

TRAVELING CLOTHES

BILL DEASY



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COVER DESIGN
HOLLY OLLIVANDER

TRAVELING CLOTHES

for Paula

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“Impressive,” Father Mike thought as his glance landed upon Monica Arnold, a woman he’d known since high school when she had represented the gold standard of beauty against which all other girls were measured, and who now sat in the seventh row of the funeral congregation. Monica wasn’t Catholic, so she didn’t attend Saint Luke’s, which explained the priest’s lack of awareness regarding the woman’s continued luster. “Still gorgeous.”

The ragtag volunteer choir of tone-challenged senior citizens dug into the responsorial psalm. Father Mike nudged his thoughts past Monica’s triumph over kids, time, and an unappreciative husband and back to the reason they were there: Chet Howard had died. Chet Howard. Chet freaking Howard. How could that be possible?

He remembered their last encounter on a recent Sunday. Mike stopped by the Shake Shack for a burger after making his communion rounds to the parish shut-ins. Chet had been settling his check when Mike walked in.

“Great homily this morning,” Chet had joked. “You really brought some things into focus for me.”

Chet’s wayward soul had become the last of their running jokes. Mike knew humor was his best hope of luring his old buddy back into the fold and always went with it.

“I thought that was you weeping in the last row. Glad I could be of some assistance my son. You have ketchup on your chin, by the way.”

Chet was back in the fold now, Mike supposed as he stood and walked to the lectern. God gets us all eventually, or something like that.

“I remember one night when Chet and I were in the ninth grade,” Father Mike said, after reading the funeral’s gospel passage. His hands gripped the podium. His eyes scanned the somber faces, as if he were addressing each of them individually, as he’d grown comfortable doing over twelve years of delivering homilies. “A Friday night, to be exact. We went to our very first high school dance. Now Chet and I weren’t what you would call smooth with the ladies.” This drew a titter from the captive audience. “But this was our chance to start fresh, we thought. Sure, most of our classmates at Pembroke High had been our classmates in grade school as well, but that didn’t matter on that particular night. We were new men in a new place with new identities.”

His dramatic pause was met with more soft laughter.

“There was one girl I’d always had a tremendous crush on. The kind of crush that causes you to forget basic skills -- like speaking, walking, breathing.” Father Mike glanced at Jane Taylor sitting red eyed in the very last row of the small church. Her nod assured him of what he already knew: she didn’t mind him sharing this story. “Many of you might even know the object of my adolescent affection,” he continued. “She’s all grown up now, a fine upstanding citizen, and the manager of the coffee shop. She shall remain nameless.”

More laughter. Everyone knew he was referring to Jane. Something was happening in the broken down barn of a church. People were realizing that although they were there to grieve and say goodbye to a dear friend, they were not there to do those things alone. They were members of something: a family, a community, a town.

“Now, girl X looked particularly fetching that night in her Jor-

dache jeans and her Van Halen concert T-shirt. And, as I mentioned before, I was feeling braver than I had in quite some time. But I still couldn't muster the courage to ask her to dance. That's where Chet came in. Chet was the world's greatest cheerleader, the very model of moral support."

He shifted into a serviceable imitation of young Chet's voice.

"Dude, it's a different era, now, Chet said. We changed over the summer. You changed over the summer. He looked me up and down as if to verify his observation. Yeah, you're different all right, he confirmed. These were the skills that would later make him a legendary car salesman. He was selling me a better image of myself. And I bought it. And I just saw her looking over at you, Chet insisted. She's checking you out, dude. Chet was quite fond of the word 'dude' – even before it was fashionable. Long story short, I took the plunge. Thanks to Chet's rousing pep talk when the next slow song started I found the courage to walk up to the mystery girl and ask her to dance."

Father Mike paused. He knew he had them in the palm of his hand and that they all wanted to hear the end of the story. He held back a moment, then broke his own silence.

"You're wanting to know what happens next aren't you?"

Nods and smiles all around.

"She told me to take a hike." After the laughter had died down he added, "Though she wasn't mean about it. Her answer was mercifully brief. 'No.'"

