

# Of God and Country

A Creative Memoir  
Based on a True Story

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and  
Nick Henderson

36,500 words

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# Epigraph

*"As a war-time Chaplain is on his deathbed, he recounts many of the adventures and life-altering experiences to paint a picture of his life's meaning and why it was important."*

*Scott Parisien*

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# Foreword

The story of Colonel Ben Arthur Henderson, the most decorated chaplain of World War II, is contained in the pages that follow. Growing up in the challenging circumstances of rural Canada, Arthur strives for answers while questioning God and pushing himself to the edge. He lives a life of bravery, passion, and devotion. From New York to San Francisco, he discovered his calling and answered it.

This is the Chaplain's narrative. My son and I were moved to write this account to share with the world because I am the Colonel's nephew. It was put together utilizing stories from my family and friends as well as other stories he personally told me. Many newspaper articles were used together with historical research conducted at the National Archives and National Personal Records of the United States of America and the Franciscan Order's Santa Barbara Mission archives. Periods in his life were unclear and incomplete. The National Archives and National Personal Records reports I received had redacted pages and text. As a result, I found myself playing the role of an evaluator or assessor as I filled in the blanks of my uncle's life story. The term "metaphysical history" is what I call it, incorporating a combination of personality, personal interactions, artistic relationships, letters, and metaphysics. Yes, metaphysical impressions. It is my belief that, as we live, we leave our psychological imprints on the world. The past is not solely carved in stone or recorded by pen or film, but I believe history is also etched into the flesh, bones, and memories of human beings and travels silently through the veins of our descendants. Inter-generational accounts are not always recorded correctly. All written history is suspect of accuracy and manipulation. Therefore, we have versions of history that do not tell the whole story. So, to that effect, I think there is historical and metaphysical history that actually travels through people.

We have compiled and written a "creative nonfiction" story based on Chaplain Henderson's life with these components in mind, which we have titled

"Of God and Country."

## 1 - A WELCOME TO WAR

The great war, 1944. France is the centerpiece of intense combat. Near Toul, on the eastern front, serious confrontations were taking place. One afternoon in September, the sky was relentlessly grayed by smoke. The serene meadow silence was stripped away by the mortar. The landscape was dominated by aggression. Dark, hazy smoke billowed upward and outward as the sounds of battle grew. Mortar, explosions, and more smoke War sounds intensify with sharp, bright flashes of hand grenades.

A soldier emerges from a wall of yellow-brown clouds and crawls through the war-hammered terrain. He moves quickly in a crouch, past a broken tank and a reverberating chamber of engine noise. A gusher of dense, rancid smoke washes over the tank. More machine gun fire, rat-a-tat-tat.

Hunched over, the soldier proceeds. His face was mired in sweat, dirt, and blood. His eyes were sharp and focused, darting urgently from right to left. His army's OD green helmet has a small white cross on its front, denoting a "chaplain." He takes a deep breath, then a loud mortar lands right behind him with a raucous burst, knocking him forward to the ground. He skids upon landing, revealing a metal plate just under the turf. He mumbles to himself, "A mine... and my chest is square on it." He realizes the quagmire that he is in. If he lifts up, it will engage the explosive. He freezes as blood rushes to his head—more gunfire sparks against the tank's steel. Thinking fast, he reaches for a dead soldier, pulls him close, and grabs his rifle. It has a bayonet attached to the barrel. He takes that bayonet end and slowly inserts it between his chest and the mine, keeping the mine trigger spring down.

Across the battlefield, some 200 meters away, in a machine gun nest, are two German soldiers, one with a mounted gun, the other with binoculars. They watch the tank and the chaplain in the distance. They squirm with anticipation and whisper in German, "He's laying on the explosive. He is crazy. Ready?" The other German answers, "Copy, just a second."

The chaplain puts his left forearm on the rifle in its middle. Now, he carefully reaches for the other end of the rifle (the butt) and lifts it up with his right hand. He keeps his left forearm pushing down on the bayonet end to keep the mine trigger spring down and not engaged. Intensity is peaking in the machine gun nest, and the German shouts, "Now!" The priest rolls (somersaults) forward, then leaps again, a split second before the mine explodes and the German machine gunner fires. He clears the blast as it propels him forward. He keeps rolling. The Germans miss. A dark and bitter dread sinks into his chest, and he gazes into the smoke and haze of the battlefield. He rises to a half-crouch and hears footsteps. He falls to the turf, swallows, sighs, and thinks, "It's my saviors." It's the G.I.s!

## 2 - TELLING OF THE TALE

Father Chaplain Henderson, my uncle, was telling me stories about his life. He was speaking while lying in an old metal hospital bed. In 1970, he was driving from Mexico to Texas when he was hit head-on by a large truck.

I was a touring musician and rushed to his aid. He was my favorite uncle, mentor, and friend. When I arrived in Matamoros, Mexico, it was just two days after the accident. I had postponed my gigs and planned to stay until he got back on his feet. Then I planned to meet up with my bandmates in New Orleans. I was 20.

A kind-faced nurse handed me his glasses in the hall before I entered his hospital room. I could see that the head that those glasses had been on was in bad shape. Feeling flushed and alarmed, I grappled with that image. I did not understand much Spanish, so it was crazy gibberish to me. The speed with which the doctors and nurses spoke was unsettling. I entered the room. My uncle (Arthur or Fr. Ben) was lying prone in bed in traction with bandages wrapped loosely around his head. A somber room with dingy, dirty walls, peeling paint, aged medical gear, and a four-post metal bed frame. There was a gloomy atmosphere in this dreary chamber, with faint light flickering on the walls. I saw a concrete block mantelpiece above which hung a handsome cross in oak wood, bearing the figure of a severe Christ. I settled down in a green plastic-upholstered bedside chair. My uncle asked who was there. I said something cheerful, like, "I'm your favorite nephew." He then answered, "Why did you come? Is it serious?" I replied, "Why were you driving at night in Mexico? Jeeze!" "I needed to get to Texas," he answered. I repeated softly but more loudly than before, "You seemed to be being pursued. Are you a witness to a terrible event?" I paused and said, "You are a war hero. Please talk to me." Another pause. "You are a dignified priest. What is up? What is God up to?" After a very long pause, he just stared above me, seemingly lost in his own private world. Then he broke the silence. "Being tested. We are always tested. I am no hero! I am ordinary." He dropped his head. I looked at Christ on the wall. Then I stood with my hands in my pockets, concerned. I saw a



small "Angel-Light Worry Stone" on the nightstand. I said, "You are not every man. You're my idol! My true hero, always. You were just in a horrible accident." He replied, "Instinct. It's an instinct, I think. Some kind of innate drive. I am no hero." "But is instinct a learned trait or are we born with it?" I asked, "You mean, are we born with integrity or do we somehow learn it? Both and neither, in my opinion, both are possible." He continued. "With God's help, we developed into the people we are today. Insightful life experiences and upbringing shape who we become. We struggle with "discernment," the ability to do what is right and to recognize when something is wrong. It is odd, sometimes you just let it flow. Being positive is useful in dealing with life's challenges."

I asked him if he ever made decisions based on the stars or horoscopes. Because of the splendor of the stars, planets, and constellations, he conceded that it did make some sense. However, he did not accept the zodiac as gospel. But, he said, it's the universe—God's universe. "When there is no moon, he said, "there is nothing more awesome than staring up at the heavens. I've spent some time learning about the cosmos, and if it were nighttime right now I could name a number of the constellations and other heavenly bodies for you. Obviously, you start wondering, "What is God? Who are we? And what does it all mean?" Christianity has not adequately answered these questions by merely saying "faith." Science seeks to provide an explanation, but isn't it true that human curiosity is a facet of God? Thus, relying solely on the concept of "faith" is becoming increasingly unacceptable. Anything mysterious, like cancer or the universe, or even to say "God called him home," is answered by the word faith. I conclude that the universe is completely indifferent to God or that indifference is God. Of course, that is nearly subjective. With the support of the Catholic Church and everything it implies, I have helped people through difficult times in their lives, and I plan to keep doing so. There are deep mysteries within me, and I cannot deny the faith I have in them. I'll explain how I came to feel that way."

Then he stopped and stared directly into my eyes. He said firmly, "We have a strong line, you and I. An ancestry. Let me fill you in on the details."

### 3 - OH CANADA

He begins his speech by setting the stage for his life. "When I was a kid—seven or eight years old, to be exact—my family lived on a homestead outside of Peace River, Canada, which is where your father was born. I remember that long, dreadful winter. The mercury went to the bottom of the thermometer that hung outside the front window and stayed there for three weeks. It was more than forty degrees below zero. It was a dismal place, rural and isolated. Especially for me."

"As the story goes, your grandfather, who was my father, was building a bridge across the frozen river. Whiteout conditions prevailed, and the unsettling howl of the wind was enough to send chills down one's spine and blow one's hair back. A yell, a splash, and the sound of cracking ice followed as a fisted glove broke upward. A hand, then an arm, poked out. A taunting rope wrapped around the arm. A second rope flies off the bridge in slow motion. Two construction workers scurry across a bridge, followed by a larger group. There is a strong grip on the rope from the hand in the river. As the arm shivers, a body is pulled from the melting river ice. In a horse-drawn ambulance straight out of the early 20th century, Dad was taken away."

"Our home was a cabin-like structure with a small barn outback on the homestead grounds, and cows grazed in the surrounding snowy pasture. My father, Charles Henderson, was athletic, handsome, and a gentleman. He was unshaven, leaden, and a bit grizzly. He was in his forties, hardworking, but now bedridden after the accident."

He continued, "I remember our family gathered around his bed, your grandmother Blanch, a pioneer woman, pretty with long brown hair and sunken cheeks, always in a full-length country mountain dress, holding the youngest brother, your dad, on her hip, multitasking between cooking and caring for him. Wade, the middle brother, was twelve years old and would stand with mom in the creases of her flowing gown. Wade seemed to have a mischievous look in his eyes and a dirty face. A little rascal. I was the oldest of the siblings. I would stand in the

corner with my hands in my pockets, being skinny and over 6 feet tall. My eyes would dart around the room, absorbing the family's emotions. We seemed distant from dad at the moment, so because of that, we all moved closer to his bed.”

“We were reassured by his words that everything would be alright. 'I'm feeling better by the minute,' he promised, 'I'll be back up in no time.' Since he was obviously in the river, I wondered if he was feeling any chills. He joked, 'Only when I think, and I think too much. Your mother and brothers need you now. It's time to step up. You have the gift. God has his finger on your heart'. I was embarrassed to hear this. He asked me to come closer, and he grabbed my arm, pulling me into his face. He looked into my eyes and whispered, 'Don't be late to follow your path to destiny'. As a result of my shock and apprehension, I jumped to my feet. I paced around the room hiding a small smile, then it turned into a quirky half-smile. Eric, the dog, limped into the doorway, wagging his tail enthusiastically. I remember patting him on the head confidently as I pranced out.”

“With springtime arriving in Alberta, Wade and I would go wandering on adventures through the green meadows of Canada. We would just meander. On one occasion, shabbily dressed with fishing poles in hand, we looked for the perfect spot to drop our lures. Eric would always make an arthritic attempt to keep up. I said to Wade, 'The Rolands that ran the general store, the one in town, they're not doing so good. Did they close up shop?' 'Yeah, Peter is a friend. They're Methodists,' he replied. 'Dad refers to them as Baptists who could read. Molly, do you remember when she dropped out? Yeah, she could really learn from you and that stick-to-it-ivity.”

“While fishing in time with the babbling stream, Wade saw a friend. 'Hey, isn't that Josh?' Wade picks up a rock and intends to throw it. I stopped him and said, 'Don't do or say anything, just let him go'. He giggles, 'Yeah, but he's got chicken salad sandwiches in that knapsack, he always does. His mom bakes pies, and she gives us cherries, ya know?' I said, 'Yeah, they're from Montana. They spin a yarn about fishing'. Wade points, 'Let's go downstream. The fish are all over there'. We laughed and joked as we pushed each other along and ran downstream, over the

rocks. I found a small, unusual rock. It was weird and perfect. I rubbed it. A worry stone. I still have it.”

"Remember Freddy? I said, 'He was the craziest kid in school. His dad was given to fits of rage. One time, he put a fork up Freddy's nose to pull him outside for a whipping. Even Dad would cringe around him. He used to fish for brownies right out there! He once "bad-talked" our dad.' Wade said. I answered, 'Dad has never laid a hand on me since I was three, and then I was eating Borax from under the sink. We are lucky. Our folks are good. Fishing brings us close to God, don't you think?' We smiled.”

"Another time, Wade and I were chopping firewood on a crisp, clear day. The porch was in the distance behind us, and the yard was sprinkled with old wheelbarrows, a buttermilk churn, fence posts, and tools. We would bicker about silly little things. I would explain to him how big the real world was and how far away those places in the Bible were, like Jerusalem and Egypt, as well as Europe and Asia. New York City, too! The world is not just this back country, and he would say to me, 'Why you always got ants in your pants? What's the matter with right here?' “

"All of a sudden, there was a loud bang, a gun blast. We both whipped around and saw Mom on the porch holding a shotgun. Her entire being was shrouded in smoke. We heard the sound of a goose cackling and then plopping to the ground. I disgustedly said under my breath, 'This is a godless land'. Wade snickered aloud as I continued mumbling to myself, 'Why would God keep me in this hinterland? He knows me, he knows I hate it here. He is aware of the fact that my presence in this place is detestable.' I turned to Wade and said, 'There are people in this world that have other gods that they worship'. He asked, 'Yeah, like who?' 'Like the Magistars.' They lived here on earth thousands of years ago and believed that the world was created by two gods doing battle. The winner cut the other into pieces and flung him in the air. The pieces stayed and became the planets.' Wade responds, 'No Artie, that's not right.' I grinned as I looked up to the sky with my own little snicker.”

"There were two bedrooms, a small kitchen, a dining area, and a large living room with a river-stone fireplace that took up one entire wall of the cabin's interior. The "Good Book," a "Koran," a "Tibetan Book of the Dead," and some poetry by Yeats and T. S. Elliot were all stacked on a withered wooden shelf in the corner. In the early hours of the morning, while my family slept, I would wake up, get up, and stand in the window reading these books."

"Early one morning, Mom startled me by standing directly behind me. 'Are you still believing? A doubting Thomas, maybe?' She asked. 'Just being curious,' I replied. She said, 'Is that a yes?' 'More or less.' I answered. 'Why?' She continued, 'Does the more you learn diminish the likelihood of Christianity being true?' I sneeringly state, 'What about free will, Mom? The world is a frightening place. It's a scary place. War, suffering, violence,' She interrupted, 'And yes, and it is not fair. But through it all, God exists!' I held up the Bible and said, 'You can't just tell someone that. God is not just information. God is conviction.' I slammed it down. Mom said, 'You are so right, it's like love. You can't tell love, you feel love.'"

"A stormy gloom descended on the homestead, leaving me beyond cold as I gazed out the cabin window. I was eighteen when Wade became sick. Within hours, he became dreadfully blue in color and coughed non-stop. My little brother, Wilbur, whimpered, and my parents were gone. They were working, and I didn't expect them to be back until late. Pacing back and forth across the wood floor planks, I grew increasingly concerned as the wind howled. My inability to make a decision was driving me crazy. Exactly where were my parents? The tic-tic rolls off the old coo-coo clock. I felt clumsy and dull. I was a mess, a dunce. I cried, covering my face with my hands. Wilbur sensed it and was anxiously silent. OK, I thought, it's up to me. The doctor is more than an hour away. I looked at him, turning blue. Another hour. Wilbur continued to cry as hesitation followed me. I have to leave now. We walked into the blizzard as Wade rode on horseback, slushing along the trail to town as the gale raged on. The town was five miles or so away, and the doctor's office was towards the other end of town. It was a small alpine structure, and as we three arrived, we smelled the smoke of pine from the fireplace. Soon, the

entire family arrived. Immediately, I realized I was too late. My decision to take him to the doctor was too late. I cried out in anger and marched out the door back towards the homestead. I relived it the whole way home—and every day since, I cannot forgive myself. My younger brother has died because of me. I am heartbroken, shaken, and devastated. I took out my worry stone."

Back at the Mexican hospital, I picked up that stone and rubbed it while standing at his bedside. "Wade was your best friend," I said. "He was, and ever since then I've carried around this guilt over his death. I just wanted to run," he said. The response I gave was, "Did you have any friends or acquaintances you could confide in aside from your family? Any girlfriends? or some sort of social life?" In reply, my uncle continued his tale by saying, "Yes." Then he gazed out the window, "I went all the way to New York and beyond. But first, earlier that spring, I met up with Anna, an old friend from school."

#### 4 - PEACE RIVER TO NEW YORK

"Anna was a natural beauty, with her appealing auburn hair, large green eyes, and extensive education. As we strolled through the village, I could sense her approving glances at me. She'd say, 'It's nice to see you again.' I stuttered and fumbled over my words as I tried to express my strong feelings of attraction. Finally, I said it, 'Let's, uh, go to the coffee shop, shall we?' 'Great,' she exclaimed."

"We were happily walking along the village street when I saw the 'Closed for Remodeling' sign at the popular cafe hot spot. Then I began to grin. 'What are you smiling at?' Anna asked. I said anxiously, 'That poster of the banjo band.' I pointed out, 'I've been dabbling in guitar'. Anna responded, 'I love music and art stuff. There are some incredible ice sculptures in Calgary. So I've heard, anyway'. It became awkward. Then silent. I guess she was hinting at taking a road trip, but I was too dumb to get it. The words 'I'm thinking of hopping a train and getting out of here' came out of my mouth. Anna asked, 'Are you leaving your home?' She flipped her hair with a flirtatious smile and continued, 'We could walk in the park and just sit on the bench. I love the cathedral'. Then she squints. I calmly responded, 'So, I've been learning cello, too. Who's your favorite classical composer? Bach, Beethoven, or Chopin? She narrows her eyes and looks closely at me and says, 'You are truly admirable, Artie. You have a psychic twinkle'. "

"As we strolled along, I pointed out some graffiti. Specifically, it was a swastika. Inaudibly, I said, 'discussing.' Anna heard and remarked, 'My mother hates that and everything it stands for, but I'm a bit confused by it.' I uttered 'fascism, or dictatorships, and that's not my cup of tea, I have no interest in that'. I stopped for a moment and then said, 'An outdoor springtime get-together or social is in the park this coming Sunday. How about we go?' "

"I stood in the kitchen at the cabin, and on the porch, I overheard mom and dad engaging in serious conversation. It was a bright spring day with cows meandering

in the pasture as Eric lifted his head and looked curiously at Mom. 'Alberta has been hard on Artie. He needs a bigger world,' she said. 'It's tough on him and this family,' he answered. 'He's gotta spread his wings.' Mom said boldly, 'Yeah, but New York, not Calgary or Vancouver? Even Portland? I'm afraid we will lose him.' Dad responded, 'I believe Artie is destined for something. He battles between good and evil constantly. He is driven the likes I have never seen. I am proud of his tenacity. But there are times when I can't stand it'. He paused for a beat, looking at the pasture, 'That inner strength. I do admire that'."

My uncle embarked on his journey. It's 1928, and the Roaring Twenties are in full swing. It was all about New York, New York.

He continued, "It was tense. It was certainly intense, full of confusion and absolute fear. I seated myself in the passenger seat of an old steam-engine train, mesmerized by watching the Canadian landscape go by. I dressed up in an old suit, an overcoat, a tie, slacks, and a fedora. I had waves of feeling good and feeling anxious. The steam pumped upward as the locomotive moved onward through the vast terrain; yet, I was overwhelmed with exuberance and anticipation. Clickaty-clack. As time moved on, I finally relaxed and settled in. I began to read the Bible, Sigmund Freud, and comic books. I gazed out the window and would rub my worry stone while remembering my father's words: "Don't be late to follow your path to destiny'."

Back in the hospital room in 1970, I walked over to the barred window. A cat scuttled swiftly under my legs as a petite Mexican nurse entered, speaking in Spanish. My uncle also answered in Spanish and smiled. I turned back and gazed out the second-floor window. It was overlooking a small Mexican village, and I said, "Were you afraid to go to the Big Apple? You were like 20." He responded, "Fear is the beginning of wisdom. And you? Off to Seattle at 20?" He paused, then continued. "Yes, I was scared and apprehensive, but I always, always had the feeling that something or someone was keeping an eye on me, like a veil. I've felt that for most of my life." He turned towards the nurse and said, "You move like an angel." Another pause, and then, "I have to tell my story to my nephew." My uncle



drifts for a moment, then starts, "I desired to search the arts. Ambition sometimes takes you where you might not want to go. Travel brings thoughts and perceptions that can change you. The mesmerizing sound of the train, the sound of space going by—a fine line exists between noise and music. Perception, it's opening the door of perception."

"So my thoughts," he continued, "wandered into fantasy as I traveled. What am I? Who am I? What is my image of myself? A pioneer, trailblazer? I am an explorer of new forms, desperate to make my ideas visible. I was sensing a strong urgency, but what? What was I anticipating? I couldn't place it. This journey could take me down some of the darkest corridors of the world. Or a journey that crossed paths with grifters and hustlers and con artists in both professional and amateur guises: musicians, actors, museum curators and directors, dealers, painters, and collectors; basically every manner of art world charlatan imaginable." Another pause and a sigh "Art and music can open us up and make us vulnerable; they can provide a window into our humanity. It can enhance our capacity to understand the perspectives of others and, more importantly, to feel compassion for the experiences of those with whom we share a common bond. This was the start of my new conscious reality. My awakening to the world around me had begun. Is this contemplation just another daydream along the way, or was it?"

Hearing this, I was stunned, or maybe enlightened. I'm not sure which. I briefly thought about the stages of death, then cleared that out of my mind. My uncle continued with a burst of energy as he lay prone in his hospital bed. He said, "That human need to escape, to transcend, even if just to catch a break from life's daily grind. I see Kennedy escaping and floating in space after our world explodes. White crosses floated as well, remnants of human existence, to tell others who we are. Much like that ancient stone, created out of necessity and left to the world to be rediscovered again and again," He took a deep breath, and I thought he was hallucinating. Then he looked at me. "I need to tell you all of my story for all the reasons that exist."

I assured him that I was listening. He smiled and continued. "So, that train ride was an epiphany, a revelation. But what was I envisioning exactly? Fantasies,

visions, or mental exhaustion from anticipation? Then I read from the Tibetan book: 'Against his will, he died; he did not learn to die. One will learn to die, and one will learn to live.' Then I fell asleep on the train. Morning came and was a relief from the dreams."

