

PASTORAL

ANDRÉ ALEXIS

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APRIL

Christopher Pennant had passed through a crisis of faith. His time at seminary had not been enough to free him entirely from doubt, but it had given him the strength to go on, and when he'd taken holy orders he had been both proud and relieved.

While waiting for a parish of his own, he assisted Father Scarduto at St. Matthew's, in Ottawa. This suited Christopher perfectly. He was himself from Ottawa, so some of the strangeness (and pleasure) of being called 'Father Pennant' was offset by the familiarity of his surroundings. Whenever he allowed himself to think about where he might like to go – that is, where he might like his first parish to be – he imagined he'd be happiest in a small city of some sort: Cambridge, say, or Peterborough. So, he was dismayed when he was told he'd be going to a place in Lambton County called Barrow.

He was not unhappy to be leaving the city, but the city was where he had lived out most of his life and the word 'country' – Barrow was in the 'country' – was vague to him. It was a word that called to mind Cumberland, the town near which his parents had a

cottage, the place where he'd spent his summers as a child. He had vivid memories of its farm fields and hills, but he had never gotten to know the town itself or its inhabitants. So, Barrow would be an adventure. He hoped he would be a suitable shepherd for those who needed spiritual guidance.

It would be fair to add that there was a hint of condescension to Father Pennant's attitude. He assumed that the 'country' was simpler than the city, that rural routes were, metaphorically speaking, straighter than metropolitan ones. It followed, in his mind, that the people of Barrow would be more straightforward than those who lived in and around the Byward Market.

That this was not true he learned almost at once.

Barrow was a town of 1,100 inhabitants. Whether through some divine compulsion for equilibrium or through poor census taking, its population had been 1,100 for twenty years. In every other way, Barrow was a typical town in Ontario, with its grocery store, greasy spoon and churches.

Just outside of Barrow – and all around it – there were fields, silos, barns and farmhouses. Coming in by bus, Father Pennant was so enchanted by the land, by the thistles and yellowish reeds at the side of the road, that he asked the driver to let him off at the sign that said 'Welcome to Barrow' so he could walk into town, suitcase and all, on the warm April day that was his first in his new parish.

It was a Monday morning. There were few people about, few distractions. So, Father Pennant easily took in the trees, the birdsong, the crocuses along the sidewalk and the sky-mirroring ditch water that gently rippled when the wind blew.

As he walked along Main Street, a shop door opened beside him. The smell of bread saturated the air and a man came out with an apron full of crusts and crumbs. He shook his apron. The bits of bread fell onto the street and, from nowhere, a dozen pigeons descended, their wings flapping, quivering, flapping.

Turning to the priest, the man said

– Morning, John Harrington
and held out his hand.

– Good morning, answered Father Pennant.

The priest was just under six feet, dark-skinned, neither fat nor thin, brown-eyed and handsome. He wore a black jacket, black pants, a black shirt with a clerical collar and, on top of it all, a dark overcoat. Mr. Harrington smiled.

– Nice day, eh, Father? Would you like a kaiser roll or ... No, wait. I have just the thing.

Before Father Pennant could speak, Mr. Harrington went into the bakery and emerged with a loaf of bread: warm, dark, somewhat round, pockmarked, smelling of yeast, molasses and burnt walnuts.

– Thank you so much, said Father Pennant.

He was about to walk on, pleased with his gift, when the baker said

– That'll be two-fifty, Father.

As Father Pennant, startled and slightly embarrassed by the misunderstanding, reached into his pocket for the money, a ginger-coloured mutt charged at the pigeons. The dog was so obviously playing, however, that the pigeons scarcely moved out of its way. They turned their backs to it and went on pecking, as if it were common knowledge that the worst this mutt could do was wet them with its tongue.

– Bruno, called Mr. Harrington, leave the pigeons alone.

The dog barked, as if to say

– Yes, all right

then left the pigeons alone, bounding away as suddenly as he'd jumped among them.

Father Pennant's first view of St. Mary's church was gratifying. The church was plain, not at all grandiose, though its stained-glass windows, lit up by the afternoon sun, were a little garish. The rectory beside it was also plain. It was two storeys high, narrow, and had grey stone walls and a black-shingled roof. A young maple

tree stood on its front lawn. The house was, or at least looked to be, perfect for him.

As he approached, Father Pennant noticed two older men sitting in wicker chairs on the porch. The men were partially obscured by shadow. One of them rose to greet him and Father Pennant saw that he was not as old as all that. His hair was white. He was gaunt. He needed a shave, and his bright blue sweater was fuzzy and frayed. But when he shook Father Pennant's hand, his grip was firm. And his voice was strong and clear. He was in his late fifties, early sixties perhaps.

– Father, he said. I'm Lowther Williams.

