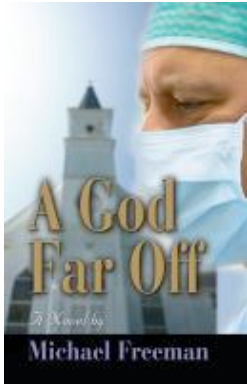




A Good Far Off

A Novel by

Michael Freeman



A world weary surgeon fights despair and self doubt while caring for a dying cancer patient. The patient's equanimity in the face of setbacks as well as the gentle but persistent counsel offered by his best friend, a Catholic priest, move the surgeon onto a path of renewal and hope. The affection and support of the woman he loves restores his sense of self worth.

A God Far Off

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A GOD FAR OFF

Michael Freeman

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ISBN 978-1-62646-385-1

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2013

First Edition

I

GERALD ANDREWS AND FRANK REAGAN

It was the waning time of December and Gerald Andrews was dying. He couldn't know that exactly, but he had reason to be suspicious. That's why one winter day he told Ida that he thought he should see a doctor.

Ida had looked at him for a long time before asking him why he felt he needed to do that, and when she did, she declared that she couldn't remember his ever going to the doctor. During their acquaintance he had always seemed, in her words, "healthy as a horse."

"Well this old horse is sixty-five; a man has to be careful at sixty-five if he wants to see seventy," Gerald said. When he mentioned that he had been having abdominal cramps after eating, which he had never experienced before, Ida advised that it could be just indigestion. She had read that intestinal enzymes work less well as a person enters his sixties.

"That may be and maybe that's all that's going on but I've noticed some blood in my movements for the past few weeks—not a lot and not every time. You know my mom had colon cancer; I've got to admit I'm a little worried about that. What do you think?"

"In that case, I think you're right to check things out with a doctor," Ida said and then smiled. "I'll bet it won't be anything serious. You're more active than most men a decade or more younger than you are...and besides you're too good a person to have a bad disease. God has plans for us all; I can't see that being His plan for you."

Gerald didn't offer any comment immediately. Ida's remark brought to mind the memory of a firefight just outside of Salerno in 1943. His platoon had come upon a small band of Italian soldiers who had no way of knowing that Italy had officially

surrendered to The Allies a week before. A skirmish erupted that left dead on both sides. That incident wasn't Gerald's only experience with the inscrutable machinations of fate. As far as he was concerned, a right ethical compass faithfully followed did not guarantee immunity to calamity. He wouldn't express that opinion to Ida though or his conviction that no deity intervened in the affairs of men. He gave her a neutral answer.

"I'd like to believe that. Anyway, I've already made an appointment with Dr. Reagan."

"Frank Reagan? He's a surgeon not a general practitioner. Sounds to me as if you've already made the diagnosis."

"No, not really. I just figure that if it turns out to be something serious, I'll probably have to see a surgeon eventually—don't see the use in going through a middle man."

Gerald had seen Ida frown at the first mention of Dr. Frank Reagan's name. Her expression hadn't changed, and he had a pretty good idea why. He wanted to steer her away from that issue.

"From what I've heard he's a pretty good doc," he said and watched Ida's look change from challenge to concern. She agreed that she had heard only good things about Dr. Reagan's surgical abilities and dedication to his profession.

"Well good. It looks like we're both on the same page then."

"Aren't we always?" Ida said.

"Pretty much. Just wanted to make sure."

Gerald went on to close the discussion by assuring Ida that for the most part he felt good physically. He was sure the odds were in his favor and he was confident that if he had a serious condition, it would be curable. Moreover, Frank Reagan was the man who could be the agent of that cure if all that he had heard about the man was true.

Two days before Christmas, with storm clouds warring with a weary sun, Gerald Andrews found himself in a physician's

office, an event as rare as his presence in a house of worship. Nevertheless, he felt comfortable, dressed in clean blue-jeans and a freshly ironed red-checkered flannel shirt when he approached the receptionist's desk.

The identification tag on the receptionist's white blouse said *Laura Ward*. When she pushed the sliding glass window in its groove along the counter top to the open position and showed a smile used so often it had only a hint of enthusiasm left, Gerald introduced himself and then the proper looking lady with him.

"This is Ida James, my best friend," he said.

Gerald smiled when he saw Laura Ward's eyebrows go up at his announcement. He knew that the community of Riveredge saw him as a quiet widower with no romantic interests. He accepted the clipboard containing printed forms for the recording of biographical information from Laura Ward with a nod and a grin and turned toward the row of chairs along the wall opposite the reception counter.

"There are some nice magazines there on the table, Ida," Gerald said as he neared the row of chairs. He smiled as if the presence of the magazines were a happy surprise.

There were two other people in the waiting room: a grey-haired woman who stared at the space in front of her with the look of one who is preoccupied with examining, from all sides and many times over, a life whose promise has morphed into a gift withheld; the man with her had on clothes that looked as if they might slide right off him at his slightest movement. His eyes, larger than the size of his face warranted, looked out over prominent cheekbones with an insistence that reminded Gerald of glowing charcoal.

Andrews sat and put on his reading glasses. He felt the other man studying him. When he looked up, the man nodded and offered a smile that seemed to suggest to Gerald that he knew some secret that Gerald was not yet privy to but would know soon enough. Out of courtesy Gerald returned the smile and turned his attention back to the papers on the clipboard in front of

him. In plain, sturdy lettering he printed out his name, date and place of birth, present address, and his phone number at the top of the first page.

Under *Personal Data*, Gerald indicated that he was a widower—his wife having died four years before of a cerebral hemorrhage, unexpected and unexplainable. There was no place to describe the unusual circumstances of his wife’s final illness. He thought that was strange because it seemed to him that information was as important as the fact of his wife’s death. He marked an *X* on the short line following the word *single* and printed in *deceased* where the form asked for the name of his wife. Gerald turned his attention to the section marked, *Children*.

Andrews had two sons, both grown. The younger one, dark-haired like his mother, turned sullen after her death. He moved to Bakersfield, some ninety miles south of the family home in Riveredge, and got a job there as an automobile mechanic.

Gerald paused at that memory. Albert would have been his favorite son if he bothered to think about things like that. The boy had natural mechanical ability early on. He helped repair things around the house and spent Saturdays at Gerald’s cabinet shop, developing facility with tools and an obsession with order and symmetry. Like many adolescent males, he became interested in automobile engines.

During his final two years in high school, Gerald and he rebuilt an old model-T Ford from parts ordered out of automotive specialty catalogues and scavenged from local junkyards. They painted the car canary yellow and drove it down Main Street as part of the town’s Fourth of July parade the summer after Albert’s senior year. That was a pleasant time to remember.

