

# ANASTASIA'S GRAIL

*For all of my daughters, but especially for Nikki and  
Kirsten, who refused to hear my Shroud proofs unless I  
wrote them as fiction.*

## Anastasia's Grail

### Rebirth

*“The Saints are not people who never made mistakes or sinned, but who repented and were reconciled...Hence, also among saints there are oppositions, discords and controversies, and this is very consoling for me, as we see that the saints have not 'fallen from Heaven'...They are men like us, with complicated problems. Holiness does not consist in not making mistakes or never sinning, holiness grows with the capacity for conversion, repentance, willingness to begin again, and above all with the capacity for reconciliation and forgiveness...”*

--Pope Benedict XVI , general audience, Jan 31, 2007

“Guess where we're going on vacation?”

Groggy, Stacy looked up from the novel she had been trying to read, “Aspen.”

“C’mon, Stace.”

“Paris, then.”

Rose shot her daughter a look.

“We never vacate, Mom. What about the bread store?”

Her mother adjusted the heat to a lower setting and nudged the car radio down a bit. “Your uncle can mind the register for a couple of days and we've got quite a bit frozen. They can do without the fresh stuff for awhile. I doubt if anyone will die until we get back.”

Stacy was completely awake now. She firmly closed her book and shoved it in her pack. “Who all is included in this “we” that are going on vacation, anyway? For that matter, where are you planning to take me?” She was unable to disguise her alarm.

“Emily and you. Reecie, of course. I'm hoping your grandmother will come to keep me company. Since I'm renting a van I thought Ezekiel and Arthur could come with us.”

*Hmm. Arthur was of interest, although the last thing she would do is let her mother know she thought so. Wait a minute. Where could she possibly be planning to take such an oddball group of people?* Stacy was definitely suspicious. She locked eyes with her mother's image in the rear view mirror. "Where are you taking me?" (*against my will*, was implicit.)

Her mother cleared her throat. "It's kind of a pilgrimage," she said.

"Absolutely not," Stacy folded her arms and looked out the window.

Her mother pulled the car to the side of the road and placed it in park. She turned to face her oldest daughter. "Stacie, sweetie, your sister and the boys need a retreat in order to be confirmed. There's this conference coming to the Cities with a lot of top notch speakers. I had hoped we could all go as a family. We'll get a hotel suite with a pool and hot tub. We can eat out in the evenings." She flashed her daughter her most winsome smile. "It'll be fun. You'll see."

"Mom, you know how I feel about religion." Stacy had not attended religion class since her mother had removed her from CCD in fifth grade, angry that her teacher at the time was not adhering to the doctrines of Catholicism. Stacy had quit going to church altogether when she was in ninth grade. "Can I just stay at the hotel and watch TV while you all do this conference stuff?"

"I already enrolled you in the teen workshop. I wish you would just go with the others. Stacy," her mother clasped Stacy's hands in her own,"it would mean a lot to me. I know you're almost eighteen. Soon you'll be making all of your own decisions. Humor me with this last thing we do together. Besides," she considered her eldest daughter gravely, "you might meet someone interesting." There was the familiar glint in her mother's eye. Where other moms tend to tell their daughters that it was just as easy to marry a rich man, Stacy's mom would say it was just as easy to marry a Catholic. "I firmly hope I didn't make a bad choice when I named you after St. Anastasia." Anastasia, Stacy knew, had married a pagan who had treated her ill for her

entire life, imprisoning her in their home and abusing her for her Christian beliefs. Stacy's goofy mom tended to believe that the name you chose for your child could predetermine her life. "Oh well, at least you 'will rise again!'" She said this glibly.

*Resurrection.* That was the meaning of Stacy's name. Stacy's mom pulled out into traffic. "We can talk about this more at work," she said.

Stacy, along with her sister Emily and her cousin Ezekiel—his friends called him Zeke—worked in the family business. Ezekiel and his family lived in Florida, but after he graduated, Zeke came to live with Stacy's grandmother and her uncle to help them start up Grandma Annie's business. Stacy's grandmother had invented an amazing bread that contained no real flour at all. It was made of various fibers and other extremely healthy additives like flax and a substance called barley beta glucons, which was a flour-like powder extracted from barley with extreme heat. The bread was crazy good for you, especially if you were a diabetic, and people everywhere had clamored for it so much that her grandmother had been forced to open a factory out of her home—which had been an industrial building, and was zoned commercial. Her mother's mother had not liked the look of the place so she had had all of the windows replaced by stained glass ones depicting early church martyrs. She had gotten these cheaply when an ancient area church was demolished. Stacy's grandmother was just as Catholic as her mother.

"How's business?" Stacy's mom greeted her grandmother as they entered the shop.

"Busy. More so all the time. We have so many mail orders that Zeke will have to make a second run to the post office today." Grandma Annie was wearing an apron and her whole self was dusted with powdered fibers as usual. "Rose, can you and Stacy get the loaves into pans right away? There's a big ball of dough ready to go in the steamer."

Stacy and her mother put on aprons and got to work. Her mother weighed 1 lb. blobs while Stacy deftly pounded, pinched and rolled the things until they were perfectly formed loaves.

They were quick with it from much practice. On another bench bread loaves were cooling while still more loaves were being bagged and trayed for transport by her younger sister and Zeke. He was tall and thin, with a shock of black curls hanging in his face. Zeke was two years her senior and had not yet started university, so he was able to help Granny full time with her fledgling business. Likewise, her mother was at the place for most of the day. Stacy and Emily put in four hours every day after school. “Where is Reecie?” Stacy wondered aloud. Often her 4-year-old sister would be hanging around with them. She had a little TV/DVD unit they kept on the bench to entertain her with Veggie Tales, Barney and Blues Clues.

“She's hanging out with George,” Stacy's Grandma told them.

As if on cue Stacy's great uncle came staggering through the door to the production room, his straggly white hair flying and her little sister, Clarice, perched precariously on his shoulders. Reecie's hands were partly obscuring his vision so that he lurched and stumbled as he entered. “Off, tiny tyrant,” he hoisted her to the floor unceremoniously. “For your information, I am a very old and venerable gentleman. You're wearing me out before my time.”

“Again,” Reecie pleaded. “More horsie. Plea-ease!”

“All done!” Uncle George brushed his hands together with finality. “Anyway it's 3:00. The perfect hour of divine mercy.” Stacy's involuntary groan was echoed by Emily from across the room. Uncle George seemed impervious. “Who would like to pray a Chaplet with me?” He surveyed the room's busy occupants.

Before anyone could come up with a plausible excuse for non-participation, Zeke chimed in, “Let's do it. Stace'll lead.” George smirked. “In fact,” Zeke continued smoothly, “I'd kind of like her to sing it today. Do you need to warm up, Stace?”

George looked as though he were about to bust. “Ezekiel,” he murmured fondly, “you have always been such a talent. You sing today.”

Zeke nodded and began to intone the words in a fakey falsetto, at which Stacy muttered under her breath, "Oh you're so-o-o holy!" Surreptitiously she gathered a golf-ball size chunk of dough and just as surreptitiously flung it in the direction of her cousin, striking him smartly behind the ear.

Zeke picked the offending blob up off of the work room floor and lobbed it back at her.

"Enough!" Stacy's mother intervened before the thing could escalate. "Stacy," she said, but not unkindly, "let's not waste Grandma's dough. You don't have to pray if you don't want to. Just tune it out."

Stacy shrugged. It was a short one anyway, not like a fifteen-decade rosary.

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That night, as she slept, Stacy dreamed she was riding in a car. She didn't know who the driver was. She couldn't see his face. He didn't respond when she nudged him on the shoulder; he was impervious. The night sky was lit red-gold with explosions and there were smoldering fires all along the edges of the road which continued for as far into the distance as her eyes could discern. She felt helpless--utterly helpless—to remove herself from the situation... and she was more afraid than she could ever remember having felt.

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The event was a Marian/Eucharistic Congress and there were more than eight thousand in attendance from every state in the union. Lectures were being given at regular intervals in the main auditorium, which was normally used for major sporting events. There were also "breakout" sessions for the children and teens in a side auditorium. Grandma Annie, her mother and Reecie had more or less camped out in the main auditorium where they had managed to find good seats on the main floor. When the

lectures were less than stellar the teens decided to wander throughout the complex. There was a room the size of a football field filled with Catholic and Christian items available for purchase. You could easily spend a couple of hours just browsing through the many booths filled with statues, tapestries and pictures, books, videos, and DVDs on any imaginable Christian topic.

There was another room which was dimly lit and had Gregorian chant music piped in. This room was lined with glass cases containing relics—bits of bone from or fabric worn by countless saints and martyrs from every era of the Church's two thousand year history. There was even a relic of the true Cross, on which Jesus Christ had supposedly been crucified. The Brown hooded caretaker told them that any object touched to this relic became a third degree relic, so people were hastily rummaging for holy cards, rosaries and jewelry, pressing these against the glass container in which the fragment was held.

Below this level there was another area, part of which was designated for perpetual adoration. The Sacrifice of the Mass was offered daily for all Congress participants, but for those who wished to spend more time with their Savior in silent companionship, this room had been provided and was furnished with pews and kneelers. A consecrated Host was on display in a giant gleaming container called a monstrance. Stacy's mother and grandmother kept a regular hour for adoration in a local chapel where this was available back home. Once Stacy had gone with her Mom, but this had been years ago, part of the hodgepodge of childhood memories that swirled together in the back of her mind.

The last part of the complex was a long hallway leading to a large room, partitioned off into twelve sections. Each section contained a cubicle, two chairs and a kneeler. Within each was a black-clad collared priest sitting on one chair and an empty chair was available for any who wished to go to confession. People were lined up on either side of the hall for at least a hundred feet, waiting for their turn to tell their sins and receive absolution from the priest. When Zeke saw this he immediately joined one of the



lines. "I need a bath," he said, sniffing his armpit. Arthur joined him and Zeke gave the girls an expectant look. "I don't think I'm the only one who could use a good cleaning. How long has it been, Stacy? I know you had a first confession. Did you ever go back for another?"

He was not far from the mark, but Stacy didn't appreciate the coercion. Besides, she didn't even believe in this stuff. She tossed her hair with annoyance and grabbed her sister's arm. "I think I saw a concession stand back there. Let's get a cappuccino, Em." Emily shrugged and gave the guys an apologetic backward glance. "Sister bonding," she agreed, although somewhat unenthusiastically.

"I'll pray for you, Stace," Zeke called out as they headed back down the hallway, "to St. Jude!"

"Who's he?" Stacy asked her sister.

"The Patron of Hopeless Causes," Emily said, and she smiled tightly.

Not without difficulty, the girls managed to find a table in a corner where they settled themselves, coffee and hazelnut pastries in hand. "I thought he was funny enough," Stacy said of the first speaker they had listened to that morning. The topic had been, *Music: Sacred or Satanic?* "The content was a load of crap, though. You can't actually believe that major music companies are owned by Satan worshipers, or that the music we listen to on the radio was consecrated to the devil in a black Mass." She considered her younger sister dubiously. Actually she wouldn't be surprised if Emily believed the things the presenter had said. She was pretty gullible.

"Well, how could he just get up and say that stuff if there was no factual documentation? I mean really, Stace, that would be a *lie*." Emily's eyes were so serious that her sister couldn't help but laugh.

“Emily,” she said, condescension evident in her tone, “I know this will shock you but... people lie!”

Emily shook her head somberly. “Not these people. Besides,” she took a sip of her coffee, “I heard the same thing before from another source.”

Stacy met her gaze levelly. “Name the source,” she challenged her sister.

Emily's gaze wavered. “Uncle George,” she said.

Stacy almost spit out her coffee. She raised an eyebrow but didn't bother to reply.

The day's lectures concluded with a high Mass in the auditorium, twenty priests and several Bishops in attendance. “High” meant there was a lot of music and the music was emotionally swaying. A concert violinist was present and the choir was well-practiced. Even Stacy could feel her heart swelling in her chest as the music came to a crescendo. When it came time for those present who were in a state of grace to receive Jesus in the form of bread and wine—what is termed Eucharist—Stacy jumped to her feet with the rest of her family. Ezekiel gave her a warning look and her mother gently nudged Stacy back into her seat. “No, Stace, it wouldn't be right.”

Stacy blinked angry tears from her eyes. What right did anyone—even her mother—have to determine what was right for her? Fat chance Stacy would ever bother coming to worship with her family if this was the kind of treatment she could expect! She couldn't imagine why she had ever come in the first place. Stacy stumbled down the aisle of makeshift seating and found her way to the lobby, fighting back tears. She looked up at a gentle touch on her shoulder to see the face of her grandmother, sympathy evident in her gaze. “It's not what you're thinking, Stace,” her grandmother brushed her cheek gently and motioned her to a love seat near the wall. “Did you hear the words the priest said right before we got up to go to Communion? He said '*let it not bring you condemnation, but health in mind and body*'. You need to be

properly disposed—for your own sake.”

“But Gram,” Stacey blinked back tears, “I do feel disposed-”

Her grandmother cut her off, “It’s not about feeling,” she said. “You haven’t been to church in years. You need confession first.”

“Well then,” Stacy stood with determination, “I’ll get confession!” She left her grandmother gazing after her with concern.

Stacy dropped into a seat opposite a bearded brown-clad figure. The room was dimly-lit, with the light scent of roses. Stacy could just make out the priest’s face as he inclined toward her. “How can I help you, my child?”

“They said I need to come here before I can have Communion.” She fidgeted in her seat. “It’s been a long time. I can’t quite remember the procedure,” she spoke hesitantly.

The priest said nothing for awhile. “Are you Catholic?” he finally broke the silence.

Good question. Stacy considered before she spoke. “I was raised Catholic and have received the Sacraments,” she responded carefully.

“But are *you* Catholic?”

Stacy wasn’t sure. She decided to be honest, “I’m here with my family. I love God. People think I don’t love Him just because I don’t go to church all the time.”

The priest considered her gravely. “I’m going to give you a pamphlet. It will help you examine your conscience. When you decide what you want to do, then you can come back for absolution.” When she didn’t get up, he said firmly, “Go my child. God waits for your response.”

Back in the lobby, Stacy shook her head. She stuffed the pamphlet in her pocket. She wasn’t sure what she wanted.

The family ate at a Villa Italia that night. It really had

been awhile since they had all gone out together. The bread shop took a lot out of Gram and Stacy's mom, but the business was in its infancy and new businesses require a lot of nurturing.

“Table for seven,” Grandma Annie spoke for the group. The waitress was thirtyish and a bit chubby. She led them to a table set for eight and brought them a booster seat for Reecie, who was small for her age. After they had ordered and had been given sufficient time to survey the room, Stacy decided to have some fun. She reached over and unbuttoned the top button on her mother's shirt. “Possible unattached distinguished gentleman at three o'clock,” she informed her mother

“Oh, Stacy!” Stacy's mom slapped her hand away and rebuttoned herself.

“Mother!” Stacy feigned exasperation. “You're far too eligible to hole yourself away. Anyway, he looks like he could be fun and we have an extra seat.”

Despite herself, Rose sneaked a glance in the direction her daughter had indicated. Rose tilted her head, considering the man. “He looks like a bus driver,” she pronounced. He was bald, chubby and wearing sports clothes. She shook her head. “Can't account for some daughter's taste.” Her mother drifted back to recapping the day with Grandma Annie. Neither was paying attention to the others for the moment. Stacy got up.

“Where are you going?” Emily asked her.

“Never mind,” she shushed her sister. She walked over to the waitress and they spoke for awhile.

Emily's curiosity was peaked. “What did you say to her?”

“I slipped her five bucks to give that guy another soda and say it's from Mom.” Her sister snorted. Stacy nudged her mother's arm. “I think he likes you,” she said. As her mother looked up the man lifted his glass and winked at her.

“Stacy,” Rose frowned with mock disapproval, “what did you say to that man?”

Stacy and Emily dissolved into laughter.

After the family had polished off two large pizzas: one sausage and mushroom and one small pepperoni—Reecie only

ate pepperoni—they all went for a swim. The teens and Reecie played with a beach ball in the pool, which was tolerably warm, while her mother and grandmother soaked in the hot tub. Within an hour the adults went back to their rooms and Stacy took a turn in the hot tub. She shut her eyes, lolled back and let her mind drift over the past day's events. She opened her eyes lazily to a soft touch on her arm. It was Arthur. She glanced at the larger pool and saw that Zeke and Emily were happily torturing Reecie with a game of *monkey in the middle*. Stacy smiled lazily.

“I just wanted to make sure you were all right,” Arthur stammered a bit. “I don't exactly know what happened during the Mass, but when you left you seemed pretty upset.” Arthur was blond—one of those in between shades—and had brown eyes that were round and soft. He wasn't as tall as Ezekiel but they were both muscular. Uncle George, among other things, was a fitness enthusiast, and he kept a bunch of weight lifting equipment in one of the upstairs rooms at the factory. He also had a treadmill which Stacy had been known to use from time to time. All of the teens had good muscle tone. “I just wanted to let you know I'm here,” Arthur finished quietly, “if you ever need someone to talk to.”

“Thanks.” Stacy's eyes met and held his. “I'm really not sure what's going on with me right now. I almost feel like I'm on the outside, looking in. This whole place is so different from our normal reality. It makes you stop and think—only right now I'm not quite sure what to think.” She flashed him a quick smile. “I appreciate the offer and I might take you up on it.”

The next day was a blur of lectures. The first was by Fr. John Corappi. He told his conversion story. He had been a teen football star, had joined the military, become a high-stakes realtor and had gotten into drugs and partying with rock stars. He became an addict, lost every penny of the millions he had earned and ended up sleeping on a park bench. Then, by simply reciting one *Hail Mary* a day to begin with, he was extricated from the

depths into which he had fallen and went on to become a priest—and not just any priest. He was ordained in Rome by Pope John Paul II. Now in his fifties, but still a striking and charismatic figure, Fr. Corappi was a contemplative priest with no possessions of his own. He gave inspirational speeches and relied on God's providence.

After a ten minute break there was another lecture—this one by Fr. Pablo Straub. Fr. Pablo was a little older gentleman with a thick Mexican accent. He talked about how much Jesus loved each person—so much so, that if there had only been one person, He (God!) would have given His life just to save that one person. Fr. Pablo said it was as though God was “in love” with us! He was so much in love with us that, not only did He give His life for us at the crucifixion, not even was that enough, He also continues daily to give Himself as food. An analogy would be that it was as if a person loved their puppy so much that they—to save the puppy—became a puppy. But, more: not only did this person become a puppy, he became for that beloved pet—puppy food. The thought was almost blasphemous, but it was exactly (no, not exactly, because God was no mere human, but the Creator of the universe, and what He did for us was vastly greater) what God did. Stacy's head hurt from thinking about this. She excused herself and took a walk to clear her thoughts. Wandering through the complex, Stacy eventually found herself in the adoration chapel. She knelt on the prie-dieu in front of the monstrance and contemplated the Wafer—which was no wafer—that was on display therein. The concept was mind boggling. She wanted to know Him, but it was hard to connect the morsel of bread in front of her with the God-man who had died on Calvary two thousand years ago, still less with the Creator who had knit her—and specifically her—in her mother's womb eighteen years previously. “I want to know You,” she whispered under her breath. “Please let me know who You are. What did you look like?”

When she left the Adoration area she found her way into the confession line. There were only a few people lined up again,

probably because there were very good lectures going on at the time. Stacy didn't even stop to think it an odd coincidence when she ended up in the the same rose-smelling cubicle she had been in the previous day, with the very priest she had spoken with before. She knelt and without preliminaries, because she couldn't remember the preliminaries, she blurted, "I don't know if I'm Catholic. I know I want to be whatever Jesus wants me to be," she paused and took a breath, "I just don't want to get freakish about it."

The priest remained silent for a moment. "I want you to go carefully through each of the ten commandments, then come back and tell me every sin that you can remember having done." In the half-light his eyes appeared nearly black. "Are you hungry?" he asked unexpectedly.

Stacy was startled. "Excuse me?"

"Perhaps you will be hungry tomorrow. He is hungry always." He blessed and dismissed her.

The family did lunch at Sloppy Finger Sam's—who can resist their ribs? There were bag lunches available on premises, but their mother said they really were forgettable, and this trip was supposed to be a family event. The guys especially liked to eat ribs and this joint had all you can eat for \$6. The competition to eat the most greasy pork was fierce and it was close, but in the end the group decided Zeke had gotten more for his money, although Arthur made a good showing. None of the others were even in the race.

Afterward they regrouped in the auditorium, ready for the afternoon's presenters. On the docket first was a contingent from Stockbridge, MD. They were giving a summary of the life of St. Faustina, the first Saint canonized by the late pope, John Paul II. Faustina had been a young Polish nun—a mystic. Jesus had appeared to her repeatedly through her 33 year life as a cloistered nun, always imparting a message of mercy. As a preliminary, a man and woman highlighted the major events in her short life, sharing key messages with the audience. Then the audience was

told they would experience something that had been discovered by accident in the course of studying this image which had been commissioned by Jesus to be painted, exactly as He had appeared to Faustina. Upon the big screen in front of the room appeared an enormous depiction of Christ. “This,” the audience was told, “is the first painting of Jesus as Divine Mercy, which He asked Faustina to have painted.” The image faded to blackness. “This,” the audience was then told, “is a photograph of the Shroud of Turin—the alleged burial garment of Jesus.” With another click the two images reappeared, superimposed upon each other. They were an exact match. A shiver went up and down Stacy's spine as she realized the answer to her heartfelt prayer to know what He had looked like when He had walked the earth. The images continued to shift, from Faustina painting to Shroud image, and back again—occasionally both together, while the presenters played a love song about Jesus. “You love me,” Stacy realized with shock. “You really love *me*.”

This time she really went to confession. While standing in line, she examined her conscience using the little card the priest had first given her as well as reviewing the ten commandments. She reflected ruefully on the many years that had passed since her last confession. The card said you were to confess by kind, and also by number, your serious sins. How could she possibly remember each and every lie, theft or lustful activity engaged in? Her whole life was a blur of self-seeking behaviors. She would just have to tell the priest she wasn't sure of the numbers, but the infractions were many and they had become habitual.

When she entered the dimly lit chamber filled with cubicles she was not at all surprised to be led to the exact station where she had been the two previous times. She would have been shocked if it had not been the same bearded priest who was waiting for her. He helped her through the formulaic



preliminaries and listened patiently as she enumerated her sins, interrupting occasionally to seek clarification or to dig deeper and find other sins she had not even realized she had done, or that they were hurting God, herself or others. At the end the priest sighed. “That was a good confession,” he said. When he pronounced the words of absolution, Stacy felt the shock of a shiver that assailed her body like a wave from head to toe and back again. It was almost like the waves of pleasure that she had occasionally experienced illicitly, but in another way it felt like feathery wings tickling her inside. When she left the confessional she felt so light that it was almost as if she could fly and there was a heavenly scent of roses so strong it almost made her dizzy.

Even though the lectures had been exceptional, Mass was the high point of the day. Again, the auditorium was packed, all of the bleachers filled to the top. From their vantage point on the floor, but three-fourths of the way back from the altar, Stacy could pick out the individual faces of the day's lecturers, including Fr. Corappi and Fr. Pablo. The oddest thing were the tiny children and infants. Many of them had become quite fussy being confined to a tight space for so long. Not a whimper was heard during Mass. Reecie knelt with the rest of the family on the hard wooden floor, periodically making the sign of the cross. The sense of the Presence of God was palpable. When it came time for communion and the violin broke into the first strains of Franck's *Panis Angelicus*, no one said a word to dissuade Stacy from joining them in the Communion line. They could tell she had changed.

“C'mon,” Stacy grabbed Emily's arm. “I want to get some books and things before the Expo room closes.” She let her mother know where she would meet them afterward and the girls started to thread their way toward the door nearest the gargantuan room filled with vendors. Stacy felt a pressure on her elbow.

“We're right behind you.” She looked into Arthur's eyes. “Zeke and I want to get some things, too,” he told her.

Stacy nodded. It was too loud to do much talking until they were removed from the throngs of chattering people who mostly filed out the exits and presumably off to find somewhere to eat their evening meal. Stacy could feel her own stomach growling.

“What are you getting?” Zeke asked her.

“I need some books, mostly. Something on the Eucharist, something on Divine Mercy—maybe a life of Faustina—and I want something on the Shroud of Turin.”

“Oh,” Zeke began to rummage in his beaten pack, “I've got that last one for you.” He pulled out a beaten copy of a book entitled, *Report on the Shroud of Turin*. The author's name was Dr. John Heller and there was an intriguing mummy-like image of the Shroud man on the cover.

“Where did you get this?” Stacy asked her cousin.

“Bartleby's used books. I only paid five dollars for it. It tells about the STURP team effort to study the Shroud in 1978 and all of the opposition they encountered. It almost reads like a novel.” He handed the book to Stacy. “You can borrow it if you want. I already read the thing.”

“Thank you.” She took the book. They were by now moving down the first long aisle of displays. Suddenly something caught Stacy's eye. *Oh hey!* On a nearby table was a book that sported a large picture of the man who had heard her confession. *He must be a presenter here, she thought.* She was about to let the others know that she recognized the man as her confessor when Arthur picked the book up. “I read this,” he said to Ezekiel. “It was interesting.”

Zeke took the book from him and examined it. “Didn't he have the stigmata?”

“For decades,” Arthur nodded. “He also could bilocate and was responsible for healing countless people, including a little girl who was born without pupils. Through his intercession, God made her see even though she still didn't have any pupils.”

Arthur nodded solemnly. “Padre Pio also could tell you your sins. He would send you away to think about it unless you confessed them all. So people would come from all over the world just to stand in his confession line all day.”

Stacy took the book from her cousin. “What is stigmata?” she asked, thumbing through and looking at the pictures.

“The bleeding wounds of Christ. Padre Pio had all five. He died in 1968. They say his stigmata smelled like roses.” Stacy felt the blood drain from her face and she almost dropped the book. “Hey, are you ok?” Arthur put an arm around her and led her to a chair.

“Just a little dizzy,” she said, burying her head in her lap. *It isn't him*, she told herself. *My priest only looks like Padre Pio*. Nevertheless she bought the book.

By the time they left the vending area, Stacy had also acquired a book on Divine Mercy and an 8x10 image that, when looked at head on, was a picture of Divine Mercy, but when looked at from either side became a picture of the Shroud. She found a book on Eucharistic miracles and another on the Shroud. This one was by Dr. Gilbert Lavoie and was called *Resurrected*. Although she ate and swam with the others, and it was fun, she couldn't help slipping into long periods of silence as she mulled the day's happenings over in her restless mind.

When Stacy awoke the next morning she was aware of a feeling that she was not alone. *Good Morning*, she said to Jesus. *I know You are with me. Stay in all of my activities of this day*. That was the best she could manage for a morning offering. With mixed feelings, she reviewed the events of the previous day, not quite sure what to think.

Then, careful not to wake anyone else, she got dressed and made her way to the breakfast niche alcove just off the hotel lobby. A warm fire was crackling and the tempting aroma of freshly made Belgian waffles filled the space. Stacy poured

herself a cup of coffee from the big carafe and quickly made herself an english muffin. Then, breakfast and reading materials in tow, she made her way toward the row of tables that were facing the fire.

“Care to join me?” The person at the table next to hers lowered the newspaper he had been reading. It was Arthur.

Stacy gathered her things and moved over to his table. “I didn't know you were an early riser,” she said.

Arthur surveyed the peaceful morning scene. “I always have been,” he said, “ever since the paper route I had when I was twelve. Is that all you're eating?” He surveyed her piece of toast and black coffee with mock disapproval. “You know this place has a world famous breakfast.” He pointed to their brochure on the table. *World Famous Breakfast*, it read. He pushed his overflowing plate in her direction. She dutifully took a grape.

“Have you been enjoying the conferences?” she asked.

“I really have,” he told her. “I didn't even know this sort of thing existed.” He spiked a big forkful of scrambled eggs. “How about you, though?”

“Yeah,” Stacy's response was non-committal. “It's big.” *And confusing*. “You know, I was wondering, how is it that you and my cousin weren't confirmed in eleventh grade with the rest of your class?”

“I don't know about Zeke,” he said, after he'd swallowed. “I wasn't real sure I was Catholic back then.”

Stacy took a sip of coffee. “You are now?”

“I've been doing a lot of reading since then,” he told her. “I'm seeing the world a lot differently.”

Stacy considered him gravely. “I'll admit the world looks different when filtered through Catholic eyes.” She sighed. “I have a lot more reading to do, I guess.”

He met her eyes. “I guess,” he agreed. He tapped her pile of books. “So read.” He smiled slightly. “I look forward to discussing them with you.”

The first event on the last day of the conference was again a lecture by Fr. Corappi. He emphasized that we are all in the midst of a great battle. We do not battle against flesh and blood, but against the Powers of Evil that are in high places. He told a story of receiving a call in the middle of the night from friends of a woman he had known who had been a very powerful and successful person, but who, like him, had lost it all with an addiction to drugs. Later he had found her behind the grille of a nunnery, but now the demons of her addiction had driven her back onto the street. Fr. Corappi had to literally buy her back from a brothel. He told his audience they should never think it could not happen to them. With the pressures of temptation, there was no one immune from backsliding. And there was nothing Satan would like more than to see us give up. The Evil One wants us to believe it is not possible for God to continually forgive us when we just fall back into our old sins. When Judas hanged himself after handing Jesus over to be killed, it was not the sin that condemned him, but his inability to conceive of so great a Mercy that there was *nothing* that could not be forgiven. We must never hold ourselves back from such torrents of Mercy, but be confident that in any moment of our life, however bleak, He will forgive us.

This lecture completed the workshop. Before leaving the convention center she had to do one more thing. With trepidation, she found her way back to the confession line again. Her examination of conscience this time consisted of repeating, *I imagined the whole thing. He only looks like Padre Pio* over again and again until it was her turn. As she knelt in the cubicle and looked up, this time there was the smiling face of a portly Irish priest. “What can I do for you, my child?” he asked, with a thick accent.

Stacy breathed a sigh of relief. “Nothing,” she said, getting up again. “I guess I’m ok. Thanks.” She pumped his hand. “I don’t need confession after all.” He gazed after her departing figure, a confused look on his face.

When she got back to the area of the auditorium where her family had “reserved” their seats by placing personal items on them, the rest of the family was gone, either at the expo center or in the rest rooms. While waiting for the final Mass, Stacy opened the book on Eucharistic Miracles and began to read about the Miracle of Lanciano, Italy. In the eighth Century a priest was plagued by doubts as to the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. He prayed for an increase of faith and when he spoke the words of consecration over the Host, the wafer of bread became a chunk of striated human heart tissue. The wine became blood—type AB+. This event continued to be miraculous in that it never decayed. More than twelve centuries after the event, the miraculous relic was still available to be seen and venerated by believers.

An ancient little nun was sitting beside her. The tag on her garment read Sr. Loretta. She interrupted Stacy's reading to put a veined and wrinkly hand on her arm. Her bony fingers felt cold. “Dear, would you mind getting me a glass of water?” Her eyes were lively and warm in spite of her age. Stacy put down her book and ran to get a drink for the old woman.

“You know,” the old woman said, after taking a drink, “I can't wait for my wedding day.” Seeing that Stacy had no reply, she continued, “The day that I die I will be finally united with my Spouse.” Her eyes were simple and earnest. “I can't wait.” Stacy smiled softly. The elderly lady tapped a bony finger on Stacy's Eucharistic Miracle book. “Would you like to hear my two miracles?” she asked. Stacy nodded and the old woman got a faraway look as she collected her memories.

“The first happened when I was a very little girl.” She shot a guilty glance at Stacy. “I just loved chocolate,” she said. “I had a habit of spending my allowance on candy bars every week but, since I am a shrewd person, I wanted to get the most for my nickel a week. You could get one bar for a nickel, three for a dime. I would save up one week and get the three. Only one time when I had my dime and I was heading off to buy the three bars, I decided to stop in the local church for a visit with Jesus. While I

was kneeling I got the feeling that I should light a votive candle to pray for a special intention.” The elderly nun nodded her head, remembering the incident. “So I put my dime in the slot and lit the candle.” She caught Stacy's hand in her own. “When I left the church, it was as though I could taste chocolate with every piece of my body.” She said this intensely, then sighed, remembering. “That,” she told Stacy, “was my first miracle. Stacy wondered how she could be certain of something so little and so long ago. “Would you like to hear the other one?” Stacy nodded.

“This was a bit later, when I was a young nun. I had just received a brand new blue suit. I remember how crisp and spotless it was. Anyway, I had been assigned to direct traffic for an event like this in my new blue suit. I was standing outside, doing my job, when I felt a few drops of rain.” Her eyes showed the alarm she was feeling, reliving this memory. “I called out to my Spouse, asking Him please, not to let my new suit get ruined,” she met Stacy's eyes with excitement, “and the rain stopped.” She said this with breathless excitement, then they both lapsed into a thoughtful silence.

Stacy felt ashamed. The second one was even smaller than the first. If it had been Stacy she would have probably attributed that incident to mere coincidence. Here was a woman who had selflessly given Jesus her whole life, while Stacy found it difficult to give Him one grudging hour a week. Here she was thinking she may have gone to confession three times with a dead Saint, and this holy woman had never experienced anything in the ball park. She didn't get it.

The little old nun reached in her purse and pulled out a pamphlet. “I want you to have this. Read it when you are in doubt.” She pressed the pamphlet into Stacy's hand, who dutifully pocketed it. By now her mother and the others had returned from their various pursuits and the Mass was about to begin. Stacy introduced Sr. Loretta to her family.

The final Mass was, if anything, more wonderful than the previous two. The Gospel reading was the episode after the Resurrection, when Thomas, who had not been with the others when Jesus appeared the first time, said he would not believe unless he was able to put his fingers into the wounds in Christ's hands and his fist into His side. Then, when Jesus again appeared, Thomas fell to his knees, crying, "My Lord and my God!" But Jesus said, *How blest are those who have not seen, but still believe.*

The Mass ended with a Eucharistic Procession, eight thousand people falling to their knees as if on cue every time the bishop, who was bearing Christ aloft in the monstrance, passed before them. They were all singing songs of adoration and the Presence of the Holy Spirit was so strong that Stacy was assailed by almost continuous shivers, such as she had experienced when her sins were forgiven. Filing out afterward, she became separated from the other members of her family. She was being carried along effortlessly by the motion of the crowd when she suddenly bumped against a motionless figure clad in brown. She looked up and into the eyes of—well, there was no denying it was Padre Pio. Stacy just stared.

He looked a bit disapproving. "*How blest are those who have not seen, but still believe,*" she heard him say, although he did not move his lips. Then he vanished, but she was the only person who seemed aware of this.



## Broken Elevators

It was raining when the family packed up and pulled out of the conference. Stacy was quiet on the trip back home. She couldn't help replaying the events of the previous few days, mulling them over in her mind, but she suspected that no sane person would believe her if she told them about it.

Instead of talking she began to read, switching off between the Heller book on the Shroud of Turin that Zeke had loaned her and the book about the life of St. Padre Pio. The Shroud book began with a personal testimony-style progression to explain how he, a southern Baptist, had become involved in a research project dealing with what he had always considered a Catholic relic. He read an article in *Science* magazine about a research team lead by John Jackson, a scientist from the Air force Academy. The team included Walter McCrone, an analytical chemist from Yale who was famous for debunking the Vinland map that had placed Vikings in the new World long before Columbus and the pilgrims. There was also Ray Rogers, who worked with thermal effects. Rogers said that since the Shroud had been through a fire that had heated it to 200 degrees inside its container, if the image had been painted there would be a significant change in color in portions of the Shroud. This seemed plausible to Heller, who still had no intention of getting involved. Heller called Jackson, anyway, to ask him about the presence of blood. Jackson said previous tests had been inconclusive, which Heller said was bunk—either there was blood or there wasn't. They didn't do the right tests. What they needed to do was to get the porphyrins to fluoresce. Another member of the team, Dr. Cook, came to his house and showed him the docudrama, *The Silent Witness*, based on the Ian Wilson book

about the Shroud. Heller had also been curious to hear that the Shroud, in addition to being a photographic negative-- and this was long before photography would be invented-- possessed 3-D characteristics. This film showed how a photo of the Shroud, placed in a VP-8 image analyzer, would yield a three dimensional image of a man. This was not so with other two dimensional photographs.

