

The background of the cover is a photograph of a person's silhouette with their arms raised in a gesture of triumph or joy. The person is positioned in the center-right of the frame. The background is a clear blue sky with a bright sun on the right side, creating a lens flare effect. The overall mood is one of freedom and hope.

The Last Fling

a short novel by Ronda Chervin

*The
Last
Fling*
a novel

Ronda Chervin

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Cover credit: many thanks to Beverly Hall for allowing us to modify her beautiful photograph of Carla DeSola Eaton.

Dedicated to the widow saints.

Brainy Women



YOU WOMEN OVER FORTY," THE WOMAN'S VOICE on the radio said, "only about 1 in 6 of you will find a husband. And for each academic degree you've earned, your chances go down. With a Ph.D. it's about one in five hundred! The basic reason is that most men over forty want to marry young women. They don't want to see their ever-aging bodies mirrored in the body of an aging wife. Those even more mature men you are attracted to, over fifty, are looking to recover their youth by dating thirty year olds!"

"And, Dr. Rogers," came the modulated voice of the female interviewer, "I was intrigued by your point that the majority of men prefer a wife just smart enough to admire them, but not so smart as to outshine them.

"For latecomers, you are listening to N.P.R., National Public Radio. I am Carolyn Brown talking to Janet Rogers, professor of sociology from Southern Texas University, about her latest book: *Brainy Women*."

I punched the button on the car radio dial to “off” and increased my speed to 70-mph, and shouted to nobody “And I’m Margo Kemperdick, Ph.D., fifty-five-year-old widow, who refuses to fit into your stupid statistics!” The sign on the road reading “Rest Area: 5 miles” looked blurry. Tears!

I decreased my speed to 15-mph as I exited Pacific Coast Highway north of Oxnard on the Pacific Coast Highway for a pit stop. It was a long trip south from San Francisco to San Juan Capistrano. At the rest area, I pulled into one of the diagonal spaces and curled up the back seat of the van for a nap. When I am angry for more than a few minutes, I soon become sleepy. I think it’s because I’m afraid where the rage might take me. But before giving into the soporific urge, I try to analyze the cause of the upset.

Before falling asleep, I asked myself: okay, sweet Margo, when was the last time you felt happy, or at least slightly content, and when did your mood change back to grey?

So, that day in the parking lot by the ocean, I asked myself, “Okay, sweet Margo, when was the last time you felt happy, or at least slightly content, and when did your mood change?”

After becoming a widow 6 months ago, I started talking to myself regularly. No one knows until they lose their spouse what a satisfying part of marriage it was to have someone around to share one’s thoughts with, even if the other’s head is buried in a newspaper. There is a limit to how much friends want to hear. I worried that my closest buddies felt liked

the trapped audiences of the Ancient Mariner. Besides, much of the time these buddies are not within reach of my voice. It would seem ridiculous, for instance, right now to call my best friend, Ellen, on the phone from a hundred fifty miles away to talk about nothing.

So when did I last feel good? I was feeling wonderful after the visit to Natasha and darling first grandchild, Lucia. Beautiful Natasha, the artist, at twenty-three, with her long curly blond long hair and full figure, was even more radiant as a mother than as a teen. Seeing her again, I felt such pride in her for keeping the baby even when the father bailed out. The blissful feeling of Lucia's dear squiggly nine-month-old body pressed into my bosom during the goodbye hug lasted about sixty miles down the coast. Memories of Lucia were gradually replaced by euphoria over the infinite sweep of the ocean's water, hymns of praise to the Creator for all the beauty in the world. A glass of Japanese beer, sushi, and fragrant green tea at the seaside dive north of San Luis Obispo was delightful. So what was it?

Lying in the back of the van, coherent thought was yielding to a mishmash of overlapping, unintelligible images, when the truth came through: that loathsome statistic, one in a hundred Ph.D.'s over forty will find a spouse coming from the mouth of that Brainy Woman gal. Shutting down my future, were you? I wondered what my being a Jew who became a Catholic would do to those numbers. Minus three out

of three hundred? How dare a sociologist try to psych out my future!

Nonetheless, just before losing consciousness in sleep that afternoon I prayed: "Jesus, was it you wanting me to hear how little chance I have at finding a man? Trying to get me out of fantasyland about second husbands so I can settle down and concentrate on living for you and the kingdom?"

I woke up groggy and numb. On the way to the bathroom I stopped to gaze at the black rubber-garbed surfers bobbing in the waves. "By the sea, by the sea, by the beautiful sea, you and me, you and me, how happy we will be," I sang as I opened the door marked "Women."

The rest area bathroom mirror revealed a lined face I hated to claim as my own. Fishing through my purse, I found remedies. I applied bright red lipstick, a light coating of base to cover wrinkles, a little rouge, and darker eyebrows to highlight my large hazel eyes. My curly hair was still mostly brown except for the natural grey stripe across the top; I released it from the bun and thought the result not bad at all.

I returned to my orange VW van, a cold Coke in hand. I found a caller ID with the number of the monastery. In 1990, when my late husband Gustav and I had grown tired of university teaching, we founded a lay community around a group of Benedictine monks. The members paid a rental-donation for their casitas. Most of them, like me, had pensions from former jobs, or on interest from the bank, stocks, or social security. I wonder what Father

Michael wants, I asked myself. Gulping down some of my Coke, I dialed the monastery. Michael is the forty-five year old Prior of St. Gregory the Great in Capistrano. He was one of our older students when Gustav and I taught at the Catholic Culture Institute in Northern Arizona.

“Hi, Margo dear,” came that deep rich voice I loved so much on the other end. I swung the van out onto the highway.

“How close are you to home?” the monk asked?

“About four hours away if I don’t run into too much traffic, Michael. What’s up?” My stomach turned over. Ever since the accident that killed my husband I tense up at unexpected phone calls without a clear reason for the call given early in the conversation. An emergency in Heidelberg where my son, Johannes, was working as a history professor? Lucia or Natasha in trouble in the short time since I’d last seen them?

Father Michael must have sensed my fear for he quickly reassured me, “Nothing bad, sweetheart. There’s this guy visiting the monastery. Says he knew you in grad school at Fordham in the Bronx. He was planning to stay just for the afternoon, but he’ll stay overnight if he knows you’re coming back.”

“Oh yeah,” I replied excitement rising. “What’s his name?”

“Robert something? I forget. But I do remember that he said you were the smartest, most attractive woman he’d ever met.”

"So tell me, already, is he wearing a wedding ring?"

"Come on, Margo, calm down," Father Michael chuckled. "Would a holy monk be looking at the hands of visitors for wedding rings? I did notice how heavy his veins were, like the sculpture "praying hands"...Hold on a minute, Margo, someone else needs to talk to me."

I thought, when Father Michael gets back on the phone he's going to start in with his grief-takes-time-speech. As my mentor and also a dear friend, the priest was worried about his jumpy lady disciple. His concern was more welcome than the ridiculing remarks of Ellen Davis, my English crony. Ellen is a member of our lay community who lost her husband many years ago. When she noticed my avid interest in male guests after Gustav's death, she nicknamed me "Barry." She claimed it was short for barracuda. She remarked jokingly that I seemed more like one of those voracious fish searching for prey at the bottom of the ocean than like a dignified Christian widow.

"Are you still there, Margo? Sorry it took so long. You know what my life is. One hundred percent availability to the monks, the guests, the lay community! Listen, Margo, try leaving this second husband thing in God's hands instead of snatching at straws. You'll need to grieve much longer before you're ready for another man in any case."

"Okay, okay. So what else did he say about me?" I persisted.

"It's always lovely to talk to you, sweetheart, but I'm due at a meeting in a few minutes, so let's end with a prayer. In a serious priest-tone Father Michael prayed: "Lord bless our dear lay community leader Margo Kemperdick. Give her safe travel and prayerful thoughts as she returns. Bless Gustav on his journey to heaven. And bless their children, Natasha and Johannes."

"Amen, Amen, Amen!" I responded but without a pause added before he could hang up: "You're sure you don't remember his name?"

"Robert...something with an 's'?"

"*Auf wiedersehen, Vater,*" I signed off, reverting unintentionally into the mother tongue of my late husband. "Tell Robert whoever it is, I'll be there around 7 PM and not to go away!"

Flinging the cell phone into its nest of clothing in the passenger seat, I accelerated and started twirling a piece of my long hair into a long curl. I speculated: Graduate school - Robert? Robert S? Robert Schuler? Robert Somanski? Robert Solimanti?

It happened that Father Asher, the leading professor of the Graduate Institute of Catholic Cultural Studies at Fordham University, where I had earned my Ph.D., insisted that the students sit in alphabetical order to facilitate quick attendance taking. My maiden name being Schwartz, I sat in some 6 different classes between Robert Schuler and Robert Somanski. Was this Robert, the one who was so attracted to young Margo some thirty years ago one of those two Roberts? Then I remembered Father

Asher's jokes about the four Roberts in our program. "What do the four Roberts think?" he would ask waggishly when no one wanted to respond.

Talking to myself as I maneuvered through the relatively light early evening traffic between Malibu and Santa Monica, eating a double-burger and downing another coke, I pictured Robert Schuler...tall, good looking, but unfortunately married, even then. Somanski...flat-faced, short, beady-eyed...very smart though. Sometimes men look better as they age. That's right, Somanski became a Jesuit priest. I went to his ordination. Could have left by now???? Robert Solimanti...cute, lots of fun, liked to doodle on the page of my notebook nearest to his desk. Hmmm. Don't recall what became of him. Was he at the twenty-fifth reunion?

Grief knifed me suddenly at an image of Gustav in his sixties at the Fordham reunion. Big-bellied but still so interesting looking with his large bald head and red and grey beard. Never lost his thick German accent.

"I do miss you after all, old wretch," I said aloud, reaching out with my right hand for the wool car pillow. I knit the cover for that cushion for him in 1990 for our twenty-fifth anniversary. The pillow was covered with his blood after the accident. I never washed it, but left it in the car as the last part of him I could keep. Now, with my left hand on the steering wheel, I grabbed the cushion with my right hand, lifted it to my lips and kissed the bloody stains. The

yarn smelled dank - had baby Lucia perhaps gone pee pee on it on the way to the park?

"St. Veronica pray for me," I called out thinking of the woman of Jerusalem wiping the face of Jesus with her veil and saving it as a relic.

North of San Juan Capistrano, I stopped at the Mall to get flowers for Gustav. Ever since his death I like to put red roses under his portrait as a sign that I am missing him and praying for his soul. I locked the van and started toward the supermarket with the plants and flowers on the sidewalk in front. Impulsively I ran back, opened the car door, and dug out of the pile of clothing in the passenger seat the black velour dress I wore for the classical concert I had gone to with Natasha. In the rest room of the store, I changed from my grungy old sweatshirt and jeans into the dress and refreshed my make-up.

"Go for it, kiddo," I muttered jumping back into the van.

First Fling



LLEFT PACIFIC COAST HIGHWAY JUST SOUTH OF Laguna Beach and started up the dirt road that led to the Monastery, waving goodbye to the waves. Even though St. Gregory's is closer to Laguna than to San Juan Capistrano, we describe our community as near Capistrano, originally a Franciscan mission village. Our terracotta adobe houses adjoin the Spanish style monastery of some twenty Benedictine monks. To lovers of old Capistrano, our property seems like a quieter extension of the tourist-ridden San Juan Mission.

Approaching the entrance to the monastery, I drove slowly on to the side of the road, without fully braking. The scent of the thick umbrella pine needles being ground under the wheels of the van proved I was home. This stop before entering the gates had become a ritual. It allowed me to fix myself up one last time, so as not to be too much in contrast to the beauty of my surroundings. This time just one last

look to see how I might appear to my old friend, Robert whoever.

The woman's face in the tiny rear-view mirror looked appropriately exhausted from the trip. Is that a third furrow now etched into my brow, I asked myself with a sigh? As always, I ended my roadside stop with a Hail Mary, that at least my soul might be more lovely.

Seven PM on the dot, I noticed on the car clock as I sped through the white Spanish style arch. Monastery of St. Gregory the Great in large terra cotta colored letters was lit up for the sake of late guests.

To be sure to catch the visitor before he gave up on me and left the dining area, I parked in the spaces in front of the cafeteria. On the tiled walkway that joined the parking to the dining hall, I saw a slightly bent, medium sized man in a red lumber jacket and faded blue jeans. There was a black knit sailor-type hat on his head. He was chatting with tall Father Michael, garbed in his black hooded robe.

"There's your old friend," I could hear Father Michael telling the man, pointing to my van. I jumped down from the driver's seat.

The man walked toward me grinning. I hoped that he was appreciating my still relatively young looking trim form and attractive dress. "Hello Margo. I'm Robert Sullivan. I don't suppose you recognize me after all these years?"

"Robert Sullivan! What do you know?" I gave the stranger a quick tight hug. "I spent hours on my ride after Father Michael called trying to remember the

faces of the four Roberts. Remember Father Asher's joke? Which of the four Roberts is best prepared today?"

Actually, I didn't recognize this one at all. Schuler, Solimanti, Somanski, and...he turned out to be the fourth Robert I hadn't remembered. Whatever he looked like then, he wasn't very handsome now, in his fifties or sixties.

Robert Sullivan readily agreed to keep me company for my late dinner. The large rectangular refectory was constructed out of adobe with log ceiling beams extending outside the building. Inside were twelve polished wooden tables, each seating eight to ten members and guests. The monks sat with the lay community members at lunch but by themselves in the old dining room of their own private quarters for breakfast and dinner.

As the Pope is called the Servant of the Servants of God, so did our Father Michael like to see himself as our servant. And true to this calling, he'd arranged for the cook, Brother Juniper, to save a covered plate of roast chicken, rice pilaf and green beans for me at my usual table near the kitchen.

"How good of you, dear Father Michael. How did you know I'd be hungry no matter what I ate on the way?" Turning to Robert Sullivan, I exclaimed, "Can you imagine what a wonderful life for a widow. After thirty years of cooking every day, I get to have delicious meals prepared by holy monks. Did you enjoy the smell of the rosemary Brother Juniper smothers the chicken in Italian style when you had it

for dinner?" In case he had missed it, I extended my plate toward his nose. He smiled and sniffed with obedient appreciation.

Chatting away, I boasted: "All I have to do in exchange for this great food is to run the lay community, and give lectures on Catholic culture. Of course some of our women love to cook. Perhaps you've already sampled Becky Moriarty's beef stew?"

"Yes, in fact, I did. I imagine having excellent meals is important for a monastery. I understand that guest donations are your sole support." Robert winked.

"Main source of income. Of course, we lay community members pay rent and board."

In spite of my initial disappointment at the forgotten Robert's non-descript appearance, as soon as I had wolfed down a hefty bite of the chicken, I questioned him warmly about his life, "So, Robert, not Somanski, not Schuler, not Solimanti, what have you been doing, lo, these thirty...is it really thirty years?"

Up closer the man's face wasn't so bad, I decided. His thin grayish brown hair was not attractive, but his craggy face was interesting, as were his large blue eyes that were regarding me with a delighted, engrossed expression. I noticed the arthritic knobs and heavy veins on his hands, and that there were no rings on his fingers. Having a distaste for the vanity of polished nails on people's hand or feet, I was pleased his fingernails were natural, grooved and cut squarely.

"Probably my life's not too different from yours. I've followed you and Gustav in the Alumni News. Of course, you two, his favorites, became Father Asher's successors at Fordham. I wound up teaching Great Books at a small college in Brooklyn, St. Dominic's."

I blushed as I realized I could not remember anything from the Alumni Notes about Robert's career. "I'm not sure," I guessed, "Didn't you get married and have a brood of kids?"

"Three boys and three girls." Robert reached for his wallet to show a wad of photos spanning many ages of children but none of his wife.

After appropriate oohs and aahs about his kids, I paused. As if intuiting the question behind the silence, Robert added, "My wife died three years ago of cancer, but we were separated by that time."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I replied laying my hand on his broad hairy one. I kept it there a few moments longer than I planned. The first sign of a lonely heart, I thought later that night.

Still hungry for more chicken, I asked Robert if he might want a second dinner, too. There are always leftovers in the monastery refrigerator because Brother Juniper never knows how many guests will show up unannounced. The cook was always willing to finish up any more ancient leftovers himself.

"Sure," Robert answered with a grin.

"Leg or breast?" I yelled from the door of the kitchen.

"Breast."

I giggled to myself while ladling a leg and rice onto my plate and another with the breast for Robert.

Gnawing on my second chicken leg while Robert sent down large bites of the breast, I was reminded of a funny image from a British film based on an historical novel, what was it, Tom Jones, perhaps, where the magnetic energy between a man and woman was symbolized by the gusto with which they bit into the meat on large mutton bones, all the while ogling each other.

Good grief, I thought, to myself. I must be going out of my mind. I've only just met this guy and he's not even my type which is large and heavy like Gustav. And here I'm already flirting with him, if not in spoken words, then in my thoughts. I better study those passages from Acts and St. Paul more seriously about the holy widows and the bad ones, I decided.

I drew my hands under the table and gave my left hand a little slap with the right one. This was a gimmick I picked up years ago from an old school teacher nun in our parish. When the law came down on any kind of corporeal punishment in the schools, even rapping the knuckles of naughty pupils, Sister Elizabeth substituted the kids slapping their own hands. From years of modeling how to do it on her own hands, it had become an automatic habit whenever she said or did anything she deemed to be unholy.

Pulling myself together, I fled from thoughts of seduction to the more comfortable world of the mind,

expostulating to Robert about my favorite truths from Father Asher's Catholic Culture classes at Fordham.

Just then Ellen Davis passed through the cafeteria on the short cut to the plaza where the lay community's casitas surrounded a pleasant fountain area. Trotting in a decrescendo from her usual cantering gait, and looking spiffy in her silk-like jogging suit, she called out in her English accent "Ta, Ta, Barry. How are you going?"

"Barry?" Robert smiled.

"Oh, just an inside joke," I said.

When our plates were empty, I extended my hand across the table. "It's been a pleasure seeing you again, Robert. I've had a long drive from San Francisco. Won't be going to night prayer. If you're still here tomorrow, maybe we can chat some more about old times."

On the way out, I made a bet with myself. If he follows me to the van instead of going to the guest rooms or the chapel, something more will come of this.

Just as I backed out the car to move to the garage in the back of my adobe casita, I saw Robert waving me down. I drove the VW around to meet him coming down the path, and called out the open window, "Another memory to share?"

"I just thought you might want to glance at one of the books I wrote. I brought a copy with me to the Great Books Conference in San Diego to show a former colleague," he replied, leaning through the open window.

"I may be too sleepy, but I'll try. If you want to get it for me, I'll be sure to give it back in the morning."

The man walked off. I stroked Gustav's bloodstained cushion, as I waited. When he returned, the book in hand, he said: "Take your time. I'll be here a few days I think, Margo. It's spring break at my college. I have an open-dated return ticket thinking I might find a way to extend my vacation."

As I reached for Robert's book with the right hand, he laid his gnarled hand on mine for a few moments, smiling, and then took off slowly toward the guest rooms.

Even though night had fallen, the round womb-like shape of my adobe casita was visible in the streetlight. I walked right through the heavy wooden doors without a key. It felt blessed not to have locks in the community. The hanging Tiffany lamps I had left on before my trip cast a warm sheen over the living room, furnished with heavy leather couches, recliners and blue and yellow tiled tables. I smiled at the stunning effect of Mexican folk-art panels I bought in San Miguel d'Allende on vacation the summer before Gustav's death. Over the mantelpiece on the opposite wall was a large print of El Greco's head of Jesus.

Wild scuffling. Yes. Max and Mimi, our marmalade cats, came running to greet me. I dropped the first pile of clothes from the trip onto the sofa to give them full attention. It was a ritual. Back home? First thing, Mother Margo had to go to the kitchen and open a can of sardines into their plastic kitty saucer. The

pussycats lowered their heads into the dish and forgot me.

After depositing everything from the car onto the floor in the bedroom, I made myself a cappuccino and set it with a plate of biscotti next to one of the recliners. Soon I was snuggling into the chair with Robert's book. My little pals Max and Mimi jumped up into my lap like soft bolsters on either side of me.

I examined the cover of the book first. It was made to look like parchment. Fra Angelico's angels danced above the title: *Dante's Paradiso Regained: A Modern Commentary*. Clever title.

A half an hour later, impressed, but sleepy in spite of the caffeine fix, I put the book down and let the cats follow me into the bedroom. There neatly made up with a flowered comforter was our spousal bed, king-size with a wooden headboard engraved with dancing medieval knights and ladies. It was two hundred years old, part of the legacy from Gustav's Bavarian mother. Max and Mimi leapt up and curled on what used to be Gustav's pillow. With their dark and pale orange stripes contrasted to the snow-white lace pillow-case, they seemed like gigantic versions of those spiral circle candies I used to pick out of variety candy boxes.

From my side of the bed, I looked up at the portrait of Gustav on the opposite wall. It was an oil painting made by a student as a parting gift when we left New York for Arizona.

"So what do you think of Robert Sullivan, hubby?" I asked aloud. Receiving no clear answer, I directed a

quiet prayer to Elizabeth Seton, one of my favorite widow saints, "Dear, St. Elizabeth, you were a widow, so you understand. You wrote about your inflammable heart, even when you were wearing a nun's habit. As I place this new relationship into the hands of Jesus, I ask you, my mentor, to implore the Celestial Bridegroom, whose company you now enjoy, to give me a little dignity. Let me not make a complete fool of myself."

Still a bit too restless for sleep, I considered a few theories about Robert's seeming interest in me. Maybe the guy's just lonely. Or he could be nostalgic for his young manhood. I grimaced as I decided he was probably just projecting the memory of me as a young filly on my present person.

With that came to mind the famous line of Dante, "In Thy will is our peace." I repeated it three times, making the sign of the cross over my forehead, heart and shoulders as sleep overtook me.

Getting Warmer



IAWOKE THE NEXT MORNING TO THE TOLLING OF THE monastery bells for morning prayer. I like to keep the blinds open at night so that I can see the heavy metal bells swinging slowly in the white stucco church tower.

It took me only ten minutes to jump out of bed, go to the bathroom, pull on a leotard top, broom skirt and embroidered Mexican poncho and put on some lipstick. Feeding Max and Mimi, I noticed the wilted roses lying on the kitchen cabinet. I slapped my hand.

It was my custom to go to the dining hall for an early snack of toast and coffee before 7:30 morning prayer and the 8 AM Mass. On the way, I ran into half a dozen lay community members. Big hugs from Sandy and Howard Finley, a shouted "welcome back Mother Margo" from Maryanne Bochenski. Waves from the others as they strolled toward the chapel.

Once in the dining hall I went around to the back to embrace Becky the cook. Seeing me through the

plate glass windows, Ellen Davis, my English widow friend waved, and then bounded in to greet me properly.

"So Barry, darling, how did it go with the gent last night?"

Getting out of my chair, I kissed her on both cheeks. "Oh, Ellen, you can't believe how great it felt to be sitting across from an interesting man over a dinner."

"How are Natasha and baby Lucia?"

"I'll tell you all about that when we have more time, Ellen. By the way, did ya ever listen to that awful MPR talk show host, Janet Rogers? She had this horrid expert on the radio yesterday who wrote a book called, of all things, *Brainy Women* - sounds like computers dressed in those loathsome jogging suits.

"Oh, Ellen, dear," I added quickly noticing that this morning she was wearing a new shiny mauve-colored running outfit. "I didn't mean to insult you - with your figure and thick blond hair you look great in those jump suits."

Ellen laughed. "Good to have you back, darling outspoken Margo. We miss you dreadfully when you go off, you know."

At the thought that my lay community cared about me, those tears that seemed ever ready to spill out since Gustav's death, made a brief appearance. Knowing that Ellen tended to go for the bottle when she felt lonely, I wondered how she had fared in my absence. She had many friends in the community

both among the monks and the lay folk, but I was her only confidante. Brother Juniper would be the one to tell me if she had broken the Monastery rule against liquor on the property in too flagrant a manner. Once the Finley's and I had to drag her from the edge of the fountain to her casita. She had been singing English ditties in a loud voice, while guzzling down a bottle of Guinness Stout. The occasion was the 70th birthday of her dead husband.

Gobbling down a piece of toast, I tried to get in as much more gossip as possible in the five remaining minutes before morning prayer. "Anyhow, that Janet Rogers said that statistics show that only one in a hundred women with Ph.D.'s will ever get a husband, especially if they're over forty. What's the matter with older men? Do they have such fragile egos they can't stand to have smart women around?"

"Well now, don't you suppose the fact that so many single academic women of that age are aggressive, demanding and bitter might have something to do with it, too?"

In self-mockery I made a fist and beat my breast, "*mea culpa, mea culpa, mea culpa.*" Noticing the clock read 7:25, I leapt up and ran with Ellen to the chapel. Just before opening the carved wooden doors of the church I whispered. "So, what do you think of Robert?"

"You mean as a person or as a mate for a barracuda?" Before I could think of a zippy rejoinder she put up her index finger to her lips for silence.

The white Spanish style chapel of St. Gregory the Great consisted of two rows of heavy dark oak choir stalls, the 20 seats on each side divided by wide arm rests. Tradition had guests sitting in the back near the door; lay community in the middle, and the monks themselves close to the altar. Huge candelabras hung from the arched roof in which glowed electric bulbs concealed within candle shapes.

All those attending the service were observing the mandatory fifteen minutes of total silence before communal prayer. The monks would not agree to have a lay community living around the monastery unless Father Michael enforced perfect quiet in the chapel. I noticed that Robert was sitting at the furthest guest seat away from the door near the Finley's and gazing up at the sloped sides of the roof on the opposite side. These were decorated with frescoes of Benedictine saints.

Ellen and I genuflected before the real presence of Jesus in the tabernacle mounted on the wall behind the simple altar. Above the tabernacle was a large picture of St. Gregory and St. Benedict ascending into heaven, awaited by Jesus, Mary and Joseph seated on simple thrones.

Ellen walked over to the left side of the chapel to her usual seat next to the Bochenski's. I went to my usual seat in the lay community section, grabbed by Liturgy of the Hours prayer book, but then walked to the guest section to sit next to Robert. Our visitor was wearing the same black knit hat, red checked jacket and blue jeans. He smiled at me and leaned over

whisper good morning in his pleasing low voice. I wanted to give him a hug but decided instead to comply with the reverent mood of the others.

Soon we were caught up in the rhythmic chant melody of the Psalms. Away for two weeks I was happy to be back. I love personal private prayer. Just the same there is a strength that comes when many worship together. Knowing so much about each one's daily struggles makes the earnest trust in their faces so moving. If I am in a sufficiently quiet mood, the shape of each devotee stands out for me like an icon of piety.

By the time of the Mass, however, the presence of the single man so near to me in the choir stall became distracting. I felt magnetized toward Robert, as if we were a couple. Instead of paying attention to the readings and to Father Simon's always strong preaching, I started planning the day. The big breakfast after Mass we could have together. Then I could invite him to the talk I was giving to the lay community about the sacred space of the Cathedral in medieval towns. Perhaps in the afternoon there would be time to talk about his book - have him read something aloud, maybe by the fountain if it was a warm enough day, or perhaps sitting by the fireplace in the guest lounge. A walk on the beach before dinner? Invite him to my casita for an after dinner cappuccino and music?

Robert followed me off the breakfast line to my usual place in the dining hall near the kitchen. It amused me how my tablemates, Ellen, Sandy and

Howard and the Bochenskis walked past us to a table way on the other side of the room. Howard was a deacon. He and his wife Sandy were old friends from a previous parish. Jack Bochenski was the supervisor of operations for the community and his wife, Maryanne was one of my closest friends. I figured before the first soft-boiled egg went down the hatch these two couples would be gossiping about my chances with Robert.

Living in a fish bowl is one of the major adjustments of relationship in a community whether it be lay or monastic. Once, for fun, I told one person a vague rumor about a community of nuns joining us. I wanted to check how quickly it would get around. In an hour all thirty of the residents were talking of nothing else.

"So, Robert," I asked after my first soft-boiled egg, "what do you like best so far about St. Gregory's?"

"The prayer life," he replied right away, after swallowing a piece of Becky's home-baked challah bread.

"Do you think you might be called someday to lay community?"

This answer was longer in coming. "Four years from now, perhaps, when my last child graduates college. I'm still helping them with tuition. I'll have to stick with teaching till that's paid up for sure."

When I ran my proposed schedule for the day by him, Robert laughed. "It reminds me of grad school, Margo. When any of us were unsure about an assignment, you were the one we'd come to. You'd

whip out a calendar with every item due for the semester marked with a different color for each class. Remember that?"

"Haven't thought of it for years." My laughter was shaky. Father Michael, my spiritual counselor as well as my priest, sometimes chided me for compulsive list making.

I went back to the casita for the hour hiatus before the community gathering to sort out the wash from the trip and clean up the mess I had seen last night that the cats made with the newspapers while I was gone. Dusting in the bedroom, I replaced the thoroughly dead roses in the vase underneath Gustav's portrait with the new slightly wilted ones. "Sorry, honey. Your flowers are all withered. But they still have that scent you loved so much. Here, I'll inhale it for you," I muttered breathing in the aroma with a sigh.

On the way to the trash with the dead roses, I turned back and responded to the scolding look on his then middle-aged face: "I know you wanted me to become a nun if you died first so that no other man would ever get me, but...well...some people say the better the marriage, the quicker the remarriage. Like it proves your first didn't sour you on tying the knot again."

I didn't really think about it that way. Our life together was more like a turf-war than an Eden, even though it got better after what we called the pit years. When Ellen teased me about becoming a man-hunter-widow, I explained myself saying: "Well, I did such a

bad job with number one I want to prove I can do it better with number two. Nothing wrong with that, is there?"

"I wouldn't marry again for a million dollars. Once is enough," was Ellen's cynical rejoinder. Now I wondered if someone as nice as Robert showed interest in her she would change her mind.

Normally, I would have dashed out as is to give a community lecture, but this time I turned back to freshen up the make-up and brush the hair.

Monday mornings in the guest lounge with its circle of comfortable sofas there was an obligatory lecture for the lay community. This was attended on an optional basis by monks and guests. The talks were about Catholic culture and spirituality. On the first Monday of the month, which happened to be this one, I gave the lead talk. I took my materials from our multi-media team-taught university courses.

