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GUARDING THE CHAPEL:
THE STORY OF A SMALL COMMUNITY, KEPT FAITH, AND AN
EVER-CHANGING RIVER

by

Leigh Ann Vanscoy

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

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ABSTRACT

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This piece emerged from an article I wrote for *The Poughkeepsie Journal*, a Gannett daily newspaper in the Mid-Hudson region of New York State. As a summer reporter for the local section I wrote weekly “Dateline” stories that highlighted local and historical places in the area. I chose to write about my own church, St. Nicholas on the Hudson, because of its history and community spirit in the small river town of New Hamburg. Membership and resources were dropping and I hoped that my article would promote interest in the chapel. While researching and interviewing for that news story I learned the struggle of a small band of worshippers, mostly older women, who kept the church afloat, even when active membership dwindled to 15 and there was very little money to hire a priest.

This 15 chapter account follows the parishioners of St. Nicholas through their ups and downs at the chapel. Through my personal experiences and research my story chronicles a church, the last gathering place for neighbors in a tight-knit community that is fading away. The piece explores my personal spiritual journey on the way to finding peace in my own relationships and the questions I asked along the way. I’ve come to recognize, through St. Nicholas, the difference between finding a place of worship and finding a place that connects you with God.

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Introduction

I sit studying the two pictures at the top of the article trying to recognize faces now older and gray. The article, “This Little Church Refused to Close,” by Gerry Raker, published on January 6, 1983 by the *Poughkeepsie Journal*, a Gannett local daily newspaper for the Mid-Hudson region of New York State, begins with this sentence: “Two years ago this month, Zion Memorial Chapel in New Hamburg, more than a hundred years old, seemed headed for oblivion.” The piece chronicles the events of the year the chapel’s attendance dwindled to less than 15 and Zion Episcopal Church in nearby Wappinger Falls, which had been subsidizing the chapel, decided that it would no longer be able to offer monetary support. Luckily, after some pleading, the Episcopal Diocese of New York gave the chapel 18 months to solicit new members and “prove its worth.” The chapel members, mostly older women, fundraised, received new members, and gained support from the New Hamburg community in a valiant effort to keep the doors open. This story, the article declares, has a happy ending. The chapel experienced growth and was renamed. The last sentence of the article reads “St. Nicholas on the Hudson Lives!”

As a local reporter for the *Poughkeepsie Journal* the summer after my sophomore year, I was assigned the weekly Dateline story, a column that highlights a historical or unique place in the Hudson Valley. I decided to write about St. Nicholas because as an active parishioner I knew that membership and resources were declining, and I hoped the piece would spark renewed interest. Locals still use the endearing term the chapel, but the official name became St. Nicholas on the Hudson after becoming a self-sufficient mission church in 1982. Through my research I found Raker’s article. I knew that St. Nicholas,

like many small churches, had been through its ups and downs. I had also heard the consistent account, passed around in the undercroft of the chapel that the women, now the matriarchs, had saved the church, but I didn't know the details. The article fascinated me; I wanted to know more about the strong little band of worshippers who persevered through various ministers, business problems and low funds to save the chapel.

My Dateline piece, written on a very short deadline, explored the importance of the chapel in the community. I interviewed Roger Higgins, a county legislator living in the river community of New Hamburg, who told me the community supports the church and its outreach through various dinners and events "where neighbors can meet and chat." St. Nicholas and the New Hamburg Yacht Club are the last two gathering places in the hamlet. The members of these institutions blend and assist each other. The last quote in my article comes from Teresa Croke, one of the matriarchs of the church, who joined the church in 1949 and who has held many positions through her years as a parishioner: "I love the church with all my heart and soul," she says. "St. Nick's has been a place of up and downs, but the love of God is in that church."

I recognized Teresa in the photo from the 1983 article. Her brown hair is cropped close around her younger, but recognizable face. She has her arm around an older, shorter, white-haired lady, almost protectively. They stand looking at the camera as if staring directly into the sun. Their eyes are squinted and their faces show a slight smile. Behind them the chapel looks bigger than it really is. The photo is taken from an angle that shows almost no ground, making the chapel appear to be floating over the Hudson River. The black-and-white printed photo emphasizes the white trim on the high, angled roofs and dark, shadowy slate of the roof. There is something about the two women in the

forefront of the photo that reminds me of patriots or soldiers defending their territory, their beliefs, and each other.

The other grainy photo, dated back to the 1970s, is of the organist and a teenage choir adorned in robes. The singers stare down at the sheets of music, mouths open in song, concentrating. I think of the church now. There is no choir. Instead, a few strong voices ring out to lead the rest of the worshippers. I count the singers in the photo, nine visible, plus the director. There aren't nine teenagers in the congregation right now. Less than a decade later these people disappeared from the church. Why? Although, when I look closer to the names under the photos, I recognize them. At least four of them are now active adult members in the church. When I began to research my 2006 piece, I asked the same question during each interview: "How would you describe St. Nicholas to someone who has never been?" I've continued to ask this question throughout the years as a way to remember why people keep coming back to the chapel, and why most of the members choose to stay for life.

My family arrived at the church by chance in 1994 and never left. We'd never been a particularly religious family, spiritual maybe and Christian definitely, but we weren't practicing in a church. All three of us, Mom, Dad and I, expected to someday become more "religiously involved." When we found St. Nicholas it was as if they needed us, which I think was half the allure. The parishioners take on the responsibility to help keep the church afloat. We felt comforted and encouraged in the small, 100-seat chapel. I was confirmed at St. Nicholas and became a lay reader, pageant director and active fundraiser. My dad served as the Warden, president of the vestry, also known as the advisory board. He also shoveled snow and helped with the grounds. My mother

became the bookkeeper and member of the financial committee. A part of our endeavors come from the responsibility of being a member of a small church. Something always needs to be done. The church is not only a place of worship, but a community and family requiring work and protection. Every year St. Nicholas produces a Stewardship Directory. The booklet provides reasons for pledging money to the chapel. The photos show members hugging, families smiling, and festive events. The message, as the current vicar Astrid Storm wrote, is “Giving to St. Nick’s is a gift not just to the church and to God, but also to yourself.” She means that giving to the church enhances and supports a religious community, which enriches our life.

When I came back to St. Nicholas after being away at college, I felt an immediate calming. My personal religious experience is braided to the walls of St. Nicholas and holds me there. Dating a conservative Baptist, I am forced to realize the differences between denominations of the Christian faith. I wonder why, if we are praying to the same God, there are fundamental differences in our beliefs. As our relationship grows, I am forced to examine my own beliefs and understandings of my religion. Why does my relationship with God feel reliant on St. Nicholas? As I sit in the pews, talk to parishioners both new and old, and research the historical impact of the chapel on the small river town community of New Hamburg, I begin to realize that a church is much more than a place to worship.

Recently, one Sunday after church, I walked on the smooth black rocks that line the Hudson River. Behind me lay the small hamlet of New Hamburg. Barefoot, my sandals discarded on the road, the cold water slipped in and out around the soles of my feet. Occasionally a speed boat or a jet ski raced by me, and in the distance, a slow barge

blew its horn. The yacht club, nestled next to me in the small cove in front of the church, was silent except for a couple older fishermen on the dock. When my mother called to me from the backyard of St. Nicholas, I turned and gingerly stepped across the rocks back to the pavement. The Methodist and Presbyterian Churches, turned private homes, have transformed with yellow peeling paint and white picket fences. From here the Metro North train station that shuttles families back and forth into New York City is hidden. St. Nicholas stands out prominently; the chapel represents a last attempt to protect the tight-knit community bond from fading away.

Chapter 1

House of God on the Hill

Between the town of Wappingers and the city of Beacon lies a quiet, quaint hamlet, shaped like a semi circle, hugging the Hudson River. This part of New York, which residents call “the valley” is a luscious mix of oak, maple, long grass and swamp land. East and west mountain ranges loom in the distance secluding the area protectively. Small towns follow the coast line of the Hudson River, which starts at the Battery on the southern tip of Manhattan and runs 315 miles north to the Adirondack Mountains. The river’s shape transforms from an estuary, to major waterway, to a raging current, to a stream, to a pool of water. The Native Americans living on the river named it Muhheakunnuk, which means “great waters in constant motion” or “the river that flows two ways.” When Henry Hudson, the river’s namesake, stumbled on the waterway, which he hoped led to China, his sailors referred to the portion of the river surrounding New Hamburg in their journals as “Devil’s Horse Race” because of the powerful current and fierce winds that whip through the alley way between two large mountain ranges that rise 1,000 feet along either shore. Hudson understood the potential of the land and an influx of Europeans soon settled the rich river valley and adapted to the ever-changing river for food, transportation, drinking water, and wildlife.

The Hudson River Valley, the common name used for the towns settled in the U shaped depression, is far enough north of New York City that homes have backyards with dog houses, gardens, and basketball hoops. Yet the valley is close enough that the harsh, distinct accent of the five boroughs are still identifiable. Patches of farmland, haystacks, and meandering cows appear just south of New Hamburg alongside antique farm houses

with white shutters and picket fences. The peeling white paint, stone walls, and wood stove chimney smoke echo reminders of New England farmers from past centuries. The Metro North train whistles down the eastern side of the Hudson, stopping at river ports, for commuters and travelers to access New York City. On the western side of the Hudson cargo trains barrel as far North as Canada transporting goods from New York harbor.

The commuter train stops at New Hamburg, the second to last stop, about 80 minutes from New York City. On the once completely silent landing the train cars shriek to a stop and the ticking of high-heels and soft murmurs fill the air as people pour onto the concrete platform. Their cars are lined for a half mile in a lot efficiently marked with parking numbers and organized rows. The passengers are rushed, walking quickly, the high pitched beep from unlocking cars harmonizing. Most choose to continue straight west, out of the parking lot heading towards the village of Wappinger Falls, Poughkeepsie and other nearby communities. Some make a right turn, heading to their homes in southern Dutchess County. And, a few turn left and twist their way into New Hamburg, which sits embracing the train station in an awkward, cumbersome way. If one were to zoom out to dissect that relationship they'd see that the prosperity of the community relies on the train and the river. Without the train, the river might have preserved the self-contained community New Hamburg had once been, but then again the river changes too. The Bald Eagles left the Hudson Valley for decades, becoming endangered because of pollution in the water, so maybe New Hamburg still would have faded into a commuter town anyway and without the train maybe it wouldn't have survived at all.

The hamlet is in total less than 100 houses bundled together on a slight incline of rolling hills. The air is crisp, the roads ambling and bumpy, the houses heaped and scattered. The impression isn't messy, but instead homey and historic. Down at St. Nicholas on the Hudson, the last remaining church in the hamlet, the young priest duct tapes a laminated notice on the white wooden sign in the front yard of the church. The sign announces a new church service at 9 a.m. in big black rounded letters. The young priest squats, her clunky brown hiking boots sinking a little into the ground soften by the dew of the morning, and pulls up her floor length brown skirt over her knees. She leans back on her heels, making sure the sign isn't crooked, and smiles at her handy work. She's growing the parish at the little chapel, changing its history.

The chapel, built on a grassy hill above the river, can be spotted from almost anywhere in the hamlet since its cooper steeple pierces into the often blue, cloudless sky. The small church's dark brown shingled walls contrast with its white accents and red barn doors. The little chapel stands out against the slight variety of white, beige homes that fill the rest of the neighborhood. The red giant, clunky, wooden doors of St. Nicholas are meant to incite strong emotions of passion and love and serve as a reminder that the church is not meant to be constant and serene. It is meant to be a place where you actively fight for an intimate relationship to the higher powers and finding spirituality in yourself. The doors are a bold reminder that going to church is not a passive act, but one full of boldness and valor. It's no coincidence that red is the highest arc in the rainbow—the closest to heaven.

The open doors can be hooked at either side with large, tarnished sliding locks. Once in place the chapel is exposed to the outside world. The chapel is dark, hazy from

sleep. The worn maroon carpet gives off a familiar musty smell. The floor creaks underneath the softest footsteps groaning with age. Tall stained glass windows on either side of the church let fuzzy light into the chapel. The carpeted aisle leads to the altar, preceded by two small steps and a wooden railing. The wooden altar itself is decorated according to the season. The silver chalice, covered with a white linen, sits in the far corner. It is called the Eucharist in the Episcopalian church, the blood of Jesus Christ, passed to the congregation. The chalice is plain, simple, and old fashioned. It is a reminder of the history that connects a church to the modern world. Of course there is evolution, a change in beliefs, systems, and traditions, as the centuries push forward, but some things remain.

St. Nicholas, originally Zion Memorial Chapel, was founded on St. Nicholas Day, December 6, 1876 for the purpose of a Sunday school. The Reverend Henry Yates Satterlee rented a meeting room on the corner of Point and Cross streets in New Hamburg, down the street from where the chapel exists now, to hold classes for local neighborhood kids. Interest grew and in 1897 the congregation decided they wanted a “suitable house for the worship of Almighty God.” The first service was held on January 30th, 1903 at 7:30 p.m. at the present building, which was dedicated as a chapel of Zion Episcopal Church of Wappinger Falls. A \$1,500 gift as a memorial for recently assassinated President William McKinley finalized the building fund. In the early 1900s New Hamburg thrived as an important fishing, transportation, and shipping port. Limestone and freight moved up and down the river by large ships. It is estimated that in 1850 there were 150 steamboats making their way up and down the Hudson carrying a million passengers.

On recent Sundays the chapel fills its pews—80 people pack into the small space. When empty the chapel feels stale and fusty, but for Sunday service the space seems to awake with a high energy charge. On the steps just outside the chapel members stop to greet each other with a hug, while children race the length of the front yard before descending the outside steps to the undercroft where Sunday school meets. The organist sits elevated on a platform just inside the building shaking hands and blowing air kisses. He points to the weekly pamphlet and calls out reminders of upcoming events. Finally when everyone is settled the priest, who prefers to be called by her first name, Astrid, walks down to the altar dressed in a plain plum colored floor length priest's robe and long decorative scarf. In the distance the faint sound of a steeple bell reverberates through the hamlet's streets. It is rung by the present homeowner of a long closed church indicating the start of the service. The organist wiggles his fingers and presses the first chord on the keyboard, which fills the room with a vibrating deep sound. He holds that first note while the congregation fumbles to find the song in their hymnals. Then he launches into song.

I decide to write about St. Nicholas while singing, "Bless Thou the Gifts" in our family pew while I'm home on winter break from the University of Memphis. It's a time of growth for the church: weddings, a full Sunday school, a completely filled coffee hour hostess list. All are little signs of the chapel's stability. My family joined the church 14 years prior when the congregation shrunk to less than twenty and the vestry always seemed to be searching for a new priest. Since I've attended St. Nicholas there was always a hovering sense of survival. A feeling, never spoken, that the church might get too small and shut its doors. My thesis would not be a story about a church overcoming

unthinkable hardships. Many little churches face low budgets, experience priest turn over, but continue strong fellowship. I had done some preliminary research on New Hamburg and St. Nicholas for a *Poughkeepsie Journal* Newspaper article a few years before. I'd discovered that the actual structure of the chapel incited so much loyalty and attachment that worshippers would guard the chapel against all odds.

Earlier that morning I had stood at the crossroads of Point and River street holding a crock pot of sweet pea soup, while my mother re-covered the ham with tin foil in the backseat of the car. From here I could see the old Methodist and Presbyterian churches that had been transformed into private homes. The Methodist church had recently been painted a dull yellow color in hopes that it would blend in with the rest of the houses. My mother joined me with the ham and together we walked towards St. Nicholas, which had somehow overcome the plague of small church collapse. We dropped off our food in the kitchen downstairs for the potluck and headed up the warm stairs to our family pew. I wondered how this church had survived over others. Teresa, a woman I felt had the greatest commitment to St. Nicholas, told me once that the church never failed her and she would never fail the church. I knew that somewhere in that quote was my answer.

Mom, Dad, and I sit in the second to last pew on the left side of the aisle for worship one Sunday in late December. It isn't where we usually sit, but our spot was already taken by a young couple and their baby, Ollie. I can see Ollie from here, resting his head over his father's shoulders sucking his thumb. He looks up every once in a while to shine a big smile towards all the adoring members at the back of the church. I lock

eyes with him and give him a little wave, which is enough to coax a toothless smile and a baby giggle. There is a unanimous “awe” from the congregation.

It is also one of the first times that we have to share a pew with another family. It is an older woman Jackie, whom we later find out is Teresa’s sister-in-law, and her daughter Diane. When we introduce ourselves, Jackie—who looks severe with her short white hair and pursed lips—opens her mouth in a semi- smile. Later we find out that she grew up attending St. Nicks but left the chapel in her 40s after her husband was transferred to southern New York State. Her daughter, who spent her childhood in the church, recently bought a house in the Hamlet and had just been elected as the president of the board of trustees.

Tears fill the corners of my eyes and spill down my face when Astrid announces the new additional 9 a.m. service to the congregation. She claps her hands together and holds them parallel to her heart like a small child learning to pray. Her head bobs up and down swiftly as if to say, “Yes! For real!” The congregation applauds and I see Teresa, a matriarch in the church, stand up, slowly, at the back of the church. The arthritis in her hip has kept her from standing through the hymns and gospel, but she fights the pain now to rise. One by one members begin to follow her lead and soon the entire congregation is giving a standing ovation. I lean my head against my father’s flannel shirt and wipe my eyes. The cloth is soft and comforting against my skin. Astrid makes a motion for us to sit down, “The good news is we’re up in numbers. I want to thank all of you for your hard work.”

Teresa shouts over the lingering chatter, “We love you Astrid and we’re so glad you’re here with us. You did this.” Astrid nods a thank you and again claps her hands together and bows towards the congregation.

“We’ve all worked together to make this happen,” Astrid replies looking back up into the congregation, “the church is only as strong as its worshippers.”

That wasn’t the moment that I decided to write about St. Nicholas. It was when I heard little ten-year-old Aiden singing as loud as he could from the back row. I turned and saw him standing with the old blue hymnal in front of him, mouth open wide, eyes downward towards the book, singing his heart out as if he was the only person in the church. His usually floppy, blonde curls were pushed back on his face, and his round face looked almost angelic. I felt the familiar choke in my throat and then the heavy tears in my eyes. I realize I’m about to cry for the second time during this service.

I’d been crying during church for a few weeks now. I can’t put my finger on why. I’ve never been a crier. I didn’t shed a tear at the end of Titanic, when it seemed like everyone else in the movie theater was bawling. I almost didn’t cry at my own grandfather’s funeral. Don’t get me wrong, I was sad; I just couldn’t quite muster up the sob. I do, however, know the feeling of stubbing a toe on the deck or breaking an ankle from a hole in the ground during a soccer scrimmage, both induced such intense pain that it made my eyes water and my entire body shake.

The church crying wasn’t unpleasant like getting injured; in fact, it was the opposite — an overwhelming feeling of great happiness. I’ve spent some time looking in a thesaurus for the perfect word to describe it, and the closest one I could find is ecstasy. The reaction made my throat tight, my head light for a minute, and my eyeballs heavy.

Then I could feel a stray tear wandering down the side of my face. Really the feeling was over in a minute - never truly bursting into anything more — but I knew that in these moments I experienced something greater than myself.

After church we sit around the card tables in the undercroft of the church buttering bagels and drinking orange juice out of paper bathroom cups. I ask Teresa if she would be willing to talk to me again about the church. It doesn't take a genius to know that Teresa is key to information about St. Nicholas.

"I'm flattered," she says in her usual upbeat but slow drawl. "But, interview some other folks too. Lots of people go way back with St. Nicks."

I explain to her that this piece will be much longer than the newspaper article—almost a full book. She laughs and claps her hands together. "All about us here at St. Nicks?" She leans across the table to the three white haired women on the other side who just happened to be her sisters-in-law from her first marriage. "She's gonna make St. Nick's popular!"

And that's Teresa, always trying to get St. Nicholas recognized. I don't think she'll ever give up trying to spread the joy she finds at the chapel with the entire world, even if there are only enough pews for 80 people.

I'm wearing my favorite pink flannel pajamas, snuggled in my single bed under the glow of green plastic stars taped to my ceiling, reading my favorite book aloud with my mom. I can feel her chest vibrate against my hair as she reads Anne of Green Gables again. I am dreaming that I can meet Anne or at least be independent and smart like her

when my mother quietly closes the book. She strokes my head and says, “Repeat after me: Our father who art in heaven.” I repeat. I like the way her voice falls at the end of each line. It’s rhythmic and soothing. We’ve been reciting the “Our Father” before bed every night because Mom says it is important that I memorize it. All Christian children should know the prayer because it is a way of giving thanks to Jesus. When we are done, Mom tucks me in, leaving her warmth next to me on the bed. She bends down, tucks a strand of hair behind my ear, and whispers “pray.”

Chapter 2

What Religion Are You?

I come to St. Nicholas one Sunday after a sleep over at my friend Lauren's house. Her family offers to bring me to church with them, which her Mom describes to my mom on the telephone as family-friendly, uplifting, and on the way to my house, so they can drop me off after the service. Lauren and I stand behind the wall to the kitchen crossing our fingers that I'd be allowed to spend more time with Lauren while the moms discussed the plans. Not wanting to go home after her tenth birthday party at the bowling alley, we crouch on toilets and locked the stall doors to hide from our parents. My mom, after what feels like an eternity of waiting, agrees to church and we jump up on the couch in celebration and immediately yelled at by Lauren's Dad reading the newspaper in his lazy boy recliner. We're late when we get to St. Nicholas, so Lauren grabs my hand, and we run down the steps to where the Sunday school meets in the undercroft of the church. The chapel itself is situated on the second floor, which is ground level from the road, and reminds me of the church in the Laura Ingalls Wilder's "Little House on the Prairie" movies. There is an outdoor wooden stairway that leads down a steep slope to a flat, manicured grassy backyard and a door at the side of the church that leads to an open community room. We take off our coats and hang them on the shorter coat racks in the entryway and walk into the room, which is a set up with metal folding tables and chairs around them. Children's artwork and drawings are collaged on the far wall and smiling families and fading newspaper articles hang framed on the walls.

The church's Sunday school only has six kids. My family doesn't regularly attend church, but I've been to various Sunday schools before and this class is definitely

small. I hold tightly onto Lauren's hand as she introduces me to the rest of the kids. We both have straggly blonde shoulder length hair, blue eyes, and skinny pre-adolescent bodies. We've dressed alike in pink dresses and black leggings because I realized as we were getting ready that if we looked like sisters I might fit in better at church. The Sunday school teacher motions us all to the front table to begin class. She is tall, with dark hair, cut close to her ears, and spiked up with gel. Her voice is nothing like what I imagined a Sunday school teacher's to be. It is what my father would call "smoker's voice" – rough and uneven like she has a sore throat. Lauren grabs my hand, proud to have brought a friend to church, and whispers, "yeah, most everyone is here." Melanie, the spiked hair teacher, asks us if we know what day it is.

"It is the first Sunday after Epiphany. Does anybody know what that means?" We all shake our heads no, so she continues, "today we are celebrating the revelation that God made Man in the person of Jesus Christ." She takes out a children's Bible and begins to read from it. The Bible has brightly drawn pictures that make Jesus look a little like my father. Jesus and Dad have beards, are tall, and have longish, curly dark brown hair. This makes him more ordinary and familiar. I feel badly for Jesus; he was killed, then resurrected and gone again. Of course, I know that story. I hear it every Easter in my grandmother's church, but the story seems different in this book, coming from the raspy voice. After finishing the story she closes the Bible and brings us over to a small craft table. We all crowd around as Melanie puts a pack of styro-foam cups, white candles, and rice on the table and tells us that we are going to "light the Christ candle." She tells us to draw a photo for Jesus thanking him for his sacrifice. I see Lauren drawing a rainbow with a smiling sun and I think, "What does that have to do with Jesus?" I see other people

drawing similar things on their cups. I decide to write Jesus a letter. I've never been an artist, always better with words. So, I write:

Dear Jesus,

Thank you for all that you have done for this world. I think you are great.

Your sister,

Leigh Ann

I write the sister part because I've heard my parents say that we are the brothers and sisters of the world. I think it sounds churchy. On a styrofoam cup the words wrapped around twice and my name looks cramped at the very end. But, I know that Jesus would be able to read it, since he is in Heaven with God and probably has super powers. I put the rice in my cup, stick the candle in and follow the other Sunday school children up the stairs into the chapel. Melanie lights the candles and gives us a nudge towards the center aisle. We hold our candles in front of us and I notice that everyone is smiling, even the minister. I sit with Lauren's family in the pew, careful not to spill my candle wax, proud of my glowing Christ candle.

When I get home I can't wait to tell my parents about church. I sit at the kitchen counter next to my Dad while my Mom cuts the rolls for cold cuts sandwiches, recounting my experience to them. At that time, we didn't go to church regularly. My mother grew up in a devout Roman Catholic Italian home fully adorned in Virgin Mary statues and paintings of the saints. To this day, I can't sleep alone in my grandmother's guest room because of a faux gold figurine of Jesus on the cross, blood running down his body, with a horrible look of grief on his face. My grandmother's decorating style emerged from Catholics' idolization of saints. The St. Aloysius School nuns taught Mom

through eighth grade. The school sat behind the same church that her family attended every Sunday to worship. Growing up in a Catholic neighborhood, most of my mother's friends attended the same church and the ones who could afford it went to Catholic school as well. There wasn't much diversity to her bringing up. She barely knew people without last names like DeBenedetto, Cappiello, or Testa. She met my father in high school, a Vanscoy, big basketball star but not Italian. Why couldn't she just find a nice Italiano? Although, my grandmother came around to my father not being Italian, partly because he appreciated her food so much, she insisted they get married in the Catholic Church. The wedding, with the high Mass at St. Aloysius, lasted two hours.

When my parents moved four hours away to Wappinger Falls where my father had taken a job, the Italian guilt kept my mother at St. Mary's, a one thousand member church. As one of those members, my mother attended Sunday service irregularly and pledged a certain amount of money each year. We still get letters asking for donations or volunteer work from them. I'm not sure they realize yet that she left. Occasionally I went with her and we would sit in the back of the church, sing and pray with the sea of anonymous faces, and then walk out before the end of the service to beat the traffic.

