

HUSH

A true story of lust, madness and deception

Kate Burke

Based on an original manuscript by
and interviews with
Anna

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On behalf of Anna, this book is dedicated to Carrie and Dr. O'Patrick, with a special dedication to Anna's beloved friend, the late Fr. Cyril O. Schommer, S.J.

It is dedicated also to Eloise, for being there through thick and thin, and to Penny, just for being.

1 *A Good Girl*

She was 18 years old, a high school dropout but a good girl. He was thirteen years older, successful in insurance and finance, a married father of three.

He would go on to an important elected post in state politics.

She would go on to a life in and out of the psych ward.

On that day in 1954, he crossed the street from Holy Mother, the church that had been the bedrock of her family's lives for decades. It was prestigious to have this community leader seen on the doorstep of their home. He rang the bell, smiled and spoke pleasantries with her father, then said he was looking for a girl to come to his house and babysit his children while his wife recovered from a miscarriage.

"My daughter Anna can help you," Daddy said. Daddy was a good man, a trusting man.

“Anna” is not her real name.

“Holy Mother” is not her real church.

Names and places in this book have been changed to avoid embarrassing the innocent. With most of her life behind her now, Anna wants her story told, but she does not want real names and actual locations revealed. For many years, shame knotted the gag across her mouth. She has done her penance many times over, but she still respects the feelings of loved ones who do not wish to discover themselves today’s gossip through no fault of their own.

And she is still, in some respects, protective of the important man who was so much a part of her life, long ago. She still loves the Church. She assigns no blame. She just has a story to tell.

Today, the tiny hamlet north of Buffalo, N.Y. where Anna grew up is crowded with housing developments and strip malls. Thousands of cars a day speed along Meridian Road where it bisects Ess, making the crossing treacherous between the modest white house where Anna grew up and the Holy Mother campus.

In the 1950s, it was a place little changed from the early decades of the 20th century. Gravel roads were starting to be paved over, and cars had long since replaced horse and wagon, but milk and beef cattle still grazed in pastures between wooded areas and fields sown with wheat, corn and row vegetables.

Houses clung to the road frontage, small houses by modern standards, divided into even smaller

rooms, the windows heavily curtained. The post office, the fire house, a service station, a tiny grocery and a couple of taverns offered respite to through travelers.

The religious, cultural and social center of the community was Holy Mother Catholic Church. On Sundays, just about every house in Ess, overstuffed with big, German Catholic families, emptied into the church.

The Church, big C, small c, was the center of Anna's family life. Her mother had grown up in a house immediately adjoining the Holy Mother campus. Anna's childhood and many of her adult years were spent in a two-story house directly across the street from Holy Mother School.

Both her mother and her father had attended the old, multi-story school set back from the road; Anna graduated from the eighth grade in the new school that replaced it, a long, one-story brick structure.

The nuns who taught in the school exist today only in the movies, clad in full black skirts and crisp, white-rimmed black habits. They lived comfortably in the convent, a two-story, red-brick house a short walk from the school across the leafy green campus.

The rectory, a large, handsome house that was the home of the parish priest and his assistants, lay a short distance beyond.

Finally, surrounded by tall trees, Holy Mother Roman Catholic Church rose gracefully from a corner lawn of the campus. From the outside, it was a simple country church, its only ornamentation a

bit of brick scalloping on the front facade, and a tall, slender spire.

On the inside, it was unashamedly Catholic in declaring itself a house of God. A heaven of gilt stars spangled the pale blue ceiling and the altar surround. A large, painted mural of the Holy Mother, her flowing robes swirling around her ankles, towered behind the substantial marble altar. Stained glass windows crafted by German artisans soared to the ceiling, each depicting one scene from the life of Jesus.

Anna and her eight brothers and sisters were in church every day, attending daily Mass with their school classes, then back again on Sunday with the family. On Saturday, they knelt inside the elaborately ornamented booth of the confessional and asked forgiveness for their sins.

The influence of the church crossed Meridian Road and pervaded the family home. Pictures of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and reproductions of DaVinci's "Last Supper" hung on the walls of the house.

It wasn't enough to pray in church every day. At home, the family prayed when they rose from bed, at breakfast, lunch and supper, and again at bedtime. Plenty of little in-between prayers, fervent pleas for a new bicycle, for good grades on a test, for protection from evil and the pit of Hell, were sent heavenward through the gracious intercession of the Holy Mother.

To Anna, the parish priest was a higher authority than her father. The diocesan bishop,

because he was a lot closer and seldom seen in anything but his grand ritual attire, just about superceded the Pope himself.

The real authority in Anna's house was her mother, always known as "Mother" to her children. Raising nine children through the Great Depression and the privations of World War II, Mother organized her household efficiently and handled the family purse with strict discipline. The attic bedrooms Anna shared with several brothers and sisters were not heated. Electric lights were used only when necessary. Baths were taken once a week, and sometimes the bath water was shared. Money that had to go to the power company or the water bill could not be put toward new dungarees or new tires.

