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*about the author
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(dedication page)

To those of you everywhere
who silently patiently suffer and endure
endless acts of discrimination
and bigotry
and the cruelest forms of marginalization . . .

To those of you too
—true poorest of the poor—
who perpetrate and perpetuate such abominations
from deep within the darkest chasms
of your every fear of those who are not like you,
dying slowly miserably from within
with each new effort to exclude . . .

TO EACH OF YOU AND ALL OF YOU

~ ALIKE ~

(for the same Stardust of which we are made
and the same Waters of the Womb from which we burst forth
neither favor nor exclude
the one or the other of us
but instead hold out to each of us
a lesson for all of us)

THIS BOOK

IS

DEDICATED

(excerpts from the second chapter)

LOVER



Mary.

Her name was Mary.

Now Mary lived and had grown up in Joe's old neighborhood, about a block, maybe two, from where the above events took place, and this was only a few blocks from the church of St. Philip Neri, where Mary had worshiped for most of her life and from whose grade school Joe had graduated.

Little Italy many had once called the area, because for maybe a hundred years before, and even in some of my lifetime, it had been home to a large Italian immigrant population.

The Italians had built St. Philip's. Located where Southeast Division Street and Eighteenth Avenue meet, the church stands quietly, stark and handsome, at the south end of historic Ladd's Addition—one of the most laid back and romantic neighborhoods in all of Portland. A place where neighborhood still means community, and neighbors and their dogs still really know each other. Where tall magnificent elm trees spire up and up in majestic elegant vigil and all main streets lead to a central park—Ladd Circle—around which vehicles and bikers alike move together with grace and harmony along a generously broad yet intimate one-way road. Inside this Circle with wide expanses of green grass and massive plantings of rhododendrons and camellias, a small park laughs with children bustling at play and welcomes lovers holding hands

as they stroll amidst the mirth that surrounds them or whisper sweet nothings to each other on a nearby bench....

The section of the neighborhood where Mary lived was on the other side of Division and was not a part of Ladd's Addition. It was rather run-down. Disintegration had begun there in the seventies and eighties during a period of a fair amount of urban decay in the city generally, and especially wherever the concept of "old" had become underappreciated and even devalued. The area where Mary lived hadn't felt particularly safe at that point of relative collapse, but by the time I began to visit her things were better.

The year was 1994. I had offered to become what was called a "minister to the homebound" for St. Philip's, and Mary was to be my first experience. It was my charge to visit her regularly and bring her Communion, as well as to keep her updated on the various happenings in the parish; in short, to help her maintain a sense of connection to the people and to parish life generally.

The pastor had introduced me to Mary and her youngest brother, Frank, a few weeks before. I had found out during that visit that Mary had some hearing loss, and it was clear to me that the situation was going to be different from what I had been imagining. For one thing, all the window coverings that I could see during that meeting were in the closed position, even though it was only three-thirty in the afternoon. For another, the priest found it next to impossible to determine exactly what kind of arrangement Mary wanted, since she seemed reluctant to respond. And her brother—well, let's just say that he seemed neither excited about our presence nor fond of his sister. I don't know to this

day who called the parish to request Communion visits for Mary, but it seemed rather obvious that it had not been Mary herself, and (as you might conclude the same for yourself later) neither do I believe the request came from Frank.

Both Mary and her brother were born in Portland, but their parents, now deceased, had come from Sicily. Sicilian dialect rather than standard Italian had been the language of preference in the home as the children were growing up. Mary was in her mid-eighties when I met her, while Frank, the youngest of several children, was, I guessed, in his mid seventies.

It was agreed that I would visit Mary once a week, on Mondays, at three-thirty in the afternoon....

(the first visit begins)

As I climbed the steep, numerous, creaky wooden steps that led to the front door on this my first solo visit, my foot went out slightly from under me and I lost my balance. One of the boards was loose. "I should tell Frank about this," I remember saying to myself.

