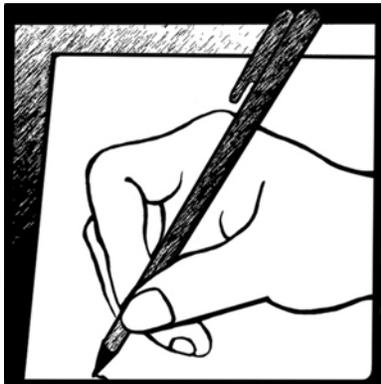


Megan and Nick



Authors
Joan and John Houk

Illustrator
Jane Pitz

TABLE OF CONTENTS

About the Authors

Introduction to Megan and Nick

Discovery.....Page 5

Decisions.....Page 33

Making It Work.....Page 50

Christmas.....Page 82

Life.....Page 98

About the Authors

Joan is a native of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She has raised six children, three of them adopted. With four children already in her family she continued her love of learning with an Associate Degree in Social Science, then a B.A. in Elementary Education, an M.S. in Conflict Management, and finally, (her husband hopes) an M.Div. from the University of Notre Dame.

During these years she welcomed two more children into her family, and after completing her M.Div. Degree she was given the position of Pastoral Director for first one, and then a second Catholic parish where there was no resident priest.

Joan is now a full time advocate for the full inclusion of women in ministry including the priestly ordination of women in the Roman Catholic Church. In 2006, intentionally breaking Church law to change it, she was ordained a priest through the Roman Catholic Womenpriest initiative (RCWP), and in 2009 was elected and ordained bishop for the Great Waters Region of RCWP. In 2019 she retired a bishop, but continues in active participation in RCWP.

Joan remains committed to the Roman Catholic Church, and works continually to convince her Church to ordain women for the good of the Church and for the women who are called to priestly ministry.

Joan can be reached on e-mail at: jhoukmdiv@mac.com
Her web site is: <http://joanclarkhouk.com>

John is a native of Dayton, Ohio, with a B.S. in Civil Engineering from the University of Dayton. His engineering career took the family to numerous places as he worked on a multitude of projects. John loved the challenge of building things; especially things that had never been built before and sometimes in new and unusual places while helping Joan raise their family.

John is now retired and is a full time supporting partner in Joan's ministry. He shares her fire and enthusiasm for the inclusion of women at all levels of ministry and the professions. He is pleased that in his engineering field the participation of women has gone from essentially zero to approximately 30%.

After years of being "on call" John enjoys the freedom of not carrying a mobile phone or maintaining an e-mail address. He enjoys the company of his two Tomcats and writing as a creative outlet, including letters "to the editor" and to their children and grandchildren.

Introduction to Megan and Nick

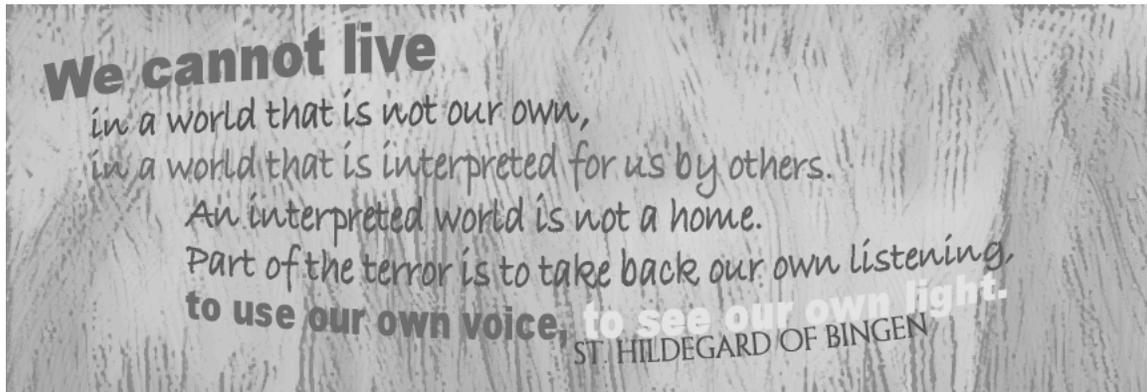
In 1958 we met and quickly made a commitment to keep faith with each other. Over the years we have been partners in marriage, careers and children. When the children were nearly gone we became partners in a Catholic ministry, first for the advancement of lay people, then more specifically for the advancement of women.

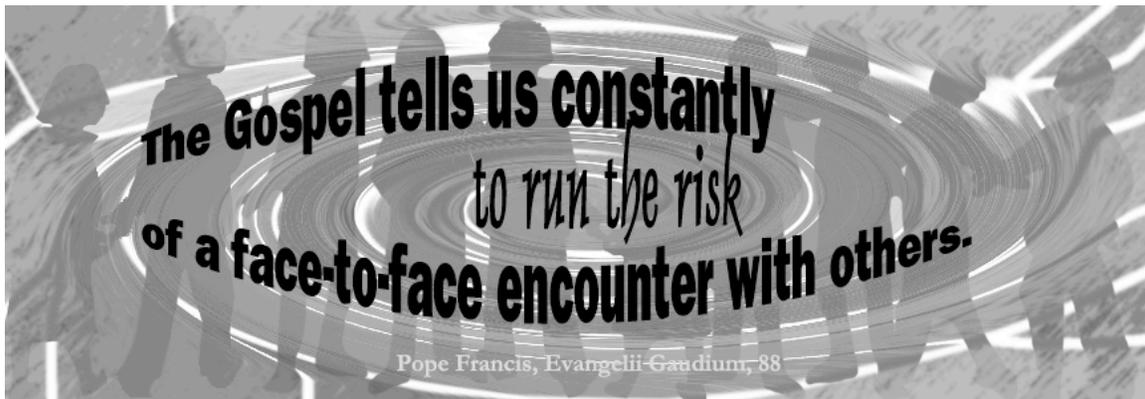
Our partnership continues here with a teamed excursion into creative writing. The story of Megan and Nick and friends is about ordinary people in sometimes too ordinary circumstances. These are the kind of people we know, and the kinds of lives we know they live. This is the world we live in.

All the characters are creations of our imaginations. If you find in this story someone who seems familiar, it is because they are ordinary people. It is your imagination that has rendered them even more familiar. Actually, we hope that happens.

This story is intentionally not, repeat not, a “published” document with “rights reserved.” This story is an extension of our Catholic ministry, and as the Gospel advises, we “take no money in our purse.” So we will take nothing for this creative journey. If you choose to copy the story, we ask that you always include this Introduction Page, and honor the missionary spirit of the authors.

Joan and John Houk





DISCOVERY

THE LETTER

Brother Nick, you have a letter. Would you like me to bring it to you? It was Megan, the parish administrative assistant calling to Brother Nick in his office. Megan had blossomed into a well-formed middle age, and contrary to what many women in her age feel, she was comfortable in her skin. Thanks, Megan. I don't get many real letters. Who is it from?

Brother Nick always liked to have Megan bring him anything. Men know, consciously or unconsciously, that women half their age, plus a few years, were the most attractive women, and Megan fit that profile for Nick. She enjoyed the fun of showing celibate Brother Nick a little wow power although sometimes she was not completely sure about how safe it was, which made it even more fun. I'll bring it in, she said, knowing that would please him. They had been friends a long time. Megan informed Brother Nick that the letter was from Jennifer Baxter. Brother Nick was puzzled. How nice, but why write me a letter? We have talked often enough on the phone, and I even learned how to do text messages, responded Brother Nick. If it's not something confidential let me know what she writes; I am curious too, Megan said as she started back to her desk with only the smallest swish of her hips that no one would have noticed except maybe Brother Nick. After a moment Brother Nick's mind went back to Jennifer's letter, and he opened it.

Dear Brother Nick,

I hope you are well and enjoying the fall weather. You may wonder why I am writing you a letter. Well, it's part of my First Year Writing Class. Professor Yo wants us to be able to write a good letter, but the whole class argued that no one writes letters any more. And they really complained when she insisted that we hand write in cursive. My cursive is not the best so I hope you can read it.

Brother Nick paused and agreed with Jennifer that Sister M & M (that's Sister Mary Margaret) would not have passed Jennifer's cursive, but he could read it. Brother Nick called to Megan that it's a class project to learn how to write. Oh, isn't it sweet that she picked you to write to.

I was going to write to Annie, but she is so busy in nursing school so I thought of you. You always seem to have time for a friend.

She says she wrote to me because I don't seem to be too busy, he called out. Megan laughed. She knows you, Brother Nick.

College is way different than I thought it would be. So many different kinds of people - and all really good students. I don't think I'll be number one in class any more. I can feel the pressure already.

Grandma Ruth once showed me some letters she had from her father when he was in the war. Isn't it interesting that she had kept them? They were all neat with a ribbon tied around them. I am sure she still has them.

My brother, Billy, is doing well in school. Billy has a new friend who says he is from Birmingham, Alabama. He looks like he could use a good meal and some new clothes, but he seems like a nice kid.

Brother Nick, I can't think of anything to write about. My brain keeps jumping around. I am afraid I am not going to be good at this or maybe anything else. Don't tell my parents I said that.

*Sincerely,
Jennifer Baxter*

Megan, Jenny may not be doing well, Brother Nick shared his concern. That's not the Jennifer we know, Brother Nick. She has always been a bright kid, a do anything kid. Megan, I'll write back to her. I am sure there is a lot of help for her at Notre Dame. They don't let kids in unless they think they can do the work, but one more friendly voice may help. I'll do it in the morning when my mind is fresh. Nothing left on today's calendar, is there? Megan checked. No, you're as free as a bird. See you in the morning. Give Jennifer my love when you write.

As Brother Nick waited at the bus stop his mind turned to dinner at the friary. One look at Brother Nick and you knew he liked his meals. Now he remembered this was Brother Ed's night to cook. He loved Ed, who was a nurse during the day, and his big dog. Who wouldn't like a huge creature with big sharp teeth that would come and put its chin on your knee? But Ed's typical Prego sauce and overdone spaghetti was not a pleasant thought for Brother Nick. He would pick up some fresh Parmesan, a couple of bags of salad and some crusty bread. Ed would be pleased for the additions and the meal would be, if not memorable, at least pleasant.

Maybe I am overreacting to Jenny's letter, he thought. I'll respond, but keep it light. I'll pray on it tonight and write in the morning, and then he got on his bus.

Brother Nick loved his vocation. He "coordinated" all the parish support groups, AA, NA, Divorced, PTSD, and he never overbooked his days preferring to be available to listen to anyone, anytime. Listening was really his first talent. People loved him for it. He heard a lot of "unofficial" confessions while people relaxed watching his saltwater fish tank with its colorful reef fish. And Megan was the pinch of chili powder on the stew of his life. Life was good. He even started to look forward to Brother Ed's cooking. Then a woman got on the bus, saw Brother Nick and sat down next to him even though there were plenty of empty seats. It was the brown robe and the smile. Brother Nick was ready to listen.

THE BUS RIDE

You got \$7.50? I need a prescription and that's what it costs, and I haven't got the money. Brother Nick often ate lunch at the homeless shelter and suspected that he was being conned by his new seat partner. Isn't that also what a bottle of Wild Irish costs? Brother Nick's question surprised her. You're pretty smart for a priest. I'm not a priest, but I am glad you sat down with me. My name is Nick, and I am a Franciscan brother. I thought with the robe and all that you were a priest and an easy touch for a little change. Where you going, she asked? Brother Nick told the woman that he was going to the store to buy some food, and then home for some dinner with the other brothers he lives with. Where are you going? No place. I have a senior pass and I get on the bus to warm up when it's cold, or, like today, just for a little ride. I ride to the end, and then back. Most drivers don't mind. I don't make any trouble.

Brother Nick was curious. I often eat lunch at the homeless shelter, and I don't remember seeing you there. What's your name? My name's Rose, and I don't like shelters. Sometimes I flop with a friend, but mostly I'm on the street. What are you having for dinner? Brother Nick responded with an invitation. Why don't you come with me and find out. I think it will be spaghetti. Really? You would do that? I love Italian food. Don't get it very often. I don't want to put you out. Brother Nick said that they often have guests. There is always plenty. Why don't you join us for dinner? We live only a short walk from the bus line, and then you can go wherever you like.

So it was agreed. No one was surprised when Nick showed up with a guest for dinner. It happened often. Someone politely suggested that Rose could use the bathroom to clean up a little. Nick had guessed correctly. It was Ed's infamous jar spaghetti, but no one was complaining.

This is a nice place you have here, Rose said. You mind if I finish that bowl with another piece of bread? It was really good. Brother Ed handed Rose the nearly empty spaghetti bowl with a smile. He didn't receive many compliments. After we eat we go to our chapel to pray. You can join us if you like, but we have no place here for a woman to stay the night. Ed was being host to his dinner guest. I don't know. Prayer has never done me any good. Thank you for the dinner. I'll be on my way. Anyway, it's too late.

Brother Nick knew that Rose wasn't talking about the hour. It was still light out. He took Rose's hand and waited. She realized that he wasn't going to let go of her hand. Rose began to speak. They told me I have cancer and I don't have much time. But what the hell! It's not that I have a lot to lose. Brother Nick gripped her hand a little firmer and led her over to a couch and sat down. Rose sat down next to him and began to tell her story. The pieces didn't fit neatly together, but the big picture was clear enough. Rose had had a tough life that may have put anyone on the street. What put her permanently on the street were the medical bills she couldn't pay, but she had friends, lots of them, and they were her daily salvation. Then Rose went quiet. I will add you to my daily prayers, Brother Nick said with compassion.

Rose knew a friend when she saw one, and she added Brother Nick to her list of friends, and told him so. For Nick that was as good as having someone pray for him – maybe better. He led Rose to the door and gave her a hug good-bye. He had a new friend, and he knew they would meet again.

Brother Nick was free for the rest of the evening. It was the cook's job to clean up, and Brother Nick had a letter he needed to pray about. He had a feeling that he needed to write that letter without any delay. He would write it tomorrow.

Hi Jennifer,

How nice to get a letter from you. We miss you around here, and Megan said to send you her love.

I can understand why you and your classmates may think that writing letters is old-fashioned, and in a way it is. You will get good instruction on the “how” to write a letter, but maybe it would be helpful to think about the “why”.

Your grandmother’s little bundle of letters may have contained some bits of interesting information, but I don’t think that is why she kept them, or why she showed them to you. I think she kept them because they were pieces of her father, his way of connecting at a distance in the difficult times of the war. I believe she showed them to you for the same reason. You are very important to her, and she wanted to connect with you in a way that was important to her.

So I think that writing a letter is like a personal gift, a little gift of yourself, and information, while perhaps useful at the time, is not the big reason we write letters. There are plenty of other easy, fast ways of sharing information.

Letter writing also requires one to think differently because it is a creative process, and writing in cursive is part of what I think your instructor, Professor Yo, wants you to experience. Cursive writing causes the mind to flow, connecting one letter to the next and one word to the next. This is how the creative mind works making new and maybe beautiful connections. Writing letters is a creative outlet for the mind. Letters are an art form.

Sure there is convention and structure like any art form. Those things are easy to learn, and you will have no problem mastering them. Art, however, is always personal. You have a style, a personal style. That is why everyone loves to have you around. When you bring that style to your letters everyone will love them too. I suspect, no, I know, that some day in the far future, someone whom you may not even know yet, will have a little bundle of your letters tied up with a ribbon.

I am happy that you chose to write to me. Perhaps there is something you would like to share with me. Perhaps it’s because you know I am a good listener. What do you think? Let your personal style flow from your writing.

*Pax et bonum,
Brother Nick*

Dear Brother Nick,

I really enjoyed your letter. Thank Megan for her love, and that I send it back.

Professor Yo thinks you snuck a peek at her syllabus. She thanks you for supporting her teaching point that a letter, and cursive writing, each demonstrate a personal style. She reminded the class that handwriting is unique to the writer in that it can be used to identify someone in the same way as a fingerprint. Professor Yo said that she would like to meet you some day. I hope you think that's a good idea.

Our next assignment is to write a Letter to the Editor, and I don't know where to begin. I read some examples today, and they all seemed like angry people spouting off. I'll think of something I like, instead of something I don't like, to write about. This is more of a challenge than I thought it would be.

You wrote that maybe some day someone may have a ribbon tied around my letters. What a wonderful thought, Brother Nick. That puts a whole new light on what I might write and to who (or about whom?). There is no one like that in my life now, but it's exciting to think about. I didn't pick ND to grab a man, but you must know how people talk. There are some really neat guys here. There is no one special, and I am in no hurry.

So why did I pick you to write to? I really didn't think about it much. You just seemed like a good friend, and you are. Good friends are people you write to. Oh, is that a new idea for me? I guess it is. Am I a good friend that you would write to?

Well, good friend, how do I know when a person is telling me the truth? Is it harder to tell lies in cursive than in social media? What do you think?

There are times when I think I have been lied to. Would a good friend lie to you?

I have always been full of questions, and my Mom and Dad always tried to give me good answers—I always thought, but now I am not so sure. No one in my family has ever gone to college. Yep, I'm the first one. Perhaps I'll lead a parade, a large family parade to higher ed.

Tell me the truth, Brother Nick, like the good friend that I know you are.

*Love,
Jennifer*

Dear Jennifer,

I hope you are having the same glorious fall weather in South Bend as we are here on the South Side. This is my favorite time of the year.

Please tell Professor Yo that I would love to meet her. I would never want to teach her class, but it does seem that we have important things in common. Please give her my best wishes.

Wow, what a tough question, how to tell when someone is telling you the truth? I think this is a trust question. My cat may help us here.

I got Buddy at the animal shelter, and they told me he was about a year old. He was thin and his hair was stiff and shedding badly. He had captured my eyes when he looked at me, and I brought him home. For a month or more I could see that his food was gone, but I never saw him. Then finally he began to show himself, and after about a year he would sit in my lap. Trust is like that. It can take a long time, but it's worth the wait.

You grew up in a world where trust came easy to you, I think. Loving parents, stable home, good school, even good neighbors all with similar values. You were curious, everybody loved that, but it was pretty much curiosity with a small "c". I think now the questions are bigger, and whom (I think "whom") do you trust to tell you the truth? You want to know, and you should.

So I think the people who will not lie to you are the people who have never lied to you. The fact that you call me friend and trust me with your questions is humbling for me, and I will never intentionally tell you a lie. And I don't think you will ever lie to me either.

But, and there is a big "but", by far the most common kind of lie is the null lie when the truth is not completely told. Let us pray that the lie of omission will not creep into our friendship.

*Pax et bonum,
Brother Nick*

P.S. Please let me know how the Letter to the Editor goes.

NICK AND MEGAN

Megan, do you trust me, Brother Nick called out to Megan from his office. Nick, isn't that like Tevye asking, "Do you love me?" Nick's silence surprised both of them. Nick, how long have we worked together? I don't know, Megan. Maybe fifteen years. More like twenty years, Nick. Megan sometimes dropped the "Brother" and it never seemed in any way inappropriate or even noticed. Today Brother Nick noticed, and he liked it, and that surprised him even more than his silence.

OK, Nick, why would you ask me such a question? But Brother Nick, now Nick, had mentally moved beyond his "do you trust me" question. He had unintentionally opened up a whole new panorama, a "Tevye" view of himself, and the words came out all by themselves. Megan, I don't know why I asked, but I am really glad I did. It's been twenty years you say. No wonder I feel so connected to you.

Megan was usually sure of her footing, but suddenly she sensed a slippery slope. Nick, this may not be the best time to talk about trust, but I do trust you.

Brother Nick knew that the way he thought of himself had taken a shock. Struggling to recover his own footing he explained that it was because of Jennifer's letter. Jennifer asked me, more or less, whom and what to believe. I suggested it was a trust question, and how pleased I was that she trusted me to be the person she asked. Now I want to know why you trust me. You just told me that our working together for twenty years answers the question without any more explanation. But why have you stayed working here all that time? Brother Nick was finding it impossible to stay away from their slippery slope. Yes, it was "their" slippery slope, and for the first time in twenty years he knew it.

Nick, I'll quote Jennifer's grandmother, Ruth Connolly, who calls you the "cutest little man". She's right, Nick. You are a very attractive person (pause), and I like working with you.

Brother Nick, who loves to talk, again said nothing. Finally, he said, Megan, I don't know what to say. This is the first time I have ever thought of myself as an attractive person.

Nick, do you think we have a decision to make? I really do trust you. It was then that she realized that their calling back and forth from about thirty feet apart could have been heard by others. She really should have gone into Nick's office and closed the door. But then that may have been exactly the wrong thing to do. Too late now. Whatever someone else heard couldn't be taken back.

Dear Brother Nick, or should it be Hi Nick!

Thank you for your last letter. I hope you continue to write to me, and yes, the weather here is the best - sunny days and cool nights. There is a little color in the trees. It's going to be a glorious fall. It would be even nicer if the football team won more games.

Sure, you are right. We trust people we know well to tell us the truth, as best as they know it, but maybe not the whole truth. It's the truth that I wrote to you because you have always made time to listen to me, and also that I trust you not to lie to me. But those were not the only reasons - not the whole truth. So it's me that was holding something back. OK, out with it, Jenn. Why did you choose a celibate life? And more truth from me. I wonder if this is something I should consider for myself.

There, I said it. You are the only person I have said that to because I knew you would give me a truthful answer. It seems like a big decision. Can you believe that I have thought about it since seventh grade! Now I really have to choose.

Brother Nick, I think telling yourself the truth is more difficult than knowing who else to believe. What do you think? And I didn't tell you the whole story about there being someone who would "keep my letters with a ribbon". There is, or there could be. How can I tell?

He's super nice, Brother Nick, and he likes me. He's not Catholic. He's not even American. I need help. What would Mom and Dad say? Could you come meet him - you know - without him knowing you are "coming to meet him"?

I know this is asking a lot, but that's how I feel. I need help - I said that didn't I? Please let me know if that is even possible.

*Love,
Jenn*

Megan, would you come in here? I would like you to read this letter from Jenny. Megan came into Brother Nick's office, sat down next to his colorful fish and took the letter. It only took a minute or two to read it. What are you going to tell her, Nick?

I can tell her about what it was like for me as a young person. How I wanted to be Franciscan and be part of their community. I can be very open and honest about what that time was like for me. I can tell her how I love my work, how being a Franciscan brother helped me when I wanted to become a psychologist and help people. All of that I can tell her about as easy as I just said it. But it would not be the whole truth, would it?

Maybe she doesn't need the very whole truth, Nick, but we do. Nick sat there thinking. Should I run out the door or should I close the door? Then Nick looked at Megan. How would you like to go to a Notre Dame football game with me?

Do you mean a football weekend? Megan's mind was spinning; is this really what I want? No, no, we could leave early, spend time on campus, go to the game and come home. It would be a long day, but it's not that far to South Bend. What do you think? OK, you make it sound like fun. Can you get tickets to the game? What would I wear?

I know someone who knows someone. I am pretty sure I can get tickets. Why don't you talk to Jennifer about what to wear? As you read, it was her idea. Well, not the football game part, but you read the letter. I would like to meet Professor Yo, her writing instructor, and Jennifer would like me to meet her mystery man without him suspecting. Your going along may make that easier.

Megan felt a little deflated. Was she only a decoy, someone to hide why Nick was really there? Was she only imagining their "slippery slope"? Did she want to go because she had never seen a Notre Dame football game? OK, she thought, this may be complicated, but none of it was her imagination. She would call Jennifer. It will be fun, she said.

FOOTBALL WEEKEND

Megan had on skinny jeans, sparkly Nikes, a loose top and carried a light sweater "for after the game when it gets cool". Jennifer also told her about The Shirt, and she wanted to get one. Nick, I want to stop at the bookstore. Jenn told me about "The Shirt" that everyone is wearing. OK, we have plenty of time, but I am starting to get hungry. You know I don't need a shirt. Megan picked up the right size for herself, and then picked up a men's 2X and held it up to Nick. We are going to a football game, Nick. This would put you right in with the crowd. It's a "build community" thing, Nick. You know all about that.

Megan, I am not going to put that shirt over my brown robe. What would people think? They would think you were a Franciscan with a Notre Dame spirit. Try it on. Let's see how it looks.

Brother Nick prided himself on being flexible and being in the moment so he tried it on mostly to please Megan. As he was standing there feeling foolish a group of young people walked by, and they all yelled “Go Irish” and wanted to give him hugs and shake his hand. This sealed the deal, and Nick agreed to be both brown and green, for today only, he thought. They left the bookstore looking very Irish.

Jennifer met them as they were finishing their brats. Brother Nick, you look great! It was Megan’s idea, he quickly explained. He was still getting use to being a green Franciscan. Professor Yo said she would like to meet you. I’ll text her to see where she is. She says that she is in the library downstairs. It will be quieter there. So off they went to the library with Brother Nick getting a stream of positive vibes.

Professor Yo, this is Brother Nick and his friend, Megan. They work together at the parish where I grew up. Nice to meet both of you. I see you have gotten into the spirit of the day. We love our football weekends. She held out her hand to each of them giving no sign of any reaction to a sight she had never seen before, that is, a green and brown Franciscan.

Professor Yo, I was impressed that you had challenged your students to become competent letter writers. And with cursive, no less. This seems almost a lost art form to me. Brother Nick, I used your letter to Jenn to reinforce the creative art idea that I was trying to instill. It was very helpful. Thank you. Do you write many letters yourself?

Brother Nick suspected that Professor Yo could not be fooled so he gave an honest answer. No, I have not been writing many letters even though I like getting them, and I always respond with a letter. I could never see myself texting, “I got your letter.” We write official letters all the time. Megan is good at that, but, no, I have not been in the habit of writing personal letters. Would it be OK if I would write to you?

What a nice idea, Brother Nick. I can see why Jennifer is so fond of you. You are a very interesting man. (She didn’t say attractive, but the hint was there and Nick didn’t miss it.) Here is my card. Do you come to Notre Dame often? Why are women suddenly finding me interesting flashed through Nick’s head, followed by, maybe they always did and I didn’t notice it? I have been on campus before, years ago, but this is my first football weekend, answered Nick. I hope it won’t be your last, commented Professor Yo.

Megan thought it was time for her to add a clarifying interjection. We are only here for the day. Driving over and back makes a long day, but I am glad we are here. Megan was pleased. She could tell Professor Yo got her message. Professor Yo said that she needed to be on her way. I’ll be looking for your letter, Brother Nick. You would be welcome in my class anytime. As Professor Yo walks away, Brother Nick was pleased with himself. He will enjoy writing to Professor Yo, and realized that he would also enjoy being invited to a future class.

I like your Professor Yo, Jenny. Yes, she is very popular considering that she teaches a required first-year class. Now I would like you to meet my friend, Alexi. He is working at one of the club food tents. We could get something to eat from him, and you could

meet him. We already ate, but maybe one brat wasn't enough. I could eat another one. Megan would pass up another brat, but she said that she would enjoy a cold drink. I am surprised how hot the sun is today. Let's go meet your friend, and not be too obvious about it. Megan was enjoying being included in what she hoped would be a harmless charade.

Alexi was standing next to the smoky grill as the conspirators walked up. He himself looked rather mysterious wreathed in brat smoke, a little taller than Jenny, 5'8", slender, but not skinny, tan and with a black beard, someone who would easily make a good first impression. Hi, Alexi, I want you to meet two of my friends from back home. They are hungry and thirsty.

Hi, Jenn. Tell Pete at the table what you want. Hi, I'm Alexi. Alexi starts to hold out his hand, but realized it could be a problem for people reaching out over a smoking grill. Jenn likes to talk about the South Side. She makes it sound like a nice place, but she never said anything about a friend who wears a brown robe. Oh, and The Shirt!

Nice to meet you, Alexi. I am as surprised as anyone that I am wearing The Shirt today. My name is Brother Nick, and my work associate, Megan, here talked me into it. So you belong to this club? Yes, they're a good bunch of guys. So the brown robe is an every day kind of thing? It's an old tradition, and it helps me with my ministry. People tell me things they might otherwise keep to themselves. Check out Franciscan Brothers. You may find us interesting. I'll do that, and it's Megan, is it? You work with this strangely dressed person? Nice to meet you. I have to get back to my brats. Let Pete know what you want. Jenn, I'll look for you at the game.

As they walked away with their food, Brother Nick had a knowing look on his face. I think he's on to us, but I like him, Nick said. Megan gave a thumbs-up.

THE RIDE HOME

The ride home was going slow. It was dark by now and the after-game traffic was heavy. Nick was Brother Nick again. He had taken off The Shirt. He had resolved to keep it; tacking it up on the wall in his room at the friary seemed like a good idea. All in all it had been a good day. Even the team had pulled out one of its signature last minute wins. Brother Nick decided that today had been one of his better ideas. Now he wanted to do a check in with Megan.

Did you enjoy the day? Yes, Nick, every minute of it. It was a great idea, but this traffic is crazy. I'll turn on some music. No, I like the quiet. Megan was curious. Tomorrow is Sunday. What do you do on your day off? Nothing very exciting – Church – lunch with the brothers – maybe some reading.

Megan sat quietly for a few minutes. Should she or shouldn't she? I think I'll spend some time at the Art Institute, and take a walk around Millennium Park. The weather is perfect for being outside. Would you like to go along? I would like to see some art and spend some time outside before it gets too cold. There are plenty of places around there where we could get some lunch. Megan thought for a moment. How about noon at the Bean?

OK. I still need to answer Jenny's letter. For some reason she thinks this is a critical decision time. I would hope she would get a little more experience, and not rush big decisions like religious order verses marriage and family. She is only eighteen, or could be nineteen; I have forgotten her birthday. Nick, I think I know how she feels, and I'm past forty and counting.