The lecture this morning, with Robert in attendance, was on the cathedral as a sacred space in the medieval town, this time Chartres. The projector for the slide show of the stained glass windows was on a table next to Robert's chair. After the presentation my friend leaned over to say, "That was great."

Happily the weather for March was warm enough for an afternoon stroll on the beach happily almost deserted. We left our shoes and socks near the dunes to walk on the wet sand near the ocean. Due to what I found out was his arthritis, Robert's pace was slow, hard on a fast walker like me. I noticed his steps

quicken, however, when he was talking about his projects.

"We are nearing the millennium. I'm thinking of a book about 20th century sacred art and architecture. I'd like to show how artists like Rouault and Chagall, modern as they are, stand in continuity with the tradition."

"Unlike, say, people like Dali or Gaudi?"

"Right. As the years go by Father Asher's notion that certain modern art is demonic in its purposeful destruction of reality has something to it. Take the famous Dali crucifixion. By having a relatively unwounded Jesus drifting toward the sky on a floating cross he becomes more of a New Age symbol. The whole point of the tradition of crucifixion art is that God in Christ came down to the earth. The cross is plunged into the soil of Jerusalem. He died the most painful death possible so that we could know God shares our pain."

"Robert, it feels so good to be talking with a man in my field. It's tedious giving long explanations for ideas we students of Father Asher take for granted. It took me a while to realize why that Dali crucifixion is so popular. You know, before I became a Catholic, I had that Dali painting on my wall. Do you remember that I am a Jewish convert?"

Robert nodded smiling warmly. "Who could forget? You were so proud. Have you forgotten that the whole Institute went to your baptism?"

Again I blushed at how much he remembered about me and how little I recalled about him. I hastily

went back to the previous topic: “Anyhow, I bought a cheap print of that Dali painting a year before I became a Catholic and hung it in my bedroom. My parents were horrified. I said it was just art since I didn’t have a clue who Christ was.”

I glanced down at my watch. “Uh, oh. We have to get back in a little while for evening prayer. If you’d like to talk more tonight we could get together after dinner by the fireside at my casita.”

“Thank you. This exchange is good for me, also.”

After dropping Robert off at the monastery, I drove like a maniac to the supermarket for firewood and a bottle of Merlot. Got to make it back right on time for prayer, I muttered to myself as I ran around the store. Father Michael thought that as heads of the lay community it was important that Gustav and I always be there on the dot if not earlier.

Standing behind Robert later on the dinner line it felt again as if we were a couple. We enjoyed a meal made by Becky and her Irish husband John of corn beef and cabbage. Sitting at my table were a lay community couple, Graciella and Jaime Ramirez. After a few minutes, my dear friend Brother Junipero lumbered toward us. With the round face above his rounded body in his heavy brown robe with the white rope around the middle, he always looked to me like three circles going down from small, medium to large.

I was surprised to see him since the monks avoid the lay people at dinner to eat together by themselves. Later when questioned, Brother Junipero admitted

that Father Michael had sent him to my table find out what was going on with Robert, not out of curiosity, but so they both could help me better after the predicted crash.

In his Southern accent, Brother Robert gave us a long description of the pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City that changed his life. "There I was a single cool Texas oil-driller crawling on my knees on the cobble-stones from the back of the plaza up to the Church. Mary took me just like I was. After only thirty minutes of penance, with the blood beginning to stain my jeans, I felt the hand of Our Lady in mine, urging me on. I swear she really did that for me."

Graciella and Jaime heard the story many times but they still beamed with joy at this repeated affirmation of their Mary's powers.

When the evening meal was finished, Robert covered a yawn with his gnarled hand. "I hope you'll excuse me. I guess the ocean air did me in. I'll have to take a rain check on our evening plans."

Of course I said it was okay. I walked slowly back to the casita. Max and Mimi jumped on me when I opened my door. "You want some T.L.C. with your kitty food, don't you, my dears. I'll give you the chow, but that's it." With tears in my eyes I shelved the Merlot and put away the CD of Berlioz's Romeo and Juliet I was going to play for Robert. Then I pulled out an almost empty half gallon bottle of Burgundy and poured myself a glass. I sat down on the recliner to watch the TV news. Max and Mimi

jumped up to keep me company. I stroked them throughout the program.

The wine tasted like vinegar.

“Good morning Becky, dear. I need a hug for sure this morning.” The breakfast cook paused the electric eggbeater and came around the kitchen counter to enfold me in her arms.

“Didn’t see you at night prayer, Margo. Missed you. Oh, by the way, Brother Juniper told me to let you know that our guest was called back East suddenly last night. Something about one of his daughters needing him pronto.”

“What? Is he gone?” I exclaimed with shock. I hope it wasn’t a tragedy.”

“I don’t think so. They had a quick snack a half hour ago. The guest didn’t seem much upset. Then Brother Juniper took him off to the airport to catch the first flight out.”

At Mass Father Michael included in the intercessory prayers: “Travel blessings for our guest Dr. Sullivan and for his family.”

After the service I dashed into the sacristy where Prior Michael was taking off his vestments. “So, what’s caused Robert to leave so unexpectedly?”

“I was half asleep when the emergency call came in, Margo. Robert said something about his daughter needing the key to his house so she could stay there. Didn’t sound like anything serious.”

At breakfast the Finleys, the Bochenskis, and Ellen wanted to hear all about my time with my new

prospect. I gave them a brief synopsis and then asked, "Don't you think he'd be perfect for me?"

Sandy, my practical-minded friend, said: "You've only known him two days. How can you be projecting all this so soon?"

Maryanne, my sensitive friend, said in a whisper, "Robert told Ellen that he was divorced before he was widowed. I suppose it wouldn't have been right to ask, but maybe you need to know more about that divorce before building castles in Spain."

Howard, Sandy's husband, my blunt friend, bellowed out, "How well does he know you, Margo? Now, you know we all love you to death, darling, but you won't be mad if I put it this way, let's suppose a guy is out looking for a sedan. Along comes a Jaguar and its for free, he still might not want to buy."

Jack, Maryanne's husband, best buddy of Howard let out a guffaw.

Ellen put her hand on mine, suspecting the beginning of tears, and glared at Howard and Jack. "Stop picking on Margo." Turning to me she said: "We're just worried about you. We don't want you getting hurt, sweetheart. How about taking it slower. For instance, tell me, did he do or say anything to give you the impression he wanted you as more than a friend?"

At that I spooned into my mouth the whole yoke of my soft-boiled egg followed by a forkful of Becky's waffle. The smell and taste of the strawberry syrup on the confection reminded me of the scrumptious waffles we used to eat at stands in Belgium.

Hmmmmmm." I thought of Robert's warm but not at all seductive behavior during the visit and his ducking out of the romantic evening I had prepared. "I guess not. Case closed. You guys are all killjoys. I'm going to the chapel to talk to Dr. Jesus instead."

On my way to the dish counter I called back to Howard, "Just you wait till one day, God forbid, you're a widower. Someone might want a Jaguar but not necessarily a ten ton truck!"

Before leaving for the chapel I checked with Becky about the lunch menu. Since Gustav's death I was ravenous. Then I double-backed to the cafeteria rest room.

As I opened the door I could hear a voice that sounded like Maryanne's telling whoever: "I know Father Michael thinks Margo might have a vocation to that order for widows, the one Sister Barbara started in Arizona."

I decided to close the door softly and listen.

Next I recognized Ellen's laugh loud enough that it must have been coming from the sink area: "Not likely. I don't think our little barracuda's going to give up till she finds her knight in shining armor or at least a Don Quixote look alike."

"You're probably right. If Margo's bent on pursuing him, I sure hope this Robert fellow is really interested, " Sandy put in. I'd hate to see darling Margo get hurt after all she's been through. I can't explain it exactly, but there's something about that one I don't trust...a little too charming maybe? Being

around him made me feel grateful for my steady old Howard.”

With that I opened the door and started singing Franz Lehar’s Merry Widow waltz loudly. They looked abashed. I waited before going into the toilet to reassure them it was okay by joyful hugs. “To quote St. Paul: ‘Honor widows who are real widows...whereas she who is self-indulgent is already dead.’ I guess you know which kind I am.”

As they left the bathroom laughing I called out, “Don’t expect an invitation to the wedding you staid old pessimists.”

My visit to the chapel that first day with Robert gone did not bring the peace I sought. Instead of bringing the relationship to Jesus in prayer and listening to what he might want to tell me, I used my holy hour to fantasize about the future and strategize. First step – find Robert’s phone number from the guest book. Second step: give him a day and call up to find out how his daughter was. Third step: find an excuse to visit him in Brooklyn – suggest helping him with his new book? Plan joint lectures? Too obvious? Visit my friend Hope in Manhattan for a week and casually pay a visit to Robert during that time?

“Oh my Jesus,” I ended my prayer time, “I’m sorry for being so manic. Give me Your peace, please. Okay. I give you this new friend. Let it be done unto me according to Your will. Let me go about my day with loving care for those who are right here in our community.”

It was one of my chosen tasks in the lay community to go out every afternoon to the supermarket to pick up any extra ingredients Becky needed for dinner. That day her list included a couple of cans of garbanzo beans for the salad, and a 5-gallon can of olive oil.

As often happened, driving back to St. Gregory's brought memories of that phone call from the highway patrol about Gustav's fatal accident. Again and again I would hear in my heart the exact words:

"Mrs. Kemperdick? Sorry to have to tell you bad news..."

Gustav had been driving the monastery's station wagon to pick up a couple at John Wayne airport in Orange County. The visitors were coming to see the lay community in action. On the way the driver of a semi, trying to pass without enough room on a two-lane highway, pushed Gustav's car over into a ditch where it rolled over into the cement embankment. He died before the paramedics could get to him. "Only sixty-five, only sixty-five, only sixty-five," I repeated to myself so many times that first week.

Those memories never failed to bring the tears. But then usually came better images of the comforting solidarity of family and community. Natasha and three-month-old baby Lucia took a commuter flight and arrived the night of the accident. They slept with me in the Bavarian bed, all three of us clinging on to each other in a cocoon of grief. The funeral was delayed to allow time for our son, Johannes, a professor of history in Heidelberg, to arrive. After the

austere Gregorian chant monastic funeral and burial at the cemetery on the communal property, the monks accompanied us to the site of the accident where we planted a cross Johannes made with Gustav's name and the single word EWIG painted on it. EWIG was the word my husband loved most in his own language. It meant eternity, and Gustav had it engraved on our wedding rings.

Now, six months later, I sighed as I neared the freeway cross marking the spot. Back home when I passed the mantle-piece I fingered the wedding rings that lay under the El Greco Christ. For the first month after Gustav's death I wore our two wedding rings strung together with the crucifix around my neck. Then one day without any special reason I took the rings off and placed them under that painting.

Night prayer felt consoling that evening after Robert left with those deep words of Jesus, "Into thy hands I commend my spirit."

By 9 PM I was cozily snuggling with the cats in my bed when the phone rang.

"Mon cher amie...Donna Margolina... carissima," came the mellifluous manly voice on the other end of the phone.

It took me a second or two to realize that this must be Robert calling from Brooklyn. What would it have been? Midnight his time?

"Hi there, Robert," I replied to his effusive greeting. "How's your daughter? Anything wrong?"

“Not really. Her husband lost his job and they decided to get out of their apartment quickly to avoid renewing the five-year lease. She needs to stay with me while her husband looks into jobs in Connecticut. She didn’t have a key to get in.”

“We miss you, Robert.”

“Not half as much as I miss you, Margo. It meant so much to me to see you again after all these years. Is this a good time to call?”

Stunned at the idea that Robert meant he might be calling often, I sat up in bed and muttered a yes. The skepticism of so many friends in the lay community must have sunk in, so I started with light chatter about the happenings of the day. After a half-hour of back and forth I suggested we end the call with a short prayer:

“We ask you dear Jesus to bless our friendship and bring from it fruit for the kingdom.”

To Fling or Not to Fling? That is the Question!



IT HAPPENED THAT SANDY AND HOWARD FINLEY OF my community were still in touch with our mutual old friends Jeanine and Dave Portero from Pebble Creek, Arizona. When Jeanine got wind of the Robert Sullivan prospect from Sandy, they called me up. Jeanine made the connection and then got Dave on their extension phone.

After a few perfunctory hellos, Jeanine stated the reason for the call, "Tell us about your new fella."

"Hi Jeanine and you there probably Dave," I replied. "Well folks, I think he's just perfect - God's gift to a poor widow - brilliant, charming, open to marriage."

"Talking about marriage already?" David asked.

"Hmmm. Not exactly Dave, old cynic, but I'm sure that's what he has in..."

Jeanine interrupted, "When are you going to see him again? I was reading an article about these Internet romances and how people can really get

fooled that way. Not enough contact - all fantasy and no nitty-gritty experience. Sandy said you talk to him on the phone every night. That could do the same kind of number on you."

"Maybe that's why I didn't tell you guys about it. But, as it happens, I'm going to New York to see him next week. We're working on a book and a lecture series we could teach together at different Catholic colleges on weekends for continuing ed students."

"Whose idea was that, Margo?" David asked. "I thought you were burnt out on teaching strangers now that you have friendly lay community members to lecture to."

"Hmmm." I felt irritation tensing my voice. "All right, already. It was my idea, I guess. Why the 4th degree? You'd think I was one of your children you found out was planning an elopement." With that sally, I started laughing and couldn't stop for a few minutes. I had to pause them and go get a glass of water to continue the conversation.

When I picked up the phone after calming down, I overheard Jeanine telling her husband to be careful. "Shut up, dear. Let me handle this before we make an enemy of a friend."

Noticing from my breathing that I was back she explained, "Margo dear, we're your friends! In case it doesn't work out, we want you to know we're here for you. Get it? If you need a break from that lay community of yours, also, come visit us. Ciao!"

How like Jeanine and David, I smiled as I put down the phone. I felt warmed and safe as I went out to night prayer in the chapel.

The trip to New York was in May. Even though I knew that it would be chilly back East unlike in sunny Southern California, I chose to wear a light long black dress with a pink flower pattern. Sometimes I bind my hair back in a ponytail, but for the trip I wore it loose. Not wanting to burden my body or my spirit with heavy luggage, I carried instead a large black canvas tote. It would be easy to shove the handles of the bag to my shoulder, for that initial hug I pictured and almost felt in my body beforehand over and over again on the flight from John Wayne Airport to LaGuardia.

On the in-flight audio program, one of the pieces was the *Rosenkavalier* by Richard Strauss. It fit my mood perfectly. The song Gustav and I liked the most in the operetta was the most famous. A beautiful but middle-aged woman is expressing her love for a younger man. Even though Robert was older than I by a few years, the melancholic sentimentality of the heroine served to enhance my feeling of anticipation and uncertainty. In the midst of the selection, I began to feel anxious. Not a common emotion for me. I think of myself as unusually brave. Stretched out with no one in the middle or window seat to distract me, with my thoughts ranging all over the map, I remembered an intriguing idea of the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard about original sin. "Dread is the hope that sin will overcome one."

Dread is the hope that sin will overcome me! Aha! Is that what I'm anxious about? On the advice of Father Michael I made sure to ask Robert whether we would be alone in his Brooklyn house. It would not be proper for two unmarried Catholics to be in the same house overnight.

He laughed. "My daughter and her son are still with me and sometimes her husband when he's not working weekend. He got a job in Connecticut, but he wants to be sure he likes it before they buy a house."

In spite of my raising the issue, I was alarmed to find that I felt disappointed about the family being there. Alarmed by my reaction, two days before the trip I had a long talk with Ellen about etiquette for new widows.

We sat together at my kitchen table snacking on brie and crackers washed down with the Merlot left over from Robert's non-visit to the my casita so many months ago. With that knowing look which impresses me even as it annoys me, Ellen embarked on another chapter of her old widow-to-new widow speech, "Come on, Margo. Get real. Even if this man is an ardent Catholic he's still a man." It was with her ironic smile that she added face in closer, "You've got to make up your mind what you really want out of this and how far you'll go to get it."

I sighed. It wasn't that easy to say how far I'd go to get it, or what "it" really was. I stared at Ellen's sophisticated face. She wasn't what we thought of as pretty in the American sense but, trite as it sounds, she emanated a typical European feminine

fascination. It seemed there were as many levels of hidden meaning behind her words as there were other colors under her expertly layered waves of short blond hair. I wanted to ask, how about you, Ellen? With all your wealth, savoir-faire, glamour, and genuine spirituality to boot, and ten years of practicing your wisdom on this, I don't see any sweet second husband by your side.

I couldn't question her. Partly I restrained myself out of kindness in case she had tried and been rejected, but also because I'm old enough to know that failure doesn't mean someone's ideas are false. I had benefited myself five years ago from Ellen's wisdom. That was when, in what I thought of derisively as a fit of religious fervor, my husband thought he should become a Benedictine monk and I should become a nun, like medieval older couples sometimes did. It was Ellen who helped us out of that one. By transatlantic phone from England, of course on her schilling, she persuaded him to stay with me. By then Father Michael had come up with the idea of having us run a lay community together on the grounds of St. Gregory's witnessing to the graces of the sacrament of marriage even for older couples.

That evening talking with Ellen about the visit to Robert, after much hemming and hawing, I rejected the fantasies that had been playing around in my imagination, and answered Ellen's challenge. "Even if the idea of a love affair with Robert could be attractive, and even if I left aside the issue of it being a mortal sin, obviously offensive to the God I adore,

what I want is not a gigolo but a second husband. You know, like the old cliché, to have and to hold till death do us part.”

“So, my pet, draw the line through. That means that in case his family decides to go to the movies while you’re there, you don’t want to have sex with him. One heavy kiss, maybe...but anything more and you’ve given up on what you really want. Get it, gal?”

With an hour to go until landing at the airport in Queens, I reviewed the portentous conversation with Ellen. As I swayed down the aisle to the bathroom, I thought, God it feels funny to be debating this stuff in my head at my age.

The mixture of anxiety and excitement I felt as I squashed into that Ladies’ Room going to the bathroom, washing hands and face, and reapplying make-up reminded me of teen dating, but also of something more recent. What was it? Of course. Brother Lucien. When the children were still small, Gustav fell and sustained a severe back injury. He was disabled for a few years. I took over the full load of our team Catholic Culture courses at Fordham. Our marriage was in crisis. I had become disillusioned with him when I found out my supposedly brilliant scholar husband had plagiarized his Ph.D. thesis, all the time having me type out draft after draft of the translation, not of his words, but those of an obscure published author. I discovered the fraud when an old friend of his from Europe sent him a copy of the original book by the real author. Into this

psychological mess came the figure of Brother Lucien, a remarkable holy French monk who was doing graduate study at the University. Nothing sinful ever happened between us, but his presence threw me into an abyss of emotional turmoil as I longed to be married to a man like him instead of Gustav, who I then thought of as an inauthentic husband.

“Okay, woman in the mirror. What are you telling me?” I asked, staring at the face in the bathroom of the TWA jet. What beautiful hazel eyes you have? Thanks, Mom. The nose is a little beaky, but not too long. I accept that, Father. The cheekbones are terrific, Margo. Thanks Grandma Mitzy from Hungary. And the long, curly, brown hair? Pretty sexy. Thanks Grandpa Moishe from Poland.”

Fortified by these perceptions, I gave the woman in the mirror a radiant smile and adjusted the soft gauzy black dress around my waist and hips. God bless this trip, please,” I prayed to as I sat down in my seat and began the 5-decade rosary with just enough time till landing.

Walking out of the plane down the ramp to the gate, head held high and tote bag swinging from my left shoulder, I found that the airport was jammed with Friday evening arrivals. Why didn’t I come on Thursday? I asked myself. Of course, because Robert teaches Thursday nights. I looked around amidst the crowd for the form of my beloved friend. Not to be seen.

Bewildered for a few minutes, I suddenly remembered. That’s right, *stupnagel*, I admonished myself.

How could I forget? He said that if I didn't see him right away I should go down to baggage. I had failed to mention that I didn't have any luggage. Walking swiftly on the moving platform, I spied a very old looking Robert slowly limping toward the start of the moving platform going toward the gate. I waved frantically, and yelled out his name. He was staring ahead, hand on the smooth black grip of the platform rail. Just when we would be passing each other in opposite directions, I tripped on a newspaper that was lying on my platform.

There I was flat on my face, the tote bag having disgorged all its contents. A woman helped me up and stuffed everything back in the tote. Meanwhile the platform had put me far away from Robert who I could see in the distance was slowly moving off his platform toward my gate.

Breathless, with hair in disarray, I raced back calling out "Robert, stop."

He turned around and waved. When I caught up to him, he offered a clumsy half embrace. I explained about my fall. With Robert's arthritic limp, the going was slow. My suave scholar in his late fifties began to seem to me more like a tired old man.

"Let's find a nice restaurant here at the airport, Robert. I'm ravenous." It turned out that better dining places, such as the NY Steak House and the La Fonda were closed for the night. The only open eateries were Burger King and Taco Bell. No alcohol at these joints.

I realized that I was counting on wine or beer or stronger to overcome the awkwardness of making the

transition from the slightly manic night phone calls to a face-to-face encounter. At the Burger King, I offered to pay for both of us. To my surprise, Robert responded to my half-hearted offer by suggesting Dutch treat. That old expression Dutch treat was one of the many items on the list I wrote on the plane ride back entitled FORGET IT. Since I had paid the fare to come all the way to New York, shouldn't he have paid the expenses? Was it rubbing it in that the trip was my push and not his initiative to suggest Dutch treat? Or was he trying to indicate in a subtle way that it was to be a Platonic friendship, since friends usually go Dutch treat?

"Tell me about the daughter and grandson who are staying with you," I said after finishing off the first large bite of my double burger.

"You'll meet Stephanie and little Frankie tomorrow morning, I dare say, her husband's working out of town this weekend." Robert replied.

"How old is Frankie?"

"Around four, I guess."

I thought of asking my Robert more about his other children, but I didn't want to. Surprised at myself, I had to admit it was not Robert as a father that counted for me. I was only interested in Robert Sullivan the second husband. Was that wrong? Did it signify I wasn't relating to the whole person?

In the silence that followed as we finished our snack, I wondered whether to talk about our plans for joint lectures or wait till the drive to Brooklyn. I decided to say nothing for a while and see what my

host might offer. The result was a silence of about ten minutes.

Visiting the airport bathroom, I noticed bags under my eyes from jet lag and, maybe also tension. "Jesus!" I whispered to myself, half an expletive and half a prayer. But then I added frantically, "Oh, my God, what have I gotten myself into! Help!" I rummaged through the tote until I found my perfume vial. Sweet scent couldn't hurt.

The darkness outside at the outdoor parking lot and the darkness inside Robert's car felt comforting, especially because Beethoven's *Appassionata* was featured on the FM station. "Oh," I exclaimed, "one of my favorites." I moved my hands in rhythm to the rhapsodic crescendos of the famous piano piece. After a few minutes I laid a hand on Robert's and asked, "Who is your favorite composer, Robert?"

Turning down the volume, he said in a soft happy sounding voice, "For me, Margo dear, that's quite a question. You see, in the loneliness that came even before the separation, music became my closest friend."

"I understand."

Robert continued to explain. "I often think that God is telling me which music he inspired composers to create to help us. Bach gives me security in the midst of empty feelings. Aaron Copland a sense of my American identity in spite of all the horrors of our times, slave labor in our exploitative businesses overseas, migrant oppression, the squalid slums of the lower East side through which I drive so often.

Then there's Debussy for reverie. Beethoven's good for a passionate, no pun intended, sense of hope. Monteverdi links me to the music of the angels."

For the first time since meeting him at the airport, Robert's tone expressed the warm richness that affected me so much over the phone. I sighed. The magic was back. His personal comments about music opened me up.

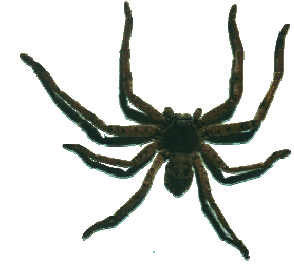
"That's beautiful, Robert. Yes, we must integrate beauty and spirituality because, of course, God is beauty as well as truth and goodness and love."

I paused while the Appassionata came into its final coda. Robert turned down the volume during the news brief.

"You know, I dearly love my lay community and know many of the monks are holy saints, but the cultural dimension of Catholic life is not as vibrant as I'd like at St. Gregory's. Father Michael loves classical music but he's much too busy to listen with me the way Gustav did. Now that he's gone I realize the great rapport we had in spite of his horrid faults. I guess he was a soul-mate and I'm looking for that again," I ended on a provocative if purposely vague note.

By the time we reached the Brooklyn exit nearest to his home, Robert and I were joining the soprano as WQXR played a disc with the famous drinking song from the first scene of *La Traviata*.

The Spider and the Fly



THE WEEKEND TURNED OUT TO BE A ROLLER COASTER of good and bad times. The arrival at Robert's house was one of the good ones. From the car lights his street seemed typical Brooklyn with such a greater number of trees and more space between houses than similar parts of the Bronx where we used to live.

Inside Robert ushered me into a huge living space spanning the whole ground floor. The stone fireplace and wall-to-wall bookcases gave the room a cozy and traditional look. Old-fashioned couches covered in flowery cotton were arranged in a three-sided square in front of the fireplace with Navajo rugs spread over the shiny wooden floor. I thought of the hours I could spend some day, if all went as I hoped, reading everything new to me on the shelves.

Hmmm, I hummed in a low voice. I thought about how much I would enjoy living in such a place. Aimlessly, I reached out to stroke a Siamese cat who was stretched out over the top of one of the couches. I

thought of Max and Mimi back at St. Gregory's. Maryanne would feed them breakfast and dinner, but I'm sure not a late night snack.

After the high point of seeing Robert's beautiful living room, the next low came when Robert announced with an impish grin: "I hope you won't mind, *cher* Margo, sleeping in my bedroom." I guess I looked sufficiently shocked because the man explained immediately. "Oh, sorry, I didn't mean with me! There was a crisis at the college this week, so I didn't get to clean up the guest room. I thought that I'd sleep in that messy room and you can have my nice tidy bedroom."

Relieved, I followed Robert up the spiral staircase to the master bedroom furnished with a canopied early American king-size bed. The puffy flower print comforter made me guess that it would have been the choice of Robert's former wife. Even though it was late May, it was cold enough to make the warm bed seem inviting.

Before leaving me to my own devices, Robert showed me the bathroom. There was a towel on the floor, open toothpaste and hairy brushes on the counter. The sight of a bathtub duck and rubber balls clued me in that Stephanie and her son Frankie were also using this bathroom, not to mention the unflushed toilet.

"What time should we get up for Mass?" I asked, yawning with exhaustion.

"We don't have a parish Mass Saturday mornings, so you can sleep as long as you like. We'll catch the 5

PM Vigil service. Good night, Margo – it's great to have you here," Robert said in a neutral tone of voice as if women from across the country often slept in his bed.

"God bless you," I called out to the back of the man who seemed at this moment more like a stranger than a prospective spouse.

He closed the door of the bedroom after him. I wondered why.

In the old-fashioned brass lock of the door there was a rusty iron key. It looked to me like something out of a fairy tale. I walked up to the door and turned the key, then turned the knob to make sure it was really locked. I wondered why.

Curled up in my sleeveless white cotton nightgown under the fluffy comforter, I thought I would fall asleep immediately. Instead I lay awake for hours, body tense and mind racing. He sleeps in this bed every night after he finishes talking to me on the phone. Does he dream of having me in the bed as his wife? Right now in the guest room is he thinking that he has me where he wants me? What would happen if I didn't lock the door?

Thinking my fantasies could be drifting toward the sinful, I slapped my hand, and then made the sign of the cross. "Dear Jesus," I prayed aloud but in a soft voice, "You know that I would rather die than offend you. Send my guardian angel to put the images in my mind you want to have there. Help me remember that Robert is first of all your beloved son. You want him to become your saint. Let me never be an obstacle to

your plan. I'd like to pray with him this weekend in a personal way. Show me how to do that."

I tried to drag my soul into the place deep within where Jesus abides, but the strongest feeling was pain from the place of the void filled in the past by my husband and then twice by our babes in the womb.

Tossing and turning, in tears, I prayed out of that place of emptiness: "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, help me!" And then in the words of St. Francis of Assisi "My God and my All." And finally thy will be done!" Then I turned on the bed lamp, found the rosary in my tote, and fell asleep on the fourth decade of the joyful mysteries.

When I awoke sunlight was coming through the chintz curtains, revealing the hands on my watch at 8:30 AM. Dreamily I took in the flower pattern on the comforter. On the wall opposite was a painting of grazing cows and sheep.

Sitting up in the bed as the first step to making a trip to the bathroom, it occurred to me that there was not a single religious picture on the wall, not even a crucifix. Maybe his wife wasn't too Catholic, I thought. Perhaps that was part of their separation. But she's been gone many years now...you'd think he'd want the comfort of seeing Jesus on the crucifix before his eyes, especially in the loneliness of his bedroom. Should I ask him about it?

Working on my make-up I noticed circles under my hazel eyes and a gaunt look around the cheeks. Applying a little more blush to my cheeks to compensate for the dark under my eyes, I practiced

on my own image in the mirror what I thought of as my dazzling smile. I felt anxious about how the day might go, so I the good memories of the closeness during the ride from the airport.

At the bottom of the spiral staircase I found not Robert but the grandson. Dressed in a cowboy outfit complete with tooled boots, he was watching Sesame Street on a small TV wedged into one of the bookcases. Extending a hand, I walked up to the child saying "Hi! You must be Frankie."

The boy paid no attention to my greetings, but I was not upset. My own children at that age would have been equally impolite had not Gustav insisted on European manners. As a result of his training Johannes and Natasha in their youth were as friendly to strangers as most present-day home school children.

In the kitchen area separated by a long bar-counter from the rest of the living room I came upon Robert's daughter Stephanie kneeling on the floor, laying tiles. Robert's wife must have been tall, I thought, looking at the long back of the daughter whose straight light brown colored hair fell down to her shoulders. She was wearing shorts and a T-shirt embossed with a picture of "The Grateful Dead."

I realized that my rubber-soled Birkenstocks made little noise over the TV, so I initiated the conversation: "Hello, you must be Stephanie. I'm Robert's friend Margo Kemperdick from California."

