

The Bishop's Man

A Novel

LINDEN MACINTYRE



RANDOM HOUSE CANADA

The Long Stretch

Who Killed Ty Conn (with Theresa Burke)

Causeway: A Passage from Innocence

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THE
BISHOP'S
MAN

A Novel



RANDOM HOUSE CANADA

BOOK ONE

† † †

*Oh ye sons of men,
how long will ye turn
my glory into shame?*
PSALMS

The night before things started to become unstuck, I actually spent a good hour taking stock of my general situation and concluded that, all things considered, I was in pretty good shape. I was approaching the age of fifty, a psychological threshold only slightly less daunting than death, and found myself not much changed from forty or even thirty. If anything, I was healthier. The last decade of the century, and of the millennium, was shaping up to be less stressful than the eighth—which had been defined by certain events in Central America—and the ninth, burdened as it was by scandals here at home.

I was a priest in a time that is not especially convivial toward the clergy. I had nevertheless, achieved what I believed to be a sustainable spirituality and an ability to elaborate upon it with minimal cant and hypocrisy. I had even, and this is no small achievement, come to terms with a certain sordid obscurity about my family origins in a place where people celebrate the most tedious details of their personal ancestry.

I am the son of a bastard father. My mother was a foreigner, felled long before her time by disappointment and tuberculosis.

I was, in the most literal sense, a child of war. I've calculated that my conception occurred just days before my father's unit embarked from England for the hostile shores of Italy, on October 23, 1943. There is among his papers a cryptic reference to a summary trial and fine (five days' pay) for being awol on the night of October 17. I was born in London, England, on July 15, 1944.

Isolation? I had, though perhaps imperfectly, mastered celibacy, the institutional denial of the most human of transactions. I was and am, to a degree, excluded from my peer group, my brothers in the priesthood, for complex reasons that will soon become apparent. But at the time I thought that I'd discovered an important universal truth: that isolation, willingly embraced, becomes the gift of solitude; that discipline ennobles flesh.

In that evanescent moment of tranquility, I was feeling okay. I see it as another life, the man I was, a stranger now.

I'd spent the weekend in Cape Breton, in the parish of Port Hood, filling in for Mullins, who had gone away with his charismatics or for golf. Escape of some kind. Mullins likes to pamper himself. I'd planned to extend my visit by a day, to spend that Monday reading, meditating. The village of Port Hood is a pretty place and restful. I grew up in the area, but my personal connections there were limited. I could pretend to be a stranger, a pose I find congenial.

Mullins and the good Sisters up the road had given the glebe a comfortable tidiness. Anyone could feel at home there, as in a well-maintained motel. It has a remarkable view of the gulf and a small fishing harbour, just along the coast, called Murphy's Pond. It was

pleasant change from the incessant noise and movement at the university an hour or so away where, normally, my job was dean of students. In truth it was, as my late father used to say, in a rare ironic moment, not so much a job as a position. Others did most of the real work. I was, in fact, in a kind of pastoral limbo, recovering, ostensibly, from several years of hard, unsavoury employment.

The phone aroused me on that Monday morning in Port Hood and launched the narrative that I must now, with some reluctance, share.

“The bishop needs to see you.”

“What does he want now?” I asked.

“He didn’t say. He said to come this evening. To the palace.”

I know now that I was stalling when I drove to Little Harbour, which is another, small fishing port just off a secondary road on the southern edge of the parish.

The harbour seemed to be deserted. Among the vivid particulars of that October morning in 1993 I remember a blue heron, knee-deep, transfixed by something in the quiet, oil-stained water. Then I heard a throbbing diesel engine and at that moment observed a tall radar antenna mounted upon what might have been a crucifix. It was moving slowly above the crest of a low ridge in the near distance. The transient cross and the gentle rumble seemed unrelated until a boat suddenly appeared around the jagged end of a breakwater. It was a fishing vessel, about forty feet long, bristling with aerials and with a broad workspace behind the cab. The name, the *Lady Hawthorne*, might have been an omen, or maybe I just think that now, in the clarity of hindsight.

The boy standing on the bow was about eighteen years old. A rope dangled casually from his large left hand. He wore the uniform of the shore—jeans, a discoloured sweater unravelling at the elbows, knee-high rubber boots. He had a thick mop of unfashionably long hair obscuring his brow and neck. His face was tanned. He stared straight ahead but then turned and nodded, a moment of distracted curiosity as the boat slipped down the long throat of the harbour, stem turning a clean, whispering furrow.

It was about eight o’clock. The blood-red sun hovering behind me lifted a flimsy mist and held it just above the surface of the water. I felt the first stirring of a breeze. Something about the boat, perhaps its name, and the posture of that boy caused me to defer my anxieties for the moment. It was so rare to see someone that age stationary, sombre. I was more accustomed to a rowdy adolescent enthusiasm. This young man, I realized, was exceptional only because of time and place. Maybe any one of them in those circumstances would have been the same. Quiet. But he caught my attention nevertheless and linked that moment to tender places in the memory. Doomed boys and men: in retrospect they all have that stillness.

The man at the controls was probably my age, tall and heavy-set. They were, to my mind, almost reckless then, rushing through the narrow passage, past a nestling line of sister boats. But just before the wharf there was a roar of reverse acceleration and the *Lady Hawthorne* seemed to pivot in a tight circle then drift gently into a space between two others, both pointing seaward. The boy stepped casually ashore with the rope. The older man was already

at the stern, gathering another line into a coil, which he tossed up onto the land.