Brother Nick had just agreed to spend another day with Megan. Today had felt what – comfortable to be with her like their being together was a natural thing. There was no reason, he thought, that tomorrow wouldn't be the same. Why push decisions? Why was Jenny pushing herself to make a decision? Why did Megan feel the same way? Careful, Nick. Watch your driving. He didn't want to make any decisions now, and he certainly didn't want to make Jenny's decisions for her. Brother Nick liked his life to flow like a meandering stream in a meadow, and now he could hear the sound of rapids and he didn't like it. So he said that maybe tomorrow is not such a good idea. OK, Nick, maybe another Sunday.

This was not the way the day should end and they both knew it. I love Frosties. How about we stop and get one, then I'll take you home? OK, Nick, I'd like a Frosty.

Dear Jennifer,

Megan and I had a really good day at ND. It was easy for us to get into the spirit of a football weekend. I'll keep The Shirt to remind me of what a good day it was.

I have promised to write Professor Yo a letter. It's on my list for this week. It was a short visit with your friend, Alexi, but both Megan and I liked what we saw and heard. It's also clear that he likes you too.

The question I like to ask about people is, do they help me to be a better person? If the answer is yes, then they are a keeper, at least as a friend. As far as making your "big decision" I suggest patience. You have at least three more years of school. Take a deep breath and enjoy them.

Alexi looks like he may be from the Middle East. Does he have any family here that you could get to know? How did he get to ND, and has he talked about what he would like to do? I am not suggesting that you "interview" him, except - just thinking - if your class with Professor Yo has a journalism component, and you need to interview someone, he could be an interesting subject.

You haven't told me about your other classes. I would like to hear what you think about them.

It's been awhile since I was in school. Things would be different today. Most of the people I know have never been to college, people like your Mom and Dad, and yet life has been good for them. Being a firefighter and a middle manager can be rewarding, and they have been a big help around the parish. They want you to have an even bigger life, and they think that's what you want too. Keep the future open. I didn't do that.

What I wanted, when I was your age, was so clear to me. There was nothing fuzzy about it. I knew a Franciscan brother, and I wanted to be just like him. He had a peacefulness about him that drew me like a magnet. I discovered that his peacefulness was nourished by his simplicity and his trust in people's goodness. How could there be anything better than being in community with people like that? Still, they insisted that I go through a time of discernment.

So you see I may not be the best person to confide in about making decisions. It was easy for me. It was, it really was, but I am not so sure anymore. Did I just say that? When we think about whom to believe, who will tell us the truth, whom to trust, it seems we must start with ourselves.

*Pax et bonum,
Brother Nick*

WENDY'S

Hi, Father Mike. Come on in. Good morning, Brother Nick. Father Mike, the pastor, came into Brother Nick's office and closed the door. Closing the door alerts Brother Nick that this may mean bad news.

How are your support groups going, and what is this green shirt on your desk? The groups are steady at about six to eight people each. If they get bigger than that I split them up. The green shirt is from Notre Dame. I was going to tack it up in my bedroom, but then I thought I might use it for my PTSD group. I like the message on the back, "No breaking point."

I hope the shirt's message helps. The shirt may be related to the call I got this morning. One of our parishioners called to tell me she saw you and Megan out together "rather late in the evening" were her words, and she expressed concern that this may "look bad" and again her words. What's going on, Nick? This doesn't seem like you, or Megan either.

Jennifer Baxter wrote me a letter that was a call for help with a decision she thinks she is faced with. I wanted to help, but not be obvious about it so I got some tickets to the ND football game, remember Jennifer is in school now, and asked Megan if she would like to go along. I think it was a successful day, and on the way home we stopped for a Frosty, which again was my idea. I am sorry that resulted in your getting one of those Monday morning phone calls; at least it wasn't about your homily this time.

Brother Nick was using as light a tone as he could manage, but he wasn't very good at not telling the whole story, which would have included the way his relationship with Megan had taken a new direction.

Nick, I thought there was a good reason for you and Megan to be out late together. I do hope you were some help to Jennifer. She and her family have been special to me and to the parish for a long time. However, your rather loud conversation with Megan recently, which I couldn't help but overhear, makes me think there may be more to your football Saturday, it was just Saturday, wasn't it, than you may be telling me.

Brother Nick felt like a deer caught in the headlights. What to say? The truth? What was the truth?

Father Mike, yes, it was just a Saturday, do you remember when I talked to you about feeling attracted to women, and how you told me it was normal and I should enjoy it "within the context of the rest of my life" I think you said? That conversation was several years ago, but I do remember, responded Father Mike. I accepted your advice and I learned to enjoy the company of attractive women. Now I have a new problem; I guess you would call it a problem as it sure is to me. I have discovered that some women find me, little Brother Nick, to be both interesting and attractive, and I don't know what to do with that new information. Up close, right here, Megan has let me know that she enjoys my company in ways I never expected, and I like it Father Mike.

I have great respect for both of you, but the whole parish is also my responsibility. Can I expect that you will work this out between you and Megan without causing the parish community a problem? It's never just between two people is it? No, Nick, it isn't, but hasn't that always been your message? Yes, Mike, I always made a big thing about how we are connected to family, friends and Church. It's funny how I seem to have forgotten about that for myself. Telling the truth begins with ourselves, doesn't it, Nick? How could I have forgotten that, Mike?

Dear Professor Yo,

Megan and I thoroughly enjoyed our Saturday at ND. Jennifer is a good friend. I was at her parents' wedding twice, a long story, but a good story. Jenny has always been a star student and helper around the parish. The first in her family to go to college, and we are all pleased that she chose ND.

She speaks highly of you, saying that your class is popular considering that it is a required class. You are in a great place to have a positive influence on great young people.

I was schooled in the Palmer Method of cursive writing, but as you can tell, my penmanship is rusty. Even my sentence structure and punctuation are rather old-fashioned, I think. But I do want to impress on you how important your work is. Your positive influence on Jenny tells me that you must have a positive image of yourself. I'm guessing here, but you must see your work as a vocation, a ministry perhaps. How nice for Jenny to have an instructor like you.

*Pax et bonum,
Brother Nick*

Hi Brother Nick,

I'm catching on to your letter writing style. You ask a lot of questions along with unexpected revelations about yourself. I think you are trying to draw me into being a dedicated letter writer. Am I right about this? That's my style for today - imitate you by asking questions.

Your suggestion that I interview Alexi as part of my classwork was really helpful. My assignment was to write a Letter to the Editor. I chose immigration as my subject, and guess who is from another country whom I could interview about his experience? Clever, don't you think?

I'll enclose (Professor Yo taught us to say enclose) a copy of my letter so you can read it. Professor Yo thinks I should send it to a newspaper hoping they will publish it. What do you think?

How do I know when I am being honest with myself? Surely we must be good at telling ourselves lies. Is that really very bad? And what do you mean that your decision to become a brother was easy for you, but now you are "not so sure"? I know you love your work with people. How could you be not so sure?

Searching for my own style.

*Love,
Jenn*

JENN

Letter to the Editor:

Immigration is the subject of much news coverage today. Our leaders in Washington have taken a harsh stand calling people who want to come to our country “invaders” and even harsher, we are being “infested” by immigrants. There is reason to believe that the Native Americans saw the white Europeans getting off of their big boats in the same way. Were we not invaders of their land infesting their way of life? Think about it.

As a student at Notre Dame I see students from many other countries so I asked one of them to give me his prospective on today’s immigration situation. This is what he said:

I am from the Middle East, and I feel privileged to be here in the U.S. It was not safe for me to remain in my home country. I hope to learn how to make things better for my country and return there after my time at Notre Dame. Looking from the outside, your immigration system is broken. The people who come here, some with professional skills, often take jobs that Americans don’t want, the difficult, low-paying work that no one else wants to do. Americans get rich on the backs of these poor people doing the worst work for low or no pay, and yet these same rich people hate the immigrants because they are different, forgetting that their ancestors came here in the same way.

So that is how someone from another country sees our immigration system.

*Jennifer Baxter
Notre Dame, Indiana*

MEGAN AND NICK

Megan, can you get away for lunch? I want to talk about this letter from Jennifer! Sure, Nick, but aren't you going to the homeless shelter today? Megan, I think this is more important. OK, in about fifteen minutes.

As they made their way to the diner Brother Nick was once again struck by how "comfortable and natural" (he liked those words) it felt to be with Megan. Even simply walking to lunch felt good. Then he spotted his new friend, Rose. Rose, how are you today? This is my friend, Megan. Brother Nick, I woke up this morning and that makes it a good day. How's yourself? That's a mighty pretty woman you're with. Nice to meet you, Rose. I'm the Church secretary, and we are on our way to lunch. Brother Nick, you have nice friends. That includes you, Rose. We have things to talk about or I would invite you to have lunch with us. Could you use \$7.50? Thanks, Brother Nick, but I'm good today. Got my SSI check yesterday. Enjoy your lunch together.

Nick, what's with the \$7.50? That's a little joke between Rose and me. I'm curious. OK, Rose asked me for \$7.50 "for a prescription" and I told her that's about what a bottle of cheap wine costs. She said that I was smarter than she expected me to be, and that began our friendship. It is good for me to see you interact like that with a street person, Nick. We have worked together for all these years, but I seldom got to see what you really do.

Why don't you come to the shelter with me some day next week? I know they would enjoy someone new to talk to. OK, I'll come with you. Let's sit in the booth. What are you having? I'll have a burger and milkshake. Good choice – make it two – that's chocolate, right? Nick turns his attention to the subject at hand. Jennifer's friend, Alexi, plans to go back home when he is finished school. It's a dangerous place, at least it was for him, and now he wants to go back. That makes me worried about Jennifer getting serious about him.

You didn't expect Jenn to come back to the South Side, did you? Nick, that was not likely to happen, and you know it. But I didn't expect her to put herself in harm's way, Nick blurted in concern. I'd like to know what you think.

I don't think you should discourage this relationship, Nick. Who knows what good they could do together? Didn't Jesus send his disciples out two by two? Brother Nick couldn't believe what he was thinking. They finished their lunch and walked back to the parish where Nick had Professor Yo's letter.

Dear Brother Nick,

What an absolutely wonderful letter, and your writing may not be perfect Palmer, but it is certainly readable and stylish.

You must be a blessing to many people. I would love to hear about your ministry, and so would my class. They tell me that they have never personally met a Franciscan. Please consider coming to my class and telling them that, for you, writing letters is an art form, and you simply must tell them about yourself.

Do you wear a brown robe all the time? I do hope you could wear it to my class. It's not that Franciscans are completely absent from our campus, but we seldom have a chance to meet one up close.

Jennifer has my contact information. Call me if you agree to come and we can schedule it. Please bring your friend, Megan. She is like your administrative assistant, isn't she? She could add her experience with business correspondence, and the style that she uses. Does the local Church have a preferred format for official documents? If so, she could explain that to us.

Hoping to hear from you, and blessings on your ministry.

*Sincerely,
Professor Yo*

Back at the parish Nick called to Megan. Megan, Professor Yo wants me to speak to her class, and she would like you to come too. Why would she want me? I'll let her tell it. Brother Nick walks out to Megan's desk and hands her Professor Yo's letter. Nick was bringing something to her? This is not how it usually works, and she notices. As she reads the letter she realizes that she would like going with Nick back to the ND campus. Talking to a class about official Church correspondence could be rather boring, but being on campus with Nick – she would enjoy that, and she knew it.

If you would like me to go along, I think it would be nice to meet some young people. Telling them about Church correspondence could be simply passing out some samples. What do you think? I think it's a good idea, and you could count it as work related and be on the clock. I'll check that with Father Mike to make sure he's OK with that.

Nick, keep me in the loop because I'll need some time to clear my desk if I'm going to be gone for a day. I don't like to be critical, Nick, but my car is nicer than the old parish car you borrowed for our last visit to Notre Dame. We could take my car and have a more comfortable trip. Good idea! Brother Nick realized that riding in Megan's personal car could be a new kind of experience. Maybe she should drive, he thought. His new ideas were coming fast, maybe too fast?

Dear Jennifer,

Thank you for sending me your Letter to the Editor. I would like to include it as a bulletin insert with your permission. People would like to hear from one of their own on a subject even the pope has been writing about.

Megan and I will be speaking to your writing class a week from Tuesday. Is your friend, Alexi, in this class with you? If so, it would be another chance for us to get to know him. Also, if you have any suggestions regarding what the class may find interesting, please let me know. Megan will be talking about how she does office letters and I will talk about letter writing as art and a little about myself.

I saw your football team won again yesterday. Now that I have been to a game I find myself in front of the TV Saturdays watching ND football.

Answering your questions – yes, I like to ask questions to encourage you to write back to me. I suppose I have been rather obvious about it. It does seem to be working don't you think?

Saying we tell ourselves lies seems a little harsh. What do you think? A good self-image is a mark of mental health, but if it greatly exceeds our competence, it's a problem isn't it?

When I used the phrase "not so sure" I was trying to be honest with myself and with you. I do love my ministry. I don't think I will ever do anything else, or be anyone else for that matter. But when I recently was faced with new information about myself I began to rethink. How do you react when you discover new information about yourself?

Let's take some examples here. Suppose in your writing class you discover you really like to write, and you are good at it. Isn't that one reason for requiring a variety of First-Year courses? It's part of a self-discovery process isn't it?

Another example: what if you suddenly discover that another person thinks of their relationship with you in ways that you had never imagined? This is new information that demands some rethinking. Don't we take our clues about who we are from the people around us? Then there comes a time when the most important information about ourselves comes from the inside. Don't you think?

Sorry about the proliferation of questions. These are questions I ask myself so this letter is not a test. You passed all my tests years ago. Megan is sitting here and she wants to add a note.

Hi Jenn. I am really looking forward to coming back to ND and speaking to your class. If I didn't make it clear before, I do like your friend, Alexi. Nick and I talked about how he wants to go home after he gets his degree. We think that shows good character. Now back to Nick.

So that's the news from the South Side.

*Pax et bonum,
Brother Nick*

PROFESSOR YO'S CLASS

Brother Nick addressed the class by telling them that Professor Yo asked him to talk about letter writing and how he thinks it's an art form.

Brother Nick, it may be an art form, but it's dead, or dying. Some of us were not even taught cursive writing, and see it more like some ancient hieroglyphics. Nick was up to the challenge. Not everyone enjoys painting or sculpture or pottery. Fewer yet learn to be good at any of those art forms. Art communicates. Personal letters communicate in their own particular way. Surely everyone learns to print, and I have seen some beautifully and personally styled printing. If this were a class in pottery you would challenge yourself to learn how to throw a pot, and this is no different. Learn how to write.

Another hand goes up. Brother Nick, I never know what to write. Maybe you have something in particular that you want to say like, I love you and I miss you, offered Nick. Or it could be you write the same things differently like, the food here is not like your good home cooking. Part of a creative writing process is finding different ways to say the same thing. The words creative and process always go together. Creativity happens in the doing. Pick up a pen and paper and write.

Brother Nick, we want to hear about you and what you do.

This may sound repetitive, like I have only one song that I play over and over, but I want my life to be a creative process. I highly recommend that each of you adopt that way of thinking about your own lives. We learn to do, and we do to learn. There is a "do" in both statements. You asked what I do. Your question already says who I am. I am a doer guided by the example of Jesus. Now I know you want some specifics. I coordinate support groups, NA, AA, Divorced, PTSD. These are people who need to know that they are not alone, that there are other people like themselves. I help people form supporting communities. I also live in a community with other brothers, and I often eat at the homeless shelter. One of the things I like doing best is inviting people to eat with us at the friary where I live. Sharing food is following the example of Jesus in a most fundamental way. Jesus called his disciples to a common table.

Thank you, Brother Nick. Professor Yo motioned to the clock and said that they also want to hear from Megan about her work. This is a writing class, and I want to help these young people to be able to effectively communicate in a more formal way. Megan, would you tell us about what you do?

Thank you, Professor Yo. Here are some examples to pass around. Brother Nick's way is creative, and I must take what he wants to write and style it so that the information is clearly stated, unambiguous and up front. Catholic Church style is to say the most important thing first, in fact, many documents are identified and named by their first words. So that is part of my style. Say what needs to be said, the most important thing, at the very beginning; then use extreme care to avoid mistakes like wrong words, spell check is not enough, proper sentence structure and punctuation. Formal letters must also be polite in their tone. There it is, to the point, professional looking and polite in tone. Questions please?

Do you use form letters, Megan was asked. Sometimes, especially when I am pressed for time, but I still like to add a personal note, maybe a hand written "hello" at the bottom. That little extra can really smooth out a dry communication.

Megan, you work with Brother Nick. Do you go to his support groups? No, but I would like to. He says that the best thing he likes to do is invite people over to dinner at the friary. Have you ever been to the friary for dinner, and if so, what is it like? No, I have never been to the friary for dinner so I can't tell you what it's like.

Brother Nick, it looks like you have some inviting to do, proposed Professor Yo. Class, we have a very few minutes left for questions. Alexi, I see your hand. Brother Nick, where I come from it seems like religion leads to violence. I don't want to be part of that. Why do you?

Avoiding participating in violence of any kind shows good judgment on your part, Alexi. None of the major religions have violence as part of their core beliefs, yet we know religion has been used as an excuse for hatred and war. This is a tragic misuse of what all religious founders intended. If you want to understand a religion, go back to its founding documents and not someone else's interpretation. I hope we have other opportunities to talk about it.

Thank you, Megan and Brother Nick, for being with us today. Class, don't forget your next assignment.

Brother Nick looked at Megan and he knew that Professor Yo was right. He had some inviting to do.

RIDE HOME

This is not the way back to the toll road, observed Nick. My GPS is directing us this route. It must be a better way. Looks like it's taking us past the airport. OK, Megan. I'll sit back and enjoy the ride. What did you think of the class?

I enjoyed it very much, Nick. They genuinely seemed interested, and I want to talk to you about widows. This caught Nick's attention. Do you know someone who needs help? Actually I know several. A lot of people come to my desk. Often, I suspect, they are lonely and have no one else to talk to. Some of them are widows. Nick thought about Megan's work at the parish office. You are often very busy. Making time for a lonely person is not easy. What are you suggesting? I think they need a support group, Nick. Are you talking about recently widowed women? Hospice has a group like that. No, I am thinking lonely women who have no one to talk to, and most of them are widows. OK, let's try a group for, say, six weeks and see how it goes. Friday evening is open, or do you think Saturday morning? Let's try Saturday.

You are not talking about just my doing it, are you? No, Nick. What I would really like is for us to do this together. You have the skills, and I know the women. Nick agreed. OK. Do you want to do this word of mouth or put it in the bulletin? Let me get the word out with women I know and start there. You hungry, Nick? It's getting to be dinner time.

No Wendy's, Megan. That got Father Mike a Monday morning call. You're kidding, exclaimed Megan. It seems we were noticed, and it, quoting this person, "looked bad". How would you like to have dinner with the brothers? What would they think, Nick? I don't want to create a problem for them, or for you. They would love it, Megan. They half expect me to bring someone home to dinner because it happens often. So I would be like a street person? I'm not sure about this, Nick. The brothers would enjoy being able to talk with an interesting and attractive young woman like you. I don't know who is cooking tonight so I can't predict what the food will be like. You just said some really nice things about me, Nick. I meant every word, Megan. Turn off your BMW's GPS. I'll give you directions to the friary.

Dear Brother Nick,

Peace and all blessings.

You and Megan were a big success at Professor Yo's class. It's Megan, isn't it? God, Brother Nick, how could I have missed that? When you were together yesterday I saw you really together for the first time. What are you going to do? I hope no one but you sees this letter. Please let me know how you work this out, and I am not talking about this with anyone. God, what are you going to do, Brother Nick?

Of course you can put my Letter to the Editor in the bulletin if you think people would like to read it. I haven't done anything about getting it published. Our immigration system is broken, isn't it? Alexi thinks a lot of rich people like it that way, and it won't ever get fixed. We have so much and so many people have so little. That's just not right.

I agree that we get clues about ourselves from the people around us and that the most important judge of who and what we are is ourselves. There are smart people in my classes who never participate, and there are some not so smart people who always have something to say. I have always been a confident person. I can thank my Mom and Dad for that, I suppose, especially my Mom. Dad always "complains" that Mom is compulsive, but he obviously likes it. I am my mother's child, Brother Nick. At least three more years of school seems like forever. I want to bring Alexi home to meet Mom and Dad. Do you think this is too soon? Why am I in such a hurry about them getting to know him? (copying your style, Brother Nick) I don't want to mess up his future by being foolish and impulsive. He doesn't like religion. You heard him say that. Would you write him a letter? You are such a wonderful friend. OK, I'm being nice hoping you will do what I want, but you will always be my friend no matter what "big" decisions you make or what letters you write.

I like my First-Year courses. Haven't thought much about "self discovery" in these classes. I always thought I would do something medical. Maybe be a general practitioner. Sister Jennifer Mary, the doctor, was my childhood dream. God, how many years would that take? Calm down, Jenn - I sometimes talk to myself. Why am I in such a hurry? Take a deep breath, Jenn.

It's another home game weekend coming up. I am learning what it's like to be part of the school's welcoming tradition. But when I see the campus flooded with Georgia red or Texan brown all I want to do is yell, Go Irish!

*Thanks for being such a good friend,
Jenn*

THE NEW NICK

Megan was always on time. She came in each morning with her Starbucks coffee, checked her phone and was ready for anything that came her way. She had just sat down when she looked up and knocked over her coffee.

Brother Nick was also a person of routine, except when he wasn't. He was dressed in neat slacks and an open collar shirt, brown loafers, a fresh haircut, and his beard was gone.

Just then Father Mike walked in coming from early mass, and stopped. Seeing Brother Nick like this was as surprising as if he was seeing Megan standing by her desk in a black bra and panties. Brother Nick was looking at two people with their mouths open, but saying nothing. Finally he broke the spell.

I wanted to see what a day without my brown habit would feel like. Shocking to you two it seems, but on the bus over here no one even noticed me. It was like I was invisible. Well, what do you think? Sister Mary doesn't wear a habit, and you see her all the time. Speak up.

You shaved, Nick. You look so different. I didn't know what you looked like, without a beard, I mean. It took awhile, Megan, and my face still feels a little new. I hope it's not too pink.

If this is the new you, Brother Nick, I think we should talk about it. Father Mike was trying to digest what he was seeing.

I don't know if it's the new me, Father Mike. I wanted to know what it would feel like. What does someone in the military feel when, after 20 years, they take off their uniform? I know people like that. I said hi to Joe, the bus driver, this morning, and he only gave me a little double take. No one else even noticed.

Megan had wiped up her coffee. Nick, no one noticed because you look like everyone else. It's going to take some getting use to. She wasn't going to say she liked it, at least not here, not now. Father Mike went on to his office shaking his head.

Megan, how many widows do you have lined up for Saturday? Looks like five or six, with a couple of maybes. The women are not really sure about this group idea, but some of them are willing to give it a try.

Nick was pleased. That's a good start. I have a new letter from Jennifer that I would like you to read. She said not to share it, but I think she would be OK with your reading it. Megan took the letter. OK, is this something we need to talk about? Yes, when you think the time is right. I want to go to the shelter for lunch, try out the "new me" on the people there. How about a Frosty after work? Sure, Nick. You know I like Frosties.

A DAY IN CIVILIAN CLOTHES

At lunchtime Brother Nick walked to the bus stop, got on the first bus, and sat down by himself. He had a couple of small taus in his pocket to give to people who asked for prayers. No one asked.

When he walked into the homeless shelter no one called out, "Hi, Brother Nick." If they thought anything, it was that he was clergy because he was clean and neat, but probably clergy that didn't stop in often enough to be recognized. Lunch was being served at the steam table, and he picked up a plate and got in line. Jim, the cook, was at the end serving the green beans. What the hell happened to you, Brother Nick? Where's the robe and beard? Hi, Jim. You were in the Army, weren't you? Yeh, twenty years, that's why I can work here for almost no money. Can we talk after lunch, Jim? Sure come on back. I'll be cleaning up as usual. We are light on volunteers today.

Brother Nick sat down to eat, and someone else finally recognized him. There were some "hi, nice to see you" from others, but no one asked for his time later. Brother Nick was the unofficial chaplain, and the shelter had given him a little space to "counsel" people. No one asked. After he finished his meatloaf and green beans he went to the kitchen.

Got a question for you, Jim. What was it like for you when you stopped wearing a uniform. You wore a uniform in the Army, right? I was a cook, Nick, so I often wore cooks' whites, but otherwise mostly fatigues. When I got out I had to buy clothes, and had to decide what to wear every morning. That was new. Nick asked Jim if people treated him differently. Sure. I made sergeant, and those stripes got respect. When I took them off, I was just another Joe.

People respect you here. They like your cooking. I guess so, Nick, but I had to earn it. People had to get to know me, and it took awhile. With stripes on my sleeves I got instant respect. Being in civvies is different, Nick.

I'm finding that out. It's a lot different than I expected, confessed Nick. Is that what the new clothes are all about? You going to stop being a religious? I wanted to see what it was like, and now I think I know. Say, you got time to slop some dishes? They are stacking up out there. No volunteers today. Sure, Jim. I've got time. If I did that every day people would get to know me. That's what it takes, Nick. Join the club of the invisible people.

MEGAN AND NICK

I read the letter. I didn't realize we were being so obvious. It makes me feel like everyone is looking at us. It's uncomfortable, Nick. I don't like it at all. Nick's turn. Funny. My day was the opposite. No one looked at me. It was like I was invisible, and I don't like it either.

If we work together, travel together, eat together, run a support group together, your changing the way you look and dress, everyone, and I mean everyone, is going to notice and wonder about us, Nick. They will get their own ideas, and it won't be good.

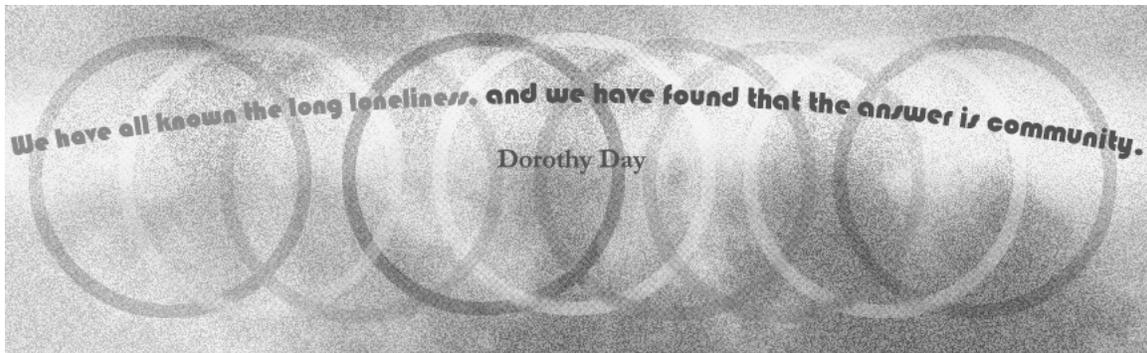
We could move. Start over. Are you serious, Nick? Would you really do that? All I know, Megan, is that I never wanted two different things at the same time. This is our home, Nick. We can't run away from it. Or can we? I could get a different job. That could give us some distance to try to work this out. Would you marry me, Megan? Is that a question or a proposal, Nick? To answer the question, yes, I would. I have known you for twenty years, and I trust you. Ask me, Nick, and you will get your answer.

Nick looked at his empty Frosty cup. Don't go away, and he got up and walked outside. Moving his feet often helped his thinking; when in doubt, take a walk and work it out. After three times around Wendy's parking lot, it wasn't working. He went back inside. Come take a walk with me.

Megan put her purse strap over her shoulder, picked up their leftovers and put it in the trash drop. She wouldn't leave a mess for someone else. As they went out the door Nick took her hand. In the short distance between the table and the door he had decided. I want us to work together, eat together, live together. I want us to be always together. Megan, will you marry me? Yes, I will, Nick.

Nick said that it was going to be difficult for a lot of people. They won't understand. They will think the worst of me, Nick. I know that. You OK with that? Yes, I am, Nick. I will need to let that be their problem, not mine.

A lot of men will be envious of me. They will wonder how a man like me got a woman like you. You think, Nick? I know so. Megan's comeback was to let them be green with envy. Kiss me, Nick. What a woman, he thought. Wow, am I a lucky man!



DECISIONS

NICK TELLS FATHER MIKE

There is no community in hell; one simply goes "missing" there without a trace.

Hans Urs von Balthasar

That's one of my favorite quotes, Father Mike. My whole ministry is bringing people together, and I love a simple life without a lot of stuff and distractions. It's the Franciscan way.

Brother Nick, why are you giving me a mini lesson on Franciscanism? We have been friends a long time. You are the "build community" guy. We all know that. If you like my wall quote, have Megan make you one with her new certificate program.

I guess I had to ease into telling you that Megan and I are going to get married. Brother Nick was sitting in one of the visitor chairs, and Father Mike was sitting on his swivel desk chair facing him. When Brother Nick made his announcement Father Mike swiveled his back to Brother Nick and stared out his favorite big window. Brother Nick waited what seemed like a long time. Finally, Father Mike turned back.

Are you familiar with the French phrase, "folie a deux"? No, but I can translate; it means "madness of two"? Nick, two people can do crazy things that neither one by themselves would ever do. We are not Bonnie and Clyde. We are Megan and Nick. You may be Megan and Nick, but what you are proposing is so out of character for either one of you that it has the ring of a crazy idea.

The proposing happened a week ago. Megan and I decided to keep to our regular schedule while we figured out some of the details. We did start something new together, a widows support group on Saturday mornings. We work well together, Mike, and the women liked it. They want to continue. I would like to continue coordinating my support groups under the auspices of the parish and Megan would like to continue as parish secretary, but we are prepared to make changes.

