

Love's Surprises

Chapter Two The First Step – A Bold Leap Forward

The evening was lovely, the weather glorious; the end of the first warm day of a long cold spring. The brilliant red sun was sinking into the western horizon well beyond the bay to the limit of the eye's vision of the ocean. Shane and Katie walked hand in hand and strolled briskly toward the priest house to keep their appointment with Father O'Malley. Shane had promised Katie that they would meet with Father O'Malley twice a week for six months to try to iron out the wrinkles in their relationship. They had been an item on and off for the past six years since they graduated from university. While they weren't quite engaged, they were deeply in love and genuinely pledged to each other.

Katie instinctively knew that their relationship could be better. She wanted to be able to commit to a better relationship before committing to marriage. At times she wondered if this could be a fiction, something culled from the romance of the literature she read so intensely on the way to her doctorate. She had no illusions about perfection but, short of that, why not work together to make their relationship as good as it can possibly be? She saw these next months as a blessing, and an incredible teaching and learning opportunity.

Shane also thought this was an incredible opportunity but he approached it like a typical male. He had no idea what to expect but he was very proud that he had thought of it. They started a bit later than they planned. Besides being hailed as a hero for his daring rescue of the Nina G fishermen, Shane had a bout with pneumonia as an outcome of his battle with the North Atlantic. Apparently, only a Shakespeare character could bare his chest to the storm without suffering consequences. Shane had spent most of a full night exposed to the frigid waters and the winds of a raging storm, thanks to the notoriously cruel North Atlantic.

The adulation he received was almost as cruel as his illness. Hailed as a hero, he knew well the fear he experienced in the face of death. His pneumonia was cured in ten days. The celebration of the conquering hero just went on and on. He would never have a wall big enough for the honors, trophies, plaques, and citations he received. He knew it was important, though, because financing Sea Rescue depended on the generosity of the people for free will contributions and the courage of volunteers who would, at times when recruited, be called upon to risk their lives. Being hailed as a hero was a small price to pay for the contributions that would inevitably follow.

It was not a great time to be a priest in Ireland. Ireland had a lot of dirty little secrets and the pedophilia of some priests was just one of them. The Church was rapidly losing credibility and its position of power among the Irish people. Liam O'Malley, however, was liked by everyone and especially so by Shane and Katie. He was a real people person and that was his priestly charism. He was in his mid forties and ordained about eighteen years. He was old enough to have made all the mistakes and experienced enough to have learned something from most of them. He could easily be described as a holy priest. He was prayerful and humble, led a beautiful Mass, and gave short but great homilies.

He walked the streets of the town every day and would drive to the outlying farms in the hills at least once a week. He visited the sick, comforted the troubled, relieved the anxieties of the desperate, counseled the confused, and forgave the sinners. With all of this, he had still had time for daily prayer as well as a ritual stop at the Glowing Lantern for a pint before dinner. He had mastered the *ministry of being* and was there for everyone if only to share sympathy, a bite to eat, and a drink of the dark brown brew. He believed that the people of his town and parish encountered the risen Christ when they encountered him. He saw himself as the vessel for this, even if only a vessel of clay. His visibility was an extension of the Sunday Mass and homily. There were no lost sheep in the parish. He knew everyone personally and treated everyone with dignity whether or not they attended his church. He had lunch with the pastor of the Church of Ireland parish every Tuesday. Rev. Garvey was Liam's guest at the pub more and more frequently as he became comfortable with the respect offered to him. During this past Lent, instead of the customary pint, the two shared cups of tea with Irish soda bread almost every day. Over the door to the dining room was a wooden sign inscribed with Elizabethan script, "*And they recognized him in the breaking of the bread.*"

Shane and Katie practically danced up the few stairs to the porch of the Rosseville Church parish house. "Have you ever been here before?" Katie asked Shane. "I wonder how he lives. Life was pretty grand for the priests at Leveegee."

