

## Chapter1

### The Typhoid State Revisited

Sister Mary Joseph Praise had come to Mission Hospital from India, seven years before our birth. She and Sister Anjali were the first novitiates of the Carmelite Order of Madras to also go through the arduous nursing diploma course at the Government General Hospital, Madras. On graduation day my mother and Anjali received their nursing pins and that evening took their final vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience. Instead of answering to “Probationer” (in the hospital) and “Novitiate” (in the convent), they could now be addressed in both places as “Sister.” Their aged and saintly abbess, Shessy Geevarughese, affectionately called Saintly Amma, had wasted no time in giving the two young nurse-nuns her blessing, and her surprising assignment: Africa.

On the day they were to sail, all the novitiates rode from the convent in a caravan of cycle-rickshaws to the harbor to send off their two sisters. In my mind’s eye I can see the novitiates lining the quay, chattering and trembling with excitement and emotion, their white habits flapping in the breeze, the seagulls hopping around their sandaled feet.

I have so often wondered what went through my mother’s mind as she and Sister Anjali, both just nineteen years old, took their last steps on Indian soil and boarded the Calangute. She would have heard stifled sobs and “God be with you” follow her up the gangway. Was she fearful? Did she have second thoughts? Once before, when she entered the convent, she’d torn herself away from her biological family in Cochin forever and moved to Madras, which was a day and a night’s train ride from her home. As far as her parents were concerned, it might just as well have been halfway across the world, for they would never see her again. And now, after three years in Madras, she was tearing herself away from the family of her faith, this time to cross an ocean. Once again, there was no going back.

A few years before sitting down to write this, I traveled to Madras in search of my mother’s story. In the archived papers of the Carmelites, I found nothing of hers, but I did find Saintly Amma’s diaries in which the abbess recorded the passing days. When the Calangute slipped its mooring, Saintly Amma raised her hand like a traffic policeman and, “using my sermon voice which I am told belies my age,” intoned the words, “Leave your land for my sake,” because Genesis was her favorite book. Saintly Amma had given this mission great thought: True, India had unfathomable needs. But that would never change and was no excuse; the two young nuns—her brightest and fairest—were to be the torchbearers: Indians carrying Christ’s love to darkest Africa—that was her grand ambition. In her papers, she reveals her thinking: Just as the English missionaries discovered when they came to India, there was no better way to carry Christ’s love than through stupes and poultices, liniments and dressings, cleansing and comfort. What better ministry than the ministry of healing? Her two young nuns would cross the ocean, and then the Madras Discalced Carmelite Mission to Africa would begin.

As the good abbess watched the two waving figures on the ship’s rail recede to white dots, she felt a twinge of apprehension. What if by their blind obedience to her grand scheme they were being condemned to a horrible fate? “The English missionaries have the almighty Empire behind them . . . but what of my girls?” She wrote that the seagulls’ shrill quarreling and the splatter of bird excreta had marred the grand sendoff she had envisioned. She was distracted by the overpowering scent of rotten fish, and rotted wood, and by the bare-chested stevedores whose betel-nut-stained mouths drooled bloody lechery at the sight of her brood of virgins.

“Father, we consign our sisters to You for safekeeping,” Saintly Amma said, putting it on His shoulders. She stopped waving, and her hands found shelter in her sleeves. “We beseech You for mercy and for Your protection in this outreach of the Discalced Carmelites . . .”

It was 1947, and the British were finally leaving India; the Quit India Movement had made the impossible come about. Saintly Amma slowly let the air out of her lungs. It was a new world, and bold action was called for, or so she believed...

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The black-and-red floating packet of misery that called itself a ship steamed across the Indian Ocean toward its destination, Aden. In its hold the Calangute carried crate upon crate of spun cotton, rice, silk, Godrej lockers, Tata filing cabinets, as well as thirty-one Royal Enfield Bullet motorcycles, the engines wrapped in oilcloth. The ship wasn't meant to carry passengers, but the Greek captain did just that by housing "paying guests." There were many who would travel on a cargo ship to save on passage, and he was there to oblige by skimping on crew. So on this trip he carried two Madras nuns, three Cochin Jews, a Gujarati family, three suspicious-looking Malays, and a few Europeans, including two French sailors rejoining their ship in Aden.

The Calangute had a vast expanse of deck—more land than one ever expected at sea. At one end, like a gnat on an elephant's backside, sat the three-story superstructure which housed the crew and passengers, the top floor of which was the bridge.

