

A Priest discovers at his mother's death bed that he was adopted. He ultimately learns that he is Jewish and had survived the Holocaust. The novel relates the events of his life as he learns his true heritage.

Roots of a Priest

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## **Roots of a Priest**

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# **Roots of a Priest**

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## Prologue: Roszi

The door burst open, suddenly and vehemently, like a soldier carrying out the orders of a higher authority. The young woman Rozsi clutched her baby tightly against the chill bite of blowing snow. Hesitating a moment, she pressed back against the doorway. After bundling herself more tightly in her old coat and checking that her child was well protected by the blanket, she started off again down the snow-covered road.

“Beni, Beni,” she whispered over and over to her half-sleeping, half-moaning child. As she pushed her way through the blinding white wall of snow, her boots often sank deeply into knee-high drifts. Her whispering blended with the howling wind to form a haunting lullaby.

“You’ll be all right, my little one. They won’t find you, my angel. They won’t hurt you. The bad people won’t hurt you.”

Her words were a monotone chant of love and devotion that built a shield of safety around young Beni, who felt peaceful and secure in the arms of his mother. Her destination was clear, although her visibility was not. Her resolve was unwavering as she forced her way through the relentless hammering of nature. Her emotions were at a heightened state. Her senses were attuned to every sound, sense, and sight that accosted her from all directions. She concentrated with all her will on her mission of love. No one was going to stop her from doing what she knew she must do.

“Nobody will hurt you ever again, I promise you, Beni, my love.”

The bitter cold snow whipped at her face as she plunged onward; she fought back the tears.

*No one was going to stop her. She had to do what she had to do!*

## **1. Back to Roots**

My story could have begun anywhere, but I chose to begin it in the sky, soaring high like an eagle, in a 727, circling Pittsburgh International Airport. The pilot had just announced that air traffic was backed up because of snow delays at airports that Saturday afternoon, and we could possibly remain in our holding pattern for another hour or more. At that point I recalled that I had crossed myself and said a few words of prayer to the Father.

I looked again at those wintry sculptures of whites and shades of gray that populated the landscape beneath us. I immediately recalled the words of the poet who wrote, “Come see the North Wind’s Masonry.” Everything was so majestic, so tranquil, so sublime—as pure as angels congregating on a ceiling in alabaster abandon, yet as still as a funeral. These heightened imaginings brought on a tear, so I shook them off and discretely made my way to the back of the plane.

In the lavatory, I washed my face. As I dried myself off, I became keenly aware of the face staring back at me from the lavatory mirror through many long years, many trials and tribulations, many joys and many sadnesses. A time-worn and torn priest stared back at me. Though I was only in my fifties, a more wizened countenance seemed to be sketched before me. I mouthed the name, “Father Eric Russman, Man of God.” I watched as my reflection’s mouth formed the syllables of that oft-repeated title. It used to roll off the tongue like honey, pleasant to the taste, but now the words barely choked their way out. A man just in his fifties, yet an old man in a disheveled collar.

As I continued staring deep into my own tired eyes, I remembered a time when I had looked at a much younger face. I was traveling backwards in time, back to the Ellwood City of

my youth. North Star—that old red brick country schoolhouse. All those precious experiences uniquely made me who I was today ...

The urinals in the old wooden clapboard outhouse had overflowed again!

I remembered how they used to overflow on cold wintry days and how we used to ice skate on the frozen urine. I often wondered how many Olympic champions got their start on such an unlikely arena. The urinals also got the attention of Tony Corsi, who, on a dare and some cash bets, plunged through the seat opening. Needless to say, Tony was hastily dispatched to his home and an unhappy mother.

I remembered St. Gregory's Catholic school in Zelienople. I remembered petite, freckle-faced Janice, with those long, braided pigtails that went clear down to her tailbone. She used to swear at Sister Mary Kathryn, calling her "Lard Ass" to her face. I also remember the time Janice practically knocked Sister Mary Kathryn out when the sister put her hands on Janice's shoulder to keep her from giving another student, Big Myrna, an upper cut in the back of the classroom. Janice thought that another student was interfering with her business. Without looking, Janice spun around and gave an upper cut to Sister Mary Kathryn instead. Even wearing her habit, with the Sister's huge feminine endowments, there was only one place where the upper cut could have landed. It knocked the wind out of the Sister and quickly ended Janice's and Big Myrna's scuffle.

I laughed, remembering the odd characters I had known.

I laughed, and then I sighed. It had been more pleasant at the country school than at St. Gregory's, but Dad insisted that Catholic schools were superior to public schools.

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“Superior in manners, superior in religion, superior in curriculum,” he would always say, whenever he felt the need to justify his actions.

While I only spent three years at North Star at that country school, I’ll always remember those as among my happiest times—times without pressure, times without worry. I’ve never been able to regain that carefree spirit. The pressures and worries have been a continually expanding mushroom cloud ever since.

But it wasn’t all pressure. Home life was frequently pleasant. “Home.” Even the sound of the word is pleasing to my ears. Home. The aromas of roast beef, homemade bread, steaming pies. Even though money was sparse, the dinner table always seemed abundant with the finest of culinary delights. Mom should have been the head chef at a fine Parisian ristorante. She could take the most mundane of staples—the meat, the potato, the vegetables—and mold them in her hands into a wondrous feast fit for no less than a king. In our home, Father was the king. And Mother...yes, Mother truly was a queen.

“Mother.” Another word with pleasant effects on my mind. Mother was always happy, effervescent. She was chubby and a right jolly old elf. Whenever I used to try to visualize what Santa Claus might look like, he would always look a lot like my mother.

