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JENNIFER
HAIGH

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FAITH

a novel

JENNIFER HAIGH



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Dedication

For Jimmy, my first friend

Epigraph

*It's a fight you'll never win
And now you bow your head in shame
For a sin no one forgives*

—DROPKICK MURPHYS, “THIS IS YOUR LIFE”

He lives for God, who lives by the Rule.

—ST. BENEDICT

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Chapter 1

Here is a story my mother has never told me.

It is a day she's relived a thousand times, the twenty-first of June, 1951, the longest day of that year. A day that still hasn't ended, as some part of her still paces that dark apartment in Jamaica Plain, waiting. I imagine the curtains closed against the five o'clock sun, hot and bright as midday; her baby boy peacefully asleep; her young self with nothing to do but wander from room to room, still filled with her dead mother-in-law's things.

At the time she'd thought it a grand apartment, her from Roxbury where the children slept three to a bed. Even as a boy her husband had had his own bedroom, an unimaginable luxury. His mother had been injured somehow giving birth and there had been no more children. This fact alone made the Breens wealthier than most, though Harry's father had only worked at Filene's stacking crates in the warehouse. The entire apartment had come from Filene's, on the employee discount, the lamps and brocade divan and what she had learned were called Oriental rugs. Mary herself had never bought anything at Filene's. Her own mother shopped at Sears.

In the bedroom the baby slept deeply. She parted the curtains and let the sun shine on his face. Harry, when he came home, would pull them shut, worried someone might see him dressing or undressing through their third-floor windows. Sure, it was possible—the windows faced Pond Street, also lined with three-deckers—though why he cared was a puzzle. He was a man, after all. And there was nothing wrong with the sight of him. The first morning of their marriage, lying in the too-soft bed in the tourist cabin in Wellfleet, she had looked up at him in wonderment, her first time seeing him in daylight, his bare chest and shoulders, and her already four months along. Nothing wrong with him, all, her husband tall and blue-eyed, with shiny dark hair that fell into his eyes when he ducked his head, a habit left over from a bashful adolescence, though nobody, now, would call him shy. Harry Breen could talk to anyone. Behind the counter at Old Colony Hardware he had a way with the customers, got them going about their clogged pipes and screen doors and cabinets they were installing. He complimented their plans, suggested small improvements, sent them out the door with twice what they'd come in for. A natural salesman, never mind that he couldn't, himself, hit a nail with a hammer. When a fuse blew at the apartment it was Mary who ventured into the dark basement with a flashlight.

What did you do before? she'd asked, half astonished, when she returned to the lit apartment and found Harry and his mother sitting placidly in the kitchen, stirring sugar into teacups.

We didn't burn so many lights before, the old lady said.

It was a reminder among many others that Mary's presence was unwelcome, that Mrs. Breen, at least, had not invited her into their lives, this grimy interloper with her swollen belly and her skin and blouses from Sears. As though her condition were a mystery on the order of the Virgin Birth, and though Harry Breen had had nothing to do with it.

She lifted Arthur from his crib and gave his bottom a pat. He wriggled, squealed, fumbled blindly for her breast. The sodden diaper would have to be changed, the baby fed. In this way minutes would pass, and finally an hour. The stubborn sun would begin its grudging descent. Across town, i

Roxbury, girls would be dressing for the dances, Clare Boyle and her sister and whoever else they ran with now, setting out by twos and threes down the hill to Dudley Street.

She finished with the diaper, then sat at the window and unbuttoned her blouse, aware of the open curtains. If Harry came upon her like this, her swollen breast exposed, what would he do then? That thought was thrilling in a way she couldn't have explained. But it was after six, and still there was no sign of him. When his mother was alive he'd come straight home after work. You could set your watch by it, his footsteps on the stairs at five-thirty exactly, even on Fridays when the other men stopped at the pub for a taste. Lately, though, his habits had shifted. Mondays and Tuesdays he played cards at the Vets.

Once, leaving church, he'd nodded to some men she didn't recognize, a short one and a tall one sharing a cigarette on the sidewalk. *See you tomorrow, then*, Harry called in a friendly tone. The shorter man had muttered under his breath, and the tall one had guffawed loudly. To Mary it couldn't have been plainer that they were not Harry's friends.

THEY'D MET the way everyone met, at the dances. Last summer the Intercolonial was the place to be; now it might be the Hibernian or the Winslow or the Rose Croix for all she knew. On a Saturday night, with Johnny Powell's band playing, a thousand or more would crowd upstairs at the Intercolonial, a mirrored globe hanging from the ceiling so that the walls shimmered with light.

