up my disappointment with the memorial at the family gravesite. When my father's mother Bridget died, her husband Colum omitted her name from the monument, but later inscribed the name of his second wife Nicola along with his own name. In the end, he was buried between both women, and for years I complained to my father that omitting Bridget's name was unfair to her memory. His reply was the same each time,

“Dorothy, I don't think either of my brothers or I have any understanding about our father's inner world where Bridget's death is concerned. He kept it to himself, even to the point of never speaking to us about our mother after she died. In any case, this is how my father wanted the memorial, and I will not cross him.”

Our mother's dissertation and her articles in professional journals about the American Travelers led to contacts with Ireland's professional associations concerned with the Irish Travellers' quality of life. On two occasions she flew to consult with faculty at University College Dublin, and now she had a one year position as a visiting professor in the School of Public Health and Population Science. Our father stayed behind a few months to complete and defend his own Social Work dissertation concerning services for the aging homeless. After he joined our mother, he volunteered to be a member of both Ireland's Commission on Itinerancy and The Travelling People Review Body. Then he drew upon his experience on these bodies to obtain part-time employment in the national Department of Health and Children.

During her second sabbatical, mother's research pointed out how mechanization during the preceding decade had created radical changes in Irish agriculture. The Travellers who provided farm labor became expendable, leading to settlements of their caravans in cities and political uproar about absorbing them into the common population. After the large cluster of Travellers in Galway City suffered vigilante attacks in 1969, Bishop Eamon Casey reminded his flock of their "Christian duty" to settle the Travellers, offered diocesan land for building half-way houses, and allowed priests to live in the Travellers' encampments.

Then Ireland turned upside down. Reports surfaced across the country about fifty years of clergy and religious brothers sexually abusing thousands of children in parishes and schools. Bishop Casey himself had to resign when the news spread that he was the father of a teenage son. The Irish government established a commission that investigated abuse in church sponsored industrial and reformatory schools, and then broadcast its devastating findings. The Dublin archdiocese admitted that it concealed from parishioners a staggering list of pedophilic priests who remained free to prey on them. The scandals preempted the public's attention, and tempered the concern given to issues with the Travellers.

I am celebrating my graduation from Cambridge University as an archaeology major. In high school I had informed my parents that I would suffocate as a student at the college where they were teaching, even though the college would waive my tuition because of their faculty

status. When I told this to my maternal grandparents as well, they responded that their graduation present for me would be a full four year scholarship to the university most renowned for the major I chose. When I told them that that would be Cambridge University, England, they replied,

“Your parents agreeing, it’s a deal! At least you will be researching dead people, rather than those dreadful Travellers who beleaguered us in Kerry.” Though she was born in America, grandmother regularly crossed the Atlantic with her family’s prejudices intact. In fact, my parents, who named me after Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker houses serving the homeless, never told these specifics to Dorcas, my grandmother. She has a penchant for the names of early martyrs, and thinks that I am named to honor Saint Dorothea of Caesarae killed under Emperor Diocletian.

Again thanks to my grandparents, I am continuing at Cambridge for my doctorate. No less significant, I met Clive, a pre-med student, here a year ago. He rents a first floor apartment with its own entrance in a large rooming house, and after Cambridge admitted him to its medical school, he kept the same accommodations. I had greeted his landlady several times, so I was not surprised when she stopped me one day. Only this time she wanted to confide,

“I have observed what a lovely couple you make, and I want to tell you that Clive is one in a million, a keeper for sure. You may have noticed that all my other tenants are women. I wouldn’t be surprised if he hasn’t. After his classes, he studies for hours and hours every night! You are his only diversion. Dorothy, all these

women support themselves as prostitutes, and evenings carry on their profession in this house. I wanted you to know that Clive has been oblivious. If you want to repeat our conversation to him, I recommend that you wait until he has finished his term.”

I knew he was earnest about medicine, and happily I can report he seems no less devoted to me. I decided not to say anything to Clive. With his outstanding grades, there was nothing to gain by rocking the boat.

Before our family gathered for a second day of celebration, Clive and I visited the family gravesite where I explained how the monument excluded my grandmother’s name. I saw, though, that he had already been distracted by the parish priest who was concluding a burial service nearby.

“Speaking of monuments, I want to ask the priest if can tell me about the person buried in the cemetery’s only mausoleum.”

With a whimsical smile, the priest shared that the deceased was a devout parishioner who was terrified that, were he buried under ground, he might not hear Gabriel’s trumpet.

The exchange prompted Clive to confide in me,

“Like that poor chap, Dorothy, the Irish certainly have escapist imagery about death. I’m familiar with the Irish expression when a person dies, ‘Sure, he got away.’ They clearly see death as a release from ‘this vale of tears’.”

“Whoa, Clive, think through what you are saying. The centuries-long oppression and starvation the English imposed upon them account for many of those ‘tears’.”

“Of course, Dorothy, your point is well taken, and I stand corrected. In fact, I can remember a decade ago travelling through Ireland as tourists with my English aunts. The bus driver used an amplifier to point out the English massacres of Irish rebels that had occurred at several sites we were passing. After the fourth such description, one aunt rose from her seat to announce,

“‘We want you to know that we are terribly sorry about all this.’ The other tourists gave her a hand for her candidness.

“Dorothy, this visit keeps showing me how little I know about your family. Should I be apprehensive about what I may find out? I can already tell you from my pre-med pathology courses, though, that Patrick’s under-bite is likely a birth defect known as Crouzon syndrome, and Colum’s age at the time of conception may be the cause. Since I had read this much, I wanted to study him up close, but Patrick is so engaging and knowledgeable that, instead, I simply enjoyed being in his company.”

“Clive, the Hartnetts are written large. Our virtues are our faults overturned. The men dance stiffly around authority: a few lead, more follow, and others fruitlessly attempt to alter the rhythm. The women, on the other hand, are executive and supportive. The adults so consistently model caring and outreach that, growing up, we children periodically had to surface for air to breathe. Are you game for the likes of such a family?”

“It sounds as though I may need to get in shape first by listening to what they may not be sharing! By the way, the bus driver I mentioned had none of those problems with authority that you say afflict your menfolk. He pulled over to a pub one day for lunch. Trying to bedevil him, since he seemed to know perfectly what he was doing, I asked what the single yellow line across the way meant. He answered, ‘It means you can’t park there atall.’ And what do the double yellow lines the bus is now straddling mean? He smiled, looking me in the eye, and said, ‘They mean that you can’t park here atall, atall!’ No rigidity there.”

“Clive, I love your humor, and, especially, your progress from a clinical to a personal relationship with uncle Patrick. Keep it up, you should do fine with our family.”

DORC AND DEN

I arranged my schedule so that I have no classes before eleven on Friday mornings. I am a doctoral student at NYU in Education, and my residence hall almost nudges Washington Square Park here in Greenwich Village. So, it is a simple matter for me to arrive by eight at the park's south-west corner where the built-in outdoor chess tables are located to set up pieces on an inlaid chess board. Prepared with my thermos and hard boiled eggs, I await my first opponent. The unkempt men idling around are not intimidating because the city police and the security officers from both NYU and the Department of Parks are all on patrol.

Early on these mornings a fellow sounding very Irish, scrambled by to attend early mass at nearby St. Joseph's. He looked about thirty, perhaps two inches taller than me, with an aquiline nose and curly, dark hair. On his way back, he would dawdle for a few minutes as I played, and after several weeks, he inquired if I win all my games.

“Just about; I was the Louisiana state champion.”

He introduced himself as Michael Hartnett, and after I replied that I was Annie (Anastasia) McGuirk, he inquired,

“I was wondering whether the months of residence hall living might have whetted your appetite for a sumptuous home cooked dinner. How does this sound to you? Perhaps we could go out next Friday evening, and you could tell me your favorite dishes. I'll tell my brothers

I'm preparing a special meal, that you are my guest, and we can all enjoy it the Saturday evening of the following week.”

I accepted his invitation, and as scheduled, Michael escorted me to Brendan's apartment, where he also lives, for a grand evening of family stories. The apartment is on the third floor of a four story walk-up. One of the other three apartments on their floor is the home of a retiree who spends hours each day on his outboard catching and gutting fish and sharing his catch with his neighbors. The accountant in the next apartment shows his gratitude by doing the fisherman's taxes at no charge. In the final apartment a retired office manager types for private clients. One day as I was arriving home, she showed me an erudite paper she was typing about Henry of Ostia. In the fourteenth century he wrote about the tensions between ecclesial and secular powers. Though I have no interest in the topic, I did help by pointing out that there is only one “n” in canon, i.e. ecclesial, law. I laughed, though, when I told her,

“Those who were excommunicated for violating canon law, of course, undoubtedly described the experience as closer to ‘cannon law’!”

For Michael's dinner Sean, a middle brother and Charlie a cousin also came, completing the bachelor wedge of family members who emigrated to New York. I had so much fun, enjoying their intelligence, wit, and ready ease with me, and even though I have no siblings, I was comfortable as they drew me into their banter. Eventually they inquired about my reasons for leaving my home and

career in New Orleans where I had taught the sixth grade in a parochial school.

“In 1962, Archbishop Joseph Rommel ended racial segregation in the Catholic schools of the diocese. I felt vindicated because I had been arguing at diocesan faculty meetings that the schools should integrate. Finally, Rommel excommunicated the parties involved when three schools actively resisted integration. At that point, several of my opponents made threatening phone calls, and even spray painted my house with graffiti. NYU has been my opportunity out of New Orleans, and my degree will be the leverage I need to make a difference for the future.”

Ten months after this first meal, Michael and I told his brothers we were soon to be engaged. So, the time had come to prepare them for meeting my parents who were flying up for the engagement party. I had called my parents with our news only the night before, and I was still staggering under my mother’s fusillade of accusations. I had “ungratefully slighted” my parents, and discarded the opportunity to receive their caring advice by keeping my relationship with Michael from them. Not only had I prevented her from hosting a society headlined Engagement Gala in New Orleans, but now she would have to fabricate some tale about her difficulties keeping this news a secret after supposedly meeting Michael, not now, but months ago.

My father Dennis is a gentle, unassuming man, while my mother Dorcas can be a challenge, a high-profile woman who presides over relationships before her gloves are off. To be comfortable in her company, I frequently

have to recall that her off-putting manner is a strategy for surviving her own caustic personal history. I should confess too that her style also distracts me from her many inconspicuous, heartfelt acts of generosity.

Dorcas, for instance, overheard a conversation at one of the funeral parlors Dennis owns. A father had died with huge bills unpaid, his widow was virtually catatonically traumatized, and the adult children were busy living out the next chapter of their sibling rivalries. The first born daughter was beginning her doctoral dissertation concerning the etymology of the idioms used in a seventeenth century Russian epic. She needed at this point to make her own microfilmed copy of the extensive text held in the Yale University library's rare book collection. In private conversations with this daughter, Dorcas learned that the student was pennies away from penury, the epic was one hundred and five pages long, and the time the student could invest in microfilming was limited by her need to support herself. Accordingly, Dorcas paid the expenses for them both to visit Yale, and hers is the anonymous thumb holding down the pages that the student microfilmed. Finally, she provided a no interest loan so the daughter could postpone employment for a year. Dennis and I alone know about this.

Dorcas's father Declan O'Brien emigrated from Kerry to New Orleans in 1895, survived malaria, and worked on bolstering Lake Pontchartrain's back levee. Then, following the 1927 flooding of New Orleans, he supervised the job of exploding thirty tons of dynamite to destroy the levees down river to lower the Mississippi's

level. Only then did he meet my grandmother Phoebe Walsh who had escaped from Clare Morris, County Mayo, as an unwanted marriage was being arranged for her. She was living in New Orleans with a cousin who also employed her as a seamstress in her dress-making parlor.

Daniel's marriage to Phoebe was more problematic than the levees. Our family lore records that they had had a tiff only a few days before his birthday. He had hinted that he wanted new suspenders, and while she was ironing in the kitchen, he also sat there sewing to reinforce the buttons on his pants that these suspenders required. They did not speak, he finished his sewing, and on his birthday she presented him with clip-on suspenders that needed no buttons.

Grandmother was the first born sister of seven brothers, and when she married, she informed grandpa that she no longer washed men's socks and that smoking was limited to the basement. According to the story Dorcas told, one evening grandpa arrived home to find that his wife had purchased a piano for the drawing room. When she confirmed this, grandpa and she became verbally combative, after which the piano stayed. When Dorcas asked her mother why she did not discuss such purchases first with grandpa, she replied, "What, and have two fights?"

Phoebe's parents had all their children baptized with the Greek or Latinized names of first generation Christians. Phoebe appreciated that her name distinguished her in any group, leaving her the exclusive Phoebe in the Ladies' Catholic Benevolent Association. The LCBA

provided her with monthly evenings out to attend meetings at which the members socialized while they reported their sale of the association's insurance policies, paid their dues, and sponsored charitable causes. There was also a week long annual convention located at a resort location. Wondrously, the LCBA chose New Orleans as the convention site for the year in which Phoebe also happened to be the chairwoman of the local chapter. She knew she would be on the podium a great deal.

Grandmother had thick, wavy, auburn hair in which some wayward gray hairs were beginning to appear. Like her parents, she borrowed from the earliest Christians the name Dorcas for her only child. She had generously endowed Dorcas with the identical auburn hair worn in a single coil to her waist. Dorcas was sixteen at the time when Phoebe used her shears to cut the coil and wear it as a fall to the convention. When Dorcas sobbed,

“Stop, mama, it's my head! You're stealing what's mine!”

Phoebe retorted,

“I'll tell you what's yours, those brown eyes in our blue eyed family and those poorly aligned freckles on your cheeks.”

Fortunately, under these assaults, Dorcas was able to glean some resilience from a conversation she had had at age fourteen with her algebra teacher Sister Jeanne. The nun had noticed how demoralized Dorcas appeared in class one day, and stayed alone with her afterwards. As part of a larger imbroglio Dorcas was having with her mother, she

mentioned the criticisms of her eye color and freckles. Sister Jeanne was not intimidated, and encouraged Dorcas,

“The characteristics ascribed to us at birth don’t matter. They’re simply how we come. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph had brown eyes, and I’m sure the Holy Family didn’t even think about it. As for your “freckles,” they are ill named. Think of them, rather, as ‘Sun Kisses!’ What does matter is what you can do to benefit others. For instance, since you know how it is to feel ‘not good enough,’ you may be gifted at spotting when others are feeling that same way. Then, perhaps you can support them in whatever ways occur to you.”

My mother told me how often she has drawn both personal “sturdiness” and openness to others from that conversation. Dorcas majored, for instance, in economics and administration with the goal of working for a non-profit organization. At the same time, I could see that Phoebe’s spirit lurked no less behind her public presence of superiority. For instance, when a sorority sister called her “Dorc,” she pointedly replied,

“My name is Dorcas, or you can use its Aramaic equivalent, Tabitha, the name with which St. Peter addressed me when he raised me from the dead.”

She repeated this correction until she was never “Dorc-ed” to her face again.

After graduating fourth in her class, chair of Student Volunteer Services, and sorority liaison with member-named SPIC (Spanish Students in College), Dorcas began her first position as an administrative assistant at a guidance center. Only a month later however, her mother

died from a second stroke. The initial stroke had left Phoebe furious when she could not recover words to express herself, or when she steered her walker into pieces of furniture. One morning Phoebe entered the kitchen undressed.

“Mother,” Dorcas shouted! “Get clothes on right now; the gardener is outside!”

Her mother glowered, “Don’t you ever raise your voice to me like that again!”

Then, she slowly returned to her bedroom. When Dorcas knocked thirty minutes later, Phoebe had already died.

When Dorcas accompanied her infirm father to The McGuirk Funeral Parlor to make arrangements, she met Dennis who was his father’s junior partner. Dennis had never met a young person capable of making so many decisions this executively. He noticed too how her galaxy of freckles seemed to reassemble when she smiled, an apparent courtesy to her lush auburn hair. After allowing an appropriate time for her to mourn, he intended to follow up this business contact with a social occasion.

He would first, however, have to manage a mystifying crisis. Three weeks before Phoebe’s funeral, McGuirk’s held the funeral of a young man killed in a motorcycle accident. He had been the childhood friend two brothers, now freshmen in college. They arrived at McGuirk’s in their own car, but left for the cemetery in the car of a cousin who would return so they could pick up their own. Before leaving the second time, though, they entered inconspicuously to use the men’s room. As they

entered, Dennis was absorbed in opening a freight elevator's door. He was inserting a two foot rod into a hole at the top, and then concealing the rod on a hook behind nearby drapes. The door consisted of two panels that opened when the user raised the top panel and the lower panel simultaneously dropped to the floor. The elevator enabled the employees to descend with the body for viewing after it had been prepared in the laboratory on the second floor. Fastened to the unusual door panels was the modest sign, "Not for mourners' use." The two brothers were no sooner back in their car than they began plotting their ultimate practical joke, "Ghouls Don't Rest".

Back at college, they bought an audiotape, forty-five minutes per side, and left the first fifteen minutes blank. Then, in haunting, screaming, hollow, and maniacal voices they recorded,

"I am still alive; stop injecting me! I can't see now; give me back my eyes! I won't forget this; I'll follow you forever! Ooo, we're waiting for you; there's no escape!" This went on for the remaining thirty minutes of the tape.

They waited three weeks before returning so that no one would remember them. This time the wake for Dorcas's mother was in session, and the staff and mourners were clustered by the viewing room. No one paid any mind to the two youths who out of the way quietly used the rod to open the panels. The elevator was there, and the brothers put the recorder's volume on high, relocked the panels, and secreted the rod in the sleeve of a top coat. They abandoned the rod in the parking lot, and had a

comfortable quarter hour to escape before the recording began.

The prank achieved chaos! The shrieks flooded the mourners with terror and the staff with horror at the panic the racket was causing. While many mourners were fleeing the premises, Dorcas remained seated next to her father, assuring him that the funeral director would find the source of the confusion and explain it to them. When he seemed mollified, Dorcas began a private conversation with her deceased mother.

“I expected you to manage something flamboyant at your funeral, but this travesty is not your style. Perhaps you’ll be an apparition in the incense at mass. In any case, kindly prevent my rancor toward you from infiltrating my relationships with others still alive.”

The staff located the source of the sounds, but found that the rod was missing. Dennis had to scurry through a back staircase to the second floor where he purloined the laboratory’s rod to open the panels and turn off the recorder. Then he sat with his father in the office where they agreed that, in the face of such a grievous episode, they would provide the funeral at no charge. They invited Dorcas and her father to the office, showing them the recorder and reviewing the inexplicable prank, and asked if their proposal to cancel the cost of the funeral would be acceptable to them. In doing all this, Dennis made a profound impression on Dorcas which was to deepen still further. The prank and its resolution made the newspapers.

The brothers, of course, riding this notoriety, boasted to their friends how they masterminded the prank.

Once the police learned the facts, the chief met with the McGuirks to see if they wanted to press charges. They did not, but they wrote to the boys' parents, asking to meet with them. The evidence horrified the parents who offered to pay the cost of the funeral. The McGuirks agreed to a monthly repayment plan without interest, and explained that they wanted to meet their sons, secure a written apology for Dorcas and her father, and have them complete one hundred hours each of community service. The parents agreed, and thanked the McGuirks.

When the brothers shamefacedly arrived, Dennis and his father played the videotapes of the bereaved relatives and friends huddled, mystified, cringing, and sobbing. The brothers noted,

“And it was an expensive mistake, too.”

“Yes, but it is more important that you make up for the pain you caused these innocent people. You may not be able do it for them directly, but you have a responsibility now and in the future to respond to other opportunities to ease people's pain.”

The brothers followed through. They sent the McGuirks a copy of their letters to Dorcas and her father. They followed Dorcas's recommendation about the setting for completing their community service. Best of all, when Dennis was opening his fifth mortuary years later, the brothers sent Dennis a card wishing him well and noting,

“We have been trying to follow your advice. One of us has become an immigration lawyer and the other a public defender.”

Despite the inauspicious beginning of their courtship, Dennis wooed Dorcas with his attentiveness and wry good humor. She appreciated the esteem he had for his parents. They had let him decide upon his choice of careers, but were delighted at his enthusiasm to follow his dad's. His father had begun with a modest mortuary practice which he expanded with his innovations. He used his early income to purchase a fleet of distinctive white limousines, a color, he pointed out to mourners symbolic of the deceased's spiritual abode. Of course, he also rented out his limousines for weddings and graduations.

Dorcas enjoyed, too, the way Dennis laughed at himself. He told the story about his father enhancing the entrance to the funeral home by installing an impressive chandelier in the lobby. Dennis thought the installation should be brighter, and had the staff replace the forty watt bulbs with sixty watt bulbs. Beneath the fixture a round mahogany table held an array of business cards and brochures. The heat from the more powerful bulbs, however, snapped the thin wires that held the crystal pendants of the chandelier, and five of them tattooed the leather tabletop. Thankfully, no one was pierced, and Dennis brought the table unrepaired to his office as an object lesson not act unilaterally.

After their two year courtship, they married in St. Charles Cathedral with Archbishop Rommel presiding at the high mass. Dennis especially appreciated the shimmering tone of the organ that his family had anonymously refurbished. For years Dennis had been an inconspicuously generous donor to several charities in

New Orleans, to the archdiocese's agencies and building funds, and to overseas missionaries. Dorcas joined him in this philanthropy by proposing an expanded list of recipients and volunteering to serve as chairwoman of fund raising dinners.

Only a year later Dorcas's father died from lung cancer. For Dorcas there was no rancor this time. Rather, at the funeral a socially prominent friend took Dorcas aside to point out that Dennis and Dorcas both had the professional distinction and record of service to the Church that should qualify them for membership in the Order of Malta. The Order is a philanthropic organization of prominent lay Catholics that requires two members to sponsor an applicant seeking investiture. Then the applicant completes a year of formation performing service projects for the Order. Once invested, men are "Knights of Malta" and women "Dames of Malta."

Dorcas conferred with Dennis who agreed that the Order could channel and amplify their philanthropy. The friend arranged for the required sponsors. Then, during the year of formation, Dennis both inaugurated a policy of providing funerals for the diocese's priests and religious at cost, and underwrote the expenses of a high school equivalency program at the city prison. Dorcas sponsored country club luncheons that raised one thousand dollar scholarships for New Orleans students accepted for a semester of study abroad, but could not afford to attend. She also arranged for McGuirk's to be a silent donor to The Black Funeral Directors Alliance that subsidized funerals for the city's black poor.

