

CHAPTER 17

Fortunately for Father O'Neill, T. Wallace Barrington had arranged for him to fly back to the Twin Cities from Ely, the nearest town with an airport large enough to accommodate his corporate jet. But Father O'Neill would have to hurry. The plane was already there, fueled and ready to go. Quickly, he threw his garment bag inside his rental car and thanked his host for his "hospitality, assistance, and advice."

Those were his very words. He nearly choked on them.

"You need to get a handle on this situation quickly, Liam," Mr. Barrington told him in parting. "It can't be allowed to interfere with our plans. You must go ahead with the announcement tomorrow night. Otherwise, I may have to reconsider my offer."

"That may not be possible," Father O'Neill protested. "People might think it in poor taste to hold a celebration the day after such a tragic event."

"It is an unfortunate circumstance, indeed," Mr. Barrington acknowledged. "But I have already set plans in motion. I've contracted with a PR firm from Chicago to manage things after the announcement. If news of the university's rebranding should leak to the press before your announcement, it will prove embarrassing to everyone involved. I would have to withdraw my substantial support." He cleared his throat. "And if I do, the banks may question whether the University in fact has the full two hundred and sixty million to back the bonds, in which case an investigation would ensue. Think about that, Liam, before bending to the whims of the public."

Choosing to let the matter go for the moment, Father O'Neill said one last goodbye before getting behind the wheel of his car and driving off. He raced the fifty miles back to the old mining town turned resort and art

community. Along the way, he tried to call Ray Weems again on his cell phone but couldn't get through. Another call to his assistant Matthew also failed. He wasn't used to the spotty cell coverage in the north woods.

Arriving in Ely, he pulled into the parking lot of a Super 8 Motel on the west side of town where he had registered under an assumed name. Checking out, he stowed his suitcase in the trunk of the rental car alongside his garment bag, and then trotted across the road to the Northland Nursing Home. There remained one last thing to do before leaving town. He hoped Barrington's people would hold the plane for him.

Built on a slight rise overlooking the highway and nestled at the edge of a vast wood of birch and pine, the senior home consisted of a central administration building with two long patient wings jutting off at an angle from either side. Outside, a handful of residents lolled on benches or rocked in chairs beneath large shade umbrellas. Immediately, Father O'Neill caught their attention as he came up the drive. A few of them said "good morning" to him.

"Good morning," he replied, and then slipped inside.

At the main reception station, he stopped to make an inquiry.

"Excuse me, is Declan Coughlan up yet?"

The heavyset nurse behind the desk looked up and, recognizing him, smiled kindly.

"Well, welcome back, Mr. Nobles, good to see you again," he said. "Yes, I believe Mr. Coughlan is awake. He should have just finished breakfast. Will you be taking him for a walk as usual? If so, I'll have one of the aides bring you a wheelchair."

"No, not today, thank you," Father O'Neill explained as he signed the guest book with the name William Nobles and took a visitor's pass. "I only have a few minutes."

Briskly, he walked down the corridor to the left of the station until he arrived at Room 48 East. Inside, sitting quietly in a lounge and staring out the window, he found a shriveled old man wrapped in blankets despite the warm summer weather. Red geraniums and yellow snapdragons dancing in the wind just outside his room had caught his attention.

“Declan?” Father O’Neill said to the room’s lone occupant, pulling up a chair next to him.

“Lovely,” the old man said, not noticing him. “The garden is so lovely this time of year.”

“Yes, it is,” Father O’Neill agreed, although he doubted the old man was even aware he had company. “The view from your window is beautiful.”

These last words alerted the old man to Father O’Neill’s presence.

“Oh, Father,” he said, turning his head slightly toward him and extending a limp hand in gesture of greeting. “So good of you to come to see me. It’s been a long time.” His age and infirmity hadn’t seemed to affect the soft Irish lilt of his words.

Gently, Father O’Neill took the old man’s hand and looked into his dull gray eyes. They were distant and unfocused.

“Declan, I saw you yesterday,” he said to him. “Don’t you remember?”

“Yesterday?” the old man replied, confused. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Father O’Neill assured him. “I took you for a walk. In the garden.”

Pointing a long, gnarled finger in the direction of the window, he asked, his voice quavering, “Out there?”

“Yes, out there, don’t you remember? We reminisced about our days together at St. Ignatius’s School. I asked you what you recalled about the incident involving Father Paul and the boy. Remember?”

A flicker of recollection swept over the old man’s face.

