

Chapter 1

My father has a house in Rowanek, New York, a village in Westchester County, the most expensive place in the country in which to live. If he were to sell it tomorrow, he could get close to two million dollars for it. In spite of this, when I was growing up I was under the impression my family was poor. We never went on long, expensive vacations, we always bought no-name products, and my parents economized in every way. Their efforts led me to believe we had no money. I was wrong, we had plenty. My father's salary was large. The reason he and my mother had to maintain a frugal lifestyle was because they had nine children.

Twelve Cherrywood is a three-story, white stucco house with a huge porch that wraps around three sides. My friends who see it in pictures describe it as looking like the Waltons'. They're right. The front porch is the heart of our home. It's there we spend most of our time in the warmer months. It's there my parents would entertain on Easter, Memorial Day, July 4th, Labor Day, and after graduations. It was the sight of my parents' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary party, my mother's sixtieth birthday party, my father's seventieth, seventy-fifth and eightieth, and Deirdre's wedding. In the summer, most meals are eaten on the porch's left side, which has a door that leads directly into the dining room. During heavy storms and hurricanes we gather on the very sheltered front porch to enjoy the weather.

We spend little time on the porch in the winter, although during Joan's wedding reception in January of 1981, most of the guests assembled out there to watch the bride engage in an impromptu snowball fight with Colin, Deirdre, William Jr., Sean and Matthew.

My mother and father were raised in strict Catholic homes, and they raised their children in a strict Catholic home. My parents didn't practice birth control, and one day when I asked my mother why she and Dad chose to have so many children she said it wasn't their choice but God's. My response to her was, "Thank God, I'd hate to think you did this deliberately."

Because there were so many of us, my parents found it necessary in the early sixties to buy the house on Cherrywood Avenue. It has seven bedrooms and for many years after my younger brother Matthew was born we lived there in relative comfort. Joan had one of three bedrooms on the third floor. The other two were occupied by Rose and Deirdre, and William Jr. The four rooms on the second floor were occupied by my parents, Colin and Sean, Thomas, and Matthew and me. It was a cozy arrangement, but everyone was satisfied but Rose, who always wanted her own room and never got it.

Our large numbers made it necessary for us to eat dinner in our large breakfastroom in two shifts. The room's large table accommodated eight. The younger children, who for a long time included Colin, Sean, Thomas, Matthew and me, would eat around five-thirty p.m. After we were done the older ones and my parents would eat. This was usually shortly after six. I used to be jealous of those members of the second shift. They always seemed to enjoy dinner more. Their meals lasted longer, and their conversations seemed more interesting. I had the impression my mother sort of rushed through the first shift, anxious to get our dinner out of the way so she could sit down with my older siblings, relax and enjoy her own. At the time I resented her for this, but in retrospect I understand and forgive the haste with which she fed us. As a child I couldn't wait until I was old enough to join the second shift; however, by the time I was, the older ones had moved out and shifts were no longer necessary.

My father's house is so large it needed an intercom system. Dad had one installed when he bought it. It came in very handy for calling us to our assigned dinners, and to summon us for phone calls. The largest unit, Houston, was installed on the wall in the kitchen above a little desk on which a telephone rested. It was quite a complicated device, especially for something manufactured around 1960. One of us could either call a room specifically, and all the bedrooms had one, or we could put out an all points bulletin of sorts when everyone needed the same information. It also had an AM radio built in, and we could play it throughout the house if we wanted to. No one ever did.

APB's would go out for dinner, when we had guests, when the family was going to church together or, and this call we all used to dread, when the basement was flooding. My father always monitored this part of the house during a heavy rain, and the moment he noticed water seeping under the door he would march over to Houston, press that special button and shout, "Flood!" Why he felt the need to yell it is beyond me. I mean, the reason we had such a sophisticated communication system was so that he didn't have to. Perhaps he raised his voice to alert us to the urgency of the situation, or maybe he was just angry he owned a house whose basement flooded regularly.

After receiving such a call, everyone would stop what he was doing and head downstairs with mops, brooms and rags. My family and I would then spend sometimes hours pushing water either back out the basement door or into the playroom where we had a drain for these occasions. Mostly our efforts were in vain as a flood usually just had to run its course. Our labor was not entirely fruitless, though. We did to remove everything that could be damaged from the basement floor, and we had to put all furniture on blocks. No one in my family enjoyed battling these little deluges, but of all of us Rose seemed to hate

it the most. She would always complain to my parents that men could be sent to the moon, but the structure of our house and our village sewage system could not be altered to prevent these floods. My father always responded that they could, but the cost was prohibitive. What he discovered years later, and never told my sister, was that they could be prevented by altering the drain pipes that ran along the roof of the house and down its walls. My father adjusted them in the mid-eighties and no water has entered our basement since.

