

Letters From the Dead

George R. Hopkins

Book I

*We lay aside letters never to read them again,
and at last we destroy them out of discretion,
and so disappears the most beautiful, the most immediate breath of life,
irrecoverably for ourselves and for others.*

Goethe

1

Mary Jane MacIntyre lay in her bed fingering her rosary beads. She looked down at her hands as she started the first decade of the Sorrowful Mysteries – the Agony in the Garden. Her fingers were bent and twisted by arthritis. She looked at the brown spots and wrinkled skin on the backs of her hands. And her mind began to wander.

“Peggy, you’ve got to tell the police....”

Tears rolled down Margaret’s cheeks. Her hands and voice trembled. “I can’t, Mary Jane. He’ll kill me. You don’t know what he’s like.”

“You can’t let him do this to you, Peggy. You can’t let him get away with this.”

Like a sheet of newspaper caught in the wind, the voices within her skipped from place to place as another voice within voiced a series of Hail Marys.

She lifted her eyes to see the black and white picture of three young people framed in a faded leather frame on her night table. She didn’t need her reading glasses to recognize the three

standing, smiling on the sandy beach of Coney Island. He stood in the middle with one arm around each girl. He was tall and thin, and his dark hair was ruffled. Both girls were laughing. One wore what looked like a short shirt with two thin bands running around the bust and the bottom. The other wore a sleeveless dark woolen jersey tank suit that clung tighter to her body with a light belt around the waist. The bathing suit was actually navy blue and the belt white rubber, Mary Jane remembered.

The words of the prayer in the background peeped in again as she started the second Sorrowful Mystery. "... lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil...."

She was the only one left now. They had gone. He first, then she. Mary Jane was the only one left now - the only one who knew.

The door to her room opened a bit as a nurse looked in. Ms. MacIntyre was saying her rosary again as she did every day. The nurse decided not to interrupt her reverie. She would come back later.

Mary Jane heard the door open and close. Her ears had not lost what her legs, hands, and eyes had. She may be old, but she still could hear. Sometimes, as she continued to pray the rosary and try to concentrate on the second Sorrowful Mystery – the Scourging at the Pillar, the voices of her past were as clear as the opening of the door.

"Yeah, and what are you going to do about it?" The voice was gruff and loud with a slight touch of a coarse Irish brogue. She heard the thud again as he punched her in the chest and threw her against the car. "You mind your own bloody business, you little whore, or I'll do the same to you."

"I hope you die," the young woman's voice replied. She saw herself running down the street screaming, "I hope you die. I hope you die...."

She heard his laugh again. Its icy tone sent shivers through her body. Howling like a madman, he lifted his flask of Bushmills and shouted, "Not before I take your little sister with me."

"Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners...." Mary Jane's eyes moved to her end table where she kept the letters. No one seemed to write letters very much anymore. At least she never got any. But who was left to send her any? The letters in the drawer were sacred to her. They held a secret she had kept buried within her for a long time. Maybe too long. Soon it would be her time. Should she tell someone? What good would come of it now?

On the wall by the side of the window, the MacIntyre coat of arms hung, another remembrance of the past, a gift her father had given her on her twelfth birthday. She recalled his stories about the ancient MacIntyre clan and how one of its earliest lords cut off his thumb to plug a hole in a sinking ship. He regaled her with stories as she sat in his lap at the kitchen table in their fourth floor railroad apartment and he drank his Pabst Blue Ribbon beer and told her about how the MacIntyre family was a proud clan of warriors and poets that survived battles and adversity. How many times had he made her shout with him, the MacIntyre war cry, "*Cruachan*"?

Her eyes could just make out the two red eagles with outstretched wings, the ship with furled sails, the red fist clutching a cross, and the hand with a dagger protruding from a knight's helmet on the family crest. She couldn't see the family motto from where she lay, but she knew it by heart – "*Per ardua*" – through difficulties. Life had been a series of difficulties, yet here she was – the only one of the group left with a secret buried in the letters which pressed on her heart.

It was time to let go. But she had to tell someone before she left. "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death."