“Father Paul?” he said. “Father Paul? Yes, I remember Father Paul. A wicked, wicked man.” He turned back toward Father O’Neill. “Where did you end up sending him?”

“Never mind that,” Father O’Neill answered. He was finding it hard to keep patience with his fellow priest and countryman. He had been over this same ground with him more than once during the past few days. He simply needed to know what the old man could remember.

“Tell me. Do you recall what happened between Father Paul and the boy?”

“Father Paul and the boy?” the old man repeated. “Why, yes. Yes. I remember. What that man did to that child was awful. Simply awful. Please tell me he isn’t still a priest, is he?”

“No, Declan,” Father O’Neill assured him. “He was defrocked.” Then he moved in close to the old man. “But do you remember who else might have known about him and the boy? Did you tell anyone else?”

“Anyone else?” he asked, the old man suddenly confused again. “Anyone else what?”

Growing frustrated, as he had so many times before over the preceding days, Father O’Neill tried to lay out the essential points in the hope they would revive his memory.

“Listen to me, Declan,” he told him. “There’s me, Father O’Neill. I was the headmaster. I knew. Then there’s you, Father Declan Coughlan. You knew.”

Vaguely, the old man seemed to connect with the sound of his own name.

“Then there’s Father Paul and the boy. The boy Simon Peters. Of course, they knew.”

“Oh, poor Simon Peters,” the old man moaned.

“Yes, Declan, poor Simon Peters,” Father O’Neill agreed. “But besides the four of us, who else might have known? It’s terribly urgent you tell me.”

“Who else?”

“Yes, I need to know,” Father O’Neill demanded. “Someone else knows. Whoever he is, he’s blackmailing me.”

“He?”

“I assume,” Father O’Neill said. It seemed logical his blackmailer was a man, possibly someone else who had attended St. Ignatius’s at the time. “But tell me. Who else might you have told?”

“Who?”

For the love of God, Father O'Neill thought, nearing the breaking point of his patience. Time was growing short. He needed to press the old man hard.

"Father Paul never confessed it to anyone. At least as far as I know. And the boy assures me he said nothing. That leaves you, Father Coughlan. I know it's difficult, but you must remember whether you told anyone else."

His eyes darting back and forth, confusion reigned on Father Coughlan's face, as if in search of a memory just out of reach.

"I remember you, Father," he said, pointing to Father O'Neill. "You come see me."

"Yes, Declan, I'm Liam," Father O'Neill replied. "I come see you. Often. We're old friends."

"And I remember Father Paul," Father Coughlan continued. "Don't like him. I hope he doesn't come see me."

"No, Father," Father O'Neill promised him. "You won't be seeing him again."

"And I remember the boy," Father Coughlan told him. "The boy Simon Peters. Poor child."

"Yes, Declan, yes, you do remember. Now tell me what else you remember."

"And I remember another man," the old man then spoke haltingly. Father O'Neill's hopes brightened. "He wore a red cap." He put a hand to his head to emphasize it. "And he had dots on his face."

"Dots?" Father O'Neill asked, confused.

"Freckles, uh, m-moles, I think," Father Coughlan tried to clarify, clearly confused himself.

A red cap and freckles? Father O'Neill asked himself. *Who could that be?*

"Who, Declan? Who was this man?"

"He came to see me last week, I believe."

Last week? Feeling himself getting closer to an answer, Father O'Neill grilled the old man some more.

"Yes, I understand he came to see you last week, Declan. But who was he?"

James W Bennetts

“He sat right there,” Father Coughlan said, patting the window ledge next to his chair. “He sat right there and spoke to me.”

“*Jesus*,” Father O’Neill swore. “Do you *remember* who it was?”

Suddenly, the old man looked at him as if he were insane.

“Why, of course I remember who it was, Father. You just said his name yourself.”

Incredulous at Father Coughlan’s response, Father O’Neill nearly lost his temper until it occurred to him that perhaps the old priest had merely mistaken a present-life visitor for a heavenly vision of his Savior.

“What a blessing, Declan. What did he say to you?”

“What did he say?”

“Yes, Declan, what did Jesus say?”

Seemingly struggling once more with vague memories, an old look of confusion returned to Father Coughlan’s face. Then he drew a long breath and spoke once more.

“I think he said he’s coming again.”

“Coming again?”

“Yes, yes,” the old man said emphatically. “I remember. He said he is coming again. To judge us. To judge us all.”

Copyright 2022 James W Bennetts

Buy a copy of CATECHISMS
<https://store.bookbaby.com/profile/jameswbennetts>