

Going Home

By R. A. Conti

Father Dan looked on as the school children played at recess. He could not hear them through the closed window. Their frenetic excitement and random actions reminded him of the freedom he felt as a child, before the need for responsibility and purpose became important in his life. His own childhood seemed ages ago, although he was only in his thirties.

His phone chimed. He turned away from the window and walked over to his desk. His mother's number flashed on the screen. He picked up the phone and answered it cheerfully.

"Hi, Mom!"

"Daniel? How did you know it was me?" He had explained caller ID many times but she did not grasp the idea. Her home phone had buttons but no screen. She had an old cell phone, but never used it.

"I'm psychic," he said.

"Oh, you must take after me."

"I do," he said, ironically. "How are you?"

"I'm okay, but I'm worried about Beatrice." She was Father Dan's younger sister, about ten years his junior. He had called her Bee since they were kids.

"Is she okay?" he asked, concerned, but not worried. It was not a crisis, probably. His mother's random worries did not alarm him. They often amounted to nothing. Sometimes he thought she used them as excuses to call him. He did not mind.

"Yeah. Right now, she is," his mother said. He wondered whether she meant to imply Beatrice had not recently been okay, or was not soon going to be okay.

"Did something happen to her?"

"Not yet," she answered, evasively. He waited for her to elaborate.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" he prompted.

"I don't know how to explain it. I just think you ought to talk to her."

"What about?"

"It would be better if she told you."

"You can't tell me *anything*?"

"Could you just call her, for me, please?" She ignored his question, and he knew she would offer no more details.

"Sure, Mom. I'd be happy to call her."

"Thanks. When are you coming over? I haven't seen you in a while."

"Maybe next week. I've been busy, but things should be quiet soon and I can take a break."

"Good. Come for dinner."

"Okay. I have to go now."

"You *will* call her, right?"

"Of course. Right away. 'Bye, Mom." She hung up before he did.

Dan turned back to the window. The schoolyard was empty. The children had gone back inside to resume their classes. He marveled at the tranquility of the empty space, and remembered Shakespeare's line about, "...sound and fury, signifying nothing." Moments ago, the schoolyard was alive with children's sound and fury, and now it was empty. Where did that sound and fury go? Did it really signify nothing? Father Dan did not know. He turned back to his priestly duties and did not give it any more thought.

Bee called him before he could try to reach her. He asked whether she was okay.

“Why do you ask?” Bee sounded surprised.

“Mom called me.”

“She did?”

“She was vague. What’s going on?”

“I need to talk to you.”

“Of course, anytime. You know I’m here for you.” He was her big brother, and had been her counselor from time to time. She came to him with personal questions and problems. Sometimes they concerned boys, back when she was in her early teens, and he was a new priest.

She felt comfortable with him because he would not judge her or think she was immature just because she had relationship questions. She had to talk to somebody, and her mother was out of the question. He was always neutral, open-minded, sympathetic, and never patronizing. He never gave her advice, unless she asked for it.

“Um, is this a problem with a guy?” he asked.

“No. Not this time,” she answered, and then paused. “Well, maybe it is,” she added, enigmatically.

“Okay. Well, who’s the guy?”

“It’s Jesus.”

“Oh.” She had never before talked to him about religious stuff, despite his being a priest.

“Um, maybe we should meet. Do you want to come here?”

“No, I can’t. Could we meet for coffee?”

“Sure. I’m free tomorrow afternoon. Would that be too soon?”

“No, that’s perfect. Let’s go to our usual place.”

They met at the Holy Grounds coffee shop, which was in an old church not far from where they grew up. He had gone there in his teens, and knew some of the people who ran it. They were not part of any specific religion, as far as he could tell, and were always welcoming, helpful, and kind to anyone who came in.

“Jesus, huh?” he said as soon as they sat down in a booth in the back. There were not many other people there and none of the employees looked familiar.

“Um, yeah,” she said, and looked down as if she felt embarrassed.