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2

As Detective Thomas Cavanaugh drove to District Attorney J. R. Coyle's office in downtown Brooklyn, his mind was racing in all directions. Did he really want to get married? What was his half-brother's relationship with the Cuban nurse he had brought back with him from Havana? Ordinarily, he probably wouldn't care, but his brother was a priest. And what did J. R. Coyle call him down to his office for? He knew Judas Ripperda Coyle didn't like him, but what could he actually do to him? Coyle was the Brooklyn District Attorney, not the Police Commissioner. Cavanaugh's record was exemplary. Well, okay, there may have been a few hiccups along the way, but he did his job. As a homicide detective, he had been involved in a number of high profile cases, including the shooting of two teenage robbers of a bodega, the Maple Syrup Murderer, the mysterious vigilante mob killer, an international assassin, the kidnapers of the former Mayor's grandson, a Cuban drug cartel, a cyber-bullying case that resulted in the death of a young girl, a Russian ring of prostitutes. Sometimes his methods, he knew, were unorthodox, to say the least, but, he reasoned, he produced results and got a lot of bad people off the streets of New York.

Cavanaugh never cared for the publicity that followed him like a dark shadow. The more he tried to avoid it, the more he seemed to step in it and cause more controversy. J. R. Coyle had no use for him. To Coyle, the detective was more a problem than an asset. The one thing they both agreed upon was they didn't like each other.

But when Cavanaugh was told the newly elected Mayor John Dearie, Police Chief John Mullen, Chief of Internal Affairs Jeanette Hibble, and Deputy Inspector Kit Krug, and wanted to see him in D. A. Coyle's office, Cavanaugh knew he was in trouble.

Driving down Bedford Avenue, Cavanaugh thought how wonderful it would be if the world were made of nice people - really good people, not like the ones who see you when you are signaling on the highway and then they speed up so you can't get into the lane you want to. Sometimes he felt like he'd like to have a disintegrating ray gun on his car that he could press and eliminate these inconsiderate low-lives from the planet. But the world's not like that, is it? Maybe he'd run out of rays too fast anyway.

The elevator was broken when Cavanaugh arrived at Coyle's office building. After climbing three floors, he sat in Coyle's outer office for forty-seven minutes thinking and fuming. To Detective Cavanaugh, District Attorney J. R. Coyle was the lowest form of pond scum he could think of. To begin with, he was a lawyer. Add to that Coyle's political aspirations for Mayor and who knows, maybe governor and even president. Nothing would surprise Cavanaugh nowadays. Coyle's ambitions were boundless. And he was ruthless.

It wasn't anything personal, but Cavanaugh just didn't like lawyers. Maybe, he thought, it was a job hazard from being a cop for too many years. He had seen too many sleaze bag lawyers get crooks and perverts off on technicalities.

All around Coyle's outer office were plaques given to J.R. from various ass-kissing organizations. There was a gold framed picture of him shaking Barack Obama's hand, an honorary jurisprudence degree from City College of New York, even a certificate of appreciation from Jerry Lewis.

The guy made Cavanaugh sick.

And here he sat in a worn red leather chair directly opposite a blonde secretary with the IQ of a microcephalic. She wore a tight - way too tight - low cut blue sweater. When he came in and signed in, he could have sworn he could see her belly button. From her perky nipples he

doubted she wore a bra. In fact, he knew she didn't. He also doubted she was a virgin and would put his next pay check on good old J.R.'s familiarity with her entire body.

Cavanaugh felt Coyle was deliberately making him wait. The prick was like that. In addition to the Police Commissioner, Cavanaugh's lieutenant and captain were in there with him. He knew the meeting was about him. In addition to being a lawyer and being an aspiring politician, J. R. Coyle, he knew, hated his guts. Cavanaugh usually didn't care about people hating his guts. There were just too many of them. But this was different. Thinking about marriage made things different. He had a future to think about now. And it scared him.

The palms of his hands were wet. "What the hell is happening to me?" he thought. "What can he do to me? I'm a decorated New York City detective with a string of commendations."