My mother, Sister Mary Joseph Praise, was a Malayali from Cochin, in the state of Kerala. Malayali Christians traced their faith back to St. Thomas's arrival in India from Damascus in a.d. 52. "Doubting" Thomas built his first churches in Kerala well before St. Peter got to Rome. My mother was God-fearing and churchgoing; in high school she came under the influence of a charismatic Carmelite nun who worked with the poor. My mother's hometown is a city of five islands set like jewels on a ring, facing the Arabian Sea. Spice traders have sailed to Cochin for centuries for cardamom and cloves, including a certain Vasco de Gama in 1498. The Portuguese clawed out a colonial seat in Goa, torturing the Hindu population into Catholic converts. Catholic priests and nuns eventually reached Kerala, as if they didn't know that St. Thomas had brought Christ's uncorrupted vision to Kerala a thousand years before them. To her parents' chagrin, my mother became a Carmelite nun, abandoning the ancient Syrian Christian tradition of St. Thomas to embrace (in her parents' view) this Johnny-come-lately, pope-worshipping sect. They couldn't have been more disappointed had she become a Muslim or a Hindu. It was a good thing her parents didn't know that she was also a nurse, which to them would mean that she soiled her hands like an untouchable.

My mother grew up at the ocean's edge, in sight of the ancient Chinese fishing nets cantilevered from long bamboo poles and dangling over the water like giant cobwebs. The sea was the proverbial "breadbasket" of her people, provider of prawns and fish. But now on the deck of the Calangute, without the Cochin shore to frame her view, she did not recognize the breadbasket. She wondered if at its center the ocean had always been this way: smoking, malevolent, and restless. It tormented the Calangute, making it pitch and yaw and creak, wanting nothing more than to swallow it whole.

She and Sister Anjali secluded themselves in their cabin, bolting the door against men and sea. Anjali's ejaculatory prayers startled my mother. The ritualized reading of the Gospel of Luke was Sister Anjali's idea; she said it would give wings to the soul and discipline to the body. The two nuns subjected each letter, each word, line, and phrase to dilatatio, elevatio, and excessus—contemplation, elevation, and ecstasy. Richard of St. Victor's ancient monastic practice proved useful for an interminable ocean crossing. By the second night, after ten hours of such close and meditative reading, Sister Mary Joseph Praise suddenly felt print and page dissolve; the boundaries between God and self disintegrated. Reading had brought this: a joyous surrender of her body to the sacred, the eternal, and the infinite.

At vespers on the sixth night (for they were determined to carry the routine of the convent with them no matter what) they finished a hymn, two psalms, and their antiphons, then the doxology, and were singing the Magnificat when a piercing, splintering sound brought them to earth. They grabbed life jackets and rushed out. They were met by the sight of a segment of the deck that had buckled and pushed up into a pyramid, almost, it seemed to Sister Mary Joseph Praise, as if the Calangute were made of corrugated cardboard. The captain kept his pipe lit and his smirk suggested his passengers had overreacted.

On the ninth night, four of the sixteen passengers and one of the crew came down with a fever whose flesh signs were rose spots that appeared on the second febrile day and that arranged themselves like a Chinese puzzle on the chest and abdomen. Sister Anjali suffered grievously, her skin burning to the

touch. By the second day of illness she was raging in feverish delirium.

Among the Calangute's passengers was a young surgeon—a hawk-eyed Englishman who was leaving the Indian Medical Service for better pastures. He was tall and strong, and his rugged features made him look hungry, yet he avoided the dining room. Sister Mary Joseph Praise had run into him, literally, on the second day of the voyage when she lost her footing on the wet metal stairs leading up from their quarters to the common room. The Englishman coming up behind her seized her where he could, in the region of her coccyx and her left rib cage. He righted her as if she were a little child. When she stuttered her thanks, he turned beet red; he was more flustered than she by this unexpected intimacy. She felt a bruising coming on where his hands had clutched her, but there was a quality to this discomfort that she did not mind. For days thereafter, she didn't see the Englishman. Now, seeking medical help, Sister Mary Joseph Praise gathered her courage to knock on his cabin. A faint voice bid her to enter. A bilious, acetone odor greeted her. "It is me," she called out. "It is Sister Mary Joseph Praise." The doctor lay on his side in his bunk, his skin the same shade as his khaki shorts, his eyes screwed shut. "Doctor," she said, hesitating, "are you also with fever?"

When he tried to look at her, his eyeballs rolled like marbles on a tilting plate. He turned and retched over a fire-bucket, missed it, which didn't matter, as the bucket was full to the brim. Sister Mary Joseph Praise rushed forward and felt his brow. It was cold and clammy, not at all feverish. His cheeks were hollowed, and his body looked as if it had shrunk to fit the tiny cabin. None of the passengers had been spared seasickness, but the Englishman's affliction was severe.

