

Souvenirs from the Vatican Gift Shop

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Mama sat in her easy chair, staring out the window at the neighborhood kids playing across the street. With arthritic hands she fingered her black onyx rosary, the one she had bought in Rome where she and Papa had gone to celebrate their 25th anniversary. On that brilliant July day in Saint Peter's Square twenty-something years ago, she and thousands of other faithful pilgrims had listened to the Pope speak from his balcony, blessing the crowd and consecrating the objects they had brought with them. That particular rosary on her lap told me just how worried she was. She only used it for the most urgent of prayers.

The nurse had called us earlier in the day, her voice steady, her words precise and direct. But all of her detached, clinical jargon failed to buffer the reality of the diagnosis: a stage three pancreatic tumor with metastasis to the liver, lungs, and spine. Even though I had braced myself for the worst, still felt the bile rising up in my throat as I listened to the words. I don't recall the remainder of the conversation after that; I have only a vague sense of thanking the nurse and hanging up the phone.

Standing in the kitchen, I splashed some cold water on my face and took a quick pull from the Sambuca bottle that I keep above the stove. At forty years old, I suddenly felt like a little kid faced with the paralyzing fear of showing her mother a bad report card or something. I waited for the alcohol to reach my head before I went into Mama's room to give her the news.

Until just a few months ago, Mama was still making all her usual rounds: going to the farmer's market in Oak Park twice a week, attending her ladies' club meetings at Sacred Heart, and visiting my brother Johnny way out in Schaumburg every Sunday evening, bringing him two grocery bags full of meals that she had prepared and frozen for him to eat throughout the week. Although she has never learned to drive a car, she has memorized every bus

route and train schedule in the city and is able to get to wherever she wants to go on her own. Her independence makes her easy to live with, and I rarely have to adjust my own routines to accommodate her.

Gradually I started to notice that she was making lame excuses for not leaving the house. Her back hurt, she had letters to answer, her back hurt again, there was a TV show she wanted to watch, her back was still hurting her. Finally we went to the chiropractor who took an x-ray of her spine and then immediately referred her to a physician. The physician ordered a CAT scan, and that's when they figured out the reason for her back pain. She had a tumor, and it had spread.

I poured two cups of coffee and brought them into the living room. "Mama, you ok?"

She looked up and tried to smile at me, "Of course, Carla dear, everything's gonna be fine." She gathered the beads and laid them on the side table and picked up her coffee.

"Mama, I made an appointment for you to see the oncologist next Tuesday."

She slurped the coffee, then put the cup back down immediately. "Why? What for? What's he gonna tell me that the other quack hasn't already said?"

I pulled the footstool next to her chair and sat down so that I could look her in the eye. I tucked a loose strand of her hair behind her ear and then gently grasped both her hands in mine. It would take some convincing to get her to cooperate.

"Listen, Mom, I know you don't trust doctors, especially after what happened to Papa. But that wasn't anybody's fault, you know that. His heart was weak." I took a small sip from my cup.

"His heart wasn't weak, he was healthy. Just a little indigestion, that's all. Too much of his sister's marinara all those years. That woman puts a bushel of garlic in everything. My chest hurts, too, when I eat at her house."

For almost an hour it went on like that until she finally agreed to keep the appointment if only to get me to shut up about it.

In the days that followed, she found some comfort with her women's group at church. She listened to all their inspiring anecdotes about friends and relatives who had faced cancer and lived to tell about it. So even though she wasn't feeling well physically, she decided to join the group anyway on their monthly outing to the Horseshoe Casino in Hammond Marina on Lake Michigan. About twenty of them climbed into the church's minibus immediately following the 11:00 Sunday mass, and off they went to feed their social security checks into the slot machines. When Mrs. Martinelli dropped her off at home later that evening, Mama seemed to be trying very hard to conceal a smile.

"What, did you hit the jackpot or something?" I asked, helping her towards the easy chair.

"No, better than that." She gave me a sideways look, holding my gaze for a moment.

“Well? Are you gonna tell me about it or keep it a secret?”

She hesitated, then turned to collect her rosary off of the side table where it had seemed to find a new home. She started to work the beads between her thumb and forefinger, as if trying to shine them up.

Finally she turned to me, “You know Edna Murphy from church? The one with the bad hip who always sings so loud during mass?”

I nodded, even though I wasn’t exactly sure who she was talking about. They all wear the same frumpy clothes, the same thick glasses, and suffer from the same maladies of old age. They are all over 70, first-generation decedents of immigrant parents, and most of them are widows.

“Well, her sister lives in a tiny little town just west of Peoria called Eden.”

I shrugged, “Never heard of it.”