Now the fragile moment is at hand when my parents are going to meet Michael and his brothers. Michael and I devoted the day to following multiple recipes for a feast, while the older brothers' efforts at tidying and polishing had the apartment looking welcoming and comfortable. Michael and I were already at the gates when my parents landed at Kennedy. While the two men were gathering the luggage, mother and I were idling by a rack of phones and chatting about their flight. A young woman, unaware that others could not avoid overhearing her, was lamenting into the phone,

“You decided not to come, but not tell me! I’ve been cooling my heels because you decided on your own that it’s over between us! (Sobbing) I’m just to carry on like nothing’s happened?”

I apprehensively watched as Dorcas swelled into her dramaturgical role, snatched the phone away, and lambasted the no-show,

“Listen, you cad, you coward, go sit in a highchair until you grow up. You don’t deserve this woman, and you’re going to rue your idiocy the rest of your life. A real man should knock some sense into you.”

The caller stood there mouth agape, then blushed as she nodded, and fled. I was about to agonize, “How could you butt in, mother,” but, instead, I kept quiet and let Dorcas explain to the returning men how she provided “a cathartic release” for the caller.

Because Michael knew the side streets, we soon arrived at the apartment Brendan generously shared with him. Dorcas promptly began “the third degree,” pinning

Michael with questions about his brothers. She no sooner learned that Brendan dug graves than, struggling for command of her face, she sequestered everyone in the apartment's parking lot to explain the problem his employment was causing her. She would have to reframe the nature of his work for the guests at our wedding reception. Accordingly, she stipulated,

“Should anyone ask, Brendan is “an excavation engineer,” and to curtail contact with the guests, Sean and he should be seated at the table set aside for your father and me. I’m sure, Anastasia, that Sean would be delighted to be the best man.”

“Mother, Michael and I have already asked Brendan to serve as best man. He is the oldest brother, and Michael has lived with him since he was ten. Sean will be an usher.”

“Oh, Anastasia, you do complicate matters unnecessarily!”

While they waited for Brendan and Sean, Michael made Dennis comfortable in the living room. Dorcas wanted to mix some fruits in the kitchen into a *mélange*. When the brothers rang the bell, however, she was on the kitchen phone. As the introductions were going around, Dorcas flounced in, apologizing that an important phone call tied her up.

“I hope everything is all right, mother.”

“Yes, yes, dear. But I did have to assist Sunsweet Prunes with its marketing. You see, while I was completing my *mélange*, I noticed an error on the container, and called the number they supplied. I quoted

the error, ‘We believe making good food choices are critical to treating your body...,’ and directed them to correct the ‘are’ to ‘is’.”

Sean observed,

“I hope that Sunsweet thanked you.”

“They did, but without the enthusiasm I would have expected for the trouble I saved them. Please excuse me while I bring out the hors d’oeuvres I’ve almost finished.” When she finally returned, Dennis and Brendan were discussing the durability of various coffins. Dorcas intervened,

“Oh, Dennis, please don’t talk shop at this grand occasion.”

I tried to rescue the moment by talking about the support the brothers patiently offer when I tell them about challenges confronting me in my research. I explained to my parents that I am examining the differences in children’s education among the Travelers’ extended families in South Carolina, Mississippi, and Texas. These American Travelers are the descendants of Irish Travelers who emigrated to New York City during the Great Famine and worked their way south.

While my father held eye contact and slightly nodded at me, mother dismissed my topic,

“Oh, we’ve had our fill of Travelers already. The Irish newspapers report that half of them die before age forty, with three fourths of the men unemployed, and three fifths of the women. I recall how my parents originally used the term ‘nackers’ for them, referring to their horse

trading at Irish fairs and transporting older horses to slaughter.”

Undeterred, I brought up that in New Orleans I had met members from the Mississippi contingent, but the inspiration for my research occurred when I was visiting a hospitalized cousin in Atlanta. The leader of the South Carolina Travelers was a patient there also, and his followers filled the parking lot, the open spaces on the first floor, both sides of the hallway outside his room, and whatever waiting and examination rooms happened to be unlocked. They were among the three thousand Travelers who had their home base in Murphy Village, South Carolina.

Like their ancestors in Ireland, these Travelers lived mostly on the road, seeking door-to-door employment painting barns, paving driveways, laying down linoleum rugs, and making home repairs. Most of the year extended families drove their pick-ups throughout the South, and during the winter returned to Murphy Village and made shorter forays for work. I estimated that ninety percent were hardworking citizens. The others, known as “yonks,” were criminals whose reputations unfortunately stereotyped the Travelers in general. Some would steal valuables from older customers for whom they were making home repairs. Others painted so shoddily that the coat came off in the first rainfall. All payments were in cash only, so redress was difficult to come by. Here among my fellow Southerners was a marginalized group whose children rarely continued beyond the eighth grade, and I

knew scarcely anything about them. My dissertation would change that.

When my mother and I were alone in the kitchen later, she informed me how my nickname and entire educational venture disappointed her.

“You are our only child, and, recalling how your great-grandparents’ began our family custom of using early Christian names, we baptized you Anastasia who was martyred under Diocletian. But you have settled to be called Annie! The shame of it! You know your father has not paid for your private school education through university so that you would end up teaching in a grammar school and then wasting a graduate education by studying the worst kinds of people. If you are interested in studying ‘losers,’ there are plenty of crazy folk in New Orleans to observe, and some fine psychiatrists around to marry!”

There it was out in the open! Even at my own engagement party, she criticized my choice of fiancé because he was not in a prestigious career. I held my ground, and suggested that Michael could undoubtedly help her to manage *her* prejudices, but I knew that she regarded Michael’s impending Master’s Degree in Social Work as preparation for a second tier profession.

After enjoying the aromatic supper we had prepared, everyone was relaxing with a cordial. In this mood, Dorcas saw no harm in saying to Sean,

“I’m sure that your career on the police force has provided several exciting, even dangerous, encounters for you.”

“It was more exciting,” he replied, “when I was a cop on the beat, but now that I’m a lieutenant, I am more involved in supervising the performance of my officers. For instance, I assigned a female officer to play a prostitute in ‘Operation Losing Proposition’. Whenever a male drove up and arranged for her services, an unmarked police car suddenly blocked his car and the driver was arrested. The last driver arrested, however, was an off-duty policeman from another precinct, and my officers wanted him released. When I refused, the cops took out their frustration on their female colleague to the point of smearing feces in her locker.

“She came to me for redress. After morning roll call I asked the men assembled to help me with a puzzle:

‘An officer has successfully performed her assignment, but instead of receiving congratulations, she is being harassed. I made the decision about how to proceed with the john, and anyone who has a problem with it should see me, not the arresting officer. In any case, I know the harassment has ended.’ At that moment it did.”

While dad was exclaiming, “Well done, Sean,” I saw that mother had not anticipated so graphic an account. Prostitution as the topic caused her to squirm, and at “feces” she gulped down her entire drink.

Two weeks after Michael earned his degree, we were wed in New Orleans with Rommel’s successor, Archbishop John Cody, presiding, as my parents had arranged. More guests than mother would have liked discovered that Brendan and Sean were stunning raconteurs. A cadre of listeners and story tellers gathered

around them most of the evening, and standing closest for the give-and-take was my father.

Nonetheless, my mother never appeared more radiant and sublime. She progressed from table to table, attentive and gracious. With my parents' investitures in the Sovereign Military Order of Malta already one week old, the invitations from the bride's family had read:

Commander Dennis Michael McGuirk
Knight of the Order of Malta
and
Dame Dorcas Walsh McGuirk
Dame of the Order of Malta
Announce the Wedding of their Daughter
Ms. Anastasia Lydia McGuirk
to
Mr. Michael Martin Hartnett
at
Saint Charles Cathedral
Archbishop John Cody Presiding
Eleven O'Clock High Mass

After the celebrations were over, Dennis requested to be addressed simply as Dennis. Dorcas, to put people at their ease, pleaded that they put "Dame Dorcas" aside and address her simply as D.D.

The Geisha and the Bar

In my earliest memory of accompanying my mum Kathleen on her monthly visits to Aunt Bridget and Uncle Colum Hartnett's cottage in Feakle, County Clare, I am about five years old. Fortunately for us two days of rain had dissipated the stench from the recently tarred road we followed for our hour's cart ride. After spreading the ooze, the work crew laminated the surface with gravel, enabling us for a few months to escape the jarring that the aged wheel ruts usually caused.

The two women are devoted sisters and Irish twins born ten months apart. My mother is the older, slightly taller and heavier, with flaxen hair while Aunt Bridget's is more chestnut. Since I have no siblings, mum took me along to play with my cousins Brendan, eight, and Sean, three. Later, while we were eating afternoon scones, our mothers spoke with each other about poetry, folklore, and literature. In fact, around this time I began to notice that as we approached the Hartnetts, mum called out atop the cart and her sister answered back. Their greetings were the same each month, as was my aunt's to me,

“Ah, my fine Charlie Sullivan, how are you today?”

I remember bringing up excerpts of their conversation I had overheard, and asking mum to tell me more about their meaning. Then I inquired what Aunt Bridget and she were shouting to each other when they met. She explained,

“Soon I am going to teach you about the stories that a great playwright named Shakespeare wrote. In one of the stories a king named Duncan sees a castle he is about to visit. I pretend that the Hartnetts’ cottage is that castle, and I call out to Bridget what Duncan says, ‘This castle hath a pleasant seat (location).’ Then Bridget replies from her doorway with the rest of Duncan’s words, ‘the air nimbly and sweetly recommends itself unto our gentle senses.’ It’s a whimsical greeting we give each other, because we both love Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets.”

When I told her I had no idea how she came to know all this, she explained,

“While my sister and I had only two years of classroom learning, we lived near a school master for a dozen more. He could see that our mother was priming us as best she could, and he befriended us. In return, our parents kept him in milk and butter.”

On this visit, while we were playing hide-and-seek in the field, Brendan told me that his mother was going to have another baby in about six months. During our visits after that, I noticed that the infant crib was being set up in the parents’ bedroom. Then, mum and dad told me one evening during dinner, that Aunt Bridget had had a baby named Michael. Tragically, giving birth was more than her long-time heart condition could tolerate, and she had died.

Our family attended the wake and funeral, though my dad Joseph had to walk home to care for our animals and then return. I knew that the Hartnetts were really hurting, and our own mum did not eat a complete meal for two weeks. She would often be crying at the sink, sobbing

about missing Aunt Bridget and worrying about care for the baby. She had offered to care for Michael, but Uncle Colum said that they would manage.

I lived my first quarter century without another untoward incident, but then our Irish Free State began its war for independence. For several years in my twenties I had been serving as an officer in the unpopular Royal Irish Constabulary, the armed police force of the United Kingdom in Ireland. It was, in fact, a cover for my real identity as a member of the Irish Republican Army. With our independence, however, many citizens were ready to seek revenge against members of the Constabulary. As a quick solution, my captain in the IRA wrote a note for me to carry explaining my real identity, and hoped it would secure me safe passage to a ship for America. I briefly informed my parents, and I recall their parting words,

“Go swiftly to the ship, and if you fall, don’t stop to rise.”

My initial contact in America was with my mum’s second cousin Deidre who lived with her sister Colleen in the Woodlawn neighborhood of the Bronx. The sisters offered their couch until my first paycheck could provide for a room elsewhere. Deidre was stunning, tall, with wavy strawberry blond hair, green-brown eyes, and the smile that won the Winsome Woodlawn pageant. When she passed by the intersection with the three pubs, the regulars would chorus,

“There goes a waft of spring!”

She used her acclaim to ease an introduction for me with Kevin O’Malley, the owner of “Keeping Kool with

Kevin,” a company whose trucks delivered twenty-five pound blocks of ice for customers’ iceboxes. Kevin had me spend a day shadowing the icehouse foreman, learning to use the hooks, tongs, and icepicks to sculpt these smaller blocks from the huge slabs of ice loaded on the trucks. By the day’s end, the foreman assessed me as competent, and Kevin directed me to show up at the icehouse the next morning at four o’clock to load up my truck and get my route. The foreman would also provide me with a leather vest and a piece of sackcloth to cover the shoulder on which I carried the ice from the truck to customers’ iceboxes.

As luck would have it, a new customer, home with a punctured foot, met me at the door two weeks later. In no time he revealed he was Seamus Comisky from O’Callaghan’s Mills, about a dozen miles from our small farm outside Ennis. Now he was a crew chief in Local 293 of the United Cemetery Workers. After Seamus was able to return to work, I asked his wife to pass on a note in which I said,

“I hope I can meet with you to see if I have a shot at joining the union. Please leave an answer with your wife.”

He replied that we should meet at a pub nearby, and the employment interview occurred over a few drinks. In two weeks, I was digging vigorously in Calvary Cemetery in Queens.

Shortly thereafter I was closing a grave near an attending oak tree where two middle aged sisters were walking distractedly back and forth. At Calvary I attend to my work, and do not go out of my way to fraternize with

visitors. On this occasion, though, one of the sisters asked my opinion about the attractiveness of the location. I replied that the cemetery held three million bodies and few were in a more scenic setting.

“O, thank you. The deceased has been a great friend to us, and since he had no family, we arranged for his burial. The cemetery originally buried him in a row of newly dug graves that looked like a gash on the landscape. We couldn’t bear it, and paid the cemetery to reinter his body here.”

When I repeated that she had found a fine location, she conferred with her sister and advised me,

“If you’d like to learn about him at greater length, stop by Max’s Brau House four blocks down from the main gate. My sister and I are the barmaids there.” I thanked her, and said that I passed that location on my way home.

I arrived after work two weeks later to squeeze at the crowded bar rebounding with hilarity and toasts to Lily Rafferty. She is the sister to Rose with whom I had been speaking in the cemetery. I learned that the past Sunday the crusty ancient pastor of the local parish had bemoaned from the pulpit that the rectory housekeeper had retired and he was left struggling to prepare his own meals.

“Is there anyone in the congregation up to replacing her?”

A response spread from the bar where a team of regulars paid Lily to apply, and were giving odds about the number of days she would last until the pastor fired her. For, she was still too attractive to be, paraphrasing

ecclesiastical guidelines, “the sure cure for concupiscence” required to protect the clergy’s chastity. It would only be a matter of time until some stalwart women after mass would share with him their embarrassment about her other employment, and question the propriety of his hiring her. So, reluctantly, because she did cook well, the pastor dismissed her when he learned the facts.

I introduced myself to Rose, praised her for whatever contribution she made to her sister’s rascality, and asked if she would tell me more about her late friend while she filled my stein. Interrupting her story to attend to other customers, she explained,

“Lily and I are originally from Oswego. It’s a city of twenty-eight thousand people on Lake Ontario at the mouth of the Oswego River, a northern terminus for the Barge Canal. Our father, like so many Irish immigrants, had worked the canal moving the barges until he finally settled in Oswego.

“There he worked days as an assistant at the terminal lock, a ‘siphon lock,’ setting the air valves pushing the water in and out. He worked nights as the bartender at Gormley’s Bar and Grill, one of the eighty-two bars in the city, serving workers from the Alcoa Aluminum factory, ship hands, and students, too often underage, from Oswego State Teachers College. When the lock installed a pump in 1943, he became redundant and was let go. All this time our mother worked as the secretary to the superintendent of the public school system. So, using their savings, father bought ownership of the bar in 1944.

“Lily graduated from the college that year, and I was a freshman. The momentous event that year, however, was the preparation and opening of an Emergency Relief Center at the historical Fort Ontario in the city. The purpose of the Center was to meet for the duration of the war the basic needs of nine hundred and eighty-two largely Jewish refugees from Eastern European countries. The Center forcibly held them behind a chain link fence topped with barbed wire that surrounded the fort. One hundred and fifty soldiers patrolled the fence to thwart escapes. No visitors were allowed into the fort, and even American family members could speak with kin only through the fence. At the war’s end, though some chose to return to Europe, most did overcome bureaucratic impediments to achieve some form of temporary or permanent status in United States.

“Lily and I were among the eager volunteers from the city’s churches who used gestures and pantomime to learn what the refugees needed that we could fit through the fence. It was our secret that we also passed on miniature bottles of alcohol. One recipient, a Hungarian jeweler and chronologist, thanked Lucy in French. This Adam Doka, at whose grave site we met you, lifted the language barrier since many of the early settlers of Oswego were French Canadians. We befriended Adam in our own high school level French, and when the Center closed, our family invited him into our household.

“Because our parents did not speak French, at first we translated conversations between them and Adam. Several volunteers, however, tutored him in English until he was

fluent enough, with a delightful accent, to work for an Oswego jeweler. Our parents refused to charge rent, and in less than a year Adam moved the thirty-five miles to Syracuse, a city ten times larger. There he worked for five years, before winning an exclusive position at the Manhattan showroom of the internationally located Harry Winston's Jewelers. Twice a year for the following three years Adam invited us to visit, paying our expenses for hotels and tickets to Broadway shows. Then he purchased a home in Queens, and asked us to allow him to repay our parents' generosity to him by having us live rent free in his new home.

“Ever since Lily and I had tasted the diverse vitality of New York City, Oswego seemed to shrink. On Sunday afternoons we were often the only ones about, save for the few attending the only theater or completing errands. We were both grammar school teachers in Fulton two towns away, and for our own enjoyment worked evenings at our dad's bar. By the conclusion of the school year we handed in our notice that we were resigning. Then, we explained Adam's generosity to our parents, and encouraged them to visit us.

“Once we were in place, Adam offered to pay our tuition to attend graduate school. We thanked him, but postponed that option until we had our ‘sea legs’. So, to earn money of our own from a colorful job with little pressure, we found our current barmaid positions. Within a year's time, however, our positions became a necessity when Adam was diagnosed with stage-four pancreatic cancer. In the few months before he died he finalized his

will, leaving his estate to us. We were able to split our shifts at the Brau House so that one of us was always home to care for Adam. At the end, he shared that he was agnostic about theology, and we could inter him wherever we wished. And you, Charlie, you've been listening without interruption. Tell me about yourself."

"Sure, but before I do, I want to point out that Lily's shenanigans seemed to have prompted several of the fellows here to ask her out."

"There's no chance for them! Lily and I agreed that we won't socialize with customers because we are prisoners here. If a relationship soured, we would be trapped prey at the bar. In any case, now that Adam is gone, Lily is planning to pursue a doctorate in School Administration and Supervision. She'll be too busy to continue here, no less for frolicking."

"And you, Rose, will you be leaving?"

"No time soon; I'm leaving my options open for now."

I felt comfortably spirited with Rose, sharing stories, easing into roles as confidants, all without an encroachment of romance. I started telling her about my constabulary functions back home, my secret IRA affiliation, and the note from my commanding officer.

"That note saved me in Ireland and then in New York City, but here the humidity and heat bullied the docks, and most of the people spoke English so quickly that I understood very little. Even more confounding, I discovered that some of our own were the worst sharks, shilling for land lord predators. Luckily, a cousin in New

York helped me find a job delivering ice. Then I learned that one of my customers was a crew leader at Calvary Cemetery, and he hired me for my grave digger's job.

"I keep to myself on the job, but when I am the closest person at hand, deeply moved kin of the deceased sometimes approach me. This week I buried two retired professors, and in each case the deceased's brother spoke with me. The first seemed to die once his children began harassing him to leave his apartment. In the lobby, a lout had stopped him at knifepoint, and demanded he turn over his wallet. Instead, he looked at the culprit and quoted from Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*,

"It matters not how a man dies, but how he lives. The act of dying is not of importance, it lasts but a moment. A man knows it must be so, and submits."

"Fortunately the perpetrator, stunned in place, responded,

"You all right, mister?" and absented the scene none the richer.

"The other had taught history to no one's surprise. 'At age ten,' I was told, 'he repeated with amusement an anecdote about King George III condescending to Edward Gibbon who was penning *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*,

'Scribble, scribble, scribble, eh, Mister Gibbons!'

"The youngster had already read the three volume set. He accomplished this even though his eyesight was so poor that his draft board later deferred him and he could never drive."

“You’re getting quite an education at your job, Charley,” Rose beamed.

“Well, I’ve always been a reader, and I find that helps me link historical events, but my shovel seems to unearth more familial topics these days. To appreciate them I’d need a background in Sociology. For example, a woman my age turned from her father’s grave and said to me,

““Once he was widowed, he promised me as his youngest daughter that, if I stayed at home with him, he would see to it that my life would be comfortable. Instead, I secretly married, continued to live at home, and revealed my marriage only when my pregnancy began to show. Then we newlyweds moved to our own apartment, and papa took his meals at the Elks Club. He saw to it, one way or another, that he was served his meals.”

“Then there was the young man with the sharp fedora and herringbone top coat whose mother was being buried. He shared,

““My widowed mother died in her fifties after living decades with a rheumatic heart. After an abscessed tooth led to endocarditis, she was living with my younger brother and his family while she recovered. During my visit to her, she took my hand and earnestly pleaded with me never to leave her. Only days before, however, I had quietly filed an application to begin graduate studies in France in ten months’ time. I could not respond affirmatively to my mother’s request, so I looked at her painfully and said nothing. My mother dropped the subject, and died two nights later. I feel so torn, so disloyal.””

“Rose, I tell you that I have no idea how to help them. All I can do is listen, and like this time, I can get as depressed as they are.”

“What a relief these mourners don’t expect more than a caring ear from you,” Rose empathized. While I nodded my agreement, Rose mentioned that often enough customers looked to her as well to provide such an ear.

The following Monday night Rose had a tale for me.

“Our neighbor across the street is Mrs. Russo. She is a widow who maintains her property fastidiously, and gaily greets anyone who passes by when she is sweeping her sidewalk. She has shown some eccentricities, though, that became more colorful each year. She loves opera and sings arias loudly as she plants her front yard, wearing her bathing suit from spring through early autumn. She so fancies Christmas that she keeps a considerably sized crèche assembled on her lawn all year round. Once she painted the trunk of the tree in front of her house fire engine red. No one criticizes her to her face, but neighbors roll their eyes and give her wide berth.