She was seventeen then, too young for such pleasures. But it had been easy enough to slip out on a Friday night with Ma dead asleep, exhausted by the work of getting three small ones bathed and tucked into their beds. And it wasn't even a lie to go dancing on a Wednesday, when Mary really did attend the novena at nine o'clock as she was supposed to, the church packed with other overdressed girls and men who'd already had a drink or two, who'd meet up later across the street at Fontaine's Café and make their plans for the evening. *All right, then. See you at the hall*. The men were deep on Wednesdays; you could change partners all night long if you wanted. Thursdays were a different story: maids' night out, the halls packed with Irish girls. There was almost no point in going on a Thursday: the numbers were so against you. On a Thursday you were lucky to get a single dance.

Harry Breen hadn't chosen her, not at first. That first time they'd danced purely by chance. She knew all the dances—the reels and jigs, the wild *céilí*. At the Intercolonial waltzes were the thing, though once each night Johnny Powell would force the dreamy couples apart. *Line up, everybody, for the Siege of Ennis*. A mad crush, then, as they formed two long lines, men and girls facing. You'd take your turn with every one, herself and Clare Boyle laughing the whole way through. Some of the men were clumsy, some so strong they'd nearly swing you off your feet.

She noticed Harry a moment before he reached for her. He was taller than the rest, his movements liquid; he swung her gracefully, smooth and controlled. And that thing she first felt, that swooning joy: maybe it was simple geometry, the relative size and shape of their bodies, his chest and shoulders just where they should be, their hips meeting, her eyes level with his mouth.

The plain fact was that she'd chased him, courted his attention. Gone to greater lengths than any girl should. There was no point, now, in being ashamed. She had a ring on her finger and it hardly mattered how. They were married fast by her uncle Fergus, who'd skipped, discreetly, the time-consuming step of publishing the banns. Fergus had guessed what everyone would soon know, that Mary had gotten exactly what she wanted, and a bit more besides.

She looked down at the baby at her breast.

In the kitchen she took her beads from the drawer and found the station in time. Missing the Archbishop's greeting was like coming late to a movie; she'd be unable to enter into the spirit of the

thing. When Harry's mother was living, they had knelt in the parlor for the rosary. Now the old lady was gone and no one was looking, so Mary dragged a chair to the open window and settled herself there. *I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth.* Through the window a breeze came, carrying the Archbishop's voice from the two apartments below. Up and down the street every radio was tuned to the same station. Through every open window came the same holy words.

It being Thursday, they started with the Joyful. As a girl she had studied the illustrations in her mother's missal. The Joyful Mysteries were the most straightforward, the pictures almost Protestant in their simplicity: the Blessed Virgin kneeling in prayer, waiting for the angel; the Virgin noticeably pregnant, embracing her cousin Elizabeth. The Sorrowful were haunting and in a way lovelier: Our Lord kneeling in the Garden of Gethsemane, glowing in His anguish, perspiring drops of blood. But what was the Glorious Mysteries she waited for, Our Lord lifted into heaven, clouds bubbling beneath His feet like a cauldron of spirits. The Resurrection, the Ascension, the Assumption of the Virgin: all these stirred her deeply, even though (or perhaps because) she understood them the least. That was the beauty of it: contemplating the miracles, sublime and unknowable, and yet the words you repeated couldn't be simpler. *Hail Mary, full of grace.* A prayer you'd known since earliest childhood, familiar as your mother's voice.

She closed her eyes and enjoyed the breeze, the baby's warm weight, the Archbishop's familiar intonations. She had seen him once standing beside the carousel at Paragon Park, eating ice cream with a dozen beaming nuns. In photos, in full regalia, he was imposing, and yet you never forgot that he was from St. Eulalia's in South Boston, that his own father had worked in the repair pits at the Boston El. He never forgot it, either. You could tell this from the photographs: the Archbishop tossing around a football with the CYO boys, or raising a glass at a priest's golden jubilee. The Archbishop wouldn't say no to a drink, according to her uncle Fergus, who'd met him on several occasions. Cushing was God's own, and yet he was theirs, too, in every way a regular man.

She heard two sharp knocks at the front door.

"Coming," she called, drying herself with a tea towel, noticing all at once the wet stains on her blouse.

She threw open the door. A strange man stood there smoking a cigarette. He wore a thin mustache and was her own height, though she was barefoot and he wore heeled boots. It took her a moment to place him: the short man from outside the church.

"Is your husband at home?" He looked over her shoulder, his eyes darting around the room.

"I'm sorry, he's not."

From the kitchen the Archbishop droned: *Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost.*

"Listening to the rosary, were you? My mum does that every night." The man dropped his cigarette and crushed it with his heel. He stepped past her into the apartment. "You're sure he isn't here?" He glanced into the kitchen as though Harry might be hiding and Mary felt a sudden urge to laugh, a nervous tic. She was forever laughing at the wrong times.

"He hasn't come home yet. Try the store, maybe?"