Then, with a movement of his head toward the shade-hidden man behind him

– That's my friend, Heath Lambert.

– Are you the caretaker? asked Father Pennant.

– If you like. I don't think of myself that way, though. For Father Fowler, I did the cooking and cleaning and just about everything he couldn't do for himself.

– I'm sorry, I thought there was a woman who did the cooking and cleaning. Someone from the parish.

– There was Mrs. Young, but she died two years ago, and I kind of took up the slack.

– I see. That's great, but I'll have to ask the bishop. We don't have ... I don't think we can afford ...

– You don't have to worry about the money, Father. I had an agreement with Father Fowler. I work for room and board and a few dollars now and then. If it's okay with you, I'd like to carry on.

– I think I'll still have to check with the bishop. I'm a pretty good cook myself and I like to keep things tidy, so I don't know if I'll need anyone seven days a week. But let me talk it over with the bishop. You can stay on till then.

– No, said Lowther. I don't think that would be right. I won't stay if you've got no use for me. You can call me if you need anything fixed or anything. I'll be at my mother's old house in Petrolia for a while. The number's in the parish phone book, by the phone.

Behind them, Heath Lambert rose from his chair and came down from the porch.

– I told you, he said softly to Lowther.

Feeling as if he'd been unpleasant, Father Pennant relented at once.

– No, no, he said. On second thought, I'm wrong. I'll need someone for the first few weeks at least, until I get on my feet. If you don't mind, I'll still check with Bishop Henry, but it'd be great if you stayed on for a bit. Is that okay?

Heath and Lowther looked at him as if they were amused.

– Yes, said Lowther. Thank you, Father.

They shook hands. Or, rather, Lowther took the loaf of bread from Father Pennant and *then* they shook hands. Lowther then withdrew, speaking softly with Heath who, after a moment, walked off, raising his hand in a wave meant for the two behind him.

Lowther opened the door to the rectory. The house was filled with light. There was a window in every wall. There was very little furniture: a chair and chesterfield in the living room, table and chairs in the dining room, a kitchen with a white linoleum floor, a white stove, a white fridge, light green cupboards. Everything was spotless. By the looks of it, Lowther Williams was a tidy and thorough housekeeper. Upstairs was much the same. Father Pennant's bedroom had a small closet, a severe, Shaker-style bed and an equally severe bedside table on which stood a round-bodied, white-hooded lamp. His bedroom window looked down onto the maple on the lawn and over at the yard of St. Mary's school. Lowther's room, at the back of the house, was as bright as Father Pennant's and as chaste. But there was a music stand in the room, and on the stand a score stood open. Beside the stand, a cello lay on its side.

– I hope you don't mind, Father, said Lowther. I've been playing since I was twelve.

– I don't mind at all, said Father Pennant.

From the rectory, Father Pennant and Lowther went into the church. St. Mary's was tall-ceilinged but relatively small. There was

a nave, but it was barely deep enough to accommodate the font, a shallow but wide white porcelain bowl set on a solid rectangle of dark wood. There were two rows of ten pews, enough room for two or three hundred parishioners. The pews were of an unstained wood that had been lacquered and looked almost ochre. Though the lights in the church were off, its interior had the warm feeling of a gallery or museum. The church's four stained-glass windows were its first oddity. The windows depicted moments in the lives of rather obscure saints. On the left, if one were facing the altar, were Abbo of Fleury, shown being killed by rioters, and Alexis of Rome, dressed as a beggar with a book. On the right were Zenobius of Florence, depicted helping a man rise from a coffin, and St. Zeno, shown laughing at the side of a lake, a fish in his hand.

– Why these particular saints? asked Father Pennant.

– Father Fowler's predecessor wanted two A's and two Z's, answered Lowther. He thought it would remind people just how many saints there have been and maybe encourage them to be saintly themselves.

– Hmm, said Father Pennant.

He would have preferred more recognizable figures (St. Paul or St. Anthony, say), but the four obscure saints did not diminish his liking for the church. If anything, he was, when he thought about it, inclined to agree with his predecessor. There was something about these little-known saints that suggested the great range of sanctity.

The church's second oddity was endearing. In the sacristy just off from the altar there were the usual things (vestments, wine, unconsecrated hosts) as well as a surprising number of candles. It was as if Father Fowler had feared a shortage of wax. There were dozens of candles – tall, short, narrow, thick, round, hexagonal – neatly stacked on the floor and in the cupboards and cabinets. The sacristy itself smelled of candle wax.

Father Pennant had assumed the church would be eccentric, something amusing to talk about when he visited the bishop or wrote to his fellow priests. Small-town churches were almost always

eccentric. But here was a church in his own image: modest and straightforward, despite its oddities. It might be that his parishioners were 'prickly,' as he'd been warned, but his church and rectory were all he might have wished for.

