

THE VOICE OF GOD (Part 1)

Larry J. Maness*
Professor of English (retired), Rivier University

Chapter 1

When the church caught fire, rumors spread like so many sparks in the night sky: Father Jerry set it himself. Hadn't faulty wiring popped up in one sermon after another over the past months? He could build a sermon around anything, but he chose old wires and imperfect circuits to prepare the congregation for what was coming. It's clear as a spring morning now--Father Jerry wasn't raising more money to fix what ailed the hundred-year-old building. No, he was raising money for his own personal use once he caught the Provincetown bus to Boston, then onto Logan Airport where two tickets to Rome waited for him. He burned the church to destroy evidence that would lead to his conviction.

But, the tickets were never picked up, and Alitalia's Flight 725 left without Father Jerry and his companion. Where they got to, no one knows. Who Father Jerry was traveling with, no one is telling.

The silence only fueled the rumors: The airplane tickets were a hoax, a planted diversion designed to perplex. Father Jerry was as Irish as a Dublin pub; he wouldn't run to Italy. He'd go back home and disappear among all the Dublin Dunns. Or, maybe South America. How long could you live in Argentina on three hundred thousand dollars? If, indeed, that was the correct amount stolen from the church. Father Jerry didn't keep all the money in the bank and what records he did keep burned in the fire. Gossipers started out at eighty thousand stolen and like bids shouted out at an auction, stopped at half a million before people came to their senses. Where would Father Jeremiah Dunn, the parish priest of St. Peter the Apostle in Provincetown, Massachusetts, lay his hands on that kind of money? It couldn't have come only from the congregation. They gave small amounts weekly and willingly but nothing close to three hundred thousand in the six years Father Jerry urged their generosity.

Maybe it wasn't money that drove him to overload the wiring, feel the walls heat until flames shot through the roof, making sure the old wooden church could not be saved before he called the fire department. Maybe at fifty he'd fallen in love with someone other than God. Maybe a woman captured his kind heart. Or, maybe the suspicions about his sexual preference were true, and he gave in to a man. Or, maybe, like the tickets to Rome, that second seat on the airplane was also meant to cloud clarity. There was no one else. There was only Father Jerry who had vanished with the money like the smoke mixing with the sparks that rose into the night's sky.

Ben Covey drove past the locked and unmanned ranger station at the edge of Herring Cove's nearly empty parking lot and backed his double slide Fleetwood into place. It was the last week in April, and a heavy northeast wind stacked choppy seas along the beach. Covey liked this time of year on Cape Cod. The camp grounds were officially closed, and large crowds were weeks away as were the sand flies, gnats, and mosquitoes. Covey and his family had the entire beach to themselves.

Usually, the Timlins joined them for the inaugural weekend of the camping season, but Joey Timlin said it was still too cold to hit the road. Joey, like the rest of New England's residents, had suffered through the longest stretch of bitter winter on record. Over one hundred inches of snow had fallen in Boston, making unbearable the subzero temperatures. In February, the thermometer never rose above twenty degrees. Most nights were in the minus single digits. As bad as it was in the city, the Outer Cape, that thirty-mile stretch of sandy land between Chatham and Provincetown, received more snow than any other place in the state. Blizzards and nor'easters pounded the fragile shore, dumping over a foot of snow at a time. The last storm in mid-March buried the dunes in more than three feet of white powder. For the first time in memory, the beaches were filled with more cross-country skiers than fishermen. Joey Timlin jokingly told his friend Ben Covey that when he got to Provincetown, a foot of snow would greet him at the Herring Cove parking lot. Joey would wait another week or two to keep peace in his family before driving down and freezing.

Ben found the cold wind refreshing. It cleared his head and gave him fleeting, anxious thoughts about exploration and traveling where no one had before. The RV salesman stressed adventure--pack up the family and set out on a trip of a lifetime. Ben believed in that adventure. He savored moments alone on the windy beach under low, gray clouds. You had to dress for the weather, but the Fleetwood had plenty of closets, enough to please Janie, his fourteen year-old daughter. Twelve year-old Sam, Ben and Sarah's other child, got by on sweatshirts and shorts. No matter what the weather, Sam put on his red Patriots football sweatshirt and cutoff blue jeans. Freezing or not, he stayed true to his summer uniform.