"Crestfallen, I walked back to Chet and told him the sad story of the one-word rejection, and he did exactly what Chet always did, persuaded me to see it differently, to look for the silver lining, make lemonade from lemons, you supply the cliché. That's who Chet Howard was. He was a masterful revisionist who always saw the best in a situation. He was the kind of guy who might not take the bullet for you but would tell you how cool it made you look the moment you took it yourself. He was a true friend."

Father Mike stopped then. The story was all he'd prepared.

"I really don't know how to comfort you this morning...or my-

self, for that matter. To be honest, it hasn't sunk in. I still can't believe he's really gone." He ran his fingers through his short black hair and fought the tears that filled his eyes. "I will say this, though. I believe that Christ is in our suffering in exactly the same way He's in our joy. And I think, I pray, I hope that birth and death look much the same in God's eyes. Just as Chet was born into this world thirty-eight years ago, today he is born into eternity."

An hour after the funeral Father Mike returned to Saint Luke's from the cemetery where they'd laid Chet in the ground. He would head over to Melissa Howard's house shortly but needed a few minutes to himself. He treasured his time alone in the modest white rectangle of a church. Though he didn't actually believe that God was any more or less present there than in, say, a grocery store, the priest seemed better able to speak to Him in this threadbare house of worship, with its dozen small, square, stained-glass windows and its wooden pews seemingly designed to bring maximum discomfort.

He remembered the line from his homily about Christ being present in our suffering and asked himself if he really believed that. He walked through the sacristy, gave a cursory look around to make sure that everything was in its proper place then entered the sanctuary through the side door. All the while the questions continued. Did he have faith not so much in Christ but in the Church to which he'd devoted his adult life? Did he believe in his role as middleman between his congregation and God? Was he filled with the Spirit in the way he needed to be to fulfill his duties at Saint Luke's?

This train of thought led him to the one big question. The one he had not yet managed to voice but which he did then, silently, in the holy solitude of the sacred altar on which he'd consecrated ten thousand hosts: Did he want to remain a priest? He moved to his plush, red altar chair, the church's one extravagance, and sat down heavily, forcing himself to breathe more deeply as the weight of his doubt hit him like a bucket of bricks.

"Are you okay?"

The question came from a young girl he had not seen enter. She

looked to be in her teens and was pretty in a plain way, her freckles, brown hair, and brown eyes, a pleasant matched set that created an almost soothing effect.

“Yes,” he replied, after recovering from the surprise of her presence. “I’m just a little emotional today.”

“I was at the funeral,” the girl replied. “I’m really sorry about your friend.”

“Thank you.”

“And I’m sorry to bother you,” the friendly girl continued with an ease that impressed the priest. Too many teen-agers talked to the floor and were incapable of looking adults in the eyes. This girl was different. “My name is Molly Faber. I’m a student at Harrison. A freshman.”

“Good to meet you, Molly Faber. I’m Father Mike.” He covered the ground between them and extended his right hand, which she accepted. “Is there something I can help you with?”

This was the aspect of his job that was never in doubt, those moments when another human being, sometimes a stranger, more often times, not, reached out to him, and the two made a spiritual connection that did, indeed, feel sanctified by heaven.

“I think there is,” the girl continued. “It’s about your friend.”

“Chet?”

She nodded then said, “I was in the room when he died. I volunteer at the hospital a couple of hours most weekdays. I talked a lot with Mister Howard when he first came in. Got to know him a little.” She smiled, remembering. “I liked him. He was funny.”

“This seems like a sit-down conversation,” Father Mike interrupted.

They sat a few feet apart in the first pew.

“I stopped to visit him every day even after he went into the coma,” she continued. “Just for a few minutes. I’d stand there. Maybe say something about my day or mention something in the news or whatever.”

She paused.

“So I was there Thursday afternoon when all of a sudden I heard

him whisper something. His eyes were still closed, and he didn't move or anything. It almost gave me a heart attack."

She paused. Mike was suddenly desperate to hear his friend's final words.

"What did he whisper, Molly?"

She leaned toward him.

"He whispered, 'Ghost Tree. Reunite the band.'"

The strange, deathbed directive hovered in the air. Mike looked confused.

"He said what?"

"Ghost Tree. Reunite the band," she repeated. "And then... he died. Right then. I wasn't sure who to talk to about it. But then I came to the funeral and heard you talking, and I knew it was you."

