

WHEN WALLS WEEP

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Thomas Donaldson, Stirling's mayor, lived on the west side of town, and so was unaware of the plywood sign that had appeared a few hours earlier on the east side, across from the State Forest, announcing, "NOAH'S ARK. COMING SOON TO THIS LOCATION." Hank Guenther, who made part of his living painting signs and who happened to be chairman of the town's zoning committee, called Thomas at his law office.

"Don't mean to bother you none," Hank said, "but George McBurney's put up the damnedest sign. It's on his property, but it's an eyesore. The kerning ain't right at all."

"The what?" Thomas didn't know the word, and did not appreciate Hank's alarm.

"The kerning. The doo-dads at the top of italic lettering. It's wrong."

Thomas chuckled impatiently. "Not everyone's an artist, Hank."

"That's not all, Thomas. It says Noah's Ark is coming soon. What's that mean? No way we're going to allow no water park here. They've got one over in Johnsville, and it causes one helluva traffic jam every darn day all summer. Ugly, too. You can't allow that across from the Forest. It's not right."

"Hold on, Hank. I don't know what you're talking about. George hasn't said anything to me about a water park or an Ark or whatever it is, and I can't imagine he would make a big decision like that without asking my advice. Let me talk to him. I'll find out what's up."

When he'd been elected a year ago, Thomas, a moderate conservative like most of his constituents, had thought that being mayor would both give him a chance to transform Stirling and serve as a stepping stone to the state senate. Stirling teetered on the precipice of ex-urban ruin: it could retain its small-town character and die a slow, economically-deprived death, or it could be bull-dozed into the newest, and furthest-out Milwaukee suburb. Thomas's plan was to

straddle these two unholy ends by designing a showplace community, an arts, antiques and historical destination, the sort that would draw retirees from the suburbs of Milwaukee and Northern Illinois, but he spent most of his mayoral time--it was not a paid position—using his legal skills to resolve such intra-citizenry issues as who was awarded the contract for the town's holiday lights and whether or not the Rotary should get a beer and wine license for its corn and brat festival.

"Okay," Hank said, "but I'm telling you, Thomas, people in this town will not sit still for no water park."

Thomas put the receiver down and looked out the window of his office on the town square just in time to see his wife of twenty-four years, local liberal and community activist, Daphne Hotchkiss, striding up the sidewalk. She seldom visited him during the work day; she must've heard--she was always a few rumors ahead of him. Even at a distance, he could see her powerful green eyes etching the glass, searching for him, her bushy brown eyebrows arching high on her forehead in anticipation. Tented by unruly auburn curls with sporadic strands of gray, Daphne's face braved the world naked, without bangs or make-up. Her complexion was lightly tanned, but not weathered, the shade of someone who paid careful attention to the weeds of her garden, who didn't hide from the world and encouraged others not to, either. Thomas heard the tinkle of the bell as she walked in, followed by the pleasant muffled tones of her conversation with his secretary.

There was a perfunctory knock before the door opened. "Hi, honey," Daphne said with the mischievous enthusiasm she usually saved for a particularly juicy protest.

"I heard," he said, sighing and putting aside of stack of legal documents.

"Oh," she said. "Still, it's quite something, isn't it?"

"Hank called and thinks it's an eyesore. Something about the lettering being off-kilter and the fumes from the traffic stifling the Forest."

She rested her elbow on his desk. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Noah's Ark."

"I was talking about the BVM."

For the second time that day, Thomas felt as if he'd lost his mother tongue. "What?"

"Martha Downing said she saw the Blessed Virgin Mary--you know," she said, knocking on the desk as if to wake him up, "the Mother of God? Merry Christmas, Away in a Manger, Ave Maria?"

"I didn't hear you," Thomas said, mildly vexed that a Unitarian like Daphne should think that a former altar boy like himself wouldn't know the BVM, and that someone like Martha, one of the most annoying of Stirling's small band of Roman Catholics, should be given this fuel for her evangelistic fire.

"Martha was walking her dog along Morningside Drive, where it crosses under the railroad tracks, and she saw an apparition. On the cement wall of the underpass, like a painting."