He elaborated, saying, "I saw the city—yes, THE CITY—like an oil painting, like first gazing upon the Grand Canyon with equal parts awe and disbelief. There was no delusion; I really was in New York. We got closer, churning into Grand Central Station, revealing the megalopolis full of bustling activity, sky-tall buildings, and steam rising from manholes. I pointed and said out loud, 'Wow, that is overwhelming.' I turned to face a lady, a young, attractive, tall, and athletic woman who sat one seat away from me; she was well-dressed and in her twenties, with short blond hair. Speaking with a transatlantic accent, she was trendy for the times, outgoing, and comfortable with herself. I gestured toward the window and exclaimed, 'WOW! Just take a look at that. Unbelievable.' She appeared a bit startled and replied, 'Yeah, that is the cat's meow. Is this your first time here?' 'The first time,' I remarked. She replied, 'I'm Elizabeth. I came with my family a few years ago. It is spectacular. I'm from Buffalo, and I'm going to Broadway, and all I want to do is dance. Just curious, where do you call home?' 'Peace River, way up in Canada. North country.' I said. She replied, 'Never heard of it.' I pointed to the city and said, 'Well, it is not that swank. It's a thousand miles out in the wilderness. Cowboys and all, it's really kind of silly up there.' I paused, and then I whimsically said, 'What do you call a happy cowboy?' 'Should I know this?' She answered. I grinned and said, 'A jolly rancher.' She shook her head, giggling either with me or at me, and she said with a question, 'I see.' I explained, 'I needed a change from that rural life I grew up in. I needed to get out, to feel creative. Feel excitement. 'I want to feel, I want to be creative,' I explained."

"Steam bellowed as the train screeched to a stop. Then she commented, 'This is the real McCoy and so exciting. A spot for creative expression.' We arrived at Grand Central Terminal. Together, we walked off the train. The crowds of people were overwhelming. Elizabeth said, 'I am looking for my aunt and uncle.' After dropping some change in a beggar's cup and making a few laps around in a

haphazard attempt to find direction, I finally said, 'I'm looking for a city map of some sort.' 'Where are you off to?' She asked. '43rd Street. A friend told me about an actor's bunkhouse'. I answered. "Bunkhouse?" laughed Elizabeth. 'Ha! We are not cowboys here. This is the big apple, the big time. It's called a Boarding House'. She set her bags down, and I helped her put her coat on. She said, 'I'm staying with family over near Columbus Circle. I'll be looking for that dance job on Broadway'. I looked at her and caught myself staring; The wind played with her hair, reflecting the sun. Her face lifted slightly, toward the sky. We walked along the jam-packed and vibrant streets, through savory scents and the noisy cacophony of the modern city. On a building, there was a swastika painted in graffiti style. She said, 'What is that? I have seen it before.' I answered, 'Mother says it is no good.' She looked at me longingly and said, 'Your mother sounds very nice'."

"All of a sudden, a loud chorus of ragtime piano jolted the sky above us. Labor strikers were protesting by using a zeppelin to broadcast their message via a megaphone. It was both annoying and funny. We continued our stroll as she started to ask, 'Maybe you should - ' She was interrupted by a loud shout. 'Oh, there they are.' She waves and starts to run off, then turns to say, 'Bye, good luck.' She rushes off, and I wave. I adjusted my tie, picked up my bags, and walked away. I felt a smirk dance across my face. I looked to the sky, thinking, "Don't be late for destiny." I walked on and on, absorbing all the sounds, chatter, sidewalk hawkers, smells, the feel, and the hordes of people, the likes of which I had never seen. I walked alone. "

## 5 - THEATER AND ART

My uncle's expression in the hospital in Matamoros was one of bewildered surprise. "What a time and what a city," he exclaimed, "hard but wonderful." Continuing, "I moved into a tiny, messy, lived-in studio apartment on the third floor of a building off Forty-Second Street. It would be days before the garbage trucks arrived, making the already noisy alley below smell even worse. Then the aroma was pleasant until the refuse built up for the next weekly pickup. The walls of my apartment were covered with paintings, and I had a cello, guitars, posters, and scripts all over the place. It was 1930. I remember taking a poster off a bulletin board at a local coffee shop. I kept that poster on my makeshift coffee table as a reminder. It said:

"All Souls Eve" a Musical

Auditioning Actors

Tuesday 10am at Maxine Elliott Theater, 109 W 39TH

"I wanted that job. Some of the actors, already cast in it, had rooms in my building. They encouraged me to audition. I was stumbling around that tiny apartment, talking and gesticulating to myself. 'I can do this. I can do this'. "*All souls dance tonight, for tomorrow we shall pray alike.*" I would recite my lines over and over in the mirror. I sighed and felt dejected. My buddy from acting class and one of the featured actors in the play came over, frantically knocking on my door. Whipping the door open, there stood John Rooney. Everyone called him JohnJohn, a good-looking, seasoned actor in his twenties, my age, with a great sense of humor and a whimsical demeanor. A friend to all, boisterous, loud, a born entertainer, and at that moment in time, my best friend. He burst in, arms flailing,

talking, walking, and announcing, 'Tis me, JohnJohn. Is that you, Raul Ben-Gay? A name in lights? The Inevitable!?' “

My uncle continued, "I tagged myself Raul Ben-Gay, a stage name. I told JohnJohn that I was in over my head with this upcoming audition. JohnJohn was always cheering me on. 'You're a natural. Relax. Everything's Jake. You got this. You are good looking, have a strong presence, and have a wonderful voice. All you've gotta do is read this paragraph and sing a little. But please, not "Home on the Range'.”

"He pointed downstairs and said, 'Let's go for a toddy at Paddy's.' 'Oh, I need to memorize this.' I quipped. 'You got it. It's only a line or two,' he said. JohnJohn opened the door. I cracked a smile and succumbed, we laughed all the way down the hall and down the stairs. My uncle continued: 'Paddy's was a small speakeasy bar on Lexington and 38th, popular with locals, actors, and artists alike, but ignored by law enforcement. The behind-the-bar liquor display had a black curtain in front of it that, when drawn back, revealed the liquor and hand-drawn caricatures of regular patrons. It was dirty, run-down, and heavy with the haze of cigarettes, last night's beer, and peanut shells on the floor. The bar is along one side of the long room, and tables are strung along the other, leading up to the front window overlooking the street. JohnJohn and I were seated at the bar, deep in discussion, and it went a little like this: I said, 'The soul doesn't die; it goes back to the universe.' "That's not Christian," JohnJohn pointed out. 'That's like, well, Hindu or something.' I was a little tipsy and said, 'That's my point. It's all the opinion of some people. PEOPLE. Human beings with all the emotions, irregularities, and baggage!' Johnjohn, also a bit tipsy, 'Yeah, it doesn't really matter. What matters is that you've gotta get this gig. It's my play. I'm the lead. We are going on the road for six weeks across this beautiful land. You've got to be there'. I said, 'I'll get it. It will be the bee's knees. Alice is coming, right?' My uncle continued, 'Alice Rossin was the lead female in the play. Both of us had eyes for her. She was thin and a polished actress, chic and charming, with a wit as quick as a cat and wisdom beyond her age. She spoke with an "up-state" New York accent. She was the main attraction and a supporting actress."

"After a few moments, Johnjohn pointed at the door, saying, 'Look, look, some tomatoes.' I laughed as I said, 'flappers.' Three athletic, good-looking young ladies pranced into the bar. They took a seat at a table by the window, giggling and laughing. I recognized one of them. So, I got off the bar stool and approached her. 'Elizabeth, is that you?' She swung around so fast that she knocked into me, spilling my drink. She says, 'Oh, Arthur, sorry. How are you?' She stands up, and we hug. 'Terrific to see you'. Speed-talking, she adds, 'These are my dancing friends. We're rehearsing over at the Liberty Theater. What are you doing? It seems like an eternity since we arrived in the city. How are you doing? I have been thinking about you getting used to the fast pace and all this fine city has to offer. I could feel a big smile growing across my face. 'I'm doing fine. It's wonderful to see you. I'm auditioning this week for a road company: "All Souls Eve". I am a bit nervous.'

JohnJohn interrupts the conversation. 'He's going to be great. He has the gift, the looks, and the voice.' 'JohnJohn,' I said. 'This is the lady I met on the train, Elizabeth.' JohnJohn bows like a jester and, with an English accent, speaks properly, 'Ah, Madame, 'tis a pleasure. What brings you to this fine pub? Could it be for the warm pints?' Elizabeth, playing along, 'My Lord, I come to dance.' She points to her friends and in normal speech says, 'We are rehearsing a brand spanking new musical called "Lady, Be Good" by some unknown guys called the Gershwin's?' Johnjohn replies, 'Splendid, never heard of them. I'm hoping to see it and you soon.' Elizabeth blushes, her cheeks turn red. I said to JohnJohn, 'She's a real Oliver Twist'. Then to Elizabeth, 'Are you staying with your family?' Elizabeth states, 'For now, us girls are looking to move in together. How about you?' I replied, 'I have a room, really close to here. It's not great, but it's in the middle of the action. "

"We got lost in chit-chat. Meanwhile, JohnJohn worked the room, talking and laughing. The music grew louder, and the bar filled up and turned crazy, dancing, toasting, and musicians playing Irish jigs. So we invited the whole bar over to my one-room flat. All the bar patrons came to my humble little room. We were sitting, standing, drinking, and frolicking about, elbow to elbow. No one seemed to mind. There was a mime explaining hand techniques, and Elizabeth showed off her

"Charleston" chops. I played the guitar, and people seemed fascinated with it and applauded. JohnJohn, acting as my agent, shows off my paintings. I was embarrassed, but a good time was had by all. I later learned that most of these folks were in the play that I was auditioning for the next day."

"So, that audition at the Maxine Elliott Theater was stressful, to say the least. I could feel my face full of anxiety, a bit hungover from the previous evening. I was standing, sitting, and standing with other young people, all waiting. I took a deep breath, mumbled to myself. The receptionist at the desk shouts, "Raul Ben-Gay, Raul Ben-Gay, next." 'That's me,' I responded. The receptionist barked out, 'Fallow me. You'll be seeing Hal Sanders. Don't mention his wig. I rubbed my worry stone and thought to myself, "Don't be late to follow your path to destiny."

## 6 - HORRORS OF WAR

In 1970, as I sat in the same Mexican hospital room, witnessed my uncle's deterioration as he struggled, lost consciousness, and eventually regained consciousness. I asked him if he was doing okay, and he shook and quipped, "Yep, yep," with a struggle, and he continued, "All my life, I've been searching for meaning." I asked, "What does that mean?" He replied, "Of God, of life." "Why?" I asked. He explained, "To fill the hole, the hole in my soul, with a reason for being. A reason for suffering." He paused and said, "Sometimes I think too much. Then there is silly ambition." He shook his head, pondered, and said, "You should know more about the war. I have not spoken very much to the family about it, really, if at all." He continued his war-time story:

"France in the fall of 1944, somewhere east, by Fort Villey le Sac I recall the immense sound of a massive barrage of explosions. The force was astounding. It jolted through the body, blew back the helmet, and rattled the ears. Surveying the battlefield with my binoculars, I saw a burned-out Sherman tank, still smoldering. The steel side ripped open like tin foil. More tanks and gunfire, a hailstorm of mortars and machine guns, and confusion scattered soldiers. There were so many casualties that the many medics were unable to care for them all. It just went on and on, with massive explosions from German artillery shells and mines tearing apart the landscape. Guns loaded with tracers poured out a red snowstorm of bullets. I was heading directly into a nightmare."

"There was a GI shouting at me. 'Chaplain, there is a wounded man in that tank.' He pointed, and I shouted back, 'I see. I got it. You retreat'. I recall the sheer terror on the dirt-covered faces of the soldiers. Boys, eighteen or nineteen years old, who are tough and well-trained, startled with blank stares, trying to block out the madness around them. I rushed from tree to tree in an attempt to avoid being spotted. I got to a clearing, and I evaluated the burning tank from some 200



meters away with my field glasses. Despite the heavy fire, I fell to the ground utilizing the military leopard crawl. Like all chaplains, I had no weapons of any kind. I moved on with the crawl. Then I came upon a soldier who was lying face down and still. I had gloves on, so I stuck my nose into the GI's cheek. It was cold. I traced the Sign of the Cross with my thumb on the soldier's forehead, then crawled on."

"Boom-Boom-Kaboom! -- Shells explode around the tank, rocking it. Then silence for a moment. I rest face down, breathing slowly, deeply, and silently. I continued to crawl. I reached another soldier, and I grabbed and pulled his arm towards me. I pull in half a torso. A dog tag fell out with the name "Saul Abelman" and a "Star of David." I kept it."

"I crawled on, yelling towards the tank. 'Soldier! Soldier!' I was met with gunfire that grazed my helmet. Shaa-Wang! I rolled over, and I froze briefly, and then I crawled on. I faintly heard a voice, in English. 'Here-Here-In here!.' I knew the GI was alive. I felt my instincts kick in. I positioned myself on the backside of the tank. I was receiving incoming fire. I pulled up and shimmied myself towards the hatch of the tank. There was a loud blast on the tank's far side that threw me back onto the ground. I froze and heard the GI screaming from inside the tank. I crawled back up onto the tank and said, in almost a whisper, 'Coming. I'm on my way; stay put.' I crawled back up to the hatch. I reached down and grabbed the soft-faced boy infantryman by the arm, hauled him out, and pulled him to the ground. The GI looked dehumanized, and I sensed the fear that surrounded his heart."

"Another mortar shell exploded nearby. Another storm of bullets from yet another machine-gun nest in yet another thicket of trees. I calmly told the GI to put his good arm around my neck. I laid on my stomach and told him to roll on top of me. 'Okay? So, go ahead and do it now!' I ordered. The GI nods in agony and tells me that "Jerry" is still in there. I said, 'Here we go, I'll come back for him.' Then I started to crawl with the GI on my back. The sounds of battle intensify all around us."

"After 100 meters or so, the GI loses the grip on my neck. So I bit the GI's wrist very hard. I held it tight with my jaws clamped down, and I pulled the man along,

lurching as we went. I felt blood squirting out of his wrist and streaming down my face. We finally got to the safety of the trees, where a medic litter squad scurried to rescue us. Again, the GI points wildly back at the tank and screams, 'My buddy'! So, then, I immediately started to crawl back to the inflamed tank while machine-gun bullets splattered around all of us. I shed my binoculars and other bothersome gear. This time I moved surprisingly fast, ignoring the explosions and bullets. I crawled by a soldier who was vomiting and touched his back to calm him down. I used hand signals to alert the litter squad about him. I felt more shock waves. The sky was filled with flak and smoke. I was approaching the tank on my elbows and knees. I lifted myself up to the hatch. "Chunk-chunk" holes were being punched into the tank. I see a man running, "rat-at-at-at," and the man bursts like a water balloon. I dove, then I stretched into the hatch and dragged the soldier out and down to the ground. Then, on hands and knees, I pulled him to safety. “

"The gunfire began to slow. It was sporadic by now. An occasional mortar round screamed in. A chill came over the battle scene, revealing the smoldering, crushed, and beaten landscape. All existence is exhausted and spent.”

I stared with a chill of astonishment at my uncle, who was lying prone in his hospital bed. "Holy Shit' I said to myself. The Horrors of War !

I needed a bathroom break, so I slipped out of the room in silence, down the hall, and returned a few moments later.

## 7 - A TOURING COMPANY

As I watched from the hospital window, Mexican children were playing in the street below. My uncle was being monitored by a nurse, who came in with a bright smile and an expression of genuine warmth. Peaceful. When I visited Mexico, I saw how much respect the locals had for my uncle, who was a priest. He inquired, "Before you arrived here, you were playing music somewhere, right?" "Yeah, I was in Texas, going east from Los Angeles to New Orleans. Dad called to tell me about the car accident you were in. So, being relatively close, I came down," I said. "Traveling with a touring company is a lot of fun." He answered, "I remember touring middle America with that musical play I was in."

He looked across the room, and a peaceful nostalgia appeared on his face. "I was with JohnJohn and Alice and the entire cast, including young people like Gigi, a twenty-something who was tall, wiry, and anxious. She was an aspiring actress and dancer, oozing with confidence, although I don't know why. Then there was Morgan, a young man of nineteen or so, smaller than the others, who listened to JohnJohn's stories with eager admiration. There was Kiri, the significant female protagonist, and she was exciting to be around. A couple of lively young dancers and old Stephan, the elder soothsayer type, who backstage was a true comic."

"Canton, Chicago, Peoria, St. Louis—we would go from town to town. The touring theater company was no different from the traveling rock and roll band. I miss it. Anyway, on the train in the '30s, the diner car was where we would all end up convening. It was like a magnet for us to connect and talk, gossip, and discuss the performances. The chatter would sometimes get loud and obnoxious as the train would click and chug along."

"I became more at ease with myself as I told stories and received respect from my friends. It seemed like we bonded in some special way. It was us against the current. Our team was out to conquer the world and show everyone we were the

new and upcoming "stars of the stage." The play's director was Sean McGuire. We all called him "Chief." In his forties, he had a chiseled face, was nicely dressed, and was fairly muscular. One time, I noticed the Chief sitting alone in solitude, so I thoughtfully asked, "Hey, Chief, is everything alright?" Looking up slowly, he said, 'I'm feeling a bit detached.' That answer was unclear and bothersome to me. I didn't know what to say. So, I gazed out the train's window for a minute, and then finally remarked, 'We had a great run in St. Louis.' He replied, 'Yeah, nice work,' and paused. 'I have some reservations.' Then I said, 'I've had odd feelings too, like maybe this life is not who I really am.' In a low, deliberate voice, he replied, 'You are perceptive, Artie. This world—ah, this world—I don't know, but I'm feeling something. Something is not quite right. I need more, I guess. I miss my family,' he said after another long pause. 'I was brought up Catholic. My entire family is devoted. I still go when I can. I'm beginning to understand how they feel. Happily accepting things'."

"Then JohnJohn noticed us talking. He approached and said in jest, 'Now, Chief, are you letting Raul talk you into putting him in the lead role?' I interjected, 'Far from it. We are like discussing the meaning of life.' JohnJohn, 'Oh, you are still poking that snake?' I answer, 'It's never been resolved. The Chief is merely giving me some thoughts.' JohnJohn holds his hands up and says, 'Don't twist yourself into knots.' Then he waved to the waiter, 'I need to meditate too. I meditate with a French lady that I know, called Martini. Or is that Italian?' Chief said, 'I need to eke out a bit more meaning in life than a French lady.' JohnJohn returns to the bar."

"I made a statement to Chief, 'Religion is the great opioid of the people, and it is persuasive.' Chief replied, 'Yeah, that's kinda right. It can put your mind at ease. Don't worry about the future because it's unavoidable.' I concluded, 'Que sera, sera'. The chief nodded in the affirmative. 'Mom would just put things in the "hands of the Lord." She didn't worry about the small stuff.' Finally, I agreed to take the book he offered me."

Back at his hospital bedside, I commented, "Uncle Art, you once said, fear is the beginning of wisdom. What did you mean?" He replied, "It's how a person

overcomes fear, that is the "excellence" of it all." I said, "Is then "fear of God" the beginning of wisdom?" Continuing, he explained, "God is the beginning of everything. Fear of God? Well, sometimes that fear makes you afraid of everything. Some people are good at being afraid. So do you still believe?" I respond, "I do. You say God is mysterious yet merciful. I have recently felt God only stands up for power grabbers and war-mongers. Are we supposed to worship such a deity? Then "Jesus", the Lord of the Poverty Class?"

I heard dogs barking wickedly in the street below. Looking bewildered, I looked out the second-story window at peasant children with boxes of "chickleets" and an old woman on the boulevard. I see my own sadness. I hear distant Mexican radio music.

My uncle acknowledged, "It's that ageless quest for a God and an afterlife." I answered, "What is your conclusion, then?" I stared blankly into the space above the Christ on the wall, and then he finally answered. "Perhaps the answers are with the poor and the innocent." He took a deep breath with a long pause and said, "I learned a lot from the Chiefs' book. Maybe it's not what you think. He stopped mid-sentence and snatched a fly mid-flight with his hand. Then he continued, "What I learned then, from that book and all those lectures in theology school, is that belief comes from within. Learn all you can, but the truth is inside you. And inside each and every one of us, he clarified."

"As I began reading the book Chief gave me, I was immediately drawn in. I was entranced by the clicking-ity-clicking of the train traveling across the heartland. "Understanding Catholicism," it was called, I read on and on. I fell asleep, woke up, and read again. I couldn't put it down. I think I needed that guidance at that time. I was forming my own conscience and sub-conscience. The book helped." "Were you an instant convert?" I asked. "No, not at all. Remember, I studied the Tibetan book, Hindu, and Mormon too," he reminded me."

"Suddenly, the whole cast and crew began dancing up and down the center aisle of the train. I laughed at the absurdity of pirouettes, arms waving, and veils fluttering. JohnJohn shouts with excitement, 'Look, look, it's the Bay. We're loving it-it's regal!' As he danced on, I stood up and joined in with the dance and celebration. I hugged JohnJohn, Alice, and the cast. I was feeling jubilant and thinking, "WOW! It's the glitz. "The City of the Golden Gate!" As things settled, I sat with JohnJohn. He said, 'I am charged up, abuzz.' Then he pointed at the book and asked, 'Are you getting anything out of that?' 'Yes,' I replied. 'It's intriguing. I like it.' Then he added, 'You know, I was raised Catholic. School, twelve years, the whole thing—great memories. You should look into it, Raul."

## 8 - CITY BY THE BAY

My uncle continued his story, saying, "The train arrived at the Oakland Bay Terminal in California. Our crew departed and boarded a ferry and cross into San Francisco. We were treated to spectacular views of the bay and city. We boarded a bus and traveled through Chinatown to the "Geary Theater" in the downtown area. We walked through the theater like schoolchildren on a field trip, full of excitement. I fell behind, absorbing culture and pondering deep thoughts alone."