It's going to divide the parish, Nick. I don't see how either one of you can continue here. This is not what the parish needs right now. We barely escaped being closed once before. Ever since our narrow escape I have been concerned that my retirement, which keeps getting closer, could be the final excuse to close us down. There will be people in high places who will see a big scandal, Nick, and use that as leverage against us. This is not good news for the parish, Nick. It's not fair to put closing the parish on us. I didn't create the situation. I know, Nick, it's been building for a long time with people moving out of the parish boundaries, but I think you are going to push it over the edge.

MEGAN'S HOUSE

When Nick came out of Father Mike's office Megan had to know. What did he say? I would like to talk about it later. This evening, if you can make time. I have a chicken in the slow cooker. We could talk over a nice dinner. It was agreed. Megan drove them to her house after work. Fridays were still an open evening for Nick.

When they stepped through the front door it smelled wonderful. It smells like heaven, Megan. That's dinner. You have interesting ideas about heaven. You know I love to eat so I hope for the best things I can think of. There's Black Box Wine in the kitchen with glasses above it. Get us some wine while I set the table. Nick calls over his shoulder from the kitchen. This is a nice house. Megan called back. It's too big, but the neighborhood is nice. It was my mother's house. It came to me when she died.

Nick was thinking that all he owned was some clothes and a few little things in his room at the friary. He could see a problem. Megan has a nice big house and a nice car. Looking around he could see furniture that looked fairly new and wall-to-wall carpet. This was a long way from his vow of poverty. Father Mike had said they had the "madness of two" – was he right? Megan set the table with nice china and silver. He saw problems, maybe big problems, but it didn't feel crazy.

Come sit down. Bring those glasses of wine. Nick picked up the two glasses. It was not expensive wine, but a good deal better than what he was used to. Nice house, nice wine, he thought as he made his way to the table. This is all much nicer than I am. Nick had a habit of saying what he was thinking. Megan cut him off. I know that you are comfortable with simple food on mismatched dishes, but relax, Nick. What did Father Mike say?

He is concerned about how our getting married will affect the parish. He asked me if I would take some time away to think about it, and I said that wasn't necessary. Then he wanted to know if I intended to stay connected to the Church, and I said yes. He said he had heard that getting released from my vows, which I would need to do, could take six months or even a year. Megan asked, would you want to do that before we got married? No, but later, yes.

When would you like us to get married? How soon could you be ready? Tomorrow, but really, shouldn't we include some friends? How about two weeks? OK, the chicken's great. After a good meal and a glass of wine Nick didn't want to leave, and Megan saw

his hesitation. You must go back to the friary tonight, Nick. We want to be able to tell the whole truth? And if you stay? Nick knew she was right. Two weeks he thought as he left.

Dear Alexi,

I hope the school year is going well for you, and I hope you remember me as Jennifer's friend from the South Side. She knows that I write letters and she asked me to write to you about religion. We have met twice, a football weekend when you were grilling brats and in Professor Yo's class. So I guess we know each other a little bit.

If I remember your comment about religions it was that you saw them as a source of violence, and so do I. So we can start by agreeing on something important. However, I don't think that eliminating religions would eliminate violence. It would be interesting to know your thought about that. You have seen more violence up close than I have.

Let's look at how religions came to be, and how natural I think they are. It goes like this. Someone has a life changing experience, and they do the natural thing and start telling others about their experience. People begin to retell the story, and then they build communities around the story. It's like this, experience becomes story becomes community. It's a very organic, natural process I think, and one that has been going on forever.

This is why I always suggest to questioning people that they go back to the original story or stories and get as close to the original story as they can. Seldom does one find violence in the beginning of religions.

My own religion has a checkered past of using violence to drive away the "outsider" or demand compliance. I hope we have moved beyond those mistakes. If we looked at our original experience of Jesus and his ideas, as I have suggested, we would never see there any violence against outsiders or a demand for compliance.

My personal ministry, what I think I am called to do, is to build community. Specifically, I gather people who have experienced difficult personal struggles like addictions into groups so that they know they are not alone. This often results in a healing process. I believe in the power of community to heal.

Say hello to Jennifer for me when you see her. You would be welcome here on the South Side if you would ever like to visit.

*Peace and all blessings,
Nick*

MEGAN'S DRESS

Megan, it's Nick. I know it's getting late, but can I come over? I just got out of my Monday evening AA group, and we need to talk. Sure, Nick. Have you had dinner? No, and I am hungry. I'll order a pizza, veggie, right? And I do have some beer. That would be great. I'm on my way.

When Nick got to Megan's big old house the porch light was on and the inside door was open. Nick gave a gentle knock and walked in. He took two steps and stopped. Nick had never seen Megan like this. She was wearing a long loose sheath of soft material that skimmed over her body from neck to feet. It lightly touched her, now here and now there, as she walked toward him. Nick's brain filled in all the details, and he experienced a touch of vertigo.

Well come on in. Don't just stand there. Do you like my dress? And she lightly made a turn to give him a full view. Yes, I do like your dress. It's the way I like to dress around the house when I am not expecting company. I hoped you would like it.

Nick was still stuck to the floor two steps from the door. He was imagining a future with Megan in this dress and the thought had frozen him to the spot. He startled at a loud banging at the door right behind him. It was the pizza delivery kid. The money for the pizza is on the little table by the door, Nick. There's a nice tip. No change.

Nick managed to gather his wits and picked up the money. As he took the pizza he saw the kid look past him and he saw his eyes widen. When he turned back holding the warm pizza he knew that it wasn't just him. Megan really was an awesome woman.

Put the pizza on the table, Nick. I'll set us a couple of cold beers. Nick did as he was told, and loved doing it. The pizza was his favorite, black olives, onions and green peppers. How did she know? Megan came into the room, handed him a beer, plate and napkin, the perfect administrative assistant always thinking of everything. Then she gave him a big hug and kissed him. Nick completely forgot about the pizza. Sit down, Nick. The pizza is going to get cold. We have a big problem, Megan. Later, Nick. Eat your pizza.

Most of the pizza had been eaten and Megan wanted to know if Nick would like some ice cream. No thanks, but another beer would be nice. You know how we had talked about keeping a low profile with a small quiet wedding? We were going to try to cause the least amount of problems for the parish? Well, that's not going to happen.

Before you go on, I talked to Sue Baxter, and she wants to hire me as a clerk. It's not much of a job, but it would be steady income with health insurance. That's all good, but when I told my AA group that they would need to continue without me, they wanted the whole story so I told them about us. That probably wasn't a good idea, Nick. What did they say? They think our getting married is a great idea, and they all want to come, and

they are going to make a fuss about my not being able to continue with them. Our plan to quietly go away is busted. Nick, I think you need to talk to Father Mike. I think we need to talk with Father Mike. OK, but we need a plan B. He is not going to tell us what to do. That's not his way.

I have the NA, Divorce and PTSD groups to meet with this week and the widows on Saturday. What if you come with me? It will be easier for them to digest what we are planning. OK, Nick. I can do that, but what are you going to tell them? That we are going to have a potluck wedding in the park and everyone is invited. If we can't keep it quiet we will be as public as we can.

There will be people who won't like this. It won't be nice, Nick. If the AA group is a good indicator, and I think they are, we will have a lot of support and we will have a great wedding celebration. You really think so? I can feel it, Megan. When I told my Franciscan brothers about us they were sad, but not angry. I think they could get into the spirit of our celebration. St. Francis loved a party, and that's who they are. They will join in. I know it. I love you, Nick. We will tell the world, Megan; and I know, I have to get back to the friary tonight.

Dear Jennifer,

It has taken me too long to answer your last letter. Please forgive me. I have honored your request and not shown your letter to anyone, except Megan, because you guessed correctly, it is Megan. We are going to be married, and you are invited.

At first we were going to be quietly married and withdraw from our work at the parish, but then we saw this wasn't going to work. It became clear that we couldn't keep things quiet so we will tell the world, so to speak, and have a big celebration in the park; a potluck in the park.

There will be people who will not like my asking to be released from my vows, we know that, and there will be those who will criticize Megan for luring me away from my Order, but she didn't. We are prepared for the criticism. What troubles us most is the possible negative impact we may have on our parish. We love our Church and the parish, and it hurts that people may think badly of it. Our hope is that it will pass, and people will move on.

I did write a letter to Alexi as you requested. I hope he responds. Megan's and my first impressions were good.

As you can see Megan and I are not being patient and taking a long time to discern if this is the right thing for us to do. So in this case we are not good examples. That doesn't mean that, at your age especially, you shouldn't be patient and discerning. Your point about not wanting to do something to disrupt his career plans - his dream really - says good things about you. I would have expected nothing less. Look for ways for you two to support each other; help each other to be the best you can be. If you do that you will make good decisions. Bring Alexi to our wedding. I hope you come. It would be a good chance for him to meet a lot of us South Side people.

I thought our presentations in Professor Yo's class went well. I am happy that you thought so also. It's not likely we will have that opportunity again. Our future is uncertain in many ways, but it will be our future together. Keep us in your prayers.

Go Irish!

*Pax et bonum,
Nick*

P.S. I never knew a woman could love me. It's an awesome feeling.

Dear Brother Nick,

Jenn told me that she had asked you to write to me so I was not surprised when I received your letter. Thank you for taking the time to write.

I don't know much about religious brothers in brown robes, but you are celibate. Is that correct? That's why I was surprised to hear that you and your friend, Megan, are getting married. That must be a very big change for you, and perhaps, a difficult one. Hopefully it will work out well for both of you. Jenn has asked me to accompany her to your wedding. I will be honored to attend.

A person who seeks equality and justice does not need to be a religious person. Too often I have seen people who profess religious beliefs actively oppress others. Religion and injustice can go together. Perhaps that is not what founders of religious systems intended, as you suggest, but that is the way it is today. So why would I want to be part of an unjust system?

In listening to my new friends here in the U.S., they talk more about what puts people out of their Church rather than what it means to be a member. If there are shared values required for membership they are not easily visible. It looks like belonging means performing certain pro forma rituals. I don't find this very attractive. Rituals do not produce equality and justice.

I don't want it to sound like I am attacking what you believe because I believe you are a sincere person. You write about a ministry of creating community. That is a valuable and helpful thing to do. You must also be aware that communities become tribal and exclusive, and even violent to those seen as outsiders.

I admit that I have been well received here. Also, I know about the work your Church does in the refugee camps. In fact that is how I came to be invited here. But where are the people of color? Where are the women in leadership? Who are the people who voted for an aggressive and divisive government?

I hope I have not offended you, but those are some of my questions.

*Sincerely,
Alexi*

THEY TELL FATHER MIKE ABOUT PLAN B

When Nick and Megan got to the parish offices this morning they knew that they had to tell Father Mike about their plan B, and they expected the meeting to be unpleasant. Father Mike was his always welcoming self, and they settled into his visitors chairs. Nick began.

We first thought that we could keep everything low profile, but now we know that will not work so we are going to have a big celebration and invite everyone we can think of. We didn't want to cause harm to the parish and still don't. However, we have been surprised and delighted at the positive responses from my support groups. They think our getting married is a great idea and they want to celebrate so that's what we are going to do.

Megan, we have known each other for a long time, and you haven't said anything. How do you feel about making your wedding a big splash? Father Mike, that wasn't my first choice, but now I am fully in favor of it. Now we need to know what you think. Mike's turn. If I wear a hat, dark glasses and some old clothes, maybe no one will recognize me.

It was like a fresh breeze had suddenly sprung up in Father Mike's stuffy office. Megan jumped up and went to Father Mike and gave him a big hug, and Nick began to laugh.

Father Mike had experienced every kind of emotion in his years as a priest, but being drawn into this circle of friendship was an experience he would never forget. Now there were things that needed to be done and quickly.

As much as I would like it, you will not be able to continue working here at the parish. I need for you to help me make your leaving as painless as possible. Give me some kind of transition plan by tomorrow morning. I will draft a message to our auxiliary bishop. He needs to be informed. I'll do that this morning. I will call the archbishop's office and beg a minute of his time and go to see him this afternoon. He may want to talk to you so be prepared. Are we all together on what needs to be done? And when and where is this wedding going to happen?

Megan and Nick looked at each other and nodded agreement, then Megan responded. We understand what we need to do. The wedding will be a week from Saturday at the park. It will be a potluck in the park. We have someone to officiate, and we are looking for music. We want you there, Father Mike, even if you need a disguise.

I'll wear civvies, and I know someone who knows someone who has a food truck, tacos, I think. I'll ask him to arrange it. Megan found her voice. We love tacos, Father Mike, and we love you.

FATHER MIKE'S VISIT TO THE ARCHBISHOP

Father Mike was able to get a quick visit with the archbishop.

Mike, you knew these people and you didn't see this coming? I know them very well, Archbishop, and I didn't see it. What may seem strange is that I don't believe they saw it coming either. You know this is not a new problem for us, Mike, but the number of people leaving is down from what it was a few years ago.

I don't necessarily see that as a good thing. The numbers are down because there are fewer of us to leave and get married. Undoubtedly you are right, Mike, but how we handle this is important. You say they are going to have a very public wedding? That's the plan, and I don't see any way to stop it.

Then we need to get out in front with some kind of public statement. You know these people so you write it and I'll endorse it. Mike, your auxiliary bishop called me this morning and said he got a message from you. He was not happy that you had already called me, complained that you had gone over his head. He thinks we should kick Brother Nick's Friary out of the diocese.

I hope you are not considering doing that, Archbishop. I think that move could make things even worse. After a moment the archbishop responded. I'll let Brother Nick deal with his Order, but a very public wedding will not make life easier for them. Some of the old stories about monks and women still linger. You need to assure me that some investigative reporter won't dig up who knows what. Without hesitation Father Mike was able to support Megan and Nick. There has never been a hint of any such problems. Neither is there any hidden story behind Megan and Nick.

You are sure about this, Mike? You admit there have already been surprises, and I don't like surprises. The more I think about this, the more I want to talk to these two people myself, and I want to do it as soon as you can get them here. My sense is that too many people already know, and it's going to leak before we get a handle on it.

I have already told them to be prepared. They could be here in the morning. That may not be good enough, Mike. Have them come over to my home this evening. Better yet, you bring them to dinner. I'll tell the housekeeper to expect guests.

Is 7:00 the right time? 6:30 is better. I want to hear their story.

MEETING WITH THE ARCHBISHOP

The archbishop met them at the door at exactly 6:30 p.m.

Thank you for coming on such short notice. It seemed important to me that we know each other better and quickly. Please take a seat here. Dinner will be served in the dining room shortly. Megan, we have talked on the phone. It is nice to meet you personally, and Brother Nick, I wouldn't recognize you without your brown robe. Would you like anything? A glass of wine, perhaps? Father Mike, how about you?

A small glass of wine would be nice. Megan and Nick declined, saying they were just fine. The archbishop got himself and Father Mike each a small glass.

I want to tell you up front that I am not going to try to talk you two out of what you are planning, nor am I going to give you a lecture on the problems you are going to cause for yourself and the Church. However, I do need something very important from you which is honesty. I need complete honesty from both of you for two reasons. First, I need to be prepared for any and all facts that may come to light when people see smoke and start to look for the fire. More important, perhaps, is that I am and will continue to be involved in an ongoing discussion within the Church on the subject of mandatory celibacy. So you see I need facts, and I need your honest experience. I even need your thoughts. My questions may seem unkind, but they are the kind of information people will be digging for. Megan, I would like to hear from you first.

Certainly, I will be as honest as I can be, and thank you for not being critical. That was my worst concern and you have lifted that weight, so thank you. What would you like to know about me?

Give me a brief personal history, please. Well, I'm from the South Side, an only child, went to Catholic schools then took classes in Microsoft Office and office management, and I have worked for the Church as parish secretary for twenty years.

Have you ever been married? No. Serious relationships or children or had an abortion? No to all those questions. I am sorry I need to ask this, but are you pregnant now? No. Are these questions really necessary? These are the questions other people will ask. Only a couple more. What is your financial situation? I own a big old house that I inherited from my mother, and used some of her insurance money to buy a nice car, and I have a small emergency fund in the bank, otherwise, I live on my salary.

You must be near forty years old. Were you beginning to feel that you needed to find a husband? And finally, why Brother Nick?

I didn't consciously worry about not finding someone to marry, and I am a little past forty. I learned to trust Nick. He is a genuine, nice guy. In the years I have known him he never said or did anything inappropriate. Then it happened. We discovered we really liked each other and wanted to be together. There was no seduction, nor plotting or planning, it just happened.

One last question, have you been seen together at times and in places that would cause someone to doubt what you have just told me? Finally, a question that got a laugh. No, except for very recently we were spotted at Wendy's having a Frosty. Father Mike had a caller that said it didn't look good that we were together at Wendy's. Thank you, Megan, but I needed to know if there was anything hidden, and I see there isn't. Brother Nick, tell me about yourself.

Nick gave a short rundown of himself and how he was attracted to the simplicity and community of the Franciscans. Is there anything hidden in your relationships that we need to know about. I am not asking you to go the confession in public, and what about the Friary? What will people find if they go digging around? There are women that I call friends, but there have been no inappropriate relationships. The Friary has been careful with appearances. We do not have overnight guests. The only complaint from our neighbors that I can think of is that we have been asked to keep our yard a little neater and cut the grass more often. We are a pretty boring group of men.

Did you intend that celibacy be a permanent commitment? Yes, that, and the simple life style and the brown habit made it easier for people to approach me. All these things made my ministry of being present to people and creating community for people easier, and I believe, more effective. But now? Now I have discovered that there was something that I was missing. A partner in life. It's an awesome feeling. Do you think being married will affect your ministry?

It will be a huge change starting with my expectation that the Church may no longer support it. That will be a big loss to me. I have already tried out not wearing my brown habit, and I immediately noticed the difference. People no longer see me or approach me in the same way.

Megan put her hand on Nick's. She was feeling his loss. Were they doing the right thing? Was she thinking too much about herself and not enough about what this meant for him? She had heard him say to others that you judge a relationship on how it affects the other person, and she felt doubt creeping in.

And you are willing to give up your ministry as you described it? Yes, absolutely, I have no doubts. It may take more time for people to get to know me. I may even need to develop skills that I didn't need because people assumed so much about who I was and what I was. I know I will need to be more intentional about what I say and how I act. That may actually be good for me. I know I will lack instant recognition and trust, but I am willing to work for it.

He took Megan's hand, and he could feel her tension ease.

You have both taken a great worry away from me and you have given me some serious food for thought. I suspect dinner is ready. We can continue getting to know each other around the table.

Megan couldn't resist. It would be nice to hear your story, Archbishop. You have a good point, Megan. I can tell that Nick's life is going to be interesting.

ARCHBISHOP AND FATHER MIKE

The dinner at the archbishop's house went well. There were no more questions, and the archbishop himself enjoyed telling some stories about his own life. Then he asked Father Mike to stay, and Megan and Nick left.

Mike, I think we heard some important things this evening. All indications are that Megan is an outstanding person. I heard no hint of hidden agendas. She clearly likes working for the parish, and I don't think she will say anything bad about the Church, and you know she will be asked.

I could have told you the same, but it was better that you heard it for yourself. She is even interviewing replacements, and has one picked out for me to interview. She is in every way a classy woman.

What do you think about Brother Nick's sense that titles and clothes can too easily function as an excuse to avoid developing real relational skills? Is that what you heard him say?

When he tried wearing every day clothes for a day he was shocked at the difference his brown robe has made. Now Nick does have good people skills, but he found out that being a skilled person doesn't automatically connect you with people the way his habit did.

We understand that, Mike, but he experienced it first hand. That is valuable information, and we needed to hear that. What bothers me is his point that titles and clothes can cover up poor skills or worse, let people think they don't need to develop them in the first place. We have poor attendance at our priest workshops to bring people up to date or continue their development. I think we are not developing the right skills.

Brother Nick has been a great asset to the parish and his brother friars are major contributors in the community. It would be a great loss and an injustice to ask them to leave.

I won't ask them to leave, and I believe Brother Nick when he says there are no skeletons to be found in their closet, but you need to find a way to keep his support groups alive. They need to continue.

I'll work with Nick on that. How do you think I should handle the publicity about this wedding? What do you think, Mike? I think the people in the parish should hear it from me before they see it in the newspaper. I think a short paragraph in Sunday's bulletin would be enough and be prepared to answer questions.

Do that and send me an advance copy. Encourage Megan and Nick to take a private honeymoon, the longer the better. That will let things settle down and get them away from media. And make sure they understand canon law.

THE SUNDAY BULLETIN WEDDING ANNOUNCEMENT

From the Pastor

It has not been our practice to announce weddings since the wedding ban requirement was dropped, but this is a special case. Megan, our parish secretary, and Nick, our Franciscan Brother, will be married in a civil ceremony this coming Saturday at noon. Nick is asking to be relieved from his vows. They ask for your prayers and wanted everyone to know that you are all invited. It will be a potluck in the park so if you come bring a dish.

Father Mike

Megan saw this and seems OK with it. She is sending it to the archbishop's office for him to see it. What do you think, Nick? It leaves out a lot, Father Mike. That was on purpose. People will fill in the blanks if they think they need to.

I have a meeting tomorrow with my provincial. It may be easier to answer questions about my status as a Franciscan Brother if I have already started the process to leave. I agree, Nick, and I hope they don't make it too difficult for you. We have always gotten along well so I don't expect an angry reaction to my leaving.

The archbishop wanted me to make sure you clearly understood that by getting married you are ipso facto dismissed from your order. There is no discussion, no deliberation and no waiting period. Your dismissal will be immediate. That's canon law. I knew it was something like that, Nick responded.

Also, it is important that you start the paperwork process asking for dispensation of your vows because you will be forbidden participation in the sacraments until your relationship with the Church is regularized. Do you understand this, and does Megan understand it?

I knew there would be restrictions. We could do this in a more orderly fashion, and we talked about it, but we don't want to wait. And we aren't going to be quiet about our wedding, and we are not moving away.

The archbishop has accepted all of that but he wanted me to make sure that you understood. Now I want to talk about your support groups. Mike, there seems to be two options. We could find another facilitator and keep the groups here at the parish, or I could continue to meet with these groups at a different location.

There is a third possibility, Nick. They would need to find other groups to join. There are other AA and NA and divorce groups, Nick agreed. I can find out their locations and times. The PTSD may be more of a problem. The VA does that, but I am not sure how easy it is to get in or how convenient they are.

Do you know someone who may be a good facilitator? Yes, I'm going to ask Allen Baxter if he would facilitate at least temporarily. AA and NA has their own people who could step up. I'll think about divorce. They would need a facilitator. I'll get my facts together and present them with the alternatives, and let them decide. OK, Nick, but do that this week. What about this new widows group? I'll let Megan take the lead. She may want to have them come to her house, but I'll tell her she can't delay. Whatever she is going to do needs to be done now.

Will you be going away for a few days after the wedding? We will get away for a few quiet days then not answer the phone for another couple of weeks. I hope this all works out, Nick. So do I.

CHURCH ON SUNDAY BEFORE THE WEDDING

Father Mike drew people's attention to the brief wedding announcement in the bulletin. As always there are important things in the bulletin including a wedding announcement and invitation. Nick and Megan, will you stand up please? Nick and Megan have been beloved staff here at our parish, and now they will be married this coming Saturday. Thank you both. Please also note that there will be a second collection next Sunday.

There was an "elevation of the host" kind of hush in the church. Then one person began to clap, then two, then it seemed like the whole Church joined in. The people around the couple reached out to congratulate them as the final hymn, "Peace Is Flowing Like a River" slowly picked up the momentum. Father Mike was pleased with himself and with his parish.

There were people who knew the celibacy rules, but they would hold their peace until another time. Megan and Nick floated out of the Church with much backslapping and hand shaking, fully convinced, for the first time, that going public was the right thing to do.

On their way to Megan's car they discussed where to go for breakfast. There would be no privacy at any of the local restaurants, which would be full of parishioners wanting to "hear all about" their wedding plans. Best choice was to go to her house they thought, so it was agreed. This would be their first private breakfast together.

The people in Church were wonderful, weren't they? How do you like your eggs? Over well, but not burned. Do you have any rye bread? I love rye toast. No rye bread, but I'll put it on the grocery list, and you like your coffee black, am I right? Yes. After

breakfast I need to tell you about the process I must go through. OK. She sensed a little tension in Nick's voice, but she would not push. After breakfast would be OK. Nick liked his eggs, and the coffee was a great improvement over what he was used to. He loved the simple life, but he could get used to better coffee. He began.

I want to be in good standing with the Church, and that means I must go through a formal process. We agreed that I would do that after our wedding and not wait because it could take a year. I knew all of this, Nick, so what are you trying to tell me? Megan, by getting married now, I will be automatically dismissed from my Order, and will be excluded from the sacraments. Are you sure about this, Nick? Yes, it's canon law.

I know people who have left and people who just ignore the rules. That was their choice, but I don't want to do either of those things. I want us to get married on Saturday and I'll sit in the pew at communion time until my petition is granted. I am confident it will be granted. You heard the archbishop. He is not going to slam the door on me. You mean us, Nick. There would be no reason for you not to go to communion at least I don't think so. Megan took a stand. If you stay in the pew, so do I. No discussion, and we will do things your way.

THE WEDDING

The scattered picnic tables had been gathered into a line with colorful cloths and rows of food dishes down the middle. It looked like someone had carefully planned it, but no one did. It just happened. Right now Megan and Nick were standing looking at a crowd of people with a lawyer friend facing them. She spoke quietly to Megan and Nick. Outside weddings mean that you must use your outside voices. The people need to hear you both so please speak up. I mean really speak up. They nodded their agreement, and she turned to the crowd. I see open spaces. Move closer. And they tried, but touching the next person in a crowd was difficult for most of these people. Finally she gave directions. Take your neighbors hands and get as close to me as you can. Short people and children come up front. OK, that's better, and she said to them, Megan and Nick have invited you here to witness their exchange of vows as they enter into marriage.

Then turning again to the couple she said, Nick, we will begin with you and then Megan. Nick looked with longing and anticipation into Megan's eyes as he pledged his love and fidelity to her. Megan was radiant as she confidently vowed her love and faithfulness to Nick. Following the vows the couple exchanged rings as symbols of their commitment to one another.

Then turning, the lawyer friend addressed the crowd again. Are you prepared to support this newly married couple with your love and support? There were some small yeses. She was not satisfied. Lift up your hands and say a loud yes. And it was better, but not good enough so she asked again, and finally the crowd found its voice with a loud yes! And now the couple would like you to find a place at the tables and they will come around to greet you individually.

A few rushed up to Megan and Nick, but most followed orders. It helped that it was past mealtime and people were hungry. Megan and Nick began to circulate. They spotted Jennifer and her friend, Alexi. Jennifer, so glad you could make it, and you brought your friend. How nice. Alexi wants to talk to you. Could you come to campus sometime soon? Yes, we could do that. By the way, what are you studying, Alexi? Anthropology.

MEGAN AND NICK

Finally they managed to get away from the crowd and back to Megan's house.

For much of my life I avoided women. They often seemed dangerous, and always mysterious. Then I discovered that women could be great friends. Now I am married to one. This is going to take me awhile to get use to. Nick, you have always been all about other people. Tonight you can be all about us. I wish it were that easy, Megan. I feel like one of my tropical fish that has flopped out of its tank. You know we were so busy circulating with well-wishers that we didn't get anything to eat. Go with me to the kitchen and help me find something good to eat. Megan knew that Nick was at home in any kitchen.

There is a bottle of cold good white wine, and a cork screw in the drawer. Open it for us. How about a Swiss on rye sandwich, with a little mustard? Right now I can't imagine anything better. Heavy on the mustard, please. Nick managed to get the wine open without spilling it. He found two glasses and filled each of them half full. He had been outside of his comfort zone all day, but being in the kitchen with some good wine and the promise of his favorite sandwich was having the calming effect that Megan sensed he needed. Take the bottle to the table and I will bring our sandwiches. Watch the edge of the rug. I, I mean, we, need to get that fixed. The caution was almost too late, but Nick did a little hop and avoided tripping on the rug. My, you are light on your feet when you need to be. The thought of tripping and fumbling the wine on his wedding night made Nick smile.

Well, I'm glad you are learning to navigate your new home, but it would have been a great story to tell about how the bottle of wine flew through the air and landed on the couch without spilling a drop. It could have been your first miracle when they put you up for sainthood. Nick started to laugh and really did almost spill the wine. You really are like one of your fish flopping around out of its tank. Let me put you back where you belong.

Megan put the sandwiches on the table, and before Nick could sit down she gave him a kiss and leaned against him. His hands seemed to disconnect from his brain and found their way to her hips. He had wondered what they felt like and now he knew. The power of human touch flooded his reconnected brain and the sandwiches were forgotten. If someone were watching they would have seen a glow that had not been there when they were standing apart. Megan whispered, sandwiches later. Nick nodded and followed her up the stairs.

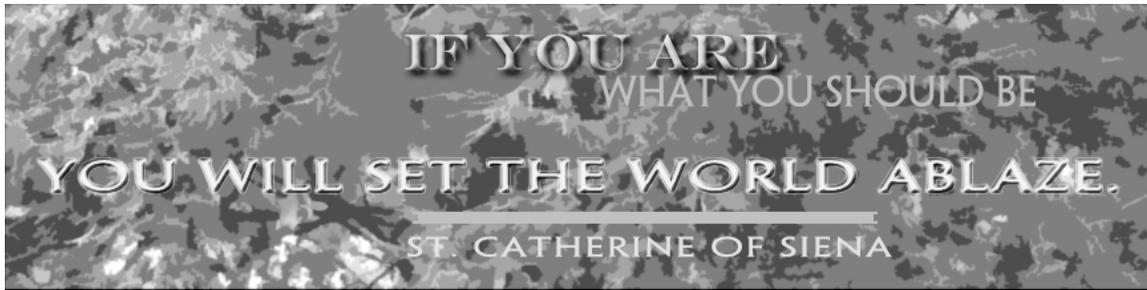
The next morning Nick woke up alone in bed. This was not unusual, but something was different. Then he realized that he felt a new unexpected freedom. This is the new me he thought, and then he smelled rye toast, his favorite. He stood up, then wondered what he should put on. He needed a bathrobe. He hadn't thought of that, and he wondered how many other things he hadn't thought of. He found his pants and shirt, made a bathroom stop and padded down to the kitchen.

