

Going Home

By R. A. Conti

Father Dan looked on as the school children played at recess but 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 responsibility and purpose became important in his life. His childhood seemed ages ago, although he was only in his thirties.

The phone chimed. Father Dan turned away from the window, walked to his desk, and saw his mother's number on the screen. He picked up the phone and answered it cheerfully.

"Hi, Mom!"

"Daniel?" Melissa said. She sounded surprised he knew she was calling. "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 replied, ironically. "How are you?"

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

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

"Yeah. Right now, she is," his mother said. He wondered if 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," Melissa answered. 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?" Dan urged.

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

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

"Thanks, Dan. 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, I will. Right away. 'Bye, Mom." She hung up before he did.

Dan turned back to the window. The schoolyard was empty. The children had gone inside to resume their classes. He marveled at the tranquility of the empty schoolyard 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 all that chaotic energy 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 tried to reach her. He asked if she was okay.

"Why do you ask?" Bee sounded surprised.

"Mom called me."

"She did? What did she say?"

"She was vague. What's going on?"

"I need to talk to you."

"Of course, anytime Bee. 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.

Bee felt comfortable with her brother 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. Dan was always neutral, open-minded, sympathetic, and never patronizing. He never offered her advice unless she requested 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?" There was a long pause. Dan waited. "Uh, Bee?"

"It's Jesus."

"Oh." She had never talked about religious stuff, despite his being a priest. "Um, maybe we should meet. Do you want to come here?"

"No, I can't," Bee replied. "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. It was in an old church basement not far from where they grew up. Dan had gone there in his teens and knew some of the people who ran it. As far as he could tell, they were not part of any specific religion but were always welcoming, helpful, and kind to anyone who came in.

The pair didn't look like brother and sister. Dan was tall and light-haired. He had a long face with a prominent nose, penetrating eyes, and a wide mouth that smiled a lot. Beatrice was short and dark-haired. He thought she'd changed her hair color since the last time he saw her but wasn't sure. She had a round face with delicate features. Bee often seemed demure and shy as if she felt awkward around people. She admired her brother because he never seemed anything but warm and open to others, even perfect strangers. She didn't know if it was because he was a priest or because that's just the way his personality was. She often wondered how they could have turned out so different yet never doubted the strong brother-sister bond between them.

"Jesus, huh?" Dan said as soon as they sat down in a booth in the back. There were not many other customers and none of the employees looked familiar.

Bee looked down as if she felt embarrassed. "Um, yeah," she replied.

"Do you want to tell me more?"

"I've been having these feelings. I thought you might understand them."

"What are they?" Dan asked.

"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," Bee replied.

"But, you're not sure?"

"It's confusing."

"Tell me what's going on, Bee. 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. Bee needed someone to listen. That was Dan's role in the past when he was just

her brother. Now he was Father Daniel. He was eager to listen, but was it *him* she wanted to speak to? She was not sure. Maybe she really 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 Dan would respond; would it be as her brother, or as a priest? He remained 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 replied.

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

Dan 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.

"Do you *want* me to?" he asked.

"I don't know," she confessed.

"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," Dan said, looking at his sister. She felt confused. "You *pray*. Have you been doing that?" Bee did not know how to answer. She had been feeling, and thinking, but praying? Not so much.

Bee felt frustrated. Dan had not confirmed her feelings, talked her through her problem, or 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 jumped up to leave. Dan thought about persuading Bee 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," Bee said, as she walked out. Dan watched her leave and wondered if 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 that there was some kind of shortcut?

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. Beatrice 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, despite being a priest.

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 Melissa?

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

Bee called from work after Dan arrived and told Melissa she had to stay late to finish a project. Dan assumed she was avoiding him but did not know why. He would have to try to figure this out on his own; but how? He could not just ask his mother why she called him, what was going on, or why she felt worried. He would have to let her bring it up.

Melissa was shorter than her son but taller than her daughter. Her hair had gone gray early but she didn't dye it until after her husband died suddenly. She didn't want to go around looking like an old widow. Melissa preferred to look like a young widow, but not to attract

men, only to conceal her grief. It wasn't just the loss of her husband that she grieved. There was something else missing from her life, although she didn't know what it was.

She carried on casual 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.

Dan helped her clean up after dinner. Melissa washed the dishes and he dried them. While they were restoring the kitchen to pristine order, 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 talk.

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

"She's changed, Dan. 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, too."

"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." Dan 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?"

Dan sighed. He didn't know if his sister would talk to him, but he would try.

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

"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?" Dan asked.

"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. He got over it pretty quick, though. I thought he was disappointed in me."

"No, he wasn't," Beatrice assured him. "But, he wasn't proud, either. I think he was just shocked."