Ben caught a glimpse of that uniform disappearing over the steep dune that bordered the tarmac parking lot. Janie led the way, hoping the dune's height would provide reception for her cell phone. When that failed, she pulled her fleece jacket tighter around her and picked her way around a thorny cluster of *rosa rugosa* full of tiny spring buds.

"Who you callin'?" Sam dashed past her, stomping across some beach grass flitting in the breeze. "I bet I know. Ryan."

"Shut up."

"Ryan, Ryan, he's my man. If he can't do it, no one can."

Janie spun and hurried off in the opposite direction. "I have other friends."

"Say what you want. It's Ryan."

Janie tried the number again, then glared at her awkward brother. "It's not anybody. The phone doesn't work out here in the middle of nowhere."

"It's not the middle of anything. It's the end, the end of the world. You can't go any farther unless you want to drive into the Atlantic and drown."

"I can swim."

"Not as good as me." Sam caught up to his angry sister and reached for the phone. "Let me try."

Janie jerked it out of reach. "When you grow up."

"I'm almost as old as you." Sam lunged one of his famous, high-energy, fake-out lunges he used on the basketball court to steal the ball. Janie stepped aside and watched her brother fall in a heap.

"How's that beach plum taste?" Janie snickered. "You want to watch those stickers don't cut your baby face."

"Who you calling a baby?"

"You."

"You don't know what you're talking about." Sam squirmed to his seat.

"Do to. Mom taught us last year." Janie swept one arm over the mounds and hallows of sand chiseled and changed for thousands of years by the wind. The dune's immensity produced a loneliness

in her that made her secretly glad her brother was with her. “Nature walks,” Janie continued. “You should have paid more attention. If you had you would know you’re sitting on a clump of dusty miller.”

Startled at the thought, Sam put his hands down to push himself up only to jerk his right hand away.

“What’s the matter?”

“I dunno. Something hard.”

Janie bent down for a closer look as Sam clawed through the sand. In seconds, he pulled out a tarnished, silver cross upon which lay the delicate figure of the crucified Christ. The cross more than covered both of Sam’s open hands.

“It’s huge,” he cried, not able to contain his excitement. “Maybe it’s part of some buried treasure. I bet it is. Mom said explorers were here hundreds of years ago. They probably left stuff behind.”

Janie took the cross and held it by the piece of short chain attached at the top. “It’s not all here,” she said, looking more carefully at Sam’s find. “The chain’s broken. See this link? It’s opened the slightest bit.”

“So?”

“So maybe it got caught on something and fell off somebody’s neck or out of their hands. I don’t know.”

“I do,” Sam blustered. “I say it got caught on an old nail in the wooden chest when the pirates went to bury it. Those old chests were heavy, especially loaded down with gold and jewels and iron muskets to fight off their enemies. I’m going to find it.” Sam dug wildly, not waiting for Janie to join in. “I’m gonna be a billionaire.” His hands sprayed sand like a digging dog. “I’m gonna buy a motorcycle and an airplane and a movie theatre so I can see all the films and eat all the popcorn I want, free.”

Sam’s furious digging flung a clump of something that fell with a thud near Janie’s feet. Could her boneheaded brother be right about the treasure? With the tip of her shoe, she nudged the offering, scraping off some of the caked-on sand.

“Sam?” A hint of revulsion and fear mixed with the words. “Samuel? Would you stop digging, and tell me I’m seeing things?”

Sam stopped his search, but he couldn’t do more to ease his sister’s mounting fears.

“Mother!” Janie’s frightened voice quickly pierced the wind. “Mother, up here. Quickly!”

Ben Covey had never before been a news item, but now he stood beside his wife and children with their RV as a backdrop. Adventure, indeed, he smiled to himself, knowing that the image of him and his family filled the airwaves all over New England.

