

Episode 8: Saint of Darkness

ERIKA LANTZ: One fall evening in 1995, Mary Johnson went to bed in the dormitory of the MC convent in San Gregorio, Rome.

MARY JOHNSON: Went to bed, closed my eyes, had this dream where I'm seeing a potter at a wheel. She's just there humming as she's forming this clay. And that wheel turns. I noticed that she's forming these little figurines, and they're various people, and when she finishes them, then she breathes life into them. And they come alive and they look like people.

ERIKA: In the dream, the floor of the studio opens up. Mary can see the world below.

MARY: And she lifts that little figure up in her hands and places it wherever.

ERIKA: She breathes life into a figurine and sets it down on a busy street in Hong Kong. She puts another one in a gray office. One in a rainforest. One in the kitchen of a small house.

Then the potter forms another figure. This one has dimples and curly hair. The potter pulls out tiny glasses from her overalls and balances them on the figurine's nose. She takes a deep breath.

MARY: When she breathes life into this clay figure that she's created, I recognize that that's me. What I'm really waiting to see is where is she going to put me? And so she's looking me over, turning me this way and that, and then she speaks for the first time in the dream. And she says, "This one. This one I like so much that I'm gonna keep her all for myself!" And she puts me on this high shelf in her studio, far away from everything and everyone, and I'm so mad at her. I'm stomping my little figurine feet, and I'm shaking my fist at her, and I'm shouting from my little shelf up there, "Let me down!"

ERIKA: But the potter's already turned back to the wheel. She ignores Mary. She starts to pedal, and she doesn't stop. The wheel turns and turns and turns.

From Rococo Punch and iHeartRadio, this is "The Turning." I'm Erika Lantz. Part Eight: Saint of Darkness.

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MARY: At a certain point, I was just really, really exhausted, physically tired, intellectually finished. And I went to my superior and I said, "I, I just need a break. I can't take this anymore. I'm really kind of scared what's gonna happen to me." She could see that, she knew that, and she was a very kind person -- Sister Dominica. And she said, "Well, the superiors are having a retreat. Let me see if I can get you permission to go on that retreat."

ERIKA: She did get permission. Mary would have some time off for prayer and reflection.

On the retreat, she met a priest. He was just over 40 years old. He had an easy smile, and something about his talks at the retreat caught Mary's attention.

MARY: He spoke with so much compassion and so much humanity and so much insight into the gospels.

ERIKA: We aren't using his real name. Mary calls him Father Tom.

MARY: Father Tom was a person that everybody kind of felt at ease around. He had this easygoing attitude. I heard once heard another priest describe him as the only priest that he knew who really had no ego. He knew how to listen.

ERIKA: Father Tom would be the one to take Mary's general confession this year -- that's her annual review of faith and conscience.

Before she knelt for her confession, Mary thought back. It had been a turbulent year. She'd felt overwhelmed with her workload, and there had been that incident with Niobe -- the sister who said I love you whom Mary loved back but who eventually pressured Mary to get physical, and at times, when she specifically said no.

When Mary met Father Tom, her relationship with Niobe hadn't turned sour yet. Mary asked Niobe to hold her, and they had embraced for the first time. Now she had this nagging feeling: Guilt.

Before she started her confession, she thought about all the ways she'd failed her vows. Then she knelt and made the sign of the cross. She spoke through the screen, "Bless Me father for I have sinned ..."

First she listed her usual confessions: putting her own needs above others, failing to serve with a generous heart. But at the end, she added:

MARY: "I've bent the rules, especially by showing affection in inappropriate ways." I hoped he wasn't gonna ask for details. But instead, what he did is he said, "You gotta be careful to balance the love of others with love of yourself. Didn't Jesus say, 'Love your neighbor as yourself?' So shouldn't you be loving yourself? It's not one or the other. You have to do both."

And then he said the words that really threw me. He said, "You're just as worthy of having your needs met as anyone else is." And that just really kind of violated the whole, you know, Missionary of Charity life is to serve others, it's to forget yourself, and we're always told that and not supposed to think about ourselves, even.

And I thought, "Wow. OK. So he went straight by the inappropriate affection thing and went to that place inside where I wasn't loving myself."