“Eventually, her next door neighbor moved, and sold to a Jewish family, the Pitkins. Within the week some seventh graders from the other end of our street rode their bikes past the Pitkin’s house shouting anti-Semitic curses. It happened a second day as well. On the third day, however, Mrs. Russo was waiting for them, and drenched them with her hose. When their mothers asked what had happened to them, the boys complained that Mrs. Russo had soaked them. The mothers conferred and walked back

to confront Mrs. Russo, but after she described their sons' behavior, they were horrified and solemnly returned home.

"The following day the boys walked down to Mrs. Pitkin's with homemade pastries, and haltingly apologized to her. Then they volunteered, under parental orders, to perform any moving-in chores she needed done. She suggested they clear out several cartons of bottles and 'keep the deposit for your trouble.' A week later she returned the plates to the boys' mothers with her own homemade rugelach. Ease returned to the block, and one of the boys' mothers invited Mrs. Russo and Mrs. Pitkin to lunch with all the mothers so that together they could orient her to their favorite shops and answer her questions. Best of all, according to the youths, thirteen year old Joel Pitkin is fabulous at third base."

"I'm not trying to play 'Can You Top This,' Rose, and my tale doesn't have such a positive ending, but I have to tell you about an event that happened to me on Saturday morning. It involved a neighbor whose apartment is on the floor above mine, and I only know her to greet and hold the door for her. She identifies herself as Irena. Last Saturday was a rainy day when we met in the elevator with our baskets to go shopping. Unfortunately, the supermarket is on the other side of Queens Boulevard, the thoroughfare with the highest fatality rate for pedestrians in the entire city. When she realized she had forgotten her umbrella, I offered to share my huge umbrella with her coming and going. With no warning, she stretched out her arms, and exclaimed,

"My God, You send him to me!"

“The elevator arrived at the lobby precisely when she was addressing the Lord and the residents were opening the door to enter. I tried to exit inconspicuously, while Irena was further announcing,

“He’s such a gentleman, a hero, a mother’s pride!”

“As we were re-crossing Queens Boulevard after our shopping, I heard her humming ‘Un Bel Di Vedremo’ from *Madame Butterfly*. I identified it, elaborating on the divas who sang it and its significance for the plot. At this point we were in the middle of the Boulevard, when, standing in place and accompanying herself with vigorous gestures, Irena started to sing the aria aloud. The traffic bolted toward us, and I waved my umbrella frantically for them to swerve around us. An officer in a nearby patrol car roused his siren, and blocked off traffic between us and the island separating the main lanes from the service road. First, he accompanied us safely to the island, and parked alongside. Then, in choleric tones he castigated the two of us for endangering our lives and those driving by. I was devastated. Never before had an authority needed to dress me down in public. But Irena sidled close to him, thanked him for being ‘so brave,’ and assured him that there would be no further occasions when she would bring opera to Queens Boulevard. From now on, Rose, I am not entering that elevator when it is descending with anyone from her floor!”

“You hadn’t told me you are an opera aficionado,” she replied.

“I am, but I can only afford to attend performances at the City Opera.”

“And I haven’t told you that in the Fulton schools I was teaching music.”

“Fulton is another of those upstate cities that you’ve mentioned before, including Syracuse that has an airport where car rentals are available. I know this is a surprise, but, if it is not an imposition, I was hoping that Lily and you would allow me to join you on a sightseeing tour up there. I’ll pay the expenses. You can visit your parents, and then show me what I’ve been missing up there. If this idea is OK with you, would you bring it up with Lily?”

“All right. Is there a particular season you prefer for this tour?”

“Not at all.”

So, the next time I was at the bar, Rose told me,

“I told your suggestion to Lily, and we came up with a different plan. We thank you for your generosity, but we prefer to drive. We will, though, let you pay for the gas going and returning. Our parents would be extremely hurt if you did not stay with them. We will show you more of the North Country than you ever wanted to see. Let’s plan for the last two weeks of June, after Lily has finished classes and the weather is moderate.”

It was early April now, and I would have opportunity to arrange for a vacation during June.

“It’s a deal!”

With the three of us alternating driving, the three hundred miles were no labor. My only disappointment during the trip occurred because the sisters had never mentioned that Fulton was the site of Nestle’s chocolate factory. Had I known, I would have proceeded more

slowly with open windows to savor every whiff! Soon enough, though, we pulled into the Raffertys, where they greeted us on the porch.

“We’re Marlene and Simon, Charlie, and we’re delighted to meet you after all we’ve heard about you.”

“About me? And what have you been told that pleases you so?”

“That you’re an eager businessman. We’ll talk about it later.” I looked to Rose for guidance, and she shrugged her shoulders with a nod that Lily must have been the source.

During dinner I noticed that Lily showed a remarkable resemblance to her mother, not only in complexion, forest green eyes, aquiline nose, and wavy hair, but in sharing behavior that appeared unconscious to each of them. Each woman wanted a circumference around her plate clear of condiments. Without raising her eyes Marlene moved all condiments away until they eventually impinged on Lily’s barren space. Following the identical protocol, Lily then returned the pieces to their original locations. And so, these subliminal chess moves proceeded back and forth several times during each meal.

Rose, on the other hand, resembled both her parents, left handed like Marlene, but with Simon’s blue eyes, tightly curled hair, and freckles. She was a touch more relaxed than Lily, and knew, when she was setting the table, that her mother and sister drank beer in glasses while Simon and she drank from the bottle. She served me, as a surprise, in a Brau House stein. No topics were off limits for discussion. Rose recalled how her mother

had served her bowls of prunes and oatmeal each school morning before grammar school. One morning she tried to escape this routine by lopping most of the cereal into her prune bowl and concealing it in a credenza draw. She finished the little that remained and left for school, but when she returned for lunch, Marlene had the cold oatmeal waiting at Rose's place. The Raffertys, in turn, were taken by my account of the cemetery strike.

After breakfast the following morning, Lily asked Rose if she would tour downtown and the state college campus with me, while Simon was at work and she showed Marlene her research. Rose recommended that we set off by foot passing the river lock, Rafferty's Bar and several of his competitors, the hunting and tackle shop, several churches, and then a side street near the campus. On this street we found three young teenagers shouting as they ran their bicycle tires over frogs they had hunted and now held ready in bags. I greeted them pleasantly,

"Say, may I make a deal with you? Because I know that those frogs can feel lots of pain when you crush them, I'm ready to buy all the ones you have left in the bags. How much do you want for them?"

They conferred together, and replied, "Fifty cents each."

"It's a deal, but notice that I am giving you two dollars more than you asked for. That means I have already bought the next four frogs you catch. So, you need to throw them back in the pond."

"OK, mister."

As we entered the campus Rose beamed, “You were masterful! You are a fine fellow, Charlie.”

“O, good! Will you marry me, then?”

“And when did it first occur to you to ask?”

“I think we were passing by Verona on the Thruway, when I realized I loved you. I said to myself,

‘Ah, I am off to see the duke of Verona, and my Sylvia is already at my side!’”

“You are so slow! Once you told me how you grew professorial about *Madame Butterfly* on Queens Boulevard, I knew you were a ‘keeper’. And now you tell me you have found us in Shakespeare. So, my answer is ‘Yes!’ because I am mad about you!” We embraced on the sidewalk, and meandered around the campus like lovesick classmates. On the walk back we purchased the most sparkling ring in the jeweler’s window.

Before dessert, as I slipped the engagement ring on Rose’s finger, she announced that we had become engaged this morning. Amid the well-wishing exclamations around the table, I caught covert winks passing among the family members. So, sniffing some kind of conspiracy, I asked Simon if our engagement would interfere with whatever business mindedness he seemed to expect from me.

“Ah, Charlie, you never had a chance! We saw you coming. Our only challenge was keeping Rose in the dark, and I hope she will forgive me now that she is blissful with you.”

Lily spoke up, “I started this plot by writing quietly that I was certain, based on what Rose was telling me and the softening I observed in her, that your relationship was

warming, whether or not you knew it. When you proposed (oops!) this trip, I signaled the folks to do what they could to expedite matters.”

Marlene continued, “Simon and I knew we had to appear indifferent to your relationship, so we pretended to understand that you were here because you were interested in buying the bar. You acted so swiftly, though, that we did not need to use the ploy. We are so delighted, and if you don’t mind, we would prefer that you continue the current bedroom arrangements here.”

The next day Simon brought up at breakfast a discussion that Marlene and he had had in their room.

“I said to Marlene, ‘now that we are all on the same page, actually I wouldn’t mind retiring if our two generations could work out a mutually satisfactory arrangement.’ This idea was good news to Marlene, and perhaps we can all consider it further.”

“Thank you, but count me out,” Lily responded. “I’m intent on earning my doctorate, and then I’ll go where openings take me. Any business about the bar only concerns you.”

Simon suggested that we open the books so we could lay out the business details. Afterwards, while Rose and I were visiting Fort Ontario, we discussed how we could go about thriving in Oswego rather than in Queens. We worked out a contract about the bar with Marlene and Simon that included a probationary period during which we were free to change our minds. At first Simon and I worked the bar together, then Rose and I worked as a team, and finally either of us tended the bar alone.

Rose and I invited our families and friends to the wedding at Oswego's St. Mary's Church and with a reception at the Elks Hall. Lily was maid-of-honor and Sean the best-man. All the Hartnetts were there and joined by Marlene's younger brother, his wife, and a smattering of Marlene's cousins. The celebrant was the popular Morris O'Malley, and for a priest not yet fifty, he had a lofty reputation in the parish. Marlene and Simon vied to tell the details underlying his reputation.

"Before Vatican II, the wedding ceremony for a 'mixed marriage' between Catholic and non-Catholic parties took place outside the sanctuary where the altar is located. At this particular wedding, the bride was Catholic and the groom was Jewish. Father O'Malley, the groom and best man, and, in this case, the "non-altar" boys stood just outside the sanctuary. Father greeted the couple with warmth in his voice and eyes, and asked them,

'Do you think God prefers to measure in inches or feet?'

'Who knows?' replied the groom, while the bride added, 'Maybe God uses metrics. Why do you ask?'

'Well, since we don't know the answer, I think we could move our ceremony closer to the altar.'

"With that, he led the bride and groom into the sanctuary. The groom seemed puzzled, the bride was ecstatic, and with no further reference to their mobility, Father O'Malley presided at the wedding. Afterwards, when asked about his observance of protocol, he smiled wanly,

“‘There are Rules and there are rules, there is the Spirit of the law and the law, there is Compassion and there is rigidity.’

“At another wedding the groom not only gave the servers a generous tip but even invited the altar boys to join Father O’Malley at the reception being held in the parish hall. As usual, a cocktail hour preceded the toasts to the bride and groom and the start of the meal. Unfortunately the best man who was making the first toast had already consumed enough alcohol to blur the pronunciation of his words. Trying to be humorous as he held his glass aloft, he trumpeted,

“‘God help them since they’ll need it!’

“Though what others heard was open to interpretation, the bride’s mother was certain that she heard,

“‘God help him since he’ll need it!’

“‘Grievously insulted, she ordered her nephew sitting next to her ‘to get that bum.’ The nephew stormed the dais and wrestled the best man to the floor. The best man was the brother of the groom, and the young men in the groom’s family rose as one. The men on the bride’s side did the same, and, embellished by alcohol, a melee filled the dance floor. At one point, the tiers of wedding cake flew as missiles, and Father O’Malley called the precinct.

“Once the police restored peace, Father O’Malley persuaded the captain not to arrest anyone since the combatants had used no weapons other than fists and no ambulances were needed. Then he conferred with the bride

and groom and their parents about salvaging the day. With that, the couple requested everyone to pitch in to clean up the hall.

“‘This way,’ they announced, ‘whenever our families are together to celebrate our anniversaries, we can happily recall how we overcame misunderstanding to work together.’”

“A third wedding began exactly as it had been rehearsed. The bride’s mother was a widow, so her uncle escorted the bride up the aisle. At the front of the church she met the groom, a fellow from Rochester, and the couple then entered the sanctuary together. Father O’Malley and the altar boys were standing on the top step before the altar as the couple approached. Their location enabled them to hear the bride whisper,

“‘Oh, I’ve been meaning to tell you, honey. My mother is going to be living with us.’ There was no reply. When the couple reached the top step, the groom said only,

“‘I’m sorry, Father, but there will be no wedding today.’ Then the groom left the church through a side door.

“The bride seemed to petrify in place, while Father O’Malley looked nonplussed about proceeding. He motioned to the uncle to come to the altar, and explained what occurred between the couple. The uncle supported the bride’s arm, and without consulting anyone, faced the congregation to announce,

‘Unfortunately there will be no wedding today, but the reception will proceed as scheduled.’”

“Then he escorted the bride to her mother’s pew. Father O’Malley dismissed the altar boys, joined the bride and her family, and led them to the privacy of the rectory.”

Of course, once my Hartnett cousins heard these stories, they spent hours conjuring fantastic, hilarious wedding scenarios about Rose and me that outdid each other. They were merciless, slandering me to my almost in-laws with fraudulent accounts of my smuggling poteen out of Ireland and of defrauding investors in a scheme to build a bridge between Scotland and Armagh. Despite my cousins’ feigned hand wringing, our wedding was heartfelt and graced, with none of the surprises often stalking Father O’Malley. Our reception was an historic craic. While we were honeymooning at Niagara Falls, Lily invited the relatives on both sides to reassemble at her house for a craic-continuation over the Labor Day weekend.

Before the wedding Rose and I rented a house in which the previous owner had included a beauty parlor. We converted that room into a baby’s bedroom, hoping that Rose’s maternity window continued to be open. Four months later the doctor confirmed that Finbar was on his way! Since no siblings followed him, he was cherished all the more, and Simon publicized his grandson’s most recent accomplishments with telling photos at the bar. As Finbar grew, Simon and he gradually built an operational model of the river’s lock. Of course, nothing was more special than Aunt Lily coming home and the two of them touring the Revolutionary War exhibits upstate.

He Didn't Lick It from a Stone

The sixteen miles from Feakle to Ennis stretch forever before day breaks. Because I am traveling west to get to market, fastened shadows precede my horse, and the wind wrings me to match the predawn damp. I make the journey longer, of course, by burdening my horse-drawn cart with worries about possible brigandage. It is 1922, I am twelve, and our rebellion for nationhood threatens to spill blood on the road I must travel to sell our potatoes, cabbages, butter, milk, and eggs at the Ennis market and return with the sundry supplies our step-mum Nicola had listed. Because dad needs to be working in the fields, he has entrusted the journey to me.

My own mum Bridget prepared me to entertain larger journeys by naming me after Saint Brendan who supposedly journeyed across the Atlantic in ages past. She moved me to read and memorize dramatic texts by reciting them herself with broad gestures and élan. I learned Robert Emmet's speech to the British court trying him for treason as a leader of the Irish Rebellion of 1803. I quickened the miles to Ennis by giving his oration on the way, standing up momentarily upon the seat of the cart and championing the final line of the twenty-five year old martyr,

“When my country takes her place among the nations of the earth, then, and not till then, let my epitaph be written!”

Like her sister Aunt Kathleen, my mum loved Shakespeare and read dramatically from his plays in the evening. She was so engrossing that dad joined us with

many questions and requests for her to repeat scenes. Our nascent literary abilities even surfaced one day in our field. Dad had pointed to a berm at the bottom of a slope, and announced it was a splendid spot to set up a limestone kiln to bake “quick lime” that we could sell at market with our produce. The damp climate guaranteed that every spring the exterior water soluble whitewash on the cottages needed a new coat. So, families bought bags of quick lime to which they first added water to make whitewash and then different ingredients for coloring it: pig’s blood for pink, onion skins for yellow, copper ore for green, and red cabbage for blue. To improve the modest water shedding quality of lime, painters would add some animal fat.

From our field’s plentiful supply of rocks, dad and I built the kiln into the edge of the berm. Our kiln was fourteen feet long, six feet wide, and eight feet high. The front had a sizable hole at the bottom through which we could start a fire. Our field was close by the village owned commonage from which we carted off all the limestone we needed. At the top of the berm I smashed the stones with a sledge hammer, and dropped them into the kiln onto a grill above the fire. As they baked, they fell apart and mixed with the ash forming powdered quick lime. It took a week from the initial smashing to the cooling and removing of the quick lime. Every market day, I hawked my supply, but with meager sales in rainy weather.

On the kiln’s first day in use, my dad called for me to drop the stone fragments, shouting dramatically,

“Lay on, Macduff!”

Without hesitation I finished Macbeth’s line,

“And damn’d be him that first cries, ‘Hold, enough!’” At that, we saluted each other and laughed.

At this time mum was overseeing the education of my seven year old brother Sean when she gave birth to Michael. I noticed, as the time swept nearer to the birth, she seemed more easygoing, more relaxed about our lessons, while dad grew increasingly jumpy. When he greeted mum as he returned from the field, he would twist his cap so relentlessly I thought he could never wear it again. Our parents had prepared fully for the birthing, and when mum went into labor, dad promptly fetched the nurse-midwife to hasten to our home. Even with her ministrations, though, mum died before the umbilical cord was cut. She had a weakened heart that I knew nothing about, and it had given out.

Sean and I were in the kitchen with dad when the midwife called him into the bedroom. For a moment we heard only the baby’s cries, and then dad shouted in terrifying anguish. We stood calcified until he careened out, and then we rushed to clasp him. Dad continued moaning,

“She died! She died! She died! My lads, how we need each other now,” he exclaimed, embracing us as we all wept together.

I answered bravely, Sean joining in,

“Yes, dad, I want to help. Tell me what to do.”

“First, Brendan, tell Father Cooney that mum died and ask him to come. Sean, go to Mrs. McNulty’s house and ask if she can help prepare mum’s body for burial. I am making a coffin for mum.”

I had already been to five wakes, and at each the mourners vied with each other to share fond and humorous memories of the deceased, while unsteadily imbibing from the host's hospitality until they grew boisterous. I could not imagine such a wake for mum, and dad determined that it would not occur. Instead, our wake was more the quiet, heart-rending affair that families held when a child died. In the evening of the day mum died, Mrs. McNulty washed Bridget's body and she and dad laid it out on the bed. Then he covered her in white linen, and lit candles circling the bed. Dad limited the wake to the following day, with no keeners or alcohol, while he kept vigil with the body constantly. On the day of the funeral, dad insisted he and I would carry the coffin back to the church and cemetery.

During the mass Father Cooney showed his compassion for what we were living through, and boldly omitted the dread-filling hymn *Dies Irae, Dies Illa* (That Day of Wrath). His concern was sending the message that God's only agenda was welcoming Bridget. He was a brave man to alter the liturgy, since the biddies would eagerly inform the bishop.

For most of the next year I took care of the baby, initially under the tutelage of some women from our parish who came by in the evening when dad was home. Although they brought baby food and washed the baby's clothing, dad called them "marriage vultures" who were competing to feast on him for the remainder of his life. After hearing his sweep of the helpers, I began to note the subtle rivalry between two neighbors who kept coming earlier and earlier in the hope of being with dad before the

other arrived. Dad asked me to put a broom next to the door as a signal that only one woman was inside. He would smoke his pipe out of sight until the other showed as well. Finally, when Mrs. Grogan, whom dad called “widow Gorgon,” outlasted the other contenders, he thanked her with an ample supply of butter and cheese for generously helping us all. Then he told her that since he now had a wet nurse who was feeding Michael daily, she need not inconvenience herself any longer by visiting our place. He teased her further by not mentioning the name of the wet nurse.

Dad explained to me that his strategy was not simply to stanch the widows’ ardor, but to embolden his stature in the eyes of Nicola Tierney. Mrs. Tierney was a widow whom dad had been introduced to at the Ennis market where she arrived with her son Malachy only a month older than Michael. One day, in response to dad’s suggestion that perhaps they could share “widowhood survival strategies,” she suggested,

“If you would have Sean bring the baby over for the mornings, I have lots of jobs that Sean could do, while I nurse both Michael and Malachy and then prepare lunch. On Sundays after church, we could all visit the pub and discuss how we could be helping one another.”

Soon after, he was escorting her frequently to a pub with Malachy bundled at their side and I was home with Michael. In 1928, they married when Michael was sixteen months old, and I was proud to accept dad’s request to be his best man. The “marriage vultures” continued for

months to spew whatever libel about the couple they could imagine.

I accepted Nicola from the first I met her because in her presence dad shone light-hearted, and she clearly loved us as much as her own Malachy. Even more, many residents of Clare regarded her late husband as a martyr for our independence since he had valiantly died during an exchange of gunfire in which he killed three Black and Tans. To quell Ireland's rebellion, the British had mobilized seven thousand veterans of World War I to form the Royal Irish Constabulary Special Reserves. Their tactics were especially lethal, and in 1920, they burned and sacked the town of Tuam in nearby Galway. We called these reserves Black and Tans after the color of their uniforms and their hearts.

Oddly, though, once Nicola entered our home, only Sean and I ever spoke about our own mother. Once, when Nicola was carrying an afghan for Michael's bed, I mentioned how mum had spent months knitting it. Nicola replied solemnly, "Oh, how she loved you all," and that was the last of it. Except for this strange omission which I senses not to challenge, we proceeded as a caring family. Malachy was an easygoing baby and toddler, gentler than his step-brother Michael. My half-sister Maureen arrived fifteen months later. Four years passed before her sister Maeve was born, and six years after her came her brother Patrick.

I was not around for this myself since I had sailed to New York with dad's blessing. As the first born, of course, I was in line to inherit the farm, and to assess its value, I

found myself on each trip to Ennis counting the windows of the farmhouses I passed. Since 1825, houses with more than seven windows incurred a tax. Accordingly, most farmhouses, like our own, showed only seven. Perhaps a third of the houses had up to ten, and there were three farms that even boasted fourteen windows. I could see that our limited acreage would never allow me to achieve the prosperity of these mighty mullioned neighbors, unless I intended to marry above my station. I did not.

Clearly ingenuity and invention, teamwork, and long, pain bearing days were paying the bills, but providing no security. So, I wrote to my first cousin Charlie Sullivan who had emigrated to New York City. He replied that I could initially stay with him, and he would even try to get me a job in his union. I bade farewell to my family and my inheritance, and offered to help my siblings and half-siblings to follow me.

Dad acknowledged that I had thought through my decision, and thanked me for waiting until he and Nicola married. Then he drove me to Ennis where I would join other emigrants proceeding by journey carts and train to Cobh or Kinsale. There we would board the crowded ships to America. Since this was my last opportunity to talk about my mother's absence from his speech, I brought it up. Dad replied slowly, sighing first, and avoiding my question by repeating family lore I already knew.

