

Why Matt Hughes is Going Straight to Hell

Matt Hughes followed his parents' slow crawl to church. At 72, his dad had become a hesitant driver, dangerous in his over-deliberation. Alone in the second Camry, the old Camry, the one with the conscience-pricking, empty child safety seat in the back, Matt gave the accelerator a gentle tap, madly flirting with 30 miles per hour. He imagined three-year-old Leo back there shouting, "Faster, Dadders, faster!" His fingers slid into his inside blazer pocket, withdrawing the flask. "Chug, Dadders, chug!" He swigged. He grimaced. The flask was to fortify himself for Asian Mary.

Earlier that afternoon, as his mother flustered about them to prepare for this evening's Easter Vigil Mass, Matt and his father had sat watching a college basketball game.

"Oh, did your mom tell you about that girl?" his father asked.

"What girl?" Matt shouted over the TV.

"The girl in her RCA class." His mother ran St. Mary's RCIA program, which prepared adults who wanted to convert to Catholicism. "The one who went to RM with you."

A girl from high school? Uh oh.

“No. What’s her name?”

“I don’t remember. Where’s your mother?” She was not in view from his recliner. “I think maybe she said Mary. Or something like Mary. Maria maybe. Marian.”

Oh crap, Mary LeFebre, Matt thought. But no, Mary Lefebre was born Catholic. She wouldn’t be in a class to become Catholic.

“I think she said Oriental, too,” his dad added from behind the sports section.

Matt tamped down the volume a couple notches.

“She’s Asian then? Was she in my year?”

“Ask your mother.”

But his mother was not to be disturbed. Tonight was the night her candidates became Catholics. Satan had evidently stranded someone’s sponsor with a snowstorm in Connecticut. So Matt’s mom was working the phones, quite possibly on a direct line to the Vatican, and would brook no idle inquiries.

So Matt bounded up to his old bedroom. It now served as his father’s office, where he kept his bowling trophies and *National Geographics*. Matt braved the closet, rummaged on the upper shelf and finally, beneath an ancient argyle sweater vest, found a Richard Montgomery yearbook.

There were Marys and Asians aplenty in his and adjoining classes, but no overlap. Maybe someone like Mai Nguyen here in the Juniors section had Anglified her handle. And if she was going to change her name to fit in, it made sense she’d change her religion too if need-be, right? Hopefully her hairstyle as well.

Matt couldn't help flipping to the pyramid picture. *Summer Fun* read the page heading. Look at Rebecca laughing, her sweet little breasts barely taxing her sweet little bikini top, her sweet little hands on the lotion-slick shoulders of Mary LeFebre and Joanne Murphy. There crouched young Matt, too, muscles standing out, even decent triceps, by God, smiling, straining, trying to hold up Rebecca – a layer away – while Mary Lefebre's impossibly sharp right kneecap knifed into his back. It was Konkel, the chunky bastard beside him, who buckled first, leading to Rebecca's strained wrist.

She'd gamely made use of her other wrist that night. And the next, stupored with Schnapps, scratchy with sand, she finally let Matt see her own upside-down pyramid. Just as he was adjusting his khakis nearly two decades later, his mother, still aflutter, burst into his old bedroom.

"Oh! Sorry! I was just looking for a...I'll come back."

Busted by Mom! Just like old times. Except now he was old himself, thirty-six. Seven turbulent weeks after the pyramid fell, Matt's world had collapsed, too; Rebecca was gone, her dad abruptly transferred to Topeka at the worst possible moment. "Don't worry; I did it," she'd said on their last phone call. "We're leaving in the morning. I don't think we should talk again."

Waiting for an opening to turn left across the Pike, Matt wondered if Asian Mary would even recognize him tonight. Though she wasn't on the anxiety-inducing level of a Rebecca or a Mary Lefebre or indeed anyone he actually remembered, he was still antsy about meeting any girl from high school, even an obscure, insecure Asian. His triceps were not all that he had lost. He'd had hair in high school, glorious

curly hair, hair that flopped over his very eyes when he was asquat in pyramid formation. Now his head was as shaved and shiny as a Benedictine's. Though his arms tensed against it, he knew he had to make the turn. This wasn't about him. It was about his mom. This was important to her. He snuck another swig, the last, he promised himself, and made the turn.