I rang the doorbell, which I could not hear. As I stood observing the house, I noted how old and run-down it appeared. Upon more careful scrutiny, however, I realized that, while old, the house was actually more drab and unremarkable than run-down. I had the impression that it would be care-free for ages. For one thing, the siding was asbestos shakes and there were well-secured aluminum storms on all the windows. It seemed that someone had weather-proofed, maintenance-proofed, and, in effect, time-proofed the house not altogether

dissimilarly in intent to an Egyptian pyramid. Its faded, weather-worn, scratchy-textured surfaces reminded me of a dry and parched land. The shakes would have been perfect for running your fingernails down and watching someone you didn't like too much be startled and grimace. Except for a large spider and webs that were everywhere, a vague absence of life surrounded the entrance.

I rang again. Then remembering Mary's hearing problem I began to pound on the cheap aluminum storm door, which was locked. After a bit I heard a soft and regular thumping, as of one soft surface coming against another. It was becoming increasingly louder.

Click, flip, slide, bang sounded from the various locking mechanisms, and the tightly weather-stripped front door sucked ever so slowly open. Through the small crack that had been formed between the door and the jamb, I could make out long strands of gray hair that seemed almost to blend with the rest of the opening. Then the large old wooden door opened fully, and there she was.

Mary.

Pursing her lips while simultaneously rolling them outward somewhat, and at the same time raising and lowering her jaws without her teeth touching, as though chewing on or massaging a piece of food without use of the teeth, Mary continued these movements while focusing intently on the screen door latch, furrowing her eyebrows in concentration. Moving her head very slowly toward the latch until just five or so inches from it, she brought her kinked forefinger to meet it. Click, flip, and she unlocked the door. Turning the squeaky hand-lever slowly downward, she pushed the door open toward me so quickly that I had to move back

and down one step equally as fast in order to avoid falling and to allow the door to open sufficiently for me to enter.

Greeting me, Mary smiled sweetly and coyly, much the same as Meryl Streep had done often and wonderfully as Ethel Rosenberg in the film version of *Angels in America*. She began to speak. Slowly and in a staccato manner, giving every word its own special emphasis, "Oh . . . What-Do-You-Know-About-That?" she said. Then, pursing, rolling outward, and spasming her lips and jaws again, over and over in the same manner as before, with delight in her eyes and long whiskers in continual undulation above her upper lip, she added as I stepped over the threshold, "My L-L-L-L-O-V-E-R! My L-L-L-L-O-V-E-R has come to see me!" As I turned around to watch her close and lock the door, she repeated, stressing each word equally, "What-Do-You-Know-About-That!"

Well, I didn't know *anything* about that, and even less if I was going to last on my very first assignment.

I was led into a barely lit living room. Aside from the fact that it was fall—October to be exact—and even though only three-thirty in the afternoon, the room was dark. This appeared to be due mainly to all of the windows' roller shades which were pulled down to the closed position, same as during the introductory visit the week before. Every one of them. I remember thinking to myself how strange this seemed. "Was she allergic to light?" I wondered. "Did she suffer from depression?" The shades had likely been cream-colored and normal-looking at one time, but now they were severely jaundiced, torn in many places, and just in terribly sad shape. Though Mary and

Frank were not poor, they did not have money to spare or waste, and they both were frugal, understanding the value of a dollar. Yet it seemed a shame that they had not replaced these emotionally heavy and sad-looking shades.

Mary was using a walker to get to her chair, and I realized then that the thumping I had heard previously had been the sounds made as the rubber caps that tipped the walker's legs struck the carpeted floor with the weight of her body coming down on them. She appeared to manage the walker with a fair amount of agility, pushing it forward incrementally by barely touching it, then jerking her hands quickly off of the handlebars as if they were hot metal. Two steps, then a push. Two steps, then a push.

Mary's clothing was always plain and simple: an old-fashioned, old-lady's thin cotton dress with lots of little flowers, over which she would wear a long-sleeved sweater with buttons. Almost always over these I would find her wearing a full-length kitchen apron made of cotton, the kind that loops over the head and goes to below the knees. I am not sure why she wore the apron, as she no longer cooked or cleaned. Perhaps this was simply a prudent economy measure to help keep her dress and sweater clean longer while doing other activities.