"After a week or so, as the excitement cooled down, we felt that this might be the end of the tour. World tensions and economic unrest were creating uncertainty all around us. There was this restaurant in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco that the Chief frequented when in town, and this trip was no exception. It was called "The Trattoria Restaurant." We were all sitting in booths one afternoon. The Chief remarked, 'This is the best of the best. Yes, yes, the finest minestrone anywhere, bar none.' He indicated that he was a great connoisseur of Italian cuisine. 'I know Italian-o!' he boasted. Then he spoke quietly, 'OK Gang, this is our last two weeks in this marvelous city, and I have news'. Of course, JohnJohn enthusiastically shrieks, 'What, what?' The chief shushed him, saying, 'We might be ending our run right here at the Golden Gate. Investors are concerned about monetary upheaval, both domestically and internationally. We are all very unsure right now. Just beware. Think about your future'. I asked, 'Will we be stranded here?' 'Most probably', he answered, 'but we will get paid. A majority of the company will go back to New York. Some will stay. Some will go to Los Angeles and Hollywood. You guys might consider all those options'. JohnJohn asked, 'What about you, Chief?' The chief answered, 'Going home to my wife and kids.' JohnJohn said, 'So, we will get paid, right Chief?' The chief responded, "I'll see to it. You all think about your options, and please keep them to yourself for now. We will talk soon.' The chief gets up and

leaves. JohnJohn turns to me and exclaims, 'Let's go to L.A. and stop by my uncle's house in Santa Barbara. It's amazing'."

"Alice entered the restaurant and took a seat. 'Hey Alice, top of the morning to you!' said JohnJohn. 'Boy, you guys look startled,' Alice said.' 'Oh, it's nothing,' said JohnJohn. 'You get strange feelings sometimes in this world, you know.' Alice said, 'It does feel glum today.' 'I, too, feel strange,' I said. I'm not sure what I make of it.' Alice took a menu and flipped her hair from one side to another and said, 'You know, I got a letter from my big sister in Paris. She mentioned that there was a peculiar vibe all over Europe. Despair, anxiety. Not calm.' 'I've got to catch up on some things,' I said as I stood up and began to walk away. JohnJohn later told me that the two of them had a lengthy conversation, which he described as follows:"

*"Gosh. Is he OK?" Alice said to JohnJohn. He answered, "He's reading Catholic stuff like you and I did as kids. What Chief said bothers me more." Alice answered, "Perhaps I should reconsider my new obsession—the atheist one—and return to my roots. The roaring 20s are over—aaand, Artie might be right. Time to grow up." JohnJohn responded, "Easy for you. I can't grow up. Alice, "We might be forced to, we might all be forced to. Let's get out of here. I feel claustrophobic." JohnJohn, "It's going to be fine. We should be celebrating this, the last week of the tour. Whoops! Well, according to rumor," "I'm not surprised," Alice said.*

*They walked out of the restaurant and through the streets of San Francisco, winding their way back to the theater. He didn't think Alice was all that enthusiastic about atheism. She admitted to believing in God. She said that ever since high school and her dad's death, she has prayed and looked for a sign of strength, but without a simple result or a sign from anywhere. No response. Nothin'. Nada.*

*She said this with sadness to him.*



*So now she thinks that we only live here and now. There is nothing from our past and nothing for our future. Taxes, death, and the end - over - kaput. That is what she has come to believe. JohnJohn said to her, "Remember how in school, you wanted to be a nun. So that's history? Kaput? " "Yeah, that's history," she said. "After school, I went back and forth to the city. After all, it was the Roaring Twenties, and I wanted to act, dance, or be something other than a housewife in Connecticut—auditioning, partying. I had lost contact with myself or with who I was." "I know," I JohnJohn admitted. "Me too, and I'm still there, still in that headspace. The twenties are over. So, if this tour is over, what are you thinking? Go back East? " She was not sure. JohnJohn told her that there were options."*

"In the meantime, I returned to my hotel room and resumed my reading. I couldn't put the book down. Then, someone rapped on the door. 'Mr. Henderson, you have a telegram,' the voice said. 'Telegram!' When I heard the door open and saw who was there, my stomach dropped. When I reach for the envelope, I stop cold. 'Where do I put my signature?' I laid back on the bed and let out a sigh of relief. My adrenaline began to pump, and I could feel the irritation spreading across my face. I read the telegram that had arrived. A message from your dad, my younger brother:"

TO: MR. ARTHUR HENDERSON  
HOTEL FAIRMONT, SAN FRANCISCO

START: ARTIE, BAD NEWS. MOM HAS DIED.  
MEDICAL PROBLEMS. PLEASE CALL.  
BILL.

STOP:

"Serious sadness overwhelmed me. I rolled around on the bed, got up, and laid back down, heartbroken, which caused me to cry. I got a flash of nausea, and then I quickly stormed out of the room. I bolted for the lobby, where I made a beeline for the front desk. To speak with my brother Bill, I dialed his number. Alice came over and sat down next to me as I continued talking. She sat on an overstuffed couch and picked up a copy of Marie Claire after listening in on the conversation. She nervously flipped through the pages. I talked to my younger brother and got all the specifics I needed, then I hung up, feeling very sad. Alice asked me, 'What is it, your mother?' She saw the panicked look on my face. 'Let's go for a walk,' I said. We left the hotel on foot. At first, I didn't say a word. The feelings of despair, isolation, anger, guilt, and emptiness were just beginning to overwhelm me. I paced quickly, emphasizing each step and punctuating with my hands. Alice could barely keep up."

"Passing the Presidio, several cable cars, Telegraph Hill, and then a large statue of Christ the Redeemer seem to loom up out of nowhere. I stopped, glared, and shouted at the figure, 'What are you looking at?' We continued talking as we walked and returned to the theater right before our show."

"She said, 'The show must go on. Do it for your mother, your family.' I respond softly, 'Yeah.' Then, after some thought, I profoundly stated, 'I've got to go up there. To Oregon. I have made my decision'. 'What?' Alice asked, surprised. When did you move to Oregon?' I responded, 'Last year. Dad never really recovered from the accident.' 'We close next week,' Alice replied. 'Four days off, then next weekend, and that's it! That's all we have left.' JohnJohn stepped in and said, 'Sorry about your mom, Artie.' I acknowledged him, 'Thanks, John. I'm going north tomorrow. But I'll be back to finish up with this play. JohnJohn, 'In four days. Artie, you are going to Oregon and back just to finish the tour? That's crazy.' I responded, 'I have got to go. I am committed, and I'm committed to finishing this tour, plus I feel the calling to go south with you guys'. JohnJohn looked down with a pause and a quirky smile and said, 'Hey, that's it then. Us three to L.A.' Alice said sarcastically, 'Remember, bad things come in threes. One, the play ends. Two, his mom's death.

What's next? What's number three?' JohnJohn shook his head and said, 'Ooh, thanks, Alice.' She replied, 'Yes, the Supreme Being is at work.' “

Back in the Matamoros hospital, I looked at my uncle face-to-face and asked, 'You went to Oregon and back in four days?' My uncle said, "Obligations are unyielding, for both blood family and extended family." I replied, "I know that feeling." He said, "When people are touched by your passion, it is godlike. You know what is right in your heart." He paused, saying, "I was concerned about my family. I was still upset about the delay in getting Wade to the doctor." He pauses again, then looks up. "Decisions. I needed to make them; I had to make them, and I did. It was a rushed journey with long hours sitting on the bus, but I did it and am glad I did'."

"Anyway, after Saturday night's final show, the crew assembled in the grand lobby of the hotel with hugs and condolences. Chief tapped his wine glass with a spoon to command the room. He made his speech. 'Thank you all, and I promise to stay in touch,' he pronounced. Everyone in the lobby got boisterous. Each of us got an envelope. There was a party at a chateau overlooking China Beach the next day. It was a wonderful old mansion overlooking the Pacific Ocean, owned by a wealthy theater lover. But we—JohnJohn, Alice, and myself—decided to head to L.A., plus JohnJohn had talked to his uncle in Santa Barbara and secured the guest house. “

My uncle sat up from the hospital bed, and he had a sparkle in his eye when he talked about that California coast road trip. He said, "We bought an old Ford Model T convertible. It was really fun to watch JohnJohn haggle with the salesman. The car lot was just down the street from our hotel. We were overjoyed and filled with pride. As we drove up to the hotel, we honked and yelled, "LA Bound, Hollywood Here We Come," in a kind of chant. That seemed to annoy the other cast members as well as onlookers. We packed up. JohnJohn grabbed Alice by the hand and

jumped into the rumble seat. We called it our "Cali Jalopy," and it was incredibly exciting. "

"It appears you had feelings for Alice," I asked. "Yes, I did." He quipped. "We had become great friends, and I had hoped that it would lead somewhere more. Still, I couldn't help but observe that she was always with JohnJohn, and it started to grate on my nerves. I kept it hidden. My constant worry was that one of my actions would cause harm. When I relied on my gut instinct, I was at my most productive." "Are you ever tempted by sexual desire?" I wondered aloud. When asked for an explanation, he responded with a friendly smile, "Of course, it's a constant struggle."

## 9 - CALIFORNIA JALOPY

"This road trip along the California coast was fantastic. As we made our way through Big Sur, we noticed that Highway 1 seemed to hug the towering cliffs above the dazzling blue Pacific Ocean and its beautiful shores with fluffy white waves. At times, we were going too fast, and at others, we were going too slowly, wandering the quaint beachfront communities, sharing stories and good cheer. In sum, it was a fun ride."

"Our crew arrived in Santa Barbara late in the afternoon. Confidence and foresight, like those of a conquistador, drove our focus forward. The "estate" that belonged to JohnJohn's uncle was a stunning California-style mansion. The entrance gate was a colossal structure that stood between us and our future. The gate gradually opened, revealing a gentleman in the driveway."

"JohnJohn's uncle, Edmond Rooney, was forty-ish, overly gracious and welcoming, and gave hugs to us all. He had a big belly, a cocktail in his hand, and an infectious laugh. He said with a beam, 'My favorite nephew, Oh, what a nice jalopy!' JohnJohn laughs, 'Uncle Edmond, hey hey! Yeah, this is our "Cali Jalopy." Where's Aunt Ruth?' Edmond answered, "Shopping. Always shopping. Getting something special. We want a nice dinner for our famous "Stars of the Stage." We laugh as Alice and I were introduced."

"Edmond led us through the house into the well-manicured backyard with statues of St. Francis and Our Lady of Guadalupe, brilliant flowers, and palm trees. The guest house has cathedral ceilings, stained glass, and elegant furnishings. Edmond, 'I hope this will do. However, Alice, you'll need to take a room in the house, per orders from my wife. You understand?' Alice answered, 'It's so beautiful here. I appreciate your warm hospitality. 'We are pretty devoted Catholics here,' Edmond said. 'My parents, too,' Alice replied."

"We had a magnificent dinner prepared by Ruth and her kitchen attendant. JohnJohn's aunt was also in her forties and appeared as though she had just

stepped off the cover of Vogue magazine. Stunning. Through the big, tall windows out the back, I saw lavish plants and the brilliant California sunset. All has gone well. I was feeling good.”

“Early the next morning, with the light shining through the stained glass windows, I heard panting, groans, and footsteps. From the guest house window, I saw Edmond scurrying down the path towards us. It felt a bit unreal. He had a newspaper in hand, and he knocked frantically on the door while shouting, ‘JohnJohn get up! GET UP!’ So, JohnJohn opened a crack in the door, sleepy-eyed, and said, ‘Calm down, uncle Ed. What is it? Fiery, Edmond shrieks, ‘Was that play you were in called “All Souls Eve”?’ “Yeah, so?” JohnJohn asked. Shaken, he responded, ‘The newspaper here says that in San Francisco, there was an accident involving members of the cast of “All Souls Eve,” a musical play that just closed at the Geary Theater. It happened a few days ago, on Sunday. They were swimming in the ocean at China Beach, and a riptide pulled them out to sea.’ JohnJohn shocked and astonished, said, ‘What? Let me see.’ Edmond showed him the front page. JohnJohn’s eyes watered, ‘Oh, it’s not so. No, it can’t be true. No! No!’ I poked my head out of the bedroom door that was partially opened. I stopped and stared. Then I took the newspaper and sat down. Alice now stood at the door’s entrance, teary-eyed and in shock. We all wept.”

“Is there anything we can do, son?’ Edmond asked and looked exhausted. He now stood with Ruth at his side. ‘WOW, I, I, I... I don’t know,’ shudders JohnJohn. Edmond continued, ‘My house is your house, all of you. You can stay as long as you want. He looked to the sky and said, ‘I have taken the liberty to make a call. I’d like you all to meet a dear friend. He will be here soon’. Edmond leaves. JohnJohn stands. My jaw was stiff and taunt, and I felt my eyes squint. All of us were silent, taking it hard—harder than expected. The front door remained open as the sun streamed in, heavy, thick sunbeams, ghostly and spiritual at the same time. A celestial wind grew, then calmed.”

“As if out of nowhere, a tall, partially obscured figure materialized with an unyielding stance in the doorway. The image was covered with a long, dark-brown

hooded robe. The entire space was bathed in sunlight. A low, deep, resonant voice spoke slowly, 'Welcome. Welcome to the serenity and sanctuary of Santa Barbara. May God Bless you'."

"It was Father Theodor McDaniels, the Catholic Rector of Santa Barbara. He had a soft manner and a strong character. He was tall, with silver-white hair, and appeared to be in his fifties. He entered. Edmond followed. Then Edmond introduced him, 'I want you to meet Friar Theo'. 'Oh, I've met you before,' JohnJohn blurted out. 'We visited about 5 years ago from New York'. Edmond said, 'Oh yes, the friar is now the senior Rector of Santa Barbara and the Mission.' JohnJohn responded, 'Oh, I remember you as Friar "T". Fr. Theo said, 'Yes, JohnJohn, I am still Friar Theo. Not Friar Tuck, as you used to call me.' A slight chuckle was heard by all of us. Fr. Theo continued, 'So, you are the actors, and you are going through a tough ordeal.' Sarcastically, I quipped, 'To say the least.' Fr. Theo then states, 'It is difficult to understand what this world can throw at you sometimes. It's simply not fair.' I raised my voice, 'Fair? What is fairness? Who understands fairness? It just plain does not make sense. A betrayal by God.' Fr. Theo calmly answers, 'Dealing with this deluge of feelings is here, and it is upon you NOW. Sadness, anger, guilt, emptiness. You'll feel these in the hours, days, and months to come. It will decrease. You are lucky to have each other. Discuss these feelings. It is important. Talk. Communicate with one another, as well as with your uncle Edmond and aunt Ruth. Talk to me, and, if you can, talk to your parents and loved ones.' Silence, placidity, and a bit of relaxation grew on everyone's faces. I still felt contemptuous. So then I asked the Friar, 'Do you think bad things come in threes?' Fr. Theo, 'No. No, I do not. It is random. Things happen. It's not a bad omen or deliberate mischief by any force or forces, and if it is, so be it. Your will is as free as Eve's was in the Garden. Pray or meditate on the calmness of the universe. Each of us knows what is right and what is wrong. Sometimes it takes a while to discern. Our souls know it.' He paused. 'What can you tell me about those who perished?' 'The chief was funny and in command,' I replied. 'He just wanted to go home. Sad. I feel like I am homeless now, and I just fell out of a boxcar'."

"Then, I kind of went into a rage, I guess. I started sweating, slugging the air with my fist, and then I jogged in place. After a moment, I composed myself. With tears, I then said, 'Chief was my mentor. He showed me the spiritual aspect of the arts. I loved him'. Fr. Theo said, 'The grieving process can be many things. It will be long, short, and come in phases. It's a disaster. Talk. God is there. God is direction. Pursue it'."

"This priest filled the room with calm, and I was amazed. As Alice began to cry softly, I lowered my head and closed my eyes. Fr. Theo exclaimed, with his hands extended, 'Let me take you to a place of healing'."



## 10 - SANTA BARBARA

"After a few days of rest and reflection, as well as hours of discussion, we all went with the friar to the famous mission. He treated us to a grand tour of the grounds, with panoramic views of the holy shrine. All four of us walked through the arches, chapels, and lush grounds and sat in the garden courtyard. While discussing all things worldly and touching on spirituality, the friar said, 'We should soak this moment in and realize we are truly alive and we are just at the beginning of life'. We walked on. One moment I precisely remember is when Father Theo lagged behind, and I felt that he watched me. It was an odd feeling as JohnJohn, Alice, and I walked ahead, engaged in chitchat. He observed us with intensity." Later, he told me that he saw "intangibles" in me, such as intelligence, an infectious personality, leadership, and so on. Surprisingly, I remarked, 'I feel calm here.' 'This,' he said, indicating the world around him, was 'his life right now. Assisting others in their pursuit of biblical knowledge by offering guidance and interpretation in the hope that it will be beneficial, but more importantly, by simply being present.' In response, I simply said, 'Serving humanity.' I mean, that's a lot."

"Father Theo then invited me to a class where I could learn more about his way of life." 'That is an option,' I said. Alice and JohnJohn exchanged odd looks when they heard the priest's overture to me. Father Theo then continued, 'It is a simple class, a lecture, really.' 'What exactly would it entail?' I was curious. 'What is the obligation—what is the catch?' 'No catch, and as much time as is required,' he replied. 'There is no obligation to do so. That is not the case. You simply listen and ask questions to learn more about this mission and how things work here.' John spoke up, 'We are going to stick around a few more days, maybe a week or so.' I looked across the courtyard gardens, sober, clear-eyed, and in thought. Then I squinted at the sound of music in the distance. What exactly is that music, Fr. Theo?' I inquired. 'Where is the music coming from?' Father Theo answered, 'The Friars are rehearsing for an upcoming event. The nuns from the neighboring

convent are joining the performance. All are excellent singers.' I asked, 'Can I peek in and listen?' 'Sure' he said."

"So I remember walking over to the great wooden doors of the old mission church. I slipped in and stood alone in the rear. I believed Father Theo, Alice, and JohnJohn were just outside on the steps. I stood and watched a nun sing a moving rendition of "The Only One Who Can." A slow, emotional ballad with deeply moving lyrics, it was really a prayer. She seemed to be singing directly to me, and I got choked up several times. It was wonderful. The grandeur of the cathedral and the penetrating quality of her vocals, it was mystical:

*Father, I ask you this  
Because I believe you care  
Father, will you please tell me  
What it is that's causing me this pain?*

*I'm so alone and want to die  
I've given up and I don't know why  
To live today is too much to bare  
So please Lord will you send someone who cares*

*'cause theirs no one else to ask  
'cause theirs no one else that can tell me, tell me  
'cause theirs no one else that can help me to understand  
So please Lord will you lend me your guiding hand"*

*(Curtis Daniels)*

"My emotions were inflamed as the adrenaline rushed into my heart. My breathing increased. The space inside that church started swirling around me with colors that appeared to be hallucinations or fantasies. The Nun. The Crucifix. Then a fog appeared. Out of this wretched haze came rage, anger, and then stillness. A

universal silence was backing itself into my soul, becoming more organized as it crept along. I took a gallant step through the fog of this existence. I focused on the crucifix, and soon the music subsided. I walked back out to the courtyard and saw Fr. Theo and the others standing outside in the sun. They walked toward the fountain in the courtyard's center. Fr. Theo came over to me, and he looked closely at me and commented, 'You seem troubled, Artie, more than you show'. I said, 'I had a constant ache in my heart.' Then I looked down and said softly, 'It's like I am being punished for my ambition. Leaving my parents and making silly youth blunders. Now this accident in San Francisco, that crew, Chief, and all these issues. It seemed overwhelming, and I am not sure where or in what direction I am going.' Fr. Theo responded, 'I am disheartened to hear this. The blues are hard to navigate.' He paused and said, 'Nothing lasts. We inherit the desire to move forward as positively as possible'. He paused again and asked, 'Is this angst locked in or locked out of your heart?' 'I can't say,' I replied."

"We heard the music again. "That song touches me so deeply, I can't express my feelings," I said as I turned toward the chapel. We paused and listened. Fr. Theo comments, 'Remember, son, those who live in fear are in a jail all of their own.' I said, 'It seems so enormous'. To that, he replied, 'Don't confuse your will with God's'. The music faded, and the rehearsal seemed to have ended. I went back inside the church to be alone, and I sat. I just had to think."

"The next day, I went back to the church, again alone. I felt pale. My stomach was twisted, and I felt abandoned. In silence, I just stared and stared at the altar. Then, with my eyes closed and a feeling of stress rumbling throughout my body, I pondered the uselessness of my private universe. A slow calm grew within me. It gradually engulfed my entire body. I let out a breath and became tranquil. Still a bit anxious, I stood abruptly. Then I twirled around and stretched. I put my arms above my head as I stretched. I reached high, toward the heavens. I stretched again. I took deep breaths several times. I turned around and walked out those enormous Spanish doors."

In the hospital room in Mexico in 1970, my uncle stated the obvious: "That was a gigantic flood of emotions. To put it simply, I was at a fork in the road. It was impossible to find a life raft. Only forward progress was possible at that point. But I was curious as to what path I was actually on—what was the next step?" I asked my uncle, "You had a sudden awakening?" "It was a long time coming, really, and it became clear what the vision of what my life was meant to be," he continued, "and Fr. Theo had a significant influence on me." Then I commented, "He was your guide or shaman." "Yes, and I needed it at that moment. His values, beliefs, and perspective on life. Ideas on the arts, the humanities, politics, and social justice. I was now a pupil of the friar." "WOW. It must have been a really heavy time, life-changing and all." I said in '70s English as he grinned, "Yeah, you could say that." He smiled, "Father Theo gave me his Bible. It was an old Bible with his handwritten notes scribbled over the text. I made my decision."

"So, JohnJohn and Alice went to Los Angeles?" I said as I approached the hospital window. "They did," he said. "It was a passionate and tearful departure. Nevertheless, I was anxious and ready for the change. And they were ready for their future."

Unexpectedly, a loud swoosh rattled the entire hospital floor. Down the hall, a whistle and buzzers could be heard echoing and growing louder. A fire alarm had gone off, and everything had gotten drenched with sprinkler water. Then the alarm stopped and the confusion settled. Towels and blankets were brought in, along with mops and buckets—old and torn, but towels nonetheless. We chuckled. The whole staff was scurrying around mopping up the mess. All in all, it was funny.

"In order to become a priest, I had to put in a minimum of eight years of school." He continued, "Some fun times and lots of hard work. I acquired lasting friendships. I painted in oils and sang in the "Padres Cloister," a vocal choir. We even recorded an album on RCA Records of Spanish Christmas songs."

"Our studies were not just "theology" and advanced "Catholicism," but everything in the world. We studied all things imaginable and unimaginable, with a Catholic slant, of course. In any case, it was a well-rounded education. And then, finally, I became "Father Benedict Henderson." It was a happy ceremony when I was ordained a Franciscan priest in 1939, with St. Benedict as my chosen patron saint."

