

The Road to Emmaus

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Halfway through his vacation, Father Jim Gallagher could tell it was not working out. He closed his breviary, which he had been trying to read propped up against the pillows of his bed in his mother's house. Then he slung the prayer book. It skimmed the desk top, hurling the plastic stand-up calendar to the floor, and hit the wall with a dull thud. Father Jim lay back against the cushions and shut his eyes.

He wanted to drift away from the experiences of fourteen fraudulent days of dinners with relatives, and neighbors, people whose names he remembered but whose faces in the intervening years had lost their structures and sagged like loose slipcovers. People whom his mother had invited to congratulate her son, the priest, who had recently left Holy Spirit parish, Cold Spring, New York, and was about to begin a new life, at age forty-two, as a missionary to the people of Costa Rica.

He had expected the enthusiasm of so many people to replenish his zeal, but that had not happened. He felt no conviction that he could or even wanted to improve the life of one Costa Rican.

The jangle of the doorbell startled him. Then he remembered that his mother had invited the ladies from her charismatic prayer group for dessert. He rose from the bed and tucked his black shirt into his slacks. He adjusted his Roman collar, put on his shoes, and walked into the hall.

As he descended the stairs, the ladies gaped up at him from the living room. Stepping closer, he tried to smile sincerely, but his face felt as stiff as his collar and his smile was a caricature.

"Don't think we don't know what you've been up to in New York these last fifteen years."

His back muscles tensed, and his hands began to perspire.

"Your mother's purse is bulging with newspaper clippings."

"Was it the day-care center for the elderly you started first?"

"The teen basketball tournament."

His mother slid her arm around his waist.

"After that first tourney, my Jimmy got his boys to look out for the old souls in the neighborhood who were too scared of the gangs to buy themselves milk. Jimmy's boys walked them to the store like vigilantes."

As she spoke, she brushed a few specks of lint from the back of his shirt where it had lain against the white chenille bedspread. He could feel the pride in her hand.

"I couldn't have done any of it by myself."

"The *Times* said you singlehandedly turned the neighborhood around."

His mother led them into the dining room.

He sat down uneasily. He did not like to be reminded of the good he had done.

"So, then you started a soup kitchen?"

The question was unexpected. It made him remember the smell of pine oil from scrubbed floors, Sister Betty's cinnamon coffee, Sara in her pea jacket and red beret holding a jar of honey.

"Lay members of the parish saw the need."

"Wasn't there a newspaper picture of you painting the kitchen in that abandoned house?"

"Yes, but others did most of the work."

"Nonsense," he heard his mother say. "He was there every Saturday night lugging baskets of vegetables and whatever leftovers he could gather from the markets on the Island. Jimmy was the first to arrive and the last to leave."

He remembered the obsession to get that dilapidated shell fixed up, and the soup kitchen in operation. He had been driven to lay linoleum floors at two in the morning.

"When did you start the kitchen, Father Jim?"

It had been his last project.

Before he could answer, he heard his mother respond for him.

He watched his own face and the rumpled faces of the grey-haired ladies reflected in the mirror above the buffet.

Someone touched his arm. Turning to the left, he looked into the doughy face of Mrs. Gormley, a woman whose son, Tim, the fastest runner on his grade-school baseball team, he had always envied.

Pressing his wrist with her damp palm, she whispered, "The doctors don't have much hope of stopping my sister Winnie's cancer this time. Could you say a few extra prayers for her?"

He nodded.

She squeezed his arm and continued, "If you pray, God will cure her."

Father Jim felt his face burn. Who did they think he was? He didn't have God on the other end of his phone. He stood up, and said that he had an appointment up at the rectory that he had forgotten about.

Mrs. O'Neil thrust an envelope into his hand.

"Buy a little something for yourself, Father."

The others opened their handbags and searched among change purses, bottles of aspirin, and rosary beads for similar white envelopes addressed to Father Jim in Catholic school Palmer scrawl.

"This isn't necessary, really. The order provides everything."

For them, his refusal verified his holiness. While he stood there awkwardly holding the cards, Mrs. Gormley got down on her knees.

"Your blessing, Father."

"Yes, your blessing."

"Please," said Father Jim. "Please don't kneel."