Behind the rhythmic swish-swish of the windshield wipers, Stacy could hear a faint ring. She looked up from her book.

“Oh, Dear, is that your phone?” Grandma Annie fumbled near her feet, looking for Rose's purse. Plucking the object from her daughter's bag just before the fourth ring, she said, “Hello...? George, is that you? Oh, hi. You're what...?” She glanced at Stacy's mom with consternation. “No, George, please leave the bread in the freezer... George, are you listening...? We mail it frozen—oh, dear!” She turned to face her daughter. “I think we got cut off. Drive faster, Rose. George said he's taking all the bread out of the freezers to fill those orders he took. Dear me,” she fretted, “if we don't get back pronto, he'll probably hold a super-sale and sell it all for a quarter!”

As Rose kicked the cruise control up a notch, Stacy gazed out the window for awhile. A sign read Green Lake Bridge—1 mile. As they approached the bridge, another sign alerted them to the Green Lake Dam. There was a small sign with an arrow pointing to the left. This one read Dam Bar. Stacy cleared her throat. She leaned forward and nudged her mom on the shoulder. “I suppose you and Gram will want to stop at the Dam Bar,” she said, mock-disapproval in her tone.

“Stacy, really!” her mother seemed shocked.

“Didn't you see the sign back there on the bridge. It said, “Dam Bar.” Stacy looked to the others, “You saw it, right?” When they all just looked blank, she shook her head and poked it back into the Heller book.

Heller decided to sift through the pro and con data, and there was an unbelievable amount of it, but, historically, the cons

mostly came down to one letter written by a Bishop six hundred years ago. In this letter the bishop denounced the Shroud as a painted forgery. This bishop was mad because the local church was getting rich off of pilgrims' donations and he said that a previous bishop had told him that a painter had confessed to having painted the thing. But to Heller, no matter. A few simple tests would prove if the Shroud was painted or not. He joined the team.

She did not read the Padre Pio book from beginning to end, instead opening at random and reading snippets. She read about the long lines of people who traveled to have him hear their confession, sometimes waiting for up to ten days, and how he would sometimes read their minds, telling them their sins. She read a story of a bilocation incident in a palace where a dying man, who was Masonic and whose lodge-members were guarding the entrance lest a priest should be let in to give him the last rites, received absolution from Padre Pio, the man's premature daughter being born simultaneously. The child would later become a spiritual daughter of Padre Pio. Many of the stories were fanciful—how he received the stigmata, his many battles with the Devil, verbal and physical. Stacy would not have wanted to live his life. She was glad she was not that holy. Her head was beginning to throb from so much reading, especially reading while riding in a vehicle. She pushed both books back into her pack and closed her eyes.

“How did it go, George?” Stacy's mother looked up from throwing suitcases and bags out of the trunk of the rented van and onto the pavement in front of the factory.

“It went,” her uncle grinned. “There isn't much left in the freezer and I took another ten mail orders. You all are gonna have to get baking.” Striding back toward the bakery, he yelled over his shoulder, “If you need me, I'll be taking a nap.” Grandma Annie grimaced.

“I'll help you carry your bags in, Gram.” Stacy bent to pick up her grandmother's satchel and suitcase. As they threaded

their way through the hallway towards the back of the building where the stairway to the upper floor was located, Stacy noticed, as if for the first time, the six stained glass windows that looked down upon the west side of the building. The setting sun glinted through the depictions of first John the Baptist, (the plaque below his image read circa 30 AD: Beheaded), then Stephen (circa 33AD: Stoned to Death), Polycarp of Smyrna (circa 155AD: Stabbed, Burned on a Pyre), then Joan of Arc (circa 1431AD: Burned Alive at Stake), then the North American Martyrs—eight men (circa 1600sAD: Killed by Aborigines), then finished off with Maria Goretti (circa 1902AD: stabbed, died as the result of attempted rape).

She had never thought much about these windows—they had been a fixture of the place since her childhood but, looking at them now with more grown-up eyes, she could see why the local church had not chosen to recycle these particular images, however beautiful they were. They were a bit on the gory side. Stacy shuddered and hoped she would not have to die for her new found faith. She doubted that she was up to their standard of dedication.

Carrying the bags, she ascended the stairs. She passed by the bathroom and the chapel that George had installed in a spare room. She passed the workout room where she and the other kids, and even some of their friends, would do workouts—aerobic and weight lifting—with Uncle George as personal trainer. She finally deposited the cases in front of the bedroom at the end of the hall where her grandmother slept. “See you tomorrow after school,” she said, kissing her grandmother's cheek.

Stacy always met her friend, Libby, for breakfast. Libby, she knew, was agnostic. She said she was unsure what to believe, that she was still searching for the truth. The one thing she was pretty sure of was that her parents and the other adults she knew didn't have it. Actually she and Stacy were a good match before Stacy's trip to the conference. They had always been able to share secrets. Stacy decided to tell her about the Padre Pio thing.

“Wow,” Libby said, after hearing the story. “So you think

you did this confession thing with some guy who's been dead for forty years. Whatever you were drinking at this conference, I want some of that stuff!"

"I 'm serious, Libby." Stacy was starting to regret having chosen Libby to share her secret. "I feel like I am seeing my family's faith in a whole new light. I think it might be real, after all. I could show you some stuff--"

"Whoa, girl!" Libby cut her off. "Sounds to me like you've been brain-washed. Maybe I don't want to drink that happy juice they gave you. I mean really, Stace. You're talking about *THE CHURCH*. This is quite possibly the most war-mongering institution that so-called civilization has ever produced. Have you forgotten about the Crusades? Does it mean nothing to you that people were forced to become Catholic or they would have been put to death?" Libby got up and shook her head, apparently lamenting the loss of her friend's brain. "Think about it. You are not being rational."

After she left, Stacy had to admit she was right. They had studied many wars in history and most of them had started over differences of religion. "Where's Lib?" their friend, Chad, sank down into the chair she had so recently vacated. Chad had a crush on Libby so he often found his way to their table to smack her in the head and mess with her stuff in the hope that she would actually notice him. Libby was one of these crinkly-haired model-thin blonds the guys always go gaga for.

"She left me." Stacy sighed. "She told me my new found faith in Christianity is mis-placed because the Church is too war-mongering."

"Is she nuts?" Chad pushed his books to the side and hunkered in for the argument. "Are we talking about the same turn-the-other-cheek religion my Mom wants to push on me? If you ask me, the problem with Christians is they are too meek. They never want to offend anyone, they're always fighting to abolish the death penalty, it's like pulling teeth to get a real Christian to fight for his rights, or to fight at all—they're so damned pacifist. If Libby were here I would say-- I don't know

what I'd say-- she's nuts!" And he left in a huff, the same as Libby. Stacy had to admit, they both had a point.

Her first class of the morning was history. Ms. Felch was a feminist—card-carrying. Her point this morning, as it seemed to be most mornings, was how Western (and by extension, Christian) culture had oppressed women, dooming them to a lifetime of drudgery and childbearing. Until the advent of women in the work place and especially since the marvelous discovery of the pill, only childless women had any chance at using their brain at all, and the childless were mostly pitied for being spinsters. Western culture was decidedly the enemy of women. She pitied those brainless enough to buy into the system.

Stacy left the class, reproaching herself for spinelessly caving into a system that was designed by men, for men. History class was followed by gym and normally Stacy would have been the most enthusiastic dodge-ball player on the floor, but today, pensive, she sank to the floor by the wall. Her teacher, Mr. Clancy, kicked at her left foot. "What's up?" His face showed concern.

Stacy looked up at him. "You're Catholic, Clance. I saw your family in church when I went to my sister, Clarice's, baptism. Why is it that you weren't with them?"

"What?" He crooked his head to one side.

"I was just wondering why it is that you didn't go to church with your wife and kids."

"I don't mean to offend you, Stace, because, let's face it, you're almost like a guy." He kicked her foot again. "That church stuff is for women. All those tear-jerker sermons and stuff, they don't do them for men. You wouldn't catch a real man setting foot in a church. You know what I mean? Now get your head into the game! Your team is behind." He threw her the ball and Stacy dutifully got up, but she was confused. How is it that the Church could be anti-woman and for women at the same time?

As usual Stacy sat with Libby at lunch, but they didn't talk much. Stacy could almost touch her friend's disapproval, it was so solid. Chad had also joined them at their table, still hoping to enter as a blip on Libby's radar screen.

"What's up with them?" A friend of Chad's--Stacy knew his name to be Frank—nodded towards the girls.

Chad shrugged. "They're fighting over religion."

Frank raised an eyebrow. "Don't tell me, let me guess--" he gestured toward Libby, "She's Irish Protestant," then gestured toward Stacy, "and she's Irish Catholic. No, wait--" He pointed to Stacy, "She's Muslim," to Libby, "and she's Christian." He sat down between them. "Guess what girls," he put an arm around each, "we live in a melting pot." *EW!* They both shook him off.

"Actually," Chad smoothly explained, "Stacy's leaning toward being Catholic and Libby thinks it's for the birds."

"It is," Frank agreed with her friend. He faced Stacy. "Who wants to take part in a religion that's all sack cloth and ashes, no meat on Fridays and fasting during Lent? It's far too austere. I gave it up years ago."

Stacy didn't need to come up with a defense. "Oh, yeah?" Libby was instantly on her feet, hands on her hips. "You call her church austere with all those Cathedrals and the way the priests dress and, for goodness sake, what about the treasures of the Vatican!? I've never seen such an abomination of opulence this side of Paris Hilton." She plopped down and crossed her arms. "I rest my case."

Stacy knew her friends had definitely said something, but she wasn't sure what.

After school, while waiting for her mother to pick her up, a kind of boyfriend Stacy had sort of dated sidled up to her. "Hi, Darius," Stacy said. He took a puff of his cigarette and offered Stacy a drag. "No, thanks," she said, but her tone wasn't judgmental. "I'm kind of trying to give it up." To be truthful, she had barely started and wasn't sure she liked it, especially the smell

in her clothes, but she didn't want to seem uncool.

“There's a party at Drake's this Friday.” Darius took another drag. “His parents are out of town. I was thinking you might like to come.”

Stacy's nod was non-committal. “Maybe,” she said, but her heart wasn't in it. Normally she would have jumped at the invitation.

Seeing her mother's car pull up, he ran his fingers gently down the inside of Stacy's arm, provoking an electric response within her. Then he sauntered off. “I'll call you,” she heard him murmur.

Stacy's mother frowned after his departing figure. “Who was that boy?”

“Just a guy I know,” Stacy said, getting into the car.

The work load was fantastic that day. Fortunately, they had returned in time to prevent all of the supplies from thawing and they had been duly dispatched frozen that morning at the post office. But there was very little left in storage and Stacy's mother and grandmother had been working frantically to replenish the supplies. Stacy got to work immediately. To make matters worse, next weekend was third Sunday. Third Sunday of each month the family would shut down production of protein bread for one day, switching over to caramel rolls and pastries, which they would serve as donated hospitality at Holy Apostles Church. Their involvement with this ministry predated the bread shop by many years, so it took precedence. All of this meant that this would be a short work week.

“Would you girls be able to stay an extra two hours each night to help us catch up?” Grandma Annie asked. “I'll order take out for dinner.”

Stacy and Emily agreed and Stacy noticed that Arthur was working beside Zeke. It was cool of him to help out. They had fettucine alfredo delivered, which they quickly ate and then got back to work for several hours. By the time they went across the



street to do a little home work and get ready for bed, Stacy was worn out, but they had accomplished a lot. Two more days like this and the stores would be replenished.

At school the next day, Libby pointedly sat at a different table. Apparently she thought Stacy had turned into a God-Squader or something. No matter. Stacy had a lot of reading to do.

When she wasn't doing homework, Stacy thumbed through the books she had bought at the conference. She read a few more miracles of the Eucharist. There was one where a consecrated host, thrown carelessly into a Priest's breviary( or prayer book) for distribution to a sick parishioner he was intending to visit, became a splotch of blood in the book, still visible to this day. There was another where hundreds of consecrated hosts being held in reserve for an upcoming feast day, were stolen and stuffed into a poor box. The thief had only wanted the gold container they were in. After much prayer the missing hosts were found but, fearing contamination, it was decided they would not be consumed, but rather would be allowed to experience natural decay—only they never did. It had been hundreds of years and these particular hosts were still as fresh as the day they were baked. Scientists had done numerous experiments, putting unconsecrated hermetically sealed hosts beside them, and such. These invariably experienced decay within a few months, but the Miraculous Hosts of Siena, completely unprotected from the elements, refused to break down.

Continuing to read through the drama of the Heller book and all of the trials and obstacles overcome by the STURP team to be able to conduct their experiments—from incredibly expensive equipment being donated, to clearing up impossibly tangled red tape, to windfalls of money being received just in time to purchase the necessary airplane ticket for dozens of individual scientists, it was clear they were experiencing Divine

Intervention. It was equally clear that there were Powers trying to prevent the team from completing this work. Stacy felt the author's frustration when he discovered that all of the samples had been given to the one scientist, Walter McCrone. He had to wait and beg forever before being given such a meager amount of wound image fiber that there was no way to do a porphyrin fluorescence test. Meanwhile McCrone told reporters that there was no blood on the Shroud—just iron oxide paint. But after searching every slide, Heller found tiny amounts of what certainly appeared to be blood in most of the non-image slides. Gathering all of these tiny bits together and, with much difficulty, managing to get them into solution, he and his companion scientist were rewarded when the solution began to clearly fluoresce, and it was equally clear that it was blood.

At this point Stacy, not finding any info on the blood type, went to the school's library, got on line and punched in *Shroud of Turin blood type*. She was immediately rewarded with many articles, each attesting to its AB+ type—the same as the Miraculous Host of Lanciano.

*Lord, Stacy breathed, You had real human blood, and you had AB+: the universal receiver.*

Stacy had taken biology the previous semester and they had studied blood types. They were even allowed to type their own blood, which Stacy did. She knew her own to be O-, the universal donor, and apparently the exact opposite of the blood that had coursed through Jesus' veins when He walked the earth. That figured. She was painfully aware that her own nature was about as far from sinless as it could possibly be. She knew she shouldn't even consider going to that party with Darius, for example, but she found herself looking forward to his call and, truthfully, she didn't yet know if she would go or not.

Stacy had a scheduled appointment with her counselor after sixth hour to determine whether she had completed all of the necessary requirements for graduation.

Mr Smith turned the screen of his computer toward Stacy. “As you can see,” he said, “Your grades are all fine and, assuming that you pass all of your current classes, you should have no trouble receiving your diploma at the graduation ceremony. However,” he regarded her gravely, “there is the matter of your senior presentation. You are one of the few students who has yet to declare what you will be presenting to the panel. I believe you are scheduled to present on,” he flipped through a calendar on his desk, “March 6.” He faced her squarely. “Have you decided on a topic yet?”

Stacy scratched her cheek nervously. “I was thinking of doing a presentation on the Shroud of Turin,” she heard herself say. Stacy blinked. *I was...?*

Mr. Smith rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “What an intriguing idea,” he said after a pause. “What slant?”

“I’m still doing the research,” Stacy said quickly. *Lord, help me. She most certainly couldn't do a Catholic presentation in a secular school.* “I’ll let you know in a few weeks.” Stacy got up, trying to look confident.

“Well, I’ll pencil it in. I’ll be looking forward to seeing your research.” Mr. Smith shook her hand. “What an intriguing idea—the Shroud of Turin.” Stacy smiled nervously and headed to her next class.

It was another hectic night at the bakery. They ate take-out subs that Zeke picked up on his last post office run. There was a delivery of several pallets of grains needed for the bread that a semi had dropped off and since Zeke was out on a mail run Grammy asked if Stacy and Arthur would mind taking the rickety elevator down to the basement to put them away. The chore required four trips in all with the dolly piled high. On the last run the lights in the elevator began to flicker. Then—horrors—it stopped altogether. She and Arthur were stuck between floors.

“Now what...?” he asked her.

Stacy sank down to the floor and drew up her legs,

regretting the lack of a cushion. “We wait. Someone will get us out,” she said, “once they figure out we're in here.” It wasn't the first time this had happened, but it was a bit annoying, as busy as they were at the moment.

Arthur shrugged and sat down opposite her. “Maybe we should yell or something.”

“It's unlikely they'd hear us. We're on the opposite side of the building and with the mixers running it's pretty loud in there.” Stacy put her head on her knees. “Of course someone could run out of an ingredient.” She rolled her head to the side to look at him. “That might speed things up. You know,” Stacy smiled at him slyly, “I don't really mind being stuck in here. We could use a rest and...” she hesitated a bit, “well, it could be worse.” She had been thinking, *I don't mind being stuck here with you*. In the confined space she could smell his cologne and she was extremely aware of his nearness. His stretched out leg was only inches from her thigh. She was aware of her pulse. Stacy swallowed. “I know you've hung out with Zeke for years so I should know you, but I really don't. For instance, your family: Do you live with your father...? mother...? I don't know if you have any brothers or sisters.” Stacy didn't think there were any near her age. She would have met them at school.

Arthur looked surprised. “My life is boringly normal, except that these days it's so unusual to be normal.” He cleared his throat. “I live with both parents—never divorced. I have four older siblings. They are all married and have families of their own. One lives near. The others had to follow careers elsewhere, so they're scattered.” His eyes took on a faraway look. “I think my mom misses my sisters a lot.” Arthur smiled softly. “Zeke said your dad passed away.”

“Car accident. It's been almost ten years now.” She said this wistfully. “After that Mom brought us to live near Gram. She needed her to help take care of us while she worked. Of course all this came before the bread shop. Now we all work together—one big happy family.” There was a note of insincerity in this comment and it didn't escape Arthur.

“You do all seem pretty happy,” he stated.

“Anything else...? Stacy prodded.

Arthur's face was blank. He shrugged.

“You don't think we're a bit weird?”

He shook his head. “Everybody's weird, Stace... one way or the other. I guess I don't know a lot of other families who periodically interrupt their work schedule to pray together. That's a bit odd,” he paused thoughtfully, “but I like it.”

Stacy tossed her hair. “Sometimes George bugs me.”

“He doesn't mean to,” Arthur assured her. “I kind of know what he's doing. He's just more aware of what's going on out there and he feels the need to do battle personally. He's kind of like Noah, you know. He just wants to keep you all in the arc.”

“Sometimes I'd rather take my own dinghy,” Stacy's eyes flashed, “and I don't so much mind it out there.”

“Someday you may see things differently.” Arthur's leg brushed against hers. “Things change. And that was something I was kind of wondering about, too. If it's not too personal, where is Reecy's dad?”

“Who knows?” Stacy shrugged. “After Dad had been gone for awhile some well-meaning friend of Mom set her up with this guy and, for awhile, they really hit it off. He did a lot of stuff with us, too—the first year. I think Emily liked him.”

“What about you?” Arthur asked.

“I never trusted him. One day he just left. After that we found out Mom was pregnant, but we never saw him again.” Stacy's eyes met his. “I'm glad we got Reecie. I can't imagine life without her.” After that they were silent for a bit. Eventually Arthur looked at his watch. When he didn't say anything, Stacy asked, “About how long do you suppose we've been in here?”

“I don't think more than ten minutes.” He shifted his body to get more comfortable. “Are you cold?”

“A little. This basement shaft isn't heated. Do you mind if we sit next to each other for body warmth?” She felt a bit of pink creep warmly into her cheeks.

“Not at all.” He quickly slid down the wall next to her, the

left side of his body against her right side. The thought popped into her head that it would be warmer still if he would put his arm around her, but Stacy didn't say this out loud.

“Thanks.” She nuzzled toward him a bit and closed her eyes. He sure did smell good.

Stacy awoke, startled, to the noise of the elevator grinding back into motion. She must have dozed off. Vaguely she wondered how long it had been. She jumped hastily to her feet. Arthur was gazing at her intently. Neither spoke.

“Sorry about that.” George was holding a wrench. “It took a couple of hours to get the thing going again.” He looked from one to the other and back again. “I hope no one's virtue has been compromised.” But there was a twinkle in his eye.

“I don't know, Uncle,” was Stacy's saucy reply, “you really should keep better watch of your flock.” She raised an eyebrow and headed back to the work room.

By Thursday the bread store was fully replenished and everyone exhausted from the effort.

“Tell Mom I won't be around tonight to work on the sweet rolls for the church, but I should be able to put in a few hours tomorrow afternoon.” Stacy said this to Emily on Friday as they were getting ready for school.

Emily looked up from brushing her teeth. She spit in the basin. “Where are you going?”

“There's a get-together with some friends. Darius invited me.” Stacy grabbed her book bag. “Mom's waiting for me in the car. Just let her know.”

“Why don't you tell her yourself?” she heard her sister call after her.

*Good question. Why didn't she?* Maybe it was because she was feeling a bit guilty about the whole thing and she thought her mom might notice. Mom could always read her like a book.

Maybe she didn't want to give her mother the chance to say she couldn't go. "Just tell her!" she shouted back.

Stacy left school with Darius that afternoon. They didn't go to Drake's right away. They sauntered around the mall, played a few video games, split some Chinese at the food court, and shopped in the more nefarious stores that catered to young adults. After a few hours of this, Darius casually looked at his watch. "We should get going to Drake's, don't you think?"

"If you like." Stacy surveyed her companion with approval. She liked the the casual but stylish way Darius dressed. She was pretty sure Stacy and Clinton of TLC's *What Not to Wear* would give him a thumbs up, too, and it made her feel popular just to be seen with him. He gathered her in closer and let his hand slide down her body, lightly resting on the lower part of her hip. He led her through the parking lot to his black truck. Blaring hip hop music, the base nearly deafening, he tore out of the parking lot, throwing Stacy's body forcibly against his with the thrust of acceleration.

There were lots of vehicles already parked in the driveway and along the street near Drake's house. Darius smoothly pulled in behind the last car on the block. "Let's go," he said, leaving Stacy to get her own door. She scampered after him, his strides twice the length of one of hers. As they entered the dimly-lit living area, Stacy could make out couples scattered everywhere throughout the room. There was very little talking going on. Stacy hesitated, but Darius grabbed her by the elbow. "You like to work out, don't you? C'mon, let's go check out the weights and other stuff in the basement. His parents are really into fitness."

His suggestion appealed to Stacy far more than trying to socialize with the lip-locked couples scattered around the living room, so she followed her companion as he threaded through the living room, dining room and kitchen and down the basement stairs.

"At least we'll be alone here," Darius said, clicking on the lights. There was a professional-style weight bench, a treadmill

and an elliptical machine, as well as mats strewn about the floor. Drake's parents had a miniature fitness center.

“Wow!” Stacy breathed. It was even more impressive than Uncle George's. She hopped up on the elliptical and jogged a bit. “This is nice.”

“I thought you'd like it,” Darius said, surveying her. Then he knelt by a weight bench. “Angelina tells me you're pretty strong.” He put his right elbow on the bench. “Wanna arm wrestle?”

Stacy doubted her ability to beat a guy, even a wiry one like Darius, but she shrugged and knelt opposite him. She clasped his hand.

“On three,” he said. “One... two... three!” Stacy gave it everything she had. For about forty-five seconds they struggled against each other, arms trembling with the strain, but eventually Stacy's went down hard on the bench. “You *are* strong,” Darius breathed, winded.

“I'm better at leg wrestling,” Stacy told him.

Darius lifted a brow. “I'm game,” he said, laying down on a mat.

Stacy took her position with her head by his feet and vice versa. They lifted their inside legs and locked them together.

On three, they started and this time Stacy's tenacity paid off when she flipped her opponent.

“I won!” she shouted jubilantly. She was laying on her back on the mat.

Darius rolled over on top of her, pinning her arms with his. “Are you sure?” he said, his face inches from hers.

Stacy let him kiss her, one long, lingering time, then she struggled to a sitting position. *It felt good, but it felt wrong.* “I'm kind of thirsty,” she said, standing. “Are there any drinks in there?” Darius shrugged, so Stacy opened the mini-fridge in the corner and found a diet sprite. “Do you think his parents would mind?” When he didn't answer, she popped one and drained half the can in one slug. Then she offered it to Darius. “Want some?”

“Thanks.” He took the can, but he didn't drink from it.



Fumbling in his pocket, he pulled out a mini-bottle of what Stacy presumed to be alcohol. "I prefer mine spiked." He poured the liquid in and lifted the can to his lips. Then he passed it back to Stacy, but she didn't drink any, instead setting it on the bench beside her.

Darius sidled next to her and put his arm around her. "Getting back to what we were doing..." he started to pull her in again, but Stacy held him off.

"Darius," she said hesitantly, "I really don't feel comfortable with this."

Her companion gave her an appraising glance. "You've changed," he stated coldly. "I kind of thought so earlier at the mall. It just doesn't seem like you're into the same things you were before."

Darius was the last person Stacy felt like sharing her budding interest in Catholicism with. But he was right. Doing whatever she felt wasn't as easy as it had been before. She sensed a Presence within her, struggling to impose itself between her and the careless activities she had been only too eager to participate in before. However, before she could get as much as one word out to explain this, she heard someone shout, "Raid!" and Darius yanked her to her feet. "We've got to get out of here," he said, scrambling toward a window.

"Why?" Stacy stumbled after him.

"Take my word for it, Stace. You don't want them to find you here." Then he hoisted himself through the little window he had managed to pry open and disappeared into the night, leaving her to fend for herself.

Back at the bakery, preparations for the upcoming weekend of hospitality were in full swing. Stacy's mom was proofing sweet rolls and she had ten 24-roll pans of caramel rolls lightly done and cooling on a rack. Stacy's grandmother was rolling a second pan of apple squares and Emily was working on chocolate chip cookie bars and some with maraschino cherries

that Stacy particularly liked. Arthur was again helping Zeke. The family owned a donut robot and they had previously mixed the batter, which was now frying itself, being flipped automatically at the midpoint. All the guys had to do was to stack them neatly in boxes. Tomorrow they would be frosted as they were too fresh to work with today. Then some would be coated with sprinkles or nuts or toasted coconut. The children particularly liked the brightly-colored donuts.

“You guys are so good to help out,” Rose said.

“Sometimes I feel guilty that we ask so much of you.”

“I don't mind,” Arthur answered for the two of them. “It's my church, too. This is little enough to contribute.”

“Still,” she said, between squirting jam onto rolls. “You young folks should be out having fun on a Friday night.”

“The night is yet young,” Zeke said, innuendo ripe in his tone.

Rose smiled. Going by past experience, the guys would probably pray the family rosary, work out with Uncle George and watch a movie before calling it a night. “At least Stacy is enjoying herself,” she commented. “Who did you say she went with, Em?”

Stacy's sister looked up from sprinkling streusel in a pan.

“Some guy called Darius,” she said.

Arthur's head shot up. “Did you say Darius?”

“Yeah,” Emily looked at him curiously, “why?”

“Never mind. I've gotta go,” he said, grabbing his jacket. To Zeke, “I should be back soon... I hope.” The swinging door slammed behind his hastily departing figure.

Rose looked after him with concern.

With much difficulty Stacy managed to pull herself through the narrow opening of the window. There were alarms and flashing red lights surrounding the house and an ever-growing group of half-clad teenagers standing in the spot light which was illuminating the entrance. She flattened herself against

the building, vaguely wondering why she was even doing so. She began to sidle toward a stand of pine trees near one side of the house. She figured she might be able to slip away using the trees for cover. As she was in the process of melting into them, someone strong grabbed her firmly by the arm and pulled her toward the alley. Once they were far enough from the house to no longer be in danger of discovery, he stopped under a street lamp and she realized with shock that it was Arthur.

“What are *you* doing here!” she demanded. “Were you spying on me?”

“I was trying to save your butt,” was his irritated reply. “C'mon,” he took her arm more gently now. “I'll explain on the way back to the shop.”

She followed him to his SUV and climbed into the passenger seat. He shut the door for her and got in the driver's seat. Before turning the key he faced her, “Do you know what kind of party that was?”

Stacy really didn't, so she remained silent.

“Those guys had ecstasy. They were giving it to the girls.” He let this sink in. “Did you drink anything?”

Stacy nodded, then shook her head. “I drank some soda but I opened the can myself.” She remembered watching Darius pour something into the can. *What if that wasn't alcohol, after all?* Now it was Stacy's turn to ask questions. She turned to face Arthur. “How do you happen to know about this?” she asked him.

“You remember I said one of my brothers still lives here. Mark is a cop. He probably shouldn't have, but he told me they got wind of Drake's party this morning. They were planning a bust. When I heard your sister say “Darius” I figured you were at the same place. Some people are notorious. Stacy,” he took her hands in his, “I really wasn't spying on you. I just figured you might need some help. Now let's get out of here before I get my brother in trouble.” He turned the key and backed down the alley.

Back at the bread shop, the family had cleaned up from the day's work and the whole group was headed upstairs for what was a nightly ritual—the family rosary. Every night Grandma Annie, Rose, Reecie, George and Zeke would pray. Depending on homework and her personal schedule, sometimes Emily would join them. Lately more often than not, Arthur would be there, too. Stacy never prayed with the family, but tonight she was shaken from her close call and she didn't want to be alone across the street. She was also feeling grateful and wanted to thank God for her near miss.

There were makeshift pews and benches in the chapel upstairs and light played off of the Holy Spirit stained glass window against the back wall. Uncle George lit several candles and knelt on a prie-dieu. Making the sign of the cross, he began with the creed. Most of the others sat on softly padded benches. Ezekiel knelt and Reecie just ran around, dancing and tumbling, nevertheless managing to throw in the occasional “Holy Mary” or “Amen”. After the preliminary prayers came this evening's petitions. George always said the same thing: 'For all the things I prayed for last night and...' (here he added anything new). He figured that way he would be sure never to forget anything important and, since God is omniscient the ever-growing list was of no significance to Him. Stacy's mom always said the same thing, too: “I bind my children to the Sacred Heart of Jesus through the Immaculate Heart of Mary.”

Following the rest of the petitions, George announced the mysteries for that night. It was Friday, so they would pray the Sorrowful ones. (Monday and Saturday were Joyful mystery days, Tuesday and Friday were Sorrowful, Wednesday and Sunday were Glorious, Thursday were the Mysteries of Light, or Luminous. They were brand new, instituted by Pope JPII.)

The Sorrowful Mysteries recalled the Passion and Crucifixion of Jesus. They included the Agony in Gethsemani, the Scourging, the Crowning with Thorns, the Carrying of the Cross and the Crucifixion itself. Ever since she had been reading the Shroud of Turin book, Stacy had developed much more

appreciation for what these mysteries entailed. It had been years since she had bothered to pray with the family, except on the occasion when George would waltz into the work room, arbitrarily declaring it a Day of Atonement and inducing the others to join him in in a reparatory rosary. Stacy wasn't sure if she had ever meditated a rosary properly, or possibly at all, until now. But this evening as they prayed, she couldn't help visualizing the sweat which fell as drops of blood, the one hundred twenty lashes of the whip (scientists had counted them) with the barbarous flagrum, a torture device that had been used in scourgings of the period. Mosaic Law prohibited anyone receiving more than forty lashes with this whip, as it could cause death, but Jesus had been given over to Roman officials for His flogging, thus receiving three times that number. It was amazing He didn't die from the scourging alone.

She knew from shroud studies that the crown of thorns was more of a cap, and that the thorns were several inches long and vicious. There were numerous puncture wounds all over the shroud man's skull. She also knew that the cross which He carried was only the horizontal beam. There was evidence that the man of the shroud had fallen and was unable to protect himself. The cartilage of his nose was broken and his knees were full of abrasions. The dirt in these wounds was traceable to Jerusalem, as was the dirt on His feet. The evidence was that he had been nailed using one nail through both feet and that, in order to be able to breath he needed to push himself up with his wounded feet. Usually a crucifixion victim would have his legs broken to bring on death, as the victim would no longer be able to lift himself to breathe, but the Shroud man's legs were intact. There was one blow of a Roman lancea to the Shroud man's side. This, too, had slipped between ribs without breaking any bones. And so it was that no bones were broken, noted as unusual in a crucifixion, and a fulfillment of a prophecy for the Christ.

After possibly the first rosary that Stacy had ever prayed

properly, she headed with Uncle George and the other young people to lift weights and work out for about an hour. Tonight Stacy did some weights and ran for about twenty minutes on the treadmill. They all were feeling pretty sweaty when they went to George's apartment room to bake a ready-made pizza and get sodas. Stacy's uncle George was a complicated person. A decorated hero of the Korean war--George had received a Purple Heart—he had retired young from a lifetime in the Armed Forces, returning to live with his sister, Stacy and Emily's grandmother, when their grandfather died. This was ten years ago when the girls were still little. George's room was bedless, seeming more like a living room with its long low couch, loveseat, bean bag chair and big screen TV. Friday was movie night. George would rent new releases at Rupert's Video Emporium. He would call and reserve whatever the kids wanted to watch (within reason) Monday morning. They had been doing this ritual since Stacy and Emily had moved here when their dad died. Lately, though, Stacy had more and more frequently chosen to spend Fridays with friends from school, rather than with George and the others.

Tonight's choice was a horror film, but it was of the sort that was so unbelievable that it bordered on being comical. Depending on whether he had the remote handy, George would either fast-forward over questionable (usually sexual) content, or sometimes he would just dance in front of the screen until the offensive portion was past. The young people had gotten quite used to this practice over the years and would sometimes imitate the Uncle George dance—Emily was quite good at it, really. Tonight Stacy really enjoyed being with the family, and she cast glances at Arthur when she thought he wouldn't notice. He wasn't like Darius but in his own way, he was good-looking. You could lose yourself in eyes like his. In truth Stacy wouldn't have minded staying all night, just casting surreptitious glances at Arthur, but when the movie was over they all headed out to give Uncle George his space. He needed to sleep, too.

Hospitality Sunday began early with loading and hauling all of the bakery—fresh and frozen—to the church. Stacy's mother would put on the massive coffee pots while Stacy and Emily frosted, cut and trayed bars and pastries. Grandma Annie would set up tables and chairs. Then, while Emily went to Mass, Rose would bake off the caramel rolls. They were always served fresh and warm from the oven. Usually Stacy would stay and visit with her mother and Grandmother, but today she went to the church service with her sister. She was inwardly glad that nothing had happened at the Darius party that would make it necessary for her to go to confession before Communion. On other occasions she and Darius had been a bit naughtier.

As they had for the previous eight years, Stacy and Emily poured beverages for the crowd that came down to socialize after Mass. Their mother monitored the rolls that were still baking, refilled pitchers with milk, juice or coffee, and retrayed pastries. Their grandmother helped folks to separate the gooey warm caramel rolls to keep the line moving. In between the two Masses they retrayed and finished baking. After second Mass there seemed to be more unfamiliar faces in the line. Stacy's mom thought there might be some homeless who had gotten wind of the fresh, warm breakfast. She hoped so. The two priests who served Holy Apostles appreciated the opportunity to sit and visit with their parishioners and the rest of the folks could get to know each other better. It was a much appreciated ministry and the family had made it a priority ever since Rose and the girls had moved into town.

