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Front cover art by Joe Macca, April 2014. This is the same Joe, and friend, who appears in the opening chapter of the present work. Thank you, Joe!

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The Mouth Is for Talking

by Ron Talarico

it is anyone's guess
why we waste
so much of our lives
resisting the thought
that no one is worth more than we are
and no one is worth less.

but that such resistance, unchecked, will destroy us all eventually

is a certitude

which time isn't going to wait around for us to ponder

TOMORROW.

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

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CURTAIN UP

I had never been to that part of the neighborhood except for a few times in the mid-sixties to visit my friend Joe. Joe and I were seniors in high school at the time — Central Catholic. An all boys school in those days, Central had lots of priests and nuns and few distractions. And the school offered such an exuberant abundance of discipline that just to sell a small fraction of it would have made them rich. I don't think we had laymen then, except for maybe the athletic coach and the cross-eyed chorus teacher.

Mister somebody or other, the latter. He said he was related to Lawrence Welk, but this didn't make a bit of difference to a room full of young boys whose hormones were threatening to overcome them at any moment. And his association with the wellknown television personality certainly wasn't much help when it came time to figuring out if he was looking at you or if he was looking at me; we would get so uptight and he so furious whenever our young eyes would prove to be too inexperienced or distracted to tell. As a kid I remember not understanding why the glasses he was wearing did not help resolve his problem, though in retrospect I guess the problem was really ours. One time, because a few of us could not tell from his eyes if he was talking to us or to the group standing beside us, he pounded the piano bench so hard in anger that several books flew off the bench. The noise from his hand coming down forcefully and the books falling to the floor, together with the raging fire of red in his face in that instant, were too much for a teenager to bear, and hiding our laughter from him required all the discipline in the world.

My parents would let me take their car to visit Joe. A beauty of a 1953 Chevrolet Bel-Air it was. Green body, cream-colored top, whitewalls, rear fender skirts that covered half the wheels, and front wing-windows that let you direct the raw outside air in any direction you liked. It was a two-door hardtop. Every side window opened, too, and fully so, and when all the windows were down on a side no structural post blocked any of your view — there would be just one unobstructed opening front-to-back. That was a look and a feel that most folks nowadays have forgotten, I suspect, or do not know about, but one which comes back to me off and on through the years and always fondly. Those were the days when a car had personality and, unlike today, you could easily distinguish one from another.

My parents allowed me to use the family car on my own though I was barely eighteen and had little driving experience. I never did understand their trust of my driving abilities in those days, especially since I was not even sure I trusted myself. Maybe they consented because I was a low maintenance son who was not reckless and had never asked for much. I just did not know and did not inquire. In any case, I was allowed to make an occasional trip to Joe's by myself, a run to the neighborhood grocery store for mom, a quick jaunt to the record store for a new Connie Francis album. Oh yes, I do mean Connie Francis. Though honestly, in the sixties I never felt a conflict about this with my peers who were seriously into the Beatles and Elvis and such, and it did not seem to matter to any of us that I was somewhere else on some other planet when it came to music and a few other things. None seemed to raise an eyebrow or to notice.

The funny thing about the trips to Joe's house was that, even after we had just talked on the phone and agreed to a visit only minutes before, several times he wouldn't be at home when I would arrive. I can still remember more than once knocking on the front door and his mother answering.

"Joe no 'ere," Mrs. Macca would say with a very lively, open expression on her face.

"Do you know where he went?"

"I nuh know," she would reply, raising her shoulders and displaying extended, empty palms to my confused spirit to reinforce her words. "Maybe 'e go to store."

"Go to the *store*?!" I would say to myself. Well... no matter. I'd sit down on their front steps and wait. And Joe would almost always show up ten minutes later or so without any recognition whatsoever that anything odd was in the air. I never could understand that behavior of his, and, being particularly non-assertive in those days, I wouldn't ever get into it with my friend. He was clearly a good person. Maybe that's just the way they do things in Sicily was my best guess. The few times Joe didn't show at all, however, were particularly embarrassing for me whenever my mother happened to ask if I had had a good time. She had to have wondered why I continued the friendship at that point, though she never asked. She was magnanimous that way, and I was grateful.

I liked Joe. We got along, maybe most of all because we were both a bit awkward and shy and behind the times compared

with our contemporaries.

Joe and his parents were from Sicily. They had come from there to Portland in the mid-fifties when Joe was maybe ten, seeking a better life. They had had to leave behind Joe's elder sister who had died early in childhood. His parents planned to return to Sicily upon retirement, with two pensions — one U.S., one Italian. Coupled with free Italian health care and the lower cost of living in Siracusa (the town they would return to), this was not a bad deal all in all. The parents did forget, however, to take into consideration other possibilities, for in the end things went in a painful direction when Joe eventually married an all-American Portland girl, and he and his wife and eventual children remained behind in America. Perhaps as much as one of the Seven Sorrows of the Virgin Mary herself, it had to have hurt deeply, I imagined, for Mrs. Macca not to be able to watch her grandchildren mature and to share with them what she knew and loved of life.

Being young and quick to learn, Joe became the official interpreter for the threesome. His childhood ended, I believe, when he got off the boat in New York City. He became rather instantly an adult-boy. Doctor's appointments, financial arrangements, legal transactions, car purchase — you name it, Joe was there with his parents, interpreting. As the years went by, to think about this always left a particular sadness in me, for Joe seemed to have lost a significant part of his youth in the process. It had been stolen from him, and the thief was none other than Life itself. He seemed far more mature and reliable than his peers, but also too serious when it came to doing things the kids his own age were doing all around him. Perhaps this situation is the same for many young people who are caught in a similar immigrant experience; yet the case I describe was different, for Joe was my friend.

I too was serious and more mature than most of my peers, but for a far different palate of circumstances than Joe's. Our serious side alone would have probably been sufficient as a basis for us to bond, but there were other factors as well. We were both Italian, for example, both Catholic, both shy, and both artistic and very appreciative of beauty.

Mr. Macca (senior, that is) was not the best of drivers at the time. I remember one icy morning he offered to take me to school with Joe. The two of them came by at about seven-thirty in Mr.'s blue 1960 Chevrolet. Nice car, very nice man, bad driver. Coming from warm, sunny Sicily, it was possibly his first

experience driving on icy streets. No roller coaster I had ever been on was a match for Mr. Macca's unconcerned sense of adventure on ice that day. The fact that he maneuvered the situation completely unruffled only made me more nervous. I fantasized the car to be just one big skate on ice without a foot guiding it. He would turn the wheel in one direction and we would go in some other direction. Then both surprised and confused by the car's reactions to his movements at the wheel, and unable to explain them, he would raise his shoulders and head, and say simply, "Boh!" followed by a mild head shake and, "I dunno." If I had been a lot younger, the relative danger of the situation would have been a thrill, but as a mature teenager I was definitely too smart to be so stupid. Despite all the sliding, we did make it to school eventually that day, and I had concrete thanks to offer up at first period morning prayer.

I always liked the Maccas. They were good, basic, hardworking, fun-loving folks who understood the meaning of the opportunities that America was offering them and took advantage of them in the spirit in which they were being offered. But Mrs. Macca's sesame-seed-and-honey thingies and Mrs. Macca's spinach she could have left in the Old Country as far as I was concerned.

Whereas my mother always used fresh spinach and cooked it quickly and sparingly, Mrs. Macca's spinach was from a can, or at least that's what it looked like to me. Precooked and overcooked to begin with, she would cook it again anyway — and I mean cook it. I would see it boiling in the pan. Her spinach always looked black to me by the time she was done with it, especially when compared with my mother's, which would be bright green. And compared with mom's it would be bitter. Joe told me many years later that he thought his mother added black olives and that's what made the dish look black. Let me tell you, though, that even if she *did* add black olives, that would only have elevated the situation from bad spinach to worse.

Then there were those honey and sesame seed sweets. I had eaten other versions elsewhere a couple of times before, and they weren't bad really. So one time I accepted Mrs. Macca's very insistent offer to have one that she herself had made.

It, too, was bitter! She must have burned the seeds, I figured, or maybe used a brand of honey from oddballs (who were also bees, that is). In the end, I managed to get it down — only to have her offer another and yet another, both of which I accepted

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only because, as I said earlier, I did not have good assertiveness skills, and this was particularly the case with adults. It was easier to accept her offer and suffer than to squirm my way through a declination. And I couldn't bring myself to disappoint her as she stood there with such an open, lively expression on her face.

A year or so later during a visit, Joe himself offered me one of his mother's honey delights. Though she was not in the room with us, I realized much to my dismay that I could not muster up enough assertiveness to decline even with Joe. I suppose lurking in the back of my mind was the thought that Mrs. M. might make a surprise appearance and I would have to answer to her. At any rate, my friend must have thought I had eaten and enjoyed his kind offer, for he extended another to me, which also I accepted, unable again to decline. What he had not noticed with the first one, gratefully, was that I had put it in the left pocket of my pants in order to avoid eating it, which... was exactly what I did with the second one as soon as he wasn't looking. This strategy turned out to be ill-advised, as by the time I got home my pocket had become one warm and unopenable mess of goo. It was not easy to clean up the mess, and I concluded that honey on your fingers is like a persistent temptation to do what is forbidden: very hard to get rid of.

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 oneway 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.

It was still common to see a large number of Italian surnames at St. Philip's. They appeared, for example, across the bottoms of the donated tall, narrow, blue, stained glass windows that are set into the walls of the nave. And they were still the majority of the names in the Mass intentions part of the weekly bulletin. As for the language itself, you could still hear Italian spoken at Sunday Mass and at social functions, like the Spaghetti Dinner every November or the Rigatoni Luncheon each spring around Valentine's Day. Those delicious hand-stuffed rigatoni, arrayed in a rich red tomato and meat sauce, can still make my mouth water just to think of them.

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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 mideighties 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. That would give me just enough time (though barely) to walk to the church from my place of work downtown, remove a couple of consecrated Hosts from the tabernacle, add them to my pyx, and then proceed on foot to Mary's

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house.

The pyx, which the church had given to me, was a brass or gold-plated, round metal receptacle, one and a half inches in diameter (slightly wider than a Communion Host) and a half inch high, with a cover that hinged at the back and snapped open and closed at the front. In addition, it had a pewter Jerusalem cross on the cover — a cross with arms of equal length, each arm terminating in a short crossbar, with an equilateral cross within each quadrant. My pyx could hold up to five Hosts or so.

I remember feeling awkward at first carrying the Blessed Sacrament on my person. While I never quite lost the feeling that I was some sort of Grand Protector of the Lord, a crusader, a type of Swiss Guard or the like, yet I really never found a place or a way in which to carry the pyx and Hosts that felt either dignified or reverent.

Pants pocket was too presumptuous somehow — and what if I had to use the restroom? I didn't like the image.

Coat pocket was too distant and transient. What if I had to remove my coat and then forgot about the pyx? Or if someone stole my coat? To misplace or outright lose Jesus was not an option.

Now my shirt pocket didn't make much sense, either: what if I had to bend over? And often my shirts didn't have a pocket, anyway.

Putting it in my fanny pack felt too "out there" and crass, especially when the time would come to remove the pyx. I could not appreciate the image of reaching for the Lord in such a contraption.

I concluded there was no appropriate place to keep consecrated Hosts but in the ciborium, in the locked tabernacle, at the church, that's all.

In the end, forced by circumstances to compromise, I settled on the fanny pack as the best of all the undesirable options. And I suppose to conjure a blessing upon this most scrupulously arrived at and still uncomfortable decision, I added a "ritual of transition" from fanny pack to full exposure of the Host by buying a brightly colored, tightly woven, cloth pouch with zipper in which to store the pyx. The pouch had the additional advantage of providing one more layer of shelter from the crazy world beyond.

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-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.

This recollection led naturally to another, and my thoughts left Mary again and flashed back to Sister Catherine almost forty years before, to a fond memory which, just to think of it, has always left me feeling more sure of myself somehow, and which my mother by now will come to know only from heaven:

At around five o'clock each day in the fall of our seventh grade year, after basketball practice in the gym that was located next to the convent, my friend Tommy and I would go to the back of the convent and tap meekly on the door

that stood at the top of a flight of stairs and was surrounded by a lattice-work enclosure. The fever excitement on both our faces betrayed our immaturity, but Sister would kindly ignore that minor flaw of still-inexperienced youth and instead bring us a cake that someone had given her and the others. She would always give us a piece that would outdo in size anything our mothers could ever have imagined or allowed, and a few times when the cake was small Sister would just cut it in half, offering one side to Tommy and the other to me. You can doubtless imagine the thrill of it all to two twelve-year-old boys in those days. It was no less than trick-ortreating Monday through Friday throughout basketball season that year.

Now Tommy was what at the time people commonly called fat and I was wiry according to my parents, and my childish logic and probably inflated sense of self told me that I always got more cake than he even though the pieces were equal in size, because my piece would fill up more of my body than his piece would of his.

At any rate, the work that lay immediately ahead for us on those evenings we clearly understood: to manoeuver our bikes home with one hand, using the other to keep the cake conveniently propped to our lips; finish and destroy all evidence from hands and faces before arriving home; and devour dinner like famished growth-spurting pre-pubescent boys, no matter how hungry we were not, thus assuring that our mothers would be none the wiser regarding our harmless deception.

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 annoved 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, 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.

Feeling somewhat nervous and scattered during this our first visit, I forgot to refer to the guide I had brought with me, which outlined a suggested format to use when bringing Communion to the homebound. Instead, I dove right in to reading the previous Sunday's gospel, after which I planned to share the highlights of the priest's homily.

"Would you like to read last Sunday's gospel together," I

asked, "and then maybe talk about it?"

"Ohhhh?" Mary replied as though asking a question. At the same time she appeared to stall and hint vaguely that such could be a possibility if one chose to do it. "That's okay," she continued, raising the pitch of her voice almost playfully. Then suddenly, with power and a force reminiscent of authority, and with almost a tone of scolding, she added firmly and rather loudly, "The-mouth-is-fortalking." She delivered these words especially slowly and with staccato, giving equal emphasis to each word.

I was caught off guard by what she had said and how she had said it. Was she implying I didn't talk enough? Was I upsetting her somehow? Yet I had just arrived! I really didn't know how yet to talk to this woman whom I had barely met. I couldn't tell if she was angry or irked, with me or with life or with what. It was a bizarre moment. I had no precedent in my life to draw upon that might provide me with a comfortable reaction, and I had no clear idea how to proceed. I told myself I would just have to make it through this somehow until I had more time to think about it.

Opening the little missal of Mass readings I had brought with me, I handed it to Mary indicating where to begin, and I waited. And waited. And waited some more. Her mouth and lips started to "seizure-purse," as though this helped her to focus. Then she stopped, apparently about to begin reading, but instead the seizure-pursing resumed.

As mentioned earlier, the living room was poorly lit due mainly to the closed window shades, but this situation was made worse by the fact that there was only one light turned on in all of the room, and it must have been a tired twenty-five-watt bulb at best.

"Maybe we need more light, Mary," I said as I started toward the lamp on the floor behind her.

"No," she responded quickly and dismissively, motioning for me to go back to the sofa.

"Was she trying to save money?" I wondered. This was easy to think since the furnishings immediately around us reflected humble means. As far as the eye could travel from the modest observation deck that the sofa had become for me in this past hour, what I could see in the living and dining rooms seemed old and uncared for, faded, torn, yellowed, tired, dry, and not dusted for a long time.

"The glasses."

"The glasses? Do you want me to get your glasses?"

"Frank's s'posed to... I had a visit to the doctor for the eyes."

"When?" I said.

"Oh...," she paused, "whenever his mind told him to take me."

"What did the doctor say?"

"He'll have to do what he'll have to do," she responded, turning to me, as if advising.

My mind was beginning to tire by now from the difficult conversation and from the excessive mental energy that was being required of me in attempting to understand what Mary meant when she spoke.

Notes on the manner of Mary's self-expression:

<u>pronunciation</u>. Although this woman's pronunciation was American English and not in itself seemingly influenced by the Sicilian dialect which she seemed to prefer, Mary did have what sounded like a lisp. It was mild, I think, and seemed to come centrally from the front and the roof of her mouth rather than from one side or the other. The problem with these hissing sounds seemed obvious enough in words containing only one of them, as in jail and *cheat*, *sharp* and pleasure, *Sunday* and bees. But words

with combinations could be quite noticeable, as in ages and cheeses, for example, or especially and measures. Her lisping did not seem to be consistent on the same word all of the time, and while sometimes the habit was strong, at other times it would be weak or even vague.

grammar. I might mention here a grammatical peculiarity which I had begun to notice in Mary's speech and seemed clearly to be an influence from the Italian — namely her use of the definite article where native speakers of English would omit it. She liked the coffee, for example; she preferred the Parmesan cheese on her pasta; and she drank the wine with supper.

<u>vocal quality</u>. Her voice was on the deep side generally and often had a rather rough and raspy quality to it, though it was always mild and soft. Dispassionate and matter-of-fact self-expression was a fundamental part of Mary's speaking style.

<u>fluency</u>. Her speech was consistently slow, never rushed. I don't think Mary knew how to rush anything. It just did not seem to be in her to express herself quickly, though perhaps things had been different in youth.

<u>logic</u>. Depending on something I could never quite figure out, Mary often made sense from the start to the end of a given single thought, but she never made complete sense in everything or even in most of what she would say during an entire visit. I always had to work to understand the intent of her words. When she didn't make sense in a thought, I could often end up understanding if I asked enough questions.

Ah... but which questions?!

<u>talkativeness</u>. Using few words and expressing few thoughts, Mary was definitely not the long-winded type.

pauses. The pauses between my questions and her responses could be so long that I would not always be sure if she had heard me or if, having heard me, she might have decided simply not to respond. And these pauses could be tense, especially when they would cause me to wonder if I had said something which, unbeknownst to me, might have been offensive or otherwise seemed inappropriate to her.

<u>authority</u>. There was an authority about many of Mary's pronouncements. The source of this authority was a mystery to me, but the authority itself was easy to sense and once in a while felt strangely to be on the prophetic side, especially in the sternness she could convey through the tone of her voice and expression on her

face. Sometimes this authority would cause an irrational discomfort in me or an odd sense of fear, not knowing if I had done something to offend her or if her manner might intensify and result in an outburst. I just did not know and could not tell. Often she would sound like an adult talking to or even mildly scolding a child who was in need of some correction or other, advice, or maybe just simple instruction. Yet this impression of authority that could emanate from her would never feel condescending, no matter its content, and never did she display an outburst.