The Hugheses found St. Mary's empty. Matt's mom went into a side room off the vestibule and came out carrying an armful of rectangular *Reserved* signs.

"Here," Matt said, "let me."

"No, I need you to go in there and get the stanchions."

Matt trundled the stanchions to the front of the church, where his mother was affixing her signs to the sides of pews.

"Shouldn't they say *Saved*?" Matt joked.

"Probably," she replied. "Do the first four rows."

His father helped him clip the red velvet ropes from pole to pole.

"Okay, now what?" Matt asked.

"Now we wait for the ushers to show up," his mom said. "And then the candidates and sponsors and families will start to arrive, and you can show them to their seats."

"Okay," Matt said, glancing at his watch. Mass was still a half-hour from starting.

"The library's open," his dad suggested.

The library was another small room off the vestibule. Three of its walls were lined with full bookshelves. In the middle stood a pamphlet rack. Matt snuck another

belt of whisky and spun the rack. *The Divorced Catholic*. Very funny, God. He spun again. *Misconceptions About Mary*. Better leave it there. The next spin was sure to bring *Why Matt Hughes is Going Straight to Hell*.

He left the library to find his mom in the vestibule, brandishing a chalice, in urgent conversation with some ushers, while his dad tried to count people who were filing in, his finger jabbing vehemently at some, hovering still over others.

Nobody seemed to need additional ushering, so Matt sat in an empty pew in the back to scan for Asian women. After some time he noticed his mother, beside a pew, beckoning him. She stood next to an Asian man in a suit. An Asian *man*! His dad had got it wrong. Matt approached with a smile of false recognition, trying to come up with an Asian male name that sounded anything like Mary.

“Matt,” his mom said. “This is Dr. Su.”

“So you are the famous Matty,” the small man said, shaking hands, grinning. “Nice to finally meet you.”

“It’s Matt. You, too.”

“And you know,” his mom said, stepping aside to reveal a family in the pew, “Mary Su.”

The woman, in a cream jacket and skirt outfit, had her back to him, wiping down a toddler. Beyond them sat a small, elderly Asian woman in a red silk blouse, looking rigidly forward.

The younger woman turned. Her hair was straighter, shorter. There were lines around her eyes. But it was, of course, Mary Lefebre.

“Mary,” Matt said, holding out his hand. “How are you?”

“Wow,” she said, switching the wipe to her left hand. “You look different.”

“Yes, well,” Matt laughed, “time has certainly been kinder to you.”

“No,” she said, rising. “I didn’t mean... I’m sorry. Thank you.”

“Don’t panic,” Matt said, “but someone’s rifling through your purse.”

Mary glanced back for a second. “As long as she doesn’t find the crack pipe.

How are you?”

“I’m good.”

“Dr. Su,” Matt’s mother said, grabbing the man by the elbow. “You need to sit up here in front. Is your sponsor here? We need to get everyone situated so we can see who’s missing.”

“I will get him,” Dr. Su said and sauntered off.

“Ugh, I’ve got to go yell at a deacon,” Matt’s mom added, bustling away.

“So,” Mary said.

“So.”

“What have you been doing for the last twenty years?”

“Oh, you know. Playing polo. Singing operas.”

“Right. Do you have any kids?”

“I have a son actually. He’s three. He’s in Chicago with...his mother.”

“Oh.”

“Hang on.” Matt took out his phone and showed her the wallpaper image.

“This is Leo.”

“He’s got your curly hair.”

“So that’s where it went.”

“That’s Jia Sun down there editing the hymnal.”

The girl looked up with a bright blue gaze, red crayon aquiver.

“Hey, Jossyln. You’re right. No one sings that third verse anyway.”

