

GETHSEMANI

BEFORE THE MORNING SUN CLIMBED THE KENTUCKY HILLS, I FILED INTO THE GETHSEMANI CHAPEL AT A TRAPPIST MONASTERY. I WORE A WHITE, FLOOR LENGTH ROBE. A COWL COVERED MY HEAD, HIDING MY FACE IN ITS SHADOWS. MY HANDS AND ARMS, IN LONG SLEEVES, KEPT OUT SOME OF THE COLD IN THE UNHEATED CHAPEL.

THE SOFT, QUIET SHUFFLE OF SANDALED FEET MIXED WITH THE DIMNESS OF THE COMING DAWN. IT WAS 3:30 IN THE MORNING. THE HOUR WE ALWAYS CAME TO CHAPEL. 25 MONKS STOOD ON EACH SIDE OF THE AISLE IN WOODEN PEWS FACING ONE ANOTHER. MY SPIRITS SOARED. I LOVED THESE WAKING MOMENTS. I LOVED BEING ALIVE. I LOVED THE SILENCE. IT ALLOWED ME TO THINK ABOUT GOD. I ALWAYS ANTICIPATED THE BEAUTY OF THE GREGORIAN CHANT, SOON TO REVERBERATE IN THE STONE WALLS WITH THE CHANT OF FIFTY COWLED MONKS.

THE CHANT BEGAN WITH THE VOICES OF THE TWO CANTORS, ONE SIDE ANSWERING THE OTHER. "GAUDEAMUS OMNES IN POPULI. NUNC ET IN HORA MORTIS NOSTRAE AMEN. GAUDEAMUS OMNES IN POPULI. NUNC ET IN HORA MORTIS NOSTRAE, AMEN." REJOICE ALL PEOPLE, REJOICE NOW AND AT THE HOUR OF DEATH, AMEN. FIFTY VOICES CONTINUED THE RHYTHM OF THE GREGORIAN CHANT. THE NOTES LINGERED IN THE STONE CHAPEL

WALLS, LEAVING WARMTH IN THE CREVICES. THE SOUND RESTED THERE LIKE A PRAYER, HEARD AND WAITING TO BE HEARD.

I WAS CONTENT AMIDST THE SONG. IN THESE FRAGILE MOMENTS, MY HAPPINESS BECAME COMPLETE. WE CHANTED THREE TIMES EACH MORNING. SONG BECAME PRAYER. PRAYER BECAME SONG.

WHAT BROUGHT ME TO THIS MONASTERY? I WENT TO ST. XAVIER HIGH SCHOOL, THEN GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY. THEN I MET THE VERY CHARISMATIC TOM DOOLY. OVER THE SUMMER WE BECAME VERY CLOSE FRIENDS. HE TALKED ABOUT VIETNAM AND THE GREAT GOOD THAT HE COULD DO THERE FOR THE PEOPLE. THIS WAS MORE THAN TEN YEARS BEFORE THE VIETNAM WAR. I BECAME CONVINCED OVER THE SUMMER THAT MY LIFE SHOULD BE INVOLVED IN HELPING PEOPLE. I WENT TO BARDSTOWN, KENTUCKY, TO THE GETHSEMANI MONASTERY, TO SPEND A WEEK TO SORT OUT MY LIFE.

I COULD NOT LEAVE. MY SPIRIT AND MY THOUGHTS SEEMED TO REST IN THE CREVICES OF THE STONE WALLS, PERHAPS FOR LIFE. IN THE MORNINGS WE MONKS WORKED THE FIELD. WE PLOWED WITH TWO MULES. WE PLANTED AND EACH YEAR WE REAPED. AFTER TWO YEARS, I TOOK THE REALLY SERIOUS VOWS OF POVERTY, CHASTITY AND OBEDIENCE, AND A FOURTH VOW, ONE OF TOTAL SILENCE. WE DID NOT SPEAK TO ONE ANOTHER OR TO

VISITORS. THIS LEFT FOR EACH OF US SILENT SPACE TO TALK TO, THINK ABOUT OUR GOD.

EACH AFTERNOON, AFTER WORKING IN THE FIELDS, I STUDIED AND WROTE IN THE LIBRARY. I READ ALL OF THE WRITINGS OF THOMAS MERTON, THE WELL KNOWN AUTHOR OF THE SEVEN STORY MOUNTAIN WHO LIVED THERE AS A MONK. THOUGHT THAT I, TOO, COULD CLIMB THE SEVEN STORY MOUNTAIN. AT THE END OF MY THIRD YEAR FATHER PRIOR ORDAINED ME A PRIEST, WHICH MEANT ESSENTIALLY A PRIEST FOREVER. AT THE CONCLUSION OF ANOTHER TWO YEARS I OFTEN THOUGHT ABOUT MY FUTURE AT A MONASTERY. I SAW LITTLE OR NO PROGRESS IN MY SPIRITUAL LIFE. I WONDERED, DO I WANT TO BE SILENT, DO I WANT TO BE CHASTE, FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE? THOMAS MERTON HAD LEFT. SHOULD I? FATHER PRIOR ASKED ME TO STAY FOR ONE MORE MONTH TO THINK ABOUT WHO I WAS, AND WHAT I WOULD OR COULD BE.