In those commanding moments of authority Mary's articulation would be more staccato than usual as she carefully would enunciate each word. There would almost always be a rise in volume on the final word or two and a fading away of the last syllable; this fading would consist of an almost inaudible and drawn-out "uhhhhh" sound which provided what I thought of as a vocalized period to these special communications. And at the end of some of these pronouncements it much amused me to watch her frequently cast a glance my way that seemed to communicate very matter-of-factly and without accusation, "You should know this by now." One such pronouncement was stated earlier, "The-Mouth-Is-For-Talking." Another was, "You-Have-To-Do-What-Your-Mind-Tells-You-To-Do."

Returning to the reading... so I suggested to Mary that I myself read the passage from the previous Sunday's gospel. Retrieving the missal from her, I began to read from the Book of Matthew, Chapter V: "You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lamp stand, where it gives light to all in the house. Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father."

"What do you think, Mary?" I asked.

"Ohhh...," she delayed a bit, then continued with a solid termination of approval, "good." Pausing a little longer as though reflecting further on the reading, she added, "Well... if you don't put the salt on the food, your mind tells you it doesn't taste and you have to wait for the salt."

I was not prepared for this type of response but did not let on to being caught off guard. "Anything else, Mary?" I said.

"The mind gets all mixed up," she answered, "and tells you to put the fire under the basket. But you have to call the fire department if you do what your mind tells you to do." Then turning to me, clearly in a spirit of offering advice, she added, "It's not good."

It was responses like these last two to questions like these last two that provided for me a strand of insight into how Mary's brother could give the impression that the line-up of cars to get into his sister's mental parking lot might be short, or at least that she was not to be taken as seriously as others. While I was determined not to give in to this temptation, I could now at least image the possibility that others might not feel so inclined.

Venturing one more try, I said, "Does anything more strike you about this reading, Mary?"

"The priest," she quickly replied, "the priest."
"The priest?" I said.

"Who was the priest?"

"Well, Father Bossi did the reading at Mass," I replied.

"He wanted the money for the church. To pay. Oh, it was just awful. Awful," she said as she began to shake her head from side to side, muttering a deeply toned grunt of disgust with each shake. Slowly she lowered her head until her chin came to her chest. "Just awful."

"Fr. Bossi?" I said, confused, since I was certain she had only just met him the day he introduced us.

"His name was what it was," she said slowly, raising her head and as though instructing me. "I was a girl, just a little one. I went to the church before my mother and father could get there with me."

"How old were you?"

"Oh, seven or eight maybe, or something." This would have been eighty years before, more or less.

"I was going to go up the stairs but there he was, standing in my way, the feet down hard and the hand was out. 'The coins, Mary. Where are the coins? We all have to give for this brand new church. Where are your coins?"

I realized then that she was referring to the original church. which was still located on the parish grounds. It had been replaced by the newer and much larger construction designed by a then young and now famous architect named Pietro Belluschi.

"The coins, Father?" she continued. "I don't have the coins.' He wanted whatever we could give him, to pay. 'You need

to bring the coins, Mary,' he said."

"Well, the idea!" she uttered to me with great disdain while looking at me. Then she lowered her head slowly again, shaking it from side to side all the way down, muttering a disappointed and disapproving "Mmm" with each shake.

Apparently the pastor at the time expected all parishioners to help contribute to the costs of building that first church and was not particularly reticent about asking for money, even during what for most of us might be considered to be awkward and inappropriate moments, like entering the church for Mass on Sunday morning, which was what Mary had been doing that day.

After several seconds of seemingly further recalling the incident and gathering her thoughts about it, she raised her head and fixed her eyes hard on me. "*The-idea-Father!*" she resumed scornfully, as though I were he, "you mean you are going to make me go all the way back to my house and get the coins from my mother and father?" Mary was so tightly engaged in me in that instant that for a few moments it was not clear if she was able to distinguish between that person and moment from eighty years ago and this poor soul she called "Don" who was sitting before her now.

"So he wouldn't let you in unless you paid something," I declared.

"Well, the idea! I had to run all the way home by myself in my nice little dress and ask my mother and father for the money!"

Realizing how far we had strayed from the original question about the gospel reading, I said, "Mary, we're getting a little off track here." Looking down at my watch, "It's getting kind of late," I added. "How about we receive Communion and then I'll go?"

"Okay," she replied, almost singing it. Then quickly she added "I don't care" in such a manner that it was unclear if she was simply adding to her consent or if instead it didn't matter to her whether we proceeded or not with Communion or terminated our visit then and there.

Now the usual format that had been suggested for use when bringing Communion to the homebound included more than simply reading and discussing the previous Sunday's gospel, talking about the homily, and administering Communion. Other parts involved asking God to forgive any recent transgressions or habitual faults, praying for special concerns, saying the Lord's Prayer, and reciting the Lamb of God part of the Mass that precedes reception of Communion — all in a spirit of supporting one's relationship with God and strengthening one's connection to the local community of believers and to the world generally. This service can take on alternative and more elaborate formats, but simplicity was what Mary seemed to need from me, so that's what I tried to offer. Anything more than the simple appeared at this point to be beyond her capacity (and perhaps my own as well).

Despite the lack of clarity in Mary's I don't care, I decided to proceed with the service since it was, after all, the primary reason for my visit.

I had removed my jacket and fanny pack upon arriving and placed them next to me on the sofa. Slowly reaching now for the pack, I took from it the cloth pouch containing pyx and Hosts and placed it on the pack.

"In the name of the Father," I began, "and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," as with my right hand I made the traditional corresponding movements to the Sign of the Cross. Mary accompanied me naturally with these same actions and words, which was a hopeful sign. With this simple affirmation of belief in a single triune God, we had begun.

"Lord, have mercy," I said next, which she repeated after me and without prompting.

Surprised and pleased I continued, "Christ, have mercy."

"Christ, have mercy," she followed in turn.
"Lord, have mercy," I concluded, and she repeated this as well.

Since these verses come from the Mass, which Mary had not attended in years but otherwise had attended regularly before that, it was easy to conclude that she was tapping into old, strongly established memories. In addition, this was by far the most normal moment I had experienced with her thus far. She had recited as naturally and comfortably as I had.

In spite of thinking we might be on a roll at this point, I did not wish to challenge my luck, so I skipped the special concerns part, which required more of an involved thought process and verbal exchange, and moved directly into the next traditional prayer.

"Our Father who art in heaven" — Mary joined in with me and continued confidently to the end, though barely audibly.

At this point we were at the final prayer before Communion. "Lamb of God," I began slowly, wondering if—"You take away the sins of the world," she broke in very softly, "have mercy on us." We repeated this and then concluded together with the third and final verse, "Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, grant us peace."

We had said only traditional prayers. We had skipped the riskier but more creative and dynamic parts of the ritual, which would have required spontaneous verbal interactions and original thought (and probably would have been more interesting). But Mary had gone all the way with me! We had encountered common ground! I felt a connection with her at last. An opening — a breakthrough. Something to remember later when things might turn weird again and I would need to remember that she does have at least one solid-rock place within, a foundation place that can be built upon.

As she watched carefully at this point, I took the brightly colored pouch into my hands, unzipped it, removed the pyx, got up from the sofa, and planted myself on my feet before her. Reverently snapping the pyx open, I removed a Host and leaned down toward her. There was a curiosity and anticipation about the expression on her face, as though she were about to experience something new, even if familiar. Her head was cocked at an angle and stretched somewhat forward and upward in a look of expectation. The moment had the feel of cooperation. Holding the Host about a foot from her face, her eyes settled deeply and quietly into mine.

"Mary, this is Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away our sins and gives us peace. Talk to him. Hold him. Receive him."

She extended her tongue, which indicated the manner in which she wished to receive, and I remember wondering if she even knew that for a quarter century we have had the option of receiving Communion in the hand.

Delicately placing the Host on her tongue, I watched as her chin then lowered slowly toward her breastbone and one hand unfolded limply inside the other in the middle of her lap. She had closed her eyes, and, except for the wrinkles of tension around them which denied a completely relaxed state, she appeared to be asleep. At that point I administered Communion to myself, returned to the sofa, and sat and waited — one ear in my own world, the other listening for a stir from Mary.

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.

the mouth is for talking 37

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.

THE HAIRCUT & THE CHAIR

Several more visits to Mary went by, and on the next I decided to try and bring up the matter of the step again, weaving it into a conversation with Frank as discreetly as I could.

Today was the day.

As I approached their house from the end of the block, I could hear the loud sound of an electric saw coming from what seemed could be their property. Upon reaching the driveway, the sound led my eyes to the double garage forty feet or so at the end of it. The structure's large metal roll-up door was completely open. The driveway itself was in disrepair and old-fashioned — the type that had been designed for two concrete runners for car wheels and a wide area of grass in-between. In this particular case the plans for the grassy area appeared to have been foiled over time, for it was now no more than sharp-edged gravel and a motley assortment of weeds. As for the runners, I saw multiple cracks in them and abrupt inclines.

Frank drove a fairly new American car whose make and year I don't remember. I stopped noticing cars once they all began to look alike. In the fifties, when they had distinctive designs, I knew most cars by their look alone; there was no need to see their name or insignia in order to identify them. Not so today, it seems. Discerning differences among most cars nowadays can't be much different than trying to distinguish between bugs from the same family — all but impossible, unspeakably boring, a waste of time.

Frank was in plain view inside the garage, moving about quickly, clearly busy about something. Resolved to talk about the needed step repair and wanting as well to greet him, I proceeded first to the garage rather than to the front door.

"Hi, Frank!"

"Oh, hi," he replied with bright, smiling eyes.

Frank always had a happy twinkle in his eyes, which would be present even when I knew he had not understood this or that remark. The twinkle could be an affirming and calming attribute that allowed each new encounter to begin on a positive note, as though he did not carry forward from one day to the next the remembrance of some previous unpleasantness experienced

with you. That look in his eyes conveyed that all was well with the world and he was in a receptive mood. This frequently reminded me of two- and three-year-old children who are often receptive in a rather similar way — easily forgetting some disappointment or other unpleasant experience from yesterday or even an hour ago and ready to start afresh in the moment at hand. And I remember wondering if there were other child-like qualities about this elderly man that had not yet introduced themselves.

On the other hand, that sparkle in Frank's eyes could also be hard to read, as several times by now he had spoken rather harshly about Mary or to her with that same look.

I observed Frank moving about quickly, taking wood from a large scrap pile, sawing it in lengths of a foot or so, and stacking it neatly in various types of containers. He was using a rather fancy electric saw and saw table, and I recall being impressed that he was able to use a machine that required such a high level of concentration in order to work safely. I say safely, but the fact is I don't know about this; I guess I really mean just that he wasn't missing any fingers (or anything else that I could tell at this point).

Some of the storage containers for the wood were good sturdy cardboard boxes, like those in which you often see oranges and bananas delivered to grocery stores. Others were five-gallon commercial plastic tubs that contractors use for paint and glue and such. And still others were old and battered two- or three-gallon metal pails that looked like they had seen better times and one load too many.

"For the wood stove," he offered. "In the basement. I use it for the cookin'. It was my mother's." I understood now why I had not seen a stove in the first floor kitchen.

Frank would collect wood scraps from wherever he would come to find out there was a supply available locally, and then he would cut these for use in the stove. A local grocery store a few blocks away, for example, where he did most of his food shopping, would regularly offer him wood pallets that were no longer of use to them.

"You eat in the basement, then?"

"Ever since my mother died. It's easier there. Got a 'frigerator, too, and a sink down there." This helped explain why the kitchen on the main floor appeared barren, except for the small dining table from the sixties with its top of gray-marbled Formica, curved chrome legs, and two chairs. The counters in the first floor

kitchen were void of everything, and I remember not seeing even soap or a washcloth or any other item there that you would commonly associate with a functioning kitchen.

"I'm gonna start the cookin'," Frank said unexpectedly and bluntly. "Mary's in the house waitin'. You go on in." His words had a timing and manner of delivery that gave a clear indication that any more conversation was over... except perhaps for—

"Hey, Frank, have you gotten around to fixing that step yet?"

With a scornful look on his face and an unpleasant intonation, "Oh, yeah," he replied slowly. The marriage of that look and voice seemed to indicate his complete displeasure with having to do the repair. And thrown in with his response was the feeling of "what do you take me for, someone who's not gonna repair a bad step?!"

"Great! Thanks, Frank!" I said cheerfully, completely ignoring the negative taste of his reply. Then I headed for the front door, still puzzled that from the outset Frank had not seemed able to appreciate the danger of losing one's balance on an upper step of a long flight of steep steps.

As I climbed the old, creaky wooden stairway to visit once again with my self-proclaimed lover, consciously holding on to the railing all the way, I saw that the door was ajar—

"Damn!" I said to myself looking down, having almost lost my balance at the top, "He didn't fix it!" Frank had obviously made some attempt at repair, because I could see what looked like a rehabilitated nail that had been newly added. But he hadn't positioned the nail where it would have had the needed effect, and neither had he fully hammered it in. What's more, a single nail alone could not possibly have sufficed.

"Oh, hello, Don," came a soft, slow, welcoming voice at the door, which by now was fully open. Mary was smiling that sweet, coy smile again, this time like a little girl who had been up to something of which her playmate was not aware. And I could not help but wonder if she had been hiding all along behind the crack that had been formed earlier between the hinged side of the partially opened door and its neighboring jamb.

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

"Well, that's okay," she replied reassuringly. This was not the first time the mood of her response felt as though I had made some sort of confession or mild apology to her and she was giving comfort by letting me know that everything was going to be all right.

With quick and continual movements of her lower jaw up and down while keeping her mouth closed as she focused hard on the lock of the aluminum screen door, squinting rather intently, she flipped open the latch and I entered.

A look of delight danced in her eyes as I crossed the threshold barely brushing against her. "Well... and how is my L-L-L-L-U-V-E-R who has come to call on me this afternoon?" she inquired.

"Oh, just fine Mary! He's just fine," I went along with her light-heartedly. "Just fine."

After we got settled, I noticed that Mary had had a haircut since our last visit — a very strange hair cut. A kind you rarely see. It looked like someone had taken a pair of scissors to the back side of her head and cut at whatever angles their hand happened to be in. The cuts reminded me of a movie or two I had seen in which one of the female protagonists had her hair cut similarly, either because others were trying to shame her or she was trying to shame herself. For the life of me I could not recall how Mary's hair had looked before, except better. Her hair was yellowish to whitish gray in color and paraded many black, common-variety bobby pins that were all competing to hold back the bad cuts. As with the cuts, these pins were also at odd angles.

"You got your hair cut!" I said brightly.

"What?" she replied in her slow, drawn out fashion, almost dividing her reply into two words, as in "whah-ut?"

"Your hair. It's been cut!"

"Yeah," she replied slowly and matter-of-factly. "Well," she continued after a lull. Then leaning forward as though we were about to have a deep, intimate discussion about which she would have some advice to offer, she added, "It was time. It needed it. Too long."

At that point, without transition, she immediately went dead on me. Turning away sharply, she had closed her eyes tightly, pursed and rolled her lips, cupped one upturned hand inside the other in her lap, and driven her chin down to her sternum, remaining perfectly still.

Should I not have commented on her hair? Had she been humiliated because perhaps she had not had the funds to have a proper cut or because her brother had refused to take her to a hairdresser? Had I reminded her of the plainness and lackluster of her life? Was she asleep? Yet her eyes, lips, head position — all were in a state of tension and definitely did not appear as someone who was sleeping.

What to do?

Maybe a minute or so into this strange and uncomfortable scene, I said, "Mary?"

"Mary?" I repeated, concerned. "Are you okay Mary?" Nothing.

I waited another bit and then noticed that smile again on her face, like the one at the door earlier and others before it, only more subtle. *What* was she doing? Was there a point to be made here?

"Mary?" I said again.

No response.

Because of her smile and its convincing revelation that she was all right, I decided to take a risk and call out her name playfully, in a way that would indicate I was on to her.

"Maa...aaa...ry?" I sort of sang to her. Her smile widened but her eyes remained shut. Her jaws and pursed lips began to twitch up and down, tightly and quickly. By now I realized I had her! "Oh, Maa...aaa...ry?"

Suddenly she jerked her head upward and shook it back and forth quickly a couple of times, as though waking up, snapping out of it, and able neither to imagine what had happened nor to believe I had even noticed.

What looked like a TV remote control fell from her chair at that point, except that it had a cord attached to it. Mary noticed the fall.

"What is that, Mary?" I inquired.

"Ohhh...?" she searched questioningly and slowly, "a this or a that I s'ppose." Pausing briefly, she added, "We don't know." Curious to see for myself, I got up to have a look.

"It's a control for your chair, Mary." I could tell this by the buttons on the face and the fact that its cord was connected to the chair." This lets you stand up without trying. It makes it easy for you to stand up. It saves you from having to rock back and forth to get up. But I haven't noticed you using it. Is it broken?"

"Ohhh...?" she stalled.

"Let's see if it's plugged in," I said as I leaned over her chair. I could see that the control was connected to the outlet on the

wall. "It is plugged in. Does it work? Can I push the button to see?"

"Go ahead. I don't care," she replied slowly, with an odd tone of voice that seemed to indicate she either didn't care what happened to her or was not interested in my proposal. I could not tell.

Wanting to know if this potentially great aid for getting into a standing position was operational, and thinking that she might not understand how to use it, I pushed the button.

Though the chair started to move only very slowly and gently, Mary immediately gave such a jump and a twitch that you would have thought she had just received an electric shock or had a bucket of iced water tossed on her. Naturally I let go of the button at once. Her whole, aged body caved in toward her center as she curled her shoulders and limbs inward as though trying to protect herself. I felt badly and was also somewhat alarmed, especially remembering her arthritis and realizing I did not know anything really about her health.

"Are you okay, Mary?!" I said, kneeling in front of her, concerned. "Are you hurt?"

Taking time to respond, she came back with a convincing, "No. It's all right. I'm all right," which gave me great relief.

"Has the chair hurt you before when you've pushed the button?"

"No," she replied. "It must have a good mind."

Thinking, too, that she might not know how convenient the chair could be for her, I said, "Well, then, how about we try it together and see if it helps you get up?"

I wondered if Frank had ever shown her the fully upright position that the chair could reach. She probably would love it, I thought, if only she could experience it the way it was designed to work.

"Well... what your mind tells you to do," she advised, "you have to do it, that's all."

I took this response as a yes, more because I felt I could get away with it than because I was confident I had understood it. So, placing the control in her hand, I asked her to push the up-button that I was pointing to and to hold it down. The arthritis in her hands was such that she had to hold the control in one hand and push the button with a finger of the other. As she did this, the chair began to crack open, revealing a crevice here and there. Quickly she jerked her hand upward as though she had touched a hot stove

burner, then gradually she came to hold the button down, barely cringing. And up, up, up she went!

