

The Priest

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My father, who was proud of the fact that I was on the McGill University Dean's list, took me to the Ford dealership in our town.

"Son, choose the car you would like me to buy for you" he told me.

I walked around the showroom looking at the shiny cars, unable to make up my mind, until I saw a black Ford Mustang convertible with light gray leather seats. I lifted the hood, looked at the large eight-cylinder engine.

"I would like to have this car," I told my father.

The salesman who stood next to us approved.

"You made a good choice," he assured me. "I think you'll enjoy driving the car."

Next, he pointed at a blue Mustang that was parked outside the showroom.

"You can test drive this one. It has same engine."

When we left the parking lot I pressed the accelerator. It resulted in leaving rubber on the road.

"Take it easy," the salesman warned. "The car has a powerful engine. All you need to do is give a little gas to get it going."

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It was a lively graduation party at McGill University. Jean, my girlfriend, and I danced and her big black eyes shined when she kissed me. After the party ended we drove home on a country road. It was a warm night with millions of shiny stars. I had the car roof down and we laughed when the wind blew Jean's long, silky, black raven hair in her face. I enjoyed the sound of the powerful engine until I heard Jean's panicky voice.

"Sean, slow down, there is a deer on the road!"

At that moment I saw a deer standing there frozen, staring at the car's bright headlights. I honked the horn and forcefully pressed the brake pedal. The sound of the horn and the noise of screeching tires scared the deer, who took a few graceful leaps,

disappearing into the safety of the woods. The powerful engine slowed and the steering wheel vibrated in my hands. I had difficulty controlling the car and it ended up in ravine thirty feet below. Before I was thrown out of the car I heard Jean's scream. I passed out when my head hit a bed of rocks.

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I woke up disorientated in a room with white walls. I saw my father and mother sitting on the chairs next to my bed. My father had a grim look and my mother was crying.

"Where am I?" I asked my father.

"You're in Holy Cross hospital."

"Why am I here?"

"You and Jean were injured when you lost control of your car and it dropped into a ravine."

"Where is Jean?"

"She's in the intensive care ward."

"Is she going to be okay?"

My mother crossed herself and sobbed.

"We hope she will," my father said as he grabbed my hand. "The doctor said her condition is critical."

* * *

After I left the hospital I found out about Jean's funeral. The Canadian State Police report said the accident was unavoidable. In spite of this I felt I caused her death. My father, trying to help, encouraged me to enroll in McGill University's MBA program. I decided to take his advice. I would sit in the classes, unable to comprehend what the teacher would say. So, I eventually decided to drop out. At night I was afraid to fall asleep because of the recurring nightmare of the deer staring at me. The dream often changed and once I even saw him jumping at the car windshield and heard Jean scream. It resulted in my being afraid to fall asleep so I got in the habit of drinking until I passed out. My

parents, not knowing what to do with me, asked Father McCleod, our parish priest whom I had known since I was a little boy, to help me.

Father McCleod spent long hours telling me it wasn't my fault that the deer had ended up in front of the car. He explained that it was God's wish that I survived and Jean died. He often took me to visit Jean's grave. My hand would shake as I held red roses, staring at the marble cross engraved with her name, birth, and death dates. After one of the visits to Jean's grave, Father McCleod drove me to the church. I sat in his office, staring at him and expecting a lecture about my drinking. What he had to say surprised me.

"Sean, I'm concerned that you are getting drunk every night. I would like you to attend my AA meeting that takes place here in our church."

It took Father McCleod three months before I agreed to attend the meetings. I sat in a room surrounded by people and listened to them describe why they drank, unable to tell them why I did. After attending the meetings for a month, Father McCleod approached me.

"Sean, I think you should tell the group members what happened the night Jean died."

Unable to say a word, I started crying. Father McCleod gave me a concerned look.

"Sean, I know it's painful telling the group what happened, but sharing with them how you feel will help you stop drinking."

His words enabled me to build my courage to describe what happened that night to the group.

"I'm afraid to fall asleep because of my recurring nightmares so I drink until I pass out," I declared.

Father McCleod reminded me again it was God's wish that I survived and Jean died and spoke about the ten steps and giving control to a higher power. After attending the meetings for a year, I stopped drinking. My father was relieved.

"Son, I suggest you resume your studying at McGill University and get your MBA," he urged.

"I've decided to become a priest," I responded.

"Why do you want to do that?"

