

# Prologue

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**T**he slowing of the bus had woken him from a deep sleep. Shifting in his seat as his eyes opened and focused, he sensed a tension in those around him, a forced silence. Stretching quickly at the shoulders and arms, he saw the others straining to look out the window of the bus, into the dark. “Oh, my Jesus...” one woman said under her breath. “Lord, have mercy,” said another.

A flash of light rose quickly, a brilliant orange, the entire scene opening before him—a tank truck on its side, still burning, a car, old and big, maybe a Cadillac, against the trunk of a large tree, several Highway Patrol officers and a fireman now recoiling from the flame and heat. And through all this there had been no sound, as if everything before them played on a silent screen and they all sat in a theater, safe.

It was as he rose and came to the door of the bus that he first heard the sounds—men shouting, the blare of police band traffic from the loudspeaker of a patrol car, a siren in the background growing louder as it neared the scene and then the wail, a woman’s wail. It had to be a mother.

Out of the bus now, he stood at an embankment. A retaining rail had been torn through and broken, the ground down from there to the car and truck scarred by tire tracks. To his left, the woman’s voice rose again. He was close enough to see her face, a gash at her temple, her hair mussed and out as she struggled against those restraining her. Then came a silence as she rose to her full height, seeing above those about her, her eyes fixed on the car below. “I see him! Lord, Jesus, I can see him!” She struggled forward. “Can’t you see him? There! There! He’s alive!”

Turning toward the car, he could see a head through the back-door window rising in silhouette against the flames on the far side of the car.

“There he is! Jesus Lord! My boy’s alive, I tell you, he’s *alive!* There!” And as if propelled by the sound and purpose of her own voice, she broke through the men holding her, bolting down the embankment, toward the car. Others closed to block her way, bringing her to one knee, holding her at her shoulders, one embracing her.

Looking back to the car, he could see the boy’s head rise again, now turning toward them, and in an instant of time he was there, his right hand on the rear door handle, shouting to the boy to unlock it, pointing with his left hand at the lock button.

It was no use. The boy was dazed, his eyes swollen and bloodied, unfocused. Turning back to the door handle, he pulled again, the burning rubber and plastic stinging his eyes. Holding his breath against the smoke, he banged on the window again to spur the boy to action, but still nothing. Stepping back, he looked left and right on the ground for something to break the window, anything, and now the shouts of those on the embankment calling him back, that there was nothing to be done, then the smell of fuel oil all around him.

He turned toward the sounds, forms huddled amongst the stopped cars and trucks, arms and hands waving him away, colorless, the bus large to the left, then back to the boy, his eyes now alert, staring at him, scared and pleading, helpless as a blinding white flash rose and part of a sound, then nothing...to nothingness...

# Chapter 1

## Fr. Joseph Hara

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**M**ary Riley's St. Patrick's Day party had become something of an institution in Blessed Sacrament Parish. Such were its restorative powers at a winter's end that Peter Flannigan had dubbed it the "Eighth Sacrament," a levity ill-received by an earlier pastor, a humorless man whose name need not trouble us.

Now, the whole thing started many years back, before World War II, to celebrate the birthday of Patrick Francis Riley himself, husband to Mary, dead now 25 years of a sniper's bullet in the Pacific War. The Irish hardly needed one reason to celebrate and here there were three—St. Patrick's Day, the anniversary of good Paddy's birth, and him gone now a full quarter century, reason enough to lift a pint of Guinness. There may not be a heaven, but among the Irish there is certain immortality in being dead.

It was a Thursday evening, after dinner, and Fr. Joseph Hara sat at his desk in the rectory. This was the night of the week he held to himself to clear his desk and begin work on his homily for that Sunday. Atop the pile in his in-box was the invitation to Mary's party. Holding it to the light, he studied the renderings of shamrocks and leprechauns that adorned it, printed at Michael Casey's shop and done by Mary's own hand, and not badly. And it was one of those years when the party, always on a Saturday night, would fall on the 17th itself, a particularly good omen that would lend added purpose to the festivities.

He laid the invitation on the edge of the desk to his left, wondering briefly why Mary went to the trouble of sending out

invitations to a party everyone she wanted to come to already knew about and no one had ever been kept out of.

Now well into its third generation of Rileys and assorted relatives and friends of all stripes and times, the first party had been held at their house on Fourth Street in the Southwest quadrant of Washington, DC. Bought in 1935 on the tenth anniversary of their marriage, the house was in St. Dominic's parish, its church and spire not eight blocks from the Capitol itself. And sure, it was in St. Dominic's that Patrick had been born, March 17, 1900, being the month, day and year of it all.