My father was adamant that I would not grow up in the Catholic Church. The Pope's power is a problem for my father. "I don't believe in one man's infallibility," he would explain to my mother calmly when she begged him to come to church with her. He had grown up Protestant and attended churches of many different denominations. Growing up, my father's family moved often, due to his father's construction company; they used churches as a way to meet people. The first thing my grandmother would do when she moved was dress her four children up in their Sunday best and stride into the

closest church. There she would get involved with pancake suppers, Bible meetings and bake cookies for coffee hour. Soon she had a new group of friends. Finally when they moved to New York state, they settled at a United Church of Christ. When they retired and moved to south Florida they began attending Congregational Community Church and became very involved. My grandfather still helps to run the thrift store and my grandmother volunteers regularly.

When I told my parents about Sunday school, they both agreed quickly to try St. Nicholas. This is what they prayed for. We'd been church shopping for a couple years, attending a couple services at each church, mostly recommended by friends or neighbors. They just didn't stick. It's hard to explain why they didn't, except to say that a church has to feel right in a way that the bedroom you pray in feels. They wanted me to have a spiritual relationship with God. My mom said the "Our Father" to me every night until I memorized it, my father read me stories from a children's Bible and we said nightly prayers together and gave thanks to God before dinner. A church, they agreed, should be a place of worship to bring a person closer to God to experience the joys of Christianity. Plus, St. Nicholas being an Episcopal church, my mother reasoned, was close enough to Catholic that my Italian grandmother couldn't complain too much.

"Come down to the stony beach with me," Lauren says. She pulls my arm and we begin running down Point Street to the sharp bend in the road that leads to the Hudson River. This is the second Sunday I've attended St. Nicholas on the Hudson, in New Hamburg, NY and the first Sunday that my parents have come. After church everyone wanders from their pews and forms a line down the twisting stairs to the undercroft of the

church. The children play in the church's backyard, which overlooks the river. While our parents mingle on the grass drinking their coffee, Lauren shows me her favorite place, a great spot to play make-believe and hide from our parents. Our fathers tell us they will follow us down there in a little while.

We race down the road with our dresses blowing and Mary Jane shoes flopping across the pavement. When we get down to the beach, I see signs that say "New Hamburg Yacht Club, Private." We take off our shoes and socks and leave them by the sign, and barefoot we carefully step down to the water on the stones. The stones have been smoothed over by the river's current and my feet curl around their soft roundness. When we get to the water we squat down on the stones and put our hands in to feel the temperature.

"Let's pretend we are lost at sea and our ship has floated away. So, we need to make a home here," I say.

"This area can be our shelter," Lauren says walking over to the bushes covering the dead end street. I get a stick and pretend to be fishing while Lauren lays out some green leaves for us to have a dinner table.

I look up and see St. Nicholas's congregation milling around the grassy backyard above the road. I see my father and mother holding paper coffee cups and small paper plates talking to Teresa Croke, the graying lady that welcomed us into church that morning. As she handed us a bulletin she invited my family to stay for coffee hour to meet the parishioners. She had looked at me and winked, "Glad you came back to join us." I was surprised she remembered me.

That pretend-night we snuggle up on the leaves that doubled as our table and Lauren says, “pray that God gets someone to find us.”

There are two things I hate about this project already. I've been paired up with Kelly Marsh, who smells like applesauce and is associated with un-cool, and I have to spend an extended amount of time learning about her life for the biography project my fourth grade teacher, Mr. Sautter, has assigned. I'm already getting dirty looks from the popular girls who think I'm a dweeb because to make friends at my new school my parents made me sign up for the Science Olympiad team. Turns out, Science Olympiad is for dweeb boys. Kelly and I have pushed our desks together for the interviews. She asks me questions first, her finger twists her dark straight hair nervously, looking down at the piece of crumbled paper with her questions scrawled on it. After the basics, full name, birthday, places I've lived, schools I've attended, favorite color, she asks, "What religion are you?" I stutter. I was baptized Catholic, but don't attend church regularly or know enough about it to pretend to actually be Catholic. I try to remember what church my Grandparents in Florida attend and what my Dad calls himself. My mind is blank and my palms are clammy. How can I not have a religion?

Finally, after what seems like too long, I stutter, "Christian," hoping she doesn't push me to answer anything further.

"Where do you go to church?" she asks. "Do you go to St. Martin De Porres?" She is referring to the big Catholic Church in town. I shake my head no and put it back on her by saying something like "Do you go to St. Martin De Porres?"

Later that day, when we read our biographies aloud to the class, we stand side by side in front of the chalkboard. My cheeks are red as I listen to her read my biography. She doesn't mention my religion.

Chapter 3

River Town

Evelyn Connors turned nine in the summer of 1951 at her small colonial house in the center of New Hamburg. A small brunette with olive skin that tanned easily and dark brown eyes, she looked different than the rest of her Ruf cousins. Her mother, one of six Ruf children, grew up in New Hamburg before she married Evelyn's father, Dominic Martino, a dark Italian from New York City. They moved back to New Hamburg when she was pregnant with her first child. It was the only place Evelyn's mother could imagine bringing up children; three generations of women in her family had raised their families in the same neighborhood. Evelyn couldn't imagine leaving New Hamburg either. She hardly ever did leave New Hamburg, except on Thursday afternoons when she paid a quarter for the 15 minute bus ride to the Wappingers Recreation Park.

All the Rufs attended church at Zion Memorial on Point Street. At that time there were three small churches in New Hamburg: the Methodist, the Presbyterian and the Episcopalian. Her family came from a long line of Episcopalians. There was rarely a Sunday when she didn't walk down to the chapel with her mother and sister for service. Her father, a Roman Catholic, did not attend church with the family. He stayed home and cooked big Sunday meals of spaghetti and meatballs, manicotti, chicken parmesan, or lasagna. Evelyn's father was deployed in World War II when she was born. After a couple months her mother wrote to her husband overseas and told him that they couldn't wait any longer to baptize their daughter. He wrote back and gave his blessing for her to be baptized at Zion Memorial. Evelyn's baptismal in 1943 was attended mostly by women. The only man left in the town, had an amputated leg and couldn't go to war,

stood in as her proxy Godfather until one of her uncle's came home from war.

Summer was Evelyn's favorite season growing up. She and her friends, or "gang" as she called them, held hopscotch competitions, bicycled to the grocery store for sodas, played hide-go-seek in the cornfields, and got in trouble for playing on the railroad tracks. Evelyn was assigned chores by her mother and grandmother to keep her from spending too much time wandering the streets. "It isn't good for young girls to be running around wild," her grandmother told her when she came to dinner muddy from playing in the cornfields, "You are already the color of an Indian don't act like one." One of her jobs including tending her grandmother's garden. Evelyn would kneel on the earth, surrounded by the smell of growing tomatoes and basil, daydreaming about being grown up while weeding and watering the plants. She imagined bringing fresh produce from her own garden to the chapel's tag sale and impressing everyone with how green and healthy her zucchini grew in this year. And everyday at 3 p.m. three horn toots echoed through the streets from the Dayliner Steamboat. That woke her from her reverie and sent her flying home.

She dropped her bicycle in front of her house and ran towards her family's shed. Her sister was usually already there opening with the big metal lock. Evelyn jumped up in down on one foot, impatiently, as her sister unhinged the lock and opened the doors, "hurry, we're gonna miss it!" They both grabbed big, black rubber inner-tubes, jumped back on their bikes and rode down to the water with the inner tubes pressed flat against the sides of their bodies.

Captain Dewitt Robinson lived on Railroad Avenue, on the shore of the Hudson River. He pulled his Dayliner, a white steamship that carried passengers up and down the

river, into the cove to toot three times to his wife, Emmy. The tradition for the children in New Hamburg was to race down to the docks and jump in the river to catch the big boat's waves. Evelyn hardly knew how to swim when she started taking part in the activity. The boat's magnificent size and delicately fashioned wooden trim was glamorous to Evelyn. She'd never been anywhere outside of New Hamburg and imagined where the boat could take her; the Hudson river looked infinite when she looked down the horizon from the yacht club.

Evelyn peeled off her jean shorts and tee shirt to reveal her red one-piece swimsuit underneath. She left her clothes in a heap and ran towards the end of the dock. The other children were already splashing in the water. A couple of the moms had come down to the end of the dock. They carried umbrellas or wore big floppy hats to keep the sun out of their eyes. They, too, wanted to get a glimpse of Captain Dewitt and witness his romantic call to his wife, who waved to her husband from their porch. Evelyn stepped into the inner tube and leaped off the dock just in time to catch the first big wave. She screamed and kicked out farther from the dock, and the waves rushed over her head, making a cocoon around her.

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The first time I meet Evelyn I think she's new to the church. In the 12 years I've been attending St. Nicholas, I've never seen or heard about her. Before I can introduce myself, she's already talking to the minister about making lasagna for the potluck dinner and signing up to be a Sunday school teacher. She's short with curly dark hair that circles her head like a crown. Her arms and legs are thick and soft like the women on Italian cooking television shows.

Later, I find out that Teresa is her aunt. Teresa's first husband, Evelyn's mother's brother, was a Ruf. They stand talking after coffee hour like they haven't seen each other in years. "I wonder," my mother says motioning towards them, "if she moved back from somewhere." The Ruf tribe, as I liked to call them, are tight-knit and everywhere in New Hamburg. As I began to follow the family tree I realized that the bulk of the families at our church are somehow related to a Ruf. The six brothers and sisters never moved away and as the generations grew and married, many stayed in New Hamburg or the surrounding area. Evelyn, after an inquiry from my mother, lived in New Hamburg her entire life and attended St. Nicholas all that time. When we asked her why we hadn't ever met her she mysteriously replied, "I've been attending Zion in Wappingers since 1993." We tried to press her on the fact and she simply said, "It was a better fit at the time."

Evelyn rejoined the chapel without hesitation. She took over the Christmas pageant, which she boasted she had plenty of experience with. "I've been putting on this play since I was in my teens. Not a big deal for me." My mother and I volunteered to make the children's costumes - Mary, Joseph, shepherds, angels, wise men, and an inn keeper. We insisted that there wasn't any usable material left at the church to make the costumes, but Evelyn searched the undercroft, locating long, thin brown, white and blue sheets left over from plays in the past. She took the material home and washed the mildew and stains out of them. We transformed the pieces of fabric into robes, dresses and togas with gold and maroon trimming for a total cost of \$15. When we presented the costumes to Evelyn she thanked us profusely and said, "When I was a young girl we used the same costumes every year. Let's save these for the years to come."

I liked Evelyn right away because of her frankness. She casted her grandchildren

as angels, but was the first to admit the irony. “It’s not that they’re bad children, just very energetic,” she explained to us with a wink after her granddaughter ripped her halo into two pieces while running out on the chapel’s yard. “I was running around this chapel at her age too. I’m just glad my son lets me bring the girls to St. Nicholas every Sunday.” We watched as Evelyn jogged into the yard to pick up the pieces and tell the kids to come inside.

Evelyn’s cousin, Diane, another Ruf, decided that St. Nicholas needed to update their archives. In the weekly church bulletin she expressed concern that the historical value of St. Nicholas on the Hudson was going to be lost because of disorganized records. Diane, who had also left the chapel for several years when she moved to Europe for her husband’s job, and had only recently returned after moving back to the area. An archival committee formed and met to discuss gathering historical documents and preserving bulletins, flyers, and photos that were haphazardly thrown in cabinets in the undercroft of the church. The mission began as a way to collect the past into organized files that would remain at the bottom of the church. The group quickly realized that this type of job would take many hours of research and filing.

Diane asked me if I’d like to be a part of this effort. She knew that I was collecting my own information for the book I was writing. I think she hoped that I’d write a history book on St. Nicholas. I explained to her that I was graduating in creative nonfiction, which is truthful, accurate, historical, but not just a book of factual events. I had been interviewing members of the church so that I could recreate the spirit and

mission of St. Nicholas through the years. She looked disappointed, so I quickly told her I would still help her with the archives.

I decided to start by organizing the photo albums squeezed unsystematically in the wooden cabinets in the back of the Sunday school room with loose photos floating in the midst albums and packs of pictures tied with rubber bands. The newer photos were the first to be drawn out. I saw photos of me in braces and bangs at my Confirmation, a photo of my parents cooking pancakes at Shrove Tuesday, a photo of me as a narrator in the Christmas pageant, my Mom with her arm around Teresa selling crafts at a fundraiser. I recognized almost everyone in these photos; my childhood memories captured and held in the undercroft of the church.

The next batch of images I pulled out was before our time at the church. Between the occasional documentation on the back and the newer faces I could identify the people who had been at the church before me. My friend Lauren's family, her brother still in a stroller, laughing in their pew, Teresa with brown hair, and a minister I didn't recognize with some the Sunday school kids I'd grown up with. There is something unsettling about my family not being in these photos; we're missing. I pull out the photos from the back and find a photo of Evelyn, Diane and the women of their family. On the back the photo says, "Ruf ladies 1962." Their smiling faces look towards the camera and their hands stretch back towards the chapel as if to say, "ta da."

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"It is always snowing when we walk out of the church," Mom looks at me from the rearview mirror. We're driving to Christmas Eve Mass—Mom, Grandma, and I— at Saint Aloysius church in Auburn, NY. There isn't any snow yet, although it is definitely

cold enough for snow. My fingers are frozen in my gloves and I've pushed them into the pockets on my new black peacoat. It's our tradition. The three of us stay up playing cards and eating roasted chestnuts until the 11 p.m. service. My Mom grew up attending the same Mass with her entire extended family. "Uncle Tony used to always fall asleep in church," Mom tells me, as if I haven't heard the story a million times.

"Remember when we woke him up and he took out his cigar to start smoking? We had to remind him he was at church. Oh my, I thought they would kick us out of Mass," my grandmother says putting her hand on her forehead like she's still embarrassed, but she's smiling.

We park the car and walk to the church. My grandmother kneels at the pew and makes the sign of the cross before walking in. We disrobe our coats, scarves, gloves, and hats. My favorite thing about going to Catholic Church is the incense. When the priest shakes the big clunky gold bell filled with incense down the aisle, the soft, sweet smell fills the whole room in a cloud of stillness and peace. The pipe organ music echoes through the church with the familiar Christmas song, "Silent Night", as Father Shammon carries a ceramic figurine of the baby Jesus over his head, unhurried and reverently. The altar boys walk next to him shining flashlights on the baby Jesus. My mother and I hold hands and sing along. Besides the music and Father Shammon's theatrical entrance, I can never remember much from those Masses. Maybe it's the incense that makes my memory hazy—in a good way, a feeling of peace and family. And when we leave the church it's snowing.

Chapter 4

Self Revealing Worship

There is something oddly self revealing in a daughter. Teresa felt this way as she watched her second daughter, Donna, walk down the aisle of St. Nicholas on her wedding day. It was Donna's second wedding; her first marriage lasted seven rocky years away from the chapel. Donna's thin and usually untidy hair was swirled in a small knob on the top of her head and she'd added a bit more blush than usual, which looked bright and foreign against her pallid skin. Her eyes were wet as she said her vows in front of the altar she spent her childhood; a sort of homecoming. Teresa thought she looked similar on her wedding day, to her second husband, at the same chapel. They both wore off-white pant suits, carried wild flowers, and, above all, ached to be loved and cared for again.

Teresa married her first husband, Donna's father, at 17 years old. She'd met Donald Ruf when she moved to New Hamburg when she was eight. He was three years older than her and someone she could never imagine turning down. She followed him around for most of her preadolescent years trying to get his attention by daring him to jump over the railroad tracks, challenging him to swim races, and chasing after him and his friends on her bike until her mother told her that she needed to leave him alone or he'd never like her. There was something about Donald that made everyone want to stop and laugh with him. As the youngest of six Ruf children he learned how to make his stories exciting enough to get a reaction from a crowd. Teresa remembers hearing him tell jokes down at the docks of the yacht club, around the corner from where she lives now, with his friends. His voice, low and slow as he leaned into the group, got louder and more confident as he reached the punch line. There was something in that voice that took

residence in Teresa's heart. Her heart felt heavy every time he said her name or tickled her under her chin until the day he died.

She was pregnant before they were married, although she wasn't yet showing on her wedding day. They spent that summer rolling around in the fields behind the old farm house at the edge of New Hamburg. When they told his mother, who everyone, even adults, called Momma Ruf about the pregnancy she instructed them to get married and baptize their child at the chapel. Momma Ruf planned and invited family and neighbors to the wedding a month later. When Deborah was born her baptismal was held at St. Nicholas. They pushed the stroller from the small apartment they rented up on the hill to the church. The minister held Deborah up in the air and asked the congregation if they would pray for this baby and accept her into the church. The congregation, all the Ruf family and friends affirmed the newest member.

Teresa's three daughters, all born a year apart, grew up in the church. It was always Donna who felt the closest to God. Teresa remembers finding Donna sitting on the lawn of the chapel or in one of the pews doing her homework looking more comfortable there than at home. Teresa was surprised when Donna, who married quickly and young like she did, stopped attending church regularly. Her excuse was, "I work all week long. I don't want to have to get up early in the morning for something else." Teresa could feel Donna's unhappiness but could do nothing to help her. She wouldn't listen.

After Donna's divorce from her first husband, she moved home to live with her mother in New Hamburg and became a recluse, not wanting to see anyone. She spent hours rocking on Teresa's front porch looking down the road towards the river knitting.

Her demanding job as a customer service representative at IBM only stressed her more, so she took a year sabbatical. She told everyone she needed the year to travel and write. Teresa encouraged her to find a part time job, to reach out to her friends, or to the priest at the chapel, but for the first few months Donna just sat. Her hair grew straight and uneven across her face and her mouth became a permanent frown. At night she would drink bottles of whiskey or bourbon by herself watching old black and white films and listening to the radio simultaneously. In the morning Teresa would find Donna in the fetal position on the rug beside the couch, with no blanket, asleep.

After some begging, Teresa convinced Donna to begin attending church again. They walked down to the chapel hand-in-hand smiled and stopped to talk to everyone who arrived. It amazed Teresa how Donna could be a completely different person in front of other people. She watched as Donna would kiss old Mrs. Hess on the cheek and slap Mr. Hess on the back and tell him he looked younger than her. It was hard to watch her daughter hiding her pain. But, Teresa remembered that she had done something similar, although she never felt she was as convincing, after Donald had died.

Donald was 33 when he was diagnosed with bone cancer. The doctor said that there was nothing they could do for him. He lay in a hospital bed in the center of their living room for 14 months. He died in the middle of night when everyone else was sleeping. Teresa swears she heard a sigh from downstairs that night, but rolled over exhausted with fear and waiting. In the morning when she went down to check on him, the house still cold and damp from the night, he was already stiff and lifeless. She drank her tea with him like she did every morning, talking to him softly, before she went to

wake up the rest of the family. At 33 years old Teresa became a widow. She had three young daughters to raise, no job or source of income, and little faith left in God.

Donna borrowed her older sister Deborah's white dress for her Confirmation at St. Nicholas. It was the same dress that Deborah had worn the year before when she was confirmed. The girls were similar sizes, except that Donna was shorter, so the dress hung low at her ankles. Donna got dressed alone in her bedroom that Sunday. She could hear the nurse come into the house to help her mother bath and dress her father. Aggressively she pulled at her hair, remembering how Deborah had complained about sleeping in the pink, fluffy rollers her mother had fastened in her hair the year before. Donna thought she would give anything for curlers in her hair. She fastened her hair in a tight bun on the top of her head and pinched her cheeks for color. "Good enough," she said looking at her thirteen year-old self in the mirror.

Her two sisters were waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs. Deborah held Nancy, the youngest sister's, hand. They were both dressed in jeans and t-shirts. "This is my Confirmation day," Donna reminded them. "Don't you want to put on a dress?"

"We're fine. Come on, we're late," Deborah replied pulling Nancy out the door. Donna shrugged, disappointed that nobody seemed to recognize her big day and turned around to wave to her mother, but her mother wasn't there. As she walked out of the room she heard the shower running and her mother singing to her father over the running water.

Her mother had warned her that she wouldn't be attending the Confirmation. Her father who had been sick in bed for six months, needed her help. "God will be watching,

sweetheart. That should be enough for anyone,” her mother squeezed her hand. Donna knew better than to complain. The tired, weak look in her mother’s eyes scared her. Too many nights Donna woke to her mother crying in the room beside hers. She didn’t want to be the one to make her mother cry again.

“Maybe we can celebrate when Daddy gets better?” Donna asked hopefully, remembering the party in the backyard her parents had thrown for Deborah. Her mother turned and walked into the kitchen pretending she didn’t hear her. Donna wondered, as she climbed the stairs to ask Deborah if she could borrow her dress because clearly she would not be able to shop for one, she wondered if her Mother had given up hope her father would survive.

The night after the Confirmation service Donna lay in bed praying. She wondered why God would do something this terrible to her father and to their family. She lay face down in bed with her eyes tightly shut and her hands balled up into fists. “God, why would you do this to us?” She remembered that a counseling priest had told her mother that, “God has a path for you. Don’t loose faith in hard times.” Her mother had stared blank faced at the priest and replied, “Thank you. We appreciate your visit.” Donna, who sat on the couch next to two sisters, wanted to ask the priest why God had given her family such a crummy path to follow. What had they done so wrong? But, she had sat quietly believing that was the polite thing to do. And tonight, desperate, she told God she would follow his path if he would straighten it out a little and make it easier for all of them. “Please. I want to understand. I want to follow you.”

Years later, Donna told me that the months her father was sick changed her. She watched as the priest came to her house to cut her father’s dull, thinning hair, gave her

mother and father a special blessing on Sundays when they couldn't attend church, and suggested that her and her sisters become summer counselors at an Episcopalian sleep-away camp. The church's outreach comforted her and wanted to somehow be a part of that.

When her father died less than a year after her Confirmation, Donna asked God why he could be so cruel. She realized that her family would never be the same again. Her older sister began hanging out with older kids and sneaking out late at night. One afternoon Donna caught her smoking marijuana out the window of their bathroom with a faraway look on her face. When Donna asked why Deborah liked to smoke that stuff she answered, "It makes me happy." Donna walked away jealous that Deborah found a way to make herself forget.

After the wedding, family and close friends followed Donna and Gary down to the New Hamburg Yacht Club for their reception. On the short walk to the water, they passed the house that Donna grew up in. A friend, who acted as the wedding photographer, set up to take their photos with the river as their backdrop. The chapel watched from its perch on the hill as Donna stood below grasping on to her new husband's arm and smiling towards the camera. She'd walked into the undercroft from the backdoor millions of times for Sunday school, church meetings, coffee hour, and receptions, but had never noticed the ceramic ivory sign that hung beside the door. She couldn't read it from where she stood. The photographer called her back to the camera and she snuggled closer to her husband. Temptation kept drawing her eyes up to the church. She had to see what the sign said. She asked, after the rapid clicking of photos

ceased, if they could take some photos from the other direction. The chapel seemed to beg to be in the framed. The photo that hangs in their house today is a candid of her and Gary walking in the direction of the church, smiling at each other.

Before Donna and her husband greeted their guests at the reception Donna ran back up to the chapel. Her husband followed closely behind yelling to her that they'd get whatever she left at the chapel later. Donna skipped down the outside stairs around the left side of the church to read the sign hanging on the door of the undercroft. She could hear her husband walking down the steps behind her and her guests laughter under the tent at down at the yacht club. "All Are Welcome." Donna felt silly for running up here for these simple words and as she turned to her husband who shook his head and held his hand out to her she laughed at herself. "I wanted to see the new sign." They turned and walked back up the steps and down the road where their closest friends waited to celebrate them. Donna wondered if the sign had always been there inviting her, no matter the circumstances, to worship. All my misjudgments and misfortunes have led me here, she thought. I am welcome in this space and time to celebrate that.

Donna brought Gary to St. Nicholas for the first time when she realized he wasn't leading her down another dead end road. Gary inched closer, even when he learned about her AA meetings and the debt she carried from her first marriage. He was a Roman Catholic, who didn't attend church regularly. He felt spiritually unfulfilled and hoped to find new light with Donna at an Episcopal church. Donna, after many years of doubting her relationship with God, longed for resolution. She wanted to serve the Lord like he had served her through the hard times. They began attending St. Nicholas regularly.

She visited Zion Church, which she calls “Mother Parish” because growing up Zion subsidized and supported the chapel before it was renamed St. Nicholas, to talk to their vicar, Father Miller. She marveled, raised in St. Nicholas, at how big the inside of Zion felt as her high heeled shoes echoed through the stone entranceway. The church could hold ten times the parishioners as St. Nicholas and she stopped for a moment to reflect on how the fellowship would be different at a larger church. People could concentrate on what would make their relationship with God stronger, instead of worrying about the lawn or fixing the bottom stair of the undercroft. But, then parishioners might not feel the intimate connection to the church itself; to loving their house of God. Father Miller sat waiting for her in his small office at the end of the hallway. A tall, dark haired Irish man with cheerful blue eyes and a strong voice, he welcomed her into his small office. Although he confessed he was in his early 50s, he looked youthful in his jeans and polo shirt. They had met at an Episcopal diocese meeting in New York City at St. John’s cathedral a year before and she liked him right away because of how open and honest he was talking about his relationship with God. Easily and quickly she divulged into her story. She told him about her love for St. Nicholas, her father’s death, her alcoholism, and her struggle to reconnect with God. She said, “I need to serve the Lord in a great capacity.” She looked up at him, “I know that God’s path for us is not the easiest one, but it is the best one.” Softly, Father Miller put his hand over her hand, “Could you be happy doing anything else?” he asked her.

“No, I think I can’t do anything else until I do this,” she responded. The rest of their meeting they discussed what part of ministry most appealed to her. She felt

spreading the word of God as a lay person would fulfill her. Father Miller wished her luck and offered his help in the future.

As if a sign from God, Gary was laid off from IBM and he took another job in Philadelphia. This gave her an excuse to quit IBM and decided to enroll in the Master's program at Lutheran Theological Seminary School in Philadelphia. She believed it would prepare her for a career in lay leadership by enabling growth in faith by worship, study and field education. After the first semester she chose Pastoral Care and Counseling as her major and studied with Father Miller at Zion Episcopal Church to complete her field work.

Donna told her mother that she wanted to bring comfort and peace to those who have lost. "Dad's death brought me closer to God. I want to share that realization with others." Teresa, whom had been a faithful servant at the chapel, understood completely. She found God at St. Nicholas – sitting in the pews, blessing the parishioners, and attending Sunday school. It was the people of God that nourished her and helped her heal after losing her husband. One of Teresa's favorite versus from the Ephesians 5:28-30 refers to how God cherishes the church, "For we are members of His body, of His flesh, and His bones." The members of a church reach out and care for one another because Christianity is about sacrifice. Jesus died for the people of God and the church is his home. The members of St. Nicholas love each other as Jesus loved the church.

