

Cynthia Cárdenas-Kolak

Code Blue

**A Walk into the Kingdom
with the Ghost of Time**

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Kolak Group Inc.
Houston, Texas

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Code Blue: A Walk into the Kingdom with the Ghost of Time

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This Work is Dedicated
to the
Queen of Heaven and Earth
and the
Prince of Peace

Acknowledgements

This book was a labor of love. I thank my husband and my son, Steven, for their love and support. I thank my parents, Raymond and Anita Cardenas for raising me with strong morals and values. I thank my sisters, Susan, Carolyn, and Jacqueline for listening tirelessly to my stories, while offering much mercy and grace. I thank my brother, Thomas, for the music. But most of all, I thank God for colourful life, full of interesting and loving people, and for giving me the eyes to see the world and ears to listen to the music as uniquely as I do.

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Last, I would be remiss if I did not mention the inspiration behind this story, Mr. Ivor Arthur Davies, AM, whose generosity and kindness set me in orbit on March 21, 2013. Each chapter in this story is named after one of his many compositions.

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Introduction

This is a true story told in the context of a fictionalized tale to take a stab at how an ecumenical conversation might unfold between individuals from different religious perspectives. The purpose of such dialogue is not so much to will the other to one's point of view, but to grow to better understand and know the other as other with dignity and respect. Only love can truly evangelize and change hearts.

Conversations as such can be or get messy. It's tough to keep our inner judge and feelings in check. No one likes to feel mischaracterized or judged, and yet, good friends will work to steer fellow companions in this life to those things that are good and just, without strings attached or expecting anything in return. They simply act in accordance with a higher intention and purpose, knowing that it's best to let go of some battles (petty and snide arguments and offenses) in an effort to win the war (unity, mercy, and justice). This requires great spiritual maturity and the willingness to make sacrifices for others.

Charity and humility go a long way when the objective is to build bridges between people to bring about peace—heaven on Earth as the Kingdom of God. What amazes me most, is how the element of time does all the heavy lifting, if only we could be so patient to let go and let God.

Introduction

Given all that takes place and all the dialogue that is shared in this story, my hope is that the characters would want to reunite and break bread together on another occasion.

Chapter 1

Don't Believe Anymore

“Every word of God is a test; he is a shield to those who take refuge in them.”

~Proverbs 30:5

It was a mother's dream! I had the house all to myself. And that meant I could blast the stereo as I straightened up things here and there, rounding out my chores that early afternoon. I'd been taking in the last of ICEHOUSE's "I Don't Believe Anymore" when a rumble of thunder shook the house. I hoped that my husband and son were playing it safe out in the woods while engaged in another round of weekend airsoft. They weren't planning to be back until later in the evening. I hated to think that they might have to come back early. They had been looking forward to spending some time together, just father and son. Houston is a strange town when it comes to the weather. You could be driving on one side of the highway, dry as can be, and watch the hard rain plummet on all the cars over on the other lanes running in the opposite direction! So, I understood that chances were, Mike and Steven weren't under any threat of a storm. With

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these thoughts, the music shifted in the background. It was Lone Justice with the empathetic vocals of Maria McKee singing "Shelter". I ran to crank up the volume when I heard the boom of another clap of thunder.

I walked over to one of the windows up front to survey what the sky was doing. The clouds were rolling in and darkening the neighborhood. I could see that the wind had picked up considerably when my eyes fell on a couple of young men in white shirts and ties at the front door of my neighbor's house across the street. No one answered the door, although I knew my neighbors were home. I watched as the gentlemen grabbed their bicycles and headed towards our driveway. I backed away from the window and watched as they started across our lawn. Surely, they could hear the music. Before I knew it, I heard the faint sound of the doorbell as it competed with my jam.

"Just a minute!" I yelled over the music. I dashed into my office to turn it down and then ran into the foyer of our home mortified by the fact that I hadn't combed my hair, had on no makeup, and was still in my pajamas! "So sorry! Just give me a minute," I ranted apologetically. I made my way into the bedroom and re-emerged in one of my concert tee shirts, shorts, and my hair ratted up on my head. I made a stop into the kitchen and grabbed a couple bottles of water. I returned to the door and opened it, ready to offer my best "Mother Goose" for the guys.

"Hi! We're from the Church of Latter-Day Saints," said the taller of the two.

"I know, and thank you," I responded joyfully and matronly.

"Huh?" the gentleman sounded.

"Yes, I know a little bit about who you are and what you're doing. I think it's great. In this day and age, it takes a great deal of courage to talk to people about Jesus door to door even in this

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neck of the woods where most of us Southerners are happy to call home the *Bible* belt.”

The gentlemen were shocked. I think I might have taken them by surprise as I held out the bottles of water for them, “Here. I’m sure you must be thirsty. Just know that I want to thank you for your efforts. We’re on the same team, after all, as believers.”

“Believers?”

“Yeah. You believe in God, and that puts us pretty much on the same team. There are lots of folks out there that don’t believe anymore. I actually know a few things about your religion. As far as I’m concerned personally, the best things that ever came out of the Church of Latter-Day Saints were The Osmonds and The Killers! Oh, but, then there are Imagine Dragons and Stephen Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. He really smashed it, using biblical principles to teach the masses! I have to admit that his work especially touched my life, more so than the time when I went to Sunday school with my friends who shared your faith. So, I know enough about where you are coming from to appreciate your efforts.”

“You do?”

“I went to Sunday school with some friends who were Mormon here in Texas and others in Alaska when I was just a girl. In fact, I’ve been to Sunday school with the Presbyterians, the Baptists, the Catholics, the Lutherans,” I numbered on my hands while trying to recall the other denominations including those that didn’t declare a brand of Christianity.

“So, what are you?”

“Well, that’s a long story. Let’s just say that I’ve always had a thing for God.”

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Just at that moment, a thunderous sound bellowed as the rain started to hammer the neighborhood as if some strange force was creating a reason for the young men to stay and hang around for a while.

“Looks like we have the time,” beamed the tallest of the two young men, who seemed to be the spokesperson for the duo.

“I love sharing my story because it’s not all about me, and every name, number, and date is loaded with meaning and importance. Every episode sounds really random and appears to go nowhere until finally, things begin to come into focus. That’s pretty much how life works. Hindsight is 20/20, right?”

The boys stood at the door in silence with puppy-dog eyes. I paused for a moment, took a look around and hesitated, before stepping back and welcoming the missionaries into my home.

“Well, come on in. I’m Cindy. You’re welcome to wait out the storm in my library over here just to your right. If you’ll listen to my silly goose of a story, I’ll sit and listen to your spiel. Deal?”

“That will work! I’m Elder Young, and this is my friend Elder Smith.”

I shook each of their hands as they came in and found seats at a small table that was situated in the middle of what used to be our formal dining room. The walls were lined with shelves of varied heights full of books, except for the front wall where the windows provided a view to the outside. My folk harp was stationed in the far right-hand corner next to a tower of art supplies that seemed to have a life of its own as it grew over the months. It leaned against a bookshelf that was crowned with a stack of coiled colored belts of canvas that sat next to a small collection of trophies from Tae Kwon Do. Just a few inches to the left of the tower of colored belts hung a tapestry of a southwestern house of God with my husband’s Indiana Jones-like whip draped over it. Below the

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tapestry was a much shorter bookshelf that made it possible to make the house of God the central focus of the whole library. A wooden miniature of Noah's ark that my mother-in-law made found its home there. To the left of the tapestry was a tall bookshelf with a small easel atop of it, presenting a blue book, one of my publications as a trainer of teachers. An entryway into my kitchen was adjacent to this assortment of books. The wall that extended back towards the foyer was decorated with our accumulation of certificates of higher education situated just above another stretch of mid-sized selves of literary treasures.

"We're not exactly the formal type," I explained. We decided to keep all our books and knick-knacks in this room right across from our office for quick and easy access.

"You have a doctorate," noticed Elder Young as he pointed to the framed document on the wall among the others that belonged to me and my husband.

"Yeah, it took me twelve years after earning it to finally hang it on the wall," I admitted. "It's only been there for almost five years now."

"Really? Why didn't you put it up sooner?" asked a curious Elder Smith.

"I don't know. Maybe it was because I didn't feel like I had found what I was looking for. I went into graduate school wanting to understand how it was that I knew what I knew. I had dreams that came true and intuitions that were spot on, but I didn't really know how to explain these kinds of things to others, nor did I feel "normal" even mentioning them out loud. You could say that I've always been ahead of my time. My professor asked me about my research interests, and I told him that I wanted to learn how one comes to know what they know. He wrote the word "methods" next to my name. So, I ended up studying research methods. It made perfect sense. I'd always been a very serious seeker of truth.

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What I eventually learned over time is that the paper on the wall wasn't ever about "knowing". It was about the fact that I was greatly loved through the process of "finding out". I had four academics who stepped up with me to earn that degree, and I had a lot of divine intervention. It's not my own."

"So, you consider yourself more science-based in your faith? Is that right?"

"Yes and no, Elder Young, or can I call you by your first name? You may be here for a while. We might as well be on more informal terms," I suggested.

"I'm Phil, and this is my friend Tim" he disclosed as if I wouldn't pick up on the fact that he was giving me random names and not their real ones.

"Okay, Tim, I learned the answer to my original interest later, after I gathered more data about my life. I'm fifty now. I earned my doctorate when I was 33. I didn't have enough experience at the time to more fully appreciate the gifts in my life. It's taken quite some time to figure out that I've always been quite a contemplative and that much of my knowledge comes from prayer."

"Prayer?"

"Oh, yes! Prayer!" I mused. "My spirituality is based on both faith and reason. Unfortunately, I relied on reason a little too much in the beginning. I once thought that I could be a strong independent woman all on my own and live my life on my own terms. And I certainly had my reasons. But I didn't believe that anymore the day I met my husband. I thought I married the perfect guy and would have a perfect life. But then, there came a time when I didn't believe that anymore either, so much so, that I thought I was having a nervous breakdown. I called out to God to tell me who I am. I just couldn't accept that maybe I wasn't the person I thought I was.

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Everything came to blows when my child completely lost it at school one day when he was just in first grade. It amounted to much soul-searching, therapy, and the threat of divorce. Not only was my family falling apart, but I thought I was losing my mind.

I went to all the books, the research studies, the on-line resources, the educational workshops I could find only to take in the myriad of contradictions out there. For every research study that pointed in one direction, I could find another that suggested the opposite. After a while I found myself spinning out of control, lost in all the data. It was as if I had gone online to find out why I felt so bad, thinking I might have strep throat, only to draw the conclusion that I was dying! Admittedly, this kind of absurd-self-diagnosis was all wrong and seemingly unrelated to my original quest for the truth. But somehow, this gut-level feeling I had as I searched for answers was in tune with something I needed to uncover. I was dying, but not in the literal sense. I was dying to myself—the self that took all of my hopes, anger, and fears and boxed them up deep inside me where I thought they'd never be found.”

“Why didn't you go to your pastor?”

I looked very seriously upon my visitors, “I didn't trust that I would get any better help from the men who led the houses of God I visited, my dear. After all, many of the men I was supposed to trust didn't exhibit trustworthy behavior, so I wouldn't go near,” I playfully rhymed to take the sting out a very personal set of images that flashed across my mind.

“My grandfather was among the worst of them. He was the sort of fellow who treasured his sense of entitlement and freedom, thinking he could do and say anything he wanted without considering the repercussions on his family, church, business, and friends. Frankly, it took me a great deal of time to forgive him for all of the damage he caused. I realized that there were good things

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about him too. I couldn't let the bad completely eclipse all those things he got right in his life. For all I know, he probably wasn't at the very root of the sin and darkness that plagued my family.

But still, I overheard enough stories about other male figures and had enough experiences with shady menfolk to carry a big chip on my shoulder. I grew to totally distrust men and kept them at a distance. I wasn't going to be vulnerable. My grandfather was closely tied to the Church, so when it came to the idea of trusting any of the clergies, I saw that as a big dead end too. I thought it best to leave things between me and God.

I had much to learn way beyond any special degree or school of thought. I came to understand that everything I said and did, everything-everyone I encountered mattered and for better or worse, had something to teach me. I grew to accept that real growth is never comfortable and comes mostly when there is some sort of push-back, a bipolar opposition, the very kind of thing that made me feel like I was reaching my limit of sanity. And that's the crux of the matter. In these situations, you either fall or you rise to the occasion to receive grace. Either way, there's always grace. I was taught that everything comes in threes. Maybe so. But I would venture to argue that the precursor to getting to three is the fact that two opposites came together with love to become one before they became three. I know I must be talking in circles..."

"No! Go on. It's really raining out there. We have time," Tim urged and then took a sip of water.

"I thought I was totally losing it, until the perfect alignment of the stars," I said, lost in my thoughts as I shook my head and babbled on as the gentlemen began to dread the fact that they were trapped in my home.

"We went down south. We went down under.
I walked right up to the Man of Colours!"

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You seem to speak in riddles,” sounded Phil.

“No, like nursery rhymes,” I said with a twinkle in my eye. “I know. I tend to bat my wings. There’s just too much to explain and so few words in the English language to share it in a way that would do it justice. And you’re so young.”

I leaned in towards my guests and offered a dreamy smile. “I always wanted to be a kindergarten teacher. I loved nursery rhymes. I actually wanted to be Mother Goose! I grew up in the eighties. Music could be seen on TV when music is usually simply heard. But some of us can see the music with or without the assistance of the boob tube, and it tells us things. For me, it has always been a segue to deep contemplation, deep prayer. You could say that I let the music speak. Then there was Oprah. I am part of the generation that was raised on her, even before she had *Super Soul Sunday*.”

“Come again? Boob tube? ABBA, as in father?” Phil puzzled.

“Oprah?” Tim snickered.

“That’s what we called the television back in the day, and on it we had both music and Oprah on it!” I chuckled. And ABBA was a great pop group of two married couples who had a real talent for delivering melodies with sounds of joy despite some of the sad things they expressed in their songs. The eighties were a time when songs like “Kyrie” by a band called Mr. Mister could sit at the top of the Billboard Charts for weeks and not be labeled and limited to the Christian genre. There were songs such as “All You Zombies” by The Hooters that referenced the *Bible* over and over again. Then there was my favorite music video, “Stranger in Town” by a group called Toto. It presented an awesome string of vignettes that played with the question of what would happen if Jesus came back. Would he be recognized? I always wondered if I would recognize him.”

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“So, who was the man of colours? I thought you were talking about Joseph and his coat or maybe even Jesus.” Phil pressed.

“Yes and no. On the surface, I was talking about a rock star. In spirit, I was talking about the Creator himself. The musician is the lead singer of an Australian band called ICEHOUSE. He’s a musical genius, and I’ve always been totally crazy about anything Australian and for no concrete reason at all! I have all of Olivia Newton-John’s albums. You’re probably too young to know about her. I love the story *Alexander and Terrible Horrible No Good Very Bad Day*, where, spoiler alert, Alex decides that it would be best to move to Australia by the end of the story! They made a movie based on it recently. Then there were the Koala bears. I just loved Koalas when I was a little girl. Later came *Muriel’s Wedding*.”

“So, what do you mean when you said you stood before the man of colours? Why do you call him that? What do you mean when you said that the stars came into perfect alignment?”

“With perfect timing, the Lord made it possible for me to not only begin to really understand who I was, who I am, and who I was becoming, but he placed me in the very same room with the Australian rock legend at a charity event in Sydney, Australia, so I could walk up to him and face him and understand that he was real.”

“So, are you talking about God, or are you talking about the rock star?”

“Both. It’s weird. I know, and it’s funny how some of us subscribe to the notion that somehow time and distance keep us separated when this is a big lie. Distance can make us feel safer. It allows us to feel unaccountable when nothing can be further from the truth. Something just snapped when I recognized that the rock star was a real person, a mysterious other who I didn’t really know but somehow knew. Call me crazy or a silly goose! But deep in the recesses of my imagination, he had been much like a guardian angel

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who sat in the corner of my room and knew all of my secrets. “Man of Colours” was the name of both one of his songs and the album in which it could be found. The beautiful melody would come back to haunt me in special ways over time, although many of his earlier works had already placed a strange spell on me. This reckoning completely changed the trajectory of my life. Like the Star of Bethlehem, his image and music led me to the foot of Jesus. Other famous musicians were there, but in my world, he was the brightest of all the stars.”

Chapter 2

West Eleven Genius

“So, whoever is in Christ is a new creation; the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come.”

~2 Corinthians 5:17

The wind howled and blew so hard that the rain appeared to fly sideways through the air.

“Let me turn on the lights,” I said as I got up to flip the switch on the wall.

“Perfect alignment? Details, please,” Tim pushed.

“When my life began to fall apart, I wanted to go to Australia. I wanted to find a psychologist, Dr. Tony Attwood, and learn all I could from him. I wanted to listen to ICEHOUSE live, not just recordings. I wanted to be where I thought the grass was going to be greener on the other side. I was only going to be in Australia for seven days. It was just a short window of time. ICEHOUSE stopped touring, and the good psychologist wasn’t slated to

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conduct any workshops during the time that I was going to be in the country. But the Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways. He made it possible for me to go to Australia, go to a special meeting in which Dr. Attwood and his colleague, Dr. Michelle Garnett, were hosting an informational session, and go to the charity event in Sydney to be in the same room with the lead singer of ICEHOUSE. I longed to just hear his voice, to hear him sing live.”

“So, did you get to hear him sing?” Phil asked with curiosity.

“No. In many ways, I experienced something much better. Something quite unexpected and unexplainable when I visited with him,” I said with much conviction. “He wore his sunglasses at night. No matter. I wasn’t one to ever make much eye contact when visiting with people to begin with, but somehow this night was different, especially since I was the one doing all the talking. I’m usually the one to sit silently while sponging everything around me, every nuance, every word, every movement. But I kept talking and looking upon the rock star as I chatted him up in a one-way conversation. It made perfect sense to me because I believed he really wasn’t there. Peering into his sunglasses, only made me feel as if my words were being soaked up into a black hole of nothingness, complete absence. Perhaps that’s what the rock star wanted, to be absent. One can only let her imagination run wild when conjuring up reasons why one would wear his shades at night. By the time I parted ways with him, I was convinced that he was wearing those shades because it must be blinding when you reflect light from a greater source. I spoke *at* him as if I was shadow boxing with a specter from my past. It wasn’t real. He wasn’t real, I allowed myself to believe. But then something quite unexpected happened.

He took his index finger and tipped the bridge of his sunglasses down so that his blue eyes appeared amused and transfixed on me. Who knows what he thought! All I know is that as I gazed back at him, I suddenly became aware that he was in fact very real. I instantly became so self-conscious, that I began to shake my head

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as I grew more and more lost in his eyes. It was a defining moment as I saw my past, present, and future come together in such a way that I came to know some things that I couldn't have known, shouldn't have known, but knew none-the-less. I even knew things about the man who initially hid behind those dark shades that kept me from getting a sense of his spirit. But when I saw his eyes peeping back at me over the rims of his spectacles, I stood amazed in a grace that I still struggle to understand today.

I'd come full circle to face the man I could swear existed in a secret corner of my room who knew my every thought, who saw my every act and leaked out the details of the dossier he kept on me in his songs. I both loved and feared him for he represented a part of me that I tried to hide for years, that I kept protected, that I had always kept at arm's length. But then, there was nowhere to hide or run, nor did I want to anymore. I'd specifically cried out to God, 'Please tell me who I am!' just weeks before this encounter. And I was being uploaded with all the answers all at once as I stared into the eyes of the humble stranger who was stationed before me, front and center of the room.

I'd been around celebrities in past, but this was very different. Even the guy who I commandeered to go up there with me to approach the West Eleven Genius for an autograph observed, 'You were treated very well. They usually just scribble their names, but he wanted to do things just right for you.' It was true. I had been handled quite remarkably and so much better than I deserved or could ever dream, given all that I confessed to him. In fact, he should have been insulted and peeved that I was up there bugging him for his autograph. If he was, he hid it very well."

"Come again?" Tim chuckled.

"West Eleven Genius?" Phil repeated. "What do you mean by that? And what do you mean by confession? What did you say to him?"

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“The West Eleven Genius” references a song that he wrote that appears to mirror himself in many ways, especially in the context of the consummate professional who routinely does the social rounds expected of those who live the life of a celebrity. He was at the charity event to serve as a judge for a concert tee-shirt contest they were having that evening. I brought the Pat Benatar tee-shirt that I had worn back in 1988 when I served as our campus’ entertainment chair in college.

I chose to invite her to our campus to play for homecoming as opposed to his band. My reasons were all my own even though I had a committee to which I had to answer. While they wanted me to look into the availability of ICEHOUSE, I told them Ms. Benatar was available and omitted the fact that I had not called to inquire about Mr. Iva Davies’ band. Years later, I found myself still very preoccupied with the whole incident.

On one hand, Ms. Benatar sang songs that reflected female empowerment in a world that was still very sexist, while at the same time sang songs that acknowledged other truths as reflected in “Hell is for Children”, a song about child abuse. They meant the world to me. They justified the anger and rage I harbored for years. But then, during soundcheck, when she came to our campus, she sang a beautiful song called “One Love: Song of the Lion”. It was the answer to all the turmoil that had been surfacing on campus as tensions grew over race relations, religious beliefs, and sexual identity. In many ways, the concert itself worked to unify our student body with one constructive goal—to bring to the stage a woman who then offered a song of great healing about Christ. Or then again, it might have been Bob Dylan as there were specific references to his prophetic song “A Hard Rain is a Gonna Fall”.

On the other hand, Iva Davies was the man whom I should have approached and simply thrown my arms around him as if I met my long-lost twin brother for the first time. The projections I place on him, after all, said a lot more about me. But I didn’t embrace him, because not only had I not fully embraced my own

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identity, but I had major issues with men. Worse yet, I had preconceived notions of celebrities and rock stars. You could call them prejudices. But the encounter I had with this enigmatic figure, completely defied my expectations, and I was truly humbled. I confessed that I invited Ms. Benatar and grew to regret the fact that I hadn't followed through with looking into bringing his band to our campus. I told him about our campus troubles and how the song "One Love" brought about healing for many that day. But when he lowered his glasses and I peered into his eyes, I turned into complete mush as I realized that for me "One Love" was about something more, though I couldn't put my finger on it. For some reason, the rock star reminded me of my godfather. I knew it had something to do with perfect timing, in that my godfather gave me his pocket watch when I met him, but there was more. In retrospect, it was the look in my godfather's eyes when he gave me his timepiece. It was a gaze I never forgot. It was the same regard I saw in Mr. Davies' eyes.

After listening to a young man with autism sing a couple of songs earlier in the evening to demonstrate how music therapy can bring a person out of his shell, I intuited and understood at a deep level that Mr. Davies' music had been very good for me. In retrospect, it was to be expected. I had been inundated with ICEHOUSE music during the time that I was becoming a confirmed Catholic, a special time when our baptismal promises are renewed, and the Holy Spirit brings us special gifts."

"Catholic? You're a Catholic?" Tim pressed.

"She did mention having a godfather. I think that is a Catholic thing. Isn't it?" Phil said to Tim and then directed his attention to me.

"It depends on what you mean by Catholic, I suppose," I came back. "For me, it meant that I was declaring that I was a person who could universally worship and praise God anytime, anywhere and with anybody because the Holy Spirit was going to come and

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shower me with gifts while reigniting the baptismal promises that were made for me by my parents and godparents when I was but an infant. I had no idea what “Catholicism” really was or *really* meant. Sounds kind of crazy, I know. But what is even wilder was the fact that I could be found in Protestant churches on any given Sunday too. For me, it was all about love and Jesus, who was Love incarnate. I told you that I had always had a thing for God.

Needless to say, I found myself muddled between Catholicism and Protestantism and didn’t even fully appreciate it for what it was for quite some time. But I must acknowledge, that I discovered my true relationship with God only when I sought out higher ground between the two seeming dualities. It’s what has always made the greatest difference in my life, because only when one is seeking the higher ground, one is seeking the Holy Spirit. If one is only seeking to win through a one-sided conversation or without fully acknowledging “the other” in a respectful and dignified manner, there can be no real connection to the Paraclete. This means that we must be able to face those things that we fear the most, including the possibility that we could be mistaken, wrong, unjust, or even hypocritical. But sometimes it’s even scarier to find out that even in the face of “getting it all wrong” you are still very much loved and blessed.

So, it wasn’t until Mr. Davies started talking back to me, that I snapped to the possibility that he really was present indeed. He was real,” I began to reminisce again. “I asked him to sign my Pat Benatar Tee-shirt. A lady sitting next to him said, ‘Yes! Oh yes! You have to do it!’ I wanted to thank her because he looked pretty blank to me after I asked. It was like Mary prompting Jesus to make more wine at the wedding at Cana. Realizing that I might have pressed my luck, I thanked the rock star after he signed my shirt and turned to make my way back to my seat. I began to wonder if I had violated the prime directive, so I needed to get out of there fast.

“Prime directive?” Tim uttered with confusion.

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“Don’t you watch *Star Trek*?” Phil chuckled at his friend. “My dad watched it all the time. It was a strict order to avoid interacting with beings from the past because it could change the trajectory of the future.”

“And it did,” I admitted. “I had dismissed myself and was walking away when Mr. Davies called out to me while extending his hand out to his side as he said, ‘You know I met her. She was this tall.’ He was referring to Pat Benatar. ‘We were under the same label,” he continued. I was taken aback, as I visualized a butterfly flutter about when he mentioned his label. I remembered it was Chrysalis.

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing or seeing for that matter. He made a bid for a conversation, but I was not in a position to handle it. I was very aware of our surroundings and the timing. It wasn’t the place or time to utter all that I really wanted to say or do or acknowledge. So, in stark contrast to what I’d always done in the past, I babbled on and on, bewildered that not only was I talking to Mr. Davies, but I was talking! If you knew me, you’d understand that this was miraculous in its own special way. It wasn’t me, but it was me. I was teetering between the past and the present while talking about Pat Benatar and how she sang “One Love” and how music can be so very healing while concealing the fact that his music contributed to my personal healing. When I looked down and saw Mr. Davies shift his sunglasses to make eye contact with me, I froze in my tracks and just shook my head. I wanted to erupt but kept my composure, and politely dismissed myself once again. I returned to my seat, but never to my old self again. I was forever changed. Even a woman that I barely knew could see it a couple of days later.

“Something happened to you. You are glowing. You need to write it all down. Keep writing until you feel the butterflies,” she urged me to do. There was something about her that reminded me of my mother-in-law, who died a couple of years earlier. At first, I thought it was the fact that she kept apologizing about being a little

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on the tipsy side. My mother-in-law hated anything that had to do with alcohol. I went to bed unsettled about it, as I realized that I couldn't recall the name of the woman who offered her advice. When I found her the next day, I was astounded when I was reminded that her name was, in fact, the same as my mother-in-law's. It was like someone threw gas into the fire that was set ablaze in Sydney. Thirty-three months later, I had a finished manuscript in hand and a relentless fixation on Iva Davies. I couldn't understand how it was that this man perplexed me so. I remained on a quest to figure out what it was about him that drove me to *The Ghost of Time* and to the edge of insanity for there is a very fine line between pure lunacy and pure genius."

"Ghost of Time?" Phil uttered under his breath.

"In my world, The Holy Spirit," I clarified. Only the Holy Spirit can place you in the midst of the stars!"

Chapter 3

The Ghost of Time

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, on your own intelligence do not rely; In all your ways be mindful of him, and he will make straight your path.”

~Proverbs 3:5-6

There was a long uncomfortable pause before another crash of lightning, followed by an immediate roar of thunder, broke the silence. The lights blinked.

“Whew! That was close!” I gathered.

“I don’t get it,” Tim eventually charged in all seriousness. “I don’t get it at all. Aren’t we talking idolatry here? What kind of religion do you follow?”

“I heard that there is a lot of idolatry in Catholicism,” Phil chimed in.

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“Much is said about the Catholic Church, and not all of it is good or,”

“So, you’re not a Catholic?” Phil interrupted to ask.

“I didn’t quite say that Phil.”

“Ah hah! So, you are Catholic, aren’t you!”

“What do you believe?”

“I think you need to learn more about the Church of the Latter-Day Saints!” he fired back.

“I learned a lot from your religion, and some of it has stayed with me, and some of it has not. It took me a great deal of time to get to where I am today, and one thing I know for sure is that few people immediately and completely believe in *everything* that their religious leaders teach. They have their own questions, doubts, and validations when they read the *Bible*. Their personal victories and struggles create special filters they use to understand the scriptures. We are all works in progress. We are all on developmental trajectories. What doesn’t make sense today, might make sense tomorrow. I know Mormons who think gays should be embraced in their communities and Catholics who think women should be allowed to be priests. You might know a Baptist, but it doesn’t mean you know everything about Baptists. You only know one Baptist. And that Baptist today, can become a Methodist tomorrow. C.S. Lewis was once an atheist but became a Christian. Sigmund Freud was once a Christian but became an atheist. That’s why we need to pray and ponder what we read in the *Bible* in relationship to what we are being taught in relation to how we are living. Truth has a way of rising to the top.

“Few people even read the *Bible*,” Tim added. “Catholics don’t.”

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“I know Catholics who do. We all hear things, but few go the extra mile to see for themselves if what they hear is really true. We jump to conclusions and often too soon. I suspect that there are far more untruths about many religions today than there are truths. Religion is under attack, and many people are leaving their houses of God across the board in most Christian denominations. So, tell me. How well do you understand your religion? What do you wonder about it?”

“What do you mean by wonder?”

“When it comes to God, there is a great deal of mystery. The more I learn about Him, the more intrigued I become. I recognize that while I know some things, there are many more that I simply do not know or understand. I figure that all will be revealed in His time.”

“How can you be so sure that you’re even headed in the right direction?”

“They say that only time can heal our deepest wounds. They also say that in time, all things will be revealed. Give it time. It’s within the contexts of sayings like these, that I’ve come to believe that “time” is just an essence of God—especially when one alludes to “perfect timing”. It’s one thing to avoid “missing a beat” or maintaining a tight schedule. It’s another to recognize the otherworldliness of how dreams, thoughts, and actions within our interior worlds line-up in a kind of perfect harmony with those things that can suddenly occur in the outer, exterior domain. And what’s more? These perfect intersections between time and space somehow leave impressions that change us. They cause us to grow. So, when I crossed paths with Mr. Davies in Australia, the trajectory of my life had been totally recalibrated and uplifted in many ways. It’s kind of hard to explain.

“You’re not making any sense,” Tim searched.

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“Let me start by explaining something about one of Mr. Davies' most famous songs, “Great Southern Land”. I once read an article where Mr. Davies explained that a phrase in his song was grounded in a time when he noticed that his father was covered in black soot after fighting bush fires. He went on to point out that the flora and fauna in Australia actually needed the yearly bush fires to penetrate and crack open the tough outer shells of the very seeds that would bring forth new growth, new life. I took that as an indication that the bush fires in Australia were responsible for turning the seeds and even his own dad black—a loaded concept for me personally. It would take me over five years to figure this out.

Interpretation of lyrics can be funny when you compare and contrast what any phrase might mean to the artist who wrote it versus what it might mean to the listener. Mr. Davies' story reminded me of John 12:24, “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit.” I understood at a visceral level that I needed to go to that great southern land where this nut, err, this seed could “crack open”. But by what flames? It was the flames of the Holy Spirit, or what I came to call the Ghost of Time due to events that fell into place over time like as if all had been carefully plotted well in advance without my knowledge of it. I was burned black.

Change and time go hand in hand. Perhaps the Australians understood this too on some level when they commissioned Mr. Davies to take his anthem, “Great Southern Land” and expand it to synchronize the music with the carefully orchestrated happenings on land and on the bay in Sydney, Australia, to usher in the new millennium in the shadow of all the hoopla over the Y2K bug. Mr. Davies called this new version of his song, “The Ghost of Time”. Surely, all eyes would be on the festivities in Australia during a most auspicious time to showcase their very best to the whole world. After all, they were getting ready to host the 2000 Summer Olympics. You were probably just babies back then, that is if you were even born yet!”

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“I’m 19,” Tim offered.

“I’m 20,” Phil chimed in.

“It was my mother who called me to ensure that I was tuned into the broadcast where I saw and heard Mr. Davies triumphantly present his work, donning a silver crucifix around his neck, against a black backdrop, framed in an electric blue suit. My heart sank as I knew that all of this was not just happenstance. No. It was prophetic. We were going to be entering an age when faith and reason would clash on the world’s stage at a new magnitude, for there are those who want to control time and others who understand that it is time that most greatly influences us and, in the end, has the last word. Isn’t that the most fabulous part of understanding the Living Word? That God loved us so much that he gave us his only son to take away the sins of the world through his death and resurrection? And we, as followers, are then charged with following in His footsteps to invite others into His kingdom, just as you are doing today? What great work you’ve chosen to undertake! To lead others to repent and to believe in the Gospel! This is what St. John Paul II echoed out to everyone when he recalled Vatican II’s summons for a New Evangelization in the Catholic Church and called for a Great Jubilee for the year 2000 to offer mercy and forgiveness of sins.”

“Well, that’s what we’re here to clarify and to teach!” Phil came back while shooting a smile at his buddy. We’re here to free you from the oppression of the Catholic Church or any other religion. You don’t have to do what the pope or any other false teacher tells you to do or to believe what he wants you to believe. The Church was corrupted during the Great Apostasy when the Church became Roman and integrated many teachings from the pagans. It no longer was the church that the original apostles died for. Catholics and other groups practice idolatry when the *Bible* clearly says that idolatry is wrong, with all those statues and icons.”

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“Perhaps this is where I need to make a major clarification myself, Phil. Let’s not be naïve. Every church has leadership, in one form or another, who calls the shots. And yes, I can point out the scriptures in the *Bible* that support Catholic doctrine. I can also show you the scriptures that Protestants use to dismiss the pope and other Catholic teachings. And when it comes to statues and icons, these are inspired works, or in other words, works that were made “in the spirit”. And by the way, Catholics and other groups do not worship them. It’s no different than hanging pictures of your family members on the wall in your home to remember them. Those photographs are not shrines of worship, nor are statues or icons.

Many of us find inspiration and special connections to God in the sheer beauty of inspired works. I would say that my life-changing experience in Australia was one in which I experienced a time and place where the good, the true, and beautiful intersected in such a powerful way that all of those pent-up feelings I had boxed up deep inside of me shot up and out in a way that I could no longer deny or ignore them, and it changed me to the extent that a stranger could clearly see it. In her advice, I was prompted to trace the fingerprints of the Holy Spirit in my life. The good usually came in the form of people. The truth came in the form of the Word, and the beauty came to me in the form of inspiring music, art, poetry, literature, and film.

“Well, the Word is very powerful,” offered Tim. “You got that one right.”