"I fancied your mum even when we were children. After leaving church on Sundays when Bridget was nine or ten years old, she would teach younger girls playful songs and lead them in a makeshift chorus. She taught them

rhymes and encouraged them to include the verses in brief, impromptu performances. I had never before seen a girl so talented and self-assured.

“As teens we were at the Ennis market each weekend, and I made it a point to give her my best turnip. The lads my age hassled me no end for this while they coalesced, smoking and edging closer to the pubs. Eventually we earned a reputation as the smoothest couple on the dancefloor, and by this time we were mad for each other, full of talk and kisses. For our wedding we invited friends and kin from Scotland, England, and counties round about. Our reception was a three day uproarious craic.

Into the prolonged silence that immediately followed, I said,

“O, dad, how you loved her!”

“Aye,” he replied, and that was the end of that.

Finally, at the end of my crossing, my cousin Charlie was, indeed, waiting for me. He shared his apartment until I could afford my own accommodations, and secured membership for me in his cemetery workers’ local in Queens. I was especially fortunate, because the Great Depression began only four months after I started in the cemetery.

In later decades, my brother Michael, who now lived in America, and his wife Annie visited Feakle on their sabbaticals, and Sean would join them all for ten days. My own too-lazy contacts were seldom more than cards at holidays and birthdays. When Nicola contacted us brothers to report that dad had now suffered a mighty stroke, we

replied that we would be there as soon as we could, but he died while we were travelling. So, instead of any time with dad, we found ourselves at the wake and funeral with a crush of his neighbors and friends whose celebration of his life was a grand tribute to him.

We stayed at Smith's Hotel in town, and eventually I had time alone with Nicola. I apologized again for being such a reticent correspondent. She pouted that she'd forgive me once I filled her in about myself, but she started first,

“Michael and his wife have told me how Sean and you have your own apartments upstairs in the huge house where they live on the first floor. They added how you met a grand Irish woman Nollaig your wife. I would love to hear more.”

“All the while I was digging thousands of graves I gave no thought to marrying. I was delighted for Charlie Sullivan and for my brother Michael when they announced their engagements, but I felt no interest for myself. It was similar to cheering their emigration to a foreign country that I had no desire to see.

“After Sean and I moved to the house we share with Michael and Annie, I began volunteering at a Catholic Worker House in a decrepit part of town. Each day homeless folk who lived in cardboard accommodations under a highway joined our lunch line. When same woman lined up for the third time in as many days, I finally detected that she had a Derry accent. While she was eating I surprised her with this information, and asked if she

would tell me more about her Irish roots and what led her to her homelessness.

“Her name is Nollaig, and she had worked as a family’s housekeeper for twenty years until the elderly employers both died. Their wills included her, leaving her sixty-five hundred dollars, and bequeathing the rest of the estate to their son. Nine months later a driver running a stop sign at night knocked her down, and the medical bills and physical therapy fees consumed her resources. She would not ask the family’s son for help, nor did he offer any. She had no way to pay rent, and tried the homeless shelters, but she was too frightened to stay. She lived now with the others on the food line, sleeping in cardboard shelters under the highway with the food line providing the main meal of their day.

“I could not bear hearing Nollaig’s story, and with her permission I called Annie to ask if she and Michael would accommodate Nollaig in their apartment for a few days while I was making more permanent arrangements for her. They agreed, and we discovered that we all got along wonderfully. All aspects of life in Ireland were grist for us, and Nollaig was back in her old environment helping with a household, albeit slower. In less than a week they were delighted to ask her to move in permanently so that she would be in place when their baby arrived.

“Each evening I joined the craic on the first floor. Nollaig often held the floor with tales about her Irish kin.

“‘I was so surprised when my parents died,’ she reported, ‘because we came from long-living stock. My uncle, for instance, once quipped,

“Ah, here we have to shoot a man to start a cemetery!’

“But nothing could top 1963, the year prelates visited Ireland on their way to and from Vatican Council II. Father Casey was visiting his parents at the time and also helping out the pastor, when an American bishop pulled up and asked to see his father’s baptismal certificate that he understood was in our parish records. When Father Toomey left the parlor to find the ledger for that year, however, the pastor whispered that he was to tell the bishop that it was currently at the binder’s shop. Father did as he was directed, much to the bishop’s consternation. Then, after his departure Father asked the pastor what was going on.

“Oh, those records included more information than a person might want to know. The bishop would learn, for instance, that his father is illegitimate.’

“Months of such daily conversations bewitched me. Though Nollaig and I are long past our salad days, our time together is the highlight of our days. Then one evening we gleefully interrupted each other to announce,

“Since you insist on having this baby, then you have to acknowledge the child will require the steady love of both an aunt and an uncle. Therefore, we have decided to wed shortly so that uncle and aunt are here when the baby arrives. This way you’ll also have an extra room. By the way, we would appreciate your being our maid-of-honor and best man.’

“Nicola, we’ve been baby Dorothy’s live-in uncle and aunt from day one, though I’ve continued volunteering

part-time and raising majestic flowers and vegetables in our back garden. Nollaig is with Dorothy now, and, let me confess, I hesitated coming for a moment. The prospect of dad never mentioning Bridget's name, even to the end, intimidated me. Now, please tell me whether you think dad had been able to move positively beyond Bridget's death."

She paused awhile before answering,

"Back then, of course, there was no doctor available for your birth. Not even a midwife. So, your parents called upon the services of a handywoman, an older neighbor who often knew about using herbs, and provided assistance based on folklore, observation, and experience. When Bridget finally found a doctor for her postpartum checkup, however, he was deliberate and somber, eventually concluding,

"'You've had a serious heart condition for some time. You were fortunate that your heart survived this birth, and you will definitely be risking your life if you have any more.'

"The doctor's warning changed Colum's life. He told me,

"'I've no ease in remembering my life with Bridget. Those memories summon again a searing guilt for putting her at risk.'

"So, he asked me to agree that neither of us would bring up Bridget's name. Less than a week later, though, didn't Sean say to me,

"'Now that Brendan's not here, I have no one to talk to about my mother. He had so many stories about her, lots of them funny too. Dad and you don't do that.'

“‘You are right, Sean, and you must miss her terribly,’ I answered, hugging him. ‘I only met her at the market twice, so I really don’t have stories about her to tell you. But I’d love to hear all the stories about her that you would like to tell me. Your dad misses her so much right now that he gets sad talking about her, but I’m sure he’d love to answer all your questions when he’s feeling better.’

“‘OK, a perkier Sean accepted, ‘but I don’t have any stories for you today.’

“I repeated this account to Colum after Sean was asleep. He thanked me for building in some lead time before he could expect Sean’s questions about Bridget. He used that time to visit Father Cooney, and explained that he wanted to help Sean but couldn’t find the words. Father Cooney answered in parts,

“‘First, Colum, Bridget did not marry a man too choked to answer his son’s questions. Toss the hair on Sean’s head when he mentions his mother, and feel the vitality of her love pass through him to you. You’ll survive.

“‘Second, you may remember that Maureen Gallagher was Bridget’s closest childhood friend, and now her youngest boy is about Sean’s age. If Nicola told her that Sean had questions about his mother’s childhood that she could not answer, I am certain Mrs. Gallagher would help. Let the women work it out. Some free time for the boys together and reminiscing over a snack later will lead to many stories.’

“Colum reported this advice to me, and I caught up with Mrs. Gallagher after next Sunday’s mass. Both the

lads and we mothers became friends, and she compassionately sated Sean's curiosity. Sean never did ask Colum or me about his mother.

“Our own relationship was placid and gratifying until Colum entered his seventies. Then, he would occasionally call me ‘Bridget’. In the beginning I amiably corrected him, and he took the correction in good spirits. When he began to call me Bridget regularly, however, I simply went along. Only this past year did I understand that his strategy of repression was never more than a holding action. For, on the anniversary of Bridget's death, he had me swear that, should he die before me, the monument at his gravesite would include only his name and mine, but not Bridget's.

“‘In death, at least, let me be at peace.’

“This year on her anniversary he stood atop the kiln, and orated from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*,

‘Fear at my heart, as at a cup
My life blood seemed to sip.’

“Then he added, ‘No longer, by Jove! No longer!’

“When he descended, Colum looked at me intently and claimed,

“‘I faced my torments down! I dropped them crushed into the fire, transforming them into quick lime for painting something beautiful.’

“Then he collapsed, and we lost him.”

We hugged each other, and I brought Nicola and my half- siblings to Smith's Hotel where we shared endearing memories about Colum. Taking Nicola aside, I thanked her for being so forthright in speaking with me. I

affirmed that she loved me and my brothers as though we were her own, I applauded the love between her and my dad, and I assured her that she was a profound blessing for him.

I said my goodbyes to Nicola and to my half-brothers and sisters, Malachy, Maureen, Maeve, and Patrick and to their families. I invited them to visit me, but they never did.

Never Fired

I was six years old by the time our war for independence, then our civil war, and then the assassinations and brigandage were completed. I followed dad's lead, and sided with Michael Collins throughout. Dad taught me hurling too, and said I had a natural swing that promised victories when I was older. I looked forward no less to my lessons with mum. Once she saw that I could sound out words, no matter how long and how ignorant I was of their meaning, we moved on to define their meaning and categorize them with other words I already knew.

Her talent for acting out scenes from plays by Shakespeare invariably drew dad and Brendan to join me in the audience. She introduced me to poetry, and enjoyed my telling her that my favorite poet was Alexander Pope because she adapted his lines whenever someone died. I thought them so clever:

“Cease, fond Nature, cease thy strife,
And let me [her/him] languish into life.”

Little did I realize that I would be murmuring the lines at her own funeral.

When mum died during Michael's birth, I was so frightened that I clung to dad and Brendan until dad said kindly,

“Step away, Sean. I don't want to hurt you with this tool.”

Dad was busy making mum's coffin. Since I was too short to help carry it, Aunt Kathleen, mum's sister, held

my hand as we walk behind it to the church. She told me how happy mum had been when I was born, and that mum would now be looking out for us from heaven. She complimented Brendan for being a grand older brother to me, and said that I could be a helpful older brother to Michael too.

Very soon after her funeral, the neighboring widows began coming with meals and staying to care for the baby. Several called me “Dearie,” and encouraged me to address them by their first names. They asked for my favorite recipes and for dad’s. When I told him about this, he slammed a fist into his other hand, and announced that he needed “to meet a mother for my children!” And so, when Nicola asked me to call her by her name, I felt comfortable doing that. She was not my own mother, but I felt she loved me as though she were.

When I finished grammar school, dad said he needed me in the field fulltime. Brendan had left for America, and I became the oldest son at home. Soon, though, Nicola became friends with Mrs. Gallagher, and dad let me play with her son Brian on Saturday mornings. I also improved my hurling on Sunday afternoons. All this time, though, new siblings arrived to squeeze into the corners of our house.

The papers reported that Hitler too was feeling crowded, and clearly was mobilizing to conquer all the territory his uber-folk would need. I was pumping to be fighting tyranny, but never in a British uniform. Our Free State, though, appeared ready to let Germany overwhelm Britain by remaining neutral. So, when I was of age and no

longer needed dad's approval, I contacted Brendan, and asked if he could help me to get started in New York.

Initially, dad was of two minds about my leaving. On the one hand, I was his dependable co-worker. On the other hand, the cottage was crowded, and he could count on Brendan, and hopefully cousin Charlie Sullivan who had helped Brendan out, to keep an eye on me overseas. In the end, Nicola and dad said that they knew a soldier when they saw one, gave me their blessing, and asked that I write home more regularly than Brendan had.

On board the ship there were rumors that German submarines might sink us mid-crossing. Fortunately, the Germans had not yet inaugurated their submarine warfare. On a seething hot Friday both Charlie and Brendan met me at the dock, left my bags at Brendan's, and celebrated our reunion at a pub. Over the weekend, they showed me around the neighborhood, took in mass Sunday morning, and in the afternoon introduced me to Deidre, hoping she could help again.

Though she and her sister Colleen were about to visit western Pennsylvania where they had family working in the mines, Deidre interceded with the notables at Gaelic Park in the northern most part of the Bronx. The park included a dance hall and a turf playing field for hurling and football. Thanks to her, an Irish football team welcomed me, and my play won the coach's attention.

Destiny had it that the coach was also the manager of a company delivering Borden's milk. When I asked about a possible job, he told me,

“Show up at 3:30 AM at the milk plant to load the truck of a driver retiring the following day. Pay attention, ask questions, and get the list of addresses he serves and the products he leaves. Lucky for you, Torch, his horse, is a veteran of the route. We rely so much on our horses that we have a blacksmith at work in the milk plant.”

I quickly learned that after the stable boy delivering the horses to the plant had hooked Torch to the truck, it knew where to stop without command. That meant I could make a delivery or even two and advance to the next stop.

I explained to Brendan that I had been impatient to emigrate so that I could fight in the American army. I intended to stay only temporarily, and my priority would be repaying the fare and rent-free hospitality he provided. Once I had saved enough, I moved to a place of my own, and brought him monthly installments to repay my passage.

Brendan rented a two bedroom apartment in a walkup building fairly near the cemetery where he worked. Although he thought that he did not have the time to be much of a “Good Samaritan,” my presence showed that Brendan could provide hospitality much as Deidre had for him. In fact, hospitality was his forte. He entered the lobby one day to discover an older woman pummeling an apartment door and amid tears shouting in a foreign language. Brendan knew that a young Uzbekistani couple had recently moved in, two of the two dozen immigrants from that region who had opened small shops in Queens. He stood politely, and speaking softly, gestured to the older woman to accompany him to the nearest shop where

he had heard her language spoken. There, the proprietor translated that the older woman had taken a bus for the first time in America to visit her granddaughter. When no one answered the door, she was not even sure she had the correct address. The store keeper, however, knew how to contact the couple, and made the woman comfortable until they arrived. The woman kissed Brendan's hand, and from that day forward, it seemed that every Uzbekistani he passed smiled and acknowledged him.

Every Saturday evening until my induction, Charlie joined Brendan and me for a grand craic at our apartment. When the military's concern about preparing for hostilities finally quickened the induction process, the army assigned me to its Signal Corps. I had wanted Infantry, and I knew that tests ordinarily determine placements, but a major summed up how this assignment occurred,

“When we heard you and Pvt. Loughran laughing over some tale in Gaelic, we knew that whoever could decipher that language, would easily handle the messages and codes of the Signal Corps.”

So, I was given a teletypewriter to fight the Japanese, then promoted to laying long-range field cables relaying messages for hundreds of miles, and finally to a post training the armored force how to use frequency-modulated short-range radios during battle.

It turns out that I never saw battle myself. Our troop ship broke down on the third day after leaving California. The captain did not dare to report our predicament lest a submarine torpedo us. So we simply floated until another of our ships appeared and tugged us to Hawaii for repairs.

Once we docked, however, we idled our time by playing baseball. There I discovered that dad was correct about my hurling swing which I adapted for slugging baseballs and making throws from deep center field. A senior officer decided there was real money for him in keeping me behind on his team after my ship departed. He simply bet on our team defeating every opponent. Our planes were bombing Tokyo before I was finally forwarded to a garrison in Manila.

I was back in New York by 1946, and how we celebrated! Now there were the four of us, since Michael arrived to stay with Brendan in 1939. Our family's recessive genes had finally surfaced in Michael, providing substantial grist for the rest of us to charge him with pretending to be our brother. His complexion was not ruddy like ours, but almost sallow. His hair and brows were black instead of tawny. He was five-eight while we were at least five-ten in height. What we did share in common were our keen, mirthful blue eyes. We sparred, claiming he snookered mum and dad about being ordained a priest in New York in order to escape the drudgery of farming. He proved then that he also resembled us in his readiness to use imagination and word play to give as good as he got from us.

I hastened to apply for the New York City Police, and once on the force, I brought to our Saturday gatherings as much adventure as the others. I told them of the time a fellow undercover cop and I were waiting on the subway station to board the last car when it pulled in. My partner Ricardo, a dark skinned Honduran, was ready to enter the

first door and I the last door of the last car. Each of us appeared disheveled, probably homeless, with no connection to one another. Before the train arrived, a group of five college age men came through the turnstiles speaking softly to one another. One of them called on a phone, and with a smirk, knowing he was frustrating anyone overhearing him, started speaking in Greek about partying in Astoria that night with lots of the drugs they were carrying. My partner, standing near the turnstiles, pointed his weapon at them and shouted for me to assist him. We called for backup and lined the five against the wall. They were all cuffed and their pockets emptied. What I witnessed puzzled me, and I asked Ricardo how he knew what the culprit was saying.

“Oh, when I was younger I worked four years for a Greek speaking florist, and I got to know the language!”

I told them how I had to confront corruption. My captain had appointed me to be the precinct’s integrity control officer. My job was to oversee that the officers are honest in fulfilling their job descriptions. Each precinct has a command log which records all the activities that occur in the building, such as the times when senior officers arrive and depart. A fellow lieutenant, who arrived consistently a half hour to an hour late for work, expected that I would continue my predecessor’s practice of leaving a blank arrival line that this lieutenant would later fill in as though he had arrived on time. When I left no blank lines, this colleague complained that I should ‘back off’. I answered, instead,

“Original rules; new man; shape up.”

Afterwards, he never stopped bad-mouthing me, but he showed up on time.

I told them, too, how I had arrived at a fracas where the combatants had been wielding knives. As I moved in, a woman pointed to a car under which one of the combatants was hiding. When I bent over to order him out, the seam of my pants' bottom split its entire length. It was one thing for civilians to laugh, but word of this incident was all over the precinct before a stitch was in place.

Life changed for us brothers when the grave diggers struck on January 6th, 1949, following the archdiocese's rejection of all union terms for a new contract at Calvary Cemetery in Queens, and offering, instead, the 2.6% annual cost of living increase. The two hundred and forty members of Local 293 of the United Cemetery Workers, Congress of Industrial Organizations, had stipulated that the new contract include a decrease in their work week from forty-eight hours to forty, continuing their same salary for a five day week in place of the current six days, and overtime pay after eight hours and for work on Saturday. The hearses arrived as usual and discharged their caskets inside the gates where the strikers left them in untended piles. By the time the strike began, there were already twelve hundred unburied bodies with sixty more arriving daily. By now Brendan had become the local's shop steward. I was soon on the phone with him.

“Brother, the precinct's grapevine has it that the archbishop asked the commissioner to provide heavy duty security at the cemetery. It seems you're a bunch of Commie dupes violating the work of mercy to bury the

dead. So, he's drafting the students at the senior seminary to do your digging. I expect to be there tomorrow morning as part of the blue wall keeping the peace."

Brendan retorted, "Spellman's shouting, 'Bury the dead,' but stymying Commies is what he's all about. Remember, he is the Apostolic Vicar for the U.S. Armed Forces, and regards the CIO as riddled with Communists and the strike 'Communist inspired'. No surprise. Some commentators argue that Pius XII considered Russian Communism such a threat that he became too accommodating to Hitler. The newspaper of the Brooklyn diocese, *The Tablet*, is currently hawking Joe McCarthy's political rants."

Brendan's synopsis proved correct. For, after the archbishop's "volunteers" broke the strike, he agreed to an eight percent hourly wage increase for the grave diggers, but required them to withdraw from the CIO for the less progressive AFL [American Federation of Labor] affiliation.

Only hours later, Brendan said that Michael called from the seminary to clarify that he would not be on the bus delivering the students tomorrow. In fact, the archbishop's action finally crystallized for Michael that he could not serve the New York archdiocese, and raised a question about his suitability for the priesthood at all. He had become apprehensive that often obedience was supplanting love and compassion as priestly charisms. Brendan, however, asked him to show up, if only for tomorrow, to experience the situation first hand. Michael agreed.

That evening the seminarian “volunteers” joined in protracted analyses about differing responses to their situation. Several had called their parents who advised them to consult with priests whose opinions they respected, pray that they would make an informed decision, and remember throughout that their parents would back them up. Some brought up in discussions among themselves that their commitment to ordination already included a fidelity to the will of the archbishop. Others more cynically concluded that not boarding the bus destroyed any chance that the archbishop would ever ordain them.

When the buses arrived, the strikers shouted out, “Scab! Scab!” at the seminarians, who included the strikers’ neighbors and relatives, now hastening with eyes downcast between the banks of strikers. Every so often a striker’s face would flush and he withdrew from the front of those shouting, because his own son was about to pass him. Michael spotted Dorothy Day’s braided hair as she hoisted her placard supporting the strikers, and he shriveled within. Once within the gates, as they were being provided with gloves and tools, Dominic settled his mind that justice had sided with the strikers, and he needed to, as well.

The following morning he withdrew from the seminary, and took the subway to Brendan’s apartment. His single day’s participation, however, enabled the archbishop to proclaim that the seminary’s entire student body had “volunteered”. We joined him there and offered our support. He appreciated it, but after three days he

joined the volunteer staff of the Catholic Worker, living there and preparing the meals for the line of homeless folks. After a decade at the Worker and acquiring a fluency in Spanish, he received a scholarship to the Hunter College School of Social Work, and returned to live with Brendan.

We brothers and cousin Charlie had the liveliest craic each weekend. Then Michael introduced his friend Annie who fit right in with our group. When they married, they had the good fortune to obtain faculty positions for each at the same Catholic college for women. Brendan and I visited them at Thanksgiving, and saw that they were renting an old boarding house too expansive for their own use. So, we proposed that we all purchase it together, and create separate apartments for Brendan and me.

Since the college was closed on the day after Thanksgiving, Michael escorted us around the campus and showed off the renovated novitiate building and his own office. Living nearby, he was among the earliest arrivals in the mornings, but always second to the president who had already brewed coffee in the kitchen next to her office. Today was no different, and the aroma caught the brothers' attention. Sean inquired if there were enough coffee and cups for everyone, and began investigating the kitchen. At that moment the president entered, and before Michael could introduce us, I held the carafe aloft, and boldly greeted her,

“Allow me, sister; you prepare a grand brew.”

As I filled her cup, I continued,

“We realize that you hired our brother, but he’s not so keen a knife as the rest of us. So anytime you think we could bail him out, don’t hesitate to call us.”

