You're So Fresh

A Memoir of Sr. Joan Frances Crowley

Sister of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVM)

Revised Edition

"Every human relationship involves an eternal responsibility."

Written by Dan Vaillancourt

A featured book in the *Million Decisions* series

"Storytelling is the most powerful way to put ideas into the world today."
-Robert McKee

The books in the *Million Decisions* series highlight people who have at least one characteristic in common—they set a direction for their lives and then persevere in the journey, making a million tough decisions to move toward their goal. Should I sleep longer this morning or go to work? Do I paint the living room wall to cover the scratch or go to work? Do I find other excuses for not getting to work, like listening to the radio, watching TV, taking a nap, surfing the web, texting acquaintances, dreaming of easier work, more money, a bigger house, a faster car, and so on? To be human is to make a variety of decisions each and every day. But the people in *A Million Decisions* have made at least 30 years of hard decisions in pursuit of unusual and praiseworthy goals, and in the process they have created lives that teach and inspire.

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100 – The tough decisions made each day to pursue the goal.

10,950 – The days in 30 years.

1,095,000 – The tough decisions made over 30 years to pursue the goal.

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All proceeds from the sale of *You're So Fresh* will be donated to Sr. Joan Frances's favorite organization, The Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVMs).

If you wish to send a tax-deductible donation to the BVMs, please send your contribution to:
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1100 Carmel Drive
Dubuque, Iowa 52003

Cover design by Kathy Vaillancourt

Preface

The old joke goes this way: If you want to make God laugh, just tell God your plans. Sr. Joan Frances and I were supposed to write her story together, just as we had written a book and taught a college course together. But it didn't turn out that way, and in the distance I think I heard Someone chortling.

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In fall 2008, I taught 21 students in two aesthetics courses for the philosophy department at Loyola University Chicago. The students interviewed 19 Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVMs) as part of a service-learning project involving the memoir art form. Meeting an hour a week for about two months, the students asked the sisters about their family lives as young girls, discernment of vocation and novitiate years, service to others, and leadership style. The students then transcribed the interviews into chronological narratives, and selected a life segment or two from the narratives to develop into memoirs written in the voices of the sisters (in the first person as if the sisters were writing them). After the courses ended, the sisters edited the documents, approved their final form, and

permitted their delivery to the archives at the University and/or the BVM Motherhouse in Dubuque, Iowa.

Sr. Joan Frances participated enthusiastically in the project, working as an energetic recruiter of other BVMs to the project and an eager interviewee for two students. She fell in love with, as she said, "the lovely girls," and in the end she agreed to the placement of the documents about her life in the archives. However, she felt the students had missed the spark in her heart, the glow that warmed her interactions with people. They had not explored adequately in their writings the eternal dimension in every human relationship.

I asked her if she would be willing to start over with me as the interviewer. And would she agree to share her story with a public audience, perhaps as the lead chapter in a book featuring the stories of people who had lived inspiring lives? I would title the book, *A Million Decisions*, since the stories would demonstrate how the selected people (like herself) had made at least a million tough decisions to fashion lives that held significant meaning for them and that others might view as inspiring for themselves. We could work together on the story, include photographs, documents, and testimonials, and decide later how to camouflage or to delete sensitive biographical material. She said simply, "I can't imagine who would be interested in my life, but I trust you." Those were our plans.

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I conducted my last recorded interview with Sr. Joan Frances in early May 2009. She was 90 years old and living on Chicago's north side with other retired sisters at Wright Hall, the ten-story retirement home for the sisters on Sheridan Road across the street from erstwhile Mundelein College but now part of Loyola University Chicago.

Her head of shocking white hair lit up the hallway of the home's first floor as I watched all 80 pounds of her baby-step toward me. She had fallen on her bedroom floor the previous week and broken a rib, so she had to take millimeter steps and stay hunched over to tolerate the pain. She wobbled a bit as she approached me, making her look inebriated. I took her arm and said, "Have you been nipping on martinis again?" The remark was a longstanding joke between us, because at social gatherings where the hosts served liquor she regularly requested a martini, though no one had ever seen her finish one.

She lifted her head and peered up at me with cataract-dimmed blue eyes. "You're so fresh," she said. "May God forgive you." Then she smiled and decades of wrinkles and age spots fell from her face. She looked young and vibrant again, and it could have been 1972 when I first met her.

Back then, she had tinted gold-blonde hair trimmed below the ears. Stylish glasses magnified her twinkling eyes, which were as quick as her feet, darting back and forth at the ready to greet students and fellow professors. Add a knee-length colored skirt, white blouse, and low leather pumps, and she might have passed for one of the professional

women completing their college degree in a continuing education program.

I met her in the elevator of the Skyscraper building (the main structure) of Mundelein College, an all-women's college in Illinois and one of the few remaining women's colleges in the country at the time. I was 25 years old, about to complete my Ph.D. dissertation, and hired in a tenure-track position to teach philosophy.

After some small talk, she wasted little time. "May I ask you what you studied in graduate school?"

My response of "continental philosophy, especially phenomenology and existentialism" was met with silence, so I threw in some big names like Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty.

"What about Marx?"

"I've been hooked on him since I was a teenager, when one of my uncles gave me *The Communist Manifesto*."

Her eyes widened. "You would be perfect then, that is, if you're interested."

Before I could answer, she explained that she taught Russian history courses and would like to cover the post-1917 Marxist period, too. "But I need a philosopher to do the Marxism. I just don't get philosophy. It ruffles my hair as it flies over my head."

The self-deprecating comments would come often enough, but they were misleading. This woman, who barely weighed 100 pounds and stood a mere two inches over five feet, packed the pulling power of a large magnet. She asked questions; she smiled; she told stories; and she joked with

everyone, especially the boyfriends of the women students. Once in her orbit, people felt pulled to come closer, to be with her, to be her friend. And I was no exception.

We set up a time to meet later in the week and to begin building the course. Then, the elevator stopped and the doors opened on the seventh floor. As she stepped out to go to her office, she turned and said, "I'm sure the girls in class will enjoy looking at a handsome young man." Her blue eyes sparkled as she raised her right hand to waive. "Nice meeting you. Bye now, and God bless."

And that's how our friendship started. We created and then team-taught the course Marxism and Communism at least once a semester for 18 years, and we co-authored two editions of the interdisciplinary book *Lenin to Gorbachev: Three Generations of Communists* (the second edition was expanded to include the Gorbachev years and the beginning of the Yeltsin rule). I relished every minute I was with her.

I could say of her that she was "pure" (as a good friend said of her), that she was a "mischief-maker" (as my wife Kathy referred to her), or that she was a "party pooper" (as the students called her when she left the dormitory lounges at midnight to go to her own room to prepare for early morning classes in Russian or French history). These descriptive words or phrases would all lead to interesting stories from Sr. Joan Frances's life. Instead, I want to relate two stories of my own that capture the measure of the person and that define for me who she was.

That October evening in 1978 was unusually mild, and I had just completed my lecture on Stalin's "Dialectical

Materialism" in our Marxism and Communism course. I was sitting in the back of the room trying to listen to Sr. Joan Frances discuss Stalin's purges, but I was distracted by several students fanning themselves with papers and slumping in their seats. Suddenly Sr. Joan Frances stopped in mid-sentence and said, "Dan, would you mind opening a window? It's warm in here." I walked to a window in the front of the classroom, and, as I was prying it open, she said, "See, class, there *is* a use for men after all."[1] After the loud laughter died down, she slipped back into her sentence and continued the lecture—to a now energized audience—as if nothing had happened. (She will tell her own version of this story in the memoir.)