The only part that was dreary was the cleanup. Sometimes the people seemed to want to linger over their coffee for hours and Stacy would grow impatient to wash the trays, pots and tables (leaving everything cleaner than they had found it, as the sign on the wall demanded) so that they could go home to a leisurely Sunday afternoon. She was glad they didn't have to do it every week.

Stacy was sitting by herself—her new ritual—during lunch the next day when Darius dropped into the seat opposite her. She stiffened when she saw him.

“Hey, Stace,” he leaned toward her earnestly, “I’m sorry for ditching you last Friday. I just knew there were some people who were doing stuff they shouldn’t be doing at that party and I didn’t want to be associated with them. I knew you’d be all right because you weren’t doing anything wrong. Besides,” his eyes seemed to reflect admiration, “you’re so smart I figured you could take care of yourself.” When Stacy didn’t say anything, he continued, “Well you did, didn’t you? I didn’t see your name in the paper.”

*Thanks to Arthur. No thanks to you.* “The paper said there were people using ecstasy at that party.”

Darius fidgeted. “Maybe one or two. It’s hard to control what sort of people come to an open affair like that.” He ran his fingers through his perfectly straightened hair. “Wait a minute, you don’t think I would do something like that to you!” Darius took her hand. “I swear to you, Stace. I would never hurt you. I care about you.” When Stacy still looked unbelieving he continued, “Just let me explain all of this to you after school. I’ll pick you up by the center door.”

“I’ve got work,” Stacy began, but he cut her off.

“Your family will understand if you’re late. I only want to talk to you for fifteen minutes.” His eyes were pleading and Stacy’s resolution began to waiver. “Fifteen minutes, Stace. I promise.”

Stacy reluctantly nodded.

Darius waited for Stacy after school. He hid himself while she lied, telling her mother that she needed to stay late to work on a school project and that she would catch a ride to the bread shop in a half hour or so. Stacy felt awful hiding the truth from her mom, but she knew that being truthful would be even harder than lying. She pictured the scene and shuddered. Part of her resented Darius for putting her in this situation, but deep down she knew it



wasn't his fault. She was the one who chose to tell the lie and she was the one who did it.

“Ok, she's gone.” Stacy glared at Darius, who was wearing his best wounded puppy look.

“Can we sit in my truck?” he asked.

Stacy mutely nodded, following him to the parking lot. She climbed in the passenger seat and waited.

Darius surprised her by putting his head down. For a long while he stayed like this and when he finally sat up he was trembling slightly. “You know my mother ditched us when I was a baby. I live with my older brother ever since my old man went to jail.”

Stacy looked at him with surprise. “I didn't know,” she said, seeing him with new eyes. “What's he in for, if it isn't too personal.”

“Embezzlement. Really I don't want people to know. I'd rather have them think I came from a good stable family, like yours.” He took Stacy's hand in his. “It's been a lot better for me since we've been hanging out. I don't know what I'd do if you weren't my girlfriend any more.” He took a deep breath and looked her squarely in the eyes. His own were pleading.

*I never knew I was.* But Stacy found herself feeling protective. She squeezed his hand and said nothing.

True to his word this time, Darius dropped her off at the bread shop within a half hour. Her family was hard at work—Emily was forming the loaves which was Stacy's usual job. Stacy was secretly relieved not to see Arthur there today. She could imagine how he would feel about the day's turn of events.

## **Lady in Red**

It was mid-November and the days were flying by. Stacy knew that she had to give her counselor a rough draft of her presentation on the Shroud before Christmas vacation. She still was unsure which direction she could conceivably take. From what she had read, Stacy had come to realize that the Shroud of Turin was a very controversial topic. It seemed people were either predisposed to believe in it or to disbelieve and if the latter, many seemed to need to refute it. That's what was cool about the STURP team, though. Virtually none of them were predisposed in either direction. They had merely become involved for the sake of the scientific challenge. Much of what she had read so far was data which tended to support the hypothesis that the Shroud was the burial cloth of Jesus Christ. Now, as she was sitting in the lunchroom perusing her notes, Stacy began to wonder what other line of inquiry there might be—something that wouldn't net

her enemies on either side of the issue.

“So Libby just never sits here anymore, I guess.” Stacy looked up to see Chad's disappointed face. He certainly was tenacious.

“I guess not,” she said. She smiled sympathetically and dived back into her book.

“Whacha reading?”

*Was he still there?* Stacy closed the book and handed it to him.

“What's the Shroud of Turin?” He appeared mystified.

*Was he just bored, or what?* “The burial cloth of Jesus—supposedly. You know how he was taken from the cross and they put his body in the unused tomb of this rich guy, Joseph of Arimathea. Well, this is what they wrapped Him in.”

Chad scratched his ear. “Wasn't Joseph of Arimathea Virgin Mary's uncle?”

Now it was Stacy's turn to be mystified. “I have never heard that,” she said.

“Well, I read it somewhere.” Chad thumped her book and got up. “If Libby ever comes back, tell her I miss her.”

Stacy just smiled. Libby really could do worse, she suspected. At least he appeared to be devoted. Just when she was beginning to sink back into her reading, she felt the presence of someone else opposite her. She looked up and into the eyes of Darius. “Oh, hi,” she said.

“How's my lady?” It felt strangely old school to be called that. At least he didn't say “old lady”.

“I'm good,” she said.

“I wanted to make it up for getting you involved with that party. Close your eyes.” When she did, he pressed something cardboard into her palm.

“What's this?” She opened her eyes and found she was holding tickets. She looked at him curiously.

“Two tickets to the winter formal,” he explained. “It's two weeks from Friday. We're going.”

*Wow.* Stacy didn't know what to say. She would have to

get a dress somewhere. She had never been to a formal dance.

He took the tickets back and slipped them into his pocket. Standing, he said, "Let me know what color your dress is so I can get a tux to match." Then he was off again. Darius never stayed put for long.

She took her sister with her to try on dresses the next weekend. There were two shops that typically catered to those seeking prom gowns and the like, so they went to the mall where they were located. Stacy tried on blue, fuchsia, green, gold, black and red gowns. Some of them were ok, but there was none she absolutely fell in love with.

"I like you best in red," Emily told her as they were sitting down for a sandwich and soda.

"Which dress?"

"They were both nice..." her sister's voice trailed off. *But neither was spectacular*, they were both thinking.

This was her first formal dance, she couldn't help wanting her dress to be special. Stacy took a sip of her soda. "Let's not buy either just yet." After they finished lunch the two girls left the mall. Stacy had borrowed her mother's car, so they meandered through the city, taking side streets and looking in store windows. This gave them the opportunity to play one of their favorite games. The two girls would take turns claiming the guys they saw walking on the sidewalk. "Mine," Stacy shouted, and they took a good look at the plaid-jacketed bearded man on the left.

"This one's mine," Emily claimed a thin blond guy with a baseball cap. At every stop light they would wink or blow a kiss at the usually elderly gentleman in the car next to theirs. Stacy's mom hated this game, almost as much as the one they played at the Villa Italia. She said that it objectified people. The old guys didn't seem to mind it, though, and it definitely spiced up an afternoon ride.

"Whoa!" Stacy exclaimed, as they turned down a side street. "Upgrade." Her guy this time was wearing a well-tailored

suit and tie. Then, “Downgrade!” she said, laughing and pointing at Emily's next “catch”—a very old gentleman who was struggling along with a walker.

“Stop!” Emily suddenly shouted. “What's in that window?”

“Black pants suit?”

“Behind the pants suit.” Stacy looked. Emily was right. There in the window of an upscale consignment shop was *the* dress. She pulled the car to the curb and placed it in park. They went inside to get a closer look. The dress was floor-length red velvet with white velvet accents. It was cut princess-style, had built-in crinolines and just the hint of a sleeve. Both the neck and back were cut low enough to show some skin, but not distastefully. This dress exuded quality.

“Can I help you girls?” A red-haired lady appeared at Stacy's elbow.

Stacy sighed. “I'd like to try this on,” she said.

“Are you planning on attending a formal event?” the sales clerk asked her.

“Winter formal at my school.”

The clerk nodded and smiled. She led Stacy to a dressing room and she and Emily waited while Stacy zipped herself into the dress. Then she lead Stacy to a triple full-length mirror. She didn't have to say a word. No one did. The dress fit Stacy as though it had been tailored especially for her.

“Shall I wrap it up?” The saleslady knew she had a winner.

Stacy nodded, then looking at the price tag as an afterthought, she was horrified. This dress cost three times as much as all of the money she had in savings. Stacy's face fell as she regretfully began to unzip the dress. “I can't afford this,” she said.

The clerk bit her lip. “Maybe we can knock off a bit for you,” she suggested. “If I make a call I think I can get the previous owner to take off twenty percent, since it fits you so perfectly.” She hastily made the call, but even with this reduction

the dress was still quite a bit above Stacy's budget.

"I still can't commit to this," Stacy said. "I need some time to... " *To what?* It seemed such a trivial thing to pray about, but Stacy had never wanted anything this badly. What was the name of that Patron of hopeless causes... St. Jude. Stacy closed her eyes and said a hasty prayer. "Maybe I can work something out," she told the clerk as she left. Even the clerk seemed sad to see her go.

Stacy couldn't ask her mother or grandmother for the money. She knew they were not the sort to blow a wad for a one-day event. Even if they were, they wouldn't want to support her going out with Darius. She couldn't even bring it up to them. No, what she was hoping for was truly a miracle.

That night Stacy sat at the computer at home. She called up their internet server and typed in *Joseph of Arimathea*. A column of articles appeared on the screen. Scanning them, she decided to go with the Catholic website. This site told her nothing that she could not have gleaned from reading the Gospels: that Joseph was a member of the Sanhedrin, that he was wealthy and had an unused grave to bestow upon Jesus and that he was a disciple, although a secret one for fear of the Jews. It also said there was no substantiation to the legend that Joseph was Uncle to the Blessed Virgin. *What legend...?*

Next she opened the Encyclopedia Britannica site and was rewarded with the answer to her question: the Arthurian Legend. Apparently ancient British sources suggested that Joseph of Arimathea had been a seafaring merchant, uncle to the Mother of Jesus. Some legends held that, as a child, Jesus had accompanied His great-uncle and His Mother on certain voyages, that, in fact He had played on British soil. Later, it was held, Joseph of Arimathea had fled to Britain with the Holy Grail—a container that held the Blood of Christ. People assumed this to be the Cup which was used at the Last Supper. Ultimately this led to a search for this Grail when it became lost—a Crusade. Many British

Royals believed themselves descended of Joseph of Arimathea. Curious legend.

Next she googled the Holy Grail. Scanning the column of offerings, her eyes arrested on one that read: *The Holy Grail and The Shroud of Turin*. When she pulled up this article she discovered that many people now believe that the Holy Grail was never a Cup. The Container in question was originally supposed to hold both Jesus' blood *and His sweat*. What contained both sweat and blood and was in the possession of Joseph of Arimathea? The answer is right in the Gospels: The Burial Shroud which Joseph both bought and folded around the dead body of Jesus. The Shroud itself was the Holy Grail.

The internet article had especially cited the work of a Dr. Daniel Scavone, who had done his doctoral thesis on this subject, but Stacy was unable to find anything he had written available to the general public, so she gave up the search—for the time being. When she went to bed that night she pulled out the remaining book which she had bought at the conference, *The Diary of Faustina: Divine Mercy in My Soul*. She pictured this girl about her own age who, thinking herself called to the religious life, had asked her parents' permission to become a nun. This was refused. Later, at a party where she was trying to immerse herself in the careless pursuits of others her age, a scourged and bleeding vision of Jesus appeared to her. She left the party and went to a nearby chapel, where she was counseled by this Apparition to go secretly to Warsaw. There she would be told what to do. She ran away, ultimately to become a nun, but she continued to have mystical experiences. Jesus asked her to do difficult and embarrassing things, many of which her superiors refused to allow, just to induce Faustina to learn to trust Him and to obey legitimate authority. One day she asked Him to explain to her what it meant to be God. (This reminded Stacy of the time she had asked to know what Jesus looked like.) He took her to a Place of Great Light, where she perceived Three Individual Lights. Out of one

of these Globes of Light an Apparition of Jesus separated Itself. This Jesus gave Faustina to understand that she couldn't be expected to comprehend God in His Essence. She should seek to know Him by His Attributes.

Stacy fell asleep contemplating how holy Faustina must have been to have wanted nothing to do with parties or frivolity. Stacy herself couldn't help dreaming of her upcoming dance. She couldn't help hoping against hope for her dress.

Awaking the next morning, Stacy added a new prayer to her simplified morning greeting to Jesus: *St. Jude, come through for me.*

Stacy saw Darius the next morning. He was in a circle of teenagers who were milling outside the main entrance of the school, deep in conversation with a little blond sophomore, Stacy only knew her name—Junie. She thought about butting in and telling him her dress would be red—whichever dress she wore, it would be red. But feeling suddenly insecure, she decided to wait until she could talk with him alone. What if he had changed his mind? Then she would be mortally embarrassed.

Libby found Stacy sitting at their usual table that morning. She offered Stacy a plate. “Want a muffin?”

Stacy took the muffin—morning glory or bran, she thought—and bit it. “Did you make these?”

Libby nodded. “In Domestic Science.” She took a seat. “When I heard you were going to the dance with Darius I figured you were done with being a Bible thumper.”

Stacy didn't go there. “The muffins are good.” She polished the rest of it off. “I'm working on my Senior Panel Presentation.”

“What's your topic?” Libby asked her.

“The Holy Grail.”

“Well, I know what that is,” Libby said, “or rather, *who.*”



Now Stacy's curiosity was peaked. She bit. “Oh, yeah? Who?”

“Mary Magdalene. It's all in here.” She plunked a copy of *The Da Vinci Code* in front of Stacy.

Stacy picked up the book and whiffled through it. “Can I borrow this?”

Libby shrugged. “Why not? Of course it's long been known that Mary Magdalene and Jesus were a 'thing', if you get my drift. In this book you find out they had a love child and that a certain secret order was pledged to protect the Seed of Jesus—His Grail—until the end of time.”

“Sounds interesting,” was Stacy's comment.

“You'll like it. It's a good read.” Libby settled back in her chair. “Anything new I should know?”

“I've actually been hiding for awhile.”

“That Chad is very devoted to you,” Stacy said. “He came looking for you every day.”

Libby dismissed him with a wave of the hand.

“Are you going to the dance?” Stacy asked her.

“I could, I suppose.” She examined her perfectly French-tipped nails, frowning at a chip. “It might be rather festive.” She leaned in towards Stacy. “How long have you and Darius been serious?” she asked.

“I don't know that we are.”

“Going to the Winter Formal is a serious date. I rather envy you. I don't know if there is anyone more fashionable around here.” She bit her lip. “You will make a fetching couple.”

Stacy breathed in, thinking about the dress. She imagined they would—if she could just get that dress.

*St. Jude...!*

As it turned out, Darius found her after lunch in the hall. She told him her dress would be red and he seemed agreeable to her choice of color. She also asked him who he had been talking

with that morning (even though she knew already). She couldn't help feeling a twinge of jealousy.

“Just my peeps,” he said.

“I saw you with a blond girl,” she persisted.

“Oh, Junie?” Darius' look was noncommittal. “She's just a sophomore girl in my circle of friends. Junie's OK, you'd like her. You really should hang out with us more often,” he suggested. “As far as I can tell, you spend most of your time alone.”

“I mostly study when I'm at school.” Stacy's reply was defensive.

Darius punched her lightly on the arm. “There's more to life than school,” he said before he left.

It was early Sunday morning—Stacy was just getting ready to go to church with her family—when she got his call. “Stacy, I need to see you right now. It's urgent. I'll be by in a few minutes to pick you up.”

She really didn't want to miss church on Sunday, but his tone had been so urgent. When his truck pulled up in front of her house she ran, barely managing to call out to her family that something had come up. They should leave without her.

“What's the big emergency?” she asked, as Darius pulled away from the curb.

“The florist says she needs forty dollars right now for the corsage and boutoniere. I don't have it, Stace. Can you float me a loan?”

Stacy winced. Then she mutely dug in her purse and handed him the cash. She couldn't believe she had missed Mass for such a trivial thing that could so easily have been done later.

“C'mon,” he said. “I'll show you the ones I picked out.” He drove to a strip mall florist and ushered her in, a protective hand about her waist. “Gladys, I'd like you to meet my lovely girlfriend,” he introduced her to the proprietor.

Gladys held out a thickly veined hand, which Stacy shook.

“Here's your money, by the way.” Darius handed the woman the cash he had gotten from Stacy. “Can you show her how they'll look?”

Gladys dutifully leafed through a catalogue until she came to an arrangement of sweetheart roses and baby's breath. “There you go, hon” She pushed the book closer toward Stacy.

“That will be lovely,” Stacy murmured, but she still felt like crap.

“Let's hang out together,” Darius suggested as they left the strip mall.

Stacy couldn't see why they shouldn't now that she had missed going to church. There was nothing on her schedule and she didn't particularly want to face her family.

Darius took her to the apartment he shared with his older brother. They baked a couple of store-bought pizzas for lunch and watched videos until his brother, who worked swings, had to go. Then Stacy was alone with Darius.

He brought her home at ten that night. She barely spoke to Emily and her mom, going straight to her room. Not only had she missed Mass that morning, but now she would again need to go to confession before she could receive communion. It's not that they had done all that much; they'd really just messed around, but she knew she wasn't clean. Her soul felt heavy.

She tried to read a bit more in *Divine Mercy*, but when in a vision Faustina received a golden belt to wear around her waist that made it so she would never be tempted to be impure sexually, Stacy wished it could have been her instead. Not that she would have enjoyed giving it up. Sex was Stacy's favorite thing and her strongest temptation. She loved being in love. She had noticed and remembered the cutest guys in her class since kindergarten. She really wouldn't want to have no more interest either, because she knew it served a purpose, and more than anything Stacy someday wanted to be a mother. She just wished she hadn't hung out with Darius for so long unsupervised. Unsupervised. Stacy

smiled ruefully. She was almost eighteen. She needed to supervise herself from now on. She was in charge of her own soul, and she knew it.

That night Stacy had her second apocalyptic dream. This time she was in a war zone. There were wounded everywhere and she was picking through the rubble, looking for the ones who could be saved. Stacy was startled to find an alien-looking Creature, ancient and shriveled in appearance. He/she seemed to be very gravely wounded and Stacy gathered the Creature in her arms. The Creature smiled at her serenely. "I can answer your questions," she heard him say inside her head.

Before thinking, Stacy blurted, "Will Darius go to Heaven?" The Creature's face became downcast. "No," he said with regret. "As it now stands he will not."

"And Libby...?" Stacy asked him. It seemed the only question worth asking for some reason. Once again the Creature sadly shook his head.

Distant crashes almost like thunder alerted Stacy that time was running out. She hesitated. Then, bracing herself, she asked. "Will I...?" She couldn't even say it. The Creature's face became regret itself. Large tears rolled down his craggy cheeks as she heard the answer she knew she would hear even before she asked. Stacy laid him gently where she had found him. In her dream she got up and slowly started to walk away. Then, suddenly she turned around.

"But wait," she ran back to the creature. "It can change?" She was now holding him, searching his face desperately. "I can change." Her voice was almost pleading.

The Creature's crestfallen appearance became aglow as though this were a great revelation for which he was extremely grateful, "Yes!" he almost shouted it in her head. Stacy awoke with a thunderclap. Tears were streaming down her face.

It was Saturday morning – the day of the Winter Formal dance—and St. Jude had not come through for her after all. Stacy had really not expected that he would, not after lying to her mom, messing around with Darius, and the worst part was that now Stacy didn't even have enough money left to pay for the cheapest satin dress at the mall—not since Darius had borrowed the money for the flowers. She would have to come up with forty dollars somehow or she would be naked tonight. She knew that Emily had one of those old fashioned piggy banks. George had given it to her years ago. Stacy knew there was money in that pig—more than enough to buy the dress. Anyway, Emily didn't need money for anything and she would probably never even notice it was gone before Stacy was able to return it. Stacy quietly crept downstairs and took forty dollars from her sister's bank. Then she put on her coat and headed out on foot.

The dream she had after her day with Darius had lingered in her mind, haunting her as she went about the days at school and work. She felt the need of confession stronger than she had ever felt any need. Stacy knew there were confessions available prior to every weekend Mass. There would be a Mass this morning. She should be able to make it in time to talk with the priest.

Stacy was fortunate that there was no one in line that morning when she arrived at Holy Apostles. The priest was sitting behind a screen in a side chapel. She could see it was Father Joseph, the younger Associate pastor. Fearing the condition of her soul more than what he might think of her Stacy entered, closed the door and sat on the chair facing him. She limped through the formulaic preliminaries. Then she quickly launched into her sins. She told them all, everything she could remember having done since they got back from the conference. It was easier this time because she could actually remember her sins. When she was done, Father Joseph told her she would have to return the money to her sister. Stacy deep down had already known this. But she was sure Emily would gladly loan it to her anyway. She just hadn't wanted to explain why she no longer had enough money for her dress. It didn't paint Darius in a very

favorable light, and he was already on shaky ground with her family. Father also reminded her that sex was sacred and not to be engaged in outside of marriage. She needed to discern whether Darius was the partner for whom God had created her. She needed to discern her vocation. When he absolved her it was just as it had been at the conference, Holy Spirit waves dancing up and down her spine.

As soon as she got back Stacy returned the money. She was just getting ready to wake Emily to ask her if she could borrow it for the dress when she was suddenly surrounded by her mother, grandmother and Emily, who was beaming. They were carrying boxes. Rose placed a large ribbon-wrapped box on the table in front of Stacy. Her eyes were teary. "Why didn't you tell me about the dance? I would have been happy to help you." She brushed her daughter's hair back from her face. "Open it."

With trembling fingers Stacy untied the ribbon and lifted the lid. All she saw was red velvet. She began to sob. The dress was even more beautiful than she remembered. She held it up in front of her and hugged it, grateful tears streaming down her face. "Mom, you can't afford this..."

"I can," Rose assured her. "This is important to you and I want to be a part of every big event in your life. Stacy," she hugged her daughter impulsively, "I'm so happy to do this for you!" Then she stepped back. "Now open the rest."

Grandma Annie gave her two boxes. The first contained delicate red slippers, the second a satin sequined purse to match. There was still one small box on the table.

Grandma Annie picked it up and gently caressed it. "This is one of the few things remaining from my mother's estate. I have these two necklaces, and I intended to give them to the two of you when you were old enough." She laughed slightly and glanced at Rose, teary-eyed. "I guess that's now." She dabbed at her eyes before continuing. "Before I wasn't sure which necklace to give to each girl." She caressed the velvet of Stacy's dress. "I guess that's been decided for me. Emily will receive the

emeralds.” She handed the box to Stacy, who opened it with trembling fingers. She gently lifted the strand of rubies and pearls. It sparkled in the morning light which was flowing through the kitchen window of their bungalow.

“I’m afraid to wear it,” Stacy said with near reverence. “I’ve never seen anything more beautiful.”

“Just be careful with it,” Rose cautioned.

But Grandma Annie interjected, “What good is jewelry that stays in a box? These are meant to be worn, not hidden. I just ask one thing of you.”

Stacy looked up quizzically.

“Pray for my mother, Josephine, when you are wearing them, or anytime you think of her. This necklace is only a thing. Our souls are what matters. You know, when we die, we’re not all that dead!” She ran her fingers through Stacy’s curls. “I know someone who will be watching you tonight from above. I know she would be proud of what a wonderful, kind person you have turned out to be.”

Stacy didn’t feel worthy of her grandmother’s praise, but she knew she could always try harder to live up to her glowing opinion.

The remainder of that day was spent primping. After Stacy showered with jasmine-scented body wash, Emily helped her to straighten and then elaborately curl her dark brownish-auburn hair. When Emily was done and with the better part of a can of hair spray keeping each perfect curl in place, Stacy examined the result with satisfaction using a hand held mirror to see it from every possible angle. The top was piled high, but ample curls cascaded down below her unblemished ivory shoulders. Then Emily helped her to put on subtle, but glowing makeup. She applied a lining of light brown under and above her soft brown eyes and added a glossy lip color which was just the right shade of red to match her dress.

Then it was time to put on the dress. With the heels and

purse, and especially with the lovely addition of her grandmother's rubies, they all had to admit the only thing lacking to complete the perfect picture of a princess was a crown.

It was time for Darius to pick her up. He was a bit late—no doubt he considered this fashionable—but when he saw her, even smooth tongued Darius could think of nothing better to say than “Wow.” He continued to stare at her as though he had never seen her before. Eventually he breathed out. “You know, we might even win this thing.”

Stacy looked up sharply. “It's a contest?”

Darius laughed at her naivete. “Haven't you ever been to a winter formal before?”

Stacy shook her head.

“There are about twelve faculty chaperones and they vote each year on who they feel is the best dressed couple. Then they dance with the likely candidates to determine who has the poise to be selected as honorary king and queen. You carry yourself extremely well,” he spoke quietly, as if calculating her attributes, “you are a good conversationalist. It goes without saying that I am...” “he took her elbow confidently and twirled her to get the full view. “You know Stace, I think we'll win.”

Stacy experienced instant butterflies. She had no idea she would be judged on her appearance. If she had known she might not have been so eager to go. But Darius' confidence in her was reassuring. She could tell he was honestly impressed by her beauty and with someone like Darius by her side she really *felt* beautiful.

When they entered the ballroom of the posh Lincoln Plaza, which was where the dance was being held this year, the Great room had been elaborately decorated in gold and white. Balloon sculptures cascaded from the ceilings and twinkling lights were everywhere in the room which was otherwise dimly lit. There was nondescript piped in music softly playing in the background. Later, when everyone had arrived, there would be a



contemporary soft rock band playing. Was it Stacy's imagination, or was every eye in the place fixed on the two of them? They descended the stairway into the plaza to take their place in line among the other couples who were waiting to check in at the head table.

Before the dance began, there would be a grand march. There was a viewing area above where parents and other interested onlookers were beginning to gather. Stacy scanned the people and quickly located her mother, grandmother, Emily and Reecie. Reecie saw her, too, because she squealed and pointed. Stacy smiled. She could not remember any time in her life feeling more excited. Every time Darius leaned toward her to whisper in her ear, she felt her heart flutter. He wore a tux about as well as anybody could and she didn't know what kind of cologne he was wearing, but it was intoxicating.

“Name...?” The smiling lady looked up as Darius and Stacy took their turn at the sign-in table .

“Darius Vincent with... “ he paused and looked at her as if she were a rare jewel, “Anastasia Greenwood,” he said softly. Then they took their place in the Grand March line.

**“Anastasia Greenwood, escorted by Darius Vincent.”** Stacy felt her knees go weak when she heard the announcement, but she fixed her gaze on an imaginary point in the center of the wall at the end of the aisle, which suddenly seemed ridiculously long. She tried to remember to walk as though there were a book on her head and she fixed a pleasant, but enigmatic smile on her face. When they finally reached the end of the runway the applause seemed thunderous and there were even some appreciative whistles she was sure did not come from her family. Stacy felt herself blush.

At the end of the runway was a rectangular table where were seated the faculty of which Darius had spoken. With a lurch of her stomach, Stacy picked out several of the teachers from whom she had taken classes and some who were teaching her now. She saw them making notes in the ledgers on the table.

When she and Darius had completed their walk they joined the many couples who were already gathered, awaiting the completion of the march, eager for the dance to begin.

The first dance was “no cuts”. The couples were to dance with their own partner. After that there would be a period of a few dances, during which faculty would be allowed to dance with possible queen candidates. For their first number, the band played Chris DeBurgh's *Lady in Red* and Stacy couldn't help feeling that, for Darius and her, this would forever be *their* song. (Never mind that one third of the girls at the dance that night were wearing some shade of red.) Stacy was quietly grateful for the six years of dance classes to which her mother had insisted on sending her and Emily. Although there was no ballroom dance in her repertoire, this experience, combined with the occasional sleepover dance party that she had attended during junior high, sufficed to render her more than adequate on the dance floor.

It didn't take long into the following number before one of the male faculty cut in on Darius, and Stacy suddenly found herself dancing with her ninth grade algebra teacher, Mr. Gunderson. “Well,” he paused a moment, looking her over, “You certainly have turned out to be a beautiful young lady. Let's find out if you've kept up with your studies.” Although her heart lurched at this suggestion—he may as well have said, “pop quiz!”—Stacy maintained a pleasant visage. “If there are roughly four hundred ladies on the floor, and one-third are wearing red, what is the percentage wearing black?”

Stacy tilted her head to look at him. He didn't say anything else, so she shrugged. “I'd love to answer your question,” she said, “but I don't have enough information.”

“And that, my dear, is the answer.” He gave her a twirl and handed her back to Darius. “You pass.”

The next faculty member to dance with Stacy was Mr. Clancy, the gym teacher. It was a faster number and he was actually quite good. “Clance, you can cut a rug!” she exclaimed

breathlessly.

Mr. Clancy grinned. “Although I had to take a lot of dance classes for my phy ed degree, I actually enjoy dancing—a lot more than my wife does. I sign on for these events because it gives me a chance to get out on the floor for a bit. You know,” he spoke mischievously, “for being 'almost a guy', you're not so bad yourself!” While Stacy was dancing with male faculty, she noticed Darius was dancing with some of the female teachers. He appeared to be charming them. Stacy had no doubt he was holding his own.

The last teacher Stacy danced with during her allotted time was Mr. Smith, her counselor. “So, Stacy,” he said after the obligatory pleasantries, “Have you decided upon a slant for that Shroud of Turin presentation?”

Stacy had thought about this quite a bit and she was ready to commit. “I want to discuss the historicity of the Holy Grail. I'm planning on exploring three possibilities of what the Grail may have been, one of which is the Shroud.”

Mr. Smith paused, considering the idea. “Fascinating,” he eventually said. “A very intriguing idea. I'd like to look over your notes as soon as you have them prepared.”

Stacy nodded, pleased that her concept had passed muster. She was also grateful that the faculty portion of the dance was behind her. When Darius made his way back and bowed low before taking her arm for the next dance, she was convinced she had died and gone to fairy tale heaven. He was a considerate partner, never leaving her side for very long, although they did each dance with other people a few times. When Stacy was refreshing her makeup in the rest room she ran into Libby, who was wearing a gold-beaded white satin dress. “You decided to come,” she greeted Libby, who was reapplying lip gloss.

“I let Marcus bring me.” Libby fluffed her curls. “I almost wish I hadn't come. I'm tired of Chad pestering me for a dance. It makes me feel bad for his date.”

“Maybe you should just dance with him once,” Stacy suggested. “Get it over with.”

“I don't want to encourage him at all,” she said firmly. “But enough about me. Girl, you are *it!* You have everybody mesmerized with that fantastic dress. Wherever did you get it?” There was just a hint of jealousy in her voice. Stacy gratefully told her about her mother's gift. After a hug and a promise to call each other, they returned to their partners.

“**If I can have everybody's attention...**” Stacy disengaged from Darius' arms at the sound of the announcement. “**We are ready to announce tonight's King and Queen.**” A hush fell over the hundreds of assembled teens. After a pregnant pause the announcer continued. “**Everyone please give it up for... King Darius and Queen Anastasia!**” Stacy felt something being placed in her hair and she reached up to touch a crown. With a shriek that was almost frightened she watched all the other couples back away, leaving her alone with Darius on the dance floor. He confidently reached out and took her hand and as the band struck up the beginning chords of what was this year's coronation dance—Kelly Clarkson's, *A Moment Like This*—he led her onto the dance floor. With anyone else, Stacy would have been petrified, but as she danced with Darius, everyone else seemed to fade and disappear. She only could see Darius; she only could feel love.

The rest of the dance was a blur of photos and congratulations and dancing, mostly with Darius. When it came time for the dance to end, she wished it never would. Seeking to prolong the magic, Darius drove her to a hill that overlooked the city. The night sky was filled with stars and, since it was warm for early December, the couple decided to walk for a bit. A few times they stopped to embrace. The whole night had been so perfect, there almost seemed no need for words. When they had reached the most scenic point on the overpass, and surrounded by stars so big and so bright, she could almost hear them whispering to each other, Darius dropped down on one knee and took Stacy's hand. “I can't believe I never noticed how beautiful you are until tonight. I love you, Stacy,” he said. Then he gathered her in his

arms and kissed her. “I feel so good with you on my arm! Stacy,” he whispered in her ear and his breath tickled, “Let’s move in together.”

Stacy sighed and kissed him back. When she was through with the kiss, she corrected him. “You mean, ‘Let’s get married’. Catholics don’t believe in living together unless they’re married.”

Darius smiled a bit condescendingly. “How quaint and antiquated,” he said, but his words were not harsh. “Alright,” he kissed her again, “let’s get married. I wouldn’t want to come between you and your beliefs.”

It was hard to let go of such a magical night, but Stacy knew her family would worry if she didn’t get back home soon, so she told him she’d better call it a night. As she tumbled into bed, exhausted but exhilarated, she remembered to thank St. Jude for coming through after all, and she apologized for having doubted that he would.

## **Blood in Glass**

It wasn't until the following morning that Stacy realized what it was that had been gnawing at the back of her brain all night. The ruby and pearl necklace her grandmother had given her was gone.

It was still early and there was some time before she and her family had to go to church. After searching the house fruitlessly, Stacy figured she must have lost it at the dance, in Darius' car, or at the scenic overpass. She hastily called Darius, waking him, and he assured her he would search his car right away. Then Stacy called the school. On Sunday there was no one available to answer the phones, but she knew there would be people in the gym taking down decorations, so she borrowed her mother's car and sped the few intervening miles. She combed the place, again without success, before enlisting the help of everyone who was working on the undecorating committee. Then she found a janitor and made him open the lost and found for her, all to no avail. The necklace was not to be found at the school.

By now it was light enough to see outdoors, so Stacy

drove the car to the scenic overpass and retraced her steps of the previous night. She kept thinking she was bound to see it glinting in the bright morning light. There had been no new snow overnight and the tracks she and Darius had made still appeared undisturbed. She was grateful to see no other prints. Apparently no one had been there since the two of them. Absurdly she wondered if a bird or other animal would be attracted to the bright jewels. She could just picture her family's heirloom as part of some eagle's nest.

After several hours of searching and feeling frantic and dejected, she hung it up and headed back home. Her mother was in the kitchen drinking coffee with her grandmother and Reecie was having a bowl of cereal. Emily was in the bathroom, getting ready for church.

The anxiety must have showed on Stacy's face. "What's wrong?" were her mother's first words.

"Oh, Grammie!" The tears came down Stacy's face like a flood. "I lost the necklace!"

Grandma Annie enveloped her with a hug and brushed away her tears. "I'm sure you didn't mean to lose it, and, remember, it's only a thing. Let's say a prayer to St. Anthony," she suggested. "He's in charge of finding lost things." So they all held hands and said the St. Anthony prayer. "Now," her grandmother told Stacy, "We'll put it out of our minds and he will take care of it. Dry those tears and get cleaned up. We're going to church and afterward I'm taking you all out for breakfast. We want to hear about last night."

Mass was comforting to Stacy. The Gospel reading was about the parable of the rich man who put up silos to store his excess grain. Then he decided to sit back, rest, and enjoy his wealth. "Fool!" Jesus said to His disciples, "This very night his soul will be demanded of him." This reading, coupled with the sermon by Fr. Joseph, helped her to gain some perspective on the value of things. Still, her grandmother's necklace was more than a possession. It had sentimental value because it had belonged to her grandmother's mother. She hoped St. Anthony would find it

for her and she didn't think she was being too attached to earthly goods in hoping this. She would gladly pass it down to Reecie or someone else, if she could only get the chance.

