

AMERIGO MERENDA

STRAIGHT
TO THE
WHITE
HOUSE



A NOVEL

Straight to the White House

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Chapter 1

Eric was a child who loved to get up early in the morning and think about what he wanted to do for fun and he managed to accomplish this more than not. He had friends who he called at this time; friends who shared his time clock-early risers were usually hard to find. After a bowl of Cheerios he would leave home and allow for the day to take shape. Not too far from his home was a wooded area that he gravitated to and where he enjoyed the solitude of being totally enclosed by trees and all the animal life that surrounded him. On this particular day he heard noise that sounded like leaves and twigs being stirred by someone walking; quietly he gazed through the brush not to be noticed. It was a boy he didn't recognize so he kept still and just observed his movement approaching in his direct pathway. When their eyes glanced at each other it was like no other experience he had ever known and he was confused by what he felt. They both froze in their tracks as if statues posing for an artist. Eric was the first to speak. "Hi, my name is Eric. I heard you coming toward me; thought you were a friend who sometimes meets me to hang out together. Sometimes we sneak up on each other." The boy stared at Eric, somewhat startled but realized that Eric was no one to fear from the tone of his voice. He had a knife in a leather clip attached to his belt. Eric had a pocket knife but was impressed by the more appealing style of what he saw on this stranger. "I just moved here and wanted to explore these woods. Do you live nearby?" The conversation began and would lead to an amazing friendship that would open new emotions and trepidations for these two youngsters. They were eleven years old in 1958 and the world they knew was quietly evolving; family traditions, religious faith, and baseball were dominant themes in both of their lives. Eisenhower was president and America appeared to quietly and steadily progress in a decade that was stable and predictable.

Eric and Jim would begin a relationship that was based on shared interests and common beliefs. Both were Roman Catholics who attended St. Mary's church in upstate, Oswego, New York. Sunday mass was a regular habit and Eric was an alter boy who realized at one point that he may want to be a priest; he did however have mixed feelings even though his mind was leading in that direction. Jim on the other hand was an athlete who loved sports and was quite talented in high school and intercollegiate baseball; however he loved to follow political events and would gravitate toward history and political science.

Their childhood culture was surrounded by strong family ties and traditional values. Personal feelings were privately maintained; their futures seemed fairly predictable for their generation and could only be threatened by unconventional and unexpected behavior or events. The instant they met was ingrained in their memory; both knew something was present but as eleven year olds, could not understand their emotions nor where they would lead. Several years later after the high school prom which both attended with two female classmates who were childhood friends, they partied on the shores of Lake Ontario where a raging fire was built and where their dates would share intimate embraces on blankets covering large and small stones beneath their excited bodies. Whatever it was they felt with these two excited females would not take them the distance. Their inhibitions blocked natural instincts and sexual prowess; the girls were somewhat confused by the sexual disconnect that followed. All four peered into the blazing fire that generated a

warmth in the night chill. Maybe the intimacy shared was not private enough for more activity to continue. Instead they stared at the fire and it satisfied them enough from saying a word. The crackling sound of flames and crashing waves on shore were enough to distract their natural impulses. Their silence was only broken by crackling flames that warmed their bodies but left their desires void. The girls were not inclined to stop but picked up some unexpected message displayed by Jim and Eric. Neither one of these young men took advantage of an opportunity for expressing their sexuality with a woman. Eight years later, Jim would marry his college sweetheart and Eric would follow his chosen path to priesthood. They would maintain distant friendships where infrequent letters would reveal their childhood innocence and the adult desires of two grown men.