“You want to tell me more?”

“I’ve been having these feelings. I thought you might understand them.”

“What are they?”

“I think it’s love. Some kind of love. I don’t know what else to call it.”

“And it involves Jesus?”

“It seems to.”

“You’re not sure?”

“It’s confusing.”

“Tell me what’s going on. Take your time.” She looked at him and knew she could trust him. He was her big brother and had always listened to her when she had problems. Nevertheless, this problem was different and she did not know whether she had come to him because he was her brother, or because he was a priest. She did not know what she wanted from him - brotherly help, or priestly advice.

She needed someone to listen to her. That was his role in the past, when he was just her big brother. Now he was Father Daniel. He was eager to listen, but was it him she wanted to speak to? She was not sure. Perhaps it was not him, this time. Perhaps she needed to speak to God.

“I’ve been thinking of becoming a nun,” she said, quietly. It was the first time she had spoken those exact words to anyone. She did not know how he would respond; would it be as her brother, or a priest? He was silent for a few moments.

“Bee, I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t you think it’s great?” she asked, assuming he would want to recruit a new person to serve the Church.

“What I think isn’t important,” he said.

“So you want to talk me out of it?” she asked, eager to engage him. He held back.

“Do you *want* me to?” he asked, firmly. He was trying to discern what she wanted but also knew he had to figure out what God wanted. Perhaps that was why she came to him. He was a representative of God, and she needed to talk to God.

“I don’t know,” she replied, frustrated.

“So that’s the problem? You sort of do, but sort of don’t...”

“Exactly! How do I decide?”

“The best advice I’ve ever heard is that you *don’t* decide,” he said, and looked at her. She felt confused. “You *pray*. Have you been doing that?” She did not know how to answer. She had been feeling, and thinking, but praying? Maybe not.

He had not confirmed her feelings, talked her through her problem, and solved it for her. What good was he, as a priest, if he did not help her with this? Was *prayer* all he had to offer? Her frustration got the better of her.

“I just remembered something I need to do, so I have to go now,” she said, and then abruptly stood up to leave. He thought about asking her to stay and talk some more, but did not pressure her.

“Okay. Maybe I’ll see you next week. Mom wants me to come for dinner.”

“Sure. See you then,” she said, and walked out. Dan watched her leave, and wondered whether he had let her down. Did she expect him to make this easy? Did she think because he was a priest, and had been through this himself, he knew some kind of short cut?

Serving God, or, the decision to serve God, was never easy. It was the most important decision anyone could make. It had to be the *right* decision. There could be no doubt or hesitation. She was not there, yet. She might get there, eventually, but it would have to be on her own. This was something he could not help her with.

Hours later, he thought about their conversation, and realized it was not clear whether it had anything to do with his mother’s phone call. Why had she asked him to talk to Bee? Was it because Bee was thinking about becoming a nun? Was his mother concerned about that? Why? She was Catholic. She had known about nuns her whole life. Why should Bee’s inclination toward becoming a nun concern their mother?

He decided to visit his mother for dinner so he could figure out what was going on.

His mother carried on her usual chitchat while they ate. How were things at his church? How was the school doing? Did he see that article about the Monsignor in the newspaper? Was he going on vacation this year?

He answered her questions and asked a few of his own. How was she doing? Did she get out with her friends very much? Was her car running okay? Was she going on vacation? Neither of them mentioned Bee.

He helped her clean up after dinner. She washed the dishes and he dried them. While they were restoring the kitchen to pristine order that she liked, she casually said, "I don't know what's gotten into her."

"Who?" he asked.

"Your sister."

"Is something wrong?"

"Did you talk to her?"

"Yes. We met for coffee."

"Did she tell you anything?" He was suddenly not sure what his mother knew about his sister's problem, and whether he should reveal any of their conversation.

"We talked. That's all. Why do you ask?"

