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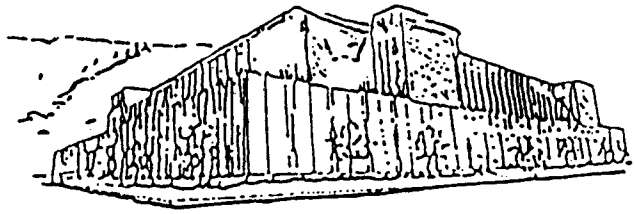
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OUR FATHERS

by

Nancy Stevens

B.A. The University of Montana, 1975

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of


Master of Fine Arts

Creative Writing

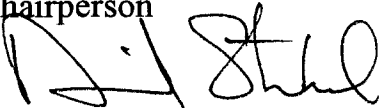
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1998

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CHAPTER ONE

I knew more dead people than the average thirteen-year-old. Three grandparents, an uncle, my father, Melody Padilla and now TJ. The headache was coming on, white and brilliant like staring at the sun, sweetly sickening like eating all the icing off a three-layer cake. I fought it back, fanning myself with the Carpelli Funeral Home pamphlet. Gold letters on softly ragged gray parchment read: “Theresa June Dillon, June 3, 1945 -- April 17, 1959.” TJ.

No air to breathe, only incense and the overpowering richness of too many clove pinks trapped inside the candlelit chapel. TJ always hated carnations. Taped organ music scratched along from reel to reel. Bach in B Minor. Why B minor if you can B major? If you don't C sharp, you'll be flat. Don't B flat, B natural.

“She looks so natural,” old Mrs. Costwick whispered on cue to even older Mrs. Sterling as they filed by the coffin. She dabbed at her eyes with a real Chantilly lace hankie. Blessed by the Pope, you know.

“Yes, yes, bless her soul.”

Professional mourners. I'm told that, when I was nine, they attended my father's funeral. I did not. I passed out before the pallbearers got his casket halfway up the steps to St. Mark's. I was assured everyone forgave me, considering the circumstances.

"Poor baby. Bless her poor little soul. So natural."

I glared at Mrs. Costwick and stepped up to view my friend's body. A dead teenage girl in a glossy black coffin. Not natural. TJ Dillon's lank blonde hair had never held a curl before that day and her lips had never been so silent. Her bruises were masked over with makeup and she seemed coated in wax, ghastly as a plastic lily. And I didn't care how much they blessed her poor little soul or how many votive candles they lit, TJ had always told me she wanted to go to Hell so she could visit her sister Roxanne and say hello to my dad.

My standard response to this taunt had always been, "I'm gonna kill you, Theresa Dillon!" and now I finally had. My hand did not send her hurtling off the bluff above the Dry Fork riverbed, but it was every bit my fault she was dead. Through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault.

Sometimes in confession, Father McConnoughey would admonish me, saying, "Holly Ryan, I think you'd like to take personal blame for everything bad from the Black Plague onward. It's a sin to be so egotistical."

Only a priest could make you feel guilty about feeling guilty, but, after all, the sacrament was named Penance, not Forgiveness. I was never real big on forgiveness. I knelt in front of my roommate's coffin, closed my eyes against the headache and fought for air, gulping in the thick odor of candle wax and chemical preservatives. Embalming

fevered memories forever in my brain. Even now, thirty-seven years later, the words, “Thank God, it’s Friday,” have never crossed my lips.

The Padilla girl was killed on a Friday in March. That day of the week was normally a bad one for me at St. Mark’s -- piano lesson in the early morning, fish sticks in the lunchroom, confession in the afternoon and all day spent dreading another weekend alone with my mother, a bone-china beauty who was, as TJ put it, “flying on Percodan Airlines.”

That particular Friday I woke to find TJ in her nightgown drawing a white chalk line down the center of our room at the Sacred Heart Academy. Her blonde hair swept the floor as she backed up on hands and knees.

“What are you doing?” I asked, forgetting I wasn’t speaking to her. We’d had a fight the night before -- a ferocious whispered fight so the nuns couldn’t hear. She had snuck in at ten, claiming to have been on a date with Danny Kellogg, senior track star at the St. Benedict’s high school for boys across the compound. I had covered for her all evening and then she lied to me. Danny Kellogg, sure.

“I’m dividing up the room -- Holy Holly on that side; Terrible Theresa on this side.” She pointed to the sink, where a tin bucket caught rusty drips from the corroded elbow. “You get the holy water tap; I get the hot water tap.”

“Stop it. Sister will have a cow.”

“Sister is a cow,” she muttered. She finished her line across the cold gray tiles and continued up the wall, white chalk snicking against industrial-green plasterboard.

She reached the picture of Jesus that was decoupage onto a cross section of ponderosa pine. Jesus was pointing sadly at His sacred heart, as if you wouldn't notice it already, sitting there outside His chest like a botched-up biology experiment.

“TJ, don't you dare!”

“You get the right hand of God; I get the left hand of God.” She had bisected His heart and made it as far as His chin before I struggled out of my twisted sheets, ran to the foot of the mattress and tackled her from behind. We collapsed in a tangle of legs and giggles.

“Shh! Shh!” I warned between squeaks of suppressed laughter. I began to mop up her chalk marks with a damp towel.

I had been cleaning up TJ's messes for almost three years, ever since she became my roommate at Sacred Heart. The old granite academy housed the girls' high school and the nuns' quarters. It wasn't set up to be a boarding school. TJ and I were the only student roomers, allowed there because of our “special circumstances.” Papal disposal, TJ called it.

We attended the co-ed St. Mark's Elementary situated across the street alongside St. Mark's church. The diocese owned two city blocks, plus an undeveloped riverside lot and the Catholic cemetery on the far bank overlooking the confluence of the Dry and East forks of the Ravalli river. The entire complex was a pretty place, a stonework sanctuary cushioned by clipped lawns and shaded by huge elms and cottonwoods planted there a century before by the missionaries. Back then the Indians had begged the blackrobes to come to Montana, and, “Boy, were they sorry later,” TJ was fond of saying.

Before TJ showed up I had lived there alone almost a year. My room was in a wing off the long third floor hallway beyond the nuns' quarters. It wasn't so bad. I liked the quiet. The Sisters of Providence were mostly nice and they let me visit my father's grave site across the river almost as often as I asked.

My "special circumstance" was a car wreck. One Sunday morning when I was nine, my parents and I were in a head-on with a drunk driver on a narrow country road north of town. We were test driving a new Olds 98 in a shade of green called Seafoam Mist. We couldn't afford to buy it, but my dad liked to take test drives.

We were reading a Burma Shave verse and had almost reached the punchline when the drunk cut his pickup across the line into our lane, then corrected to his lane, then swerved onto the wrong side again.

My father, trying to avoid him, matched every move, our car like a magnet following the pull of the pickup. He shouted, "Holly, get down!" and I dived to the rear floorboards. The creamy upholstered front seat saved me from all but a few bruises.

When the screaming, crashing and shattering had stopped, I leaned over the seat to find my parents unconscious with the dashboard crumpled into them and shards of glass strewn everywhere. My father was wedged behind the steering wheel, his right arm pitched across my mother as if in one last protective gesture. The driver's side got the worst of it. They said the other guy and my father died instantly, but he was still alive when I touched him. Some things you just know.

The main artery in his upper arm had been severed and his blood seeped along the fabric of my mother's white linen dress like red ink spilled onto a blotter. I found that by

holding up the arm and pressing tightly against the wound, I could slow the flow and keep it from running onto my mother's best dress. His arm was big and muscular, capable of laying brick or pounding nails all day, but I never dreamed it could be so heavy.

I held on, trying to pray. I knew dozens of prayers, but the only line I could remember was, "Our Father, Who art in Heaven." I repeated it nonstop, running all the syllables together into one word. His life ran out through my fingers and I could feel it when he died, I don't care what they say. It was invisible, yet warm, like a rising sigh. I must have prayed wrong, I decided, and God thought I wanted my own father to be in Heaven.

That's how they found me when they pried the dealer's Oldsmobile apart -- holding up a dead arm and chanting the Our Father. My headaches started soon after that. There are still two white crosses sprouting from the barrow pit at the particular curve in the highway, but they took down the Burma Shave signs. Spring is sprung, the grass is riz, from where all the crazy drivers is.

My mother's cuts and broken bones healed, but the pain never left her. At any rate, she kept taking the pain pills. On Saturdays I fetched them for her at one of four different drug stores and pretended I didn't notice they were prescribed by four different doctors. I also pretended I didn't know about the empty wine bottles she stashed behind the flour bin.

At first I thought it achingly romantic that she suffer in such a way for her lost love. Pale and thin, dark-haired and dreamy, she seemed on a higher, almost saintly, plane. I strove double hard to cause her no trouble and I loved her, helpless, from an

awestruck distance. Most of my spare time at home I passed sitting quietly, hands folded, staring straight ahead. One of the two neighbors who used to drop by with food wondered aloud once if I were catatonic.

“No, just Catholic,” the other neighbor whispered. “The nuns teach them to sit that way. Isn’t it wonderful?”

“Scary, if you ask me.”

Eventually, I was said to be too much for my mother to handle full-time and, courtesy of the insurance money, was sent to live at Sacred Heart, coming home most weekends and holidays. TJ often came with me, or I went home with her. Safety in numbers.

Her parents fought, she said, and that was why she lived at the academy. Her parents did fight, but the real reason was her sister Roxanne, who had run away to Seattle at sixteen to be a prostitute. She turned up dead on the docks. The nuns were supposed to keep TJ from a similar fate. Her mother worked two jobs to pay her tuition and board.

TJ said I was lucky my dad was dead. She also said my father was probably in Hell since we had gone for a drive that last Sunday instead of to Mass. I said the day wasn’t over yet and we could have gone to Mass later if we hadn’t been in the wreck, couldn’t we? It was the kind of question the boys liked to ask old Father Brentwood to derail his train of thought when he visited class. TJ was adamant: my father was in Hell along with her sister and hordes of other interesting people. I guess we wouldn’t have been friends if we hadn’t been thrown in together by Papal disposal. One thing about TJ; she was never dull.

“You’re going to be late for your piano lesson, Vanessa Cliburn,” TJ said as I finished erasing her chalk line from the wall. “It’s almost seven-thirty.”

Van Cliburn had been my idol ever since he won the 1958 Tchaikowsky International Piano Competition in Moscow. TJ preferred Elvis Presley.

Moaning, I threw on my uniform. “Quick, braid my hair.”

“Lucky you. An hour with Father McConnoughey.” TJ dug into my brown snarls.

“If I don’t get another piano teacher next year, I’m going to quit.”

“Father McConnoughy is the only reason to take piano lessons as far as I can see.”

“The piano kept me out of the rhythm band.” I reached for my music books.

“Hold still. You never got to be in any of the school plays. Just had to bang away on the piano.”

“Yeah, I missed my big chance to be a sheep.”

“You would have been a natural as a sheep. Or the Blessed Virgin. The nuns never let me be the Blessed Virgin. I wonder why. I can act.”

“TJ! You are acting. And I don’t believe for one second you were with Danny Kellogg last night.”

“Oh, yeah? Where was I?” She jerked on the thick braid she had finished.

“Ow! I don’t know. All I know is he’s going steady with Melody Padilla and even if he wasn’t he’d never bother with a mouthy little eighth grader.”

“I happen to be much in demand. Very much in demand.” Her tone was turning ugly and I stepped out of hair yanking range.

“TJ, you’ve got to stop lying all the time. No one believes a word you say anymore.”

Her green eyes were going that scary slate gray, prelude to a fighting madness I was never any match for. “I do so have a guy. Believe that, Miss Holy Holly. Believe that.”

I fled before she started throwing things.

Father McConnoughey was waiting for me in the St. Benedict auditorium, seated at the baby grand, a study in black and white: ebony and ivory, notes and music sheets, cassock and collar. The Sacred Heart Throb. I guess he was over forty, but that still qualified him as young compared to the rectory’s other resident ancients. His hair was prematurely gray, but thick and wavy. His blue Irish eyes and quick grin could melt down the sternest of the nuns, make the rectory housekeepers sigh, and charm the knee socks off the general female student body. I hated him, he knew it, and it drove him nuts.

“Good morning, Father McConnoughey.” I set up my music, sat next to him on the bench and stared straight ahead.

“Good morning, Holly. Why do we not always obtain what we pray for?”

Father McConnoughey had learned not to tell me jokes since I never laughed, even when they were funny. Instead he was asking me Question 480 from the Baltimore catechism. Confirmation was in May.

“We do not always obtain what we pray for, either because we have not prayed properly or because God sees that what we are asking would not be for our good,” I recited.

“And do you understand what that means?” Father asked.

Blast him, he set my teeth on edge. There is no “Do you understand what that means?” in the catechism. Father McConnoughey was always trying to get us to think-- something the nuns would whack us for. Father had a degree in psychology, so maybe he couldn't help himself, always asking why and what does that mean. Always trying to pick my brain in particular since the accident, but I was too hard-headed for him. I understood what the answer to Question 480 meant all right. It was a loophole for God. The catechism was full of them. If we didn't get what we prayed for, it was our own damn fault and God gets off scot-free. Even Father McConnoughey might have whacked me for an answer like that, so I answered simply:

“Yes.”

“Yes, what, Holly?” he prompted.

“Yes, Father.” I studied middle C.

He sighed. “No, I mean, what does that answer mean to you?”

“What?” I tried to bat brown-eyed confusion at him, but he wasn't having any.

He sighed again.

“Holly, why do you think we don't always get what we pray for?”

“Our father in Heaven knows best,” I said in my best pious old lady imitation.

Father Mac was about to sigh himself into hyperventilation.

“Play the Scriabin, Holly.”

Etude in D Sharp Minor, Opus 8, No. 12. An intense, brooding Russian thing that would have made a great score for an Alfred Hitchcock movie. I hammered out the piece,

desperate to be perfect. For six years I had been Sister Constantine's star pupil and then she had offered me up to the priest, saying I had surpassed her, which wasn't saying much. I was the envy of all, his only female student. The only one not impressed was Father McConnoughey.

I bashed out the last chord, my foot heavy on the gas, and let out the breath I'd been holding. Father sighed as well. After a pause he said, "Holly, the notes are right, but where is the music, hmm? Where is the music?"

