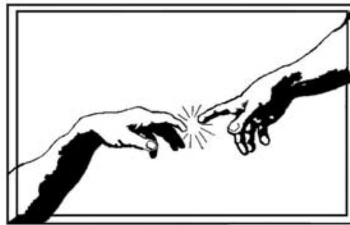
Fatherless

A Novel

Brian J. Gail



One More Soul Dayton, Ohio

Contents

Part One THE CALL 1

Part Two THE CRISIS 45

Part Three THE CHARISM 273

Epilogue 395

Bibliography 411

Acknowledgments 415

Part One

The Call

John Sweeney was rushing. This in and of itself was not uncharacteristic of a man widely and fairly judged to be both impulsive and intemperate.

It was not that he hadn't battled his demons. And—truth be told—he had made progress, though it seemed to come in agonizingly slow, slight increments. There would forever be limits—he was, after all, a first son of Irish parentage, used to getting his own way in what was occasionally a bare-knuckled competition with his five siblings.

He was a son of expectations—most of which he'd failed to meet. This produced different reactions in his parents. His mother blamed herself for not being more selective in her choice of men; his father simply regarded him as Exhibit A in the case for a life of celibacy.

He was thrown out of the Boy Scouts as an incorrigible after a weekend camping trip. He had incited almost half the scouts to leave their tents after dark to relieve themselves in unison on the scout leader's tent during a torrential downpour. He had thought, incorrectly, that the sound of the rain would mask the sound of their urinary serenade.

Little Richie Cavanaugh, however, hadn't been altogether clear on the instructions. Or so he later claimed. The deposit he left was viewed to be of a different order of "malevolence" in the minds of the judge and jury—in this case, the scout leader and the four parental chaperones, one of whom was Mr. Richard Cavanaugh, Esq. Unfortunately it was not little Richie Cavanaugh but John Sweeney who was expelled from the troop for the poop.

And of course it was, as the adults who populated his world were fond of saying, "part of a pattern of activity" that tended to color their

perceptions, and therefore their judgments, about him. It was well known, for instance, that he had barely escaped expulsion from his elementary school, St. Martha's, in the little borough of Narbrook, about 10 miles due west of Philadelphia. One beautiful spring afternoon his seventh-grade teacher, a good and holy nun known as Sister Veronica, had asked him a question about Bolivian exports. Young Sweeney, however, hadn't been paying attention. This lack of attention greatly irritated the good sister, who promptly marched from her desk in the front of the room to his desk in the back of the room. "What is the question, Master Sweeney?" she had asked: once, twice, thrice—her inflection rising with each repetition.

John could no longer see the sun, or much of anything else. Looming over his desk at 5′3″ and some 225 pounds, "widely" guesstimated, Sister Veronica now filled his field of vision. Her words, for some reason, greatly irritated him, and so he answered: "The question . . . is: ' . . . what time does the balloon go up . . . blimp?'"—a line from a popular sitcom of the period.

For several awkward moments there was no sound in the classroom. Then suddenly there were gales of laughter from the boys and shrieks of horror from the girls. A fireball of pure fury, Sister Veronica grabbed John by the scruff of his thin neck and led him to the blackboard in the front of the room, knocking over several of his unfortunate classmates in the process. There she proceeded to play paddle ball with his badly home-cut head. Bam, bam, bam—six, seven, eight times by one classmate's audible count—she banged his little head into the slate, exhausting herself and creating an indentation the size of a half dollar in John's forehead. When she had completed her work, they both fell down, she on top of him, noisily breaking wind in her exhaustion.

But it was at Monsignor Clarkson High School in Upper Haviland, about 5 miles southwest of Philadelphia, that John Sweeney had become something of an urban legend. One morning he had discovered that the school principal was ill. He commandeered the public address system for the morning announcements. The problem wasn't so much that he rendered a dead-on impersonation of Father Gillen, a serious and scholarly Augustinian friar; it was rather that he chose to sketch Father Gillen as a fall-down drunk, slurring, stumbling and hiccuping his way through the list of upcoming events, schedule changes, and after-school activities.

