The Long Yearning's End

Stories of Sacrament and Incarnation

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PROLOGUE

Sunrise, Sunset

Dad died on a Wednesday. By Friday dusk my brothers and I were traipsing along the short fairways of the Indian Camp Golf Course in Tulelake, California, where our dad had played often after he retired from lawyering and moved back to his boyhood home. "The First Annual William Hannon Memorial Golf Tournament" we were to call it, and anytime my brothers and I hit the links now, we relive the day we first golfed in Dad's honor. That Friday evening, though, we went golfing because we were anxious with grief and needed to do something, anything, to distract us.

Mom, Grandma, and my sisters had stayed at the farmhouse. Music was blaring from the living room as I climbed onto the bed of the pickup to leave for the golf course. My sisters were in prime form, singing mostly in tune, and though I can't say for sure, I bet they were dancing.

We boys arrived at the golf course around five in the late afternoon. The sun was teetering on the edge of the hills to the west. It appeared to me to be worn and weary, like a working stiff ready to punch the clock after a long shift. A cool breeze kept the mosquitoes at bay, and the air smelled of wheat and barley and harvested potatoes. There also seemed to be the lingering aroma of musk that denoted my father's presence. Earlier that day I had found my dad's flannel jacket hanging on a hook near the washing machine. I buried my face in it and inhaled deeply, breathing in my father. Everything around me carried with it hints of Dad's presence, especially my brother's faces: the same grin and grimace, the same jaw line and crow's feet. My father's ghost happily haunted Indian Camp that Friday.

The first fairway faces west. It's a par-3, two hundred yards, give or take, from tee to hole. Greg was the first to go, and he set the tone by slicing the ball deep into the rocky rough to the right. His swing is a sight to behold, wrong for a hundred reasons but earnest and heartfelt. Cashing in the one and only mulligan we normally allowed one another for the

day, Greg went at it again, this time whacking the ball to within fifteen feet of the hole. He strutted down the fairway with the rest of us in tow. So began one of the most joyful nights of my life.

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My brothers may dispute my recollection, but we were awful golfers that day. We swung our clubs like peasants with scythes in hand, hacking and slashing at the ball. We were the Keystone Kops in blue jeans, running this way and that, cussing and spitting and granting mulligans to each other like this was our last day on the planet. Apparently, we had all unconsciously decided to honor our father by playing exactly as he would have.

By the third hole, Brian suggested that one of us run down to the market across the street from the course and buy a couple of six-packs of beer. One of us did, and we took our time with each hole, sipping our beers, resting our arms on each other's shoulders, reminiscing about Dad, and searching for errant balls. We walked the course as if we were making our way to an important destination, our own Calvary, unhurried and purposeful. Every moment was ripe with significance; every word spoken was meaningful.

By the sixth hole it was clear to all of us that we hadn't sufficient sunlight to finish the course, so we decided to make our way to the ninth hole and sit by the empty pond and finish our beers. The sun was nearly set and the sky was burnt orange and red, reclining on a bed of purple. The dying sun's last blessing, Grandma used to call it.

The early evening coaxed out of us stories of our father, and we listened to them with heedful reverence. We had become caretakers of the tradition, keepers of the story. We belly-laughed and wept, sometimes at the same time, for our father had odd penchants and exasperating habits, all of them endearing. A man of ironclad memory, Dad would inexplicably forget our names when we brought our girlfriends home for supper. Every evening after dinner, in front of Walter Cronkite, he would at the appointed time let out a prodigious burp and then sit back in his easy chair with adolescent satisfaction as one of his brood who happened

to be downwind let out a painful groan. We could set our watches to his belching. Coming home late from an evening out with the Missus, he would, against the vehement protestations of said Missus, proceed to wake his children and rile us all up. We would then wrestle and spar with one another long into the night and early morning, while Dad went to bed and slept like a baby.

By the time we left the golf course that evening, our sides ached from the laughter borne of a hundred memories of a man we all loved and already missed terribly.

I remember thinking that evening that I had never felt closer to my brothers in my life. I loved them thoroughly and was stunned by the realization that it was suffering and grief that had brought me to this moment of grace, this experience of God. I willingly walked the road to Calvary that Jesus walked, because in the end I was left with cavernous, consequential joy. It was a sunset's blessing. It made my grief bearable.