"She's changed. Something's going on. I can feel it, but I don't know what it is. I hoped you would find out." It was clear his mother did not know what Bee had told him.

"Changed? That sounds mysterious. What do you mean?"

"Well, she's out a lot."

"Is she seeing anyone?" he interrupted.

"I don't know. But what bothers me is *when* she's out."

"What do you mean? She goes out on dates, right?"

"She's *always* out on Tuesday nights, sometimes on Thursdays, too, and for a long time on Sunday mornings. She gets dressed up."

"So what's wrong with being out on Sunday mornings? Maybe she's going to church."

"If she is, why doesn't she come with me?"

"Oh." He was beginning to understand. He remained silent.

"I don't like it. I'm worried."

"Mom, she's a big girl. You know she's not going to do anything to hurt herself."

"I hope not. Can't you talk to her, again?"

"I'll try."

"You could just tell her you're going to church. *She* goes to church," Dan suggested, when he called Bee to discuss the dinner.

"Yeah, she does. But only on Sundays."

"So that's what you do on Tuesdays and Thursdays, too? Why not just tell her?"

"Because she wouldn't understand."

"Why not?"

"She goes to church, but she's not religious. Neither was dad. Remember the fuss he made when you decided to become a priest?"

"Yeah. I thought I disappointed him, but he got over it pretty quick."

"No, he wasn't disappointed. But, he wasn't proud, either. I think he was shocked, mostly."

"So you're worried about shocking her? You haven't told her what you told me, have you?" Bee shook her head.

"She wouldn't understand."

“Unfortunately, I agree with you. I think she goes to church because she’s thinks she’s supposed to, and not because she wants to.”

“Or, *needs* to.”

“Is that why you go?” She did not reply. “*Where* do you go?” he asked.

“It’s this community of nuns that have a retreat house. I’ve never met people like them. They’re different than any other people I’ve ever met. They’re *special*.”

“Well, nuns aren’t ordinary women, that’s true, but they usually don’t think of themselves as special. That would be the sin of pride.”

“I know. They’re not prideful. They’re down to earth. But there’s something different about them.”

“What’s different?”

“It’s their *certainty*.” He thought he understood what she meant but hoped she would explain more.

“What do you mean?”

“Surely you know what I mean? Don’t you feel it, too?”

“I can’t answer that, and it’s not important what I feel, anyway. What’s important is what *you* feel.”

“Everybody else goes through life *guessing*,” she said. He felt confused. “No one really knows. They *think* they do, but they don’t. Usually, at some point in their lives, they realize they don’t know. But it doesn’t bother them. They just go on.”

“That’s happened to you?” he asked, sympathetically. He realized he might be close to understanding why she wanted to be a nun.

“Yes, but because I met them, I realized I *didn’t* know, and it bothered me.”

“So you believe if you become one of them you’ll *know*?” he asked. She felt pleased he was beginning to understand. “And that’s why you want to join them?” He wondered if he should tell her the truth.

“Bee, you know I love you, and I would only ever tell you the truth, right?” She felt confused. “You’re not going to like it. They don’t know *because* they’re nuns. They’re nuns because they know.” She burst into tears, stunned by his words.

“No! Shit! That’s a lie! I’ve been *with* them. I know them! You don’t. I thought you would get this. I was wrong.” She stopped, angry with him. “Oh, I get it; you’re playing with me, aren’t you? You’re trying to discourage me.”

“I’m merely trying to be realistic.”

“You’re no fucking help at all!” she shrieked, and then hung up.

“I found out where she’s going,” his mother said.

“You did? How?”

“I followed her the other night.” She rarely drove at night. She only drove in the daytime if she had to.

“Where did she go?”

“The sign said something-or-other Sister House.”

“Oh, it’s probably a community of nuns.”

“I guess so, but I never heard of them.”

“Why did she go there?” he asked, to encourage her to continue.

“You tell me.”

“Didn’t you ask her?”