"I've been there. He left hours ago."

"I don't know, then. He could have stopped off at the pub."

The man frowned. "Never seen him take a drink, myself. Likes to keep his wits about him, doesn't he?" He smiled then, and she saw that on both sides his teeth were missing. It made the front of his face look suspect, like the vampire dentures children wore at Halloween.

In her arms the baby let out a loud hiccup. She raised him to her shoulder. "Excuse me. I was in the

middle of feeding him.” Patting him gently, waiting for him to burp. She was afraid to look down her blouse.

The man stepped in close to her, smelling rankly of cigarette. “Sorry to miss that,” he said, and her horror his rough hand touched her face.

Arthur let out another hiccup and vomited in a great burst.

“Jaysus!” The man stepped back, shaking his sleeve. It was coated in yellow spew.

“Oh, no! I’m so sorry.” Mary took the towel from her shoulder and wiped uselessly at his sleeve. The smell was terrible, sour as vinegar. The man tore his hand away, eyeing the baby like a snake.

“That’s a real charmer you’ve got there.” He turned to go. “Tell your man Shorty wants to see him.”

She closed the door quickly behind him. The door, then the bolt, then the chain.

TELL YOUR *man Shorty wants to see him.*

He had never, in her memory, stayed out after dark. Only for the card games, and then he always told her beforehand: *I’ve got the cards tonight, so don’t hold supper. I’ll have a sandwich or something at Taylor’s.*

If he stayed out all night, would she sit up waiting? Brushing her teeth a hundred strokes, a hundred strokes to her long dark hair. Always the counting calmed her—brushstrokes, rosary beads. Half the reason she loved the dancing was the counting of the steps. It gave her mind something to do.

A strange fear gnawed at her stomach. For the first time she wished for a regular man, who’d go to the pub on a Friday. Then, at least, she’d know where to find him. But it was true what Shorty had said: Harry liked to keep a clear head. There was nothing to do but go to Old Colony Hardware. *A* detectives did in the radio serials: she would go to where Harry was last seen.

I’ve been there, Shorty had said. *He left hours ago.*

How many hours? she wondered. Where on earth could he have gone?

She went to the telephone. “Is Father Egan in, please? This is his niece, Mary Breen.” The name was new enough, still, to have an odd flavor on her tongue.

“Wedding tonight,” the housekeeper said. “He’ll be back late. I can have him call you tomorrow.”

“Yes, please,” Mary said.

Arthur was cranky and lethargic, his arms and legs moist. She coaxed him into his clothes. Downstairs Mrs. Ruocco was already in her housecoat. She looked startled when Mary came to the door.

“It’s my father,” Mary said. “I have to go see him in the hospital. Could you look after the baby, please?”

Her father was dead five years already, and couldn’t be hurt by her lie.

How light she felt, walking up the street with no baby in her arms. She had done it her whole life and never realized. Old Colony Hardware was closed, of course, the metal grille pulled shut in front. Upstairs was an office and a storeroom. Both sets of windows were dark.

Around her the sidewalk was empty, the shops—a butcher, a shoe store—closed for the night. Above them, in apartments, people were living. The open windows rained down cooking smells, the scrape of cutlery. From above the butcher’s came strains of music—Tommy Shields’s program, she’d know it anywhere.

Mary Breen stood staring up at the windows, understanding, slowly, that she was alone. The swirl of her life had stopped short and sent her flying. She was eighteen on the longest day of the year; she had bet everything on Harry Breen, and had nothing left to lose. She, my mother, crossed the street to the El station, where a train would take her to Dudley Street, and the dancing.

Chapter 2

June 1, 200

Most of you have heard, by now, what happened to my brother, or a version of it: the alarming events of that spring and summer, the single, vile accusation, still unproven, that made a ruin of his life. In Philadelphia, where I live, his story was buried deep in the Nation section, a terse paragraph picked off one of the wire services, giving little more than his name, Arthur Breen; his age, fifty-one, and the name of his parish, Sacred Heart. The Boston papers paid more attention, delving into his years at seminary, his time in Rome, the three suburban parishes where he served without incident. As is typical in these cases, his accuser was not named.

You may not remember the particulars. In that year, 2002, it would have been easy to conflate the story with others. The sad truth is that such tales are no longer rare. As a girl I once went along with my mother, who cleaned, for no pay, the parish rectory every Saturday morning. I watched her take wastebaskets from the bedrooms and bathrooms and empty the used dental floss and crumpled Kleenex into a metal trash can she then dragged to the back door. I was very small, five or six, and flabbergasted by the discovery that priests blew their noses. The very idea gave me a jolt.