The rest of Father Pennant's first day in Barrow was uneventful. He unpacked his clothes and put them in the chest of drawers in his closet. He inspected the books Father Fowler had left on the bookshelves: novels, mostly. He ate the first meal Lowther prepared for him: trout with lemon and salt. The trout, perfectly cooked, lay headless on a bed of white rice beside a small handful of fried mushrooms. And for dessert, apple-ginger crumble.

To think he had almost dismissed Lowther before tasting the man's cooking! But then, Lowther was not easy to gauge. He had appeared to be an old man, but he was, in fact, only sixty-two. He seemed to be rudderless, but he was self-assured and spiritually oriented. He treated his duties as caretaker with the utmost seriousness, but when Father Pennant asked him why he chose to be the parish's caretaker, Lowther answered that there was no particular reason. It was the same answer he gave when asked about the cello: no particular reason. The cello had belonged to his grandfather. Asked by his mother if he would like to play the cello, he had answered yes, though he had felt neither compelled nor all that interested. Once he chose a thing, however, Lowther devoted himself to it completely. To Father Pennant, there seemed something almost superstitious about the strength of Lowther's devotions.

– Do you believe in God? Father Pennant casually asked.

– Yes, very much, answered Lowther.

Which was good enough for Father Pennant who, reassured, spent the rest of the evening reading *Memoirs of a Midget* (a novel he chose for its unusual title) before falling asleep in his room, his sleep haunted by passages from Debussy's *Sonata for Cello*.

At least part of the reason for Father Pennant's enchantment with Barrow was that, without being aware of the extent of his distaste,

Christopher Pennant had tired of big cities. Ottawa, his home, had become impersonal and oppressive to him. It made him lonely just thinking about all that tar and concrete. The only things he missed about Ottawa, now that it was behind him, were its many old churches and its river, which, at least in his imagination, had constantly promised elsewhere.

This longing for 'elsewhere' had been a long time coming. Christopher Pennant had always imagined that the city would be the place he'd be most needed. After seminary he had devoted himself to those whom the city had decimated: the poor, the addicted, the downtrodden. And he had felt his work was necessary. But that which had driven him to the priesthood in the first place, the spiritual presence of God, had grown more faint. It wasn't that Ottawa itself was godless. It was, he imagined, that any place that covered the earth with tar and concrete was a place where His presence was bound to be muted. And Father Pennant had come to resent this mutedness. He'd begun to suffer from it. So, when the parish in Barrow was offered to him, Father Pennant, though he might have preferred a smaller city to the country, hoped that southern Ontario would be a way back to the feeling of closeness with God, a way back to the fount of his own spirituality.

His first moments in Barrow were enchanting because they suggested that his hopes were not misplaced. The dun hay that covered the fields like rotting mats, the crocuses, chicory and dandelions, the songs of the birds, the clouds so solid and white it was as if they were being held up from below: everything brought relief and joy. These feelings in turn brought him a kind of grateful curiosity about the town itself and he tried to learn as much as he could about Barrow and the land around it.

Founded in 1904 by an oil baron named Richmond Barrow, the town was, originally, a settlement for those who worked in the oil fields of Lambton County. Over the decades its importance had receded with the oil, but as Barrow was not far from Sarnia it became something of a suburb: near enough by car but still far enough away to maintain its independence and personality.

Along with its history, Barrow also had its mysteries. First among them was its haunted house. Barrow Mansion, the oldest house in town, had been the site of two murders. During the first, Richmond Barrow was stabbed to death by his wife, the former Eleanor Miller of Oil Springs. Years later, Richmond's son, Clive, was stabbed by *his* wife, the former Eleanor Burgin of Strathroy. After a century, the two deaths merged in the minds of the town's inhabitants, some forgetting that *two* Barrows had been murdered, though there was general agreement that the name 'Eleanor' was a bad omen and that the mansion was haunted.

The first sightings of the town's ghosts came shortly after Barrow Mansion had been turned into a museum, in the 1950s. After that it was easy to find men and women who swore they had seen 'Mr. Barrow' wandering the mansion's corridors. By all accounts, the ghost was as baffled as the townspeople. It sometimes wandered the mansion with (according to witnesses) a knife or a fork or garden shears protruding from its chest. These ghostly apparitions were traumatic for those who experienced them, but they were a boon to the town itself: the mansion attracted the curious and the skeptical, all of whom came from places like Wallaceburg or Timiskaming or even Saskatoon to see the house and its spectral occupants for themselves.