ERIKA: Mary returned to the convent and a year later, she became Niobe's tertian mistress, preparing her for final vows. You remember what happened: Mary says she told Niobe the relationship needed to change; as her mistress it could no longer continue. But Niobe didn't stop. She requested to have a bed by Mary's and then, at night, she'd reach over, unbutton Mary's nightdress and grope her. Or one time after rule class, Niobe tried to unlace her bodice. To make her stop, Mary says she kicked Niobe's shins.

At the same time, Mary had other tertian sisters to take care of. She was in charge of rule class, and the tertians had a lot of questions for her: questions about experiences they'd had at missions, where they worked with people of other religions, or at orphanages with large groups of children. Situations more complicated than Mary felt she'd ever faced. She wasn't sure how to navigate it all.

But what really seemed to help was Father Tom. Even though Father Tom was her confessor and a priest, Mary felt a mutual respect.

Of course the two of them had very different roles. Father Tom had more freedom and more power. Women can't become priests in the Catholic Church. And actually the Pope recently doubled down on this rule. In his new canon law rollout in 2021, Pope Francis declared that anyone who attempts to ordain a woman will be automatically excommunicated, along with the woman.

MARY: The very first time that I went to confession to Tom as my regular confessor, he said, "I just want you to know, if women could be priests, you're the one I would make my confession to." I was like, "OK. OK." So this acknowledgement from the beginning that though there is this power dynamic there, we are both equals in the sense of being spiritual seekers with some sort of wisdom to share.

ERIKA: Father Tom came to the convent every week for the sisters' confessions. As tertian mistress, Mary always went last. This meant she could stay as long as she liked. And they talked.

She liked talking to him. She found solace in it. Father Tom was educated and smart, and he knew the gospels in this deep, unusual way. He spoke of God as love. They discussed religion and their spiritual journeys. When Mary struggled with the sisters, he smuggled in a pop psychology book for her, since MC reading is so controlled.

And she could talk to him about Niobe.

MARY: He knew everything, all the battles that were going on inside, and I was very happy that I didn't have to hide from him. I could show him everything that I was going through, and I didn't feel judged, and he would give me good advice about how to handle things.

So, like, I could tell Father Tom, that, you know, "I know I'm not supposed to let anybody touch me, but it just feels so good. And I don't know, it's, it's the same kind of feeling I get when I have a good feeling in prayer, when I feel this sort of human closeness and this touch." And he wouldn't give a response that I might expect from a priest. He'd say, "No, you know, human

touch can be very healing. Of course it feels like that.” And he would he would always return it, you know, more than to the rules, he would turn it to the gospel. Jesus says, “Love as I have loved you.”

ERIKA: Soon Thursday confessions turned into post-confession heart-to-hearts. Father Tom would drink coffee and they talked. As weeks passed, she stayed later and later. Finally she could be with someone who accepted her as she was. She says it gave her courage to go out and deal with the problems she faced.

MARY: There was one Thursday when I went to confession, and I was reaching my wit's end, basically. And as I confessed it's like (sigh). I told Father Tom all of the things I was doing wrong, all of the ways I was failing, and he says to me, “But you're doing your best. You don't need to try so hard. Concentrate on what's important. Let the rest of it slide.”

And those words just -- the tears, they fell down my face. I just started crying and crying, because he was being so kind to me, and I wasn't used to that. I wasn't kind to myself; others weren't kind to me. It was just like ... and here he was just, just so kind. And that day, instead of putting his hands just above my head when he gave me absolution and a blessing, he put his hands *on* my head and said that prayer. And when he did that, I just I just felt like I was melting inside just this, this sense of this love flowing from his hands through me.

One day, I went and I stood behind his chair and I just put my hand on his shoulder and tried to channel that love from my hand through him, the way he had done for me. At one point, Father Tom said, “I just feel it really strange that you keep calling me ‘Father.’ Why don't you just call me Tom?” And I asked him to call me Mary, not Sister Donata. And we had been talking to each other as Tom and Mary for a while.

Whenever we would have our weekly meetings after all the other sisters had gone to confession, I would sometimes put my hand on his shoulder or take his hand in my hand, and he'd sometimes respond by putting his hand on my knee or some similar sort of touch. But he never started, he never initiated in those circumstances. And it's like, sitting opposite him, and I'm looking into his eyes, and I know how we have both been trying so hard to kind of keep our hands to ourselves. In fact, I noticed that sometimes his hands would perspire, with, I don't know, the effort to keep them to himself, and it'd be like, “Hmm.” And so I just told him one day, I said, “You know, if you ever want to take my hands first, that's OK with me.” And he told me, “I've been waiting for that.” And I told him, “I know you have.”