It was in Southwest that many of the poorer Irish had grouped and cloistered, sharing their poverty and held tight by their religion, the very thing that had landed them there in the first place. And Joseph Michael Hara had been born there as well, in the evening shadow of old St. Dominic's and in the same week, too—March 19 being the date, the feast day of St. Joseph, devoted husband to Mary and earthly father to Jesus.

Returning to his mail, Joseph Hara began to sort it according to type and action to be taken, most to be left to Fr. Weber, the assistant pastor. Studying each piece, he was taking more time at it than the task required and he knew why. It was after the sorting and opening of the mail that he would have to start on the homily and this weighed heavily on him this night, his morning's work not twelve hours done, a service that day at Mt. Olivet Cemetery. Tim Fitzgerald's son Michael had come home for the last time, this from Vietnam and a thing called the Tet Offensive. The fighting that had raged across that poor land for most of February was only just now passing from the headlines.

There had been others before Michael, sons of parishes throughout the city. But there was something about Michael's passing that was not going to go away. He had had to leave college because his father's business had failed, taking Michael out of school and costing him his deferment. Drafted the previous spring, he was back in less than a year, in a box, sealed forever from his mother's eyes, killed in a place called Nha Trang.

Tragic as this was, what would not go away, not from

Joseph Hara, was the look on Tim Fitzgerald's face as he stared vacantly at the coffin, his son gone because he couldn't keep him in college. It was not until Joseph Hara had seen that face that he came to understand the true complexities of this war and its hurt, what it was doing to the country.

Alone in his study, the dark and silence of a March night all about him, Joseph Hara's mind drifted back to his own war, to his years in Europe during World War II and after it. An Army chaplain, he had been sent to England before they left for Normandy and followed them over to console and to bury them as they fell wounded and dying in the march east to Berlin.

There was not much of it he did not see. Broken bodies and shattered forests and cities gone to rubble, the spiked remnants of buildings above brick and stone strewn streets, their jagged edges scratching and rough against gray skies and drifting smoke. And, in the countryside, farm houses torn and shattered by thundering machines of war piloted by man-boys, and people everywhere, lost and wandering among the already dead.

For all this, though, he had yet to see hell.

Hell was Buchenwald. Even before they saw what it was, they knew what it was. There had been rumors on which the mind in its darkest recesses had feasted. But even in the darkest mind there was no appreciation or understanding of the reality of what had happened, what was there in front of them as they entered the gates, rows of rusted wire organizing the human chattel that stared blankly at them, struck dumb between the disbelief of liberation and the horror of their lives in the camp.

The stench of the place was overpowering and all around them the drifting smoke of burning flesh that lay on the skin like a film, something that could be felt at the rubbing of thumb against finger, the airborne residue of the living, now dead. But there was something worse than the sight and stench of it. It was the fear that what he saw, what he walked amongst, was beyond forgiveness, a fear that if this could happen, which it had, there was ultimately nothing to redeem it, that it was a sin not even God could forgive...or should.

He remembered that at his first confession after Buchenwald he wanted to confess the sin of it, the enormity of the crime. Though he had no part in it, having been witness to so

horrific an act moved him to see that it be confessed by someone, if only him, and that the grace of penance be applied to the scar that now marked his being. But he could only look through the screen at the profile of the priest who waited in silence, his eyes closed. Joseph Hara was unable to speak what he had seen, to explain it, his presence and being seeming so trivial against the magnitude of the crime, the sin of it. Slowly, and in silence, he had risen and left the confessional to wander the city, and for the first time since his ordination he came to doubt his vocation, even his faith.

Joseph Hara's first experience of something that he would never understand had been an appreciation of infinity. He could understand the cosmos, if not all its parts and pieces and how they were bound in it then certainly the idea and fact of it, its size in millions and millions of stars and its dimensions expressed in so many years it would take for light to travel across it at 186,000 miles per second. He could deal with all that. It was just more of what was already all around him.

What he could not comprehend was, What was it *in*? The Cosmos, no matter its ultimate size, had to be *in* something. He was not able to comprehend something not being *inside* something else, because everything he knew of was in something – churches were *in* parishes, rooms were *in* buildings... And as he had come to understand this limit on his ability to comprehend, he took some comfort in it, in the certain knowledge of his limits, an anchor that in some useful measure quieted the quest to learn what he came to know he would never understand. He had reached at least one point beyond which he need seek no further.

But this was only of the physical world, the easy part.