“Nobody has, it’s really small. Anyway, seems they have this nun at their church named Sister Maria D’Angelo. She just arrived there last month after ten years at The Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta. You know, as in Mother Teresa of Calcutta.”

I wasn’t sure exactly where she was going with this, but I was pretty sure I wasn’t going to like it. Over the years, Mama and I have reached an unspoken agreement: I don’t ridicule her faith and she no longer badgers me about my lack of it. I sighed, “Yes, Mom, I know where Calcutta is, and I know about Mother Teresa. So?”

She shot me a quick look that served to remind me of our truce, but then continued, “Well, while she was in Calcutta, this Sister D’Angelo made quite a reputation for herself at the mission, working with the sick and the dying, just like Mother Teresa used to do. They say she’s young, very quiet and shy. But filled with the Holy Spirit! And there are people in Eden who she has cured of their illnesses. One man who had arthritis so bad that he could barely walk is now mowing the lawn and tending to the rose garden around the rectory every Saturday morning. Another lady who has worn thick glasses her whole life, practically blind, didn’t need them anymore the day after being touched by Sister D’Angelo.”

“Aw, Mama, please don’t tell me that you are taking this seriously. You need real help from a doctor, not some crazy incense and candle ritual. I’ve got you an appointment with one of the best oncologists in Chicago. You should be grateful that he even takes Medicaid—”

“Fine. I’ll go see your doctor, if it makes you feel better. But the ladies are already organizing a trip to Eden next week. And I’m going, so please don’t argue with me about it, Carla.”

She turned her head away and started reciting her rosary prayers to herself, her lips barely moving as she worked her way around the loop of beads. I sat staring at her for a moment or two then said, “good night,” and turned to go into my bathroom to get ready for bed.

My parents tried to raise me as a good Catholic. My schooling was all under the watchful guidance of the brothers and sisters of Sacred Heart,

those lovers of strict discipline who never saw a contradiction in literally trying to beat the faith into you. We were made to memorize impossibly long prayers, usually in Latin. We then recited these prayers while kneeling on a cold marble floor for what seemed like hours at a time in order to demonstrate our deep devotion to God and Mother Mary. Guilt and shame were the tools of a different sort that were wielded with the intention of preventing future transgressions against the Church and Our Lord. And if all of that failed, well, corporal punishment was quickly dispensed. For most impressionable young minds, these time-tested indoctrination techniques were remarkably effective. But then there were the occasional rebellious ones like myself who required more evidence than the slap across the face from a drunken priest to convince me of God's presence in my life.

During adolescence my resistance to church doctrine was loud and direct. These days it is generally more indifferent than angry. As an adult, I am able to appreciate some value in the peace of mind that my mother and her fellow believers gain from their faith. And so I have resolved to keep my criticisms mostly to myself. Nowadays, even more so. Even for me, it's not so hard to accept that a person can be made healthier by a positive outlook and the presence of hope. For this reason, I decided not argue with Mama on this topic anymore.

Which was a good thing, because the following week when the oncologist told us that there was absolutely nothing that modern medicine could do for her, Mama hardly seemed fazed by the news. He had given her only six months to live, give or take a month or two. Her look said, "I told you so," but she stopped short of actually chastising me for dragging her to see the "quack" in the first place. Instead, on the way home she talked of nothing except the upcoming pilgrimage to Eden to see the blessed nun, Sister D'Angelo, on Friday. She and three other ladies from the women's club of Sacred Heart had confirmed their plans and there was to be no further discussion on the matter.

For me, however, the emotional impact was greater than I was prepared for. When we got home from the oncologist, I helped Mama to her chair then quickly excused myself to the bedroom where I cried into my pillow all afternoon until, my husband, Tom came in after work and settled me down a bit. The reality of losing my mother had finally hit me, and I wasn't handling it well.

"Tom, I just can't believe it. I don't know what to do," I sobbed, burying my face in his neck.

Tom is a big teddy bear, with messy reddish-brown hair and pale skin that flushes easily in the cold. A good Irish boy with a sympathetic ear. His common sense is usually the necessary antidote to my Sicilian temperament, even when I don't want to hear it.

"How's Mom taking it?" he asked.

"A lot better than I am. But she's got it in her head that this nun is going to lay her hands on her and perform some sort of miracle cure."

"Well, stranger things have happened."

“Please, Tom, don’t patronize me. I need to find another doctor who specializes in this type of cancer. We’ll go to the Mayo Clinic or something if we have to. I’ll start looking online after she goes to bed tonight.”