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I was up early the next morning just before dawn. The night before, my brothers and I returned to the farmhouse to find the womenfolk, well, living it up. They were tipsy, so they were all gangly arms and wet lips, hugging us and kissing us as if we had just returned from the war. It was all a bit unconventional; the farmhouse that night certainly lacked the heavy somberness usually reserved for such occasions, but we welcomed that sad joy. Watching my eighty-five-year-old grandmother dancing to a Perry Como ditty with her recently widowed daughter, who happened to be my mother, hushed for a while the growing pangs of anger in my heart. I decided then and there I would cut God a little slack. I could tell he was trying hard to comfort me, and that meant a lot.

I replayed that dance in my head that early morning. I sat on the picnic table on the front lawn, waiting for the sun to rise. Everyone else slept, or so I thought.

As the sun rose over the ploughed fields of Butte Valley, I remembered one Easter when I was in high school. Fr. Gene Montoya, a Holy Cross priest from the University of Portland, came to our home with

my brother Mike, then a freshman at the university, for the holiday. The whole family celebrated Mass that Holy Saturday night in our living room. Most memorable from that celebration was our communal butchering of Cat Steven's rendition of "Morning Has Broken," sung in more keys than there were singers.

"Mine is the sunlight, mine is the morning, born of the one light, Eden saw play," I sang softly on the farmhouse lawn. My voice cracked and quivered, but I forged ahead, thankful for the solitude. Like my brother's golf swing, my singing was a woeful and embarrassing display, but it was heartfelt.

God wants to be seen and heard and touched and smelled and tasted, for to be known by the senses is to be loved.

I don't know what made me turn toward my mother's bedroom window, which looked out onto the lawn, but I did. She was standing there in her long flannel nightgown, wearing her black-rimmed glasses, so she knew it was me. She looked vulnerable and sad and so utterly human. She was singing along with me. But she was not alone. And neither was I. God was there with us.

This became a defining moment of revelation for me. I now know and believe with every fiber of my being that when sunlight warms the reddened cheek and mother and son steal a secret moment together at dawn, God is there. When brothers weep and laugh together on a golf course cut into fields of harvested October hay, and when sisters sing and dance with insouciance borne of a ferocious love that cannot be defeated, God is there. God is there in the smell of the musk caught in wool fabric and in the sound of a scratchy Perry Como LP. When joy beckons us to imbibe, God is there.

This is why God came from heaven to be with us in the first place: to join us in the drama of our lives…in the laughter and the tears, in the sunrises and the sunsets, in triumph and defeat. God wants to be seen and heard and touched and smelled and tasted, for to be known by the

senses is to be loved. And more than anything else, God wants to be loved.

This is the enduring gift of the Incarnation, God becoming one-with-us. God is not far off, nor is God indifferent to our trials and tribulations. The truth of the Incarnation reminds us that God is close by, approachable and tangible. A friend once observed that the great tragedy of our time is that for too many people God has become painfully distant. "Here we are," he once told me, "walking in a downpour of Incarnation, and nobody's getting wet!"

The following stories speak of this enduring truth: we are all getting wet all the time, every single one of us. "God is in the bits and pieces of Everyday," Patrick Kavanagh once wrote, "A kiss here and a laugh again, and sometimes tears, a pearl necklace round the neck of poverty."

These are stories that speak of sacrament, the ancient belief that says in so many words that God can be tasted and touched and seen and heard and smelled. The Church teaches that Christ instituted seven sacraments so we could train our senses to see God coming down the road and hear his voice; feel his embrace; smell his musky, perfumed body; feast upon his countenance. These become the transforming moments of our lives worth retelling: stories of being washed clean and nourished, of being forgiven and enflamed, of being wedded in love and anointed for service, of being held and healed and made whole. These stories remind us that our story is God's story too. As someone once told me, the one thing we have in common with God is our humanity.

One evening many years ago, I was humbled by a sunset that recast my whole world in a soft, inviting, and healing light. I was for a short while unafraid of death, no longer intimidated by darkness, because like King David I had felt God's presence in a valley of tears. And the next morning, as I sung of a new dawn secretly with my mother, I knew that there was no turning back. Wherever I went, on whatever road I trod, God would be there, demanding nothing, simply enjoying—or at times enduring—the journey with me.

Patrick Hannon, CSC

ONE

Baptism: Living Water

In their distress, they will beg my favor:
"Come, let us return to the LORD;
for it is he who has torn,
and he will heal us;
he has struck down,
and he will bind us up.
After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will raise us up,
that we may live before him.
Let us know,
let us press on to know,
the LORD;
his appearing is as sure as the dawn;
he will come to us like the showers,
like the spring rains that water the earth…."
For I desire steadfast love
And not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God
rather than burnt offerings.

