

Chapter VII

Grimaldi began each day with a prayer that he learned about ten years earlier. It was called centering.

He sat in the flowered arm chair by the window in his bedroom, feet squarely on the floor, arms resting on the arms of the chair, palms up, head back, and he focused on his heart of hearts, the quiet place where God dwelled in him.

Images and thoughts having to do with the school crisis, the teenager that died, his meeting with chancellor and Collins the lawyer swam in his head.

“Love,” he prayed and came back to the quiet place.

Then he thought of Katie, saw her face again, and a stream of images came to mind, one of which spoke boldly.

“Are you called to the priesthood?”

It was a question he had thought about before he married Katie. Becoming clergy was something that people often mentioned to him even after he married.

“Have you thought of becoming a deacon?”

He had, but he never felt deep inside that was what God wanted. He was a lay person, and that was good enough.

“Love,” he prayed out loud and came back to the center.

At different times, his prayer word was different.

Once it was Abba, Daddy. Another time it was simply God, Almighty God, creator of heaven and earth, creator, for whom he was above everything else indebted, but came to know through Christ.

``Love."

Through the prayer he had experienced moments of clarity and others of utter desolation.

He'd learned from a 13th-century mystic the image that was to help him: that of being in a dense fog or cloud. You simply can't see but a few feet in any direction, your mind is dulled from the cottony surroundings. The only thing to do is wait, to put your energy into waiting, being open, because God is there.

In the darkness, God is there.

Knowing God came through momentary encounters in this environment, when all guards are down, the senses are suspended, and God is there.

In the darkest times, it seemed that God was never there. He learned early on that some days were better than others, and it didn't pay to compare them. Regardless, there was a degree of assurance that he came away with that helped him, and today was no different.

But when he got into work, Grimaldi found that the briefing with the bishop had been postponed. So he walked over to the diocesan archives to spend some time going through old newspapers to find articles having to do with closings and policies of the diocese that made the news.

``Brother Thomas," Grimaldi called from the doorway to the archivist's office in the basement of the chancery. He could see the piles of artifacts and papers the brother had been accumulating for decades at the job. The assortment seemed to grow like plants that flourished under Brother Thomas' care.

``Over here," a scratchy voice answered.

Grimaldi walked in.

The white-haired man sat on a stool. He was bent over some sheets of paper. He glanced up at his visitor.

“Ah, Grimaldi,” he said. “Too busy to talk. Help yourself. Just got the first pieces of Bishop Totten's papers.”

Brother Thomas looked up at Grimaldi. Without waiting for a question, he spoke again.

“Bishop Totten. First bishop of the Deer River Diocese.”

Then he was back at work.

The cagey old archivist had grown in Grimaldi's esteem from the moment they'd met. Grimaldi made frequent use of the archives.

He'd learned Brother Thomas had a tendency to hoard things, but this tendency was balanced perfectly with the complementary tendency to share the things he uncovered.

When Grimaldi asked about schools, Brother Thomas provided him with a lecture that ended abruptly with, “But you'd better see for yourself.”

He led Grimaldi to a well-lighted corner of the room and pointed to some filing cabinets.

“You'll find anything you need to know about the diocese's schools there.”

The old man cleared a pile of papers from a table top.

“Work here,” he said.

“Efficient operation,” Grimaldi said. “I didn't know you discovered filing cabinets.”

The man looked at him over the tops of his eye glasses.

“If I didn't know better, Grimaldi,” he said, “I think that was a stab at humor.”

Grimaldi got to work.

Within an hour he found that twenty-five years earlier the diocese was having fund drives to raise money for a new regional school. The concept was similar to the one the school office was promoting again, and what Grimaldi was supposed to be preparing the people for. Of course, he didn't have any of the details.

The more things change, the more they stay the same, he thought.

Two weeks after the regionalization plan was announced, the school office said it was beginning a new program to send students from parishes with schools that were filled to capacity to parishes with school that had vacancies.