No doubt, Barrow's reputation for 'prickliness' came with its ghosts. The people of Barrow, most of whom were of English stock, were neither gregarious like hard-oilers from Petrolia nor voluble, like the inhabitants of Bright's Grove. They were quiet, not much given to talking with strangers. They were not unfriendly to those who came to see the mansion, but they were cautious and their caution was taken, by those who'd come to see the ghosts, for 'attitude.' And yet the townspeople were capable of great warmth and generosity. On Barrow Day, for instance.

Barrow Day was a celebration of the town's founding. All visitors were welcome. The day began with masses said in the town's churches. Then there was a parade, a banquet and, finally, a fête in a gravel pit to mark the end of the festivities. Those who found themselves in

Barrow on June 15 were almost inevitably overwhelmed by the generosity, passion and drunkenness of the townspeople. On Barrow Day, when something of Barrow's 'earth spirit' surfaced, the town's mood belied its reputation for reticence and reserve.

Barrow Mansion and Barrow Day were two of the town's mysteries. There is a third, but one can't talk about Barrow without first mentioning an aspect of the town that is less than mysterious but that was, for Father Pennant, just as affecting as ghosts and parades. That is, the physical beauty of the land on which Barrow lay.

Barrow was the quintessence of southern Ontario: low hills, thick scrubby woods, farm fields sprouting corn or grain, grey barns, farmhouses, maples, elms, weeping willows, apple orchards, the dark brown earth, alfalfa for the cows, acres of grazing land for sheep or horses; the smell of it: sweet, acrid, nasty, vegetal; robins, blue jays, scarlet tanagers, cardinals, hummingbirds; thistles, pussy willow, clover, Queen Anne's lace, dandelions.

The land around Barrow was that aspect of the world one would willingly worship, if one were a pantheist, say, or a pagan, as opposed to a priest.

On his second day in Barrow, Father Pennant rose at five. Lowther had been awake for some time and had prepared a breakfast of apple-cinnamon pancakes with back bacon. He had grated the apple himself and had timed it so that the bacon was hot when Father Pennant sat down, but there was little sign that the kitchen had been used. Everything had been cleaned up by the time Father Pennant ate and, shortly after he finished, it would have been difficult to show he had eaten at all. His dishes had been washed, dried and put away.

The early service was well-attended that morning. There were at least twenty-five people at the low mass, most of whom came to get a look at the new priest.

After the mass, few stayed to talk. Those who did did not stay long. The day and the world called. But Father Pennant had the impression he'd been deemed acceptable. No one had been unfriendly or

dubious or overtly critical. He had made a good beginning, surely. But just to be certain, Father Pennant spoke to Lowther, who'd attended.

– How was it?

– It was good, answered Lowther. Your voice doesn't shake as much as Father Fowler's.

– That's not a ringing endorsement, Lowther.

– No, Father, but this was low mass. It'll be different when you sing.

There were a number of visitors to the rectory that day. It was sunny and warm. You could feel summer approach. Which, perhaps, explains why two women brought mounds of Jell-O in which the preserved remains of the previous summer's strawberries and raspberries were suspended. Another parishioner brought cherry pie and an angel food cake so airy it clung to Father Pennant's front teeth as soon as he bit it. There were plans for an official welcome. It was to take place the following Sunday. But those who came to the rectory on Father Pennant's second day were the ones who could not resist seeing him sooner. Here was the man to whom they would confess the darkest things. It was important to feel him out. Mrs. Young, for instance, after she had watched him eat a piece of her macaroni pie, quietly asked what he thought of adultery.

– It's a sin, answered Father Pennant.

– Yes, but I wonder where it is on the scale of things. Is it worse than murder?

– No, said Father Pennant, but all our sins are interconnected. One is the road to another.

– I never thought of it that way, said Mrs. Young. I'll be sure to tell that husband of mine what you said.

Then, looking at him meaningfully, she asked

– Did you like the macaroni pie? It's my mother's recipe.

The morning was busy and then, following the afternoon mass, there were even more people to meet, more food to sample: a pear cake, a honey and plum cobbler, an apple crumble. In a matter of hours, Father Pennant had a strong sense of his parish. It was as normal as could be. And here again, he felt fortunate. It would be a

pleasure getting to know those who'd been too shy or too busy to approach him early on.

The day's only sour note came from an old woman named Tomasine Humble. Her hands constricted by arthritis, her thin body like a knotty stick under a thick yellow dress, her white hair held stiffly in place by hairspray, she was not in a good mood, or perhaps she was in the best mood her ailments permitted. When someone asked if Father Pennant had enjoyed a piece of cake, he'd answered

– Yes, very much.

But Tomasine had muttered

– Not on your life.

and smiled when he looked at her inquisitively.

When someone else mentioned the good weather they'd been having, Father Pennant answered that he was looking forward to exploring the countryside in spring, to watching the gardens bloom. Tomasine Humble then said

– Not much point in that. You should be taking care of souls, not gardens.

– I can do both, surely, Mrs. Humble.