The president was momentarily taken aback by my forwardness, and then appreciated the whimsy of this early morning spectacle. After Michael introduced us and inquired if he could brew another carafe, the president asked about our areas of expertise. Brendan identified several, including soil management, horticulture, and digging up solutions to weighty problems. I added that my career in law enforcement had made me proficient in systems management, surveillance, emergency intervention, and crowd control. The president replied that as the college grew it would certainly need experts in all these areas, and encouraged us to stay in touch.

I was, of course, at Nollaig and Brendan’s wedding in the college chapel and the reception in the old novitiate building’s wainscoted drawing-rooms. During the reception, Sister Felicia, the president, took me aside to say,

“I have an offer for you, Sean. Last month two carloads of fraternity brothers from elsewhere drove to the front of our students’ residence hall about 1:00 AM, and made all the noise they could dancing naked in a large circle. When I called the police station, the officer tried to muffle his laughter and the frat fellows were gone before the squad cars arrived. Surely we are in for more male harassment, and I would like you to consider an offer to come aboard as the Director of Campus Security. I already

have every confidence that you will interact with our students only in a professional manner.”

“Sister, I’ll need a week to explore my mind and heart. If I decide to come, I’ll need some time to terminate my career with the police department. I’ll also need a commitment that the college will support a field hockey team that I can coach. I can easily confirm that I shall act only in a professional manner with our students.”

“I appreciate all your answers, Sean, and I look forward to continuing this conversation at our next meeting.”

I accepted the position, and, like most officers retired without ever firing my weapon in the line of duty. In my new position fortunately I have fewer complaints than I hear from Annie and Michael when they unburden themselves about the day’s “can you believe this” moments. In fact, their accounts often revived memories of dealing with young, recalcitrant, work-phobic cops. We supervisors had to shape them up repeatedly before they could help the public professionally.

By the beginning of the second semester Annie reported,

“I was flabbergasted by students’ attitudes toward grades. Several approached me as though their grade was a matter for negotiation rather than a reflection of their achievement. A student who failed my course pleaded that *my* grade was keeping her from receiving a sports car from her father. Another student whose work was marginally acceptable at best pointed to an empty corner in my office,

and said that her father was ‘an upscale cabinet maker who’d be pleased to make a lovely piece for the space.’”

Michael hotly joined in,

“Today was the first session of a three hour class that meets only once a week. My preparation for each session is intense because I have not taught this subject before. So, I was horrified to discover that the class was meeting in a room whose clock made a clicking sound as the hand advanced each minute. The students paid it no mind, but the sound wholly distracted me from the lesson to the point I began awaiting the next click. Distraught, I picked up the chalk board erasure, and tossed it at the clock high on the back wall. I knew I was only releasing my frustration because I have no aim. Except this time I clocked my target, causing it to crash very audibly behind the last row of seats. The class divided between some students in shock and others cheering, even shouting,

‘Put that player in right field!’

“I excused myself, and told them I would return momentarily. I went directly to the dean’s office where I told the secretary, omitting specifics, that I had broken the clock in my room, and asked that the bill be sent to me. Then I returned to the students, explained that the clicking had discombobulated me, and I would try to proceed with more self-control. Of course, one of the students had to ask,

‘What clicking?’

“When I caught up with the dean, she wanted all the details and, satisfied that no one was injured, enjoyed my

‘escapade’. She said I would not be liable because the college should have removed that time piece ages ago.

“The day before that, I had made the mistake of allowing a child into my classroom, one without that clock. He was about five years old, and his mother, my student, at the last minute was without child care. She assured me he would not make a sound while he sat in the back of the room. Thirty minutes later I was explaining the Poor Law provisions among the Puritan colonists when from the rear of the room “VROOOM!” erupted as the child whipped a truck across his desk top. Of course, one of the students felt compelled to shout, ‘The Plymouth Rock fire department has arrived!’ Never again!”

Then he continued, “In the afternoon I had a freshman advisee whose father insisted on meeting with me himself. He preceded his daughter into the office, and explained that since this was his daughter’s first experience away from home, he wanted to be sure that she handled it wisely. I appreciated his concern, but reiterated the point he heard during orientation that the college regarded her as capable of selecting with my advisement an appropriate foundation for her liberal arts degree.”

“Surely,” he insisted, “I could at least sit in.”

I emphasized that his presence would have to be a distraction for his daughter, and mentioned that no other parent had ever made his request.

After he stepped out, his daughter and I had a productive advisement session during which she thanked me for insisting that she “have room enough to breathe.” On a lighter note, let me add that later that day the advisee

introduced me to her mother who had a notable Scottish burr with which she pointed out,

“Hartnett is also a popular Scottish name. I strongly encourage you ‘to do the Scots justice’ when you teach.”

I answered that I was proud to be a second cousin-ten times removed of Robert Burns.

“Oh,” she grinned, “he slept with so many women, I wouldn’t be surprised if we were all related to him!”

“To be fair, though, I am indebted to the students in my 8:00 AM class. I rose early, prepared my lesson, and saw that I had a moment to repair the crib’s plastic mobile that had snapped. I proceeded diligently with fast bonding glue only to discover that I had glued together the fingers of my right hand. No one else was awake when I left to teach with my shirt tucked in but all the buttons undone. Embarrassed, I explained my situation to the class which responded en masse, ‘Use nail polish remover on your fingers to unglue them!’ ‘Here, use mine,’ offered a student emptying her purse. Then the class cheered me on to success!”

I learned, however, that awkward interactions with students do not require a classroom. One morning a freshman stayed behind with me after field hockey practice. She said that she wanted to talk with me “in the greatest confidence.” I replied that I could provide that so long as no crime was involved and she was not a threat to herself or others. Assuring me that this was not the case, she tried to speak, but began to sob and shake. Eventually she shared that she had become infatuated with Michael, now one of her instructors. She was tormented in his class,

she explained, ever since she learned that he was married and had a daughter. She was determined to withdraw from his class, even though this would leave her with a credit deficit in her core requirements.

As she became more composed, I mentioned that such attractions do occur, and that they are usually brief. I suggested she try an experiment before she withdrew. For her next class session she should sit near his desk, closely note what she observed about his head, and meet with me again. She reported with equanimity next time that his nose was not really in the center of his face, that one eye socket seemed a bit higher than the other, and that a balding spot was beginning at the back of his head. Then she interrupted my compliments about her breadth of perception to share that the content of the course was really too interesting to miss, and she would continue the course after all. As she was taking leave, she checked again, “You’ll never tell him, right?”

“Right!”

Unbelievable; infatuated with my baby brother!
Give me a break!

The student interaction that keeps recurring in my memory, however, took place in my office. One evening as I was about to leave for dinner, a student who had excelled in field hockey first semester and then withdrew from the team knocked on and closed my door in an uninterrupted motion.

“I can only stay a moment. My boyfriend is in his car out front. I just want you to know I’m getting an abortion.”

I believed that she truly meant to “only stay a moment,” so I dismissed the urge to ask her reason for wanting to tell me. I broached, instead, her readiness to make this decision,

“This is a big time decision. I’d be pleased to have your boyfriend join us so you both can fill me in on what you see as the pros and cons of this decision.”

“No, no. We weighed all that up already. I’ve got to go.”

Because of her haste to carry out the decision, I suspected she might not have been so thorough in “weighing all that up.” I hoped to raise options she had by involving more participants in a discussion of them.

“May be you’d like to have me with you to talk to your parents? I am ready any time.”

“Are you crazy? My father would kill me for being pregnant! I’m leaving.”

With that she rose, opened the door, and began to leave. Ah, that was her motive for coming to my office at the end of the day. She was not interested in treading again the ground to her decision. She was looking for me to respect her as a person whatever her decision. I suspect that my prematurely graying hair and balding head had qualified me for the role of being her “good father.” I wanted to reinforce that I was a person she could approach at any time in the future.

“May I stop by your residence hall around eight tonight to see how you are?”

“Sure, if you want to,” and she was gone.

Our visit that evening was brief. She came to the foot of the residence hall staircase, precluding any privacy by staying in this public area. She said she was “O.K.,” thanked me for visiting her, and told me that she saw no likelihood that we would be talking again. Then she turned and ascended the stairs.

As a lieutenant, the officers of the precinct knew I was accessible. At the college, the students need me to be even more accessible. Thank goodness, I am able to be.

Checkmate

Months after my birth the Great Depression began to hammer Ireland too. Dad worked the farm with Sean while Nicola managed the kitchen and us little ones. When I was ten years old, one evening after I finished my homework, I told my parents,

“I want courses that will prepare me for the seminary at Maynooth, so I can be ordained a priest. I enjoy the way we pray the rosary every night and how neighbors sometimes join us. I think it must be wonderful to comfort the sick by bringing the sacraments to them and to counsel people with problems they’re worrying about. Father Cooney looks so intent when he walks around the parish with eyes downcast, carrying communion in the box he holds at his heart. Priests can tell us what they’ve learned about the Bible, and bring the parish together for novenas and benediction. I want to help people the way he does.”

Dad answered gruffly,

“I can’t imagine any intelligent man wanting to be a priest. All they do is rail against dancing and hear old biddies’ gossip in confession. But if you persist, stay a simple priest like Father Cooney with none of this ‘Monsignor,’ ‘Your Excellency,’ ‘Your Eminence’ title-touting. So many peacocks with their coats of arms! Poor Jesus!”

Nicola gave me hug and kissed my forehead as she added,

“Michael, you’re only ten, and you probably wouldn’t be ordained until you’re twenty-five or so. Be patient for now, stay close to God, and if this is God’s plan for you, it will work out.”

Then, when I spoke with my teacher a week later, he hesitated.

“You don’t show a particular talent for languages, Michael. So, you may have difficulty being admitted to Maynooth.”

It was Malachy who had the talent for languages. Nicola had grown up on the western coast where the inhabitants preferred speaking Irish to English. When we were young, she recited nighttime stories for us in both languages. Speaking English, I would beg her the next night to repeat my favorite. Malachy would ask too, but in Irish. When we were older, I envied his gift for language, but not enough to bother with the discipline language required of me.

I remember the day in third grade when Malachy stunned our teacher. I was all at ends in class that morning. When I was lifting my coat, I broke the peg supporting its weight. When I sat down, I clattered my books on to the floor. Losing my place, I asked the student behind me about the page we were on. That was it for the teacher who growled in Irish so no one of us English speakers would understand,

“You are driving me crazy, you little bastard!”

Malachy, though, promptly answered in Irish,

“Dominic is not a bastard.”

The teacher was alarmed that he had been found out and might have to confront our parents, so he swiftly responded in Irish,

“No, no. Of course he’s not.”

That night we told our parents what happened, and dad burst out,

“Ah, he walked into that one! It was wrong for him to say that in any language, but you were really testing him, Michael, and, Malachy, you completely upended him. Brilliant! For now, we’ll let it rest.”

The observation that I did not have a talent for language, which my grades confirmed, worried me that I would be left on the farm and deprived of ordination. So, I wrote to Brendan asking him to sponsor me and to let me live with him. This was bold of me because he had never returned and I had never written to him. We were fraternal strangers, and yet he replied that he would gladly sponsor me once Nicola and dad gave their approval. Brendan continued that I would be a “latchkey” child until he returned home from the cemetery each evening. He even went so far as to write one of his infrequent letters to them to express his readiness to take me on.

I explained the plan to dad, and asked him to sign the emigration documents. Nicola and dad were anxious because of my youth and the distance involved, but reluctantly agreed. They softened, I suspect, at the prospect of the relief my departure would bring to our cheek by jowl household. Brendan paid my fare, met me and took me in, and enrolled me in junior high school. This was one week before Germany invaded Poland.

I had usually finished my homework by the time Brendan returned home. He showered, and insisted on cooking dinner for the two years before I began at the junior diocesan seminary. After dinner we enjoyed getting to know each other.

“I’ll bet,” he reflected, “the recessive genes you show were from our mother’s side, courtesy of survivors from the Spanish Armada. She would tell stories about her ancestors that were more dramatic than anything dad remembered. She credited her own mother with passing onto her the facility to recall classical poetry and to compose her own limericks which she recited for me. There were so many, but this is one of my childhood favorites that she’d repeat when I was ill,

“No more nice guy; just be tough,
And tell your body, ‘That’s enough!
No more virus, not a germ;
I’ll send you back. This time I’m firm.’
Ask your brain, ‘What were you
 thinking?’
Tell your spine, ‘Stand tall; no
 shrinking!’
Tell your liver, spleen, ‘Excrete!’
If they’re slow, keep on, repeat.
Tell your limbs, ‘Just skip a beat.
I want to rest. Hear that, my feet?’
Tell your ears, ‘Don’t get me wrong.
I’ll be asleep, not hear a song.’
Then, tell your muscles, ‘Please, stay near.
I’m using you throughout the year.’”

“Brendan, that’s a lengthy limerick you’re able to recite all these decades later,” I said in amazement.

“Ah, but I recite it every day. The first half invigorates me after lunch, and the second relaxes me at home. And it releases a warm memory of mum.”

Once I enrolled in the junior seminary for high school students, I learned that our year was expected to complete six hours of volunteer work weekly. Since a local hospital was located on my way home, I chose to be a friendly visitor there. After each visit, I let Brendan know that evening how challenging I found these visits to be.

“I was directed to visit patients regardless of their religious affiliation, and one of the first patients, speaking with an Indian accent, told me he was a Sikh.”

I answered, “Of course you’re sick or you wouldn’t be here.”

Brendan smiled as he listened, and had me look up “Sikh” in the encyclopedia.

“When I returned to the hospital, I visited an older woman who had a young man at her bedside holding her hand. Using a little Irish palaver, I greeted her by nodding toward the young man and saying,

‘I see you have an angel at your bedside.’

‘How can you tell, he blurted out?’

‘How can I tell what?’

‘That my name is Gabriel!’

The patient clasped his arm, and wide-eyed gasped,

‘Son, maybe he has the powers!’

Then, she asked me,

‘Pastor, can you see right into people’s hearts and know about their future?’

‘I have no powers, as you call them. I did not know his name is Gabriel, and I’m not a pastor yet.’

‘Don’t worry, she advised me. We won’t tell anyone about your powers. Your secret is safe with us.’

I thanked them for their reassurance, and promptly fled.”

“Little brother,” he answered, “whatever special powers you may have had, they’re only good in Ireland! Sorry.”

Then, Brendan continued,

“Tonight I also have a tale about my day. My supervisor pointed to this priest who was consoling a family at a graveside.

“‘Lots of priests merely shake hands, say a prayer, and move on to the next burial. Not this fellow, and the bereaved stay around a good while to speak with him. On inclement days, I see him linger with family members in the chapel. Here’s the story why his ministry is cemetery chaplain instead of parish priest.’

“Since I learned information about this priest that he probably wants to keep private, I am not telling you his name. About six months after he began his first parish assignment, he started enduring great sweats, an unremitting heaviness, and delusions. It did not matter if it were children at the communion rail, or brides at the altar, or the choir master processing by, suddenly upon their shoulders a skull appeared asking,

“‘No joy today?’

“Then, one Saturday afternoon a psychiatrist in his parish was entering the church at the same time as the priest was to hear confessions. He asked the doctor to call him between six and half-past when he’d be eating before returning to hear confessions in the evening. The doctor did one better, and was waiting for the priest at the rectory door. The priest became his patient, and agreed that the doctor could also keep in contact with the director of diocesan personnel. For a while the priest was hospitalized, and learned there that his psychotic episodes had their roots in biological and chemical imbalances. The delusions continue to occur occasionally, but he recognizes them now for what they are. Of course, the fact that he is now actually offering peace and hopefully some joy is an anchor in reality.”

“Don’t worry, Brendan, I won’t pursue his identity. Sure, we’re all human beings, and weaknesses seem to be our strongest connections.”

“I agree on that point. I’ve always thought that the Hartnett liabilities were our biggest assets,” he nodded.

Then I told him that my grammar school instructor had definitely been correct: I had no gift for languages. Worse, we tediously translated from the western Church Fathers rather than the more fluid Lucretius and Horace. Far, far worse was ancient Greek, “so much barbed wire,” where we mastered conjugating the “aorist passive” rather than reading Homer and Euripides. All this infuriated Brendan who determined to supplement my junior seminary education with experiential lessons of his own.

Since we lived only a few blocks from Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker House, Brendan had us attend the Friday evening meetings there. There folks from the soup line and anyone else heard guest speakers, all of them committed to social justice.

"No better seminary education than this! 'Sermon on the Mount' all the way," Brendan declared.

On the way home he shared his memories of previous Friday meetings, including the night he accompanied the guest speaker back to her car parked on the Bowery. They found a thief in her trunk trying to pull out her spare tire, and when Brendan challenged him, he pleaded,

"OK, OK. But I'm not the guy who stole your battery!"

So, Brendan escorted her to a gas station on Houston Street, bought a battery, and installed it in her car.

I am all the more beholden to Brendan for introducing me to the Catholic Worker and Dorothy Day. I attended the Friday meetings all through the seminary and encouraged classmates to accompany me. When my schedule permitted, I volunteered to make soup and clean up. When the cemetery workers struck during my final year before ordination, I consulted with Brendan about observing Archbishop Spellman's order to break the strike, and agreed to do so for only one day, as he advised. What a learning experience: walking downcast past Uncle Charlie at the gate and then watching Dorothy Day hoist her placard on the workers' behalf! The following day I left the seminary, and moved back to Brendan's apartment.

I had no idea about a career choice, so I moved to the Catholic Worker as a fulltime resident volunteer. After a decade during which even I learned to Spanish, the School of Social Work at Hunter College accepted me.

The curriculum required me every semester to carryout social work functions under supervision. My first field placement was at a medical center in Manhattan where I was one of four students with our own field instructor provided by Hunter. She oriented us to the hospital's departments, and was also arranging for us to be included in two lectures about medical nomenclature. Before the first lecture occurred, however, I was in my lab coat sitting at the nurses' station reading the record of the first patient I was to see. I could not yet understand the medical argot used for the diagnosis, but at that moment a lab coated man strode comfortably by. I addressed him,

“Doctor, would you kindly explain what this diagnosis means? He turned to face me head on, while I stood and raised the record closer to him. He stood there voiceless with crimson blotches rising above his collar. Finally, he hastened,

““Doctor, I am a medical student. We have not yet covered this. I don't know the answer.’

““Oh, relax. I'm a social work intern and I don't know what it means either.’

““Ah, yes. You're even lower around here than I am.””

We laughed a bit, and said we'd root for each other.

One of my patients was a ten year old boy who ran after a ball while his father was mowing the lawn. The boy

rushed upon his father exactly as he was turning the tractor, and in a moment the rotary blade severed the son's forearm. I was meeting with him to see how the boy felt about wearing the prosthesis our rehabilitation unit provided. I was anxious because I had never spoken with anyone maimed by a family member, and it showed when I could not think of the word "prosthesis". I had already begun,

"How are you doing with [mental blank]," when I finished my question with "that *thing*?" Remarkably, my tongue-tying amnesia proved to be an excellent conversation opener. The boy interpreted my saying "*thing*" as removing heavy affect from what others might belabor as a tabooed subject. He shared how frantic his parents have been, how fortunate he was, as a lefty, that it was his right arm, and how much he is looking forward to the Disney World trip his parents have prepared for him and a friend he chooses.

"As we were ending, my desk phone rang and I briefly turned to answer it. A moment later, *TWANG!* With his prosthetic arm he had pulled the back of my suspenders. He seemed well adapted to using his new arm."

My brothers teased that they were having none of my self-criticism, claiming,

"Go on, you planned your faux pas from the beginning to get the ball rolling. Clever fox you are!"

"Well, for a 'clever fox,' I certainly can dig a hole for myself. Seriously, when I was at the beginning of my second year internship in a low-income daycare center, I

made a tragic mistake. After I was introduced at the pre-school staff meeting, I learned every one's first name since that was manner in which they were addressing one another. The children were present the following morning, however, so the staff used proper names to address one another. I alone remembered no one's last name. Then there were all the children's names, and since a variety of cultures were involved, many had names I had to learn with no mnemonic to help.

"I wanted to meet with parents in their homes so I could see each child's environment. My plan was to introduce myself to the parent who picked up the child and to make an appointment. The first five parents who arrived next day for pickup were all mothers, and I addressed each one by her surname as we made the appointments. I continued to address the sixth woman formally, but she was adamant that I call her by her nickname Bea 'like every one of my family, my friends, and co-workers do'. She also encouraged me to forget about any home visits, pointing out,

"My husband is insanely jealous! You could never come to our place, even if we were both there. He'd kill me!"

"To be honest, I did not take her literally when she said this. At the CW soup kitchen I routinely heard folks on line threaten anyone trying to cut the line, 'If you try that again, I'll kill you!' I had become inured to it. So, when her husband unexpectedly picked up their child the following day, I introduced myself, and, failing to refer to her as 'Mrs.,' I told him,

“How glad I am to meet both Bea and you so soon. Perhaps we three could meet together, and you could tell me more about your daughter so I could help her get the most out of our daycare program.”

He replied, “I’ll talk with my wife about it, and let you know.”

The police were at the daycare center next morning. A neighbor heard the child at the curb screaming. She had come from her bedroom to find her mother’s body mangled on the living room couch where her father had left it after mowing her down with his car and driving back and forth over her. He had already confessed to the Delaware State Police who had spotted his car on I-95. Child Protective Services now had custody of the child, and was arranging for meetings with the extended family driving up from Virginia. I met with my field instructor for help in dealing with my ineptitude and feelings of guilt. She was most supportive, and Hunter provided me with its own excellent resources, including a referral for psychotherapy.

“That’s a tough one,” the brothers agreed, and began commiserating by sharing their own stories of awkwardness and failure. Sean recalled a draining and too frequent experience of his on the police force.

“Too often, the function of the force is to tourniquet social wounds so they can be contained without the disruptive institutional surgery really needed. We are expected to intervene quickly and move on. This was stamped vivid and raw the day I was sent to accompany two child protection workers who were visiting a home to

remove five siblings. The single mother worked in a stockroom and maintained the cleanliness of a large hardware store. While she is gone, her oldest child, ten year old Sabrina, cares for her siblings, the youngest only one and a half years old. All five have juvenile diabetes, and Stephanie gives them their daily insulin shots. None are attending school, and it is illegal for young Sabrina to be administering the shots. A neighbor learned about the situation, and contacted child protection which confirmed child neglect.

