**A Struggle through life:**

**The journey of a young man**

**To the whole Diocese of Dundee: the bishop, priests, deacons, seminarians, lay ministers, altar servers, sodalities, councils and all the faithful parishners.**

**Chapter one: The call**

**Chapter two: The response**

**Chapter three: The romance**

**Chapter four: The beginning of the future**

**Chapter five: The beginning of the end**

**Chapter six: Life outside formation**

**Chapter one:**

**The call**

1. **The words game**

I sat up quietly on my bed, awoken not by the sound of the neighbour’s cock crowing, nor the train which passed through Forestdale every morning coming from Glencoe or Ladysmith or Newcastle. I was not awoken by the sound of the siren of the local Coal Company two blocks away, nor the huge machinery of the Laundry starting up from down the road. As noisy as these sounds all were, they’d no sooner put me very comfortably back to sleep than wake me since I had gotten so used to them going off every weekday morning at six. They sang to me like a symphony orchestrated by motion and sirens and churnings, and when accompanied by my soft warm blankets and the sweet smell of porridge, they lullabied me to sleep. I was, rather, awoken by the chit-chatter of my big brother Warder and little sister Nurse as they prepared to make their way out of the house to town and to school respectively. They mumbled words to each other in deep husky voices as they opened and closed taps, opened and closed pot lids, opened and closed doors, dragged feet, turned switches on and off, till eventually their noises drowned by the voices of the Morning Live Show when finally the TV came to life.

Warder was in Dundee for the weekend, and was on his way to do some grocery shopping for mum before heading back to Glencoe, where he lived and worked. The food at home had depleted, we were down to our last bowl of maize meal. Mother had called Warder and asked if he could try and buy something for the sake of Nurse, who was still in primary school. Mother had tried to save as much as she could this month, even to the point of cooking once a day, but since food prices kept going up, she couldn’t buy as much as she used too, making her task of saving near impossible. There was only one source of income at home, a grant which mum received on behalf of Benzo, my younger brother. My eldest brother Smiley had dropped out of high school and had been struggling to find work since, even after re-entering school and completing his matric. Steel, the second born, though he had completed matric, also struggled to find work, finding himself in and out of temporary jobs in and around Dundee. Poppy, my eldest sister, had moved out and lived with the father of her daughter. She was the only one to have started a family of her own, and having completed her matric, the challenges of being a mother, housewife, friend, confidant, sister and counsellor, made it hard for her to look for work. As for me, I just completed my matric and was looking for a job. Warder was the only one of us who managed to find a decent permanent job so far, the rest of us just felt like dead weight, especially those of us who still lived at home. We are the ones making it difficult for mother to save food, and coming just before me, Warders accomplishment both motivated me and pressurised me to succeed.

It was thanks to Nurse that mother would wake up early in the morning and prepare the coal stove, making sure that the house was warm and that there was hot water to wash or to make tea, and that there was breakfast. Nurse insisted on washing and preparing herself for school ever since she was in pre-school, so when the stove was hot, the lunch prepared and the breakfast ready, mother would sometimes give Nurse the opportunity, like today, to wash and prepare herself. As a single woman taking care of seven children, mother had become used to waking up every morning and preparing the coal stove. She had done so with all of us before, and now she was continuing for the sake of her last born, hopefully for the last time. It isn’t like she loved preparing that old coal stove which demanded so much sacrifice and hard work to get ready. No! The stove was her only means of preparing food and boiling water, and had been so ever since the municipality shut the lights for being unable to pay the electricity bill. The grant which had taken years to approve was too little to manage a household of eight, and without the help of dad, it was difficult for mother to manage on her own.

Born in Nqutu and raised in Johannesburg, mother never had any close family or friends in Dundee, people in whom she could trust, people who could help her. No, she was alone. And she believed in her heart that she could do it alone, that she didn’t need to complicate our lives by finding someone to support us. Yes, she could replace dad, but at what cost? No! She did it alone, but then again, she knew in her heart she wasn’t alone, that she had us on whom she could one day depend. We weren’t staying young, we were growing up, slowly but surely, and soon we’d help her. All she needed to do was persevere in our upbringing, and make sure we persevere in our studies.

Sitting up on my bed, I was greeted by the familiar smell of smoke mixed with porridge, a smell I knew all too well and had even come to enjoy as a little boy growing up. It was a warm sweet smell that had woke me up on cold winter mornings to find the coal stove both warming our three room home and polluting it with the smoke that seethed through the cracks of the old Defy Jewel: an old iron coal stove placed at the right hand corner of the kitchen. I would enjoy, after having washed up and gotten ready for school, the priceless moments of laughing and chatting with my brothers and sisters as we’d stand in front of the little stove to warm ourselves up just a bit more before setting upon the frost-bitten foot path to school.

I had thought myself very lucky not to have to wake up in the early hours of the morning to chop the wood that prepared the coal stove, making it as nice and hot as I always found it when I woke. This was Smiley’s job, then Steel, then Warder, but not me! I was still considered too young to wield a chopper. Instead, I had to go with mother and Poppy to pick coal at an old dump in the outskirts of the township near the Coal Distribution Company. I didn’t like picking coal at all; in fact, I dreaded having to do it. Picking coal happened on most days after school and it took what seemed like forever, digging and sifting lots of black sand until the coal emerged, and then the tricky part: removing the black stones from the coal. How could they tell the black stones from the coal remains for me a mystery; they all looked the same. Mother and Poppy would fill an old ten litre bucket while they’d give me a one litre bucket to fill. They took turns trying, time and time again, to teach me the art of coal-picking: how to tell the difference between black stones and coal, which spots were preferable and which were dangerous, but I wasn’t interested. I didn’t like going there to that old dump and I didn’t like picking coal, so much so that I even began to hate my bucket. Sometimes I’d hide it or throw it away between the trees in the yard, hoping that this would free me from the burden of joining them, but they always seemed to find it: it had a handle and no lid, and from afar the little bucket looked black from the black coal dust which formed a black coat all around it. But if you came closer you’d notice the faint traces of a dirty white beneath the black – especially around the edges – which betrayed the fact that the bucket was once white.

I began to think that I wasn’t so lucky after all, that the grass was greener on the other side, and that waking up early and chopping wood for the coal stove was much better than picking coal. But when I did become of age to wield a chopper and chop wood, wood which was usually hard and smooth with a chopper that was small and blunt, I quickly realized the grass wasn’t as green as I had expected. I’d struggle to chop the available wood kept at the back of the house, and when this wood was depleted, I had to go off into the nearby forest in search for wood, always finding only the left overs which others had abandoned, wood which, yes, was hard and smooth. Perhaps there was a lesson to learn from my siblings and my mother as they’d go about quietly doing their chores without ever complaining: that with patient perseverance, small things can lead to great ends. For without the chopping of wood and the picking of coal, there’d be no nice and hot coal stove, and without the nice and hot coal stove, there’d have been no priceless moments that have lived on long after the chores have become a distant memory.

Now, however, four months out of school and desperately looking for a job in this small town, the enjoyable feeling which the smell had once brought me was slowly replaced by a hollow feeling of resentment and a deep sense of despair at the way in which things seemed to be turning out. I hadn’t thought that four months out of matric I’d still be unemployed, broke and at home! Why was it so difficult for me to find a job? I got off the bed and found myself immediately before the window. I opened the curtains to let in a bit of the light from the partly cloudy morning and opened the window to let in some fresh air, in the hope that the smoke filling my room would finally make its way out. Looking out the window was the concrete fence dividing our yard from our neighbours. It stood just over a meter, and so the neighbour’s kitchen window was in full view as I looked straight ahead. Then, turning my gaze higher up, I saw a line of birds perched on the uppermost cable of the pylon structure which stretched into the air in the nearby empty field beside the crèche. I began to recall, with bitter resentment, the words of the branch manager at the local clothing store which I had visited the day before: ‘sorry my man, as you can see we’re full, we’re not hiring!’ and looking at the black file I carried with me housing five copies of my CV, he quickly added: ‘and we don’t take CV’s’.

These words were repeated by all the local branch managers of all the retailers and outlets I visited in the last few months; and since Dundee is a small town, there weren’t many retails to visit! Not only did they dismiss me without employing me, they also refused to at least give me some kind of hope by at least accepting my CV. I had longed even to hear the uncertain words of ‘come back during the festive season’, or ‘try applying online’, to come from the managers mouth, but they gave me nothing. And so, after eagerly handing my CV to two retail shop assistants whose managers weren’t in for the day, I found myself walking back home, tired, hungry and with three CV’s still tucked neatly in my black file.

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I turned my back to the window and looked into my room, at the unmade bed in front of me: an old mattress held up by four bricks, and at the wardrobe to my left: which even though was much, much older than my bed, wasn’t as painful. I could still feel the pain of the broken springs which poked me in my left ribs every night. The wardrobe actually held together pretty good, if not for the skew left door as a result of a missing bottom hinge. I could’ve easily knocked a new hinge in place, securing the door, but the wood at the hinges was so soft that I never dared try. I began the narrow path between them that led to the door, brushing my leg against the mattress along the way. And as I walked, narrowly avoiding my big toe kicking the brick at the corner of the bed, I made my way out the door with one thing on my mind: I need a job.

I bumped into Nurse as she was making her way past me and to the bathroom, ‘watch were you going?’ she said as she closed the bathroom door behind her, ‘morning to you too young lady!’ I called out after her. I made it to the kitchen and to the sink, where I began washing one of the cups and teaspoons among the many to make myself a cup of tea. ‘Where you going, waking up so early? Are you going to town? Are you going to look for a job?’ Nurse asked as she walked into the kitchen, her big brown eyes searching me intently, her face shining, and her hair combed carefully into a bun. She was neatly dressed in her navy blue school dress atop her powder blue shirt, her white socks neatly folded on the top and her black shoes shining. Even she knew I’m looking for a job, how wonderful!

‘If I were you’ she continued, ‘I’d still be sleeping! I like to sleep, especially in the morning when it’s cold and the blankets are warm’ she said enthusiastically.

‘Yeah it’s great to sleep in the morning’, I tried to sound as enthusiastic, ‘but I have to wake up, otherwise I won’t find a job’.

‘But you can wake up at 8 or 9’, she insisted, looking at me straight in the eye and waiting for a reply.

‘Yes I can’, I replied, then after some time thoughtfully added, ‘but it’s the early bird who gets the worm’.

She opened her mouth to respond, but thought better and said nothing, turning her gaze downward in thoughtful reflection. Had she come across this saying before and now it’s finally making sense? No! That’s why her next question startled me as her gaze remained downcast, searching the kitchen floor, ‘where’s the worm?’

I had forgotten there was no food: no sugar or tea or milk, and so I opted to drink hot water instead. I took a seat at the small kitchen table and began to do what a big brother supposed to do: teach. ‘If someone says to you: the early bird gets the worm’, I began as Nurse took a seat in front of me, ‘it means that if you wake up early, you’ll be the first person in line, and if you’re the first person in line you have a good chance of getting what you want before it gets finished’.

‘Oh’, she exclaimed, ‘then why don’t you just say so?’

‘Ah… I am saying so, but I’m using a short way to say it. It’s like writing Mr instead of Mister, using less words to say more things’.

‘Oh… abbreviations’, she said flatly.

‘Yes, very good, like abbreviations!’ I exclaimed, taking a huge sip of my drink to warm myself.

‘Miss Molfey says we mustn’t use abbreviations because they make us lazy. She says we must write in full’.

‘Miss Molfey is right, you must write in full. You’ll learn more that way’.

‘She brought a bird to class once and it could say: Hello, How are you? It could even say her name! Then she told us’, she pointed a finger at me before continuing ‘don’t be like a parrot, just repeating everything, you must THINK’, pointing the same finger at her head as she said it. I couldn’t help but laugh at the way she said it, reciting so thoughtfully, and she joined in the laughter.

‘Miss Molfey’s right! I like her, she sounds like a fun teacher’, I added.

‘She is’.

We sat quietly for a while before Nurse finally spoke out, ‘I’m bored! I have to wait until the long one is by the three and the short one is by the seven before I can go to the bus stop’.

I looked at the time, seven-o-clock, and taking another sip of my drink, said ‘I have an idea, let’s play your favourite game: words!’

‘Yeah’ she exclaimed excitedly, raising both her hands into the air, ‘I’ll get the paper and pencil’, she said, climbing off the chair and disappearing into mother’s room.

‘Come along with your school bag’, I shouted after her before taking another sip.

‘OK’ she shouted back. She appeared seconds later wearing her small school bag and with a paper and a pencil in her hand, and hurrying to the kitchen she sat on her chair, placed the paper on the table and looked eagerly at me, waiting to write.

‘OK. Are you ready?’

‘Yah’ she said excited.

‘First word, write for me: caught’.

‘How, that’s easy’ she said as she bowed her head and wrote on her paper C A U G H T, she lifted her head and looked at me once she was done.

‘Very good’, I affirmed, having another sip of water.

‘Now write for me: fight’.

‘Also easy’, she said as she bowed her head and began writing F I G H T.

‘Hmm, very good! Wow, you’re very good at this game’, I encouraged her. ‘Write for me: eight, the word eight not the number 8’.

‘OK’, she said as she began writing E I G H T.

‘Very good’, I acknowledged. ‘Ok another word’, I continued with the game. ‘Write for me: ate, like today you ate porridge’.

She bowed her head and began to write A T E. ‘Ate is the past tense of eat’, she added excitedly.

‘Yes. That’s right’, I affirmed, ‘you get an extra mark for that!’

‘Yeah’, she exclaimed excitedly, lifting both hands in the air as she did.

I looked at the time, ten past seven, time just for one more word, I thought. ‘Now let me give you the last word’, I said, thinking of a word a bit more challenging for her. ‘Aha! OK. Now spell for me: numb’.

‘Num’, she repeated confused.

‘Yes numb’, I affirmed, ‘like the way your feet get when you walk on the white grass at school, or the way your hand feels every time you sleep on it, or…’

‘OK, OK’, she interrupted, looking at me thoughtfully. She placed the pencil onto her mouth, and after a while she finally bowed her head and began to write shyly, N ‘don’t look’, she instructed, covering her paper with her left hand as she continued to write. I looked over her and at the blue kitchen cupboard behind her, at the empty bread tin, and placed neatly beside it at the empty containers of sugar, of tea, and of coffee. I’m probably the reason they’re empty in the first place, the reason Warder was asked to come by. It really sucks sitting at home, there’s nothing to do, and in an attempt to keep myself out of the trouble of the streets, what else can I do besides watch TV and eat? When she had finished, she looked up at me and smiled, then she revealed the word: N U M M.

‘Ah’, I exclaimed as I looked at her, her eyes wide with excitement, ‘you’re almost right, but it’s just that the second M needs to be a B’.

‘A B?’ she looked at her word, ‘like N U M B?’ She spelled out.

‘Yes, that’s right, very good: N U M B’.

‘Hmm’, she uttered thoughtfully, pausing for a while as if recording the word in her small yet very bright head. ‘Another hard word’, she asked, looking up expectantly.

‘Look at the time first’, I instructed her, and seeing that it was quarter past seven, she quickly jumped off the chair, ran into mothers room and, saying goodbye, ran off through the back of the house to the bus stop shouting ‘Bye Jamie’ as she left.

‘Bye’, I managed as I got up and put both chairs neatly under the table. I took the paper and pencil she had left on the table and made my way back to my room with the water in my other hand. I kept the pen and paper in the top drawer of the wardrobe, it wouldn’t be long before she came asking to play another game of words.

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1. **My big day**

A cold autumn wind greeted me as I opened the kitchen door to make my way to Church one April morning. I had exhausted all my options, and I felt depressed that things weren’t going the way I had hoped, the way I had planned. I never planned to be sitting at home till now! For four full months! I had hoped to be working by now, didn’t matter what kind of work, just working! I had hoped to be helping out at home; making things a bit better for mother, for my brothers and sisters, instead of making things worse. Sitting at home, eating and watching TV, was making things worse, especially when I couldn’t replace the things I ate. I felt helpless that I couldn’t do anything to change the situation on my own, because all my efforts were in vain. Mother, advancing in years, had begun to challenge me; she challenged me to man up to the situation I found myself in and find a job. She advised me to be humble enough to accept anything I may find, after all, everybody starts somewhere. She challenged me to begin pulling my weight around the house, because I was no longer a school boy who needed her care, but a young man who needed to begin providing for myself and perhaps even start caring for her in her old age.

 As I stepped out the house and looked up into the sky, I admitted to myself, as much as I hated to, that she was right. Mum’s always right! I needed to pull my weight, needed to find a job, needed to man up. It’s just that sometimes she could really get to me, especially when she gets as angry as she did yesterday. I recall the bitter encounter:

‘You lazy bugger, you can’t just sit at home and do nothing! Can’t you see that there are bills to pay and mouths to feed? Can’t you see we’re suffering? Can’t you see your brothers and sister can’t provide for us and for themselves, that they need your help? You have to help out, otherwise, the door is open!’

‘But ma, I am trying, it’s just that it’s not easy. I’m struggling to find a job here in Dundee, it’s too small!’

‘Then how did Brennen and Ashley find jobs? They finished matric with you! How did Warder, your own brother, find a job? It definitely wasn’t by saying that Dundee is too small’ she folded her arms as she finished.

‘I don’t mean it like that’, I defended, ‘I just mean that I’ll need more time’.

‘Time is of the essence, my son’, she calmed down as she continued, ‘as you can see I’m not getting any younger. There’s Benzo and Nurse who need my support, I can’t add you to that list, I’m sorry. You’re a young man now, finished school. I need you to help me support them’.

‘I know ma, I just wish that someone could help me. I wish that I knew someone who could show me where to go and what to do. It’s hard searching alone’.

‘I know it’s hard, and I know that we failed you as parents to be there for you at this time. But you mustn’t give up. Yes Dundee is small and you don’t know anyone who can give you a head-start, but you’re young and you’re smart and there’s nothing you can’t do if you put your mind to it’. She paused before continuing, ‘I have made some terrible decisions in my life, some of which have put us in this suffering we find ourselves. I wish I could go back in time and do things differently, because I know where I went wrong, but I can’t. It’s done, and I can’t undo it. I just have to keep moving forward’, she looked at me as she added, ‘I don’t want you to make those mistakes’, and she walked out of my room, leaving me with questions in my head and feelings in my heart.

It wasn’t my first time to hear those words; I have heard them said to my brothers before me, and it was only a matter of time before my turn came. And it did come, yesterday, just after I had finished my breakfast. And though I thought the encounter would be boring and indifferent, having gone through it in my head so many times; it wasn’t, for the words hurt me as if I were hearing them for the first time.

Indeed mother knew a life filled with hardship all too well, and she didn’t want this life to be the lot of any one of us. This was why she pushed us hard, knowing very well that we’d thank her one day for it. She knew that she could never be too optimistic about our future, and that she’d rather be too optimistic than underestimate us. For someone who had never been to Church in a long time, she displayed a great deal of faith: faith in herself that things will one day be alright, and faith in us, her children, that we will all one day succeed. Indeed she didn’t need to go to Church to have faith; many people who don’t go to Church have great faith. And so, tagging on to this same enormous faith, I decided today that I’d ask for some divine help, some divine intervention, and some divine guidance.

After all, it wasn’t like I had just woken up and realised that there’s something in the world called a Church! It’s not like being unemployed has forced me to explore the option that there might be a God out there! Definitely not! There was a time when I, and indeed the whole family, were actually quite regular Church goers! I remember how, growing up, I used to enjoy going to Church with father and mother, my brothers and sister. I remembered even more vividly how after the Church celebration we’d pass my uncles Café just up the road and treat ourselves to some ice-cream, or how at other times we’d all go shopping at the supermarket. Looking back I remember, with admiration, how dad had always made time for Church, and how he managed to bring us up in the Catholic faith: always insisting that we attend catechism classes and receive the sacraments. Somehow he knew what needed to be done, if he was still living with us he’d probably know what to do.

I remember how I had envied my brothers and sister when they reached their big day and could finally receive the white host and drink from the golden cup during mass. I couldn’t wait for the day when I, too, would be able to do the same, couldn’t wait for my big day to come. Sadly, it never did! Not then at least! For when the time had come for me to enter first Holy Communion class, mom and dad had separated. The separation was a terrible time for me, a little boy watching the dispute going on around me in the house. I was young, nine years old, and only remember vaguely how it happened: mom and dad always arguing, watching strange men in blue uniforms walking in and out of the house at different times, watching furniture being taken out of the house and not returning, then finally wondering why dad wasn’t coming home anymore. This had a tremendous impact on me. I used to be an outspoken, confident and very bright little boy who enjoyed arguing, asking questions, and even drawing. I used to compete for the number one spot in class.

But after my dad left, everything changed. Not only did our standard of living begin to drop, I began to lose confidence, I began to withdraw. I asked for reasons why things were changing, and when I got none, I began to blame myself: maybe if I hadn’t broken the cup on this day, or if I hadn’t told lies on that day, things would still be the same. No one told me what was going on; they’d dismiss me whenever I asked. They pushed me away to the point that I had no one to talk to about how I was feeling. Even my brothers and sister gave me no solace, and when I observed that they were doing fine, carrying on as if nothing had happened, I couldn’t even confide in them. It seemed like I was the only one who was in inner turmoil, who was suffering, and so I kept it to myself. I felt lost and confused, and for the first time in my life, I felt utterly and totally alone.

Would I have grown up different were this never to have happened, only God knows. I was a shadow of my former self, for the outspoken, confident and very bright little boy had given way to a lost, confused and withdrawn one. What would it have been like if father was around growing up? Would I have allowed my friends to bully and tease me? Would I have passed with an exemption, I will never know. Furthermore, I can never blame mother for the decision that she made in leaving dad. We all have to make tough decisions, and she admits to have made a great many mistakes which she regrets. Nevertheless, I will take heed to her warning and try my best to stay clear of such mistakes going forward, for I can see now how the decisions I make impact those around me, even those not yet born.

After the separation, there was no more going to Church. Church became for everyone nothing but a memory, something that used to happen, a once-upon-a-time for mother and my brothers and sister. But not for me! I held on to the hope of one day tasting that white host and drinking from that golden cup, I had also wanted to join the rest of the family in getting the white candle and getting the certificate, in being honoured as someone important, no longer seen as a child by the Church community, but seen as someone who can do what all the other members of the congregation did: receive. And so I would wake up most Sunday mornings, attend the celebration and then afterwards attend catechism classes. And if I woke up late, as on cold winter mornings I usually did, I’d then only attend the catechism classes. Day after day I continued alone, keeping alive a fire long put down. Who knows, maybe I can make things better; maybe things can go back to the way they were if I persevere.

And so I did persevere, until finally I made it to my big day; finally I was counted worthy to receive the white host and to drink from the golden cup, having got my certificate and my candle as the others did: as my brothers did, as my sister did. Finally I could join their rank, continuing a tradition which had long since faded away. Finally my big day had arrived. But it wasn’t the same! Mom and dad, my brothers and sister, weren’t here to share the celebration with me, to share this day with me: taking photos and eating cake, laughing and joking as we had done before. This time it was different. This time I was alone, utterly and totally alone.

My big day had finally come but it didn’t bring with it the satisfaction I had hoped it would. Rather, it left me feeling a deep, dark void, the same void which woke me up on Sunday mornings and motivated me onward, in the hope that one day I’d fill it. No! The void hadn’t been filled but to the contrary had only gotten a little deeper, a little darker, for it brought with it the reality that things had changed! Indeed things had changed, they were not the same and they were never going to be the same no matter how hard I tried to force them to be. I watched as my classmates took photos with their parents and siblings, smiling and jokingly poking and picking at each other as the cameraman took happy shots of them, and I remembered my own parents and brothers and sister. At the end of the celebration, the walk back home was a lot longer and a lot less exciting as the one I made to the Church, when I was all excited and anxious in my white, neatly ironed long-sleeve shirt, my navy blue pants with matching bow tie, and my shining black shoes. For the walk back, my clothes seemed to mirror my emotions: dreary and creased, shaken and used.

After crossing the road which set me on the path home, I unpinned the paper flower which my catechism class teacher had placed on my shirt and, looking intently at it with sad, watery eyes, threw it to the ground and trampled over it as I made my way home. Welling up at the banks of my eyes were all the tears which threatened to break free, tears for today and tears for long ago, tears of turmoil and tears of deep void. But I never cried, comforting and relieving as it would be, I held back the tears, held in the pain, for this pain would be my only friend henceforth. The paper flower now lay on the ground, flattened and smudged with the print of my underfoot. But the image of a smiling face drawn upon it with a black marker still remained, and just under the smile were two words written in large bold: BIG DAY.

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1. **Sunday Morning**

I closed the door behind me, put my left hand into my jacket pocket, and clenched my right hand which held the Sunday missal I had uncovered from one of the many black plastics in my wardrobe. I began the narrow path to school I knew all too well as the Church was directly behind it. I drew my gaze downward to the footpath so as to avoid the wind which gushed violently at my face and cause my eyes to tear, thinking how amazing it is that God comes into the picture when all else seems to have failed, when all hope seemed lost.

Is God only a God of the hopeless, the lost, the poor and the needy? Is it only when the situation and circumstances are well beyond me that God comes and perfectly fits in, bringing with Him a profound sense of promise, of hope, of guidance, of abundance and of success. If He is such a God, then what would happen to Him when I finally figure the situation out or finally receive the help I need to get over it? Would I have no need of Him anymore? Would I then say to Him: alright, thank you God, I have it under control, goodbye, I don’t need you anymore? Maybe I don’t know who He is, for surely He must be more than this, because in such a view, when the hopeless are hopeful, the lost are found, the poor have plenty and the needy have no need He would cease to exist, wouldn’t He?

Or perhaps the efforts which brought about the hope, the safety, the plenty and the fulfilment would be attributed to God. Those qualities such as hope, safety, plenty and fulfilment can only come from Him, surely? Again, what about those who, to begin with, have no situation or circumstance of need at all? Who would God be to them, if He is to them at all? Could He be for them a God of the hopeful, the found, the rich and the successful? And what exactly would be the benefit of such a God to a people so content? Would it be to keep them content? To humble them in order that they don’t show off their contentment? To humble them in order for them not to be bashful about their prosperity and selfishly keep it to themselves, but for them to give it freely, creating an environment of sharing and of caring between the content and those in want; and environment which might one day balance off into an equilibrium of peace?

But does God even have to have a purpose to be at all? Does He have to be a God of this or that situation and circumstance? Maybe that’s just how I see Him because of the situation and circumstance I find myself in now, because when He is compartmentalised like this, He’s much easier to relate to, He becomes approachable, empathetic and real to me.

Then perhaps it’s not so amazing how God comes into the picture when all else seems to have failed, when all hope seems lost. Perhaps it was just meant to be. After all, what would have happened if I had worked harder and got an exceptional matric result than my simple exemption pass? Would I have had the push I now have to get up and be on my way to Church? Would I have thought of Church at all, after neglecting it for so long? To be honest I wouldn’t have! I’d probably be worried about my test or assignment somewhere in a posh university after having earned a scholarship. But here I am, on my way to Church, because I’m neither studying nor working. A series of events have brought me to this point, forcing my hand to take this chance.

Then perhaps it’s not by a random chance that I walked out the door this morning to Church, but by a particular chance that I did. I would’ve been taking a different chance if I were in a different situation, but I am taking this chance because I find myself in this situation, a situation of despair and helplessness, and it’s no random chance that I’ve decided to approach God in my situation of despair and helplessness and ask for His divine assistance either. I could’ve sought a friend or a family member, I could’ve sought drugs or alcohol, but I didn’t. I felt like a failure, I felt hopeless, and I sought the help of the God of failures, the God of the hopeless, so that I’d stop feeling like a failure, so that I’d get some hope. It’s not so amazing at all. The only thing that’s amazing is that it’s my very distorted and fragmented idea of God that brought me away from possible disaster and into the mercy of God.

I was brought from my deep thoughts and back to reality by the steep little hill which led straight to the Church gate. I climbed it, and manoeuvred myself between the many people and cars which began to fill the Church parking lot. I made my way to the entrance of the Church and to my usual place on the fourth-to-last pew to the left of the Church, where I sat quietly alone, put my missal beside me and waited for the celebration to begin. I couldn’t help but overhear two girls behind me as they whispered about the arrival of a new priest:

‘Do you know we have a new priest?’

‘Oh yah I know… I like his short homilies’.

‘Yah he gives good homilies, simple, short and straight to the point. Not like the previous guy who spoke for too long, beating around the bush with all sorts of stories and jokes. And when he did finally finish, I could never tell what he was talking about!’

‘Maybe it’s because he was still young. You know how young people are; they want to prove themselves somehow. This new guy is much older! He doesn’t want to prove anything! He just says what he wants to say and sits down!’

‘Maybe he got a problem with his knees or something. Who knows? That’s why he’s so quick’.

‘Or maybe he got a back problem or something. But whatever it is, I’m not complaining … he just mustn’t fall over the stairs or something while he’s preaching, my goodness, I’ll fall of this pew with laughter’, and at this they both giggled softly.

A new priest I thought to myself, this should be interesting.

\* \* \*

1. **Why not?**

I felt disappointed after the Sunday celebration had ended and everyone began to make their way out of the Church. I remained seated on my pew for a little while longer, looking directly ahead of me and to the tabernacle which faced me since it was placed on the right side of the altar. We Catholic’s believed that the real presence of God – body and blood, soul and divinity – is contained in the form of all the consecrated hosts reserved in the tabernacle. We believe that God is right here in front of me! And what’s more, that just a few minutes ago we ate Him and He is inside of us, giving us not only spiritual but also physical nourishment! It’s quite an amazing belief, really, that someone as important as an all-powerful God can become at the same time something as simple and basic as bread! And why not, He’s all powerful after all! I got up from the pew, reverenced the tabernacle and made my way out of the Church. But how does this change my life? How does this help me? How does this help us at home when the food finishes? Perhaps it could if God also became, somehow, a permanent source of ordinary bread so that I don’t have to work or even sometimes steal simply to survive. Perhaps then He would definitely change my life, definitely help me and my family whenever we find ourselves in need, for indeed we’d have Him! And why would He not do this for us, He is all powerful after all!

I went through the exit and down the stairs. I folded the Sunday newsletter one of the ushers had handed me at the beginning of the celebration and put it into my missal. The cold wind which had battered me earlier, causing my lips to dry up and present the look of a man who hadn’t eaten in days, had since given way to the bright and hot sun which shone straight into my eyes, but the feeling of hopelessness and despair, which I had hoped would’ve given way to hopefulness and determination, remained, like a stubborn stain on a favourite pair of jeans. I lifted my right hand which held the missal and used the missal to shield my eyes from the bright light, thinking as I did that my attending the Sunday celebration wasn’t what I had expected at all. For me, coming to Church was more than simply receiving the Eucharist as it had been for me all those years ago when I was young. To tell the truth, I never went to receive at all, something about confession and missing Sunday mass prevented me. Coming to Church was, rather, a final effort to gain a sense of hope and direction in my life, a final effort at making sense of the seemingly hopeless situation I found myself in. And this effort, like every other effort I had made in the past four months, had turned out to be a total waste of time.

The heat of the day, coupled with my long strides as I rushed home, caused me to perspire under my now heavy jacket. The words of the sister who had been invited to give a talk on vocations in the place of the homily didn’t seem to have made a good impact on me. I would’ve preferred it if the priest gave the homily, the short homily, for at least then I would’ve had the opportunity of better understanding the gospel reading of the day: Peter’s profession of faith. I couldn’t, for the life of me, make the connection between the gospel reading and vocations, and I didn’t have what the sister called ‘a vocation to religious life!’ I had been hoping for some words of encouragement and solace, for words which could uplift me from the sense of failure which ate at my dreams, for words which would guide me on the sure path to success. But instead, I found a baseless challenge and empty words. *Or was it?*

I crossed the road and headed towards the bridge, and as I did I noticed the fallen cracked plaque which introduced the Forestdale bridge covered in sand and what seemed like smudged canine excrement lying on the grass. I remembered how quick the erection of this very bridge had been, remembered how my friends and I would walk on it while it was still an incomplete steel structure in an attempt to avoid the soaring river waters during the rainy summer days, remembered how happy the whole community of Forestdale and even the staff at my primary school had been at its completion – that finally we had no excuse to bunk school and sleep on longer during the cold rainy days because of the river, and I also remembered how quickly that very plaque had fallen from its place at the entrance to the bridge and to the ground. I made my way through the small forest home. Upon my arrival I took advantage of the fact that everyone was still asleep and the kitchen and bathroom were vacant. Yes! Finally, some peace and quiet, some ‘me’ time. Even though this ‘quiet’ was just for a little while, I made the most of it, putting a large iron kettle full of water on the hot coal stove for a nice bath.

The bathroom was also the toilet, having the toilet next to the bathtub, and so whenever one used it, one was expected to be quick as someone else may be waiting patiently to use it for more urgent reasons. It was the smallest room in the little house and was situated between the kitchen and the living room, with the bathtub to the left of the entrance and the toilet straight ahead, above which was the window. The window was half the size of the other windows, and had been the window most worked on, even the putty which held the stained glasses to their frame were all in different stages of setting, some very hard and old, some only fairly hard and more recent, and some soft and most recent. In fact, I had put that glass on just a few days ago! Each window pane was of a totally different colour of stained glass which brought different shades of light into the bathroom: brown, blue, and green. The bathroom was so small that an average size man could touch the door and the window, or the left and right wall, if he stood in the centre and stretched out his hands. I kept the missal back in the black plastic from where I had taken it and readied myself and the bath tub for a bath. I removed the kettle from the stove, carried it into the bathroom, poured all the hot water into the small bathtub, and went quickly back out to keep the empty kettle in its usual place. I then went back into the bathroom, shut and latched the door, and got into the bath tub with a heavy thud.

‘Ask yourself: why not?’ This was the question the sister had posed to all the young people in her talk. ‘When we are asked what we want to be when we grow up, seldom do we hear one say that they want to enter into religious life, and why not?’, she had asked. The steam quickly filled the small bathroom, turning it into a steam room. *Mxm*, what a ridiculous idea, which young and ambitious guy in their right mind would seriously want to become a priest? What kind of a job is that, demanding so much sacrifice and self-control yet offering no salary for it, just a stipend? *Mxm*, it’s ridiculous! Yet the question kept repeating itself in my mind and I couldn’t get rid of it: why not? Well for one thing I want to get married and have kids. I want to be rich! I want to have all the things I never had growing up: be independent, own a sports car or even two, own property and a mansion. I want to be a family man, I don’t want to be alone, I’ve been alone all my life. I want to have a beautiful wife and a few kids, I want a son to carry my name. I want all the things that religious life doesn’t accept, let alone offer! In any case, just because I don’t have a job now doesn’t mean that I should throw my happiness away in order to get one, no way! I’ll never do that. I’ll get a job one day. I just need to be patient and to persevere. But the question still remained: why not?

Attempting again to push the question from my thoughts I used a more defensive approach than before, calling not on my needs but on my inability to enter into religious life: I’m not even religious for goodness sake! I never enjoyed going to Church anyway, I just went because of my family, and after that, I just went to compete with my brothers and sister. I don’t have faith! None whatsoever, and to become a priest one should be a staunch believer, shouldn’t he? I’ve never even been an altar-server, they’re the ones who should take up this kind of calling, and they’re the ones who have the necessary kind of faith, not me. I mean, that’s why they wake up every Sunday and serve, they believe somehow, and they learn a lot about the things of God, don’t they? Me, on the other hand, I would be a complete disaster. The sound of a door opening and footsteps moving through the narrow corridor moved me away from my thoughts and to the job at hand, which I quickly finished, and after cleaning the bath tub I mopped the floor and made my way out of the bathroom and into my room.

\* \* \*

Later on the same day, now feeling fresh in my favourite black track pants and matching golf t-shirt, I had decided to do a little neatening up, and beginning with my wardrobe, began arranging the old black plastics which were filled with old toys, old clothes and old school text books. I sorted them out neatly and set them upon each other in the corner of the wardrobe. I then moved to neatening my clothes, packing them according to size and type, into those that need ironing and those that don’t, and into those that need washing and those that don’t. And then finally I neatened up all of my documents which lay scattered in the upper drawer of the wardrobe. I closed it for the time being and opened the bottom drawer to check if there weren’t any more documents lying around in it. Nothing! Closing it I then opened the top drawer again and took all the documents out and placed them onto the bed where I could sort them out properly. I put the pen and paper of the words game to one side and then began sorting the documents according to importance. I put my certificates in one batch and my CV’s in another. I collected all the articles of recent job openings I had copied or wrote down in one batch, and those I had already completed and sent with no reply in another. I put the various brochures of different universities and colleges in one batch, and different magazines and pamphlets in another.

There aren’t many jobs here in Dundee. But after reading the first two vacancies appearing in the previous edition of the local newspaper, I corrected that there weren’t many jobs here in Dundee for me! I wasn’t a plumber or an electrician or an engineer, I only had my matric certificate, and not even this but a statement of symbols since the certificate will only be available in June. I had no work experience and no post matric qualification. I knew no trade and was consoled by the fact that at least I was computer literate after choosing Computer Science as one of my six subjects at high school. So for me, finding work was twice as hard in this town. In fact, life in general was hard for me here. I had no money to further my studies. My bursary applications were all unsuccessful. I had even tried to take a loan from the bank but they refused me. And now, after having used the last R10 I had this past weekend to post two CV’s, I was as broke as ever, with no money even to make another copy.