I stared at the keyboard trying to absorb his kindly spoken insult. I refused to let him make me cry. Knowing he was right didn't make it easier. Religion by rote, music by note. Father McConnoughey didn't buy my act. I didn't buy his either: the jolly priest. Baloney. I felt my left knee sock crumpling around my ankle, sinking with my soul. I picked lint from my wool skirt. Our St. Mark's uniforms made us look like Scottish Highlanders. Blackwatch plaid skirts, white blouses, gray knee socks. All that was missing was a tamo'shanter and a bagpipe. It didn't make sense. I thought the Scots were Presbyterians.

"Holly?"

"I'm only thirteen," I whispered, knowing I was well over the prodigy hill.

"Hah! Well, so you are. I was thinking you were twenty-five at least." He tugged at my braid. The smile I gave him would have made Mona Lisa look slap happy. I couldn't help it if I'd inherited the exact wrong set of trait from my parents. Instead of being blessed with my father's guts and my mother's classic carriage and willowy

suppleness, I had been cursed with her stage fright and my father's freckles, sturdy build and stubby fingers. I played the piano like a scared Irish bricklayer.

Father caught himself at the beginning of a sigh and swallowed it.

"Let's try it once more, shall we then?" The piano sang for him. Sister Constantine said Father could have been a concert pianist. I almost believed it, watching his long slender fingers float over the keys while my own hated paws fumbled along trying to keep up. Almost believed it-- who would rather be a priest than a concert pianist? It was just one of many rumors about Father McConnoughey.

We lived on rumors at St. Mark's. Like the cherished one about Sister Mary Helene posing for a girlie magazine spread entitled "Get Thee to a Nunnery." TJ's favorite rumor about Father Mac (one she probably started after seeing "The Quiet Man" three times) was that he had been a prize fighter and had killed a man in the ring, hence his calling to the priesthood.

"TJ, that is so stupid," I would argue. "How could he be a pianist, like Sister says, and a boxer, too? He'd wreck his hands."

"He gave up the piano to earn prize money in the ring. His mother was sick."

"I bet she was really sick when he became a priest. He seems to go lower with every career change. Maybe next he'll dig graves over at the cemetery like Slow-Joe Costwick."

My favorite rumor about him was that he had raped and strangled a Scared Heart sophomore named Cathy Jill Callantine on Good Friday back in 1954. The murder itself was not a rumor. She was dead all right, a priest's cincture stolen from the St. Mark's

sacristy slip-knotted around her neck. They found her body dumped beneath the juniper bushes in back of St. Mark's church.

Everyone from altar boy to bishop was suspect, of course, and it was a scandalous ordeal for St. Mark's parish and the entire town. Murder in Montana was a rare event back then, usually confined to barrooms fights or the occasional duel of jealous spouses. At school, the nuns forbade us to discuss the murder, or, God forbid, the rape, whatever that was. I was only eight. I don't remember feeling scared then. My father was still alive. The police couldn't solve the Callantine case, but life went on for most of us.

"Holly, what's wrong?"

"What?" I'd been looking at the priest's long, strong fingers, imagining the concerto of death, the shrill notes of terror those hands could wring from the ivory neck bones of his worshipful victims.

"Look at your key signature. B flat. B flat."

"Sorry, Father." I played, he listened, we endured. I bolted from the bench at hour's end.

"Holly, wait."

"Yes, Father?"

"How is your friend Theresa doing with her catechism?"

"Fine, Father. " I was supposed to be helping TJ memorize.

"Is she going to be ready for confirmation?"

“Yes, Father.” Lying to a priest. “Well, she hasn’t picked her name yet.” Every time I asked her, she would blurt out something ridiculous like “Buffalo Bob,” “Linguini of the Flowers” or “Ignats.”

“Not staying up too late, I hope?”

I tried to keep panic out of my voice. “No, Father.” Another zillion years in Purgatory. If TJ ever got caught out at night it would mean expulsion. Maybe execution if they found her set of keys to every building on the compound.

The autumn of our seventh grade year, while playing croquet with us on the campus lawn, old Sister Mary Helene of centerfold fame lost her keys out a hole in her interminable pocket. The chain was as long as Marley’s ghost’s, but Sister didn’t hear the keys ching to earth because she was nearly deaf and was preoccupied with gleefully croqueting my ball halfway to Idaho with a solid whack of her mallet. TJ snatched the keys up quick as a magpie and had them all copied down at Woolworth’s before she slipped the originals into Sister’s room the next week.

“Well, please keep on helping her, Holly, and set a good example. I worry about her. Her family life, you know...”

“Yes, Father.”

“Go along then.” He waved a vague sign of the cross at me. If only he could have seen how his precious TJ did it--groping at various parts of her anatomy and chanting, “Spectacles, testicles, wallet, comb.”

I thought I was shed of Father McConnoughey for the rest of the day, but he popped into our civics class before I’d had time to recover from a lunch of pasty fish

sticks and sodden hash browns that no amount of catsup should improve. The rest of the class was elated at the respite from municipal bonds and leaped up with a heartfelt, “Good afternoon, Father McConnoughey.”

He had come to talk to us about confirmation procedures, but soon allowed himself to be sidetracked by questions. Lenny Plenty Guns eventually came up with a stumper.

“Father, what did Joseph and Mary do with all the gold and frankincense and myrrh that the Wise Men brought?”

“They bought tax-free municipal bonds, ignats,” TJ blurted.

I thought she would be sent to stand in the hall, but Father was roaring and after some hesitation Sister Benedict decided to laugh as hard as everyone else.

“That’s a very good question, Leonard.” Father McConnoughey thought fast and made up something about travel expenses as he edged towards the old upright piano in the back of the room. Time for his jolly priest routine.

A squad of brown-nosers urged him on, but he never needed any encouragement. Not at all like a concert pianist, he pounded out pop tunes on the old Conestoga--thus labeled because of its suspected mode of transportation to Montana.

Everyone except me gathered around to listen to him. I worked on my civics chapter outline. He finished up his act playing and singing his theme song.

“Honey in the morning, honey in the evening, honey at supper time. Be my little honey and love me all the time.” A above middle C was broken and every time he hit it he sang louder to drown out the dull plunk. Bing Crosby had nothing to fear.

TJ joined in with him. “Throw your arms around me and promise stars above, you’ll be mine forever in heaven of love.”

What kind of song was that for a priest to be singing? He and TJ hammed up a big finish to much applause. “Theresa, you make the bird jealous,” he told her.

The birds and me. It was true. She could have sung professionally. Four octaves plus. People stopped to listen when she practiced, which wasn’t very often. We were supposed to perform a piece together for graduation. Me on piano, of course. I had yet to get her to practice with me.

I looked backward out of the corner of my eye. TJ was grinning like a sap at Father’s praise. Odd someone as brassy as TJ would like a priest, but I believe Father McConnoughey was the only person TJ ever loved.

Father blessed the group around the piano, gave a puzzled shake of the head at me and left. I feared Sister Benedict would make me stand in the trash can for being rude to a priest, but apparently I had collected enough good conduct holy cards to stave her off.

People left me pretty much alone. Most of the kids were in awe of my migraines. It was almost as good as having the stigmata. I never faked one though. Even TJ wasn’t that good an actress. And I felt if I faked one, God would give me one for real, maybe one that would never go away, and I would end up forever like my mother, lying in a darkened room, drapes drawn against the world, cool washrag on my crazed porcelain forehead.

Many people assumed, since I lived at the academy, suffered white headaches and had the catechism memorized right through to question 499, that I had the calling. I did

nothing to discourage this fiction. Sin of omission. Difficult enough to confess the sins you did do, without having to remember all the right actions you failed to perform. You could be in confession all day. I didn't carry Sister's books, I didn't give food to the poor, I didn't, I didn't... I didn't help TJ when she needed me the most.

We finished off the school day with confessions in St. Mark's church. TJ shoved to get into the long line in front of Father McConnoughey's confessional. She had a pink Kleenex pinned to her head because she'd forgotten her mantilla as usual. I tagged onto the three-person line by old Father Brentwood's booth. Sister force-marched TJ and a dozen others over to my line. I gave her cuts.

"Let's go practice our piece afterwards," I whispered.

"Okay, okay." TJ scowled and kept eyeing Father McConnoughey's confessional.

Father Brentwood gave out the stiffest penances and his breath could turn daffodils black, but he didn't ask any questions and he pretended he didn't know who you were. Maybe he wasn't pretending. Father Mac could tell us all by our voices and never missed on a name. With him it was all, "Why is that so?" or "How does that make you feel?" until I was ready to kill him.

"I thought unkind thoughts about someone." I knelt in the draped darkness and whispered my latest transgressions to Father Brentwood. He sentenced me to ten Hail Marys and ten Our Fathers. If he'd known the unkind thoughts were about his fellow priest, he'd probably have doubled the penance. I didn't volunteer the information.

I grabbed a vacant pew, sank to my knees and did my time, hands over my face. I could still taste fish sticks. You were supposed to be sorry. I was sorry I wasn't sorry,

but I wasn't sorry. Another unclean confession, another rotten Friday. I didn't know yet how rotten.

By the time I buttoned up my green sweater and went outside to look for TJ, she was gone. A stealthy breeze silently tossed a pink kleenex in lazy lonely somersaults across the granite steps of St. Mark's.

CHAPTER TWO

Ten minutes later I got a letter from her postmarked Minneapolis. She wasn't in Minneapolis, of course. She was always pulling this crazy stunt on me. TJ had a friend there who supplied her with postcards of Minnesota. Lakes and universities and Twin Cities scenes. TJ wrote notes on them and mailed them back to the friend who posted them for her inside envelopes so the nuns couldn't read them. TJ thought this was hilarious, but I never did get the point.

This one said, "Dear Holly, Here I am at the University of Minnesota. I have been accepted to medical school because of my great brilliance. P.S. The doctors are mad for me. TJ."

When she delivered the envelope from "your little friend in Minneapolis," Sister Mary Helene explained that TJ's father had picked her up after confession to take her to dinner. Sister permitted me to skip dinner, since I said I had an upset stomach, which was no lie. The thought of the inevitable macaroni and cheese and the resigned munching of twenty-five silent nuns giving mental thanks that at least it wasn't fish sticks, was always good for a Friday night belly ache.

Alone again, I changed into my jeans and watched out the window. At six-thirty I saw TJ and her dad pull up in his brown Hudson. I ran outside to say hello.

“Howdy, Mr. Dillon!” I called, dragging one leg behind me like Chester on “Gunsmoke.” It was a routine we always did. Actually, TJ’s father looked more like Chester than Matt Dillon. Tall, gangly and lots of Adam’s apple. Mr Dillon started at the sound of my voice and scowled a little, I thought, before smiling and waving at me.

They had been fighting again. TJ hated her father and I could never figure why. He often showed up to take her for a treat somewhere, usually Woolworth’s, where he was second assistant manager, which meant he ran the lunch counter and soda fountain. He was always doing funny things to entertain us when I spent the weekend at TJ’s place.

He usually made Sunday breakfast for us after he picked us up from Mass. A couple of times when we were little, he made about a billion dollar-size pancakes and fed them to us on the tips of our tongues like Holy Communion wafers. “Take this and eat it, for I have sweat my blood to make it.” Mr. Dillon wasn’t too keen on Catholicism. It was sacrilegious, but very funny the way he did it. I could see where TJ got the ideas for some of her stunts. TJ’s baby sister Donna and I thought it was a stitch, but TJ didn’t laugh. She just took the pancakes in her mouth without protest, solemn as High Mass.

Mr. Dillon also bought TJ a lot of five-and-dime jewelry that the nuns usually confiscated, and he always had a kind word and a hug for me. But not that day.

TJ flung herself out of the car. She actually looked glad to see me. She clenched a foot-long hot dog wrapped in a Woolworth’s napkin. She was squeezing it so hard that mustard and chopped onion and relish oozed from the toasted bun. My mouth watered.

“Bye, girls.” Mr. Dillon sped off. I waved after him to make up for TJ turning her back. She really was awful to him.

“Why’d he come today?” I asked. “Your mom’s picking us up tomorrow morning, isn’t she?” I was supposed to stay with TJ until after Sunday Mass.

“I guess he can come when he wants to, can’t he? He misses me.” TJ scowled.

“I wonder why,” I said and backed up a step, but TJ ignored my comment.

“Want a bite?” She offered me smooshed frankfurter. It smelled delicious. Her moods changed so fast it was scary.

“Oh, yeah. Thanks.” I took a huge bite and munched dreamily. “I got your postcard from Minneapolis today, Dr. Dillon,” I mumbled through my gnashing teeth.

She grinned. “Really? It only took two days then. Last time . . .”

“Oh, God, it’s Friday!” I screamed, spitting hot dog pulp onto the winterkilled boulevard.

TJ howled and pointed at me, chanting, “Mortal sin! Mortal sin!”

“That’s not funny! You did that on purpose, TJ Dillon! I just went to confession. I’m gonna kill you!” I continued spitting red juice.

“Look, Holly.” TJ removed the wiener from the bun, threw her head back and made a great show of smacking her lips, licking off the mustard and devouring the meat.

I gasped. “If you died right now, I swear you’d go to Hell.”

“Good, then I would visit your . . .”

“Don’t you say it!”

“Good grief, Holly, if eat a hot dog’s the worst thing you ever do, you’ll be one lucky kid. One real lucky kid.”

“I’m not coming over this weekend.” That threw her.

“Oh, come on. I’m sorry, Holly, okay? I’ll confess it. It wasn’t your fault. Come on, stay with me this weekend.”

“I don’t know . . .” I knew I had her. She really did hate being alone with her parents.

“Come on. I’ll go practice the Ave Maria with you right now.”

“Oh, all right.”

TJ changed into her out-of-uniform uniform -- white shirt, jeans and penny loafers -- while I got permission and a key to the auditorium from Sister Mary Helene. That was a joke; TJ already had a key. We let ourselves into the St. Benedict’s auditorium just as darkness fell.

I punched the old-fashioned button light switches.

“Let there be light!” TJ ordered like Cecil B. DeMille. And miraculously, the ancient wiring brought forth light. The black baby grand Steinway loomed on the empty stage. I sighed. This was as close as I’d ever get to Carnegie Hall.

TJ could have performed there, though. She turned into a different person when she sang -- a woman, a star; an angel maybe. She shrugged off a talent I would have killed for. She didn’t need to practice. The melody was perfect. Even the Latin was perfect. I shivered at the high notes, half expectant that any nearby glassware or hearts would shatter at the purity of the sound. When we finished, I had tears in my eyes. As

for TJ, she leaned over my shoulder and picked out “Shave and a Haircut” on the keyboard.

Then a man’s voice called out, “Hey, that was real pretty, TJ.” We both screamed and grabbed at each other before we realized it was just Slow-Joe Costwick, janitor and assistant grave digger, come to check why the lights were on. “Hey, I didn’t mean to scare you chickens.”