Yet despite the huge demands put on the family's meager income, Mother always found ways to save.

When the boys were old enough, they were sent out to work wherever a few cents could be made, picking green beans, mowing lawns, shoveling snow. They caddied at the local country club, a world apart from their own. They helped their grandfather, Mother's father, steam willow reeds and weave them into baskets. These were sold in Buffalo as laundry baskets, providing extra income. The family had practiced this craft for generations, first in Germany, then in America.

Anna recalls the girls' work being mostly confined to household chores, doing dishes, dusting, hanging out laundry. However, even as a young girl,

Anna contributed a little money through babysitting jobs, and she, too, picked beans and blackberries. She did dishes and dusted in the Holy Mother rectory. Her older sister, Eloise, took a housecleaning job in Buffalo.

As the children grew older, Mother worked outside the home on cleaning jobs. Daddy – he was always Daddy – was a laborer at the chainworks in Buffalo.

At heart, Daddy was a farmer on an acre of land, planting a huge garden every growing season and keeping chickens behind the garage. Daddy was the one Anna ran to for a sympathetic ear and a hug. Daddy always gave her the extra piece of candy, and taught her the secret to good scrambled eggs – a slice of American cheese.

The family could not afford vacations, but on warm summer weekends Mother and Daddy often assembled a big lunch, packed the kids into the car, and drove off to a favorite picnic spot at Olcott Beach, along the southern shore of Lake Ontario. In the winter, Anna enjoyed snowball fights with her brothers.

Anna recalls it as a good, secure childhood. She worked hard, got caught in a few innocent pranks, said her prayers, and honored her father and mother.

Anna was a good girl.

2 *Fantasy* *vs.* *Reality*

Signs of mental instability emerged in Anna early on, unrecognized at the time.

She describes herself as a “nervous” child, frightened to jumpiness by thunder storms and darkness, to the point where climbing the stairs to her attic bedroom every night was a nervous ordeal.

She felt singled out in school when called upon to read aloud, though she was complimented as an excellent reader. She asked the nuns not to call on her again.

She was so afraid of failing when she was selected to crown the statue of the Blessed Mother, she began to cry and refused to do it.

Mother also had attacks of nerves. She grew flushed and irritable, and sent one of her young sons off on his bicycle to fetch her “nerve medicine” from the doctor, several miles away. Yet in a century of living, Mother’s supposedly frail nerves

never collapsed or failed her; in fact, somewhere along the way, she seemed to forget that she needed nerve medicine.

Much more seriously, Anna's older sister, Nancy, developed schizophrenia at a young age and spent much of her adult life in and out of psychiatric care. She died at age 43 while a resident at the Buffalo Psychiatric Center, under circumstances some of her surviving siblings regard as questionable.

Anna, previously a good and conscientious student, began to falter around the eighth grade. Taking college entrance classes at the old Bishop Neumann High School, Anna quickly fell behind and indulged in fantasies.

A new assistant pastor was recently assigned to Holy Mother Church in Ess. Anna found him very handsome and developed a crush on him. In her fantasies, Anna was exceptionally beautiful and married the assistant pastor. She constructed a whole world around her "husband" while still keeping close to her father who, in her dreams, was fabulously wealthy.

Anna failed the tenth and eleventh grades, and dropped out of school. Her fantasy world, which was becoming much more substantial and sustaining to her, was where she preferred to be.

Yet she also had an interest in real boys, and plenty of them pursued her. She was a shapely girl, with dark hair, blue eyes and a ready laugh. She loved dressing up for a date. She often went out with her beaux in large groups.

One such triple date ended with Anna and her boyfriend alone in his car on a lonely road at two o'clock in the morning. Anna recalls him saying, "I don't care if you are a virgin or a Catholic, I will be the first to break you."

Anna fell out of the car and fled. A couple at a nearby house sheltered her and took her home. The next morning, her purse was hanging on the doorknob of the family home. Daddy asked how it had come to be there.

Anna said she didn't know.

Then came that Sunday morning in 1954.

In the way of small towns, Anna knew Mr. Fox by sight. To her, he was practically an old man, though, at 31 years old, he was in the prime of his life.

A Navy veteran, Mr. Fox now ran his own insurance and investment office out of his home. In addition to the private advice he gave individuals, he donated his financial savvy to the church. In this blue collar and farming community, he and the local undertaker were almost alone in feeling comfortable wearing suits and ties.

His wife was at his side in the pews every Sunday, expensively dressed and scented. The couple discreetly tutored their young children, also smartly turned out, in the appropriate times to kneel, stand and sit during the Mass.

It seemed a thoughtful gesture, to get a nanny for his children while Mrs. Fox recovered from the