The second incident occurred when we were grading papers during our first trimester together. We agreed to evaluate the student argumentative essays independently of one another and then to come together to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each essay and to assign a grade. Every teacher knows that strong and weak essays virtually grade themselves, but the essays in the middle—with both strengths and weaknesses—give teachers headaches: is the essay a B+ or A-, another essay a C- or C, and so on? When Sr. Joan Frances saw me agonizing over a B or B+ for a paper, she said, "When in doubt, shouldn't we assign the higher grade? We want to err in favor of the student."

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[1] This incident happened before the days of political correctness, and, besides, our close friendship and affection for each other opened a door that allowed us to use one another as joke bait.

These two stories incorporate the characteristics I admired most in Sr. Joan Frances. Her quick wit drew out humor in the most mundane or trying situations, and she displayed a concern for others manifested in daily details, like a half step higher in a grade on an essay. She summed up this other-centeredness in a line she quoted frequently to me: "Every human relationship involves an eternal responsibility."[2] Unfortunately, this line sailed over my head when I was younger, but I now understand how Sr. Joan Frances made it her life's mission to cultivate the seed of eternity in each human relationship. "I was only living the Gospel," she said.

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Sr. Joan Frances died on October 6, 2009 at the BVM Motherhouse in Dubuque, Iowa. She did not have enough time to work with me on her story or to collect photographs and documents, and she never identified sensitive material or edited the text. However, her close friend Sr. Jackie Burke read a few chapters of the first memoir draft to her, and the two of them laughed and cried at descriptions of some events. Sr. Joan Frances told me, "You make me look too good. I'm tempted to ask that your interpretation of my life be buried with me in case I need it when I come knocking on

[2] Sr. Joan Frances credits the sentence to a book written by Monsignor Ronald Knox. She read the book—"title long forgotten," she said—during her novitiate years.

heaven's door." We both laughed, because we didn't know that she would be at heaven's door in a few weeks.

The opportunity to get the full story of Sr. Joan Frances's life with her help has slipped away forever. I even considered throwing away the pages I had written, the pretext being that if I couldn't get the story right I might get it all wrong. However, I chose to persist and to complete the job, knowing that the story could never claim to be a full and accurate account of the life of Sr. Joan Frances. What *You're So Fresh* loses in factual accuracy, it gains, I hope, in the ability to draw readers into the soul of the person to understand how she nurtured the seed of eternity in each human relationship. It is not the story I planned to tell, but in this instance the laughter in the distance encouraged a venture into the realm of wisdom. I hope the wisdom of Sr. Joan Frances will trump all else.

Second Preface

More than a year has passed since I wrote the first words of *You're So Fresh*. This time away from the story has improved my hindsight on memoir a bit, but, more importantly, sufficient time has elapsed to bring new documents related to the life of Sr. Joan Frances to my attention, especially documents concerning Sr. Joan Frances and her good friend Lana Peters, the only daughter of the Soviet Union's Joseph Stalin. Thus, it is time to write more explicitly about the nature of memoir and to revise the segments where Peters makes an appearance.

In 1998, professor of English (and my good friend) Mary Griffin described memoir as "deeply personal as well as historical." *You're So Fresh* reads like memoir on some levels but on others it does not. Let me explain.

The story of Sr. Joan Frances borrows many elements from memoir. For example, it is written in the first person point of view to capture the voice of Sr. Joan Frances and to give her story immediacy and authenticity. However, Sr. Joan Frances did not write the words, as would be expected of a traditional memoir. I wrote the words and modeled each sentence after the rhythm and vocabulary of her speech from digital recordings and from almost four decades of dialoguing with her. The story also borrows from memoir the narrow life segment as its subject matter. Judith Barrington

in *Writing the Memoir* says, "autobiography is the story *of a life* [….] Memoir, on the other hand, is a story *from a life*." I organized the segments of *You're So Fresh* as narratives, utilizing all the tools of storytelling to do so. Unfortunately, life segments do not appear in one's existence as ready-made stories, with frames, beginnings, plots and subplots, tensions, climaxes and dénouements, not to mention symbolism and expressive language like simile, metaphor, hyperbole, euphemism, irony, and so on. I structured the segments of Sr. Joan Frances's life as narratives that still read like memoir on some levels but not all.

The strength of *You're So Fresh* as story may harbor yet another idiosyncracy. The story is historical without any pretense at recording history. The two major events of the story concern the relationship of Sr. Joan Frances with a student, Betsy Buntz, and a celebrated woman in her 50s, Lana Peters. I bring the events together in 1978-1979 for dramatic effect, though Buntz matriculated at Mundelein College sometime in the 1960s and Peters visited the College in spring 1987. Moreover, Sr. Joan Frances held the Dean of Residence position from 1962-1969. In this sense, the story does not record history. However, every detail Sr. Joan Frances could recall about Buntz and Peters has been incorporated in my reconstruction of the two relationships. Additionally, I participated in the Peters visit to the College, and a few months ago (January 2010) the letters written by Peters to Sr. Joan Frances became available in the Loyola University Chicago Women and Leadership Archives. In this

other sense, the story attaches its "meat" on the skeleton of history.

The reader who wishes to reconstruct the history related to *You're So Fresh* may profitably consult two sources: the collection title "Sr. Joan Frances Crowley" in the Loyola Women and Leadership Archives, and Joan Frances Crowley, BVM, "Remembering 1962-1969" in *Mundelein Voices: The Women's College Experience, 1930-1991*, Ed. Ann M. Harrington and Prudence Moylan (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2001) 151-180.

April 11, 2010
Chicago, Illinois

Chapter One

God Wants Me Here

I could be lippy with the best of them, especially the boyfriends of the Mundelein College girls. No boy ever got the upper hand on me. I remember one boy when I was Dean of Residence at Mundelein—I think it was in the late 1970s. He was visiting his girlfriend in Coffey Hall one night, and he stayed about 30 minutes past visiting hours. The woman on duty at the front desk reported him to me. "Sister, Carmela's young man hasn't checked out yet."

You know, the girls themselves through their elected representatives had decided on the visiting hours (and curfew), and so I expected them to abide by the rules. I marched up to the third floor, and knocked on the room door. The laughter inside the room drowned out my knocking, so I tried again, this time louder.

"Come in!" The voice was deep and strong, Carmela's voice for sure.

I leaned close to the door and said, "It's Sister." I liked to let the girls know who was on the other side of the door in case they needed to straighten out the room or themselves a little.

After a few seconds and some ruffling noise inside, the door opened but not too wide. Carmela was a lovely

Italian girl, a few inches taller than I, with coal-black eyes and matching hair falling in waves over her shoulders. She was dressed in black Jordache jeans and a red Mundelein sweatshirt. Her boyfriend was wearing gray sweats, and he was sitting on the floor in the middle of the room. It was a typical dormitory residence with two of everything—beds, desks, chairs, and closets. He smiled up at me and said, "Come on in, Sister, and join us." You would think he owned the place.

"Carmela, dear, my lower lip is trembling." I touched her arm as if to underscore the point. "It's past visiting hours."

Before she could respond to me, her boyfriend—I think his name was Andrew—said it was all his fault.

I noticed another girl in the room, Carmela's roommate Betsy Buntz. She was sitting on the lower bunk against the wall, looking at everyone. If Betsy was there, it meant that Carmela and Andrew were behaving themselves.

Andrew, mind you, never stood up to greet me. Instead, he challenged me. "Sister, what if I refuse to leave?"

His tone was not belligerent. In fact, he was generally a well-behaved boy. But he was testing me to see what I would say.

I played along. "Oh, you're so fresh! May God forgive you."

I turned to Carmela. "I don't know what you see in him."

Andrew jumped up from the floor and stood close to Carmela. "I'm her knight in shining armor. Right, hon?"

He was enjoying himself, but Carmela had a Mona-Lisa smile frozen on her face, and she was seesawing from foot to foot, probably hoping he would not push me too far.