Teresa shows me a photo of her second wedding to Donald Croke. I never met either of her husbands; she buried her second husband a couple years before my family joined St. Nicholas. She and her second husband are walking out of St. Nicholas, holding

hands, and waving towards the camera. I tell her she looks young; her hair is a deep brown and her face is suntanned and smooth. She pulls the photo closer to her face and tells me she was 43 years old and lived a whole life before that day. I know that she is referring to her first husband dying so young and having three young daughters to look after. After the death she went through a time of depression, where she could barely stand up in the morning. She told herself that the last 14 months were given to Donald and she deserved a couple for herself. But, all she could do was sleep. Her daughters spent a lot of time with their aunts and uncles down the road. There were days she'd go without eating. "You gotta pull yourself together for your children's sake," Momma Ruf told her one afternoon. Teresa had tried to make herself presentable to go to lunch over at her in-laws. She applied some make-up, and put on a dress before walking over. But, when she got there she drank too much wine and ended up throwing up in their bathroom.

The chapel, she told me later, was the only place she found solace. It was the only steady thing in her life. Every Sunday she could attend church at the same time, with the same liturgy, and the same rituals. There was something very comforting in the simplicity of the service. She kept track of the days in terms of Sunday - two days until, three days after. It was this relationship with the church that never let her give up on her life. God is something that she's tried to understand and failed at times. But St Nicholas is something that is known.

"Look," she says pointing to something in the photo, "The old slates before they went bad." We've been fundraising at the church to make money for a new slate roof for years now. In this photo the slates are already a dark gray, already been there for 75 years. "They weren't leaking yet. Really did last us a long time."

I look up at Teresa, her eyes still sparkling determination, and realize that she will never give up on the chapel, even in the hardest of times, because the chapel never gave up on her.

“It’s just you, me and God,” I whisper to my Dad from the front of the canoe. His yellow wooden paddle dips firmly in the water, steering us towards the cove at the tip of the lake. The boat makes a small ripple on the flat, clear water as we glide across. The lake’s face reflects the red and orange oak tree leaves growing over the bank like an open hand. My father, dressed in flannel and old jeans, nods at me. He suggests that we might see a beaver, deer, or mink in the cove. It’s October and we’re closing up our summer camp in upstate NY. All of the motorboats have been towed away to be stored for the winter in garages, and the docks lay stripped and empty, waiting for spring. There is no human movement from any of the camps; it’s just us. I see a fish jump; it makes a small splash that swells into rings on the water. The boat moves over the splash and I lean over the side looking for the fish swimming below us. He’s gone.

We enter the cove, the shallow bottom bumps the canoe and we have to push off with our paddles. The small opening leads into a larger area of water. “It feels like it’s just us for miles around, doesn’t it?” I say, my voice softly echoing across the enclosed space.

“We’re like Indians exploring new land,” my father agrees. I begin to sing from the Disney movie Pocahontas. “Shhh” he puts his finger to his mouth. “You don’t want to scare the animals.” He points his finger towards the brush ahead. We sit in silence,

completely still. The boat rocks slightly underneath us. I tell Dad that I give up. I don't see anything in those woods. "Have faith," he replies still staring straight ahead.

And then there is a small rustle and a creak from a tree branch. My father points towards the noise. Amidst all the brown oak branches, pine leaves, and wild grass I see the head of a fawn with nearly all its spots gone. She dips her head towards the lake for a drink. From the boat, Dad and I watch silently, amazed at her beauty.

Chapter 5

Unwavering Faith

Suburbia inches up the coast line of the Hudson River and replaces small communities and the sprawling farmland that once covered the river valley. The Metro North commuter train is the major threat; making it easy for people to live in New Hamburg but work, eat, and leave their social lives in the city. There are still established families in the hamlet, like the Ruf's, but the new people fill in around them; somehow acting as a separator. Two, once thriving, church communities' close and are now private homes. The Methodists and Presbyterians who built them could no longer sustain them. The commuter city feeling inches closer and the once self-sustaining community dims.

The river compliments the community's transformations. I meet a tanned, cigarette smoking fisherman watching four fishing poles up on a draw bridge over the Wappinger Creek that flows to the Hudson River. He's sitting in a tailgate style portable chair with a can of beer next to him and a cigarette hanging out the side of his mouth. I stop to ask him if he's caught anything. He sighs and shakes his head. He takes a slow drag on his cigarette and says, "Nothing too big here. With the Shad all gone it is a different spring." There is a bite on his line and he surprises me by jumping up and racing to the edge of the bridge to check his bending pole. By the time he gets there the fish is gone. He settles back into his chair unhurriedly, and tells me that he's been netting shad herring for most of his life and this year they didn't show up.

Shad, a skinny silver-scaled fish, annually migrate into the Hudson's freshwater for about two weeks every spring. Each year they return, traveling up the Hudson River in huge spawning runs. Their flesh and roe are culinary delicacies in the Hudson Valley.

Many local fishermen made their living off netting, catching the shad as they arrive in large schools. Overfishing and the introduction of zebra mussels, who compete for the tiny plankton that served as a food source for baby shad fry during their first year of life, cut down shad populations to a historic low.

I ask the fisherman what he'll do now that the Shad are gone. He answers the question looking down at his hands, "work more construction and fish out here in the creeks." I get the feeling, as he takes the last swig from his beer and tosses the can in the back of his pick-up truck that he's resigned to the fact that his shad fishing days are over. I wish him good luck and continue my walk across the bridge. Later, I learn that the state Department of Environmental Conservation closed shad fishing, months before I met the fisherman in 2010, in hopes that the population would grow again in a couple of years.

The fishing environment in the Hudson Valley changed with the loss of shad. Like New Hamburg the purpose and character adapts to something new. The zebra mussels have hurt the shad run, but contributed to cleaning up the once polluted river. The once rare striped bass returned and accumulated and Championship tournaments are held up and down the river for these fish. The river, like the world around it, adjust to survive. Although the shad are gone for now, they could always return as the river transforms again.

In early spring of 1982, Teresa Croke pulled her long, thick overcoat closer to her body and lowered her chin into the neck of her coat to keep warm. The walk from her house, where she has lived for 30 years, to the church is only a 10-minute stroll, but at this temperature her feet brought her there quicker showing her excitement to be in the

warm shelter of the small chapel. March in New Hamburg is always icy. The brisk winds pick up from the Hudson River and can hit with an unexpected chill, especially on the hill to 37 Point Street where St. Nicholas on the Hudson sits nestled on the snowy bank looking royally over the icy river. She stopped for a moment to peer over the hill to the rapidly flowing river beneath. Large ice chunks had broken off and flowed rapidly past the docks; a sign of spring, she thought. Teresa hummed a made-up tune as she approached the church stopping in front for a moment with her arms crossed over her chest and called out in greeting, “Beautiful as always, St. Nicks.”

Teresa walked up the three cement stairs to the entrance of the church and pushed back the tall arched red doors. This Sunday, like any other for many years, Teresa’s job prepared the church for 10 a.m. service. She arranged the altar, put the kneeling pillows at the pew accessible for Communion, turned up the thermostat, put on the pot of coffee, and collected the items from the downstairs soup kitchen to be blessed. Teresa knew when she woke up that morning that it would be an important Sunday for the small congregation of St. Nicks. Father Robert Willing, Archdeacon of the Mid Hudson Region, would deliver a message from the diocese as to whether or not St. Nicholas showed enough promise to stay open.

The threat came a year and a half before. Because attendance at Sunday service had dwindled to less than fifteen, Zion Episcopal Church in Wappinger Falls, the larger village outside the hamlet, which had been subsidizing the chapel, decided it would no longer be able to offer any monetary support. The Zion vestry voted to close the chapel. The diocese agreed stating that, “insufficient time and money was required to keep the chapel open for such a small congregation.” It was Father Willing who swooped down to

act as an Interim, giving the chapel eighteen months to prove value and potential. With the vestry, Father Willing came up with a Plan of Action that wrote, “The chapel will remain open only because there has been a continued growth rate and a determined reason for being.”

Church membership had dropped to a few dedicated women and some neighbors. If they were surprised by the threat for closing they didn't show it. Teresa, for one, knew this was coming. She couldn't even get her daughters to attend anymore. They said they wanted to go to a church where there were people under 50 years old. The church had gotten smaller and smaller since Reverend Charlie had left. They'd tried fundraising with a bake sale and getting their children and grandchildren to join the church, and hanging flyers in the New Hamburg community. She also knew that the church wouldn't close. There was too much determination from the women sitting in that room. Keeping the chapel open had embodied in the lives of these women and they would gradually begin to attract new members and raise money, as they always had in the past.

The seven of them had begun knocking on doors almost immediately. Really, who could resist a nice old lady with cookies? They laughed that they were like the IRS, never going away. George Liegerman, a neighbor, offered to install plumbing and a year later became the treasurer. Gwen Stevens, a pianist who was formerly on the music faculty at Vassar College, volunteered to put together a children's choir. She solicited her son's friends from the neighborhood to join. She had never worked with church music before. Elizabeth Ballantine offered to help landscape in front of the church and create a community garden. Many other community members helped paint, mow and fix up the church. It wasn't a lot, but it gave St. Nicholas a kick in the right direction.

I don't know the story of these women when I recruit some of my high school friends one Shrove Tuesday to help with the community pancake dinner, but I realize later that I've followed in their footsteps. The pancake dinner is a long standing fundraising tradition for St. Nicholas, but this year the vestry assembled a marketing team to get the word out. We need a new roof badly. The one we have leaks and when it rains Teresa runs over to the church and put metal dog bowls under the leaks to catch the rain. Advertisements have run in the newspaper, flyers were posted in convenient stores and the town of Poughkeepsie's fire department even offered to put a notice on their sign in front of the firehouse. My father, as the warden of the church, decides that it is "do or die" for this roof. We need to make money. I tell Lauren before the night begins that we're going to go down in the St. Nicholas history books as the pancake chefs who saved the chapel. "I don't think they have a history book," Lauren says smiling back at me.

"Fine, then we'll just have to tell our children and grandchildren that we saved the church."

We're holding the dinner from 4-8 p.m. in the downstairs of the church. "\$6 for adults, \$4 for children," reads a sign hanging over the St. Nicholas on the Hudson sign in front of the church "everyone welcome." We have a pretty good set up. Dad and my friend Ben, an active Baptist, operate the two large black pancake griddles. My friend Mike and Leanne, Catholic and atheist respectively, make the batter. My friend Lauren, the girl who first brought me to church, and I act as waitresses running up and down the rows of card tables asking people if they want more pancakes and clearing plates. My

mom and Lauren's mom have their own card table set up at the bottom of the stairs selling raffle and dinner tickets.

"I think I can eat one more pancakes," Roger Higgins, a Dutchess County legislator, says to me leaning back in his chair and rubbing his stomach. He's already had about five, but who's counting.

"Coming right up," I tell him heading back towards the kitchen.

"You know, this church will never close, the community likes eating here too much," I hear him say leaning over to his wife. The Higgin's family lived four houses down from the church for over 20 years. Their kids grew up walking past the church on their way to the bus stop in the morning.

I see Teresa going over to talk to Higgins as I stand in front of the kitchen holding my plate out waiting for another pancake to be plopped onto his plate. "I'm so glad you came, Roger," Teresa said rubbing his back and leaning over to kiss his wife on the cheek.

"Fat Tuesday wouldn't be the same without this meal," Roger's wife says taking Teresa's hand. They both know the tribulations of the chapel.

Later, a little past closing time, there are still a few lingering customers and we are on our last batch of mix. My feet hurt and I sit down to rub them. I have a mix of syrup, flower and batter on every piece of my clothing. My mother is counting the money at the back table. I ask her how many people she thinks came in tonight. She says she thinks about 200 people. Teresa walks over to us and puts her arms around us. She's been there all night. "God, sent us you folks to get this little church back on track," she says and kisses our temples. "This here is the best Fat Tuesday this church has ever had."

There was a lot to be thankful about on that Shrove Tuesday. My friends who made batch after batch of pancake batter, the church members who volunteered to clean silverware in the kitchen, and the community that came out for the event. I felt proud explaining the experience to the National Honors Club search committee that year. They asked all candidates for an example of volunteer work that caused a sense of accomplishment and pride. I gloated about the amount of people who came, the teamwork of the volunteers, our organization on getting the plates to the tables quickly, our marketing strategy and the amount of money we made. Then one of the teachers on the committee asked, “Did the money go to something specific?” I realized that I hadn’t explained why I was so proud.

“We were specifically raising money for a new roof, but the event also brought the community together.” I explained that the church is one the last community meeting places in New Hamburg. “It’s more than just a religious sanctuary; it also houses Alcohol Anonymous meetings, literacy volunteers and provides a place for the community to congregate.”

They must have liked my answers because I got into National Honors Society. At church that week my father announced my acceptance to some of the people at church. I told them that I’d talked about the pancake supper in my interview. Jean Hess, who I always assumed was hard of hearing because of her age, listened from across the room where she sat at her pew waiting for service to begin. At coffee hour after church she approached me and said in her usual cracked and slow voice, “Congratulations on National Honors Society.” She patted my back; the strength in her hand surprised me.

“And I never thanked you for helping out with the pancake supper. Your generation needs to start taking over for us old folk.”

“I had a really good time that night,” I said.

Jean replies, “That’s what I always said. Working at those fundraisers and church fairs are fun. I never minded it,” her face turns serious for a moment, “That’s why when people say that it must have been hard work to keep this church open all this time I tell them that it was fun.” She tapped my back again as if she was pushing me forward.

When Father Willings told the congregation, during the announcements that Sunday in 1982, that the diocese would keep the chapel open they weren’t surprised. The women, sitting at their pews, smiled at each other. Teresa let out a whoop from her back pew and threw a fist pump in the air. When I asked Teresa how she felt on that day she says, “Well, we already knew that the community was getting involved and we’d probably stay open, but it was nice to hear it out of the archdeacon’s mouth.” She giggles like a young girl and then says, “There was something really special about that day. We all kind of realized that the community would protect us.”

Katy and I squat on the small cement grave. We’re dressed in large faux gold costume jewelry and her Mom’s old stiff prom dresses that we found in an old trunk in the spare bedroom. We’re trying to look like Ruby—or how we imagine Ruby to have looked when she lived. We’d over heard that she had an affair with her young caretaker and that made her sound fascinating and alluring even to eight year olds. Plus, when you see her ghost she is always wearing gold jewelry or so we’ve heard. Slowly, I lean over

and whisper, “Ruby, you don’t have to be scared. We’re your friends.” My heart is beating fast when I say, “Show yourself to us.”

We’d become obsessed with Ruby at the beginning of the summer when Jane, Katy’s Mom, told us that she’d once seen the ghost of Ruby. When Katy was a baby, Jane woke up to beautiful piano music in her living room. With her husband sleeping soundly next to her, she crept into the living room wondering where the sound was coming from, the music stopped and she swore she saw an old woman with long white hair wearing a pink tunic, a long gold chain, and many rings walking out her front door. When I asked why Ruby didn’t go to heaven Jane shrugged her shoulders and said “I guess she has something to finish here on earth.”

When I went home that night my father told me there absolutely wasn’t a ghost. He told me I shouldn’t bother myself with such nonsense and, in fact, Ruby had lived in the house next door to Katy’s. Jane and Katy’s home was a converted bunk house built well after Ruby had died.

But, I didn’t listen to him. Katy and I began leaving treats for Ruby hoping she would show herself again. We left shortbread cookies, goldfish, little glasses of lemonade and anything else we could get our hands on. In the mornings the gifts would be gone and the glasses tipped over. We agreed that Ruby must have taken a liking to us, so we planned a séance, something we’d seen in a couple movies, to try to get her back on earth. I wanted to ask her why she was still living on earth. Why wasn’t she ready for Heaven?

Katy repeats my chant, and says, “Show yourself to us.” She jiggles climbing up my back.

“I think I feel something,” I say looking at Katy who has her eyes clamped shut in what looks to be a prayer. She is praying that Ruby makes her appearance.

“Maybe she needed to make friends with people on earth to be able to go to Heaven,” Katy suggests. We stand there a little longer before Jane yells for us to come home for lunch.

“I hope I don’t become a ghost. It must be so lonely. Let’s pray she goes to Heaven,” I say to Katy. We hold hands and squeeze our eyes closed. “God, please accept Ruby into Heaven.”

Chapter 6

Chapel Women

Just across the river from the chapel in Newburgh, NY lies an unrelenting smokestack. The discharge is a thick, gray funnel that swirls up into the sky and disappears. The source of the chimney is Danskammer Generating Station, a coal fired electric plant built by Central Hudson Gas and Electric in the 1930s and later sold to Dynegy in the 1990s. The plant has been the target of an environmental lawsuit because of its cooling system. According to Environmental Protection Agency figures, it was among the top ten releasers of pollutants by weight in New York, releasing 1.2 million pounds of hazardous emissions in 2000. The lawsuit basically suggested that the plant's once-through cooling, pumping river water in to cool the plant and then pumping it back into the river, was largely responsible for killing large amounts of fish. There has never been a resolution to the lawsuit. Dynegy filed a suit of its own alleging that the plants had been overvalued and thus paid more in taxes to Orange County, the Town of Newburgh and the Marlboro school district than it should have. The exact details of the case are unknown due to the judge's gag order to protect Dynegy's proprietary information on the plant.

Sitting in St. Nicholas's backyard I can't help but notice Danskammer Generating Station. It sits up on a flat piece of land on the Hudson's bank. Journals and other historical documents recount the first time Henry Hudson sailed past this piece of land in his Half Moon and witnessed a group of Indians dancing in the firelight on the flat rock that crowned the point. It was a shocking and terrifying sight for the men on the ship. The Indians performed semi-religious rites before embarking on hunting trips, fishing trips, or

battle. With a fire raging around the site the natives jumped, yelled, danced and sang, their painted bodies reflecting off the water in terrifying color. According to legend it was Hudson's crew who named the spot Duyvil's Danskammer, Dutch for The Devil's Dance Chamber. This spot was a religious sacred ground for centuries.

The religious or spiritual acts that the Indians were engaging in sound fierce, untamed and brutal to my modern brain. I can't imagine running around proudly showing a scalp of a man or burning the soles of my feet to honor a God. However, there is something sad about the pure loss of this entire tradition and place. The land has become an electricity plant and the natives have long gone. —

“God is in that church,” Teresa tells me. I've heard her say this before. We're sitting on her front porch with a pocket-sized black recorder between us. She's leaning back in her plushy lazy boy recliner and I can see the red paint chipping off her yellowish toe nails. It is one of the hottest days of the summer, and even with the breeze of the fans she has pointed directly on her, I can see sweat beads forming around the top of her forehead. I'd asked her if she wanted to reschedule, but she insisted I still come. “The heat isn't going away, darling. Come on over later today.”

So here I am asking her questions about St. Nicholas for a *Poughkeepsie Journal* article that will appear this Wednesday in the local section. I've landed an internship at the newspaper for the summer and have been put in charge of all the “Dateline stories” that highlight a historical or unique place in the Hudson Valley. I pitched the idea of writing about St. Nicholas to the editors because of its historical and community value in

New Hamburg, the charm and beauty of the chapel on the river, and the uniqueness of its members.

“Teresa, did you ever think St. Nicholas would close?”

“No.”

“Even when there were only 15 members, zero funds, and little support from the diocese?”

She pops her body forward kicking the recliner in an upright position and leans over the recorder for emphasis. “Never. Leigh Ann, God watches over that chapel. You know that. And our faith is what keeps it open.”

When I ask her more about what happened during that dark time in the 1980’s when the chapel was almost forced to shut its doors, she won’t answer me directly. She denies the threat of any failure from the chapel. Maybe she doesn’t remember — it is a stifling 90 degrees with high humidity, which can shut anyone’s brain waves down, especially if you are 78 years old— but I think it is because she truly couldn’t imagine her life without St. Nicholas.

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The matriarchs rule the chapel like the British Monarchy. They don’t have actual decision making power, but fulfill important ceremonial and traditional roles. They sit in the same pew every Sunday, eat all the food they want at church potlucks and fairs, sit queenly at coffee hour and pass on oral traditions and history to the younger generations. And when they die, they are mourned, and celebrated for how they rallied to save the chapel when it was on the verge of having to shut its doors.

When Sunday attendance dropped to less than 15, Zion Episcopal Church in the village of Wappinger, who had been subsidizing the church, refused to give further monetary support. The diocese of New York told the church it had 18 months to grow its membership and “prove its wealth.” The congregation, mostly women, was devastated. They could have given up, closed the doors, gone to Zion for service, but they didn’t. Instead they vowed to keep their little chapel on the Hudson alive.

The four women that I attribute as the greatest deliverers of St. Nicholas are Helen Sodderman, Rhoda Wood, Jean Hess and Teresa Croke. There are others who have died or moved away that I never met or have gotten lost in the generations, but I can tell you that these women were mentioned in every interview I did on St. Nicholas. Rhoda Wood, died about 10 years ago from cancer and Helen Sodderman died five years ago from old age. For so many years these women held the key to the events that happened at the church. There are documents with names and dates, but nothing that truly addressed the sparkle of significance in these women’s eyes.

“There is nothing worse than forgetting history,” Jean Hess once told me in an interview. She sits at the end of her dining room table shaking her head and then rubbing her temples as if to revive some date in history that had got away from her. Forgetting is frustrating, especially when you know the memory is floating around somewhere inside your brain. I wait patiently to see if it’ll come to the forefront of her 88 year-old experience packed mind. Finally, just as I am about to ask something else to prompt the thought, she makes a clicking noise with the back of her tongue and then snaps her delicate, small white fingers, “I’m pretty sure it was December of 1941,” a pause, “I could be wrong though.” I try to reassure her that I can barely remember what I ate for

lunch yesterday, never mind certain dates from years ago, but she's still shaking her head, annoyed with herself.

One woman, Jackie Ruf, refuses to talk to me about the book. When I finally get her on the phone she sighs and says, "I'm not sure I can help you, Leigh Ann. You see I moved away from the church for a while, when we moved down to Peekskill, and I'm having a hard time remembering all those details." I try to explain that I just want to talk with her. I'm not looking for anything specific, I'm trying to recreate the atmosphere of the church during those times when they thought the chapel might close. I could tell that she'd already set a barrier that she wasn't willing to let down on this subject because she a little louder said, "I'll see you at church on Sunday, right?" and hung up.

There is something about getting older that leaves people vulnerable and scared. I've always imagined getting older as a freeing experience — no real obligations, retirement, and no children to worry about, but spending time with these ladies started to make me feel differently. There is a fierce grasping for memories to fill up life and make it feel right again. Jean fumbles for her thoughts and I can nearly sense the weight of the past settle uncomfortably on her small shoulders.

That Sunday at church Jackie delivers me a clean, white scrapbook. She nods at me, thrusts it in my arms, and says, "I think it'll help, maybe not, but it's got a lot of stuff about New Hamburg." I thank her and for the first time I see her smile. The pages are crisp and filled with newspaper clippings, old service pamphlets, and notes from yacht club meetings. There really isn't much that I don't know or can use but, I'm impressed in the care that Jackie used to put the scrapbook together. After church I sit with Teresa, who's always excited to talk about New Hamburg and the chapel, glancing through the

book. Jackie sits across from us methodically eating her muffin and grunting or nodding in agreement with Teresa as she makes comments, “Oh! Oh! That’s my first husband, Donald, see, right there?” I put my face closer to the photo. There are about 20 young kids standing the chapel stairs the caption reads, “Sunday School 1940.” Donald Ruf stands as a long-legged teenager on the chapel stairs giving a smirk to the photographer. Teresa runs her finger over the picture as if to jolt a memory. “Mm hmm, he was always such a class clown, but he loved that choir, I’ll tell you what.”

And then I see Jackie in the photo. She’s older than Donald, almost an adult, standing in the back row with a wide smile across her face. Even in the black and white I can tell she’s laughing. I push the book over towards Jackie and point her younger self out to her. She looks closer and then farther away. “Yep, that’s me. Always so tall I had to stand in the back with the boys,” almost laughs. She points out Jean Hess and her sister-in-law Thelma. “You know,” she says pausing to look up at me, “We all didn’t know a Sunday without the chapel, and we were all involved in choir, Sunday school, the whole shebang. Uh-huh.”

To these women St. Nicholas isn’t just a place to pray. It is a place that they’ve spent their entire lives filling up. As I’m talking to these ladies they bring up their mothers, their best friends, and siblings who have died. They’ve all held multiple positions on the chapel’s board, stepped in as warden when there was nobody else to do it, baked cookies until their hands hurt for fundraisers, carried heavy loads of donated food to the food pantry, and memorized Bible verses and hymns for Bible study. The chapel seems alive because of these women. Their memories and their voices echo through the basement and the card table where they once played.

The wooden patio chairs in the cushy backyard grass, makes the church look homey. The furniture is arranged in a semicircle overlooking the Hudson River where In the warmer months the congregation spills out of church and lingers in that area enjoying the warm sun and scenery. The mountains seem to encircle the river protectively on the far side; from this angle the motor boats are silent but you can hear the cargo train following where the river and the mountains meet.

After spending the day interviewing and searching through old record books in the dark downstairs of the church I stop and sit in the patio chairs to look out over the river. To the left a cloud of smoke rises from Danskammer. The black disappears into the atmosphere, but there is always more coming out of the chimney. I watch it for a long time almost memorized by the dispersion. I think about the Native Americans who danced and worshipped their Gods in that same place. When they saw Henry Hudson sailing up river in his massive ship did they realize that their lives would never be the same again? Of course not, they were trying to make sense of each other, their pasts and their histories. I can't imagine having to give up everything I've ever known because someone else said that time was over. Now, the sacred ground is covered by an environmental hazard.

Walking to my car I see Teresa limping down the road towards me. Even with her sore hip she moves quickly. She doesn't notice me right away and I can see her brow grimace in pain every time she puts pressure on the left side. She's wearing large arthritic sneakers and a loose jogging suit. I wince at how elderly she looks. She looks up, squints

her eyes, and waves at me. “Leigh Ann, oh sweetheart, is that you?” And there it is: that young, excited look I remember.

“Are you looking in on the church?” I ask, shifting my weight against the box I’ve filled with photo albums and scrapbooks I found in the bottom cabinet of the Sunday’s closet.