Gerald recalled how the messiness of Loretta Andrews’s unexpected death spawned grief in the boy that later turned to anger that he directed at his father. Albert stopped talking at any great length, muttering only the barely necessary things. He made day-long trips to other towns in the valley, looking for work and—Gerald supposed—a place and time to forget the family tragedy.

He let the boy have his space, anticipating that time would heal the broken relationship.

After accepting a position as a mechanic in the garage of a large car dealership in Bakersfield, Albert came back home infrequently and always stayed for a shorter time than promised. When Gerald took up with the widowed schoolteacher Ida James, two years after his wife's death, Albert stopped coming around altogether. The two of them hadn't spoken since that time.

The rapidity and the senselessness of the estrangement blindsided Gerald. It happened, and he couldn't understand the why of its happening; worse, once it was done he saw no way he could change it. In time, he came to thinking about the unhappy occurrence as little as possible.

He still had the affection of his older son, Bernard. Early on the boy seemed to have no direction or plan. He liked sports but was an athlete of only average skill. Win or lose—it was all the same to him. He was good at schoolwork, but it frustrated Gerald that the boy could argue with equal vehemence on either side of an issue—first taking one position then the exact opposite. Nothing was ever certain for him. That was aggravating, but Bernard was at bottom a good boy as far as Gerald was concerned, and he, Gerald, couldn't stay displeased with him for any length of time.

Bernard did well in college, and after that he took a position as a tenth grade history teacher in Clovis, a town not far from Riveredge. He was a good enough son—calling Gerald every fourteen days, on Sunday at 4 PM exactly. That was funny; Gerald had never known him to be that precise about things.

Everything changes—Gerald understood that—but he came to realize that a man doesn't often recognize a change as it's happening. In Gerald's reckoning, change plays out slowly; then all of a sudden everything that was once familiar is no longer recognizable. When you understand that what's happened crept

up on you without warning, you know there's nothing you can say for sure about what's going to happen next.

Gerald's wife was dead, and one son had slipped away to a place where his father wasn't welcome. When Andrews thought about it, a phone call from the other boy every fourteen days was a pretty slender threat to hold onto. If it weren't for the fortuitous connection with Ida James there would have been slim chance for happiness in his future.

The questionnaire in front of him didn't require the revelation of the kind of biographical detail Gerald's musings produced. He put *yes* and *2* where the form asked about children and continued on.

Occupation: *carpenter (cabinet maker)*

Employer: *self*

Position: *owner*

Insurance: *Aetna* and then the policy number.

Person to reach in case of emergency: *Ida James* followed by two phone numbers—one at the school where Ida taught, the other his home phone number.

Gerald went through the medical history checklist quickly, marking every item negative except two under *Family History*. There he explained that his father had died of a stroke, unpreventable and untreatable according to the doctors attending. Gerald supposed they were probably right about that.

The death of his mother, on the other hand, was a little more complicated. She had died of a colon carcinoma, which was discovered late in its course despite her getting yearly physical examinations without fail. That course of events provoked second thoughts in Gerald's mind about the accuracy of medical science. That was two decades ago however; now TV programs and newspapers regularly documented great strides in the early diagnosis and treatment of cancer. For Gerald it was a comfort to know that progress was being made in the management of the serious diseases.

After completing the section on present symptoms, Andrews walked the forms over to the receptionist and then returned to his seat. He sat and waited without looking through the magazines on the low table in the center of the room. The wasted man a few chairs away was watching him with more interest than Gerald found comfortable. It was only polite to acknowledge the man with a neutral grin and a nod. The stranger responded with the question that had prompted Gerald's visit.

"You got cancer?"

"Don't know; I guess I'll find out soon enough."

Gerald smiled again but looked away from the man. He was glad when the door between the reception area and the hall leading to the exam rooms opened. A woman wearing blue surgical scrubs and precisely applied make-up made an announcement.

The woman sitting next to the gaunt man rose from her chair and urged the man with her to follow her. The man rose but didn't follow his companion right away. He spoke to Gerald.

"I've got cancer, the bad kind, Dr. Imura said."

The woman apologized to Gerald then urged the man with her to move on, but he stood his ground. "This guy is supposed to be my last chance. I hear he's pretty good," he said.

The woman made another entreaty. The nurse in blue scrubs continued leaning against the door to the exam area. She smiled but offered no comment.

"Have you heard anything about this guy?" The gaunt man looked back at Gerald Andrews.

"I've heard he's good."

"Come on now, Harold." The woman grabbed the man's sleeve and started toward where the nurse was standing. This time Harold followed her lead.

"Well, good luck," was all Gerald could think to say.

Harold turned and gave Gerald that awful smile again. Then he shuffled off behind the two women and on through the door. Ida turned to Gerald and said she was glad the man was gone. When Gerald offered only a non-committal shrug for a reply, she went back to the magazine she was reading.

It was a half an hour later before the nurse returned and called Gerald Andrews's name. He rose from his seat and then turned to answer Ida's query.

"No, it's probably more comfortable out here. You can browse through the magazines. I'll have the doc send for you when we have our talk after the exam."

Ida had moved forward to the edge of her chair; now she nodded and settled against the back rest again. Gerald followed the nurse down a narrow corridor lined with closed doors and unadorned white walls that gave away nothing about the building's occupants. The reception area door behind them closed with an emphatic click. A few minutes later Gerald Andrews was alone in an exam room.

There was no nonsense here, no broad-leafed potted plants and no piped in music. Andrews had noticed that sort of stuff when he remodeled rooms in other medical offices; nothing like that here though. Its absence gave him comfort. A floor-based cabinet with a sink at one end of its counter ran the length of the wall opposite the foot of the exam table. Its surface supported jars with cotton balls, tongue depressors, and gauze bandages. Two built-in wall cabinets—doors closed—hung over the counter. A wooden ledge protruded from one wall, and there was a desk chair with casters on its legs fitted up beneath the ledge. A few pastel seascapes decorated the wall opposite; Gerald thought they were probably the receptionist's idea.

Gerald Andrews had never met Doctor Frank Reagan, but he had heard a lot about him. Overheard conversations while in line at the local Savemart, casual talk with customers in his cabinet shop, and endorsements from some of Ida's friends all had one

theme: Reagan was the best surgeon the town had ever seen and for some, “the only one I’d trust my life with; that’s for sure.”

There may have been some exaggeration in all that. There were two other fully trained general surgeons on the Riverview Medical Center staff, and Andrews had heard nothing bad about them. They alternated call with Reagan, but in the local mythology they stood in his shadow. Andrews knew the history, but he wondered how much was true and how much was apocryphal.

