

CHAPTER FOUR

Where Do We Go From Here?

Two Roman Catholic nuns were guests at our house. Everyone was on good behavior including the "old man". The Sister Superior, who asked me to call her Sister Elizabeth, was my foster Father's youngest sister. He had often crudely stated that when Elizabeth announced to the family her desire to give her life to God as a nun, he would rather have seen her hit on the head with a baseball bat. During the entire week of the visit the Sisters were wonderfully cheerful. They showed themselves to be very good sports on the fishing expeditions and sight-seeing ventures, but about them was always a veil of mystery and secrecy. To me the dark robes and cowl were frightening and yet it was hard to be afraid for their faces were very kind.

Sister Elizabeth discussed with her brother the possibility of my being brought up in a Catholic convent. The irreligious one of the family was my foster Father. He stoutly refused to give consent. The matter came up for discussion several times after the Sisters departed and he repeated again and again that if any priest set foot on his property, he would fill him full of salt. They had a way of taking buck-shot out of a shotgun shell and filling the shell with course salt. I had seen stray dogs get the salt treat-

ment. It was really just big talk but in all the noise his true sentiments on religion were expressed.

VOID OF CHRISTIAN INFLUENCE

Our country district was void of Christian influence. There was no church on our side of the river within several miles. Only one of the fishermen we knew was religious and he was regarded as somewhat of an oddity. The lack of Christian influence could be felt in the morals of the young people. At thirteen years of age I had never seen a Bible, never heard a hymn sung, nor had anyone talked to me about God. He was completely unknown to me except as I heard His name frequently in profanity. Many of the men were masters in the use of vile and filthy language.

In the months prior to my thirteenth birthday my mind became agitated by several difficult questions. The first question concerned death. Two Japanese girls had been drowned in the channel just below our house. I had been left motherless because Mrs. Gerard died. Now my favorite Aunt was dead.

RELIGIOUS ILLITERATE

On the way to my Aunt's funeral my foster Father and brothers had stopped for a drink of beer at a tavern and left me sitting in the car. By the time we arrived at the church I was thirsty too and much relieved to see the fountain at the church door. The water did not taste as good as I had expected but it was quenching my thirst. Just as I poised for one last

gulp, Harold turned around, grabbed me by the arm and said, "Silly, that's not for drinking, that's holy water." Poor little religious illiterate that I was, I fearfully asked, "Will I die because I drank the holy water?"

"No," said Harold, "but the priest won't think much of you."

Aunt Sina had been very kind to me, writing letters and sending gifts through the mail. Now she lay cold and white in the coffin at the front of the large Roman Catholic church. The priests were chanting and waving their smoking censers. The affect on me was drastic. The funeral, the incense, the mournful chanting and the sight of my Aunt cold and still made me sick to my stomach. It was a great relief when the funeral was over.

IMPORTANT QUESTION

What is death? Where do you go after you die? After the funeral I asked my brothers many questions about what happened to Aunt Sina and where she had gone. They knew nothing at all about it. To them she was just gone—that's all—never to return again. In the weeks following the funeral, the buzzing of a fly or the drone of a bumble bee on the window sill filled me with a sense of dread because it reminded me of the drone of the funeral service.

Our house was located across the river from a great hydro-electric plant. At certain seasons of the year there was a tremendous roar as the water plunged through the flood-gates of the dam. The grown-ups said that if ever the Stave Falls' Dam broke we would

be washed away, even though there was an island between us and the mouth of the Stave River. Always in connection with these fearful thoughts was that terrible uncertainty about the hereafter. The only consolation in it was that all of the people in the world were in the same predicament—brought into this world to live, love and laugh for just a while and then sent out to nobody-knows-where. Little did I know that a merciful God had by His Spirit awakened within me a consciousness of the hereafter and that He was about to take up my cause.

When my father and my mother forsake me,
then the Lord will take me up. Psalm 27:10