I was out of ideas, I was downcast and depressed, and the more I thought of my future, the bleaker it seemed. It had always been my dream to go and study further, whether in a university or college. I may not have been in competition for first place after the separation, yet I was still pretty smart. I knew I had what it takes to study because even though things were bad, even though I was going through much pain and suffering, from home, from my friends, from my classmates, even though I was often absent-minded and aloof, too hungry to pay attention, I still managed to pass all my subjects every time. As a little boy I wanted to be a medical doctor, but after the separation I’d settle for anything that pays well. But as I got older and more mature, witnessing the situation at home, seeing my older siblings finishing matric and not going to study, I knew that my dream to study wouldn’t come true. This left me feeling depressed, especially when I’d hear that some of my classmates had begun applying for acceptance at universities around the area, broadening their opportunities and increasing their chances at success, speaking of studying law and engineering and other fancy professions which would earn them lots of money and make them very successful. What about me?

This angered me, though the anger was useful as it pushed me and made me more focused towards my studies in high school. I’d work even during the breaks and in between classes, and even at home I tried as much as I could to hide myself in any quiet room and study. My friends had begun accusing me of pushing them away as I spent more and more time at home and less and less time with them, though that was for my own good since they missed teasing me more than anything. I wanted to do my best so that I could go to study further. I wanted to earn a scholarship or even a bursary, and I knew that if I produce exceptional results, I could get one. But my best was unfortunately not good enough for neither. I couldn’t avoid the human factors which worked against me.

I had unresolved inner feelings of hurt and guilt which ate at my confidence. I had a variety of chores that had to be done each and every day, chores which not only took up all of my time, but all of my energy too! I was hungry all the time, I seldom had a decent meal and sometimes went to school on an empty stomach, even going to bed on one. It wasn’t easy to study on an empty stomach, or on an unbalanced diet. I couldn’t concentrate and focus as much as I needed to and so my best wasn’t good enough! The exemption I got couldn’t get me to go study, not without a sponsor. *Why not?* Came the question again, why not give this priesthood a chance, what have you to lose? Becoming a priest was a definite opportunity for me to finally realize my dream and go and study, even if at a Catholic university studying religious subjects. The idea, finally, had begun to sound much more enticing than before, but I brushed the thought out of my mind once again.

I began rather to reflect on how Warder got his good job. Maybe I can learn from him. He found a job a few months after his matric at a wholesaler. Having a job he could both sustain himself and apply for a better job in his off times, which he did. He managed to find a permanent job in government a couple of months later, and has been there ever since. What about me? Four months out of high school and still unemployed, what lay in store for me only God knows. Was I going to be like one of the many guys in Forestdale who finish school, do drugs and commit crime for a living? Or was I going to be the success I knew I could be? I chose the latter because what I have to do is to keep trying, I’m only four months out of school, there’s still the rest of my life! It was then that the idea struck me yet again: why not? Why not give religious life a try? Why not go and study priesthood?

Letting myself entertain the idea of entering religious life I figured that at least as a priest I’d be someone, I’d be respected and I’d have a life. I wouldn’t have to worry my mother and live here in Dundee any more, I’d have my own place to live, drive my own car. It’s not quite the career I had in mind, being unmarried and working for God, earning a stipend and not a salary, but at least it beats being nobody, sitting at home and doing nothing, running around Dundee in the hope of finding a job. And besides, my basic needs would be met, I won’t suffer or struggle. I might also be able to save money and help out at home from time to time, who knows? Having no kids would be the biggest challenge I’d face, but as things stood I’d rather have no kids than bring them into a world of suffering. This was mother’s lesson to me: not to make the same mistakes she made. And who knows, as I study priesthood, I might be lucky enough to actually find an opportunity to pursue a different profession, an ‘ordinary’ profession. I might get the opportunity of fulfilling my dream. Entering into religious life could be for me the stepping stone I need to pursue an ‘ordinary’ profession. Who knows what could happen? And how will I know if I don’t give it a try? What do I have to lose?

From the documents which had littered the bed, six batches had been sorted, and stacking each batch neatly across the other to form a cross, I placed them neatly in the open top drawer from which I had removed them. I placed the pen and paper from the words game on the top and closed both the drawer and the wardrobe door. I then got up and stood before the window. As I looked out I could see the ruffling of the leaves of the neighbours peach tree, and, feeling the curtain gently brush against my face as the warm breeze forced its way into my room, I concluded to myself in very certain terms on the subject: I wasn’t sure about what I was about to do or how I was going to do it, nor was I sure about how my decision would impact my friends and family, my brothers and sisters, my mother and father, myself. I wasn’t sure about nothing regarding my future endeavours and plans, about what I could expect and about how I could prepare myself adequately. I may not be very bright, and my matric pass may not have had the impact I had hoped it would. I may be a dreamer, gasping on straws since I never knew anyone in my family or even in my community who had made the decision I was about to make. But I concluded nonetheless in very certain terms that I’d give the priesthood a chance, for as much as I had tried to come up with reasons why I shouldn’t, why I couldn’t, or why I wouldn’t, the question that the sister posed to the congregation that morning, the question she posed to me, the question: why not, stuck in my mind and wouldn’t go away, offering me the change I had been looking for, the change I had been praying for, even though it was a change I had never expected, not in a million years!

Perhaps it wasn’t a waste of time to go to Church today after all, for this decision could prove to be the beginning of something different, of something better, of a brighter future. It wasn’t a coincidence that on the one day I decided to go to Church the sister would be there to talk about the vocation to religious life and open up to me this option which gave me a chance to study and could possibly be used as a stepping stone towards greater things. I had to admit, the sister was right, the option to enter religious life for me, and for many in my community, never existed. I had never even thought about it at all until today, not even as a stepping stone, not even just to give it a try, nothing! I had never heard it from any of my friends or relatives or even from members of the Church community whenever I had gone to Church. Not at all! This was indeed a good move from the God of the hopeless, the lost, the poor and the needy in offering me the prospect of success, offering me hope in my despair, and offering me opportunity amidst my many disappointments. And for someone who admitted to having no faith, someone who had never been an altar server and never performed any activity in the Church; for someone who never showed an interest in God but in sacraments; for such a one, God had really went out of His way and showed Himself in a strangely unfamiliar yet profoundly enticing way, guiding me on as I drew close to Him through the sacraments, and guiding me as I draw closer to Him in my hope for a better future.

Maybe, just maybe, I am really called! How could all these circumstances which led me to this very decision be a coincidence? I may not feel it now, but maybe, if there is such a thing as God calling someone, it wouldn’t be a loud voice from heaven or some mysterious angel appearing out of nowhere. Maybe God called like this, through ordinary every day decisions! For it sure seemed so very strange and so sudden, as if I had been pushed by some strange force into making this decision. Maybe, just maybe, it was my destiny!

**Chapter two:**

**The response**

1. **Me and Fr. Lionel**

I couldn’t sleep that night! I was anxious about what I was about to get myself into, and as I tossed and turned on my bed, trying to convince myself that I was making the right decision, the broken springs played at my ribs, causing more tossing and turning. I pulled the blankets, which were now falling off of the edge of the bed, and covered myself properly, trying to get some rest. But I was restless, my heart raced in my chest and my nerves were on edge! I calmed myself with deep heavy slow breaths and before long, with my heart rate slowing down and my mind finally drifting away to other things, I realized just how tired I actually was and found myself fast asleep in no time. When morning broke, I woke up to the sound of the front gate as Nurse shut it on her way to the bus stop. It was quarter past seven, and as I got out of bed I made haste to begin preparing myself to head off to the Church. The feeling of anxiety returned as I thought about what I was about to do, and so I quickly readied myself, enjoying Nurse’s remaining porridge which I found cooling off on the table, and made my way out the house before I talked myself out of it.

*Talk to your parish priest if you feel called*, the sister had said in her talk, and this was exactly what I was going to do. The parish priest was an elderly guy, probably in his fifties, who had just recently taken over from a very young and enthusiastic priest. From what I had heard and from my own first impression of him, the new priest, Fr. Lionel, seemed to be a very kind and good man, open to everyone, greeting everyone, shaking everyone’s hand. I was counting on this kind and good nature today: it would sure make me feel a whole lot better about the decision I was about to make. Besides, he doesn’t know me at all! To him, I’m just as good as any other guy in the parish community. That’s right! I began to feel myself relax a little. That’s just it: the opportunity for me to approach my parish priest about entering religious life couldn’t have come at a better time! What I had was the opportunity to present myself to the new priest as best I could. I had the opportunity to make a good first impression. I was sure that he hadn’t run a background check on everyone in the parish and that I wouldn’t have to answer difficult questions like: *the records show me that you’ve never been active in Church, never even served at the altar! Furthermore, they show that you hardly ever came to Church after your confirmation! What happened? Why did you just disappear like all the other young people? Let’s start here before we can even go into your decision to want to become a priest!*

Yes, I did continue – after my big day wasn’t as I had expected – to attend catechism classes and progress further in my quest for sacraments. I was still hoping to fill the void that had gotten deeper and darker, and I thought that if I could carry on attending classes and receive other sacraments, those that my brothers and sister hadn’t received themselves, that maybe I’d prove to myself that I was better than them, and that feeling better the void would surely go away. It did go away, when after being confirmed I realized that there were no more classes to attend. I had reached the final class and there was no more, like reaching the top of a mountain with nowhere else to climb. I had nothing else with which to prove myself better than my siblings, I had reached a *Cal de sac*. And when this happened, the void was no more, it just disappeared. And when the void which woke me up on Sunday mornings to go to Church had finally disappeared, I had no reason to wake up any more on Sundays, and like mother and my brothers and sister, I abandoned Church altogether. This was the harsh reality which I was thankful I wouldn’t have to explain to Fr. Lionel. With him, I expected no such judgement about my unfortunate past; rather, I only anticipated the prospects of what could become of my bright future.

I carried nothing with me as I made my way up the steep hill and into the Church parking lot, I had no idea what exactly was I supposed to bring, the sister had conveniently forgotten to mention those particulars in her talk! All she had said was to approach the parish priest, and this I was about to do, but as to what I should bring, only God knew. Why didn’t I ask her after the service? Oh Yes, I wasn’t interested! I would’ve no sooner shouted at her for replacing the homily rather than chat to her about particulars. I stopped at a nearby tree to the left of the parking lot to catch my breath, and reaching into my right pocket, drew up my handkerchief and used it to wipe away any perspiration in order to look as calm and collected as I could. I began to recite in my mind what exactly would be the best thing to say to him when we met:

*I want to become a priest*… No, too direct.

*I’ve been thinking about joining the priesthood, what should I do?* No, too short!

*I’ve always been attracted to religious life, I’ve always wanted to be a priest, and when sister pointed out yesterday that such a life was possible, I’ve come to find out if I can give it a try.* That sounded alright, I’ll just say this and take it from there. I folded my handkerchief and placed it back into my pocket as I surveyed the Church yard. The yard looked big with no cars in the parking lot and no people walking about, it seemed very quiet and very peaceful, with neatly mowed lawn beside a neatly kept rose garden, with birds chirping as they bathed in the small font before the entrance to the Church, and with neatly paved long pavements which lead to every door available on the Church yard, stretching mysteriously towards the back of the Church and out of sight. There were trees spread throughout the yard, some around the Church building and behind it, some around the hall, and some on the parking lot, all with many bear branches, and the laden branches threatened to shed more brown leaves to join those already on the ground. It looked like the gardener had his work cut out for him! I made my way out of the parking lot and onto the pavement which led to the priest’s house. I rang the door-bell, and while patiently waiting for someone to answer I turned my head to admire the huge palm tree which stood planted beside the house, but I never admired long as I was suddenly drawn back to the door by the priest’s warm and friendly voice, ‘Hello! How can I help you?’

Fr. Lionel never had on his collar as I had imagined he would, but instead he had on a casual striped shirt under a woollen jersey. He was an Englishman with blue eyes and brown hair.

‘Hello’, I replied as I instinctively reached out to shake his hand, ‘my name is Jamie and I would like to be a priest’. The words had just came out of my mouth without me realizing. So much for the rehearsal! As I released his hand and I realized what I had said and quickly added, smiling shyly ‘I’ve always wanted to be a priest and now I think I want to give it a try’.

Fr. Lionel widened his eyes in surprise and stared at me intently! For a while I held his gaze, but began to feel anxious and averted my gaze to the glass door which he held open. He then broadened his smile, and stepping out the house, patted me reassuringly on the shoulder as he said in a loud deep clear voice ‘hey, you want to be a priest, that’s great’, he stopped patting me, and folding his arms across his chest, asked me politely ‘how old are you?’

‘I’m 18’, I replied, and continued ‘I’ve just completed my matric last year’.

‘Okay’, Fr. Lionel continued thoughtfully, ‘are you working?’ I began to feel as if I was making a mistake, as if the priest was seeing through my lies and that it was only a matter of time before my lies would catch up with me.

‘No I’m not working. Not yet anyway. I do plan to go study next year but before I do, I thought I might give priesthood a chance and if it doesn’t work…’ I lied. *Go study? With what money*! Though the proposal does make me seem less desperate.

Fr. Lionel looked at me and then to the palm tree, ‘I’m actually on my way out. I have a meeting in Newcastle in about an hour. Come and walk me to my car, it’s just over there’, he pointed to the white Toyota Corolla parked on the driveway behind me. We began to walk slowly towards it as he asked ‘what exactly do you want to study if priesthood doesn’t work out? I mean, there are plenty of opportunities for a young guy like you: doctor, lawyer, engineer, politics, accounting, construction, teaching…?’

‘Well, when I was young I always wanted to become a medical doctor, but since I didn’t do so well at high school, I wish to study anything in the health department’.

‘So your into health, well, you’re in the right place, for like the body, the soul hurts and heals. Anyway, health includes a variety of professions, as you probably know, from dentists to psychologists to paramedics to nurses! I’m particularly fascinated at how important nurses are in the health department towards the ministry of healing. In the hospitals and especially in the clinics and among the ordinary and needy people who come from far seeking medical attention. It is the nurse who people first encounter, who assumes much responsibility. They’re really quite a driving force behind the health profession if you ask me. Being a nurse is a vocation, and a real nurse is worth more than any of these bogus doctors mushrooming around the cities and townships’

‘Yes they are! They are well trained, equipped to handle many minor health conditions in order to ease the pressure in hospitals and increase service delivery. I mean, that’s why there are clinics to begin with. But besides nurses, your right, there are many options in the health department to choose from. I guess that’s what makes it so difficult to choose in the first place, having so many options! I’ve gone through the brochures and have seen what many universities and colleges offer and still I’m unsure. I guess I should just give it time’.

‘That’s a good place to start: time. You’re still very young, don’t rush these decisions, take your time, you’ll know soon enough. In the real world, we make choices every day, and sometimes these choices are very difficult, very challenging. But we make them anyway because we have too, and we look back and wonder how things would’ve turned out if we had chosen differently, that’s how life is: full of regret. But don’t worry, the real reward isn’t that things turn out great, sometimes we don’t even live long enough to see how things turn out at all. The real reward is that we chose, and that we kept on moving. That life became challenging and that we went through the challenge, emerging better, smarter, and stronger’.

‘Yes I agree, that makes a lot of sense. We can’t live life full of regret, we have to stay positive and move forward, having learnt from the past’.

‘Indeed. By the way, I forgot to ask, where are you from? Are you a local guy?’

‘Yeah I am! I’m from Forestdale, the location down the road. I went to that school behind you and then to this school in front of you and now here I am between them’.

‘Wow you really are a local fellow. And before studying anything related to health do you really want to give priesthood a try?’

‘Yes I do. The sister yesterday had asked the question: why not? And since then I couldn’t get the question out of my head. I tried and failed and so here I am’.

‘Yes, she was convincing wasn’t she? Her name is Disney, she is an Augustinian sister from Pomeroy. She volunteered to give the talk since it was vocation Sunday, says there are few young people entering religious life these days. Wait till she hears about you’.

I began to feel a bit embarrassed, and Fr. Lionel, noticing my embarrassment, added quickly, ‘Or not. She meant well in the things she said’, and smiling at me he added, ‘anyway what matters is that you’re here and are willing to give priesthood a try. The rest is in God’s hands, after all, God writes straight with crooked lines!’

‘What does that mean: God writes straight with crooked lines? It sounds funny’ I asked curiously.

‘Well, in simple terms, it means that things we consider as bad and evil, the ‘crooked things’, God can use in order to make something good, something wonderful’.

‘Oh! Okay, would I be right if I said that God can use the poverty of someone and make something good come from it?’

‘Yes you would be right to say that. That’s exactly what the saying means’.

*Hmm, I don’t know about that. Why would God want to make anyone poor in the first place only to make something good come from it? Why not skip the poor part and just make the good happen already, why must there be poverty first, why must there be suffering first?* But I kept that thought to myself. What I didn’t realize is that it’s not God who causes the poverty and suffering to begin with, who causes the ‘crooked lines’, we do, with our selfishness and arrogance. God simply uses it to His advantage and ours.

‘But let’s not worry about what brought you here, that’s between you and God. Let’s worry about why you’re here: because you want to become a priest. Well, you’re in the right place; the sister did say you should come and see me and this you did. It’s the first step, and I am grateful that you had the courage to make it. There will be some protocols and assessments that you’re going to have to complete and submit, a necessary evil, I hope you don’t mind. And there’re also going to be lots of forms which you’re going to have to fill in, but don’t worry, I’ll be with you all the way. I have all these forms in my office somewhere, I could show them to you now but we don’t have the time. So I tell you what: let’s meet tomorrow, same time as today, and we can go through all the requirements together? I have an appointment tomorrow but it’s in the evening, I think we’d be long done before then’.

‘So you’d like me to come back tomorrow at this time?’

‘Yes! We could’ve done it today but unfortunately I have to leave now for Newcastle. And I can’t ask you to wait for me because I’m not sure when I’ll be back. If you have plans for tomorrow we can do it another day, there’s no rush, my papers aren’t going anywhere, and neither am I’, he smiled jokingly, hoping to add some humour to the conversation.

‘Tomorrow is fine. I’m not doing anything anyway. I’ll come by at around ten-o-clock?’

‘Yes ten-o-clock sounds great’. He stood beside the car, and as I was about to turn and leave offered ‘where you going? Come, let me give you a lift home, you said you live just down the road’.

‘Yes I do’, I said as I turned back to the car and got into the passenger seat, ‘thank you very much’.

We made our way to Forestdale where he dropped me off. ‘See you tomorrow’, I said as I stepped out of the car, ‘Yes, tomorrow at ten’, Fr. Lionel confirmed, and closing the passenger door he made his way out of Forestdale and to Newcastle.

\* \* \*

The next morning, I decided to sleep on a bit longer and savour all the strength I could for the mystery of the day. I remembered the conversation with Fr. Lionel about certain forms I needed to fill in and certain protocols and assessments that I had to submit, wondering what they could possibly be? I began to feel a bit anxious again, thinking that I was going to hit a brick wall somewhere and fail. These protocols and assessments seemed to be the exact kind of thing that separates someone who is truly called from someone who wasn’t, from someone like me. Well, if that’s the case, then today is the day I’d be caught out. After failing an assessment the priest will begin to see right through me and realize that my intentions aren’t pure, sending me away ashamed and disappointed. These thoughts made me feel anxious, and I even thought of not going at all, of just forgetting about the whole thing and rather going to look for a job instead. But I thought better, thinking that I should at least give it a try, because it was better for me to try and fail rather than to fail to try, for if I did fail to try, how would I ever know how things might have turned out?

I may not be a staunch believer, but if indeed there is a God, I truly believed that it’s Him, surely, who even put the idea into my head in the first place, who led me to Church this past Sunday, of all Sundays, so that the sister who gave her talk on vocations would plant the question in my head, why not, a question that led me back to the Church and talking to the parish priest about the possibility of entering into religious life. Besides, I’d really spoil any chance I may have if I stand the priest up. It’ll look too suspicious and I’d have failed before even starting. Therefore, I concluded, I’m going! And so I pushed the blankets off me and got onto my feet. I got myself ready, and left the house carrying nothing like the day before. I put my hands into my jean pockets and began on my way to the Church on the warm sunny day. Along the wayI thought about what I’d do should I be unsuccessful, thinking of the last CV I had and of which places I should go in an attempt to drop it off, if they accept it at all! I thought about visiting Warder in Glencoe, that maybe I could have better luck there than here in Dundee, though this thought frightened me a little because I’ve never been to Glencoe before, what if it turns out to be a cruel and strange place I don’t like? No! That can’t be an option! Besides, I don’t think Warder is allowed to have any guests living with him. It’s not his place but an accommodation his work offered.

Thinking the grass is greener on the other side seemed to be in my nature, but I should learn from past mistakes that this isn’t always the case, and that going to Glencoe I’d be taking chances. But it is the time to take chances, now more than ever, isn’t it? I mean, here I am taking a chance at religious life simply because I could, should I not also think of broadening my horizon and going to other towns should I fail? It may be a cruel and strange place, but if indeed Warder could accommodate me, there was also the hope of finding a good job, earning a living and maybe even finding a better job. I’d never know until I tried: you know, the whole ‘it’s better to try and fail’ speech that got me this far. Fr. Lionel was right! In life we make different choices all the time, and the reward isn’t in how things turn out, even though this is important, but in the living: getting better, smarter, and stronger after each choice.

I looked at my watch, nine-thirty, and as I made my way up the little hill and approached the parking lot, I decided I’d sit on one of the chairs which were neatly arranged on the left hand side of the Church hall and wait for a while, catch my breath and just enjoy the silence and tranquillity that the place brought at this time of the week. But I didn’t have time to do these things, for just as I was making my way through the parking lot, Fr. Lionel spotted me and called me into his presbytery with the same warm smile as the day before, ‘Hey, Jamie , how are you? Please do come in’. He led me past the living room and into his office, where I took a seat among the many seats surrounding the table.

‘Hello father. I’m good, can’t complain’.

‘Don’t’, Fr. Lionel said, widening his eyes and taking a thick file from the shelf and placing it in front of us on the table, ‘it doesn’t help complaining if you can’t do something about it’. He paused, looked at the file on the table, and then continued, ‘here we are. Here is the file which has the documents that have to do with the requirements towards entering into religious life. Religious life is quite broad, there are a variety of spirituality’s from Franciscans to Dominicans to Jesuits. But since you want to be a parish priest, we don’t have to go through all these, you’ll learn about them in the seminary’, Fr. Lionel smiled as he paged through the file.

At that moment the helper came into the study carrying a huge tray with tea and warm, freshly backed cupcakes on it. The cupcakes were still smoking hot having just come out the oven, and they brought a sweet smell which quickly filled the room and made me lick my lips in hunger. My goodness, I can’t remember the last time I ate cupcakes, the last time I ate anything delicious. She placed the tray on the desk and walked out without saying a word. ‘*Siyabonga*’, Fr. Lionel called after her as she smiled and closed the door behind her. I was impressed that he was already using the local language, it was a sign that he was open to all races. ‘Please help yourself’, he pointed to the tray on the table then continued fiddling with the file, paging and pulling out pages.

Well, he didn’t have to ask me twice, I was starving! The little porridge I ate for breakfast that morning faded into nothingness at this point. I helped myself to some tea and, taking a cupcake, reclined to enjoy my snack. After sorting out the papers he had removed from the file and placing them on the table, Fr Lionel kept the file away and helped himself as well, relaxing on his chair as he did. ‘Don’t worry about these papers’, he pointed to the sorted papers, ‘there’s nothing here that’s difficult. It’s actually just administration really’. He took his third cupcake, and noticing I had only taken one, offered me another, ‘please have another before I finish them all by myself’. I took another cupcake, the last one, and as with the first one I tried to eat it as slowly as I could not to give the impression that I was starving. *Mm, the cupcakes were delicious;* I could eat them all day.

‘The only two important things we need are your matric and confirmation certificates and then you’re through’, Fr. Lionel said, ‘the rest is paperwork’.

‘Does it matter how I did in my matric or which subjects I took? I’ve passed my matric with a simple exemption’.

‘A simple exemption?’ Fr. Lionel repeated surprised, ‘what on earth is that? I’ve never heard of that kind of exemption pass. What kind of pass is that?’ he asked sarcastically, then continued without giving me a chance to respond, ‘the exemption pass that I know of is a good pass! It’s a pass that allows you to study and earn your degree at any university, is it not? And that pass is perfect to qualify you for the priesthood no matter what subjects you chose’.

‘Yeah well, it can’t get me into medical school… for me it’s not what I expected. I wish I could have earned more than this’, I said as I looked downcast and sad.

 He looked at me intently for a while saying nothing, he then focused on the papers before him, fidgeting with them as he said, ‘don’t look down on yourself and on what you’ve achieved simply because its less than you’ve expected. An exemption pass is a good achievement and you should be proud of it. Just because you never got what you wanted doesn’t mean you got the worst deal. You got a pretty good deal if you ask me. Think about the many young people out there who got it worse than you, and I’m not talking about how they passed!’

I nodded as I realized exactly what the priest was talking about. Things could’ve been a lot different, they could’ve been a lot worse. Being unemployed after having passed matric meant that it was just a matter of time before an opportunity presented itself, and luckily for me, it just did. What about those who are unemployed and haven’t passed matric? Even if opportunities for employment present themselves they’re unable to grab them because they don’t even have a basic requirement: a matric certificate. That must be very painful. I should be grateful that I passed all my subjects and got an exemption. Maybe my hard work, my staying at home and studying, did pay off after all, because now I can study and make something out of myself. I can study and be someone. ‘Thank you Fr. for reminding me just how lucky I am’.

‘Don’t mention it’, he said with a smile, ‘I’m just glad you did. Some people, myself included, take time to realize such things. It takes courage to own up to our mistakes Jamie, so… thank you! I can learn from your courage, we all can. We all need a bit of courage to change those things in our lives which we can, a bit of humility to accept those things we can’t change, and a bit of wisdom to know the difference between them’.

‘Wow thanks, I don’t know what to say’, I began.

Fr. Lionel smiled and nodded, looking intently at me, ‘say: where do I sign’, he laughed. He then took the pages before him and, one by one, began explaining to me the procedure for someone wishing to enter the seminary. I sat there, wide-eyed and attentive, though unable to take in all the information at once. There were health forms and information forms, request forms and application forms which needed to be filled in. There were documents which had to be produced, from testimonials to personal letters to certificates.

Finally Fr. Lionel finished explaining and looked up, he saw me wide-eyed and dumbfounded. ‘It’s okay; you won’t have to remember all this stuff. I’m just explaining so that you know what it’s all about. It might make sense later and you can ask me any questions you might have as we go along. You won’t go through all this alone, that’s why you came to me, so that I can help you, just like when I told my parish priest and he helped me, and maybe someday some young fellow will come tell you when you’re a priest and you’ll help him, and so on’.

‘Yeah, it’s quite a lot. But I expected nothing less, I mean, I am applying, and applications are like this, some even more complicated’.

‘That’s right! And just to be sure, this information, especially the medical stuff, is confidential, so it will be between you and the doctor’.

The conversation shifted from the application to more general things like health and science and unemployment. We got the chance to know each other better, and I got to know a bit more about what a parish priest is. Fr. Lionel seemed an open and down to earth guy and I found myself opening up more and more to him. I liked his positive and optimistic view about things, always seeing the good in everything, opening my eyes to possibilities I didn’t really notice, possibilities I so easily took for granted. Finally I had overstayed my welcome, and as Fr. Lionel got up from his chair and led me out of the house and to his car, he concluded our plan for tomorrow, ‘so we’ll begin tomorrow with the psychological test, and then we can take it from there’.

‘Great’, I replied as I got into the passenger seat.

Fr. Lionel continued as he fastened his seatbelt and started the car, ‘you have nothing to worry about, it’s just a test to prove if your sane or not, and from what I see, your more than sane, your quite smart, and will do well in the seminary’. He paused for a while before continuing, ‘you know, things like these, exams and tests, paperwork and that kind of thing, a lecturer of mine called them a necessary evil. He said we don’t want to do them but we can’t live without doing them. Does that make any sense?’

‘Yeah it does’, I smiled as I added, ‘sounds just like what a friend of mine told me about women. You can’t live with them, and you can’t live without them’, and we both laughed.

As we halted in front of my gate Fr. Lionel said, ‘I think ten-o-clock is fine don’t you think?’

‘Yes it’s a good time, especially with the cold that is slowly creeping in’.

‘Yeah about the cold, how cold does it get here in Dundee?’

‘It can get quite cold here, there’s a small river and a damn nearby so there are some cold winds, but not very cold, to my knowledge it has only snowed here twice, when I was about six and thirteen, so…Yah’.

‘Thanks for that, it will help me as I prepare’.

‘It’s a pleasure, Fr.’ And after saying our goodbyes Fr. Lionel made his way back to the presbytery and me, excited and thankful, made my way into the gate, into the house and into my room. I hadn’t expected such a good outcome to today’s meeting. What I thought were protocols and assessments out to catch me turned out to be an adventure which I couldn’t wait to begin. I hadn’t felt this excited in a long time, I hadn’t felt this useful and needed in a long time either, and it felt good. It felt good to finally have something to look forward to rather than the snag of going to look for a job. I had a purpose again, one which made my eyes light up as they did whenever I was on my way to write an exam I enjoyed, or on my way to the bridge to meet someone special, or even on my way to see my friends on a Friday night, with a spring in my step and a naughty smile playing on my lips that said to everyone: watch out! Here comes trouble with a capital T.

Every day after this was filled with a unique adventure, Fr. Lionel would come by at ten and we’d be off either to the doctor or to my old school or to the library or even out of town! I was happy that I was doing something with myself. I’d wake up after Nurse had gone and begin preparing myself for the next adventure. One day as I was sitting on the couch sipping a cup of hot water, waiting for the priest to come, mother came into the lounge and asked me, ‘who is that white guy you’re always going with?’

‘He’s the new priest, can you believe it? I’m hanging out with the new parish priest’.

‘Oh, okay! So there’s a new guy in the parish Church now, that’s great! I wonder what happened to the old one’, she smiled and sat on the couch beside me. ‘So what have you guys been up to in these past few days?’

‘Ah, nothing much, I’m just keeping myself busy while I’m still job searching, that’s all’, I lied, sipping my water, ‘I don’t want to sit around and do nothing, or hang around by the street corners, I’d rather do something constructive’.

‘Wow’, she nodded violently, ‘I’m really happy to hear you say that. Keep it up and you’ll find yourself in a job in no time’, and she got up and walked out the lounge. Should I have told her the truth, I wondered, or is it a good idea to keep it secret for a while, I mean, what if my application was unsuccessful? I think I should keep it secret for a while, I concluded, just until I’m sure. I finished my water, got up and made my way to the kitchen to wash the cup in the sink, and as I was about to wash it, heard the sound of the car hoot and quickly dashed out.

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‘We did it!’ Fr. Lionel said to me as we sat in the car parked on the side of the road beside my gate later on that day. ‘The requirements have been sorted out and the final application form sent’. He looked at me as I sat quietly on the passenger seat, downcast and unmoved. This silenced him for a while, and after some thoughtful reflection, he asked ‘is something wrong Jamie? You haven’t said anything in a while’.

‘I’m alright. I’m glad that we’re done. I’m just thinking about what I’m going to do now?’

‘Well, there’s a whole range of options, either you stay at home and get some much needed rest or you can spend some of this time finding out what seminary life is all about, and I can help you with that. The seminary usually begins evaluations in August/September, so we should know by then whether you’re accepted or not, but I have no doubt, you have no impediments, and my testimony was very good’.

‘Thanks Fr.’, I smiled, ‘it’s good to know that you’re on my side’.

‘Yes! I am, I’m your parish priest! Anyway, just be positive, you’d be surprised at what a positive attitude can do’.

‘Yeah, that’s true. In a world full of negative energy, be positive. Don’t just go with the flow when you are born to stand out’.

‘Sounds like someone’s been reading, where did you read that, it sounds great!’

‘It was an advert, a long time ago, I can’t remember about what. I think it was Old Mutual or BMW or something’.

I’m also not sure! Anyway I’m surprised you remember it, you must’ve been like three or four at the time, it sounds like an old add.’

‘Yah, well, some things just stick in the mind, you may not know exactly where you got it from, but you remember the words clearly because they mean something to you’.

‘Does it mean something to you?’

‘Yeah it does, it reminds me that I’m special and that I was put on this earth for a reason. I don’t believe that I was born to end up in a normal job doing normal things, I have a feeling I’m destined for something great. This is how I feel’.

‘I couldn’t have said it better myself. Let no one tell you otherwise Jamie. You are special, it’s how God made you, and He has a purpose for you, this is true’.

‘And for now, His purpose for me is that I rest. See you around Fr. and thank you for all your support and guidance, it meant a lot to me’.

 ‘You’re welcome! And whenever you need someone to talk to, I’m just fifteen minutes away, so please do come by and pay me a visit sometime if you need to, I enjoy your company’.

It was about four-o-clock in the afternoon, and the warmth of the morning had since given way to a chilly mist which began to settle over the neighbourhood. Indeed it got quite cold in Dundee, and from as early as four-o-clock people were already preparing for the cold night ahead as the chimneys coughed out the smoke of a coal stoves heating up, and even in autumn, it could get quite cold. We said our goodbyes and I stood for a moment and watched as he drove off into the distance, and the priest, seeing me standing and looking at him through the rear-view mirror, gave an extra hoot before accelerating off into the distance. Now that I’ve given that a try I guess I’m back to job hunting again. And that was why I felt a bit down, felt a bit sad. It was back to square one, I was right back where I had started. But Fr. Lionel was right, if I keep trying I’ll succeed, all I have to do is try, is put myself out there into the world and say: hey, I’m here and I want a job! Someone somewhere is bound to notice me after some time. After all, I’m not invisible. I lay on my bed as I wondered what my next move would be. And amidst the many ideas of reading newspapers and posting CV’s, I fell asleep.

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1. **A happy visit**

This wood is as hard as a rock, I thought as I secured one end of the thick log under my left boot and, raising the small blunt chopper above my head, attempted for what seemed like the hundredth time to split the log in two, only to succeed in once again sending grass and sand flying to my already dirty face. I went to the stone I had placed near the wall of the house and began to sharpen the edge of the chopper against it, again! It was around four-thirty in the afternoon, yet one could hardly notice the rays of the setting sun as it hid beneath a dark cloud at the distant horizon as a result of the smoke from chimney tops which formed a thick cloud hovering over the whole location. It wasn’t that cold yet, winter was still coming. I went back to the log to continue chopping, moving the chopper forcefully down towards the dead centre of the log. It’s still autumn, an unusually cold autumn, but autumn nevertheless. And besides, warming ourselves wasn’t the only reason that we prepared the coal stoves here in Forestdale. We also prepare them as a cheap means for cooking and for boiling water.

‘Hurry up before it gets dark’, mother shouted. Indeed I had to hurry up, because without any outside light and with only the light from the kitchen window which faced the back of the house to see with, I couldn’t do any chopping from dusk till dawn without risking chopping more than wood. I knew I had rested well, in fact, I dozed off around five yesterday. I was fresh, but the wood was strong. Staring down at the tough log, I realised I had only chopped a hand full of small pieces from the hard and smooth log. I’ll deal with you next time, I thought, fed up with it. I put the chopper aside and was about to carry the log to the wood pile behind the house when Nurse came rushing to me, calling ‘Jamie, Jamie, your friend is here!’ She had been running from the front gate towards the back of the house, and as she turned the corner towards where I had been labouring for what was the better of two hours, she continued, ‘he wants to see you, he’s standing by the gate’. She appeared in a hurry, bear-footed and in her favourite pink track suit. She was halted dead in her tracks when I yelled out to her, ‘wait, don’t come near the back, you’ll get hurt’ stretching out my hand as I continued, ‘alright, tell him to wait for me a little bit, I’m coming’. After staring at me with big eyes for a few seconds in silence, she ran back the same way she had come, disappearing out of sight as she passed the corner of the house. She was still within earshot as she shouted to the unknown friend ‘he said his coming’.

I was afraid of seeing her or any little child around me when I was chopping wood. I knew how easy it was to lose sight of them, and, in the process of chopping, find them pop up suddenly and in a dangerous place. It had happened to me more than once as a little boy, always wanting to be around my brothers, even when they were chopping wood, and I remembered how on more than one occasion, I found myself struck by the chopper. I didn’t want any child, let alone my little sister, to suffer the same fate. I pulled myself up, and leaving the log and the chopper by the woodpile, made my way towards the front gate in my dirty boots, old torn jeans and old dirty T-shirt which bore the phrase ‘here comes the pain’ on the front.

I wondered who this friend might be, and as I turned the corner of the house and faced the front gate, saw a complete stranger standing there, his arms holding the bars of the brown rusting iron gate, his eyes searching me intently.

‘How are you doing? Are you Jamie?’ He asked in a deep voice.

‘Yes I am’, I replied, and walking closer towards him I realised that the guy standing in front of me was in fact no stranger, he was Smiley’s friend. I then smiled and greeted him heartily ‘how’s it going?’

‘I’m good, I’m good’, he repeated before asking, ‘where’s Smiley? I haven’t seen him in a while’.

‘He’s around’ I responded, figuring out that maybe he wasn’t here to see me. But then why did he ask for me? ‘You can find him by the shop, and if he’s not there, then he’s by Wayne’s. He’s always with Wayne’.

‘Yeah, I last saw him with Wayne’, he laughed before adding, ‘but I’m here to see you. My mother sent me, you know my mother, she works for Shoprite; she sent me to tell you to come to Shoprite tomorrow morning at seven’.

‘Okay’, I nodded surprised. ‘I must come to Shoprite tomorrow at seven o’clock. What should I bring?’

‘Bring your CV and look smart because she wants you to come for an interview’. The word sounded like music to my ears.

‘Really? Wow’, I was at a loss for words. I have been trying so hard to find a job and here is my chance. ‘Okay, thanks man, that’s good news’.

‘Don’t thank me yet, thank me when you get the job’.

‘I’ll do my best, I just don’t know what to expect’.

‘Expect the worst, hope for the best, that’s what I did for my interview at Consol’.

‘Oh yes, by the way, you used to work for Consol. What happened to Consol, why did it close down?’

‘I’m not sure, but what I know is that it moved to Durban somewhere. Forestdale was too small, there was no business here’.

