



Three

Home Sweet Home

Outside in the crisp cool air, I stood briefly at the top of the steps while Sister Maureen indicated the distant tree-fringed boundaries beyond the fields, insulating St. Agatha from its neighbors. The buildings seemed to be resting, waiting for their inhabitants to return. I kept reminding myself that it was just for the weekend, sort of like squeezing your eyes shut until a scary movie ends.

“The children are still in school,” Sister Maureen broke into my thoughts as she stopped alongside Uncle Eddie’s car. As if she’d read my mind, she pointed across Convent Road, opposite the entrance, to a two-story white building standing well back from the road.

“The big building in the middle is the upper school. To the left is Sacred Heart cottage for kindergarten-aged children. And in the front, the lower school, for first through third grade.”

“It’s so big,” I whispered to Jackie rather incredulously.

He nodded slightly. My brother had believed all along that we were staying, but did not press it when I insisted it was for the weekend—probably trying to spare me.

Uncle Eddie held the door and Sister Maureen climbed into the back seat to escort us to our temporary homes. We kids all rode with Uncle Bill. He said nothing; none of that adult, “Won’t this be nice?” stuff. He didn’t seem to like it any better than we did.

Home Kids



The upper school

I reminded myself that this was just an adventure, which we would all laugh about on Sunday when we got back to the Bronx. My friends would forever say, “Remember the time you got shipped off to that Catholic Boarding School?” and we would roll our eyes at the memory like we were talking about Uncle Joe’s farm in Iowa.

At Catholic school, we’d considered nuns holy, but we came to fear their strictness. Not all of them, of course. Most were nice, but when someone strikes you angrily with a ruler for chatting, you fear them all for safety’s sake. The boys laughed about it, showing off their wounds to each other, but the girls were afraid and dreaded their disapproval as much as the harsher rebukes.

My siblings and I were generally respectful kids, just somewhat unruly left on our own. We had fallen away from the rules of the Church the way most kids do when no adult makes them tend to their religious duties. For the previous four years, we’d attended public school, and the younger kids attended religious instruction once a week at a nearby Catholic school. Jackie and I had made our First Holy Communion and Confirmation. When we lived on Devoe, Gene was an alter boy at St. Peter’s—the honor of every Catholic family dreaming that the priesthood could not be far beyond, and providing an “in” with God. Instead, more in keeping with his mischievous personality, Gene was expelled from school for fooling around. After graduating from Dewitt Clinton High

School, he joined the Air Force. Mom and Gram adored Gene, the first-born, and missed him terribly after he left.

I didn't want to think the unimaginable, that we'd have to live with nuns taking care of us. Jackie had to be wrong about this. But what if after our weekend visit to St. Agatha things went back to the way they were? Why couldn't Gene come back and keep us all together? Why couldn't Jerry continue to be in charge until Mom got better?

Jerry, eighteen, would begin attending City College while staying with Uncle Eddie. Our mother's increasing absenteeism forced Jerry into the role of "man of the family" left vacant by Gene. He tried to get us to do chores, play nicely, go to bed on time, do our homework, go to church, and was not averse to muscling us when we were uncooperative. Of course, when Mom was around, we undermined him and got his decisions reversed, much to his frustration. All of the responsibility without the rights. Ours was a reactionary household without any plan. All Jerry could do was try to handle each situation and crisis as it arose, a lot to ask of a teenager. But now that I saw the alternative, I knew we could be better behaved, help out more.

And why take the big kids to the relatives when the two boys, Jerry and Billy, could be out on their own soon? Let the younger boys go with the relatives.

Billy at seventeen was finishing his last year at St. Peter's. He was quiet, intelligent, witty, handsome. He took after both my mother's father with his fine features and blond hair, and my dad with his bright blue eyes. He was a Johnny Carson imitator, with that same dry wit and easy, charming delivery, but he could also grow quiet and become reclusive. He remained focused on school and succeeded there. He let Jerry run the younger kids, for the most part. But if we get another chance at staying together, that role would be easier because things would be different.

Or why not take Helen and me to live at Aunt Mary's with Ginger, or Aunt Terry's? Two or three girls together in a bedroom didn't matter much more than one. I thought Ginger was the lucky one.

She turned sixteen the month before, and was a sophomore at St. Peter's. It had been a real challenge for her and Billy, concealing our home life from the school, the nuns, and most of all, their friends. Ginger had babysat Aunt Mary's kids for a couple of years, and used her earnings for the never-ending expenses of Catholic school and her expanding social life of proms, parties, and school activities. Often she had to dip into her funds to buy us dinner, or donuts and milk in the morning before school when Mom was gone and there was nothing to eat. Sending her to stay with Aunt Mary did seem natural. It didn't occur to me that she would be lonely and want to be with the rest of us, as it apparently turned out.

I kept reshuffling the deck of options in my mind. Why couldn't someone get a bigger house, or add on to the one they had?

Aunt Mary and Uncle Johnny waited eight years for the first of their two little girls, now six and eight at the time we went to St. Agatha's. They lived in a nice basement apartment, just spacious enough for their little family. Aunt Mary was home-economically gifted and could make any place comfy. Shoe-horning any more of us in would have been a hardship to her family.

Uncle Bill and Aunt Terry had a newer, tri-level ranch-style home in Westchester. Its rooms were spacious, but they also had eight kids and another on the way. They were persuaded that, while their desire to take the rest of us was well-intentioned, the arrangement would not be best for anyone: their kids, them, or us. Uncle Bill didn't think his brother would agree, and always regretted going along with the St. Agatha alternative.