The two fishermen were winching some large plastic boxes onto the dock as I was walking back to my car. Father and son, I assumed. They didn't seem to notice me.

I was almost at the car when the older man spoke. "Wicked morning, eh, Father."

I turned.

"I never forget a face," he said. "Father MacAskill, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said.

He walked toward me then, holding out a large hand. He seemed a bit unsteady. The boy was back on board the boat and out of sight.

"Dan MacKay," he said. "I think I heard you're from up around the strait."

"Yes. And you?"

"I'm a shore road MacKay."

His hair, the colour of sand, was streaked with wisps of grey. A name stirred in the memory.

"Danny Ban," I said. "They used to call you Danny Ban, I think."

He blushed. "Years ago. I'd hate to think of what you heard. Danny Bad was more like it probably."

I laughed.

"But I don't live here now. I'm up in Hawthorne. Been there for years. Built my own place after the young fella came along."

"Hawthorne," I said. "I noticed ... the name on your boat."

"You know the place?"

"I've heard of it. But I've never been there."

"You should drop in sometime. Visit the house."

"Maybe I will."

The boy was walking toward their truck, ignoring us.

"The name is on the mailbox at the lane," his father said. "MacKay. We're the only ones up there."

"Thanks."

He turned then and walked toward the truck, where the boy was already waiting at the wheel. The engine roared impatiently to life. I wondered again about the unsteadiness in his pace. From being on the boat, I thought. Sea legs.

He'd hardly closed the truck door when they were off, rear wheels spinning in the gravel. The truck stopped briefly where the wharf road meets the pavement. You could tell by the angled heads that they were talking. Using their secret language, the dialect of intimacy. Single words and obscure phrases conveying volumes.

"I'm a shore road MacKay," he'd said. A brief biography and, for those who know the place, a genealogy, all you need to know summed up in a single phrase. Once, I might have

felt a little envious. But somewhere along the way identity has ceased to matter, where I'm from, inconsequential. I have become the cloth. That's enough for anyone to know.

"Come by any time," he'd said. "For a visit."

And that's how things begin. Needs dressed up as hospitality.

There was a rusty freighter in the canal that technically sustains our status as an island. The swing bridge at the end of the mile-long causeway was open, the road lined with cars and trucks impatient for their mainland destinations. I welcomed the delay. The bishop always has a reason when he calls; he always has a "special" job.

I've often tried to remember how it started, how I became his ... what? What am I? I suppose it's all a matter of perspective. I'll put it this way: for other priests, I'm not a welcome presence on the doorstep.

The first summons by the bishop had seemed innocuous enough. The particulars are almost lost now, obscured by far more troubling memories, but I remember what he said: "I've asked you to come here because you have a good head on your shoulders."

He wanted me to handle a delicate matter. That was how he would describe them all. Matters that were delicate. Issues that required a good head and a steady hand. It was probably the late seventies. I'd only just returned from my two years in Honduras.

"After what you've been through down south," he said, "you'll probably consider this kind of Mickey Mouse. But things are getting out of hand here. Dear old John the Twenty-third, God rest his soul ... he had no idea what he was getting us all into."

I remember listening carefully, trying to anticipate where he was heading.

He sighed deeply. "There's a young priest ... You probably know him."

I probably did, at one time.

I'd prefer not to name the place specifically. Just imagine one of many threadbare little communities clinging to the hundreds of bays and coves that once had integrity by virtue of their isolation. The priest in question and his young housekeeper had become a source of local gossip. I do remember that she had a pretty face with warm, frightened eyes and a full mouth that trembled when I asked her if Father was in. But mostly I remember the culpable attitude. It was his smugness, his unspoken sense of superiority. It was his obvious certainty that he'd transcended the lies and postures that had trapped the rest of us, we lesser priests in our barren inhumanity. I've heard and seen it all many times since then.

I said: "Your housekeeper seems to be putting on weight." I smiled, coldly, I hoped.

He laughed. "I already know why you're here. Let's not beat around the bush."

"You go first," I said, sipping at my tea.

He told me that "in all sincerity" the situation made him a better person. He actually believed it. I confess I felt like hitting him. I think I arranged a period of reflection in Toronto and he was gone in a few weeks. I persuaded her to lie low for a while. Life is full of temporary absences, I told her. It was that simple. But it was only the beginning, a sa

rehearsal for the challenging assignments yet to come.

I was rattled by the time I reached the campus. It's difficult to say for sure why. The reference to Hawthorne? The boy on the boat? Given what I now know, it could have been either, but it was, in part, almost certainly the summons from the bishop. The bishop on calls when there's a problem.

"You know about the bishop?" Rita reminded me.

"Yes."

"And you have an appointment at three this afternoon. An incident on the weekend."

"Incident? What kind of incident?"

"Campus police found a fellow on the roof of the chapel. They think that you should handle it." She smiled, sympathetically, I thought.

I guess by then a part of me accepted that I'd become a specialist in discipline. Technical, it's part of the dean's job, and I was officially a dean. In truth I had neither the academic nor the occupational background for such a post. Just the temperament and, by default, the practical experience. I was a clergyman posted to a small, nominally Catholic university because my bishop didn't really know where else to put me. At the peak of my usefulness I was attached to the diocesan chancery, but I soon became too controversial even for that busy place. Toxic, I suppose, is not too strong a word. My colleagues know about my history, my experience rooting out perversions, disciplining other priests, and sometimes students when the cases are particularly sensitive. The Exorcist they've called me. Behind my back, of course.