– We don't know what you can do at all, she'd answered.

– Well, I hope I won't disappoint you.

– You'll disappoint me. There hasn't been a priest yet who hasn't disappointed me.

– Perhaps I'll disappoint you less?

– I live in hope, young man.

With that, she had turned away, her point made, apparently.

Despite Mrs. Humble's warning that the soul, not the earth, was his proper domain, Father Pennant spent the last hours of his first afternoon exploring the countryside around Barrow. He was driven about in an old Volkswagen by Lowther, who also acted as his guide. Everywhere the earth was coming back to life: here, a scarlet tanager, like a tongue of flame, alighted on a telephone wire; there, at their feet, a shrew scampered for cover. The earth, which has only two words, intoned the first of them ('life') noisily, with birdsong, the

gurgle and slap of rushing water, the suck and squelch of the ground itself. Not that its other word ('death') was banished. As they walked in a field, Father Pennant spotted a small clearing over which bleached animal bones (ribs, skulls, backbones and limbs) were strewn. Among and through the bones, young grass grew. It was like an open ossuary.

– What's this? asked Father Pennant.

– I'm not sure, said Lowther. Maybe someone dumped the remains of animals they didn't mean to trap. Poachers, most likely.

The most impressive thing they saw that afternoon, however, came as they stood by George Bigland's farm admiring the violets and thistle. They were on their side of the barbed wire when Father Pennant saw, in the distance, a dark sheep. It was followed by others and still others until, after a while, it was as if a wave of sheep, baaing and crying out, were subsiding in their direction. The sheep, their fleeces dark with dirt, seemed aware of Father Pennant's and Lowther's presences. They pooled about on the other side of the fence, hundreds of them. Then, curiosity satisfied, they dispersed, going off here and there to eat the short grass.

Lowther was an ideal guide to the fields. He knew the names of all the birds, grasses and wildflowers. As Father Pennant was himself an amateur naturalist, his respect for Lowther grew. It grew immeasurably when he discovered the sheer breadth of Lowther's learning. Lowther seemed to have read everything and his memory was extraordinary. He could, if asked, recite reams of Coleridge and Shakespeare, Dante and Hopkins. He was modest and self-effacing, but there was also something slightly disturbing about him. Why should such an evidently talented man be satisfied working at the rectory? How did he support himself? What was he after, exactly? It troubled Father Pennant to think this way about a man with whom he felt a kinship, but it was like finding a gold ring in a back garden: you had to wonder to whom it belonged.

Then, too, there was the angularity of Lowther's thinking. As they were driving to Petrolia and talking about southern Ontario, it emerged that Lowther did not like to speak of the past. He insisted

that what had been was a distraction from the here and now. To Father Pennant, this seemed a clear contradiction. The past was the place from which Coleridge and Hopkins reached us, no? Lowther was steeped in the past, wasn't he?

– You must be right, Father, but I don't think of it that way. A tea bag comes from somewhere, but tea exists when you pour hot water on it. I'm steeped in the *present*.

– Yes, but what about tradition and the people who came before us? You and I wouldn't be here, we wouldn't be talking, if it weren't for what came before us.

– I'm sure you're right, Father, but I don't see the contradiction. The past has no meaning, absolutely none.

– Hmmm . . .

As they drove over the dirt roads and along narrow lanes, stopping now and then to admire a farmhouse or a striking vista, it seemed to Father Pennant that his companion was trustworthy, more or less, but Lowther Williams was also difficult to read.

Anne Young, who had asked Father Pennant about the relative weight of adultery, was not afraid her husband had been unfaithful. For one thing, John Young was as lazy a man as she could imagine. Though he was still handsome and desirable at sixty, he was not the kind of man to take on the work of planning, calculating and deceiving. He might commit adultery, but only if there were very little movement involved. Besides, he loved her, and she was sure of it. They had gone through so much together: childlessness, hard times, deaths and, most importantly, the adoption of his sister's daughter, Elizabeth. In these crises he had been all that one could have wanted from a husband. And loving him the way she did, there was no question *she* would be unfaithful. He was the only man she had ever slept with. Not that she hadn't been curious, from time to time, but she was curious about all sorts of things and you would no more find her with another man than you would have found her drinking a glass of Cynar, that greenish, artichoke liqueur her neighbours had brought back from Italy.

Adultery was on her mind, though, because she had seen Robbie Myers with Jane Richardson, and Robbie Myers was her niece Elizabeth's fiancé. If he was not, technically speaking, 'adulterous,' there was almost certainly a serious name for his behaviour.