“Words are very powerful indeed. From the start of Chapter 1 in Genesis, we come to understand that God spoke all the universe and everything in it into existence. We all were given a similar capability on a smaller scale, but just as powerful, none the less. It was Wednesday, the day before Passover, that I gave words to my most inner desires for the perfect husband in the spring in 1993. I spelled out his every attribute and offered it up in prayer before a crowd of amused colleagues at work. Later, that evening, I received

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a phone call, ‘We have your Renaissance Man! Will it be OK for us to leave your phone number in his mailbox? We’ll direct him to call you tomorrow evening at 7.’ It was too good to be true, but what did I have to lose?

What I didn’t know at the time, was that my future husband, had walked into his principal’s office and whined with good humor and gross exaggeration, ‘Here I am, a single guy, working in a school district where the average age of all the teachers is my age, and I get stuck in the one school, where everyone could be my mother! Find me a woman, or I’m out of here!’ What he didn’t know, was that his principal was going to be sharing dinner with her sister who happened to be present at the time that I described said “Renaissance Man”. Then bingo! They came together in perfect timing. Just a few short hours later, my Michael found my phone number in his mailbox the next morning at school and called me right on schedule that evening at 7.

After our five-hour conversation, he wanted to meet me, but I planned to go home to visit my parents for Easter. ‘Call me when you get back,’ he suggested. I did. I met him the following Friday. I married him three years later and then sat in front of the TV three more years after that, watching Mr. Davies sing about the Ghost of Time to ring in the new millennium. I was completely snowed under by that stage of the game, struggling to make my marriage work, living in my very own ice house. How I desperately wanted to go to that great southern land where maybe I could find some warmth, some fire.

“So, what happened?” asked Phil.

“By that time, everything was just falling apart. While my house was in a constant state of renovation, the relationships inside of it were allowed to decay. Mike and his father planned yearly projects that made it difficult to really build our marriage and connect as a couple. Everything was about the façade. As long as everything

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looked okay on the outside, it didn't quite matter what was going on inside.

We were off balance. Mike's parents spent long stretches of time in our home sprucing up and making sure everything looked good. So, when the day came when I made a bid for my husband's attention by asking him how I could be a better wife, he responded, 'Clean the house.' I wanted to smack him! The house was immaculate. Always! His mother kept it that way. What I didn't know was how the Comforter would come to completely illuminate a whole new meaning for the phrase "clean house". In fact, I hadn't been moved to clean house until our son came into our lives and caused us to have to take a good look in the mirror."

"What was the matter?" inquired Tim.

"He wouldn't look me in the eyes. It was if I wasn't there. He didn't seem to recognize me or even want to recognize me. I worried that he might be autistic."

"Autistic? I've heard that word a lot. What exactly does that mean?" inquired Phil.

"That's just it. When it comes to autism, there is no exacting anything. There are only shades of abilities and sensations like any other person. Except, one with autism may experience greater extremes that make it difficult to cope with everyday life. While one might not look you in the eyes, another may. You can't always tell just by looking at a person, but there are some clues. For starters, a person with autism may appear to lack empathy and have trouble with communication in one way or another. I know I am being quite general, but that's just it. Just because one might appear to lack empathy doesn't mean that they actually do. They might be far more empathetic than they can handle. So, they shut down and appear indifferent.

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When my husband and I started to encounter marital trouble, I sought help from a family therapist. My husband didn't want to go at first, but I convinced him to see her with me. By the time we had our fourth session, he refused to return. She suggested that he may have Asperger's Syndrome and should be screened for it. Mike just shut down and didn't want to talk about it."

"There's been a lot of shows on TV recently with characters with autism," Tim plugged.

"Yeah, I have a friend with a brother with Asperger's," chimed in Phil.

"My mother-in-law always hinted at something about Michael, but it never occurred to me that it could be something related to autism spectrum conditions. If anything, several of my friends often asked me if his mother was autistic. We're all teachers, so we've seen these kinds of things over the years. This is why it was so important for me to find that expert on Asperger Syndrome while I was in Australia. I read books about how Asperger's could affect our child and how it could affect a marriage. Most of the forwards in the books were written by Tony Attwood. When I learned that he lived in Brisbane, I was stoked. My cousin was engaged to a young woman from there. It was their wedding that served as the special occasion that got me into Australia in the first place. My mother and I met up with our relatives for the big event.

"So, how was it that you didn't see any of these signs that your therapist picked up on before you got married?" Timothy searched.

"Love is blind. Right? Mike and I were "like peas and carrots"! I thought he was adorable. I thought that our trouble was rooted in the fact that his mom wouldn't leave us alone. I thought he was a gift from God. But by late winter of 2013, I was ready to completely throw in the towel. I was done, and I was really on my way to Australia because I had a "terrible horrible no good very

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bad day” myself. I prayed out loud, ‘Please God, please tell me who I am!’ I didn’t like the person I had become—the ice queen who eventually stood before Mr. Davies himself, having a moment with the Ghost of Time. The Holy Spirit opened me up to a different way of thinking and being. I wanted to give, to share, and to serve. I didn’t think I had much of a story to tell, but by the promptings of a woman who allowed God to speak through her, I learned that I needed to write until I could feel the butterflies.

When I arrived home back to Texas, I learned that Pat Benatar was going to be in town within days! I grabbed my husband and took him to see her. She and her husband, Neil, announced that they had just completed their 33rd year of marriage and were happy to begin their 34th. I was thrilled to be there with my husband. My belief that he was a gift from God was affirmed as I started to gather my memories and start to write.”

“She’s cracked,” Tim nodded as he gazed at Phil with a concerned look in his eyes and then turned to look towards the window to see the rain still swirling about outside.

“I was placed in the express lane for personal and spiritual growth. I was even ready to face my husband and confront our challenges in a more constructive way because my perspective had been radically shifted. I saw Michael as evidence of the Lord’s presence and grace in my life. Michael was both a carpenter and a teacher. His very name meant “Who is like God?”. How wonderful is that? Especially for a girl with a thing for God? All of these strange and timely coincidences were like breadcrumbs on a trail back to where I had come from. I fell in love again, and it happened as if it had been written in the stars.”

Chapter 4

Your God (Not Mine)

“Therefore, I, too, hearing of your faith in the Lord Jesus and of your love for all the holy ones, do not cease giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation resulting in knowledge of him.”

~Ephesians 1:15-17

Tim and Phil sat stunned, unsure of what to think or what to say. Phil got up to look out the window. The rain was still coming down hard. The wind continued to swirl as if circling the house. The guys had yet to understand how all of the strands of my story would come together most remarkably.

“Can I get you any more to drink? I have juice, soft drinks, tea, coffee—oh wait. Can I assume that you don’t drink anything with caffeine?” I asked with sincerity. “I also have some cookies.”

I got up and went into the kitchen to retrieve the cookies I made to surprise Mike and our son upon their arrival back home. Tim

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said, “Thank you,” while grabbing a couple off the tray. Phil returned to the table to take a couple himself.

“You are too kind,” he complimented.

“Would you like some milk with that?” I offered.

The gentlemen looked at each other and then smiled back at me, “Yes,” they both nodded.

After bringing them some milk, I sat back down and asked them if they had any more questions for me.

“How was it that you were Catholic and still attending services in other churches?”

“I wanted to cover all my bases. I was under the impression that the Catholic Church was the only one that kept records of your sacraments and formation. This wasn’t true in other churches, so I kept one foot in the Protestant ring and the other in the Catholic one. There was a lot of tension straddling both. And at times, I stayed out of both circles.

Only a single letter distinguishes the word worship from the word warship, and for me, it was difficult to fathom selecting a place to worship when so many Christian denominations were engaged in spiritual warfare with not only the powers of darkness but with each other. And I wasn’t completely convinced that these houses were truly in the service of God, for much of the secular media was keen on exposing how these “institutions” appeared to be more in the service of prestige, sex, money, and power—anything but real love, mercy, and charity. So, when a close friend asked me, ‘Doesn’t it all just make you want to run back to church?’ after listening to me share my experiences in Australia, my immediate response was, ‘No’.

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I felt that I could pray and worship anywhere, with anyone, and at any time. I didn't want to have to go into a church and be made to feel like I was taught all wrong, and that I didn't have the true story of who Jesus is and wants from me. I had a long history of trying to fit into different houses of worship. In most cases, I experienced very happy faces that were welcoming and accommodating, until it was time to choose. "Our way or the highway" seemed to be the only option put up on offer.

This tactic didn't work very well for the little girl who hadn't any real grounding in any religion from her parents. Although they took the time to baptize me Catholic, they never took me or my sisters to a church unless we were invited to a wedding, baptism, or funeral. I understand fully well as an adult, that they definitely had their reasons like many other Catholics who left and continue to leave the Church today.

I had evangelical-type friends who invited me to attend services with them. My earliest experiences took place in a Presbyterian Church for months, but then my friends moved away. It wasn't long before I started to go to Sunday school with a family who introduced me to *The Book of Mormon*. They too eventually left our community. Then one of my mother's friends, Cecilia, suggested that my sister Susan and I attend CCD classes at the local Catholic Church to prepare for this thing called our "first communion" and offered to take us to church. Mom was fine with it and even began taking turns with Cecilia to drop off her children and us to catechism each Sunday.

It was a confusing time for me since I heard different things about the *Bible*, not only from the churches I visited but also from the different pastors my father watched on TV every morning, not just Sunday. So, I was positioned to be more of a skeptic than an "all in believer" in any one denomination. This came to a head the day I asked my catechism teacher about a picture in my sacramental preparation book. It was of a stairway that appeared to lead to heaven.

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‘Are there really stairs in the church that will get you to heaven?’ I asked with great hope. ‘Why, yes there is!’ I was told. And so, for weeks, I looked all over the worship space of the church for it. I searched down hallways that we were not allowed to explore and peaked behind doors that we were not allowed to open. I even worked up enough guts to sneak behind the altar to look for that stairway and in the nooks and crannies that were created by the position of the elaborate system of organ pipes. But alas, I could not find it.

I drew the conclusion that it had to be a hoax and told my catechism teacher so. She just gave me the same glare that I received so very many times in the past that somehow spoke the wordless message, ‘I don’t have the time or desire to have to deal with you.’ I learned the protocol early in life. It was my cue to just go away or understand that they were going to walk away from me.

So, I left my teacher with no explanation for the missing stairway and no resolution for my distrust in what I was being taught. Before long, Mom purchased lovely white dresses for me and my sister. There was no turning back, we were moving forward with this special ceremony. I recall feeling so grown up. We were going to be allowed to participate in an activity that appeared to be for only the adults! I was so, very naïve and clueless about what was really happening although I was way beyond age 7, the age of reason, according to the Catholics. I simply did what everyone else appeared to be doing, and that was just getting along by going along. I prayed that the understanding would eventually come.

As time passed, I could be found in yet another church and then another. Every place seemed to have their own take on the biblical stories, even within the same denomination! And at times, I thought that the distinctions were prized more than God Himself. This was most apparent when my three sisters and I were invited to attend a church with friends.

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The four of us were taken into a room where we were surrounded by several members of the church. They wanted us to “get saved”. I heard that phrase before and understood that two of us had made our first communion and were in the clear—or at least that’s what we were taught. A woman came forward and said, ‘I used to be a Catholic, so I know that you are not saved. And you shouldn’t have to do good works or tell your sins to a priest.’

‘Of course, we are saved!’ I came back. ‘Well, maybe not the younger two. Save them.’

‘Just repeat after me,’ we were told. We were prompted to pray for Jesus to be our Lord and Savior. It didn’t seem too bad of a process, but I was at a loss for words after the fact. I thought to myself, ‘Was that it? That’s all you had to do to be saved? We had to go to class for a whole year at the Catholic Church!’

I decided not to fret over the details of what I heard at all these houses of worship I attended. I just loved learning about God, listening to music, and praying with others. I left these sessions with Jesus in my heart as I pondered for hours on the teachings I heard, trying desperately to understand. The best I could make out was this: Jesus commanded us to love Him and one another. This seemed to be consistent teaching across the board no matter where I went. So, with that way of thinking, I ventured in and out of churches with the intent to love Jesus and love others. I figured it was much humbler to admit that no one really knows everything about God and all that the *Bible* means and has to offer and that included me.

“Live and let live,” was my attitude until the day one of my favorite columnists declared himself an atheist and started to attack spiritual and religious people in their writings. Over several days, they shared the belief that religious people were simply uneducated and lacked science education. They also alluded to the notion that people who worshiped a god were delusional and mentally ill. The charges struck me as down-right ignorant and

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insulting. I might not have been a “player” on any denominational “team”, but I did have an intuitive sense of the presence of God. I could see the fingerprints of the Holy Spirit all over the writing I was doing.

This newfound sensitivity made me more open to investigating those things I would normally dismiss or glaze over as inconsequential. But not anymore. I grew more vigilant to watch for the synchronicities that seemed to guide me to people and places where I could find answers to my questions. I enrolled in a course at the Jung Center, presented by the author of *Hauntings: Dispelling the Ghosts Who Run Our Lives*, Dr. James Hollis, after learning about Carl Jung in a class I took earlier in the summer and through audio recordings that were challenging the very way I saw and interpreted the world all around.”

“Who’s Carl Jung?” Phil asked.

I didn’t want to get too detailed about the famed psychologist, because so much of what I was sharing with my visitors was complicated. Every detail mattered and would play a significant role in the outcome of my story. I simply told them that Jung believed that exploring one’s spirituality is an important dimension of one’s personal growth and mental health.

I went on to explain, “While conducting an additional independent study of Jung’s work just days before the commentator’s scripted tirades about the faithful, I made a discovery that sent shivers down my spine. It was a picture of the constellation of Pisces that had a timeline transposed over it based on some of Jung’s writings and intuitions. According to the timeline, we were headed towards the age of the “anti-Christ” starting on March 21st, the same date in which I recognized Sam Neill as the anti-Christ at the Nordoff-Robbins Music Quiz in Sydney, Australia on the same night I met Mr. Davies. Mr. Neill played Damien, the anti-Christ, in the third installment of *The Omen* trilogy. I specifically remembered, saying to myself, ‘Demons are

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not allowed to play here,' when I first saw him. With that thought, I instantly saw Mr. Neill as the scientist who loved and studied dinosaurs from *Jurassic Park*.

All of these factors came together in a way that inspired me to continue to write my narrative in response to the charges made against Christians and other members of the world religions in the posts I read. What hurt the most were the true statements. I hated to have to admit that the columnist made some very good points about the lack of love, mercy, and charity in some of the institutions that they attacked. But I found that despite the shortcomings, there were many more positives to support—positives that I might not have thought of had it not been for the outrageous posts I read each week.

Who would have thought that an atheist could influence a benchwarmer to get in the game to play ball, so to speak? The posts in relationship to the timing in which I found Jung's forecasts for the emergence of an era of anti-Christian sentiment, in relationship to the date in which I acknowledged the presence of the anti-Christ in a beloved actor made me dig in deep and ask myself, 'What do you really believe? Where do you go to look for answers?'

I was nudged by yet another encounter with the Ghost of Time. I began writing with greater fervor when the journalist went totally ballistic over Matthew McConaughey months later. He was slammed for thanking God while accepting the top prize in Hollywood. I hadn't watched the televised event but had the chance to see what all the fuss was about when I clicked on the link that was made available within the post that was aimed to shame Mr. McConaughey. I was greatly moved by his speech. From that point on, I avoided the column that I had been reading for over five years and committed myself to not only attend church but to be an active member. Like Mr. Davies, Matthew was now on my radar as a means to navigate the high seas I was sailing. With just that one speech, in my world, he became one of the brightest of all the stars!"

Chapter 5

Where the River Meets the Sea

“In green pastures he makes me lie down; to still waters he leads me; he restores my soul. He guides me along right paths for the sake of his name.”

~Psalm 23:2-3

The discussion continued as both gentlemen gazed upon me with curiosity and a smidgen of disbelief.

“So, how did you know which church to go to?” asked Phil.

“I was no stranger to having dreams that came true. The Holy Spirit came to me in dreams and spoke to me as He always had through the beauty of music, poetry, art, literature, and film. I began the early fall with a fascination with the book cover on *Hauntings*. The cover donned a painting of a window with a candle sitting on the sill. Its wick was newly blown out by the wind that was obviously blowing into the room as suggested by the position of the curtains in the painting. The smoke appeared to segue up to the full moon that can be seen in the sky, shedding light onto the

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world all around and into the home. Here, let me grab the book for you so you can see it.” I got up and went over to the bookshelf where I kept the book, retrieved it, and handed it to Phil.

“Oh, wow! The moon is the new light,” Phil commented

“Let me see it,” Tim demanded with his hand out, snapping his fingers before Phil handed it over to him. “Ooh! I see what you’re talking about. What do you see, Cindy?”

“It shows that the self-serving candle has been extinguished and transformed into the moon by the wind.”

“Huh?” both boys responded at once.

“You would have to understand that I once wrote a poem in the third grade about a candle that was afraid to blow out in the dark. In this painting, the candle blows out, but it is not in the dark. It is under the light of the moon that reflects light from a bright star. After I returned from Australia, I felt as if I had been that candle afraid I was blowing out in the dark, only to come to understand that somehow, I had been transformed into the moon instead, no longer fueling my own light, but taking it in and then reflecting a greater light than my own. As the moon reflects the light of the sun, I could reflect the light from an even brighter star as in *Jesus Christ Superstar!*”

The guys were flabbergasted. Both looked out the window to see if it stopped raining. Then they turned back to look at me, sheepishly. The thunder grumbled, and the rain appeared to fall even harder.

“Okay. So, you felt you had been transformed in such a way that you wanted to reflect the light of Jesus?”

“Well, I guess. It was more of a hunch that I penned in my writing. I was still journaling and struggling to figure out what was

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happening to me. I grew increasingly sensitive to everything around me. I also attended additional classes and listened to other recordings from the Jung Center, one of which featured the early poetry of T.S. Eliot. Part of the beauty of recordings is that you can listen to them again and again. Through that medium, I heard ‘The Hollow Men’ for the first time. I recognized lines that Stephen King used in his epic novel, *The Stand*, my favorite of his works.”

“You listened to lectures? Voluntarily?” Phil inquired with reserved disbelief.

“Stephen King? Beauty?” Tim uttered with a hint of disgust.

“Oh, I listen to lectures and sermons all the time. I pick up CDs, watch YouTube videos, and find lectures in blogs, Facebook, and other online media,” I explained.

“Uh-huh,” gasped Tim, as another clash of lightning was quickly followed by a shattering boom.

“And Stephen King?” Tim repeated.

“Yes! I find much of his work beautiful in that he has a gift for fleshing out the abilities in the disabled in striking and compelling ways.”

“What!?” Phil exclaimed as he leaned forward in his chair.

“Sure, Stephen King presented at least two major characters in *The Stand* with disabilities. One was deaf and mute, who turned out to be a great leader. The other was mentally challenged with the heart of a child. Of the entire epic tale, he was my favorite character. His name was Tom Cullen. He loved to take words and spell them out loud so very proudly. Every time he spelled a word, he unknowingly called out the letters for the word “moon”. This

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endearing tendency played a perfect and significant role in the defeat of evil in the storyline.

Some of the characters King developed in some of his other stories included a girl with autism who loved to listen to music for hours and had the gift of psychokinesis in *Red Rose*. *Silver Bullet* featured a young boy in a motorized wheelchair who saves the day. I could go on. But do you get my point? We're meant to be able to see the beauty and usefulness—the necessity of everyone around us, regardless of their station in life.”

A soft rumble echoed in the distance as I got up and waddled back into the kitchen to bring the carton of milk to refill my guests' glasses.

“I guess, I never thought of those things,” Tim offered. “And thank you, these cookies are great!”

“Yeah, I got this recipe from my father. He worked a great deal in the kitchen during the Vietnam War.”

“The kitchen?” mused Phil.

“Yes. Dad was always in trouble for one thing or another and was put on KP duty to scrub pots. Eventually, the mess sergeant came to him and told him that he noticed that he was in the kitchen so much that it must be for a reason. He took my dad under his wing and taught him all about yeast. Before long, dad was baking fresh bread every day and then moved onto pastries. His specialty became pie.

When the time came to find gunners to fly on the choppers to replace the ones that had been wounded and/or killed in battle, my father volunteered right away. After much deliberation, my father was told that he couldn't go. The men simply loved his bread. He was told it was a matter of morale. It was one of the few things the men had to look forward to. When I stop to think about it, bread

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saved his life; and it was made accessible to him by another person who cared and had faith. He believed that things happen for a reason and acted on it. *That*, my friends, is beautiful! And it happened within the context of an awful time in my father's past. He came back pretty messed up and in ways that we didn't really understand, until later, years after he retired an officer in the military. In many ways, dad was like the original Forrest Gump. Which gets us back to how I ended up at my current parish. Mind you, once I got there, I wasn't sure if I was going to stay. I carried with me a great deal of baggage."

"Oh, so you went to a Catholic Church, but you weren't certain that you would stay?" pressed Phil.

"No. I was quite a flight risk. Worse yet, my baggage served as an obstacle that could keep me grounded if I didn't do something about it. The tales of sexual misconduct in the Church made me very nervous about entering a house of God, but I sensed that I was being called to report to active duty somewhere."

"Active duty?"

"Oh, yeah! Spiritual boot camp. And the call was very strong. I was having reoccurring dreams that early fall in 2013. My disgruntled husband was the one to call me out on it. He noticed that I was waking up at the exact same time every night.

It was true. I was waking up at 3:33 every morning for 8-9 days before they eventually dwindled to a stop. I woke up visibly shaken, much to the dismay of my husband. He had been very patient with me and wondered why I was dreaming of tornadoes chasing our little family of three across open fields until we found shelter in what appeared to be underground culverts of some sort. Lines of twisters passed overhead but completely vanished before they could do any harm.

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For a while, I was fine until I witnessed an actual tornado descend from the sky. I was leaving a school with a teacher I was coaching who happened to look a lot like Indiana Jones' son for lunch when I heard a woman behind us ask, 'Is that a tornado?'

I thought I was dreaming. Everything seemed to move in slow motion, as I froze and glanced at all the children looking out of the windows of the school cafeteria to see the low-pressure system moving towards us. My much younger counterpart, you know, young Indy, stood amazed as he took out his phone to take pictures of the twister.

'Shouldn't we be alerting somebody in the school?' asked another woman from behind. But at that moment, the clouds began to dissipate back into the darkened sky.

I puzzled over the whole affair for the next few days after the fact. I even searched weather reports to find out if the tornado was documented somewhere. But alas, I found no evidence of what I saw, that is until I went back into the school. Not only did young-Indy-look-alike have pictures to share with me of the tornado, but virtually all of the students in his class had pictures of their own that they took that day.

There was no doubt about it. I was caught somewhere between my dream world and reality, and I didn't know what to do about it, especially after the night I took in the movie *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*. Based on a true story and surely embellished by Hollywood, Laura Linley played an attorney assigned to defend a priest who was accused of being responsible for the death of a young girl who was believed to have been possessed by the devil. The narrative delved into the heart of the bipolar oppositions between faith and reason, religion, and science. As an agnostic, she began to experience supernatural happenings around her apartment at night. These activities took place shortly after she awoke from her sleep at exactly 3 o'clock each morning. The priest later explained that

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3:00 was the hour in which the devil mocked Christ's passion on the cross.

Alerted by many elements coming together all at the same time—the dreams, the three o'clock hour, the tornado, the March 21st date, the attacks on religion—I fell to my knees and asked God if I should go back to church and if so, where? I felt as if I had been compelled to take a stand and pick a side. If that meant reporting to a church, I was going to need help finding the right place.

'How will I know I am in the right place?' I continued to ask and pray. 'Where should I start?' I was scared. I knew something was happening, but I hadn't a clue what to do about my feelings. So, I sat and waited quietly. Would I get a burning bush? Would I hear a voice call out to me to say something like, 'Cindy, go find Kerry Shook!?' Would I report to a Catholic or Protestant church? Once I reported somewhere, would I stay? How would I know that I need to leave and find another place to go? My heart was open.

I prayed for wisdom. I prayed for courage, but most of all, I prayed for faith. At times like these, I turn to music for inspiration. My thoughts took me to ICEHOUSE's beautiful "Where the River Meets the Sea". I went into my office to sit at my computer, I went to YouTube to find it. And for a while, I was okay as I closed my eyes and meditated and waited. When the song was over, I opened my eyes and noticed that there was another song named "Where the River Meets the Sea" that was newly posted over that summer by a group called White Pearl. I wondered if this band rerecorded the beautiful melody and clicked on the link. There, I found a gorgeous composition that seemingly sounded like some sort of response to the ICEHOUSE song with the same name. I listened to both of them over and over again back to back. The White Pearl video was more gothic to the simple and plain recording of ICEHOUSE's song. It shockingly had a feel for a time when King Arthur and the Holy Grail was all the rage. Oh! You gotta see and hear this for yourself!"

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I got up and rushed into my office to grab my laptop. I brought it into the library and sat it on the table. A few moments later, the guys were taking in ICEHOUSE's "Where the River Meets the Sea." Then I played the version by White Pearl.

"Okay! That's just crazy! The second one seems to call out to the first one!" Tim recognized.

"But were they written around the same time?" asked Phil.

"No. The ICEHOUSE version was released in the early '90s. The White Pearl version wasn't released until the summer of 2013."

"This is crazy!" Tim came back again.

"It's a crazy, holy, grace," I responded with joy. "The next day, I sat in Dr. Hollis' class at the Jung Center and took a good look at a picture in the classroom. It was a sketch of a fish with the forms of a man and a woman inside of it. At first, I thought of the fish as a symbol of Christ whose body was made up of both men and women. But then I read the little plaque next to it with information about the artwork. It said something about the anima/animus complex. I thought I'd look it up. I learned that this idea was explored at length by Jung's wife Emma. She spent her entire career exploring the Grail Legend. I was intrigued and went to buy her book on the animus/anima complex and her other book, *The Grail Legend*. I have both of them here in the library."

Again, I went to a shelf and pulled out both books to show the young men.

"I was spellbound by what I was learning, and it made me stop to think about who I was and where I was going. I jotted down some names, and before I knew it, I had reason to seek a specific person.

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Eventually, I turned to my husband and declared after making up my mind that morning, ‘I think I know which church I need to approach first. I’ve been studying the Grail legend, and I think there is a connection between Emma Jung’s work and a homilist I saw only once way back in the ’90s. He was the one who did a homily on *Forrest Gump*. I never forgot about it. This man illustrated how Forrest was an echo of God, willing to take Jenny back no matter how often she strayed, no matter what sin she committed. He always accepted her with open arms. That’s real, unconditional love,’ I thought out loud.

To make a long story short, I found the homilist I was looking for on the 33rd Sunday in Ordinary time, on my third visit to the church. He spoke as if he had been in my kitchen with me and my husband listening in on our conversation and had stolen a copy of my manuscript, especially when he mentioned Indiana Jones with a specific reference to the Holy Grail. I know it sounds outlandish, but all he had to say was just too close to home. I came back to my house a total mess, crying and babbling on and on to my husband. He was completely unaffected.”

“What? He didn’t say anything?” Phil asked.

“He must have thought you were one crazy bird,” Tim chuckled, rolling his eyes.

“Mike has always kept his feet on the ground and has been totally rational. In many ways, he brings balance to our marriage. By the time the new year was upon us, I happened upon a stack of cards in a restaurant that caught my eye with the number 33:3 on them. When I picked one up to get a better view of the contents, I read “Jeremiah 33:3 Call to me, and I will tell you great and mighty things you do not know.” I knew in my heart that this was the answer to my first research question: How do I know what I know? The answer was prayer. I just didn’t realize or understand the extent to which I had always been in communication with the Lord. This newfound insight made the difference between feeling

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like a broken Pinocchio, hard and unable to lie worth a damn, and being a real person. I was never an ice queen. I was always a very real sensitive person.

To kickstart the new year, I went to a Switchfoot concert with my youngest sister. I didn't know anything about them but was open to taking in a new band, especially when my sister called to tell me that she had seen them just the night before in Austin and wanted to come to Houston to see them again. 'Go online and look for the song, "I Dare You to Move". You'll love it. I had to admit to myself that the title of the song appeared to be a message from beyond. I looked up the band and happened upon their song "Love Alone is Worth the Fight" from their album "Fading West". When I saw the accompanying video and recognized the Sydney Opera House, I knew something more was happening. I'd been to my first Tae Kwon Do tournament and was upset with myself for hauling off and really punching a woman much too hard. I understood the song as an admonishment. I agreed to go to the concert with my sister. There, among a sardined crowd, I listened to the beautiful melodies until I couldn't handle the heat, the smells, and the touching. So, I moved to the very back of the venue and just listened. It was that night that I took in what would become my favorite song from the band, "Stars"."

Chapter 6

Big Wheel

“Then Peter approaching asked him, ‘Lord if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?’ Jesus answered, ‘I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times.’”

~Matthew 18:21-22

Tim stood up, saying, “Well, yeah, we gotta go. Looks like the rain just stopped. Thanks for the cookies.”

The rain indeed stopped, although a murmur of thunder could be heard in the distance.

Phil reluctantly got up and offered a hug, “So, you joined the Catholic Church. The End.”

“Not exactly Phil. There was still much to learn and much more to do,” I said as I embraced the young man.

Phil turned to Tim. “She’s not done with her story.”

Big Wheel

“We need to go before it starts raining again,” Tim urged while shooting large saucer-sized eyes at his friend.

Phil stood his ground. Tim proceeded to open the door to let himself out when all three of our cell phones sounded an alarm. Phil was the first to find his phone. “We’re under a tornado watch!” he announced and then sat down immediately. “We’re not going anywhere.”

“Why, don’t you sit down and join us, Tim? I’d love to learn about your faith journeys,” I urged, as I turned to Phil to ask, “So, were you always with the Church of Latter-Day Saints?”

“Well, no,” Phil began as Tim gave up his post and slammed himself into a seat at the table. “My parents were Catholics, that is, until the divorce.”

“I’m sorry, Phil.”

“It was tough. Dad moved away, making it difficult for us to have chances to see him. Frankly, I don’t think he *wanted* to see us. I guess I still harbor a lot of anger towards him. He was such a hypocrite because he criticized my mother when we joined the Church of Latter-Day Saints. He didn’t even go to church! And he didn’t understand or even care what was happening to us.”

“Funny how the biggest critics can be seemingly uncaring people who don’t even attend church, huh?”

“Well, yeah! There are a lot of folks who don’t go, and then there are others that do, but are so fake! They go out of some sort of obligation but leave with no real relationship with Jesus,” Phil came back.

“And don’t forget about the Great Apostasy! Once Christ’s church became Roman, it wasn’t what Christ intended anymore,”

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Tim darted back at me, disgruntled that his friend didn't want to leave.

"Well, yeah. I just don't get it. The priest told my mom she couldn't have communion anymore. It felt really uncomfortable for us to go up to receive it without her. My dad is the reason they got a divorce, and yet the church treated my mom like she was some sort of degenerate. Where did they come up with those rules? I don't think Christ ever meant for anyone to be excluded from having communion," Phil questioned with a tremble in his voice.

"Oh, no! They started changing all of Christ's teaching the moment He ascended into heaven. The church let in pagan ideas and adopted idol worship," Tim asserted.

"I understand, Phil. I struggled with a lot of questions myself. I struggled with many things, and frankly, I still do," I offered while ignoring Tim's slight against the church in charity.

Coming back to life and more fully into the conversation, Tim straightened himself up in his chair and with hopeful expression guessed, "So, you reported to a Catholic Church, but didn't stay there, did you! Yes. That's it! Isn't it?"

"Admittedly, I wasn't certain that I was in the right place, despite all the signs. I've never had Jesus miraculously appear and point the way for me to go in a literal sense. Nor was I certain that I could expect for that to happen," I began. "I just went where my sensibilities led me. When I first walked into the Catholic Church, I felt as if there would be someone there to announce that everyone should take out their rosary beads and hold fast their babies, because a heretic had just entered the building. I didn't report there as a convicted Catholic. I entered that beautiful worship space as a convicted sinner."

"So, what's your story, Tim? Why all the hostility? Did you feel hurt by the Church?"

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“Oh no, I have always been with the LDS community. I just have friends that know a little bit about the Catholic Church. Why would I want to go to another church, if all of the answers are already in mine? I know the scriptures. I agree with my friends who believe that the Catholic Church would emerge as Anti-Christ. She would endorse false teachings and lead God’s children astray. I think that’s what you saw in that timeline you mentioned a while ago, and you actually went there!” charged Tim.

“Easy, Tim,” Phil cautioned.

“No worries, Phil. These kinds of conversations do not ruffle my feathers anymore. Now about the ‘rules’, Phil. I wondered about that too. I wondered about a lot of things for which I had no real answer —at first. I understood, maybe because I went through that Covey training, that I needed to be sure that I first took the time to understand, before being understood. I spent a great deal of time just watching, listening, and most importantly, praying. I remained in prayer.”

“So, did you stay?” Phil asked with much curiosity.

“Well, you just don’t walk into a Catholic Church and start participating immediately. I had to go to confession first if I wanted to participate in the Eucharistic celebration.”

“The what?” asked Tim.

“Communion. I had to go to confession.”

“So, what’s up with confession? God knows your sins. You don’t need to report your sins to anybody.”

“Don’t you need to make a confession in your church if you do anything, like really, really bad? I thought that was something that was part of the Church of LDS.”

“Yes. This is true.” Phil admitted.

“Back in the day, Christians made public their sins before all of the community. Thank God we don’t do that today! We receive the Lord’s grace when we admit our sins to a priest. We can confess without the fear of our sins being made public unless we choose to make public our sins.”

“But God already knows your sins!” Tim affirmed.

“Yes. He does. But there is something that happens when you concretely experience forgiveness. You receive grace. If you are honest and go in with all of your heart and are truly sorry, you receive grace. That’s what happened when I walked up to that rock star and admitted that I lied, by omission, to the individuals to which I was accountable. And like the priest in the confessional, he seemingly brushed it off—took it very impersonally and treated me exceedingly well. When you experience love like that, it changes you. You receive grace as the Holy Spirit Himself comes to you.”

“And how did you know that the Holy Spirit came to you?” pressed Tim.

“I was overcome with both joy and a strong fear of the Lord. I suddenly knew many things I couldn’t have known and had other things I thought I knew, validated. I also received personal revelations, that of which I cannot speak. I knew that my grandfather was dying that evening, although he wasn’t sick. It was confirmed the next day. I realized that I had been given many gifts and had been treated so very well all my life. I realized that there was more to that man who wore his shades at night—who sang songs that haunted me. I can’t explain it. I have no words for it. I was overwhelmed and launched into a whole different kind of orbit, for a lack of a better way to put it.