AT THE END OF THAT TIME I SAID TO FATHER PRIOR "I WANT TO LEAVE. I WANT TO JOIN THE WORLD." HE WAS GRACIOUS AND UNDERSTANDING. HE SAID TO ME THAT HE WOULD IMMEDIATELY RELEASE ME FROM MY VOWS OF SILENCE, POVERTY AND OBEDIENCE, BUT HE COULD NOT RELEASE ME FROM THE VOW OF CHASTITY BECAUSE OF MY ORDINATION AS A PRIEST. HE DID SAY, HOWEVER, THAT ROME HAD QUITE RECENTLY BECOME MUCH MORE LENIENT ABOUT LEAVING THE PRIESTHOOD. HE PROMISED ME THAT IN A

SHORT TIME I WOULD BE RELEASED FROM MY PRIESTLY COMMITMENT, AND IMPORTANTLY THE VOW OF CHASTITY. HE SAID, "MY SON, I HOPE YOU HAVE MADE THE RIGHT DECISION, BUT YOU ARE ALWAYS WELCOME BACK TO THIS MONASTERY." HE ASKED ME MY PLANS.

"I AM GOING TO NEW YORK TO CONTINUE MY STUDIES IN LITERATURE AND POETRY AT COLUMBIA." HE SAID, "I HAVE A GOOD FRIEND, THE CARDINAL AT ST. PATRICK'S CATHEDRAL IN NEW YORK. HE OFTEN NEEDS EXTRA HELP ON SUNDAYS. WOULD YOU BE WILLING TO HELP THE CARDINAL OUT UNTIL YOU ARE RELEASED FROM THE CHASTITY VOW?" I PROMISED THAT I WOULD DO THAT.

THAT PROMISE PROVED TO BE A MISTAKE.

I RENTED AN APARTMENT AT 69TH AND CENTRAL PARK WEST. I WENT FREQUENTLY TO THE SCULPTURE GARDEN AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, MOMA. I READ ABOUT THE HENRY MOORE, THE GIACOMMETTI, THE PICASSO AND OTHER SCULPTURE WORKS. MY MIND WAS FULL OF LIGHT WITH THE ANTICIPATION OF THIS NEW LIFE. I REMEMBERED WELL, HOWEVER, THOSE ENCHANTING GREGORIAN NOTES GAUDEAMUS OMENS INPOPULI, NUNC ET IN HORA MORTIS NOSTRAE, AMEN.

NOT LONG AFTERWARDS, AT THE METROPOLITAN OPERA, I SETTLED COMFORTABLY INTO THE SECOND SEAT FROM THE AISLE IN THE SECOND ROW OF THE GRANT TIER.

THE CHANDELIER MOVED SLOWLY UP, MAJESTICALLY. THE LIGHTS DIMMED. JAMES LEVINE ENTERED TO GREAT EXTENDED APPLAUSE. HE SAT TO CONDUCT TRAVATORE. HIS BATON SEEMED TO MAKE THE MUSIC. AMAZINGLY, QUIETLY, HE SANG ALL OF THE NOTES.

IN THE DARKNESS, I REACHED FORWARD TO PRESS THE SPECIAL BUTTON WHICH ILLUMINATES THE PRIVATE SCREEN FOR EACH VIEWER. I NOTICED THE PERSON TO MY LEFT HAD NOT REACHED FOR THE BUTTON. I STARTED TO HELP. OUR FINGERS TOUCHED THE BUTTON AND EACH OTHER'S, MINE OVER HERS, THE FINGERS OF A WOMAN.

OUR FINGERS MOVED BACK TO OUR LAPS. THE CONTACT HAD BEEN MOMENTARY, YET SLOW AND GENTLE. I ENJOYED THE SENSATION.

THEN THE GREAT FAMILIAR RHYTHMS OF VERDI RESOUNDED IN THE HALL. THE WOMAN NEXT TO ME DROPPED HER PROGRAM. I REACHED DOWN TO PICK IT UP FOR HER. SHE ALSO REACHED. DOWN.

OUR FINGERS AGAIN MET. THIS MEETING SEEMED LEISURELY. SHE RETRIEVED HER PROGRAM. MY HAND BY SOME MISTAKE LIGHTLY BRUSHED AGAINST HER SKIRT.

AT INTERMISSION SHE WALKED QUICKLY UP THE STAIRS. I OBSERVED THE SOFT BROWN HAIR ON HER SHOULDERS, HER SILK BLOUSE, HER FEMININE FIGURE AND THE SWAY OF HER SKIRT. THIS ADMIRING MAN, THIS PRIEST THOUGHT, "SHE IS QUITE BEAUTIFUL." I WONDERED HOW I COULD MEET THIS WOMAN. THERE WAS, THOUGH, THE QUESTION REMAINING, "WHEN WILL I BE RELEASED FROM THAT VOW OF CHASTITY?"