It was known that Reagan came to town after investigating a recruiting ad put in a surgical trade journal by the local hospital. That was four years ago now, but in a small town, the man’s credentials quickly became common knowledge: medical school and surgical residency at UC, San Francisco; two years in the Army, one spent in Vietnam; four years with a large surgical group in Sacramento; and then the inevitable dark thing there had to be to explain why a young surgeon with great talent leaves a promising practice in a big city to look for opportunity and a new beginning in a venue that promised nothing but obscurity.

Riveredge gossip had it that Reagan had an unhappy marriage to an airline stewardess he had met on an R&R leave in Hawaii. The story went on that the decision to marry was impetuous, and whatever joy there was in the union was short-lived. Those in Riveredge who were privy to such information whispered to listeners at cocktail parties that the couple had loud, public arguments according to the physicians who offered character references for Reagan. The two evidently limped away from their union after two tumultuous years, for Reagan had listed his marital status as *divorced* on his application for privileges at Riveredge Medical Center.

Other than the facts the surgeon revealed on the application, little was known for sure about the man other than his professional qualifications. He immersed himself in his work. His

dedication and professionalism were often talked about. People supposed he was trying to forget his past. That was the history of Frank Reagan, pieced together by townspeople interested in such things; by the time Gerald Andrews found himself in Reagan's office, that history was understood as solid fact, but there was a bit more.

There were rumors—the kind that grow out of declarations that begin, “I can't vouch for this for certain, but someone told me”—of heavy drinking and womanizing at clubs and hotels in Fresno. Whether those rumors were true or not most in the community of Riveredge looked the other way, preferring to see only the eccentric surgeon's dedication to his craft and his good track record at the local hospital.

Everyone in town, including Gerald, knew of the hazy rumors about Reagan. Gerald also knew the surgeon served on hospital committees but didn't socialize much in town, and that fact made people talk all the more. Most of what he had heard—about the important things that is—was favorable. As for the other stuff, he paid little attention to small town gossip; he would make his own assessment.

The door to the exam room opened, and a man—with the remnants of military bearing, a shade under six feet tall—entered. He took two steps and stood directly in front of Gerald Andrews when he extended his right hand. His greeting was so straight forward it almost seemed curt.

“I've heard a lot about you, Doc,” Gerald Andrews said.

“And you kept your appointment anyway. You're a brave man.” Reagan's lips formed the slightest of smiles. He took a step back and leaned against the cabinet with the medical equipment jars on its counter. He held a medical chart against the front of a knee-length lab coat with *Frank Reagan, MD* in red script above the left breast pocket.

Gerald had little experience with doctors and hadn't given much thought to how they might dress or how they ought to present themselves to new patients, but Reagan's sharply creased

grey slacks, light blue dress shirt, and tie with alternating red and blue stripes along with the straight-up bearing seemed about right.

Gerald's assessment was that the surgeon's presentation showed respect for his profession and for his patient. Even if Reagan were playing a part—once studied, now second nature—his appearance gave no reason to believe that the integrity and confidence he projected wasn't real. Andrews guessed him to be in his late thirties.

"No no, Doc." Gerald grinned and glanced down at his bare feet dangling in front of the exam table. "Nothing but good reports. I mean that." He looked back up.

"Well that's reassuring. You did the cabinets for the VIP rooms in the hospital, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I did that work...about five years ago. What do you think of it?"

"I think it's horse's ass."

A pause with no expectation of a response, then: "Not the cabinets; they're beautiful. But the whole idea of a fifty bed acute care hospital spending a fourth of its annual budget on two frilly-dilly boudoir rooms instead of the nuts and bolts of patient care makes no sense to me."

Gerald could think of no answer to the surgeon's declaration or his gaze. He said nothing, and Reagan started up again.

"That's what I think, Mr. Andrews. Maybe I'm wrong. How do you see it?"

"Well, I can't say I have any opinion one way or the other about that part of it."

Andrews thought the dialogue had taken a strange turn. He shrugged. "I can see that you could have strong feelings about it though, and I appreciate an honest answer."

"Any other kind of answer just confuses things. I don't know about you, but I don't like confusion."

"I don't know of anyone that does. Straight answers and honest opinions are fine with me."

"Good. I'm pretty much of a *yes* or *no* guy, Mr. Andrews. Some people, some of my patients in fact, don't like that. They aren't always ready for black and white. They want a little wiggle room, I guess."

"Black and white is a little hard to take sometimes, I imagine."

"It is. I try to provide the gray if I think a patient really needs it. But I'm not very convincing, or comfortable either, with *maybe's* and *what if's*. Sometimes I wish I were, but I'm not."

There was a momentary silence that reminded Gerald of two boxers pausing after a flurry of punches. The surgeon's outspoken demeanor had thrown Andrews off balance, but there was an honesty there that was reassuring. A man so willing to expose his private motivations to a stranger had to have confidence in his ability to prevail. Gerald could go along with that; he watched the surgeon move to the desk chair by the writing ledge and sit down.

"My receptionist wrote here on your chart, 'thinks he has cancer.' Is that what you think?"

"I've got reasons to be worried about that."

"Tell me."

Andrews related the symptoms that prompted his concern. He mentioned his mother's death from colon cancer. "When you add it all up, it kind of hits you in the face. You can't ignore the truth," he said.

"You can't ignore the facts; the truth is a different animal." Regan looked away from Gerald, then down at the chart. "When did you first see blood in your bowel movements?"

"About four weeks ago, maybe a little longer, but not by much."

"Anything else: nausea, constipation, diarrhea, weight loss, loss of appetite, unusual fatigue...any of those things?"

Gerald was glad he could answer *no* to all those items. Then Reagan asked him for details about his mother's cancer. After that the surgeon flipped through the pages of the chart. "You're sixty-five?"

"Sixty-five last April." Gerald nodded.

Reagan asked Andrews a lot of questions about symptoms he never had, conditions he had never thought of, and a lifestyle he took for granted. The interrogation ended with a compliment.

"Looks like you're trying to stack the deck in your favor, Mr. Andrews."

A smile flickered across Reagan's face and disappeared. The surgeon tapped the fingers of his right hand on the writing desk.

"Hard work and no fooling around has always been part of the deal for me," Andrews said. "It just comes easy for me...too easy maybe."

"Give yourself some credit. Good habits are only easy after years of practice; the bad ones are easy from the start...and get easier as you go along. I know all about that."

There was the inscrutable look again, as if the surgeon wondered about the advisability of intimating a truth about himself that he normally kept hidden. Reagan stood up and pulled a stethoscope from a side pocket of his lab coat.