“When we arrived, bedlam burst out. The mother was bawling and started to strike one of the workers. I had an officer threaten to arrest her unless she sat down, and then spend the time we were there talking with the officer. Sabrina, meanwhile, had thrown herself across her four siblings on the couch, as though she could thwart child protection’s plan. When she refused to move, I tossed her on to my shoulder. At that point, she calmly told me that she had been through this action before, and to put her down.

“I know what kinds of clothing each of them needs to bring. Let me prepare their bags and gather their medicine. Mom is too disturbed to help.’

“While she was doing this, one worker escorted the eight year old brother down to the car. Shortly after, we all exited the apartment to find that the eight year old had fled from the back seat while the worker was up front. Knowing that a missing person search was going to be a lengthy assignment requiring lots of personnel, I really lost

it and cursed out the worker. That's when Sabrina looked up at me,

“Lieutenant, I know where he is, at his best friend's house, for sure. Trust me, and I'll bring him back.’

“I gambled that she was being honest with me, and I was right. Back came the two of them. Everyone leaves, and I continue cursing because the city has so many of these kids powerless to escape.”

And so it went week after week, we brothers and cousin Charlie hailing each other, supporting each other, and celebrating or commiserating with each other. Then, I brought up that I wanted to bring a friend of mine Annie McGuirk, an NYU graduate student to our next meeting. I explained that I would do the cooking that night, and I expected she would return double whatever palaver they threw at her.

“Oh, we'll be kind to her,” they chorused. “She must be in a sorry state already if she's been hanging out with you. Is she one of the patients from your field placement? Does her mother know she's been in your company?”

“OK, big guys, be sure you're this facile next week, because the food and the banter will be first class.”

Meeting Annie was a new kind of experience for me. It seemed at the time as though I were in an invigorating stream with a gentle current moving me along with little effort on my part, all very pleasant. I did not have field placement on Fridays, and so I managed to catch a morning mass at St Joseph's church. My route crossed Washington Square Park where Annie was setting up her

pieces to play chess. Suddenly, one day I greeted her, and we introduced each other.

Our meeting could have been in Feakle when I noticed that her deep brown hair in a pageboy cut set off her blue eyes and almost chalk white complexion. Then, upon awakening on Friday mornings, I found myself looking forward to finding her at the chess table. On the way home, if she weren't playing, I'd ask about her dissertation on the American Travelers whose relatives in Ireland we called Tinkers. She was interested in my seminary years, the Catholic Worker, and my social work education. When she inquired further about the topics discussed at the CW's Friday meetings, I asked her out to dinner after which we'd attend the current meeting.

The speaker's theme was "Strategies for Non-Violent Active Resistance." Among other examples, he brought up the leadership of Gandhi, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Berrigan brothers, and then opened the floor for discussion. Annie referred to five examples of men and women who were martyred during their non-violent activities on behalf of civil rights. She was impressive, and I think that she could have conducted the evening herself.

Afterwards over pizza, she shared that she had friends at the university who would "eat up" the Friday meeting. She would like to raise the subject with them, if I didn't mind. Even though a tightening in my chest told me that I did mind, that I wanted the CW meeting to be part of a date with Annie, I lied,

"You'll be doing them a big favor. Good for you."

Then I hit on a clever strategy myself, and asked her to share a meal I'd make for my brothers and cousin and give her a chance to meet them. She was delighted, and so was I because all of us created a whopping craic. Whenever my siblings denigrated me profusely, Annie would prompt them to tell her more until they touched the level of absurdity. Then Annie mentioned various challenges of her own family's patterns of give-and-take over the generations. Finally, Brendan declared that he wanted everyone to acclaim that Annie should participate in our weekly meetings hereafter. The affirmative shout, with Annie's voice included, was unanimous

And so, I gradually managed to claim Annie's weekends with our mutual attentiveness to social issues and to outrageous humor. After some months had passed, we announced our engagement, and Annie's parents flew up to meet me and my family. Her mother is a person of formidable opinions while her father is relaxed and hospitable. Her mother oversaw all the details of our wedding; so our responsibility was merely to show up. I had graduated two weeks before our wedding, and Annie was less than a year away from finishing her doctoral dissertation. She had a close friend as her maid of honor and Brendan was my best man. We wholeheartedly enjoyed the reception, and had a grand wedding trip to Charleston and Savannah.

More good fortune awaited us. Archbishop Cody had recently returned from Vatican II where bishops took the occasion to inform one another about the news in their diocese. A colleague had told him that a religious

congregation of women in his mid-western diocese had transformed its novitiate into the recently opened “Mount Shekinah College” for women. Annie and I could apply for faculty positions, if we were interested. We did, mentioning that the archbishop was referring us. Sister Felicia, the president, interviewed us on campus, and appreciated that the archbishop was involved and that she could fill two vacancies at Instructor rank with its modest salaries. We started with one year appointments toward tenure which, of course, required doctoral degrees. I would teach courses in Sociology and Latin and Annie courses in Education.

Sister Felicia also brought up that next to the campus there was a house available to purchase or rent. We were able to rent it, and two weeks before classes started we moved in. Because the house had been recently used as a bed and breakfast, an inoperative pay phone was on the wall in the foyer. We wanted a land line in the kitchen, so I called the phone company from my office to have it installed. Unfortunately, I forgot to ask for the pay phone to be removed. When the kitchen phone was installed, the technician inadvertently hooked up the pay phone as an extension of our new land phone number. So, one day while I was passing through the foyer, I remembered to call the phone company and used the pay phone in front of me. When the operator in the business office asked for the number of the phone I was using, I told her how the pay phone became activated, and explained that she really wanted the kitchen phone’s number.

“Sir, I want the number for the phone in your hand.”
When I told her, she replied,

“You cannot be calling from that number because it has been disconnected. I am referring your call to the department that manages pay phones.”

The representative there asked if this were a prank because the company does not install pay phones in private homes. I explained myself again, and arranged for the phone company to come the following morning to remove the phone. A technician arrived promptly, emptied a few coins from the locked tray in the phone, and left. Then, speaking in my most stentorian voice, I arranged for a terminal visit next morning. The technician who arrived wielded a mighty crowbar that gouged cavernous scars in the wall that now needed professional repair, but the phone was gone!

We invited Brendan, Sean, and Charlie to visit for the Thanksgiving weekend. Charlie assured us he loved us, but he no longer used planes. Brendan and Sean, however, were arriving “on the red eye” flight Thanksgiving morning. While I was meeting them at the airport, however, Annie discovered that the oven had broken down with no time to repair it. She paid a restaurant to cook the turkey, and then lived with the remarks of my brothers about this being “the safest turkey they ever ate.” For, Brendan and Sean had picked up the turkey, and shuttled it home ensconced in its own seatbelt.

The brothers visited again when the college closed for spring break. At that time Brendan and Sean canvassed the variety of rooms in the house, and ran the following

idea past Annie and me. We three brothers would buy the house with Brendan and Sean paying up front, while I contributed my share through monthly payments equivalent to my current rent. My brothers would divide the ample quarters upstairs, and Annie and I could have the entire first floor.

“We’ll need that much space because our first born is on the way,” Annie announced.

Delighted with our news, the uncles announced they would will the property to us upon their deaths. After we bought the house, Sean used it for vacations. Brendan retired from the cemetery, and moved in permanently announcing,

“I know children of my own would do me in, but as an uncle I’ll be superb!”

The future, however, was not so straight forward. As the nuns became familiar with Brendan tending the flowers and vegetables on his property and offering tips about how they could enhance theirs, they invited him to attend their daily early mass. One morning he overheard a nun talking about the new Catholic Worker House that opened in a woe-be-gone neighborhood of the state capital nine miles away. Soon Brendan was regularly involved there preparing the hearty soups and stews to be served to the homeless throng at noonday and then cleaning up afterwards. Waiting on the line each day was a woman Brendan’s age with a brogue he recognized as originating in Derry. She was amazed that he could identify her hometown, and introduced herself as Nollaig Reilly.

She soon showed him that she was his equal as a raconteur. She had emigrated to Boston twenty-five years ago, where Franklin Lee, a prosperous lawyer, hired her to work in his household. More than someone performing the housework while his wife prepared the meals, she was a valued companion to his wife and an authority to his son Raymond who was directed to address her as Miss Reilly. A decade later business opportunities drew the family to the mid-west. Here, Nollaig asserted, life in the household quickened:

“When Raymond asked for a Daisy B-B rifle for his tenth birthday, Mr. Lee set up a ‘shooting range’ in our basement with the stipulation that Raymond was never to ‘take the gun outside.’ One Saturday afternoon Mr. and Mrs. Lee were at a party, and I was relaxing with the papers while Raymond was reading as well. I fell asleep, and Raymond purposefully violated the heart of this prohibition while observing the letter of the law. He closed the doors to the kitchen, and opening a window began shooting outside targets while standing inside. He had discovered, after targeting a light bulb in the basement, that it imploded when hit rather than spewing shards every which way. He realized then that he could insert light bulbs as targets atop the hollow metal posts supporting the backyard fence. When he shot accurately enough from the window to hit a bulb, there was a gratifying “pop,” and the implosion drew all the fragments down inside the post. In the course of that memorable afternoon he unscrewed almost all the light bulbs in the house, and used them for target practice. He had given no thought, however, to my

awakening to, and his parents returning to, a world of darkness. His allowance ended up paying for candles and new bulbs, and his rifle disappeared for six months.

“I was surprised that his parents agreed to his having the air rifle, after his antics with a water pistol the summer before. Lost in imagination one August day, he was patrolling up the driveway of a neighbor on the block after ours. A voice startled him. Through an open window a woman at her ironing board asked peremptorily what he was doing. He answered by blasting two drenching shots through the window with his water pistol before taking off. He had not anticipated that she would walk around the corner to our block and that his friends would identify his house to her. When Raymond arrived home, his mother and I were waiting to interrogate him. After he confessed to everything, his mother reported how mortified she was to learn that her son had even shot at an adult, no less a woman who ended up dropping an iron on her foot because of it. He was to apologize to the woman immediately, and promise that she would not find him on her property ever again. The neighbor accepted his apology, and admonished him to appreciate that he was growing older and should act more responsibly. At supper Mrs. Lee announced that there would be no chocolate pudding for him to help him remember the lessons of the day.

“Without his air rifle to occupy him, Raymond now had some free time to fill, and conjured up the challenge of walking the mile home from school atop the backyard fences along the way. He had a book pack with shoulder straps that freed up his arms, and he held on to tree

branches for extra balance. He was able to travel one block before he fell from a fence, scratching his face and tearing the sleeve of his shirt. When Mrs. Lee and I asked about his appearance, he came clean about his adventure, including his encounter with a girl a year ahead of him at school.

“When I reached the third backyard, I saw, embedded near the top of the fence I was standing on, a large hook supporting the wheel for the clothesline which reached the length of the yard to a rear window in the house. Only this time the hook also had a second, shorter section of clothesline draped over it with a noose at one end. My schoolmate, Louise, was climbing upon a gallon paint can, and readying to put the noose over her head.”

“Hi, Louise what are you doing?”

“Oh! You surprised me, Raymond. I finished reading a book about the death of Abraham Lincoln which showed a picture of the perpetrators being hanged. One of them was a woman. I was wondering what hanging must have been like for her, so I’m trying it out.”

“You mean you’re hanging yourself?”

“No, no. I’m not going to kill myself, but I want to put myself in the situation.”

“But what if you kill yourself accidentally?”

“I can guarantee there will be no accidents. This paint can is full and won’t budge. Anyway, I’m holding on to the other end of the rope. So, I can always let go.”

“Please do it now while I’m here, just in case.”

“OK, but you have to promise not to tell anyone, or I’ll get into a lot of trouble.”

““OK. It’s a deal.””

“She carried out what she said, pulling the clothesline taut, and reported it was really ‘nasty’. Louise began tidying up the yard so there would be no evidence when her parents got home.

““You did this even though you knew your parents would be opposed?’ I asked her.

““That’s right. They’d object because they’d fear an accident could happen, but I knew there was no chance because of the precautions I took.’

““Are you going to do this again?””

““Not this, but who knows what’s coming down the road. Remember, don’t tell.’

““I won’t, but I think it’s a good idea to be cautious sometimes.””

“I cannot tell you how excited his mother and I were to hear Raymond finally express some maturity, even if only as advice ‘to be cautious sometimes.’”

“Regrettably, we had erred about any progress toward maturity. Instead, Raymond was acting now with greater stealth, and when Mr. Lee died about five years later, he became unmanageable. He was curt and sullen toward Mrs. Lee, and spoke to me in foul, abusive language. Unlike his mother, I stood up to him and left him to wait on himself.

“To Mrs. Lee I tried to be as kind and supportive as ever, but I was exhausting my reserves. I began drinking in the evenings to relax, and this self-medication seemed to be working. On particularly trying days, I started drinking in the afternoon. Then after an explosive morning episode

during which I feared Raymond was about to strike me, I poured an ample amount of alcohol into my tea. A few drinks more, and I was off to the races.

“Mrs. Lee died eighteen months after this episode. She left me five thousand dollars in her will and remainder of her estate to Raymond. He promptly ordered me out of their home, and I found a wee apartment for myself. Alone in the apartment, I ate randomly, read the daily paper, and drank too much. Then one evening I was so groggy, I did not notice a car run a red light until the driver hit me. I ended up spending my funds paying for pain killers. Soon enough I was evicted and dreading the night ahead, I entered the shelter downtown. There I saw incidents of theft and sexual harassment, and I was too frightened to return. Fortunately, others in the same boat let me join them in their cardboard huts under the speedway and on the meal-line at the Catholic Worker.

“At the CW Brendan befriended me, and said he might be able to find me permanent housing if I joined AA. This was the right moment for me to hear ‘AA’ and ‘permanent housing’ linked in the same sentence. That very night, there was a meeting at St. Mel’s Presbyterian Church and I was there. I chuckle at the way AA is a non-sectarian organization that’s often benefitting Catholics with meetings in the basements of Protestant churches! After keeping sober for two weeks and agreeing to the stipulation that he drive me to future meetings, Brendan told me about Annie and Michael. He had already spoken to them about my staying with them, and they were willing to try the arrangement out.

“Once I began living with them, three mornings a week Brendan drove me to meetings and returned me to their home. He would go back to the CW, and each evening join the craic on the first floor. I was often holding the floor with tales about my Irish kin, experiences with the Lees, and life as a homeless person. For example, I told them,

“I was so surprised whenever any of my kin died, because we came from ‘a long-living parcel’ of Ireland. My uncle, in fact, once quipped, ‘Ah, back home they had to shoot a man to start a cemetery!’ Then, there was 1963, the year prelates visited Ireland on their way to and from Vatican Council II. Father Toomey was visiting his parents at the time and also helping out the pastor, when an American bishop pulled up and asked to see his father’s baptismal certificate that he understood was in our parish records. When Father Toomey left the parlor to find the ledger for that year, however, the pastor whispered that he was to tell the bishop that it was currently at the binder’s shop. Father did as he was directed, much to the bishop’s consternation. Then, after his departure Father asked the pastor what was going on. ‘Oh, those records included more information than a person might want to know. The bishop would learn, for instance, that his father is illegitimate.’

“Then I began reflecting upon my ties with fellow homeless folk that often buoyed my spirit, my body notwithstanding.

“I think of Ricardo, harmless, generous with the scraps he had, but always mumbling. Last Easter as I sat

toward the back of the cathedral for mass, I noticed Ricardo three rows ahead next to the aisle. The bishop was the celebrant and began the service by proceeding down the aisle sprinkling the congregation with holy water from a bowl the deacon was holding. When the drops fell upon Ricardo, he whipped out a water pistol from his waist band and shot the bishop right across the chest. When the bishop and deacon realized it was only water, they continued on as though nothing had happened. Those of us who saw the mutual exchange of greetings, however, were chuckling until the bishop was back at the altar.”

Over the months, all the stories, the exuberant times together, the shared purpose in caring for the infant coming were preludes to the news Nollaig and Brendan were now vying to share,

“We are marrying! Before the baby arrives, you will have another room free!”

Such jubilation! What a party followed! The wedding took place in the college chapel three weeks later, but they had to postpone their wedding trip down the Mississippi River in a paddle steamer because baby Dorothy arrived one week prior to her due date. Consequently, Mrs. McGuirk and Sean the godparents, nun-chums, faculty friends, and Nollaig’s street companions celebrated the wedding in the morning, the baptism in the afternoon, and a glorious, perhaps historic, craic afterwards.

The President's Report

Brendan whispered, "Sister Felicia," to me after a weekday mass, hoping that Nollaig and he could see me later in my office. When we met at eleven, they asked my permission to wed in the college chapel. I was delighted, and offered to hold a small reception in the old novitiate building's wainscoted connected drawing-rooms. Of course, I had come to know Brendan very well since he became our neighbor and later accepted our invitation to join the sisters for morning mass. After a few months, in fact, I learned more about him than he wanted me to know.

Brendan customarily entered our small chapel before most of the sisters and sat in the back row because he had observed how each sister had her favorite chair. One morning, though, he arrived only seconds before mass was to begin, and confronted a choice. There were only two empty chairs because the back row had been removed to start cleaning the rug. One chair was nearest the altar and required him to traipse past everyone. The other was only two rows ahead, but was the preferred chair for an older nun who required a leg brace. Ordinarily, she was among the first sisters to enter the chapel, but this day she was absent. So, concluding she wasn't coming, Brendan sat in her chair

Brendan was barely seated, when that sister belatedly entered the chapel without his noticing. When she saw her seat was taken and started toward the front, the nun who sat behind her shouted, "I think it's terrible that he took your seat!" Brendan visibly winced, and the other

sisters melted in empathy with him. As the chapel emptied after mass, one of the sisters whispered to Brendan that the nun who shouted “is losing to dementia.” There was, in fact, never any difficulty between Brendan and the re-seated sister, and he continued at mass without interruption.

Six months later, however, another episode in the chapel tested his mettle. To express his devotion, Brendan regularly genuflected before taking his seat and again after mass was finished. No one seemed to notice that he was taking longer making these gestures, until the morning after mass when he bent his knee and could not rise. As they were leaving, the nuns thought he was praying in that posture. Fifteen minutes later a sister passing by heard him calling, and entered to find him sitting on the floor.

“Sister, would you kindly give me a wee lift to get up?”

She tugged and he pulled, but the situation needed more muscle power. After saying that she’d be but a minute, she returned with two nuns as old as herself and with Sister Felicia, the youngest of them all. They elevated him successfully, and respected his decision to forego a cup of coffee. Brendan was present the following morning, but never again genuflected. Nor did any of the sisters ever avert to the incident having happened.

Over the following year I met Nollaig at a variety of student sponsored assemblies, and I learned about her own commitments and social justice experiences. I invited her to have lunch with me, this time with my agenda in mind.

“Nollaig, I noticed that your activities at the Catholic Worker capture the college’s mission statement ‘to empower women with the analytical skills, knowledge, and compassion to enhance their quality of life and that of marginalized populations.’ I think you’re in a key position to help our faculty, who are without your experience, become more knowledgeable in four areas: the risks in America of becoming homeless; how the homeless help one another survive; the social services the homeless need; and the social services actually available to them. In addition to lectures and/or workshops with the faculty, you could also meet with their classes whenever you’re invited. Finally, I am offering you a two hundred dollar stipend for each of these meetings.”

She smiled, “You have already been so gracious to me that I could not possibly accept a stipend. The faculty’s humorous company at the social events Brendan and I have attended has undermined any deference I might have felt because of their advanced degrees. I am thrilled that you see me benefiting the college, and the only anxiety I’ll feel will occur because of my inexperience in public speaking. In terms of public *shouting* I have lots of experience! You have been hospitable, even indulgent, to my homeless friends. I know that some of their behavior can be trying. Don’t hesitate to call me anytime I can be of service, and thanks so much for a very fine lunch.”

Perhaps a year later, as our contacts at the college’s academic events continued, Nollaig asked,

“Here we are most improbably working together at the same college. Would you like to contrast the different ways we got here? I am so curious.”

“Sounds interesting, but I am a public figure at the college, Nollaig, and I would want us to keep our stories exclusively between us. Is that a deal?”

“Sister, I am a tomb.”

“OK, I’ll say a bit and then it’s your turn. My family lived in Vermont in a household that included my widowed paternal grandfather, my parents, my older sister and me. The multiple generations in my family were initially a boon for us children. My paternal grandfather, austere with his own children, insisted on caring for my sister and me as preschoolers during the day. He prepared our favorite meals, and let us help him by stirring the ingredients, cracking eggs, and buttering toast. Weather permitting, he drove to several parks where we played with other children. Otherwise, we played indoors, and after lunch he read from Beatrix Potter’s stories.

“Once my sister and I began dating, however, he resumed his patriarchal stance. He was a Montenegrin immigrant who expected to give the final approval to our choice for husband. Our parents went along with him, conveying that they would not join any subterfuges we might create. And so, we learned to keep our own counsel, and hope for the best. After she graduated, my sister moved five counties away to live near the hospital where she was a speech pathologist. Following a tacit agreement, though, she ate with us each Sunday, and kept us up to date with an edited account of her activities.

“I was the one who upended everyone’s comfort zone. During college I began dating Josef, a witty, attentive, and conscientious European literature major planning for a career as a professor. He first caught my eye as a classmate in high school when I learned that both our families had paternal grandfathers from Montenegro. Over the years, Josef became a regular member at our table, and purposefully sought grandfather’s memory of the folklore surrounding the battle of Grahovac, May, 1, 1858. On that anniversary each year, Grandfather toasted the Montenegrins, outnumbered two to one, who routed the Ottomans and liberated the country.

“Nonetheless, all was lost when Josef introduced his family to ours at our commencement dinner to share a moment celebrating our graduations. In his enthusiasm, Josef’s grandfather raised his glass and recited a soaring Montenegrin toast. Our grandfather nodded and said to him,

““That toast sounds familiar. Perhaps it is from the southern province?””

““Yes, the southeast, ‘The Bastion of the Whites!’””

“Josef and I traded puzzled glances, and he gently moved his family on, claiming they should not risk losing their reservation.

“The next morning my parents woke my sister and me to join grandfather and them for breakfast. Ordinarily they would let us sleep in, but grandfather had directed that we all be present. As we were finishing our coffee, he cleared his throat and announced,

““Josef is unworthy of you, Stephanie. This

hypocrite who claims to know European literature allowed his grandfather to ridicule me publicly. For the sake of defending our family heritage, I insist you end your romance with this White.”