Thomas looked at her blankly.

"Mr. Mayor, aren't you going to say anything?" He knew that Daphne used "Mr. Mayor" to taunt him, and that she was delighted to stand opposed to him on almost every political topic. It had been that way since they'd met, on opposite sides of the street--literally--when Ronald Reagan came to The Pfister Hotel in Milwaukee in 1979.

"Doesn't sound like it has much to do with me," he said. "Martha can see whatever she wants to see. Isn't that your thing--freedom to have and to hold absurd, obscure and just plain wacky ideas?"

"Alright then, if you don't care about the BVM's appearance, what do you know about the Ark?"

Of course she'd heard. "Just what the sign says," he confessed. "Hank seems to think it's going to be a water park. Beats me. What could George be thinking? A life-size replica of a religious myth? We'll be the laughing stock of the state."

"Maybe he thinks he's helping," Daphne said, holding her palms up, like an offering of hope. "Building a family tourist attraction."

He pointed his index finger at her, but retracted it when her eyes bulged. "You can't support him," he said, shaking his head. "That kind of attraction is not in my development plan."

"I have to support his individual rights, even if I don't like what he intends to do with them." She bowed her chin, then looked up, a wry flirtation.

"His rights are to express his religious beliefs, not to build a commercial monstrosity." The last thing he needed in the middle of his senate campaign would be a public fight with his wife. As it was, they amused the entire county at election time, dividing their yard with yellow police tape into his and hers, right and left.

"We'll have to see," she said, and he appreciated her backing away from the impending argument. She was right, they'd have to see. Who knew if George would even pull it off? He could have that sign up for years, and maybe nothing would come of it, like when the Pizza Hut announced it was coming to the outskirts of town, across from the Greening Family hog farm, but never did.

"Don't you want to see it?"

"It's only a sign."

"I meant the image."

He rubbed his stomach, annoyed that so much could happen in a single day to ruin a person's career. "I'd rather get lunch."

She didn't say anything.

"Have you seen it?"

"No, and I'd like to. Just to see what the fuss is about. Let's run over there, and then you can buy me lunch."

They drove around the town Square, passing a block of two-story brick storefronts, two of the five unoccupied. Just last week, the movie rental store had closed, complaining of competition from mail-in services, the internet and the bigger stores in Janesville. The town needed something to steady itself, and Thomas liked the answer he'd come up with, Project Heritage. His idea was to preserve the architectural character of the town, which was not particularly remarkable except that it was, by Midwestern standards, old, and therefore could pass for charming.

In the car, Thomas was still concerned with the implications of the Ark for his political career. "It's not the Ark itself," he said. "To make Project Heritage work, we need to hold fast to our history and our identity as a community. No Wal-marts or Home Depots or McDonald's."

"You want a town where you know everybody. You want to know the sales clerks, the cooks, the mechanics. And you want them all to act predictably."

He ignored that last jab. "I know you agree."

“Yes. I think it’s more egalitarian. We all know each other’s names, not just their functions. Dr. Ellis lives next door to Fred Smythe, who collects garbage, for gods’ sakes, and where else in America does that happen anymore? They work the pancake breakfasts together, volunteer as firefighters, show up at Author’s Night at the library. It’s how things should be.”

He could only do so much as mayor. He thought he could do more as a state senator, but now, George’s idea--whether commercial or religious--competed with his own and threatened to brand the town the wrong kind of eccentric, possibly reactionary. As did Martha’s sighting. By implication, the mayor of an eccentric or a reactionary town would be deemed an eccentric or a reactionary--and Thomas was neither. He fancied himself a moderate: moderately smart, moderately ambitious, moderately conservative, moderately religious. He abhorred extremes. He could convince himself that even his eccentric wife was only moderately radical, perhaps merely liberal, and that in any event, all individuals were entitled to their own views. He didn’t like to impose his beliefs on others, and he especially didn’t believe in mixing religion and politics or personal matters and public life. He liked to think of himself simply as a private person drawn to public service.