As a kid, I couldn't see that the options were impractical, and didn't consider the other families at all. It seemed wiser to them to keep the five of us together until mom got well. We wondered how long that would take.

We backtracked up Convent Road to the boys' cottages. Three large brick houses in a row were named Loyola, De Paul, and Seton Hall, according to the painted wooden plaques mounted beside each entry door. At the third one we got out of the car and met Sister Alexander, dressed in the snow-white version of Sister Maureen's outfit that the Group Mothers wore. Sister Alexander—a big, powerful-looking

woman—filled the doorway to Seton Hall. Her size might be essential in dealing with thirty or so high school boys. Though her voice was soft and



Seton Hall

somewhat high-pitched, she spoke in an authoritative, no-nonsense way like Aunt Rita Mary. Both were accustomed to co-operation.

I turned my back to look at the surroundings while the adults chatted. Athletic fields stretched in all directions. I could see the Administration building off to the right. And in between, a running track and baseball diamond. Behind it, a green water tower as tall as an apartment building mounted atop four spindly legs.

The interior of Seton Hall felt like the rectory of a church—dark, cool, and silent. The long hallway ended in a “T” at the entrance to the dining room. Sister Alexander pointed out the bedrooms, TV room, and bathrooms.

“This will be your room, Jackie. Here’s your bed, and you can put your things in this locker,” Sister said at the entrance to a room with six beds. Jackie, still a resentful look on his sullen face, took his assignment in silence. He opened the locker and put his small bag of belongings inside without a word or a glance around.

“It’s hard to believe any boys live here,” Aunt Rita Mary kidded, probably trying to break the tension. “Everything is so clean. I have two sons and three daughters who are not this tidy. No towels on the floors, no unmade beds,” she trailed off. “Certainly none of the disinterested housekeeping I had long since grown accustomed to.”

“The boys do chores; they even buff the floors,” Sister said, “to earn their allowance. But we have a housekeeper that comes in each day, too.”

In the brightly lit dining room, blue-and-white-checkered cloths covered ten tables which seated four boys each. Drapes of royal blue flanked white metal blinds matched the tablecloths. The walls held

paintings—some religious, some like Ansel Adams' prints of mountains—and a crucifix.

From the dining room, we went next door to the recreation room. Comfy chairs for observers waiting a turn surrounded two competition-sized pool tables. I looked at Jackie and raised my eyebrows in the universal “this is nice” expression. But he was stoical, and I felt a little like a traitor, finding something good about our situation.

“That piano gets a surprising amount of use,” Sister Alexander said as Aunt Rita Mary commented about what a nice home this was, or something similar. I hoped our cottage had these amenities. I had been wondering what we would do all day Saturday and Sunday. Now, at least we can play pool and pound on the piano.

With no one around except Sister Alexander, it felt like a model home we were viewing to buy. Without further ceremony, we left Jackie with Sister Alexander. He and I exchanged looks as I moved outside. I figured once we were all settled I'd come and see him later. In my head I heard the snap-snap-snapping of when you pull up a plant up by its roots—a sort of permanent severing of ties.

We could have walked over to 12 Hayden Circle beyond Seton Hall. The six houses we'd passed earlier formed a cul de sac. Tommy and David were handed over to Sister Robert, a pleasant looking and smaller version of Sister Alexander. Her smile was friendly, and she chatted more. I was glad that the younger boys would stay together. Tommy could look out for David, who often needed rescuing when he put his foot in his mouth. Besides a short temper, David had a habit of arguing everything to the death—like which was a better baseball team: the Yankees or the Dodgers. On top of that, he would always choose the team that was winning the season instead of staying loyal to one team. This drove Tommy crazy. But Tommy's diplomacy could either get David under control, or help to defend him when he put his foot in his mouth.

Sister Robert's face was sweet with a ready, broad smile. She was young and slightly plump, friendly-looking. But while she smiled, her eyes watched us. She had been at St. Agatha long enough to have formed the

opinion that a swift separation was best. After brief pleasantries outside, she placed a hand on the shoulder of each boy and decisively steered them through the front door. I wanted to go in and look around, but Sister Robert knew best, so we got back into the car.

At the end of the service road, we turned left and looped back down Convent Road again like mailmen on a delivery route, dropping off kids instead of packages. We entered the first driveway on the girls' side, almost directly across from Seton Hall into the older farmhouses we'd passed earlier.

The car stopped at the first of two buildings connected by a long glass hallway called, "St. Agnes Cottage." Helen and I would be staying here.

Sister Lucy met us at the first door. Brief goodbyes accompanied glances at watches as our Uncles hastened to avoid the Friday night commuter traffic; back to the City for Uncle Eddie, and over the Tappan Zee Bridge to Westchester for Uncle Bill. I was tired and hungry, but snapped alert at the realization that this was what I had dreaded all along: the actual moment of being left behind.

I felt like screaming. But like our mom, we didn't make a fuss. We allowed ourselves to be led away. My aunt and uncles would have been



St. Agnes cottage 1935; it still looked the same in 1965

Home Kids

disappointed if I, of all the kids, began protesting and bargaining. This would frighten Helen, too. So I kept silent and reminded myself, “It’s only for the weekend, it’s only for the weekend.”

I believed me.