“I don’t understand what you are talking about,” I gasped. ‘All he does is rejoice with you over repelling the Ottomans!’”

“Surely, Josef must know his Montenegrin history beyond 1858, how we sided with the Allies during World War I and afterwards briefly achieved independence. Then, in 1919, we endured a civil war. Our highland, northern tribes, ‘the Greens,’ fought to maintain an identity independent from Serbia. The southern tribes, ‘the Whites,’ abetted by Serbian troops already in our country, fought to unite with Serbia. The Whites won, the unification took place, and many of us Greens dispersed for our lives to other countries. The memory of our loss is unbearable for me, my only defeat, and to escape reopening this trauma, I have kept these details to myself. I would have continued my silence, had Josef and his family not meant to make a fool of me. As soon as they heard my accent, they knew I was from a northern tribe and promptly started to rub it in.’

“Grandfather, you had barely spoken before Josef’s grandfather toasted us. You are imagining they slighted you.”

“It is not your place to tell me about my thinking! It is your place to introduce any man who has caught your eye to your family for our approval.”

“That’s what this all about, isn’t it, that I have

disrespected you! How wrong you are. I do love and honor you. I am sorry that the Greens lost, now that I know about them, and I did introduce Josef to our family. It's your imprimatur alone that matters, though. My parents sit here voicing no opinion, lest they antagonize you. Now that you have played your hand, I expect them to take your side. My place is with Josef as we together decide how we shall proceed.'"

"You make my disgrace complete. When you come to your senses, speak to me personally. Until then, I am retiring to my room and fasting on water only.'"

"That afternoon my parents took me aside, and pleaded with one voice,

"Stephanie, you know how he is. He will fast to his death unless you relent. We have to side with him. Any responsibility we could have for his dying is too much for us to bear.'"

"I shouted back, 'This is his choice; his death will be his responsibility, no one else's, and certainly not yours. Let me tell you that he has tensed our relationships to the point that I can no longer live here, and I'm moving out.'

"I called my college roommate who lived in a neighboring town, and her parents kindly agreed that I could stay temporarily with them. Josef and I met that evening, and he was undone when I told him about these conversations. He could barely manage to say,

“This is madness. The only word my grandfather said to us after being introduced to your grandfather was his delight in meeting a landsman. Your grandfather is conjuring up this White and Green hostility between them. What about you and me? We’ve been talking about announcing our engagement in a year once you have teaching experience and I’ve completed the first year toward my doctorate. You were going to save money by living at home, and my parents would cover my room and board at the university. You know that I love you, Stephanie, but I can’t walk away from the scholarship I won.”

“Of course you can’t, and I shall search for the least expensive rent I can find for me. Let’s meet here same time tomorrow to assess the lay of the land.”

“Josef and I met daily trying to find a way ahead for ourselves, but we seemed mired in so many dead ends. Finally, after the next weekend passed, Josef, with hesitant glances, admitted that he now thought we should suspend our relationship.

“In the future, who knows? For now, though, your bizarre family is leaching into every aspect of our lives. I abhor the pain I am causing you, but this is the least bad choice I can make.”

“Lost and rudderless, I later told my roommate, and slept. For two days I remained catatonic and solitary at my friend’s house. Then my mother called to let me know that grandfather had died from a stroke. I could attend the funeral or not, but to avoid any outbursts would I keep Josef and his family from attending. Our breakup, of

course, had already seen to that. When I arrived, my parents were chilly and taut. They did not offer to have me move back, nor did I ask. A month later I visited his grave, shared my memories of his kindness to me as a child, and lamented how star-crossed our relationship ended.”

“Oh, Sister, that was a dreadful experience. I am so sorry you had to endure it. I am the oldest of five children, three daughters followed by two sons, and that left me little time and spirit for any romantic relationship. As far back as I can remember, I had my youngest sibling on my hip. I was, though, involved in a scandal my cousin caused that was the talk of our village.

“Ralph, a cousin on my father’s side, was about three years older than I, and we had grand times together at our families’ celebrations. Though he enjoyed telling a good story, he was also a patient listener and attentive to others’ needs. When I turned twenty-one, he was opening his office as a mason, painter, and roofer. His business was succeeding, and a year later he married. Then, when their daughter was two, he suddenly ran off with one of the garda. The two men had given no clue about their relationship, and left their families without even a note. They may have fled to Great Britain, even though homosexuality was illegal there. In any case, no one heard from them again.

“The village had no folklore of such a thing occurring before. In fact, until our later adolescence most of us had no idea what “buggery,” as homosexual acts were known fifty years ago, was all about. Adults might whisper snippets in conversations we overheard, and

otherwise curiosity had to help us with the puzzle. Ralph's devastated parents took in his family, and they were all making-a-go of it for three years. Then, the younger daughter died from meningitis. Everyone in the village was bereft. My own father made the coffin. There were sobs wracking the funeral mass and the procession to the cemetery.

“After the burial, the villagers were passing through the gate of the cemetery and wandering to their homes, when my next younger sister and I spied Ralph hidden by a monument at the far end of the graves. On the spot, I signalled to her to remain silent, while I turned back to meet him. He was remaining in place until the cemetery was empty. He let me come to him, and when I asked how he learned his daughter had died, he answered he was not free to say. He was alone and knew that he was an unwanted mourner, but he had to come and say, ‘Farewell,’ and pocket a handful of dirt from her grave.

“Thank you for your kindness in greeting me. You are as I have always known you to be. I am leaving right away. You won't hear from me again.”

“When I reached home, I discovered that my sister could not remain silent when our parents asked where I could be. My parents were furious with me for ‘betraying the family’. They foresaw the villagers becoming enraged with me, if not with the entire family, for appearing to sympathize ‘with that villain’.

“I have no idea how word of my outreach to Ralph wound through the village, but soon enough the village ostracised me. When I sought the pastor's counsel, he

reported that he had never seen such universal rigidity before. He would always publicly greet me as a parishioner, he assured me, but perhaps I should be open to emigrating for the sake of my family.

“So, I shared this conversation with my parents who by now could see that I acted in charity on the spur of the moment. When they asked what I thought of the pastor’s suggestion, I told them that it sounded fair. They then contacted a sponsor in America, and gifted me with the fare and some discretionary funds. My mother wrote several months later that my exile satisfied most of our neighbours and our cousin’s family.”

“Nollaig, I think that’s enough reminiscing for now. Our journeys have their own routes, but at least we’re in the same country now. I need some time to digest again what we’ve shared.”

At the end of the semester, Nollaig and I were attending a faculty reception, and as our colleagues were leaving, she observed,

“I notice that neither of us drinks at these occasions.”

“Your fidelity to AA is an inspiration, Nollaig, and I know that the story of your drinking and recovery is well received at the other AA chapters.”

“You know that? Are you also ‘a friend of Bill’s?’ [code referring to a member of Alcoholics Anonymous]”

“Indeed, I am,” I answered. “Do you want to pause for a few minutes and continue our journeys to the college?”

She nodded, “Yes,” and I continued, “When we left

off, I was high-and-dry. I postponed my plans to teach, and was fortunate to find a position at a nursery in the neighbouring town. I gradually progressed to the 'go-to person' in the garden supplies department, but I was a mess after hours, spending more and more time with Jack Daniels. I was arriving at work with a sour stomach and a stabbing pain over my right eye. Finally, my supervisor warned me that my drinking was no secret,

“Stop now or be fired! Here is the schedule of AA meetings in the county. Pick one quickly.”

“I picked the closest group, and at my first meeting discovered that my supervisor was a decade long member. Though I was early for that meeting, someone was already setting up chairs and I joined him until we had forty circling a comfortable room in a church basement. The next person set up the coffee urn and put out the condiments. Many of the men and all the women greeted me as they arrived.

“As you know, at the beginning of every meeting, each person gives her/his first name and adds, ‘And I’m an alcoholic.’ Then, the entire group replies, ‘Welcome, [name].’ Following that, we pass the hat. That night was an open meeting which anyone can attend, and at which a member gives an account of his/her drinking history. Several mothers spoke about driving home from school while under the influence with their children and the children’s friends in the car. A middle aged fellow told about the birth of his first child. While he was buying beer for the monthly poker game he was scheduled to host that night, he helped himself to several. Then, he planned on

visiting his mother to pick up her pigs' knuckles that his buddies loved so much. At that moment, his wife told him that she was going into labor.

“No. no, you can't be in labor,' the beer replied. 'I haven't picked up the pig's knuckles yet!’”

“Seeing how the situation was deteriorating, she threatened,

“If you don't get me to the hospital now, I'll have the baby in the middle of your game!’”

“Oh, that sobered me up really fast.’”

“A second member, much older, told about the end of World War II.

“I was a mail carrier, and on V-J Day the homeowners kept pressing alcohol upon me. I was so loaded by the time I was half way through my route that when I staggered to the next door, the patron drove me and the mail back to the post office. My supervisor, a bit tipsy too, went easy on me.’”

“A third speaker recalled an artic-chilled, momentarily deep blizzard. He was the driver of a sanitation truck outfitted with a snow plough, and scheduled to work through the night.

“In the late afternoon I began to fortify myself with a bottle of brandy, and brought a flask to the cab of the truck, as well. We were moving towering heights of snow, and I was downing slug after slug. I noticed, though, that the truck had been struggling for the past mile, and asked my co-pilot, who was blotted with rum, to check if our wheels were clear. He reported that the wheels were fine, but we had been pushing a buried Volkswagen bug. We

backed away from the car and moved on, but imagine the owner's panic in the morning!"

"Then, there was the speaker who shared how he lost his job as a crew leader laying macadam in Brooklyn.

"I was scheduled to tear up two blocks on Ocean Avenue in preparation for laying macadam. In my stupor, though, I had my crew tear up the busier, six lane Ocean Parkway. Maybe, if it had been my first drinking incident, I wouldn't have been fired."

"Eventually we all heard one another's stories. I learned from them and from the humor, attentiveness, and kinds of feedback members gave each other at our closed meetings who the person was I wanted as a sponsor to guide my progress through sobriety. This woman happened to be a nun whose colleagues at her convent recognized that she had a problem, and insisted that she needed to get help. As she dawdled and kept drinking, they brought the situation to the attention of the order's provincial administrators. They too challenged her to begin a recovery program, or be relieved of teaching in her favorite grammar school. Twenty years ago she joined AA, and has been busy speaking at many and distant AA groups since.

"She generously accepted my request that she sponsor me, and during one of our daily conversions encouraged me to fill up some idle time after work. She had joined a dojo and persevered to become a black belt in karate. She brought up how both the exercise and comradery involved helped her sobriety. She welcomed me to join her there, were I interested. I tried it out, became enthusiastic, and after several years also earned a black

belt. It proved very valuable when a year later as I was moving a shrub on at work and a colleague squeezed my buttocks. Holding on to the shrub, I swivelled and landed a practiced kick to his crotch. He went down hard, the entire sequence witnessed by our supervisor who then fired him.

“After benefiting from her sponsorship for four years, I became increasingly curious about her decision to become a nun and specifically in her order. I peppered her with questions about living in community, and her life satisfaction over the decades. Then, as summer was approaching, she asked whether I might be interested in accompanying a band of sisters as they went about their ministry offering courses, kindergarten through second grade, to children of migrant workers.

“I arranged at work for my accumulated unused sick leave and my vacation to free me up to join them. We taught at a migrant camp in Immokalee, Florida. While their parents boarded the 6:30 AM bus driving them to the fields where they would pick ninety percent of the country’s tomatoes, we did our best to minimize the distance these children were falling behind academically. When I had to leave, I was exhausted and exhilarated.

“Back home, I spent more time meeting other sisters and curious women like myself. After completing a retreat focused upon discerning my path, I entered our religious community and completed my novitiate. I invited my family to attend my taking of vows, and shared that my name in religion would be Felicia, my mother’s name. My parents and my sister’s family answered that they were all eager to come, and at the ceremony my sister’s youngest

daughter Sofia, age five, felt my habit between her hands and informed me that I used to have her middle name, ‘Stephanie’. The healing had begun.

I had been teaching high school for two years, when my superior sent me to the University of Notre Dame for a doctorate in Sociology. My dissertation identified the variables that contribute to the life-satisfaction of elderly women religious retired from their primary ministry. I discovered that besides good health, high morale corresponded with maintaining satisfying ties with family members and friends in their communities. This was interesting since they had ‘left’ their families to join the community and had been admonished for decades to avoid ‘particular friendships’ for fear they would lead to homosexual relationships. Fortunately, the sisters knew that their mental health required good friends.

“With my new doctorate and multiple scholarly articles lifted from my dissertation, I taught Sociology for a decade. Then I was elected superior of the convent which, in turn, led the board of trustees steering our new college to appoint me its president.”

When I raised my eyebrows and turned my hands palms-up to indicate that I’d said it all, Nollaig added,

“Sister, at the Hartnett family events and gatherings, you learned about my wanderings before reaching the college. Certainly, they covered an awful lot of ground, and today I introduced you to Ralph and my emigration. I think the adventures that brought us to Mount Shekinah were tortuous but worth every step! What do you think?”

“I agree wholeheartedly,” I answered resting my hands on my knees. “I am gratified, too, that I do not have to walk those trails again.”

Sisterhood

The day before a meeting of the president with the assembled faculty, Sister Felicia and Annie were completing the logistics for the reception to follow in the old novitiate's parlor. At first, they stood near one of the windows with diamond shaped, beveled panes lined with lead. As the sunlight welcomed the room, the two women ensconced themselves in the plush blue parlor chairs that the parents of one of the nuns had upholstered as a gift. Sister Felicia began joking with Annie that the Hartnett brothers must have been an uproarious combination when she first encountered them.

“Oh, you bet, and you have not met their cousin Charlie Sullivan who was regularly with them and added riotously to their pile-on.”

“Sullivan,” Sister Felicia repeated. “In my Pennsylvania hometown I was friendly with two Sullivan sisters, Deidre and Colleen who were visiting a relative.”

“Deidre and Colleen,” Annie exclaimed, “helped Charlie and Brendan find jobs when they arrived from Ireland! How did you ever come to meet them?”

“It is an unusual story, Annie. Barry Sullivan was a grammar school classmate of mine. When Barry's parents died from tuberculosis in his senior year of high school, he followed his dad into the mines after graduation, and only a year later married Margarita. Somehow Deidre and Colleen are his cousins.”

Annie replied, “You really need a scorecard, Sister, to keep track of our families. Begin in Ireland with

Bridget, the mother of the Hartnett brothers, and her sister Kathleen. Kathleen married Joseph Sullivan, the oldest of three brothers. They had one son Charlie. Joseph's next brother Vincent emigrated to the coal mines and had one son Barry, your classmate.

“The youngest brother Jerome came to New York City, and had two daughters Deidre and Colleen. These sisters told me that their father was a sunny, portly man who worked as a subway conductor and had the misfortune to lock himself out of his train at a station. The train left without him, and he ran as best he could to the next station. There the train was waiting because the engineer noticed that none of the doors had opened and now he had to proceed from car to car opening them. Because the train was a local, the stations were only a few blocks apart, and the engineer could see Jerome puffing down the tracks. When Jerome reached the engineer, he explained between gasps what had happened, and then collapsed from the exertion of running. He did not revive and died on the station's platform.

“Carrie his wife died a year later from endocarditis. She had been a sturdy, good humored housewife and treasurer of the neighborhood taxpayers' association. She spent most evening hours crocheting expansive table cloths for her daughters to spread once they had their own families. Jerome's abrupt death, however, massively traumatized her. Despite her daughters' entreaties, Carrie neglected her social ties and ate erratically. Then, after years of scheduling appointments to doctors and dentists for every family member, she left an abscessed tooth

unattended until the pain was excruciating. By then the germs had reached the lining of her heart and were soon to kill her.

“Deidre and Colleen were scrupulously attentive to her, but they were undone when their mother began distorting facts. She wailed, for instance, ‘How can I go on? Your father used to make all the decisions,’ while they knew that the opposite was true. After Carrie’s condition required hospitalization, her daughters were ever at her bedside. They arranged for the chaplain to provide ‘Last Rites’ and were praying the rosary in the room when Carrie died.

“A year or so later, Deidre and Colleen sold the house in Woodlawn to save the mortgage payment and pay the lower rent for a small apartment. Deidre was twenty, and continued to work for a florist. Colleen was seventeen and entering the final year toward her commercial degree when their cousin-in-law Margarita called them in distress. Regina, the first child Barry and she had, was born with cerebral palsy, and now, only ten months later their second child was due. So, with Barry’s indifferent agreement, Margarita reached out to the sisters to see if either of them could move in with them to help out for a month.

“Although Colleen was willing to go by herself, Deidre insisted that they go together. She protested that they really did not know Barry and Margarita that well and caring for Regina must be quite a handful. Deidre asked the florist for a month’s leave, and he, in turn, asked her to allow his sister’s family to sublet her apartment for the month. When the sisters reached western Pennsylvania,

they found that Margarita was far through, that Regina really needed professional intervention for her cerebral palsy, and that Barry provided his paycheck and little other help. He did hang around, though, asking about his cousins' families, and loitering over supper to tell them about his work in the mines.

“Then, only two weeks after newborn Cynthia came home, and appeared normal, Margarita took Deidre aside and confided,

“I’ve made a huge mistake, and I deeply, profoundly apologize to you for it. I didn’t know how attractive you are or anticipate that Barry would become so infatuated with you. I see how he looks at you, how he wants you. Our household is a tinderbox, and I am out of my mind with anxiety. If only I knew then what I know now, I never would have contacted you.’

“She continued, ‘I was on the phone this morning with my friend Sonia Bejelica to ask her advice. She lives across town, and offered to have you and Colleen stay with her family until you ready to return home. Please leave immediately without saying anything to Barry. I’ll tell him that today’s mail contained medical reports warning that you both are highly contagious with some kind of streptococcus especially dangerous to babies. For everyone’s safety you left in a great hurry, and will contact us when you have an address. I’ll add that I have no idea where you are.’”

“Sonja even picked them up. On the way home she shared that she knew that the Sullivans were on overload, and she was glad to help Margarita out. She did not expect

the sisters to fill her in on any details. They should feel free to stay, however long, until they were set to leave. Deidre would share Sonja's older daughter's bedroom, and Colleen the younger daughter's.

“Ordinarily the sisters would have promptly returned to Woodlawn, but because of the sublet, they had more than a week before they could leave. After four days Colleen and Philippa the younger daughter became so comfortable with each other that they began to confide personal information as they were retiring. Philippa found Colleen's stories intriguing because she discussed her reaction to having a beauty queen for a sister.

“Deidre is three years older than I, and I accept that it is not her fault that she is so photogenic. Actually she is both a knockout and a classy young woman. There is nothing smug or put-on about her. She is an easy conversationalist with a spritely sense of humor. She expects that her escorts will be attentive, provide intelligent conversation, dance smoothly, and drink moderately. Flashy guys who strut and talk over others are out of the running. Fellows who only talk about sports are out, as was the date who accepted my invitation to play chess while he waited for her, but erred by finishing the game while Deidre sat idly by for thirty minutes.

“Our parents assigned me at age thirteen to greet her dates at the door. I learned then about the competition to take her out. She went out with different fellows on Friday and Saturday nights, and even in the morning Deidre was a “catch”. Our house was mid-block from the stop for the bus that took her to school. When the driver

saw her in transit to the stop, he would wait for her even though the bus had the green light.

“Corsage bearers were ever coming, very deferential to my parents while they namelessly dismissed me with, ‘Hi, kid. Your sister home?’ I could remember every date’s name, but when anyone acted like he was something special, I would adlib, ‘Ah, you’re back, but at number four this week!’

“One pursuer tried to improve his chances by ingratiating himself with our father. Dad was finishing his favorite sandwich of bologna with spicy mustard one Saturday when the young man arrived to go picnicking with Elizabeth. He returned the following weekend to escort her to a formal dance. One arm held a corsage and the other a huge, sealed package of bologna for dad. It seems the date’s grandfather was a butcher. None of this helped his cause, though, because he ill-advisedly went on that evening about the variety of other delicacies his grandfather could provide.

“All these swains, however, had to cope with our mother’s monitoring of romance. Until Deidre returned home, mother stalked the window overlooking the front of our house, and upon sighting her, mother threw up the sash with a resounding clang. When that failed to quicken the date’s departure, mother opened and shut the metal screen window insert until it reverberated like a manic grating machine.

“The summer Deidre worked as a park counselor, one of the counselors arrived to take her out to an evening party at a nearby beach. Our mother, however, saw the

mats of hair covering his chest and back, and concluded he must be far too old for her to date. So, later that night Deidre groaned to see our parents strolling nonchalantly along the water's edge past the counselors' party. Her protestations next morning were futile.

“Once in a while a fellow could not accept Deidre's reluctance to continue dating him, and unsolicited flowers and pleading notes would fruitlessly appear. One New Year's Eve I answered the door to find an unsuccessful rival to that night's date waiting to speak to my sister. While I kept him at the door, I broke the news to her. When she came down, I overheard him telling her, ‘I know that you are not expecting me. I've just come to say, ‘Good bye.’ I'll let the falling snow cover my steps as I leave.’ After he left, she returned to her room to descend with her usual aplomb when her date arrived.

“Once Deidre's dazzled callers left the house, I'd roll my eyes and mutter, ‘O, give me a break!’ Even after she graduated and began working in the florist shop, fellows who came in to buy a corsage for their date would return days later to ask Deidre out. She'd declined, telling them that she could see they were already spoken for. Apparently the men anticipated this rebuke, and had rehearsed forlorn tales of their previous relationships being over. It didn't work; she dated none of them.”

“Once the sisters returned to their apartment in Woodlawn, Colleen and Philippa stayed in contact with each other. I learned from Philippa that caring for Margarita's baby had so moved Deidre that she was looking into becoming a physical therapist helping patients

with cerebral palsy. Since she was supporting herself, this was a huge decision. She needed to begin the protracted years of evening classes and graduate school after that. She enrolled at the community college as soon as she could.