“So,” Daphne said, as he slowed the car near the half dozen pick-ups and sports utility vehicles that lined Morningside Drive near the underpass. “Looks like the press will want a comment, Mr. Mayor.” She pointed to a white van with a satellite dish poised on top, which bore the insignia of one of Madison’s television stations.

“What’s there to comment on?” He pulled their Buick off the road.

“They’ll want to know if you agree it’s the Blessed Virgin.”

“No,” he said. “I don’t have to answer that.”

“You’ll look silly if you don’t. They’ll say you’re a typical politician, can’t say what he sees until he takes a poll first and sees what everybody else sees.”

“That’s not fair.”

“I know,” she said, patting his hand. “Particularly in *your* case. You’re not what I’d call a born politician. Just don’t overreact. Say that you can see why some people believe it looks like the BVM, and you respect their beliefs.”

“It’s a Rorschach on a wall?”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“I was kidding,” he said. “Sort of.”

She gave his ear a tug for good luck. “Shall we go then, and greet the media?”

“Sure,” he said, and combed his hair back with his hand.

“Oh,” she said, as he opened the car door. “I’m certain the ACLU will have an opinion on a religious icon in a public place.”

He slammed the door shut again. “What?”

“If you leave it up, isn’t that a religious symbol in a public space? Like a Christmas tree in the town square? If you have a Christmas tree, you have to have a menorah, and a crescent moon, *etcetera*.”

It irked him when Daphne’s thinking turned constitutional before his. “I suppose that’s the law these days, whether we like it or not.”

“But if you want to leave it up, an argument could be made against the state’s use of its police power to eradicate religious imagery.” She smiled a damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don’t smile.

Just then there was a metallic rap on the car window.



“Holy...!” Startled, he turned to see a blond-haired woman with a hand-held microphone. He rolled down the window, and before he could say hello or ask what she wanted, she was bending in, inches from his face. “Mayor Donaldson? I’m Tracy Chase from Channel 8. Can I get a comment from you?”

“We haven’t seen it yet,” Daphne interrupted. “The Mayor won’t comment on something he hasn’t seen.”

Thomas shot Daphne a grateful look, which Tracy ignored. “Oh, great, then we can shoot you as you see it—her—for the first time. That’ll be terrific! Bill,” she turned to her cameraman, “we’re going to get the Mayor as he sees her for the first time.” She opened his car door and took him by the elbow. “It’s this way.”

Thomas shook free of her grip and waited for Daphne to catch up with them. As they approached the underpass, a dull gray tunnel overgrown at the entrance with weeds and stringy saplings, Thomas recognized most of the local citizens who stood in small clumps staring at the east wall and pointing, one drawing an outline, showing another where the image was located. He felt his pulse crank up a notch, as it did when he appeared in court, or gave his Memorial Day speech at the cemetery, or presided over a contentious town council meeting—times when he felt the need to perform at his best, times when he felt under the sharpest scrutiny, times when his personal privacy was forcibly invaded.

The temperature dropped a few degrees when they made their way into the underpass, and Thomas breathed in the raw, earthy smell of wet cement. There were caves and a tourist attraction thirty miles west of Stirling, and the scent reminded him of the time he and Daphne had taken their daughter Laura there. He’d had trouble explaining to her why the rock walls were weeping; she’d become frightened and they’d had to come up out of the caves right away.

The small crowd parted for their mayor. Martha remained on her knees on the sidewalk in front of the unpainted cement wall, her blue jean skirt her only insulation from the broken pavement and gravel. Tough old bird, he thought, although he wasn't certain of her age, except that her blunt-cut hair was thin and gray, yellowed at the scalp. He turned his attention to the wall above her head. As he stared, he saw at first only gray and dark brown stains and smudges, long stalagmites that grew from the girders overhead. Against the wall, someone had placed a bouquet of unnaturally blue and white carnations, still wrapped in plastic from the Piggily Wiggily grocery store on the edge of town, and a fat ivory candle.