“No dear, I’m here to water the flowers. There’s been quite a dry spell,” Teresa says peeking in my box. “Find everything you need down there?”

I nod and show her what I’ve found. She looks at the bed of the plants. “Oh, I see someone has already watered them. Who’s been down here?” I tell her who’ve I interviewed. “How nice they thought to sprinkle the flowers.” She walks into the chapel and gets the watering can. I’m wondering if I should tell her that she might flood the plants watering them again. But, I see the persistence in her eyes.

“Do you need help, Teresa?” I ask. She waves me off. And I know better than to insist and try to help her.

“I’m just gonna give them an extra pinch of water. I’m down here today anyway.”

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Hospital rooms tend to be sterile and undistinguished, but I’d depict the one my Grandfather is dying in as septic and memorable. Colors radiate from the bed where my grandfather lays choking and gagging for breath. I’m unable to look at him for long periods of time. It makes my chest hurt seeing him in so much pain and it’s almost embarrassed to watch someone in such a vulnerable and personal state. The vivid brightness in the room makes me flinch and I have to blink to stay focused. Red bounces off the beeping heart rate monitor, orange off the small clip on his middle finger, yellow

flowers someone sent, blinding blue waste buckets, the flashing green print across the computer monitor above his head. None of this compares to the brilliant white from his bulging eyeballs that surge at me from the across the room, looking for a way to stop the suffering.

My mother and her brothers crowd around the bed holding his hand, whispering that he can give up the fight, and that they love him. The nurses have instructed them to do this: tell him to die. I stand with my dad and cousins at the back of the room, close to the door, in a feverish haze, unable to think of anything clearly. I keep telling myself to think of something else, anything else, but all that echoes through my head are the colors and sounds from the room. Nurses bustle in and out of the room checking the machines, adding morphine to his drip, asking if we need anything. What could you possibly need in this situation?

The priest came to give the last rites. He crossed my grandfather's body, prayed for Jesus to escort him into Heaven, and then incensed his bed with the smoke rising towards the heavens. I've always loved that sweet smell and felt immediately comforted by the act. My grandfather seemed comforted too. He settled back onto the pillow and stared at the ceiling, almost like he could see what would come next. Suddenly, I pray. I pray that there is a Heaven, that God will somehow swoop down and seize my Grandfather's soul, and that I too find Heaven someday. Seeing my Grandfather die brings death closer.

My mother calls me to the bed and into the huddle she and her brothers have created around their dying father. Her eyes are wet and I notice that her eyes, like my grandfather's, are bugged out and so fiercely green they scare me. I lean over my

grandfather and touch his tawny hand. The skin feels cold and tight against my sweaty palms. I can't make myself talk; I can't think of anything to say. My mother urges me in a desperate whisper to tell my grandfather it is okay to die. I lean closer to him, he smells sick, rotting, and I say "Go on. Go on to Heaven." And in these words I find relief.

Chapter 7

Who is Without Sin?

Teresa compares a vicar in charge of a chapel to a conductor of an orchestra. Their duties are similar — teacher, director, mediator, and advisor — and have the same goal in mind: to get their group to function as a whole. Picking a vicar is like appointing the principal conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. Teresa reminds unhappy congregation members that it is better to wait for the “perfect fit” than rush with someone who “may work out.” A priest, she warns, can ruin a chapel as easily as he or she can fix one.

One afternoon while searching through historical documents at the church I come across notes from a meeting held in April of 1982 discussing possible names for the chapel. Helen Soderman, the secretary at the time, has assembled the list in neat script and tallied an early vote of the board members. Towards the end of the document board members decided that they would bring the list to the entire congregation. I see that St. Nicholas on the Hudson is not on the early list. I immediately wonder who put forward the name.

A few days later on Teresa’s front porch I ask her about picking a name for the chapel. As the president at the time I figure she’s got to remember who suggested the name. She rests her head on a closed fist and blows wisps of hair out of her face. “Honey, it doesn’t really matter,” she tells me. I sit back and think that over. She continues, “We brought a list of names to the congregation and people began to shout out and write down different suggestions.” I press her on how they finally chose St. Nicholas. “It was right

there all along. The chapel's first service was on St. Nicholas's day and it lies right there by the river." She says it so quickly and matter-of-fact that I can't imagine any of the other names working. "Plus," she adds, "How many congregations can say they named their church?" I can tell she's proud, not only of the name, but of the unified congregation.

On June 10, 1982 the congregation of St. Nicholas submitted a plan to the diocese of New York asking to be recognized as an Organized Mission Church to be known as St. Nicholas Church on the Hudson. The diocese approved. Reverend Deborah Tammearu joined St. Nicholas that year as the first vicar of the chapel. Under her guidance St. Nicholas joined with St. Mark's, in Chelsea and with Trinity Church, in Fishkill to form the Western Dutchess Ministry. The three churches sit in small communities within 20 miles of each other former near the river. The idea was for the alignment to provide an umbrella for funding their clergy and outreach. Deborah suggested that with shared manpower, ideas and resources the three small parishes could become stronger. She would lead service at St. Mark's on Saturday night, at St. Nicholas on Sunday morning, and at Trinity late Sunday afternoon. As the vicar for all three churches she would oversee all three of the congregations.

Deborah, a tall woman with big, fashionable 1980's teased brown hair and ambitions just as thick, jumped at the chance to run the Western Dutchess Ministry. She'd gone to seminary school in her late 30s after a successful career as a sales woman for an insurance company. Out of seminary school she became a favorite of the diocese but bounced around from church to church. The reason, it later turned out, was because

she was a lesbian. In the early 1980s there weren't any clear rules about ordaining gay priests. It is not clear if the diocese knew about Deborah's homosexuality. At St. Nicholas, while some members knew that Deborah was gay, she never came out to the parish as a whole. She did not duck any private questions from parishioners, but few asked. When Deborah took over the Western Dutchess Ministry the lines for gay priests were blurry in the Episcopalian church. The overarching feeling at the time was in line with Bill Clinton's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy." If you didn't come out, then you couldn't get in trouble. It wasn't until 1995 when a group of Episcopal bishops charged Walter Righter, the retired bishop of Iowa, with charges of heresy for ordaining an openly gay man, Barry Stopfel as a deacon, that it became a national issue. There had been no other heresy trials of a bishop since 1923. On May 15, 1996 the court on the Righter case concluded that there is no core doctrine prohibiting the ordination of a non-celibate homosexual person living in a faithful and committed sexual relationship with a person of the same sex. Righter's action had not violated the rules and could not be prosecuted. The case made a precedent for gays in the Episcopalian diocese. Now, many who were "closeted" could come out to their parishes.

Deborah appeared to be just the right spark for the small, waning parishes. "She would always weave a theme in and out of her sermons in such a way that you couldn't forget it," Evelyn Connors exclaimed to me one afternoon when I brought Deborah up, "Whenever I left the Church on Sunday morning, I took that with me. And it stayed with me for the whole week." New groups such as a spiritual advisory committee, a property management committee, an outreach committee and an adult Bible school started almost immediately under Deborah's direction. She wanted fast, wide-reaching results and she

wanted them quickly. New members began attending the chapel; some of these from St. Mark's and Trinity. The church, to an outsider, seemed to be growing. But, there were still major problems with the finances. Deborah's scheme did not include keeping up with archival notes or minutes, proper financial statements, or Episcopalian members' books. At vestry meetings she reassured her parishioners that those things would come with growth.

Deborah's tenure with the Western Dutchess Ministries happened before my family arrived at St. Nicholas. I'd heard stories about her growing up at the church; the wind before a strong storm. The more people I asked about her the more opinions I got — a firecracker, played favorites among members, strong leadership, dictated, unfriendly, hard worker, and ambitious to the point of wreckage. Evelyn Connors, who had recently returned to the church after a long spell, attending Zion Episcopal in Wappingers, was the first to admit the schism. She sat across from me at her kitchen table, covered in a tablecloth decorated with Italian pasta, sauces, and Italian words, with her hands in fists. She must have got up four or five times to check the lasagna baking in the oven and the AC temperature before she told me, "I left St. Nicholas, that had been my home since I was a child, after Deborah left." I wait for her to continue. I see in her face she is deciding how much to tell me about the decision. "I loved Deborah, but she wasn't for everyone. I fought hard to keep her at the chapel and when she left I thought there wasn't a place for me there anymore. It was a very hard decision."

"Did other people leave when she did?" I ask wondering how bad it really must have been for Evelyn to have left the history that she's just talked an hour to me about.

“Yes, a few. We mostly went to Zion,” there is a pause. “You know, Deborah didn’t care for kids. She didn’t put much into the Sunday school. That was one thing I didn’t agree with, you know, I’ve always been a teacher at St. Nicholas.”

“Oh. Was that what upset people?”

“I think some people were upset by that. We really didn’t have a lot of families with small children at that time. But, I think it had to do with her way of leading.”

“Which was?”

“She wanted to become a bishop, always very determined. I think she wanted to show people that gays could lead the Episcopal Church. She wouldn’t let that out of her mind for anything. People realize that sort of thing.”

Evelyn believed that a priest has the right to a private life and didn’t push the gay issue. However after talking to other members of the congregation I realized that some people knew and some people didn’t, which created an “in crowd.” That isn’t healthy for a parish. Teresa explained that she didn’t believe that Deborah being gay would be a problem for the congregation at St. Nicholas, but they ultimately felt slighted by being kept in the dark. The tension quickly ascended into complaints and members leaving the church. When Deborah left the church in 1994 to join a larger parish in Westchester County there was a mixture of relief and anxiety about the future. Nobody knew what would happen as the church moved forward.

After the Eucharist, the Sunday I’ve begun writing about Deborah, I’m kneeling with my hands clasped together resting on the pew in front of me; something about this traditional stance makes me feel closer to God. I pray for the usual suspects - my parents,

my boyfriend, loved ones, my future. Before I sit back up to rejoin the service I make one last request: Protect St. Nicholas from itself. People are flawed; everyone has their own agendas, but help us celebrate you together in fellowship. I love the chapel— its smooth wooden pews, musty smell from the faded red rug, the little silver chalice on the altar, the glow through the painted windows — with such fierceness that I am unable to separate it with my belief of God. It's the people I see every Sunday in the pews that remind me of my own spirituality. For me St. Nicholas, its members, and God are a connected entity of my religious life. I'm flawed, I know that. But, in that moment I couldn't feel closer to God.

Later, I think about Deborah and the divide at the church. I am reminded of a Bible story from the Gospel according to John, Chapter 8, verses 1-11. The story about how an adulterous woman was brought to Jesus by the Pharisees and scribes. The law commanded that the woman be stoned for committing such an act. Jesus said, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first." One by one, convicted of their conscience, everyone left and threw no stones at the woman. When Jesus was left alone with the woman he said, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more." The Pharisees are among the most religious and law abiding men. They believe that this woman should be punished for her faults. Jesus is saying that we all have faults and we must forgive them and help them live a life closer to God.

I think about this compared to something I once read that a spiritual director said about God living in the margins. There is always room for sin and immorality, but it is important to remember that we are all people of God. "You can ask a drunk not to drink on the porch of the church, but you can't ask him to leave. He lives in the part that makes

the church uncomfortable and that's where Jesus lives.”

Deborah moved on because she was unable to connect with the values and goals of St. Nicholas. A priest must fit the church as importantly as a member must feel comfortable in that same church.

Teresa, as it turns out, was right.

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Arielle's blonde hair, tucked behind her ears, sparkles gold in the candlelight. I've never seen my middle school friend like this: pious, reverent. I knew that Arielle's family practiced strict Judaism because on Fridays after sundown Arielle can't buy anything at the mall, she keeps Kosher, and celebrates holidays I don't recognize. Tonight, because my parents are at a wedding upstate, I'm celebrating the Sabbath with her family.

The meal, which seems to decorate the table rather than fill it, is puffy, sweet bread twisted into braids and vegetable dishes that I've never seen. Candles form a line down the center of the table. There is no other light in the house. Arielle's father and brother place black yarmukles, which remind me of fabric made drink coasters, on the back of their heads. We all hold hands and Arielle's dad begins to sing in Hebrew. The song is slow, beautiful and strange. When he's done the whole family begins to speak in unison their voices low and methodical.

I can't understand the language, but prayer is familiar. In my church we sing and recite verses to praise the Lord. Sabbath is like an extended way of saying grace. A way of giving thanks to the Lord for all that he's given us. Our rituals use different words, melody, and costume but at this moment I am compelled to pray to my own God.

“Leigh Ann, you’re our guest,” Arielle’s mother says waking me from my trance, “We’ll serve you first.” I’m usually a very picky eater. I don’t like things on things I tell my mother; that takes away casseroles, mixed salads, shepherd pies, and anything cooked in a crock pot, but at this moment I’m willing to try any of these unrecognizable, mixed dishes.

“I’ll try anything.”

After we’ve boiled water and washed the dishes in the sink, without using electricity, we settle on the couch to play board games by lanterns and candles. My family’s summer camp runs on limited solar power and most nights we use flashlights and kerosene lanterns to read and play cards, so this feels familiar, comforting. As I move the token around the board I think, “Our Gods are pretty similar.”

Chapter 8

Worship God Not Your Church

Polly Myhrum found New Hamburg through an advertisement in The New York Times for a firehouse for sale. The building had been converted to a house and a basement artist space because the floors could hold a lot of weight like they originally did for the trucks. A perfect set up for my pottery business, Polly thought as she ripped the ad from the paper and posted it on the refrigerator. Polly, her husband Myron, and their two-year-old daughter Emily lived in a loft in the SOHO district of New York City. The loft, even with tall ceiling and open space, still felt too small for Polly. She'd grown up in Westchester County, north of New York City, and always wanted to move back to the country. Myron, a location and production manager for film companies wasn't so sure about the move. He was apprehensive of the long commute and leaving his life in the city. After weeks of strategic begging, Myron finally agreed to take a family trip to New Hamburg to see the renovated firehouse. They loaded up the car and headed 80 miles north. The air felt crisper, colder as they headed into New Hamburg.

"The snow looks whiter here, doesn't it?" Polly said pointing out the window. "It makes the whole world brighter." She looked at her husband who was trying to hide his smile. "Oh, and there are swans on the creek! Look Emily, quack quack."

They passed a bridge over the railroad tracks and made a right turn. "We're looking for Point Street," Myron said squinting in the sunlight at the street signs. They drove around for a while before finding a small grocery store next to the train stop. "At least this is convenient to commuters," Myron said throwing Polly a wink.

Polly got out of the car and ran into the little store. There were only two women sitting at one of the tables drinking coffee. They both wore big knit sweaters and snow boots.

“May I help you?” asked one of the women standing up from her chair. Her English accent surprised Polly.

“We’re looking for the fire house on Point Street?” Polly told the woman.

“Oh yes, you’re right there. Just veer right at the end of this street. You really can’t miss it. It is such a beautiful place, all brick. Are you looking to buy it?”

“As a matter of a fact we are. Drove up from the city.”

“Well, that’s nice dear, good luck.”

Polly turned to walk out when she heard the bell ring and a little boy walk into the shop. He looked around nervously and headed to the candy section. The woman still sitting at the table reached out and touched Polly’s arm as she walked by. “You ought to check out St. Nicholas on the Hudson. The little chapel, let’s see, three houses down from the firehouse is a wonderful little place. That’ll sell you on the property.” Polly nodded her thanks and as she was leaving Polly heard the woman working the cash register say “Jonathan, you know you can’t have bubble gum. Choose something else.” This is the place we need to live, she thought. This woman knows all the dietary concerns of everyone in town.

It wasn’t until five years after they’d lived in the firehouse that Polly, Myron and Emily attended St. Nicholas on the Hudson. It was Emily who wanted to go to the church. Every Sunday she would stand in the front yard watching the parishioners of St.

Nicholas walk into the chapel and then leave an hour later. “We aren’t church people, Em,” Polly told her. “We aren’t religious in that way.”

Polly had gone to a strict Episcopalian boarding school, but was never baptized. Reciting the verses and hymns everyday made her no closer to God. She grew up on the fringes of religion. It was always there, but she refused to accept it or make it a part of her life. One Sunday, Emily asked if she could go play with the kids who were playing in the church’s backyard after service. Polly watched the children laughing and playing and decided that it was time to go to church.

The next Sunday the family dressed up and walked to church. There were only about 20 people total. Polly was anxious and a little nervous to be in the church. She told her husband and daughter that they wouldn’t be receiving Communion because they hadn’t been baptized. They remained seated when everyone else rose for the Eucharist. During the Sign of Peace, towards the middle of the service, a woman came over and squeezed Polly’s hand. It was the same lady from the grocery store when they’d just arrived into town.

“I’m Teresa Croke, the self-appointed welcome committee at St. Nicks. Welcome! You live in the firehouse? That’s wonderful. Please stay for coffee hour after church.” The woman winked at Polly before moving on to another family. Polly sat back down and thought, “I guess I’m here, might as well meet my neighbors.”

That was over 20 years ago.

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My family met Polly during one of our first times at church. Her premature white hair was tied up in a knot and she wore a flowing green dress down to her ankles. Her

smile was wide, but she had a calm, almost serene, air about her. I think that mostly has to do with her speaking voice, which reminds me of a flute – soft and yet high pitched. She told us that she ran a pottery business out of her house, the old firehouse, a couple houses down from the church. A few weeks later she invited us to come over for a free lesson, where we fold the clay in our hands and work it into a circular bowl shape. I didn't want to finish and put it in the kiln, because I liked how the wet clay formed around my hands. As she leaned over me to help my fingers form the bottom of the bowl I smelled fresh mint. There is something Godly about her – her movements gentle and yet strong.

Our family didn't join the church in a moment of prosperity. St. Nicholas needed a minister. The diocese sent supply priests to worship for a Sunday or two and although some weeks there was only common prayer led by Larry Hanes, a deacon at the church. Larry and his wife Michelle lived across the street and walked to church every morning. Larry, a tall middle age man with wire rim glasses and a large brown mustache that reached across his face, always made me think of a 1940s man who smoked a pipe and took business meetings in his leather, decorated study. I'm not sure I ever had a real conversation with the man. Michelle, a short portly woman who did smile on a rare occasion, moved so slowly it looked like the weight of life was slowing her down. She was a member of the altar guild and performed common prayer with Larry many times. Together they would putter around in slow motion never looking at each other. I had a hard time believing they were married, let alone happy.

Polly, whose family by this time had all been baptized and confirmed at St. Nicholas, felt a certain responsibility to the church. The "sad state" of the church during

this time directly related to money issues. The chapel could only offer a minister a part time salary, with very few benefits. This made the process of finding a minister arduous. The vestry met with about five candidates during this time- all newly ordained, inexperienced and desperate. One of the five candidates was Helen Packer. She had gone to divinity school with Polly's best friend Sally from high school. On a late-night phone call, while Polly on her couch in pajamas drinking decaffeinated tea, they talked about Helen. Sally said she was smart, hardworking and dedicated. After a short interview St. Nicholas hired Helen Packer.

Helen was a small, angled woman who always pulled her hair back in a tight bun, which made her already sharp nose look harsh and severe. The robe seemed to swallow her up. She spent hours and hours working on her sermons. Polly would find her sometimes, when she was watering the flowers at the back of the church, sitting in a pew with her Bible and notebook thinking and writing. She would even look up as Polly walked by. "Helen, do you need anything?" Polly would ask.

"I'm just fine," She'd say looking up briefly and settling back down to her Bible. But, it was Polly who sometimes wanted to talk. She felt that she had brought this priest, because of Sally's recommendation, to the church and she wanted to get to know her. Helen's sermons didn't help Polly get to know her either. Polly noticed that the people in the pews, listening to one of Helen's 30-minute sermons, shifted their weight as if the fabric of their clothes itched and stared with glazed over eyes. At the end of the sermon Polly never felt the ah ha moment. She felt that Helen never came full circle with her sermons.

“Sally, she’s hard to follow. She makes everything so complicated!” Polly said in a phone conversation one Sunday.

“Is she? How is she fitting in with the congregation?” Sally’s words always comforted Polly.

“She’s not fitting in. She doesn’t seem to know how to care for a small church. St. Nicks needs someone to oversee the finances, fundraising efforts, and meetings! It doesn’t seem like she understands people or how to communicate God’s word either.”

“Well, this sort of thing can be complicated. She’s really just got there. Maybe you should go talk to her. I’m sure she’d like to hear your advice.”

Polly went to bed vowing to talk to Helen the next week after church. As she worked on her pottery the next morning she began to form what she would say and later practiced it in front of her husband. Myron had stopped coming to church altogether. He didn’t agree with Helen’s traditional Anglican style. She had recently implemented a “healing service,” where people could, individually, come to the altar for a special blessing during church. Myron believed that should be done on one’s private time with the minister.

The next Sunday after church Helen casually asked Polly, “How did you enjoy church today?” They were walking down the stairs to coffee hour in the basement of the church.

“I think some of what you said today was interesting. But, I was confused at times. We’re used to much simpler sermons.”

“Well, this one suited the liturgy of today.”

“I hope that the minister sheds some light on the readings and therefore helps me feel closer to God.”

“Polly, listen to me,” Helen turned to face Polly. “When you see me on the altar you should see God. I am God’s messenger.” With that she turned towards coffee hour still adorned in her divine robe. Most ministers would take that off after service and become one of us, Polly thought as she walked out the doors and back up the stairs to the road.

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As a member of the Mid-Hudson Chapter of the Episcopalian Diocese of New York, Polly attended monthly meetings to represent St. Nicholas. Sitting in the back row in a metal chair Polly felt like St. Nicholas was failing her but she couldn’t imagine attending another church. She leaned over to the minister next to her and said, “I think I’m going to leave a little early. It was good seeing you again.”

“Is everything ok?”

“Yes, I’m just not sure I feel like being here right now. My heart isn’t in it.”

“Polly, I want you to remember something,” the man reached over and grabbed her hand. “Worship God, not the church.”

That night when Polly walked out to her car and began to drive the dark, rough country road home tears ran down her face. She knew what the minister said was true, but somehow she couldn’t separate God from the chapel or the chapel from her heart.

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The number I’m holding on a white receipt appears at the top right of the projector screens on both sides of the stage: 206. I wait a minute hoping that whatever

the problem is will be solved. It is in a line of other numbers getting larger and smaller like an inch worm across the top of the screen. 206 begins to blink, which means emergency. I lean over and tell my cousin Josh that his three year old son Ben's number is blinking. I'm going to have to go get him from Sunday school.

I stand up and walk towards the back of the stadium seating church, which looks more like a amphitheater. I am spending the summer in Charleston, South Carolina to nanny for my cousin Josh's four kids who are twelve, eight, three and two. On Sundays we attend Sea Coast, what is commonly known as a mega church. Before the service we drop each kid off at their respective Sunday Schools — a maze of trailers that represent certain age groups. At each station they print you a number to represent each child. If your number goes up on the screen during the service you must come pick them up immediately.

When I finally find the toddler trailer Ben, my lucky number 206, is waiting for me at the door. His face is red and smudged from tears and snot. I can tell that he has given the teachers a hard time. "What's going on, Ben?" I bend down to him and he immediately hugs me and settles his head on my shoulder.

"Ben is mad that he didn't get to be with his brothers in the older group," The girl explains to me. "He's gotten himself all worked up. You should probably take him," an annoyed teenage girl tells me. I look around. They've got her hands full with about 25 toddlers between a teacher and two aids.

I carry him back out through the parking lot and back into the church. I can hear a guitar playing and can see some ballerina dancers on the stage. A guy with long grayish hair and a Hawaiian shirt steps up to the microphone and begins singing

something that sounds a lot like I would listen to on the radio. Instead of saying “baby or lover” they’ve changed the words to Jesus and Savior. The congregation is clapping and singing along with the music. Even Ben, with his thumb in his mouth, pops his head up for a moment to see what is going on.

“Is that Jesus?” He asks. I’m taken back by this question.

“Of course not. Jesus is in Heaven” I say.

“Oh,” he says settling back on my lap and curling his longish brown hair with his first finger. “Is that Jesus?” he asks pointing to the minister who has come back out on stage and is clapping to the music with a big smile on his face and tapping his foot. I notice he has a head mic attached to his face.

“No, that is the minister,” I say to Ben. And I want to add “Although, he looks like a leader from a boy band.” I move my knees up and down to bounce Ben to the music. He’s listening, watching the stage. I wonder if he realizes he’s worshipping or thinks he’s at the theatre.

Later after church we run into some friends from the neighborhood. We are standing in the front entrance of the church waiting for the traffic to clear.

“You can’t beat this church. Where else do you get a rock band, dancing, and a good sermon?” I smile, unsure you need to be entertained at a church service, and turn to Ben, who is dancing around like the ballerinas on the stage. In the car he tells his father that he won’t be attending Sunday school with the babies anymore. He wants to go to church.

Chapter 9

God's Song

They are doing Confirmation classes this year,” my father tells me on the way to church one Sunday. “Should we sign you up?”

“How many nights a week?” I ask thinking about my sports practice schedule. I'm on the eighth grade modified field hockey team. We practice every day after school and play games twice a week at 4:30 p.m. I don't want to miss practice because then I won't get as much playing time during the games.

“Two nights a week for six weeks at Zion. The classes are from 7-9 p.m. I'm sure you can fit that into your busy schedule,” my Dad says sarcastically. I realize that he isn't suggesting I take the class, but already has his mind made up for me.

We turn onto Point Street, drive past St. Nicks on the right—its guardian Maple tree's shadow casts long across the red double doors. The grounds teem with green grass and wildflowers and then drops down in a sharp embankment. I see the light cedar steps built up the embankment near the rear of St. Nicks and remember how Dad zipped me in my old winter coat and drove us there as the sun broke. We shoveled the snow from the steps as the sun rose, our brittle hands burned from the cold even under wool gloves.

When we returned the shovel inside the chapel, I remember the sweat on Dad's face, the sun streams beaming through tall slender windows. It actually felt good to work for the church, and inside its dark old walls it was warm.

“I'll go,” I tell him, finally returning from the daydream. “I might want to be a minister someday anyway. It is all the things I like: helping people, giving advice, speaking in public, reading history and writing.”

“It sounds up your alley,” Dad answers pulling the car into park. We hop out of the car and head into the chapel.