"My first appointment was mission work at the Apache Reservation in Arizona. My favorite memories are from the White River Saint Francis Mission. I arrived during a wild sand storm. The wind was howling, and I remember a solo flute playing way off in the distance. The melody was lonely. Then I saw the silhouette of a small boy dressed in typical Native American attire. As the wind subsided, he approached. He asked me if I liked sand. 'Not this much,' I replied. The little guy then asked, 'Do you like to fish?' 'Certainly,' I replied. 'Do you have a wife?' 'No, but I have family,' I said. That seemed to satisfy him for the time being. Then he asked, 'Wanna go fishing?' I answered, 'Maybe in the morning'."

"These people were one with nature, and that was eye-opening after all the academics I just went through—deeply spiritual and naturally aware. These lessons I respected, and I learned well."

At his bedside, I asked, "Did you go fishing?" "Yes, of course we did! We went to a small stream, a secret little brook he knew about, and we both fished. His name was Naiche', and he caught some nice trout. We laughed and laughed and had a great time. He asked me if I liked it at the reservation, and I confirmed that I did. I told him that my boss wanted me to go to a big city parish. I requested to be here. I am at home here. He liked that answer."

"In the mission courtyard, under the shaded trees, I frequently sat with the Native kids. We would clown around, wear masks, and be silly. I would play guitar and sing songs like "Old MacDonald had a farm," "Yankee Doodle Dandy," and "Danny Boy," and they would teach me Apache songs and music along with their dance rhythms. Great fun. We would all sing along at the top of our lungs, dance, and laugh. The children loved to laugh."

"For the duration of my 16-month stay, I laid the groundwork for what would become the definitive Apache-English Dictionary. They called their tongue Athabaskan (Na-dené)."

"Why did you leave?" I questioned. My uncle answered, "Well, every day or so I would get mail from Phoenix, and that included the newspaper. I kept in touch with the world, and at that time, it was getting ugly. I realized that we, as Americans, are not doing enough to stop the 'final solution' started by Hitler. I can best explain it by telling you the gist of the letter I wrote in 1940. On an old Remington typewriter in the Mission Church rectory, I wrote to the Provincial Minister of the Franciscan Order in Oakland, CA:"

*"Reverend and Dear Father,*

*As you are aware, there is a major conflict in Europe, and our country is poised to enter it. For the past years, a ranking Army official has constantly urged me to join as a Chaplain. Now he has contacted me again and promised to procure for me the highest-ranking commission in the best regiment possible. The only reason why I have not is that, to me, it would seem like desertion from the Order which has done so much for me. Now I'd like to leave this whole business in your hands . . ."*

I tried to get to the bottom of it by asking, "How did war factor into your worldview?" " Oh, oh - No! No! When I found out that Germany, and that regime was murdering its own people I felt I had to do something". He stopped, then said, "I enlisted in the Army and eventually became an officer."

## 11 - THE WAR MACHINE

"They put me through boot camp, albeit a brief one, followed by schooling, schooling, and more schooling. Harvard, the Army School, and the War College. Finally, and only then, did they believe I was prepared. I had no idea what I was getting myself into. I became "Chaplain Arthur Benedict Henderson" and went off to war."

"It was late at night in 1944 when I arrived near Liverdun, France. The entire area was shrouded in a thick, eerie gloom, with a slight light in the eastern sky. It was silent except for the occasional boom of artillery in the distance. I fell into a deep sleep. I woke up to an acidic smell with that distant rumbling."

"I recall one night I was inside one of those makeshift barracks. A runner came out of the dark and approached the Army tent. I was preparing to bed down for the evening when he shouted loudly, 'Who's in the tent? Evacuate, Evacuate—NOW!' I mumbled and stirred. I clicked on my flashlight as it illuminated the tent walls. Three wounded GIs and myself rose up and looked outside. There stood Private Terry James, all of nineteen, a rugged, sharp, and cocky kid. He was wild-eyed, exhausted, and unshaven, smeared with dirt and blood. His eyes shone. He was breathing hard but still shouted, 'Enemy advancing!!! Does that ambulance work?' I acknowledged him calmly but sternly and said, 'Help me get these soldiers in'. We scrambled and pushed the wounded infantrymen into the ambulance. 'You get in there, Private!' I ordered him while pointing forcefully. 'There are wounded soldiers up on that rise, in another tent.' I jumped into a nearby jeep, and Private Terry said, 'Sir, I don't mean to be disrespectful, but that is behind enemy lines.' I shouted and pointed, 'So are those soldiers up there. Keep moving, private, a sitting duck is a dead one'."

"I was driving intensely through the dark rain, dashing toward those tents up on a rise a half-mile away. With the aid of an onsite medic, we yanked four wounded American GIs out of that tent. Everyone was hanging on as I zigzagged my way to safety. We got to the "Foret De Facq" aid station with the breaks shrieking, mud splashing, and skidding."

"After getting out of the jeep and securing help for the soldiers, PFC Terry salutes and remarks, 'Chaplain, Sir. You saved those lives.' 'Private, relax. What is your name?' I asked. 'Terry, sir, private Terry', he answered. I said, 'Private Terry, you are a strong and smart soldier. You have done an outstanding job.' Quickly speaking up was Medic Rachael Grossman, a stern, no-nonsense woman with dark "pit bull" circles under her eyes, wide hips, and an air of authority. She seemed to take over as she spoke in broken English. 'Clean up after yourself. Keep this area clean,' she instructed. Then she looked at me and said, 'Oh, you're the Padre. You are quite the hero, a real "Mr. Sangfroid," aren't you? She picked up some chairs and continued to ask, 'What makes you tick?' I said, 'A reaction, like you—a reaction, an instinct of sorts, I think.' Shaking her head, she responds, 'Or stupidity. Nothing is true, everything is permitted.' Private Terry then asked me, 'How can you not question God, sir?' Medic Rachael sarcastically quips, 'If God be for us, who be against us? Right Padre?' I quipped back at her, 'A bit cynical, ay medic? War makes it subjective. Ours is not to reason why.' I did not elaborate anymore. I was being a bit elusive. Rachael's breath then became hard as she barked with snake-like viper. 'Those fucking Krauts! God? Reason?' Rachel stormed away. "

"You can't blame her," said Private Terry. She saw her family gunned down, and then she hid for a week in a suitcase. Captain McCully found her and has been helping her out. She has had some medical training and has been here for several months now.' 'God bless her,' I said. The private nodded his head and said, 'She's the best.' 'Are you alright, Private?' I asked with uncertainty. The young soldier took a deep breath and sighed. 'You know, Emerson, the writer?' he asked thoughtfully. I nodded affirmatively. 'He wrote: "War educates the senses, activates the will, perfects the physical constitution, and it's a way to make men measure men." What do you make of that, sir?' I thought for a minute, then I replied, 'It is a



way for man to make some sort of sense of all of this. All this craziness. His quote does not work for me. War does not educate; it degenerates man. The work of evil. And so it is with war.' After a long pause, I said, 'Indeed; "FUBAR". The privates' eyes opened wide, then a loud laugh erupted. 'Did I hear you say that, Father?' I felt a twinkle in my eye. I asked, 'Where are you from, Private?' 'Nebraska, Sir. Podunk Nebraska.' I smiled and said, 'Ah, yes, a cornhusker. Good football.' 'Of course, sir, the best.' He continued, with some emotion, 'I was planning to play. Coaches came to watch me in high school. They were coming back, then the war happened.' 'Well, you know, son', reminding him, 'they still just might come back. I'm a little psychic about these things' I said. Then, with a long pause, 'We need to get some sleep. Think about cornfields, and touchdown passes'. He replied, 'Yes Sir, agreed'. We both leaned back and fell asleep quickly, to the faint sounds of war in the distance."

"I woke up very early the next morning, feeling the urge to get positive. Being under constant wartime intensity, daybreak shone clean after the night's rain. So, as the sun broke over the tents, I gathered what things I would need from the battlefield strewn with wreckage. I created a makeshift bench and cleared an area on a slightly sloped hill. I was preparing my plan. I felt the urge to sing. Yes, I burst into song. Slowly, with all my might, I sang in Latin, 'Ad Deum qui lætificat' . . . the High Mass."

"Soldiers, medics, and patients were waking up and drawing back their tent flaps. They peered out one by one. Everyone gawked and walked slowly toward the makeshift altar I had constructed out of debris. Passionate and in my "theater voice," I would sing stronger and louder, belting out "Krie, eléison." The troops gathered closer to me. Some kneeled, some sat on their helmets, and others stood. Some were on crutches, while others were splintered and bandaged. I sang, "Panem de clo prstitsti eis." PFC Terry and Medic Rachael were wide-eyed and amazed, wearing heartfelt smiles. 'Kýrie, eléison. Christe, eléison'. I held my hands out to my sides, and I slowly brought them together in the bright sun. I blessed

those who were there. Then a funny thing happened. Applause! Yes, applause. I put my face toward the warm sun. I thanked the universe, I thanked God.”

"Two days after that, Private Terry and I were on a mission near Pont-A-Mousson, France, delivering plasma to a medical aid station. Several US Army jeeps lay in ruins, surrounded by the charred remains of GI soldiers. All six Americans had perished in a nightmare scenario. I quickly called in the location. As time passed, we progressed. The rain was pounding down on us. Conditions were cold, stormy, and wet. I got out and slowly walked in front of the jeep to help PFC Terry navigate through the mud. I was twenty feet or so ahead, directing the vehicle through and around rain-exposed mines in the pathway. The aid station was a few miles away. I recall pointing and shouting, 'Watch this one, jump to the right. Veer a little more—10 feet left, just a little more—back, left.' I said, and the Jeep moved inch by inch with my direction. Silently and ever so deliberately, we continued in this manner. I heard some sporadic small-arms gunfire. I thought that a German squad had spotted us and was opening fire, so I dove face-down in the mud. The Jeep stopped. We listened, trying to pinpoint the exact source. I got up on one knee and pointed out my best guess. Again, bullets splattered into the mud around me. I went back down. Then there was a huge explosion. A mortar landed right in front of me. Shrapnel knocked me back. A violent crack jolted the air. I go down hard. Mesmerized, I knew immediately that I had been hit. I landed on my back in the mud. I froze. I was stunned and in shock. I attempted to void my mind of thought and let my sub-conscience take over. I told myself to just react as the universe wished me to do. I prayed. I regained some perception of reality as PFC Terry located the German squad. After an intense machine-gun blitz, he disabled them. Terry jumped into the mud and screamed, 'Say something! Say something.' I was dazed, muddled, and stiff-jawed, and I remember looking at him. 'Ah, protect yourself, private,' I said softly. Terry said, 'Yes, sir, you'll be right as rain'. He carefully helped me into the Jeep. Then we backtracked. I recall grimacing with

pain, and I slumped over in the seat. I felt warm blood slowly soaking my uniform and oozing all over my body. I remained silent and did not utter a sound.”

“Later that evening, I was diagnosed with three gunshot wounds and a concussion. I regained consciousness after being sedated for several hours. Medic Rachael was standing over me with a kind smile. I looked up at her while I was lying on the gurney-style table, and I said with a slur, ‘Did you get the plasma?’ Medic Rachael said, ‘Padre, we have the blood.’ She pointed at the I-V and said, ‘You bring it yourself.’ I lifted my head and quipped, ‘What? It’s not for me, nurse. It’s for the wounded GIs. ‘Yes, for you, Padre. You need to be well. So you can keep to liberate.’ She clarified, ‘You are now the wounded, too.’ I laid back down and stretched out on the makeshift cot and closed my eyes. She gave me another injection. So, as the gloom began to fall, my mind repeated over and over, ‘Keep to liberate—keep to liberate—keep to liberate’. I saw only aureole, and I faded.”

I was appalled to hear my uncle re-live the war from his Matamoros hospital bed. His eyes now glazed over, and he said, "I do not understand war. I do not claim to be able to unravel those mysteries. I treasure the good, as you should." I stared at him, trying to understand. He continued, "I more fully understood my lot in life." With that and a long sigh, he continued, "A month or so later, I was feeling much better. Medic Rachael brought me some oil paints and army surplus canvases for artwork. Those canvases were pretty shabby, but they worked out’.”

"The war dragged on. I did not want to leave the Pont-A-Mousson medic station, feeling compelled to return to my service, to my role as chaplain. As I got stronger, day by day, I would walk. Each day I strolled on longer and longer walks. The commander in charge would give me small tasks to accomplish to help with the overall war effort. On one of those days, he asked me to send some soldiers out on a recon mission. After doing so, I walked through the vacant bunker

and through the trenches. I noticed the pungent smell of stale gunpowder. Something didn't feel right, so I slowly and cautiously moved along the foxhole. Turning a slight corner, I suddenly found myself face-to-face and at gunpoint with two German soldiers. Both are extremely young, seventeen or eighteen. Both were terrified and anxious. So, I said to myself, 'Think like a young German kid.' Then I prayed, 'God, thank you for insisting I learn colloquial German in war school. I stood there and stared at them, not angrily, just gazing at their faces.'

"German #1 pointed his rifle close to my temple. He said in German, 'On your knees, Amis, NOW! Danke!' Angrily, the other German #2 quipped, 'Dirty Yankee!' Recognizing their youth and sensing their fear, I looked as deeply as I could into their eyes and remained standing and unshaken. Making an attempt to keep a compassionate, soft look in my eyes, I said softly, 'I am a priest. Do you know what that is?' German #1 pulled his gun back, spooked and dazed, and he said, 'Religion? What? Yankee Religion!' I responded more sternly, 'Your mother did not tell you? Clergy. We do not fight. We carry no weapons. We represent peace. You should be ashamed of yourself.' German #2 spoke up, 'The Pope? Ha, it is a trick.' I replied, 'Catholic, yes. Are you boys Catholic?' German #2 exclaimed, 'AAAH!' 'Hush,' German #1 instructed. I sensed a Catholic connection, so I continued to press, 'I am a Catholic priest. You should not threaten me. I am not a threat to you.' I then put my hands together with a pious look and gradually moved my hands palms out, chest high, towards the boys. German #2 looked petrified, a tear grew in his eyes. German #1 spoke to German #2, 'Quit, Quit. Stop your sobbing. We are proud German soldiers.' German #2 weeping, 'No, I will not do this. He is a priest. Mother will never, ever forgive me. German #1 to German #2, 'Stop it! Just stop it.' From German #2 to German #1, 'Your mother too, Kommandeur, and you know it'. Now I sensed vulnerability, and I shouted, 'God is your father. We ALL answer to him, and only him. German #1 said, 'We answer to the Fuhrer.' Again, I responded strongly, 'You don't know God. God does not put a gun to someone's face, you don't know God!' German #1 said, 'What makes you have all the answers?' 'Jesus died for you. That is the truth. I have the truth.' I shouted theatrically, 'From now on,

when you put your head on your pillow, you will be tortured by your subconscious. Do you really want to test God in this manner?' German #1 reiterates, 'I die for the Fuhrer, he is God. To us, he is God.' I responded with empathy and softly said, 'You are a German child, not a Nazi. Look around you. This war, this destruction. This is not God.' I shook my head and continued, 'The Fuhrer is not God. The Fuhrer hates Jews. Did you know Jesus was a Jew? This is not you. This is not right.' I then put my hand on my heart. I continued with a gentle voice, 'In your heart, you know the truth'. I looked in the eyes of German #2 and said, 'You both know what is right. Look at each other. Look, you are good, you are brothers, you are German.' I then point to German #1, 'Jesus died for you, and above all, Jesus will forgive you. Are you sure you would die for this Fuhrer? Quickly turning back and pointing to German #2, I said, 'ARE YOU? What would your mother say?' I nodded positively and said softly, 'I think we know.'" Both boys looked down, then up at one another. There was crying, and the weapons were put down. You should be out there playing futbol or basketball, I went on. Simply act like the innocent children you are. I will get you back to your families, so listen to your moms and go home. The boys seem dejected and hopeless. The group prayed together.

'What drama!' I exclaimed at the Matamoros hospital. Were you afraid?' 'Yeah, terrified, but something led me through it, God, I suppose,' he replied. 'Was it difficult to feel God?' I inquired. There seemed to be high tensions everywhere.' 'You just put your head down and hit it right in the middle,' he explained."

"Another good example of this happened a week or so later,' he continued. 'On a beautiful French day, I was walking through a green meadow and sat under a prune tree. I began to read some intelligence reports. It was very serene and calm. Suddenly, a loud mortar shell hits the tree with a thud. Not a normal sound for incoming shelling—just a thud, period. It turned out to be a dud and only showered me with prunes. I got up very slowly and looked to the heavens. I made the sign of

the cross and strolled off. I recalled my father saying, "Follow the path to your destiny'."

"So then, through the fields and hedges, I walked, attempting to mentally capture landscape images in my head for painting them on canvas later. I kept hearing whispers, thinking they were birds or squirrels. As I wandered by an enormous thicket of brush, I heard something that alarmed me: the overtones of very faint German speech, and I asked myself, 'Are Germans hiding or stocking me?' I heard it again. Then the moving brush was followed by a thump, accompanied by a moan and muffled conversation. In the distance, I saw a bull ox, and it howled out like a cow. I spoke in a normal tone: 'Who goes there, Wehrmacht? Hello?' I heard voices again, followed by silence. Then, in German, a voice said, 'Here. Over here. We are wounded'. I followed the voices and proceeded with caution. Slowly, step by step, I crept. I found twelve wounded German soldiers. They were in, under, and around a hay wagon hidden in the massive underbrush with piles of rubble strewn about. With moans and sighs, they put their hands in the air. Depleted and defeated, they seemingly wanted to surrender."

"I said to them, 'Are you impaired? Can I help? The apparent leader of the group answered, 'We are weak. Some of us are wounded. We do not want a fight. Please, do you have medicine? I approached very cautiously and anxiously and said, 'Be still, all of you.' They stopped and froze. I pointed and said, 'Clear out that wagon, and all of you get in'. Over the next few minutes, they very slowly did as I said. I grabbed the harness of the ox that was close by and hitched him up to the wagon. I started walking the beast slowly. The ox bellowed, the wagon wheels squealed, and he pulled the cart out of the brush. I was on the lookout for snipers, and with less than a mile to the aid station, it wasn't too far, I thought. There were plenty of mortar-sized holes disrupting the emerald landscape. Signs of warfare lay everywhere. Only a slight breeze provided relief from the stench of oxen dung, stale gun smoke, and grizzly Germans who hadn't slept or bathed in months. So, with twelve wounded German soldiers riding in a French farm wagon with me at the helm, we headed towards the aid station at Pont-A-Mousson."

"That German soldier, who seemed to be more in command and spoke some broken English, apparently had some authority. He said, 'OK, no weapons.' We left them behind. Is the war over? He then showed me his wounds and scars. He said, 'Comrade, do you have medicine?' I answered, 'We will take care of you. What is your name? He quipped, 'Klaus', and continued, 'Not Russian medicine, NO, NO! Russians have no food or medicine for Germans. Another German spoke up, 'Russians are not kind. They're assholes.' I remarked, 'I am American. 'All of us, all humans, require dignity.' The German quips, 'Profound talk coming from invaders.' I quickly state, 'We are no invaders. We are liberators. We free France from an invasion. Liberate Germans from autocracy'."

"The wagon bounced through war-torn meadows green with vegetation, shrubs, and trees to the sound of hoofbeats. Another German asked me in German, 'Do Americans have beautiful frauen nurses?' Another asked, 'How about borscht?' 'We'll feed you,' I said. Klaus, in English, asked, 'Brew? Maybe sausages?' 'We will feed you,' I say again. Another asked, "Sauerkraut?" I said emphatically in German, "WE WILL FEED YOU."

"We went by a hedgerow that paralleled the oxen's path. The Germans talked amongst themselves, then one asked me, 'Comrade American, do you know how we conquered Poland so fast?' I answered, 'How?' He responded, 'We marched in backward, and the Polish thought we were leaving.' Ruckus laughter. I felt a slight smile grow on my face. The German continues in English, 'Comrade American, do you know Mae West?' More laughter. The atmosphere became relaxed as we bounced along the trail."

"I began to sing an old German folk song I learned in school: "Kein schöner Land in dieser Zeit", (*No more beautiful land than this*):

*"Kein schöner Land  
Kein schöner Land in dieser Zeit",*

Each individual German then began to sing along with the group. Slowly they all sang louder and louder.

*"Als hier das unsre weit und breit,  
Wo wir uns finden  
Wohl unter Linden  
Zur Abendzeit, Abendzeit'."*

"As a result, the entire hay wagon, twelve seriously injured German soldiers, were singing at the top of their lungs, and me too, as we approached the aid station. Medics, patients, and soldiers came out and looked at the incoming vocal ensemble. I recalled Medic Rachael encouragingly shouting, 'Looks like the Padre is gathering his flock'."



## 12 - POSTWAR CLEANUP

My uncle stared vacantly ahead, peering intensely from his bed in the hospital. The evening was coming, and he said, "Mercy, mercy!" and shook his head from side to side. I said, "The war was over." "Yes" he said, "and I was numb from a surge of sentiment that is too much to handle. It was hard to assimilate. They planned to shower me with accolades and certificates. That didn't seem plausible to me at all. Therefore, I avoided further conversations about that nonsense."

"We were not done with our aggressive obligations in the war theater. Now the grim part was just beginning. Identifying hundreds of bodies. Contacting the Grave Registration Unit and the families."

In a slow rage, my uncle hurled his hands into the air, pulling out his IV in the process and knocking over its stand. It was an enormous outburst for him. The nurse rushed in and settled things down. He composed himself and then continued, "I wrote over 3000 letters in all. I became obsessed with writing letters to the families of the dead. Government incompetence. This is mankind's biggest flaw, known as "WAR." And now I write the paperwork of death." He turned away from me, and I could see tears sliding down his cheeks.

"One citation I received had a statement written on it about chaplains. It said:

THE MILITARY NEEDS THOSE OF FAITH  
WHO GO TO WAR ARMED WITH RAW COURAGE,  
GENTLE HANDS AND THE ARMOR OF GOD.

We were fronts for the war machine, and now we were tasked with cleaning it up."

I had no words to calm him. This enraged him, and he continued with outrage. He said, "One letter to the family of Saul Abelman was extremely emotional. I

enclosed his dog tags and the Star of David that I had saved from that day I found his body." I could see my uncle was on the brink. He looked out the window into the Mexican sunset, and I said to him, "Dad mentioned you had some hard times right after the war." "Yes; we both did," he replied, looking at me, "and I was fortunate to go to the Trappist Monastery Retreat. He was lucky too. He went home to your mother."