Slow-Joe -- we were supposed to call him Mr. Costwick -- lived with his grandmother, the Requim Mass addict, in a blue frame house right across the street from St. Mark’s. He’d come out of a bout with scarlet fever a little short on brain cells. He was graduated from St. Benedict’s at twenty-three -- they won the football championship that year. Now, at thirty-two, he still wore his blue-and-gold letter jacket and his grandmother called him Joey.

It was too bad he was slow in the head, I thought, because he really was nice-looking, though not so cute as Van Cliburn. A shock of his shaggy black hair was continually falling down into his long-lashed eyes of vacant violet and he continually hand combed the forelock back across the top of his head, only to have it fall immediately back into his puzzled line of vision. TJ sang the Bryl-Cream song whenever she caught him at this Sisyphean task. She also claimed to have kissed him once. She wished.

He was my cemetery buddy. He helped keep up the grounds there. The first year that my father lay in the graveyard, Slow-Joe watched me make five trips a week to place cut flowers by the headstone and he finally suggested that I plant my own flowers there. He probably was just tired of throwing away all the Mason jars full of rotted stems and

blossoms, but I thought it was a sweet notion and a pretty smart idea for someone who couldn't figure out how to keep the hair out of his eyes.

He helped me plant daffodil and tulip bulbs in the fall and the next April, when they sprang up like red and yellow revelation, I badgered him into doing petunias, dahlias, marigolds, and clematis. It was against cemetery policy, but no one tried to stop us. I even planted shamrocks one year, but they kept dying, so I settled for bringing a potted one on St. Patrick's Days only. And when I read that Van Cliburn had planted a lilac bush at the grave of Rachmaninoff, I insisted on lilacs as well, and Slow-Joe complied, wedging one in near the headstone.

It was the best looking plot in the whole cemetery, but my mother could not bring herself to go there. One Memorial Day I overheard some Ladies' Auxiliary members call it an "idiot's garden" and they wondered aloud if Slow-Joe and I might plant carrots and broccoli next. I never went back on Memorial Days after that. Too many amateurs.

"Arn'cha goin' to the game, TJ'n'Holly?" Slow-Joe asked. The St. Benedict Soldiers of Christ were in the state championship basketball tournament across town. Probably everyone in the world was there except me, TJ and Slow Joe.

"I don't get to do anything fun on Friday night until I'm thirty-five," TJ replied. That was nearly true. TJ had so many infractions piled up, she wasn't allowed off the parish grounds unless her parents took her.

"Don'cha got dates tonight?"

Slow-Joe was fixated on "dates," always asking who was going steady, who had a date; who just broke up.

“Yeah, we both had real hot dates, but we canceled cuz we’d rather stay here and sing the Ave Maria.”

When TJ was sarcastic, even Slow-Joe got the point. He turned to leave, then stopped and called to us, “Well, I got a date. I’m gonna meet her on the footbridge right now an’ I’m gonna take her to the game.” He reminded me of TJ, inventing a date like that, but I knew better than to tell her so.

“Better hurry, then Joey,” TJ taunted.

“You call me Mr. Costwick and you turn off all the lights and lock up when you leave,” he ordered, giving the lecture Father Brentwood had drilled into him over the years. “Bye, Holly.”

“Bye, Joe.” I waved. I was the only kid he let call him Joe.

He was scarcely out the scratched mahogany doors when TJ said, “Let’s follow him!”

“No.”

“Stick-in-the-mud.”

“Let’s practice.” I needed to, if she didn’t.

“Come on. I don’t believe he’s got a date, but if he does I bet she’s a lulu. We’ll leave the lights on, then if Sister looks, she’ll think we’re still over here practicing.

“What if she walks over her and checks up on us?”

“She won’t. God, Holly, you’re such a goody two-shoes.”

“I am not.”

“Then let’s go! We’ll lose him!” She leaped from the stage and ran up the sloped aisle between the chairs, flaxen hair flying. I drew on my navy duffel coat and dawdled over fastening the wooden buttons, then, heart pounding, I followed her at a hesitant jog. Outside, I could barely make out her skinny form flitting from building to building with the stealthy expertise of a born criminal. Or the ghost of a born-and-died criminal, white shirttail flapping and billowing in her flight. She never remembered her coat.

The one yard light cast blue-violet rays weakly across the compound. The rectory, next door to the auditorium, was all in mute blackness. I figured the priests had traveled en masse to watch the Soldiers slay the Protestants. Feeling braver, I burst from the auditorium doorway and scurried after TJ, trying to run silently on my toes like Lenny Plenty Guns said the Indians do it.

TJ had worked her way past the rectory and the elementary school building. She bounded across the road and into the vacant lot above the Dry Fork. Since this was the way to the footbridge that led to St. Anne’s cemetery, I was certain I could find my way in the dark. I had never visited the cemetery at night, but I wouldn’t be afraid, I thought, knowing my father was there.

Speeding to catch up, I was about to “psst” at TJ to wait, but then I saw her throw herself flat on the ground behind a fallen cottonwood near the beginning of the switchback trail that led down to the river. The thick aspen and willow stands along the river below offered excellent cover for high school neckers and I thought maybe TJ had heard a couple approaching. Or maybe Slow-Joe was returning from the nearby footbridge.

I ducked behind a dense but still leafless hedge that formed the border of the elementary school lawn. I duck-walked to the base of an elm tree and pressed my face and hands against the bark. From across the vacant lot, someone was approaching. Weeds scratched against striding pant legs. Footsteps slapped across the blacktop road. I clung to the tree, trying not to breathe or wet my pants.

I forced myself to look. A tall form swept out of the darkness and into the faint blue haze of the distant street light. It was Father McConnoughey. He wore a dark, hooded sweatshirt, slacks and tennis shoes. I thought I would pass out from holding my breath. He was out of breath as well, panting from his climb up from the river, I supposed.

Sometimes the priests went down there on “necker patrol,” but since all the potential lovebirds were still at the basketball game, I couldn’t figure the reason for this premature hike. He passed within three feet of me, but never looked left or right as he strode straight to the steps of the old brick rectory. I let out a sigh, then tensed for a running start back to the auditorium once Father Mac went inside the priests’ lodgings. But he didn’t go inside.

He lit up a cigarette. I had to cover my mouth to keep from gasping. I knew priests smoked, but I’d never caught one doing it. He began pacing on the cracked, buckled sidewalk in front of the rectory. Pacing, smoking and studying the ground. He did not look at all like a jolly priest. It took him forever to smoke his cigarette. He tossed the butt on the concrete, ground it out and lit up another. I suppressed a moan. My hands were freezing.

He had his back turned, pacing away from me, when I heard TJ's loafers scuttling across the road. I stood and leaned out from the elm, intending to flag her down. At the same moment, she scissored over the hedge and crashed smack into me on the fly.

Both of us hit the frozen lawn hard. I figured you could hear our grunting and thudding clear to the academy, but all I could do was lie on my back like a gut-shot turtle and observe several constellations blinking and spinning in the cold night sky above. TJ was holding her mouth and moaning, "My toof." She had whacked her lower incisors against my skull. I got enough air to shush her and then we both started to giggle. We couldn't get enough air to do more than hiccup and wheeze, but I was certain Father McConnoughey would hear and swoop down upon us with a holy vengeance.

But he never heard us because right then Slow-Joe came pounding across the vacant lot yelling, "Help! Oh, Mama!" He flew by us in a blur of letter jacket, running like the football hero he once was. He snapped his head from side to side as if dodging the clutches of a murderous tackler. "Help!"

I jumped up and started to call out to him, but TJ yanked me behind the tree again. "Shh!"

"Joe! What is it? What's wrong?" Father Mac ran up to grab Slow-Joe's arm and nearly had to tackle him to slow him down. Joe staggered to a stop.

"Father Mac! She d-dead. D-dead! I din't do it, I swear! Oh, Mama!"

CHAPTER THREE

“Calm down, Joe. What’s going on? Tell me!” Father McConnoughey shook Joe by the shoulders.

Joe pointed toward the river. “I had a date. She was gonna meet me on the b-bridge. Was gonna. She said so. An’ I waited ‘n’ waited, but she never. Said she was gonna, but she never. I went on the bridge clear to the graveyard, then I come back acrost an’ I went down the path to the river cuz I thought maybe she got lost or sumpin’ an’ . . . Father Mac, they’re gonna say I did it like the last time, but I didn’t. I didn’t!”

“Lord, Joe, tell me who’s dead!”

“I dunno. She was k-kinda like behind a log. I mean, I think it’s M-Melody. Melody Padilla. She’s got that long black hair.”

TJ and I huddled at the base of elm tree. She was shaking so hard I thought Father Mac would hear her teeth knocking together.

Melody Padilla. She was a junior at Sacred Heart. A beautiful Mexican girl who always got picked to play the Blessed Virgin back when she was in grade school. She had wanted to marry Danny Kellogg since they were eleven years old.

“Joe, did you see anyone else down there?”

“N-no. No, I ran. She . . . she got no clothes on.” Slow-Joe moaned, as if her nakedness were far more frightening to him than her deadness.

“Come inside, Joe. We’ve got to call the police.”

“They’ll lock me up!”

“No they won’t. I won’t let them. Come inside.”

I was too scared and stunned to move, but the instant Father McConnoughey and Joe entered the rectory, TJ grabbed my wrist and dragged me toward the auditorium. I balked at first, then galloped after her like a panicked racehorse, legs three furlongs ahead of my brain.

She didn’t let go of me until she had pushed me down onto the piano bench. “We didn’t see anything, got it?” she panted as she pulled my duffel coat off me and tried to pat down the crackling, frizzed wisps of static hair that sprouted from my disheveled braid by the thousands as if shocked upright by Slow-Joe’s cry of bloody murder. I could hear the police sirens already. The station was only six blocks from St. Mark’s.

“TJ, what are you doing?” I swatted her hands away.

“Shut up. We’ll get expelled if they find out we were out there.” With trembling fingers she brushed at the mud on her white shirt. She must have been frozen stupid, being out there so long with no coat.

“We’ll get expelled for lying.”

“Play the piano.”

I couldn't have played Chopsticks. My grubby fingers ached with borderline frostbite. TJ's lower lip bled where she had bitten it and her hair was matted and wild. A blonde banshee. Two musty leaves were tangled in the strands, but I was unable to lift a hand to remove them. My head hurt where TJ had knocked into it.

"Ave Ma-ri-i-a," she began, then winced and put her hand to her split lip. The sirens were everywhere -- in the playground; down by the river.

"This is crazy. They'll know we were outside."

"We'll say we had a fight!" TJ exclaimed. "Say we had a fight out behind the auditorium and we didn't hear or see anything."

"Then we'll get expelled for fighting. What is wrong with you?"

"They'd never expel you. Just say you started it and it wasn't my fault."

"Oh, thanks a lot, TJ!" I stopped, finally realizing what we had just seen. "You want to cover for Father McConnoughey. You think he did it!"

"No, I don't!"

"Well, Slow-Joe didn't do it. He couldn't kill a fly."

Outside, cops were running and shouting orders.

"Neither one of them did it, stupid."

"How do you know? Did you see someone else down there? Did you..."

"Just keep your mouth shut, Holly Ryan, or they'll both be in jail. And we'll be expelled."

"TJ was making absolutely no sense, but her brain was working faster than mine.

"What'll I say? What'll I say?" I whispered. No script or score. I never could play by

ear and the police would not be asking catechism questions. I was starting to hyperventilate and all I could think of was:

Q#450 -- In case of sudden or unexpected death, should a priest be called?

A#450 -- In case of sudden or unexpected death, a priest should be called always because absolution and Extreme Unction can be given conditionally for some time after apparent death.

A parent's death. We should have taken a priest with us on that Sunday drive. How many minutes were allowed, how fast did the priest have to talk to be able to chase down the departing soul and save it? Only a priest could administer Extreme Unction, but a layman could baptize in an emergency, sort of like a citizen's arrest...

"Holly, snap out of it!"

TJ had no sympathy for what she called my flashback fits, and was about to administer her usual remedy, a solid punch to the hollow of my shoulder. I was spared when a young cop with a big black revolver pointed skyward burst into the auditorium, kicking the mahogany door aside. It crashed against the wall. We screamed. I might have fainted from terror, had the cop not looked exactly like Ricky Nelson.

"Anybody else in here?" he demanded.

We shook our heads.

"You girls seen anyone prowling around here tonight?"

"No, sir. What's wrong?" TJ asked, trying to sound scared, which she was, and sweet, which she wasn't.

“What are you two doing in here?” He edged toward us, still not convinced there was no murderer lurking in the wings.

“We’re practicing the Ave Maria.” TJ was going to do all the talking and that was aces with me.

“Been here long?”

“We’ve been right here since seven.” TJ pulled on my coat to cover her filthy shirt.

“Have you left the building? Seen anyone sneaking around?” He climbed up on the stage with us.

“No, sir.”

“Hear anything?”

“No, sir. Just the sirens.”

“Can’t your friend talk?”

“She’s...uh, shy.”

He reached out and plucked a leaf from TJ’s snarled hair. “Sure you haven’t been outside, girls?”

I sighed. If we couldn’t even fool Ricky Nelson...

“You two come along to the rectory. Lieutenant VanOverbeck is gonna want to talk with you. You, too, Tarbaby,” he said to me. I stared at him. He shook his head.

“Tarbaby don’t say nothin’.”

* * * * *

They kept us there for an eternity, waiting for the detective in charge to finish dealing with the body, the parents of the body and the scene of the murder. TJ and I sat in straight-backed cherrywood chairs on opposite sides of the rectory visitors' lounge. Father McConnoughey sat in a green wingback chair near the front door, smoking Camels and studying the Moroccan rug. The police had not allowed him to administer Extreme Unction to Melody Padilla, but Father Brentwood had been called from the basketball tournament for the task.

Marauders 37 -- Soldiers of Christ 29. At the half. The fat cop who was watching us had the game on the radio. George Plenty Guns was in foul trouble already.

Melody's boyfriend Danny Kellogg also had been paged from the bleachers. He sat on the red carpet, back against a bookcase, knees drawn up. Father McConnoughey tried to comfort him once or twice, but Danny shrugged his hand off his shoulder. Slow-Joe wept off and on as well, hulked over his knees at the end of an overstuffed couch.

Sister Rita Anne, principal of St. Mark's, swept through the door like a thin, icy gust, raising the needle on my personal terror gauge into the petrified shock zone. She glared through her steel rims at my disgraceful, unkempt braid and glared even harder at TJ's swollen lip.