‘And when they moved all of you guys were retrenched? That’s not good man, I mean, by now you’d be a supervisor or something’.

‘A supervisor’, he laughed then continued, ‘they did compensate us for the inconvenience, but they couldn’t stay. Forestdale, Dundee in general, is becoming a ghost town. There are no investors here, firms are relocating, the railway station closed down, transport service is underdeveloped, I mean, the bus, really? The same bus I’ve been using as a child! Why can’t we have a decent taxi service here in Forestdale, why do I have to call a meter taxi just to get to Peacevale?’

‘Not to mention that we don’t have a decent mall. I agree, service delivery leaves much to be desired in this town. But you must admit, we’re better than Glencoe’.

‘But we’re getting there, would you believe me if I told you that Glencoe used to be a vibrant town? People from all around used to come to Glencoe to catch the train to work, from Dundee, Vryheid, Pomeroy, Nqutu, Hattingspruit and even Danhausser, they all used to meet here in Glencoe. Glencoe was a busy town, and if it wasn’t for government abandoning railroad for tar road, it would have been a big city today’.

‘Your right, that’s hard to believe because now it’s a real ghost town. Most people from Glencoe come to Dundee for their shopping’.

‘And soon, we’ll all be going somewhere else to do shopping if no one, not even government, invests in Dundee’.

‘Yeah, it’s true’

‘I was lucky I invested my early retirement package otherwise I would’ve been broke by now. Now I live off the dividends and am able to provide for myself and my family while the capital remains intact, who knows when it might come in handy with such an volatile economy’.

‘I guess I can learn from that’.

‘Yes, you can learn how to be smart with money. Don’t spend everything you get, you’ll be tempted to live above your means and this will lead you to debt. Rather, think of your salary as capital: capital needs to be invested, when you invest your capital you gain interest, which you can spend’.

‘But if I can’t spend my salary, how do I get to work or buy lunch or provide for the family?’

‘Getting to work and buying lunch can also be considered investments because they allow you to get to work and make more money. That’s what I mean when I say capital needs to be invested. The issue comes with the interest on investment: whether it gains interest like a bond or a business deal, whether it incurs a loss like lunch and transport, or whether it balances out’.

‘I can understand the investment of a bond or business deal, it’s pretty straight forward: a bond accumulates a fixed interest rate per annum and a business deal measures interest on income and expenditure. But as to how lunch and transport incur a loss I’m not quite clear’.

‘Yah it’s not easy to understand. Maybe if we use numbers it could help: let’s say I earn R50 a day. To get the R50 I need transport to get to work, which costs R15, and I need to have lunch to work properly, which costs another R15. Thus I invest R30 each day in order to earn R50, but I incur a loss because at the end of the day I only made R20 capital, since salary is capital’.

‘Okay, I see’.

‘Now, in this example, my capital increases by 40% each day, which is good because being smart with money means that my capital must increase. But, I incurred a loss and not a profit, which means I’ve got no money to spend, which means there’s no money to provide for the family. What I need to do is put structures in place so that I can make interest on my investment, which I can spend. For instance, if I walk to work and carry a lunch box I eliminate the R30 and my capital increases by 100% each day. It balances out. Furthermore, if I buy sweets at R40, sell them to make R60, I make a profit of R20 and my capital increases by 140% for the day, the 40% profit I can spend on my family. And so on, and so forth. The idea is to provide for your family and save capital at the same time so that you increase your capital in order to gain financial independence and become an investor, invest in others or even in yourself’.

‘Wow man, you should be an accountant or something, you know a lot about money’.

‘I have to, I’m a family man. Anyway, don’t forget, tomorrow at seven at Shoprite with your CV’.

‘I won’t forget. Thanks for coming and letting me know’.

‘No problem’, and he started on his way home.

Wow, I was unable to contain the excitement I felt at the prospect of a job, my first interview. I turned and dashed towards the back of the house. I picked up the chopper and, holding it firmly, began a brutal assault on the log I had left on the ground. I possessed a new burst of energy which the log couldn’t endure, and before I knew it, the log was chopped up into many small pieces of wood scattered across the back yard. I hurriedly collected the pieces of wood and put some into the old black pot which was reserved for the morning. I stacked the rest among the wood pile nearby, grabbed the chopper and pot and made my way towards the kitchen to give to mother to prepare the coal stove. I did all this with a big smile on my face and the happy thought which kept playing in my head like a favourite song: I have a job interview, tomorrow at seven sharp.

\* \* \*

1. **Working at last!**

I stood behind the cashier in my jeans and t-shirt, readying myself to pack the goods of the next customer in the queue. There was no interview, the moment I walked into the empty supermarket I saw a women looking straight at me and I realised this must be the guys mother as she walked up to me. She was looking at my clothes in distaste as she said to me ‘come this way Jamie’, motioning me to follow her to the same office I entered not so long ago, asking for a job. Waiting for me was the same man who rejected me and a woman next to him. ‘Couldn’t he have at least worn a formal trouser’, the woman asked?

‘No, I don’t think he was expecting to work today’, the guy’s mother replied in my defence, taking my CV and handing it over to the lady.

‘Assign him under one of the packers and get him to start work before the store starts filling up. I have to go to the back and help the floor manager put up the winter goods at the home and ware department’, he got up and moved past me and through the office door, disappearing behind a shelve.

I may not know the guy’s mother, but it was clear that she not only knew me, but she somehow saw something good in me. It was clear that it is by her testimony that I found myself employed in this supermarket since I was already rejected by my own effort. By my own effort I was dismissed without the opportunity to leave a CV, by my own effort I was not good enough. I guess I am still not good enough, but because of the testimony of someone they trust, they are willing to give me a chance to prove my worth. Why was this the case? Why did someone have to give testimony of me before I could be offered the opportunity to prove my worth? Is it not enough that I present myself, that I offer my CV which is my testimony, containing my biography, my qualifications and previous experiences? Well, experience shows this is not the case, that another testimony, one of someone from within, is necessary. Maybe this is one of the major reasons why I struggled to find a job, the fact that there was no one who knew me, no one who could give testimony to my ability. In such a situation, finding a job becomes a popularity contest since only the popular get an opportunity to prove their worth, for they have the testimony of others.

While experience does show that hiring an unknown person opens the company up to much risk, without risk there can be no reward. People who are popular may not be the best suited for the job since there is a lot of deception in popularity, just as the unpopular may be best suited based on their qualifications, experience and character. Yet if employers continue to give opportunities based on the testimony of people they trust, the suited candidate may not get the post just as the unsuited one can. I appreciate sincerely the testimony of the guy’s mother, for it secured me the opportunity to show my capabilities. Indeed I looked forward to proving that I am more than capable, I looked forward to showing just how resourceful I can be, yet I do wish that I had the opportunity on my own effort. I wished that the company could have given me a chance based on who I am and on what I presented to them so that I can earn the opportunity fair and square. Was it not enough that I overcame my fear, walked up to the manager and asked for a job like everyone else? There is no fairness in obtaining an opportunity because of who I know in the company since not everyone has that advantage, and amongst the many inequalities which distinguishes job seekers, such as upbringing, education, race, gender, qualification, convictions, social status, religion, language, nationality, political affiliation and health, should knowing someone in the company be added to the already extensive list? It’s no wonder the unemployment rate is so high, with customer service and service delivery being so slow.

Before I was assigned I was warned about the dress-code: to wear black shoes, a navy blue pants and a white shirt whenever I came to work. ‘You may not have navy blue pants or black shoes but at least try to wear the closest colour when you come to work tomorrow, understand!’ the female manager said to me, ‘but after your pay at the end of the week, we expect full cooperation in this regard, is that clear’. She looked at me threateningly with big scary red eyes full of eyeliner.

‘Yes ma’m’, I managed.

‘Good’, she said in a more calmer tone, ‘and maybe if you work hard and do whatever I tell you, I’ll get you a nice navy Jacket like the one I’m wearing with the company logo on it’.

I was assigned to work under Themba, one of the other till-packers so as to train for the day, to learn how things are done. But after getting me a bucket with soap water, a cloth and a sponge, he was called by the manager and disappeared with him behind the store. I guess he’s going to help put out those winter goods in home department. I touched the wet sponge Themba had place on the corner of the till and began opening the plastic bag and filling it with goods. There isn’t much to learn anyway, hell, I’ve been packing all my life, every time I did shopping. All you do is open a plastic bag and put goods into it, how hard can that be!

‘What are you doing?’ the customer shouted at me after I handed her the plastic bag, ‘why are you mixing the dishwashing liquid with the bread?’ She began frantically removing the items from the plastic bag and as I was about to protest the lady manager came out and apologised to the customer. She tore a plastic from the roller hidden under the till and put the dishwashing liquid into it before packing it along with the bread. ‘Sorry, he’s still learning’, she said to the customer with a smile as she handed the customer her goods.

‘Well, he better learn fast, he can’t be mixing soaps with food he’ll spoil someone’s shopping’, the customer added angrily as she took her goods and made her way out of the store. The lady manager then went back into her office without saying a word to me. And I felt like an idiot taking my first lesson from a customer: don’t mix detergents with food stuff. How hard can it be huh!

I began to recover from my little packing incident a while later, packing very carefully from then on, especially for women, they’re so demanding. Aha, so that’s what that roller was for, I had thought the roller was only used for weighing the fruit and vegetables, guess it had other uses as well. After a while I never thought much of it, and began to think how ironic it was that I should get a job immediately after submitting my application for the priesthood. It was almost as if the world was waiting for me to apply before giving me the opportunity to work. It was almost as if God was waiting for me to make the move and apply before He could shower me with the graces I so desperately needed. But I don’t even really want to be a priest, how could that be? Could it be that God was writing straight with my crooked and deceptive intentions, and that something good will come out of my application? I mean, now that I found a job, I don’t need to continue in that direction, do I? Or could it be that I really have the call and that I just don’t know it yet? Goodness I hope not; I don’t want to live my life without getting married and having kids. No way!

I stopped thinking about it and found myself thinking about the tasks at hand, packing goods into plastic bags and into trolleys, returning goods left by customers back into the shelves, returning baskets and small trolleys in order that customers find them at the entrance. Unlike the cashier, who had a seat, the packer had no seat and was expected to stand throughout the day, and so as my legs began to feel heavy and my back began to ache, I found myself at times slouching sloppily onto the till point, making the manager and supervisor and even customers look at me funny. Being a till-packer wasn’t as easy as it looked, it required a certain degree of mental and physical fitness. The customer was always right whenever a dispute arose, and as a packer I could easily lose my job because of customer complaints without any investigation. This was why Themba had advised me to join a Trade Union, so that the Shop Steward could defend my rights as the company’s main focus is its customers and not me. I was expected to work: to be punctual, to perform whatever tasks my superiors designated to me, to comply and never complain, to accept whatever remuneration they gave me with gratitude. I was expected to work!

Customers bring in the money, so happy customers means good business and high profits, and this is what the company promotes. My job was to serve the customers every need, to go out of my way to please them in order that they return. This was not commendable, it was expected, by management as well as customers, so that the store gets renowned for its good customer service. However, even with good customer service, even when I aim to please each and every customer, there are some customers who are not happy with service but with dominion, happy when they feel superior to me and when they trample over my rights for selfish reasons. And with an under-skilled job such as a till-packer, one in which I am dispensable – here today, gone tomorrow – I let customers get their way in order to keep my job. This type of work, where I am neglected and used, eats at my self-esteem, making me feel more like a hired slave than an employee. But it was my job, and because I didn’t know people in better jobs who could testify for me, I had to accept it, after all, others don’t have this job, I didn’t have it yesterday.

Lunch was introduced at random, whereby each till point closed one at the time and went on lunch for one hour (half an hour if its busy) and only upon their return could the next till point close. It was our turn to take a lunch break at around two-thirty. I was as hungry as ever, and I hadn’t brought any lunch money or any lunch. I thought about running home but I knew I wouldn’t make it, an hour was too little! First day at work and I’m late after lunch, no way! I knew there was nobody I could ask since I was new: Themba? The guy’s mum? But on the first day! I decided that I’d have to stick it out like a man, after all, I wasn’t going to die if I missed lunch, I’d just be very, very weak and hungry by the time I got home, but at least I’d still have a job to come back to tomorrow, prepared!

As the cashier hurriedly put all the money into a zipper bag, she instructed me to wipe the till, to block the entrance to the till with an upside-down trolley, and then to return all the goods around the till-point to their respective shelves. As I was still returning the goods, she came rushing up to me saying, ‘I’ve been looking for you, come lets go and have our lunch quickly, we only have about twenty minutes left’, and, grabbing me by the hand, she led me through the isle and out towards the back entrance to the security officers who sat in a dark little room at the furthest end of the store. The security guards quickly searched us and we made our way to a large room filled with fixed wooden benches and small fixed wooden tables between them. The room was crowded with people, some sitting and eating, some standing and talking, all wearing different uniforms representing different companies: clover, orange grove, blue-ribbon, tiger brands; every brand of the goods packed in the shelves out in the store was represented by a man or woman eating or talking in this room. Wow, so it’s like this at work! The cashier led me to an empty spot at the furthest right hand corner of the room and instructed me to wait for her there. She returned five minutes later with buns and a two litre cold drink on one hand, and many small brown paper packets filled either with chips, chicken and baloney on the other.

She laid them out on the table and began dividing them between herself and I as I sat there stunned in disbelief.

‘So… what’s the deal? Are these for me or what?’

‘No, they’re for Elijah’’ she joked.

‘Who’s that?’ I asked.

‘What? Are you joking right now? Aren’t you hungry? I could eat it all if you’re not hungry, it’s not a problem…’

‘No, no, no’, I interrupted, helping myself, ‘I’m just stunned, that’s all. It’s not every day that someone buys me lunch’.

‘Yeah, well, it’s your first day at work’, she said as she took a sip of her drink, ‘I’d like to take the credit, but it wasn’t me. It was Aunty Marlene who gave me the lunch money’.

‘Aunty Marlene?’

‘Yeah, the supervisor’.

‘Oh’, I realised she was talking about the guy’s mum. Wow, I should really thank her sincerely; she seems to be some kind of guardian angel.

‘My name is Jamie by the way’

‘And I’m Zama’.

‘So… where you’re from, I haven’t seen you around before, I’m from Forestdale’.

‘Just because you haven’t seen me around doesn’t mean I’m not from here’.

‘I didn’t say that you’re not from here, I’m just curious as to where you’re from, that’s all’.

She stared at me for a while before adding, ‘It’s the same thing. Anyway you’re right, I’m not from around here I’m from Glencoe. Your new here, what were you doing before Shoprite?’

‘Well, I was in school. This is my first job so…’

‘Do you have any kids?’ she interrupted.

‘No! Not yet anyway, I’m still too young and too broke’.

‘Good for you. No kids, still young! You should consider going to study next year. You’re no longer broke so save as much as you can then do a short cause in computers or something. And if you passed with an exemption, get a degree’

‘Yes I did get an exemption pass and yes I do intend to study next year. I’ve actually already applied for admittance to the Catholic priesthood and am waiting for a reply’.

‘Wow’, she looked at me for a while, ‘a priest. What kind of priest, those who don’t get married?’

‘Yes, those’.

‘I don’t like those kind of priests’, she said flatly, ‘as a man you can’t live without a woman, it’s wrong. Even the Bible says so. You should study IT; you could work in a bank or any private company and earn big bucks’.

‘Yeah, but do you know how much it is to study IT? A friend of mine told me it costs something like R50 000 a semester! Where can I get that kind of money in these few months?’

‘Try saving’.

‘But enough about me and my confused future, what about you, any kids, any plans for the future?’

She paused for a while before responding, ‘Yeah, I’ve got three kids, the smallest one is a one year old girl, my very own bundle of joy. I plan to grow them up with integrity and to provide for their needs, to be their father and mother and to give them a life I never had’.

‘Wow, sounds great, what does the father do for a living?’

She looked at me then back to her meal, ‘the father of my two boys past away, he was a taxi driver and was shot forty-eight times during a taxi war. The father of my little bundle of joy bailed on me when I was still pregnant, I haven’t seen him since and I’d like it to stay that way’.

‘I’m sorry to hear that. So you’re on your own?’

‘I’m on my own!’

‘You’re a strong woman’.

‘I’m not strong, I have to be strong. Now finish up’, she said as she stood up to leave, ‘and don’t yet move the trolley blocking our till-point until I say so alright?’

‘Alright’ I repeated as I finished the last of my drink, collected the empty packets and threw them into the black bin at the corner of the room near the door and hurriedly followed her out.

The rest of the day flew by rather quickly, and before I knew it, the front door was closed and the few customers who were left all lined up at the last till point while the rest of the tills closed up and went to the door with the big red title: cashing up. I followed the same procedure as at lunch time, and after placing the last of the goods from the till to their proper place in the shelves, I began making my way out of the store when I was stopped by the lady manager. The packing incident, damn! I hope she isn’t going to fire me over it, on my first day! I braced myself as she approached me, coming out of the office in a hurry. She handed me a card instead and said ‘this is your work card! Always swipe it before you enter for work and after you leave from work, is that clear?’

‘Yes!’ I confirmed relieved.

And as she was leaving she added ‘and don’t forget the dress-code for tomorrow. I don’t want to see you dressed like that again while you’re working’.

‘I won’t forget’, I called after her as she left, placing the card into my jean pocket. And as I did I got a surprised pat on the back by Zama as she walked past me and towards the front door. She stopped and turned towards me and told me sternly ‘don’t keep the card in your pocket, you’ll lose it’.

‘You’re right it could get lost easy, where should I put it?’ I asked her.

‘There’s a place for the card near the swiping machine at the back. All our cards stay there you’ll see it clearly as you approach the swiping machine’.

’Oh, thanks’, I felt a bit embarrassed, ‘and thanks for putting up with me and my mistakes, I appreciate it’.

‘That’s alright’, she replied, ‘everyone makes mistakes, especially on their first day. But tomorrow…’ she warned me, not finishing her sentence.

‘Tomorrow what? Tomorrow is only the second day’, I called out after her as she turned to leave, ‘everyone makes mistakes on their second day also’.

‘Not here in Shoprite. Here everyone is a pro in their second day. No special treatment, no lunch, no nothing, bye…’ she joked as she exited the store.

I watched her leave for a while, absorbing what she had just said. Was she for real? Is it going to be tough tomorrow? I should prepare myself. I then quickly turned and made my way to the swiping machine before I’d forget. And while on my way I thought about the day and how it had went, about the customers and my colleagues. I thought about the priest and about my application and what I was going to do if I am successful, now that I actually have a job to start off with, to build on, I mean, Zama was right, I could save and go study IT or something practical like that, I could make it without this priest thing, I’d never know unless I try. In no time I saw the rack near the swiping machine as Zama had said, stuck on the wall and plastered with the many different cards of all the different staff members. I looked at the different names: Tracy, Gail, Marlene, Deborah, Pat, Zama, Themba, Andy, and finding an empty slot at last I placed my card in it: Jamie. I smiled to myself as I thought rather happily; I’m one of them now, part of the family, a working man.

\* \* \*

**Chapter three:**

**The romance**

1. **The story of Amanda**

I was woken up early one morning by the sound of my phone ringing, I stretched out my hand to pick it up as it lay placed on an old folded t-shirt on the floor besides the bed. I saw, to my surprise, that the caller was someone I hadn’t spoken to in a long time: Amanda! Amanda was a very complicated part of my life; I’m not really sure how to think of her or how to speak about her. Even the way in which she entered my life was complicated, because it was neither by my initiative nor hers that we came to know each other, but like family, we came to know each other as a result of forces not in our control. This may even sound clichéd, but the reality was that fate brought us together: fate which had a lot to do, in fact, which had everything to do, with our parents.

When I was a little boy I had been fond of running off to live with my dad, especially when things got really bad at home. I’d pack some clothes secretly into my school backpack and after school I’d make my way to my dad’s place, especially when he lived in and around Dundee. I didn’t know why he had left home, no one was brave enough to tell me, and so I saw nothing wrong with running away and living with him. I didn’t see why I had to choose between mum and dad. He was my dad, and whenever I felt my mum wasn’t looking after me, wasn’t paying attention to my needs, I’d leave. I was the one who felt a void after he had left, and judging from the reaction of my mother and brothers and sister, it seemed like I was the only one who had the void, the only one who missed the way things used to be. With Nurse still an infant and Benzo’s health condition, mother had her hands full and didn’t really have time for anything else, let alone my need to know what had happened between her and dad.

Perhaps it would’ve been better for me to confide in my brothers and sister rather than run away because running away was dangerous as a little boy. Who knew who I would meet at my dad’s place or what it would take for me to get there? But the truth is that I didn’t trust my siblings. Something about me believing they testified against dad held me back from confiding in them. Whether they did so or not, it was the reason why I felt all alone, why I ran away every time I had the chance. I wouldn’t blame them, either, if they did, for they were young themselves, and there was lots of pressure from adults. Regardless of how old they are or how pure the intention, it’s not fair for any child to have to choose between mum and dad. Mother was scared of my behaviour of running away, and would often scold me for it whenever I came back home weeks or months later. All I wanted was to have my dad back, to sit on his lap and ask him questions about the world, to hear him promising me fancy clothes and toys if I pass at school, to ask him for one rand so that I could go buy sweets with my friends. Was that too much to ask? I never knew that the Castle he liked to drink made him drunk and abusive, I never noticed the scars on mother’s hands, on her head, in her heart. I do remember us hiding from him when he’d come back drunk, locking ourselves in one of the rooms as he would bang on the door and threaten to come in, but I thought it was a game that adults play, a game I’ve seen played in stories like Dallas. Had I known the truth, I probably would’ve never run away, but no one told me, so I didn’t know, so I ran away.

Once as I went to visit him during the school holidays, I found that he had moved yet again and was now sharing a house up the road with two other families. As I made my way to the house to ask the kids playing outside if indeed he lived there, I was greeted by a young chubby little girl, a little younger than I was. She was fair in complexion with chubby cheeks, a double chin and round brown eyes which slanted at the sides. She had freckles around her nose and long brown hair. She wore a blue t-shirt which revealed her well-forming breasts and bulging belly, and a leopard skin skirt which revealed a voluptuous backside and chubby legs.

‘Hi! My name is Jamie, does my dad live here?’

She stared at me with her slanted brown eyes as she replied ‘yes… he does live here… but… he’s not here at the moment, he’s at work’, she paused between her sentences. Her voice was dry and hoarse as if she had been screaming for a very long time. ‘But please come in and wait for him’, she insisted, ‘he’ll be arriving any time now since it’s almost five-o-clock’.

‘That’s alright, thank you’ I replied as I peered inside and saw many strange faces staring at me from the corridor, ‘I’ll rather wait here on the veranda if that’s alright’.

‘That’s fine if that’s what you want’, she said as I moved from the door and picked a spot on the veranda wall. I rested my back on the wall so that I could look over the veranda and onto the street. As I stood and gazed upon the children playing soccer on the streets, I remembered seeing that girls face in school but I never knew who she was or what grade she was doing. I didn’t wait long, just as my gaze moved from the children across the street to the house on my right with many busses parked inside and outside the yard, I saw my dad over the hedges of the fence as he walked past the fence and into the gate.

‘Jamie, my son, how you doing, it’s so good to see you’, he said, coming up the stairs to the veranda and giving me a hug, ‘why you sitting outside like a stranger, come on in’. He led the way into the house, passed the first two doors and strange faces and entered the third, where he introduced me to his new girlfriend and her daughter, who I had already met earlier: Amanda.

The strange faces became friendly as I had spent the holidays there with them, enjoying the company of Amanda and the neighbour’s children during the day when our parents had gone to work. It felt really good to be treated like a child, not having to worry about where the next meal is coming from, not going to pick coal, not going to ask for sugar from the neighbours, but just being a child and playing with friends. We’d play all kinds of games, from soccer on the streets in the mornings to TV games at the shop up the road in the afternoon. We had chores which we did in between, these included cleaning the house and the yard, washing our school uniform, as well as buying essentials like bread and milk. By evening we’d sit on the cleaned veranda and tease, chat and talk about anything and everything until our parents arrived. It felt good to be a child, it felt good to play, and this was what I missed so much, what I ran away from home to enjoy. Was this too much to ask?

After the holidays, I stayed on and went to school from dad’s place. Mum didn’t like the idea and was opposed to it, but she knew she couldn’t stop me and out of the fear that I’d run anyway, she let me go, warning me to be careful and to take care of myself and to come back home if anything bad happened. And as I stayed there I grew fond of playing with Amanda and the other kids. We eventually moved from that house because the room we rented was small and found a larger place where we kids could have our own room to sleep in. It was here that the relationship between Amanda and I began to turn into something else. I never really wanted anything to happen between us, she wasn’t the kind of girl I’d find myself asking out! I think I wasn’t her type either otherwise we’d have noticed each other at school. Nevertheless, something happened beyond our control, the occasional lingering stare, the brush of a hand fetching the salt, the gentleness of the voice when we spoke, defending each other when in trouble, these very small things began to awaken in us something we had never felt before, something strange, something warm and fuzzy, something strong and nice. Our parents, beginning to get suspicious, warned us occasionally not to be naughty, but the feeling grew and grew and grew! Finally, after spending about two years with my dad, he moved out of town to Glencoe because of work, and I, not wanting to be so far from mum, went back home. I fitted back into my old life as if I had never left, but I always remembered the life I had given up.

Amanda had remained for me a complicated part of my life, being for me at times a sister I could talk to about my struggles at home, and at other times a lover with whom I had summoned neither the courage nor the reason to fully accept. I’d find myself torn between the feelings of guilt and shame on the one hand, poking into my head and warning me of the wrong I was doing, and the feelings of love and affection on the other hand, poking into my heart and warming me up with the prospect of a deeper relationship. But like all relationships, we came across stormy weather and found ourselves in a heated argument. Amanda wanted me to announce my love for her and she called me a coward for not standing up to my father, not standing up to her mother, not standing up to myself and embracing a feeling she believed I shared with her. She accused me of hiding behind the fact that I was her step-brother, and she rejected the idea that I was, suggesting that even though her mum and my dad lived together, that we are no more than strangers, sharing no blood between us. I admonished her for thinking so, explaining that even though we weren’t related by blood, that we were related by law, and that any union between us would be a scandal to them and to the whole community. After this argument, we had neither seen nor heard from each other in any way, until now.

\* \* \*

1. **Falling in love**

‘Amanda’, I answered in the most excited tone I could master at that early hour, ‘Wow, I wonder what I’ve done to deserve this honour? How are you doing?’

‘I’m alright, how are you?’

‘I’m OK. I can’t complain. I’m just a bit tired, you know I like sleeping’.

‘Yeah I know. I’m sorry to wake you up this early. Forgive me. It’s just the only time I have free call minutes to talk. You know these networks in South Africa, they only offer free minutes between twelve and five AM’. She paused and then continued, ‘congratulations on the new job by the way, you should be really proud’.

‘Thanks. I am proud, proud that I’m finally doing something with my life. I’ve been bored to death’.

‘Bored? What are you talking about? You just finished school a few months ago!’

‘A few months too many if you ask me! It felt like a lifetime’.

 ‘Yeah, I guess it could feel that way. Just hanging around doing nothing, going door to door asking for work, it must’ve felt like a lifetime. But hey, you made it through and no one got hurt, right?’

‘Right! I made it through, and I don’t want to ever go back there’, I replied, trying to focus on the conversation and not on the warm blankets inviting me back to sleep.

‘So’, she took a deep breath, ‘how is everyone at home? Is everyone alright?’

‘Yeah everyone’s fine! My mom is alright, she has since stopped calling me a lazy bugger; my brothers’ are alright, their heart’s in the right place, and my sisters’ are alright…’

‘Their hearts in the right place’ she finished off.

‘Yes that’s it; everyone’s heart is in the right place’.

‘And what about your heart Jamie?’ She asked in a low gentle voice. It was a voice I knew all too well. Hell, I could almost see her face as she said it: gently-eyed and smiley-faced.

‘What about it?’

‘Is it in the right place?’ she asked, ‘how has it been since we last spoke’.

‘I don’t know, you tell me because I don’t know where I stand. Last time we spoke you were accusing me of being a coward and…’

‘Shush’, she interrupted, not wanting me to say something I might regret, ‘it’s alright, I understand’. There was silence for a while before she continued, in the same low, gentle tone, ‘please can we meet and talk, I’d really like to see you again. I miss you Jamie’.

‘Well, you can always come by the supermarket if you want to see me and talk, I’m always there’, I said sincerely.

Amanda laughed loudly, ‘Come-on Jamie, you know what I mean? I’d like us to have a good chat, there’s so much we need to talk about’.

‘Oh, I see’.

‘Yeah’, she said.

‘Well, I don’t know, work takes up most of my time and when I’m off I have to do my washing and get some rest so…’ I paused.

‘…Oh, OK! That’s fine. I was just hoping to see you and talk after so long but…’ She said defeated, hoping I’d say something, and when I didn’t she added, ‘but I guess we can’t always get what we want. Well it was good to hear from you, I’m glad that you’re OK and …’

‘Alright’, I interrupted, feeling guilty as ever, giving in to the warm feeling which welled up inside me. ‘Yes! We can meet, let’s meet’. I couldn’t help myself. I couldn’t bear the thought of dismissing her like that, never knowing when I’d hear from or see her again, not knowing what exactly it is she wanted to talk about. And embracing the strong and warm feeling I added, ‘I miss you too’.

‘Oh Jamie …’

‘Don’t’, I interrupted quickly, ‘don’t say something you might regret’.

‘Like what? How do you know I was going to regret what I was about to say huh?’

‘I have a good idea’.

‘Yes you do. But there’s no need for me to say it anymore, because you have a good idea’, she laughed before continuing, ‘so when can I see you?’

‘Well I’m free today so what do you think? We can pick up where we’ve left off’.

‘Wow that sounds great! I can’t wait. I can be there as early as twelve-o-clock’.

‘Let’s make it after lunch, say two-o-clock?’

‘One-o-clock. It’ll give us more time to talk before it gets dark’, she added.

‘Where are we meeting by the way?’ I asked, not clear which place I mentioned, not sure if I mentioned a place at all!

‘At our special place, silly, where else?’

Ah yes, the bridge! Just thinking about the place brought back some very good memories, some very precious moments. And after saying goodbye I put the phone back on the floor and covered myself with my now cold blankets, hoping to get a bit more rest before having to wake up and face Amanda.

Oh no, what have I done! I thought I had closed this chapter. I thought she was something of the past. And for a while I was doing so well, I was in control. With Amanda in my life, it was exactly the opposite. There was no control and no direction, I felt like I was falling down and had no safety nett, with the feeling of helplessness and fear welling up inside me. But unlike being in control, which ate away at my feelings and left me with no feeling and no life at all, being with her made me *feel:* deeply, madly, truly. As much as I hated to admit it, just one second with her was much more satisfying than an eternity without her, filling my heart with so much joy it would take me the rest of my life to enjoy it. It was such a contradiction that it left me confused as it always did, but the confusion quickly vanished as an imprint of her face appeared in my mind, and with it, the warm fuzzy feeling she gave me.

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1. **My love life**

Being a quiet self-conceited young man with a low self-esteem, I never had many encounters with women. I couldn’t look at a lady in the eye let alone speak to her. I was, rather, consumed with the situation at home and with my studies; I left little room for anything else, dating was a luxury I couldn’t afford. It was Amanda who opened my eyes to the reality that woman actually exist and are interested in me regardless of my social status and upbringing, regardless of my shyness. She awoken in me desires I hadn’t even dreamed of, showing me that I do have the capacity to love and be loved. When dad went to Glencoe, not going with him and rather returning back home to mum was one of the most difficult decisions I had to make because it involved separating from Amanda! And finding myself at home, I found myself incomplete, lacking something, or someone. I had never experienced such pain before, a pain I couldn’t control, for unlike the pain of a wound, it was much deeper and hurt in much more violent ways.

I was too young to really know what was going on with me, what it is that I was experiencing, or how to make it come to an end, if it could end at all. Who could I speak to about it? I knew that the relationship was wrong to begin with, so I had no one with whom to share the emotions I was going through with, and had to deal with them on my own. I dealt with it as best I could by occupying myself with work and with study to avoid confronting the pain I felt. And for a while it felt as if I had overcome it, as if I was moving forward at last. I even found myself finding solace in other habits like reading and music. In reading I could escape my immediate world and enter into a whole new world, a whole new life; I could be anyone I wanted to be, I could be free. In music I could temper my feelings, avoiding the emotive songs of love and consume myself with other more aesthetic symphonies of joy, dance, classic and even anger.

But all the reading in the world, all the music in the world couldn’t erase the void I felt at losing her, at losing love. I needed a different approach, a more direct approach, to fight fire with fire, or in my case, to fight love with love. And so I started dating other girls. I still wasn’t very good with approaching them, the whole self-esteem issue, and so my friends helped me, introducing me to one of the girls in the location. She was younger than me, they all were, I’m traditional like that! She was slender with brown hair and brown slanted eyes. We dated for a while until I found out that she was cheating on me with another guy, something about me being too slow. Anyway, sometime later another opportunity presented itself during my confirmation workshop held at the presbytery a week before confirmation day. Again through the help of a friend I found myself teaming up with a girl who apparently was interested in me for a while: I had no idea! She was fair in complexion and had chubby cheeks and a double chin, with freckles around her nose. We had a lot in common, and even though it was difficult for us to meet since she was from town and from a different race group, we had a lot of fun together. She made lots of effort to come down to my level, meeting at the public library or even coming to my location. I realise now that she really cared a great deal about me and our relationship, and when we were together I forgot all about Amanda. Pity it didn’t last, once her parents found out, they moved her out of town and I’ve never seen or heard from her since.

Finally I came to my senses and, ignoring everything and everyone, started making more efforts to see Amanda again. I couldn’t take it anymore! I had tried and had failed to keep myself from her. I spent years torturing myself, thinking I was doing the right thing, thinking I could brush her away as easily as I had brushed off the others, but I couldn’t. With her there was some kind of eternal force which couldn’t go away. It was like I was trying to hold my breath! And when I saw her, when our eyes met, it was like nothing in the world mattered, we were trapped in a moment of love. It was the most fulfilling moment of my life, like everything was complete, like all was well. It was a strange feeling. I hated feeling it because I had no control over it, and I was powerless before it because all my efforts to escape it only drew me closer to it. Yet at the same time I loved feeling it and wanted to feel it more than anything because when I felt it, I felt alive. And she made it very easy to feel that way, because somehow she had the power to bring the feeling out of me naturally, the power to make the feeling feel irresistible by her openness toward me, her loving me, and her matching my overpowering feeling with her own overpowering feeling pouring into me every time I looked into her eyes. What chance does a mortal have against such power?

Even though she was in Glencoe, we made time to see each other, and our luck turned for the better when one day her mum and my dad had an argument, and leaving my dad in Glencoe, her mum and her decided to return to Dundee. This made it easier for us to meet, and so we began to see each other often. We developed a special meeting place near the Forestdale Bridge where we’d hide away from the worries of the world and focus on each other, making promises to each other and declaring love and affection to one another. It was a place where we felt comfortable, where we could be ourselves and speak our minds. We couldn’t wait for school to end so that we could meet there sometime afterwards, me sometime between chopping wood and doing homework, her sometime between cleaning and cooking. Our meeting became for us a source of strength and hope, waking us up every morning with the expectant hope that we might see each other again, might touch each other again, might stare into each other’s eyes. But when my dad and her mum got back together again and my dad came back to Dundee to be with them, Amanda felt threatened. She knew that I would distance myself from her and treat her like a sister again, and so she challenged me, and we had an argument, and we hadn’t seen each other ever since, until now.

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1. **The special place**

I thought a lot about what I was going to say to Amanda as I prepared the bathwater. And as I went back to my room to make up the bed and arrange my clothing for the day, I thought about our relationship and what could really become of it. Would I ever find the courage to stand up to everyone, including myself, and declare my love for her? Will I be with her no matter the scandal it brought to everyone? No! I concluded firmly. I don’t have that much courage. I love her! That much I’ll never try to deny, but it was wrong, she was my step sister. I decided that I could at least have the courage to let her go so that she could find someone else who would be there for her in a way that I couldn’t. I couldn’t keep lying to her about love and making promises I knew I couldn’t keep. This was just making it harder, and inevitably, when I did tell her, she’d be devastated, and so I will have to tell her now. I can’t keep playing with her, with myself, and if I can’t love her as she deserves to be loved, as she had asked me to love her when we last spoke, then I didn’t deserve to have her at all. I could at least have the courage to do this, to let her go, and hope that one day long into the future, she’d forgive me and that we could be friends. That was the most I could ask of her, that she could be my friend. And so, after having a quick bath and a late breakfast, I was out of the house and on my way to that special place, and as the warm sun stood high up in the sky, unopposed by any clouds, I hoped to go there for the last time.

Amanda stood at the other end of the bridge, her hair platted in rows neatly downward, forming a long pony-tail which curled from behind her head, over her left shoulder and onto her left breast. The fair skin of her face shone like the sun and seemed to glow in the distance. She wore a long bright blue dress which hugged her chubby curves and revealed her feminine features: her wide hips which made both her waist appear small and her chubby legs appear long and sexy. As I made my way onto the bridge and towards her, I noticed her golden earrings which brought out her golden neck and arms, the earrings had blue shiny pearls attached to them, bringing out her blue dress. She was no longer the small chubby girl I had met on the veranda, Oh no! Standing on the bridge was a fully rounded young woman, attractive and beautiful and waiting for me. ‘Hey you’, she greeted me with a big smile which made her slanted eyes to slant even more. She took a step towards me and opened her arms invitingly to give me a big hug. ‘I missed you’, she said softly. Unable to fight the heat of the moment, I allowed her to pull me intimately, tightening her arms around my neck and pressing her soft warm body against me. She was a head shorter than me, so as I lifted my head she began to tighten her hold on me and pull me closer, tucking her head neatly under my chin and closing her eyes. She slouched her head to rest perfectly on my chest, and placing my right cheek against the top of her head, I closed my eyes as well. All the thoughts I had had as I made my way there vanished into nothingness as all the attention rested on my heart: tender and beating and burning with love.