It was so very charming to watch this woman who came from another time using this modern-day technological advance, a touching juxtaposition of the old resting safely and peacefully in the arms of the new.

"That's *good*, Mary. *Very* good! Keep holding the button down until I say stop."

Up and up and up she continued to rise, and I found myself fantasizing one continual uninterrupted rise through the ceiling and roof to the sky and beyond. Poof, there she goes. "Bye, bye, Frank. You weren't very nice to me, anyway," I imagined her saying while looking down on the world below, thoroughly delighted with her new find.

"Okay, you can let go now, Mary," I said. She released her hold on the button. "See? You're standing! Your walker is right there next to your hand. You could just start walking now if you wanted, and you didn't have to do all of that rocking back and forth to get up!"

"Yeah," she replied matter-of-factly, without particular affect. On both sides of that most brief reply she pursed and unpursed her lips, rolling them in and out repeatedly as though offering playful platonic smooches to an imaginary someone before her, all the while taking along for the ride of their lives a few cute, long whiskers around her mouth.

"So you see how easy it is, Mary?" I commented. Then pointing to the down-button, "Now just push this button here," I directed her, "and you'll start to go back down."

Pushing the button, she immediately jerked her hand back as she had done on the way up. Then she pressed the button and held it down firmly. And the slow, long, regal descent to ground zero had begun. She appeared thoroughly delighted and almost mesmerized by the service of this nifty modern device and the power it was giving her. And with her lover at her side as a special bonus, just perhaps Camelot was just maybe a simple wish away this day or had arrived at last.

[&]quot;Shall we do Communion now?" I asked, after it seemed she had adjusted to the new experience of the chair and was ready to proceed.

"Well... the dinner is getting to its time with Frank," was

her reply.

Now I knew this response made no sense by itself, and perhaps you are still scratching your head trying to figure its meaning. Yet I was betting I had understood, for by now it was sink or swim regarding Mary's thought process and how to deal with it, and as a result I had given myself permission to take chances on guessing the meaning of her expressions without worrying about being wrong.

She meant that Frank almost had dinner ready and we

needed to get a move on.

So we went through the ritual that had been established on

the very first visit, up to the point of Communion.

Then going over to her, I held up the Host in intimate proximity to her eyes and said, unrushed, "Mary, this is Jesus, the Son of God. Your brother. He's coming to be with you again till the next time we meet. He lives for you and died for you. He'll be here with you when everyone else has abandoned you. Put your arms around him sweetly, Mary. Talk to him gently. Protect him deep inside the quiet refuge of your heart."

Her eyes had moved completely and calmly inside of mine by this point. She appeared transfixed, as if she had transcended the moment that lay before us. I know, for the same it was with me

in that moment.

Next I placed one of the consecrated Hosts delicately on her tongue and administered the remaining one to myself. Quietly I closed the pyx so as not to distract her with its click. Returning to the sofa, we both were silent and still for a time, and my mind began to wander:

At the sight of the Host, Mary's manner would always calm completely. There would be no movement coming from her and no bizarre words. She would focus so intently and sincerely on my eyes that I would be hard pressed to give a finer example of the feel or the look of intimacy. It was wonderful to realize that something — something! — could still get through to my new friend after all these years and be as normal for her as it had always been. For at Communion time Mary was not only completely normal but she shared a bond with millions of people throughout the world who this very same day had done this very same thing as she had just done with me.

No... no one would raise an eyebrow to her at Communion time or do a double take. There simply would be no reason for it.

I was always struck and moved by this manner in which Mary's behavior would change at Communion time. She seemed to know that what was coming was special. And I guessed that with me in those moments this woman was experiencing possibly more directed intimacy and attention than she had experienced since even early childhood, when, for a time at least, she likely had been everyone's joy.

For a time at least, I say, because I could not keep from wondering from where exactly between childhood and adulthood they come — the walls too high for some of us to scale, I mean. The fears too strong to conquer. The deeds that lie unforgiven or seem unforgivable. Who or what determines the courses our lives shall take and when there is still time to change direction and when it is too late? How, I asked myself in conclusion, had Mary arrived from sweet and unencumbered infancy to here?

And I did not know the answer.

"I'll be going then, Mary," I said after our time of silence. It was clear that she wanted to accompany me to the door, but instead of using her electronic chair she began to rock back and forth as she had always done.

"Mary! Don't you want to use your chair to help you up?" I asked.

"You have to do what your mind tells you to do," was her only reply.

My impression of this chair business was that, however much it would have helped her, Mary's refusal to use the chair went beyond simple declination. In part, I believe this was because the chair involved a technology that was beyond her familiarity and beyond her ability to appreciate, no matter how convenient her use of it would have been. But her unwillingness was also and perhaps mainly due to her seeing the chair as a statement of sorts by her brother and others that she was independent of them and they now had permission and more occasions on which not to have to be around her or concern themselves with her. The chair in effect represented a device of isolation to her, and by not using it Mary

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was in her own way saying no to Frank and the others; she was resisting being left alone and was doing so with all the power that she had at her disposal: simple, humble refusal. A form of passive resistance, it seemed. Such was my take.

Gaining at last the momentum required to lift herself, she grabbed her walker and we walked slowly together the short distance to the front door.

"Thank you, Don," she said sincerely and poignantly, and

"Thank you, Don," she said sincerely and poignantly, and with those words, free from all deceit, I knew I had done something good for someone that day.

Letting the name-thing go, I said simply, "You're welcome, Mary. See you next Monday," and departed on my way.

HALF HERE, HALF THERE

It was spring by now, and since that first visit five months earlier I had been to see Mary every Monday without fail at threethirty in the afternoon.

The way I see it, spring is nature's period of puberty. A time when life, which has been asleep seems like forever, now aroused ever increasingly and passionately, awakes in full. And pulsing, rushing, restless through the hills and the valleys of every time and place, it pervades every thing that is, searching for that which desires to live and return to the beauty and truth of times past. Again. Like last year. Now. It's here. Take my hand.

And this year was no different.

In materialistic, advertising-driven America, if a product is not "new and improved" each time you go to purchase it — if it has not changed since the last time you bought it — then the unspoken message is that it is inferior to the product that claims to be new and improved. So pervasive in our culture is this message about the importance of continual change — often change for the sake of change alone rather than for anything else — that it can be easy for many of us to apply that message to our very selves and our lives.

Without knowing how or even *that* it happened, many of us come to believe that we *ourselves* are undesirable unless we too are continually "new and improved," continually changing — often here, too, for the sake of change or show alone rather than for anything else. In an effort to assuage the deeply painful and panicinducing feeling of self-dissatisfaction with which advertisers fill us, we run around in near frenzy to buy a new this or change an old that, to grab on to some new fad or drop another, afraid that otherwise we might look bad, get left behind, or worse yet get left out altogether.

Then Spring comes along. Wonderful, wonderful Spring. And we are amazed. We even lose our breath before it. In awe, we stand and gaze at it for hours. We move, charmed, amidst its every fragrance. In the flow of its energy every part of us can

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feel renewed. We find joy year after year in the same beautiful flowers, the same marvelous fragrances, the same life-force. We celebrate them and are grateful for them.

Yet Spring comes back to us seemingly unchanged each year, the same as it was the year before and the year before that. When we are twenty years and forty years and sixty or eighty, Spring appears the same then as it was before we were even conceived; it is faithful each year to the one and only song it sings each year.

...simply being and remaining for each other who we are, what we are, as we are... How in the world did something as simple and natural as being just ourselves take for so many of us the long dark detour into the labyrinth of unfamiliar ways?

The walk from work to St. Philip's to Mary's was incredible this day. Sun, rain, cold, clouds, hail, heat! April can bring the craziest weather to Portland, and all of these changes can happen within a very short span of time — even one hour!

It was sunny and warm when I walked onto the west end of the Hawthorne Bridge downtown, so I removed my jacket. Before arriving at Grand Avenue at the other side of the bridge, the rain was pouring. By the time I made it to St. Philip's it had hailed and was cold. Upon reaching Mary's, my umbrella, though barely needed, was still open, and my jacket was unzipped again and pushed away from my shoulders to cool me down. All of this in fifty minutes — unbelievable!

Unpredictability, wild ups and downs, passionate cries and whispers, yes please, no please, I don't know please — spring in Portland is not unlike pubescent youth. Not at all.

As I climbed the steps to the front door, it occurred to me that I no longer looked to see if the problem step had been repaired. Without realizing it, I had adapted my mounting technique to avoid it.

After ringing the doorbell and knocking until my knuckles were beginning to hurt, I began to wonder if Mary was at home. Remembering her hearing problem, I tried once more, knocking much more loudly.

No Mary.

Descending the steps, I went to see if Frank might be in the

garage. Through the glass of one of the garage door's horizontal panels the movement of a body could be discerned, and getting closer I could clearly make out Frank who was scurrying about in his usual manner. Catching sight of me, he motioned to enter through the side door.

"Hi, Frank!"

"Hello," he returned lightheartedly.

"How's it going?"

"Oh fine."

"What are you up to?"

"Oh, just puttin' some things together."

Curious about all the pieces of wood that were lying in perfect order before me on a pair of tables and on the floor, "What are these, Frank?" I inquired.

"Bird houses."

"Bird houses?"

"Yeah. Parts of bird houses. I make 'em and a friend o' mine sells 'em for me."

"What do they look like?" I asked, as I could not imagine how what I was looking at could turn into bird houses. He pointed to the wall behind me.

Turning, I saw several charming little bird houses hanging from a wire that was strung out along one side of the garage, from one end of it to the other. They were a delight to behold. Each house was built with rough pieces of wood that had been put together roughly. Most had a sturdy twig perch below the entrance hole, sprigs of moss on the roof, and a face-panel painted all in one color or striped. Some units were larger than others, and the round entrance holes varied in diameter, presumably to accommodate various species and sizes of birds.

"Frank! These are really beautiful!" I said, genuinely enthused. "You make them all yourself?"

"Yep. From scraps of wood I find that people don't want no more. Leftovers I see on curbs on garbage day. People give me stuff, too." Shaking his head from side to side while offering a downward gesture of mild disgust with his arm and hand, "Boy," he added, "you wouldn't believe the stuff people throw away!"

As I continued to look admiringly at his creations, "Yep," he repeated, beaming a look of real satisfaction my way — and always those smiling, sparkling eyes. "Yep. All by myself."

"That's great, Frank!"

It was just amazing to me how such a seemingly simpleminded person could come up with such a lovely, clever, charming design as Frank had done with those bird houses, and it proved to me one more time the folly in forming limitations in one's mind regarding another person's capabilities.

After a bit, I said, "Mary didn't come to the door, Frank. I—"

"She's at the back door. Go ahead and come to the back door from now on. It's too hard for her to open the other door."

"So—"

"Just go on in. She's there."

Something about the way he was cutting me off made me wonder if he had given me the true reason (concern for his sister) or if instead he didn't want any more discussions to come up around the repair of the step. The issue of the bad step was difficult for me to let go of, most of all because, as mentioned before, Frank did not seem to grasp that repairing the step would be for the benefit of every visitor, especially the new and unsuspecting ones, not just for me. But it was his house, after all, and from that day forward I did not mention the subject again.

The back door of the house was up a half flight of steps from ground level. It did not have a doorbell, but knocking on its wood frame or its loose glass panel was much easier on my knuckles than the same action had been on the harder, metal storm door in the front of the house. In time I would often use my house key to tap on the glass to announce my arrival, as Mary seemed to hear that sound better.

Several minutes after knocking, Mary still had not come. Peeking his head out from inside the garage, Frank said rather curtly and with a condescending and half-irritated look on his face, "Ah, just go on in!" His delivery of these words felt as though I was messing up his routine. I often felt I was a bother to Frank, and because of this I never was convinced he appreciated my visits to his sister, nor was I ever really fully at ease around him.

So I did. I went in, and the back door opened directly into the first floor kitchen without having to climb any additional steps.

"Maa...aaa...ry?" I sang out to her in a friendly tone (but not one loud enough that Frank would hear). No response.

"Maa...aaa...ry?" I repeated a little more loudly. Still no response.

Leaving the kitchen I passed into the dining room.

Now except for the couple of old, yellowed, tattered roller shades that were in the lowered position, this room appeared normal. There were lots of family photographs hanging on the walls, as well as several standing freely on the sideboard, atop doilies. A bowl of artificial fruit was on the table and a vase of artificial flowers on the sideboard, both heavily dulled by what had to have been a very long period of accumulated dust. The carved wood dining table was draped by a loosely woven lace cloth, and my guess was that if the cloth were removed very carefully a beautiful filigree design would remain on the tabletop. The light fixture hanging from the center of the ceiling was clearly old and sported several pointed light bulbs that appeared to serve as anchors for the numerous cobwebs that were ever so delicately moving their numerous strands among them, thanks in some measure to the movement of air that was created as I passed by. The overall feel of the room communicated that it possibly had not been used in many, many years for a family meal or celebration, perhaps not since Frank and Mary's mother had died.

When I arrived in the living room, I saw Mary standing motionless at the front door, which was open. Her body was positioned sideways to me, and I could see that she was gazing out searchingly, apparently looking for me. By the time she had heard my first knocking at the front door from the back door where she had been waiting, and traveled all the way to the front door, I had already gone to the garage, visited with Frank, and entered the house through the back door! Poor Mary. I knew it had required a lot of effort and discomfort for her to journey from one end of the house to the other, even with the aid of her walker, and I felt badly

about the inconvenience I had caused her.

"There you are!" she said, turning toward me, smiling sweetly. Lower jaw and pursed lips in syncopated spasm, whiskers on upper lip dancing to and fro, "Are we going to play hide-andseek, then?" she added. With this she closed and locked the door and returned to her large chair, plopping down perfectly into place and with some control.

Removing my coat I lowered myself to what by now had become my usual spot on the sofa across from her. Setting the garment and my umbrella beside me, I inquired, "So how are you today, Mary?"

"Oh...," she said, stalling and with a questioning intonation, "half and half, I s'ppose."

"Half and half?" I repeated.

"Oh...," she stalled again, "one foot here, one foot there," she continued confidently and with a delivery that conveyed "let me put it to you that way" — self-assured it seemed that this would be the definitive clarification.

"One foot here, one foot there?" I said.

"Oh...," she stalled yet again, "half here, half there."

"Half here, half there?" was my rather frustrated reply. This layer by layer, onion-peeling approach to understanding was starting to get to me. "What do you mean, Mary?" I said firmly and directly.

"One-foot-in-this-world-and-one-foot-in-the-next-world," she came back to me very slowly and with a distinctly staccato emphasis on each word. Voice raspy and deep, her manner of saying this had authority and force, as though she were as determined to teach me the concept as I was to learn it.

"Oh...," to myself I concluded, "four new ways to say so-so!"

As my eyes slowly opened to a soft voice, they met Mary's eyes which were fixed on mine from her chair that was positioned only six feet or so away and at an angle to me. Her mouth was sweetly pursed and playfully coy, as though she had caught her playmate off guard in some game or other and won; as though her patience had given her the victory, like a spider's patience gives a fresh catch in the web.

I realized at this point that I had fallen asleep on her. Between the long walk to her place after a full day at the office, the dark and over-heated rooms of her house, and conversation that often required more work from me than did my employer, I had fallen asleep.

"You went to sleep, Don," she said, taking her time.

"It's Ron, Mary. My name is Ron," I corrected her politely.

"Why that's okay," she responded in the same gentle and comforting manner as she had done so many times before.

Not knowing what to talk about that might result in a normal verbal exchange, I waited for her to initiate.

Nothing.

Finally, sounding stern and scolding, she spoke up.

"The-Mouth-Is-For-Talking!" At the same time that these

words passed between her lips, each distinctly emphasized, Mary brushed her now straight and rigid index finger forcefully against her lower lip and then sent it traveling quickly and brusquely (almost angrily) from there up and out to the world, as though making a proclamation. Her arm was also straight and fully extended. She did not point her finger at me or at anything really, but just allowed her gesture to terminate somewhere in space. She delivered these words with a confidence and authority that caused the mind to image some ancient prophet chastising the people and led the heart to skip a beat for the tension thus created.

The mouth is for talking. Hmmm... What did Mary really intend? I understood no better now than I had when she said it on a previous visit.

Was she angry with me about something? That I had fallen asleep? That I didn't talk more? Yet what could we talk about?

The confusing thing about this remark of hers was that I generally could not get Mary *herself* to talk, to carry on any verbal exchange that seemed in any way to be sustainable — or even to her desirable. I could not seem to locate a single subject that would lead to more talking. And when she did talk I usually did not succeed in understanding her, not without making numerous assumptions at least and asking numerous questions. Almost everything that she expressed I would continually find myself either having to sew together or unravel. So basically I had no clue what in the world she meant by these words.

The mouth is for talking. Hmmm...

...Now Catholics believe in what is called the "Real Presence"; namely, that Jesus in the consecrated Host is present *truly* (not only symbolically), *really* (objectively, that is, not only subjectively in one's mind), and *substantially* (body, blood, soul, and divinity). And I solemnly declare to you here and now that even this terribly complex and virtually incomprehensible belief would have been somehow easier for Mary and me to comprehend in this moment than it was for us to comprehend each other.

"Let's do Communion, Mary," I proposed after an awkward silence. Not that this was something to do when all else failed, you understand, but it did have its way of grounding us and assuring that we were both moving in the same direction.

As I came to believe more and more that the Jesus the two of us believed was fully present in the Communion Host would be Mary's only visitor for another week in the lonely desert of her solitary existence, my expressions to her while holding up the Host became more numerous, varied, and, I hoped, more engaging for her than otherwise.

So after the customary preparatory prayers, which she always recited correctly, I took the pyx in hand and went over to her. Removing a Host, I knelt before her on one knee, held the Host to her eyes just short of causing them to cross, and continued slowly and softly: "Mary, this is Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, real and true. He came into the world for you. Spoke words for you. Suffered for you. Died for you. Rose for you. He is coming to you right now, to be your companion for another week until I come back. Talk to him. Hold him. Whisper to him. Tell him what you tell no one else. Enjoy him. Behold your best friend, Mary. Receive."

With this, I placed the Host on her tongue.

As mentioned earlier, Mary always watched intently and motionless during these moments. She would lean her head toward me (almost *into* me, in a way) and cocked at a slight angle. Her eyes would be quiet and look calmly into mine. Not a part of her would twitch; her lips would not purse, her jaws did not spasm. And the expression on her face would be intensely inquisitive, one of concentration and of complete presence in the moment.

I distributed the second Host to myself and returned to my place.