After church they went out for breakfast at a cheap hotel, the Oasis, which nevertheless put on a good breakfast buffet, and their pancakes were delectable. Uncle George came with them, but Zeke was out with Arthur somewhere. When they were seated, and after much discussion, the family decided they all knew exactly what they wanted to eat so there was no point in getting the buffet, however adventuresome it may be to try a little of this and a little of that. While waiting for their orders, Stacy told her family about the contest, she recapped dancing with her different teachers, and when she recounted how she had been crowned queen, Emily squealed and the rest of her family congratulated her with hugs. Even Reecie looked up from her crayon picture with a questioning smile, “Congratula-ta-tions” she said, imitating the others. Then she went back to drawing.

“Well, I guess you got your fifteen minutes of fame!” This comment came from Uncle George.

Stacy didn't know what that meant, so she looked to her grandmother, who clarified, “They say everyone will have one moment in the spotlight at some time in their life.” Stacy kind of hoped last night wasn't the only time something big would happen to her. She was still quite young to have all the good stuff be finished.

“Will your picture be in the paper?” Stacy's mother asked her.

“I suppose at least in the school newsletter. There were a lot of photos taken.”

Stacy stopped short of telling her family about Darius' proposal. In the bright light of day it didn't seem all that solid, so she decided to wait awhile, to see how things developed. By this time their food had arrived. As usual, everybody tried a forkful off of everybody else's plate—really they should have gotten the buffet, after all. Later in the meal, Grandma Annie informed the others that she had invited the Associate Pastor, Fr. Joseph, to



come for dinner at six that evening. “So save some appetite!”

Stacy called Darius when she got back home, but he still had not located the necklace. No matter. She felt a measure of peace with the situation after praying with the family. She knew it was being taken care of. She would just have to be patient. She spent the better part of that afternoon finishing her homework, and she also did some more reading on the Shroud. By now she had nearly finished the second Shroud book she had purchased, *Resurrected*, by Dr. Gilbert Lavoie. There was so much good stuff in the books she had read, she regretted that the scope of her presentation wasn't broader, but she needed to keep it concise to do a good job. She knew from reading these two books that the image of the man was not formed by any natural process, such as heat or paint. Multiple tests eliminated such methods as a possibility. The actual fibrils had been chemically altered—aged, so to speak. Her favorite chapter of this book was toward the end when Dr. Lavoie demonstrated how the Image which was on the burial cloth had to have been formed while the Body was in an upright position and floating, with the soles of His feet visible. Lavoie quoted the Scripture, “And when I am *lifted up*, I will draw all people to myself.” Previously Stacy had heard this passage interpreted as referring to the moment of crucifixion. It made so much more sense as the moment of Resurrection. She realized with a shiver of excitement that twice life had been infused into this same human Body by Someone—Holy Spirit, God the Father...?—and that the Body which had been covered by this Shroud had truly experienced resurrection. The moment was scientifically recorded in the cloth.

When Father Joseph arrived for dinner, Stacy's mom asked her to take him on a tour of Grandma's bread factory, while she finished preparing the food and Grandma worked on making the table beautiful. Stacy dutifully ushered him across the street and showed him the production room. Then she gave Father Joseph the tour of the west side Martyr windows. Father saluted the saints individually and as though they were close friends. It had been years since Stacy had really considered these windows or

remembered the stories her grandmother had told her when they were first installed in the shop.

“Ah, John the Baptist! How timely to find you here as we approach Christmas.” Father Joseph touched Stacy lightly on the elbow. “Stacy, you will notice our readings during advent include those of John the Baptist—a Voice crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the Way of the Lord. Make straight His path!'. Jesus spoke of His cousin, John, as the 'Elijah' figure who was foretold to precede the birth of the Messiah. Greetings, dear friend.”

As Stacy led the priest to the next window, he exclaimed, “And of course, St. Steven, the first martyr of our infant church! It was right after Pentecost when the Paraclete descended upon the disciples, who were at the time hiding out, because of fear. And then you, Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, spoke bravely to tell everyone this Joyous News. They killed you for it,” Father Joseph kissed his own hand and touched the image of Stephen, “and we, the Church remember your sacrifice on the day after Christmas each year.”

Stacy smiled, realizing that Father was giving his own tour. All she had to do was nod.

“And Polycarp,” he said, approaching the next window, “you were an old man by the time God accepted your sacrifice. All who knew you recognized your holiness. How many years you longed to be allowed to give your life as so many others had. You studied at the foot of St. John, the Evangelist, You were faithful to the truths he taught you, passing them on to young Christians of the second generation. These Christians, such as Justin-Martyr, have left us such a wealth of knowledge and tradition. You,” he touched the image reverently, “are one of my favorites.”

Stacy quietly appreciated the refresher she was getting from her parish priest. “Ah, Joan,” he said, approaching the next window, “how misunderstood you have been, even to our own day. People thought you were insane when you obeyed the Visions and Voices that you heard, but you, a mere girl, were able

to lead the French army to victory. Clearly the hand of God was with you, the Maid of Orleans.”

The next window was of the eight north American martyrs. Father Joseph saluted them individually, and from memory: John Brebeuf, Noel Charbonel, Anthony Daniel, Charles Garnier, Issac Joques, Gabriel LaLament, Rene Goupil and Jean de LaLande. Turning to face Stacy, he explained, “I memorized their names when I visited the National Shrine of the North American Martyrs.” He seized her arm and said with intensity, “It was their blood that was the seed of our Church!”

The final window on the west side of the building depicted Maria Goretti. “Maybe,” Father Joseph turned to his tour guide, “you would like to take this one.”

He had certainly picked the right window for her to recap. “Maria Goretti,” Stacy said softly. “When I was at the conference with the rest of my family, there was an actor who portrayed Alessandro, her attacker. Maria died slowly and painfully of wounds she obtained when fighting off his advances. As she died, she told her attacker that not only did she want to protect her virginity, not only did she not want to offend God, she resisted Alessandro because she feared for *his* immortal soul. She forgave him in the hours before she died and told him she hoped she would see him in heaven.” Stacy gravely met Father Joseph's eyes. “He had stabbed her fourteen times.” She sighed and paused for a moment, remembering the intensity of Jeremy Stanbary's performance. She wished she could do it justice. “After he had been in prison for quite a few years, Maria appeared to him, offering him fourteen lilies—one for each time she had been stabbed. He had become quite a hardened sinner, but after she appeared to him like this he repented, completely turning his life around, and he fought against pornography for the rest of his life. Along with her own mother, Alessandro attended Maria's beatification ceremony. He was instrumental in her becoming a canonized saint.”

“Very good.” Father Joseph was smiling at her. “That must have been *some* conference.”

Stacy nodded. *He didn't know the half of it.*

After they had toured the upstairs of the building Stacy would have given Fr. Joseph a run through the East side Martyr windows, but the sun had gone down and it was too dim to see much detail.

“We'll save that tour for next time,” Father said amiably and they headed back across the street. It was time for dinner. Stacy's mother had made an old fashioned pot roast with mashed potatoes and baby carrots. There were also fresh veggies and dip. Fr. Joseph led the family in a before meal prayer. There were four ladies—Grandma Annie, Rose, Stacy and Emily. There were four gentlemen—Uncle George, Zeke, Arthur and Fr. Joseph. And then there was Reecie. Company or not, she began industriously to scoop all of her mashed potatoes, carrots and gravy-covered beef into little piles beside her plate. Later she would scoop it all back. Stacy's mom shrugged apologetically. “We think she does this to cool it off.”

“That's why I didn't bother with table linens,” Grandma Annie said with good humor.

Father nodded as though this were quite normal. “Speaking of table linens,” he interjected, “did any of you know that the original linens for the Eucharistic liturgy were made to the specifications of the Shroud which covered Jesus' body at the time of His death.”

“I read a book on the subject,” Zeke told him. “Stacy is studying the Shroud right now for her senior report.”

“Ah, fellow sindonologists!” Fr. Joseph exclaimed. “And I thought I was the only member of the 'Shroud crowd' at Holy Apostles.” He took a forkful of carrots and enthusiastically ate them. “Some say that James, who was head of the Jerusalem church, celebrated the Mass with the Shroud itself as table linen a few days after Pentecost. Others say it was not only Jesus' burial cloth, but also the cloth which covered the table at the Last Supper on Holy Thursday. I have a few books on the subject, if

you'd like to borrow them, Stacy.”

Stacy nodded enthusiastically. “I would very much appreciate that.”

“If you don't mind me asking,” Father continued, “what is the particular topic of your presentation?”

“The Shroud as Holy Grail.” Stacy took a drink of ice water. “I'm going to contrast it with the other grail possibilities: the Cup which was used at the Last Supper, and the bloodlines of Mary Magdalene.”

“That DaVinci bunk!” Father's tone was openly disgusted. “But I like the concept of your talk and I'd be more than happy to help in any way that I can. I'll bring those books to Mass next Sunday... unless you'd like to pick them up tomorrow,” he said this with a sidelong glance in her direction, “at Confirmation class.”

Stacy hung her head. “I haven't been to religion class since fifth grade,” she said with embarrassment.

“Isn't it high time we changed that?” Father asked her, not unkindly.

Stacy smiled. “I'll be there.”

“About time!” Zeke whispered under his breath.

“We all have our own time, Ezekiel,” Father reminded him. “Rose, would you mind passing me one of those magnificent wheat buns.”

“Not wheat,” Rose handed him the basket. “The only wheat in it is some gluten to help it rise. The whole thing is made of healthy fibers.”

“So this is *the* bread.” Father buttered a bun and took a good-sized bite. “It's amazingly soft,” he commented. “You don't usually see that in a healthy bread.”

“Mom would never serve something that didn't taste good,” Stacy's mother assured him. “She's even a better cook than she is a scientist.”

“How is it that you all came to be involved with the creation of this wonderful product?” Father asked, after savoring the last bite.

“A couple years after Uncle George came to live with Mom,” Rose told him, “he developed diabetes.”

Grandma Annie interjected, “There was just no bread out there that my brother could eat.” She gave Uncle George a fond glance. “George has always loved bread more than any other food.”

“So we started to study the subject. In the course of his research, George linked up with a scientist who had developed a method of extracting the very best part of barley—which is good for diabetics anyway--”

George interrupted his sister to say, “I got the fellow to send us a ten pound sample bag, and Anne got to work.”

“Keeping in contact with the scientist, of course, and following his suggestions as to other healthy additives.” Anne shook her head remembering. “It was definitely a challenge. Most of my first attempts were flat, hard and nearly inedible.”

“Even the seagulls refused to eat them,” Zeke informed him.

“After more than a year of trying, we came up with this bread.” Stacy’s grandmother gestured to the basket.

“How did you eventually get it to work?” Father Joseph asked her.

Grandma Annie smiled. “Trade secrets,” she told him. “I’ll get you a few loaves to take home.”

“I’d like that,” the priest told her. “Have you tried making anything other than bread and these buns?”

“Pizza crusts. We also make a variety with jalapeño and sun-dried tomatoes.

“Might I try a loaf of that and a pizza crust, too?” Father asked Grandma Annie.

“It would be my pleasure.”

“If you can come up with a substitute for tortilla chips, I’d be in the market for that, too,” he said, with a twinkle in his eye.

Stacy could tell by the look on her face that the gears were working in her grandmother’s head. “Expect those chips in a few weeks,” she whispered to Fr. Joseph.

At school the next day, Stacy received near-Goddess treatment, especially from the underclassmen. Sidling up to her in the hallway, Darius put a possessive arm around her waist and pulled her in to kiss her near her mouth. As he did so he whispered in her ear. “You and I are so hot, hardly anybody is talking about anything else.”

Stacy's heart skipped a beat. “I missed you yesterday,” she said softly.

He held her shoulders and gently backed her into a bank of lockers, kissing her.

“Careful.” Stacy wriggled out of his grasp, scanning the hallway for monitors.

“He just walked down the hall,” Darius informed her, and he kissed her again.

“I still don't feel comfortable,” she told him and tried to wriggle free.

“I told you, he's gone.” Darius gestured up and down the near empty hallway.

“It's not just him.” She looked at her feet as she said this.

Darius pushed her away then. “You're no fun since you got religion.” He walked away a few paces, then returned. “I was going to ask you over to watch football with me tonight. My brother will be working.”

“That sounds like fun,” Stacy said. *Maybe too much fun.* “Unfortunately I have Confirmation class tonight.”

“Who am I supposed to hang out with if you can't come?” His voice was almost a whine.

“Maybe I can come another night,” Stacy tried to appease him.

“Maybe,” Darius' words were very deliberate, “*maybe* I'll invite you another night.” Without another word he left her standing in the hallway.

Stacy's struggle was fierce to resist calling Darius up and

telling him *she'd changed her mind. She had decided to forget about Confirmation class—she'd probably never be confirmed anyway.* In the end, though, her growing interest in the faith won out and she went ahead with the class. There would always be another night to spend with Darius.

Fr. Joseph was teaching the last year of Confirmation and he was in the middle of a series on the seven Sacraments. He had already gone through Baptism, Holy Eucharist, and Reconciliation (or Penance). He said he was saving Confirmation for last. So that left Holy Orders, Last Rites, and the topic he was discussing tonight, Matrimony.

Father began with the controversial readings in St. Paul's Epistles Ephesians (5:22-24) where he tells wives to be submissive to their husbands. He asked the class how they felt about this. For the most part the girls were disgruntled and the guys thought it sounded pretty good so far. Then Fr. Joseph went on with the passage, reading the part where it says, "husbands, love your wives..." He let this hang in the air for a bit before he finished, "as Christ loved the Church." He paused for awhile, letting that sink in. Then he asked the class, "How did Christ love the Church?"

In reply to his own question he took a bloody crucifix down from the wall and laid it on the table in the center of the group.

Then he asked them, "Who's got the harder job?"

That was pretty obvious. He told the group that what St. Paul was describing was a life of mutual self-donation, where both husband and wife were not in it for what they could *get*, but for what they could *give*, and where there were to be no boundaries to this giving. Only extraordinary love and commitment could make such a thing possible, and you needed to have both parties fully committed to this level of giving for it to work.

Then he told them that more than fifty percent of marriages, including Catholic marriages, were now ending in divorce. Why did they think this was the case? He challenged



them to come up with examples of perfect marriages that they knew of and to list them. The list was, needless to say, short. He told them this was because no individual is perfect, and in marriage two imperfect people are united. This makes for a daily struggle. In order to stick with a commitment under these circumstances, the parties were required to transcend their day to day feelings, and to make a daily act of the will—that this is the one person for whom they have promised to suffer, no matter how challenging this becomes, no matter how much they think they may have misunderstood what was involved when they made this commitment, they need to make a conscious choice to live up to that promise, regardless of their emotions.

In the end, he reminded the class, what really matters is whether or not the two of you will get to Heaven. Your job, as a husband or wife—your primary job—is to help your spouse make it to Heaven. Nothing matters more than this. Stacy thought about Maria Goretti and her concern for her attacker's soul. How good she must have been to worry about someone who was taking her earthly life, and whether he would in so doing, lose the chance at his own eternal life.

As soon as Stacy got home, the promised Shroud books safely tucked away with the others, she tried to call Darius. The phone just rang. He never picked up. Maybe he had decided to go out somewhere to watch the game or maybe he had turned off the ringer. If so, he was probably still mad at her. Stacy sighed.

Emily, watching with concern, bit her lip. “Stacy, why don't you just hang out with me and the guys tonight. There's no point in sitting all night by a phone that won't ring or waiting for someone to answer who isn't there.”

She had a point. “And do what...? Pray the rosary...?”

“There are worse things,” Emily reminded her. “Anyway, George is starting something new tonight. He calls it 'religious interval training'. We're supposed to come dressed in work out clothes.”

Stacy shrugged. She had nothing better to do.

Instead of meeting in the chapel for the rosary that night, George had them come straight to the workout room. Grandma Annie and Rose had a bench from the chapel pulled into the hallway and they were already seated by the time the girls had changed and made it across the street. After they were in the work out room, George put up a gate to keep Reecie safely out in the hallway and away from the whirring equipment. He didn't want any pinched fingers. He was dressed like a drill sergeant, complete with a whistle around his neck.

"I've been reading up on a new trend in fitness," he told his assembled 'troops'. Pacing between them, he continued, "it's called interval training and it helps step your metabolism up to peak performance. In researching the subject I came to realize that the perfect pacer for this training, which alternates between slow-to-medium, is the rosary." Uncle George stepped out of the room and closed the gate. "Because it's Monday the ladies and I will lead the Joyful mysteries. Select your equipment."

After some deliberation it was decided that Ezekiel would lift weights, Emily would take the treadmill, Arthur was on the stationary bike and Stacy would be at the elliptical. Next time they would alternate.

"OK, so you all start your workouts at a medium pace for the creed, the intentions and the Our Father/three Hail Mary/Glory Be intro. After that, all out to a count of sixty. Use your arms as well if you're on a piece of equipment that only works out your lower body.

"You'll repeat the same medium pace during each of the decades—don't forget to meditate, people!" he admonished the teens, "followed by sixty seconds of all out after each decade. We'll finish with the usual closing prayers. Now let's begin. Triple power prayer!" He blew his whistle and the exercises began. Every time he blew his whistle for the sixty count, Stacy on the elliptical would do brisk karate punches to involve her upper body more fully. Arthur did curls with five lb. weights, while riding the bike and Emily punched at the ceiling. They all looked so funny they had a hard time keeping a straight face—at

first. Later, when the sweat was pouring down their faces and everywhere else, they didn't have the energy to laugh at each other.

When it was over they slumped on the machinery, panting. "Good workout!" George patted Stacy's back. "We'll do this every other day in lieu of the usual rosary. Have a good night."

Then they were off to the showers. "That wasn't too bad," Stacy commented to her sister as they crossed the street. "At least you get to bed earlier than when you have the rosary followed by the workout. How was your meditation?"

"Better than usual." Emily bent down to pull up a sock at half mast. "It kind of keeps you alert. George is a goofball but sometimes I like his ideas."

Stacy awoke early the next morning and baked a batch of chocolate chip cookies for Darius. She hoped her peace offering would smooth things over. While the cookies were baking she pulled out the books Father Joseph had lent her. One was called *A Case For Authenticity*, by Fr. Vittorio Guerrera. The other was thicker and had a lot of glossy photos. Written by Frank Tribbe, it was called *Portrait of Jesus?*. In this one particularly she found the mother lode of historical data, including whole sections which alluded to the Shroud as the Holy Grail, attributing much of this line of thought to the work of Daniel Scavone. Excitement did not half cover her feelings about this jackpot of useful data. She began to read voraciously. Her mother had to forcibly drag her to the car when it was time to go to school. She and Emily rode together in the mornings, but Emily's school got out an hour earlier than Stacy's. Stacy always teased her sister that she was more educated because she put in more hours, even though Emily attended a private Catholic school, while Stacy attended the regular public school—by choice. Stacy had not been interested in going with Emily when her mother asked them three years ago.

"Check this out." Stacy showed her sister a picture of Jesus Pantocrator that was identical to the mosaic that was displayed on the domed front ceiling of Holy Apostles. There had been major renovations to the old Cathedral three years ago and

the stylistic representation had been much criticized by older parishioners. Little did they know how ancient the Pantocrator icon was—it had been copied off of the Shroud of Turin anywhere from the fifth to thirteenth century, and was Eastern in style, which suggested it may first have been painted while the Shroud was in Constantinople (before the twelfth century). The Shroud was taken as spoils of war during the fourth crusade. After that it had belonged to the House of Savoy and ultimately, to the Vatican. Stacy had no idea her church had chosen a replica of the Shroud as their main representation of Christ.

“Apology accepted.” Darius was still munching one of the cookies Stacy had sent him as he sat down that morning. “How about a rain check on coming to my house. We can make it tonight.”

“How about you come to my house instead,” Stacy hastily suggested. She wanted to avoid a near occasion of misbehavior. She knew there would at least be people coming in and out of her house all evening, making it less likely they would get into trouble. This was her real reason. To Darius, she explained, “I want you to meet my family.”

Darius looked annoyed, but agreed anyway. It was decided he would come after they finished up at the bread shop.

“This is Darius,” Stacy introduced him to everyone who hadn't been there when he had picked her up for the winter formal dance. Zeke pumped his hand enthusiastically. “I like a man who wears black.” Darius was wearing a black sweater over jeans that evening. “It's very 007.”

Arthur just nodded with no hint of a smile. Uncle George lowered his glasses to peer at him over the top of them. He walked up and looked Darius full in the face. Then he backed off three paces and extended his hand. “Do you have a job?” George asked him.

Stacy was mortified, but Darius smoothly nodded. “I

front for local talent,” he told Stacy's uncle.

George tilted his head. “What does that mean?”

“For example, rock bands. There are a number of amateur ones in this area,” he patiently explained. “I find the gigs that they need and act as a go-between.”

“And you take a cut,” Stacy's uncle clarified.

“Of course,” Darius' gaze shifted a bit, “it's only temporary. Ultimately I hope to become a politician. I hand out political tracts and such during election time to try to get my foot in the door.” Darius put an arm around Stacy. “Of course it never hurts to be associated with the right people if you want to get ahead.” Stacy wondered when she had become 'the right people'.

“Hi, Darius!” This was Reecie.

“You do remember my little sister, Clarice?” Stacy hoisted her up on one hip so that Darius could shake her hand.

“We never properly met.” He gave Reecie his hand.

“High five!” said Reecie, and smacked it instead. Darius smiled.

“Let's go across the street and get something to eat.”

Stacy grabbed his arm. “I'm hungry.” Darius waved politely to the others and went with her, Reecie still in tow.

After they had eaten a pepperoni protein bread pizza and mozzarella sticks that Stacy made in the little convection oven, she, Darius and Reecie, who seemed to be enamored of him, settled in on the living room couch for an evening of TV. Anytime Stacy would try to sidle closer to Darius, Reecie would impose herself between them. If it hadn't been annoying, it would have been funny. At any rate, it accomplished Stacy's goal of keeping herself from doing anything that went against her new moral code.

“Doesn't she ever go to bed?” Darius asked with exasperation.

“Reecie still sleeps with my mom,” Stacy told him.

“She'll probably take her to bed after the rosary, which is where

they all are now.”

“What's that?”

Stacy looked at Darius and sighed. They were so very different. “Evening prayers that my family says together.”

Darius seemed mildly alarmed. “Are you guys some kind of a cult?” he asked her.

Stacy laughed, but then shrugged. “We do take our faith seriously, if that's what you mean. I plan to raise my children Catholic.” She gave him an appraising glance. “You know, the family that prays together, stays together.”

“So I've heard.” Darius said this with distaste. “Well, don't expect me to get all caught up in that religious nonsense.”

Stacy's eyes couldn't help reflecting her disappointment.

“Don't get me wrong,” he hastily amended. “I know it's got its place. Children who are raised with religion,” his words seemed to imply *any* religion, “do tend to become better individuals—more disciplined. I just don't appreciate all of this morals crap coming between you and me, if you know what I mean. Really, what business is it of your church what you and I do when we're alone together. They shouldn't be able to say this is wrong—that's OK.” Darius' tone was exasperated. “Your church is far too anti-sex for me.”

“That's funny,” Stacy said.

“I don't think so.” Darius did not appear amused.

“Not that,” she said. “In school today, Mr. Hershel said it was the Catholic church's promotion of rampant and unbridled sexuality that caused the population explosion.”

“See what I'm saying...?” Darius didn't seem to realize he was disagreeing with himself. “The church has no business saying anything about sex. It's far too out of touch.”

Stacy gave up trying to talk to him about it. They were simply not on the same page. In fact Darius grew tired of Reecie fawning on him and excused himself. By the time her mother and Emily got back from the rosary, Darius had already left.

After her mother and sisters had gone to bed Stacy sat on the couch. She couldn't sleep. She felt the need to talk to someone, so she went across the street to see if the guys were still there. She found Zeke and Arthur in the work out room. Zeke was on the treadmill and Arthur was bench pressing what looked to be a couple of hundred pounds. Stacy sat cross-legged on the floor by the bench.

“Where's your boyfriend?” Arthur exhaled as he lifted.

“He went home. We were kind of arguing.”

Amid grunts Arthur kept up his side of the conversation. “What about?”

“Religion.” Stacy put her chin in her hands. She couldn't help feeling glum. “It seems like everyone is mad about something having to do with Catholicism, but nobody can agree on what to be mad about.”

“What do you mean?” followed Arthur's whoosh of expelled breath.

“Well, Libby says the Church is war-mongering, but Chad says it's too meek and pacifist. Ms. Felch says the Church is the enemy of women, forcing them to continual childbearing and subordinate positions, but Clancy says the Church was invented for women and no self-respecting man would have anything to do with it. Frank says the Church is too austere, with its fasting and sackcloth, Libby says it's extremely opulent, with its vestments and art treasures. Now tonight, Darius says the Church is anti-sex and controlling personal freedom,” Stacy noted that Arthur raised a brow, “but Mr. Hersh says the Church promotes unbridled sex and is the reason for the population explosion. For Gosh sakes, who's right?” She felt as if her head were going to explode.

Arthur placed the weight in its bracket and sat up. “Let's go to the chapel where we can talk.”

After they were comfortably situated on a cushioned pew, Arthur took a swig of ice water. “Have you ever heard of G.K. Chesterton?”

Stacy shook her head, so he continued. “He lived around the turn of last century and was well-known for his common

sense. He was actually a newspaper reporter, but he could have been a professional debater. At first he wanted nothing to do with Christianity, but as he attempted to go against the flow of unoriginal thought, his radical positions led him right back to orthodoxy. He wrote many books, but the one called *Orthodoxy* has become known as a classic of common sense. He deals with your question in this book.”

“Which one?”

“Pretty much all of them. Basically what he says is it depends on your vantage point. For example, if a fat man were to see someone who is the right weight, he might think that person was too thin. A very thin man might say the same person is too fat. So someone who leans toward austerity in their personality might think the Church too opulent, but an extravagant person by nature would see it as austere.”

Stacy nodded. “I’m beginning to see your point. A person who tends toward sexual excess would see the church as being oppressive and controlling...”

Arthur finished for her, “and a person who tends toward prudishness would find it out of control and vulgar. Chesterton’s point was that the Church in actuality is right down the middle. Common sense indicates that if there are people criticizing her from either direction, she must be standing firmly right where she should be.”

Stacy’s face reflected the relief she felt. “It seemed like I was the only one who was noticing these inconsistencies.”

“Nope,” Arthur smiled ruefully. “Just like Chesterton, you set out to find the truth and landed in your own back yard.” He extended a hand to her. “Welcome back.”

Stacy took his hand, then impulsively she hugged him. “Thank you for being here for me. You’re like the big brother I never had.”

There was a look of vague pain behind his nod. “Any time... Sis.”



As she was settling down to sleep that night, relieved to finally have some answers to her many questions about the church, Stacy realized with a start that it was mid-December. Christmas was only a couple of weeks away. She had not even begun to think about what she should get for people, and especially for Darius. It needed to be something pretty special since this was their first Christmas together. She would also have to get something for each of her family members. She counted the money she would receive from her work at the bread shop between now and then. Grandma Annie couldn't afford to pay full wages yet. She and Emily would get \$100 a week for putting in four hours a night. That would give her \$200. She still had the forty dollars she hadn't needed to spend on a dress. It wasn't much. She regretted the fast food, movie and clothing purchases that had prevented her from being a better saver. She would just have to divide it out, with most going towards Darius' gift—of course. She closed her eyes and decided to get started shopping that weekend. She fell asleep, counting possible gifts in lieu of sheep.

## Smokin' Snowman

Stacy knew it was absurd, but she felt guilty. She realized she hadn't been much fun for Darius since the winter formal. First, she had refused to hang out with him so that she could go to Confirmation class. Then she had insisted he visit with her family so that they would stay out of trouble—only she didn't tell *him* that. She didn't want to be the reason their love died. She made a resolution to be more open to romance with him.

When they saw each other that day at school she offered to hang out at his house and apologized for Reecie being such a pest the previous evening.

“I wish we could. Tonight I've got some appointments—business,” he said quickly. “I've arranged to have a rock band do a sample performance for the manager of *Chez Herman*. I need to be there to negotiate.” He flipped open his cell phone and checked his schedule. “We could get together and do something Saturday evening.”

Stacy nodded. “What time?”

“I'll pick you up at eight at your place.”

Stacy socialized with the family for the rest of the week. She found she really liked doing religious interval training with George. It felt good to be working her muscles regularly and she

appreciated being able to get a rosary in at the same time. She and Emily were growing closer since they had begun spending more time together. As a family they put up and decorated two Christmas trees—one at home and one in the hallway of the bread shop—on Friday night. They also dug out Stacy's great grandmother's nativity and arranged the little porcelain figures of Joseph, Mary and Baby Jesus, plus sheep and cows and little shepherds. There were even a couple of porcelain angels. The pieces were ancient and yellowed. Stacy looked forward to seeing them each year at this time. Never one to jump the liturgical gun, Grandma Annie refused to put the camels and wise men out until Epiphany. But she had made a makeshift advent candle which they had been lighting every night when they prayed together. Reecie was mesmerized by all of this and by the whisperings of presents soon to come. In all it was a magical time, and when big soft snowflakes began to tumble from the sky early Friday evening, the little cul-de-sac where they lived took on the glow of Christmas past.

Reecie and the teens had a snowball fight in the street between the shop and their house after the rosary and before it was time for that night's movie, for which Reecie was being allowed to stay up. Last year's hot Christmas film about a sick elf being saved by a dog sledder who just happened to also be a medical doctor had become available at Rupert's and George had snatched it up with Reecie in mind. Actually the family was always careful to make sure that Reecie knew there was no Santa Clause; he was only a fairy tale. None of them had been raised believing in Santa. Their mother and Stacy's dad had been too traumatized when, as children, they found out it was all a lie. Stacy's mom felt that if they lied about Santa, why wouldn't it be just as likely they were lying about Jesus?

Stacy and Emily got up at the crack of dawn the next morning in order to catch some of the early bird specials which were advertised in the paper. It was less than half price for bathrobes and slippers. Stacy bought a soft lavender set for her

grandmother. She got her mother gourmet coffee beans and had a mug made for her with a particularly nice photo of Reece that Stacy had taken when they were playing in a pile of autumn leaves.

She bought George a new fleece jogging suit—he liked to wear that kind of thing. She really lucked out when she found a pair of tennis shoes in Zeke's size in a pile of clearance shoes. They were orange, but who can't use a pair of orange tennies?

She found a soft baby ogre doll that sang off-key lullabies and bought it for Reecie. That only left Emily, who was with her, and Darius.

“Check this out!” Emily had found a device that projected a floating image of Jesus. “That's really cool!”

Stacy agreed, but it cost a bit much.

“We could go in together and get it for Arthur,” was Emily's suggestion. After doing the mental math, making sure she would still have enough left over to get Emily's—and especially Darius'—presents, Stacy agreed. Arthur had become almost family to them. It would be an oversight if they didn't get him something.

Stacy did have an idea for Darius. She had heard that the hot vintage band, *Downhill Nikki*, was going to be in town the week after Christmas. If she could get him good seats to that concert, it would really be a coup, and she had an idea of how she might get them. Libby's uncle, Ryan, was a close friend of the band's lead singer, Jeff. Using her as a go-between, Stacy was sure she could get tickets near the stage. She hoped so, anyways. She needed to do something big to let Darius know he was special to her.

Driving home after a successful day of shopping, Stacy noticed the gas guage on her mother's vehicle was low. She decided to put in a few bucks and pulled into the nearest station. Stacy had rarely pumped gas, so she carefully read each one of the directions—to no avail. She simply couldn't get the thing to pump. She was getting pretty frustrated by the time she bothered to look at the station itself. She immediately saw it was closed

and boarded up. They were still by the mall and this was a very busy street. Realizing how stupid she must look, she hastily replaced the nozzle and pulled out of the parking lot.

“Why didn't you tell me that gas station was out of business?” she asked Emily, whose head was buried in a novel.

“Huh?”

“Never mind. I'll just get gas someplace else.” Stacy drove a few blocks and pulled into the lot of a different station. This time she made sure it was open. When she flipped the lever to access the gas tank she realized that in her haste she had driven away minus the gas cap. She must have left it sitting on the trunk of the car. She quickly put in a few gallons and paid for it.

“We've got to go back to that other station and get mom's gas cap. I lost it there someplace.”

As they neared the boarded up station Emily alerted her, “There it is.” She pointed to an object lying in the middle of the intersection.

“This is not good,” Stacy said. When the light turned green, she pulled into the middle of the intersection and put the car in park.

“What are you planning to do?” Emily asked, anxiety in her voice.

“I've got to get it.” She opened the door.

“You can't!” Emily frantically grabbed her arm.

“I've got to. Somebody will run it over.” Stacy shook her sister off and jumped out.

“There's more people involved than just you!” Emily yelled after her.

But Stacy had left the car driverless and was nimbly prancing into the middle of the street, Emily stilling hurling protests. Cars swerved around them, impatient to cross, but no one even honked. One older gentleman held up a copy of the state driver's manual, tapped it, and shook his head. *Who keeps a copy of the driver's manual in their car...?* After scooping the thing up and hopping back in—a feat that took probably thirty seconds, but felt like an hour—the light was no longer green.

There they were in the middle of the intersection with a red light. Stacy decided to go anyway. Vaguely she wondered how many laws she had broken. At least she had the cap and it was still intact. By the time they got home the incident seemed more funny than dangerous, but Emily finked on her just the same.

After supper Stacy selected different clothes to wear on her date with Darius. He would be at her house within an hour. Stacy hadn't thought about how she looked since morning. Her hair, which fell in soft natural curls was loose around her shoulders. She pinned it up expertly and with little effort, leaving it just a bit messy. Then she put on the jeans that showed her figure most to advantage and refreshed her make-up. She never wore much, just a hint of shadow around the eyes and a dab of soft color on her lips. She brushed her teeth again and put on a soft green pullover sweater that was just the right shade to flatter her hair and skin. Surveying herself in the mirror, she knew she was pretty. But there were a lot of pretty girls available to Darius. She hoped she had what it took to keep his interest.

When Darius arrived he was dangling ice skates from his left hand. He lifted them in a questioning gesture. "I was wondering if you might like to walk to the outside rink and skate for a bit. It looks really beautiful lit up and with the snow falling."

"I like to skate." Stacy had even played hockey for a couple of years. She ran to get her skates and bundled up with a furry parka and feathery white scarf. They walked with their inside arms linked. It was a warm night for December, snowy but without any wind. It was so warm that you could barely see your breath when you exhaled.

There was piped in music of the schmaltzy Christmas type, and a fair amount of people were skating. Darius grabbed her arm and spun Stacy almost immediately when they hit the ice. It brought her right back to how she had felt when they danced at

the winter formal. After they had skated for a few songs they drank some cocoa in the little shed where they had put on skates. Stacy asked how it had gone with the rock band's audition.

"These guys are pretty good. They don't have as much problem with stage fright as some bands do. I think the manager liked them." Say Stace'," Darius seemed a bit fidgety. "Would you mind taking a walk so that I can smoke?"

"Of course not." Occasionally Stacy would forget that he smoked. He normally hid it quite well. As they walked, he lit up and took a long drag. When he exhaled, his relief was almost visible.

"Let's make a snow man," Stacy impulsively grabbed his arm. They were in a park-like area that was open to the public.

Darius took another puff. "We don't have anything for his eyes and nose."

Stacy dug in her pockets. "We've got mints!" She triumphantly produced two starlight mints. "They'll make good eyes." She cast about, looking for a suitable nose. After turning full circle, not spying any obvious nose offerings, she considered her companion at length. "Got another cigarette?" she ultimately asked him.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he fumbled in his pocket. "I didn't know you wanted one."