The world around us seemed to melt away and just the two of us remained. Here I was, blocking the entrance to the bridge, yet at that point, at that moment, I didn’t notice anything: not the people passing by the way or the noise in the distance, not the sun above me or the bridge beneath, not the clothes on my back or the soles of my feet. I was swallowed up in the moment, consumed by her beating heart, her warm and soft embrace clinging onto me and inciting me to cling onto her. Her rapid breathing slowed down, her soft body pressed tightly against me, sharing its warmth, making way for me, comforting me, inviting me. After a long while I was brought back to the reality of the people and the distant noise, the sun and the bridge, my clothes and my aching feet as the thought of what I had intended to say to her came rushing back into my head. I felt my heart beckoning me not to say anything, not to spoil this moment, our moment, the moment which made us feel so alive, the moment I always longed for. But my head cautioned me that it was now, more than ever, that I needed to be courageous for her sake. I gently loosened my grip on her, suggesting that the hug is over, and pulling my head back such that it no longer touched hers, broke my hold on her altogether. I rested my hands on either side of her hips and began to gently push her from me. But she was indignant. She didn’t break the hug, she only held on more tightly, moving her head and rubbing her cheek against my chest, pressing her now hot body more firmly against me, so soft, so tender. She gently asked me with a husky, sleepy voice, ‘please don’t let me go’.

I mended the hug, returning my hands to their place around her waist, though this time rather loosely, and kept my head held slightly backward. I could feel my courage slowly drowning by the strong, sucking force of her love pulling me into herself, but I tried again, I had to have courage. I raised my head to the corner house in front of me in the distance and implored her gently, ‘please Amie; there’s something I have to tell you’. Without loosening her grip on me, she lifted her head and looked straight up at me, arching her back, tipping her toes and pressing her belly and breasts more firmly against me as she did. Her cheeks had turned rose, with her right cheek bearing an imprint of stitching after having been pressed flatly on my t-shirt. I looked into her eyes, sleepy and watery and staring intently back at me as she beckoned me once more, ‘Jamie, my love, please’. We stared intently at each other, her watery eyes widened submissively, searching mine intently, asking, begging, pleading. I felt a deep gush of painful and pleasurable love suddenly flow deep within me, mesmerising me with the intense love which poured forth from her eyes and drowned whatever courage I had left, gently inviting me in, pulling me in as I began to tighten my hold on her once more. She grabbed the invitation to continue as she closed her eyes and slouched her head back gently onto my chest. I let go, I gave in! I allowed myself to enjoy the moment, to savour it, to live it. Surely there will be another time to summon the courage to tell her what I needed to, but not today, this day I was hers. I never stood a chance against such power.

We remained huddled and silent; enjoying the simple presence of the other, for to us this gesture spoke louder and clearer than any amount of words ever could. We both knew the urge very well, and we both had the need for each other even though we hadn’t spoken about it. For a variety of reasons sex was not one of our main topics, even though it was constantly on our minds. The complex nature of our relationship made it difficult to speak about it, and it remained for us the ignored elephant in the room. Nevertheless, it was times like these, in each other’s arms, that we showed by our openness and willingness just how far we were willing to go in order to please the other. Yes, there was the issue of pregnancy and all its implications, but if I really wanted to, if she really wanted to, we’d be willing to go as far as the other because the need of the other outweighs the need of the one. In her sober mind, how can I refuse her simply because I’m not in the mood, or because it’s wrong, or because I’m not ready? How deep is her urge, how bad her need? How would I feel if the tables turned and she refused me in my time of need? How much would it mean to me if she didn’t; a value which lasts far beyond the implications of pregnancy ever could.

 Hearing someone approaching the bridge and aware we were blocking the entrance I pulled her towards me and pushed myself towards the wall of the bridge, resting my back against it and making room for people to pass by. She moved gently and willingly with me as I moved, making us move as if we were one: one moves another allows, another allows one moves. And as we moved, she remained unfazed, not even to lift up her head, not even to utter a word. With my back to the bridge wall, I felt much better, releasing some weight off my feet. ‘Are you still alright on your feet?’ I asked her softly, moving my right hand from her waist and up her back to her head, brushing her plats gently and playing with her ponytail. ‘Yes’, she affirmed, and as she spoke I could feel her cheek vibrating and her warm breath sweep gently across my chest, ‘I’m OK my love’, she spoke up. I never tried to stop her utter the words as I had this morning, but let her say it. It felt really good to hear those words, it felt good to love and to be loved, felt good to need and to be needed. I continued to brush her head gently with my right hand until I couldn’t feel it any more, until she swallowed me up and I drowned in an oblivion of love, making me utter the words to her, words that were my expression of devout love for her: ‘my love’.

After a long while I picked up my head and looked at the tall pine trees behind the bridge wall. I noticed that moving to the wall made us move quite far from the entrance and neatly concealed by the bridge walls. Closing my eyes and placing my cheek back onto her head, I moved my right hand from her head and back to my other hand, and pulling her against me, rested myself more firmly on the bridge wall. She matched my pulling her with her pulling me, an expression of desire for the other, an expression of presence to the other, an expression of love for the other. We began to rock slightly, moving slightly to the left and slightly to the right till we kept a comfortable rhythm. The world began to disappear again from my feet to my clothes, from the bridge to the sun, and from the distant noise – now distant silence – to the people. My heart began to race as I realised just how much joy this one creature brought into my life, at how much I cared about her, how much I loved her, and at how lucky I was to have ever been given the chance to encounter such a person in my life, an encounter which brought me an experience of deep passionate love. Almost as if she were thinking the same thing, I felt her heart also begin to race, trying to catch up with mine. Alarmed, I asked gently, ‘is something the matter my love?’

‘No, my love’, she replied a while later, ‘you?’ she asked right back.

‘No’, I replied, and after a while ‘I was just thinking about you’, we said in unison.

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1. **Blood or water?**

The supermarket always closed early on Sundays, at one-o-clock, and while I was busy emptying my till into a zipper bag and about to head for the cashing up room, a security guard came and informed me that someone was waiting for me outside. I had surprised myself at how easily I had learnt to work as a cashier, maybe my computer science course wasn’t a waste of time after all! I made my way into the cash office and out again, then to the back of the store to swipe my card and fetch my bag. I finally reached the exit point where Amanda stood waiting for me on the other side of the closed glass door. ‘Hey you’, she greeted me as I walked out, opening her arms wide to give me a big hug. It was a short hug, even though she managed, as always, to pull me extremely close, brushing her soft warm body up against me hard, and it always made me feel embarrassed when she did it in public. We made our way outside and down the street towards the bridge. It was a fine sunny day, and the streets were empty with only a few people walking by.

‘Don’t you have a test or an assignment to do, standard seven isn’t a joke you know!’ I said jokingly.

‘No its not, it’s full of hard work and tests and assignments and stuff’, she said giggling, ‘so tell me the secret, how did you pass?’

‘I worked my butt off that’s how! I couldn’t afford to fail, and neither can you. Failure is a luxury we don’t have, we who are underprivileged and poor’.

‘Yeah’, she said, grabbing my hand as we walked side by side down the street, ‘you’re right. We can’t afford to make the same mistakes our parents did, we have to be smarter so that our children can enjoy the luxuries we couldn’t’.

‘So that they can afford to fail?’ I asked.

‘Yeah’, she giggled, ‘so that they can be brought up in an environment where there is little want, where they have the support and care they need in the case of failure. But seriously, our kids aren’t going to fail, they’ll be as determined as their mum and as smart as their dad’.

‘If I was smart I wouldn’t be here, I would’ve got better marks and got into a good university by now’.

‘You need to stop being so hard on yourself. Tell me, how many of you had exemption passes last year?’

‘I don’t know, we were about ten I think, I’m not sure’.

‘Ten, out of a class of about a hundred, and you say you didn’t do well?’

‘We weren’t hundred, your exaggerating… maybe if you include all the courses, the whole class of 2005 in Dundee Secondary, we could get pretty close to hundred’, I had to pause for a while, thinking about my former classmates and wondering what they were up to, ‘you’re bringing back good old memories’.

‘You know what Jamie…’, she squeezed my hand as she continued, ‘even though you didn’t get what you want doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be grateful for what you have. Life isn’t always fair, in fact it’s never fair, the things we seek often elude our grasp; but this doesn’t mean we have nothing. You have something, and your one of a few to have it, one tenth to be exact, you should be proud considering that you did it having half the resources they had’.

‘You’re right Amie, I know that I did well, a friend of mine drummed these words of yours into my head not so long ago. I just can’t help feel like I let myself down somehow, that I could’ve done more. I don’t know what it is, maybe it’s a phase I’m going through, I really don’t know’.

‘Yeah I think it is a phase, welcome to the adult world Jamie’, she smiled at me, ‘you’ve always wanted to be an adult, well, here you are, how do you like it?’

‘Quit playing around, I’m serious’.

After a long pause she managed to reply, ‘so am I’.

Approaching the bridge Amanda led the way, still holding my hand, through the bridge and to a quiet little spot down the river bank on freshly cut green grass under the shade besides flowing waters. I put my bag down, removed my jacket and sat on the soft grass near a fallen tree stump, resting my back on the stump. Amanda lay belly down on my spread out jacket in front of me, and using my bag as a pillow, she rested her head on it as she waved her legs playfully in the air. She stared at me for a while with a grin playing on her lips before closing her eyes, saying nothing. That grin could mean anything, but for now I thought it was because of my jacket and bag which she placed at her disposal without asking me. *Mxm*, woman! She wants me to talk, she wants me to say something. Well, I won’t. I closed my eyes and began to listen to the birds chirping in the distance, the trickling of the water as it passed by the wayside. I felt the cool breeze on my face and arms, gushing gently, smelling fresh… ‘Ouch!’ I was startled by the prick of an ant bite as an army begun an assault on my left arm. Suddenly I was on my feet in a frantic attempt to drive them away. When I was sure they were gone, I surveyed the area of any more insects before sitting in a different place near the same stump. As I turned I saw Amanda staring at me, the same grin playing on her lips, even in her eyes, but silent. Still, I decided as I remained silent as well, the grin could mean anything!

‘It’s lovely out here, isn’t it?’ she said finally, ‘cool and quiet’.

‘Yes it is, seems you’ve been surveying the area without me’.

‘I saw a couple having a picnic here yesterday and I realised it’s a lovely place to chill’.

‘Aha?’ I said menacingly, ‘you sure that the couple wasn’t you and someone else?’

‘Jamie! How dare you’, she sat up, ‘how…’.

‘I’m joking’, I interrupted, ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you, I was just joking…’

‘I’m sorry’, she said as she relaxed a little, though remaining seated up so that we were looking at each other squarely, ‘I thought you were serious’.

‘No, it was a bad joke! Sorry. Anyway, thank you for showing me this place, besides the ants, it’s wonderful’.

‘The ants’, she repeated as we both laughed, ‘well what can I say, they were here first. On a serious note, though, I want to let you know that you don’t have to feel threatened by anyone, you’re the only one I want Jamie, it was always you, and it will always be you’.

’Yeah… about that…’

‘What?’ she interrupted, slanting her already slanted eyes until they were only slits.

‘There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you, I don’t know how to say it’.

‘Just say it, I can handle it’.

‘Amie, you know that I love you, but…’

‘You know I don’t understand you Jamie, I really don’t’, she interrupted, ‘love is not as complicated as you’re making it out to be. Why do you worry about your dad or my mum or what everyone else is thinking, or what they’re going to think? It’s none of their business! Our love is none of their business because it’s not about them, it’s about us, it’s about you and me, that’s all, the rest doesn’t matter’.

‘It matters to me. How can I love you knowing very well that it’s wrong? How can we walk down the streets or go into town when everyone is busy back-chatting about us, ‘Oh just look at them, they’re in-laws but they don’t care, they got no respect’, just imagine Amie? I can’t live like that, I’m sorry, I can’t’.

‘We’re in-laws, so what, where’s the sin in that? What does it even mean to be in-laws Jamie huh? Tell me please, I’d like to know because it seems I really don’t know what it means or I got the wrong meaning or something’.

‘It means that we’re related by law Amie, it’s like dating Arthur or Dan, I mean really, can’t you tell that something’s wrong here?’

‘You’re using the wrong examples; Arthur and Dan are my cousins, we have a blood relation because they’re my mother’s sister’s children. There’s a blood relation, as you can see: my mother and her sisters share blood from their parents; their children will share the same blood of their parents from a second generation; my kids, and Arthur’s and Dan’s kids will share the blood of their parents from a third generation, and so on. But you and me, I don’t care if our parents were married by the Pope, it doesn’t change the fact that we share no blood, your mum and dad, and my mum and dad, share no blood; you and me, share no blood, so there’s nothing wrong. We can raise the most beautiful and healthiest children the world has ever seen’.

‘Yes, you’re right about the whole blood thing, but in-law relations are about law and not blood. Being married means that all your mum’s kids and all my dad’s kids are related by law, we are one family by law. And being one family, we are all brothers and sisters by law, and they are our parents by law. And by law, a brother cannot marry his sister, it’s an abomination’.

‘Oh yeah? The only abomination is you’re respect for the law at the expense of your happiness. People break the law all the time, who knows, we might be breaking the law by being here at this river? Laws are made by people, and some laws are selfish and stupid because they benefit few people and oppress others. I can understand the whole ‘being one family’ thing, but the laws which bind biological families shouldn’t be used to bind in-law families. If there is genuine love, as I believe we have, the law should allow us to express our love for each other because there’s no abomination in it’.

‘Why do you say there’s no abomination in it?’

‘The abomination comes from the risk associated with biological relations up to the third generation because the genetic make-up is too similar. The risk includes deformed and abnormal infants. But there’s no risk of deformity between you and me, my genes and yours are totally different, as I said, we’d make a healthy baby’.

‘But I don’t want to break the law, I’m not a rebel, I never was. Please don’t turn me into something I’m not, you might not like the man I’d become’.

‘No I won’t like him’, she let out a huge sigh, ‘I like you as you are, you’re the one I fell in love with in the first place, and I wouldn’t change you for anything or anyone’.

 ‘But I can’t go on loving you like this, in the shadows, secret lovers. No, it’s not what you deserve. You deserve someone who will show you off to the world, someone who will love you freely and not be afraid to show you his love. I’m sorry…’

‘First of all don’t tell me what I deserve’, she interrupted, ‘I know you’re trying to be nice and stuff but please, I’m big enough to know that fairy-tales don’t exist, that this ‘perfect guy’ you’re talking about, doesn’t exist. I’m cool with what I have, don’t try and take it away from me’.

‘So you’re cool with hiding in the shadows?’

 ‘It will have to do for now’, she said as she crawled up to me and put her arms around me, and getting on to my knees I put my arms around her in a warm and gentle embrace, ‘But we’ll figure it out’. We held each other in silence for a while, eyes shut as we pulled each other intimately, her soft and tender body drawing me in, teasing me, inviting me. We began to listen to the birds chirping in the distance and the trickling of the water as it passed by the wayside. We felt the cool breeze on our face and arms, gushing gently, smelling fresh, and as we pressed ourselves more tightly to each other until there was no room left to press further, we were able to feel each other’s heartbeat, and immediately our heartbeats began to race, the one encouraging and inviting the other to race faster, causing a rush of heat between us which enveloped us in a warm blanket of love.

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1. **The response**

I felt exhausted as I made my way home after another long day at work. The supervisor had summoned me to help take the winter items from the home department off the shelves and place them back into the store room in order to make space for the summer stock that had arrived. At the same time I was given a float and had a till-point to manage, and the supervisor kept paging for me whenever I wasn’t there. So I had to run up and down from the back of the store to the front and back again. I was doing two jobs and trying to please two supervisors when in effect I couldn’t get one thing done properly. After removing the winter stock, I couldn’t pack neatly all the items I brought down, in fact I packed very little, and so I had to simply place the rest, unsorted and unpacked, in the remaining space to fill it up. I wasn’t winning at the till-points either, my packer had abandoned me for someone else because I wasn’t there, so my till was dirty and empty, with no plastic bags. Customers kept complaining whenever I had to leave the till-point in search of plastic bags. So by the end of the day, not only was I exhausted, I also had a shouting from the floor supervisor and the till-point supervisor for poor time management and poor performance. I couldn’t wait to get home, it seemed like everything I was doing went wrong. Ever felt like everyone and everything is against you, when whatever you touch just goes wrong, like the whole world just woke up angry with you? Well, that’s exactly how I felt, and I felt a sense of relief as my house came into view, relieved that I’d made it home without an incident.

I hadn’t seen Amanda in a while, and I didn’t know whether to be happy or to cry about it. I should be happy since it was my intention to push her away so that she could find someone new, but I felt like crying because I missed her so much: that hug, that laugh, those eyes. But if it is so, if indeed she’s fed up, then I should respect her decision and give her the space she needed to move on. I came through the front gate and front door, and as I was approaching my room I heard mum calling me from inside her room ‘Jamie is that you?’

‘Yes it’s just me ma, back from work’.

She appeared a second later ‘your priest friend was here’.

‘Oh really?’

‘Yeah, he was, he came and left you this letter’, she handed me a small white envelope.

It was very light as if containing nothing. ‘Thanks ma’.

‘I told him to go to your work but he said he’d rather leave it here for you, said it’s safer that way’.

‘Yeah it is better that he left it here because at work I’m not allowed to carry anything in my pockets’.

‘Really? Why not?’

‘Because I’m a cashier and deal with money so they don’t want me to steal a few bucks’, I said jokingly.

Mum laughed, ‘how, just a few bucks? How! They’re very stingy those people’. She made her way back into her room, laughing and mumbling something I couldn’t make out. I went to my room, put my bag down and opened the envelope, and in it was a letter addressed to me. The letter was no more than a few words, but those few words revealed a message that changed my life forever:

Dear Jamie Fear

We have evaluated your application to study for the priesthood and, after careful consideration, approve your application as successful. We look forward to meeting you next year.

St. Kizito Orientation Seminary

Oakford Priory

Verulam, Durban.

Opening day: 29 JANUARY 2007

Kind regards.

I sat on the bed and read the message over and over again, making sure that I was reading it right and hadn’t missed or misread a word. The two key words which stood out for me, which I made sure I read well, were: ‘approve’ and ‘successful’. These were affirming words, these were positive words, and they promised me a life of adventure, a life of change, a better tomorrow. It took me less than a split second to be able to figure out whether I was going to stay in Dundee and continue working or whether I was going to go study. I needed something new, I needed something different, and for as long as I could remember, I wanted to study. At this point it didn’t really matter what it was that I was going to study as long as I was studying. I didn’t want to be like many of the people I met in Dundee, many of my colleagues caught up in a life-sucking and unfulfilling job, too scared to leave because finding another job is hard here in South Africa. I’ve found people who have been working for years here in Shoprite, and while I do commend them for their dedication and perseverance, it isn’t the life I see myself living.

I’m not afraid to take a chance, to roll the dice and see what life has to offer. Holding on to a meagre job simply because it’s difficult to find another was not my style. If my plan failed and I found myself back home and unemployed then so be it, I’d just get up and carry on looking for a job, big deal, I’ll find one eventually. But if I don’t take chances, especially as they present themselves like the priesthood did, how will I ever grow, how will I ever succeed? I always saw myself as someone special, destined for greatness, and this opportunity to study was my chance at realising this. I needed to go into a new environment and explore other avenues. I had nothing to lose and everything to gain from this once in a lifetime experience, I was very excited.

But my excitement was short lived as the reality of the people around me began to weigh in on me. Nobody knew about my decision to study for the priesthood except the priest. I had managed to keep it secret because I wasn’t sure that they’d respond positively. Now that they have, I should begin to live the part of someone studying for the priesthood. People are bound to know, especially my parents and siblings, so I had to tell them myself. I put the letter safely away among the other documents and went into the kitchen to prepare water for a bath. As I walked into my room to ready myself, I thought how strange it was going to sound when I told them: I’m going to Durban to study to become a priest. Surely they’d stare at me blankly as if they were seeing a ghost. I mean, a priest, since when? A while ago you were packing goods at the local supermarket and now you’re going to study to become a priest, come-on, stop pulling our leg! But it may not sound so farfetched, considering that I was the only one who went to church when everyone had given up, the only one who was confirmed. Surely this shows that I have a peculiar interest in the church, and that I’m continuing my journey in my studies towards the priesthood. Yes, the idea that I want to become a priest may not seem so crazy to everyone after all, it may just be what they have come to expect from a quiet, shy church-goer like me.

Yet somehow the whole idea of studying for the priesthood still sounded crazy, like a nasty joke, but I didn’t care, I was prepared to go through with it because someone I love told me that in life, I need to start being happy with what I have, even though I might never get what I want. And that’s exactly what I was going to do, I was going to be happy studying for the priesthood! Indeed shock may be the reaction of many people, mother, my brothers and sisters, my friends, everyone, so I just have to be prepared for it, that’s all. The idea is definitely something unexpected, even for me not so long ago, but somehow I had come around to it, it made an impact in my life, and with a little time, it will in theirs too.

At best I wouldn’t have to face Amanda; at least the way things seem to be going she’s let me go. This must be a sign that I am free to go, free to explore this option of priesthood, for at least now I won’t have to argue with her about why I want to remain unmarried. She’d be devastated, I mean, I’ve already broken her heart so many times with this step-sister thing, I didn’t want her to go through it all over again. I don’t think I can handle it.

\* \* \*

1. **The intruder**

Two months later, after cashing up and on my way out the store on a Sunday afternoon, I saw Amanda with a couple of her friends as they passed Shoprite. I longed to see her again, even if just for a little while, before I leave, but I held my nerve. What was I going to say to her? Speaking with her will just make things worse, I just have to be strong and let her go. After all, I’m the one who pushed her away, I should be grateful she went down without much fight, and at such a convenient time too. With my studies on their way, I’d just be plain selfish if I were to engage her. I’ve placed many obstacles between us, first the whole step-sister saga, now the whole priesthood thing, I just have to let her go, it’s that simple. But it’s not that simple, life never is. I need her in my life somehow, I’m not prepared to give her away completely, just like that! No way, I love her! If the universe declares that we’re not meant to be, that’s fine, I can’t change that, even if I went back in time and fell in love with her before our parents met, she was doomed to be my step sister. But the universe can never dictate that she can’t be in my life, no way. The fact that we can’t publicly love each other doesn’t mean that we can’t love each other, because we do and we always will. My decisions may not be the best, they may be close to the worst, but I had to do something to prevent it, I’m the oldest after all, I’m the responsible one, even if maturity doesn’t always come with age.

I clocked out and made my way out the store, head down and hands in my jacket pockets as usual. As I exited the shopping complex and was about to take the direction home, I felt a sharp nudge to the lower ribs coming from someone to my left, ‘you can run but you can’t hide’, Amanda teased, as she pulled me over to the left of the pavement with a big smile, her arms open wide.

‘Amanda’, I managed startled, ‘my goodness, you frightened me’.

‘Sorry’, she said as she came up to me and gave me her famous big hugs.

‘I saw you earlier with your friends, I thought you’d be long home by now’, I manage, as I held on to her, looking to see if her friends were still around. ‘They left you?’

‘I chased them away’, she said as she took my hand and led me down the street.

‘Please don’t chase me away’, I joked as I walked beside her. This holding hands business always made me uncomfortable. I felt like a naughty child whose mother was afraid he’d run into a car or something.

‘I’d never do such a thing Jamie, you know that. The real question is: why are you chasing me away?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Don’t play dumb with me’, she said in a calm but stern tone, ‘It’s been two months since we last spoke, two months! No phone call, no message, not even a ‘please call me’ just to let me know you’re alive. I’m really disappointed’, she looked down and shook her head.

‘Okay, I understand and I’m sorry. I thought you were moving on and I didn’t want to get in your way, I…’

‘Moving on?’ she interrupted, looking at me with a confused expression, ‘what made you think that?’

‘Well, last time you said that we’ll figure this relationship out, and so I thought you figured moving on is the best option’.

‘What!’ she shouted, stopping dead in her tracks and staring intently at me. Lucky we were in a quiet residential area and no one was around. ‘Are you for real? Don’t tell me that’s the best excuse you could come up with in two months’.

‘It’s not an excuse it’s the truth’, I pleaded gently, ‘I’m sorry that the truth sucks’.

‘Yeah it sucks’, she repeated, calming down, ‘sucks so much it has to be the truth. I wonder what made you think that, but anyway, it doesn’t matter, you never cease to amaze me. I did say we’ll figure it out, I meant that we’ll figure out how to love each other and respect the law, and that in the meantime, I’d love to be your secret lover. I didn’t want to before, I wanted you to stop being a coward and publicly fight for me, but now I understand’.

‘You understand that I’m an idiot?’ I joked.

‘Yeah’, she smiled, that big beautiful smile I loved, ‘and also that this idiot of mine wasn’t trying to play me for someone else, using me as a side chick or something. You’re just really afraid that’s all. There’s nothing wrong with being afraid, sometimes I’m scared of just how much I love you, and of what I’d do if I were to lose you. But it’s okay now, I’m willing to be the side chick. Nobody will know the things we do, I promise you; our love is just between the two of us’.

‘Wait a minute! If you weren’t moving on, why didn’t you call or message or something for the last two months either? What’s up…’

‘Because… I’m a woman’ she interrupted firmly, hand on her hip.

‘Oh’, I nodded in acceptance. ‘Right!’ Wow, crazy how just those few words answered all my remaining questions. Such a powerful statement, pregnant with meaning, and she said it so well.

She stared at me for a while, challenging me with her fiery eyes and firm posture, and when she saw that I said nothing, relaxed her hand from her hip as she added ‘but I’m here now aren’t I?’

‘Oh yes you are’, I said softly as I pulled her close, putting my hands on her wide hips. She made no resistance, welcoming the intimate gesture as she pulled my hands from her hip to her buttocks. She then pressed her soft warm body against me firmly as she put her arms around my neck. She stood on her toes as she pressed herself against me, hot and soft and inviting. She closed her eyes as she brought her lips close to mine, gently pulling my head into hers for a kiss. It was a soft kiss, a gentle kiss, more the brushing of lips than a kiss which took less than a second. Yet it was the best second of my life as I felt a sudden strong rush of pleasure surging through my body. I had no control over the intrusion of my member poking violently at her soft warm belly, and as I stood there embarrassed and shy, I prayed that she didn’t step away to reveal to the world the fact that boxers can’t hide an erection. To my surprise she said nothing as she pulled her face from mine and rested it on my chest, eyes still closed. The heat and pressure from her soft belly made it worse as the intrusion fought to be noticed, hard and erect and urging me to press harder. I had to stop now while I still could, otherwise I may go too far, and sensing that by now it must be hurting her, I loosened my grip from her buttocks to create space for me to move away. She refrained from standing on her toes and stood straight, no longer leaning onto me, and the intruder was set free, standing tall and strong between the two of us. Again, luckily there was no one around, ‘I’m sorry, I couldn’t help it’, I managed after some time, feeling flushed and embarrassed.

‘Why?’ she asked gently, her arms still wrapped around my neck and her head resting against my chest, ‘it’s natural, don’t be sorry. If anyone should be sorry it’s me for pressing and hurting you’.

‘You didn’t hurt me, I thought…’ she stopped me dead in my tracks as she quickly looked up at me confused, then saying nothing she took my hands and placed them back onto her buttocks. She pulled me back to her as she stood on her toes and pressed herself against me once more, arms wrapped around my neck and head resting against my chest. I didn’t resist, I ceased the moment, pulling her as close to me as I could, closing my eyes and pressing myself as hard against her as I could. She made no protest, she just absorbed my pressure like it was nothing, inviting and tender and loving. ‘Don’t be afraid, press as hard as you want’, she said as the intruder retreated, defeated, leaving me calm and content.

\* \* \*

1. **The picnic**

The next Sunday Amanda came by my work and waited for me to finish as she window shopped. I still hadn’t told her about Durban, each time I tried she’d bring something up that made me forget. I’ll try again today, she deserves to know. I don’t look forward to her reaction, I really don’t, I just need to tell her in a quiet place with no one around so that when she screams at me, I don’t feel too embarrassed. As I walked out the exit there she was with her wide arms and broad smile, ‘Hey how was work’, she asked in a low and gentle voice.

‘It was okay, Sundays are nice quiet days’.

‘That’s nice to hear’, she said as she put my hand in hers as we strolled down the road, ‘today I don’t want us to fight Jamie, I’d like us to try and forget about all the negative things and just focus on positive things. Every time we meet there’s always an agenda and an argument, let’s forget about all that just for today. For this one day let’s pretend everything is good and well, let’s pretend fairies exist, let’s pretend you’re my superman and I’m you’re wonder woman, please, just for today’.

‘Sounds great to me’, I said, mindful that if I did bring up the Durban issue now, I’d be toast. See, she always brings something up to prevent me from telling her! As we got to the bridge and walked along it I noticed a brown blanket laid-out on the grass beside the tree stump, and as we got closer I saw many loaded plastic bags. ‘Wow, is this for us?’

‘No, it’s for the fairies’, she joked as she passed me, sat on the blanket and began emptying the contents of the plastic bags onto the blanket: food containers, plates, spoons, glasses, drinks, fruits, snacks, serviettes. ‘If anything tastes bad, it’s Antonio’, she said to me as I made myself comfortable beside her, ‘she helped me with some of the cooking’.

‘Smells delicious, I’m starving. How is Antonio anyway, I haven’t seen her in a while’.

‘She’s okay I guess’, she said as she handed me a plate of chicken curry and rice, with salad on the side.

‘Wow, thank you’, I said as I straightened up and took the plate.

‘Where’s Sam? Remember him and Antonio? Wow, I was so surprised that night’.

‘Hey, so was I, I thought they knew each other’.

‘No they didn’t, well, not formally anyway, I still tease her about it sometimes’. She placed a glass of water beside me.

‘Thank you, this is five star service, beats any restaurant around here, and the meal, mmm… delicious!’

‘Stop pulling my leg’, she said as she took her own plate and her juice and began to eat as well.

‘No I’m not, it’s really great, just you and Antonio made this? I’m officially impressed’. I finished eating a few minutes later, and hovering about the containers, asked ‘can I have…’

‘Go ahead, help yourself’, she interrupted, and I did just that.

After we had finished eating, I helped her dry the plates and spoons and pack them into one of the plastics as she washed them out, and as we did we laughed and joked and touched each other playfully. When the cutlery and crockery were cleaned and packed, she placed the fruit and snacks out between us as we went back to sit beside the stump, keeping the snacks within her reach as she sat down beside me. I moved closer to her and placed my arm around her neck as I ate the fruit, and she rested her head on my shoulder as I did. ‘Are you all filled up?’ she asked as she patted my belly gently with her hand.

‘I am Amie, thank you so much for this whole picnic it means so much to me, Wow. I know it took a lot of effort and hard work, for this I am grateful’.

‘You’re welcome. I just wanted to be here with you, that’s all. I just want us to spend some time together so that we can work things out, so that we can plan our future’.

‘What plans do you have in mind? I hope they involve struggling in poverty with your hustling boyfriend’.

She laughed and added, ‘you won’t struggle for very long, you’ll find something better, just be patient’.

‘I’m not so sure about that! Dundee is a ghost town, there are no jobs here’.

‘Maybe so, but what about outside Dundee? You can work here, but you can apply anywhere in the world. Just keep looking and keep applying, something will happen eventually’.

‘Easier said than done! If it was so easy, why hasn’t anyone tried it, I mean, I know so many people at my work who have been there for years, you know them too, why hasn’t something happened for them? What makes me so special?’

‘Because…’, she patted my belly, ‘they gave up! What I’m talking about won’t happen overnight, it will take months, even years. They wanted it to happen now, as you do, and when it doesn’t they lose hope and stop trying. You must not lose hope, you must not stop trying. And besides, you are special, I can feel it. One day you’re going to be something great, trust me’.

‘No pressure’, I added sarcastically, and we both laughed.

‘No pressure. We’re still young; we still have the rest of our lives ahead of us. There’s no rush, I’m not rushing anywhere. In the meantime, I’ll be happy to struggle in poverty with my hustling boyfriend’.

‘You have no idea what you’re asking. Being poor is no joke, many couples have broken up because of poverty. It eats at your self-esteem and renders you helpless. I can’t imagine us living that kind of life’.

‘You’re right, it’s no joke, and I don’t know what I’m asking, But I do know that if I’m with you, anything is possible. There’s nothing we can’t overcome if we just put our minds to it. Suffering is everywhere, even rich people suffer, we just have to find the right things worth suffering for’.

‘I’d like to believe that I’m not worth suffering for and…’

‘Well that’s not up to you to decide’, she interrupted, ‘good as your intention may be, someone does find you worth suffering for, and she’s right here’.

‘Well, I wish to do all that is humanly possible to at least reduce her suffering’.

‘You already are’, she said, ‘even though better opportunities will later present themselves’.

‘I’ll do my best to grab them’, I assured her, knowing very well that such an opportunity had already come. Knowing that I’ve already looked abroad and a response did come. I know it won’t be quite the opportunity she had in mind, and quite frankly, I was really afraid of what her reaction might be. But she had to know, and I was going to tell her. She was right about everything, all of the time, and even though this scared me sometimes, it gave me a sense of hope most of the time. Hope in the fact that we can overcome anything if we put our minds to it, just me and her, and this decision to study was just one of the things we’ll eventually overcome. Would she say I mustn’t go? I don’t think so. She seems to be aware of the opportunities I’ll be throwing away if I don’t, and she wants what’s best for me. The question will be: will she be prepared to wait for me?

\* \* \*

1. **Goodbye Amanda**

It was a sunny Saturday morning as I made my way out the house and to the bus stop. Usually I got every second Saturday off, and I used this time to do a little shopping, to patch up at home so that we could ease into month end rather than struggle towards it. Nurse usually came along, bringing with her a much needed female point of view, but today she wasn’t home, she was spending the weekend at Warder’s place and would be back tomorrow. I could’ve asked mum to come but I didn’t want to disturb her; besides, it’s just a few things, nothing extravagant. I could barely fill a shopping basket with my weekly wage, mum wouldn’t resist filling up a trolley and I’d have to make a plan on how were we going to get pass the check point. I think it’s better that I go alone, I could use the time by myself and maybe do some window shopping of my own, maybe check out the Motorola V3 Raizer I wanted to buy, a smart and sleek little gadget, latest model of its kind. I could probably lay by it and pay it off little by little, that way I won’t have to spend my whole wager on it.

I hadn’t been waiting long when the bus came and picked us up at the bus stop close to the Lucky Seven supermarket. It took us pass the Laundry and the garage, pass Telkom and TFS wholesalers, pass the scrapyard and down the road through the bridge leading straight into town. Town was already full of people as they ran various errands out and about. I noticed some of the Forestdale guys standing outside Pelican café after having spent their last 50c on Street Fighter. I remembered how that was me not so long ago, how I’d run from Forestdale to Pelican with one five bob just to play one game of Dinosaurs and Cadillac’s. For a time I was addicted to that game, adamant that I could clock the game with one five bob. No such luck! I got off at the traffic lights, and as I made my way up the road towards Spar Supermarket, I bumped into Amanda as she came out of one of the shops.

‘Hey you, how you doing’, she greeted me with a big smile, pulling me out the way and giving me a hug.

‘Hey’, I managed, surprised, ‘what are the odds of meeting you like this?’

‘And on your off day’, she finished off, ‘some things are just meant to be aren’t they’, she teased as she joined me on my way up.

‘I’m going to Spar to get a few things, where you off to?’

‘I was just window shopping’.

‘Alone? Where’re your friends?’

‘Alone’, she said flatly, ‘I don’t need friends to window shop you know, I’m perfectly capable of doing it on my own’.

‘Well, that’s a first. A young girl going to town on her own, aren’t you afraid someone might take advantage of you? I wouldn’t let Nurse come to town alone’.

‘I’m not six years old you know, and besides, I can smell danger from a mile away’.

‘Who are you trying to convince, me or you?’

She just laughed as she followed me into Spar and helped me with the shopping. Ladies are very particular when they shop, noticing the things I would never notice, like the expiry dates on the bread and milk, or the portion chunks in the braai pack. I would’ve missed so many little things if it weren’t for her, and as she walked me to the bus stop, I knew mum would be so impressed.

‘Come with me, I’ll walk you home. You can wait for me at Lucky Seven. It’s the least I can do to thank you’.

‘You don’t need to thank me, but okay’, she boarded the bus and sat beside me as we made our way pass Dundee Primary and to the bridge which took us straight into Forestdale.

‘Buy something to chew on as you wait’, I handed her some money as we got off at Lucky Seven, ‘I promise I won’t be long’, and with that, I was off. Lucky Seven was a small square shop built entirely out of phased brick, with a cracking stoop and a veranda overlooking a ground of grass and a set of old broken Telkom phone-booths. It was newly built as it stood opposite a much smaller dilapidated little room that used to be the only shop in Forestdale before Lillian, Tom and Dalton built the LTD store which they sold when they moved out of Dundee and the new owner renamed Lucky Seven. The dilapidated room was covered with graffiti, with broken glass, stones and other debris littering its floor. A bunch of guys stood beside it as they beat-boxed and sang in large hooded track tops and sagging jeans which revealed silky boxes. They formed a circle in which others entered and break-danced, street-danced and crumped, attracting onlookers and pass-byers. Kids loitered around the new building and on the streets, some playing *tazo’s* on the stoop, others spinning tops on the grass, others using the broken booths as a jungle-gym.

I returned about an hour later to find Amanda playing table soccer with one of the kids hanging around the shop.

‘Come let’s play’, she challenged me as she left the boy to play with his other friends and made her way to the snooker table, ‘I don’t know when was the last time I played’.

