

BEHIND THE TAPESTRY
MY DISCOVERY OF GOD'S GRACE
AMIDST CHRONIC PAIN AND LOSS

M. Rose Peluso

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Note to Readers: This is a work of nonfiction. In order to protect the privacy of certain individuals, names of people and places have been changed. In recounting the events in this memoir, they are told to the best of the author's recollection and based solely on her perspective. Where dialogue appears, capturing the essence of the conversation was the goal, rather than quoting verbatim.

Chapter One

“But whatever is good and perfect comes to us from God, the Creator of all light, and he shines forever without change or shadow.” James 1:17

That fateful day I found myself standing at a small window. I don't recall how I got there. Waking up that morning was a blur. I went through the motions but the details escape me. I stared out the window for the longest time unsure of what I was feeling. So many thoughts swirled around in my head and my heart. I knew the events of the previous day were monumental, not just for me but for the whole country and maybe even the world. The implications of just how huge were still unclear but of one thing I was certain – nothing would ever be the same, not for me or the life I was trying to lead.

As I stood at the window, I got completely lost in my own head. I felt chilled to the bone despite the balmy temperature outside. The sun shone so brightly through the window, I needed my sunglasses indoors. Yesterday was much the same. The tragedy that had taken place

twenty-four hours earlier seemed surreal as many of the interviewed eyewitnesses had attested to. Indeed, this unforeseen tragedy was beyond anything I had ever experienced in my lifetime. The entire country, the government and its people, were stunned!

I backed away from the window and gazed at the hermitage, a tiny cottage resting on ten acres of hills and valleys covered by lush green lawns. Ahead was a converted mansion shaded by evergreen and oak trees with a welcoming floral garden that stood in contrast to the adjacent dilapidated building that once served as a horse stable. These grounds were nestled on the outskirts of Coconut Grove, New Jersey. I was a novice in a religious community occupying the hermitage on one of my required *desert days*. I valued this time spent alone, just me and my Lord.

I usually took advantage of this time to catch up on sleep, quiet my mind, and pray. My visits were sometimes spent complaining to Jesus about my chronic pain, even to the point of crying. I looked forward to them each month but not on this particular day, the day after America was attacked. Deep in my soul, in parts of myself I hadn't known existed, I knew that everything had changed. Thankfully my family, friends, and I had not suffered any personal losses. But so many others knew of someone who had perished or lost a loved one that day. And yet the overall devastation felt personal. I was certain God was asking something profound of me as a result of this horrific event. But what could it possibly be?

As I spoke to Him aloud, I imagined God being bombarded with requests from all kinds of people, even those He created and loved but had never heard from before. I didn't cry or shed any tears over the tragedy at that moment because the pain I felt was so deep inside me, it was *untouchable*. No amount of tears could release my sadness. I needed to know what God was trying to tell me or show me through this tragedy. Somewhere in the chaos was an answer.

I took a walk outside to pray the Rosary. I begged the Lord to open my eyes and heart so that I could hear Him. Shortly into my walk, I felt the presence of the Holy Spirit giving me a powerful revelation. So strong was the message, my breath was taken away, leaving me light-headed, and in fear of passing out. So I scurried back to the hermitage and entered a miniature room that seemed even smaller than usual. The walls felt like they were closing in on me. I gasped for air and flung myself onto the sofa bed, grabbing for the arms to steady myself. I begged the Lord to help me calm down while I pondered what, exactly it was, He was asking of me. I asked Jesus to clarify my understanding of what was happening and the implications it would have for my life and my calling.

After a few minutes, my breathing returned to normal and my thoughts came back into focus. The revelation became clear; I realized that *everything* had truly changed. Nothing was the same nor would it ever be. I came to understand that the minute details of those who lost their lives that day – their social or economic status, how many children they had, their professions, where they lived – in the end – none of that mattered because in an instant, all of that changed. But one *person* and one *thing* remained unchanged by the tragic events – God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I believed in my heart that God was deeply saddened by the devastation unfolding before us but He had not changed. He would forever be the same – yesterday, today and tomorrow. Knowing this changed everything for me too. I knew I was being called to dedicate my life entirely to Him, the only one unchanged by the events of September 11, 2001.

Chapter Nineteen

“What happiness there is for you who are now hungry, for you are going to be satisfied! What happiness there is for you who weep, for the time will come when you shall laugh with joy!” Luke 6:21

After settling in at St. Katherine’s, I found it in my best interest to keep to myself when I wasn’t getting acquainted with the others. In Dorrisvale, I felt instantly welcomed and accepted but at St. Katherine’s, not so much! As the only junior sister living there, Sr. Raymond looked down on me and Sr. Vito had the idea that I was supposed to do everything and never relax. In other words, I had to earn my place within the Congregation. I didn’t understand this at first, but once I caught on, I felt confused and uneasy about my place in the community. However, I never confronted the sisters about it, especially since I was still in so much pain. All of my symptoms persisted in spite of taking the four medications Dr. Marcel prescribed and eating an acid-free diet. In fact, on some days the pain got even worse.

About two months into my residence at St. Katherine's, I heard trouble was brewing within the Delegation. One situation involved the community of sisters living in Pennsylvania and another concerned a sister living in Coconut Grove who had serious mental and emotional issues. I had gathered bits and pieces of information through the grapevine. Sister Angelo had her hands full dealing with these challenges but as far as I could tell, none of it had anything to do with me. I tried to keep the promise I made to myself about being a *good* sister. I didn't want to add to Sr. Angelo's burden of dealing with my health problems and those other issues. Unfortunately, I discovered, later on, that Sister actually had multiple concerns about me and my vocation.

At the time, I was still in therapy but working with a new therapist, Doctor Davies. He had almost become a Religious Order Priest and had a strong faith. Therefore, he understood the dynamics of living in community and offered valuable insight into my situation. Like myself, Dr. Davies suffered from a chronic illness which helped him relate to the myriad of emotions I was experiencing as a result of my poor health. He comprehended my constant battle to keep my feelings in check and was all too familiar with the emotional roller coaster days I was facing.

My first few months at St. Katherine's weren't *all* bad though. I was enjoying the seminary for the first time since attending. For whatever reasons, I didn't care for the undergraduate studies I attended with Meggi as a postulant but driving back and forth with Sr. Leonard as a graduate student was delightful. I enjoyed the coursework in Pastoral and Spiritual Theology and took pleasure in getting to know Sr. Leonard better. We engaged in some interesting conversations during our commute and seemed to have a lot in common.

At the end of September, I visited Dr. Marcel to follow up on the effectiveness of her prescribed medications on my pain level. According to my journal, pain levels were all over the

place. Two of the past four months were moderately painful; the other two months had more difficult days. Neither Dr. Marcel nor I could account for these fluctuations. I was back to feeling alone especially since I no longer had Sr. Louis coming with me to the doctor. And unfortunately, the sisters at St. Katherine's all worked full-time and were unable to accompany me on my many visits to various specialists.

Doctor Marcel refilled three of my four medications, substituted a new prescription to replace the fourth medication, and added *Xanax* to the mix. The goal was to relax or stop the spasms in my pelvic floor. She told me to return after Thanksgiving. If there was still no significant improvement, the doctor knew of other options to try. She was truly committed to helping me. I saw compassion emanate from her eyes. Doctor Marcel was determined to get to the bottom of my condition and if it couldn't be cured, she at least hoped to manage the pain.