WHEN THE WARNING BELL SOUNDED, I WENT RIGHT TO MY SEAT. THE WOMAN TO MY LEFT RETURNED JUST AS THE LIGHTS DIMMED. THE CURTAIN WENT UP. SHE PUSHED HER "SUR CAPS" BUTTON AS DID I. I DIDN'T MISS THE CONTACT OR EVEN THINK ABOUT IT UNTIL A BRIEF MINUTE LATER, WHEN HER PROGRAM FELL ALMOST SILENTLY TO THE FLOOR. I REACHED DOWN, AS DID SHE. OUR FINGERS MET AGAIN AND I THINK LINGERED. WAS THE DROPPED PROGRAM ACCIDENTAL? I COULDN'T TELL.

I TURNED TOWARD HER AS I WHISPERED, "I'M SORRY." SHE LOOKED AT ME WITH A WARM FRIENDLY SMILE. SHE IS A PRETTY WOMAN. THEN THE MUSIC ENGULFED MY THOUGHTS. AS TRAVATORE ENDED SHE STOOD UP,

APPLAUDING ENTHUSIASTICALLY. THEN SUDDENLY SHE LEFT. I STARED AT THE EMPTY SEAT, DISAPPOINTED.

I WALKED ACROSS THE LINCOLN CENTER PLAZA, WATCHING LIGHTS DANCING IN THE FOUNTAIN. I TURNED TOWARD THE OPERA HOUSE TO ADMIRE THE TWO CHAGALLS IN THEIR NIGHT TIME ILLUMINATION. I WALKED TO MY BROWNSTONE. I LOVED THE OPERA, BUT COULDN'T HELP FROM THINKING, I WISH SHE HAD WAITED AND NOT LEFT SO SOON. THE NEXT DAY, A BRIGHT SUNNY MORNING, I WALKED THROUGH CENTRAL PARK, THEN DOWN 5TH AVENUE TO 53RD STREET TO "MOMA."

IN THE SCULPTURE GARDEN RODIN'S BALZAC, LEANING SLIGHTLY BACK, DOMINATED THE VIEW. WITH THE SUN AND THE OURDOOR PLEASANT ALMOST WARMTH, I WANTED TO SPEND MOST OF MY DAY IN THE GARDEN. I LOVED THE SPACE, THE AESTHETICS AND THE SCULPTURES.

BUT FIRST I TOOK THE ESCALATORS TO THE FIFTH FLOOR RESTAURANT. I SAT AT AN OUTSIDE TABLE LOOKING DIRECTLY DOWN INTO THE SCULPTURE GARDEN. I ORDERED A CAPPUCCINO AND A SCOOP OF CHOCOLATE ICE CREAM.

BELOW I COULD SEE THE RODIN, THE HENRY MOORE, THE GIACOMETTI. I STOOD UP TO GO DOWN TO THE GARDEN, WHEN I NOTICED A WOMAN

SITTING ON ONE OF THE GARDEN CHAIRS FOUR FLOORS DOWN. I FELT CERTAIN IT WAS THE WOMAN FROM TRAVATORE THAT HAD LEFT SO ABRUPTLY THE NIGHT BEFORE.

I MOVED QUICKLY DOWN THE ESCALATORS, THEN THROUGH THE GLASS DOORS TO THE GARDEN. IT WAS SHE; IT WAS THE WOMAN FROM THE OPERA. I SAT SEVERAL SEATS AWAY. I SHUFFLED MY FEET. I COUGHED. I MOVED ABOUT, HOPING TO GET HER ATTENTION. NOTHING WORKED. WOULD SHE LOOK MY WAY? SHE DIDN'T.

I LEANED TOWARD HER. I SAID IN A FRIENDLY TONE, "DID YOU ENJOY TROVATORE LAST NIGHT?" SHE TURNED HER SHOULDERS AND HER FACE TOWARD ME. THEN CAME THE SMILE THAT I REMEMBERED SO WELL, AND THESE WORDS, "I LOVE LEVIN'S CONDUCTING. HE BRINGS PASSION TO THE MUSIC. HE MAKES EVERY OPERA SPECIAL. HE SEEMS TO SING EVERY NOTE. HE BRINGS OUT THE TALENT OF EACH SINGER." I MOVED DOWN A CHAIR TO SIT NEXT TO HER.

SHE DIDN'T SEEM DISTURBED OR UNEASY. SHE SAID, "THAT IS BETTER. IT'S NOT LIKE AT THE OPERA WHERE IT WAS DARK AND I DROPPED MY PROGRAM, TWICE. THE FIRST TIME WAS A TOTAL ACCIDENT. THE SECOND TIME, I'M NOT SURE." "I REMEMBER WELL." SHE SMILED THAT SAME WARM SMILE.