"Hi," the woman on the floor replied, without turning around. Then in a low lifeless voice she

added, without looking up, "Help yourself to whatever you want to eat. My father went to the store for supplies."

Stepping around Stephanie, I opened the fridge and took out a pitcher of orange juice. It took me some time to find a glass. I made some toast of thick seven grain bread and spread it with strawberry jam. There was a pot of coffee at the bottom of a drip maker. After filling a cup with it, I discovered there was no milk. Coffee without milk tastes to me like mud. So I set aside the coffee for a possible iced drink later on, and boiled water for tea instead.

Feeling ignored by Stephanie and Frankie, I took the elements of my breakfast out to the main part of the living room and set them on a long monastic looking table near the wall bookcases. I was happy to see many of my favorite books on the shelves. I fingered Mt. Saint Michel and Chartres, but took out a book of the Frescos of Fra Angelico to glance at. The page I opened to was the delicate picture of Our Lady accepting the salutation of Gabriel. Quietly, I nibbled and scanned the book.

Not knowing quite what to do with myself, I decided to try to talk to Stephanie. I passed little Frankie still absorbed with the TV, lay my dishes in the sink, and trying not to inhale the fumes from the heavy glue, remarked to the woman squatting on the floor, "Your father and I are working on a lecture series on Catholic Culture."

"Good luck!" the daughter replied. "What was your name?"

“Margo,” I replied into the chill of the young woman’s clipped responses.

Her first longer sentence did nothing to warm things up.

“My Dad is always planning things...we don’t even bother to talk about his schemes any more.” The woman turned around and gave me a marble-eyed stare. Stephanie’s face was like Robert’s, long with penetrating blue eyes.

Hmmm, I thought, the plot thickens. This sounds like the beginning of a Gothic romance.

I was relieved at a loud noise as the automatic door of the garage opened signaling, I hoped, the return of my host.

The uncomfortable mood was dispelled by Robert’s broad smile at seeing me up and about in his home. “Good morning, dear Margo,” he said in the sonorous voice. The man was wearing long-sleeved checked shirt with a suede vest and khaki pants. He looked younger and more relaxed than the evening before. The first thing he did was to open the heavy drapes to reveal the rock garden on the front lawn. The sun was shining.

After unloading bags and bags of groceries, Robert put together the makings of an omelet for four adding to a dozen eggs chopped onions, chunks of tomato, shredded cheddar cheese and assorted spices. I watched him with delight. A nurturing male?

Frankie picked at his portion at the end table near the TV. Stephanie ate hers from a dish on the floor. This left us to sit at the table near the fireplace. After

our common breakfast, Robert brought out his slide collection of masterpieces of Marian art. In preparation for our future lecture series I was to match the slides with my notes from a previous class Gustav and I taught at Fordham and later at Northern Arizona University. While consolidating these media, we listened to music that might fit in with the history and art: Monteverdi's Vespers Music and Bach's Magnificat were those we judged to be the best sources for short excerpts.

Engrossment in the project did not prevent me from ruminating in another part of my mind on the personal issue. Do I want to commit to lecture series if this turns out to be no more than a Platonic friendship? Why does the romantic side mean so much? Is it sex I'm craving? Actually, I don't feel overwhelmingly drawn to him that way. Maybe it's more the desire to feel wanted as a woman and not just as a colleague.

When the clock chimed four, Robert looked up and proudly announced he had reserved a table at the best French restaurant in Brooklyn for after Mass. At the thought of getting away from the work and the presence of Stephanie and Frankie, my spirits lifted. I bounced up the stairs and changed from my plain jumper and blouse into the flowered black gauze dress I wore for my arrival. Putting on bright red lipstick and combing my long curly hair, I admired the way the white streak on the side set off the dark brown of the rest of it. A few dabs of Ellen's My Sin perfume wouldn't hurt, I decided. He seemed much

too scholarly a type to ever connect the scent with the name, I thought, giggling to myself.

Following Robert out to the garage for the trip to Mass, the man turned around abruptly. "Why Dr. Margo Kemperdick, fancy a scholarly professor, and a wannabe saint as well, wearing My Sin."

I blushed, slapped my hand behind my back and sputtering lamely, "Umm. Well, you see, I have this sophisticated friend Ellen, you know the English woman you met at St. Gregory, and she made me take her perfume with her."

Pulling out of the garage I noticed on one side of the doublewide driveway a small tan Honda. On the bumper was a sticker with large letters saying "Vote Pro-Choice!" Startled I asked Robert, "Whose car is that?" in as casual a voice as possible.

"Oh, that's Stephanie's car," Robert replied.

"How can you stand your daughter sporting a pro-choice sign in front of your house?" I asked in a voice rising with tension and shock.

"Oh well, you know that young people don't exactly accept our values."

A fierce pro-lifer who used to do rescue work at the killing-center, I was stunned by my friend's apparent nonchalance. "You mean it doesn't even bother you?"

"Of course I wish she was more pro-life. But I don't believe in being a one-issue Catholic. She's strong on social justice. She used to work at a shelter for battered women."

There was no time for a retort since we had just arrived at the parish church, St. Anthony's. During the Mass my mind seethed with rejoinders to Robert's not one-issue stance. Fifty million babies killed in the womb and you think it's just one issue among many?

Through the static of my raging thoughts, the only words from the liturgy to penetrate were from a hymn: "Zion, sing, break into song, for within you is the Lord, with His saving power. You who were desolate and alone, a place unvisited by men, shall be the pride of ages untold, and everlasting joy to the nations."

That's me, I thought. "Desolate and alone, a place unvisited by men," but joy is in the wings. God is telling me to hope. After the Our Father I could hardly bear to extend my hand to Robert I felt so alienated by his liberal attitude toward the abortion holocaust.

Nevertheless, before Holy Communion I forced myself to calm down enough to pray to get the grace, after Mass, to "speak the truth with love," as St. Paul recommended. And after receiving the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity, of my Savior, I begged Jesus to let His real presence seep through my whole being to fill that place deserted by my dead husband.

In spite of these strong gutsy prayers, kneeling side by side with Robert during the many verses of the post-communion hymn, "Here I am, Lord" my attraction to the body of my friend increased. I wondered, does this mean that You want to fill my body with his body as his wife? Please let me know if

that's Your will. If not, help me not to be longing for a something that will only become a nothing if You haven't put any desire for me into him. As if from the Holy Spirit I remembered a line from St. Francis de Sales: "People will love you only as much as God wants them to."

After the Mass, Robert bowed as he opened the door on my side of the Chevy. Touched by the gesture, I thought, "Maybe if I cool it on that abortion stuff we could have a lovely dinner."

It really seemed that the drive to the restaurant, Chateau de France, was the turning point. Would everything have gone differently if I had forced myself to avoid confronting him on the neuralgic abortion controversy?

I started out in a soft moderate voice. "Robert, what you said on the ride to church confused me. How can you see abortion as just one issue? It's a holocaust! Sixty million babies dead, much more than the Jews killed in the Nazi holocaust and it's right here in our country!"

Tears filled my eyes and my voice got shriller as I added: "And what about the number of Catholics killing their tiny babies through the abortifacient results of contraceptives!"

Not hearing any reply to my diatribe, I turned my head slightly for body-language clues. Face-set, Robert concentrated on the road. There was a twitch in his jaw.

"I'm sorry, Robert," I said quickly, "not for what I said but for the harsh tone."

“You don’t really think that desperate women who don’t know where to turn in our cold society are the same as Nazis, do you?” he asked.

“Of course not! But the mentality that sacrifices the babies rather than helping the women is fascist. Can’t you see it’s like the Nazi attitude that the end of ennobling the world through German domination justified the means of slaughtering the Jews?”

By then we arrived at the Chateau de France. It was built a few yards from the sidewalk with a flower garden in front. With windows set in deep concave stone frames it looked like a chateau on the Loire.

Dashing into the women’s bathroom to comb my hair and improve my face the phrase came into my head “consorting with the enemy.” Why had I just assumed that Robert was a gung-ho militant Catholic? Years with our “one mind, one heart” community had blinded me to the extent of apathy on major issues in a large part of the church. The chill that went through me at the thought that Robert was probably part of the dissenting Church brought to mind Martin Buber’s famous line in *I and Thou*. “Suddenly a sense of otherness can overcome even lovers as they are forced to confront their differences.” I smarted with disappointment at the turn things were taking. Then I had to laugh. This felt like nothing so much as a badly arranged blind date.

Just the same, two glasses of Chablis and a bowl of piping hot onion soup, like magic, turned us around once more. With that impish grin I found so charming, Robert unexpectedly extended a hand

across the round table and gave mine a squeeze. I beamed a forgiving smile. Just in time the main course, filet mignon drenched in melting butter surrounded by artistically arranged steamed vegetables, appeared to complete the reconciliation.

After a short time of concentration on the dinner, emboldened by the effects of the wine, I ventured a leading question: "It's strange, Robert, I feel so needy, but you seem almost Stoically impassive. At this stage in your life, what are you really looking for?"

Leaning forward and taking my hand again, he replied in an intense manner, "Intimacy."

Later on my return flight I turned that word over and over in my mind. Such an ambiguous term, really. Did he mean the closeness of a best friend, or sexual intimacy? For me, a strong Catholic loyal to the way of Jesus, that could only be for married couples. Did he speak of intimacy at that dinner with a view to seducing me that weekend?

After the long dinner topped off by coffee and éclairs, I assumed that something at least mildly romantic would happen on our return should Stephanie and Frankie be occupied. Maybe we would sit on the couch together and listen to some beautiful music - a bridge between hearts and souls?

Not to be. Even though his daughter and grandson were not to be seen, as soon as we got in the door my host said, "It's been a long day. I'm going to bed. If you want to read in here, I could start a fire for you."

I fell asleep immediately that night, due probably to the effects of the fourth glass of wine at dinner.

When I got up for breakfast there was a note on the kitchen counter. "Dad, he found a house. We're going to take a look. See you Monday. S." So we had been alone together, after all, but not much of a fling.

I had scheduled a flight home Sunday for 11 AM to be sure to get home early enough to be fresh for a retreat I was leading starting Monday. The trip to the airport was uneventful. Robert seemed to be concentrating on the road more than seemed necessary. I felt sad and bewildered. He must be attracted to me or why the intimate sounding phone calls and why let me come to visit, yet he certainly didn't seem to care much for me now. He didn't even park the car to accompany me to my gate, but instead let me out at the departure sidewalk, reminding me that he wanted to get back in time for a noon appointment.

After exiting from the Chevy, I walked over to his side of the car and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Bye, bye, Robert. Thank you for the wonderful time. I'll work on the lectures we planned." I turned around to go but then doubled back and asked wistfully: "You will call me tonight at the usual time, won't you?"

"Certainly." That in the flat tone of a dutiful husband.

Buckled into my seat on the plane I thought of the nursery rhyme of the spider and the fly. If I was the spider I certainly hadn't caught the fly. If he was the spider, he hadn't even tried to catch me.

All Alone by the Telephone



WHEN THE JET LANDED AT THE ORANGE COUNTY airport, I wondered who would be coming to get me. If it was Father Michael, I might squeeze a confession in during the half-hour drive to the monastery. I wanted to confess the indulgence in sexual fantasies, maybe also harsh judgments about Robert's daughter with her pro-abort views. Coming off the plane I saw with arms outstretched my friend Ellen, stylish blond hair set off by a bright blue woven poncho over tight black pants. She enfolded me in a tight embrace. "Not so good, eh, my friend?"

I refused to get more into it than to say I would rate the visit about C-. Once inside her sporty little BMW, Ellen probed: "Listen, darling, it's normal for widows to be a bit, what shall we say, frenetic."

I smiled bitterly: "Frenetic?"

"Yes. Frenetic. Just because your marriage to Gustav got so much better the last ten years, it's

natural for you to be looking for another mate. You don't have to feel rejected if things don't go smoothly with a man right away. You could just consider it an adventure."

"You're wrong," I replied sharply. "You're not going to like this, but I have to say it anyway. Just because you haven't found a second husband after 10 years of widowhood, and you're looking for what you could call little adventures instead, doesn't mean that I won't find a husband. And I'm not giving up on Robert. It wasn't as idyllic as I hoped, but there were beautiful moments. Between Jesus and me, we're going to catch this fish!"

Ellen shrugged. "Who knows? You could be right. Certainly, I'll pray for him. There is one thing I would really like to know though, Margo, do you really love this man?"

We passed the place on the other side of the highway with the white wooden cross to mark the spot where Gustav was killed in the accident. I made a perfunctory sign of the cross. I was surprised how hard it was to answer Ellen's question. Yes, I was deeply interested. Yes, I loved those times when I could feel the chemistry between us.

Finally I replied, "I guess the best way to put it is he's is a man I could love very much, but I'm too afraid of rejection to give those feelings free reign. Can we stop at the supermarket? I want to buy some fresh roses to put under Gustav's portrait."

The exhaustion of the flight, jetlag, and my mixed emotions were so heavy that, skipping night prayer in

the chapel, I fell into my bed at 8 PM. When the phone rang at the usual 9 PM time I had to wake myself up. There was that strong animated voice. "Margo dear, you can't imagine how empty my house seems without you in it! I even left your sheets on the bed, still with the scent of My Sin on them."

"Hmmmmmm! Well, I'm glad you miss me. I miss you too, but I'm too tired from the trip to talk now. Call me again tomorrow night, okay? God bless you."

Robert called faithfully every night at his time midnight, my time 9 PM, always with some slight romantic turn to the conversation - one night *carissima*, the next *Margonella*, or ma *cher amie*. From my side I said how happy I was to hear from him, laughed at his jokes and every few days pressed him for a time for our next meeting. "Anything from those Catholic colleges about scheduling our series? When can you come for a visit here so we can polish up the program?"

Robert wouldn't commit to anything. He muttered something about family problems he couldn't share as a reason not to rush into anything. During the next two months I worked hard on the lecture series, making notes for the book based on our presentations. Whenever I tried to picture a future with Robert as a second husband I'd start wringing my hands. A new nervous habit? I'd question, would I want to live in Brooklyn? Could I persuade him to let his younger kids pay their own college expenses so that he could take an early retirement and live here with me at St. Gregory's?

The only time I felt good was when I was giving talks to the lay community. I'm a good speaker and it seems all my best energies come up to meet a friendly audience. This series of lectures was on the saints of the 3rd Order of St. Benedict, mostly married.

Trying to pray in the chapel alone between services only made things worse. One moment I would beg Jesus to help me out of my obsession with Robert; but a few minutes later I would weave fantasies of my new life with him. I wanted a husband to share dinners with followed by beautiful music or shared ideas as we sat together in the evening before the fireplace. I wanted someone close in bed. I wanted someone to sit next to at Mass and pray, with our spirits soaring together toward eternity.

Occasionally during these turbulent times in the chapel, I'd look up to see a compassionate look on the face of my mentor, Father Michael, who dropped the church whenever he could get away from his desk. I supposed that he was expecting me to talk to him about Robert, but I didn't want to. Since he had a degree in counseling as well as being counselor a spiritual director, I was sure he would tell me to cut off a co-dependent friendship that didn't seem to be going anywhere real. But when I tried to imagine life as a widow without even the hope of a second marriage, all I felt was heavy depression, and such fatigue that I could hardly bear to go on.

Each night as 9 PM approached, I imagined that this time I would hear Robert's voice saying "Margo, *cherie*, my love for you has grown so strong I can't

bear to have you so far away. I'm coming this weekend to ask you to marry me, or "I bought a ticket for you to come see me. On the way, think about how you will answer when I ask you to marry me." Then I would think about what that first intimate kiss would feel like or picture myself in the lacy white Mexican wedding dress I saw hanging in the window of a shop in San Juan Capistrano.

But the man never said those words. Instead he would utter poetic expressions like "you are the key to the innermost depths of my being." Eyes almost closed lying in bed with Max and Mimi curled up on either side, such phrases sounded beautiful. But the next morning my sharp mind would be analyzing how vague all this verbiage was. Where was the commitment in being the key to a man's innermost being?

By the end of July, I could stand the suspense no longer. On the anniversary of Gustav's death, when Robert called that night I threw out my "fish or cut bait" ultimatum.

My frustration came through the tenseness I couldn't eliminate from my voice as I confronted him: "Look, I know women are supposed to let men take the lead, but I'm finding this very difficult. Actually it's driving me crazy. Where do you think our relationship is going? Just good friends? Something more?"

No answer.

Clutching my rosary beads tightly I challenged him. "Let me make this clearer. I don't want to

continue this way. Unless you want to look toward marriage, I'm just going to split."

He whispered back, "Can you give me a little while to think about it?"

"I suppose so. How about a week? Don't call in the meantime. Pray and let me know." I hung up.

Anxiety shivered up from my chest to my brain. Unable to sleep from wondering what Robert was thinking those thousands of miles away, I finally gulped down a jigger of liqueur from a bottle of Benedictine in the back of a kitchen cabinet.

Back in bed with the rosary in hand I must have fallen asleep between the fourth and fifth sorrowful mysteries.

A week later, I wished I had specified an exact time for the portentous call. It would be reasonable to assume that he would phone at the usual time. I certainly wasn't going to miss the morning community Mass to sit all alone by the telephone. After lunch I put a sign on the door of my casita: "MAKING A PRIVATE RETREAT. DO NOT DISTURB."

The next day, Sandy Finley said she had come over that afternoon to discuss a community problem. She was surprised by the sign on the door. I hadn't said anything about a retreat at lunch. Remembering that I looked unusually strained and withdrawn during that meal, she admitted to peering through the Venetian blinds on my bedroom window to see if everything was all right. She expected to see me kneeling in front of the large cross, she was amused to

see in the wall to wall mirror of the closet that I was lying prostrate on the floor arms extended like one crucified, but with the portable phone clutched in one hand.

I must have fallen asleep in that dramatic pose, for when I looked up at the clock the hands pointed to 7 PM.

"Damn it," I cursed. "It's already 10 PM his time and that bastard hasn't even deigned to call me up!" Awkwardly rising, I went to the kitchen to see what solace I might find in the way of dinner. Cold macaroni and cheese wasn't enough for a moment like this. Instead, I thought of quickly defrosting the filet mignon I'd saved for a celebration dinner with Ellen if Robert came up roses. I took out the steak and started walking toward the microwave. Just about to punch in the timer, I wondered, would eating the whole thing myself now be a symbol of defeat? Woefully, I put the treat back in the freezer and took a can of beef stew out of the pantry instead. Glaring at the portable phone, I took out a can of Bud Light to wash down the dinner. I opened the can. It amazed me how wonderful canned beef stew smelled and how cruddy it tasted.

I brought my simple tray into the living room and set it down on the end table next to my recliner. Max and Mimi bounced in and sat in front of my seat. They stretched their necks forward in anticipation of the tidbits they knew I'd give them after I wolfed down the main part of my dinner. It was a pleasant distraction to cut up tiny pieces of beef from the stew

to hold above the heads of each cat and watch them leap up to seize their snacks.

It was 8:30 PM by the time the Saturday night news update was over. Just half an hour to go till Robert's usual call time. Eager to finally get an answer out of him, I paced the floor in a circle, finally taking a rosary with large wooden beads off the hook under the wall panel featuring a Mexican village church. I see the rosary as being a sort of supernatural umbilical cord of the soul to its mother in heaven, and that thought came to comfort me as I prayed the glorious mysteries of the rosary slowly, eyes fixed on a painting of the Madonna and child on the wall above the TV.

By 8:45, I thought maybe I should call him myself instead of sitting there like a mouse about to be devoured by a python. I picked up the phone and dialed the well-memorized number up to the last digit. Then I paused. Don't chase boys, Margo. Let them call you first. Wasn't that what my mother used to tell me when I was a teenager just starting in the dating game? Hearing the canned words of the telephone operator, "your call cannot be completed as dialed," I flung the phone across the room, yelling, "Damn! Damn! Damn!"

Fearing I might have damaged the phone and would then miss his call if he did call, I picked the portable off the floor and set it back on the holder.

Just then the phone rang. I made myself wait for a second ring, not to appear desperate.

“Hello, Margo. Thank you for your patience.” The sad weary tone of his voice should have been my first clue.

“Hello, Robert.”

“Margo, I can’t explain it to you. If only I had met you three years ago. There’s this other person here I feel obligated to. I can’t give you what I think you want. I’m terribly sorry.”

I inwardly gasped and tears started to come to my eyes as Robert added: “If you want to do the lecture series just the same or the book...we’ve invested so much time in it.”

For a moment anger replaced misery. Reverting to pre-conversion language of many decades ago I screamed, “Who the hell do you think you are Mr. Robert the 4th? You think you can just come into a woman’s life and suck the juice out of her heart. If I never see you again it’s too soon.” I banged the receiver down on its cradle.

Curiously, even though I felt the rejection like a dagger in my heart, over the rest of my body I felt a mantle of peace enfolding me, sheltering me from turmoil and racing thoughts.

I ran into the bedroom and flung myself face down on my pillow calling out through my tears “Jesus, take me!” This plea alternated with “Damn you, Robert!” Too tired to keep it up I changed into my nightgown and fell into a deep sleep.

When the tolling Morning Prayer bell woke me up the next morning, I felt dull pain through my body. Breakfast in my own kitchen seemed preferable to a

snack in the common cafeteria. I wanted to ponder Robert's phone call before revealing my shame to Sandy, Howard and Ellen. As far as I could recall they were the only ones who knew about the ultimatum. I knew they would be searching my face for the outcome.

On the way to my kitchen for orange juice, a bagel with cream cheese and a cappuccino, I passed Gustav's portrait. Same old round bearded face. I fancied he was chortling over my folly. I stuck my tongue out and proclaimed aloud, "I'm not so far gone as to believe your fat arm could reach all the way from purgatory to stop Robert from proposing to me."

I took a red rose from the vase in front of his portrait. As I sniffed it a tear rolled down my face into the petals. The cats were doing their usual feed-us-first dance around me as I poured out the juice. I opened their fishy smelling cat food, dumped it in their dish, and aimlessly stroked their sleek orange stripes as they daintily enjoyed their repast.

At the chapel for Morning Prayer, Ellen moved from her usual seat to be next to me. Observing the mandatory silence, but perceiving immediately the fiasco with Robert from what must have been the sad look on my face, she gave me a tight hug.

For the first five minutes at community breakfast, Sandy and Ellen were too delicate to ask any questions. They couldn't know if Maryanne and Jack Bochenski were up on the details of my romance. Desperate for sympathy after a few sips of coffee, I let

it all out: "Well, dear friends, your Margo experienced a major rejection last night. Maryanne and Jack, I don't think you know the latest about Robert, but for a long time I've been hoping it would be more than a friendship. I finally popped the question, and he was supposed to fish or cut bait, and there's blood all over the floor. It came out a big No."

Howard and Jack kept eating their eggs with expressionless faces. I judged this to mean they didn't want to get too involved with what they thought might get too emotional. Sandy, Ellen and Maryanne all leaned forward at the same moment. Sandy's large brown eyes filled with compassion as took my hand while I continued on what was to be only the first of many versions of this episode. "That S.O.B. actually had another woman on the string all this time and was just playing games with me!"

"Oh Margo, dear," Ellen cooed. As my oldest friend of the lay community, she knew she'd hear the details by the end of the day. Right then, surmising that humor might be my best friend, she nudged Maryanne and remarked, "Did you notice how quickly Robert went from Mr. Perfect to an S.O.B.?"

Maryanne tittered for a second but then turned back to ask me, "Did he tell you what this other woman had that you didn't?"

"Rats," I replied. "I was too angry to get into that. I suppose she's some simpering feminine creature who lives only to please her man."

“And what’s so terrible about that?” Howard grinned reaching over to give Sandy a pat on the head.

“I’ll be around after dishes, if you need someone to talk to,” Sandy offered standing up to leave but giving Howard a little kiss on her way to the kitchen.

“Thanks, but I’m headed for as long a session as I can get from Father Michael. I’m so confused I wouldn’t even mind if he tried his psychology stuff on me.”

The door to Father Michael’s office was closed. Under his nameplate was a colorful embroidered sign that read, “In Patience you will Save your Soul.” I knew that the other side had the words “Come in, I won’t bite.” I pressed my ear to the door to figure out who was with him and guess how long it might take. It was an unfamiliar woman’s voice.

Just then Brother Junipero came by. I slapped my hand, realizing that he saw my ear to the door, an enormous no-no when the door belonged to a spiritual director.

“Who’s with him?” I asked. I was sure Brother Junipero would know. As guest master and part-time cook, round happy Junipero always knew where the guests were socializing, hiding or praying. At this time of the day the monks and lay members were about their chores, so Father’s visitor was probably a guest.

“You’re going to like this woman, Margo.” He winked. “I’ve an intuition she’s gonna mean a whole

lot in your life gal," he added in his thick Texas accent.

"Oh yeah?" I sat down in one of the comfortable stuffed couches near the fireplace, resigned to the wait before getting in to see the priest. I was sure that Brother Junipero would take the opportunity to avoid his tasks and gossip with me till Father Michael emerged.

When, after puttering around a bit, the brother did sit down, he said, "Sister Barbara's an extraordinary woman. Drove in last night from Arizona. She's started an order for older women."

"Sister Barbara! Why I know her. She's wonderful. Come to think of it she's a lot like you - a short female model of dear you," I grinned and pressed his large hand. I wanted to say "round" but caught myself. Many overweight people I'm friends with seem invulnerable on the surface in their joyful warmth. But joking remarks about girth elicit pain you can see in their eyes, like a needle went through their eyeballs.

Barefoot Brother Juniper wiggled his toes as he listened to my story about meeting Sister Barbara. "She runs a retreat center near Phoenix. One of my mentors Father Gormley, the pastor at St. Martin de Tours in Pebble Creek was recuperating from heart surgery. I drove him down to Sister Barbara's hermitage for his rest time. That was when Gustav was here at St. Gregory's dreaming of becoming a late vocation monk. In the few hours I was there Sister Barbara told me about her community of older sisters.

You see, I was under pressure to free Gustav from his marital obligations by becoming a nun. That was common in the middle ages, especially for older couples. But in deference to the graces of the sacrament of marriage, the Church insisted in later times that no one could run off to a monastery unless the spouse also wanted to live some kind of celibate life. I doubted I did, but even so, and even though I wasn't a widow, I was interested in the idea of late vocation nuns."

I shuddered remembering that awful time alone without my husband before Father Michael came up with the idea of building the St. Gregory's lay community with Ellen Davis to fund the project and us as its heads.

That morning after the terrible phone call, I leaned into Brother Juniper's well-padded shoulder as I gazed into the empty fireplace. "Did you ever wonder why the guests gravitate toward our hearth even in the summer?" I asked, not really expecting an answer. Brother Juniper had known me long enough to assume that most of my questions were rhetorical openings for a professorial mini-lecture.

"Remember the business about the four elements and the four temperaments from the book on healing by Betsy Caprio?"

"Not really," the brother muttered.

"Sure you do. There's water as a symbol for the phlegmatic lay back type of person; earth for the sanguine hopeful ones; fire for the choleric passionate people; and air for the spacey melancholic ones."

"I remember now. You went around the circle identifying us. You had me pegged as phlegmatic. So I guess that's why they assigned me to drown in dishwater," he said, with a wink.

"Yeah, right. But just because you're watery they also send you out to garden as an earthy balance." I walked toward the fireplace. "Anyhow, so I'm thinking that fiery people like me are so afraid of out-of-control passions that we have a special attraction for the demure fire of candles and the enclosed flames in the hearth are soothing."

In his soft southern Texas accent Brother Juniper asked: "Didn't work out so well with the man from Brooklyn?"

I turned to face him, "How did you know?" It's true that our community grapevine is about ten minutes long, but still I had only told my tablemates at breakfast. Did one of them rush to the dish room to tell Brother Juniper before he got to the lounge?

Brother Juniper took my hand in both his large ones. "Guess it shows on your face, honey."

"Yeah, I feel yucky today, but by tomorrow maybe I'll have come around to my Dad's favorite phrase: good riddance to bad rubbish." I withdrew my hand and made a fist.

"Thank God for you, dear brother. What would I have done without your love at this bleak time since Gustav's death?" I held back repeating again how maternal Juniper was, given the embarrassed way he had received this comment before. The idea of some men being maternal came to me watching Mrs.

Doubtfire. I saw this hit first on the Finley's VCR. I cried at the end and insisted that the whole lay community watch it together. On the re-run I pointed out how the movie represented, possibly without being planned, Jungian feminine and masculine archetypes.

"What does it mean that the male hero only becomes lovable only when he masquerades as a woman?" I asked. The responses led to a discussion about men who are maternal and women who are paternal such as strong single mothers often get to be. When I pointed Brother Juniper out as an example of a maternal man with a well-developed nurturing anima, he got up and left. Afterwards he denied being upset by the idea, but it stayed with the rest of us. Once when he hugged Maryanne close to cheer her up, she looked up at him and said "Thank you, Mother Juniper."

Sitting in the lounge that morning after Robert's rejection, I let Brother Juniper's silent presence comfort me. I thought about the coming talk with Father Michael. He was usually more of a challenge than a consolation. I used to say to Gustav when Michael was our student that this young priest was my soul mate. "If I were a priest, I'd be like him, intense, prophetic."

My memories were interrupted by one of Brother's curve balls. "Margo, Jesus is telling me that He wants you for Himself. You know he's a jealous lover."

"What?"

Just then the door to Father Michael's office opened. Out waddled Sister Barbara in her brown burlap jumper, plain T-shirt, and bare sandaled feet. A nun's veil covered her head with only a band of thick white hair showing in the front.

I jumped up and ran toward the woman, "You can't believe how glad I am to see you again, Sister..." I fingered her white cotton headgear as she enfolded me in her large bosom.

Sister Barbara released me and replied, "Let's see, when I last met you with Father Gormley, I wasn't yet wearing the veil. It takes 20 years to get an emerging community approved, but at this stage we have enough members to wear veils after first vows. I'll be here till tomorrow morning. How about a chat before evening prayer?"

When I noticed the tall priest flipping the sign over to "Come in, I won't bite," I nodded yes to Sister Barbara and then dashed through the open door.