These floods used to irritate my parents severely because they insisted the house and yard be kept as clean as an operating room. We were forbidden as children from playing anywhere on the first floor. We could either play in our bedrooms or in the playroom in the basement. The only time the living room saw a toy was Christmas morning, because by the afternoon all presents and wrapping paper had to be put away and cleaned up. Our house has two staircases, front and back. We children were forbidden from using the front stairs because my parents didn't want the carpet covering it to wear out. Indeed, the only time we were allowed to use that staircase was Christmas morning, when we descended it in age order while my mother, beaming, took home movies of our excited faces. This annual use of the front stairs was a big thrill for my siblings and me, and out of respect for my parents I was always careful to step gently on the carpet as I walked down.

The Gallagher children were also not allowed to walk around the house in either bare feet or socks. We had to wear shoes everywhere except our bedrooms and the bathtub.

The inside of our house never saw a dog or cat or goldfish. Because my parents didn't grow up with pets they didn't develop an affection or even a tolerance for them. Pets were not a part of our lives at 12 Cherrywood. An animal would have been smelly

and messy, and there were already enough living creatures causing problems in our house. As a result of our unfamiliarity with them, my siblings and I dislike animals, and if our parents' grandchildren have pets it's because their children's spouses have insisted on it. No Gallagher would ever voluntarily have a dog or cat. We see no reason. I mean, people are so interesting, why bother with animals?

Holidays at 12 Cherrywood were always extremely interesting, and the highlight was never the presents or the Easter baskets but the banter my brothers and sisters and I exchanged at the holiday dinner table. Wearing ties and jackets or dresses, we sat around our dining room table eating turkey on Thanksgiving or Christmas or ham on Easter and engaged in conversation that can, at best, be described as witty and, at worst, cruel. Everyone in my family is very funny in his own way, but the one thing we share is an ability to viciously insult each other, and there is no better forum for our attacks than these meals. Whether this behavior was motivated by a genetic hostility or simply the spirit of the season I have yet to determine, but it is something to watch.

My father tended to ignore our maltreatment of each other on these occasions and rarely reprimanded us for our cruelty. Mother, on the other hand, used to shake her head at our brutality wondering, I am sure, how her children could have developed such terrible tongues. What she didn't realize, or choose to admit, was that she could dish with the best of us, and while she was in her heart a sweet and compassionate woman, she had just the tiniest, and sharpest, streak of sarcasm in her. No better example of this exists than Christmas, 199-something, when someone brought up the William Kennedy Smith rape case. My mother summed up the whole lewd affair when she said, "He should have followed his Uncle Ted's example and

drowned the woman after raping her.” Our eyes went wide. My father went white. Mother continued, “He could have worn a neck brace to her funeral and been off the hook.” What a line. I stole it from her and used it at a New Year’s Eve party I attended the following week.

No house in Rowanec was better decorated at holidays than the Gallaghers, and I don’t just mean the big three. Not only did we have a wreath on our front door at Christmas, we had one hanging in every window. On Easter, we displayed paper flowers, stems and leaves, on Halloween, orange pumpkins and on Valentine’s Day, red hearts. Far from being embarrassed by such a public display of construction paper and Scotch tape, my siblings and I were proud of our efforts and often stood across the street to admire our work.

We always looked forward to holidays at my house, in spite of the boring visits to church that accompanied them. Christmas was the favorite. We were on vacation from school, there were interesting television programs to watch, and our parents were always generous on Christmas morning.

No one who grew up in the Gallagher house ever believed in Santa Claus. Ever.

In spite of my parents’ best efforts we all always knew the gifts were purchased by them. My mother wrote “Santa” on as many to/from cards as she could but fooled no one. We all recognized her handwriting. As a young child I remember challenging the existence of Santa Claus to my father, who insisted he was real and lived at the North Pole, blah, blah, blah. At four I would have none of it and put up such a tremendous fight my sister Joan dragged me into the den and told me to knock it off. “Why?” I asked her, righteously. Her compassionate response was, “It gives Mom and Dad pleasure to think you believe in Santa Claus.” I opened my mouth to protest and she cut me off

with, “And if you don’t I’ll crucify you.”

How stupid my parents were to say “You’re welcome” when we thanked them for gifts given to us by Santa.

While we didn’t open any of our gifts until the morning of the twenty-fifth, because of course the fat old man hadn’t dropped them off yet, Christmas Eve was still a hoot. Every year, my parents lined up their brood in age order in front of the mantle holding onto their stockings, which were in reality my father’s support hose. Dad has weak ankles. We were required to stand there and smile, proudly displaying his socks, while my mother, beaming, took pictures. After that was done we did everything we could to avoid going to bed. This was our wicked attempt to force our parents, who went to bed by nine o’clock every night, to stay up extremely late in order to assemble our presents without our knowledge. What a wretched bunch of children we were.