He did not. He said something about coming back tomorrow to see Carmela.

I pointed my bony index finger at him. "Andrew, you had better come during visiting hours. Otherwise, I'll have to throw my body across the entrance door, and you'll never be able to enter the dormitory."

Mind you, I was all of 100 pounds sopping wet, towel included, and he was a Loyola University Chicago athlete, probably over 200 pounds.

He laughed. "You've got me there, Sister."

I purposely never addressed his initial tease about what I would do if he refused to leave the dorm room. I didn't want to push him into a corner. Nudging him in the right direction was what I was trying to do. Generally, it worked out well. Andrew, like the others, was a good boy, just lippy sometimes.

"Carmela, can I count on you to take your knight downstairs to the front desk and to sign him out?"

"Yes, Sister."

"And would you please stop by my room sometime tomorrow so we can have a little talk?" The girls knew I meant business when I suggested "a little talk." I pushed the room door as wide open as I could, and then left.

I went to my room on the first floor to prepare my Russian history lecture for class the next morning. My room resembled a big book with small fold-outs on each side, in

the right fold-out my bed and study desk, and in the left my kitchenette and bathroom. I walked across the open living room into the right fold-out and sat at my desk. I had just opened the history text to the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, when someone knocked on my door. It was long past 1:00 A.M., but I opened the door anyway (I could never keep my door shut on a student). There was little Betsy Buntz, a wisp of a girl, so frail and delicate. She looked especially fragile this early morning in narrow-legged blue jeans and a short-sleeve pink tee-shirt. I always worried that if someone exhaled on her, she would tip over.

"May I speak with you…a few minutes, Sister?" Her voice was low and breathless, as if she had just run up a flight of stairs. But I knew Betsy couldn't run, even walk up a steep incline. This darling girl had been born with a serious heart defect—a blue baby, they called her—and she was fortunate to have lived this long. She had arrived at Mundelein in March for the third trimester, gone home (she lived in Rockford, Illinois) for the summer like the other girls, and now enrolled in the first trimester of the new academic year. Her parents had begged the College to accept Betsy, because it was the only school in the area that had elevators to take her to her dorm room and then to all her classes. Mundelein would allow Betsy to live the life of a normal college student without requiring that she climb one flight of stairs. Her parents, such darlings, had teary eyes when they dropped Betsy off at Coffey Hall. They didn't want to live a minute without her, but they knew Betsy

would be happy at Mundelein, and their daughter's happiness came first.

"What's on your mind, Betsy? Are you feeling well?" I scanned her face and noticed the telltale tint of blue around her lips.

"Oh…it's nothing like that, Sister. But I was wondering…do you think I'll ever have a boyfriend? Am I…pretty enough?"

That was how she spoke, innocently and in spurts. I thought she was very pretty, with light brown hair falling to her shoulders, a delicate mouth and nose, and the most unusual eyes I had ever seen—light orange and big and round like saucers.

I invited her in, and led her to the couch that separated the large living space from the opening to the bedroom and study desk. Then I poured each of us a glass of ice water. "Maurice my chef has left for the evening, so water will have to do."

Betsy laughed, as she always did when I joked about my imaginary chef. And she laughed again when I told her that I hadn't dated any boys recently, but I'd do my best to help her out in the boyfriend department.

I don't know why I did this, but I started with stories about my years as a young girl—that I was a tomboy and could run faster and climb higher than all the boys in the neighborhood, and that I was on a grade school basketball team and helped win a city championship by scoring eight points in the final game, and that I thought my life would be

free as a breeze and filled with games. But God had different plans for me.

"I'm sure God has someone special for you, Betsy. But you must be patient. God's plan for us unfolds in time."

"You really think so, Sister?"

She looked at me with such sincerity, with such trust, that I wondered if she was just too sweet and innocent for this world. I took her hand and squeezed it, trying to reassure her that everything would turn out just fine. "Now go get your rest. Class time is just six hours away."

When Betsy left at 2:00 A.M., I was exhausted but at peace. God wanted me to be here for girls like Betsy.

Chapter Two

Stalin's Daughter Said Yes

Obviously, my enthusiasm and passion for teaching Soviet history (especially the Stalin years) were not generating any energy among the 40 students sitting in front of me. It was only early evening, but already the eyelids of the students were slowly closing and then snapping open like erratic window shades, and their bodies were sliding down their chairs lower and lower. In a few more minutes, some of the bodies would slump to the floor. I had been lecturing hard in the Marxism and Communism class for 45 minutes, regularly inserting statistics like the amount of coal and electricity generated at the conclusion of the first five-year plan in the Soviet Union: from 35.4 million tons of coal to 64.3, and from 5.05 billion kilowatts of electricity to 13.4. I wanted the students to understand the enormous transformation that had occurred in the USSR[3] during the early 1930s when the rest of the world was experiencing a severe depression. The Soviet people by sheer dint of will had pushed the nation into the ranks of the world powers.

I threw out a few more statistics, each time raising my voice a little, but it was no use. My voice had become their sleeping pill. So, I resorted to a little trick I had learned

[3] Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, also known as the Soviet Union.

when teaching children in Butte, Montana. Fresh air and a good joke worked better than a jolt of caffeine.

I said to my co-teacher Dan, who was young enough to be my grand-nephew, "Would you mind opening one of the front windows? The air's stale in here."

"Sure, no problem." Dan walked quickly to the front window and tugged at it for a few seconds.

At that very moment, the Irish in me blurted out, "See, class, there *is* a need for men after all."

Well, you would think I had just delivered the greatest funny line in the history of civilization. The class roared with laughter, and the person laughing the loudest was sitting in the back row, Lana Peters, the only daughter of the Soviet Union's Joseph Stalin.[4]

I still shake my head in disbelief at how an incidental newspaper article led to Lana's visit to Mundelein College and to our eventual friendship. My time with Lana Peters was the most exciting period of my teaching career and…but I'm getting ahead of myself. I want to relate the story, not in pieces, but as it unfolded.

It was a drizzly fall morning, a Sunday I think. Yes, it had to be a Sunday, because that was the only morning of the week when I could sit down and read my two favorite newspapers, the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Times*, without interruption. The girls in the dorms had arrived late

[4] Svetlana Aliluyeva Stalin changed her name to Lana Peters in 1970 when she married her third husband William Wesley Peters, an American architect and first apprentice to Frank Lloyd Wright (the marriage lasted 20 months).

from their Saturday night parties and dates, and they were still sleeping. So, there I was, sitting on the window side of the couch, wrapped in my warm pink flannel bathrobe, sipping on a cup of hot tea, and reading my newspapers. I learned in a brief *Times* article that Svetlana Aliluyeva Stalin, now Lana Peters, had returned from England to the United States and settled in Spring Green, Wisconsin. By coincidence, Julie Strael, one of the students in the Marxism and Communism class, also came from Wisconsin, around the Milwaukee area. In my profound knowledge of geography (it was not a favorite subject in school), I thought Spring Green bordered Milwaukee instead of being on the other side of the state. Anyway, I pulled Julie aside one day to talk with her. There was no mistaking Julie for anyone else. She was a tall girl with fine blonde hair down to the middle of her back, and she always wore a brown or white sweater, hand-knit by her grandmother who lived in Norway.

I began with a little guessing game I had used to great effect with the girls at OLP (Our Lady of Peace High School in Minneapolis, Minnesota) when I taught there in the 1950s. I put the palms of my hands together as if to hide something, and then asked Julie to pick a number from 1 to 10.

"Three," she said, pushing up the sleeves of her brown sweater.

I opened my hands and feigned great surprise. "You win! You win! You get to do me a little favor."