SHE WAS FUN. WE TALKED ABOUT VERDI OPERAS RIGOLETO AND TOSCA, THEN ABOUT MADAME BUTTERFLY AND LA BOHEME BY PUCINI. WE DISCUSSED AT LENGTH WAGNER'S RING, WITH ITS EXCITING CHARACTERS. I WAS INTRIGUED, AND INDEED INTERESTED. IN A LIGHT AND EASY WAY, WE DISCUSSED PLOTS, MUSIC, CONDUCTORS AND ORCHESTRAS. WE BOTH OBVIOUSLY LOVED MUSIC AND OPERA.

AS WE BEGAN TO STROLL THROUGH THE SCULPTURE GARDEN WE STOPPED TO LOOK AT RODIN'S BALZAC. IT OVERWHELMED THE TWO OF US. WE ASKED EACH OTHER IF SUCH INCREDIBLE POWER COULD BE PUT TO USE OR DOES SUCH POWER MINIMIZE US INTO ALMOST NON-BEINGS?

IN CONNECTION WITH THIS MASSIVE, STRONG RODIN SCULPTURE SHE SPOKE OF GOD AND POWER, OF JUSTICE AND FORGIVENESS. I SPOKE OF HUMANITY AND ITS ABILITY TO DO WHAT MANY PEOPLE THINK GOD DOES. BE CAREFUL, I SAID TO MYSELF. SHE DOES NOT KNOW I AM A PRIEST.

WE MOVED ALONG TO THE PICASSO SCULPTURE. ITS NARROW IRON PIPES ROSE 15 FEET HIGH, DISCONNECTED AND LIFELESS, UNTIL A SMALL HEAD IN IRON AT THE VERY TOP GAVE THE ENTIRE SCULPTURE A LIVING, MOVING CHARACTER. PICASSO HAD CHANGED THE SPARSENESS OF IRON PIPES INTO A MONUMENT OF INTELLECT AND STRENGTH. IT CAME TO LIFE AS WE TALKED. HOW COULD COLD PIPES BECOME WARM AND FRIENDLY?

AT THIS POINT WE DIDN'T EVEN KNOW ONE ANOTHER'S NAMES. YET, WE TALKED LIKE INTIMATE FRIENDS. THIS UNUSUAL SITUATION GAVE FREEDOM TO OUR THOUGHTS AND WORDS. WITH THE PICASSO, WE CONCLUDED THAT LIFE IS NOT WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE. DEPTH DOES NOT JUST APPEAR, IT REQUIRES REFLECTION. SHE OFTEN BROUGHT BELIEFS AND GOD INTO THE DISCUSSION. WE CONTINUED TALKING UNTIL WE STOOD DIRECTLY IN FRONT OF HENRY MOORE'S SCULPTURE, THE FAMILY.

WE FELT ITS HUGE FORCE OF BRONZE. I THOUGHT MOORE PORTRAYED THE WORLD. MIGHT MAKES RIGHT, PHYSICAL STRENGTH AND POWER CONQUER ALL. SHE WAS CONVINCED THAT MOORE PORTRAYED MIND OVER MATTER, AND THAT IS THE WAY GOD WANTED IT.

UP THE STEPS IN THE GARDEN, AGAINST THE WALL, GIACOMETTI'S ELONGATED MAN STEPPING FORWARD REPRESENTED A RELIGIOUS AESTHETIC TO HER, A PERSON STRETCHED TO REACH HEAVEN. I SAW IN THIS SCULPTURE LEANNESS AND BALANCE AND BEAUTY, BUT NO RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE. IT SEEMED LIKE SHE WAS ALMOST TALKING LIKE A NUN. FOR MY PRIESTLY SECRET, I WANTED TO GIVE NO HINTS.

HER INTERPRETATION OF CALDER'S BLACK WIDOW SPIDER SCULPTURE WAS "BEWARE OF DOING WRONG." TO ME IT WAS, "ACTIONS BRING THEIR OWN RESULTS."

THERE WAS CONTENT AND HAPPINESS IN THESE DISCUSSIONS. HOW COULD WE HAVE BECOME SO CLOSE SO QUICKLY?

WE WERE GETTING TO KNOW EACH OTHER WELL. SHE SAID, "LET'S GO HAVE A COFFEE. WE CAN BE TOGETHER AND, BY THE WAY, WE CAN INTRODUCE OURSELVES. I WOULD LIKE TO DO THAT."

WE TOOK AN OUTSIDE TABLE OVERLOOKING THE SCULPTURE GARDEN. SHE LAUGHED, THEN LOOKED AT ME WITH HER WARM SMILE, ALMOST STARING INTO MY EYES. SHE SAID, "LET ME INTRODUCE MYSELF. I'M MARIE, MARIE O'FLANIGAN. I'M PLEASED TO BE HERE. RARE IS IT WHEN MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCES PRECEDE AN INTRODUCTION." WE PARTED AFTER THE OPERA, YET I HAVE A SENSE THAT MY LIFE MAY NOT BE COMPLETE. WHAT ARE YOUR FEELINGS?"

"MARIE, YOU HAVE GONE NICELY BEYOND AN INTRODUCTION." I TOLD HER MY NAME. "FOR ME, ALSO, THESE SHARED EXPERIENCES HAVE BEEN UNIQUE. I KNEW WHEN OUR FINGERS FIRST TOUCHED AT THE OPERA THAT I

WANTED TO KNOW WHO YOU ARE, MARIE. YOUR PROGRAM DROPPED ACCIDENTALLY THE FIRST TIME, BUT WAS THE SECOND TIME ACCIDENTAL?