He performed Gerald's physical exam, giving brief explanations and making small talk as he proceeded—mostly questions about Gerald's life with commentary that offered no invitation to further explanation. When the surgeon was finished with the exam, he went to the sink and washed his hands before telling Gerald he could get dressed. Reagan dried his hands with a paper towel. He was almost out the door when Gerald spoke.

"Doc, I'd sure like it better if you would call me *Gerald*. I don't think anybody calls me *Mr. Andrews*. Kind of makes me uncomfortable when they do."

“That’s fine, Gerald. That’s easier for me too. I’ll be back in a bit.” Reagan showed a brief grin and left the room.

Gerald Andrews took his time getting dressed. He decided to trust Reagan. Nothing the surgeon said or did during this first encounter gave him any reason to doubt the good things he had heard about the man’s professional competence and dedication. Moreover, the surgeon’s forthright manner of speaking convinced him he could depend on Reagan to be honest with him if and when difficult issues arose. All in all, the surgeon was a man Gerald thought he might like to have as a friend; he doubted it would ever come to that however. Andrews was seated on the exam table when Reagan reentered.

“Well, what’s the verdict, Doc? Will I make it to New Year’s?”

“You’re going to have to. I need some time to run up a slew of diagnostic charges.”

Reagan waved some color-coded sheets of paper—lab and X-ray requisitions—in the air as if he were disclaiming the attempt at humor as something he didn’t feel entirely comfortable with. The surgeon sat down at the writing desk, but before he could begin to explain all the diagnostic studies, Andrews asked him if Ida James could come in.

“Is she a relative?” Reagan started fussing with the chart. “I thought you had no relatives other than the two boys.”

“She’s a very good friend.”

“Well, that’s a nice thing—having a good friend.” The surgeon’s comment was accompanied by eye to eye contact with his patient. “I’ll have Laura bring her in,” Reagan said. Then he disappeared into the hallway.

When Ida walked down the corridor toward him, Reagan noticed that she was trim and nearly as tall as he was. She answered his smile with a steady gaze from blue eyes that highlighted an uncluttered face. Despite the translucent whiteness

of her skin and the thinning, reddish blond hair, her appearance suggested anything but fragility.

Reagan offered his right hand and introduced himself before ushering Ida into the exam room and over to the desk chair. He steadied the chair as she sat down. Then he took a spot in front of the medical supply cabinet and began explaining the lab tests and X-rays he would order. He ended with a description of the colonoscopy that would complete the work-up. Ida and Gerald had a few questions about that procedure but mostly they sat in silence.

When Reagan stopped talking and it was clear he was finished with his explanations, Ida spoke. "Do you think he has cancer, Doctor?"

Reagan hadn't mentioned the word *cancer* during the discussion of the diagnostic studies; he didn't respond immediately.

"That's what we're afraid of." Ida looked over at Gerald as if for confirmation. He responded with a grin but said nothing.

Reagan answered Ida's question: "He certainly has some risk factors and symptoms that are consistent with that diagnosis but nothing really specific right now. There are other conditions that could cause the problems he's been having. I can tell you a lot more after the colonoscopy."

"If it's cancer, he'll need an operation won't he?"

"Yes, he will..."

"I think if we get after this thing right away, we'll be okay," Gerald said.

Reagan could see that his patient wanted affirmation of the statement. He had to be careful.

"From what I can tell so far you've come in early in the course of the disease; that is if it is cancer. And of course we don't know that at this juncture. Frankly, I think we're getting a little ahead of ourselves. I don't think it's a good idea to have a

discussion of treatment options, prognosis, and all the rest of that stuff until we have a diagnosis.”

“I guess this is one of those gray areas we mentioned.”

Reagan saw Gerald smile as he made the comment. He took the gesture to mean his patient wasn’t mocking Reagan’s earlier observations about being honest with patients.

“Yes it is. But it will be black and white after the colonoscopy; I can assure you of that.”

Andrews rubbed his hands together. “I didn’t mean to put you on the spot, Doc. Waiting around for an answer to a question you wish you didn’t have to ask in the first place is tougher than the answer itself sometimes. I guess it’s tough for you too though.”

“It’s tough on everybody.”

Reagan tried not to seem hurried as he started toward the door. Before his exit from the room, he turned and offered a professional smile. “I’ll leave these requisitions at the front desk. Laura will give you all the instructions you need.”

Another moment of practiced hesitation; then he slipped into the hallway. The exam room door shut behind him.

In the room, Gerald eased off the exam table and put a hand beneath Ida’s left elbow as she rose from the desk chair. “I guess it’ll be a quiet Christmas this year,” he said.

“We’ll be all right.”

II

FRANK REAGAN'S NIGHTMARE

In Frank Reagan's den an NBA basketball announcer described, with great enthusiasm, the action flickering back and forth on the screen of Reagan's TV. At that moment, however, the viewer sitting in front of the television, a tumbler of Irish whiskey and melting ice in hand, wasn't listening. If someone asked him just then, Frank Reagan wouldn't have been able to relate the game's score; and he had forgotten who was playing. Realizing his preoccupation with other matters, Reagan aimed the remote and pressed its ON/OFF button—turning the screen into a dusk-colored void. Light from a lamp sitting on the end table that separated two sofas arranged at right angles had already lost its battle with the darkness that had settled in the room like an occupying force.

The surgeon recalled the tightening in his stomach he had felt during the discussion with his last patient of the day and the man's female companion. He had liked Gerald Andrews instinctively. There was a self assurance and solidity about the man Reagan admired and—he knew—envied. The feelings had aroused discomfort. For Reagan, there was danger in becoming emotionally attached to a patient, particularly one who might have a lethal disease.

The surgeon had long ago admitted to himself that the ambivalence he felt whenever that kind of empathy toward another human being surfaced was symptomatic of a serious character defect. Nevertheless, there was little he could do about the visceral sensations of confusion and anxiety that overwhelmed him in those situations, as they had when Gerald Andrews reached out for reassurance about his condition.

Reagan would have liked to provide encouragement, but to do so with any degree of commitment would have been

dishonest; and, in Reagan's mind, a breach of professional integrity. So he backed away from Andrews' questions with practiced tact. The words he used to keep the distance between himself and his patient were familiar enough to be remembered exactly.

Risk factors...symptoms that are suggestive...but nothing specific...I can tell you more after the colonoscopy—the phrases had rolled off his tongue as automatically as breathing. Now they echoed through his mind to remind him again of his uncertain hold on things.

Reagan finished the last of the whiskey and rose from the couch. Stopping in the kitchen to rinse the glass before walking to his bedroom, he knew he would have a fitful rest. He wondered which of the bad memories would inform his dreams this night.

A tall man, gray-haired and solemn, stood beside a bed on which lay the emaciated body of a woman whose features were forever frozen by death's grasp. The bed was in a hospital room; flowers in plastic pots sat on a window ledge and gave off the too sweet odor of rot.