A friend told me that I sounded like a mystic to her. I wasn’t quite sure what she meant by that, but when she told me to read

Big Wheel

Falling Upward, by Richard Rohr, I took it as an order from above. I found the book and inhaled it. I started to search for a way to explain what happened to me. So, I went to the Jung Center after happening upon the movie *A Dangerous Method*, a story about the rift between Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. I became aware that Jung was very interested in those things that I experienced time and time again but blew off as just crazy coincidences. I began to realize that perhaps my life was always steered by the hand of God.”

The guys sat quietly.

“So, Phil, you haven’t told me how it was that you became Mormon.”

“My older sister got into a lot of trouble, and we needed help. When my mom went to the church, no one seemed to care. No one was there to help us. By the time she was able to see a priest, he chalked our problems up to my mom not practicing her faith and failing to teach my sister properly. My mom was mad. We went to church every Sunday. We gave money to the church too, even though we couldn’t afford it. My sister served our country with three deployments to Iraq, but the priest had choice words about that too. And as you say, there’s just something about the Lord’s perfect timing. A couple of guys showed up at our apartment. Mom let them in and told them about how we were treated at our own church. They connected mom with people who could help us. Before I knew it, we were becoming Mormon. It makes a lot of sense too. The Catholic Church is corrupted. It’s all about procedures and rules to keep people at bay, so they can lord power over others. I hope you figured that out for yourself after going to that church. It’s a cult.”

“I’m sorry to hear that your mom did not feel like anyone was listening or even cared. Sounds like she went in and got a lecture,” I acknowledged.

Big Wheel

“That was the last thing we needed at the time!”

“I hear you. The sensitivity wasn’t there.”

“So, did you stay at that church?” Tim asked.

“I gave it around nine months...”

“There you go!” Tim interrupted.

“I don’t think you understand, or I’ve misunderstood you. I went to confession and showed up for Mass the next day. I noticed in the church bulletin that a group called “The Mystics Class” was going to be reading Pope Francis’ book that he wrote with his friend, Abraham Skorka before he took over as head of the Catholic Church. The book was called *On Heaven and Earth*. It was a great model for how to approach an ecumenical conversation.”

“Ecumenical? What do you mean by that?” asked Phil.

“It’s kind of like the nature of the conversation we are having right now. It’s when you engage with people of other faiths and beliefs to come together to build closer relationships and better understandings so as to bring a sense of unity in some form. Pope Francis and Rabbi Skorka discussed their belief systems about a variety of social issues of today. They covered divorce, abortion, euthanasia, women in the priesthood, suicide, and other topics from the vantage point of their religions. They agreed on some points and disagreed on others. Nonetheless, they had a civil conversation and grew in their appreciation and respect for one another.

Attending “The Mystics Class” made it safe for me to ask questions and learn more about the Catholic faith. I was accepted with open arms. The leader was stern, direct, but always very compassionate. She was just what I needed at the time. I felt

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comfortable and opted to stay with the group for a while to watch and listen.

By the third month, I was ready to participate in a ministry. I signed up to serve at funerals. Before I knew it, a deacon called me into his office to introduce himself and to get to know me. There was something about him that made me feel very safe with him. He assured me that I really couldn't do the ministry wrong and told me that if I had any concerns or problems to come straight to him.

Eventually, he introduced me to a couple of other seasoned funeral coordinators. They helped me learn the ropes and were very patient with me and eager to field my questions. I was actually being thrown into a crash course on the Catholic Mass 101, where I had to learn a whole new vocabulary. Perhaps that was the hardest part, the language. One day, one of my teammates noticed that I didn't have a badge or key to get into all the rooms in the chapel and the main church to prepare for the funerals. I took for granted that I would always have a partner with a key. I was directed to the parish office to make a request for them. Within a few days, they were ready for pick up. I couldn't believe it! They actually gave me a key to open all kinds of doors, although I hadn't registered as a parishioner! It was kind of like receiving keys to the kingdom, just in a different way!

It reminded me of the time that my husband and I went to Germany for a couple of weeks to visit my other sister whose husband was stationed there in the Army. Every time we stopped at a hotel, the receptionist would simply hand me a key without requesting an ID or any other information about me. They just trusted that we would pay in the morning. For some reason, this kind of trust—freely given, made us feel that much more obligated to settle our bill the next day. The assumption made was that we were trustworthy people, so we acted as such. As I glanced at the key that the receptionist gave me from the parish, I chose to formally register as a parishioner.”

“What? You stayed?”

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“Of course, I did. I was learning, and the more I learned, the more I recognized the extent to which I didn’t know about the Catholic Church. I participated in an adult catechism class called OASIS. There, I learned a lot and had many of my questions fielded. I also read books and bought CDs. I went to go listen to guest speakers like Australian born, Matthew Kelly. By then, I had also discovered another Aussie, Nick Vujicic, a super positive guy who loves God more than anything. With each passing day, I was learning more about the church and more about myself. It was glorious until the day came when I hit the wall so hard, it left me seeing stars!”

Chapter 7

Hey Little Girl

“For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.”

~Romans 8:14

The wind picked up again and whistled through the front door. Tim did not securely close it before returning to the table to join Phil and me. I got up and walked over to the door to close and lock it. I gazed out the window as I returned to my seat, noticing that the sky was growing darker with a hint of green. I tried to get the young men to tell me more about themselves, but they remained reserved.

Finally, I gave in and continued with a voiced whisper, “I could have sworn I could feel the butterflies. I thought I was finished writing my first manuscript. But just as I was putting on the finishing touches, I received some unsettling news about my husband. At first, I was relieved to finally get some answers about the difficulties we had been having in our relationship, but as the days passed, I grew more and more angry—so, angry that I began

Hey Little Girl

the dehumanizing process of totally emasculating him,” I squawked.

Tim interrupted, “Well, that’s not very Christian of you!”

“No, it wasn’t,” I admitted. “It made me feel awful. So, I took it to confession. I attended an evening service for reconciliation, where twenty or so priests were spread out all over the church. The lines were long, as hundreds of people waited for their turns to confess their sins. The line I chose moved very slowly. It gave me time to rehearse what I was going to say to expedite the process and not take up too much time with the priest.

Apparently, he saw it quite differently and kept me for a while, probing for more and more information once I got in to see him. I knew I had at least 33 chapters worth of explanation as his questions brought different vignettes to mind. He also skillfully tapped into other episodes that I either edited out of my story or refused to admit to myself much less put into writing.”

“Like what?” Phil murmured as he put his head down to stare at the carpet.

“Let me put it this way. If unchecked, the ghosts of shame and despair that come with incest, sexual abuse, and other ghastly sins can haunt a house for many generations—even more so, if those who inflicted pain were among the individuals we were supposed to trust the most, like clergy and other religious folks,” I disclosed.

“And you’re still in the Catholic Church?” Tim coughed up as if trying to rid a bad taste in his mouth.

“Don’t kid yourself, Tim,” I came back gently. “These things happen everywhere, to anyone, regardless of age, sex, religion, or any other attribute. Sexual abuses go on in homes, schools, universities, business offices, and yes, in churches including yours.”

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“Uh, well now,” Tim began, but I cut him off.

“I heard a lot. I knew of things that happened. When things happened to me, I figured that I should have known better. I couldn’t believe that I could be so blind. The priest in the confessional knew I needed help with cleaning out the wounds I carried over things that happened to family members, friends, and me. Finally, he leaned back and became quiet. ‘You’re going to have to rely on your female friends,’ he began to counsel. Then he stopped midsentence, ‘Go to Mary!’ he spat out as his eyes flashed as if he had been struck by lightning. ‘None of this is your fault. I want you to find a quiet place to recite a single *Hail Mary* very slowly, and then go in peace.’ I wasn’t quite sure where I was going to find Mary, but I knew I could handle the prayer that I was directed to recite. Admittedly, I knew very little about the Blessed Mother and struggled to find any real meaning in what happened in the confessional that evening.”

“That’s because you’re not supposed to worship Mary.” Tim admonished.

“No, Tim. Catholics don’t worship Mary. That’s where a lot of people get confused about the Mary thing. Making blanket statements like saying Catholics worship Mary is like saying Mormons approve of polygamous marriages. While some offshoots may practice polygamy, the vast majority denounce it. Correct?”

“Well, yeah. We don’t practice polygamy,” Tim conceded.

“The same conceptual understanding holds true in the Catholic Church. While there are minority groups within Catholicism that probably do worship Mary, the vast majority do not. The Catechism teaches that while we demonstrate reverence to the Blessed Mother, we do not worship her.”

“So, what’s with the Mary thing?” probed Phil.

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“As I said, I really didn’t know when I left the confessional that evening when I was told to go to Mary. What is quite inspiring to me is the fact that I didn’t have to go to Mary. She came to me but not in the form of the exciting apparitions that transpired in places like Fatima, Guadalupe, or Lourdes. Heck! I didn’t even know that the apparitions were of the same woman!”

“Yeah, what’s with the apparition thing anyway?” Phil pressed.

“The Immaculata has made appearances in a variety of places throughout the world. Her sightings have brought about masses of conversions and associated miracles. The Catholic Church is very careful when authenticating a Marian sighting. The process usually takes years. Not all of them are recognized and approved by the Church, but Fatima and Lourdes are. When she appears, she always directs people back to Christ.

As it turned out, much to my surprise, a presentation was planned and delivered about the role of Mary at the next Oasis meeting just a few days after I went to confession. The leader of Oasis invited one of our other ministry leaders to visit with us about the Blessed Virgin. I was dumbfounded! By the time she was finished, she mentioned something about a Marian Consecration. I had trouble pronouncing it much less understanding it! The whole thing sounded pretty heavy to me, as I made a mental note to look further into what this was all about. I was moved by the reverence, sincerity, and gratitude that was expressed while our teacher tried to explain what she meant by committing oneself to Mary.

Within days after the presentation, I signed up to go on what is called an ACTS (Adoration, Community, Theology and Service) Retreat. To my surprise, the whole event turned out to be completely decorated in everything related to the Blessed Mother. Each table was set up to commemorate a Marian apparition. The table in front of the one to which I was assigned was labeled Rosa Mystica. I wanted to be at that table! I didn’t even know that Rosa

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Mystica was related to the Virgin Mary. I only knew it as the name of the cassette of beautiful music featuring the harp. Many of my students loved it.”

“I was wanting to ask about the harp,” Tim admitted while nodding his head towards the harp in the corner of the library.

“Yes. I always wanted to play the harp but couldn’t afford one. Even when I got a job and started to make money, I had college bills to pay. But there came a time back in the early days of my teaching career when I learned of the music of Therese Schroeder-Sheker, a harpist and music thanatologist.”

“Music what?” asked Phil.

“Thanatologist, a person who especially plays the harp to comfort the sick and the dying.”

Phil just nodded and pierced his eyes at me, “Surely, this was all just a coincidence.”

“No, Phil. There’s no such thing as just a coincidence. It was all about the timing. I was told to go to Mary. Learning more about Rosa Mystica led me to suspect that perhaps the Blessed Mother had been with me all along.”

“How so?”

“I’m getting ahead of myself. I’ve always been told that I’m ahead of my time. Let me get back to Rosa Mystica. While teaching at a middle school I was approached by a counselor that came to find out what I was doing to change the behavior of a student so noticeably that his other teachers were certain that I had conjured up some magic spell of sorts to change his behavior. I didn’t even know which student she was talking about! When she said his name, I thought, ‘Oh, him!’ He was the kid that always went to my listening center after completing his assignments in class. I would

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have never guessed that he had quite a negative track record when it came to both academics and his social development.

When he arrived at the class, I congratulated him on his improvements and asked him how he managed to turn things around. He replied with great enthusiasm, ‘Oh miss! It’s that lady! It’s that music! It makes me feel better. My parents fight every night, and I can never get any rest. But when I come to class and get to listen to this music, I feel so much better!’

Perhaps, because the music was laced with the Blessed Mother, he received healing from the Holy Spirit through it, I thought. Mothering in and of itself has its own kind of magic, and I wanted to be a good mother.

Before long, I was in a room with a spiritual director discussing my relationship with my son and his needs. I told her that he walked around looking for his sister. At other times, he spoke of her as if he expected her to show up any minute. When we moved into our new house, he walked into a room and said, ‘So, my sister can have this room. I think she’ll really like it!’. It was like he knew that he had had a twin sibling somewhere. It freaked me out that he just assumed that she was a girl. We never told him about the miscarriage I had when I was pregnant with him and his twin.

My spiritual director pointed out that perhaps he needed to know that he did indeed have a sibling, but that she was in heaven. She urged me to recall how I felt when my intuitions were validated. I had to admit that it made me feel like I wasn’t crazy after all. It was just a matter of figuring out when and how I would sit down to talk to our son about his humble beginnings.”

“So, you had twins, but only one survived?” Phil asked with amazement. “I’ve never heard of that.”

“Yes. I lost his sibling in the first trimester, and yet, he knew that she was missing all along. Puts a whole different spin on the

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question of when exactly life begins. Doesn't it? I mean, when John the Baptist was in his mother's womb, he leaped upon hearing the voice of the Blessed Mother. He recognized who she was carrying into the room right away!"

Phil and Tim glanced at one another, unsure of how to respond. So, I continued with my encounter with another spiritual director at the retreat.

"A few hours later, I found myself in a spiritual direction session with yet another individual. This was a huge step for me because he was male. We met in a small room where he sat in a huge armchair and I on a couch with one of the pillows that lay on it clutched tightly across my stomach to create a barrier between us. To say I was intimidated was an understatement. I knew I had been sent to this powerful teacher for a reason. I'd always had opportunities to learn from the best of the best. I'd only seen him one time in action back in the nineties. He was the homilist I mentioned earlier.

I can still remember turning to my friend and telling her that he looked exactly like one of my uncles—one who I knew for his penchant for whistling show tunes, quoting lines from classic novels, and keeping his fingers on the pulse of everything theater, live and on the silver screen. Most of all, I knew him for his great generosity as he always wrote big checks at Christmas.

I was greatly moved by his teaching about God's merciful love using scenes from *Forrest Gump*. I was so captivated by his message that I arrived home, grabbed my husband, and sped off to the theater to see the film that very Sunday afternoon.

Although I wasn't exactly sure about what I wanted to talk about, something took over; and before long, I put the pillow down and unleashed a speech more epic than Mark Antony's at Caesar's funeral, at least from my point of view. For all I know, he might have thought that he had a "live" one on his hands, a mental

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case. He just remained quiet and probed for more information as I continued to speak.

‘You’re the teacher I always wanted to be. You joke about the geese here following you, but there is a reason that they do. It’s the same reason I wanted to talk to you. You are so close to God,’ I disclosed.

‘I’m the lady that had I been born years earlier would have certainly been burned at the stake because I know things. I feel things, and I don’t always have a good filter. I’m a bit of a rebel. Can you recommend any books or movies that I could watch to learn more about Jesus and the Church? It seems that there is so much to learn and know. It can be pretty overwhelming. It’s tough to pick out which references are most reliable. I’ve spent my whole life pursuing all the education and knowledge I could acquire in hopes of being able to separate lies from truth. I studied critical ethnography, a research method that takes power relations into consideration when searching for the truth about people. I also feel a need to be able to not only defend the Church but to also help bring unity among all Christians—I mean, the terrorists out there are not asking hostages for their particular denomination of Christianity. They see a cross on a person or a *Bible* in their hands, they strike them down or chop off their head!

Since writing a memoir, *I Let the Music Speak: How a Heretic Found a Stairway to Heaven*, my private prayer has become, Lord make me shine like the moon, reflecting your light and love in the darkness. Use me as your instrument. Make me full! I say it each time I see the number 33, and especially each day at 3:33 p.m. or any other time when the minute hand points to 33.’ The teacher just nodded and remained silent.

The session went well for me. I had a chance to dump a lot of what was on my mind. I also had the chance to let the teacher know that I would provide him with a copy of the memoir since he was a major character I referenced in it and assured him that I would

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send one to Mr. Davies since I talked about him at length. He too was a central figure in the narrative. As for the teacher, he asked me to pray for him. In fact, I learned that he asked someone to pray for him once he was out of the room. By the next week, we all learned at Mass that he was in the hospital having gall bladder surgery. It never occurred to me that the weird noises he was making during my session might have been related to *his* pain and not my brand of crazy.

I was feeling better, so I assumed I found Mary. But I still had much to learn, especially the day I saw the cover of the album that ICEHOUSE was releasing that summer of live concert recordings. I sent a letter along with my manuscript to Mr. Davies that asked him to let my story move him in some way. He was on the cover in white in a pose that had a striking resemblance of Christ crucified. My obsession with the rock star was at an all-time high, as I reread everything on a fan-based website and his official website hoping to find hints to help me understand the nature of the fixation that had only intensified over the months since I had last seen him in Australia. Friends figured it was the way that the Holy Spirit was keeping me hooked on all things Christ. I cross-referenced everything I could find, following every lead. Eventually, I was back to Matthew McConaughey!”

“What?! Matthew McConaughey?” Phil uttered with disbelief.

The thunder rolled as I came back, “I know. Right?”

“How did you end up back to Matthew McConaughey?” Tim pressed.

“I gathered with friends one afternoon to give them copies of my manuscript as I thanked them personally for the blessings they were in my life. We all got caught up and rehashed the good times we had while teaching at the same school moons ago. One of the ladies talked about her new digs near Austin and mentioned that Kay Mac, Matthew McConaughey’s mom lived in the same

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community. It wasn't unusual for my friend to visit with her and even spot Matthew working out in the community fitness center every now and then.

While the ladies swooned over the Matthew thing, I sat there wondering what Kay Mac's real name was. It's funny how I can get distracted like that. Call it weird, but it was a call I had yet to understand. I wondered how she felt about her baby playing the role of evil characters in movies. Admittedly Matthew stayed on my radar up until the meeting with my friends that day, because there had been rumors circulating for months that he was contemplating taking the role of Randall Flagg, the evil guy, in a remake of the *The Stand*.

I probably would have shaken off the Matthew thing had it not been for the biography that came on within the same week on none other than Matthew McConaughey. My husband was the one with the TV clicker. I wasn't even seeking further clarification about him. But then, as I was doing dishes, I overheard that Matthew lived in Australia as an exchange student during the time that I recognized as the hey day when ICEHOUSE's "Man of Colours" reigned supreme between 1987-1988. I recall thinking to myself, 'He could pull off impersonating Iva Davies. Maybe a bio-pic was in store for him.' It just seemed like the kind of role the talented actor could capture if he had to compete for the part against other stars."

Chapter 8

Touch the Fire

“...the people who sit in darkness have seen a great light, on those dwelling in a land overshadowed by death light has arisen.”
~Matthew 4:16

Tim looked out the front window like a little boy waiting for the ice cream truck to come by, so he could race out into the street to find his refuge in something sweeter than what he was hearing in my library. He visibly struggled to take in the strangeness of it all, just as I did when I was actually living out the experiences in my story. But Tim wasn't going to find relief any time soon, because the rain started to come down harder than it had earlier when the storm first overshadowed my neighborhood. My guests had no idea just how much more peculiar my story would become. As they say, “Truth is stranger than fiction.”

“So, did you ever hear anything from the rock star? Do you think that he had let your narrative move him in some way as you requested? Especially after you saw the cover of the album?” Phil pursued.

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“I did think that the pose on the cover might have been a subtle response. But no. He never received the manuscript with the letter.”

“How do you know?”

I went into my office and pulled out an unopened parcel to bring to the young men.

“Here is the original package that I sent. Notice the letters here on it,” I directed while pointing to the acronym “NATA”. “It means “not at this address”. Whoever received it on the other end was kind enough to make sure that it was sent back. That’s a pretty long way when you consider the round trip! Within three days after receiving the box, my sister shot me a message on Facebook suggesting that I have a listen to a new song by Collective Soul called “AYTA”, meaning “Are You the Answer”? I was perplexed at first but then decided to have a listen since it was another acronym that rhymed with NATA and had come to me with well, perfect timing. I simply loved the song. I wondered if this Blessed Mother stuff was really a good thing for me. I was still learning and laboring to understand. The song became my special prayer I offered to the Blessed Virgin every day until, August 15, 2015.”

“So, did you have a special haunting?” Tim asked sarcastically. “One of your neighbors told us that this house is haunted.”

“Yes, this house is haunted, but again, that’s getting ahead of the story. I had a special encounter. In fact, I’m still not quite sure what to call it. I only know how it made me feel.

I got up that morning and made myself comfortable on our sofa and prayed the Rosary, a new ritual I adopted from the ACTS Retreat. After the last prayer, I looked up into the blackness of the television screen and could only make out the reflections of the faint outlines of myself and all that was around me. I glanced down at the cable box, 7:32. It was almost time for my special mantra.

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The clock turned 7:33, and I prayed my little request, “Lord, make me shine like the moon, reflecting your light in the darkness. Use me as your instrument. Make me full!”

I reached for a book called *My Life with the Saints*, by Fr. James Martin. I took in a chapter about the author’s special relationship with Mary and his reference to the feast day for the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

‘August 15th? That’s today!’ I thought. When I looked up, I found myself virtually blinded by a strong ray of light that came into our living room through the window over our doorway. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed an image that appeared in the blackness of the television screen before me. It was the reflection of my round face, illuminated by the light of the sun. Nothing else was on the screen—no evidence of my torso or arms, not even a clear reflection of my facial features—just a round ball of light surrounded by complete darkness. I sat and stared in silence as the tears came.

‘What is this?’ I asked the Lord. ‘I don’t understand. What do you want from me?’ As the light shifted through the window, the image on the screen went through phases like that of the moon. I was both fearful and overjoyed, paralyzed for a few minutes until the image faded away. I sat in complete silence for a while, before I eventually broke free from my trance.

I jumped up and headed for my office to read the daily meditation I received from Fr. Richard Rohr and then ventured into Bishop Robert Barron’s website, “Word on Fire”. I read a posting by contributing blogger, Dr. Tom Neal. It was called “Mary, An Echo of God” and then realized that the show “Catholicism” was on.

I went back into the living room to turn on the television. There, I found Bishop Barron talking about a church dedicated to the Blessed Virgin. The graphics on the screen showed how the

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church was laid out so that her head, arms, and body were evident. He went on to explain that a large labyrinth can be found inside of the church, positioned where one might find her womb. Each day, when the sun shines through the huge stain-glass circular window that sits above the doorway, it reflects its brilliant colors onto the labyrinth—her womb, from where Jesus was brought into the world.

Okay. So, let's just say, that the Holy Spirit finally got my undivided attention, especially when Bishop Barron quoted Venerable Fulton J. Sheen with "Mary is like the moon. Hers is always a reflected light coming from a greater source." I sat bewildered, sobbing, and searching for what it was that I was sensing. I used the same metaphor to describe my transformation within the last few paragraphs of my manuscript! And a mysterious light came through the window over my door and reflected my face on our television set, much like the light that came through the stained-glass window onto the labyrinth on the floor where Mary's was. She delivered Jesus from her womb. What was I to deliver on TV? I wondered.

Twice before, I had been urged to put my memoir on YouTube. Given that the reflection of light that came off my face was directed to the TV, I drew the conclusion that perhaps the Holy Spirit wanted me to offer up my story too. So, I began the long process of recording myself as I read each chapter aloud and created a slide for it to represent a core concept from that part of the story.

The process compelled me to draw, paint, take photographs and learn how to navigate the world of connecting each slide with related links to music, professional photos, articles, and books that I mentioned in each chapter. It was a labor of love that I worked on tirelessly over the next couple of months with a self-imposed completion date of November 13th, the release date for the movie *The 33*. But then something quite unexpected happened. While working on a slide with a picture of Rosa Mystica on it, I reached

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into my desk drawer to retrieve a file I compiled on her. When I looked down into the drawer, there was my “Man of Colours” CD. A streak of heat went up my spine as I looked at the image on the album cover. There was the outline of a man with three flowers upon a white background, a virtual twin image of Rosa Mystica as she appeared in white with three flowers. Here, let me find my YouTube Channel to show you.”

I grabbed my laptop that was already on the table and found my channel. I showed the gentlemen how everything worked. I showed them the image of Rosa Mystica and the album cover for “Man of Colours”. Tim and Phil remained silent. Then I continued, “When I found and opened the file, I read about how she appeared to a young nurse in Northern Italy in 1947. She was distraught about how the clergy and religious people were not honoring their vows of chastity—the very topic that came out of my confession just six months earlier when the priest told me to go to Mary.

I explained I felt an immediate need to get as much of the narrative posted by November 6th, the official release day for the movie *Spotlight* that rehashed the story of how an investigative team from the *Boston Globe* uncovered scandalous evidence that the Catholic Church had been sweeping sexual abuse cases under the rug and simply moving accused priests around. By this stage of my spiritual formation, I came to understand that there was so much more about the Catholic Church worth knowing, other than those disgraceful episodes in a long and sad history of child exploitation. I worked with real purpose to shine a light on how it was that I was just one of many people being called to help clean up the mess and move on with great hope. Creating the YouTube channel was only the tip of the iceberg.”

I continued describing the process of creating content for my YouTube channel with my manuscript, “I made another important connection when I thought about taking the pocket watch my godfather gave me and photographing it for a slide. When I

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reached into the jewelry box to retrieve the watch and turned it over, I was livid. The cover of it was missing.

‘Mike!’ I screamed as I stormed out of the room to chastise my husband for damaging my watch. ‘Mike! What the hell did you do to my watch?!’

‘What’s wrong? What did I do now?’ he moaned.

I held out the watch, pointing to the naked face. ‘The cover is missing! How could you be so careless with my things? Where is the cover anyway?’

‘That’s my watch,’ Mike said as a matter of fact. ‘Where did you find it?’

I was completely blindsided with the revelation. ‘What do you mean it’s your watch?’

‘Yeah. My grandfather gave me that watch before he died. My mother kept it for me. When I went up north to help my dad start to put her stuff away after she died, I saw it when I grabbed the pearls my mother wanted you to have. I put both in your jewelry box,’ he explained.

‘So, where’s my watch?’ I asked with a heavy heart, regretting that I had once again, blamed my husband for all that was broken in our lives.

‘I put it over here,’ he said as he got up to show me that he placed it in a box in another location for safekeeping. There it was, totally intact. They were the same, made from the same manufacturer, but one had an exposed face, while the other one had a face that was completely concealed in a hard-outer cover. It was us! I had him, the man whose face was hidden behind a strong exterior cover who might or might never emerge to face the sun. And he had me, a woman whose face was completely exposed and

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only desired to reflect the light of the sun—a marriage of opposites—as opposite as the image of Rosa Mystica and the image of the “Man of Colours.” Our challenge was to find God in the upper levels of the in-between, a most daunting task, given the degree to which we were so alike and yet so very different. I was open to receiving any kind of help I could get.

The completion of my YouTube Channel just happened to coincide with the fact that our church made available a web-based library of sorts of everything Catholic called FORMED. It was as if my request for reliable resources to help me learn about Jesus and the Church was heard. By the season of Advent, I was like a fat kid in a candy store, quite literally. I put on a lot of weight while my goal was to get back in shape. But I spent hours in front of the computer screen, taking in more and more information about the faith in which I was completely immersed. When I logged in for the first time, the page opened to a section with programs. There appeared a banner for the series “Catholicism” I saw all those episodes several times, so I started to scroll down. I stopped immediately when I saw the number 33. There were three programs by Fr. Michael Gaitley with “Hearts Afire”. The first one was called *33 Days to Morning Glory*. I clicked on it immediately. There, I learned that the program was centered on that thing I heard about before I went on retreat earlier in the spring, Marian Consecration.

I lightly surfed through the contents of the site and chose to move forward with what would become my journey toward dedicating my life to serve as humbly as those who Mary instructed to do all that Jesus told them to do at the wedding at Cana. By the time I came to the portions of the study that were related to Saint Theresa of Calcutta, I was astonished as I read about her desire to be a light in the darkness for those here on Earth as she was quoted in *Time Magazine* as having said, “If I ever become a saint—I will surely be one of darkness. I will be continually absent from Heaven—to light the light of those in darkness on Earth.” The statement took my breath away, as I had acquired the same desire.

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Specific words and ideas flew off the pages of the downloadable book that supported the videos and the journal that came along with the program and left me feeling like someone had gone into to my heart and echoed my intuitions and longings. I was well underway to consecrating my life to Jesus through Mary on the first of the New Year, the Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God.”

“Uh! Why do you do that? Call her ‘mother of God’? She was not the mother of God! That’s heresy!” Tim charged.

I positioned myself to comfortably make complete eye contact with Tim, “God made all things, correct?” I waited for Tim to confirm the truth claim before I went on. “He made every living creature including the woman who would become His mother on Earth. She’s the part of him that made him human.”

“But Jesus is not the same as God! He is the son of God and brother to Lucifer,” Tim put forth with great zeal.

“We could debate this claim. Let’s just recognize that I believe in the Trinity and that is why I’m not Mormon. I know God as the Holy Trinity—the oneness of Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

“But that doesn’t make sense to me!” Tim fussed with frustration.

“I struggled with a lot of things too, Tim. In the times of my weaknesses and doubts, I clung to the Holy Spirit, especially when I encountered these kinds of differences in beliefs.”

“How could you just do that?”

“The *Bible* teaches that one very clearly. I even memorized that scripture. Matthew 12:31-33 admonishes:

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And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

Tim and Phil sat in complete silence.

“We might disagree about Jesus and even feel in our hearts that the other is wrong, but let’s not risk blasphemy against the Spirit. Let’s work to understand each other. I gave you my solid reason why I didn’t become Mormon. It rubs you the wrong way. I get it. It rubs me the wrong way when you make sweeping statements about the Catholic Church and would if you made an unfair statement about any other. Our goals are pretty much the same. We all wish to be in Paradise with God, and bottom line, that requires repentance of sins.”

“But what we think is sinful is not what you think is sinful,” Phil contended.

“We’re not supposed to judge. We are all sinners. No one is perfect. We all struggle with something. Only He redeems us if we believe in Him, even though we don’t deserve it. That’s grace. That’s love. We are all called to love Him and to love one another.”

“So, how did you determine which church was right?” Tim questioned.

“I wasn’t so much interested in being right, as I was interested in wisdom, in remaining in prayer and practicing holiness. In prayer, I stayed on the path. I continued to learn. I questioned and responded to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. I’ve learned that being right is not the destination. Righteousness is a by-product of walking the path with Love knowing that we’re never alone and

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that if we even ended up screwing things all up, He'd be there to catch us and love us still. With that kind of faith, I forged forward to learn about this notion of the Blessed Mother with an open heart and an open mind. I learned that God was in control. He crafted a woman who would bring Him into the world. I once heard a Marian priest, Fr. Donald Calloway, argue that if you could make your own mother, the one who would love you, nurture you, protect you, teach you, and guide you, wouldn't you create the most beautiful, sweet, honest, loyal, and loving creature you could imagine? Mary was totally human, and yet made perfect in every way, void of original sin. She would also become the icon of Christ Himself. After all, from where would he get His humanlike image on Earth? He would have been a mirror-like reflection of His mother. And so, her image presents a reminder that God was made man, having been born through a human mother who was specifically crafted by and for God Himself."

Phil just huffed, as I continued.

"I know this is hard to hear, especially if you don't subscribe to Marian doctrine. But I was willing to trust the process. No one was pressuring me. No one was forcing me. My objective was to learn to reflect the love of Christ as sweetly as his human mother did and to simply ponder those things I didn't understand. I'm not God, nor am I trying to be God. I delighted in the notion of being like Mary. So, before I celebrated my special day to officially begin to reflect the Love and beauty of the Lord as faithfully as she did, I made sure I went to confession to start out clean slate a few weeks before I recited the prayer of consecration.

I found myself one morning in line for the confessional wondering if all that I had been doing and learning had any meaning or credence. I mean, 'Was it all in vain? Was I on the right path?' I had my reservations. But then I saw a light scan across the upper wall in front of me. It seemed to cast a shadowed image of a forest. I looked around, trying to find the source of the light and anything that looked like trees and scrubs that would have

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produced such an impression, but I never did. The entire church was very dim that morning. One would have needed some sort of projector to produce such a clear image.

Later that evening, while playing with our newly adopted dog in our living room, a trailer for a movie appeared on our TV screen. It was for *The Forest*. The words “stay on the path” appeared before the whole thing was over. I saw it as a warning, much like the one Little Red Riding Hood received from her mother.

Off to my office, I went to learn more about the film. I found out that it was a fictional tale about a woman in search of her twin sister who allegedly disappeared into the Sea of Trees, a place where people go to commit suicide in Japan. Only the Golden Gate Bridge can boast more suicides per year than the area at the base of Mount Fuji.

‘Suicide?’ I gulped. The word had layered meanings for me. First, it implied mental illness. Then it conjured up memories of all the people who had walked up to me and disclosed that they tried or desired to kill themselves within the past three years or so. I wondered why they would tell me of all people. I’m not a psychologist or doctor. It’s been as if I have a sign on my forehead that says, ‘Tell me your secrets.’ And here it all was, coming around again. All I could think was, ‘Why me, Lord?’

As I cross-referenced “The Sea of Trees”, I found that a movie was released earlier that past summer. I almost came unglued when I discovered that it starred Matthew McConaughey. I wracked my brain trying to figure out how it was that the Matthew connection was now starting to upstage my Iva fixation. Only time would tell. I chose to remain in prayer and to stay on the path, as I continued to model myself after Mary, the bright moon among the stars.”

Chapter 9

Paradise

“That I may praise you with the lyre for your faithfulness, my God,
And sing to you with the harp, O Holy One of Israel!

~Psalm 71:22

Trying desperately to change the topic, Timothy redirected his attention to my harp again. “So, you actually got a harp.”

“Ah, yes! After learning about St. Therese of Lisieux, the Little Flower, it dawned on me that I should be playing the harp as a ‘little way’ to express love.”

“The Little Flower?” Tim repeated.

“Yes. St. Therese taught that since she knew that she didn’t have it in her to be as great as other saints such as St. Catherine of Siena, a woman who counseled Pope Gregory XI, she had faith that she would be raised up to the heights of great saints by the Lord Himself for her small, yet loving efforts to glorify Him each day! For me, the harp provides a means to pray for others, to

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summons Mercy Himself for those who need it the most—among them, the sick and the dying. I'm not great with words, but I do know a thing or two about tone. I know very personally that music is a special kind of medicine for the soul. I was surprised when my husband supported my desire to purchase a harp.”

“You thought he was going to think you were crazy?” Tim mused with a crooked smile and piercing eyes.

“I thought he was going to say that it was too expensive. Mike has always held tight reins on our bank account. I was sitting in a favorite pizzeria in early January with Mike and my father-in-law, when I interrupted their conversation with a very stern and direct declaration that seemed to come out of nowhere.