"I might be forgiven by serving God."

It was a nightly discussion until my mother spoke with Father McCleod and asked him to speak with my father. Father McCleod agreed.

"Don't try to influence Sean," he urged my father. "Be grateful he stopped drinking,"

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Father McCleod and I were staying at his family's campground in Dunvegan, on a beach in Nova Scotia. It was a large campground that had designated areas for RV's with electric hookup and sewage facilities. The rest of the campground had spacious campsites near the ocean. We were enjoying the cool breeze from the sea when the ten-year-old boys we chaperoned came running out of breath.

"The nasty man who camps near the sea said he'll throw stones at us," they told Father McCleod.

"Check on what kind of trouble the little brats got into this time," he told me in his gruff voice, after he chased the kids away.

I wasn't looking forward to finding out what they had done. They were delinquent kids living in a rich neighborhood in Montreal. Their parents gave them money instead of disciplining them. In his Sunday sermons, Father McCleod chastised the parents, reminding them where their responsibilities lay. Before they left the church, they promised to mend their ways, but on Monday, forgetting what they had promised the day before, repeated their old behavior.

Father McCleod's parish was affluent. The parents were upper middle-class professional and business people who gave generous donations to the church. I felt they did it out of

fear of him and had difficulty accepting his behavior. I often told him, "People should donate out of the goodness of their hearts, not because they're afraid of you."

He smiled, squeezed my shoulder with his strong boney fingers and said, "Father O'Connor, you're young and naive. When you reach my age, you'll learn that the only way to keep your parishioners walking the straight and the narrow is by putting the fear of God into them."

I was a twenty-four-year-old deacon practicing under him and was supposed to be ordained in a couple of years. I feared Father McCleod, a muscular man of six foot four who towered over my five-foot eight-inch frame. I envisioned him as God's messenger, making sure his flock didn't sin. Despite his gruff behavior, Father McCleod had redeeming qualities that I learned to respect. He was supportive when I spoke with him about my conflicts about becoming a priest, trying not to give into my father constantly pressuring me with the same speech, "Why do you want to become a priest? Resume your studying at McGill University, get your MBA degree and then join the family business."

* * *

I walked toward the ocean preoccupied, composing in my head the apologetic words I was going to say. The brats followed me.

"Father McCleod shouldn't have sent Father O'Connor," one of them told the others. "He won't be able to punish the nasty man."

I turned and gave them an angry look. They stopped walking for a second and then increased the distance between us. When we got closer to the secluded campsite near the sea one of the boys came to me, pointed his finger.

"That's the man who was going to throw stones at us," he told me. Ready to apologize, I told myself, *These people liked their privacy and the kids must have disturbed them.* I approached their campsite, ready to offer conciliatory words, when the young man gave me a quizzical look.

"Would you like to have a cup of coffee?" he asked.

Happy he wasn't being confrontational, I told myself, *He must think it's funny seeing a priest in his black habit on the beach.*

"I would like to apologize for the way the children behaved," I told him. The young man had an intense look on his face.

"They threw stones at the beaver's dam trying to get him out," he explained. "I asked them how they would feel if I threw stones at them. Then they would know how the beaver felt."

While speaking, he frowned and two deep lines appeared on the sides of his mouth. *He's seen hard times I told myself.* The young man suddenly smiled and extended his hand.

"My name is David and this is my girlfriend Donna."

I looked at her and saw an attractive, slim, young woman who gave me a pleasant smile.

"The coffee will be ready soon," she said. "Sit on the bench side facing the ocean so you can enjoy the view"

I looked at the blue water and felt we could become friends despite the fact that we were strangers who had just met. The boys, who stood at a safe distance, started to approach the site slowly. I waved my hand at them.

"Go play somewhere else."

The brats gave me a scornful look before they went to visit the beaver dam a short distance away but didn't throw stones this time. While they were standing around the dam, one of them got stung by a bee and cursed before they all ran away. I pointed my finger toward the sky.

"God punished them for throwing stones at the beaver," I said jokingly.

David laughed. I sensed they were not people of faith and decided to inquire about them.

"You have an accent. Would you mind telling me where you are from?"

"I was born in Israel and left the country when I was twenty-one years old."

"I would like to bless you in Aramaic. It's the ancient holy language."

“I’m not a religious person,” he responded and the two lines around his mouth deepened.

“In spite of that, I still would like to pray and bless both of you.”