"Doctor, I am wanting to report a fever that has affected five patients. It comes with rash, chills, and sweats, a slow pulse and loss of appetite. All are stable except for Sister Anjali. Doctor, I am most worried about Anjali . . ."

She felt better once it was off her chest, even though other than letting out a moan the Englishman made no response. Her eyes fell on a catgut ligature that was looped around a bed rail near his hands and that displayed knot thrown on top of knot, ten-score of them. The knots were so plentiful that the thread stood up like a gnarled flagpole. This was how he had logged the hours, or kept track of his bouts of emesis. She rinsed out the bucket and put it back within his reach. She mopped the mess on the floor with a towel, then she rinsed the towel out and hung it up to dry. She brought water to his side. She withdrew, wondering how many days it had been since he'd eaten anything.

By evening he was worse. Sister Mary Joseph Praise brought sheets, towels, and broth. Kneeling, she tried to feed him, but the smell of food triggered dry heaves. His eyeballs had sunk into their orbits. His shriveled tongue looked like that of a parrot. She recognized the room's fruity odor as the scent of starvation. When she pinched up a skin fold at the back of his arm and let go, it stayed up like a tent, like the buckled deck. The bucket was half full of clear fluid. He babbled about green fields and was unaware of her presence. Could seasickness be fatal, she wondered. Or could he have a forme fruste of the fever that afflicted Sister Anjali? There was so much she did not know about medicine. In the middle of that ocean surrounded by the sick, she felt the weight of her ignorance.

But she knew how to nurse. And she knew how to pray. So, praying, she eased off his shirt which was stiff with bile and spit, and she slid down his shorts. As she gave him a bed bath, she was self-conscious, for she'd never ministered to a white man, or to a doctor for that matter. His skin displayed a wave of goose bumps at the touch of her cloth. But the skin was free of the rash she'd seen on the four passengers and the one cabin boy who had come down with fever. The sinewy muscles of his arms bunched together fiercely at his shoulder. Only now did she notice that his left chest was smaller than his right; the hollow above his collarbone on the left could have held a half cup of water, while that on the right only a teaspoon. And just beyond and below his left nipple, extending into the armpit, she saw a deep depression. The skin over this crater was shiny and puckered. She touched there and gasped as her fingers fell in, not meeting bony resistance. Indeed, it appeared as if two or perhaps three adjacent ribs were missing. Within that depression his heart tapped firmly against her fingers with only a thin layer of hide intervening. When she pulled her fingers away, she could see the thrust of his ventricle against his skin.

The fine, translucent coat of hair on his chest and abdomen looked as if it had drifted up from the mother lode of hair at his pubis. She dispassionately cleaned his uncircumcised member, then flopped it to one side and attended to the wrinkled and helpless-looking sac beneath. She washed his feet and cried while she did, thinking inevitably of her Sweet Lord and His last earthly night with His disciples.

In his steamer trunks she found books dealing with surgery. He had penned names and dates in the margins, and only later did it occur to her that these were patients' names, both Indian and British, mementos to a disease he'd first seen in a Peabody, or a Krishnan. A cross next to the name she took as a sign the patient had succumbed. She found eleven notebooks filled with an economical handwriting with slashing downstrokes, the text dancing just above the lines and obeying no margin save for the edge of the page. For an outwardly silent man, his writing reflected an unexpected volubility.

Eventually she found a clean undershirt and shorts. What did it say when a man had fewer clothes than books? Turning him first this way and then that, she changed the sheets beneath him and then dressed him.

She knew his name was Thomas Stone because it was inscribed inside the surgical textbook he'd placed at his bedside. In the book she found little about fever with rash, and nothing about seasickness.

That night Sister Mary Joseph Praise negotiated the heaving passageways, hurrying from one sickbed to the next. The mound where the deck had buckled resembled a shrouded figure and she averted her eyes. Once she saw a black mountain of a wave, several stories high, and the Calangute looked poised to fall into a hole. Sheets of water smashed over the bow, the noise more terrifying than the sight.

In the middle of the tempestuous ocean, groggy from lack of sleep, facing a terrible medical crisis, her world had become simplified. It was divided into those with fever, those with seasickness, and those without. And it was possible that none of these distinctions mattered, for very soon they might all drown.

She awoke from where she must have drifted off next to Anjali. In what seemed like the next instant she awoke again, but this time in the Englishman's cabin where she'd fallen asleep kneeling by his bed, her head lolling on his chest, his arm resting on her shoulder. In the time it took her to recognize this, she was asleep again, waking at daybreak finding herself on the bunk, but on its very edge, pressed against Thomas Stone. She hurried back to Anjali to find her worse, her respirations now sighing and rapid. There were large confluent purple patches showing on Anjali's skin.