“Your Mom will never agree to that. Carla, instead of looking for miracles, maybe we should all just be looking for a way to accept the fact that--”

“Tom, don’t! She’s my mother, for Christ’s sake, you expect me to just sit back and watch her die?” And with that I jumped up and went into the kitchen, trying to distract myself by making dinner.

After eating, Mama was tired from her long day at the doctor’s office and went to bed early. Tom volunteered to do the dishes so that I could go online and do some more research into pancreatic cancer. The news wasn’t very heartening. The oncologist we had seen earlier in the day said that her type of tumor had a statistical five-year survival rate of less than two percent. All of the information I had found on the internet pretty much confirmed this. Then I started coming across a couple of different message boards that were discussing alternative treatments in Europe and Central America. I would normally dismiss claims by herbalists, acupuncturists, and other such new-age nonsense. But this new thread that I had found was discussing real drugs that were being used in countries with less rigorous drug laws, especially when treating terminal diseases with few other options. There were some encouraging reports coming out of Mexico, in particular, and the success their doctors were having with the drug Laetrile, which was once used in the United States but was now banned due to some legal problems back in the seventies. Since then, some researchers had continued to modify and refine the active ingredients, increasing their efficacy while reducing toxicity. The results were impressive and after several more hours of reading up on the topic, I was convinced. I knew what I had to do.

I emerged from the bedroom to find Tom sitting on the couch watching the end of the Cubs game. I started to tell him about the plan I was formulating.

“What?! You want to go where, Carla?” he asked, turning the television off.

“Haven’t you been listening? Mexico is the only place on this side of the world where they sell this drug.”

“Yeah, but if the FDA has banned it, what makes you think it’s safe? Or maybe they’re just selling expensive snake oil to desperate people like you. I mean, if it was a real cure, why wouldn’t it still be available here?” He let out a deep sigh, “Mexico? Jesus Christ. Why can’t they just Fed-Ex the pills to you?”

“First of all, because it’s illegal. But mostly because they customize the formula for every patient. They need all her medical records, blood tests, x-rays... all that stuff. Plus I want to check it out. I’ll be honest with you, it’s expensive. So I want to make sure that it’s not a scam, like you say. I want to see the place with my own eyes, make sure it looks legit.”

“Oh, Carla, I don’t know...”

“Check out the websites for yourself, Tom. I left them up on the computer screen. There are plenty of strong opinions on both sides of the issue, but the bottom line is that these drugs have actually cured a lot of people. And she’s my mother, Tom. I have to do something, even if it’s just for my own conscience.”

So that was that, I wasn’t going to debate the topic further. I left Tom pacing in the living room while I went into the bedroom to pack my suitcase. On his way to work early Friday morning Tom reluctantly dropped me off at O’Hare, and I was on my way to “La Clínica Naturales,” in the mountain town of Tejocote, just a little over an hour’s drive from Mexico City.

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I rented a car at the airport and arrived at the clinic late that Friday afternoon; the air dusty and dry, the glare of twilight reflecting off the surrounding landscape washed the entire compound in an orange glow. The main building seemed brand new but borrowed from Mayan architecture with faces of ancient gods etched into the walls. Native plant life encircled the complex and was accented by bubbling waterfalls and stone sculptures of strange, mythical creatures. Large blue agaves lined the stone walkway to the grand entrance where I was met by a stunning young woman with big brown eyes and long black hair who spoke perfect English with only the slightest trace of an accent. We entered the main building and strolled through the plush hallways on our way to the consultation suite. She began answering most of my lingering questions before I even had a chance to ask them.

“It is unfortunate that the U.S. government will not recognize the benefits of alternative treatments. But they are so closely connected to the powerful drug lobbyists in Washington that natural therapies such as ours would threaten to undermine the entire economy of the pharmaceutical industry. Furthermore, I think you’ll find that the side-effects of our treatments are almost non-existent, unlike traditional chemotherapy. The plants used to make our medicines are grown organically right here on the premises.” She timed her speech perfectly, pausing next to a framed 11”x14” glossy photo of a sad-looking shrub. She called it a Mexican Hawthorn, but it had a reddish-yellow fruit growing from its branches that resembled the crabapples that used to grow in my grandfather’s backyard when I was kid.

Walking just a little further we arrived at the door to an office. “Please, have a seat,” she said, motioning to the exquisite leather furniture against the wall on the far end of the room. The space was decorated in a clean, modern style offset by traditional Mexican art. Soft, ambient sounds played through invisible speakers and the air smelled of lavender and fresh vanilla.

