

# *Chapter Two*





Brother Justin Meyer playing his homemade banjo and Bonny Smith playing a guitar the night they met at Dr. Harold and Helen Olmo's home

## *No, I Was Never a Nun*

**I**t was a natural question, but it always amused me. People would learn that I married a monk, and ask if I had been a nun.

Monks and nuns becoming husbands and wives sounds like an oxymoron, but it began to occur frequently in the 1960s as more people questioned traditions and institutions of all kinds. Catholic religious orders, in particular, experienced a mass exodus from which they have never recovered. Just in my own circle, a number of former teachers and current friends made the journey from a religious life into married life.

I did not. But I came close.

My childhood years were fairly typical of the post-war 1950s. Though neither of my parents finished college, they both put a high value on education and had aspirations that their children would get university degrees. They grew up in Dearborn, Michigan, where both their fathers worked for Ford Motor Company. Grampa Smith ran Henry Ford's bank; Bompas Gasset, my mother's dad, was an inventor who helped develop early technologies for radio, television and airplane flight for Ford. One of those technologies is the instrument landing system still in use today, allowing airplanes to land safely at night or in low visibility using a combination of radio frequencies and light. Regardless of their status or role at Ford, or what they had accomplished, people from Dearborn carried the manners and ways of people from a small, provincial company town.

Eager for adventure, my father followed a college professor to Central America to collect specimens for study at the University of Michigan one summer. He liked it so much that he stayed when the fall semester started. Thus he found himself in Panama when World War II broke out. He was quickly conscripted by the U.S.

government to work in the Canal Zone. Except for contracting malaria, my father had a much better experience during the war than most everyone else. As a civilian, he got hazard pay and weeks of time off. He used that time to explore the jungles of Panama and Guatemala, his machete becoming his most prized possession.

When he finally returned after the war, he looked for Isabelle Gasset, the girl he had fallen in love with as a 17-year-old. Though they had each written to the other during the intervening years, their letters were never delivered. So my father was both relieved and excited when he found that Isabelle was in good health—and unmarried. Soon they married in a simple ceremony, with borrowed wedding clothes. Then they packed their few possessions into my father's car and headed to California for their honeymoon, and never returned. Must have been something about those Michigan winters.

My siblings and I, Baby Boomers all, grew up in what is now known as Silicon Valley. Back then, the prune and apricot orchards that blanketed the gentle slopes bordering San Francisco Bay were giving way to new subdivisions. Los Altos was a sleepy little town along the railroad tracks in Santa Clara Valley, where San Franciscans had come for generations to escape their cold, grey summers shrouded in heavy fog. At the edges of Los Altos there were still orchards and grapes, along with row crops of every kind. We called them "truck farms" because they fed the local community and San Francisco—always called "The City"—40 miles to the north. Santa Clara had been named "Valley of the Heart's Delight" by the Native Americans who lived there. Along with its deep, fertile soils came temperate weather: moderate rainfall, sunny summer days and mild winters without frost.

The children in my neighborhood grew up running free, playing in the adjacent field until it was covered by trays of drying prunes and apricots in late summer. Even then, we would sneak out to help ourselves to a handful of sweet, half-dried fruit. Mothers made apricot pie and apricot jam, and the children harvested prunes for spending money. When we got tall enough, we cut "cots"—apricots—for 50 cents a tray: lofty wages in those days.

I loved being outdoors and playing sports, so I was quickly termed a tomboy. My summer days were usually spent at the local elementary

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school, participating in all manner of recreation programs. I enjoyed leadership and teaching as a teenager and became the youngest employee of the Santa Clara County school district, running summer recreation programs at elementary school campuses when I was only 15 and 16 years old.

Like my brothers and sister, I attended public schools through junior high. But when it came time to go to high school, my mother suggested I might want to attend the all-girls Catholic high school in Mountain View run by Sisters of the Holy Cross. She knew how frustrated I had been in junior high when students were disrespectful to teachers, resulting in chaos in the classrooms. I allowed that I would try Holy Cross, but I also secured a promise from my parents that if I didn't like it, I could transfer to the town's secular high school after a year.