Like so many times before, I left Dr. Marcel's office feeling hopeful that the new drug mixture might actually work. Knowing there were still options added to my optimism. With the Lord's grace which I begged for daily, I managed to hold on. Even though I still had dark days when I wanted to give up and leave the Convent, give up on God and my faith, and give up on life in general, I didn't give into these depressing emotions. Whenever a dark day loomed over me, I spent most of it in prayer. I was, after all, a Coconut Grove Franciscan Sister. Giving up wasn't an acceptable option so I carried on, leaning more and more on the Lord. It wasn't easy but together, Jesus and I were making it.

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As an adult I didn't care much for Halloween but as a child I was like every other American kid. Getting dressed up, being someone else for a day, and getting mounds of candy, what's not to like? However, being a grown woman who lives in a convent, why in the world

would Halloween appeal to me, right? It was just another day on the calendar. However, working in the educational field surrounded by hundreds of school-aged children, my love of this weird and whimsical holiday was rekindled. Watching the children show off their colorful costumes and act the parts, was priceless! Now, anyone who knows me, knows I absolutely love the movie, *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, starring Gene Wilder as Willy and Eddie Albertson as Grandpa Joe. Therefore, it didn't come as any surprise that two of my favorite costumes were Oompa Loompa suits worn by two 6th grade girls. The costumes were custom-made by a friend of one of the girls' mothers and they were spectacular!

As much fun as I had with the girls dressed like Willy Wonka's loyal and trusted helpers, the best part of the day was actually something else. The fun began that morning in the teacher's lounge. Due to Halloween celebrations and the schoolwide parade, there was less need of teacher assistance. Consequently, I sat in the lounge doing paperwork. The pre-kindergarten teacher, Ms. Grant, came in and asked if I wanted to borrow her Mrs. Potts costume, the character from Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. She suggested I drape it right over my habit. Feeling festive, I was thrilled to wear the costume. I must admit, I looked hilarious as a giant teapot with a spout extending from my navel and a bonnet-like tea kettle top over my veil. Anyway, everyone seemed to think I looked cute in it.

After donning Ms. Grant's costume, I headed back to the teachers' lounge and to my elation, a bunch of goodies were sprawled out on the table closest to the entrance. The golden rule amongst educators has always been this: any food item left in the teacher's lounge is fair game. If it's lying on the table with no label, name, or classroom indicated, then it's yours, mine, and ours! So I began to help myself to the scrumptious cookies, cupcakes and candy on display. Boy, did I ever enjoy myself! After a few minutes of indulgence, I went to the main office

for something. Along the way I chit-chatted with a faculty member, admired more of the children's costumes, used the restroom and finally headed back to the teacher's lounge to finish my paperwork.

When I returned, a new treat caught my eye. This particular goody was especially enticing because it was my all-time favorite, candy corn. Just like the other goodies, this flowered paper bowl of candy with no label was covered with clear wrap. I proceeded to peel back one corner of the wrap and dig in. I hadn't treated myself to the yellow, white, and orange sugary candy in ages so my taste buds danced with every bite!

A few minutes later, I left the room again. When I returned, one of the 1st grade teachers, Miss Linn, was eyeing the bowl of candy corn. She asked me whose candy it was and I told her I had no idea. Apparently, candy corn was also one of Miss Linn's favorites so before I knew it, there she was, peeling back another corner of the plastic wrap and grabbing a handful. She commented on how good it tasted and then left the teacher's lounge. Before sitting back down, I dug into the bowl again and scooped up an even larger handful of candy than the first time around. Oh boy! What this yummy candy did for my disposition should have been sinful!

Anyway, as I remained seated at the table drinking coffee, eating the candy corn and finishing up my paperwork, Sr. George wandered in. She asked if I had tasted any of the goodies and I shared that I had tasted the cookies, cupcakes, and my favorite, the candy corn. Sister George didn't see the bowl at first but once I pointed it out, she grew a huge smile. And once again, before I knew it, she dug out a hefty handful, so large that pieces of candy corn began cascading through her fingers. She and I laughed and shared how much we loved the sweet treat.

I left the lounge again to use the ladies room. I took my time but when I returned, the clear wrap was ripped from the bowl so I figured others had also helped themselves to the

delightful treat. I refilled my coffee mug, helped myself to more candy corn and sat back down to finally complete my overdue reports.

A moment later my friend, Barbie, who is also the school's beloved art teacher, entered the room. She called out, "Hey Sister Mare, what's up?"

I looked up from my work and replied, "Yo, Barbie, what's going on? How are you, my friend?"

"I'm doing pretty well. How you doin'?" I love your Mrs. Potts costume. Where'd you get it?"

I smiled, "Oh, do you like it? It's really cute, isn't it? Ms. Grant let me borrow it. I love that movie and Mrs. Potts and her son, Chip, are my favorite characters."

I was seated towards the back of the room near the windows that overlooked the parking lot. Barbie was seated near the main entrance of the only door to the room, directly in front of the candy corn.

She yelled, "Hey, Wow! Look at all these treats. Who brought 'em in?"

"Can't say. Have no idea. It was already here when I came in this morning. It all looks yummy, doesn't it? You should try the chocolate chip cookies. They taste good enough to be homemade!"

"Oh, I don't want to take any if we don't know whose they are," Barbie insisted.

I laughed heartily and assured her, "Are you kidding me? This is the teacher's lounge, my friend. Everyone knows by now that if you leave something in here unmarked, it's up for grabs."

"So you think it'll be okay if I go ahead and have one of the cookies?" Barbie asked. Just as I inched closer to grab another cookie, she added, "Oh wait. I didn't see these," as she pointed at the bowl of candy corn, "Whose are they? I just love candy corn. They are my favorite."

I noted, “Yep, yours and everyone else’s around here.”

“So did you have any yet? Who brought them in?” Barbie asked.

“Oh, how the heck should I know? But who cares? If they’re in here and unlabeled, I say help yourself. God knows I did, at least three or four handfuls so far,” I admitted.

Barbie displayed an incredulous look but nonetheless proceeded to help herself to the candy. After eating only a few pieces her aura emanated pure joy and satisfaction! As we continued to sit and chat, two boisterous women who I didn’t recognize entered the room. Barbie had her back to them but because my back was to the windows, I faced the doorway and looked right at them. As soon as they entered, Barbie and I stopped talking.

One woman was towering and the other was a bit chunky. The shorter woman practically screamed out in horror as she exclaimed to the other woman, “Oh My Gosh, Betty. Look at our bowl of candy corn. Who the heck has been eating our candy? I don’t believe it. We just put it down here for a few minutes and then we come back and it’s almost all gone. Where did it go?”

Now understand something, Barbie was my friend. And friends are supposed to have each other’s backs, right? Well in this case – yeah, not so much! Barbie sat there appearing quite stunned but in total silence. She grinned and looked right at me, keeping her back to the women and still not saying a word.

I finally admitted, “Oh, sorry ladies. Is that candy corn yours? We didn’t know. It was just sitting there for more than a few minutes. It’s been there a while now. And it wasn’t labeled or anything so some of the faculty members and myself had a little bit of it. Sorry.”

The stocky woman rebutted, “Ate a little bit of it! Are you kidding me? There seems to be a lot more than just a little bit of it missing, right, Betty?” She turned to Betty for confirmation but Betty stood there, frozen, except for her shrugged shoulders.

I continued, “Again, I’m very sorry ladies. But I wasn’t the only one who had some. Sister George and Miss Linn were in here earlier and I know for a fact they each had a few pieces and I haven’t been in the room this whole time so who knows who else might have come in and had a little. But again, I do apologize for whatever I took. I had no idea the candy belonged to anyone. Of course, if I’d known I never would have eaten it.”