THEN, AFTER THE OPERA YOU SO QUICKLY LEFT. MY THOUGHT FOLLOWED YOU – RIGHT TO HERE.”

WE EACH REFLECTED ABOUT WHAT WAS HAPPENING. OUR THOUGHTS OF THIS RELATIONSHIP RACED.

I ORDERED TWO GLASSES OF RED WINE. MARIE’S WARM SMILE AND THE WINE ENCOURAGED MORE CONVERSATION.

WE TALKED AGAIN ABOUT OPERAS WE LOVED. WE TALKED ART AND SCULPTURE AND THE FUN WE WERE HAVING TOGETHER. THE MODERN WAS ABOUT TO CLOSE. “MARIE O’FLANAGAN, MAY I WALK YOU HOME?” MARIE SHOOK HER HEAD.

“I WOULD PREFER TO GO ALONE. IF WE WALK TOGETHER TO MY APARTMENT I WOULD WORRY EVERY STEP OF THE WAY THAT I WOULD ASK YOU TO COME IN, WHICH I SHOULD NOT DO.”

I WAS TOTALLY SURPRISED, INDEED AMAZED, AT THIS LAST COMMENT. I DIDN'T PURSUE THE POSSIBLE INVITATION. I SAID SIMPLY, "EVERYTHING IS GOOD BETWEEN US; HOWEVER, MAY I HAVE YOUR TELEPHONE NUMBER?"

SHE HANDED ME A SCRAP OF PAPER ON WHICH SHE HAD ALREADY WRITTEN HER TELEPHONE NUMBER. "EVEN IF YOU HADN'T ASKED, I WANTED YOU TO BE ABLE TO CONTACT ME." I GAVE HER MY NUMBER. I THOUGHT, "SHE IS AS INTERESTED AS I AM."

MARIE STOOD UP, SMILED WARMLY, SAID "THANK YOU," AND LEFT. I WANTED TO FOLLOW HER BUT KNEW THAT WOULD BREAK AN IMPORTANT TRUST.

I WATCHED HER LEAVE, ADMIRING HER FINE FIGURE, THE WAY SHE WALKED AND THE WAY SHE MOVED. AT GETHSEMANI MY PHYSICAL DESIRES HAD BEEN SUPPRESSED. NOW THOUGH, DESIRE IS, WELL, DESIRE.

I WALKED SLOWLY TO MY APARTMENT. I SAT BY THE TELEPHONE TO CALL MARIE, WHEN MY OWN TELEPHONE RANG. A SOFT VOICE SAID, "THIS IS MARIE. MARIE O'FLANNIGAN. PLEASE DON'T TALK. DON'T SAY A SINGLE WORD. I WANT TO GIVE YOU SEVERAL IMPRESSIONS. THEN I WANT TO HANG UP. I ENJOYED THE DAY, WHICH BEGAN LAST NIGHT AT THE OPERA, AS OUR FINGERS TOUCHED. TODAY HAS ENDED FOR ME, AS YOU MAY HAVE SURMISED, WITH A NICE SENSE OF WARMTH. PLEASE DON'T REPLY AND

DON'T RETURN THE CALL. I HAVE ALREADY SAID TOO MUCH." THE RECEIVER WENT DOWN.

I CALLED MARIE THE NEXT MORNING. WE TALKED FOR A BIT, THEN I SAID, "I WOULD REALLY LIKE TO SEE YOU, TO GET TO KNOW WHO YOU ARE, WHAT YOU DO, AND JUST GENERALLY ABOUT YOUR LIFE." THEN ANOTHER SURPRISE. "I WOULD LIKE FOR YOU TO COME TO MY APARTMENT THIS EVENING FOR DINNER. I WANT TO MAKE SURE THAT YOU KNOW, DESPITE MY DESIRES, THAT THIS INVITATION TO COME FOR DINNER IS JUST THAT, AND NO MORE."

I ARRIVED PROMPTLY WITH A BOTTLE OF WINE. SHE WAS PLEASED. MARIE HAD STARTED A SMALL FIRE IN THE FIREPLACE. I SAT ON THE COUCH, MARIE IN A CHAIR NEXT TO THE FIRE. NO WORDS WERE SPOKEN AS THE WARMTH OF THE FIRE WARMED OUR SPIRITS. AFTER A TIME, MARIE SAID, "I LOVE POETRY, DO YOU?"

I THOUGHT FOR A MINUTE, THEN DECIDED TO TAKE A CHANCE. I REPLIED, "TO MAKE A MEADOW IT TAKES A CLOVER AND A BEE AND A REVERIE." SHE FINISHED THE POEM, "AND IF THE BEES ARE FEW A REVERIE ALONE WILL DO." MARIE JOINED ME ON THE COUCH. "I LOVE THOSE WORDS OF EMILY DICKENSON. WITH US, I HOPE THE BEES ABOUND. A REVERIE ALONE WILL

NOT DO – AT LEAST FOR ME.” I WAS SURPRISED AT THE COMMENT AND THAT SHE KNEW THE POEM AND EMILY DICKENSON.