"I'm glad you came, Molly," the shaken priest responded.

"Do you know anything about that band? Ghost Tree?"

"I was in it – if you can believe that one. A million years ago. I played bass. The girl I was talking about in my homily today was in it, too. Chet was our manager. We only played in public a handful of times."

"Must have left a big impression," Molly said.

"I guess so. I just can't quite get my head around it. I mean we hadn't talked about the band in years. Why would that have been his final thought?"

Molly broke the ensuing silence by standing to leave.

"I sure don't know, Father Mike, but I'm glad I found the right person," she said. "Hope I didn't bum you out."

She turned and headed for the front entrance.

Mike stopped her by saying her name.

"You didn't bum me out. Thank you for coming to me."

"Maybe I'll see you at the reunion show," she replied and then departed.

It was coincidence that brought Kenton Hall from New York to Chet Howard's funeral that weekend. Kenton's brother and sisters

were throwing a surprise seventieth birthday party for their mom, and the curly-haired filmmaker's presence was one of the gifts. When he'd reached the house late Friday night, he was greeted by the news of Chet Howard's death. And though he was younger than Chet by six years and hadn't known him well, he liked him, and was more saddened by the announcement than he would have expected.

So Kenton was in Saint Luke's that morning and was there again in the early afternoon retrieving his cell phone, which must have slipped from his pocket during the service. He was just entering the building as Father Mike and his young visitor began their conversation. Sensing a need for privacy between them, he ducked into the shadows and waited.

Ghost Tree.

He hadn't heard that name in twenty years. When he was a kid, he spied on the band's rehearsals and was enthralled, to put it mildly, by the music they made. It was like nothing he had ever heard (granted, he was only twelve years old at the time.) The band may very well have been the reason he ended up pursuing a career in filmmaking. Their music had been cinematic, larger than life, and had left him in search of the movie to match it.

As the college girl left through one door and Father Mike through another, Kenton stood off to the side, an idea forming.

At 5:00 a.m. Monday morning Jane Taylor pulled her long brown hair back into a ponytail, laced up her running shoes and walked out of the modest one-story house she'd called home for the past dozen years. Blue, her freakishly intelligent Australian cattle dog, spun around feverishly as Jane joined him in the front yard. The two had said their good mornings moments before as they'd both awakened to the radio alarm. Blue was engaged now in his traditional I'm-about-to-go-running-with-the woman-that-I love-

life-doesn't-get-any-better-than-this dance. They trotted across the lawn and onto Route 29, in the direction of town.

As Jane found her pace she let her thoughts drift to Chet – big, silly, lovable Chet. She still couldn't compute the loss. Chet's presence in Pembroke was fundamental. He was a mountain of mirth, a brother for life, no matter how infrequently they saw each other. She loved him – plain and simple. Now he was gone.

Her sadness was deepened by the fact that their friendship had faded over the years. They'd moved in different circles. She was the coffee house maven, and he stuck to the steak and beer joints. But time could never erase the bond they'd forged in high school -- Jane, Mike and Chet. Not a weekend went by in which they didn't do something together, if only just sitting around listening to music.

Mike's older brother had a vast record collection and it was almost like going to church when the three of them sampled his goods. There were the '70s crooners like Jackson Browne and James Taylor, edgier stuff like the Sex Pistols and the Violent Femmes, all of Ron Lennon's records – and, of course, every single Beatles song ever released. They also turned each other onto some unknown, up-and-coming artists like U2 and REM. Though Chet enjoyed the long nights of listening, it went deeper for Jane and Mike. It was like they were absorbing it all -- the melodies, the production, the lyrics, the history.

Their shared love of music was what led to the highpoint of that golden era -- Ghost Tree. The band was named for a towering old oak famous in the town for its purported mystical properties. It was said that the spirits of all Pembroke citizens who passed away were housed there until their lives' remaining conflicts were resolved. It stood all alone in a field not far from where Jane ran now – a field that was technically owned by the Mischelers but which had come to be considered community property over the years. Anyone was welcome to go there, and people often did -- to forgive some sin or provide a final answer, thus granting a loved one flight.