That isn't to say I considered priests superhuman. Despite his flash costumes and his one, peculiar superpower—the miracle of transubstantiation, performed seven days a week, twice on Sundays—our Father Cronin had little in common with the masked heroes in comic books. And yet I did see him as *other than human*, made of different stuff than the rest of us. It sounds fanciful now, but I truly believed it, and I suppose other children did, too.

I mention this because a child's ideas about priests seem relevant to the story, though the world has changed in thirty years, and for all I know children have, too. Though I never saw a priest do anything truly outrageous, I probably wouldn't have objected if I had. Honestly, I expected them to be strange. The rules allowed it, even required it: the lonely rectories, the long black dresses. At the same time, I understood that these men were not born priests. My brother had been a normal boy, a child like any other. It was at St. John's Seminary that he became something else. That he himself was transubstantiated.

How exactly that happened is a question I still ponder. I was a teenager when Art was ordained. It is a memory that still haunts me: nine young men in white robes lying facedown on the cathedral floor receiving the blessing of Cardinal Medeiros, who ran the Boston Archdiocese at the time. When he had finished with them, the candidates were seated on the altar. An army of priests filed past to offer blessings, a hundred times the laying on of hands. Truly, it was something to see. Yet I am a doubter, and I doubt that these rituals caused Art's transformation. At most, they simply marked it. Transubstantiation had begun years earlier. Art was not yet a man when he started becoming a priest.

He was fourteen, and I was too young to notice, when he left us for St. John's—its high school division, what was then called the minor seminary. It isn't called anything now. The Archdiocese no longer corrals together herds of parentless boys in the throes of hormonal upheaval. I'd like to say that Lake Street finally came to its senses, but the truth is that there are no longer any boys willing to be herded. It's hard to imagine now, but in the mid-sixties there was no shortage of volunteers. Ever

autumn, male teenagers from across the Archdiocese were packed off to Brighton, traveling home, ~~Art did, on holidays and occasional weekends.~~ It sounds quaint, in an age when every teenager carries a cell phone, to say that he wrote weekly letters to my mother, but that is what he did. Ma read them aloud at family dinners, at church functions. Frankly, she bragged. To have a son at St. John's was a prestigious thing for a family like ours. I was an erratic student, and my younger brother Milo downright hopeless; but Art excelled in all subjects, not just the priestly ones. He had an ear for languages and music; his voice, before it changed, was fine and pure as the top register of a clarinet. As a boy he sang or whistled constantly, a habit that irked my father.

Cut it out, will you? he'd complain when he caught Art humming under his breath.

Art, who feared him, hushed instantly, only to start up again a few minutes later. He was not a defiant child; in fact, the exact opposite. But his singing was unconscious and irrepressible—an expression of his native exuberance, the dreamy, buoyant soundtrack running through his head.

Whatever his other sins, my father, Ted McGann, is not a dour man. He has been known, late in the evening, to croon a few bars of "Mother Machree" in a manly tenor; in his young days he was considered to have quite a voice. It was Art's repertoire that rankled him. My brother was a small, slight boy; puberty came late to him, and the Rondelles and the Supremes were still an easy reach. I imagine the family sitting down to supper, an unseasonably heavy meal of beef stew or shepherd's pie. I imagine rather than remember, though technically I was there, in my high chair, eating mashed potatoes with a spoon. All five of us, in fact, were present, my mother eight months pregnant with a kicking, oversized male infant, Mike taking up as much space as possible even in the womb. The snuggly eat-in kitchen was stifling, filled with afternoon sun. Like most of our neighbors, we kept Raytheon hours. My mother put dinner on the table at five o'clock precisely. Dad's shift ended at four.

At dinnertime the radio played softly in the background—my mother kept it on all day, at low volume, as she cleaned or cooked or laundered. Marooned with a cranky toddler, she was profoundly lonely, yet she chose its staticky drone over the gossip of the neighborhood women, whose company she both longed for and scorned. She was the first to notice when Art began humming, the first witness of his sweet falsetto. Even now, in her older years, she hears like a bat. Her foot would seek his under the table, a nudge of warning. But Art could not be stopped.

She glanced nervously at my father. His anger was a mercurial thing, sometimes gathering slowly, sometimes bursting forth without warning, a fast-moving storm. He drank then, but not as much as he would later. He might have stopped off for a quick one after work, no more. Yet even sober he had a temper. I say this not to shame him, but because his anger was a factor in Art's choices: my brother's place in the family and the reasons he left us, the sad trajectory of his priesthood. A factor, even, in his recent actions, ending in the events I'll get to soon.