“Well, where did you think it came from? Do you think it just got here on its own?” Betty finally spoke up. The shorter woman just shook her head back and forth, somewhat violently, while Barbie sat on the sidelines pretending to be hard of hearing. She never attempted to step in or admit to her own part in the apparent *Crime of the Century*. It took all the composure I could conjure up to not burst out laughing at the ridiculousness of the whole situation.

I answered, “Oh, I don’t know really. I mean, I had no idea where the candy came from. It’s one of my favorites and so I had a little of it.”

“Well, how much is a little?” The shorter woman asked.

“I honestly don’t know, to tell you the truth,” I said and then went on, “Not that much. Maybe a small handful or two.”

“A small handful – are you serious? It looks like a lot of the candy is missing and you supposedly helped yourself to only a handful or two?” she squawked. I just shrugged my shoulders as she went on, “I think it’s kind of nuts that you would just take it upon yourself to eat someone else’s candy without knowing exactly who it belonged to or where it even came from in the first place. That just seems so crazy to me. Don’t you agree, Betty?” Again, she looked over at her friend who didn’t respond. I gazed at Barbie who was shaking her head and acting as if she had no idea what was going on. She didn’t seem to care that I was taking the heat, not just for myself but for all the culprits involved!

I had nothing else to say so I put my head down and went back to my paperwork. The two women lingered a while longer, debating about what to do with the remaining candy.

After some internal laughter, I asked, “Is there a problem with the candy? I mean, we honestly didn’t know who it belonged to and certainly didn’t eat it on purpose. If we’d known it was yours we wouldn’t have eaten any of it. But now that we know, is it really that big of a deal?”

Well, this was a loaded question because the shorter woman yelled at me with more than a hint of disdain in her voice, “Yes, yes, it most certainly *is* a big deal! That wasn’t just for the party in Mrs. Burns’ sixth grade classroom, ya know. That candy corn was all counted out for a contest! The children were supposed to guess how many pieces were in the bowl!”

I gulped and quickly diverted my attention to Barbie, who looked like she was about to fall right out of her chair. She sprung from her seat and excused herself. Racing for the door, she nearly collided with both women. Mortified, I wanted to crawl under the table and stay there for the rest of the afternoon. Instead, I apologized profusely and reminded them I didn’t take that much. I also added that there was still plenty of candy corn left for the game. The mothers did an abrupt about face, ranting and raving along the way!

Since Mrs. Burns’ classroom was across from the teacher’s lounge I heard one of the mothers announce to the teacher and the entire class, “I have no idea who the heck she is. Never seen her before. Don’t know her name. But that nun, that nun ate our candy! She ate all of the candy corn needed for our game today. Can you believe it? She ate it all. How rude! She didn’t even try to find out who it belonged to. She just helped herself. How dare she?”

As I remained alone in the teacher’s lounge with the sin of the century staining my soul for all of eternity, I snickered to myself. I mean, I really did feel bad but it was somewhat

comical, pretty darn hysterical if you ask me. When the story traveled around the school and Sr. George and Miss Linn learned of the crime, like Barbie, they never fessed up. I became their scapegoat, the sole owner of guilt in the eyes of both mothers.

What took place the following day was almost as funny as the incident itself. Practically everyone in the school learned about what that *awful nun* did to the 6th graders. That morning I entered the school through the side entrance which led down a lengthy corridor to the main office. Lo and behold, plastered all over the walls were *Most Wanted* posters asking the public's help in capturing the year's most notorious criminal and offering a reward for her apprehension. A mugshot of *The Candy Corn Thief* was smack in the middle of the 8 by 11 inch posters and it was uncanny how much she resembled me! Hey, wait a minute, it *was* me! Posters positioned about ten inches apart lined every hallway leading to the teacher's lounge. One poster after another displayed my mugshot with Mrs. Potts's teapot plopped on top of my veil. I got the biggest kick out of this and laughed hysterically for several minutes. I later learned that it was the 6th grade teacher's idea to design and hang up the posters. Just about everyone, students and faculty alike, thought the posters were the cutest things ever. At the end of the day when I returned to the convent, I stopped in the chapel before going to my room. I just had to kneel and pray to thank the Lord for the joy and laughter the whole candy corn fiasco brought me. I believed the Lord was telling me through this silly ordeal that life can still be enjoyable and that it was possible to experience moments of lightheartedness even in the midst of my chronic pain. And for all of this, I was eternally grateful to Him.

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In early December, I was back in Dr. Marcel's office. I had been experiencing less and less good days. Since my last appointment, the burning pain had grown in intensity. I couldn't sit

for more than fifteen or twenty minutes at a time. The only thing that was helping to alleviate some of the burning sensation was lying flat on my back with an ice pack on my abdomen. All of my pain had become nearly impossible to ignore. I could barely concentrate on my studies, my work duties, and most importantly, my prayer time. I was extremely frustrated and had gotten to the point where I wanted to stop taking medication and reject any type of treatment.

Doctor Marcel advised me against all of that. She encouraged me to not give up on the four medications she prescribed. She told me there were other options we could try to help lessen the nagging, burning pain. She wanted to know if I had someone to talk to about my feelings of despair and asked if I was taking any medication for my depression. I shared with her that I was in counseling but hadn't been prescribed anything yet. Doctor Marcel recommended that I specifically share with my therapist how I was feeling and maybe even ask for some medicine to help me function better on a daily basis. I promised to at least consider her advice.

Before departing from her office, she recommended we try a treatment called intravesical cocktails. This procedure would require me to go to her office once a week for six weeks. At each visit, I would receive a mixture of three or four separate medications through a tube inserted vaginally and guided directly to my bladder. She told me the procedure was virtually painless and wouldn't take more than a few minutes. Doctor Marcel wasn't certain it would work but wanted to give it a try. The burning pain was so awful at this point, I agreed to try it.

When I returned home and told the sisters about the procedure, they looked at me like I was crazy. Later on I called Sr. Louis to fill her in on what was going on. She expressed how sorry she was that I still wasn't feeling any better. Sister Louis also felt bad for me because I was going to be putting myself through medicinal instillations, which sounded painful despite what Dr. Marcel had told me. Sister reassured me I would be in her prayers.

I proceeded to ask Sister a question before hanging up. I told her I needed to share something that I needed her to keep in the strictest confidence. Sister assured me she wouldn't repeat what I was about to share. I confessed to Sr. Louis that I had no one in the community at St. Katherine's I could really talk to. I informed her that there was a lot of kidding around and I took a lot of teasing especially from Sr. Raymond. I felt that everything at St. Katherine's was a big joke and there was very little serious conversation. I was doing my best to stay present to the community but it was tough because most of the time I felt alone.

Sister Louis reminded me that Sr. Raymond was rather new at being a superior. She asked me how well I thought she was doing her job. I informed Sister that in my humble opinion, I didn't think Sr. Raymond was doing such a great job. I was basing my opinion on the fact that she hadn't asked to meet with me privately to discuss how I was doing so far in the community nor had she asked me if I needed anything. I revealed to Sr. Louis that in my time with Sr. Raymond, she had only come to speak with me one-on-one when she had a complaint about something she didn't approve of or that she believed was detrimental to our community life. Sister Raymond had yet to compliment me or share something positive about my presence in the community.