Hosea 6:1-3, 6

I.
Coppertone, Chlorine, and the Endless Summer

Standing in line was the hardest part. Mom would drop us off at eight in the morning that first day of summer vacation at the front entrance of the city pool, reminding us that she would be back to pick us up at five. It was only years later that it struck me that Mom seemed to speed away faster than the other moms, with the energy and enthusiasm of a prisoner who had found a breach in the wall. Dropping nine kids off for the day must have brought my mother a sense of deep and abiding freedom few of us would ever understand.

So there we were, in a long line weaving its way around a gate whose entrance wouldn't be unlocked for a half hour. From where the Hannon kids stood we could see the high diving board dangling over the big pool. We drooled over the sight of the blue, still water that filled the pool to its brim. Coppertone lotion glistened on marble-white skin, transistor radios blasted rock 'n roll, and the feeling of anticipation in the air was thick. I was one of a hundred kids in line that first morning of summer; and I'd bet every one of us wanted to forget everything, to leave the book reports, the science projects, the vocabulary lists, the grammar drills, and the schoolyard fights—all of it—behind. It was as if there was an unwritten rule that morning: you may only talk about what you are going to do, not what you have done. Talk that morning was of campouts in the hills and trips to Disneyland, of baseball games and pranks planned on unsuspecting neighbors. It was the horizon of fresh, blue, still water that drew our attention, and nothing else.

The gate was unlocked promptly at eight-thirty; had the teenager who opened the gate not gotten out of the way, he would have been trampled underneath the asphalt-heated pitter-patter of two hundred feet. Anyone who says we are not, at the core of our being, a people dependent upon ritual has never been to a city pool on the first day of sum-

mer. We all staked out our territory first, placing towels and sandals and sodas on the grassy area next to the pool. We stripped to our swim suits and trunks and then made our way deliberately to the pool's edge, where a big toe was submerged to test the water. A smile would quickly crease our faces as one by one or in groups we jumped, dove, or cannonballed into the pool. For my part, I remember jumping into the deep end, feeling as my body pierced the surface of the water that every single thing in my eleven-year-old life was being washed away, that the Pat Hannon who jumped in and the Pat Hannon who climbed out dripping in the waters of a new summer were two different people.

My Batman and Robin lunch pail had begun gathering dust in the closet; memories of fights and feuds from school melted away; the smells of textbooks and playground asphalt were overpowered by the fragrances of summer. And though I never would have put it in these words then, it was as if my soul had been washed clean by the heavily chlorinated pool water. It was a new day and a new dawn. I knew it. We all knew it. The only thing that really mattered was the present day. It had been blessed by the water of summer.

Our horizon is the still, blue waters of renewed hope and promise. Everything else we leave at the water's edge.

Whenever I enter a Catholic church now, I remember those summer days of my youth as I reach for the holy water to bless myself. It is a holy gesture, a movement of the heart that seeks to bring all of us to a place of peace once again, for the waters of our baptism have never stopped flowing. God's favor still rests on us; we are God's beloved sons and daughters.

The past is prologue. We train our eyes on what is ahead and not on what is left behind. Our horizon is the still, blue waters of renewed hope and promise. Everything else we leave at the water's edge.

II.
Getting Wet

It was a Sunday morning, maybe five, five-thirty. Mr. Rodriguez, the man in charge of us forty paper boys, hoisted the bright yellow Oakland *Tribune* burlap sack stuffed with rolled and rubber-banded newspapers onto the back rack of my bike just outside "The Shack," the place we assembled every day to get our newspapers. His tanned Portuguese skin tightened at the biceps as he lifted the sack, and I secretly prayed that someday I might be that muscular. I was ten years old, scrawny and thin, a bully's perfect target. This was the first Sunday that I was to be entrusted with my paper route all on my own. Past Sundays, Dad would rise early and take my brothers and me in the station wagon to deliver our papers and then treat us at Winchell's Donuts after the early morning Mass. But on that particular Sunday, I was there poised to ride into the darkness all by myself.

After Mr. Rodriguez secured my sack of papers to the back rack, he stepped back and I grabbed hold of the handlebars. Immediately, the bike reared back on its haunches and the front tire was now three feet in the air. Mr. Rodriguez took hold of the handlebars and wrestled the bike down so that the front wheel gently touched the asphalt. I climbed aboard hoping my meager frame would be a sufficient counterweight to my thick Sunday papers. By this time a dozen of the older, more seasoned paperboys were gathered around, enjoying the spectacle.