GRANTHAM IS a seaside town, battered by weather. It occupies a narrow finger of land jutting into Boston Harbor, the outermost reaches of a cluster of suburbs known as the South Shore. At its thickest the finger is a half-mile wide, so that no house is more than a quarter mile from the ocean. To the west of the finger lies Boston Harbor. A commuter ferry crosses it four times a day, from Long Wharf in Boston to Grantham's Berkeley Pier. On the east side of town, grand old houses occupy the Atlantic beachfront, built when the town was a vacation spot for the wealthy. (You may have seen the famous photo of a future president, a blue-eyed urchin of three or four building a lopsided Camelot out of Grantham sand.) Today the old Victorians are still standing, dark in winter, in season rented by the week. Year-round residents like my parents live in low Capes and ranches, covered in vinyl siding torn and cut down on the painting, though the salt air still takes a heavy toll on porches and windows and doors.

The backyards are squared off by chain-link fences. The houses are tidy or ramshackle, depending on the street, but even the most derelict neighborhoods have a certain charm, gulls squawking, a smell I never noticed until I moved away. In stormy weather add the low moan of Grantham Light, the second oldest on the East Coast.

There are storms. It's impossible to describe Grantham without mentioning the wind. It is, I'm told, the windiest town in Massachusetts, no small distinction if you've witnessed Provincetown, Gloucester or Marblehead in a gale. I heard this from an insurance agent who, after the blizzard of '77, spent half the eighties processing claims for Grantham homeowners. In most months the wind is omnipresent, a constant ruffling, scratching, snuffling, as though a large pet, a zoo animal perhaps, were sleeping at the back door.

My parents' house is three blocks from the seawall, so by local standards they live inland. Like many places in town, theirs started out a Cape. The prior owner had added a second floor, two snuggly bedrooms that would soon belong to me and Mike. When I go back to visit, which isn't often, I am struck by the closeness of the place. Our living arrangements were so intimate that no cough or sneeze or bowel movement could go unnoticed. I fell asleep each night to the sound of my father's snoring, a low rumbling beneath the floorboards. Dad was the rhythm section, riffing along with the soprano gulls, the bass violin of Grantham Light, the percussive brush of the wild, wild wind.

In the eyes of the neighborhood we were a small family, made exotic by my mother's past. She had been married before, a brief teenage union that her uncle, also a priest, had used his influence to have annulled, though it had already produced a son. Her husband had disappeared into a bright Friday afternoon when Art was just a baby, for reasons that remain mysterious. According to Aunt Clare Boyle—not really my aunt, but a childhood friend of my mother's—he'd borrowed money from a South Boston shark only a fool would cross. It remains to this day a breaking story: fifty years on, the details are still subject to change. Clare, lonely in her old age, uses the information to attract visitors and serves it up a scrap at a time alongside the shortbread and milky tea.

The marriage itself was no secret—Art kept his father's surname, Breen—but it was a topic we didn't discuss. According to a raft of yellowed papers I found in Ma's attic, the Commonwealth granted her a divorce on grounds of abandonment, a fact never mentioned. She preferred the Church's explanation: the marriage had simply never occurred.

And so my father, Ted McGann, became Art's stepfather. At the time nobody used the idiotic term *blended family*. Maybe such households exist, but in our case, the label did not apply. We were two distinct families, unblended, the one simply grafted on to the other. I felt, always, that Art belonged to Ma and to his lost father, Mike to my own father and what I think of as Dad's tribe, who are noisy and numerous and in their own way impressive. Like them Mike is blond, square in the shoulders and jawed. He has the McGann restlessness, stubbornness, and stamina. It says something about him, and the way he lives his life, that he has never solved a problem by mere reflection. This goes a long way toward explaining his role in Art's story. He so resembles Dad that he seems to have no other parent. His DNA is pure McGann.

I have always been fascinated by heredity, the traits passed on from mother and father, the two sets of genes whirred together in a blender. Art and I favor our mother. From the time I was thirteen or fourteen, people have noticed the resemblance: *Ah, Mary, she's the picture of you at that age*. Always Ma dismissed the idea—quickly, prophylactically, as if afraid of where the conversation might lead. Once she turned to study me intently, as a stranger might. *Really?* she asked, as though she were seriously considering the possibility. And then: *I don't see it, myself*.

Yet a few facts even Ma can't deny, such as our common height, our dark hair and pale freckles.

skin, our eyes that are sometimes green, sometimes brown. Ma and I have long faces, thin lips, sharp noses. These are features a woman must grow into: homely in childhood, plain in adolescence, attractive in middle age. Well into her sixties, my mother was finally quite striking, though the overall effect was not beauty, but a fierce kind of astuteness. Art's more generous features, his dimples and full mouth, must have come from his father. Because I have no way to verify this, not even a wedding picture, I am free to fill in the details as I like; and I like to think that there was something sweet and expansive in that man, Ma's first love.

As a child I felt caught between these two families: on the one hand Ma and Art, who *looked* like my relations; on the other Dad and Mike. I switched allegiances as it suited me, depending on which way the wind was blowing.