I was honest with Sr. Louis about my struggles resulting from Sr. Raymond's leadership style. I truly believed she wasn't helping me in my ongoing formation. Based upon my understanding of what life as a junior sister was supposed to be like and the various ways a superior should be facilitating growth and maturity, I didn't believe this was happening at St. Katherine's. Sister Louis stated she would share some of my concerns with Sr. Angelo the next time they met to discuss my formation. In the meantime, Sister told me to hang in there and to call if I needed anything. I thanked Sister for her time and hung up. Between community

struggles and the ongoing problems with my health, it was taking everything I had just to get out of bed every morning. The pain of feeling all alone was even more draining than my physical pain. Without a doubt, I was approaching my breaking point.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“God will surely do this for you, for he always does just what he says, and he is the one who invited you into this wonderful friendship with his Son, even Christ our Lord.” 1 Corinthians 1:9

As the school year progressed, nothing changed in my relationship with Sr. Leonard. I chose not to see the signs right in front of me that something was off. I cared about her so much that I ignored the promptings of the Holy Spirit who was trying to draw attention to the dysfunction in our friendship. I suspected that Sr. Leonard was using me to get Sr. Raymond’s attention or to make her jealous. Regardless, repeated incidents occurred similar to what happened at Coconut Grove’s Day of Recollection.

One night after returning home from classes at the seminary, Sr. Leonard and I went into the kitchen to enjoy a cup of tea. She had been unusually quiet in the car going to and from the City so I knew something was bothering her. Concerned about her state of mind, I asked, “So, my friend, tell me what’s going on. I know something’s up. It might make you feel better to talk about it. You know I’m always here for you.”

Sister Leonard responded, “Yeah, I knew you’d know something was wrong. Sister Raymond really pissed me off today. I had a problem with a student so I went to the office to talk

to her about it. I needed to call the parents but wanted to discuss the situation with Sister first. But she didn't have time for me. I was so mad."

"Why didn't Sister Raymond have time for you, what was she doing?"

Sister Leonard breathed a heavy sigh, as if someone had killed her precious puppy, and lamented, "I knocked on her office door. She was on the phone. She told me to come in but before I could even sit down and tell her about it, she just blew me off. Told me I'd have to wait until we got home to talk. She said Ms. Smith was having some problem and she needed to run down to her classroom right away to take care of it."

I replied, "So, she never even heard you out?" Sister Leonard shook her head back and forth as she and I nursed our mugs of scalding hot tea. I wrapped my hands tightly around the mug to warm my frozen hands and continued, "Sister Raymond just blew you off and ran out on you? Has she tried to catch up with you like she said she would?"

Sister Leonard answered, "Nope. Nada. She did nothing. She just ran to the other teacher and didn't care about me or what I needed."

"Oh well, I keep telling you over and over but you don't want to hear it. In my opinion, Sister Raymond's feelings for you aren't the same as your feelings for her. In the end, you're going to get hurt and she isn't going to lose any sleep over it. This is just my opinion but it's what I've been observing."

Sister 'thanked' me for listening and told me I was probably right and that she was wasting her time trying to get closer to Sr. Raymond. We said 'good night' and went off to bed. The next day, I figured Sr. Leonard would be over her obsession with Sr. Raymond and that now, *I* would truly be her bestie. I stopped by her classroom to see how she was doing. Sister Leonard was in a wonderful mood, smiling from ear to ear. She told me Sr. Raymond apologized

to her and that she just had to forgive her. I read Sr. Leonard's body language. It was telling me, 'Oh, by the way, thanks for listening to me last night. But you were wrong. Sister Raymond loves me as much as I love her. And everything is back to normal so I don't need you anymore.'

Of course, Sr. Leonard didn't actually voice any of this but it was certainly the vibe I was getting. So what could I do? I walked out of her classroom and told myself I would never try to convince Sr. Leonard to forget about her relationship with Sr. Raymond ever again. But who was I kidding? I was a glutton for punishment and kept repeating this behavior over and over. And with each new incident, the same exact thing continued to happen.

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A month before Thanksgiving, I went to see Suzie, the specialized physical therapist. Upon our first meeting, I instantly liked her. Although she was a non-Catholic Christian, Suzie totally respected my vocation as a religious sister. The facility was small and the receptionist, Myra, was sweet. Suzie and her partner, Simon, owned the business and took pride in creating a friendly but professional environment. Given the sensitivity of my condition, I was grateful for the respect they showed me and couldn't have asked for more.

Suzie advised me to receive treatment at least twice per week for ten weeks. I wasn't thrilled but agreed to do it. She reviewed Dr. Ziffer's report, and asked questions about my pain before discussing the material with me and demonstrating exercises that I could do at home. Suzie began treatment with manual manipulation followed by biofeedback. Like Dr. Ziffer, Suzie learned that I had overly active levator muscles that were in constant spasm. On a scale where the normal level of these muscles upon relaxation register as a two, mine were a six! She asked if I had ever had an internal massage either vaginally or anally and I responded with an emphatic 'No.' Since I was unfamiliar with this type of treatment, Suzie didn't begin it

right away. She wanted me to ease back into physical therapy and grow comfortable working with her. I greatly appreciated her kindness and concern. I knew by all of this that I would get along great with her.

A few days later, I returned to see Suzie. She asked how I did with my home exercises and if my pain was any better. I shared that the exercises were challenging and there had been no improvement in pain level. After performing manual manipulation and biofeedback, Suzie noted, “Sister Maryanne, I’m detecting a possible structural problem. There’s something going on with your left side.”

At the time of her questioning, I was already out of my habit and dressed in sweatpants and a T-shirt. While lying on the treatment table on my right side, Suzie began massaging my left hip, buttocks area, left thigh, and foot. As she dug her strong thumbs into my flesh, I finally understood what the hanging meat must have felt when *Rocky Balboa* punched it so hard his hands were covered in its blood!

With all the extra flesh I carried around, you would think I’d be protected from her probing fingers, but no. The pain of her deliberate kneading swept over me, making it nearly impossible to form even a simple sentence. But somehow I mustered up a few words and asked, “What do you mean, exactly?”

“You see,” Suzie said as she indicated where she was referring to by pressing firmly on my left hip and buttocks, “Right here.”

“Oh My Gosh, are you kidding me? That hurts!”

“Oh, sorry Sister, I didn’t mean to hurt you. I just wanted to point out exactly where I’m talking about. You do feel that, don’t you? That something there isn’t quite right. Seems to be a little out of whack, don’t you think?”

But I couldn't answer her; I truthfully couldn't manage a single word. I simply winced and nodded my head in response. "You see," Suzie continued, "That's where the issue is – I mean structurally anyway. You see this left back bone here, and then your pelvis bones? They aren't *sitting* correctly on your frame. They aren't in the correct position," Suzie studied my facial expression and body language before going on, "Okay, you know what? I can see you're in a lot of pain. Why don't we take a five minute break? I'll help you off the table and ask Myra to get you some water. Then we can pick up where we left off. I'll point out all the areas to you. How does that sound, Sister?"

Again, all I could do was shake my head in agreement. Suzie proceeded to rip the latex gloves from her hands and helped me rise to an upright position. She opened the exam room door and asked Myra to bring me some water. I drank it slowly and took a couple of deep breaths. I couldn't wait for this session to be over so I could get the hell out of there. When I finished drinking and breathing deeply, Suzie returned to the room and we continued. She pointed out the exact areas on my body she was referring to and continued with her external massage. Afterwards, she informed me that when I return the following week, she will begin internal massage, first vaginal, then anal, depending upon my comfort level. I thanked her and thought to myself, 'Oh, goodie! Sounds like such fun. Geez, I can't wait!'