“Early on during her first semester, Deidre’s assignment for her writing course was a paper on ‘Ten years from now I shall be’ In it she described her work as a physical therapist with cerebral palsy patients. The instructor made only a few editing corrections, and found her subsequent papers equally well done. Then, after the instructor had submitted her grades following the final class, she asked Deidre to meet individually with her to say,

“Deidre, you know that you have written your papers very well. In my feedback, though, I have not commented on your unexamined assumptions about people with cerebral palsy. You have been viewing them exclusively as patients, as though they were ill. Yes, their inability to control motor function, their muscle spasms and involuntary movements are a permanent condition of their lives, but they have vigorous personalities and intelligence. So far, the only person with this condition that you have met is an infant. Perhaps you need to meet some adults.

“My sister’s first son has CP, and besides spasmodic movements of his left arm his only other symptom is loss of acuity in his vision. Even with his glasses, people and objects appear blurry. I have told my family about your motivation and talent, and my nephew Mathew is eager to meet you. He is a graduate of Lemoyne

College in Syracuse, and is now a dispatcher for the New York City Police Department. This coming Friday the Communications Division is presenting him with a citation honoring him as the dispatcher providing the swiftest, most accurate information to the precincts for an entire year. The next afternoon our family is holding a barbecue to continue the celebration. Everyone hopes you would like to come.”

“Thank you so much for inviting me. I’m looking forward to coming.”

Deidre brought a bouquet as her contribution to the celebration which occurred in a modest back yard a block removed from the Bronx Zoo. Her professor welcomed her, and asked to be addressed by her first name away from the college. Everyone greeted her as though she were a familiar cousin. Matthew introduced himself, thanked her for coming, and found them a comfortable settee. He began,

“I understand that you were in my aunt’s class. I hope she was not intimidating this semester.”

“I can’t imagine that she would be intimidating in any semester,” I replied.

He continued, “Thank you for bringing such an aromatic array of flowers.”

“Well, I work for the florist, so I had a head start in putting the arrangement together,” I laughed.

According to Colleen’s summary of Deidre’s account, they had an enjoyable, winding conversation. He asked about her family and her plans for a career as a physical therapist. Though she reddened with self-

consciousness and paused for words, she spoke of Margarita's baby as a catalyst for working with patients having cerebral palsy.

"Of course," Matthew mentioned, "CP is on a spectrum from mild to severe dysfunctions. Except for significantly blurring my sight, my symptoms are light: a hitch in my stride and a lateral flinch in my left arm. It didn't bother me in college, and it doesn't interfere with my job as a dispatcher for the police. I have a screen on my police computer that has enlarged type, and that is all I needed. When someone calls 911, the receptionist, knowing the correct destination for the call, instantly alerts the appropriate dispatcher who then mobilizes a precinct's response by the location and nature of the problem. By now I may have memorized a street map for every precinct."

Deidre discovered that Matthew was a raconteur when she asked him about college. During his junior year in high school his parents agreed with him that he should test his independence by boarding away, and recommended he attend a college with a fairly small enrollment. He agreed and chose Lemoyne.

His first assignment in the theology course was a discussion about the most meaningful relationship students had with a person from a religion other than their own. Matthew did not have access to a typewriter yet, so he hastily wrote out his answer. When the professor returned the papers, he made a point of publicly noting the inadequacies of each student's work. Matthew smiled as he waited his turn for the criticism,

“Of all the papers this is the worst. The writing itself is only chicken scratch. I can’t even make out the author’s name.”

Very purposefully and slowly Matthew raised his stricken left arm rather than his right. The professor stood there abashed, wanly cleared his throat, and moved on, “We’ll talk about it later.” In the hallway afterwards Matthew’s classmates saluted him with a barrage of back slapping.

There was even more merriment following the next incident. In his second year Matthew enrolled in a course on metaphysics that included Sister Eunan, a nun who was a Philosophy major. She was far more learned than any of the other students, and regrettably opened the course by asking the professor two sophisticated questions. Knowing that he could not stomach a semester of these esoteric exchanges, Matthew followed Sister Eunan’s latest question and the professor’s reply with one of his own. He started his question, “When Sister *Urine* asked...,” and the class exploded while Matthew sat there with innocence on his face. Once he was informed of his supposed error, of course, he apologized.

Wiping her eyes from laughter, Deidre told Matthew that he certainly brought a novel orientation to his studies. The only things she remembered friends saying about Syracuse were comments about the unrelenting grey skies and the traffic light in the Irish neighborhood called Tipperary Hill that had the green on top of the orange and red lights. “All true,” he corroborated. Then he told Deidre,

“My older brother, sister, and I have tickets to the Philharmonic for a week from tomorrow night. They have to miss it because they’ll be at a Notre Dame home game. We could use one of their tickets for you, if you would care to come.”

“And what will you do with the other,” she asked.

“Right now it’s going begging.”

“I know my sister would love it, if that is OK with you,” she lied, hoping Colleen could eventually meet the entire family.

“You have a sister? You could have brought her with you today.”

“Your aunt didn’t mention her when she invited me, and I didn’t want to be too forward. She is my younger sister, a senior in high school.”

“Deidre, this barbecue has lots of life in it. Let’s give her a call and invite her. My youngest brother Simon is here, and they might hit it off. He’s a senior at Cardinal Hayes, and has his driver’s license. I’ll tell him he has a blind date who’s waiting for him to bring her here.”

“I’ll call and see if she’s free. Thank you for including her.”

Colleen’s primary concern was her sister’s assessment of Simon’s appearance, his sense of humor, and his ease in conversation. Though Deidre had barely met him, she assured Colleen that he had made an excellent impression on all accounts. Matthew’s summary for Simon about Colleen was equally extravagant, and Simon was soon off to pick her up. In the course of the afternoon, Simon levelled with Colleen that he was no fan

of the Philharmonic which Matthew was imposing him, and he much preferred the music of U2. Colleen sighed with great relief because she loved U2 and couldn't even spell "Philharmonic". So, Simon informed Matthew that they were going to pass up the Philharmonic for a dance at Hayes. The two couples had a grand time at the barbecue, each couple in its own sphere, and the brothers accompanied the sisters home that evening in Simon's car.

Colleen's latest correspondence to Sister Felicia described Deidre and Colleen's mildly enmeshed social swirls. Deidre is elated to have joined Matthew's symphonic world and his family's summer vacations on the Irish Riviera: Spring Lake, New Jersey. He is an enthusiastic coach for her progress through her evening curriculum. Colleen, in turn, was voted queen at Simon's prom, and basked in the attention that several of his friends flirted her way. To her surprise, she is discovering a connection between her rising social life and an unanticipated interest in matriculating for her own college courses.

Peace Comes Dropping Slow

What is going on? Here is am, Rose Sullivan, a substitute teacher in the Fulton, New York schools, shouting at Finbar my ten year old son,

“Speak correct English! Do not answer me with ‘yeah’ or ‘I’m gonna’.”

Of course, once I collect myself, I can accept the truth that his sloppy speech has triggered my memory of the rigid tester I had for the elocution section of the State Teacher’s Exam. He almost flunked me for my pronunciation. He even went so far as asserting,

“Surely your upstate whine will deter potential suitors coming from any other place!”

Often enough Finbar has also been my sounding board about the day’s teaching. There was the morning I was in a dither because it was Washington’s Birthday and I had forgotten to gather the stencils that the fourth graders would copy to make cutouts of his profile, cherry trees, and hatchets. Then, sometime in the morning, the principal would visit to congratulate the class on the art work which I had showcased around the room. When Finbar asked me later how it went, I told him that at the end of the principal’s visit he asked me to step into the hall for a moment.

“Oh, Finbar, the principal told me it was Lincoln’s Birthday!”

Other times I grumbled about particular students. In the first row the girl with a glass eye extracted it and rolled it on her desk, and in the fifth row sat a boy who furtively

ate bananas with the skin on. Then, there was the boy who made sure he was the last to leave, and, turning at the doorway, gave me the Bronx cheer.

Each summer, my husband Charlie accelerated the college course load he pursued toward his own graduation, and I gladly worked at our bar for longer hours. Finbar looked expectantly to spend a month with my sister Lily in New York City. Besides riding the roller coasters at Coney Island and Rye Play Land, swimming at Jones Beach, and visiting the Statue of Liberty, Lily and Finbar made it a point to tour sites devoted to the British conquest of Long Island and Washington's evacuation of Brooklyn during the Revolutionary War. Then, on their way home to Oswego, they visited battle fields at Saratoga and Fort Ticonderoga.

For seven years, beginning when he was ten, Finbar also served as an altar boy at masses Father O'Malley's masses. Before mass one Sunday, Father told Finbar the day, September 26th, was the feast of the eight French Jesuit martyrs tortured to death by the Mohawk tribe during the 1640's. He added that they are now memorialized in Auriesville, about forty miles west of Albany on the southern bank of the Mohawk River. Soon enough Finbar persuaded us to visit the site.

That summer he brought his discovery to Aunt Lily's attention. Since by now he was about to enter his senior year of high school, she suggested he might want to look into the offerings at the Jesuit campuses of Fordham University at Lincoln Center in Manhattan or the Rose Hill campus in the Bronx. She invited him, too, to stay with her

at no expense, should he decide to attend Fordham and commute to these campuses. He thanked her, and asked her to let him visit the sites alone during the week “to get the feel” of the journey and of the campuses.

His first dispatch to us covered his journey to the Bronx. He outfitted himself with paperbacks to occupy his time on the subway.

“I completed *The Last Days of Socrates* before the two hour ride ended. I knew then that this campus was too distant for commuting. Even after you leave the subway, there is a hefty walk down Fordham Road to the campus. After walking five minutes I heard a gunshot, and a policeman eating his lunch ran out to learn what was going on. He saw that a passenger had tried to rob a cabdriver’s money, and shot through the driver’s window when he resisted. The driver was not injured, and the culprit was running down the sidewalk. The officer was taking off after him, when the gunman turned around and fired at him. Seeing what was about to happen, the officer threw himself to the ground and did not fire back because of the many shoppers. Instead, he renewed the chase, while the driver sped ahead and, cutting off the perpetrator, enabled the cop to tackle and disarm him. While everyone was applauding, the cop’s first words were to the driver,

““You must be crazy; this guy could have killed you!”

““He shot at me! I was going to get him back!”

““Mom, the officer never used his gun!””

Lily was quick to get on the phone and explain that such a drama had never been part of her experience, that

Finbar never seemed to be in danger, and that he succeeded in interviewing several students on the campus about their satisfaction with the university.

The following week Finbar took the subway to Lincoln Center, and that evening telephoned his parents.

“This time the ride was an hour at most. Because I got on in Queens, I was able to get a seat. Before Manhattan the train filled up, and among the last to grab a seat was a fellow in a karate outfit. After a couple of stops he started to smoke a cigarette, and even though everyone knew this is illegal, no one spoke up. Then, a policeman opened the door between the cars, and seeing the smoker and the anxious looks of the rest of us, squeezed nearer to him.

“‘Sir, it is illegal to smoke on the train. Put it out now.’

“‘So I shall- in the palm of my hand. I feel no pain. Then, I shall shut your mouth for good.’

“Everyone, except for the officer, was transfixed as he burned his hand. The officer could see that the packed car guaranteed passengers would be injured if he physically engaged the fellow. So, very deliberately the cop kept eye contact with him while they growled at each other, and then backed to the windowed door which he closed behind him. Then the cop called for backup, and said which station they were approaching, in which direction, and in which car the deranged smoker was located.

“At the station, the doors to the other cars opened, and only after the other passengers exited, did our doors

open. Passengers fled between the police lines, and then the culprit tried to karate his way through the blue wall which engulfed him. The medical report revealed he was using angel dust. I confess I was a bit shaken up being so close to the action, but that cop was really on top of monitoring the crisis and keeping us safe. Impressive!

“The location and the facilities at Fordham Lincoln Center were terrific. I was even able to talk with faculty and students about a major that interested me, the Humanitarian Studies Program, preparing graduates to intervene in crises involving civilian populations in distress around the world. Then, touring the surrounding neighborhood, I came upon the John Jay College of Criminal Justice almost contiguous to Fordham. Because of my recent observations of the police in action, I reviewed their catalogue and met with their admissions staff. I was particularly interested in the Culture and Deviance Studies program with its breadth of courses in Anthropology and Interpersonal Relationships. I decided- the clarity came to me on the spot- that after graduating college, I intend to join the New York City police. I do not need to be overseas to protect civilians and their quality of life.”

Lily took the phone, once again confirming that Finbar was perfectly safe and that we had no need to be concerned about his wellbeing. In fact, once he was out of hearing, she reported that for Finbar, his only confounding moment had occurred when he held the door for a coed, and as she passed snapped at him,

“I am not a cripple!”

“Wasn’t she being rude after I was courteous to her?”

Then Lily explained,

“Some young women don’t see holding a door as a courtesy but as a patriarchal act conveying that they don’t have all the abilities they need to take care of themselves, no less compete with men. In this case, she may have seen your gesture as conveying she doesn’t have the muscle strength to open the door.”

“Well, how am I to know what a woman following after me through a door is thinking?”

“I think you can go ahead with the manners you have learned, but be attentive to a woman’s body language and note who wants independent selfhood above all.”

“Oh, this is a bother, but I think a gentleman is someone willing to be bothered. Thanks.”

After graduating and being accepted at John Jay, Finbar called Sean to share his intention of following Sean’s career. Sean wished him well, and advised him not to sit in the last car of a subway where crime most often occurred. As he was finishing his call, Finbar mused to himself,

“I’ll bet that my genes have brought this to pass. Ages ago, dad, you were a constable in Ireland, and this truth will out now.”

During his years at college Finbar commuted from his new home at Aunt Lucy’s. Her location in Queens enabled him not only to secure a seat on the subway every morning, but also to receive a broad, informal education. For instance, Lucy was soon to finish her doctoral studies,

and her fluid schedule for each day allowed her to participate in the borough's polyglot neighborhoods. So, it was not unusual when Finbar found Lily sitting with an Arab neighbor on the concrete steps to the house where he had rented a third floor apartment only two weeks before. It was unusual, however, that she was trying to console him, rubbing his back and feeding him tissues while he sobbed and swallowed wails. He had learned that morning that a Saudi plane had bombed his home in Yemen, killing his entire family. Eventually his public grief attracted other Yemeni men who clustered around him. Finbar came upon the scene in time to see the bereaved Yemeni turn to Lily and say,

“I am a Muslim and my religion forbids me to touch you, but you have been so very kind to me that I must shake your hand.”

During our dinner I told Lily,

“That was a powerful moment when our Yemeni neighbor shook your hand today. Think what it took for him to break that taboo about touching!”

“Yes, he is a scalded man, but he knew I only wanted to help.”

One Saturday Finbar accompanied Lily to the local library, each burdened with armfuls of inter-library materials. After they deposited the volumes and left, Finbar overheard a bundled eight year old ask Lily,

“Do all your books mean you're studying to be a teacher?”

“No. I'm studying to become a principal.”

“O, no! I hate my principal. He’s really mean and scares me.”

“Oh. I hope he isn’t like that all the time. Maybe some problems were bothering him when you met him.”

“No, no! He’s mean. On our last day before Christmas recess, he saw me throw a snowball at my friend as we were running from the building, and he shouted,

“I shall see you about this incident when you return in January.””

“Mother wanted to know what had happened, but left me alone after I said,

“The principal was only being his grouchy self.””

“I was worried, though, because I had heard that a principal has lots of ways to punish a student. I was so afraid that he might hurt me that I started planning ways to defend myself. I decided on a surprise attack, and the night before school began, I filled up the squeezable handle of my water pistol, and plugged up the nozzle with a needle from my mother’s sewing basket. Right after Miss Burleigh finished our spelling lesson on the first day back, the principal entered our room, picked me out, and called me to the front of the room. I was almost going to cry, but when he pointed his ruler toward me, I understood what was happening. The principal was the Black Knight jousting for my kingdom, and to ward off his lance, I pulled out my water pistol and squeezed the handle. The needle ended up hanging from the principal’s thumb, and water was dripping from his hand, when he shouted, ‘You little fiend, give me that gun!’ I was so terrified that I ran out of the room and hid in the janitor’s closet at the end of

the hall, but the principal saw me, and stationed a sixth grader outside the closet door.

“The principal called my father who came to the school and told me gently to leave the closet. The principal explained to my father that he hoped to teach me that throwing snowballs was dangerous, but before he could, I had shot him with a water pistol and run away. My father thanked the principal for going out of his way for me, and assured him that we would have a talk about my behavior. On the way home father asked why I had taken the gun to school. I told him I was afraid of the principal who had threatened me, and I wanted to protect myself.

“Listen, Lennie, promise me that the next time you are afraid of someone who is bigger than you, you will talk to me about it before you do anything. Deal?”

“Deal!”

“O.K. Let’s go for sodas.”

“Lennie, I am so glad that you and your dad had sodas! Your dad gave you great advice, too. If your mom or dad had been with you when you returned to school, I’m sure you would have remembered that the principal was not the Black Knight and he would have explained the dangers of snow balls in a nice enough way.”

Lily shared that this exchange seemed to transfix Finbar.

“You were so helpful to him, Lily. Hopefully he was calm enough to take in what you said. In the police I’m going to have many contacts with kids who are terrified about something and expressing it recklessly and violently.

If I can handle those situations half as well as you did here, I'll be proud of myself!"

Soon enough Finbar had a run-in of his own to share with Lily. He walked the same route each day coming home from the subway to the house. One intersection had a bodega on one corner, a florist on another, a bank on the third, and a dry cleaner on the last. He had given no mind to the same few men who clustered in front of the florist, but they had noticed the constancy of his route. So, one day, one of the men accosted him,

"Hey, kid, I see you comin' by this corner just about every afternoon 'round this time. It's bothersome, you know? So walk on a different block from now on. A word to the wise."

Finbar was ecstatic, and told Lily the story as soon as they met.

"I'm only a student, and already I'm acting undercover! Tomorrow I'm going to the precinct, and report that these guys must be selling drugs. I'll do whatever the cops say, and until they say otherwise, I'll avoid that intersection."

"You stay safe! I have to answer to Rose, and so do you."

Next morning, Finbar spoke to the sergeant at the precinct desk who referred him to Lieutenant Desmond Lynch. He proudly identified himself to the lieutenant, and explained what had occurred. The lieutenant replied that the precinct was aware of the situation, that Finbar should definitely avoid the corner, and that he better ace his

courses because he might serve under the lieutenant one day.

“I’m demanding, thorough, and don’t tolerate half-ass performance. Check it out with Dr. Eilis Lynch at John Jay. She’s my sister.

“She’s taught me already! She knows her stuff, and is a tough marker.”

“Yeah? She’s kindergarten next to me.”

Three days later the newspaper told the whole story. A truck delivering flowers pulled up in front of the florist, this time not carrying gardenias but eight officers. At the same time, a truck supposedly carrying deli-products for the bodega emptied, instead, another half dozen officers who rushed the dry cleaning shop. The proprietor there had been allowing the dealers to conceal their drugs in the tailor’s small fitting room that was continually occupied by an accomplice.

The dealers had been paying three hundred dollars a week to eight and nine year old boys who brought the drugs to the dealers. As the days progressed uneventfully, the dealers concluded that no one suspected the participation of children. The lieutenant, however, was determined to destroy the entire enterprise, and needed the time to complete his surveillance before moving in. Two days after the raid, a patrol car pulled next to Finbar, and Lieutenant Lynch leaned out.

“You did a good job handling yourself, kid. You can return to your old route now. Just be sure to keep up your studies.”

At John Jay, Finbar stopped by Dr. Lynch's office to tell her about meeting her brother. She assured him,

"You'll hear more about Desmond on this case, I'm sure. He has a ten year old son, and he's taking the dealers' corruption of children personally. He's going after the kingpins running the drugs, and the feds are with him. You would be fortunate to have him as your superior, so keep your grades up."

Finbar went on at great length elaborating upon this episode to his father and me. Then, he told us that for the coming semester during the autumn of his third year, he hoped to enroll at the London School of Economics to follow their curriculum in Social Systems Analysis. He sweetened the pot by recommending the dates for us to visit him.

After discovering that the weather in London was even more blustery and sodden than he had warned to expect, Finbar sought out the warmth of libraries rather than the challenges of sight-seeing. A month into his studies, though, he called his cousin Dorothy. He learned that she was on a dig in Ghana, and was given the number of her fiancé Clive. They were enjoying dinner when Finbar mentioned that he had yet to visit the homestead at Feakle. Clive, in turn, shared Dorothy's dismay that the Hartnett family's cemetery monument continued to omitted her grandmother's name and that her father had forbidden her to talk to Patrick about it.

Shortly afterwards, Finbar did visit Feakle, and at the gravesite mentioned to Patrick how he missed seeing a

reference on the memorial to his dad's favorite aunt Bridget.

"My dad has spoken so often and fervently about her, I hoped that you would allow me to pay the expense to include her name on the stone. If I could bring home a photo of the embellished monument, it would be the gift of a lifetime for my dad.

"She is more kin to us than to you, Patrick, so please, let us pay to have this done."

Surely, these were wee white lies.

"There's plenty of space between the names of my parents, so go ahead."

"Would it be acceptable to you if I also planted a copper beech nearby?"

"Of course, and in Ireland, it's no trouble for the storms to find the trees."

Years later, after my parents died, Charlie and I bought Lily's house. She lives now in northern Connecticut where she's become superintendent of schools. Captain Finbar Sullivan, NYPD, has his own family nearby in Forest Hills, Queens. The Sullivans travel twice yearly to the mid-west for a grand craic with their Hartnett cousins. Charlie and I are currently looking toward the next chapter of the Hartnett-Sullivan saga, since we have the large house and our families seldom let beds stay vacant for long.

About The Author

James J. Magee's maternal grandfather emigrated from County Clare, Ireland, and his paternal great-grandfather from County Wexford, Ireland. Patrick Hickey from Clare, married Mary Mitchell Bunce, an American woman of Scottish and English ancestry, and settled in Brooklyn, New York. James Magee from Wexford married Margaret Mangan in Ireland, and emigrated to Rome, New York.

This is the author's first work of fiction. He began it after concluding his career as a professor of counseling and gerontology in the graduate school at The College of New Rochelle where he taught for thirty years. He has also had a social work practice in family counseling, both with Family Services of Nassau and in private practice. He is the author of *A Professional's Guide to Older Adults' Life Review: Releasing the Peace Within*, and *Paradox for Life Review: A Guide to Enhancing Older Adults' Self-Esteem*. He has authored forty articles and chapters on a variety of gerontological topics.

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