“A family on vacation, in a spot they’d visited for years, has found what looks like human remains in the Provincetown dunes,” stated the news anchor. “The local police will say only that they can reveal nothing at this time. It’s too early in their investigation, but the State Police and their crime labs will be actively involved in identifying the tattered pieces of cloth, the two small bones, and the tarnished silver cross. Even when asked directly if the cross came from the church that burned to the ground last January in this small seaside community, the police would not speculate. And, Father Jeremiah Dunn, the missing priest? Were the bones the children found his?”

Ben had his theory even if the police were saying nothing.

“Of course they are Father Jerry’s,” Ben said, looking solemn and straight into the camera. “We never miss a mass, even when we come to Provincetown. But wherever the church, the priest protects what belongs to God. That’s his job. Father Jerry came out here to the dunes to get that cross back from whoever stole it.”

“And who might that be?” the on-scene reporter asked.

“The guy who set the church on fire. That’s obvious,” Ben said. “That’s the only thing that makes sense. Father Jerry was chasing the guy down and caught him. Only he found out too late that he couldn’t defend himself. Priests fight for our souls, they don’t do hand-to-hand combat. What happened to Father Jerry is proof hand-to-hand combat is not a good idea. It cost the poor man his life. And, I know one other thing.”

“And what is that?” the eager reporter asked.

“Even for a priest, it was a terrible way to die.”

Chapter 2

The two story, red shingled, three bedroom house at 610 Commercial Street radiated the charm of an old farmhouse. Its small parlor looked across the street, offering views of Provincetown Harbor. A spacious, low ceilinged kitchen in the rear connected to an ell and small workshop. In back of the property, surrounded and hidden by trellised wisteria, sat a comfortable cottage Mrs. Katharine Cardosa used to rent out in the summers to help pay the upkeep on her house and the ever-rising property taxes. The cottage had housed her son since Lino moved back home. His older sister, Dr. Carol Cardosa-Stanley, lived in San Francisco with her own family, her own medical practice, and her own set of problems. It was impossible for Carol to get away for more than a few weeks at a time, which added to her worries about her mother’s failing health. Since Carol didn’t need the money, she offered the family house as a bargaining chip. If Lino would accept responsibility for dealing with their mother’s decline, Carol’s share of the property would be his when the red house sold.

“Even in this market, that house alone is worth well over a million dollars,” she reminded him. “That’s not including the value of the cottage. What do you think? Another four to five-hundred thousand?”

“It’s not going to happen,” Lino said when he’d first heard Carol’s proposal.

“But there’s plenty of room. You remember how big the house is. You could finish off the attic in your spare time,” Carol said. “You and Linda won’t even know Mom’s there.”

“Linda and I are splitting up.”

Carol wasn’t surprised. Only the strongest families survive the death of a child. “I’m sorry, Lino. Really, I am,” she said, seeing in her mind a defeated Lino. He’d changed since Steven’s death. Not in looks. He would always look like their father--five feet ten inches tall, jet-black hair, and the body of trim middleweight boxer with wide shoulders that slanted down from his collarbone, as if something were pressing on them. His dark eyes surrounded by crow’s-feet were direct and piercing to the point of unsettling those who didn’t know him. What changed was his attitude. He had buried all happiness with his son and now moved through life as if carrying the coffin on his back. “Not the best of times, is it?” Carol offered.

“Not the best.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” She knew he wouldn’t. Lino sailed with a level keel, keeping both sorrow and joy to himself until he ran aground and exploded.

“There’s nothing to say,” he said. “It just didn’t work.”

“You need to bring closure to this, Lino. You and Linda both. You’re never going to have a moment’s peace until you find out what pushed Steven over the edge.”

“Aren’t there rules forbidding psychiatrists from counseling family members?”

“Friendly advice, that’s all.” Carol knew her brother well enough to change course. “What are you going to do with your house?”

“Linda’s staying. I’m moving out.”

“If you don’t have a place...”

“I’m a grown man, I’m not moving in with mother.”

“There’s the cottage.” A memory jarred her. “And the bay. You used to do all right running dad’s little skiff across the bay taking clients fishing.”

“That’s ancient history, Carol. Nobody remembers.”

“Not until you tell them you’re back. You can’t keep closed lipped about it. Guides get the word out. Besides, you love being on the water. What is it you used to say? All you need to be happy is a body of water, a trustworthy boat, and a customer paying you to take him to the fish.”