A student on the chapel roof?

"He had a handsaw."

"A saw?"

"Go figure."

The bishop was expecting me at seven. I decided to walk. The town was quiet. On Monday nights the students usually stay in because they're broke or hungover or both. Bored waiters stood outside the silent pub, the smoke from their cigarettes curling like fog around them in the still October air.

"Winter's not far off," I remark, walking by.

Once, the reply would have been swift and respectful. Yes, Father. Hand raised quickly to the cap. You can feel the snow in the air already. Good evening to yourself, Father. Now they stare. They're just suspicious. Burly boys in baseball caps, arms folded. We are a fallen species. Strange men in black, stunted by the burden of our secrets. I smile. What if they knew the whole story?

I try to remember all the times I've made that walk through town to see my bishop. Past the looming cathedral, the bowling alley, the pub. Past what was, in my student days, a restaurant called the Brigadoon. We had rules back then. Lights out at eleven. Up and out

time for Mass at seven. No alcohol or women in the rooms. Virtue was the essence of the status quo. Virtue was the norm, they taught us.

Times have changed.

I fumble for the rosary in the pocket of my overcoat. The mindless recitation always helps subdue anxiety.

The first sorrowful mystery. The agony in the garden. The smooth, small beads are soothing on the fingertips.

The bishop's palace is set back from Main Street, among dark chestnut trees. I don't know why they call it the palace. It's just a house, large to be sure, and elegant. The designation "palace" probably had more to do with the authority of the old man inside than the architecture.

He met me at the door. I anticipated the welcoming aromas of cooking, but the place seemed clean and empty, vaguely like the cathedral on St. Ninian Street.

"I forgot," he said. "Herself had the day off. I'm hopeless in the kitchen. You didn't eat, did you?"

"No."

"Well, I'm starved. You order up a pizza. It'll be on me. You'd have a dram?"

"I would," I said, "if you coaxed me."

"Help yourself. I'm on the phone. There's a takeout menu on my desk."

He disappeared again and I headed for the sideboard in his study, where the whiskies were lined up in crystal decanters. I poured a drink. Picked up the phone, heard someone talking far away, quickly opened up another line and dialed the local takeout. Then sat down to wait. Our Saviour, hanging on the large crucifix above the desk, was staring down at me. He seemed to be saying: You again? What now? I wish I knew. I could hear the bishop's voice faintly in another room. He was speaking loudly. But then I heard what seemed to be a laugh.

I'm sure he wasn't that informal for everybody. I had special status because of my unusual history. My adult life, I suppose, could be measured in the spaces between my visits to the little office. How many years since I first sat there, a student, earnest in the throes of my vocation, oozing piety and purpose? I can see him now, sitting serenely beneath that crucifix.

"I think I want to be a priest," I told him, heart pounding.

He listened quietly, but in the manner of one who already knew far more than I was telling him. He was smiling, but the eyes were not encouraging. "Why would you want to be a priest?"

I wasn't ready for the question. I assumed the Church was like any wartime army, always looking for recruits.

"I might need time to think before I answer," I said carefully.

"Good. Take all the time you need. The answer is important. It could one day save your soul."

He never asked again, which is just as well, for even now I'm not sure what I'd say.

My eyes drifted back to the crucifix. The Saviour's face exhibits a kind of weariness that can easily relate to. When all is said and done, I thought, I don't really have the stomach for this anymore. Disciplining wayward priests and drunken students.

The door opened suddenly. I want to say he "swept" into the room. You could imagine the swish of vestments, medieval dust rising around sandals. He was wearing running shoes, shorts, and a cardigan. His silver hair was disorderly. He went straight to the sideboard and poured himself a stiff drink. The bishop grew up in a place called Malignant Cove and clearly loves the reaction this disclosure always gets. You laugh as though you haven't heard it a hundred times before.

"You were in Port Hood for the weekend."

"Yes," I said. "Mullins called out of the blue."

He was pouring generously. "Coincidentally, I was just on the phone about a matter indirectly concerning Port Hood. And you."

I was trying to imagine what it was.

"You remember Father Bell ... the notorious Brendan Bell?"

"Yes," I said warily, thinking to myself, So that's what this is all about. Brendan Bell. Who now?

"One of your former clients," he said.

"I remember."

Bell was supposed to be the last of them—"the last station on our *via dolorosa*," was how he phrased it. The bishop actually promised. This should be the last of it, he'd said. Maybe that's why I recall that particular encounter with such clarity.

The first time I met him, Bell was sitting exactly where I was sitting at that moment. It was in the winter, 1990. He made quite an impression, an Anglo-Irish Newfoundlander, a little shorter than I am, but most people are. Dark brown hair pulled back tightly into a tiny knob-like ponytail, a brilliant smile that seemed genuine, and nothing whatsoever in his manner that might reveal the miserable circumstances that sent him to us. But I soon found out that he was in a spot of trouble. The bishop of St. John's was asking for a tiny favour.

I suggested Mullins in Port Hood.

"You'll like Port Hood," I said. "But they won't put up with any bullshit there."

Bell smiled at me and nodded. "I hear you loud and clear."

"You probably knew he was in Toronto," the bishop said, now sniffing at his drink.