And from that time on, I didn't always have to take the first step.

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COLETTE LIVERMORE: Cheerfulness and joy have to come from within, don't they? I suppose there is that fake-it-'til-you-make-it, that if you pretend to be happy, you will eventually be happy. I think Mother Teresa was a past master at that. She always was smiling.

ERIKA: Colette Livermore, the sister from Australia, had been struggling with a tension between what her conscience was telling her and what her superiors told her. She didn't like that she'd been directed not to follow her inner compass.

By 1980, her eighth year in the MCs, Colette felt dull and empty and emotionless. And to her, it didn't feel like peaceful detachment. She says it felt like the apathy of depression. She decided to go home.

COLETTE: It wasn't the first time it had occurred to me, but yeah. I was still (sighs) mentally controlled by the order and by the all the religious stuff ... about God's will and all that.

ERIKA: Colette knew she wanted to leave -- the order and her vocation. It was her last chance before final profession -- her lifelong vows.

She was stationed in Kolkata at the time, so she asked to meet Mother Teresa for her "general permission." That's a monthly ritual where sisters ask for permission to use of any belonging, like toothbrushes or prayer books. Because technically, they don't own anything themselves. They also speak their faults, and they're assigned penances.

COLETTE: So you go in the room, you kneel down, you don't look in her eyes, you have to "kiss the floor," they used to say. You had to put your head down to the floor.

ERIKA: As Colette knelt in front of Mother Teresa, she spoke her faults, as usual. And then she stayed there.

COLETTE: I was still kneeling. I basically told Mother that I couldn't stand the way we treated each other, the way we treated the poor, that way we were ... moved around and (sighs)

ERIKA: She told Mother Teresa she'd seen sisters hit the poor they were serving out of anger. When she tried to help people on the street, she was chastised. This life wasn't for her.

COLETTE: She was singularly unimpressed.

ERIKA: Colette says Mother Teresa said, "Look me in the eye. I tell you, Sister, and I would not tell you a lie, you have a vocation to be a Missionary of Charity."

Colette says Mother Teresa spoke with this dogmatic certainty -- that she seemed to have no empathy for a sister who struggled to believe. She told Colette she had no doubts. She said Colette's desire to leave was the devil's temptation.

COLETTE: The devil pretending as an angel of light, and that it was pride. "I forbid you to think like this." She told me to take 'the discipline' --

ERIKA: Take it harder than usual.

COLETTE: You know, this strange habit of hitting yourself with a knotted rope.

ERIKA: And she told Colette not to judge the sisters who were angry or violent. Those same sisters, she explained, might be feeling just as much pain and guilt for what they've done.

COLETTE: “Don't judge. You may be as displeasing to God with your judgmental attitude as the angry sister is.”

ERIKA: Then she told Colette, “If you think like this, you must go to confession and say 'I was disobedient and judgmental.' You must tell yourself, ‘Mother has forbidden me to think this.’”

And then she told Colette a story.

COLETTE: The story of a mother who said that she'd rather her daughter come out of the convent in a coffin (sighs) than to leave ... than be unfaithful to her vows.

ERIKA: I mean, how did it feel to hear her say these things to you?

COLETTE: She's the saint. I'm the sinner. (laughs) She must be right. Yeah ...

I think I felt a bit despairing. Like I was trapped. And I couldn't get out. But I *could* have got out, if I believed in myself more. But that's the trouble. Somehow my inner self, my confidence, my belief in myself, which, and the truth of my own thoughts, had been somehow undermined. I should have stood up and said, “Look, Mother, I've had enough. Not going to hit myself. Not going to go to confession. I'm going. I'd like you to arrange for me to leave. I need to leave.” But somehow I couldn't seem to. I just knelt there until she dismissed me.

ERIKA: Colette had spent years learning to obey. And that's what she did.

Little did she know that the very woman who convinced her to stay -- who told her to whip herself harder, who told her to stick to her vows -- was going through a hidden darkness of her own.