* * * * *

The school year was well underway and the relationship between Sr. Leonard and me hadn't changed. I continued caring about her tremendously and wanted desperately to be closer to her. But this didn't happen. Instead, the status quo lived on. I was there for Sr. Leonard as a friend. I gave her my shoulder to cry on whenever she was mad at Sr. Raymond, and I told her what she wanted to hear. The cycle continued with me reaffirming how I felt about her and

assuring her I would be her friend forever. Her response was positive until it all went to hell when she made up with Sr. Raymond and acted as if I didn't exist. This pattern repeated over and over through the year's end and into the New Year.

Shame on me though, for allowing it to happen. My only consolation was that I wasn't aware of it while it was happening. However, I finally woke up after Sr. Leonard and I got into a major argument. At the time, I asked the Lord to give me the grace to do what I needed to do which was to surrender my relationship with Sr. Leonard to Him. I needed to let God be God so that I could refocus on my health, vocation, and the life I vowed to dedicate to Him. I could no longer allow the nuttiness of my friendship with Sr. Leonard to get in the way of what was most important.

* * * * *

The following week I returned to physical therapy. I was about to experience my first internal massage, vaginally and anally. I was so nervous I thought I might pass out or throw up. My hands were actually shaking but as usual, Suzie was both kind and professional. She put me at ease and made me as comfortable as possible. After changing out of my habit and into my sweat clothes, we began. She started in the front first. I won't go into a whole lot of graphic detail here but I'm sure your imagination could fill in the blanks. Basically, Suzie inserted her fingers into my vagina and went up as far as she could go and began massaging me. There was nothing sexual about it and the procedure did not cause any kind of arousal but it sure hurt like hell. I was, once again, in agony. When Suzie moved to the rectum, the procedure was basically the same. Fortunately, the anal pain wasn't as severe as the vaginal. The idea behind the internal massage was to loosen up the levator muscles as much as possible. The desired outcome was to

help these muscles relax, calm down, and spasm less. If we could achieve this, perhaps the burning pain in my abdomen would lessen as well.

Suzie explained that it wasn't going to be *fast* or *easy*. I'd been suffering with chronic pain for several years so I couldn't expect to turn things around after only a few sessions. She asked me to trust her and be patient. What other choice did I have?

I recall a conversation I had with Sr. George after returning from a session with Suzie. I was exhausted from the day's events and decided to grab a cup of coffee before going to bed. I was expecting to be alone but when I entered the kitchen, Sr. George was already there. I knew from previous conversations with her, that she didn't understand my condition or have a clue what my pain was like and the talk we had that evening cemented my beliefs.

“So, Sister Maryanne,” Sr. George began, “Welcome back. How was your physical therapy? You were having some weird kind of thing done tonight, right?”

“Oh, hi Sister George. I'm okay. Thanks for asking. Yeah, I had what Suzie calls an internal massage. It was pretty intense. I'm wiped out and very uncomfortable so I just wanna have a quick cup of coffee and hop right into bed.”

Sister George got this really peculiar look on her face – kind of like half smile, half smirk. She cocked her head to one side and asked, “Internal massage? What do you mean? It sounds really painful.”

“Yes. It was. And it *is* exactly what *it* sounds like. Suzie massaged my pelvic floor muscles internally, going through my vagina first and then my rectum. Believe me, it was no picnic. But what can I do? This burning pain is so awful, I have no choice but to trust Suzie and try whatever treatment she recommends.”

Again, Sr. George made the same expression as before and exclaimed, “Wow! Your pain must really be bad because there is *no* way I would put myself through half of what you’ve tried. There is *no* way I would let anyone do to me what this Suzie and the other doctors did to you. I can’t believe you’re putting yourself through this!”

I was caught off guard. I mean, what in hell was Sister saying? She had no clue what my pain was like. If I thought stripping down to my long johns, painting myself purple, and doing back flips in the church parking lot, would get rid of my pain, I would do it in a heartbeat! I didn’t know how to answer Sister respectfully so I replied, “Well, I sure hope and pray you never experience this kind of pain, Sister. If you could feel even a small percentage of what I feel, trust me, you’d be desperate enough to try just about anything.” She looked at me like I was speaking Greek but didn’t respond so I said ‘good night,’ grabbed my coffee, and swiftly left the kitchen.

When I got to my room, I wanted to scream but instead, cried myself to sleep. Regardless of my physical pain, these were tears of loneliness. I knew Sr. George’s attitude reflected what *all* the sisters at St. Katherine’s felt. And this hurt. But what could I really do about it beyond praying and asking God for the strength to go on? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

A few days later, I called Suzie to let her know I wouldn’t be coming back to physical therapy right away. My response to the internal massaging was the opposite of what I had hoped for. Instead of feeling relief, my pain got much worse. The burning sensation in my abdomen, lower back, left hip, thigh, and leg, was out of control. On a scale from 1 to 10, my pain level was a 50 and that was on a good day! Suzie wasn’t in the office, so I left a message with Myra and went to work at the school. I couldn’t bear the thought of getting more internal massage feeling the way I did. I would later come to realize that when an entrapped or damaged nerve is

roughed up in order to coax it to calm down, it will sometimes *rebel* and overreact. At the time, I was unaware that this is what likely was happening to me.

The next day, while helping a student with his English test, I heard an announcement over the loudspeaker asking that I promptly report to the main office so I excused myself and rapidly proceeded to the office. I was afraid that one of my parents or a relative had become ill. I didn't need another tragedy at that point in my life. The whole way to the office, I prayed that this wasn't the case. When I arrived, Sr. Raymond's secretary, Hillary, told me my physical therapist was holding on line two. I sighed in relief and answered, "Hello, this is Sister Maryanne."

"Hi, Sister, How are you feeling today? I got the message you left with Myra yesterday. What's going on? Why are you postponing future sessions?"

I didn't feel like discussing that topic at the moment. I was right in the middle of helping a student and just wasn't in the mood. I'd been suffering for many years and quite frankly, was sick and tired of it all. I wanted all treatment to stop and didn't want to waste another minute acknowledging the beast that had taken over my life. I was done!

"Well, Suzie, I'm just tired of the whole thing and can't do it anymore or at least not now. Instead of helping me, the massages made me feel worse. Don't know what happened and I'm not even sure I care anymore. I just need a break. I hope you can understand."

"Of course, Sister, I get it. Believe me. I'm really sorry if I was too rough with the massage the other night. I didn't mean to be. But you realize it was our first time trying it. Now that I know the pressure I applied ended up hurting you, the next time I'll lighten up a bit. In the long run, I think you'll see that the massaging and techniques I use are actually helping you."

Exasperated, I took a deep breath in an attempt to release the tension that was building up. I liked Suzie and knew she was determined to help me but I just wasn't feeling well. After a

short pause, I said, “Suzie, listen. I can’t really talk right now. I’m working with a student. Can I call you back later?”

After a prolonged silence which made me wonder whether Suzie had heard me, she replied, “Actually, Sister Maryanne, you are on the schedule for an appointment this evening. I would prefer that you come in, even if you don’t receive any treatment. Maybe we could just sit and talk. There’s something important I’d like to discuss with you, if that’s okay?”

What could Suzie possibly want to tell me that I haven’t already heard before? But what Suzie was about to say, was the key to everything, the answer I’d been searching for. Finally, I would have an accurate diagnosis!

“Yeah, I guess I could come in tonight. I didn’t think I was going to keep my appointment so I’ll have to make sure it’s okay with Sister Raymond. But in the meantime, could you give me a clue as to what you want to talk about? What could be so urgent?”

Suzie took her time and explained, “Sister, I think I finally know what’s causing the burning pain in your pelvis.” After a pause, she continued, “Sister Maryanne, I think you have a condition called pudendal nerve entrapment or *PNE* for short.”

I interjected, “Excuse me, what did you say? A what nerve entrapment?”