The fat cop wouldn't let her talk to us, but I think she scared him, too. He let her go into the kitchen to make coffee. Sister must have been more rattled than her brusque manner let on, because she gave cups of coffee to TJ and me just as if we were grown-ups and I caught her eyeing Father Mac's cigarettes with definite lust. The whole lounge

reeked of cigar smoke and I spotted some whiskey bottles in the bookcase above Danny's bowed red head. Priests.

Afraid to refuse the coffee, I poured sugar into my cup while Sister turned her back and addressed TJ. Sugar in the morning, sugar in the evening...

"Theresa, do you know where your father is this evening?"

TJ flinched at her words. "No, Sister Rita Anne," she said, none too steady.

The watchful cop was about to object to the conversation, but Sister four-eyed him down. "We're trying to get the children's parents down here. Theresa's mother can't leave work and her father isn't home. Holly, your mother is on her way," she told me, scowling at the empty sugar bowl I was returning to the coffee table.

At that depressing news, I forgot and gulped the scalding sweet sludge I'd created in my cup. I choked and Father McConnoughey had to pound me on the back. That was when I noticed his shiny black street shoes and I choked harder. He had changed out of his sweatshirt and sneakers into his customary priest suit. I had a bad feeling vanity was not the reason.

I had stopped coughing, but he was still thumping my back. I glanced up at him, then away, afraid he would read the Good Friday rumors that ran wild through my mind. The priest started to speak to me, but the fat cop cleared his throat and Father Mac drew back and returned to his chair. Marauders 46 -- Soldiers of Christ 42.

I decided I was going to tell the truth. I was certain somehow that Father McConnoughey was going to lie to the police about being down by the river. TJ could go hang if she thought I was going to lie for a lying priest. A murdering priest? I didn't

want to believe that, no matter how much I disliked him, but I couldn't help thinking there'd be no more piano lessons with Father Mac if he was in the state penitentiary. I also couldn't help thinking about what substance might be on his cast-off sneakers.

I tried to catch TJ's eye. She sat stonefaced, still wearing my coat which she refused to remove even after Sister had poked up infernal blazes in the fireplace. I cleared my throat, tapped my foot on the carpet, looked at my shoe, looked at TJ's shoes, pointed with my eyes toward Father McConnoughey's shoes. I did a double take and looked again at TJ's penny loafers. They were caked with mud from the vacant riverside lot. Most of the ground was still frozen, but the path through the lot had recently thawed.

TJ saw me looking. Sweat was running down her face. She slowly drew her feet underneath her chair and began to wipe the side of one shoe on the carpet. Blast her, she was still planning on the big lie. I tried again to get her to look at Father Mac's shoes, but instead it was Father who caught my glance and then he started looking at shoes. Slow-Joe's sneakers were muddy, of course. Then Father saw the dried mud TJ was scraping onto the Morroccan rug and his cigarette fell out of his mouth.

"Be a shame to ruin that nice carpet," Detective Lieutenant VanOverbeck said as Father McConnoughey bent to pick up his Camel.

We all flinched in unison and heads snapped upward to locate the speaker. The lieutenant had let himself in the back door and sneaked in through the kitchen. If he was trying to scare up the guilty party, he was going to have a hard time picking out who looked guiltiest. Except for Sister Rita Anne, everyone looked absolutely stricken with fear. Maybe it was because we were all Catholics and guilty by nature. Guilty faces:

sweating, smoking, tear-streaked, white. I was getting a headache. We all held our coffee mugs and avoided the detective's eyes. A guilty party. I almost giggled at my cleverness. The headache was coming on in six octaves.

I made an effort not to look at shoes. Except my own. They were clean. Goody Two-Shoes. Etude in D Sharp Minor crashed around between my ears.

Lieutenant VanOverbeck was looking at me, frowning, as he introduced himself and removed his topcoat. His oxfords were muddy and his brown cuffs sandy from the riverbank. Quit looking at shoes. I forced my gaze upward again in time to catch his blue eyes check out every clodhopper in the place in about two heartbeats. Then he was looking at me again. He squinted at me as if my head were transparent and he could see Aleksandr Scriabin in there pounding away on a cerebral keyboard.

I blushed, which saved me from fainting. He turned his attention to hanging his topcoat on the hall tree. He'd forgotten his suit jacket. His sky-blue shirt was comforting to look at, soft and loose on his tall frame. A rainbow trout danced in the center of his brown tie and I wondered if his kids had given it to him some Father's Day. He passed one hand back across his receding hairline in what must have been a habitual gesture, since his neatly clipped brown hair was far too short to need smoothing. I wondered if Slow-Joe's hair would retreat from his constant fingercombing in a similar manner, leaving a high forehead exposed to the world by the time he reached the lieutenant's age, about thirty-five, I guessed.

I put one hand to my own forehead, trying to quell the mounting pressure. The lieutenant started to say something, but at that moment Plenty Guns fouled out and my

mother walked in the front door. I could have ascended into heaven and no male in the room would have noticed.

My mother was the only woman I knew who could wear a headscarf without looking like a babushka. The white silk made her own complexion seem less pale. The March night air had actually put some color on her cheeks. That, and the helpless look in her fawn-like eyes added to her lost schoolgirl appearance.

“I’m Holly’s mother?” she told the lieutenant, as if she weren’t sure it was true. “Should I tell the cab to wait?” She had never learned to drive, although we had a perfectly good ‘49 Ford pickup in the garage. Marauders 56 -- Soldiers 53.

Father McConnoughey leaped to get her a chair. “Sit down, Breanna.”

The lieutenant took her arm and escorted her to her seat. “Please, ma’am, this might take awhile.” He motioned to the fat cop, who ran to dismiss the cab. My mother had that effect on men, even priests.

“Thank you, Jack,” my mother whispered to Father McConnoughey.

Jack?

She swept off her scarf, loosing thick, dusky hair across the shoulders of the London Fog raincoat my father had bought her in Seattle. Lieutenant VanOverbeck couldn’t take his eyes off her, which gave TJ a free moment to grind more mud into the carpet.

“Are you all right, darling?” my mother asked me, and for a crazy second I thought she was talking to Father McConnoughey, alias “Jack.”

I nodded I was fine, then wished I hadn't moved my discordant, throbbing head. She began to remove the three-quarter-length white gloves she always wore to cover the scars from the car crash, then she decided against it.

"TJ, what happened to your lip?" she asked.

TJ stopped scraping.

"I busted her one," I blurted, sorely wishing that I had. Damn TJ and her lies. Say we had a fist fight. Was that Plan A or Plan B? I had forgotten the plans, including my own plans to tell the truth.

Sister Rita Anne's eyes glared at me, white hot through the spectacles. You could have used them, if you were lost forty days in the wilderness, to start a fire.

"Oh, Holly!" my mother admonished.

There was a dead girl out in the weeds and maybe a murderer in the room and my mother was scolding me for being in a fist fight that never happened. The trout on Lieutenant VanOverbeck's tie was swimming in a peculiar manner.

"Please, ma'am, I need to talk to these girls alone and one at a time..."

"Lieutenant! Lieutenant! I found this in the brush out there!" Our Ricky Nelson cop burst into the rectory clutching a priest's stole. He held it aloft like a prize fish. The white silk was skewbald with great splotches of rusty dried blood. "Look what we got here, Lieutenant!"

Slow-Joe bleated in horror and threw his arms over his face. TJ went whiter than my mother. Sister prayed, "Lord, preserve us!" Danny turned his face to the wall. The Soldiers of Christ lost in double overtime. I was staring at the bloody stole, trying to

listen to the lieutenant bawl out his rookie cop for disturbing evidence. Disturbing evidence. Ha-ha. I was having some trouble hearing him, although Lieutenant VanOverbeck appeared to be shouting in a lively manner. Finally he cut off his tirade to look at me. Everyone was looking at me.

“Holly, stop it!” my mother begged.

But I couldn't stop. I was praying out loud, over and over, “Our Father, Who art in Heaven; Our Father Who art in Heaven; Our Father Who art in Heaven...”

CHAPTER FOUR

Sister Rita Anne wasn't one to hesitate. She fetched a tumbler of icy water and splashed it onto my face with repeated slapping motions of her skeletal fingers. I gasped.

“Holly, you will stop this nonsense at once.”

I couldn't figure a nun calling the Lord's Prayer nonsense, but I didn't argue. By clenching my teeth until I thought they would splinter, I managed to stop “Our Fathering.” The fat cop shut off the radio. Silence, except for my hyperventilating.

My mother, I knew, was just as terrified of Sister Rita as I was, but she slipped between me and the nun and knelt beside me, drying my face with little pats of her white cotton gloves. Sister withdrew. “It's okay, Holly,” my mother quavered. I sucked in a breath of peppermint mouthwash. She'd have to find a better brand if she wanted to mask the traces of an intimate afternoon with Jack Daniels.

Lieutenant VanOverbeck had dragged “Ricky Nelson” into the kitchen with his bloody treasure. The lieutenant called him “Hightower,” spitting out the name as if he'd discovered an interesting new swear word to add to his already magnificent repertoire.

I couldn't make out the rest of what they were saying out there, except that the lieutenant was going to make sure Hightower worked graveyard shift for the next thirty bleeping years. They went outside to view the site where Hightower found the stole.

The fat cop -- Beaumont -- answered to a pounding on the front door. It was TJ's father. He dodged past Beaumont's belly and rushed toward TJ, his Adam's apple leaping above his collar and tie as if frantic to find a way out of his throat. TJ looked in need of Sister's ice water therapy. Mr. Dillon gripped the back of TJ's neck and pressed her face to his stomach. He stroked at her tangled hair with his free hand.

"Terry! What's going on here? What are they making you say?"

"Nothing!" TJ squirmed out of his clutch, almost tipping her chair over. She looked ready to bite him. She hated being called Terry.

"Sir." Beaumont laid his hand on the sleeve of Mr. Dillon's black windbreaker. "We'd just like to question your daughter briefly in your presence about anything she might have seen. Please don't discuss..."

Mr. Dillon snatched his arm away. He wasn't Catholic, but he looked as guilty as the rest of us did. He turned on Father McConnoughey and Sister Rita Anne, his unblinking green eyes bounding from one to the other. He reminded me of a cartoon character watching a tennis match.

"What's going on here? You people are supposed to be protecting my daughter. Now my wife calls up and says Terry's seen a murder! What the hell..."

That got everyone's attention. Even Slow-Joe and Danny were shocked out of their miserable reveries. They all gaped at TJ.

“I did not tell your wife...,” Sister began.

“I didn’t see anything! I didn’t!”

“Everybody sit down and shut up yer flappin’ mouths! S’cuse me, Sister.”

Beaumont restored order just in time for the arrival of Father Brentwood and Danny’s parents. I shivered in the draft. It was getting crowded as Sunday Mass in there.

Beaumont wearily cautioned the newcomers against conversation and allowed Father Brentwood to retreat to his room. The old priest murmured Latin as he scuffed across the carpet. “Domini, Domini...”

Lieutenant VanOverbeck and Hightower returned via the back door and kitchen, setting up a nice cross draft. I sneezed. Hightower slunk over to stand by Beaumont. Apparently he’d been demoted to assistant doorkeeper. The lieutenant breathed on his hands and rubbed them together. He’d gone out without his topcoat.

Father McConnoughey approached the detective and in confessional terms I could scarcely make out, asked to make an addition to his initial statement given to the lieutenant when he first arrived.

“Of course, Father. I’d love to hear the second version,” he muttered.

A toilet flushed somewhere down the dim hallway. I tried to gauge the location by listening to the gurgle and whoosh of the water through the ancient pipes. To the habitual heaver, knowledge of the sprinting distance to the nearest toilet was priority information. Father Brentwood was in there, I presumed. I put my hand to my forehead. I didn’t want to think about priests using the bathroom, smoking cigarettes, lurking in the woods.

“First off,” the lieutenant announced to us all, “I’d like to interview these two girls so they can go home with their parents, maybe get cleaned up.” He was looking directly at TJ. “Then I’m afraid the rest of you will have to come down to the station house so we can get your statements on tape.”

Slow-Joe started crying again. I wondered where his grandmother was. Danny started to take a punch at the bookcase, but restrained himself. Father McConnoughey patted at his pockets, out of cigarettes.

The lieutenant took a pad from his back pocket and consulted his notes...”Okay, Theresa, is it? If you and your father would join me in the kitchen.”

“I object to this,” Mr. Dillon began, but the lieutenant silenced him with one cocked eyebrow. Mr. Dillon’s tortured Adam’s apple revved up again. I wondered if even TJ would have enough guts to lie to the detective’s stern face.

As she followed the two men to the kitchen, she banged each penny loafer in turn against the back of its mate, dislodging the last of the dried mud. Then she snapped her head around, curled her fat lip and bared her teeth at me in a warning grimace far more menacing than anything the lieutenant could possibly muster. I moaned. What would my mother do with me if I got expelled?

Prompted by my moan, she began to pat at my pulsing head again. “Mom!” I flapped at her hands. She retreated to the rear and attempted to unsnarl my Medusa hairdo. I guess she wanted me to look nice if they hauled me off to jail. I’d learned not to argue with a drunk and I endured the hair pulling for her sake. The toilet was still running. Father Brentwood had forgotten to jiggle.

Father Mac continued to frisk himself for a smoke. His hands shook.

“Father, Father,” Officer Hightower scolded. He stepped up to the priest. “Still smoking Camels? Here ya go.” He shook a couple of cigarettes out of his own pack.

“Thank you, Bobby.” Father took the cigarettes, but grudgingly, as if he hated being one-upped by the young cop. He started to turn his back on him, but Hightower stepped in closer.

“Remember how you used to lay for us, tryin’ to catch us smokin’ out behind the gym? Father?” Father Mac ignored him.

So Hightower was an alumnus. I cringed in embarrassment for the school. The way Sister Rita was scowling, I doubted he was a star pupil. Maybe he’d gotten expelled, like I was about to.

“It’s good to see ya, Father. I been down to Fort Hood. Joined the army right after graduation. Military police. Got on with the city here soon’s I got home a couple months ago. Bet you thought I’d never make good, huh? Now here I am a cop and you’re...”

“Hightower, do I have to tell you to keep quiet, too?” Beaumont glared at his fellow officer and mouthed a word. TJ and I practiced lip reading a lot -- always beneficial when you had to live with nuns -- and I was pretty sure the word was “punk.”

TJ strode into the room, trembling chin held high. Apparently the lieutenant had persuaded her to remove my duffel coat. Mr. Dillon had hold of her grubby white shirt at the small of her back and was guiding her like a hand puppet.

