

Some of the Treasures of a Sunday Afternoon

by **Sheila M. Hempstead**

Sunday afternoon, October 17, 1993. Long Island, New York. It was a balmy day and my meeting with Patricia Priest, daughter of Elsie Hauck Holahan was a memorable occasion. An occasion of unexpected laughter and tears. The purpose of my visit was to learn more about Ruth Clavert Jenkins Merton, mother of Thomas Merton. Patricia was a small child when Ruth died, so any information would be through family remembrances. Patricia was well acquainted with Thomas and John Paul. She and John Paul were about the same age.

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Listening to the planes flying overhead as I waited on the doorstep. Praying.

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Frank Priest, Jr's surprise that I had found the house.

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Being greeted enthusiastically by Sherlock, their tiny, boisterous dog.

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Patricia greeting me with a comment on my English print dress.

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Patricia, regally enthroned in a wing chair, preparing her special recipe for yams on the TV table across her lap.

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Two large packing boxes.

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Paul Priest with his wife, Diane, carefully wrapping curios from the glass-fronted case and filling one of the packing boxes.

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The family's cautious acceptance of my intrusion that quickly changed to one of enormous generosity. The timing of my visit coincided with the final packing up of the home Patricia and Frank Priest had lived in since 1951. Prior to 1951, they lived in the house on the opposite side of the street.

Patricia talked animatedly and with conviction as she finished preparing the yams all the while keeping an eye on me, on Paul as she packed, and on Steven, Paul's son who liked to tease Sherlock who had decided to lie across my feet. After answering the door and introducing me, Frank Jr. retired to the far end of the living room. Frank Sr., after his smiling greeting, sat close by me on the sofa to my left.

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Patricia instructed Paul to bring the portrait of Ruth painted by Owen.

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Me, sitting holding the painting, recognizably of Ruth but strangely ethereal; the pose classical, the brushwork impressionistic, the hair color a bid at realism, and interestingly the only warmth in this icy rendition of the woman Owen loved.

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Steven, sent by Patricia, to bring Christian (my husband) from the car to photograph the portrait.

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Paul bringing out a second painting of Owen's of a house, commissioned by the owners, but later rejected because of a detail concerning the position of the bathroom.

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Paul bringing two blackbound, ringed notebooks: Ruth's record of John Paul's birth and development. "One side was empty, but when I put John Paul on the other, he managed to get milk." The doctor advised Ruth to stop nursing, but she continued to nurse John Paul, though she did agree to give him a supplement.



RUTH MERTON

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Second, identical blackbound, ringed notebook: a daily record of Tom's development.

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A two page typewritten article by Ruth Jenkins Merton.

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Christian photographing the painting and the notebooks with a disposable camera.

There were several loose leaved pages in Tom's notebook. Some had turned brown with age and they were extremely friable. I touched them very carefully. I asked Patricia what was going to happen to this collection of hers and she replied that she intends to give it to Radcliffe.

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When I suggested that perhaps Ruth was special and ahead of her time, Patricia laughed, rolling her eyes upwards and replied, "Ruth was really smart, hadn't she won scholarships like her brother Harold"

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When Harold Jenkins, Ruth's brother, learned that Tom had entered the Abbey of Gethsemani, he said, "What a waste of a brilliant mind because it is a place of silence, of no words." Harold couldn't have anticipated the irony of his comments, that Tom's words would actually and publicly hurt the Jenkins family with his negative portrayal of them in his best selling autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, published seven years later. At his ordination, Tom told "Homily," his nickname for Elsie Holahan (then his aunt by marriage), that the negative portrayal of the Jenkins family was a literary device crafted in order to sell more books as the Abbey needed the money. For the most part, Tom's negative attitude towards his mother Ruth and her family would indicate that it was indeed a fact, rather than a literary device.

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Patricia: "Tom made me blush," laughing self-consciously, she added, "I blush easily."

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“He made me blush when he teased the maids at the dinner table at the Jenkins house in Douglaston, New York.”

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“Tom made me blush when he filled all the blank pages of my autograph book with dirty pictures.”

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“I thought Tom was snobby and sarcastic. Tom may have been interested in me, but I was never interested in him.” Patricia bristled as she said, “That was just one of the facts which got twisted around by Michael Mott [in *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*].” “He rubbed me the wrong way,” was how Patricia remembered Michael Mott’s visit. The two facts that irritated her are:

- a. It was John Paul with whom Patricia had a friendship and whom she dated until Frank Priest came along. Her friendship with John Paul continued until he was killed in World War II.
- b. It was Frank Priest’s mother, *not* “Nanny” Hauck, Elsie’s mother, who had purchased her rosary at the Abbey of Gethsemani before Tom entered the monastery.

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Patricia then went on to tell me that she had the following in her possession:

1. One box in the attic, containing Tom’s earliest childhood writings.
2. A package of papers she wanted to show me, but which Paul was unable to find in the desk at the far end of the room.

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Paul Priest then told me he and Diane have a painting done by Ruth. They like it for “its strong lines.”

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As we are about to leave, I ask Patricia if we may take a photograph of her. At first she refuses, then with a deep laugh, she agrees. But the camera misses the smile and captures instead the serious and stoical side of Patricia Priest.