Poor Julie responded to her sudden good fortune with a look of bewilderment and a barely audible, "Oh."

I proceeded to lay out my plans. I told Julie what I had read about Lana and that I wanted to invite her to speak to the Marxism and Communism class. "Oh, how wonderful it would be to have you and the other students hear firsthand the story of this remarkable woman, whose mother committed suicide, whose father was a ruthless dictator, and who compared her childhood to paradise. It would be the first time living history walked into one of my classrooms. It's something history professors dream about for their students." Then I explained why I needed her to write the letter to Lana. "She might respond to you, but she would probably suspect a professor of staging a publicity stunt. She despises the media."

"Well…alright, Sister, if you think I can…"

"I *know* you can! And I'll help you." If I were not wearing a skirt and heels, I would have run to the chapel to give thanks to God for sending me students like Julie.

It was a busy few weeks getting Julie ready to write the letter. I gave her a crash course in the Stalinist dictatorship and had her read Lana's *Twenty Letters to a Friend* and *Only One Year* to get a sense of the woman's views and current background. We kept the letter direct and simple—about Julie and where she lived in Milwaukee, about Mundelein and the Marxism and Communism course, and about me and Dan and how we team-taught the course. The letter concluded with an invitation to visit the College and to speak to the students in the class.

The reply arrived quickly, as if Lana had read the letter and mailed her response the same day. She would

come to Chicago in two weeks, on a Tuesday, and she wanted Julie to contact her to make arrangements to pick her up at the bus station in Chicago. But she had conditions attached to the visit: no reporters or publicity of any kind and no lecture in the Marxism and Communism class. My lower lip trembled until I read further. Lana would attend one class as an anonymous visitor to observe how Dan and I presented the philosophy and history of the Soviet era, and then she might consider giving a lecture at another time. "If I ever decide to do so," she wrote, "I'll do it in a R-C [Roman Catholic] College." There was hope, I felt.

I was elated that the students would have an historical figure sitting among them, even if they didn't know it. The eternal optimist in me predicted that she would eventually consent to lecture to the class. So during the two weeks prior to Lana's visit, I filled the students' minds with tidbits about her life.

And so, on a warm Tuesday afternoon in late October, Julie, wearing a new white sweater, drove me to the bus station on Dearborn to welcome Lana Peters to Chicago and Mundelein. More than a decade earlier, after Svetlana had defected to the United States, the media dubbed her the "Kremlin Princess." I half expected to meet someone with the look and bearing of royalty, you know, a woman in a long flowing dress, her hair in perfect curls, her nails long and manicured, that sort of thing. Anyway, royalty did not walk off that Greyhound coach. Lana was 53, heavy set, and gray—graying hair and dressed in matching wool gray-brown skirt and dress jacket. I stared at her for a few seconds

and thought, "So, this is Stalin's daughter. This is the woman from my history books." I don't remember what we said to each other or what kind of luggage Lana had, but I do recall Julie driving the three of us to a restaurant near the College. I was looking forward to dinner, because good food often feeds good conversation and fills the awkward silences associated with first encounters.

I remember two things from the dinner. Lana put away food like someone storing calories for winter. She cleared all the food from her plate, the bread from the basket, the salad from her bowl, and she finished a large slice of three-layer chocolate cake with vanilla ice cream. I wondered if she had skipped lunch to make her bus ride to Chicago on time, but this pattern of gusto at the table continued throughout her three-day stay at Mundelein. I admired and somewhat envied her appetite, since food allergies had turned me into a nitpicker at the dinner table. The other recollection is that in the beginning Lana Peters did not like me, not at all. I felt it the moment she stepped off the bus, and it continued throughout most of the meal. It was nothing overt. I mean she never said, "I don't like you." But there seemed to be a myriad of little things, such as the shallow smile etched in concrete, the perfunctory questions asked of me ("Are you warm today, Sister?"), and the glancing looks up and down my frame—things of that sort. She remained cordial, but there seemed to be a block of ice between us that I could not melt no matter what I did. I can only surmise that she was displeased to see me in a blouse and skirt instead of a sister's habit.

But Lana adored Julie, and this was most evident when she asked Julie if her professor—meaning me—was giving her excellent assessments on her assignments. "You must be the first student in the class," she said, looking directly at Julie, almost as if I was not present at the table.

Julie slid her dessert plate aside, and put her hands on the table. She turned to me and said, "A student has to work hard to earn a good grade in Sister's class." She pushed up the sleeves of her sweater and leaned back in the seat.

I could have hugged her right then and there, but I didn't want to show too much emotion. "Julie, dear, you just might find a holy medal under your door tomorrow morning."

For the first time, I saw the concrete on Lana's face crack and fall away. She smiled broadly, and the apples on her cheeks beamed bright red. She asked some questions about the history papers Julie had sent to her, especially the paper about Lana's life and writings, and then the rest of the dinner passed in pleasant conversation about French, American, and Soviet history. (When Julie contacted her, Lana asked to read some essays Julie had written for my history courses.) From this moment, I felt the ice between Lana and me melt away.

Anyway, Julie drove us back to the College in early evening, and she excused herself saying she had more studying to do for her classes the next morning.

After Julie left, Lana expressed deep gratitude for having met this young woman. "She seems to be one of

those angels who come unexpectedly and open new doors for us or show us the way to something new."

I didn't say anything, but deep down I was smiling. Julie had been my angel, too. Hadn't she brought me and Lana together today?

Lana and I went into the Skyscraper building and rode the elevator to the ninth floor where the sisters in residence there had prepared a guest room for her. My excitement at having Lana at Mundelein was palpable now. The first person to greet us was the former President of the College, Sr. Ann Ida Gannon, who was waiting for Lana with the key to the guest room. I don't know how she knew the time of our arrival, but there she was to show Lana how to operate the lock to the room door. Then Ann Ida said something that stunned me. "The key also opens the door to the chapel next door. Feel free to use it. The sisters on the floor gather to pray at seven in the morning. You are welcome to join us."

In my excitement, I had forgotten about Lana's journey in Christianity, first in the Russian Orthodox Church with her baptism in Moscow in 1962 and then in Roman Catholicism with her conversion a few years ago in England. But I didn't know how public she was about the practice of her faith. I found out the next morning when I met her for breakfast in the College dining room.

We were finishing our second cup of tea when she asked me for the schedule of masses for the day at Mundelein and Loyola. Then she added, "I would like to

read in the morning and attend a mass in the middle of the day. Would it be possible for you to accompany me, Sister?"

"Oh, I'd be delighted."

I brought her to the 11:00 o'clock mass at the Loyola Madonna Della Strada chapel, and sat with her in the back of the church. We had arrived almost 30 minutes early to a chapel with a handful of people praying and reading in the front. I tried to pray, but my mind kept repeating the same words, "I'm sitting in a Catholic church next to Stalin's daughter." I could barely sit still in the seat, unlike Lana who had her eyes closed and fingers intertwined in a prayerful pose. After a few minutes, she leaned over and whispered to me, "Do you think, Sister, you could find me a priest so that I could go to confession?"

Lana's simple request triggered what I call "the dumbest moment of my life." I jumped up from the chair, and flew down the aisle toward the sacristy in the front of the chapel. If I had been dressed in my old sister's habit, I would have looked like the flying nun. I have no recollection of opening the sacristy door. I just remember a young Jesuit priest looking at me with his mouth agape as he was adjusting his vestments to celebrate mass. He never had a chance to say anything, because I blurted out, "Father, Stalin's daughter wants to go to confession. I'll get her." I ran back to Lana and then led her to the priest.

Confession must have done Lana some good, because she walked slowly from the sacristy back to her seat with a face dispersing subtle smiles the way a prism refracts the hues of the color spectrum. I felt humbled by the look of

contentment on her face, and I bowed my head and asked God's forgiveness for running around the chapel like a crazy sister.

