

A New Song -1st Chapter

Angel of Light

Dappled by its movement among the branches of a Japanese cherry, the afternoon light entered the study unhindered by draperies or shades.

It spilled through the long bank of windows behind the newly slipcovered sofa, warming the oak floor and quickening the air with the scent of freshly milled wood.

Under the spell of the June light, a certain luster and radiance appeared to emerge from every surface.

The tall chest, once belonging to Father Tim's clergyman great-grandfather, had undergone a kind of rebirth. Beneath a sheen of lemon oil, the dense grain of old walnut, long invisible in the dark rectory hallway next door, became sharply defined. Even the awkward inscription of the letter M, carved by a pocketknife, could now be discovered near one of the original drawer pulls.

But it was the movement and play of the light, beyond its searching incandescence, that caused Father Tim to anticipate its daily arrival as others might look for a sunrise or sunset.

He came eagerly to this large, new room, as if long deprived of light or air, still incredulous that such a bright space might exist, and especially that it might exist for his own pursuits since retiring six months ago from Lord's Chapel.

As the rector of Mitford's Episcopal parish, he had lived next door in the former rectory for sixteen years. Now he was a rector no more, yet he owned the rectory; it had been bought and paid for with cash from his mother's estate, and he and Cynthia were living in the little yellow house.

Of course-he kept forgetting-this house wasn't so little anymore; he and his visionary wife had added 1,270 square feet to its diminutive proportions.

Only one thing remained constant. The house was still yellow, though freshly painted with Cynthia's longtime favorite, Wild Forsythia, and trimmed with a glossy coat of the dark green Highland Hemlock.

"Cheers!" said his wife, appearing in jeans and a denim shirt, toting glasses of lemonade on a tray. They had recently made it a ritual to meet here every afternoon, for what they called the Changing of the Light.

He chuckled. "We mustn't tell anyone what we do for fun."

"You can count on it! Besides, who'd ever believe that we sit around watching the light change?" She set the tray on the table, next to a packet of mail.

"We could do worse."

They thumped onto the sofa, which had been carted through the hedge from the rectory.

"One more week," he said, disbelieving.

"Ugh. Heaven help us!" She put her head back and closed her eyes. "How daunting to move to a place we've never seen ... for an unknown length of time ... behind a priest who's got them used to the guitar!"

He took her hand, laughing. "If anyone can do it, you can. How many cartons of books are we shipping down there, anyway?"

"Fourteen, so far."

"And not a shelf to put them on."

"We're mad as hatters!" she said with feeling. During the past week, his wife had worked like a Trojan to close up the yellow house, do most of the packing, and leave their financial affairs in order. He, on the other hand, had been allowed to troop around town saying his goodbyes, sipping tea like a country squire and trying to keep his mitts off the cookies and cakes that were proffered at every turn.

He had even dropped into Happy Endings Bookstore and bought two new books to take to Whitecap, a fact that he would never, even on penalty of death, reveal to Cynthia Kavanagh.

She looked at him and smiled. "I've prayed to see you sit and relax like this, without rushing to beat out a thousand fires. Just think how the refreshment of the last few weeks will help you, dearest, when we do the interim on the island. Who knows, after all, what lies ahead and what strength you may need?"

He gulped his lemonade. Who knew, indeed?

"The jig, however, is definitely up," she said, meaning it. "Next week ..."

"I know. Change the furnace filter next door, weed the perennial beds, fix the basement step, pack my clothes ... I've got the entire, unexpurgated list written down."

"Have your suit pressed," she said, "buy two knit shirts-nothing with an alligator, I fervently hope-and find the bicycle pump for Dooley."

"Right!" He was actually looking forward to the adrenaline of their last week in Mitford.

"By the way," she said, "I've been thinking. Instead of loading the car in bits and pieces, just pile everything by the garage door. That way, I can check it twice, and we'll load at the last minute."

"But it would be simpler to-"

"Trust me," she said, smiling.

Barnabas would occupy the rear seat, with Violet's cage on the floor, left side. They'd load the right side with linens and towels, the trunk would be filled to the max, and they'd lash on top whatever remained.

"Oh, yes, Timothy, one more thing ... stay out of the bookstore!"