"That's where he was heading after Port Hood," I said.

"Your Brendan has applied for laicization. That was Toronto on the line just now. Wondering if we'd put a word in. He wants to be fast-tracked."

"What's his rush?" I asked.

"He says he's in love."

"In love with what?"

“He says he’s getting married.”

“Married? Brendan?”

The bishop nodded, a tight smile causing the corners of his mouth to twitch.

“Marrying a woman?” I said, incredulous.

“That’s what they do, though you never know, up there in Toronto.”

“So what will you do?” I asked.

“I said I’d help. Brendan married—good for the optics, don’t you think?”

The pizza arrived and we moved to the kitchen. The bishop was carrying our glasses and a fresh bottle of Balvenie. He arranged two places at the table, tore sheets from a roll of paper towel.

“You’ve been ordained, what, now? Twenty-five years, I think.” He was speaking with his mouth full.

“Approximately.”

“Are you planning anything ... some little do to mark the special anniversary?”

“No.”

“I suppose,” he said, chewing thoughtfully, “you have no family to speak of. I suppose it would be different if you were in a parish.”

“Perhaps.”

“You must sometimes wonder why you’ve never had a parish of your own.”

I shrugged. “You’ve told me more than once. I think you used to call it my ‘asymmetrical family history.’”

“You were a curate once.”

“Assistant.”

“Well, never mind that. I sent you down to Central America. In 1975, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Those were the days, when I had manpower to spare.” He shook his head and studied me for a moment.

“But it wasn’t exactly a ‘manpower’ decision, was it?” I thought he’d ignore the comment.

“You went through a hard patch, true enough,” he said. “But it defined your special gift. I’m loath to quote Nietzsche ... but ... you know what I mean. You’re a strong man. A survivor. I always knew that.”

I nodded uncomfortably.

“I consider that period a little ... hiccup ... in an otherwise exemplary priesthood.” He sipped the drink, reflecting, I assumed, upon my exemplary service. “Ministry takes many forms. Tegucigalpa revealed yours. The Lord’s methods aren’t always obvious to us mortals.”

“I suppose,” I said, attempting a wry smile.

I had three drinks in and more than half the pizza was already gone when he got around to what I was really there for. He said he wanted me, after all these years, to take over a parish.

A little place. Nothing too strenuous.

“Me?”

“Time to settle down,” he said. “I figure you’re ready for some new challenges. What would you think of Creignish?”

“Creignish,” I repeated.

“Yes,” he replied.

“I can’t see it. I wouldn’t have a clue what to do there. And I’m perfectly happy at the university.”

But I knew his mind was made up. He had that sorrowful look he sometimes gets when exercising God’s authority.

“Having priests semi-employed at the university became a luxury we can’t afford a long time ago. There’s no shortage of lay professors and administrators. Look around you.”

“But the Catholic character of the university? People from all over send their kids here for what they expect to be a Catholic education.”

“We’re more concerned about the Catholic character of the countryside, the solid places like Port Hood and Creignish. Malignant Cove.”

I knew I was supposed to laugh. “But—”

He raised an apostolic hand for silence, then stood and paced the room. “Look,” he said finally. “I regard you as a clone of myself. So I’m going to be frank.” He took the bottle and splashed both our glasses. “I thought certain ... matters ... were all behind us. But there have been developments.”

“Developments?”

“Nothing to concern yourself about just yet. But next year could be tough. Big time.”

Instantly, half a dozen names and faces flashed before my eyes.

“Not Brendan Bell?”

“No, no, no,” he said impatiently. “That’s old history. We seem to be entering phase two now. The lawyers are getting into the act. I’d like to get you out of the line of fire.”

“What line of fire?”

“I just want you out of the way. You never know what lawyers might come up with. I think Creignish is perfect. Off the beaten track.”

We sat in silence for a full minute, the old house creaking around us.

“You’re going to have to tell me who it is,” I said. “Which one they’re talking about.”

He reached for my glass, which was still half full. “Let me freshen that.”

“Look, I’d appreciate just a clue ... just to know how worried I should be.”

“It’s none of them and all of them. You can relax.”

The face and tone were unconvincing. We sat and stared at each other.

Finally he said, “You’ve been mentioned.”

“I’ve been mentioned.”

“You know how it is these days. Everything a conspiracy. Cover-up. You, me. Now we seem to be the bad guys. Whatever happened to trust and respect, never mind the faith?”

“Mentioned by?”

“The damned insinuating lawyers.”

“What are they insinuating?”

“It’s only speculation about how we handled certain matters. They keep going on about something called ‘vicarious liability.’ Did you ever hear the like of it?” He tilted his head back, staring at the ceiling, lips puckered. “Vicarious my foot.” Then he sighed and sipped his drink. “You’ve turned out to be my rock. It was as if providence revealed your strengths to me exactly when I needed you. But now it’s time for you to get lost in parish work and pray that this thing blows over without bankrupting us.”

“But Creignish?”

“You’ll have no trouble settling in. You’re from around there. They’ll know the kind of man you really are, no matter what they might or might not hear.”

I stared at him. I thought: He’s dreaming. But argument was futile.

“For how long?”

“As long as necessary.”

At the door, when I was leaving, his mood became enthusiastic. I was going to love parish work, he said. “Especially Creignish. Good old-fashioned people there. You’ll do a bang-up job. You’re going to be a real priest for a change. Anybody comes looking for you, that’s what they’re going to find. God’s shepherd, tending the flock.”