“She’s three, too,” Mary said.

“Nice. She’s got your eyes.” Except of course, that hers are slightly slanted.

“Her name’s Jia Sun, by the way,” Mary said. “It’s Chinese.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“But thank you. Give me your cell number.”

She entered it into her phone and said, “Put yours on Mute. We’ll send notes, just like in school.”

They’d never passed notes in school. She’d never liked him in school. After Rebecca left they didn’t even speak any more.

“Okay.”

“Jia Sun, don’t climb on Grandma. Okay, see you later.”

Matt returned to his pew in the back, settled in to watch the regular Mass-goers amass. He felt sorry for the folks who didn’t know what they were in for. Usually, Saturday night Mass was a quickie, 45 minutes tops. But his mom had warned him that this was a special deal, with all the extras of Easter, plus all the extras of a multiple adult baptism thrown in.

Matt’s gaze swept the church for any further blasts from the past. Nobody recognizable. The VIP rows were filled with candidates and sponsors, their backs to him. There were several thirtyish Asians of both sexes. A couple fortyish black women, possibly West Africans based on their bright garb. And the rest were twenty

or thirty-something whities, male and female. The one who really stood out was an obese white dude with a blonde ponytail and blue shirt. The dude turned his head and the ponytail shunted aside for a second to reveal the tendrils of a tattoo.

A white-haired woman in an Easter Bunny sweatshirt and jelly-bean-shaped earrings joined Matt in his pew. Mass began. Reaching for the hymnal (not that he was going to sing), Matt noticed a couple thin white candles wedged into the little hymnal-holding shelf. Oh brother. If they all had to get candles lit that was going to add another 15 minutes minimum to this show. Hopefully they wouldn't have to factor in a visit from the Rockville Volunteer Fire Department, as well. In due course, his mother shuffled up to do the first reading.

Soon after she sat back down, Matt's phone vibrated against his upper thigh. *Still awake?* Mary's message read. *Barely*, he tapped back. Texting like teens. *Sneak out for a smoke?* she replied. Mary Lefebre smoked? What had the world come to? She'd made that joke about a crack pipe in her purse, too. Another snort would be nice, but he really wasn't up for any more time with Mary Lefebre. That "you look different" still burned. Plus she was bound to bring up Rebecca. Just type *No*. He did, but his predictive text suggested *On* and instead of correcting it he found himself sending *On we go!* The woman next to him pursed her orange lips. Several rows up, Mary bent to whisper in her mother-in-law's ear, got up and left the pew. Eyes downcast, hands folded around her candle, Mary passed Matt without a glance. Off she went. He waited a minute then clambered around the Easter Bunny lady.

Outside, he didn't see her at first. She shook her candle at him from the sidewalk beside the parochial school.

"I can't believe Mary Lefebre smokes," Matt said, reaching her.

"Mary Su sneaks one now and then," she replied. "Tell me you've got a pack."

"Nope, just this." He withdrew the flask.

"My hero," she said, taking it. "Yech," she added after a swig.

"Cheers," Matt said, taking his own. "Mary Su, huh? Very country."

"Ha ha," she said, snatching back the flask. "What is this?"

"Maker's Mark. It was the only bottle in my parent's liquor cabinet. I think they bought it back when Mary Lefebre didn't smoke or drink."

"Yeah, I know. I was a prig."

"You were."

"Have the courtesy to deny it."

"No, no, Mary. You were the life of the party."

"Well, I took all this," she waved the flask toward the church, "very seriously back then."

"Now you don't?"

"Not like then."

"But you're still signing Dr. Su up?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. Because once I really wanted him to. For Jia Sun. Because I still think it's...true-ish, I guess. To piss off my mother-in-law."

"All solid reasons."

"You're still a wiseass, huh?"

“My faith in sarcasm has not wavered.”

“It’s not as cute on a bald 36-year-old.”

“Give me my flask back.”

“Sorry. I’m still a prig, too.”