Reagan recognized the tall man as his father, Dr. Thomas Reagan; the deceased woman, his mother—not yet forty years old. There were two nurses bagging up disposable hospital paraphernalia; they seemed overly intent on their task. And, standing at the room's door—observing it all while resisting being a part of it—stood a small boy. He wore a San Francisco Giants baseball cap and anger.

"You should say good-bye to your mother now, Frank. It will be a while before you see her again." The gray-haired man looked at the boy.

"Why? She can't hear me." The boy met the stares of the nurses with his own. "She's dead you know."

The nurses looked at the boy and studied him for a moment before putting the plastic bags with the used equipment into a

two-wheeled receptacle that had *DANGER, HAZARDOUS WASTE* written in large red letters on its lid. Reagan's father spoke again.

"Whisper your good-bye like a prayer. She'll hear if you whisper it."

Reagan heard the boy's speech: "I don't want to talk to her. She told me she wouldn't die, but she knew all along that wasn't true. Now I don't think I like her very much at all."

The nurses glared at the boy, and nothing Frank Reagan could do would keep the boy from uttering his final terrible words. "She lied to me; I hate her."

The boy ran from the room and down the hospital corridor, but no matter how fast he ran or even if he held his hands over his ears as he was running, he would still hear that last damning utterance and the nurses' assessment.

"Do you have daughters, Lettie?" one asked.

"A seven year-old. She's in the same class with Dr. Reagan's son at St. Theresa's."

"Keep her away from that boy. I wouldn't want a daughter of mine associating with a boy who said such hateful things about his dead mother."

"I think he's just hurting."

"No matter. I think he meant exactly what he said. There's something I've never liked about that boy. Believe me, he'll be trouble for any woman who gets involved with him."

"Can you be sure of that?"

"I've seen it before. Some people are just born to be trouble for others."

"Perhaps you're right."

Frank Reagan awoke from the dream as he always did—nearly shouting his rebuttal: "I didn't mean it. I loved my mother."

However, he could not escape the fact that the last thing he had said about his mother in the presence of other human beings,

and most importantly his father, was that he hated her, and the one nurse was right about his meaning it at that time. As time went on for Reagan, it seemed she was right about the other things also.

IV

FRANK REAGAN AND FATHER PAT O'LEARY

Frank Reagan sat in the parlor of the rectory at St. Theresa's Catholic Church and looked over at Father Patrick O'Leary without speaking. It was a moment of silence among a number of moments of silence that had chopped their dialogue up into pieces of angry questions and hesitant explanations. There was a bottle of Jameson Irish Whiskey along with two half empty glasses, a bowl of ice, and a pitcher of water on the coffee table separating the two men. Reagan leaned forward and pulled his glass to his lips. The priest did the same and sank back into the sofa. Reagan watched him take a deep breath; he seemed to be bracing up to face another verbal assault.

The surgeon, however, was out of anger for the moment and out of questions that there were no good answers to. While Reagan's relationship with his father had been an uneasy one—the estrangement starting, Reagan was sure, at the time of his angry outburst at his mother's deathbed and worsening with his father's displeasure at his son's profligate lifestyle—Reagan knew the priest had great affection for the man who had taken his life with a .38 revolver after returning home from Mass the day after Christmas.

Reagan hadn't made his usual Christmas visit to the family home in Vallejo. It was his turn to take hospital surgical call over the holiday. The excuse felt valid enough at the time, and he had promised his father he would drive up for New Year's Day. For a few brief moments they talked about watching the football games. That period of shared warmth was so brief Reagan wondered if the memory of it was true at all. What he remembered more vividly when he replayed that phone

conversation in his mind—the last time he ever spoke to his father—was that the whole exercise felt awkward and contrived, even more strained than their usual dialogues.

So now, self recrimination, along with the emptiness that came over him with increasing frequency lately, rendered Reagan helpless to offer comfort to Father O’Leary, who, he knew, was in need of solace right then. O’Leary’s eyes were bloodshot from his grief. Reagan, angry at the circumstances of his father’s death and angrier at his own part in the deterioration of the relation between him and his father, had not been able to cry. *His* eyes were clear and steady, giving the impression of deep insight but all Reagan saw through them was an inscrutable void.

It was the evening after Thomas Reagan’s burial in consecrated ground—a dangerous act on the part of Father Patrick O’Leary. That act of courage and loyalty inspired Reagan to put aside his self pity for the moment.

“Ah hell, Pat, let’s not argue about *why* anymore. I’ve got the rest of my life to try and figure that out,” Reagan said.

“It’ll take the rest of both our lives and more, and we’ll still never appreciate how much Tom was suffering. Not with any great depth anyway.”

“I suppose. I wonder what tipped him over. You would think after all those years he’d be used to the pain—numb to it almost.”

“I don’t know that you ever get used to that kind of pain. I think Tom just got tired of it; that’s all.”

“Tired?”

“Yeah, ten or twelve years—however long he was crippled up with the rheumatism—may not seem like a long time to us, but to wake up every morning knowing that you have nothing to look forward to that day but pain—that has to make a year seem like an eternity I would think,” the priest said.

“Then maybe the question isn’t what tipped him over, but why he didn’t do it sooner. That’s something to think about.”

Reagan set his glass down on the table and half-filled it with ice. After pouring whiskey over the ice, he gestured with the

bottle toward Father O'Leary. The priest gave a negative response.

"Well, at any rate, I appreciate what you did for him, Pat. I mean about making sure he had a Mass and a grave at Sacred Heart. I've been giving you a lot of guff here. It's take me all day to get around to thanking you, and I apologize for that."

"It's a tough time—no need to apologize."

"You must have had a hell of a time getting the archbishop to give permission for a Church burial." Reagan took a sip of his drink and looked over the top of his glass at O'Leary.

"He was reluctant, but Riordan isn't a totally unreasonable man, for an archbishop." The priest paused, and he held his head and eyes steady as he looked at a spot on the wall behind Reagan. "Anyway I would have buried your dad from the Church without permission."

Regan exhaled a short chuckle. "I believe you would have. Yeah, you would have. That would have been risky business, Father O'Leary."

"Faith is all about risk. But it's not as risky as a life without faith." O'Leary looked hard at Reagan, then let his face relax. "I'm sorry, just talking like a priest."

"I wonder why."

"Comes with the territory, I guess. Who said that? I remember that from something we read in high school."

The priest held the glass of watered down whiskey—the ice had long since melted—halfway between his mouth and the coffee table. He looked up at the ceiling. "I should know who said that," he said.