Mike played bass, and Jane sang harmony and played rhythm

electric guitar. Nathan Booth, the singer, provided lead guitar. Jonathon Hilliard, now the Dean of Admissions at Harrison College, played piano and organ. Kenny Maxim drummed. Chet rounded out the equation as the band's fast-talking, overreaching manager. He booked their gigs and gave them rousing pep talks before each one – assuring, no, guaranteeing that each was a “stepping stone” on the path to fame and fortune. He'd insisted they were the next big thing. And for a few months they were.

Jane rounded a bend with Blue angling beside her. The Hutchinson boy emerged atop his bike from his driveway fifty yards ahead, armed with a cloth sack, off to blaze his morning newspaper trail. The low, uneven line of Pembroke's modest “business district,” barely cracked the dawn-lit sky.

Though the recently opened outlet mall a few miles away, strategically positioned next to the interstate ramps, had instantly become the small town's claim to fame, it would never be Pembroke, at least not for Jane. Pembroke would forever be the humble stretch of independent shops and restaurants that lined Broad Street, the slanting white-housed neighborhoods crowding around them, and the wide, gentle maze of country roads surrounding them. It would also be the idyllic, shimmering, white and green presence of the college that stood on the fringe of “downtown.”

Jane and Blue picked up speed as Jane remembered Ghost Tree's final gig – a festival called Strawberry Days that was held each August in the heart of Pembroke. The few gigs preceding that one had generated a buzz, but their popularity solidified that day. Excitement surged like electricity through the large, beaming crowd. By the time the band hit the stage a little before sundown you'd have thought it was a Rolling Stones show, not the seventh public appearance by a group of recent high school graduates who had a musical catalogue of nine original songs and one cover -- Elvis Costello's “Peace, Love and Understanding.”

But then it all disappeared.

Jane fled to Pittsburgh. She heard Nathan went to Europe. Mike went to Erie, Jonathon stayed in Pembroke to attend Harrison,

Kenny took a job at Miller's Garage, and Chet went to work with his dad at the car dealership.

Ghost Tree was dead.

She saw Mike now, jogging in place at their traditional Monday morning meeting spot. His tall frame, black hair, and blue eyes gave him the look of a Kennedy. Jane envied his ardent religious faith. She could use some eternal, loving force to provide easy answers and comfort right about now. But she'd given up on such notions years ago thanks to a pious, controlling father and a few too many philosophy books. She traded in the saccharine fairy tale she'd been given at birth for a practical agnosticism.

"Top of the morning to you Miss Taylor," Mike said in a horrible Irish brogue as he fell in step beside her. They continued down 29 away from town, instantly in rhythm. "And good morning to you as well, Blue," the tall priest said, also in dubious dialect, to the blue-and-gray-checked dog.

"You seem chipper this morning."

"Totally faking it," Mike said. "I'm a mess."

"Glad to hear it. Me, too."

After a good five minutes in which the only sound to be heard on the tree-lined stretch of countryside was the pounding of their shoes on the smooth, black, two-lane asphalt, Mike said, "Something strange happened this weekend."

"You mean other than our friend kicking the bucket?"

"Yes," he said, "other than that."

He described his encounter with the college co-ed he'd met the afternoon of the funeral. Jane slowed their pace to a halt.

"Are you kidding me?" she asked. "Why the hell didn't you call me?"

"I thought I'd see you at Melissa's house," Mike said. "Then I got caught up with masses yesterday... and just wasn't feeling like talking. Sorry."

"It's okay," Jane said more gently. "I don't know what I'm freaking out about. It's not like it's some giant breaking news story." She paused, gently biting her lower lip, then resumed running. Mike

and Blue followed suit. “That’s crazy though, Mike,” she observed just after the first car she’d seen all morning passed on their left. “He was in a coma, for God’s sake.”

“Watch your language, Jane,” Mike cautioned. “You wouldn’t want anyone to mistake you for a believer.”

“Has Chet even mentioned Ghost Tree to you in the past ten years?”

“No,” Mike said. “Not that I can remember. Of course, I barely saw him.”

“It’s been bumming me out that we were so out of touch. How does that happen?”

“We grow up. We get lives. Losing touch seems to go with the territory.”

“You and I have managed to maintain contact.”

“That’s just because I feel sorry for you,” Mike said. “Never found a man. Living with a dog. Managing a coffee shop. I mean, how much more pathetic can you get?”