She wouldn't look at me, but when she came near the pacing Father McConnoughey, she threw her arms around his neck and cried, "Father Mac," into the black broadcloth of his jacket.

Father touched the back of her head and whispered, not very convincingly, "It's all right, Theresa." There was not enough space between them for the Holy Ghost and I thought Sister was going to whack both of them right in front of the police. Hightower smirked. Mr. Dillon yanked TJ backward.

"Cat lickers," he said under his breath. He propelled her toward the door. I longed to go with them.

Lieutenant VanOverbeck took all this in, leaning hipshot in the archway. He crooked his finger at me and smiled, I think, at my mother. My turn. I stood up and prayed to lapse into an extended coma.

Danny and his parents started in on a fresh round of crying. That set Slow-Joe off again. I decided anything was preferable to staying in that room any longer. The lieutenant's eyes seemed far kinder than Sister Rita Anne's and I figured his interrogation techniques would be mild compared to what TJ and I would face in Sister's office Monday.

I wobbled toward the kitchen, but it was my mother's arm the lieutenant took. I tried to keep a bearing on the sound of the running toilet -- behind me, on the left, down the hall maybe three doors. The detective guided my mother to a chair behind the kitchen table. He pulled out another white-enameled chair for me. My duffel coat was hanging on the back of it.

He closed the door, trapping us in the tiny kitchen. The paint job on the walls looked familiar -- industrial green and peeling, just like my room at the Academy. The place reeked of fried fish. I winced and tried not to breathe.

“Holly, do you have to throw up?” my mother asked.

“No!” I fought the power of suggestion.

Lieutenant VanOverbeck had planted one foot on the seat of a chair. He leaned forward with his forearms on his bent knee and hovered over me so close I could see a speck of spaghetti sauce on the fish on his tie. I blushed as he scrutinized my face.

“You okay, hon?”

“Yes.” Lying already. I blushed some more.

“All right, Holly.” He consulted his note pad and pulled a pen from his pocket.

“I’ve got your name and home address. Better give me your phone number.”

“I live at the Academy mostly,” I mumbled.

“Lincoln-six-two-three-two-nine,” my mother volunteered.

It would have been impossible for me to blush any harder without rupturing something. The lieutenant wrote down my mother’s phone number. He was left-handed, had hairy knuckles and no wedding band. Perfect.

“Okay, Holly, I need to know everything that happened this evening, from the time you and Theresa left the Academy. Anyone you saw, anything unusual you heard.”

“Well...” I wondered if I was supposed to start from when I left the Academy to greet TJ and Mr. Dillon, or from when TJ and I left for the auditorium.

“What time did you get to the auditorium?” he prompted.

“About seven I guess.”

“See anyone hanging around on your way over there?”

“No.”

“Go on.” His voice was soft, encouraging. My mother smiled a timid smile at him and patted a stray lock of hair back into place.

I launched in like I was prattling off sins, real and invented, in the confessional. “Me and TJ, TJ and I, practiced the Ave Maria. I play the piano and she sings. She’s a real good singer. We’re doing the Ave Maria for graduation ceremonies in May. Uh, we practiced a couple of times I guess and then that’s when the policeman came in. Oh, no, first we heard sirens, then...”

“Didn’t first you get in a fight with TJ?”

“Well...”

“Holly!” My mother pressed one hand to her right temple and gave the lieutenant a look of apologetic mortification.

“She gets terrible migraines, Lieutenant. Maybe she can’t remember, it’s been so upsetting...”

“I can remember!” She was trying to pass me off as a mental defective.

“Please, Mrs. Ryan. Just let Holly tell it.” He leaned closer to me. “Look, Holly, I know you and TJ went out of the auditorium without permission. I’m not here to get you in trouble. I’ll even put in a good word for you to the boss nun or whatever you call her. I just need to find out if you saw anything that will help us find Melody Padilla’s killer.”

Poor Melody. I hadn't even been thinking about her. Had TJ already told the lieutenant the truth about everything? I doubted it. No way she would have told on Father Mac. She would kill me for ratting on him, but I had to. Melody was dead. Father Mac probably had a good excuse for being down by the river. Maybe. If I could just figure a way to keep my buddy Slow-Joe out of the story. The part about how his "date" stood him up. But Father McConnoughey would tell the police that part anyway, wouldn't he? I sighed. The lieutenant most definitely was here to get me in trouble. No matter what I said, somebody was going to be in trouble. But I had to obey the law.

Q#247 -- Why must we respect and obey the lawful authority of our country?

A#247 -- We must respect and obey the lawful authority of our country because it comes from God, the Source of all authority.

When I quizzed TJ on that question she would answer, "We must obey the awful authority because it is awful." The lawful authority standing over me sighed and sank into his chair.

"Hon, just tell me what happened and then you can go home. Tell me about the fight. Earlier this evening you said you slugged TJ. Where?"

"In the mouth. But I didn't exactly slug her."

"No, I mean where were you when you slugged her." The lieutenant appeared to be developing a migraine himself, but his tone remained gentle.

"Over by the hedge. By the grade school. But I didn't slug her. She bumped into me when she jumped the hedge and she bit her lip. We fell down."

"So why did you say you had a fight?"

I put my hand to my forehead. "I'm not sure. It was TJ's idea..."

"You were out there spying on someone, weren't you?"

"Yes, sir." I had never called anyone sir in my life.

"Who?"

"Father Mac."

"Father McConnoughey?" The lieutenant tried to keep the surprise out of his voice. Obviously TJ had neglected to mention the priest to him. "Why were you spying on him?"

"I didn't mean to. I was behind the hedge and I hid when I saw him cuz I didn't want to get caught outside."

"But you were outside because you were spying on Mr. Costwick, weren't you?"

"Yes," I whispered. A tear slipped down my face. I swiped it away, mad at myself for being such a baby. "But he didn't do anything. We didn't see anybody do anything. Honest."

"Then why are you so scared? Did someone threaten you?"

"No." Not unless you counted TJ.

"Mr. Costwick talked to you and TJ tonight, didn't he?"

"Uh, oh, yeah, he told us to turn the lights out when we left."

"He told you he had a date with a girl down by the river, didn't he? Holly?"

I listened to the rush of the toilet down the hall; assured myself I could make it there in five seconds, tops. I offered up a brief prayer. Jesus, Mary, Joseph, don't let me barf in front of the law.

“I...I don’t think Joe -- Mr. Costwick -- really had a date at all. And for sure not with Melody. She’s Danny’s girlfriend.”

“Maybe she asked him for a date to tease him. You kids tease him sometimes, don’t you? Call him Slow-Joe?”

“Yeah, but...No, I don’t call him that.”

“He ever try anything funny with you?”

“What?”

“Try to, you know, touch you? Kiss you?”

“Did TJ say that? She’s lying! Joe never kissed her! She made that up! She is such a liar!” I wanted to kill her. “Joe wouldn’t hurt anybody!” I was crying again.

“Please, Lieutenant,” my mother said, her own voice shaky. “Joe is Holly’s friend. He helps her plant flowers on her father’s grave over at St. Anne’s. It’s been so hard on her.”

I glared at her. She just had to tell him. Just had to play the stricken-yet-beautiful widow. He handed her his handkerchief while I made do with my sleeve. Wouldn’t be long, I figured, before he’d drop by the house to reclaim his hanky and, by the way, he would just happen to have two tickets to the policemen’s ball. Perfect.

“I tried to tell you. It’s Father McConnoughey you ought to check up on, not Joe. I saw him. He came hiking up from the river and he was panting and he was wearing sneakers and a sweatshirt and regular clothes and he changed them all before the cops showed up!” I gasped for air.

“Oh, my God,” my mother whispered.

Lieutenant VanOverbeck had gone tight as a wire and his left hand scribbled and underlined at triple speed, but his voice was calm as he dismissed us. “Thank you, Holly. Mrs. Ryan. I’ll be in touch. Please don’t discuss this with anyone. I may have some more questions later.” He was already heading out the door.

“I think we can go home?” my mother whispered to no one in particular. She stood up and dabbed at my face with the lieutenant’s handkerchief, but I wasn’t crying anymore. The worst was over. I thought.

I gulped a breath of fish-free air as we left the kitchen. Halfway through the narrow passage that led to the visitor’s lounge, the lieutenant and Father McConnoughey met us coming.

“I’m so sorry,” my mother whispered as they brushed past us, heading for a kitchen conference. I wasn’t sure what she was apologizing for -- maybe my existence. I don’t think Father Mac heard her. He was busy giving me a look. The kind of look I figured Christ must have lowered on Judas down the supper table. A mix of reproach, pity, forgiveness and resignation. It was too much. I had to find that toilet.

I halted, but my mother, oblivious, drifted into the visitors’ lounge and picked up the phone to call a cab. I backpedaled around the corner and started homing in on the bath down the hall. The lieutenant and Father McConnoughey were already shut inside the kitchen. It occurred to me that I was alone. As alone as I could get in a rectory full of people.

I caught a word or two of what the detective was saying to Father Mac and I lost interest in throwing up. I edged backward until I was near the kitchen door, but facing the

direction of the bathroom in case anyone asked me what I was doing. I hoped my mother would give me a few seconds before she came looking for me. The kitchen was far from sound proof.

“I can get a search warrant, Father, or you can save us some time and just let me have a look at the clothes you were wearing.”

“That’s why I wanted to talk to you again, Lieutenant. To mention that I’d gone for a walk down the river path.”

“And tried like hell to hide the fact.”

“Naturally, in light of what happened five years ago, I didn’t want to...”

“I think I’d better take your statement down at the station, Father. And you might want to bring a lawyer along. Now do I have to get a search warrant or...”

“Joey!” The squall came from out in the lounge. Apparently Sister Rita Anne had finally tracked down Slow-Joe’s grandmother. “Let me see my poor Joey!”

Then I heard a colossal crashing and thudding out there, which my mother explained to me later was the sound of Mrs. Costwick tripping on the edge of the Moroccan rug, grabbing the hall tree to keep her balance and wrestling the whole works to the carpet in a flying display of overcoats and black fedoras. I clapped my hand over my mouth.

“Granny, look out, you’ll break your hip for sure!”

“What the hell?” the lieutenant said. The kitchen door knob clatched and I sprinted toward the bathroom, hand still covering my mouth. I shot one look back before I dove inside -- second door on the left -- but the lieutenant and the priest weren’t paying

any attention to me. They made for the lounge and I locked myself into the bath. I could hear all the racket on the opposite side of the wall in spite of the rushing commode.

“I’m not hurt! You can take your paws off me, you policeman! Who’s in charge here?”

“I am, ma’am. Please calm down. I’m Lieutenant Van...”

“Then you let Joey go right now. I have his doctor papers. That boy couldn’t harm a fly and I can prove it, you lieutenant.”

“Doctor papers?”

“Yes, doctor papers. We had him fixed after the last time you police said he was bad.”

“Mrs. Costwick!” Sister Rita Anne used her severest principal tones on the old lady. “You will please lower your voice!”

All conversation dropped to inaudible-through-walls level. Fixed? I sat down on the edge of the claw-footed bathtub and put my face in my hands. Fixed. I didn’t want to think about what that meant. The solitude of the bathroom was blessedly peaceful. I concentrated on taking inventory. TJ would be sure to ask about the contents of your average priestly privy. If we ever spoke to each other again.

Not surprisingly, the toilet seat was up. Walls green, natch. Norman Rockwell calendar, standard issue crucifix, white towels that looked like some you might steal from the Pitts Motel; laundry basket full of dirty clothes. TJ had told me that the nuns wore special underwear stitched exclusively by some company back in New York City. I wondered if the priests got theirs the same place or just browsed in J.C. Penneys.

“Oh, God.” I dropped to my knees on the gritty ceramic floor. Not to pray, but to get a closer look at the heap of clothes. There was a hooded navy blue sweatshirt near the top. And, I was betting, a pair of muddy, if not bloody sneakers near the bottom.

“Excuse me, does anyone know where Holly is?” My mother’s voice from far away.

I leaped up and grabbed a green toothbrush out of the holder. I wasn’t about to touch that sweatshirt with my hand. I clenched my teeth and poked the brush end into the wad of laundry. If I saw so much as one speck of blood from a razor nick I knew I was going to pass out. I tried to draw the sweatshirt upward by hooking the bristles into the pouch pocket. The toothbrush hit something. A box of cigarettes by the outline of it.

I raked at the box until it popped two thirds of the way out of the pocket. I stared at the brand name. The Soldiers of Christ had played a team by that name last year and all the boys had sniggered.

“Holly? Holly, are you in there?” My mother was outside the door and Lieutenant VanOverbeck and Father Mac were muttering in the background.

“Yes.” I was very calm.

“Hurry, darling, please. The police need to get in there!”

I pictured a long blue line of police officers, each standing with mouth pursed, shoulders hunched, legs crossed. I tapped the box back into the pocket.

“Holly, hurry!”

All right!” I returned the toothbrush to the holder. Someone was going to scrub his teeth with navy blue lint balls come morning. I took six deep breaths, lowered the

toilet seat, flushed and jiggled. I knew one thing. Father McConnoughey did not smoke Trojans.

CHAPTER FIVE

I spent the weekend under house arrest in the brown brick home my father had built for us three miles up Jackknife Canyon Road. He had liked the ponderosa pines and the view of Indian Grave Peak, so named for two unfortunate Blackfeet who were shot by vigilante settlers in pursuit of stolen horses.

I awaited my own retribution, cringing each time the phone rang, certain it was Sister Rita Anne with tidings of my expulsion. My mother, I believe, was equally certain Lieutenant VanOverbeck was on the line. Her “hellos” were downright jaunty. Whoever was calling kept hanging up and I finally decided it must be TJ, bored with her own confinement and mad as hell at me.

My mother kept giving me pep talks. “They won’t expel you, Holly. I’ll bet that nice police detective put in a good word for you like he said he would. Wasn’t he a nice man?”

I refrained from a sarcastic remark about the nice man’s swearing. My mother, at least, was in a rare happy mood.

“Besides, you’ve never done anything wrong before and I’m sure they wouldn’t expel someone with such a good conduct record?”

It was true I possessed seven blue-and-gold deportment medals, one for each year of grade school. TJ had one. She had purchased it from Louise Dusenheimer for two dollars and a sticky handful of red hot cinnamon bears.