I plumped myself down in the captain's chair across the desk from Father Michael. The top of the desk was piled high with magazines, opened and unopened letters, and cups with different amounts of old coffee.

Since priests are not allowed to question those coming to confession, Father Michael tended to carry that over to all private conversations. Instead of asking me about my trip, he tilted back his chair. The brow was furrowed on his long forehead with the light brown moustache and beard covering the bottom of the face. I realized once more that my eyes

must have been revealing more of my misery than my lips as they automatically curled up in a fake smile of greeting.

"Oh, Father Michael!" I sighed. He pushed himself back to a vertical position and interlaced his long fingers in prayer, large grey eyes filling with compassion. "Widow grief coming on more strongly today?" he asked.

"I wish! Well, I suppose that's part of it, but not the biggest part. That thing with Robert Sullivan broke up last night."

"Praise be Jesus Christ," he exclaimed throwing his head back with a laugh.

"You mean you never thought it would work?" I asked. I felt angry that he concealed what he thought for so long. Of course, I hadn't told him much.

The priest, my former student, apologized, "Darling Margo, you know I love you, but for such an intelligent woman, you're pretty stupid about men."

I leapt at the chance to cover my vulnerability with a sarcastic rejoinder. "Come now, darling Michael, if I'm such a fool about men what does that say about my love for you?"

It was typical of Father Michael, to counter the spirit of repartee with a probing question. "Do you remember Freud's famous answer to the question 'what do women really want?'"

"I forget."

"To control a man."

"You mean that you could see it wouldn't work with Robert for me because he wouldn't let himself be

controlled by a smothering bitch like me?" My voice rose as I plunged into self-deprecatory defense mode.

"Who do you suppose wants you to think of yourself as a smothering bitch?" Father Michael asked, tilting his chair back against the wall again.

Trying to avoid Father Michael's penetrating eyes, I stared at the picture on the wall of Christ and Satan having it out during the forty days in the desert.

"Satan?" One of the priest's main teachings was that all feelings of being contemptible come from the devil. By contrast, words of truth from the Holy Spirit, even if chiding, yield not disgust, but humble desires to improve.

"Exactly, an A + for Professor Kemperdick. Why don't you tell me more about what happened on that visit to New York? You never told me about your hopes, you know?"

I blushed. Whereas my friends would kill me if I didn't update them on every episode of the dramas of my life, I've found that priests are willing to wait patiently until their advisees choose to fill them in. Maybe after years of hearing people's stories, dealing patiently with the pathetic hope and idiotic denial of others is part of every priest's stock in trade.

When I got to the part about Robert's daughter being pro-choice and the one issue dispute, Father Michael put up his hand as a stop signal. "Have you considered why that argument had to take place at that precise moment?"

"No." I twirled a lock of hair nervously.

"It's my opinion that many people who feel tempted to sexual sin, foment fights. Anger can be a strong antidote to lust."

"Hmmm. Possible. I did have fantasies the night before that argument that something might happen. I want to confess that part later."

"Yes. Do. But now, to explain, the reason I and probably others in the community who know and love you didn't think it would work out was because we knew why your marriage with Gustav did work."

"That's funny, Father. I rated my marriage up to the last ten years or so about B-."

The monk laughed, his even white teeth visible between the moustache and light brown beard. He leaned toward me fingers still interlaced. "Gustav was a man of heart, Margo, a heart large and quiet enough to hold your nervous little heart. And even though you, like other women, think you want to control a man, you really want one like Gustav who is strong enough to provide resistance. After all, you know you're not always right. This man Robert may be resistant, but he's also much too uptight for a woman as intense as you. Too much mind, not enough heart, was my estimate. You know, Margo, I've never completely agreed with the way you talk about marriage in terms of someone seeing the unique preciousness of the soul of another. That needs to be there, yes. But there is also a way that God, in his providence, configures two people to each other. Maybe you love Robert's soul but you and he are not configured to each other in personality."

“Oh.” It sounded right but it was too new an idea to take in quickly.

“So, I suggest that if you’re looking for a last fling, throw yourself into the arms of someone who’s strong enough to carry you.”

I laughed. “You have anyone in mind?”

Before leaving the office I took the opportunity to make a confession. “Indulging in sexual fantasies... wanting to control Robert and force him to be the man I wanted... harsh judgments about a Catholic weak on abortion.”

Father Michael suggested as a penance that when feelings of rejection and anger came up I should meditate on Dante’s famous line “In His will is our peace.” Then he laid his hand on my head and said the words of absolution.

I passed the rest of the morning and afternoon emotions running up and down. There were heavy feelings of rejection but then consolation from the loving gestures of lay community members. I counted twenty-four hugs before my late afternoon visit with Sister Barbara. Maryanne Bochenski admitted after her third hug: “We were afraid we’d lose you.”

At four PM sharp I walked into the guest lounge with a tray of cheese, crackers and a cappuccino for me with a cup of tea for Sister Barbara. No sign of my rotund friend. When the fifty plus widow nun finally arrived fifteen minutes late and settled herself with a bright afghan on the couch next to me, asking if I minded if she smoked, I plied her with questions about her community.

“We’re called Sisters of Mary, and we’re modeling ourselves on the life we imagine was led by the group of consecrated women who, you know, probably surrounded Mary and St. John at Ephesus after Jesus ascended into heaven. The sisters were spread out in old convents in different states running Eucharistic adoration prayer. I found the details about the daily life she had planned for late vocation women tedious. What difference did it make exactly how long they were to spend on morning prayer as compared to evening prayer? It was hard for me to see as a laywoman why wearing brown burlap jumpers would be holy but brown suits or pants not.

After a time my attention drifted from the Sister’s words to the unusual personality I suspected lay behind her patient smiling blue eyes. An early widow without children, she decided not to marry again, but to raise foster children. She had a Velveteen Rabbit frumpiness to her I liked. I thought perhaps she saw all people, including me sitting next to her, as just other children: fractious, rebellious, but still in need of tenderness.

When I brought a second cup of tea, she drew out my tale of widow woe.

“Perhaps Jesus wants to be your Bridegroom,” she remarked in a soft dreamy voice, taking another cigarette out of the pack she had tucked into her sack like bag.

In and Out of the World



WANT TO COME OVER TO MY PLACE AFTER NIGHT prayer?" I asked Ellen during dinner. I wanted to hear her analysis of the whole Robert fiasco. I also wanted to avoid being alone at 9 PM when the potential second husband used to call.

"Sorry, pet, but I'm invited to the movies with the Bochenskis. What about tomorrow morning after breakfast?" I must have looked crestfallen because she urged me to come with them to see the rerun of *Hannah and her Sisters*, an old Woody Allen film being shown at the Laguna Plaza.

"Hmmm. I suppose it would be distracting, but I really hate to miss night prayer. There's nothing like it when you're down. So comforting those words, 'Lord, now you let your savant go in peace...'"

After giving the Max and Mimi their evening snack, I felt too restless to watch TV. Instead I opened

my phone book and started calling up old friends secretly hoping for an invitation to visit. Was the lay community souring on me without Gustav or a fantasy second husband?

Since these phone friends didn't know about Robert shafting me, they didn't realize these were S.O.S. calls. I was too depressed to spell it all out for them. After five strike outs, no one home or phone busy, I decided that even though it was July, I would call my daughter about my annual Christmas visit to San Francisco. For the monks and single guests, holidays at St. Gregory's were glorious with the special chants and the gigantic nativity village around the fireplace. For lay community, there was a greater pull to be with family. Our first Christmas at the monastery Gustav and I did stay. It felt strange with the lay community thinned out, our favorite couples the Finleys and Bochenskis off to visit grandchildren. Ellen was also gone, back to England to see her children and grandchildren. The second Christmas we went to see Natasha in San Francisco and had been doing it ever since. Last December was the first time going alone after Gustav's death. Holding baby Lucia close to my bosom during bouts of teething was a comfort for me as well as to the miserable little tot. "I think I need to be needed in more physical ways, not just for my intellect and spirit," I theorized talking to Father Michael when I returned from that first trip to San Francisco without Gustav. That July of 1996 after Robert's rejection, when I called Natasha to work out the plans, she announced that she had

rented out the second bedroom of the apartment to an unmarried couple.

"Of course, dear *Mutti*, you could sleep on the living room couch."

"Thanks but no thanks, sweetheart. I suppose I could go to London with Ellen or maybe I'll try Johannes. A trip to Heidelberg could do me good ...memories of our honeymoon and all."

"I vote for Heidelberg," Natasha chirped. "Johannes sounded lonely to me when I called for his birthday. If he found anyone since Gretchen broke up with him last year, he wasn't telling me."

"*Guten nacht*, dearest." I hung up. I wondered why Natasha sounded so glad I wasn't coming. Was she relieved that I wouldn't? On an emotional level I was closer to Natasha than Johannes, but with him I could share the faith and not run into a stone wall on ethical issues.

I waited till 10 PM California, 7 AM Heidelberg time to call my son. A sleepy voice muttered, "Isn't it far off to plan, *Mutti*?"

"Not really. Do you have other ideas you were juggling for *Weihnachstag*? I don't want to interfere with anything more romantic."

I guessed my son was now wide-awake since it was with his formal professor voice that he replied, "*Weinachtstag* is a traditional family holiday in Deutschland, even more so than in the United States, as you well know. I would be honored to have my mother visit me during that sacred season."

“Jumpy and crazed,” was the answer Ellen gave me the night before I left for my Christmas week to Germany. Over our traditional wine and cheese visit I had asked her how she thought I was progressing for a one-year-old widow.

“It’s perfectly normal. How easy could it be after thirty years of marriage to be alone again? I think it was ten years after my husband’s death before I could see the pieces that used to be me assembled once more into a woman even I could stand to live with!”

I bit into a thick hunk of cheddar. “I guess I thought it would be easier because I didn’t fit those stereotype widows.”

“And what were those?” Ellen asked with a wink, as if ready to mock whatever philosophy of widowhood I might come up with. She was always accusing me of using thinking as an escape from the pain of just feeling things.

I ignored the implications of that familiar wink since I had a deep need to bring analysis to bear on my state of being. “Seriously, you know. Of course the women with perfect marriages would be devastated by the loss.”

“Ever talk personally with any of those one in a thousand perfectly married couples?” Ellen’s lips twisted cynically.

“Well, even if part of it was façade, some of them are not faking it when they say they wish they had died on the same day as their husbands. I don’t just mean romantics. Think of Edith Bunker of *All in the Family*. She was so totally dependent on that shrewd

pig of a man, she probably wouldn't know how to sign a check if he died first. Anyhow, those type of widows don't become barracudas like you say I have."

Ellen laughed. "When I used to go to healing workshops and grief groups, I met still another kind of widow. Probably I fit that stereotype myself for a long time. Those whose marriages were really awful don't get closure. They want to forgive and forget but they can't seem to be able to do so without the dead spouse offering the corresponding repentance and forgiveness."

The English woman sipped her Merlot thoughtfully, stroking Max curled up in her lap. "And when I finally did my forgiving and repentance, I went into a new stage. Just because my husband disappointed me, I wanted desperately to be a wonderful happy wife after he died. Proof that it was not my fault the first time, but his."

I jumped up, upsetting Marmalade Mimi who had been snoring in my lap, to give Ellen a long hug. She shrugged off my embrace and with a tone of superior knowing asked me: "Wouldn't it help if you confessed to someone, even if only to me, your best friend, that since becoming a widow the lay community doesn't feel so good to you any more? You don't really want to visit Johannes for Christmas. You're afraid if you stay here you'll get depressed? How long is fleeing from the problem going to work?"

"Hmmm." I took a large gulp of the wine. Not committing to any of Ellen's disconcerting theories, but accepting they might be correct, I said simply, "I don't know." Then I got up from my recliner and went to the bathroom. I came back and tucked Mimi into the recliner next to me. She sat peacefully in my lap letting me stroke her. "I thought of something the other day that fits in a little to what you just said. In a certain way a husband and children have to love you, even when they hate you. But in the lay community nothing is guaranteed. Any one of you, no matter how close a friend, could leave tomorrow and I couldn't say a word to keep you."

As if realizing her question about the community was too confrontative for me to cope with in any depth, Ellen changed the subject. "Tell me your plans. Are you going to camp out in Johannes' tiny flat the whole time, or go somewhere more exciting? A Bertold Brecht-Lotte Lenya tour of Berlin, perhaps? You might meet Gustav's clone there, eh?"

"Hadn't figured that out yet. If Johannes is busy with research, I could always check out Churches in old towns along the Rhine."

Ellen grimaced. "Not too thrilling."

"Johannes can be kind of stiff and boring over time. I guess it's understandable. You see when Gustav was laid up on the couch all day with his bad back, Johannes was only eight years old. He was pushed into taking care of everything the minute he got home from school, including wild baby Natasha. I had afternoon classes to teach. I suppose it robbed him of

his youth. By the time dinner was over Johannes would rush to the solitude of his room away from all the..."

Ellen interrupted. "That's so American, Margo, to worry because a child learned to be responsible for a change! What about the first eight years of his life, before Gustav was disabled? You feel cheated because your son takes after the German side of the family, stolid instead of mercurial, like the Jewish side."

When Ellen had one foot out the door, I asked "By the way, do you, as a widow, feel totally fulfilled with just us lay community for company?"

She pretended not to hear.

Gustav's dark green *loden* cloak felt uncomfortably heavy in the sunshine of Southern California as I left for my Christmas trip to Heidelberg. By the time I hit the long check-in line I felt sorry about the whole venture. Travel is so fussy with all the baggage for just ten days away.

"*Guten tag, meine Heren und Damen.*" At the sound of the Lufthansa announcements in German, my mood changed from disgruntled to ebullient. My seatmate was a woman who spoke only German. The old words flowed from my mouth readily after the year's hiatus since Gustav's death. He and I spoke English in public but always in his tongue at home.

Ich liebe dich. I saluted his invisible presence on the flight. How many times a day did we say those words during courtship, and how few times later in our marriage.

Over the Atlantic portion of the flight, on the way into a long nap, memories of my first trip to Germany came drifting into consciousness. Meeting Gustav for the first time at the Fordham Study Abroad Center in Munich. The horror of my Jewish mother and father when I wrote them I was engaged to a German. In those days when few people made international phone calls, they got back within minutes of getting my letter, "So what were his parents doing when Hitler was top dog in that God-forsaken country? You didn't ask, *stupnagel?*" That from my mother.

"I'm breaking into the long term interest account to get you a ticket back tomorrow, Margo" my father offered, his usually soft voice tense with fear.

They were only a little mollified when I reported in my next letter home that Gustav's folks had been underground anti-Nazis. "And, would you believe it? Yesterday I turned on the radio and they were playing Israeli folk songs. Times have changed."

Later, at the lowest point of our marital problems when the whole thing could have seemed like a huge mistake, I wondered about that Jewish/German angle. I thought I had fallen in love with Gustav as a representative of the rich pre-Third Reich culture of Germany. Then I was grateful at the new world of European depth he opened for me.

On our second date he proclaimed, "Now I am going to teach you the three B's."

"What?"

"Bach, Beethoven, Brahms."

Every evening I went to his tiny apartment where he would play me selections from the music of these composers. After the first week, disgusted to see an open book on my lap and me taking notes while the music played in the background, Gustav grabbed the books and forced me to sit still and listen with all my attention. "Let the beauty of this music overwhelm you, instead of settling for only tiny dots of its joy!" he would repeat in his amusing English. I agreed to one half-hour of total attention to the music and had to agree that he was right. What was the point of writing papers about culture if I wasn't willing to immerse myself in it thoroughly?

After a few years living together as man and wife in the Bronx, the shadow side of my husband's ancestry began to surface. The back injury he sustained when Johannes was eight and Natasha a toddler left him a semi-invalid. From his couch of pain came a crude male humor common to men of his peasant ancestry, with the equivalent of four letter words in German interspersed with blasphemous phrases. At first I laughed at these expletives, but after awhile it began to get to me.

Johannes would ask. "*Mutti*, what does *Pappi* mean by those words?"

"Pay no attention, dear," I would reply.

I begged Gustav not to translate them for the boy who was self-conscious about even mentioning the need to go to the bathroom no less have such functions described in vulgar terms.

After the renewal of our marriage and Gustav's conversion to a deeper spirituality as a daily Mass Catholic, the vulgarity gradually faded out. And I was willing to laugh when the bad words came out suddenly under stress if someone cut ahead of him too abruptly on the road.

When now Father Michael, then a counseling student at Northern Arizona University, used to talk psychology with us, the subject of motives for marriages of opposites once came up.

"Well, we certainly married opposites," I said.

After regaling the man with my list of our differences, Michael surprised me with a new perspective, "Ever think that a Jewish girl might carry the archetype of fear of Germans because of the Holocaust? From a psychological viewpoint, getting a tough German husband as a body-guard could be a shrewd move?"

I was glad when the flight attendant announced. "*Guten morgen*. Those on the left side of the airplane, if you open your blinds you can see in the dawn's early light the first sight of the coast of Belgium." Peering out the small airplane window, I could barely make out the land through the fog. I remembered descriptions in novels about how exciting it used to be for travelers from America on long ocean trips to see the shore of Europe looming on the horizon.

As wake-up refreshment came a tray with a magnificent German breakfast of fat German sausages giving off a spicy aroma; fluffy scrambled eggs, a Kaiser roll with a corona of real butter balls, piping

hot coffee with thick cream and a slice of Christmas log cake.

While enjoying this treat, in expectation of seeing my son for the first time since his visit to California for Gustav's funeral, I called up images of Johannes at different stages of his life. The hard skull of the baby boy emerging from my womb seen in the overhead mirror at the birthing; little two year old Johannes standing at attention in his first lederhosen given him by his grandmother on a visit to Bavaria; studious elementary school boy Johannes leaning at his desk in his bedroom doing homework – the only kid I'd ever seen who preferred an evening at a desk behind a closed door to lolling on a couch in the living room with one eye on the TV; Johannes, mortar board on his large head in a black robe at the podium giving the valedictorian address in the High School auditorium. It was a rigorously logical treatise proving the unconstitutionality of any form of abortion. Since the 80's, even in Catholic schools, there were already quite a number of parents and some teachers who thought exceptional cases justified the taking of the baby's life in the womb, it took courage for Johannes to choose such a topic. Since his speech coach turned out to be one of those dissenters from the Church's teaching, it was an uphill road to get the talk approved.

I thought of the sad resigned face of my son coming home from school with the news, "They won't let me give the speech, *Pappi*. They say I should

talk about how great it was to go to our High School instead.”

The next day Gustav marched into the Principal’s office without an appointment.

“Listen, Father Bardino. My parents risked their lives hiding enemies of Hitler under the haylofts on their farm during World War II. What are you risking by allowing my son to speak the plain truth about the new Holocaust in the free country of America? What’s the worst penalty? A little ridicule by liberal parents?”

On graduation day we were proud of our son’s courage, but I squirmed at the wooden delivery. Five minutes into the speech, hoping to catch his attention from my front row seat, I mouthed, “Make eye contact with the audience!” He never looked up from his typed notes.

The last image before landing in Frankfurt was of Johannes the adult, 6 feet tall, looking so much like his father and grandfather, except for his brown hair. The beloved greenish eyes and stout build. Big tears came down my son’s cheeks at the funeral. On tiptoes kissing those tears, I realized they were the first I had seen since he was a 3-year-old getting booster immunization shots at the doctor’s.

Picturing our embrace on meeting at the Frankfurt airport, I wondered if I should ask him about Gretchen. Natasha who was better than I at worming stuff out of her brother, had talked to the woman on the phone. She was a German woman teaching English to students at the University of Heidelberg.

As soon as I stopped getting busy signals from Natasha's phone after her call to Germany, I asked: "So what did she sound like, Tasha?"

"He put her on the phone to introduce her," Natasha said, voice bubbly. "She sounded wonderful, *Mutti*. I think we'll like her. You know, that kind of rich European voice with a humorous lilt so many intellectual German women have."

"Did you hear wedding bells?"

"I don't know about that. When I asked if she would come to visit us in the summer she answered enigmatically, "I guess it depends on your brother's plans."

"Hmmm. Cagey."

But then when I called him on his birthday two months later, Johannes didn't mention Gretchen.

"Johannes, *meines kleines*, my little one," I cried out at the sight of my substantial oldest child now in his early thirties standing waving to me through the glass that separated customs from the main lobby at Frankfurt Airport. Walking to the car park I asked: "How are things with you, Johannes?"

"Perfectly fine, *Mutti*."

A half hour more of his uninformative replies to my questions made me wonder why I had come so many miles away from my delightful lay community. Why was it so hard to talk to him with any natural flow?

Johannes had arranged everything in the small apartment near the University for the maximum comfort of a guest. "Of course I will sleep on the sofa

bed in the living room and give you the bedroom. That will be *ganz richtig*, perfectly proper.”

I took a long nap under the feather comforter wanting to be wide awake for the evening’s festivities. The awkwardness of dealing with Johannes’ reticence was overshadowed by a charming pre-midnight Mass Christmas party at the home of Johannes’ friends from the University, a German couple with four children.

The Peterson’s wooden house, vintage 1900, was in the midst of a glen of pines. The door was opened by the eldest girl, a twelve-year-old with thick blond braids wearing a long dress with a lace apron. The younger boys wore lederhosen. As is the tradition still in Germany, the tree is never decorated until Christmas Eve itself. Instead of American style gaudy baubles and tinsel, the children were clamping pewter candleholders onto the tree.

After taking our coats, the hostess brought us to a table decked with pyramids of homemade tarts accompanied by eggnog and a variety of liqueurs. The host poured cherry brandy into a small rounded glass for me. We sat around the tree munching the pastries, sipping our drinks, and watching the children lighting the white candles. That ritual accomplished, it was time for the three older children to sing carols, while the youngest boy, about 4 years old, brought from the attic a wooden infant Jesus to the elaborate nativity village sitting on a table next to the tree. Josef Peterson explained, “We build the Bethlehem village each year with different rocks and

branches around the miniature houses and barn. It's a family tradition."

Looking at my son's face by the light of the candles I leaned over and whispered, "Don't you want such a family for yourself one day?" I saw tears in his eyes.

We bundled up, scarves covering our mouths, to walk through the snow some five streets to a small Baroque Church for Mass.

Even though I am a charismatic Catholic who loves Gospel music and a chance to clap and dance, I also love traditional services. The solemnity of the German High Mass moves me profoundly. Jammed into the pews listening to the choir singing Bach's Christmas cantata before the main service, I wondered how the American post-Vatican II church so willingly lost the past. Where did all the reverence and beauty go?

When I received Holy Communion, I offered mine for the soul of Gustav and prayed, "Jesus, Son of God, hidden in a tiny infant, surely you can also hide in a circle of white unleavened bread to be close to us still, so many years after you left the earth. *Nicht wahr?* Isn't that so? Please go to Gustav wherever he is on his journey, and bless my Johannes and Natasha and little Lucia....Who knows if my darling daughter, with her unsettled life-style, still receives communion? And for my father and mother who died with their lukewarm belief in the God of our people...but surely with all our witnessing, when they saw a vision of you as they shut their eyes in death they must have run into your arms."

Having had such a long afternoon nap, when we got back to the apartment, I found myself unable to sleep. Curled up under the cozy comforter, I lay reading the book I had brought along for the long airline trips. It was *Scandalous Risks*, a Susan Howatch novel. I loved these fictional accounts of pharisaic, lax, and mystical Anglican clergy. Grinning at a witty description of the muddle the middle-aged hero got into with a young woman he was mentoring, my mind drifted to our monastery priests. From our early acquaintance with Michael at Northern Arizona University, I knew he was a “prodigal son” And Brother Juniper had hinted to Gustav during a retreat that he was no angel either. I assumed that many of the monks of the Benedictine order had past lives they were less than proud of.

“Let us pray for all those with vows who are undergoing temptation,” was sometimes called out as a prayer intention at St. Gregory’s. Did it refer only to those outside our Catholic Eden? I remembered how surprised some of us were during our long retreat before the lay community officially began when Father Michael read us the rules for fraternity between the monks and the lay people. “You may go to confession to the priests and seek direction from priests or brothers, but no lay person is to ask about the problems a monk might have with his vows.” After a pause, he looked up from the carefully worded text, winked at me and added, “Prying is a form of asking!”

As a married woman this prohibition seemed excessive, but now as a single widow the taboo was more understandable. Would it really be good for me to know that Father X was dreaming of ditching his vows of celibacy because he wanted a woman? And thinking of the lines from Acts about bad wine-bibbing gossipy widows, I decided that even speculating about the troubles of different monks at St. Gregory's could hardly be God's will.

After indulging in another juicy chapter of the Howatch novel, I fell asleep praying for Father Michael, Brother Juniper, Ellen, the Finleys and the Bochenski's, ending with a decade of the sorrowful mysteries of the rosary for Robert - "Thy will be done."

The morning after Christmas, while enjoying a quiet breakfast of heavy pumpernickel bread and cheese, Johannes pulled out a map "Heidelberg and Environs." Historic churches had red circles around them.

"Trying to keep the old hag busy so you can get to your research," I joked.

Johannes blushed, but quickly covered his embarrassment by pulling out a page with careful directions by car to the places he thought I would most enjoy.

"Perhaps you'd like to provide a knapsack with cooked food as well, Johannes, so I don't have to come back for lunch?"

"*Geliebte Mutti*, you know I love to have you here. I was only thinking that you should not be bored."

I gave him a long hug. "I'm only teasing. I'm so proud of you and your work." He was preparing a book based on his Ph.D. thesis. It traced the influence of German eugenics on the philosophy of Margaret Sanger, founder of Planned Parenthood.

Just the same, pulling out of the parking lot of his apartment building, I realized how ridiculous it would be to try to live with Johannes some day should he never marry. He would never have time for me. Ellen must be right. It takes a long time for a widow to know where she belongs.

Off on my tour with Johannes' elaborate camera strung around my neck over the heavy *loden* coat, I squeezed into his small VW. Five miles out of the city I found the first church Johannes marked on the map. I hummed with joy as I photographed the colorful dome of the Baroque church in the quaint village. Inside the entrance I made out a brief history of the building carved into the marble in old-style German script. I hastily wrote the information down in my notebook with a number to match it to the slide I would later show to the lay community members and monks. My mind was busy with questions relating this church to things of their experience, "Now, Jack, as a carpenter by trade, what do you make of this 17th century design? Ellen, I know you favor English churchyards, but look at these gravestones with the Christmas wreathes and perfectly tended bushes of berries?"

I came back tired and happy with a roll of thirty-five exposures.

If the supernatural highlight of my visit was Christmas Eve, the worldly lowlight was New Year's Eve. It started at eight PM in the living room of Johannes' apartment.

"Now, Johannes, I'm not going to let you become an old foggy before the age of thirty-five. It's New Year's Eve. Why don't we go to the Inn down the street? It's all lit up. If we're lucky we can get a table by the window and watch the rushing waters of the Rhine while we have a few drinks."

"I thought you'd want to pray the Liturgy of the Hours together for tomorrow's great feast of the Mother of God."

"Tomorrow's Mass is time enough for special prayers." I always brought the Liturgy of the Hours with me on trips, to be in solidarity with the monks and lay people at St. Gregory's, but usually found it hard to pray the Psalms with attention in strange surroundings.

Reluctantly Johannes agreed, a break from his work might do him good. I dressed up in the same black flowered gauze dress I had worn for Robert; this time with a bright red sweater underneath in case the inn was not as warm as we Americans are used to.

From the entrance to the crowded restaurant we could hear the oompah, oompah, of the tuba playing a polka. Older couples in colorful traditional outfits were dancing as well as university boys in U.S. style grungies and girls in mini skirts, fluffy blouses or tank tops fringed by bangles, and high boots. Some of

the *madchens* had up to five earrings encasing their pretty pink lobes.

We couldn't get a table with a view of the Rhine, but soon we were enjoying a large stein of dark beer with a plate to share of sausage, assorted cheeses including smelly limburger, pumpernickel bread, and pears.

Alcohol of any kind smashes my scruples. After fifteen minutes I vetoed my previous decision to let Johannes keep whatever happened with Gretchen to himself. I clinked the heavy stein to his and yelled over the roar of the music and stomping, "*Gott sei dank, ich bin hier mit du.*" Then in Bronx English to lighten the question: "So, *stupnagel*, how did you manage to lose Miss Heidelberg?"

Evidently the beer loosened my son's tongue as well. He frowned but then coughed up a whole paragraph about his disappointment. "Maybe as a woman you can help me understand. Between one week and the next Gretchen changed from following me around the University at every opportunity - I mean, between our regular dinners together on Saturday night, she would turn up at the cafeteria, at the bookstore, my regular coffee house, beaming with effervescent prattle. Then suddenly she disappeared between Saturdays and then cancelled our dates two times in a row."

"So, what did she say when you asked her what happened?" I asked biting into another piece of dripping sausage.

"It puzzled me. She met me for coffee one afternoon and told me she wasn't interested in dating a married man any more."

"What? But, you're not married, Johannes!...unless there's something I don't know about?"

Johannes smiled sadly. "*Nein*. She said I was married to my work."

"But she'd known you for a year. She had to know how devoted you are to your teaching and your great book project. Or isn't she pro-life?" When he didn't answer, I shut my mouth tight. It felt like a *déjà vu* of my fight with Robert about the one issue abortion argument."

He shook his head.

"Sometimes when a woman is interested in a man she'll muster up a greater love than she really has for whatever his thing is. Maybe the theme of your book opened a wound. Besides bad family memories of the German Holocaust of the Jews, perhaps the theme of the abortion holocaust could open other memories for a sophisticated lady professor, *nicht wahr?*"

Before Johannes could answer, our conversation was interrupted by a voice calling from a few tables over: "Johannes! Johannes Kemperdick!"

Barreling toward us through the small spaces between the jammed tables and chairs came a heavy older man dressed in grey lederhosen. On his large head was a green felt hat with a jaunty feather in the brim.

"Who is that?" I asked.

Johannes turned his head; then waved. The man reached our table and quickly grabbed a chair from another table, probably belonging to someone dancing the polka. Johannes rose, "*Mutti*, allow me to present you to my academic mentor, Dr. Helmut Frank of the history department at the University. As you will see, since he studied American history several years at Harvard he speaks perfect English. Dr. Frank, this is Dr. Margo Kemperdick, my mother from California."