"It's not for me." Stacy rolled the thing between her fingers, considering it. "Pity you don't smoke cigars," she said, sighing. "Oh well, this'll have to do."

"For a nose?"

"Sure, why not?"

"It won't show up."

"We can put it in backwards," Stacy suggested.

"Or I can smoke it a bit," Darius said, snatching it back. "Wouldn't want to waste the whole thing."

They got to work. When the snowman was complete he was bigger than either of them.

"Very imposing," Stacy said with satisfaction. "I think the cigarette makes him look distinguished."

“But the starlight mints make him look crazed.” Darius snuffed his third cigarette, the one he lit after they finished the snowman. “Pity he has no mouth,” he said. “He won't be able to tell anyone what I'm gonna do to you now!” He playfully tackled her, trying to shove snowballs up her sweater, and the two of them wrestled in the soft snow until they were exhausted. Then they lay on their backs, looking at the sky full of stars that seemed like they'd appeared from nowhere. Wasn't it snowing a few minutes ago?

“Make a snow angel,” Stacy ordered him, as she flailed her arms and legs. Darius carefully extricated himself from the snow so as not to spoil it. Then, just as carefully, he traced horns and a tail on his. “Mine would be a fallen angel,” he said, by way of explanation.

Stacy's eyes met his. “Only if you want it to be.”

Darius didn't say anything in reply.

By Sunday the snow drifts were so enormous, Stacy wondered if they would have school the next day. They made it to Mass with no problem, though. Later her mother said she was intending to put an ad in the paper's lost and found. She posted a reward for its safe return, or for any information concerning the necklace. St. Anthony probably wouldn't mind if they helped him out a bit.

Monday morning Stacy found Libby and asked her if she could get tickets.

“Oh, that concert is sold out,” she told Stacy, but at her look of consternation, she promised to try. “Ryan owes me a favor for cleaning up his mess, anyway.”

Stacy hoped Libby would be successful. If she couldn't get tickets to *Downhill Nikki* she wasn't sure what she could get for Darius.

That night was Confirmation class and this week father



Joseph was teaching about Holy Orders. He said a person does not decide to become a priest as he might decide to become a doctor or electrician. It is a calling, and it is up to each individual to discern whether he is, in fact, called to the religious life. In the meanwhile it is important to know what life as a priest or religious might entail. Of course a person could either be a contemplative religious, such as a cloistered nun, or an active religious, such as a parish priest.

As priest, a man would lend his body to Christ—in effect, act as stand-in—while the original sacrifice which Jesus had made once, but for everyone in every age, was re-presented daily. This is what Jesus had asked of us at the Last Supper, when He said, “Do this in memory of Me.” Although the most important work of a priest was to be celebrant in the Eucharistic sacrifice, or mass, there were many other duties involved with the running of a parish, which was in essence, a business. So the man who became a parish priest would need many facets to his personality and many different skills, but most of all he needed to *desire* the priesthood. He needed a voracious longing to know Jesus better, and an inherent sense that nothing in this world could compare with Him.

The same was true of the woman who was called to be a nun. And since both vocations entailed making a vow of chastity, that the person was in effect to be bonded to Christ, and only to Christ for all eternity, it was a particularly challenging commitment, taking years of training and discernment. Stacy highly doubted that she was a candidate for the nunnery. Not only was chastity a daily challenge to her, but her dream had always been to bear and raise children, possibly even many children. She loved Jesus, and was growing in her desire to know him daily, but she suspected her call was to be married and a mother.

Tuesday, at lunch, Stacy got the good news that Libby had, in fact been successful in obtaining the tickets. Not only did she get tickets, they were front row seats which included a back-

stage pass. Darius was sure to be happy with this gift!

“Thank you, Libby,” she said as she hugged her friend. “I owe you one.”

With only Emily left to buy for—although now, she really felt the need to get Libby something—it was clear sailing to Christmas. Next weekend was hospitality Sunday again—had a month gone by already...? After that was the final week of advent and all four candles on the wreath would be lit in anticipation of the Incarnation: God Himself taking the form of a human being. She had never before realized how amazing this was.

Christmas Eve morning. Darius had arranged to take her out that night for dinner at an elegant restaurant. They would exchange gifts at that time. After dinner she and Darius would join her family for Midnight Mass at Holy Apostles. The family would open gifts in the morning, as always. Afterwards there would be the traditional brunch: usually a sausage, egg, and cheese bake, fruit and muffins. There were always stocking treats. As kids they had never bothered with real food, preferring the candy, chips and pop with which their mother would fill their stockings. Although Arthur needed to be with his own family, many of whom were in town for the holiday, he had agreed to join Stacy's family for their Christmas morning festivities, at least for a bit.

Stacy had been so busy worrying about what she would get for Darius, she never paused to think about what he might get for her. With a jolt, she realized it was entirely possible she would receive an engagement ring tonight. After all, hadn't he already proposed? She shivered at the thought. Part of her longed to be married, but part of her felt she wasn't ready yet. She didn't know whether to hope for a ring or not.

One thing was certain—tonight would be a special night. She needed to come up with a special dress for the occasion. Stacy hastily threw on clothes and headed downstairs. She found her mom in the kitchen, having just finished brewing coffee.

“Hi.” Stacy grabbed a cup and filled it with the fairly

weak columbian her mother favored. She started to cut a couple of slices of protein bread for her morning toast. “What are these boogers?” she asked, sweeping a pile of greenish fragments off the cutting board.

“Jalopena bits,” Her mother answered without looking up from the newspaper she was reading. “Last night Reecie grabbed one of your grandmother's fresh loaves and took a bite of it.” She lowered her reading glasses to look at her daughter over the paper. “You know how I feel about waste.”

Stacy did. Shrugging she popped two slices in the toaster. While she was waiting for it to toast, she sat opposite her mother. “Ummm...” she said, hoping to get her attention.

“Yes...?” Her mother didn't look up.

“I was wondering...” Stacy stopped again, so her mom finally lowered the paper.

“Wondering what, Dear?”

“I was wondering, back when you used to have a life, before...” her voice trailed off again.

“Before your dad died?” her mother suggested.

“Yes.” Stacy looked at her hands. “Did you have any—you know—nice dresses?” She looked at her mother hopefully. “I kind of have a dinner to go to tonight and was hoping to wear something...”

“Special.” Her mother finished the sentence for her. She tilted her head and appraised her daughter. “I might.” She went back to reading again.

Stacy's toast had popped. She buttered it, sat down and took a hesitant bite. “It's not bad,” she commented after swallowing.

“And it's very good for your prostate,” said her mother.

Stacy giggled. Her grandmother made this variety at the request of Uncle George.

“We can go through my closet after breakfast.” Rose smiled at her daughter. She sighed. “You're just growing up right before my eyes.”

After much trying on of dresses, Stacy settled on a simple sleeveless black dress. Cut just above the knee, it made a classic statement with silky black stockings and heels. Stacy rued the loss of her grandmother's necklace, which would have been the perfect finishing touch, but she made do with a braided gold chain and dangling earrings. Surveying herself critically in the oval standing mirror in her mother's room, she decided it would do.

“Guess where I'm taking you?” Darius said, as he pulled away from her house.

Stacy shrugged. *It had better not be Micky D's with me dressed like this.*

“Chez Herman. You asked about the group I got the gig for. They're playing tonight. I thought you might enjoy catching the act.” Darius turned the radio on and flipped the channel until he hit the vintage station. Stacy recognized the song that was playing as “*Prodigal Lass*”, one of the better known songs that *Downhill Nikki* had recorded.

“What do you think of these guys?” she asked him. She hoped she didn't sound nervous.

“*Downhill Nikki?*” He changed lanes to avoid a merging minivan. “Who doesn't like their work?”

“Right,” she agreed with relief. Inwardly she had been worried that her present might not hit the mark.

“Too bad it's impossible to get a ticket to their concert,” he continued. “It's one I would have liked to have caught. Oh, well.” He shrugged. “Maybe they'll come out of retirement again sometime.” Pulling into a parking lot he turned off the engine. “Chez Herman.” He gestured to a strangely top heavy building lit up magenta and decorated with flamingos. “Shall we...?”

The inside was modern and looked newly built. Darius told her that the owners, J and J Herman, had come into inherited money. Both had worked in the hospitality industry and knew their way around the business, so they decided to invest in

starting their own. This place served classic dinners. They had been careful to hire excellent cooks and the establishment, though only a few years old, was well-known in the area for its cuisine and cutting edge entertainment. The band Darius had helped to get their foot in the door, *Choir Dogs*, played semi-orchestral rock music, and was very polished for being newcomers. The place was packed. Fortunately Darius had made a reservation. The band would not begin for another hour and a half, so that gave them plenty of time to enjoy their meal.

Darius helped her remove her jacket, and Stacy, suddenly feeling self-conscious, asked, "Do I look OK?"

"You," Darius assured her emphatically, "would look good in a hefty bag."

Stacy ordered a roasted chicken and vegetable linguine and Darius chose the steak. While they were waiting for their food to arrive, Darius, chewing on a toothpick, kept his eyes fixedly on hers. Finally he spoke. "I don't know what it is about you," he said this with a sigh. "I've never known anyone who played so hard to get... and I've never wanted anybody more." He continued to gaze at her until Stacy was feeling less flattered and more like prey.

She hastily changed the subject. "Would I know anybody from *Choir Dogs*? Do they go to our school?"

"Max Benson is in our grade. The rest are a couple of years out of high school."

Stacy knew Max. "I bet I know what he plays." She could remember him drumming on the chair of her desk in fourth grade when he sat behind her.

"He's a fantastic drummer," Darius said. "Natural rhythm and lots of speed. I think you'll like the show."

*Choir Dogs* lived up to Darius' billing. You would have never known they were not already a professional group. Although the music was loud, you could still make out the lyrics of the songs. They had original stuff, along with a few covers.

Stacy thoroughly enjoyed herself. She would have to compliment Max when she saw him in the halls.

There could not be a more complete contrast than between the *Choir Dogs* concert and the choral concert preceding midnight Mass. They had left the restaurant at 11:15 and arrived a bit into the half hour of music that anticipated the great event that was to come. Not that the church choir wasn't as good as *Choir Dogs*, they were just very different. Along with the music, the well-decorated sanctuary was mesmerizing. Stacy felt as though she had stepped into a different world. She vaguely wondered whether Darius had ever been to church and she cast a sidelong glance in his direction. His head was tilted back and he seemed to be drinking in the surroundings. Even the ceiling of the Cathedral was ornate. "This would make a great concert hall!" he whispered.

Stacy was horrified at the thought. She fondly met the shroud-like eyes of Jesus-Pantocrator. She wouldn't want some rock band to take over His home.

The Mass was beautiful, the liturgy and music compelling. There were three priests, along with the Bishop, who showed up as celebrant on every major liturgical feast. The Cathedral was packed, but Stacy hardly recognized anyone there as being from the parish. She vaguely wondered if they were even Catholic, and when everyone in the place got up at Communion-time, she found herself in the shoes of her family back at the conference when they had dissuaded her from going to communion without confession first. She grabbed Darius' arm and encouraged him to sit back down with her. *Sorry, Jesus*. She would have to go to communion another time. She couldn't let Darius enter into something so sacred with no knowledge of what it meant. It wouldn't be good for either him or Jesus. It just wouldn't be good.

After Mass, with her family back home, and presumably sleeping, Stacy and Darius found their way back to the little park

where they had built the crazed-looking snowman. He was intact.

“Mine first,” Stacy said, as she handed him her gift.

When Darius opened the little box and found *Downhill Nikki* tickets inside, he whooped and twirled her. “Thank you,” he said, after giving her a big kiss. “I can’t wait to go.” When he handed Stacy a little jewelry box, her heart beat out of control. Could this be...?

She opened the box with trepidation to find—what was this...?

She held up a necklace with what appeared to be an odd-shaped pendant. Looking closer, she could see that it had been engraved—only what did it say...?

Darius reached down the neck of his shirt and pulled out a pendant which was the mirror opposite of Stacy’s. “It only makes sense when they’re together,” he explained, fitting the two pieces together to form a heart. Now it was possible to read the engraving. Stacy squinted by the light of the street lamp. This is what it read:

*Our love will only be complete  
When our two hearts and bodies meet*

(and on the other side:)

*Until that time I wait  
With baited breath*

“Did you make this?” Stacy held it closer to peer at the writing.

“I wrote the message and had it engraved for you.”

Stacy didn’t know whether to feel relieved or disappointed. “It’s beautiful,” she finally said. After all, it did *imply* an engagement. He couldn’t be suggesting a mere liaison, he knew how she felt about living together. She hugged and kissed him. “Thank you, Darius.”

“Merry Christmas, Stace.” They kissed and talked for another half hour before he took her home.

Everybody liked the gifts Stacy had gotten them, especially Arthur, who had received the holographic Jesus from her and Emily. In the end she had found a sale and had managed to buy Emily a whole outfit. Stacy received cash and gift cards (her mother and Grammy had given up on trying to pick out clothes for the teens), body wash and lotions, jewelry and the like. Her grandmother had given her a 2-CD set of music by an artist named Danielle Rose. It was called *Mysteries* and contained songs for each of the twenty decades of the full rosary, plus intro and summary songs, and a very haunting and lovely rendition of the *Hail Holy Queen* prayer.

“What’s this supposed to mean?” Stacy held up a growling aardvark t-shirt she had received from Ezekiel and raised an eyebrow.

“You kind of remind me of an aardvark when you’re mad,” was her cousin’s response.

“Thank you...?” Stacy refolded the object and threw it in her pile. “I’m sure I’ll wear it a lot... when I’m washing the car.”

“As will I these.” He held up the neon orange tennis. “My favorite color. How did you know?”

Stacy’s favorite gift ended up being from Arthur—good thing Emily had talked her into getting him something. He had given her a poster of the Shroud of Turin. It measured about five feet and was of both the front and back. This would make an awesome visual aid for her presentation. “Wow. This is wonderful.” Stacy didn’t know what to say. “Where did you find such a thing?”

“On-line,” Arthur said. “I knew you were into the Shroud.”

After opening presents they had brunch. Only Reecie refused to eat. She was too busy with her new toys and couldn’t be pried away.

“What did you get from Darius?” Emily asked her later, when they were alone in the room they shared.

Stacy was still wearing the necklace. She pulled it out



from her shirt and showed her sister, who read it and furrowed her brow. “It's only one half,” Stacy explained. “Darius is wearing the other. He had it inscribed. When you put the whole thing together it says:

'Our Love Will Only Be C.omplete When Our Two Hearts and Bodies Meet'

and on the back, 'Until Then I Wait With Baited Breath.'”

Emily pursed her lips disapprovingly but didn't say anything.

“What's that look supposed to mean?” Stacy asked her.

Emily shrugged. “Well, if you ask me, that guy only has one thing in mind. He may as well have written, 'Our Love Can Only Be Shared in a Dance—One That Does Not Include Pants', or wait! This is even better, 'Love Will Blossom When Two People Join—Heart to Heart and Groin to Groin!’” She dissolved in a fit of giggles.

Stacy didn't think it was funny. See if she shared secrets with Emily anymore! She turned on her heel and left without another word. Hastily she threw on the overcoat she had worn the previous night—incidentally the same one she had worn when she went to the Marian/Eucharistic conference. She slammed the front door as she left. Inwardly she was seething, and not just at Emily. She was mad at Darius for not getting her an engagement ring like he should have. She walked purposefully, but with no destination in mind. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. Angrily she thrust her hand in her pocket, searching for a tissue. She came up with a scrap of paper instead. What was this...? She recognized the slip of paper Sr. Loretta had given her at the conference. She had told her to read it when she was having doubts. If ever there was such a time, it was now. Stacy unfolded the paper:

### Novena to St. Jude

Most holy Apostle, St. Jude, faithful  
servant and friend of Jesus, the Church

honors and invokes you universally as the patron of difficult cases, of things almost despaired of, Pray for me, I am so helpless and alone.

Intercede with God for me that He bring visible and speedy help where help is almost despaired of. Come to my assistance in this great need that I may receive the consolation and help of heaven in all my necessities, tribulations and sufferings, particularly-  
(make your request here)  
-and that I may praise God with you and all the saints forever. I promise, O Blessed St. Jude, to be ever mindful of this great favor granted me by God and to always honor you as my special and powerful patron, and to gratefully encourage devotion to you. Amen.

*Of course.* When Stacy had needed a dress—let's face it, she had only wanted that dress—hadn't St. Jude come through for her? And she hadn't even used the proper formula then. How much more did she need a proper engagement ring, so that people would see that Darius loved her, and wasn't just after her body? Stacy marveled that Sr. Loretta had managed to give her a novena to the one saint with whom she already had a connection. It was clearly a sign from God. She would begin the novena today.

## Snow Games

“Stace', mind if I borrow your hoodie?” When Emily's sister didn't reply she marched up to Stacy's desk and held it in front of her upturned nose. “Well, can I...?”

Pursing her lips, Stacy nodded. She was still mad at Emily, refusing to talk to her. Because she was trying to maintain the silent treatment, she threw herself into studying for her presentation on the grail. She found material which supported the more widely held theory that the grail was the Cup which had been used at the Last Supper. There were also legends that this Cup had been used to catch Christ's blood while interring Him, and that in Britain, Joseph of Arimathea had founded a line of guardians to keep it safe.

This legendary Cup was thought to have special powers. Mythology surrounding it was combined with the Celtic mythology surrounding a “cauldron” of great power. Early grail romances involved Percival and were woven into the Arthurian legend. In these legends, the hero, whether Percival or, later, Galahad, needed to prove himself spiritually mature enough to be in the presence of this grail. Sometimes the grail was seen as a symbol of God's grace.

The earliest French spelling of grail was greille, meaning grill, and this gave way to greal, which was thought to be a shortened version of sangreal (true blood, or blood line). In the works of Chretien of Troyes, based on an incomplete poem given him by his patron, Count Philip of Flanders (1180), Perceval was

dining with the legendary Fisher King. Of none of the feast was the wounded King able to partake, but only of That Which was born in on the last dish, the Graal—a single communion wafer. So here, graal is a dish that holds the eucharist.

In the works of Robert de Baron, Joseph of Arimathea began a line of Grail keepers that eventually came to Percival. The most celebrated grail-bearer, though, was Galahad, son of Lancelot and Lady Elaine. In the Arthurian legend, the Grail is kept in a Grail Castle and is visited by knights, or is quested after.

Emily hadn't left the room that the two girls shared. While Stacy pored over her book, she had been listening to some Christian music that their grandmother had given her for Christmas. Now she was playing a song that was so beautiful, Stacy longed to ask her what it was—only that would entail actually speaking to her. Stacy sighed and continued her research.

Belief in the Grail has never ceased. Ownership has been attributed to various groups, among them the Knights Templar, who were at their peak at the time (1200's) most of the tales originated. There are Cups claimed to be the Grail in several churches, most notably one in the Valencia Cathedral, which has been called the official Papal cup and most, if not all popes have prayed the Mass, using It (most recently, Pope Benedict—July 9, 2006). This one was supposedly taken by St. Peter to Rome in the first century, then to Huesca, in Spain, by St. Lawrence in the third century. Scholars say the the artifact is a first century Middle-Eastern stone vessel, possibly from Antioch. It is made of agate and rests upon a gold and gemstone stem, made in the Medieval era.

There is another candidate, the Emerald Chalice of Genoa. This was obtained in Caesarea in Palestine during the Crusades at great cost, but it was later revealed to have been made of glass, not emerald. So it is less touted as being the true Grail at present.

“Stacy... Em...!” Stacy heard Ezekiel's voice calling from downstairs, “We're setting up a touch football game and snowball fight and we wanted to know if you can come.”

“When?” Stacy yelled back.

“Half an hour,” said her cousin.

Stacy looked at her watch. Darius was coming over at about that time. She told Ezekiel this.

“Bring him, too,” said her cousin. “We want as many people as we can get.”

Stacy shrugged. At least it was something to do. She made a hasty call to alert Darius so that he would dress appropriately. Then she put on sweats and a hoodie. Stacy had decided that the only way Darius was going to become comfortable with her family and vice versa was if he actually came over a bit more. So she had talked him into hanging out for the afternoon and staying for dinner. After that, who knows? Ideally he would be agreeable to staying with them during religious interval training. But they would have to take it one activity at a time.

There ended up being five to each team. Stacy and Arthur's friend, Marco, were the fastest runners, so one went with each team to keep things even. Stacy and Darius were on Zeke's team. Emily was on Arthur's team. Most of the rest were acquaintances to Stacy, people that worked out and played basketball with her cousin. It was apparent pretty quickly that these guys took their touch football pretty seriously and that the game might be a bit more aggressive than had been advertised. Stacy was playing wide receiver to Zeke's quarterback. Darius played running back, but he wasn't nearly as nimble running as he was with his tongue and it became clear that he neither appreciated getting dirty, nor injured. Pretty soon Zeke quit giving him the ball altogether, opting either to throw to Stacy or to hand off to his workout buddy, Frank. Darius pretty much kept to the sidelines and he seemed bored.

Meanwhile Arthur and Emily's team was faring better, having successfully breached their opponents' end zone three times to Stacy's team's one. Their lone goal had come from a quarterback keeper after Stacy had set them up with a completed bomb, only to be stopped five yards from the end zone. They

needed a comeback. Too bad one member of their team was dead weight. Of course this could work to their advantage if he could be persuaded to come alive for just one play. They discussed this in the huddle and Darius agreed to try for one play. When the ball was hiked, Zeke faked a hand-off to Frank, instead completing a screen pass to Darius by the sideline. They managed to take the other team by surprise and it might have even gone all the way, except that Emily was too aggressive, grabbing Darius by the back mere feet from their end zone, and she actually tackled him, causing him to rip a hole in the knee of his sweats.

Darius stood up, dropped the ball and walked to his car without a word.

“What's his problem?” Frank said with disdain.

“I'd better go.” Stacy was apologetic, but she scampered after Darius, leaving her cousin's team two members shy.

Despite her attempts to talk him out of it, Darius got into his car and drove away.

“Your boyfriend's kind of a dud,” was Zeke's flat statement that night at interval training.

Stacy bent to tie her shoelace. “Not always,” she said. “In some situations, he's really charming.”

“Well, he didn't bother turning on the charm for us.”

Stacy had to agree. Darius today had been like a different person than the Darius she had previously known and been enthralled with. “Maybe he was just having a bad day,” she suggested.

“Maybe.” Zeke shrugged. “I hope so for your sake, if you plan to continue to hang out with him.”

There was more than a week left of Christmas vacation and Stacy had promised herself she would do a bit of work on her Grail presentation each day. Today she hunkered down to finish The DaVinci Code, which up to now she had only been able to

read in snippets. The novel centered around an expert in symbology, Robert Langdon, and a cryptographer, Sophie Neveu, who was working on a murder case, with which the Paris police were also involved. The curator of the Louvre Museum had been found dead with a symbol carved on his chest. Langdon was in Paris to give a talk and Neveu warned him that the Parisian police had him pegged as the prime suspect.

Langdon and Neveu escaped the Louvre together and set out to decipher a series of clues left by the victim to determine who was his assassin. They were hunted by both police and a member of Opus Dei, who here had been hired to kill them before they uncovered a secret which the Catholic church had supposedly been covering up since its inception: that Jesus never believed Himself to be God; that the four gospels which were chosen by the church were only selected in order to further an agenda of male dominance; that, in fact, Jesus had been romantically involved with Mary Magdalene—together they had given birth to a daughter; and that the true gospel had been suppressed by the Council of Nicea in 325. The (so-called) Gnostic gospels better fit with the truth of the divine feminine, and Goddess worship, with which Jesus was actually involved. Physical union with a female was the sole means by which man could become spiritually complete and achieve *gnosis*—knowledge of the divine.

So Mary Magdalene and her bloodline, the *Sang Real*, (passed down through the French Merovingian royal family) was the real grail. The secret was preserved for centuries by the Priory of Scion, whose military branch, the Knights Templar, had guarded not only the roads to the Holy Land, but this secret.

*Knights Templar...* That was the second time—at least—that she had read about them. She remembered they had been connected with guarding the Grail cup as well.

No Darius today—he was busy setting up gigs—so Stacy joined Zeke and Arthur in playing outside with Reecie. After a few hours of tag and snowball fights, they made a giant snowball

with a smaller ball in front and placed it near the back door to Stacy's house. Reecie would use the smaller ball to climb onto the larger, then she'd slide down the back side. The yard was sloped to begin with, so she could get a good long run out of it.

"The snow slide is great." Stacy smoothed a rough bit on the larger ball. "Reecie is really enjoying this."

"Wait 'til tomorrow." Arthur grinned at her.

Stacy's curiosity was peaked but neither of the guys would let on what they had in mind.

The next morning she found them hard at work, hollowing out the balls. They were using trowels and mini-shovels. "We're making her an igloo," Zeke told Stacy when she leaned over to peer in at them. They had already hollowed the small ball for an entryway and were halfway through scooping out the larger one. Arthur was working on the inside, chipping away at the hardened snow, while Zeke, who was bigger, shoveled and removed the snow piles generated by his friend's labor.

It was splendid. Reecie loved it. She insisted on eating her lunch in there and it was like pulling teeth to get her indoors when she needed the bathroom. She even invited Stacy inside for a tea party. There was just enough room for two. (Truthfully the larger of the two was a bit cramped.) When Darius arrived for a surprise visit in the mid-afternoon, he received a tour of the place. He was only willing to poke his head in and look, but even he was forced to agree, it was a wonderful fort.

Since Reecie still refused to go in the house and there was loads of available snow, Stacy, Darius and Reecie decided to make a snow man to guard the entryway. This time they would have access to a proper carrot nose and button eyes. Even scarf and hat were available, but since he was policing the place, perhaps helmet and club would be more appropriate. They were just in the process of rolling the three balls for his body when Stacy was called away to help her mother bring some supplies from the basement of the bread shop into the work room.

"Do you mind watching Reece for a minute while I get



that?" Stacy asked him.

Darius agreed, so she left him in charge of her little sister.

When she returned there was no one in sight. *Maybe they went in to warm up.*

Entering the kitchen she found Reecie sitting at the table, eating a cheese sandwich.

"I found her alone in the back yard." Emily's tone was clearly disapproving.

"Where's Darius?" Stacy asked them. When no one answered she took Reecie by the shoulders and looked in her eyes. "Reecie honey, where's Darius?"

"In a fort," Reecie said, her mouth still full.

Stacy ran back outside. This time she noticed that one of the snowman balls had been rolled in front of the entrance. Stacy kicked it to the side and peered in. "Oh, hello," She smiled at Darius. "What are you doing in here?"

"What do you think...?" Darius' tone was acidic. He crawled out, stood up and shook the snow off. "Freezing and cramping up."

Stacy knew it wasn't really cold in there. "Well, why did you go in then?"

"Your satanic sister told me to. Then she rolled a damn ball in front of the entrance."

Stacy suppressed a smile. "Why didn't you just kick it away?"

"Every time I tried my butt would slide." He faced her, frankly irritated. "Well...?"

"Well, what...?"

"Aren't you going to punish the brat?"

Stacy shook her head. "I'm sure she didn't mean to block you in, Darius."

"The hell she didn't!" He pulled his gloves back on. "You people spoil that child." He strode to his car and got in.

*What was his problem? Anybody else would have thought it was funny.* Stacy sighed and went inside.

“Did you guys have fun in the igloo today?” Zeke bent to pick up a tray of bagged bread.

“Mostly.” Stacy told him how Darius had been trapped inside by Reecie.

“For how long?” Ezekiel seemed much more concerned than Stacy would have expected.

“No more than fifteen minutes.”

Zeke breathed out. “We should have made some air holes. It didn’t occur to me that the entrance could get blocked off.”

Stacy pounded a glob of dough. “What’s the big deal? I went in there with Reece. It was fine.”

“You went in when the entrance was open. Have you any idea what it’s like when it’s not?” At her bewildered look, Zeke explained, “Pitch black, kind of wet, and with diminishing air supply, it would be petrifying.”

“So then why didn’t he just yell. We would have let him out.”

“If you heard him—which I doubt you would. Snow makes very good insulation.” Zeke regarded her gravely. “If Reecie hadn’t told you where he was, well... it’s not that I’m all that fond of the guy, but he couldn’t have lasted for long.”

Stacy took five to call Darius and apologize for having been cavalier about him being trapped in the igloo. She explained she had no idea how dangerous it was. He had every right to be upset. He accepted her apology and they cemented their plans for the Downhill Nikki concert which was coming up Sunday night.

The next morning found Stacy back at work, this time studying the history of the Shroud. Earliest mention of Jesus’ burial linens was in the Gospel of John. The disciples entered the tomb, saw the linens – and the separate cloth which had covered His face folded up in a different place—they saw, and were amazed. Why...?

The next record of these linens was when they were

brought to Edessa in fulfillment of the promise made by Jesus to the ailing King Abgar. They were brought by Thaddeus, described as one of the 72, and for Abgar the Image shone like the sun as Thaddeus approached: he was enveloped in the light emanating from It and was instantly cured of his malady. Then Abgar's servant, Aggai, fashioned an ornate frame into which the linens were folded and kept with only the oval-framed face of Christ exposed. An image in mosaic was created that had been fashioned after the Face and was placed atop the city gate. Ultimately, as the people who lived in Edessa became less Christian, the Shroud and the mosaic image were sealed inside this gate where they remained safely hidden and forgotten until the sixth century. Then they were rediscovered and it was at this time that the first images of Christ with long hair, unshaven and with a forked beard began to appear. Up to this point depictions of Jesus had varied and were generally more Roman in character—clean-shaven, short-haired, etc.

Edessa, which had become Moslem, sold the Shroud to Constantinople for the release of two hundred Muslim prisoners, twelve thousand silver crowns, and perpetual immunity from attack. The Image of Edessa was kept in Constantinople until the year 1204, when during the fourth Crusade, it was taken as spoils of war. After this time period, the Shroud became historically linked with—who else?—the Knights Templar.

The Templars were responsible for protection of pilgrims who were traveling to the Holy Land and also were guardians of relics. It is therefore quite likely that the Shroud passed through their hands at this time. They were an extremely secretive group. Their initiation rituals were said to involve looking on the True Face of God. When they were disbanded by King Phillip IV due to alleged heresy, tortured members gave up the information that they worshipped a bearded head. Later some fifty-three copies of the Shroud Face were found in trunks that had once belonged to the Templars, and which they apparently had used during worship services.

Whether he retained possession of it, or whether the

Templars were guarding it for him, most likely the Shroud was actually the property of Othon de la Roche, one of the interim governors of Constantinople, because we next see his granddaughter, Jeanne de Vergy using it as dowry in her marriage to Geoffrey of Charny. This twosome received Papal approval to display the Shroud in the Cathedral of Lirey. A pilgrim's coin found in the Seine depicted the Shroud, Jeanne de Vergy's coat of arms and Geoffrey of Charny's coat of arms and was issued the year of this exposition:1354.

Jeanne passed the Shroud to her granddaughter, Margaret, who, having no suitable heirs, passed it to the House of Savoy. The Savoys rose in power until they became rulers of all Italy. In 1946 the last Savoy ruler, Umberto II, was deposed and when he died in 1983, the Shroud was given to the Vatican at his request. It remains on display in the Cathedral in Turin, which is attached still to the palatial residence of Umberto.

That completed the known history of the Shroud. Stacy closed the book she was reading. She put on coat and shoes and headed across the street to the bakery. It was Saturday morning and she had promised to help in the bread shop for a few hours. When she got there she found Father Joseph just preparing to enter the shop. He grinned at her. "Your grandmother has a prototype for those tortilla chips I asked her to make. She wants me to sample them." Stacy's look said, 'I told you so' as loudly as if she had spoken the words. "Maybe afterwards you can give me that tour of the east side Martyr windows." He followed Stacy into the work room.

After considerable banter and the delivery of the promised chips, Stacy was again dispatched with Father Joseph to complete her tour with the east side windows, beginning with the eleven Holy Apostles: Peter, James, John (sons of Zebedee), Andrew, Matthew, Phillip, Bartholomew, Thomas, James (son of Alpheus), Thaddeus and Simon the Patriot. Each of the Apostles was depicted holding a symbol which distinguished who they were. For example, Peter carried a set of keys. Stacy noticed that Thaddeus carried an oval image of Christ. Thaddeus was the

disciple named as having brought the Shroud to King Abgar in Edessa. “Is that supposed to be the Shroud?” She pointed to the image.

Father scratched his head. “Strangely, Stacy, I never thought about it until now. You know, the more common name used by Thaddeus the Apostle was St. Jude...”

Saint Jude—*My* Saint Jude...? Numbly Stacy wondered how much the events of the past weeks had been orchestrated by this saint whom she had begun to regard as her personal patron. As she sifted through her mind, untangling minute details, she realized Father Joseph had continued to talk about the window. She apologized for her inattention and explained that St. Jude had become very important to her in the past few months.

“Perhaps you should choose him as your Confirmation patron,” Father suggested.

Stacy searched his face. “Do you really think I can be confirmed starting this late?”

Father cleared his throat. “Well, I suppose that would ultimately depend on how you do with the test.”

“There's a test?” she squeaked.

Father put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “Don't worry. There's plenty of time to memorize the information. I'll give you catch-up study sheets the next time we meet. Stacy,” he met her eyes confidently, “I'm sure you'll do fine.”

They continued their tour of the east side windows with Justin-Martyr (AD165, beheaded), a successor to Polycarp. Then came St. Cecilia (third century). She was surrounded by musical objects as she was considered the patroness of music. She was depicted holding up one finger on one hand and three on the other, the position in which she had been found dead. The one finger stood for one God; the three fingers for three Persons. The plaque below her name read: *asphyxiated, head severed*.

The next martyr window was of Sir Thomas More (1535), who died under King Henry VIII for refusing to acknowledge the king's remarriage. He had been beheaded.

The remaining two windows depicted modern martyrs: St.

Maximilian Kolbe (1941, starved to death at Auschwitz, gave his life in place of another), and Gianna Molla (1962), only recently canonized for having sacrificed her life in bringing her unborn child into the world, rather than having her aborted in order to treat the cancer which ultimately claimed the life of this young doctor and mother of four.

Of her, Father remarked, “She's rather newer. I thought these windows were old.”

“The church we got them from had them installed in the early seventies,” Stacy explained. “I guess they were mostly considered to be not politically correct by the other churches. Mom said the congregation at St. Mary- Theotokas was very traditional for this diocese.”

“Oh, they were.” Father sighed. “So that's where they came from. It's too bad that parish was closed in the latter seventies. Many of the parishioners were never able to assimilate into another church and fell between the cracks. It was a unique group of people—very bonded.”

“So, that's it for the windows.” Stacy shrugged. As she walked him to his car, Father suggested the two of them could collaborate on a Shroud of Turin presentation for one of the remaining Confirmation class lectures. That way she could get a little practice and everyone could benefit from what they had learned. Stacy agreed. It couldn't hurt to do a trial run.

Father Joseph's Sunday sermon was a weird one. Stacy couldn't help wondering if it had been inspired by their tour of the windows.

He began by depicting a scene: a grandmother gathering all her family around for a traditional look at the family photo album. The first page contains two pictures of babies. Everybody oohs and aahs at how cute they are. She retells the story of the circumstances surrounding the birth of these little ones. Everyone is smiling. Then she turns the page.

Grimly they look at photos of a handsome young man.

“Ah, cousin Stephen.” The grandmother sighs. The photos show a crowd surrounding a young man who is lying in a heap, dead at the hands of this angry mob. The family remembers grimly how brave Stephen had been. After a moment of reflection, she turns the page.

They are met with gruesome images of their uncle, John, laying out on a slab, having been boiled in oil. He is old and looks distinguished, in spite of the torture. They remember his talent with writing and lament that he should have come to such an end.

