

For Joey, Dom, & Sam

We are all immigrants, landing
each moment upon a gray shore....

—Gilbert Allen

1.

Autumn 1975.

LP didn't hear the knocking on the door. Not at first. Instead he felt it, as if he were submerged in a vast ocean, and the knocking was a broad undulation heaving through the element, first lifting him toward the surface, and then drawing him deeper into darkness. It felt not like moving but being moved. Then again, *knock knock knock*, the sound piercing his consciousness this time, sharp like a hook, pulling him up to the watery surface.

"Father, you have a phone call," the priest said.

LP hoisted himself onto one elbow and squinted at the doorway. He could see the priest's silhouette in the wedge of yellow light, but couldn't make out the man.

"Thank you," he said, sitting up. The words, the action came from a place beyond thought.

The door closed.

LP turned on the lamp beside his bed. It illuminated a narrow room with a small window framing a full moon. A worn kneeler leaned into the far wall, and above it hung a bronze crucifix. On the dresser beside the bed sat a dirty ashtray, an empty medicine bottle, and a rotary phone. He hesitated, afraid to pick up.

“Hello?”

“LP? Is it you, dear?”

“Yeah, Ma, it’s me.”

“Did I wake you?”

The alarm clock read 4:54 AM as best he could see. “No, I was on my way to mass. What’s the matter? Is Pa okay?”

“Your Aunt Ida died this morning.”

LP’s immediate reaction was relief. He felt around the top dresser drawer for his lighter and cigarettes. “How’s Uncle Paolo?”

“Okay, I guess. It was your Uncle August called.”

A growing cloud of smoke shifted in deep circles over LP’s head. “I’m worried, Ma.”

“You need to come home, dear.”

“I knew that was coming.”

“It would mean so much to Uncle Paolo.”

“I don’t want any shit from Pa, Ma.”

“You broke his heart.”

LP looked at the moon creeping beyond the frame of the window. “I don’t wanna discuss it.”

“I’ll talk to him. Can you come home today and help with the funeral arrangements?”

“I’m worried about Uncle Paolo.”

“I know, dear. Would you call Maria and tell her the news?”

“Yeah, I’ll give her a call....”

LP hung up the phone and sat on the edge of the bed. He ran his long fingers through his black hair, grown too long, and sucked deeply on his cigarette. The smoke filled him in a way that nothing else could. So much had happened in the years away that Ontario Falls felt like another lifetime. He reminded himself to talk with the bishop—to ask for yet another favor. He feared that this could be the straw.

Outside, the bell tolled 5:00 AM, meaning he was late for mass again. He rummaged through his dresser for his address book, an ordination gift from Ma. She had carefully inscribed the names, phone numbers, and birth dates of everyone in the family. When he had called to thank her, she pleaded with him to stay in touch. “Charity begins at home,” she said. “Don’t turn your back on your family.” Ma had the annoying habit of reducing everything into the tritest expressions.

He dialed Maria and launched into the news, but it wasn’t Maria on the line. It was some woman named Shirley. He wanted to apologize, but Maria answered before he could formulate a polite sentence.

“Who is it?” Maria said. She stretched the question across a yawn.

“It’s me, LP.”

“What’s wrong?”

He lit another cigarette. It waved between his lips as he spoke. “Aunt Ida died. We need to get back—“

“How’s Uncle Paolo?”

“I don’t know. Not well, I’m sure.”

“Louise won’t take care of him.”

“Of course not. He’s open game now.”

“Trust me, you don’t know the half of it.”

“What do you mean? What do you know?” LP paced the length of the room, stretching the phone cord to its limit.

“The place has gone to hell,” Maria said.

“What happened?”

“I don’t wanna talk about it now. I need coffee and a cigarette before I can think straight.”

“Alright, you can tell me in person. You wanna catch a ride with me?”

“When ya comin’?”

“Now.”

“You know what this means for the farm, Aunt Ida dyin’ an’ all?”

“Yeah, I know. I wouldn’t go back for anything less.”

LP hung up the receiver. His impulse was to pack his things and take off without a word, but he knew better, especially in light of his recent reassignment to St. Paul’s.

He picked up the empty medicine bottle and turned it in his hand until he could read the label, *zero refills available*. He'd been meaning to take care of this for days, and now there wasn't time. He raised his eyes to the crucifix on the wall where Christ hung as he always did, head down and to the left, his body tense with agony. Then he looked out the little window, framing nothing now but a square of black.