‘I have an important announcement to make. I want to buy a harp,’ I blurted out. My husband and his dad paused for a moment to look at me with disbelief ‘What?’ chuckled my husband. ‘I’m very serious. I’ve always wanted to play the harp. I just finished another program, *Consoling the Heart of Jesus*. It was about Divine Mercy. I realized that I should be playing the harp and that I’ve been stalling by the time I finished the last chapter,’ I came back, fearful of what my miserly husband would have to say about the expense of purchasing the instrument. His eyes softened and he turned to his dad and said, ‘Okay. I think we are going to be buying a harp.’

I was shocked. For years, he fussed with me over the financial details of our business. I assumed that he would be the same with what I thought he was going to be earmarked as a frivolous splurge. But no, he was totally supportive of the idea. In fact, he accompanied me to the little shop I found that sold folk harps.

‘Let’s go ahead and get the stool for it and the case so you won’t damage it when you carry it around,’ my husband suggested. Again, I was shocked that he was ready to buy me not only the harp but other bells and whistles for it!

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When the clerk told us the total cost of all my new tools, I rejoiced, “There’s my number!” “What number?” the shop owner inquired. “The 33! It’s my special God number. It’s like God is telling me that I am doing the right thing,” I continued.

The store owner looked up at my husband as he simply smiled and threw his hands up in the air as if he found my response as puzzling as the store owner did.

I took the harp home that day and immediately made out the melody for “Pachelbel Canon in D”, before playing the “Chaplet for Divine Mercy”. It was a perfect fit! It was as if I hopped on a bicycle that I hadn’t ridden since childhood. I was a little wobbly at first, but then got the hang of it. A few weeks later, I arrived at the couple’s home that was adjoined to their little shop for my first harp lesson. I was moved by the fact that his name was John and her name was Mary and my purpose for playing the harp was to console those who were amid great suffering as was Jesus when he was crucified on the cross at Calvary. When I called Mary, she asked me if I could meet with her on Friday at 3:00 p.m. for my first lesson—the same day of the week and time in which Jesus died while his mother Mary, and his disciple, John knelt at the base of the cross. My instincts served me well. It was my objective to be the best student she ever had! There was no doubt it. I was on fire!

One day, not long after that, I recalled that I always loved the song “Threnody” by Frida, a woman who once constituted one-fourth of ABBA. It featured the harp, and I hoped to learn to play it by ear. As I went to go find it, a thought came to mind. What did “threnody” mean? When I looked up the word in the dictionary, I was stunned to find out that it meant funeral song or song of lamentation. I was on the path all along.

Yet another parallel storyline was unfolding just as I was learning about my call to play for the sick and dying that brought a whole other dimension to my understanding of the mission that

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was planned for me. It started the evening that an organizational meeting for the next Women's ACTS Retreat took place. I was in the process of deciding whether or not I wanted to serve on the team. The theme for the retreat was going to be based on John 21:17 "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." It was particularly poignant for me because of the scriptural verse that I found at a restaurant with Jeremiah 33: 3 written on a card, "Call on me, and I will tell you great and mighty things that you do not know." I learned that it was God who answered all my questions through a variety of channels such as works and words of people—especially music which brought to mind a Collective Soul song and the accompanying images in the music video for it. The song was called "The World I Know." Ya gotta see this! Maybe you've seen this before?"

I stood up and grabbed the laptop and found the video for the "World I Know" on-line and presented it to the missionaries. The video featured a depressed man who ended up on top of a building ready to end his life. At the moment that he leaned forward to jump, a bird landed on one of his outstretched hands as he looked like a suffering Christ on the cross. The man became startled and distracted by the bird and slowly brought his hand closer to his chest as he marveled at what I saw as a sign from the Holy Spirit. While keeping the pigeon with him on one hand, he slid his other hand into his pocket where he placed a bagel inside earlier that morning at a coffee shop at the start of the video. He broke off pieces of it to offer the bread to the bird. As he watched the bird eat the crumbs from the edge of the building, he noticed that ants started to come out to have some for themselves as he caught a glimpse of the people walking on the sidewalk far below. The people looked like the ants too, as it was made obvious that the man was processing a lot in just a short amount of time. All a sudden, he joyfully sprang up and started to empty his wallet onto the street below. With arms stretched out and up to the sky, the man held his gaze up to the heavens while spinning atop the building in what appeared to be a state of peace and grace.

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“See? The entire encounter with the otherworldly combination of symbols and timing completely changed his perspective. It was all so very close to home. I understood the power of grace brought on by the Holy Spirit! Three times Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him. After the third time, Peter responded, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Then Jesus told Peter to feed His sheep, and that’s exactly what that man atop of the building wanted to do after accepting the grace that he had been given that day. I understood this well. I kept this vision in my heart and spoke nothing of it. In fact, by the time I was on this retreat, I completely lost my voice with laryngitis. It was not time to speak, though I somehow intuited that the time was drawing near.

Too many coincidences were occurring and things that I thought would be difficult to manage and accomplish were easily done. I could feel a presence all around me, as I simply said yes to new challenges. It wasn’t long before I learned to make fairly decent Rosaries. I befriended a woman, Terry, who made them—anytime and anywhere. She seemed to always have cord on hand, ready to create patterns of knots, topped off with a cross.

I was particularly interested in learning to make these prayer ropes, because it reminded me of the days in Hawaii, when I was outdoors, picking Hibiscuses, and stringing intricate patterns of colored flowers into leis when I was very young. As it turned out, making Rosaries was a much more challenging task. I grew more interested in the circle of friendly ladies that came together to visit while transforming cord into these holy tools. Within this circle of friends, I became aware that other religious groups use some form of prayer beads or ropes.

It never occurred to me at the time that my intuitive need to pray whenever I saw the number 33, might be directly tied to what I now deem to be a universal call to prayer and meditation. It wasn’t until I started to research prayer beads and ropes around the world that my suspicions were affirmed. Muslims have prayer beads made up of 3 sections of 33 beads. Other groups that also

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involve some sort of 33 and 3 configuration in their beads in some way are also used by individuals from the Eastern Orthodox Church, Hindus, Buddhists, and those who practice Sikhism, not to mention other Christian groups such as the Anglicans.

There was another place that I found the 33 and 3 patterns. It came in the form of Italian poet Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*. Trust me. It was never my intention to ever crack his work open, but when you are on fire, you start appreciating how your flame can split you open to new explorations.

Because I became a big fan of Bishop Barron, I returned to his blog often. He reiterated a suggestion that was made by Pope Francis just after the pontiff declared a special Extraordinary Jubilee year of Divine Mercy on December 8th. He suggested that Catholics go back and read Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Admittedly, I didn't recall ever reading it. And if I did, well, it wasn't memorable. So, I first hesitated until my curiosity won me over, especially after learning that *The Divine Comedy* spanned over three books, each with 33 cantos, or 'songs' except for *Inferno*, the first book, that included an additional canto for the introduction of the complete work. Interestingly, the last sentence of each book was punctuated with the word *stars*.

I, too, wrote a book with 33 songs subdivided into 3 sections of 11 chapters each. While Dante worked to diversify writing styles in his work, I tried to diversify the songs that were included in mine. While Dante walked readers through his imagined afterlife, first starting out in hell and progressing towards heaven, I walked readers through real-life vignettes that reflected an Earthly stairway to heaven. Best of all, Dante charted his journey as a soul growing closer to God, just as I did.

There were other interesting facts about Dante that raised my eyebrow. In many ways, my story was his story. While examining Dante's work in light of my own, I could tease out elements of similarity that held within them great differences. For example, we

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were both heavily under the influence of the popes of our times with regards to the fact that both of us saw a pope step down from the papacy on his own accord and another rise up and referred to this rarity in our works. We didn't, however, share the same sentiments about the popes or the situations.

He positioned the pontiffs that drove the Catholic Church during his life into hell. He felt that Pope Celestine V was a coward for abdicating the papacy after four months of service in what he called "the great refusal." This left the gate wide open for the rise of Pope Boniface VIII, a man Dante placed even deeper in the depths of hell. Boniface established the first Jubilee with a focus on the pope being the king of all nations. He made a very bold claim to power, the sort of thing Jesus always avoided. Dante saw this as particularly evil because he believed this claim was not for the glory of God, but for Pope Boniface to glorify himself. He wanted to be at the center of the political arena. Saints can do a lot of good with power, but in the hands of a sinner, power corrupts.

I wrote about Pope Benedict XVI and his abdication in March of 2013 in my memoir and saw it as an act of humility and strength. After all, one would assume that one might enjoy the perks of being the head of any organization. But no, Pope Benedict XVI stepped down, and I had an actual visceral reaction to it. His outward behavior was in complete contradiction to my expectation of how men respond to power. Instead of fighting for it or cleaving to it, he released it. I was both stunned and grateful. It was a sign of hope.

I also wrote about the impact that the rise of Pope Francis had on me. He was officially inaugurated, March 19th, during the time that I was in Australia undergoing my extreme spiritual makeover. By early December in 2013, I chose to go to confession, so I could fully participate in the Mass the following day on December 8th. I saw Pastor Rick Warren on the Piers Morgan show discussing all the happenings in his life that year. It wasn't long before they were talking about the new Pope Francis. When I heard the author of

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The Purpose Driven Life say, ‘He wants to clean house’ about the new pope, I was certain that I was specifically called back to the Catholic Church, for this reason, to help clean house. The evidence was splattered all over my memoir as the phrase ‘clean house’ surfaced again and again in my writing in relation to some of the encounters I had with people and some of the sources I ran across in my studies.

Still, I couldn’t seem to shake the shadow of suicide. That interview with Rick Warren was spiritually charged with messages from beyond for me personally. He discussed his weight loss program, a hot topic I’d struggled with all my life. And he also discussed the death of his son by suicide. This issue reared its head, calling out to me, ever since I left Australia. While on the plane home, my mom and I sat next to a young man who told me of his personal struggles with wanting to take his own life. And time would tell that I’d eventually happen upon several others who claimed suicidal tendencies and made attempts. It made me that much more aware that the incidence of suicide was on the rise. I wondered, ‘Why are you drawing this to my attention, Lord?’”

I paused to take a deep breath before continuing when large chunks of ice spiked the front windows. “Um. That’s not a good sign,” I observed.

At that very moment, all three of our cell phones sounded with an official alert. “Tornado warning!” Tim read aloud.

“Over here! We can go into the closet underneath the stairwell.”

“You mean, you don’t have a storm cellar?”

“No! This is suburban Houston! Over here!” The lights flickered and then completely went out. “Let me go grab a candle.”

“Are you crazy!? Get in the closet!”

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“I’m fine. I have several over here in my office.” I grabbed one of my candles I usually prayerfully keep lit while sitting at my computer, especially when writing. Once I had the candle in hand, I grabbed my lighter and one of the many knotted rosaries that were on my desk. I rounded into the hallway and over to where Phil stood with the door of the walk-in closet open, ready for me to come inside. Tim had already situated himself to the very back of the opening, the furthest away from the door.

I flicked the lighter and lit the candle while taking a seat against the inner wall of the closet.

“According to the notice, we are under a warning for the next thirty minutes,” Tim reported.

“Fine. So, let’s make it 33 to play it safe,” I chuckled.

“You’re nuts!” Tim whipped.

“I’m already saved,” I corrected joyfully.

The silence was deafening. The wind stopped blowing, no longer hurling ice at the house. Timothy came forward, opened the closet door, and threw open the front door, only to notice the green hue of the sky and all of the shards of ice scattered about the front lawn like hundreds of fallen stars.

Chapter 10

Walls

“Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God.”

~Philippians 4:6

Phil yelled for his friend, “Get back in here, you fool! It’s usually quite still right before a tornado hits!”

“Are you sure about that?” I asked Phil. “Have you ever seen a tornado or been in one?”

“Well, no.”

“So, how do you know?”

“Well, that’s what I heard.”

“It must have come from a good source too, right?”

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“Have you seen?” Phil stopped in his tracks. “Oh, right. You have seen one.”

“And it was quite still outside, for the record. But it can also be raining and storming too with lots of thunder and lightning,” I added.

“Yeah. Get in here, Tim!”

Tim came back into the closet, while I called Mike to find out how he and our boy were doing. They experienced some rain but were out in the sun again. I urged Mike to take his time coming home, letting him know about the tornado warning and my guests. By the time I got off the phone, a roar of thunder could be heard nearby.

“What’s that?” Tim rattled out.

“It’s just thunder,” I came back as I took my rosary and began to pray.

“What do you think you’re doing?” interrogated Tim.

“She’s going to pray the Rosary,” Phil began.

“Put that pagan thing away! It’s not going to help us!” demanded Tim.

I looked up calmly and smiled, “The Rosary is like a song of biblical scriptures you pray in thanksgiving. It’s been a great weapon in spiritual warfare and at times of need.”

“And I bet you have a book about it too,” Tim murmured sarcastically.

“Yes, I do. It’s called *Champions of the Rosary* by that priest I mentioned earlier, Fr. Donald Calloway, better known as the surfer

priest. Boy, does he share quite the story, both about himself and the Rosary!” I offered. “I had the opportunity to hear him speak when he came to our parish a couple of years back. Where do you think I got my perspective about Mary being crafted by God for the purpose of bringing Him into the world. She is the New Ark of the Covenant. At least, that’s what us Catholics believe.”

“Uh-huh,” Phil squinted, as we all heard a loud crash from outside.

“Let’s just pray!” I shouted. I can pray my Rosary after praying with you.”

We each bowed our heads and began to pray. I offered up praise and thanks before requesting protection from the storm. Knowing that the Rosary made my guests uncomfortable, I clutched it and began the “Apostle’s Creed” under my breath once the guys somewhat settled down. The wind roared and howled in the background, as I offered up the Joyful Mysteries, starting with the annunciation, followed by Mary’s visitation with Elizabeth and the birth of Jesus, before finishing up with the presentation of the Lord at the temple and the scriptures related to how Mary and Joseph found the then twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple after having been missing for three days.

After praying the last prayer, the “Hail, Holy Queen”, Tim became totally unglued.

“Mary, Mary, Mary! You don’t worship Mary!” he admonished.

“I don’t worship Mary, Tim. I asked her to pray for us. Christians ask others to pray for them in times of need. I asked Mary to pray for us. She got Jesus to work his first miracle. Surely, she could put in a good word for us in the middle of this storm. While these walls might offer some protection, nothing is stronger than the Wind. If anything, the Wind seeks to break down the

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barriers that keep us separated from one another and from Him. I'm not afraid of this tornado, Tim. I welcome it!"

"You're insane!" Tim screamed.

"So be it! I'd rather be this kind of crazy than the one that I see all around us in the world today!" I shouted back. "If the tornado wants to come and take me, I'm more than ready! He tore my walls down moons ago!"

"You've gone mad!" Phil charged.

"No! Madness is running out onto the lawn as Tim did! I'm doing all of the things most people would do under the circumstances. I've taken cover and have been offering prayers. I haven't taken the ball and run out of bounds if you know what I mean. And if the tornado comes and finds me still, I will be just fine with it. It would be God's will. His will *is* my will."

"So, why didn't you just offer prayers up to God Himself? Why did you have to involve Mary?"

"Why even go to Mary? Is that what you want to know?"

"Yeah!"

"For starters, I did pray the "Lord's Prayer", the "Glory Be" and the "Fatima Prayer", all of which are directed to the Lord. Like the "The Lord's Prayer", the "Hail Mary" prayer comes from the *Bible*. It's how Elizabeth addressed Mary when the Blessed Virgin came to visit her with Jesus in her womb. The Blessed Mother always brings us closer to her son. I spent a great number of my early days as quite a broken little girl because I did not trust men. So, I saw the Catholic religion as a major obstacle to developing a relationship with Jesus along with many of the other denominations of Christianity, simply because, they too were predominantly patriarchal and seemingly merciless. Pile that on

with the fact that I learned to fear God, starting with traumatic stories of the great flood that wiped out much of humanity which included children who were guilty by association. My ‘house’ was not clean; and by the standards that I learned from the Old Testament, I’d find no mercy from God either. Even in *The Divine Comedy*, before getting to the lowest level of hell, Dante described a father imprisoned with his children who starved to death. He was so self-centered and concerned with his own fate, that he didn’t even care about the gravity of what it meant to drag his very own children into hell with him. How’s that for a definition of “father”?

I feared men, but I also subconsciously transferred that fear to God, who was characterized as a male and a father. But I have a friend who defines fear as an acronym meaning:

False
Evidence
Appearing
Real.

Fear comes from false evidence appearing real. Doesn’t that sound familiar?”

“So, how do you know false evidence from real evidence? How did you get married? How did you learn to trust God?”

“Science has its own set of litmus tests, but even science cannot answer all questions. Face it. Some things are simply beyond measure, beyond rational comprehension like love. Religion has a way of seeking the rational within the irrational, largely through patterning. Religion is rarely arbitrary. There is an inherent order in it. For this reason, many of us just salivate all over it, because it’s a form of beauty as is love itself.

Whoever said that the devil was in the details was wrong. It’s in the details that there is sufficient data to begin to see the patterns that make up the tapestry of all of life. One can begin to make out

the fingerprints of the Holy Spirit. We are most vulnerable when we make sweeping overgeneralizations.

For many years, I harbored several grudges against the Catholic Church, because I was under the impression that women were not held in high regard as evidenced by the absence of female clergy. It appeared that women were to take orders, to be seen and not heard—contained in a box. But I learned that Pope Gregory XI was counseled by Catherine of Siena. She was canonized a saint and declared a Doctor of the Church. She died at the age of 33. Then there was Saint Theresa of Avila, a contemplative master of mental prayer. She too was declared a Doctor of the Church. Then there was the Blessed Mother.

I believed that the church was doing little to address the fallout from the sexual abuse cases and the related administrative failures. But in the summer of 2014, I found myself in what is called a VIRTUS course to learn about new regulations that the church put in place during Pope Benedict XVI's papacy to protect her children. Now, I've been through a myriad of training courses throughout my educational career. This one was truly exceptional. It should be required training in parenting classes and in public schools across the nation.

I didn't understand the Mass, nor did I even know what the word "liturgy" meant. I was always told, 'Just be glad it's all in English now. It used to be all in Latin.' Since attending adult classes at my church, I now know that the liturgy is the ceremonial words and phrases that enable churchgoers to participate in collective worship. Another word that I used a lot is not even part of the Catholic vernacular anymore as of Vatican II. The church no longer uses the word "heretic" to describe people who do not subscribe to the teachings of the Catholic Church.

In short, my grudges were not grounded in any real truth. I didn't know the story of the Church. I had no real knowledge as to how any of the teachings were developed within the context of

the scriptures. I didn't know that the liturgy came directly from the *Bible*, especially the *Book of Revelation*. Further, I always heard things like; I don't need a bunch of dead men to tell me how to live my life. I wondered who these dead men were, especially after diving into *The Divine Comedy*. There were many historical and literary references in those poems to keep scholars busy for still more years to come.

Eventually, it had to happen. I started to learn about the work of Saint Thomas Aquinas, perhaps the most influential of the "dead men" on the Church's catechism. I discovered that I could follow his rationality and methods for pursuing the truth. I also appreciated his willingness to concede to the mystery of God. He stopped writing at one point and thought his work straw in comparison to what he felt the Lord had shown him. He died shortly thereafter.

Unfortunately, for much of my life, I functioned off what I would call BPC, or Bullet Point Catholicism, a religion based on just the bottom-line "rules" without any regard as to how the rules came to be and why they are important. Like any spoiled brat, if I didn't like the rules, I just didn't follow them. It was easier to sit back and criticize that of which I had no real understanding. I doubt that I was the only one.

The fact of the matter is that we know little about our history in general. I've taught social studies across all grade levels, and for the most part, the kids understand it as a big yawn, mostly because of the way that it's taught. One doesn't have to go too far to find that many people know little about our government and our rights; much less the rationales behind the decisions that have been made to grow our great country.

I find it interesting that there are movements in the U.S. aimed at erasing some of our historical references as if they hadn't existed, which is highly dangerous. It makes it easy for us to forget the past and to therefore repeat it. But then again, everything has been

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condensed down to a sound bite, including people. Tweets, Facebook, memes, and text messages are just a form of BPF or Bullet Point Friendship. We know little about our neighbors and even less about people from other countries or religions. We are all more than this!

Many of us have even lost our sense of our own stories. This kind of thing breeds fear and defensiveness, especially when confronted with someone else's point of view. It's easier to say "live and let live" in apathy as opposed to working to get to know someone well. We're all taught the adage that familiarity brings contempt. It does because we fail to go beyond the trivial and the superficial. These qualities don't grow trust.

Whenever we glance at each other with a suspicious eye loaded with negative judgment, we begin the process of tearing each other down. It doesn't build trust, because the negative gaze reflects an absence of mercy. The defensive walls go up.

So, how do we learn to trust again and to tear down the walls that keep us from engaging in fellowship? We become better listeners and learners with five important steps in the acronym WALLS.

Wait and suspend judgment.

Ask questions.

Listen with an open heart.

Learn with an open mind.

Seek out the best in others.

The greatest barrier to this endless source of Love and Mercy is hate dressed up in judgment. Today's conversation isn't discussion at all. It's finger-pointing and blaming, without any commitment to truly understand. It's all about 'winning' no matter what the expense, including understanding and love. Further, there is a belief that religion is partly to blame. Yes, this may be true in some instances, but I would venture to redirect the focus on the

fact that we are all on a developmental trajectory. Moving towards maturity or holiness takes time. It requires enriched dialogue and a certain fearlessness to ask the hard questions and the willingness to hear the types of answers we may not *want* to hear from others. One must be willing to suffer, to get hurt if he really wants to learn the truth, because the truth comes with uncomfortable growing pains, uncertainties, and mysteries that stretch our complacencies, rattle our cages and ultimately change us. To put salt in the wound, this all requires *hard work*. So, most people would rather just follow the rules, without any regard as to how the rules came about until the rules are no longer in their favor or support their beliefs.

Jesus asked us to love Him and one another first and foremost, and yet the language between brothers and sisters today is that of condescension, putting at risk our ability to live and grow together in community. Crucial conversations that need to happen become muted and are completely shut down with accusations of prejudice and violations of personal freedom. Labeling and name-calling begin. It's not our place to get ugly about the shortcomings in others. We were meant to live together, pray together, and support one another as we each work to overcome our weaknesses. Without these intentions, we might not ever again go to the moon or solve the world's problems or shine as brightly as the stars."

Chapter 11

Mercy on the Boy

“Merciful and gracious is the Lord, slow to anger, abounding in mercy.”

~Psalm 103:8

Feeling quite claustrophobic and a bit uncomfortable, Tim lamented, “I want to get out of here!”

“I know I got on my soapbox, Tim. I didn’t mean to make it stuffy in here. Time’s almost up. The worst of the storm should be over soon; thank God, we’re still here.”

“I don’t think I can wait another minute being caged up like this!” Tim came back. Before he could continue to put forth additional grievances, all of our cell phones sounded off again. Timothy was the first to take heed of the incoming message.

“The tornado warning has been extended for an additional thirty minutes and we’re now officially under a flash flood warning too!” Phil announced.

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Tim screeched out in frustration, “No! We’ll never get out of here!”

“It’s three o’clock. Time for the Chaplet of Divine Mercy,” I whispered to myself as I clutched my rosary and began with “The Lord’s Prayer”.

“What now!?” Tim bellowed. “The Rosary again?”

I continued to pray the short chaplet until I was finished and turned to Tim to explain, “I prayed for Mercy—for us and for our neighbors.”

“Divine Mercy?” Tim probed.

“Oh yeah! Before we got boxed up in here, I was telling you that Pope Francis called for an Extraordinary Year of Mercy on December 8, 2015. Among all the other activities in which I immersed myself, I watched a ten-part documentary about how the Chaplet of Divine Mercy came to be by Fr. Michael Gaitley, the same priest who wrote the books *33 Days to Morning Glory* and *Consoling the Heart of the Jesus*. He became quite influential in my faith formation during that special year. I just about died when I learned that he was going to be making an appearance at our church for the Second Annual North American Congress on Divine Mercy. I made sure I got my ticket to the conference early and even volunteered to help out behind the scenes.”

“So, don’t tell me. You got to meet this guy too. Didn’t you?” Timothy mused.

“I wrote a letter.”

“You asked him to meet with you?”

“No, I asked him a question. I asked him what the 333-number configuration meant to him. That’s how I ended up getting

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involved in his program “Hearts Afire” to begin with starting with *33 Days to Morning Glory*. I was following the number 33 and 3 configurations.”

“So, did he answer back?”

“Yes and no. It’s amazing what the Holy Spirit can do. It was sort of like what happened when I started to write Keith Welsh, the manager for ICEHOUSE, Mr. Davies, band. He was the former bass player when the band first started. I felt the compulsion to give him a heads up on what I was doing in the first letter. I started a manuscript with the working title “Touch the Fire” and specifically offered up an opportunity to collaborate and forecasted the names of chapters that would appear in in the work based on Mr. Davies’ songs. No response. Just a couple of months before the conference on Divine Mercy, I wrote a second letter with more details in outline form on what I was writing and promised that I would not pursue publication of the manuscript until after Mr. Welsh had an opportunity to have Mr. Davies look it over first to ensure that I would not have a forest fire on my hands if you know what I mean. But then again, sometimes it’s the fires that crack open tough seeds, so they can grow. Right? In many ways, I had nothing to lose, provided that my intentions were honorable.

But what blew me away was the fact that I wrote within the outline:

‘...I learn that a musician from Sydney, Australia...stood in “loco parentis” (In place of a parent, animus, Higher Self, God-image) for me through his words and melodies at the time that I was becoming a confirmed Catholic...’

Within the next month, an interview with Mr. Davies was published with a picture of him in what appeared to look like a red jacket. Seems inconsequential on the surface. And surely that photograph had been taken long before I’d even sent that second

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letter. But the fact was, the title of that section of the outline was “My Obsession”—and my fixation on Mr. Davies had become quite obsessive by that time. I prayed and prayed about it, asking God for help. But the more I prayed, the more I received little whispers that brought me great calm and peace, so much so that I spent that whole summer badgering my husband about returning to Australia. ‘I want to hear ICEHOUSE!’ I whined like a spoiled brat. One of Mike’s friends, Paul, consistently offered to escort me abroad since my husband dismissed me time and again. It was nice to see James step up, but I sensed that God had a different plan. ‘No, Paul. I’ll go with the Blessed Mother. I went the first time with my worldly mom. I will return with my spiritual mother.’ I had no real idea how powerful those words were at the time. They were loaded. All I knew as I gazed at the photograph of Mr. Davies in red, was that the Holy Spirit was tugging at my heartstrings. For all I know, Mr. Welsh most likely ignored my letters, but the Holy Spirit does extraordinary, supernatural things.”

“What was the significance of the red jacket?” Tim leaned in and inquired with great curiosity, forgetting that he was shut out from the rest of the world in a closet as we awaited an all clear.

“I wore a red jacket that looked just like what he was wearing in the photograph the night I met him. I’d never seen him photographed that way before. You have to understand. From my vantage point, Mr. Davies is like a parrot—a man of colours, who simply has repeated the same stories, the same words, the same details over and over again over the years. Ask any hard-core ICEHOUSE fan. He’s very well scripted and extremely predictable from that standpoint. His band had been out of commission for several years. Wandering around in the websites during the time that I was getting caught up with the band after years of silence, was like being in the wreckage of an old abandoned space ship, marveling over what was left of it, reading the old logs of where it had been and what it had accomplished in its heyday when all of the sudden, the switchboards lit up and the engines were fired. I’d been rummaging around the exact time that ship would lift off with

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both old and new crew members. The timing couldn't have been more perfect! So, for seven years, I'd acquired enough data about the crew's captain to recognize when he was in uniform and when he was not. I'd never seen an image of him in that red jacket, ever. That photograph appeared in perfect sync with my letter carrying the words like 'Higher Self'. That was a feat of the Holy Spirit for sure! What I saw in him was merely a mirror's reflection of what I saw in myself in quite a literal and concrete sense."

"So, what about the spiritual director?" Timothy inquired.

"I was going to share my story of why I was at the conference with a reporter when I realized it was too late in the evening, and I had to get my son prepared for school for the next day. The reporter suggested we find another time if it was Our Lady's will. A feeling came over me that I was in fact already being guided by my Blessed Mother, and if it was her will that I speak with the reporter, it would happen in God's time. As I tucked my son into bed, I was struck with a thought, 'Gosh. There will probably be crowds of people who will want to meet Fr. Gaitley at the conference.' I sat in quiet contemplation as a soft voice inside told me to prepare a letter that I could hand to him or leave with someone who could ensure he would get it. Before I knew it, I was standing in the narthex of the church helping with registration and directing foot traffic when a gentleman walked up to me holding a stack of index cards.

He introduced himself, 'I work with one of the organizations hosting this conference.' 'Hello, I'm Cindy,' I chirped back. 'I'm just directing traffic for now.' 'Can I ask you for a big favor?' he began with a friendly smile. 'Sure,' I returned. 'I was asked to pass out these index cards at 10:15, but I need to go pick up Mike at the airport,' he explained. 'Okay. I can handle that,' I said as I reached out to take the cards from him. 'So, you're going to be picking up Mike as in Michael Gaitley, Mike?' I asked. 'Yeah, I gotta go get him,' the gentleman continued, surprised that I caught on to who he was talking about. 'Uh, might I entrust you with something to

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give to him? Something personal?’ I asked. ‘Sure!’ the gentleman responded with a smile.”

“No way! You got that guy to deliver your letter just as Fr. Gaitley was being picked up from the airport?”

“I didn’t. The Holy Spirit did. And that wasn’t all. That was only the beginning! I wasn’t just at any conference. I was at graduation. My spiritual boot camp experience was coming to a special nexus, where I was being prepared to receive my official “military” orders. I came to know this at morning Mass the very next day. It was a Feast Day for Saint John Paul II and the Blessed Virgin Mary. I was aware of this and even peeked at the scriptural readings for the day. I was prepared to hear the parable about the fig tree that hadn’t produced any fruit in three years. You know, where the gardener defended the tree and asked that it be given another year to produce fruit before it was struck down while offering his services to cultivate it. I loved the story because the gardener recognized that like some of us, the tree might have simply been developmentally young. It simply just needed more time and more nurturing to produce fruit.

This scripture was also very meaningful to me because I was coming upon my third year at that Catholic Church. The 33rd Sunday in ordinary time was only a few weeks away—the day that I heard the homilist who sounded like he had been in my kitchen before Mass. It was the day I came to know where I was to show up for active duty. I thought about all that I learned and all that I experienced and understood on a deep level that I needed the requests I drew up and submitted to one of the parishes ministers to come through. Among them a request to start a support group for adults and adolescents with autism. Before I knew it, I was hearing a different yet, very familiar reading. It was from the Gospel of John.

‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you. Then feed my sheep,’ the deacon read aloud as tears poured from my

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eyes. Then the presider of the Mass appeared. I was so very discombobulated that I thought I heard something about an “insurance risk for the Vatican” when he was talking about how St. John Paul II had been quite the athlete well into old age. My heart sank as surely, my proposal that I drafted for support groups could pose an insurance risk if not careful. My mind went into damage control mode as the presider continued with his homily, reminding us that if we wanted to be a disciple of Christ, if we want to truly love—we have to feed His sheep. We also must be willing to move out into the margins to become missionary disciples of Mercy. I started to reconfigure my proposal on scratch paper while in the pew as I listened in on the remaining speakers for the rest of the day.

Father Donald Calloway made an appearance and gave an inspiring talk on the Rosary and the Blessed Mother. He also kept harping on how religious and tenacious Filipino women can be with their prayer. I thought it unusual that he was talking about this at length. Little did I know, his words would come back to haunt me later. He too, like Fr. Gaitley was eventually surrounded by a sea of people who wanted him to sign their books. It wasn’t long before I recognized that the individual moving the conference along was not getting as much fanfare as the others. He was Father Chris Alar. His words were perhaps those that I most needed to hear. He spoke intimately about the topic of suicide and the need to pray for the suffering.

Once I made it home that late afternoon, I simply crashed out on my bed and fell into a deep slumber. When I woke up in the morning, I headed straight for my office to draft an updated proposal to replace the support group proposal. But first, I thought I’d have a look at email. Among the messages that came in from the day before, a special announcement from the organizer of the citywide support group for adults with autism was needing to step down and was seeking someone to take over her role. I didn’t jump at the opportunity immediately. I thought I’d sleep on it.

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Later the next morning, I found myself at church chatting with a fellow funeral coordinator after a service. Out of seemingly nowhere, he started to share his faith story with me. The details sounded so familiar to me that I sat there just waiting for him to mention the number 33. It also dawned on me that he had a very prayerful Filipino wife. I listened that much more intently when he mentioned the name Rosa Mystica. It wasn't long thereafter that he mentioned that he ventured off to the Holy Land with 33 priests.

'Okay! I have to stop you now to show you something,' I said. I reached down into the cupboard where I secured my purse while serving at the funeral we worked together. Under it, I had a blue folder with a copy of the materials that the nice gentleman at the conference passed onto Father Gaitley for me. I went page by page, pointing out the pattern of the numbers 33 and 333 that appeared in my life and all through my stories in *I Let the Music Speak* and now, *Code Blue* in relationship to Rosa Mystica. I asked Father Gaitley what the number configuration of 33 and 3 meant to him by the last page.

'Can I have that?!' the gentleman asked as he eagerly grabbed the small stack of pages out of my hands. Taking them back, I promised to provide him with a copy later, because I needed them for a meeting that I was going to have that afternoon with a woman who might possibly replace my spiritual director who moved out of town. Although I was willing to drive out to her, I sensed that she might be the right fit for the new place I was finding myself in my spiritual journey.

'Isn't your wife Filipino?' I inquired. 'I remember Father Calloway going on and on about Filipino women this past weekend and how they are strong prayer warriors.' 'Yes!! He wasn't kidding! She is one of those Filipino women that priest was talking about at the conference this past weekend. And are you ready for me to really blow your mind?' he asked with great seriousness. 'The house address of that Mass I was telling you about in my story was 3331!

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I remember it because we were all commenting on it as we gathered together. We figured that it meant that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were all one thing,' he continued.

I smiled as I recalled the name of Father Gaitley's program; *The "One Thing" is Three*. 'We'll have to introduce you to this priest I know,' my friend continued. 'He'll be here in December. He knows a lot about Rosa Mystica. He can probably help you, Cindy. Just be sure to ask the Lord for what you need. Stay in prayer. Here, let me give you his name and phone number.'