"It was Willy Loman, or maybe it was his brother-in-law, Bernard—somebody in 'Death of a Salesman.' Who cares anyway?"

"I just thought you'd know. You always knew stuff like that when we were in school."

“Yeah, I had all the answers. Now I don’t even know the questions.”

The priest watched the contents of his glass swirl around as he rotated his hand in tight circles. “You’re giving me an opening, Frank. You know that?”

“I know that.”

“You sure you meant to?”

“I’m pretty sure. We’ve talked about everything else. We might as well talk about me...and the state of my immortal soul.” The surgeon uttered that last phrase with a theatrical flourish. He watched O’Leary take a long swallow of his drink and wrinkle up his nose.

“Pat, throw that dishwater out and fix yourself a decent drink for God’s sake. If we’re going to have a serious conversation here, you’re going to need a real drink.”

The priest, still holding the glass in his right hand, got up from his chair. “We’ve done this before haven’t we: summer nights after work at the refinery, sitting in your kitchen with a bottle of Old Yellowstone on the table? You ever drink that stuff anymore?”

Reagan shook his head in a negative. “Me neither,” O’Leary said. “But every once in a while I look for it on the shelves down at Belletini’s. I’ve never found it. You think they still make it?”

“Beats me, Pat. I just stick with Jameson now.”

“We solved a lot of the world’s problems those nights; I know that. But I could never remember the next morning exactly what we decided.” O’Leary chuckled and shook his head.

“That’s too bad. The sign of genius is having a great idea when you’re drunk and still being able to remember it the next day.”

“That’s very apt. Who said that?”

“I did—just made it up. Get yourself a fresh glass.”

O’Leary picked up the bowl containing the mix of shrunk-down ice cubes and water with his free hand and walked off to the rectory kitchen. *He never changes*, Reagan thought. The

surgeon's hair showed tips of gray at the temples, but O'Leary still had lush, curly, black hair covering a head that housed dark blue eyes and blush-red cheeks set against a skin that was forever white no matter the season. He still walked with the clumsy gait of the adolescent who sprouted up to six-foot, four over a summer and couldn't get his new height and his suddenly too-large feet under control.

Regan remembered that Pat O'Leary, unlike himself, had been only a mediocre athlete in high school. He was a relief pitcher on the baseball team—not bad but not real good either. “Comic relief,” the coach once called him. When Reagan thought about it years later, it seemed that being a relief pitcher was an appropriate role for a young man aspiring to the priesthood.

He's always the same; no surprises from him. Reagan smiled into his drink and—feeling better with the whiskey on board—liked the thought that some people, some things never change.

Father O'Leary reentered the parlor and set two clean highball glasses and a bowl heaped with ice cubes on the coffee table. He put ice in each glass and poured the Jameson; then he pushed one of the glasses toward Reagan and picked up one for himself. Reagan gulped down what was left in his old glass and lifted up the fresh drink, holding it toward the priest.

“Slainte.”

O'Leary nodded and settled into his chair. “Where do we begin?” he said.

“I think you had implied that my current intellectual position with regard to religious belief carries with it considerable risk.” Reagan stared at the glass he held out in front of him as he spoke. Then he looked back at O'Leary. “I think that's what you meant.”

“Yes, that's what I meant. You know when you think about it, faith isn't such an unreasonable thing after all. I said faith involves risks, but they are relatively small risks; and the reward is potentially very great, infinitely great you could say. On the

other hand ignoring faith, living as if there is no caring and judging God, gives you some fleeting reward—the freedom to do whatever you think you can get away with, I suppose—but carries an infinite risk if you’re wrong.”

“A rephrasing of Pascal’s wager—that’s not very original, Pat,” Reagan said. Then he showed an evanescent smile and put up one hand as gesture of reconciliation.

“It doesn’t matter who said it first; it’s still a pretty reasonable argument.”

“Too reasonable and too easy. I never bought it. I don’t think you can discuss religion like it’s a problem in economics. People just don’t work that way.”

“Actually some people are quite satisfied with that formula. They’re almost smug about it.”

“Well, they may feel comfortable, but what they have isn’t faith. I don’t know what it is, but it isn’t faith.”

“What do you want faith to be?”

“It’s got to be a feeling, a certainty; you either have it or you don’t—no halfway stuff. It’s a conviction. I’m not so sure you can convince yourself it you don’t have a strong feeling in the first place.”

“You’re talking about grace I think, and there may be some truth to that. You had that feeling once. You’ve never told me what happened; you just sort of drifted away.”

“I guess the arguments for drifting away were more convincing than any reason I could think of for staying with it.”

“If you reasoned away from faith, you can reason back to it—or at least make it reasonable, if not compelling, to believe.”

“That’s just the point: if it’s not compelling, it’s not faith. It’s just a bunch of schoolboy arguments—no real conviction there.” Reagan reached for his glass and gave O’Leary a defiant smile before bringing the glass to his mouth.

He expected a rejoinder from O’Leary, but the priest’s response was a thoughtful stare. There were accusations hiding in the curtain of silence that now separated him from Pat O’Leary.

Reagan took another sip of his whiskey and then let his eyes follow the glass as he replaced it onto the table. He looked up and drummed his fingers on the table for a few seconds before trying to justify himself.

“You know my father had great faith, always did. After the arthritis forced him to retire, he went to Mass and Communion every day; and what happened? He winds up shooting himself. I don’t see where his faith helped him much in the end. I think he’d had enough of God’s ignoring him.”

“Actually I think Tom’s faith was a great source of comfort and strength for him,” O’Leary said. When Reagan offered no comment, he continued with his thought.

“I’ll tell you why. You yourself said it was a wonder he endured his pain for so long without doing anything as desperate as he ultimately did. I don’t think that was out of any presumption that somehow God would take away his pain. I think it was out of love; I think he was sharing his pain, and his doubts too—I’m sure he had them at times—with the One who suffered so much at Calvary. And even He had a moment of despair at the end.”

Reagan considered O’Leary’s explanation but could think of no answer. During discussions like this one, it frightened him how far apart their positions on existential matters were. That distance could too easily destroy their friendship. He took a deep breath and reached for the bottle of Jameson.

“Want a sweetener, Pat?”

“I’m good...we’re all asked to do that, you know,” the priest said.

“What?”

“Take up the cross. Most of us don’t, of course. So some people have to carry a heavier load to make up for the rest of us. That’s kind of the way I see it.”

Reagan looked at his friend and decided on another tack. He rested his elbows on the arms of his chair and leaned toward

O'Leary. "Let me tell you about another man of faith," he said. "Exhibit B."