I wish I could relate some dramatic tales about Lana's presence in the Marxism and Communism class that evening, but everything went on as it always did. A visitor in the classroom surprised no one, since the girls sometimes brought their boyfriends or siblings to class. This time, the visitor was an older woman sitting in the back row between Julie and little Betsy Buntz. I can't recall anyone even taking a second look at her.

It was a three-hour class, and so Dan and I lectured on numerous topics covering the Soviet Union in the 1930s: the first and second five-year plans, the purges and show trials, and an excellent book chapter, "Dialectical and Historical Materialism," often attributed to Stalin.[5] In the middle of my presentation, I caught Lana's eye and remember thinking, "I'm speaking about her father and the atrocities he committed—is she going to jump up and strike me?" Lana seemed unperturbed, looking intently at me and then Dan without ever changing facial expression or body posture. Well, that's not quite true. I learned that she did have a sense of humor when I played my little window joke on Dan to wake up the students. I was stunned that her laughter was as robust as her appetite and that she turned to little Betsy Buntz and nodded her head as if to say, "That

[5]Commission of the Central Committee of the C.P.S.U. (Bolsheviks), editors, *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks), Short Course* (New York: International Publishers, 1939) 105-131.

was a good one, wasn't it!" Anyway, the joke worked as well as caffeine. The students sat up in their seats, and a faint sparkle of life returned to their eyes.

I knew that evening classes were challenging for students, especially since they had other classes during the day and some of them had part-time jobs to boot. I could understand why they were tired, and so I concluded the class with a provocative Stalin-era story. I told them how Stalin's long arm, like an octapus's tentacle, reached across the Pacific Ocean all the way to a prison in Mexico to assassinate fellow revolutionary and political rival Leon Trotsky. The story of Trotsky's last years—the affair with Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, the life of leisure and comfort in prison, and the death by ax blow from a Stalinist henchman—left the students shaking their heads in disbelief. Writers of fiction could not have imagined a more lurid and bizarre scenario. The students were wide-awake now. To help them understand the point of the story, I ended with these words: "On the brink of what the Soviet people call the Great Patriotic War [World War II], only Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin remained from the original group of committed revolutionaries who had aspired to fashion the world's first Marxist state. Lenin had died in 1924 after a series of strokes, [Lev] Kamenev and [Grigory] Zinoviev had been executed at the conclusion of a show trial in 1936, [Nikolai] Bukharin had died in 1938, victim of another show trial, and now Trotsky in 1940 had fallen at the hands of an assassin wielding a pick ax. When Hitler invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, Stalin stood alone from the old

guard, and he cracked under the pressure. But that's a story for next class."

The students started stirring and speaking to one another. Someone in the front row said, "Oh, Sister, don't tease us. Tell us what happened to Stalin." Others joined in.

"I'll start with Stalin's breakdown next week, if you promise to come to class rested. One of these days your yawning will prompt me to break into a song and dance, and then you'll be sorry. You all know I can't sing and dance."

A number of them lingered to ask questions about the upcoming essay and to clarify a few of the five-year plan statistics.

After the last student left, Dan and I brought Lana to her room, where the three of us conducted a post-mortem, an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the class (a common practice for Dan and me after each class). Lana had an electric teapot in her room, and she poured each of us a cup of tea. Dan and I recited our usual litany of apologies to each other for going over our allotted lecture time, and we also praised details of each other's presentation. For her part, Lana commented more about the ease with which Dan and I related to each other than she did about the content of the class, except for one point. "You Americans have this love affair with numbers, like the numbers of victims in the purges. It amazes me." She was not questioning the accuracy of the numbers but rather the manner of presenting this dark period in Soviet history. Dan and I continued discussing the point with her, but more important to me was what happened after Dan left.

Actually, Dan was not supposed to leave until he had asked Lana the big question, "Are you willing to speak to our class?" But our post-mortem took longer than we had anticipated (we ended at 11:00 P.M.), and Dan had to drive 30 minutes to get home to his wife and two children. I was on my own now, and my lower lip trembled as I worried that Lana would not agree to my request. So, there we were, sitting next to each other with only a small table separating us. When Lana stood up to pour me another cup of tea, I summoned my courage to ask the big question. But before I could speak, Lana said, "Sister, I know I can trust you to make sure there will be no publicity when I speak to your class."

I left her room on legs shaking from excitement, and I went straight to the chapel on the second floor to thank God for my new friend.

Chapter Three

You Could Have Killed Yourselves

It was a bitter cold and snowy winter evening, and I was sitting at the study desk next to my bed sipping a cup of hot chocolate while grading a stack of essays. The dorm was quiet, and I imagined all the girls were in their rooms safe from the storm outside. I had just put the cup down on the desk when I heard a staccato rapping on my door. It was a nervous type of knocking, as if the person was sending a distress signal in code. My worry-meter shot up, and I jumped up from my chair. On my way to the door I called out, "It's open, please, come in."

The door flung wide open, and there was little Betsy Buntz with snow covering her bulky red winter parka and her jeans. She was taking short shallow breaths and shifting back and forth on her feet.

"Oh, Betsy, what's wrong? Are you in troubl…"

Betsy didn't let me finish. "Sister, I couldn't wait…to tell you. This is the happiest…day of my life. You won't believe it. I can hardly believe…what happened myself." Her knitted wool hat had slid to the side of her head, almost dangling on one ear. She was smiling, and her cheeks were two ripe tomatoes. I had never seen Betsy look so healthy. She was positively radiant.

"Come in, come in, and tell me."

"But I'll get your…floor all wet."

"Betsy, dear, my lower lip will tremble if you don't start telling me what happened."

Betsy laughed. "We were making a snowman and…he threw me in the snow and…then he packed a snowball." She took several quick breaths, and put her hands around my right arm. "But he didn't throw it at me. Instead…he put it against this cheek." She slid her hands to my fingers, and then raised them to her right cheek for a moment.

Students told me all manner of things, and I had learned to honor each event in their young lives by listening carefully and rejoicing with them. I was thinking of ways to fuss over Betsy's important event, like inviting her over to my desk to circle today's date on my calendar or sending her a little card with a snowman on it, but she interrupted my thoughts.

"Sister, there's more."

My worry-meter shot into the red zone. Was this a good news-bad news visit? In the past, some girls told me about the wonderful marriage proposal they had received. After I celebrated with them, they told me a little more—one was already pregnant, another was eloping, and still another was certain her parents would never accept the young man. They were all so young, and already life was weighing on them with heavy challenges. That's why I worried. How could little Betsy take on another challenge?

"He…kissed me on the other cheek." She took another quick breath, and exhaled the big news. "And he asked me to go to…the dance with him in two weeks."

I was so relieved that my shoulders dropped and my knees buckled a little. I didn't want to spoil Betsy's big moment, so I packaged and put away my relief as quickly as I could. "Betsy, I'm delighted for you. Come, sit down, and tell me more." I led her to the couch, and then helped her remove her heavy winter clothing and snow boots. "You sit and catch your breath, and I'll heat some milk for hot chocolate."

With these kinds of life-altering events, the girls usually wanted to re-enact every movement and line of dialogue. I felt honored to be their audience, but, really, it was an extraordinary privilege to watch these young women navigate the manifold passages to adulthood, one of them being love and marriage. They taught me one lesson well: it was possible to fall deeply in love at 18 and 19 years old. And now Betsy had begun this most important journey, in a winter storm no less.

I brought her a cup of hot chocolate and then settled next to her on the couch to listen and to enjoy. At one point, I lifted my cup to toast with her the unfolding of God's wonderful plan. We clicked cups with too much gusto and spilled a little hot milk on our hands.