When I show these and other family pictures to my friends they’re amazed at the resemblance we share. Everyone in my family is decent looking. We all have gorgeous eyes we inherited from our mother. We all also have very thick eyebrows, like both of our parents. This part of our appearance is very striking on everyone, including and especially the girls.

Most of us have light eyes. They’re all either blue or green, except for William Jr.’s who, in addition to having brown eyes, is almost blind. Except for the black-haired Deirdre and William Jr., we all have brown hair, mostly straight. Joan’s hair is long and curly and very pretty. Colin and Matthew also have curly hair. The resemblance we share is so strong that when shopping in the local grocery store people will still stop us and say, “You’re a Gallagher, aren’t you?” In school our teachers would always say, even before looking at their rosters, “I have another Gallagher. I had your sister Joan and your brother Colin...”

Being recognized by our appearance never bothered any of us, except maybe for Rose, who would whine about it on occasion but could never explain why she was so aggravated. The only time I was ever annoyed was in sixth grade when my teacher, Mrs. Tremaine, could not stop referring to me as “Thomas,” who had her four years earlier. This annoyed me because I have always maintained, even since that young age, that while Thomas and I do look alike, I am light years more attractive.

Our voices are also similar. I sound a lot like my mother, so much so that as a boy when I would answer the phone and it was one of her friends or someone from the parish, she would usually say, “Joan!” I would always respond, “No, this is her son, Christian,” just to see how she would react. Most callers apologized. My mother hung out with classy people.

It never bothered me that my voice sounds like my mother’s, indeed, the similarity came in handy in high school when I needed a day off. On more than one occasion I called the school secretary and said, “Hello, this is Joan Gallagher. My son, Christian, isn’t feeling well and won’t be in school today.” I am sure I pulled this a dozen times for myself and as many for Matthew.

I have never referred to my little brother as Matt. No one ever does, except maybe after just meeting him. After spending time with Matthew, or any other Gallagher with a polysyllabic first name, people realize we answer only to our full names. Deirdre, William Jr., Colin, Thomas, Matthew and Christian are not called anything else. We six always introduce ourselves by the name on our birth certificates, and we expect everyone else to use it.

No one in my family was given a middle name. My parents chose to give us the opportunity of picking a confirmation name that, as adolescents, we would use as a middle name.

My confirmation name is Paul. I took it because my mother's brother was named Paul and I wanted to throw her a bone. I don't use it, though.

I like my name. I understand that when I was born my parents were initially going to call me Andrew. I don't like that name and was touched when I later learned Joan and Deirdre also disliked it, and convinced my parents to call me Christian instead. Deirdre stressed to my mother that there is no holier name, and what an inspiration it would be for me to be named after the one true religion. Mother bought this bit of nonsense, probably thinking I would become a priest, and Dad went along with her choice. How angry she was to become when, as a young adult, I told her I was an atheist.

My mother had a temper, and held the role of disciplinarian in our house. If I were to get caught doing something bad and one of my siblings threatened to tattle on me, I would beg him to tell Dad instead of her. My father used to advise us not to repeat what we did. Mother, on the other hand, either sent us to our rooms or struck us, always once, on the buttocks, hands or face. Such a blow from any one else would have hurt badly enough, but that lady was strong, and that one blow was hard. I think my father left this parental duty to her because he thought, as a woman, she would naturally be gentler. He was wrong.

Physical punishment stopped as we grew older. As adolescents we would just get grounded. As adults, my mother punished us with guilt. I would like to say it had very little effect, that we had developed personalities too strong to succumb to it, but I can't. At twenty, in a hostile exchange inspired by the hamburger I was preparing myself on a Friday during Lent, I told my mother I was no longer Catholic. She asked me what religion I was and, as I was in a particularly rebellious mood, I

said “atheist.” Her horror-stricken face made me think she was going to hit me, perhaps repeatedly, but she didn’t. Instead, she told me twice that she pitied me. She might have only had to say it once, but I told her the feeling was mutual and she had to get the last word. After telling me again how sorry she was for me she asked, as sadly as she could, “Don’t you want to believe that after I die you will see me again?” I felt terrible and said nothing.