“When do you want me to go?” I asked.

“The sooner the better.”

“I’ll go in the spring,” I said.

He looked dubious.

“Unless, of course, the bailiff is on the way already.”

He didn’t react to my irony, just said, “Suit yourself ... but keep your head down in the meantime.” Before he shut the door, he said, “I heard about the kid on the roof of the chapel the other night. What are they doing about him?”

I shrugged and waited.

“They say he had a saw or something, that he was heading for the cross ...”

“I’m giving him a break,” I said.

“Good. You know who his father is.”

And he shut the door.

† † †

Walking home on that cold October night, I was barely conscious of the town, the small clusters of subdued youngsters straggling along the street. A fine drizzle filtered through the low-beam headlights of a passing pickup truck. A fluorescent light flickered in an office an

another window filled with darkness. I felt disoriented. It was his mood. The heartiness was false. Something large has rattled him. He's sending me away again. Where did this begin?

And then it is 1968 again and I am on this street, walking full of purpose in the opposite direction, toward the railway station, with a suitcase and a briefcase, the sum of all my secular possessions. Walking tall, bound for a place that I now dare not name for fear of stirring best-forgotten trauma. It is June, an evening sweet with early lilac and the hum of hopeful voices talking politics. June '68, a renaissance of sorts, at least for me. I was reborn a priest.

Oh, yes. He told me that time too that I was going to love the place, the place I dare not mention now, in middle age. And by the way, he said, you'll be with an old pal of ours.

"Surely you remember Dr. Roddie ... your old philosophy guru. He'll be there with you. He said he'll keep an eye on you. The two of you can spend the long winter evenings reading the Summa to each other."

"Father Roddie?"

"I knew that you'd be pleased. He's taking a little sabbatical. Teaching college students burned him out. He could have gone anywhere ... I offered Rome. But he insisted on helping out in a parish for a while. Isn't that just typical?"

The street was almost empty. The drizzle warmed below my eyes, ran like tears beside my nose. Father Roddie. I'd almost forgotten him. A dormant apprehension glowed within me then, just as swiftly, dimmed. It can't be Father Roddie this time. He'd be nearly eighty now. I laughed aloud.

"Father Roddie. Wherever did you get to?"

A student shuffled by, stopped and turned. "Excuse me?" he said.

I hurried on.

The campus was quiet but for the throb of music from the residences. I was near the chapel so I turned toward the stone steps leading up to its double doors. They were unlocked but yielded with reluctance. I dipped my fingers in the holy water then slid into a pew near the back. The gloom flickered near the altar. Somewhere in the basement auditorium someone was practising scales on a clarinet. A tuneless wail of notes gave substance to the shadow around me until I felt that I was wrapped in a suffocating shroud, lost in the endless carnage of days since I first embarked upon this journey into ambiguity. It's ironic when I think of the beauty of the priesthood used to be the promise of its certainties.

The clarinet faltered. A music student struggling with a hard passage from *Rhapsody in Blue*. The wind rose outside, tapping at a window.

Tap tap tap.

"Hello ... are you in there?"

Tap tap tap.

"Father Roddie?"

The door is ajar. I hear a sound. Someone moving.

Just walk right in, he'd said. The hearing isn't what it used to be.

I walked right in.

An old priest's sanctuary, drape darkened, sound muffled by reams of books, ancient tomes promising the wisdom of the ages.

"Father Roddie?"

He's at his desk, expression calm and cold. "And what can I do for you."

Not a question. A comment.

"I had a question ..."

"What about?"

And then I see his visitor, the boy, stricken. Pale with guilt.

I think I must have slept there in the chapel for a while. It was late when I returned to my room. Then I remembered: Creignish. I had a mental picture of the place, the side of a low mountain of the same name, a few miles from where I grew up. Oh, well.

My eye moved to a bookshelf, stopped at a black book spine. *John Macquarrie Existentialism*. I removed it from the shelf, turned to the neat handwriting on the title page. *Tragedy and limitation are part of what it means to be human ... Then: Welcome back from your sabbatical. Found this in Boston. Perhaps our paths will cross ere long. RM.*

And then the scrawled signature: *Roddie MacVicar. December, 1977.*

I closed the book, and then my eyes. The images were overwhelming.

"I don't care what you think you saw."

The bishop's neck is pulsing, a purple swelling throbbing at the centre of his forehead, outraged roseola nose aglow. "I know what I saw." "You think you know." "I know."

"Our eyes play tricks."

"I know."

"We know nothing. We believe. We have faith. It is our only source of hope. But that isn't the point. You had no goddamned business spying."

Spying? I just stare.

"I sent you there to help them out, not to snoop."

I turn away from his outrage. Study the crucifix above his desk.

"You're talking about a saint," he says, quiet now, the rage replaced by injury. "A saint. A prince among men. I know him well. I've known him since we were students. You should aspire someday to be his equal."

The bishop, finally calmed, declared that it was my "asymmetrical upbringing," my "dysfunctional home life" that was at the root of my deficiencies. It caused me to see the worst in everyone, he said, and to be too inclined to read things in then jump to wrong

conclusions. I don't understand the family dynamic, and until I do, I'll never be a parish priest. A parish is the ideal family, he said.

"What are you trying to tell me?"

He waved an impatient hand. "Let's not get analytical. Let's just say you need some special on-the-job experience. Which is why we're thinking of sending you away for a while."