David didn’t respond and stared at the sea as he listened to me pray. After I finished praying Donna gave me a cup of coffee and put cookies on my plate. Before I was able to thank her, I saw a large, wet Springer Spaniel with liver and white spots running towards us. Amy, whose parents belonged to our parish, was chasing the dog. She was a pretty ten-year-old girl with bobbed raven black hair and deep blue eyes who always spoke to me after Sunday mass.

“Do you know Amy?” I asked David.

“Sure. For the past week she’s been visiting us every day keeping Brandy, our dog, busy by throwing driftwood into the water for her to retrieve it.”

Donna waved her hand at Amy to join us.

“Amy is a good kid,” Donna said. “She leaves before we have supper and returns a couple of hours later just as we’re ready to walk on the beach so David can photograph the sunset. We’ve asked her to stay for dinner but she always refuses.”

Amy smiled when Donna served her a glass of milk and cookies. When she saw I disapproved of her giving Brandy cookies, she gave me a mischievous look.

“If I don’t give her something to eat she’ll drink water and punish me by putting her wet mouth on my lap.”

Donna seconded her.

“Brandy has a nasty habit of getting people wet when she doesn’t get her way.”

I enjoyed David and Donna's company and visited them every day. When I arrived, they were either reading, playing Scrabble or watching Amy run along the water's edge holding a piece of driftwood with Brandy chasing her.

One day when I arrived at their campsite I was surprised at not seeing Amy playing with Brandy on the beach. Soon afterward she arrived looking sad. Donna gave her a concerned look.

“Amy, what’s the matter?” Donna asked.

“I told my parents that I have friends who camp near the water and they have a dog I play with. They would like to meet you.”

“It shouldn’t be a problem. We’ll visit them.” Donna replied.

Amy’s face brightened

“I hope you don’t mind meeting them. They’re not much fun to be with.”

* * *

When we entered the RV Amy’s parents welcomed David and Donna and knowing they camped in a tent, gave them a tour. The RV had a living room, three bedrooms, kitchen and bathroom with a shower and toilet. The walls were covered with white pine wood, giving the feeling of a comfortable home. The father, who was a road engineer, told David that he enjoyed hunting big game. The lines on David's face deepened when the father told him that the previous hunting season he'd killed a big buck and described how many points it had. Oblivious at how unhappy David was, the father continued.

"I hope to get another big buck in the upcoming hunting season."

Amy's mother, who liked Donna, discussed her surgeries with her.

"Because I couldn’t get pregnant after my operations, we adopted Amy when she was three months old. Her mother was American Indian and her father was a Dutch sailor. A year after we adopted Amy, Jason was born."

The father, realizing that David and Donna were upset hearing what the mother had told them, changed the subject.

"Last year I took Amy and Jason backpacking. Jason didn’t stop complaining and I ended up carrying his backpack. Amy, who’s a tomboy, enjoys the outdoors. She carried her own backpack and helped me set up the campsite at night while Jason kept whining."

I heard the mother telling this to other people in Amy's presence and wondered if she was sorry they adopted her. I discussed it with Father McCleod who told the mother not to say it in Amy's presence. However, she ignored his advice and kept doing it.

* * *

The next day I visited David and Donna's campsite and saw David sitting at the picnic table staring at the ocean. He smiled when he saw me.

"Donna went to the store to get coffee. She will be back soon. Sit at the table and enjoy the cool breeze from the sea."

"I would like to consult with you about an issue I have."

"What's on your mind?"

"I'm conflicted about becoming a priest."

"I don't think I can help you."

The two lines along David's mouth deepened and I saw a bitter old man despite his young age.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have burdened you with my issue."

"Please tell me why you're conflicted about becoming a priest."

"My father would like me to go back to McGill University, get my MBA and then join his business."

"What would you rather do?"

"I can't make up my mind and often speak with Father McCleod about it. He keeps reminding me that my mission in life is to serve God and I shouldn't listen to my father."

"Does it help you?"

"Yes, but it doesn't resolve my conflicts. Father McCleod was a young boy when his family left Scotland and came to Nova Scotia. He often talks about his difficult childhood growing up in a poor immigrant neighborhood and using his fists to settle arguments. The parish priest, concerned about it, convinced him to join the Church.

"What would you do if you don't become a priest?"

"Get my MBA at McGill University and join my father's farm supply business that his grandfather established. He'd be so happy that he would call the travel agency he uses for his business trips and ask them to arrange a nice vacation for me."