On her feet would be either cute, fuzzy, soft slippers or, if she had been to the doctor's that day, then plain, black, closed-toe, thickly healed, tie shoes—substantial objects. Those shoes seemed identical to the ones the nuns in their habits used to wear during my years at St. Stephen grade school in the fifties. I know this to be so, and yet, if I focus my memory tightly on those far away times, I do not recall ever actually *seeing* Sister Petronella's feet, or

tall Sister Thomasine's, or even those of Sister Catherine, the principal and the nun who forever will be ingrained the most fondly in my memory.

The nuns had hands and faces, naturally, though their hands were often unseen inside large angel sleeves that seemed mysterious dark tunnels to me at the time, and you had to be standing in front of them to see their faces due to those side shield things I can only improperly (I am sure) call blinders . But the feet, the feet . . . and the rest of their bodies . . . well, I just never was convinced about the existence of all the rest. If the proposition is true that seeing is believing, then I could believe only that these good women had hands and faces, accompanied by yards of black cloth that flowed in the wind and bulged and de-bulged at various moments throughout the daylight hours, depending on when and where you might be looking. And I would have to take it on blind faith alone that the rest of their body parts were present somewhere in all that yardage....

Returning to Mary . . . the heat in the house was excessive and I would often find it challenging to stay awake, especially after having walked an hour by the time I would get to her place from downtown after a full day of work. Yet there was something reassuring and almost comforting in hearing the furnace humming quietly in the background and seeing the effects of the warm air from the registers as it blew gently on the sheer curtains that would dance effortlessly nearby before the windows they stood guard to. And I would see the air blowing almost playfully on a dress that would now and then be hanging over a chair to dry in front of one of the registers. "Too bad the sound

of the furnace and the blowing heat aren't love," I thought to myself more than once, "because, like good love, they were enveloping, reliable, and abundant." They were also one of the few things I could identify with as familiar in this new and otherwise strange environment, as I had the same form of heat where I lived. Still, the heat was excessive.

As she eased herself down gently and gingerly into her large over-stuffed chair, Mary surrendered to a mild plop a few inches above the seat proper. I had chosen to sit on the sofa a few feet away.

There . . . the two of us now were both settled and ready to begin.

"How are you, Mary?" I asked cheerfully and in quite a friendly manner, I thought.

At this she lowered her head some, and I noticed that her eyes were shut. They were not closed softly as when in slumber, but tightly as though consciously and deliberately. "What is the message?" I asked myself. And what was I to do?

I waited. Nothing.

Thinking that her hearing loss might be the problem, I repeated loudly, "HOW ARE YOU, MARY?"

With her eyes still tightly closed, she began to rock her head from side to side, slowly and rather widely, in three or four return trips, as she lowered her chin toward her chest. By the end of this, her chin was resting on her sternum. She remained in that position for twenty seconds or so, which seemed like forever. Still I had no clue what was going on or what to do.

Then I began to notice a very slight smile form at her lips. With her mouth remaining closed,

the smile expanded and solidified and she sat up straight, looking as though she had just awoke from a pleasant dream or a trance, or as though we had been playing some sort of game which was now at an end and she had won.

"Oh, perty good, Don" she said at last.

"It's *Ron*. My name is Ron, Mary."

"Ohhhh?" she responded with an ascending pitch that indicated this might be news to her. Long pause. "Well . . .that's okay, too," she continued slowly, in a deep-voiced, declarative manner.

In the distance I could hear thumping sounds again—slow, firm, evenly paced—followed not long after by what sounded to be a door creaking open shyly. From the room that was hiding behind the dining room door just across the way from me, I heard the sound of shoes quickly picking up the pace as they moved across the floor there, as though finally encountering an unobstructed surface and the person wearing them could move with more speed now. Finally the dining room door swung open revealing the silhouette of a man, behind whom was what appeared to be a kitchen.