Chapter 2

Eric graduated from Cornell University at the top of his class; the year was 1968. Several offers were received post graduation; all were declined. His intelligence was complimented by his good looks and Eric noticed women looking at him with more interest on many occasions. Eric however decided to embrace a non material world vocation, very different from the corporate/material professions of his peers. Eric had prayed about the decision to be a priest for over a year. On Good Friday his mother handed him an envelope; an appointment for an interview with Monsignor Quaid at St. Michael's Jesuit Seminary was inside. In order to be accepted for the seminary, Eric's interview had to be completed within a week of receiving the notice. He immediately called and scheduled a day and time for the interview with Monseigneur Quaid. Upon arriving at the seminary, Eric noticed the architecture of the buildings; it certainly appeared like a place for prayer and reflection. The driveway entrance was a city block long and lined with large Elm trees that draped over the road. Even without their leaves, their majesty was magnificent. Eric always loved trees and woods so he found these surroundings very attractive and comfortable. This he thought was a good sign. He parked in front of an old stone edifice that was the first building in the complex, St. Michael's Hall. When he walked inside there was an aromatic smell that he found very pleasing. The secretary at the desk looked up and saw Eric standing before her. He wore a dark blue suit, white shirt and tie. She was an older woman but she could not stop staring. Monseigneur Quaid opened the door of his office and greeted Eric with a friendly handshake. "Good afternoon Eric. Please come in and have a seat." Eric heard an accent in his speech. This priest was from Ireland with his brogue in tact. Since Eric was also half Irish, he was feeling more comfortable. Monsignor Quaid did not waste any time with small talk. After staring at Eric for a moment, and looking at his transcript he got very direct. "You are too good looking to be a priest. Are you sure you're in the right place? This is not going to be easy for a man like you." The smile on Monsignor Quaid did not alter Eric's discomfort. "Eric, I see you were valedictorian of your class. That's quite an honor. Why the priesthood Eric?" Apparently, Eric thought, intelligent men who are also handsome are suspect. "Well Monsignor, this is a decision that was not hastefully made. My ambitions are not found in a material world. I prefer the spiritual." Eric was sure that he responded with conviction. "Would you call yourself an extrovert Eric?" This priest, Eric felt, had prejudged Eric based upon subjective feelings. Maybe monsignor was trying to unnerve him, to break him down. Was this a tactic? It was understandable that candidates have to be critically vetted in order to avoid wasting time and resources. After all this is a serious endeavor. "No, I am not an extrovert. I am however quite the opposite and prefer quiet surroundings most of the time. I do not have many close friends because I am mostly interested in my studies. I am not preoccupied with socialization as are most of my peers." Monsignor smiled and told Eric how his appointment was almost certain but that he had to ask questions that maybe difficult but are nevertheless necessary. After almost an hour with Monsignor Quaid, Eric was told that he would be accepted and that he could begin in the fall term. When Eric left he noticed several young men talking outside of the building. They looked at Eric not knowing he would be joining them in a few months.

Beginning seminary training during the following autumn was exactly what he

imagined.. There were moments when he felt his decision was a mistake. He shared this feeling with other men but all agreed that it was something to be expected and most agreed to continue forward. One evening when classes and prayers were completed, the student seminarians gathered around the television to watch the 7th game of the world series when Msg. Quaid entered the room. All stood out of respect but were shocked and disappointed as Msg. Quaid walked over to the television, turned it off and without a word, left the room. This was obviously one of many “tests” of fortitude and will that would determine the staying power of priestly candidates; one by one they quietly left the parlor and moved to their rooms in retreat. Not a word was spoken. The next morning one candidate did leave before morning prayers. He left a note for Eric which read: Like you, I love baseball. The only difference is that I apparently love the seventh game of the world series more than the priesthood. I’m fortunate this happened so soon so that I can move forward with my life. My team at least won. Wish you well. John