It was at Buchenwald that he realized that he had always had in mind a dimension of God's world, the moral context of Joseph Hara's life, in which the question of whether God had created the physical world was irrelevant. It was a question of what God comprised, and to Joseph Hara it had been the entirety of the moral world, that there was no bad that God was not greater than, that there was no bad that could ever be worse than God was good.

Not until Buchenwald. Here there was bad, there was evil

beyond all appreciation and understanding, maybe beyond even God's power to contain. In the seminary, he had come to realize that from his earliest consciousness he was aware of good and that, over time, this awareness of good had become concrete within him and it was in the context of this good that all things were ultimately to be measured, and this good was *God*. But he had now seen a bad that was beyond his imagining of good, and thus of God. He was at sea, torn from his moorings, alone and scared, terrified. *Had God lost?*

In the weeks after Buchenwald, as he went through the motions of a chaplain's life, he knew somehow that this could not be resolved back home, in some parish amid quiet homes and treed streets as seasons passed in the calm of a peace. This had to be fixed here, by him, in Europe, or what remained of it. And in this, he had to see it all.

There was more than Buchenwald, even worse. The commandant there had tried to lessen his guilt by explaining that this was only a concentration camp, that the extermination sites were all further east and Treblinka, north and east of Warsaw, the worst among them. And it was to Treblinka that Joseph Hara had to travel to see the limits of the physical part of it because without that, without seeing with his own eyes and smelling with his own nostrils the ultimate dimensions of what had happened, without this, he had no hope of knowing the limits of the moral part of it, the depth and width of the sin and it was with this understanding that he might hope to appreciate how much good was needed to contain it, just how infinite God must be to have meaning.

But a person did not just go to Treblinka, even after V E Day, especially an Army chaplain assigned to a division assigned to an occupied region under Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces Europe, SHAEF. In his efforts to get to Treblinka, though, Joseph Hara had in his favor an ultimate truth and it was this: he could not remain a priest unless he saw Treblinka and maybe not even then, that he needed to be fixed inside, in his mind and in his heart, no less than the minds and hearts of the soldiers he consoled.

Thus emboldened, he had sought a meeting with the commander of chaplains in his Army Group, a Catholic

monsignor from Cleveland. As he waited outside his office, though, he came to realize that his “ultimate truth” was really no more than a threat to throw away his own life as a priest. Stripped of this thin shield, his only armor, it was with great fear and trepidation that he had entered the office, taking a seat before the monsignor’s desk.

After several minutes of pleasantries, he began to explain his dilemma, clearly and with as little emotion as he could manage. On finishing, there was a long silence, Joseph Hara knowing somehow that it was not intended to intimidate or to delay. The monsignor was thinking deeply about what he had heard, studying it. After perhaps a full minute he sat forward, his arms laying folded on his desk.

“You are not, alone, Fr. Hara,” he began, and seeming to anticipate what was in Joseph Hara’s mind, continued. “And I don’t mean that God is with you, which He most certainly is. I mean I have had several requests such as yours, and on consideration, have denied them.” Another silence. Sitting back, he looked at the ceiling and continued.

“Is all that we have lived through so horrible that even the end of it, even peace, is not enough to quiet the heart, to bring hope?” Looking back across the desk, he gestured with his hands as if making an offering. “You may go to Treblinka, and wherever else you feel you must go. Something tells me that your need to do this is far greater than the others. And it is because of this that I sense that you have the greatest hope of coming to a resolution of it.” He paused. “And not just a way to get by, you understand, but a *resolution*.”

His eyes had fixed on Joseph Hara for a minute. “There is one condition, though.”

“Yes?”

“That when you come to this resolution, that you share it with me—how you came to it and what it is.”

Joseph Hara silently nodded his assent on which the monsignor rose and motioned toward the door. “I will assign you to a separate billet in SHAEF, apart from your current command. This will take you off the list of those to be mustered out and sent back to their dioceses. You’ll remain here, under my command. For a while, at least.”



“Thank you,” Joseph Hara had said, shaking the monsignor’s hand. “You are very kind.”

“And let us hope wise.” The monsignor smiled warmly. “I will pray for you, father.”

“Thank you.”

They had come to the door and as the monsignor reached to open it, he turned and looked directly into Joseph Hara’s eyes, holding them for a moment, as if weighing whether to do something of consequence before speaking. “I want to pass something on to you that was once told to me,” he began. “It was at a time of great confusion and doubt in my own life. And there is a hardness to it that I did not like at first, though I have come to value the thought deeply. It is this: *A faith untested is but a habit unbroken.*”

He stared at Joseph Hara as the words sank in, as if to measure their impact. “Think about that as you search for the faith you will need to live your life as you have chosen—a man of God, and a priest of Christ.”

