



PIPE, ST. LOUIS, MO.  
PHOTOGRAPH BY ROGER PFINGSTON.

# Juventútem Meam

GARY GILDNER

The light ring roused me enough to pick up the phone beside my bed. A woman said my name and then hers so warmly I let her go on: her mother—Patricia, did she say?—had just died, and in a few minutes the woman on the phone would be leaving Pennsylvania and heading for Michigan.

“The funeral is Friday.”

“What happened?”

The caller, Donna, said her mother had gone into the hospital with a nagging flu and died there of an aneurysm.

“All very unexpected. Except for that virus, she was in good health. I wanted to call because Mom was always very fond of you.”

“How old was she?” I said, waking up more.

There was a pause. Then: “This *is* the Gary Gildner who went to Holy Redeemer in Flint?”

“Yes.”

“She was your age.”

I snapped fully awake. She was talking about my high school girlfriend.

“I am so sorry,” I said.

"I woke you up, didn't I?"

Where I lived in northern Idaho was as a matter of fact on Pacific Time, I said. "But, really, it's okay."

Donna said she would back up. She reminded me of when we'd met: in the mid-1980s at Michigan State while I was visiting writer there and she was a student. She'd come to my office. Her mom, actually, had sent her to meet me. Donna now lived in Bucks County and had two boys who loved baseball. Here's what she knew: at the hospital, an infectious-disease doctor pressed on Patricia's abdomen when she was not very alert and she screamed. Her own doctor came in later and also pressed on her abdomen, causing her to scream even worse. Nothing was done right away. They were thinking diverticulitis and wanted to wait for things to calm down; they waited too long. Because she was on blood thinners, bleeding internally all this time, there was, finally, nothing anyone *could* do. She died of an abdominal aortic aneurysm. Patricia was a nurse; she had worked lots of ERs, assisted at heart operations, and near the end of her career served as head nurse in a chronic-pain clinic. How was this scenario of screams-leading-to-nothing-anyone-could-do possible in a hospital? Screams by one of their own? Donna said her mother's Mass would be at Holy Redeemer at eleven o'clock on May 8th, the day after tomorrow.

The second phone call I got that morning, after a shower and coffee, was from my publisher, to tell me that a poem from my new collection was going to be read on public radio's "The Writer's Almanac" in a couple of weeks. "Rock Tea," the poem, is about (to put it simply) the journey of life.

I was dumbfounded at Patricia's death, and angry. But neither bewilderment nor anger could compete with the images that started rushing into my head: among which, not oddly, were some nuns we'd known who could briskly enter a classroom and immediately render us mute, alert, servile,

ready to scale a wall, scared, happy, nervous, confident. All more or less at once. They wore the full habit in those days—Holy Cross sisters from South Bend—and they wore it to win. The only time they lost control was when the pastor, Father Louis P. Gauthier, short and round, rolled into class like Napoleon because he had been inspired, suddenly, to share some of his thoughts. He left English, math, and biology alone; but religion and history and Latin were his for the taking, since they were so solidly in his bailiwick and, anyway, always good backdrops for the largesse he was eager—beaming—to distribute. “If Sister didn’t mind?” She never did, of course. How could she, committed as she was to poverty, chastity, and obedience? Forget that the wedding ring-like band on her third finger symbolized a spiritual hip to hip with J. C. himself. He couldn’t help her, *nicht wahr*? And what were Father’s enthusiasms? A love of learning. Order. “Always,” he would advise, “keep a pencil in your hand when you’re reading a book. I do.” And then we’d get to hear, once again, how he played saying Mass at the altar he’d built in the attic of his boyhood home. *Ora pro nobis*. Let us pray, indeed. Patricia’s death took me back to that disciplined, conformist, but rich-in-introspection—sometimes wildly rich—parochial school theater of our youth.

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