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

"She wouldn't understand."

"Unfortunately, I agree with you. I think she goes to church because she thinks she's supposed to, and not because she wants to."

"Or, *needs* to."

"Is that why you go?" Dan asked. Bee 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, Bee, and it's not important what I feel, anyway. What's important is what *you* feel."

"Everybody else goes through life *guessing*," she said. Her reply was vague and Dan 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."

"Has that happened to you?" he asked, thinking he might be close to understanding why she wanted to be a nun.

"Yes, but when 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. Bee felt pleased he was beginning to understand. "And, *that's* why you want to join them?" Dan wondered if he should tell her the truth.

"Bee, you know I love you, and I would only ever tell you the truth, right?" It was her turn to feel confused. "You're not going to like it." Dan paused. Beatrice didn't say anything. "Bee, they don't know because they're nuns. They're nuns because they know." Stunned by his words, she burst into tears.

"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, still 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," Melissa told her son.

"You did? How?"

"I followed her the other night." Melissa rarely drove at night and 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," Dan commented.

"I guess so, but I never heard of them."

"Why did she go there?" he asked.

"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." Dan knew it was useless to tell his mother not to worry. That's what mothers did.

"It *still* doesn't feel right."

"She *followed* me?" Bee asked, aghast, feeling 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 explain it, you know," Bee explained.

"You don't have to *explain* 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. She seemed evasive.

"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 suspicion 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, do you?"

"That's it. I don't know how she'll react."

"Why are you concerned?"

"I don't think she'll be happy."

Melissa drove to the sister-house one afternoon. She parked her car, noticed a couple of nuns working on the lawn, and 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 from time to time. What's her name?"

"Beatrice."

"Oh, Beatrice!" Charlotte exclaimed. "You're her mother?" Melissa nodded shyly.

"We've all gotten to know her. She's a wonderful person. You must be very proud of her," Bernice added.

"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*, Melissa thought, *but will I be ready?* She left without thanking the nuns.

"Mom's been strange," Beatrice told Dan the next time they met for coffee.

"You mean stranger than usual?" he asked, grinning. 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?" he asked. "Is she sick, or something?"

"If she is, I'm not seeing it. She's just been cold to me."

"She's ignoring you?" Dan asked.

"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 mention anything to me. Have you tried to ask her what's going on?"

"No. I'm afraid to," Beatrice admitted. "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, big brother. 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."

Father Dan paid another visit to his mother. "What a surprise!" Melissa said as she opened the door and saw her son.

"I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd drop by," Dan said. "I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not," she replied. He tried to hug her but she evaded him. "Are you hungry?"

"No, I just ate." Melissa seemed disappointed. "But I didn't have dessert," Dan added. She seemed delighted. For her, food was love.

"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 asked.

"No, that's okay."

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

"Mom, I wanted to talk to you," he said.

"So how are things at St. Gregory's?" Melissa 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 that school. All her friends were public school kids. I think it made her hate the Church."

"It's not homemade," Melissa apologized as she took the pie from the microwave and placed it on the table with the coffee mugs.

"So how's she doing," Dan asked, boldly.

“Who?” Melissa replied. Dan watched his mother cut a piece of pie and place 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 empty plate and did not reply. “What’s wrong with *you*?” he asked, gently.

“Nothing,” she lied.

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

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

“I was worried.”

“There’s nothing to worry about, Dan. I’m okay. Eat your pie before it gets cold.”

Dan took a bite and smiled. “It’s 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?” Melissa nodded. “So, why don’t you talk to me?”

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

“I can be either one, Mom. You choose.”

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

“Of course. Can I finish my pie, first?” he replied, smiling. Dan wanted to give her 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?” Dan asked.

“Here, Father.”

Then her son became her priest. He ritually blessed her and asked the age-old question, “How long has it been since your last confession?” Melissa remained silent. Dan 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...,” Melissa said.

“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, and 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!” Melissa stood up, pushed back her chair, and ran out of the kitchen. Dan did not know if she was coming back or if she wanted him to follow her. He heard her sobbing in the living room and went to her.

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

“It’s not that she’s leaving me,” Melissa began. “I would accept that if she was getting married. I mean, it’s normal, right?” Dan 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?” Dan asked.

“You knew?”

“Yes, she told me she was thinking about it.”

“How could she do this to me?” Melissa shrieked. “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, Dan. I still am. I think you're a good priest."

"Thanks," Dan replied, hoping she would calm down. "I'm always trying to be."

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

"But, Bee...?"

Melissa became agitated again. "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, Dan. What she would be giving up," Melissa argued. Dan heard agony in her voice. Bee's action had hurt her deeply and Dan wondered why.