“I don’t know,” Jane said. “Sounds pretty good to me.”

As they fell back into silence, Jane continued to contemplate their lost friend’s strange, dying request.

“So what do you think?” she asked. “Should we do it? Should we reunite the band?”

“The band ... is there even a band to reunite?”

“Well we know where Jonathon is,” Jane said. “He’s busy being a Jesus freak up at Harrison. And Kenny’s around and still playing out. Nathan’s back somewhere in the area I think. He’s living like a hermit in the mountains somewhere.”

“When did you hear that?”

“I don’t know. Last month maybe? Heard it at the coffee shop. I get all the local scuttlebutt there.”

“Did you just say scuttlebutt?”

“Hell yes, I did. You got a problem with that?”

“Why didn’t you tell me that?” Jane snapped.

“I don’t know. I didn’t think of it,” Mike answered defensively. “I wasn’t even sure it was true.”

They ran a few paces in silence before Mike continued.

“And I can’t imagine he’d be up for a reunion,” he said. “I can’t believe we’re even talking about considering it. Are we talking about considering it? Aren’t we like a million years old now? Who would even care if we got back together? I’m not even sure I can still play bass.”

“Easy there, Skippy,” Jane replied. “No one would care...but we’d be fulfilling Chet’s last wish. It seems pretty reasonable to me in a weird way. And you can still play bass. It’s like riding a bike, or serving communion or whatever the hell you do.”

Mike laughed.

“I just can’t picture it.”

“I can’t either, really. But if you made some weird request on your death bed wouldn’t you want me to make it happen?”

“I guess,” Mike said.

“Let’s consider it.”

“Isn’t that what we’re doing?”

“Let’s just keep considering it,” she clarified.

The two friends, accompanied by a gray and blue-checked dog, continued their run, considering for the better part of an hour.

Dr. Roy Kaufman appeared to be asleep. Edith Mathers wasn’t falling for it but had to admit it was a pretty convincing display. The snoring was subtle, believably arhythmic, and not the least bit hammy. There was even some drool involved.

Of course, this was the very end of the semester, and all of the students in the overflowing Intro to Film class had grown used to the gray-haired eccentric’s clumsy theatrics. Finally, he burst to life, bellowing, “Time is up, as they say!” The students jumped in their seats then started laughing. Edith smiled as she handed in the final exam of her freshman year at Harrison College and left the room – a free woman.

Moment later, she entered her stately dormitory and climbed its

elegant staircase. She felt as good as she could ever remember feeling, even calling goodbye to the few girls she'd become acquainted with in the course of the year. She threw her stray belongings into a duffel bag then started for the door. Before she could open it, though, she remembered the small, white container on the wooden dresser and walked back to retrieve her pills.

The mountain man stood at the bathroom sink. He gripped the clean white porcelain and leaned toward the mirror. Smiling, he twisted the hot water faucet on with his steady left hand. He took the shaving cream and the new razor from the drugstore's paper bag and set them on the back of the toilet, then splashed his cheeks with water and smeared on the weightless white foam. After holding the blade in the steaming current he lifted it and shaved away the thick black beard. His clear, bright, gray eyes stared back at him in the mirror.

"There you are," he said, still smiling, then added:

"I am love."

"I am joy."

"I am light."

He repeated the three simple phrases aloud for several minutes then proceeded to brush his teeth.

Monday, the late morning rush was severe due to the influx of parents and relatives in town for the day to retrieve Harrison students for the summer. Jane and her godson, Chuck, struggled to keep up with the flow.

Steerbucks Coffee Shop was conceived and owned by Pembroke's lone cattleman, Harry Compton. Believing that his town should bend to no trend, he outbid a mainstream coffee franchise for the space then proceeded to borrow every aspect of said com-

petitor's marketing and overall look and feel while skewing each detail to match his own strong character and self-image.

In place of their frilly green and white circular queen emblem, Harry Compton's green and white circle featured a proud, snarling cow. And whereas the competition's merchandise racks cradled classy folk rock and soft jazz artists alongside fancy cups, games, and trinkets, his boasted the complete Merle Haggard and Waylon Jennings along with a dazzling array of lethal Bowie knives. The master stroke, though, was the subtle shift in name, which oftentimes led visitors to believe they were in a café owned by the competition, giving Harry the feeling he was stealing "the man's" money – a feeling he liked very much.