The anxious faces of the sleepless crew and the fact that one fellow had knelt before her and said "Sister, forgive my sins!" told her that the ship was still in danger. The crew ignored her pleas for help. Frantic and frustrated, Sister Mary Joseph Praise retrieved a hammock from the common room because of a vision she had in that fugue state between wakefulness and sleep. She strung it in his cabin between porthole and bedpost.

Dr. Stone was a dead weight and only the intercession of St. Catherine allowed her to drag him from bunk to floor, then feed him, one body part at a time, onto the hammock. Answering more to gravity than to the roll of the ship, the hammock found the true horizontal. She knelt beside him and prayed, pouring her heart out to Jesus, completing the Magnificat which had been interrupted the night the deck had buckled.

Color returned first to Stone's neck, then his cheeks. She fed him tea spoons of water. In an hour he held down broth. His eyes were open now, the light coming back into them, and the eyeballs tracking her every movement. Then, when she brought the spoon up, sturdy fingers encircled her wrist to guide the food to his mouth. She remembered the line she'd sung moments before: "He hath filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He hath sent empty away."

God had heard her prayers. A pale and unsteady Thomas Stone came with Sister Mary Joseph Praise to where Sister Anjali lay. He gasped at the sight of the wide-eyed and delirious nun, her face pinched and anxious, her nose sharp as a pen, the nostrils flaring with each breath, seemingly awake and yet

completely oblivious to her visitors.

He knelt over her, but Anjali's glassy gaze passed right through him. Sister Mary Joseph Praise watched the practiced way he pulled down Anjali's lids to examine her conjunctivae, and the way he swung the flashlight in front of her pupils. His movements were smooth and flowing as he bent Anjali's head toward her chest to check for neck stiffness, as he felt for lymph nodes, moved her limbs, and as he tapped her patellar tendon using his cocked finger in lieu of a reflex hammer. The awkwardness Sister Mary Joseph Praise had sensed in him when she had seen him as a passenger and then as a patient was gone.

He stripped off Anjali's clothes, unaware of Sister Mary Joseph Praise's assistance as he dispassionately studied the patient's back, thighs, and buttocks. The long sculpted fingers that probed Anjali's belly for the spleen and liver seemed to have been created for this purpose—she couldn't imagine them doing anything else. Not having his stethoscope, he applied his ear to Sister Anjali's heart, then her belly. Then he turned her to one side and pressed his ear against her ribs to listen to the lungs. He took stock, then muttered, "Breath sounds are diminished on the right . . . parotids enlarged . . . she has neck glands—why? . . . Pulse is feeble and rapid—"

"It was a slow pulse when the fever started," Sister Mary Joseph Praise offered.

"So you mentioned," he said sharply. "How slow?" He didn't look up.

"Forty-five to fifty, Doctor."

She felt he had forgotten his illness, forgotten even that he was on a ship. He had become one with Sister Anjali's body, it was his text, and he sounded it for the enemy within. She felt such confidence in his being that her fear for Anjali vanished. Kneeling by his side, she was euphoric, as if she had only at that moment come of age as a nurse because this was the first time she had encountered a physician like him. She bit her tongue because she wanted so much to say all this and more to him.

"Coma vigil," he said, and Sister Mary Joseph Praise assumed he was instructing her. "See how her eyes keep roving as if she's waiting for something? A grave sign. And look at the way she picks at the bedclothes—that's called carphology, and those little muscle twitches are subsultus tendinum. This is the 'typhoid state.' You'll see it in the late stages of many kinds of blood poisoning, not just typhoid . . . But mind you"—and he looked up at her with a little smile that belied what he said next—"I am a surgeon, not a medical man. What do I know of medical matters? Except to know that this is not a surgical illness."

His presence had done more than reassure Sister Mary Joseph Praise; it calmed the seas. The sun, which had been hiding, was suddenly at their back. The crew's drunken celebration indicated how grave the situation had been just hours before. But though Sister Mary Joseph Praise did not want to believe this, there was little Stone could do for Sister Anjali, and in any case, nothing to do it with. The first-aid box in the galley held a desiccated cockroach—its contents had been pawned by one of the crew at the last port. The medicine chest which the captain used as a seat in his cabin seemed to have been left over from the Dark Ages. A pair of scissors, a bone knife, and crude forceps were the only things of use within that ornate box. What was a surgeon like Stone to do with poultices, or tiny containers of wormwood, thyme, and sage? Stone laughed at the label of something called oleum philosophorum (and this was the first time Sister Mary Joseph Praise heard that happy sound even if in its dying echo there was something hard-edged). "Listen to this," he said, reading: "'containing old tilestones and brickebats for chronic costiveness!'" That done, he heaved the box overboard. He'd removed only the dull instruments and an amber bottle of laudanum opiatum paracelsi. A spoonful of that ancient remedy seemed to ease Sister Anjali's terrible air hunger, to "disconnect her lungs from her brain," as Thomas Stone explained to Sister Mary Joseph Praise.