The next page depicts frightful scenes of an overturned bus. Innocent children strewn dead upon the pavement. Their cousins, lost forever in this tragic accident.

The last page of this album reveals another uncle, a clergyman, ambushed and killed in the vestibule of his church. She sighs and closes the book.

What a weird family ritual. What kind of twisted family would partake in such activities...?

Father Joseph paused before answering his own question, “Our family. The family of the Roman Catholic church where the day after Christmas we remember the martyrdom of St. Stephen, followed in rapid succession by the feasts of St. John the Apostle, the Slaughter of the Innocents, and the martyrdom of Saint Thomas Becket. Why does the Church do this...?”

To remind us not to sit and stare at the crib for too long. It is hard work being holy. It may even require the ultimate sacrifice. Stacy found the sermon sobering, especially coming only a few days after celebrating Christmas.

Stacy dressed casually in jeans and sweatshirt for the *Downhill Nikki* concert. She was still not talking with her sister, although Emily had been driving her nuts playing that song. Stacy so longed to ask her whose song it was. Did she have more like it? But she was too stubborn to break her own silence. Now, as she sat watching out the window for Darius to arrive, she

began to wonder how healthy it was to maintain this stubborn attitude. She knew she was not behaving like a Christian. She could even understand that on some level her sister was trying to look out for her. It was just the way she did it that irked Stacy. Why did she have to be so crass? Hearing a honk, she snapped out of her reverie to see Darius' truck under the street lamp across from her house. "Bye!" she called out to no one in particular.

The concert was wonderful, living up to the early promise the group had shown, before diverging paths caused each member of the band to go his own way. Shane was spectacular on the drums. Daryl was probably the heart-throb of the group and all the ladies were trying to tear at his clothes. Stacy had read somewhere that he was married. She felt sorry for his wife. The solo song by Paul, *Floating Endless*, was one of Stacy's favorites. But what could beat the haunting ballads sung by the lead singer, Paul's brother, Jeff. *Prodigal Lass* had been on top of the charts for nearly a year. When they finished the concert with *Dream Vacation*, Stacy found herself clamoring along with the crowd for an encore. Downhill Nikki wowed the crowd with a brand new song. Stacy couldn't wait to buy the CD.

Darius enjoyed the concert every bit as much as Stacy had. Being in the front row was an unparalleled thrill. Afterward they were allowed backstage, as Libby had promised. They got autographs from each member of the band and joined them for appetizers and soda. Darius joined in an impromptu duet with Daryl, something Stacy was sure he would never forget. When they pulled out of the parking lot, he suggested they get some cappuccino and take a walk before going home. Stacy was flying high. There was no school yet. Tomorrow was New Year's day, and there was no one she would rather ring in the New Year with than Darius. They didn't kiss until midnight because they wanted their first one of the year to be memorable. So they slow danced in the middle of the dimly lit cul-de-sac where Stacy lived, Darius humming romantic standards rather well, she thought. He had a tolerable voice and ample star quality; she wondered in passing why he had never sought the limelight for himself. In between



songs she murmured that he should be a lead singer. Darius laughed softly. "I'm good at advising other people. I don't know if I can take criticism half as well." Then he looked at his watch. "One minute," he said softly. With the blue-lit face of his watch counting down the seconds they held each other close. At the stroke of midnight they abandoned themselves to the kiss for which they had been waiting.

## Seeing Air

That song again. Stacy could no longer take it. “I give up, Em.”

Emily looked up. “What...? You're talking to me now?”

“I have to know who wrote that song! Ok, I admit—I like it. So whose song is it?”

There was a mischievous glint in her sister's eye. “I'll tell you if you apologize.”

Stacy was shocked. “Me apologize! It's you who ought to apologize.”

“For what?” Emily's face was blank.

“For saying crass disgusting things about Darius.” Stacy frowned at her. “You don't even know him.”

Emily bit her lip. “I apologize,” she said, after a pause.

Stacy sighed and smiled. “Then so do I. Now who wrote it? I want to buy the album.”

“Danielle Rose,” said Emily. “And you can borrow mine if I can borrow yours. Grandma gave me her *Defining Beauty* CD. She gave you her two-CD *Mysteries* set. I've been waiting for you to listen to it, but you won't take the hint.” Emily tapped the CD player.

Stacy had completely forgotten that she had received Christian music from Grandma Annie for Christmas. Where had she put it...? She rummaged through her dresser drawers. Aha! She pulled it triumphantly from her sock drawer and ripped off the plastic wrapping. She handed the first CD to her sister and opened the jacket, which included the lyrics to all of the songs on the discs. “There's a song for meditating each mystery of the twenty decade rosary plus intro and concluding songs,” she explained after scanning the leaflet. The two girls played the whole set straight through.

“Awesome,” was Emily's comment.

Stacy nodded in agreement. “How can one artist do such varied styles of music?” The songs were sometimes bluegrass, sometimes rock, sometimes guitar and sometimes choral. A few were reminiscent of Baptist folk music. One sounded like Enya. She could do it all. Stacy was extremely impressed. The meditations were creative, too. For example, the Nativity song was written from the point of view of the Star of Bethlehem. She could really see a children's choir performing it. The third sorrowful mystery was written from the point of view of the crown of thorns which had been placed on Jesus' head, and was an acapella ballad. “But what is that song from your CD that you've got me hooked on?”

“It's called, *Let Me Be Your Bethlehem.*” Emily handed her the CD. Stacy read the lyrics:

Is there no room in this world for You  
Oh, let me be Your Bethlehem, let me be Your Bethlehem  
It's cold outside – see, I've opened up my door  
Let my life be Your Bethlehem  
Unto my life may You be born

*Born in a stable with the Angels close at hand  
Strength became weakness that we might understand  
A God Who is hungry, a King without a throne  
Emmanuel, a child is born...*

“I don't know why I like it so much, but it just haunts me.” Stacy sighed and handed the disc back to her sister. “I'm a sucker for bluegrass, anyway.” She smiled and met her sister's eyes. “I'm glad we're talking again. I missed you.”

“Let's make a pact.” Emily held out her hand. “No more silent treatment. We can fight it out if we need to, but let's not let anything or anybody ever come between us.” Stacy nodded and shook her sister's hand.

“So now that we're talking...” Emily cleared her throat. “Are you really serious about Darius?”

Stacy nodded. “It's the real thing, Emily.”

Emily's look was skeptical. “How do you know?”

“I just know,” Stacy sighed and met her sister's eyes levelly. “We're right for each other. I can feel it in my heart.”

“You're not considering marriage,” Emily's words were hesitant.

Stacy paused, then decided to tell her. “He has asked me.”  
*More or less.*

“Promise me one thing.” Emily took her sister's hand. “Please, take your time before you decide. You don't need to rush into anything. Marriage is forever,” she reminded Stacy.

Stacy nodded, but she couldn't make that promise. She wasn't sure what circumstances might dictate. And besides, she was so in love with Darius, she couldn't help but do whatever he wanted—as long as it didn't go contrary to her beliefs.

Monday found Stacy back at school after the long Christmas break. She was a bit irked to see Darius talking to Junie again in the hallway, but she let it go. She knew she had nothing to worry about. Darius loved her. She was sure of it.

“I know what you can do to repay me for those tickets,” Libby took a dainty bite of her big leafy salad.

Stacy swallowed and nodded. “Anything, Lib. The concert was unforgettable.”

Libby looked a bit uncomfortable. “You know I can get anybody I want, Stace.”

Stacy nodded again. Libby was very popular with guys.

“The thing is I need someone to break the ice...” Her voice trailed off and her eyes got a distant day dreamy look. “There's somebody I've been interested in for awhile, but nobody I know knows him,” she met Stacy's eyes, “except you.”

Now Stacy was truly curious. Who could she possibly know that popular Libby didn't have access to? She raised a brow.

“He's a friend of your cousin, Zeke. His name is Arthur.”

*Not Arthur. Anybody but him.* Stacy hesitated before

speaking. "Are you sure he's right for you? I mean, it doesn't seem like you'd have all that much in common."

"Believe me, Stacy. He's got what I'm looking for, and I'm sure I can convince him that I'm what he's looking for. Besides," she nudged Stacy's foot with hers under the table, "that'll give us more opportunity to hang out together."

This was true. Stacy wasn't all that sure it would be a good thing. But she did owe Libby. Why was she feeling so reluctant? For goodness sake, she had *Darius*. What more could she want? "Sure, I'll talk to him, if you like." She said it quickly, like pulling off a bandage. "Just what do you want me to say?"

Libby laughed nervously. "Don't say anything *obvious*. I'll just hang out with you for a few days and it's bound to happen naturally." It was clear she had thought this thing out. "So, how about tonight? Will you see him?"

Stacy nodded. She felt like she was stabbing Arthur as she spoke. "We go to Confirmation class together. Then we pray and work out afterwards. He's always there."

"I'll come to your house tonight. You can bring me as a guest to Confirmation. I'll come with workout clothes and then I'll hang out with you guys." When Stacy said nothing she paused. "Is that all right with you?"

Was it...? "Of course," Stacy heard herself choke out. But it didn't feel all right.

It was a bit awkward explaining Libby's sudden interest in hanging out at their house. She came toward the end of Stacy's slightly shortened shift at the bread shop. Stacy gave her a mini-tour of the place. When she brought Libby to Confirmation all eyes were on the two of them.

"Are you interested in studying Catholicism?" Father Joseph asked her.

Libby flashed him a flawless smile and shrugged. "Possibly."

Father waved her to a seat near Stacey. "The subject

tonight is Extreme Unction or, as it is more commonly called, Last Rites.” Gruesome topic for a gruesome night. Stacy sneaked a look in Arthur's direction and was horrified to see he was looking at Libby with interest.

Last night didn't go all that badly, Stacy reflected as she was brushing her teeth the next morning. Father's talk had been interesting. Stacy didn't know that Last Rites were routinely given when you became elderly or suffered catastrophic infirmity, or that they were good for more than getting your soul ready to meet God. Sometimes a person would be healed in body when he received them. Father had given her the Confirmation info to memorize, and it didn't look all that difficult. Most of it she had absorbed simply living in a Catholic family. Admittedly, Libby's workout clothes showed about as much of her flawless skin as is possible without looking like you stepped out of a music video. This was not lost on the guys, who were quietly interested—or on the adults, who were quietly disapproving.

But at least she went home fairly early. Stacy was sure Libby would catch up with her to discuss how things were progressing. She wasn't necessarily looking forward to that. She would have to try to explain the concept of modesty to her friend. Otherwise George might not let Libby back in the house.

Darius surprised Stacy with a perfect red rose that morning. “How's my love?” he said and handed it to her while she was unloading books into her locker.

Stacy took the rose and drank in its heavenly scent. “Pretty good. This helps.” She was glad to see that the thornless stem was in a mini-container of water, so leaving it in her locker all day, it shouldn't die. She regretfully fastened the padlock, then hugged Darius and gave him a respectable kiss. “That was very thoughtful.”

He just smiled. “I was hoping you would come and watch a jam session with me tonight. It's a newer band I'm considering

taking under my wing. I want another opinion.”

“What time?” Stacy asked, shifting her books.

“Right after school—“ Then, at her predictable look, he quickly said, “I know you work in the bread shop, but can't you get out of it for one day? Your family can manage. It's not like that's a real job.”

“Grammy would not appreciate you saying that,” Stacy told him, but she smiled tightly. “I'll call and ask how busy it is, if you like.”

“Good. Meet me by the front door at three-thirty.” Stacy sighed. She didn't even know if she could go yet. She did know she couldn't make a habit of missing work—even if she did work for family. They were counting on her.

Stacy called and got the reluctant OK from her Grandmother right before lunch. She hoped she wasn't putting her family in a spot, doing this. Libby, as expected, was eager to know whether she had made the desired impression on Arthur. Although Stacy was sure that he had taken notice of her, she hadn't actually talked to him about it, so she told her friend she would feel him out about it later that night, if she got the chance.

It was fun hanging out with Darius that afternoon, but Stacy couldn't help thinking about her family, wondering how they were managing without her. The group was young—Stacy recognized several members as underclassmen from her school. They had the rudiments of talent and were a pack of pretty boys. They were still looking for a name—maybe that would work: *Pack of Pretty Boys*. She suggested it and they groaned. Stacy shrugged. It was better than *Rat Puke* or *Fat Buttered Gecko*—some of the other names that had been suggested. They jammed for a few hours and she enjoyed being there, but Stacy still felt like she had let her family down. She was grateful to be dropped off in time for religious interval training. Anyway that gave her a chance to see if Libby had made the desired impression on Arthur.

“So what did you think of my friend, Libby?” Stacy asked him as they were pulling on tennis previous to working out.

Arthur looked up at her. “Why?”

Stacy looked annoyed. “Never mind why. Just what did you think of her.”

Arthur shrugged and went back to tying his shoe. “She's all right.”

Stacy gave him a piercing look. “Really? Just all right?”

“Look, Stace, what do you want me to say—that she's hot? That I couldn't take my eyes off her?” He leaned back and looked her directly in the face. “Just what exactly are you getting at?”

Stacy could feel her face flushing red and she wasn't sure why. “I'm no good at this,” she finally muttered.

“No good at what?”

“Libby likes you.” She said it right out. “I owed her a favor so I promised to feel you out. To see if you would be interested in getting to know her.”

Arthur chewed his lip and stared at her awhile before speaking. He looked like he was considering his next move in a game of chess. “All right,” he eventually said.

“All right- what?,” Stacy tilted her head.

“All right, I'll date her. Give me her number.” His tone implied 'I dare you to'.

Stacy pursed her lips. “Fine.” She grabbed a slip of paper, scribbled it down and slapped it on the bench hotly.

Arthur slowly grinned, picked it up and put it in his wallet.

“So when are you planning to call her?” Her voice wasn't entirely steady as she said this.

Arthur shrugged and smiled at her. “That's my business.”

“Right,” said Stacy, and since she couldn't think of anything else to say, she picked a machine for the night's workout.

The next day Libby seemed satisfied that her goal of



impressing Arthur had been accomplished. She didn't give Stacy any details but it appeared that they had made arrangements, which was fine with Stacy. Her duty had been fulfilled and she was more than willing to keep her nose out of their business. After working in the bread shop that night, Stacy's mom offered to make her dinner—a real home-cooked meal! With everybody's schedule so different, as well as different tastes, they rarely ate together. Rose made chicken stir-fry and they ate together as a family—Grammy, her mom, Emily and Reese, as well as Stacy. After dinner Emily excused herself and Reecie settled down to watch Blues Clues in the living room. This left Stacy with her mother and grandmother.

“Honey,” her mother began hesitantly, “it has come to our attention that you are considering choosing a life partner.” (Emily was such a blabbermouth!) “First of all, why is it that you think you should marry Darius?”

Stacy shrugged. “We love each other. I feel different when I'm with him—like the whole world is better somehow, and exciting. I look forward to being with him and enjoy every moment when we're together. It's been like this with us almost since we met. Isn't that love?”

Grandma Annie smiled at her. “That's being 'in love',” she said.

Her mother took over. “Can you listen to your mother for a minute? I think we can all agree from what happened to me when... well,” she hesitated for a moment, searching for words, “when we got Reecie,” she smiled awkwardly, then continued, “even I was confused about love. I was a lot older than you and a bit more experienced. I still got it wrong. One thing I can guarantee is that the feelings you have described that you have for Darius, I felt the same way about Jack. It turns out that he didn't love me. We know this because his actions didn't show love. He left us... He left me.” She looked so sad when she said this, Stacy wanted to give her a big hug. “Ultimately love isn't a feeling. It has nothing whatsoever to do with feelings. Love,” she said this with conviction, “is a decision.”

“Well, I have decided to love Darius.” Stacy's voice was firm.

“But,” said her mother, “has he decided to love you—really? And even if he has, would he make a good choice of husband?” She pulled a sheet of notebook paper from her pocket and put on her reading glasses. “Your grandmother and I have made a short list of things to be aware of when you choose a future husband.” She peered at Stacy over the rim of her glasses. “Shall we go through them?”

Stacy shrugged, so her mother began.

“First and foremost, you want to look for someone who loves people and uses things, rather than someone who loves things and uses people.”

Stacy nodded. It made sense.

“Second,” said her Grandmother, “there is no such thing as 'love at first sight'. There are many possible marriage partners out there from which to choose. You need to find the very best one. You owe it to your children and,” she paused for emphasis, “you owe it to yourself.”

“Little things to pay attention to:” her mother began to list them, “does he like to spend time with *you*, or is the bulk of his time spent elsewhere and with other people?”

“Does he like children and animals?” Grandma Annie interjected. “Then again, does he like them more than you—could be something wrong there!”

Her mother took another turn. “Does he have expensive tastes? Does he always have to have the best for himself? In a family, finances become very significant. Believe me, you don't want a husband who puts himself before you and the kids.”

“And what about work?” her grandmother chimed in, “does he have a work ethic, or is he likely to call in sick on a whim? You need a person who can be relied upon to provide. He has to take work seriously.”

“As far as that goes, how does this man feel about work around the house—chores and child care and the day in and day out of making a house run. Does he value this type of work?”

Does he realize how hard it is, or will he be putting you down if you put your family first?" Her mother took her glasses off and faced Stacy. She spoke frankly. "These are just some things I want you to keep in mind. I promise, they will be of vital importance to you later."

The next day there was another red rose for Stacy. Darius tried to talk her into missing work at the bakery again. *Her family wouldn't care if she did*, he coerced, but Stacy knew better. Missing work was one of the things on their list. She firmly refused, so he said he'd pick her up afterwards. They needed to talk.

They did need to talk. Stacy realized she really didn't know Darius all that well. She was pretty sure from what they had experienced together that Darius had expensive tastes. Was this to a fault, though? She didn't know.

It seemed like he liked Reecie—or did Reecie like him...? Stacy had never seen him around animals. This was something to pay attention to.

As far as that went, she didn't know how he felt about having a family. Did he even want kids? If so, would he help with them? Would he support her if she needed to be a stay-at-home mother? Suddenly Stacy felt overwhelmed. Never mind Darius. Was *she* even ready to think about all of these things?

Stacy looked up from the textbook she was studying during lunch. "So, how's it going with Arthur?" She spoke hesitantly, unsure if she wanted her friend's answer.

Libby sighed and looked at her, paused, smiled and said, "It's going." She offered no details, though.

Stacy let this sink in. "Good," she finally said. But she felt a slight spike of jealousy. *What was wrong with her? Arthur was like her brother. For goodness sake, was she going to be this possessive with Ezekiel, too?*

Then again, maybe she was feeling jealous because she knew Libby's guy passed the test. She knew that Arthur was a perfect candidate for marriage according to the standards her mother and grandmother had laid out. She was harboring serious doubts about Libby, though. Stacy doubted that Libby was even looking for a life partner. She didn't deserve to strike gold. She was probably just looking for someone to kill time with. Briefly Stacy considered the horrible possibility that she would use Arthur, then dump him when she got tired of him. It would be Stacy's fault.

Arthur could handle himself. Stacy was sure he was mature enough not to get sucked into a situation that wasn't good. But what if she was wrong? It would be so tragic. She bit her lip and tried to go back to her book.

Darius picked Stacy up after her shift in the bread store. This time he brought sandwiches from a drive-through and they ate them when he got to his apartment. After they had finished, he sank back into the couch and breathed out. "Things are gonna change around here pretty quick." Stacy had never seen him look so anxious. "My brother joined the marines. He's leaving the beginning of March." Darius slid up next to Stacy and took her hand in his. "I'm so glad I'll have you." He leaned his head on her shoulder. "How soon can we do this wedding thing?"

"I don't know." Stacy tried to hide her sudden panic. "We're not even out of high school yet," she hedged.

"I know," Darius gently ran his finger tips from her shoulder blade to her hip, then pulled her in tight. "I need you," he whispered in her ear.

Stacy tried to slow her pounding heart. "I don't even know how it works—getting married. I have to ask Father or someone..." *"Definitely not her mother or grandmother. They'd throw a hissy fit."*

"Well, can you get on that?" Darius kissed her persuasively. "We need to get this thing moving. As far as that

goes, if you ever change your mind about living with me, or even if you just need a place to stay for a night, I'm open to that. You know you're always welcome here—especially after my brother leaves. I'll be pretty lonely.” He held her even more tightly.

With an effort, Stacy pushed herself away from him. There were some issues she needed to resolve before she could abandon herself to this line of thought. “Darius,” she batted at his somewhat invasive hands, “we need to talk.”

He pouted coyly, giving her the sad puppy dog look.

Stacy tried to ignore it and pressed on. “If we can please talk seriously for one moment, we need to discuss some things.”

Darius erased the pout and gave his best polite but serious look. It was an improvement.

Stacy began rather awkwardly. “Do you like animals?”

Darius grinned mischievously. “Of course,” he said. “Didn't we just have burgers?”

Stacy frowned at him. “I mean as pets, and such.”

Darius shrugged. “I can take them or leave them,” he said. “I don't mind little dogs or kittens. I guess I haven't had all that much experience with them. Why? Is having a pet vital to your happiness, or something?” He pulled her close again and whispered, “Because I am dedicated to the task of making you happy in any way I can.” He kissed her softly. “If you want a pet, we'll have a pet.”

Stacy cleared her throat. “It's not that I want to have one. I just need to know who you are, what are your goals...? Do we believe the same...? Are we headed in the same direction...?”

“Well, I know one thing.” Now Darius was all-business. “I'm headed for success, and nothing's gonna stop me. That's why I want you by my side. You're level-headed and confident and smart, not to mention beautiful. You have success written all over you. As far as the rest goes, I'm a reasonable man...”

“OK,” Stacy went for a biggy, “how do you feel about having a family? Do you like kids?”

Darius hedged a bit here. “Kids are fine when the time is right,” he said. Then, at her look, he quickly added, “Even you

have to agree that you can't bring a child into the world unless you can reasonably provide for it.”

What he said did seem reasonable. “When they do come, would you be a hands-on dad?” Stacy asked. “Would you play with him, and change him and hold him when he's sick.”

Darius blinked and his cheek twitched a bit. “Of course,” he said, looking down. “If I had a child, I would do whatever I could to be a good father.” Now his face took on a wistful look. “I wish my father had done more with my brother and me. He was so busy trying to make money, we hardly saw him.”

Stacy took his hands in hers. “You can be the father you wish you would have had for your children.”

But he firmly pulled his hands from hers. “I'm not ready to be that father yet,” then, at her look, he said, “maybe in ten years.”

When Stacy awoke the next morning it was bitterly cold. The temperatures had plunged to well below zero overnight and the weather forecaster didn't see any respite coming for awhile. There was an AM delivery for the bread shop and sometimes Stacy was needed to bring the supplies downstairs. As luck would have it, her help was needed this morning to unload. She bundled in layers, quickly ate some toast and coffee and joined Ezekiel and her mother across the street. The driver was still unloading hundred pound sacks onto the sidewalk in front of the building. They took refuge just inside the building until he was finished. Then Granny inspected the delivery to make sure she had received everything she ordered and paid him. When she was done, Zeke propped open the door. The contrast between the warm air inside and the cold air outside made it so you could see the air where the two extremes collided, shimmering like a pool of water. Stacy was fascinated by this. It was so cool to be able to actually see for a moment something that was generally invisible. She knew air existed, but she took it for granted. Being able to glimpse air reminded her of the Shroud—an impossible

image of the historical but improbable truth that God had once walked the earth as a man. It was hard to pull herself away when they needed her to start hauling.

Another rose from Darius this morning—this time with an invitation to the Valentine's dance at the school. This one wasn't formal. Stacy could probably borrow another dress from her mother, which was good. With all this talk about marriage she had begun to see the need to save money. Her Christmas money was still untouched and she had been able to save a few weeks' paychecks, so she was starting a little nest egg. She told Darius this and he seemed to approve. Libby was also excited about the dance, to which she was planning to bring Arthur. Stacy inwardly winced when she said he would make good 'arm candy'. For some reason, she dreaded seeing the two of them together on a date. It was tolerable when she knew they were going out, so long as she wasn't witnessing it first hand.

Stacy was unsure why it bothered her so much to think about Libby with Arthur. She was also unsure why the thought of actually marrying Darius petrified her, even though she really wanted him. She needed to take some time to mull things over. Maybe she could make some time for that. Maybe tonight after the rosary...

“I'll take your adoration hour tonight, Mom.” Stacy placed a carefully shaped loaf in the first slot of the industrial bread pan, which holds four. “That way you and Grammy can take a break and avoid this bitter cold.”

Her mother looked up with concern. “That's very nice of you, but what if your car stalls and you get stranded?”

“What if it stalls for you...? You know there's a phone in the bathroom attached to the chapel. George or Zeke will help me, if I need help,” she rolled her eyes, “which I won't. Just let

me do this for you.”

“It would be nice to take a little break, “ Rose said wistfully. “All right, Stace. Thank you for offering.”

Stacy brought a rosary, yet another book about the Shroud—this one by Mark Antonacci, called *Resurrection of the Shroud* (George found it at a thrift store), and the study sheet that Father Joseph had given her at Confirmation class. That should give her plenty to do. The Chapel was attached to Holy Apostles with access from a side door, but adorers weren't able to enter the church itself. The door which would allow this was always kept locked. Stacy signed the ledger when she entered the little room, which was just big enough to hold ten chairs. She knew that on a night like this she would most probably have the place to herself. No one else would want to venture into this kind of weather. She made the sign of the cross and dropped on both knees in front of the monstrance which took center stage. She closed her eyes and concentrated. “*Hi, Jesus.*” She heard the door to the chapel softly shut behind the adorer who was assigned to the previous hour. Then she was alone with Him. There was always at least one person assigned to stay with Jesus for every hour of the day and night. It was a commitment made by the members of this diocese.

The Chapel itself was tiny, but beautiful, like the larger church. There were angel mosaics on the walls and they were struck in poses which suggested awe. The wall behind Jesus was covered with rich tapestry and, in front of this was an ornate altar, the door to the tabernacle open to reveal that it's Occupant was no longer inside. The monstrance itself was golden and had the symbols for each of the four evangelists at its feet. It resembled a star burst on a stem, with a single consecrated wafer framed in its center. There was a statue of the Blessed Mother beside the monstrance. The red candle was lit, indicating that Jesus was really present—Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity. There was a little library at the back of the room, with donated books and



pamphlets in case adorers wanted information or something to study. Except for the noises made by the radiators kicking in, the little chapel was quiet. Stacy took out her rosary and started to pray it, concentrating on the sorrowful mysteries tonight.

After she had finished the rosary, she slid onto the chair behind her and leaned back, contemplating. Without speaking out loud she told Jesus about her frustration with Darius and her confusion about whether she should get married. She voiced her concerns regarding Arthur and Libby. She even complained a bit because to date St. Anthony had not come through for her, and she reminded Jesus that St. Jude was supposed to get her a proper proposal, with a ring. She let Him know she thought Valentine's Day might be an appropriate time for this. Meanwhile she promised to continue her daily novena for this intention. She read a few of the prayers which were provided in a little pamphlet at the back of the chapel. She particularly liked one by Padre Pio, entitled *Stay With Me*. When she got to a prayer called, *Personal Consecration to Jesus through Mary*, she shrugged and prayed it. Then she opened the study sheets Father Joseph had given her and started to memorize.

When her brain grew weary of this exercise she read for awhile. This book was the most dense with information that she had read to date. She began to jot notes about the amazing properties of the Shroud, which the Antonacci book stated was irreproducible by any medieval or even by any modern means. She wasn't sure if she would be able to use all of this information for her presentation at the school, but she certainly could in her presentation for the confirmation class and, in any event, it was just good to remember as many details as possible for her own information. The hour flew by and she was startled when her replacement, an older gentleman she recognized from church, entered and waved to her before signing in. Stacy bundled up and left, but thought she might like to come again, maybe even take an hour of her own. It was good to spend really quiet time with Jesus. It wouldn't hurt to make it a habit.

A week had passed more or less uneventfully and the Valentine's dance was rapidly approaching. She had seen little of Darius. Most evenings he was either working to set up gigs or busy with some other facet of his personal life. Stacy didn't fail to take note of this; it was one of the things on her parents' list. She had raided her mother's closet once again, this time coming up with a classic red dress, very similar in cut to the little black one she had worn to *Chez Herman*. There had been another single red rose for her every morning when she got to school. Younger students looked at her enviously when he gave them to her. She had to admit, they did make her locker smell like a florist's shop. They each lasted for a few days and since there had been a steady stream of them for the past couple of weeks, she managed to always have two or three beautiful ones by her bedside each morning. The older ones she hung on her bedpost to dry. Later, if she added other foliage, they would make a nice dried floral bouquet .

Arthur had been missing from prayer and workout time quite a few times over the past couple of weeks. Even when he was there Stacy avoided talking to him, other than superficially. She really didn't want to know any details of his personal life with Libby. She was glad that Libby wasn't one of those 'tell-all' sorts of girls. It would have been painful to hear the gory details.

Valentines Day fell on a Thursday and the annual dance was always held on February 14. Stacy would have preferred Friday because she still had home work, but there's no messing with a tradition. And so it was the evening of the Valentines dance and Stacy had managed to throw together a classy but flirty look without buying anything that cost more than ten dollars. Thankfully her mother's shoes and matching handbag had been a perfect fit. Emily did her hair again, and it couldn't have looked better if she had gone to a salon. Although not as surprised by the transformation as he had been the first time, Darius seemed

appreciative. He gave a low whistle as he handed her this time the full dozen roses. Stacy asked her sister to put them in a vase and they left.

As usual they arrived fashionably late. Arthur was already there with Libby in a dress that she must have had painted on. Stacy noticed that most of the guys there were ogling Libby, although Arthur seemed impervious. Stacy couldn't help but notice how attentive and protective he was, almost like a butler or body guard, but his face showed little expression. He had to know that he was with one of the most sought after girls at her school, but she seemed like the one who was chasing him, jumping through hoops to get him to notice. It was a surprising role reversal for Libby. Stacy had to tear herself away from the sight when Darius asked her to dance.

This time there was no contest, but that didn't diminish the excitement of the evening. Stacy and Darius had had enough practice by now to be able to dance rather seamlessly. Nearby couples watched with admiration when they effortlessly executed fairly complicated twirls and dips. In between dances they met up with Arthur and Libby at the punch bowl. "How about a switch?" Darius suggested, offering his arm to Libby. Normally Libby called the shots in a situation like this, but when Darius made the suggestion she giggled and flushed in an uncharacteristically giddy way that reminded Stacy of Scarlet O'Hara in *Gone With the Wind*. They left Stacy and Arthur standing rather awkwardly by the punch bowl. Arthur made a vague gesture toward the dance floor with a questioning look. Stacy shrugged and took his arm just as the DJ began the first strains of what is perhaps the most passionate love song ever written: *Unchained Melody*.

Where she and Darius were accomplished as dancers, she and Arthur were unforeseeably electric in each others' arms. Stacy wished her dumb heart would stop pounding when he held her, at the same time wondering why it was doing so. She doubted that they were dancing very well since she could hardly think. She did notice that Arthur kept his eyes riveted on her, never glancing in Libby's direction. Nor did Stacy think to look

for Darius. They hardly realized the song had ended until a still giggling Libby reclaimed her escort.

The rest of the dance was a blur. It wasn't until she was back home that Stacy realized she still had not been offered an engagement ring although, right now, she was more relieved than upset about this. It would have been confusing to deal with such a thing after her dance with Arthur.

Stacy reminded herself the next morning that feelings had nothing to do with real love. Love was a decision you made, and, whether or not it was a good call, she had decided to love Darius. They had agreements which, admittedly, would seem more solid if they had been backed up with a little hardware on her third finger, left hand. Despite this lack, words had been spoken and Stacy was not one to go back on a promise. She would remain faithful to him as long as he was true to her. It was who she was.

Stacy had a crappy day at school. To begin with, she forgot about her algebra assignment and received a zero for the day. She was unprepared for her history quiz and probably failed it. To make matters worse, it seemed like every girl in the school was fawning on Darius—not just Junie. Stacy even saw Libby laughing and hanging out at his locker. It kind of seemed like Stacy herself was the one female in the building that he didn't have time for. By the end of the day she had still not touched base with him. When Emily asked her if they would be seeing Darius later that night, Stacy just looked down, but not before she saw her mother and grandmother exchange knowing glances.

“What was that look supposed to mean?” Stacy snapped at them.

Her mother sighed. “Your grandmother and I can't help noticing that you spend a lot of evenings by yourself. For someone who is thinking about marriage, well... “

“It isn't a good sign,” her grandmother said flatly.

“I don't think it's any of your business,” Stacy returned, her cheeks flaming. She punched down a blob of dough rather harder than was necessary.

“Your happiness *is* our business,” her mother reminded her, “because we love you.”

“Well, maybe I don't want your controlling kind of love.” Stacy flung the beaten dough into a pan and looked up at them. “I think I know what will make me happy better than you people.” The look on her face challenged them to disagree, but no one said anything. They knew better than to confront her when she was in this mood.

The rest of the shift was spent in an uncomfortable silence.

*I'll show them.* Her family thought they knew everything about her situation. Well, they didn't know that she had repeatedly been invited by Darius to stay at his place. Even though she had been holding out for a wedding, maybe if she lived with him things would fall into place more smoothly. Stacy knew Darius would be more than happy to hang out with her, as long as it was away from her fuddy duddy family. Maybe she would only stay for the weekend, just long enough to show them that he *did* want to spend time with her, just not with them. Tomorrow morning she would surprise him by appearing on his doorstep. She started to thrust a couple of day's worth of clothes into an overnight bag. She hesitated before selecting sensible cotton underthings over the revealing lacy ones she had bought during more adventuresome shopping sprees. After all, she wasn't planning to do anything bad with him. She would probably come back home Sunday night. She really only intended this to be a kind of warning shot to show her family that she and Darius would be inseparable, except that the necessity of being married kept them from fully bonding. She went to sleep feeling tense and frightened. It came as no surprise when she had another nightmare.

She was running through a forest with the sky lit once

again red-orange. In addition to loud explosions in the distance she could hear the growling and panting of enormous beasts which were chasing her. She could feel the skin on the back of her head prickling. At any moment she expected to be overtaken by these hideous sentient monsters. Her heart was pounding in her chest and she could taste blood from the exertion which had forced open the capillaries in her lungs. *I'm gonna be devoured*, she thought, and when one of the beasts tackled her, pulling her to the ground, she braced herself. The creature sat back on its haunches and paused for a second and, in that fraction of an instant before he plunged his dagger-like jaws into her throat, she heard a Voice. It was a female Voice, like a bell, but possessing great authority. ***There is no need to be afraid***, the Voice spoke. ***You belong to me now...***

When Stacy snapped awake her heart was no longer pounding and she was able to fall into a peaceful sleep.

Stacy could remember this dream vividly when she awoke—more vividly than any she had ever had. She could still hear the haunting voice echoing in her memory. It was early—not even eight o'clock. But her plans had not changed in spite of the dream. She hastily grabbed the bag she had packed. She had showered the previous night and was ready to hit the road. She grabbed her coat and purse and walked a few blocks to a less conspicuous bus stop. Darius and his brother lived on a main drag so it would be little trouble to get there by bus. Her ride came within ten minutes. Stacy paid her fare and settled in. During the ride she imagined her family's reaction when they found the note she had left for them. It explained where she was going and why. She supposed they would regret being so judgmental of her and Darius. Even though she reassured them that she would be to work at the bread store for her scheduled shifts, she knew they would be distressed that she had done this. Stacy didn't like to picture her mother and grandmother being upset, so she put it out of her mind and focused on how great it

would be to hang out with Darius in total freedom. She sighed and imagined herself sitting in his arms, just watching TV and such. Before she knew it she could see the building where he lived looming. She signaled the driver to stop and gathered her things.