But they didn't listen. All five of them, including his mother, who had to be helped because of her arthritis, were kneeling in front of him.

He laid the envelopes on the table by his plate. In the mirror he watched himself raise his right hand to bless them. The setting sun caught the reflection of his ring in the glass, bathing his mirrored hand in a burst of light. He heard the contrast in the monotone of his prayer and the vitality of his mother's amen.

He walked across the living room and through the open door into the hazy sunlight of the sultry August evening. He stopped on the porch and rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. He had lied about his appointment. Like a retiree, he had no place to go.

He meandered up the Anderson Street hill toward Woodale Road feeling fragile. Each lie he told hollowed him out. He lied so regularly now he felt as thin as paper.

He headed toward Pastorious park. Hearing the tinkling crystal sound of a woman's laughter, he glanced to his left and saw a curly-haired blonde holding a drink and leaning against the wooden railing of a side porch on an old Victorian someone had painted beige and blue. The way she held her head, tilted a little to the side as though she were listening intently to some inner voice, reminded him of Sara. Sara had been his first volunteer from outside his parish at the soup kitchen. She had read about the project in the newspaper and arrived because she said, "God didn't want people spending all their time in church praying; he wanted them out in the world fixing it up." The first time he saw her, she was holding two enormous jars of honey.

"What is this?" he had asked.

They needed flour, vegetables, and meat.

"You planning on making honey soup?"

"Bees," she had said. "My husband keeps bees. You use this instead of sugar. The beauty is, it's free."

On the porch sitting on a wicker rocker behind a newspaper was a man. Father Jim wondered if the man was the woman's husband. Sara's husband, the beekeeper, was tall, thin, and balding. He wore metal-rimmed glasses and was ordinary in every way, except he was Sara's husband. Husband and wife, some intangible unity, that made Sara often say "we did this" or "we went here." The beekeeper would be Sara's husband until he died or she died. That was Church law.

Father Jim strolled toward a bench in the park. Sara had said Church laws were detours on the path to God. He had called her a heretic. She laughed at him, pointing out that the church now permitted women to distribute communion. He said that laws could be changed, but until they were, it was wrong to break them.

He sat down and noticed a group of boys playing baseball in the meadow. There was a hit and the baserunner started to move. Father Jim thought he should stop at third and not risk an out, but he kept going and made home.

Beyond the baseball game on the edge of the woods, he noticed a woman's long hair spilling across the chest of a man she was nestled against. Father Jim imagined that the woman's hair smelled like apples because Sara's had the first time he got that close. He was sitting on her couch, and she was on the floor in the center of the soup kitchen's monthly bills, sorting them into piles for food, repairs, clothing and supplies, and miscellaneous expenses. She held up a bill from the drugstore for vitamin C, not sure where to file it. And he grabbed her arm and kissed the palm of her hand, then her fingers, and then the pale blue veins in her wrist, tracing them with his tongue. She knelt on the floor between his legs so that her body leaned against him. Never had a woman been so close to him. She moved her cushioning body easily across his. So this is what lovers do, he remembered thinking. And he remembered how abruptly he abandoned himself to the feeling. Never had such pure excitement seemed so joyously good, so compelling in its invitation, so insatiable in its demand that he love another in a way he never had. My God, Sara. My Sara, God. He remembered crying out. Opening his eyes, he remembered his guilt, as wild and terrifying as lightning cracking a tree open in the front yard. That day he ran from her living room slipping on the papers, losing his balance, and banging his knee on the doorjamb. But he returned.

There had been days he desired her obsessively, when he would call her at six A.M. and let the phone ring once, jealous that she might be making love to the beekeeper. He would arrive at her house at 8:30 when he saw the school bus with her children on it pass the Wawa where he was parked. He would interrogate her, panicked that she might not need him enough. Then he would make love to her in the sewing room among the bolts of cloth or on the living room floor convinced by the intensity of his passion that God sanctioned their love. There had been other days when he vowed he would never touch her again, when he went off to the soup kitchen to scrub walls, or to peel potatoes and chop carrots and boil huge cauldrons of pea soup in penance for his lust.