The wind, of course, being Dad.

My father's drinking, and his anger. Each fueled the other, though in which direction? Did he drink because he was angry, and or did he get angry when he drank?

Art was twelve when my parents married, and I can imagine how that affected him. My father, as I've suggested, is not an easy man, and here was a boy used to having his mother to himself. Ted McGann was twenty-four when he met Ma, just out of the Navy and, by Clare Boyle's account, looking for a good time. Why he got mixed up with an older woman (four years, to Aunt Clare, was a significant age difference), a woman who already had a child, was a Sorrowful Mystery for the ages.

Of course, Clare Boyle knows nothing about men.

I have seen photos of my mother at the time, her skirts shorter than I have ever seen her wear, her black hair long and loose. Where's the mystery? My parents were handsome people; they dated a few short months and quickly became engaged. If I know my mother at all, she kept Art clear of my father until the deal was closed, a habit she maintained throughout my childhood, perhaps unconsciously. Even now (especially now) her firstborn is a subject she and Dad don't discuss.

Art remembered little of their engagement, a fact I have always found significant. Before the wedding he met Ted a handful of times: a few Sunday dinners, an afternoon at the beach. Then the man moved into their apartment—they lived in town then, the top floor of a three-decker in Jamaica Plain—and soon I was born. A year later my parents bought the house in Grantham, and the following year Art went off to St. John's, the first step in his long journey to become a priest.

• • •

IF YOU aren't Catholic—or maybe especially if you are—you have wondered what possesses a young man to choose that life, with its elaborate privations. I have asked Art this question, expecting the boilerplate Church response, that priests are called by God. His answer surprised me. It helps, he said, to be a child, with little understanding of what he is forfeiting. Love to marriage to home and family connect those dots, and you get the approximate shape of most people's lives. Take them away, and you lose any hope for connection. You give up your place in the world.

His words startled me, the deep weariness in his voice. We were speaking by phone late one night, a few years back. I have tried to date the conversation, with no success. We are both nocturnal, and likely spoke after midnight. But was it five years ago, or four, or three? Had he already met Ka Conlon and her son?

We became close in adulthood, a fact my younger self would have found surprising. Art had been a fixture in my early life, a regular presence at family gatherings; but our childhoods had scarce

overlapped; we never shared the noisy, grubby intimacy I had with Mike. My younger brother tells a story about his own fourth birthday. (Can he really remember that far back? Or is he merely conjuring up a photo from the family album, one I also recall: Mike sitting regally in his high chair, a chubby potentate; before him a decorated cake, a candle shaped like the number 4.) Art had brought him a toy—a stuffed giraffe with a ribbon round its neck, and Mike knew to say *thank you* even though it was nothing he wanted, a gift for a baby or, maybe, a girl. He had hesitated, unsure how to address the man in black. The aunts and uncles called him “Father.” Yet Art was also his *brother*. None of it had made sense.

I felt a similar confusion. My deeper closeness with Art coincided with my move to Philadelphia and, not accidentally, the end of my churchgoing. It was easier to think of Art as a brother the less I thought about his work, and in Philly I had no contact with priests. I once phoned Art in mid-August and asked, innocently, how he’d spent his day. I’d forgotten it was the feast of the Assumption, though the Holy Days of Obligation had been drummed into my head from an early age. We both knew that I had left the fold forever. Except for the one time, which I’ll get to later, he never tried to coax me back.

It seems, now, that I should have seen trouble coming. But Art had been a priest for twenty-five years; moreover, he had never been anything else. I understood that his life lacked certain kinds of human closeness, but then so did mine. I’d recently placed a down payment on a studio apartment, a large sunny room at the top of an old row house. In Philadelphia it was all the space a high school teacher could afford, and all I could imagine needing, a concrete commitment to the path I’d been following quietly for years. I’d tried marriage—briefly, disastrously—and was divorced with a slice of wedding cake still in my freezer, awaiting our first anniversary. It had long appeared likely, and at last seemed decided, that I would always live alone.

Was it my own loneliness that made Art’s invisible? I wouldn’t have said he was unhappy being a priest. I was present the Sunday he gave his first homily and I can still remember his ease at the pulpit. Years of parochial schooling had overexposed me to sermons, but Art’s were unlike any I’d heard. His style was gentle and humorous, slyly persuasive. He was so thoughtful and engaging that I might have listened to him anyway, even if he weren’t my brother. His new life fit him. Singing the Kyrie, he seemed to glow with a deep contentment, his rich tenor filling the small chapel, his eyes closed in prayer. Unusual, and gratuitous, to sing it in Latin: I understood this was a private gift to my mother. I turned to look at her sitting behind me, her eyes full.