Elizabeth had come to stay with them under the worst circumstances. She was the daughter of John's sister, Eileen, and one summer, seventeen years ago now, Eileen had asked if they would mind taking care of Liz while she and her husband went off to Europe for a romantic holiday. Childless themselves, Anne and John adored children, so they had happily accepted. But Elizabeth's parents had drowned when their ferry sank somewhere between Piraeus and Naxos. It was a tragedy on a number of fronts. John was, of course, devastated by the death of his younger sister and her husband. And then she and John were bewildered to find themselves entangled in legal proceedings to determine who should take care of the child. And then there was the three-year-old Liz, a strange little puzzle. They did not at first know how to tell her that her parents had died, but when they did tell her, it was as if the child could not or would not understand. For months Liz would calmly ask after her parents, as if she were asking after clothes she'd misplaced. Reminded that they were dead, Liz would go back to her toys and remind the dolls and fuzzy bears that *their* parents had died.

– Your mother and father are dead, she would say to each of them.

For all of that, she grew up to be a normal young girl, whatever 'normal' was when it had its hair cut. A shy child, she had opened up at school, making friends easily at St. Mary's Primary School. From there, they had the usual problems with her. Liz questioned everything they did or said. For a time, she insisted they were not her parents and so had no authority over her. For a very long time, they could not get two words out of her. She would mutter at them on her way in or out of the house.

Then came Elizabeth's interest in boys. There were the 'wild years' with Michael Newsome, the 'dull years' with Matthew Kendal and

now, finally, there was Robbie Myers. How grateful Anne had been that Liz had settled on a genuine country boy, one whose family owned a farm just outside of Bright's Grove.

As far as Anne was concerned, dealing with young love was the most difficult aspect of parenting. John regarded 'boys' as belonging to Elizabeth's private life and refused to get involved. (Did he even know the difference between Michael Newsome [black jacket, slicked hair] and Matthew Kendal [baseball in spring, hockey in winter]?) John was unconditionally loving, and that was fine, as far as it went, but Anne would have preferred to feel a little of his steadying hand where Liz's boyfriends were concerned.

Anne herself was too involved, albeit discreetly, to be impartial. She identified with Liz. She worried Liz would misstep, would end up with a good-for-nothing townie who'd waste his life drawing a paycheque from Dow Chemical and pissing it away at the Blackhawk Tavern. She wanted more for Liz whom, after all, she really did think of (and love) as a daughter. If it came to that, it sometimes seemed to Anne that Liz's relationships were more important to her than they were to Liz herself.

Despite her better instincts, despite John's sombre advice, Anne had, in the past, allowed herself to feel for this or that boy. It had broken her heart, for instance, when she learned how unfair Liz had been to young Matthew. But then, who had asked her to talk about *her* hopes for Liz and Matthew's life together? And who knows if her enthusiasm hadn't, in the end, turned Liz against the boy? She had sworn she would not allow herself to care whom Liz brought home, had sworn to remain above it all or beyond it, as John did. So, although this business with Robbie Myers would have been difficult for anyone, it was even more so for her, because she had vowed to keep out of her niece's affairs.

But what had she seen, exactly?

She had gone to Sarnia to find cloth for the new drapes she would sew for the living room. As she sometimes did when she was in the city, she allowed herself to eat at the Lucky Dragon along the strip. It

wasn't only that she liked Chinese food; it gave her an indefinable thrill to eat beef with black bean sauce in a big city. So, there she was in the Lucky Dragon, at a table by the front window, when whom should she see in the parking lot outside but Robbie Myers. Her heart lifted. She genuinely liked the boy. He got out of his truck, walked around to the other side and opened the door for ... Was that Jane Richardson? Yes, Fletcher Richardson's daughter: dirty blond, thin, wearing a leather jacket two sizes too big. Thank God the two did not come into the Dragon itself. It would have been humiliating to face them. But why? What had they done? Nothing explicit or illicit, not that she had seen. But you didn't have to catch people at it to know there was something between them. It was in the way Robbie had opened the door and helped her down, the way they had walked away together. That is all she had seen. Robbie Myers had helped Jane Richardson down from the cab of his Chevy. But that was enough for an attentive person. It had occurred to her – no use denying it – to follow the two wherever it was they were off to. But she had not. Instead, she had stayed in the restaurant, unable to enjoy her food, wondering if what she had seen was innocent or not.

During the days that followed, she had been as discreet as possible. She had not spoken of what she had witnessed. She had asked only two bland questions:

– Was Robbie in Sarnia the other day, Liz?

and

– Liz, are you still friends with Jane Richardson?

There was nothing more she could do without meddling. She would have to bite her tongue and observe. It was either observe or investigate. That is, snoop. As she considered snooping a vile habit, she did not snoop.

It isn't as if Elizabeth was unaware that something lay behind her aunt's questions. They were asked in such resolutely bland tones, it had been like hearing a mortician speak. Besides, Elizabeth was sensitive to any mention of her fiancé, and though she had not thought of

Jane Richardson (Robbie's first love) in a while, hearing Jane's name brought more than an inkling of the connection between them.