When I heard the name of the priest, I couldn't help but recall that it was my cousin who was the key that ignited my first journey to Australia. Both he and the priest shared the same name. Might this name continue to be the key I needed to venture back to that great southern land? Only time would tell after I called the leader of the support group to offer to take over the citywide support group and offered continued prayers to the Lord for the wisdom to take on the challenges that I knew I could face by embracing such a role as I did have my reservations with moving forward without what I thought would be the safety of the church. But the gentleman really emphasized that I needed to pray for the help I needed. The words of the presider of Mass echoed in my mind's ear from his homily from that special Saturday morning. Not only did he emphasize the need to feed the sheep, but that our reluctance to move forward was very apostolic. Whenever Jesus asked his apostles to do something like feed 5000 people on just two fishes and five loaves of bread, they whined back that there wasn't enough to go around. But Jesus asked them to simply give Him what they had, so He could do the rest. With this thought in mind, I prayed for help, and I prayed for another opportunity to go to Australia with a vision of me taking in the beautiful melodies of ICEHOUSE while sitting under the stars."

Chapter 12

Anything is Possible

“For I know well the plans I have in mind for you—oracle of the Lord—plans for your welfare and not for woe, so as to give you a future of hope.”

~Jeremiah 29:11

Certain that he had my number, Tim uttered, “Uh, huh. So, you’re going to tell us that by your prayer, you got to go back to Australia. Right?”

Phil interrupted, “The answer is going to be yes and no.”

“Well, you’re right, Phil. You’ve gotten to know me. My prayer was just one small part of the equation. These supernatural kinds of things happen by the power of the Holy Spirit, for with the Lord’s grace and mercy, anything is possible. This I know for sure. It’s quite biblical. My husband was adamant that I was not going, no matter how much I poked and prodded him about it. I drafted budgets. I figured how our spring break would allow us to take our son. But Mike was not having it. He hated to fly. He hated to

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spend money. Everything seemed to be working against me as far as winning over my husband. But then, just a few short days after I started to pray daily about going to Australia, I received a bulletin from a company called *Minds and Hearts*. It is an Australian organization that provides training and support to professionals, parents, and patients interested in learning more about autism spectrum conditions.”

“What timing!” blurted Timothy with a big smile.

“Oh, yeah!” I chimed. “I learned that they were going to be providing a two-day workshop on how to work with adults on the spectrum. The dates were set right before spring break. So, I approached Mike again and suggested that I go abroad early to attend the training and to go to the ICEHOUSE concert I badgered him about all summer. I pointed out that I could train on Thursday and Friday and then drive down south of Sydney on Saturday to have a listen to ICEHOUSE before meeting Steven and him back in Sydney to vacation for spring break.

He rolled his eyes and said, ‘No. We’re not going.’ I pointed out that it was the perfect itinerary. It didn’t move him at all. I tried to call it a God thing, an answer to my prayer. But again, he gave me a flat, ‘No. It’s just too expensive!’

My heart sank. I left Mike with my tail between my legs as if obeying my husband was a kind of disobedience to God. That’s quite a pickle. You can’t serve two masters. But my own internal doubts were coming forward too. Was it God’s will that I go? Or was it simply a fanatic’s will—my own will—that I go? I tried sour-graping the whole thing by yelling, ‘Well, I did want to do both adults and teens! Perhaps it’s not the time to go,’ to smooth out Mike’s ruffled feathers.

But then a couple of days later, I received another e-mail reminding me of my reward miles for flying with United Airlines. After some quick research, I returned to my husband, with the

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news that I had enough miles to get to Australia and back for free. Mike just shook his head and looked at me like I was crazy.”

“Imagine that!” chuckled Tim.

“Maybe so, but another email came in from *Minds and Hearts* that provided me with more ammo. I learned that a presentation was planned for working with teens on the spectrum for the Saturday after the first two-day session on adults. Again, all the stars were lining up just like they had the first time I went to Oz. It was so perfect that I really did question my own sanity—even more so when another message came in via Facebook. I had to plea my case one more time and gave it all I had.

I reminded my husband that I had been telling him about my desire to go back to Australia all summer long. I told him point-blank back then that I was feeling called back, especially since ICEHOUSE was celebrating 40 years in the business. I know I must have sounded nuts when I mentioned that the number 40 was loaded with meaning in the *Bible* and that it was a special milepost. I explained that each passage to and from Australia would cost 40,000 miles, and I had them to burn. I told him that I could go to three days of training to receive answers to my prayers after I accepted the responsibility to rebuild the support group for individuals on the autism spectrum. And then, if for some reason, I couldn't make it to the concert after the third training, I'd just learned via Facebook that a new concert date was added to the slew of dates that had been announced over the summer for the following Sunday in Melbourne in the Royal Botanical Gardens. But Mike was still very unaffected. He had no idea how much going back meant to me. He hadn't read any of my memoirs though I told him about them. He had a first-row seat to all of the mysterious things that were happening in my life but was still very stubborn and skeptical about anything spiritual or religious. My ploys meant nothing to him. Or so it seemed...

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You could say that I officially threw in the towel when I made one last appeal that I figured would completely seal my fate. Like a disappointed little girl, I pleaded, ‘I have to go. I was watching *Ancient Aliens* with your dad about the Aborigines of Australia and learned that the Blue Mountains, the Pammarata River, Darling Harbour, Sydney, —all of it--sits on the -33 degree latitude. I’m being called there again. It’s where the river meets the sea!’

Needless to say, I wasn’t going to Australia, so I set my sights on earning my black belt in Tae Kwon Do instead.”

“A black belt in Tae Kwon Do?” the guys chuckled. “You?”

“Yes, me! It’s a great place for me to kick and punch and scream my frustrations out in a healthy way. It’s really great therapy, you know. I convinced myself that I was an addicted fan that looked for a way to see my band and looked to continue my training towards self-mastery. I was just experiencing a setback. I gave myself credit for how far I had come in all areas of my development—mind, body, and spirit. What I didn’t realize was the fact that I was coming under a spiritual attack. It would take some time for me to understand just how cunning the enemy can be.

I was so very focused on all things Australia, that I completely missed the boat on everything Rosa Mystica. December 8th was closing in on me and I hadn’t called the priest that my friend encouraged me to contact.”

“You’ve mentioned that date at least a couple of times,” Tim pointed out.

“Yes. It was the day that Pope Francis called for an Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy in 2015. It was also the day that I returned in full communion to the Catholic Church in 2013, but I learned as I was watching the documentary on Divine Mercy, that December 8th was not only the day that we Catholics celebrate

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the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin but was also the day that Rosa Mystica asked for an Hour of Grace at 12 noon back in 1947. While Fr. Gaitley never mentioned anything about Rosa Mystica, the visual images in the documentary caused me to look even deeper into the story behind the apparition.

I found out that Rosa Mystica requested an Hour of Grace which was to start at 12 noon on December 8th. She specifically asked the faithful participants to pray the *51st Psalm* three times at the start of the hour. She promised that many healings and conversions would take place as a consequence of prayer, penance, and sacrifice in response to her call. She was said to have appeared at noon on a stairway to heaven on December 8th, completely in white with three roses.

We had Divine Mercy established by Saint John Paul II. I posed the question in my letter to Fr. Gaitley if perhaps Pope Francis would eventually request an Hour of Grace. I knew this was a dicey question to ask because the Marian apparition of Rosa Mystica has not been authenticated by the Church. The Church does not recognize all claims made out there about these kinds of spiritual happenings. Investigations can take decades. In many cases, there isn't sufficient evidence to flip all the switches. But this notion struck a chord in both my mind and my heart. I just couldn't shake the instinctive rumblings that stirred my soul.

Thankfully, I found the phone number my friend gave me in my purse in time to call the priest before the 8th. He was quite gentle over the phone with a spirit of joy in his voice. He shared that although the apparition of Rosa Mystica was not officially recognized by the Church, she was still part of the Litany of the Blessed Mother and that we all needed to be sure to pray for our priests and religious. He then shifted our conversation to me and my marriage to Michael. He asked for the date when we were married after requesting my full name. He told me that he and all of his seminarians would pray for the strengthening of our sacred union. I was really touched and was equally eager to make an

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appearance at church on the 8th to pray *Psalm 51* three times before Mass started at noon. Luckily, the liturgy had not been planned to start until 12:10, so I had plenty of time to arrive and recite my prayers.

Shortly thereafter, Michael approached me in the morning with a cup of coffee in hand saying that he had a strong feeling that I needed to go to Australia. He spent the morning actually encouraging me to go. I thought I was in the twilight zone. At first, I hesitated. I accepted the fact that my husband didn't want me to go and had been working through the disappointment with a focus on martial arts.

It was my best friend from college who urged me to enroll in the classes and book my flights to Australia before all the variables changed. I knew she was right. So, I ended up booking my trip right before the New Year. I needed to be in Sydney for at least four days for the three-days of training.

Then I went to follow-up on driving to the ICEHOUSE concert. I learned that I grossly miscalculated the distance I would have to drive. Luckily, I had that extra date to fall back on for Melbourne, but did I have the mileage to make everything work? As it turned out, I did. After digging around, I learned that it was strikingly cheaper for me to fly to Melbourne as opposed to renting a car and driving to the other location just south of Sydney as I had originally anticipated!

Once I received confirmation for my registration for the training, I looked to book my concert ticket. I was assigned seat X-3 for the Melbourne show. But something about my seat assignment haunted me, but I couldn't figure it out. Later, I realized that I had finished my manuscript *Code Blue: Reflections on Becoming an Echo of God* just after a former assistant to exorcists came for our Parish mission just before December 8th. I provided a copy of it to our leader of the New Evangelization. In the last chapter, "Touch the Fire", I decided that I would celebrate the

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numbers 3 and 33 by assigning the number 33 in reference to Christ and the 3 in reference to the Blessed Mother. So, when both of the numbers came together in any configuration of 3's as in 333:3, 33.3, 3/3, 3.33, or just 333, I knew that something special was being communicated in some way. In any case, just the number 33 alone was cause for celebration!

When you take X as in X-mas, you get Christ-mas. When you take my seat number, X-3, and do the same, you get Christ-3, or in terms of my newly determined nomenclature, I was assigned seat #33-3! I was my perfect spot.

As for my flight to Sydney and back from Melbourne, I had many choices for my itinerary. One jumped out as *the* one! I would arrive home in Houston at 3:33 p.m.! Everything seemed to be falling into place quite wonderfully, but then I began to experience a sharp pain in my right wrist that shot down into my palm and thumb and up into my arm. I couldn't recall damaging it in any way other than the time that I slammed the hatchback of my trailblazer onto my wrist back in early October. It hadn't bothered me up until I booked the trip. A feeling of dread slowly started to creep over me."

"I knew it! This place is haunted. Isn't it? All of this is not of the Holy Spirit. You attracted evil spirits by subscribing to a false god!" Tim spat out. "You worship idols. You've been polluted by pagan ideas. Your marriage cannot be strengthened by some priests praying for you. Your marriage has not been sealed in the temple. You should have never gone to the Catholic Church!"

"I can see how it could appear that way. This place is haunted, but it's probably not what you think. It was quite a blessing that a real-life 33-year old Tae Kwon Do enthusiast who served as an assistant to exorcists for many years came to visit our parish before the year's end to help us understand that no matter how bad things can get, the Lord always finds a way to bring a greater good out of it. The presentation was called "Christ the Victor" as he shared

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some of his experiences working along-side Catholic exorcists. Two things in his mission really stood out for me. First, he reported that demons hate the “box”, the code name they used for the confessional. It made perfect sense to me. When people get real and own up to the truth of their ways, nothing can touch them. They are saved by the Truth. Second, they hate the Blessed Mother. She was perfectly obedient. She was fully human and full of grace! She’s even mentioned more times in the Quran than in the *Bible* for her purity and righteousness. She is the Lord’s secret weapon against the forces of darkness. She is often depicted with her foot atop the head of a serpent. There *is* something about Mary. You don’t mess with her! For these reasons and more, she was the woman described in the *Book of Revelation* with her head crowned with twelve stars!”

Chapter 13

ICEHOUSE

“A thief comes only to steal and slaughter and destroy; I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly.”

~John 10:10

A strike of lightning followed by an earsplitting boom rattled the entire house as if all four walls imploded. But the rain continued to beat the rooftop as the wind whirled about aimlessly outside. Phil curled up in a ball in the corner as if on a plane in crash position. Timothy took the candle and held it close as I recited a Hail Mary aloud. A loud crash of shattering glass punctuated the last lines of the prayer, “Pray for us sinners, now, and at the hour of our death. Amen.”

We were at a standstill, unsure of what to do next. I wanted to get out of the closet to check the damage to the house, but the tornado warning had not been lifted.

“You need to stay here,” Timothy advised. I know you’re wondering what happened, but it’s just not safe right now.

Icehouse

The longer I wait, the more water damage,” I started.

“You can’t worry about that right now,” Timothy counseled.

“It’s dark. It’s raining. It’s scary. We have perfect conditions for a ghost story. Why don’t you tell us about your haunted house? It will take your mind off of the storm,” Phil suggested.

“Good idea, Phil,” Tim supported. “I have to admit that I am curious about what you’re going to say.”

“Right now, the only ghost I want to talk about is the Holy Ghost!” I barked. “Let’s talk about the Holy Ghost! The Ghost of Time! It can easily get confused for the bad type of spirit by those who lack the eyes to see and the ears to hear. I mentioned spiritual attack and you automatically assumed that it had something to do with worshipping a false god or worshipping idols or some other offense of the ten commandments, Tim. But I’ll have you know, that some of the things I learned from our visitor, really helped me to better discern spirits.”

“Like what?” Tim came back.

“Thankfully, he participated in a podcast with our leader for the New Evangelization. They discussed hauntings and infestations. He told stories about genuine hauntings, where restless souls had the need to communicate something or get the inhabitants of the house to understand something. That’s the type of hauntings we’ve experienced. We are not left feeling concerned or afraid. We’re left feeling like we want to help whoever is on the other side.

This house might have been haunted in the past when other families lived here. It’s my understanding that at least four others have occupied this house before we picked it up as a foreclosure. All I know is that I wanted to be sure that this house was clean before we brought our belongings into it. While Mike and his dad changed out the locks on the doors, I went about the business of

Icehouse

opening all of the windows and splashing Holy Water everywhere, claiming our home in the name of Jesus.”

“You mean, you didn’t get a priest to come in and bless the house?” Tim marveled.

“No. I had not been going to church when we first moved here. I was still very shaken by all that had transpired in our other house. I lost sight of who I was. I was at a loss for what I really believed in anymore. I fought many battles and ultimately won the war, but it was awfully costly.

My mother-in-law was an atheist. Sometimes, she even said she was an agnostic. She questioned and made fun of my faith over the years. I defended it fervently, but it got ugly, very ugly. I was ashamed of how low I could go to win, be right, and come out on top; although I hit rock bottom. I lost sight of the Spirit. You don’t kick people when they’re down, but I did. You’re supposed to offer them a hand up. Even in Tae Kwon Do tournaments, we are expected to turn around and kneel quietly, to give our opponents time to get back on their feet. But when it came to sparring with my mother-in-law, I offered no mercy. I’d become quite ruthless over the years. While she eventually went back to church and made sure her husband got baptized before she died, I left her deathbed feeling as if I had wagered my soul to get her to do so. It made me feel dirty. I learned that it’s one thing to be strong in your faith. It’s another to teach about it, and at the most critical level, it’s that much more important to actually live it. That’s where I failed. Yes, it was one thing to be right, but it was a completely different thing when I stopped to consider how I conveyed what I knew and understood. My manner wasn’t very Christian. I was just as judgmental as she was. I was just as argumentative as she was. I was just as self-centered as she was. I focused on being the winner at the expense of being the servant of God that I purported to be.”

Icehouse

Tim and Phil just stared at me. It was to be expected. After all, I was speaking about the heart of evangelization, the very heart of their mission.

“So, the whole ordeal with my mother-in-law and her death really messed me up. It wasn’t long before the hauntings began. It started in my son’s bedroom. One of his toys kept playing the same ‘ole song “Found a Peanut”, over and over again on its own. I even thought that it was my husband who was pressing the button to make sure that it continued to play. But then came the second verse about cracking the peanut open. I could have sworn I heard someone come into the room. But Mike was fast asleep in our bed.”

“Was this happening at 3:33 in the morning?” Phil asked.

“I don’t know. I hadn’t been really cognizant of that number configuration before my first trip to Australia,” I explained. “All I know is that something was making that toy sound off. Mike suggested that maybe the battery was low, but it continued to play the next day when we went back into our son’s room to check on it. I moved our boy into our bed, so he could sleep that night. One of our neighbors suggested that it was Mike’s mom coming in to check on her grandson.

We had no other issues until we moved into this house that we are in now. It started with a missing lithograph. The assistant to the exorcists mentioned that signs of a haunting or infestation included strange smells or missing items. It seemed as if the artwork had grown legs and just walked out the door. I actually hated that particular work. Who knows, it might have been worth a lot of money.”

“Who did the artwork?”

Icehouse

“It’s a strong possibility that the work was done by Salvador Dalí. We have three other lithographs that are on the wall right here in the foyer. If we opened the door, you could see them.”

“You mean, you don’t know if they are real?” asked Tim.

“No. Mike and I Googled to find out where we could take the lithographs to find out if they are authentic. When I saw the phone number on the first link that we tried, I just about flipped!”

“What do you mean?”

“Google Salvador Dalí, and see what you get!”

“Oh snap! Look at all the threes! The phone number is virtually all threes!” Phil observed with amazement.

“And they are out there, possibly in danger of water damage if not soaked already,” Tim mourned. “I love Salvador Dalí, especially his most famous painting, “The Persistence of Memory” with all of the melted,” Tim went on before pausing as he realized the connection to Dalí’s images of time.

“Watches,” I offered with a smile.

“Yes, all of the melted pocket watches,” he confirmed. “And one of the pieces of art disappeared?”

“Yes. It’s gone. Then there was the night that our radio in our bedroom came on by itself. Then there was another night when the humidifier over by my husband’s side of the bed kept bubbling air bubbles without even being plugged in. My harp was strummed by some force one evening when Michael was away at work overnight. Even my blender came on in the kitchen by itself. The dog has moments when she will bark into the air as if she can see something floating there. The list goes on.

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Mike is quite the skeptic. He comes up with an explanation for everything, and that's exactly why I think these things keep happening. When I shared what happened with the toy in our son's room, our neighbor suggested that it was Mike's mother, trying to communicate with us. I thought he was right. She wants the men in this house to become believers. I truly believe that's what all of the strangeness is all about.

There was one late afternoon, when Mike, our son, and I were having dinner when I heard voices coming from the hallway."

"They must have been coming for the artwork!" Tim chuckled.

"I said nothing, but our son said, 'Mom, who is that?' Mike jumped up and looked at me, 'Did you hear that too?' acknowledging that he heard it also. 'Mike, I told you that our house is haunted,' I started. In a flash, he was in the hallway, looking for the visitors that all of us clearly heard. He went into the library and then the office, before heading upstairs to check all of the bedrooms. No one was there. Mike came down the stairs, clearly rattled by what had happened. He couldn't create any type of explanation for what all three of us experienced. It was awesome because it was the first time that he really had to give the possibility of the hauntings some considerable thought. 'Your mom wants you to come to Jesus,' I intuited as I tried to comfort my disgruntled husband. 'She knows she didn't teach you, Mike. And she's helping me with our son.'

And she was. There was an evening when my boy came to lie down with me in my bed. I just held him close, when all of the sudden, the Barney stuffed animal on my bed stand started to sing his "I Love You" song. My little guy was startled. I accused him of pressing the button on the toy to play the song. I asked him to play it again. He reached over and pressed its foot. No sound. I picked up the toy and started pressing it all around. When I pressed its heart, the song came on again. There was no way that my son had

Icehouse

originally played that song. He didn't even know where to press it to play! He just stared at me in amazement."

"Again, why didn't you call a priest or deacon to chase the ghost out of your house?" Phil pressed.

"I wasn't afraid of it. It wasn't bad. I figured it's better to save those types of interventions for the big scary stuff. Why call for an ambulance when all you need is a band-aid?"

"What about strange smells?" Tim pressed.

"Oh, that's another can of worms! I am extremely sensitive to smells, and so is our son. Mike, not so much. In fact, Mike's sensory system is very impervious. He adds hot sauce to everything. I mean everything! He's very hard of hearing and has a hard time estimating his own strength sometimes. So, we are on opposite sides of the spectrum, so to speak.

There was an evening when I took my little family to finally get a chance to see Collective Soul in concert, just before the Second Annual North American Congress on Divine Mercy event. We sat in the very last row of the outdoor pavilion. I like sitting where there are no people behind me. Again, I don't care for big crowds, but this concert series was special. Not only were we going to see Collective Soul, but we were also going to see the Goo Goo Dolls."

"I don't think I know who they are," Phil came back.

"Me either," Tim added.

"Hey, I didn't know much about them before the concert either. I learned that they were going to be headlining a concert in which Collective Soul would support them while at a Duran Duran concert with my husband to support their album "Paper Gods". All of the PR for the Goo Goo Dolls was related to the image of a box with a storm inside. And I was already in the throes of

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sensing that there was something I needed to learn about the “boxes” at the time. ICEHOUSE had just rereleased an album called “Boxes” that contained music for a ballet that they worked on back in the early ’80s. Mind you, it had a giant X on it! I also learned that the Lord’s throne in heaven was described as a perfect cube, or rather, a box. Then there was an inspiring Kelly Clarkson video that came out when she turned 33 with a bunch of boxes that contained women, that busted out of them. And yes, being the obsessive type, I did notice that some of the images in her video mirrored images in ICEHOUSE’s video for the song “ICEHOUSE”. So, when I heard “Boxes” by the Goo Goo Dolls, I just knew something was up.”

“You are nuts!” Phil laughed.

“Yeah, but don’t ya love it?” I came back.

“Ok. So, what happened at the concert? What did you smell,” Tim giggled and urged me on.

“We smelled Roses.”

“Roses?”

“Yes. It was very potent and most definitely, roses. Our boy was overwhelmed by the scent, so much so, that he switched seats to be as far away from the fragrance as possible. Mike and I tried to locate where the perfume was originating. It seemed to be coming from behind us, but there was no one there. And of course, all of the ladies in front of us were a little weirded out about us sniffing around them.

I later learned that if you pray the Rosa Mystica novena, you may smell roses. And yes, I prayed the last Rosary for that novena earlier that day.”

“And you didn’t know about the prayers and the roses?”

Icehouse

“No. In fact, I later learned that if you ask the Blessed Mother to send you a rose, she will.”

“Mary! Mother of Jesus. Send me a rose!” yelled Tim.

“You’ll be surprised, Tim. If you were sincere, she’ll send you a rose.”

“I want one too!” Phil added.

“Go ahead and ask for one.”

“Mary! Mother of Jesus. Send me a rose too.”

“She’ll make you a believer. In fact, that’s what she does best. It’s been 500 years since the Protestant Reformation. Over 9 million people left the Roman Catholic Church, but the Blessed Mother showed up in Mexico, causing another 9 million people to join the Catholic Church. She always brings people to Jesus.”

“So, what about the bad kinds of smells? Have you encountered the kind of smells that you needed to be concerned about?” asked Phil.

“Oh, yes! Like I said, I was at the start of some pretty serious spiritual warfare. I was heartbroken that I couldn’t play my harp. I could barely move my right hand. It was as if the enemy knew that I was going abroad and going to want to reach out to others, but the sharp pain made it difficult for me to offer my hand without wincing. And then there were the smells! I told you before that I couldn’t handle being at the Switchfoot concert I mentioned earlier and ended up standing in the very back of the venue. I saw them again with my sister in Austin shortly after going to the National Congress of Divine Mercy and again, ended up in the back of the venue.”

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“Oh no! You went to go see ICEHOUSE and gave up your perfect spot!?!?”

I looked at Tim and cringed, “I started to doubt that I would be able to see them. In fact, I came to a point when I almost canceled the whole trip.”

“No way!” Tim responded in disbelief.

“Oh yes. Some things gave me pause. First, the lead guitarist of ICEHOUSE had an accident and messed up his right wrist. Later, as the 40 Years Tour was in full swing, it was announced that ICEHOUSE had to cancel a couple of concerts in Perth. It was at that point that I realized that I might go to Australia and end up holding a ticket for a concert that might not happen. Adding fuel to those doubts were the photographs of Mr. Davies that were published after getting back on the road again. He too looked like something happened to his right wrist. Then there were postings by a fan to the band’s website insinuating that ICEHOUSE was somehow connected to Freemasonry, so much so, that the fan posted that she was not going to listen to any more of the music.

But then, there was more. The itinerary for the trip to Australia strikingly resembled my first one. It occurred to me that someone died while I was abroad with my family. Now, our pastor fell ill and ended up in the intensive care unit, unable to accept visitors. I prayed that he would walk out of it, but I had my doubts. I feared he was going to die, and if it wasn’t him, it was going to be someone else I knew. I could feel it.

I sat in my office in front of the computer contemplating a cancellation when I received an email from a ticketing agency for an upcoming concert. The announcement gave me hope. The Goo Goo Dolls were returning in the fall with a new tour, called the “Long Way Home” tour with Phillip Phillips. I grabbed my “Boxes” CD and cued up the player to the last song “Long Way Home”. It was as if the Blessed Mother herself was telling me that

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everything was going to be just fine, but that I couldn't let go of her gentle hand. The lineup of songs also included another I really liked called "Prayer in my Pocket". I instantly knew that it was going to be important to keep a prayer on me at all times."

"Which one?"

"*Psalm 51*, of course! It was at this time that I decided that this trip was going to be about complete surrender to the Lord's will. I would be clothed in the precious blood of Jesus, meaning I would wear red with black only. And I would fast. I could eat anything available on offer like the lunches that came with my participation in the courses I was going to take. Otherwise, I limited myself to purchasing no more than one meal a day. In preparation for the trip, I had already chosen to fast for 24 hours on Tuesdays and Fridays every week, from the start of January until the journey in early March."

"Woah! You took things to the extremes."

"I had to. I was dealing with some pretty serious thoughts that were trying to disrupt my peace. By the time I left for Australia, my head and heart were in the right space. Thank God, I had some wonderful encounters with women who made sure that I was more than prepared to go and completely trusting in Lord!"

"Speaking of trust in the Lord, time is up. We can come out now," Phil announced.

"Yes! I want to see your lithographs!" Tim exclaimed with great enthusiasm.

Phil got up and opened the door. We each emerged from the closet, stretching out our limbs, grateful that we successfully weathered the worst of the storm.

Icehouse

Tim glanced at the artwork on the wall before him. “Wow! They are even numbered!” he pointed out.

“Yes. I was watching a television show with my husband, when we learned that Dalí signed a lot of blank canvasses and paper. His signature alone is great to have. When they zoomed into his autograph, I immediately recognized it and had my husband DVR the show to pause on the signature, so I could compare it to the ones on these pieces. They matched!”

“Wow! You’re pretty good.”

“Well, I notice little details. That’s all.”

“So, what were you watching?”

I smiled with a twinkle in my eye, “Pawn Stars!”

Chapter 14

The Lazarus

“Rather, living the truth in love, we should grow in every way into him who is the Lord, Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, with the proper functioning of each part, bring about the body’s growth and builds itself up in love.”

~Ephesians 4:15-16

Phil, concerned about the rising water warned, “Hey! I can’t see the street! It’s completely covered with water, like a river. It’s creeping up on your lawn!”

“Yes, I’m sure we’ll be under the flash flood warning for a while. All I can do is pray that it drains faster than it rises.”

“Oh no!” cried out Tim while facing the back windows. “Looks like your fence is down and in your swimming pool!”

I turned to look back, “Oh no! Where did the trees go?!”

The Lazarus

“What trees?!” asked Phil while walking beside me.

“The trees that lined the back of the fence,” I spilled out as I made my way across the living room, into the breakfast area and out the back door to survey the extent of the damage we took. I could see into our neighbor’s yard to the left and saw several long branches sticking out of their swimming pool before I noticed that a tree had been slammed up and against our house with several branches lodged through the upper windows on the second floor. My heart leaped as I raced back inside the house. “Upstairs!” I hollered. Tim made a mad dash up the stairwell as Phil and I followed.

There was broken glass everywhere as some of the limbs and branches of the tree amply plugged the windows as the rain continued to pour down outside. The water damage appeared to be minimal for the time being.

“Hey! Who went in that room?” Tim puzzled.

“Huh?”

“The door is open. It was closed when I first got up here!”

“Are you sure, Tim?”

“Yes. I swear. It was closed.”

Phil turned to walk towards the room.

“My son says he can feel a presence in that room.”

Phil stopped in his tracks. “Do you mean it’s haunted?”

“It’s a special space. I call it the upper room. Let me show you.”

The Lazarus

We walked into the large oblong hideaway where a bed sat at the very end to the right of the doorway.

“What’s that?” Tim squinted as he walked to the bed to see what was posted on the wall.

“It’s a picture of Mary with the apostles awaiting the Holy Spirit in the upper room,” I noted softly.

Phil walked behind a small table that was stationed to the left of the door, with a chair that faced the bed on the complete opposite side of the room.

“What’s with the table?” he asked.

“That’s where I wrote *Code Blue: Reflections on Becoming an Echo of God*. See the candles and my *Bible*? I used to come up here and sit my laptop on the table, light the candles, and wrap myself up in the blue blanket that is draping the chair right now. I prayed that the Paraclete would help me see and write things through the eyes and the heart of the Blessed Mother. You could say I was very ritualistic about it. If you take a look in the closet over there, by the bed, you will find additional artwork and all of the charts that used to be posted on all of the walls up here.”

Tim walked over to the closet and slid open one of the doors. “Whoa! How many charts are in here? What did you do? Print what you were writing and then glued them to the large sheets of paper in here?”

“Yes. It made it much easier for me to see the connections—the fingerprints of the Holy Spirit,” I began.

“Huh?” Phil wondered, as he grabbed one of the charts and estimated its size. “This must be at least a 4’ x 3’ section of butcher paper!”

The Lazarus

“Yeah! My husband figured that he would really worry about my mental health when and if I started to connect the charts with yarn or string.”

“Come again?” Phil asked confused.

“Maybe, you were too young for the movie *A Beautiful Mind* with Australian actor Russell Crowe?” I began.

“More Australian references?!”

“Told you I was a bit obsessive,” I defended, interrupting Tim.

“And so, it helped you to do all these things?” Phil mused.

“Oh yes! I even experienced a small miracle up here. They actually happen every day. You just have to keep an eye out for them with an open heart.”

“What happened?”

I walked over to the table and pointed up to the lights that hung down from the ceiling fan.

“Notice how some of the light bulbs have burned out in this room. There is one on this ceiling fan and a couple more over there by the ceiling fan that is over by the bed. They all have black-colored soot of sorts splashed on the inside of the bulb. There was another one over here that was closest to where I sat that blew out while I was writing about the Virgin. I was so stunned by what I saw that I took pictures of the bulb and then looked up to it to find inspiration whenever I had writer’s block. Once I finished the manuscript, I took it down and placed it in one of my blinged-out boxes that can be found in the library downstairs.”

“What was it about the bulb?”

The Lazarus

“Go downstairs and see for yourself.”

Phil shot out of the room first, followed by Tim. I stayed upstairs to offer the Lord thanksgiving for sparing my home through the storm and prayed for protection from the floods.

“Ah!!! It looks like a blue and white splatter of Mary!” Phil cried out.

“Be careful with my bulb!” I cautioned.

“I don’t see Mary,” Tim smirked. “Just blue and white dust in there.”

“But it’s blue and white!” Phil came back. “The other bulbs were burned black.”

“Blue is Mary’s signature color in the Church. Red represents the fire of the Holy Spirit—the Divine. When you mix red and blue, you get purple—royalty and/or passion. You get Jesus. Yes. There has been quite a presence in that room for a long time.”

“But how can you be sure that these things are not signs of evil? You gotta know that we think that your doctrines about Mary are heretical—even blasphemous!” Tim probed with a hint of loving concern.

“Honestly, I have to admit. I wondered about that too. When that fellow came and started to talk about his experiences with exorcisms, he acknowledged that levitations were real. But then, I recalled that several saints were said to have the ability to levitate, especially while in prayer. He also mentioned that an indication of possession included the fact that the person knew information that they couldn’t have known on their own. But Pope Gregory XI saw it as a supernatural sign when St. Catherine of Siena alluded to a vow he made to move back to Rome from France if he were to become pope. He never told a soul about this promise, and yet

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Catherine brought it up at just the right time. As a consequence, he did in fact return to Rome and maintained his relationship with Catherine look to her as a counselor and guide. Other saints like Joan of Arc were said to have the charism of knowledge in a similar way. Some saints, especially the apostles, experienced the charism of speaking in tongues; and yet, the assistant explained that people under possession usually can speak in different languages. Do you see where I'm going?

Even when Jesus performed miracles and healed people, some doubted and even assumed that His works were rooted in evil; so, the story goes. He was accused of blasphemy and wrongdoing by those who purported to be righteous people. After raising Lazarus from the dead, it was some of the most religious men who began to plot his demise. You know that.

When I came under spiritual attack, I was bombarded with negative thoughts and intuitions. Anybody can go through a dark night of the soul. The means to come out of it is to draw closer to Christ. I wanted to go to Australia and hounded my husband about it. And then the perfect reasons and opportunities came up, and I was going off my rocker. But my husband did not want me to go. I had to really step back and evaluate my feelings. Yes, I had my desires. And certainly, all of the signs were there. But I wondered if they were of God.

So, what did I do? I went to confession. I worked at keeping myself squeaky clean, so much so that at one point, the priest in the confessional asked me if I'd ever seen a therapist. 'Oh, yes, Father,' I assured him. But then I learned that one should go to the "box" as often as possible. I got the message that participating in the sacraments was going to be very important if I wanted to be able to discern those things that were of God as opposed to the enemy. Even when I went to that second Switchfoot concert with my sister, I instantly fell in love with their opening song, "Holy Water", a tune about praying for rain to heal, stay clean, and wash all doubts away. Man! That was an amazing prayer!

The Lazarus

I knew I had to totally let go of the whole notion of going to Australia. So, I chose to refocus my efforts on pursuing the black belt in my martial arts class, finishing my manuscript, and making sure that I prayed *Psalm 51* three times to begin an hour of grace on December 8th. When Mike came to me to tell me that I should go to Australia, I got really scared. Why? Because I knew then that it was God's will. And like usual, I pushed back in fear, and that's probably what brought on the spiritual attack. I'd been down that road before. It was my MO. I was always quite comfortable in the driver's seat, but to let Jesus completely take the wheel scared me to death. And that's what you get, when you are disobedient, death. I really hadn't learned to fully trust Him. That's what my second journey to Australia was really all about. I had to go and set aside all of my desires and just live out each day the way the Lord wanted it to unfold. Yes, I prayed for what I wanted. I even sent a third letter to ICEHOUSE's management along with the first draft of my manuscript. I figured that if there was a problem or if Mr. Welsh wanted to speak with me, it was going to be a good idea to tell him I'd be in Sydney and then in Melbourne. I put it all in God's hands. I would do nothing more other than to show up everywhere as scheduled.