When it got dark and he could no longer distinguish the outline of the couple, he left the park bench and strolled back toward Anderson Street. Sara had told him she could no longer live with her husband, and she had left him. Father Jim had wanted her, often desperately, but he wanted her permanently only when the soup kitchen didn't need him so much, when the Christmas liturgies were over, when he could find a reliable replacement for himself at the teen center, sometime in the future when he could tell his mother without disappointing her. Still Sara was always there on the other end of the phone when he had to talk to her about the scheduling of volunteers, the cheapest place to get potatoes, or the symbolism in a movie he had just seen. And there had been days when he had to talk to her about things like that. This inability to control his need for her made him jog the streets of Cold Spring hoping to catch a glimpse of her leading her children into one of the tiny shops in the business district. It made him arrive at the movie theater just as he knew she would be leaving with her husband.

He was sure his lack of control led to the interview with the Provincial. He felt that the embarrassed looks he had seen on his parishioners' faces when Sara was present may have reached the Provincial in the form of letters, and he was going to be confronted. He talked to Sara about this possibility, but truthfully those conversations never seemed real to him. It was like playing "what if" when he was a kid. He finally settled on what he would say as he drove to Father Lawton's residence. If asked directly he would say, "Yes. Yes, I have done what you think I have done." He would marry her and break the Church law because he didn't see how he could get on without her.

The Provincial was late for the ten o'clock appointment. It seemed he waited hours for Father Lawton in the prelate's study sunken in

a high-backed leather chair, staring at the crucifix reflected in the shiny surface of the Provincial's desk. The Provincial arrived noiselessly, like an apparition. He reached across the desk and shook Father Jim's hand. In the warmth of that handshake Father Jim touched the foundation of his life. And as Father Lawton moved backward and sat down in the swivel chair behind the oversized desk, he felt the firmness of it slip away. He would be alone. The pride in his mother's face when she ironed his black shirts would erode into revulsion. Even in death he would be separated from her, and from his fellow priests. With Sara he would live in a continuous state of adultery. Forever unforgiven. Forever separated.

Father Lawton moved some papers. He took out a large envelope and laid it on his desk. Then he folded his hands on the envelope and looked directly into Father Jim's eyes.

"You have been given one month's vacation starting on Saturday. After that, you will be reassigned."

The Provincial paused, not taking his eyes from Father Jim's face.

Very slowly he added, "For your own good." And then, "For the good of the order."

Father Jim did not ask why. He asked one question. Could he be assigned to the South American missions?

Father Lawton looked surprised. Then in a kindly voice he said he would look into it.

When Father Jim reached Germantown Avenue, he remembered that his mother's chiropractor was dropping in after he closed his office to wish him success. He decided on the spot to step into Flannigan's bar and have a scotch to steady his nerves.

The bar smelled the way he remembered it, a mixture of warm soup and cold beer glossed over by the comfortable aroma of old wood. Father Jim sat down at the end of the bar where it curved against the wall, and ordered a scotch and water. The same tiffany lamps hung above the dark wooden booths in the back, and the walls were still covered with 19th-century photographs of very Irish-looking families. There was a couple in a booth and two men talking at the far end of the bar. The waitress was setting up, filling ketchup bottles. The bartender was slicing lemons.

"It's just not healthy, the way he's been acting," the waitress said.

"Seems the same to me."

"Nah, Lenny. I tell you he's going into one of those depressions. Doesn't say two words anymore when he comes in here."

"So when did he ever say much?"

"He used to go on about how he was a starter on the Phillies' farm team way back when. Now, every night it's, 'How's the weather? What's new with the Phillies?' and that's it."

"Every night he has two Beefeaters, leaves me a buck and good-bye. The perfect customer."

The waitress shook her head and wiped up some spilled ketchup with a cloth she had taken from under the counter.

"It's just not healthy. His wife's been dead three or four years and he's still wearing that black tie."

The bartender turned toward her, playfully waving the knife.

"Well, Jeannie, never thought I'd see the day you'd fault a man for mourning his wife."

She waved him and his knife away and continued talking.

"Just last week, I asked him what the name of that disease was killed his wife. I thought maybe my brother-in-law's mother might have the same thing. Anyways, I asked. His eyes just filled up. You'd of thought she died yesterday. Then real slow he says it, 'scler-a-derma.' The whole time looking down at the table. Next time I look over, he's gone. His drink barely touched."