The captain came by, sleepless, apoplectic, spraying saliva and brandy as he spoke: "How dare you dispose of shipboard property?"

Stone leaped to his feet, and at that moment he reminded Sister Mary Joseph Praise of a schoolboy

spoiling for a fight. Stone fixed the captain with a glare that made the man swallow and take a step back. "Tossing that box was better for mankind and worse for the fish. One more word out of you and I'll report you for taking on passengers without any medical supplies."

"You got a bargain."

"And you will make a killing," Stone said, pointing to Anjali.

The captain's face lost its armature, the eyebrows, eyelids, nose, and lips all running together like a waterfall.

Thomas Stone took charge now, setting up camp at Anjali's bedside, but venturing out to examine every person on board, whether they consented to such probing or not. He segregated those with fever from those without. He took copious notes; he drew a map of the Calangute's quarters, putting an X where every fever case had occurred. He insisted on smoke fumigation of all the cabins. The way he ordered the healthy crew and passengers around infuriated the sulking captain, but if Thomas Stone was aware of this he paid no attention. For the next twenty-four hours he didn't sleep, reexamining Sister Anjali at intervals, checking on the others: keeping vigil. An older couple was also quite ill. Sister Mary Joseph Praise never left his side.

Two weeks after they left Cochin, the Calangute limped into the port of Aden. The Greek captain had the Madagascar seaman hoist the Portuguese flag under which the ship was registered, but because of the shipboard fever the Calangute was promptly quarantined, Portuguese flag or no Portuguese flag. She was anchored at a distance, where, like a banished leper, she could only gaze at the city. Stone bullied the Scottish harbormaster who had pulled up alongside, telling him that if he didn't bring a doctor's kit, bottles of lactated Ringer's solution for intravenous administration, as well as sulfa, then he, Thomas Stone, would hold him responsible for the death of all Commonwealth citizens on board. Sister Mary Joseph Praise marveled at his outspokenness, and yet he was speaking for her. It was as if Stone had replaced Anjali as her only ally and friend on this ill-fated voyage.

When the supplies came, Stone went first to Sister Anjali. Making do with the crudest of antisepsis, with one scalpel stroke he exposed the greater saphenous vein where it ran just inside Sister Anjali's ankle. He threaded a needle into the collapsed vessel that should have been the width of a pencil. He secured the needle in place with ligatures, his hands a blur as he pushed one knot down over another. Despite the intravenous drip of Ringer's lactate and the sulfa, Anjali didn't make a drop of urine or show any signs of reviving. Later that evening, she died in a final dreadful paroxysm, as did two others, an old man and old woman, all within a few hours of one another. For Sister Mary Joseph Praise the deaths were stunning, and unforeseen. The euphoria she felt when Thomas Stone had risen and come to see Anjali had blinded her. She shivered uncontrollably.

At twilight, Sister Mary Joseph Praise and Thomas Stone slipped the shrouded bodies over the rail, with no help from the superstitious crew who wouldn't even look their way.

Sister Mary Joseph Praise was inconsolable, the brave front she'd put up shattering as her friend's body splashed into the water. Stone stood beside her, unsure of himself. His face was dark with anger and shame because he had not been able to save Sister Anjali.

"How I envy her," Sister Mary Joseph Praise said at last through tears, her fatigue and sleeplessness combining to release custody of her tongue. "She's with our Lord. Surely that is a better place than this."

Stone bit off a laugh. To him such a sentiment was a symptom of impending delirium. He took her by the arm and led her back to his room, lay her down on his bunk, and told her she was to rest, doctor's orders. He sat on the hammock and watched as life's only sure blessing—sleep—came to her, and then he hurried off to reexamine the crew and all passengers. Dr. Thomas Stone, surgeon, did not need sleep.

Two days later, with no more new cases of fever, they were finally allowed off the Calangute. Thomas

Stone sought out Sister Mary Joseph Praise before disembarking. He found her red-eyed in the cabin she'd shared with Sister Anjali. Her face and the rosary she clutched were wet.