He bowed low as he covered my hand with both of his, "But I thought you must be an older woman?" The professor winked under a shaggy eyebrow.

"And are you supposed to be Heidi's old uncle?" I quipped.

Johannes left for the men's room. By the time he returned we were deep in conversation about the beauty of the German countryside.

When the band started the opening bars of "*Du, du, liegst mir in herzen*," suitable for slow dancing, Helmut caught my eye and asked, "Would this beautiful mother of my friend consent to dance with this old professor?"

By the second time around of the famous refrain, "*weiss du wie gut ihr der bin?*" (do you know how much I love you) I stopped thinking that his embrace was a little too close for a stranger.

When we returned laughing and breathless to the table Johannes stood up and started putting on the coat he had draped over the back of his chair.

“Excuse me dear *Mutti*. I have a tradition that every New Year’s Eve I go to the Cathedral to await the bells tolling midnight. I am sure Dr. Frank can escort you home.”

“How will I get in?”

“To avoid being awakened by drunken revelers the landlady leaves a pass key under the mat on New Year’s Eve.”

I felt torn. How could an ardent Catholic lay member of the St. Gregory community prefer chatting with a lusty gent at a noisy inn over praying with her son in a beautiful church? Just at that moment the waitress brought another platter of sausage and cheese with a fresh Stein of beer.

“But, we didn’t order more, did we, Johannes?”

Johannes told her it was a mistake. But Helmut gestured to the young woman to leave the things on the table.

“Come, *geliebte* Frau Kemperdick, surely we can enjoy more of this delicious food on such a happy occasion?”

I smiled uncertainly into the laughing face of my companion. When I looked up to ask what my son thought, he was gone.

Over the tasty dishes Helmut explained that he and his wife were separated. She had gone to Zurich to pursue Jungian studies three years ago, and didn’t seem to be thinking of coming back.

In spite of warnings going off in my head that this could lead to trouble, I couldn’t resist dancing a Strauss waltz with Helmut. The waltz is my all-time

favorite dance. I think that in heaven I will cajole Jesus to dancing it with me as a welcome gift.

At 11 PM Helmut paid the bill and we left the inn. We walked arm in arm quickly through the cold but noisy streets. So many people were rushing from one place to another on this festive night.

At the door of Johannes' apartment building Helmut smiled.

"Perhaps we could continue this fascinating conversation upstairs. I am sure Johannes wouldn't mind if we borrowed a little of his fine brandy to drink a toast to the New Year?"

I held out the bottom of my *loden* cape and curtsied. Then I reached out and shook his gloved hand.

"*Danke* for such a special evening Herr Professor Frank. Perhaps I shall see you on some future visit. Look out for my dear son, will you? *Auf wiedersehn.*"

With that I abruptly turned the ornate key in the lock. When I looked back at him through the glass window at the top of the door his face look puzzled and sad.

Under the goose feather comforter in Johannes' bed I congratulated myself on a close call. "My God, one second more and I could have been in bed with that fellow. What's the matter with me? Why didn't I leave with Johannes? I better be more careful about drinking. But how good it felt to have a little fun with a man!"

The beer had relaxed me to the extent that after just a few minutes of reading the Howatch novel my eyes closed. I was too drowsy for a last night prayer.

New Year's Day, 1997: the grandfather clock chimed 7 AM . Eyes still closed, I saw in my mind's eye what seemed at first to be a dream. Later, because of its distinct clarity I was sure it was what is called an interior vision. Above me I saw the figure of Jesus. The face was the long sorrowful image of El Greco, the same that was on my wall in the casita. But instead of robes, this Jesus was wearing a tuxedo. I was wearing a lacey long wedding gown, the same as at my wedding to Gustav. Jesus placed a ring made of braided hair on my finger. In the vision I was conscious that this was what is called "a spiritual marriage."

The vision continued. "Why are you wearing such a banal outfit as a tuxedo?" I asked Jesus.

Smiling, he seemed to answer, "So you would recognize what is happening."

I smiled back at him. "Does this mean you want me to join Sister Barbara's order?"

"Yes. It would focus you more on me."

I opened my eyes. Everything around me looked the same: the comforter, the clock, the crucifix on the wall. I sat upright against the wooden backboard of the bed, closed my eyes again, hoping the vision would continue. It didn't.

"Was that really you, my Jesus?" I asked in prayer. I went over each aspect of the vision and locution again to see if there was anything obviously fishy

about it. The only thing that seemed strange was the tuxedo. I shrugged. After all, I have often taught that Our Lord, when walking our earth, didn't mind a good joke. How he must have laughed telling a disciple to pull out a fish from the sea and find the money to pay the tax! Must we picture him dead solemn when he multiplied the loaves and fishes?

I grabbed my tote bag still lying on the bed next to me from the night before, and reached for the notebook. On a fresh page I put down the date, January 1. Then I wrote a description of the experience as well as a sketch of Jesus as my bridegroom. Finally, I got out my nail scissor, cut off a strand of my hair and fashioned it into a braided ring around the fourth finger of my right hand.

Johannes was surprised how quiet I was at breakfast. During the 10:30 Mass my mind raced with thoughts about being a nun. When I told Johannes about it at lunch, he was skeptical but not against it either.

After lunch I put through a transatlantic call and got Sister Barbara at the hermitage in Arizona. I could hear the click of her cigarette lighter. Could I visit her to talk about her community? Yes, there was a group of older women making a discernment retreat in March.

There was just time before leaving for the plane home the next day to stop by a fabric shop. There I bought a few yards of brown burlap material and a pattern to make a jumper. As well I grabbed up a

spool of brown thread and a needle figuring I could hand sew the thing on the plane.

I emerged from John Wayne airport in California looking like a thinner version of Sister Barbara.

Almost a Sister



WHAT IS IT EXACTLY, MARGO? YOU LOOK different...where did you dig up that weird outfit? A thrift shop in Heidelberg?" That was Ellen's reaction to my brown jumper and white blouse almost-nun garb.

As we waited for the luggage, I told my friend about my vision-locution and the decision to go on Sister Barbara's discernment retreat. Ellen was too clever a woman to question the mystical part. But the decision to dress like Sister Barbara even before becoming a sister she thought ridiculous. "Come off it, silly. You don't really think that wearing a drab jumper most often seen on teen-age home-schoolers is going to make you instantly holy."

When she saw tears coming into my eyes she let up, gave me a hug and apologized. "How about we stop by the grocery and get some wine and cheese and, of course, roses, and you can tell me all about it in detail when we get home."

We stashed the supplies in the back seat of Ellen's BMW. Once out of

the huge mall parking lot, Ellen surprised me with news of Robert, my first fling. "Guess what? That pseudo-swain of yours called the Monastery."

"Really?" I was horrified at the joyful lilt in my voice. "Did he ask for me?"

"No, actually, ducky. He wanted to ask Father Michael some information about an early Benedictine monk scholar, but since Father Michael wasn't around and I was taking messages, I took the opportunity to satisfy my curiosity."

"How dare you? So, tell me. What did you ask and what did he say?"

"I just simply said, 'You know Margo was rather shattered by those episodes with you. I could help her more if I had a clue how you saw it.' You'll never imagine what he said, nothing like we thought."

"Come out with it already, Ellen," I said, taking the rosary out of the pocket of my jumper for security.

"He said that you made him realize what he really wanted was peace, not excitement. Women, he pontificated, in that professorial voice of his, were too demanding. They always want a man to be something different than he can be."

"Right. How dare we actually want a man to improve such as to act loving instead of horrible...What a rat, pretending there was another woman just to get rid of me." I kept quiet through on the rest of the trip home.

As we drove up the fragrant pine lined road to St. Gregory's I said reflectively, "Of course it's a cliché to say that you can't marry someone on the basis that they'll change, but isn't part of any good friendship the gradual growth of each party? Do all my friends think I'm too demanding? Do you put up with me out of pity?"

"Don't be a goose, we all love you. What Jewish *yente* wouldn't be a bit pushy?"

Back in my casita I let Ellen lay out the wine and cheese while I fed a can of sardines to my leaping pussycats. When they gobbled up the tiny tidbits, I seized Max in my arms and stroked him hard. Then I put him down so he could frolic about with Mimi. "Make some cappuccino, too," I told Ellen, as I arranged the fresh red roses in the vase underneath Gustav's portrait and addressed him, "You always said I should be a nun if you died first so no other man could have me. I bet you're pleased I'm going to be a nun, after all."

I almost imagined that the head in the portrait nodded slightly.

As could be expected, Father Michael and Brother Juniper thought going on a discernment retreat at Sister Barbara's hermitage was a great idea. The lay members of the community, however, all hated the plan. By dinner, the rumor had made the rounds of the whole group.

"She says her sisters can live wherever they are needed, but as soon as she sees how well-organized

and brilliant you are, you can bet that scheming foundress will decide she needs you in Arizona to run the whole damn thing," was Howard Finley's prophetic remark.

"Margo dear, I hope you think this over very prayerfully. You're so charismatic. Sister Barbara's more of a quiet type. She might try to quench your spirit," warned Maryanne.

"I thought we were a team here at the lay community. I hope we can veto any plan for you that doesn't fit in with your being our head woman." Jack piped in.

"Heh," I joked. "What is this, an intervention? Maybe you'll get Graciella and Jaime into it as well. All I'm doing is looking into this higher vocation. There's no commitment in going on a retreat."

"So why did you rush and sew yourself that jumper if you're just discerning?" Sandy Finley asked.

"I don't know exactly. It's like I suddenly wanted to look like Sister Barbara instead of like old Margo. Like 'clothes make the man/woman' maybe?"

In the time between my return from Germany and the discernment retreat in March, my interior life took a big jump forward. After Gustav's death I felt as if I was praying through a fog. I called it the grey night of the soul. Now it seemed that whenever I went into the chapel alone, Jesus was waiting to fill my heart with his love. I felt physical warmth fill my breast as aspirations gushed up in the silence and aloud when I was alone there: "Oh, my Jesus, I love your Holy

Face. Take me! I surrender my whole life to you. I am your bride at last."

Sitting with Brother Juniper in the lounge in front of the fireplace the night before leaving for the retreat, I confided "It's as if when the El Greco's Christ took me for his own I walked with him into a deeper mansion of my soul - a place of beauty and purity."

"Different from being an ardent lay woman, I bet," the monk smiled.

"Yeah, I sighed. I always thought that being a nun was just a bit more intense than being a devout laywoman. It's actually as different as going from single to married. Sister Barbara told me on the phone that if I should decide to try out the new life she would give me the documents of the Sisters of Mary to study for a year. After that I could become a novice, wearing the veil for two years and then a fully professed sister."

The whole community, lay and monks, surrounded me in the cafeteria as I kneeled for Father Michael's blessing before my trip to Arizona for the come and see sisters' retreat.

The eight-hour trip with rest stops from California to Southern Arizona went fairly quickly. I played CD's of my favorite sacred music, matching them with the mysteries of the rosary: Bach's Magnificat while I prayed the joyful mysteries, Allegri's Miserere for the sorrowful mysteries, Poulenc's Gloria for reflection on the Resurrection, Ascension, Descent of the Holy Spirit, Assumption, and Crowning of Mary, Queen of Heaven. It felt like a honeymoon for my

soul, free on the long drive from the cares of St. Gregory's community and nagging worries about Natasha and Johannes.

Father Michael had given me a three-inch Benedictine crucifix to wear. From time to time I lifted it to my lips to kiss the body of my Jesus.

Enjoying a bagel and cream cheese I picked at a deli along the way, I began to wonder what the other women considering Sister Barbara's order might be like. Would any be as clever and amusing as my English friend, Ellen, or as warm and cozy as Maryanne, or as refined and holy as Sandy?

On the return trip back to California I would keep asking my Lord "Why? Why? Why didn't you warn me how awful that retreat would be?"

It started off well enough. After the long drive to Arizona it felt so good to see from the freeway the geodesic dome hermitages high on the hill. Welcoming me in the parking lot of the hermitage was round Sister Barbara. Before embracing me she remarked on my clothing. "Well, well, what a sign. I thought it would be quite a wrench to shed your colorful old hippie skirts for our dull jumper and the large crucifix."

Since the tote was big enough to hold all I thought would need that was all I needed to carry into the hut like building with my name on a sticker on the door. People making hermitage retreats, of course, got a room to themselves, but for this large discernment meeting we were doubled up. I carefully made sure to

leave room for the toiletries of whoever would be my cellmate.

I love meeting new people, so it was no strain to help Sister Barbara greet the women as they pulled up in their cars or alighted from the hermitage van one local woman had used to pick up the ones who had arrived at Tucson airport from far away.

Soon there was a merry conversation going in Sister Barbara's dome house, smelling of stale tobacco from the ashtrays with old butts in them, where we assembled for assorted snacks and a first talk by the foundress. We certainly were a diverse bunch sitting in a circle in cheap plastic chairs.

The first woman to speak was a sporty looking gal with a short mannish haircut. She was wearing a grey sweatshirt and blue jeans. Her voice was soft, her blue eyes a bit dreamy. "My name is Clare Duquesne from Alberta, Canada. I was widowed ten years ago. I have six grown children. I'm a nurse."

"I'm Paula Sebasti, from New Jersey," said a loud woman with long frizzy blond hair, who looked about forty. She was wearing a passionate pink muumuu. "Seven years divorced, five years annulled. No children. I am a drama director at a High School...never thought of being a nun until I saw the article about older vocations in Our Sunday Visitor. Sister Barbara's description of this one stood out, I guess because I love Mary and Eucharistic adoration so much." I smiled, liking her for talking more about herself, better than Clare's self-contained non-revealing way of describing herself.

When it was my turn I said, "And I'm Margo Kemperdick, widowed just one year, a professor of Catholic Culture. I run a lay community at a Benedictine monastery in California and have two grown children and one granddaughter." The others looked impressed.

"Whatever your history you all can fit into an emerging community called Sisters of Mary if you are called. The name comes from the tradition that when St. John took responsibility for the mother of Jesus, a widow, of course. They went to Ephesus and a group of widows and single women surrounded them," Sister Barbara explained. She smiled wearily at us like a mother cat inspecting newborn kittens. She was the first out the door, package of cigarettes in hand.

Since many of us had come from afar, we went to bed at 9:30 PM after praying the joyful mysteries of the rosary together.

The first problem came the next morning when I walked over to the larger dome house used for dining. I was looking for coffee and a donut before prayer scheduled for 8 AM. The carved wooden door of the cafeteria was open. On a long table I found a hot water canister, herbal tea bags, a jar of decaf Folgers and a bowl of Sweet and Lo packets. There were also saltine crackers, four to a cellophane wrapper. The door to the kitchen had a padlock on it with code numbers. There was no sign of a pantry.

I gazed dismally at this array and tried to recall when Sister Barbara had said breakfast would be. Oh for our dining room at St. Gregory's where one could

always find, at my insistence, a variety of snacks including rolls, bread for toast, mounds of cream cheese and jelly as well as every variety of caffeine and decaf coffee and tea packets, even apple cider for guests who stayed away from stimulants.

To my relief, Sister Barbara poked her head in the door, the usual cigarette in hand.

“Just looking to see who was up so early.”

I ran toward her to give her a hug. “Dear Sister Barbara. I’m so glad you’re here. I just have to have my caffeine fix before prayer and something substantial to eat. There’s nothing here but decaf and saltines. Could you open up the kitchen?”

To my surprise there was no sign of apology on the usually so kindly face of the foundress. In a stiff voice she replied, “I’m afraid you’ll have to wait, Margo. We’ll have breakfast after the first conference.”

“But, I can’t. I’ll fall asleep on you,” I implored.

“Now, now, don’t exaggerate,” she said, arranging a cup of decaf herbal tea for herself. “You know, I watched that caffeine habit of yours at St. Gregory’s. Have you considered that all that nervous energy you deal with might come from the excess coffee you drink all day?”

I turned my back so she wouldn’t be able to see my anger. Then, after I heard the door to the dining house close, I meekly opened a package of strawberry tea, released the bag into a Styrofoam cup and added lukewarm water from the canister.

“Damn!” I muttered to myself. “Who the hell does she think she is? Obviously, if Sister Barbara’s not addicted to caffeine, she’s hooked on nicotine!”

Sipping the miserable tepid pinkish tea and munching on stale saltine crackers, I looked out the window. A pair of retreatants were walking on the path. I was happy to recognize Paula, my cellmate, the drama teacher I had liked the evening before. The thin woman walking next to Paula in a plain white dress I couldn’t identify.

“Already forgetting their names...bad sign,” I muttered slapping my hand. As a professor I made it my business always to remember the names of my students. I thought it almost a crime when teachers acted as if the individual persons present were less important than supposedly life-changing ideas of the profs.

Waiting to see if the women would come into the dining room, I asked myself: “So what does it mean, then, *stupnagel*, that you didn’t remember the names of these women who are possible sisters of yours in this new community?”

There was a loud knock at the door.

“It’s open,” I yelled.

“Praise the Lord, it’s you...” Paula shouted back merrily when she saw me by the sparsely arranged table. “Sorry, here I am, your cell-mate, and I can’t even remember your name.”

“Margo Kemperdick...the one with the lay community in California,” I answered, feeling better that the younger woman’s memory had also failed.

"Thank God this is open. I'm dying for my morning wake-up coffee," the thin widow said.

"Hmmmmm. Was your name Ann?"

"Jane."

"Well, Jane, unless you're a decaf person, you're out of luck," I replied with a knowing smirk.

"I suppose we should expect some penances," Paula smiled sweetly as she reached for the jar of decaf.

I felt deflated and out-classed as I crushed my paper cup into a ball and tossed it into the trash. "*Ciao*. See you in chapel."

The inside of the church at 7:30 AM was gloomy and bare. There were no pictures on the rounded walls, only an ugly modern Spanish style bleeding ten-foot crucifix above the wooden altar. The seats were white Wal-Mart type plastic benches arranged in a semi-circle, enough to seat no more than the maximum of twelve hermitage guests.

Though March can sometimes be warm in Southern Arizona, this morning it was chilly. I looked around. No vents or radiators in sight. Kneeling on the cold concrete floor I prayed, "Sweet Jesus, help me. You know I love you. Do you really want me to be this austere? Our St. Gregory's is so simple, but beautiful and even though the kneelers are hard wood, the chapel is nicely warmed."

If the Lord heard my plaint, he wasn't giving me his opinion. I kept myself busy until communal Morning Prayer closing my eyes and saying the Jesus

prayer over and over again, "Lord Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me, a poor sinner."

By 8 AM all of the retreatants had assembled themselves on benches arranged in fours across from each other with the altar as the top of the square. Sister Barbara gave each one of us a book of the Liturgy of the Hours. Some of the women were not familiar with this way of praying, so easy for me as a Benedictine oblate. The prayers divided into morning, daytime, evening and night involve reading aloud or singing psalms with voices alternating from one side of the chapel to the other. I suggested that those of us who knew how to do it have women on either side who could learn by following.

It felt good to be praying together the liturgy of the hours as at St. Gregory's. Of course it is hard to do at first. Half way through Morning Prayer, my new friend Paula rolled her eyes and gave up. When we had closed our books and set them under our benches, Sister Barbara pushed her chair to the center in front of the altar. "Now I will give you a talk about the canonical steps in the founding of a community," she began in her soft but firm voice.

I took careful notes of what she said with a view to running it by Father Michael on my return. I might have seemed peaceful to the others, but inside I was churning with questions and doubts.

"Did Sister Barbara hide that austere side before? Hmmmm. Suppose Jesus wants me to prove how much I want this new life as his bride by making the

sacrifice of caffeine for a few days. I could ask him, as a special grace, to keep me awake and lively.”

That holy thought lasted only a few minutes before it was replaced by visions of quickly driving to the nearest convenience store for caffeine coffee and real tea and maybe even some buns. Once picturing the store, it was easy enough to imagine myself driving right from the mall onto the freeway back to California.

I gave myself a little hit on the hand. “Could you imagine a saint actually running away from a retreat?” Suddenly I remembered how St. John Vianney used to fantasize about running away from his demanding parish to a quiet hermitage. Not exactly the same idea, but still...

“So you see,” Sister Barbara was winding up her talk, “it could be a long haul, but we should never get discouraged. It’s such a new idea to have a community where women can live near their families if they need to. During the years of waiting for final approval, we are moving ahead toward holiness.” She gathered her notes and threw them into a bulging worn leather briefcase.

We waited calmly for instructions. She might have given us an agenda so we would know what we were going to do each day, I thought waspishly.

“Now dear sisters, I can call you sisters even though you’re not professed, because I mean sisters in the general biblical sense – time for a real breakfast! Our dear sister Margo would be a good one to prepare it, wouldn’t you?” she laughed.

“So where’s the key to the kitchen?” I asked, an edge of irritation in my voice.

“It’s a padlock with a code, dear: 8-3-6-2.”

I quickly reached into my tote for the notepad. “Would you mind repeating those numbers?” I asked scowling. Does she think I have a mind so empty I just memorize numbers as they roll off someone’s tongue? I wondered.

After the closing Hail Mary, I rushed over to the dining hut hoping to put together a great breakfast for all the other women. Scrambled eggs, toast, maybe even pancakes? Since it appeared that most of the women had gone right from their cells to Morning Prayer, they would be even hungrier than I.

Fumbling a few times trying to get the combination right by swirling the dial this way and that on the lock, I finally managed to get in to the kitchen. It turned out to be a narrow area with a counter. The “doors” that separated the counter from the dining room could be opened for serving. The stove had two burners. I found a large pot and heavy old-fashioned skillet in the well under the sink. However, the cupboards contained nothing more inviting than large boxes of corn flakes and cheerios and giant cans of mixed fruit. On the top shelf were paper plates, small bowls, and plastic cutlery. The medium size fridge had nothing but loaves of white bread, peanut butter and cellophane packed luncheon meats plus some white American cheese of the type given out free to people on welfare. There was a gallon of milk.

I poked my nose in the opening of the container. At least the milk smelled fresh.

It took little time to assemble the cereals, milk, and aluminum bowls of canned fruit on the tables. The potential future sisters were so busy chatting with each other they hardly noticed the arrival of the eats.

One of the most mousy women of the group, a seventy year old grandmother of twenty with thin hair done up in a tight bun, walked up to part of the table with the decaf selections of coffee and tea sitting on it. Instead of helping herself to one of these offerings, she reached into her large fake leather purse and whipped out a jar of caffeine-filled

Taster's Choice. "I take it with me everywhere," she commented to no one in particular.

"Alleluia, praise the Lord," I yelled out. "Mind if I have a cup?" I asked with a side-glance at Sister Barbara. I was pleased that instead of intervening with some admonition that I was not to have caffeine mother-foundress smiled at me. I read into the twinkle in her eyes, "You won this time, Margo, but I'll get you next time. Cheater." On the long trip back to California, remembering these incidents I decided I must be getting paranoid.

The first cup of real coffee changed my mood from disgruntled to hopeful and even, to my surprise, happy.

An old priest from the nearest parish came and said Mass for us at noon. When I watched the now more familiar women receiving Holy Communion, I felt bonded to them for the first time. Back at the

bench I prayed: "Oh my Jesus, if this community is really inspired by Mother Mary, please give us the grace to love each other. Help me not to succumb to feels of alienation because of the new place...and maybe, especially hating having another woman in charge. You know that I prefer the male Benedictine heads at St. Gregory, and me as leading lady of the lay community, but that's all so trivial compared to the chance to be your bride."

After lunch in the still cold chapel on the hard benches, we listened to Sister Barbara lay out the elements of the unusual rule she had concocted for the emerging community. I had no trouble understanding the idea of women living just for Christ and the Church, exercising such needed apostolates as caring for sick relatives, teaching, and promoting Eucharistic adoration in the parishes. I worried more about the communal part.

Clare, the sporty more reserved woman of the bunch wearing a plain white T-shirt and blue jeans, at this point raised a thin graceful hand. "Excuse me, I have a question. It says in the Vatican document On Consecrated Life that for a religious group the community is even more important than the works. How do women of our age who are so close to our families really get close enough to each other to be a real community?"

"As many as possible will be live in convents at parishes, Clare."

Of course that started me thinking about my friends in the lay community. I thought that if I joined

I would retain my post with them. If asked to go somewhere else, could I just refuse?

Attention was soon deflected from these more general topics to the issue of habits. Janet McNally, a widow from Boston wanted to know: "How was it decided to wear calf length jumpers? Why not long ones? Most of the new men's orders wear long habits."

Sister Barbara replied: "The brown jumper and white t-shirt is working out just fine." I didn't like how quickly she exerted her authority with so little discussion.

By 9:30 PM in my room that second night I was thinking that the whole thing would never work for me. As if intuiting my uncertainty, Sister Barbara knocked at my door. She sat down at the bottom of my cot to ask how I was doing. Whispering, so as not to wake Paula, I confessed: "I don't know. I feel confused. I think I need to give this nun idea a lot more thought."

"What about what Jesus told you in Heidelberg? Maybe my ways are annoying you, but that's a minor matter. You didn't want to become a nun because of me, did you?" In the dim light from the small path lamps that shown through the windows I could see that her eyes were focused not on me but on the simple wooden crucifix above the bed, as if imploring Jesus to make up for whatever faults of hers had caused me doubt.

With a rush of sympathy, I got up and gave her a hug. "These retreats must be pretty hard to run, Sister Barbara. How are the others doing?"

Before Sister Barbara could answer there was a knock on the door. It was Clare. "We heard the sound of the phone in your hut ringing off the hook, Sister Barbara. I took the liberty of answering it. It's a priest. He said that he knows you stay up late praying, and could I get you in the chapel."

I stayed awake waiting for Sister Barbara to come back. I was sure it was my friend Father Gormley from Pebble Creek. When Sister Barbara came back, I could make out on her face the wide smile I had liked so much in the past. "Great news!" she whispered.

"Father Gormley wants to start twenty four hour adoration in his parish right away."

Picking up her enthusiasm, I guessed, "And he wants Sisters of Mary to live there and run the program?"

"That's not all. When I told him you were making the discernment retreat, he said he wished that you and two other candidates could spend your first year setting up adoration at his parish!"

Not pushing her luck further, Sister Barbara kissed me on the forehead and walked out the door.

"So, what do you think, Father Michael?" The morning after getting back to St. Gregory's after my discernment retreat with the Sisters of Mary I demanded a long appointment.

The monk leaned back in his chair, laced his fingers and closed his beautiful grey eyes. Looking at his long

thick beard, I thought of how much I would miss my mentor in the unlikely chance that he thought I should leave his community and venture forth as an aspiring sister. "Come Holy Spirit. Let it be the will of God and not mine that is done," I prayed silently.

Finally, the priest opened his large clear eyes and smiled mischievously: "I think you should try the Sister Act."

"What? But why?"

"Don't take this wrong, dear friend. We've always been frank with each other. I'd rather see you try to be a sister at St. Martin de Tours in Pebble Creek, than have a restless lay leader here flinging herself at the male guests!"

I blushed. "Hmmmmmm. Even if what you're saying is a bit insulting, I guess I see what you mean. But that's not reason enough to go if I don't have a vocation, is it?"

"We don't know about that yet. Maybe you're called to be nun and maybe not. In any case you could need time to come deeper into that possibility. Suppose I give you a leave for a year."

"What about our lay community? Aren't I indispensable?"

Father Michael leaned forward. "You know I think you're fantastic, Margo. But it's important to give you a chance to explore this opportunity. Ellen can run all the practical lay community matters - visits of come-sees, schedules, meals, vacations...and I can give the talks. After all, I was the student of Dr. Kemperdick

the man and Dr. Kemperdick the woman, lo those many years ago.”

At lunch the same friends who had predicted I would leave did their best to dissuade me.

“Of course Father Gormley’s a dear and we know how you love him, but, Margo, do you really think you can get on with two other sisters in that convent? You already told us at breakfast how claustrophobic it made you feel to be with them at the retreat. And that was just a week,” Sandy Finley challenged me.

“I give you a month before Sister Margo becomes barracuda Margo,” Ellen said cynically.

The only one to give me a chance was Jack Bochenski. “Gee, guys. You’re leaving out the mission she’d be doing there. Suppose Jesus wants all those people in that parish to come and give their hearts to him in Eucharistic Adoration. With her infectious enthusiasm, she might be just the one to pull off getting those sleepy Catholics to fill up twenty-four hours of prayer.”

It took me a week to decide that I did want to try it in spite of the negative feelings at the retreat. A symbol of the way I thought Jesus was drawing me to himself as a consecrated person was my reaction to my clothing. When I opened the wall-to-wall closet in my casita, the colorful broom skirts and tight leotard tops looked tawdry. The austere white t-shirts and plain brown jumpers somehow seemed just right. The sight of my long face in the mirror without make-up and with my curly hair in a bun made me feel not drab but good. It reminded me of Amish women –

wholesome instead of flamboyant. It was without regret that I shoved all my clothes into boxes and brought them and my personal pictures to Ellen's house to stash in one of her closets. My casita I rented to a couple who wanted to try six months with the lay community before making a commitment.

I calculated that the trip through southern California to Tucson, Arizona to St. Martin de Tours in Pebble Creek would take around eight hours with rest stops. It turned out to be exhausting. Max and Mimi, leaped about in the back seat instead of sleeping as I expected, sometimes jumping into the front. "Need some stroking therapy?" I asked them as I petted their orange and white striped furry bodies.

An hour into the chorale tapes and the fifteen-decade rosary, I felt so agitated, I turned off the music and slipped the beads into my tote bag. Most of my memories of Father Gormley and the parish were good. To encourage myself about my new move, I began my inventory of past times with thoughts of Father Gormley, one of my oldest friends.

Our relationship started through the Porteros, Dave and Jeanine, parishioners at Pebble Creek who ran a Catholic tape ministry. David recorded a series of lectures Gustav and I gave at Northern Arizona University on Medieval Sacred Drama. He liked us so much he brought his wife Jeanine for one of the lectures. The Portero daughter, Felicity, eventually became one of my best students. Between semesters, on the way to St. Gregory's in California, we made it a habit to stop at the Portero's large family house.

Sunday AM Mass would always be at St. Martin de Tours, pastored by Father Gormley, a stocky pipe-smoking priest with a knack for unusual sermons. We decided he was a sort of American form of G.K. Chesterton mostly because of his girth and humor.