But he knew he had embarrassed Coyle publicly when they were investigating the Maple Syrup Killer and during the cyber-bullying Grand Jury hearings, and Coyle didn't forget. Cavanaugh's thorough investigation of the cyber-bullying case that resulted in the death of a sophomore high school girl caused Coyle a lot of grief in the media and dampened his public image. And Cavanaugh's last little escapade left him a little vulnerable. He had left the country and taken some unauthorized leave. It's the leave, he saw as his weak point. "But he'll never be able to prove I went to Cuba," he thought. "At least I don't think he will."

"You ever been here before?"

Cavanaugh looked around thinking he just heard a female mouse speaking. It sounded like a Southern version of Minnie Mouse.

A few cracks later, he heard, "I ain't never seen you here before?"

It was the sexy blonde behind the big mahogany desk across from him. She looked like she was chewing a mouthful of *Triple Bubble* bubble gum. Cavanaugh decided quickly he'd bet his year's salary that J.R. was banging her.

"I'm here from the Department of Health," he heard himself saying. "Standard procedure in checking on all cases of venereal diseases. It's rare that one person can be the carrier for syphilis, gonorrhea, chlamydia, herpes and hepatitis all at once. But the D.A. is a special person. I just have to follow up on the number of people the district attorney has had sex with in the past month."

Miss Vacant Mind's mouth dropped. Cavanaugh envisioned a fly entering between her Botox swollen lips and getting stuck to her bubble gum.

"It won't take long," he said. "I've just returned from the bathhouse and by law I have to tell him what I discovered from his intimate contacts there."

The blonde suddenly got up and headed for the door. She was holding her mouth and almost tripped on her six inch stiletto heels. Cavanaugh moved aside thinking she was going to puke. She raced out of the door just as J. R. Coyle's door opened. He looked surprised as he watched his blonde secretary's tight ass vanish into the hallway. He turned to Cavanaugh abruptly like a hungry tiger.

"I don't know what happened to her," Cavanaugh stated in a monotone, matter-of-fact voice. "She just up and left."

J. R. Coyle stared at Cavanaugh with absolute hate in his eyes. Cavanaugh smiled. "It couldn't have been anything I said." Deny and delay. The lawyers use it all the time. "Maybe we should wait until she comes back."

Cavanaugh thought he saw white foam starting to ooze from Coyle's mouth. Maybe, he realized, it was just wishful thinking or his unnaturally white teeth.

"Get in here, Cavanaugh!" Coyle shouted. "You've been asking for this for a long time, and it's my pleasure to give it to you."

Cavanaugh thought about answering him, but realized for once maybe the prick was right. He knew his career might be on the line, but somehow he didn't care anymore. The only thing he was sure about was J. R.'s little sweetie with the IQ of a sparrow would not be available today for any previously planned matinee. He knew it may not save his job, but it was something.

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3

When Tom Cavanaugh and his half-brother Jack Bennis returned to New York from Cuba, there were a lot of loose ends to tie up. For Father Bennis, who was a Jesuit priest, he faced the additional problem of María Isabelle. Maybe it was a foolish move to bring the young nurse María Isabelle back with them from Cuba, but he couldn't leave her there after the shootings. She was vulnerable. But now he didn't know what to do with her. And try as he did to avoid the fact, he felt himself attracted to her. It seemed to be a recurring theme with him. He was attracted to women. But he was also a priest and had taken a vow of celibacy.

The first problem was finding a place for her to live. He needed time for this and called an old friend, Angelo Senamo, who was pastor of St. John Berchmans on Staten Island.

Ironically, Saint John Berchmans, who was a Jesuit priest as both Fr. Bennis and Fr. Senamo were, is the patron saint of altar boys and young people. The years had hardened Fr. Senamo and enlarged his stomach. Yes, he had a couple of spare rooms in the rectory where they could stay, but Fr. Senamo was clear – he did not like it and emphasized it would be a temporary

situation. He could use Fr. Bennis with the daily duties of the parish, and she could temporarily cook and clean. A priest who spoke English and a good cook and cleaning lady were positive incentives. The fact that Jack Bennis had once saved Senamo's reputation when Neville Lawley, a disgruntled former altar boy with formerly undiagnosed histrionic personality disorder, accused Fr. Senamo of sexual impropriates was another thing.