He could feel the Channel 8 camera trained on his right profile, and he squared his shoulders. As he did, the apparition came into focus. The figure was standing, her arms bent, palms pressed together, fingertips pointing towards heaven in prayer. She wore the loose robes of statues, a veil. Her face was empty and light, her features just shadows, her eyes merely suggestions, but they pointed directly to him. It was a haunting image, oddly calming, and highly personal. He remembered the devotion to the Blessed Mother which he'd felt as an altar boy, particularly in May, the month the church celebrated Mary as the Blessed Mother, when, despite his dutiful loyalty to his adoptive mother, he sometimes dared to think of his own biological one, in heaven with her. He liked the Blessed Mother, even though he sometimes was angry with God for taking his own mother away.

He would've liked to touch the wall, to rub the outlines with a moistened finger, the way his adoptive mother would wipe grape jelly from his cheek. Taking a step towards the wall, he leaned closer, but behind him a rising murmur among the crowd warned him. He stopped, and from a foot away, he looked at the Virgin's face, too close: the crags in the cement were like rough pixels, light gray, gray, dark gray, brown, black, dirt, soot.

He stepped back, and the blonde shoved the microphone in his face. “Do you see the Blessed Virgin Mary?” she demanded.

Personally, he thought he saw something like a rendering of the Virgin, but it would be impolitic to say so. “I do see an image of a robed woman,” he said.

“Do you think this is a sign? That she has a message? ”

For a moment he tried to remember what he’d learned at St. Mary’s grade school about messages from other Virgins: Fatima, Guadalupe, Lourdes. World peace, unborn children, healing, maternal love. He caught a glimpse of Daphne’s face, tongue bulging against her cheek, right hand on her hip, her head slightly tilted. He’d not been told of any message.

“I’m sure everyone who sees this will see it differently, and they will each take something from it that means something to them.”

“Are you going to make this a shrine?” the reporter asked.

“I’m seeing this for the first time, Miss,” he said. He wished he hadn’t said “Miss.” Made him sound like a country bumpkin, not senate material.

“Will you paint it over then?”

He shook his head. “We’ll need time to consider all the possibilities,” he said. “Thanks for coming out. That’s all I have to say for now.”

Thomas and Daphne dashed to their car, and Thomas turned the key before buckling his seat belt. He revved the engine harder than he intended and asked, “How about the Dairy-Doo for a burger and a vanilla shake?” He was relieved that for all of her left-wing radical socio-political-enviro cause making and rabble rousing, she hadn’t yet joined the ranks of the vegans or the animal rights activists. She’d only been arrested once, and that was in Chicago, an afternoon in jail, in support of the right to gay marriage.

At the Dairy-Doo, Daphne gave him a welcome compliment. “Good non-answer on the message,” she said, “but what do you really think?”

“It’s interesting,” he said, not wanting to be pestered by her about his religious inclinations.

“I’m your *wife*,” Daphne said, bug-eyed.

“You first,” he smiled.

“I think people have needs that aren’t apparent—like George and his Ark—and they’ll go to crazy lengths to have them met.”

“Who’s crazy, George or Martha? Or everyone gathered at the underpass?”

“A lot of them,” she said.

“So should I let George build his Ark and Martha have a shrine?” he asked.

“Yes to the first and no to the second.”

“How so?”

“Private land vs. public,” Daphne said, as if it should be that easy.

“So the BVM chose the wrong place to appear? She should have appeared privately?”

“You’re saying you believe it’s her?” Daphne sounded incredulous.

“Say I do,” he said, letting a challenge enter his voice.

“Then what’s the message, Mr. Mayor?” she asked.

“What I said back there. Everyone gets a personal message. I’m not trampling on anyone’s rights.”

“Except by enshrining it, you acknowledge that there *is* some kind of message.”

“So they get a message,” he said. “What are you afraid of?”

“I’m not afraid,” she said. “Unless they get a crazy message, and acting on it would harm them or someone else.”

“It’s the BVM,” he said, taking the last word. “I expect her messages are harmless.”