"Guess he really loved her." Lenny put the lemon slices into a plastic container. "Some men do, you know."

"I know what I know," said Jeannie. "That man needs to tell somebody about his wife."

"He'll talk when he's ready, and he'll pick the person. That's how I see it."

"Listen to me. If he doesn't, it's going to eat right through him. He's going to be wearing that black tie to his own funeral."

Jeannie gave the top of the last ketchup bottle a little extra twist for emphasis. Then she tossed the empties into the trash can under the bar, and picked up the tray of filled bottles.

"He's 'bout due now, Lenny, and we ain't busy. Couldn't you. . . ."

"No. You know I don't go for prying."

Jeannie moved to the booths, depositing one filled bottle on each table.

Father Jim sipped his scotch. Often help simply amounted to listening to a man's story, and then pointing out a different perspective from which the man could view his own situation.

The oak door opened and in walked a tall man with thick white hair who sat down a few stools over from Father Jim. He wore a neatly ironed blue shirt and a black cotton tie. His eyes were opaque as though they had been painted with pale blue enamel. He looked no sadder than most men you see on a bus or in a church.

Lenny poured a Beefeaters straight up.

The man said, "How about the Phillies this week?"

"They might win it yet."

"No," said the old man. "They'll get close, real close, but then they'll blow it. They'll choke."

"I hope not. I've got good money on 'em."

The old man didn't respond. He wrapped his fingers around his drink and hunched over it.

Father Jim glanced over to see if he had a pack of cigarettes in his pocket or a newspaper under his arm. He thought he could start a conversation by asking for a cigarette or the sports page. The old man had neither. He was sitting there as still as a beer bottle. Father Jim slid across two bar stools, but the old man didn't look up.

Then the priest turned toward him and said, "I've forgotten how humid Philadelphia can be in August. Is there any letup in sight?"

The old man didn't reply.

While he tried to think of another opener, Lenny answered his question.

"It's supposed to rain tomorrow, but you never know. Most times rain just makes the humidity worse. Say, are you the new priest who's just been assigned up at Saint Francis?"

"No, I'm visiting my mother over on Anderson Street."

"Where are you stationed?"

"Come September I'll be doing missionary work in Costa Rica."

"Well, I'll be," said Jeannie who was back behind the bar. "You're the first missionary ever been in this place. What's it like down there?"

"I've never really been there yet. I've been in a few suburban New York parishes the last fifteen years."

"And at your age you got the calling to do more," added Jeannie. "What a beautiful thing!"

He was immediately sorry he had told them.

The tables in the back had begun filling up. Father Jim saw Jeannie talking to a couple who had just been seated. They smiled at him and waved.

If Jeannie were going to tell every person who came into the bar, the whole place would be gawking at him. Father Jim stood up and started to count out his money. He felt a hand on his shoulder.

"I'd be honored, Father, if you'd let me buy you one drink before you go on your journey." The old man's face was as emotionless as the face of a clock.

"Thank you," said Father Jim.

"If it's the same to you, let's sit in a booth." The man picked up his drink and Father Jim's and ambled to the back of the bar.

Father Jim felt pleased with himself, and he gave Jeannie a conspiratorial wink when they passed her. They slid onto the wooden benches whose high backs cut them off from the rest of the bar. Father Jim noticed that the man's face was tired. The skin under the man's eyes rested lazily on his cheeks and the corners of his lips turned down exhausted.

Jeannie plopped a basket of pretzels in the center of the table. "On the house."

Father Jim noted that she was about Sara's age but heavier and without Sara's grace. He remembered Sara in sneakers deftly balancing a tray of dirty dishes and kissing him on the neck behind the cellar door at the soup kitchen.

He was surprised to hear the old man's voice. "I'm sorry. My mind drifted away for a moment."

"I said, so you are running away from society in order to save the world."

Then in a voice as soft as rabbit fur, he added, "Why?"

No one had asked Father Jim why, not the Provincial, not his mother, not even Sara who had quietly hung up the phone while he was explaining what had occurred in the Provincial's study. He looked down at his hand as he rubbed his finger around the edge of the pretzel basket. Various images came to mind, a dream he had of himself trapped in Sara's house while it burned to the ground, his mother's hands brushing his shirt, the Provincial behind his oversized desk. He settled on the Provincial.