And she was a bit of a wiseass now, herself, Matt noted. She hadn’t been like that in high school, had she? They passed the flask back and forth a few times.

“So your mom told my husband,” Mary said, “who told me, you’re back home.”

“Yeah, until I figure out the next step.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, it’s...I don’t know what it is.”

“Is the divorce...happening?”

“Yup.”

“Your mom said you do websites?”

“Yup. Divorces and websites.”

“John might need one. A website, wiseass. He’s opening his own practice.”

“This would be the perfect moment for me to give you my card if I had a card.”

“I’ll settle for that.”

He handed her the flask.

After a sip, she asked, “Have you seen the new RM?”

“No. My parents told me about it.”

“You won’t believe it. Let’s go check it out.”

“What, now?”

“Why not? We’ve got two hours to kill.”

“What about your...”

“Jia Sun won’t even notice I’m gone. And my mother-in-law already hates me, anyway. Come on.”

She grabbed him by the hand and led him towards the street. They darted across a couple lanes of the Rockville Pike to the traffic island that held the giant American flag, then hustled across the next two lanes to the other side.

“Whoa,” Matt panted. “Little out of shape.”

“And I don't have the shoes for this. Come on.”

Their old high school was about 50 yards away, obscured by a large furniture store. They passed the store and there it was, with bright new brickwork, and twice as big as before.

“Wow.”

“I know,” she said. “It’s huge. Come see the new football field.”

The field was dark, the big bank of lights unlit, but they could hear whoops of laughter and grunts of effort coming from the middle of it.

“Look, kids!”

Matt picked out the shapes of people playing touch football.

“Look how young they look.”

Matt could barely see them. “I know.”

“Can you believe that’s how young we were back then?”

“It’s hard.”

“One, two, three, four,” Mary said. “Perfect.”

“Huh?”

“You know what we can do?”

“Count?”

“No, wiseass.”

“Go back to church?”

“Hey! You all!” Mary yelled and waved. “Hello!”

“What?” one of the smaller shadows, a girl, yelled back. “We’re just playing.”

“I know. Toss it here!” Mary called. “Come on!”

The girl looked to her companions who shrugged variously. She threw the ball and it spun end over end, bounced, and rolled to Mary’s shoes.

“Sorry,” the girl called. “I can’t really throw.”

“Me either,” Mary said, stooping to pick the ball up. “We’ll walk it back over.”

The groups met in the middle of the field. The girl’s companions – another, larger girl and two boys in dark hoodies and baggy jeans – were all possibly Hispanic.

“Hi, guys,” Mary said. “Do you go here?”

“Yes,” the throwing girl answered. “We’re seniors.”

“We went here, too,” Mary said. “A hundred years ago.”

“Really?...Cool,” the lead girl said. “Can we like have our ball back?”

“Sure. If you do us one little bitty favor.”

“You don’t want to...play?”

“No, no, we just want to do a quick human pyramid. You’re little, you can be on top! It will be fun!”

“Mary,” Matt said.

“Come on, don’t you remember that time we did it at the beach?”

“Vaguely.”

“So, what do you say, guys?” Mary asked.

“*Ella quiere formar un human pyramid,*” the girl said to her friends.

Eye-rolls were exchanged.

“No thanks.”

“Okay, fine,” Mary said, underhand tossing the girl the ball. “Then Matty and I will have no choice but to fuck on the fifty yard line.”

“Ew!”

“Any of you boys have a condom?” Mary asked. “*Necesitamos un propholactico, por favor.*”

“Gross!”

“Mary,” Matt said.

“Hey, we’ve got to do something before we go back to church.”

“*Dios mio!*”

“*Vamos,*” the larger boy said. “*Estan borrachos.*”

“*Si, muy borracho!*” Mary said. “*Quieres whisky? Matty, chop, chop, your flask. El flasko!*”

“I think we better be getting back,” Matt said. “Sorry, guys. Have a good night.”

“Control your woman, man,” the larger boy said.