#### Honored as the Most Decorated Chaplain in WWII:

- Distinguished Service Cross, Heroism in Action"
- Silver Star w/ 1 Bronze Oak Leaf Cluster
- Bronze Star Medal w/1 Bronze Oak Leaf Cluster
- 3 Purple Hearts
- Army Commendation Medal
- Presidential Unit Citation"
- Euro-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal w/2 Bronze
- Service Stars,1 Silver Service Star
- WWII Victory Medal
- Army of Occupation Medal w/Germany Clasp
- National Defense Service Medal
- Korean Service Medal
- United Nations Service Medal

He refused to accept the numerous post-war honors offered to him, citing his religious vows of humility and poverty.

My uncle, "Father Chaplain Benedict Arthur Henderson," sought refuge at a Kentucky Trappist monastery after he developed post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the war, despite his own morality. He recuperated by drawing, listening to

music, and studying theology, metaphysics, poetry, meditating, and praying. He put in a lot of time praying. "That was a very tough time," he said from his bedridden Mexican perch. "Rock bottom. However, day after day, I felt stronger and stronger. I remember the smell of the green Kentucky horse pastures and the flowers that the Trappists had cultured all around those lovely grounds."

"After several months, an old 1941 Packard Staff Car in OD Green with a "Five Point" Army Star on the door pulled up to the entrance of the Grand Abbey. A fully decorated general stepped out, and I greeted him. I was dressed modestly in my brown Franciscan robe."

"General Arnold, a stout, commanding figure with gray hair and facial scars, stepped out. He took small, timid steps, assisted by a cane, and approached me, clicked his heels, and saluted. With a crusty voice, he said, 'Colonel, great to see you. How are you doing?' I said, 'I am doing well. These Trappists here do not talk. So, with loneliness comes wisdom. And you, General, how's the effort?'

"Adequate," he said, "let's talk about it."

"We were led to a courtyard in the lush lawnscape by a monk and seated beneath a flower archway then given tea. 'Times are improving and moving quickly,' said the general. 'We are dealing with the Russians and a collapsing Germany. It's a delicate situation.' 'We should not have stopped where we did,' I said. 'Yes, a lot of us thought that way,' he replied. "What ifs" will make you insane," I said. "IF" is life's middle word.' 'That brings me to my point,' he said. 'You are a hero of this war. Congress and the administration wish to bestow honors on you.' I strongly replied, 'No, I have enough honors. I have a vow to live up to, and it is not that.' 'Well, you are indeed respected,' he replied with a pause. 'We'd like you to come to the Pentagon. Sir, your input is requested.' I sarcastically looked at him, sipping hot tea, and said, 'You need MY input?' Startled, he answered, 'We need it now.' After an awkward pause, he said, 'Sometime in the next week or so. A request, not an order. A strong request, however.' So, evidently, the Army wanted to give me more awards, and when I refused, they offered me a job. I accepted the offer to finish up my military work at the Pentagon. I knew that this request would eventually become an order."

"I went to D.C. and immediately sought out my old friend who was in town working with government issues, he too was in the war. Father Radlinski was an old colleague from my time in seminary school. He would visit Santa Barbara from the East Coast and stay at the retreat outside of the mission. I had kept in touch with him throughout the years. He came out to Eugene. I am sure you remember him."

Looking at his I.V. back in the hospital, which was hanging upside down with tubes leading to his arm, I said, "Yes, I remember him. Mom called him "Father Grumpy." "Your mom had quite the personality," my uncle replied with a smile. "Fr. Rad appreciated the dignity of a diocesan priest, while I had taken the Franciscan vow of poverty."

"Anyway, we met up. I was in full Army dress, and my old friend was in his Roman collar. We entered a popular D.C. restaurant called "Billy Martin's Tavern." Fr. Rad was not only a ranking official in the church clergy, he was also a consultant at the U.S. State Department. He had an aristocratic air about him; that was what your mom didn't like. We shared a bottle of red wine and sat across from each other. The restaurant was preparing a rich-smelling wine-garlic sauce that made my mouth water. 'Wonderful smell if you like garlic,' he said, smiling. 'Look at yourself; you look good, sort of.' He paused with a chuckle, waiting for a response. After a brief exchange of small talk, he inquired, 'What are your thoughts? These times are changing in a twist. We last spoke about seagulls on the beach and why they follow boats. 'How to become a boat that leads the flocks' 'Ah, yes,' I said, nodding, just before being ordained. We would stroll along the ocean in Santa Barbara, engaging in long conversations. We were so naive then, thinking we were going to change the world. After all, how could God let the world get in our way?' We both chuckled, and I wanted to cry. 'Now, oh boy, look now— circumstances,' I continued. Time catches up with you. 'Nice to see you again, old friend.' We exchanged a warm smile and civility. 'Is there a sea beneath the gull?' Fr. Rad continued, 'Or simply land?' 'The gull glides with the landscape, in the moment, land or sea, following the boat, a natural reactionary act,' I said with a

smile. 'There is no time to think, 'God, get me to the next moment, because that moment arrives on its own'."

"The war was such a contrast of emotions. The guilt I feel now for not doing enough is prodigious. But what is enough? Do your job and help the soldiers get through it all. I still blame the governments of the world for letting this happen. But what about "God"? Does God have any responsibility for this disaster, or is it all because of "free will" or "we don't understand God's intent"? Am I losing my religion?"

"After a long drink of wine, I sighed and looked towards the patrons along the bar, over my right and then left shoulder. As more people gathered in this familiar establishment, cigarette smoke began to fill the air. The chatter was loud and getting louder, and I was getting red-faced. In my mind, I saw a battlefield filled with dead soldiers. I tried to block it out, which did not work. I continued talking as Rad continued to listen, 'If you keep your head straight when those all around you are losing theirs, and they blame it all on you? If you can believe in yourself when everyone else does not, then you are the boat, and the gull knows it. I call the gull instinct and the boat character.' I paused, then said, 'The monastery was a welcome rest, physically. Spiritually, it was also beneficial. Not so much for the mind.' Fr. Rad replied, 'The mind is tricky.' I added, 'Shadows chase me like cruel ravens of grief. The more I think about it, the more terrified I become.' 'Not ready to put it to rest?' he asked, referring to the pesky ravens. 'Funny, I hear gunshots and mortar rounds, it does take some time, and when I go for a walk I end up looking for mines under my feet. I'll never forget the expressions on the soldiers' faces when they realized I was there to help. There were so many opportunities for compassionate action and so many opportunities for ruthless action. Sometimes the pain at night burns a hole in my chest. Is it the sins of the father? Is it the sins of the present? Is it pay forward, into the future? I don't know. Is it the trauma called inter-generational. We are both aware of the church's role in previous wars'."

"Fr. Rad asked, 'What does the brass want? The generals? Do they want you to jump back in? Do you want to return to the Trappists and leave well enough alone?' I explained, 'My work is not done. I'm not sure if it's what I want or what I

need? I've simply got to finish. We have got to deal with the aftermath of the war. The people, the souls. Neither the regimes nor the governments It's baffling, I know, but I have got to put my two cents in. It still follows me like a cold wind. A damp draft of lost souls.' Fr. Rad chimes in, 'And then these generals—are they good, bad, or what?' I made clear, 'The most terrifying monster is the one you invite into your own home, destroying the inner harbor's balance while attempting to lock in rationalizations.' 'Do you get immune to the stories of the soldiers?' Fr. Rad asked. 'NEVER! You never get immune to that. This one soldier told me: 'Every time I kill someone, I feel farther away from home.' I felt my voice crack and my eyes squint with emotion, so I spoke louder, 'Then, that same GI said to me: 'When you end up killing one of your own men, you tell yourself it happened to save two lives, or three, or maybe even ten. If I've killed fifty, that means I've saved a thousand, right? That's how simple it is. How to justify it: "mission over men"! I shook my head and took a long pause. Then I clarified, 'I consoled soldiers for killing, yet scripture says not to kill. But if they are the enemy, that's okay. Where is humanity? We are not the "saber cat" killing the "rabbit." We are human beings. Aren't we above that? It is my fault for propagating this. It is MY fault that I bought into it.'

"I stood up and walked to a window overlooking the outside deck in the restaurant, away from the patrons. Fr. Rad said, 'It is not your fault.' Raising my voice, 'It IS my fault; I AM AT FAULT!' Fr. Rad got up and walked in front of me, our faces flush with red intensity. 'It is not your fault, Arthur,' Fr. Rad responded. I shouted at him in anger, 'IT IS MY FAULT!' Everyone turned and looked. I had tears. Fr. Rad grabbed my shoulders and whispered into my ears, 'Listen, don't let your past define your future. Remember you are the boat, leading the gull'. Fr. Rad then took a deep breath, and I looked skyward. He said, 'Always remember: these soldiers may not believe the same as you, but they believe so very much in how much YOU believe'. We both slowly got a grip . . . two war-torn souls."

## 13 - PENTAGON

The scent of the bougainvillea flower hung in the musty, warm Mexican air. The nurse pattered around the room, sterol alcohol began to permeate; and she walked out. My uncle looked at me with gratitude that I was there. Fireworks went off in the street outside, and he seemed comfortable for the moment, reacting to whatever the nurse had given him.

He went on telling me his tale, "I got settled into my Pentagon job and had some good times. My receptionist was animated, amusing, and knowledgeable. She would sing in the corridors just to hear her voice echo. She was passionate about the arts. Her name was Katie Del Torre, and she was young, flamboyantly dressed, and flirtatious. She knew the comings and goings of all things in the office, making it her business as she pranced around."

I asked my uncle, "That was the fifties, right? Were you concerned with the "red scare" that I had read about?" He said, "At that time I was not. I was into my particular job, and Fr. Rad pushed me to play cello in the philharmonic. I was enthralled with culture and the arts, having not been around either very much for a while. However, at some point, I did start to take notice. Washington, D.C., is a captivating seat of power and attracts those who crave power and celebrity."

"Sergeant John Quincy entered my office, a young soldier in his twenties with dark hair and a shady demeanor. He was under my command and wanted to see me. "I'd heard hearsay about him, but I was open to whatever his inquiry was."

"When he entered my office, we stood and saluted. I said, 'How can I help you?' He answered, 'Well, sir, I am trying to meet with Col. Tracy, and I am told that I must go through you.' I said, 'Sergeant, is there something specific I can help you with? You know, I have seen you before. You were in that musical at the Arts Center last week, right? Good work'. Quincy said, 'Yes, sir, and thank you, sir. Is Col. Tracy around? What, shall I say, is this inquiry about?' I asked again. 'I have a question,' said Quincy. 'What is it, Sargent?' I asked. Quincy stated, 'Are you aware of curious

activities around the Arts Center, sir?' 'Rumors,' I replied, 'I have heard rumors. I haven't given them much thought.' Then I squinted and looked Quincy in the eye and said, 'Activities? What activities are you talking about precisely?' Quincy quickly looked away. I was aware of investigations, and I had forwarded some informal intel to superiors, all the while knowing the Vatican is not happy with priests working as operatives or undercover. 'Communists,' Quincy replied. 'Soviets. Turks, covert operations, espionage—things like that. Some are handing out their own propaganda and literature.' 'I've seen radical activists around the Arts Center,' I replied. Then there are those investigations into artists, writers, and actors. And those on the blacklist? Nonetheless, rumors abound, and we must remain vigilant. Don't you agree?' 'Correct,' Quincy said. 'Vigilant'. 'Always on guard,' I replied. 'Col. Tracy will see you now.' Quincy then strolled off to Col. Tracy Harrington's office. Tracy was a happy-go-lucky warrior. He was tall and a bit aloof, but confident. His office was next to mine. He liked to joke with my receptionist, Katie. So, then I would banter with him, claiming I could hear him singing in his office and that he was extremely flat. He would chime back, saying that I was the only one who would listen. Then I would retort, 'Are you and Katie auditioning for Hamlet?' "

"What's that aroma coming from the hospital hallway?" my uncle asked back in Matamoros, Mexico. "Oh," he exclaimed abruptly. "I smelled soup, tortilla soup!!! I'm hoping that was dinner. I'm not hungry, but I suppose you are," he said as he looked at me.

"That struck me as odd, Quincy, the arts, secrets?" he continued. "Soon after that, I got called into General Bradley's office." I remarked, "General Bradley? "THE General Bradley?" "Yeah," he said. "So then I slowly marched down the long corridor to a Pentagon conference room."

"The official "Generals" seal was on the door as I walked in. I saw portraits of several generals, along with the president, all framed and spaced nicely on the wall. There were five military personnel and two civilians seated at a long



boardroom-style table. Everyone stood and saluted, as was customary. The General and I saluted again, then we sat at the table. I adjusted my seat and took my hat off.”

"The general was in his fifties. A solid-looking man with a strong jaw and eye-catching chest honors, which he proudly displayed. He stated in an unyielding voice, 'Good afternoon, Chaplain. I am pleased you are here. On behalf of the Army and the United States of America, I would like to thank you for your heroic service'. I meekly answered, 'Thank you, General. It is good to be here.' 'I requested this meeting because of your military knowledge and service,' he explained. 'I was briefed on your writings on "Soviet indoctrination" in the context of Christianity vs. Communist Imperialism. We are engaged in a highly sensitive operation involving postwar Germany and Europe. Did you receive the documents I sent you? I responded, 'I did, sir.' 'We continue to conduct in-depth research on international relations, foreign policy, and national security, with a focus on the Soviet bloc.' He explained, 'The Soviets and the Allies are wrestling over Germany. Germany struggles to rebuild. Everyone has their own agendas. Can you speak to that? I humbly said "yes," then gathered my inner strength with a thought of God. I said 'Yes, and my agenda is freedom and human rights, as always. The current populace of Germany is torn. They are good human beings. Good souls. They are spiritually decomposed. It's a land of multiple atrocities struggling to emerge from the shadow of traumatic memory.' The general asked, 'Any suggestions?' “

"I started in with my thoughts: 'The Soviets want control of ideology, government, geography, social structure, the economy, political relationships, and the police state. They hold nothing back, as we know.' I paused a brief beat for dramatic impact, then continued, 'So right there emerges a dismal, dramatic picture of civilization. I am a liaison between church and state. My interests are promoting freedom and a Catholic viewpoint in the formation of policy. I am not advocating for the church to interfere with the state; rather, I am providing an educated viewpoint from our, the church's, perspective.' The General chimes in, 'I know, I know, but this situation continues to tear apart the German infrastructure.' “

"I gathered more inner strength, and then I stood up. In my strong theater voice, I expanded, 'Look, the big difference between Christendom and Communism is basic, it's freedom. We are at a crossroads. The Soviets are not stopping. They continue the "cold war." We are all playing a secret game with freedom, propaganda, and manipulating the press. Politicians want that "cold war" so as not to run up casualties. Again, those under Soviet influence will die spiritually, artistically, and it is a death sentence for liberty itself. The Communists do not believe in God nor freedom and will incarcerate those who do. In terms of human rights, there are none.' The general asked, 'What is realistic, then'? 'Our human rights policy needs to be promoted more intensely.' I said, 'Calling them out, enhancing Radio Free Europe, adding TV and film, and such. Dropping more pamphlets, change begins at the roots. Ardently promote the joys of liberty across all human behavioral disciplines and endeavors, also promoting this through the underground or "back-channel" venues, as it were. And, in my opinion, the "arts" should be encouraged in all mediums and forms'."

"Isn't that simply "cold war"? 'Politicians do not understand what you and I understand,' he said. As I moved to the right, I became more passionate, intense, and loud."

"It is exasperating to see useless attention and energy focused on minor issues. Does peace really exist anymore? 'If honor were profitable, everyone would be honorable,' Thomas More once said. When we ask questions as to why we cannot pull nations together and to our side, we find that our tariffs and economy forbid it. WHY? - Oh, we are told the congressmen want it that way. Short-term titillation instead of long-term nurturing, and that amounts to ignorance, misunderstanding, and indifference toward "We The People," the innocent. Are they not informed of the terrible issues at stake? If they are informed but do nothing, why? They say our standard of living must keep rising. We must keep it that way at all costs. The only good answers I can find here are selfishness, a lack of international charity, and a lack of spirituality. We must keep these values. We must let Germany be free—free to govern itself. We can not slice it up as Solomon did. Each life is too precious. Each life must have freedom."

"Bradley clarified, 'Keep pushing Germany into a free democratic society, and help restore and support Germany's rebirth as a sovereign nation with our allies.' 'Sir, yes, sir, that is my opinion.' 'Good. Agreed. Please take a seat, Chaplain.' He paused, and then he asked, to my amazement, 'You are involved in the arts, correct?' I took a deep breath and gathered myself. 'Yes, sir,' I replied. He said, 'That makes you a pseudo-liberal.' He laughed and threw a quirky smile at me. I did not take it well and responded, 'Not so fast, sir. I have no political bias. I am neither conservative nor liberal. I am in-between a realist and a humanitarian.' He smiled and responded, 'Liberal is not a bad thing, I do like "Miracle on 42nd Street," "Tchaikovsky," and "John Wayne." But "art" people are easy prey for unsavory regimes.' I answered, 'Perhaps.' 'But you as an art person - ', I interrupted him with a sneer, 'An artist, sir, not an "Art Person".' He continued, 'Yeah. As an artist, you should be wary of unusual infiltration. 'Watchful eye, sir' I remarked. 'Yes, use your intuition to spot things that aren't as they should be or aren't on the up and up.' You understand?' He clarified and I responded, 'I am forbidden to spy, sir.' He smoothly replied, 'Not spying. You, being a "chaplain" and an "ARTIST" have a unique position. I would never ask you to go against your convictions.' 'All right, General.' 'To be clear, we must assist ordinary people and artists on the street level in continuing to protest for freedom everywhere,' I said."

"He paused a beat and looked around the sterile room. Then he continued, 'So with that, the Joint Chiefs are meeting this afternoon. I will forward your input. Furthermore, I am requesting that you become the personnel officer for the Chief of Chaplains. You'll be reporting to me, the Joint Chiefs, the Secretary of Defense, and the President. I would like you to start a dialog with Colonel Scott here regarding the artwork lost post-war. See the major general in my office for your orders. I look forward to working with you.' We stood and saluted. I was shaking but kept myself under control. After all that, I was promoted. "Peculiar," I thought to myself."

## 14 - THEATER OF PECULIAR

I mentioned at his hospital bedside, "So Bradley was pretty intense!" He answered, "Not really, I was. I was out of line, but I didn't care. I was tired of all this government stuff and felt like I was being used. However, I was obligated to see it through. I kept telling myself that I had done enough for my country and that it was now time for just me. I indulged myself in music and painting for a while, I needed the escape that the arts provided." He hesitated, then said, "I was preparing for my first concert with the Symphony. The National Symphony Orchestra. That was my priority at that moment. I had auditioned for the vacated second-chair cellist spot a few weeks earlier, arranged by Father Rad. I was very anxious, with sleepless nights and all. But in the end, I did get the job, or gig, as you would say."

"At the D.C. Arts Center, there were several concert halls and a large auditorium. The backstage corridor connected them through various tunnels and walkways. Fr. Rad and I walked into the dressing room designated for us and heard distant conversations. We approached, and the excitement electrified the air for sure. The conductor, musicians, and whoever else were huddled to one side of the chamber talking, laughing, and discussing the upcoming show. Quincy and Katie came in and walked up to join the gathering. Fr. Rad was chatting, 'The opera houses in Château de Lunéville are astounding.' The conductor, a tall, skinny fellow, 60ish and with well groomed white hair, chimed in, 'Impeccable sound.' Fr. Rad added, 'The acoustics here, in the big hall, are good but not as warm as those European houses.' Quincy laughed and interjected into the conversation. 'It was the aristocrats that had those old structures built. Built by slave labor.' An uncomfortable silence fell. It was broken up by the clear sound of a soprano singing the "Kyrie" from Mozart's C minor mass. It was puzzling and alarming. Quincy cupped his hand around his ear. Samuel the conductor said, 'She's warming up'. Fr. Rad said, 'Ahh, Mozart. He transcribed music in his head. God loved Mozart'. I sang along with the soprano, "Krie, éléison. christe, éléison". Then, to my complete

surprise, Alice Rossin from the old New York play stood behind the group and applauded. 'Bravo, Artie, Bravo!' She cried as I whipped around. Astonished and amazed, I blurted out, 'Oh, blessed be Alice, my star from Babylon'. She exclaimed, 'A canary said you were in the orchestra.' 'Yes.' I said, 'Here I am, WOW. I heard you are married. Who? 'Children?' 'We had children and married during the war,' she replied. Alice twirls around and points, in the corner of the backstage area was JohnJohn. I yelled "YAHOO!" loud enough for the entire auditorium to hear. It was indeed emotional. I used my "Theater Voice" to introduce them to everyone who could hear me. 'These are some of my old friends. As I previously stated, I was in a Broadway play many years ago, and I was extremely fortunate to be a part of it. I had the pleasure of working with these wonderful people. I'm overjoyed to see Alice and John'. JohnJohn spat out, 'Thanks to Katie, we found you; she got us in here. Now, we are looking forward to a fantastic show.' 'This is a special evening,' I said. I remember us having big smiles on our faces."

"We got the two minute call, and we performed. It was the "1812 Overture" we played that evening, and I thought it was an appropriate choice. I saw the faces of Katie, Tracy, Fr. Rad, Alice, and JohnJohn in the audience. I finally focused over on Quincy, and I watched him as he gave an acknowledging nod to an unknown man. I had no idea who that guy was."

"After the concert, it was customary to have a reception in the lobby of the auditorium. Because of some kind of security threat, it was decided to have it backstage, where it was evidently more controllable by the authorities. It was catered, and there were delectable appetizers and wine. We all milled around and discussed the concert. It was wonderful to see Allison and JohnJohn and we planned a rendezvous for dinner before they returned to New York, where they lived. I kept an eye out for Quincy to see who that mysterious, unknown gentleman was. The atmosphere was fun as our wits were dipped in wine."

"Suddenly, there was a loud scream followed by a piercing, high-pitched yelp. An unknown man shouted, 'We are all being experimented on. They want to exterminate us all!', a loud slam and a thump, then silence. Everyone looked around, shocked, then looked at each other. A woman gasped and pointed to a rope

hanging from the theater rigging in the auditorium. We follow it down to a body hanging by the neck. A sign on the naked body read: "THE FUHRER IS NOT DEAD"."

"It was such a tumultuous time back then, during the post-war period, not knowing what the next day, let alone the next hour, would bring."