"For my own good. For the good of my order. I will . . ." he began to fidget with the pretzel basket almost upsetting it, "be of some . . . good. I will compensate for . . ." He paused, groping for a word. "For . . ." He waved his hand in front of him. "Injustice."

The old man continued to stare at Father Jim, who began to feel as if he expected more. That in fact he knew that there was more. He tried to think of something to say to focus the conversation on the other man.

While he was thinking, the old man spoke. "Tell me, is there a baseball team in Costa Rica?"

Father Jim let out his breath. "I think so. There's baseball everywhere."

"A man has to be able to make decisions if he plays baseball," the man said as though it were a revelation.

Father Jim nodded. "I was never any good at baseball." He was fascinated with the contours of a circular knot in the pine table.

"I mean quick decision under stress. For instance, when he hits that ball, he has to be able to tell by the crack of the bat just how far he can run."

Father Jim nodded again because it seemed the man had paused. He was running his finger up and around the curling wood, tracing the outline of the knot.

"When he rounds first, he has a split second to decide if he can make it to second. If he hesitates, he is lost. He hears the conflicting commands of his coach, his teammates, the fans, but in the final instance, and this is important, Father, it is the player who alone can decide whether to run and just how far."

Blonde curls. The curling wood reminded him of Sara's ringlets.

The old man waved his arm at Jeannie. "Bring the bottle over here. Tonight I'm going to have myself a few extras."

"Father, if the man makes the wrong decision, if he hesitates when he should have run, he loses. If on the other hand, he runs when he should have stayed, he loses as well. You will agree, Father, baseball is not an easy game."

Jeannie set the bottle of Beefeaters on the table.

"Now, Mr. Mullin, you be careful." She looked quizzically at Father Jim. "Would you like another scotch, Father?"

"A light one."

"You will agree, Father."

Father Jim did not know what to say. He did not remember, perhaps had not even heard the question.

"Of course."

Jeannie brought his scotch. He took a sip. "Is your wife home by herself in all this heat?"

Father Jim congratulated himself on the cleverness of his lie.

The man poured himself a drink. "My wife is dead."

A smile crossed his face. "It will be four years this November tenth." His smile broadened and he took a gulp from the glass.

"The last few years we were always together." He held up his hand with one finger crossed over the other. "Like that. But since she died, she is closer than she ever was. I carry her with me always and will for eternity."

He tapped the side of his head with his finger. "She is up here." His smile turned into a hollow laugh.

"I wear this tie," he said, picking up the bottom edge of it, "to remind me." He chortled uncontrollably. Tears rolled down his face.

Father Jim had seen people laugh when they were too desperate to cry. He downed some scotch.

"Loneliness," he said. "You miss her." Then more to his drink than to the old man he added, "Believe me, I know."

The old man took another swig. He let the gin stay in his mouth a few seconds before he swallowed it. Then he smacked his lips, and spread his palms flat out on the table on either side of his drink. He looked up at the priest.

"You don't know."

He paused and began slowly to drum his index fingers on the table. "But I can tell you will."

The old man sucked in his breath, and rolled his hands around the glass of gin.

"Once a woman loved me. Love can't be ignored because it changes things. It gets right down inside you, and when you look out all the things you used to be are just that—things you used to be."

The man took a belt from the glass, and then looked over at the priest.

Father Jim nodded, not at all sure what the old man meant, but pleased that he was talking.

The old man finished off the glass and then began to pour another.

"When I was going on forty-five, I was down on life. It all seemed a waste. Then I found a woman who made me laugh. Simple thing like that. Everything looked new. The grass looked green like a just-mowed ball field. Felt like all of a sudden every day I wanted to race across fields like that with my mouth open and taste the freshness."

"Lucky."

"Not lucky. I choked."

"What do you mean?"

"At the time I was married to Mary, and had five kids."

He took a gulp of his gin.

"Three years I tried balancing between two lives. Couldn't give anything up. To hold on, I did things I never thought I could do. Always lying. Sometimes I'd lie to one, sometimes to the other."