The classes are held at Zion Episcopal that originally supported the chapel before it became self-sufficient in the early 1980s. This is the first major cooperative function since the two churches split. Attached to the large gray stone church is a rectory and community banquet room where we meet for our confirmation classes. Fifteen of us sit around a heavy wooden table; the five of us from St. Nicholas crowded at one end. A stout, middle aged woman introduces herself as a deacon at Zion in charge of youth education. She informs us that she will guide us through the lessons needed to prepare us for a lifelong membership in the Episcopal Church. Through these sessions we would come to understand the importance to Biblical and Anglican teachings.

“In the Episcopal Church, Confirmation is the renewal of baptismal vows for those baptized at early ages who desire to make their first adult affirmation of faith. It is a sacrament of mature adulthood.” The deacon explains. “You should only be here if you are willing to give your life over to God.”

The night before I am to be confirmed I pray with such seriousness and urgency that I scare myself. I want to be changed after tomorrow’s service. The priests and deacons who taught the confirmation classes emphasize that our commitment will make us different people, promised to God and the church. I want to uphold this responsibility and become, somehow, more faithful to Jesus. I’m not completely sure what this means in my daily life, but I hope that the answers will come to me after I’ve been confirmed. I imagine myself sitting in the pews of St. Nicholas with my head down, eyes closed

praying. I am reassured by that image—that the chapel will be my guide. I kneel at the foot of my bed with my hands clasped and pray, “Please help me become more faithful to you. I want to find you. Please come to St. Nicholas tomorrow. Amen. P.S. Bless my family and friends.”

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The next day my family arrives at church exactly like we do every Sunday. I wear a silver satin ankle length skirt that moves in slow waves around me as I walk and a light pink knit tank top and a matching cardigan. My hair is swept back in a tight half pony tail; my mom curled and sprayed the bottom half before we left for church. I feel different, certain, as I walk down the aisle of St. Nicholas to our family pew. My mother smooths out the back of my skirt before I sit down so it won't wrinkle. I notice that the church is almost full. Members, friends and family have come to see us receive our Confirmation. My own grandmother and grandfather have traveled four and a half hours to see me be confirmed.

My stomach flutters when the precession begins. I remind myself that the deacon told us today we would confirm our commitment to God; this is something that had to come from within us, not something someone could tell us to do. I'm making one of my first grown-up decisions Bishop Mark Sisk follows Father Bane down the aisle wearing his traditional white pointed miter. The braided ends of the gold rope bounce back and forth around his neck as he makes his way to the altar. He strides slowly and purposefully and I can only see the top of his vaulted hat from the back of the chapel and hear the crisp clicks of his Wingtips. The first part of church seems to take forever. I wiggle and move my skirt uncomfortably until the first half of the service is over. I watch the Bishop, who

sits on the wooden chair carved with a Bible verse, watching over the congregation. I catch his eye and he winks. Finally, after the sermon Father Bane announces that it is time for the confirmations. He calls us to the front of the church and asks us if we understand the commitment of promise we are making to the Episcopal Church. He stands in front of me at the altar, puts a heavy hand on my shoulder, and recites, “Strengthen, O Lord, your servant Leigh Ann. With your Holy Spirit; empower her for your service; and sustain her all the days of her life. Amen.”

After I’ve been confirmed, he hands me The Book of Common Prayer. It has the same gold trim as the Miter hat that all Episcopalian Bishops wear. The leather is soft and pliable in my hands. The pages are so thin and crisp that I’m afraid I’m going to tear them. I open it up and see that the Bishop has written this note: To Leigh Ann, May God bless you always. December 5th, 1999 and signed Bishop Mark S. Sisk. He also filled out the Certificate of Confirmation page that provides my name, date, and place with his signature as well as Father Bane’s. At the bottom of the page there is this: “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people, Jeremiah 31.33. The Bishop pronounces us confirmed. Like the sacrament of marriage this confirmation has bonded me forever with the church and with God. I beam out to the congregation, proud and happy to be an official member of their church, while they snap photos and applaud for us.

As my family and I leave the church Teresa grabs my hand. She smiles, congratulates me, and exclaims, “Welcome to Christ’s family.” The chapel was full today; that makes her happy. Before she lets me walk away she hugs me close and

whispers in my ear, “Did you hear God in that church today? He was singing such a lovely song to welcome you.”

Years later I go back to the church to pick up some religious memoir books that Astrid has left for me to read. I’ve just finished substitute teaching English at a local high school and I’m rushing home to meet some friends whom I haven’t seen in over a year for dinner. The traffic driving south from Poughkeepsie to my house in Wappingers is atrocious. Cars are backed up two or three lights by the malls. In my manual five-speed, cramped, hot Jetta I’m sweaty and tired. I’m in a rush to get home to shower before the dinner. I’m thinking about the cold water shower running down my face as I hurry up the path to St. Nicholas. It’s a Wednesday and the church is completely empty. I walk through the unlocked chapel to get the key, hidden under a kneeler, to the downstairs meeting area. I reach down and feel for the key and find it in its usual spot. I can smell the familiar mildew from the cushions and I am compelled to kneel down for a moment. I take a deep breath trying to shake the overwhelming feeling of being rushed. I lean my head against the cool wooden pew in front of me and feel the tension leave my body.

I sit there for another ten minutes breathing and trying to clear my mind from the racing thoughts. The air in the chapel is calm and warm. There is no air conditioning; the windows have been propped open. A small breeze passes over me. I begin to think about my day in a new way. I’m thankful for the money and experience that comes with getting a substitute teaching job, for my old friends being in town, and for the fact that my old car still runs. As I get up to continue downstairs I walk a little more slowly, a little bit more appreciatively.

Priests like to say that they are “called” to ministry. People claim to feel God beckoning them to a spiritual life. All of God’s prophets supposedly received a clear message from God telling them what to do. What does that voice sound like? I try to remember ever hearing this voice during my confirmation classes, but all I can remember is the deacon reading from the Bible—her deadpan tone faintly echoing throughout the chapel. When I asked Astrid Storm, our current priest, if she’d heard this voice she responded that priesthood is a vocation, “it is the same sound that encouraged you to be a writer.” But, nobody told me to be a writer. I just got the best grades in English, loved to read, and loved to tell stories. Astrid tells me, “It’s a feeling that this is what you were meant to do. Some become priests who shouldn’t, just like people go into writing who aren’t good writers.”

In middle school I considered becoming a minister. I didn’t consider myself holy, certainly not holier than anyone else, but, I had the characteristics of a good priest. I was always chosen as the leader at school, liked to speak in public, worked well with others, organized, and liked to be the boss. What I didn’t consider was whether or not God had called me to priesthood. As I grew up I liked the idea of studying the Bible, writing and giving sermons, and reaching out to those in need, but I didn’t do it. Instead I played sports, joined the newspaper staff, acted in plays, and joined Leo Club, a community service organization. My attributes were still there, but I used them in a different way.

I chose Elon University for college because of the journalism program and its developing newspaper. When I interviewed at the school months before, the professors told me that freshmen contribute articles and sophomores sometimes get editor jobs. Many of the other schools open these positions only to upperclassmen. I joined the

newspaper staff after an organization fair in the fall of my freshman year. Every two weeks I wrote an article that appeared, mostly unchanged, in the Features section. Janna Anderson, the professor overseeing the newspaper (although it was mostly student-run), advised me on what journalism classes to take and how to prepare myself for a future as a journalist. I took her advice seriously; she had worked in newspapers most of her adult life and joined the faculty at Elon as a second career. As a sophomore I was elected as the Features Editor, and then as a Junior I became a copy editor. And even when I said I would take my senior year off to concentrate on my internship at Hemispheres, the official in-flight magazine of United Airlines, I was asked to fill in as Features Editor when another student quit. My career was decided; I would be a journalist.

My professors encouraged their journalism students to get a graduate degree. “It will make you more marketable when you go to apply for a journalism job against many other applicants,” my senior thesis advisor told me. I was double majoring in English with a concentration in Professional Writing and figured that a higher education couldn’t help but solidify a career in writing. The current director of the college newspaper had recently returned to Elon after receiving a masters in Journalism from the University of Memphis. He suggested I do the same and promised me an enthusiastic professor recommendation. While the rest of my friends struggled to find jobs, by January of my senior year, I was happily settled on going to the University of Memphis.

When I got to Memphis, however, things changed. The University of Memphis’s MA in Journalism concentrated on theory and research. Elon’s program used the hands-on approach, which encouraged practice writing for newspapers and magazines. At this new program I was forced to memorize theories, communication laws, and research

methods. Also, the journalism world, which had already begun to change, hit an all time low. Most newspapers were forced to fire large percentages of their staffs. Many medium-sized newspapers folded. I remember reading an article about the San Francisco Chronicle laying off half of their newspaper staff. In the new world of instantaneous blogs, tweets, and websites, print news struggled. My friends who had graduated with journalism degrees were freelancing, interning for very little money, and giving up news work for public relations work. Professors reassured me that although the medium was changing, we'd always need good journalists. That was hard to believe when watching the Memphis Nightly News, dedicated to crime reports and sensationalism. I began to worry.

Halfway through my second year at Memphis, I decided to switch over to the Master in Fine Arts program in Creative Nonfiction from getting my masters in journalism. The English department, who sponsored the MFA, promised that my journalism credits could count towards an interdisciplinary major. The required classes for an MFA consisted of mostly workshops, places where I could write and share my stories with others. And in this atmosphere I again began to flourish. Even my social life improved. The people I met liked to do the same things I did. We'd cheer at the Memphis Tigers basketball games, dance until 4 a.m., listen to poetry readings, and explore the city. This is where I met my boyfriend, Wesley, with whom I moved to Denver, Colorado after school.

While my path has changed, I keep similar goals. I'm still planning to be a writer, even a journalist, but my choices have opened the doors which may lead to a career as professor and book author. Astrid traveled a similar course on the way to her ministry.

She studied German and religion in college, followed a boyfriend across country to seminary school, fell in love with the Bible, and discovered St. Nicholas after working for the diocese of New York. I've come to the realization that there isn't a strong voice booming from the skies "calling me" to a certain profession, but maybe the voices are in the people I meet along the way. My mentors, guides, and experiences have led me to the place I am now. The voice lies in talent and intuition, failure and success, and fate. Maybe God doesn't choose priests, they choose Him.

On my confirmation day I was nervous that God was watching me, judging me. I certainly was not perfect; I was a sinner. Why would he want me as his servant? But then I realized that I was choosing to walk with him and when I left church that day something inside of me changed. Perhaps not a new voice, but a stronger voice that dictated the way I live my life.

Polly once told me that, although she attended church weekly at her Episcopalian boarding school, she never paid attention to the words she recited. Religion remained something she didn't care to understand. Just going through the church rituals bonded her no closer with God. It wasn't until she came to St. Nicholas and began to study the words and apply them to her own life that she began to believe. "When I was confirmed I meant every word I said," she told me. "And when I left service confirmed I knew that my life would always somehow be different."

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The man standing in a suit at the front of the cafeteria tells me I am a sinner. The people around me nod; some put their hands in the air and wave slowly back and forth. Their "uh huhs" and "mmms" seem to keep time to the soft hymn playing in the

background. I'm a freshman in college and a new friend, Jayson, has brought me to Campus Outreach. He asked me so casually that I'd mistaken it for a volunteer group. And now I'm being told that I am headed straight for hell because I haven't completely given my life to the Lord.

I try to blend in. I am afraid the man will point me out and tell everyone that I'm not religious enough to be there or that he'll somehow know I'm headed to a frat party after this thing gets out. It's Thursday night, what do you expect? The man puts his arms out, closes his eyes, and whispers for Jesus to forgive us all. I'm impressed by his ability to be so certain that Jesus is listening, like He is standing right in front of him. I close my eyes, but only feel the beat of my heart and an uncomfortable blackness.

Later, when I get back to my dorm, I lie on my bed and nestle my head into my pillows. I pray to God, my nice, loving God, and tell him that I'm sorry for sinning. Although before that night I never felt like a sinner; I'm a good girl. I want to come back to comfort, what I knew about God as a child. I find myself repeating. "I'm a good girl," and when I stand up I don't feel any closer to God, just guilty for answering the phone and meeting my friends at the frat party.

Chapter 10

In Jesus' Name We Pray

Dale Cunningham's philosophy is Christian Science. She tells me this casually while holding a white teapot under the faucet getting water for peppermint tea. Her blonde hair, which hangs down close to her face, has strands of silver sparkling in the sunlight. She looks particularly fit in a tennis skirt, sweat proof tee-shirt, and sneakers. We're at her new house, a historic landmark for New Hamburg, the old inn and bar next to the train station. The inn abandoned for years since going out of business, needed to be gutted, rebuilt and decorated. It now reminds me of a house out of Southern Living magazine. The whole house is painted white—the walls, the wood floors, the cabinets, the window frames, almost everything—except she's accented the white with brightly colored furniture and dark wooden tables. The decoration reminds me of Dale. The space feels open, fresh and spotless. The one room that is different is her dining room, which has a yellowy, orange big floral wall print. She tells me that Jackie Onassis had bought the exact same wallpaper for her house.

“What is that exactly?” I ask, referring to her Christian Science affiliation. As far as I know Dale is Episcopalian. She attends St. Nicholas almost every Sunday and is the lead singer in the choir, which is really four or five people who sing louder in church from their pews. Dale's voice rings out louder, higher more distinct than the others. Born and raised in England, Dale has a way of pronouncing words with clarity and importance. She's told me that she feels bad for people who can't sing because for her singing is way of expressing gratitude to God and to life.

“Christian Scientists believe in healing the way Jesus did,” she tells me sitting down across the table from me. She points to my recorder and asks, “Do you read me my Miranda rights before we start this thing?” That makes us both laugh. “Really, Christian Science is about love,” she says.

Before she married her now ex-husband, a Christian Scientist, she had no idea what the belief meant. She says that before meeting her husband’s mother for the first time, he warned Dale that she was a Christian Scientist and her first response was, “Oh my, those people who don’t allow blood transfusions?” Through practice and what she describes as “mind over matter” she has come to believe that you can save yourself through God’s teachings and the healing power of God’s love. She doesn’t normally go to a doctor; instead she concentrates on healing herself. But, she says of course you can still get a blood transfusion in Christian Science. “There is no sense in dying because you didn’t take the blood transfusion. You can do what your heart feels is necessary.”

As she pours the tea she says, “You can borrow a book from me or read up on Christian Science on the internet. But, it’s about healing like Jesus and if it’s good enough for Jesus then, it’s good enough for me.” She pauses and smiles. “I don’t want to sound like a Southern Baptist.”

Dale’s religious upbringing mostly came from her boarding school. Her father, a scientist, called himself agnostic. “No one has proved to me that there is a God, but nobody has proved that there isn’t,” he told his daughter once over dinner. Through boarding school she was confirmed into the Church of England. At the higher school, from 13-16 years old, her school schedule introduced her to choir. She had a short meeting and then they sang hymns and then another class meeting. She began to learn

about choir singing and memorized hymns. “My voice is slightly better than most.” She says. “Music was and is my favorite part of church.”

I finally get up the guts to ask her, “Then why do you attend and support St. Nicholas so fully if you call yourself a Christian Scientist?”

She giggles her standard response. But she gets serious and looks at me and says, “Leigh Ann, I love St. Nicholas. It’s not just a church but a community busting with Jesus’ love.”

The church’s recent growth inspired the property committee to think of building a new addition. This makes people nervous because in a small church you never know how long prosperity like this will last. The first and most important thing they decide is to create a boiler room. The church’s boiler had recently died and they agreed that it is important to have a safe and secure place for the new one. Colin, who has recently joined the church with his wife and three blonde children, is a builder. He’s a tall, muscular blonde man with an encouraging laugh and booming voice. After someone told me that he was an actor before moving to New Hamburg, I thought of him as an actor playing a construction worker. He offers to take the bricks down and push out the wall for a new addition. The only catch is that the church would need to buy him an automatic drill that cost \$750.

The property committee passed that news to the vestry. Dale, a member of the vestry, was told to meet downstairs after church for a vote.

“On what?” she asked. “What are we voting on?”

“We’re voting on the boiler room,” the warden called back to her. “We need a majority vote, so please make sure you stay.”

The meeting downstairs after church was disorganized; the congregation was still milling around getting their coffee and cookies and talking at the tables next to the meeting. Colin, standing at the front of the card table, proposed his idea to the board members. He leaned in and rested his hands on the table so that everyone could hear him. He said the building would be “no problem” and he’d be happy to “do it for free with his tools, but he needed an automatic drill.”

When Colin was done explaining his plan, the warden asked him to walk away. “Any questions or concerns?” he asked the vestry.

“I think that \$750 dollars for a boiler room is reasonable,” one of the members said. Everyone nodded in agreement. The vote was cast and the members filed out into the backyard to meet their families.

“Enjoy the rest of your day! Happy Sunday,” Dale called to Howie and Edie as she passed them getting into their late model black sedan on her walk home. She always enjoyed the walk to and from church it gave her time to think about the week’s blessings and misgivings. She loved early spring days when the sun was warm, but the air cool.

“Dale, can we talk to you for a moment?” Howie asked waving her over. Howie, the self-appointed handy man and a server at the church, looked worried and Dale could see sweat beads on his forehead and his face was red.

“Sure, Howie, what’s up?” Dale asked walking over to him.

“We aren’t sure that buying the automatic drill is the best use of the church’s money.”

“I see. Well, we’ve just voted on it this morning. But, maybe you could talk to Colin about it?” Dale hadn’t realized that Howie might feel slighted that the vestry chose the young new member over him. “We’re you at the property meeting when he proposed the idea?”

“I was there and I told them I would do some more investigating.” Howie’s voice was low, yet strong. Edie had come to stand next to her husband with her arms crossed over her chest.

“I wish they would have waited to do this vote.” Eddie looked rather put off and defensive.

“I’m sorry Howie. It’s not that we appreciate you any less. I hope you know that. I think people just wanted to get the process in motion quite quickly,” Dale answered back to him. The couple nodded and thanked Dale for listening to them. The car backed away from church slowly and then headed down the road leaving Dale looking on at them.

A couple of days later Dale was still thinking about Howie and Edie when she remembered the Bible story of the prodigal son. Those poor people feel like the older son she thought as she reread the story. After writing down a particular passage of the story, Dale began drafting an email to Edie:

St. Nicholas appreciates Howie’s hard work and dedication. When we are in a jam, we know who to call. It is wonderful to have a handy man we can depend on. Do you remember the story of the prodigal son? The older son is upset because the father throws the younger son a party for coming back after losing his inheritance and leaving

the family, although the older son has been loyal and hardworking. Remember what the father says to him? “My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.”

The church went ahead and bought Colin an automatic drill and he completed work on the boiler room. Howie stopped investigating construction prices; instead he was voted to be in charge of the property committee. Dale’s voice, “Jesus’ words heal,” stuck with me after our meeting. This is what all Christians believe: the Bible is from God’s mouth. His words are to live by. The science part of Christian Science believes in the application of the laws of God to heal physical ailments, relationships, and psychological issues. This isn’t to say that you can’t visit a doctor if you are seriously ill, but you do it after first turning to God’s love. These beliefs still feel abstract and almost supernatural to my Episcopalian ears. I’ve never heard of Christian Science and I’m trying to compare it to my own set of beliefs.

When attending a Campus Outreach meeting, a Baptist based organization that met at Elon University, I remember the preacher saying that everyone who doesn’t believe as he believes is going to hell. I see the man, waving his arms and boasting about his love for Jesus. “Nobody, except Christ, is without sin,” he said. “But, we must try to walk with the Lord and follow his lead.” In that man’s eyes, I was headed straight for damnation. In fact, most of the people I knew, were headed in that direction as well.

I played this experience off as a weird “Bible-belt” experience. Various denomination congregational buses lined up on the main street of my college on Sunday mornings waiting to pick up passengers headed for church. These God people seemed to roam the campus handing out Bibles, giving out free pizza to attend youth group

meetings, and giving motivational Jesus speeches during organizational fairs. I had never experienced such pushy people and I came from New York, home of the overbearing, aggressive commuter. My boyfriend, who grew up in Memphis and Dallas, was not surprised when I told him about experience with Campus Outreach. His mom sent him with a mission camp to San Diego the summer before he turned 18 to spread the word of God to the people of God. His assignment was to walk up to people and talk to them about being saved. Hearing this made me laugh uncomfortably. I couldn't believe that my boyfriend was one of those Jesus pushers. He assured me that after a couple days of working at Sea World and talking to people about God on the beach, he realized that he wasn't comfortable. There was something that didn't feel right about selling Jesus to strangers. Clearly Northerners don't advertise their God as much as Southerners, but I do remember a few times when Jehovah Witnesses knocked on our front door and asked us to give them a couple minutes to save us.

The Bible tells Christians to spread their love for Jesus Christ. It is part of their duty, a part of getting them into heaven. I think about the efforts at St. Nicholas to recruit new members. Teresa, exclaims her love for the little chapel, to almost everyone she meets. In line at the grocery store she tells the people in front of her about our new minister; at the yacht club meeting she boasts about the new roof and the growing population; when she meets a young couple pushing a baby carriage in front of her house, she runs out to invite them to church next Sunday. If Campus Outreach, Jehovah Witnesses, Born-Again Christians, and Teresa are all Jesus pushers, why do I choose to love Teresa?

Maybe Dale is on to something. She believes that the ideas of Christian Science fit her lifestyle. “I experience so much joy through Christian Science,” she explains, “I’ve been healthy and happy since beginning the practice.” She goes on to admit that St. Nicholas brings about very similar feelings. St. Nicholas, for her, is a place where her community celebrates Jesus and their lives together. Here she also finds spiritual and physical comfort.

“I told Astrid when she first came to St. Nicholas that I was a Christian Scientist,” Dale says, as if to let me know she isn’t hiding anything from our vicar. “She welcomed me to keep attending service at St. Nicholas and admitted to being called a Buddapalian in other circles.”

“You can’t pick and chose from the Bible,” my boyfriend told me when I boasted about our minister’s open minded attitude.

“They aren’t picking and choosing from the Bible, babe. They’re exploring the parts of the Bible they want to promote.” I tried to make sense of this by answering, “Jesus’ love is what Dale is concentrating on. You believe in that too.”

“I think you’re simplifying things,” he told me.

But then, when I got home, I thought, “isn’t living simply what Jesus wanted?”

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My boyfriend, Wesley, remembers the day he accepted Jesus Christ into his heart. He was twelve and raised his hand when his Baptist preacher asked if anyone had been saved or touched by God that week. He walked to the front of the room in some weird daze claiming that Jesus personally touched him, and therefore was reborn, and promised to dedicate his life to God. When he tells me this story I ask, “How did you

know?" He says, "I just felt something." He looks at me like, duh, don't you know what I'm talking about? I'm 24-years-old, writing a book about religion, and at that moment I'm oddly afraid that I'm a fraud. I can't even remember my second birth.

Later that night, lying in bed, I wonder if Episcopalians aren't saved like Baptists. And what makes you a certain denomination of Christianity? Is it the way you worship or what you are worshipping? I've pledged myself to living as a good Christian when I was confirmed. But, is that enough? Or do I need to be personally touched by the hand of God? Something about that made me shiver. There is something very scary about lying in bed thinking about religion. It can swallow you up and make you feel microscopic. I wonder if my snoring boyfriend ever wonders if there isn't something greater out there. I turn over on my side and pray to the God I always do. And then a feeling of peace sedates my racing mind and I fall asleep.

Chapter 11

Ark of My Testimony

“Sit down. Pay attention. Let’s start from the beginning,” I yell to the Sunday school kids at St. Nicholas in my loudest director voice. “Places, people.” I clap my hands together trying to get the attention of the fifteen children milling around the chapel. I’m still in my soccer uniform: green mesh shorts and a white jersey with the sleeves pushed up and tied at my shoulders. My hair is knotted in a sweaty pony tail and a cloth headband keeps my bangs off my forehead. I’m aware that I smell and I want to get this dress rehearsal over so I can take a shower.

Lauren and I asked to direct this play for two reasons: we need to rack up volunteer hours for our Girl Scout Silver Award and we feel too old to have actual parts in the play anymore. We’re fifteen and want to be in charge, but we possessed little experience or knowledge about what it takes to produce a play. As it turns out, wrangling young children into anything semi-organized is hard.

There are noses, wings, ears and masks lying in piles on the pews. The kids, who have been chasing each other up and down the aisle and overtop of the pews finally start moving towards the back of the chapel where they’ll set up for the show. We decided on Noah’s ark because the younger kids who couldn’t memorize lines could be animals. The kids were given the opportunity to choose to be whatever animal they wanted so we have a unique zoo – lions, dogs, sheep, cats, mice and even a pumpkin. Lauren, her face blotched red from the overheating boiler downstairs, helps the younger kids get dressed and applies face paint. I walk to the back to help her organize the children in a two by two line. “Remember your walking partner,” I tell them. “Hook arms if you need to. You

shouldn't be walking if they are walking," I say as I push five year olds twin girls together. William, a chubby six year old, who is bouncing up and down, grabs my pant leg. "I gotta pee." He begins to take off his pumpkin steam hat and his orange shirt.

"Slow down there William, let's get you downstairs. You can leave your shirt on." I say grabbing his hand. "Isabella, can you take him downstairs?" I ask one of the older girls who are lounging on the altar reading their scripts. She gets up and reaches her hand out to William. "Thank you," I tell her walking back up the aisle.

I take a deep breath. The play will be in place of the sermon during tomorrow's service. "Remember guys: left, right, left," I say showing them by over exaggerating my steps. They are not in step as they imitate my march. I sigh, "Follow what I'm doing. LEFT RIGHT LEFT." They get it, barely, and Lauren calls them to the back of the church to reread the Noah's Ark children's story we found in the Sunday school cabinet. She points to the photos and says, "look how they march two by two into the boat. That's what you're going to do tomorrow."

Meanwhile I walk to the front of the church to watch the two lead characters, Noah and his wife, practicing their lines. They stand awkwardly, emotionless, reciting their parts. The narrator reads his script from the pulpit with his hands clapped together fidgeting back and forth. "Remember to look up at the audience. and you should have these lines memorized," I remind him. "Mem-or-ized," I say again for emphasis.

As Noah begins to build his ark, pretending to cut down trees and hammer nails, a couple of mothers walk in.

“Wait! You can’t be here!” I hear the little kids whine. “You’ll ruin the surprise!” They say trying to push their mothers out the door. The mothers wave them away and sit in the back chatting among themselves.

“Is it time already?” I look at my watch. It’s already almost eight when the practice is supposed to end.