A novel concept. He smiled.

But elementary and high schools weren't the only area that apparently stayed the same.

At the college level, there seemed to be some turmoil. One headline read, “Universities tangle with identities.” Turned out the story discussed efforts to maintain a Catholic university's need for the freedom to raise questions and inquire about the nature of things without jeopardizing its Catholicity.

It was only a few short years ago, in the 1980s, when Charlie Curran took Catholic University of America to court for revoking his license to teach theology, despite the fact that he was tenured. Curran was pushing the limits about birth control, abortion, and medical ethics in his classes, careful to tell his students what the church taught and where he deviated, but, nonetheless, engaging in speculative theology.

If Grimaldi remembered correctly, the Vatican was upset about the amount of publicity Curran was getting. Since CUA was the sole Catholic university in America with a Vatican constitution, here was an opportunity for the Vatican to exert itself. Curran lost the case, based on separation of church and state.

Any church in the United States can do anything it wants to violate human rights as long as it does so in the name of God, Grimaldi thought, and continued turning pages.

This basic principle of American life was clearly demonstrated as Curran tried to find a new job, regardless of whether or not the schools were Catholic. When Curran was up for a chair at a prestigious Southern school, the bishop of the diocese there interfered, reportedly, and made sure he didn't get it. Exactly how that happened, Grimaldi wasn't sure. He was sure about things like that happening, though.

Trouble with the church was that it had the answer in Christ, but it had a long way to go in dealing with human beings. It didn't have a clue when it came to treating people with dignity.

Jesus came to stop the oppressors. Wherever there was oppression Christ was at work. Grimaldi was convinced of this. He'd seen it over and over again as a reporter, but experienced it even more as a human being. Christ would never side with an oppressor even if he had the insignia of the Vatican coat of arms sown into his underwear.

This was even truer if the insignia were worn like a badge and understood by its wearer as an opportunity to abuse others. Anyone who worked within the structure of the church was tempted to become an oppressor, he thought. Anyone who thought they had the answer could become the oppressor.

The trick was to become a liberator. That's what drew Grimaldi to journalism. That was where he could work with the truth, uncovering stories that had to do with abuse. Sometimes it worked; sometimes it didn't, because there were restrictions on what could be printed, even in America.

The search always started with a simple question and ended up with people, mostly the poor.

There was the boy who was now dead.

None were poorer or more voiceless than the homeless man murdered in the factory. Senseless. Yet, he looked at both deaths as sacrifices. As long as people got what they wanted, every so often they will sacrifice a few of the worthless to some unnamed evil thing. As long as we can go on with our lives, accumulating something, sailing in a beautiful place, skiing down some white mountain, buying bigger games, a few deaths don't mean a thing.

It got so bad at one point, this way of thinking that Grimaldi began to equate sickness with sin. As long as there was sin there would be sickness. That way Katie's death became part of a recurring sacrifice. But he only let himself go so far.

The mystery of evil followed him like a stray cat.

The only consolation was to pray, ``Merciful God, Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me a sinner."

He prayed now as he thumbed through the old copies of the diocesan newspaper and some files that the old archivist had put out.

He laughed when he saw the file labeled Curran case, but didn't look through it.

He made a few photocopies of the information that interested him and stacked the materials neatly for the old man.

“So how goes it, Brother Thomas,” Grimaldi asked as the archivist appeared from behind some filing cabinets.

“As long as I'm down here with these things, everything is well,” he said. “Do you know they want me to retire? They're afraid that I'll kick the bucket. Don't they know it's as easy for a 45-year-old to kick off as it is for a 77-year-old?”

“Everything is neat and organized, just the way I like it. Nothing else in my life is as pleasing, which I suppose is okay, too, since I wouldn't want people to think I was in a rut.”

Outside, Grimaldi stopped at a vendor for a chilly dog and a diet Coke.