"Well, I'd better be on my way now, Mary," I interjected softly into the silence that had fallen peacefully between us.

She pointed in the general direction where I was.

"What?" I said, not understanding.

"The candy."

I looked more carefully where she was pointing, and on the coffee table next to me was an uncovered candy dish with all kinds of small candies, of the type I was no longer accustomed to eating — candy that is generally for children. A good many of these were lying naked in the dish, having either lost their wrappers or spent their entire lives without such a gift. Pretty much all looked as though they had been waiting for a taker since perhaps my childhood or even Mary's. There were Tootsie Rolls, M&Ms, Hershey Kisses, and several morsels of hard candy. They were dust-coated to the one, and a couple of the unwrapped pieces had had a bite taken from them and then been put back, or so it seemed

to me. I can't say I was excited about the prospects before me, but not wishing to offend Mary I decided on a Kiss and thanked her.

"You be good, now, Mary," I said, offering a friendly wink and smile as I got up from the sofa, "and I'll see you next week."

"Okay... I will," she replied softly, slowly, humbly. Her delivery of these words was particularly moving, for she appeared clearly normal in that moment, and the peace and calm she was conveying reminded me of someone who has just experienced some form of deep relaxation or emotional release.

As she began the cumbersome task of getting up from her chair, "Don't trouble yourself to get up, Mary," I said. "I'll let myself out."

"Okay," she said, sort of singing it out and elongating her response.

"Bye, Mary."
"Bye, bye, Don."

I smiled deep inside, for whether I was Don or Ron seemed hardly to matter anymore. My name was no longer of importance to me when I was with Mary.

Closing the back door behind me, I assured it was locked, for Frank had made a special point of instructing me to do this. I descended the stairs, and as I headed down the driveway for home I suddenly realized that Frank's car was gone and he with it.

I resolved then and there to listen more carefully during future visits for the sound of the car leaving, for I knew that hearing Frank leave would free me up and give the time I needed in order to feel safe asking his sister questions or bringing up subjects of a more personal nature. Up to now, I had not felt comfortable pursuing this. For one thing, Frank seemed to be always somewhere around the house and able at any moment to break in on us unannounced; for another, the significant amount of time that was usually required to engage Mary in conversation could only increase the risk of an untimely interruption. Consequently, I had not spent much time pondering personal questions to bring up. But from today I could see that things might be able to change, and that the straight path thus far of Mary's and my time together might soon be encountering a crossroad here or there, a little detour this way or that.

NEVER-NEVER LAND

Summer had arrived again, and the lyrical signs of its presence were all around, inviting one to relax and enjoy a respite from life's every problem. Warmth, sunlight, breeze-blown dappled shadows moving in graceful arabesques across broad green lawns and flower beds abloom in every color imaginable — these were an offer of encouragement to even the weariest spirit.

Sometimes if the weather was warm enough, Mary would be waiting for me on the back porch, sitting in a small rocking chair. She would be dressed in one of her old-fashioned cotton dresses with either a broadly brushed flower garden imprinted all over it or endless fields of tiny sweet flowers. It would make me happy to see her like this. The constancy of her peaceful appearance in those moments would give me a sense of calm and stability and predictability, and so of reassurance, like just the sight of my grandma Antidormi once had.

Mary would usually be beltless on those days, perhaps because of the heat and the greater possibility for better air flow through the garment, though I was not sure, for admittedly I did not and still do not understand why women do many of the things they do

Black tie-shoes, old, wide-healed and unpolished would be on her feet, with plain, tan-colored cotton stockings covering the lower halves of her legs — the same type of stockings as I had seen many women wear in villages and smaller communities in Italy many years before. Her gray hair tied back, several renegade strands that had escaped the round-up would be blowing about happily, wistfully in the gentle breeze. She would look comfortable sitting there and fully a natural part of her environment, like a rock outcrop in some city landscape.

Sometimes on other occasions, if the weather was less warm or just plain cool but fresh air was desired, I would find Mary sitting in the kitchen on a chair that had been placed just inside the back entrance, with the door left open for her. Or maybe she would be at the kitchen table. In those times her hands would inevitably be folded in her lap, one cupped inside the other, and she would be quiet and motionless and not engaged in any activity;

neither radio nor television, for example, nor book nor magazine would be present in the area.

At still other times she would be in the living room, often asleep, though not infrequently feigning that state. Though we had never discussed it, she seemed to adore playing that little game of my finding her supposedly asleep and trying to rouse her by half whispering, half singing, ever more loudly, "Maa...aaa...ry? Oh Maa...aaa...ry?" And that sweet expression that would come over her face upon "awaking," revealing her fully transparent joy, was worth more than all the treasures in the world put together. Her lower jaw would start to move quickly up and down in those moments, while her lips simultaneously would purse and un-purse. Long gray whiskers above her upper lip would move like those of a cat or like pairs of animated antennas searching the skies for a good reception. Fine wrinkles would be stretched to their limit around her delighted eyes, revealing that her heart was smiling. And a sweetness about her mouth that was simple and unadorned would grab my heart.

Early on in my back door entrances, I had been invited to just go on in, as it was becoming too inconvenient for Mary (particularly if she was in the living room) to walk all the way from wherever she might be to the back door and then back again, what with her arthritis and having to use the walker.

Perhaps because today the door was completely open and I figured this meant she was somewhere in the immediate area, and because I did not want to alarm her with too quick of an appearance, I decided to stand at the open doorway and call out her name rather softly as a way of announcing myself.

"YEAH," I heard her respond, unusually loudly and quickly, followed by some mumbling I could not make out.

"Should I come in?" I said, sensing that something might be different today and maybe I should ask.

"YEAH," her reply came back the same as before, followed again by the mumbling.

Once I entered, it was clear she was in the bathroom, which was right there. I say "right there" because this particular bathroom had a flimsy thin door with wide gaps above and below it, and the kitchen itself had nothing in it to absorb sound — all of which meant that I could hear Mary now and imagine all too easily things one probably need not imagine.

Uncomfortable, I waited and looked around and looked

around and waited and waited some more and looked around some more, all the while trying to block out the thoughts which my active imagination was happily producing and I was trying to squelch.

This process took me back to the sixties and seventies when not infrequently I would have a similar experience as part of going to confession. During that period, every Saturday afternoon around four-thirty or evening around seven-thirty you could count on finding me at my main social event for the weekend: confession at St. Stephen's or St. Philip Neri's. And sometimes during those "special outings" it would be surprisingly easy to hear a penitent confessing his or her sins to the priest, especially if the former spoke too loudly due to hearing loss or to a false sense of privacy afforded by the small intimate room in which he or she would be kneeling before the confessional screen, on the other side of which sat the priest. In terms of sound baffling, there was not much difference between my memory of those confessional walls then and the stark reality now of that portion of the bathroom wall before me that was called a door. I am sure I tried harder not to overhear in the days of confession than on this day with Mary, but the discomfort was, nonetheless, not dissimilar.

I heard the expected flush, and Mary soon emerged. She announced that Frank had gone shopping with their cousin, Anna, and she asked me to close and lock the back door, which I did.

Figuring I could be quick, even beating her back to the living room, I asked if I too might use the bathroom, to which she consented.

Now the bathroom was not what I had expected. It seemed to be an add-on room with only a toilet and sink. Completely unadorned and unattractive, and looking worn out, it had neither soap at the sink nor towel on the towel bar, and the mirror was so distorted that even the ugliest among us could compete favorably against the most beautiful if looking into that sorry object were the sole basis for comparison.

If the house had a second and better equipped bathroom, well... I did not know about it, neither Mary nor I had used it during our visits, and it was much too late now, besides.

At this point I wondered if Mary... how Mary... I had heard no water running at the bathroom sink earlier and none at the kitchen sink since beginning my turn. Did she... how in the world... with her fingers bent and malformed from the arthritis — there just seemed to be no way I could keep a rein on my curiosity at this point. How did she... how could she... what if... By this time I had finished with the reality at hand and was not feeling particularly comfortable touching that which was necessary in order to exit the room, inside of which I had suddenly come to feel trapped and desirous of escape.

Without asking permission, I proceeded directly to the kitchen sink to wash my hands but quickly remembered there was no soap there either. Knowing it would be too time-consuming and in the end might embarrass Mary, and because the determination to wash my hands was unstoppable, I did not ask permission at this point either, but instead took the bold liberty of quickly opening the cupboard doors below the sink in search of any product that might produce suds. There on the bottom I spied a bar of soap that likely had been smooth and white in a former life but now revealed deep, brown- and green-colored crevices and a blotched surface. Despite its unsightly and dried up appearance, I used it rapidly to wash my hands, drying them on my jeans.

Upon entering the living room, I tried especially hard to come up with a topic for making conversation. Failing at it not long after fumbling at it, to my rescue then came the sound of a lawnmower in the distance, and I decided to ask Mary if she had ever done yard work around the house when she was younger.

After a silence so long that I was about to repeat the question, she began.

"I was sweeping in the front."

She cast a few furtive glances my way, which was unlike her and felt awkward, as though she were both screening me for trustworthiness and assuring herself that I was paying close attention.

"The man came up to me and — oh my stars!" Mary put her loosely opened palms and fingers against the sides of her head while lowering her head slightly. After a brief pause, "Oh my stars!" she repeated. This was an expression Mary used fairly often and one which I had not heard before.

"What happened, Mary?" I said with concern and great interest.

"He came closer. He said, 'Lady, I wanna make a baby with you." She said this matter-of-factly and as though the man thought nothing more of his declaration than one might think when

ordering a loaf of bread in a bakery.

"'Oh my stars,' I said, 'are you *crazy*, mister?""

Then turning to me, "Why-the-IDEA!" she said in her usual slow, staccato delivery. But this time her voice was much deeper than usual, and it was guttural-sounding and carried with it a tone of clear shame and scolding aimed at the man. "The-IDEA!"

Mary could make the hairs on your arms stand up sometimes by the tone of her voice — like the caw of a crow that is very close to you — and this was one of those times. "The-IDEA!" she repeated.

"Well, I was alone at home," she continued. "My mother was gone to the store with Frank, I don't know what for."

"How old were you, Mary?"

"Bout twenty, maybe twenty-five or so."

"You got some nerve, mister!' I said to him."

"See this here broom, mister? It can do more than sweep. And so can I. AND-SO-CAN-I!"

"'So you better know what's good for you, mister, and tell your mind to tell you to do what you're s'pposed to do, or you won't see the end of this stick where you see it now."

"Oh, it was awful. Just awful!" she added.

"Then there was the other man." She led straightaway into this, as though one story.

"What other man, Mary?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said slowly and matter-of-factly.

It seemed to me for the first time that *this* time she actually wanted to talk. And I remember feeling tense inside during the silence between the affirmation she had just uttered and her continuation which was soon to follow. She appeared more focused than usual just now. And though the look on her face was not noteworthy, yet there was something in the air that left me feeling I was not sure I wanted to hear what might be coming. Something in the air. An indiscernible mist of the finest particles of somber. A terribly vague yet even more terribly present something.

"I was just a girl," she proceeded. "A little girl. Coming home from school. St. Philip's. I was on a corner, close to Division [Street]."

"How old were you, Mary?"

"Little. Maybe in sixth grade or something." She paused at length here, gazing into the distance as though reminiscing and gathering.

"'Want some candy, little girl?' he said. 'It's real good and I have a whole bag.' 'No thanks,' I told him, 'my mother said she gives me all the candy I need."'

"My mind told me to say that," she turned to me quickly, "but my mother didn't buy me the candy. She didn't like it for us kids — well," she added abruptly, "the teeth. The teeth."

Mary stopped talking for maybe only twenty seconds at this point, but to me it felt like an hour. She continued...

"'Oh, but mine's real good. Nice 'n' tasty. Just got it.' Then he pulled his car over to me and he said, 'Here, try one.' It looked

real good to me, so I took it and I ate it and it was real good, just like what he said it was."

"'Wanna go for a ride with me? I know a real nice place we can go, with lots o' perty trees 'n' all. It's cool there, too, 'specially when it's hot like today.""

"'Sounds like a nice place, mister, but I have to go home now,' I told him."

"But I wasn't really in a hurry," she said, turning to me again. "I just said that so his mind would make him think so. That's

how my mother said to say to strangers."

"'Ah, c'mon. We'll have a real good time. C'mon, now. Get in!' he said real happy 'n' all. He was real nice, real friendly. Then he pushed the door open. 'We'll be back before you know it, you'll see — before your mother even knows. I mean it! And you can pick some flowers for her where we go. She'll like some perty flowers, now won't she. She'll be glad you went.'"

"'Okay, mister,' I told him, 'but I have to get back soon or my mother will get mad and ask me lots of questions and my mind won't know the words to say."'

"So I got in his car, and he was real nice to me. We talked bout this 'n' that. He was a good talker. The car was nice, too."

"Where are you taking me, mister?' I said. 'We have been in the car a long time now. My mother might even have me in her mind now.' But he did not talk to me then."

"He took me some place far away. I did not know where we were. No. I did not know the way. Huh-uh."

"We went some more in the car and then he made the car stop. We got out and walked around a little bit here and there, this way and that way. I figured he was looking for something or I don't know what. And I did not see any children or any big person."

"He talked, too. But he talked fancy, like the big people,

and my mind did not know what he was saying to me."

"There was no place to go for us. NO-PLACE-AT-ALL," she emphasized. "Then he put me down on the ground. He took a stick, a piece of wood maybe or I don't know what it was. Maybe six inches or so, it was, I think." Mary leaned forward toward me and measured out six inches accurately between her two index fingers. She continued, "He put the stick inside and moved it around and around and up and out and things. And he had his way."

I was not at all at ease pushing for details just then because this was a story far more personal and uncomfortable to listen to than I had ever heard from a woman. And I could not understand why she would say all of this to me — someone of the opposite sex and with whom she had rather limited familiarity. But since she did not seem uncomfortable describing her experience and I was intensely curious to understand her on as deep a level as this rare opportunity seemed to be offering, I held my breath while asking gingerly and softly, "Inside of you, Mary? A stick?"

"Oh yes," she said insistently. "It was a stick, six inches, maybe more." She again measured out the length, and her

measurement again was accurate.

"He put it inside of me and moved it all around. He put his hands all over me, too, here and there and wherever his mind told him. He was heavy to me and hot and he made funny noises my mind never told me about. It was awful. Just awful!"

"Did he hurt you? Did he hit you?"

"No. Huh-uh."

"Oh at first it kind o' did hurt a little bit," she added. "Then it did not hurt a little bit. It kind o' felt... differ'nt, I s'ppose. Real differ'nt."

"After he had his way with me, I looked at my dress. Oh my stars!" she said, raising the palms of her hands again to the sides of her head, as though seeing the dress again. "My dress was so dirty dirty. There was blood all over it! Oh it was messy messy. Just awful," she said disgustingly and disgusted. "Just awful. I did not know where the blood was coming from. I looked at my pants and they had the blood too. 'Oh, my stars,' I said to myself. I was so ascared. And I thought, 'What-is-my-mother-going-to-do? What is going to happen to me?""

"He fixed himself real good with his pants and his shirt 'n' everything, then we went back where we came from. He took me

close to the home but not real close. He reached across me to open the door. He was all smelly. He said, 'You have to get out now. G'on."

"Right here, mister?!' I said. He gave me a little push, and I got out."

"I was so ascared. What was my mother going to say?"

"MARY! she said to me. 'MARY! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!' Oh, my stars, she was so mad and loud and I was so ascared."

"I told her there prob'ly was some kind o' accident or somethin' or other and I didn't know."

"What has happened to you, Mary?' she asked me. 'WHAT HAS HAPPENED?' And she put her hands together like when she prays to God, only she shook the hands back and forth many times, then she looked real sad. Real sad. She took me right away to the bathroom and gave her eyes a good look."

"Mary, who have you been with? Where have you been?" she said."

"So my mind told me I had to tell her about the man and his stick 'n' things, so that's what I did."

"We got me all nice 'n' clean. I put on clean pants, clean dress, and she took me on the bus to see the doctor. My mother stayed with me in the doctor's room while he did a look there."
"'It's what you think,' he had to tell my mother. 'It's what

you think.' And he shook his head real bad."

"When we got home, my mother gave me a good talking. She told me not to go with a man again. Not ever. I told her okay. 'NOT EVER!' she told me again."

"Okay, mother, okay!' I said. And she didn't let me go by myself for a long, long time. Not anywhere. Not even to the school. I got so far behind in the school. Then she said I could not go anymore. I was so sad. I had to lose my friends. I cried for a long time. I had to stay home, she told me, and take care of Frank and help her with my other brothers and the house 'n' things. That's what her mind told her I had to do, so that's what I had to do."

"So you didn't finish grade school? Your mother didn't change her mind?"

"No. Huh-uh. I had to stay home and help my mother. I did the clothes and the iron. I made the beds and kept the wood in the stove. I helped my mother to cook the food. I watched Frank when she had to go for the shopping; I showed him a lot of things to make him grow up good."

Now whether I was the first person to whom Mary had said these things I did not know, but one thing was certain: she had wanted to say them and for some reason to say them to me. This I could not deny. Nor could I deny that the trust and vulnerability she had just shared were among the finest examples of what it means to be human and of the sacredness of the human experience.

I wondered if she had ever desired or been forced by her mother to discuss the incident with a priest and how that might have felt. Had she named and confessed the guilt she had surely carried for having consented to enter the man's car and be lured into his trap of candy and sweet-talk? For having shamed herself and her family? For having initiated a chain of events from which she would never be free?

Looking back, perhaps I myself had served as Mary's priest that summer day; the man she had first called lover become now confessor.

While the delivery of her story may have been matter-offact and for the most part without perceptible emotion, yet the mood had been anything but cool. Mary had recounted that brief and tumultuous period of her life with warmth and intimacy. In addition, the low lighting and resulting muted colors that surrounded us in the room that day, the absolute quiet, and the complete focus of each of us on the other served only to underscore this.

I could not avoid wondering, too, if during the unfolding of her narration I had in some mysterious way been identified and confirmed in Mary's mind as her knight in shining armor, her protector of sorts, someone who represented a goodness and purity to her which — aside from my dearth of qualifications — she had never before experienced with a man. It was my distinct impression that day that I seemed to be someone with whom and through whom this woman had possibly sought and found redemption at last from the degrading evil and humiliation she had experienced some seventy-five years before.

As a type of sacrificial offering to the gods (it seemed to me), Mary had been forced by her family and the specific circumstances of the times surrounding her to give up just about

everything so the others might have whatever the others might have. She had never been at liberty to pursue the life which others pursue so easily and naturally. She told me she had never had a boyfriend, never dated, never been in love, never held hands, never kissed. And I knew she had never given birth. Condemned to remain isolated at home, she had as well remained virtually unaware of the outside world.

