

I was about to press the button again when I heard something on the other side of the great portal. At last one of the doors opened to the inside, and a gray-haired woman, perhaps in her early sixties, stood before me. She could have been clerical help or some other servant, but most probably a nun. It's difficult to tell anymore—you have to look at the shoes.

She looked at me without expression. In fact, hers was a face that seemed incapable of expression—the product of decades of stifled emotion, of being in the midst of the great and powerful but seeing and hearing nothing. Her little round spectacles and hair cropped like Joan of Arc only added to her nondescript air.

“Father Joseph,” she said.

Why did she call me that? I had never been called that. I couldn't tell if it was a greeting or a question, and not so much as an arching of an eyebrow gave me a clue.

"Anthony Migliore," I said.

She did not correct herself but only lifted her chin the tiniest bit and looked me over through the bottoms of her little spectacles—a "that's what you think" look, as if she knew more about who I was than even I did. It was the most animation I would see from her, even as she led me silently through one hall and then another. We passed the kitchen, and I could see that it was spacious and well appointed—pots and utensils hanging on walls—like an intimate little restaurant in the Quarter. I could smell the fried seafood; a Friday lunch was apparently in preparation. Was I to be dining with His Excellency?

A marble staircase took us to the second-floor hallway, its walls lined with portraits of all the bishops of New Orleans. There was the first—Penalver, the Cuban who was so appalled by the depravity of eighteenth-century Louisiana that he wrote a formal complaint to Pius VI. And then the familiar ones, immortalized in the names of local schools: Chapelle, Blenk, Shaw, Rummel. Finally, there was Franklin Ratchett himself, his image the only photograph; the others were oils on canvas. What a fitting testament to his meretricious administration. If only Luis Penalver could return to whitewash the grime and rot that has come to corrupt the diocese he founded two centuries ago.

Several doors flanked the "Hall of Honors," interspersed asymmetrically among the portraits. All were closed and unmarked. One final door stood at the head of the hall. I knew from the size of the building and the relative shortness of the hall that there had to be a great deal of space behind this door. Perhaps it was the entrance to the archbishop's private suite of rooms. A sensation of anticipation and prideful intimacy washed over me at that thought. I could literally be standing on the threshold of the acceptance and recognition that had so unjustly been

denied me these many years. Pretending to be patting down my hair, I stealthily checked my snaps again while the woman knocked on the door.

A muffled voice could be heard from within, unintelligible to me but apparently not to my guide, who tried the brass knob in response. Opening the door just a few inches, she turned back to me and, without making eye contact, gestured with an outstretched arm and open palm, her fingers pointing to my feet and sweeping toward the threshold. Her movements seemed strangely stylized, like a figure from a medieval portrait only partially infused with animation. Apparently I was to proceed. My guide, meanwhile, backed away, then turned and retraced her steps down the hall from which we had come. It was the last I saw of her.