"A few days later, I brought some of my paintings into the office. I placed them deliberately on the side of my desk. Soon, the gruff and confident Col. John Parker strutted into my office, growling, 'Morning Chaplain'. I grunted back, 'Top o' the morning, sir.' He leaned in and said, 'Notice any odd activity around the Performing Arts Center?' I quipped back, 'Not really. It's normally odd there'. 'I just got briefed to be on the lookout for a "Mozart's High Mass in C," he continued. It might be code. Not sure.' I answered, 'Yes, Sir. Vigilant, I will keep on guard'. I thought to myself, 'Am I in training for some kind of covert operation or something?'

"In the meantime, Katie, who has been transferred to another office, paraded in. 'Morning Padre, great performance Saturday,' she said, decked out in flashy attire. I have a friend who is very good at folk music.' 'Thank you, does your friend play around here?' I asked. 'Yeah, local,' she replied. He's a musician from the area. Nice work, Padre!' she exclaims, pointing to my paintings. 'He'll be at a hip coffee shop in Georgetown, and my brother will be there as well.' 'Fantastic!' I said. 'Do they study music?' 'Political science major with a minor in music'. She said. Are these new paintings? Padre, you're great!' indicating the artwork, 'So, he's playing Friday evening; do you want to come? It's at a Georgetown coffee house?' I asked, 'Woody Guthrie-type music?' Katie answered, 'Yeah, and Pete Seeger. My friend is really good too. Other people are playing. It's Vibrant. Poet readings and like performance art.' I said, 'Hmm, interesting. Performance Art?' Katie, 'Little scenes or stories acted out with actors from like original writers.' I said, 'I'll ask Fr. Rad, he loves that type of thing. What do you think?' She exclaimed, 'SUPER!'."

"On that Friday evening, we met up and made it to Georgetown University. The cafe was called "Old World Coffee House." A scrappy little establishment with a beatnik vibe, old couches, funky art, music, and actor movie posters. With patchouli oil in the air, it was warm and stuffy. Katie was sporting bohemian garb, I was in funky "down-home" clothes that I paint in, and Fr. Rad was in a Roman collar. We were an odd-looking trio. We proudly pranced in and seated ourselves in the packed house amongst all kinds of eccentric types. I looked around and said, 'Great energy here. Love it.' Fr. Rad snarled, 'That's debatable'. Katie's brother Peter saw us immediately, I guess we stood out prominently, and he rushed over to greet us. He had long brownish hair, a 'go-t' and round sunglasses. Conversations were nearly shouted out because it was so loud. Fr. Rad asked Peter, 'You're the performer. Right?' Peter answered, 'Yeah. Cool. I'm glad you all came out.' Katie asked Peter if Vincent was around, 'Oh, somewhere,' he answered. Then Peter said to all of us, 'Hey, thanks for coming, man.' And then he was off to prepare for the show, I assumed. To that, Fr. Rad remarked as dry as chalk, 'Did he just call us "man"?' Katie quipped, 'Hey, when in Rome, I'll go get some drinks. Padre, what'll you have?' 'Earl Gray, hot.' She looked at Fr. Rad, 'How about you, Father Grumpy?' 'The same.' he growled out. 'Coming right up'. Katie headed for the coffee bar through the beautiful people and serious smoke. Fr. Rad got his handkerchief out and cleaned the utensils and glassware vigorously, saying, 'Don't trust this place.' I responded, 'Get in the spirit, Rad. We've had it worse. This is the front line of humanity—not bad, really.' The good father sarcastically replies, 'I guess so'."

"A few minutes passed and a hand taped me on the shoulder. A voice said, 'Chaplain Henderson?' 'Ahhh—John, John Quincy,' I said as I turned around. Quincy was almost shouting, 'Of all the places. What brings you here?' I replied, 'I came with Katie to hear some folk music. I'm looking forward to it. And You?' He replied, 'Yeah? I come here all the time. It's invigorating. 'This is Jack, my friend. He owns a Texas nightclub. You should stay for a contemporary performance of "Mozart's High Mass in C" later this evening. It's worth a listen,' I responded, 'Hmm—perhaps.' My face flushed. Quincy, who was acting very busy, said, 'Catch

ya later.' I became unfocused and stared straight ahead, like in a daydream. I squirmed in my chair and looked over both shoulders, thinking to myself, 'Invigorating, huh? and intriguing'."

"Katie returned. 'Here you all go' and set our drinks down. She asked, 'Was that Quincy?' I said, 'Yes, an odd duck. He sows the seeds of unrest in me. Katie, have you ever fished? I mean, like fly fishing? Katie replied, 'Yeah, my dad would take us all the time. We would go up to the Poconos. I enjoyed going, but I detested cleaning up fish guts, slime, and the odor. But fly fishing itself is cool.' I then said, 'The act of fishing is being close to God.' Fr. Rad chimes in sarcastically, 'Only you, Father, would say that!' Katie said, 'Oh, there's Vince'. She waved, and he waved back. 'They have a song on the radio right now, "Hard Traveling," by Vince Martin and the Tarriers. I'm so proud. My brother's playing first. Then Vincent.' We adjusted chairs to view the stage. Excitement was all around, and then a hush filled the room . . . the music began."



## 15 - I SPY

"On a crisp D.C. night, dark and silent with a sharp smell of winter in the air, Fr. Rad and I walked along the sidewalk, heading to our respective residences. 'Things are heating up, and it's alarming,' I remarked. Fr. Rad quipped back, 'Blacklisting? Who are these communists, socialists, or radicals the news gossip speaks of? Am I missing something? Who is deceiving whom?' I respond, 'The Communist Party is a double-edged sword. It wants to bring the poor up to a minimal level of life while eliminating any spiritual beliefs. The rulers or magistrates get the spoils. The conservatives accuse the liberals of being communists. At the same time, the left accuses the right of being authoritarian, which is a dangerous rationalization considering what we just went through. It's a "political stew," and it is becoming evil. Congress investigated the military and citizens for being communists with no real evidence.' Fr. Rad reacts, 'Evidence can speak with a forked tongue, anyway.' I continued, 'I've been told to be on the lookout for anything relating to "the High Mass by Mozart," and that reference to the Mozart piece keeps coming up.' Shaking his head, Fr. Rad does not respond and walks home. I headed to my apartment, which was closer to the Pentagon, with a secure phone."

"This is where things got weird," my uncle said, opening his eyes wide and looking at the evening outside the hospital window. I was beginning to realize the abundance of suspicious people around me. This was not like the war. A new reality was becoming obvious. This whole spy thing has everyone—the government, the church, and even myself—looking over their shoulders."

"Fr. Rad told me that he had been questioned about me by some "guys in black." Perhaps CIA personnel? I had no idea, but Fr. Rad told them emphatically, 'The chaplain speaks for the poor. He is involved in the arts and is the war's most decorated chaplain.' Then they asked him if I might be adversely influenced. When he told me that, it made me very angry. 'I stand tall for all my actions!' I declared.

Why am I even being scrutinized in this way? Something is seriously out of place! This threw me into a state of paranoia. I started to look over my shoulder. Yeah, I would even see people in the landscape and in the bushes. And what, after all, was Quincy up to? That night, after leaving Fr. Rad, I had the distinct impression that I was being followed. I'd stop, then continue, then stop again. Nothing seemed to be there, but I had a suspicious feeling.”

"Things slowed down a little, and one day, after my work was done early, I went for a walk to the Washington, D.C., Modern Art Museum. It's a wonderful place to just browse and think. I was gazing at a "Monet" when someone spoke up behind me, 'Beautiful, isn't it?'. Looking around, I answered, 'Agreed!' I took a few steps, and the person asked again, 'Visiting or from D.C.?' 'I work here,' I explained. 'Well, I see you are a chaplain,' he noticed. 'Indeed'. I said and added, 'Do you paint?' He said, 'A little bit, I sell. I'm kind of an art broker.' I answered, 'I indulge in painting. Mostly oils, but not like that.' He asked my name, and I said "Art" 'I'm Tony, here visiting my sister'.”

"It turned out he was Tony Taylor, a Santa Fe merchant and philanthropist in his fifties who was fun-loving, cheerful, and a little overweight. He said, 'These are unusual times, Chaplain. An art walk is nice. Do you take your painting seriously?' I answered, 'Yeah, it's a great outlet for me, as is music.' 'Music too?' He asked. 'Yeah.' I replied, 'Cellist in the D.C. Philharmonic.' 'Well, I sell paintings and artifacts in Santa Fe. But I'm from Texas.' He stated this unequivocally. 'In D.C. to buy and sell?' I inquired. 'Along with seeing my sister,' he replied, 'I'm always looking. I specialize in Southwestern art, Mexican and Indian art, and artifacts.' 'Oh, I love that style'. I replied, 'My first assignment as a priest was at White River, in Arizona,' I said, 'Yes, yes, I'm familiar with it. Apaches!' He stated'.”

“You'll soon realize why this unexpected encounter was so significant.” he proclaimed setting up from his bed.

"The next day, back at the Pentagon, I had a meeting with a lobbyist who was organizing a National Military Act of sorts. These guys were a bit bewildering to me,

and in the office, we called them professional "Wall-A-Wers." His name was Mr. Forrestal, and he, too, would become important, as you'll see. Anyway, he waltzed in and sat right down. I said, with light sarcasm, 'Make yourself comfortable'. 'I have some intelligence reports here,' Mr. Forrestal began. 'These papers show artwork and art treasures from various Jewish families, as well as people of all faiths and colors who have gone missing and ended up in Latin America, Russia, or simply vanished. This leads me to the conclusion that they have either made a good escape or someone is hiding them. What have you heard about this?' I replied nonchalantly, 'Only rumors, however, both the Vatican and the Army are concerned.' Mr. Forrestal, 'Rumors, I love rumors! Facts can be so misleading, rumors are often revealing. What rumors have you heard?' I repeated myself, 'Again, Mr. Forrestal, rumors. This hearsay you mentioned, suggests that artworks have made their way to Latin America. Is that what you're thinking, Mr. Forrestal?' He leans back and states, 'So the rumors that you have heard have been of Germans taking articles to South America? More specific, please.' 'Rumors, just rumors,' I replied, 'we act with due diligence around here'. 'Adolf Eichman is rumored to be in Argentina.' he spat out. I sighed, 'Due diligence.' Seemingly annoyed, Mr. Forrestal clarified, 'Chaplain, just so you know, I am requesting information from faithful clergy and the United States Military, and it is a request of patriotism.' Again, with a bit more sarcasm, I said, 'Are you looking for "crypto-Marxists"?' I paused with a smile and continued, 'What is your background, sir?' He snipped his answer, 'FBI for fifteen years. I primarily worked to recover stolen art.' 'I see. So, what do you request of me?' I asked. With a slight smile and a twinkle in his eye, he said, 'I would like to invite you, as Fr. Ben, to a gala event at the Argentina embassy.' I replied, 'I could do that, what's the catch?' 'Wear your Roman collar, not military colors'. He said."

"He called several times that week to make sure I would show up. 'OK then,' I confirmed. So a few days later, I went to this function at the Argentina Embassy in Washington, D.C. I did wear my Roman collar and met Mr. Forrestal, who was in a tux. We walked in together, I was completely in the dark but overjoyed by the fine cuisine and cocktails. It was very classy, and everything smelled divine. We mingled

with foreign and D.C. elites. I recognized a few of the guests, but mostly I new no one. An excellent small tango combo was playing. The beat caught on like wildfire.”

“Mr. Forrester introduced me to Congressman Mathew Ellsworth. I said, ‘Congressman, you know, I love Tango music’. Ellsworth nodded. The representative was in his forties, a sternly conservative-looking man in a bow tie who represented an Oregon district. I believe Mr. Forrestal recognized me as an Oregonian and was anxious to introduce me. We shook hands and said, ‘It is an honor to meet you.’ His wife, Deloris, smiled. Mr. Forrestal said, ‘Father Ben is an Army chaplain, a war hero, and from Oregon.’ Ellsworth responded, ‘Ain't that the limit and impressive? I believe I read about you in the Oregonian newspaper, Father. Then I interjected, ‘Mr. Forrestal here follows the ups and downs of politics, even Oregon politics, as do you, Congressman.’ Ellsworth replies, ‘Yes, until my death, my dear Chaplain’.”

"Way across the room, I saw Tony Taylor. We smiled, waved, and approached. I said, ‘Good to see you, Tony. Are you looking for tango art?’ ‘Ah, my artist friend,’ Tony laughed. ‘I find you at the most interesting events.’ ‘My job is to facilitate’. I replied. Tony proudly announces, ‘May I present my little sister, “Claudia”.’

"Well, well, well - It was Claudia Taylor, or "Lady Bird" Johnson, as I knew of her, the wife of the distinguished Senator Johnson (D-TX). Refined and petite, once her nursemaid said, "She's as purdy as a ladybird," the rest is history. ‘It’s my pleasure, Miss Claudia’, I said. ‘This is such an honor, and may I introduce Rep. Ellsworth from my state of Oregon?’ Ellsworth took her hand, bowed, and said, ‘Good evening, Miss "Lady Bird," and nice to see you again’. An awkward pause happened then as I turned to Tony and whispered, ‘Something’s stirring in the weeds.’ Tony whispers back, ‘A beast in the shadow of Bethlehem.’ We gave each other an ambiguous look.”

"Lady Bird and I chatted for a brief moment. Someone interrupted us, and Tony mentioned that I should stroll around this beautiful structure and see the art because he was needed to accompany his sister on a "meet and greet tour" of the event.”

"The embassy was of modern design, a kind of contemporary deco. As I meandered, I stopped and looked closely at a painting that caught my eye. The man standing next to me was admiring it too, so I voiced my opinion, 'This painting has a slightly European feel with brilliant "Latin" colors.' The gentleman said, 'His name is Xul Solar, from Buenos Aires. Yes, I enjoy his colorful emotions, too'. I asked him if he was a student of the arts. He said, 'I am a professor and historian at the National Art Museum.' His name was Russell Quandt. He was perhaps in his sixties, a short, aloof, polished man with a thin mustache. 'You know the art world,' I remarked. Russell replied, 'Of course. Are you interested in any artists in particular?' 'Like perhaps missing works?' I remarked after a brief pause. Russell was startled, eyes wide with a peculiar look, and said, 'You mean post-war?' I nodded. 'Ahh, yes, indeed.' He said, 'Some greats are unaccounted for, Father'. I replied, 'The rampage of war, greed, vandalism, and evil has resulted in too many disappearances.' 'Yes, the list grows,' Russell replied. 'It sickens me, and many are to blame.' I seized the window of opportunity to pry, 'I have questions. Could we further this dialogue at some point? This may not be a good environment to talk in.' 'Yes, I understand'. Russell said as he leaned in closer. Anytime, come by the museum. Ask for me. Russell handed me a business card. I said, 'Soon!' We nodded in agreement."

"So with that, I went back to the National Art Museum within the next week. I was dressed in my full Chaplain Army uniform, complete with colors, this time. As soon as I entered, Russell hurried over to meet me. Eagerly, he said, 'I have been doing a little poking. You are a chaplain, and I have some interesting data that I have discovered that you might be interested in.' 'This is getting a bit complicated', I said. Russell then gave me a large envelope, inside was a partial list of lost artworks."

"He continued, 'A good friend of mine is with the CIA. He works on lost and stolen art. Apparently, there are so many pieces in question that it is hard to keep up. My friend mentioned that some priceless pieces of art from European Christian churches were stored by a Rabbi in France for safekeeping until after the war. Then some were thought to have been taken (or perhaps re-taken) to Latin America by

Germans. This is interesting, and there are some dubious candidates on this short list.' I replied, 'So, a Rabbi secretly hides art that may have been stolen by Germans. And now, somehow, they get to the Americas. South America?' 'Perhaps', he said, 'and you might stumble upon them or whatever it is they want.' As we walked out to the courtyard I asked, 'They, meaning the CIA? Why would they want them, and why would I deny them?' 'Well', he explained, 'I am not sure, but what I think is that the Israelis are involved and want some kind of leverage over the Zionists, who are forming talks with the Arab States.' 'All right,' I said, "so the Jewish State wants to use Christian masterpieces as a kind of ransom or leverage over the Zionists in order to keep them from talking to the Muslim Arab States?' Russell answered, 'They think they are the Rabbi's property. They may be right. But I think it's more about money and power.' At this point, we were standing in conversation outside, in the front courtyard of the museum, where we smelled roses and other floral fragrances. An overripe tomato smacked me in the face, forcing me to back up several steps. Russell jumps up with his hands held high. Protesters. Protesters are marching all around us, raising a ruckus over "prayer in school" issues, and we were caught up in the skirmish. Several tomatoes zip by again. It was messy. Apparently, there was a modern-art statue close by that they were jousting about."

My uncle continued from his Mexican bed, "The protest was about the never-ending debate over "Prayer in Schools." Looking back, it seems funny now, except for dry cleaning." He began to laugh, and it quickly turned into a cough. A nurse rushed in and took the bandages off his head and replaced them with new ones. "I can come back in the morning," I said. Choking in his speech, he said, "No, no. I need to finish telling you these stories." 'Ok,' I said, "so, through protests and espionage, you unwillingly go with the flow." He answered, "Yeah, things happened. I had faith that it was leading me into something good. Faith begins at the edge of understanding." My uncle's jaw tightens, then relaxes as he takes a deep breath. Then he continues, "You remember those fishing trips?" "Oh, yes," I acknowledged. "I could never forget those times'."

## 16 - VACATION

My uncle used to come out to Oregon for a visit every few years, and he'd stay for a minimum of two weeks. I was young at the time. He would always want to venture up to the family cabin in the mountains. It was on a beautiful mountain stream named the Metolius River. Peaceful with gentle winds, birds, and sunshine, it was spectacular. We would cast our flies in sync with the gurgling of the brook. It filled our souls with peace. My uncle would beam as he cast his line. He wasn't very good at it and frequently had to rescue his fishing line from the trees. Once, while struggling with this, he slipped and fell face down in the ice-cold river. We laughed and laughed.

I remember asking him, "Do you know important people? like presidents and everything?" He explained, "Yeah, and the people around them, cabinet members, senators, and congressmen." I replied, "Wow. That's kind of fun." He remarked, "I guess it's fun, but it gets very stressful." I said, "Not like here, on the river." Then I pointed to the snow-capped mountains while walking downstream. "Nice out here." "Wonderful," he answered, "just standing in the river with the rippling sound—a dream come true and glorious." I replied, "Better than school." He said, "This is school. Take it all in. Flyfishing is a spiritual experience. Let's try it over there. Flyfishing is an art form, you know. Think about it: an artificial fly at the end of a line reacts to wind, atmosphere, and your arm motion, then dances to a precise point on a stream to lay eggs—on this babbling symphony of sound." I exclaimed, "WOW!" That was a sermon, wasn't it? We both smile affirmatively and cast our fly lines.

In this Oregon wilderness, I smoothly asked my uncle, "Do you know any spies? Like Boris and Natasha?" He smiled and said, "No, but sometimes it seems that corny. I do like what I do, especially when I feel I'm doing something right. Not always, though. Doing the right thing usually feels good, and accomplishments feel good." Some ducks flew by overhead, cackling and heading upriver. He continued, "I'm going to retire in a few years, but the Army wants me to go to Japan first." I

asked, "What's it like at the Pentagon?" He answered, "All kinds of crazy people are asking you to do things for them, and there are orders to carry out. Then someone wants you to get them into an office and see that person or that person." "How can you tell who's who? Like a spy?" I asked. He said, "Ha, they wouldn't be very good spies if I could tell who they were. You just don't know, you go with your instincts. It's a feeling you get in your gut. You kind of know what's right and what's wrong. I support the poor and those without a voice who are caught up in everyday struggles." I then asked him, "Can you vote?" "Of course I can!" He quipped. "Would you like the tuna fish sandwich Mom made?" "Sure," he replied with a smile, and I asked, "Nixon or Kennedy?" "Kennedy," he said.

He continued his story in the Mexican hospital, saying, "What wonderful times we would have! An extraordinary place to go if you just need to relax!" "I wholeheartedly concurred." "After a year or so in the Orient," he continued, "I made my way back to the States. Retirement from the Army was just on the horizon. I needed time to reflect and prepare, so I took a three-week long voyage on a freighter ship, from Japan to San Francisco. I remember the huge freighter docking as the foghorn blared on a rainy and dismal February day. The ship's top deck had several cabins, and I bunked in one of the cabins. I'd had enough of being at sea. I came up to see you guys. I bought that Oldsmobile in Portland, stopping in Santa Fe to see Tony."

"It was just after daybreak as the sunbeams danced across the rustic, reddish colored New Mexico canyon. We began to fish. It was crisp and chilly outside, with wind and stream sounds. Tony mentioned that I was "riding into the sunset" with my impending retirement. I cried foul and said, 'Not so fast. I am just refocusing my energy. I have new things to do.' 'Other than fish?,' he joked. Tony knew I was under pressure to work in a surreptitious way for the government. I continued, 'Tony, Tony, you are a good Catholic. But, do you know how to walk the line between church and state?' 'Well, my sis does, to some degree.' He answered, 'She's now the wife of the Vice President', he kept reminding me that. 'She is in town, why don't you meet us for dinner this evening? We'd love to have you'. I



replied, 'Dine, talk, and art with the second Lady? Okay, that sounds terrific'. So, with that, he invited me to an elite dinner with his sister at the Grand Hotel in Santa Fe."

I asked my uncle point blank at his hospital bed, "Did you know she was the Second Lady of the country at that moment?" He said, "Yes, I did, but the depth and importance of her position didn't really register with me until that dinner." I thought for a moment, then asked, "I was also wondering if you kept in touch with Alice?" He responded passionately, "Sure did. And we are still in touch to this day, and it is most enjoyable." I said, "How about Quincy? Did he keep showing up at such bizarre times?" "Yes, yes, he did," he said, his eyes wide open.

"Let me continue,—I went to the Santa Fe Grand Hotel that evening for dinner with Tony and his sister. Upon entering that old, elegant hotel, and to my surprise, I was met by several secret service agents who were all in suits; other agents were standing nearby. Tony saw me and waved me in, but their eyes followed me with piercing authority. He quipped, 'Not like the old days at the saloon'. Then he pointed toward the rear of the Spanish-style structure and said, 'Come on, our table is set up back here. My sister has quite the entourage now, doesn't she?' "

"We were escorted through a palette of natural colors, echoing the days of the early Franciscan missionaries. Spanish guitar filled the hotel with melody, and the scene was not at all what I was expecting. We arrived at a long table with classic "Santa Fe" style place settings. Some of the guests were seated, others stood and talked. I remember the smell of eucalyptus as I surveyed the clientele seated at the dining table."

