

ONE GOOD REASON

*A Memoir of
Addiction and Recovery,
Music and Love*

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WITH ANDREA ARAGON


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PRELUDE



NOVEMBER 9, 2011, is the anniversary of my husband Séan's sobriety. It's an amazing accomplishment and one that helped save our marriage, and our family, but it was also the beginning of a world of hurt I tried not to see coming. On this day, when my husband celebrates, I'm reminded why I had to give him an ultimatum to sober up, to choose us over booze. I'm reminded of the worst day of my life. I'm reminded of the words that literally brought me to my knees.

But a lot happened to us—two broken people—before we found each other. Things that could have torn us apart or crushed us.

While it certainly battered us, we ended up here, in a place of truth, compassion, loyalty, and most of all, love. Together.

This is our story.

THE LION LIES DOWN WITH THE LAMB



FORGIVE ME, FATHER, for I have sinned and it's been a week since my last confession. Since then I stole some comics from my brother and I lied to my mom."

"Anything else?"

"No, Father."

"Are you sure?... Have you had any impure thoughts?"

"Father?"

"About girls...?"

"Oh...yes, Father...sometimes...."

"Do you ever act on these thoughts?"

"No, Father."

"Not even when you are alone...by yourself?"

"Yes, Father...."

"Masturbation is a mortal sin against God and His holy church. We must control our urges or face eternal damnation. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Father."

"Are you sorry?"

"I am, Father."

"Then by the power and the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ, I absolve you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. For your penance say the rosary every day this week starting with the Sorrowful Mysteries and come back to me for confession next Friday."

"Yes, Father."



“What is your name?”

“...Father?”

“Your name...who are you?”

“My name is Séan McCann, Father.”

“And what grade are you in, Séan?”

“Grade nine, Father.”

“And what are you reading?”

“Whatever my teachers tell me to read, Father.”

“We shall have to do something about that. You have given me an honest confession, Séan, and I would really like to meet you. Would you please wait for me until I am finished hearing confessions so we can talk some more?”

“Yes, Father. I will.”

SHOW ME A FAMILY



I WAS BORN in the very small town of Carbonear, Conception Bay, Newfoundland, on May 22, 1967. The first child of recently wed Anita March of Northern Bay and Ed McCann of neighbouring Gull Island. The two outports sit “side by each” on the Bay de Verde Peninsula and have supported their minor populations (approximately five hundred combined) for almost three centuries exclusively with the inshore cod fishery. Settled by Irish immigrants fleeing famine and religious persecution, the inhabitants were also exclusively Catholic. My mother’s labour was difficult and long, a foreshadowing of our future relationship. My father, who was generally not a drinking man, had time to get drunk twice during the eighteen-hour ordeal. I was a very big baby and I cried loud and often.

I still do.

On my father’s side, the McCanns were a hardy fishing family of sixteen who managed to somehow scrape a living off the rocks in “the Gulch,” where they lived in exile due to a mixed marriage in a previous generation. While Catholics and Protestants worked side by side out of necessity, they were strictly forbidden from falling in love and the social penalty from both sides was high.

Isolation.

Jeremiah, my grandfather, was a well-respected jack-of-all-trades and did whatever it took to keep his large hungry family fed in the modest four-bedroom saltbox house they called a home. He fished, farmed, hunted, and cut wood. Generally a quiet man, he was known to be good with his fists when it was called for and on several occasions used this skill to secure his berth on the treacherous sealing vessels, putting himself at great risk copying (essentially running) over the ice floes in the dangerous pursuit

of pelts. This bloody and perilous work provided a desperate infusion of cash and fresh meat in early spring when household larders were at their lowest. “Daddy Jerry,” as he was affectionately known by his lawless gang of grandchildren, was a gentle man with giant hands and a glass eye, the result of an accident while playing with dynamite blasting caps as a child. The injury quite likely saved his life, as it prevented him from passing the physical exam when he tried to enlist in the First World War at the age of fifteen. A pipe smoker from the age of ten, he had another close brush with death in his sixties when he developed cancer in his throat and lower lip. There was no real form of treatment at the time so Jerry sought the help of a spiritual healer on the mainland in the small town of Sydney, Cape Breton, where he had sometimes worked as a coal miner. He credited the application of a special bread poultice and the endless repetition of the rosary with saving his life. After a month the malignancy literally fell from his face, leaving him with nothing but a bad facial scar. He was cancer-free. (He would only quit smoking when he was seventy-two because tobacco went up to two dollars a package.) Before he finally left this world, he told me that when he was my age (twenty-one at the time) his life looked like a very long road ahead but now that he was at the end and looking back, he felt like it had all happened in a single blink. He was ninety-eight years old when he died.

Hard as nails.

Jeremiah McCann married Agnes McCarthy of Red Head Cove on December 26, 1917, and the couple proceeded to spend the next sixty-two years together. Agnes, or “Ma” as everyone called her, was known for her fiery temper and sharp tongue—and who could blame her? She gave birth to sixteen children and outlived almost half.

Ma was a woman of selective beliefs. She considered Neil Armstrong’s walk on the moon to be an elaborate US government hoax but never missed an episode of her favourite TV show, *Maple Leaf Wrestling*, which aired every Saturday on one of our two available channels. She was particularly fond of the “Macho Man” Randy Savage. Ma was a very proud teetotaler her entire life but took great comfort in her daily medicinal “tonic,” which she ordered from the Gerald S. Doyle catalogue and consumed

every evening after supper. Its effect was always to make her much more approachable and docile; my inner addict would love to know exactly what that over-the-counter cure was really made of.

When I was just eight years old, I fainted on Ma's front porch after badly cutting my left index finger with a splitting axe. This was back in the days before safety helmets and seatbelts, when small boys still played with sharp things. I remember her slapping me hard across the face to wake me and wrapping my mangled finger up with some black electric tape to stop the bleeding. When I questioned her rather rough and rudimentary form of treatment, her simple response was: "If you scalds your arse, you gotta learn to sit on the blisters."

Salt of the earth.

The Marches of Northern Bay on my mother's side were also Catholic but cut from a slightly finer cloth. The progeny of another mixed religious marriage, in 1863 my great-great uncle John was only the second March on the north shore to be baptized a Catholic (he was preceded a year earlier by his father, Simeon, who converted from the Anglican church so he could marry my Catholic great-great-grandmother, Cecilia). He attended school in Northern Bay until he was fourteen years old and was known to assist his formerly Protestant father with his successful family business: a cod liver oil factory. From his industrious dad, John March acquired those sound and thorough principles of order and method which later shone so conspicuously in his storied religious career. In 1882, at the age of eighteen, John felt his spiritual calling (from the Catholic side) and left for Rome, where he received his ordination from the Propaganda College on March 16, 1889. He arrived back in Newfoundland in June of that year, where he was appointed curate at the diocese of Harbour Grace.

For many years John did missionary work in Labrador, harvesting "heathen" souls from the Indigenous peoples who still remembered how to live off the natural bounty of "The Big Land." His star rose quickly within the local ecclesiastical ranks and, much to the chagrin of every Protestant who ever hailed from Conception Bay, on November 4, 1906, he became the first native Newfoundlander to be consecrated bishop of the diocese of Harbour Grace. He was now one of the most wealthy and powerful men in