‘Me neither’, I confessed as I collected the balls and placed them into the triangle, ‘it’s been a long time, I last played with Sam, and he whipped my ass’.

‘Well’, she said as she broke the balls, ‘you better prepare that ass for another whipping’. She fell silent before asking, ‘so tell me, Jamie, when were you planning on telling me?’

‘Telling you what?’

‘That you’re going to Durban!’ The words hit me like ice water, freezing me in my steps. I didn’t know how to respond, I was so unprepared for it. I wanted to be the one to tell her, that way I’ll expect her disappointed reaction. Now that she already knew, I didn’t know whether she was happy for me or not, whether I should run away or not. She continued playing for a while before adding, ‘or were you too scared to tell me?’

‘I was going tell you, I was just waiting for the right time’.

‘Well your too late’, she said as she sunk the black ball, ‘one, two, three, four piece’, she counted as she collected the balls into the triangle for the next game.

‘Amanda I’m really sorry you had to find out from someone…’

‘So it is true, you’re going to become a priest, Wow, I can’t believe it, like seriously?’

‘Well, it’s a bit complicated than that’.

‘How?’

‘I’m not sure if I really want to be a priest, I’m just giving it a try to see what happens. I’m trying to get out of Dundee, out of this life-sucking abyss and this might be my only chance’.

‘Okay’, she said as she sunk two of her stripes, ‘it’s a chance alright! A very good one since you’re leaving just next month! I thought it would be a while before this would happen, before you’d find something better. There’s so much I wanted to do with you, so much I wanted to say, but I guess it wasn’t meant to be…’

‘What do you mean it wasn’t meant to be? Are you giving up on us?’

‘You gave up on us the day you left us and came back to live with your mother’, she said as she threw her queue on the table and walked out. The black ball had not yet been sunk so I figured she was fed up as I chased after her, not knowing that she’d scored all of her stripes while I hadn’t sunk a single solid, ‘ever since you left us things between us have never been the same, You used to love me Jamie, really and truly, but now you’re distant, and no matter how hard I’m trying to bring you back to me, you’re refusing. You keep putting obstacles in our way, that I’m you sister-in-law and now this priesthood thing. But I’m not giving up on us, I never will, forget it! You can…’, I pulled her and kissed her, violently, madly, deeply. I didn’t care who was watching, I didn’t care about nothing, I only cared about her as she grabbed violently and kissed me back, somewhere between sadness and joy, anger and lust, hatred and love. It just happened! I just did it, like something came over me. I was so overcome with emotion I couldn’t contain it. She pressed onto me as I pressed onto her, hot and sweaty, gripping and pulling, scratching and biting, losing each other in an intoxicating wave of lust, moving unstable, lost, stumbling, craving, giving in, until eventually we froze when I banged my head hard onto the wall of the store.

We stared at each other in a moment of challenge, hot, sweaty, aroused, breathless, our hands touching places we’ve never touched before, our clothes falling over: are we really going to do this, here, now? I could feel the eyes of the kids all over us, hear the commotion of the guys dancing and cheering, hear the cars passing by, hear the sound of loud music in the distance, and all these noises made me nervous. But if I let go I’ll just prove once more that I don’t love her the same, I needed to show her, here and now, that I’m willing to go all the way. I have to trust that she’ll stop me, how can she go on in such a public place. I pulled her close again and kissed her more violently than I ever have in my life, she resisted my kiss as she loosened her grip on me, ultimately pulling away and straightening herself out, ‘we can’t do this here Jamie, really?’

‘No, I guess not’, I managed, all out of breath.

‘Come’, she stretched out her hand, ‘give me that walk home you promised’. I held her hand as we walked slowly together.

‘I’m so sorry about everything’, I said to her, ‘I’m sorry I pushed you away because I was scared of our relationship, I’m sorry I pushed you away with this priesthood thing, I’m confused and I don’t know what I want. I’m so sorry. If you ask me to, I won’t go, I’ll…’

‘You must go Jamie!’ she interrupted as she squeezed my hand, ‘you’re right, it is your chance of coming out of this suffering. It may be your only chance and you must take it, don’t think twice about it. I’m just angry that you didn’t trust me with the idea, that you chose to go through with it alone, but I will never stand in the way of your happiness, ever. I just wanted to be a part of it, I wanted to prove that I can support you in the life changing decision, I wanted to prove to myself that I can be a real woman for you’.

‘But you are the woman for me, it has always been you Amie, and it always will be. There’s no one who knows me like you do, and I know I’m a lousy boyfriend, but all I am is yours’.

‘Thank you, I’ll remember that. The question is, will you remember that when you’re in Durban surrounded by all those beach bunnies huh?’ she joked.

‘What beach bunnies?’ I joked back, ’I know no such thing. Besides, it’s not like I’m at a normal public university, it’s a male-only private institution, my challenges are more than woman’.

‘Yes they are, but you must be strong, and whenever you feel like quitting, think of this life of suffering that you’ve left behind, think of your parents and siblings supporting you, think of me’.

‘Your big smile and warm hugs will be the only thing that will keep me sane in that place. I’m going to miss them terribly.’

‘You bet you will’, she said as she pulled me in for a big hug, ‘don’t miss them, don’t miss me either, because I’m not going anywhere, I’m right here, I’m going to be right here, waiting for you. Don’t worry, no one will find out about us, your secret is safe with me, just trust me with it and don’t push me away. Whenever you need me, I’ll be here for you, I’ve always been here, and I’ll be here until we can finally be together, whether after ten years or a hundred years, I’ll be right here waiting for you’. I squeezed her tighter as she said it, feeling the words burn deep into my heart as she squeezed me in return. How could I respond? What can I say? It needed no response, no explanation, just a listening ear and an accepting heart, and that is what I gave her. After a while we continued on our way as I dropped her off a few meters from her house. The sun was setting and a bright orange hew wrapped the sky in a warm blanket. The air was cool and fresh and the birds on the peach trees besides the fences were chirping. ‘I love you Amanda Goose’, I said as I left, ‘I love you with all of my heart and soul’.

‘I love you Jamie Fear’, she called after me as I hurried down the street, past the pre-school and through the forest home. Oh, did I mention that there’s a forest here? That’s why it’s called Forestdale.

\* \* \*

1. **Goodbye Forestdale**

I began closing my fully packed travel bag, and since I had filled it to the brim, had to sit on it to get the zipper to go all the way. I tried to limit my luggage to one huge bag because it’s easier to travel that way. Once I was done I got up and stared out the window and into the distance. Working these few months really paid off as it allowed me to budget for certain essentials I’d need for such a change, things like a travel bag, blankets, toiletry and basic stationary I thought I might need. Even better, after handing in my resignation letter typed out by Fr. Lionel to the management of Shoprite, the lady manager got me not only the logo jacket she promised, but also a good sending off package which allowed me to get some gadgets that I thought I might need: an alarm clock, a CD player with some head phones, the V3 Raizer, and some petty cash I’d use in case of emergencies. As I looked out the window I saw the darkness already beginning to settle, and thought I should have an early night since Fr. Lionel was going to come and pick me up as early as four-o-clock to begin our long journey to Durban. It’s a long four and a half hour drive, he said he’d come back the following day and be on time for the evening mass at seven. I took the bag off the bed and placed it beside the wardrobe, and as it stood there the room suddenly appeared cramped.

The family was happy about my decision; they supported me and wished me well. Mum didn’t like the fact that Catholic priests don’t marry and worried that this may be a stumbling block for me since I’ve had no experience with woman, and as I grow up, it would only be a matter of time before I notice them. Her fear was that I’d give up for some woman two or three years down the line and embarrass myself, this was why she advised me to come home if things didn’t work out, assuring me that there’s always a place for me at home no matter what. She didn’t know that I had some experience of women, and that if I do leave early, it will be for other reasons. My brothers and sisters encouraged me, offering to help out should I need any financial assistance. There was no one in the family who was a priest, so I was doing something that hadn’t been done before, they were proud that I was opening up a new reality in the family, one that could inspire not only the children but many young men to avoid crime and violence for something better, even if one comes from a disadvantaged location like Forestdale.

Even Amanda was proud of me! We hadn’t met since that Saturday even though we keep in contact. Just last night she reminded me to buy bedding, sheets, pillow cases and other linen so that I can change them regularly. She didn’t want there to be any scepticism about my decision on her account so she played it safe, reminding me that all I have to do is call her, and she’d be right here. I was glad that she was still on my side, that after everything that had happened, all the lies and deceit, she still found it in her heart to forgive me and support me throughout. I used to think it was a mistake for my dad to have met her mum, now I’m convinced that it was destiny. I’ve found someone special because of it, and for this I will be eternally grateful, I just hope that I have what it takes to keep her.

I had something to eat and decided to call it a day. I wasn’t really hungry but I knew I had to eat something to keep my strength up for the task that lay ahead. As I tucked myself in, I quickly realised that I wasn’t tired either, and as I tossed and turned I was anxious of what tomorrow would bring. I’ve never been to Durban before, and I didn’t know anyone or any place there, and so I wondered what it would be like, giving myself many scenarios to choose from. I also didn’t know who I’d meet tomorrow on orientation day, guys who have a passion for the priesthood. How am I going to relate with them, rich guys, educated guys, guys who will expect the same from me, a poor guy? Then I remembered Amanda’s words from earlier, *you must be strong, and whenever you feel like quitting, think of this life of suffering that you’ve left behind, think of your parents and siblings supporting you, think of me,* and with these uplifting words I drifted off into a deep sleep.

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**Chapter four:**

**The beginning of the future**

1. **Welcome to St. Kizito Seminary**

‘Hey Jamie, the day we’ve been waiting for has arrived. The air is cool and fresh, the sky is clear and there’s no traffic on the roads, yet!’ Fr. Lionel said enthusiastically as he stood beside the car, arms crossed and smiling.

‘Yeah the day is here’, I said, mastering all the enthusiasm I could at that early hour.

‘Are we ready to go, do you still need a bit more time or what?’

‘No, I’m ready! Everything’s all packed and ready to go, I’ll go fetch them’. I disappeared into the house and came back a minute later with a green duvet set on my left, a big blue trolley bag on my right, and a black backpack on my back.

‘Is this all of it’, he asked as he took the duvet and trolley bag from me and put them into the boot of the car.

‘This is all of it’, I said as I followed him and placed the backpack into the boot as well. The boot was spacious, not only could it house all of my luggage on the left, it also fitted Fr. Lionel’s backpack, briefcase, mass kit, alb, stole and chasuble neatly on the right.

‘I’ll wait for you in the car’, he said as mum appeared at the door, ‘take your time, we are in no rush, in fact we’re very early’. I went to mum and gave her a hug, ‘mum, I’m going now’.

‘Yes, I see that. You must take care of yourself my son. And remember what I told you to do if things get bad’.

‘Yes mum, I will’. I then entered the house to find everyone looking at the commotion through the living room window. ‘Bye guys’, I managed, and one by one they turned and shook my hand.

‘Shup’

‘Ola’

‘Shot’

‘Look after yourself’

‘Bye Jamie’, managed little Nurse as she gave me a hug, ‘I’m going to miss you’

‘I’m going to miss you too, little princess’, I said as I held her tight.

I made my way out and was about to head for the car when mum pulled me and gave me another hug before planting a kiss on my forehead. I felt so embarrassed, this five year old treatment. But hey, she’s my mum; I guess to her I’m still five years anyway.

‘Bye mum’.

‘Bye my son’, she called after me as I climbed into the passenger’s seat and fastened my seatbelt. Fr. Lionel started the car and began our long trip to Durban.

I wasn’t feeling as excited as I had anticipated! I was on my way toward the better opportunities I had always wanted, it was finally happening, but I didn’t feel excited about it. In fact, I felt anxious that something was going to go wrong! I felt like I was trying to cheat God and that somehow I was going to fail, because it’s impossible to cheat God. How does someone know if they’re really called by God? What are the signs? Does God really call us in our sleep or something? Does He call from a voice in the sky as we read in the prophets of old testament in the Bible? Maybe that’s why mum kept insisting I come home when things get bad, maybe she believed, as I’ve always believe, that I’m not called. But maybe I am! The reasons why I got here fade when compared to what I choose to do henceforth. The past is history, tomorrow is a mystery, but today is a gift, that’s why it’s called the present. I stared out the window and saw the darkness of the night give way to the bright summer morning as I wondered what lay in store for me, success or failure. And in a city I had never been to before: Durban.

There’d surely be lots of attractions and temptations to lure me from what I wanted to achieve. And coming from such a small town, it’ll probably be very easy for these attractions and temptations to overpower me since I’m ignorant of them. Indeed I had heard of and witnessed many people who left Dundee and went out into the cities to study, many who had come from rich families or who were smart enough to earn scholarships. They’d leave excited and bashful about their future, inspiring us that we too can leave Dundee for something better if we work hard. Unfortunately, they’d come back a couple of years later with addictions and dependants which brought them down and made it difficult for them to continue their studies. This shows that life in the city was going to be a real challenge for me and for my studies, and I had to come up with some kind of strategy to try and overcome them since I didn’t want to end up like one of those people I knew. I didn’t want to come back home with any addictions or dependants, I didn’t want to find myself unable to continue my studies and right back at home where I had started, only worse.

Amanda was right! I had to be stronger than them! I had to succeed! And knowing where I come from, the life I was leaving behind, the hardships of my family, of my mother, this must be enough to motivate me to stay focused, to persevere. Even though I didn’t come from a rich family or earn a scholarship, I have been given a chance at becoming something different, something better. This chance is different since I’d be studying to becoming a priest, but it was a chance nonetheless. My main concern is that I was on an uneven footing with the guys I’d meet there, because not only did I know very little about what I was getting myself into, I lacked the basics like deep faith and active church participation. Nevertheless, I needed to fit in, so I needed to play the role of something I’m ignorant of. Like an actor in a movie playing a character different to their own so as to complete the plot of the movie, I was to play a character I’m unfamiliar with. In this case, perhaps it wouldn’t be God who catches me out and sends me packing back home embarrassed; perhaps it’s these and many other challenges which I am bound to undergo that would. And maybe if I could succeed and overcoming the many challenges that lay ahead of me, then God would let me continue, because to overcome them in the first place would’ve already needed God’s help in one way or another. ‘Hey Jamie, is everything alright?’ Fr. Lionel asked, noticing I was too quiet.

‘Yeah, I’m okay, I’m just anxious about what lies ahead, what to expect, those kinds of things’.

‘Hmm’, he nodded, ‘don’t worry, you’ll be fine man. Just take it one day at a time, that’s all’. ‘Thanks, I will’.

‘Yes it is challenging but… there’s nothing you won’t handle. It’s a good place, a place for forming priest, yes there’s the academic training, but there’s also a spiritual training that runs through it all so…if you mean well, you will get by’.

‘And if you don’t mean well?’ I asked, expecting the obvious answer.

‘Well, if you don’t mean well then you don’t belong there’ he said flatly, then after a while he added, ‘but there have been many cases where people didn’t mean well at all, they were menaces in the seminary causing headaches for staff members, their bishops and the rector, but as time went by, as formation took effect, they eventually came around to meaning well, becoming some of the most influential priests in our country today. That’s the spiritual hand running through formation, the work of the Holy Spirit’.

‘Well then there’s hope for guys like me yet’, I joked.

‘Yes there is’, he laughed, ‘though I don’t think you’re a menace at all. You’re different, but not a menace. They’ll love you in the seminary. Plus being different is useful, we need diverse priests to speak to the diverse people who need our care’.

‘If your aim was to make me feel better, it’s working’.

‘No, it’s the truth. Though I’m glad the truth makes you feel better, it seldom does’, and we laughed. Jokes aside though, if that’s the truth then there really is hope for me. I looked at him for a while, wondering what made him to speak about the very thing that was on my mind. I turned and stared back out the window, and as the silence returned, Fr. Lionel turned on the car radio to ease the tension and keep our ears occupied. I made myself comfortable, resting my hands on my belly, and my head onto the head rest. I looked out the window as the light gave way to bright, as the buildings gave way to houses, as the houses gave way to wide open fields stretching across the distance. It wasn’t long before I dozed off and my sleeping head bounced gently as the car moved into the direction of my future.

Fr. Lionel looked over at me as I sat very still on the passenger seat; my face turned towards the window, yet the way it bobbed gently up and down betrayed the fact that I was fast asleep. He then turned the car radio off, and adjusted the air-conditioner to a more comfortable temperature. He began to reduce his speed slightly so that the car moved more steadily and quietly onward. It was going to be a long journey, not just to Durban, but to the priesthood. He looked at the crucifix attached firmly on the dashboard, then at the sky blue rosary hanging from the rear-view mirror, he began to pray silently in his heart: for a safe journey there and back, for the Church which he loved so much, and for my intentions, a young man taking a very brave step forward, presenting myself as one called to do God’s work. I may not know it now, but it’s to me and to all the many young brave men like me that the Church belongs, for a Church without young men sacrificing their lives for the service of the priesthood, is a Church heading for its own death.

We finally stopped at an old large complex in the countryside, hidden away from everyone and everything, secluded, abandoned by life! I hadn’t expected us to stop here! Why hadn’t we stopped at one of the many large and modern buildings we passed on our way here, ones that looked beautifully designed and recently built, surrounded by wide open tarred roads and stone pavements busy with smart cars and beautiful people? To the contrary, this building was quite far from these. It was built in a classical design, flat and broad rather than thin and tall. The entire main structure was built solely out of stone brick, while the surrounding buildings, which stretched out for quite a while, was built out of both stone brick and wood, with patches of modern brick sticking out the way patches of dirt sticks out on a white shirt. The building looked like it had been patched up more than a few times, and the stone brick was dirty and seemed to be cracking, giving in to the many years of harsh weather. There were trees everywhere, exotic trees and local trees, spread all over the property, along with many neatly kept huge patches of long grassland between narrow driveways. Cottages appeared here and there, a swimming pool, a sports ground, a chapel, and then more grassland. ‘Well, this is it Jamie!’ Fr. Lionel said as he unpacked my luggage from the boot, ‘home sweet home! At least for this year it is’, he added as he closed the boot and began to admire the wide grasslands.

‘Yeah, home sweet home’, I repeated, trying to hide the distaste in my voice.

He helped me carry my luggage along the stone driveway and towards the entrance where two Dominican sisters were seated behind a table filled with nametags and keys on it. They both got up to shake our hands jovially and began speaking about me to Fr. Lionel as if I weren’t there. I stood by quietly, familiar with how it felt to be made invisible, and remembered when it happened in the office of the supermarket on my first day at work. Or was it perhaps the sisters who thought I couldn’t speak English since they kept glancing at me and smiling yet saying nothing? After telling them who I was they gave the priest a key and the priest gave the key to me, ‘here you go, your room is the second room to the right as you turn into the corridor, it’s number …’, he looked at the number as I held out the key for him to read, ‘twenty eight!’ He then gave me the rest of my luggage, which was only the duvet, and said to me, ‘now take care of yourself, young man. This is your home, you’re no stranger here. Treat everyone as if they were your brothers and your sisters and you’ll be alright’.

‘I’ll do my best’.

‘Goodbye Jamie’.

‘Goodbye’, I let go of the trolley bag and the duvet and gave him a hug as he extended his arms to hug me, he then turned and dashed off, jumping into his car and heading towards the nearby parish where he intended to spend the night before getting another early start for the journey back to Dundee tomorrow.

‘Come’, I turned to see one of the sisters approach me, ‘come’, she repeated as she turned and began leading me to my room. I followed her, picking up my duvet and adjusting my trolley bag, with my backpack firmly on my back.

‘Thank you so much sister’, I said, smiling to her as she led me to my door, and the sister nodded in acknowledgment and left without saying a word. Hmm, maybe it was her who couldn’t understand English! Anyway, I walked through the already open door of my room. It was a large room with a single bed, a wardrobe, a washing basin, a cabinet, a table and a chair. The walls were painted cream white with a crucifix hung on it above the head of the bed, and a small painting of Mary hanging at the foot of the bed. The bedding was also cream white, along with the linen covering the table. The floor was wooden I realised as I walked inside, and had a white mat over it with a small carpet beside the bed, also cream white. I placed my luggage on the floor and went to close the door. I walked back into the room and sat down on the chair, looking around again, I couldn’t help notice the colour of my luggage as they stuck out like sore thumbs on the floor of the room: home sweet home.

I hadn’t even spent fifteen minutes in my room before I heard a loud bell ringing from the corridor. It might be a calling of some kind. I stopped unpacking my clothes and went out to see what the noise was all about. As I opened the door and walked into the corridor, I met several guys walking aimlessly on the corridor as well, looking as puzzled as I was at the sound of the bells. There was a slender tall guy with a deep voice, a short stout guy with a bald head, two guys my height, both slightly bigger with one much older than the other, and another stout tall big guy with a bulging belly and trimmed moustache. Ignoring the bell, we began to introduce ourselves to each other, smiling shyly as we did, meeting each other for the first time, all from different parts of South Africa: Bethlehem, Pretoria, Bloemfontein, Kimberly, Durban, and yes, Dundee.

As we stood in the corridor and chatted to each other about our trip here, and about how tired and excited we were about everything, a priest came by and called for our attention, ‘Hey guys how you doing? My name is Fr. Charity, I’m a Jesuit priest and a formator here in the seminary. This annoying bell means we all have to meet in the hall, that’s down the stairs to your left as you turn that corner’, he pointed to the corridor I had just come from at the farthest end. ‘Come lets go’, he turned and invited us to follow him ‘the orientation program is about to begin’. He led us through the corridor, down the stairs and into the hall where hundreds of people were waiting seated. It was filled with priests, sisters, guys in brown robes, guys in black robes all seated neatly in groups. Disciplined; quiet. Then there was a group of guys sticking out in ordinary clothes, seated together, looking around strangely, noisily asking questions, looking lost. Fr. Charity pointed us to them, though he didn’t need to, it was the only place we fitted into, where we sat down and waited for the orientation program to begin, anxious and eager to learn exactly what that meant.

One thing I knew was that I didn’t like the orientation program, it ran through the night, up until eleven, with different priests and sisters and professors giving long presentations about the institution which they called a minor seminary, its aims and objectives, it’s staff members and organisations, and it’s expectations of all the young men who enrol in it: me! The presentations were very technical and the presenters used many difficult words which I couldn’t quite understand. Everyone was silent during the presentations, listening attentively and nodding and smiling at different occasions throughout. For the most part, I looked at the presenters and admired their vast knowledge and ability to use complicated words, and I admired those students around me who appeared to be understanding and even enjoying the presentations, concluding that they’re the smart guys who matriculated with distinctions and who were sacrificing their lives for the priesthood. I inclined my ear and tried to listen as attentively as the others were, making sense of what I could from the presentations. And the whole orientation program was summarized by the presentation of the rector:

‘The minor seminary is a Catholic institution of higher learning which is primarily aimed at introducing successful applicants for religious life into religious life. It follows a specific timetable which is peculiar to religious living, involving extensive mandatory activities such as prayer, reflection, recollection, silence, physical work, and study. Since the successful applicants’, he looked towards us, ‘are unfamiliar with this way of living, it is up to the minor seminary, up to us, to gently introduce them into this lifestyle, to form them into submitting and adapting themselves to this lifestyle, a lifestyle they are expected to adopt as they continue their studies in the major seminary and indeed for the rest of their lives should they successfully complete their studies and receive the rite of ordination. The ordination rite is performed by the Catholic Church through its ministers in order to bestow on successful candidates the power to exercise the ministry of being a priest in the Catholic Church: the power to consecrate and to absolve. This task of forming the successful applicants is the task of the individual bishops. A Catholic bishop is one who, after having received the power to consecrate and absolve as a priest, is further elevated to receive the power to ordain and confirm as a bishop.

A bishop has the task, among many others, for the care of souls within a certain region called a diocese. Successful applicants come from their respective dioceses, and it is the responsibility of the bishop to form them and then ordain them to work in the diocese. The work of forming he does by sending successful applicants to one of the regional seminaries within the region of Southern Africa established by and for him through the Southern African Catholic Bishop’s Conference’, he paused and took a sip of the water hiding under the lectern, then continued:

‘Thus the bishops within the region of Southern Africa entrust us, learned priests of high standing, to assist in this task of forming these successful applicants’, he glanced at us once more, ‘at their initial stage of formation. We are the ones who live among them in the seminary, encouraging and educating their spiritual and human formation in the chapel, as well as encouraging and educating their pastoral and academic formation in the classroom. They are expected to look up to us and to one day aspire to reach the same stature of wisdom and high standing, that they may become wise and learned priests of the future in a society in desperate need of such. They are encouraged to abandon a life of materialism and shun the desire for worldly things for the adoption, rather, of a desire for the things of the spirit, where God is, for such is the life of a priest’.

He paused again for a moment, scanned the whole crowd, then continued, ‘and what else could characterize the life of a priest? Any priest could do well to consider that the life of a priest can be characterised by a pure and honest simplicity, a moderation in the pleasures of the world, a firm resolve to be zealous for the things of the spirit and to dedicate himself to prayer, fasting, and alms giving. Any priest would also do well to consider that the life of a priest also asks for a gentle and humble regard for the structures of the Church, to respect those in authorities above his own in whom a larger responsibility is entrusted, to assist and enhance those below him, and to imbibe within him a certain spirit of docility and openness to his service of consecrating and absolving, wherever this divine service can or may lead him. And finally, any priest would do well also to consider that the life of a priest is to commit himself with single minded devotion to his service. Not to be moved from his duty towards those entrusted to his care by the necessary demands of dependants. Thus he exercises wisdom when he remains without dependants, sacrificing them for the salvation of souls and the nurturing and up-building of societies, that when finally our Lord comes on earth, he does indeed find faith. This is my humble perspective of what it means to be a priest, dear seminarians; you must make your own. With that I welcome you to the beginning of your future’.

At ten o’clock we broke for supper, just imagine eating at ten o’clock! We moved from the lecture hall to a large dining hall. I sat next to two students, or properly called, seminarians, one was small and a bit taller than me with thin bony hands and small ears while the other was average built, with a receding hairline and big eyes, and they began an interesting discussion around the last point that the rector mentioned in his presentation: remaining without dependants. I ate quietly and listened intently as they spoke,

‘The call to matrimony is at the same level as the call to priesthood’, said the guy with small ears.

‘No they’re not, how can they be? Priesthood demands more sacrifice, haven’t you been listening?’

‘Yes I have, there’s a great sacrifice in becoming a priest. But there’s also as great a sacrifice, or sometimes even a greater sacrifice, of those called to married life. That’s why they’re both sacraments of vocation. They’re equal’.

‘That may be so if we’re looking at their practical value, their laborious strife in a cold world, and how they manage their day to day affairs. Then I can agree, they do carry an equal amount of sacrifice and commitment, and maybe sometimes the married man has more of a sacrifice than the priest in some instances and vice versa. But, and a big but…’, he paused as he caught me staring at him from across the table, ‘on the level of their final goal in life I disagree totally! Priesthood, by its very nature and lifestyle, already here on earth necessarily points to the things of heaven. It’s the role of a priest to bring people back to God! But this isn’t necessarily true for married living. Married people don’t necessarily point to God inasmuch as they necessarily involve Him, rather they necessarily point to each other. Their love is for each other such that the two become one, a unity of love, and this unity of love cannot contain its love but this love overflows into offspring. So they’re not equal in this sense’.

‘So let me get this straight! You’re saying that while matrimony and priesthood are practically and even theologically on the same level, that priesthood is necessarily eschatologically ahead of matrimony?’

‘That’s exactly what I’m saying!’

‘Wow, I never really thought of it that way, what do you think?’ I looked up and realised that the guy was speaking to me, after all, there’s only three of us, he couldn’t be asking the guy he’s just been arguing with, surely. They both looked at me expectantly, and I, unaware of how to respond, pretended as if I wasn’t sure who the guy was asking, ‘me?’

‘Yeah, don’t you think that becoming a priest is better than getting married, I mean that’s why you’re here right? That’s why we’re all here’. My heart rate shot up as I began to feel a swell of nerves grab hold of me, I began to feel my muscles tightened and to find it difficult to breathe, I had no idea what to say or even how to say it, and they both looked at me, quiet and expecting some kind of clever answer. At that moment the bell rang and everyone got up almost immediately, including the two guys. They got up as if they’d just been waiting for the bell to ring, like they were programmed or something. I let out a huge sigh of relief as I began to breathe properly again, as my body relaxed, as if it had been held bound by something. My goodness, acting religious is going to be more difficult than I thought! I finally got up and began making my way out, what do I know about eschatology and theology and all the religious stuff they were talking about? Talk about being saved by the bell.

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1. **The ‘no judging’ club**

I had quickly gotten into the rhythm of seminary life, and for me it wasn’t such a bad place to be in after all. The buildings may be old, but the people were friendly, warm and welcoming. There was Morning Prayer at five o’clock, followed by meditation and morning mass. Breakfast was at eight followed by lectures which commenced at nine and ended at one. Lunch followed immediately afterwards, with afternoon classes or manual work or pastoral work or study time or sports and recreation occupying the hours between this and Evening Prayer and meditation at five. Supper followed meditation with choir practice or interest groups or study time leading up to lights out at ten.

I was lucky to have worked the previous year and so I had gotten used to waking up early and sleeping late, with a lunch hour in between. Others, however, weren’t as fortunate! Some had been staying at home for years awaiting their application approval, while others visited different parishes while they waited. Point is, many weren’t used to waking early and sleeping late and would find themselves walking into prayers late, rubbing their eyes with their hair still unkempt, clearly advertising that they’d just woken up and rushed out of their rooms. Others would come late for class and sit quietly in their place, embarrassed at ever having missed prayers, and hungry to have missed breakfast. And for the whole day they’d be grumpy and agitated and they’d still wonder why. But not me! I never missed a meal and I was never late, for prayers or class or anything; in fact, I was always early. I showed a lot of focus and discipline and determination which the formators admired. I was motivated by all the advice the people at home had given me, valuable advice, and I was now putting it into practice, overcoming my challenges and making it through, day by day. It had been said to us before that lax behaviour was frowned upon and seen as an indication that one isn’t enthusiastic about religious life, and that, if it became a habit, such behaviour gave the staff reasonable grounds for dismissal. I was not ready to be dismissed, not now, not ever.

But the formators weren’t harsh on us; they never held it against us at all. In fact, they were open and honest and encouraging, allowing us to slowly get into the rhythm of religious living. They’d even sometimes make fun of lax behaviour so as to deter the others from being lax by giving nick names to notorious lax students; but they never dismissed any student for it. I was surprised and encouraged at this open and honest behaviour of the staff, I had thought if I did one thing wrong, if I so much as sneezed wrongly, I’d be sent back home, and this thinking had made me extra careful and super alert at what was going on around me. I knew I only had one chance and I wanted to make the most of it. I didn’t want to be sent home after a few months, become the laughing stock of all those who knew that I had been studying, and embarrass everyone for something as simple as laziness. What would Amanda say? What would my mother say? But the priests were not out to get us, they were not policing us but forming us, and time and again they would assure us that they are here to form young men who knew nothing of religious life, and so they’d be patient with our mistakes so that we could learn from them and improve for the future. ‘Everyone deserves a chance to grow, and this is your chance: grow wisely’, they’d say.

This made me to soften up a little, to begin to unwind a bit, and seminary life became quite enjoyable. Soon I was familiar with the chapel and the prayer rooms, the dining room and the library, the classroom and the sitting rooms. Soon I was familiar with the playground and the swimming pool, the clinic and the local parish, the tuck shop and the bus stop. Soon I could find my way from Oakford to Verulam, where I could buy some toiletry and stationary, and other essentials I might need. And every time someone would ask me where I was going when I boarded the bus back to Oakford, I didn’t hesitate to say that I was going home! It had become home, the classic old building in the countryside had become home, a place where I was surrounded by mentors and wise men, all fully equipped to handle the needs of young men, all sharing wisdom and encouragement whenever they were given the chance.

There were many places where I could be alone with my thoughts as well. Areas where I could simply admire the beauty of creation, admire the lovely scenery, and embrace the natural world. But among these places, I chose to frequent a large oak tree situated in an isolated and quiet place on its own, but from where I could see almost everything. It was somehow in the centre of the property, and placing some bricks underneath it, I would sit under the tree and just be alone, watching people from a distance carrying on with life, and think about my own life and where it was going. And soon afterwards I wasn’t the only one who took a liking to that spot. There were two other guys who frequented the place as well: Fred, the average guy I met in the corridor on my first day here, he was from Bloemfontein, and Ted, the guy with the small ears from Johannesburg, and when we found out that we frequented the same place at different times, we decided to frequent the place together.

Fred was the eldest of us three; in fact, he was the second eldest of all the seminarians. He had a lot of experiences with religious people, with religious living and with the life of the Catholic Church. But unlike my painful experience at the dining hall on my first evening here, Fred was more humble about it. He didn’t take it for granted that others knew what he knew, but rather he approached others with caution and respect. He was an open, honest and fun guy to be with. Ted was a brilliant academic, knowledgeable and smart. He laughed when I told him about that evening, saying he had forgotten all about it. He had the sharpest mind I had ever come across, and in the classroom, he was top of the class. To my surprise, he too was a humble guy who never showed off his intellect, seldom asking questions but rather joking and fooling around. He had an outgoing and kind personality, always willing to do what others aren’t, and he took life very easily. He was an approachable guy, also fun to be with, and from his personality one could never guess that he was an outright genius. We’d walk to the tree together, sit under it and talk about many different things. I learnt a lot about the seminary from them, about the things of the Church of which I was ignorant. The fact that they never judged me on my ignorance drew me even closer to them, and when I failed to comment on a specific topic, instead of asking me *what do you think* they’d rather change the topic and speak of other things.

They knew that I didn’t know much about religious life, or even about some simple catechesis everyone would expect me to know, my comments gave it away, as well as my quiet demeanour in the classroom where I kept to myself and minded my own business. I thrived on being independent, not bothering others for anything, and if I didn’t have, I’d rather live without it. I wasn’t like other seminarians, speaking about popes or priests or some other religious topic. I maintained my silence while doing diligently all that was required of me. Inside and outside the classroom, I worked really hard, and this was evident to everyone. Certain activities were taken as second nature to many, but not to me! I would take everything seriously, and put my best at every task I was assigned to do. While this was a very strange attitude which made many other seminarians question my conduct; it was this same strange attitude which brought Fred and Ted towards me, because to them I was a breath of fresh air, I was something new in an already familiar environment. It made them to feel at ease around me, to speak casually and simply, and to avoid religious talk for the more ordinary conversations of life.

‘Hey Mr. serious, what’s up?’ Fred teased me as he stood in my doorway.

‘So, what does that make you, Mr. funny?’

‘Yeah, you can say that, I was thinking more like: The Joker’.

‘You’re watching too many Batman movies Fred’.

‘Speaking of which, let’s go out later. It’s our last day here in Durban, some of us may never come here again, so let’s blow this joint and go out, we can go to the beach, entertainment world, cinema, mall, casino, wherever, as long as it’s not here’.

‘Sounds like fun, also sounds expensive’.

‘Well, unfortunately the best things in life aren’t free’.

‘That being so, at least we’d have some good memories to leave behind, memories which can last a lifetime, memories which cost nothing’.

‘So I guess that’s a yes. Let me go and find Ted and see if he’s up to it. It’ll be great if the three of us can go, especially money wise’.

‘Yeah, while you do that, let me make some progress with packing’.

‘Hey, don’t forget, it’s time for manual work’.

‘Oh, by the way, I almost forgot. And todays it’s me and Binang cleaning the kitchen’.

‘Good luck, I hate cleaning that kitchen, it’s so big’.

‘Tell me about it. Last time I was cleaning it with Pieter and he fell ill the day before, and so I had to clean it myself. I won’t forget, it took me almost till lunch time’.

‘Sucks when you have to do something alone, that’s why I’m going to see Ted. We can leave immediately after manual work so that we can have enough time ‘wherever’ and return early enough to pack properly, what do you think?’

‘Sounds like a plan. Let me go’, I hurried out the room and to the kitchen, ‘Binang must be waiting for me’.

‘See you later’.

‘Later’, I called back as I hurried on, hoping Binang wasn’t mopping alone.

After manual work we made our way out the seminary and to the bus stop,

‘Did you hear about the pastor who made his congregation drink petrol?’ Ted asked as we seated ourselves at the back of the bus.

‘Yeah, it’s awful isn’t it? How does someone do that to people? He’s supposed to be their pastor not their tormentor’, Fred added.

‘Well, I hope that they learnt their lesson, not everyone who carries a Bible and preaches is a pastor. There are lots of charlatans out there’, Ted said.

‘That’s true. People need to be educated as to the difference between a true pastor and a charlatan. Religious freedom, coupled with scarce opportunities, high competition and limited resources leads people to do desperate things, even preying on the vulnerability of honest and faithful believers’, Fred said disappointed.

‘That’s quite a mouthful’, I said, trying to add into the conversation.

‘Yeah it is, it just simply means that our job is being made difficult by people who are tainting the name of the priest for selfish reasons’, Ted clarified.

‘And that there are characteristics which only a true pastor would possess, characteristics which people should look out for before joining any congregation’ Fred added.

‘Yeah, kind of like the ones the rector mentioned, um…a pure and honest simplicity, a gentle and humble regard for the structures of the Church, and uh…’, I tried to remember the last one

‘Single minded devotion to ministry’ Fred helped me out, ‘but these are the rectors ideas of what it means to be a priest. There are many more characteristics along these lines which he didn’t mention, many which reveal the life of a real priest from a charlatan’, Fred added.

‘But they are a start’, Ted said as he looked at Fred, ‘you’re right Jamie it is those you mentioned’.

‘Thanks Ted’, I said, ‘so the more these false priest, or char…’.

‘Charlatans’, Ted corrected.

‘Yes, the more these charlatans deceive people the more the people will hate all priests and call them bad and this is bad for our business, right?’