“Shut up, Mario,” the lead girl said. “Don’t make it about that.”

The kids walked off.

“Wait,” Mary called after them. “At least let me bum a cigarette. *Un cigarillo, por favor!*”

Mary got the smaller boy to light her candle. She walked back to Matt, igniting her bummed cigarette from its flame. She took a deep drag, exhaled.

“Oh hell yes. What do you think this candle symbolizes?” she asked.

Matt blew it out. “That it’s time we blew out of here. Come on.”

They ran back across the Pike. In the church parking lot, Mary finished her cigarette, dropped it behind a bush and said, “I’m so pathetic. Seriously, I should never drink. I had so much I wanted to say to you.”

“It’s okay.”

“I only just found out John’s teacher was your mom. He always called her Edna. Then I saw her last name on some official letter she sent.”

“Okay, let’s just go inside.”

“I probably would have let you, you know.”

“Okay, let’s – let me what?”

“Fuck me.”

“Whoa. You need to go into the ladies room in there. Splash some water on your face. And get back to your family.”

“Why did I love you so much?”

“What? You didn’t love me. You hated me.”

“Oh yeah. I forgot. Wait out here five minutes.”

She went in, tottering only a little on her medium heels. Matt finished off the flask, waited five minutes and went in himself.

Eventually the Mass ended and they were bid go in peace. Outside, Matt stood by his dad as his mom, giddy with fulfilled responsibility, accepted hugs and accolades from the gathering crowd of candidates, sponsors and families. There was much laughter and digital photography. Matt took group pictures with a succession of cameras and phones. Thankfully there was no suggestion of a human pyramid.

“Everybody, this is my son, Matthew,” his mom called out. “With whom I am well pleased.”

The group shouted out greetings.

“Hello, Easter Vigilantes!” Matt called back, realizing he was drunker than he thought. Mary and the other Sus were somewhere in the bustle but he avoided them easily enough. It appeared to Matt that it appeared to his mother as if he’d done his duty as a son. He could go home now. Sneak another few slugs of whisky, sleep.

“All right, Catholics,” his mother shouted, “let’s go get some pie!”

That was his mom’s tradition, everyone heading down the Pike to the Silver Diner afterwards for pie and ice cream.

“I think I’ll just head home,” Matt told her quietly.

“Oh no, you need to give Scotty a ride. His sponsor just left.”

“But aren’t other people going?”

“Yes, but they all have multiple folks in their cars. And Scotty’s...Here he is. Scotty, this is my son, Matt. He’ll take you to the diner.”

“Thank you, sir,” Scotty said. Scotty was the blonde-pony-tailed, tattooed man-mountain Matt had noticed earlier. From the front, Matt saw Scotty also sported multiple silver facial piercings. He seemed quite young, twenty maybe. Where was his family? Whither the fiancée making him do this? Or had the young behemoth done it all simply for the promise of pie?

“Okay,” Matt said. “I’m over here.”

Scotty was the largest person Matt had ever walked next to. He waddled and roiled to move forward. Even if he were that sort of guy, Matt could not have wrapped his arms around Scotty to embrace his new co-religionist; his hands probably wouldn’t even reach Scotty’s shoulder blades. Underneath that voluminous shirt – that sail – Scotty probably had tattoos larger than Matt’s son.

“Congratulations,” Matt said.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Are you from around here?”

“I grew up in Philadelphia.”

“Oh yeah? So you’re an Eagles fan?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, I guess I’ll give you a ride anyway.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Hey, excuse me. Can I catch a lift with you guys?”

It was Mary Lefebvre, clutching her brown purse in front of her like it was helping her stay upright.

“What about your family?” Matt asked, peering behind her.

“Oh, they’re not doing the pie thing. My mother-in-law has a feast waiting at home.”

“So why... ?”

“I told them we wanted to reminisce a little more.” She smiled at Scotty. “If that’s all right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

It quickly became clear the Camry could not accommodate Matt, Scotty, Mary and the child safety seat. Scotty was so big he was only barely able to wedge himself into the passenger seat with it pushed all the way back.