Sunday evening, my mother I were sitting on the nubby beige couch in the living room watching a Russian bear troupe on Ed Sullivan. TJ called from her parent’s house on the other side of Meriweather, demanding to know what I had told the police. I had determined to hang up on her, but such gleeful rudeness is almost physically impossible for the bearer of seven good conduct pins. I informed her that I had told the truth about Father Mac. Then she hung up on me. I didn’t even get a chance to tell her about the priests’ restroom.

I went back to watching TV. The bears pedaled tricycles in circles. My mother served me Nalley’s beef stew on a tray, then sat down with her third bloody Mary.

Telling TJ about the Trojans would have been a good dig. I probably wouldn’t have known what prophylactics were but for TJ. She always seemed to know about everything she wasn’t supposed to and did her best to relieve me of my stubborn innocence.

The Plenty Guns family, over the hill from my mother’s house, used to keep an Appaloosa stallion. TJ and I watched him mate with squealing mares on several occasions and TJ liked to make me squirm by insisting that people also did things like

that. For years I refused to believe her -- she did lie a lot, after all -- but she wore me down finally. She also said if you held your breath, you wouldn't get pregnant.

Then she summed up by saying that since I was an only child, my father must have sinned against the Church and used rubbers. She was determined to see my father in Hell.

If using Trojans was a sin, then Father McConnoughey was in deep trouble. First, for breaking his vow of chastity and second, for using contraceptives while he did it. Murder was also big on the no-no list. I couldn't figure going out to rape and murder someone, then worrying whether she got pregnant or not.

"Do you suppose the lieutenant will want to talk to you again?" my mother asked for the twelfth time.

I didn't bother to answer. I sighed and debated asking her how you "fixed" a person, but you didn't talk about things like that with someone who was busy swabbing tomato juice and vodka from the bottom of her glass with a celery stick. I would have to ask TJ. I was sure she would at least have a theory.

My own theory was based on having watched the Plenty Guns geld their Appaloosa after it dawned on them that his runty offspring were worthless. TJ and I were in sixth grade. We watched four Plenty Guns kids and their uncle run the stallion around the corral and front-foot him, spilling him on his nose. Then they ran in, sat on his head, twitched his ear and trussed his flailing legs to fenceposts. The uncle cut fast with his knife, then squeezed the testicles out with a shiny emasculator and tossed them to a frenzied dingo pup that swallowed them whole. The horse was bugling with pain and

rage and they were all laughing until the animal flung two kids off his head and sank his teeth into Jimmy Plenty Guns' forearm, ripping out half the muscles. They'd had to take both Jimmy and me to the hospital. All that spurting blood and screaming had induced one of my more spectacular fits of hysteria. Nothing bothered TJ. She wanted to be a vet for about a year after that.

I shuddered and tried not to think about Slow-Joe. I snagged the Meriweather Pathfinder off the coffee table and reread the small article about Melody's murder. She wasn't mentioned by name. No one was, to my thankful relief. Except the lieutenant was quoted as saying one suspect was being held. There was nothing about the bloody stole or the Callantine case. The radio reports had been equally noninformative. I guessed that the lieutenant was "keeping a lid" on the press.

Pensive, my mother tapped the end of the celery stalk against her lower lip. "Maybe," she mused, "maybe if Lieutenant VanOverbeck needs to ask you some more questions, maybe we could invite him over for dinner?"

Very quietly, I groaned.

I rode the decrepit St. Mark's school bus back to the Academy Monday morning. The Plenty Guns family lived the farthest up Jackknife Canyon, so they were the only ones on; the bus when I boarded -- my classmate Leonard Plenty Guns and several little sisters and nieces.

I sat next to Lenny, who was pencilling scribbles in a notebook. "Hey, Lenny."

"Nnnh." He didn't look up. "You know enathin' about St. Ingnashush?"

"A little."

“I gotta get this done for religion class.”

“That was due Friday, Lenny.”

“Nnnh. I’m in trouble.” He shifted his pudgy body for a better line of attack on the notebook and swapped the pencil to his left hand. He prided himself on being ambidextrous. Either way, his penmanship was illegible.

“Didn’t you hear about Melody Padilla?”

“Yeah, too bad. We got a new horse. Maybe you ‘n’ TJ can come ride ‘m sometime.”

“Yeah!”

“Help me with my report?”

I knew I was being bribed, but I dictated as much as I knew about Ignatius Loyola to him as the bus belched and lurched toward town. Wild pencil bursts punctuated each pothole we hit.

Mary Carlson boarded the bus. “Was it you and TJ who turned Father Mac in?” she gasped.

I cringed. How did she know?

“I’m not supposed to talk about it.” That was as good as saying yes. My unwelcome celebrity grew with each subsequent bus stop.

“Did the police take you to the jail?”

“What are they gonna do with Father Mac?”

Annie CarPELLi got on the bus clenching a copy of the Weekly Monitor, “Meriweather’s Only Independent Newspaper.” The Monitor like to stress the

“independent” part, since the Pathfinder was owned by the Anaconda Copper Mining company and was a “slave to the Company line.” That is, there was no controversial local news and commentary tended to be about Afghanistan rather than Montana.

The Weekly Monitor was sometimes independent to the point of lunacy, but was a lot more interesting to read than the stodgy Pathfinder. Depending on whom you asked, the Monitor was run by pro-union liberals or “a bunch of communist idjits.” Annie let me read the front page editorial. Or maybe it was a news story. With the Monitor, it was sometimes difficult to distinguish between the two.

“Another Holy Friday Slaying?” the headline read. I skimmed through. “. . . nude slain body . . . Two resident schoolgirls witnessed the priest near the scene. Father McConnoughey was later released when a “lady friend” came forward to vouch for his whereabouts for the entire afternoon, sources close to the police department say. The Padilla girl died at approximately 3:30 Friday afternoon, according to preliminary autopsy reports. . . . Police Lt. Eric VanOverbeck declined to say if the death had any connection to the Good Friday death in 1955 of Cathy Jill Callantine, whose nude body was found on church grounds, strangled with a priest’s cincture. That murder was never solved by our fine local police department. VanOverbeck also declined to say if a bloody priest’s stole was found near Miss Padilla’s body as our source has indicated.

The paper had printed photos of both dead girls. Melody alongside Cathy Jill, saucy yearbook grins. Hysteria guaranteed. I wondered who “sources close to the police department” were. I imagined Lieutenant VanOverbeck swearing an electric blue streak at having his department smeared.

I read a few more digs about “philandering priests,” “Papist hypocrisy” and “podunk police.” Our names had not been leaked by the source, but since we were the only resident schoolgirls, everyone on the bus knew it was me and TJ. People began taking up sides.

“If he broke his vows he oughta be kicked out,” several of the more righteous declared, probably echoing their parents.

“I like Father Mac. You shouldna turned him in, Holly.”

“Yeah, Holy Holly. They’ll prolly send him away.” Billy Broderick leaned over the seat in front of me to scowl in my face.

“Eat dirt, dimwit,” Lenny advised calmly. “C’mon, Holly, what else?” He switched his pencil to his right hand.

“Your stupid brother George lost the basketball game,” Billy razzed.

“Take a hike off the planet.”

“Injun.” Billy grabbed Lenny’s pencil and threw it in the aisle.

Lenny punched Billy in his smirking face, one-two, left-right, fast as I could blink. He really was ambidextrous.

“Mr. Gutschmidt!” Billy wailed through his bleeding nose. Lenny’s report and my white blouse were spattered with gore.

Mr. Gutschmidt braked viciously and parked the bus. He stood up and whirled to face down the aisle. “Kviet! Everboda shuddup!” He spat a revolting gob of tobacco juice into the Folgers can he kept by the gear shift. Mr. Gutschmidt spoke like Lawrence

Welk with rabies and was rumored to be an escaped Nazi war criminal. “Kviet! I’ll t’row you offa der bus! Everboda!”

“An a wan, an a two,” some wag called out.

We all fled the bus. Conveniently, we were parked in front of St. Mark’s. I hurried toward the Academy to change my blouse.

“Hey, Holly, tell me some more about St. Ignashush,” Lenny called.

“He died and went to Heaven.” I stalked away from him.

“Surly woman. See if I let you ride my horse, woman.”

I turned to see him blow on his knuckles and grin.

Sister Rita Anne made it very clear to TJ and me that we had been spared the paddle only by the intervention of the kindly Mother Superior, who had just returned from some sort of nun convention. We had been “punished enough by the terror of Friday night’s events.” I could tell Sister Rita didn’t buy this line of thinking; she was itching to whack us. I almost smiled. A reprieve from the boss nun. I thought good thoughts about the lieutenant.

TJ and I were confined to our room, except for classes. TJ wasn’t speaking to me, so I had a quiet week. Evenings she spent standing in our window, gazing out at the rectory. Staring at Father Mac’s window. She had told me once which room was his. First floor, third room along. I never knew how she got such information. Probably flat out asked him, something I could not have done on a bet.

Father McConnoughey had been relieved of his teaching duties and was also confined to his room until the Church decided what to do with him. At least that was the

playground gossip. We were going to lose the parish's favorite priest and it was all my fault. TJ made sure everyone knew that she had not been the one to rat on him. She had enough sense to know he wasn't a murderer. We were forbidden by the nuns to talk about Melody or Father Mac. That only fueled the rapid fire rumors. I was real popular. Even Slow-Joe, back at work mopping floors and screwing in light bulbs, wouldn't speak to me. Every time he saw me, the gelded janitor would turn his back. Father Mac was his favorite priest, too. I followed the lieutenant's orders and kept mum.

I couldn't stay mad at TJ. I knew she was heartbroken over the priest, not because he had lost her respect by breaking his vow of chastity, but because she had wanted to be the one to help him do it. She'd had some crazy notion that he would wait for her and they would go off together to do good works in China or the Belgian Congo or whatever TJ's country of the week happened to be. She had never exactly told me this in words, but I had lived with her for three years and I knew how she thought and how she felt things. At least I thought I did.

All that week TJ would stand in the dark watching the light in his window long after I had gone to bed. And when she thought I was asleep she would cry. Thursday afternoon someone pelted me in the back with a stone. By then I was feeling like I deserved it.

* * * * *

Melody Padilla was buried Friday afternoon at St. Anne's cemetery, one week after her death and less than a quarter mile from where she died. Her funeral had been held up until the autopsy and coroner's report were completed and the police had gleaned

every bit of evidence her silent body could offer. St. Benedict, Sacred Heart and the upper grades of St. Mark's let out early for the two o'clock services.

“O Lord Jesus Christ, King of glory, deliver the souls of all the faithful departed from the pains of hell and from the bottomless pit; deliver them from the lion's mouth, that hell swallow them not up, that they fall not into darkness. . .”

I quit reading the English translation of Father Hennessey's Offertory. I closed my missal. Listening to the incomprehensible Latin was much less depressing. I gazed at the domed ceiling of St. Mark's, an experience that simulated going to Heaven. Indeed, there was God with a long gray beard, his arms outstretched to welcome new arrivals into the cotton candy clouds of eternity. Many a slack-jawed first grader had gaped in awe at the sky-high murals overhead. After the first week of school, you learned that excessive gawking earned you a nun's knuckles in the back of the neck. I still felt nervous whenever I looked.

The mural artist, a Jesuit brother, had done the paintings in the 1880's. This Montana Michelangelo had covered the Baroque interior, floor to ceiling with his holy artwork.

I glanced left at his “Agony in the Garden” but it only reminded me of Melody's agony in the woods and I quickly closed my eyes. I tried to think of something cheerful. The best I could come up with was that I had forever escaped Friday morning piano lessons with Father McConnoughey. The thought, instead, caused me to plunge into a guilty reverie.

Q#268 – When does a person commit the sin of detraction?

A#268– A person commits the sin of detraction when, without a good reason, he makes known the hidden faults of another.

A dead body was a good reason, wasn't it? I interrupted my own pondering with a furious fit of sneezing. Father Hennessey was getting wild with the incense up there.

Mercifully, we were soon out in the clean March air, column of two's, lined out for the cemetery, boys on the left, girls on the right. About four hundred pairs of feet clomped like cavalry horses across the wooden footbridge that spanned the Dry Fork of the Ravalli.

The high school students led the way, St. Benedict boys in gray blazers escorting Sacred Heart girls in their gray felt jumpers. We grade schoolers slogged along behind in our damnable plaid skirts. The boys got off easy. White shirts and navy slacks. Leonard was my marching partner, as we were about the same height.

TJ, much shorter, was up ahead five girls. Immediately in front of me was Enormous Betty Campbell, a wide load of a girl who hadn't yet discovered the miracle of antiperspirant.

Whoever marched near Betty was at the mercy of capricious winds, but as we crossed the bridge, the breeze gusted down river and we could stop holding our breath. Down below, through the bare cottonwoods, I could see a bit of yellow tape fluttering, a remnant of the police barricade around the murder scene. I wondered how long before anyone had the courage to neck in those woods again.

We gained the far bank and entered the cemetery grounds, a rolling expanse of grizzled lawn faintly tinged with false spring green. I had made this journey alone so many times, the horde of mourners seemed an intrusion on my private turf.

Melody was to be buried in the newest section of the cemetery. Here, no crosses or monuments broke the horizon. At the head of each grave lay a white marble marker, about the size of a shirt box, flush with the ground. This unpretentious look had been implemented as cemetery law two years earlier and was the only reason to be glad my father had died in 1955. His four foot Irish cross of granite was protected by grandfather clause. I could just see the top of it, over the swell of the hill.

When we left the gravel lane to arc round Melody's gravesite, most everybody started walking as if afraid of stepping in dog doo. I wasn't bothered by walking over a grave. No skeletal hand had ever reached up to grab my ankle.

Our eighth grade class was wedged in two thirds of the way back, so I couldn't hear or see much, which was fine with me. I'd already heard and seen too much. This was the first funeral I had attended since I had almost made it to my father's. I offered this one up as penance for missing his, but nothing could ever make up for it. Always fainting or throwing up, hyperventilating, getting headaches. Chanting the Our Father. Lieutenant VanOverbeck must have thought I was a real nut case. I got so sick of being sick. I wished I was tough like TJ.

I glanced over at her and caught her eye. She stuck out a very purple tongue at me. Grape Stix. It was her refined way of telling me she would start speaking to me again soon. She was supposed to spend the weekend with me. I knew she would find

that preferable to another weekend with her parents. Besides, I had tempted her with news of Leonard's new horse.

TJ caught sight of something she didn't like and blew another raspberry. I sighted off the tip of her tongue straight to Lieutenant VanOverbeck. He stood a little off to the side of the row of chairs where the immediate family sat. He shifted from foot to foot, hat in hand, his trouser legs and tie flapping in the out-like-a-lion wind. His eyes shifted as well, checking out the front rows of mourners.