"The Lieutenant Governor of New Mexico, Mack Easley, and his wife, Joyce Ann Easley, a renowned artist, dressed nicely, with a fashionable haircut, gloves, a matching handbag, and shoes. To her right, Lynda Johnson and her friend Chuck both looked elite and a bit stuffy. Another official-looking lady stood next to them, which I assumed was a secretary. Lady Bird sat at the head of the table. Bodyguards stood nearby. I smiled at Lady Bird and said, 'Your following has become quite enormous, Mrs. Vice President.' She laughed and smiled as she

said, 'Indeed, a lot has happened in the last few years.' Tony chimed in, 'More than one would expect. In addition, we didn't catch any trout today'. I said, 'Well, we were not on an Oregon stream'. I smiled and continued, 'But yes, the times are gathering speed, and I'm looking forward to retirement.' 'What are your plans, Padre?' She asked. I quickly responded, 'I'm not out to pasture yet. I am looking into a project the Vatican has floated. It has to do with restoring artwork in Latin America.' Tony cried out, 'Better be careful down there. It's a risky business.' I respond, 'Yes, but as the saying goes, 'somebody has to do it'! Anyway, I love the arts and history, not to mention the Latin community'. I looked at Loyce and said. 'Loyce, that is something you may know about.' She comments, 'I do, as a matter of fact. I have a good friend who restores objects of Apache and Navajo origins, and he continues to develop his technique'. 'Does he have any publications?' I asked. "Yes, I can get them for you," she said, and Tony says, "Get them to me." I can send them along. The good padre is off to D.C. tomorrow. "That's right, my friend; I'm announcing my retirement from the government," I explained. Lady Bird spoke up, saying, 'Indeed, Padre? Wow! So soon.? Your heroism will be missed by me and Lyndon. You must come to dinner before your new adventure.' 'Yes. Yes, I'd be delighted! I was humbled, and I started to tell a story."

"Ya know, I was spending time at the "All Saints Catholic Church" in Houston a few years back. The monsignor wanted to get his driver's license renewed, so we took off to find the state offices. We stopped and asked a gas attendant for Kuykendahl Street. He said, 'Oh, Kirk-in-doll is a few blocks that-a-way. "No, Kuykendahl," I said, and he said, "Yep!" Tony mumbled under his breath, 'I know where this is going.' I continued, 'The monsignor then said to me, 'Ya know, Ben, there is no "r" in the word at all. We could send in troops on a search and rescue mission, and they'd never find an "R," Texans just throw one in for the hell of it, I guess'. Tony said, laughing, 'And many of us do it with "prostate," saying prostrate instead of the prostate—an extra "R" slipped in. We streamline our speech to better suit our "Texas style'.'. I am glad to hear that, Tony, and that "R" does not stand for "Republican," I clarified. There was loud laughter by all at the table, especially "Lady Bird," as she put her hand over her mouth in a dignified way, saying, 'Oh,

funny. Lyndon will love that story.' 'I'm sure he's heard that one before. We've got our own lingo—free "R's" and Spanglish too!' Tony quipped. We all laughed, and our cheeks were now rosy with wine.”

"I noticed a quiet bodyguard standing mysteriously behind Lady Bird toward the corner of the room. This guy had oversized sunglasses and a black suit; he looked somewhat recognizable. I rose from my chair to go to the restroom. On my way back, this guy was now in the hall and he stopped me. I was surprised when he took off his huge sunglasses that it revealed Quincy. He quipped, 'Padre! You didn't recognize me! Did you? I guess my disguise worked'. I chuckled and said, 'Sargent Quincy, is that you in street clothes?' 'I'm a major now, sir.' He corrected me. 'On special duty, assigned to the Vice President's family.' I said, 'That's incredible, Quincy, congratulations. Why the turtleneck in Santa Fe?' He responded, 'It's a Nehru jacket, it's going to be fashionable. Plus, it's a part of my deception'. 'Don't you think it looks just a bit fascist?' I said. Thinking fast, he quipped, 'Works for the devil.' 'Well now, that's dramatic, indeed.' I responded. We exchanged intensely sarcastic smiles. I headed back to the table and resumed the conversation.”

"Taking my seat, the second lady looks over at me and says, 'Padre, you must find yourself in some interesting situations.' I said, 'I do. I know how to dance around them, too'. I paused then continued, 'Like, if I get stopped by the D.C. police, I tell them I'm an Army Colonel. In New York, I say I'm a priest. Most New York cops are Irish or Italian'. Tony chuckles and states, 'Best of both worlds. And you say you're not a politician.' Again, everyone laughed.”

## 17 - THE CONFESSION

Dusk was coming to the window of the Matamoros hospital. I remarked, "That was way cool about Lady Bird." He answered, "I was not expecting it. She was so kind-hearted and authentic." My uncle squirmed and grew uncomfortable, but he wanted to continue telling me his remarkable life story. Apparently, he has never shared all of this information with anyone before.

His narrative continued, "So, back in D.C., I announced my retirement, late summer 1963. Col. Tracy was sad to see me go and said I'd be deeply missed. 'Changes are happening so rapidly now,' he said, 'and as you know, you are required to go through an in-depth debriefing in these next few weeks.' I asked, 'Why, and in reference to what?' 'Everything you might or might not be aware of,' he said, 'and we'll keep you up to date on all current events.' We saluted, and I left his office a bit bewildered. But in two weeks I was off to Italy anyway."

My uncle was fidgety and became agitated. He was silent for several long minutes, then I blurted out the obvious: "You feel okay?" "Yes," he said and paused again. "I need to tell you about the extraordinary thing that happened next."

He blinked open his eyes, tilted his head forward, took a deep, dramatic breath, and then exclaimed, "I was helping Fr. Rad out at his church, St. Charles in Arlington, when he went to see his family in Baltimore for a week. On that Friday, I noticed Mr. Forrestal and Quincy, along with two other people, in the pews. It was unusual because I hadn't seen them in a long time. After Mass, I went out to find them, but they were gone. So, we didn't speak then."

"I was hearing confessions in the back of the church the next day. It was the weekly ritual of "Saturday Confessions," and there were several confessors that morning. I was going through the motions when one person entered and kneeled in the booth. I open the slider. The penitent started, and I listened. My jaw dropped, and I shuddered at what I heard. I remained silent for an unknown amount of time. Then, unsettled, dismayed, and upset, I stormed out of the confessional. Kneeling

at the altar, I gazed at the crucifix. I felt anger run across my face; I was tearing up, and I slammed my fist on the pew. Beads of sweat ran down my forehead. Remarkably, I then heard the music of "The Only One Who Can," that song the nun sang in the Santa Barbara Mission many years ago, the song that beckoned me to the priesthood. I knew I could not reveal this confession to anyone. It was that one confession, that one moment, that shook me to my roots. I am still struggling with it. It's haunting me. It's always haunting."

"The sacrament of confession," I stated to my uncle after a brief pause in the hospital. "Why do you believe you were placed in that situation? Was it God, the circumstances, or just a coincidence?" "I guess it was necessary," he replied. "Perhaps a learning experience to help me strengthen my moral character. Whatever it was, I didn't get it then, but I have no regrets." "Didn't this make you doubt your faith?" I asked. "As it turned out, it strengthened parts of it," he admitted. "I reacted instinctively, as I always do. That is God's reaction, you know. God within me." He took a breath. "As a result, I prayed a lot and meditated all night. It still bothered me."

"So the very next day, Sunday, Fr. Rad came back from his vacation. I was sitting with him and Sister Francis in the rectory when an old acquaintance of Fr. Rads' came to visit. His name was George. He was with his wife. After introductions and small talk, I realized he knew a lot about me. I was alarmed but determined not to overreact. I noticed a birthmark under his left ear that looked like a small brown Byzantine cross. He insinuated that I had some kind of information and that, being a priest, I was insulated from reality. I ignored that notion. He looked at me again and again, and finally he said, 'I'm interested, Fr. Ben, the Army has educated you, and you have rewarded this fine democracy with your heroism. But now, it seems you could, well, stick around for the pie and ice cream?' I replied, 'I have new horizons now. Anyway, my presence here would only be ornamental'. Shaking his head, George continued, 'There is so much you could still do for your country.' I answered, 'So I've been told.' Fr. Rad quipped, 'It is clear you will be doing important work, and the results would benefit both God and country'. George

pipes up, 'Precisely, the information you hold is best used by the right minds'. Sister Francis gave her thoughts, 'Old World values in New World covertness?' Fr. Rad said, 'You're caught in a shimmer, Padre'. I shook my head. I was still concerned about some threat or some sort of collusion, and no one knew about that confession, or so I thought. My feelings were weary, and Sr. Francis silently motioned to Fr. Rad to go toward the door. In the hall, she told Fr. Rad that she smelled a rat."

"George apparently knew I was retiring soon and going to study in Europe, leaving all this mystery behind. I knew that voice. His voice. I just could not place it. Again, I was thrown into something I didn't understand. I had a bad feeling about the guy. He had the appearance of a mobster. It was unsettling! Then I asked him just what he thought I knew. 'World balance, balance', he said. Again, that shook me. He left without resolve. Fr. Rad, Sister Francis, and I had sour feelings. And then, just a few hours later, I received an urgent message from Quincy. Now, he wanted a meeting with me."

"I arranged for this meeting to take place at the old "Billy Martin's Tavern." Because I was leaving in less than a week, I sat at a bar table beneath a stained glass chandelier, directly across from Quincy and Mr. Forrestal, who, unbeknownst to me, was accompanying him. I recall light restaurant sounds mixed with a Perry Como pop song, "Catch a Falling Star," I believe. I began the conversation by saying, "Gentlemen, nice to see you both again. This tavern is one of my favorites. It makes me want a pint of Guinness and talk about politics and rumors." Quincy responded, "Speaking of rumors, rumor has it you are going to retire?" I quipped back, "Rumors, I love rumors! Facts can be so misleading, while rumors are often revealing. Isn't that correct, Mr. Forrestal? He snarled, 'You have an impeccable memory, and that's why we are here.' Quincy leaned forward and squared up to me, his eyes "deadpan." 'I'm no longer assigned to the V.P. Detail.' He said angrily. 'I'm a member of the special forces. You have been exposed to numerous insidious circumstances,' he said after a brief pause. 'These can be turned into gold for our country.' Rolling my eyes, I said, 'Is this inquisition political in nature? I can never

be involved in politics. You are aware of that, Quincy!' 'But you are sworn to uphold the Constitution, aren't you?' Quincy blurted out. Mr. Forrestal then said, 'And to God!' Quincy continued, 'We are the people under God. You have an obligation to the common people'. I answered with vigor and strength, 'Nice try, guys. I am a chaplain. I have a clean conscience. I will be a full-time Franciscan monk very soon'. 'Consider the benefit you can give this democracy.' Quincy said. Mr. Forrestal chimed in, 'Catholic all my life, I am a bit disturbed by a systemic feeling that the ruling class is losing authority to a new lazy class.' To that, I stated loudly, 'Plantation capitalism? Times are changing, and out of this change comes new life.' Mr. Forrestal even louder, 'We are losing our way of life'. I leaned forward, looked into his eyes, and softly asserted to him, 'We are gaining a new reality. Incredible things grow out of corpses, don't you think, Mr. Forrestal? How about you, my friend Mr. Quincy'?"

I was pacing around the hospital room after a short lull in our conversation when my uncle began to snore as he dozed off for a few moments. The nurse came in, asking if everything was alright. I told her that I thought so. She looked at him. Then she looked at the chart and the I.V. tubes and said, "Bueno, bueno!" He quickly opened his eyes and said, "OK, OK, then, I'll be fine. So, now listen," He continued without missing a beat, "Within days I went to the Vice President's residence, Number One Observatory Circle. It was a mansion. The event was attended by some 25 or so dignitaries and friends."

I was impressed by his waking up so abruptly and starting right where he left off. I could only ask, "Did you meet Johnson?" Continuing, he said, "Yes, yes, thanks to Tony and his sister. It was quite an experience. The V.P., Lady Bird, Senators, and Congressmen were there. Even General Bradley and lots of military folks 'Was President Kennedy there?" I enthusiastically asked. No, he was not, but that "George" guy was there, and I think he got asked to leave. Tony mentioned that the vice president disliked him and suspected him of being up to something. When the vice president stomps his heels, the rats are scared away'. So, I asked, "Was the

function superficial?" "The dinner party was joyous. It was semi-formal, and I wore my Army uniform," he continued. I thanked Tony for inviting me. He claimed his sister demanded it. He asked, 'When do you leave on your journey?' I answered, 'In a week. I have an audience with the new "Pope Paul VI," and after that, I'm off to Florence to study the old masters with several famous painters and historians. I'm looking forward to it'. "That is exceptional!" He exclaimed, "Have you met the Vice President?" Tony asked. "No, I haven't," I answered. "

"We made our way through the party and came across Lady Bird, and Tony announced, "Look who I found—the "Padre." 'Thank you for the extraordinary invitation,' I said quickly. 'I'm delighted you could come,' she replied. 'Are you planning your trip to Europe soon?' Before I could respond, she spun around and motioned her husband over. She introduced me. Overwhelmed, I said, 'Mr. Vice President, sir. It is an honor.' We shook hands, and he said, in his pronounced Texan accent, 'Chaplain, I've heard about your dedicated service to this country'. I replied, 'Thank you, sir!' I believe I blushed and was a little starstruck. ' Then I inappropriately said, 'I am here . . . if you need a confession.' A beat of silence followed, then the Vice President put his head back and let out a colossal Texas laugh. The whole room looked around and smiled. He exclaimed, 'Son, I needed that."

"Commotion was stirring all around us. I wasn't sure if something was happening or if this was normal. I overheard General Bradley talking to Tony about me. I thought he said, ' -- we need insight into the Vatican world and -- ' I couldn't understand most of the sentence. When I turned around, I was surprised to see Rep. Ellsworth walking after Lady Bird, followed by George and his wife being escorted out. More uproar and confusion everywhere. So, Tony and I escaped outside to the backyard veranda. 'I'd like you to stay in touch,' Tony said solemnly, 'as you enter the world you're about to enter; any information can help gain an overall perspective of the landscape, particularly the European landscape.' I reminded him that I was a priest, not a spy."

"I was nervous about everything, but meeting the Vice President made me very proud. However, all of the activity surrounding so many different issues made my



head spin, and the coincidences were profound. I thought it all might be a joke. Then I got scared. Is God pulling a prank? Can't God just speak to me without a riddle? My stomach began to wrench. I was eager to get out of D.C. and the USA. I wanted to go tell Fr. Rad everything. The following day, I paid him a visit at his rectory.”

“We sat in the classic church rectory's den in oversized old English "Waterville" chairs. Over a glass of red wine, Father Rad and I were discussing the future. 'Exciting times, Ben, life-changing,' Fr. Rad began. 'I'd like to take things in a different direction,' I replied. 'I have a heavy heart. It's a maze to unwind a heavy mind.' I stood up, abruptly cracked my knuckles, and uttered, 'Okay, Rad, I have something to get off my chest. I'm at a loss for what to do. I'd like your advice. I am handcuffed by Canon Law so as not to disclose it to anyone. I'm exhausted.' He cried, 'Canon Law? Is it that serious, Ben? What's the nature?' 'It distinguishes between my devotion to God and my devotion to my country'. I stated. He quickly howled, 'Oh God, the Confessional!' 'Yes, and I am extremely torn.' I continued, 'The sanctity of the Sacrament. I hope you understand that I cannot betray that command. However, there seem to be serious truths involved in this. I'll forever hold those truths in my heart.' 'If you can articulate in non-specifics without betraying your character or vows,' Fr. Rad said, 'you should do that. Pray, pray, pray—then act one way or another. Remember not to take the law too far'. I responded with my head bowed low, 'Agreed, but the spirit of the law does not rub well with my heart'.”

*CONFIDENTIALITY CLAUSE: Priest–Penitent privilege, unconditionally FORBIDDEN by Church Canon Law from making any disclosure to anyone. Also, the rule of evidence of confessional privilege forbids Judicial inquiry into communications made under the seal of confession.*

## 18 - EUROPEAN STUDIES

"With that, I was off to the Vatican," he said, sitting up and rearranging the tubes in his arm. "Italy is so wonderful. Culture, art, and the aura of the cathedrals, with all their history, are just divine. You really must go." I asked, "The Pope, what was that like?" "The audience with the Pope was proper and formal. All that pomp and circumstance was a bit much for my taste, but he was gracious and he overruled my Franciscan orders from the Oakland diocese. New orders, or directives, would allow me to study in Florence, Paris, and London, after which I would return to the Mission in California to research historical art in the new conquered world by Spain." I responded, "That was awesome and just what you wanted." "Yeah," he said, "I still find it glorious and dreamlike. For the time being," he paused, "I began to forget about the nightmare in D.C."

"In Florence, Italy, I secured a small old European-style flat by the Arno River, Ponte Vecchio. I was helped by the Vatican's Archbishop of Florence, Ermenegildo Florit, who introduced me to Giovanni Benelli. The apartment was two blocks from the basilica where I studied. It was a charming old building with high ceilings and sixteenth-century architecture. My flat was always cluttered with artwork, antiquities, and books. Mostly books. I have books all over my bed, the floor, and the table."

"Electricity in Europe is unique and somewhat unreliable. Because of this, the phone ring is different, if it works at all. It's an unusual chime. The "ringing sound" began one night or early in the morning. I didn't wake up right away because I was in a deep sleep. It persisted, and it eventually surprised me. As drowsy as I was, I rolled out of bed and answered, "Buongiorno." It was Sister Francis, my assistant, who I requested to assist me from the States. 'Padre, Padre, have you heard the news?' she screamed. "What, no?" I responded slowly. 'It's the president,' she said.

'The President of the United States, John F. Kennedy,' she sobbed. 'He was murdered, assassinated.' Terror crossed my face. I struggled to stand after dropping the phone. I gathered my courage and picked up the phone, perplexed and befuddled, "Oh, God be with us," I said. After a brief pause, she stated, 'I am going by the chapel, then the studio, and I will meet you there.' "

"No sooner had I hung up than it chimed once more. This time, in English, I answered, "Yes." It was Fr. Rad in the States: 'Ben?' "Yes John, I am devastated." I said, "How's the atmosphere there?" He said, "Scary, and all I can say is confusion, turmoil, and trauma. The word "astonished" comes to mind. Are you alright, Ben? There was a pause. "Are you surprised?" he softly asked. As I looked out my window up toward the night sky, I saw no stars and felt my eyes well up with tears. After a moment of silence during which I tried to collect my thoughts, I replied, "Not surprised, and yes, I'm okay." After that, I asked, "How are the Vice President and Lady Bird doing?" Father Rad says, "Fine." Both Johnson and Lady Bird are fine. Kennedy was killed, and Gov. John Connally was shot. That's all I know.' Another pause, and Fr. Rad said, 'Lady Bird is the First Lady.' "Wow," I said, as I hung up the phone, my hands trembling and my body shivering."

"I got settled, dressed, and dashed to the basilica. It was early morning and a little damp. The upper floor, in the rear, was where the art-filled baroque-style studio was. My assistants, Sr. Francis and Fr. Sullivan, were having a somber but excitable discussion when I arrived. They both greeted me and consulted me. A car horn blared unexpectedly from outside. Through the window, I saw a black car on the cobblestone street, and a vegetable truck flashed past it, revealing a figure stepping out of the car. Another truck pulled up, and another person got out, pointing towards the basilica. I dash out of the studio, sprinting downstairs through the old structure and out of the church. I felt panicked for some reason. I realized that I could not let anxiety get the best of me, so I stopped and just froze in my tracks. I took a deep breath and slowly walked home. Concerned but not shaken, I was unsure about who those two men were, but later, Sr. Francis said they came looking for me. Then they left without explanation."

"When I returned to my apartment, the phone rang again, and it was Fr. Rad. He had just received a phone call from that mysterious acquaintance of his, George. George was at an upstate New York estate, which he described as a "safe haven." He was with Quincy and others. Some sort of "boss" was ordering everyone around. A disagreement took place, and it turned physical. Photos were thrown on a table, and some were of you, Ben, and they referred to you as "that priest." You were pictured with Mr. Forrestal and Quincy, and this person advised Quincy to "button this situation up." "Ben, they were talking about you," Fr. Rad passionately cautioned. "George inquired as to your location. I didn't tell him. "

"I was so shaken that I wanted to crawl under the rug. I just sat there by myself and attempted to reflect. There was a knock at the door. I slowly opened it. Two men who identified themselves as U.S. agents stood with an authoritarian demeanor. I let them in, and they informed me about the President and questioned me about "Quincy," "Tony Taylor," and "Lady Bird," emphasizing "George" and "Mr. Forrestal." I answered all questions honestly but did not elaborate, and they seemed appreciative, I thought. Then they left. They never asked about a confession or anything related to the church, nor about lost artwork. Still, I am flustered about why they came at all. Maybe I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"I turned on my old black-and-white TV to the only English news program available. Of course, the headlines were "The Kennedy Killing," and nothing else. On my evening walk to the corner newsstand, the English paper headlines "The Kennedy Saga." It was everywhere. Back at my apartment, I began to spend more time watching Italian television. The footage and coverage were horrifying, and I became discouraged. I looked closely at the photos of Oswald and Ruby and squinted at the screen. I became concerned. Ruby looked familiar to me. He was the man who was with Quincy at Georgetown's "Old World Cafe." The more I looked, the more certain I became."

Back at the Matamoros hospital, night had overtaken the Mexican sky. clean, bright stars. I gritted my teeth and asked, "Did you feel some sort of pressure or obligation to say anything?" "At that moment, I was just overwhelmed with a deluge of questions," he explained. "I could never ever reveal the confession. It was just the way it was, but being in contact with nefarious people? I felt protected by the Vatican. I did nothing wrong, and I knew that in my heart. Some circles may have thought I was somehow involved. I heard nothing for several weeks, then during a break in classes I decided to go on holiday."