He paused as though he were just figuring something out.

"Mary, she must have begun to notice things. Never said a word. She could tell I wasn't much interested in anything around the house, especially those things used to be I couldn't get enough of."

He slugged down more gin.

"One day she's lying on the couch, I think looking at TV. I'm

reading the newspaper. In an anchorman's even voice she said, 'Nick, when you leave, I want this house, and all the furniture in it.' She caught me by surprise, but I could tell by the distance in her voice she'd been thinking about this awhile. I hadn't really looked her in the face in along time. Now, when I did, first thing I felt was scared. All along I thought the first thing I'd feel, if it ever came out, was relief. But no. Seeing her cold and steady, I was damn scared. It was one thing to have this woman love me, to have something exciting to get up for. It was a whole other thing moving out of my house, looking my kids in the eye saying I was leaving them. I told Mary I'd have to do some serious thinking before I was ready to move out. Mary said, 'It's her or me. You got a week.' I hesitated. That week I got sentimental about things. I mean the roll-top desk I'd refinished for the girls, the kitchen I'd done over for Mary when she had the last baby. And then there was my boy. He liked to watch me fool around in the back garden with my tomato plants. It wasn't just me like when I was twenty. Now somehow I was tied up into all these other people. This make any sense to you, Father?"

The priest was pushing the pretzel basket back and forth, covering and uncovering the knot in the wooden table.

"Who was I if I pulled myself out? Who was I if I stripped myself of parents, children, church, friends, home, everything I had ever known? That's just what I'd have done if I'd have left Mary. Each day that went by, the more I knew I couldn't do it."

The old man paused, polished off his glass of gin and poured still another.

Father Jim wasn't sure why the old man wanted to talk about some affair that had been over and done with years before. It seemed pointless. The whole story unsettled him. He took a sip of his scotch.

Guilt. Now that she's dead, the old man feels guilty that he had ever caused her any pain. Father Jim had seen guilt rot many a man like standing water hollows out trees.

"Listen," the priest began, "this happens to people. A pretty woman. You think you love her. It happens."

The old man grabbed Father Jim's arm.

"No. You got to understand, Father. It wasn't I didn't love that woman. It was just that I didn't know how much. I thought maybe it'd turn out just like me and Mary. After a few years the romance would die and those other things, I'm not sure what to call them. Those things that made me father, son, neighbor, Catholic—they seemed to matter a hell of a lot. Those names. They were me. I choked."

Father Jim found himself very much interested in what the old man was saying. He had stayed with his commitment. In the end, he had grown so close to his wife that, Father Jim remembered Jeanie saying it, he mourned her still after four years.

"I thought I could just stop seeing her. I told Mary that I would. I meant to. Lord knows that. I knew it was the decent thing. It didn't work. Felt really bad then. Mary being sweet to me. Me a hypocrite, sneaking time off from work. Hated myself. Then one day at work, I heard about a transfer to Philadelphia. I put in for it. I made up my mind. I ran. I figured in a new city me and Mary would go back to the way things had been in the beginning."

"And you did."

The old man didn't move a muscle, just stared with those tired blue eyes at Father Jim who got the feeling those eyes could see into his own head, and that the old man was in there sorting things out.

"I kept busy at first moving, then adjusting to the job, building a patio, painting the porch. Didn't work. Wanted it to, but it didn't. I'd pick the paint colors I knew she liked. Even when I decided to do the opposite, to know what flowers she'd plant in the back garden, and then to plant different ones. I'd look out and see her flowers. Figured in time it would pass."

"And it did."

Father Jim moved his hands out in front of him as though he could coax the word "yes" from the old man.

"No. The more time went by, the more I knew that whatever had happened between me and her made it so that what had been with Mary never could be again. Spent my time in the garage. Got to liking to refinish furniture. I'd go out there after dinner. Some nights I'd work 'til bedtime. Time went by and all those things I thought were so important just faded away. Parents died. Kids got married; started their own lives. Friends stopped coming by. Finally it was just me and Mary."

"And then," asked the priest waiting to hear that somehow when they were alone, they had found a miraculous closeness that explained the closeness the old man had spoken about earlier.