She peered at him with that no-nonsense gleam in her sapphire eyes, a gleam that, for all its supposed authority, stirred a fire in him. As a man with a decidedly old-shoe nature, he had looked forward to the old-shoe stage of their marriage. So far, however, it hadn't arrived. His blond and sensible wife had an unpredictable streak that kept the issues of life from settling into humdrum patterns.

"Anything wonderful in the mail?" she asked.

"I don't know, I just fetched it in. Why don't you have a look?"

His wife's fascination with mail was greater even than his own, which was considerable. William James, in his opinion, had hit the nail on the head. "As long as there are postmen," James declared, "life will have zest."

"Oh, look! Lovely! A letter from Whitecap, and it's to me!"

He watched her rip open the envelope.

"My goodness, listen to this...."

Dear Mrs. Kavanagh, We are looking forward with great enthusiasm to your interim stay in our small island parish, and trust that all is going smoothly as you prepare to join us at the end of June.

Our ECW has been very busy readying Dove Cottage for your stay at Whitecap, and all you need to bring is bed linens for the two bedrooms, as we discussed, and any towels and pillows which will make you feel at home.

We have supplied the kitchen cupboards with new pots, and several of us have lent things of our own, so that you and Father Kavanagh may come without much disruption to your household in Mitford. Sam has fixed the electric can opener, but I hear you are a fine cook and probably won't need it, ha ha.

Oh, yes. Marjorie Lamb and I have done a bit of work in the cottage gardens, which were looking woefully forlorn after years of neglect. We found a dear old-fashioned rose, which I hear your husband enjoys, and liberated it from the brambles. It is now climbing up your trellis instead of running into the street! We expect the hydrangeas and crepe myrtle to be in full glory for your arrival, though the magnolias in the churchyard will, alas, be out of bloom.

Complete directions are enclosed, which Marjorie's husband, Leonard, assures me should take you from Mitford straight to the door of Dove Cottage without a snare. (Leonard once traveled on the road selling plumbing supplies.)

Please notice the red arrow I have drawn on the map. You must be very careful at this point to watch for the street sign, as it is hidden by a dreadful hedge which the property owner refuses to trim. I have thought of trimming it myself, but Sam says that would be meddling.

We hope you will not object to a rather gregarious greeting committee, who are bent on giving you a parish-wide luau the day following your arrival. I believe I have talked them out of wearing grass skirts, but that embarrassing notion could possibly break forth again.

When Father Morgan joined us several years ago, he, too, came in the summer and was expecting a nice holiday at the beach. I'm sure you've been warned that summer is our busiest time, what with the tourists who swell our little church to bursting and push us to two services! We all take our rest in the winter when one must hunker down and live off the nuts we've gathered!

Bishop Harvey was thrilled to learn from Bishop Cullen how greatly you and Father Kavanagh were appreciated by your parish in Mitford! We shall all do our utmost to make you feel as welcome as the flowers in May, as my dear mother used to say.

Goodness! I hope you'll forgive the length of this letter! Since childhood, I have loved the feel of a pen flowing over paper, and often get carried away.

We wish you and Father Timothy safe travel.

Yours sincerely,

Marion Fieldwalker, vestry member of St. John's in the Grove, and Pres. Episcopal Church Women

P.S. I am the librarian of Whitecap Island Community Library (35 years) and do pray you might be willing to give a reading this fall from one of your famous Violet books. Your little books stay checked out, and I believe every child on the island has read them at least twice!

His wife flushed with approval. "There! How uplifting! Marion sounds lovely! And just think, dearest-trellises and old roses!"

"Not to mention new saucepans," he said, admiring the effort of his future parishioners.

She drank from her perspiring glass and continued to sort through the pile. "Timothy, look at his handwriting. He's finally stopped printing and gone to cursive!"

"Let me see...."

Definitely a new look in the handwriting department, and a distinct credit to Dooley Barlowe's Virginia prep schooling. Miss Sadie's big bucks, forked over annually, albeit posthumously, were continuing to put spit and polish on the red-haired mountain boy who'd come to live with him at the rectory five years ago.