"Brady was a friend from the art classes in Florence. He was charismatic and a bit wild. He held several degrees in art history and restoration. We went skiing around Christmastime after the Kennedy tragedy. I remember him saying, 'Ah, the Alps. God's idea of money.' He didn't ski much, and I did. About skiing, he would say, 'Isn't skiing frightfully energetic?' He liked to have a few drinks, and that was the real reason he went with me. One morning, he told me he had met a lady the night before. She seemed to know a lot about me and a guy named "Quincy" and I'm not sure if she was full of it or not. He claimed she belonged to a criminal organization known as Union Corse. How could someone know about me and my past up there in the Alps? That irritated me greatly. I didn't say much at the time, but I did ask Brady to keep me and my past private and that I didn't recall me mentioning the name "Quincy." He agreed and said he had never heard me say "Quincy" before either. Later, I called Fr. Rad in the United States. He inquired as to whether I had discussed any of this with anyone in the United States. I hadn't, but I told him there were strange things going on here. He then said, 'Crazy investigations. Do you remember George? He's now implicated, along with Oswald and Ruby, in the Kennedy ordeal. Also, there have been lots of investigations about stolen art by the Germans. I then informed him that I had a strong suspicion that Quincy was following me around Europe. "Quincy?" he asked. 'How's that? He's an oddball'. I said, 'I always had the impression he was never completely honest with me.' Then I told Rad that someone had been snooping around and apparently

knew about me, and then I heard the name "Quincy." Since then, I've been extra cautious."

"That was it for the time being. I finished up my studies and got certified by a whole host of major institutions, galleries, and even the Smithsonian. I got the assignment I wanted. Restoring art in the Americas! The Santa Barbara Mission assisted me in establishing the operation in the United States and Latin America.

I would look for works that had been misplaced, tampered with, stolen, or hidden. I was overjoyed."

## 19 - LATIN AMERICA

My uncle stated, "I felt driven to do this work, guided by a muse of some sort. An art collector finds a path of redemption as he leaves behind a world of threats, grifters, and shattered lives to realize that abandoned or lost art lives in its own world. We must transform ourselves to bear witness to each of the art pieces' spiritual message. One collector told me I was searching for over a billion dollars' worth of artwork, and he would not want to be me. I learned about forgeries, the men who perpetrate them, and how art is used to launder money and bribe one another. Unwritten laws, secret governments, and works easily smuggled and protected by corruption at all levels—church and state, cults and corporations—are all examples of this exploitation. I was entering this world of paintings, stories, and spies with glimmer and glamour, lies and truth."

"After returning from Europe, I ran into Father Wasson in Santa Fe, fly fishing with Tony. Father Wasson founded Mexico's famous "Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos" orphanage, and he knew many wealthy donors and art collectors. He invited me to stay in Cuernavaca while I established my work. Mexico made me forget about the stress of my previous government job."

I spoke up at the hospital, saying, "Exciting and scary. I came down for a visit, and yes, it was totally cool. They adore you over there. Is that where you came from to end up in this room?" "Yes," my uncle continued. "I was going to a function in Texas to meet with several people about some antiques I had discovered. Anyway, I enjoy working with the kids, playing guitar, and singing. The dinner parties were incredible, with exquisite food and charming celebrities."

"Father Wasson had a wide range of donors, including artists, musicians, political figures, and clergy, and he always expressed to me that he was so

fortunate to have compassionate and empathetic friends of the orphanage. One soiree, which I recall with affection, was held at the Cuernavaca Ranch orphanage site. The young children grow their own food and poultry for the orphanage. They prepared it specially for this event. Over Spanish guitar and hazy chatter, you could sense extraordinary charisma. Mangos, palms, and lime trees, with Bougainvillea and tropical plants adorning the setting, are accented by magical strings of small twinkling lights. The English-speaking students greeted the arriving guests and escorted them to a long Mexican table and rattan chairs for the twenty-something patrons invited.”

“These young orphans dressed in humble attire moved wordlessly while keeping the platters and glasses full. The mood was flavored by insignificant polite conversation, canapés, wine, and a tropical breeze. Distinguished guests were mingling with each other, like Billy Hovde, a retired Air Force colonel with a strong friendly presence. The singer, Nina, young and sexy, glides by like a flamingo. Paula Gray, a flamboyant redheaded actress from the golden years now living in Cuernavaca, is educated, glamorous, and still has grace. Artist Ima Baensch, wistful and eccentric, is forever cooking up another project with her artistic eye. And the “First Lady of American Theatre,” Helen Hayes, commanded everyone's attention. ‘Was she in those old black-and-white movies?’ I asked. “Yeah, the ones where the guys wore tuxes all the time because they knew their life expectancy was short and they only had a limited amount of time to dress up,” he replied with a distinct laugh. Anyway, I was now immersed in a fantasy.”

“I met “Hans,” a Cuernavaca restaurant owner who was in the war and stationed not far from me in France. In our simple conversation, we got along quite well. He spoke in a low, deliberate tone with an unyielding German accent. He frequently donated food and supplies to the orphanage school.”

In Matamoros, a nurse entered and asked my uncle about the pain. There was pain on his face and stress on mine. So the nurse asked me to leave. My uncle objected, saying, “This is urgent; I will finish my thoughts so my nephew knows the truth.” I was unclear what he meant by “knowing the truth.”



"Something for pain, Padre?" the nurse inquired. "No, no, I need a clear mind," he said, struggling with his words. I turned to the nurse and said firmly, "Please leave us for a few minutes, please!" My uncle motions for me to come closer as he speaks softly and laboriously. He went on, "Hans seemed to know things about me. It was unsettling not only because of the war but also because of other issues. I wasn't sure, but I had a feeling someone was talking to him behind my back. Over the course of a few months, I got to know Hans, and he revealed to me that he was in the German army."

"It was around this time that I received a call from my restoration associate, Father Victor. He was at the great old cathedral in Puebla, Mexico, rummaging around in the catacombs, searching for artifacts. He was excited, yet tried to hold back his enthusiasm. He calmly said, 'Hola, Padre! We have found something.' I excitedly said, 'Hola Víctor, what is it? What is there?' He continued, 'Deep under the main altar, in a cavern that opens up into several chambers, I have discovered some paintings and other artifices. And, in my opinion, these are very old, unknown, and appear to have been untouched for years. I am not sure if the Bishop is aware of these.' I responded, 'Very good. Have you seen the artwork at all before? Are you sure? Has anyone?' He said he had not, so I said, 'I will get there this week. Can you close up the chamber until I arrive? and not mention it to anyone?' Victor replied, 'Yes, Padre, I think you are going to like this'."

"As I started packing for the trip to Puebla, I decided to stop by Hans' Cantina for dinner." It was a small establishment with Mexican and German decor and the smell of deep-fried tortillas. Light Latin music with accordion, influenced by northern Europe, completed the Mexican setting."

Hans walked in wearing an apron and struck up a conversation with me as I sat at the multi-colored table and chairs."

"I asked him about his homeland and experiences as a youth, not trying to pry. Without hesitation, he launched into his story, 'I was raised in Munich. I was 20

when the movement started. The crusade of the political party known as the Third Reich slowly encircled our thoughts. Surprisingly quickly, it seemed.' While I listened, I remember nonchalantly snacking on crazy little pretzel-tortilla chips and asking, 'Did it put a squeeze on your ethics?' Then I commented, 'These are wonderfully salty.' He explained, 'It was cult-like, and it just overtook us, satisfying us, just like those chips. Anyway, most importantly, we gained work. We believed in work, and when the Fuhrer would speak, it was like a symphony. Total devotion.' I asked, 'Were your friends and colleagues mesmerized also?' 'Sure,' he said, 'we had our group, we had our secrets. Youth camps and all. Slowly, we begin to fall in love with only Germans and only Germany. Everything and everyone else was an infection. I was not aware of the depth of the disinformation until afterward'. Hans took a deep breath and spoke again, 'I feel good telling you all this. I came to Mexico after the war and began to understand what had happened. For some reason, they do not teach this, they do not talk about the war in Germany'. 'I can tell you that we are all dealing with the aftermath of the struggle.' I said. His breath sped up; anxiously, he continued, 'People talk. I am grateful to those who have helped.' Another pause, and he slowly says, 'As a matter of fact, one person has been here several times over the last year. He has mentioned you. You in particular!' 'ME?' I exclaimed. 'He has even rented a room upstairs,' Hans continued. He stopped mid-sentence and said, "Wurst Carnitas" is very good. I'll have it made for you. I will go and find him if I can.' I motioned to the waitress for another cerveza and shook my head, wondering, "What's next?"

"After about ten minutes, a familiar figure appears through the long front window facing the street. The door opened to a back-lit silhouette, revealing QUINCY. A large smile ingratiates Quincy's face. I felt a grimace grow on mine. Hans rushed to close the door behind them, Quincy is followed by two other men. 'Chaplain, how nice to see you here in Cuernavaca, I love this cafe,' Quincy began. 'Hans has done well for himself,' I replied. 'These are my good friends, Giuseppe from Staten Island and Lev from Europe,' Quincy continued. I looked them both over. Giuseppe, a thirty-ish Italian who spoke with a New York accent, was short and muscular. Lev, also thirty-ish, spoke with a deep Russian accent and was blonde, tall, and thin.

Both stern-faced. They all sat down abruptly. The atmosphere was dense and tense. 'We are working on this project, you see,' Quincy continued. 'We need to get some answers. You, my old friend, have information on events that occurred some eight years ago.' Giuseppe chimes in, 'Our understanding is that you are sitting on knowledge.' Quincy asserts, 'We would like to know who YOU might have told.' 'Or you're going to tell,' Lev adds. I looked at them, puzzled, and said, 'I'm not sure what you mean.' Is it related to the "Mass in High C" you mentioned years ago, as some kind of code?' 'We represent individuals in this matter,' Quincy continued. 'We are all different, but we have common interests.' 'I'm still unsure,' I replied. 'I'm not sure what you mean. Was all that snooping done with the CIA's permission?' Giuseppe again snaps in, 'You've got to be kidding!' I said, 'Explain Quincy. What was that all about? Who are you and who are these thugs?'"

"You heard a confession,' Quincy declared. 'It was not in the plan. We need to know who knows!' I argued, 'Confessions are between the penitent and God.' Giuseppe sarcastically quips, 'But you know! You are aware! I proclaimed, 'I am an instrument of a Sacrament.' Giuseppe quipped, 'Not good enough'. I shouted back, "God is not good enough? 'Shameful!—you all are!"

"I feared this day would come. I slowly stood up in an attempt to gain control. Then, as if I were at the Vatican Papacy Pulpit, my toes curled in my shoes, and I visualized the Lord before me. With a loud theater voice, I sternly spoke, 'Let it be known that whether you're from the United States government, the CIA, FBI, Gestapo, KGB, or Mafia, I will not betray God.' I paused for drama and said, 'I will not sacrifice integrity. My ultimate sacrifice is to my God and my honesty.' Again I paused and said, 'Do what you must.' That was followed by a long, intense SILENCE. They stood and left. Lev spouted out, 'You're going to regret this, Padre.' Hans opened the cantina door for them to leave. I sat back down, waiting for some sort of calm to overtake me."

"'You are an honorable man, Padre,' Hans said softly.

'You know, Hans,' I replied, 'Cantinas like yours come and go.' Friends come and go. Through it all God remains. Love is fleeting. Life passes us by. Countries, civilizations, the sun, the moon, and the mountains are all examples of this.' I took a deep breath and sighed, 'I have always been patriotic toward my country, but in the end, I choose God. I choose integrity' "

## 20 - PYXIS

"I had a good night's sleep after that ordeal." The next day, I went to Puebla, Mexico, to see the Catedral de Puebla. Fr. Victor greeted me at the grand cathedral entrance. The friar was short and round, with gray hair and a strong Latin accent. We exchanged greetings, and we were both excited."

"Fr. Victor led me down a flight of stairs and into a cobblestone tunnel. Even narrower corridors and steps led to a series of chambers. It was dark, gloomy, and musty. In the corner of a stone room, we discovered eight large paintings and an old locked chest, all covered in thick dust, stuffy, and ancient. These were vintage, but in good condition. 'Look, look very closely at them, all around the edges,' I exclaimed, adding, 'The frames appear European, possibly sixteenth century.' Víctor pointed to the corner of one of the paintings on the canvas, revealing that the top layer was possibly indigenous in nature. I agreed and started peeling a tiny bit of that corner to see. 'It appears that three to five layers of paintings were beneath it,' I said. Each appears to be a separate painting. The frame was old, so perhaps the first painting layer was as well. 'Look here on the back, this appears to be some kind of etching,' I said. I'm not sure what it is. It resembles a seal. In Europe, I studied these. I'll clean up the dust, dirt, and grime; aah, it's the "Athena's Owl." 'What exactly is that?' Fr. Victor was curious. 'Greek,' I said, 'referring to Greek mythology, German philosophy, and Bavarian idealism'. Several ideas ran through my head. Then Víctor exclaimed excitedly, 'Look. Take a look here. This chest or coffer is constructed of hardwood and brass. Extraordinary! The inscriptions appear to be in Arabic.' 'Look here again.' He stated. 'I see what you're saying,' I replied, 'That could be correct, but, it is Hebrew, and it says "Solomon." ' We took a breather. We were stunned and held our breath."

"Then Víctor began examining the word "PYXIS" engraved on the metal lock. He said that opening it takes some kind of odd combination, and he wrestled with it for several minutes. I mentioned that the "Pyxis" is a constellation in the Milky Way.

Perhaps those stars may hold a clue to opening it'. I began to look at the other end and saw a shield carved or engraved into the wood. 'It looks like a seal of the "Knights Templar." Out of this world!' I exclaimed. 'That, my friend, is an old Catholic military order.' Víctor's eyes opened wide as his hands trembled. I fumbled around for a charcoal pencil. We heard a squawk and a scrambling noise, then a loud squeal that startled us. A large rat ambled across the dusty cobblestone floor. 'Whew!' I exclaimed. 'OK, now, I will sketch these paintings and the old "pyxis" lock. It is just too dark for a camera. But I'll take some pictures anyway. I will get answers.' I began sketching, and Fr. Víctor shot several photos. I said to the friar, 'So now, in the meantime, let's close it up and tell no one. You know, these articles might be extremely valuable. Again, tell me who knows about this catacomb.' 'Not many,' the friar slowly articulates, 'let's see, me, Fr. Juan, and a few altar boys. Sargent Lorenzo knows what we're up to, but he has no idea where this cavern is. Colonel Lopez with the Federales has stopped by explaining that whatever we find belongs to the Mexican government, which I mostly ignore and appease, and, of course, the bishop, Bishop Durán. He is senile.' 'All right,' I said, 'I'll make some calls. Let's gather all the information we can. But it's like catching butterflies; we have to pinpoint the exact location of these treasures, as well as the time and date they were discovered. We do this before we announce anything. An excavation zone will come here with plenty of media. So, let's put this on hold until I get some answers and guidance.'

"I rushed back to my apartment in Cuernavaca. The next morning, with knots in my stomach, I called Tony Taylor. He is the only one I could trust to give me this type of direction. I'll contact the Vatican as well, but because the process is so time-consuming, I'll start with Tony, I reasoned."

"I hope you all had a good Christmas,' I said to Tony on the long distance call. And after the friendly overtures and small talk, I said: 'I'd like to make a request of you. It's a little urgent.' 'Anything, Padre, and Merry Christmas to you,' he replied. 'What exactly is it?' 'It appears I have unearthed something that just might be significant,' I clarified. I'm afraid to go into detail over the phone, but I'd like to meet with you, Lt. Gov. Mack, and Loyce as soon as possible. 'Wonderful, when are you

planning to come?' said Tony. 'And do you have your fishing pole?' 'Whenever a meeting can be arranged, sooner is better than later,' I said. 'Yes, yes, there is a barbecue planned at my sister's ranch next weekend, and both Mack and Loyce will be there,' Tony explained. 'Can you also see if a person knowledgeable in national security is available, Tony?' I asked. 'Sure,' Tony replied, 'I'll ask my sister.' 'Are you flying up or driving?' 'Perfect,' I said. I'll be driving up. It only takes a couple of days, and I will be bringing my fishing pole. I'll call along the way. We hung up, and I relaxed, remembering my very first memorable journey: intense, confusing, and terrifying, yet at the same time, full of zeal and anticipation. And the words "Follow your path to destiny" popped into my head."

My uncle raised his head in the hospital room and exclaimed, "That was, I believe, maybe last week? I still feel terrible about not taking Wade to the doctor sooner." He was having difficulty thinking, and his breathing was irregular. I waited for the appropriate moment to ask a profound question: "How offensive is it to reveal a confession?" "Mortal!" he exclaimed loudly. "Severely moral, it is paramount in Catholic Law as well as in my own principles." Then I asked meekly, "Even if it's a benefit to mankind?" "That is subjective'," he commanded. "Someone's happiness is another one's grief. But who's to say in the end? The mystery could be unraveled by others, I suppose." I looked at him and said, "Me?" He nodded. "

He raised his head, closed his eyes, and pondered for a moment. He began speaking again: "Driving across this land, as desolate as it is, gives you time to reflect and dissect your past and make decisions about your future. The planet is so beautiful and vast that it is difficult to comprehend from a train or an airplane. I have given much thought to all of the spiritual issues that I have spent my life debating. I'd like to share some recent conclusions with you."

"My knowledge is far from complete," he continued, "but it is based on lifelong observations—the political struggles that humans go through in order to exert control over one another. The human act of believing in "God," a god, or the

supernatural is a relief, and sometimes that belief or perception is crushed by religion itself. I've discovered that as soon as a person attains subjective enlightenment, they feel compelled to use that knowledge to persuade others to join them. It appears that it is human nature, and all religions do it. Buddhism, Shinto, Hinduism, Islam, and the Jewish faith, plus others but particularly Christendom, all claim to be correct and feel only they have the answers. I have been a priest for years now, and I do believe that the Catholic Church does a lot of good. Religions are all like blankets that people can wrap themselves in to protect themselves from humanity's cold evils. It provides protection from life's tribulations. I support that. However, as I analyze these concerns, I question the church and past decisions made by these so-called "men of God." These decisions are pawned off as "inspired by God," like the Bible itself. We, as humans, have a great capacity for empathy and perhaps a greater capacity for greed. The church sometimes thinks it can balance or correct human failures by applying an authoritarian dialogue. But does it accomplish that? They are humans too. The church states it can make decisions and claims they are infallible and that what they proclaim is the "word of God." As I grow older, the more I dispute that. They are humans. For example, Pope Nicholas V proclamation of "Doctrine of Discovery 1452" :

*"invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors the kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, principalities, dominions, possessions, and goods, and to convert them to his and their use and profit"*

"This is unacceptable. Hateful rhetoric, including the attempted annihilation of the Indians, slavery, and even our own Catholic Fr. Coughlin and his Christian Front, among many other examples. Inter-generational trauma follows us and is in our



bones. So, after all I have been through, I am now changing. I see all the suffering, all the pain, and I realize those small sacrifices by me amount to nothing. Still, I wouldn't have done anything differently. I respect the Christ passion like those peasants who crawl on their knees for miles to the Lady of Guadeloupe shrine. So like those peasants, I will see this journey through as it is laid out before me. Not expecting anything from the church or state. Just a belief in myself. As far as the priesthood is concerned, I will continue my efforts to enlighten. Perhaps the only measure of hope lies in the future. For as long as it remains unwritten, it is all we mortals have the power to change. “

A nurse rushed in to check on him. She pressed a button. Next, Dr. Ramfres entered the room. The doctor appeared to be a military commander, as he was accompanied by a soldier from the Mexican army. I asked angrily, "What the hell is going on?" as they scurried around in a befuddled fashion. The doctor stated, "I am giving him something. He is having signs of a seizure." "Seizure?" I said. My uncle raised his head slowly and looked at me with one eye. Horrified and candid, he whispered, "The Byzantine cross, the cross. Remember." His eyes were red, his face white. He lowered his head back onto the pillow and muttered, "Checkmate." I said. "With who?" His eyes were closed. The doctor said, "He is not doing well. How long have you been here? Are you next of kin?" "Yes, he is my uncle," I said, and I turned to the doctor and asked, "Do you really know what happened to him?" Dr. Ramfres cleared his throat and slowly clarified, "The information I have at the moment is that he was driving alone towards the States. A mysterious mishap involving several vehicles occurred. It was nighttime on a two-lane highway through some desolate terrain. He was apparently blinded by headlights that flashed brightly. Two trucks were said to have come straight at him. He swerved sharply, but his car was struck, rolled, and hobbled to a halt. Your uncle was apparently thrown up from his seat and out the front window of the car, over the front hood, and onto the ground. One truck driver allegedly remained slumped in the driver's seat for a short time. Your uncle lay still where he landed, a few feet ahead of the crumpled nose of his car. The other truck driver stumbled out and began to walk

around in a dazed and agitated manner. Then all went silent again. Yet another person walked away from the crash site and disappeared into the shadows. Again, that is what was told to me.”

The doctor stepped toward the window and motioned for me to come, and with almost a whisper, he said, "Also, it was described to me that a photographer ran out of nowhere and kneeled beside the apparently incapacitated priest. It is not clear whether he is taking his picture or ministering to him. It is clear that several vehicles were involved. It was also noted that several people got into an apparent large truck and left the scene. The whole spectacle was incoherent and berserk. "This is not an official account, but it was made known to me."

In a daze, I remember staring at his bed. The doctor elaborated, "It's so tragic. Investigations will be carried out. We must now adjust him. Change the bandages and put him on another I.V. Please just wait in the hall." I waited. Finally, the nurse rushed out, shouting, "Señor Neil, come quickly!" When I entered the room, I found several people surrounding his bed, including a priest. I shouted, "What?" The doctor cried, "He's dying." I yelled, "You all know this was no accident !!!"

I was led back into the hall. I went over to a window and looked out at the stars. The hall had a mysterious, mystical atmosphere that gradually changed into an official or political tone. It arrived like a cloud. It was chaotic and unsettling as people dressed in black, dark blue scrubs, and uniforms passed through, some entering the room and others standing in the corridor. Not a particularly hostile feel, as each individual appeared to be on their own mission. More people came. One man in a black suit and a lady came walking down the hall. As he turned to enter my uncle's room, I noticed a brown birthmark under his left ear. It looked like a Byzantine cross. I got the chills! I turned back and looked out the window at the night sky. I found Jupiter and Saturn. I clutched my uncle's worry stone and, aloud, with a quivering voice, I said, "Oh God, is this it? His destiny?" I noticed a star cluster on the southern horizon and looked and looked, and I looked even closer. Yes, I believe it is the "Pyxis" constellation—alive and guiding voyagers as it has done for centuries.

My uncle's death was officially ruled an accident.  
Jupiter and Saturn shone brightly!

THE END

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for more information on the life of  
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“Of God and Country”

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