“I’m not listening, Carol. Tuned out.”

“Think about it, all right? That’s all I ask. We can’t let Mom go it alone much longer. She needs help.”

“She doesn’t want any.”

“I know what she says, but what she says isn’t reality. You and I know that. She needs somebody with her.”

“How about a rest home?”

“Don’t be mean, Lino. Besides, Mom won’t leave her house. She loves it there. Even if you were only nearby to check in, that would be a great help. We can hire someone else to actually take care of her.”

“Someone like who?”

“Social workers, nurse’s aides, care givers.” Lino could almost see his sister twirling her long black hair around two fingers as she worked toward a solution. “People trained to do that sort of thing. There’s help out there, Lino, we just have to find it. I’m not asking you to do it all alone.”

“It just sounds like it.”

“What’d I say about being mean?” She let the thought hang. “We’ve got to work together, Lino. We can’t bicker over this. We’ve both got our own problems, but Mom needs us, and I can’t do much this far away. You can. You’re going to have to do it.”

Lino knew it was true, but he didn’t like being pushed into corners. “I’ll think about,” he said and hung up.

The cottage had not been renovated in the hundred years since it had been built. Lino liked that most about it. It had a feel, a spirit, a sense that it belonged. He felt none of those things about himself, even though 45 years ago he’d been born twenty yards away in the red shingled house.

Lino’s father, Vincent, like most Portuguese who settled in the area, fished Cape Cod’s waters until his dragger went down killing captain and crew in a violent fall storm off Stellwagon Bank. Lino was studying when his mother called with the news.

It was exam week at Boston College. Adilino Cardosa, the first male in his family not to fish for a living, closed his books, turned out the desk lamp, and sat alone in the darkness. He saw clearly the

seventy-foot *Amy Ann* floundering as his father tried to save his ship and crew. At the memorial mass, said at the church that was now burned to the ground, Lino heard only the wind shrieking through the winch cables; he saw waves the height of mountains; he saw the futility and fear in the men as their watery grave rolled them under.

Lino held back his tears. The few that escaped were for his mother who would live lost without her husband. Lino knew that as certainly as he knew he would graduate and marry Linda Maria Colas even though he had yet to propose. Some things were meant to be like his new life in the cottage.

Lino moved out of his Gloucester house and loaded what little he needed in the back of his SUV. He, then, drove to Brown's Boatyard where the *Pico II* waited on its trailer. In five hours, boat and man were parked in the shell-covered driveway of the family home in Provincetown's east end. He spent one night in the red house before confirming what he already knew: Staying under the same roof with his 75-year-old mother would never work. She repeated conversations, asked the same answered questions again and again, and wet herself at the dining room table. Lino knew about her mental lapses but not the physical. The next morning he was on the phone to social workers who put him in contact with a nurse's aide whom Mrs. Cardoso fired within the first week. Lino hired another--the stout, Irish Colleen Hurley, sixty years wise and wily. He gave her a key to the red house, so Mrs. Cardoso couldn't lock Colleen out, and promised her a bonus if she'd stay six months. Lino found great peace when Colleen survived the first 30 days.

Lino dropped his charter off at the landing on Fisherman's Wharf and backed his boat out between the other boats for hire that lined MacMillan Pier. Tourists could spend money traveling a few miles out to sea on whale watches, or stay in the harbor for a few hours under sail. Still others came to Provincetown to fish. Most fishing boats that left MacMillan were bruisers. The large day boats carried dozens of fishers dangling lines over the anchored boat's sides in hopes of catching fluke and cod. The smaller charters carried four to six passengers plus crew on 40-feet of sportfish capable of chasing down everything that swam, including thousand pound tuna. Lino occupied the other extreme. He took only one passenger with fly-fishing gear for either four- or six-hour trips out to Billingsgate Shoal or the Race or the shallows off of Herring Cove or wherever his father taught him bass or blues could be found.

Lino made his father proud by learning quickly and well. In college, there was never any doubt as to Lino's summer job. He would guide fishermen along the National Seashore in his father's 4-wheel drive or take them to the flats in his father's skiff. It was in college that one charter asked if Lino had ever guided a fly fisher.