"Hey," he read aloud from Dooley's letter, "I have thought about it a lot and I would like to stay in Mitford and work for Avis this summer and make money to get a car and play softball with the Reds."

"I don't want to go to the beach."

"Don't be mad or upset or anything. I can live in the basement with Harley like you said, and we will be fine. Puny could maybe come and do the laundry or we could do stuff ourselves and eat in Wesley or at the Grill or Harley could cook."

"I will come down to that island for either Thanksgiving or Christmas like we talked about."

"Thanks for letting me go home from school with Jimmy Duncan, I am having a great time, he drives a Wrangler. His mom drives a Range Rover and his dad has a BMW 850. That's what I would like to have. A Wrangler, I mean. I'll get home before you leave, Mr. Duncan is driving me on his way to a big meeting. Say hey to Barnabas and Violet. Thanks for the money. Love, Dooley."

"Oh, well," said his wife, looking disappointed. "I'm sure he wanted to be close to his friends..."

"Right. And his brother and sister...."

She sighed. "Pretty much what we expected."

He felt disappointed, himself, that the boy wouldn't be coming to Whitecap for the summer, but they'd given him a choice and the choice had been made. Besides, he learned a couple of years ago not to let Dooley Barlowe's summer pursuits wreck his own enjoyment of that fleeting season.

It was the business about cars that concerned him.... Dooley had turned sixteen last February, and would hit Mitford in less than three days, packing a bona fide driver's license.

"Knock, knock!" Emma Newland blew down the hall and into the study. "Don't get up," she said, commandeering the room. "You'll never believe this!"

His former part-time church secretary, who had retired when he retired, had clearly been unable to let go of her old job. She made it her business to visit twice a week and help out for a couple of hours, whether he needed it or not.

"I do it for th' Lord," she had stated flatly, refusing any thanks. Though Cynthia usually fled the room when she arrived, he rather looked forward to Emma's visits, and to the link she represented to Lord's Chapel, which was now under the leadership of its own interim priest.

Emma stood with her hands on her hips and peered over her glasses. "Y'all won't believe what I found on th' Internet. Three guesses!"

"Excuse me!" said Cynthia, bolting from the sofa. "I'll just bring you a lemonade, Emma, and get back to work. I've gobs of books to pack."

"Guess!" Emma insisted, playing a game that he found both mindless and desperately aggravating.

"A recipe for mixing your own house paint?"

"Oh, please," she said, looking disgusted. "You're not trying."

"The complete works of Fulgentius of Ruspe!"

"Who?"

"I give up," he said, meaning it.

"I found another Mitford! It's in England, and it has a church as old as mud, not to mention a castle!" She looked triumphant, as if she'd just squelched an invasion of Moors.

"Really? Terrific! I suppose it's where those writing Mitfords came from-"

"No connection. They were from th' Cotswolds, this place is up north somewhere. I had a stack of stuff I printed out, but Snickers sat on th' whole bloomin' mess after playin' in the creek, and I have to print it out again."

"Aha."

"OK, guess what else!"

"Dadgummit, Emma. You know I hate this."

She said what she always said. "It's good for you, keeps your brain active."

As far as she was concerned, he'd gone soft in the head since retiring six months ago.

"Just tell me and get it over with."

"Oh, come on! Try at least one guess. Here's a clue. It's about the election in November."

"Esther's stepping down and Andrew Gregory's going to run."

She frowned. "How'd you know that?"

"I haven't gone deaf and blind, for Pete's sake. I do get around."

"I suppose you also know," said Emma, hoping he didn't, "that the restaurant at Fernbank is openin' the night before you leave."

"Right. We've been invited."

She thumped into the slipcovered wing chair and peered at him as if he were a beetle on a pin. Though she'd certainly never say such a thing, she believed he was existing in a kind of purgatory between the inarguable heaven of Lord's Chapel and the hell of a strange parish in a strange place where the temperature was a hundred and five in the shade.

"Will you have a secretary down there?" she asked, suspicious.

"I don't think so. Small parish, you know."

"How small can it be?"

"Oh, fifty, sixty people."

"I thought Bishop Cullen was your friend," she sniffed. She'd never say so, but in her heart of hearts, she had hoped her boss of sixteen years would be given a big church in a big city, and make a come-

back for himself. As it was, he trotted up the hill to Hope House and the hospital every livelong morning, appearing so cheerful about the whole thing that she recognized it at once as a cover-up.