The actors’ attention is visibly waning. William tells Lauren his costume is itching him and Carmen, one of the mice, climbed on his mother’s lap and is playing with his toy truck. I can hear him vrrrm vrrmming.

“Quick! Don’t worry about the set, let’s just cut to loading the boat.” The “set” I’m referring to is a spray-painted brown boat on a king sized bed sheet. We’re planning on hanging it on the altar behind the marching animals, so they appear to be walking up onto the Ark. I cue Noah to lead the kids down the aisle. Noah hobbles down the aisle towards the altar with his walking stick with the kids trailing behind him. They march to their own time.

“Are we done yet?” Noah’s wife asks. She’s already got her jacket on. “We practiced this part last time.” I nod to her and she walks out to meet her father. And we’ve lost them. Lauren and I collapse in the back pew and muster smiles and waves as the children rush out with their parents. When they are all out the door Lauren rests her head on my shoulder. “They’re bad. Really bad.”

“Their acting skills or discipline?” I ask. We both laugh.

Lauren and I arrive an hour early the next morning to set up the chapel. We unstick the bed sheet, which has melted together and try to smooth the creases. I try to make clouds out of the brown spots that have smudged onto the white parts of the bed

sheet. The kids are visibly excited as they begin to arrive. We help them get dressed in their costumes; and remind them that they have to be quiet while others are performing. Those with lines congregate around the back table practicing their lines. I walk around them listening to their lines reminding them, “acting is showing a character’s emotions and personality. Run with it.”

“Can I bring my papers up with me?” the narrator waves a crumbled mess of papers in the air. “I’m never going to remember all these lines.”

“Jimmy, I want you to look out at the audience and speak clearly. If you need to bring your lines up there, go head.”

“My Grandma is in the audience, so I have to speak loudly anyway or she won’t hear me.” He looks down at his paper and back at me, “Next year, I want the part of Noah. I have all his lines memorized already.” I laugh and tell him to think of his Grandma’s poor hearing the entire time he’s up on the stage. Then I tell him to get through this year before he plans next year, smiling that the play has already become a tradition, something that will continue.

I am hidden in front of the first pew when the play begins. I’m there to mouth lines and give cues if something is to go wrong. The play starts. Noah has written his lines in black ink across the palms of his hands and uses them when he gets stuck, but other than that faux pas the first part goes swimmingly. The organist begins to play the building music and the bed sheet, wrinkled and uneven, gets put into place. The animals, on cue, follow Noah down the aisle. I turn and give them the thumbs up; I see Lauren doing the same from the back of the church. Flashes of cameras go off and the congregation is points and awes at the eclectic two-by-two animals. I hear somebody say,

“Noah saved a pumpkin?” I notice my tears as I chuckle at the comment. And behind me the kids march in the rhythm we taught them “left, right, left.”

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Lauren and I don't do another play for St. Nicholas. Although, according to the parishioners who attended Noah's Ark, we pulled off a great show. We keep the stories about the kids throwing juice at each other during practice, clogging a toilet, and having to staple ripped costumes together the day of the play, to ourselves. Those facts are exceeded by the final product. William, Pumpkin Man as we fondly call him after the play, still asks me, years later, if I'm going to direct another play. Lauren and I agree that we'd do another one, even with the unruly children, but we don't get a chance.

Lauren and her family leave the church that year. Father Bane had resigned from St. Nicholas and the church began the long interview process for a new priest. Lauren's mother, LuAnn, understood and agreed with Father Bane's departure from St. Nicholas, but was nervous about fulfilling his role with a desirable priest. “How will we hire a priest with no money?” she asked the vestry one Sunday. The church's fellowship and activity was struggling, there was not enough children for Sunday school, fewer fundraisers, and financial problems reappeared. She wasn't being fulfilled by the visiting priest. She needed a stronger priest/parishioner relationship. LuAnn believed in confiding and receiving advice from a priest. She'd always been extremely close to the other priests and felt an empty relationship with Father Bane.

LuAnn discovered her new church from the uplifting Christian quotes on a bulletin board beside the highway. On her drive to work every morning she passed the church and read their signs. One read, “Lift up your heart to the Lord,” another one, “We

welcome the prodigal son.” She felt like the church was calling to her. LuAnn and Lauren began attending the new church a couple Sundays a month, but were still compelled to support St. Nicholas that had acted as their spiritual family for so many years. Lauren’s father, a vestry member and former warden, didn’t feel the same urgency to leave St. Nicholas. He and Lauren’s brother continued to come to the chapel on Sundays, although they too eventually stopped coming because they missed their family’s support and participation at the chapel. I watched as my friend disappeared from St. Nicholas. It happened so slowly and smoothly that I didn’t realize they were gone until they had already joined the other church. I guess it was like deep sea diving, after so many years at the chapel, they had to ease their way up to the surface, careful not to pop their ear drums and cause any permanent damage.

“Any new people at church?” Lauren asked my family at dinner one Saturday night. We had invited her to come to St. Nicholas with us in the morning after our sleep over, like I’d done with her family so many years ago, but she declined. “I miss everyone sometimes,” she admitted. “But, I signed up to help in the Sunday school this week.”

I still hoped Lauren’s family would return to St. Nicholas. “You should come back,” I told her over pizza and salad that night. “Everyone definitely misses you.” I saw my parents, from across the table give me a look that says “quit it.” When I first realized her family had left for good I felt rejected. I needed Lauren to help me direct another play, work at the pancake dinner, and laugh with me about Teresa’s loud, ear piercing singing. I had threatened, crying facedown on my bed, to call her mother to tell her the big mistake she was making, but my parents had stopped me mid-dial. They reminded me

that their leaving the church had nothing to do with me and I couldn't be the dictator of where they felt spiritually happy.

Lauren fiddles with her pizza crust and says, "I would come back to visit, but Mom loves this new church and I think the youth group is pretty cool." We don't have a youth group at St. Nicholas and I am immediately jealous of this "cool one." She tells us, "We talk about the Bible during church on Sundays, but we also go bowling and get ice cream." I begin to tell her about the dark chocolate delicious brownies Polly brought to coffee hour last week when I see my parents giving me the look again. I get up and start clearing the dishes.

I especially miss Lauren's family during the Christmas season. We'd always pick a name off the "giving tree" and shop together to buy presents for that kid, whose parents couldn't afford anything that Christmas. We shared the duties of narrators at the Christmas Pageant, caroled around New Hamburg, and helped to read the story of the birth of Jesus to the younger children. I'm old enough where I no longer go down to Sunday school with the children; instead I listen to the service with my parents.

This particular Sunday, December 6th, the Sunday school children have joined their parents for the Eucharist when the big red arched doors of the church blast open and there stands the shadow of St. Nicholas. This is an annual tradition that I'd somehow forgot about. One of the men from the parish (Lauren's dad use to play this part) dress up like St. Nicholas and surprises the children at church by making an appearance a couple weeks before Christmas on St. Nicholas Day.

Saint Nicholas walks down the aisle and sits on one of the red plush kneelers at the altar of the chapel throwing little chocolate gold coins out to the congregation. His red

robe is a little worse for the wear. The edges of the cloth are torn, the color faded and the belt a little loose. His beard is held on by a white elastic string around his face. He wears a gold trimmed red hat that hangs tilted to the right side and carries a tall staff. There is something charming about this raggedy patron saint. The children crowd around him, biting into their candy, and the chapel grows silent as St. Nicholas begins to read his story.

Saint Nicholas was born during the third century in the village of Patara, which was Greek and is now the southern coast of Turkey. His wealthy parents, who raised him to be a devout Christian, died in an epidemic while Nicholas was still young. Obeying Jesus' words to "sell what you own and give the money to the poor," Nicholas used his whole inheritance to assist the needy, the sick, and the suffering. He is most widely known as the patron of children. In France the most familiar legend tells of three little children lured into the clutches of an evil butcher and then rescued by Saint Nicholas. He is known to watch out for the orphaned, kidnapped and poor children. As the self-appointed guardian he looks over these children and makes sure they find happiness and good health. As the patron saint of sailors and ships, Saint Nicholas offers safe voyage and protection from storms. Many ports, most notably in Greece, offer statues and paintings to Saint Nicholas asking him to safely guide and protect their ships home from sea. In some places sailors say "May Saint Nicholas hold the tiller" as a way of offering good luck.

There are many other groups of people that Saint Nicholas has been connected to as patronage including everything from prisoners, thieves, unjustly condemned, bankers, pawnbrokers, lovers to murders. Some unlikely groups, like thieves, are in his

patronage—not because he helps them steal, but because he helps them repent and change. Many churches are named after him because of his generosity to those in need.

When St. Nicholas is done reading the story he shuts the hardcover book and puts it back in the black sack he is carrying. He makes a dramatic exit out of the front doors of the chapel and into the snowy air only stopping for a moment to wave back to the congregation before disappearing. The organist begins Jolly Old Saint Nicholas and the congregation joins in.

Later that day I call Lauren and ask her if she wants to go see a movie with me that afternoon. She tells me she's been in church all morning and now she's going to a youth group function at the YMCA. They are going to climb a rock wall. "Is that a metaphor for some Bible story?" I ask sarcastically.

"No, it's just for fun and fellowship," she says not catching on to the jealousy oozing out of me. I tell her that St. Nicholas came to church today.

"Did you eat all your gold coins?" she asks, referring to the chocolate.

"Nope. Put some in the freezer."

"Save me some," she says. And for the first time I recognize a bit of envy in her voice too. She's missed out on one of our favorite services at the chapel. The story of St. Nicholas comes back into my head. He delivers gold to the children who wouldn't normally have anything. He protects all types of people — even those who have sinned. I'm stuck, at least for a moment, in that spirit. I remember the story about St. Nicholas trudging through rain, snow, sleet, and hurricane to bring gifts and hope to those in need. He gave away his fortune to serve his God. St. Nicholas faced challenges that I couldn't dream of, especially losing his parents. I realize that I can't be greedy. Lauren's Mom

left St. Nicholas because the priest, the fellowship, the prayers didn't link her with God. She obviously was missing something from her spiritual life that was worth searching for. I'm being selfish and defensive about the chapel. I believe that everyone should love it as much as me.

St. Nicholas, like any church, changes as different priests take over, new leadership forms, and families leave the church. LuAnn felt that the chapel had fallen too far this time. My family, who still believes in the mission of the church, chose to stay at St. Nicholas and fight for renewal and growth. Neither decision was wrong. Like trying times of faith, the church will never remain stagnant. The animals in our Noah's Ark may or may not still be members of St. Nicholas to direct the play when they turn fifteen.

"I'll save you some," I answer and we decide to see the movie some other time.

—

Wesley and I travel to his mom and stepdad's log cabin in Red Feather, Colorado one weekend to fish, hike and relax. As we drive up the winding dirt roads, gaining elevation that makes my head light, I notice thick red arrows painted on the aspen trees pointing down the mountain. Wesley tells me that "The arrows point the quickest way down the mountain." I imagine the roads in the winter, dangerously thick with snow, and understand why people might need the arrows. The little brown signs sticking out of the ground bare road signs that would be buried in the snow.

We've switched Wesley's fourteen-year-old Honda Civic for his mother's SUV to make it up the mountain. His mother, surprisingly, has let us come up to the one bedroom cabin alone even though she doesn't believe in us "acting as a married couple before marriage." She nervously has called him five times since we left their house two hours

ago. At 28 years old this will be the first time he'll stay unsupervised at the cabin. They've named the place, "Two Steps Closer to God," because of its high spot on the mountain. The deck overlooks a sharp drop of mountainside over a running river.

We make pasta and meat sauce, in the small, well-stocked kitchen for dinner. Fittingly, the only station that comes in clearly on the radio is a religious country station. Wesley offers his hand to me and we begin to slow dance in the kitchen to a Martina McBride song whose lyrics thank Jesus for his eternal love. He spins me around and dips me as the water begins to boil for the pasta. I giggle, still a little dizzy from the high altitude, and move towards the couch to sit down while he dumps the rigatoni into the pot. I see a big black Bible on the end table. I pick it up, it's been a long time since I've held a Bible and its heavy and wobbly in my hands. I know that Wesley's mom and stepdad read the Bible many nights before bed. I remember a recent fight I had with Wesley about women becoming ministers. His response was, "They can't. It's in the Bible."

"That's sexist. You don't believe you're better, more capable than me!" I reasoned with him. He reached for my hand, which I pulled away my eyes darting in his direction. His eyes, soft and concerned responded,

"God wants us to follow everything that is in the Bible. You can't pick and choose."

"Is that really what you believe?"

"I don't understand it either. I'll have to read the Bible more to make sense of it."

Now, resting the Bible on my lap, I open the pages, almost expecting a beam of light to shine out. Wesley comes and snuggles up next to me and flips to his favorite story.

We sit reading about Jesus and his disciples and I realize there are no arrows pointing us down this mountain. We will have to find comprehension for ourselves.

Chapter 12

Keys to a New Direction

The freckles on Teresa's hand look like rough polka dots, but her hand feel soft and cold in mine. The smile on her face never dims as she says, "it's a miracle this church. Look how it has come back to life," she waves an open arm across the church's undercroft during coffee hour. Her smile curves into a slow smile, as if suddenly slipping into a reverie.

Teresa recently began to need a cane. I see her that Sunday limping her way down the stairs of the church. She shoos off anyone who tries to help her, "It's only arthritis, I'm fine." She's also recently had to give up her position as the vergger, the person who looks after the church, a job she took very seriously for years. Every morning she strolled to the chapel to make sure everything was in order.

One time she found a boy, maybe 25 years old, laying at the front of the church with his head propped up on a velvet kneeling pillow. She stood for a moment, staring at the boy, before walking away. She figured maybe the boy had fallen asleep while praying. The next day the boy was still there, sleeping again. She nudged him with her foot. "Welcome to St. Nicks." The boy opened his eyes and sat up.

"I'm just sleeping," he told her.

"We'll that part is obvious. But, why aren't you in a bed someplace?" Teresa asked. The boy told her that he had been kicked out of his home and had nowhere to go. She stood there for a moment trying to figure out if he was dangerous or not. "Have you eaten? I have some soup at my house and bread. I'll bring it to you."

As they sat in the undercroft of the church 30 minutes later waiting for the soup to heat up she asked him bluntly, “Why don’t you have anywhere else to go, hun? You know they have regular AA meetings here at the church if you need em’ I could get you a schedule.”

The boy shook his head. He promised to leave in the morning. Teresa nodded and gently putting her hand on his shoulder warned that if he didn’t leave she’d have to get the warden involved. He couldn’t move into St. Nicholas, but he sure could attend on Sundays at 10 a.m. The boy left the church and Teresa never saw him again. She thinks about him sometimes, where did he go? She’s decided to believe that St. Nicholas did its job — provided shelter for someone who needed it. “A church should be a safe place for those who need a cushion from the outside world,” she said when she finished the story about the boy. “Hopefully he ended up going home to make things work with his family.”

I see the same dreamy look on her face when she talks about the runaway boy, as when she boasts about the influx of new members at the church. The boy has become a metaphor for her own life at the church, a place that she found hope and refuge. In her determination to keep St. Nicholas open there is a sense of being scared to leave the church; to not have her security blanket.

She is one of the last people to leave the chapel that Sunday. She pushes in the metal chairs around their card tables, wipes up the sticky kitchen counter, and turns off the lights before walking out. My father and I are rounding the corner on the way home from a walk around the hamlet; we see her side-stepping gingerly up the stairs. She waves up at us, insisting that she doesn’t need any help, and says, “Isn’t this just wonderful, another beautiful Sunday at the chapel.”

The doors of the chapel are always open to those who need to pray, find peace, or just feel closer to God. The vestry passed this decision after the September 11th attacks. The vicar at that time, Reverend Donald Bane's 33 year-old son Michael Andrew Bane was caught in his office near the top floor, working for Marsh & McLennan, in the south tower of the World Trade Center. They never found his body.

Father Bane's energy and focus at the church waned after his son's death. He never talked about the tragedy or his son, but the bitterness surrounded him in a fog. His sermons, which came from articles he read on the Internet, were short and given in a monotone voice. He became intolerant to any mistakes or misgivings. If a child cried he looked annoyed and would ask the parents to take them outside. My parent's godchildren, Samantha and Alli, began attending church with us regularly. Sam, in her terrible twos, a child that everybody said "needed God," because of her outbursts, would sometimes get away from us and begin running up the aisle or yell out during service. One Sunday she squirmed out of my mother's arms and ran down the aisle yelling, "I want my ba ba." Her brown hair in pigtails and her hands on her hip she demanded her bottle. Father Bane ignored her completely and asked my parents to please quiet her down. He didn't even smile when she yelled "Pleeeeeease. I said please" as my father carried her out of the church.

His anger was apparent; during a Sunday service procession he yelled up ahead to his altar boys to slow and count their steps. He refused to conduct a confirmation class for the church. He claimed to be busy with other matters. He also felt that the young adults, five at the time, should wait until they turned fifteen instead of the usual thirteen.

The upset parents, who wanted their teenagers to be confirmed in the Episcopal Church, held meetings about sending them to other churches for confirmation lessons. My friend Elizabeth, who had been confirmed with me a couple years earlier, said her mother came home from the meeting defeated, "That poor man. He is completely out of his mind." She'd been one of the parents fighting for her younger daughter, Laura, to get confirmed at St. Nicholas. "He just sat at the meeting and shook his head no. He looked 70 years old." Father Bane's whole demeanor changed after 9/11; the parishioners could barely recognize him. Then one day, about 8 months later, he sent a letter to the vestry telling them he had to get out of New York state.

Father Bane left St. Nicholas in very poor condition. Membership had dropped. The families of the prospective Confirmation class left for other churches that had active youth programs because the church could no longer sustain an active Sunday school program. The church struggled to find a new rector because of the small budget. A rector could only be offered a small salary of less than \$13,000 a year. Almost weekly the expenses exceeded the collection. The vestry stripped unnecessary costs such as lawn mowing, snow plowing, and outside bookkeeping. Parishioners and neighbors had to take on the responsibilities themselves. My parents were among these volunteers. My Mom's accounting background made her the best candidate to take over the financial affairs and my Dad shoveled snow off the stairs and walkways. A teenage neighbor took over mowing the lawn to accumulate volunteer hours for Boy Scouts. Representatives of the diocese suggested that the church rent its space for weddings, organizations and different denomination worship. They also suggested finding another community church to combine parishes. Alcoholics Anonymous, the church's largest outreach, which met at

the chapel three or four nights a week, was asked for a small monetary contribution. For decades St. Nicholas had provided a safe and comfortable meeting place for AA meetings. Many members of the chapel were closely involved and proud of providing this free service to the community and were reluctant to ask for any kind of payment.

Curious sources of money appeared that kept the church just barely buoyed during these days. Franny Reese, a wealthy philanthropist, who the congregation began to think of as a Saint Nicholas figure, dropped a few gold coins to deter the possibility of closing from our mouths. As if from a ghost, a \$5,000 check would appear in the collection plate. Her youngest son and grandchild attended church regularly, but never mentioned the money.

Everyone at St. Nicholas knew of Franny Reese, some met her, but few had personal relationships with her. Her estate's property overlooks New Hamburg like a loving shepherd watching over his farm stock. She believed that St. Nicholas was a vital place in the small community, and being an Episcopalian herself, encouraged her son to attend St. Nicholas. She, however, remained a member of Zion Church, which coincidentally used to support the chapel before the split in the 1980s, but pledged \$12,000 yearly to St. Nicholas and attended on special occasions or fundraisers. In the late 1970s she bought and donated the firehouse, a few houses down from St. Nicholas, to be the chapel's community center. After a few years, while the church plunged into debt, they sold the firehouse. Now, Polly Myrhum and her husband Myron Adams live in the house and run a pottery business.

Franny died in a car accident in July 9, 2003. Her name scattered around the Hudson Valley on plaques and signs, will never be forgotten. Her major donations were

to town parks, local nature conservatories, and Hudson River clean up. Her obituary in the New York Times named her “defender” of the Hudson Valley because of her fight to terminate pollution.

Another unexpected offering arrived in the mail from a farmer across the river from the chapel. In the envelope was a check for \$3,000 and a hand written letter explaining that he knew of financial hardships and at one time could barely pay the taxes on his land. Community members from the area had helped him raise enough money to save his farm. Years later a miracle emerged in the form of a cell tower. One day Verizon Phone Company knocked on his door and offered a yearly payment to build a cell tower on his property. The man vowed to donate that money, anonymously, back into the community that had once saved his land.

One Sunday service a stranger, Gregory Citraella, sat in the very last pew next to the organ. It was hard to ignore his six-foot something, 250-pound frame dressed in a purple and pink striped starched button up shirt and a matching floral bow tie. He sat comfortably in the back of the chapel with one leg over the other with his head bobbing to the music. He didn’t seem to notice the parishioners turning around to sneak a peak of him during the service. Besides the cheeriness that oozed out of his clothing, the man never stopped smiling. Two perfect red circles formed in the center of his cheeks like you’d expect on a porcelain Santa Claus doll.

Gregory took up residence in the chapel as colorfully and customary as a piece of stained glass. He’d been the organist and director of music at St. James in Hyde Park for five years and before that the organist at Holy Cross Episcopal in Kingston for 15 years.

When his mother, who he was very close to, died, he decided he needed to make a change in his life. He wanted to worship in a place where he could concentrate on his relationship with God and nature — not becoming a famed organist. After his resignation from St. James, Gregory talked to his friends in the diocese about his hopes to find a special place to attend service. Somebody recommended the little chapel on the river in New Hamburg, which Gregory had heard about, but had never seen. That first day in church he was greeted by the matriarchs, Teresa, Helen and Jean whom welcomed him into the church without even knowing about his organist talent. Truthfully, I don't think they realized or cared that Gregory attending church could mean anything more than a new member. At the coffee hour after church he greeted and talked to Polly and her husband about their experience with St. Nicholas. Polly told him, "a close community of people who are welcoming of new members." She even offered him a look at her pottery studio when he told her he was interested in art. "I'll tell you what," she said. "If you come to church next Sunday I'll give you a tour of the firehouse." Gregory told me in an interview, sitting on Adirondack chairs on the grassy backyard of the church, he came back to see the art business and make a new friend.

When he showed up the next Sunday he was still wary about vocalizing his organ skills. Alex Ma, the current organist, had come to St. Nicholas on recommendation from Gwen Stevens, the retired long-time organist for the chapel. He also used his volunteer hours towards National Honors Society and hoped to become a serious pianist later in life. Gregory offered lessons and advice to Alex, who he called "the young scholar," but Alex resigned after six months to leave for college. Gregory, who by this time was a full time member of St. Nicholas, offered to play at the church on a volunteer basis. In the

interview he told me, “One of things I noticed as an organist over the years is that a big church like Zion or a cathedral can pay an organist. Small churches like this one can’t. I was lucky enough to be in a personal financial position where that didn’t matter as much.” This struck me as very sentimental, which was common from my interviews with the parishioners, but also a bit of an exaggeration. I think truthfully Gregory hoped the new minister would add the organist into the budget. He decided it was his place to show the congregation how important good hymnity is to a church.

“Good basic structure of hymnity should complement the scriptural text for that particular Sunday. Hymns need to represent the seasons. There is nothing worse than picking a hymn from the wrong part of the liturgy,” he explains his legs crossed, foot bobbing. His sing-song voice floats throughout the room. “Some ministers just pick a hymn they like and say let’s go praise the Lord, and that’s all fine and dandy, but we are a structured church. It has to fit the text of the scripture for that day.”

From the first moment he heard the resonant organ in Lady of the Assumption Roman Catholic Church in the Bronx, where he grew up, he knew it was his calling. As if from a dramatic scene from a movie about a young genius, Gregory remembers pulling on his mother’s white blouse sleeve, looking up at her, and saying, “I want to play that.” The conflict of the story is that many Roman Catholic churches were getting rid of their organs and replacing them with contemporary music and guitar. But, luckily one day walking home from school he heard a pipe organ and gorgeous singing coming from Zion Episcopal Church in Wappingers. “Of course, I knew as a Roman Catholic that there is only one true faith and we shouldn’t walk into any other church so I passed it by. Finally after several weeks I got up enough courage to sit in the back of the church while the

organist and choir practiced.” Finally, Gregory got close enough to the organist to flip pages for him and then to ask him for lessons. Gregory dreamed of going to music school as a child, but his mom didn’t see the value or money in that degree. To please her he received his bachelor’s in business management with a minor in music from Mount Saint Mary’s College in Newburgh, NY.

The hymns Gregory plays are traditional. “There are some churches that do contemporary music, and do it well, and there are some churches that don’t have any music. My calling to a ministry is not that. I don’t po po any of it. I just say if someone is not happy here there are enough churches that can make them happy. St. Nicholas is that kind of place; they follow the traditional Episcopalian liturgy that follows a cyclical three year scripture.” I’m startled by this statement. I’ve always described St. Nicholas as being anything but traditional. We openly accept and welcome gay couples, invite people to bring their animals to service and we even recognize and embrace people in the church who aren’t Episcopalian. When I mention this to Gregory he says, “What and how we administer the scripture is actually very traditional, but what is untraditional is that we preach to all God’s people.”

When Gregory came to St. Nicholas he set to work generating the music program at the chapel. This wasn’t an easy task partly because the chapel was focused on more immediate needs such as finding someone to conduct service on Sundays, but mostly because there were only 11 regular attending families left in the church and there simply weren’t enough good singers.

Gregory, right away, brought a sense of professionalism to the chapel. The organists before him would receive Sunday’s music a couple days before the service or,

more likely right before the service began. This caused pauses in between versus, lines and sometimes even words as the organist would try to figure out the notes or rhythm. Gregory chose his own music, practiced it, and showed up on Sunday chipper and ready to perform. In a way he also became the greeter in the church. Sitting on the organ bench, in the back right corner, he still to this day welcomes with a hand shake, winks to or kisses on the cheek most of the congregation. And almost before the little chapel realized where it came from, there appeared some solidarity in the chapel.

To find his voices Gregory held hymn sing-a-longs on Sunday afternoons. He encouraged members to bring friends and family to these events. They were set up much like Girl Scout camp fire's I've been to. Everyone sat in a circle and called out their favorite hymns and then Gregory would find or remember the song — either someone would hum the lines they could remember or sing the chorus — and he would bob his head to the beat of the song and tap his foot against the edge of the organ until he came up with the song's name. Then he would play a couple bars of the song before cuing the whole group in by an exaggerated nod of his head.