Danny Kellogg was up there with Melody's parents and brothers. Lenny's big brother George towered over the other five pallbearers. He squirmed in his dress-up clothes, pulling at the tie knotted round his neck. Joe's grandmother, in black as always, blubbered into her Pope-blessed snot rag. Slow-Joe himself waited down the lane in the parish pickup. He would help cover the pink casket with earth once the mourners had left for the funeral feast in the church basement. I was glad I could give that part a miss. The women of the Ladies' Auxiliary would have the place hip deep in tuna casseroles.

The absence of Father McConnoughey loomed. I guessed the Lieutenant was there to see if the Holy Friday guy might show up at the funeral. Return to the scene of the crime sort of. How would the lieutenant be able to tell? I didn't envy him his job. He was the only one there who didn't join in the Our Father. I wondered if he was an atheist, too, on top of being a champion cusser. Or maybe he couldn't pray and snoop at the same time.

Clouds stuck like gauze to the sickly sun and I shivered in the resultant shadow. Maybe someone was stepping on my grave. At last, the service ended. All but the crying. I hoped we had prayed Melody out of the lion's mouth.

The chief mourners piled back into the three Cadillac limousines. The car entourage would take the long route back to the church - - east out of the cemetery along the unpaved river road, north across the Clark St. Bridge and west to St. Mark's.

The nuns had forgotten to choreograph our return march and we gangled off in six directions. Technically, school was out. After some half-hearted heel snapping, the sisters gave up on their milling flock. I took the opportunity to slink over the hill to visit my father.

It was too early to plant flowers, but in my coat pocket I carried the tail feather of a golden eagle. I had found it on our lawn Saturday. Lenny had told me once that eagle feathers are powerful medicine. Couldn't hurt. Glad to be out of the crush of uniforms and habits, I knelt by the Irish cross of Francis James Ryan and worked the quill into the thawing earth, feather stretching heavenward. Slow-Joe and I would need to turn over the flower beds soon. Crocus shoots had emerged half an inch, testing out the climate. I cleared some decayed leaves from near the marker and whispered, "Hi."

"Holly?"

I squeaked and lept up from my knees. I whirled toward the sound of the voice, which foolishly, for one second, I had thought was my father's. It was the lieutenant.

"Sorry, hon. I didn't mean to scare you."

"I'm not scared," I gasped.

“You shouldn’t wander off alone down here.”

“I’m going right back,” I said and started to do so. My knees were muddy, but I didn’t want to call attention to the fact by brushing at them. I blushed.

“Wait, I’ll walk back over with you.”

I froze in place. I wished he would disappear. He probably thought I was a dopey little kid for putting Indian charms on my father’s plot.

“I guess your mother’s not friends with Melody’s parents? Didn’t see her here today.”

Was that why he’d attended? To pick up a hot date in the boneyard?

“No, they’re not friends. Besides, she doesn’t go to funerals. Ever.” I looked down at her husband’s grave. I wanted to add that she didn’t have any friends, period, but it seemed too unkind.

“Better get you back.” He crooked his arm, escort style, but I pretended I didn’t notice and shoved my hands into my pockets. I had no choice but to accompany him back toward the footbridge.

“I appreciate your telling the truth the other night. I know you kids all like Father McConnoughey.”

I decided it was best not to tell him I was not a member of the Father Mac fan club. “Everyone says now he’s gonna get transferred or defrocked.” I blushed at the “defrocked.” It was all too descriptive of Father Mac’s exposure. “And it was all in the paper.”

The lieutenant glowered so fiercely I edged a step away from him as we walked.

“I don’t know who leaked that story, but I’m gonna find out and when I do, somebody’s gonna get canned if I don’t kill him first.”

“All the kids know I’m the one who got Father Mac in trouble. His life is wrecked and it’s all my fault.”

Lieutenant VanOverbeck reached out and clasped onto my wrist, stopping me. “Hold on a minute, kiddo. The priest got himself in trouble, not you. And you know what? Your buddy TJ was so busy lying to me she blurted out, ‘And Father Mac wasn’t even out there hiking yet until after Slow-Joe came pounding on the door.’ I knew something was fishy before I ever talked to you.”

I stared at him. He let go my wrist and shook his head.

“Aren’t you Catholics supposed to be choosy about your companions?”

“TJ’s okay, really.”

“That girl’s no stranger to a whopper. She had me going for awhile with her Slow-Joe stories.”

“She wants to be an actress,” I faltered. “And a bareback rider.” I smiled a little, trying to soften him up. I didn’t know why I was defending her; maybe I just didn’t want the lieutenant to think I chose bad companions. “You still don’t know who did it, do you?” I asked as we continued walking.

“You just stick close to the nunnery, kiddo.”

That was as bad as a no. I wanted to tell him it wasn’t a nunnery. I most definitely did not want him to think that I had the calling. I also wanted to warn him about my mother, but I was suddenly too embarrassed to speak one coherent word.

“Uh,” I managed and I nodded toward the last of the funeral stragglers crossing the footbridge ahead. I took off running to join them, my dirty knees flashing high.

Back in our room, I found TJ flopped on her bed. “Okay,” she greeted me, “so what does Lenny call his new horse?”

CHAPTER SIX

Saturday morning my mother caught us as we headed out the front door, bound for the Plenty Guns encampment. She was not about to have TJ and me “traipsing along through the woods with a crazy killer on the loose out there.”

“It’s Saturday, Mrs. Ryan,” TJ said in the patient, condescending tone people use on drunks and idiots. “He only strikes on Friday, so we’re safe for another week. Right?”

My mother ignored her and phoned for a taxi. It was part of her ongoing plot to embarrass me to death. The Plenty Guns lived only a mile and a half from our house if you took the shortcut across the neighbor’s cow pasture, then followed a hillside road through forested power company land. We always saw deer or elk, and once, a snarling badger.

Instead, we were soon motoring grandly up Jackknife Canyon Road, both of us trapped in the rear seat of a yellow cab. My mother said it wasn’t proper to sit up front with the driver. TJ bailed over the seat back and plopped down next to the cabbie ten cents into the ride. She was fuming and didn’t want to sit next to me. To show up at the

Plenty Guns in a cab would be the ultimate in snobbery. TJ had a crush on Jimmy Plenty Guns, hence her uncharacteristic sensitivity to the feelings of the poor.

Our driver was a frustrated poet who spouted odes to my mother's beauty whenever he drove us to church on Sundays. So far he hadn't asked her for a date and I prayed he didn't. He smoked a stinking pipe and his gray beard was peppered with loose tobacco. My eyes were already smarting from the smoke.

"Goin' up to see your boyfriends on the rez?" he asked. Everyone called the Plenty Guns place the rez, but it was actually a long ways from any real reservation, which was why Mrs. Plenty Guns lived there. TJ scowled and didn't answer.

"Well, I thought I was your boyfriend," he said in a pouty voice.

TJ said something that sounded like "shit" and she climbed over the seat again, preferring my company.

"And constancy lives in realms above;

And life is thorny; and youth is vain;

And to be wroth with one we love

Doth work like madness in the brain.' Samuel Coleridge, *Christabel Part II*," he recited.

"What's 'wroth'?" I whispered to TJ.

"Horny probably. It rhymes with thorny. Why didn't they just say that in the first place?" she whispered back.

"We're just going up to ride Lenny's new horse," I volunteered, not wanting the cabbie to think we were wrothing with anyone.

“‘Spur not an unbroken horse; put not you ploughshare too deep into new land.’

Sir Walter Scott. The Monastery.”

“Flap not your stupid lip,” TJ muttered. “Death of the Zombie Cab Driver.”

I shushed at her, but giggled, glad she had turned her spite on someone else. The cab left the paved road and bumped along for a quarter mile on the dirt lane that led to Lenny’s place. Pipe smoke and rear seat motion sickness prompted me to crank the window down. TJ shrank from me in disgust, but I recovered before I disgraced myself. The piney air was cool and delicious.

The Plenty Guns family leased fifty acres from the power company. Their family population varied widely, with sometimes twenty or more relatives camped out in the cabin, trailer house and blocked-up school bus. Every type of domestic animal roamed the acreage. The livestock population varied widely as well. What didn’t get eaten got sold or ran off - - escapees leaked throughout the countryside. I had learned not to get attached to any of the horses. On a couple desperate occasions, Granny P.G. had sold an old horse to the mink farm up the valley to get money for bingo night.

Ducks scattered as the cab driver braked in front of the log cabin. A pack of dogs ran out from beneath it, yelping and marking their territory on the taxi tires. I fished in my jeans for the money to pay the fare. TJ was already out the door, patting dog heads.

Jimmy Plenty Guns was replacing shingles on the much-mended roof of the chicken coop. He grinned at us with nails in his teeth and held his hammer high overhead with his good arm. His left arm hung limp inside his jean jacket.

TJ hollered, “Yah-ta-hey!” like John Wayne. I cringed. The Plenty Guns were Blackfeet and I didn’t think they said yah-ta-hey, but Jimmy didn’t seem to mind.

He spit out the nails and leaped from the roof. He hit the ground running. If it hadn’t been for his arm, he could have been a basketball star like his older brother George. Jimmy was fifteen and the best looking boy at St. Benedict’s except for maybe Danny Kellogg.

“Hey, Leonard,” he yelled, “come quick! Rich white women with a show-fur! They want your plump body!”

I looked both ways before I got out of the cab. You never knew what you might step in around there. I edged close to TJ and said, “Hi,” to Jimmy, feeling as bashful as the various little sisters, nieces and toddler aunts who were peeping at us from behind the school bus and trailer.

“Hey, Holly. Nice ribbons.” He spoke in low-pitched tones that floated toward me beery and sensual at ten a.m.

“Thanks.” I blushed and TJ glowered.

I had my hair in two braids tied with blue bows to match my clean jacket and Levis. In anticipation of the new horse, I also wore an old pair of cowboy boots TJ and I had dug out of a dumpster downtown. We had wrangled over who got to keep them, but I had won out. My feet were bigger. The boots were one size too large, but I still felt spiffy.

Lenny strolled out of the cabin, feigning annoyance. I had phoned ahead to let him know we were coming, but he gawked at us as if we were unwelcome intruders from

a distant galaxy. TJ maintained that boys did that when they liked you. If that was the case, I hoped Lenny didn't like me too much; he might go back inside and get a gun.

"Whad'ja come in a cab for?" he asked, watching the taxi lurch back down their driveway.

Mrs. Plenty Guns stepped out the door behind him. She wore jeans and boots and a cowboy shirt tucked into a beaded belt. Her hair hung straight to her slim waist. I could never believe she was old enough to have an eighteen-year-old son. She was stirring at a huge bowl of pancake batter that she cradled in the crook of her arm.

"Leonard, invite your guests in. You got the manners of a goat. Jimmy, you go saddle up the bay. An' don't forget to finish that roof."

Lenny turned his fat rear on us and went back inside. Mrs. Plenty Guns shook her head.

"Come on in, girls," she said. "Lenny's just mad cuz I'm makin' him write his paper over. He got F on St. Ignatius and I just found out about it. Little snot turned it in to Sister with nosebleed all over it. Says it was his own nose. Huh. I'm feedin' the second shift. Come have some flapjacks. Haven't seen you two since Christmas caroling."

"I'm goin' with Jimmy!" TJ called out and took off running after him.

She was rude as a goat, too. I followed Mrs. Plenty Guns inside, though I would rather have gone to see the horse. Being an only child, I was a bit frightened of the boisterous slew of Plenty Guneses. When my eyes adjusted to the dim interior, I seated myself next to Lenny at the picnic table near the woodstove. George was feeding log

splits into the stove, too grimly preoccupied to acknowledge my presence. A couple of aunts and uncles smiled at me over the table. I was sure they all joked about me in private ever since the day I went loco during the horse-gelding incident.

Lenny labored southpaw on his new report. This one was in danger of being splattered with huckleberry syrup.

“Whad’ja come in a stupid cab for?” Lenny asked again.

“My mother made us. Because of the murder.”

“That’s smart, not stupid,” Mrs. Plenty Guns said as she set a stack of hotcakes in front of me. “George will drive you two back home when you’re ready to go.”

George shot his mother a dirty look, but shut it off when she shot him one right back. “Won’t you, George?”

“Yeah, ma.” He slouched into his place at the table and poked at his food, not eating. I wondered if he had been Jimmy’s drinking partner last night.

“Melody dyin’s been pretty hard on him. He knew her since first grade,” Mrs. Plenty Guns apologized.

I sipped tea from a painted mug. Mrs. Plenty Guns and her sister made pottery and sold it at the St. Mark’s Christmas and Valentine bazaars. Also handmade Indian blankets. I turned to look at the loom in the corner of the cabin. Granny P.G. was over there working on a rug patterned geometrically with bright reds and blues.

The old woman scowled at me and said, “Saw you in a vision last night. Lotsa blood runnin’ down the road.”

I gaped at her; felt flaming embarrassment. I was certain she was having a joke over my fear of blood. Tears welled.

“Granny! You hush up that vision talk. You’re scarin’ her half to death. Shame on you, old woman! Never mind her, Holly. This murder business has got everyone crazy...”

“She’s crazy all right. Just shut up, Granny!” George banged his fist on the table and knocked his coffee all over Lenny’s St. Ignatius paper.

“Aw, shit man!”

“You’re both grounded! Right now! Forever!”

I fled the ensuing fireworks and jogged toward the horse arena, thanking God I was an only child. I gulped back my tears. Granny P.G. was rumored to have put the hex on Mrs. Dan O’Donnell a couple years back after she won two bingos in a row. Mr. Dan O’Donnell died the next week. Of course he was ninety-four years old, but still...

Q#212 -- When does a person sin by superstition?

A#212 -- A person sins by superstition when he attributes to a creature a power that belongs to God alone, as when he makes use of charms or spells, believes in dreams or fortune telling or goes to spiritualists.

I thought about the eagle feather I had put on my father’s grave and supposed I would have to confess it. “Lotsa blood runnin’ down the road.” The old dingbat. I had stopped shaking by the time I reached the arena.

The family had leveled a one-hundred-fifty by seventy foot field and enclosed it with a jackleg fence of lodge pole pine. A steel rail panel borrowed from the Montana

Power Company served as the gate. The Plenty Gunses staged o-mok-sees, games on horseback, during the summer months.

I joined Jimmy in the middle of the arena. TJ was riding, just like she did everything else, hair flying, full gallop. Jimmy told me the horse's name was Bay Rum. He was a splendid charger, part Thoroughbred, with a wide blaze and four white stockings and he stood almost sixteen hands. He was the kind of horse my father might have bought me, had he lived to see my tenth birthday. He'd promised me, when I turned ten...