Cynthia returned with a glass of lemonade and a plate of shortbread, which she put on the table next to Emma. "I'll be in the studio if anyone needs me. With all the books we're taking, we may sink the island!"

"A regular Atlantis," said Father Tim.

"Speakin' of books," Emma said to his wife, "are you doin' a new one?"

"Not if I can help it!"

He laughed as Cynthia trotted down the hall. "She usually can't help it." He expected a new children's book to break forth from his energetic wife any day now. Indeed, didn't she have a history of starting one when life was upside down and backward?

Emma munched on a piece of shortbread, showering crumbs in her lap. "Do you have those letters ready for me to do on th' computer?"

"Not quite. I wasn't expecting you 'til in the morning."

"I'm coming in th' morning, you all th' late-breakin' news. But," she said, arching one eyebrow, "I haven't told you everything, I saved th' best 'til last." I just wanted to run by and tell

you all th' late-breakin' news. But," she said, arching one eyebrow, "I haven't told you everything, I saved th' best 'til last."

His dog wandered into the study and crashed at his master's feet, panting.

"If you say you already know this, I'll never tell you another thing as long as I live. On my way here, I saw Mule Skinner, he said he's finally rented your house."

She drew herself up, pleased, and gulped the lemonade.

"Terrific! Great timing!" He might have done a jig.

"He said there hadn't been time to call you, he'll call you tonight, but it's not a family with kids like Cynthia wanted."

"Oh, well ..." He was thrilled that someone had finally stepped forward to occupy the rectory. He and Harley had worked hard over the last few months to make it a strong rental property, putting new vinyl flooring in the kitchen, replacing the stair runners, installing

a new toilet in the master bath and a new threshold at the front

door ... the list had been endless. And costly.

"It's a woman."

"I can't imagine what one person would want with all that house to rattle around in."

"How quickly you forget! You certainly rattled around in there for a hundred years."

"True. Well. I'll get the whole story from Mule."

"He said she didn't mind a bit that Harley would be livin' in the basement, she just wanted to know if he plays loud rock music."

Emma rattled the ice in her glass, gulped the last draught, and got up to leave. "Before I forget, you won't believe what else I found on th' Internet-church bulletins! You ought to read some of th' foolishness they put out there for God an' everybody to see."

She fished a piece of paper from her handbag. "Next Sunday," she read, "a special collection will be taken to defray the cost of a new carpet. All those wishin' to do somethin' on the new carpet will come forward and do so."

He hooted with laughter.

"How 'bout this number: 'Don't let worry kill you, let th' church help.'"

He threw his head back and laughed some more. Emma's life in cyberspace definitely had an upside.

"By th' way, are you takin' Barnabas down there?" She enunciated "down there" as if it were a region beneath the crust of the earth.

"We are."

"I don't know how you could do that to an animal. Look at all that fur, enough to stuff a mattress."

Barnabas yawned hugely and thumped his tail on the floor.

"You won't even be able to see those horrible sandspurs that will jump in there by th' hundreds, not to mention lodge in his paws."

Emma waited for an argument, a rationale-something. Did he have no conscience? "And th' heat down there, you'll have to shave 'im bald."

Father Tim strolled across the room to walk her to the door. "Thanks for coming, Emma. Tell Harold hello. I'll see you in the morning."

His unofficial secretary stumped down the hallway and he followed.

He was holding the front door open and biting his tongue when she turned and looked at him. Her eyes were suddenly red and filled with tears.

"I'll miss you!" she blurted.

"You will?"

She hurried down the front steps, sniffing, searching her bag for a Hardee's napkin she knew was in there someplace.

He felt stricken. "Emma! We'll ... we'll have jelly doughnuts in the morning!"

"I'll have jelly doughnuts, you'll have dry toast! We don't want to ship you down there in a coma!"

She got in her car at the curb, slammed the door, gunned the motor, and roared up Wisteria Lane.

For one fleeting moment, he'd completely forgotten his blasted diabetes.

"I'm out of here," he said, kissing his wife.