The next day was eerily quiet, as if the people of Stirling were madly at work, making up for time lost at the shrine. There was no public meeting of the Zoning Commission to discuss George’s Ark, and the Channel 8 camera abandoned the underpass for other stories. Thomas let his secretary go home about 4:30, and found himself driving out to Morningside Drive, vaguely haunted by the image, but officially only keeping his mayoral pulse on the goings on in his town. From a few hundred yards away, he could see that a large number of people still huddled there, and to avoid having to explain himself to his constituency, he only slowed, not getting out of his car.

At home, he found Daphne seated at the kitchen table. She was in her spring jacket, still wearing her back pack. She was reading a letter that appeared to be handwritten on a white legal pad. She didn’t look up or say hello. Thomas stood next to her. He couldn’t imagine what was wrong.

Silently, she handed him the letter. Her eyes were wide and full of unspilled tears. He read:

*Dear Mom and Dad:*

*First, let me tell you how much I love you both, and how much I appreciate everything you’ve done to give me all the opportunities I’ve had in life. You are, each of you, an inspiration.*

*This is a difficult letter to write, because I think you're going to take it personally, and it has nothing to do with you. It has everything to do with me, and how I was wired from the beginning. Dad: read this as "how God made me." Mom: read this as "the right to be different."*

*For a year now, I've been taking the necessary steps to create a body that matches who I am. Despite the outer appearances, I am not a woman. I am a man. A man! I've always felt myself so. Dad: remember sports? You used to say I was stronger than the boys. Mom: what real woman would wear pink frills? (!) (You knew then that was an over-reaction to something, didn't you?)*

*I didn't come home at Christmas (the flu) because I thought it would be too confusing for all of us. I've been undergoing hormonal treatments since I was 22, and a pretty heavy-duty course of psychotherapy (pro bono!) with someone who has a lot of experience with people like me (to the extent there are a lot of people like me!). Next week I will have breast reduction surgery. Sometime in the next year, I will have a hysterectomy, and then additional reconstructive surgery. I know, Mom, you've probably stopped reading this letter and have started doing the research: you'll be more of an expert than I am when this is done!*

*My hair is short, what Mom would call "uni-sex." I wear a lot of khakis, Dad, and golf shirts, and I'm thinking of getting one of those two-buttoned navy blazers that you like. I think I look a lot like you must've as a young man. After the mastectomy, I'm transferring to a different store. I have a few friends here who know all about this and are very, very supportive, but mostly I'll be making new friends. (Don't worry: I probably won't be attending any High School Reunions any time soon. As for Yale, I don't know yet.) I do know, though, that this is right for me and that I love you both.*

*Love ya,*

*L*

Thomas put his hand on his wife's shoulder. It was solid, like the marble base of a statue. Her neck arched back, her forehead tilted towards the ceiling, and her eyes were pressed shut. "Are you okay?" he asked. He could hardly form the words, even for such a feeble question. His mind felt as empty as a dry canyon. In true emergencies, this happened to him: a stilling of all thoughts, a complete suppression of either fight or flight.

He sat down next to his wife and she held out her hand. He covered it with his. "I don't know," she said. Nervous red blotches mottled her cheeks and neck.

They sat at the kitchen table, in the home where they'd raised their only daughter, not speaking, their hands knit together in the manner of people who know each other's suffering, and know the other knows.

Daphne cleared her throat. Thomas looked up and saw her face was wet. She took her hand from his and wiped her nose. Still, she didn't meet his eyes.

"The important thing," she said, her voice low as if she were talking only to herself, "is not to over-react." She heaved a sigh, then hung her head and began to massage her neck with her left hand. Taking her hint, Thomas jumped up and began to knead her shoulders and then her temples. He understood, without saying so, that Laura's letter, confusing though it was to him, was devastating to Daphne. Not just the breaking of some idealized mother-daughter bond, but also the breach of a mother's intuition. "A mother knows," had been one of Daphne's favorite sayings, an exception to an otherwise rigorous gender neutrality. Thomas had had the good sense always to defer to such proclamations.

"We mustn't over-react," she said again, still not looking at him.

"Over-reaction would be impossible," he said, meaning to be of comfort. "It's an over-the-top announcement. You're entitled to react however you want to react."