“Oh dear,” Mary said when Scotty was in. “Whatever will we do?”

“Why don’t you just call your—”

“Oh, I couldn’t disturb honorable mother-in-law any further. I could just hop in your lap, Matty. It’s not that far.”

“Let me take the safety seat out.”

Matt opened the rear door and started wrestling with the seat. His wife always handled putting these damn things in and taking them out. His parents had bought the exact model she’d dictated and left it strapped in ever since the calamitous Christmas visit.

“It’s not as easy as they say, is it?” Mary asked.

“Just...give...me...a second,” Matt said, pulling on the tightened seat belt.

“Sorry, Scotty.”

“No problem, sir. I’m a big guy. Do you want me to get out?”

“No, I’ll try to get it out without punching you any more.”

“Kids can be inconvenient, right?” Mary asked.

“What are you talking about?” Matt said over his shoulder.

“They say it’s a simple procedure. Just pop it right out.”

Matt stopped struggling and looked at her.

“Of course it’s harder,” she said, “when you have to do it yourself. Step aside.”

Matt, sweating now, moved out of the backseat. Mary leaned in and in seconds was thrusting the disengaged seat into his arms.

“Congratulations,” she said. “It’s out. Now tuck it away someplace and never think of it again.”

“Mary, you should call your husband to pick you up.”

“No, no, I’m sorry. I’ll be good. Let’s get some pie. Let’s get our pie on. Let’s fill our pie holes.”

She hopped in the car where the seat had been and shut the door.

Matt stowed the safety seat in the trunk, got in the front and pulled out on the Pike, keeping an eye out for tipsy thirty-six-year-olds dashing across it.

“So,” Mary said, “it’s Scotty, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Well, congratulations.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“Ma’am? Thanks for making me feel decrepit.”

“Sorry.”

“That’s okay. I am decrepit. How old are you, Scotty?”

“I’m twenty-one.”

“Wow, Matty and me are almost old enough to be your parents. If we’d had you in high school, that is.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“But who has kids in high school in this day and age, right?”

“Mary’s husband was in my mom’s class with you,” Matt interjected. “Dr. Su.”

“Yes, sir. Nice man.”

“So, what’s her name?” Mary asked. She poked Scotty on the shoulder. “I’m talking to you.”

“Oh, sorry, ma’am. Whose name?”

“The girl you turned Catholic for.”

“Um, Colleen.”

“I knew it. And where is young Colleen this evening?”

“She had to work.”

“That’s too bad.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Matt checked the rearview to change lanes. All he could see was Scotty.

“So now,” Mary said, “you probably know much more about the Church than Matty and me, the born Catholics, do.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“Well, whatsay we give him a little quiz, Matty?”

“Whatsay we leave the poor guy alone, Mary?”

“He’s fine. Right, Scotster?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“So, Scotty, what’s the latest teaching on, I don’t know, divorce?”

Scotty swiveled his fleshy, glinting head towards Mary. “It’s not allowed by the Church. Though some people in our class got annul—”

“Sure, sure,” Mary said. “Hey, Matty, where’s your wife tonight?”

Matt cruised down the middle lane. “Chicago.”

“Oh, too bad. Sorry I interrupted you there, Scotto,” Mary said. “Continue.”

“Well, just some people got –”

““What about birth control?” Matt broke in. “What’s the deal there again?”

“Well,” Scotty said, turning his head toward Matt, “it’s still the rhythm method, officially. Though again some—”

“So no pill?” Matt said, “No *propholacticos* if you will?”

“Condoms?” Scotty asked. “Officially, no. But in some —”

“Hold that thought,” Matt said. “How long have you been married again, Mary?”

“Six years, Matty.”

“And how many—”

“I still have the one child. You just met her.”

“Right, right. Josslyn. Well, if there’s one thing I remember from my high school dances, Scotty, it’s that Mary Lefebre had excellent rhythm.”