"Get him to leave something for the island breezes to flow through, darling. Don't let him cut it all off."

"You always say that."

"Yes, well, you come home looking like a skinned rabbit. I don't know what Joe Ivey does to you."

Considering what Fancy Skinner had done to him time and time again, Joe Ivey could do anything he wanted.

"Leavin' us, are you?" Joe ran a comb through the hair over Father Tim's left ear and snipped.

"Afraid so."

"Leavin' us in th' lurch is more like it."

"Now, Joe. Did I preach to you when you went off to Graceland and left me high and dry?"

Joe cackled. "Thank God I come to m' senses and quit that fool job. An' in th' nick of time, too. I'm finally about t' clean up what Fancy Skinner done to people's heads around here, which in your case looked like she lowered your ears a foot an' a half."

"My wife says don't cut it too short."

"If I listened to what wives say, I'd of been out of business forty years ago. Do you know how hot it gits down there?"

If he'd been asked that once, he'd been asked it a thousand times. There was hardly anything mountain people despised more than a "hot" place.

"I'm an old Mississippi boy, you know."

"An th' mosquitos ...!" Joe whistled. "Man alive!"

"Right there," he said, as Joe started working around his collar. "Just clean it up a little right there, don't cut it-"

Joe proceeded to cut it. Oh, well. Joe Ivey had always done exactly as he pleased with Father Tim's hair, just like Fancy Skinner. What was the matter with people who serviced hair, anyway? He had never, in all his years, been able to figure it out.

"I hear it's a ten-hour trot t' get there," said Joe, clearly fixated on the inconvenience of it all.

"Closer to twelve, if you stop for gas and lunch."

"You could go t' New York City in less'n that. Prob'ly run up an' back."

"There's a thought."

Joe trimmed around his customer's right ear. "I'm gettin' t' where I'd like t' talk ..."-Joe cleared his throat-"about what happened up at Graceland."

"Aha."

"I ain't told this to a soul, not even Winnie."

There was a long pause.

Father Tim waited, inhaling the fragrance from Sweet Stuff Bakery, just beyond the thin wall. Joe's sister, Winnie, and her husband, Thomas, were baking baklava, and he was starting to salivate.

"You couldn't ever mention this to anybody," said Joe. "You'd have to swear on a stack of Bibles."

"I can't do that, but I give you my word."

Joe let his breath out in a long sigh. "Well, sir, there towards th' end, I got to where I thought Elvis might be ..."

"Might be what?"

"You know. Alive."

"No!"

"I ain't proud t' admit it. Thing is, I was gettin' in th' brandy pretty heavy when I went up there. My sister's husband, he was laid off and things was pretty tight. Plus, their house ain't exactly th' Biltmore Estate when it comes to room, so ever' once in a while, I'd ride around after supper t' give Vern and my sister a little time to theirselves."

"That was thoughtful."

"I took to lookin' for Elvis ever'where I went, 'specially at th' barbecue place, they all said he was a fool for barbecue. My sister, when she heard I was lookin' to sight Elvis, she started pourin' my brandy down th' toilet. A man can't hardly live with somebody as pours 'is brandy down th' toilet."

"That would create tension, all right." Heaven knows, he'd tried for years to get Joe to quit sucking down alcohol, but Joe had told him to mind his own business. Something, however, had happened in Memphis that sent his barber home dry as a bone.

"Then one night I was drivin' around, I said to myself, I said, Joe, Elvis wouldn't be cruisin' through a drive-in pickin' up a chopped pork with hot sauce, he'd send somebody. So I said, if I was Elvis, where would I be at?"

"Seem like somethin' told me to go back to Graceland, it was about eleven o'clock at night, so I drove on over there and parked across th' street with my lights off. I hate to tell you, but I had a pint in the glove department, and I was takin' a little pull now and again."

Joe took a bottle off the cabinet and held it above his customer's head. "You want Sea Breeze?"

"Is the Pope a Catholic?"

"First thing you know, I seen somethin' at th' top of the yard. There's this big yard, you know, that spreads out behind th' gate an' all. It was somethin' white, and it ..." -Joe cleared his throat-"it was movin' around."

"Aha."