I don't want to give the wrong impression that the email about the Goo Goo Dolls was the only thing that made me reconsider my feelings about canceling my trek Down Under. There had been other encounters that led me to understand that it wasn't necessarily me drawing closer to Christ. It was *He* drawing closer to me through other-worldly encounters that took me by surprise. Each occurred at the right time at the right place with all the right reasons and answers to make my voyage to Australia that much more meaningful and holy. Each person stood out uniquely and came to me as part of a constellation shining more brightly than all of the other stars!"

Chapter 15

We Can Get Together

“You will show me the path to life, abounding joy in your presence, the delights at your right hand forever.”

~Psalm 16:11

My phone rang. “It’s my husband.” Tim and Phil left outside the front door to give me some privacy. I thought it odd that they opted to walk out onto the front lawn to stand in the rain, as I watched them through the front windows of the library.

After finishing my conversation with Michael, I went outside to meet up with the guys. “Our bikes are gone!” Phil announced.

“And there are fallen trees and debris everywhere, but most homes look intact. Your neighbor’s fence fell over too,” Tim reported. “And it looks like the rain isn’t going to let up.”

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“No worries! Let’s go in have a bite to eat. I’m hungry and relieved that the damage isn’t too bad. We’ll recover, good Lord willing. Come back inside.”

We all turned to walk into the house. “Is your husband alright?”

“He’s fine, although concerned about how we’re fairing. I told him that it might be best to wait to see how bad the flooding is before returning home. Here, let’s get some towels.”

“I hadn’t thought about that. It’s one thing to get out of here. It’s another to make it back,” assessed Phil.

“Here. Let’s dry off, and we can take some of these large plastic garbage bags upstairs to line the floor under the windows upstairs since the windows are not perfectly sealed before I get too involved in the kitchen.”

“Sure,” Tim agreed, holding out his hand to take some of the bags.

We all made our way back up the stairs and proceeded to move the pieces of glass under the branches that protruded from the windows, before laying out the trash bags to catch any moisture that seeped in from outside. After lining the wall and laying out the plastic, Tim and I stepped back to admire our work, as Phil headed back into the upper room.

“Phil?” Tim called out.

“I just had to see the lights again in this room. The bulbs that are burned out really do have blackish soot in them. I just wonder how that bulb downstairs turned blue and white?” Phil pondered. “So, what, you couldn’t make out the image of the Virgin in the bulb. The fact of the matter is that the bulb burned out in different colors when compared to the others.”

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“Well, maybe it was a different type of bulb or brand?” Tim suggested.

“No. That bulb was the same as the others,” Phil claimed with certainty.

“Let’s get back downstairs where y’all can have a seat,” I redirected.

“So, you were going to tell us about some encounters you had?” Tim prompted as we headed downstairs.

“Well, yeah. The first encounter came through the woman who taught me about the Rosary and showed me how to make them. I ran into her at the grocery store, where she noted that I looked kinda chipper. When I told her that I was going to go to Australia, she immediately went into geologist mode. She told me that she collected sand from all over the world and didn’t have a single sample from Australia. Long story, short. I promised to bring her some sand from Bondi Beach. I had no idea how this was just the start of an important chain of events that would unfold while I was Down Under.”

“What do you mean?” Tim pressed.

“Well, each conversation contributed to my overall spiritual wellbeing to the extent that I had more of a positive disposition than a negative one. Further, the conversations made me that much more curious and gave me a sense of wonder that trumped the fear that was slowly starting to shake things up deep inside my soul. I also had a whole other level of accountability going on other than the one I was making to God. You could say that both my spiritual and physical worlds were running parallel and were soon going to be overlapping into one. It was just a matter of time. Why don’t y’all guys take a seat here at my breakfast bar while I get us some stuff out for us to make our own sandwiches? I have some

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assorted sodas here too. Take what you like, while I get some glasses out with ice.”

Phil and Tim each took a bar stool and sat quietly, making and eating their sandwiches as I continued, “Eventually, a couple of emails emerged out of nowhere. The first one came from a woman I met months earlier through a women’s group at church called WE, meaning “Women Experience”. She helped and sat alongside the woman who founded the group, as I tried to explain what I was writing about and how it was related to her mission. Both ladies expressed interest in looking over my manuscript and providing feedback. But of the two, it was a helper who got back to me.

‘I’m ready to read *Code Blue*,’ she wrote. I was stunned. I really didn’t know her and was surprised that she took the time to contact me and offer to read the manuscript. We arranged to meet at a coffee shop, so I could provide her with a copy of my work. Hours later, she had my manuscript, and I had a prompting from the Holy Spirit: read the book *The Shack*. She turned out to be a massive fan of the novel and suggested that I might want to read it given all that we discussed. She reported that a movie version of the book was going to be released on March 3rd, which translated into 3/3. The date alone sealed the deal. And so, I found the book and read it virtually overnight.

As I read, I recognized that there were some things in the story that I knew would rub people the wrong way, given that it’s a tale that fleshed out the concept of the Holy Trinity in ways that not all Christians would agree. Some found the work heretical. Others found it groundbreaking. I found it perplexing, especially after reading the chapter called “A Festival of Friends”. In it, author, William Paul Young, described a sliver of heaven, set in an open field at the foot of a forest. All the inhabitants were described as somewhat glowing with auras of multicolored configurations. For example, one person might have more red and blue in their aura than another, but less green and yellow. I was tickled by this

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imagery, because all the press related to ICEHOUSE's 40 Years Tour, presented an image of Iva Davies lined in a multicolored aura as described in the book, and in my case, I was going to see him in quite a similar setting quite literally in Melbourne. The timing of reading the book and actually going to Australia couldn't have been more perfect. Consequently, I garnered great hope for my trip from that chapter.

The second email came from another woman I met through the number 333. She was the one who taught me about the scent of roses being related to the presence of the Blessed Mother when I told her about how Mike, our son, and I went to a concert and smelled roses between the Collective Soul and Goo Goo Dolls sets.”

“Yeah, I remember you mentioning that,” Phil confirmed.

“After several months since our last communication, she wanted to sit down and reconnect. It was great to see her, and by the time we parted ways again, she left me with the suggestion to read the book *Unbound*. It is a book about a deliverance ministry to cast out evil spirits in others. She thought that I might be a worthy candidate for taking up the cause. I must admit, it seemed like everyone I was talking to had a book in mind for me.

Another such individual was my friend who worked with me to help individuals in our parish write their life stories to pass down to their grandchildren. We took up the weekly ritual of meeting up at a coffee shop to touch base and just hang out. She'd heard all of my fantastical ramblings for some time and constantly gave me something to read about my musings. For example, when I told her about Stephen King's *The Stand*, in relationship to my fixation on Matthew McConaughey, she brought me King's memoir *On Writing*. Go figure!

When I told her that I was going to go back to Australia, she bought me a copy of the Victorian novel, *The Woman in White*. She

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called it a page-turner and thought it would be a great way to spend my time on the long flight over the Pacific since I had a habit of saying, 'I just love the mystery of it all', and the narrative was one of the greatest mysteries ever written in her opinion. I ended up watching the BBC version of it on YouTube, before diving into the pages long before leaving the country.

Now speaking of Matthew McConaughey, I knew that I needed to get in contact with my friend, the one I mentioned earlier who was talking about his mother. I hadn't disclosed anything about my Matthew fixation with her, nor inquired about his mother until this particular time while I was in Round Rock visiting my sister. Georgetown was just up the road, and I decided to call her before leaving my sister's house. She invited me over for breakfast.

While feasting on her homemade treats, I told her that I saw a preview for the animated film *Sing* and was officially freaked out that not only did Matthew voice a character that was a Koala bear but that his name was Buster Moon. 'I expect to see Matthew McConaughey in Australia,' I disclosed much to the surprise and confusion of my dear friend. It was then that I told her about my weird Matthew fixation. 'I haven't been able to figure out why he is on my radar. I just always remembered that if for some reason I needed to find him, I knew I could come to you because you know his mom. I just have this creepy feeling that I'll see him there. It's just a strong intuition. I don't even know what I'd say to him if I did run into him. I don't like that feeling. And there's something about the name of his character, Buster Moon. I think it has something to do with the moon somehow, which I relate to the Blessed Virgin Mary, which brings me back to the fact that you know his mother,' I shared.

No stranger to my fanciful experiences and thinking, she suggested that I might need to read *The Cloud of Unknowing*. She pulled out a copy of the book for me to see and suggested that I also consider reading St. Theresa of Avila's *The Interior Castle* and *Revelations of Divine Love* by Julian of Norwich. Always very

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respectful and glad to have her counsel, I left her home that morning, intent to find the books as soon as possible.”

I took on *The Interior Castle* first and was blown away by St. Theresa’s description of spiritual marriage. Here, let me show you.” I left the kitchen to go get my copy of the book. I brought it back to the gentleman and opened it to the exact quote I was referencing. “See. Take a look. I have it highlighted in yellow here,” I prompted Phil.

Phil put his sandwich down, grabbed the book, and read aloud,

...spiritual marriage is like rain falling from heaven into a river or stream, becoming one and the same liquid, so that the river and rainwater cannot be divided; or it resembles a streamlet flowing into the ocean, which cannot afterward be disunited from it. (p. 273)

“Isn’t that so cool?” I asked just beaming with a huge smile. “She basically described spiritual marriage as the place where the river meets the sea, and that’s exactly where on a very cognizant level, I was headed!”

Phil and Tim nodded their heads and dined, while I continued, “But there was another section of the book in which I was particularly interested. It had to do with what she called the flight of the spirit. She was known to have had the grace to levitate, a great aspiration of mine. I love to fly! I love airplanes and am quite fanatical about it. I even had a legendary meltdown when I was a child, no older than four years old when I refused to leave the cabin of the airship that transported our family from Hawaii to California. Up in the air is where I have always felt closest to God. So, I was most interested in the section of the book where she was describing her experiences of this kind of ecstasy. She particularly wrote:

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She does not know where the spirit is going, who is raising her, nor how it happens; for at the first instance of this sudden movement, one does not feel sure it is caused by God. Can it possibly be resisted?

No; resistance only accelerates the motion, as someone told me. God now appears to be teaching the soul, which has so often placed itself absolutely in His hands and offered itself entirely to Him, that it no longer belongs to itself; thus it is snatched away more vehemently in consequence of its opposition. (p. 200)

The notion of just totally trusting God like that can be quite daunting, especially in the face of not feeling sure that what is experienced is caused by God. So, I am still very much talking about a kind of possession—possession by the Holy Spirit. It made perfect sense that my friend suggested *The Cloud of Unknowing*. When I read the first few pages, it had warnings in it that made me pause. These cautionary sentences stated that the book was for the very mature Catholic, which I doubted I was. I noted that the contents within it could be damaging for one not fully ready for it. With this call for discretion, I suspended any further reading. It was at this juncture that I realized that it was going to be of the utmost importance to go on my journey with an emptied mind of everything including what I knew about Iva and the need to keep an eye out for Matthew, within the cloud of unknowing as best as I could, so that the Spirit might refill it.

By the time I picked up Julian of Norwich, I found myself flipping through the programs that I recorded off of the cable TV channels one night and happened upon a program that turned out to be about Julian of Norwich!

Oh! And there was another gentleman that totally blindsided me during one of my training sessions. He suggested a book for me to read after the first day of my three-day training. It was called

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How to Start a Movement. I spoke with him a little about my calling and my impending trip to Australia after he overheard a conversation, I had with the art teacher on his campus. By the next morning, he brought me a copy saying, ‘I had an extra laying around.’”

“So, what was your conversation with the art teacher about?” inquired Phil.

“I mentioned the time that I was assigned the Brown Pelican to deliver an oral report in science class in the third grade when we were studying endangered species. I mentioned that I was shocked to learn that when food was scarce, the mother birds would actually tear their breasts so that their young could eat their flesh. In the interest of exploring culturally responsive teaching, I mentioned that some students might be like me and mention that this story reminds them of Jesus Christ. A discussion followed before we took our morning break. The art teacher made a bee’s line to where I was standing and started with, ‘Did you know that the Brown Pelican has actually been used in art as a symbol of Christ? I can show you all kinds of paintings where this is evident.’ I answered, ‘No, I didn’t know that,’ and was completely dumbfounded by this insight. The teacher whipped out his cell phone and proceeded to show me several works of art that included the Brown Pelican, especially in Christian art.

All of these experiences and suggestions prepped me for what was to come—an incredibly intricate head game where I had to let go of all things that I knew and desired and accept whatever was going to unfold in the absence of any of my own meddling. While I chose the blurriness and uncertainties related to the cloud of unknowing, one thing was clear. This excursion was about complete surrender with a joyful heart and the darkening of my willful world in favor of recalibrating my sensibilities with the one true North Star.”

Chapter 16

Sister

“Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

~Philippians 2:9-11

Tim interrupted and cocked his head towards a set of paintings by the fireplace, “So, I’m glad you mentioned artwork. I just wanted to ask you about the paintings that are leaning against your fireplace over there.”

“Well, the first one was created by my mother-in-law. She took first prize at an art show in Chicago when she was barely in her twenties. A thousand dollars was a heck of a lot of money back then. Can you see it?”

“Sure. It’s over there. It’s a picture of a woman sitting at a table, holding some sort of drink.”

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“Yes. My mother-in-law said that it was supposed to be a portrait of her sister. But can you see *it*?” I accentuated.

Both Tim and Phil stared at the painting from their barstools.

“I was asked the very same question over the years each time we went to Mike’s house to visit his parents in Wisconsin. The painting was kept high up in a dark corner. Whenever they asked me if I saw it, I’d always say, ‘Yes.’ But the fact of the matter was that I hadn’t really seen what they were hoping I would have detected in the painting.”

“You mean there is something in the painting itself that we should be able to see?”

“Yes. Take another look at it.”

Again, Tim and Phil stared at the painting, disappointed that they couldn’t see what the big deal was. I explained, “It wasn’t until we had to move my father-in-law into our house that I actually saw what Mike and his parents were talking about. We were unloading his belongings from his minivan. Mike asked me to grab the painting and put it upstairs in my father-in-law’s new room. So, I grabbed it and proceeded to walk into the house and up the staircase with it. At one point, I lost my grip and dropped the painting on the step in front of me. That’s when I actually saw *it* and busted out in uncontrollable tears. I never looked at it at close range.”

Phil and Tim came off their barstools to approach the painting and continued to search.

“I see him!” Tim exclaimed with excitement

“Who?” Phil asked.

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“There’s a man in the picture, sitting next to the woman. It’s like he’s a spirit or something. Is that what it is?” Tim pushed.

“Where is he?” Phil muttered.

“He’s right next to her. Look at the ripples in the paint. Look at the raised portions, and he should pop out at you,” Tim coached.

“Oh my gosh! There he is! How did she do that? Who is he? Why did it make you cry?” Phil cascaded with questions.

“I don’t know. She never told me. Maybe, it was her father who abandoned her siblings and her when they were incredibly young. Maybe, it was one of her brothers or an object of affection or of unrequited love. Then again, maybe, it was Jesus.”

“And that made you cry?”

“Maybe it was her lost twin brother, or then again, maybe it was the shadow of an assailant whose actions robbed her of her innocence and dignity. So, now she has found an addiction to help soothe her restless soul,” I added as my eyes welled up in tears. “Then again, maybe it is the memory of a loving father, now fading into the past. It’s just too heavy. Give me a moment, please. I know too much background information.”

Tim and Phil returned to the bar to munch on the chips and vegetables I put out for them to nibble on, as I pulled myself together. My phone rang. It was from Mike. He was letting me know that our friends Paul and Mary’s apartments were flooded again and that they were making their way to our house to stay until the waters receded.

“Um. Some friends are coming over,” I reported. “Their homes flooded.”

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“How are they going to get in with the water so high over here?”

“Hopefully, much of it will be gone by the time they come this way.”

“So, can I ask you about the other painting? It looks like a giant T.A.R.D.I.S. with Dr. Strange floating in the sky with a giant firebird!” observed Tim.

“You mean Dr. Who, don’t you?” posed Phil.

“I know that the TARDIS thing is actually a building. It could be a scene out of Dr. Strange. That man is levitating, so he must be wearing his red cape to fly like that! Just because you can’t see it, doesn’t mean it isn’t there.”

“Oh yeah, nice observation, Tim!” I praised.

“But I don’t get the part with the explosion on the building on the other side. And why is the girl raising her arms like Dr. Strange or Dr. Who or whoever he is? Is she trying to float in the sky too? It’s a bit over-the-top. Don’t you think?” Tim questioned with a tinge of sarcasm in his voice.

“Um. I painted that one,” I confessed.

“No way! You are an artist-artist too, not just a martial artist?”

“I’m a victorious painter! I named that one “The Edge of Glory” after the Lady Gaga song. I was striving to duplicate my mother-in-law’s technique of using the rippling of the paint to include something that you might not see immediately.”

Phil got up and closed in on the painting. “Hey! You did it! You did it! I can see the crucifix in the paint! It’s a reflection of the

passion. That's it. Isn't it? Dr. Who and the girl are reflecting the passion."

"If you say so," I returned.

"Dr. Strange was more passionate," Tim interjected. "Surely, you're going to tell us what it all means, Cindy."

"It's meant for you to interpret it. If I had a dollar for every time a person came in and asked about the giant T.A.R.D.I.S., I'd be living in Hawaii again! The image came to me after I returned from my trip to Australia. I just couldn't help it. The Holy Spirit took a hold of me, and my creative juices just overflowed! I've been painting ever since."

"What on earth happened in Australia?"

"It was the accumulation of a lot of things, including everything I've told you so far, that came together at the right time and place, I suppose, one of which was another important discovery I made over the weekend before leaving for Australia. My friend from WE contacted me to follow up on how I was doing with *The Shack*. She thought it would be a good idea for us to get together at some point to go over the story page by page, so we could compare our reactions and thoughts about the narrative. One of the things she stressed was that the names of the characters were significant. This piece of information that she dropped in my lap, came at the time when Mike and I had been discussing the names of two new arrivals we were expecting from our extended family. In fact, I was due to go to their baby showers over the weekend before flying out to Australia on Monday, March 6th. I figured the name of the girl might not have much history since her name was created by fusing portions of different names together. But my nephew was a different story. I got on-line and found out that his name meant "man's protector or warrior".

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Before I knew it, I got carried away looking up a variety of names, starting with Michael. That's how I found out that my husband's name meant "Who is like God?". This also included any variations of Michael such as the feminine "Michelle". After looking up all of the names of family members, I went to everything I had written and started to look up significant names in my manuscripts. Perhaps one of the most startling findings I made was that most of the key characters whose names appeared repeatedly shared the same base-line meaning, "gift from God" or "God is gracious". These names included John, Joan, Janet, Jan, Iva, and Matthew. Then I noticed that I had a slew of common names. For example, I have several Catherines and Cathys as well as derivatives such as Kaitlyn, and Katie, all of which mean "pure". Another name along with variations are Theresa or rather, Terri, Tracy, or Therese, meaning "to reap or to harvest". I mentioned the names Mary, Carolyn, and Diana quite often too. But then, I realized that I hadn't looked up my name, Cynthia. I learned that it meant "woman from Kynthos" the place where she and her twin brother Apollo were born. It was also a nickname for the Greek moon goddess Artemis in Greek mythology, or Diana according to the Romans, who was envisioned as a huntress, ready with bow and arrow, much like her twin brother who as usually depicted as also holding a bow and arrow and/or a lyre.

But then an odd feeling came over me, and a gentle whisper in my heart reminded me that Iva was not the actual name of Mr. Davies. His birth name was Ivor. I hesitated to look up his name at first because deep down, I knew what I was going to find. Somehow, his name was going to be related to Apollo, the Greek god of the sun, music, and truth, because of the excessive number of times the "twin" thing was coming up again and again in my narratives, like as if some hidden truth was coming forth from my subconscious memory of sorts. When I gave in and looked to confirm my hunch, my heart leaped as I read aloud, "archer or bowman". In my mind's eye, I could see him holding a bow and arrow. I came to consider my impending visit to Australia as a special type of homecoming, where I had an extended family on

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the other side of the world, both literally, by my cousin's marriage to a native-born Australian and figuratively, by Iva, my long lost spiritual twin brother who sang a song that called out to me with a rebel yell, "Sister".

I was in denial of this special connection from the start back in the '80s when I vetted his band. Some of the things he shared in interviews back then, were experiences and viewpoints that were strikingly similar to mine. Everything associated with him was too close to home, and I wasn't developmentally ready for an encounter over homecoming back in 1988. It was kind of like being aware that some things need to be disclosed or uncovered in its proper time—like waiting to be mature enough to handle the book *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Otherwise, it could be damaging.

Most startling for me personally was the discovery that Mr. Davies had written a song comprised of segments from nursery rhymes called "Big Fun". I, on the other hand, had written a paper in the 3rd grade comprised of segments from all of the dinosaur songs we learned in music class that year. It just goes to show you, we are all children of God no matter our age or station in life!"

"I just think that you're transfixed on an idol," Tim asserted.

"Don't you think I had to consider that too? Have you not figured out that I can be very tenacious when it comes to figuring out whether or not something is coming from God or the enemy? I do a great deal of soul searching. I avoided this 'strange attraction' to this person for years because it was strange. It begged the questions from adaptive systems theory that I ponder on while working on my dissertation once again such as, "Can the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil cause a tornado in Texas? or 'Does God play dice?" In this day and age, we are taught to be totally rational and to dismiss those things that actually make us pause and wonder or better yet, make us uncomfortable. We go to school and are made to feel like we have to come up with an answer for everything when certain things in life are simply unexplainable. They are

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beyond language, our senses, our capability to reason. No. I would call Mr. Davies one of my icons, not an idol. Within the pages of *Strange Gods: Unmasking the Idols in Everyday Life*, I found a means to distinguish the differences between idols and icons.”

I got up, grabbed my laptop, and found a picture of Mr. Davies that a fan posted on-line of the iconic image he takes while singing his song “Don’t Believe Anymore”.”

I continued, “See. Take a look. The light comes from the stage and shines out into the crowd. Mr. Davies’ image is darkened, and yet from the vantage point of the crowd, the image Mr. Davies looks a lot like Christ crucified. That’s iconic. Idols ensure that the light shines on them and draws attention to them, putting the crowd into the shadows. Icons have a way of quieting us, so we can hear the whispers in our hearts. Idols have a way of ensuring that we hear only its voice. Not only does Mr. Davies allow other musicians on stage to sing solos, but he did let me babble on and on when I met him without a sense that he just had to be heard. He simply listened in silence, modeling true wisdom. And here’s the kicker, and this is a direct quote from Elizabeth Scalia’s book, “An Icon looks us straight in the eyes and dares us to pursue the truth. An idol wears shades and tells us what we want to hear.” Sound familiar?”

Tim looked at Phil and then at me, slowly nodding yes.

“But Iva was not the only man who challenged my sensibilities,” I added. “There was my pastor. I scoped him out from afar in the ’90s but did not seek him out until I returned from my first trip to Australia in 2013. Then there was Dr. Attwood. I was reminded by how he struck me as a mirror reflection of myself about my work and how I conduct my business in the chapter called “Great Southern Land” in my first manuscript. But of greatest significance, was my husband with whom I shared the sacrament of marriage. Had I known what I know about him now, I probably wouldn’t have married him. I wouldn’t be the person

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I've grown to be today. And that would be a tragedy because I love being a wife and a mother. And I especially love my son, a boy who lost his twin sibling early in life, the one he called "sister", the one he decided should have the upper room upstairs, the very location in which he felt a strong presence. Aren't we all made in the image of God? The *Bible* tells us so. We love. We teach. We sing. We pray. And we all share in the passion—the image I see when Iva appears on stage with his head bowed down and extends his arms out to the side, having sung the chorus to his song, "Don't Believe Anymore", reflecting a time when Christ faced his darkest hour.

So, you see. That man sitting by that young woman in my mother-in-law's painting, who is there, but not there, could be any one of the individuals I've mentioned. It is evidence of a knowing and a pang of hunger that dwells in each one of us. We all try to fill that empty space with someone or something. We all participate in this wild goose chase. But the only thing, the only one that can truly satisfy this basic need is God Himself."

Tim and Phil just stared at me in silence, when the doorbell rang. It was Peter, Paul, and Mary, along with Peter's mother, Maria. As my new visitors came in, I introduced each to Tim and Phil. Mary, Peter's mom went straight into the kitchen to look for the coffee pot, knowing that I always had some available, while Peter and Paul surveyed the damage in the backyard and upstairs.

"Mike wanted us to take a look and offer a full report," Peter explained. "The rain is still coming down!"

"How did you manage to get through the water?" Tim asked.

"Peter virtually drives a monster truck," I chuckled.

"And this ain't our first rodeo!" Peter added. "Cindy and Mike took us in when Harvey hit Texas last year. By the way, you have a couple of bicycles in your tree!"

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“That’s where they are?” a surprised Phil reacted.

“Yeah. It looks like the tornado just barely kissed your neighborhood. I still have my ladder with me. I can help get them down when the rain lets up. There are a lot of trees down, and we grabbed a couple of bushes that were just lying in the middle of the road. Mom made me stop to pick them up and put them in the bed of my truck for you. We figured you might want them.”

“Thanks, Mary,” I offered as she sipped her coffee, making herself at home. “I have stuff for sandwiches if you are interested.

“Oh, yes! I was hoping you had a little something,” Maria beamed as she waved Mary on back into the kitchen with her.

“So, you guys are stuck here too?” Paul asked Tim.

“We were hoping we could ride out the storm and then be on our way.”

“There’s a lot of water all over the place. It might be a while,” Paul added.

“I’m just happy that Peter has that big truck and that Cindy always has coffee. The lights are out at his place. And as usual, Peter had nothing to eat or drink. We were getting ready to call over here when Paul and Mary pulled up. They couldn’t get into your neighborhood, Cindy. But they could get into Peter’s, so it was a no brainer.

We knew we could just climb into Peter’s truck and roll on over here,” Maria shared. “And for that, I thank my lucky stars!”

Chapter 17

The Kingdom

“For you were called for freedom, brothers. But do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh; rather, serve one another through love.”

~Galatians 5:13

Everyone settled into the breakfast area to sit together at the table, except for Paul. He relaxed on the living room sofa and surfed the internet as usual.

“So, hope we weren’t interrupting anything,” Mary offered and then bit into her sandwich.

“She was telling us about her trip to Australia last year. We were waiting to find out just exactly what happened that made her start to paint and whether or not she saw Matthew McConaughey or if some mysterious thing happened,” Phil explained.

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“What? You paint? And what’s this about Matthew McConaughey? We hadn’t heard about any of this, Cindy. Please continue,” Maria prompted.

“Well, let me just get you up to speed on what was happening. Basically, my second trip to Australia closely mirrored my first trip. Within seven days, I sought and found a specific psychologist. I found a specific musician, and I attended a wedding. My second trip was like a total enhancement of the first trip aligned with my deepest desires all within five days. I originally wanted to attend a workshop with the psychologist, but alas, it was a short lecture for parents. On my second trip, I was blessed to attend not one, but three days of training with him. While it was great to be able to talk to the musician the first time I went down under, I had the pleasure of hearing him sing in a beautiful garden. And while I attended a wedding on my first visit. I was there to remember and celebrate my own. I believe each trip was made possible through the will of the Lord through an individual named Ernie. Sounds totally peachy on the surface until you consider the fact that my grandfather passed away while I was there. And while I went with my mother and got to be there with other relatives, I went totally alone, with a prayer in my pocket, and the Blessed Mother.”

“OK!” Peter exclaimed. “I knew you were a little religious, but you’re actually a little nuts!”

“Given the kind of insanity I see in the world these days, there’s no other kind of crazy I’d rather be, and if I was going to totally lose my mind or go off my rocker, I was going to be in the perfect place, surrounded by professionals in the mental health industry! It can’t get any better than that, given your diagnosis for me,” I chuckled.

“I offered to escort her, but she refused my offer,” Paul called out from the couch.

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“You’d get me arrested, Paul. I wanted to be one of the invisible people. That wasn’t going to happen if you came along,” I came back with a chuckle.

“Oh, yeah!”

“Truth!”

“Arrested or killed!”

“Good call, Cindy!” came the responses in different directions.

“And there was one more thing. My grandfather died. If the pattern held true, someone would die while I was on my second trip, and things didn’t look good. Our pastor was ill and in intensive care, ICEHOUSE had to cancel a couple of concerts, due to someone getting sick, and I knew of several individuals who were not very healthy around here, including my father-in-law. For this reason, I hesitated and almost canceled the whole trip. Then I received an email for a concert and considered all the good things that happened and all the things I was learning and chose to forge forward.”

“Uh-huh?” Paul mumbled from the couch. “Does this make sense to anybody?”

“Well, you would have had to be here earlier to hear about some of these things,” Tim explained.

“Well, of course,” I nodded and continued. “I had two baby showers to attend over the weekend before my departure. When I arrived at my parents’ house, mom sat me down to alert me to the fact that a beloved family friend had become dangerously ill and appeared to be very weak. Mom feared that she was not going to be around for long. This woman was a great friend to my parents, and I could see that both of them were very concerned about her. By the time I had everything loaded up to leave for the airport on

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Monday, I received mom's call, letting me know that our friend passed away. I wondered if this was the death I was expecting. I thought that there was no way I could be certain. I was praying Chaplets of Divine Mercy for her and was glad to learn that she was now at peace and with the Lord.

The flights over to Australia were fairly smooth. I first flew into San Francisco, before heading out to Sydney. I curled up in my seat four hours into the flight after taking some Benadryl. When I woke up in the morning, light from outside the window caught my peripheral vision, much like the light that hit my face and was reflected onto the television back when I was first learning about the Virgin Mary. When I turned to look to see where the light was coming from, I saw what looked like a beautiful star, shaped like an angel that shone over the sea below. I grabbed my phone and started to take pictures of it. I felt totally at peace and was delighted to see that we were just a few hours away from our destination. I just knew that Star of the Sea was providing us safe passage to the land Down Under.

I spent the first day in Sydney getting settled into my hotel room and then exploring the transportation system. It was a great way to see the sights around the harbor while learning how to get off and on the trains, ferries and buses. One of my first destinations was Manly Beach. I spent time praying there in thanksgiving that I had a safe and pleasant flight and asked the Blessed Mother for continued protection and guidance. I was there for a while watching the surfers and playing with the sand. I recalled my promise to my friend and collected some sand into a small plastic bag I had in my pocket along with *Psalm 51*. I took the ferry back to where the Opera House was and decided to look for a bus to get to Bondi Beach. Long story short, I was elated that the number on the bus I took over there was 333."

Tim and Phil did a high-five in recognition of the number, as Peter, Mary, and Maria sat cluelessly.

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“I walked around and continued to take in the beauty of the day. Before leaving, I collected another small bag of sand. Filled with excitement, I headed back to the hotel to rest up for the workshop in the morning.”

“So, where did you go to eat? Did you try some kangaroo or wallaby?” Mary asked.

“Oh no, I was exhausted. I went back to my hotel, got a shower, and did some reading and prayed for a while before getting under the covers.”

“You didn’t eat at all?”

“I had breakfast on the plane, earlier in the morning, and I’m not sure I really wanted to eat. Every now and again, I detected a strange odor. I reckoned it was a popular perfume. It was all over the airport that morning. I figured that it might have been in the fashion magazines at the newsstands.”

Tim glanced over to Phil, raised his eyebrows, and gave a look of concern.

“Funny thing is, it was totally gone at the workshop. I guess none of the women cared for it. It was great to be in the presence of Dr. Attwood and his colleague Dr. Garnett.”

“So, you found where to go to the workshop fairly easily?”

“Oh yeah. It was a glorious morning. I was feeling great and shot a text to Michael to wish him Happy Anniversary. We already celebrated well in advance. He didn’t want me to feel bad about being away and totally supported the trip after he had whatever epiphany he had.

When I emerged from the train station out into the sunlight, I stood before three towers. I’d never taken photographs of

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buildings before, but this was just too overwhelming. I knew I was seeing something very special. Each building appeared to have awnings set to the side of the windows on the building as if they were petals on a flower. The first building's were yellow. The next were in white, and the third in red...like the flowers of Rosa Mystica. I teared up and started to tremble as I could see that they were newly constructed just off of the shore of Darling Harbor. The hairs on my arms were standing up.

I later learned that I was looking at a new development called Barangaroo. It was the site where Pope Benedict XVI celebrated World Youth Day in 2008. The theme that held it all together was “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses. (Acts 1:8).”

“Oh! That’s pretty cool,” Phil enthusiastically responded.

“And the class?” Tim followed.

“I had the pleasure of meeting several angels of psychology in class. One even gave me her card and offered to give me a tour of the city should I return. I met another psychologist at the training who did Jungian sand therapy. She gave me one of her brochures. She was thrilled to learn that I had actually been in one of Dr. Hollis’ sessions. Dr. Attwood and Dr. Garnett were simply delightful and very knowledgeable, making the time I spent in the training sessions fly by.”

“So, did you invite them to dinner or get a chance to visit with them at all?” Mary probed.

“No,” I came back.

“What! You traveled thousands of miles to see them and didn’t say a thing?”

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“I did towards the end of the second day of the first workshop. I asked if any of them had ever heard of Interpersonal Process Recall, the method that I believed really helped me to be a better communicator and develop a better sense of what was called ‘theory of mind’, or rather the skill of anticipating other people’s thoughts, actions and feelings. No one had. I figured that it might be a good idea to write a book about it. Later that night, I went through my whole ritual of getting cleaned up, doing my reading, and praying.”

“Could you smell that odor at your hotel you were talking about?” asked Phil.

“No. I usually smelled it outside and especially on the trains.”

“So, did you ever see Matthew McConaughey?” Maria inquired.

“Yes!”

“Oh my gosh!”

“Wow!”

“That’s crazy! What did he say? What did you do?”

“I saw him on the Graham Norton show!”

“You got tickets to go to a show?”

“No. He was on TV! He was on with Ed Sheeran, Christina Ricci, and Josh Widdicombe.”

“I thought you were going to say that you met him!”