The green van with the white strip could be counted on to be at the curb in the same place day after day. The food was greasy spoon, but there was something about it that kept bringing him back. Maybe it was the woman who ran the operation. Dressed in peasant skirts and a body suit with a bandana wrapped around her head, Suzy flipped burgers and tossed salads and kept the line moving, especially in cold weather. She had blotchy skin and a scar on the right side of her face. He couldn't help but think that she taught dancing lessons at night to bring in some extra case.

She smiled at the regulars, but wouldn't give the time of day to strangers.

He waited along with the others, ones that acknowledged each other with a nod.

A warm feeling of belonging swept over him as he waited and watched. The gypsy put an extra helping of chilly sauce on the hot dog and wrapped it, grabbed the soda from a red cooler, and stuffed the food and the drink into a small brown paper bag.

He handed her a twenty dollar bill.

``Something smaller," she said, reducing her smile to a grim expression and holding on to the bag.

``Come on, Suzy," he said. It was the first time he mentioned her name.

``Sir," she said. ``I can't make change."

``Suzy," he said, ``Come on, I'm out here almost everyday. I'm not going to give you a phony bill."

``Something smaller," she repeated.

He could feel the eyes of the people on him. As she spoke, her dark gypsy eyes looked directly at him. The grim expression had turned to one of calm defiance. He was in a foreign country now, and there was no way to get through.

``Okay," he said and smiled his own version of the grim expression. A sadness filled him.

He came up with a smaller amount.

She gave him his change. As he walked way, she called after him. ``My name is not Suzy. It's Susan."

He pulled his collar up around his neck to protect himself from a cold wind that had kicked up and nipped at him like a small dog, just enough irritation to have to pay attention.

Walking up the back alley behind the office, he noticed the large holes in the ground. He guessed the rat population around there was still considerable.

He worked one summer when he was a senior in high school with the maintenance crew at the chancery.

At the beginning of summer and at its end, there was a rat harvest. The crew, which had become fairly proficient at destroying rats, pumped poison down the holes and waited for the drugged rats to emerge.

There was the day when Grimaldi was cutting grass after the last poisoning. He'd come up the bank near the same alley.

At first he thought it was a puppy. He cut the motor and took a few steps in the direction of the animal before he realized it was a rat, black in the sunlight, laying belly down.

He must have watched for forty-five minutes as the damned thing wasted away. The poison turned the animal's intestines literally to rock. Then the body would shut down. When it finally did, it lay there in the sun, eyes rolled back in his head.

He didn't know what to do with it until one of the men came by. He pointed it out. The man laughed and got a shovel.

“Here,” he said, “when you're finished mowing grab this and pick the thing up. It goes in the incinerator.”

The large holes in the ground here now told him the rats were still a force.

The alley opened on to the lot where he parked his car, at the rear of the office building. He stood at the rear entrance fumbling for the building key when he glanced over to his Reliant. Did something move inside?

He fumbled for the key while he stared over at the car.

He must be getting paranoid.

He finished the chilly dog in one bite. Warily, he began walking over to the car.

Then, as if he remembered something, Grimaldi turned quickly around. Up the stairs to the second floor landing, he saw he would be able to get a better look. And it would be safer, too.

He was right. From the landing he could see down into the Reliant, where someone was working under the dash board.

Grimaldi ran up the stairs the closest office and called the police. Someone was stealing his radio.

When he got back to the landing, Grimaldi looked down into the car again. This time he saw a face staring up at him. A deep chill shook his body as the face receded into the shadows in the car.

Grimaldi put his soda down on the window sill. His body quivered.

Then, a hooded figure burst out the driver's side door and scooted around the building.

Grimaldi was down the stairs, through the heavy metal doors, and to his car quickly. The door had been left open. He knocked into it as he passed, trying to keep an eye open for the perpetrator.

As he came around the opposite side of the building, he realized that this was the same route he had taken the night of the shooting.

He stopped dead in his tracks. His heart pounding, Grimaldi focused his thoughts and tried to catch his breath. Conceivably, someone could have shot the teenager and run down the sidewalk to a car waiting on the street in front of the school between the time he heard the shot and circled the building.