“Right! You’ll see Jamie’, Fred said, ‘there will be all kinds of debate surrounding this petrol incident, and most of them will be on the authority of the pastors or on the necessity of faith or even on the existence of God. There will be a general rejection of religion because of the fault of someone who claims to be a pastor and has a congregation’.

‘Yip, the religious chain of command is only as strong as the weakest link’, Ted agreed.

‘Yeah, but this guy is not even part of the chain, he’s not a real pastor, so why should it affect us?’ I asked.

‘You’re right, he’s not part of our chain of accepted pastors, but he is part of our chain of religious gatherings because he holds a following in the name of religion’.

‘I see’, I said, ‘there are many chains which bind us’.

‘Many chains’, Ted said, ‘as one of the oldest and largest Christian denominations in the world, we Catholics have many chains, it’s what makes us strong, giving us much authority’.

‘It’s why I’m proudly Catholic’, Fred said with a smile.

‘Me too’, Ted added.

‘Me three’, I conceded.

Durban was a nice place to have fun. The air was cool and fresh with a tinge of humidity in it. The weather was beautiful, with blue skies and a shiny sun being the order of the day. The atmosphere was wonderful, with clean streets besides green cut grass and green trimmed trees. The occasional chirping of birds, butterflies and humming bees added a natural friendly vibe. As we got off beside one of the tall beautiful buildings I had hoped would’ve been our seminary when I first arrived, we were met with friendly and beautiful people, everyone was clean and fresh and smart, everyone was approachable and friendly, everyone was happy. ‘Alright, we’re here’, Fred said, looking up and down the busy road and not knowing which way leads where, ‘let’s go up’, he said finally.

‘Fred do you know where we’re going?’ asked Ted.

‘Hey let’s just follow the leader. OK! Fred knows what he’s doing’, I said, half joking, ‘you the man Fred, do you’re thing!’ We made our way crossing wide roads and passed many shops, restaurants, clubs, bars, until finally we came across the Gateway Mall which we knew would narrow our search for a good place to chill out. Making our way into the mall and walking around for a bit, I spotted a nice restaurant which had seats overlooking the busy main road underneath, ‘here’s a spot to begin with’, I recommended, moving towards a nice place beside a small water-font near the philodendra.

‘Jamie, you’re the man’, Fred said as he took a seat beside me and looked down onto the busy road happily, seeing the cars and busses and taxis and people all moving by below us, ‘this place is great’.

‘And expensive’, Ted warned us as he took a seat casually beside Fred, ‘great and expensive’.

‘O come-on’, Fred said, ‘lighten up man, it’s our last day we deserve some expensive things huh?’

‘Yes, why not’, he said defensively lifting his hands in surrender, ‘just don’t say I didn’t tell you’, he warned.

‘Don’t worry, we’ll be fine. Plus we’re seminarians, what could possibly go wrong’, I joked. ‘I wouldn’t be so sure if I were you’ Ted said as he glanced at Fred, ‘some of us can get pretty messed up’.

‘No one’s getting messed up today’, Fred confirmed, ‘not unless being messed up means having fun’.

‘I’m with you there Fred’, I said, ‘let’s just have fun guys’.

‘Yeah’, Ted added finally, ‘let’s have fun’.

The seats were soft leather with a wooden finish which seemed to surround the whole restaurant. The wooden finish had holes out of which a cool steam seethed out, cooling the place. There were large plants all around, with a small water-font in the middle. Large monitors showed the latest super-sport games playing in high definition, and friendly waiters walked around in black uniforms smiling and chatting to customers. It wasn’t long before we were spotted and a waiter sent to us, ‘hi, my name is Pinky and I’ll be your waitress for the rest of the day’ she introduced herself as she handed us the menu.

‘Hey’, we all managed as we went through it.

‘Are there any specials or do we have to stick to the menu’, Ted asked.

‘There aren’t any specials here’, Fred said confident, ‘this is not your local bar were you can order the pap and chicken feet’, he mocked.

‘Or the *amagwinya*’ I added.

‘Yeah’ Fred agreed, ‘this is a place for the upper-class, the bourgeoisie, so let’s try and act the part for once in our lives’, he said as he sat up straight, pretending to be someone important as he browsed the menu.

‘Alright’, Ted agreed, ‘but there’s no harm in asking, in today’s economy, every restaurant has specials, people don’t have money, even ‘rich’ people order the special’.

‘You’re quite right’, Pinky saw this as her queue to finally speak, ‘there is a special, it’s our famous ribs, buy any twelve hundred grams and get an extra six hundred grams free. We do this every Saturday and call it the Family Meal because it comes with a chicken and wors combo’.

‘Alright, it sounds reasonable, at least something is free, so I guess we’re saving something out of it, so…’ I said cautiously.

‘Yeah, I guess we’ll have it’, Fred said as he closed his menu and reclined on his chair once more. So much for the bourgeoisie look.

‘Okay’, Ted said as he took my menu and handed it to Pinky together with his.

‘Can I get you’ll anything to drink while you’ll wait?’ she asked with a smile.

‘No, not yet, I’m good’, Fred said, glancing at the two of us expectantly.

‘I’m cool for now too’, I said.

‘Me too’, Ted joined in.

‘Okay’, she said as she went through our order once more before heading off into the back, returning minutes later with our order in hand.

‘That was quick’, I commended.

‘That was super quick’, Ted added, also surprised.

‘Specials are on stand-by because they usually ordered regularly so… enjoy’, she said as she placed the delicious smelling hot food before us. She didn’t have to ask us twice, after a quick sign of the cross over the food by Fred, we all began a vicious assault on the food, knowing very well that such meals only come once in a long, long while.

 After we had eaten and were more than fully satisfied, we called the waitress so that she could clear our table out and get us something to drink. She appeared a little while later with a huge tray on which she placed all our empty plates. ‘Would you‘ll like something to drink or are you‘ll still fine?’ she asked as she looked at us wide eyed and expecting.

‘I’ll have a Castle Lite’, Fred said, breaking the ice.

‘I’ll have that too’, Ted said, and they looked at me expectantly.

‘Well, I guess this is the part where I say I’d like an orange juice and then you‘ll start laughing at me, right?’ I asked jokingly.

‘Wrong’, Fred assured, ‘this is the part where you tell the waitress what you’d like to drink and she goes and get it for you. There’s no laughing at all, why should we laugh at your drink?’

‘Yeah, what’s there to laugh about, hell you can order water if you like, no one’s going to laugh as long as it’s what you want’, Ted added, ‘we just ordered first so that you’d feel comfortable ordering a beer if you drink, but there’s no pressure man, order what you like’.

‘Okay, I’ll have a Castle Lite as well’.

‘You sure’, Fred asked.

‘Yeah I’m sure’, I replied.

‘Okay, three Castle Lite’s coming right up’, the waiter confirmed as she disappeared into the back again, coming out seconds later with our drinks.

‘Don’t tell me they’re also on stand-by’, Ted asked as he poured his drink.

‘No’, she laughed, ‘they’re just really easy to get. Enjoy, I’ll come by to check if you’ll need a refill every now and again’, she added as she went off to serve other customers.

‘It’s good to relax once in a while’, Fred said as he sipped his drink and reclined onto his seat, watching the people and cars as they passed by underneath.

‘Sure is’, Ted followed suite, ‘nothing like a cold sundowner on a hot day’.

‘If only we were allowed to drink in the seminary’, I added.

‘No’, Fred said, ‘it’s good that we’re not allowed to drink in the seminary, otherwise many of us would’ve been expelled for misbehaviour or worse’.

‘Yeah, not all of us know how to drink responsibly, or even what that means. Seminary rules exist for a reason, to protect those bound by them and channel their energy to constructive and divine realities’, Ted added.

‘Yeah, but like us, wouldn’t seminarians drink outside the seminary and still misbehave? Wouldn’t it be better if we misbehaved inside rather than outside the seminary?’ I asked.

‘The seminary is not a place to hide our weaknesses’, Fred replied, ‘but a place where we can transform our weaknesses to strengths, to shape and mould us into being better people, into priests’.

‘Yeah, but how would it transform our weakness if it doesn’t know them? By allowing us to drink in the seminary we expose our weaknesses for transformation’, I said.

‘You’re right Jamie, though we should not invite weakness in the name of transformation. Almost everyone acts differently when under the influence, mostly negative, it wouldn’t be a good idea for the seminary to experiment with alcohol for this purpose, it’s like setting us up for failure’, Ted replied.

‘Your weakness isn’t something you invite with a drink, it’s something you keep away from and which finds its way into your life unwanted. It is these weaknesses which are identified, embraced and transformed. Saying that I fight when I’m drunk and should try and transform this weakness isn’t the same as saying that I have a masturbation problem. The one I can prevent by simply keeping away from alcohol, the other needs far more transformative solutions’, Fred added.

‘Yeah I see the difference now’, I conceded, ‘one is tempting myself and the other is tempting me’.

‘Yes’, Fred agreed, ‘and there are times when the alcohol doesn’t just bring out my weaknesses, but it is the weakness, it is the thing that finds its way into my life. Some people behave relatively strong once under the influence, they are kind, relaxed and good to be around, one can almost say that alcohol brings out their strength rather than their weakness. But they can’t stay away from alcohol’.

‘Alcohol is the problem’, Ted added.

‘So these people need to embrace their weakness in alcohol and to transform this weakness into something constructive and divine’, I said.

‘Yes, if it is a weakness!’ Fred pointed out.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked, confused.

‘Well, if alcohol makes me a kind, relaxed and fun guy, if it brings out my strengths, why is it a weakness? According to whom is it a weakness? What is it in this glass of beer that’s weak if drinking this and drinking juice has the same effect on me?’ Fred asked.

‘Well, if beer and juice had the same effect on you then I don’t see anything wrong in it, apart from health reasons. It would be like smoking, it’s bad because of the health reasons’. Ted said.

‘But it’s my health, why force me to be healthy?’ Fred asked.

‘Social responsibility forces all of us to live our best lives’, I added, ‘it’s not fair to our family and friends that we deliberately shorten our lives, especially when our death would have a negative impact on them’.

‘Yeah, but who is to say when I die, that’s not for me to decide, that’s God’s prerogative’, Fred insisted. ‘I could live longer than those who don’t drink or smoke, a bus can knock them, a bullet tear through their heart. Point is, their death could be sooner than mine and would also negatively impact those around them’.

‘Yeah, but those are unintentional deaths: getting shot or run down by a car. Smoking is deliberately killing yourself, it’s like suicide, isn’t suicide wrong?’ I asked.

‘Drinking isn’t suicide, that’s ridiculous’, Fred said.

‘Now, now Fred’, Ted said, ‘Jamie has a point, suicide is the direct and deliberate killing of oneself, whether quickly or slowly, or very, very, very slowly as is the case with cigarettes and alcohol’.

‘But that’s ridiculous’, Fred repeated, ‘that could apply to anything! Eating fats and protein without regular exercise can cause blood circulation dis-function and lead to heart failure and even death; living in a township increases the risk of crime and robbery and certain death; not dressing warmly in winter can cause influenza and if left untreated can aggravate and cause certain death; inability to eat because of poverty causes certain death. If you say these people are suicidal in the very, very, very slow sense then, almost everyone in the world is suicidal, deliberately shortening their lives, and have a social responsibility to stop these habits’.

‘Now that’s ridiculous’, I said, ‘because in the cases you mentioned the potential deaths are invincible, they can’t avoid the circumstances they find themselves in’.

‘Neither can an addict avoid smoking or drinking or whatever destructive habit they have acquired! Even though they know that smoking kills they can’t help smoke for the relief that it provides them’.

‘That’s true’, Ted said, ‘that’s why addictions are attenuating factors to impunity, addicts can’t help it’.

‘What? I didn’t get that’, I said confused.

‘Um, I’m saying that the fault of an addict and an ordinary person in stealing a beer is not the same because the addict steals out of need while the ordinary person steals out of greed. They can’t be blamed in the same way even though they did the same thing’.

‘Yes that’s true’, I agreed.

‘So then you’ll have to agree that someone who’s addicted to alcohol or beer cannot have the same social responsibility as others because the addicted party’s motives are different?’

‘I have to agree! Though we’re on dangerous ground as we are promoting addictive behaviour at the expense of…’

‘No one’s promoting addictive behaviour’, Fred interrupted, ‘it’s wrong and addicted people should change. But while they’re still addicted, they are different’.

‘So, who’s addicted?’ I asked.

 ‘Are you judging us’, Ted asked?

‘I have no intention of judging anyone’, I replied, ‘I’m in fact grateful to you guys for everything you’ve done for me in the seminary, for helping me whenever you’ll could and for not judging me for my ignorance. It feels good to be free, and to live my life as normal again without the stress of rules and regulations, to just relax’. The waitress came with another round of beers and as she handed Fred his beer, she smiled at him about to say something funny. Fred quickly stretched out his hand to silence her and said jokingly, ‘don’t say it! We won’t give you a tip if you do’,

‘Don’t say what, I haven’t said anything?’ she smiled as she handed us our beers.

‘Yet’, I added.

‘It’s not what you said, it’s what you were about to say’, Ted added. And as she left Fred took his glass and raised it to me as he said, ‘welcome to the no judging club’, and I took my glass and gently hit Fred’s glass in the air, and Ted joined in as we all said together, ‘no judging’.

\* \* \*

1. **The holidays**

I don’t consider myself smart, I don’t think anyone in my class did because they didn’t even know what I was thinking most of the time, with me being so quiet and reserved in my opinions. Though I was confident that I was promoted, and that I had passed all my academic subjects, showing a certain level of maturity in pastoral and spiritual formation, as well as showing a good degree of human development: I managed to make some friends. This was a great achievement for me, adapting from a life of work in Shoprite back to a life of study, of becoming a student again. But unlike at home, the environment of the seminary was different, the peace and quiet, the times for study, and the accommodation made it easy for me to quickly adapt. I didn’t have to worry about where my next meal would come from, or where I was going to get money for stationary or toiletry, everything was provided, and more, all I needed to do was apply myself. Furthermore, I wasn’t alone anymore; I had some friends I could share my experience with openly and honestly. I considered them a real blessing in my life, and until we met again next year, we were all on a six week highly anticipated summer holiday.

I spent my summer holidays at my home parish assisting Fr. Lionel around the Church; and at other times at other nearby parishes within the diocese. I visited Fr. Thane in Danhausser, Fr. Danny in Pomeroy, and Fr. Zulu in Volkrust. I had a lot of catching up to do regarding what it meant to be a priest, and I needed to do some homework on the subject from priests themselves. I do admit, one of my biggest fears was that the parish community would not accept me, that they’d be suspicious of me since I’ve never been active in the parish, I haven’t even been an altar server. But to my surprise they were happy at my decision and wished me well for the long journey ahead. Occasionally they’d ask some personal questions about me, like where did I come from or who my parents were. But besides this they accepted me, giving me the much needed space to grow: some doubtful I’d ever make it, others hopeful that one day I would. I couldn’t win them all, I doubt if anyone can.

I didn’t know much about the history of the parish, but I was surprised at the fact that I was one of the first seminarians to come from it. But this ignorance soon changed when during celebrations and feasts, a senior woman would come and sit next to me, look me right in the eyes and tell me all about it: how the hall was the Church before the construction of the Church, how the sisters built the Church, who the sisters were, where they came from and why they were here in the first place. And only afterward she’d ask before she left, ‘by the way, what’s your name young man?’ As I think about it, maybe it isn’t so strange that I’m among the first seminarians from this parish since becoming a priest wasn’t something spoken about in my community. Had it not been for the sister, I would have never known that I too could become a priest. There was a general lack of vocational awareness, a lack which I hope ended with me.

Within the larger community, somehow everyone knew that I was studying to become a priest, and people would meet me on the streets and ask me all about it, ‘I hear you want to be a priest. Ah, that’s good my boy. You’re doing the right thing. You’re not like these other boys who just sit around doing nothing, wasting their time on drugs and alcohol. Keep it up! I’m sure your mum must be proud of you’. But there were few who didn’t know what I was up to and would ask me, ‘so were you working now? I don’t see you around anymore?’

‘I’m no longer working, I’m studying’, I’d say proudly.

‘Oh you’re studying now! So you left the supermarket and now you’re studying! That’s great’.

‘Thanks, what you up to?’

‘Ah nothing… So what are you studying?’

‘To become a priest’,

‘A priest!’ Their eyes would always widen when I said it as if to say: what on earth are you thinking, studying to become a priest! You must be crazy, couldn’t you have chosen to study something more practical that can make you a lot of money! But they’d just ask, ‘why?’ And I’d make up a number of excuses which would sometimes surprise even me, from it being what I had always dreamed of, to it being a call from God. They’d look at me for a while, almost as if waiting for me to say that I’m joking so that they’d have a good laugh about it. But when I didn’t they’d simply approve and wish me well, ‘I hope you know what you’re doing’, they’d warn me. Whether I was going to become a priest or not, I was just a desperate young man trying to find a way out of the poverty I found myself in, an ordinary guy with an honest dream to one day make something of myself, no matter what it takes.

I didn’t spend my whole holiday at the parish, before I left back to the seminary I was given a chance to spend some time at home. They were really happy about my new life, happy that I was out of Dundee and doing something with my life. Many young men more fortunate than me weren’t given such an opportunity. The whole family, my mother and brothers and sisters, considered me fortunate since I was still young and fresh out of high school, since I had no dependants and was free to go where I was needed. Many guys my age weren’t so fortunate, some may have wanted to study like me, but either their schooling or responsibilities would prevent them from applying: *a priest exercises wisdom when he remains without dependants*! They considered me fortunate also to have been successfully chosen to study. The suddenness of the decision wasn’t an issue to them as I had suspected it would be. They never questioned me, asking why all of a sudden? What happened? But rather they applauded me, knowing that when opportunities present themselves it was always wise to take it, no matter what it was. This is what happens when one lives in a small town, has no money to study further, and comes from a poor background. It leaves one without the luxury of choice. Such a life is what dreams are broken with, crushed into fine powder and tossed across the dirty rivers. Doing what I can to survive, trying to avoid falling into the whirlpool of hopelessness and despair, is what characterises me. The stories which I would hear on the radio or see on the television about people who come from poverty and who have fought their way up to success are exactly that for me: stories! The harsh reality of staying alive was more important to me than chasing after a dream because I had no one and nothing to fall back on. Chasing a dream was a luxury I couldn’t afford.

Finally, dad was also very supportive of me, and whenever I saw him, sometimes at Church or around the town, he’d always leave me with the assurance, ‘if that’s what you really want to do, then great’. He was the one who introduced me to the Catholic faith in the first place; he was the one who loved Church. I guess he understood more than me what it means to be a priest at this point, and he just wanted me to be sure. I’d always reply with the most enthusiasm I could master, ‘yes it is!’ not knowing whether I was trying to convince him or me. It was really sad that I never really spoke much with him, I only had a few days at home, the last week of my holiday, and even then just a glimpse of him passing by in a hurry, always busy finding the next job opening in some construction firm or some engineering cite, trying to get enough money to finally open his own construction workshop. But there was no fire in his eyes as they had been before, no spring in his step as there was of old. Rather he was just a man, who was getting old, who was trying his best simply to make ends meet.

It was more than a blessing for me to have all the people in my life supporting and encouraging me on my journey. Perhaps there were some who were a bit sceptical about my decision, I can’t win them all, but they didn’t show it, and this motivated me onward. The truth was that I didn’t know what I was getting myself into, and that this first year was a real test of my endurance. Had I not had the support I got at this early stage of my formation, had either the community or my family or my dad openly reject my decision, perhaps I would not be preparing myself for another year of formation. There are lots of things we can do on our own, but on our own we can only do so much, the rest needs assistance in one form or another. After the holidays, I was motivated to continue, I was dedicated and ready to tackle anything the seminary had in store for me. What’s more, I was eager to meet my new friends, to hear how their holiday had been, to share my holiday experience with them and learn from them. Indeed I was not alone; I had people supporting me from all dimensions of life, showing me that I have the potential to be anything I set my mind to. And in such time I fell for the priesthood, hook, line and sinker; in such time I believed in my heart that I could make a good priest. Everybody thought I could, why can’t I just accept it? Fr. Lionel was right, formation could turn me into a priest after all.

Before I returned to the seminary, I was expected to meet with my bishop in order for him to assess my progress thus far. The bishop is in charge of training young men to become priests in his diocese, this he does through the regional seminary he helped establish and helps maintain. Bishop Malcolm was his name. He was a kind and generous man with a big heart, and though he had lots of responsibilities in running the activities of a diocese the size of a province, he made time for us, his seminarians. He was the one who disclosed my academic results to me, as well as my progress report which assessed my overall development, and as he sent me off to the major seminary, he blessed my journey and wished me well in the experience of a merged seminary.

Indeed there were two major seminaries in existence, one lecturing in philosophy and the other lecturing in theology. The formation program in order to become a Catholic priest required a minimum of two years of philosophical training and four years of theological training, this included spiritual, pastoral and human mandatory formation. Both seminaries were in Pretoria, and for logistical and financial reasons, the plan to merge the two seminaries into one large major seminary took effect. The seminary which was chosen to house both the philosophical and theological training was the St. John Vianney Seminary in Waterkloof, and this merger, or amalgamation as it was commonly called, happened at the time of my promotion to the major seminary.

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**Chapter five:**

**The beginning of the end**

1. **Welcome to St. John Vianney**

I was very surprised when Fr. Lionel stopped at a huge building in a suburb in Pretoria. I had thought the seminary would be in another countryside somewhere far removed from the temptations and lures of the city, like the previous seminary was. I thought that such an isolated place was an ideal place to keep students studying to become priests since we’re to live a certain lifestyle different from normal people. And surely a secluded place ought to give us the space to develop it, encouraging a life of asceticism and detachment which are characteristic of priests. But to my surprise, I was wrong. And I was glad I was wrong! The building was a large, broad structure made entirely out of modern brick, and as we entered the entrance gate, a huge tower greeted us, tall and extending several meters high, with a cross right on the top. If I hadn’t been busy playing games on my cell phone as we entered Pretoria, I’d have noticed the tower a long way off. The seminary was built in a rectangular form, with four large two story blocks at right angles from each other forming a large courtyard in the centre, and the large courtyard was divided into two by a chapel built in the centre. One half of the courtyard had a beautiful water font in the centre surrounded by neatly kept grass, the other half had a huge square rose garden, with a huge statue of St. Joseph in the centre. There was a tennis court, a basketball court, a swimming pool and a huge soccer field within the property. There was also a beautiful little stream which passed through the property flowing pass a beautifully decorated grass area called the Kloof adorned with a huge statue of Mary.

‘Do you have any idea where do we go from here?’ Fr. Lionel asked, carrying my duvet set as we stood in the courtyard with the water font and looked around lost and confused. The place looked messed up. There were builders walking up and down, standing on ladders and banging nails in place; there were other workers in different uniforms moving furniture, some coming some going, two by two, three by three; there were people dressed in casual, running up and down, calling to one another from across a long hallway in excitement – these must be seminarians. There were boxes everywhere, large and small, waiting to be carried somewhere, and people standing next to them speaking angrily to one another. There were men in black suits and white shirts speaking angrily on their cell phones, pacing up and down a long corridor. The seminary was still putting things in place, still ordering all the furniture and other goods it inherited from the philosophy seminary. I realised it would be a while before someone would pay any attention to us, I could see that everyone was still busy trying to meet a deadline, trying to put the seminary into order before the orientation program began later that day, and boy did I dread having to sit through it again. I reached out to Fr. Lionel with my free hand for my duvet and said, ‘I got this, don’t worry’.

‘Are you sure Jamie’, he resisted, ‘I mean look at this place, it’s a mess, where you going to start?’

‘Well it really doesn’t matter where I start, I’m home. Someone somewhere has the key to my room, and sooner or later, if I don’t find them, and I will, they’ll come looking for me, so don’t worry, I got this. You, on the other hand, have a long way to go until you’re home, so you should head off, it’s okay’

‘Alright’, he said as he handed me the duvet, ‘all the best then, I’ll see you during the holidays’.

‘Yeah’, I said as he gave me a hug and made his way out. I watched as he drove out and waved goodbye as he got to the gate. I set my trolley bag firmly on my right and the duvet on my left as I looked around for someone who might know where the hell I should go from here.

There were many students all in different years of formation, from the final year students doing their fifth year of theology to the first year students doing their first year of philosophy, like me. But I didn’t care very much about the new situation, about the merging of the two seminaries or any other thing which seemed to be the topic of many a seminarian. I had other more important things to concentrate on, like completing my studies a bit better this year, like exploring the different opportunities this seminary has to offer, like completing my priestly formation. This was all I ever thought about, all that mattered to me, and not the fact that two seminaries became one. They did, so what! It was during the orientation program that an opportunity at another career presented itself when the academic dean, during his speech, explained the degrees which the seminary offered. The seminary offered a Bachelor of Arts degree in philosophy, a Bachelor of Arts degree in theology, and an Honours degree in theology, and all these degrees were fully registered and fully recognised nationally. Wow, this is it! I can actually graduate with a degree in this place, now that’s what I’m talking about! While I knew that the minimum training for priesthood was six years, I had no idea that I would actually graduate with not one but two degrees! If I could get even the Bachelors of Arts degree in philosophy which I was about to study now, this should definitely give me an opportunity at getting a decent job somewhere, surely. At that point I knew nothing about what philosophy was, but I did know that possessing a degree, no matter what degree it may be, was a great achievement for anyone, and that it put one on a much higher level than those having only passed their matric. This was the opportunity I had been looking for, a chance at a professional career other than being a priest. I smiled to myself as I made my way to my room after the orientation program, which wasn’t as long as the one in the previous seminary. Here, they cut down on many things like religious living and other things which we already knew, and concentrated on administrative issues such as the present merger. Also, the fact that everyone was exhausted after all the preparation for the seminary to finally be ready, was considered. That’s why they weren’t as many presentations and it ended in less than an hour.

I had to admit, there was nothing wrong with being a priest and I would have loved to be one: preaching the Word of God to the faithful, teaching them how to live a life of Christ in a world so desperately in need of true Christians, ministering to their spiritual needs through the sacraments and showing them that the work of God is alive and active in our generation. I would really enjoy it, in fact, I have come to be quite the preacher as many seminarians and ordinary people have told me. There’s nothing wrong with being a priest, even the simplistic lifestyle is honourable, I don’t really care much about being rich, so long as my basic needs are met. But the imposition of a celibate life! My goodness, this was too much of a sacrifice for me to make: No wife, no kids! No! I can’t! I want to have my own family more than anything, and for this I have to give up this priesthood career for something else, anything else. And now I had a real option other than becoming a priest, I had an option of pursuing a career in philosophy, whatever that entailed, and as I neatened out my room in preparation for my very first class, I was eager to find out exactly what philosophy was all about.

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1. **Welcome back**

Philosophy wasn’t as bad as I thought. It was a science that dealt with reason and logic, dealt with correct ways of thinking, as well as dealt with thinking about thinking. It was both a formal science which focused on rational reflection, as well as a natural science which focused on empirical demonstration, in its considerations. It would take a bit of getting used to, but I think I was going to enjoy it. It seemed to be exactly the kind of science which would stretch my mind and open me up to dynamic reflective possibilities: to think big! Fred came over to me from across the hall and shook my hand. ‘Hey man your back’.

‘Hey, man what’s up?’ I replied.

‘I’m good man, good to see you’.

‘Good to see you too man’.

‘What was good in Dundee?’

‘Dundee was great, family and friends are all good bra. What’s good in Bloemfontein?’

‘Ah, nothing much really, I always spend my holidays in different parishes around the diocese, so for me, the holidays were basically work as usual’.

‘Yeah that’s another thing you should know about Fred’, Ted said as he walked in on the conversation, shaking our hands as he continued, ‘he lives like he’s already a priest. You’ll see him in action one day, preaching and teaching and giving workshops and retreats and days of recollection, and all those kinds of things. He’s the main man’.

‘Wow, is he for real?’ I asked Fred.

‘No, that’s not true! I’ve just got so many friends who are priests that I find myself doing what they do… sometimes. I mean they like having me around and they prepare those things for me, the preaching and what not’, Fred said flatly, folding his arms.

‘Ah come-on Fred’, Ted said jokingly, ‘sometimes, really? When was the last time you were home… for over a week?’

‘Who spends over a week at home?’ Fred asked, ‘that’s too long, that’s when they start asking for money and stuff’.

‘See what I mean’, Ted looked at me, ‘that’s what…’

‘Hey you guys, quieten down, it’s quiet time now’, one guy said to us in a quiet but stern voice as he passed us along the long corridor towards another block, ‘I could hear you guys all the way from the stairs, and if I could hear you, who knows who else could hear you’, and he disappeared behind another long corridor.

‘Welcome back to religious living guys’, Ted said sarcastically, speaking in a low voice. ‘Yeah there’s nothing like it’, Fred added, ‘come-on let’s get back to our rooms before the lights go out and we’re trapped in the dark like sitting ducks’.

‘But it’s great to see you guys again’, I said as we walked towards my room.

‘Yeah it’s great seeing you too man’, Fred said.

‘Yeah’, Ted said, then added, ‘maybe we could go out sometime and just get away from it all’.

‘Yeah that sounds great Ted. But not now, let’s go out after we’ve settled down properly, when there’s no test or assignment nagging us’, Fred said carefully.

‘Yeah that sounds like a great idea, just the three of us like old times’, I said.

‘Yeah like old times, no judging’, Ted added, and Fred and I echoed him as we disappeared into our rooms to retire, ‘no judging’.

\* \* \*

1. **The dilemma**

Life in the major seminary wasn’t as difficult as I had anticipated. I spent most of my time with my friends, and if I wasn’t with them, I was in my room studying. I had a new energy around my studies, knowing that now I was studying towards a purpose, towards a goal of getting a degree. I never knew many people in Forestdale who had a degree, no matter what degree it may be, and this pushed me harder into my studies. I didn’t want to miss an opportunity of becoming one of the few who have graduated in my location simply because I was lazy! Goodness no! Besides, the environment of this seminary, just like the previous one, made it very easy to study: there were times set aside for study; there was a library on the property where I could get the necessary resources for study; there were computers available in the library all with internet access; and all students had access to personal laptops and printers complements of their respective dioceses. Everything was available for me to study, stationary was provided, lecturers were very supportive and encouraging, and the dynamics of the different students in my class: the different age groups, cultures, countries, upbringing, and academic history made it easy to engage in healthy competition and to stretch my limits, to push myself and be the best that I could be. In such an environment, I could forget that I came from a poor family or that I didn’t attend a private school. I could simply put my mind to the test and push myself to be as smart as anybody else in class. I was human, they were human, and that’s all that mattered to me. So what if they came from private schools and got distinctions, that was an unequal environment? Here the playing field is even: we eat the same food; went to the same library; did the same subjects; had the same stationary; so why should they get higher marks than me? No way, I can get high marks too!

Apart from my studies, I also took a keen interest in extra-curricular activities like jogging, soccer, cricket, and gym. I enjoyed many indoor activities as well, like playing table tennis, snooker, table soccer, scrabble and chess. I believed that I shouldn’t only push my mind to the limit, but that my mind needed a healthy body in which it could be at its best, so I needed to push the limits of my body as well. Exercise somehow opened up my mind, making it easier for me to absorb the abstract concepts of philosophy, as well as making me study for longer hours. The choir also became a pastime of certain interest, I’ve never been in a choir before, but since Fred and Ted joined, it wasn’t long before I joined as well! It became a place where we could be together, and I did enjoy it after some time. The choir sang religious and spiritual songs in a variety of ways and in a variety of languages. The choir performed in parishes and in theatres and for different occasions. They even produced a number of CD’s and DVD’s; indeed it was quite amazing to be part of something that big.

We seminarians were very fortunate because the seminary structure and protection made life very comfortable. We weren’t like other students, even those students who earned bursaries, because they had to look after themselves outside the classroom, with a place to stay and food to eat, transport money and toiletry money, and many other necessities which life demanded. But we didn’t need to provide any of these, because everything was provided here. All that was expected of us was to comply with the rules and regulations, as well as work hard! Indeed there were statuettes to follow and mandatory responsibilities which we were expected to comply with for the smooth running of the institution. But any institution has statuettes and responsibilities, at least any respectable one, and the statuettes and responsibilities around the seminary were manageable. In fact, they presented good opportunities for us to develop social and human skills, to be docile and humble, to develop good leadership skills, to work together and achieve common objectives. They were good opportunities for us to explore our leadership qualities as well, to discover what kind of leaders we were, our weaknesses and strengths, so that we could use this knowledge to our advantage whenever we left the seminary.

I was at loggerheads with my inner intentions, finding myself at times convinced that I was a student studying to get a degree in philosophy, and at other times a seminarian who preached, taught and prayed. The latter was a constant reminder as I was faced with it on a daily basis, the former a conscious decision I had to keep reminding myself every day: *you must be strong, and whenever you feel like quitting, think of this life of suffering that you’ve left behind, think of your parents and siblings supporting you, think of me.* This inner turmoil led me into myself, making me even more reserved and shy than I already was in the classroom, the playground, the chapel and everywhere else in between. So apart from finding me with my friends, where I felt free, I’d almost always spend my time alone, studying, reading, listening to music or keeping myself fit by going to the gym or running or doing some other outdoor activity. With my friends I could be more myself, I could speak freely, openly and honestly, but without them, I had to be aware of the battle going on inside me, afraid which one might win if I were to get into conversation with anyone, and so I’d speak less and listen more. And everyone would wonder why I was so quiet, so reserved, and in time they’d take the silence to be part of my nature. Being silent was good, it allowed me to learn much more about everything: the complicated world around me, as well as the complicated world within me. At first it was hard to keep silent amidst the confrontation at loggerheads within me, and often I’d bring a book to meditation rather than endure it. But since my silence was beyond meditation, I had to confront the turmoil, and in time it quietened down as I discovered reasons either to stay on and become a priest or leave and get married. I’d discuss the issue in my head every day, and assured myself that whatever choice I’d make would be the one that would make me happy, after all, it is my choice and mine alone.

And whatever my decision would be, it was becoming clear to me that religious life was slowly becoming part of me as a reality which slowly clung to me like the smell of incense clings to the thurifer. I couldn’t help but get caught up in this life and make it my own – I wouldn’t be human if I didn’t. At the end of the first semester I was extremely happy with my results, passing all my subjects very well and achieving an above average aggregate. It’s the result I expected after all the time and effort I had put into my studies. I was very happy with it, that hard work actually does pay off. I began to realise that if I worked hard, I could do anything, I could be anyone. I realised that the more effort I put in, the sweeter the rewards would be, and so I encouraged myself to do better, to push harder, to dig deeper. By now there were lots of people who were counting on me to succeed, not just my family and friends, and so I had lots of motivation to succeed*: think of me*.

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1. **Out with my friends**

After the final exam was over, my friends and I went out to explore Pretoria and what it had to offer. From Hatfield Square to Sunnyside Park to Arcadia to Menlyn Park, we enjoyed some of the fun spots of Pretoria, and though the environment was not as friendly and happy as in Durban, we did have a great time. There was less trees and grass, and more buildings which gave the place a cold, hard feel to it. The people were quiet and reserved, keeping to themselves, and the possibility of being deceived was high so talking to strangers was a risk we couldn’t take. Eventually we returned to Brooklyn Mall and dined in a restaurant within walking distance away from the seminary. ‘So how’d you do for the semester’, I asked, ‘I’m happy I’ve got an aggregate above the average’.

‘That’s good Jamie, well done’ Fred assured, ‘I’m just glad I passed, now let’s see if the bishop promotes me’.

‘Yes, me too’, Ted added.

‘Yeah me too’, I said, then quickly asked, ‘wait, wait! What does that even mean: the bishop promotes me?’

‘It means that since the bishop sends you to the seminary, he can take you out, regardless of your academic progress. He recalls you back to the diocese’, Ted explained.

‘Okay, so even if I get distinctions and am highly praised by all the staff, if the bishop recalls me then I’m done?’ I asked.

‘Yes, you’re done!’ Fred said.

‘The seminary can’t do anything to prevent it?’ I insisted.

‘They can’t’, Fred said, ‘look, as much as this is a house of formation, it’s an institution with financial obligations. If the bishop stops paying, you’re out, top student or not. The seminary can make recommendation to the bishop on your behalf, but like all things in life, money talks’.

‘What about bursaries?’ I asked.

‘The seminary doesn’t offer bursaries’, Ted answered, ‘it’s a private institution with the sole intention of forming priests, and seminarians coming from the diocese are sent to study there by the bishop or any other institution in the bishops name. If you’re going to get a bursary, it will have to come from the diocese in one way or another’.

‘Other institutions like what?’

‘Like sodalities’.

‘What’s a sodality?’ I asked.

‘It’s like an interest group forming part of a parish: the Catholic Woman’s League, St. Joseph’s, St. Anne’s, are all examples of sodalities in a parish’, Ted explained.

‘Okay, it’s like a group of people in a parish sharing a common spiritual interest who come together and support each other in this interest. But how can sodalities sponsor seminarians?’ I asked.

‘They can’, Fred answered, ‘sodalities raise funds and some have substantial treasuries. They can sponsor a student…’

‘But always in the bishops name’, Ted interrupted, ‘there cannot be a conflict of interest between the two because a sodality cannot ordain a successful student, nor can the seminary accept a student without the approval of the bishop or his equivalent – in the case of religious’.

‘…Because the seminary was established by mandate of the bishops. I see’, I said. ‘But if money talks, then can’t anyone who pays be accepted into the seminary?’

‘In principle, yes, and this has been done more than a few times in the past where ordinary people entered the seminary just to study philosophy or theology. But the practice has been frowned upon since the seminary is more than an institution of higher learning, it’s a house of formation, and such practices threaten the intricacies associated with formation’, Ted answered.