"I have my own issues with my family. Unlike your father, they weren't nice to me, but I'd rather not discuss it."

“I’m sorry.”

“Are you sure you want to become a priest?”

“It’s my duty.”

“Maybe you should reconsider it since you have so many conflicts.”

“I must do it. When I graduated from college my father bought me a Ford Mustang. At the graduation party I drank more than I should and drove Jean, my girlfriend, home. I drove fast and didn’t see the deer standing in the middle of the road until it was too late. I tried to avoid hitting him and lost control of the car. Jean got killed and I was injured. That’s the reason why I became a priest. It goes beyond the family business and money. I promised God that I would go to schools and discuss what happened to me with young people, hoping it will prevent another tragedy.”

David didn’t respond as he looked at the sea, his emotions reflecting on his face. I felt he needed to be alone and left for the beach. There I saw Amy swimming in the ocean with Brandy next to her like a duck without splashing water. When I returned to the campsite I found David sitting in the same position, staring at the sea, and Donna reading a book.

“Amy looks happy playing with Brandy,” I told David. “She keeps telling me that Donna and you are her new friends.”

“Amy told me that she’s unhappy when her mother tells people she was adopted and who her parents were,” Donna explained.

“Father McCleod and I spoke with her mother about it many times. We tried to stop her from doing it but she refuses to listen.”

“I’m concerned how her family life will affect her,” she said, with a sad and concerned look.

The deep lines on David’s mouth reappeared and I realized he was reliving his unpleasant past.

“She’ll be fine,” he said. “We all get adjusted to our sad reality.”

David then quickly changed the subject.

“If you don’t become a priest, how happy would you be twenty years from now as a businessman with a family?”

His words startled me as I began to visualize myself as a forty-four-year-old man who missed his calling in life.

“I’d be miserable and would not be able to forgive myself,” I answered.

* * *

We were back at home from vacation when Amy approached me after Sunday Mass

"I'm going to ride our neighbor's horses," she exclaimed.

"Did you get his permission?"

"Yes. He has two horses and rides them every Saturday and Sunday. Yesterday, after he came back from riding one of them, I told him that I'll groom his horses if he lets me ride them."

"Did he agree?"

"He wasn't sure it's a good idea because the horses don't know me. When I told him that I feed them carrots and they love me, he agreed and told me to be careful when I ride them. I said I would and thanked him."

The following Sunday, Amy's mother approached me after the church service ended.

"I'm unhappy that Amy is riding our neighbor's horses," she confessed.

"Why do you object to it? It's a nice sport."

"Girls should not ride horses. It's a men's sport."

* * *

The following year, Father McCleod and I brought the children for their yearly two-week vacation on the beach at Dunvegan and Amy's family joined us. The next day Amy came running to our campsite. Her cheeks were flushed and her big blue eyes shined when she said, "Father O'Connor, they're back."

Before I was able to respond she ran to the office where David and Donna registered. Happy we met again, I helped them unpack the car and set up their tent on the

remote site near the sea where they camped the year before. Amy, who realized we needed to talk, picked up driftwood and ran to the beach with Brandy chasing her.

“Did you make up your mind about what you want to do?” David asked.

“Next year I’ll become a priest and will have my own parish in Sidney. It’s a fishing community. Unlike Father McCleod’s parish, they’re not well off.”

David, ready to photograph, took his Minolta X3 camera and lenses out of their leather bag and put them on the table. I envied him and wished I had such a nice camera. He sensed it.

“Would you like to use it? I have plenty of film. After we return home I’ll develop the rolls you used and send them to you.”

“It’s not a good idea. My father, knowing I love to photograph, offered to buy me a Nikon F1 camera and lenses. I told him he shouldn’t because my new parishioners wouldn’t be happy seeing me walking around with an expensive camera around my neck.”

“I have been photographing since I was ten years old,” David explained. “It helped me cope with my bitter reality. When I was young my father, who designed and made clothes, had his shop at home and I had to deliver the merchandise riding my bicycle to his store in Tel Aviv which was six miles from where we lived. On the way home I stopped in Manshia, an Arabic village on the Mediterranean Sea that was destroyed in the 1948 Independence War. I walked my bike between tumbled-down stone houses to the water’s edge ignoring the unexploded mortar bombs that were scattered all over.”

“Weren’t you afraid of getting hurt?”