How alive he seemed to me then, how exhilarated by his first baptism, first wedding, first midnight Mass. But these are old memories. In recent years he scarcely spoke of his work. Our conversations revolved around family news, the aches and illnesses of our aging parents, Mike’s marriage and the births of his three sons. Art never expressed regrets, not explicitly; but of course he had them. Show me a man of fifty who doesn’t regret the lives he hasn’t lived.

I read over what I’ve written—*of course he had them*—and am ashamed of myself, the words seem so smug and facile. How easily I dismiss his sorrows, the griefs and losses that haunted him. The truth is that I loved Art, and that I failed him, in ways that will become clear.

For the first few months I tracked the scandal. Soon the reports referred to Art’s case only in passing, and I realized that the story was much larger than my brother. At minimum it involved the entire Boston Archdiocese, hundreds of victims, dozens of priests. Day after day, until I could swallow no more, I ingested the queasy details, nicely organized in timelines and bullet points. The reports didn’t strike me as biased, and one could hardly accuse them of laziness. One persistent fellow dogged my poor parents for months. I don’t believe, as my mother still does, that the press set out to make Art

a monster. The accusations themselves were monstrous. And the evidence either way—of his guilt or innocence—was very slim.

And whose fault is that? a small voice asks me. It isn't God's voice or my brother's, but the voice of my own conscience, which I have ignored successfully for some time. I have kept Art's secrets. My excuse until now has been loyalty. Art asked that I tell no one, and I have kept my word.

Two years have passed since the events of that spring—a calendar spring, equinox to solstice; three months that, in New England, can feel like summer or winter. My parents still live in Grantham. On the surface their lives are unchanged. But my mother no longer attends daily Mass, or cleans the church rectory or pours coffee at parish dinners. On Sundays she sits alone in a rear pew, her head bowed. (My father won't set foot in a church, but that's nothing to do with Art. He hasn't been to Mass in years.) Kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament, Ma prays only for her Arthur, that God in His mercy will forgive whatever he has done.

Lately I visit Grantham without seeing my parents. I've never done this before, but then I've never had any reason to go back beyond guilt and a vague sense of obligation. Now I sleep on the folding couch in Mike's finished basement, waking at dawn when my three nephews clamber down the stairs to play video games at high volume. I pay visits to Art's former church and rectory, and to those who knew him at that time: the church council; the parish housekeeper; the few diocesan priests willing to talk to me, only one of whom Art might have called a friend. We meet away from their rectories, at Dunkin' Donuts outlets deep in the suburbs, at diners, at bars. It is a function of my upbringing that I find it unsettling to drink with a priest. Certainly my mother would be mortified at the thought. Recent events have done nothing to dim her admiration of these men, and yet her encounters with them—Legion of Mary bake sales, the annual Christmas luncheon of the local Catholic Daughters of the Americas—are fraught with anxiety. Three years ago—just before Art's disgrace—she attended the celebration of his silver jubilee. She beamed with pride through the anniversary Mass. Yet according to Mike, who sat beside her, at the dinner afterward she was nervous as a cat. Introduced to a series of friendly men in clerical collars, she flushed and stammered, stricken with embarrassment.

What she fears—I know this—is exposure. Of her own sins, real or imagined; her and my father's secret shames. After I have told Art's story, it's possible, likely even, that she will never speak to me again. Foolishly maybe, I hope otherwise. In my fantasy we sit together in her quiet kitchen, just the two. I open my heart to her and lay it on the table between us. I am still child enough to wish it were possible, adult enough to know it isn't. We are too much ourselves, the people we have always been.

THE BIBLE offers four accounts of the life of Jesus, told by four different writers: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. God's Beatles wrote in different languages, in different centuries. Each saw the story in his own terms. Matthew had a particular interest in Jesus's childhood. Mark cared mainly about the endgame, the betrayal, crucifixion and death. Only Luke—who never met Our Lord—mentions the two famous parables, the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. John's gospel is full of miracles and revelations, the raising of Lazarus, its own charmed poetry. *I am the Light of the world. I am the true Vine. Abide in me.*

The story of my family likewise changes with the teller. Ma's version focuses on the early years (Each year at our birthdays we were treated to our own nativity stories—Art the preemie, Mike the breech birth, myself the induced labor—as though she were trying to decide, once and for all, which child had caused her the greatest misery in coming into the world.) Mike's gospel is terse and action-packed; like the apostle Mark, he cuts to the chase. Clare Boyle's tale, if she'll tell it, is full of innuendo and hearsay. Like Luke, she merely repeats what she's heard.

Art was our apostle John.