We?

"We're thinking of somewhere in the Third World, where things are simple and straightforward. A good place for you to experience the richness of family and parish life and the undiluted faith of the common people."

The Third World?

"We happen to have an arrangement with the archdiocese of Tegucigalpa ..."

"When?"

"They're expecting you next week."

I poured a whisky, sipped it straight. It was Tegucigalpa then, Creignish now. In a way it was easier this time, I thought. Nothing in my life, since then or yet unlived, could ever be like Tegucigalpa. And this time I'll have months to make the mental adjustments. And who knows? Things change. By spring we could all be different people.

I surveyed my tiny room. And if I go, I won't have much to pack. Mostly books. Some photographs. A frugal wardrobe. One of the advantages of my calling: we travel light.

The sun was slow in '94. The drift ice from the Gulf of St. Lawrence stayed late, blocking the advance of spring somewhere near Montreal. The wind still cold, the hills around me tawny, splotches of dark evergreens brooding.

Crossing the causeway, I felt a sudden need for a toilet and I remembered there was a washroom at the information bureau they installed on the island side of the strait many years ago, just after they finished the link to the mainland. But the place was locked up awaiting summer and the strangers for whom it and the toilets functioned. I walked around the end of the building and emptied myself there, huddling close to a stone chimney to escape the attention of passing cars and the southeasterly wind.

Across the strait the rain was blackening the stone on the carved flank of the cape where they had gouged out enough rock for the crossing forty years before. The mauve strait water flashed silver highlights in the wind. The air was sharp with the smell of sulphur and a salty fish tang. Great plumes of steam fleeing before the chill wind slanted over the pulp mill that has transformed the place.

At the base of the cape there is now a large pier, and on that day a huge Canada Steamship Lines bulk carrier was tied up there, loading stone. I'm told the rock from the cape makes excellent pavement, that people haul the stone from the cape away for roads in distant places. I once believed it would make the road that would bring all those places here. It paved the way for me to leave forever.

1975. november 9. left miami about 3 on taca flight 801. one stop, at san pedro sula. lush countryside, mountains, plantations green as golf courses. banana groves with gushing irrigation pipes and smoke from small fires rising ... they call it the third world. but it's like a garden. and it smells like home. smoke and decay. almost familiar.

A sudden gust of wind dashed my face with a cold, salty spray. I turned toward the car. The causeway forks in three directions at the top: town to the right, Creignish a hard left, and, a few miles up the middle, a non-place called the Long Stretch, where I grew up. A country road, basically. The old home is still there. It is my only connection, apart from memory. *Almost* the only connection: there is a neighbour, John Gillis, with whom I share a troubled history. The fact that he was briefly married to my sister is only part of it.

My sister's name is Effie and she's all I have by way of family. Effie and her daughter whose name is Cassandra and who has, in the blur of time, evolved into a young woman. I don't think I'd recognize her anymore. They live in Toronto.

At the first clear view of Creignish I stopped and studied the stern old church in the distance, with its modest dome and crucifix grimly overlooking the flashing bay and the distant mainland. You'd hardly notice Creignish before you'd passed it. Some houses strung along the lap of a low mountain with an old church and glebe about halfway up its rock

flank. The parish is called Stella Maris. Star of the Sea.

The eye is drawn to the broad expanse of St. Georges Bay, which sprawls before you narrowing as it approaches the Canso Strait to the south, reaching toward invisible Prince Edward Island to the northwest. The dark outlines of Antigonish County define the mainland shore.

Creignish. *Creig* means “rock.” It also means Peter. Upon this rock, said Jesus, I will build my church. And Peter’s church stood there, rocklike, on the stony banks of Creignish, a visible symbol of authority and permanence, like the Mother Church herself. Impervious to death and time and the winds of history.

I realized I’d parked at the end of someone’s driveway. On a low knoll at the top of the lane there was an old house that had grown shabby since the last time I noticed it, many years before. I struggled to remember a name, something MacIsaac. And I realized that I once knew most of the people around here. Now they and I are strangers, set apart by the sacrament that I embraced in 1968.

The old glebe house stood to the right of the church, at the end of a steep driveway. A tiny cemetery on the left wrapped around a hill with a large crucifix on its crown. The porch door was sticky and I had to use my shoulder to force it open. Inside there was a damp, familiar smell of decay and turpentine. The scent of history. The odours of my childhood. The Third World reek. Woodsmoke and kerosene. DDT. Boiled tea and old clothing. Rot.

The door to the kitchen was unlocked and it swung wide to reveal a sterile interior. White walls. A tile floor of alternating white and black squares. A silver Saviour hung on a black cross above a doorway to the interior of the house. A pantry door, nibbled at the corners by mice. An unturned calendar, January 1991. More than three years old. I tore it down.

I stood still there in the chilly kitchen for what seemed like a long time, trying to warm the moment by thinking of the place as home, but there was no comfort in the memory. I felt the presence of all the solitary men who stood like this before my time, staring into a lonely future. Probably kneeling to acknowledge acceptance of their fate.

I knelt.

Jesus. I didn’t ask for this, but help me make the most of it.

I sought the worn wooden prayer beads in my jacket pocket.

tegucigalpa’s airport is dingy, full of sullen men with guns. weary inspectors deferring to my collar. alfonso was waiting. had a lit paper sign with something like my name in heavy ink. FR. MACKASGAL.