It was Frank, Mary's brother, come up from the basement. He continued his entrance without excusing himself or conveying anything beyond a simple acknowledgment of our presence with a nod of his head. It appeared he thought he had been invited and now we should just continue, pretending that his little interruption hadn't happened or didn't matter. He pulled up a dining room chair, sat down, folded his arms across his chest, spread his feet on the floor forming a wide V-shape with his legs, and sat there silent and still.

Mary and I carried on for a while as if nothing had happened and we were still alone, yet I

found Frank's presence distracting and stymying. I asked her a few simple questions—small talk, really—in an effort to get to know her better and solicit what some of her preferences might be regarding our visits. But Frank began answering for her. He did this several times, which felt irritating, invasive, and controlling to me. Though Mary did not seem to mind his verbal intrusions, I wanted to hear *her* answers, and Frank's continual intervening frustrated this. In addition, his responses were condescending in her regard. He seemed definitely to be impatient or even annoyed with her. I had the sense, again, that Frank didn't care much for his sister and, even more, that he thought her to be slow and too far behind the times to count for much. I had the impression also that his expectation might have been that someone from church would simply come once in a while to quickly give Mary Communion and then dash off faster than would give him the time to have to muster up a welcome. Frank did not seem to be aware of or interested in process, including in the relationship which needed yet to form and develop between Mary and me, but to be concerned rather with quick results. It would be nice if he didn't come around like this in the future, I thought.

Suddenly I remembered the bad step.

"Oh, by the way, Frank, one of your front steps needs some work. I think it's the top one or second one down."

"No, no," he said, drawing out his words while frowning and sounding quite irritated at hearing this news. "All the steps work real good," he insisted confidently.

"But I almost fell, and someone with less balance than I have—."

"No, no, no," he replied in the same way as before, but this time as though I had not understood. "You must have stepped on it wrong."

"Stepped on it wrong?" I said.

"Why sure," he said in a consoling tone.

"Next time I bet you don't even notice it."

"Next time I will probably break my neck!" I muttered to myself. Then I surrendered for the time being. Though he was having the effect on me that I imagined a grater to have on a carrot, I decided not to pursue the subject of the malfunctioning step any further that day.

As I tried to continue the conversation with Mary, Frank resumed his interrupting. By now I was more than annoyed and wanted him out of our hair as soon as possible and for as long into the future as possible. Besides, I had come for Mary, the homebound of the two, not for Frank. I wanted to have Mary to myself during our visits, and just maybe she wanted the same. I decided it was time to proceed full force into the headwind of Frank's intrusive and negative behavior, hopefully nipping it in the bud and thereby eliminating any chance of his establishing a precedent regarding participation in the time that Mary and I would share together.

"So Frank . . ." I turned to him. Then with veiled and uncomfortable sarcasm, yet firmly and matter-of-factly, I continued with my best poker face, "Were you wanting me to come each week for you, too, Frank? Shall we do this Communion service together, with you here with us every Monday? We'll pray together every week for an hour or so, and talk and things? Would you like that kind of commitment?"

Skeletons, scarecrows, demons, ghosts, lions and tigers on the loose. "No, no," he said, sending a

"not interested" gesture my way and a shake of the head while rising quickly from his chair as though his worst nightmare were about to entangle him. "No, no. Just seein' how things were goin'. Gotta get back downstairs now. Gotta see about the cookin'." Then he turned away from us, adding on his way out of the room, "Gotta get dinner goin'. Dinner goin'." Thump-thump-thump-thump, thump-thump-thump-thump, he and his short little footsteps very quickly disappeared into the kitchen, followed by the same dull, firm sounds I had heard before he had cracked open the basement door and so unpleasantly arrived to us. The more his descent down the stairs faded into its final landing, the more the soft ticking of the wind-up clock on the coffee table before me could be heard.

And he was gone. Gone gone. For good gone. Never again did Frank come and sit with us...