“Of course not! You want her to know I followed her? Can’t *you* find out why she goes there?” Father Daniel knew why his sister went there, but did not want to tell his mother. “Dan, did you hear me?”

“Maybe she’s just volunteering there,” he said.

“Why didn’t she tell me?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t think it’s anything you should worry about.”

“It *still* doesn’t feel right.”

“She *followed* me?” Bee asked, aghast. She felt violated.

“Yes. Don’t be angry. She’s been worried.”

“It’s okay. I’m not angry,” she lied, and then immediately felt sorry for lying to a priest, even if he was her brother.

“Maybe you should talk to her,” Dan suggested. “Tell her where you’re going; say you’re volunteering, or something.”

“I don’t know. I care about her, and don’t want to worry her, but it’s my life and I don’t want to share it, you know.”

“You don’t have to *share* it. Just be honest with mom.”

“You understand why I haven’t said anything, right?”

“Well, I can see why you might keep it to yourself. You’re still trying to decide. But, is there some reason you don’t even want to *talk* to her?”

“Maybe,” Bee replied, evasively.

“Do you want to tell me what it is?”

“It’s just that I don’t want her to ask me a lot of questions. You know how she worries. She’ll test out every idea she’s come up with about why I go there, and what I do there...”

“You don’t want her to figure out you’re thinking about joining the order?”

“That’s it. I don’t know how she’ll react.”

“Why are you concerned?”

“I don’t think she’ll be happy.”

Their mother visited the sister-house one afternoon. She parked her car and noticed a couple of the nuns working on the lawn, so she went up to them. They smiled and greeted her warmly.

“Welcome. I’m Sister Bernice, and this is Sister Charlotte.”

“Oh, hi. My name’s Melissa. I was wondering if I could talk to someone,” she said. “It’s about my daughter.”

“Oh, is she here at the sister-house?”

“She doesn’t live here, but she comes here.”

“Several women drop by. What’s her name?”

“Beatrice.”

“Oh, Beatrice! You’re her mother? We’ve all gotten to know her. She’s a wonderful person. You must be very proud of her.”

“Um, proud?”

“Yes. For wanting to join us.”

“Wanting to...*what?*” Melissa replied, shocked.

“Oh, you don’t know? Don’t worry. Some women don’t tell their family members until they’re sure. I’m certain she’ll talk to you when she’s ready.” *Yes, she thought, but will I be ready?*

“Mom’s been strange.”

“You mean stranger than usual?” Dan asked, smiling. He tried to get Bee to smile, relax, and tell him what was happening. She remained grim. “What do you mean?”

“She won’t talk to me. At least, not like she used to.”

“Do you think she’s all right? Is she sick, or something?”

“If she is, I’m not seeing it. She’s just been cold to me.”

“She’s ignoring you?”

“Well, she still makes my lunch and saves me dinner when I work late. But, we used to talk, watch TV, and hang out. I liked it. I thought she did, too.”

“Well, she didn’t say anything to me. Have you tried to ask her what’s going on?”

“No. I’m afraid to. I don’t want to upset her. I think she’s mad at me, but I don’t know why.”

“So you want me to talk to her, again, don’t you?”

“I know it’s asking a lot. I’m sorry, but I don’t know what else to do.”

“It’s okay, Bee. I’ll try to talk to her, but I can’t make any promises. Maybe she’s mad at me, too.”

“I hadn’t thought of that. If you could at least try...”

“I will. I’ll call you soon.”

“Dan! What a surprise!” Melissa said when she opened the door.

“I was in the neighborhood and thought I’d drop by. I hope you don’t mind.”

“You don’t usually drop by, but I’m glad to see you.” He tried to hug her but she evaded him.

“Of course not,” she said. “Are you hungry?”

“No, I just ate.” She seemed disappointed. “But I didn’t have dessert,” he added. She seemed delighted. Food was love, for her.

“I have some apple pie. Sound good?” He nodded. They went into the kitchen. She put the kettle on the stove and went to the refrigerator, rummaged around, and found the pie. “You want me to warm it up?” she said.