The receptionist left the room, and I waited anxiously for the doctor to arrive. I wasn’t kept waiting for very long; the door swung open five minutes later and in walked a striking young man in a crisp, white clinical coat carrying a clipboard at his side. He was tall with caramel skin, a perfect haircut, and the same warm demeanor and charming accent as the receptionist. He smiled easily and held out his hand to greet me.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Byrne; I’m Dr. Gonzalez. I have all the information that you brought right here,” he said, tapping on the clipboard. Then his smile faded and his brow furrowed a bit. “You understand, of course, that it is our preference to have the patient here for a physical examination before prescribing a therapy?”

“Yes, yes, of course, Doctor. But as I said in my email, my mother is simply too weak to travel right now. The cancer has taken all her strength. She can barely get out of bed.” I felt bad about the slight exaggerations, but I was afraid that if I told him the whole truth, he’d be hesitant to help us.

In any case, he just nodded gravely, “I understand. Many of our patients reach the advanced stages before finding our clinic. But the treatments that we offer are so effective that our results are still far better than are offered by conventional medicine.” His broad, opalescent smile instantly returning as he said this.

We discussed my mother’s condition for a bit longer while he patiently took notes and reviewed the results of her lab work. After we had finished, he called the receptionist on his cell phone and asked her to arrange overnight accommodations for me. Meanwhile, he and his team of physicians, pharmacists, and local herbalists would be working on a custom formula for Mama’s treatment. It would be ready to be picked up first thing in the morning and I could be on a plane back to Chicago by noon.

He scribbled something on a pink form that was atop his clipboard. He then tore off the bottom section, handed it to me and said with a grin, “Please see the cashier on your way out.”

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I arrived back home late the next evening. I was relieved when Tom told me that Mama wouldn’t be returning until sometime the following day because the group of ladies had decided to stay an extra night in Eden. They were so taken by their experience with Sister D’Angelo that they wanted to attend mass with her Sunday morning so they could pray side by side with their new spiritual guide. Consequently, Mama would never even know that I had gone to Mexico.

I got up early the next morning and began the task of grinding up the pills and trying to figure out a way to get Mama to eat them without noticing. I tasted the dry, white powder myself just to see—there was nothing terrible about the flavor; in fact, it was sort of sweet and fruity. It could be easily disguised in anything that Mama would normally eat without her detection, I was sure of it. I scratched out a grocery list and took off for the supermarket. I wanted to make a special Sunday dinner for Mama to welcome her back and to try out the new secret ingredient in my cooking.

Later, just as I was pulling the pork roast out of the oven, I heard Mrs. Martinelli’s Buick backfire in the driveway. Before I even had a chance to wipe off my hands, I heard Mama coming through the front door. I walked out to greet her.

“Hi, Mama, how was the trip?”

“Oh, it was lovely Carla. I can’t wait to tell you all about it. Mmm... what’s that divine smell?”

“All your favorites, Mama. Tagliatelle al ragù, roast pork with rosemary, and grilled eggplant with mushrooms and onions. Oh, and I stopped off at Silvio’s for some pastries, too.”

Mama went to her room to wash up while I finished preparing the meal. At dinner, the three of us sat around the table and Mama told Tom and me about her trip to Eden with her lady friends and their audience with Sister D’Angelo.

“Words just can’t describe this beautiful young girl. So quiet, so innocent. At times, you almost forget that she’s even in the room. Then the next moment, you feel a powerful energy coming from her and you can’t take your eyes off of her.”

I must have rolled my eyes or something, because Mama gave me her patented look of reproach. However she only paused for a moment before resuming her story.

“We learned that Sister D’Angelo arrived in Calcutta on the same day that Mother Teresa passed away in 1997. They say that the soul of Mother Teresa leapt into this young girl at that very moment, which is how she came to be so full of the Holy Spirit at such an early age. She has been called upon to be the new custodian of a rare and blessed soul.”

Tom wisely interjected before I could open my mouth to speak, “I forget, is Mother Teresa considered a saint yet?”

Mama answered, “Almost. She’s been beatified, which is the third step in the process. Thanks to Sister D’Angelo, Mother Teresa already has one confirmed miracle cure to her credit. Back in 2002, there was a local Indian woman with a large tumor in her abdomen. Sister D’Angelo touched this poor woman with a locket containing a picture of Mother Teresa. And just like that, the woman was cured. People who witnessed it say they saw a bright beam of light coming from the photo and filling the entire room.”

“Wow!” Tom yelled, “And so did she touch you with that same locket?”

I gave him a little kick under the table.

“Yes, the very same one that cured that woman in India,” Mama replied with a big smile.

I started to say something, but thought better of it. But Tom still seemed enthralled and kept asking all the right questions.

“So when she touched you, did you see a light, too?” he asked.