As it turned out, I thrived. It was essentially a competitive college prep school, which energized me. Our teachers were a mixture of nuns and lay women. They generally were bright, fun and light-hearted, so they were easy to admire and emulate. The Sisters in particular were well-educated and relatively broad-minded. Their mother house at St. Mary's College was in South Bend, Indiana, across the street from and associated with the University of Notre Dame.

In addition to the school's curriculum, culture and educators, I loved being at an all-girls school where I felt totally free to be, well, all girl. Students could sit cross-legged on the hallway floor talking with each other, be silly in class, ask the craziest questions and never be concerned about how we were seen by boys. I could take leadership roles, excel at math, compete in sports and not be seen as too athletic or "brainy." I love to sing, and led "hootenanny Masses" at church on Sundays. Students at Holy Cross wore uniforms, so the only wardrobe choice each morning was whether to wear a navy blazer or a blue sweater. I'd iron my white blouse collar and run out the door.

When I was in my junior year, I dated a boy named Mike who was a senior at St. Francis, the boy's Catholic school down the road. He was quite romantic in his way. He particularly liked to draw floor plans of the future home we would live in. What was most curious about this is that he was also determined to join the Congregation of the Holy Cross—a celibate order. So, after graduation, he headed off

for his orientation and serious religious studies. We kept in touch—though he had to pretend I was his cousin.

Maybe he was the one who inspired me. Maybe it was my teachers. Maybe it was the spirit of peace and light-heartedness that pervaded the school. Perhaps it was all of these. During my senior year, I decided to become a nun. By April, I had applied to the Sisters of the Holy Cross and had been accepted.

By June, I changed my mind. I simply decided I loved men and wanted a family too much to be happy with a celibate life. At graduation, the names of girls headed for the convent were announced to the assembly. Mine was not one of them. A hundred wondering faces turned in my direction. It was delicious.

## *First Meeting*

I started college in the fall of 1967, attending the University of California at Davis, in California's central valley. A month into the first term I got an invitation to a dinner party at a professor's house. I didn't know the hosts or any of the guests beside the young man who invited me. But after four weeks of dorm living, being in a professor's house and eating a home-cooked meal sounded like heaven.

The invitation came from Norm, a senior. We had met during my first week at the university, when I had gone to Newman Center, home of the campus' Catholic ministry, to volunteer my services as a musician. Norm was nice and we became friends. Now he was inviting me into a whole new world.

The previous year, he had lived with Professor Harold Olmo, his wife Helen, and another UC Davis student known as BJ, short for Brother Justin. While Norm had since moved to an apartment in town, BJ was still living with the Olmos. The dinner was a celebration of his 29th birthday.

The Olmos lived in a rambling farmhouse outside of Davis, down a gravel road next to Putah Creek. By the late 1960s, Harold was a world-renowned viticulturist and grape breeder. On his property was a walnut orchard and acres of tomatoes but no vineyard. I came to find out that Dr. Olmo spent his time in the university campus

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vineyards, green houses and off-campus research stations. He had no need, or time, for a vineyard of his own.

Norm took me into the Olmo home the way the family entered, through the garage. My whole body relaxed as I was engulfed with the sights, sounds and aromas of a happy family home. In the kitchen, I met three generations of the Olmo family: Dr. Olmo's wife Helen, their kids Jeanne and Paul, and Helen's mother, known as "GG." I offered to help set the table and was directed to a large china cupboard which held service for fifty. Clearly the Olmos loved hosting dinners for friends and students. The dining room table was covered with an elegant, hand-embroidered Italian lace tablecloth. The dinner plates were made of fine china and were complemented by beautiful stemware.

When Harold offered me a glass of wine, I hesitated only a moment before accepting. I had turned 18 less than a month before, but everyone drank wine in the Olmos' house. Fruit of the vine, nectar of the gods, staple food of Italians. And Dr. Olmo had the most interesting wine collection: a crazy mix of experimental varieties, good cheap red and fine older vintages. This evening we were drinking wines from the Christian Brothers winery. They had been made and blended by BJ and his mentor, America's most famous winemaker at the time, Brother Timothy.