Betsy apologized and then giggled. She raised her cup again. "I want to toast another use…for boys, Sister. They make…good snow balls." She laughed and laughed at the double entendre of her own joke. One would have

thought that the hot chocolate contained something more potent than just milk and chocolate syrup. Betsy was as giddy and happy as I had ever seen her. First love, there was nothing more intoxicating for a young woman.

At the end of an hour, we decided to return to our schoolwork. Before I said goodbye to Betsy at the door, I remembered her parents. "Betsy, you won't forget to share this wonderful news with Mother and Father, will you? They will want to hear every word, I'm sure of it." I often dropped a reminder about mother and father to the girls but never insisted that they pick it up. Family relationships were a maze. Some girls scurried away from their parents so that they could grow up on their own, while others ran to the Coffey Hall phone on their floor every night to call home. I let them make their own decisions. But Betsy, she was different. In her world, a dance could send her straight to the hospital or worse. I hardly slept all night, worrying that Betsy would not tell her parents about the dance and that I would have to override her decision and call them myself.

But I worried for nothing. The next day Mr. and Mrs. Buntz phoned me in my office. They had heard every exciting word from Betsy, and they couldn't be happier for her. In fact, they were driving from Rockford to the College over the weekend to take Betsy shopping for a new dress, and they asked if I would join them for dinner later in the day.

"I'm honored that you've asked me," I said. "But I couldn't possibly impose. This is a special time for the three of you to be together as a family."

They fussed a bit over my response, but they understood that a first date, like a first baby step and a first day at school, was a very special time for a family. And for the Buntzes, this was especially true, because Betsy was their only child.

Mr. Buntz asked if I knew anything about the boy who had invited Betsy to the dance.

I knew only what Betsy had told me—he was a Loyola freshman from California and he was cute. I continued to converse politely about college dances, dresses, first loves, broken hearts, and so on, but I wondered when the topic of Betsy actually dancing would surface. Finally, I interjected, "Won't the dancing be too much exertion on Betsy's heart? Won't it be dangerous?"

"Yes, it could be," Mr. Buntz said. "Now you know how we've felt over the years. We want to protect her and to keep her close to us all the time, but that's not fair to Betsy. And so we let her go. She can use her wings to take her where she wants to go."

"Sister, Betsy knows how to monitor her activities," Mrs. Buntz added. "We trust her." Mrs. Buntz worked as a pediatric nurse at a hospital in Rockford, so I knew she grasped the situation as a medical person as well as a mother.

With the parents in agreement over Betsy's participation in the dance, how could I give the issue another thought? I proffered my good wishes to Mr. and Mrs. Buntz for a wonderful visit with Betsy, and then hung up my worries with the receiver.

During the next week or so, my course, committee, and residence work kept me very busy. If Betsy had not stopped by my room to show me her dress the day before the dance, I would have forgotten about the event. The ankle-length, pale peach gown matched Betsy's orange eyes, and the pink sequins lining the collar complemented her rosy cheeks. I told her she would look like a princess in the gown.

The next day I was going to see Betsy and her roommate Carmela off to the dance, but a last-minute emergency with a sick student prevented me from doing so. But I made a point of stopping by their dorm room after curfew. This was not my usual custom, since I allowed the girls the privacy of their own lives. But I wanted Betsy and Carmela to know why I had not come to their room before the dance.

Anyway, I was knocking on Betsy and Carmela's door, and no one was answering. But there was much commotion—like things banging and crashing—inside the room. I tried again and added, "It's Sister."

"We'll be right there, Sister. We're cleaning up." The voice was Carmela's.

Finally, the door opened halfway, and I stepped inside. The room looked in order—floor free of clothing and books, chairs at their desks by the window, and the two beds made. But it felt chilly, and Carmela and Betsy in their sleeveless formal gowns seemed to be shivering. Then, I spotted water and snow on the inside of the windowsill.

Mind you, all this sleuthing occurred while we were exchanging greetings.

I was so sure something was amiss that I said directly, "Girls, something doesn't feel right. Do you have anything to tell me?"

Carmela moved toward the door, and Betsy followed her, causing me to turn my back to the window. They muttered over each other, "No," "Not at all," "We're fine," "Just a little tired."

I was about to ask them for details about the dance, when, behind me, I heard a sound like snow crunching under a foot. But how could that be? We were three stories above ground level. I turned around and saw that the window was open maybe an inch from the bottom. After that, the little ruse unraveled quickly. As Carmela scurried to the window saying "I'll close it," a man's foot was pressing down on the bottom of the same window from the outside. Of all the inane pranks to pull, and dangerous, too! The girls' escorts had crawled onto the outside ledge of the building to avoid being discovered in the room after visiting hours.

"Carmela! Open the window and get those boys in here!" I was shaking with anger.

Within seconds the two boys scrambled inside and stood before me with their heads down.

"The sign-in book at the front desk does not list your names," I said. "How did that happen?"

Carmela's boyfriend, Andrew, muttered something about a crowd of people, being in a hurry, and forgetting to

sign in. He was about to say something else, but Betsy interrupted him.

"Andrew, you had…better tell the truth."

The other boy said to Andrew, "The gig's up." Then he looked at me.

"Sister, the truth is, we climbed on the roof of the structure that connects Coffey Hall to the building next to it, and then the girls let us in the dorm through a second story window."

I looked at the four of them and kept shaking my head. "You could have hurt yourselves, or worse." And then I lectured them about the role of rules in a community, the trust they had violated, the disrespect they had displayed toward me, and the selfishness of their behavior. "Do you know what is so sad about this inexcusable behavior? All of you will have to pay a price for it now. And it could have been avoided. I knew that tonight was a special occasion for the four of you. If you would have asked me for more time together, I would have given it to you. What a shame!"

I told the boys to gather their things. They were getting a personal escort out of the building tonight. I let them out the Coffey front door, and then returned to the girls' room to inform them that they would be appearing before the student judicial board. "Your future in the dormitory lies in their hands."

It had taken me years to persuade the President of the College to institute a student board to adjudicate dormitory violations like this one. The girls elected to the board were bright, and they possessed a practical wisdom that served the

students in residence well. Thankfully, they gave an excellent accounting of themselves in this instance, too. The board voted to bar the two boys from visiting any Mundelein dormitory for the rest of the school year, and it assigned to the girls 50 hours of community service for the residence staff. Additionally, Carmela and Betsy were put on probation for the remainder of the academic year; one more infraction would automatically lead to their dismissal from the residence halls at Mundelein.

I thought the board decision would put the incident behind all of us. But it didn't. Betsy just couldn't tuck the memory of what she had done into a back room in her mind. Every time she spoke to me she broke into tears and then started apologizing again. "I'm so sorry, Sister…after everything you've done…what was I thinking…I never should have…."

I opened my drawer of useful lines—"we all make mistakes" and "the point is to learn from them"—but they offered no solace for Betsy. The more I tried to say something uplifting to her, the louder her sobbing became. Even her schoolwork suffered. In class she locked her eyes on her desk, and she never raised her hand to answer questions or to contribute to class discussions. And she proceeded to fail her next two class assignments. In the end I stopped trying to buoy her spirits and, instead, took a different approach.

Lana Peters was returning to Mundelein during Holy Week to lecture to the Marxism and Communism class and to participate in the rituals of the holy days. Her recent letter

to me reiterated the need for privacy. "I would hope that at Mundelein," she wrote, "we simply shall not meet a situation when curious press, newsmen, etc. try to enter the classroom." She even asked me to post a guard at the entrance to the classroom to keep out "those sharks and wolves." Lana's request gave me an idea.