Eric smiled and was sympathetic with the sentiments expressed but he apparently realized at that moment that he was going the distance. Nothing would stop him. He shared this story in a letter to Jim. In a response letter, Jim suggested they rendezvous one evening for a beer at a local tavern. Before leaving to meet Jim, Eric had an afternoon prayer seminar where Msg. Quaid led a discussion of meaningful prayer for seminarians who will on many occasions be faced with all sorts of temptations and moments of doubt where the absence of the holy spirit may leave one vulnerable to sins of the flesh. The discussion was very open, mature and relevant to issues that will confront all priests throughout their vocation. He was moved by the gravity of Msg. Quaid’s advice which was to pray and move away from temptation when it was consuming ones mind and body. In essence, “leave the scene of the crime”; don’t capitulate. While driving to meet Jim, Eric could not stop thinking about what was discussed with fellow seminarians and Msg. Quaid. He was shaking with fear and had to pull off the road and pause for silent prayer; he almost turned around to return to the seminary but once he allowed himself to think this through, he realized more and more what he would have to face. Why not now? Why reject a feeling without exploring it further. It would be worse to suppress or even repress sexual desires before surrendering to God’s plan for him. Suddenly he felt a surge of energy and his composure returned. He remembered reading Victor Hugo’s LES MISERABLES where a priest leaned on prayer and meditation when his mind was moving in a direction he was trying to avoid. He regained his balance and began to think of his sexuality in ways that were acceptable but also disturbing to him because he thought he was attracted to men but realized that maybe he was also attracted to women. With his peers he had discussed men who left the priesthood because they fell in love and wanted to marry and have children. Eric was really confused partially because he had not been with a woman or man for that matter. At age 22 he was grasping for his identity and thought the priesthood was a good place to start because he would place himself in a quasi solitary environment. Time alone was important for processing; he wanted to take control of his life. He knew he had to determine his sexual orientation before he could feel comfortable in his skin. He was concerned about Jim and feared their friendship could be compromised if he was not sure of his behavior when they were together.

Jim was sitting at the bar having a beer when Eric entered THE CHART ROOM. Jim was hungry and ordered a hamburg when Eric joined him. They decided to sit at a table

overlooking the river view where they could have a meal along with private conversation. Jim appeared to have gained weight and looked much more mature and handsome than his appearance just six months earlier. They looked at each other, smiled and embraced warmly. Jim immediately wanted to know how the seminary was working for Eric. Their eyes locked and Jim revealed that he missed Eric and wanted to let him know his thoughts were confused since he met a few attractive women on campus. "What exactly do you mean Jim?" Jim didn't hesitate to respond. "I think you know what I mean Eric. Haven't we had this mutual feeling since our childhood? That's why I'm confused. What should we do?" Just then Eric looked into Jim's eyes and said. "What do you want to do? What do you think is best to do? I have these confused feelings too but I am about to become a priest. We were both raised in the Church and have to think before we leap into a relationship that can unravel our lives." Then Jim responded. "What about our happiness, our love for one another? Should we deny our feelings?" Eric was about to get up and leave, but instead, reached for Jim's hand, held it gently and said: "I love you as a good friend, but only as a friend. Surely you can understand that. Our friendship and love can grow over time and our lives will be different. I will be married to the Church and you to some beautiful woman. You get laid regularly and I get to just think about it." They both laughed uncontrollably until the waitress brought them their juicy hamburgers. Jim began to tell Eric about his girlfriend from college and how she gave him goosebumps with her beauty and charm. He showed Eric a photo of Connie and Eric agreed that she was a very attractive young woman. He was almost relieved by Jim's new love because it distracted them from their focus on each other. Eric saw excitement in Jim's portrayal of Connie and realized that maybe it's normal for men to have loving feelings for another man without any sexual relationship. Could that be or were they both kidding themselves. Eric knew he had to be patient and allow their relationship to evolve without any expectations one way or the other. When they left the pub, they gave each other a warm embrace that seemed innocent and comforting. After all they were friends. Their religion, education, discipline and professional growth would lead them to their separate paths. They agreed to see each other whenever possible. When they left the CHART ROOM, they had advanced their relationship to a mature understanding of each others needs and wants.