Thomas stopped his massage, and Daphne didn't seem to notice. Her head continued to droop.

"Did you?" he started. He wanted to ask if, in fact, she'd known, but even as that thought filled the vacuum in his head, he realized it was a meaningless question, and a dangerous one, implying that if Laura's inclinations had been known, something could've been done about them.

"Did I what?" Daphne said, throwing back her shoulders and tossing her head angrily.

"Did I know? Did I know and not tell you?"

"No," Thomas said helplessly. "I know you didn't."

"This isn't about me! I was a fine mother. I was plenty feminine."

He was stunned by her defensiveness and self-justification. He himself had stopped short of letting himself think that his wife should've offered a more traditional role model. They lapsed into silence, staring at the letter, still propped open on the table.

What did a person do at a time like this? Thomas's stomach growled, and in spite himself, he felt ravenously hungry. He thought about the pulled-pork sandwich at Lucy's Family Restaurant. Daphne would kill him if he mentioned food; that would seem so unfeeling. He thought about a scene in a movie where the man of the house would stride to the liquor cabinet and swig two stubby glasses, neat, and swig his down in an exaggerated life-is-hell toast, but neither of them drank hard liquor.

"I bet you're starved," Daphne finally said. "I think there's meatloaf in the freezer." She sounded valiant, courageous, indomitable.

"I could do that," Thomas said appreciatively. "Could I make you up some mash potatoes?" He knew her comfort foods as well as she knew his.

"Make it a double," she said, feigning intoxication with a wild sweep of her arm, "and keep 'em coming."

"We'll get through this," he said, and kissed the top of her head.

At his kiss, something broke in her. She doubled over, groaning and burying her face in her hands. She began to sob uncontrollably.



"Why?" she moaned. She clenched one fist and then the other. She fanned her fingers wide on the table. "Why? Why?"

He couldn't answer. His own throat felt constricted, dry, cracked in an unrelenting vise. He could not fathom why. He was politically conservative, but gender issues were not among his top priorities. He'd been against gays in the military and women in combat, but for equal pay. He shied away from flamboyance of any sort, which might have been at the heart of his uneasiness about George's grandiose design for an Ark and Martha's sighting, but in the end he wasn't that dogmatic. He'd come to a "live-and-let-live" philosophy, as long as the "living" was private.

This was not about public politics. This was about personal loss. The loss of their daughter. The loss of twenty-four years, twenty-four years of unflagging love. A loss of heritage and memories, of their family identity, Laura's identity. A loss of his own youth; of his view of himself as 'father.' How could they ever again look at their daughter and remember her childhood, remember who she was? Because she was saying now that she wasn't their daughter.

Daphne's wails turned high and shrill, and, eyeing the open letter, he felt, with a certainty he'd tried to hold at bay, an unmitigated revulsion. "I can't imagine why," Thomas said. "I can't imagine it at all."

"She's out of her mind," Daphne said.

"She is," Thomas agreed.

After a while, when her face was dry and the blotch had faded to a mere pink, he asked, "You were going to make meat-loaf?"

They ate the reheated meat loaf and new mashed potatoes in silence, the duets of Tony Bennet and K.D. Lang playing in the background, full of messages: "Exactly Like You," "Dream a Little Dream of Me," "You Can't Lose a Broken Heart," "If We Never Meet Again." The album was called, "A Wonderful World." Thomas and Daphne got up at the same time, each clearing their own place, Thomas hovering next to her, waiting to rinse his plate before putting it in the dishwasher. She held out her hand and he gave it to her, then returned to the kitchen table, picked up the butter dish and the bottle of barbecue sauce and put them in the refrigerator. He took the broom from the closet to sweep the floor; she took it from him and he sat down again and watched her as she slowly and meticulously swept the already spotless tile. The grandfather clock chimed eight bells.

"How about a walk?" he said.

She nodded and took her spring jacket from the kitchen chair she'd been sitting in when he'd walked in. Just that day. Just a couple hours ago. Before.

As they were heading out the door, the phone rang. The noise was deafening, and nearly paralyzing. Daphne dashed back to pick it up.