Despite her aunt's careful nonchalance, Elizabeth had been spooked.

When she was thoughtful, as she often was in these months before her marriage, Elizabeth liked to walk. She walked along the fence of her uncle's sod farm, whatever the season, but in spring she was comforted by the new grass, the spluttering sprinklers and the sight of the far trees, the point at which she would usually turn back for home.

Days after her aunt questioned her about Robbie and Jane, Elizabeth went out for a long walk, taking with her the prayer book that had belonged to her parents. The book was small. As a young girl, she imagined the prayer book had been made just for her. It had been slightly larger than her palm when she was eight years old, and thick as three of her small fingers. It was bound in black leather with, embedded in its cover, a single white pearl that had, somehow and for years, resisted her efforts to dislodge it. The edges of the book's pages had been gilded and, inside, it contained hundreds of prayers, prayers for every imaginable circumstance, including one that was to be said on being captured by cannibals and another to be said before eating food 'of dubious provenance.' Not that she had ever used it for its prayers. She was not devout. Her aunt and uncle were the devoted ones. From the age at which she had first been made aware of the idea, 'God' had seemed to Elizabeth a shaky proposition. It didn't help, of course, that if He existed He had murdered her parents. But, really, there was no deep calculation, no rancour or bitterness involved. She simply was not convinced or was not yet convinced of God's existence. The prayer book was a thing she held because her parents had touched it.

The sun was out and doing its best to dry the ground. The clouds were thick and white, like gouts of clotted cream in a wide blue bowl. The earth smelled of her uncle's sod and of cow manure from the next farm over, Mr. Rubie's, from which, if the air was

right, you would occasionally hear the faintest lowing, a sound that always surprised her, as Rubie's farm was acres away.

For the first while, Elizabeth thought of nothing in particular. Walking was a way to stanch thought. But she was in love and that meant, for her, that Robbie was at the tip of most of the strands within her. This was a pleasant thing. She could be with him in an instant, and the image she held of him was almost as vivid as Robbie himself. Of course, there was a difference between the man within her and the one who walked about or drove around in his father's truck. The real Robert Myers was, naturally, more desirable. His eyes were always bluer than she remembered, his lashes longer. And, of course, there were aspects of him that paled in her imagination, however she tried to keep them: the light hair below his stomach, the way his back narrowed to a groove above his buttocks. These things never failed to fascinate her, because she perpetually rediscovered them.

The Robbie within her had his charms too, however. He was made up of words, of impressions. He was a bright smile, an allusive thought, an attitude she found irresistible. At times, she was at odds with herself, missing the one while with the other, wishing he were physically gone when he was there or there when he was gone. Usually, this fracas between her Robbies lasted only a moment. But now that they were to be married, there seemed to be more serious skirmishes. Who was Robbie, really? How could she know? Was he the man with whom she wished to be married 'til death? Each of these questions was a cloud above the road to church. And now, so was the question of Jane Richardson. Where did Jane fit in all this? She had been Robbie's girlfriend ages ago, in grades 9 and 10. She no longer figured in his life, did she?

Elizabeth came to the trees at the edge of her uncle's property. Instead of turning back, she climbed over the wire fence and went into the woods. The woods were cool, as always. The tightly grouped trees were a canopy, keeping the sunlight out, preserving the last granules of frost through which the ferns and fiddleheads pushed

up and unfurled. There were paths that meandered confusedly about the woods, paths made, some of them, by her younger self. Or so she liked to imagine because when she'd been a girl bent on mastering the woods, she used to stamp her feet as she walked, creating faint trails that led nowhere, trails that came to sudden stops at the foot of this spruce or that white pine. She herself was well beyond needing the trails for guidance. She could have made her way through the woods with her eyes closed, reaching the destination of her choice (the highway, Fox's farm, the quarry, 'Regina') in no time.

Elizabeth chose to walk toward Regina and it was at Regina that she first saw Father Pennant, the priest who, it seemed, would preside at her wedding.

On this, his third afternoon in Barrow, Father Pennant was on his own. Lowther Williams had gone to Wyoming to deliver a supply of unconsecrated hosts to the church there. Before going, Lowther had recommended that Father Pennant visit 'Regina,' Barrow's third mystery. Regina, source of the Thames River, was discovered in 1905 by an Englishman named John Atkinson. Regina was a vein of glass-clear fresh water that sprang from the ground, ran for six feet and returned underground. The water was cold enough to rattle teeth, in summer or winter. It ran in a narrow, stony depression that tapered at its ends so that, if your imagination was so inclined, the source of the Thames resembled a vulva, which is why Atkinson, attempting wit, named it 'Regina' to rhyme with 'vagina.' The name stuck, but it was now more often called 'the Queen' by the people of Lambton County, and it had become a kind of shrine where pregnant women – farm girls, mostly – went to pray for healthy children.