Included in many family events through the years, yes, she had been, though from what I could tell this may have been for the most part only to the extent necessary in order for all parties to save face. And it was not difficult to imagine Mary during those social moments being found in some corner of some room, watching but never seeing, as though through a thick glass wall dimly. Listening but never hearing.

It appeared that she had never seemed quite normal or even particularly known to the people around her. I could gather this in part from the interactions I had had at St. Philip's with a small handful of people who still vaguely remembered her. Though she had lived in the parish some eighty-five years and only a few blocks from the church, yet the reactions from those few folks I mentioned her to were, "Mary WHO?" or "Isn't she the one who stayed home?"

She had never lived in any house but the house we were in that day. Never experienced another environment. Never left town. Never flown in a plane or gone on vacation. Never gone to a concert, a circus, or even to the library. Never been acknowledged. Never been celebrated for who she was. The journey from the Land of Never to Never-never Land was, for Mary, a journey too far and was almost as unimaginable as it was unpursuable and unachievable.

In the end I could identify with Mary; not with the details of her life-story as she had recounted them thus far during the course of our many visits, but with her isolation and her experiences outside the mainstream. Two upstream swimmers we were. Yet my case was different, for while Mary's isolation had been imposed from without, by others, mine had come primarily from within, by choice (though not entirely). Two upstream swimmers nonetheless.

From that day forward I felt a unique bond with this woman and very honored to know her.

From that moment forth Mary became for me a model of

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patience and long-suffering during those periods of seemingly inescapable entrapment in our lives, an example of how to carry one's cross with profound patience and humbleness and in a way that ennobles and gives strength to whoever is so fortunate as to witness it.

From that incident like none to which I had ever been privy, Mary became fixed forever in my memory as one of the women I would most admire for the rest of my life.

"We have to do the best," she would say to me often. "We have to do the best."

THE FALL

Movement in the basement as I passed by was what caused me to stop and look more carefully. Tap, tap, tap. Using my house key against the glass of one of the basement windows, I tried to get the attention of the person there who I assumed was Frank doing something which I could not make out at that point. Standing in the driveway that flanked the house, I was bent-over with my face just below the top of the window. Tap, tap.

Through the frustrating reflection of myself and the outdoors in the glass, the upper part of her legs was all that I could make out of what I presumed was Mary. She was sitting along the driveway wall of the house and immediately beneath the window, with her back to me. I could not see her head. It seemed she didn't move in the slightest to the crisp, sharp sounds of my racket. Perhaps she could not hear me; perhaps she was asleep.

Finally my vision succeeded in passing through the annoying reflection. Tap, tap, tap, I touched the key to the glass again, but more loudly this time. I was able now to clearly see a wood stove in what appeared to be roughly the middle of the room. Tending several large pots there was Frank. Turning his head toward me, he jerked it a couple of times toward the direction of the room, which I took as a signal to go on down.

Entering the house through the back door, I turned immediately to the door on my left which on several occasions I had seen Frank take to go downstairs. After my first few steps the door slammed shut with an unexpected bang, startling me almost to the point of losing my footing.

Looking down to the bottom landing as I continued to descend, "Gosh!" I muttered under my breath, "How in the world does Mary manage these steps?"

A full flight without turns or a mid-way landing, and quite steep, how Mary had not fallen to her death was amazing to me, as she went to the basement at least three times a day, for meals. The steps were obviously well-traveled; the wood on them was heavily worn, and only here and there could one discern evidence of a former finish.

"Hi Frank! Hello, Mary!" I greeted them light-heartedly

and robustly. If Mary had been asleep earlier or hadn't heard my tapping, she was fully awake and alert now, thanks to my noisy entrance. As I got closer to Frank, I was impressed with how many pots were actively cooking away on the iron stove top — three of them to be exact — and how quickly he was managing them all. He was clearly confident at the stove. I watched him stoke a few twigs and stir the pots, banging his long wooden spoon on the rim of each in its turn. I could tell the stove was very hot, because steam was streaming upwards forcefully from each pot.

The aromas that filled the room were quite wonderful and familiar to me, and they led me to feel a little more in common with Mary's youngest brother. Tomato, onion, garlic, oregano, parsley, meat of some kind, all dancing with each other as though madly in love. Wonderful!

"What are you cooking, Frank?" I asked, to break the silence.

"Oh, the sauce for the spaghetti in the big one. And here," he pointed, "the minestrone soup. And this one has the greens and beans." While Frank's cooking was primarily from scratch, nutritious, and based on his mother's cooking, I knew from things Mary had told me that the two of them ate basically only ten dishes year in and year out. Very tasty food, I was sure, but not much variety beyond this. The cuisine was traditional Italian and without influences from other ethnic groups. For all their years in this country, it appeared that Frank and Mary had not ventured to prepare dishes of other cultures or even to try preparing them all'italiano. America's national melting pot experience and facile culinary symbiosis had not yet, it seemed, reached this house.

"Looks like you're a good cook, Frank!" I said.

"I do it all myself. Over there," pointing to a corner, "we got the sink and counter and 'frigerator. Even two freezers on the other side back there. And that little room with the broke wood door and lock, that's the cellar. My father used to keep the wine there. Just cobwebs now. Anymore I buy it at the store — well," he said as though needing to justify himself, "grapes are so 'spensive anymore and I got too many things to do besides."

"Over there at the table's where we eat." He motioned toward the table close to where Mary was sitting. "We' been eatin' down here for years now. Perty much live down here. Ever since my mother died," which would have been twenty-five to thirty

years before, as best I could determine.

Frank seemed particularly friendly today and apparently in a good mood. This, plus the sparkle in his eyes and the aromas that filled the entire basement made me feel good about him for a change, which was welcome.

"Frank, aren't the steps kind of dangerous for Mary, though?" I inquired without thinking.

"No, no, no" he replied with irritation and disdain. And where just seconds before there had been smiling in those sparkling brown eyes of his, now there was a changed look, and only clouds of mild disgust were to be seen in them.

"There's-no-problem," he continued, offering me a well-aimed put-down. "She's been goin' up 'n' down those stairs fr years."

"Oh," I said, nodding my head a few times and offering a facial expression to indicate I understood. "Well I just—"

"Mary's been waitin' for yuh," he broke in. "You go ahead,

now. I'll just finish up here, then get back to the garage."

I regretted both the timing of my remark about the stairs and not having eased into the topic. In actuality I was sorry I had brought up the subject at all, as things had been going so well for us up until then.

As I turned toward Mary, I realized that the basement was quite alive with natural daylight, and cheerful because of it. There were only two or three windows, but they were much wider and taller than most basement windows I had seen. Clearly I would not be falling asleep in *this* environment, what with so much light, so many sounds, such appetizing aromas. I had never felt so full of energy at Mary's house as I did today.

Mary was sitting on an old antique-looking darkly stained wooden love seat with a rather tall back at the center that achieved its peak from upward sloping curves coming from each side. Its only softness was a thin pad on the seat portion. The pad was covered in some sort of green velour fabric which had a yellow-gold filigree design on it with a red background. The ensemble must have been attractive in its day, though now the wood was without sheen, heavily smudged and worn, and the fabric was faded. All the same, Mary looked like quite the VIP sitting there quietly — regal almost — as though that sofa were a throne of sorts or other seat of power, or perhaps a seat of honor in some old mansion in some old Sicilian town in the 1800s.

We began some conversation, but just about every time she

tried to respond Frank would break in and say, "Oh, she don't know what she's sayin'," or, "Don't pay no 'ttention to h'r," or, "She don't make no sense." His voice and facial expression were perfectly disparaging during this. And once or twice he even made a sign with his index finger going round and round fast by the side of his head to indicate that she was crazy.

I could not believe that he would talk like this about his sister or make such an offensive gesture, especially right in front of her and in the presence of a guest. This, in effect, shaming behavior toward Mary left me feeling tense and as one caught between two conflicting forces. I also felt hesitant to talk further with her just then, as I did not want to provide Frank with another occasion to berate her.

She must have felt at least *some* humiliation from her brother's remarks — though, if this had been his pattern of behavior for years (which was probable), she may have become accustomed to it by now and numb to its weighty darkness. And who knows: because Mary had been raised in an old-fashioned world of old-fashioned Italians, of whom a good many of the males likely had had chauvinistic tendencies, perhaps she thought it her place to put up with the abuse and to do so in silence. I felt like having a good cry at the sight of this completely vulnerable sweet old woman being struck from so many directions by this man's verbal poison. Every one of his sour remarks reminded me of one of those arrows in the body of St. Sebastian that you can see in many depictions of his martyrdom — painful arrows, numerous, and assaulting from every direction.

Frank and Mary had always been together. He, as she, had never married or left home. She had served for his entire life either as second mother while their mother was alive or as surrogate mother after she passed. Mary would have changed Frank's diapers, taught him how to do things and what he could and could not do, disciplined him, and possibly done her share of nagging. Parents can be hard-pressed to stop serious parenting after their children become adults, so my guess was that Frank and Mary's relationship was still based significantly on a parent-child, teacher-student dynamic. And I guessed, too, that Frank had built up possibly quite a reservoir of resentments toward Mary because of all of this. These were my impressions, based on numerous observations of the two of them interacting over the course of what was by now a full year of weekly visits.

In addition, the fact that Mary was Frank's sister had to have led to some sibling rivalry issues as well. Probably most people could not live easily with their mother for seventy plus years without building up a resentment here and there along the way; but to live with a surrogate mother who was also your sister—this would surely have required a special discipline in order not to succumb to resentments at times. I doubted Frank had the self-control that was necessary not to give in, and his behavior only minutes before was a good example of this.

And because he had likely been raised in a chauvinistic environment with chauvinistic expectations laid on him, the probability was good that he felt a certain humiliation in the fact that he was a fully grown man who was still being given advice from a woman, a sibling no less — and even worse, from a person he believed to be crazy.

He had to have felt resentment also whenever he realized, at least on some level (as I believe he did), that despite his greater freedoms and advantages he was, in effect and so to speak, on the same ship with Mary, in the frighteningly close cabin right next door to hers, headed for the same ports.

Frank eventually left for the garage and I felt the tension in the room vanish immediately. No matter if Mary's and my conversation from this point forward today unfolded in understanding or ended cramped and tangled, the abuse at least was over for now and the two of us would be able to experience our remaining time together without her brother's negative presence.

"The money..." she said after a bit and then paused. The look in her eyes gave the impression that she was drawing on thoughts from the past.

"It was the money, the money," she asserted firmly and with disappointment, as though I was part of her inner dialogue and had forgotten something I should have remembered. "I worked with him on the money. Many times after the school. But he was no good. His mind did not tell him to learn it, so he did not learn it."

"Frank can't count money?" I asked nervously, looking around furtively and listening acutely — like an animal who senses possible imminent threat — to assure there was no sign of the man.

"His mind is no good. He's not a learner."

"But doesn't he pay the bills?"

"Anna," she shook her head to indicate no. (Anna, you will recall, was their cousin.) "Anna writes the money."

"But I've seen Frank at the market, doing the grocery

shopping—"

"He doesn't give the coins," she interrupted. "He gives the paper and doesn't count the coins they give him. He doesn't count the coins. If he has to owe three dollars and some more, he gives four dollars but not the coins. He saves the coins and takes 'em to the bank and gets the paper. He knows the paper perty good but not the coins. I used to teach him every day the money, when he was little, but his mind wouldn't learn. It told him not to, I s'ppose—."

"Well...," she interrupted herself, then resumed, "the fall." She said this turning toward me, eyes at the floor, reminiscing. "It

was the fall."

"Frank fell when he was a child?"

"Oh, he was just a baby. Off the table he went. On the floor. The dining room. Oh, it was just awful. Just awful. And my mother told us he was not going to make it. She cried a week, or maybe more. The doctor made him be in the bed a long time. Then he came good. But not the money. Not the money. Not the head."

This news from Mary helped situate my longtime impression that Frank seemed slow mentally. It also gave those smiling eyes an additional dimension, for as pleasant as they were to experience they had frequently seemed to form a mysterious curtain between us while conversing. I could not see behind his eyes; they seemed more often an impenetrable wall than an entranceway. The accident also helped perhaps to explain why he was so literal and seemingly unable to stretch his imagination; why, too, he had a short fuse.

Frank must have been aware of his intellectual limitations on some level, to some degree. Surely there would have been many times in his life when he would have sensed he had fallen short by the standards of his peers or at school or in the community generally. This had to have had a negative impact on his self-esteem and, as a result, on his relationship with Mary, causing even further resentment in those moments when he quite possibly realized that — unlike her — his very mind was contributing to his entrapment and isolation. Poor Frank.

Poor Mary!

We finished Communion just in time that day, for no sooner had the lid of the pyx snapped shut than the wood door at the head of the stairs creaked slowly open and the heavy thumps of Frank's descending footsteps followed.

The pots on the stove had been boiling and boiling and boiling, stewing and brewing the whole time Frank was gone, and the entire basement at this point was exploding in the most maddeningly fragrant smells of Italian cooking. You can't believe the torturous agony in my having to resist going over to that stove and sucking up the entire contents of every pot. I was starved by this point; I tell you, starved!

With his back to us, busily checking and stirring his three treasure chests, clanking one lid down after banging a long-handled wooden spoon against the rim of the pot it covered, lifting another lid up, Mary began to speak to Frank in Sicilian. She did this frequently when the subject seemed to regard only the two of them. I say "seemed" because, while I had a respectable understanding of standard Italian and could take care of myself in most situations, Italian dialects generally and Sicilian in particular were beasts for me to get much out of. Even so, I definitely recognized a form of "il giovanotto" in what Mary was saying, meaning young man (which was me compared with them I guess, as I was hardly young anymore). I heard what I was certain was a form of the verb "mangiare" (to eat). I knew from her intonation and the expression on her face that she was asking Frank a question. And they were obviously getting close to having supper. So... well... it was pretty clear to me that Mary was asking if I could stay for supper. In fact I was sure of it. And I felt honored, for this was a sign that she was comfortable with me and perhaps wanted to explore an additional level of relationship.

"NO!" I heard Frank respond to her firmly and rather loudly, as though this was one thing he did not want to have to repeat to his hard-of-hearing sister. I quickly averted my eyes from both of them, embarrassed, and tense again, and pretended not to have noticed the single most slightest thing about what I had just witnessed. I knew from experience that Frank was not interested in anything that had to do with making Mary happy.

To me, another indication of Frank's intellectual impairment was his obvious utter confidence that I had not understood anything of this exchange with his sister, even though he knew I was of Italian descent and in the past he had heard me

speak far more than a sentence or two in Italian with Mary.

Despite this unfortunate moment of deflation for my ego, I cheerfully wished them both *buon appetito*, took my leave, and fantasized all the way home what I myself might prepare for supper that evening that might match the appetizing fragrances of Frank's cooking which were still stirring and stirring, clanking, banging, boiling, brewing, steaming, stewing round and round in my by-now obsessed mind and more than tormented belly.

THE BOX

Another summer had come and almost gone. It was late August now. The weather was calm, predictably warm, and sunny. But in the many dry-edged leaves still clinging to their branches, and in the red- and gold-hued maple leaves being tossed about here and there in the breeze along the ground before me, you could already tell that fall would not be long in coming.

The simultaneous interplay of sunlight, leaves on trees, shadows on the ground, and light breezes has just got to be one of the most lyrical and satisfying sensual experiences in life. To watch the sunlight journey in among the leaves of a tree, or in the breeze catch its flickerings among the swaying of the branches, the turning of the leaves, and the touching unencumbered... To rest the eyes a while up high on a limb in the warming light when the air is still as the sun arrives through countless panes of stained-glass windows green... But most of all to walk the ground beneath it all through spotlight beams and woven shadows cast that take you by the hand through kingdoms small of light and dark with boundaries vague there deep inside Creation's Finest Lace that clothes the earth in endless dreams of life at peace.

So it was that summer day. So it was. Life's moments don't get any better I think. Many equally wonderful moments come our way, none better. And we need not concern ourselves with comparing them or improving on them. Our task seems only to receive them as they arrive to us along our journey this side of the stars. To enjoy them and be glad for them.

By now on my visits to Mary I would just give a firm knock at the back door and go in, calling out her name as I traveled from room to room to wherever she might be. Usually she would be in the living room, in her chair, but once in a while I would find her sitting at the kitchen table.

Frank wasn't home today, which was a special relief, as his absence always freed me up to have a more personal conversation with Mary. Today he would not be interrupting, not be discounting, not be limiting the possibilities.

I found Mary in the living room, sitting in the dark except for what could not have been more than a twenty-five-watt bulb burning in the floor lamp that stood guard behind her. The room today had a warmth about it that was emotional as well as physical. The strong afternoon sunlight was trying hard to make its way into the room through those same yellowed and tattered roller shades that had likely not been opened since the day of my first visitation almost two years before. Through precious few openings here and there in the shades — wherever time and the heat from the sun had joined forces to dry them out and usage had caused small tears through these specially favored fissures sunlight had managed to penetrate the cloud of isolation that hovered over the room. Infused in its midst there seemed to be a vague thread of hope that perhaps life might yet succeed in revealing to Mary some wonderful piece of long-awaited news. The sparse spots of bright light on carpet and walls seemed to cheerfully greet whoever might happen to notice the gesture, and I hoped that my friend was among them.

Mary was asleep.

Or was she?!

Observing her tightly closed eyes, which revealed her poorly executed stratagem, it was clear she was awake, and I guessed she probably wanted to play a bit first with her friend.

"Maa...aaa...ry? Oh Maa...aaa...ry?" I called to her in singsong voice. "Wake up, Mary. Your friend has come to call on you," I continued playfully.

Feigning that she had no idea what possibly could have happened to her, she jerked her head upward and to the right until her eyes eventually met and settled into mine. Then shyly, with that charmingly coy smile, those tightly rounded lips, and the up and down jaw quiverings— "Oh, hello, Don!" she said. Continuing in slow staccato, "Wherever-has-he-come-from, my caller?!"

"Well, normally, Mary — as you may know and might recall — I come from the land of foggy, foggy days and crazy moons and other things. But today I have come from heaven and I am your special angel. I bring some sunshine with me. See it there [pointing to it in the room]? For you, Mary. Just for you and you alone. Yes! Mr. Sun is outside right now, Mary! He wants to say hello but he can't come in by himself very well, for he can't see through your shades. So he told me outside... he said to me, 'Ron,' he said (that's what most people call me), 'I pray you greet Mary in my name.' So... HELLO MARY! Now what do you know about

that?!"