MIDROLL

ERIKA: When Mother Teresa died in 1997, Father Brian Kolodiejchuk knew what to do. He was ready to start his research for her beatification and canonization process. He would be her postulator for sainthood.

FATHER BRIAN KOLODIEJCHUK: When we began the cause, one of the first things we do is collect the documents.

ERIKA: You've heard from Father Brian before -- he's a priest in the Missionaries of Charity.

FATHER BRIAN: I'm serving now as what we call superior general. That means like the CEO, if you want, of the Fathers' congregation.

ERIKA: So he started looking for anything he could find about Mother Teresa. And that's when he discovered the letters.

FATHER BRIAN: The letters were in the archives of the archbishop's house in Kolkata.

ERIKA: They were letters hidden from public view. And if Mother Teresa had her way, they wouldn't exist.

FATHER BRIAN: Mother Teresa kept insisting that they be destroyed.

ERIKA: But they weren't destroyed. The men she wrote to -- a handful of confessors -- saved the letters. They felt they had to keep these texts, as they revealed "the depth of her vocation."

FATHER BRIAN: They had a sense that these were very special -- sacred, even -- because they were her very personal, intimate things that we had no idea.

ERIKA: Father Brian knew how special these papers were.

FATHER BRIAN: And I didn't want to read them just like that.

ERIKA: So when Father Brian got them, he took them to a chapel. And then he started to read through the papers.

(reading letter): Mother Teresa to Father Neuner, undated.

"Now Father, since '49 or '50, this terrible sense of loss, this untold darkness, this loneliness, this continual longing for God, which gives me that pain deep down in my heart. The place of God in my soul is blank. He does not want me. He is not there. Sometimes, I just hear my own heart cry out, 'My God' and nothing else comes. The torture and pain I can't explain."

Mother Teresa's darkness seemed to begin almost immediately after she founded the Missionaries of Charity. As Father Brian kept reading, he watched years pass in Mother Teresa's life. He read references to events he recognized, but she always came back to the darkness.

In one letter, she described her smile as a "cloak which covers a multitude of pains." In another she says, "I don't believe I have a soul. There is nothing in me."

Reading those letters in the chapel, Father Brian was shocked. He had no idea Mother Teresa had experienced decades of darkness and misery. She wrote, "*So many unanswered questions live within me. I am afraid to uncover them, because of the blasphemy. If there be God, please forgive me.*"

When I read these letters, I felt such strong echoes of everything I've heard from the former nuns I'd interviewed, like Mary and Colette. How many felt pulled by despair and submission? How many felt twisted and torn and alone?

I get the sense that a lot of them felt like imposters, like everyone else was doing better than they did. But Mother Teresa felt that, too.

FATHER BRIAN: "I see my sisters, they seem to be so close to Jesus, and me no."

You might think if you were a wife in some, you know, similar situation and your husband, you really passionately in love and and then he's like, "Hmm," doesn't seem to care at all, that would be extremely difficult .

ERIKA: I think some people hearing this might say, “You know, this example of a husband ignoring you -- that doesn’t sound like a healthy relationship.”

FATHER BRIAN: No, yes, it’s very -- sounds difficult, yeah. But then the other dimension in this is what we, you know, we refer to as “the mystery of the cross.” In our Christian understanding, as strange as it might seem, the closer you get to Jesus, the more you’re going to suffer. That’s the whole experience of the saints.

ERIKA: In a letter to Mother Teresa, one of her confessors suggested another interpretation of the emptiness she felt. The fact that she couldn’t feel God anymore wasn’t a sign that God had left her. Instead, it was part of a mystical process experienced by some saints -- something called the “dark night of the soul.”

It’s part of a tradition in Catholic spirituality -- a process of purification that many saints and mystics go through. One that ultimately brings them closer to God, but involves a lot of pain and suffering. Along the way, become “a plaything in God’s hand,” as Mother Teresa would say, quoting St. Therese -- “like a little ball of no value,” she wrote, “that could be thrown on the ground, kicked about, pierced, left in a corner, or pressed to Jesus’s Heart just as it might please Him.” Part of the Dark Night of the Soul involves losing pleasure in the senses, leading to a feeling of pain, dryness and emptiness. Another part of it involves feeling abandoned by God.

FATHER BRIAN: And there’s so much egoism in ourselves, you know, so much of self. It’s very painful to go through that purification.