I asked Betsy after class one day if she would mind very much stopping by my room in the evening. I had a favor to ask of her. "It's top secret, so I can't discuss it here in public." I kept a solemn FBI look on my face, because I didn't want Betsy to think I was teasing her.

"Yes, Sister." She wouldn't look at me.

I must have done something right, because Betsy dropped by later in the day. "Come in, please." I led her to the couch, and asked her to sit down. "You're a lucky young woman, my dear Betsy, because my chef Maurice must have known you were coming. He prepared a little treat for you. I'll be right back." I went into the kitchenette, and quickly poured a glass of cold milk into a Mundelein mug and placed a handful of chocolate chip cookies on a plate. All the while I kept talking about Maurice. "He always prepares a snack for me before he leaves. I keep telling him that he does too much for me. How will I ever enter heaven when I have the luxury of a private chef? After all, I made a vow of poverty. God will never open heaven's door for me." I returned to Betsy and presented her with the mug and plate. "This is Maurice's favorite snack. He calls it 'Cookie-au-lait.'"

A faint smile formed around Betsy's pale lips, and she raised her head to look at the cookies and milk as she took them. Her eyes were watering already.

I sat on the other end of the couch, by the windows, and decided not to waste any more time. "Thank you so much for stopping by, Betsy. I won't keep you much longer. It's true, I have a big favor to ask of you, but first you must swear on your life not to breathe a word of this to anyone, not to your boyfriend, not even to Carmela." The jokes were over. I was ready to negotiate a deal that would facilitate the most important event of my teaching career.

When Betsy first stepped into my room, she may have thought that I wanted to rehash the dorm incident. She came in with her head down, shoulders rounded, and body lumbering forward. But now her demeanor changed as I switched from jokester to businesswoman. She put the milk and cookies down on the coffee table in front of her, and then looked me in the eyes. "Yes, Sister…you can trust me."

I told her everything about Stalin's daughter, that she had visited Mundelein in the fall trimester, that she had sat next to Betsy in the Marxism and Communism class, that she was returning to the College in a few weeks in mid-April to lecture to the class, and, most importantly, that she despised the media and publicity.

Betsy's eyes were no longer watering. They were bright and twinkling and as large as the cookie plate. "You mean the older woman…but I never knew."

"You weren't supposed to know. Lana was coming to the class incognito to observe. I had given my word not to divulge her identity to anyone."

Betsy took one of the cookies from the plate and bit into it. Then she sipped some milk. Her body moved slowly, as if made of honey. I think she was processing what I had told her. Anyway, she wasn't crying in my presence for the first time in more than a month.

"Lana won't lecture to the class unless I guarantee her that there won't be any reporters anywhere near the College. She even insists that I post a guard at the classroom door." I moved closer to Betsy and touched her on the arm. I waited until she looked at me in the eyes. "Betsy, dear, I'd like you to be the guard at the door. I know you can do this, and you'll be given a walkie-talkie to communicate with the people in security at the College. Will you do me this big favor?"

She said yes.

Chapter Four

I Didn't Say My Goodbyes

I watched Lana Peters pace back and forth in her room as she reviewed her lecture notes. She would be speaking to the Marxism and Communism class in a few hours, on Wednesday of Holy Week. She kept telling me that her nerves were big Russian ants crawling over her body. It was her first time lecturing to college students, and she was more nervous than at any other time in her life.

Lana had arrived in early afternoon, and settled quickly in the Skyscraper guest room. She had chosen this particular week to lecture to the students so that she could also participate in the rituals of Holy Thursday and Good Friday with me and the BVM community. She had to return home on Saturday to begin preparations for a special meal with friends on Easter Sunday.

I knew the lecture would be emotionally difficult for her, so I tried to buoy her spirit. "The girls in class will be sponges and soak up every word you say. It will go just fine, I'm sure of it."

Lana didn't respond, but she stopped pacing. "I think I'm ready," she said. "Will you accompany me to the chapel before supper and the class?"

"Of course. It will be my pleasure."

During the past several months, I had gradually become Lana's unofficial spiritual director. Our conversations by mail worked like a spiral. She would write to me about questions of faith, and I would reply with suggestions of helpful readings; then she would comment on the readings, and this would prompt new readings, and so on. We always ended in better places than where we started. In one exchange of letters, she asked me about the nature of faith, and so I sent her Francis Thompson, *The Hound of Heaven*; by return mail, I received a cassette of her own recitation of the poem with an accompanying analysis. What a treasure this package and all her letters were to me.

We prayed in the chapel for almost 20 minutes, and then moved like automatons through supper and back to Lana's room. She changed into a heavy brown tweed suit flecked with orange fibers, the skirt modestly below the knees. After applying a little rouge to her cheeks, she gathered her notes and led me to the elevator. We arrived at the classroom so early that no one was present except little Betsy. She was already at her post outside the door, and dressed completely in black as she had told me she would do. "It will make me look more official," she had said.

"Lana," I said, "let me introduce you to one of our bright Mundelein students. This is Betsy Buntz. You may remember her from last fall. She was sitting next to you in our class."

Lana turned quickly to me with a grimace on her face.

I may have read too much in her look, but I gathered that she was worried Betsy would reveal Lana's identity to the press. I put her at ease immediately. "I may have forgotten to tell you, but Betsy will guarantee that no media people approach the classroom."

Betsy extended her hand to Lana. "It's such an honor…to meet you." With the left hand, she held up a new walkie-talkie for Lana to examine. "I have a…direct channel to the…security people at Mundelein. We won't let…anyone disturb you."

I had grown accustomed to Betsy's halting speech so that she could take in breaths of air, but tonight the speech seemed more broken than usual, and she was breathing more rapidly than what I recalled. Perhaps she was as nervous as the rest of us.

As I led Lana into the classroom, I gave Betsy a thumbs up. Her solemn and professional demeanor had confirmed my choice of her as guard. I whispered, "You look like an authority figure, even an intimidating one with your outfit." But black was not Betsy's color. It made her look too pale. I also knew that extended nerves would blanche Betsy's face no matter what color she was wearing. After these passing thoughts, my mind shut the door on Betsy for a while. I had so much to do—helping Lana settle comfortably in a back row seat, coordinating last minute class items with Dan, welcoming the students, and writing some first five-year plan statistics on the board.

Lana would speak after the class break, in the final 75 minutes of the period, to guarantee that no student had time

to leave the classroom to call a friend, or worse, a reporter. I trusted the girls, but it made no sense to place temptations in front of them, either.

The 90 minutes before the break ticked away in molasses. Dan and I presented our parts on the USSR in the 1930s, the same lectures Lana had heard in the fall. The words flowed slowly, while the mind raced to the upcoming introduction of Lana Peters. The final words of my presentation finally slid off my tongue, and then I announced the break. "Please be back promptly in 15 minutes. I will personally award a gold star to each of you, if you return on time." Jokes about gold stars for promptness reminded the students that there was still important work to do and that every available minute was needed to get it done.

As the last student returned from the break, I began Lana's introduction. "Class, we have with us tonight a special guest." I looked at Lana, who had sat after the break in the front row next to the lectern. "A former Soviet citizen, she defected to the United States in 1967, and then published two important books, a memoir titled *Twenty Letters to a Friend* (1967) and two years later *Only One Year*, an account of her first year away from the Soviet Union." I quoted complimentary lines from reviews of the two books, and then said, "Class, let me present to you Lana Peters."

No clapping, no murmur, no noise. The students were absolutely stunned. They all knew who she was, because I had prepared the soil well by dropping items about her life and reading passages from *Twenty Letters* during previous classes. Perhaps the sight of living history standing before

them seemed as significant to them as it did to me, an event absorbed at the moment but celebrated later.