“No, that’s okay.”

“It has to be warm or you won’t enjoy it,” she insisted. He did not reply. She put the pie in the microwave, and got out some plates, forks, coffee mugs, and a jar of instant coffee. She stood with her back to him, as if she was shutting him out.

“Mom, I wanted to talk to you,” he said.

“So how are things at St. Gregory’s?” she asked, interrupting him. “Is the school doing okay this year?”

“Um, yes. There are more kids. It’s a shame, really.”

“Having more kids is *bad*?” she asked, still with her back to him. The kettle boiled and she poured hot water into the coffee mugs.

“The kids are not Catholics. They’re coming to us because they have nowhere else to go. Not like when Bee and I were kids and you sent us to Catholic school because you wanted to.”

“Your father and I thought it was a good idea. You liked it, as I recall.”

“Yeah, but Bee didn’t, remember? She didn’t have any friends at the school. All her friends were public school kids. I think it made her hate the Church.”

“It’s not home-made,” she apologized, as she took the pie from the microwave and placed it on the table, with the coffee mugs.

“So how’s she doing,” he asked, boldly.

“Who?” she replied, coldly. He looked at her. She cut a piece of pie and served it on a plate. He took it and picked up his fork, but did not eat any. “What’s wrong?” she asked. He was about to tell her the pie was too hot, but decided to be more direct.

“You tell me,” he said. She looked down at her own empty plate, and did not reply. “What’s wrong with *you*?” he asked, gently.

“Nothing,” she lied.

“Bee’s worried about you. She told me you’re not feeling well.”

“Is that why you stopped by, to check up on me?” Melissa felt flattered.

“I was worried.”

“There’s nothing to worry about. Eat your pie before it gets cold.” He took a bite and smiled.

“Almost as good as yours,” he said.

“Your father always said mine was the best.”

“Bee and I loved your pies. You know that. You know we love you, right?” She nodded. “So, why don’t you talk to me?”

“Are you being my son, or Father Daniel right now?”

“I can be either one. You choose.”

“Father, will you hear my confession?” she asked, startling him. He had never heard her confession before.

“Of course. Can I finish my pie, first?” he replied, and smiled at her. He wanted to give her some time to collect her thoughts so she would make a good confession.

“Hurry up,” she said. He finished his pie and sipped the coffee.

“Do you want to sit here or go into the living room?”

“Here, Father.” Her son became her priest. He ritually blessed her and asked the age-old question.

“How long has it been since your last confession?” She remained silent. He did not want to press, so he waited. After a few moments of silence, he asked, “Do you have anything to confess?”

“I’ve sinned, Father. Really sinned...” she said, hesitantly.

“It’s okay. You can talk to me. Just go on.”

“I know this will sound like blasphemy, but I think God hates me.” He thought it best not to argue with her.

“Go on. Why do you think God hates you?”

“I gave Him my son. I was happy to do it. Now He’s taking my daughter, too. That’s too much.”

“What do you mean when you say God is taking your daughter?”

“He’s stealing her from me. It’s just not fair!” She stood up, pushed back her chair, and ran out of the kitchen. Dan did not know whether she was coming back, or if she wanted him to follow her. He heard her sobbing in the living room, so he went to her.

“Do you want to say more?” he asked, trying to remain in his role as priest. She nodded, slowly, but did not speak. “Take your time,” he encouraged.

"It's not that she's leaving me," she began. "I would accept that, if she was getting married. I mean, it's normal, right?" He listened, hoping she would continue. "But she's *not* getting married. She isn't even looking for a husband. I'll never have any grandchildren. My life is over."

"Mom!" he interrupted. "Your life isn't over. We love you."

"Yes, but it's *only* you two. There won't be anyone else to love me. Ever."

"Has she decided, yet?"

"You knew?"

"Yes, she told me she was thinking about it."