I VENTURED ON WITH ANOTHER FAVORITE. “TO GO IN THE DARK WITH A LIGHT IS TO KNOW THE LIGHT. GO DARK AND FIND THAT THE NIGHT, TOO, SINGS AND TRAVELS ON DARK FEET AND DARK WINGS.”

AGAIN A SURPRISED. “I LOVE THE WORDS, THE THOUGHTS, THE VERY LIFE OF THAT POET WENDELL BERRY. MARIE PUT ANOTHER LOG ON THE FIRE. SHE DIMMED ALL THE LIGHTS. I THOUGHT SHE WOULD HAVE OR SHOULD HAVE RETURNED TO SIT CLOSELY BY ME. SHE DIDN’T. SHE WENT BACK TO HER CHAIR.

WE TALKED AT LENGTH ABOUT POETRY. AS THE EVENING BEGAN TO CLOSE I SAID, “MARIE, CAN WE DO THIS AGAIN SOON? HOW ABOUT NEXT SATURDAY? WOULD YOU COME TO MY APARTMENT ON 69TH?” “I WOULD LIKE THAT VERY MUCH, BUT YOU MUST REMEMBER PLEASE. THE RULES WILL BE THE SAME; HOWEVER, I HAVE A REQUEST. WE OBVIOUSLY LOVE TO TALK ABOUT POETRY. CAN WE TALK ABOUT T.S. ELLIOT AND THE WASTELAND? IT IS BY FAR THE MOST DIFFICULT POEM I HAVE EVER READ. I AM NOT SURE, EVEN NOW, THAT I UNDERSTAND ITS MEANING.”

THAT VERY MOMENT INDICATED TO ME THAT WE HAD A FUTURE TOGETHER.

MARIE ARRIVED. AS WE SIPPED A GLASS OF WINE SHE SAID, "I KNOW MANY OF THE LINES OF WASTELAND." SHE QUOTED THE FAMOUS FIRST LINES:
"APRIL IS THE CRUELEST MONTH, BREEDING LILACS OUT OF DEAD LAND,
MIXING
MEMORY AND DESIRE, STIRRING
DULL ROOTS WITH SPRING RAIN
WINTER KEPT US WARM, COVERING
EARTH IN FORGETFUL SNOW, FEEDING
A LITTLE LIFE WITH DRIED TUBERS, SUMMER SURPRISED US, COMING OVER
THE STARNGERGERSEE"

WITH A SHOWER OF RAIN; WE STOPPED IN THE COLONNADE, AND WENT ON IN
SUNLIGHT, INTO THE HOFGARTEN, AND DRANK COFFEE AND TALKED FOR AN
HOUR.

I SAID, "I KNOW THE OPENING LINES YOU HAVE QUOTED SO BEAUTIFULLY.
THEY SEEM ALMOST TO REFLECT OUR OWN TIME TOGETHER."

MARIE THEN SAID, " I KNOW BY HEART SOME OTHER BEAUTIFUL LINES. THEY
ALSO SEEM TO MATCH OUR MOOD."

AGAIN SHE QUOTED:

“YOU GAVE ME HYACINTHS FIRST A YEAR AGO;
THEN CALLED ME HYACINTH GIRL.
YET WHEN WE CAME BACK, LATE, FROM THE HYACINTH GARDEN,
YOUR ARMS FULL AND YOUR HAIR WET, I COULD NOT
SPEAK, AND MY EYES FAILED, I WAS NEITHER LIVING NOR DEAD, AND I KNEW
NOTHING LOOKING INTO THE HEART OF LIGHT, THE SILENCE.”

I SAID, “YOU ARE INDEED THE HYACINTH GIRL. AND NOW DO YOU REMEMBER
T.S. ELLIOTT IN THE WASTELAND? HE WROTE ABOUT YOU.”

“MARIE, MARIE, HOLD ON TIGHT. AND DOWN WE WENT.
IN THE MOUNTAINS, THERE YOU FEEL FREE.
I READ MUCH OF THE NIGHT,”

SHE SAID, “THAT POEM IS THE MOST DEEPLY INFLUENTIAL I HAVE EVER
READ.” WE TALKED MORE ABOUT THE POEM. WE HAD SUPPER WITH RED
WINE. OUR CONVERSATIONS WERE NOT LIGHT, BUT DEEP AND REFLECTIVE.

I SAID, “WE NEED TO DO THIS AGAIN. PLEASE COME HERE NEXT FRIDAY.”
SHE SAID, “YES, BUT LET’S AT LEAST TRY TO KEEP THE RULES THE SAME.”