It was his highly regarded football coach, Sal Pescatore, who saved him from that threatened expulsion. And so, in the protective custody of his coach, Sweeney dutifully rendered his 50 hours of community service to the Augustinians. A practical man, Pescatore told his quarterback, among other things, to review and catalogue game film from rival Catholic league teams. Ever inventive, Sweeney took the

opportunity to score the upcoming game film for neighborhood rival East Catholic with the sound track from In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida, Iron Butterfly's iconic anthem for adult films, called smokers in the day.

When the team was assembled, and coach Pescatore asked for the lights to be lowered and the film to roll, the sound at first startled his team. Within moments, however, laughter of the worst sort filled the room. This brought Pescatore to the back of the room, where John Sweeney was convulsed on the ground in a paroxysm of laughter. At the sight of his coach approaching him with a dead-eyed glare that had hitherto been reserved for running backs who fumbled in the red zone, John scrambled to his feet and his chair.

Pescatore waited patiently for John to reseat himself and then delivered a forearm to his chest with such force that both John and the aluminum folding chair he had been sitting on went ass over teacups—in the peculiar expression of the day—with the chair eventually coming to rest on his head, eliciting a laugh even from Pescatore.

The coach nonetheless held him out of the East Catholic game until Clarkson's first drive stalled and East's all-Catholic tailback, Ronnie Shields, ran the ensuing punt back for a 62-yard touchdown. John was under center the next time Clarkson had the ball. That day he completed 12 of 18 passes for 186 yards and two touchdowns, and Clarkson beat East 20 to 14. All was forgiven.

John Sweeney played well enough in his senior year to earn all-Catholic honors and several college scholarships. That fall he enrolled at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, a mid-level Division I state school. One year later, as a sophomore, he was listed as the number-three quarterback on the depth chart.

One drizzly Saturday afternoon, he found himself under center in the midst of a blowout at the hands of the University of Minnesota. The starting quarterback went down with a fractured tibia, the number-two quarterback played like a deer caught in headlights, and suddenly, to his great astonishment, he was being yanked from the bench by a very red-faced offensive coordinator and thrust, quite urgently, onto the field of play. On his first play from scrimmage, he fumbled the snap but fell on the ball just moments before the avalanche of grunting, swearing behemoths who were in mad pursuit. He later remembered being kicked in the groin, having his helmet yanked almost completely from his head, and being told by one rival student athlete that his mother's lineage was open to question.

He rose with a resolve he didn't know he possessed and marched his team down the field to their opponents' six yard line, where the drive stalled. After a false start, a holding penalty, and a very open receiver missed in the end zone, Rutgers settled for a field goal.

Those had been the only points his university was able to put on the scoreboard on that otherwise most forgettable of days.

That was the sole inspiration for John Sweeney's phone call home that evening.

He went to the pay phone at the end of the dormitory hall, found a line of other students waiting to use the phone, and retreated to his room to await another attempt. He had a visceral reaction to waiting in line. A slight pain would begin in the pit of his stomach. Then, spreading like an offshore storm, the pain would begin a forced march till it burrowed itself somewhere behind the frontal lobe of his brain. Full detonation was an inevitability that he worked assiduously to avoid—in public. On this particular evening his wait was interrupted by a stage bellow from down the hall: "Hey, Sweeney, phone!"

He scampered off the military-issue dorm bed and quickly made his way back down the hall to the phone. It was his brother Peter, now a senior at Monsignor Clarkson, and his parents' best hope for immortality. Peter, smaller, quicker, and brighter than John, was a three-sport star, student government vice president, and a member of the National Honor Society.

"Yo, what's up?" John rasped into the phone. "John," his brother said, voice trembling, "Dad had a stroke. He was gone. I revived him. He's on his way to County Memorial in an ambulance. I'm taking Mom over now. Jim's watching the others. I'll call you from the hospital when we know something."

AS FATHER JOHN SWEENEY RAISED THE HOST, he slowed his pace. He had promised his mother on his ordination day that he would always conduct the Consecration of the mass, the most sacred moment in what the Roman Catholic Church has always regarded as its most solemn prayer, with a manifest reverence. As he knelt, Host in hand, he couldn't rid his mind of Margaret Kealey's voice.

She had called just before he left the rectory to say the 7:00 a.m. mass to tell him that chronic migraine pain was engulfing her in a fire of unbearable torment, and that she believed that she was close to death. "Father," she whispered, "I think I'm dying. Bill's in New York. Please help me."

"I'll come, Maggie," he promised, "Right after mass. And I'll be praying for you."