I peer into the gloom of what will be my study. The other peril, I tell myself, is silence. I was so accustomed to the sounds of other people’s lives around me at the university. The old priests coughing and shuffling in nearby rooms, awaiting their eternal rewards. Squealing slamming doors. Students rampaging in and out. Incessant booming stereos. Traffic passing endlessly on West Street. No more of that. Silence now. I must consider this a welcome change. Learn to work with silence. The silence can become a passageway to better places.

Up a creaky stairway. This must be the bishop’s room, I thought as I peered into a large dark space. Every glebe house has a special guest room for the bishop. There was a fair

smell of clammy wallpaper. I could see the dim shape of a bed and a dresser with a large water jug and wash basin. I could feel the dampness of disuse. I walked toward a slash of light and pulled back drapes, exposed a window. There were clumps of dead flies between the panes of glass. The sun was beginning to press weakly against the filmy sky. Small fishing boats dotted the choppy grey sea. Inside the room, the anemic light revealed the face of a sallow Jesus on the wall. On another wall, the Blessed Virgin, a hand raised in salutation, a child with a dead man's face in the crook of her left arm.

I lit a candle on the bedside table, hoping to defeat the smell of loneliness. Opened a stick drawer. More dead flies.

A smaller bedroom along the hall. Bathroom. A second large bedroom. Closet door ajar, metal coat hangers entangled. A faded *Blue Boy* print on one wall and another crucifix above the naked bed.

Back downstairs, in the study, I found a large safe, pointlessly locked; the combination was taped to the outside of the door. It was full of ledgers. Records of births and baptisms, marriages and deaths. Parish finances. And photographs of old men in black suits and liturgical vestments.

You had no goddamned business spying ...

I study a stern, anonymous face above the Roman collar. Pious, slightly arrogant. He wearing a hat even though he's obviously indoors. Concealing baldness? A hint of hidden vanity? Was he one of those whose secret weakness undermined the Rock as nothing had before?

Maybe they were classmates, he and Father Roddie. They'd have known each other. Old men, presumed exempted from temptations of the flesh.

I closed the safe.

I don't belong here.

But this is the priesthood. This is what you're for.

But that's not why I'm here.

There was a radio on the desk. I switched it on. The house filled up with mournful country music. I unpacked the few photographs that I'd brought from my rooms at the university. One I've carried with me everywhere. There are two men in uniform, one of them my father and a third in work clothes with a hunting rifle in his hand, and a dead deer draped on the fender of a truck. There's an inscription on the back: *October '41. Home from Debert. Three men, decades younger than I am now, faces still defined by innocence and curiosity, yet to be rewritten by experience. My father's name was Angus. These were his closest friends, Sandy Gillis, in his army uniform, and Sandy's brother Jack, holding up the deer's head, a knowing expression on its lifeless face. Effie gave it to me. It had once belonged to John. He didn't want it when they finally broke up their marriage. The rifle in Jack's hand was the one his brother Sandy used in 1963.*

That photo, in a way, is my biography: three men who shaped what has become my life, created what became my family. My sister Effie, briefly married to Sandy's only offspring, John Gillis. And Sextus Gillis, the son of Jack, closer to me than a brother once, smitten

briefly, like his cousin, by my sister.

In another photo, Effie is a child, red hair wild and unruly. And there is a more recent formal portrait, Dr. Effie MacAskill Gillis, or Faye, or *Oighrig nic Ill-Iosa* as she sometimes styles herself now that she's a scholar. The sharp-tongued history professor, with a rare smile for a stranger's camera.

And then there is the photograph from Puerto Castilla. Three ordinary people on a holiday. The younger me, tall and leaner of jaw, longer of hair. Jacinta in the middle, shorter, arms outstretched to catch our shoulders, hauling us together. Dark Alfonso on her left, me on the right. We are smiling.

In one of seven boxes filled with books I find my diaries.

1975. nov. 26. harsh dreams and the humidity and crowing roosters drive me out of bed early. dawns are pink and misty here. people emerge like shadows from the darkness with their packages and their children. trinkets, fruit and vegetables to sell, families trudging toward the glow of day. there is an old woman who cooks on a bucketful of burning charcoal. through doorways i see women bending over open hearths and the tortillas. everybody friendly to the new priest. and dogs barking at the roosters. the old woman at the smouldering bucket calls me padre pelirrojo.

I closed the journal, then placed it and the others on top of an empty bookcase. There were a dozen journals. Careful, coded records of my years of ministry. The record of my sordid service for our Holy and Eternal Mother, a source of self-recrimination but also of security. At the university I'd leave them prominently displayed. Reminders of who I am and whom I work for. At the university, my visitors would eye them nervously. They'd mean nothing here, except to me.

I arranged the journals carefully by year. Then I set the photographs on the mantel above the blocked fireplace. They are as alien as I am, I told myself. Strangers here. Strangers from the dead past. Chilled, I found a thermostat, turned the dial and heard the distant rumble of the furnace.

In the house where I grew up, I have another photograph from just before that first assignment, in Honduras. I haven't set eyes on it in years, though I remember it in detail—the dreamy expression, the piety of innocence. One day it suddenly became too much. A reminder of all the contradictions. I shoved it in a drawer. I couldn't find it now even if I wanted to.

My sister Effie was the only one to notice it was gone. It was during one of her rare visits home.

“What have you done with that lovely picture, your ordination portrait?”

“I put it somewhere,” I said.