“Pudendal nerve entrapment, also called pudendal neuropathy or neuralgia. They’re all pretty much the same thing.”

Of course, I had no clue what she was talking about. I couldn’t even pronounce its name. I finally spoke up and asked, “P–U what? Dengdull? What’s it called? How do you spell it?”

Suzie corrected my pronunciation. “No, not pudengdull but P-U-D-E-N-D-A-L, pronounced pyu-den-del. The pudendal nerve is a tiny, thin, intricate nerve that runs through just about the whole pelvic floor. So it is extremely hard to get to. I think I may have felt part of it the

other night when I was doing your vaginal massage. For some reason, the nerve is either entrapped or damaged. In your case it's probably entrapped as evidenced by the constant spasms of your levator muscles. When this nerve gets pinched, entrapped, or pushed, possibly by the levator muscles against the pelvic floor, it causes pain – a lot of it. And because it's technically considered nerve damage, a burning sensation is a common symptom. This, Sister Maryanne, is what I believe is going on with you. It is a difficult diagnosis to arrive at. And unfortunately, many doctors have no idea what the pudendal nerve even is, let alone what happens when it is entrapped or pinched. So, this would explain why no one has been able to properly diagnose you.”

There was dead silence on my end of the phone. When Suzie wasn't even sure I was still breathing, she asked, “Sister, are you still there? Are you alright? Do you understand what I've just shared with you?”

I couldn't answer her. Was Suzie right about the possible damage to this odd-sounding nerve? Is this really it – the *correct* diagnosis – not from some big shot, fancy, male physician but from a female physical therapist? I couldn't fathom it! Was my journey to find the truth about my condition truly over? I must have been in shock. I finally found my voice and replied, “Yes, Suzie, I'm still here. So what does all of this mean? Where do we go from here? What is the cure for this *PNE*, pudendal nerve entrapment? How do I get the burning pain to stop?”

Suzie hesitated again and answered, “Sorry, Sister, but there *is* no cure. All that we can really do is manage the pain and get the nerve to calm down as much as possible. There are some medications out there that you can try such as *Lyricea* and some others. A lot of bed rest and staying off your feet will also help. Limit the amount of times you go up and down stairs and don't bend forward or backward too often, if you can help it. Don't lift anything heavy and limit

house cleaning, like vacuuming, as much as possible. Keep up with P.T. including the internal massage. We will probably have to try a combination of things like what I just mentioned before we find the right combination that works for you. But I think it's important that we keep searching for an effective treatment that will reduce your burning pain even if it's only by a little bit."

I was speechless, probably for only the third or fourth time ever in my life! But I was honestly dumbstruck. There was *no* cure? Was she serious? How could I go on knowing there was no end to this pain? How was this even possible? I remained silent, giving Suzie the opportunity to continue, "Sister Maryanne, I think it's crucial that you come to the office tonight so that we can discuss this diagnosis some more. And also, I want to refer you to Doctor Nygale, an urogynecologist. She might actually be able to help you more than I can at this point. Doctor Nygale can offer treatment options that I'm not even aware of. I don't know everything about this nerve condition but what I do know, is that time is of the essence. So this is why..."

I cut Suzie off in mid-sentence. Anger began to surface, but it was not meant for Suzie. I was mad at the whole situation and maybe even at Sisters Charles, Rocco, and Angelo for holding me back from receiving treatment while I was a novice. I practically screamed into the phone, "Time is of the essence! Are you kidding me right now, Suzie? Time is of the essence. I've had this awful thing for many years already. My time to turn this thing *around* is probably gone, goodbye! It's been years. As a novice I did nothing to help myself, not even see a doctor. So now, all of a sudden, time is of the essence! I think that's a joke! Actually I think the joke is on me!"

I thanked Suzie and told her I'd see her later. With anger spewing from my pores, I slammed the phone down. I was so agitated that I had to grab hold of a filing cabinet to steady myself before returning to the classroom.

I finished helping my assigned student and with God's grace, managed to make it through the rest of the school day. Once my paperwork was finished, I rushed back to the convent. I hoped and prayed along the way that no one else would be home so that I could go online and research pudendal nerve entrapment. I needed to see for myself, with my own two eyes, if this was even a bonafide condition. I wanted to read about the symptoms and prognosis, and locate a leading specialist. I needed to know all of this as soon as possible.

When I got home, everyone else was still at the school, so the computer in the library was available. I typed P-U-D-E-N-D-A-L nerve entrapment into *Google* and there it was in black and white. About a hundred or so websites popped right up within the first three pages of the search. I couldn't believe it. Oh My Gosh, this was for real! I clicked on the first link which brought me to a website dedicated to the education and medical research about pudendal neuropathy/neuralgia. I scrolled down until I saw a section entitled, "Testimonials." I clicked on it and began reading a story written by a woman a few years younger than I. And as I read *her* story, I discovered my *own*. Healing tears raced down my face in search of my wounded soul.

Chapter Thirty-One

“You have let me sink down deep in desperate problems. But you will bring me back to life again, up from the depths of the earth. You will give me greater honor than before, and turn again and comfort me.” Psalms 70:20-21

For the next three days, I tried to act like my usual self. I didn't want anyone to suspect something was terribly wrong, not even Sr. Leonard. I also continued studying for the exams at the seminary. I wasn't sure what the future would hold if I left the Convent before the summer, so I chose to continue studying. I played it cool at the zoo just as I promised Sr. George. Under different circumstances I would have enjoyed it more, but I did my best to disguise the underlying turbulence in my soul. From that day forward, I spent every free second in the chapel, praying about my decision.

I attempted to contact Fr. James for an appointment but it took him a few days to get back to me. In the meantime, I continued to pray and met with Dr. Davies. He was surprised to hear

what had transpired since our last session, but told me he'd always had a sense about me. Something led him to believe that God may have had other, even greater plans for my life. Perhaps I *was* destined to do something big for the Lord outside of religious life. Doctor Davies told me he would support whatever decision I made, but encouraged me to speak with Fr. James and Sr. Angelo before making a final decision. He didn't want me to have any regrets. I thanked him for his concern and support and left his office. I would never see Dr. Davies again.

The day before I heard back from Fr. James, I realized that my parents needed to know what was going on, and I couldn't put off telling them any longer. They would be key in where I would go and in how I transition from religious to secular life. Sister George gave me permission to call them on the weekend. My parents were flabbergasted by my account of the recent turn of events. They had no idea that things with my health and the sisters had gotten *so* bad. I explained to them that I really didn't want to leave but felt as if Sr. Angelo had given me no other choice. She was aware of my difficulties at St. Katherine's and had the opportunity to *fix* them in some way. She could have transferred me or attempted to step in and do *something!* But she chose to do *nothing*. Sister essentially left me with no other viable choice. My parents knew I struggled with chronic pain and suspected I was having a tough time with some of the sisters, but in no way, shape, or form did they realize circumstances had deteriorated enough to cause me to leave altogether.

My mother and father reassured me of their love and support and told me not to worry about anything. Of course, I could move back in with them. Whatever I needed, all I had to do was ask. They felt horrible for me but were happy for themselves that they'd have me back soon. They missed me so much. It would be fantastic to welcome me home! They shared the news with the rest of my immediate family and their reaction was primarily the same.

Knowing I would go back to that much love and support helped me tremendously during these last few, dark and lonely weeks in the Convent. I felt more alone than ever and was eager to speak with Fr. James, who essentially, was my last stop before taking my final decision to Sr. Angelo. Unless Fr. James strongly opposed my departure from religious life and believed I was making a life-altering mistake, I had every intention of informing Sr. Angelo of my decision to leave as soon as I could meet with her.