A siren cut the air and interrupted him.

There was another noise he heard that night, now that he was close to the occurrence, to remembering how things played out.

What was it?

He started walking back to the parking lot and got lost in a train of thoughts.

A police officer would be waiting for him when he got back to his car.

Then again the killer could have run in the opposite direction to the street, toward the front of the cathedral.

Or even cut back toward the parking lot.

Perhaps, if he could track down the woman he saw cross the church parking lot, he could find out something more.

Grimaldi loosened his tie and slipped off his blazer and slung it over his shoulder.

He took another survey of the territory before cutting through the back yard of the rectory. The church loomed high above all the surrounding buildings. Its spire, topped with a simple silver cross, entirely still in the noon sunlight, barely cast a shadow.

His eye ran down the east side of the building. He had to look twice, but in an area where there was shadow, he noticed a car. He walked up the sidewalk. It was a silver BMW. He didn't see how he could have missed it.

He scanned the area again where he found two people standing precisely at the spot where the body had been found.

Grimaldi walked over to them.

“Hello,” he said.

The man, tall and slender, reminded him of someone, but Grimaldi wasn't able to place him.

“Terrible thing that happened here,” the man said.

“Terrible,” Grimaldi said.

He introduced himself.

“I'm over at the chancery, just through there.” He pointed up the sidewalk.

“Jack Grimaldi,” the woman repeated. “You found my Chris.” Her grip on the man's arm tightened.

“Agnes Watson,” she said introducing herself. “I'm Chris' aunt.”

She shook his hand.

“This is Nelson Johnson, a friend of Chris' and mine.”

Johnson said hello and shook Grimaldi's hand.

Where in the world did Grimaldi see this man before?

“Chris was a good boy,” Watson said. “He never did anything wrong or no body no harm. Something happened here ...” She stopped in mid-sentence and tried to compose herself.

Grimaldi was struck by her sadness. He could see she was a beautiful woman. He could also see that the two people were markedly different. His clothing was neat, but tattered. Her's was elegant. He was curious about whom the owner of the car would be and decided it had to be hers.

“Nelson will tell you Chris was an innocent victim. Something happened that was terribly wrong. He wouldn't let himself get mixed up in anything like this. He had a future.”

“And he wouldn't let himself get mixed up in anything too bad,” Johnson said.

“There are plenty of rumors circulating,” Grimaldi said. He surprised himself. “Some people are saying it was a drug drop. What makes you think it was something else?”

“The kids on these streets,” Johnson said, “live fast and die faster. They're the ones who live for the thrills. But we live for something bigger and we all form something grander.”

What was he getting to? Grimaldi wondered.

“We are a church, the People of God,” Johnson said. “We believe in Jesus Christ. So when we die, death is different, death is beaten down. I have no doubt that something good will come of this tragedy.”

“I've looked around here,” he continued, “and I've figured something out. You wait here.”

He ran up the incline.

“Nelson is a good man, but he's a little overboard with this Jesus stuff,” Watson said.

Grimaldi listened to her apology as he watched Johnson climb through some brush and over a waist-high wrought iron fence, and disappear.

“Can you see me?” he yelled.

“No,” Grimaldi yelled back and looked at the woman.

The man climbed out from his hiding place and began walking slowly down the hill.

“You some kind of Boy Scout?” Grimaldi asked Johnson.

``Two places they could have gone from there," Johnson said, catching his breath. He pointed to at the church building and toward the rectory.

``You are a crazy man," Watson said.

``From up there you can see the doorway to the rectory and this spot clearly. It's a totally unimpeded view."

``Sounds like someone was waiting for him," Grimaldi said.

``It sure does."

``Nelson," the woman said, ``let's go."

She started back to the car.

``She is a beautiful woman," Grimaldi said. He surprised himself again.

``That she is," Johnson said and shook his head.

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