I thought the smell of toast would get you up. Are you ready for breakfast? Nick couldn't find his voice. He was looking at Megan who was wearing her favorite kind of house clothes, close fitting, but not tight, and of almost filmy material. In Nick's mind the filmy robe disappeared, and all that was left was a magnificent woman. Nick, are you ready for breakfast? Two eggs over well, but not burned. I remember. Finally Nick found his voice. Is this what it's going to be like? Well, I hope so. Although, it would be nice if you got up first and made breakfast occasionally. I don't mean breakfast, Megan. I mean you. No, I mean us.

So you like what you see? Megan, you take my breath away. Why did you wait so long, Nick? Sit down. I'll bring your black coffee. Do you like orange juice? Nick sat down at the little kitchen table. This was a new kind of obedience, and he liked it. OJ would be nice, and I don't know why I took so long. Did you know that it could be like this? I thought my life was complete. Now I look back, and it was hollow. Why didn't I see that?

The idea of getting married was scary for me, Nick. My father was not a nice man so I grew up not trusting men, but I came to know and trust you. I also respected you. I especially didn't want you to see me as the woman who lured you away from your vocation. Maybe that was foolish of me, but I didn't want you to hate me. So I waited.

I need a bathrobe and some slippers. What am I saying, Megan? I still don't know how to talk about us except to say I love you and thank God for your being part of my life. That's a good start, Nick. Your eggs are ready. Salt and pepper are on the table, and there's butter for your toast. I am going to tell everyone how wonderful this is. Don't tell them everything, Nick.



MAKING IT WORK

THE NEXT DAY

Father Mike thought it was a good idea that we get away for a few days. I think he was concerned that we may be bothered by media, but so far it has been quiet. There must be more interesting things going on, Nick. If they have a slow news day they may show up. Why don't we take a car trip for a few days? I can stop the mail and be ready to go by noon. I need some clothes. Not a lot of clothes. I am still a simple man. Some jeans and shirts, a jacket, and a robe and slippers. OK, Nick, if you don't need me take the car and go to the mall and get what you want. Our gift cash is on the table. We will need to get you a credit card.

Jennifer's friend asked me if I could talk to him. Not sure what he wants to talk about, but we could drive by the campus. I like Lake Michigan. We could drive up the lake to Travis City, over the big bridge and back through Wisconsin. What do you think?

Megan liked the idea so they agreed. Nick went to get some new clothes, and Megan straightened up and stopped the mail, put a few clothes in a travel bag and was ready to go when Nick got back. Two pairs of jeans and two shirts are not enough, Nick. That's all I need. You married someone with simple needs. I'll get a jacket at St. Vincent's. That's all I need. OK, we can pick up anything else on the way. You will need to expand your wardrobe. Let's go.

When they got to South Bend it seemed too late to arrange a meeting so they got a nice room and called. Jennifer was pleased they had come, and said she would check with Alexi about getting together in the morning and get back to them. Would you like Chinese or Mexican, or maybe a burger and a beer? We have a lot to learn about each other, don't we? I don't have any secrets, Nick. What you see is what you get. I like what I see. What if we have pizza delivered? What kind of monk have I married? Are all those tales about monks in bed true? I think those are Balzac fantasy stories, but right now food is not my first interest, you are, and Franciscans are friars, not monks. Seems

I married the right friar although that seems like a small distinction right now. Call for some pizza and close the drapes.

Jennifer called in the morning and suggested the basement of the Huddle at 10:00 a.m., and it was agreed. After greetings Nick was curious and had to ask Alexi, what's on your mind that I may be able to help with? The extinction of species. Ours.

NICK LISTENS

Nick leaned back. He had been part of enough late night bull sessions to know it is important to give ideas the smell test. But here was an anthropology student, seemingly well focused and earnestly wanting to talk about humans becoming extinct. So he tried to focus himself.

This sounds more like a doctoral thesis issue. Aren't you a second year student, and why is this something you want to talk to me about? This is not my field. I'm a psychologist, not a biologist or an anthropologist. Nick was being matter of fact, and he didn't put any kind of edge on what he was saying. Megan looked at Jennifer and their minds connected with "there's a Starbucks upstairs" and without saying anything they got up and left.

I come from a place that at one time was the center of civilization. Now it is a desolate place. There are only scattered villages and almost nothing grows there. This is more than an academic question for me, Nick.

I didn't mean to suggest that it wasn't a real question or a real concern, but you must know that not many people go around thinking about it. My guess is that even the people living in the difficult conditions you describe spend most of their time doing whatever is necessary to keep themselves alive. I doubt that they spend much time thinking about the rest of us much less all of us.

Of course you are right. They must always be about taking care of themselves and their families, but today they can't even do that. Their world is so violent and difficult that they try to escape, to a refugee camp or to a place where people have food and shelter like Europe. It was in a refugee camp that I began to imagine the worst, and came to believe it could happen.

Once again, I don't have the background or training to think creatively about this, and you just made the strong point that I don't have the experience of being with desperate people either. So why do you want to talk to me about this?

There are no desperate people in Chicago? There is no violence in Chicago neighborhoods that make people think about escaping to a safe place? There are no hungry people in Chicago? Is food insecurity not a daily concern for many people?

The answer is yes to all those questions, and you must know that these are also my personal concerns. So maybe our experiences are not completely different, but still, why me? Alexi continued, I hope you will be my connection to understanding a way out or maybe a way forward. You think I may have a way? You need to explain. Yes, I do think so. You call it salvation.

When Megan and Jennifer came back to the downstairs booth they found the men in animated conversation. Nick saw Megan look at her watch and he reconnected. So he said, this conversation deserves more time than we have today. Here is my suggestion. Jennifer, bring Alexi home for Thanksgiving weekend. We have plenty of extra room. He can stay with us, and he and I can continue our discussion. Jennifer looked at Alexi, and he said, sure, I would like that. Then he added, there is such a thing as a tipping point. That's one reason I think we should be talking about it.

Nick responded, I am very interested in what Alexi has given me, which is, fresh eyes on my own traditions. Jennifer, did you know Alexi has been reading about our Church? We have talked, but I didn't know he was serious about it. Are you? And she looked at Alexi. I think the Catholics I have met take their religion too lightly, that is, until I met Nick, and that's why I wanted to talk with him. Spending some time with you, your family, and being able to stay with Nick and Megan sounds really nice to me. I didn't mean that as a criticism of who you are, but being a Catholic is not very visible, at least not here on campus. Jennifer took offence, if you think we should all go around in brown robes that's not going to happen.

Megan thought it was time for her to speak up. You wouldn't believe it by looking at us, but we are newly married and going on a road trip to be all by ourselves for a few days. So what you see is never the whole story. Jennifer quietly added, I get all fired up when I think someone is being critical. My dad says I am my mother's daughter. Nick was quick with a response, I think your dad is right and you are a very lucky young woman. See you at Thanksgiving.

TRIP AROUND THE LAKE

I really like the lake with its dunes, beaches and piers. I like the little shops and restaurants. Can we skip the outlet stores?

I don't need anything, but what about yourself? I noticed the knees on the jeans you brought home looked a little worn. You didn't get them at the mall, did you? No, I didn't. I got them at the thrift store. That's where I have always shopped for things for the house and kitchen. Old habits are hard to change. You have a wife now, and I want you to look nice and be comfortable in your clothes. OK, I'll negotiate clothes. What are you thinking about dinner? I think Mexican. What about you?

Good idea, Megan. Mexican food with a cold beer. What did you think of Alexi and his ideas? I like him, but he seems kind of intense and academic. Do you enjoy that kind of discussion? You have always been a down to earth person. My first choice is always to

be a good listener, and he has some good things to say. He comes from a different place, not just a physical place, but also a different mental place. He has the advantage of new eyes. Has he actually been studying Church teaching? I think he has been doing more observing than reading. Except, he is familiar with some of the Gospel stories. New eyes on the scriptures are what I find most interesting.

Speaking of scripture, what do you think of “and the two shall become one flesh”? Megan, I love that quote. OK, you love it, but what does it mean to you? I don’t want to push you away, but when you put your hand on my knee when I am driving it’s distracting, Nick. It means we live our lives as if we were one person. And Nick reluctantly took his hand away. Do you think we can really do that? I think this is not a discussion we can have while you are driving in traffic.

OK, take my phone. It’s linked to the car and ask where there is a Mexican restaurant near us. I am getting hungry. It says about 4 miles ahead on the right. I’m going to struggle with all this technology, Megan. Don’t you like to tell people that they should make their lives bigger? Well, Nick, now you have a wife. Is that big enough? I’m a simple man, Megan. Not any more, Nick.

GIRLS LUNCH

Sue Baxter, Jennifer’s mother, is a middle manager at an insurance company and long time friend of Megan and Nick. She is showing Megan around her office. Megan, this will be your desk. It’s a clerk position. I know you are over qualified, but I am delighted to have your help. Accurate recordkeeping is an essential part of what we do. There will be opportunities for you to take on more responsibilities. We will watch for openings in other parts of the company where I won’t be your direct supervisor. I want us to remain close friends, which means I would rather not be your supervisor.

This will work for me, Sue. You know I am use to running my own show, but this will work. You can start on Monday. It’s a short walk to the Church and the parish offices. I sometimes go to daily mass. Being so close makes it easy. I am having lunch today with my friend, Mildred. Would you like to come along? Yes, I have no conflicts. Nick is seeing about getting his fish tank moved to our house. That will keep him busy all day. How is Nick doing? This has been quite a change for both of you, but it seems especially for him. I love his fish tank with the beautiful saltwater fish. I am glad he is keeping it. He’s OK. Maybe we could talk about it at lunch, and they made their way to lunch with Mildred.

Mil, do you remember Megan? You may have met her at our wedding years ago. She was parish secretary, and now she is going to work with me. I can’t say for sure that I remember us meeting. It is nice to know another one of Sue’s friends. Sue and I go back to Catholic grade school. Hi, good to meet you. The salad bar looks good. It is; that’s why we come here, and they filled their plates and found a quiet table.

Megan recently married Brother Nick. You may remember him. He was best man at our wedding. The little Franciscan in the brown robe? I do remember him. Megan, you married him? I didn't think that was possible. It was a surprise to a lot of people. It was even a surprise to Nick and me. Most people are supportive, but not everyone. That's why I changed jobs. I didn't want to be a daily problem to our pastor, Father Mike.

You look like maybe you are forty or so. Is this your first marriage? Yes it is, and you need to add a bit more to the age. I don't see a ring, are you married, Mildred? No, and I never have been, and probably never will be. Men and I don't get along. It's interesting that you say that. I felt that way for years until I began to see Brother Nick as someone I could trust. Are there any more like him around? If I see one I'll send him your way.

Sue shares her opinion of men. Men are really rather simple. Allen is a firefighter and loves what he does. He enjoys our children, Jennifer and Billy. There is nothing complicated about Allen.

Nick told me he was a simple man, and I told him that would change now that he was a married man. What I think he meant was that he didn't need expensive things or really anything. But as a married man he will need a house and everything in it, and if we have a child there will be all kinds of things he will need as a father.

Do you think you will have children? Our two kids really did change our lives. Sue, we haven't talked about children, but we haven't done anything to prevent it. I mean we have just been natural with each other. Mildred had to get into the conversation. I would have thought that would be the first thing you talked about. Can you even get pregnant at your age?

I guess I could. This may sound strange. Nick and I have known each other for a long time. I really liked him, but I tried not to be obvious about it. Then one day it clicked between us. I think it was a complete surprise to Nick although I had imagined us as a couple. Then we decided, why wait? Then everything happened so fast and we were married. There was no thinking about much of anything. We wanted to be together and it just happened.

Wow, Megan, you make it sound romantic. Nothing like that has ever happened to me. I am still trying to picture you with a celibate monk, and he is older than you I expect. I can't get my mind around you two together. Mildred almost made it sound as if she was a little jealous. Mildred, I guarantee you that Nick is a passionate man. There is no doubt that his passionate side was the biggest surprise to him. That part of our relationship has been really fun for both of us.

I think I understand what Megan is saying. Allen is a passionate man too, but there were few surprises for us. Mildred couldn't resist. You make your husbands sound interesting. Most of my friends only complain about their husbands. I would like to know Allen and Nick better. We are going to be together for Thanksgiving dinner. Why don't you come, Mil?

Mildred has had her own experience with Thanksgiving dinners, and they were not positive. I don't know, Sue. I don't want to be a fifth wheel. Isn't there someone you could bring? We have plenty of room. We even set up a table for the young people in our game room. Come join us. Well, there is Jerry. Jerry is kind of shy. We work together, have lunch together once in awhile, but he has never shown any real interest in me. Megan smiled. That sounds very familiar, Mildred. Come have Thanksgiving with us.

THANKSGIVING AT ALLEN AND SUE'S HOUSE

When Sue and her husband, Allen, bought their house it was their dream home. A solid brick house back from the street in a mixed but stable neighborhood. With only two kids and no plans for more, it had always seemed large enough. Today Sue could see some limitations. It was too cold to be in the yard or on the porch. So she would need to make it work. She counted sixteen people. If she put four young people in the basement, that left twelve for the dining room table, which was a table best suited for eight, but it was workable. Allen, would you set up a table and four chairs in the basement, please. Here's a tablecloth, and set the table with picnic dishes.

Are you sure Tina and Mohammed are not coming? I knew Annie would be here, but what about her parents? Annie was Jennifer's best friend who lived next door, but Annie's Muslim parents did not usually accept party invitations. Tina told me that she couldn't drag her husband over. Drag was her word, so they will not be here. What's the total then? I count sixteen all together. Someone is going to have to sit on my lap, Sue. It had better be me! We will put the card table and chairs at the end of the table, and it will work. Fix up the basement for me.

Mildred and her "shy" friend, Jerry, were the first of show up. Allen met them at the door. Mildred, it's been a long time, and Jerry, I didn't expect to see you today. Come on in. Allen, I didn't know it was your house we were going to. It's nice to see you. Jerry had been in Allen and Sue's circle of friends when they first met. Most Sunday mornings seven of them would meet at McDonald's for breakfast. Allen knew that the group had stopped meeting regularly, then he lost track. A surprised Mildred spoke up.

You two know each other? Jerry and I were part of a Sunday morning breakfast club years ago. Find a place to sit. I'll tell Sue you are here. Jerry, we'll need to catch up. Sue came out of the kitchen. Hi Mil, and Jerry, what a surprise. I see you still like to wear a tie. Mil, Jerry and I met at Brother Nick's divorce support group. Could that be twenty years ago, Jerry? That sounds about right, Sue.

Mildred heard "divorce support group". She knew all about Sue's disastrous first marriage, but Jerry being divorced was new information. She wondered if that was a door into Jerry's shyness and whether it was permanently closed, but right now she said, I'll come help in the kitchen, Sue. What do you want for me to do?

There was another knock at the door. It was Allen and Sue's old friends, Dave and Alice. The two couples had been married during the same ceremony. Hi guys! What's this? I didn't expect to see you here, Jerry, like old times. Hi Dave. You still driving that old van? No. Would you believe Alice talked me into a convertible? Tell me what's going on with you. And Dave sat down with Jerry as Alice made her way to the kitchen. Just then Dorothy, Sue's mother let herself in without knocking. This was going to be a difficult Thanksgiving dinner for her and she knew it. Sue's father, Bill, died in the spring, and Dorothy was facing the holidays by herself for the first time. She nodded to the living room group and went on into the kitchen. Sue knew her mother needed something to do so she asked her to put water glasses all around.

There was a soft knock at the door and Allen went to look. It was a small boy. He could have been Billy's age, about thirteen, but shorter than Billy by half a foot. Come on in Jesus. Billy's in the basement. He was looking forward to your coming. He told me you are good at Foosball. Billy's good too, but he doesn't always win. We will have to play sometime. Go on downstairs. Billy had said that Jen is going to invite Annie and he asked if he could invite a friend for dinner too, and Sue had said yes. Allen went to the kitchen to see if Sue needed anything. Allen knew that Jennifer was with her friend, Annie, and that they would be coming soon so there would be plenty of kitchen help, but he was going to check on Sue anyway. Then he heard the back door bang and knew that Jennifer and Annie had come from next door. Too bad that Annie's parents were not going to come. He especially like Tina, the nurse. Then Megan, Nick and Alexi came up onto the porch. It was shy Jerry who saw Nick first. Brother Nick, where's your brown robe?

Jerry, good to see you. I am not a Franciscan Brother anymore, well maybe technically I am, but I have turned in my papers. This is my wife, Megan. You may remember her from the parish, and this is Jennifer's friend, Alexi, from college. Can you believe Little Jenny is now a college student? Brother Nick, I can't believe any of this. I didn't even know I was coming to Allen and Sue's house today. Life can be full of surprises, Jerry; and hi Dave, is Alice here with you? This is going to be a great day. Nick didn't know the best part yet as their old friend, Pat, walked in the front door.

When Allen asked me to come he said they were inviting everybody, but I didn't expect this. Brother Nick, or do I just call you Nick, where's that beautiful wife of yours? Megan's in the kitchen, Pat. You're looking good yourself. Allen, you got anything to drink around here? I could use a beer. Help yourself, Pat. I think we are waiting for my parents, then we can eat. I just took the bird out of the oven. Oh, I see them coming up the walk. Get yourself a beer. We will be eating soon.

Ruth and Pop, Allen's parents, came in and Pop looked for a place to sit and saw Pat come back with his beer. Pat, where'd you get that? In a cooler on the back step. How you been Pop? You still working? Here have this one. I'll go get myself another one. In a cooler, you say. Just bring it in here. I don't want to go outside every time I want a beer, and I quit working. Ruth still works at the school; says she likes it, but we have Medicare now so she doesn't need to. Go get that beer cooler.

Dorothy counted chairs at the table and it looked crowded and not near enough chairs. Sue, where is everyone going to sit? The young people are going to be in the basement. Put me down there too. That would give people more room. OK, Mom. Jenn, set a place for Grandma with you downstairs, then have everyone come up for a blessing. Allen, get everyone else in here. Get them around the table. Billy and Jesus came upstairs and the rest pushed in around the table. Sue said, Nick would you lead us in prayer?

Sue, this is your home and your table. You lead us. Sue thought, Nick you did it to me again, but only took a deep breath and began with the Sign of the Cross. Loving God, we thank you for bringing us together. We thank you for this food and all who made it possible. Most of all we thank you for friendships, old and new. We remember those who are not with us here today and those who do not have enough. Give us always an attitude of gratitude for all that we have, and we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Jennifer gave her grandmother a hug and started her toward the basement steps, but Dorothy said, let's take the food with us. Get that friend of yours to help. Dorothy felt better when she was doing something. So they made their way with their bowls of food. When they were seated and eating Dorothy took charge of the conversation. So, are you in classes with Jenn? Why do you let yourself be so wild looking? You need to shave and get your hair cut. We can't have our Jenny going around with someone who can't take care of himself.

AFTER DINNER

The Bears – Lions game was over and the Cowboys were beating up on the Redskins, and to nobody's surprise Pop was asleep in front of the TV in Allen's favorite recliner. In the background you could hear the click-click of the Foosball game, and everywhere small groups were in semi-loud conversations.

Mildred had been looking for an opportunity to talk to Nick and saw her chance when he left the over-warm kitchen and went out the back door to get some cool air. Mildred followed him out. You and Megan seem to get along really well. You are fun to watch in the kitchen. That's nice to know, but we haven't been married long enough to get past our honeymoon glow. You have been friends with Sue for a long time I hear. Yes. We remain close. She is so busy with work and family that we don't see each other often anymore. You were friends with Jerry some years ago, weren't you?

Nick's mind sharpened on why Mildred, who he really didn't know, wanted a conversation with him outside, away from the kitchen crowd. I knew Jerry when I was a facilitator of a support group and as a casual friend. I learned today that Jerry was divorced. Was that the kind of group he was in? Yes, and you must know that I can't talk about what may have been said in that group, but Jerry was open with his friends that gambling debt was what caused his marriage to fail. I work with Jerry and we have become friends, but he

seldom talks about himself. If you don't mind my slipping back into my facilitator role, getting someone to talk about themselves begins with revealing things about yourself and then being a good listener.

Thanks, Nick. Now I know why Sue likes you. Do you do counseling? I have the education and experience, but not the license. It is something I have thought about, but I have been busy with other things. If you decide to do counseling I would be interested. You can always find me through Sue. Mildred, I think you have pushed me in the direction I need to go. No charge for my advice, Nick. I'm beginning to get cold. Let's go in. Now I know why Sue likes you. You can call me Mil. All my friends do.

AT MEGAN AND NICK'S HOUSE

The ride back to Megan's house had been quiet. Alexi was sitting in the back and didn't want to talk to the back of heads. When they were settled with a glass of wine Megan asked, what do you think of our Thanksgiving tradition? Your family is all very nice. Grandma Dorothy told me to shave and get a haircut, but she was nice about it. Megan said that Irish grandmothers tend to say what they think and Dorothy, I'm sure, never sat at a table with someone with a big black beard and longish hair. This was a new experience for her. I didn't take offence, Alexi said. I knew I look different and everyone else seemed to be OK with the way I look. Megan went on, they love Jennifer so they like you.

Alexi puzzled. There was a person who looked different to me. His name is Pat, offered Megan. Pat is transgender, which is why he may look a little different. I have never been close to a transgender man before. No one else treated him any differently, that I noticed anyway. Pat has been a friend of the family for years so there is nothing new about Pat that anyone would notice, but you saw because you were new. A person with "new eyes" can see things that others don't notice. Alexi expanded upon Megan's phrase, "new eyes". You mean like when I look around this room, I see Megan? Megan likes nice things. Everything is orderly and clean except that one statue on the corner table. It is chipped and faded and the colors don't fit with the rest of the room. So that says that Megan is not so easily understood.

Megan wasn't sure she liked being talked about as if she were not present in her own living room. This house belonged to my mother who died two years ago. The statue is of a Polish saint, St. Stanislaus, and it belonged to her mother so it's been in the family a long time. It was one of my mother's favorite things so I keep it.

My family is Russian Jewish. They fled Poland when the Jews were being persecuted and killed. They made it to Israel where my parents were born. My family does not have positive memories of Poland. Megan responded. My family left Poland to find work.

Nick thought it was time to say something. I had the impression that you didn't follow Jewish traditions. Am I right about this? Yes, Nick. You could call me a secular Jew. I don't follow the Jewish religious traditions. How is it that a Polish Catholic, an ex-Franciscan and a secular Jew sit here together with a glass of wine talking about a transgender man and an Irish grandmother? Alexi responds to Megan, I don't know how it happened, but I like it.

FRIDAY AFTER THANKSGIVING AT MEGAN'S HOUSE

Nick has gone off to visit a sick Brother in the hospital and Megan is enjoying the quiet with her second cup of coffee. Alexi has finally roused himself and came down to the kitchen.

Good morning. Coffee is made; cups are over there and there is toast if you like it. I could fix some eggs. I hope you slept well. I did sleep well, and some coffee would be nice. Your coffee is very different than what I was use to, but I have adapted to it. Megan said, there must be many things that are different. I have never tried to live in a completely foreign place. It can't be easy. It has been easy to get accustomed to a better bed and all the food I want. I have even put on some weight. Nick mentioned that you had spent time in refugee camps. Is that true? Yes, I volunteered, then an NGO hired me, then a CSC priest got to know me and that's how I got to Notre Dame. Are you able to talk to your family? I can Skype with my mother and she is going to try to visit here next year. Do you have everything you need? I mean clothes and such. Jenn has helped me find things at the Goodwill store. I am doing OK clothes-wise. Megan, where did you go to school?

When I finished high school, that's grade 12 here, I took classes in things like Microsoft Office and Quick Books. I enjoyed my work as an administrative assistant, and now I do office work for an insurance company. You have a nice house and a nice car. I didn't know that kind of work paid so well. Sorry, I didn't mean to ask personal questions. That's OK. This was my mother's house and she left it to me when she died. What was it like in the camps?

They try to provide food and shelter, but people's lives are completely disrupted. I think the emotional stress could last the rest of their lives. You were talking to Nick about some kind of end of time concern that you have. It didn't make much sense to me. Is this something you study? We study civilizations and social theory. What I tried to talk to Nick about, and we haven't gotten very far, is the possibility of a global civilization collapse, that we, I mean the big we, may not survive. Megan thought about what Alexi was saying. I would like to be in on that conversation. What would you like for lunch today? I brought home some leftovers from yesterday's dinner. Would that be OK? That would be great. Megan turned and walked into the living room, and Alexi really saw Megan for the first time and knew that Nick was a lucky man.

LUNCH

Megan had invited “the girls” over for lunch of leftovers. Jennifer and Annie blew into the house. Their energy made the dishes in the cupboard rattle, and Alexi was overwhelmed with attention. He had only met Annie yesterday, but already he was fascinated by her energy and flawless brown skin. Annie asks, are you always so quiet? There doesn’t seem to be any chance to say anything. Well, Alexi, you just have to jump in. You can’t just sit there. And so he tried, but without much luck.

Some things are even better the second day so lunch was a success, and “the girls” announced that they were going to the mall. Alexi passed. He had no ready cash and didn’t want to talk about it. So Megan, Nick and Alexi once again found themselves in a quiet house.

You said that your mother may get to visit you next year. I would like to meet her. Megan was all about family. Travel is uncertain. The rules keep changing. But we hope she will be able to visit. I know she would like seeing what it’s like here. Well, if she comes we would be happy to have her stay with us. Thank you; I’ll keep that in mind.

Megan again – Nick may have married someone who could outtalk him – I have read about ancient civilizations and found them to be very interesting. Anthropology must be a very interesting field. It is for me, Megan. What have you read? Oh, the regular popular stuff, such as the fall of the Roman Empire and the ancient Mayan people. I couldn’t get interested in the Egyptians. I have no interest in mummies or pyramids. Alexi admitted that a lot of people find those ancient people interesting, but his big interest is in what happened to them.

Nick finally found a place to say something. Theory is interesting, I suppose, but I am a practical person. Franciscans are more inclined to do things rather than talk about them or study them. Alexi said, that’s why I wanted to talk to you. It’s interesting that you still seem to think of yourself as a Franciscan. I suppose I do, and I guess that isn’t going to change. So if you want to talk to me you must walk with me. Come to the homeless shelter with me tomorrow. I want to come too, Megan jumped back in. Do you really think homeless people and ancient civilizations have something in common? We can’t talk about it, Megan, unless we see for ourselves.

HOMELESS

Nick insisted on taking the bus to the homeless shelter. He didn’t want to pull up in Megan’s luxury car. They had not talked about the car yet, but they knew that conversation was going to happen one of these days. Today Nick’s concern for luxury was delayed by taking the bus. Almost everyone else on the bus was African American Megan noticed. I didn’t know it was like this. Nick explained, the bus is how poor people get around, and it’s easy to see who the poor people are. Alexi didn’t understand the American version of discrimination, but he knew poor people when he saw them. He also

saw concern trending toward fear when they looked at him. He suspected that if he had been by himself the reactions would have been even more towards fear. When they got off the bus people's faces told them they were glad to see them go. How different, Nick thought, than when he was wearing his brown robe.

Hi, Jim. This is my wife, Megan, and our friend, Alexi. We will help wherever you need us. Hi, Megan. Nick's a lucky man, and turning to Alexi he said, I know I won't say your name right, but that's a great beard. Welcome. We had turkey and everything on Thursday. Sorry you missed it. Today it's hot dogs and tater tots. We have volunteers today so you can just visit. Nick suggested they spread out. Megan saw a woman with a small child and an empty chair. Alexi got a cup of American coffee and sat down next to a man whose shirt looked like it had been made from parts of an American flag. Nick saw some old friends and joined them.

The food was hot and no one went away hungry, but everything was better with a lot of ketchup. Everyone was polite, maybe too polite. Sort of like people who suspected they were being studied, or worse, judged, and wanted to make an impression. Whatever the reason the conversations were friendly. When they got on the bus to go home the driver recognized Nick and their friendly exchange calmed the other riders who were looking at Alexi.

Megan had to say, what an eye opener. I never knew what your lunches at the shelter were like, Nick. All these people who just don't fit. Alexi, the academic, spoke up. They fit together, Megan; they just don't fit into what is available to them outside. I noticed a lot of friendships; people knew each other. This was not a room full of strangers. They are not the problem. They don't fit in the habitat available to them, and neither did the Mayans. Nick thought he understood. You are saying that these people are not the problem, but they don't fit in the world available to them. That's what I'm saying, Nick, and we are all at risk of being in the same situation.

Thinking about this Nick said, I have been with homeless people for years, and I always saw them, not their, did you say, habitat? That's a new way of thinking for me, Alexi. Megan thought she saw some light, did you say we may find ourselves in the same situation? I don't think you are saying we will all be homeless like the people we were with today, but are you saying they may be like the canary-in-the-mine telling us there is a problem we don't see?

Megan, that's one way to put it. I think we should be looking at the kind of world we are creating for ourselves and not just looking at the people who don't fit. Homeless people in Chicago may be telling us something important, and thanks, Nick, I like your way of doing instead of talking.

There were a few minutes of quiet, but Megan doesn't do quiet very well. Nick, your ministry was all about creating community. Support groups, Franciscan Brothers, even the center for the homeless was all about building community, but where was the coming together, the becoming part of a larger community of people? It was often

there in my mind, Megan. I had “all groups” picnics, and pushed family connections, but you are right, integrating groups, bringing groups of people together was not my first priority. But I don’t think that is what Alexi is saying. I think it’s more like the Franciscan vision of how things are interconnected. It’s never just us; it’s us and all the things around us.