With a start he registered what he had failed to before: that she was extraordinarily beautiful, her eyes big and soulful and more expressive than eyes had a right to be. His face grew warm and his tongue wouldn't unstick itself from the floor of his mouth. He shifted his gaze to the floor, to her travel bag. When he finally spoke it was to say, "Typhus." He'd looked in his books and given the matter a great deal of thought. Seeing her puzzlement, he said, "Indubitably typhus." He had expected the word, the diagnosis, would make her feel better, but instead it seemed to fill her eyes with fresh tears. "Most likely typhus—of course a serum test could have confirmed it," he stammered.

He shuffled his feet, crossed and uncrossed his hands. "I don't know where you're going, Sister, but I'm heading to Addis Ababa . . . it's in Ethiopia," he said, mumbling into his chin. "To a hospital . . . that would value your services if you were to come." He looked at her and blushed again, because the fact was he knew nothing about the hospital he was going to or whether it could use her services, and because he felt those moist dark eyes could read his every thought.

But it was her own thoughts that kept Sister Mary Joseph Praise silent. She remembered how she'd prayed for him and for Anjali, and how God had answered just one of her prayers. Stone, risen like Lazarus, then brought his entire being into understanding the fever. He'd barged into the crew's quarters, run roughshod over the captain, and bullied and threatened. Doing the wrong thing, as Sister Mary Joseph Praise saw it, but in pursuit of the right thing. His fierce passion had been a revelation to her. At the medical college hospital in Madras where she trained as a nurse, the civil surgeons (who at the time were mostly Englishmen) had floated around serene and removed from the patients, with the assistant civil surgeons and junior and senior house surgeons (who were all Indian) trailing behind like ducklings. At times it seemed to her they were so focused on disease that patients and suffering were incidental to their work. Thomas Stone was different.

She felt his invitation to join him in Ethiopia hadn't been rehearsed. The words had slipped out before he'd been able to stop them. What was she to do? Saintry Amma had identified a Belgian nun who had broken away from her order, and who had made a most tenuous foothold in Yemen, in Aden, a foothold that was in jeopardy because of the nun's ill health. Saintry Amma's plan was for Sister Anjali and Sister Mary Joseph Praise to start there, perched above the African continent, and to learn everything they could from the Belgian nun about operating in hostile climates. From there, after correspondence with Amma, the sister-sisters would head south, not to the Congo (which the French and Belgians had covered), not to Kenya, Tanganyika, Uganda, or Nigeria (the Anglicans had their fingers all over those souls and disliked competition), but perhaps to Ghana or Cameroon. Sister Mary Joseph Praise wondered what Saintry Amma might say to Ethiopia.

Saintry Amma's vision now felt like a pipe dream, a vicarious evangelism so ill informed that Sister Mary Joseph Praise was embarrassed to mention it to Thomas Stone. Instead she said in a breaking, hopeless voice, "I have orders to Aden, Doctor. But I thank you. Thank you for all you did for Sister Anjali." He protested that he'd done nothing.

"You did more than any human being could do," she said and took his hand in both of hers and held it. She looked into his eyes. "God be with you and bless you."

He could feel the rosary still entwined in her fingers, and the softness of her skin and the wetness from her tears. He recalled her hands on him, washing his body, dressing him, even holding his head when he retched. He had a memory of her face turned to the heavens, singing, praying for his recovery. His neck grew warm and he knew his color was betraying him a third time. Her eyes showed pain, and a cry escaped her lips, and only then did he know that he was squeezing her hands, grinding the rosary against her knuckles. He let go at once. His lips parted, but he didn't say anything. He abruptly walked away.

Sister Mary Joseph Praise couldn't move. She saw that her hands were red and beginning to throb. The pain felt like a gift, a blessing so palpable that it rose up her forearms and into her chest. What she couldn't bear was the feeling that something vital had been plucked out and uprooted from her chest.

when he walked away. She'd wanted to cling to him, to cry out to him not to leave. She had thought her life in the service of the Lord was complete. There was, she saw now, a void in her life that she'd never known existed.

The moment she stepped off the Calangute onto the soil of Yemen, Sister Mary Joseph Praise wished she'd never disembarked. How absurd it had been for her to have pined to come ashore all those days they'd been quarantined. Aden, Aden, Aden—she'd known nothing about it before this voyage, and even now it was no more than an exotic name. But from the sailors on the Calangute, she gathered that one could hardly go anywhere in the world without stopping in Aden. The port's strategic location had served the British military. Now its duty-free status made it the place to both shop and find one's next ship. Aden was gateway to Africa; from Africa it was gateway to Europe. To Sister Mary Joseph Praise it looked like the gateway to hell.