That year when Gustav wanted to try out being a monk at St. Gregory's with the idea of persuading me to become a nun, I spent the summer in a deserted convent at Martin de Tours, thinking the proximity of Father Gormley and the Porteros would help me get through the crisis. Happily after three months, when I heartily resisted Gustav's plan for our separate lives, Father Michael came up with the idea of both of us heading up a lay community instead.

So, now, five years later, here I was with Gustav dead and me driving east toward the parish to try to be a nun in the very convent that had been my previous refuge from becoming a nun. God's ways are not our ways.

Still feeling uneasy, in spite of calling up a string of pleasant memories of that long ago summer, I was finally able to let the real causes of anxiety surface: the two other aspiring sisters I would be living with. Clare Duquesne, the Canadian widow nurse, was more quiet than I like, but still she seemed to be what my mother used to call a good egg. At the retreat I noticed that Clare was the first to volunteer for little chores such as hauling out the garbage, or unmaking the beds and washing the linens after the others left. Just the same, the thought of Clare made me nervous.

Would Father Gormley compare jumpy, confrontative me unfavorably to this paragon of virtue?

Mary Greeley was another story. Divorced at forty five and then unexpectedly widowed two years after the break, now at fifty-five she still seemed bitter. When I asked her over lunch the last day "What was your former husband like?" she replied, "I'd prefer not to talk about him at all, if you don't mind." Mary wore her thin fading blond hair in a pony-tail. Her eyes darted about giving a wary appearance. I managed to drag out of her that she was a substitute teacher from Iowa, tired of her job, interested in doing something different.

Before that last meal ended, Sister Barbara plopped herself down at the table where Clare, Mary, and I were getting better acquainted with a view to the future together.

"Of course, I'm only an hour north of the parish. I'll be sure to visit you often to work on any problems you might be having," our mother superior offered.

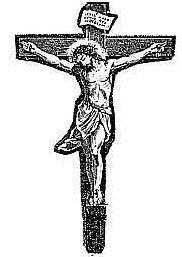
I forced myself to smile in spite of thinking, "You'll probably be the worst problem with your anti-caffeine cold breakfast policies."

Now, enroute to the parish assignment further north, I saw the exit sign for Sister Barbara's hermitage. I had an impulse to take a detour and visit my foundress, but when I remembered that there was no real coffee at her place, I stopped instead at an exit advertising MacDonald's and Burger King. I wolfed down the King's quarter-pounder with a large Styrofoam cup of coffee, not forgetting a bowl of milk

for Max and Mimi. The quick nutrition changed by mood from anxious to excited.

By the time I pulled into the driveway of St. Martin de Tours parish, I was telling myself, "It's going to be a great new adventure in grace."

A Very Short Nun's Story



A

HIGHLIGHTED MAP OF THE CONTINENT WOULD have shown us converging in Arizona from three directions: Alberta, Canada; Des Moines, Iowa; and Laguna Beach, California. Clare Duquesne, from Canada, arrived a day before I did. Both of us had a week together to adjust before the coming of Mary Greeley from Iowa. To my relief, Sister Barbara appointed Clare as spiritual leader of the convent. I thought it would be much easier for me to obey this serene woman than for her to deal with my temperamental ways as her leader. Besides, I wanted to throw myself into organizing the Eucharistic Adoration apostolate at the parish. Mary would handle our meager treasury and manage any other practical household affairs that might come up.

Each of us had a room to ourselves on the first floor of the convent. This simple stucco building had once housed eight Franciscan sisters. Ten years ago, due to post-Vatican II fall out, the few nuns still at

Martin de Tours left to join another small group of their community in New Mexico.

Our cells had single beds as well as plain wooden bureaus and a simple desk with four small drawers. On the wall the only decoration was a cheap 2-foot bronze crucifix. I was pleased to see how hanging up the El Greco painting of Christ, Gustav's portrait, and the Mexican folk art panels livened up the room. And, of course, the colorful pair of Max and Mimi added plenty of action to the small enclosure.

On arrival, the marmalade cats followed me from the front door of their new home to my room and then made a beeline to the space beneath my bed. When I saw Clare later in the kitchen, she smiled sweetly, "I see you brought your tiny tigers! That's wonderful."

I had no trouble accepting my new spiritual director's schedule that I found tacked on a bulletin board.

Breakfast on your own

6:30 AM - Morning Prayer together in the convent

7:30 AM - Parish Mass followed by rosary with parishioners

Noon - Daytime prayer and lunch

5 PM - Evening prayer before dinner

9 PM - Adoration in the Church, followed by night prayer in the convent.

My first moment of homesickness came when we began our common prayer. Clare and I sat on the sofas in the family room that extended from the kitchen area. The sound of two women chanting the

liturgy of the hours sounded thin and insignificant compared to the resounding male voices of the Benedictines.

A week after my arrival, Mary showed up just before dinner exhausted from the three-day drive from Iowa. There was the woman I remembered from the retreat but wearing instead of the blue denim wrap skirt and white knit sweater our community's brown burlap jumper and simple white T-shirt. Her dull blondish hair was escaping from a loose ponytail. In spite of the fatigue of driving, her pale blue eyes focused sharply on the new place. Finding Max and Mimi curled up on the couch in the family room, she exclaimed: "Oh! I told Sister Barbara that I'm allergic to cats. I suppose these belong to the pastor. While I find my room, Margo, would you please get rid of them?"

I gulped. Was there anything in that fat rule of life for Sisters of Mary to cover pets? Not that I remembered. Perhaps something about a majority vote on all conflicts? Would Clare back me up? Not wanting to alienate Mary on her first night with an argument, I decided to compromise.

The sleeping cats had a quick awakening when I scooped them up and tossed them out the screen door. "Now, Max and Mimi, be good! Stay away till after night prayer. I promise I'll find you and bring you back to my bed." As if they understood, the felines slowly made their way from our kitchen door over to the Rectory, a place of known snacks offered to them with ceremonious humor by Father Gormley.

It was his droll habit to bless each one with a hand on his or her furry head, and then make them take tidbits one by one from his extended palm. Any show of greedy desire for large mouthfuls he admonished with a light tap on the cheek such as the one given by the bishop or priest at confirmation.

With our help, Mary dumped most of her stuff into her room. She then sat down for a glass of the iced tea Clare prepared. The new girl on the block sipped her drink and then stretched out her long legs and asked: "How old are those mattresses? Did you smell them?" She studied our faces as she ran her fingers through her hair attempting to tuck strands back into the rubber band.

"It may sound silly, Mary, but in the excitement of moving in, I don't think I paid any attention to the beds," I replied mildly. "I'll go take a sniff."

On the way from the family room to the hall with the bedrooms I heard Clare's mollifying voice, "We could always look into a new mattress for you tomorrow, if you like."

Clare's income allowed for more discretionary spending than my professor's pension. I wondered whether the cost of the bed would be divided equally among the three of us or be a gift from Clare since it was her suggestion. I had savings in the bank, but I wanted them for trips to see Natasha and Johannes or as mad money in case the nun thing crashed. Where had I stashed that Way of Life for Sisters of Mary?

As I bent over the three mattresses to see if they had a bad odor, I thought about the basic

arrangement. The parish agreed to supply the convent for us to live in, but each of us was to chip in for food and miscellaneous. Perhaps the mattress could come under the general expenses fund Sister Barbara kept. This came from what each of the forty sisters in the worldwide community gave each month to the motherhouse. For me, all that meant was writing the name Sisters of Mary on the check for a fourth of my income, \$500. I previously sent that amount each month to the Franciscan friars ministering in the slums in the South Bronx.

Even Clare, with her scrupulously clean nurse's training, denied that there was the slighted smell of mildew on the mattress. Nonetheless, the first night of her stay, Mary folded her long body onto the family room couch rather than sleep on the bed in her own room.

At 11 PM, when the regularity of her snoring convinced me that the woman was sound asleep, I crept out the front door to look for Max and Mimi. I wandered around the parish grounds with a flashlight shining on the ground cooing "Here kitty, kitty, kitties." Finally I found them curled up under a bush in front of the last outdoor Station of the Cross: the Crucifixion. One under each arm I softly sang them their favorite song, *The Cheese Stands Alone*.

We passed through the common room safely with just the flashlight beam. "Oh, God," I prayed, "please don't let Mary wake up sneezing." After arranging Max and Mimi in my bed on either side of the pillow,

I set my alarm clock to 5:30 AM to be sure to get them out the door far in advance of Morning Prayer.

Success on that score. No sign that morning that Mary had been bothered by the cats. But there was a new conflict at Morning Prayer. After we had intoned the first psalm of the day, Mary interrupted the flow before the second antiphon slamming her prayer book shut. "Wait a minute. What is this, communion with God or an Amtrak ride?"

Clare and I, cozily ensconced among the cushions of opposite sides of the couch, looked up simultaneously at the glaring blue eyes of the woman sitting on the straight-backed wooden kitchen chair.

"Hmmm. Gosh, Mary, you could be right," I responded cautiously. "Maybe you should take the lead."

"No. You're the PhD, Margo," she came back in a peevish tone of voice. "Sister Barbara gave me the book to study but I can't figure it out...For sure, though, I know that muttering words a mile a minute isn't what I call praying at all."

Clare smiled. "Mary, dear, it takes a long time to get this. I'll do it slowly, since I'm the spiritual director of the convent. Anyhow, it's part of my role to teach you."

During Mass that morning I was distracted. I wondered if so critical Mary sitting next to me in our front row pew thin arms crossed over her chest would ever become a friend. What could I do this day to build a bridge?

Sitting around the dining table after rosary planning our day, Clare said she had an appointment from 9-10 with Father Gormley to work on how to apply our community documents to our new situation at St. Martin de Tours. After that she said she could go with Mary to Sears to get a new mattress. Mary said she would use the interval to hang her pictures up in her room.

"Can I help you?" I volunteered. "I love to decorate."

"When my husband left and then the kids went off on their own, I find I need time to be alone, Margo. I hope you can accept that."

In spite of the polite phrasing of her reply, I sensed hostility. Shrugging off the apparent rejection, I busied myself assembling the ingredients for a Greek salad for lunch. The smell of the feta cheese mingling with the purple onions cheered me up. I thought how refreshing this would be with iced tea when the other two got back.

An hour and a half later, from behind the screen door, I watched the other two make their way to Clare's station wagon for their trip to the mall. "Uh, oh!" On the roof of the large tan car were the familiar yellow striped furry bodies of Max and Mimi.

Within seconds, Mary reached up and whipped my darlings off the wagon. They looked startled as they scrambled to Father Gormley's porch. I restrained my urge to rush out and defend them, especially since I hadn't yet told Mary that they were

mine. Instead I decided to put in an emergency call to Sister Barbara.

First I insulated myself against not finding her in or receiving some unsatisfactory answer to my complaints by fixing a cappuccino and a bagel with cream cheese. Sitting on a high stool at the kitchen counter, I punched in the Sister Barbara's telephone number. It took ten rings before the foundress answered the phone. "Sisters of Mary," came the standard greeting in her soft tentative voice.

"Oh, thank God you're there, Sister Barbara."

"What is it, Margo? You sound upset."

"You'll never believe what's going on here since Mary came from Iowa."

An excellent trait of the foundress was her willingness to listen to details of our woes over the phone. During these long calls, I could sometimes, as I could today, hear the click click of her computer. It didn't bother me. I knew that one could do two things at once, since I, myself, used to type up lecture notes while talking long-distance, stopping whenever a reply seemed urgent.

Five minutes into my juicy description of Mary's behavior since her arrival, focusing on the mattress issue and her desire for such a slow way of chanting the hours, I was ready to bring up the subject of Max and Mimi, when the click-click on Sister Barbara's end stopped. Waiting for a response from her before continuing my narrative, I thought about what a nice question for a workshop it would be to ask: "what pushes your buttons enough during a telephone

conversation to get you to lift your fingers off the keys of your PC?"

Did Sister Barbara stop typing because she was afraid I would louse up her blue- print for the perfect Sisters of Mary convent by over-reacting to things?

There was a sigh and then Barbara's patronizing advice: "I'm sure there are many things that are annoying to you, Margo, with your great desire to see everything go smoothly all the time. But the focus of your attention needs to be on getting twenty-four hour Eucharistic Adoration off the ground. Just cool it with trying to fix Mary. She'll be fine after she gets used to it. What does Clare think?"

I paused and then exploded. "Oh, so you expect me to be like cool-as-a-cucumber Clare, do you?" The click-click resumed. "I told you I didn't think I was suited for this."

"Now, now. Calm down. Why don't you just try to be kind and loving? Mary comes to us with deep problems to work out. It will take time. You tend to impatience and irritability. By the way, how many cups of coffee have you had this morning?"

"Two," I replied without any fuss. It would have been nice to retaliate, gain a symbolic victory by asking how many cigarettes Sister Barbara had smoked that morning, but I didn't want to waste time from getting a handle from our foundress on how to resolve disputes in a nun-like fashion.

When the foundress put me on hold so she could take another call, I thought about our lay community at St. Gregory's. How did we deal with conflict? We

fought it out, sometimes loudly and publicly. If no one gave in, we brought it to Brother Juniper. He would take each party aside and, after a long hug, whisper something like, "Think of the pain she carries!...Anyhow, it's not about washing machines, it's about who's boss." A few days later when the feuding members had mellowed out, and gone to confession at the brother's insistence, Juniper would suggest compromises. They worked, at least until the next conflict. Would Father Gormley come to serve in that role with the Sisters here or did we need to find a way to do it for ourselves?

I gulped down the rest of the cappuccino and finished the bagel. When Sister Barbara came back on the line I persisted, "You didn't let me finish telling you about Mary." I wound up the story about the cats with an ultimatum in an angry but tremulous tone, "Maybe if they go, I go!"

Sister Barbara seemed unimpressed. "I recall Father Gormley loves cats. Why don't you explain to Mary how much you care about your pets, and then say that you will ask Father to keep them during the day? You could see if she might be willing to let you try having them in your room only at night so their fur doesn't spread around the whole house. If she doesn't have an allergic reaction, she'll have to let you keep them overnight. But if she does, then you can give them to Father for good but still see them every day."

"Thanks. Good idea. I'll keep you informed."

Feeling better, I poured myself another cup of coffee and sliced some cheddar to go with it. Then I added lemon and olive oil to the luncheon salad, tossed it a few times, and put it into the fridge. I was about to go to see Father Gormley about his adopting Max and Mimi as day boarders, when I remembered Mary's pictures. Why not take a peek at them?

"Oh, my gosh," I exclaimed aloud when I entered Mary's room. I'd been expecting either mawkish devotional statues or cheap conventional nature scenes. Instead over the mattress, which did smell slightly of mold this morning, was a heavy wooden framed print of Piero della Francesca's Resurrection. On the other walls were poster size photos of what must be her children, heads stark against plain grey backgrounds. Nothing built a bridge faster for me than a common sense of beauty.

Mary and Clare were back before noon. After enjoying the Greek salad and bagels for lunch we found ourselves giggling merrily together dragging the new mattress out of the station wagon into Mary's room.

"Oh, what wonderful pictures you put on your wall, Mary," I said, as if seeing them for the first time. Looking at the large photos of Mary's children naturally led to showing pictures of our children. It turned out that with all the things we had left behind, we all considered it absolutely necessary to take along the images of our children. The sharing brought us the closest we had been up till then.

On the way to the dumpster in the back of the Church parking lot to get rid of the old mattress, I started singing Praise ye the Lord, Alleluia. The others joined in. Back in my cell washing off invisible mold from my hands, I smiled at my face in the mirror. Maybe it could work, after all.

On the way into my Eucharistic Adoration office off the parish hall, I saw Max and Mimi curled up together in a circle of fur outside Father Gormley's room. I gathered them up into my arms, and kissed their heads. Since the door to the priest's office was a quarter of the way open, I kicked it ajar and plumped down in a chair. There was a veil of smoke between the old priest and myself.

"Hi, Father G, it's me, Margo," I yelled. He brushed a cloud from the top of his cluttered desk to reveal in full glory the culprit, his large Meerschaum pipe, the bowl in the shape of a lion. Those in the know recognized why he called it Aslan after C.S. Lewis' lion-messiah in the Narnia Chronicles.

"Should I send Aslan away?" Father Gormley asked in a wistful voice.

"Nah. That's okay. Remember, Gustav used to smoke a pipe. It's nostalgic to smell the tobacco burning."

I told Father Gormley about my problem with Max and Mimi and Mary's supposed allergies. "If you could take them during the day, whenever you are ready for bed, you can leave them outside your screen door with a bowl of milk, and I'll get them after Mary goes to sleep."

In response the priest opened his arms wide and calling out, "Here kitty-cats," beckoned them toward him with his fat hands. They leaped into his ample lap and then turned and stared back at me with their pale yellow eyes.

"It's okay, darlings," I cooed. "You can stay with your father during the day and come to mommy at night."

I started out the door but turned when Father Gormley said "Before you go, Margo, David and Jeanine invited us for dinner tonight. Can you come?"

"I'd love it, alleluia," was my response. I realized I was starved for male company after all that time with Clare, and then Mary, too.

Before getting to work on my Eucharistic Adoration scheduling calls, I decided a good long talk with my Bridegroom might be fruitful. I sat in a pew in the middle of the round white stucco Church facing the copy of the famous fresco of St. Martin of Tours giving away half his cloak to the beggar.

Before I could sink into wordless prayer of silence, anxiety set in as I chided myself, "Some nun! Here you are running away from your dear sisters who will surely feel left out and marginalized." I slapped my hand. Should I call Jeanine and ask if Clare and Mary could come along? Whose voice was that? The Holy Spirit? My guardian angel, or the devil who loves to lay guilt trips on us for minor defects, distracting us from the real issues. I chuckled thinking of Father Michael's wonderful teaching at a retreat at St. Gregory's about monitoring our thoughts. "Don't

tune into K-HELL, you know like radio KBLY, K-HELL, especially not in the middle of the night! The voice of K-HELL is always telling you to give up since you're rotten to the core. If you are thinking of doing something wrong, then for sure you ought to feel bad, but when choosing between two goods, if what is going on in your head doesn't make you feel peaceful, it's not from God!"

When I got back to the convent for a coffee break Mary was vacuuming up what I was afraid she must have realized were cat-hairs. Clare was working on dinner.

"Hiya," I yelled over the hum of the Hoover.

Mary shut the machine off.

"Some old friends invited me for dinner. I think they want to talk to me privately about family problems or they would have invited you two also," I lied.

"Have a good time," Clare replied, but then, remembering that she was in charge, asked, "leaving after evening prayer?"

"Yes, mother superior," I replied lightly. "And I'll be back by night prayer."

It was with dismay that I looked at the rack in my closet. In principle, I loved living in poverty and having only 3-4 brown jumpers with white t-shirts to choose from each day. Buying little meant that much more money I could give to the poor. But on occasions such as visits to friends, it felt depressing to have so little choice. In anticipation of such feelings I had cheated slightly on the rule about simplicity of

dress. I had a seamstress in Laguna Beach make me one better jumper of a golden brown silky material and a white blouse with balloon sleeves. I sneaked that outfit in my tote to the bathroom at the Church before leaving for the Portero's. After donning it, I rubbed my cheeks to bring a little more color into my face.

When we got to the familiar barn-like house of my old friends, Jeanine immediately took Father Gormley aside for a private conference about the possible vocation of her youngest college age son.

"Can I get you your usual Bloody Mary, Sister Margo?" her husband, David, asked with a wink.

"Hmmm. Well, we're not supposed to drink anything alcoholic except with a meal and never in the convent. I don't see dinner on the table but, I suppose, one half hour in advance and only one couldn't really be cheating."

David poured the drinks, a Martini for himself and the Bloody Mary for me. When we were seated in the seedy stuffed chairs in the living room, he remarked, "Here's looking at you, kid." It was an old joke. Because I thought David at sixty looked something like Humphrey Bogart, we used to exchange those words from Casablanca when toasting each other at dinners.

"You look great, Margo."

"Even without any make up?"

He grinned. "Yeah, kind of pristine. I must admit it's been hard getting used to the idea of you as a nun."

The way he stared reminded me that years ago, when I lived at the parish, David seemed to have a crush on me. Better watch it, I thought. Maybe there's something after all in that rule about not drinking except during a meal.

David leaned forward with his super-serious look, "Tell me the truth, are you happy in the convent? I always thought the lay community at St. Gregory's was perfect for you, with or without Gustav."

I told him about the El Greco Christ vision and locution. But I realized that this didn't answer David's question, so I took out my rosary to hold to ease the tension as I admitted, "It's kind of mixed. You see I haven't felt so good at St. Gregory's without Gustav. There are all these close couples: the Finleys, who you know, the Bochenskis, the Ramirez couple. When Gustav was alive it felt good having Ellen, my single English friend, as an alternate companion to gossip with about Gustav and the others. Now being with her feels kinda bad - like two old biddies with nothing to do but live vicariously through others. But living with two women at the convent feels even worse. I was an only child, so I'm not used to having sisters around in that close."

Without asking, David took my glass and made a second Bloody Mary for me and another Martini for himself. "Have you given up thinking about re-marrying after that fiasco with the fella from Brooklyn?"

"Come on, Dave, it's not like there are hundreds of single sixty year olds out there dying to marry a

sharp-tongued Ph.D. A sociologist I heard on the radio said my chances would be one in a hundred.”

“Well, I probably shouldn’t say this, but if anything happened to dear Jeanine, I’d be the first to knock on your door.”

I lowered my eyes and fingered the rosary. I was glad that Jeanine returned to put the finishing touches on the dinner a few moments after David’s comment. I walked over to help her set the table. Helping with domestic chores seemed much more nunny than responding to David’s conditional proposal.

The combination of the excitement of being with old friends, the drinks, and the strong coffee kept me awake most of the night. Simultaneously I stroked Max and Mimi, and read a novel. Between chapters I prayed desperately, “Jesus, Mary, Joseph. It felt so good being with a married couple last night instead of strained celibates. What does it mean? Do you really want me to be a sister?”

The contented face of Father Gormley floated across my inner screen. “All right, that priest is celibate and he’s not strained or unhappy! But he’s never been married...all right Clare’s been married and she seems happy enough with this new life.”

The following week, with the convent in reasonably good shape, I spent all my time on the scheduling for Adoration. Since we still had almost one hundred hours still open, I got Father Gormley to agree to give a rousing talk at the weekend Masses, to be followed by short reminders at all future Masses including weekdays where I thought we’d find the

most likely adorers. There would be a giant sign on a separate bulletin board with the whole week laid out in hourly portions with room for two sign-ups per hour. Joy came over me as I wrote in the names of our sisters in some of the empty places with Sisters of Mary after each name: Mary Greeley for every night at 2 AM; Clare Duquesne, 6 AM, and Margo Kemperdick 9-10 PM.

That Saturday evening, tears of affection came to my eyes as Father Gormley moved to the pulpit to give his first weekend Adoration sermon. The unkempt appearance of the priest with his tobacco stained grey beard, spotty black shirt and always wrinkled pants covering his ever-extending pot belly delighted me. For strangers, his slovenly demeanor masked the deep sweet holiness and sharp intelligence of the man. Old timers revered the priest and proved it by their attention to his sermons and willingness to back up any project he suggested with money and time. The sprinkling of orange cat hairs did not improve his image.

Not to my surprise, Father Gormley chose to ignore the fine materials on the history of Eucharistic Adoration I had carefully marked for his use. Instead he delivered what turned out eventually to be a spectacular witness story. Hoary leonine head above his bright green vestment, he leaned toward his people from the pulpit. As usual he went about it by indirection.

"I'm sure you all know there's a crisis in the priesthood? Who could have missed reports of

scandal and million dollar law suits against dioceses for covering up these scandals.”

Father Gormley paused, eyes roaming over the congregation as if to be sure every mind was in gear before he continued. “I know from the confessional that some of you wish you could damn such priests to hell.”

I looked over at my friend, Dave Portero – the most archconservative of the bunch. His eyes were closed. I had to smile when I saw Jeanine’s forefinger moving in for a jab in the ribs. David’s wife chided him often for his harsh and sarcastic judgments of others.

“But there’s something you’re not considering. What about the loneliness of priests? I’m fortunate. I get more dinner invitations than I can accept, but many priests rarely get close to their flocks. Even when we’re asked to dinner, there’s often a hidden agenda.

“Know what I mean? After the second cocktail, it’s ‘by the way, Father, have you considered giving a sermon about high interest loans? The other day I went to the bank thinking the man would give me a break on a home improvement loan since he owns the darned bank and he’s here every Sunday, two pews to my right. Not a chance. 8% on \$30,000 with a balloon payment after two years.’”

I noticed all the men in the church were wide-awake at this point wondering where the wily priest was going with all this.

“Now, don’t get me wrong. I’m all for social justice and I do think that interest rates today are a new form

of usury, but why didn't this man come to my office with a suggestion about homilies instead of doing it on my day off at a dinner where I'd wanted to relax and enjoy his kids and maybe watch a basketball game?"

I turned around to see what kind of expression Jim Giroux, the banker, might have on his face. It was deadpan.

Now came the witness part of Fr. Gormley's memorable homily. "I myself went through a terrible time of loneliness in the last parish. It was so bad I decided I'd leave the priesthood unless something good happened fast. Well, the Bishop suggested I go on a thirty day Ignatian retreat. Total silence most of the time, only talk to your director for one-half hour a day, and the others on Sunday, and no smoking!"

I laughed to imagine Father Gormley without his pipe pacing the floor of a bare cell like a caged lion.

"Pretty bleak except there was one thing I could have. That was Jesus on the altar disguised as bread twenty-four hours a day. At first I felt bored sitting in the bare chapel looking up at this huge crucifix and at the round circle of the host in the gleaming gold monstrance."

Laughter.

"Gradually he got through to me. Without words, I felt his Real Presence and this incredible love pouring into my tired lonely heart." He paused to let it sink in. "So, that's what I want for you. Of course, you're busy people, if not at school or work then with the

thousand things we all do for fun or distraction or just fixing up the truck or the rock garden.”

Then came Father’s mischievous smile.

“Look, we’re not too far from Vegas. I’m a betting man. I’ll bet a hundred bucks cold cash that if you commit to a measly one hour of Eucharistic Adoration a week for a year’s time, you’ll experience God’s love like you never have before.”

Silence.

I did the announcements at the end of the Mass, so I could reassure them that signing up didn’t mean being trapped. There were always substitutes for any time someone couldn’t make it. No questions asked.

By the time the last parishioner left that evening we had fifty hours pledged. The rest of the open hours got filled up after the people at the Masses the following day heard that sermon. After the final morning Mass and sign-ups, I couldn’t wait to report the sensational results to Father Gormley. His office door was closed with a light showing underneath. Standing right next to the door I could hear the soft voice of Sister Clare. I waited for ten minutes wanting to knock or just yell in the good news, but held back. Finally, I left for a lunch of baked beans and limp salad prepared quickly by Sister Mary. She was in too much of a hurry to make anything more elaborate since she wanted to get to her favorite animal shows on cable TV.

I curled up on the dining room sofa to write a long letter to the lay community, glancing up occasionally at the wildebeests moving across the Serengeti desert

of Africa. I had seen the program before and knew how distressing would be the final shots of wildebeest corpses strewing the arid sand.

When Sister Clare came back an hour later her eyes were shining. "Father Gormley's such a good counselor. Thank God he's our chaplain."

"So, what did you ask him about and what did he say," I asked casually without looking up from my letter

"I talked to him about changes in our Way of Life."

"The rule! Without consulting Sister Barbara?" I lifted my head, shocked.

"All in good time," Sister Clare replied, moving toward the kitchen to finish off the beans.

Another sleepless night. Basically I felt left out. I was Fr. Gormley's old, old friend, so why was he cooking up changes in the Rule with Sister Clare without even talking to me about it? On the other hand, who wouldn't prefer the angelic simple soul of Clare to my nervous manic-depressive ups and downs? Would it hurt me for a change to be a second-class citizen servant soul instead of a primadonna? I grabbed for the large beaded rosary under the pillow. "Dear Mother Mary, exalted widow, was it true that you were silent, always in the background like the introverts claim? Or were you more like me, a real Jewish mother, passionately involved in the lives of the apostles, disciples, virgins, and other widows?"

How dare Sister Clare say "all in good time," as if we two other sisters wouldn't have a right to know what she was planning for us?

I slapped my hand. Just like me to be jealous of Clare, as if Father Gormley was my property, like my father who adored me. And just like me by now to prefer Mary to Clare by now just because she was more problematic so I could feel superior.

“Lord have mercy,” I prayed in a soft voice. “What have I gotten myself into? It’s bringing out the worst.”

I went to sleep finally resolved that after we had adoration going full swing I’d make a thirty-day retreat myself. Sister Barbara would have to agree when she saw how miserable I was in the convent.

Second Fling



MARGO, DARLING, IT'S YOUR OLD FRIEND ELLEN. You can't believe how we miss you."
"I know, I miss you all to," I replied.

"What's the matter? You sound awful."

"Nothing really. The medievals called it *tedium vitae* - you know, what we would call the blahs."

"Well, hold onto your seat. I'm on to something fascinating and we need you to come sort it all out."

"Yeah. What's up? The Monastery was flooded and you're moving to England."

"Poor Margo, you must be miserable in that convent. You sound as cynical as you always accuse me of being."

It took awhile for Ellen to tell me about her quandary. "Last week you got an invitation which I opened, as new manager of the community. It was an invitation to a big do at UC Irvine. The art department was sponsoring a unique exhibit. 'The Cathedral of Chartres Comes to You,' was the banner

above a line drawing of the famous church...anyway, to make a long story short, Father Michael and I went to Irvine to see what it was all about.

"In the lobby of the auditorium were standard black and white posters of the cathedral. Ushers trained flashlights on the ground as they brought us into the dark auditorium where we were seated first come first serve.

"As we waited in the dark for all the guests to be seated, we were surrounded with Gregorian chant, you know, those exalted melancholic tones, as our mentor Dr. Margo, puts it. Lots of incense added to the mood."

"Sounds pretty exciting. Who put it together?" I was starting to wish I had been there to experience it.

"I'll get to that later. After about ten minutes of the music, we saw one after the other of transparencies of the stained glass windows of Chartres illuminated by floodlights. The climax was the great rose window lit up at the center of the stage area."