"No," Lino answered skeptically. "Should I?"

"You'd be the first in this area," the man said. "You should try it. It might change your life."

Lino took his advice, learning first how to cast saltwater flies so as to anticipate the frustrations and joys of his clients. Before long he was tying experimental flies and testing them at various depths and lighting conditions. Word traveled quickly among recreational fishers of Lino's dedication to the sport. Within one year, he became the youngest and most sought after fly fishing guide on the Outer Cape.

Back at his mooring, Lino put away his gear in the lockboxes, then dropped the painter into the dinghy and rowed the fifty yards to shore. He pulled the dinghy above the high water mark and pushed it up onto the small dock. He carried the oars along the path lined with sea grass that led to Commercial Street. In his mother's drive, he saw a neatly dressed, elderly man leaning against a large black car

parked behind Colleen's little Honda. Lino crossed the street, wondering how a chauffeur could get so lost.

"Take a wrong turn?" Lino asked. "Not likely anyone here called for a driver."

The man smiled self-consciously. "You don't recognize me, do you?"

Lino took a long look. Something familiar in the round face and pale brown eyes nagged his memory, but he couldn't make the connection. "Sorry."

"It's the collar or lack of it." The man tugged at his open shirt. "I'm out of uniform," he said. "Katharine didn't remember me either."

"Mother doesn't remember much," Lino said, trying to place where he'd seen the man. "What can I do for you?"

"Quite a bit, if truth be told. Quite a bit." The man extended his hand and held it there until Lino leaned one oar against the car and accepted the greeting. "I'm Father Silva. Retired. Katharine and I had a nice visit. A bit strained, but I did some catching up with Colleen's help. I'd say your mother is at that stage that she requires a good personal attendant. Colleen seems to be that. It's also good of you to come back and spend time with your mother. She may not say as much, but she appreciates it. I can tell."

Lino picked up his oar. "Father Silva?" he mused.

"Coming back?"

"Some."

"No wonder," the priest said. "You and I left Provincetown at about the same time. It's easy to forget. How many years has it been?"

"Twenty-five, more or less."

"That's about right. I presided over you and your sister's first communions. And, your dad's memorial mass with his crew."

Lino blotted out the memory.

Silva half smiled. "You do remember some of it. You may not want to, but..." The priest matched Lino's steps toward the cottage. "I drove down from Boston to see you."

"Me? Why?"

"To ask a favor. Strange, isn't it? You don't see someone for all that time and, then, out of the blue, he shows up and asks you to do something for him."

"Like what?" Lino asked, not sounding encouraging.

"You're quite right to be skeptical. Who wouldn't be?" Shoes crunching shells underfoot broke the awkward silence. "I understand you were in insurance for many years. Not sales but corporate investigation. Hauling in the crooks and thieves out to defraud Colas, Haggerty and Johnson. Your father-in-laws company isn't it?"

"It is."

"One of the largest insurance firms in New England."

"In the country," Lino corrected.

Father Silva nodded. "Of course. Then, all of a sudden, you quit and went back to fishing up in Gloucester near where you and your wife lived."

"A little guiding, that's all. I had the boat up there. I might as well use it."

"Quite a career change. One day you're traveling all over the world chasing crooks, the next you're in your boat chasing fish."

Lino shrugged.

"Do you mind if I ask why?"

“Family issues,” Lino said flatly.

“Meaning your son. I left a message when I heard, but you never called back.”

“There wasn’t much to say.”

“We all need someone to talk to from time to time. Especially when something so horrible...”

“You never said why you drove down from Boston.”

“I did. I want a favor. Nothing official from the Church, mind you. This is a personal favor for old time’s sake. I assume you’ve kept up with the goings on regarding Father Jeremiah Dunn.”

Lino shrugged. “I’ve heard rumors like everybody else. I didn’t go looking for more.”

“That’s the favor,” Father Silva said. “I want you to go looking.”

“I’m a fishing guide. What free time I have belongs to my mother. I’m not interested in doing anything else.”