Scotty wriggled, looked out his window. Matt felt the car list to that side.

“And what about abortion, Scotty?” Mary asked.

“Here we go,” Matt said.

“Shut up, you. What’s the latest there?”

"It's murder, ma'am," Scotty said quietly, still looking out his window.

"Ah, but who is the murderer? Just the poor girl?"

"Well, the doctor, too."

"Of course. But not the boy who makes her do it?"

"Um, I don't know. Maybe. Probably," Scotty said, looking out the front windshield now. "Could we talk about something else, please?"

"In a sec," Matt said. "But what about the girlfriend who helps the girl figure out all the logistics?"

"I really don't know," Scotty said, chewing a ring-encrusted lower lip. "I'm not really comfortable with—"

"Toughen up, Scotster," Mary said, punching him on the shoulder. "You're a Catholic now. These are the questions. Got to figure out who's responsible for killing the babies. Right, Matty?"

"What about forgiveness, Scotty?" Matt asked. "Isn't that still in there somewhere?"

"Oh, not for abortion," Mary said. "Is it, Scotty?"

"I don't think so."

"Besides," Mary continued, "you'd have to be sincerely sorry."

"I am fucking sorry," Matt said, hitting the brakes too hard at a light.

"No, you're not," Mary said.

"I was a stupid kid. I was scared shitless."

"That's no excuse. We were all kids."

There was silence for a couple minutes.

“You know, Scotty,” Matt said, hitting the gas as the light turned green, “getting back to birth control. If we truly accept the Church’s teachings on the primary purpose of marital sex and the sanctity of life and whatnot, isn’t using birth control tantamount to killing hypothetical babies, too? Hmm?”

“What?” Scotty said, pressing more of himself toward the passenger window. “No. I don’t think so. I’d like to get out now, please.”

“Nonsense,” Matt said. “We’re almost to the pie. Purgatory is almost over. No more questions. You passed.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Actually, Scotterino,” Mary said, “just one more. And Matty, you can chime in on this one, too. Let’s say a boy gets a girl pregnant, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And the boy says he wants the girl to get an abortion.”

“Jesus, Mary. We’ve covered this,” Matt said.

“No, no, there’s a new twist. So the girl – wait for it – doesn’t get the abortion. She moves away and actually has the baby. Twist!”

“Mary,” Matt said. “This isn’t funny.”

“Who’s laughing?”

“Are you seriously saying…”

“Let me finish,” Mary said. “This is a truly interesting theological conundrum, Scotty. What if the boy in question thinks the girl went through with it? Okay? He sincerely believes she did what he wanted her to do and that then, and I know this is far-fetched, what if the boy lets himself believe some ridiculous story like her father

coincidentally gets transferred right then and she has to move away? Is the boy still guilty of murder? At least in his heart? Don't you think he's still...Oh my God, are you okay?"

They'd stopped at another red light, and Scotty was bucking and heaving, shaking the car. His seat belt snapped off; he shouldered open the door, pulled himself out with a loud grunt, and ran, with amazing agility, pony-tail flopping, across three lanes of traffic and into the parking lot of a mini-mall.

"Wow, he's fast," Mary said.

"Is it true?" Matt asked, craning to see Mary in the seat behind him.

"Yes, just look at him go."

"Mary."

"Yes."

"Crap," Matt said, putting the car in Park and unbuckling his seat belt.

"What are you—?"

"Get up here and drive to the diner. I'll meet you there."

As Matt got out, the light changed. He held up a hand to traffic, went around the back of the car. Horns started honking. Hand still up, Matt sprinted across three lanes. Brakes squealed; more and angrier horns sounded; Matt ignored the ruckus. He'd accepted the responsibility of getting Scotty to the diner, getting the boy some pie. He ran full out, dodging more cars in the mini-mall parking lot, his lungs starting to sear. The big bastard had a good lead on him, but Matt would run him down, all right. Damned if he was going to let this one get away.