Mother was what modern America would stereotype as a “career housewife.” In my days of youth, most women held that profession. She was very good at her job. Graduated from a one-room country schoolhouse, she had the insight of a Ph.D. in Psychology. That dark-haired, four-foot-eleven, 160-pound, super giant of a woman, though chained to her home, was more liberated than most modern liberated women today.



Mother was dying. My mom. Lying and dying now in Ellwood City Hospital as I circled high in the sky above the mountains near Pittsburgh, her body smaller than the smallest speck from my view above the clouds.

I blinked back a tear.

My mom had been so full of life. Even the last time I saw her, not so long ago—but sitting here helpless in this circling plane, it seemed like an eternity ago—she had been bouncing around a room, never sitting still. I always thought she had enough vitality to outlast eternity. How could she be so close to death? How could she be so close to meeting her Maker?

I washed my face again and toweled myself off, then I returned to my seat. The view from my window was steel and glass, grand pillars of strength. Pittsburgh. So magnificent from this lofty perch, just like Mother.

Mom. What would her sisters do without her? The Graffs were always such a close-knit family. They always loved getting together, sharing the warmth of each other's company, sharing the laughter, the joys, the pains. Yes, even the pains.

How much easier it was associating with Mom's family rather than Dad's. Everyone in Dad's family was all pried out of the same mold: good staunch Catholics, good people, but—God forbid!—no good times! No joking. No picnics. Everything was quite serious when they came around. God forbid if anyone should catch one of them actually attempting to form the slightest hint of a smile.

At that last thought, I smiled. The stewardess caught me at that moment and smiled back. That helped.

Where had the time gone? It had all blown past me like a sandstorm in an hourglass. Dad was gone. Grandma and Grandpap Russman were long gone. Grandma Graff, after three marriages—what a shock among the upright, monogamous

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Russmans that was!—outliving each of her husbands. They were all gone now. Dear God in Heaven, don't let Mom leave me, too! I held back the fountain that welled up inside me and tried to turn my concentration to the view from my window. No one ever clutched his rosary as tightly as I did at that moment.

“Father, please fasten your seat belt.”

“What?”

“Didn't you hear the announcement? We're landing.”

“Oh. Thank you. Yes, of course.”

I remembered thinking as our plane touched ground, I, a priest, a comforter, who has performed hundreds of sacraments and last rites and anointings of the sick, how could I feel so inadequate at a time like this? Where is my faith, Lord? Help me, St. Jude. Help me, St. Anthony. Jesus, help my unbelief. Please restore my faith.

Before I realized it, we were disembarking the plane. I moved mechanically, gathering up my carry-on and coat from the overhead and stiffly moving to the exit door.

As I moved away from the terminal, modest luggage in my hands, the snow squalls that danced like miniature ivory starlets were oblivious to my unfeeling body. I squinted through the sheets of white in search of my cousin Tom. Unsurprisingly, he was late. I kicked the powdery snow at my feet and watched the patterns it formed on the sidewalk. Tom, were you ever on time for anything in your life? I looked at the swirling snow expecting an answer.

Even though I was an only child, I felt I truly understood the closeness of having a brother when I had a cousin like Tom. In childhood, we shared everything, from smelly blankets for sleeping out on hot summer nights to those scrungy hankies that soaked up the bloody aftermaths that invariably resulted from our brotherly disagreements. Despite, or perhaps because of our friendly skirmishes, we grew up closer than many brothers I

have known. He was a head taller than I was and quite heavy set, while I was as skinny as he was fat. I enjoyed the academic curriculum, while his graduation certificate was nothing more than a certificate of attendance. Not a scholar by any means, yet Tom could sing like a prized canary and could tell if a car wasn't idling properly, then proceed to tune the car to a "T." I have compared myself to Tom many times when conversing on talents in my homilies.

Every time the youth in my parish insisted that they were constantly bored, I would think back and I could remember no time in my youth that I was ever bored. And we had so little. How did I have fun? Let me count the ways.

Sleeping out on a summer night ...

Playing cowboys and Indians, using willow tree branches for our horses ...

Sledding down that snow-covered slope in the woods on an old round washing machine lid ...

Playing kick-the-can, wiffle ball, softball, kickball, football, you-name-it ball ...

As Mark Twain had once said, "We were poor but didn't know it."

Entertainment also took the form of weekly sing-alongs around the piano at Tom's house. Music was second nature to me. I loved it. Even though I didn't have the voice of Tom or Tom's mother, my Aunt Margaret, or his older brother, I was able to play the melodies on the piano after Tom's mom, my Aunt Margaret, methodically pounded them out for me.

I loved that old upright piano. How I used to beg Dad for a piano! He wouldn't even debate the issue. "We can't afford a piano," he would grumble. "We don't have room for a piano. Where would we put it?" he would growl. "It isn't masculine to play a piano. You can't earn a living playing a piano. And besides, those Protestant 'gospel' songs are just

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dripping with the sin of Satan, and no good Catholic would have anything to do with them.” Case closed. Heck, I didn’t even have a case.

The snow battered me and the bitter wind howled my name: “Eric! Eric!” When I looked up, I spotted a familiar silhouette approaching me. I immediately recognized my cousin’s form through the curtain of the storm. I lifted my free hand to acknowledge his wind-distorted calls, calling his name several times.

When at last he stood next to me, we gave each other a hearty handshake and a brotherly hug. I said in a soft voice, “It’s good to see you, Tom.”

He took my small suitcase. I let go of it without protest. “You too, Eric. Let’s say we go home and get some rest—freshen up a bit, you know?”

“I’d like to see Mom now, if it’s all right with you.”

“Sure. The car is this way.” It was uncharacteristically low-key for Tom.

We plunged into the howling squalls.

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