In addition to just plain wanting to have fun and be silly with her in that moment, I was curious to see what reaction she would have to my bizarre rambling. Would she indicate in some way that what I had said was very strange to say to someone, and so further my conviction that she was no loony? Or would she seem not to notice the oddity that had just been presented, thus leaving me wondering?

Suddenly Mary's lips began to purse more deeply and tightly than usual, her jaw movements went into higher gear than usual, and her eyes lit up with a smiling expression of delight that I had not seen before. "Why that's all right, Don!" she said almost singing. "That's all right. We don't mind at all!"

Now *that* simultaneous ensemble of non-verbal and verbal expressions, coming from *her*, would surely count for a laugh, for I realized in that moment that in all the time I had known her Mary had not laughed.

This may be as good a place as any to mention that Mary was missing several teeth. I noticed this especially along the front lower jaw, where something I had always thought of as a kind of monolith tooth stood in solitary vigil, more or less centrally, almost as a guard to the entrance to her mouth, and with no apparent neighbors on either side. The tooth, in addition to appearing large, seemed somewhat chipped and heavily stained in shades of brown with spots of black. I don't recall ever seeing Mary's upper teeth really, and the fact that she did not seem to smile with her mouth open made observations of that area difficult. Perhaps she needed dentures — I could not tell — but I did wonder more than once if having more teeth in her mouth might have resulted in a positive influence on the lisping I described earlier. Somewhat related to all of this would be an occasional unpleasant whiff of bad breath, though on the whole the unpleasantness was minor and seemed to be indicative more of poor oral hygiene habits generally and over a long period than of specific food odors.

Sitting in my usual place at the far left end of the sofa, with Mary sitting almost sideways to me in her easy chair a very short distance across the way, I noticed that her feet were quite swollen.

"Mary!" I exclaimed. What has happened to your feet? They're so swollen!"

"Oh...?" she said slowly and questioningly, looking down

at them. After several seconds of pondering, "Must be the shoes," she added. "Frank bought me the shoes the other day."

"Didn't you try them on first?"

"No," she sang quietly back to me. "I didn't go. Frank didn't take me. He took my old shoes away and put these new ones on me and that's all I know about that business."

Kneeling on the carpet to observe the situation up close, I could see that the shoes were completely the wrong size. The tops of her feet were pushing forcefully up and out of the new acquisition as though trying to escape, like a woman's abundant breasts in a tight-fitting low-cut top. And the laces weren't tied; they were not long enough to tie because her feet were too swollen.

"Mary, these shoes are the wrong size for you! They are too small. Don't they hurt?"

"Oh...?" she hesitated, forming a question again with her voice. Then, as if advising, she looked at me with furrowed brow and continued, "Well, we have to do what we have to do, and what the shoes have to do the shoes have to do, that's all."

"Mary, you need to return these," I said, sure of myself. "Can you ask Frank to take you to the shoe store so you can try on a pair that fits properly, so your feet won't swell? It's not good for your feet to swell up like this. It's bad for your health."

"Oh...," she replied slowly as though stalling, while sliding her pitch upward. Then seemingly advising again, "His mind has to tell him what he has to do and then he has to do it!"

Ignoring her response to save time and remain focused on the problem at hand, "Will you ask him to do this, Mary?" I said. Then, attempting to supply her with a simple and compelling reason that Frank would have to accept and act on, I added, "Tell Frank these shoes hurt you. Tell him they *hurt* and you need a different pair. Will you do that for me, Mary?"

"Oh...," she replied same as before, "we'll have to see about that. Frank doesn't like to take me in the car. I'm too slow maybe. It takes too long or somethin', maybe, I think."

I repeated the importance of exchanging her shoes and then dropped the subject, thinking enough had been said for now.

Determined today not to risk hearing her say "the mouth is for talking" (whatever she meant by this and the hint of scolding that often accompanied it), I decided to attempt some small talk.

"So, Mary, tell me what you used to cook when you would help your mother in the kitchen."

After some time in thought, "Well... the bread," she replied. "The bread day."

"You used to make bread?"

"Uh-huh," she affirmed with a deep, raspy, guttural tone. "Every week, maybe two weeks, we made the bread."

"How did you make it?"

"Oh...," she delayed with the usual questioning rise in pitch, "some flour... maybe some egg, some water — whatever my mother's mind told her to put. We mixed it all up real nice. Then it went in the oven for the rise. And we waited. And we used to sing to it."

"Sing to the *dough*?" I said, amused.

"Mm-hum." She drew this out, using a noticeable guttural tone here, too.

"What would you sing, Mary?"

"Oh...," she paused, "prob'ly a song or sump'in' like that."

"Sing it for me, Mary! I'd like to hear it! Sing what you used to sing to the dough."

As happened so often, she waited so long that I didn't think

she was going to respond. Finally she began.

"Up-ity, up-ity," she started, very slowly and softly, with breaking voice. She was singing either off key or a strangely unmelodic line, I did not know which.

"Up-ity, up-ity," she continued, "when will you come up to see us? Up-ity, up-ity, when the surprise?"

And the song was over.

"That's really wonderful!" I said, thoroughly charmed.
"And did the dough rise for you?"

"Mm-hum," she confirmed slowly and in the same deep guttural tones as before. She seemed interested and quite satisfied, as though I had hit upon a topic she was familiar with and enjoyed.

"But sometimes she was a bad girl the dough, and she stayed asleep," she continued with a smile, "and we had to wait for another day, till her mind was better. And my mother would get so mad. Oh... so mad — well my stars," she turned toward me suddenly, "it was such a waste. We worked so hard all the morning, and then I had to go to the store after all that to buy the American bread. The bread at the store was so puffy-puffy," she said, contorting her face to indicate strong aversion, "not good like the one my mother made. No..." she said, drawing out this last word as if recalling those times and wishing to remain with them

some. "No... huh-uh."

A long pause ensued at this point; in truth it was likely less than half a minute but was the kind of time whose passing you think you can feel every second of and will never end, as when on the receiving end of a stiff reprimand. It was probably also the case that I was tense, because it was clear that the subject of breadmaking had no where else to go by now and I had no other subject to bring up.

"My mother made a box for me," she said at last.

"Box?"

"With all the things that are needed."

"What box, Mary?"

"The *box*," she said insistently and more loudly, as though I knew to what she was referring.

"What box, Mary?" I returned her serve, having no clue.

"The box my mother made for me! In the bedroom. The corner. You go look."

Now I really did not want to go into her room by myself. This would have felt invasive even with permission, and if Frank were to come home on me I did *not* want to have to explain being alone in his sister's bedroom.

"Let's go together, Mary," I said with a tone that was not open to compromise. "I don't want to go alone."

"O...kkkay," she said immediately and with alacrity, almost singing it out. Clearly she wasn't going to mind accompanying me, and my guess was that she had sensed what I had been thinking. "O...kkkay," she repeated.

So the two of us walked slowly to her bedroom, the walker leading. Observing Mary from behind, I noticed that the ill-fitting shoes were causing her feet to roll slightly to the outside, and her knees with them, giving a mildly bowlegged appearance, not unlike you sometimes see when a young girl first tries to walk in high-heeled shoes.

The entrance to Mary's bedroom opened directly from the kitchen, without transition; there was no short hallway leading to it, for example. The room itself was very small. Beside the one-person bed was a tiny night stand with a wind-up alarm clock atop. The slow, steady pace of its ticking calmed and reassured in the scarcity around me and drew the beating of my heart into its own rhythms, slowing me down and calling me back to a more relaxing

time in an age that by now seemed but once upon a time.

A small chest of drawers was situated along one of the walls. I saw no closet or armoire in which to hang her clothes.

A single shadeless light bulb hung from a single black cord in the middle of the ceiling. The room was as sparse as the cell of a cloistered nun.

Mary flipped the light switch on with the side of her index finger, which was kinked from arthritis rather than from willful intent. So severely deformed and uncoordinated were parts of her hands from the disease that she was no longer able to make many of the movements with them that likely had been easy for her in an earlier time.

The walls of the room were dark beige in color, with a flat finish that had become soiled over the years and seemed to be crying out for a dripping wet paintbrush to come and devour it mercilessly and without deliberation.

The room was dark overall, even with the light on, for the wattage of the bulb in the ceiling fixture was less than low (as in the living room), the color of the walls was somber, and the yellowed roller shade over the room's solitary window had been drawn closed.

What I had not expected, however, was the obvious odor of urine that surrounded us. It seemed Mary did not notice the smell; perhaps she had grown accustomed to it. In any case, I realized only then that I had encountered that odor before when going past her room en route to the living room, though I had never been able to identify it except vaguely and as something that was somewhat unpleasant. But today I came to know its origins: Mary had accidents.

"Over there," she said, pointing to the corner by the window. "Over there."

As we approached the spot, I saw a fairly large wooden chest. It had a domed top and was covered with dust. It was sturdy looking, dark in color, plain in all respects.

Mary supported herself against the front of the bed's frame, and upon her bidding I pulled the chest away from the wall, across the carpet, and opened it. She invited me to look at the contents.

Filled with linens and other household items, as well as objects of a more personal nature, it was a hope chest. Mary's hope chest. My heart seized up immediately with sadness (which I hid from view), for instantly to me that crate represented long-vanished

hopes and dreams — possibilities gone like a passing shadow, a fallen leaf, a once-familiar face you can no longer recall except for the feel of it.

The chest was replete and well organized with what appeared to be bed linens, table linens, towels, a blanket and bedspread — all mainly white — several crocheted items, silverware, a couple of pans, some cooking utensils, bars of soap, a few now-expired sachets, and two candles. There was also what appeared to be a child's doll. Nothing I could see looked as though it had ever been used. Crowning the top of all this was a large crucifix, and the first thing your eyes were drawn to upon opening the chest was the corpus of the crucified Christ.

Why had she brought me to this box of desolation, I wondered? To this bastion of emptiness? Did she not feel the loss? Did it no longer pain her to face those still imprisoned symbols which lay before us, poignant reminders of one of the strongest drives and highest aspirations of the human person: to have a family, giving life to children and nourishing in them the hope that is so necessary for a future of promise — times to come which we ourselves shall live to see only in part?

How many times over the years had Mary gone through those items, taken each in hand, carefully one by one? Held it before her young eyes still able to admire? Drawn it tightly to her yet tender breasts? Smiled as she breathed hope upon it and into it, imagining all the while how things might be some day, or as she grew older how they might have been? How often had such objects and rituals served as her only Saturday night entertainment. "her date" on some warm summer's eve, while her peers, whom she did not know but could all too easily imagine, were out and about having a good time? How often was this her main escape — in short, her way of preserving the sanity and dignity of her inner self? And I could not help but flash back to all those Saturday confessions I told you about of long ago and ask myself if there was any essential difference between my imaginings now about Mary's hope chest on Saturday nights and the reality then of my own Saturday visits to the confessional box; I could not find one.

"So many nice things my mother gave me," Mary said softly, as if to herself, without perceptible sadness, resentment, or other emotion. Her eyes became locked for a bit in a vacant stare into the box. "So many nice things," she repeated. Then lingering in the moment a while longer, she whispered, "For some day." And

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deep within those words I heard to my surprise a transparent hint of possibility still, of hope.

"For some day," I said to myself, and the raw emotion of it all tore a hole in my soul.

Closing the top of the box slowly, mindfully, I reverently slid the chest back into the corner whence from slumber it had been roused. Unable I to spend one more second in the presence of the supremely ironic juxtaposition of what my hands had just done in pushing the chest away from Mary so close to her words *for some day*, we departed in silence.

"Eat the grapes," was the first thing she said as we reentered the kitchen, pointing to a bowl at the sink. "I did the washing myself a few days ago." As she began to sit at the table in the middle of the room, easing herself slowly into one of its chairs, I went over to have a look. Inside a clear glass container, whose only detail was a generous array of fingerprints along its rim, were ten or so now shriveled examples of a once happy existence. All the grapes seemed to be begging me with what little strength remained to them to end their misery. The bathroom incident from some time before came back in mind, and still I saw no soap at the kitchen sink. An unmanageable free-for-all of conflicting thoughts about hygiene invaded my head, and all possible desire for food quickly abandoned me. I thanked Mary but politely declined her offer, saying I wasn't hungry and didn't want to spoil my appetite for dinner. This statement was true but equally a lie and I knew it; vet the greater harm would have been to tell the truth and hurt her feelings and I knew that too.

We began and concluded the Communion ritual right there at the table. Holding up the Host, our faces today were closer than they had ever been, and for the first time I was struck by how softlined and beautiful Mary's face was when viewed perfectly head-on.

In contrast with this, her face in profile was quite structural and not unlike a small, jagged mountain range whose edges have been dulled by ions of erosion; its bone structure was just that way. This was often made more pronounced by all the jagged chops from the haircuts she had been given or had given herself. And contributing to this scenario were the many bobby pins here and there which would be placed in every direction imaginable on the sides and at the back of her head.

But today, here before me, directly head-on, Mary looked like a truly beautiful old woman. From this center-front position there were no jagged peaks or other definable angles. Her skin, without make-up or powder, was flawless and barely wrinkled. Her eyes dark brown, direct, sincere, plain, calming. Her hair was longer than usual and combed back nicely, very close to her head, with wisps of long gray strands swaying ever so gently on both sides, adding grace and a certain elegance. Her sort of notchy nose from side view, and the whiskers above her upper lip which were long and generally noticeable, were both, in this moment, entirely minimized and inconsequential.

As we got up to send me on my way, I approached her slowly. "Gimme a hug, Mary," I said, completely relaxed and limp, emotionally as well as physically.

I did not anticipate how stiff she would feel in my arms. Stiff, I tell you. As rigid, still, and passive as a tree trunk. Lifeless. A warm mannequin. And I thought, "I'll bet it's been a long time since anyone has hugged this woman." It seemed she had forgotten how.

I asked myself several times if it were possible for a human being to forget how to embrace, but I could not get beyond the question mark.

"Bye, then, Mary," I said brightly while opening the back door, adding as I turned toward her, "Until next week! And remember the friend who just came to you in Communion. Take care of him. He-needs-you-as-much-as-you-need-him [I delivered these words with deliberate staccato, much the same as she had done so often with me, hoping to underscore in her mind a more immediate and closer connection with them]. Go to him in that special room in your heart where he lives and no one else can go. Just the two of you, Mary, until I come back."

"Just the two of you," I repeated, sending a wink her way.
"Okay, Don," she replied, holding the door open to watch
me descend the stairs. "I am going to talk to him about you and all
that your mind tells you to do for me," she added with a smile.

At the bottom of the steps, I turned back quickly, "Oh, and be sure to tell Frank to exchange those shoes!"

Every second of my walk home that afternoon was saturated with thoughts of Mary and the shoes and uppity-uppity and the bedroom and the hope chest and the grapes and the newly

discovered beauty of her face, and the hug. But more than all of these, I found myself asking repeatedly, "Can there ever come a time when hope no longer springs eternal for a person?"

And it was not with regard just to Mary that I asked, and not just to myself.

I'M YOUR DOUGH

As I approached the back porch on this cold and damp November afternoon, I caught sight of what looked like Mary's bed. It had been thrown into a jumbled heap alongside the steps. The frame was old, very plain, iron, and unremarkable except perhaps for the extent to which it was unremarkable. This was a bed that had been purchased surely more for durability and function than for beauty.

The headboard and footboard each were in the form of an upside down letter "U," with their tops horizontal rather than arched, and rounded at the corners. The "U" itself was two-inchwide round pipe, and within the "U" were four narrower vertical bars resting on a horizontal bar. All the pipes were completely smooth, without detail or other adornment. In addition, the sturdy, wide diameter of the outer pipes seemed to indicate a bed more appropriate for a male, and I bet that Mary had inherited that piece of furniture from one of her older brothers. The finish was cream in color and very obviously worn from years of use. My guess was that Mary had slept in that bed for most of her eighty plus years.

The mattresses were heavily stained. They were difficult to look at, repulsive visually, and just to view them felt to be invading Mary's privacy and degrading her in some way. Anyone who might pass by would discover about her something new that she surely would not want them to know and would find embarrassing. If Frank had only turned them upside down...

Looking around for Frank, to ask what had happened, I realized that his car was gone. Already late due to lingering at the scene of destruction and discard, I proceeded without further delay to the back door.

Upon entering the kitchen, the smell of urine was stronger than at any time when I had passed by Mary's bedroom — stronger even than when I had been in her room a few months before. The fact that the heat was on and was the forced-air type only exacerbated the problem. I could see a new bed through the doorway to her room. It was made up nicely, and everything appeared to be normal in that moment — except for the odor.

In the living room, Mary once again had the look of being

asleep. Since I had knocked boldly at the back door and called out her name loudly when approaching, I figured it was game time again. I didn't mind, though, really. In fact sometimes this behavior of hers was downright enjoyable because playing with Mary afforded me the opportunity to pretend I was a kid again.

What did bother me, however, was to see her so alone during the day and without stimulation, isolated from life and from people. Try to imagine roller shades down at every window all the livelong day every day, no radio or TV, not a book or a newspaper or a magazine, not a smile from a single soul, no visitors (except for her lover, of course), always in the shadows, ever "in the other room" where most of those present at a given event were not, or upstairs from the main event.

Where was the sun for this woman? Where the fresh air, the open window, the sounds of children at play — where were the many things that confirm to us that all is well and life is good? And I realized again that, although I had never observed a sad look on her face, neither had I even once seen Mary laugh in all the time we had known each other. Her usual facial expression was open, and I never felt that she did not want to interact. And we had simple fun all right with the little games she liked to play. But I never saw Mary actually laugh. And I remember wondering if laughter can come back to you as easily after a long absence as can reading music or riding a bike or swimming.

After playing our usual little game, I said enthusiastically, "You got a new bed, Mary!"

"Well it was time," she answered matter-of-factly and in the vein of giving advice as she turned toward me with head cocked downward and that look of hers that conveyed, "I would think you would have known this."

"What will you do with your old bed?" I asked, having just had an idea occur to me about it.

"Oh...," she hesitated, "whatever Frank's mind has to tell him he has to do with it he has to do with it." With the flavor of an official pronouncement she concluded, "That's all about it." Then pausing, perhaps to reminisce about the many years

Then pausing, perhaps to reminisce about the many years she had spent with her long-time chamber friend and what the exchange of beds might really mean beyond the literal, she added slowly and vaguely, "I don't know." The feel of these words was that her future might be uncertain at this point and perhaps about

to change, but in a way yet unknown to her. After pausing again she said, "I don't care," delivering these words in a manner that was sing-song and carried a strong overtone of emotional detachment, resignation, or lack of interest — I could not discern which, yet I knew that all three together were a possibility.

