

A Beginning

The boy stood on a landing looking down on the gym. The basketball court looked like a very large garage or more likely a building that had been converted into a gym perhaps once a storeroom or an unfinished addition to the fine, muscular Spanish style stucco buildings that made up the compound.

He walked down the stairs. Looked like a gym. Why had he thought it too small? Polished floors. Benches against the cement walls. Windows up against the ceilings. There was a basketball on the floor. He picked it up and tossed it towards one end. Edgy, he looked at his mom. "Can I shoot some free throws, Mom?"

"Sure," she smiled. He went to the far side of the cracker box with hoops at both ends and bounced the ball twice, three times, paused....and set. The ball swished through the net, no rim. He smiled. Not bad.

"Can I bring my own basketball," he asked his mother. She looked at the man in the robe and then at her son. "I think so, but they must have their own balls. Brother?"

"He can bring his own ball," he said. The Brother Director had a huge head and bobbed it around as he spoke. The boy's mother liked him, though. They had talked about their common majors in college: English Literature. The boy was left for awhile in his own thoughts as they discussed Beowulf and Milton.

Leaving the gymnasium, they walked up the stairs to the main hallway, turned and went towards the front entrance. The large, wooden doors looked out over the Napa Valley. Down to the vineyards, to a field, down to a small, muddy lake, down between a "v" in the hills to the valley below. The panarama was spectacular.

"What a wonderful view, Brother," his mother said. Brother Michael was charming. He put a protective arm around her shoulder and said, "He will be fine here. He will learn, grow and become a fine young man." The boy wished his mother would say something like, "He is already a fine young man," but she was anxious to leave now.

She kissed him goodbye. "Be good, my big boy. I'll see you in a couple of weeks." Another hug, into the car and away, down the road to the gnarly trees, the creek and Spanish moss everywhere.

The boy stood there with Brother Michael, watching his mother's car disappear around the bend. A vague feeling of foreboding flooded him. He mustn't cry.

"We have visitations the second Sunday of the month. You will see her soon." The boy looked one more time before turning around, walking back through the big doors. A rather large, red haired young man was in the foyer. "Son," Brother Michael introduced him, "Bill will be your 'guardian angel' and show you the ropes." Brother Michael disappeared around the corner of the room whistling an unfamiliar tune.

Bill Stopper. Tall, rather stern but friendly, shook hands. "Let me take you around the Mont," he said. "The Mont" was a one stop shopping place for the good Brothers. Boarding School, Novitiate, winery and last stop for old monks. "Let's start at the dormitory. I'll show you your bed.

"My bed," he thought. "My bed? I only have a bed?"

The rest of the afternoon was a tour of the grounds, the classrooms, the "common room" the "refectory" and the dormitories. This place had a small swimming pool too. Bill explained that at certain times there was recreation and the students could use the pool. He mentioned one of the teachers that had been a world class swimmer in college. "Brother Vincent is a sports fanatic and our coach. We play all the sports. Brother Michael said you liked basketball. We have a very good team. Occasionally teams from other Brother schools come to play us and we have won our share."

The boy had to learn a new vocabulary. The refectory was where everyone ate. Five long tables and one in front perpendicular to the rest. It was called the "High Table." The Common Room was a large area full of carefully placed desks, all in a row, all the same. A large desk at the front on a platform faced the rest of the room. In the back was a sparsely furnished office with windows. It was empty. It looked suspiciously like a place that someone could view the students at study or fooling around. The boy filed this away for the future.

Next was the dormitory. Bill said, "This is your bed." 60 iron bed frames with perfectly made up sheets, blankets and pillows were lined up in perfect rows in a large room. In the back, a bathroom of immense proportions with urinals and stalls.

As they walked down the stairs, Bill put his arm around the boy. He instructed, “We have prayer in 45 minutes in the chapel, down the hall there. Why don’t you walk around the garden until then? Come in when the bell rings.”

The boy looked at the receding figure of his angel. He walked to the big double door leading out to the garden. He wandered around looking at the plants, flowers. An old man, looking dirty and disheveled wearing the traditional robe and little white thing in front, was bending over some flowers and making grunting sounds.

“Hi,” the boy said. The man didn’t move, didn’t speak. “Hi,” the boy said again. No response. As he walked away, the man mumbled something not quite intelligible and pointed to an alcove in a corner of the garden. The boy walked over, sat down on a bench and stared at the most beautiful plant he had ever seen.

It was a vine, resplendent, radiant with purple blossoms and wrapped around a mural of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

The bell rang. The boy hesitated for a moment, gave one last look at the plant and followed some other boys to the chapel, head down, respectful, worried.