Chapter 3

A month later, Eric left for home to visit his parents for the weekend. During an afternoon of shopping he met a woman he recognized from high school. She was two years younger, very attractive and would be teaching English beginning in the fall. Eric was 6 feet tall, had a good frame with dark brown hair, handsome and a good dresser. She had no hesitation in introducing herself outside of a pharmacy in the mall. Eric found her very attractive with her blond hair, blue eyes and beautiful smile. “Hi! Are you Eric?” Her smile was so pleasing and made her voice sound melodic. He often wondered if he would ever have feelings like this with a woman and was pleased with himself. “Yes, I am. I’m sorry but I can’t remember your name but do know we went to high school together.” She appeared pleased that she apparently made an impression. They both had bags filled with purchases and were walking toward their cars when Michelle asked: “Do you have time for a cup of coffee? There’s a nice place just down the road on the right.” Eric smiled, paused and reluctantly said. “Sure, why not. I’ll meet you there in a few minutes.” Eric was two years away from his ordination; better take advantage of every moment just in case his feelings changed. He realized situations presented themselves and anticipated occasions where he could test his commitment. His refusal would have been a sign of weakness and even rude.

In the local diner, they found a booth where they could sit facing each other. She ordered tea and Eric the same. She was not aware of Eric’s future and rather than have her ask, he informed her of his future plans after completing his seminary schooling. “That’s wonderful. What led you in that direction?” Her stare pierced through Eric and he was caught off guard; his response required some pondering and processing; he did not want to appear unsure or unworthy. “It’s a first step on my journey to the papacy.” She enjoyed his humor and wanted to hear more. “Seriously, that is a lifestyle that many men would find a real challenge. Was this something you planned for some time?” Eric knew he was experiencing one of many more tests that would make him question his judgment and determination. This was one he did not expect so soon but was looking forward to the challenge. “Being a priest is certainly a commitment but there are also many rewards that come with it. Serving a spiritual community will expand my appreciation and understanding of Christ’s mission.” Eric did not want to dominate the discussion. He wanted to hear more of her outlook on life and future plans. So he stopped and turned the conversation over to her. “Actually I would like to know what an attractive young woman, who just graduated from college will be doing with her life. You said something about teaching English. Is that correct?” Michelle’s smile showed her beautiful teeth. Eric was feeling something he never found time for before and was surprised with himself. His sheltered life of retreating from social interaction was being altered by this sudden and unexpected encounter. He was enjoying her company and replayed Michelle’s earlier comment. “Was this something you planned for some time.” Those words hit a nerve deep within his soul and he never realized he would have a reality check so soon. Once he realized his uncertainty, Eric took a deep breath and allowed the moment to pass without too much notice. He was relieved when Michelle explained her new position as a high school English teacher. Her instincts noticed that Eric was unsettled by their brief exchange and she had enough sensitivity and compassion to refrain from probing too far.

She lead her discussion into a new realm of public service and how both teacher and priest would both play similar roles. Eric was impressed with her finesse and marveled at the ease in which she transitioned their conversation. Her tactful demeanor was even more attractive so his ultimate mood was still one of finding her very appealing. This was truly a test he was not prepared for and realized that meeting with Michelle would only act to undermine his thinking and comfort level. Eric looked at his watch and suddenly remembered his obligation to his parents and sister Mary. He felt that Michelle knew what he was about to say and do and felt bad because what he was about to say was not completely true. "You'll have to forgive me Michelle but I have to leave. I promised my parents and sister that I would be home an hour ago. You will be an outstanding teacher." He took her hand and lightly squeezed a warm goodbye. Before he could let go, Michelle stood and reached toward his shoulder and made contact to indicate her affection. "Eric, please notify me when your ordination will take place. I would like to attend if possible. Can non catholics attend?" Nothing she said diminished Eric's attraction to her. He felt trapped in a wonderful sort of way. "Of course. I will call you when the date is set." Michelle wrote a telephone number down on a small piece of scrap paper from her purse and handed it to Eric. Was it her way of holding on to a moment in time. Eric wondered as he walked to his car.

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