“You’ll be less interested when you hear that I’m not in a position to pay you.”

“Then why should I even consider it?” Lino asked genuinely curious.

“Because you are Vincent Cardosa’s son.”

Lino put the oars against the cottage porch. “Can’t deny that,” he said, opening the screen door. “Sorry you made the trip for nothing, Father, but I’ve had a long day and want nothing more than to mix myself a drink and relax.”

“A fine idea,” Father Silva said and followed him inside.

Chapter 3

The first floor of the cottage was open living space with a small kitchen along the back wall and a living-dining area in the front. A glass slider opened onto a small side garden that Lino tended intermittently. An outdoor shower was on the same side of the house as the garden. Two bedrooms and a bath were upstairs. The furnishings were typical renter’s fare: A pullout sofa and round Formica kitchen table for four. In one corner, Lino created a cramped office complete with an answering machine, a place for his fishing logs, fly tying vise and tying material, and a marine radio that murmured weather updates. A small television sat unused in the opposite corner.

“What would you like?” Lino asked, annoyed the priest had invited himself in.

“Scotch over ice. One cube.”

Lino removed a bottle and two glasses from a kitchen shelf. He clanked a single cube into each and poured while Father Silva studied a photograph of Vincent Cardosa standing proudly at the docks in front of the *Amy Ann*.

“Did you know your father had a vision regarding the events that would take his life?”

Lino handed the priest his drink. “I can’t say that I did.”

“Thank you.” Father Silva raised his glass in salute before taking a satisfying sip. “He did. He had a vision in which he saw every detail. The storm. The wall of waves. He knew he would die at sea. Yet, he kept going back out.”

“Fishermen don’t have much choice,” Lino said. “They take risks to care for their families. In bad weather the risks go up, and bad weather is never far away. Which is why he pushed Carol and me off to school. He used to say nothing bad could happen to us on dry land. He should have said nothing that would kill us as quickly as a sinking ship would happen on dry land.”

“I understand things have been hard for you, Adilino. I’m sorry. Truly. If there is anything I can do...”

“There’s nothing anyone can do.” Lino sat wearily at the kitchen table and drank as the feelings of betrayal flooded in on him, bitter and raw. Adilino Cardosa, a practicing, faithful catholic for over forty years could not get past the feeling that God had betrayed him. His father’s death and his son’s headstone marked the harsh truth.

Father Silva crossed the room and sat opposite his reluctant host. “How long have you been back in Provincetown?”

Lino had arrived in mid-October, it was now the middle of June. “Eight months,” he said.

“Then, you were here when that terrible business happened at my beloved St. Peter’s. My most rewarding years as a parish priest were spent in that church. I fell to my knees and wept when I heard it had burned.” Father Silva steadied himself with a long pull of scotch, then said, “You must have heard about the bones that were found out on the dunes next to the cross. From the hind leg of a coyote according to the authorities. I don’t know how they can be so sure of such things. Some anthropologist in Siberia finds a tiny two-inch fossil and based on that builds a hundred-foot dinosaur complete with sparkling eyes and shiny teeth.” He shook his head. “A coyote, can you imagine?”

“They’re all over the dunes,” Lino said. “Scrounging for scraps, trying to beat the sea gulls to the feast. My guess is that last winter, a lot of coyotes starved to death.”

“Or froze.”

“Probably both.”

Father Silva swirled the ice in his glass. “I wonder if a man died out there.”

“What makes you think that?”

“The cross. The bit of cloth found with it. The cross had to get there somehow. Maybe the cloth was from a man’s jacket, a priest’s jacket.”

“The State Police can tell you that,” Lino said. “They’ve surely completed all their lab tests by now.”

Father Silva bobbed his head. “The State Police don’t confide in the likes of me. All I know comes from Tony Santos. You remember Tony. Can you imagine him now a sergeant on the Provincetown police department? A sergeant willing to share a few pieces of information with his old priest, and I’m thankful. God bless him.”

“Did Tony tell you anything about the scrap of cloth?” Lino asked.