Of course, Harry Compton was rarely there. In fact, it had been over two years since he set foot in the place. Consequently, townsfolk had come to perceive Steerbucks as belonging to Jane, if not in body then in spirit. Rarely did anyone call it Steerbucks anymore. It had become, simply, "Jane's."

Finally, by around two o'clock, things slowed down.

"Damn," Chuck said. "I don't think I've ever seen it so busy."

"You like this?" Jane asked referring to the CD she'd thrown on a few minutes before.

"Yeah, I do. Reminds me of someone from the 70s or something. Joni Mitchell?"

"Her name's Claire Jordan," Jane said. "Finbar sent it to me."

Dan Finbar was an old friend of Jane's who attended Harrison and had been a regular performer at the coffee shop. He sent Jane the Claire Jordan disc along with a note saying, "This girl is good. You should give her a gig."

Jane agreed.

The song playing was as sad-sounding as anything Jane had heard in a long while. It suited her mood perfectly, a mood the morning throng had obscured but not dispelled. It was pure melancholy, which sprang not only from the loss of a friend but also from the resurgence of memories she thought she had buried deeply enough

to stay hidden. It was talk of a Ghost Tree reunion that did it. What the hell had she been thinking?

The entrance of two fresh-faced college girls interrupted Jane's brooding. The shorter one, whose straight brown hair fell to her slumped, tank-top strapped shoulders, walked straight to Jane and introduced herself, expressing, somehow, that they were there for business, not pastries.

"Hi," she said, a little nervously. "My name's Edith. This is my friend, Molly."

"Hi," Molly chimed, her freckled face all smiles.

"We heard you might be needing some help here for the summer."

"You heard right. And my name's Jane, by the way. You guys aren't going home?"

"We're house sitting for the Krings," Edith said.

"They left for Italy already?" Jane asked.

The Krings were beloved by college kids and townies alike, easily bridging the gap that often existed between the two groups.

"Last night," Edith said.

"Is tomorrow morning at 7 a.m. too soon for you to start?"

"That would be awesome," Molly replied on behalf of both of them.

"Well, all right then. Be here tomorrow morning at 7, and we'll see if you're Steerbucks material."

As the girls left, Old John, the town's ancient chess hustler, shuffled in chuckling his raspy pipe-breath hello and giving Jane her first real smile of the day.

Van Morrison had done the trick, at least for the first forty-five minutes or so of Father Mike's impromptu drive to the monastery Monday afternoon. The bleary-eyed priest had successfully lost himself in the singer/songwriter's forty-year-old poetry. A song called "Cypress Avenue" was especially helpful. And yet, the cler-

gyman's existential angst persisted -- which was the reason he was going to Pittsburgh in the first place.

He crossed the Liberty Bridge then drove through a tunnel, returning his frazzled focus to the feeling that had awakened him far too early in the night and kept him awake from that point forward.

Turning right just past the tunnel's end, a memory played. Mike was a junior at Mercyhurst and had overcome his antisocial tendencies and attended a fraternity party. The instant he arrived, he ran into a girl he knew from his Economics 101 class. Her name was Betsy Kern. She had curly, black hair, freckles, and a few extra pounds. But she was friendly and cute in a way. She and Mike, each motivated by wallflower shyness, quickly struck up a conversation.

As Mike drank more and more of the free-flowing beer, his personality shifted into a new kind of friendliness, more like a talk show host's than a mild-mannered college kid's. Before he was even aware of his own motivations he had invited Betsy out to enjoy the cool night air and the two had walked through the deserted back lawn into a strand of tall trees.

Mike felt powerful. His words came easily. He was funny and comfortable in a role he had never played before -- seducer. And soon both he and Betsy realized seduction was, in fact, his goal. In their drunkenness, they started talking about it, laughing.

Mike knew that he was not interested in starting a romantic relationship with her. He also knew that Betsy would gladly have called herself his girlfriend. He preyed upon her affection as he manufactured reassurances. The night ended with her performing oral sex on him on the dying autumn grass, the distance between them returning even before his release.