I want to hear more about what you just said, Nick, but it’s not exactly what I mean, so let me try again. I think we need to relook at the world we are creating for ourselves. Our big complicated social world may seem normal, but it is a very new creation. For all of our human history, until just very, very recently, we didn’t live like this, and there is reason to believe it’s not working. It’s certainly not working for the people we had lunch with. Megan wanted to hear more, but she saw their bus stop coming up. This is our stop coming up. Don’t leave anything on the bus. Megan was still the all-seeing administrative assistant.

Where they got off the bus was a busy main street. Cars speeding in both directions and not a tree in sight. They found themselves trying to see with new eyes. It was what they knew. It was normal. It was familiar and it was ugly. There was a man sitting in a doorway with a paper cup at his feet. The sign on the door said “closed - out of business.” Nick dropped all his change in the cup. The man said, thanks brother, even though Nick had never seen him before.

ALEXI AND JENNIFER

The four-day weekend flew by and Jennifer and Alexi are on the South Shore on their way back to South Bend. The train was quiet and there is not much to look at out the window on the run from Chicago to South Bend. I really like your family, and your Irish grandmother is someone special. She worries about you and whom you spend time with. Alexi, she thinks that because I bring a friend home for the holiday weekend that there is a serious relationship between us. She is very old school.

Alexi took her hand and didn’t say anything for what seemed liked a long time. Then he said, I don’t want to get too serious about anyone. I don’t have anything to offer anyone. I am looking at years of school and an uncertain career. Jennifer said, what if I don’t need a well-planned, certain future? In fact, that sounds kind of boring. It’s the beard and long hair, isn’t it? Alexi, you’re making fun of me, aren’t you? Yes I am, and I like your angry look. Annie says I am impulsive like my mother. No one would have guessed. I certainly didn’t notice. OK, let go of my hand, Mr. Practical.

What did you think of Annie? Wow. Just wow? I like your friend, Jenn. Don’t push. I think we should change the subject. OK, I heard that Nick took you to the homeless shelter. What was that like? It was Megan’s first time there too, and I think it was important for her to be there. I think she really likes Nick and had not experienced that part of his life before. Megan sees everything, but what was it like for you?

I told Nick and Megan that those homeless people didn't fit in the world we have created for them, and that we may be doing that to ourselves, meaning everyone. Alexi, I never thought about homeless people that way. I like my city and neighborhood and Church. The first birthday party I remember included a stop at the homeless shelter. This is the world I know, and I like it. Maybe it's not perfect, but there are people like Nick trying to make it better.

That's why I enjoy spending time with Nick. He is the closest thing to being a real Christian that I have met. You don't think I'm a real Christian? Jennifer, I think you are a good person and a good Christian, but I think you are a secular Christian like I am a secular Jew. I am not sure what secular Christian means, but I don't like the sound of it. What I mean, Jenn, is that you adapt to the world around you, and you don't live in a world that is really Christian. Doesn't everybody do that? Oh, maybe not. Are we back to Nick again? Everybody can't be like Nick. We talked about this once before. Alexi, everyone is not going to go around in a brown robe, and how do you know what a real Christian is? I have been reading your book, Jenn. You read the Bible? Why didn't you tell me you were doing that? We could have talked about it.

I read it before I met you, and anyway, I didn't want to hear what other people thought. I wanted to read it for myself and I did. I then realized that someone who grew up with Christians couldn't do what I did. I don't think you can read your book like you have never seen it before. I just don't think it's possible. Your mind is full of other people's interpretations.

Maybe it's not possible. Of course it isn't possible. I had Bible stories read to me as a little child. I went to Catholic schools. I can't forget all that and read the Bible like I had never seen it before. It's not possible, Alexi. You can't ask me to do something I can't do. I wasn't asking you to do the impossible. I was telling you what I have done. I was able to read your book like I had never seen it before.

And now you don't like Christians? I didn't say that. Don't get angry with me, Jenn. OK, if you are so smart, what did you read? I read that Jesus wanted to change everything. Not a little change here or a little change there. He taught a completely new way of being in the world. I know that, Alexi. It's a vision, a way in the future vision, a challenge to work toward.

That's not what I read, Jenn. Jesus didn't say, here do this and at the same time know that it was impossible. People would have just walked away. There would be no book, and no Christians. What he taught must be possible or it's nothing. That's way too idealistic for me, Alexi. Maybe so, but it may be that our future is also either possible or it is nothing, and that's what worries me.

Dear Nick,

I still want to write Brother Nick. Really I should write Dear Nick and Megan, so please, Nick, share this letter with her.

Thank you for giving Alexi a place to stay. He told me how much he enjoyed your company, and food too, to be honest. He doesn't have much so he enjoys whatever comes his way. He is a practical man, and I didn't know that before. And he likes Annie. Can you believe it! I bring my boyfriend home, and he likes my best friend.

When I wrote you back in October I thought I had found my future husband, and yes, I was in a big hurry - he says I am impetuous - and I guess I am. Nick (and Megan) I may have found the right one, but in a new way. Does that make any sense? Now I know Alexi is a practical man; he is in no hurry about our relationship, and he likes other women. So if it works out for us, I will know it wasn't just because I rushed him. Does that make any sense? I hope so.

He also confuses me about my being a Christian. He says I am not a "real" Christian. That's the word he used, "real". I didn't like that and I told him so. He said I cannot read the Bible the way he can. He wasn't mean about it. He says he can read the Bible with "new eyes" and I can't because I have been to Catholic school, etc. so I already know what the Bible says before I read it. I always thought that knowing my religion helped me to read the Bible, but he doesn't see it that way. And Nick (and Megan) he likes to talk to you because he thinks you can understand what being Christian means.

I think Alexi mixes his anthropology classes with what he thinks he reads in what he calls, "my book". Really Nick (and Megan) Alexi thinks too much. What is he talking about?

Finally, I'll get to the point. What did you think of him? You spent more time with him than I did. Did he seem arrogant or whatever? Of course I like him, but your opinion means a lot to me.

The holidays are coming. I don't want to be away from him for the whole holiday season, but do I want him to spend a lot of time around Annie?

Help me, Nick (and Megan).

*Love you both,
Jennifer*

Dear Jennifer,

Megan and I are writing this letter together. You wrote to the two of us and we really like that. There are a number of things we need to work through together. Our individual lives were really different before we got married so there is a lot of sorting out we have to do.

We like Alexi. We had good late night conversations. He was a very pleasant houseguest. He was always courteous to Megan and honest in our talks about what interests him so much. He is welcome back anytime, including over the holidays if you would like to bring him home again. That he likes Annie shows him to have normal male instincts. We think you should let things take their natural course with your very practical friend, Alexi.

You shouldn't feel like Alexi is putting down your Christian faith because we don't think he is. At the same time, we find his "new eyes" reading of the Bible to be very interesting. Jesus provided the example of humble servant leadership, which would lead people to radically change. We agree with Alexi that there have been few Christian leaders like that. They stand out as the exception, not the rule. This is what Alexi and his new eyes see. But that's not all he sees.

He reads, "God so loved the world" to mean that God intended, in Jesus, to save us from the possibility of a disastrous end. What or who were we to be saved from? Alexi thinks "from us".

*With love,
Megan and Nick*

MEGAN AND NICK

Christmas was coming and Nick wanted to get something small but nice for Megan. This was all new for Nick. Clothes? She seemed to have what she needed. A pretty set of China cups? The shelves were full. What about Christmas decorations? He didn't know what she had. Ask her what she would like? He didn't know what else to do.

I would like to get you something small and nice for Christmas, but you seem to have everything. This gift buying is new for me. That's sweet of you, Nick, but you are right; I don't need anything. What about you? Is there some little thing you would like?

Packages under the tree would be fun for our first Christmas. Do you, I mean we, have decorations like a tree and things? Yes, we do. We have a tree and some lights, and electric candles for the windows. What about a Nativity set? There is a small one. Last year I put it on the end table there by the couch. What if we get a bigger one? You mean one to put outside in the front yard? I hadn't thought about one that big, but maybe.

There is a little Church that puts on a living Nativity every year. Have you seen that? I did see it last year. So you are saying we should have actors and camels and donkeys in the front yard? Megan, what would the neighbors think? You're funny, Nick. No, I don't think we should have camels and donkeys, but a nice well made Nativity set for here in the living room? I would like that. People would like to give us things for Christmas. What if we asked people to give us figures, and we turn the sun porch into a Nativity village?

Now you're thinking, Nick. What if we have an Advent party and invite our friends to bring figures for the Nativity village, and we build it together. We could have hills and houses and all kinds of people. I think our friends would like that, and so would I. I'll invite the Brothers. They are good with ideas and handy with tools. Maybe we should be the ones to bring Mary, Joseph and Baby Jesus. What do you think, Megan?

You are full of good ideas, Nick, but speaking of Baby Jesus reminds me that we should talk about babies. We haven't taken any precautions. I don't think I would like taking precautions, Megan. That's a good thing, Nick, because it may already be too late.

Megan, are you telling me you are pregnant? It's we, not me, Nick, and I don't know for sure, but it's possible. I don't have very regular monthly periods, but this month is later than usual so it's possible. When will you, I mean we, know? In a few weeks. If nothing changes I'll go get a test. Perhaps I shouldn't have said anything. You seem a bit nervous about this. I'll calm down Megan. It just seemed kind of sudden.

We are not young kids fooling around, Nick. We are a married couple, and this is what happens. Should we stop having sex? I'm no good at this. It's all new. Nick, it seems you may actually be very good at this, and we will be just fine. Also, not to worry, fathers have a good survival record.

I have been sort of floating along enjoying us, and really enjoying being with you, but I guess I need to do some reality checks. There are so many things that I must rethink. It's like I went from having nothing to having everything. It's overwhelming, Megan.

We can work it out one thing at a time. I know I will also need to rethink, as you say, but I am going to depend on you. You have made the big leap from "nothing to everything", but really you had some of the best friends, and you loved working with people. You need to help me experience what you did have and I'll help you to learn to enjoy having nice things.

I'm not sure I want to learn how to enjoy nice things. That is a big change, and I am already struggling with it. Give me an example, Nick. We need to take this one thing at a time. OK, you have a luxury car, and it makes me a little uncomfortable to ride in it. I could never drive up to the shelter in that car.

I bought it with my mother's insurance money. I never had anything that nice before, and I don't really need it now. I could sell it if that's what you want.

What if we had something small? I would still ride the bus mostly, but I think I would be OK in a small inexpensive car for trips. OK, we can do that, Nick. Now remember when we started the Saturday morning widows group? Well, I want to continue that and have them come here at the house. The holidays are coming and for a couple of them this will be the first holiday season without their husbands. So I want to begin again this Saturday.

OK, and I often invited people to dinner; sometimes it's people I just meet on the bus. Are you OK with that? As long as you help cook and clean up. It's a deal.

NICK ASKS FOR HELP

Allen and Sue are Jennifer's parents. Twenty years ago, then Brother Nick, helped both of them through difficult times, including post traumatic stress, Allen from his war experiences and Sue from a violent marriage. Nick saw their successful marriage as one of his own success stories, and he enjoyed being around them. Now he thought he needed some help himself, and he paid them a visit. He knocked.

Sue, I love your front porch. Too bad it's cold today. I'll make a mental note to come back when it gets warm. Nick, how nice. You are welcome any time. Come on in. Would you like some coffee or a cup of tea? Coffee would be nice, thank you. Black, please. Is Allen home? He's in his workshop in the basement. Would you like me to call him? Not yet. I need some advise, Sue. Sue brought in two cups of coffee and sat down with Nick. No questions. She waited.

Megan may be pregnant. I hope this is good news for both of you, Nick. It is, but. Sue waited. I have never been around, I mean, with a pregnant woman before. I am uncomfortable, and I am sure it shows. And I don't want my lack of experience to send a message that I am unhappy. You are an experienced woman, and, well, what should I do, or maybe not do? Sue let this settle for a minute. There were some unasked questions, and she wanted to tread lightly.

This will be an even bigger change for Megan than it is for you. She will look different, and feel different about herself. She may even think she is becoming unattractive. This is where you can be a big help. You must tell her loudly and often how beautiful she is and how much you love her, and she will be beautiful as only a pregnant woman can be. You must do that for her. It never occurred to me that she may not like the way she looks, mused Nick.

Not only look different, but feel different Nick. She may be moody and take out her discomfort on you. It's not easy getting up every morning feeling sick with a bad back. You must never push her away when she is like that. I am really glad I came to talk with you, Sue. I had no idea that Megan could be so, different. Not only different, Nick, but she may feel that she is unattractive to you. This is not the time to avoid her. I don't think that's possible, Sue. I want to be with her all the time, but I don't know how.

Yes, you do, Nick. Be your natural self. I can't imagine you being rough or abusive. Be your natural gentle self. If there is any concern for Megan or the baby her doctor will tell her. You just need to be 100% supportive. Can you do that? I know I can, but I didn't know how important it was.

Nick felt like a weight had been lifted. Then he heard Allen coming up the steps. He had just time to say thank you to Sue and refocus. Nick, I thought I heard voices. What's new? I'm learning how to be a good husband. They didn't teach me that in my Franciscan formation. I bet not. I see you have some coffee. How about having a big piece of Sue's apple pie?

I'll pass on the pie, but that's one of the reasons I wanted to talk to you. I am not a very fit person, and I want to be. You always look like you could lick the world. What does it take to look like that? So, you want to shape up a little? Good for you. A little less waistline and a little more stamina would improve your life and make you a better husband, if that's on your mind today.

Allen, where do I start? I think you would like the "Y". They have swimming and a walking track. These would be good places to start. And talk to Megan about less pizza and potatoes and more fruit and vegetables. She may even like that for herself. Women are often watching their own dress size. Make it a together thing. Sounds like good advice, Allen. Now I have a different question. I would like to turn the sun porch into a counseling room with its own door off of the front porch. How do I do that?

I can bring some guys over and we could do it in one day, but you probably need a permit. Call the city and see. We are going to use the sun porch for a Nativity village so I won't want to do this until after Epiphany. I'll call about a permit.

Now I have a question for you, Nick. What do you think of Jenn's friend, Alexi? Sue's mother thinks he needs a haircut and a shave. He does look wild by our standards, Allen, but I think this is his culture. We like him; in fact, we told Jennifer she could bring him back for the holidays if she wants. We think he is a practical man, and that's good for his age, but he is definitely on the serious side. How do you mean, Nick? We don't want Jenn to be too serious about a man at her age. Sue spoke up. God, no, Nick. I made a big mistake when I was her age, and I don't want that to happen to Jenn.

That is not the kind of serious I mean, Sue. Sue took a deep breath. He is studying anthropology, and our world looks kind of black to him. We don't use black like that anymore, Nick, but I get your meaning. Sorry, I mean bleak; he has a very negative, or

maybe better, a deep concern for our future I think mostly from what he is studying. You mean concern for our country, or our Church, or what, Nick? We may have hit a rough patch, but everyone still shows up for work.

Maybe we could sit down with him if he comes over the holidays, and let him tell you what he thinks he sees coming. You may also find it interesting that he is reading the Bible, and, this I find interesting; he reads it like he never saw it before, which he didn't. We have had some really good sharing about what his new eyes tell him.

Sue remembers. When Allen and I went to RCIA so he could become a Catholic, I had to change what I believed even though I had gone to Catholic school. Is that what he means? If so, I like it. We will let him tell it, Sue. Both of you have been a big help to me today. Allen looked at Sue, and she gave him her, "later, Allen," look.

SATURDAY MORNING

Megan was up early as usual, and Nick came downstairs, hair still wet from his shower. They sat at the table with toast and eggs to talk about the day. I stopped to see Sue and Allen yesterday evening, Megan. Are they OK? They are fine. I wanted to ask them about being a good husband. Really? Is this something you were worried about? I didn't know there was a problem, Nick. There wasn't really a problem, but I felt unsure of myself. There was no father in my life when I was growing up, and you can imagine that the Franciscans didn't prepare me for being a husband. Sue was the biggest help.

I always liked Sue. So she taught you how to be a good husband. That's interesting. Well, what I asked her was how to be a good husband to you if you are pregnant. That sounds kind of personal, Nick. Mostly she talked about, I think, about how Allen treated her. I feel much better now. She was a big help to me.

OK, I'm glad you feel better. Maybe I shouldn't wait to get that pregnancy test now that you have let the cat out of the bag. I will get it done, Nick, so we can know for sure.

I like that. It's exciting for me to think about. What time is the widows group going to be here? I asked them to come at 10 o'clock, so we have some time to talk before they get here. They know each other now. What do you think our next step with them should be? I would like them to do something together, some community building. Do you have any suggestions? St. Vincent's is always looking for some help sorting clothes, and with Christmas coming they will be sorting and displaying decorations. What do you think if we ask them to help as a group?

Does the Salvation Army still wrap Christmas packages for kids? I think so. OK, that's two possibilities. They may have other ideas.

So they straightened up, dressed for the day and were relaxed when the women started to show up for their group meeting. When everyone was there and they each had a cup of coffee or tea, there was one tea drinker, Megan asked for a quick go around on how

their week had been. Betty was a small woman and slender. Today she was dressed much nicer than was required for a casual gathering, and looked like she had her hair styled, and maybe even had her nails done. This was going to be her first holiday season as a widow, and she began to go around. I booked a cruise. It is something I always wanted to do. Harry wouldn't hear of it, and now I am going to do it.

It was Dorothy's turn. My grandson came over with his friend and cleaned up the yard for me, but I didn't do anything exciting like booking a cruise. When are you going, Betty? Over Christmas and New Year's.

It was Maryann's turn. I haven't done anything to talk about. Those cruise things have a reputation. Aren't you worried that there may be predatory men on board with you? That would worry me. Betty was quick to answer. I should be so lucky.

The whole circle of women sat up. Even Megan and Nick became more alert. This was not the response they expected. It bounced back to Dorothy who was struggling with the recent loss of her husband, Bill. What would your husband think? She blurted out without thinking.

Harry was a mean and stingy man. I don't care what he would think. I am glad he is gone. Betty had been the small mousey woman of the group, and now she was the nicely dressed assertive woman. No one had the courage to ask how this change happened - except Megan. Betty, you seem to be enjoying a new freedom. Can you tell us more?

The only good thing Harry ever did for me was to have a life insurance policy. That was settled a couple of weeks ago, and I sold the old house and rented a nice apartment, even bought some new furniture. The apartment has a big mirror in the living room, and when I looked at myself I saw a young woman. I don't know how or why it happened, but there I was a twenty-year-old Betty looking back at me. I realized that that was who I was going to be again, and I am going to do it.

Nick realized that the group dynamics had radically changed, and he didn't want to let it get away. I would like us to have a dress-up day next Saturday. What do you think? Everyone gets her hair done, nails too, and buys a new outfit, shoes too. And we will give Betty a big send off for her cruise. What do you think? The group of widows surprised themselves by saying an enthusiastic yes, and Megan added, me too!

NICK VISITS HIS BROTHERS

There were a few loose ends Nick needed to tie up, and he wanted to see his Brothers, especially, Brother Ed, who had been his close friend for years. Also, there was Buddy, his cat, which had been at the friary while he and Megan were getting settled. Brother Ed saw him drive up. Come in, Brother Nick. Is that a new car? We traded Megan's big car for this little one, and there was money left over. We put that into a travel fund.

There are places we would like to visit, including the Holy Land. How are you doing? It's been awhile.

I'm doing well. We settled back into a routine again after your big wedding, but we all miss you. I miss the dinner talk. We always had the stories of the day to tell, but the truth, Ed, Megan is a better cook. I wanted to make sure that my room was cleaned out. Did you find a use for my robe? Yes, it took a little sewing, but it fits well enough.

I miss the chapel, Ed. That's one of the things Megan and I need to work out. I need a prayer room, or at least a corner. She's OK with that, but we still haven't settled on a space. I, I mean we, have a request for you and the other Brothers. We want to turn our sun porch into a Nativity scene, and we would like your help. You mean big statuary and stable? No, we would like a village with people and houses and maybe a hillside, a whole village. We would like to have it all done before Christmas, and have a party where people could bring figures and such things for the village. What do you think, Ed?

I see a Christmas village, but Bethlehem style. Lots of brown, maybe a little orchard, a road. I think the Brothers would get into the spirit of it, and love doing it. OK, let me know what the materials cost. We will cover the cost. How's Buddy?

Oh, he's fine. Sleeping someplace, I suppose. If you call him I am sure he will come to you. I want to take him with me now that things have settle down. Buddy must have heard his name because he came into the room and jumped up on Nick's lap.

Brother Nick, what's it like? I mean being married? Ed, there are some things that will always be just between Megan and me, but I can tell you that there is no doubt that this is what I wanted. There is no turning back, Ed.

It seemed to happen so quickly. I never trusted quick decisions. I know what you mean, Ed. We were always about time for discernment about everything, and I liked that. But Megan and I knew each other for a long time. It was not like I just met someone and made a flash decision. Still when we realized we wanted to be together it did happen quickly. It was almost like a surprise party, Ed. There we were looking at each other in a new way, and it was really a surprise.

I never had anything like that happen to me, Brother Nick. I never did either, Ed, but I can tell you, when it does there is no turning back. She loves me, Ed. Can you believe that! It's still awesome for me to think about. I can see it in your face, Nick. You did the right thing.

MEGAN

As Advent moved toward Christmas Megan was struggling to adapt a more flexible attitude toward her always, orderly house. Buddy had taken to her mother's favorite wingback chair. He slept on it, and used the back as his scratching post. He would not be distracted with a bed and scratching post from the pet store. Megan gave up this

chair to Buddy the cat with the thought that, as she told Nick, she may get the chair recovered “in the future”.

Then the Brothers came in with their tools, and Megan had to find a different place for all the porch furniture. She discovered dusty, even dirty, places where the furniture had been for a long time, and that disturbed her sense of being a good housekeeper. Then she had to intervene and explain that the way they were building Bethlehem Village wouldn't work because she must be able to dismantle and store it, so it couldn't be all in one piece the way they were doing it.

Nick's big fish tank was set up in the basement and he wasn't very happy about that, but he had to agree with Megan that there “was no other good place for it”. He hopes he could move it to his sun porch counseling room after Christmas, but that still needed to be worked out. Megan did not have a positive response to “cutting a hole in the sun porch wall”, which Nick wanted to do for his “door”.

Things got a little testy for Megan when she discovered her matching cups and saucers set was missing a cup after Nick brought one of his new bus friends home for dinner. So it was with some sense of “I need this” when she brought herself and Nick a glass of wine into a finally quiet living room. The kitchen had been cleaned up and the dishes put away. The Brothers were gone and the cat was sleeping. She gave Nick his glass of wine and sat down beside him. That's when Nick told her that Alexi was coming to stay with them for the holidays and was bringing a friend who had no place else to go for the days that the school would be closed. The timing of this news was not good. Nick was still in the earliest stages of learning how to be a good husband.

Nick, you are making a perfect mess of my life and the test was positive. I am pregnant. I am going to have a baby on about the Fourth of July. Some Independence Day that is going to be with my breastfeeding the baby and changing daily diapers! Nick was stunned. This was strange territory, and he had no mental compass to find his way. Then he remembered his conversation with Sue Baxter.

You will be even more beautiful pregnant with our child. I love the roundness and fullness of a pregnant woman. And when you are caring for our baby you will be the perfect picture of a Madonna and Child. I love you, and I will help with our baby every way I can. That's all very nice, Nick, but I don't think I can do this. The doctor told me that there was a risk of Down's syndrome because of my age. I don't think I could handle that, Nick. This is all just too much for me. I want us to be together, Megan. I think we can do this together. You're not the one pregnant, Nick. I know, but I want to be a father, and I never felt that before. OK, Nick, but don't bring any more bus friends home and get a slipcover for Mom's chair.

NICK

Nick thought everything was wonderful, only it wasn't. Well, he didn't like having his beautiful fish in the basement. He didn't like sitting in the pew at communion time, but

Megan sat with him so it wasn't so bad. He didn't like giving up his support groups, and now there would be no bringing marginal people home for dinner, at least not anytime soon. He would get a cover for the chair, and he now knew he had to rethink putting a door into the sunroom.

How could I have thought that Megan would give up the job she loved, her nice car, a neat and orderly home environment without any consequences, he wondered? He wasn't dumb. He thought he understood people with his degree in psychology from Marquette. Yet he didn't see what was happening, or how hard it would be for Megan, and now maybe for both of them. There were changes he could make, at least temporarily, and he set about trying to make things better for both of them. At breakfast the next morning he carefully laid out his plan, hopefully without being too obvious.

I am going to see Father Mike to see if he can push my papers to get me released from the Franciscans sooner, and then, if you want, we can get a small Church blessing on our marriage and we won't need to sit in the pew at communion time. That would be nice, Nick. I miss seeing Father Mike every day. Invite him over for dinner.

OK, I'll cook, Megan. In fact I would like to learn how to cook better. Could you teach me how to cook some of your favorite recipes? I can do that. The recipe box is next to the stove. Pick out a couple that you would like to try. Nick was beginning to feel better, and he decided that he was going in the right direction so he pushed on. I'll go on Amazon today and order a slipcover for the chair. Do we have an old blanket we can put on the chair until we get the cover? Look in the closet in the basement. Run it through the washer before you put it on the chair.

Speaking of the basement, (Nick could sense that he was on a roll) what if I have my counseling room in the basement instead of in the sun porch? How would people get there? We don't want people walking through the house do we? I'll talk to Allen. Maybe there is a way to put in a door to the basement from the front. I like how he fixed up their basement; maybe he could tell us how to do that in ours. Nick, I need to finish getting dressed and go to work. We will talk about the basement later. I'll drive you to work. That will save you some time. I know how long the bus can take.

That would be nice, Nick. Invite Allen and Sue over and you can try out your new cooking skills on them too. I would like to talk to Sue about being pregnant. Get some clothes on. You can't drive me to work in your pajamas. Nick drove Megan to work then stopped at the parish to see Father Mike. He liked the new administrative assistant so he gave her a big greeting.

Hi, Sally. How is this working out for you? You look comfortable enough. Is Father Mike in? I need to talk with him. Nick, things are going well for me. Thank you for asking. Yes, Father Mike is in, and no one is in his office; go on in. Hi, Nick. How are things going with you and Megan? Better than yesterday. I think we'll make it.

VISIT TO FATHER MIKE

Father Mike made a call then put the phone down, and turned to Nick. Your papers are not on the archbishop's desk. They are stuck someplace and his secretary, will try to find out where they are and get back to me. I can't rush this for you, Nick. You may need to advocate for yourself. I'll let you know what I find out. You will have to take it from there. Thanks, Father Mike. Megan and I would like you to come to dinner.

I would like that. Let me know when and where. I don't think I have ever been to Megan's house, or should I say, your house. It's Megan's house and we haven't done anything to change that. She hasn't mentioned it and it's not important to me whose names are on the deed. Megan is working, is that right? Sue Baxter hired her as a clerk with future possibilities. It gives us health insurance and a little income. I want to start seeing clients as soon as we can get the house fixed up with a space for me to use. Megan is sending out invitations for a Christmas party. I am sure you will get one. Our Bethlehem village is in the space I would like to use to meet clients so that is not going to happen until sometime in January at the earliest.

A village, you say? Yes, like a Christmas village only it will look like a Nativity scene that includes the whole village. That sounds ambitious. We are asking friends to bring figures for the village as gifts to the party I mentioned. My Brothers are doing the landscaping and some of the buildings. How is your relationship with them? I could imagine it may be difficult. There hasn't been any angry response if that is what you mean, and they seem to enjoy being asked to help with the village. I think it's going to be OK. I am glad you stopped in. I'll let you know what I find out. Thanks, Father Mike.

By the way, what are you doing with your time now? It sounds like you are not involved in groups or clients. Megan and I have continued our Saturday morning widows group. They are an interesting group of women. One is actually celebrating becoming a widow, and they are all going to dress up this coming Saturday to help her celebrate. Not all marriages are happy, Nick. I learned that soon enough right here in this office listening to angry women, but I am still surprised that someone would openly celebrate becoming a widow.

It would slip out in my divorce support group that there were plenty of unhappy women, and there is more violence in marriages than most people realize. I don't mean to make light of it, but I saw some sparks in Megan's eyes yesterday.

I hope you patched that up. I made some progress, but back to your question about what I am doing with my time. I am learning how to be a good cook and to clean up after myself. Sounds a little like househusband work. I guess it does, and Father Mike, I like it. You may make a good husband yet, Nick. We are going to make it work, Father Mike. Latest news, Megan is pregnant. Wow, Nick, you had better learn fast.

BACK HOME

Nick was going to make an impression with his new cooking skills so he stopped at the store on his way home. The woman in front of him didn't have quite enough on her government food card so Nick paid the difference. At home he built a pan of lasagna to die for, and fresh mixed greens with walnuts and fresh vinaigrette for the salad. Then he waited. Megan had a long day and came in the door about an hour later than usual. She didn't even go upstairs to change. She just went into the downstairs powder room, washed up, and sat down at the table. The lasagna was a little crusty, but the salad was good. Nick was smart enough not to ask about work, but he was hoping for a comment on his cooking.

This is all very nice, Nick. It is really very nice. I could get use to a good meal after a long day. And she got up and went upstairs. Nick began to clean up his mess. Then his phone chimed a text message. It was from Alexi. [Confirm bringing extra guest for holiday visit. Important she knows for sure that it is OK. Her name is Cathleen.] [Cathleen is OK. Let us know when you will arrive.]