"Wow! So it was as if you were all sitting in the cathedral."

"Exactly. Of course it wasn't like being in the real cathedral, but as close as you could get."

"Was that the whole show?"

"No. After every 'window' was lit, a spotlight fell on a man at the lecture who turned out to be the impresario of the exhibit - names of Hans...some German last name. Here, I'll look it up on the program. Epstein."

"A Jew?"

“Right. He told us the story of how when he was a baby he was hidden in France during World War II. After it was all over, when he was in High School he went on a trip to the Cathedral. The beauty of Chartres led to his conversion from Jewish to Catholic. Since he didn’t have a degree in art history, he started working there only as a guide. After that personal story, he gave a lecture about the windows and medieval concepts of scripture and saints.

“Is the exhibit still going on? I’d love to see it.”

“That’s why I’m calling you. The auditorium was packed with another hundred turned away. So they’re doing it again next month. We talked Epstein into staying at the monastery in the meantime. The barter is room and board in exchange for him lecturing the community.”

“I’m replaced!”

“No, listen, this is where you come in. You know how enthusiastic Sandy gets. She got some great ideas. First we could have the exhibit here as a fundraiser – remember that scheme to build some more casitas for lay community but no funds to do it? Then after we’ve got our feet wet, we could organize a tour of US monasteries. Have the Chartres program done in their chapels. The donation money could be used for expenses – the extra for us and for the host monasteries. And we’d be doing something more significant for the church than our usual boring chores.”

“Hmmmm. It sounds complicated.” I released my hair from the bun and started twirling a strand.

“Exactly. So we need your opinion first. We all like him, but we’re not sure if we can trust him. He’s a queer duck. As a Jewish convert you’d have a sense about him.”

“I’m busy setting up adoration at our parish here. I suppose the other sisters could take care of it over a weekend. When did you say it would be done again at Irvine?”

“April 30th.”

The advice of Sister Barbara when I asked her about going back to St. Gregory’s to advise them on the project was, “A weekend, yes. But don’t stay much longer or you’ll give the devil an opportunity to pull you away from your vocation.”

A few weeks later I was on the plane from Tucson to John Wayne, Orange Country airport. It was a welcome hiatus. Things at the convent were becoming more difficult for me with the other sisters. No matter how I fought the envy, Sister Clare’s holy radiance and closeness with Father Gormley made me feel like a rotten old witch by comparison. Sister Mary’s crankiness was also getting me down. One night, after her usual bedtime, Mary came into my room to get some community stationary. When she saw Max and Mimi curled up on my bed she shrieked, “I thought they were living with Father Gormley? How could you do this? You know how allergic I am. I’ll have a migraine all day tomorrow!”

Contrary to Sister Barbara’s instructions I’d only told the allergic widow from Iowa about the cats being at the rectory. When I told her now that they

had been sleeping with me since her arrival without causing her any ill effects, she stomped out

The next day Sister Barbara called me and told me I had to get them off the parish grounds. "A sacrifice for you to make to prove community comes above your own preferences."

Time to bite the bullet on obedience, I decided. Happily my dilemma only lasted one day since Jeanine Portero was delighted to adopt the cats. She missed their pussy-cats who died a year ago of old age. On the way back from bringing Max and Mimi to their new home I found I was grinding my teeth and for the fiftieth time questioning my vocation.

"Jesus," I prayed aloud, "you tell me how could any one possibly be called to be a nun in imitation of Holy Mother Mary of Nazareth who values pussy-cats more than a sister in her own community?" The question called up the story about how the mother superior of the Carmel of St. Therese, the Little Flower, was said to have pampered her cats in a ridiculous way, all the while neglecting her nuns. With all this stress at the convent, I was delighted for an excuse to take a little time away.

As Ellen drove me up the piney path to St. Gregory's, I inhaled the smell and sighed. "I how I miss this. It's so arid in Pebble Creek. Since the newcomers were occupying my casita, I dumped by bag in Ellen's house. At lunch, Ellen steered me over to our usual table to meet the guest.

"*Gnadige Frau Kemperdick*" was the way Hans Epstein greeted me as he kissed my hand with old

European gallantry. "What an honor that you would leave your holy convent just to see my exhibit," he added in thickly accented English. I figured out after a few hours that the accent was a mixture of his family's original German and the French of his adult life. When he spoke of the Church his English was transposed awkwardly but charmingly from French - *the belle Catedrale Chartres*.

Epstein was a small man of about 5'5" with a bald head, cherubic face, and an expression of what I came to see as perpetual amusement in his green eyes. After eating a magnificent luncheon prepared by Brother Juniper, we sat around so that what had become the Chartres-Epstein committee could clue me in on the latest plans.

With unaccustomed excitement Maryanne announced that, "Since Hans is single and semi-retired, he is open to any and all possibilities concerning his photographic, what did you call it Ellen? Oh, yes, his tour-de-force." She pronounced the sophisticated phrase with difficulty saying "de" like "day" instead of the French "duh."

"I should say," Hans broke in, "though I am a traditional Catholic and detest charismatic spirituality, I did feel that the Holy Spirit had something special in store for me that night at the University of Irvine. When I met your so fine Father Michael and so cooperating Mrs. Ellen Davis, I felt sure this was what Our Lady wanted for her tres belle French cathedral to come to your country."

In spite of the earnestness of this explanation, doubting thoughts came swiftly to mind. A neat trick? By insulting the charismatics, he must surely realize some of us might be, it could sound as if he was not flattering us, while he could meanwhile manipulate us into doing all his grunt work. I slapped my hand under the table. Come on, Margo, just because the shadow side of being Jewish clings so near to your own Catholic identity doesn't mean every Jewish convert is a conniver. Still I made a mental note that if I loved the show as much as Ellen thought I would, I was going to be sure our agreement with him was in cold ink, not vague oral mutual admiration society phrases.

To cover these cynical thoughts, I leaned forward, hands joined prayerfully, "My dear Herr Epstein, since I am a charismatic, I am happy to confirm that when I heard of your beautiful production from Ellen, the Holy Spirit leapt in my bosom."

If Hans noticed any irony in my manner of expression he didn't show it. Even though he had learned English well enough to be a guide at Chartres for tourists, I would find that he missed some nuances an American intellectual would pick up in an instant.

Ellen, however, laughed loudly at my sly response to the man's attack on charismatics. Then she leaned over and whispered, "Margo dear, I might have to leave the table if I notice there's a barracuda in disguise here."

I watched the guest waddle on his short legs toward the dessert table. When he came back with a

piece of pie for me, I said "I understand we have something in common. I, too, am a Jewish convert. I became a Catholic at twenty-three in 1963."

"Remarkable! That was the very year that I found the Lord and his *Eglise* because of my great moment of enlightenment at Chartres!"

I looked for Hans in the lounge later in the afternoon, but I didn't find him. Instead I got into Father Michael's office for a long conversation about my vocation, recounting all the negative experiences since my departure for St. Martin de Tours.

"There's no way you can know at this point," was his first comment, as he leaned meditatively back in his swivel chair. "You agreed to spend a year in discernment and that's what you should give it. Of course it's a great change. Here, as head of the lay community, your relationship to the others is warm but more superficial. I'm sure you have heard me say that it is precisely in community that what needs to be healed is revealed...precisely because of all the conflict."

"But it's not making me into a saint. I'm more evil than even before, full of anger. My prayer is all yearning, no comfort." I protested.

Father Michael's large grey eyes filled with compassion. He reached out his hand and I nodded as he laid it on my head and prayed: "Jesus, here is your bride. You know that she wants to become all love for you and her community. Send your mother, exalted widow, to show her how. Heal her of any memories from childhood of girls in school who didn't like her.

Help her believe in the love Father Gormley has for her, that there is room in his heart for many sisters.”

“Thank you, dear Michael. Gee, I miss you. It’s funny, when I was here I was so restless, but now that I’m there, this seems like such a refuge.”

“There will always be a place for you here, but you need to have this chance to test the call you heard so clearly in Heidelberg.”

After this conversation, I strolled over to the chapel and automatically sat in my former stall. Across from me in the opposite bank of seats was Hans Epstein on his knees, head cupped in his hands. For the amount of time of my five decades of the rosary, he didn’t change his position. On my way out, curious to see if he was asleep or in a trance, I walked softly over to his side and sat two seats away. The breathing was not the rhythm of a sleeper. I concluded that he must have attained what is called prayer of quiet, an almost trance-like state of union with God. I was impressed. There was a period of a few years when I was close to Brother Lucien at Fordham that I enjoyed that deep interior silence. I thought I would never lose it, but either it drifted away from me, or I from it. Since following the nun-path my sense of the presence of Jesus was stronger, but not that utter peace that seems lifted out of time.

Later at evening prayer I watched the convert’s demeanor again. There was something so solemn and reverent in his face and kneeling posture that it tipped the scales for me. “Okay,” I told Ellen after dinner at her casita, “I’m willing to believe that he is

probably authentic. Still, I'd make sure you put all the plans into a contract to avoid misunderstandings. From being English I am sure you know that Europeans and American often think of arrangements differently." Not to bring up bad memories, I didn't allude to the skirmishes she had fought through as benefactress dealing with the monks of St. Gregory's when building the lay community houses.

Saturday was the command performance exhibit at UC Irvine. The buildings and grounds people had stored Hans' giant transparencies and posters in a campus warehouse.

I drove him early in the day from Laguna to Irvine using Ellen's BMW so that he would have ample time to supervise the set up.

My plan was to spend the afternoon doing research on late-vocations for Sister Barbara at the huge university library. There was only one computer with network access at St. Gregory's and that was almost always occupied by a monk-addict. My plan was to check the Vatican website on other groups of widows and then browse through their art book shelves.

The half hour ride was a joy as I listened to Hans discourse on other cathedrals of Europe he and I both admired. I noticed with chagrin that the man never asked a single personal question. Except for courteous gestures, such as holding open doors for me, I might have been a male colleague.

Leaving Hans with the special events manager of the university who was waiting for us in his office at

the side of the lobby of the auditorium, I trotted off to the library.

“Hmmmmm. Under late vocations there was a site for Consecrated Widows. That’s new! Under the search item “consecrated widows” I found a notation on the web about the revival of the early church role. Further data pulled up a page about a group of young widows with children still living at home in Paris and another page was about a bishop in the United States looking into consecrating widows on the model of consecrated virgins. These virgins lived like nuns in terms of chastity and poverty but were under obedience to the Bishop of the diocese where they resided. They often lived alone, rather than together in convents. They usually engaged in contemplative or active apostolates, but with much independence. I thought about how I’d prefer such a way of life to the convent.

After two hours I started feeling sleepy and hungry. I walked over to the food court and got myself a double burger, and fries washed down by a large cappuccino. Feeling less drowsy, I considered going over to the auditorium to see how Hans was doing. Thinking he might not want to bother with food even if hungry, I went back and ordered an identical take out lunch for him. If he didn’t want it, I could always manage to it myself for a late PM snack.

As I walked into the lobby, I heard a voice with a heavy European accent shouting

"My God, what idiot did this to me? You told me you would be responsible for the lights. Now three of the most important of these lights aren't working!"

"No problem, Mr. Epstein." There was nothing in the tone of voice of the manager, who was probably used to temperamental directors and performers, to suggest that he was angry at Hans' insults. "One of our student workers can get the bulbs at Home Depot." He reached for his cell phone. "Hey, Joe, come to the auditorium. I need you real quick."

By this time I had joined them in the office. Hans' face was red with rage. He was thumping on the desk with the fingers of one hand, the other clutching a set of diagrams.

"In an hour, if not sooner, you will have them. No problem," the manager reported with a genial smile.

"*Ein Uhr! Mein Gott,*" Hans muttered. Then, finally noticing my presence, "Frau Kemperdick, he doesn't understand! Every moment counts for setting up such an exhibition. I could spend that hour he has stolen from me working on the music, but his assistant, who alone has the key to the audio room, is at the football game!"

"*Schade, mein freund,*" I cooed. *Schade* means "too bad" in English, but the German word was more redolent of sympathy.

It worked. He stopped fuming. Then he stood up, grabbed my hand and said, "Come. I'll show you the most beautiful transparencies you've ever seen, made by me, much better than in the tourist booklets."

“Aaaah, wie schon,” I gasped at the ten-foot size of the transparencies shining from the floodlight trained behind it. Many details of the familiar stained glass windows were now visible: St. Martin giving half of his beige cloak to the beggar; the teal blue of St. Nicolas with hard black borders; a blue robed vine dresser on a cart driving a scowling horse; bright orange clad knights fighting; the long draped loin cloth on Jesus crucified; and the bright red cloak over a green dress of Mary awaiting her assumption with the apostles mourning around her bed. On previous visits to the Cathedral, I had not noticed from the ground level that each petal of the rose window had a different design.

Between the surprising but amusing scene in the office and the glory of the transparencies I completed forgot the extra lunch bulging out at the top of my tote bag. I discovered it in the Ladies’ Room. Those days instead of working on my make up, I was in the habit of just brushing out my hair, clamping it back in its sedate bun, and then sticking my tongue out at the drab image of my face in the mirror none the brighter with no color in my clothing but the dull tan of the jumper.

I returned to the stage area to find Hans at the podium arranging his lecture notes. When I offered him the limp burger and wilted fries, he beamed with gratitude. *“What a treasure you are, Frau Kemperdick. No wonder the people at St. Gregory’s love you so much.”*

All those among the Benedictine monks and lay community who had not been to the first exhibit came to this one. We sat together twenty strong in a group right under the lectern like a clique. Of course the display of ten Benedictine monks in full black habit with their graceful scapulars, many with full beards caused many a stare from the mostly secular crowd of Irvine academics.

After the Gregorian chant in the dark, the sight of the first window, blue and red stones gleaming from the floodlight behind it, with the melody elevating us into a sense of eternal glory, brought tears to my eyes. I grabbed Brother Juniper's hand and whispered in his ear, "Yes, Yes, Yes!"

I was sure any lecture would be an anti-climax, but it wasn't. This funny little man: a merry elf, a monk-like contemplative, and a raging dwarf, who now giving his witness story, was simply a passionate Hebrew-Catholic wanting the whole world to know about his savior and theirs.

After the standing ovation, I ran up to be the first to lionize the speaker. "Hans, *wundershon!*" I gave him a tight hug and kissed both his cheeks. "Of course we'll sponsor this anywhere you want!"

Releasing himself quickly, he turned to answer the question of a tweedy professor with a small unlit pipe clenched between his teeth.

I waited in my seat for a while, but the line of people wanting to talk to Epstein was long, so I repaired to the Ladies. I looked at myself in the mirror without make-up and dressed in my ugly brown

burlap jumper and t-shirt. The woman standing next to me fixing her face was about my age but dressed in a fascinating glittering black dress, hair piled on top of her head in a French knot. Appalled at the envy I felt, I hurriedly fled from the rest room to go back to the auditorium. On the way I bumped into the manager and told him not to send the exhibit back to France as originally planned but, instead, to have it carefully wrapped up and brought to our Monastery. They could save a fortune in freight and we would have the treasure for our tours.

When I came back to the auditorium there was still a group of admirers surrounding a radiant Hans. I sat down and took out my handy pocket notebook to jot down potential sites all over the country under the title: Chartres Comes To You Exhibit.

The last person on line was talking loudly to Hans about a performance at UCLA. I decided we could let Hans make the contact but then we could intervene later to establish ourselves as his agents. On the next page of the pad I started jotting down images for a poem to express my feelings about the evening.

New Friend?
Elf to my sprite!
Dwarf to my witch!
Faux-monk to my pseudo-nun?

That night I woke up with some more exalted images:

Soul mate?
Endless hours of toil
to produce a masterpiece
of a masterpiece;
as
I
expend
endless hours of toil
to awaken students
to the beauty of Catholic culture.
Endless hours of blood, sweat and tears
Jesus offered,
his very life a masterpiece,
to dazzle us into
humble hope.

Pleased with my second effort, I wrote it out with a thin black marker pen in calligraphy style, put it in an envelope with his name on it and walked in the moonlight to the chapel. I left it on the seat of the monastic stall the man seemed to have made his own.

The next day I came to Morning Prayer in time to watch Hans pick up the envelope. To my

disappointment he didn't open it, but instead folded it and put it in the pocket of his shirt. All through breakfast I had to see the top of the envelope peeking up unopened from his pocket. During this meal, Ellen was taking notes about plans for the Chartres show at St. Gregory's, the one I wouldn't even get to see since I was a nun in a convent in far away Arizona.

I was to leave to go back to St. Martin de Tours after lunch. When the others said goodbye and Father Michael gave me a blessing, Hans was the last in line. "*Vielen danke*, Frau Kemperdick. I don't think ever anyone honored me with a poem before." Without a hint of humor in his eyes, he lowered his bald head and kissed my hand.

"Did the barracuda nun catch a German-French-Jewish-Catholic fishy?" was Ellen's sly question enroute to the airport.

I let out a pretend wail. "Waaaah! He's perfect and I can't have him because I'm a bride of Christ!"

"I don't know about the perfect part. I've found that little men sometimes compensate with big power trips. And that bald head looks like a stone shaved of moss. I wouldn't want to butt heads with that one."

"You think his bald head is ugly? I don't. I find it endearing, like the top of a baby's head that you want to kiss because it seems so vulnerable."

I told Ellen about Hans' dwarf-like fit in the manger's office at UC Irvine.

"Margo, idiot, you have to register such bad moments very carefully as an antidote to the good ones. I'm sure he's a fine person and all, but don't you

think there's a reason he's never married besides that he never met you?"

I wondered, but didn't want to ask, what kind of men Ellen had gotten close to after becoming a widow.

As a parting shot at the airport Ellen whispered in my ear. "One thing is sure, you need a lot of discernment before thinking you were made to be a nun, dearie."

On the one hour trip from Orange to Tucson my mind raced with images of an alternate life-style. Hans and I would be based as a married couple in the community of St. Gregory's sprinkled with glorious trips accompanying Hans with his exhibit all over the world. When we became too old to travel, the show could be the centerpiece of team-taught courses on medieval architecture at the monastery or even UC Irvine.

Back in Pebble Creek, five soul-mate poems later, all filed in the trash basket, I decided I'd better confide my doubts about being a sister to Clare, the spiritual director of our tiny group. A good opportunity came when Sister Mary was away on a trip back to Wisconsin to sign away her house to one of her sons and his new wife. In spite of all her tense complaining ways, Sister Barbara had high hopes for Mary's vocation.

Even though Mary was gone Clare and I had gotten hooked on her animal program, so we watched it together after a satisfying dinner of chicken cacciatore cooked by me.

"Mind if I turn down the volume. There's something I need to talk to you about."

"Sure. I've been sensing you were a bit restless," serene Sister Clare said getting up to turn the sound to off.

"Tell me. You're a widow. Don't you ever wish you were married again?"

"Never," the Canadian woman answered immediately. "Even though we were a fairly good match, Jim and I, St. Elizabeth Seton had it right."

"About what?" I took out my rosary to turn about in my hand while continuing this difficult conversation.

"You know, when a widow friend of hers was thinking about re-marriage, Elizabeth, then a nun, said that even with as good a marriage as she had with Seton, just having to fit with the personality of another person so closely was so hard she would never try it again."

"Hmmmm. I wonder why I think the struggle is worth it?" I then told Sister Clare in a sketchy way about meeting Hans.

After listening intently, Clare admitted, "Well, I don't mean that I couldn't be attracted to a man again. That happens from time to time. But since I found out about the Sisters of Mary, I feel so close to Jesus I couldn't imagine anything less."

"Of course I love Jesus, too, or I wouldn't be here. I wonder what it means that, unlike you, I still have such an intense desire for a human man's love."

“For one thing I’ve been a widow a lot longer. Here’s an idea. When you’re receiving Jesus in Holy Communion at Mass or during your adoration prayer, ask him to fill you, heart, mind, soul and body. That’s what I do.” Sister Clare put the emphasis of her voice on the word body. “Hold on a sec, I want to read you something.” She came back from her room with a Bible and opened to Psalm 63. “See, here it is from the mouth of David so many centuries ago, ‘my flesh pines for you, as a dry weary land without water...thy steadfast love is better than life.’”

For a few weeks after the conversation with Clare, I tried praying the way she suggested. “Jesus, fill me, even my body.” Once late at night a rapturous gust of grace came over me. Then I was able to sincerely pray, “Yes, Jesus. I do want to be your bride. Forgive me all my doubts.” But, by the next day, the rooms of the convent felt like a cage, especially when Sister Mary returned. I wanted to talk it over with Father Gormley, but each time I neared his office something held me back. I didn’t want him to think less of me...and more of angelic Sister Clare.

One evening Hans called with a question about some possible benefactors who could be invited to the Chartres show at St. Gregory’s. Ellen couldn’t find the latest phone number. Did I know it?

While rifling through an old phone book I thought, “It’s not like Ellen to have him call. Was he looking for an excuse to talk to me.”

“Found it! Marlene and Ken Schuler. They’re in San Diego. Here’s the number.”

After reading off the numerals slowly, I added, "Since you're on the phone, how are you doing?"

"Very well, thank you. The summer winds from the beach are good for my lungs. Chartres is so wet the air."

"No, I mean...I'm so glad. I was thinking of your soul."

"I am not in the habit of speaking about my soul, Frau Kemperdick." Then, as if afraid he sounded impolite he added, "I have always thought the deeper a thing, the more it must be by silence surrounded."

"HMMMMMM." I twirled a lock of hair wondering what to say that might be insightful but not so deep he would need to surround it by silence. After a pause I said, "I truly hope that the atmosphere of St. Gregory's is a joy to your soul. I miss it so much. A parish is not like a monastery...unless perhaps it is as sublime as the cathedral-parish of Chartres."

Taking the fact of his calling at all as some sort of a sign, that night I wrote Hans a letter about the mystical experience leading me to want to be a nun and then my doubts concerning being a sister. Giving a broad hint I ended it with these words: "You know, whenever I meet a wonderful very spiritual single man, I think I am really called to marriage in spite of that vision and locution."

When Sister Barbara came for her monthly visitation to all three of us, she included a separate time with each sister. I didn't tell her I was obsessing over Hans. Instead I asked about my troubles with convent life.

“Look, I love our prayer times. I love Adoration and I really do love the sisters, but I feel stir crazy and also, I hate to say it, bored to death.”

To my surprise I saw understanding in the eyes of the foundress. “You must never tell them what I will say now, but I wouldn’t have sent you here except that Father Gormley wanted you so much. The usual girl or woman who is called to be a nun is a fairly simple soul. She loves God and wants more than anything to serve wherever needed.”

“Sister Mary isn’t like that.”

“I know. She needs lots of healing. I’m hoping she will find it in the love of Jesus streaming to her from the host in the monstrance.”

“And you think that will happen to nervous, evil me, too?”

She smiled. “Not really. I wanted you to see for yourself that you would be better off doing your candidacy year at St. Gregory’s. In your normal relatively happy circumstances you would have the best chance.”

On the Couch



BEFORE RETURNING TO ST. GREGORY'S, I SPENT A month getting the two other sisters ready to take over my duties with Eucharistic Adoration planning, supervising them on all the details. I explained, "It is important that for every hour there be two scheduled Catholics so that if one doesn't come Jesus would not be exposed on the altar with no one there. Not, of course, as some simple Catholics imagine, because he would be lonely." I paused in my standard teaching. "Come to think of it, in a way it is true that Jesus is lonely for us. St. Augustine once said that the whole reason for creating us is that Jesus didn't want to be the only son. He wanted brothers and sisters! I love that thought."

Sister Clare beamed, but Sister Mary looked perturbed. I looked down at my notes: "Anyhow, getting back to the why of adoration, the purpose of this unique form of the presence of Jesus is to focus our attention on his abiding presence. During the Mass there are all the other themes of sacrifice, communal worship and reception of Holy Communion. Eucharistic Adoration focuses the Catholic on his presence alone."

“And what if neither of the two adorers turns up?”
Sister Mary’s thin face was tense.

“You get one from the long list of substitutes, especially those who live closest.”

“I suppose they are just sitting at home waiting for the once a month I might call?” Mary questioned with a derisive smile.

I had anticipated before that training Sister Mary wouldn’t be easy, but since it was the last step before my desired departure I found my patience was much greater than usual.

“As soon as you see that you can’t get a substitute, you have to stay with Jesus yourself. The substitutes give us a list of times they are normally home. If they are not there when they said they’d be, you can check later to see if they want to be dropped from the list or if it was a fluke. But, you know, I find I always get special graces when I’m in front of Jesus extra.”

The last day before leaving I went into Father Gormley’s office for his blessing. Pushing away a cloud of smoke belching out of his lion-headed pipe he joked, “I pray to Aslan every day, I mean Jesus, for your peace. If you go through the Acts of the Apostles carefully you’ll see that the widows went through lots of what you are going through.”

“You mean the part about gossiping and drinking?”

He smiled. “Why not pray to the widow saints for discernment?”

"I do. Of course I love St. Elizabeth Seton and Jane of Chantal and Elizabeth of Hungary, and yes, of course, Mother Mary, Exalted Widow."

"You might add to your list St. Birgitta of Sweden. She was a fantastically strong dynamic widow saint, happily married before. And Frances of Rome, the Benedictine, also happily married. And how about Conchita of Mexico, the grandmother widow saint of the twentieth century?"

I wrote down the names for future study. Should I ask him what he thought of my trying to be a Sister of Mary while living at St. Gregory's in the old role? The priest looked so weary I decided to give him a break. I wasn't up to telling him I was infatuated with a Jewish convert I hardly knew. Perhaps Sister Clare had told him about this part, but the priest would not have felt it right to bring it up such a vulnerable subject unless I initiated it.

"I bless you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit," Father Gormley intoned as he extended his tobacco stained fingers across the desk. I went around the desk to give him a hug goodbye.

It was in a sad mood that I returned to the convent. There is a feeling of loss when one conceals something important from a friend, as I had from Fr. Gormley. It is as if my friends lived in a vertical series of drawers: top drawer is best friends, next one down is good old friends, then comes friendly acquaintances in the bottom drawer. Deciding not to confide pushes a button that sends a friend I thought

of as being in the drawer marked best friends down into the good old friends level.

Trying to get to sleep that last night in the convent, I wondered if that change with Father Gormley came because I was jealous of Sister Clare's closeness to the fatherly priest. If I wasn't his favorite, why even think of him as in the best friends category? The voice from K-HELL whispered, "You're an old hag widow now, Margo. You'll never be anyone's favorite again. And since you're not holy, you can't be any saintly priest's favorite either."

I decided to leave some of my possessions in the common room of the convent. Why not have generations of Sisters of Mary enjoy my Mexican folk-art panels? My El Greco print, the portrait of Gustav, bedding and clothing I shoved into the back of the van. On the way out of town I picked up Max and Mimi at the Portero's. They jumped into the passenger seat and lay purring most of the way back.

The long trip turned out to be upsetting. I was alternately exultant at the thought of being back where I thought I belonged with the prospect of seeing Hans regularly, and anxious considering the ambivalence of that relationship. First, of course, I would have to explain to him that even though I was still wearing the brown burlap jumper and white shirt, I was probably half way out of the nun thing. That might sound strange. The worst thought was that Hans, like Robert, would think I was too strong and bossy a woman for him? Or, having been orphaned in World War II would he have a deep need

for the warmth and camaraderie I could offer, not to mention the intimacy?

Thoughtfully Ellen told me by phone that she had assembled room dividers around the sofa bed in the living room where I would stay until the couple who were renting my house made their decision about becoming members. Once they announced their intentions, if positive, I could take my casita back and they could stay in one of the trailers until their own casita was built.

When I arrived at St. Gregory's it turned out Hans was in Los Angeles arranging for the UCLA showing of the Chartres exhibit. The next morning after breakfast Sandy cornered me and invited me to the Finley casita for a woman to woman chat. Once comfortably seated together on their plush couch, my friend with her large sympathetic brown eyes began what sounded like a rehearsed speech she might have worked up under Ellen's guidance. "I want to talk to you about this Hans thing. Frankly, Margo, it seems to me and Howard, who's known you pretty long too, that you're just flinging yourself at men in your desperate loneliness."

"I never pretended I wasn't lonely," I retorted defensively.

"I mean, and I'm sorry if I hurt your feeling, what do you see in this small bald man, who's never been married or had children," she spluttered, "probably because he's too selfish, and all he's interested in is art and God, but not people!"

“Oh, Sandy, maybe you really can’t understand,” I replied, eyes shining. “But if, God forbid, you become a widow you might. I’m so sick of living just inside my own head. Even though Gustav and I didn’t get along that well – that’s an understatement – it was a relief from being me to have to be half of him. So when I’m listening to Hans going on and on about medieval French art, it’s like I feel that if he let me into his heart and mind as only a husband can do, then all his sensibility and wisdom – like all of France would pour into me and I wouldn’t feel so bored just living with me!”

Sandy looked at me with puzzled interest. “I suppose I know what you mean. Like even though I don’t play golf with him, when Howard comes back from his game and tells me about it, for that space of time I’m not just brooding about my sons-in-law and all that.”

I twirled a strand of hair from the mop I had taken out of the bun for good on my way back from the convent. “I suppose because Howard is such a big handsome guy you think little Hans is ugly. I’ve been pondering and pondering what I like so much about him, so you might as well be the one to hear it, Sandy. Maybe it sounds weird, but I actually like that round bald head. You know how when you have a baby, like my Natasha, and your Janet in the photo in your bedroom in Pebble Creek, who didn’t have much hair at first, you just want to kiss and kiss and kiss that head. It’s as if without the hair you’re closer to the baby’s little brain and you’re just pouring your love

into her, and she can't stop you because you're her mother and she's too little to push you away."

Sandy smiled and took one of my hands. "Margo, you're really great at explaining things."

I added quickly: "Of course I haven't kissed Hans, since there's nothing overt between us yet, but that's the feeling of it...and maybe just because he's never been married, maybe even a virgin, I sense how much he needs a woman's love to be complete."

When I saw Hans on the breakfast line the next day, I felt self-conscious. He hadn't responded to the letter I had written about my doubts concerning the nun-life. Maybe he didn't like my trying to get closer. The first indication was the absence of the hand-kissing gesture. Instead, he extended his hand. "As he shook mine, he winked. "Well, well. Nice to have you back. The pull of Chartres is practically unconquerable or, would you say invincible?"