Father Pennant was unprepared for Regina's beauty. The water ran so fast and constant, it was as if it did not run at all. Regina was like a solid section of crystal. Father Pennant kneeled to touch it and was surprised when his fingers parted the cold water.

It was like this that Elizabeth saw Father Pennant for the first time, coming upon him as he withdrew his fingers from the water. Startled, she apologized.

– Oh, not at all, said Father Pennant, rising. I was just admiring the Queen. Lowther told me how lovely it is, but it's really something, especially here in the middle of nowhere.

– Yes, answered Elizabeth. Are you Father Pennant?

– Yes, I am. And you are?

– Elizabeth Denny. You met my aunt the other day. Anne Young?

– So I did. I remember. She seems like a nice woman.

They shook hands and then the two of them began walking toward the highway. Beneath the shade of the trees, neither could see the other properly, but when they came to the edge of the woods the sun was still shining and each saw the other as if for the first time. Father Pennant saw a striking young woman with light brown hair, a narrow nose, a gap between her front teeth. She was dressed in slightly baggy blue jeans, and a man's work shirt beneath which she wore a pullover with three buttons (unbuttoned) at the neck. She wore wire-rimmed glasses that distracted, somewhat, from her eyes: hazel, expressive and beautiful. As they walked and spoke, he found himself happy in her company.

Elizabeth, for her part, did not take Father Pennant quite so deeply in. He was taller than she was and his hands were large, almost ungainly, like the paws of a young dog. Much more than that she did not register. He wore the uniform of the priest: black suit with a white clerical collar. Nondescript. Still, she was not uncomfortable in his presence.

They walked in the direction of town. Elizabeth would have to turn back long before they reached Barrow some seven kilometres away, but she was happy to converse, and their talk turned quickly from the general to the specific. That is, they began to talk about marriage, Elizabeth's wedding, its arrangements, the changes marriage would bring to her life, the love she felt for her fiancé.

– Have you ever been in love? she asked.

– Yes, answered Father Pennant. I know people don't think priests live full lives, but yes, I've been in love.

– Did you ... ? Have you ... ? You know ... If you don't mind me asking?

– I don't mind, but let me keep that to myself until we know each other better. It's very personal for me. But I have been in love and I do know what it's like to want someone.

(Father Pennant knew very well what it was like to want someone. He remembered the taste of salt, the smell of a room in Italy, the touch of a hand on his back. And at the memory, the hair on the back of his head tingled as if he had been caressed.)

– Why did you become a priest, then, Father? I'm sorry if ...

– No, don't apologize. I became a priest because I thought it was my calling. It's the way I wanted to be in this world. I believe in God and I think, as a priest, I can do good.

The occasional car or truck passed as they walked along the side of the road. The air smelled of the woods (a slightly fungal exhalation) mingled with the smell of the dirt road, the smell of weeds, the smell of spring.

– People tend to focus on our vow of chastity, Father Pennant continued. And I understand, because it's an unusual choice. But it isn't as if I have had an unfortunate accident. I've chosen the life I lead. I've had to learn the discipline. And I think it's made me more sensitive to the things I've given up. But even if I've given up physical love, I haven't given up on love itself. That would be perverse. I believe love is the most powerful thing in our lives. An earthly miracle. It's what makes marriage so precious.

– You were in love, Father, but you weren't married. Why should marriage matter, if love is such a miracle?

– Marriage is a way of saying love exists, saying it aloud, a way of sharing the thing inside you with your community. It's an act of generosity made by two people. Maybe in the past it was about other things, but times have changed.

All of which was fine and true or fine and not true, as far as Elizabeth was concerned. Either way. She had no problem with love or marriage. Her problem, insofar as it was a problem, was with

doubt and apprehension – not big feelings, small ones, but just as distracting. She would not be completely at ease until she knew what her doubts meant or how she was to take them. But she was grateful for Father Pennant's advice.

When it came time for them to part, she for home and he for town, Elizabeth thanked the priest and shook his hand again before heading off. Father Pennant smiled and said

– See you soon

before turning his attention to the walk home.

In the distance, the sun was setting. A pink tinge grew slowly more scarlet on one side of the clouds and evening insinuated itself from above, turning the upper arch of sky indigo.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

André Alexis was born in Trinidad and grew up in Canada. His debut novel, *Childhood*, won the Books in Canada First Novel Award, the Trillium Book Award, and was shortlisted for the Giller Prize and the Writers' Trust Fiction Prize. His previous books include *Asylum*, *Beauty and Sadness* and *Ingrid and the Wolf*.