Joe blasted his scalp with Sea Breeze and vigorously rubbed it in. "You ain't goin' to believe this."

"Try me."

Joe's hands stopped massaging his head. In the mirror, Father Tim could see his barber's chin quivering.

"It was Elvis ... in a white suit."

"Come on!"

"Mowin' 'is yard."

"No way!"

"I said you wouldn't believe it."

"Why would he mow his yard when he could pay somebody else to do it? And why would he do it in a suit, much less a white suit? And why would he do it at night?"

Joe's eyes were misty. He shook his head, marveling. "I never have figured it out."

"Well, well." What could he say?

"I set there watchin'. He'd mow a strip one way, then mow a strip th' other way."

"Gas or push?"

"Push."

"How could he see?" Father Tim asked, mildly impatient.

"There was this ... glow all around him."

"Aha."

"Then, first thing you know ..." -Joe's voice grew hushed- "he th'owed up 'is hand and waved at me."

Father Tim was speechless.

"Here I'd been lookin' to see 'im for I don't know how long, and it scared me s' bad when I finally done it, I slung th' bottle in th' bushes and quit drinkin' on th' spot."

His barber drew a deep breath and stood tall. "I ain't touched a drop since, and ain't wanted to."

Father Tim was convinced this was the gospel truth. Still, he had a question.

"So, Joe, what's that, ah ... bottle sitting over there by the hair tonic?"

"I keep that for my customers. You don't want a little snort, do you?"

"I pass. But tell me this ... any regrets about coming back to Mitford?"

"Not ary one, as my daddy used to say. It's been a year, now, since I hauled out of Memphis and come home to Mitford, and my old trade has flocked back like a drove of guineas. Winnie gave me this nice room to set my chair in, and th' Lord's give me back my health."

Joe took the cape from his customer's shoulders and shook it out. "Yessir, you're lookin' at a happy man."

"And so are you!" said Father Tim. "So are you!"

After all, didn't he have a new haircut, a new parish, and a whole new life just waiting to begin?

He couldn't help himself.

As the bells at Lord's Chapel pealed three o'clock, he turned into Happy Endings Bookstore as if on automatic pilot. He had five whole minutes to kill before jumping in the car and roaring off to Wesley for a bicycle pump, since Dooley's had turned up missing.

"Just looking," he told Hope Winchester. Hope's ginger-colored cat, Margaret, peered at him suspiciously as he raced through General Fiction, hung a right at Philosophy, and skidded left into Religion, where the enterprising Hope had recently installed a shelf of rare books.

He knew for a fact that the only bookstore on Whitecap Island was in the rear of a bait and tackle shop. They would never in a hundred years have Arthur Quiller-Couch's *On the Art of Reading*, which he had eyed for a full week. It was now or never.

His hand shot out to the hard-to-find Quiller-Couch volume, but was instantly drawn back. No, a thousand times no. If his wife knew he was buying more books to schlepp to Whitecap, he'd be dead meat.

He sighed.

"Better to take it now than call long-distance and have me ship it down there for three dollars."

Hope appeared next to him, looking wise in new tortoiseshell glasses.

No doubt about it, Hope had his number.

He raked the book off the shelf, and snatched Jonathan Edwards's *The Freedom of the Will* from another. He noted that his forehead broke out in a light sweat.

Oh, well, while he was at it ...

He grabbed a copy of Lewis's *Great Divorce*, which had wandered from his own shelves, never to be seen again, and went at a trot to the cash register.

"I'm sure you're excited about your party!" Hope said, ringing the sale. Margaret jumped onto the counter and glowered at him. Why did cats hate his guts? What had he ever done to cats? Didn't he buy his wife's cat only the finest, most ridiculously priced chicken niblets in a fancy tinfoil container?

"Party? What party?"

"Why, the party Uncle Billy and Miss Rose are giving you and Cynthia!"

"I don't know anything about a party." Had someone told him and he'd forgotten?

"It's the biggest thing in the world to them. They've never given a party in their whole lives, but they want to do this because they hold you in the most edacious regard."

"Well!" He was nearly speechless. "When is it supposed to be?"

"Tomorrow night, of course." She looked at him oddly.