ERIKA: Mother Teresa wrote, “He has taken all -- and, I think, He has destroyed everything in me. The only thing that keeps me on the surface is obedience.”

But the idea that Mother Teresa’s deep loneliness meant she was joining in Christ’s Passion -- that brought her comfort. Feeling farther from God and his love meant she was growing more intimate with Him.

After all, from the beginning, she wrote, “I want to become a real slave of Our Lady -- to drink only from His chalice of pain.

Mother Teresa once said there are two kinds of poverty: Material poverty, where someone is hungry for a loaf of bread, and then an even greater poverty -- spiritual poverty: to be unloved. Here she is on RTE in Ireland in 1974:

MOTHER TERESA: And that terrible loneliness and being unwanted, unloved, being abandoned by everybody. Even in our own homes, we may have somebody who is handicapped like that, and nobody takes any notice. Nobody even recognizes that there is this child, this man, this woman, who is hungry for love, hungry to be recognized, and to accept with respect and love the person.

ERIKA: Hearing her say the greatest poverty is to feel unloved. She was speaking from experience.

FATHER BRIAN: Mhmm. Exactly. She was sharing in solidarity with that other interior poverty as well.

SISTER KATHLEEN HUGHES: She would say, “If ever I will be a saint” -- meaning be declared a saint -- she said, “I will be the saint of darkness, of those in darkness.” And we didn't know what she meant.

ERIKA: This is Sister Kathleen Hughes, the consecrated virgin who's a former Missionary of Charity.

SR. KATHLEEN: The poor, the rejected, those who feel their life is worth nothing, you know. Those in darkness, people who are driven to to suicide or drug addiction and have failed in some way, maybe with their parents or in life. She said, “I will be ... I will be like their saint!”

ERIKA: In 2007, Father Brian published Mother Teresa's letters in a book he called “Come Be My Light.” One thing that struck me when I read it is that this sounds a lot like depression. Her letters just seem so sad and alone.

Father Brian says he looked into it. He thinks there's a difference between a dark night of the soul and depression. And actually, a number of people have argued for differences between the two. They say the symptoms aren't the same. For example, that depression spans a lot of different domains of life, while the dark night is spiritual -- focused on a relationship with God. But I can't help but think about the fact that depression looks different for different people.

Whatever lens you want to look at it through, one thing is clear: She suffered a lot.

Mother Teresa got a one short respite in 1958. For a month, she felt that she was pleasing Jesus again. But other than that one month, Mother Teresa experienced the dark night of the soul for the rest of her life -- almost 50 years.

When Mother Teresa's letters started being published, the story of her darkness shocked the world. But of course the people it impacted the most were the sisters.

FATHER BRIAN: In Kolkata, when I was reading some of these letters for the sisters, they were just like, you know, wide-eyed and crying.

SR. KATHLEEN: I mean, it was a shock.

ERIKA: When Sister Kathleen heard the news, she knew she'd need some serious time to process the letters as she read them.

SR. KATHLEEN: I decided I would take it as a kind of a retreat. You know, like I would spend these days in prayer, and I was reading -- and I ended up on the floor sobbing. Sobbing. Because I, I kept seeing her face. That stretched, tired, exhausted, face.

If you read about it in the papers, people were saying, “Oh, she was a fake,” and all, you know, it was interpreted in all kinds of absurd ways, that the world has no concept. You know?

And, uh, Sister Nirmala, who was her successor, called me, and she was telling me, “Sister Kathleen we, we had no idea. Nobody had any idea. Mother never told us, and she suffered all of this.” And that also in itself is heroic! It is heroic, that she never she never spoke about it, that ,you know, she kept that secret, because she might have scandalized some sisters or, or, or weakened their faith. How can she tell us that ... that it is as though God isn’t there?

It showed how great a person she was, how great a follower of Christ, how great a per-- a woman, a missionary. No wonder people were moved by her and drawn to her, you know? Because she was like Christ on the cross, saying, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

SUE WEBER: For me, I only found that out after I left the order. Every time she talked to us, she never projected that.

ERIKA: This is Sue Weber. She and her sister Joan both joined the MCs. Sue was a superior at the San Francisco AIDS hospice in the ‘90s.