"When I was in Vietnam—thirty days after I arrived at Quang Tri—they sent me up to Khe Sanh with a clearing company to help set up a forward station for treating the wounded coming right off the field. The US Army was supporting the ARVN, the South Vietnamese army, in their incursion into Laos; the idea was to disrupt the VC supply lines that went through Laos into South Vietnam. I think our guys probably went in with them. Anyway, I know we saw a hell of a lot of American casualties in the sixty days I was up there—two thousand wounded, somebody said.

"I wasn't crazy about the assignment. Fully trained surgeons weren't supposed to be out in the field, but the CO of the clearing company wanted a trauma guy with a lot of triage experience to help them get set up. I was the newbie at 18th Surge, so I drew the short straw and got the opportunity to eat C-rations and sleep in an eight by six foot bunker with a dentist and a partially trained pediatrician. There were two other docs with the company—both with a year of residency training—an internist and a radiologist. With that lineup I could see why their CO wanted a surgeon around, at least for a while.

"One of the other docs—he was the radiologist, from Boston I think—is the guy I want to tell you about. His name was O'Rourke—yeah one of our own." Reagan watched O'Leary's face for a reaction but saw none.

"Well this guy was a real man of faith. I heard that back in Quang Tri he went to Mass and Communion three times a week—that's how often the Catholic chaplain with the brigade said Mass at the clearing company. And there's nothing wrong with that. O'Rourke didn't drink, didn't smoke, and get this: I was told that on his mid-tour R&R he went to Honolulu...to meet his parents for God's sake." Reagan looked over at the priest and shook his head.

"A nice thing to do," O'Leary said.

“Are you kidding? Now I know you won’t agree with me here, Pat. But a guy in his late twenties, coming out of that hell hole for a week: if he has any *cajones* at all is going to want to get laid, and often—divide his time equally between alcohol abuse and sexual excess. But our boy preferred a tropical vacation with mommy and daddy.”

“Perhaps he thought it best to stay in a state of grace, considering that he was going to return to a combat zone.”

“Jesus, Pat, cut me some slack here.”

The priest shrugged and said nothing. Reagan couldn’t read the expression on O’Leary’s face. He continued with his story.

“Anyway, out at Khe Sanh this O’Rourke character gave anybody that wanted one a rosary; I don’t know where he got all of them. A lot of guys took the rosaries—not just Catholics—Protestant kids, Jews, even a few agnostics like myself. I even vowed that if I got out of there alive, I’d start going to church again. You make a lot of funny promises in that kind of situation.”

Reagan took a sip of his drink and looked at O’Leary for affirmation. The priest still wore his unreadable smile. Reagan straightened back his shoulders.

“Now I need to tell you about the Jewish kid. He was a medic from Philadelphia, a ninety-one Charlie with a college education. He wanted to go to medical school when he was through with the army. Goldman was his name, and he had won a bronze star for gallantry during a sapper attack at a firebase near the DMZ a few months before—a real stand-up guy, good medic too. He was one of the non-Catholics that wore the rosary around his neck, along with his Star of David, and a miniature Buddha. I asked him about that one night when we were playing euchre in the hospital bunker. ‘Not taking any chances, Doc,’ he said. A great kid—keep him in mind.

“O’Rourke spent most of his time in his bunker praying and rattling the beads. The CO practically had to threaten him with a court martial to get him into the hospital bunker to help us out.

“We took rocket and mortar fire every day—usually early in the morning and then again just after dark, kind of like ‘Good morning, Yank’ and ‘Good night, Joe.’ And then one day—sometime in the afternoon and just after two choppers full of wounded had landed—Charlie, or maybe it was the North Vietnamese regulars, I don’t know—started lobbing in rockets right in the middle of the day. We were in the hospital tent taking care of the wounded and trying to keep from pissing our pants. All except O’Rourke—he’s holed up in his bunker.

“The rockets weren’t landing anywhere near us. They were coming in where the personnel bunkers were, but almost everybody was busy in the hospital bunker. See, the hospital tent was in a huge hole that had been dug out of the ground by some guys from an engineering company. They put an RPG screen over the top, but that wouldn’t have helped us if Charlie dropped a rocket or mortar on the tent. Anyway Goldman crawls a little ways up the slope that led from the ground level down into where we were working. He was worried about O’Rourke because he could see the incoming landing among those personnel bunkers. I yelled at him to forget about O’Rourke and get back down in the treatment area. But he didn’t. All of a sudden he’s up, low-crawling toward the personnel bunkers.

“The top sergeant hustled up the slope and yelled at him to come back. Top told me later that Goldman didn’t even look back; he low-crawled to O’Rourke’s bunker and came out a few minutes later, pulling O’Rourke along with him. Then our quad-50 machine guns opened up and things got very loud and very scary. There must have been some sappers out on the perimeter because there were a lot of rocket propelled grenades coming in too. Goldman did the smart thing. He headed toward a trench and wrestled O’Rourke into it. He was just about to slide into it

himself, Top said, when a fragment from an RPG round took the back of his head off.

“Top sort of tumbled backward down the slope into the entrance of the bunker when he saw that. He started pounding the dirt with his fists and yelling and swearing. Everybody liked Goldman. Top wasn’t saying a lot of nice things about O’Rourke. A warrant officer from one of the chopper crews went over and held onto him to make sure he didn’t do anything crazy.

“The worst thing was that we couldn’t do anything about getting out to where Goldman and O’Rourke were for a long while because of all the ordinance flying around. Finally, things quieted down, and Top and myself and the warrant went out to where Goldman lay. He had fallen onto his back and looked as if he were just gazing up at the sky. There wasn’t a mark or any blood or anything on him or his fatigues. But when I lifted his head, the whole back of his skull was gone, and the brain case was empty. I could never figure out what happened to the brain. It was just gone—like it never existed at all, like Goldman himself never existed at all.”

Reagan stopped his story. In the yellow glow produced by the parlor’s one, inadequate lamp, the surgeon’s lips twitched and then hardened into a tight line. He held the glass in front of him a long time, staring at his private thoughts, before taking a swallow of the whiskey and leaning back. His elbows still rested on the arms of the chair.

“That had to be terrible for you, Frank. I can’t begin to imagine the horror of it.” O’Leary stopped and waited. Reagan shrugged, then continued.

“O’Rourke was just crawling around in the trench, running his hands over the ground. When I looked in he held up his rosary. It was broken in one place, and some of the beads were missing. That’s what he was doing at the bottom of the trench: looking for the missing beads. He had a weird grin on his face; I

think he was a little crazy right then. He probably didn't even know, or maybe even wonder, what had happened to Goldman.

"I took the rosary from around my neck and gave it to him. I stuffed his into a pocket of my fatigues. I still have it. I don't know why I keep the damn thing. Wanted to throw it out a lot of times; I don't know if it's been blessed or not. Maybe I'm keeping it to remind me of something, but I don't know what that would be."