I had just taken a couple sips of delicious Christian Brothers wine when Brother Justin himself walked into the kitchen. His husky, athletic form filled the doorway, but his enthusiasm, round face and friendly smile were instantly disarming. I had expected him to be dressed in a black robe like the nuns at my high school. But instead he was wearing a knit shirt with blue stripes and grey trousers. With his larger-than-life presence he would have been intimidating in all black. But this way he felt approachable and fun-loving.

Like me, BJ was studying at UC Davis. There the similarities ended. He had come to the university at age 26, with a previous college degree in economics and three years as a high school teacher behind him. He then completed a second bachelor's degree, this time in viticulture, the science of grape growing. But the persuasive Dr. Olmo had convinced him to stay another year for a master's degree in viticulture. So at 29, BJ was not a wide-eyed young student but a

winemaker and grape grower honing his technical skills.

Sitting next to Norm, I fully enjoyed BJ's birthday dinner with the Olmo family. I felt relaxed and welcome, participating in the playful conversation around the dining room table. Dinner was delicious and plentiful. Helen was an excellent natural cook, unlike my mother who specialized in casserole recipes she found in the daily paper. My excitement also included a little secret: I had stashed my guitar behind my dining chair. Norm had suggested I bring it because BJ played the banjo. So I knew there was music ahead.

As dinner wound down and it became time for BJ's birthday cake, I brought out my guitar. His eyes immediately lit up as I led everyone in "Happy Birthday." Then he went to his room to grab his banjo. Obviously handmade, his long neck instrument was crafted in the same style as the one played by famed folksinger Pete Seeger.

There at the dining table BJ and I launched into some folk songs we both knew while the men savored cigars and everyone sipped the last bit of wine in their glasses. Now focused on BJ, I matched his strums and chord changes. The two of us quickly became swept up in the music, delighted by our complementary voices and effortless harmony. We decided to move to the family room and continue playing, to the eager assent of everyone else.

Brother Justin and I played and sang together for hours that night. We were both fans of folk music, particularly the Kingston Trio and Peter, Paul and Mary. When one song ended, one of us quickly suggested the next. We easily wove our voices together in harmony, picking up the next verse whenever one of us slipped behind or forgot a lyric. Norm and the Olmo family all joined in on familiar choruses. By the time the night had ended, BJ and I each knew we had found a fun-loving kindred spirit and fellow musician.

As I put away my guitar, the Olmos encouraged Norm to bring me again sometime soon. My heart leaped at this possibility. This had been the most warm, welcoming, delightful night I had enjoyed since my arrival at the university.

As Norm drove me back to my dorm room, we quietly talked about the evening full of family, celebration and song. Had BJ been just another man and not a professed Christian Brother, Norm might have been a little jealous at all the attention I riveted on him as



we sang. As it was, Norm enjoyed the music and the evening as much as I had. For my own part, it never occurred to me to entertain any feelings toward Brother Justin other than pure friendship. I had been around celibate nuns, monks and priests in religious orders, and had even considered joining the Sisters of the Holy Cross, so I was very familiar with their vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience.

A couple of weeks after that, just before Thanksgiving break, Norm asked me to marry him. I sincerely told Norm I would give his proposal serious thought, that I had enjoyed the time we had spent together and looked forward to more. When I got home to my parents' house for Thanksgiving, I told my mother about his proposal. As we sat in our family room in front of the fire, she asked me if I loved him. I said I liked Norm well enough and considered the marriage proposal a real compliment. I went on to say it was important for me to get to know him better before any thought of marriage. Besides, I intended to get my college degree. I had no intention of settling for an "MRS degree" as some girls did, just a few months or a year into their university studies.

That was before Norm's past came rushing back into the present, changing the destinies of those around him.

## *Saved by Synchronicity*

Norm and I continued to date after Thanksgiving, but something strange was happening. This man who was keenly interested in me, who just weeks before had asked me to marry him, was becoming more distant. I was doing my best to keep up with my coursework and prepare for finals. He appeared not to focus on his classes; I suspected he was not studying much, if at all. Initially very kind and sweet, he had developed an edge of impatience and anger which I found confusing.

Things went from confused to disturbed when I received a couple of phone calls from the police department in the middle of the night, just to "check on me" and "see if I was safe." The voices were reassuring but the questions were alarming. Apparently Norm was the reason for the calls; he told the police that someone was threatening me. But

I had received no such threats. I began to wonder if Norm himself had threatening feelings toward me.