"I began to hate her. I'd watch her sometimes just walking through the house, and I'd get angry. The way she'd made tea, always wasting water boiling a full pot, annoyed me. Whatever she'd say, it'd hit me all wrong. Nothing she did was her fault. It was my fault. I hated her because I hated the way my life turned out. When I had the chance. . ."

The old man poured the last of the gin into his glass. He drank it all in two swallows. He smacked his lips.

"I made the wrong call. How about you, Father? You look like

you might need a fresh drink. Jeannie! Jeannie, bring the good Father another."

Father Jim waved his hand at Jeannie. "Two coffees."

"Not me, Jeannie," shouted the old man. "I'll have one more. Long time we lived like that, Father. Two strangers who were together because they had no other place to go. The loneliest kind of loneliness because we pretended it wasn't true."

"That's when Mary started coughing. Anything I'd say she didn't like, this cough would come up, and she'd get all red in the face. It started happening when she was eating too. She'd get scared. Have a glass of water next to her. The doctor said the tube in her throat was losing its elasticity. He said she had to avoid getting nervous, and she could adjust to it. She figured someday she would be all alone and she wouldn't be able to stop coughing. Got so she wouldn't be alone. She'd follow me around. She wouldn't say anything. She'd come out in the garage and sit in a chair. She'd look at magazines. She'd knit. But then the paint remover would get into her throat and she'd start to cough. I stopped working out there except at night. Then if she woke up, she'd call my name until I came in. I didn't know what to do. She wasn't sick enough to be in a hospital. I couldn't afford a nurse. I stopped visiting the neighbors. Stopped coming down here. I sat around the house. Sometimes I'd read. Mostly, I'd drink."

Jeannie brought the glass of gin. She gave the priest a disapproving look, and set the glass in front of the old man. Then she slid the cup of coffee over toward the priest. Some of it spilled into the saucer.

The old man guzzled down a good part of the drink.

"One morning we're eating breakfast. Mary wants to go to the mall. I've got this headache. 'Alright,' I say, 'after lunch.' 'No,' she says, 'I don't want to miss the soap-operas.' 'Then tomorrow.' 'No,' she says. 'You don't have anything to do. I want to go now.' I don't like that, 'You don't have anything to do.' It makes me angry, her saying it so natural like that. I know I can't punch her, can't even swear at her. I get up, knock over a chair, and go upstairs to the bathroom."

"I hear her calling my name all the way up the stairs. Damn, it makes me mad. I figure maybe she'll come up there, so I lock the door. I hear the coughing start, and then the wheezing."

The old man pounded his fist on the table.

"I don't want to hear it. I'm sick of it. I turn on the faucet full force. I sit down. Don't read the magazines. Don't do anything. Just

shut my eyes and listen to the peaceful sound of that water hollering its way down the drain."

"I don't know how long I'm in there. Finally I'm all quiet inside. I open the door, and it sticks like it always does. I go downstairs, and we drive to the mall."

"I don't say anything to her, and she don't say anything to me, but we drive to the mall together in the same car, both in the front seat. We're like that all day. So right after dinner she goes up to bed. I take myself a beer out on the front porch, and put my feet up on this coffee table I trash-picked. Next morning she's dead. Doctor says it couldn't be helped, sometimes people die from schleraderma."

"After the funeral, I'm clearing out her clothes and things, it hits me that doctor was wrong about what killed Mary."

Father Jim leaned across the table.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm just telling you, staying with Mary all those years didn't do her any good."

"Listen, you did what you had to. What else can anybody do?"

The old man stood up.

"Remember this, Father, a man can't be picking tomatoes come September, and giving them to his neighbors gussied up in fancy baskets when his plants shriveled up way back in some July drought."

"Wait a minute. Don't you see? You did the right thing."

"I'm paying," said the old man.

He laid a twenty on the table, and staggered toward the door.

Father Jim mulled things over drinking his coffee. Some men, often older ones, were just too set in their ways to see another perspective. Unfortunately, they ended up suffering. Then he began wondering if it was always summer in Costa Rica or if the seasons were reversed. Reversed is what he thought. When he was walking in the sunshine, she'd be trudging through the snow. She'd be bundled in her pea jacket with that red beret perched on her curly head like a flag. □