These sing-a-longs brought mostly the acknowledgement that there wasn't enough good voices to have a chorus at St. Nicholas. So, Gregory encouraged the few who were born with the talent to lead the rest during the service.

Teresa claps her hands together and gets a whimsical look on her face when I mention Gregory finding his way to St. Nicholas. "Oh he's wonderful." Her excessively dramatic mannerism reminds me of Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*; although she looks nothing like the heroine. Her white hair is cut bluntly at her chin and falls ragged

and uncombed. The skin under her eyes is blotchy, which makes me think she doesn't sleep well or enough. There is nothing about her that reminds me even a bit of a damsel and yet people are attracted to her. I've seen people pull their cars over to walk her home (she refused the ride and insisting that walking is the only thing keeping her young), tell her their problems and ask for advice, and grin when she walks into the room.

Today we are standing outside the chapel looking out onto the river. The rest of the congregation mingles inside the church and on the lawn. She points to the flower garden behind her. "Those beauties are here because of Gregory." I tell her I remember planting those years ago.

"Well, a man from the city, Donald Spanel - Do you remember him?-" began coming to the church regularly. A really nice man, I think worked mostly night shifts and would have to take the train up here on Sunday mornings. Anyways, he brought all those bulbs to plant."

The entire congregation planted the bulbs one Sunday afternoon. I had always thought that the bulbs were being planted in memory of Father Bane's son.

"No, I'm not even sure he knew Donald Bane. It was after him," she tells me when I mention this. "He brought those bulbs to do something good for the church that would last."

She meanders away into another tripod of people discussing the service to provide her input. I begin to reach my arm to ask her what the bulbs have to do with Gregory, but then I realize that it was Gregory who gave the chapel hope. In the spring when the bulbs open into flowers there will still be people to enjoy them.

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I am glad it isn't my birthday when the preacher asks if it is anyone's birthday this week in the congregation. I look around. The church only has about twenty people scattered in a space that can hold one hundred people. One man raises his hand and walks up to the stage where the preacher stands. We all begin to sing "Happy Birthday" and then the preacher yells out above the singing, "How many times have you been born?"

"Two!" The man responds enthusiastically. He raises two fingers in the air. The congregation mimics him holding their peace fingers in the air.

I look at my boyfriend, Wesley, who holds up two fingers and smiles at the pastor. We are at his mom and stepdad's Baptist church in Loveland, Colorado. On the car ride to the service Wesley warned me that the church parish is new and a little disorganized. He did not mention anything about being born again. I've heard of people, strict conservative Bible people, who believe in being reborn into Christianity. To my memory I've only been born once – and I don't even remember that. I whisper, "What's going on?"

"Have you been saved?" he asks. He looks at me like I should know what he's talking about. Saved from what? A burning building? No. Getting hit by a car whose driver wasn't looking? Maybe. Tripping off a roof while hanging Christmas lights? Yes.

"Have you felt Jesus in your heart?" he asks, and I feel him staring at me shocked that I'm even a little bit confused. Will he feel differently about me if I say no? If I hold up one finger instead of two?

Luckily the preacher begins to speak again and Wesley head turns back towards the front of the room to begin singing "My God is an Awesome God.

Chapter 13

The Way Out

Caesar, a small boy with dark chocolate brown eyes and tan skin, didn't have a whole lot to say. And when he did speak his voice came out a high pitched squawk, probably from disuse. My memories of Caesar lie in snapshots of him grasped onto his mother, hiding behind her leg or skirt, and when I zoom in he has a look of apprehension on his face. He was the kind of kid that people described as shy or timid and didn't pay much attention to. I don't remember his mother, Susan, very well either, a tall woman with long dark straight hair and a soft voice. People tell me that she'd had a break down before coming to St. Nicholas and that she was crazy, but nobody knows specifics. When I looked Susan's name up in the directory to call her she wasn't there; she was never an official member of the church.

After Father Bane left the church Franny Reese volunteered to hold the annual church picnic, usually held at the rector's house, at her estate to help raise the spirits of the congregation. She didn't ask for money from the church to pay for the party. The event was catered with white table cloths, a white tent, appetizers and a fresh seafood buffet. Congregation members showed up to number one see the mansion with two tennis courts, a lap pool, polo field, indoor racquet ball court and famous flower gardens, and number two, to meet Franny Reese who had done so much incognito for St. Nicholas. Games were organized for the kids, a life guard was on duty for swimming, and people explored the estate's grounds.

After the party, however, Susan accused a man from the church of molesting Caesar. The vestry tried to keep the matters hush hush and only a small portion of the

church knew about the allegations, but rumors began to spread. The man who Susan accused was an unkempt loafer who had become a regular at the chapel. He smelled like dirty laundry and always wore a crumbled, wrinkled three piece suit. Later when I interviewed members of the church they suspected that Susan was trying to get money from the Reese family and was in some way involved with the loafer. They both were members of AA and had mutual friends.

The matter was investigated by the authorities, who found no reason for further action. Susan, Caesar, and the loafer all left the church. The vestry did not make a public statement about the incident to parishioners. Only some members knew what was actually going on, everyone else went on tidbits and speculation, which grew like pesticides through the church.

When Cannon James Elliot Lindsley arrived to become the next rector there was still an undercurrent among the congregation about the incident. People were unsure about how the matter had been dealt with. The vestry explained what they knew about the situation to Lindsley who realized that members of the church were leaving or angry because of the rumors they'd heard. Lindsley describes the circumstances as "awkward" and "fragile" because he didn't want this to be somehow related to the reputation of the church. He told the vestry to spread the word that the accusations were not true and completely over. But, as with any gossip, people were still skeptical.

And this is how the new reverend began his term at St. Nicholas, when it was torn and faltering.

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My memory is a bit fuzzy about how exactly the congregation felt about retired Cannon James Elliot Lindsley taking over St. Nicholas. I don't remember mostly because once he arrived it felt like he'd always been there. This had something to do with his looks. A quaint chapel in the middle of a charming Victorian neighborhood should have a white haired dignified looking grandfather type running the place. My father once traveled with Reverend Lindsley through one of the worst sections of Harlem to attend the annual convention of the diocese at St. John's the Divine in Morning Side Heights. Lindsley tromped through the streets approaching every parent of a young child or baby to ask if he could bless them. And he had the kind of look where everyone said yes. My father swears that a Muslim lady even handed him her baby without hesitation.

Reverend Lindsley derived great pleasure from tradition and gave a very conventional service. St. Nicholas remained one of the few Episcopalian churches that still gave the sacrament at every service. But keeping to the old customs didn't make him slow. His energetic and passionate way of making things happen was all part of his charm. The first thing he did when he got to St. Nicholas was fire Deacon Larry Hanes who had been holding services for the church during the search for a minister. Hanes wasn't well liked at the church because of his pompous attitude and inability to connect with the parish. I don't remember ever having a conversation or even speaking to Larry Hanes his entire stint at the chapel. Reverend Lindsley, during one of the first meetings with the vestry, told the deacon that it was customary for rectors, or priests taking over a church, to pick their own clergy. Larry told Lindsley that he thought the chapel would fail without him. After all, he'd been the one holding services while the vestry searched for a new priest. "We all appreciate your help in those times," Lindsley said before beginning a

new topic. Larry, surprisingly, didn't protest further and left the congregation shortly after. I talked to Larry years later and he simply said, "my time ran out at St. Nicholas." Larry Hanes didn't fit into the changes that were happening at the chapel. Lindsley boldly made that decision, but Larry knew it was coming.

Lindsley was commuting from the Hudson Valley to New York City to work at the diocese when he heard about the position at St. Nicholas. The opportunity would cut down his commute time and give him a chance to get back into a church. In an email response, sent from Scotland where he was summering, Lindsley admitted that taking over the chapel seemed arduous and challenging, but he was confident he could keep it afloat. In the same email he told me that there are millions of little chapels just as beautiful as St. Nicholas and in just as bad of shape financially, but St. Nicholas struck him as different because of the stories that he'd heard about the congregations resolve not to let the chapel close. This, he said, reminded him a lot of himself. "Once I set my mind to something it doesn't fail. Sometimes things don't take the same path I thought they would, but never failure."

One night, returning by train to New Hamburg after seeing Beauty and the Beast on Broadway in New York City, we find an advertisement on our car. It's dark but when my mom reaches out and pulls the paper from underneath the windshield wipers we immediately recognize the chapel. There is a painting of St. Nicholas at the top of the leaflet and it says "Everyone Welcome to 10 a.m. service at St. Nicholas on the Hudson." Rev. Lindsley's signature is at the bottom as if signing a letter to the community to attend church.

My father, who is on the vestry, knows nothing about this marketing scheme. When he brings the flyer to church on Sunday Rev. Lindsley nods and responds, “Oh yes, I had some time yesterday and ran a couple of those off. I put them on a few of the cars in the commuter lot before I went home yesterday.” He says it so quickly and matter of factly that it isn’t until he walks away that my father realizes that he has made those flyers with his own time, money and sweat.

“Next time you make those flyers let me know. I’m sure we can get some members, my daughter and her friends, someone to take care of that,” my father tells Rev. Lindsley when he sees him again.

“Yes, of course. I just thought about it last minute and had the time,” he waves his hand as if to say “no big deal.”

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Reverend Lindsley came from old money. You can tell this right away by the smooth cadence of his voice that hints at Europe hidden in the vowels. There is something about him that makes people feel incredibly welcomed and yet always on their toes. Like most older men, his back bowed forward and the white hair in his nose and his eyebrows seemed to poke out at you, but somehow on him those things exuded respect and dignity. Once at an annual church picnic held at his house, really estate, in Millbrook, NY I got a look at his study. I’m not sure people really have studies anymore. They have become at-home offices that house a computer, printer/fax/copier, stray CDS and USB drives, mangled cords, and maybe a book or two. Lindsley’s study seeped academia and sophistication. Everything seemed to be made out of supple brown leather — stoic looking chairs at the far end, the little round table at its side the desk and all of

the books. The room seemed to fit Lindsley - impressive and imposing and yet incredibly soft like the leather.

The church could offer very little money to a rector and Lindsley, luckily, didn't need a dime. Gregory, the organist, and Rev. Lindsley knew each other from working with various churches in the diocese. Lindsley immediately recognized the importance and value of having someone as esteemed as Gregory as the music director and organist of the church. He discussed a formal contract and salary with Gregory. Many people in the congregation were averse to giving Gregory a salary. Where, people asked, would that money come from? Without much explanation Lindsley set Gregory a small salary. Later Gregory admitted that Lindsley supplemented that salary with a cut from his own small pay check. What church members didn't realize was that Rev. Lindsley's objective, which endured throughout his time at the church, was implementing stability and order at the church. Maintaining a renown, hard working, and high spirited organist fit this plan.

Part of this same mission to find security in creating organization within the church's infrastructure became paying all debts. Years before St. Nicholas made a deal with Franny Reese that they would rent a house from her for \$10,000 a year as a place for the rector to stay. The church never paid Franny. She absorbed the loss and never complained to anyone at the church. Lindsley paid Franny for the year, which was all the church could really afford, and then gave back the house. He organized parishioners to clean up the yard and garden, which had been overlooked in years past. "There's nothing quite like manual labor to pay back debts," he told the congregation one Sunday during service.

One Saturday morning a group of eight parishioners met at the house that had housed their vicars for so many years. My father brought his pickup truck and hauled out roots, branches, dead leaves, and rusted lawn chairs left there to rest over the years. The workers began with the backyard hoeing and upturning dead foliage, which covered the once beautiful backyard. The grass, which had been as high as an adult man's knee, was mowed, until it looked something like a backyard. At the end of the day the jungle was gone and the space looked empty, but what remained with water and some seedlings, would grow into something beautiful.

My boyfriend, Wesley, and I need a frank talk about religion. We've talked around the outsides of the issue, touched the lines that have embedded themselves in our relationship. Our skirted, ambivalent discussions are about what we do or do not believe in. He doesn't believe in woman ministers because that's what the Bible says. Homosexuals are sinners. No sex before marriage. Getting drunk is immoral. A hammer of words that chisel at everything I have known. Hearing this insanity makes my head hurt enough that I'm numb, unable to say anything back. I hear myself asking, "How? I know you better than this. How can you believe this?"

Religion aside, I am unbelievably in love with this man. I've decided to move cross country to Denver to be with him. I will leave school, family, friends and any possibility of job contacts. We talk for hours on the phone planning our life; getting married, raising kids, buying a dog. Wesley is exactly what I've always wanted: strong, ambitious, thoughtful and respectful. Unlike any of my other boyfriends I don't have to take care of him; he's independent and sure of himself.

I watch him carefully to see if this traditionalist religious rhetoric hides somewhere in his being. He invites our gay friend, Jonathan, to the big birthday bash I throw Wesley in Memphis. They break it down on the dance floor and crack jokes about being Southern. He tells me he'll move where ever I get a teaching job after graduating with my MFA. He parties until 4 a.m. with friends and laughs at me when I want to go to bed. There is no glimpse of the sexist, homophobic, conservative jargon that he preaches.

We spend hours on the phone waiting for the move to Denver. I sit huddled on the deck of my summer camp when everyone else is asleep informing him what I ate for lunch, my best friend's boyfriend drama, the shocking ending to the book I'm reading, and that I miss his eyes most of all. Our conversations about religion seem to find their way in and out of our conversations. After all his brother is studying to be a preacher in Chesapeake, Virginia, his family doesn't believe in us living together, and I've been interviewing people from St. Nicholas for the book. The closest we come to agreement about religion is this:

Him: "I want to find us a church when you get here."

Me: "Oh. Yeah."

Him: "That is the one part of our relationship I feel is lacking."

Me: "Ok. I want to have God in our lives, too."

Him: "You do?"

Me: "Yes, I really do"

There is a slight pause on both ends of the phone. We don't know where to go from here. I love St. Nicholas; I'm comfortable there. I worry that it will be hard to find middle ground.

Me: “We need to find a place where we both are happy.”

Him: “Of course. There isn’t any other way.”

Chapter 14

Another 100 Years

In the early 1900s bald eagles migrated to the Hudson River when the water froze in Canada. Their white heads and dark brown bodies swooped down in front of the chapel to catch their fish prey from the waters. I can imagine them there, landing on bare branches, resting on ice floes, flapping over barges and passenger ships. Bald Eagles look for large undeveloped, undisturbed land for nesting; they desire land unoccupied of human activity. Their beauty is a part of the landscape in the Hudson Valley. As the eagles disappeared a piece of precious wildlife and history went with them. Even to those who never saw the birds in the Hudson River, their stories are famous and photos remain in history books.

In 1976 only one pair of eagles remained in New York State. Environmentalist blamed DDT, a pesticide banned in 1972, for killing many living creatures in the river, for interfering with the birds' ability to reproduce. The pesticides weakened the eagle's eggs and they never developed properly. In 1976 began The Bald Eagle Restoration Project to reestablish a breeding population. Over 13 years, 198 nesting bald eagles were brought from Alaska and released in New York. By 2009, 500 bald eagles pairs winter in New York.

After church, while I'm home on winter break from college, I see my first eagle. It's hovering, dipping above the water in front of Danskammer, the electricity plant across the river. My Dad and I are standing in St. Nicholas's backyard looking for the bald eagles. We've read in the newspaper that they're making a comeback in our area. This Sunday is particularly cold. I can see my breath form clouds in front of me as I lean

over to take the binoculars from my father. The icy air nips at my fingertips beneath my gloves making them so numb I can barely grip the binoculars. I turn the view into focus and move slowly to catch the bird through the lens. His white head blends into the ice and snow on the mountain behind him, but as he plunges to snare a fish the white flares against the dark water. My father tells me that there are large fish kills near Danskammer because of the warm water they let into the river from the plant. He thinks that is why the eagles circle that area.

The view from the backyard of the church is something out of National Geographic. The eagles look comfortable, as if they were always meant to be there. The chalky white background suits them perfectly. New Hamburg changed since they left; the grocery stores closed, the inn and bar was sold as a private house, two churches closed, and the passenger ships that once parked at the yacht club have been replaced by the commuter train. The bald eagle population almost disappeared, but reestablished itself. St. Nicholas on the Hudson's population has dwindled; but might once again, like the eagles, revive.

The original slate roof on St. Nicholas lasts 105 years before anybody needed to worry about the slow weakening, chipping, or leaking. People figured the slate would last forever like most things at the chapel. There wasn't a financial plan, written steps, or any indication of a strategy for the possibility of a new roof. First when the rain dripped through the ceiling it was caught in big pots and dog bowls, without much concern. It was until the pots overflowed and stained the floors that the issue, finally, got recognition. It's not that the vestry and the congregation were in denial or didn't care

that the chapel's roof was disintegrating, they simply didn't have a plan. I get the feeling that to bring up the roof issue at a vestry meeting would spur a flood of overwhelming panic and maybe feelings of defeat. So in typical St. Nicholas fashion, the real implications of a decaying roof weren't brought up because there simply can't be a problem too big to fix.

Reverend Lindsley, the new minister, drowning in unlabeled records and poor bookkeeping, felt these were more immediate problems. Almost four years passed with interim ministers, visiting clergy, and interviews with inept rectors. During this time the business side of the church had failed. After all, to a diocese for a church to stay open it has to prove that it's financially viable. The congregation as a whole praised Reverend Lindsley for coming to the church. He was a traditionalist who wanted to keep the church as close to the Anglican Church as possible. He provided stability; conservatism meant little change for the chapel.

At this time, the chapel somehow that I can't quite put my finger on why, was gaining members. The only way I can describe it is to say that new families sort of wandered in and decided to stay. Maybe with Lindsley they saw potential for prosperity, new beginnings for the church; or perhaps other churches in the area were experiencing lulls. With these people came volunteers to teach Sunday school, cooks for coffee hour, altar servers, and revived vacation Bible school. The growth didn't, however, catch up immediately to the debt and untidy business side. So, as the chapel began to grow, instead of stability, there resonated a feeling of undetermined worry from the vestry and those closest to the chapel's financial matters. The roof problem could turn into a massive problem.

Owning a slate roof has become an oddity because of the clear advantages of asphalt shingles: less expensive, shorter construction time, and flexibility; slates are so heavy that if misplaced they can easily break the framing of the roof. The positives of slate lie in durability and aesthetics. If properly installed and maintained slate roofs can last a century and a half compared with a maximum of about 20 years for an asphalt roof. Found on cathedrals, palaces and estates, slate roofs give a look of wealth and affluence.

“A slate roof will cost us five times as much as an asphalt roof,” my Dad explains putting the packet of papers down on the table for the rest of the vestry members to look over. He’s talked to a contractor about prices for the roofing project. It’s a decision he’s already made. He’s voting asphalt.

Fundraising for that kind of undertaking, he figures, will take ten years.

“How much will the slate cost in total?”

“About \$80,000” my father answers. “Does anyone have big fundraising or donor ideas?”

“We could ask the yacht club to put on a dinner and entertainment?”

“A pancake dinner at the firehouse?”

“A car wash?”

The vestry sits around a long, wobbly card table in the bottom of the undercroft one Wednesday. The group is eclectic to say the least: Alex Reese, a millionaire with a small pony tail, Amy a PTA Mom, Allison a writer and adjunct English professor, Nick an engineer, and Polly, who runs a pottery business.

Teresa, who has been busily making coffee, nosily scrubbing the oven, and opening stuck windows, finally sits down. She still has a dishrag in her hand, which she

uses as a flag, like a bull fighter. “I’ve been a member of this church longer than some of you have been alive,” she starts. She moves the flag up and down for emphasis. “For a lot of us,” waves the flag towards the window as if to include everyone in the hamlet, “it is all we’ve ever known.” She pauses for emphasis.

“What are you saying, Teresa?” Reverend Lindsley asks. He looks impatient.

“I’m telling you that this church is a piece of history for New Hamburg and it shouldn’t be changed. It should look just like it always has,” she says dramatically, in a louder voice. The room is silent for a moment before she stands up, pushes in her chair and coos sweetly, “But you guys are the ones in charge so talk about it. I’m finishing up here.”

My father, who understood he had lost this battle after Teresa’s reminiscing and the look on the vestry’s faces stands up and begins to read the numbers again for the slate roof. The vote to whether the church should be roofed in asphalt or slate is superfluous. The decision has been made. The church will begin fundraising for the slate roof.

A picture of the final product appears on The National Slate Association website in their photo gallery. The photo must have been taken midwinter. The overcast, dull sky makes for a bleak background. The trees are stripped bare and the branches point towards the sky in stark lines. The roof itself, which the website aims to highlight ironically, blends into the sky. The description on the website reads that the slate color is a semi-weathering gray, which is the color I’d describe the sky. The fresh slate covers the roof in organized rows of rectangular plates, neat and tidy. Copper lines the roof’s edges, hip and ridge rolls the web site calls those parts, and steeple. The copper radiates off the gray

roof, shiny and new. The construction company informed the congregation that the penny color would turn greenish in time but the photo captures the newness.

The website reads that the “project included replacement of slate roofing to match the original.” The slates were born on the New York/Vermont border in Granville, NY at the Greenstone Slate Company. That area is known for its longtime relationship with the slate industry. Quarries, deep pits, line the land and produce thousands of pieces of rock each year. The slates for St. Nicholas were mined and brought downstate by a contractor to restore the chapel and historical landmark in New Hamburg. I like knowing that this new roof is really a piece of something that has existed for centuries, just like the parish itself.

So the newness of the roof, matching the midwinter sky, represents something much larger: piece of Mother Nature that will protect the church and help it remain a slice of history.

A party to celebrate the new roof was held on Sunday, June 20, 2010. The fundraising took just under eight years and several initiatives. The diocese offered to match the fundraising efforts and encouraged using slates to keep the historical attributes of the chapel. The luncheon offered free admission, picnic food prepared and donated by the congregation, wine, beer and other refreshments, as well as a local band. We sold drawings of St. Nicholas sketched onto the old slates at \$20 each. The rented white tents sheltered card tables with white linen tablecloths and metal folding chairs gave the church property a wedding appearance. The Hudson River provided a perfect backdrop, forever flowing from below the chapel on the hill.

A notice appeared in the local newspaper and on the St. Nicholas website inviting parishioners who had left, community members, and all who contributed time or money to the effort. The yacht club, on Water Street in front of the church, with the persistence of George Kolb a parishioner and yacht club member, organized a cruise to the Caribbean as a roof fundraiser. The more people who went on the cruise, the lower the group price would be. The cruisers paid the stated original price and the difference went to the chapel. A craft fair, organized by Polly who donated her pottery, was another money making effort. Local artists, craftsmen, and sellers bought space to sell their products at the church. Parishioners donated homemade cakes, soups, breads and salads to sell at the event. Gregory, the organist, created Christmas CDs and tee shirts to add revenue for the effort. The annual Shrove Tuesday pancake dinner, tag sale, and music concerts also funded the slate roof.

The party organizers hoped for about 200 people throughout the afternoon. The yacht club's Father's Day pancake breakfast shared the day with the roof party. Parishioners hoped that after breakfast yacht club members would wander up the street to the chapel. Many parishioners had specifically pledged money directly towards the slate, but had left before seeing the project finished. The vestry, especially Astrid the new minister, hoped that the party would encourage past congregation members to reconsider their decision about leaving. The parish had changed over the course of the eight years since the first spark of effort towards the new roof: A new minister, an increase of new, young families, an increase in budget and funds, and business stability. In the months just before the party the diocese had recognized St. Nicholas as one of the fastest growing Episcopal churches in New York.

I, working in Memphis, could not attend to the party. I sent many parishioners emails asking them to update me after the event. The overwhelming response was that the party was a success. “Again, St. Nicholas proved to be a community gathering spot,” Donna Ruf, Teresa’s daughter wrote to me, just wonderful. ” Her mother, whom I saw in church a few weeks after the event, reiterated her daughter’s response.

“Donna got to see people she hadn’t seen in ages. They all grew up here together, but moved away or lost contact,” Teresa said squeezing my hand with a smile. Donna, a deacon at Zion Episcopal, attends St. Nicholas only a couple times a year. “It was a little reunion.”

I asked Polly what she thought about the party. She’d been attending the new 9 a.m. service and missed the fellowship of the 10 a.m. service. “The church was bustling, always great to see that.” She told me.

In total, about 230 people wandered through the party that day. Volunteer parishioners decorated the undercroft and set up the outside tables, maintained the buffet and, cleared the tables for new arrivals. Many people took pictures and stopped to admire and evaluate the new roof. I, too, caught myself staring up at the roof the Sunday I returned from Memphis. The copper had already begun to fade from its original orange, brassy color to a dull green. I watched a small black bird land at the steeple’s peak and ruffle its feathers to get comfortable. I read that birds have amazing eyesight and can process what they see faster than humans. I wonder if that bird sees something I don’t as he gazes towards the river. And maybe if I watch him long enough he’ll show me the future.

My head feels full for a moment before the tears come. I'm standing in our usual family pew at St. Nicholas with the Blue Hymnal open between my palms singing along. I hear a young voice from behind us singing loudly. I turn around to see Aiden, whose family has recently joined the church, with his mouth open wide and his eyes directed down to the page of music. His bowl cut blonde hair cuts across his face in odd directions and he's sweaty from running around outside before church. Even though he's turning ten this year, and is no longer considered a child, his blue eyes are innocent, open and bright like a baby's. This has become a frequent event for me – crying in the chapel. I'm not sure why, but little moments like these hit me and my body, my heart, reacts.

Chapter 15

We Are All God's People

The continuous dissemination of pride that Teresa spreads as thick as peanut butter over New Hamburg and the surrounding towns only increases with the new victor, Reverend Astrid Joy Storm. I see her eyes perk up after church when she spots a new young couple hanging around the bagels at coffee hour. "I saw them at church. Do you know them?" she asks me and my mother, her inquisitive face looking up at us from the metal folding chair where she has anchored herself. We follow the direction of her boney finger pointing their way and shake our heads no. "Hmph. They look lonely," she says trying to wave them over. They don't immediately see her so she pulls herself off her chair and walks over to the couple.

"Welcome to St. Nicholas. I'm Teresa and you are?" Teresa asks flashing her best hostess smile.

"We're getting married here next weekend," the girl answers sheepishly. She clings onto her finance's hand. "We're Emily's friends." For a brief second Teresa looks hurt that she hadn't heard about the wedding from Emily or her mother Polly, who both attend St. Nicholas regularly and live a couple houses down from the chapel, but she quickly changes that expression to pure delight.