At the vestry, LP stood in the light of the open door and waited to be acknowledged. Inside, a young priest, thin and well pressed, stood beside the bishop and assisted with the removal of his vestments. When the priest finally noticed LP, he offered a protracted smile that had the effect of slowing the moment perceptibly. LP looked away.

“Good morning, Father Paul,” the bishop said.

“Won't you please come in?”

LP walked directly to the bishop, knelt before him, and kissed his hand. “Good morning, Your Excellence. May I please have a word with you?”

The bishop bid him to his feet. “Of course. Come with me to my office. Father Harold, would you bring coffee for two, please?”

“It would be my pleasure,” he said.

The bishop placed his hand on LP's shoulder and guided him through a labyrinth of dark hallways that terminated in a bright entryway to a large office. A wide mahogany desk rested majestically in the center of the room. On the wall behind it hung twelve oil paintings—a

chronological succession of bishops from the Diocese of Western New York—and above them all hung the largest portrait of all: The Holy Father, Pope Paul VI.

LP stood behind one of the finely crafted chairs meant for visitors.

“Sit down, please,” the bishop said, as he rounded the corner of his desk. “How are you adjusting to life here at St. Paul’s?”

“Just fine, sir. Thank you.”

“Perhaps this,” he said with a sweeping motion, “offers a more contemplative life than what you knew at Mother of Sorrows.”

“The change is welcome, sir.”

Father Harold entered with a silver tray in his manicured hands. He set two china cups and saucers on the desk and poured coffee into both. “Do you take cream and sugar in your coffee?” He was so close that LP could smell the mouthwash on his breath.

“I can serve myself, thank you,” LP said.

“Are you finding this period of discernment beneficial?” the bishop said.

“Yes, sir, although I must admit that long doses of prayer and reflection were never my strong suit. I find active ministry a bit easier.”

“Sometimes that which is uncomfortable is what we need most.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I can see that something is weighing on your mind,” the bishop said. “Would you care to share your burden?”

“Well, sir, my Aunt Ida passed away last night, and I need to go home for a week or two. You see, my Uncle Paolo needs help putting his estate in order, and I know, sir, that I’ve pushed your patience beyond endurance, but I wouldn’t ask for the time if it wasn’t absolutely necessary.”

The bishop took a small drink of his coffee. “Father Paul, please accept my deepest condolences. You may, of course, take as much time as you need. The church will always be here when you are ready to return.”

Almost imperceptibly, the opaque curtains covering the large picture window turned from dark gray to deep purple.

“I’ll be back, sir, as soon as the funeral is over.”

The bishop put his hand to his chin and nodded. “You certainly may do that, Father Paul. I would like to encourage you, however, to take some more time—to continue your discernment at a place beyond the rectory, beyond the confines of St. Paul’s, where the presence of the church isn’t so heavy.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’ve prayed a great deal for you in these recent weeks, Father Paul. I speak now with the confidence that I am communicating the Lord’s will.”

“Yes, sir.” LP’s left eye, his lazy eye, began to twitch.

“I believe, Father Paul, that you need to start again at the beginning. Rethink everything, including your most fundamental values. Strip yourself of everything, and then, with an empty heart, bid the Lord to enter again, filling you with His love. And in the process you may find a spirit renewed and at peace.”

LP pressed his forefinger against his left temple, drawing tight his willful eye. He blinked slowly, consciously, working it back into place. “I don’t need much time away, sir. Just a week or two. Then I’ll be back and ready to work.”

The bishop rocked in his chair. “I realize that there is a strong desire in your heart to fulfill your vocation. I do not believe, however, that your mind is in alignment.”

LP’s coffee, no longer steaming, sat on the desk in front of him, untouched. “Are you defrocking me?”

“Of course not. My job is to ensure the health and well being of the priests under my care, so that they might fulfill God’s will effectively. To that end I’m recommending that you spend an extended period of time in prayer and reflection at a place of your choosing.”

“And just how long is an *extended period of time*?”

“Only you can answer that. You will know when the time is right to return. And when that time comes, the door will be open for you. It will always be open for you.”

LP wondered how this ignorant bishop—a foreigner to the workings of his mind and heart—could sit there and pass judgment. “I understand,” he said, standing up.

The bishop rose.

LP walked around the desk, knelt before His Excellence, and kissed his hand. Then he rose without looking the bishop in the eye.

“Father Paul?”

LP turned.

The old man looked at him with compassion. “The Lord is calling you home. This, like every moment of our lives, is about discernment. Be open to where God is leading you.”