Stacy paused in the hallway, briefly considering buzzing his room to let him know she was there. She decided in favor of surprising him and headed for the staircase at the end of the hall. His apartment was on the fourth floor and she really didn't trust the ancient elevator in this place any more than the one at her grandmother's shop. Four flights with an overnight bag wasn't so much. She made the ascent. Just as she rounded the corner into the hallway she thought she saw a little blond who looked a lot like Junie, entering the apartment she judged to be his. *Maybe this was a mistake after all*, she thought. Momentarily she considered fleeing, but her curiosity got the better of her. She knew the doors and walls were thin in this building. Maybe Junie was here for some totally innocent reason. Now was her chance to find out. She crept down the hallway, careful to be as quiet as possible. Feeling slightly ashamed of the sneakiness of eavesdropping, she leaned her head against the door, trying to make out the conversation within.

As it turned out, this was much easier than she would have thought. She instantly knew that the girl was sobbing, and she could hear a somewhat uncaring Darius demanding that she spit it out, whatever was bothering her.

“Darius, “ her voice became squeaky and small, but Stacy could still make out the words, “I'm pregnant.”

“You're WHAT..?” Now he was practically shouting. “Well, are you sure it's mine?” To this Stacy could hear no response, but after a pause he swore under his breath. “Is it too late for the morning after pill?”

The girl sniffled and sobbed. “You know it is.”

“Then it's gonna cost more,” she heard him say this briskly. “But I'll come up with the money for it.” He spoke

under his breath, as if he were talking to himself. "I think I know where I can get some... if I phrase it right."

"But, Darius," Junie sobbed. "I want to keep it."

"That's completely out of the question." Darius' words were business-like. "It would ruin me."

"But I *love* you and you told me you loved me when you gave me the ruby necklace."

"I told you not to let anyone see that!" Darius snapped.

"I didn't." She started to whimper again. "See...? I keep it right here, hidden in my shirt, like you said. It's our secret."

"Give it back," Stacy heard him say. "I can see I can't trust you if you'd do something like this, so I'll have to hang on to it for you. You can wear it when you're here." There was a pause before Stacy heard him speak again. "I'll set up the appointment for you. If you need a ride, I'll get someone to go with you."

"Why can't you come with me?" She spoke in a very small voice.

"You know that wouldn't look good." His words were matter-of-fact. "Now come here." His voice had become softer. "I'm sure you can see this is the only way."

But Stacy knew better. She pushed the door open so hard that it banged against the wall inside. Darius was hugging Junie and they both looked up at her. There was a look of undisguised fear in Darius' eyes. "Stacy," he said, trying to collect himself. "What are you doing here?"

"You invited me," she gave him a look of disgust, "remember?"

"How long have you been..." His voice trailed off.

"Long enough." Stacy turned to Junie and extended her hand. "We've never met," she said. "I'm Stacy," she forced a half-smile, "Darius' other girl friend. I just wanted you to know you can keep your baby. I can help."

Darius looked like he wanted to strangle Stacy. "I'm sure Stacy means well, but, in addition to this being none of her business," He viciously directed these words at Stacy, "she isn't really thinking clearly about what's best for everyone involved."



Junie,” his words were cajoling now, “you are far too young to bring a child into this world. Surely you can see how impractical you're being.”

Junie looked from one to the other with confusion.

“As far as I can see,” Stacy spoke precisely, “a child *has* been brought into the world. The only question is whether or not this baby will be murdered.”

Junie seemed horrified. “I would never murder anybody.”

Darius shot Stacy a nasty look. “Of course you wouldn't. What you're doing is perfectly legal. People do it every day. Stacy has no right to interfere with your choice.”

“But it's not my choice,” Junie murmured.

“Don't be ridiculous.” Darius shook his head. “Just look at you Junie. What kind of mother do you think you would make.”

“How about we show him.” Stacy extended her hand to Junie and hesitantly Junie took it. “We're leaving, Darius. But I'll take my grandmother's necklace!” She snatched it from his hand and firmly ushered the younger girl out the door. When they got to the street she made a call from the nearest phone booth, asking her mother to pick them both up.

## **Broken Heart**

Her mother said nothing about the note she had left when she picked her up with Junie. She kept a cheerful banter about

unimportant things until they reached the house. When they got there Stacy asked her if Grandma Annie would mind if Mom spent a little time away from the shop that morning. They needed to talk. Her mother nodded and crossed the street to let her grandmother know. Stacy, meanwhile, led Junie to the kitchen. “Are you hungry?” she asked the other girl, who shook her head.

“At least let me make you something,” Stacy insisted, “cereal, or toast?”

Junie grimaced and said, “Maybe some crackers.”

Stacy dug some thin wheat crackers and saltines from the cupboard and poured each of them a glass of juice without asking. Stacy helped herself to a small handful of wheat crackers in the hope that it would make her guest more comfortable. “Are you taking prenatal vitamins?” she asked the younger girl, who shook her head. “We’ll have to get you some.” Stacy fidgeted with her juice glass. “Junie, are you OK with me telling my mom about your situation? I think she could give you a lot of help. She’s been there, too.”

Junie looked up quizzically, but Stacy didn’t elaborate. Junie nodded and nibbled crackers while they waited for Stacy’s mom to come back, which she did rather quickly, accompanied by Reecie.

“I would have been here sooner, but I had to bundle Reecie. I couldn’t leave her there all morning with only Grammy,” she explained, tugging at the toddler’s coat. With snack and Barney tape in front of Reece, Rose was finally able to give the girls her full attention.

“Mom, Junie is pregnant.” The next part was much harder for Stacy to say. “Darius is the father.” Her voice was flat, betraying none of the volcanic anger she was feeling.

Rose breathed out. “I see...” she said after an uncomfortable pause.

“Darius wanted her to abort,” Stacy continued dispassionately. “I told her she doesn’t have to. I promised we would help her keep her baby. We will, right?”

“Oh, absolutely!” There was no hesitation in her mother’s

voice. “In any way that we can. Can I ask, do your parents know yet?”

Junie shook her head. “I can't tell them. My Mom's boyfriend said they'd kick me out if I ever got knocked up.”

Rose chewed her lip. “Hopefully he was exaggerating. Still we have to give them a chance to accept the situation.”

At the look of total fear in the young girl's eyes, Rose reassured her. “We won't let you tell them alone. Stacy and I will come with you. If it's as bad as you say, you can come back here and live with us, if that's what you want. Or if you would rather go somewhere else, we can arrange something for you. There are many people who are willing to assist you in your time of trouble. I will connect you with those people. Junie,” Stacy's mother put her hand on the girl's shoulder, “there is no reason that you can't keep your baby, no matter what obstacles there may be. Also, if raising a child is too much for you to handle, there are people who would give anything to adopt. Your child would be wanted and loved and given everything he or she needs to have a wonderful life—whatever you choose. I promise you, I will help in any way I can. In a way, I know how you feel.”

Stacy's mom told Junie how she had gotten pregnant with Clarice, how, at the time, she couldn't imagine what she would do to care for her, since she was already a single mother, having lost her husband. At that time she had an office job in the city. She had decided to give it up and work full time with Grammy, whose business was just taking off. At about eight months of age, Rose realized that Reecie wasn't achieving her milestones, like sitting up and rolling over. She mentioned this to their family practitioner, and he sent Reece in for testing. It was determined that she had suffered brain damage while she was inside, but with early intervention by a group of therapists, who were paid for (thankfully!) by insurance, Reece had started to make gains. She learned to walk about a year behind schedule. She was making little gains daily. Even though Reecie wasn't developing at normal speed in some ways, in other ways she was advanced. She had a natural gift with music and this, coupled with her tiny

stature reminded people of Shirley Temple. She was unusually friendly—greeting everyone cheerfully the minute she saw them—and she never forgot a name. Rose pulled out Reecie's baby book and tearfully showed the young girl photos of Reecie's developmental stages: when she was tiny and couldn't use her hands, so she'd sit like a posable doll and swoop for her food with her mouth; when she wore braces on her legs so that she could learn to walk; the first time she got on the bus to Head Start. Now she went daily with other kids her age and was making friends and enjoying school.

“Your baby probably won't have the difficulties Reecie has, but even if she does, I promise you--” Rose's words could not be more certain, “you will not regret having this child.”

Then Stacy's mom got out the developmental stages book and showed Junie the stage where her baby would be, after calculating her(or his) age. “You can keep this,” she said, handing Junie the book. “Maybe you'd like to share it with your mother.”

At mention of this untackled hurdle Junie winced.

Stacy's mother sighed. When she spoke it was almost as though she were talking to herself. “I remember how it felt,” she murmured. “I pictured how everyone would react—my mother, my daughters, the people at church. I as much as prayed that God would make the baby...” she shot a guilty look in the direction of Reecie, who was contently singing *Mr. Golden Sun*, complete with arm gestures. Blinking back tears, she turned to face Junie, “Do you believe in God?” she asked the young girl.

“Yes, Ma'am. I went to Sunday school until the eighth grade.”

“Then you know this world is only a test. It doesn't matter what anybody else thinks or says or does. I had to picture that nothing else was real, nothing mattered—only God, the little baby, and me.” Rose brushed a tendril of blond hair from the young girl's face. “Can you do that?”

Junie pursed her lips, then nodded. So they brought Reecie back across the street and together they drove to the west

side, where Junie lived in an apartment with her mother and her mother's burly boyfriend.

Junie's mother was small-boned, like her daughter, but with straggly hair. She looked like a worn-out version of Junie. Her boyfriend was named Ed and he was no boy. He more closely resembled Brutus from the *Popeye* cartoons.

"What's this all about?" he said gruffly when the five of them were seated in the living room.

Junie faced her mother, her face ashen. "These are my friends," she gestured to Stacy and Rose. "They came to help me tell you—I'm pregnant."

Before her mother could respond, the boyfriend spat out. "Doesn't surprise me." He laughed dryly. "Well, you know what we said--" He pointed to the door. "You can pack your bags."

Junie's mother shot him a look. "How far along?" she asked her daughter.

A single tear rolled down Junie's cheek. "A couple of months," she told her. Then she looked at her hands in her lap. "Mom, I want to keep the baby."

After the merest fraction of a pause the mother said firmly. "I should hope so. That's my grandchild we're talking about!" She turned to Ed, who was glaring at her. "And if you've got a problem with that, *you* can pack your bags!"

The big man's eyes locked on hers. "Is that what you want?" When she said nothing, he got up, scowled and left the room.

"I'm sorry, Mom," Junie said.

"I'm not." She hugged her daughter. "You're gonna be OK," she murmured, caressing Junie's hair, then she looked at Stacy and Rose with tear-filled eyes. "Thank you," she said.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Rose asked her when they were driving back home.

Stacy just shook her head. Instead she pulled the ruby necklace from her pocket and wordlessly dropped it in her mother's lap. The look of elation on Rose's face quickly became one of realization and her mother knew better than to say anything. "Give it to Grammy for safekeeping. I doubt if I'll be needing it anytime soon."

When they arrived she headed straight for her room. The first thing she saw were the roses he had given her in various stages of decay. She gathered them all and, with an effort because it was jammed, she unlatched the window and heaved them out. Crimson petals splashed all over the otherwise pristine snow. Then she yanked the broken heart from her neck without unfastening it and dropped it, chain and all, into the waste basket in her room. But that wasn't good enough. She emptied the little waste basket into the larger one downstairs and, tying it off she stuffed the thing into the dumpster. The garbage guy came on Monday and he was welcome to it.

Returning upstairs her eyes lit on the beautiful velvet dress she had worn to the winter formal and tears started to flow down her face. Harshly, she pushed it to the back of her closet. How dare he ruin her memories! This whole lovely, wonderful year was so much rubble in her mind and every time she tried to call up a happy thought she was met with pain like a dagger thrust to her gut. She couldn't stop crying. No music could comfort her. Not even Reecie could get her to smile, although she tried. She patted Stacy's hair and said, "Whatssa matter...?" When that didn't help she said, "rub a back...?" and suited the action to the word—at least for a moment. Then she tried to get Stacy to rub *her* back, but her big sister was simply in no mood to comply. Having failed at this attempt, Reecie tried making the not-so-scary-scary face that usually got Stacy to laugh until she rolled on the floor. Nothing helped. So then Reecie started to cry, which forced her big sister to comfort her. This lifted Stacy's spirits for awhile—until the little girl lost interest and traipsed off with the suggestion, "Watch Barney...?"

Stacy thought not. After she had cried for literal hours,

exhaustion took over. She fell asleep and didn't bother to get up all day or all night. She dragged herself to Mass with her family, but the tears flowed, if anything, more freely there. She couldn't understand a word of the sermon, but the sweet lyrics of that morning's hymns broke her heart all over again. And when during communion, the choir sang *Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth, falls to the earth and dies, it remains only a grain of wheat and never the blade shall rise*, she knew she was the grain the song spoke of. People glanced with embarrassed concern as she wept in the line that led to Communion, but she couldn't help it and she wouldn't sit down. She needed God as she had never needed anything before. In the Eucharist she found a measure of solace.

She hid in her room for most of the day, but when it came time for the rosary, she dried her tears and joined her family. As he was listing intercessions, George, who knew nothing of the past few days' events, added a new one: "For whatever is making our Stacy so sad." Maybe this was the reason she was able to pray without crying. When she awoke the next day, she felt she could face the day at school—but she wasn't the same person she had been. She had been cruelly betrayed and she would never be so trusting again.

She saw Darius in the hall that morning, surrounded as always by his throngs (minus Junie, she was glad to note), only now there was a new addition—Libby. He seemed as carefree as ever, which didn't surprise Stacy all that much. Seeing her looking at them, Libby extricated herself from the group.

"However that looks," she put a reassuring hand on Stacy's arm, "Darius and I are just friends."

Stacy nodded. She really didn't owe Libby anything and it didn't seem that Libby was being particularly faithful to Arthur either. Nevertheless common decency compelled her to say it. "You might not want to go there, Lib."

Libby forced a laugh. "I can see that someone's jealous."

Stacy shrugged. That was all she was willing to give her. She would have to warn Arthur about Libby and she dearly hoped that he, also, wouldn't take it the wrong way.

At lunch that day, which she ate by herself—shades of old times—Junie found her. She sat opposite Stacy. “Ed's gone—he moved out.”

“I'm sorry,” Stacy said.

“I'm not.” Junie's voice was firm. “And neither is my mom. She thanked me, said he never should have moved in with us when he did.”

Stacy offered her some grapes, but the younger girl shook her head. “I can't sit here long. It's too unusual. I called one of those groups you told me about and they've hooked me up with a tutor. That way I can stay home while I'm showing. People don't need to know about this.” Junie glanced around furtively. “It's really nobody else's business. I'm hoping that you'll keep my secret, too.”

Stacy nodded. “But I hope you're not protecting *him*.”

“He has a lot of big dreams,” Junie said in reply. “If he's meant to become a politician, I don't want *this* to be the reason he was forced to work in a warehouse.”

Stacy couldn't help scowling. “He deserves to pay for this,” she muttered.

“And he will pay the birthing costs for the child,” Junie assured her. “It's required by law.”

“I won't say anything,” Stacy shrugged, “if that's what you want.”

When Stacy was getting ready to go to work that afternoon, she glanced out the back window and saw the roses scattered where she had thrown them two days ago. The snow glittered in the bright sun and one particularly large sparkle reminded her of the diamond she had asked St. Jude to get her.



She experienced a wave of gratitude that he hadn't come through with that one and she hastily thanked him. This reminded her that she needed to thank St. Anthony for the safe return of Grandma Annie's necklace. She was sorry to have doubted these 'brothers' in the faith. They weren't ignoring her and they did get the job done after all.

As far as that went, she realized that if Junie could be forgiving with Darius, she could try to forgive him, too. *I forgive you for hurting me, Darius*, she whispered. Although the words felt forced and untruthful, she experienced an immediate rush of relief.

It was Monday and that meant Confirmation class. Father Joseph reminded Stacy that she had pledged to give a presentation on the Shroud with him and he suggested that next week might be a good time to do this. Stacy realized with a jolt that her in-school presentation was only a couple of weeks away. It was time for her to stop gathering data and start putting her information together in a speech. She had compiled quite a bit by now. She hoped it was enough. She made an outline for her first speech that night before going to bed. This presentation she entitled: *The Shroud of Turin: How We Can Know It's the Real Thing*. Her other Speech would be more along the line of "*The Grail We Guard: A Templar Knight's Perspective*". As Stacy gazed at the 8x10 picture of Jesus—Divine Mercy and Shroud of Turin—she felt like a Templar. She had kept this picture on the desk by her bed ever since she got it at the conference and she couldn't say how often she had sat contemplating Him. She ruefully realized that if she had been among the Templars she might have been executed for 'worshiping a bearded Face', like some of them were. She didn't worship it, any more than she worshiped the photos of her dad that her mother had given her to help her remember him. But she did treasure it. The two of them had been through a lot since the conference and she knew He would continue to be with her—no matter where life took her.

Arthur was at the evening prayers the next night and Stacy knew that since he was studying architecture and graphic design in college he would be able to help her put together a power point presentation for her speeches. She asked him if he was too busy and he said he'd be glad to help her with this after work the next night. The school had a projector she could use and Stacy and Emily shared a laptop and scanner. There were loads of great photos in the books she had read, so they had everything they needed to begin.

“OK, so what is it that we need to accomplish?” Arthur asked as they hunkered down at the dining room table to begin the project. They were surrounded by all of the books Stacy had acquired during her research. Stacy had outlined the major points she wanted to get across for her presentation to the Confirmation class.

“We need to come up with photographic backup for every aspect I plan to discuss about the shroud. For example, my first topic is, *What is the Shroud?* I plan to show them the wall hanging you gave me for Christmas, while I tell them it is the burial cloth of Christ. If you could scan and display the cover art on the Antonacci book, which depicts Jesus being prepared for burial by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus...” She handed him the book and he scanned it, saving it as their first image. “I'll tell the class that the Shroud was a 14' 3”x3'7” cloth made of linen woven with cotton, reportedly purchased by Joseph of Arimathea for the purpose of burying Jesus after he died on the cross. At the moment of the Resurrection an image was imprinted on the cloth. The Image is a photographic negative, has 3-D qualities and is in some respects an X-ray of the subject as well. None of these properties could have been known until at least the twentieth century and most were only coming to light near the close of the century. A person can only make out the Image at a distance of 8 feet from the cloth—too near or too far and it disappears to the naked eye.” Stacy leafed through her books and found photos which showed the 3-D and X-ray qualities of the image and

Arthur scanned them. Then she had him scan another full-color enhanced photo of the Shroud frontal image and pointed out that the most notable details were the scorch marks from the fire the Shroud had been through during the 1530's. She also would have them note the blood images, which appeared as a photographic positive against the negative of the body image.

“My second topic is *What do people think about the Shroud?* Here she had Arthur scan an image of the D'arcis memorandum and a photo of Walter McCrone. She described the only credible objections to the authenticity of the Shroud—that it was a painted forgery, as stated by the Bishop of Arcis, and that the substance used to paint it was iron oxide bound using gelatin from boiled bones, which McCrone had stated erroneously, after cursory examination of the evidence, and which he later retracted. Then she showed the photo of the smug-looking doctors who were revealing medieval dates rendered by the carbon-testing experiment, and who had led millions to wrongly believe the Shroud was a painted forgery. Other than these rather weak objections, nothing had been brought forth to disprove Its validity.

Next she tackled the topic, *Why the Shroud cannot be a painting.* She had Arthur scan various close-up photos of the individual fibers. She would show them these while she told the class that the image itself only penetrated to a depth of one fibril, that it appeared darker where more individual fibrils had been yellowed, and that the overall image came through darker where more fibrils were colored, rather than because there was more of whatever colored them on some strands. It was like a computer-generated image, shaded where more dots of the screen were shaded. Furthermore the image was made with no outline and no brush strokes. The coloring did not bleed into the fiber, but remained uniformly to a depth of one fibril.

Next she turned to the question of the blood images. She had Arthur scan several of these. She would explain that the clotted blood, much of which was postmortem, passed onto the

shroud *before* the rest of the images were formed, so if you looked under a blood stain, there was no yellowed image below. Furthermore, forensic doctors had determined that they were perfectly anatomical, the blood had flowed not as it would have been painted, but exactly as blood would flow, according to the laws of physics. The blood was type AB (common in the Middle East), it had serum around the edges as would any scab as it was forming, it was a bright red because the person who had shed it had gone through extreme trauma. Finally the clots were unsmearred, as though the body which had made them had simply vanished before beginning to decay.

Her next task was to list some *Proofs that the Shroud came from the time of Jesus*.

- She would show the full shroud while she told them that the cloth was made in Antioch near the time of Jesus.
- She would show the backside when she told them that a certain stitch recently discovered underneath the backing had never been noted other than in some artifacts from Masada, where Jews had been massacred in the 90's AD.
- She would show various photos of pollens removed from the Shroud, ninety percent of which came from the Middle East, some from plants which had become extinct.
- She would show faint photos of the flora that had imprinted on the Shroud from flowers which had been placed on the Shroud when it was interred. These flowers were also from the Middle East, flowers that bloomed in the spring of the year.
- She would show the image of a Pontius Pilate coin, minted near the year of Jesus' death, which had been placed over the Shroud man's right eye. She would show the image of a 'Julia Lepton', Pontius Pilate's mother-in-law, which had many characteristics in common with the much more faint coin that had been placed over His left eye.
- She would show an image of a corpse that had been prepared for Jewish burial at the time of Jesus and would tell how it compared exactly to the Shroud.

-She would show images of people who had been crucified— Roman style, noting that this form of execution had been banned in 340 AD.

-She would show a roman flagrum and tell them the Shroud man had sustained 100-120 lashes, which it had been determined came from an instrument of this type.

-She would show a burial tomb, which was believed to have belonged to Christ, and say that dirt on the Shroud man's feet matched the limestone in this sepulcher.

Then she would ask the question: *What did the Shroud man go through?*

-She would show a scourged back and remind them of the 100-120 lashes with the flagrum, probably inflicted by two men, one taller than the other.

-She would show a cap of thorns which would have covered the whole head of the victim

-She would show a depiction of a man carrying the heavy cross beam to a crucifixion and would tell of the abrasions on both shoulders, knees and nose, that this person had fallen without being able to catch himself.

-She would show nail marks through the wrists of a man and depictions of how the feet would have been nailed, one on top of the other.

-She would show a depiction of Christ's side wound which had flowed with blood and water, according to the gospels. The shroud showed evidence of just such a wound and the instrument which would have produced it was the Roman lancea. She would show a picture of this.

-She would show a representation of the Shroud man's face, with swollen eye and left cheek from blows to the face. Stacy then planned to read a summary of the tortures Jesus had gone through, which exactly matched those of the man of the Shroud.

Next she would tackle the *History of the Shroud*.

She would show a painting which depicted how it had been bought by Joseph of Arimathea and used to wrap Jesus body. She planned to tell the class that it may have been used by St. James as a tablecloth when celebrating the Eucharist nine days after Pentecost and that altar linens are modeled after the Shroud, and always have been.

She found a painting which depicted St. Thaddeus giving the Shroud to King Abgar of Edessa and had Arthur scan it. She would tell them this story. She would tell them that it had remained in Edessa until 639 (hidden above a city gate for several centuries) until it was sold to the Eastern Orthodox Church in Constantinople, arriving in 944. It was known there as the Mandylion and was first displayed publicly in the royal palace at Blachernae in 1204 immediately before Crusaders invaded, conquered and sacked the city, taking the Shroud, among other treasures, as trove.

She would tell how the Shroud came to belong to Othon de la Roche after the fourth crusade and that he passed it to his granddaughter as a dowry when she married. This is how it came to be displayed during the 1500's in the Cathedral built to house it in Besancon, France. A medallion found in the Seine in 1855 (now displayed in the Museum of Cluny) bears an image of the Shroud plus the coats of arms of the families of Jeanne de Vergy and her husband, Geoffrey de Charney. She would show a photo of this medallion.

Geoffrey de Charney's daughter, Margaret next possessed the Shroud, but having no suitable heirs as she approached death, she sold it to the House of Savoy. The Savoy family rose to become rulers of all Italy and they possessed the Shroud until 1983, when the deposed heir to the throne, Umberto II, died and had it given to the Vatican. The Shroud remains in the Cathedral attached to Umberto's castle in Turin, Italy to this day. (She would show a photo of the Cathedral in Turin.)

*How does the Church regard the Shroud?* would be her next topic. She would show photos of John Paul II and Benedict

XVI, both of whom had visited the Shroud and who personally approved of it. She would tell the class that most popes have tacitly supported the authenticity of the Shroud, although the faithful are not required to believe in it.

*Miscellaneous closing points:*

-Shadows on the Face of the Shroud man (also the way His hair falls) show the miraculous image was formed while Jesus was suspended in midair. She would demonstrate this with photos. Another thing which suggests this is the undersides of His feet, Which are visible.

-Some people maintain that the Shroud is the real Grail for which crusades were launched and battles fought. They base this on the facts that it was supposed to have belonged to Joseph of Arimathea, was reported to have contained Jesus' blood *and His sweat*, and was taken to what sounded like Britain, but the Shroud was brought by Joseph of A to Briteo Edessenorum (the royal palace of Edessa). Briteo sounds like Britain and may have sparked this confusion.

-a sect which was also responsible for guarding the Holy Land routes, keeping them safe for travelers, was accused of heresy for 'worshiping a bearded face'. In fact, members of the sect, called the Knights Templar, did have artists' copies of the Shroud for their religious services. More than forty of these paintings have been found hidden all over Britain. Stacy had Arthur scan photos of a Templar and one of the artists' copies of the Shroud face.

-Divine Mercy and the Shroud: Stacy had Arthur scan the first artist's painting which the vision of Jesus had commissioned St. Faustina to have painted. Then she held up her 8X10 which alternated that same picture with its exact match—the Shroud. So this, she concluded is what Jesus truly looked like.

-Next she would show photos of the Eucharistic miracle of Lanciano and the Soudarian, or face cloth, of Christ. She would tell the story of how at the words of consecration, the Eucharist became a slice of heart tissue. She would then tell how all three of these artifacts contained type AB blood and that it had been

determined that the face cloth (which can be accounted for back to the fifth century AD) lay over the exact same body as the Shroud of Turin.

-Finally she would finish by showing the earliest depictions of Jesus, which had been retrieved through archaeological finds, and how they were varied, but tended to be of a Roman bent—clean-shaven, short-haired, et cetera. The first depictions of Christ which appeared with a forked beard and long hair came after the initial discovery of the Shroud in Edessa. She would show numerous examples of the same face having been depicted for Christ from that time on. She would finish with the mosaic icon which graced the Sanctuary of their own church, a copy of a thirteenth century icon which had clearly been modeled after—what else?—the Shroud. Then she would hand the presentation over to Father Joseph for the wrap up.

When she finally finished organizing this mountain of information, Stacy heaved a sigh of relief. Arthur whistled through his teeth. “Unbelievable,” he said, as though musing. “I never had any idea how real and substantial the evidence in favor of the authenticity of the Shroud was. How could this be such a well kept secret?”

“Because it was ambushed at the outset,” Stacy reminded him. “McCrone got all of the data and he made a press release debunking the Shroud before anybody else even got a chance to look at the information. The truth has been playing 'catch-up' ever since.”

“I suppose it didn't help when the 1983 carbon dating produced a medieval date,” Arthur added. “Any idea how that might have happened?”

“I've read loads of theories, from the two fires the Shroud survived having altered the C14 versus C12 ratio—that's how they measure it—to the Event of the Resurrection itself having altered it. They think that Jesus' body was radiant when it happened and then He vanished. As the cloth fell through where His body had been, the image was encoded by radiation. They suspect this image wasn't visible for awhile, though. You know



scientists can approximate the event in a nuclear physics laboratory, although the Shroud image is more sophisticated than anything we can accomplish, even with all the technology of our modern era.

One of the authors I read, Dr. John Heller, said that if he had a budget of ten billion dollars and access to every bit of technology garnered by the combined sciences, he still couldn't create an image comparable to the Shroud. Another author, Mark Antonacci, said the Shroud is irreproducible."

"There must be a reason that God has revealed the many facets of this relic to us now at this time in history," Arthur mused.

"We're a bunch of doubting Thomases," said Stacy. "We need to be smacked on the head with a sledge hammer before we are able to pay attention."

Stacy was relieved to have completed the prep work for her Confirmation class presentation. It freed her up to do more entertaining things on the weekend. She had called Junie the previous evening, wondering if she might like to go shopping for maternity clothes. Stacy had a bit of extra money she didn't mind getting rid of. Junie was agreeable, so long as they stayed away from the mall and other teen hangouts. Stacy said she'd pick her up at ten. She borrowed her mother's keys.

"Just one thing," her mother cautioned her.

"What? Is there something wrong with the car?"

"Nothing big," Rose told her. "Just a little glitch with the license plate. I doubt it will cause you any problems."

"Ok." Stacy spoke uncertainly. What kind of problem could there possibly be with the license plate? She threw on her coat and went out to check. Stacy suppressed a giggle. The tab which showed the expiration date had been put on upside down, so that instead of expiring in 08, her mother's car was due to expire in 80. She wondered how her mother could have made such a mistake. Stacy shrugged. Like Mom had said, it probably

wouldn't be a problem.

Rose had followed her out.

“How did you manage that?” Stacy asked her mom.

“It was cold when I was putting it on. The tab kind of froze while I was cleaning the plate. When I went to peel it off the paper, the darn thing cracked. I put the tab on in five chunks, piecing it like a puzzle. When I finished I realized it was upside down and the pieces were too brittle to try to change it.” She shrugged. “You know, 1980 was a very good year for me—I met your father then.”

“I say you let the thing go until 2080,” Stacy smiled mischievously. “If a cop pulls you over, tell him you paid ahead.”

Junie was ready when she got there. She wasn't showing yet, so long as she dressed carefully, but before long it would take more effort to find camouflaging clothes. Stacy hoped to help her out there. As they had when shopping for her formal, the two girls stuck to the side streets, popping in and out of specialty and consignment stores. They managed to find quite a few nice tunics and low-waisted maternity pants. They even picked up some baby underthings and blankets. They didn't know the sex of the little one yet, so Stacy didn't want to commit to anything much for the baby. Eventually they found themselves at the little consignment shop where Stacy had found her dress.

“Oh, hi again,” the sales lady said as the jingle of the door announced their arrival. “We don't often get royalty in here.” At Stacy's questioning look she gestured to a rather large framed photo of herself, crown and all, on Darius' arm. Her heart almost stopped and she glanced hastily at her companion, who appeared pale, but otherwise composed. Of course she had to have seen the pictures already. They were posted around the school and had made the newsletter.

“I'm sorry,” Stacy whispered. “Do you want to leave?”

Junie shook her head.

The clerk seemed impervious. “The dress seemed to work out for you anyway. Are we looking for another dress, maybe

something for the Prom...?”

Stacy shook her head. She felt bad that she couldn't express her gratitude or show much enthusiasm at the moment. “My friend and I are looking for maternity things.”

Stacy bit her lip as the clerk glanced from one girl to the other, clearly wondering which of them was the mother-to-be. It was the first time she really felt the disapproval that Junie was sure to face over and over again, being so young and pregnant. Stacy wished they hadn't come here. “Oh, it's not for us,” she said, trying to save her companion any embarrassment. “It's for my... aunt.” The lie made her wince inwardly. “She's quite petite,” she quickly added.

The clerk looked relieved. She showed them some nice pieces and they bought a few.

“Why did you lie?” Junie asked when they were back in the car. “Are you embarrassed to be with an underage pregnant person?”

“No!” Stacy was horrified. “I didn't want *you* to be embarrassed. Junie,” she took the younger girl by the shoulders, “what you are doing is very brave. I am anything but embarrassed of you. Please never think that. I just didn't realize until now how some people will be treating you because of this.” She smiled ruefully. “I was trying to protect you, I guess. I shouldn't have lied. I don't even believe in lying.” Her voice became more intense now. “I can see how hard this is going to be for you.” Inwardly Stacy realized it could as easily have been she who was pregnant with Darius' child. “Don't let them get to you.” (*Easy for me to say!*) “Remember what my mother said, it's a test. The only thing that matters is you, the baby and God.” But she knew it would be an uphill battle for Junie anyway.

Stacy had dropped the younger girl off at her apartment, her arms laden with boxes and bags. She was en route to her own house when she noticed flashing red lights in her rear-view mirror. She hastily pulled over and rolled down the window. She

hadn't been breaking any laws she was aware of.

The officer nervously scanned the interior of the car.

“License and registration,” he said brusquely.

Stacy rummaged in the glove compartment and her wallet for the items he had requested.

“Pop the trunk and get out of the car with your hands in clear view.”

Stacy would have been amused if she wasn't so afraid. She quickly complied.

Keeping her beside him and in his peripheral vision, the officer sifted through the contents of the trunk: spare tire, jack, lug wrench... just normal stuff. Next he had her sit in the passenger seat of the cop car while he called in her license. Finding nothing he handed it back to her.

“Do you mind,” Stacy finally asked him, “if I ask what this is all about?”

“We were just informed of a new gang which has infiltrated the area. Part of their MO is to identify themselves by putting their license tabs on upside down.” He gave her another penetrating look that almost suggested *as if you didn't know*. “I'm gonna let you go at this time.” He unlocked her door and watched as she got into her vehicle and pulled back into traffic. He continued to follow her all the way to her house.

Stacy was never so relieved to get off the road. She headed straight to the bread store and found her mother. “How much would it cost you to buy another tab?” she asked her.

“It's kind of expensive. I think I paid \$60 dollars to get it.”

Stacy dug in her wallet and slapped the money on the bench. “Worth it!” She showed her mother the perspiration stains on her shirt and told her what she had been through. “Easy for you to laugh!” Stacy didn't appreciate her mother's reaction. “I suggest you take back roads and side streets when you go to get that tab--” She started to leave, but turned around, “and I'd make it as soon as possible. You don't want to go through what I did.”

Stacy's Shroud presentation to her class went off without a

hitch. The class seemed suitably convinced that, not only was there a Shroud which had been proven to be from the time of Christ, this particular Shroud had to have been the One which was put on Him as they laid Him in the tomb. No other article of cloth, at any time in history, bore marks such as these. But then no other Event paralleled that of the birth, life, death and resurrection of God in human form. By the time she had finished you could have heard a pin drop in the room.

“So you believe now,” Father Joseph addressed the class, “not only because of faith in what you have been taught from childhood, but because of what you have seen with your eyes.” His voice became more intense. “Do not let this lull you. Even the Devil and all of his companions, the fallen angels, believe in Jesus Christ. Each of you,” Father looked at them one at a time, as a mother counts heads when her children are swimming in deep water, “will be severely tested. In the next few years there will be temptations to your faith of which you can not presently imagine. If you go to college, you will be tested intellectually. If you become a mother, bear children and struggle with spacing them and feeding them, you may struggle morally. If you are in a profession which requires you to go out and work all day in the elements in order to provide for a family, you will be tested physically. If you are betrayed (perhaps I should say 'when', because this will happen to many of you) by the people or person who is supposed to love you the most, you may be tempted to despair. If tragedy befalls you and you or someone you love becomes gravely ill, you may be tempted in more ways than you can imagine. Make what you have heard tonight—that Jesus Christ is real, He truly came to walk the earth because of His great Mercy, to pay a debt He did not owe, which was required by His Father's Justice— make this an anchor for your life.” He paused to let this sink in. “We have been given a great gift. Let us not lose sight of this moment of certainty when the cares and pleasures of life try to choke it from our memory.’