Father Silva nodded. “From a lightweight shirt or jacket sold by the thousands is what he said. Absolutely worthless in terms of learning who it belonged to with any certainty. It may have belonged to Father Jerry, it may not have. But the cross is easy. It belongs to St. Peter the Apostle. I held it in my hands hundreds of times if not thousands. The question is, how did it get out in the dunes?” The old priest waited for the longest time, then said, “Aren’t you the least bit curious?”

“You seem to be fascinated enough for the both of us.”

“Fair enough,” Father Silva admitted. “I likely am. So I’ll tell you what I think happened. I think on the night of the fire, Father Dunn was forced out onto those dunes. It was the middle of January with the temperature below freezing. In the church, he wore a light wool jacket that he didn’t have time to change. Why didn’t he dress warmer for the freezing temperatures? A gun was aimed at him, that’s why. The same gun used to rob the church of all its money. Father Jerry’s life was threatened with that gun. When the money was stuffed into bags, he was forced into a waiting car outside the burning church and driven out to the secluded end of Herring Cove’s parking lot. Once there, he was led out into the dunes, shot and left to die. The scavengers--the gulls and coyotes--picked at his corpse, pulling it apart. You can imagine in the middle of winter how ravenous the animals must have been. It wouldn’t take long to eat the flesh, to drag chunks of that poor priest’s body farther off

into the dunes to eat later, or down to the waterline where a crowd of gulls fought each other to pick the bones clean. The incoming tide swept away what remained, and the next snow storm buried what was dragged across the sand. If I'm right about any of this, the cross was inside Father Jerry's jacket pocket when a coyote or wild dog tore it from his body. We have only God to thank that it was found."

"And God to thank that Father Jerry met such a terrible end?" Lino quipped. "I've always thought it odd that the man who survives a plane crash thanks God he's alive, instead of blaming God for flying the plane into the mountain."

"Is that who you blame for your son's death, Adilino? God is not the one to blame."

"Who is?"

"Not the priest in Gloucester you accused of molesting your son."

"That little news item made it all the way to you, did it?"

"It wasn't a small news item to an innocent man, Lino. He volunteers one week at a summer camp your son attended and you accuse him something vile. You could have ruined his life."

"I accused everybody of everything back then, besides I withdrew the charge."

"And turned your back on the church."

"How do you know that?"

"All news items, as you put it, about you make it to me, Lino. Keeping track of you was part of the promise I made to your father the night he told me how he would die."

Lino perked up. "How do you mean?"

"I mean I put my hand on your father's Bible and, at his request, swore that if he was no longer around to watch over you, I would." Father Silva made the sign of the cross. "I have kept my word."

"You never before paid me a visit," Lino protested.

"I prayed for you."

"What about Carol?"

"Of course, but Carol was already married and raising her own family. You were a student still finding your way."

"Only to lose it, is that it? Is that why you're here to show me the path? Well, I'm not looking for any path. I like the one I'm on."

Father Silva finished his drink. "You don't need to convince me, you need to convince yourself."

"I have."

"And have ended up in your mother's cottage, bitter, lonely, and angry."

"Why is that your business?" Lino shot back.

"I told you, I promised your father..."

"Leave him out of this."

"I don't see that that's possible for either of us." The old priest stepped to the counter and poured himself an inch of scotch. He felt the warmth slide down his throat and said, "I knew this conversation wouldn't be easy, Lino. I understand how you must feel, but..."

"I don't think you have any idea how I feel," Lino said. "Have you had a son?"

"Of course not."

"Then you haven't experienced the worst pain imaginable, the shock and horror of his death and the gnawing guilt you feel that you could have, should have, done something to prevent it. Compound that with the blame your wife lays at your feet every time she looks your way." Lino's eyes swept over the priest's pitying face. "That's my life now, Father. Morning, noon, night. The only time it lets up is when I'm on the water. There's irony there because I'm riding on the same ocean that sank the *Amy Ann* and killed my father. Hell of a life, isn't it?"

“What do you plan to do about it?” Father Silva asked.

“I’m doing it. What you see is what you get.”

“You’ve always fought back, Lino. That’s one of the qualities I’ve admired about you. You don’t let the other man win until you’ve tried all.”

“It’s hard to fight when the opponent is inside. After a while, you get tired of beating yourself up.”