Tomorrow night they were working a list as long as his arm, not to mention shopping for groceries to feed Dooley Barlowe a welcome-home dinner of steak, fries, and chocolate pie.

He mopped his forehead with a handkerchief. He'd be glad to leave town and get his life in order again.

"I'll look into it," he muttered, shelling out cash for the forbidden books. "And if you don't mind, that is, if you happen to see Cynthia, you might not mention that, ah ..."

Hope Winchester smiled. She would never say a word to the priest's wife about his buying more books. Just as she certainly wouldn't mention to him that Cynthia had dashed in only this morning to buy copies of Celia Thaxter's *My Island Garden*, and the hardback of *Ira Sleeps Over*.

He knocked on the screen door of the small, life-estate apartment in the rear of the town museum.

"Uncle Billy! Miss Rose! Anybody home?"

He couldn't imagine the old couple giving a party; his mind was perfectly boggled by the notion. Rose Watson had been diagnosed as schizophrenic decades ago, and although on daily medication, her mood swings were fierce and unpredictable. To make matters worse for her long-suffering husband, she was quickly going deaf as a stone, but refused to wear hearing aids. "There's aids enough in this world," she said menacingly.

He put his nose against the screen and saw Uncle Billy sleeping in a chair next to an electric fan, his cane between his legs. Father Tim hated to wake him, but what was he to do? He knocked again.

Uncle Billy opened his eyes and looked around the kitchen, startled.

"It's me, Uncle Billy!"

"Lord if hit ain't th' preacher!" The old man grinned toward the door, his gold tooth gleaming. "Rose!" he shouted. "Hit's th' preacher!"

"He's not supposed to be here 'til tomorrow!" Miss Rose bellowed from the worn armchair by the refrigerator.

Uncle Billy grabbed his cane and slowly pulled himself to a standing position. "If I set too long, m' knees lock up, don't you know. But I'm a-comin'."

"Tell him he's a day early!" commanded Miss Rose.

"Don't you mind Rose a bit. You're welcome any time of th' day or night." Uncle Billy opened the screen and he stepped into the kitchen. The Watsons had cooked cabbage for lunch, no two ways about it.

"Uncle Billy, I hear you're giving ... well, someone said you're giving Cynthia and me ... a party?"

The old man looked vastly pleased. "Got a whole flock of people comin' to see you! Got three new jokes t' tell, you're goin' t' like 'em, and Rose is makin' banana puddin'."

Father Tim scratched his head, feeling foolish.

"Y' see, th' church give you 'uns a nice, big party an' all, but hit seemed mighty official, hit was anybody an' ever'body, kind of a free-for-all. I said, 'Rose, we ought t' give th' preacher an' 'is missus a little send-off with 'is friends!'" The old man leaned on his cane, grinning triumphantly. "So we're a-doin' it, and glad t' be a-doin' it!"

"Well, now-"

"Hit's goin' to be in th' museum part of th' house, so we can play th' jukebox, don't you know."

"Why, that's wonderful, it really is, but-"

"An' me an' Rose took a good bath in th' tub!"

He had seen the time when Uncle Billy and Miss Rose could empty two or three pews around their own....

Miss Rose, in a chenille robe and unlaced saddle oxfords, stood up from her chair and looked him dead in the eye. He instantly wished for the protection of his wife.

"I hope you didn't come expecting to eat a day in advance," she snapped.

"Oh, law," said her mortified husband. "Now, Rose-"

She turned to Uncle Billy. "I haven't even made the banana pudding yet, so how can we feed him?"

"Oh, I didn't come to eat. I just came to find out-"

"You march home," said Miss Rose, "and come back tomorrow at the right time."

Uncle Billy put his hands over his eyes, as if to deny the terrible scene taking place in front of him.

"And what time might that be?" shouted Father Tim.

"Six-thirty sharp!" said the old woman, looking considerably vexed.

His wife went pale.

He felt like putting his hands over his own eyes, as Uncle Billy had done.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't know how to say no. Uncle Billy is so excited.... They've never given a party before."

"Why in heaven's name didn't they let us know?"

"I think they invited everybody else and forgot to invite us."

"Lord have mercy!" said his overworked wife, conveniently quoting the prayer book.