I noticed that she was wearing slippers and her feet were not swollen.

"Mary, you're not wearing those new shoes and your feet aren't swollen!" I said excitedly. "They feel better, then?"

"Oh...?" she drew out her answer as if a question and she needed more time to respond, "we had to take the shoes back where they came from. Frank says I don't need the shoes — well...," she quickly interrupted herself. Then turning to me with lowered head, as though looking over glasses perched on the end of her nose, she continued unemotionally, "Where would I wear them? The doctor is the only one I go to visit perty much and he always tells me to take 'em off." Pausing, she added, "What's the use for the new shoes? And they're so spendy spendy!"

By this time in our relationship, I could barely control my desire to try and shake Mary loose into a new experience, to jolt her, to do something that would cause me to believe with more conviction that she was entirely normal — which I did believe, though not completely. Ever since she told me about bread-making day I had fantasized several times about how to work the jolt. With Frank away today — and definitely before he returned — I decided to play my own game with her to see if and how she might join in.

Like a bolt of lightening I rose from the sofa. Her eyes were glued to me. I lay down with my back on the floor, directly in front of her, my feet a few feet from hers. Legs together and straight, arms straight at sides, and closing my eyes, "Okay, Mary," I said enthusiastically, "I'm your dough!" With this, and except for maintaining my entire body stiff, I went dead on her.

Unless I were to hear Frank's car coming down the driveway, I was determined to remain still and silent for as long as it took Mary to react.

Close to a full minute went by.

Nothing.

Barely squinting my eyes open for a flash, the way she herself had done often, I could see that her eyes were closed tight, so tight that not even a molecule of dust in the room could have figured out how to get in. So I knew she was at least engaging with me to some degree, and that was a good sign.

I continued to wait.

By and by I heard a barely audible utterance: "Humm... well-what-do-you-know-a-bout-that!"

Still I waited. She would have to make a move to engage me before I would make another move myself.

Then ever so softly, with hesitation and in a voice that sounded unsure of itself, "Up-i-ty, up-i-ty," she began to sing. Her voice was cracking due to an output of breath too relaxed and volume too low.

With my eyes still shut, I began to rise up very slowly from the waist as she said these words, stopping at an angle of approximately thirty degrees. Holding this position, I waited for further instructions.

"What 're you... what 're you... what 're you... what 're you...?!" she stammered quickly. Barely squinting open my eyes again, and with stealth, I could see she was thinking this all through with due deliberation. Her jaws and pursed lips were spasming rapidly. Her head was cocked downward toward me, like a robin perched on a tree limb spying a delicious worm in the grass. And from the expression on her face I could tell she was thinking hard how to handle this situation and perhaps wondering if I might be going loony on her.

"Up-ity, up-ity," she resumed, singing slowly and with the same vocal quality as at the start, but more sure of herself, "when will you come up to see us?" Now no matter what the original melody of that song might have been, I had no doubt that she was not singing it as written, for it was surely beyond the scope of even fantasy to imagine a composer who would put such a cacophony of sounds on paper.

I continued my rising until she finished singing the verse off-key.

By now I had reached sixty degrees and was confident the game was going well, so I still did not open my eyes for her, but waited, holding the position.

"Up-ity, up-ity," she continued, this time with complete confidence and normal volume in her voice, "when the surprise?"

Accompanying these final words of hers I rose slowly to a full ninety degrees, then opened my eyes. Pausing there briefly and smiling proudly I got up, filled with all of a ten-year-old kid's excitement at having played a good game.

"OKAY, Mary!" I burst out exuberantly. "That was GREAT!"

But the game was not over.

Proceeding to the sofa, I sat down as if nothing unusual in the least had taken place, and just looked at her, deliberately silent, waiting for her to lead with a reaction. I was determined to wait her out in silence no matter what, because I was on a roll that absolutely nothing could pull me back from. I was so close to a major discovery about Mary that I could all but taste her complete sanity. I was going to wait like the fixed statue that I had become on the sofa, even until Frank came home if necessary, even if what he found was two adults sitting in silence, staring at each other like a pair of cats in heat.

"We made good bread, Don," she said at last! And her smile was the broadest a person could give without parting their lips. She was beaming from one side of the room to the other. She was happy — and so was I, for now I realized with certainty that Mary and I were on the same page and a well-matched pair. No matter what she might be to others, to me she was as sane and normal as I, and that was all that mattered to me in the world just then.

"We made good bread, Mary!" I concurred confidently.

At this point I could hear the rumble of Frank's approaching car.

Refusing to allow even the most remote possibility that he might dull in any way the joy his sister and I had just shared, I gave Mary Communion far more hurriedly than reverently and rushed hell-bent out the back door figuring Jesus would understand.

I came to a screeching halt on the bottom step and finished rousing a poker face just the second as Frank appeared before me, apparently on his way to the garage. "Oh hi, Frank!" I said, looking down at him while trying to hold my breath and neutral facial expression beyond any possibility of suspicion on his part.

"Oh, hi!" he replied upbeat, at which point I relaxed my position and took a deep breath without his noticing.

While his voice was friendly, I could not remember a time when Frank had used my name. Moreover, his way of on-again-off-again openness toward me resulted in a confusion and tension within me that was hard to take. Did he resent all the attention I

paid to Mary? Was he envious that I could be so uncompromisingly faithful as to show up every Monday to a woman he could not imagine someone taking an interest in? Did he simply not like the intrusion into his life that I had perhaps become? I did not know the basis for Frank's reluctance to accept me, only that I always felt its presence. The result was an inner trigger which told me with every approaching interaction to be careful.

"How's it going?" I asked.

"Oh, fine," he replied, smiling and bright-eyed. "All done with Mary?"

"Yeah. She's in the living room."

"Okay, then—"

"Say, Frank," I broke in, pointing to Mary's bed, "what are you planning to do with Mary's bed over there?"

"Why? You need a bed?" he replied with an enthusiasm that gave the impression he was hoping he had found someone to take it off his hands.

"Well... yeah... sort of... *yeah!*" I replied slower than a slug. Stalling and trying to hide my inner squirming during the first four words, I managed to muster up confidence on the last.

"Just the headboard and footboard, though," I said even more confidently. I was very nervous at this point, for while I really wanted the head and foot sections of the bed, I did not want the rails, nor did I know what to say if Frank asked what I was going to do with a bedframe without rails.

"You have a room that needs a bed?" he asked.

"Well... uhh... no... not exactly," I replied, stammering while saying a silent, fond "arrivederci" to that confidence I had conveyed only the moment before.

I knew I was going to have to tell him then and there if I didn't want to risk his anger when he found out later. And it was a very appealing thought to be able to rid myself at once of the stress related to what I needed to say to him. It would have been easier to lie, of course, and far simpler, but while the lie with Mary about the grapes had been necessary in order to spare her feelings, lying now with Frank would have served only to spare myself discomfort.

"I want it for my garden, Frank!" I blurted out with an exuberance that was false but nonetheless full of hope that he would not explode in my face.

Pow!

"YOUR GARDEN?!" he came back loudly and sharply, as though it was the strangest thing he had ever heard. I knew this would be a stretch for his very linear and pragmatic mind.

"Yeah!" I said excitedly, praying my emotion would be catchy. "For my garden! There's a small flower bed off my patio. just outside the back door. The bed would look great there and would be a way to remember Mary."

"REMEMBER MARY?!" he said, even more loudly and sharply than before. "Why, that's just real crazy now! I never heard

of *that* before!" (Actually neither had I.)
"Well...," I struggled for what to say next. For the first time I could actually appreciate Frank's point of view; he made sense. On the other hand, I really wanted that bed, for the more I thought about it the more I realized how much the bed would be a great way to remember Mary someday when she was gone. "Well—"

"Ah go ahead and have it if you want it!" he said, disgusted, as though giving in against his will to one of the most ludicrous things he had ever heard. "I was just gonna get rid of it anyway," he added, walking away from me toward the garage. "It's no good to nobody anyway. But I never heard, I never heard of that. A garden of all things!" Shaking his head several times as he continued walking, I could hear a few chuckles. "Your garden!" was his final utterance as he flipped on the garage light and disappeared into the void of his bird houses and scrap wood.

"Thanks a *lot*, Frank!" I called out enthusiastically after him, stretching my head toward the garage and raising my voice in the heavy moisture-laden air of this by now late afternoon of autumn.

The walk home that day was the happiest yet since I had begun visiting Mary, for not only had she and I solidified an eternally special bond now, but soon I would have a physical reminder of her every time I looked out my kitchen window or passed by that part of my garden.

As for guests to my home, probably none would ever realize that those two pieces of metal had been parts of a bed. This made me glad and bolstered my hope that Mary's bed would be Mary's bed just for the two of us, lover and beloved. It would be a private part of the lives of two friends for a very long time.

That old relic would serve as a backdrop for a special

flower bed. To those visitors who would not be granted access to the story behind the undertaking and probably would not find such a tale interesting anyway, the area would be simply a cheerful display of color and fragrance. To me, however, it would be this and more, for passing night after night on that iron support for probably the majority of her adult life, Mary surely had seen numberless hopes and dreams born there and die there. It was on that very bed that doubtlessly she would have cried herself to sleep often through the years, prayed for help and companionship, recovered from illnesses, imagined a different life, fashioned a prince charming with her imagination, prayed her rosary. And that old bed may well have been Mary's most peaceful, safest, and most liberating refuge of all. A space in time where she could reveal all that she was, without reservation or fear of remonstration, where no one would make demands of her or entangle or bruise her most unique and gentle spirit.

That old iron bed and the flower bed of which it would soon form a part would be the one place in the whole world where Mary would be remembered and honored for as long as I lived.

"Mary's Bed." A private shrine. Our secret garden.

THEOLOGY 101

Early summer had made its way to us again, and in the garden I had just finished installing Mary's bed. Both parts of it painted gloss black, it looked on the snazzy side if I do say so myself. The headboard, which stood a good four and a half feet once I anchored it in the ground, formed the backdrop and trellis for a fragrant star jasmine. At a right angle to this and a few feet away was the footboard; shorter, this part formed a handrail of sorts that flanked a stone path which led to the side entrance of the garage. Both the flower bed and Mary's bed were in good scale to each other and complementary. Many colorful plants provided the finishing touches — roses, delphinium, lavender, marigolds, lily of the valley, dahlias. I took several photographs and brought them to Mary.

"Well... my... my... MY! I did not know this is what you could do with a bed!" she said in her usual slow pace. "What-do-you-know-a-bout-that!" she added, amazed and pleased. "But...," she paused, looking long and searchingly at the photos, "the mattress... where is the mattress? How will you sleep without the mattress?"

"No, no, Mary," I said. "I didn't take the mattresses. There won't be any mattresses—"

"Oh my stars!" she interrupted quickly, utterly surprised. Then she gave that sweet smile of hers followed by those amusing pursed lips that were spasming by now at moderate pace. She appeared to be concentrating and in the process of gathering a thought.

"Mh...mh...mh," she muttered slowly, synchronizing these utterances with the shaking of her head. "This-is-news-to-me!" she said definitively, separating each word distinctly. "A bed and no mattress... oh my stars — well..." She stopped abruptly and shot a parental look of pride my way, head down, eyes cast up. "It's perty," she continued. "At least it's perty. Real perty." She was moving into the acceptance stage.

"And it's a way for me to remember you, Mary. I'll think of you every time I'm in my garden and see it. It'll be a way for us to be together even when we are apart." I could tell from the fullness

of her silence that she was tossing this thought about in her mind and would need more time if her usual way of relating to such ideas were going to shift and head in my direction.

"And the flowers... they are so perty!" she offered with a genuinely appreciative tone after examining the photos again. "Well... I iust never—"

Then turning to me suddenly and with a concerned expression on her face, one more detail she seemed to require, "Do they smell?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, Mary!"

She nodded her head several times approvingly, but I could tell she was still thinking.

"They're smelly, *smelly*?" she added.

The complete charm and sincerity of the manner in which she delivered this question caught me so off guard that I began to laugh as I replied, "Yes, Mary. They're very fragrant!"

A solid hearty "hum" was all she said to this. But

A solid hearty "hum" was all she said to this. But combined with the positive tone in her voice and the simultaneous nod of her head and tight blink of her eyes, her reaction served clearly as an affirming full stop to the end of the story of the bed in the garden. She was satisfied with the results of her official inquiry into the matter.

Although the admittedly strange concept and the stretch of imagination that my new flower bed presented to Mary and her brother did cause me to call into question the appropriateness of my new garden design, there was no doubt after she saw the photos that Mary's Bed had the stamp of approval of the person who had inspired it and the only person whose approbation really mattered.

Mary and I were beginning to meet more frequently at the kitchen table rather than in the living room, and so it was on this day. Sitting at what by now had become our usual places, she was at one of the table's short ends and I was immediately to her right at a long end. The walker was to her left. I had come to like sitting at that table because this arrangement not only put our eyes at the same level but also brought our bodies into much closer proximity, both of which made our time together feel more intimate as a result.

After removing the pyx and placing it reverently on the table, I noticed as my gaze moved away that the pyx and a tiny peek of sunlight from one of the windows were at such an angle to

each other as to make the container sparkle as it lay there, as though standing guard or proclaiming readiness.

We progressed rather quickly through the preparatory prayers and arrived at the moment of Communion.

Holding the consecrated Host to Mary's eyes, I could not help being distracted once again by the beauty of her face as she sat there facing me straight on. She had cocked her head to the left slightly and moved it forward an inch or so toward me, which gave her the appearance of being in a state of intense focus. Her gray hair was long again on the sides and combed back nicely, with slow-motion ballet-dancing wisps here and there. Not a muscle of her face moved. Her plain brown eyes were calm and fixed in mine; her hands were folded in her lap, tension-free and still. She was deeply relaxed.

In that moment Mary and I seemed to be as one as any two people can be, transfixed beyond ourselves. There was nothing at all that seemed to stand between her body and spirit and mine. Nothing separating us. My passing through her or her through me seemed no more a contradiction of reality than the setting sun or a crashing wave. Transcending each other's barriers, I was no longer aware of her, really, nor could I see *her* any more than I could see myself. I say all this now in retrospect after pondering the moment from a distance, but at the time I was simply aware of nothing at all, neither around me nor within. I passed through her in some way and I believe she passed through me, that's all I know.

Returning abruptly to my senses, the Host still held up before us, I fixed my gaze again on her and proceeded slowly: "Mary, this is Jesus Christ. True God, true man. It's really him, all of him: Your Lord, your savior, your friend."

Spellbound and without moving her head, her eyes transitioned from me to the Host.

"Come to earth for you, torn apart for you, broke his heart for you, died and rose for you, now he waits for you. Talk to him, Mary. Show him all those rooms in your heart where hope *is* not dead and dreams *do* not die. He's coming to be with you for another week—"

She interrupted me at this point, which I was not expecting, as she had never done so before. Transferring her focus from the Host slowly back to me, still not moving her head, she had broke in, mumbling words I could not make out.

"What?" I said quietly, maintaining the position of the

Host in front of her eyes and holding my breath that she was not about to make some bizarre remark that would lead us off course in this inopportune moment.

She mumbled again words that I still could not discern.

"What are you saying, Mary?" I repeated, vaguely approaching some degree of irritation at the awkward timing of her interruption as I continued to hold the Host all but suspended before her.

Raising her voice just above a whisper, she said with more confidence than to me she had ever offered: "He's already here."

"Already here?" I asked.

Suddenly the hair on my arms stood up stiff as she raised and extended her arm slowly and pointed her finger squarely at me, dead serious. I was completely shocked and caught off guard by the indisputable authority that felt to be channeling through her movements in that moment. She looked for all the world as though to be some powerful ancient prophet.

Then from nowhere she cracked one of those coy, sweet smiles and gave the impression she was both amused and surprised that I did not know what she was about to say.

"*You*," she whispered.

All time stopped with that single word. The most profound silence descended upon us. And deep within the feel of the interconnectedness of our beings stirred perhaps the best reason I can think of for being alive.

"You," she repeated quietly as she slowly relaxed her finger and withdrew her arm.

The unity and catharsis of two souls in that instant was for me a moment of ecstasy and release from every emotional tension such as I had not known before and perhaps would never again.

And I was silent for most of the rest of that day.

LIFE IS CHANGE

Mary and I continued to see each other as usual over the course of the next few months, and the bond and affection we felt for each other continued to deepen.

Frank phoned a few days after the last visit and left a message not to come for a couple of weeks. He didn't give a reason except to say that Mary would not be needing me for that period. The fact that he was requesting a two-week lapse left me feeling something might be wrong. Mary probably was not ill, though, I figured, because Frank would have said this, as she had been ill before and we would cancel a visit as a result. Still I was uneasy about his call.

On the next visit, Monday afternoon two weeks later, Frank bluntly announced to me that Mary had been moved.

"Moved?!" I said, completely surprised. "But why, Frank?" I asked, impassioned and confused.

"I can't take care of her no more. She needs too much help now," he responded firmly.

I was pretty sure the frequency of Mary's incontinence had played a role in this, and I knew that the steps to the basement had to have posed an increasingly difficult and dangerous situation for her. Too, Frank wasn't getting any younger or more capable, and he probably was at least beginning to have to think more seriously about his own living situation and the possible need for transition to one that was easier to manage.

Even if all of this were the case, still I felt hurt and irked at hearing the news sprung on me without any lead-in or other preparation after all this time of faithful service to Mary. Frank knew I would be coming for a visit this day expecting fully to see his sister, so why hadn't he made at least a minimal effort to ease me into the news? I was upset also that the way he handled the move had deprived Mary and me of the opportunity to prepare for the change. I could understand that he had never accepted me, and I was familiar by now with his intellectual limitations; still, this news and the way it was delivered to me came as a blow and hurt way down deep.

"Where is she, Frank?" I inquired, dreading his response.

"Oh, out on 212th and — I forget the name of the street," he responded.

"Two-Hundred-and-Twelfth!" I said loudly, and probably with an unjustifiable tone of reprimand, as though the decision for the location were my business and he should have known better. "But that's so far away, Frank!" I added, recovering from my error and calming down some, yet clearly unable to conceal heartfelt disappointment.

And I knew then and there that my worst fear had been realized. In one fell swoop the mobile of Mary's and my relationship that had been hanging so well-balanced for the last three years had been harshly struck and thrown into complete chaos. And the imbalance made my head spin.