At that moment Fred’s phone rang, and as he looked at the caller ID, he ignored the call altogether. He took a long sip of his drink and sitting up straight, began a different topic altogether, ‘guys, tell me: what do you think about being involved with a married woman as a seminarian?’

‘Goodness! Where did that come from?’ I asked surprised.

‘Not in a bad way, I mean, you’ll both agree, like adults, that the relationship is strictly based on sex, nothing more, no strings attached. I mean, she’s married and you’re a seminarian, nothing can and should happen’, Fred clarified.

‘I don’t know man’, Ted said reluctantly, ‘it’s kind of like the agreement one makes with a prostitute’.

‘No it’s not exactly like that’, I defended, ‘a prostitute demands money after sex, the married woman demands sex after money or something like that, right Fred?’

‘That’s right!’ Fred agreed.

‘I’m not a fan of that kind of thing’, I continued honestly, ‘it’s wrong on so many levels, not to mention sinful, and it always doesn’t end well, someone gets hurt. I don’t approve of it’.

‘I’m with Jamie on this one’, Ted said, ‘it can be fun for some time but, it shouldn’t be a long term thing otherwise it gets really messy’.

‘Okay’, Fred nodded, ‘let’s just say, for argument sake, that you were involved with a married woman just for fun, just for a few months. What would you do if she left her husband for you! Telling you that she loves you and that you’re the one for her, all that kind of stuff?’

‘My goodness’, I said, ‘you see what I mean! That’s exactly why I don’t approve of this kind of thing’.

‘Fair enough we don’t approve’, Ted defended, ‘but we mustn’t forget that seminarians have feeling, urges, sexual desires, and things that all human beings have. How do we express these things in an environment where anything sexual is purely platonic! Fair enough there are courses and stuff, but what good is a course going to be when I’m feeling horny right now?’

‘Spirituality says we should channel our sexual energy to constructive ends’, I said, ‘to sublimate and not suppress our sexual energy in order to be fully human. They suggest lots of physical exercise as well as socialising and other spirituality mechanisms, a good friend or director and the like’.

‘Any luck?’ Fred asked.

‘Do tell us the secret!’ Ted added, ‘it sounds good on paper and can actually work for some, even many, but not for everyone! Some of us can only fight fire with fire’.

‘Then they would argue that you’re not called to become a priest’, I said, enjoying the topic very much.

‘Yes priesthood comes with celibacy, but celibacy is a gift which can come not only through the formative stipulated social and spiritual exercises, but in a variety of ways. That’s why Fred’s example is relevant’, Ted said as he proceeded with the example, ‘so, if that were me and it’s clear that I only wanted her for sex and nothing more, now that she wants to shove love down my throat, and so suddenly, I’ll leave man, that’s not part of the agreement. I can’t offer her love I’m a seminarian and she knows it, all I wanted was to satisfy my sexual desire, and discreetly at that! So, I’ll end the relationship’, he shrugged his shoulders and took a sip of his beer.

‘Alright, I guess it’s my turn’, I said, ‘firstly I’d question the whole leaving her husband for me crap, I wouldn’t buy it so easily, especially if she told me. For all I know he probably found out about us, left her, and now after having no one she wants me to take his place by deceiving me with all that love and leaving him crap. She’s lost her husband because of me, she probably wants me to lose my priesthood for her, and then when I do, she leaves me high and dry, feeling better about herself and moving on, maybe even going back to her husband, and what would I go back to, the doors of the seminary would be shut tight’.

‘You’d be on a plane or a bus back to Dundee man’, Ted said jokingly, ‘you have a point there Jamie, but that’s just one possibility among many. What if she’s lying about losing her husband, what if she’s lying about loving you, what if everything is a lie, what if nothing is a lie? There’s too many ‘what ifs’ for us to be sure about anything other than the fact that the arrangement was for sex, nothing more’.

‘Maybe she just really loves the guy! Come-on you guys, why are you so negative?’ Fred insisted, ‘let’s just say she really left her husband for the guy, let’s say it’s all true, what would you do then, huh?’

‘Well’, Ted began, ‘if she really developed such strong feelings for me that she was prepared to leave her husband, I doubt that those feelings would’ve grown overnight! She would’ve probably developed them after some time, and I would’ve picked them up earlier and ended it before it got to this. Since I left it to get to this point, it could only mean one thing…’

‘That you also have feelings for her’, I finished off. There was silence for a while as we looked at Fred, who looked shyly to the side, avoiding our eyes. The look on Fred’s face told us that it most probably was the latter, and Ted continued, ‘if the guy has developed feelings for her then he has to let her go, he has to end it. If indeed it’s true love, you will find each other in another way and live happily ever after, but as it stands it cannot be true love, it could be lust or loneliness or something of that sort’.

‘I agree’, I said, ‘but it’s the guy’s decision at the end of the day. Nobody’s perfect, we all make mistakes, and sometimes we have to make mistakes in order to learn what the right thing to do actually is. If the guy feels it’s really love and that he’s found it in this way, then he can leave the priesthood for her, no one should judge him. There are so many cases like this where priests leave their ministry for a woman and they live happily ever after. But there are also cases where they leave and get hurt, and they learn from their mistake and move on with their lives. To be sure, and to help the guy avoid a possible mistake, I believe he should end the relationship and see what happens from there’. We sat quietly for a while as Fred digested all that had been said, and as I called the waiter and ordered another round of beers, Fred finally said, ‘alright, the guy has got to leave. So …’, he took his empty beer and, realising its empty, put it back down on the table as he asked, ‘how does the guy leave?’

‘What!’ we said in unison, and I added, ‘my goodness! That he can figure out on his own, he’s a man, come-on’.

‘Jamie’s right, there are so many ways to kill a cat’, Ted reclined onto his seat as the round of beers came, ‘let him figure it out on his own, I’m beginning to feel like I’m in a soapy or some talk show’.

‘After all, where were we when he was making arrangements in secret, in some dark place?’ I said jokingly.

‘Yeah, what was started in secret must be ended in secret’, Ted said. Meanwhile Fred opened his beer and took a long gulp in silence, and seeing Ted and me smile at each other, he joined in as he said, ‘you young people, you’re laughing now, wait till it happens to you’, and he reclined once again onto his seat.

‘I certainly hope not’, I said.

‘Yeah me neither’, Ted added, and Fred rose his glass to the air jovially and we joined him and raised ours in silence, reclining on our chairs as we did, and all the while saying in our minds our famous slogan, *no judging*.

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1. **Dad’s passing**

The choir was one of the interest groups of the student council which raised significant capital through its performances, CD’s, and DVD’s. Being a member of the choir required a certain level of sacrifice, especially of time, since such projects needed much preparation. One of the first projects I was involved in with the choir was a heritage day concert at the Pretoria Theatre. We agreed that we’d start thorough preparation after the winter holidays which would set us well on our way to a successful presentation come September. We also agreed that we would remain in the seminary for the short September break to achieve this.

It was on our way to the theatre, laughing and singing in the minibus taxi, that I received the tragic news of dad’s passing. It was the first time I received such sad news, and the first time in my life that I lost someone close to me. The news was so sudden and so surprising that for a long time afterwards it seemed like it never happened, like it was a bad dream. But as I packed a small bag and headed home immediately after the concert, I soon realised that it was real, and as I saw him lying in his coffin in his favourite suite, I had to come to terms with the fact that he was gone, and that I’d never seem him again. I was devastated, but I couldn’t show it, for I had to be strong for everyone else. What would they think if I’m falling apart, especially since I’m studying to become a priest and am supposed to have faith and believe in the resurrection of the dead? So I kept my composure throughout the service: at the late night vigil, at the graveyard and at home. But there was a time when my sadness got the better of me, and for someone who claimed to have little faith, it was ironic how after reading beautifully the first reading and taking my place at the front pew, during the most important part of the Eucharistic celebration – the liturgy of the Eucharist – that it finally came, and I began, uncontrollably, to cry! And making my way outside and to a lonely place in the Church yard, I showed just how emotional and human I really was.

What this death did to me, I will never know for sure, but since it was the very first time I actually came face to face with loss, it would be unfair to say that it did nothing. This experience opened up my eyes to the brevity of life on a personal level. Sure, I knew about it, I sang it at many funerals in comfort of those in bereavement. But until it happened to me, I never really knew what it was like, what they were going through. Theory is great, but experience is still the best teacher. The experience made me to think about my life and where it was going, I began to question my decisions and to assess what was really important in my life. Life’s too short to be unsure of what I want, for me to be living for other people. If my time were to come tomorrow, could I really say that I’m happy with what I have achieved? Dad’s death brought me face to face with the choice I made, confirming my resolution to pursue another career since the family: mum, would need financial aid, now more than ever, and the time was coming for me to step up and provide it, Warder can’t do it on his own forever.

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1. **Trying to survive**

I succeeded in passing my second year in the major seminary, passing my second year of philosophy. Again my aggregate was above the class average and for this I was glad, especially after having to go through the tragic passing of my father. I spent my summer holidays much the same as before, mostly with Fr. Lionel. He served to be a great comfort to me at this crucial time, and as I went about the business of helping out in the parish, trying not to make my personal life get in the way of my work, he’d always check up on me and ask if I was alright, or if I needed anything. He was kind and gentle towards me as he had always been, never forcing me to do anything even when it was necessary. There was a slight change in his behaviour though, since he appeared a bit more silent than usual. Maybe he thought that it wasn’t clever words that would heal a broken heart, but time, and that I just needed space, needed time to heal from so great a wound. As a senior priest I think he knew more than me the importance of a father figure in the life of a young man still growing up, and that such a loss could change my life forever. And besides, he felt responsible for me not only as my parish priest, but also since it was he to whom I had come seeking to enter religious life, who had journeyed with me from applying for the priesthood till this point, and that it had to be he to whom I can turn to in my time of need, and this was such a time.

Some members of the larger community, on the other hand, weren’t as kind and considerate! After finding out that I was studying for the priesthood, especially after the funeral, they’d question my motives, showing signs of regret at my decision whenever they saw me, especially in a supermarket or at the local library. They couldn’t understand how I could sacrifice myself to the priesthood so easily, and they thought that perhaps I didn’t quite know what I was getting into, what it meant to be a Catholic priest. They thought that since my dad was gone, that they needed to inform me as to what exactly does it mean to be a Catholic priest, that it’s not the glamorous career I may have been deceived into thinking, and that it involved a lot of sacrifice, sacrifice of a loving wife, of beautiful kids, and of a lavish lifestyle. Maybe that’s why I was one of the first in my parish to attempt a career in Catholic priesthood, maybe it wasn’t a life any parent would openly want for their child, not unless he really persevered. Maybe they’d rather prefer any other professional career which paid more and where their kids can give them grandkids to carry on the family name. This is nothing bad to desire; it’s quite standard in a society of high poverty and low employment. At least this was what one of the elderly woman told me as I was busy in the library, ‘I hear you’re studying to become a priest?’

‘Yes, I am’

‘Do you know what does it mean?’

‘Yes, it means I’ll one day be able to celebrate the Eucharist’.

‘No, that’s not what I meant! Do you know that you can’t get married or have any kids?’

‘Yes I know that’.

‘Is that a sacrifice you’re willing to make? Are you okay with that?’

‘Well, it’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make’.

‘Hmm, you must be strong, young man, there’s going to be a lot of temptation, especially for a guy like you, you need to be sure of what you’re doing otherwise you’re a disaster waiting to happen’.

‘I’m sure now, and when temptation comes my way, I’ll deal with it the best way I can. There’s temptation everywhere, I can’t avoid it; I have to face it’.

‘You’re right, temptation is everywhere, but you’re going to need a good foundation in order to deal with it, and having a good foundation means confronting the issue now so that when the temptation comes, and they will come, you’re psychologically prepared. It shouldn’t get you by surprise; do you know what I mean?’

‘Yes I do, and I agree, and that’s why I’m in the seminary going through formation, to acquire the academic and spiritual skills to tackle these and many other issues affecting priesthood’.

‘Well then’, she turned to leave, ‘I hope you put those skills to good use when the time comes’, and she left without saying goodbye.

I also met some of my old school friends during the holidays, those who worked at different places outside town and came back for the Christmas holidays at the end of the year. They were happy for my decision and encouraged me onwards. Some of them would show signs of surprise at what I was studying, and this I understood and even expected since it happened so suddenly. I never ever showed any signs of interest in priesthood or any religious thing while I was at school; it was so unexpected. But their surprise would soon turn to happiness that I was doing something with my life. They didn’t judge me or ask me accusing questions; they’d just accepted my decision and respect it. They grew up with me, some growing up in the same conditions as I did, some in worse conditions, and so they knew that when opportunity presents itself, it is wise to take it, no matter what it is. They knew what I had known for quite a while, that often choice doesn’t play a part in the decisions that we make, but rather sheer necessity. After all, at the end of the day, we all just want a chance to get out of poverty, a chance to live a decent life, is that so much to ask? And so they’d encourage me with words like ‘life is tough man’, or, ‘whatever puts food on the table’ – a casual way of saying: do whatever you can to survive. And that was exactly what I was doing, I was trying to survive.

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1. **The end of the ‘no judging’ club**

Coming back to the seminary to do my third year of philosophy, I was much more relaxed and at peace with myself. I felt a sense of calm about me and went through the daily schedules and seminary activities with that calm. I had become used to the place, used to the people and to religious living. I decided to loosen up a little, not to be as strict as I had been but to enjoy life in the seminary, to take time to laugh. The death of my dad made me realise just how short and fragile life really was, and if life is so short, then surely I shouldn’t spend all of it as if I were carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders, stressing and studying and stressing some more. No! I had a mission, and this was true, a mission to make a success of myself, to earn a degree, and this mission I was working on. But there was lots of time to relax as well, to go out, to have fun, to live. I decided I should take some time out to live life a little, to do what many other students around me were already doing: to have some fun. After all, if tomorrow never came, could I really say that I had lived? Could I really shrug my shoulders and say confidently to myself, O well, it was fun while it lasted? No, I never had any fun to begin with. And so I decided that I’d have some! After all, it wasn’t like having a little fun would cause me to fail. I knew how to approach my lectures, how to study smart, and where to get the necessary information if I didn’t have it. The studies may get harder and perhaps then I can slow down a little, but for now, I was fine, I can do it, I can manage.

And so I made lots of time to go out with my friends and explore Pretoria, its cinemas and restaurants, its monuments and historical sites, its stadiums and libraries and parks. If there ever was a time when I could ever be called reckless and daring, this was it. My friends and I stretched our religious freedom to have a little fun, chilling in a restaurant after a long day of studying, picnicking at a park after visiting a historical site, or just going out to watch the latest movie or see an important match at Loftus stadium. My friends were happy to accompany me on my quest for fun, seeing it as a reaction to the loss of my dad, a loss which they had tried, whenever they could, to encourage me and console me from, assuring me that indeed he is in a better place. And so we all had some fun, and we enjoyed every moment of it.

We continued in the spirit of enjoying life until eventually we got careless and lost sight of who we are or what it meant to be a seminarian. We forgot about the rules and regulations, about the daily seminary schedule, and most importantly, about the role of the formation staff. It happened one day as we were enjoying ourselves in one of our usual restaurants, I excused myself to the men’s room, and when I returned I saw Fred and Ted calling me suspiciously at the exit. Now why on earth are they at the exit? I was quite dizzy from the drinks and thought nothing of it. Not knowing what was going on I followed them, leaving my drink still half full on the table, and made my way to them, thinking that maybe they had another one of their strange plans or something. But when I got to them they began running and I joined them until we were clear from the restaurant when finally I asked, confused, ‘what’s going on guys? Are we being attacked or something?’

‘We’ve been caught!’ Fred said simply.

‘Caught, what do you mean?’ I asked.

‘The rector walked in while you were gone and saw me and Fred sitting at a table full of beers’, Ted said angrily, ‘and so we had to move out quickly before he came back and saw us with you’.

‘So, what does this mean?’ I began to sober up, ‘that we run away and get back to the seminary or what?’

‘It means you got to get out of here and back to the seminary quick before someone sees you with us’ Fred said as he called the taxi.

‘Why?’ I asked, feeling very emotional all of a sudden, ‘I’m not afraid of getting a warning, I’m not going anywhere guys, we came together, we leave together, come-on!’

‘Don’t make this harder than it already is Jamie’, Ted said, ‘we don’t all have to be in trouble. And besides, we can take care of ourselves, don’t start worrying about us all of a sudden’, he tried to crack a joke but no one laughed.

‘We’re friends guys’, I insisted, ‘we need to stay together, no matter what’.

 ‘We need to look out for each other’, Fred said, ‘we shouldn’t be selfish and think about ourselves, but of the others. Right now, we’re trying to think about you Jamie’.

‘Alright’, I agreed as the taxi parked beside us, ‘but let’s all go together, that’s all I’m asking’.

‘OK, we’ll come with you’, and ushering Ted inside with me at the back seat, Fred closed the door and sat beside the driver on the passenger’s seat. All he could do now was hope that no other priest would see us on the way home, otherwise the plan was compromised. If any priest saw them with me, that priest would be bound to implicate me when they met with the rector and the other staff sometime that week, and all three of us would be asked to take a break. There was no running away from the fact that he and Ted were in trouble. But at least there was a chance at saving me, should no priest see us. It’s not that chilling and having a drink with friends got us in trouble; it’s the dishonesty at not being open about our lifestyle. Honesty is a vital quality for a priest, distinguishing them from other professions. People seek priests for the honesty they are promised, in the confessional, at the lectern, in the council, and even in the presbytery. Priests are bound, not to be perfect, but to be men of integrity, to be honest, to be responsible. Fred knew this, that’s why he wasn’t going to argue the decision to take a break, but embrace it as Christ embraced the cross.

Another chance lost for Fred, and how many more did he have? He was approaching his forties, and this would be his sixth chance gone down the drain because of the same thing, alcohol! He loved the priesthood with all his heart, and for as long as he could remember priesthood inspired him to be more than he could be, to be an example of hope in a world that desperately needed it. But maybe he needed to consider other options, he couldn’t waste his life chasing a dream that seemed too far to reach, maybe it was time to be realistic, maybe it was time for him to think about settling down. He has tried his best, he really has, and given it his all. But maybe, just maybe, that’s not good enough. There are many other ways of ministering to God’s people without being ordained, by just being an ordinary layman. A humble and honest way of life often changes the lives of many and can serve as a model to everyday people that we don’t have to be superhero’s to make a difference, that our small acts of kindness, our simplistic perseverance in difficult times, our tireless pursuit to assume the responsibilities of our actions, all make a significant difference to the lives of those we meet. Indeed we don’t have to change everyone, we were not meant to, but if we can change one person, if we can make one person see that there is still honour in being good and honest and loving, then we have done more than enough.

‘Where to’ the driver asked as he approached the robots.

‘Main Street’, Fred told him flatly, and the driver set us on the path to the seminary.

A few weeks after the incident Fred and Ted were called into the rector’s office often. They never told me about it and acted as if everything was alright, as if the rector had indeed forgotten about it and moved on, after all, they were just young guys enjoying a few drinks. But towards the end of the year, a day before we were to head back home, they told me the truth, that they weren’t coming back the following year and that they had been asked to take a break. This news hit me hard, losing my only friends, the only two guys I ever spent time with, the only two guys I ever cared about in the seminary; and both of them at once. This can’t be happening! What am I going to do without them? How will I carry on living in this place without them? Imagining the seminary without them seemed like a horrible place filled with rules and orders, it seemed like a place where giants sat on large thrones and pointed long accusing fingers at me. And as I left the seminary on my way home, I wondered if I’d ever find the courage to come back to this place. After all, I was done my philosophy. All I had to do was wait for graduation later the following year, take my degree, and carry on with my plans. I didn’t need a theology degree, and what for anyway, was that not just being greedy?

Nothing had changed, I still never felt the call to become a priest, I still felt I needed to pursue another career, so why not give it all up, take what I have been given and be grateful. Maybe this loss may even be a sign that this is exactly what I was supposed to do! I had journeyed well and had made good friends who journeyed with me, friends who understood me and let me be normal, *no judging*. Maybe they were indeed sent by God to sustain me on my way, to help me get the opportunity I sought after, the degree I wanted, and now their departure was a sign that I have come to the end of the road. I had gotten what I wanted, the degree was mine, and now I should be off with it to do with it as I pleased. I had succeeded in deceiving the seminary, deceiving my family and friends, deceiving my parish priest, and even deceiving myself. But I’d never deceive God. God had let me pass through the seminary system. He understood that I had simply wanted a shot at success, a way out of Dundee, a way to become something more. Now that I have this chance, I should go! This was probably the message of this unfortunate happening: that now is my time to leave. Theology is no place for unbelievers, what more for deceivers! Maybe if I found the courage to come back, found the greed to continue onwards and attempt to take with me two degrees, then surely I’d deserved no mercy, for I was no longer sincerely seeking a way out of Dundee, but was selfishly fuelling my own interests, and should I come back I’d surely feel the full wrath of the seminary, of the seminarians, of the formators, and of God.

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1. **Going back to the seminary or not?**

I lay upon my bed at home and listened to the wind as it rustled the leaves of the trees outside. My eyes were closed as I wondered where I was going to go from here. Was it really all over, was I really not going back? I had given four years of my life to the Church in exchange for a philosophy degree which I didn’t know how to use. I was a philosopher now, great! But what did that mean? What do philosophers do in the society, if there’s a place for them at all? I had never heard about philosophy before going to the seminary, and even when I told people I had studied philosophy, many of them would ask me: what’s that? Others would say that philosophy as a practical subject in society is dead, irrelevant today as it’s replaced by science. But seriously, was this really the end of the road? Was the sacrifice that my friends made in keeping me out of sight all in vain? I moved my hands from my sides and placed them on my chest, as if lying in a coffin. It’s true that I don’t want to become a priest, and that studying theology isn’t for a deceiver like me, but would I just give up without trying? How would I ever forgive myself if I give up on an opportunity to study for another degree simply because I feel greedy or I feel I can’t stand the people or I can’t stand being judged? Let them judge me, who cares, but as long as they haven’t kicked me out, I’d just grind my teeth and carry on.

I began to play with my thumbs in a playful rhythm, my breathing slow and steady. What do I have to lose, let me just try and finish what I started, even if they kick me out miserably after a month, or even after a day, then at least I won’t have any regrets and I’ll simply move on with my degree. I’ll be sure and focused, determined and dedicated. But if I don’t go, then whenever things get tough, and they will, there’ll always be this painful voice asking me, what if? It could drive me crazy! And who knows, maybe I’ll enjoy theology? Maybe studying theology will change my mind about how I see God and the priesthood, maybe it’ll make me realise, what all those hundreds of students studying priesthood already realise: that there’s value in giving up married life and becoming a priest. Who knows? Maybe I’m really called and am just discerning God’s voice like everyone else. It’s not clear amidst the many other voices in my head, and even if I do graduate and do my own thing, I might finally find myself at the bishops door, after ten years, after fifty years, begging to be ordained, and finishing formation would be to my advantage, I wouldn’t need to come back to the seminary at such a ripe age. I need someone to talk to someone about this, and I know just who to talk too. I got up and walking out the door and through the gate, wondering if he’s still around. I made my way up the road and to an old school friend of mine.

I had known Sam for years, we grew up together, playing around the neighbourhood. He was a year younger than me so after matriculating and going to Durban we kind of lost touch. When I was in Pretoria he finally matriculated and went to study in Durban University of Technology. I wonder how far he is now; or whether he has finished or not. Indeed we had a lot of catching up to do, the experience in tertiary studying, Durban, old friends, girlfriends, so much. We may not be the best of friends, but if we do get to my dilemma of leaving or staying, at least he can give me what I needed: an objective point of view. It would be objective because he was neither Catholic nor did he have any regard for the Catholic priesthood: for he was a Muslim! I approached the house, and, knocking on the door, was greeted by his mother, who recognised me immediately. ‘Hello Jamie’, she greeted me with a warm smile.

‘Hello ma’, I replied, still having the habit of calling her ‘ma’.

‘He’s in the lounge, please come in’ she said, knowing what I was there for as she opened the door wider and ushered me into the lounge.

‘Hey, hey, look who it is? If it isn’t Mr. Fear himself!’ Sam said, surprised and wide-eyed as he got up to greet me.

‘Hey Mr. Saliem’ I replied, smiling, happy to see he was home and well.

‘It’s been a long time man, what’s up?’ he asked, offering me one of the many empty couches in the lounge. Sitting down we began to catch up on the last few years, on other members of the group, on who was married and on who had died, on who had kids and on who had graduated, and many other gossips one would think only girls did. This went on for a while until finally the subject moved from other people to us, and Sam explained how he was coping with his studies and the joys of living in Durban. How it was his final year and how he couldn’t wait to finish and start earning money.

After that it was my turn, and I began to tell him what brought me there. Beginning from the day I decided to apply for the priesthood, I told him everything. What inspired my decision to study priesthood in the first place; my intension to earn the degree and find a decent job; I told him everything, not leaving out anything. It felt really, really good to finally tell someone what had been weighing on my mind all these years, what I couldn’t tell anyone, not even the friends I had lost, not even my parish priest whom I knew I could trust with anything. And as I spoke Sam listened carefully, nodding from time to time and showing that he was following all that was being said. And after saying everything, ending off with my current dilemma of either continuing next year or not, I paused for a while and finally asked him, ‘so what do you think, am I evil or what? What a master plan huh, using the Church for my own personal gain only to leave it high and dry in the end’.

‘Evil? Not at all man, why would I think that! You were willing to become a priest, you only changed after you realised you could earn two degrees’ he said, then after a while continued, ‘in fact, I think you’re firstly a very brave guy to be willing to make such a sacrifice, not many of us, in fact, none of us were willing to, you’re the first guy I know and for that you should be proud. Secondly you’re very creative to find an opportunity within an opportunity. And to put up with all those religious rules and stuff for so long, four years! Man you’re very strong I’ll give you that’.

‘It is tough, but how do you know, you speak as if you’ve experienced religious life?’

‘I have! I spent two years in an Islamic university, I know the challenges’.

‘Wow, I didn’t know that’.

‘Yeah, I know about the curfews and strict timetables and even stricter staff members, that’s why I say you’re strong’.

‘Yeah, but you’ve always been serious about religious stuff. You could live there easily man, you could even enjoy it since religious debates were always your favourite topics. But not me man, you know me, when did I ever say I’m going to Church or start a religious topic? When did I ever show an interest in the library or in anything about religious stuff? I’m the guy who walks away when people start talking about God, the guy who doesn’t even know where the religious section in the library is.’

‘Be that as it may, who you were all those years ago and who you are now are two different people. People grow up, people change their worldviews, you know what they say about the wise man: he always changes his mind. I mean, look at me, you know that I was a heavy smoker in school days right? But I’ve quit smoking, five years straight’.

‘Wow man, that’s amazing, are you for real?’

‘Yeah really, and I’m never touching that cancer stick again’.

‘Wow, I still can’t believe it, you’re the man!’ I shook his hand in celebration.

‘So don’t think of what you’ve done in the past man, look forward to the future, that’s what I do’. He paused for a little while then continued, ‘I’ll tell you what they used to say about smokers in our Islamic campus, they say that a smoker not only holds a cancer stick, but that he also puts the butt in his mouth… sick right?’

‘Wicked’.

‘But seriously’, he added, ‘I tell you what I think about you’re dilemma. I think you should carry on man, finish what you started. You said so yourself that your opportunities will improve with two degrees so why not get those two degrees, don’t worry about what you were and all that, you’ve made it this far, you can make it all the way, why not?’

‘So you don’t think my friends’ leaving was a sign that I should leave and not be greedy?’

‘No. I don’t think so at all! Your friends’ expulsion was just a part of life, it’s no sign of anything, those things happen all the time man, even in our Islamic school’. If there’s any sign at all, it’s that you weren’t caught with them. That you escaped with the opportunity to carry on, that they hid you from harm’s way so that you could have a chance to carry on, to hold the flag of the friendship. Now that’s a sign for me’. He paused for a while, ‘and being greedy, man, there’s no such a thing called being greedy in the real world. There’s only being smart. It’s a survival of the fittest or don’t you know? Just look around you here in Forestdale to realise that you can’t be too greedy, you can’t be greedy at all. I mean, we had nothing growing up. Now that we fight to have opportunities to be better, all of a sudden we’re greedy? No way man!’

‘But I’m afraid of going back without my friends, I’m afraid that without them I’m going to be caught out or something. I look at that place without them and I think I’ll never make it on my own’, I explained sadly.

‘Well you can make it without them, you can make it on your own; you don’t need anyone to motivate you to make it. You’ve been making it all along for four years; that has to count for something!’ He put his hands together solemnly and looked at me intently, ‘look at it this way, if they catch you out then, fine, you’re caught! You get sent back here, but you still have your philosophy degree they can’t take it from you, so you start finding work, big deal, life goes on. But at least you would’ve tried’.

‘That’s exactly what I thought’.

‘The situation at home should be motivation enough. Don’t you want to change it, don’t you want to be the one who brings them out of poverty? Here’s your chance, who says it is going to be easy?’

‘Yeah I guess you’re right’, I finally agreed, examining the familiarity of those words as I heard them said in my head: *you must be strong, and whenever you feel like quitting, think of this life of suffering that you’ve left behind, think of your parents and siblings supporting you, think of me*.

‘I am right! The worst thing that can happen isn’t as worse as you think. And I think you can make it. You’ve already made it so far! You’re halfway there man! You have an opportunity I don’t think I’ll ever have, to study for two degrees! And more than that, you have the power to do it. Two years in Islamic university was two years too many, I couldn’t take another day. And DUT, I don’t think I can study any longer; I just want to graduate and start working, start making money and raise a family! But you, you can study because you want to, I can see it in your eyes. That’s why you came here in the first place. So go to Pretoria and get your second degree, it’s a chance of a lifetime. No one’s going to just hand you another degree, degrees are earned, no matter what degree it is, and having two degrees is quite an accomplishment, imagine the kind of person such training will bring out in you?’

The topic then shifted to other things as we laughed and joked, enjoying each other’s company. We were two young men trying to make it in a world with scarce opportunities. And as students, even in different fields of study, we indeed had a lot to talk about. And while we spoke I had come to the conscious conclusion that I was going to pack my bags and head back to that seminary! I decided that I’d fight tooth and nail to earn myself that other degree, and it didn’t matter what degree it was. I strongly believe that things happen for a reason, that there are no mistakes when it comes to life! Ted and Fred’s gesture of protecting me from being expelled along with them happened for a reason. Why did it happen that way? Why was I the one who was in the men’s room when the rector walked in? I couldn’t help but feel that something greater than myself was at play in all these things somehow, and that I should summon all the courage I could to get myself back to the seminary and find out what it was.

I knew it was going to be hard, especially without my friends around, but I knew that it could be done; I knew I could make it. Sam was right, if anyone could do it, it had to be me. I was a determined and motivated person who always put my best to what I believed in. And even if I didn’t believe in the priesthood, somehow it seemed to believe in me. It kept nagging at me, pulling at my shirt like a baby at the chest. How many times I had tried to talk my way out of it, to dismiss it, and many times I really convinced myself that I had had enough. But with all this, there was always something or someone who pushed me on. As much as I believe that I was only going back because I had nothing to lose, not friends, not a job, nothing, and that I had another degree to gain; I couldn’t help but think that there was something more to it than simply this, something greater, something extraordinary. I couldn’t help but think that maybe I’m really called because everything I’ve been doing, my whole life, has led me to this point: my childhood, the situation at home, formation, everything. I felt like I wasn’t in control, and that I was going to find myself ordained somehow, and this scared me.

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1. **Missing the ‘no judging’ club**

I stood beside my window and looked out into the distance, I had a new room, and it was upstairs overlooking the beautiful main entrance, font, basketball court, suburb and even Loftus stadium in the distance. I had been one of the first students to arrive since Fr. Lionel brought me early, waking me up at three-o-clock that morning. He had an appointment in Pretoria and offered to drop me off along the way. He had planned to spend the night in Pretoria and then to leave for Dundee the next morning, when he’d be fresh for the long journey back. So we arrived around noon, and I had already unpacked, had a shower, ate a late lunch at Brooklyn and was back at the seminary and ready for the orientation program by six. It was now six thirty, and I watched as two birds flew to the font and began bathing themselves. I noticed that the view of the font was great, with the green grass all around it and the sound of the water spilling into the small pond below which made the whole scene peaceful. Two students caught my eye as they smiled and hugged each other at the entrance. They started chatting and laughed as they walked together out of sight. Friends! I’d be just like them, laughing and chatting, had my friends come back. We’d probably be sitting somewhere on the seminary grounds, sharing our experience about the holidays and making plans to get away from it all, as we usually did, Fred accusing, Ted defending and me taking sides as I saw fit. But this was sadly only a dream! The reality was that I was here, all alone and without them in the seminary, and that they were out there in the real world, probably at their homes not knowing what to do or working if they were lucky. Ted had tried to assure me that they could take care of themselves but that was just to calm me down, life is tough out there, and I knew it.

I moved from the window and too a seat before my desk, wondering what I could do until orientation began, until the seminary began, until classes began. I got up from the desk and went to my CD player, and putting in one of the many CD’s I had stacked neatly beside it, pressed play and went to lie on my bed. Music had always been soothing and relaxing for me. No matter how I was feeling or what foul mood I was in, music had the power to make me feel better, to calm me down and make me realise that life wasn’t as bad as it seemed to be at times, for at least, there was music! I folded my hands behind my head as I looked up, staring at the ceiling. The music played softly in the background, causing me to close my eyes and enjoy it, and as I began falling asleep, falling, falling, there was a surprise knock at the door. Knock! I was pulled out of the potential sleep by it, and wondered who it could be since I never had anyone coming to see me apart from my friends, and occasionally group leaders or other guys with responsibilities to hand me a duty roster or to ask for a favour. But since the semester hadn’t begun yet, it can’t be those guys because responsibilities weren’t even assigned yet. I got up and made my way to the door, opened it and saw one of the seminarians from class standing before me, ‘hey…’.

‘Jamie, have you ever heard about head phones before?’ he interrupted, ‘your music can be heard outside your room, and you know what that means?’ he didn’t wait for me to answer, ‘it means that your making noise, so please, put on some headphones or switch that horrible music off’’, the guy said annoyed, and after that he left without waiting for a response, mumbling under his breath as he went. I stood there for a while, surprised at the outburst, and then closing the door I took the head phones I placed near the CD player and place the receiver into the audio jack. My goodness, orientation hasn’t even started and already I’m offending people. I need to be more careful. I didn’t like wearing headphones, they made it hard to think and they hurt my ears when I had them on for a while, but what could I do in a situation like this? I can’t even enjoy one song without someone coming to complain about noise.

People in the seminary didn’t understand noise the way I did. I grew up with noise, loud noise of different music from different places which made it impossible for someone to think, let alone speak to someone without shouting. That was noise, which I had gotten used to. I had to get used to it because I had to live in it, play in it, and study in it. But for guys in the seminary, like that fellow who had spoiled my sleep, noise was understood differently, if someone could hear you doing anything at all in your room, whether talking, walking, sleeping, anything, then they considered it noise. The idea was that there should be no sound coming from any room because this meant being inconsiderate about the next person who may be trying to study or to pray. That’s why the safest option was head phones, and if you never had any, then complete silence! I eventually did fall asleep, dreaming of home where I could play my music in peace; dreaming of my friends, Ted and Fred, Ted starting clever conversation, Fred reclining on his chair with a drink in his hand; of how we’d raise our glasses in the air, laughing and enjoying each other’s company, with our favourite motto playing on our lips: *no judging*.

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1. **Freedom came and went**

Theology wasn’t what I had expected it to be. I had expected it to be an advanced form of philosophy, rigorous and mind boggling and exciting, but it was different. Theology had everything to do with believing, it was really a discipline for believers and not for deceivers, but I didn’t let this bring me down. I just adapted and moved along, not complaining, just persevering. This was because I had taken a new outlook on life, no longer mixing work with pleasure or even a little pleasure as I had done before, no longer enjoying some of what today brought for fear of no tomorrow. No! I had turned on a new leaf, I was only working. If tomorrow never came and I was only working today, then so be it, at least I spent my today trying to pave a way for a better tomorrow, even if it may not come. I never went out as often as I used to, and when I did, it was for a specific purpose. After all, who was I going to go out with in the first place? I never took to making any new friends, especially after my experience. I had decided that trusting and befriending other brothers wasn’t worth the trouble since, like Fred and Ted, they weren’t guaranteed to be around. And so I opted rather to minimize heartache by remaining detached, because I never wanted to experience the heartache and the loss which I had gone through, never again. I began instead to focus on more impersonal pleasures which I knew I had control over, and opted instead to indulge in more extracurricular activities to pass the time. Since I had more time on my hands, I decided to focus more on my studies, and even when I didn’t feel like studying, I’d force myself because apart from it, I had nothing else with which to keep me occupied. And slowly I reduced my extracurricular activities and began only focusing on music, on gym, and on studying.

I had only one goal as the years progressed, to pass and move on to the next year. I didn’t want even to be seen by others, so apart from community activities which we were all obligated to attend, I was nowhere to be seen. This helped me to avoid conversing with other members of the community as I feared I would make friends. I kept a low profile, and this low profile helping me in focusing on my studies and to obtain a distinction average each semester of theology. It also helped me to focus on my health and fitness as well, keeping a healthy mind in a healthy body, for I believed that keeping healthy would stand me a greater chance of living a fuller life, and since after earning my degrees I’d have to start at the bottom and work my way up, I needed the fullest life I could get. Gym also served as an outlet to the many challenges I faced living a solitary life in community, a solitary life which everyone challenge me about. I had no one with whom I could share the challenges of life, no one with whom I could share an honest joke. If I found myself in a problem, I had to find a way out all by myself – I had no one. And so going to the gym helped me to relieve lots of these and other stresses I felt, and after gym and a long shower, life would carry on again.