Then, in the middle of final exam week, Helen Olmo called to tell me that Norm had been admitted to the university health center as an inpatient. That meant he was seriously ill in some way. So as soon as I finished my chemistry final later that day, I went to see him.

When I walked into his room, he was lying in bed dressed in a hospital gown. I came up to the bed intending to give him a kiss, but his eyes stopped me in my tracks. His face was a picture of thinly veiled rage. The man who had asked me to marry him less than a month before was angry, argumentative, blaming, vengeful, threatening. I stood my ground and tried to calm him down, but nothing worked. Something had changed, but I could not discover what it was. I began to feel the urge to bolt out the door.

Just then, the door was blocked by the large, athletic form of Brother Justin, carrying a couple of heavy textbooks under one arm. He too had just come from a final exam and, like me, had swung by to visit Norm. I was relieved to have him there, because he quickly had a calming effect on Norm – and on me. The three of us talked for another 20 minutes or so, and then I felt it was a good time for me to go. BJ picked up his books and escorted me out.

As we walked down the health center corridor, I felt so many conflicting emotions. How could a man who proposed to me suddenly come to revile me? Brother Justin must have read the inner turmoil in my silence, because he spoke up with a gentle yet surprising proposal: Would I like to go get a Coke?

I accepted immediately, eager to hold on to his comforting presence a little while longer. He drove us to a Dairy Queen off Russell Boulevard that had seen better days. It was an unusually warm afternoon in mid-December so we found two stools at the outside counter where we could have a private conversation. When our Cokes arrived, I almost fell off my seat when Brother Justin pulled money out of his pocket and paid. Whenever I had gone out for an ice cream or casual meal with nuns from my school, it was always on me. Nuns don't have money. But this monk had ready cash in his pocket. It was a double delight, to be treated by someone I never imagined would do so.

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After some minutes of conversation, it dawned on me that Brother Justin wasn't just socializing, or giving a confused freshman some comfort. He had something to tell me. I gave him the space to do that, and it wasn't long before a strange tale came tumbling out. Norm had lived with the Olmos the previous year by special arrangement, after being diagnosed and treated for manic-depressive disorder. Those involved thought it would be better for him to live with a family rather than on his own, and they were right. Norm did well in the Olmos' warm, caring environment. That's why he had been allowed to move into his own apartment for his final year of college. When he started to date me, his family and friends felt even more confident, BJ explained. People thought I was such a nice girl. Norm was going to be just fine.

I stared at BJ, eyes wide first with sudden understanding, then with fury. "Who knew?" I demanded. His answer shocked me: the Olmos, the Newman Center pastor, the school, the police, BJ himself. Everyone but me, the unwitting innocent in a crazy play everyone else was watching. A rush of anger and betrayal coursed through me like electricity. I already understood human psychology well enough to know that finding a nice girl doesn't make a man's mental illness disappear.

BJ apologized for his own part, and then for everyone else who was involved. He apologized for their misguided hope and misunderstanding of Norm's illness. He apologized for leaving me vulnerable and potentially in harm's way. This calmed my outrage enough so that I could explain my side of the story.

I told BJ how Norm had asked me to marry him right before Thanksgiving, but then seemed to do nothing but sleep for a week. This was followed by an apparent manic impulse when he picked me up one evening to go to Sacramento to purchase a drum set, an errand that kept us up pretty much all night and made me struggle the next day to stay awake in class. I told him about the puzzling phone calls from the police. And the way Norm had raged at me in the health center earlier that afternoon.

BJ listened compassionately, letting me pour everything out. By the time our glasses were empty, I felt like I had matured a couple of years. I was also grateful for the amazing synchronicity of Brother

## PERFECTLY PAIRED

Justin showing up in Norm's hospital room when he did. I felt calmer, but also more uncertain. Would I ever see any of them again—Helen and Harold Olmo, BJ, or Norm? I was certainly not anxious to see Norm anytime soon. But the Olmos? BJ? Losing their friendship and hospitality would be hard.

I finished my final exams and headed home for Christmas vacation. There was a new year just around the corner. I would come back to Davis in January as if for the first time, when winter descended to chill the city, farms and fields that had once seemed so warm and welcoming.