The next day was Sunday, June 3rd, and after attending Mass together, we had Eucharistic Adoration. This time was so valuable to me. I asked the Lord for the right words to explain to Fr. James why I believed leaving the Convent was best for everyone involved. I begged Jesus to let me hear Him through Fr. James. His input would be the deciding factor. If Fr. James supported my decision, I would set up a meeting with Sr. Angelo right away. But if Father recommended I take additional time for prayer and discernment, then I would do so.

Following dinner and clean-up, I left for spiritual direction. In the car, I rehearsed exactly what I would tell Father. I wanted to be able to articulate myself in such a way that Fr. James would completely understand what I was asking of him. I didn't want miscommunication to interfere with his judgment.

Once I arrived, Fr. James met me at the front door of the parish office where he served as pastor. Once I began informing him of why I was there, he shared that he wasn't *completely* caught off-guard although he was deeply saddened to hear my news. He said he would support whichever decision I made. If I thought leaving was what was best for the community *and* myself, he would fully support me. However, after speaking with Sr. Angelo, if I decided to stay, he would support that too. He told me that if I prayed a little bit longer and followed my heart, I

couldn't go wrong. I thanked Father for his time and left the office. And just as with Dr. Davies, I would never see Fr. James again.

I took my time driving back to St. Katherine's so I would have time to think and pray. What was I going to do now? Both Fr. James and Dr. Davies supported my decision to leave the Convent. I was advised to follow my heart. But my heart, the very same heart I devoted to Jesus for so long, was telling me it was time to go home to my family.

Sister George was sitting in the library when I finally returned. I asked if I could call Sr. Angelo. She wanted to know why I needed to call her at that late hour on a Sunday night. I told her it was personal and urgent, so Sr. George reluctantly agreed. When Sr. Angelo answered the phone, I asked if she was planning to attend the 8th grade awards ceremony the next day at the school. After Sr. Carmen's death, the sisters set-up a scholarship in her name which was presented each year to a deserving 8th grader who excelled in math and who would go on to attend a Catholic High School. Each year, Sr. Angelo presented the scholarship at the awards ceremony which took place the day before St. Katherine's graduation. Sister Angelo told me she would be there, so I asked if we could meet afterwards. I told her there was something pressing I needed to discuss with her that couldn't wait. Sister agreed to meet with me.

I informed Sr. George that I'd be meeting with Sr. Angelo in the morning here in the convent. Sister appeared curious as to why I needed to see Sr. Angelo right away but didn't ask why. I said 'good night' and spent an hour in the chapel. This was it; I was going to tell Sr. Angelo I was leaving religious life and the Coconut Grove Franciscan Sisters. I figured Sister wouldn't be thrilled but I never expected the reaction I got.

The next day, following the ceremony, Sr. Angelo and I met in the superior's office. This allowed us a bit of privacy in case one of the sisters came home for lunch early. Sister seemed

curious as to why we were meeting. I started out by saying that I spoke to Dr. Davies and Fr. James before asking to meet with her.

In earnest, I pleaded, “Please, Sister Angelo, if I may say something here. What I’m about to tell you is going to be hard enough, so I’m asking you now to please not interrupt me; let me say what I need to before commenting. I would really appreciate that.” I examined Sr. Angelo’s face as she stared at me intensely. I noted the concern as she nodded in agreement.

I continued, “This isn’t easy for me at all and I really do appreciate the time you’re taking to meet with me. There’s no easy way to say this but it must be said.” I paused and took a deep breath. I yanked the handkerchief from the pocket of my habit knowing that, at some point, I might shed some tears. I fidgeted in my chair and talked excessively with my hands as a way to handle the shakiness I felt inside.

I went on, “I need to leave and I need to do so as soon as physically possible. I’ve tried, but I can’t do this anymore. I know I’m not perfect and have made mistakes along the way, but my health has deteriorated and my capacity to deal with it has diminished. I know it’s partly on me because I allowed my pain to affect me in a negative way. I really did try to ignore it and push it away, as you and others have suggested. But it’s just not possible, Sister. I’ve given my all to this life – one hundred and ten percent – and even that, just wasn’t good *enough*. I don’t know exactly what you want or expect from me, but whatever it is, I just can’t live up to it anymore. I’ve prayed long and hard about this, Sister. I’ve also spoken to Doctor Davies *and* Father James, and they both support my decision. This is what I think is best for the Congregation as a whole, for the Delegation, and for me. I imagine you may not be happy about this but I hope you can at least understand where I’m coming from and why I need to do this.”

When I looked over again at Sr. Angelo, tears were in her eyes. She was visibly shaken. She asked if I was finished speaking, and I nodded. Sister Angelo said, “Thanks for sharing all of that with me, Sister. I am very sorry you feel this way and that you believe it is the only option you have. I wish you did not think this way. And I really wish there was something I could say or do to change your mind.” She paused and wiped the tears from her eyes. *My* face was still dry at this point. She went on, “I do respect your decision but I am not sure it is the right thing to do. Actually, I think you are making a big mistake and you are throwing your life away. And I do *not* think it is your call to make. Your life belongs to the Lord and so does your vocation. I do not think this is what is best for you or for us. Actually, I do not know. I think there has to be another way, a chance for us to talk this over and work it out.”

Obviously, Sr. Angelo *heard* everything I said but was she really *listening*? Actually, she wasn't responding the way I thought she would. Based on some of our previous encounters, I didn't expect her to give me a hard time. I thought she might say, something along the lines of, *'Well, Sister Maryanne, I was waiting for you to tell me you wanted to leave. And you know what? You are right. It is time for you to go because of this or that, blah, blah, blah.'* But Sr. Angelo wasn't saying any of this. Instead she was saying some wonderful things about me and expressing reasons for why I should stay, and why walking away due to my health issues wasn't a good enough reason to leave religious life. Now she wants to discuss other possibilities and figure out a way for me to stay.

I responded, “I'm sorry, Sister, if you feel I'm making a mistake but I do think this is the best and right thing to do for all of us. I just can't go on with my health being what it is. And in all honesty, Sister, you have to admit it's not only about my health. There are a lot of things going on here at Saint Katherine's and in other places in the Delegation, that have absolutely

nothing to do with me, and yet I got caught up in the *middle* of them. I can't take it anymore. I can't deal with it another minute longer. And every time something happens, it only adds to my stress which makes my physical condition and pain so much worse. Believe me, this is what's best. I prayed a lot about it and believe this is what God wants for me. It's time, Sister. I need to take care of myself and this is the only way I know how."

Sister Angelo's tears had increased. She wasn't hysterical but I could tell she was distressed and perhaps even hurt personally, as if my leaving was a direct reflection on her leadership as the Delegate Superior. I continued, "Sister, with a chronic condition like pudendal neuropathy, I need distractions in my daily life. Especially since there's no apparent cure for my condition, only ways to manage the pain. You know as well as I do that in religious life there aren't many diversions. I can't just flip on the television or talk on the phone with my mother or a friend whenever I feel like it. I can't go off for the day to sit in the park and read a book whenever I want. I can't go out to the movies and grab a cup of coffee with a friend, to get my mind off of the pain. Don't you see? Back in the *world*, I can do all these things. I can do whatever I want or need to do to help distract myself from the pain. Here, I can't do that. I mean, nowhere in religious life can I do that. And you know this better than anyone. You also know that living here at Saint Katherine's hasn't been easy for me. Maybe you didn't want to hear about it or do anything to accommodate me or improve the circumstances, but it is what it is and you know it. These sisters here don't *get* me. They don't understand what I'm going through and they probably don't even care anymore. And now, *neither* do I. It's just better for all of us if I leave as soon as possible."