The city was at once dead and yet in continuous motion, like a blanket of maggots animating a rotting corpse. She fled the main street and the stultifying heat for the shade of narrow alleyways. The buildings looked hewn from volcanic rock. Pushcarts loaded impossibly high with bananas, with bricks, with melons, and even one carrying two lepers weaved through the pedestrian traffic. A veiled, stooped old woman walked by with a smoldering charcoal stove on her head. No one glanced at this strange sight, saving their stares instead for the brown-skinned nun walking in their midst. Her uncovered face made her feel stark naked.

After an hour during which she felt her skin puffing up like dough in an oven, after being directed this way and that, Sister Mary Joseph Praise arrived before a tiny door at the end of a slitlike passage. On the rock wall was a pale outline of a signboard recently removed. She offered a silent prayer, took a deep breath, and knocked. A man yelled in a hoarse voice, and Sister Mary Joseph Praise interpreted the sound as invitation to enter.

Seated on the floor next to a shiny balancing scale, she saw a shirtless Arab. All around him, reaching to the ceiling, were great bales of bundled leaves.

The hothouse scent stifled her breathing. It was a new scent for her, this scent of khat: partly cut grass, yet with something spicier behind it.

The Arab's beard was so red with henna she thought he'd bled into it. His eyes were lined like a woman's, reminding her of depictions of Salahuddin, who'd kept the Crusaders from taking the Holy Land. His gaze took in the young face imprisoned in the white wimple, and then those hooded eyes fell to the Gladstone bag in her hand. A heave of his body produced a vulgar laugh through gold-trimmed teeth, a laugh which he cut off when he saw the nun was about to collapse. He sat her down, sent for water and tea. Later, in a mixture of sign language and bastardized English, he communicated to her that the Belgian nun who'd lived there had died suddenly. When he said that, Sister Mary Joseph Praise began shivering again, and she felt a deep foreboding, as if she could hear death's footsteps rustling the leaves in that hothouse. She carried a picture of Sister Beatrice in her Bible, and she could see that face in her mind's eye, now metamorphosing into a death mask, and then to Anjali's face. She forced herself to meet the man's gaze, to challenge what he said. Of what? Who asks "of what" in Aden? One day you are well, your debts are paid, your wives are happy, praise Allah, and the next day the fever gets you, and if it opens your skin up to the heat which your skin has fought off all these years, you die. Of what? Of what doesn't matter. Of bad skin! Of pestilence! Of bad luck, if you like. Of good luck, even.

The building was his. Green khat stalks flashed in his mouth as he spoke. The old nun's God had been unable to save her, he said, looking up to the ceiling and pointing, as if He were still crouching there. Sister Mary Joseph Praise's eyes involuntarily followed his gaze, before she caught herself. Meanwhile, his muddy eyes dropped from the ceiling to her face, to her lips, and to her bosom.

...

If I know this much about my mother's voyage, it's because it came from her lips to the ears of others and then to mine. But her tale stopped in Aden. It came to an abrupt halt in that hothouse.



What is clear is that she embarked on her journey with faith that God approved of her mission and would provide for and protect her. But in Aden, something happened to her. No one knew what exactly. But it was there that she understood that her God was also a vengeful and harsh God and could be so even to His faithful. The Devil had shown himself in Sister Anjali's purple, contorted death mask, but God had allowed that. She considered Aden an evil city, where God used Satan to show her how fragile and fragmented the world was, how delicate the balance between evil and good, and how naïve she was in her faith. Her father used to say, "If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans." She felt pity for Sainly Amma, whose dream of enlightenment for Africa was vanity that cost Anjali's life.

For the longest time all I knew was this: after an unknown period of time that could have been months or even a year, my mother, aged nineteen, somehow escaped Yemen, then crossed the Gulf of Aden, then went overland perhaps to the walled and ancient city of Harrar in Ethiopia, or perhaps to Djibouti, then from there by train she entered Ethiopia via Dire Dawa and then on to Addis Ababa.

I know the story once she arrived at Missing Hospital. There were three spaced knocks on the door to Matron's office. "Come in," Matron said, and with those two words Missing was on a course different than anyone could have imagined. It was at the start of the short rains, when Addis was stunned into wet submission, and when after hours and days of the sound and sight of water, one began hearing and seeing things. Matron wondered if that explained this vision of a beautiful, brownskinned nun, standing, but just barely, in the doorway.

The young woman's recessed, unblinking brown eyes felt like warm hands on Matron's face. The pupils were dilated, as though, Matron would think later, the horror of the journey was still fresh. Her lower lip was ripe, as if it might burst at the touch. Her wimple, cinched at the chin, imprisoned her features in its oval, but no cloth could restrain the fervor in that face, or conceal the hurt and confusion. Her gray-brown habit must have once been white. But, as Matron's eyes traveled down the figure, she saw a fresh bloodstain where the legs came together.