He was thinking that maybe he should have talked to Megan, but they had already said Alexi could bring a friend. He was finishing the dishes and wiping his hands when he heard Megan coming down the stairs. He turned around as she came into the kitchen. Megan was wearing one of her light as air dresses and it was clear to Nick that was all she was wearing. As he walked toward her she slowly backed away and started back up the stairs. Following Megan up the stairs caused him to stop breathing. Finally he had to say to himself – deep breaths, Nick – deep breaths. At the top she turned to face him and began unbuttoning his shirt. Nick's mouth opened and he said, Alexi is bringing a girl named Cathleen when he comes to visit. Megan stopped what she was doing and her hands dropped to her side. Nick, your really need to work on your timing. Go sit on the bed, and she went past him back down the stairs.

Nick pulled himself together, put on his pajamas and sat on the bed. He knew he had made a big mistake talking about houseguests. He was new at this husband business, but this was a disaster. He had gone from ecstasy to numb in 30 seconds. Whatever was going to happen next he had determined to keep his mouth shut.

Megan came back into the room carrying a tray. On the tray were two dishes of chocolate ice cream and a little plate of chocolate chip cookies. She sat down on the bed and placed the tray between them. Nick, making love is like eating ice cream. If you are too slow it melts and if you are too fast it gives you a headache, and she gave Nick his bowl of ice cream.

I blew it, didn't I? Yes, you did. Eat your ice cream. There is more if you want more. In fact there is more of everything if you want it. More of everything? Yes, and lose the striped jail bird pajamas. That's all they had at the thrift store. You don't need them, Nick, ever. Ever? Yes, eat your ice cream. It's going to melt.

Nick and Megan ate their ice cream in silence. Then he reached for a chocolate chip cookie, his favorite. Megan put her hand on his and moved it gently away from the

cookie plate. I can't have a cookie? You can have them all, later. Later? The cookies are a parents' motivational tool, Nick, and I am practicing.

Nick sat quietly, then the pieces slowly began to click into place, and the center piece was good timing. How could he have been so dumb? He took the tray with its empty bowls and plate of cookies, set it on the nightstand, and said, thank you for being so patient with me. You will always have my full attention. And he got out of bed, went to the dresser and turned off his phone, which he had plugged in for the overnight charging. Then he took off his pajamas, stuffed them into the waste basket and got into bed.

That's one thing I always liked about you, Nick; you are a quick learner. Do you want the light on our off? On, you can't see cookies in the dark.

DINNER WITH FRIENDS

It was two weeks before Christmas and Nick was busy in the kitchen preparing for his three guests when the doorbell rang. It was Father Mike, their first guest for the evening. Megan was upstairs becoming pretty after getting home from work so Nick went to the door. This is a nice big house, Nick. You must rattle around in all this space. Come on in, Father Mike. Yes, it's more than we need, but we will have guests for the holidays and that will fill it out some. I'll take your jacket. You can have a comfortable seat here or join me in the kitchen.

Father Mike went with Nick into the kitchen enjoying all the good smells. Do I smell some Indian spices? You do, and I hope the chicken turns out to taste as good as it smells. I hope you and our other guests don't mind my practicing my cooking. Would you like a glass of wine or some coffee? A little wine would be nice, and it's Allen and Sue that are coming? Yes, I expect they will bring Billy. He is still living at home, I think. Who are these holiday guests you are expecting? They are Jennifer Baxter's friends from college. They are foreign students who will not be going home. Alexi is from Israel and Cathleen is from Ireland. They sound interesting. They really are interesting. They are both anthropology students. Alexi thinks we are in big trouble, and we have been having some conversations about that.

Allen and Sue were at the door, and Father Mike went to let them in so Nick didn't need to leave his cooking. Hello, Father Mike. Have you been promoted to doorkeeper? Just trying to keep the cook in the kitchen, Sue. Come on in. I already know where the closet is on the left. They went into the kitchen to say hi to Nick as Megan came down to join them. She called into the kitchen, did you find everything you need, and when will it be ready? I found everything, and in about 15 minutes.

Father Mike found the Bethlehem village under construction and went to take a look. That drew everyone's attention, so Megan had to show it off a little and brag about the Brothers' good work. See they are making things doll house size with a hill on the left

and a curving road that takes the eye to where the stable will be. I love the carpenter's shed with the partly finished chair and table. They are very creative, don't you think?

Allen finally had something to say. If they have any trouble with the lighting let me know. I have some lights that they could use. Thanks, Allen. I'll have Nick mention it to them. Is this where Nick wants a door? Allen said as he pointed to the end of the sunroom? Nick and I are discussing it, Allen. Come with me to the basement and see what you think. You two have a seat. We won't be long.

In the basement. Allen, do you think we could put an outside door into the basement? Allen took a look around. There is a window well here at the side of the house that would make it easier, but even so it would cost a lot more than a door to the sunroom. How much are we talking about, Allen? Thousands instead of hundreds, Megan, and you would need a contractor to do it. That helps, Allen. Nick and I will work it out. Let's go to dinner.

The meal went even better than Nick hoped, and he received abundant praise for his cooking. Sue commented, Nick, you have come a long way from day-old donuts and bargain-priced coffee for your support groups. This was a very good meal. Megan, I think you should keep him. He has some rough edges, Sue, but I'll keep him. That got some laughs and boosted Nick's confidence. They moved to the living room as a group of comfortable old friends.

Allen, I want to show you the basement. Megan already showed me, Nick. A door is possible, but expensive, but if you decide to go that way, my friends and I can help you fix up the basement to look nice. Thanks, Allen. Megan and I will need to work it out. That's what she said, Nick. Let me know what you decide and how I can help.

Nick felt like a third person in a two-person conversation. It was like Allen and Megan talking and he was watching. The question of whose house this was came back to him, and he realized that what he thought didn't matter to him, maybe really did.

Megan got up and started for the kitchen and motioned Sue to come with her. She "wanted to be sure everything was put away", but really she wanted Sue to herself for a few minutes. Megan said, only a few weeks ago I had never thought that I would be having a child. This baby will be a blessing to you and Nick. I hope so, Sue. What was it like for you? I thought I was going to turn ugly and I became moody. Allen was a big help. It's really important to have a supportive husband, isn't it? Yes.

We have a widows support group and one of the women seems to be blooming now that her husband's gone. I hope she blooms all over the place. What do the other women think? They are very supportive. We need good friends, Megan. Think about coming to the interfaith women's monthly lunch. You will meet some great women. Thanks, I'll try to do that, and thanks again for giving me a job. I like seeing you every day, and you do excellent work.

Meanwhile, the three guys have found some common ground. Who is on your RCIA team this year, Father Mike? Sue and I enjoyed our time as part of the team a few years ago.

You may remember the Martins. They are running the team now and doing a good job, I hear. I do remember them. Nice people. She was Catholic and he joined the Church, if I remember right. As that conversation continued, Nick wanted to know how Allen was doing. He remembered Allen from his post-traumatic stress group, but didn't want to push, so Nick said, we thought maybe Billy would come with you. How is he doing?

Typical boy, we hope. He gets passing grades, but just barely. He hasn't gotten into any big trouble, but he hasn't found a direction yet. He talks like maybe he wants to go into the Army, and I stay quiet on the subject. He was very close to his grandfather, Bill, who died recently. That sort of set him back, I think.

This was the opening Nick was looking for. I remember that the Army experience gave you some problems. It did. You and Sue were the ones who helped me get past them. I remember, Allen, and now you are doing well? Every once in awhile I think maybe I should come see you and talk about it. I will always be available, Allen. Just give me a call. I know you are going to set up a counseling practice here at your house. There are some people I would like you to talk with. I work with vets every day and I see problems. I'll send you some clients.

If you see an urgent problem I'll come to them. We don't need to wait until I have a counseling room set up. Would you come talk to my station about post-traumatic stress? A little down to earth give and take? I would do that. When would you like me to do it? How about tomorrow?

NICK AND MEGAN

In the quiet of the next evening Megan asks, how did it go at the fire station? I thought it went well. I told them they were all winners, or they wouldn't be firefighters, but PTSD can be a life-long problem causing relationship problems as well as work related problems, and there is help when you need it. Sounds kind of generic. Well, it had to be. I don't know any of them. There were some good questions though, and now they know there is help.

I sent out the invitations to our Christmas party and asked people to bring something for our Bethlehem village. I asked them to bring something that starts with the first letter of their last name. You think that will work? I didn't know what else to do. We don't want a heard of camels and no shepherds. What do you think of having two young guests? We have three bedrooms, but only one bathroom. People will need to take turns. You and I can get up a little early to ease the bathroom traffic. I'm glad you are flexible about it. I should have asked you before agreeing for Alexi to bring a young woman with him.

Really, I'm looking forward to having some young people in the house. I'll bet Jenn and Annie will be in and out too. We'd better have some extra of everything. Speaking of extra, I bought a big box of chocolate chip cookies. You're always thinking, Nick.

CATHLEEN

Cathleen did not look Irish. She was about Nick's height, a generous 5 feet 8 inches, and not heavy built but solid. It was the black hair, a little longer than you might expect for a college student, with a somewhat oval face with a Mediterranean shade. You would not suspect that Cathleen was 100% Irish, until she spoke. What a lovely big old house you have. And what is this? It looks like it could be the start of a miniature village. Do you have some water? The train ride completely dried me out.

Megan took Cathleen's fat backpack, set it aside and said, welcome; follow me to the kitchen and I will show you where everything is kept. We don't serve people as guests at our house; instead, we treat everyone as family. I'll show you around and you can help yourself to whatever you like.

So it's family, is it? That means I can just be myself. You are a courageous woman, Megan, not knowing me at all. I think we will be good friends. They moved off to the kitchen leaving Nick and Alexi standing at the door.

Come on in and set your bundle down. It looks like those two women will become a force to conspire against us. Cathleen is already a powerful force to be respected. The two of them will be awesome. Thanks for having me as company again, Nick. I really enjoyed my first visit; and what is this work that is taking up that whole room? That wasn't here when I was here at Thanksgiving time. It will be our Christmas Bethlehem village. Our guests at Christmas will help us complete it with figures. Is this something you do every year? No. It is something I have seen other people do, but never had a place where I, I mean we, could do it. Saint Francis would have liked it, I think. He loved the natural world, and the simple world. You will have the same room. We will have Cathleen at the end of the hall. If you remember, there is only one bathroom so we will need to share. I was quite comfortable last time, better than the dorm room beds, and bathroom sharing is not new to us. Nick noticed the "us" but said nothing.

The two women came back into the living room with iced water looking very comfortable together. Cathleen tells me that she is from the west side of Ireland, and I told her she looks like she is from the south of Italy. That got a laugh from everyone, which they all interpreted as a good omen for the coming holiday together. Megan took charge.

Jenn and, probably Annie, will be here for dinner in about an hour, that is, if chef Nick can get back to the kitchen. I'll show you your rooms and you can wash up if you like. Nick's curiosity took over and he had to say, Cathleen, you don't look very Irish, but you sure sound Irish. Is there a story you could tell us? There is, and it is why I want to become an anthropologist. I want to study the movement of people, especially the Irish. Some of my ancestors were slaves, not the African kind, but the Roman kind.

JENN AND ANNIE ARRIVE FOR DINNER

The front door flew open and Jenn and Annie blew into the house. Jenn had a dozen questions for Alexi and Annie headed for the kitchen after a brief hello to everyone. What can I do to help, Nick? Check the table then ask people if they would like their coffee with their meal or later. Annie took off to do as she was asked until she got to Cathleen. A pot of tea would be nice later. I thought you were someone I knew, but we haven't met. I'm Annie. Jenn and I have been friends since we were four years old. Do you go to school with Alexi? I do. We are in some classes together.

I'm in nursing school. I follow in my mother's footsteps. So I guess you want to be an anthropologist like Alexi. Not exactly. He wants to study why people move, and I want to know what happens to people when they get to a new place. I didn't expect to see someone wearing a hijab today. I would be interested in your story. I don't have the kind of story you are interested in, at least I don't think so. I was born here. And you don't experience any discrimination? Not among my friends, but I do get stares in public places. My parents have good jobs. We live in a good neighborhood. Looking different hasn't been a big problem for me, but I am curious about what happens to people when they move to a new and different place.

Nick calls from the kitchen and Annie calls back. The table's good. Everyone wants coffee later except one wants a pot of tea. Then back to Cathleen. I don't mean to be rude, but you don't look like how you sound. That's one of the things that happens when people migrate or are forced to move; people in their new place start to look different. I can see how that can happen, but doesn't that take a long time, I mean generations? Generations are not as long as it sounds. In a century you could have five generations and people would begin to look different. Nick and Megan don't look exactly alike. He is rounder and she is taller. What will their child look like? Cathleen turned and looked at Megan who was talking to Alexi and saw that her suspicion was being confirmed by what Annie just said. I think the child will look Irish and German. There are a lot of them on campus.

Nick came into the room and called everyone around the table. People could see that he was working on his presentation, and they congratulated him on the beautiful table. Nick asked Jenn if she would say the blessing.

Gentle and loving God, we thank you for this food and for the cook who prepared it. Bless the food and all of us. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Annie found herself sitting across from Cathleen and asked, there are three of us young women who all look different, and then there is Alexi, who really looks different. What would the children look like if he had a child with each of us? Alexi fumbled his fork to the floor. Alexi wasn't sure he liked being the subject of this conversation, but he wasn't sure he didn't like it either. What he knew was that he was not in control so he picked up his fork and said nothing. Cathleen responded to Annie's question.

We can never be sure exactly what a child will look like, but there are strong probabilities. Alexi and you could produce a child who looked like Barack Obama. My guess is that you are Indian and African, am I right? Yes, my father is from an Indian family and my mother is African. With you, Jenn, I could see a child who looked like Ariana Grande. Jenn responded, wow, I like that! And what about you? I think maybe Sinead O'Connor. Everyone thought that was a great possibility except Alexi, who didn't know who Sinead O'Connor was. Then Megan joined the conversation.

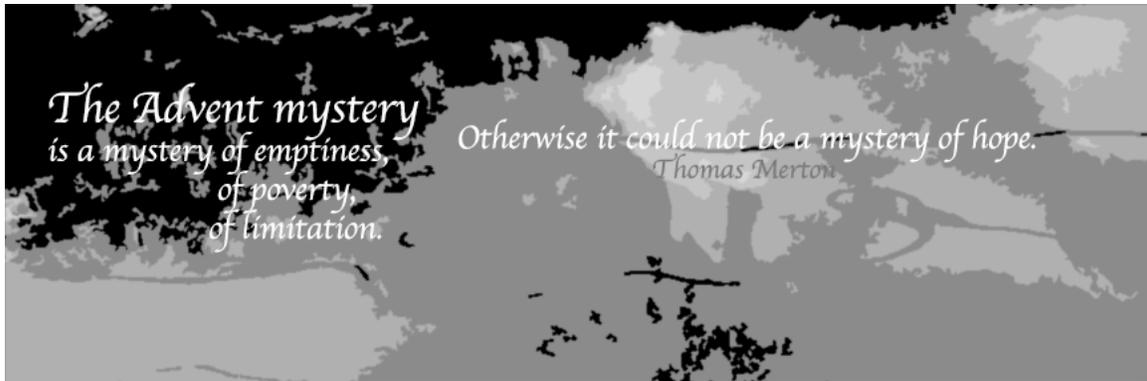
I guess, Cathleen, you chose famous people because we would know what they looked like. Yes, I did, but it is also true that people of mixed heritage have done great things. Why this seems true is one of the things I am interested in. Nick had a question, about food; who would have guessed? New people bring new food ideas too, don't they? For sure, Nick. There must be dozens of ethnic food restaurants and food stores here on the South Side.

Alexi saw a chance to push the conversation in a more academic direction. And, I think, language changes, and music and dress and art. Maybe almost everything changes. Yes, Alexi, almost everything. Megan again. We are a great mix of people here, Cathleen, but we never like the newcomers. Why is that, do you think? You just wrote my dissertation for me Megan. That's what I want to know.

Annie took the lead again to no one's surprise. I want to hear about this new baby, Megan. Get your coffee, and tea, and come to the living room and I'll tell you all about it. It wasn't said, but everyone knew that Megan was directing the talk about new baby to the three young women. Nick looked at Alexi, and they began clearing the table.

That was a good meal, Nick. I think you are becoming a good cook. Megan's recipes with a little touch here and there. I surprise myself when the food turns out well. How does becoming a good cook fit with the simple life?

Good question. Saint Francis was all about the simple life, but when there was a celebration, like a feast day, he wanted a big celebration. So I think I'll try to follow his way. Simple food most days and go all out for special days. And this was a special day because Cathleen and I were visiting? It was. How about a beer now that the dishwasher is loaded? We can sit here at the little table. You didn't get to say much at dinner. That Annie is something else, isn't she? She likes to lead the parade, Alexi. She could lead my parade, Nick. I think she just did, Alexi.



CHRISTMAS

THE SATURDAY BEFORE CHRISTMAS

'Twas the Saturday before Christmas and all through the house every creature was stirring, even the cat. The house was really ready for the guests, but Megan, especially, was fussing with little things that only she would notice. There was a pile of gift-wrapped presents stacked like a Christmas tree in one corner. The pile of gifts included a small gift with a nametag for each expected guest and two without tags just in case someone unexpected showed up.

The Bethlehem village was complete and declared "historically accurate" by Nick, who, if anyone, should know the story. Only there were no people. It had a ghost town look that was a bit unsettling if one spent too much time looking at it. But everyone knew the village people were coming. Megan's mother's big old house was ready for guests and so was Bethlehem Village.

Cathleen and Alexi had found an almost quiet place at the kitchen table with a pot of tea and a cup of coffee. Cathleen broke the quiet. I really like these people, Alexi. I can't imagine how their lives must have changed. He was a Franciscan brother, and she seemed to be in a comfortable, stable place in her own life, and they gave all of that up for what? For each other? Awesome, Alexi.

They have been welcoming to me even though I openly questioned what they, especially Nick, believe. I missed that part. What have you been questioning? I was living with Christians on campus and didn't know anything about what they believed, so I read their four Gospels.

My people have been drifting away from the Church and I haven't looked at the Bible for years, not since I was in the lower grades of Catholic school, so I don't understand why

you would want to do that. Cathleen, I was curious. It's not a lot of reading really, but I found it very interesting. How so? It doesn't interest me.

What I found interesting is how the story fits with what we know today. How did Jesus know, two thousand years ago, that we would be faced with the possibility of destroying ourselves and offered us a way out? What have you been smoking, Alexi? You know I don't smoke weed. I think someone is at the door. I'll go let them in. OK, but you had better come back. I'll explain more later.

Alexi went to the door and it was Allen, Sue, Jenn and Billy bringing Annie, their neighbor, all ready for a party. They each had a little wrapped gift. Hi! Megan and Nick are upstairs. I will tell them you are here. Come on in. Billy spied the tree-sized pile of gifts and his eyes lit up. Thanks, Alexi. We know where the closet is for our coats. We will make ourselves at home. Sue pointed Billy toward the closet just as Cathleen walked into the room. Billy forgot the closet. He was instantly fascinated by the long black hair and beautiful eyes.

Billy, close your mouth. Hi, I'm Allen, and this is Sue and our son, Billy, and I guess you know Jenn and Annie. I'm Cathleen, friend of Alexi, and yes, Jenn and Annie and I got to know each other a couple of days ago when we were talking about each other's babies. It was just talk, Dad, Jenn quickly added.

The Baxter clan and Annie spread out and made themselves comfortable. Then it was Sue's widowed mother, Dorothy, at the door, followed by Allen's parents, Ruth and Pop. Moments later three Brothers came in, but Ed, the fourth, had to work at the hospital. Megan was seeing to everyone when Nick came in from the kitchen. Megan, I forgot the dinner rolls. I was going to bake some but now it's too late. I'll watch things in the kitchen. Go to the store and get what you need. Take Billy with you. He looks like he feels kind of left out. OK. It will only take me a few minutes, and Nick grabbed his jacket and went out the door with Billy in tow. Cathleen had never been up close with Brothers in brown robes before so she had lots of questions. Then Father Mike, the final expected guest, came in wearing a Cubs jacket, which took the conversation in a new direction.

Nick was still getting use to the quick responses from their new small car, and also being in a hurry, he didn't see the woman and little child until it was almost too late. Nick hit the brakes and the woman grabbed the child, and in the process she fell down onto the rough pavement. Nick jumped out to say he was sorry he didn't see them and to help her up.

Nick noticed that they were poorly dressed for the early winter chill, and he could see that the woman's feet were dirty in her worn flip-flops. The child was maybe four years old, but small, so it was hard to tell age but the face and tangled hair said it was a little girl. I'm sorry I scared you. I was in a hurry and didn't see you. Are you hurt? It looks like you may have scraped your knee. I'm going to the store just down the street, but I can take you to wherever you are going.

I'm OK. Thank you for stopping. Some people wouldn't; and she pulled the little girl close to her. We are going to the store to warm up and get some chips and soda, so you don't need to take us anyplace. OK, but if you like, you can get into my warm car and we can go to the store together. He turned to the little girl and asked, what's your name? Princess. Mommy calls me her little Princess. Well, Princess, you and your Mommy get in the warm car and we will go to the store; then to the mother, are you sure I can't take you someplace? It's cold today. We don't really have anyplace to go.

Nick had heard this story many times so "we don't have anyplace to go" was way too familiar. Nick's response was automatic. If you have no place to go then come with me to my house; we are having a party today. Looking directly at the little girl he said, I bet you like parties, don't you? She answered by looking at her mother with that "please Mom" look that little girls are so good at. We aren't dressed for a party. I would not feel right with a bunch of nice people.

They would love to have you join them. I know them well, and you and Princess would be welcome. Just then he remembered his promise to Megan that he would not bring any more street people home, "at least for awhile". But this was different, wasn't it he reasoned? He hoped. OK, we will go to your party. The warm car will feel good. Billy was watching all of this with big eyes.

When Nick and Rosemary (that was her name) and Princess came in the door there was a moment of uncomfortable quiet, but immediately Nick proceeded, I would like you all to meet my new friends, Rosemary and Princess. They helped me get what we needed at the grocery store.

Nick could read Megan's look – all my dishes had better be there at the end of the day! But then her look softened and she walked over to Nick's "two new friends" and gave each of them a hug. Annie looked at Jenn and said, isn't it time for us to get ready for the party? Cathleen jumped up and said, "me too"? and they surrounded the new guests and ushered them up the steps. Nick held up his hands as if praying and looked around the room and said, they didn't have anyplace to go so I brought them home.

Allen's father, Pop, who was never at a loss for words said, well I'll be damned. I never thought I'd see the day. Allen's mother, Ruth, gave him an elbow and Pop quieted down. Then Nick said to Megan, the store's bakery was out of dinner rolls so I got three loaves of fresh bread. That's OK, Nick. We will use them. That may even be better.

Alexi spoke up. You bring people home all the time don't you, Nick? Well, I did at the friary, but it hasn't been as easy here. It's still something I like to do. Sue's mother, Dorothy, wanted to talk about the widows group and how last Saturday they had all dressed up for Betty who was going on a cruise. Ruth wanted to hear more, and Sue was helping Megan rearrange the table to include the new guests and two candles that Megan decided she wanted. She also got out a tray of small cups and asked Sue to put one at each place.

Soon enough the posse of young women brought their new guests down to the living room. The transformation was astounding. They were clean and dressed. Rosemary, in one of Megan's dresses, Megan wondered to herself – well why not? Everyone realized that Rosemary was really a very attractive woman. And Princess had on what was to be Cathleen's out-on-the-town very short grey party dress that had the straps pinned up so that it was a pretty floor length on Princess.

Annie said, we couldn't find any shoes to fit. We assured them that no one would care if they were barefooted. Don't they look like they are ready for a party? Rosemary started to cry and Jenn handed her a tissue. There was a loud murmur of approval around the room and places were made for Rosemary and Princess to sit. Then people noticed that Nick was taking off his shoes. Dorothy, who thought Nick was a saint who should still be wearing his brown robe, took her shoes off, Alexi was next, and then the Brothers, then everyone began taking off their shoes.

Cathleen took the initiative and gathered up the shoes and placed them next to the gifts. Megan and Sue came in from the kitchen and stopped. Their quick wits saved them from the need for an explanation and they slipped out of their shoes and placed them on the pile. Pop opened his mouth and Ruth gave him the elbow. Megan said, come to dinner.

Megan got everyone seated at the table and asked Nick if he would light the two candles, "please". My grandmother was Jewish and on this Sabbath day before Christmas we will pray in her tradition, and prepare for Jesus' coming.

Megan took one of the loaves of bread Nick brought home, raised it up and prayed, *Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth*, and she passed the bread and asked each person to take a piece and hold it.

Two bottles of wine had been placed on the table and she invited the guest nearest to each bottle to lift them up, then she prayed, *Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who creates the fruit of the vine*, and she instructed her guests to fill the little cups with wine at each place.

We remember Jesus on the Saturday before Christmas. We remember that his family was forced to leave their home to travel to a far place while Mary was pregnant. So we remember Jesus the helpless child.

Please dip your bread in your wine and take a small bite.

Megan waited, then, *we remember Jesus and his family, having no place to stay, and therefore, they had to sleep with the animals. So we remember Jesus the homeless person.*

Please dip your bread in your wine and take another small bite.

Megan waited, then, *we remember Jesus and his family forced by Herod into fleeing to Egypt for Jesus' safety. So we remember Jesus the refugee.*

Please dip your bread in your wine and take another small bite.

Megan waited, *we remember Jesus came to us as a small helpless child, a homeless child, a refugee child, who came to bring us love and offer us hope.* Please dip your bread and this time do not take a bite but instead pass it to your neighbor on your right. Now I invite you all to share the bread and wine.

Megan waited, this time longer, making sure no one was rushed. Then she invited Father Mike. Father Mike, would you offer thanks and a blessing over us and over the food, please?

Would you take hands, please? *I invite all of us here to come together with an attitude of gratitude for one another and the food that has been prepared for us in such a loving way, and we offer our thanks in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

There were several Amen's around the table and Megan gave her final instructions, pass to the right, please. If there is something you can't reach ask your neighbor, and Nick cooked plenty of everything so enjoy.

Princess was Cathleen's "neighbor to the right" so she was being sure that her new friend in her, Cathleen's, party dress got everything she wanted on her plate. When the green beans were passed Princess shook her head and the beans went on their way to Rosemary on her right, who took a double helping.

Father Mike was Megan's neighbor so he asked her quietly, where did you find the final prayers you used? I would like to have a copy. I know the Berakhah, but not those prayers. You will have to give me my job back, Father Mike, because they are only in my head. Maybe that can happen some day, but for now would you write them down for me? Sure. Pass the mashed potatoes; we are holding up the dinner. Then enjoying her role as prayer leader, there are glasses for wine next to your water glasses. Please help yourself. Dorothy wanted to know what the Brothers did all day, and Alexi was thinking about his Jewish grandparents.

THE VILLAGE

Cathleen didn't really know these people except Alexi, and she had met Jenn once on campus, but she fit right in. Pop was afraid of Ruth's elbow, but he found himself sitting next to Father Mike, whom he liked, so they were talking religion. Father Mike reminded him that his door was always open. Nick was getting compliments on his green bean casserole. Dorothy, probably on purpose, found herself in between two Brothers and loved it. Allen looked at Sue, who was next to Rosemary and their look said – we would like to know her story, but they didn't ask. No one did. Nick made an announcement,

we have ice cream or cake or both. There were a few “ice creams” and a lot of “boths” and everyone was pleased in a mellow sort of way that doesn’t happen often enough, some thought. Finally Megan took charge.

Nick and I are celebrating our first Christmas together and we wanted all of you to join us. We needed a village to celebrate with us, and then we thought of having a Bethlehem village. That’s why we asked you all to bring a figure for the village. It’s time to bring the village to life. Who would like to go first?

The Brothers surprised everyone by saying, we helped build the village and we would like to put our figures in first, and they produced a cloth bag that no one had noticed. Then on the hillside they had built they created a flock of sheep and the shepherds to “watch over them”. The figures showed the work of many evenings. They were beautifully carved.

Pop Baxter had caught the mood. We are “B’s” so I wanted to bring two bulls, but Ruth said ox would be better so I was overruled, and he placed the two ox figures next to the stable. And so it went. There was a shopkeeper, a carpenter, a woman with a water jar, camels and donkeys. Finally there appeared Mary and Joseph. Allen flipped a switch and there was a spot of light on the stable. Everyone was delighted except Princess.

Where is Baby Jesus? she asked. For a moment no one said anything. Then Megan said, well we will have to look for him, won’t we? Let’s open our packages. Do I have a package to open? Of course you do, Princess. Here it is with your name on it.

Nick wondered how Megan had managed that, but said nothing. Princess immediately opened her package. Inside was a rolled up pair of colorful socks. Princess held them up for everyone to see and a little figure dropped out. Princess realized what it was and so did everyone else. Megan said, would you like to put Baby Jesus in his place? Princess didn’t need to answer. She took the figure to the stable and placed it between Mary and Joseph, and everyone cheered.

As people were preparing to leave Cathleen said, Rosemary and Princess can have my room tonight and I’ll sleep here on the couch, and it was agreed. Finally it was only Cathleen and Megan left in the living room with two glasses of wine. Cathleen asks, how did you do that, meaning of course, the gift for Princess? Wouldn’t it be better if no one ever knew? Cathleen leaned back and took a sip then said, Yes, I agree, it would be better if it was your secret, but I would really like to get to know you better. OK, let’s start. We have all night.

MORNING AFTER

Nick came down to the kitchen and found Rosemary and Princess. Everyone else was still asleep so he thought, and this would be a good time to talk. Good morning. I’ll fix us some breakfast, but I would like to help if you would tell me a little about your situation. And he put the coffee on.