"Aye, I have been here before, Katie. You won't find anything pretentious in this house," responded Shane.

Fr. O'Malley answered the door himself, warmly greeted the couple, and invited them into his parlor. He was wearing an open collared white shirt and a red cardigan sweater.

Shane was right. There was nothing pretentious about this house. It was neat and clean. He had a housekeeper come in once a week for cleaning and Hoovering. There were no dishes in the sink. Katie knew that Fr. O'Malley prepared his own breakfast after Mass each morning. One of the parishioners provided dinner each evening and O'Malley cleaned up after himself. The parlor where they would talk was lined with books and the furniture was ordinary leather, durable and easy to keep clean. Katie was impressed with the priest's library. Indeed, he was extremely well-read, perhaps even a scholar. Katie knew nothing of his academic background other than his studies at Maynooth. She was always impressed with his sermons and conversational commentary on national and international events. She only came to Mass at the parish church when she attended with Shane. Otherwise, she preferred the convenience and community of the Newman Center at the University. Shane also was a frequent visitor to the University chapel.

The table in the dining room was hand made and distressed, hewn from driftwood ordinarily found on the strand. There was a mirrored buffet and a couple of extra chairs around the room. The small tea table in the parlor was also built from driftwood. She did not look further for fear of invading Fr. O'Malley's privacy but the house was really neat and definitely furnished by and for male tastes.

"I am so glad that you have chosen to do this," exclaimed O'Malley. "I have long admired your obvious affection for each other. I know we can all do better in our relationships, and you have taken a strong first step to doing that. I want to recommend a

format that will help us. It is the communications tool used by Marriage Encounter, a program devised in Spain to help people improve their marriages. The Marriage Encounter is usually a weekend retreat but since we don't yet have Marriage Encounters in Ireland, we'll make do using the two days a week."

"The tool is to write letters to each other about the topic planned for discussion. You will read each other's letters and then share your thoughts and reactions with each other. My role is to facilitate further communication after you have shared with each other. You will also have the opportunity to reflect on the days between our meetings and continue the discussions as necessary. I will assign topics related to the standard issues of most marriages, but I also want to concentrate first and foremost on the issues that you feel are important to you. Among the subjects you will have an opportunity to discuss with each other are your attitudes toward life, ambitions, goals, attitudes about God, sex, money, children, family, and your role in the church and community. Personal reflection and couple discussion are the main focus. I will stay out of the way and only comment when you require me to do so. Each relationship is unique so don't feel that you have to fall into some kind of pre-determined strata. All you will need is lots of paper and pencils or pens, plus your imagination. The sky is the limit. You can talk about anything and everything. Remember, you are talking to each other and this is something you will have to do for the next fifty or sixty years. This is specifically designed to give you the opportunity to talk honestly and intensely about your future together.... an opportunity to discover a deeper appreciation of your relationship and God's call to unite in a permanent union, the Sacrament of Matrimony."

Katie was both intrigued and relieved. The last thing she wanted was to be lectured at and placed into some kind of ecclesiastical pigeon hole. This strategy opened all kinds of horizons including how they were going to talk to each other for the rest of their lives. Shane was equally intrigued but anxious. He wasn't used to sharing his private and personal thoughts and feelings and was concerned about how he would do this. This was at the root of the conflict he was having with Katie in the first place. But something like this was exactly what he asked of Fr. O'Malley. He also knew what the first paragraph of his letter would be.

"Well, what do you think?" said Fr. O'Malley. Shane was practicing the art of keeping his mouth shut to allow Katie to speak first. "I like it," said Katie. "We have been through so much in our relationship from latent adolescence in college, careers and graduate studies through to the threat of death twice in the same week. We need to learn to talk to each other. I really like loving him but I want that to grow every day."

"It is going to take a lot of work for me to do that," said Shane. "I am not sure I know how to share my intimate thoughts and feelings. Katie, please be patient with me. I'll try my best but I know it won't come easy. My reluctance to speak what I feel is what brought us here tonight. Instead of saying what I mean, I end up saying something stupid and sometimes hurtful trying vainly to be funny."