~~For most of my life, I have refused to take part in the telling. In some way this was an act of rebellion. I was eighteen when I moved away from Boston, and I'd had enough of the McGann family lore. But recent events have changed my thinking, and I offer here my own version of the story, a kind of fifth gospel. The early pages borrow heavily from other accounts. The miracles and revelations will come later, the stories never before told.~~

So, to those who remained loyal to my brother, and those who didn't: here is his story as far as I know it, what Art told me at the time and what I found out later, and what I still can't verify but know in my heart to be true. In many cases I have re-created events I did not witness. There was nothing sophisticated in my method. I simply worked out what certain people must have said or felt, a task made easier by the fact that the two leading men were my brothers—one who confided in me, belatedly and selectively; the other so deeply familiar that I can nearly channel his thoughts. This isn't as extraordinary as it sounds. It's mainly a function of his consistent character that in any given situation, I can predict, with dependable accuracy, what Mike would say and do. As for the other actors in the story, I have done my best, relying occasionally on the memories of people who may have reason to mislead me. Where their recollections seem dubious, I have noted this. In the end, I believe that I have reported events fairly. So much has been spoiled and lost that there is no longer any reason to prevaricate.

Why would anyone go to such lengths to tell this sorry tale? It's a fair question, and the answer is that no one would, unless she'd felt God's presence and then His absence; once believed, and later failed and doubted. A sister might tell it, a sister sick with regret.

Art's story is, to me, the story of my own family, with all its darts and dodges and mysterious omissions: the open secrets long unacknowledged, the dark relics never unearthed. I understand, now, that Art's life was ruined by secrecy, a familial failing; and that I played a part in his downfall—a minor role, to be sure, and a third-act entrance; but a role nonetheless. There is no healing my brother now; and Aidan Conlon is a child still; it's too soon to tell what his future holds. So maybe it's for myself that I make this public act of contrition. My penance is to tell this ragged truth as completely as I know it, fully aware that it is much too little, much too late.

Chapter 3

The story begins on a bright afternoon many years ago, one I remember as though I'd seen it. (This is natural enough in a family like ours, with its canon of approved stories. They are told in the manner of repertory theater: hang around long enough and you'll hear them all.) Imagine the trees tinged with red, a sky so clear it seems contrived, the high blue heaven of tourist brochures. It is the first resplendent day of a New England fall, and Ma's new husband is driving from Grantham to Brighton with his hand on her thigh. They are dressed for a wedding or a funeral: she in Sunday hat and gloves, he grudgingly coaxed into a suit. In the backseat is a battered footlocker from his Navy days, packed with the few possessions a junior seminarian is allowed. Squeezed in beside it is Art, fourteen years old, staring out at a scene that will shape the rest of his life: the headquarters of the Boston Archdiocese and its famous seminary, St. John's.

The decision to come here had been his alone. From the age of ten he'd served as an altar boy. Two mornings a week he'd met Father Cronin in the vestry at St. Dymphna's, helped him into his chasuble and alb. At the altar Art genuflected, lit candles, carried cruets. At Consecration he rang the bells. The sound never failed to send him soaring, a feeling that was nearly indescribable: a sweet exhilaration, spreading warmth. In those moments he'd sensed a transformation occurring, before him and inside him. Bread and wine into the Body and Blood. An ordinary boy into something else.

In the confessional Father Cronin posed the question. *Have you ever considered it?* They discussed at some length what a vocation felt like, how you could ever be sure. *Certainty will come later*, the priest promised. And one Sunday after Mass, he invited Ma to the rectory for a chat.

Now, washed and waxed for the occasion, Dad's car passed through the stone gates. A few other cars were already parked behind the dormitory, a cavernous brick building perched atop a hill. Ted hefted the trunk to his shoulder and with much grumbling hauled it up three flights of stairs, down a long corridor to the cell Art would share with a boy named Ray Cousins. (I do not invent this: in those days, at least, seminarians, like prisoners, slept in cells.)

Like all others on the third floor, Art's cell was small and square. In it were two narrow beds, two wooden desks. The floors were bare; metal blinds hung at the one window. There were no rugs—a fact my mother emphasizes in the telling—and no curtains. No trace, anywhere, of anything soft.

Dad set down the trunk. Ma was uncharacteristically silent, her eyes welling. It was the moment Art had dreaded for months.

"I'll be fine," he said, embracing her. "I'll write you." Briefly he shook Ted's hand.

I SHOULD say a few words about that campus, which figures so prominently in the life and ministry of my brother. How those buildings came to be is a story in itself. For the nearly forty years that William Cardinal O'Connell ran the Archdiocese, Boston was the capital of Catholic America, and in his eyes it deserved a *facciata* as grand as the Vatican. "Little Rome," the local papers called it, the hills of Brighton dotted with monuments: the seminary's neoclassic library and exquisite chapel, the elegant palazzo where the Cardinal slept and the ostentatious mausoleum where he sleeps now. At the entrance of each building was carved the Cardinal's own motto, *Vigor in Arduis*.

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