They had collapsed on the study sofa for the Changing of the Light, having gone nonstop since five-thirty that morning. He had made the lemonade on this occasion, and served it with two slices of bread, each curled hastily around a filling of Puny's homemade pimiento cheese.

"I can't even think about a party," she said, stuffing the bread and cheese into her mouth. "My blood sugar has dropped through the soles of my tennis shoes."

Ah, the peace of this room, he thought, unbuttoning his shirt. And here they were, leaving it. They built it, and now they were leaving it. Such was life in a collar.

"Timothy, are you really excited about going to Whitecap?"

"It comes and goes in waves. One moment, I'm excited-"

"And the next, you're scared to death?"

"Well ..."

"Me, too," she confessed. "I hate to leave Mitford. I thought it would be fun, invigorating, a great adventure." She lay down, putting her head on one of the faded needlepoint pillows that had also made it through the hedge. "But now ..." Her voice trailed off.

"We're pretty worn out, Kavanagh. This is a stressful thing we're doing, pulling up stakes. I've hardly been out of Mitford in sixteen years. But we'll get there and it will be terrific, wait and see. You'll love it. The freedom of an island ..."

"The wind in our hair ..."

"Gulls wheeling above us ..."

"The smell of salt air ..."

It was a litany they'd recited antiphonally over the last couple of months. It always seemed to console them.

He pulled her feet into his lap. "How about a nap? We've got a tight schedule ahead."

"Tonight," she said, "Puny helps us clean out all the cabinets.... Dooley comes tomorrow evening just before the Watson party, and will have supper with his mother. Then a day of shopping with our threadbare boy and moving him in with Harley, followed by your meeting with the new tenant, and Dooley's steak dinner. Then, of course, there's the grand opening at Lucera on Thursday night after we finish packing the car, and on Friday morning we're off. I don't think," she said, breathless, "that we'll have time to celebrate your birthday."

His birthday! Blast! This year, he would be sixty-six, and just think-in four short years, he would be seventy. And then eighty. And then ... dead, he supposed. Oh, well.

"Don't be depressed," she scolded. "And for heaven's sake, dearest, relax. You're sitting there like a statue in a park."

"Right," he said, guzzling the lemonade.

He had noted over the last few days that the late June light reached its pinnacle when it fell upon the brass angel. Because of the exterior overhang of the room, the direct light moved no higher than the mantel, where the angel stood firm on its heavy base of green marble.

He had found the angel in the attic at Fernbank, Miss Sadie's rambling house at the top of the hill, now owned by Andrew and Anna Gregory. Only months before she died in her ninetieth year, Sadie Baxter had written a letter about the disposition of her family home and its contents. One thing she asked him to do was take something for his own, anything he liked.

As Cynthia rambled through Fernbank seeking her portion of the legacy, he had found the angel in a box, a box with a faded French postmark. Though the attic was filled with a bountiful assortment of inarguable treasures, he had known as surely as if someone had engraved his name upon it that the angel in a box belonged to him.

The light moved now to the angel, to its outspread wings and supplicating hands. It shone, also, on the vase of pink flowering almond next to the old books, and the small silhouette of his mother, which Cynthia had reframed and hung above the mantel.

As long as he could remember, he'd been afraid to sit still, to listen, to wait. As a priest, he'd been glad of every needy soul to tend to; every potluck supper to sit to; even of every illness to run to-thankful for the fray and haste. He'd been frightened of any tendency to sit and let his mind wander like a goat untethered from a chain, free to crop any grass it pleased.

He was beginning to realize, however, that he was less and less afraid to do what appeared to be nothing.

In the end, he wasn't really afraid of moving to Whitecap, either; he'd given his wife the wrong notion. He had prayed that God would send him wherever He pleased, and when his bishop presented the idea of Whitecap, he knew it wasn't his bishop's bright idea at all, but God's. He had learned years ago to read God's answer to any troubling decision by looking to his heart, his spirit, for an imprimatur of peace. That peace had come; otherwise, he would not go.

He inhaled the freshness of the breeze that stole through the open window, and the fragrance of oak and cherry that pervaded the room like incense.

Then, lulled by the sight of his dozing wife, he put his head back and closed his eyes, and slept.