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples a parable of a man who has lived a life of luxury and who ends up in Hell. He

begs Jesus to send his servant, Lazarus, who in life had longed to eat the scraps that fell from the rich man's table, with a little water so as to relieve his thirst. But Jesus told him there is a great abyss which separates Heaven from Hell, and none may cross in either direction. So then the rich man begged Jesus to warn his brothers, that they might not come to such an end as he had. 'Surely they will believe if they see someone come back from the dead.'

But Jesus said. "They will not believe, not even if someone should come back from the dead."

### **Face Bearer**

Everything in Stacy's life seemed to be moving double speed. The following week her class would be tested to determine whether they were fully prepared to be confirmed. Wednesday of that week would be her grail presentation. Assuming she passed the test and the Bishop accepted her as a candidate, she would be confirmed the weekend after her in-school presentation. As far as that went, she was only two short

months from graduation. Who knows what she would be involved with as an adult? Right now she needed to write a letter to the Bishop, telling him why she wanted to be confirmed Catholic. She had no idea how to begin. She chewed the end of her pen and decided to simply plunge in and see where it got her.

Dear Bishop Graves:

I am a high school senior who plans to graduate in a couple of months. I have only recently become a practicing Catholic, after quite a few years of straying. My conversion came about as a result of a conference I was dragged to by my mother. While there I became fascinated with the question of how Jesus appeared when He was in human form. This led me on an intense study of the Shroud of Turin. Right now, drawing largely upon the work and insight of Dr. Daniel Scavone, I am preparing to give a presentation at my secular school on the Shroud as the most plausible candidate for the legendary Grail.

It has been my grail. I have come to realize that I cannot function without Christ as the anchor of my life. Without Him, I flounder in a sea of contrasts and confusion. With Him I am firmly grounded.

I regret the many years I willfully separated myself from the Church as I know this will leave certain gaps in my education. I have been scrambling to learn as quickly as possible and truly hope it will be enough.

Once again I thank you for considering me. I anxiously await your response. Whatever you decide, I am going nowhere else. I'll be writing you next year if you decide I need more time for formation. If next year still finds me insufficiently prepared, you'll hear from me the following year. I long to be given all the graces which accompany this Sacrament. As an adult member of the Church I hope to contribute wherever I am called.

Sincerely,

Anastasia Greenwood

Stacy frowned as she reread what she had written. She

hoped it was good enough. She carefully folded the letter into an envelope, addressed and stamped it and placed it in the mailbox so that the carrier would pick it up that day.

Stacy had noticed that Arthur was around for evening prayers much more consistently than he had been for awhile. She couldn't help but wonder how things were going between him and Libby. No one else was in the workout room at the moment. Zeke had been called downstairs for some confusion with an order and Emily was spending the evening with friends from her school. Stacy sat on the floor beside Arthur as he lifted weights and waited for him to finish his set.

"I have one more presentation to give." Stacy spoke hesitantly, realizing how much time he had given her with the previous one. "I suppose I could try to do this one myself. I think I know how after watching you with the last one."

"You can try if you want to," Arthur said. He was still a bit winded. "I'd be glad to be there in case you needed advice or something. When did you want to get together?"

Stacy was secretly relieved he had not taken her up on her offer. "Tomorrow...?" she suggested.

"Sure." Arthur wiped his brow and got up to find his water bottle. He sat on the weight bench next to her and drained it.

Stacy looked at her hands in her lap. "I couldn't help noticing that you haven't been going out as much this last week. How's it going with Libby?"

Arthur didn't mince words. "She let me go."

"I'm sorry," Stacy said, but she was relieved that he didn't seem too broken up about it. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Arthur took her by the shoulders and made her look him in the face. "Do you?"

Stacy shook her head, but she spoke anyway. "I never wanted you to date Libby," she confessed. "Funny thing." She laughed, but it was a humorless laugh. "Although I was clueless about Darius, I had no problem seeing that Libby was the sort of



person who was only out for what she could get. I didn't want her to use you that way.”

“Why?” Arthur asked her. “Do you think I would let myself be used?”

“Libby is very beautiful...”

“She is,” Arthur readily agreed, “on the outside.” He got up and paced to the other side of the room, as though he were considering whether or not to say something. He refilled his water bottle from the little sink in the corner and sat down beside her again. He shrugged. “I think Libby got frustrated because I wouldn't go where she wanted to go. I don't think she's used to a relationship that isn't physical. She probably decided I was gay or something. That's all that happened.”

“Oh.” Stacy couldn't think of anything else to say.

“I told you before that I already went that route and realized it was a dead end. I don't even know if God wants me to be married. Right now I'm open to all possibilities, including the priesthood. One thing I do know for sure—you can't get to know someone—really know them—if you are sleeping with them. It clouds your vision. And you really need to *know* the person you plan to spend your whole life with.”

The Grail talk was completely different than the one Stacy had done for her Confirmation class. The last talk practically gave itself. This time her focus was on the grail and she felt more like she was preparing a debate or a lawyer's closing arguments. She also felt a bit schizophrenic because she had to give the best case for each of the three possible grails which she was considering. There were fewer pictures to scan this time, but Arthur helped her where he was able. When they had done all they could to put together the individual cases, Stacy had one big request to make of him. She doubted he would be willing to do it but she might as well ask. “Arthur, would you be willing to dress as a member of the Knights Templar for my presentation? You wouldn't have to say anything. Just look like you're standing

guard over something.” She gave him her best wheedling look but stopped short of begging.

Arthur sighed. “What time is your presentation?”

“Three o’clock on the button—Wednesday. Directly after school.”

He raised his brows and sighed again. “Only for you,” he finally said. “And only this once. If you end up having the greatest Grail presentation ever, I am not going on tour with you.”

“Good,” she said. “That will help. You can get dressed in the room right before we begin. Now all I have to do,” she smiled, realizing what a challenge this truly would be, “is get a period costume for you to wear by next week.”

“Good luck,” Arthur packed his equipment and hoisted it onto his back. “I’ll be back for evening prayers.

As soon as he had gone she got to work.

“Grammy, can you help me make a floor-length hooded white cape with a red cross on the inside cassock? Mom said you used to sew things.”

Grandma Annie looked up from the book she was reading. “I’ll need a pattern,” she said. “I never work without a recipe.”

Stacy knew this about her and had come prepared. “I already bought a costume pattern from the sewing goods store.” She dropped it in her grandmother’s lap. “I also bought the fabric.”

“You were pretty sure I’d say ‘yes’.” Grandma Annie had a twinkle in her eye.

“I figured I’d borrow your machine and do it myself if you couldn’t help.” Stacy nodded her head with mock confidence. “I did take a sewing unit in ninth grade home ec.”

“I’ll help,” her grandmother hastily said. “I would rather not have my machine all screwed up—not,” she assured her granddaughter, “that I don’t trust you. It’s just harder than it looks.”

“I believe you,” said Stacy. “I also have to make a white

shield with a red cross.”

“That's more your uncle's department. I think he's in the shop.”

After enlisting her uncle's help as well, Stacy bought a believable-looking sword from a costume shop. Then she and grandma Annie laid the fabric out on the dining room table and carefully cut out the pattern pieces. They would begin sewing the thing Saturday morning.

Before they could begin sewing Junie called Stacy. She said she wanted to show her something. Could they get together...? Stacy arranged to meet the girl later in the afternoon. She would pick her up and they could catch a bite to eat—Stacy's treat. That should give her enough time to complete the sewing project with her Grandmother. They headed up to Grandma Annie's room where she kept her sewing machine.

“Ok, that should do it,” Grandma Annie bit off a loose thread and shook out the piece onto which they had just finished appliquéing a red cross. “Now we sew the rest of this undergarment. The hooded cape is done, except for the hem. Who will be wearing this?” she asked her granddaughter.

“Arthur,” Stacy said.

Grandma Annie nodded approval. “I'll need him to try it on so I can get the hem right.”

“Maybe he'll come here after the rosary tonight,” Stacy said.

“Let's take a break.” Grandma Annie pushed the half-finished garment aside and stood up, stretching. “I could use a cup of tea.”

Stacy nodded. “You know I haven't been inside your room for years,” she commented, looking around. “It's pretty.” Her grandmother's room was large and she had it painted a soothingly rich plum. There was a plush floral rug on the floor and a complimentary floral painting on the wall. Her

grandmother opened the statuesque mahogany armoire in the corner to reveal some vintage dresses. “You know, not only has your mother hung onto some nice dresses in the hope that someday you or your sisters might like to use them, I’ve got a few myself. I don’t suppose there’s something in there that you might be interested in wearing, for example... to the prom.” She cast a coy look in her granddaughter’s direction.

“Oh, Grammy. I don’t feel like going to any more dances. Not after what happened with Darius.”

Grandma Annie took Stacy’s hand. “I wish you would consider it. Darling, I know what happened to you was painful,” she squeezed her hand, “but wouldn’t you like to make some good memories of your last year in high school. I think I know a very handsome young man who would be more than happy to escort you.”

Stacy half-heartedly sifted through the beautiful satin and chiffon dresses in her grandmother’s closet. They appeared to have been very well cared for. Her eyes lit upon an elaborately beaded green and white dress. “That was my wedding gown,” her grandmother answered her questioning look. “Back in the day, it was much more common to be married in a dress that wasn’t white, especially if you were a rebel, like me.”

Stacy smiled at her grandmother’s use of slang. The dress was spectacular. “Might I try it on?” Stacy asked her.

Her grandmother’s eyes brimmed with tears. “I would be proud to have someone like you wear this dress.” She gently laid it in her granddaughter’s arms.

Stacy disappeared behind a changing screen in the corner of her grandmother’s room. She needed her help to get it zipped up. It fit her as well as the red velvet one had. Twirling, she surveyed herself in the standing mirror. “Are you sure you don’t want to keep it and wear it someday for a special event?” Stacy asked her grandmother, doubting even as she spoke that there would ever be such an occasion in her grandmother’s future.

“Honey, I haven’t had a waist small enough to fit that dress in fifty years. If you don’t wear it now, I doubt it will ever

be worn.” She looked her granddaughter over with approval. “You know what I wore with that one?” She opened her safe and pulled out the other necklace—the emerald one that was to go to her sister. “I’m sure the ruby necklace has some pretty bad memories for you, but not for Emily. I’ll bet your sister would switch with you. Anyways, green looks spectacular with auburn hair. I’ll ask her, if you like.”

Stacy sighed. Her grandmother was right. It would be nice to have some good memories from this year. And since Emily attended a different high school than she did, they could both wear each necklace, and no one would be the wiser. She nodded as she clasped the glittering strand around her neck.

Junie was fairly bursting with excitement when Stacy picked her up. She waited to tell her until they were seated in the booth of the pizza place where they had decided to eat. “It’s a girl! See, I’ve got pictures.” She passed the ultrasound photos across the table to Stacy, who studied them dubiously.

She couldn’t tell a baby head from a butt in these photos. “Are they sure?” she asked her companion.

“Ninety-nine percent,” Junie said. “Guess what else?”

Stacy raised a questioning brow.

“I’m naming the baby after you and your mother—Anastasia Rose—isn’t that beautiful? After all, she wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for the two of you.” When Stacy didn’t immediately respond, she asked hesitantly, “That is ok with you—right?”

Stacy blinked back tears. “More than ok. I’d be so honored.” She sniffed and laughed. “I don’t know how Darius will feel about it, though—you naming his baby after a former girlfriend.”

“Who cares what he thinks!” Junie said glibly and she dug into their pepperoni and sausage pizza with gusto.

There were four members on the panel that would judge Stacy's Grail speech: an older woman who was introduced to her as a member of the school board, two area business owners and a recruiting officer for the armed forces—the latter three were men. In addition to these four there was a faculty member from her school. In this case it was the French teacher, Mme Dupont. Stacy had never taken a class with her, but she was reputed to be strict.

Arthur was standing guard in full regalia when the panel trooped in. He uttered not a word throughout the speech, as he had been directed. Stacy began by introducing herself and then she gestured to Arthur. “And this is my assistant, a member of the Knights Templar, as you can see. He has been given the charge of guarding the true Grail—only there is a problem. From our vantage point two thousand years after the fact, it has become unclear which is the Grail he is commissioned to guard. Of the possible Grails we are about to consider, all three have four things in common: 1) Each has been presented as the True Grail, 2) Christ's Blood was contained in them, 3) Joseph of Arimathea was connected somehow to each and 4) the Knights Templar have been connected with each. I present to you three possible Grails.” Arthur planted himself wordlessly in front of the projection screen, his shield held firmly in front of his white cloaked body. Then he stepped aside with a flourish to reveal the screen, which now displayed a photo of an agate chalice.

“The first is a cup, which Tradition tells us was the original chalice used by Jesus Christ Himself at the Last Supper. I will describe the history of this cup and why it is qualified to be the Grail of Legend. I will also ask if it is plausible that such an article would have inspired Crusades.”

Arthur once again placed himself between the audience and the screen and when he stepped aside there were two photos—one, a painting of the Last Supper by Leonardo DaVinci, and the other the holy card portrayal of Mary Magdalene, complete with the signature, Saint Mary Magdalene—pray for us. “The second,” Stacy told her audience, “is a woman of whom we

have read in the synoptic Gospels, but for the purpose of this lecture I will consider a different Gospel, one not contained in the regular Bible. It is referred to as a Gnostic Gospel and has been attributed to St. Thomas. Again I will describe the controversial history of Mary Magdalene, and why she is qualified to be the Grail of legend. I will also ask if such a Grail would have inspired Crusades.”

A third time Arthur placed himself in front of the screen. When he stepped aside this time, it was to reveal the full image, front and back, of the Shroud of Turin. “The third is a burial garment, which tradition and science tell us is the one which was wrapped around the body of Jesus Christ after he was taken from the cross and before placing him in the empty tomb which belonged to Joseph of Arimathea. I will describe the convoluted history of this artifact, and why it, too, is qualified to be the Grail of legend. Again I will ask the question if such a Grail could have inspired Crusades.’

‘Now we begin!’

Arthur stepped aside, assuming an ‘at ease’ stance while Stacy launched into the body of her talk.

“In considering the first object, the Holy Chalice of Valencia, we will refer to it as the graal—a word meaning cup. I draw upon the work of a scholar named Janice Bennett. She has written a book, “Saint Laurence and the Holy Grail,” which deals with the credibility of this relic. For the purpose of clarification, the true Grail is said to have contained the blood of Jesus Christ. Earliest texts also contend that the true Grail contained Jesus’ sweat. Many Christians believe that at the moment of consecration, which first took place in the Upper Room on Holy Thursday before Jesus was condemned to death, the bread and wine which Jesus held when He said, “This is My Body... this is My Blood... truly became flesh and blood—only It retained the appearance of bread and wine. St. Jerome tells us that two cups were used at this moment—one is of silver and is very large. It was used to hold the wine for the passover meal before it was poured into the smaller chalice, made of agate, which Jesus held

as He pronounced the words of consecration. This larger Cup remains in Antioch while the smaller one, believed to belong to St. Mark, was given to St. Peter, who took it to Rome with him. There it became the official Papal cup until the Valerian persecution, when this cup was entrusted by then Pope St. Sixtus II to St. Lawrence, who fled with the cup to Huesca, Spain. Throughout the crusades the Knights Templar were charged with guarding the Valencia cup. Both Sixtus and St. Lawrence gave their lives rather than reveal the whereabouts of this cup.'

'Many people mistakenly believe that there are numerous possibilities for the cup Grail, and there were quite a few candidates by the sixteenth century, but most have been ruled out by archaeological study. Now the only credible remaining relics are the one in Valencia and the larger silver one in Antioch. The Valencia Chalice is still considered the official papal cup and has been used to celebrate the Mass by most popes, most recently by our present Pope, Benedict XVI, on July 9, 2006.'

'One serious rival to the St. Lawrence tradition—and this is where Joseph of Arimathea enters this particular line of inquiry—is the legend that Joseph of Arimathea brought the Grail-cup with him to England. Incidentally Joseph is also recorded as catching some of Jesus' blood in this cup as it flowed from his side on the Cross. This may be an effort to account for Christ's sweat in the true grail. This tale is derived from the writings of Robert de Boron, which maintain that the Grail was brought to Glastonbury, where also reside the bones of the legendary King Arthur.'

'So a Chalice, or graal, is the Grail; the Chalice held the blood of Christ—either literally or in the form of consecrated wine; Joseph of Arimathea is credited with bringing this Grail cup to England; and It (if It was the Valencia Chalice) was guarded by the Knights Templar.'

'Now, having introduced Joseph of Arimathea, we are lead to the second possible Grail, whose legend is also entangled with this individual—Mary Magdalene.' (Arthur assumed a more



aggressive stance during this segway, before returning to the 'at-ease' position he had maintained throughout the cup-grail presentation.)

'In this grail legend we are presented with Mary Magdalene as the lover of Jesus Christ. It is contended that she bore a daughter who was fathered by Him. It is important to note that in this version of the Gospel, which is considered heretical by the Church, Christ was not God. He never maintained that he was God. Such claims were invented by the leaders of the Christian church in order to promote a male-dominated society. In truth, Jesus was involved in a form of Goddess worship, in which the only way for a man to commune with the divine (they refer to this as achieving 'gnosis' or special knowledge) was during sexual union with a woman. Mary Magdalene was of royal lineage, therefore her descendants were royal. In this legend she traveled to France, accompanied by Joseph of Arimathea, to establish the Merovingian dynasty. Her descendants who carried the Sang-Real (bloodline) of Jesus were guarded by the Knights Templar. This legend became widely known after the publication of the *DaVinci Code* and the release of the movie based upon this novel. Leonardo himself was supposed to have been a leader of the Priory of Scion, which headed the Knights Templar. In his painting of *The Last Supper* he was supposed to have revealed Mary Magdalene's true relationship to Christ and the astonishing truth that all of Christianity was a hoax.'

'So in this version, the Grail is the sang-real or bloodline of Jesus with Mary Magdalene, their descendants contain the blood of Jesus Christ. She was brought to France by Joseph of Arimathea, and her bloodline has allegedly been safeguarded by the Knights Templar.'

'This brings us to the the third possible Grail—the Shroud of Turin.' (Again Arthur assumed the more aggressive stance during this segway, before relaxing into his 'at-ease' position.)  
'We have only to read the synoptic Gospels to find Joseph of

Arimathea involved with this version of the Grail. He probably purchased it. What is certain is that it was Joseph, with the assistance of Nicodemus who prepared Jesus for burial, and they laid Him in a tomb that belonged to Joseph. On the third day, Christians contend, He resurrected, leaving behind the linens which covered him: : a 14' X 4' cloth which was wrapped around Him, from feet to head, then back to feet and a separate face cloth, which the gospel of John tells us was found folded up in a different spot within the tomb.'

'At some time, probably not immediately after the Resurrection Event, an image became visible upon the larger cloth. This image included unsmudged blood stains, which were found to be a photographic positive, on top of which was encoded the image of the Person Who had bled—only this image was a photographic negative. This body image was further found to possess both X-ray and 3-D characteristics. Such an image is not reproducible by any known means, whether ancient or modern, although by the use of particle physics and radiation, a lesser quality image with similar characteristics can be created in a nuclear physics laboratory. Such an image would have been formed if the Body within the Shroud were radiant and then disappeared, so that the image would have been encoded as the cloth fell through the place where the Body had been.'

'The scope of this lecture cannot include a detailed discussion of the proofs of authenticity of this object, but I have taken the time to summarize these details, for you to study at your leisure.'" She passed a handout to each member of the panel. "I will, however, outline a history of this Relic, as I have done with the others.'

'After the Shroud was found in the empty tomb, it was brought to Edessa, specifically to Briteo Edessenorum (the royal palace of Edessa. Some scholars have noted that Briteo sounds like Britain and this may explain why the Grail was thought to have been brought there by Joseph of Arimathea). There It was given to King Abgar by St. Thaddeus/Jude, as had been promised by Jesus in a letter, when the same King had asked Him to come

heal him of a severe skin disease—maybe leprosy.'

'The Shroud was encased in a greille, or grill, for purposes of display. This greille containing the burial cloth of Jesus remained in Edessa for centuries, however it was holed up inside the top of the city gate for a very long time, to protect it during the time when Christians were persecuted. It resurfaced in the sixth century, and it was at this time that the first depictions of Jesus as we have come to see Him most frequently represented, with forked beard and long hair, began to appear. The earliest portrayals of Him were more Roman-looking, clean-shaven and short-haired and not made by those closest to Him. His followers, who were mostly Jews, didn't believe in making images of God.

'Edessa, now Moslim, sold the Shroud to the Eastern Orthodox Christians in the nine hundreds AD. It remained with them in Constantinople, where it was known as the Mandylion. In the middle of the fourth Crusade, in the year 1204, It was taken as spoils of war and became the property of Othon de la Roche. During this century the Shroud is thought to have been protected by the Knights Templar. Almost fifty Face Cloths copied from the Shroud have been found which were hidden by members of the Templars. They reportedly used these cloths, and most likely the Original, in their initiation and worship services. The Shroud publicly resurfaces in 1354, when It was displayed by de la Roche's granddaughter, Jeanne de Vergy and her husband, Geoffrey de Charny, who was given It as a dowry when he married Jeanne. A pilgrim's coin found in the Seine shows both the de Vergy and de Charny coats of arms and the Shroud. Jeanne passed the Shroud to her granddaughter, Margaret, who having no suitable heir, sold It to the House of Savoy.'

'The Savoy family rose to become rulers of all Italy and were only deposed in 1946. When their last descendant, Umberto II, died in 1983, he willed it to the Vatican. The Roman Catholic Church now owns this Relic.'

'Suffice to say that the Burial cloth of Jesus Christ would have contained both His blood and His sweat; It was purchased

by Joseph of Arimathea; It was guarded by the Knights Templar, several of whom were recorded as being executed for the heresy of worshipping a 'bearded Face. Finally, the Shroud, by virtue of its display case-the grill- has been studied as a possibility of having been the True Grail.'

(Once again Arthur assumed his more aggressive stance momentarily, relaxing it to the 'at ease' position.)

"And so we have the grille, the graal and the sang-real. Now," Stacy turned to the panel of judges, "as to our second question—whether it is plausible that each of these potential grails might have sparked crusades— of the Grail Chalice—why? The whereabouts of the most likely candidate was known at the time of the Crusades. In any event, It was only a cup, whatever It may have contained at one time. The Chalice-Grail would have had no special powers which weren't based on fable. It, of itself, tells no story that would otherwise remain unknown.'

'This is not the case with the other two potential grails. If true, the Mary Magdalene bloodline Grail would prove that all of Christianity as it has been preached for two thousand years is a hoax. This kind of potential—to dismantle the (allegedly) male-dominated Christian Church, or to prevent such an occurrence—is ample reason to embark on a crusade.'

'Similarly, concrete proof of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, Who is God come to earth as a man, (such as is exhibited by the Shroud of Turin) is sufficient spark for any crusade. There are plenty of people who have had and do have a vested interest in discrediting or destroying such a relic, as It undermines the godlessness of the world. It forces us to accept that this life is not all there is. Many people were and are threatened by the impact of this artifact.'

'So what do we discern from history...?'

'Several historical books of the New Testament contain accounts of the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus. And so we have the man of the Shroud—obviously a Jewish man of antiquity—who appears to have gone through the exact same

tortures which Jesus went through, according to these accounts. When compared objectively with other historical books of antiquity, we find these books of the Bible to be the best attested sources because, not only are there far more of these ancient manuscripts in existence, but they were written far closer to the actual time of the original than were any other sources of ancient history. They were also written and translated into numerous languages, and are more widely quoted than any other sources in history.'

'Moreover, these accounts appeared during the lifetime of the participants and, if incorrect or inaccurate, you would think these participants would have spoken up to refute them. Yet history shows the witnesses never recanted, not even when tortured to death. Excepting Judas, the betrayer, all of the Apostles of Jesus Christ were martyred. At least the first eighteen popes of the church He established went to their death rather than to deny their Faith.'

'And what of the cult of Mary Magdalene...? Scholars agree the first Gnostic Gospels originated during or after the second century AD, long after the Bible-approved Gospels were written. The gnostics were more focused on personal inspiration and less on historical facts in their beliefs. Historically speaking Mary herself either accompanied the Mother of Jesus to Ephesus, where she quietly died, or she accompanied her brother, Lazarus, to evangelize France, where she quietly died. If the Merovingian line originated from her, it was not noted for martyrs or saintliness.'

'As I stated at the beginning and throughout this talk, all three possible grails are associated with the Knights Templar. All three claim to have been guarded by this sect. The original Templars were noted as having a strong devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and to St. John. The Templars have never been connected with a devotion to Mary Magdalene. It is interesting to note that, historically speaking, those Templars who were executed for heresy went to their death for 'worshiping a bearded

face'.”

With that, Stacy slightly bowed her head to the panel and she and Arthur exited.

“How did it go?” she asked when they were out of earshot.

“Good... very good. Only one thing...” Arthur furrowed his brows with concern. “I had read somewhere...”

“What...?” Had Stacy gotten some integral fact completely wrong?

“Mary Magdalene had a beard.” Arthur nodded gravely.

“Yes, I definitely read it.”

Stacy fake punched his arm. “You can take that Darth Vader wannabe costume off. Arthur,” Now she was all seriousness. “Thank you for helping me. I really appreciate it.”

At this point the door to the conference room opened and the panel members trooped out. Several nodded before proceeding down the hallway. It was the French teacher, Mme Dupont, who spoke for the group. “Your research was thorough. Many of us found the content of your speech—disturbing.” She hesitated. “However, the delivery was excellent... You pass.” She nodded and followed her companions. Arthur and Stacy stared wordlessly as they disappeared in the distance.

After they were no longer in sight, Stacy breathed. “Oh well, I pass, anyway.”

“You more than pass,” Stacy turned back at the sound of a voice. It was one of the business owners. “I liked your speech. It's about time someone stuck up for Christianity.” He gave her a thumbs up and followed the others down the hallway. His words were encouraging, but Stacy couldn't help but notice that he waited to say them until no one else would hear.

That Sunday Ezekiel, Arthur, Emily and Stacy received the Sacrament of Confirmation. She had passed the test easily the

previous Monday, and Father Joseph had given her unreserved approval. The service began like any other Mass, with introductory prayers and the three readings from the Bible. The second reading was from Acts 2, where the disciples, gathered together in the Upper Room, received the Holy Spirit in the form of Tongues of Fire Which rested on the head of each. They were emboldened to go forth and spread the Good News. The Bishop preached his homily on how each of the confirmed is required to go forth, as did these disciples, and spread the Truth, by his actions as much as or more than by his words, wherever God has placed him. When he told them this would not always be comfortable and that many would not be able or willing to hear, Stacy really knew that he spoke accurately.

The Bishop concluded by reading an excerpt from each of the candidate's letters to him, which demonstrated the qualities we are to have as modern-day disciples. From Stacy's he chose to read the part where she had said she would be writing next year and the following year if need be, in order to be confirmed. He praised her spirit of humble tenacity.

Following the homily, the candidates, Stacy among them, were presented by their instructor, Fr. Joseph, who declared them sufficiently prepared for the Sacrament. The Bishop lead them in a renewal of their Baptismal promises, where they were called formally to reject Satan and all his works and empty promises, and to profess their belief in all the Truths which are taught by the Catholic Church. Then, one by one, using the Saint's name by which they were choosing to be known as adults in the faith, the Bishop laid hands on them and marked the sign of the Cross on their foreheads with the blessed oil which is reserved for this purpose. As Stacy stepped to the front of the line, and with the choir softly chanting, *Confitemini Domino*, she heard the bishop address her for the first time by the name she had chosen for herself: Jude. She chose this saint to be her Patron over Saint Pio and her namesake, Anastasia, because she, like Saint Jude, wanted to be His Face-Bearer for the rest of her life. Not only that, but she knew she was a hopeless case, as Zeke had first said.

Saint Jude just seemed the right choice. She closed her eyes and felt the joyful Holy Spirit waves wash through her body as they had when she was absolved for the first time. When she opened her eyes the first thing she saw was the Shroud-face of Jesus-Pantocrator, His eyes glowing softly as He looked down upon her. He almost appeared to have a look of pride on His face. Finally Stacy was an adult in the faith.

### **Will Rise Again**

It was the day of the prom and, once again, Emily worked her magic on Stacy's hair. Arthur had been more than happy to serve as her escort. This would be an attention-getting flipflop as Darius would undoubtedly bring Libby as his date. They were an inseparable twosome now, despite Libby's assurances to the contrary. Not that Stacy cared. She was relieved to hear that Junie reserved little affection for him either, although she was still keeping his (and her) secret.

Emily had been happy to exchange necklaces with Stacy. She had also accepted the ruby velvet dress, which Stacy was glad



to get out of her closet. Stacy had butterflies thinking of the one dance she and Arthur had shared at the winter formal. She found herself hoping that he would be as pleasantly surprised by her appearance as Darius had been.

Arthur was on time and had brought her a wrist corsage made of white roses and emerald carnations. (In passing, Stacy wondered if Libby had been forced by Darius to pay for her own corsage, or did he reserve such treatment for suckers like her?) There were little emerald jewels glued among the flowers and in her hair, which echoed the dazzling real ones in her necklace. Arthur took all of this in for a moment, and then he looked down. "You are so beautiful, Stacy. I don't feel worthy to escort you."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Stacy kicked his foot, and she wondered if he had felt the same way when he took Libby to the last one.

They arrived at the Prom, not surprisingly, before Darius and Libby and quietly took their place in the Grand March line, which was alphabetical by the female's last name. It would be a lie to say that people took no notice of Stacy's fabulous attire. She looked like Scarlett O'Hara in the picnic scene from *Gone With the Wind*. It would also be a lie to say that there were no whispers about her escort, easily recognizable as Libby's winter formal date. However, when Darius and Libby finally entered, they drew much more overt attention in the striking black and white they had chosen for this dance. Darius was wearing a black Armani tux, complete with top hat. Libby's dress plunged daringly in both front and back, showing her figure to full advantage. They were the closest to having celebrity status of any couple at the school. They drew rapt attention.

As with the last dance, this one included a royal court, only there would be three female and three male attendants chosen to accompany the King and Queen. Unlike the last dance, this entourage had been predetermined by a vote conducted in the Senior class home rooms. It was a popularity contest which Stacy was sure she had no chance whatsoever to win. She was vaguely

comforted by this knowledge. She would not have wanted to leave Arthur for much of the dance to attend to her “royal duties” anyway. The results of this vote would be given at the conclusion of the Grand March.

Once again Stacy's family and this time, Arthur's parents—whom Stacy had never met—were in attendance. The applause was more than respectable when Stacy and Arthur took their walk down the runway, but she would not have called it thunderous. Such was not the case for Libby and Darius. They almost brought the roof down. When the two of them were named King and Queen, it came as no surprise—least of all to Stacy. Arthur looked at her with concern when she didn't make the court, but she simply shrugged. It really was inconsequential who was picked as Prom King and Queen. In a couple of weeks they would leave this artificial world never to revisit it. In any event Stacy had developed a clear focus for her life. The things she had learned in the past few weeks and months made her realize how much more lucky she was to have someone like Arthur on her arm and in her life, than she would have been if she were still with Darius.

The band began by playing the oldies, as they had with the winter formal, and the preliminary songs were for royalty only. When they struck up the chords of the first dance which was open to all in attendance, Arthur took her by the hand. “They're playing our song,” he whispered in her ear. It was *Unchained Melody*, the only song they had danced together at the last dance. Stacy was so glad he remembered. They didn't talk at all during this one—it was too special—but after that it was as if she had gone to the Prom with her very best friend. They had so much in common and had spent so much time together, plus the fact that Arthur had already assured her that he was not expecting anything physical, so to speak, Stacy had never had such a good time on a date. They danced when they felt like it, they nibbled at the refreshments, sometimes they just talked. They had so much to talk about—books and future plans and childhood stories—they could have talked all night. They talked about Stacy's senior

presentation. Stacy told him the one point she wished she could have made, but didn't know how to work it in, was about gnosis. If sexual union of a man with a woman was all *that*, why should celibates—like Uncle Joe, her mother and grandmother, not to mention Catholic priests—even bother to live? Their life, according to gnosticism, was not worth living anyway. Arthur agreed that such an ideology was ridiculous, at best. Far from expressing freedom, undisciplined sex had a tendency to enslave the person who engaged in it.

At one point in the evening, Darius was surprised as he turned around, punch glasses in hand, and saw Stacy rapt in conversation with Arthur. She caught an expression of infinite pain and loss which played across his features for a moment, but then he composed himself and disappeared into the crowd.

“So,” Stacy said as they swayed to the strains of the very last song of the evening, “you never kissed Libby—not even once.”

“Nope,” he said.

“Then I don't suppose you're planning to kiss me tonight...?”

“Nope.”

At this, Stacy's heart sank a little bit. After a pause, she asked, “Just when do you think you might kiss me?”

Arthur shrugged. Stacy didn't know whether to be annoyed or relieved.

“What if I were to just kiss you, then?” Stacy always had been a troublemaker.

“I wouldn't kiss back.”

Stacy couldn't help but be intrigued. When she was with Darius the kisses had been so free as to become annoying at times. Holding back certainly didn't make things any less interesting. Her heart was beating faster than ever.

When she crawled into bed that night, trying not to wake Emily, she might as well not have bothered. Her sister immediately snapped the light on and sat up in bed. "So tell me everything," she demanded. "Did they make you queen again?"

Stacy shook her head. "They voted Darius King, though."

Emily scowled. "That figures." Then she looked at her sister with concern. "So did you regret going then?"

"Not at all!" Stacy was emphatic. "I had the best time of my life," she assured her sister, "really."

"But it really stinks that Darius should be given rewards after what he did!" Emily continued to fume.

"That's the way of the world." Stacy sat on her sister's bed and crossed her legs. "Don't expect that just because we're doing the "right things" God will give us wealth and health and success. *Are the servants greater than the Master?*" Stacy quoted scripture to remind her sister that Jesus had said we, like He did, must pick up our cross and carry it. "*The world has always loved it's own,*" she continued to paraphrase Scripture. "I wouldn't be surprised if Darius were one day elected the mayor of this city. Nor," she did not hesitate to add, "would it bother me. Neither money nor success can bring a person the least bit of happiness. Of this I am completely sure."

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"How was it?" Stacy dropped into the chair beside the young girl's bed. Her mother following close behind her, took the other vacant seat.

"Painful." Junie grimaced as she changed position.

"Painful, but worth it. Just wait til you see her!"

"I can't wait. Where is she?"

"They had to clean her up and weigh her properly." She reached for the control to her hospital bed and raised the top part

so that she was sitting up. "What's in the bag?"

Stacy had almost forgotten. "Oh, We have presents." She handed Junie the shopping bag full of packages wrapped in delicate pastels. "Open the big one first. Grandma Annie made it."

Junie fumbled with the wrapping, finally managing to extricate a lovely white and pink quilt. "It's so soft!" the younger girl exclaimed, hugging it to her cheek.

Just then the nurse re-entered with a freshly-scrubbed baby-fragrant bundle. She handed her to Junie. "She's missing her momma," she said.

"Her momma's missing her," Junie hugged her close. "Do you want to hold her, Stacy...? Rose...?"

Stacy spoke before her mother got the chance. "Could I...?"

Junie smiled and gently transferred the tiny child into Stacy's waiting arms. "You are so precious," Stacy murmured, sniffing her impossibly soft cheek. Then, with a glint in her eye and a sidelong glance, she said, "I firmly hope your momma didn't make a mistake when she named you after St. Anastasia." She shot a quick look at her mother.

Rose didn't miss a beat. "Oh, well at least you 'will rise again'", she said, and they both laughed. Junie laughed too, even though she didn't know why.

THE END

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