I laughed nervously. The talk at the table was about an exhibit in the large Spanish-style chapel at Loyola Marymount in Los Angeles.

My perfect "second fling" didn't appear to be seeking me out for any soulful conversation. I had advertised at breakfast that anyone who missed me could find me in the lounge all day except for prayer times, hoping Hans would be the first. Then I settled myself in the lounge with a cappuccino and cheese to open stacks of mail that had accumulated in my long absence. No one came by.

Finally Brother Juniper passed through. I jumped up, gave him a long hug and asked where everyone

was. "Well, Becky's in the kitchen and John's busy with repairs to the monk's house. All the rest are working on the Chartres project. Since Hans came you should see them race through their usual morning chores. By 10:30 they're in the Bochenski's large living room. Like busy bees they assemble flyers, write letters to attract people to the shows. They're using our guests lists all the way back to 1975!"

"And what is King Hans doing while all this goes on?"

"Oh, he sits on the recliner grinning and cracking jokes. Ellen got him a cell-phone and he calls his friends all over Europe." Brother Juniper winked.

By lunchtime I was shaking inside worrying about my manipulative letter and Hans' reaction. I decided I'd do better taking the bull by the horns. "Herr Epstein," I said leaning forward across our table, "Can I see you for a few minutes, maybe right after this?"

"Certainly," he replied with his dead serious face on.

After we cleared the table, I ushered him over to a place in the lounge designed for tête-à-têtes, far from Father Michael's office. There were two armchairs facing each other across from a table strewn with Catholic magazines and newspapers.

"Perhaps I ought to apologize," I began in a meek voice head slightly bowed to avoid eye contact.

"What for, my dear?" Hans looked surprised. "You have been so good to me, this wonderful plan

approving for giving my exhibit all over. I am most grateful.”

“Actually I was referring to the letter. Since you didn’t respond, I’m thinking perhaps you found something in it, hmmm, inappropriate is the buzzword we use for that now.”

He lowered his head and cupped it in his hands, in what looked like a cross between praying and pondering. When he raised his face it was to say, “It is perhaps for me to explain, Frau Kemperdick. I have been single for so long that I am not always so sensitive to what women might be thinking. Many years ago after I became a Catholic, I thought of being monk – a Benedictine, actually! There was a monastery in Southern France I loved to visit. I kept visiting but not saying my wish to the Abbot but finally, when I did, he said I was much too nervous a person for communal life. Probably, he thought, the nervousness came from the hiding during the war. He thought living alone and being every day at my beloved cathedral of Chartres would be much better for me.”

“How interesting,” I broke in. I have thought that often about my new community. That is why I decided to come back here where life is less intense and I could be a more independent type of sister, if a sister at all.”

“To get back to your letter, when the Abbot told me I could not be a Benedictine, he also told me about making private vows. I didn’t know about that. So way back in 1970 after some years of trying it, he

received my final promise to be celibate all my life. It gave me peace. I have kept it, by the grace of God, all these many years." His smile was of a radiant sweetness.

Listening to this explanation I felt awkward. Since I was sitting there in my brown burlap jumper with my large crucifix, I could hardly say that I wouldn't have written such an intimate letter if I had known about his promise. What about my promise, if only for a year, and what about the vision and locution?

As if sensing my discomfiture, Hans concluded: "I don't want to pretend with you since I hope so much to become a friend. A woman so charming, simpatico and even from my own background as a Jewish person is not without difficulty. I know I could not write poems or letters to a woman without becoming closer than my vow would permit. One of the reasons I never would break my promise is that when I get closer to a woman I find that I am always thinking about how to please her and what to tell her. So much deeper for me, is to always be pleasing and speaking in my soul to Christ. Do you understand?"

I didn't answer. Perhaps if I fully understood his last reason, I would be like him, committed for life celibate.

"Why not think that God brought us together so that we might pray for one another and support each other's projects?" was his question, head tipped slightly to the side, green eyes pleading. With that he stood up and came toward me. Then he planted a kiss

on my forehead and turned around abruptly to walk out of the lounge.

I stared at the back of the short man waddling away in a state of disbelief. Had I called a month ago with the same probe would he have told me the same story? Probably so. And, then, would I have left the convent?

I tried to drag my heart from super-turn-on to neutral. It didn't work. I saw Hans often the rest of the day; at evening prayer across the chapel, at dinner across the table; in the lounge for a recorded concern of Bach Cantatas he had arranged for the community. In the night, lying awake, I went over each of his words again and again. "So charming, simpatico, a Jewish kinswoman." Suppose he made the vow so many years ago because couldn't fit in with the *goyish* Christian women he met. Suppose he never met as educated and cultured and attractive a Hebrew-Catholic as I was?

I confided my speculations to Ellen while she donned her elegant mauve silk jogging suit the next morning. "You're crazy. That man lives in the medieval world. Of course he would be chivalrous to a woman so obviously in love with him. Do you know you blush every time you look at him?"

"Hmmmmmmm." I bit down on my pre-breakfast bagel. "I suppose you're right. Pray for me, pretty please," I yelled just before Ellen shut the door on her way out for her run.

A few days later I made an appointment for the sacrament of reconciliation with Father Michael.

“Bless me father, for I have sinned. It is a month since my last confession. During this time I indulged in erotic fantasies about a man I can never have because of his vows and my candidacy to become a sister. I wish I was dead.”

“Now, now, Margo - how about joining the human race. Almost all celibates have fantasies. It comes with the turf. I suggest you get much, much busier. How about working on a new lecture series for the lay community? It could be given in the hiatus between the Chartres shows...Now, what do you think would be a good penance?”

I fiddled with my rosary beads. I know. Suppose I promise not to initiate any conversations or meetings with this man for any reason. Just respond to his professional questions.”

“Sounds good. May Almighty God bless you and forgive you all the sins of your life.”

It worked! For a whole week no more poetic lines forming in my mind to be written down and then trashed. No more letters. No more finding excuses to meet him about his project. I wouldn't say I felt peaceful exactly but less anxious. I think I might have made it if the next crisis hadn't hit so soon, barely a week after our pathetic showdown.

We were all sitting in the Bohenski's living room working on last minute details for the trip to UCLA. There was also a plan in the works for a trip to Europe with longer shows where I could give some of the lectures. A knock on the door. It was Brother

Juniper. "Sister Margo, Sister Barbara's on the phone from Arizona."

I took the call in the lounge.

"Hello. What's new? How are my sisters at St. Martin de Tours?"

"More to the point, how are you?"

"Just fine. You were right. I'm doing much better here than at the convent. Thank you for the timely intervention."

"Don't get too cozy, my dear. I need you right away."

"What?"

"Thanks for the enthusiasm....Only you can help me with this. The Vicar for Religious in Tucson needs a complete report of everything we've done since the beginning plus a redo of the Way of Life document to meet the specifications of a canon lawyer she's enlisted."

"Sure. We could knock it out in a month, I suppose. Why don't you send me all the materials and I'll FAX everything back with my suggestions," I replied.

"No. You don't understand. In the documents I say that I have an assistant leader living with me at the Hermitage helping me supervise everything with the candidates, novices, finances, etc."

"Why not get hold of that zippy woman who was at the retreat, what was her name, Janet, the former banker?"

"Come on, Margo. I need someone who can write and speak and who understands Church politics, and

who is also spiritual. There's no one who can do it the way you would with your quick mind and shrewd grasp of the Catholic scene."

"There's a lot going on here, Sister Barbara," I said in pitiful voice.

"I could insist under obedience, Sister Margo, but I'd rather you would want to help us this way. The whole future of our community may depend on this. Why don't you ask Our Lady what she would do?"

"Tell you what. I'll ponder it my heart, talk to Father Michael and call you back...hmmmm, next week." A lock of my hair by this time looked as tight as a 1930's style corkscrew.

Instead of running either to the chapel or to Father Michael's office I rushed to the Bochenski's casita and pulled Hans out to a bench in the plaza. "I need to check this out with you first, Hans." Breathlessly I told him the gist of Sister Barbara's request, describing the work she wanted me to do in the most sarcastic terms, "Visit each of the forty members in their States... sort out expense chits for over three years that Barbara has accumulated in shoe boxes. "I just want your okay to tell her that I'm indispensable on the UCLA showing and the tour in Europe which will probably begin in September."

Hans rubbed a forefinger on his lips and frowned. "Strange this should come up right now. I was praying about Europe. It seemed to me that in spite of your abilities as a scholar, Ellen would be much better to accompany me. She has the knowledge of the English cathedrals where we could perform.

Maryanne and Jack could handle all the practical arrangements."

"Forget it!" I shrieked. I jumped up and made my way to the chapel tears in my eyes.

"I hate her, I hate her, I hate her," were the un-nun-like words I used walking around in a circle around the grounds with Brother Juniper. Not one for swift motion in any circumstances, Brother was panting as he trotted by my side.

Finally he broke into my spluttering. "Let's sit down for awhile." I spied in the distance one of our wrought iron bench and slowed down.

Once seated, Brother Juniper wiped the sweat from his forehead. "You know the rule. Never make decisions when you're upset. Why don't we go back to the kitchen? I'll make you a bowl of soup; then we'll talk more about Sister Barbara's summons."

The anger abated as we strolled slowly back to the cafeteria. Anxiety symptoms began to rise up instead. The feeling was as if a baby octopus was trapped in my chest, its tendrils stretching out looking for something to suck out of its usual place. My heart?

Brother Juniper is a great comforter but annoying in a decision crisis. He never wants to talk about the details. I wanted to fulminate about the tediousness of the work I would have to do. He wanted to dig out the real source of the upset. He dished some of Becky's homemade soup out of Tupperware storing container into a pot for quick reheating. Then he asked "Now, tell me the truth, what would be really

be so terrible about helping Sister Barbara at the Hermitage for a year?"

The baby octopus seemed to have made its way from the chest to the stomach with a sensation like flu cramps.

"You think I'm afraid to be alone with Sister Barbara in case she'd succeed in making a real saint of me?"

"Have some soup," was his answer. There was a smirk on his round face that gave me the impression he had been thinking quite a while that I had some kind of revulsion to women, especially holy ones. He was like that. He stored up intuitions in waiting for the right moment. That perfect moment came when he could sense that the graces from his intercessory prayer and sacrifices were to combine in such a way that the subject of his ministrations might be willing to own the unpleasant truth.

I spooned the vegetable soup into my mouth and stared out the picture window of the kitchen at the pine trees. After rinsing out the pot and inserting it into the industrial washer, Brother Juniper came over to the window. He laid his beefy hand on my shoulder and squeezed.

"Look!" I pointed to the monastery parking lot. "There's Father Michael's pick-up! He must have just arrived." I ran out of the cafeteria hoping to intercept him before he got to the off-limits monk's complex.

"S.....t!" I yelled when the heavy wooden door of the cloister slammed shut with just enough time for Father Michael to walk out of hearing range.

Frustrated, panicky, and desperate, I went to Ellen's casita. I was just as glad Ellen was off to Los Angeles for the day, so I didn't have to consult her. I grabbed her phone to call my foundress.

"This is the phone of the Hermitage and the Sisters of Mary. Sister Barbara speaking. Please leave a message at the sound of the tone."

I paused. Leave it as a message? Maybe it would be better that way. "This is Margo Kemperdick. Sister Barbara, maybe this will come as a shock to you, but I've decided I can't be a nun. I'll pray you find someone else to help you and I'll still recommend the community to any older women I meet. Thank you for all your help."

I sighed deeply. On the way to my bed for what I hoped would be a long nap, I stroked Max and Mimi. "You could use a treat babies. How about a whole can of salmon?"

As I stretched out on my bed, I heard sharp knocking on the door of Ellen's casita. "Margo, Sister Barbara's on the lounge phone," came the voice of Brother Juniper.

I roused myself quickly. "Tell her I'll call her right back, Brother." I shoved the brown jumper and t-shirt into a ball in the closet, and put on a colorful wrap dress of Ellen's. Then I made myself a cappuccino. Before putting through the return call I also poured out a small glass of Merlot and sliced three thick slices of cheddar for solace.

Finally, I called. "Margo here. I suppose you got my message," I started tensely.

The soft pleading voice replied, "I don't understand. If you don't want to accept the role of assistant leader, why don't you say so? Your vocation as a bride of Christ is much more important."

I guzzled down half of the glass of Merlot and ate one slice of cheese before responding. "Sorry, just eating something. I was taking a nap when you called back before."

"Okay. Calm down. Just be a simple Sister of Mary living at St. Gregory's."

"I can't! And I can't explain either. It's just not me."

Then, in a stronger voice Sister Barbara asked, "Have you talked to Father Michael about this decision?"

My stomach was cramping. I spread my hand over it and squeezed. Then I screamed into the phone, "I'm having flu cramps. Got to get off. If I change my mind I'll let you know."

I ran to the bathroom, but nothing happened to bring relief. By now it seemed like twin octopi might be tangling in my stomach.

"Knock! Knock!" I pulled myself together and got to the door to hear the words, "Margo, sweetheart, it's Father Michael. Brother Juniper said you were looking for me."

I flung open the door, fell into the arms of the tall monk and started shaking and crying. Generally the monks don't visit the casitas except when there's a group celebration. Given my hysterical condition, however, Father Michael agreed to sit down at the kitchen table. Max and Mimi tried to jump onto his

lap. "Sorry, kiddos, I need him all to myself," I explained as I scooped them up and threw them out the door.

Breathing heavily, I summarized the events of the afternoon. The monk listened, his long fingers laced. The smell of sweat that permeated his heavy sack black habit was comforting.

"Margo, my dear," he took one of my hands in both of his. "This may startle you, but ever since I met you at the university, I thought you needed some in depth psychological counseling. No one is as tense and volatile as you just because of the ups and downs of life. These incidents with Robert and Hans and Mother Barbara must be opening some deep wounds from childhood."

I twisted a piece of hair with the fingers of one hand and plied the rosary beads with the fingers of the other one.

"Maybe so. I don't know if I could afford it. The real thing, I understand, would run me \$100 a week. I guess I could do it if I stopped giving to charity."

"As in charity begins at home?" Father Michael said gently. "Don't worry about that. I'm a trained counselor."

"I thought therapists weren't allowed to counsel friends?" The panic was diminishing, replaced by interest in this new idea.

"It's not recommended. The main reason is that most people won't show the worst side to a friend who they want to impress. In your case, you are so

open about the worst..." he stroked his beard. "I mean you don't seem to need to hide much."

I offered him some cheese and wine. He took the last slice of cheese but shook his head about the Merlot.

"I could make you a cappuccino if you like."

Father Michael looked at his watch. "Almost time for evening prayer. Tell you what. I'll pray over it tonight and see what the Lord has to say. Why don't you ask the Holy Spirit?"

"I'd be so grateful."

Was there distaste in his face, covered over by dutifulness? I looked to see but saw only love in those beloved grey eyes.

That night I skipped prayer and dinner. I still had dreadful anxiety feeling, but mostly I didn't go because I couldn't figure out what to wear. Revulsion filled me at the thought of the habit, but wearing something else and having to make an announcement I had ditched the sisterhood didn't feel good either. I was asleep before Ellen came back. Still feeling fragile in the morning, I donned the brown jumper and white t-shirt after all, just so I wouldn't have to explain.

At the end of breakfast the next morning, Father Michael came into the cafeteria and asked if he could see me. In a low voice he said, "The Holy Spirit did indicate I could be the one to help you. I think, though, we should just call it intensive spiritual counseling and I'll give it more of a psychological

basis than usual...what did you get about it in prayer?"

"Yes. Yes. Yes."

When we got to his office, I said, "Only one problem: so how can I fling myself onto the couch if there is no couch?" It was the first time I'd joked about anything for quite a while.

Grinning, the priest cleared piles of papers off the top of his desk, laying them in neat mounds on the floor. On the bare desk he placed a statue of a large wooden hand with the figure of a child leaning on it. I laid my rosary down near the statue.

After a healing prayer, Father Michael said: "Give me as long a description as you can of your relationship to your father. Start with your earliest memory."

"Hmmmmm. Okay. It's my birthday. My father is singing happy birthday and dancing me around. I'm feeling dizzy. I start to cry. He laughs and keeps twirling me. Then he kisses me on the mouth. I stop crying."

"How old were you?"

"Five."

"Where was your mother?"

"I suppose in the kitchen. She was always in the kitchen."

"What do you remember of how you felt when your father was dancing with you?"

"Scared but excited. Come to think of it, I always felt a little afraid of my father."

“Did you think he loved you more than he loved your mother?”

“Now, when I try to remember, or what I thought as a child?”

“When you were a child.”

“That hard for a kid to know.” I closed my eyes. “Strange. I never remember my mother smiling at my father or him smiling at her.”

“But you remember him smiling at you?”

“Always. He called me his Jewish princess. I think it made me feel like if I was his princess, he was a king, and I would always be safe.”

Father Michael leaned back in his chair. “When else have you felt like a princess?”

“When I found Jesus at the time of my conversion...during courtship and the honeymoon with Gustav...whenever I think a man loves me in a special way, even someone like Brother Juniper where it’s totally Platonic...and, of course, when I have a mystical experience of Jesus, like the spiritual marriage one.”

Before the time ended, Father Michael made me look closely at the child in the wooden ‘hand of God.’ He said, “Just stare at it. Let it make you feel safe.”

After the session I felt better, though I could not analyze why. I was able to go to the Loyola Marymount University show of “Chartres Comes to You” without any panic attacks. I sat behind a table in the lobby of the chapel giving out nametags, later collecting donations and serving refreshments. The

contributions toward future exhibits mounted up to a cool \$5,000!

“Did you ever wonder why you didn’t have any brothers or sisters?” Father Michael asked at my next time ‘on the couch.’

“Of course. I felt so lonely. All the other kids on the block in the Bronx had siblings to play with when they came home from school. Mother used to say that I was plenty for any family. Hmmmmm. It wasn’t till I was a teen I realized that this wasn’t a compliment. Whenever I asked my Dad why I couldn’t have a brother or sister he said ‘your mother got sick after you were born.’ Later I found out from an aunt that my mother had a bad abortion and a hysterectomy afterwards.”

Serene Father Michael leaned forward eyes gleaming with excitement. “I was just reading last week about new research on that. It shows that live siblings in families where babies have been killed by abortion, even if the parents never talked about it, it causes great insecurity for the live children. They feel as if they have to constantly prove their worth or they will be killed as well.”

Three months into my therapy I could see that I did have a problem with women, especially if they were like my mother, critical and withholding. If a woman cooked for me, that made it better, since my mother seemed happier about me when she was enjoying cooking. That explained my extreme reaction to Sister Barbara, who I had thought of as a

warm woman, withholding food on the discernment retreat.

Older men, even ten years older like Gustav was, were to be charmed and seduced. With my father dead and Gustav gone, I felt terribly insecure. I lost princess status. The married men in the community rightly put their wives first. Father Michael was more of a son figure. If there wasn't some kind of emotionally seductive feeling about the way an older man related to me I felt it as rejection. So, when Father Gormley seemed to prefer Sister Clare it felt like I was too bad to be loved.

At one of the sessions I came waltzing in announcing, "A breakthrough, Father Michael. I figured out that the panic attacks broke out just at that time because Hans, a fatherly figure even though close in age, was rejecting me. And Sister Barbara, a mother-figure, by asking me to come to be with her for a year, was putting me at a distance from further attempts to get Hans to make me his princess. I felt thoroughly emotionally checkmated. 'Check-mated,' a pun?"

"That rings true."

It took a few months for such strong insights into the roots of my extreme reactions, to percolate from head to heart. I began to feel less anxious as a result of the healings that came with the insights. When Father Michael thought I had done enough digging in the past for awhile, he got me working on prayer.

"When I watch you at prayer in the chapel, Margo, I notice that you seem mostly to be coming to God in

desperation; brow-furrowed, fingers clutching the rosary for dear life. Jesus promised peace to his disciples."

"Yeah, I know. I've always wondered about that. The only time I ever have any peace is by some infused mystical grace."

Father Michael came up with a remedy that sounded so banal at first I could hardly digest it.

"Margo. I want you to meditate on the concept of care-freeness."

"What?"

"Carefreeness."

"Who could be carefree with the millions of babies being killed in the womb, and the conflicts in the community, and...well, everything?"

"Think about the scene of Mary and Martha. Jesus tells Martha that she is busy and troubled about many things, but Mary has chosen the better part. Martha berates her sister for being, what? Carefree and absorbed in Jesus, instead of helping with the problem: hospitality for a band of disciples."

"Hmmmm. I've always had a hard time with that passage."

"Here's what I want you to do. Every time you feel driven with your work on lectures, planning, the need to analyze everyone else's problems at St. Gregory's and run your children's lives, stop still, say to yourself, "I am not a slave. I am a princess of the King of the Universe."

I laughed.

“Every day plan for some delight time with your spouse. You know, take a walk with him on the beach, or listen to music, or go to the chapel without an agenda.”

“My spouse? But I’m not a sister any more.”

“Do you think that only sisters are spouses of Christ? How could there be single and married saints if that were true? The soul of every woman and man is called to be the bride of Christ.”

“Maybe I’d feel more like the bride of Christ if I wasn’t so busy. Is that what you mean?”

“Right. So repeat your homework, Professor Kemperdick.”

“When I feel busy and troubled I will say “I am not a slave. I am a princess of the King of Kings. Each day I will plan a little honeymoon time to do something delightful with my spouse.”

Last Fling



BY THE TIME HANS, ELLEN, AND THE BOCHENSKIS left for the tour of England, a year later than planned, my life was pretty much back to normal. The day they left I got a dozen red roses to put under Gustav's portrait, a tradition I had dropped as a sister.

"Hi, old hubby. Whaddya think of your old wife back in her colors?"

Did he smile, or did I only imagine it?

Father Michael's advice about slowing down and living more like a princess of the King was paying off. From time to time the community women, who generally comment on such things more than men will do, would say something like, "You look so much younger, Margo," or "We like having you really back, and you seem happier, too."

When I began to believe that dull could be better than dramatic, it seemed like a good time to end my

formal appointments with Father Michael. I broached the subject with a rehearsed compliment: "Dear Father, now thrice beloved: student, mentor and healer."

He grinned at me across the desk as I took out of a basket of symbolic healing images I had collected over the year and a half of our therapy. There was the hand of God with the child engraved into it. Next to it, around in a circle, I placed a photo I dug out of me at twelve years old standing between my mother and father at Rockaway beach, all three smiling. To complete the circle was a statuette of a smiling Madonna with child from Bavaria; a metal holder in the shape of flames with a candle burning to represent the Holy Spirit; a photo of Gustav and with Natasha and new-born Lucia taken just before the accident; one of Johannes on a bridge in Heidelberg, and a holy card of the El Greco head of Christ.

"What have you stored up to question me about today Dr. Kemperdick, the woman?"

"I think that you've succeeded, with God's grace, in healing me."

"Death is the final healing," the monk repeated the famous slogan with a mischievous expression in his grey eyes.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I know all about it," I laughed. "I mean for now. No more anxiety attacks. I've even stopped twisting my hair, in case you didn't notice." I ran my hand smoothly down a long strand of hair. After breaking up with the Sisters of Mary I let my hair grow as long as it would, about a quarter the way

down my back. When it got too hot I gathered it on the top in a rubber band and made it into one long thick braid, Mexican peasant style. I also stopped slapping my hand over guilt feelings about trivia.

"I'm still hanging onto the rosary for dear life, but that's okay. After all, Mother Teresa and John Paul II always carry their beads."

"A little less tightly, no?"

"I tried loosening my grip after the panic attacks stopped, but it doesn't feel good. I figure I can measure my progress by the degree of tightness of the rosary-hold."

Smiling at Father Michael's non-committal face, I got impatient. "All right, already, you haven't said whether you think I'm okay or not!"

"I think you're doing beautifully. God puts everyone together differently, you know. You'll never be as roll with the punches as, say, Brother Juniper. You'll always be fairly high strung. Can you accept that?"

"Hmmmmm." I tightened the grip on the beads. "Maybe."

"Before we stop regular sessions, and of course you know that I'm always available to you for spiritual direction, I have a last big task for you."

"What?"

"Look down at your assembled icons on the desk. What's missing?"

"I dunno. Looks pretty complete to me. Everyone I love is there, human and divine."

“If you’re to love our neighbor as yourself, you have to love yourself. I’ve helped you to understand and love little princess child Margo. What about fifty-eight year old princess Margo?”

“Suppose she’s not that lovable?”

Father Michael stared at me pensively. Then he commanded, “I want you to go into the church for two full hours alone. Take notes now on what you’ll need.”

The priest dictated the instructions slowly to make sure I didn’t cheat on his prize exercise. “Bring plain unlined paper, a pencil, crayons or markers, clay and scraps of different colored material. Sit and pray until you can make either a colored drawing or a clay figure of yourself at fifty-eight who you can love the way God loves you and we love you in the community at St. Gregory’s. If it’s a drawing write your name at the bottom at any length you want, first name, last, pet-name, Mrs., Dr., Ms., professor, sister, mother. If it’s a clay sculpture, write all the names on a piece of paper you can keep underneath the statuette wherever you put it later.

I waited ‘til after night prayer to bring all my collected paraphernalia into the church. Once there I opened up the monk’s side-chapel. This was used by community members only when there was an overflow of guests or Sunday Mass-goers.

The chapel was about fifteen by fifteen feet. The walls were decorated with Russian icons. There was a red vigil lamp in front of each icon. The tabernacle was a simple hard wooden box on which was

engraved a stylized lamb, the resurrection victory flag held in its paws. It was the most beautiful place at the monastery.

After I laid all my stuff on the floor, I sat down cross-legged on the tile floor in front of Jesus hidden but really present in the tabernacle. Then I composed myself to try to see and listen.

The first half hour my thoughts sped about like clothing in a washing machine. I want to be a wife, or maybe a sister in an order I would start which would be different, a free-spirited single lay woman? Each one of the roles included self-devised images: wife in a bridal gown standing next to Hans; sister in brown rags a la St. Clare of Assisi; single lay woman in a colorful skirt and black leotard.

Then, of a sudden, peace rushed into my whole body, even up to my feverish brain. I closed my eyes.

I had an image of Jesus, flinging himself at me. He laid his bloody head in my lap and then lifted it, a pleading look in his magnificent eyes. I heard words in my soul, "Be mine and no one else's."

And, then, a few minutes later, "I am the heart of the world. Can't you hear the beat?"

I whispered back: "I want that so much, my Jesus, but I'm afraid. I need human love so much."

"I will send you the human love you need each day."

I remained for a good half hour breathing heavily, rapturous joy filling me. When the sensation began to dwindle, I opened my eyes. I felt beautiful and good,

like waking up after falling asleep on the beach after a long time in the ocean.

How would I draw that experience? I wondered. I certainly didn't feel I could sculpt it.

I closed my eyes again. This time the words that came were these, "If you saw life not as a burden but as a dance, you'd be happier."

Without much thought I sketched myself and Jesus dancing an Israeli *hora*. The picture of Jesus looked like the Jewish figure from the film *Jesus of Nazareth*, except he was smiling. It seemed as if the pencil decided how I wanted Margo to look at fifty-seven. I drew a woman's form with long flowing hair. I was wearing a simple calf-length flowing dress with a large crucifix. In the drawing I colored the dress dark red. Later I paid a seamstress to make the same basic dress in different colors: dark red to represent the precious blood; black for the Benedictine connection; blue for Mary, Exalted Widow. The summer outfits were of light gauzy material; the winter ones of wool.

Sitting in the chapel that night, I looked at the drawing with the dark red dress and then added a long white cord for a belt.

The bodies of the dancing figures, Jesus and I, were slanted backwards, hands joined tightly, as when the *hora* is done with one partner.

Pleased, I threw my crayons, paper and clay into my tote bag. On the way out I paused at the entrance

to the main church, set down my bag and danced around in the semi-dark singing, "I am Margo, a redeemed Jewish princess, blessed be the Lord."

In the morning my mind was full of questions. "What did it mean? If less than two years ago Jesus told me to be a sister and it turned out to be impossible for me to do, or apparently impossible, was that an illusion and this message real? Or, was this an illusion and that one real?"

At breakfast I was content to smile enigmatically and keep my mouth shut, but right afterwards I rushed to find Father Michael, with the rolled up drawing of myself dancing with Jesus in my hand.

"It worked. Here it is!"

Father Michael looked the drawing over nodding his head in affirmation. He listened thoughtfully to my account of the mystical words that came before the image.

"You left out something. What about your names that you were to write at the bottom."

"I did remember it this morning. I don't know. I don't like any of them: not Mrs., Dr., Sister...Oh, Father Michael, you don't think that I am supposed to be Sister Margo if only I would be sacrificial enough to do it? I mean, what do I do with the El Greco Christ spiritual marriage experience when he told me to join Sister Barbara's order? Was that an illusion? And if it was, why wouldn't this one be an illusion, too?"

The monk leaned back and closed his eyes, hands folded in prayer. Just when I thought he might have gone to sleep, he sat up straight and said, "I'm not

sure but what comes to me is that you should make a private vow, like the one Hans did. You could live here in your usual role as head of the lay community. Locutions are tricky. Jesus could have wanted you to try to be a Sister for a while, as a first step, and do something else now. Many of the saints were directed by God to go one place. They thought it was forever, but it turned out to be just a step toward something else. That's why in discernment we go less by spectacular supernatural experiences and more by Saint Ignatius Loyola's criteria. When choosing between two good paths, you go with the one that brings most peace. You were miserable as a sister. Try this single but consecrated life, and we'll see."

"Okay. That sounds real."

"Tell me those words again that Jesus said when he flung himself into your arms, the first ones."

"Be mine and no one else's." Repeating the words aloud brought with it the same sensation of joyful exaltation.

Father Michael looked down at the drawing again.

"Of course if you are going to dress in an unusual way people will question you. Wearing the cord would not be so good because it symbolizes being in a religious community with formal vows. How about saying you're a woman dedicated to Jesus with a private vow?"

When I opened the door to my casita, large orange fur balls of cat leaped at me.

“How about a can of sardines to celebrate, Max and Mimi? I’m no longer a barracuda. Jesus is my last fling.”