Like most inexperienced teachers, Lana read from her notes for the next 45 minutes. With her eyes glued to the paper, she told the class about contemporary USSR: the many economic challenges facing a 72-year old Leonid Brezhnev, the unrest bubbling in many of the 15 republics, and the place of the Soviet Union in the company of nations, especially as a rival of the United States. It was a typical talk delivered by a scholar, heady with political ideas and replete with the jargon of the day like "peaceful coexistence" and "bilateral negotiations." It fascinated me—and many of the students, as I was to learn later—to hear Lana speak so long about the USSR and not to mention the name "Stalin" even once. After the prepared speech, Lana permitted the students to ask questions related to the ideas she had covered. She erected a fence around the subject matter appropriate for discussion, not so much to bring attention to the material of the presentation but to keep out questions related to her father.

The students were such darlings. They honored her wishes, and posed intelligent questions. At the end of the 75 minutes and a round of applause, many students came forward to thank Lana and to shake her hand. I couldn't be more proud of them.

The four of us—I asked Betsy to come, too—gathered in Lana's ninth floor guest room to reflect on the evening and to conduct the customary class post-mortem. Lana and Betsy were so proud of themselves. They were

beaming. Dan and I were probably radiating some light, too. The evening could not have gone any better for all of us.

But it breaks my heart now to recall that, after this night, I would never again see Betsy, and two days later, when Dan would drive Lana home to Wisconsin, I would not experience the pleasure of Lana's company again.

Let me finish Lana's story first. We remained busy pen pals for a number of years, right through her move back to England to be closer to her youngest daughter Olga, who was attending a private boarding school there. I thought the bond of friendship between us was steel, impervious to life's corroding knocks. But I was so wrong. The acid that dropped on our relationship came from an unexpected source.

One Saturday night, I received two phone calls from a persistent London reporter. I should have treated the man as a phone solicitor, and hung up on him. But I made the mistake of listening to his pitch. He wanted Lana's address in England. Of course, I would normally have rejected such a straightforward request, but his rationale kept me on the line. He claimed that Fr. John Garbolino, the priest who had baptized Lana, was looking for her, hoping to re-establish a connection with her. I listened politely but said "NO" both times. The following Saturday he called again, and begged, begged, begged. I weakened and gave him the address.

I felt uneasy enough about the disclosure to tell Lana what I had done. Her return letter started with two words written in capital letters across the top of the page: "HOW AWFUL!" The anonymity she had found in Cornwall had given her a measure of peace finally, but all this would soon

be lost. Cornwall reporter Alex Prud'Homme wrote in the online *People.com* newsmagazine (1992) that a *London Evening Standard* reporter received a tip about Lana's whereabouts and that he was rebuffed when he tracked her down in a shabby section of Ladbroke Grove. She was angry, and would say only, "You must know I don't give interviews. Please leave me alone."

I could do nothing to restore Lana's trust in me. The letters dwindled, and then stopped coming altogether. The weakened steel had snapped, and I had lost a dear friend forever. A few years ago, I put in a bag all the letters Lana had sent to me and gave them to Loyola University Chicago. Our relationship is part of the public record now.

It is just as difficult for me to talk about little Betsy Buntz. Her parents picked her up after classes on Holy Thursday to take her home for Easter break. On Monday, she was admitted to the hospital in Rockford for tests I think, but I can't be sure. Her love for Mundelein was extraordinary. She sent me a letter from the hospital saying how happy she was at the College; she couldn't wait to return to her classes.

Little Betsy never left the hospital. She died there the following week of complications from pneumonia that she had contracted over Easter break.

I learned the terrible news from Carmela, who met me after supper on my way to Coffey Hall. She was in tears.

"Sister, Sister, have you heard?" She threw herself into my arms and sobbed tears that could only come from deep down, from her soul.

"About what?" I was confused for a moment, but then I connected the dots and figured out what had happened. I had just picked up at the switchboard numerous phone messages from Mr. Buntz asking me to call him at home right away. It was an emergency, the messages said. I initially thought he would inform me that Betsy would not return to Mundelein this trimester. Carmela's distraught behavior told me that the news was infinitely worse.

"When did it happen?"

Carmela pulled away from my arms but kept a firm grip on my hands. "Sometime this afternoon."

I brought Carmela to my room to comfort her. "Sit here on the couch." I held her hand as she sat down. "Would you drink tea if I boiled some water?" I could help Carmela only if I kept busy myself. My heart was broken, too.

"No, thank you, Sister. I feel sick to my stomach."

I sat next to her, and she took my hand and squeezed tightly.

"Why Betsy, Sister? She was so sweet. I just don't understand it." She stopped crying a bit, and looked into my eyes. She was waiting for my answer.

"I don't understand any more than you do, Carmela. But she's with God now, running around and not having to pause to catch her breath. I think she had completed God's work here, and God called her back."

We talked a few more minutes, and then Carmela remembered out loud that Andrew was meeting her outside the dorm. She thanked me, and then left quickly.

I called the Buntz house immediately, and spoke to a friend of the family. Mr. and Mrs. Buntz, after returning home from the hospital, had forced down a few bites of food, and then left to meet the funeral director. "They would certainly welcome your phone call this evening, probably after 8:00 o'clock," the woman said. I wanted to ask more questions, but a loud knocking at my door forced me to hang up.

"One moment, please." I opened the door, and there stood Carmela and Andrew.

Andrew said immediately, "I know I'm not supposed to be in the dorm, but Carmela and me want to tell you something."

I wondered what they could possibly say to me at a time like this. In my confusion, I did not invite them into the room. Instead, I scotched my foot against the bottom of the open door, and waited for one of them to speak.

"It's like this, Sister," Andrew said. "Nobody around here knows Betsy like you do, and…"

Carmela interrupted. "What Andrew means is that you know Betsy best. We know you don't drive, but if you want to go to her parents to comfort them, we'll take you. We can leave right now."

"Well…I …if you…" I couldn't find the words to respond to them. After the infraction over winter, I had seen very little of Carmela, and Andrew not at all. I thought they hated me. Of course, I wanted to be with the Buntzes, but how did they know I had never learned to drive?

"Are you sure you want to make the long trip tonight? Don't you…"

Andrew wouldn't let me finish. "Sister, if we leave now, we can get there around 8:00."

I grabbed my coat and a memorial card for the Buntzes, and out the door we went.

Andrew was driving some kind of dated big blue car where the front seat accommodated three people. There we were on the highway to Rockford, Andrew at the wheel, Carmela in the middle, and Sister on the end—the three of us shoulder to shoulder.

"The old joke goes this way: If you want to make God laugh, just tell God your plans. Sr. Joan Frances and I were supposed to write her story together, just as we had written a book and taught a college course together. But it didn't turn out that way, and in the distance I think I heard Someone chortling." From the Preface

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Sr. Joan Frances Crowley, BVM and Dan Vaillancourt team-taught for 18 years Marxism and Communism at Mundelein College Chicago, and they co-authored and published two editions of *Lenin to Gorbachev: Three Generations of Soviet Communists.* In describing his four-decade friendship with Sr. Joan Frances, Dan says, "This woman who barely weighed 100 pounds and stood a mere two inches over five feet packed the pulling power of a large magnet. She asked questions; she smiled; she told stories; and she joked with everyone, especially the boyfriends of the women students. Once in her orbit, people felt pulled to come closer, to be with her, to be her friend. And I was no exception."

Her Irish humor was fully intact a month before she died, as evidenced by her response to Dan when he teased her about the Snickers bars (her favorite chocolate candy) she had stashed in her desk drawer. With blue eyes twinkling, she quipped, "Oh, you're so fresh! May God forgive you."

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Dan Vaillancourt is Professor of Philosophy at Loyola University Chicago. He and his wife Kathy co-author books and articles on the power of memoir to capture the wisdom of people like Sr. Joan Frances.