“It never occurred to me. When I got to the shoreline I sat on a big boulder and watched the sun slowly drifting into the sea. After the tide receded I rode my bike home in the dark. It was my secret hiding place. I left Israel because of my unhappy childhood. Amy will also leave home as soon as she can and never come back. You don’t go back to a place where you were unhappy.”

* * *

Our second vacation ended and I was sad saying goodbye to David and Donna. Amy was on her knees hugging Brandy's neck and patting her head. Donna hugged me and David shook my hand.

"You should visit me when I have my own church," I told them. "It's located near a beach. You'll have privacy and be able to use the church facilities. When it rains you'll stay with Brandy in my apartment and have all the comforts of home."

"Why was the church built by the sea?" David asked.

"In the olden days, there were no paved roads. In the spring the ground thawed and the dirt roads turned into a sea of mud. On Sundays the fishermen, unable to use their horses and wagons to travel to church, used their fishing boats instead."

David and Donna didn't come back to Nova Scotia. Donna kept corresponding with me, explaining that every year they took a five-week camping vacation with Brandy visiting the National Parks in the West. She described the places they visited and how Brandy would swim in glacier water when they visited Montana. She promised that one day they would visit me but it never materialized. Amy also corresponded with Donna, confiding in her the issues she encountered at home.

* * *

I was at my parish in Sydney having dinner when the phone rang. I picked it up and was surprised hearing Amy's stressed voice.

"I need to speak with you about something very important. Can I visit you tomorrow?"

"Please come. You know I was always available when you needed to talk to me."

The next day Amy came. She was upset and hesitated for a second before she spoke.

"I plan leave home."

"Why do you want to do that?"

"My mother keeps telling people that I was adopted and who my parents were. It makes me feel that I'm not welcome at home. When I was young I had no choice in the matter, but now I do. I want to live as far as possible from my family and not have

contact with them. After we get settled in Vancouver I'll mail you my home address, but you have to promise me that you won't give it to my family."

At that moment I remembered David's words, *I left Israel because I had an unhappy childhood. Amy will also leave home and never come back. You don't go back to a place where you were unhappy.* "

Amy visited me again before she and her boyfriend left for Vancouver and made me promise once again that I wouldn't give her parents the address she was going to mail me. I was unhappy with the decision she had made.

"Did you write to Donna and tell them that you're leaving home?" I asked.

"I did," she replied and handed me the letter she was going to mail. I looked at the mature young woman with long curly hair down to her shoulders and remembered the ten-year-old girl with short, smooth, raven black hair, bangs on her forehead and big deep blue eyes who ran barefoot on the beach with Brandy chasing her.

"Dear Donna,

I decided to leave home and move to Vancouver where I'll live with my boyfriend. He's an auto mechanic and I'm a hairdresser. I'm attaching my picture so you and David can see how I look now. I love both of you and will always remember the good time I had with you, David and Brandy when we camped on the beach.

Love you,

Amy."

Amy's boyfriend was three years older than she was. He worked for the local Ford dealership as a mechanic and his manager lined up a job for him with a Ford dealership in Vancouver. When Amy told her parents that she planned to leave home and live with her boyfriend in Vancouver they got upset. Unable to change her mind they asked me to help. I tried to convince Amy and her boyfriend to get married but she refused.

"I want to live together with no strings attached."

Two weeks after Amy left I received a letter from Donna.

"Dear Father O'Conner,

We received Amy's goodbye letter and David was surprised at seeing her picture. He couldn't believe it was her. I reminded him that the last time we saw her was when she was a ten-year-old and now she's a seventeen-year-old mature, young woman. Her letter didn't have a return address. David, upset, was going to call and ask you to give him her address. I convinced him not to, reminding him that Amy walked away from her past. She wanted to start a new life the same way he did and we should respect it. We miss you and hope we'll be able to visit one day.

With warm regards,

Donna”

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Forty years later Donna emailed me that David had lunch with a Jesuit priest who was my age when we met and told him my story. The Jesuit was touched and told him,

“You were God's messenger, making sure Father O'Connor didn't leave the faith.”

The next day David received the Jesuit priest's email and Donna forwarded it to me:

Thy Kingdom Come!

Dear David,

It was very nice meeting you. It was very interesting to hear about your priest friend and his discernment. I know you're not religious but still, in Thanksgiving, I will be praying for you and your wife, that you be blessed with health and happiness.

In Christ, Br. Ronald Conklin