SUE: I always think back, if there would have been an openness of her saying, “It *is* hard and we, you know, you *do* struggle and you --” who knows where, where people would be? But when you come to find out that that which you felt was being portrayed actually was completely the opposite ... I went through a, a period of time of feeling *very* betrayed by her. And then I had to process that all for myself.

COLETTE: I was, I was -- yes, ha! I was quite elated, for some strange reason.

ERIKA: This is Colette Livermore again.

COLETTE: She was a human being, you know? (laughing) She wasn't a saint on a pedestal. That she struggled through all this. I just felt vindicated somehow. And I don't understand why how she could truthfully tell me she didn't have any doubts.

ERIKA: Colette's initial reaction didn't last though. Because of course it didn't make her happy to hear about this kind of pain.

COLETTE: I remember she told us in a talk once that she went to Andhra Pradesh in a huge flood, and there were bodies everywhere. I got a hint then that she couldn't work it out. She said, “God's obviously trying to tell us something, but I don't know what he's saying.” And like she confronted suffering very regularly. I could feel the struggle and the anguish, and she said her cheerfulness was just a cloak for a very deep loneliness. And I think the highest value in the world is love and relationships. And she'd set up a system where you couldn't get any joy from each other. I think that made people psychologically unwell.

And so when I knew she'd been through all this, I couldn't understand why it didn't change her ... her *pattern*, you know, the template that she used to run the order, but she just thought-blocked it like she told me to, you know? Just suppressed anything as a temptation.

She obviously went through hell. I wish I could have talked to her like a human being, like a friend or a real person.

ERIKA: So do I.

But as people so often point out, Mother Teresa was of another time -- with another sense of what was appropriate.

MARY: I was definitely not shocked, because I'd suspected for quite a while that she had more interior suffering than she led on.

ERIKA: It doesn't surprise Mary Johnson that Mother Teresa kept her dark night of the soul a secret. She wasn't going to go around talking about her relationship with Jesus.

MARY: It would be like asking a woman to explain what her most intimate experiences with her husband were like.

ERIKA: But Mary says she worries about the message a secret like this sends --that when a sister is depressed or suffering, Mother Teresa's dark night could be used as a reason not to get help -- a sign that she should have to suffer. It might even be instructed from above.

MIDROLL

ERIKA: Instead of feeling a dark night of the soul, Mary Johnson felt her soul coming alive.

Even with her growing closeness with Father Tom, though, there were still moments when Mary still felt hollow -- hollowness that made her think about leaving the order and that even led her to make an escape plan -- the one where she was away at the hospital by the coast. She thought she could find street clothes and slip away.

MARY: And I was very tempted, but then various things happened, and I wasn't able to run away. And when I came back and I told, I told Father Tom about that, I just looked in his eyes, and he's just saying, "You can't just disappear. I mean, tell me you wouldn't do that. Tell me you'd call."

I was like, "He'd be concerned if I disappeared. OK. He told me that I should call him when I was having a bad day. We could just talk --" and of course, how would I get to the telephone and all the rest of it. But, he told me, "I hate to see you in so much pain." And then he, he kissed the top of my head through my sari. That just ... felt so good and so unexpected and so perfect.

ERIKA: Did you feel like you were falling for him in some way at that point?

MARY: I had felt an attraction for him from the very beginning. From the first time I saw him, I knew he was somebody extraordinary. I had been holding myself in check. I didn't want to go further. I didn't want to do with him the things I'd done with Sister Niobe, that just didn't make any sense to me. But emotionally, we are having this relationship that deepens and deepens, a relationship of trust, a very deep companionship on this spiritual journey that we were both on.

And so naturally when you have a relationship where you feel completely at home with someone, where you've always felt attracted towards this person, naturally, your body wants to go there.

ERIKA: And one day, Mary couldn't help herself.

MARY: "Jesus wants me to have life, fullness of life. Where do I feel the most full of life?" And I knew that that was in my relationship with Tom! It was really kind of like almost the only place I felt really fully alive.

ERIKA: So just before Mass, Mary walked into the sacristy, a small room near the chapel. Tom was there preparing for the service.

MARY: And I gave him this big kiss! It felt just so right. It felt all tingly the way those things can do sometimes. And I walked out.

Afterwards, he says, "You know, you're very good at that." (laughs) And he says, "But please, you know, don't do that before Mass anymore like that, I couldn't think of anything else all during Mass!"