“Self-pity doesn’t become you, Lino, especially when there’s no need for it. There’s a foe out there, an evil man who crept about in the dark to steal every penny before burning St. Peter’s to the ground. Find the man who did it.”

“Even if all the rumors are true and it was Father Jerry?”

The old priest thought a moment, then said, “That would please you, wouldn’t it? All right, set your sights on that. Find that miserable thief, Father Jerry, and craft one more reason to turn your back on God. If that’s what you do find, Lino, I will stop interfering with your life. That’s what you want isn’t it, to shut everyone out who cares about you and to be left alone with your own misery?”

“I’d settle for being left alone.”

“Fine.” Father Silva put down his glass. “I guess I shouldn’t have come after all, but I had such high hopes that you would want to learn the truth.”

“I told you, I don’t care what happened to Jeremiah Dunn.”

“Not Father Jerry, the truth about your son.”

Lino’s eyes flared. “It was low enough bringing up my father, beneath you to use my son to get what you want.”

“It isn’t what I want, Adilino, it’s what you want. Or, perhaps more to the point, what you need. Haven’t you blamed your current state of affairs on Steven’s suicide?”

Lino said nothing.

Father Silva crossed his arms in front of his chest. “In your eyes, the world would right itself if you knew what drove that poor soul to end his life. To some degree, when Steven killed himself, he also ended your life. Nothing can bring him back, but you can resurrect who you are, Adilino. You can live fully again if you want to, if you try, if you find the courage to dig for answers.”

“Do you think I haven’t tried? I spoke with his friends, his teachers, I read every file on his computer, I retraced his steps down at Sweetbriar...”

“In such a rage your anger blinded you.”

“All I know is that Steven went to that summer camp for years and loved every minute. When he came home from his last stay, he wasn’t the same boy. He’d changed in the worst way. Something happened to him and I wanted to know what. I still do.”

Father Silva nodded knowingly. “Do you know who was in charge of Camp Sweetbriar when Steven was last there?”

“If I did, I’ve put it out of my mind.”

“Father Jerry.”

The name settled on Lino like ice. He wracked his brain trying to remember, then said, “I may have been mad as hell, but I would not have forgotten that.”

“Because you didn’t look deeply enough,” Father Silva scolded. “Sweetbriar is funded in large part by the Mary Alice Connelly Foundation, the rest is paid for by the Church. Mary Alice Connelly was Father Jerry’s sister.”

“Was?”

“She lost her battle with cancer. May she rest in peace.” The old priest signed the cross. “Mind you, Adilino, like you, I am in no way accusing anyone associated past or present with Sweetbriar of any misdeeds. There is no indication that anything unpleasant...”

“Or criminal.”

“Or criminal took place there. I am simply pointing out that if you were to find Father Jerry, you might discover answers and, who knows, perhaps inner peace. Are you going to do me a kindness and look for Father Jerry?”

Lino looked evenly at the old priest and finished his drink without saying a word.

Father Silva pulled open the screen door. “I’ll say goodbye to your mother on the way out.”

Lino watched the screen door close and listened as the priest’s footsteps ground into the crushed shells on the drive. He heard Father’s Silva knock on the back door of the red house. He heard Colleen’s voice welcoming the priest inside. When all fell quiet, Lino sat in the stillness. The only sound was the incoming tide and the squawk of gulls wheeling overhead.

* **LARRY J. MANESS** is the author of four novels--*Nantucket Revenge*, *A Once Perfect Place*, *Strangler*, and his latest, *The Voice of God* published in the fall of 2013 by Mainly Murder Press. Duke University selected *A Once Perfect Place* for inclusion in its Literature for Social Change collection. *Strangler* was a Detective Book of the Month Club alternative. Maness is also the author of two books of plays--*3 Plays* introduced by Pulitzer prize-winner, William Inge, and *This House Has Quiet Rooms*. His plays have been produced in New York, Boston and theatres around the country and in Europe. After 22 years teaching in the English/Communications Department at Rivier, Maness retired in 2011 to focus on his writing. He is currently working on a new play set in Rome, Italy where he spends winters with his wife, Marianne.