"How could she do this to me? I thought she loved me."

"Mom, you didn't feel this way when I became a priest, did you?"

"No. I was proud of you. I still am. I think you're a good priest."

"Thanks. I'm always trying to be."

"No, you already are. I know it. Don't sell yourself short."

"But, Bee...?"

"I'm so angry with her. She could have talked to me, but she's kept it a secret, as if she knows how much it would hurt me if..."

"She became a nun? But why, Mom?"

"Because she doesn't know what she's missing, what she would be giving up."

"And what is that?"

"You're a priest. I can't talk to you about it," she said, and then got up. "More pie? It's still warm," she asked. He knew their conversation had ended.

"I understand you met some of my friends the other day," Bee said.

"What friends?" Melissa asked, feigning ignorance.

"Some nuns?"

"Oh, yes. I remember now. I ran into them."

"They said you were very nice."

"They seemed nice, too. Not like the mean nuns when I was growing up."

"No, they're different. That's why I like them."

"And why you want to join them?" Melissa asked, sharply.

"No," Bee replied. Melissa's heart jumped. Did Bee mean she no longer wanted to be a nun? Bee sensed her mother had not understood what she meant when she said no. "No, that's *not* why I want to join them," she said.

"Then why?" Melissa asked, her voice tinged with anguish. Bee thought she should explain more about her feelings.

"It's not because I want to be like them. It's because I already *am* like them. When I'm with them I feel like I'm with my real family."

"What?!" Melissa replied, shocked. "*I'm* your real family. So is Dan."

"You're my birth family. They're my spiritual family. Remember Jesus talked about how people will leave their families and go to Him?" Melissa recalled the Gospel passage, but did not want to accept it.

"*This* is your real family, and your real home," she insisted. "There is nowhere else you belong." Bee saw how upset her mother became, just from the few words she had spoken. She wondered if she should end their conversation. "You don't realize what you're giving up," Melissa said.

“I’m not giving up you and Dan.”

“I don’t mean me and Dan,” she replied. “I mean *you*. You’re giving up more than you can imagine. You’ll regret it someday. I’m sure of it.”

“Regret what, Mom?”

“Not meeting a man, falling in love, getting married, having kids, maybe grandchildren. You’re throwing all that away.”

“I don’t think that’s what I want.”

“But are you *sure*, Bee? Really sure? What if you get in there and find out it’s not for you.”

“Then I would leave. Women leave all the time. It’s not a problem.”

“You don’t think they would be angry with you?”

“No. They’re very supportive.”

“You don’t think Jesus would be angry with you?”

“Why would Jesus be angry with me?”

“For taking a vow to serve Him and then turning your back on Him.” Melissa’s comment surprised Bee. Her mother went to church but was not religious. Bee did not know if her mother ever thought about God, or Jesus. What if she did, but kept her thoughts secret?

“Well, the nuns are careful to screen people...”

“But people can be wrong. How would the nuns know?”

“They can only go by what the people tell them.”

“What if the women lie?”

“You think I’m lying?”

“No, not you. Somebody else. But what if it happens?”

“So, you’re Beatrice’s mother! It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Sister Mother said as she welcomed Melissa into her office.

“Um, thank-you Sister Mother,” Melissa said, shyly. “I appreciate your time,” she added.

“Please call me Alice. What can I do for you?”

“I’m here about my daughter. I guess I need your advice. I’m having a hard time with her wanting to become a nun. Not that there’s anything wrong with nuns. Well, not anymore. They were different when I was a kid.” She looked at Sister Mother Alice, who rolled her eyes, and smiled.

“They were an entirely different generation, a different breed, even” she said, sympathetically. Melissa remained quiet. She wanted to explain why she had come, but did not want to risk offending Alice. “You can talk to me, Melissa. I’m not like one of those old nuns you remember. I remember them, too. The word I would use to describe them is *hard*. I’m not hard, I’m soft. Some of my nuns here say I’m too soft, but we won’t go into that.”