Sister wiped the tears that had drenched her face, and soaked the front of her habit. Again, she pleaded, “Tell me what we could have done or could *still* do to make things right for you, Maryanne, so that you do not have to leave. What could we do now?”

I didn’t know how to answer her truthfully. There were countless things I wanted to tell her, but what would be the point? I already made up my mind and wanted out! I replied, “Unfortunately, Sister Angelo, there isn’t much, at this point, that you or anyone else could do. In all honesty, Sister, nothing was ever good enough for you people. I mean, if you or another superior asked me to jump ten feet and I jumped twelve, that still wasn’t *enough*. If asked to jump four feet and I jumped only three and a half because I didn’t feel well, that wasn’t *enough*. Nothing I ever said or did was good *enough*. And that’s the truth, at least from my perspective. I’m sure if you were to ask some of the sisters how *they* see things with me, they would probably see things differently. But this isn’t about *their* perspective. Is it, Sister? It’s about *mine* and how *I* perceived everything. I’m sorry if that hurts you. I don’t mean to hurt you or *any* of the sisters for that matter. But again, it is what it is. Right now, I just need to leave as soon as possible. Please, respect my decision and let me leave in peace. I’d really appreciate that.”

Eventually, Sr. Angelo grew tired and stopped *fighting* me. However, she told me I couldn’t leave right away. I asked Sister why and reminded her that my contract with the school district ended on June 15th and I had hoped to leave that day or the next. It was now June 4th. Sister Angelo told me she couldn’t make it happen in only ten days. She said she needed time to assimilate this news and share it with the other sisters. Also, she would have to call Venice and speak with Mother General. I would have to be dispensed from my temporary vows as they were valid until November 30th. Since I wanted to leave before the vows officially expired, I would need to be dispensed from them. If my leaving wasn’t done properly, I could potentially

have a problem if I ever wanted to get married in the Catholic Church. I told Sr. Angelo I understood but asked her to please do whatever she could to speed up the process. I would sign whatever was necessary to get out right away. She assured me that if I ever wanted to come back, the door would always be open. I told her how much that meant to me, although I didn't foresee that ever happening.

After a long pause and a few more comments back and forth, Sr. Angelo concluded, "Well, Maryanne, I hope you know what you are doing, and that you are not making a big mistake. I also hope and pray that you really did not have a religious vocation. Because if your call to religious life was really what God wanted from you and now you are throwing it all away, I feel sorry for you because someday *you* will have to answer to God for that!"

I was stunned! I knew in my heart that Sr. Angelo wasn't saying it out of anger or to be spiteful; she was saying it out of hurt. But it still stung. Before I had the chance to respond, while turning away from the window and sighing loudly, she continued, "But you know what? If you really did have a vocation and we squashed it out of you, then I guess *I* have to answer for that!"

Wow! There it was, the only admission I would ever receive from Sr. Angelo or any of the sisters about their responsibility and the part they played in my decision to leave.

After a pronounced stretch of silence, I added, "Well, you know what Sister? Maybe *both* of those statements are true, in which case we *both* will have to answer to God." She nodded her head in agreement. Then Sr. Angelo instructed me to tell Sr. George and Sr. Louis. She would take care of telling the others, after notifying her Council of my decision. I said 'okay', and told her I didn't want anyone outside of the Delegation to learn of my imminent departure. In other words, I didn't want any of our lay friends or acquaintances to find out I was leaving ahead of time. I didn't want a fuss made about it and I didn't want to have to explain why I was leaving.

Some of the lay people were busybodies, so I didn't want them all up in my business. Sister agreed and told me she would be in touch once she reached out to Mother General. I thanked her for her time and that was it. Sister Angelo left the convent and I went straight to the chapel.

During my time with the Lord on this particular, beautiful spring day, I felt God's presence engulf me. A waterfall of His grace draped over me, and I basked in a peace that surpassed all understanding. Never in my entire life had I experienced so much peace, not before entering religious life and not during the eight years I'd spent with the sisters. It felt as if I was surely doing the right thing, even if it would prove to be painful for the sisters and me. I hoped and prayed that my departure date would not drag out too far beyond June 15th. I wanted *out* and I wanted *out* now!

Epilogue

“Let not your heart be troubled. You are trusting God, now trust in me. There are many homes up there where my Father lives, and I am going to prepare them for your coming.” John 14:1-3

November 30th of every year is still remembered as the day I made temporary vows. Even though I didn't remain in the Convent, I still think of this day as my profession anniversary. I still count the years, months, and days since leaving the Coconut Grove Franciscan Sisters. And I still treasure the gift of being *set apart* for Christ within a religious community for all those years. That gift lives in me and will never die.

As I'm sure you can imagine, life since leaving the Convent has neither been easy nor perfect. But that's okay because Jesus never promised us perfection in this life. His life on earth, by our standards, was anything but that.

Over the past decade, I've come to discover so much about myself, chronic pain, pudendal neuropathy, and the integral role of family, friends, and faith, in navigating the

challenges of life on this earth. I'd like to think that the knowledge I've gained has made me a wiser person, better able to impart that knowledge on those who follow. I know, for sure, that I am better equipped now to offer understanding, forgiveness, compassion, and the love of Christ to those in need.

So much has happened in my life since that mid-June day back in 2007. Along with my Master's Degree, I became certified through the Diocese of Trenton in the Pastoral Care of the Sick and Dying. A few years after that, I became a Certified Christian Life Coach.

Following the death of my father in 2012 and after working for the northern New Jersey parish for over five years, I took another parish ministerial position at a church closer to my home, where my mother and I still take care of each other. At the time of this writing, I am no longer working in full-time church ministry. I now work part-time caring for an elderly neighbor.

I continue treatment with my awesome and brilliant pain management specialist and today I am thankfully feeling pretty good. The pain caused by my *PN* is under control and this pleases me very much. The road to this point hasn't been without its challenges but the Lord has continually been good to me. He was with me throughout my eight years in the Convent and has been with me throughout the thirteen years since leaving. No doubt, He will be with me for the remainder of my years here on earth.

So, for those of you reading this memoir who are struggling through some dark time in your life – hang in there – don't ever give up! No matter what your pain may be, whether it's physical pain such as the kind caused by a chronic illness like pudendal neuropathy; whether it's the pain of a failed marriage; the loss of a loved one; or the breakup of a cherished friendship; whatever it may be, it doesn't have to take over your life as long as you cling to the Lord and allow Him to cling to you. If you let Him, Jesus Christ will see you through.

Always remember that our life here on earth is relatively short. We are not meant to live forever. We are only *sojourners* passing through. Remember what I shared from Dr. Naggety's class, that we are *outfitted* for Heaven. We spend our life here on earth preparing for our union with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in Eternal Life.

Challenges and struggles are plentiful as we live out our lives. Jesus, too, endured pain and hardships typical of His time in history. But remember, when we crouch in the corner, we are only seeing the *back*; we are only seeing a small *part* of the *wider* picture. Someday, Jesus will take us gently by the hand and bring us to the *other* side, where we will *take in* the whole picture, the front of the picture where beauty abounds, the details of our life woven together, a creation of our own in union with our Creator.

So, whatever is going on in your life, don't ever forget where you are right *now*. Remember you won't always be *there*; someday you will be on that *other* side. But in the meantime, while you wait for the Lord to finish *outfitting* you for Heaven, try to enjoy as much of your life here on earth as best as you possibly can – BEHIND THE TAPESTRY. God Bless!