I WAS NERVOUS ALL DAY. I HAD THE FEELING THAT SOMETHING WAS GOING
TO HAPPEN. HOW COULD THINGS BE SO PLEASANT AND GO SO QUICKLY? IT

JUST SEEMED OUR FUTURES WERE MEANT TO BE TOGETHER. I PREPARED A SMALL BUTTERFLY OF LAMB AND OPENED A GOOD RED BURGUNDY. I SET THE TABLE FOR TWO.

AFTER DINNER, MARIE SAT OPPOSITE ON THE COUCH FACING ME. I READ AGAIN SOME LINES FROM THE WASTELAND. SHE SAID, "WHY DID YOU CHOOSE THOSE LINES YOU READ?" WE DISCUSSED THE INHERENT CONFLICTS. WE READ, TAKING TURNS. THEN, WITHOUT REASON OR WARNING, MARIE CAME OVER TO THE COUCH.

SHE SAT CLOSE TO ME. SHE TOOK MY HAND IN HERS. "WE HAVE NOT TALKED ABOUT OURSELVES, WHO WE ARE, WHAT WE DO, PLANS FOR THE FUTURE, MAYBE OURS." SHE LET GO OF MY HAND. SHE TURNED TO FACE ME ON THE COUCH.

"AS YOU KNOW, MARIE O'FLANIGAN JUST LET GO OF YOUR HAND. SHE IS TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OLD. AT SCHOOL, SHE WAS TRAINED BY NUNS WHO CONTINUED TO WEAR THEIR HABITS.

THEY OFTEN SUGGESTED THAT I HAD A VOCATION. I COULD FOLLOW GOD'S CALLING, TEACHING OR HELPING OTHER. I LISTENED AND I BELIEVED. I BEGAN TO AVOID THE BOYS AT SCHOOL. I DID, HOWEVER, GO TO A FEW DANCES. I LIKED SEVERAL OF THE BOYS, BUT KEPT MY EYE ON BEING A NUN.

WITH MY FAVORITE BOY I HAD SEVERAL, WHAT I WOULD CALL, NICE KISSING SESSIONS. HOWEVER, I MAINTAINED WHAT I CONSIDERED MY VIRTUE TO BE. IN RETROSPECT, KISSING WAS REALLY NICE.

MY INCLINATION TOWARD PASSION WORRIED ME. I KNEW WELL THAT WITH A VOCATION I NEEDED TO CONTROL MY EMOTIONS. MY INNER THOUGHTS DID NOT ALWAYS COOPERATE.”

I WAS QUIET. I LISTENED, AND THEN SAID, “PLEASE GO ON.”

“I SPENT MY FIRST YEAR IN THE CONVENT PRAYING, MEDITATING AND STUDYING. I SENSED THAT I WAS HAPPY. I TOOK THE TEMPORARY VOWS OF POVERTY, CHASTITY AND OBEDIENCE. POVERTY AND OBEDIENCE WERE EASY. CHASTITY WAS ANOTHER THING. MY MIND ALWAYS WANDERED AND WONDERED. I THOUGHT I WAS CONTENT.

I WAS SENT TO YALE TO OBTAIN MY MASTERS DEGREE. THERE, I KEPT MY PRAYER LIFE AND MY THREE VOWS. I MADE FRIENDS AT YALE. A SMALL STUDY GROUP OF THREE MEN AND THREE WOMEN BECAME A PART OF MY LIFE. I WANTED CLOSER RELATIONSHIPS. MARRIAGE AND CHILDREN SEEMED TO BE A BETTER CALLING FOR ME. WHY WOULD IT BE GOD’S WILL FOR ME TO BE LONELY AND WITHOUT COMPASSION? I DECIDED GOD WAS REALLY SAYING, ‘LEAVE. CHOOSE A DIFFERENT LIFE.’ MOTHER SUPERIOR

RELUCTANTLY AGREED.” “BUT MARIE, YOU REALLY BELONG TO US. YOU WILL ALWAYS BE WELCOME IF YOU WANT TO COME BACK.”

“I STAYED AT YALE FOR MY MASTERS DEGREE. I WILL BEGIN FURTHER STUDIES AT COLUMBIA NEXT MONTH. MY CATHOLIC FAITH REMAINS EXTREMELY STRONG. I WANT TO KEEP IT THAT WAY. EACH SUNDAY I USUALLY GO TO A QUITE SMALL SIMPLE PARISH MASS. IT IS NICE, THOUGH MY TEMPORARY VOWS HAVE EXPIRED.”

MARIE SAID, “I HAVE GONE ON TOO LONG. WHAT IS YOUR STORY?” I KNEW THAT MY REPLY HAD TO BE VERY CAREFULLY WORDED. I WONDERED, HOW MUCH LONGER WOULD I BE A PRIEST?

I TOLD HER MY STORY, GEORGETOWN, TOM DOOLY, GETHSEMANI, THOMAS MERTON, THE SEVEN STORY MOUNTAIN, THEN LEAVING. I DID NOT NEED THE SILENCE. I WANTED TO BE IN THE WORLD. I DID NOT MENTION STILL BEING A PRIEST.