Fr. Senamo was innocent, but faced a long, ugly, much publicized ordeal if the young man persisted in his claims. Senamo only knew Jack Bennis casually through the CYO Basketball program and a parish retreat. Fr. Senamo loved working with young people and his enthusiasm could easily be mistaken by some who looked to damage the reputation of Catholic priests.

Jack Bennis offered to help when he heard of the circumstances. And he did. Fr. Senamo didn't know how, but Neville Lawley confessed to the police that it was all a scheme to get a settlement from the Church. He had seen it done in other places and it seemed so simple. Why was he recanting his claims? He said he wanted to tell the truth and he was uncomfortable about lying about a good man. The police thought there was more to the story. Fr. Senamo thought there was more to the story, too. But that was all Neville Lawley would say.

When Fr. Senamo questioned Fr. Bennis about Lawley's sudden change of heart, all he would say was he was glad he could help in some small way. He never said what that "small way" was, but Fr. Senamo always felt it was more than a "small way."

The end result was that Fr. Senamo removed himself from involvement with youth programs. He steeled himself against possible allegations. He withdrew from associations and programs that formerly had enlivened and benefited the community. He lost his mirth and enthusiasm, and gradually became a cold, bitter, angry man who happened to be a priest.

Senamo felt an obligation to Jack Bennis, and so he agreed reluctantly to let him and the nurse from Cuba stay at the rectory in separate rooms until they could find a suitable place for her to live and work.

On the third night of their stay, after María Isabelle served dinner of roast beef, baked potatoes, and salad, she excused herself and went to bed. When she had left the room, Fr. Senamo poured himself a tall glass of James Oatley Tic Tok Sauvignon Semillon. After twirling the wine in his glass for a minute, he asked, "How long do you plan to stay here, Jack?"

Bennis looked up from his plate and met his eyes. "Well, you're short of priests and you have the room"

"I don't mean you," Fr. Senamo interrupted. "I mean her!"

"Then say what you mean, Angelo"

"I can't have an unmarried woman staying in the rectory. It's a source of scandal."

"You seem to know something about scandal, don't you?"

Fr. Senamo slammed his fist down on the table spilling some of his wine. "Those allegations were false! You knew that. That was a long time ago."

"Time is a funny thing. Sometimes it flies by. Sometimes it seems to crawl. We never know how much we have of it, yet it never seems to go away."

Fr. Senamo took a long gulp of his wine. "There's bound to be talk, Jack. Rumors about you and her. I see the way she looks at you. I can't let that happen here."

Jack Bennis rose from his chair and looked around the dark mahogany paneled walls. They seemed somehow suffocating. "Don't worry, Angelo, María Isabelle starts a new job tomorrow at the Von Doussa Health Care and Rehabilitation Center as a nursing assistant." He hesitated and then added, "We'll soon be out of your hair."

Bennis picked his empty plate and glass from the table and walked into the kitchen. Fr. Senamo examined the legs rolling down the sides of the wine glass in his hands. He watched the steady, inexorable flow. The wine was supple, and graceful with a lemongrass aroma. Anxiousness enveloped him suddenly like a cold, unexpected breeze and he looked toward the kitchen. Then his eyes returned to the white wine in his glass. What did he mean by “soon”? And what did he mean by “we”?

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4

At a truck stop along Route 9 in New Jersey near Freehold, well after midnight, a man in a black hooded sweatshirt stopped and went straight toward the men’s room, carefully avoiding the surveillance cameras as best he could. The door was locked. He moved back and stood in the shadows waiting for the door to open. Finally, a tall, bearded man wearing a studded Harley Davidson black leather jacket, a black Nazi helmet and a tattoo of a boa constrictor creeping up his neck emerged.

Instinctively, the figure in black moved behind the building and watched the brute stretch his arms, spew a rattled cough, spit a blob of yellow-green phlegm on the concrete and lumber away. When he heard the roar of a motorcycle and saw the Harley leave the station, he left the shadows. Putting on a pair of Playtex gloves, he bent down and picked up the discarded sputum in clean tissue and placed it in a zip-lock bag.

He smiled as he thought about his next steps. They would pay. In time, they all would pay.

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