“Oh no. I think the Holy Spirit was playing with me. I couldn’t help but notice that Matthew had the craziest shirt that any proud Texan might buy at one of our many gift shops in our state! A

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flower surrounded by stars were embroidered on each side of his shirt—which could be very Marian indeed! Oh, and don't even get me started with Ed Sheeran. Less than a year later, he would appear before a British audience singing "Supermarket Flowers" dressed completely in black except for a very familiar-looking red jacket! I sat there and just prayed. I told Jesus that I wasn't quite sure what this was all about, but that I was going to need a much bigger sign that I perhaps needed to actively seek out the actor. I prayed, 'Lord, I will not look for Matthew until the day that I see him supporting a cause related to the autism spectrum. I don't even know what I would need to say to him. I need your help. What is this preoccupation all about, Lord? Why here? Why now? What does it mean?'

"And you ended up seeing him support this cause, didn't you?" Tim forecasted.

"Yes. I did."

"What happened?" Peter interrupted.

Paul jumped up from the sofa and rushed into the dining area. "I can take it from here because I was there right before Cindy left to go see her friend. What was her name again?"

"Kathy, Theresa or Mary," Phil chimed in.

"Yeah, that was her name," I joked before Paul continued. "I was having lunch with Mike and Cindy. She was trying to explain why she had to go find Matthew McConaughey. She saw something on the "internets" on Facebook.

"Internet," Tim corrected.

"I said internets," Paul returned. "One of her relatives forwarded, um, whatever it was. I think it had something to do with passing the ad around and the business would give a dollar to

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Autism Speaks based on the number of shares. It was something like that. Right, Cindy?”

“Yes.”

“Anyways. We were having lunch, and she said that she didn’t know what she was going to say, but that she needed to find Matthew McConaughey. We just laughed at her all lunch long! I never asked what happened? I mean, don’t get me wrong. Cindy is a little on the strange side and *catholic*, but she’s good people. She means well and can cook. So, what are you fixin’ tonight? I really didn’t want a sammich.”

“Um. I hadn’t really thought that far in advance.”

“So, you went to see your friend. Did you ask her to help you find Matthew?” asked Maria.

“No, I didn’t have to. It was bittersweet. I had other things brewing that I wanted to discuss with her. In many ways, she’s been a lot like a spiritual director to me since I first started teaching. I’m talking quite a mother hen. So, we go way back. I wanted to ask her about *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Once I got back from Australia, I felt like I was ready to read it. So, I did and had a lot of questions. In fact, I had a long list of other things to ask about and to share. But once I was actually with her, I realized that it simply wasn’t the time.”

“What! No way!” Mary uttered in disbelief.

“When I started to ask my friend about *The Cloud of Knowing*, she told me that she never heard of the book, and yet, she was the one who handed me her copy, so I could recognize it. She urged me to order it and read it.”

“Oh, no! How old is she?”

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“She’s well-refined and always has been. I became acutely interested in what was going on with *her*. To cut to the chase, I’ll tell you how things went down with my “McConnaissance”. My friend and I had lunch. Afterward, she gave me a tour of greater Georgetown and then asked me if I would like to see her old house since she moved. I was game and said, ‘Sure!’, knowing that it was probably going to be adorable. When we drove into the subdivision, she immediately started to point out all the facilities and give me a history of the area. Before I knew it, she stopped in front of a house and said, ‘I’m pretty sure this is where Kay Mac lives.’ I was so close that I could see through the screen door that the front door was wide open. I could have just jumped out of the car and made a run for it, but I didn’t.”

“Noooo! No way!”

“I would have gone for it!”

“What?!” came a rush of disappointed responses.

“And you knew he was in town, too. Doing a charity event for Harvey victims. Right?” Paul clarified.

“Uh uh!”

“Noooo!”

“That was huge! That was a huge sign!”

“I would’ve been at that door!” the voices from the table continued.

“It was not time. I understood that I was there for my friend. Plus, I already talked her head off all morning about all the things that I’d been experiencing. It was her turn, especially after she took me to the assisted living area where she placed her name on a waiting list. I feared my friend was fading away, and I only wanted

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to be with her. She has always been a great mother figure to me. I was grateful that she showed me where to go, if I ever needed to find...”

“Mary Katherine!” Tim and Phil shouted in unison then broke out laughing, while the rest of my visitors sat and wondered what was so funny. At first, I thought it odd that although I’d known everyone else for a much longer time, Tim and Phil actually knew me better. Their depth of knowledge of my background helped them to more vividly see things the way I saw them, and they’d only been in my house for a few short hours. They had more of an insider’s perspective.

“What’s so funny?” Peter asked, catching on to the fact that the missionaries knew something that the rest of the group didn’t know.

“Just seems like all the key women in Cindy’s life are some version of Kathy, Theresa or Mary or names that share the possible meanings behind those names. Look right here at the table today. We have Mary and Maria!” Tim explained and then turned to me. “And didn’t you say something about Mary being like the moon, reflecting the light of Jesus Christ Superstar or something like that? You had to be here her say something about that earlier today. Cindy’s name is related to the moon goddess in Greek mythology. I do remember that. So, under your namesakes, you are all interconnected.”

“We are all interconnected in the name of Jesus, if we seek to enter His kingdom,” I clarified. “We are all invited to celebrate our love with a fine meal at His table. All of these silly little “connections” I’ve made are more like party favors. They just dress up the occasion. My friend was kind to show me around her old stomping grounds. I hadn’t figured out what Matthew’s connection was to the Theo drama I entered. Hence, it was not the time to crash into his mother’s home. And frankly, if I was going

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to risk getting a restraining order, I was going to make it count. No. It simply wasn't time."

"But how can you say that?" Peter prodded. "You may not get a second chance."

"The Lord always grants second chances, if it is His will. And no. I wanted to see my friend's old house, not the interior decorating of a jail cell somewhere in the greater Austin area. For me, Austin has always been about the music, the techies, and the weird. I wanted to keep it that way. I did not want to make it the place and time when I got arrested. But I haven't even gotten to the best parts of my story in Australia!

I woke up the next day with great anticipation. It was the final day I was going to spend with Dr. Tony and Dr. Michelle, and it was bittersweet. I bought their book about the blues, *Exploring Depression and Beating the Blues*, and spent the last few minutes of class in uncontrollable tears. I was drowning in gratitude for the amazing grace I felt oozing from every single one of my pores, as I tried to hold back the violent eruption that was completely rearranging my insides, as I desperately penned a letter to leave with the good doctors.

I referenced the fact that Dr. Attwood stood before us on two occasions with his arms out, head down, posing as a suicidal person getting ready to jump from a building. He explained that the first person didn't jump, because he thought of his dog. The second person didn't jump, because he hadn't seen the new *Stars Wars* movie. I added that I came to their training with the image of a man getting ready to jump off a building as well, but didn't, because he had had an encounter with the Holy Spirit."

"Boom!" Phil thundered as he stood up from his chair and extended his arm straight out to 'drop the mic'."

"I don't get it," Peter uttered with frustration.

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“You didn’t see the video,” Tim began.

“The World I Know,” Phil added. “It was a music video that Cindy meditated on for some time. She described the man on the ledge as being in the position of the passion, just like she could see in the image of the rock star she was getting ready to see the next day! It’s the same position as the woman standing on the ledge in Cindy’s painting over there of the T.A.R.D.I.S. by the fireplace.”

“Very good job explaining, Phil,” I praised.

Paul, feeling quite satisfied exclaimed, “Oh! They thought it was a T.A.R.D.I.S. too?”

“What’s a T.A.R.D.I.S.?” Maria asked.

“It’s like a time machine used by the Doctor to get from place to place,” Mary started to explain.

“Who’s the doctor?” Maria pressed.

“Dr. Who,” Paul chimed in with a big smile as he took a seat at the table.

Maria sat confused, struggling to keep up with the conversation as if everyone was speaking a language she did not understand.

“Yeah! And she has a giant firebird in the sky in her painting! See it? I thought it was a Phoenix!” Paul added.

“It’s how she represented the Holy Spirit,” Tim clarified.

“And so, it *is* a firebird!” Paul asserted.

“Um, so you left the note for the presenters at the meeting?” Mary changed subjects.

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“Yes. I left it on the laptop they were using, so it would be easy to find. I had to leave quickly to catch the train to the airport, so I could fly out to Melbourne.”

“And did it smell?” Tim asked.

“Oh, yes. The smell was everywhere. But then I boarded the plane, and it was gone. In fact, I didn’t detect it at all at the airport in Melbourne or any of the other modes of transportation I used in the city. It was a nice change, and I forgot all about it. I was overjoyed to be in Melbourne, although there was a certain restlessness in the air that Saturday night when I arrived. It wasn’t until the next morning that I began to get a broader picture of all that was going on around me. It wasn’t all good, and it made me nervous. I avoided being out at night the entire trip, and now I faced the fact that I was going be out for a considerable amount of time in the evening on my own. But without the darkness, you simply cannot see the stars.”

Chapter 18

Man of Colours

“Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all shining stars!”

~Psalm 148:3

Peter cross-examined the missionaries, “Why do you keep talking about this smell?”

“Cindy is sensitive to them. She believes foul odors can mean that evil lurks somewhere close,” Phil explained, taking in the blank stares at the table. Tim simply nodded, as he looked upon the others.

“Yes. And I had been reading a book about deliverance called *Unbound* while in the country, that started to freak me out. So, I quit reading it and just decided to engage in more prayer instead.”

“So, why were you reading the book in the first place?” Peter wondered.

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“A friend of mine suggested that I read it. The more I got into it, the more I thought that the deliverance prayer was best facilitated by a priest and not a lay person. When you are talking about driving out demons and such, I figured that kind of thing should be left to the professionals, especially after listening to a gentleman tell us about his experiences as an assistant to exorcists. He said that demons hate ‘the box’ and the Blessed Mother. Mary was present. It wasn’t unusual for her to be accompanied with some of the most beautiful music in the world!

That insight made me that much more excited to be going to the ICEHOUSE concert. I focused on the fact that I was going to be listening to beautiful music in the garden, a perfect place to have an encounter with the Blessed Mother.”

“You are so Catholic, subscribing to Marian doctrine!” Paul laughed.

“I’ve never understood it,” Maria chimed in. “And the sightings and the pilgrimages to places like Lourdes and Fatima?”

“I must admit, I didn’t get it either. It wasn’t until I took the time to write my life story that I recognized a distinct element throughout the pages that I couldn’t quite put my finger on. At first, it seemed inconsequential. After all, I’d always struggled to communicate lots of things! But extraordinary and mysterious experiences kept taking place that seemingly directed me to the Blessed Virgin with an impressive sense of timing. It got to the point that I couldn’t just blow everything off as happy coincidences.

There was much I didn’t know or understand, making the learning curve quite sharp and daunting. I didn’t even know that the ladies seen at Lourdes, Fatima or Guadalupe were all the Virgin Mary! I thought they were all separate ghosts of saints that made appearances that were associated with miracles. Talk about dense!”

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All my guests broke out into laughter at the table, shaking their heads and looking at me like a lost puppy they just wanted to pat on its head and reassure it that it would eventually find its way back home again.

“Hey! I’m only laughing because I didn’t know either,” Maria offered.

“Yeah. It’s only been more recently that I learned anything about Marian apparitions, especially Our Lady of Guadalupe. I’ve been slow on the uptake.”

“Didn’t that have something to do with the guy that ended up with an image of Mary on his clothes or something like that?” Paul inquired.

“Yes. A simple man named Juan Diego was walking into town to go to Mass and encountered the Blessed Mother. She asked him to go to the local bishop to tell him that she wanted him to build a church atop of Mt. Tepeyac near Mexico City. The bishop was reluctant to take the man seriously until he finally told Juan Diego to ask the woman he met to send a special sign that would prove that she was, in fact, the Blessed Mother. Long story short—Juan Diego returned to the bishop with his tilma full of Castilian roses and a beautiful and mysterious painting of the Blessed Virgin on the rough material that Juan used to carry the flowers. The event caused several of the native peoples in Mexico to convert to Catholicism and caused corrupt Catholics to clean up their act! The cloth has been analyzed and studied over the years. It’s made out of material that usually only lasts for up to ten years. The tilma was 120 years old before someone thought it might be a good idea to encase it in glass to help preserve it. Over another 300 years have passed since then, and it is still in good shape. The colors haven’t faded, nor can anyone figure out what the pigments are made from either. The most striking detail for me personally is the notion that the stars on her mantel mirror what would have been the constellations in the night sky on December 12, 1531, when the

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image appeared on the garment. There's an awesome documentary on YouTube that goes into even greater detail!" I shared with excitement.

"Dork!" Paul came back while shaking his head and smiling. "So, what happened at the ICEHOUSE concert? Did you see Mary?"

"I flew into Melbourne and woke up in the morning wanting nothing more than a cup of coffee and Mass before going into the garden. When I turned on the TV, I happened upon a news report about a man who was preparing for an impending trial against a Catholic Church official over the child sexual abuse scandals there in Australia. For a while, I could feel a chill in the air. I felt as if Rosa Mystica was again, drawing my attention to this sad issue, and somehow, I sensed that this was just the tip of the iceberg."

"And you still wanted to go to Mass?" Paul asked.

"Of course, I did. I was accustomed to being a part of a family where there were folks who brought shame and embarrassment to the rest of us, but we didn't let those individuals completely define who we were as a family. It's no different in the Church."

"I'm glad you didn't let that report rain on your parade," Maria praised.

"I'd been forewarned that I needed to be ready for any type of weather. By the sounds of it, Melbourne weather is a lot like Houston weather. You can experience all four seasons in one day! So, I got up, showered and got myself pieced together. I studied a map I picked up when I arrived and began to plan my day. I figured I could walk to Federation Station and visit there for a while and have that cup of coffee before heading up the street to find St. Francis Catholic Church."

"No train or bus?"

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“I picked up a Myki card at Federation Station to have access to public transportation but decided it would be easier to walk to church. I noticed the trollies that were circling downtown. You can ride those for free, but I opted to soak in the sights while taking in the stroll. All worked out wonderfully. Before I knew it, I was in the sanctuary of a beautiful house of God. A beam of light shone down perfectly from a window onto a pew. That was my spot! I sat down and prayed my special prayer by Collective Soul, “Shine”, before Mass began.”

“Shine?” Mary repeated.

“Yes. It’s such a great little prayer that even Dolly Parton took it and gave it a special Bluegrass feel to it! Perfect for preparing for an evening in the garden!” I added. “Mass was heaven on earth. The gospel reading was about how Christ went up the mountain with three of his disciples and glowed in all His glory in a dazzling white garment. He told his friends not to tell anyone about what they saw. It was Transfiguration Sunday.

After Mass, I headed for the reservation chapel where visitors were lighting candles and praying before the tabernacle. A magnificent statue of the Virgin Mary holding a baby Jesus in her arms stood front and center behind the golden box. There, I stayed to rest and pray for a while in the silence. When I emerged out of the church, I saw one of the trollies go by. I thought it would be fun to take one back to my hotel. So, I spent a great deal of time chasing down a car.”

“You were in Melbourne, then, chasing cars?” Peter mused with a twinkle in his eye, knowing that I love any type of musical connection.

“Funny you should mention “Chasing Cars”. That song was in my heart all day long. It was another one of my prayers. It was all that I was feeling that day from the time that I opened my eyes in the morning and just lay rested in my bed. My favorite line was

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excluded from the radio version here in the states. In the way that I hear it, it alludes to the need to find your own grace through the grace of another! You can't find your grace all on your own. The belief that you can is the winter snow that covers the land these days just as they did in *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*. And while the band I was going to listen to in the garden that evening was called ICEHOUSE, I understood in both a literal and strange way, that they would usher their own special brand of springtime music.

But first, I needed to get back to the hotel to rest up and grab a bite to eat. When I finished my mid-afternoon lunch, I walked out into the lobby and found a stack of newspapers set to the side. I grabbed one and made my way back up to my room, which sounds inconsequential. I know. But in this case, it wasn't. Within the pages of the news rag, was an insert, a magazine-like booklet, called *Stellar* with a cover story called "The Woman in White" as a woman all in white graced the front page. It all but screamed, "Mary!?"

"Wow!" Phil reacted immediately.

"What is it?" Paul asked Phil.

"A woman gave her a book called *The Woman in White* just weeks before her trip to Australia."

"Yes. And *her* name was Mary," I explained. "The find was psychologically loaded for me. When I saw the woman in white on the front page, a memory came forward. It was the time when I was in Wisconsin at a dinner party and my mother-in-law introduced me to a woman who was completely dressed in white. She was a college professor who studied dress and costume around the world, exploring different textiles and materials used to impart cultural identity. My mother-in-law told her that I was working on my dissertation at the University of Houston. The beautiful woman in white became interested in my topic and urged me to go back to

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her house with her to get a glimpse of a book she had that could possibly help me. She couldn't recall the name or author but knew exactly where she kept it. So, she and I went over to her house, where she eventually held out a copy of *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* by Jungian psychologist Erich Neumann."

"There's that man's name again," Phil uttered.

"Huh?" a rattled Paul reacted.

"I told Phil and Tim about my interest in Jungian psychology earlier today. Finding this little insert was a treat on many levels, one of which was the fact that I now had something I could take home to my friend who gave me a book with the same title. She hadn't ever had an experience with one of the things that fascinated Jung, synchronicity. I heard of the word before getting into Jung's work but really didn't understand what it meant. I just always associated it with a Police album."

"So, what happened in the garden? How was the concert? Was it all worth it?" Maria ached to know.

"Well, I was ready for anything. I had a small backpack with a map, a blanket, and a raincoat inside. The day had been simply glorious. I took a train to the Royal Botanical Gardens and walked up a beautifully manicured hill that went straight over to the Shrine of Remembrance. I was there, just in time for the Australian version of "Taps" as the national flag was lowered and removed from its pole. A pyramid-shaped building stood to my right and an open flame inside of a large saucer sat on the ground to my left, just a few feet away from where I was standing. The shrine was erected to honor and remember those who fought in World War I and later became a place of remembrance for all Australians that have gone to war.

As I walked the grounds, I couldn't help but have a strong sense of appreciation. After all, I come from a military family myself. I

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always loved the sound of “Taps” at the day’s end and understood that the melody was one of deep respect and thanks for the service each man and woman gave to our country. It also made me that much more aware of the service that each one of us is capable of offering to each of our fellow brothers and sisters. I recognized that I had come a long way from the time that I was a little girl who preferred to sit alone in the corner of her classroom to dwell in her own imaginary world to the woman I had become. There I was on my own on the other side of the world, so far away from home, all grown up, as a teacher, a mother, and a wife—fearless. I wasn’t going to let anything rattle me that night. No way! I was determined to make the best of whatever came my way. So, I held my head high, chin up as a royal child of God who was ready to show up for a festival of friends—a special extension of Mass, a different kind of communion of saints.”

“Ok. So, what is really meant by “communion of saints”? I never really understood that. Isn’t it mentioned in the Apostle’s Creed?” Mary searched.

“When I think about the communion of saints, I think of all the people from the past, present, and future whose words, promptings, works, and gestures have and will serve as conduits of God’s love, communication, and gifts to any of us. It’s our extended spiritual family, come together as one love at the intersection of heaven and earth,” I supposed.

“Girl, you are crazy!” Peter declared, sure that everyone else at the table would agree.

“Bought the tee-shirt too!” I came back.

“What?”

“Yeah. Once I got passed security, I went straight back to go get a tee-shirt. I chose the one with “Crazy” written across it. It was the first song off of the “Man of Colors” album.

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“Oh, yeah. Didn’t it have “Electric Blue” on it too?” Peter recalled.

“Oh, I like that song,” Mary chimed in.

“Yes. That one, too. And that song reached number 7 on the *Billboard* chart. The number 7 is associated with the Blessed Mother in the Catholic Church and so is the color blue.”

“So, did you put on the shirt?”

“No.”

“What! You didn’t put it on?” Paul mocked.

“No. I was already wearing an ICEHOUSE shirt under my red cardigan. We won it off of the Spellbound website.”

“What? You broke your self-assigned dress code?” Tim chuckled.

“It was a black shirt that I wore with black pants. Then there was my red cardigan.”

“What do you mean dress code?” asked Maria.

“She wore only red and black while in Australia,” Tim began to explain.

“Not a woman in white?” Paul interrupted.

“Um. No. I chose to wear red to be washed clean by the blood of Jesus. The only other color I would wear with it was black. I was prepared for anything. If it got too hot, I could take off my cardigan and put it in my bag. If it rained, I had my raincoat. It too, was red,” I reviewed.

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“And did you see the woman in white you were looking for?” Phil added.

“An apparition? No. The smell of roses? No. In fact, all was great while I took in the first act, Clare Bowditch. The two seats to my right remained empty. But by the end of her set, a married couple came and sat down in them. The woman was in a black dress and smelled as if she had been dipped in a concentrated vat of that horrible perfume that I encountered every so often while in Sydney!”

“Oh, no!” Mary empathized.

“Oh, yes! There I was in the garden on a perfect day pretty much aligned with Iva’s mic in my perfect spot—and that odor!!! My heart was breaking.”

“Did you get up and move? She always moves,” Paul tried to explain to Tim and Phil.

“I was in my assigned spot. I wasn’t going to give it up so easily. I leaned forward in my chair and angled my body away from her. But it didn’t work. The scent only seemed to grow stronger. The second guy was on the stage. Thank God his music was good. I don’t think I would have been able to hold my station had his music been crap.”

“What?”

“Oh, I’ve walked out of music halls, because of the quality of the sound of the music itself.”

“No way!”

“Oh, yes!”

“I hate concerts,” Paul whined.

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“I love live music, but my sinuses were swelling, and I struggled to breathe. I tried to focus on the music to help me overcome the physical reaction I was experiencing. I thought, ‘I’ll be damned if I let that smell ruin my time in the garden! Uh! Don’t complain. Don’t give up your seat! It’s a long way home, and I’m not returning disappointed that the Lord had given me my perfect spot, and I let it go because of my intolerance to strange smells.’ I couldn’t and wouldn’t look at the woman. I prayed and watched the brooding clouds make their threats. I was under a spiritual attack.

Eventually, James, the guy who was singing, finished up his last song and left the stage. Immediately, stagehands started to prep for ICEHOUSE. I was exhausted. The jet lag, the excitement, and the fight I was putting up with the odor were too much. After a while, I just gave in and leaned back in my chair, letting my head drop towards the woman sitting next to me.

We made eye contact, and I smiled and groaned, ‘I’m so exhausted.’ She smiled back and asked where I was from, before telling me that she and her husband were Kiwis from New Zealand who had come to Melbourne to work. They were celebrating her husband’s birthday. She told me he was a huge ICEHOUSE fan.

Before long we were chatting away like long lost friends. It was like being with Cindy Lou Who and her boyfriend from Whoville! They had such beautiful spirits. Then there were fireworks, and ICEHOUSE took the stage. The clouds dissipated as the moon busted out and shone bright and full. I was completely stunned. As for the smell, it was gone as if it never existed.

I gazed upon the night sky for most of the concert. The moon sat just above the observatory stationed there in the garden, as I sat amazed by the grace that had been granted me. I could breathe. I was alive and well, as I took in the beautiful melodies that simply stoked the fires that were already ablaze within me. It was a time of renewal and thanksgiving. And as I sat there, I became acutely

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aware that while I was having a perfect night, I sat alone. I wondered, ‘What would I do if I found myself in heaven alone without my family and friends? And more importantly, what could I do to make sure that I did see them there?’ With this thought, I grew to understand how it was that Peter and his friends needed to come down from the mountain with Jesus and share the gospel to all four corners of the world.

And so, I sat in my perfect spot, under the full moon, and drifted into the lunacy of it all. I watched the gentlemen on stage share a special camaraderie and dignity not showcased enough among men these days. There was no need for a lot of flash or activity. They simply let the music speak its truth. And I looked upon the heavens full of stars as I could feel the rhythm of the drums adjust my pulse. It wasn’t long before Iva’s form appeared to take on the image of Christ in his passion upon the cross after mournfully crooning the chorus of the song “I Don’t Believe Anymore”. The youngest on stage, Michael, delivered a hair-raising rendition of “Man of Colours” as Mr. Davies wove the melancholic sound of his oboe in such a way that it elevated and amplified the intrinsic beauty of the composition about an artist.”

“So, you got the moon. You got beautiful music. Even the bad smell went away, but what about the flowers? Didn’t you get any sense of the flowers?” Mary asked.

“Of course, I did! They were right on stage in front of me! ICEHOUSE was not the original name of the band. Any hardcore fan would know that they were originally called “Flowers”. And the sketch of the gentleman on the “Man of Colours” album not only reflects the image of Rosa Mystica, but it seemingly mirrors what Juan Diego must have looked like as the flowers poured out of his tilma, just before the beautiful image of Our Lady appeared on it,” I explained.

“Oh, wow! I didn’t see that coming,” Tim voiced.

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“And the woman in black who sat beside me? Her name was the same as our family friend who had just passed away. She and her husband made sure that I made it safely back to my train to return to my hotel that night. They were so very sweet. They left me at my stop with hugs and kisses farewell. I couldn’t help but wonder where it was in heaven that our family friend now dwelled among the stars.”

Chapter 19

Satellite

“Let us come before him with a song of praise, joyfully sing out our psalms.”

~Psalm 95:2

I continued with my story, “I got up the next morning and headed for home. The trip was uneventful, except for the fact that I arrived in Houston at 3:33 p.m. as scheduled. The long way home gave me plenty of time to reflect and to consider what I needed to do next. By morning, I sat with a group of women at a WE book club meeting where we were reading *Who Does He Say You Are?*”

“Didn’t you mentioned earlier that you asked God to tell you who you were?” Phil recollected.

“Yes, before my first trip to Australia,” I confirmed. “And now, I had even more information after my second trip. This information combined with the kinds of things we were talking about in our book club astounded me over the next few weeks.

Satellite

Many themes surfaced in our talks on a variety of issues that women experience such as motherhood, depression, and mental illness. I'd just returned from taking in three-days of training that revolved around depression and anxiety in individuals with autism, so I was hearing the echoes of those things that were discussed abroad. I wasn't prepared for how all of this "searching" I was doing would eventually come together. Plus, I had always been slow on responding to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. So, as usual, the Lord had to really push me."

"Really? Could this story get any more off the wall?" Tim raised.

"Oh, I'm just getting warmed up! I had a dream! It was the wildest dream I had ever been able to recall. I was floating in a chapel and wouldn't come down. I just loved being up close to the ceiling that was painted blue and full of golden stars. I could feel a force holding me up as if I was suspended up there on a bed of Jell-O. But the best part was the fact that I could fly around and control where I was going. There were people on the ground demanding that I come down. Others threatened to call our pastor to make me come down. But I didn't recognize anyone, so I figured that as long as I could stay away from him, no one could ground me. So, as people on the floor shouted at me, I flew around the chapel, so I couldn't be found or seen.

When I woke up in the morning, I got up and went into the same routine I was practicing since my son first started kindergarten. I made sure he was dressed and fed and drove him off to school. When I got home, I started to get myself cleaned up and ready to go to Mass, so I could float up in the Mary chapel to show off my new talent. And yes, I did mean to show off! I'd always wanted to fly, and now I could do it! But after standing up and pressing my elbows into my sides as my fists scooped up to the ceiling in my large open space in our living room, I came to the horrible realization that I couldn't do it anymore. I was still on the ground! It was then that I actually awakened from my dream, and I was crushed. I thought that perhaps, it was my pride that kept me

grounded, and I was ashamed. Though I wanted to cry, I could not. I was that distraught. I went to bed later that evening wondering if I would fly again, if only in my dreams.”

“So, did you fly?”

“No. I woke up early.”

“Around 3:33?”

“More like 3:45 actually. That’s when the tears finally came. So, I reached for what I had always sought out at times like that—my music. I listened to both versions of “Where the River Meets the Sea”, “The World I Know”, but more poignantly, Natalie Merchant’s “Wonder”, a song that fit me as perfectly as the glass slipper fit Cinderella.”

“Oh! I love that song!” Mary rejoiced

“I don’t know any of those songs!” Peter admitted.

“You remember 10,000 Maniacs. Don’t you? Natalie Merchant was the lead singer,” Mary pressed.

“And her name is not Mary!” Paul added.

“10,000 Maniacs?” Tim and Phil questioned in unison.

“The song “Wonder” answers the question, ‘Who does he say you are?’. It was very apropos for me that morning on so many levels, most notably its reference to a wondrous woman whose body was ‘lifted’ given my dream just the night before of floating in the chapel. After listening to that song, I sat in my corner and grabbed my rosary to begin my morning prayers. I could hear the cardinals singing in the background as if they were providing me with a melody in which to offer up thanksgiving with a cheerful

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spirit. When I finished, I grabbed my *Magnificat* to take a look at the readings for the day.”

“*Magnificat*? What is that?”

“It’s a little booklet that contains prayers, reflections, and each of the scripture readings for daily Mass. I chose to get the two-year subscription because it drops the cost of each copy to \$3.33 each. But I guess that’s only important to me,” I mentioned as a side note. “Each one of the booklets features stories of saints who were known for various talents and issues. That month of March featured saints who championed different medical conditions. The saint of the day that morning for Tuesday, March 28th, was Christina Mirabilis, better known as Christina the Astonishing. Australian rocker Nick Cave even wrote a song about her. She was the saint associated with mental illness. She championed psychologists, psychiatrists, therapists, counselors, caretakers, and the mentally ill.

My jaw dropped as I read about how she suffered some sort of ailment like a seizure, was assumed to be dead, and was prepared for burial. As she lay in her open coffin during Mass at her funeral, she suddenly awakened, sat up, and proceeded to float up to the ceiling complaining of the stench of sin in the chapel. Her priest demanded that she come back down. In obedience, she did and lived out her days doing all kinds of crazy things like jumping into freezing cold rivers or throwing herself into thorn-laded brushes only to be found totally unscathed.”

“OK! That’s just strange!”

“Which part?”

“Oh, I’m not finished. The first scriptural reading for the day was Ezekiel 47: 1-9, 12. “

“And?”

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“It basically describes where the river meets the sea and promises healing and salvation to all who are touched by it!” I explained with enthusiasm while straightening my back to sit up perky and refreshed. “Needless to say, my morning got off to quite a start. I ended up at the book club meeting babbling away about my dream the night before and how I had such an inspiring morning. But that wasn’t all. I was that much more wound-up over the fact that Bishop Barron was going to be in town.”

“Who’s that?” asked Mary.

“He’s a Catholic evangelist. I tune in to all his Sunday homilies he posts on his web site “Word on Fire”. I appreciate his stronghold on the reason side of Catholicism. He explains things in ways that make Catholic teachings more easily accessible for me and others, given the degree to which he has been popularized among both Catholics and non-Catholics. I dragged Mike out with me to see him. I knew it was going to be a great presentation when we pulled into the parking lot. I spotted a car with a license plate with four threes on it! I was like a Catholic who won a round of bingo.

Bishop Barron discussed his new series on Catholicism with a particular focus on those he called the Church’s “Pivotal Players”. He also urged those of us who teach science to children to remind them of where the Big Bang Theory originated, Roman Catholic Priest and Belgian physicist, Georges Lemaitre. But he also mentioned that the Church needs strange saints, and I knew right away that I wanted to be a strange pivotal player. It was only going to be a matter of time before I would receive my marching orders as a soldier of Christ. I could feel it in my bones.

Before I knew it, I was helping out in the kitchen at a women’s ACTS retreat and had the opportunity to join the team of ladies for Mass later in the day. There, I heard them all sing Francesca Battistelli’s “Holy Spirit”. I felt like I could float, and an image came to mind. It’s there, leaning against the fireplace. I call it “The

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Edge of Glory”. It would take me several months to finish painting it, but it was a gift of the Holy Spirit that captured that moment in time. So, I took my time working on it.

The sensation of levitating never left me. I even threatened my sister Carrie to keep an eye on her painting that she had in her living room because one day it was going to be gone. I simply loved it and told her that it could possibly find a new home in Houston. She just giggled and told me that she found it online and that it was created by Duy Huyhn. The painting she had was a picture of a woman floating in an open field, surrounded by butterflies. At first glance, it looked as if she had butterfly wings. But a closer look reveals that she is painting the wings of a butterfly in the air. Though I thought it odd, the peculiarity of it made me love it that much more.

Time would tell that I would eventually finish the book *Unbound* and go through the deliverance prayer with the friend who told me to read it. Upon the completion of the exercise, the intercessor who prayed for me the whole time told me that she had an image of me in her mind. ‘I saw you floating in an open field, surrounded by butterflies.’ I jumped and gasped, ‘You’re describing one of my favorite paintings!’ I had never met this woman before. She had no knowledge of me, and yet she seemed to be able to get a glimpse of my heart’s desire. Just a few days later, I put paint to canvass and ended up with the piece over there by the window. The moment my sister saw it, she named it “Joy”. I painted it in less than four hours. It’s a depiction of me in a red dress, a blossoming rose, floating in an open field before a great forest, surrounded by butterflies and my three blood-red cardinals in the morning light. I have a twin canvas ready for me to paint an image at dawn, with a setting sun and the emergence of hundreds of sparkling stars.”

“I noticed another, smaller canvas in your library. Do you have plans for it?” asked Phil.

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“Not at present. I had three of those, one of which I gave to my mother. I was practicing scratching in an image of the Holy Spirit in the sun for another painting. Mom just had to have it, even though I told her that it was just a practice sheet I was using on the side.”

“So, what did you do with the other?”

“It was an image of the Blessed Mother pondering. I painted it for my friend, Kathie, after we returned from a retreat at a place called Holy Name Retreat Center. She urged me to go while we were in the book club together. I’d already been away from home in Australia just a few short weeks prior and wasn’t quite sold on the idea. But when I looked up the information about the retreat and realized that it was going to be focusing on Mary, I figured it was some sort of beckoning. The main emphasis was that Mary always points us to Christ. She works to facilitate that relationship.”

“But you don’t need an intercessor. You can go straight to Jesus,” said Maria.

“We’ve been trying to tell her that,” said Tim.

“Not this silly goose, and I suppose that many others may struggle like I did, too. Remember, I was a hurt little bird. I perceived that men were out to clip my wings. They were not to be trusted. Not at home. Not at school. Not at church. Nowhere! The idea that God was a force somewhere out there worked for me, while a personalized Jesus could be a dangerous thing. No doubt I had a twisted understanding. It was inevitable. We live in a twisted world. People haven’t changed much since biblical times. When it comes to choosing between virtue or vice, Christ or Barabbas, most choose the path of sin and then try to justify it in some way while engaging in some form of self-harm or harm to others.