AS MARIE LEFT THAT EVENING, I WAS THE RECIPIENT OF A SOFT, ENDURING, SOUL-MOVING KISS. OVER THE NEXT WEEKS OF SEEING EACH OTHER OFTEN, IT WAS THE FIRST KISS OF MANY, EACH WITH A JOLT FROM MY PRIESTLY CONSCIENCE.

WE VISITED MANY MUSEUMS. THE FRICK MUSEUM WAS OUR FAVORITE. WE RODE THE FERRY TO STATEN ISLAND. WE TOOK THE BUS TO THE CLOISTERS. WE SIPPED COFFEE IN GREENWICH VILLAGE AND WE ENJOYED GREAT EVENING WALKS IN THE PARK. WE BECAME VERY CLOSE. WE OFTEN KISSED. WE BECAME BOUND, INTELLECTUALLY AND EMOTIONALLY. SILENTLY WE WERE PLANNING OUR FUTURES.

THEN, I RECEIVED A CALL FROM ST. PATRICK'S CATHEDRAL. "WE NEED A PRIEST AT THE 10 O'CLOCK MASS THIS SUNDAY. CAN YOU HELP OUT? I REMEMBERED MY PROMISE TO FATHER PRIOR. ON THAT SUNDAY MORNING I PUT ON THE VESTMENTS FOR A HIGH MASS, WHERE THE PRIEST WALKS DOWN THE AISLE SINGING "ASPERGES ME" AND SPRINKLING HOLY WATER LEFT AND RIGHT. THEN, IN A PEW, THERE WAS MARIE. SHE SAW THIS MAN COMING DOWN THE AISLE. HER MAN OF TRAVATORE, HER MAN OF THE SCULPTURE GARDEN, HER MAN OF DINNERS AND DEEP LINGERING KISSES. HER MAN --- HER MAN WAS A PRIEST.

SHE STAYED IN HER PEW. SHE PUT HER HEAD DOWN, LITTLE SHIVERS WRACKING HER BODY. HE IS A PRIEST. SHE FELT BETRAYED BEYOND FORGIVENESS. ALL THAT SHE HAD HOPED TO HAVE DISAPPEARED.

SHE THOUGHT OF THEIR HOURS TOGETHER, THEIR DINNERS AND THEIR KISSES, THE WARMTH OF THEIR EMBRACES. SHE HAD BEEN KISSING A

PRIEST WITH VOWS OF CHASTITY, UNTHINKABLE FOR MARIE, A DEVOUT CATHOLIC.

I CALLED MARIE QUICKLY AFTER MASS. SHE SAID COLDLY, "I HAVE BEEN BETRAYED. YOU DID NOT TELL ME YOU ARE A PRIEST. I HAVE BEEN EMBRACING YOU, YOU A MAN OF GOD, A PRIEST FOREVER WITH A VOW OF CHASTITY. MAY GOD FORGIVE ME AND HAVE MERCY ON YOU. I WILL NOT SEE YOU AGAIN NOR EVER SPEAK TO YOU."

I TRIED TO EXPLAIN WHAT FATHER PRIOR HAD SAID. HER TRUST WAS GONE. "PLEASE DO NOT CALL AGAIN." THE RECEIVER WENT FIRMLY DOWN.

SISTER SUPERIOR SAID, "MARIE O'FLANIGAN, WE ARE GLAD TO HAVE YOU BACK. WE DID NOT THINK YOU WOULD BE GONE LONG. THERE IS STILL A PLACE FOR YOU HERE."

FATHER PRIOR SAID TO ME, "WE ARE GLAD TO SEE YOU. WE DID NOT THINK YOU WOULD BE GONE LONG. WELCOME BACK TO GETHSEMANI. YOU WILL NO LONGER BE A PRIEST. YOUR RELEASE CAME IN JUST YESTERDAY."

I AGAIN LOVED SIGNING GREGORIAN CHANT. MY LONELINESS WAS SOMEWHAT ABATED BECAUSE FATHER PRIOR SENT ME TO OTHER PLACES

TO GIVE RETREATS. I DID THEM WELL. I WAS CALLED UPON OFTEN. A YEAR LATER, I GAVE A RETREAT TO A GROUP OF NUNS.

THERE I SAW MARIE IN HER BLACK HABIT. SHE SAW ME. SHE GOT UP AND LEFT. SHE DID NOT RETURN. I COULD NOT FINISH THE RETREAT. I LEFT.

MARIE RECEIVED IN THE MAIL TEN DAYS LATER A SINGLE TICKET TO TRAVATORE. THE SAME SEAT IN THE SECOND ROW OF THE GRAND TIER. SHE WENT. THE SEAT NEXT TO HER WAS EMPTY UNTIL THE CHANDELIER SLOWLY WENT UP. A PERSON SAT DOWN. AS SHE HELD HER BREATH, SHE LET HER PROGRAM SLIDE TO THE FLOOR NEXT TO HER. A HAND LIGHTLY BRUSHED HER LEG, AS THE PROGRAM WAS LAID IN HER LAP.

MUSIC CAUGHT THE MOMENT. TROVATORE AT ITS BEST.

HARRY H. SANTEN
1/12/14