"It will come," said O'Malley. "I have a lot of confidence in both of you. It's getting late. Try to identify the hot issues that trouble you the most and write about them. Don't share until you come back on Friday. I'll help you work through the first sessions, but I really want to be in the background so you can talk to each other."

“Thanks, Father. We’ll see you on Friday.”

Friday arrived very quickly because of busy lives and the time they spent thinking about and writing their letters to each other. They settled themselves in Fr. O’Malley’s comfortable parlor. He had prepared tea with soda bread for snacks. “A nice touch,” thought Katie, “I wonder when he had time to do that.”

Katie’s letter was predictably longer and was fundamentally a continuation of the conversation they were having on the night the Nina G went down. She laid out all of her concerns about being put down and her need to have her dignity as a person recognized.

Shane’s letter was much shorter. He wrote about his fear of communicating his feelings. “I am the son of a fisherman.” wrote Shane. “My da never communicated much of anything. First of all, he was at sea weeks at a time. He was such a private person when he was home and I think my ma was relieved to see him off to sea again. I think he was relieved to be at sea just to enjoy the aloneness of a seaman. When I talk with my mates, I have something to talk about. Business, politics, sports or just joking around, making noise with no one really caring what I was saying. When I talk with you Katie, I have problems expressing myself. I have deep feelings for you. I just have difficulty putting them into words. ‘I love you’ seems too trite...not nearly enough to articulate the enormity of my respect, my gratitude, my appreciation, and my affection for you.”

Tears started to roll down Katie’s cheeks as she read his letter.

“Oh God, I hope I haven’t offended you,” said Shane.

“Shane, I am not offended. I’ve been waiting six years to hear these words from you. I only hope you know what they mean to me and what you mean to me.”

Shane was deeply relieved and elated. He had no idea how she would accept him writing those things. Katie reached over and gave him a hug while she reached for the tissues that Fr. O’Malley placed on the tea table for them. O’Malley, for his part said nothing. It was almost as if he wasn’t in the room.

“Shane, I learned something writing my letter and now reading yours. I am dictating to you what I want from you, and that is probably a good thing. While it is important to me not to feel put down, it is also important that you do not consider me your superior or boss. I want our relationship to be truly egalitarian and as I reflect on my nagging you, I am assuming a superior role. I don’t want that either.”

“I never thought of that in that way, Katie,” said Shane. “Maybe it is my own way of feeling inferior. Feeling a little helpless in the face of you, I think I just accepted whatever you said as inspired. I sure it would have bothered me in fifty or sixty years.”

“More like five or six months,” interjected Fr. O’Malley.

Shane and Katie were both startled to hear his voice. Up to now, it was almost as if they were in the room by themselves.

“One of the things you will have to work on for the rest of your lives is recognizing and dissolving the resentments that we give to each other. You will have to call each other on it and be ready to explain why you resent it. Apologies will be in order.”

“With a firm purpose of amendment,” laughed Katie.

“Aye,” said Fr. O’Malley. “If that worked better, I would be out of the forgiveness business. God doesn’t expect perfection. He does expect us to do our part to grow. He must be very pleased with the pair of you tonight. That was a remarkable two hours. Thank you for letting me be part of it.”

Katie and Shane left the parish house feeling very good about the evening and their sharing with each other. It was a little after 11:00 PM and Shane offered that she stay overnight and have a snack and a drink at the Glowing Lantern.

“You are not going to get frisky, are you,” asked Katie?

Shane laughed. “No,” he said. “I don’t feel frisky. If our experience of this night can be replicated for fifty years, I’ll just be content to have you close to me.”

“Shane, you are a remarkable man. I want that too.”

To be continued

Raymond D. Aumack

(973) 746-3474

rdaumack@aol.com

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