Vignette: Is Love Enough?

As with all stories,
this may not have actually happened,
but all stories are true.
And as story-tellers know,
once you hear them,
they are happening to you. . .

Meanwhile, sometime in 1970s Canada:

We had gathered. Food was the unspoken reason, so as to nurture existing and seed new relationships, as with all communities of faith.

Faith, of course, is a funny word in this day and age. It invites, conjures, and weaves emotive responses that underlie significant cultural and demographic tensions, especially in Western democracies. Those tensions encompass concepts that range from judgment to terrorism, and talking about faith has become taboo at the least and, at the worst, conversation ending.

For the sake of this story, let's imagine a time when structures and institutions such as government and church, though perhaps tentatively, commanded respect, when such bodies were still able to mould and define what was normal and acceptable. When difference was apparent, implicitly or explicitly, they possessed effective ways to discipline and correct. When ideas such as sin and brokenness opened or closed doors. Barred opportunities or revealed possibilities depending the nature of one's birth …

I was born into a Syrian Orthodox family in which I existed between two worlds: insider and outsider. I had the lottery of birth to be born the eldest grandchild of an Economos Priest, a man for whom the Orthodox communities from Montreal to Ottawa and all along the eastern US seaboard, held revered esteem. I had the gift to carry his name, Michael, as my middle name. And, in a culture richly influenced and informed by patriarchy, one's birth location carried with it privileged potential. This social location could have allowed me to enter places of privilege and opportunities only afforded to men in this family of origin. Could have …

In my remembering, I walked into this communal meal feeling at home, loved, and safe. We were in a hall, maybe a basement or ground floor, in which tables were set as the community prepared to celebrate. I do not recall the occasion, but there was the usual networking that carried a distinct scent of the political. As always, we gathered with an intention, yet the reason was not clear to me, initially. In all of my remembering, I was and am still a five-year-old boy ill prepared for that

which will come . . . an event that continues to reverberate in a way that begs the question whether faith communities that claim to be love, are in fact living in opposition to that central tenet that Jesus' ministry models.

In this 1970s tale, a time some have called the "Me" decade, Syrian Christians had long ago completed an exodus from a land that no longer existed, even then. During the mid-nineteenth century, privileged and educated Christians who lived in the Ottoman Empire in the province of Syria had begun a diaspora.

Entrepreneurs—male mostly, if not exclusively—began to depart to ports far and between. From Pier 21 in Halifax and the port of Montreal, to the eastern US seaboard and as far afield as Argentina and Australia, the wandering unfolded. Whether as peddlers reaching into central US or Canada, as bearers of a Christianity ancient to their new Protestant neighbours, or finding commonality with Catholic cousins, change was not new. As the tempo for war increased between Europe and the Caliphate, they seeded far and wide.

In my remembering, I walked into that communal meal knowing that there was something wrong with me, about me, in me. In my remembering, the scent of all that was savoury, mingling allspice with cinnamon, rose water and flat bread, invited identity. Even then I was afraid that such an identity was an unattainable illusion. Whatever that day's occasion, whether an occasion of joy or grief, the community followed the ritual of greeting the Other. And, for this particular meal, our Orthodox Priest was offering hospitality to his Roman Catholic counterpart. In all of this remembering, I was and am still a five-year-old boy ill prepared for that which will come. . .a moment in which love and belonging, and, ostracising and sin continue to face one another …

Though my gender and birth location foretold the opening of doors in life's journey, my paternal parentage precluded such possible ascension. Through my mother, I connect with a pedigree that traces its past to at least fourth-century Syria, which also only exists as a land now lost to time. In respect to my father, however, there was no such celebration by those who shared my maternal lineage. Through my father, I was labelled in unspoken whisper and furtive gaze: outsider. A birth context in which sin negated any privilege that might have been born by the name "Michael," which I carried.

Often when food is shared, faith communities receive and welcome. The tradition, in this telling, was that we were to be greeted and welcomed by our priest before food could be shared and tales told that weave tightly a diaspora personality. It was a cultural gauntlet that established the order of things. Like a doctor taking a pulse, in each hand gripped, in each introduction our priest made to his Roman Catholic companion, one's health in the body was diagnosed. Through Him, food was purified and with His nod or smile, in voice or silence, status was established.

- *As my mother and I arrived in the receiving line, does the forty-four-year-old adult wish for a different outcome?*
- *Do I hope that the telling of this once more might lead to a new narrative?*
- *Do I long for something other than paradox?*
- *Does the allure for certainty still beckon?*

As my hand was taken, I looked up at our priest. I could smell that scent particular to the men of my mother's kin. A scent of belonging, of masculinity dressed in tones of olive and bearded shadows that appear as quickly as blade scrapes yesterday's whiskered growth. This scent I know continues to invite intimacy that stretches back to the symposia of Sokrates and the perambulating philosophers of the Mediterranean, where once gender and intimacy blurred what it meant to be male. Where philia, brotherly love, embraced intimate relations and where concepts of homosexuality would not limit them as sinful until millennia later. It is an aroma in which philia continues to be sought, yet is often obscured by our contemporary messages of hypersexualised divisions between men and women.

As I let go that romanticised breath, exhaling to hear the manner in which I would be introduced, in my remembering there was a hush, a lull, in which only ringing silence waited. In the ethereal eternity of a second, paradox was born. A central tenet, a quintessential question was born that would drive me to this moment and this endeavour . . .

As one Emissary of the Holy introduced me to another, a journey of doubt and faith was born. In the lilting musical English cadence, which is particular to one for whom Arabic is his language of origin, my priest declared:

"And this is the bastard child . . ."