"Hey, Holly, let's do Rescue Race!" TJ called as she stood in the stirrups and hauled back on Bay Rum's open mouth. The horse squatted and slid to a stop, scrabbling to stay upright in the muddy footing. TJ wasn't a very good horsewoman, but she was fearless.

"Where'd you get him?" I asked Jimmy. Bay Rum was the finest horse I'd seen on their place.

"Uncle Bernard won 'm in a poker game." Jimmy grinned "Next game's Thursday. Don't get too attached."

"I know. " I replied.

"C'mon, Holly. Rescue Race!"

I couldn't ignore TJ any longer. She was referring to an o-mok-see event where you gallop your horse down to pick up your partner, swing her aboard, then wheel and sprint for the finish line. But with TJ and me, it only worked if I was the rescuer. I was strong enough to control the horse and to hoist TJ's lightweight chassis skyward. She had

the agility, guts and spring to rocket abroad the speeding cayuse. With the roles reversed, we were a disaster -- the horse ran away, I snatched TJ off the horse, or I couldn't swing high enough and ended up broadsiding the horse's flank and the wreck was on. Jimmy's uncle laughed so hard once he fell backward off the arena gate.

"Oh, come on, Holly. You can do it!"

I knew she just wanted to pay me back for ratting on Father McConnoughey, but Jimmy was watching and Uncle Bernard had wandered over, along with all the little kids and Leonard. They poked faces over, along with all the little kids and Leonard. They poked faces over various rail heights, eager for a show.

"Okay." I sighed and positioned myself near the end of the arena. The sticky gumbo sucked at my boots with each step.

"Ready! Go!" Uncle Bernard hollered.

TJ whacked the horse across the rump with the reins and he bore down on me like a four-legged torpedo as the Plenty Guneses cheered him on. TJ bent low, her left arm crooked so I could grab it and swing on. But she appeared to be aiming straight at me, grinning all the way. I needed to be rescued all right.

I tried to side-step, but discovered my oversize boots were rooted in gumbo. I swayed and nearly fell. It was too late to dodge. The galloping horse had sense enough to skim around me as he shot by. TJ yanked her arm away. Furious, I grabbed the saddle horn with both hands, making a pitiful attempt to regain status with the Plenty Guns. Bay Rum snatched me out of my boots and barreled for the open arena gate. TJ had lost all control. I hung on for two jumps before my fingers gave out and I went sprawling onto

my back in the muck. Uncle Bernard turned the horse at the gate by smacking him across the nose with a jacket. Bay Rum swapped ends, launching TJ over his shoulder as he wheeled. She ploughed a skinny furrow through the mud and came up spitting dirt. I hoped she had broken some bones; it would save me the trouble.

“Hey, good trick, Holly,” Jimmy said as he tweaked one of my stocking feet.

“We’ll have to make that a new event.”

It was four-thirty by the time George Plenty Guns drove us to my house. Mrs. Plenty Guns had insisted on washing our filthy clothes. We wore Lenny’s old coveralls while our jeans dried over the stove. I had managed to get a decent ride on Bay Rum, too, after his eyeballs returned to normal size.

George had been warned to return straight home after he dropped us off. “I don’t need you endin’ up a statistic,” Mrs. Plenty Guns had called after us. That was her favorite line. Her greatest horror was to have her children become statistics. When we were younger, TJ and I had thought that meant something like spastics, but now we knew she meant alcoholics or suicides or car crash victims.

George refused to speak to us as he drove the family’s ancient Buick down Jackknife Canyon Road. The muffler was about to become a statistic. A champagne colored Oldsmobile shot past us going the other way. George and the driver of the Olds slammed on the brakes and reversed until they were door-to - door. It was Danny Kellogg.

“Where you going?” they both said at once, but they didn’t laugh like TJ and I did.

“Gotta get rid of these girls,” George said, jerking his thumb toward the direction of my house.

“Thanks a lot, George,” TJ said, but he ignored her.

“Meet me back here,” Danny said. He spoke it like an order. Like he wanted to add “Injun” at the end.

“Five minutes,” George responded. He shifted gears and peeled out and when he reached my driveway, we practically had to jump from the moving car, then he was gone. No one said good-bye.

“I wonder why Danny didn’t speak to you, TJ,” I said, unable to resist a dig. “I mean you two just went on a date last week, didn’t you?”

“Danny doesn’t go out drinking. Mrs. P.G. ‘ll kill ‘m.”

I didn’t think they acted like drinking buddies, but I didn’t say anything. I was more concerned with my mother’s Saturday tippling. I edged inside the front door, hoping not to find her passed out on the couch.

Instead, she came swishing at us like a radiant prom queen, awash in taffeta and Tabu. Her pale blue evening dress sported puffy short sleeves, a full calf-length skirt and scooped neckline. There was a push-up bra under there somewhere, pushing up like crazy.

TJ gaped and launched into an Eddy Haskell imitation, complete with nasal twang and smarmy grin. “Why, Mrs. Ryan, you’re a picture of loveliness tonight.”

“Thank you, TJ.” My mother was not as sharp as Mrs. Cleaver. I glared at TJ.

“I hope you girls don’t mind. I’ve asked Mrs. Hoover to come over and sit with you this evening? I’ve got a date?” She almost whispered this last part, her eyes shiny with more than Percodan and rum.

“A babysitter?” TJ mouthed at me. My mother didn’t notice TJ’s finger-in-mouth gagging pantomime.

I knew better than to ask, but I figured TJ would learn the worst eventually and I might as well get it over with..

“Uh... who’s uh... your date?”

“It’s...well, it’s Lieutenant -- Rick-- VanOverbeck. We’re going to dinner and a movie? He called this morning after you left?”

“The cop?” TJ bellowed. “Oh, swell.”

I glared at her again. My mother was blushing as bad as I was.

“Well, he thought it would be all right since Holly’s not a witness anymore. I mean, since Jack -- Father McConnoughey -- isn’t a suspect anymore. Or Slow-Joe. I mean, Joe Costwick. so you and Holly didn’t really see anything, so you’re not... not...”

“Informants.” TJ supplied the word, making clear it was a synonym for tattletale. “We don’t really need a babysitter, Mrs. Ryan. Maybe you could call Mrs. Hoover back and ...”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t leave you alone while this lunatic is out there. Rick agreed, you shouldn’t be left alone...”

“Oh, swell,” TJ whispered to me. ““Rick agreed.”” She acted like it was my fault.

“And Mrs. Hoover has already agreed to come.”

I was confident the sixty-year-old Mrs. Hoover would be more than a match for the Holy Friday lunatic. She would bore him into submission with tales of her latest surgery and her opinions of every doctor in western Montana.

“Bradley’s the best surgeon, of course, but just try to get a smile out of that man. Seen too much cancer in his time I suppose. And Lord help you if you want to get a prescription renewed. You’d think he suspected you were hoarding them up for a suicide or something. Now, Dr. Wingo is a sweetheart...”

I believe Mrs. Hoover gave my mother tips on how to finagle multiple prescriptions. She arrived at six-twenty-nine, followed by the lieutenant at six-thirty. TJ avoided the rush and holed up in my bedroom, playing Elvis Presley full volume on my phonograph.

Lieutenant VanOverbeck and I helloed nervously. What did you say? Shot anybody lately? He looked great in a dark suit and topcoat. He helped my mother into her London Fog. I gave him credit; he tried not to look down her dress.

“Don’t they make a cute couple?” Mrs. Hoover nearly shouted at me. She was trying to be heard over “You Ain’t Nothin’ But a Hound Dog.”

I cringed and stifled a moan. My mother pressed white-gloved fingertips against her Fifth Avenue Red lips, but the giggle had already escaped. Poker-faced, the lieutenant swept her out the door into drizzling dusk. I wished I could warn him not to take her anywhere they served booze.

“I don’t want you girls running around outside tonight,” my mother called back to me.

“Oh, they wouldn’t do anything like that,” Lieutenant VanOverbeck said. That bit of sarcasm shot over my mother’s head, but scored a direct hit on its intended target. I ducked out of the doorway, leaving Mrs. Hoover to wave bye-bye. I shut myself in my room with TJ.

“Wonder what movie they’ll go to,” TJ said. She lay sprawled across my double bed, dirty tennis shoes on the patchwork quilt my late grandmother had given me. The Meriweather Pathfinder was strewn across the quilt as well. TJ gripped the movie section and chortled at the selection of films.

“Probably ‘Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.’ My dad said it’s real dirty. I s’pose the Pope gave it an X.”

I pointed at the Rialto ad. “I bet they’re going to ‘Bridge on the River Kwai.’” I figured the lieutenant would be happier at that one. But TJ was probably right. Elizabeth Taylor was in the process of stealing Eddie Fisher from Debbie Reynolds and my mother had been keeping up with the latest developments.

“Oh, look, the drive-in is opening tonight. Rick would like that. Snark, snark.”

“TJ! You can’t call him Rick. Good grief.”

I lowered the volume on Elvis and righted my photo of Van Cliburn that I kept on the oak highboy. TJ, as usual, had turned it face down. She thought he was a geek.

“Oh, perfect!” TJ said. “It’s a double feature. ‘Beautiful But Dangerous’ -- that’s your mom -- and ‘The Fiend Who Walked the West’ -- that’s old Rick.”

“Shut up, TJ.”

“Oh, wait, ‘The Brain Eaters.’ ‘Creeping, slimy things terror-bent on destroying the world!’”

“The lieutenant did not take my mother to see ‘The Brain Eaters.’” I looked over TJ’s shoulder and read part of an article about five-year-old Ginny Tiu, a Chinese piano prodigy who was wowing Chicago with her playing of Mozart, Beethoven and jazz. I sighed. If she was five, her fingers had to be stubby. I’d have to find another excuse for my lack of genius.

“Well, I want to go to it with Jimmy Plenty Guns. I’ll get scared and grab him, then...”

“Fat chance Jimmy’s gonna take you. Besides, you’d have to confess going to an indecent movie.”

“Good, I’ll get in line with your mother.”

“TJ.” I was getting a headache.

“Remember the time your mom went out with that weirdo encyclopedia salesman?”

I sighed again. I could hardly have forgotten. We were the only family in Montana with two sets of the World Book Encyclopedia. My mother had cried for three weeks.

“And the garbage truck driver?”

“He was an income tax consultant.”

“And he drove a garbage truck. Your mom oughta join a club or something. So she could meet someone besides meter readers and stuff.”

The garbage man had dumped her after he found out she had a kid and couldn't cook anything besides canned chili con carne. She took a cake decorating class to console herself, but dropped out because there weren't any men in it.

TJ got up and picked through a stack of records she'd brought along. She put Buddy Holly and the Crickets on the phonograph. "That'll Be the Day."

"Buddy Holly. Now there's a geek," I said, hoping to steer the conversation away from my mother's pathetic love life.

"If you married Buddy Holly your name would be Holly Holly." TJ turned Van Cliburn face down again. "Or if your mother marries Rick the Dick, your name will be Holly Dick."

"His name is VanOverbeck! And my name's Ryan and it'll always be Ryan!" I snagged a pillow off the bed and threw it at her head. My back ached from being flattened by the horse, my stomach was sore from TJ kicking me while I was trying to hang on to the saddle horn, my head hurt from the pounding of the record player and I couldn't stop thinking about the lieutenant and my mother in a dark movie theater watching Elizabeth Taylor jiggle around in her underwear. "Just shut up!" My voice went quavery.

"Sheesh." TJ was too shocked at my outburst to return fire with the pillow. "I'm gonna go watch Lawrence Welk with Mrs. Hoover."

I flopped onto my bed and rolled up in the quilt.

“Aw, come on, Holly. Don’t worry. He’s not gonna marry her. I betcha he dumps her in ten days, tops.” With that comforting thought, she deserted me for Mrs. Hoover and Norma Zimmer, the Champagne Lady.

I reached over and killed Buddy Holly. I covered my head with the quilt and cried over the humiliation of the entire day, but I couldn’t keep it up for long. I pulled the crumpled front page of the Pathfinder from beneath me and read the article about Melody’s huge funeral and the continuing investigation.

“Police Chief Del Walker said he has put every available man on the case and will keep them there until it is solved. Scores of fruitless leads have been followed with no success. The chief said the police and sheriff’s departments have been inundated by hundreds of ‘tips’ from substantial citizens, skid row bums and tea leaf readers wanting to help find the savage slayer of the sixteen-year-old convent girl whose nude, ravished body was found in a clump of woods near the river last Friday.” Tea leaf readers. I shivered and wondered if Granny P.G. had been consulted.

“A Negro man found loitering near the tracks was hauled in for questioning, but later released when it was determined he was in Colorado at the time of the killing.

“Several undisclosed articles found near the spot where the body was discovered have been sent to the FBI laboratory in Washington, D.C. for analysis. Investigators are hopeful the analysis will reveal whether the crime was committed by the same person who killed Sacred Heart student Cathy Jill Callantine five years ago. Chief Walker would not comment on the possibility of a ‘copy cat’ murder.

The lieutenant was not mentioned in the article, but I saved it anyway to add to my growing collection. I hope the Weekly Monitor, due out Monday, would lay off on its attack of the police department.

I lay on my back and stared at the sunburst pattern in the plaster ceiling. My father had textured it that way for me so that whenever I switched on the light, the fixture would look like the sun, shooting out white rays of sunshine to the four walls.

I could hear TJ out in the living room telling Mrs. Hoover some colossal whopper about how her dad had a gold mine in Idaho and how they were going to go over there and pan for gold all summer and how he'd named the mine after her -- the Theresa June -- because she was his favorite daughter. Mrs. Hoover was buying every word of it and TJ sounded like she believed it herself. I wondered if she'd suffered a head injury when Bay Rum threw her. I fell asleep.

I woke sometime after eleven when car tires crunched in the gravel driveway. Mrs. Hoover and TJ were still out in the living room chatting it up.

"Oh, they're back. I sure hope they had a good time. That young detective is so handsome, don't you think?"

TJ made a gagging sound.

"TJ, you get away from the drapes. That's not polite."

"He's got an old blue Chevy," TJ reported. "Oh, boy, they're kissing in there!"

“Oh, good! Now get away from the window, TJ.” Mrs. Hoover was so delighted the lieutenant had gotten to first base that she threw a giggle fit. “Well, move over then and let me see, too!”

I rolled onto my face, jammed a pillow against each ear and prayed to suffocate.