Reagan stopped there and didn't say anything more for a long time—not sure whether his story was over or not. Then O'Leary spoke through the gloom.

"So what do you make of all that? You don't have to answer if it makes you uncomfortable. I think it's an important question though—maybe sometime later."

"I'm all right. You know it's not what you think."

"How's that?"

"Well, my point isn't that a man of faith was a coward; so what's the value of having faith if it doesn't give you courage? That's not it. O'Rourke couldn't help what he was I suppose. And maybe if he had never gone to Vietnam, nobody, including himself, would ever have known he was a coward. There's something worse that bothers me about the whole thing."

"Goldman's death?"

"Yeah. O'Rourke, the coward, lives—gets a little psychiatric debriefing, a medical discharge, and a plane trip back to Boston; meanwhile the brave man, an intelligent likeable kid who could be a doctor helping people right now, which is what he wanted to do, is dead. Where was God, Pat? Where the hell was God on that day?"

"That's an old question. You know that. Jews who survived Auschwitz and Dachau asked themselves that question and came up empty, but nevertheless..."

"And a lot of them stopped believing; I know that. They were real believers before, but a lot of them didn't believe after that."

“But a lot of them still did; and maybe that fact is part of the answer,” O’Leary said. “That’s what I was going to say.”

“It’s part of the answer to a different question from the one I’m asking.”

“I know what you’re asking. We can’t guess God’s purposes.”

“I’ve heard all about the inscrutability of God’s intentions before,” Reagan said.

“I’m sure, and it’s a lame explanation. But there may be logic in the divine purpose here. Think about this: Goldman was a good person; he died saving another man’s life. Maybe God knew that his life would never achieve any more perfection than it did at that moment. O’Rourke, on the other hand, needed more time, a lot of time, to realize his potential.”

“That’s a hell of an answer. Is that what they teach in the seminary? I mean it. Is that the Church’s position? I’m not trying to be a smart ass here.”

“Actually it’s my answer. I see a lot of good people suffering from bad things—your father was one of them. What I just said helps me live with that.”

“Well it’s a pretty good answer, but you haven’t convinced me of anything.” Reagan looked down and drummed his fingers on the coffee table. “Thanks for trying. I mean that.”

“You want me to convince you of the existence of a good and caring God with an argument that leaves no room for doubt, like a mathematical proof. But that can’t be done; there’s always doubt. That’s part of what faith is. You’re right about conviction and all: in the end, faith is an act of will. If you think about everything we said here tonight, maybe you’ll see that it’s not so irrational to make that movement.”

Reagan allowed only a hoarse whisper: “Yeah, maybe.” The surgeon drank the last of his whiskey, looked at the priest for a

moment, then got up from his chair. "I'd better get back to the house. Got a long drive tomorrow."

O'Leary stood up and led Reagan to the door of the rectory. The two men shook hands and then Reagan walked through the church courtyard to the street. It was a little after one in the morning, and the air was cold but not oppressively so. Reagan was glad for the opportunity the two block walk gave him to clear his head. He thought of his father struggling along the same two blocks between the Reagan home and St. Theresa's—every morning for twelve years—to pray to a god that either didn't exist or wasn't listening.

Once back in the house, Reagan went to his old bedroom on the second floor. It was no longer a boy's room. With his son's permission, Thomas Reagan had stripped the walls of all the historical detritus from Frank's growing up in Vallejo. Posters, autographed photographs of sports figures, postcards—all were gone. The walls had been painted eggshell white; the desk with the baseball player decals had been replaced by a solid mahogany piece holding a lamp that arose from a brass base. Books appealing to adolescent males had been given away. Now the bookshelves were empty except for the old Collier's Encyclopedia series, a few college texts, and bric-a-brac collected by Thomas Reagan over the years.

There was a new, dust-colored carpet; a queen size bed rested where there once had been a single twin. Thomas Reagan had converted his son's room into a comfortable guestroom for visiting adults. As far as Frank Reagan knew he was the only guest that ever used it.

Reagan took a box from one of the bookshelves and pulled out the .38 revolver that his father had used to kill himself. The gun was heavier than its small size suggested; it had a spinning cylinder and a snub-nosed barrel—an ugly weapon, as cold and cruel as the death it dispensed. Reagan walked with the revolver into the master bedroom.

Except for one barely discernible blood stain where a cleaning lady had performed her last service for Thomas Reagan, there was no evidence that the room had been the scene of a violent death. Reagan sat on an edge of the king-sized bed and hefted the gun. He spun the cylinder then released it from its position behind the barrel and examined the chambers—all empty. He snapped the cylinder back into place, spun it again, and pulled the trigger. There was a flat click.

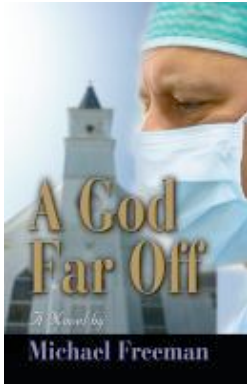
Reagan looked at the pistol and tried to imagine his father's last thoughts. He might have prayed, for forgiveness not for guidance or hope—that petition had been ignored for years. Despite its brutish appearance, the pistol could be an angel of mercy for those desperate and lost, despairing of hope and love. Reagan pushed the barrel of the gun against his ear. If one didn't think too long on its consequences, pulling the trigger would be easy enough. His hands trembled as he did just that. The result was a dull report, louder than he would have imagined. The noise, though brief, echoed in his ear canal for a long time.

He walked to the entry from the hall and flipped the hall light off before returning to sit on Thomas Reagan's bed. He placed the gun on the bedside lamp stand then shut the light off and lay down. He hoped exhaustion and the sedative effects of the Irish whiskey would assure a quick descent into sleep.

Reagan tried to call back an image of his father from an earlier time, when the two of them talked baseball or played tennis together, but all he saw was the shriveled old man whose hands had turned to gnarled claws and whose face was puffy and red from the cortisone that afforded him too little relief from his pain. A merciless disease ending in its victim's suicide had wiped out a shared narrative.

Reagan knew his mother's desertion was involuntary, and he supposed one day he would understand his father's. For now though he was alone and with no history of familial community. The last thing he saw before tottering into sleep's comforting

void were the hard knots that formed at the angles of Gerald Andrews's jaw when he told the patient he had cancer.



A world weary surgeon fights despair and self doubt while caring for a dying cancer patient. The patient's equanimity in the face of setbacks as well as the gentle but persistent counsel offered by his best friend, a Catholic priest, move the surgeon onto a path of renewal and hope. The affection and support of the woman he loves restores his sense of self worth.

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