

## **OPENING PARAGRAPHS: 9 Chapters**

### **Chapter 1**

**June 1939**

Falling into the liquid of time, born, he worked his way into reason. All about him he remembered leaving the darkness, finding first his fingers, his hands, his feet, the faces of his parents, and a great dangling bird twirling above his crib. The bird caught every draft that swept his room and circled the timeless days when twilight became light only to fade to twilight again. Screaming in the darkness, he could not make them understand the sounds he formed on his uncontrollable mouth which could not speak words. In limitless wrath he screamed, crying and relieving himself in frustration.

### **Chapter 2**

**Fall 1953**

North America. Ohio. Misericordia Seminary. September. October. November. Maps and clocks. *Tick. Tick. Tick.* After the hot waxen weeks of the long fall, I awoke one morning in the cold rain. I could read the drizzling pre-dawn sky outside the tall row of dormitory windows. Another overcast day. All around me, in nearly one hundred beds, classmates lay snoring in lumpen disarray, asleep in tangles of blankets, their unconscious faces more innocent than when awake. At the far end of the sleeping hall a student-prefect padded to the washroom to begin his day. The door thunked closed after him. My watch ticked close to my ear, loud as a sound effect in a movie. The prefect's toilet flushed in the muffled distance. For the first instant in my life I was rationally conscious of time. I had twelve years to go to be a priest. I was fourteen years old.

### **Chapter 3**

**January 3, 1957**

The simple truth was my schooling ran like clockwork. I was seventeen, a senior in high school, four years into the seminary, and able to speak Latin and German. Year after year, I traveled from Misericordia once at Christmas and once in June for the three-month summer vacation to test my strength wrestling worldliness.

My return to my parents' home always reminded me the world was out of joint with my spiritual life, my emotional growth, and my intellectual awakening. I could translate ancient Greek and Latin and modern German, but I could not break the code of life. Unlike Telemachus, the boy in Homer's *Odyssey* who searched for his father, Ulysses, to learn how to live, I had to leave my family to learn my life.

My little brother, Thommy, was fourteen, full of war movies, eager to join the Marine Corps Reserve as soon as he turned seventeen. Thommy was distant from my parents and cold miles away from me. "You're a fake," was all he said.

I punched him on the shoulder. "How fake was that?"

## Chapter 4

### July 4 Weekend, 1960

Three years later in a red Volkswagen Bug, I roared out of Peoria free, white, and twenty-one, north on a two-lane highway, singing along with the car radio, "There's a Summer Place." Destination: the home of Mike Hager. He lived in the resort town of Wisconsin Dells. We had planned at Misery how my family could meet his family the summer before by taking our vacation at the Dells. For some reason, maybe a funeral out of town, Doc and Mrs. Hager never showed. Mike came alone.

My father had shot home movies of us all on one of the small tour boats. On screen we cruised across mirror-smooth water, among beautiful rock formations with my mother pointing up at the delicate cover of green forest.

Thom stood in the background, smoking, hating the vacation, hating us singing along in the silent movie with the tour guide who was an Irish tenor happy to hear we were the O'Hara Family. Fluttering in 8mm Technicolor, we all took turns holding my little sister, Margaret Mary, *isn't she cute*, forever the new baby, who was three, and always imitating us, talking anachronisms about things the family did "before the baby was born," as if she had preceded herself, till I told her to cut it out.

## Chapter 5

### September 1960

Eight weeks later, the first day back at Misery, Mike Hager ran down the front-porch stairs. He had decided to come back for our senior year in college.

Wearing black street clothes, I approached him from my taxi.

Tentative, somewhat embarrassed, he brushed at his cassock still wrinkled from the crush of summer storage. "What the fub," he said. He took one of my two suitcases and walked me down the long corridors to my room.

I avoided saying I was glad he had come back to get unscrewed. In fact, for weeks we talked around the summer, knowing his late-night Confession happened, pretending he was a full-spirited seminarian in his black cassock, pretending we had never talked at all in the summer.

Misery taught us to work around certain facts of life. The priests warned us: "After a vacation, never come back to the seminary because you've a habit of returning, or because you like communal life, or because you're afraid of the world." For me, each willful return to Misery became a greater tryst with grace. I wanted the priesthood with every fiber of my soul, but I hungered for some priestly fraternity more than the adolescent regimen of seminary life itself.

## Chapter 6

### Winter 1961

The pages ripped off the calendar like months passing in an old gangster movie. In February, to celebrate Saint Valentine's Day, we watched Glenn Ford in *Torpedo Run*. In March, the movie for Saint Patrick's Day was canceled because of Ash Wednesday.

“We have to keep it bent for Lent,” Mike said.

He was no closer to his vocation, but I was. Mike’s questioning of his vocation clouded his quest with even more doubts. My questioning my vocation drove me closer to my calling, my surety in the priesthood. It was Lock, not Mike, who first lost interest in prying into the case of Father Dryden. No boy in our college department admitted to anything even worth telling in Confession. Seminary life thrived on hot juicy gossip that was forgotten with the new scandal of the next day. But about Father Dryden the talk was all about the golden priest.

## **Chapter 7**

**June 20, 1962**

*Tick. Tick.* Going home summers was like rowing out in a boat chained to the shore. I paddled out only to be jerked back, tethered forever to the land. I was true to my school and for me girls could not exist. I could not run with the hot boys of the town. They always chased down the same one track, luring the girls who actually existed into cars into parks into bushes for short-breathed twitchings in the darkening twilight. I had to go everywhere alone or with a few other seminarians home for the summer from other seminaries that were not as top-notch as Misery. That was the same as being alone.

I sought sanctuary in the dark of movie theaters that disguised my estrangement from a world of couples who saved no place for me. The theater seats could be old and ripped, the floor could be so sticky I couldn’t lift my feet when the mice ran by, the new wide screen could be winging precariously out of the old proscenium arch, but I loved the silver screen and the muted blue lights high in the arc of the movie palace dome.

## **Chapter 8**

**May 31, 1963**

Things grew worse. Suddenly someone in Rome, some Machiavellian cleric slinking around behind the open-hearted Pope, probably some Borgia cardinal at the Sacred Congregation of Universities and Seminaries desperate to preserve traditional Catholicism against the progressive theology of Vatican II, promoted simple Rector Ralph Thompson Karg up to the exaggerated rank of Papal Chamberlain with the title Very Reverend Monsignor.

As a young man, Karg had first been a freshly ordained priest saying Mass in a parish in an cornfield in Iowa before the War Department had commissioned him a chaplain in the Air Force with the rank of lieutenant colonel. He had come out of combat in the War into combat in the Church as the longest reigning rector of Misericordia. He had become a soldier-priest championing the discipline of a muscular Catholicism.

## **Chapter 9**

**Out of respect for readers who do not like to know the ending, this chapter is not sampled.**