The next morning he awakened consumed with a shame unlike any he had ever experienced. His body ached with sadness, and he knew that he had used her, hurt her. He eventually managed to apologize to Betsy and also shared his burden in confession. The relief he found there and his subsequent conversations with Father

Valentine had been key reasons for his ultimate decision to join the priesthood.

As he pulled his dusty Toyota Camry into the monastery parking lot he wondered about the authenticity of what he'd felt then. Did it, did God, really work that way? Had his sin really led him further from God's loving embrace, or had he been brainwashed to feel that way since birth -- through a series of sacramental rites and a steady stream of information assuring him he was desperately in need of salvation? Was the Catholic Church just a giant master of Pavlovian psychology?

Father Bill O'Shea was forty-eight, ten years older than Father Mike – to the day. The two had met at a seminary in West Virginia where Bill taught Mike a course entitled "Theology and Politics in the Twentieth Century." Father Bill had taken a special interest in Mike, dubbing the younger man an earlier version of himself. Their shared birth date sealed the deal. He became Mike's mentor, and they never went more than a week without talking or emailing.

"Michael," Father O'Shea bellowed in the doorway, pulling the younger priest into his embrace. "So good to see you, my friend. Let's head back to my office, shall we?"

As they walked, exchanging small talk, Mike basked in the warmth of his tall, portly mentor's vast presence. Kindness surrounded the gentle bear of a man. The two friends continued side by side down the quiet, stone hall then entered the building's less austere, carpeted, rear section. Father Bill's office door was the second one on the left. After grabbing them both a bottle of water from the small refrigerator tucked behind his desk, the older priest's smile changed to a more serious, concerned expression.

"Let's start with a prayer, Michael," Bill began. "Let's pray that the Holy Spirit infuses our conversation with light and grace and brings peace to your heart. And that you'll find a voice here and now for whatever needs to be said."

After a moment of silence, they both murmured, "Amen."

"Now what's got you so troubled, Mike? The angst is practically

oozing from your pores. Is this about your friend? I was so sorry to hear about that, Mike.”

“I don’t know,” Mike began, and then surprised himself by sharing the Betsy Kern story and describing the way the sad encounter had made him feel.

“I know that feeling,” Bill interrupted. “Every human being on the planet knows that feeling. We’ve all sinned. We’re all sinners.”

“I think that’s part of what I’m wrestling with, Bill. That idea – that we’re all sinners, fallen from grace. Is that really how God wants us to view ourselves? Were we made in His image or not? Maybe the whole sin and salvation motif was just a tool the early Church devised to keep people down and afraid. Is the Church really sanctioned by God or was it invented by a bunch of ‘believers’ who thought they were doing the greater good?”

“Okay,” Father Bill said, not rolling up his sleeves but sounding like he should have been. “I see where you’re coming from here, Mike. Some fundamental questioning -- you’re having a theological crisis. And I don’t mean to downplay it, but I’m relieved that’s all it is. I was afraid you’d knocked up a parishioner or fallen in love or something really prickly.” The priest paused, his smile returning for a moment. “The kind of crisis you’re in is a gift. It’s an opportunity for you to go deeper, to see and know more of the vast mystery that is God’s love. And I know it hurts and it rips you apart when it’s happening, but I promise you you’ll look back some day and be grateful for this temporary agony. I went through a very similar crisis at about your age.

“I also want to remind you of something you already know,” Bill said. “The ideas about God and the Church aren’t God and the Church. God and the Church are in us, in people, not books or even the Bible. Your questions are all valid and worth a lot of hard consideration, but they’re flimsy compared with those moments when you minister to the people in your parish...and actually do God’s work. Does that make any sense?”

Back and forth they went, discussing the principles of Catholic

theology. By the time Mike stood to leave, he'd been ushered, at least temporarily, to an internal ceasefire.

Driving back to Pembroke he returned his attention to the song he'd listened to on the way down. The lyric was truly perplexing, but the slow, plodding arrangement sucked Mike in every time. He thought about Father Bill and about their conversation. Mike had been honest, of course, but only as honest as he had been with himself. It was only now, passing hills and fields that grew less and less populated with each green mile, that he let the final piece of the puzzle fall freely into his consciousness. He was in love with Jane Taylor and had been for twenty years.