“Not only did I see it, I was practically blinded by it. It was so bright, I had to shut my eyes. And when I opened them again...” She hesitated and looked over at me as I absently tapped my fork against the table. I stopped and put the fork down.

Tom said, “Go on, Mama, I want to hear it.”

“Well, when I opened them again, I could swear that I was actually in Calcutta. I have no idea what Calcutta actually looks like, mind you, so I can’t

be sure. But the streets were filthy and there were lots of half-naked children running around and lots of people yelling and big cows walking through the market. The smell was awful: rotten food and diesel exhaust. It was so overwhelming that I just fell over, right into a big, brown mud puddle.

“Then this old woman approached me. She was small and frail and stooped, and she was all wrapped up in a blue and white robe. I couldn’t see her face; no matter which way she turned, it was covered by shadows. But then she picked me up into her arms as if I was light as a feather. She cradled me like a baby and started singing a beautiful hymn in some strange language that I didn’t recognize...”

I couldn’t take it any more. I jumped up and asked, “Who wants coffee to go with dessert? I’m brewing a pot of decaf.” And then I started walking towards the kitchen. I knew it was rude, but less rude than the comments that were about to come out of my mouth.

In the kitchen I proceeded to prepare the first dose of Mama’s medicine. I had already measured it out precisely 15 milligrams and set it aside. I found three coffee cups with matching saucers, and arranged everything on the silver serving tray that Mama had gotten as a wedding gift. I scooped out some of the ricotta filling in one of the cannolis and sprinkled the medicine inside, then refilled the pastry before placing it on the tray next to the others.

I carried the fancy tray out to the dining room, being careful to remember which cannoli contained the drug. I watched Mama out of the corner of my eye as she ate it, pretending to be busy with collecting the dinner plates. No reaction, just as I had thought. She had no idea and I felt a rush of excitement that my plan might just work.

Later that night I got back on the computer. Wanting to check out the Mother Teresa story for myself, I googled the “miracle” incident that Mama had recounted for us at dinner. Turns out, it was partly true, only somebody had left off the ending. After being examined by a real doctor, it was revealed that the sick woman had had a large cyst caused by tuberculosis, and not a tumor. The cure happened only after nine months of intense antibiotic therapy. And of course the Catholic Church was more than willing to overlook that tiny detail. With their support continuing to wane across the globe, they needed a modern-day saint to regenerate some interest. Of course, I knew I would never tell Mama about all this, just as I knew that I’d never tell her about the drug I was sneaking into her meals. Her faith gave her emotional strength and so I figured it couldn’t hurt to just leave it be.

For the next six months I had to find a way to get a dose of the medicine into Mama’s food twice a day. It wasn’t always easy, as she often likes to mill around the kitchen while I’m preparing meals. But I got better at it and eventually it was just another mindless habit. There were a couple of close calls, but she never actually caught me in the act.

But the best part was that I quickly started noticing a big improvement in her health. Within the first two weeks, the color had returned to her face and her energy levels began to slowly climb back towards normal. After

more than sugar pills and contained no traces of any therapeutic substances. Patients were being charged tens of thousands of dollars for what they were told was a purified form of the controversial anti-cancer medication known in the U.S. as Laetrile. Dr. Jorge Campos, who is a spokesperson for the Mexican Medical Association is quoted as saying, "This is a sad day for the reputation of the Mexican medical community. I hope people will realize that 99.9% of our doctors and clinics are highly reputable and that this unfortunate incident should in no way undermine the public's confidence in medical treatments south of the border."

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This morning I knelt before the altar at Sacred Heart for the first time in over twenty years. It was a bit surreal to experience this place of my childhood through my adult eyes and mature sensibilities. Instead of big and cold and intimidating, it felt warm and oddly comforting. I doubt that I'll ever feel what my mother feels towards this place. But at least now I understand it a little better. And whether by conscious choice or by circumstance, I guess sooner or later we all put our faith in something.

Following mass, I joined Mama and her group of women at the parish community center. An impressive potluck lunch had been prepared in my honor. Because then, amid a grand ceremony of prayer chanting, candle lighting, and a cloud of incense, I became the newest (and by far the youngest) member of The Ladies Club of Sacred Heart.

Afterwards, I left Mama to chat with her friends some more as I walked out of the church and into the crisp autumn day. The sun was shining bright, but there was a chill in the air. As I groped for my gloves in the pocket of my leather jacket, my hand found something else instead. I pulled it out and held it up in front of me, a little puzzled at first. It was Mama's black rosary, and I couldn't imagine how it could have fallen into my jacket pocket. I turned back to look towards Sacred Heart and saw Mama standing on the steps, smiling and waving at me.