It was wonderful of you to bring us to your home yesterday. Princess smiled and nodded agreement. We ran away and had no place to go. Are you from around here? Do you have any family? No, we are not from here. I had hoped to find a niece here, but I haven't been able to find her. Tell me a little more. I couldn't take it anymore, and he was beginning to hurt Princess too. I just couldn't take it any more.

What I suggest is that I take you to the women's shelter. It's where they provide temporary safe housing for victims of domestic violence. They can also help you find your family member, if that's what you want.

Would I have to tell my whole story, like where I came from? I'm afraid he will find me. They are very concerned about providing a safe place. Only a few people know where this house is. I know because I use to work for the Church.

OK. Will you take us there? Yes. As soon as we have some breakfast. Princess what would you like for breakfast? I like jelly toast. Nick fixed toast and eggs and put the jelly jar on the table. Then he put a note on the table. Taking our guests to a safe place. Be back soon. That is what Alexi found when he came down to find he had the kitchen all to himself.

He noticed there was coffee and he helped himself to a cup. Yesterday was still going around in his head as he took his coffee into the living room. He found the little switch and turned on the spot of light that Allen had installed. Then he sat down to think in the quiet. Alexi began to think, *Megan and Nick are welcoming people. They took him and Cathleen into their home for their holiday season then Nick brought home two homeless people. That was a new experience. Then the girls cleaned them all up for dinner like it was something they did every day. And everyone else made them feel welcome. I really like these people.*

Then Cathleen woke up from the couch. She went to the kitchen and found the coffee. Morning to you! That was some party, wasn't it? Cathleen, I like these people, but Rosemary and Princess made it special, don't you think? My party dress never looked better; she looked so cute in it. They are already gone. Really! I slept through and didn't hear a thing. Where did they go? The note from Nick said he was taking them to someplace safe. Safe you say? That tells its own story, doesn't it? It does. Megan came in and joined them.

We were just talking about yesterday. It was a grand party, wasn't it? It was, Cathleen. I see someone turned on the stable light. That was me, confessed Alexi. I like your Bethlehem village, especially since everyone in it is Jewish.

Nick came in with a rush of cold air. I took Rosemary and Princess to the women's shelter. The shelter people remembered me and that helped so they have a safe place to stay with some help to get started here if that's what they want. Nick looked at the clock. We will leave for Sunday mass in about 30 minutes for whoever wants to go. Megan headed for the bathroom but the other two didn't move. After a moment Alexi answered for both of them. We will enjoy the quiet while you and Megan go to Church.

Is it OK if I put on a fresh pot of coffee? Cathleen, do you know where the tea is kept? Yes, I do. We will be fine here, Nick. Is there anything you want us to do? No, Cathleen. You two can relax and make some fresh coffee. We can talk about lunch when we get home, and Nick went to get ready for Church.

After the churchgoers left Cathleen said, can we continue our conversation from yesterday? Refresh my memory. You said something about Jesus knowing all those years ago that we would be in trouble today and he offered a way out. What were you talking about?

It's not complicated. What is more important, me or we?

OK, so there is a lot of talk today about individualism verses the common good. I get that. What do you think Jesus said? Jesus was all about a completely new way of living that puts the common good first.

Alexi, that's how we humans have been so successful. We cooperate. Any cultural anthropologist will tell you that. I heard the coffee click off. OK, so our success has depended on cooperation, but it's different today. When civilizations failed in the past, and they all eventually did, there were other places for people to go, to restart or be absorbed. Today is all about globalized everything. If we fail at this, there is no place else to go. That's different, I agree, but what's Jesus have to do with it?

I don't know how, but it's like he saw it coming and he said you must imitate me to survive. That's what I got from reading about him.

Do you think he was right? You are talking about a really radical selfless attitude. That's martyr talk. I've never been a big fan of Christian martyrs. Maybe we should talk about something else. OK, but we are not special in the natural scheme of things. Evolution is trial and error, you know that, and we are no exception. We are not going to get a pass just because we walk and talk. You are really doom and gloom today, Alexi. Is that the Russian tragic personality coming out?

Could be, but there is a way out, if I understand Jesus. That's my big picture from my first reading of the Gospels. He said, live this way and survive. All the rest is just fluff, and there are few Christians I know who get it. And if we don't get it, what then? Think giant lizards. The door opened and Nick and Megan walked in. Hi guys! What have you been talking about? We brought home donuts.

DONUT TIME

Nick and Megan came back from mass with a giant box of donuts. They set the box in the center of the table, took off their jackets, and got themselves a cup of coffee. Cathleen and Alexi didn't need an invitation to the table. Nick renewed his question. So what were you guys talking about? I saw some long faces.

Oh, it's my gloomy Russian friend here. He thinks we are all going to die if we don't all become martyrs. Megan responded, isn't that the same thing? Even gloomy Alexi laughed. Nick, we have had this conversation before. I don't dispute Alexi's science. Civilizations come to an end and species go extinct, and we increase those risks by taking things for granted. It's like our own health, oh these double chocolate ones are really good, if we don't take care of it we lose it. That got a laugh from Megan as Nick reached for his second double chocolate donut.

Alexi wanted to defend himself. I know the science and when I read the Jesus stories, I thought I saw a grand plan to save us from ourselves. Nick responded, I guess it's there, Alexi, but so is Jesus' concern for individual people. He was very compassionate and personal, and that's what I have always wanted to be. I want people to know that they are not alone so I reach out to them and I bring people together. Could it be that you missed that part in your reading?

When we met, Nick, I thought you were a real Christian who lived what I had been reading. Now you tell me that it's not important to you? Cathleen ventured, I think you two are talking past each other. These twists are my favorite and there is only one left. Is it OK if I set it on my napkin? I saw Megan looking at it. You're right, Cathleen. I had my eye on it, but I will be happy with that glazed one, and took the glazed one and sat it in front of her coffee. Nick again, now that we have laid claim to our favorite donuts I want to say that there is another risk that I see in Alexi's interpretation, and that is the risk of turning Jesus' teaching into an ideology that sees individual people as unimportant. Our, sometimes, rule heavy Church is an example of how that can happen.

Cathleen was trying to catch Nick's direction and pushed him. Do you mean that I am more important than the rule that says I have to go to mass on Sunday? Short answer, yes. I would like you to participate with me at Sunday mass, but I like you just the way you are. There are so many lonely people and loneliness can be a terrible feeling, and Cathleen, there is no need for it. We just need to look out for each other. And Alexi, if we do that the big picture will take care of itself.

Cathleen began to cry and Megan reached over and put her hand on top of Cathleen's. No one ever told me that I was more important than good grades and following rules, and keep your hand away from me twist. Alexi took his second cake with sprinkles and went into the living room. Nick watched him go with a small smile.

MEGAN

Jenn and Annie had picked up the young people and took them to see Millennium Park and the Loop. The house was quiet. Nick, I feel really tired. Why don't you go get a nap? There isn't anything that needs to be done. I think I'll lay down on the couch. OK, I'll get you a pillow and blanket, and he went to get them. By the time he got back Megan was almost asleep. He fluffed the pillow and covered her with the blanket then went and sat in Buddy's chair. The cat jumped up on his lap and Nick lay back and he began to think about the past few days and the Christmas holiday that lay ahead.

The village was a good idea he thought. So was the Sabbath before Christmas party, and so was inviting the college kids in for the holidays, and so was Rosemary and Princess. All good ideas, but maybe too much. He had seen the lines around Megan's eyes when she told him how tired she felt. There was no maybe in the way she felt. It had been too much. He put his head against the chair and soon he too was asleep.

The cat went on alert and Nick woke up. Had there been a sound? He wasn't sure, but he knew Buddy heard something. Then there was a light tap on the door. That must have been what he heard, and he gently pushed Buddy off and went toward the door. When he opened it there stood Rosemary and Princess. He must have looked startled because Rosemary said, oh, did we wake you? I'm sorry.

Nick had a thought that was almost completely new to him. I don't want to let them in. But he said, come on it out of the cold. We don't want to bother you. We just wanted to say thanks and Princess has something she would like to give you, and the child stepped forward and held out a soft toy mouse. It was then that Nick looked past Rosemary and saw the car at the curb. Did someone bring you? Yes, I found my niece and she has taken us in until I can get work, and we owe it all to your kindness. That's why we wanted to thank you.

It has catnip inside, said a small voice. Nick refocused on Princess and the toy mouse. Buddy will like the mouse. Thank you, Princess. He likes me. He sat on my lap. Can I come see him sometimes? Nick took the mouse and said, I'm sure Buddy would like that. And Rosemary took Princess by the hand and they went back to the car and left Nick standing at the door.

Nick went back to the chair and sat down and thought. I didn't want to let them in. That's not who I am. Some things need to change. Buddy had smelled the mouse and was trying to get it out of Nick's hand. Nick tossed it to the floor and Buddy pounced on it. Megan stirred. Was someone at the door? It was only a mouse. I hope you didn't let it in, and Megan drifted back to sleep. Well, I did let it in, thought Nick, but? Buddy had no second thoughts about it. He loved his new Christmas mouse.

EVENING

Jenn called while you were sleeping, and they will be having dinner at a place she likes so we have the evening off. That's nice, Nick. We get the evening off you say. The nap helped, but I am still tired. The village was a good idea. Yes, I liked it. Having the kids here for the holidays was a good idea. Yes, where are you going with this, Nick? The Sabbath dinner and even inviting in homeless people were good ideas, but what Nick? The "but" is that it was too much, too busy. It made you tired and made me wonder about my decisions. What decisions are you talking about? Megan was now wide-awake.

I don't mean decisions about us. I love being married to you. Are you sure? You need to explain yourself. We have known each other for a long time. You even kept my schedule. You know I intentionally didn't over-schedule my days. I wanted time to enjoy

life and be spontaneous to new people. I wanted a calm life that flowed smoothly and you helped me achieve that. I loved my beautiful fish and lunch with the homeless.

You worry me, Nick. It sure sounds like you are having second thoughts about us. No, no, I need you, and I want your help to make good decisions that don't make you overtired and me feeling over-committed. There's more coming, Nick. There's Christmas and New Year's and Epiphany. Then do I need to remind you a child in July? You may not like busy but busy is what we have coming towards us.

I feel it Megan. What are we going to do? I am not ready to become part of the hurry, hurry world. I don't think you can have it both ways, Nick. I think we need to take this in little bites. What are we going to do for Christmas? No big party. OK, a quiet Christmas Eve at home. Tell stories of Christmas past. Some quiet music. Maybe we watch the Grinch on TV. Check. What if we go visiting on Christmas Day? Make a list and check it twice. Include the homeless shelter. I like your humor, Nick. We are going to be OK, aren't we? Of course we are. Now I say we go to dinner and a movie to start the New Year.

Keep talking, Nick. What about Epiphany? We put the Three Kings in the village and invite friends for cake and ice cream. Cathleen and Alexi will have gone back to school. What if the friends we invite are the widows group? That will be our meeting for the week. I like it. What about this baby that's coming in July? Can't send him back can we? Him? That's what they told me last visit. When were you going to tell me! When the time was right. Timing is everything, Nick.

CHRISTMAS EVE

Megan and Nick stuck to their plan of a quiet Christmas Eve at home. They were surprised, however, when Cathleen and Alexi said they would spend the evening with them. It seemed that the other young people had "family" commitments. They were surprised a second time when Cathleen and Alexi brought out gifts for each of them. Cathleen took the lead.

When we were in the city we bought you a couple of small things. We hope you like them. You have been so welcoming, and we knew we were a lot of extra work. And she brought out two small wrapped gifts. This one is for Megan. Thank you both. May I open it now? Yes, please do. Megan carefully opened the gift, removing the ribbon and saving it. Inside was a bubble wrapped statue of Mary. Megan had seen many statues of Mary, but never one like this. Mary was obviously very pregnant. Megan couldn't hold back a tear. She is lovely. I will keep her always.

It was Alexi's idea. He said there must be such a statue and we searched until we found one. He said he knew you would like it. Thank you, Alexi. It's wonderful to have a friend like you, and she went over and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

Cathleen handed Nick his gift. It looked like it might be a book, but when Nick opened it he discovered an icon of the Trinity, and the three images were obviously women. This

is very special. I know it will go in my counseling room. It was Cathleen's idea. She said she knows that you have a special concern for women because you like to talk about your widows group, and the way you brought home Rosemary and Princess. She thought you would like the icon. I really do. Thank you both. We have gifts for you two, but we were saving them for Christmas morning. I think we should give them to you now. What do you think?

Together they gave an enthusiastic "Now!" so Megan went to the kitchen and brought out two packages from their hiding place. Both packages looked the same, but Megan was careful to get them to the right person. Cathleen opened hers first. It was a nicely framed group picture of everyone at the Sabbath dinner table with Cathleen nicely centered in the picture. Alexi found he also had the same framed picture except he was carefully centered and smiling. Then Cathleen noticed something taped to the back of her picture.

In an envelope were two South Shore tickets good on any date. Alexi found the same. The invitation was clear enough. We want you to remember us and we want you both to come back, Nick explained the obvious. Aren't you two going to exchange gifts? Cathleen wanted to know.

Megan and Nick looked at each other and with a silent agreement they got out their own gifts. A long slinky sheath of almost see-through material that brought a little blush to Megan's cheeks, and a pair of sandals for Nick that he had to try on. Then Alexi took something out of his pocket and handed it to Cathleen. She closed her hand over it and put it in her pocket. Nick and Megan looked at Cathleen clearly disappointed that they didn't get to see what was exchanged. Cathleen saw their disappointment and smiled. Megan told me that timing is everything and Alexi's gift will have to wait.

CHRISTMAS DAY

Nick was the last to go to bed on Christmas Eve, and the first to get up on Christmas morning. As he had turned off the lights he went to the village to turn off the spot of light on the stable, then decided to leave it on. There was a small chance, he thought, that a passer-by may see it and remember why this was a special night.

In the morning Nick put on his apron and a chef's hat he had purchased for the occasion, and he went to work in the kitchen. First on his list was a raspberry coffeecake. Then he arranged a selection of cheese, ham, onions and veggies for his "omelets to order". By now the odor of fresh coffee and the baking had made its way upstairs, and Megan drifted down to the smell. Nick, you have out done yourself this morning. I think I will keep you. Should I wake the others? I'm glad you like me, but no need to wake them. It will be breakfast to order whenever they come down. I just started the bacon. My guess is the smell of bacon frying will do the trick.

It wasn't long before Nick's prediction was proven right. Cathleen came in with tasseled hair and headed straight for the coffee pot surprising Nick. What no tea this morning?

A sip of coffee to start the day is allowed. What would you like with your omelet? Everything, and I love the hat, Nick. Everything it is. Will you be going to mass this morning? If so, I would like to go along, Cathleen asked. Me too. I don't want to stay here all by myself. It was Alexi, who looked badly in need of a shower to straighten out his beard.

Megan revealed the schedule. We will go to eleven o'clock mass, then to Allen and Sue's for a late lunch. Everyone agreed to her schedule. She was use to setting schedules and rather enjoyed it. After breakfast Alexi headed for the shower. Megan and Cathleen went to comfortable chairs waiting their turns to shower, and Nick was finishing in the kitchen. Megan had to ask.

What did Alexi give you last night, or is it a secret? If you would rather not say, it's OK. It's a Claddagh ring, and she took it out of her pocket and handed it to Megan. It's beautiful. I love the hands and heart. He wants us to have the kind of friendship that I am not ready for and neither is he, but he doesn't know it. I noticed that you didn't give it back. You noticed did you? Well, I didn't say no; I just said not yet. I like him, Cathleen. Me too, but not yet. I think I heard Alexi come out of the bathroom. I'll go in next if that's OK. That's OK. Here is your ring back. Keep it safe. You may want to wear it someday.

Megan sat alone and remembered when she was Cathleen's age and should have said, not yet. She recovered from the mistake and now she had a wonderful man, she thought, as he walked into the room. She stood up and gave him a long whole body hug. It's the hat isn't it? Definitely the hat, Nick. There were only a scattering of people at the eleven o'clock mass. The four friends sat quietly in their pew together at communion time, each in their own thoughts, trying to connect with each other and with what they had just heard read to them. *The angel said to them, do not be afraid, for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.*

ALLEN AND SUE'S HOUSE ON CHRISTMAS DAY

The conversation in the car was unusually quiet as Megan drove them from the church to Allen and Sue's house. At the door the four of them were warmly welcomed. Even, usually quiet Billy jumped in and asked Alexi if he knew how to play foosball. When the answer was no, Billy knew he had a new victim and took Alexi down to the game room. Sue's mother, Dorothy, was sitting quietly, but gave Nick a big smile as he went to greet her. Cathleen saw the huge Christmas tree.

Glory be, I never saw a tree like that in the house! Sue responded, they always look smaller at the tree yard. We love it even though it is really way too big. Come sit down; would you like a cup of tea? Irish Breakfast? Perfect. Megan, would you like something? No, thank you. I love the evergreen smell, and she joined Nick and Dorothy. Nick asked, where's Allen? He's at the grill in the back yard. We are going to have burgers and chips for lunch, or is it crisps? with a wink at Cathleen.

Dorothy leaned against Nick and said, I wish Bill were here with us. He always loved Christmas. What was Christmas like at your house? Nick wanted Dorothy to remember her good Christmases. Well, when Sue was little we would wait until she was asleep and then Bill would bring in the tree. We would spend most of the night decorating and wrapping presents. But it was all worth it when we saw the joy on her face in the morning.

Megan, would you like to do that for our children? The word “children” got Megan’s attention, but she only said, I think it would be a great idea, Nick. Dorothy, what do you do when the kids get older? Sue figured it out so we made her Mom and Dad’s little helper. I think she liked that even better. Dorothy was now fully engaged in the conversation, and Nick moved away to check on Allen at the grill.

I think you like grilling burgers. I do. It brings out my primitive side. How have you been? I mean personally. I know what you mean, Nick. My PTSD doesn’t bother me, although sometimes I have that “see everything at once” kind of experience. But nothing bad has happened. I remember well how you cautioned me that it could all come back, but I sleep well. I always like hearing that. Too many vets spent too many deployments in dangerous places. I like my burger well done.

Well done it is. How are things with you and Megan? That was quite a life change for you both. You and Sue helped me a lot. I am careful about what I say about how Megan looks, but I really think she looks great so it’s easy to say it. But I am still not getting the exercise you recommended. Make a New Year’s resolution, Nick. If I can help, let me know. What about the door you wanted? Megan and I are still discussing it.

OK, the guys and I can help. Call the crowd to the table. Your burger will be the burnt one. Only kidding. As Nick was calling people to the table he felt something on his leg. It was a little grey kitten so he said to Sue, I see you have a new member in your family. Yes, if we could only keep her out of the Christmas tree, but at least she stays home, not like some people. Where is Jenn? She and Annie went to help at the homeless shelter. Nick smiled.

NEW YEAR’S EVE

Jenn and Annie had come over to spend part of the evening with Nick and Megan before going to a big New Year’s Eve party. At least that was why they said they were there but everyone, including Alexi, suspected that he was at least part of the draw for the evening. No one said it but everyone knew. That made for some interesting group dynamics.

Alexi assumed his unspoken but prominent place and led the conversation. How long do you leave the Bethlehem village in place? he asked, looking for a neutral subject. Megan felt it was her responsibility to answer. This is the first year we have had a village for

Christmas so we haven't talked much about how long to leave it in place, but at least until Epiphany.

The Feast of the Three Kings? Yes, Alexi. Although I have gotten fond of it, and I think I will miss it when we put it away for next year. What do you think, Nick? I really like it too, but I hope to put my counseling room there. Nick wasn't sure that this subject should be discussed "in public" but he had said it kind of off hand. Megan didn't miss his point.

I have resisted because if Nick puts his counseling room on the sun porch it means another door, which I think would be ugly. You know sort of commercial looking. Jenn thought this was a group discussion even though that wasn't really what Nick and Megan had in mind. What if you arranged the furniture so someone coming in would be sort of funneled onto the sun porch? Annie caught the ball and offered, what about a decorative screen to guide people? Would that work?

Cathleen and Alexi seconded the "furniture and maybe screen" idea and everyone but Megan thought the group decision-making process was working. Megan wasn't ready to let go of what she was sure was her decision to make. So she said, those are possible ideas. Nick and I will work it out. The young people felt deflated. They thought they had solved a problem in a helpful way but now it seemed they hadn't. Alexi charged ahead.

Do you think the story of the Three Kings is a literal story? Immediately, everyone had an opinion, but Nick spoke first. I like the way the story has them out-smarting old King Herod but the message of the story is that Jesus' birth has a universal quality. Alexi responded back. That was the line that struck me at mass on Christmas, "great joy for all people" but do you think there were Three Kings? Cathleen needed to say something.

I hadn't been to Church in years but I liked the "for all people" part of the message. It's not important to me if there were Three Kings or not. Annie wasn't going to be left out. Is this just a curiosity, Alexi, or is it important to you? Where is the "joy" part of the message? That's what I want to know. I'm sorry, Annie. It wasn't really a serious question. I was trying to create conversation away from feeling bad that I will be leaving and going back to school. I really like being with you all.

A NEW YEAR'S EVE CELEBRATION

Jenn and Annie took Alexi and Cathleen off to a big downtown New Year's Eve party leaving Megan and Nick alone with the cat. Megan offers an opinion. Do you think we should have gone with them? Staying home with you seemed like a better idea, Megan. I am glad to have some quiet time. Nick, do you make New Year's resolutions? I never did, Megan, but I have encouraged other people to make some changes that I thought would help them. People seldom keep their big resolutions, Nick. I know but sometimes I have thought that making a resolution may head a person in the right direction. Like what? We aren't talking about diet and exercise are we? The world's basements are full

of unused exercise machines and lord knows how much money is wasted on unused gym memberships. All true, Megan. What I have asked people to consider is changing to be more present to the moment and at the same time be more present to the people around them. We are often in our own little bubble, aren't we? and often in a hurry instead of being in the here and now.

What do we have here to celebrate with? We have an unopened bottle of Baileys. Does that go with chocolate chip cookies? I don't think we have any cookies, Nick. I could bake some. I love your zest for life, Nick, but can we just be present to one another? It's the advice you give people, right? OK, open the Baileys and tell me all about yourself. You know me like a book, Nick. I know, but I don't know the beginning chapter.

How do the Franciscans deal with spending so much time together? Do they know everything about each other? Megan, we respect one another's space and private thoughts. We also value silence. We don't need to fill the air with talk. I like that, Nick; maybe we could be more like that. The next chapter is more important than the first, Nick. I guess you are right, and the best part is that we will write it together.



LIFE

MEGAN

Nick had dropped Cathleen and Alexi off at the South Shore Station and picked up some donuts on the way home. Really, Nick, we should not be eating donuts. My doctor doesn't want me to gain a lot of weight, and you talked about healthy living for yourself. I know but I only got a half a dozen this time. Besides, I like the way you look. That's nice, Nick, but if I get much bigger I'll look top heavy. No more donuts. OK, but we could cut out potatoes instead. NO more donuts, Nick. Did the kids get off OK?

Yes. I encouraged them to learn all they can about why people move and what happens when they do. Alexi is really popular with the young women, isn't he? It was fun to watch but he really favors Cathleen. I think they would make a good couple. How do you know that? She told me that she had told Alexi "not yet". Smart kid. I like them both. Can I have the double chocolate? Sure. Get us some coffee. I want to talk about our door to the sun room.

Nick came back with two coffees and took his favorite donut and waited. I don't want our house to look like a commercial establishment, and I don't want to spend our vacation travel money fixing up the basement. Megan, what did you think of the kids' ideas of rearranging the furniture or using a screen? That would be a quick, almost no cost, solution. OK. After we take down the village you can bring up your fish tank, rearrange the furniture and have your counseling room. We can solve problems can't we, Megan? With a little help from our friends.

On the way home I got a call from Father Mike. I really wish you wouldn't talk on the phone while you are driving. Yes, I know and you are right, but I have been waiting for his call. He told me that my Franciscan superior gave me a positive review and passed the forms on to the auxiliary bishop and that's where they sit. What can you do about it? Your request to be released could sit there forever. I don't think there is anything I can do.

Well, there is something I can do. I know the auxiliary bishop's secretary. She would tell me what's happening and maybe what you could do about it. Megan, you don't want to get her in some trouble with the auxiliary bishop. We know each other, and she knows that I will not say anything to the wrong person. Whatever I tell you must be confidential too. I keep finding new reasons to like you, Megan. Push the donut box over this way. I am looking forward to the widows group. Will Betty be back from her cruise?

I think so. That should be interesting. What have you got planned for today? I know I'm going to need a nap. My doctor says for me to be sure to get plenty of rest. Do you think she means complete uninterrupted naps? Well, she knows how I got pregnant so I don't think so. Nick pushed the donuts away. I really do need to stay healthy, don't I? Oh, for God's sake, Nick, bring a donut and take a nap with me. For the third time today Nick knew he had married the right woman.

SAMANTHA

Dorothy was the first to arrive for the widows group Epiphany party. Megan and Nick had seen Sue's mother at least twice over the holidays but today something was different. Megan had a chance to ask before Nick came into the room. You look very nice today. Have you done something different? Why yes, Megan. It's nice that you noticed. It's a different hairstyle and I had her add some highlights. Do you like it? I really do. It makes you look younger. Funny you say that because it makes me feel younger. I think it's the Betty influence. I enjoyed dressing up for her going on a cruise party. That was a good idea. And I realized that I could enjoy the holidays with family and friends. I didn't think I could, without Bill, but I did.

Nick had come in and heard the end of the conversation, and was very pleased, with his part in Dorothy's positive holidays, but mostly with her new found strength. The voices at the door said the rest of the group had arrived. The new Nick had put out a platter of grapes and apple slices and the group gathered. But there was no Betty. They had all come to hear about Betty's cruise experience and now it looked like she wouldn't be there. It was a relief when they heard her voice at the door with someone they didn't know.

Hi, this is my friend, Sam. Her name is Samantha but she likes Sam. Room was made for Sam and the questions were only barely contained in everyone's mouth. Finally Betty made the introduction. Sam and I were sitting at a big dinner table doing introductions when she said she was from Oak Park. I couldn't believe my ears. We got to know each other right away and spent the whole cruise telling stories, along with the swimming and parties and, well you know what cruises are like.

They really didn't know what cruises were like and Betty seemed to be leaving too much out. Sam decided she needed to fill in some, but not all, of the blank spaces. I'm not a widow but Betty wanted me to meet you. She said you were a great bunch of women, but I didn't expect to see a man. Nick thought he needed to say something, but he suddenly felt a little out of place so he said nothing. Sam went on. I have never been

married. It would never have worked for me. Listening to Betty's sad stories about her husband confirmed my choice of staying single. Dorothy thought she had to say something. My marriage wasn't perfect but I loved my husband. He was a good man.

I didn't mean that marriage couldn't work for some women but marriage wouldn't have worked for me, and I see other women like Betty who had bad experience with men so it didn't work for them either. Betty reached over and put what looked a little like a possessive hand on Sam's arm and said, you all have been wonderful friends but I don't feel like a widow anymore. I wanted you to meet Sam and I wanted you to understand. The phrase, "I wanted you to understand" hung in the air. The widows were surprised to say the least, but understanding settled on them like a warm blanket on a cold night.

The quiet only lasted until Nick recovered his footing. Betty I hope you and Sam will stay for our party. We will be putting the Three Kings in our Bethlehem village then having cake and ice cream with a prize in the cake. Betty looked at Sam, who gave her a "why not" look. We will stay.

Good. The story of the Three Wise Men or Kings or Magi has been handed down to us by the Gospel writer, Matthew. This 2000 year old story contains the message that the birth of Jesus was for everyone. Who would like to place the three statues in the village? Everyone was surprised when Sam spoke up and said, I would like to do it, if it's OK with everyone else. No one said a word so she picked up the statues, hesitated for a moment to orient herself, and placed them on the east side of the stable. Then she looked around at the silent group. I spent twelve years in Catholic school and twenty years in the convent. The Three Magi and I are old friends.

Nick saw an opening. Then you must know the hymn, "We Three Kings". Would you lead us and help us to sing it? Sam was a lovely alto and everyone found it easy to join in. Betty started crying. I was afraid to bring Sam to meet you. I didn't know how you would react to us. Thank you for being such good friends. It was time for hugs and everyone knew it. Megan waited until things quieted down and then brought out the cake and ice cream.

There is a bean someplace in the cake. Whoever gets the bean gets a prize. She cut the cake onto little plates and passed it around. The women gently began to eat until one exclaimed, I found it! It was Mary Beth who never said anything. I have never won anything before in my life! You would have thought she won the lottery instead of finding a black bean in her cake. Megan produced a little box. Everyone's eyes widened. They knew good things came in little boxes, and she handed the box to Mary Beth. Mary Beth opened the box and sat it down. Betty said, well tell us what's in it. It's a pair of pearl earrings. They are beautiful, but I have never worn earrings, and I don't have pierced ears. What will I do with them?

Dorothy thought that she knew the answer. You must get your ears pierced and wear them to our next gathering. You simply must. Isn't that the rule, ladies? Don't we have to wear the prize? They all caught the message and encouraged Mary Beth. Megan thought that she needed to explain the expensive prize. They were my mother's.

She loved to wear them and I know she would love to see you wear them, Mary Beth. Mary Beth picked them up and held them in her hands. OK, I'll do it, she said.

Ever-focused Nick saw another opening. I think we should change the name of this group. It was quiet for only a moment, then Dorothy said, how about Wise Women? Betty responded, how about Spirit-Filled Wise Women? And so SFWW was born on the Feast of Epiphany 2018.