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I think that's why reading *The Divine Comedy* hit me so hard. Dante described the second to the lowest level of hell as a place where children starve to death due to a father's sin or inability to 'man up'—in other words, a father wound. There, in one of the lower levels of hell, a father is imprisoned with his children but is too self-centered to even care or notice that his kids are perishing too. He's more involved with self-preservation whether he knows it or not. In today's world, that could be a father more concerned with his reputation or the amount of money he makes. It could be the father who fails to show his love for his wife or cheats on her. It could be the father that physically or emotionally abandons his family. It could be the father that is controlling or bullies his children into submission. It could be the father that fails to protect his family but protects his favorite automobile in the garage. It could be any pastor, priest, or elder who abuses his authority or abuses people—worse yet children and then try to hide it! Christianity is currently suffering from a father wound that runs deep with this kind of sin. People are abandoning their faith communities in droves due to these kinds of inconsistencies between living an idealized faith life and recognizing the realities that the world presents to us. Evil has been allowed to rear its ugly head everywhere and, in some cases, ushered in. It's in our homes, schools, locker rooms, playgrounds, and yes, even in our places of worship. No church is exempt.

So, all the man-hating begins. Social justice warriors cry foul, and men are immediately deemed guilty before they've had a trial. Where did our values go? I thought we lived in a place where people are innocent until proven guilty. But we don't believe anymore! We don't believe in our justice system. We don't believe in our police officers, teachers, or church leaders. Don't even mention attorneys! Oh, how about our medical system and the insurance adjusters. People now break the law, because they do not think the law applies to them. Who set that president? Men—or so it seems. The accuser is quite slick and laughing all the while because there are just as many women out there that have piled on the snow atop of the brutally cold ICEHOUSE we live in today.

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Sounds crazy. I know. But what is even crazier is the fact that those who cry foul and point to their oppressors, usually take over and end up being just as abusive and oppressive as their predecessors. There is only a shift in power and no real change. We crave change, and yet we avoid it at all costs. The status quo prevails, just with new tormentors. This, my friends, is the definition of hell.”

“So, what will break the cycle?” asked Maria.

“Mary. We need to go to Mary. She represents humanity at its finest. She’s the long way home.

When reading *The Divine Comedy*, I tried visualizing Dante’s path from the woods, down into hell, up the mountain of purgatory and into the garden before reaching for the stars towards the upper echelons of heaven.”

I took out a sheet of paper and pen and drew a circle and marked a starting place on its circumference as the woods. Then I drew a line straight down to the center of the circle and marked it hell. From the center of the circle, I drew a line continuing down to the other side of the circle’s circumference. I turned the circle upside down, so I could draw a mountain to represent purgatory. Upon the summit, I drew a curtain of fire, and explained, “It’s a straight line from the woods to the top of Mount Purgatorio but some of us do not begin our stories as Dante did. He was in a position of privilege. Hence, he started in the woods and moved straight down through hell and out after his fall. But many of us begin our stories in hell because that is where we were born. When the *Bible* speaks of a loving father, we really don’t know what that is. So, to get out of hell, we either have to totally hit rock bottom and dwell with Satan himself at the center of the world, or we have to head back up *through* hell into the woods and circumnavigate over to the mountain, I continued as I drew the alternative route onto my map. See? It’s a scenic route home. To climb out of the slippery slope of perdition, you need helping hands. This is Mary—

the goodness of humanity powered by the grace of God. Climbing out of the abyss isn't something you can do by yourself. And you have to be willing to reach out for these helping hands in the darkness. You have to totally let go and stomach the notion of flying blind, totally trusting the Lord, or at least hoping that there is a God. Not every person who receives a helping hand readily understands how this grace comes from God. Some never do.

My path to the Lord was not a straight line, nor is it for many of us. I would dare to assess that there are a lot of folks faking it out there, showing up to the church, but returning to their old selves again. The old adage "fake it until you make it" becomes the center of people's hearts, not God. The adage fails, because people fear vulnerability and realness. They fear being who they really are because they might end up getting hurt or hurting others. But without vulnerability and realness, there can be no Love. Too many of us have taken in the lie that it's better to retreat to a life of fantasy and self-indulgence as opposed to living out a life full of real and meaningful purpose. All of us are fully capable of making an impact on *this* world because it is *through us* that the Holy Spirit keeps us connected to the Lord and to each other; and with the Lord, we can make possible the impossible.

No one understood this better than the Blessed Virgin Mary, the handmaid of the Lord. When it came to waiting for the Holy Spirit to work through her, she had the most amazing experience that any woman could have. She delivered, mothered, and raised the Savior of the World, following Him all the way to the cross. She was His first disciple.

I know that not all denominations of Christianity subscribe to the notion that the Blessed Mother Mary was with the apostles in the upper room waiting for the Holy Spirit to come and give them the power to change the world. But one thing is certain. The waiting those men went through was purely Marian in nature. Like the Virgin, the gifts they received propelled them into mission to deliver Christ into the world and change the course of history

forever. Mary already walked this path. She had a better sense of what Jesus meant when He told his apostles that the Holy Spirit would come upon them. Surely, she would have been available to lend a helping hand to the apostles in their hours of uncertainty in the upper room. Like the Blessed Mother, they were entering a marriage of opposites where the divine overshadows those who say, 'Yes,' to the mission of the Church, to bring Jesus to all. In any bipolar opposition on Earth, the breakdown of counterparts enables them to become something new. In other words, only when we come forward in humility, in full surrender to He who is love, can we break through to new learnings and understandings such that new life, new solutions can be born."

"Okay! Okay! So, let's say that you needed and reached out for these helping hands, or Mary, as you put it, to climb out of hell. Of all the hands that were offered to you, how did you know which ones to actually take and which ones to avoid? You were in hell, after all. Right? Isn't everyone in hell evil? asked Peter.

"Yes and No. I guess through trial and error, I learned to recognize Christ no matter where I went."

"How did you know where to go?"

"I followed beauty."

"But wasn't Lucifer beautiful?"

"I learned both to be patient and to take my time. True beauty waits, gives you the space and time you need, returns, and never leaves you. That's real unconditional love. False beauty burns out quickly, so it tries to rush you. It's the great deal that is offered today but won't be available tomorrow. Sometimes songs that are all the rage on the radio, become ear sores after a while, and people can't stand to hear them anymore. Others become more precious and meaningful over time. Real beauty doesn't fade, just as the tilma that bears the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe hasn't faded

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after almost 500 years, and as a consequence only grows more mysterious.”

"But you recognize the elements of time and space too. Right?" pressed Paul.

"Absolutely. Just because I take a shine to a song doesn't mean that it takes on any great meaning until it resurfaces at another place and at another time of great significance in my life. These moments are different and very personal for each one of us. God speaks to us in ways that He knows we can hear. The question becomes, are you listening?"

Going to that retreat at Holy Name was a major crossroad in my personal narrative because it caused me to really begin to face my crazy obsession with the Australian rocker Iva Davies most unusually and joyfully. Just the way I like it! Admit it. All of us at one time or another have followed a star."

Chapter 20

Electric Blue

“The way we come to know love was that he laid down his life for us; so we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.”

~1 John 3:16

Peter groaned, “Okay! So, I’ve always liked Gwen Stefani, but she wouldn’t marry me.”

“I loved everything Fleetwood Mac,” Maria beamed. “They go way back.”

“I like them too,” Mary chimed in.

“Well, I have friends who were Dead Heads! They followed the Grateful Dead everywhere,” Paul added. “But I like the Stones.”

“Funny. My son’s godparents, stalked Paul McCartney, the last time he came to Houston moons ago. It was great to hear all about their wild goose chase! They sounded like a couple of giddy teenagers following him all over town. ‘He’s just so tall! I hadn’t

realized that he was so tall,' they reported. They looked so dreamy, like no one else on the planet could be just as tall," I chuckled.

"Is he really that tall?" Paul wondered.

"I never stood outside of his tour bus to see him walk out and notice just how tall he is! My fanatical neighbors loved every minute of their quest for hunting down their favorite Beatle. It's something they will tell their grandchildren about."

"So, what will you tell your grandchildren about ICEHOUSE, Cindy?" Tim refocused our conversation.

"I'd tell them I got the goosebumps in the garden when they hit the stage!" I laughed.

"Is that all?" Tim pressed.

"Of course not! I'd tell them all the things I've told you so far. But I would make sure that they understood that the music and images associated with Mr. Davies amplified and drew attention to how God talks to me and how I talk to Him. I became more consciously aware of this dynamic when I approached the musician in Sydney but struggled to really understand what was happening. In many ways, I still struggle. All I know is that I had been hand walked through a series of steppingstones while going through a kind of spiritual boot camp at my church. Much of what I was encountering had been orchestrated by the Lord through Mary. I was far more receptive to her. By following what I was learning about her, I ended up at a retreat with Passionists who meditate on and teach about Christ's crucifixion—the very thing I was doing when I would see the image of the cross, even more so, when Mr. Davies' image appeared to mirror a kind of passion. No doubt about it, following Mary will lead you to Jesus and to the foot of His cross. And the music! Oh my gosh, the music!"

"What about the music?" asked Paul.

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“It was the music that was in my heart and in my head when I was going through confirmation, and it came back to me at the retreat as I was being officially launched into mission. I mean, I really did receive my marching orders in writing and more. I’m getting ahead of myself. But then again, I always have.”

“Marching orders? Ahead of your time?” Paul questioned.

“Well, yeah. When you become a confirmed Catholic, you are basically renewing the baptismal promises that were made for you when you were an infant. The Holy Spirit comes and ignites you with spiritual gifts. Among them, must have been the music, because I was struck by the references at the retreat that echoed the fine melodies I was listening to then in the past.

‘Crazy is a woman in love!’ was the opening statement on the first night of the retreat. I could almost hear the first few chords of ‘Crazy’ kick off the whole experience. By the second day, I was way over my head. We learned about the Crucifix of Limpias as it was pointed out that the crucifix in the chapel there at the center was an exact replica of the original in Spain. I detested that image right away when I first saw it the day before. I knew that Catholics were big on making sure that the cross included the body of Jesus on it, but this was way over the top. I told my friend that I couldn’t stand to look at it because it was so grotesque. I thought it was simply inappropriate to have on display such a horrible image of Christ dead on the cross with such a ghastly expression with his head thrust forward, looking up, with bulging eyes rolling back, blood running down from his head onto his face. I thought it crude and disturbing. I couldn’t say enough negative things about it, as it rattled me so.

I was spoiled with a more sanitary impression of the passion. I realized I’d always been shielded from the realities of the crucifixion with images of Christ with his head down and eyes closed while dead on the cross as if death had brought about release from the pain. This image in the chapel, on the contrary,

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revealed a suffering Christ who ached unbearably until the very bitter end with no signs of relief.

So, when we were told about the apparitions related to the crucifix, I was speechless. Years ago, people in Limpias reported seeing Jesus turn from the cross to look at them with piercing eyes. Others saw his body turn blue and flail about in pain on the cross. Some said that Jesus looked at them with loving eyes, while others reported seeing Jesus close his eyes. Still, some people didn't see anything while others did. The bottom line was the fact that some people reported seeing Jesus literally come back to life on the cross. The church collected around 8,000 signed documents of such accounts over the years, many independent of prior knowledge of the other apparitions. 'Sure,' I thought. I couldn't even bear to look at the crucifix, to begin with much less notice that Jesus was moving or looking at me. All I could think of while I heard the story was the song "Electric Blue."

Peter broke out with the chorus from the song as the older members of the group listened and then chimed in at the end in perfect harmony, "Electric Blue."

Tim and Phil were taken aback. The chorus about freezing up upon the piercing gaze of another was a bit much for the guys. The chorus was a perfect fit.

"How do you do that?" Phil uttered.

"Do what?" I asked.

"How is it that you know these songs that seem to perfectly capture a moment?"

"It's not me. It's the Holy Spirit," I acknowledged. "It's the same force behind the fact that later that night at the retreat, after learning about the Crucifix of Limpias, I drew a scroll from a basket with the very words I expected to read. I figured we were

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all getting the same message, but when I saw that my friend drew scroll that suggested that she “ponder” every day at 3 p.m., I was flabbergasted. Let me show you the scroll.”

I went to my office to retrieve the scroll that I had placed in a picture frame. Tim took it from me and read aloud:

Mary said, 'Behold! I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her. Luke 1:38

Prayer} Loving God, thank you for the ability, courage and strength to trust God's call in my life and to live it to the fullest in word and deed with our Blessed Mother's example.

Action} Discerning God's will and getting involved in a social ministry for those most in need for the next year: prison ministry, hospital ministry, human trafficking parish ministry, social ministry; serve God and trust in His sovereignty. (Ps. 62:1-2; Sam. 3:8-10)

“So, which one of those are you *not* doing these days?” Paul asked.

“Well, when I got back from Australia, I did receive permission to use a room to host support group meetings for adults with Asperger's. I also ended up on the Evangelization and Discipleship Commission charged with putting our parish through a divine renovation. Months later, I found myself in a group of women interested in getting involved in educating others about human trafficking. I guess you could say that I was obedient. I got that message loud and clear after our host told us about his habit as a Passionist. They wear their black leather belt as a symbol of their obedience.”

“And you got your black belt. Didn't you?” asked Peter.

“Yes. And it was like a symbol of obedience because the hallmark of a true black belt is the willingness to wear your white belt again. It was pretty emotional. Hurricane Harvey just hit

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Texas, leaving thousands of people without homes or even a way to escape the floodwaters. Rescuers from all over the country, like the Cajun Navy, came to help. I held down our fort here at the house cooking and baking to keep people fed, while Mike helped others knock out sheetrock and begin the process of repairing their homes.

Our Tae Kwon Do master called us in the middle of it all to check on us. He also brought news that the Grand Master was going to go ahead and move forward with black belt testing the next week as originally scheduled and was going to allow us to continue our preparation at his school since ours was wiped out by the storm.

It was all pretty intense. If we missed the test, we would have to wait an additional six months, before we would have the opportunity to test again. It was time. We trained for five years, and I was particularly vested in seeing our son reach this important benchmark. I was working to teach him about perseverance and never giving up, even when things got hard. And boy did things get tough! What made the stresses more bearable for me was the fact that we had concert tickets to see Switchfoot and Lifehouse at the House of Blues downtown, where they dedicated their song “Shine Like Gold” to the Texans affected by the storm. Two days later, we sat singing along with the Goo Goo Dolls in the Woodlands. Given the state of affairs at the time, the song “Better Days” seemed that much more meaningful and prayerful.

Before we knew it, Mike, our son, and I were in the Grand Master’s school waiting to meet the requirements necessary to be promoted to black belt. I sobbed all the way to the facility, as our son sat in the car beside me wondering why I was crying.

‘Mom, what’s wrong?’ ‘Nothing. I’m just so proud of you. You’ve come such a long way, and I know you will do great. I won’t have to worry about you as I did before. You can follow directions. You know what it’s like to set a goal, reach for it, and achieve it.

You've been able to gather yourself and have better self-control, and you're not so shy anymore. You've made friends, and you're doing great in school. I can't be any more grateful for what God has done for our family. And I'm so happy for you. You will be just fine.'

It was true. Our son overcame many challenges over the years, and I was relieved to see him really bloom into his own. While at the test, each one of us was asked one of five questions for which we prepared to answer weeks before the examination. My responses to all five were very personal, so when I was asked the one that I thought that surely they would never ask me in public, I just about died. Really? They asked me about the best thing I got out of taking Tae Kwon Do. I told them it was the beautiful relationship I had with my son. Then, I busted into tears.

I started to hyperventilate, as I stammered through the rest of my response. I tried to explain that I learned to be patient with him and to give him room to grow, without feeling like I had to control everything. I had to let go and let God. But I'm pretty sure that it all came out like Charlie Brown's teacher on fast forward. I never fully recovered either. I couldn't shake the emotional overload I was experiencing. I was excited, proud and all blubbery, still shedding tears as I worked to complete the remaining patterns I had to do. Eventually, I went completely blank and couldn't remember the last one. I stood heaving, almost out of breath while trying to manage my tears. For a while there, the judges thought I was going to pass out and gave me time to try to settle down. Eventually, I got my head on straight and did the best that a crazy mother goose like me could muster in front of a live audience. It was over, and with great mercy—and I would emphasize *mercy*—they passed me. I moved from a red and black belt to a solid black belt. The flames of the Ghost of Time burned me black."

"Is that why you painted a picture of a black lady?" Tim inquired.

"What?" whipped Paul.

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“So, you saw it?”

“Yes, I noticed it in the closet while you were praying. You haven’t framed it or brought it out yet. She was wearing green and looked like she had a blinged-out blue and purple shawl over her head,” Tim continued.

“Well let’s see it!” urged an enthused Mary.

“I’ll go get it,” Tim responded as he got up and headed for the closet. He carefully picked up the painting and brought it out for everyone to see.

“Oh, she is dark! What’s this about?” Maria probed.

“She is my rendition of a Black Madonna. I painted her at a different retreat on this very subject. I became acutely interested in Black Madonnas when I learned that Our Lady of Guadalupe is considered one. Not only was her image on St. Juan Diego’s tilma darker than more classic images of the Virgin, but she was instrumental in evangelizing millions of Aztecs and converting them from worshipers of their serpent god Quetzalcoatl to worshipers of Jesus Christ through their timely recognition of the painting of the Blessed Mother upon St. Juan’s tilma as a work of art from the God of all Creation. That’s what Black Madonnas do best. They unify people as One Love, to sing the Song of the Lion. She’s the beauty that draws individuals into the mystery and the wonderment of God and all of His creations in some of the most unpredictable and unorthodox ways.”

“Sounds pretty heavy,” Peter admitted.

“Oh, yeah. It was one thing to learn as much as I could about Mary, but it was another to fully appreciate to whom she would direct you. I did return to Holy Name Retreat Center for another refuge where we meditated on the suffering and dying Christ on the cross. It was then that I really began to question my sanity. I

thought this goose was cooked because I could have sworn that the body on the crucifix in the sanctuary had been switched. The first time I saw the crucifix a year earlier, I struggled to look at it. I found it too disturbing, but now the crucifix looked like it had been cleaned up. Jesus appeared to be still alive on the cross and looking out at all of us instead of having his eyes all rolled back like I noticed the first time. I found validation in another retreatant who had been on the same retreat with me the year before. She confirmed that the crucifix did look different. When I mentioned the change to our host, he told us that there were plans to change out the body in a couple of weeks. My friend and I gasped. Then he broke out with a huge mischievous smile and said he was joking. He then reassured us that the crucifix was the very same one that has been in the chapel for years.”

“We’re home!” roared Mike as he and our son came through the front door.

Peter stood up, “You made it. How’s it out there? We haven’t checked it out for some time.”

“Well, the truck stands a little higher than our minivan, so we were able to move slowly through some of the high water. It’s not as bad as it was a half-hour ago,” Mike explained as he noticed that we had new guests at the table. “Hi there. I’m Mike,” my husband said as he reached out to shake Tim and Phil’s hands. “Guess those bikes in the tree belong to you.”

Phil looked at Tim as he nodded, “Yes.”

“We can probably get them down now. I have my ladder in the bed of my truck,” Peter offered.

“Great! Let’s do it before it starts raining again,” Mike came back.

“Do you really think it will start to rain again?” Phil asked.

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“You’re in Houston, aren’t you?” Paul smirked.

Mike pressed, “No big deal. We’ll get your bikes out of the tree. You can call whoever you need to call or go wherever you need to go. Or you could stay a while and play some games with us. I’m sure Cindy will be throwing something together for dinner. You’re more than welcome to join us all.”

“Well, I can get those bushes out of the bed of Peter’s truck and put them in your backyard. Mary figured that Cindy would like the roses,” Paul offered. “I’d take them Cindy, but we won’t be able to plant anything over at our place for a while.”

“You picked up rose bushes?” Phil inquired with a hint of disbelief.

“Hey. They were floating out there in the middle of the road. Who knows where they came from. Mary just figured that Cindy might want them, so Peter picked them up to bring them to her. No big deal,” Paul defended.

“Well. We could start picking up some of the debris in the backyard and dig holes to plant the bushes,” Tim proposed. “Then we could help out in the kitchen. What are we going to play tonight? We can call our friends and let them know we’ll be coming in later tonight.”

“I can get you back when it’s time,” Peter offered.

Mary spoke up, “Since we have a bigger crowd this evening, I’d suggest we play *Trivial Pursuit*.”

“Sounds good to me,” our son answered as he emerged from the restroom. “I’ll get the gloves and find the shovels for these guys.”

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“It’s a plan! We’ll each do our part to get things whipped into shape and then we’ll play a hot game of *Trivial Pursuit*,” Mike declared.

“So, I’m just in time for the party?” came a voice at the front door.

“It’s a ghost?” Phil chuckled.

“No. It’s Mark,” Mary answered.

“Who’s Mark?” Tim asked.

Paul rattled off, “He’s the guy over there in the orange shirt who just walked in. He’ll get all the sports questions right. He loves the Astros.”

Chapter 21

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“Finally, all of you, be of one mind, sympathetic, loving toward one another, compassionate, humble.”

~1 Peter 3:8

Mike started, “Okay. This one’s for the win,” as he drew a card and read the item on it. Looking totally disgruntled, he read aloud, “Who replaced Peter Gabriel when he left Genesis?” then slammed the card on the table knowing that I knew the answer. “Dammit! That one is way too easy, and they have Cinderella on their team!”

“Do you know the answer?” Phil asked me.

“Do you know it? If you don’t, it’s a crime!” I came back, batting my eyes at him.

Phil shrank in his chair. The others looked around to see if anyone else could answer the question. Then a great silence fell.

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“Oh, come on! No way!” I cried out in disbelief. But there was no one else who would step up to venture a guess.

“I don’t even know who Peter Gabriel is and what he has to do with the Book of Genesis!” Phil caved.

“Not the Genesis like in the *Bible*, Phil! *Say Anything?*”

“Steve Harwell? That’s my speed.” Phil offered.

“No! I meant the movie, *Say Anything!* The one where John Cusack raises a boom box over his head to play a beautiful love song to win over the love of his life?” I hinted, and then turned to Peter, “Peter, come on! You know this one. Right?”

I started to sing “In Your Eyes” at the table, when Peter jumped in, followed by Maria.

“Oh, I know that song,” Phil chirped.

“Phil Collins, Phil! Phil Collins replaced Peter Gabriel as the lead vocalist of Genesis!!”

The group erupted into a joyful roar of laughter.

After getting as much as we could in order while there was a break in the storm, we spent much of the early evening having a listen to the experiences that Phil and Tim shared going door to door on mission after they locked eyes with Mark and learned that he too was Mormon. We threw some fajitas out on the grill outside and shared a traditional Mexican meal before taking out “Trivial Pursuit”. Eventually, all started to wind down, when Mark inquired about the tee-shirt I was wearing.

“I got it when I went to see Live in Austin,” I responded.

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“Oh! Oh! Did you go find Matthew McConaughey?” Mary asked.

“Matthew McConaughey?” a puzzled Mark questioned.

“No. I spent some time with my sister. We both love live music,” I started to explain.

“I’m still back at Matthew McConaughey!” Mark pressed.

“Live, as in the band, or live, as in music that is played right in front of you?” Paul spoke over Mark.

“Both. I had the privilege to see both Live and Imagine Dragons at the 360 Amphitheater. It was great to be at each concert to hear how one band shared the joys of fatherhood and how the other championed getting help when facing life’s struggles. When I saw this shirt I’m wearing, I knew it was the one because it was the word *live* flanked by all these stars. It was very Marian to me. Helping hands are best offered live. Not virtually. Not metaphorically, but live. We connect best through face to face interaction, not soundbites, memes, or flashy internet postings. We are most real and fully alive when we experience all of what life has to offer, live.

I chose not to get an Imagine Dragons shirt because there wasn’t one available with the image of the band’s album cover for “Evolve” on it. And for someone like me, given my background, the album cover speaks volumes. It screams, ‘Christina Mirabilis’, featuring a person being lifted up by some unknown force, but I think I know better,” I said with a wink.

“I always wanted to fly, and when I learned that some of the saints could levitate, I wondered if I too might one day be blessed with such a charism. Even “the little flower” figured that the Lord would raise her up in her smallness. We don’t have to be great, just

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loving, walking in beauty in a way that draws attention to the Lord as Our Lady does, a feminine icon of love and grace.

But the image on the album cover reveals something else. The person being pulled up doesn't look like he is even awake or wanting to be pulled up. It reminds me of the days when I struggled to connect with my son. He would not acknowledge me or look at me no matter what I said or did—no matter what gifts I gave him. I desperately wanted to just reach him. So, Mike and I did all we could to draw him near and provide what he needed, hoping one day, he'd snapped out of his spell and know that we were there all along, loving him.

In many ways, our culture is reflected in that cover. People have lost sight of God, but he draws us up despite it in our sleep, in our dreams, in our encounters, and in the reflections of all that is good and all that is holy. But we get distracted by the works of the devil. He'll do anything necessary to pull us back down. His spiritual attacks are merciless, dark, and ugly. He works to keep us separated and out of our churches, so we're easier to control through fear. He doesn't want us to know the truth about love, the truth about the story we all share—no matter who we are, because it is His story or history.

Jesus gave us the gift of Himself to all of us. Some of us understand that. Others don't. But despite that, the Lord still pulls us up, hoping that one day, we might come to recognize Him and know that he loves us so much.

There was a time when I walked with my eyes wide open, trying to figure out how to connect with others in healthy ways because I just didn't get it. I struggled with understanding other people, much less God, even though He was always all around me until my mother and I flew to Sydney, and I saw him reflected in the eyes of a stranger—a stranger who wrote a song that drew me to where the river meets the sea through the Ghost of Time. And as stated

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in that composition, “Great Southern Land”, this encounter would burn me black.

A great pastor once taught that when the Wise men came from the east to seek out the Savior of the World, they didn’t stop to ask for directions from the rich and powerful. No. They studied the stars and spoke with the shepherds, the lowest of persons on the social ladder at the time. Today, you would have to go to those with criminal records, the thieves, the prostitutes, the mentally ill, those members of society that most of us ignore or have forgotten because they know. And on some level of knowing in time and space, I intuited that I needed to go to Australia, the very place where the British set up penal colonies for those they expelled from their country.

Once I arrived there, I recognized where I was in some bizarre way. My relatives were astounded by how I could seemingly drive anywhere, fearless, even though from our American perspective, I was on the wrong side of the car and on the wrong side of the road. But then, life had always seemingly been that way for me. But once I recognized that Jesus lived in that rock star, it was much easier to separate Jesus from the person. The person may not know that Jesus is in him or her or even subscribe to a God, but God dwells there none-the-less, hoping to one day be discovered. And if Jesus was in him, I ventured to consider that maybe Jesus was in me.

So, when I tried out the practices of Catholicism and participated in the sacraments, I grew to learn to trust this presence within me. It no longer mattered that I’ve struggled with spectrum conditions. Yes. I see the world quite differently, I interpret things quite differently, but that doesn’t make me hopeless. In fact, it makes me hopeful that I can offer alternative solutions and perspectives that can help when everyday people hit the wall. The Lord always builds hope into our world in some way. We just don’t always see it right away. There are a great number of folks out there that will tell you that it was their dyslexia, autism, or learning difference that proved to be the element that made them a success

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or stand apart from others. People with autism are different, but many of them can still lead successful and productive lives. It's a broad spectrum. While some individuals simply need more help and time to discover and employ their gifts, others need lifelong assistance from the Marian kind.

I broke free from the belief that I wouldn't be accepted as I really am. I realized that I had let the enemy ground me with the fear of discovery, causing me to be stuck in my world for a much longer time than I needed to be. This kept me from understanding that my "condition" came with a great many gifts and talents that I had yet to unwrap and play with and share with others as a beloved child of God. Finding out that I am on the spectrum, was like discovering that I wasn't so much a silly goose, as I'm a child of God playing at being a Mother Goose. But hey! I will get off the ground someday!

As far as differences in Christian beliefs and practices, I believe we are all a work in progress. We may read the same verses from the *Bible* and interpret different things, but it stems from the fact that we've lived different lives and we are all on development trajectories of one kind or another, whether we are talking about age, educational background, or even ethnicity. What makes sense to me, might be quite alien to you, simply because the Lord graced me with something that you haven't been graced to discover in yourself yet. Until we come together to share our stories of who we are and where we came from, we'll continue to struggle with arguments over the little things that can eclipse the very things that really matter in life like charity, hope, positive regard, trust, compassion, and above all love. We all come from love and eventually come back to love. We come full circle. While God's love is providential in our lives, he allows us to be the ones to derive meaning from our experiences."

"But your church is in trouble. Don't you see that?" pressed Tim.

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Trouble or growing pains? I've seen the Church make great strides in the present day. The enemy will do anything to keep the body of Christ from growing, especially unearthing more hideous secrets from the past—and I'm not talking just about the Catholic Church. Too many of God's children have suffered at the hands of those who were supposed to protect them. It's not God's curriculum that needs to change. It's the teachers who need to change to reflect a more authentic understanding of who Jesus is. He is the Truth. He is love. He is full of grace. His methods are life-giving.

I recently received a new book that fills me with hope when it comes to methods of His kind. It's titled *Love in the Time of Ethnography: Essays on Connection as the Focus and Basis for Research* by Dr. Lucinda Carspecken, the wife of one of the methodologists on my dissertation committee. I've always been interested in this sort of thing. I even took a course with one of the contributing authors of the book, Dr. Barbara Korth. It was on care theory. I took it to get a better sense of what it really means to care. I think there is a great deal of confusion about this concept especially in the way that the sexual abuse cases have been handled in the Catholic Church. The overall response of the past has given the impression that the Church does not care about the Lord's children. It's only interested in its own self-preservation. Church leadership must respond in a way that makes it clear that it is willing to make the sacrifices necessary to ensure that the Lord's children will be freed from the hell in which they've been living. Only then, will the Church be in a position to rebuild trust. This will require the Church to take a long, hard look at itself and come to Jesus. It will need several helping hands and will have to stomach the uncertainties that come with waiting for the Ghost of Time to make things right again."

"Do you really think that it can recover? So many people are losing their faith these days. They don't believe anymore."

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“Yes, I do. Been there, done that. I prayed. I fasted. I went to confession. The best thing I did was prayerfully retrace my life to figure out where I went wrong and where I got things right. It was amazing to see how the Holy Spirit illuminated the presence of the Lord in all that I experienced. With these newfound insights, I discovered a joy that couldn’t be kept in a box. I found a new purpose and a new direction. The Church can do the same. Each individual can do the same.

Isn’t it great how the Lord leaves it all up to us to connect the dots in our lives? But this is only possible if we are willing to get real, to be honest about the quality of our lives in terms of where we’ve been, what we’ve done, what we’ve learned, and what we need to unlearn. The best thing I did to make myself ready for new learning was to suspend what I thought I knew, so I could be open to experiencing and coming to understand the old in a new light. Only then could I get a new perspective. And just because I learned something, didn’t mean that I had to agree with it. I could just hold it on the back burner. People today, want immediate results and immediate answers. But God is not about placating our childish desires. We come to maturation by learning to wait in the silence for His voice to lead us. We have to learn to separate the noise of everyday life from the melody of the song that lies just under the surface of our skin. And for heaven’s sake, pay attention to what makes your hairs stand up on your arms and your back, and learn to interpret what the Lord is saying to you, understanding that you might be in danger or you just might be closer to heaven than you think you are.

So, what strikes a chord in you? How do you respond to it? Better yet, ask yourself, ‘How do you love?’ I borrow that question from Collective Soul’s song, “How Do You Love”. When I listen to it, I hear Jesus telling me that He’s always been there for me, even when I didn’t know it, and that there were special days on the calendar that was just for me, as I can clearly recognize in all the coinciding dates I came to know in my story as I wrote until I could feel the butterflies. But given the state of the world today, we have

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to ask ourselves, ‘How do I love?’ especially if things are still not as ideal as we’d like them to be. Blaming others is not an answer. Getting violent definitely is not an answer. Bullying, badgering, poking, prodding aren’t about love. Tone, volume, proximity—these all factor into the answer. The question truly puts all of us to the test in any vocation we enter. How do you love? The answer says a lot about you and your relationship to Christ, not your bank account, not your clothes, or the neighborhood in which you live.

How do you love in a world where the suicide rate has gone up 25% since 1999 according to the National Centers for Disease Control? We have more freedoms today to be and to do whatever we want as if there is no such thing as sin. And yet, it was St. John Paul the II that warned us of the suicidal act of sin. We live in dark times. We must be vigilant and at least keep the number of the suicide hotline near.

Why do people like Matthew McConaughey get slammed for speaking out about wanting to be a better man, for praising God and leaving us with a phrase of encouragement, “Just keep living”? How do we treat people who come to our doorstep and offer to share their faith or be of some service? Who are we really? And who do we want to be? What do we want people to say about us after we are gone? How would you hope to be eulogized?

I’ve attended more funerals in the past five years than most people attend in their lifetimes. One thing always holds true. No matter whether a person loved or not, there is always an indication that they were loved. I’ve heard of some pretty vindictive stunts, but thank God, they are a rarity. For the most part, each person that I’ve seen remembered at these occasions was truly loved, and I’ve often wondered if they ever really knew it.

So, we’re back to where I started. I reached out to get my son to recognize me and know that I love him. God reached out to get me to recognize Him and to know that He loved me. Amazingly, there’s so much love that goes unrequited. If only we could see it

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tangibly or point it out. If only we could share this precious message with everyone. That is your mission. That is the mission of all of the Lord's children, to ensure that everyone knows that they are truly loved, no matter who they are, what they've done, or where they've been. Code blue!"

"What do you mean by code blue?"

"My husband brought me a gift that is hanging on the wall in the library. It's a tapestry of a Southwestern house of God. Mike had never really given me a gift that was specifically for me. They've always been about him, like the set of golf clubs he bought me for my birthday one year. He wanted me to play with him whether I wanted to or not!"

All giggled, knowing exactly how Mike can be.

"But this tapestry was super special because he unrolled it and said something to the effect of, 'I got this for you. When I saw it, I knew it was you. See? This is your mission'. It was those four words—this is your mission. In those four words, I heard "Code Blue" the title of Mr. Davies' album. He explained in the liner notes that "Code Blue" was an Australian battle cry meaning 'Got for it! This is your mission'."

Lightning crashed, and thunder rolled in the distance.

"There's another storm approaching," Peter alerted. "We probably need to get you back to your place."

We all walked outside to the driveway. Peter and Mike loaded Tim and Phil's bicycles into the bed of Peter's truck, as I got hugs from my two new friends. I gave a bouquet of roses to each one of them and a doggy bag of fajita tacos for the road. The petals of the flowers still had raindrops on them from the rain that came in fits and starts all evening. They glistened in the light of the full moon that hung high in the darkened sky. As the assorted shadows

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of clouds rolled closer, I pointed up to a set and said, “Look! Doesn’t that cloud look like a plane?”

“Oh, yeah!” Phil agreed.

“No. It looks more like a spaceship.” Tim rebutted, as we all broke out in laughter.

“I’m just so glad that despite all the lightning and thunder, the rain, and the tornadic clouds we experienced that day, we still got a chance to stand together under the full moon and the stars!”

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