ERIKA: Mary started confessing to a different priest after that.

As time went on, Tom often encouraged Mary to call him on the phone, so they could just talk about their days. But Mary didn't have a way to call him.

MARY: Missionaries of Charity did not make phone calls without a very specific purpose and without permission, and that purpose could never be just to talk to somebody about your problems.

ERIKA: Even if she tried to sneak a call, there'd always be a high risk that someone walked in on her.

But come winter, the superior of the house moved out of Mother's room to a warmer part of the convent. This meant Mary had access to that room at night -- and there was a telephone inside. She started calling Tom while the sisters were on their way to bed. She kept the calls short.

MARY: You never know who's listening at the door. You never know who might open the door. But it was just wonderful to hear his voice at the end of the day, to ask him how his day went, to hear him say, "I love you" before I hung up the phone. To be able to say, "I love you" back.

ERIKA: While Mother Teresa was experiencing her darkness, feeling ignored by her spouse, Mary was pursuing a forbidden love -- a type of love that she felt was expanding her life.

She had said "I love you" before, but this felt new. Something was different from the manipulative I-love-yous she'd heard so often from Niobe.

MARY: When Father Tom told me, "I love you," it was in line with his actions. I knew that that he meant it. And it reinforced to me the way that that God loved me ... that I was worthy of that.

ERIKA: Mary was about 36 at this point. She and Tom daydreamed about other versions of their lives. Other places they could be.

MARY: What would it be like if we could go out on the streets of Rome, walking hand in hand, go through the park like that, you know, you've got the trees on either side, one of these beautiful Roman parks. Just to be able to walk hand in hand in public, wouldn't that be marvelous?

Or, to go a little further -- what would it be like, you know, to wake up together in the morning? To make coffee for each other? To sit together and read at night, what would that be like? Wouldn't it be so nice?

Just kind of these ... imaginings of things that were totally impossible. Even though they were so ordinary. (laughs) It's kind of like me sitting here and imagining, "What would it be like to have a house in Hawaii and another one in France and, oh ..." you know, it's totally out of the question, this is never going to happen! But, you can imagine.

ERIKA: At one point, Mary got sick. A sinus infection -- a bad one. She had to go to the hospital for surgery during Holy Week. So she asked Tom if he would come.

MARY: I told him that I thought we could have some time alone.

So on Easter Monday morning, I brushed my teeth three times. I put on the most revealing night dress that the sisters had sent me, which means that it had short sleeves and it had a neckline where my collarbone showed a little bit.

And I waited and waited and, every time I heard footsteps in the corridor, I thought maybe, but then finally --

ERIKA: She opened the door, and Father Tom was there.

Mary had a roommate, so Tom suggested they go on a walk.

MARY: And I said, "Yes, let's go for a walk."

ERIKA: The hospital was quiet. Most people had been dismissed because of Holy Week. Many of the rooms were empty. They walked into one of them.

MARY: And we left the door slightly ajar, but we positioned ourselves in the room in a way that anyone opening the door wouldn't see us immediately. And ... we sat down and we ... found a physical intimacy together deeper than anything we'd managed to do back in the convent. Our hands found each other in new sorts of ways. And it was a very, very beautiful moment.

ERIKA: Afterward, they walked out of the room to the service elevator at the back of the ward. When the doors of the elevator closed behind them, they kissed again.

MARY: We rode that elevator up and down and up and down.

And every now and then, somebody would get on with a laundry cart or something like that, and we'd kind of behave ourselves for a little while. And then we'd get in. The elevator would go up and down again. And it's like, we just didn't want to separate from each other.

But then finally we did open the door on the elevator, and Tom left to go. And I watched and watched and watched, 'til I couldn't see him anymore.

* * *

CREDITS

ERIKA: “The Turning” is written by Erin Lantz Lesser and me. Our producers are Elin Lantz Lesser and Emily Forman. Our editor is Rob Rosenthal. Andrea Asuaje is our digital producer. Fact-checking by Andrea López-Cruzado.

Special thanks to Amy Gaines, Sarah Olender, Mourad Frishkopf, Beth Anne Macaluso, Travis Dunlap and consulting producer Mary Johnson. Her memoir, “An Unquenchable Thirst,” provided inspiration for this series.

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