After dinner of cabbage rolls and crusty bread, Megan's old recipe, Megan said, I talked to you know who, about your, you know what today. Is this a game? No, I just wanted to remind you that my conversation with my secretary friend was confidential. OK, I'll turn off my recorder. Seriously, Nick, she thinks her boss is very discouraged by your application to leave the order; he just doesn't want to deal with it. He remembers when people were leaving the priesthood and religious order in, what seemed like, large numbers, and he thought that this rush to the door, so to speak, was over. Now your papers showed up and he stuck them in a drawer.

He doesn't know me. Maybe that's part of the problem, Nick. He is a rules first person. We all know that. If he tried he could probably find some defect and send papers back. Apparently he hasn't done that. That seems like thin evidence but it's all we have to go on. Megan, what do you suggest? I don't want to knock on his door looking like I'm begging for something.

I suggest we change the subject from asking for something to telling your story. You have done a lot of good work and you are still doing really good work with the homeless people, with widows now the SFWW, and sliding scale counseling. Sliding scale is a good idea, but how will all that get to the right person? I know someone who knows someone. Give me some details, please.

I think your story would make a good positive human interest story that a new editor would be interested in. Heaven knows the Church could use some positive press. I don't like putting a spin on my life. But it wouldn't be a spin, Nick; it would be the truth. I can see the headline, "*Man takes his faith to the streets*". So you think you know someone who would be interested in my story? I do, and I know someone who would cut it out and put it onto someone's reading stack.

Father Mike could be sure the story gets to other high places. Nick, I think your story is the best chance we have to get your papers out of a drawer and signed. Would your writer friend interview said person, do you think? I'll suggest that may not be the best thing to do, but interview Father Mike, yes. Thanks for being so supportive. Well, I have a stake in this too. My hope is that I will be a positive part of your story and not the, you know what woman. Is that a new game or the same one? There is some ice cream left over from the party. So you would like some, I suppose? I'll fix a couple of dishes for us. You're a keeper, Nick. Glad to know that. It's always nice to be appreciated.

Dear Nick,

I still want to write "Brother Nick". I hope it is OK that you will always be Brother Nick to me.

My mother has told me about how you helped her years ago. She told me that she had been in your divorce support group and you told her she needed to be in the PTSD group, and that made all the difference for her. She really likes you, and so do I.

It was really nice of you and Megan to provide a place for Alexi to stay over the holidays, oh, and Cathleen too. It was the first time I saw the two of them really together. He likes her but she gently pushes him away, but I bet that will change.

Seeing them together has settled my crush on Alexi. I was too quick to see things just the way I wanted them. Dad says I get that from my mother and he likes impulsive women so I guess it's not all bad to be that way. Anyway, Alexi isn't my problem any more, and, in a way, thanks to you and Megan and your hospitality.

So does that open the door for me to join a religious order? I already know what you are going to say. What's the hurry? Right? Well, I have been getting little, and not so little, hints from people. You know like, why don't you visit our Mother House, or, have you thought about a vocation?

Brother Nick, there I did it again, it's like I have a sign on my back that says, possible future nun. Well, if I do, it hasn't discouraged all the young men from wanting to talk to me after class or sit at my table at the dining hall.

I like writing to you. I hope you don't mind. It would be really nice to see a friendly note in my mail.

*Your friend,
Jennifer*

Nick passed the mail to Megan with Jennifer's letter open for her to read. She read it and passed it back. I remember you working with Sue and Allen. I guess at least Sue still talks about it. Yes, they both had a bad case of PTSD and they helped each other. I remember telling Allen to slow down their relationship, but that did nothing to slow it down. It's great to see how well it has worked out for them.

Is Jenn just a normal nineteen-year-old Catholic girl or do you think she may really want to be a nun? Oh, I think it's normal with a little impetuosity added. I am starting to wonder if lifetime celibate vocations are going to go out of style. You should know,

Nick. Of course the commitment goes both ways. The religious order commits to taking care of you for life. Is anyone rethinking lifetime commitments? It seems like everyone is, but my commitment to you has no time limits. Nick, I know that or I wouldn't have married you.

“And the two shall become one flesh” it says in the Book of Genesis. Nick reached over and put his hand on Megan's growing belly and said, there's proof that Genesis is right. When will we feel the little guy move? Soon I think. They leaned against each other and thought about the new life that would certainly change theirs. When will we take down the village? Let's give it another few days. OK, but before Easter.

CHURCH

It had become a Sunday morning ritual to go to the pancake house for brunch after mass. Some Sundays it looked like the faces having breakfast were the same faces that everyone saw at Church. It was almost like the whole congregation had decided to eat breakfast together. Megan noticed all the familiar faces.

Nick, it's like the whole Church decided to eat breakfast together. Some parishes have breakfast after mass in their hall. I think it's a good idea. What's it been like for you to sit in the pew with me at communion time? I think it has made me more aware of how people gather after mass. The “Sign of Peace” is supposed to make people more aware of each other at mass, but really it is usually kind of antiseptic. Some people, I have noticed, even carry little dispensers of sanitizer to use after the Sign of Peace. Nick, you can't blame people for not wanting to catch the flue or whatever.

No, I guess not, but the whole ritual doesn't seem to accomplish much. I have felt the power of community with the Brothers and I pushed community with my support groups, but at mass it still seems like people would be happy if they were in Church all by themselves.

When I sit in the pew with you I feel left out. I'm not part of the Church. Strangely though, I feel more connected to the people. That doesn't seem right, but that's how I feel. Maybe that's why I enjoy having breakfast with people we know. I think we feel the same thing, Megan. There has always been two kinds of communion going on at mass, the Eucharist and the people. I agree with you that when we don't receive the Eucharist we become more aware of the people.

I don't think that's the way it should be, but when I stay in the pew I sometimes see other people not going to communion and I feel strongly connected to them. Sometimes I even think about all the people who are not able to receive communion and mentally connect with them. It's like a different kind of communion, Nick.

I agree something isn't right. Eucharist is to connect us to Jesus and to one another, and I agree the second part is often not happening. I have been to daily mass when there were only a few people in church and no one was sitting near another person. It's

like people are contagious. Father Mike gave up on inviting people to collect together up front. They would do it when he insisted but the next day they would be all scattered again. Here comes our breakfast. Hi, Christy, how are your two boys?

Nick, they are driving me crazy with Scouts, soccer and band. Megan when are you due? Is it going to be just one? I can tell you, my two keep me more than busy. I'm due in July. We will take it one at a time, but thanks for the warning.

Megan looked at Nick with a "maybe we should talk about this look". Nick responded. They usually come one at a time, right? I'm good with that. I think one is enough at my age, Nick. Your pancakes are getting cold. Don't change the subject, Nick. OK, one at a time. That's not exactly what I said. I want what you want, Megan. God will provide. That's what I'm worried about, Nick.

Dear Jennifer,

Thank you for the nice note. The holidays were really great, weren't they? We thought there may have been more to the story than Cathleen just needing a place to stay when Alexi asked us if she could come with him. So we think you are right that he sees her in a special way.

It is interesting that you keep getting "invitations". I suspect it is because you look like a really good person, and I agree. Invitations are compliments, I would say.

What has always been important to me is community. That's what attracted me to the Franciscans and to my support group ministry, but you knew that. I repeat it because that will always be my advice to you. Find community and you will be the best and most complete person you can be.

Megan says hello. We are finding our way through the thicket of marriage. She thinks one child is enough, and I agree with her except sometimes things happen that are not planned. Who knew we would even be married? I didn't. Life is full of surprises.

*Peace and all blessings,
Nick*

FIRST CLIENT

Nick felt good about the exchange of letters with Jennifer. He was at her baptism, and now he is delighted that she sends him real letters.

The Bethlehem village has been put away and the sun porch looked empty and sad. Nick was quick to bring up his fish tank and arrange some comfortable chairs and small desk. Allen had given Nick a couple of names from the people he supervised at the fire station. One of them had called and asked for an appointment. His first official client in his new “civilian” counseling role, but he didn’t know this person or what help they needed. He had worked with divorce, AA, NA, PTSD, and he felt well prepared. He heard the knock and went to the door to meet his first client, and there stood a petite Black woman, who didn’t look like she needed help from anyone.

Please come in. My name is Nick. Can I take your jacket? Hi, I’m Latoya. We talked on the phone. Yes, of course. Please take a seat on the sun porch. Would you like a cup of coffee? No, I’m fine. Then you won’t mind if I get one for myself. No, no I’m really fine. Nick left Latoya alone with his fish. The colorful saltwater reef fish were his counseling assistants. They had an unfailing way of relaxing the normal tension people have when they want to talk about something they really don’t want to talk about. So Nick pattered around in the kitchen, and finally came back with his coffee.

Your fish are beautiful. I came to talk to you about being sexually harassed at the fire station. My, you do get to the point quickly. Have you discussed this with your supervisor? That’s usually a good place to start. Can’t do that, Nick. He’s the problem.

Nick did some quick mental calculations. Allen had recommended that this person seek counseling with him, check. Now this person is suggesting that her supervisor, Allen, is, in fact, her problem, check. Something is missing. Only one way to find out what that is. It is your supervisor that you are talking about? Yes. And this is Allen Baxter? Yes.

You need to know that Allen and I are close friends and that suggests a serious conflict of interest. I don’t see how you could trust me to give you good advice. Latoya responded, I would like to tell you my story and then you can decide if we should continue. Would that be OK with you? I am not completely comfortable with proceeding, but I can agree to keep your story confidential up to a point.

That’s good enough for me. Allen and I go way back. We were in the same academy class. We have bumped into each other since then, and then about a year ago I was assigned to his station. Are you with me so far? Yes. Do I remember your being present at an event at his home? Could be. I have been to Allen’s home. Like I said, we were friends, now we have a different relationship. He is my supervisor. Could this problem, whatever it is, be solved by simply requesting HR to give you a different assignment? I could do that, but they would want a good reason, and I wouldn’t want to tell them.

I think it's time for you to be more specific. Latoya continued, he thinks he is treating me like one of the guys; I'm not. It's the whole package, Nick. It's harassing and toxic. It's the language, the jokes, the pat on the ass, the "sit beside me in the truck" requests, the "you look great today, Latoya" comments. A woman knows when a man is interested in her. He has that look, Nick, and it's a real problem to me, and it could be a real problem to him. Could we be dealing with a case of dumb supervisor or inappropriate sexual attraction? Could be both, Nick, and that's why your being his friend may be a help instead of a problem.

Why do you think he suggested that you see me for counseling? I think it's because he knew why I was transferred to his station. Is that really what we should be talking about? Someone almost got killed, Nick. Go on. There were people who thought I wasn't doing my job. That I, a woman, couldn't do my job. I began to doubt myself. Can't do that, Nick. Bad things start to happen. My transfer to another station was supposed to give me a new start. I'm sure they thought Allen was the right person to help me get my confidence back. And now? And now I am confused as to why I am here talking to you. How do you think Allen feels about you? He likes me, Nick, but maybe too much. Can you set the boundaries? Yes, I can. Tell him. I think he will listen. Can I come back? Give it a week, OK?

NICK

Megan was aware that Nick had his first client today, and although she knew that he wouldn't talk about it, she had to ask. How did it go today? I think the sun porch will work well. My client seemed comfortable in the space. I won't know if I have been of any help for a week or maybe longer. That's all Nick was going to say and really all Megan expected, but there was something even more important to talk about.

The promised article was in the Trib today. It was not front page, they didn't expect that, but it was a nice article with pictures. I liked the pictures, Nick. It's too bad they couldn't get a picture of Rosemary and Princess, but I understand. Your habit of inviting people to dinner seemed a really good focus for the article. You looked good. There are a lot of jealous men after seeing your picture. You think? I know.

My friend in high places called and she has made sure that someone special has a copy on his reading stack. That's all we can do for now. Is it just you and me for dinner? It seems like you had pushed back some on my habit of bringing home people for dinner. Have you changed your mind about that? I guess I have softened a little. The writer of our article seemed to focus on how that part of your Franciscan self transferred. You are who you are, Nick, brown robe or not. It could be that's who I was even before I was a Franciscan. I got it from my mother, Megan. People in the neighborhood knew that if they stopped in Mom would sit them down and give them a plate of food. Mom grew up poor and, I guess, she never forgot what it was like to be hungry.

All this talk about food makes me hungry. What magic have you performed in the kitchen today? I took the easy way today. I put a small roast with veggies in the slow cooker so I wouldn't need to spend time in the kitchen. Your client didn't take more than an hour. What have you been doing all day or shouldn't I ask? Would you believe reading, and a walk in the neighborhood? I am surprised you didn't go to the homeless shelter. So you had an easy day? I did, Megan, and I truly enjoyed it. The only thing that would have made it better is if you could have been with me.

We have that travel money from the sale of my car. When are we going to use it? Soon I'll be very pregnant, and then there will be three of us. Children can travel, can't they? Yes, but not right away. So maybe we go soon, or it's wait a year. I think so. Nick, let's do it soon. A year seems so far away. OK, I'll set the table and you bring the globe from the living room, and we will plan a trip. I already know where I want to go, Nick. When should we buy the tickets? How about tonight?

When Nick opened the slow cooker the house was filled with the most delightful aromas. Nick thought to himself – I need to cook this way more often. When the table was ready he called Megan. She came to the table carrying what looked like an old, well worn, shoebox. What would you like to drink with your meal, and what's in the box? I don't remember ever seeing it before. Water is fine, no ice. This is my treasure box, Nick. I have had it since I was a little girl. Didn't you have a treasure box?

I did have a box of special things like pretty rocks and a couple of merit badges. I didn't know you were a Boy Scout. I wasn't a very good one. Are you going to share with me what's in your treasure box now that you have made me curious? Only one thing, Nick. I have to have some secrets, and she opened the box and moved things a little until she found what she wanted.

It was a post card postmarked 1946 Tahiti. The front was a beautiful sunset over a white sand beach. The card read, "wish you were here" signed Harry. This was sent to my mother from her brother who somehow managed an R&R on Tahiti after the war. She had kept it and gave it to me to play with when I was a child. That's where I want to go, Nick. Really? You want to go to a South Sea island? Would you want to wear a grass skirt? Don't make fun of me, Nick. This is my little girl dream that I never thought could be real. Suddenly I have a chance to do it, and I want us to go.

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to poke fun at your childhood dream. It caught me off guard, I guess. It's so different from the way I have always pictured you. Can we do it, Nick? We have the money and I, I mean we, may never have another chance. Nick's dinner was getting cold, but he found himself fascinated by this woman he married. His imagination began working and he pictured her on the post card beach wearing almost nothing. Awesome he thought, just awesome. Megan had to prompt him. What are you thinking, Nick? Can we go? I was seeing you in that post card picture and yes, I want us to go. I mean I really want us to go.

It's settled then. Tomorrow we will find out what we need and how to get there. Your dinner is getting cold and so is mine. I'm going to put it all back in the crockpot for a few minutes. What else is in that old shoebox, I mean treasure box? That's for me to

know, Nick. What did you get merit badges in? So now you want to know all my secrets. Not all of them. OK, knots and carving. So you know how to tie knots, and what did you carve? You know, the little slide that holds the scout scarf. I still have some of them. You still have your treasure box? Can I see it? Maybe someday. Food's hot.

LATOYA

Nick had resumed his daily visits to the homeless shelter, but he had not brought any needy person home to dinner. Was it that the right person hadn't crossed his path or was it that he was not looking very hard? He wasn't sure, however, his days were flowing again. He was not over busy. He was patiently waiting to hear if his dust collecting papers had been moved on or that he might get a call to come to explain himself. Megan was gathering what they needed to go on their winter vacation.

The week went by, and now he was waiting to hear from Latoya, sitting in his conference room. She had sat quietly for a while, then dove into her problem relationship with Allen Baxter. Nick, you asked me to set boundaries, and you must have known it wouldn't be easy. But I have had two private conversations with Allen, and he tried to agree to no butt pats, but we both know that pats were not the problem. And he did agree that I should not get privileges or "you look good today" comments.

I am not sure I understand the pat issue. Stand up and turn around, Nick. Nick did as he was told then he got a butt pat, and then a surprise butt grab. Now do you understand, Nick? Yes. I certainly do. You made your point very clearly. So, Latoya, what do you think was happening and how do you feel about it now? Have things improved at all for you personally? I knew before we talked that Allen liked me. That has not changed. What I do believe now is that he wants me to succeed as a firefighter. That's all good, Nick, because I want to do really well, and he can help me; he wants to help me. There is, however – there is another layer here, which may not be easy to fix without my asking for a transfer. Allen is sexually attracted to me although he mostly keeps a leash on it. That may be a problem I can't fix, and he may not be willing to fix it.

The fact that you have been able to talk to him personally is very encouraging. Isn't it possible that what you are experiencing could just follow you to another station where you may not find a supervisor willing to talk about it? Yes, Nick, that could happen. I am well aware that I look good, especially from behind. My husband tells me that often enough, and I know that other men notice. I like to be noticed, but I don't wish it and I don't want pats and absolutely no grabs.

So this is what I see. Allen likes you and wants you to succeed. Yes. He is also attracted to you in ways that make you uncomfortable. Yes. You have had some boundary setting discussions that you found at least partially helpful. Yes. Would you consider talking to Allen? I'm not sure that's a good idea, Latoya. What more can I do, Nick? Have you talked to your husband about this problem? I am sure that would not be a good idea, Nick. How about injecting a little humor into the problem? Got any

ideas? One, but you may think of something better. OK, let's hear it. A very short leash placed quietly on his desk. I like it, Nick. I'll do it. I'll let you know what happens.

TAHITI

The word went out to friends that they were taking a winter vacation. A winter vacation, they would say, to Tahiti. Why would you do such a thing everyone wanted to know? These were summer vacation to a lake cottage people, and what Megan and Nick were planning seemed not only improbable, but impossible. It's a childhood dream Megan would say, and people would begin to think of their own dreams and wonder if maybe they could be possible too. This was dangerous thinking they knew, and they kept their dreams to themselves.

On the plane Nick was reading the travel magazine, which was full of bikini clad young women. This was completely new reading material for Nick, and he wasn't sure if he liked it or if he didn't. The women were beautiful, but were they being used? He couldn't tell, but they were all smiling. What do you think of these pictures, Megan? Well, they are all decently dressed, and it looks like they are having fun so I like them. My bathing suit is about that size and pink. You have a bathing suit like that one? putting his finger on the page. Yes, I do, and I intend to wear it. For everyone to see? We must suppose there will be other people on the beach, Nick. Do you have a problem with my bathing suit? You keep taking me to places I've never been, and I don't mean Tahiti. I know what you mean, Nick, and that is what I intend to do, for both of us.

The beaches were as advertised and so were the young women. Even with her little baby bump, Megan fit right in. Nick almost floated on the Polynesian breeze. He couldn't believe that he had at first resisted Megan's dream vacation. It was a steep learning curve for him and he knew it, and he loved it. He was determined to take a thousand pictures until Megan had to say, put that phone down and enjoy yourself. He knew she was right and started leaving the phone in their room.

The nights were as majestic as the days. The good food enjoyed in the open warm ocean breeze, the sound of soft surf, the touch of smooth warm skin. Nick knew that he would see dreams differently, both his own and those of the people he would counsel. Life was good. Dreams were good. He knew both now in new ways.

Most of all he loved the woman, who was taking him to places he had never been. Then it happened again. You must suspect that I had experience with another man. Megan, it didn't matter to me so I never intended to ask. It was before I took the job at the parish, Nick. In fact, that is why I took the parish job. It was to get away from an unhealthy job and an unhealthy relationship. I don't need to know any of this, but I love how you sometimes take the lead and don't put down my lack of experience. My experience started and ended as a curious boy discovering himself in the shower. You've come a long way, Nick. With your help. Yes, and I love it.

The flight home was quiet. They were both sure they would never go back to Tahiti, but they were equally sure that it had been a dream come true. They also knew a long list of people would want to know “all about it”. Megan would say, it was wonderful; Nick would say, follow your dreams; they will take you to places you have never been, and he wouldn't mean Tahiti.

ALEXI

Dear Nick,

Thank you again for allowing me to stay with you and Megan. I hope we will have more time together in the future.

Anthropologists have an intense curiosity about humanity. My studies are not work. Everything I learn leads me to new interests, and new questions. I think I have chosen the right field for myself. Here is what I am thinking today.

Western thought does not inculcate the value of social consciousness. This is not the case with small scale, or you want to call primitive, societies where family structure created social structure, and social consciousness was systematically encouraged and sanctioned. In western thought family structure has come to play a minimal structural role.

We have produced a higher standard of living but lost our sense of social unity. So what is the social glue that will hold western civilization together, Nick? The “tribal” societies were successful for many thousands of years. What we have created today is, in comparison, a very recent unproven experiment. Anthropology looks for an integrated wholeness but what we have today are separate distinct parts. This is not working, Nick.

When I read the four Christian Gospels I saw a call to unity, a spirit of unity that is missing. That's why I thought Christianity may have the answer, our “salvation”.

Finally, a question, Nick. In the book of John, he writes, “God is love”. Is that an “is” statement or an “is like” statement?

Cathleen sends her thanks also.

*Sincerely,
Alexi*

Dear Alexi,

You are always welcome in our home.

Your intense curiosity is obvious to everyone who listens to you talk. I certainly agree that you have chosen the right field of study for yourself.

There are examples of social consciousness around here, but I must admit they are the exception not the rule. We distinctly and intentionally live in a “me first” culture.

You mention family as the glue that held “primitive” groups together. I think also it was shared religious beliefs. Both are missing today which raises your question, which if I understand it correctly, does the teaching of Jesus provide this glue you and I agree is missing? Having thought about it since you raised the question some time ago, I am ready to agree with you. I am not sure human society is as close to the brink as you seem to believe, but I agree that Jesus’ concern for the other person puts a much needed emphasis on social consciousness.

To try to answer your question about John’s statement, “God is love”, I believe he intended it to be an “is” statement, not an “is like” statement. I believe that it fits with Jesus’ emphasis on relationships, both with God and with one another. When I read John’s statement it brings these seemingly separate relationships together. God then becomes the very glue we have been discussing.

*Peace and all blessing,
Nick*

THE AUXILIARY BISHOP

The call that Nick had been hoping for had come while they were on their winter vacation. The auxiliary bishop would like to talk with Nick. Please call and make an appointment, the message said. Megan recognized her friend Mary's voice and told Nick, the auxiliary bishop would like to talk with you. I'll call back and pick a time. It seems that Megan would always be Nick's administrative assistant. It was the selected time, and Nick was on time. Megan had picked out his clothes and he looked upscale casual.

Hi, I have an appointment. It's Nick, isn't it? Please sit down and I'll tell the bishop that you are here. The wait was surprisingly short and Nick was ushered in. The auxiliary bishop came out from behind his desk and offered Nick his hand. This is a good sign, Nick thought. Then he was asked to sit down in one of the two comfortable chairs and the bishop took the other one.

Nick, Father Mike, and even my secretary, have told me good things about you. I trust Father Mike, but I depend on Mary to always tell me what I need to know. I even read the article about you and your wife, Megan, which Mary snuck onto my reading stack. Tell me, do you actually pick up people off the street and bring them into your house and feed them dinner?

Nick had expected tough questions but not this one. It was too easy. All he had to do was say, yes, but that would have been an abrupt, even unfriendly, answer to what seemed like genuine interest. So Nick told a short form of his story. It was my mother's way to always have food for anyone in the neighborhood, and when I lived at the friary it seemed the natural thing to do. At our house today it doesn't happen as often, but I still invite people to dinner.

Aren't you concerned for your safety? What about theft? Bringing people into your home seems like a high risk thing to do. Of course you are right, Bishop. There must be some discernment. For example, a single woman may not want to invite men into her home without inviting other company, and leaving valuable things where they could tempt someone to pick them up would not be fair to anyone.

Is it correct that you and your wife worked in the same parish office for years and all during that time there was no romantic relationship? Nick hesitated. I don't want this to be an inquisition, but the answer is important to me personally, the bishop continued. How could this be a personal question? Nick was confused but the answer was simple enough. Megan and I had a professional trust relationship for twenty years. There was nothing more but, and I think this is important, nothing less. We were work associates with a high level of mutual trust.

Then what happened, Nick? I can't give you a clear answer, and I don't think Megan could either. There certainly was no inappropriate behavior on her part. She did not lure me away from being a Franciscan Brother. So she did not take the initiative? I must tell you, Bishop, that I am not comfortable with these questions, but the answer is an absolute, no. It was me. I suddenly realized that I wanted a different kind of relationship and I asked for it, and she said, yes. This time it was the bishop who sat back in silence.

No one said anything, but Nick's years of working with troubled people kicked in. He sensed a surprising role reversal, and in good counselor fashion he said nothing. The quiet only lasted a few minutes, but it seemed longer. Then the bishop began to tell some of his own story. Nick, you are old enough to remember when people were leaving the priesthood and religious life like rats leaving a sinking ship. Nick said nothing. Maybe that's not the best way to put it, but some of my best friends left. A few stayed privately connected. Many just disappeared. It didn't help that there were restrictions on their ministry. Anyway, those who stayed, well I don't know how others felt, but I felt abandoned.

Nick knew it was time to say something. I remember. Those were difficult times. Nick, I have always been a rules first person. I wanted structure, not confusion. I'm a strong "J", Nick. Follow the rules and everything will be all right.

A minute or so passed in silence. When I saw your request to leave, that abandoned feeling came back. So I put your papers in the bottom drawer. I didn't want to deal with it. Mary knew. She always knows. Then she put your news article on my desk. That's when I knew I had to talk with you. Do you understand what I'm saying?

Yes. It's amazing how some women can intuit feelings. I'm seventy-five, Nick. I'll be sending in my retirement letter. I know they will want me to do confirmations and odd jobs, but that letter, I know it's only retirement, Nick, but that letter, it's like I'm writing my own obituary. There was a small knock on the door. Yes, Mary? You have a lunch meeting with some finance people. It's getting to be time to leave. Should I cancel? Tell them I'll reschedule. Mary quietly closed the door.

I'll send your request on, Nick. I won't object. I think you are an honest man doing good Christian work. Do you think we need to change the rules, Nick? That's not my call to make, Bishop. You took a giant leap of faith. Has it really worked for you? It wasn't such a leap, Bishop. It was not like I became enamored of some coed I just met and made a fool of myself. I knew Megan better than I knew myself. What was even better, Bishop, is that she knew me. It turned out that she loved me. It is an awesome feeling to realize that someone who really knows you actually loves you.

Is it strong enough to overcome a sense of abandonment, Nick? I have absolutely no doubt about that, Bishop. It seems I have cancelled my lunch meeting. Would you like some lunch? I would really enjoy that. Do you have a favorite place? Yes, I like Frosties.

SAMUEL

You had lunch with the auxiliary bishop at Wendy's? Really? He seemed to like it, Megan. It was the first time he had ever had a Frosty. Nick, you're amazing. What did he say about your papers? Oh, that's not a problem. He will sign them. So soon I'll be in good standing with the Church again. Well, what did he say, Nick? You can't just tell

me he will sign them and that's that. It turned out to be more about him than about me, and that is really all I can say. You're amazing, Nick.

You can keep saying that, Megan. I like it, and by the way, I invited the bishop to dinner on Saturday. I suggested they come about 5 o'clock. Nick, this man has a reputation. He is a rules first, hard nose cleric, and what do you mean by "they"? I said he could bring a friend and he seemed to like the idea. We can't do anything about his reputation. It is what it is. However, the future is his to decide. All we can do is offer to walk with him.

I thought I would fix roast beef in the slow cooker. It's easy and most everybody likes it. That might not be the best idea, Nick. Some people don't eat red meat. You mean like some people the bishop might bring to dinner? You may be amazing, Nick, but I am on to you. I think salmon would be a better choice. So salmon it is. With broccoli and carrots. Good choices.

I saw Alexi's letter. Did you write back to him? Yes, I did a couple of days ago. Well, what did you say? Really, Nick, do I have to drag everything out of you? Sorry, I'll try to be more forth coming. Alexi is going to be a good, maybe great, anthropologist. He has a driven curiosity, and I think he knows that studying the past is really all about the present. I like him and I hope he comes back to visit us.

What about his question? Do you think John was literal when he wrote, "God is love"? Absolutely. It is God that draws everything together. Especially like us. Alexi seems to have a dark view of the future. Is he right? It worries me to think like that when we are going to bring a little boy into this world. Sam will be OK if we surround him with a loving family. It's Sam, is it? Don't you think we should talk about it? Let's talk about it. What do you think? I like Samuel. Sam is OK. Sammy not so much. People will call him whatever, Megan. We can't do anything about that. So is Sam OK? Yes, but where are we going to get this family? You don't have any living relatives and neither do I. Let's start by asking Allen and Sue to be godparents.

I like that. We could adopt a little sister for Sam. We could, but I think we should wait on that decision. OK, let's hold that idea for the future. The widows group can be his grandmothers. Yes, but they are SFWWs now. Samantha will be pleased. Then there will be all the kids in the neighborhood. Then school. I'll even take him to the homeless shelter. All good for Sam, Nick. We can, and we will create a family for him, but that doesn't solve the problems that Alexi sees. What if we start coming apart? What if our differences get to be too big?

There will always be big differences. That's not the problem. The problem is the people who are the opportunists, the people who use our differences to achieve their own personal agenda, which is usually all about themselves. A lot of people are listening to these opportunists, Nick. I'll continue to preach community, Megan. That's all I can do. Me too. Life is good. God is good. Same thing, Megan.

By the way, your client, Latoya, called and said I should give you a pat on the ass. What's that all about, Nick? Counselor-client privilege, Megan.

EPILOGUE

This story has many loose ends, but we can guess the possible direction of the lives of the people we have come to know. If you are old enough to read this, then you know there are always loose ends; life is like that. Do not try to tidy up Megan and Nick's story. Everyone deserves to be a little mysterious.