Melissa looked at Alice and sighed. “God called my son Daniel to serve Him, and I didn’t stand in his way, so now Daniel belongs to God. God wants Beatrice to serve Him, and I won’t stand in her way, either. But, I don’t like it.”

“Because you’ll be all alone?” Alice asked, understandingly. “You know, we’ll be here for you.”

“No, being alone doesn’t bother me. I’m okay alone.”

“So, what *is* bothering you?”

“I don’t know if it’s okay to say this...”

“It’s okay, Melissa, really. Go on,” Alice encouraged her.

“I have a question for God.”

“What is it? Can you tell me?”

“What’s wrong with *me*?” Melissa blurted her question out. She had suddenly become agitated. Alice listened carefully.

“I don’t understand. What do you mean?” she asked, calmly.

“Sister, I’m proud that God called my children to serve Him. But, He never called *me*.”

“I’m not sure I understand. Did you want to be a nun, when you were young?” Sister Mother asked, gently.

“Not exactly. I wanted God to want me, and he didn’t.”

“But he did. Not to be a nun. To be a wife and mother.”

“It’s not the same. It *couldn’t* be the same.”

“Why not?”

“Nuns and priests are special. Mothers and fathers are not. They’re just normal.”

“You’re wrong,” Alice replied, hoping she did not sound harsh. Melissa abruptly stood up.

“No, Sister Mother, I don’t think I am,” she said, almost in tears. Then she left.

“I think you would find a spiritual home in our community, but I’m not sure it’s right for you. I’m sorry, but I’m rejecting your application.” Bee had spent months searching her soul for assurance that she had committed herself to God, and ready to serve Him, only to be rejected.

“What’s wrong with me?” she asked, stunned. She did not know Sister Mother as well as she knew some of the other nuns, and she was respectful of Sister Mother’s authority, so she remained subdued, despite her disappointment.

“Wrong with you? Why, nothing at all. We think it’s more that something’s wrong with *us*.”

“I don’t understand what you mean. This is the most wonderful community I’ve ever found.”

“Yes, it’s wonderful. We’re wonderful. But, that’s not enough. You see, everyone here joined so they could serve God.”

“I know. That’s what I want to do, too.”

“Have you ever considered the possibility there are other ways to serve God?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Some people think nuns and priests are special, that God loves them more than He loves lay people.”

“Well, that’s true, isn’t it?”

“No. God love us all the same. But he calls some people, and doesn’t call others, and it has nothing to do with love.”

“Sister, what’s going on here?”

“I learned a lot from my conversation with your mother. She’s lived much of her life believing God didn’t love her because He never called her to become a nun. He called your brother, and now you, and she’s feeling left out.”

“I had no idea. She never told me. We never talked about this.”

“I bet there’s a lot of stuff you and your mother never talked about.”

“Well, yeah.”

“It’s too late in her life for her to become a nun. But, it’s not too late for her to serve God. I’ve realized it’s time for our order to change. We’ve been closed for a long time. It’s time to open up. What do you think?”

“What do *I* think? I’m just a lay person. I don’t know anything about all this stuff.”

“You don’t have to. All you have to know is your own heart and your own soul. What do you think?”

“I would like to talk to my mother.”

“So would I,” Sister Mother Alice said, and smiled.

Melissa’s doorbell rang around two pm. She was enjoying a lazy afternoon doing laundry and making up a grocery list. She was still wearing her bedroom slippers, although she had her pink sweat suit on. She was not expecting anyone, so she cautiously opened the door. Melissa was shocked to find Sister Mother standing there, smiling.

“Hello, Melissa. I hope you don’t mind my stopping by.” Melissa shook her head. “I wanted to talk to you, if you have a moment.”

“Is this about my daughter?”

“No. May I come in?”

“Of course.”

Sister Mother came in and Melissa directed her to a chair. “Please sit,” she said, nervously. “Is something wrong?”