"Don't!" he cried after her. Since the BVM, they'd been plagued by calls, both crank and sincere. He said, "It could be a telemarketer." Daphne let the call dump into the message machine, and they heard a man's voice, soft and mellow, like a golf commentator on TV. "This is your neighbor Matthew, calling with some good news. I'm sorry we're not speaking in person, but I wanted to let you know the Lord is waiting for you at The Stirling-Macomb Kingdom Hall and Holy Garden Congregation, now meeting in the strip mall at the corner of County Highway X and Thaler Road, between Marjie's Dry Cleaners and Harold's Taxidermy. Please join us at one of these convenient times: 9:30 Sunday mornings, 5 pm Sunday evenings."

Daphne hit the delete button. "That's a new one on me," she said. "God calling." She mimicked Thomas' cheerful secretary.

"I suppose it's random enough to actually do some good," Thomas said.

"What do you mean?" she said, sounding eager to challenge him, to defend a person's home against such invasive crusades.

"Just that it's bound to happen sometime that someone will be in real distress and will answer the phone and to them, it will be a miracle. God did call—in a sense—in their hour of need."

"That's a positive spin," she said, her tone sarcastic. The phone rang again. They both looked at it accusingly. As soon as it kicked into the machine, Daphne picked up.

"Yes, Martha," Thomas heard her say, and he laughed at his own *naïveté*. If God could call his house, so could the devil. He signaled to Daphne that he'd wait outside.

A few minutes later, Daphne gave him a wry look of resignation as she joined him on the porch. "We should drive over towards Morningside," she said. He didn't ask why. "Martha" was all he'd needed to hear to know there was more trouble in his little town.

He parked a quarter mile away from the underpass, and they ambled towards it with a feigned disinterest. It was one of those benevolent and crisp June evenings in the Midwest when every square inch of earth seemed covered in green; hostas at full size, a week or two away from spiking, untrimmed hedges woolly with fresh whiskers, the corn nearly knee high, and it not yet July. "So, tell me," he finally said to Daphne, when they were just steps from the entrance.

"She's weeping," Daphne said, and raised her chin in the little circular motion that she used to bolster herself.

"Ah," he said.

There was a handful of people keeping a vigil at the wall; but a group of five was approaching the underpass from the other side, the report of the image weeping no doubt renewing public interest. Martha spotted them immediately and came running towards Thomas.

"She's crying," Martha said. "For our sins! We must repent!" Daphne took a step sideways, positioning herself shoulder to shoulder with Thomas.

"Calm down, Martha," she said. "We mustn't over-react. You can't assume there's been a sin. You don't know why she's crying."

Martha eyed her. "Why else would she cry?"

"Some people cry for joy," Daphne said, turning towards Thomas. "Come, let's take a look."

For joy? he thought. Daphne never cried for joy. What joy? In her letter, Laura had sounded happy--happy, he supposed, that she'd found herself--but Daphne had sobbed.

Martha crossed her arms across her chest and leaned into Daphne like a teenage bully. In a loud and prideful voice, she said, "I'm the one who gets to say what she's thinking. I'm the one who found her!"

Stunned by Martha's claim of ownership and privacy, Thomas said, "She's not yours, Martha. Everyone here sees her."

"It," Daphne mumbled, then took his hand.

Together, they marched past Martha to the wall. Something in the image had changed, Thomas thought, a darker smudge around her head, a grayer tone in her face. He wondered

whether he was seeing what Daphne saw; whether they were both seeing what Martha saw, or whether everyone in the tunnel was seeing just what he or she wanted to see. Like Martha, he saw drops of moisture trickling down the wall, as if from the Virgin's eyes. They reminded him not of sin, but of the caves that had made Laura cry when she was a little girl.

He put his arm around Daphne's waist. "Don't be afraid," he said, just as he'd said to Laura so long ago. "There's no harm. It was a crazy message, but she's still our child."

"She'll be one for George's Ark," Daphne said, leaning against him.

Behind them, someone took a picture, and in the flash, he thought he saw the image smile.