The apparition was painfully thin, swaying, but resolute, and it seemed a miracle that it was capable of speech, when it said in a voice heavy with fatigue and sadness: "I desire to begin the time of discernment, the time of listening to God as He speaks in and through the Community. I ask for your prayers that I may spend the rest of my life in His Eucharistic Presence and prepare my soul for the great day of union between bride and Bridegroom."

Matron recognized the litany of a postulant entering the order, words she herself had uttered so many years ago. Matron replied automatically, just as her Mother Superior had done, "Enter into the joy of the Lord."

It was only when the stranger slumped against the doorpost that Matron came out of her trance, running around her desk to grab her. Hunger? Exhaustion? Menstrual blood loss? What was this? Sister Mary Joseph Praise weighed nothing in Matron's arms. They took the stranger to a bed. Under the veil, the wimple, and habit they found a delicate wicker-basket chest and a scooped out belly. A girl! Not a woman. Yes, a girl who'd only just bid good-bye to childhood. A girl with hair that was not cut short like that of most nuns but long and thick. A girl with (and how could they not notice?) a precocious bosom.

Every maternal instinct in Matron came alive, and she kept vigil. She was there when the young nun woke up in the night, terrified, delirious, clinging to Matron once she knew she was in a safe place. "Child, child, what happened to you? It is all right. You are safe now." With such soothing words, Matron comforted her, but it was a week before the young nun slept alone and another week before the color returned to her face.

When the short rains ended, and when the sun turned its face to the city, as if to kiss and make up and say it was after all its favorite city for which it had reserved its most blessed, cloud-free light, Matron led Sister Mary Joseph Praise outdoors. She was to introduce her to the Missing People. The two of them entered Operating Theater 3 for the first time, and an astonished Matron watched as the stern and

serious expression of her new surgeon, Thomas Stone, crumbled into something akin to happiness at the sight of Sister Mary Joseph Praise. He was blushing, taking her hand in his and crushing it till tears came to the young nun's eyes.

My mother must have known then that she would stay in Addis Ababa forever, stay in Missing Hospital and in the presence of this surgeon. To work for him, for his patients, to be his skilled assistant, was sufficient ambition, and it was an ambition without hubris, and God willing, it was something she could reasonably do. A return journey to India through Aden was too difficult to contemplate.

In the ensuing seven years that she lived and worked at Missing Hospital, Sister Mary Joseph Praise rarely spoke about her voyage and never about her time in Aden. "Whenever I brought up Aden," Matron said, "your mother would glance over her shoulder, as if Aden or whatever it was she left behind had caught up with her. The dread and terror on her face made me loath to ask again. But it scared me, I'll tell you. All she said was, 'It was God's will that I come here, Matron. His reasons are unknowable to us.' There was nothing disrespectful about that answer, mind you. She believed that her job was to make her life something beautiful for God. He had led her to Missing."

Such a crucial gap in the history, especially that of a short life, calls attention to itself. A biographer, or a son, must dig deep. Perhaps she knew that the side effect of such a quest was that I'd learn medicine, or that I would find Thomas Stone.

Sister Mary Joseph Praise began the task of the rest of her days when she entered Operating Theater 3. She scrubbed and gloved and gowned and stood across the table from Dr. Stone as his first assistant, pulling on the small retractor when he needed exposure, cutting the suture when he presented the ends to her, and anticipating his need for irrigation or suction. A few weeks later, when the scrub nurse couldn't be there, my mother filled in as scrub nurse and first assistant. Who knew better than a first assistant when Stone wanted a scalpel for sharp dissection, or when gauze wrapped around his finger would do. It was as if she had a bicameral mind, allowing one half to be scrub nurse, shuttling instruments from the tray to his fingers, while the other side served as Stone's third arm, lifting up the liver, or holding aside the omentum, the fatty apron that protected the bowels, or with a fingertip pushing down edematous tissue just enough for Stone to see where his needle was to take a bite.

Matron would peek in to watch. "Pure ballet, my dear Marion. A heavenly pair. Totally silent," Matron said. "No asking for instruments or saying 'Wipe,' 'Cut,' or 'Suction.' She and Stone . . . You never saw anything quicker. I suspect that we slowed them down because we couldn't get people off and on the table quickly enough."

For seven years Stone and Sister Mary Joseph Praise kept the same schedule. When he operated late into the night and into the morning, she was across from him, more constant than his own shadow, dutiful, competent, uncomplaining, and never absent. Until, that is, the day when my brother and I announced our presence in her womb and our unstoppable desire to trade the nourishment of the placenta for the succor of her breasts.