Mr. Rodriguez gave me a push, and I began pedaling very slowly. The bike crept along, first a little to the left, then a little to the right. I was exerting every ounce of my energy trying to keep the bike steady and moving. To the sound of whistles and guffaws, I wheeled away into the early morning darkness. At that exact moment, almost on cue, it began to rain. It was a downpour that within minutes had me soaking wet.

I arrived at my first customer's house on Chester Street. An older couple, they liked their newspaper tucked behind the front door screen. I dismounted my bike and immediately it tilted back and anchored itself

to the pavement. What was a ten-year-old to do?

"Ah, shoot," I said. But I didn't say shoot. I said what my mother sometimes said when the casserole burned or when one of her children dragged yet another stray cat or dog into the house or when Dad came home from a fishing trip with a dozen trout to be gutted. I stood there facing the house like a drowned rat—a scrawny, skinny, little wet rat. "Shoot."

Ten minutes of thinking got me nowhere. I finally decided upon a bold move. I walked up to the front door of the house and rang the doorbell. I rang it again. I opened the screen door and knocked. Finally, I began pounding the door, until I saw a light turn on in the distant corner of the house.

An old lady in floppy slippers emerged from the shadows with her hair in curlers. She opened the door and inspected me. At that point, I safely concluded that words weren't really necessary. The woman could see me. She could see my bike. I turned and faced my bike so that together she and I could hear what the bike was saying: "Oh, my God!" My bike was laughing hysterically. "Can you believe it!" the bike said. "He is such an idiot! He's completely brainless!"

I turned back around and faced the woman, my face devoid of any emotion. She turned around and motioned me to the kitchen. I placed her Sunday paper on the table near the door and followed. She pointed to the phone on the wall as she shuffled to another room just off the kitchen. I dialed the number to my home.

"Hello, Mom?" I said. "Yeah, this is Pat. Pat, your fifth son? I'm at this house on Chester Street. Yeah. I can't seem to get back on my bike. I said, *I can't seem to get back on my bike*. Can you come and pick me up?"

At this point in the conversation, it must have finally dawned on my mother that she would have to get dressed and drive four miles to pick up her fifth son, just as she had retrieved her older children multiple times and would do the same for the younger ones when their time came.

Meanwhile, the old lady, whose sleep and house I had disturbed, came back with a big towel. "Turn the lights off and make sure the front door is locked when you leave," she said, as she walked away lethargically.

Thank God she didn't hear what my mother had to say on the other end of the phone.

"Shoot," she said. But she didn't say shoot. She told me she would be there in ten minutes. I turned the lights off in the kitchen and made sure the front door was locked as I gingerly stepped outside. I took the towel with me. It was hanging over my head. Years later my mother, recalling that day, told me that when she first saw me sitting there on the front stoop of the house with the towel draped over my head and my arms hanging over my knees, I looked like a washed-up old boxer. But at that moment when she pulled up to the curb, my heart leapt for joy: Mom had actually shown up.

We took my bike and put it in the back of the station wagon, and together we delivered the papers on my route. Later, we sat across from each other in a booth at Winchell's. I read the sports page and shoved maple bars into my mouth while my mother gulped coffee and smoked her cigarettes. She stared at me between puffs, and I became more than a little self-conscious. Was she about to use this private moment to inform me of my familial status (which my older brothers had already deliciously disclosed a few years before) that I was adopted? I looked up and flashed a smile that would make any woman swoon, but it had no immediate effect on Mom.

And for a moment

that seemed to last forever,

I was the richest man in the world.

She grabbed her huge purse and began digging for something. I peered over the table to see what was going on. "Here it is," she said, and she handed me a shiny Eisenhower silver dollar coin. "I've been saving this for you," she told me. "I think now's as good time as any. Don't tell your brothers." And for a moment that seemed to last forever, I was the richest man in the world.

It was all worth it: the sweat, the toil, the humiliation, and that early

morning baptism by which I had been somehow inexplicably, mysteriously reborn. I sat across from my mother, who had already moved on to another thought, another preoccupation, and I marveled at what the morning had wrought. I had been washed clean by a storm that had, in the end, washed me up on a new shore, leaving me wealthy beyond my imagination. I didn't care anymore what my bike thought of me. My bike had got it all wrong. I was not an idiot at all. I was my mother's son. And apparently my mother would go anywhere, do anything, to save me.

This I came to believe one Sunday morning when I was ten. I've never stopped believing it about my mother, or about God for that matter.