“No. It’s very right.”

“I don’t understand. Why are you here? I mean, I’m happy to see you but a little surprised that you didn’t just call me to come to your office.”

“I came to thank you.”

“For what, Sister Mother?”

“Please, call me Alice.”

“Okay, Alice, what can I do for you?”

“A cup of tea would be nice, unless you have something stronger around.”

“You mean -?” Melissa asked, and then looked at Alice, who nodded. “Is wine okay?”

“I love wine. Don’t get to drink it much. So I’d love a glass, if you’ll join me.”

“Fine. Just let me get it from the kitchen.”

“Can I help?” Something told Melissa to answer yes, to welcome Alice not just into her home but also into her life.

“Follow me.” They went into the kitchen.

“This is lovely. Nice and sunny.”

“Yes. The wine glasses are in the cupboard right above you.” Alice reached up, opened the door and took out two glasses. Melissa got the bottle from the refrigerator. “I hope this is okay. It’s cold. I’m not a wine expert. I just like a sip from time-to-time, and I keep it for guests.”

“Like me,” Alice said, smiling. Melissa poured two glasses and then handed one to Alice. She lifted her glass. “Cheers,” she said. Melissa waited awkwardly for Alice to tell her why she had come.

“Is this about my daughter?” she asked.

“No, it’s about *you*.” Melissa immediately felt embarrassed.

“Let’s go sit down,” she said, awkwardly. She was afraid Sister Mother, despite her friendliness, had come to reprimand her. They went back to the living room and sat down. “Look, I’m really sorry about my visit. I was probably acting selfishly.”

“No, you were doing what God wanted you to do.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m convinced God sent you to us.”

“But I wasn’t there for God. I was there for Beatrice, and myself,” she added, defensively.

“Remember how you told me you wanted God to want you, but He didn’t, and you felt disappointed?” Melissa nodded. She felt ashamed she had said that to Sister Mother. She felt more ashamed she had truly felt it. Imagine her complaining about God? What arrogance!

“Well, yes. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m here to tell you that God *does* want you, only not in the way you thought He would.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You are His messenger.”

“Me? I don’t think so,” she replied, embarrassed by Alice’s statement.

“I’m sure of it. He sent you to us. We’re deeply grateful to you.”

“For what?”

“He needed you to wake us up, to change us.”

“Change you? How?”

“You broke my heart, Melissa. When you told me you thought God didn’t want you, I nearly cried right there in front of you. I did cry when you left.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, sister - I mean, Alice. I didn’t mean to make anyone cry.”

“Oh, it was good that I cried. You’re a good person. You’ve lived a good life. You’ve been a devoted mother and wife. I’m afraid I gave you a pat answer when I told you God wanted you to be a wife and mother and you should just accept that. I’m sorry.” Alice paused to think about what she had to say. She wanted to get the words exactly right.

“It wasn’t until after you left that I realized you and I have felt the same hunger for God. I, and all the other women in our order, have been able to have our hunger filled. You haven’t. That’s not right, and it has to change. That’s why *we’re* going to change.”

“I don’t understand.”

“We’ve been closed for a long time. It’s time to open up. From now on, we will be an order of lay and religious women, all dedicated to serving God together. There will be no hierarchy, no distinction between lay members and religious members. Some of us will live at the Sister House, and others will live in their own houses. But we will be one order.” She paused to look at Melissa. She was stunned. She could not understand why Sister Mother had come to tell her this. What did it have to do with her?

“I imagine the day - maybe not too far in the future - when the Sister Mother will not be a religious, but a lay member. The important thing is not how we live, but how we serve God. So, I’m here to ask,” Sister Mother Alice said, gently. “Melissa, do you still want to serve God?”

Melissa immediately understood what she was being offered. Sister Mother Alice had unlocked a door, and flung it wide open. Melissa felt as if going through the door meant she was going home. She did not yet want to believe God waited inside to welcome her, but it felt right to go in, so she did.