My time with Mary was sure to be at an end, at least the way we had known it all these years. Now she was located so far away as to make the whole effort of visiting impractical, and it would be gutted of its organic nature: Hour-long walks from work to her place, across the Hawthorne Bridge and Willamette River which by now were my friends, through lyrical Ladd's Addition to St. Phil's to get Communion. Time to get into the mood, to process what I might try and accomplish with Mary that day. Slow and relaxed walks home afterwards, evaluating how our time together had been. No stress caused by unfamiliar places and experiences, or by having to use my car and concentrate on driving and traffic jams and rush-hour traffic and exhaust fumes and cars with blackglass windows that make themselves and their occupants appear as no more than expressionless, impersonal moving objects. In short, the trip to and from Mary's would have to change from one that had been on foot and entirely organic to one by car, of which the latter represented for me the near-ultimate in mechanization, disconnectedness from the environment immediately surrounding it, and lack of direct human contact. In addition to the extra commute time and much more cumbersome method of travel that would now be required, the quality of the visits themselves would certainly be no match for the depth and intimacy that Mary and I had come to know.

One hundred ninety-two blocks from approximately Twentieth Avenue to Two Hundred and Twelfth was the difference in just the east-west direction from where Mary had lived. The new street number was now for me more a curse word than the name of a street.

The peace and joy and special value that all those moments with Mary had been on some hundred and fifty occasions were over, dead, gone, kaput. And I was sad beyond measure. Utterly inconsolable.

After meeting with the person in charge of the homebound program, it was agreed that Mary would be assigned a new Communion minister — a parishioner who would see her weekly on his drive home from work. This individual turned out to be one of Mary's not too distant relatives and someone she possibly remembered, so this arrangement was good and gave some peace of mind.

I went to visit Mary a couple of times. She was living in an adult foster care arrangement. This was a huge and beautiful new home, owned and operated by a Rumanian family — husband, wife, and two small children. There were three bedrooms on the main floor for residents, and one of these was Mary's. Everything there was new and clean, safe and decent. The staff were caring, and the fact that Mary would get to see the little children and not have to experience Frank's put-downs and lack of attention made me feel okay, even good, about much of her new living situation. It was clear that she would be taken care of well there, and valued. She was receiving more quality attention than she was used to. She seemed content enough, though how she really felt was impossible to determine, for she appeared even less willing to talk now than she had at home.

But where she was living was not home, and she had been uprooted from one day to the next, without transition or preparation. Everything that had been familiar to her for the past eighty-eight years, including diet, had been removed from her everyday experiences, and the resulting impact on her was not yet known. She was completely without a familiar foundation, and I hoped with all that was in me that her mind and emotions would be able to handle the change. There was also the issue that she was elderly and frail and had not been used to being around people; now, however, she would be exposed to probably ten people each day in the house, including a continually changing variety of visitors and those two sweet, rambunctious children — all of whom carried with them a little piece of every one else's medical history.

WHEN LIGHT WAS

October again, and the days were growing noticeably shorter again. Autumn had arrived in Portland with all of its fantastical changes of color and light and unique seasonal affirmations.

The air this Sunday morning was filled with what my mind told me were moist translucent gossamers that had woven their way into every fiber of life that surrounded me. Energized by the still fresh morning sun, these finest threads had transformed somehow into outstretched arms that sparkled quietly, unobtrusively, in the most vague of nuances, electrifying interconnections among all of that which had accepted the invitation to belong to this moment of joy.

Sunlight was flooding through the large bank of transparent glass windows located on the south wall of the sanctuary of St. Philip's. Designed originally to encourage the latemorning sun to flood the sanctuary with bright light, the further intent with those windows was to project intense, downward-angled beams of light onto the central altar just in time for High Mass. These intense beams made it especially clear where one's attention ought to be drawn. Overpowering exaltation are the only words that come to mind to describe the effect of that light in those days. And although use of the original and impressively large and expansive ensemble of marble altar and steps leading up to it had been discontinued at some point in the seventies, in favor of a new altar that faced the people, still that focal point, even if no longer able to hold to its original purpose, was able to beckon you enticingly and engage your wandering attention effortlessly.

Exaltation. You don't hear this word much anymore.

"...and for Mary Santagata," the lector called out during the prayers of petition, "who died on Friday. A Mass of Christian Burial will be held in the church on Monday morning at eleven o'clock." I had been so distracted and caught up in the light and thoughts of autumn that I had ceased to hear what was going on at Mass.

Yet Mary's name I did hear. And my heart sank to my toes. And the blood within me dried and cracked in an instant. Darkness

descended. And a part of me lay down on the spot and died.

"She got pneumonia on top of a bad cold," the priest told me after Mass. "It was over almost before it began, really. She didn't last a week."

The regret I felt in that moment was deep that I had not been there for Mary during her last days, and guilt trailed not far behind.

Eighty-eight years in the same home. Barely three months at the new residence. Not even a week for dying. Gone. Vanished. Poof. Like a puff of smoke in the wind.

WHAT MY MIND HAD TO TELL ME

Monday morning came and I left work early.

Upon debarking the bus, I proceeded to the church growing increasingly both tense and calm, for I knew it would be difficult to see Mary in this new way, yet her suffering was over. Her time on the cross had come to an end.

Father Bossi greeted me in the foyer and inquired how I was handling things. He asked if I would like to participate in the service by carrying the processional cross or serving as lector of the readings, but I declined. My need to give undivided attention to the service, without distractions, was greater than my desire to assist at Mass.

I knew that before the service Mary would be lying in her casket in the Pietà Chapel, a small room just off the foyer. I had come early before the others so we could be alone, just the two of us... as before... as always. Slipping away unnoticed, I proceeded directly to the chapel.

The casket was open and was positioned at the opposite end of the room's main entrance. The chapel itself was small, an intimate space, maybe fifteen feet by thirty. On its exterior wall was a bank of fifteen foot-square windows, generously recessed and of blue stained glass, which shed a soft and tranquil light over the room.

Above where Mary lay and mounted on the wall was a life-size wooden sculpture of another Mary, holding her dead son in her lap. This pietà, commissioned when the church was built, had been chiseled rather coarsely and always seemed to me an unusual depiction of the scene; I could never shake the impression that Mary seemed about to slide out from and off the wall. All in all I can't say I liked the work, yet at the same time I felt irresistibly drawn to it, perhaps as one feels drawn irresistibly to look at a woman who, though quite unbecoming in beauty of face, is elegant beyond belief.

Seeing *that* Mary on the wall and the son she had lost caused my mind to flash like lightening back to Mary in the casket and to the molestation scene and her life without carnal or emotional fulfilment. I thought of the child Mary Santagata was

never to have because the joy of motherhood had been denied to her. The Mary on the wall had also been denied, and together both had experienced two of the worst types of death: that of a child and that of unrealized hope.

As an artistic genre, the pietà has long been for me a symbol that you can't have it all. No one can have it all. For behold, there is Mary, mother of Jesus Christ, with two of her given titles "Mother of God" and "Queen of Heaven," revered by millions throughout two millennia for her courageous *yes* to the angel's announcement that she was to give birth to the savior of the human race. Yet hardly could she have realized then that later she would be holding the body of her dead, blood-stained son in her lap, his limp corpse pressing poignantly against her now empty womb and breasts that had once protected and nourished him.

Neither I think could Jackie Kennedy have it all.

Neither could Mary Santagata.

And neither, I am certain, can you and I.

The tides of life wash us all ashore, equal and equally, and return us to the sea the same. Some have more of life's gifts, some fewer, no one all.

Approaching the plain but respectable box in which Mary lay, I felt profoundly sad, for not only was this a friend I would see no more, but my thoughts were taking me back to the *other* box — the smaller yet no less memorable box. The one a dead body today did hold before me; the other the now dead longings of a lifetime.

Mary's hope chest, I mean. I doubted Frank would have moved it to her new residence — who would have thought to send it along with a spinster in her eighties? Was it still on the floor in the corner of her bedroom where I first saw it? Had she died with it still there, dust-covered top and all, closed tightly to life's sweet hopes and dreams of youth that lay beyond its humble walls? Or was it closed tight with her youth and sultry hopes of youth guarded safely within? Had its contents been discarded altogether and the box itself laid bare to every violation against the fondest hopes of a lifetime? I did not know the answers to these questions, and I suppose it does not matter, for no response would have made a difference to Mary's happiness at this point.

The moment I had dreaded so stoically had arrived. Before me lay perhaps *the* most ironic truth of life — Death — raw and

cruel, and nothing blocked my view of it now or softened the blow of its presence. At the sight of Mary my soul detached from the world and heaved to the very depths of hell.

Her head of beautiful gray hair had been carefully brushed back. No make-up, for she never seemed to need that. Her face appeared completely untroubled, as though she had never really experienced life or been much taxed by it. Her dress, old-fashioned as usual, was, nonetheless, decent: simple, cotton, light blue background with tiny flowers everywhere; I had never seen it before. Knowing Mary, that dress was probably one she had bought many years before for some special occasion; a time that never was to be I guessed, at least not as she had imagined it and not until today. The charming simplicity of the garment embraced her as a garden embraces the soul. A long-sleeve, pale-yellow cotton sweater, buttoned at the top, open and ajar the rest of its length, gave her heart still a window on the world. Wearing no jewelry, she appeared all the more plain and unadorned and ready for the impending journey. A rosary was laced among the fingers of her carefully folded hands, with its crucifix on top, same as the crucifix in her hope chest had been placed. Her hands themselves were cold and as wax to the warmth and suppleness of my own.

Spreading my right hand atop her hands, like the wings of an eagle in flight, and pressing down lightly, we exchanged a private gesture of affirmation that death would not — could not — separate us one from the other.

Time for my friend was of no more concern now than is timelessness for those of us who remain.

"Welcome home, Mary," I whispered to her slowly and fondly. The deep affection I had always felt for this woman moved me beyond my usual sway. Tears welled up such that I could barely see through to her. Yearning desperately to surrender to a complete breakdown at this point, I restrained myself instead, because I am a foolish man, I suppose, who listens far too often, I am sure, to the many foolish details about how in America a man is to behave.

"Welcome home, my friend," I repeated as my hand moved gently from side to side over hers, as if this were some sort of gesture of conclusion to the moment.

Something Mary had wanted for so long — to come back to church — had been granted to her at last. In death to be sure, but in reality even so. "Welcome home," I said one final time as I left

her side for the nave of the church where the service was about to begin, "you're safe now. You're where you belong now."

Ironically, both her death and this funeral had provided Mary the opportunity to come home. It took dying to get here, but get here she did. Ultimately she had won; the victory was hers. And she would be welcomed back today as everyone else in her situation is welcomed, without distinction or peculiarity. No eyebrow of disdain or of superiority would be raised to her.

If ever anyone had come home, it was Mary today. For the Church *was* home to this woman, a reliable refuge from the many storms of emotional destruction that had battered endlessly the shores of her humble spirit. It was a place she could count on for acceptance just as she was.

If coming home has any meaning at all in this complex jumble of confusion and pain and compromise that we call life—if coming home has any meaning at all beyond the literal—then it was here, it was now, it was this day, and it was in the arrival of one Mary Santagata to the church of St. Philip Neri.

I found it also ironic — supremely so — that perhaps the most normal moment I had ever experienced with Mary was now, in death, in this church, for everything was as it was supposed to be. She was the way she was supposed to be: she looked as respectable as all other people in the same situation, she made no strange statements, she displayed no peculiar behavior. The setup for the service and the service itself were as they were supposed to be. Those in attendance were as they were supposed to be. She was not shunned and no tongue wagged. There was today no sign of greater personal worth: a powerful leader, a rich businessman, Mary — all would be treated the same in death. For once, Mary was absolutely, completely, indisputably normal.

Quite a few people were present in the church, but from where had they come? Who were these individuals? How did this woman, about whom so few seemed to know so little, attract such numbers? All dressed up in their best, their fancy shiny cars in the parking lot, why were they here? Had they come to show what it means to be family, unaware that their special someone had moved well beyond her final hour just about a lifetime before their arrival? Was this really about respect for Mary? Had they come instead to gather and catch up on news afterwards at the reception that would follow in the parish hall while the guest of honor, in transit, was being carried away in silence to her grave, alone once

again, in an empty hearse with two strange men leading the way? That those in attendance were decent folks I had no doubt; yet that which I knew that most people I knew would expect me to understand and accept about human nature in all of this I *did* not understand and could not accept.

Mass today was Mary's final claim to normalcy, her final testimony before the very cosmos that she had been here. Her unabashed confrontation of none other than Life itself that she mattered, that she had value and was equal in worth to anyone and everyone, dead or alive, at any time in history, any way you cut it.

To see her in this state of ultimate vulnerability, underscored by the now-closed and sealed casket...

to hear the moving music and words of the *In paradisum*— the final send-off to paradise— being sung tenderly by the priest and cantor as one sings a lullaby to a child drifting off in its mother's arms...

to watch the priest slowly encircle the casket as billows of sweet-smelling clouds of burning incense consumed and purified it, happy to be free as they poured forth shamelessly through the holes of the censer he was swinging...

—To experience all of this happening all at the very same time was enough to make me crumble in the moment and all but lose my balance atop the emotionally threadbare tightrope on which in that instant I found myself.

As I watched them carry my friend down the aisle to the hearse that was waiting to take her to interment — oh so far away from everything she had ever known or dreamed — something always mysterious and enigmatic that Mary had often said to me came back in mind.

"The-Mouth-Is-For-Talking," she would say. And I understood at last the meaning of those words:

"We're not meant to be alone."

====THE END=====

The Mouth Is for Talking

OUTLINE OF THE STORY

■ CURTAIN UP

high school & the chorus teacher visiting Joe the Bel-Air the Maccas & Sicily adult-child Mr. M's driving Mrs. M's' spinach honey & sesame thingies

■ LOVER

1st visit: Oct 1994. Mary mid-80s; Frank early 70s the neighborhood purpose of my ministry to Mary awkwardness transporting pyx exterior of house loss of balance on loose step her mouth & smile "my lover!" dark room & roller shades walker clothing grade school nuns & Tommy heat in room sleep game Don instead of Ron Frank answering for her & interrupting informing Frank of bad step getting rid of him for future sessions "the mouth is for talking" the glasses her manner of self-expression discussing gospel reading

paying for the original church Communion time & Mary's behavior then another sleep game peeping Mary

■ THE HAIRCUT & THE CHAIR

2nd visit: c. Nov 1994

Frank's simplemindedness collecting wood for wood stove basement for dining the step again Don again instead of Ron "my lover" again the haircut another sleep game electronic chair

Communion time, more on her behavior, normalcy of moment

convenience of chair to others = more isolation for Mary

■ HALF HERE, HALF THERE

3rd visit: Spring 1995

reflections on spring Frank in garage bird houses we all have gifts start using back door dining room

Mary waiting for me at front door!

four new ways to say so-so

my falling asleep

"the mouth is for talking" again

Communion time & more again on her behavior then

candy future possibilities for deeper relationship

■ NEVER-NÉVER LAND

4th visit: Summer 1995

aura of reassurance bathroom incident

he wants to make a baby with her

the rape

ensuing & progressive isolation never-never land forever bonded (no Communion incident presented)

■ THE FALL

5th visit: no date needed, but approx 1 year into relationship

dangerous basement steps

Frank's cooking

life in basement

uh-oh (a.k.a. it's steps time again)

love seat

more discounting from Frank

he can't count money

his childhood fall

Communion time nondescript

not invited to supper

■ THE BOX

6th visit: Summer 1996

reflections on summer another sleep game

bizarre response to her

had she ever laughed?

her teeth

swollen feet

bread-making day & the song

hope chest

description of bedroom

the odor

"eat the grapes"

Communion time at kitchen table

beauty of her face

the hug I'M YOUR DOUGH

7th visit: Nov 1996

old steel bed outside stronger odor in house

utter lack of stimulation for her

more on her not laughing — can we forget how?

the shoes again

"I'm your dough" she is sane Communion on the fly requesting the bed garden area called "Mary's Bed"

■ THEŎLOGY 101

8th visit: Early Summer 1997 sharing photos of Mary's Bed Communion of Communions

■ LIFE IS CHANGE

Mid & Late Summer 1997

Frank's phone message to delay visiting finding out she's been moved from organic process to commercial assignment of new Communion minister visit at new residence

new environment may prove too much for her

■ WHEN LIGHT WAS

Oct 1997

her death & funeral announced at Mass as a puff of smoke

■ WHAT MY MIND HAD TO TELL ME

Oct 1997

the Pietá & you can't have it all hope chest revisited in the casket home again at last the normalization of death who are these people & what are they doing here? final claim to normalcy meaning of "the mouth is for talking"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

To find out more about Ron Talarico, visit www.rontalarico.com

OTHER WORKS BY THE AUTHOR

Fire in the Dark

If you have ever asked yourself what positive impact the efforts of just one person could possibly have on the world's innumerable and seemingly overwhelming problems, then this book is for you. Kate St. Martin worked alone as a nurse making her daily rounds for more than twenty years deep inside Portland Oregon's then-Skid-Road district, and this book recounts the lives and times of 115 of its male residents as seen through Kate's eyes. Interspersed among the stories are 25 interview sessions between Kate and the author, 44 historical segments, 6 photo galleries, an extensive glossary, and much more, including more than 50 available sound track excerpts from the original recording sessions between the author and Kate. This work puts a face on those who live on Skid Road, exploring their personalities, their thoughts and attitudes, their living conditions, and the disease of alcoholism. Through Kate's recollections, the reader is given rare and privileged access to the everyday lives of individuals who all too frequently have been shunned by society's mainstream. Cutting through the objectification that is commonly applied to Skid Road and other marginalized populations, Kate's efforts offer a model for change that is both inspirational and practical, energized by love of people, and based on the simplest of formulas: "I go from moment to moment, from request to request, following through."

Taxonomy of Behavioral Objectives

(with Fran Hewitt)

- a publication of Portland Habilitation Center, Inc.

A resource manual for individualized program planning, this is also a training instrument for functional independence, and develops 1,100 skills into 27,000 component tasks in nine major subject areas. This work focuses on specific skills that need to be taught to individuals at various levels of functioning regardless of age or classifying label.

Social Readiness Program

(with Fran Hewitt)

- a publication of Portland Habilitation Center, Inc.

An individualized behavior management system that completes the Taxonomy of Behavioral Objectives. This is a free-standing tool designed for daily use to systematically monitor, train, and establish maintenance of 64 "readiness" behaviors — behaviors that are assumed prior conditions to almost any performance task and basic social interaction. Originally developed for use with individuals with exceptional needs, the program merits consideration for use in regular classroom settings as well. Implementation is recommended in conjunction and simultaneously with whatever skill training an individual is receiving.

Reflections on Life

A collection of personal interpretations: www.rontalarico.com