"Oh Emily! No wonder!" Teresa exclaims like it came together neatly in her head. "Well I always say this is the best place to get married."

"Yes, we like it," the girl says politely.

"Did you enjoy service? You must come back! In fact, we are having a pot luck here next weekend after church!"

“We are going to try to come back.”

“Good! Good! Should I put your name down for next Sunday’s potluck? The signup sheet is over on that table,” Teresa begins to move towards the sheet waving them to follow her.

“Well, that’s the day of our wedding, so I’m sure we’ll be busy.”

Astrid, our new, young priest, wears bangs cropped straight across her face and the rest of her brown hair in a low, tangled bun. While she’s preaching her hiking boots peak out from her robe or, once in a while, a red sock with running sneakers. Astrid lives as simply as she possibly can with her husband, a lawyer from New York City. They live part time in a small apartment in Harlem and part-time at a little house they bought in the center of New Hamburg. She eats organic food, practices meditation, and wears clothes she’s made herself. Teresa once told me that when she first met Astrid she felt some kind of peace flow through the room and when she left the impression lingered. That’s how Teresa knew that Astrid was sent to St. Nicholas straight from God.

Astrid refused to marry her fiancé for years. She argued that if her homosexual friends couldn’t be joined in matrimony then it didn’t seem fair for her to be married. When she first came to St. Nicholas she referred to her husband as her partner. Whispers circulated through the chapel that she must be a lesbian, which wasn’t a turn off for most of the congregation of St. Nicholas who had a gay woman priest early on when the Episcopal Church was still figuring out the rules when it came to homosexual ministers. For six months everyone figured she was gay until her boyfriend, Andrew, came to the chapel for service. A few months after that Astrid, who had already bought a house in

New Hamburg with Andrew, ran barefoot down to the church, with a few close friends and family following, to get married. “A spur of the moment type thing” she told the congregation the next Sunday during service. Her good friend, a Lutheran minister, performed the wedding service and later they toasted with a twelve pack of beer and shared cheese and crackers in the undercroft of the church. When I asked her if I could see pictures she said, “I’m not sure if we got any. One of my sweet friends took photos on a disposable camera, but I don’t think they turned out.”

I wondered if the church she grew up in was similar to St. Nicholas. After a brief moment of silence she replied that the church was small, but possessed little resemblance. Her parents were strict Baptists in central Ohio, who wished to emulate Jesus’ life. With their guidance she attended Wheaton, an evangelical liberal arts school, and then later rebelled and followed a college sweetheart to New England where she attended Yale Divinity School. The study of the Bible beckoned her to ministry. Interpretations and cultural implications fascinated her. In the scriptures she found stability and understanding of the world around her. She wanted to deliver this comprehension to others. Her childhood church, according to Astrid, did not provide this shelter to all people, only the few who chose to live their lives the same way.

One of my favorite things about Astrid is that, like me, she is a writer. In an article “Marriage is Not an Evil Thing,” published in Episcopal Life Magazine she admits that her “ambivalence about marrying stemmed not only from having gay friends who couldn’t, but also from a conservative Christian upbringing during which I watched one too many strong independent women mysteriously transform in to the ‘surrendered wife’ often demanded in that tradition.” After a brief history about how marriage became a

sacrament she decides that marriage is a sacrament between two people, not dependent upon the church's traditions. It is a liberal, uncustomary response to marriage. There are many other examples of her dauntless will to change old traditions. Her article, "Memo to Rome: Some of Us Like the Reformation" received so many irate responses that the Huffington Post website had to disable the comment function under her article. This feisty article points its finger at "Rome's sexism and homophobia." Another article on the topic of virginity states that "Jesus said nothing about premarital sex, period." She looks at what Paul wrote in the New Testament that mostly makes up conservative Christian views that sex before marriage is ungodly. She highlights that in these chapters he adds disclaimers that this is him writing and not the Lord. He does not want to take words out of the mouth of Jesus. Her conclusions are that if you decide that abstinence is the right course for you, go for it. But, she encourages people who, in a committed relationship, are ready for premarital sex because, "it's not a divine mandate." It's a bold statement and when I ask her about it she responds, "I've studied the Bible for many years and feel I have the right to spread what I've found."

When I asked Astrid to describe St. Nicholas she told me this story: One day during church service while Howie, the repair man, was downstairs trying to fix the electric socket near the kitchen, a loud crash echoed through the chapel. Teresa had tried to start the coffee that morning and found that none of the sockets were working downstairs. The boom came while Astrid was preparing the Eucharist, crossing the body of Christ and the bread of Heaven. She ran down the altar and yelled down the stairs, "Howie, are you alive?" After a grunt from Howie she returned to the altar and giggling announced, "I love St. Nicks."

“I thought he’d gotten electrocuted!” Astrid laughed as she tells me the story. “There is something very special and exciting about this church,” Astrid’s smile widens, “And that’s why we all keep coming back.”

Astrid welcomes kids, dogs, cats, and every human being who wants a closer relationship to God. She brings her dog, Sybil, a rescued mutt, to service with her. The white short-haired German shepherd mix lies in the middle of the aisle, or underneath her feet on the altar, during the service. Janice, a woman with a at-home purple dye hair color who wears a red ladies hat with a feather, brings a stray cat wrapped in a birthing blanket to weekly service. The cat’s orange hair is matted and missing in large chunks all over his bony body. Janice, who dresses in an old knitted long sweater and men’s pants, murmurs to the cat throughout the service. Astrid even gives the cat a special blessing during communion. One Sunday Astrid saw little fleas jumping from the cat’s body. She was saying the sermon when she first noticed a spec bounding from the cat’s tangled fur onto Janice’s sweater. Later she tells me it took all of her will-power not to shout out right then, but she didn’t want to create panic in the congregation. She walked closer to the front pew, where Janice and her cat always sit, to get a better look at the army of fleas that a muttering Janice never noticed. After church she talked to Janice about baths and medicine to get rid of the bugs and days later dropped by Janice’s house to see if the cat was any better. Luckily, the cat was flea-less and more church friendly for the next service.

The recurrent obstacle at St. Nicholas is money; which showed up again a year after Astrid came to St. Nicholas. To keep Astrid at St. Nicholas the vestry decided that

they needed to increase her salary, after all nobody is that much of a saint. When she first took the job at the chapel as a part time priest, 20 hours a week, she made \$11,000. Astrid supplemented that money with working at the diocese a couple days during the week researching and writing grants. The commute from her apartment in Harlem to New Hamburg a couple days a week wearied her and Astrid argued that with an increased salary she could spend more time with the congregation and at the chapel. Astrid reasoned that part of a minister's duties includes spreading the love of Jesus to the community, so on her own she began spending more time in New Hamburg to full-fill this promise. She tucks a stray piece of hair behind her ear and explains, "This sweet little chapel got stuck under my finger nails. How could I not give it everything it deserved." But even so, she needed money to work less at the diocese.

With Astrid, the vestry began reorganizing the budget, which allowed more salary for a vicar. Every year during stewardship, the pledging period, Astrid continues to ask the parish for a higher salary. This isn't an easy or comfortable task. She reminds the parish that the Bible encourages people of God to give to their church as a way of giving to the Lord. Some people are turned off by these speeches. They believe that somebody else — a board member, a deacon, the music director — should list reasons why Astrid should get a higher salary, but Astrid believes that it is her duty to encourage her parishioners to pledge the money. In her sermon, she explains that her duties as a vicar encompass leading the community through liturgy and sacrament, but also administration and teaching. She reminds her congregation that a church, like a business, needs to have money to continue to function. A successful church also must have a priest that has an invested relationship with the congregation, built on trust, that points the community in

the direction of God. She promises to continue to ensure that the church operates successfully and joyfully. With this she vows new members and continued prosperity.

There are always unhappy people with every change. Amy, a longtime member and active Sunday school teacher, left St. Nicholas with her husband and two children. Many members from the chapel telephoned and visited her to ask about her change of heart. Her reasoning lies in Astrid.

“How can this unmarried young woman give me guidance in my marriage or in raising my children?” she demands. “I want a priest who I can talk to about my sins and who can give me advice.”

I’m not sure if any other members agreed with her, but a couple families left after she did. They may have left because of their strong fellowship to Amy, or some other fact that I’m not aware of. However, it was clear that with Astrid came modifications to the church.

Astrid welcomes the gay community to St. Nicholas. Some conservative Christians disagree with this openness because of Bible verses naming homosexuals sinners. I asked Teresa what she thought about the gay couples that began attending the chapel regularly. What I meant was: How do you feel about having gay people in the congregation? She took it to mean: Do you like Bob and Kevin? She answered, “Nice guys. Live all the way up in Hyde Park and drive 40 minutes every Sunday for church. Isn’t that nice?” By her answer and the look on her face I realized that it hadn’t even occurred to her that having homosexual members was unwelcome or even strange. “I don’t think anyone has left the church because of that,” she said with a serious look on

her face after I tried to explain the what I'd asked. "Astrid really loves all of God's people. I think that is clear at the chapel."

To promote the mission of the church Astrid created a website for St. Nicholas. Her words and photography of the chapel illustrate the congregation and the atmosphere of the church. It is an effort to reach out past the community of New Hamburg. A photo of Astrid's dog sitting on the red carpeted passageway between the two columns of pews is one of the biggest photos on the site. She writes that all are welcomed to worship God and find fellowship in the walls of St. Nicholas. Side bars on the webs site link to a calendar page with events for the church, a coffee hour, lay reader and acolyte schedule, and news about New Hamburg. This is the first time that St. Nicholas has appeared on the Internet. Astrid calls it, "joining the world." She updates her facebook status and twitters regularly inspirational messages and church happenings. Her profile photo shows her all bundled up with a pea jacket and warm wool hat and matching gloves. She has her arms tucked behind her back and she's leaning forward, smiling in the direction of the camera. The camera's focus is hazy and you can see bits of snow floating around her making the whole image feel fuzzy and warm. At first I didn't notice it, but later I see that behind her back she is holding a round, packed white snowball.

Owen is three years old and talks in an excited stream of words. As the third child in his family, he is very independent. At coffee hour he pours the gallon jug of orange juice carefully with his chubby hands into a small paper cup. He even offers to make my Mom a juice cup. When he tries on his shepherd costume for the Christmas pageant he announces he wore a similar costume for Halloween. What were you for Halloween I ask.

“A Hippie!” he announces practically. His longish curly blonde hair and blue eyes are something like a Gerber baby meets flower child.

The children in Sunday school rejoin the service after the sermon and before the Eucharist. Owen marches up the stairs, in his clunky cowboy boots, after Sunday school proudly displaying his art work or babbling the story he learned to his mother. Sometimes he stops to show Astrid what he accomplished that day. She attentively listens as he explains his creation, smiling up at her. She doesn't rush him or tell him that it's the middle of a church service. Then he runs to the back pew where his family waits, rolling their eyes at him. Astrid told the congregation that she loves “the incessant sound of children's coos” that happen almost weekly at the service. So, she doesn't blink when Owen begins to sing a tune he's learned in Sunday school or asks his mother, “what?” when he's heard something he doesn't understand.

During Communion, however, Owen's parents have taught him that he has to behave because it is an important, religious time. He is very quiet and serious as he wedding-steps up the aisle in front of his parents with his hands at his side. Once at the altar he gives a little bow and climbs up on to the kneelers with grace and expertise. Like his parents taught him, he crosses his right hand over his left palm and rests his little dimpled elbows on the wooden railing that surrounds the altar. These delicate actions, angelic and pure, pull at my heart. I feel tears forming and try to shake them off. Astrid gives him a wafer blessing him, “this is the body of Christ.” She lets him dunk the wafer in the wine, “the blood of Christ.” He looks up at her and says, “Amen.” He shuts his eyes so tightly that you can see the creases around his eyes and forehead and puts the wafer in his mouth. He's praying.

As he walks back to his pew I can't help but let a tear fall from my eye. He's incredibly innocent and excited about his God. He has no doubts or preconceived notions about what religion is suppose to be like. This is his relationship with God and his prayers. I think this is exactly what Astrid hoped her church would feel like.

I decide to move in with Wesley. I'm moving to Colorado with no job, little money saved, and a car full of clothes and left over college kitchen supplies. We agree that it would be crazy for us to pay double rent, especially before I get a job. My parents are cool with this idea, although, my Dad does ask, "What is your schedule for getting married?" I assured him we were heading in that direction, but didn't have any specific dates. "Well, you might as well get married if you're living together." Wesley spent time with my family at our summer house and later my Mom tells me they couldn't pick anyone better for me. The compliment makes my eyes water. My family has given their blessing. They plan to come visit in October to explore Denver.

Wesley, however, isn't sure he should break the news to his mother. She doesn't believe in people living together before marriage. It's a sin. We decide to tell her that a friend from high school's aunt has offered her basement apartment. This isn't a lie, but I've politely declined the offer. As the move date approaches I begin to worry about spilling the news to his mother. In a dream I see us standing in her kitchen and her asking me about my living conditions. She asks are you living with Wesley? And I exclaim, "yes!" I wake up after that too scared to find out what she'll do to us. I tell Wesley about this and he, true to his personality, says, "Well, then I'll tell her."

I ask him to think about it, but as soon as we hang up he calls and tells her straight out about our plans. Becky at the other end of the line, stiffens, and says, "I am worried about both your Christian walks. This is a sin in the eyes of Jesus." Wesley tells her that we've made the decision and he knows it's a sin that he can make right. "I still love you and want to know Leigh Ann better," she softens, "But, I raised you better than this."

Later, I ask Wesley if he feels guilty for going against his mother's wishes. He's made up his mind, he tells me. We're living together. I smile on my end of the phone. "But," he says. "I want to work on our spiritual relationship."

The Guard

Wesley flew to New York late in the summer after I've finished my research at St. Nicholas and we drove my compact car full of clothes and kitchen supplies halfway across the country over a three day weekend. I had taken all that fit, sticking boots into the far edges of the backseat, fitting suitcases like a jigsaw puzzle in the trunk, and mounds of clothes still on hangers laid on the backseat, which prevented me from reclining my seat. I had to leave some outfits hanging in the closet of my old bedroom and packed away in paper bags in the attic at my parent's house, but the move felt permanent. Unlike leaving for college, I didn't know when I would go home again. We listened to upbeat pop music to keep us awake and Tracy Kidder's Strength in What Remains on audiobook about Deo, a refugee of Burundi, who came to New York City looking for a new life and found only the harsh reality of the cold winters sleeping in Central Park. Deo met people along his journey who aided him with shelter, money, food and support. Without these people Deo wouldn't have graduated from Columbia University Medical School or started a new clinic in Burundi. While we listened I looked out the window at the endless open space of the Kansas plains and watched the horizon, unchanging even at our 70 mph. Deo brought his medical background, love of learning, and his determination with him across the world. He was the same man delivering groceries in Manhattan as the intern doctor in Burundi. I felt Wesley's hand on my upper thigh, calling me back to the car, and I turned off the radio to enjoy the silence of the car speeding across the highway to Colorado.

In Denver we carry up the boxes, hang my clothes in the walk-in closet, fill the sparse cabinets, and make a pizza. Wesley has moved most of his clothes to the dresser in the living room that we've dubbed a TV stand and shoved his books to the back of the closet so mine can fit. I apologize for the squeezing, but he says, "That's ok baby. I want you and your stuff to live here." We settled on the couch and flip on the TV, tired from the drive and the unpacking. I turn to him and tell him that I hope I meet the nice people that Deo did in the book on tape. He asks me why? I say maybe they'll help me get a job and make some friends. He says, "Babe, you are the nice people in the book." I laugh and say that I think nice people should hang out with nice people.

That night when we go to bed we pray together. We thank God for safe travels, enough space in the apartment for two of us, the great pizza sauce my Mom packed, and our relationship. I asked God to help me find the right job, good friends, and a church.

One day the following week I'm making Wesley's favorite chocolate chip cookies and thinking about our conversation from the night before. We looked up local churches with the idea that we would find one within walking distance. The Methodist church down the street openly welcomes gays and has a women minister; Wesley said he'd feel uncomfortable, too liberal. A Lutheran is located in an old run down 1970s style school building that I didn't like the look of. I realize that I'm being pretentious, but we're looking for the perfect church. This, I told Wesley, is not it, "The minister probably wears a disco suit and the lights change colors." We scrutinized a few more community churches and found fault with all of them. We decided to give up the search until the next week, opting instead to watch the football game with friends on Sunday. I begin to press down harder on the electric mixer, mixing the dry wet ingredients. The bowl is small and

some flies out onto the stove. I move so that I'm over the bowl more completely and start again. This time all the batter stays in.

I'm nervous about blending Wesley's and my denominations. Wesley talks about growing up in a church of 30,000 members, being saved, and one hour sermons. My church has 100 members tops, I've been confirmed, although I'm not even sure that is really on the same level as being SAVED, and the sermons are 20 minutes maximum. There seems to be less ritual in his experiences and more emphasis on preaching. One of my favorite parts of church is kneeling on the velvet plush kneelers and resting my head on the cool wooden pews and feeling direct contact with my God.

One afternoon I'm sitting on the veranda of a new friend's house drinking tea and explaining my thesis. The friend is actually family, sort of. My cousin's husband gave me his sister's email whom has lived in Denver for the past 15 years. Her response to my message is immediate and excited. A few days later we've met for tea. I tell her that I'm writing about St. Nicholas and the community and she responds, "Have you found a church here?" No, I tell her, but we're looking. She tells me she is a practicing Buddhist and doesn't attend a church regularly because she feels that the boundaries of a church are too confining. "But, a good friend of mine has taken me to church a couple of times at Pathways." She vouches that Pathways worship is a loving experience, young people attend, and the minister is a "cool guy with lots of good thing to say." It's not a perfect recommendation but I tell Wesley about it a couple hours later at home. According to the website the church is nondenominational, modern, and has a guitar player. We decide to try it.

We get lost, of course, on the way to church. The streets in Denver are largely one way and very curvy. It is easy to think you're on one street when suddenly the name changes. When we finally locate the church it isn't what we expect: a temple events center. The old, corroded building looks like it is falling apart. We walk in to a large auditorium with plush velvet chairs, cathedral ceilings that make everything echo, plastic garbage bags over the stained glass windows that have signs that warn, "construction." We're in the right place. We know this from the large influx of people ages 20-40 carrying Bibles finding their seats in the theater room. A woman sitting a row in front us with long silky brown hair and a polo shirt turns towards us to welcome us to church by shaking our hands and introducing herself. She is sitting with her husband and some other couples who greet us with smiles and waves. There is a countdown to the beginning of service running on the screen in front of us and a band that looks like a pop country group is setting up. The time runs to all zeros and the guitarist, who has a gelled fauxhawk and tight designer jeans, welcomes us to church and then strums a note on his electric guitar. The rest of the band joins in and smoke begins to come up from the stage. "They have a smoke machine?" I whisper. Wesley lets out a little laugh and says, "No wonder their budget is so high." The preacher, Gil, is young, unmarried and makes references to the band Green Day, "The Book of Eli" and other pop culture. He talks fast and excited as if he's had too much caffeine and waves his hands around at the audience to make a point. "Why is showing no emotion during pain or grief rewarded?" He asks and pauses like he's waiting for an answer. He makes a fist and punches out into the air, "You're a rock." His face holds a look of a gruff old man for a couple more sentences. The crowd laughs and Gil pulls himself out of the character and smiles to become himself again.

At the bottom of the colored, glossy bulletin ushers handed to us at the beginning of service is a perforated rectangle that asks first time guests to write down their email and home address so the church can send more information about their worship. Gil instructs us to rip off the section, fill it out, and drop it in the offering plate when it comes around. Wesley fills out the information, but keeps it when the plate comes around. He leans over to me and whispers, “We’ll talk about what we want to do after the service.” I nod and begin a thoughtful critique in my head to share with Wesley afterwards: minister talks like he’s on an upper, band is cool, too many “cool” pop culture references, needs more light in the theater, lots of people our age.

By the time the service is over I’ve half forgotten my list swaying to the band playing a Christian song that could be the next biggest hit on the radio, if the “he” they are referring to is a hot guy. We walk outside and stand for a moment on the cement stairs. Wesley takes my hand and asks me what I think. I start to go through my list. Wesley goes through his, which is pretty similar to mine. We have a lot of the same complaints, which in itself is reassuring. “Do you want to come again?”

“Yes,” It escapes from me so quickly that I follow up with, “I’ll try it again” to let him know I’m not completely sold on the place. Wesley looks at me and smiles.

“I agree.”

He pulls me in close for a quick kiss. We walk down the stairs and I say, “It’s not St. Nicks.”

“No,” he replies. “But, it might still be good for us.” And that’s really what I’m looking for. I’m never going to find a replica of St. Nicholas, the high ceilings, the musty smell from the maroon carpet, the kneelers, the stain glass arch windows and pews, but I

can surely find a place where the people have the same love and spiritual connection as the people at my little chapel. The bulletin had highlighted outreach and fellowship retreats that the church sponsored along with all different Bible study communities. I noticed the women's retreat up at a rented ski house last winter. The women dressed in snowsuits and heavy jackets all stood with their arms around each other smiling at the camera. I look back at the temple, which is getting only seemingly larger as we walk to the parking lot, and decide that the love in the chapel extends from the people, not the building. That love could be found in unexpected ways and, maybe, even in worn out temples.

The first time Wesley visited New York I took him to visit St. Nicholas. I had told him so much about the chapel that when he stood in front of it for the first time he put his hands in the front pockets of his jeans, leaned back on his heels, and said, "It is exactly what I imagined."

First, I took him to Manhattan to let him gape at the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, Central Park and relish in the pasta dishes in Little Italy. These are things that you are supposed to show a virgin visitor to the big apple. I took him back to Wappingers to the house I grew up in and my Mom made him an Italian dinner and we taught him our favorite card game, Canasta. That night he whispered, snuggled on the couch in my parent's den that he wanted to know everything about me and where I came from.

My father suggested visiting St. Nicholas, as we strolled across the Hudson River Walkway Bridge in Poughkeepsie, the longest pedestrian bridge in the country, used as

the main train crossing south of Albany during World War II. From this height the Hudson River is endless. It stretches north and south in long parallel lines only briefly interrupted by intersecting bridges.

“You should stop by St. Nicholas on your way home,” my father suggests. “Let Wes have a look at the place.” I had already thought of this and had whispered back to Wesley that night, “I have to show you the chapel.”

At the church I pulled the large red doors with my entire body to open them. I stepped up on my tippy toes and clicked the locks into place. The whole place echoed as I called in Wesley from the road where he was taking pictures. He wanted to remember the building so he could help me with my thesis.

“Wow, this place is great he says,” continuing to snap shots as he walked in behind me. The musty aroma burst from the church; like history clinging to the wooden beams, waiting to be discovered. I stood at the altar and smiled at Wesley for a posed picture. I told him that this was the same spot where I stood to receive my Confirmation, performed in the Christmas pageants, took the food pantry offerings to be blessed, and receive Communion.

Teresa, Polly, and Jean have all helped develop who I am and built my relationship with God. They’ve manifested the importance of the chapel and the determination to never let go. I’ve always known that these women watch over the chapel like its caretakers, but for the first time, standing on the altar, I had a moment of clarity: the church was actually guarding its members.

The chapel’s commitment to its people flows like the river winding in St. Nicholas’ backyard through each person who enters these sacred walls. Like the river

that flows both ways, many of the congregation have come and gone, but the chapel remains as a place of history that connects people with God. I think of Teresa's quote, "God is in that church." I thought it meant that God is watching over the little chapel sending miracles or good fate, but now I realize I'm wrong. Teresa understands that God is in the people and the community of St. Nicholas. Her love for the building – making sure the red velvet kneelers are clean and sewn, the path is shoveled, the roof keeps its slate roof – is actually to shelter the parishioners. I stop for a moment, imagining Teresa sitting in her usual pew at the back of the chapel. I see her face scrunched up in a smile and her head bobbing to the hymn. It's the church that's saved her. It's why she'll never let it go.

"Want to walk down to the river?" I asked. "It's where I used to hang out as a kid." As we walked out of the church I heard the familiar creaks of the wooden floor, hidden in maroon carpet, beneath us.

At the river I pointed up to the chapel, which looks imposing, stately and graceful sitting up on the hill. I proudly explained about the new slate roof. "It took almost a decade of fundraising to keep the chapel looking exactly the same." We turned toward the Hudson, rushing by us, and I showed Wesley where I played house on the rocks, where Lauren and I dipped our feet in the water, and walked the railroad tracks next to the shoreline.

"There is just something about this place," I turned to Wesley. "We were lucky to find it." He came over and puts his arms around my shoulders and leaned his chin on the top of my head.

We stand there for a while just looking out on the openness of the river always knowing the church is behind us.

Pray for the best outcome,” Wesley tells me before a phone interview for a staff writer’s job at a non-profit in Denver. I’m sick with bronchitis—a hoarse voice, clogged nose, blocked-up sinuses, and a heavy head. My body is so worn that I can barely keep my watery, blinking eyes open to read my scribbled notes. “Maybe the job is a perfect fit for you or maybe it isn’t. Just pray that everything turns out like it should,” Wesley reassures me.

That night in bed, lying on my back with my eyes closed, I ask God to help me through the interview and that whatever happens I’m happy. “God, please watch over me.” There is something so comforting in this prayer. My coughing subsides and my breath evens. It could be the Vicks Vapor Rub or the antibiotics, but there is a surge of relief that runs through my body with these words.

That night I dream of my wedding to Wesley. We’re in a big meadow with all our friends and family circled around us. Wesley’s brother, the preacher, is performing the service and there are red breasted robins flying around us. God is at the wedding, too. His face appears in the crowd, behind our aunts and uncles, and somehow I know it is him. Wesley whispers in my ear that he knew God would approve. When I try to find God again he’s hidden by other wedding guests, but I know He is still there. He’s been watching all along. I feel peace, we have been praying to the same God after all.

The next day, still groggy and weak from the bronchitis, I call Wesley early in the morning before he goes to work. He peps me up for the interview by reminding to

mention the magazines I've written for, to use experiences to show them your dedication, and that he's rooting for me. His voice is comforting, his words encouraging. I nod and sniffle into the phone and murmur thanks. "Of course, babe, I love you," he says.

There is something spiritual about this kind of love. It floats translucently between two people and yet it exists. God exists through this same instinctual feeling, although not tangible, proven, or distinctive, there's faith in something greater than yourself. Maybe my relationship with Wesley has taught me this. There is an urgency to living with meaning, to loving.