I had worked it out well, and my plan seemed to bother no one for a time: study, gym, music, study. But people noticed this solitary life which I led in the seminary, a place of community, and though they didn’t tell me at first, they later did hint at their distaste of my lifestyle through dining room jokes and corridor greetings, suggesting to me that my solitary lifestyle wasn’t an ideal lifestyle, that I was expected to be seen living a community life, and that I should at least try to be seen chatting and laughing with others. There were those who did care enough to tell me this sincerely, like senior guys, guys who knew who I was before I lost both of my friends, guys who pitied seeing me living so alone and detached as a result of losing those friends. These were guys with experience, knowing that I was taking the same tough decision they’re taking in trying to live a religious life, and as they saw me a very smart, motivated and prayerful person who could make a good priest, they tried to advise me to make friends. Sometimes they’d tell me this right off, while at other times they’d show me in the most powerful way possible: their way of life. I knew that they were right, that they all were right, that to be seen always alone wasn’t a good image for me to put across, especially since being a priest did involve living amongst people and serving them, did involve relating well with the different members of the parish, did involve being open, honest and available.

But when I thought about it, I came to the decision that making friends at this point in my formation, when I had just a few years to go, was not necessary. I could pretend to have friends if that’s what it took to get through these few years unbothered, but I didn’t want to pretend any longer. Besides, the bothering didn’t move me in any way because I wasn’t even sure whether I would be a priest or not. I just needed to complete my formation and go back home; it is at this point that I believe I’ll figure out exactly what it is that I need to do. Now that I’m still here in the seminary, still affected by its formative and academic pressures, I can’t make a decision. Maybe when I get home and spend some time away from it all, the answer will surely come, clear as day. As for looking for friends or pretending to have friends, No! I’ll take my chances being alone, I’ve made it this far, I can make it all the way. After all, I shouldn’t go around looking for friends, that’s not how it works at all. I didn’t go out to find Fred or Ted, we just found each other naturally. So I just got to be patient and maybe someone will come along, as naturally; someone whom I can trust. And sure enough, that person did come the following semester.

His name was Freedom, he came from Malawi and joined the archdiocese of Johannesburg. He was a serious and quiet guy who kept to himself much of the time. His focus was primarily on his academic performance, and he worked hard and received good results. After some casual exchanges in the long corridors of the seminary, getting to know each other a bit better, we became friends because we had a lot in common. Even though he was a year ahead of me I was happy to have found someone I could talk to, someone I could share my experiences with. At last, I can be me again. I was happy not only because my reputation of being a loner would finally come to an end, but rather because I missed speaking with someone, missed the human contact; after all, I wasn’t a robot. Even though our friendship wasn’t like what I had lost, it was something precious, for we were both the conscious type, both timid and cautious, both indoor guys who loved books. The friendship was much better than being alone, and so I made time to relax with Freedom. I never abandoned my new way of life, but simply adjusted it to accommodate something new, something special. I couldn’t help but be cautious, especially since the relationship was still new and I didn’t know him well enough. What if he’s on his way to another seminary? I had to tread carefully for the sake of my heart – it couldn’t bear the pain of another heartache.

The following year Freedom spent the first six months doing his internship. For this, he was expected to live with a priest and engage in the pastoral ministries of a priest under a priest’s supervision. He had to initiate projects which could run well after he was gone in order to build the parish, he had to lead spiritual exercises and encourage them beyond parish life. He had to educate all parish members with different interests about the teachings of the Church, translating complex dogma into simple everyday Catholic living. In the meantime, I continued my daily routine: study, gym, music, study. This time though, the other brothers didn’t warn me about it since they knew I had a friend who was on internship. Needless to say that being quiet and keeping to myself became part of my nature in a way, another crisis of identity which crept into my behaviour so much so that even when I wanted to say something, I’d somehow convince myself that it wasn’t necessary or that it didn’t matter.

When Freedom did finally return from internship, I asked him all kinds of questions about it because I knew that my own internship was about to begin in a few months. ‘So what’s it like going on internship, tell me about your experiences?’

‘Well, I’ll tell you one thing: internship is great if you have a good supervisor. I had a good supervisor so for me, it was good. But other guys in my class didn’t have it so good, having trouble with their supervisors either being too demanding or too detached’.

‘But that sucks because there are few priests who are willing to take an intern in their parish and even fewer who show an interest in the intern if they do take him. This means that many supervisors will be too demanding or too detached’.

‘That’s correct! Over two thirds of our class experienced this problem, a problem which we’ve pointed out in the workshop they gave us after our internship. I mean, since the success of the internship depends largely on the kind of supervisor one has, there should be something done not only about our choice of supervisor, but also on training supervisors about their responsibilities towards mentoring young seminarians. Internship is a very crucial part of pastoral formation – bad experiences can dissuade a student from continuing with formation, giving them false images of priesthood. Indeed many vocations have been destroyed because of bad internships’.

‘Yeah, but it’s not only the supervisor who needs training, so does the intern. He needs to know exactly what he’s getting into so that he can be psychologically prepared for the environment ahead. Parish life is not like seminary life, there’s real responsibility and real repercussions for delinquent behaviour, and knowing this is a good place to start. But I understand what you mean when you say it depends largely on the supervisor, the relationship is unequal, the supervisor has the power to make a seminarians life pleasant or miserable, no matter how hard the seminarian can try to maintain the former’.

‘Sounds like you’re ready’.

‘Yes I am. I’ve read a lot about the subject so…’

‘Good for you. You should encourage others to do the same’.

‘Yeah, otherwise internship is just a wild game of luck, if you’re lucky you’ll get someone who is serious, if not, bad for you’.

‘Unfortunately that’s how it is! I guess I was lucky then huh?’

‘Nah, you’re not lucky, you’re just smart. You could live with any supervisor’.

‘…Says the guy who’s all clued up on the subject! On a serious note, I had a great time I tell you, living on my own terms and doing my own things, you know? Being an independent guy for a change, without constantly fearing that I’m breaking certain rules or something. It was a great time; you’ll enjoy it just you wait’.

‘But first I have to pray for a lucky pick!’ I said sarcastically, ‘but it sounds like a good experience, being independent outside the seminary and stuff’. I paused for a while before continuing, ‘so besides the fun, what kind of work did you do?’

‘Well, I preached mostly on Sundays but also on weekdays; I taught catechism classes, especially for baptisms and confirmation; I visited the sick at least three times a week; I visited the prison once a week, sometimes twice; I opened up spiritual avenues in the parish, giving them workshops and retreats, recollections and expositions, devotions and services throughout my time there, but especially during Lent; and there were some other things which I may have done out of the ordinary, like house visits on request and stuff. But yeah, that was pretty much the work I did’, he stopped then added quickly, ‘Oh! And I served on the altar as an ordinary minister of the Eucharist, can’t forget that, that I did every day without fail!’

‘Wow, it sounds like a lot of work, I mean, just look at the work that goes into preparing a homily! I know preparing a reflection here in the seminary is hard and it takes a lot of preparation and reading, and that’s just once in a while, I can only imagine what it’s like in the parish preaching almost every day!’.

‘No, it’s not the same’, he said ‘I assure you my friend, preaching in the parish isn’t the same as preaching in the seminary, not at all. Here in the seminary it’s different. I mean, yeah there’s a lot of preparation and reading and stuff, but that’s because we’re preaching to priests and seminarians, religious people, people who are evaluating our homilies, what else could we expect? We have to give them something great, we want to impress them. But in the parish it’s different! Its ordinary people we’re preaching to, people who need us to share our faith with them rather than impress them, who need us to show them that their troubles aren’t all there is, that there’s something to look forward to at the end of the day, at the end of this life. They don’t need fancy words and quotations, I tell you, they need simple and honest reflections of faith, hope and love. It’s enjoyable actually to preach to them, I enjoyed it, and I learnt a lot from them as they learnt a lot from me’.

‘Yeah, I guess you’re right. Preaching in the parish isn’t about impressing people but about sharing faith, isn’t about eloquent words and fancy quotations, but about spreading the gospel of Christ in a way that people can understand, can appreciate, and can imitate’.

‘That’s it! I couldn’t have said it better myself. Do that and you’ll be fine’. Freedom said. I could hardly wait. Sure enough, my time did come at the beginning of the following year, and I did enjoy it, keeping to myself and doing the work assigned to me as usual, I remained for my supervisor, and even for the ordinary people, a great mystery. I did all the things that Freedom had done, I preached, taught, and served. I prepared catechism classes and workshops and all the rest, and I enjoyed the experience. I was able to work at my own time and even till late if I had to, there was no ‘lights off’. I could unwind when I wanted to, I had freedom, and it did feel great to be free from the rules of the seminary, to be independent, to be me.

It was during this time that I received another tragic phone call, the news of the death of Poppy. It was the evening before Palm Sunday and my supervisor and I were preparing the Church for the celebration by decorating it with palms. After we’d completed preparing the Church we retired to our rooms, exhausted and satisfied – and this was when I received the phone call. Luckily my supervisor allowed me to go home for the funeral preparations and the funeral. I remembered the anger I felt as I boarded the bus to Dundee the Monday morning, anger at not being there for her when she needed someone, anger at not remembering our last encounter and what I had said to her, was it something good, something encouraging, something hurtful? Since it was holy week she was buried on Maundy Thursday. It was a real tragedy, she left her son and two lovely daughters for us to remember her by. I remembered giving words of comfort to mum, to my brothers, to Nurse, and I tried my best to remain strong, to hold my nerve, to show my faith. And I succeeded throughout: during the night vigil, during the Church service and at the graveyard, I was solemn and in control, directing and making sure everything went well. Nobody saw me crying alone, at the back of the Church, before the service even began.

Coming back to continue with my internship I persevered. I didn’t let my personal life affect what I had to do, and so I went on as usual, following my time-table and doing whatever I was expected to do. It was good to be away from the seminary at that time, with no rules and restrictions tying me down, so when I felt like taking a walk to ease my mind, or when I wanted to listen to some soothing music or even to watch a movie, I could do it so long as all my tasks were done. But the internship was only six months, and after these months it had to come to an end, I had to come back to the seminary, back to lights out, back to rules, back to study, gym, music, study. I found getting back into the rhythm of the academic and seminary life a bit challenging. But as I reminded myself of my goal, and as I saw how Freedom hadn’t complain but simply got on with his work after his internship, I did likewise. Freedom motivated me onward, his dedication and perseverance were my inspiration, yet he would say that my determination and dedication to my studies motivated him. I guess we motivated each other, and I used this motivation as a sign that indeed I could be a hard worker when I put my mind to it, that I could stretch even more my academic potential, as if the distinctions I was getting weren’t enough! ‘Put your best’, Freedom would always encourage me from time to time, and this made me feel that at least someone else shared my vision, shared my goal and admired it. That at least I wasn’t a crazy fellow but was just a reserved academic who has the potential to be a great person, because in as much as powerful words and brave actions change the world, silent contemplation and active dedication also does.

This was why it was together saddening and hurtful when the news reached me that Freedom had been recalled back to the diocese, ending his studies in the seminary. The semester hadn’t even ended, it was still mid semester! And even though I had only known him for a little while, keeping my distance and protecting my heart from heartache, I couldn’t help but be heartbroken after having enjoyed spending time with him, after having had the opportunity to have someone to talk to, someone to trust, someone who appreciated me for who I was. And as I’d meditate alone in the chapel or in my room, I’d wonder why these tragedies were befalling me, I’d wonder why was I losing people I loved while here in this place called a seminary, this holy place, this place I called home. Was it a punishment from God for my decision not to become a priest? Was I destined to walk the journey of theology alone, in pain and suffering? Never again, I decided as the semester came to an end and I made my way back home. Never again will I allow myself to get close to anyone! If walking alone was the price I am to pay for my decision, then so be it. And so I hardened my heart once more: digging a hole, burying hope, and turning my back on it.

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1. **The lonely road to theology**

For the remainder of my seminary years I dedicated myself to my studies. I cared little about what people said and how sincerely they admonished my lonely lifestyle. I was done listening to what people said because they didn’t know my plight, didn’t know my intentions, didn’t know my situation. It was because of listening to what people said that I subjected myself to a second heartache. Not again, not while I have just these few years left to go anyway. Here I was – a guy from nowhere, nobody, with no money and no hope for a bright future, trying to make something out of myself, was that too much to ask? I was simply using what I had, using the opportunity which was given to me, to try and bring myself out of the pit I had found myself in, to make something out of myself in a world that seemed to be against poor and underprivileged people like me. Indeed I may be poor and underprivileged but I didn’t intend to stay that way. I am not helplessly destined to end up poor, to accept my lot in life, No! I plan to work hard in order to get out of this poverty, and this is what I was doing.

This plan was not really for myself since I will be old and grey before the rewards of my hard work begin to kick in. Rather, this plan was for my family, my kids, that they may have the opportunities I could only dream of, that they don’t find themselves in a pit of suffering, poor and underprivileged, but in a home full of opportunity. I was a pioneer at the foundation of a great empire, investing in a future I will never have the privilege of enjoying. This is a sacrifice I am prepared to make for the sake of my kids, planning for them, thinking for them even before they are even born. It was good for me not only to experience the hardships and trials of life – since these help me grow into a better person – but also to learn from the experiences of others. People who grew up in poverty usually ended up poor, for it is hard to come out of a place where everyone wants to keep you in. I would have to come out first before I could allow my kids to enjoy being out, and this meant that I had to wait.

Was it easy for me to remain without kids throughout my life, was I different from the many other guys who have kids at a young age? No, definitely not! I’m just like them, perhaps worse because I crave so much for the things they already have. I want to have kids, I never knew anyone my age who didn’t want to enjoy the benefits of raising their own child, of being a father. It is my self-control that has kept me from having kids, that has kept me single minded on first achieving my goals. Just like everyone else I would much love not only the joy of having a child, but also the pleasures which brings such a miracle into fruition.

It is more a responsibility than a right to bring a child into the world, for their complete well-being rests in the hands of their parents not only as children, but throughout their lives. How can I bring a child into the world if I am unable to provide for their well-being? Surely this is selfishly thinking of my image and what people think of me as someone without a child rather than selflessly preparing for the time when I can provide for them, regardless of how long it takes. Is my selfless preparation not dangerous as I run the risk of settling down at a ripe age? No! For as long as there are parents who continue to father and mother kids at a ripe age, it isn’t dangerous at all, and I will be reaching a ripe and not an old age before settling down, with not just time but also financial security and stability, a wise thing to do is it not? Nevertheless, I think it is responsible for me to begin thinking of my children even before they are born, to lay a sure foundation upon which they can live and grow, establishing an environment in which they can be anything they want to be.

I couldn’t let anything get in my way of this dream, not my desire for friendship, not the pressure from the seminary, nothing! With loved ones passing away and friends leaving me, I will only grind my teeth in defiance as I sojourn on in this seminary, wondering what would happen next. Nevertheless, my time will come for the end was close at hand, the end was in full view, it was just a little further, I could practically see it, smell it, taste it.

Even though the seminary became for me a difficult place to be, I couldn’t blame the place for the pressure I felt, the place did not understand my way of life and it pushed me into solitude. The seminary was a house of formation, designed to cultivate within all seminarians the desire to become priests. But I was no ordinary seminarian, but a student studying philosophy and theology. The seminary was designed to make life difficult for people like me because I was refusing the formation it offered, refusing the choice to become what it was cultivating me to be: a priest. I can’t blame the staff or even the seminarians for their concern for my lifestyle, for their pressure and advice. Though these little gestures made the seminary a difficult place to live in for me, they came from an honest and concerned heart.

This decision I made to study led me to conclude that I was different for a variety of reasons: like the fact that I never grew up with many options from which I had the option to choose to study for the priesthood; like the fact that I never grew up in a Catholic environment exposed to religious living: community life, prayer, ministry and more prayer; like the fact that I never had someone or somewhere to fall back on should priesthood not be a success. While these things may be true for some, and perhaps even for many, they weren’t true for me. For me it was different, studying was my chance, and I only had one chance to make it work. It was out of sheer desperation that I found myself in the seminary and not because of a totally free choice towards the priesthood. I was running away from a life of poverty and being a student in the seminary was my only ticket out. If only formation did not include earning any degrees, I would probably be content in becoming a priest. If only formation focused only on pastoral, spiritual and human formation, I would probably be content in becoming a priest. But it didn’t, and for this reason I had come to the decision to put all my focus on academic formation, in the hope that it could make something out of me.

Perhaps one day I’ll look back and be proud that I continued with my decision to leave the seminary, that I made it out of the seminary, that I got my degrees. Perhaps one day I will be the success I believed I could be, using the degrees I earned to make a decent living in the real world, but until then, I had to keep working. Until then I had to live in the seminary and finish what I started. I have seen many seminarians leave in the middle of formation as a result of a change of career path. I used to give this serious thought as to why didn’t I just leave after philosophy, that perhaps I would be far by now. I would make up many reasons why I continued, like the fact that it would be a waste of parish funds to just leave in the middle of the course, or the fact that I wanted to concretise my success with two degrees, but the reason that stands out for me is the fact that if I finish formation, should I need to come back to the priesthood after some time, it will be easier for me to do so. This latter possibility showed me that I had not completely rejected the idea of becoming a priest, it was still an option.

And as the semesters went by one at a time, I remained focused on the choice that I had made; I stood my ground and kept to my goal. The prospects of succeeding and finally reaching a milestone by finishing the degree seemed very high as I reached the final stages of my studies. Concerned formators continued to warn me of my solitary behaviour, but I didn’t listen, at that point I didn’t care. They tried to explain to me things I already knew, that community life is important for the life of a priest and that should I continue in this life of solitude, it may affect my formation and the chances of me ever being ordained. But I took no heed, for I had my eyes on completing my formation and nothing else. The fact of the matter was that I was tired of formation, tired of it all. How long have I been here in this place, trapped by the rules of religious life and the expectations of formation, as well as trapped by my indecision to know exactly what I wanted to get out of it all.

My decision took a toll on my physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing, for it was difficult to comprehend and tedious to maintain. Even ordinary seminarians often complained about how long formation is, tiring when they got to more senior levels of formation. I consoled myself by the fact that it wasn’t going to last for very much longer. I was going to leave, and I couldn’t wait for that moment, the moment of my freedom. And as the years drew to months, I began preparing myself for my freedom, for a normal life at last, a life with no more confusion, a life where I could finally be myself and live honestly. I eagerly longed for this day to arrive, I desired it, and I even craved it. And even though I had no idea what I was going to do when I finally left the seminary since I was still unclear and confused, one thing was clear, one thing was certain, that in less than a year, I was heading back home, and this time, it would be for good.

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1. **The end of the road**

I stood before my room window and looked out into the distance. I was now a final year student and had only a few months until I’d be done with the seminary for good. I can even say that I’ve made it, succeeded in pursuing my studies till the end, for now all I needed was to hand in my research paper and sit for a one hour Bachelors of Theology oral comprehensive exam. I came to experience that there were many freedoms as a final year student – the seminary relaxed certain rules around final years, like curfews and group prayers, as a way of preparing them for life outside the seminary, life without supervision. Among other reasons, the seminary did this because most often than not they’ll have no supervision outside the seminary even as they’d be expected to execute certain norms like Divine Office and meditation. So if they start early developing their own patterns of such norms, they are more likely to continue even after they graduate.

Indeed there were many practises that the seminary proposed which were useful for everyday life, which if practiced regularly could lead to a healthy lifestyle for anyone, like meditation. Meditation I thoroughly enjoyed, not just as a spiritual exercise, but as a healthy way of life. It afforded me the opportunity to take stock of where I am and where I want to be, reflecting, contemplating, planning, stillness, awareness, thankfulness. It was a wonderful way of starting and/or ending the day, and I was grateful to the seminary for having revealed to me such a powerful tool, a tool I hoped to keep with me forever. My eight years of formation here in this Catholic institution was not a waste of time, for apart from the degrees, there was a world of disciplines which I was taking with me: discipline and self-control, empathy and humility, determination and focus, perseverance and patience amongst so many others.

It took a lot of determination and focus for me to complete an eight year formation program which I was not enthusiastic about. While on some occasions the content matter did spark my curiosity, especially in philosophy, at other occasions I just had to accept what I was given without much discussion. It took a lot of patience and perseverance to go through each and every day with the uncertainty of my future always on my mind. Was I making the right decision? I didn’t know anyone who had gone through what I was going through so I had no one in whom I could relate, whose story I could emulate or at least learn from. I was making things up as I was going along, and this was a scary experience, an experience I had to go through each and every day. It took a great amount of patience and perseverance to have to go through it all, to put myself in that position knowing very well that I still had the freedom to end it, to quit it all, to head back home. I didn’t, I persevered in patience, knowing very well that good things always come at a price. And whenever I felt like screaming, whenever I felt like the prison was becoming too oppressive for me, I had to be disciplined and self-controlled in order to remain focused. It was from the spiritual exercises that I drew much strength, for like the meditation, they allowed me to get in touch with myself, to dialogue with God about my concerns and to find more creative ways of holding on and pulling through. This took much empathy and humility, for I had to be honest about how I felt and humble enough to accept how to live with how I felt.

These are only a few of the many qualities which the seminary had taught me – qualities which I take with me into the world. Even if I had no degree at all, I am not the same person who entered the seminary eight years ago, I have become stronger and smarter, I have acquired skills which many people would have loved to acquire, skills which build character and transform lives. Indeed I was transformed, ready for the challenges the world had to offer. At this point I didn’t need degrees, I just needed to be me and I would succeed. Sam was right; the discipline of studying and of formation has transformed me forever.

After submitting my research paper and sitting for the comprehensive BTH exams, I was done. I had successfully completed the priestly formation program as well as fulfilled the requirements for the degree. While we would only graduate and receive our degrees in October, ordinations towards the diaconate had already begun in earnest, and for the religious brothers, even earlier, the first Capuchin brother being ordained in February. I just couldn’t wait to graduate, and I wondered how I’d make it to my graduation considering I’ll probably be still at home in October. I had a lot of things to consider now that the first part of the plan was officially complete. This could all be a waste of time if I don’t plan my strategy properly, if I don’t make means to be able to use what I have acquired in order to get more. There are many people who sit at home after having graduated, those with more practical degrees such as engineering or psychology. It could be worse for me with my theoretical degrees if I don’t plan properly, and as I think about it, apart from entering the academic profession, I didn’t see anything else that I could do. These degrees serve as a foundation upon which I need to build, what I need is money and time. It would be very good if I studied immediately after I graduate, so by next year I should be enrolled in any university as an honours student. I’ll have to swallow my pride and get any job in order to sponsor myself, which means that I’ll have to work and study together. It can be done, considering that an honours degree requires only 120 credits, or five modules for the entire year. Here in the seminary I’ve been exposed to 240 credits per semester, that’s ten subjects. And if I add pastoral, spiritual and human formation, as well as community responsibilities, it meant I could more than easily work and study with the experience I’ve accumulated here in the seminary. I’ll just have to use the time management skills I’ve learnt to my advantage. The question will be, am I willing to swallow my pride, am I humble enough to work as a cashier even though I have these degrees and this tremendous experience, can I work without advertising my degrees, keeping them secret in order to blend in? I can do it, I have to, if I could blend in the seminary and pass through undecided for eight years, I can do it at work, I can do it anywhere, it has become a part of who I am.

 I began to pack all my belongings and to prepare for the long journey home. The day was finally here, I had succeeded in overcoming formation, I had made it through and would now earn my BTH degree. I had made it as everybody knew I would, as I knew I would, my determination and motivation had paid off. And yet somehow I didn’t feel as excited as I had always imagined, I wasn’t as liberated as I thought I’d be. I stopped packing for a while as I made my way to the window, looking out of it to the font and the grass outside as I often did when I was deep in thought. The sound of the pouring water coupled by the chirping birds which occasionally bathed in it was very soothing, very relaxing, very comforting. So often I’d long for the day I was free of this dreadful place with all of its rules and regulations, but now that I look upon this lovely view and this wonderful and spacious room, realising that I’d never see it again, I can’t help but feel sad.

I had given eight and a half years of my life to formation, and seven and a half of these were spent in this very seminary. Somehow this very place had made an impact on me; it had somehow grown on me so much so that I’d miss the building and the people, the studies and the formation, the seminarians and the priests. I couldn’t help but feel a sudden sadness at the prospect of leaving and never coming back. After all, how many times had I left and came back, sometimes happy, many times sad, but I’d always come back to this very building, to these very people. But now it was different, because I was never coming back. I was leaving this life for good. I was ending yet another relationship, one of eight and a half years. So many relationships are ending, and not one was being added in their place. I felt like an onion, being peeled and peeled until there might be nothing left to peel, until I was naked and vulnerable. How much more peeling could I take? How many more losses can I recover from? How many more heartaches could I endure?

The next morning as Fr. Lionel came to pick me up I tried to show that I was excited about having finally made it after so many years, and as we loaded the luggage into the boot, I cracked jokes and laughed heartily. But as we drove out the main gate the same way we had done so many times before, I couldn’t help but be overcome with the same feeling of sadness all over again, because now as I leave, I’m never coming back. And tears welled up in my eyes, threatening to come down, threatening to reveal just how emotional the heartless and selfish Jamie really was. But I held them inside, not allowing myself to cry; after all, I hadn’t cried after my big day at first Holy Communion, why should I cry now? Fr. Lionel noticed the sudden change in me as I sat, quiet and sad. He also noticed the tears filling up at the banks of my eyes, threatening to fall yet never coming down, held hostage by pride and vanity and false images of manhood. And while I lived in a new generation with different challenges from his, it didn’t mean that he should just be quiet and act as if he were blind to my plight. He was a priest for goodness sake, he had to try: ‘it’s always like that’, he began. I suddenly looked at him, drawn from my deep and sad thoughts and to his words, and so I asked shyly, ‘always like what?’

‘Goodbyes are never easy’, he continued, ‘they’re always hard, and they always take a lot from us. Someone once said that goodbye is the hardest word, harder than sorry, because every time we say goodbye, we die a little. Doesn’t matter who you are or how strong you may think you are, it’s hard to say goodbye for it fills you up with sadness and threatens you to fall apart. And when it does this, it’s not really a bad thing, whether you’re a boy or girl, to just allow the feeling to happen, to just accept the moment, to embrace the feeling’. He grew silent for a while, not knowing whether to continue or whether to leave it at that, but he decided to continue, ‘so don’t worry young man, cry if you feel like crying, don’t mind me, I’m just an old man after all, what do I know. And besides, I’m a priest. I know how to keep secrets’.

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**Chapter six:**

**Life outside formation**

1. **Moving forward**

The trip home was long and quiet as I wondered how I would set my plan into motion. When we arrived in Forestdale I unpacked all my stuff and waved Fr. Lionel off. Everyone at home were happy to see me as they usually were each time I came home to visit, only this time I had more stuff and the visit was permanent. Nobody knew about my plan to leave the priesthood, they all thought I was still in line to becoming a priest. For this reason they expected me to attend church celebrations at my local parish as I usually did. I could hardly bring myself to go to church because of the questions that the people had about my current status as a young priest. In the end, I cut going to church completely and would rather go and sit in a park and read a book by myself on Sunday mornings. I didn’t have the courage to tell my mother about my plans, that I had made up my mind that the priesthood was not for me, that I could find another career worth following, even though I was clueless as to how to go about doing it. What I wanted to do was to further my degree and start lecturing; I even managed to save some money the people gave me during my internship to fund this. But it was in the middle of the year, so before I could study, I had to find something to do which would occupy my mind from the current reality which I found myself: jobless.

I was no longer a seminarian, no longer on the mission towards becoming a priest, now I was on my own and it felt very scary and lonely. It was then that I decided to complete my book. During my years in the seminary I was always interested in writing my own book, and at each opportunity I would jot down a few ideas on my laptop regarding my future plans. These plans were all jumbled up and as I went through them I realised how much work I needed to put into putting this book together. Day in and day out I put in time on the book, adding portions and chapters until it presented a clear view of what seemed to be my autobiography. While I was in Dundee I decided to continue with my drivers’ licence, and on days when I did not feel like writing my book I would go and practice my driving. When I passed my driving test, I took this as a sign to pack my things and head to Johannesburg to live with my half-sister Letty. I couldn’t be free while I was living with my mother, and I longed for the freedom of living away from home, the freedom to do as I pleased. I knew my mother would not allow me to go on my own to Johannesburg, she was not on speaking terms with Letty, so as I packed my bags I told her that I was heading back to the seminary to finish off my studies.

When I reached Johannesburg, I struggled a little to find Letty’s place as I had not been there for a while. It was in the East of Johannesburg in a township called Zonkizizwe. Letty lived in Zone Three, in a small, three room RDP house with an outbuilding and a shack. It had an outside toilet with a sink and a tap attached to it, and she shared it with the families renting in the shack and outbuilding. The two rooms were bedrooms while the third was a big room divided by a small wall which my late uncle built in order to separate the room into a kitchen and a lounge. Letty shared the biggest bedroom with her son and I had the small bedroom all to myself. The first thing I did on my arrival was to apply to register in UNISA for the honours degree in philosophy for 2016. Applications took place towards the end of 2015, and after applying I bought some essential stationary which I thought I would need from the same internship money I had saved. When this was done I bought a bicycle for travel because it costed R10 to move from Zonke to Eden Park, Eden Park to Palmridge, Palmridge to Tokoza, Tokoza to Sontonga, Sontonga to Letsoho.

I could travel by bike to all of these destinations and save money and time, and as I travelled I began to pass on my CV to as many institutions and corporations as I could find. I could visit their libraries and roam the internet in search of online vacancies. The bike gave me the freedom to move around easily and as I did I got familiar with this East side of Johannesburg. Eventually I found a job at Ackermans, at Letsoho shopping centre. I was recruited with two others and we had to open large boxes filled with stock as fast as we could. I wasn’t the fastest and I wasn’t the slowest either, and as time progressed, my optimistic attitude gave me advantage over the others and soon I found myself working more hours. I managed to make time for my graduation which took place in October 2015 for my theology degree, I graduated with distinction, and this gave me great pride. I went alone, since I had no friends and Letty was at work. The manager took a liking to me and my situation and found me a permanent post in Alberton City. I began working there the following year as a permanent P40.

At first I never had my own department and used to fill up in different departments when there was a need, but later I began to work in the School and Mens department, assisting also in the Shoe department. It was a lot of work which kept me occupied for the five days a week I worked, on my off days I had to study and prepare my assignments for my honours programme. Although I still kept to myself as usual, I did manage to make a friend who I enjoyed talking to while we unpacked boxes and offloaded stock. His name was Kyle and he was the only one who knew that I was studying or that I had other qualifications. He was impressed that I was studying and working, and enjoyed chatting with me about different topics just to pass the time.

‘How does it feel to have three departments’, Kyle asked me as he unpacked the shoes from the shoe box.

‘I wouldn’t say three departments since I’m just helping out here is shoes, maybe you can say two and a half”, I replied.

‘How do you handle this and your studies?’

‘I just do, I don’t have much choice in the matter. I don’t intend to work at Ackermans forever so this is my plan to get me out of here and doing something better with my life. I don’t like working for someone else, pursuing their dream, what about my own dream? I want to pursue my own dream and my dream is to be a lecturer’.

‘I admire your perseverance and dedication. Many of us are consumed by our work as a permanent P40 and can’t find the time to do anything else. I can’t imagine studying during my two days off when I’d rather be resting and doing my washing and visiting my friends. You must be highly motivated and my question to you is: what motivates you?’

‘I’m motivated by my poverty, by the way of life I live. Every day I see my mother and brothers and sisters struggling to make ends meet and I’d think to myself: can I be the difference maker? Can I make things better for me and for them? And the answer will always come: Yes I can! If I put my mind to it, I can be anything I want to be. It may take time, but it can be done, all I had to do was believe in myself and stay focused on the task at hand. The same is true for you, for everybody’.

‘It sounds easy when you put it like that, in fact, it motivates me to do something about it, to also fight for a better way to live my life. Yet the reality is that when I walk out that door, all the motivation leaves me when I realise that it’s much harder than it looks, that it will demand too much from me, more than I am willing to give at this time’.

‘Everything is hard in the beginning, yet after some time things do tend to relax. Human beings are creatures of habit, things which were hard to do become easy with time and even can become like second nature. All you have to do is give it a try and stick it out for a while. It’s like going to the gym, the first few months are like hell, your body gets sore, you feel like quitting. Yet if you continue for a while the pain subsides and your body gets used to it. After a while it becomes like second nature and you begin to enjoy it’.

‘It’s those first few months that I worry about; they take what seems like forever. Anyway, you keep it up, maybe one day when you’re something important you’ll remember me here in Ackermans and hire me because I’m tired of working here, I’ve been here for five years already. I’m afraid to leave because there are no jobs in South Africa, I managed to get this job after a long time just sitting at home. Believe me: working at Ackermans is better than sitting at home’.

‘That is for sure man, keeping busy is always better than sitting at home’.

‘Yeah, sitting at home is the worst thing because you end up getting bored and thinking of doing stupid things for money. Everyone needs money, and when you don’t have any money life can become boring, you won’t know what to do with yourself and eventually you’ll do things that will get you into trouble. Working is good, even if it means working for someone else. We all can’t be like you Jamie, determined to live out our dream. Some of us need to be content with what we have’.

‘You make it seem as if there’s something special about me. There’s nothing special about me, I’m doing what anybody can do’.

‘I think your one of a kind, I haven’t met anyone who is willing to ride a bicycle to work in my whole life, especially from Zonke to Alberton City, what a distance’.

I smiled and asked, ‘they say the difference between a successful person and others is not a lack of money or strength, but a lack of will. So if you have a ‘why’ to live, you’ll overcome any ‘how’, what do you think?’

‘As I said before, it all sounds great until I have to do it’.

‘It depends on how badly you want the change’. We finished unpacking our boxes and headed off for lunch, after lunch I had to leave the shoe department and head off to the school and mens departments to replenish stock and housekeep. After housekeeping we mopped the whole store and then we’d head off home, hungry and tired.

When my mother figured out that I was in Johannesburg and not in the seminary she asked Warder to lend me one of his cars, and this he did. My mother found out that I was using a bicycle to work and was afraid that if I used a bicycle I might end up in an accident, as happened to my grandfather before me. Having the car was great, but the car brought more problems than solutions because it was a huge Toyota Condor which needed more petrol than I could provide with my small salary. The salary was small because it had to pay my studies with it, buy toiletry with it, I also had to give my sister some money for food which left me with not much. I couldn’t afford to drive the car even though driving the car was the best way of keeping it safe and keeping it moving. The first idea I had was to turn the car into a business: take the Ackermans employees home on my way so that they could help me with the petrol. So every day I would pick up Kyle and the others and take them to work and back, and most often than not we would pass by a restaurant and have some take-away before heading home. The idea worked for a while, until I became a target for the association patrols who spotted me out as someone disturbing their taxi route. After a few confrontations with them I realised that I was putting myself and those I was driving in danger. The next idea I had was to make it a scholar transport it, so I hired a driver and started taking children to school with it.

The business never made me any money, I was just happy that the car was moving so that it didn’t get stolen or broken. Working with someone whom I did not know was a challenge for me, and I had to trust him with my brother’s car. He demanded more and more payment while the business was not making nearly enough. So one day he decided to collect all the money from the parents and run away with it, leaving me to find a way of bringing those children to school with my own money. I had to dig deep and find someone who could drive them as the parents were adamant that their children needed to be taken to school after having paid their share. I struggled that month, finding myself with not enough money even for my transport to work. After much perseverance I managed to get past this trying time and resume the business as normal, with a different driver. I also managed to pass my honours programme in philosophy and to graduate in June 2017. After this I decided to apply for my honours degree in theology. I knew that with the honours degree in philosophy I stood a good chance of getting into lecturing as a junior or even as a tutor, yet I decided not to abandon my studies but to rather continue towards my doctorate as I dreamed I could. Tutoring and lecturing could wait until then, after all, my chances would only increase if I furthered my degrees, and it was better to study while I still had the drive to study. And so I persevered, finishing my honours degree in theology and graduating in June 2018. At this I was very proud of my achievement: working, studying and running a business. I was not successful yet I could see that I was on my way to being successful.

My dream to become a lecturer was slowly becoming a reality and it was thanks to the foundation which the seminary had given me. I had studied hard throughout my seminary formation and produced two degrees. It was not an easy journey, for there were many times when I felt like giving up, times I felt lost and alone, yet through it all I managed to persevere and not give up on my dream. Now I have enrolled for a Master’s degree in philosophy in the University of South Africa, and I am eager to begin my research with the same dedication and hard work as I did in my previous studies. I have the will to move forward, the will to keep going despite all the trials and tribulations which tend to come my way. I know that in life nothing comes easy, for everything which is of value requires hard work and dedication. I am willing to put hard work and dedication into my dream to make it a reality, a simple dream of finding an honest career with the skills that I have been given. God gave me the skill to study, and I am using this skill to make something out of myself, to be a better person, as well as to assist in helping other people as a lecturer.

So there is a way out of the poverty which you find yourself, if only you open your eyes to the many different options available to you and use them to the best of your abilities. While I was born poor, I refused to limit myself to the poverty which I found myself in, to simply give up and do as everyone around me was doing. I had a dream to be more, to become more, and in following my dream and exploring the many options available to me, I stand at the edge of my dream, able to see it slowly materialise. The journey for us who have no assistance is very long and hard, and as a result the possibility to give up along the way is very high, especially if you are not motivated enough. Yet just because it is long does not mean that it is impossible. It can be done, just like the journey of a thousand miles, with one step at a time. After having left religious formation, I still often ask myself if God indeed was calling me to religious life, I often think about what kind of priest I would have been if I had accepted ordination, and whether I would have made a difference in the lives of the people around me? When I think in these terms, the answer which comes to me is always the same: God is calling me to do what I am doing now, for He is not an undecided God but a sure God. In other words, I am on the right track with regards to my journey, all I need to do is continue to stay focused and dedicated that I may succeed.

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