I had a habit for bringing up uncomfortable subjects with my parents, specifically my mother, which began with that exchange, you know, just to bust her chops. Another occurred during a visit to Rowanek in 1989 when I asked my mother about sex, something that was never discussed in our house, at least not with my parents. To my knowledge my mother didn’t explain menstruation to my sisters, leaving it to the nuns at St. Sebastian’s. My father never told my brothers or me about secondary sex characteristics or warned us about our first nocturnal emission or anything else. During this conversation I asked my mother why my siblings and I weren’t taken aside at the age of ten and told about the physical changes we should expect our bodies to undergo. She said my sisters learned at parochial school and she and my father assumed my brothers and I would learn from our older siblings. I was tempted to ask her how William Jr. was supposed to figure out why he woke up one morning at thirteen with semen in his pajama bottoms, but chose wisely, I think, not to go that far.

I like my last name to a lesser extent than my first, primarily because when I share the name Gallagher with most people their response is usually, “Of course, you’re Irish.” This annoys me a great deal, not only because I am one-quarter Danish, but because the Irish seem to me to be a culture of depressed, alcoholic victims. I don’t spend a lot of time brooding about

this, though. If I did I would have to acknowledge that most of my siblings and me are somewhat depressed and drink heavily. Victims, however, we are not. I assure you, when we're wronged, we don't stop at just getting even.

In spite of this, we're a happy family, and while we may be verbally abusive to each other around a holiday dinner table, there is nothing we wouldn't do for each other. Arrogant, tribal, bloodthirsty and sweet, the insults we trade are less a form of cruelty and more an exciting match of wits, and perhaps terms of endearment.

The mantle n Christmas wasn't the only place our parents made us pose for family pictures. In the warmer months, when the mood struck, Mother made us sit on the front steps in age order and, beaming, took our picture. There were always so many of us we had to sit in two rows: Joan through William Jr. on top (second shift), the rest of us below. In later years, when it became increasingly difficult to assemble all of us at one time, my mother abandoned the age order thing and just had us, with our spouses and children, sit where we could find room. The last time we were photographed on the steps in age order was at my mother's sixtieth birthday party, in June of 1984. It was shortly after that "Risky Business" movie came out and William Jr. had picked up eleven pairs of black sunglasses similar to the ones featured on the film's poster. When Mother told us it was time for the family picture, we all put them on and sat down in our proper row. She howled. We looked dynamite and the picture she took of us, the picture that is displayed to this day in the living room at 12 Cherrywood and in the living room of my home in Florida, reminds me that we are the coolest family in Rowanec.

OK, when I was a child I was evil. I was ruthless, wicked, conniving and I had no conscience. I hurt people for the fun of it. When called upon by family or friends to explain behaviors they found heinous, I was always capable of justifying my acts as either warranted by some real or imaginary affront, or by convincing my accuser what I did really was harmless and, indeed, playful.

As a child at Flint Park Day Camp in Rowanek, New York, I remember participating in games of Red Rover with the other camp goers in the five and six year-old group. Red Rover is that game where two teams of children line up facing each other holding their teammates' hands. They take turns running at the other's lines trying to bust through the links.

I recall some of my little playmates used to enjoy the game for the challenge of breaking through a particularly tough link in the opposing team's hand-holding chain. Others just enjoyed being out in the sunshine and among friends. I wanted to win, not the game, though. I wanted, alone, to smash through two peoples' grip. I didn't care who they were or how strong they were. I just wanted to get through. I didn't care which team ultimately won. I just wanted to rip through a pair of hands.

When invited over by the opposing team, "Red Rover, Red Rover, let Christian come over," I would determine which link was the weakest. After choosing, I walked toward it, alternately looking at the enemies I had chosen to conquer. I walked slowly, smiling at them, a small, handsome five year-old devil child with gorgeous, dark green eyes squinting under heavy brown brows, my lips narrow in a tight, cruel smile. If my face alone didn't cause my victims to release their grip on each other, I stopped in front of their hands, which were usually shaking, sweaty and clasped so hard in fear they were white and bloodless. I took a deep breath, jumped as high as I could and came

crashing down on their hands not with my stomach, as did most children, but with my buttocks, and that was only because I couldn't jump high enough to land on their hands with my feet. I was as light as a feather and I nearly always broke through, because even on those occasions I wound up sitting on a pair of clasped hands, I ultimately managed to force them apart by threatening to accuse their owners of examining each other's genitals in a corner of the clubhouse if they didn't let go.

When a member of the opposite team aimed for a link I shared with someone I gave him that same devil child expression and, a moment before he made contact, punched my and my teammate's combined fists into his or her genitals. When my whiny little playmates complained to camp counselors about these pre-emptive strikes, I regarded them with innocent eyes and said in a soft voice, "I don't know why he's saying that. Why, Red Rover is the only game I'm any good at." And then I'd look at the ground, meekly.

I didn't lie about not being good at sports. No one ever chose me for basketball, but I was always snatched up for Red Rover.