"And, what is that?"

"I can't talk about it," Melissa said, and then got up. "More pie? It's still warm," she asked. Dan knew their conversation had ended. He felt sorry it had.

"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," Bee commented.

"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. "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, Mom. 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 felt surprised by how upset her mother became just from the few words she had spoken. She wondered if she should end the conversation. "You don't realize what you're giving up," Melissa argued.

"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," Bee replied, in a soft voice. She was not apologizing.

"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 a secret?

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

“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?” Melissa asked.

“Do you think *I’m* lying?”

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

What troubled Melissa was not what Beatrice might lose by becoming a nun but what she felt she had lost. Melissa thought a visit to the Sister Mother might help her understand what was happening. She hoped Sister Mother would talk to her.

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

“Um, thank you Sister Mother,” Melissa replied, 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. Not like when I was a kid.” She looked at Sister Mother. Alice rolled her eyes and smiled.

“They were a whole different generation,” Alice said. 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.”

Something deep inside Melissa needed to come out. She looked at Alice, sighed, and began speaking. “God called my son Daniel to serve Him, and I didn’t stand in his way, so now Daniel belongs to God. It seems that 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, sympathetically. “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...,” Melissa replied.

“It’s okay, Melissa. Go on.”

“I have a question for God.”

“What is it? Can you tell me?”

Melissa blurted out her question. “What’s wrong with *me*?” she asked, almost in tears.

“I don’t understand. What do you mean?”

“Sister, I’m proud that God called my children to serve Him. But, He’s 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, Melissa. 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, more hurt than angry. Then she walked out.

Bee had spent months searching her soul for assurance that she had committed herself to God and felt ready to serve Him with all her heart. Sister Mother Alice looked at her. "I think you would find a spiritual home in our community," she began. "But, I'm not sure it's right for you. I'm sorry, but I'm rejecting your application."

"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 felt awed by Sister Mother's authority, so she remained subdued, despite her disappointment.

"Wrong with *you*? Why, nothing at all. I 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 is 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?" Alice asked.

"I don't understand."

"Some people think nuns and priests are special, that God loves them more than He loves laypeople."

"Well, that's true, isn't it?" Beatrice asked.

"No. God loves us all the same. But, He calls some people and doesn't call others. It has nothing to do with love."

"Sister, what's going on here?"

"Beatrice, 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."

Sister Mother Alice looked deeply into Bee's eyes and replied in a soft but firm voice. "I bet there's a lot of stuff you and your mother never talked about."

"Well, yeah," Beatrice admitted. "I guess there is."

"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 layperson. I don't know anything about all this stuff."

"You don't have to. All you have to know is your own heart and soul. What do you think?"

Bee didn't reply immediately. She did as Alice told her and considered the question. Then she had a reply. "I think I would like to talk to my mother."

"So would I," Sister Mother Alice said, smiling. "So would I."

Melissa was enjoying a lazy afternoon doing laundry and making a grocery list. She still wore her bedroom slippers, although she had her pink sweat suit on. Her doorbell rang

around two pm. She was not expecting anyone and cautiously opened the door. Melissa was surprised 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," Alice said.

"For what, Sister Mother?"

"Please, call me Alice."

"Okay, Alice, but, what can I do for you?"

"A cup of tea would be nice unless you have something stronger around."

"Do you mean-?" Melissa asked, and then looked at Alice. She nodded. "I think I do. Is wine okay?"

"I love wine but I 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," she said. They walked 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. 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*," Alice replied.

Melissa feared that Sister Mother, despite her friendliness, had come to reprimand her and felt nervous. Had she crossed the line when she went to see Alice in her office? "Let's go sit down," Melissa said, warily. 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," Melissa argued. "I was there for Beatrice and myself."

"Remember how you told me you wanted God to want you, but He didn't, and you were disappointed?" Melissa nodded. She felt embarrassed she had said that to Sister Mother. And even more embarrassed she had actually felt it. Imagine her complaining about God? What arrogance!

"Well, yes. I'm really 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.”

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

“Well, I’m sure of it. He sent you to us. I’m 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, Melissa. 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 was about 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 fulfilled. 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.

“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.”

Melissa felt stunned. She could not understand why Sister Mother had come to tell her this. What did it have to do with her?

“So, I’m here to ask,” Sister Mother Alice said, gently. “Melissa, do you still want to serve God?”

Melissa understood immediately why Sister Mother was asking. Her heart leaped up as she felt a surge of joy, unlike anything she had ever known. Alice had unlocked a door and flung it wide open. Melissa felt going through that door meant that she was going home. She believed God waited inside to welcome her. It felt right to go in, so she did.