It was from his years in Europe, especially those after the fighting was over, that Joseph Hara had drawn the courage and resolve to continue his life as a priest. It was during these years that he had completed his growth as a person. Not that he had stopped learning since, but that the persona that was going to continue to learn had come to a core definition and dimension, even reality, to the “him” that was now Joseph Hara.

Reaching now for a legal pad, he picked up a pen from the desk, removed the top and began to write across the top of the page

V i e t n a m

The word came more easily than he had expected, and as he was about to underline it the doorbell rang. He checked the clock—9:15. Fr. Weber was out and Mrs. Jackson had retired to her room for the night. Returning the pen and pad to the desk, he rose, wondering who would be calling at this hour.

The light from his study spilled into the parlor beyond which the foyer glowed in the light of a wall lamp at the top of the stairs. The bell rang again and, switching on the porch light and looking through the side window, he saw Kevin Riley, Mary’s youngest son, now a social worker in West Virginia. A

smile quickly came to Joseph Hara's face as he undid the chain lock and opened the door.

"Kevin! What a pleasant surprise! I was looking forward to seeing you Saturday, and here you are, two full days early! Come in, come in..."

"I hope it's not too late, Father. It must be passed nine."

"Nonsense! It's never too late for you Kevin." Joseph Hara winked. It was a private joke between them. Kevin Riley had been Joseph Hara's best hope for a vocation from the parish, but he had joined the Appalachian Commission instead, choosing to do his good works outside Mother Church. Though disappointed, Joseph Hara still had hopes that someday Kevin would seek the priesthood. And no matter, really. Kevin Riley was as fine a young man as Joseph Hara had ever met, maybe the finest, and any way Kevin Riley chose to serve God was all right with him.

As Kevin stepped in, Joseph Hara could see he was not alone. "And who's this?" Bending slightly, he offered his hand to a boy stepping in just behind Kevin Riley, maybe ten years old. The boy stopped and took the offered hand, returning the smile, confident, almost beaming.

"This is James Rogers, father."

"Welcome James Rogers. Please come in."

The boy smiled as he bowed slightly at the neck and followed Kevin Riley through the doorway.

The night air was chilly, even cold, and Joseph Hara closed the door quickly before reaching for the parlor light and switching it on as he ushered them in, motioning Kevin to the couch where he sat down and James next to him. "Can I offer you a drink, Kevin? A coke maybe for James?" He stood next to his armchair, looking at Kevin and then James. "Maybe a cookie or two?"

"No, thanks, Father." Kevin Riley looked to James, smiled, then back at Fr. Hara. "We're not hungry. In fact, I can only stay a few minutes." He cleared his throat. "I was hoping to ask a favor."

"Name it," Joseph Hara said as he sat in his armchair, opening his arms to whatever he had.

"Could you put James up for a few nights? I sort of

promised his mother I'd take care of him and he'd just get lost in the house with everyone in town and Mom getting ready for the party. He's a fine boy and will be no trouble. And we'll be getting on first thing Sunday."

"Glad for the company." Joseph Hara smiled at James to reassure him, then turned to Kevin. "There's just Fr. Weber and Mrs. Jackson and me. Barely reason to heat up the old place." He looked back at James. "Sure, I can't get you a cookie or two? A glass of milk?"

"No thanks," James replied, Joseph Hara thinking how well-mannered the boy was, so self-assured and confident.

Kevin Riley rose. "I really hate to have to go so quickly, Father, and asking a favor as well, but Mom was expecting me several hours ago. I don't want her to worry."

"Absolutely." Joseph Hara rose and started for the door. "I'm certain Mrs. Jackson's still awake and she'll see that James is comfortable." He was silent for a moment, looking at Kevin Riley and giving him a chance to say more about the boy, but he didn't. Turning toward the door and opening it, he smiled at Kevin Riley and held him at the shoulder. "Good to have you home, son. Come by in the morning."

"Coffee at the rectory," Kevin said. "Will you be saying 6:45 mass?"

"I will."

"Good. Then after that. And thanks again for helping us out."

Joseph Hara shrugged, smiling. "It's what I do."

They shared a quiet laugh as Kevin Riley stepped into the cold and Joseph Hara closed the door behind him, starting up the stairs, James in tow to introduce him to Mrs. Jackson.