“I still have mine,” she said. “It's in my office in Toronto. Everybody comments.”

It was the innocence that bothered me, I think. Maturity has stripped away my palliative optimism.

they call me pelirrojo. padre pelirrojo. father red, because of my red hair. they should be careful calling anybody red around the place, alfonso says. back home in salvador they called me red. which is why i'm here. jacinta seems concerned. she has unusual green eyes.

The day's weak light was failing fast as night approached. I might feel warmer in the church I thought.

It was dim there and a kind of peace fell over me. Shadows absorbed boundaries, enlarging the possible, making the hollow, vaulted places more vast than I remembered. Surfaces and corners softened. Shadows from a solitary vigil light flickered. I noticed I was not alone. Among the wavering shadows a dark, motionless form, someone crouched in prayer before the banks of votive candles to the right of the altar. I stayed in the back. The prim kerchief told me it was a woman. I sat still, touched by her devotion.

There used to be a rail between the people and the altar. A little fence. Women were not allowed inside the fence except to change the linen, scrub the floors. I remember women with their hair covered, working silently, efficiently, to minimize their time in the forbidden spaces. And I remember Sundays, people kneeling outside the sanctuary, elbows on the starched cloth of the altar rail, faces buried in dry, knobby hands. People lined up to receive the Blessed Sacrament, eyes intense with devotion and hope. Cape Breton, Honduras—the features blur in my memory. People shaped by hardship and faith into a common character.

There was a flare of light at the front. The dear woman was lighting candles. Thanksgiving Anxiety? Light now flickered in a red receptacle, casting rosy shadows. The glow of faith and hope.

A shadow rose. I heard the clink of a coin. Another light flared briefly. Another candle. Another movement as she made the sign of the cross.

She must be old, I thought. Lighting candles, praying for some small reprieve.

The church creaked as a cold wind rose outside. A suffocating silence drifted down from the dark recesses in the hidden ceiling as the cold currents of air wafted over me. The woman hurried by, head down, arms wrapped across her chest as if cradling a child. She didn't see me. The glass front door whispered shut behind her.

Back in the glebe, I found a loaf of fresh homemade bread and a bag of tea biscuits on the kitchen table. And a note.

"If we'd known you were coming, we'd have baked a cake ..."

They'd drawn little music notes around the words. I vaguely recalled an old song. Ethel Merman singing "how'dya do, how'dya do, how'dya doooo."

"This loaf of bread will have to doooo."

It was signed Bob O.

Bobby O'Brian showed up later to apologize in person for the lack of preparation, the shabby glebe. The women were beside themselves, he said. New priest coming and the bread not even made. I assured him everything was fine. He said that he'd been president of the parish council, but since there hadn't been a resident priest for a couple of years the council had lapsed. Just in suspension, though. A lack of manpower. But ready to go again now that I'd arrived. Just say the word. His wife made the bread by way of contrition for the state of the glebe house. One of the priorities of the place was a new house for the priest.

I told him again, the place was fine.

“Did you try it yet? The bread?”

“Yes,” I lied. “It’s fabulous.”

“I’ll tell the wife. She makes the best bread in the county.”

I smiled.

Bobby was middle-aged, prematurely balding and on the heavy side. It was great to have a priest again, he declared. To see a light in the window of the old place.

“Kind of hard to take, not having a priest. We were sure they were going to shut us down for good, after so many years. Would you believe we were the only church in the area once, years and years ago? St. James we were back then.”

I nodded and smiled and said I knew that.

He said, “Of course you do. I’m forgetting, you grew up in this neck of the woods. I did a little homework. Back of Port Hastings, you grew up. Out the Long Stretch.”

“Not too much homework, I hope.”

I forced myself to smile again.

“The wrath to come ...” Those bleak words of absolution say it all, now that I think of it. The grim warning in the burial prayers. I think it was at a funeral in 1970 that the innocence first began to wash away under a pounding rain. I remember a stormy day, the pungent incense fumes blowing back in my face, censer clinking on its chains, rivulets of water creeping over around the edges of the artificial turf that hides the muddy evidence of our mortality.

Poor Jack Gillis. His death was as unremarkable as his life. He was visiting my father late one night and dropped dead.

His only son was glassy-eyed. “What the fuck was that all about?” Sextus said, gesturing angrily toward the casket. “Is that it?”

Jack’s sudden departure had caught him off guard. Jack was relatively young. There was so much left unsaid, undone; death should have meaning, not this feeling of betrayal, of something interrupted. Sextus repeated all the common phrases of confusion after unexpected loss, but later, calmed by liquor, he became more analytical. He spoke of how his father, travelling for work, was mostly absent from his life; how their occasional coexistence always suffered from anticipated separation. It was how most people grew up here, in this godforsaken place, scrabbling for survival.

“You don’t have to explain,” I assured him.

In the end he admitted his real anxiety: a father’s death reveals the awful tragedy of deferred conciliation. “I’m not talking about reconciliation,” he said fiercely. “I’m talking about the basics. I’m talking about what you, yourself, know all too well.”

I just listened. It’s my job, I told myself. I nodded, gripped his shoulder reassuringly. “You’ll be okay.” This I knew for sure.

Sextus bounced back quickly, as he has always done. It’s never long before he finds some sleazy analgesic. That was how I saw it then. How easily our lowest needs take over and redirect the heart away from grief. I see them still, Sextus on one side of Jack’s open grave

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