(later on in the visit Ron gives Communion to Mary, she enters a brief period of quiet time, and returning to his seat he waits for her to reconnect)

Hearing nothing after a few minutes, I looked at her and began to observe more closely. I could make out that she would ever so slightly, almost secretly, open her eyes now and then as though spying the situation, like some submarine periscope or other monitoring device. Then she would quickly shut them waterproof tight. She did this several times. At a certain point, I could also see what appeared to be the hint of a smile at the corners of her mouth.

In moments such as this, which were to occur frequently during the course of our relationship, Mary seemed to me as a child playing

a game—a game, however, that only she was allowed to initiate (always without informing her playmate), of which only she knew the rules, and regarding which only she could win!

Was she playing with me now, I wondered? Had she had her meal, as it were, and now she wanted to play for a while, as children cannot wait to do after a meal?

This all lasted probably no more than three or four minutes, but they were long. Quiet time with Mary always seemed to go by in slow motion.

"Mary?" I said finally, softly and cautiously, not wishing to startle her. "Mary?"

No stir.

"Mary?" I repeated more loudly.

Nothing.

Recalling her hearing problem, I said quite audibly and firmly, "MARY!" At this, her head jerked swiftly upward as though I had startled her. I felt badly, yet to this day I am convinced she had been neither asleep nor startled.

"Oh . . .," she uttered slowly, matter-of-factly, innocently, and somewhat disingenuously as she began to "wake up." Then her lips began their seizure-pursing as though she was searching rather frantically for her next strategy.

She was so charming and unique, really, and her ways so harmless and transparent, that for a brief moment here and there that day it was easy to imagine myself a kid again, at play with a childhood friend again.

"I need to go now, Mary," I said, "but I'll be back next Monday at three-thirty."

"That's okay," she said slowly, with the intonation of someone who is forgiving another for some act wrongly done—perhaps, in this case, for

my not having more time to play. "That's okay," she repeated.

At this point, she hastily pulled her lightweight aluminum walker close to her with her left hand, grabbed with her other hand the right arm of the overstuffed chair in which she was sitting, and began to rock back and forth. Long and generous rocking motions to and fro. I asked if she needed help getting up, but she just kept rocking, as though confident about what she was doing. Her back and forth motions became more and more pronounced until at last she succeeded in achieving sufficient momentum to bring herself (with difficulty) onto her feet, completely upright. Then she led the way slowly to the front door, favoring her left leg in such a way as to give the appearance of a slight limp.

With her click, flip, slide, bang on all the door's locking devices using quick and almost spasmodic motions of her rather severely arthritic left hand, she managed to pull the door slowly open with her right hand as its suction slowly surrendered to her. Her careful movements there reminded me of one who is concerned with being hurt or wants to avoid experiencing startle at all the racket, or both.

"Goodbye, Mary. See you next Monday," I said cheerfully while pushing open the screen door.

"Bye," she replied, stretching out the length of her farewell and delivering it in the sing-song fashion used by many. "Thank you, Don," she added.

"Let the name-thing go," I said to myself, amused and admittedly more than just a little charmed by both the name confusion and the experience overall of that first day.

It was dark outside by this time and I was

glad, for the darkness signaled that my day of work and other responsibilities was completely over and the rest of the evening would be mine alone, without further obligations.

Now the porch light on Mary's house was as dim and impractical as the light inside the house had been. With my back by necessity to the beams of the fixture, I struggled in that poorly lit world of "I can't see!" to make my way safely down the steep steps. Only with luck did I manage to avoid a problem with the faulty step, for, departing far more distracted than I had arrived, I had completely forgotten about it.

Upon reaching the bottom landing, I turned and looked back at the door. It was ajar all the width of a fruit fly, and I knew that Mary had to be there behind the opening, peeping, quite possibly playing her own version of hide-and-seek and wondering if her sweet new love would e'er return. I dared not wave, for I was certain I was not supposed to notice her watching.

Turning in the direction of home, I proceeded happily on my way, feeling lucky to breathe-in the normalcy of the fresh, moist evening air of October and to be the more in harmony with myself the closer each step brought me to home. I felt completely unencumbered and free in that moment. Back in the arms of the familiar.

(end of chapter)

