

## Mother and Father

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### At 30, Carla Latty learned she was adopted. Now she's trying to unravel a bigger secret.

By Irene Sege, Globe Staff | November 21, 2006

MORRIS TOWNSHIP, N.J. -- Carla Latty removes a 1982 letter from her file of important papers. Written shortly after Latty learned she is adopted, it offers the first clues in her search for her birth mother.

"Your mother was described as a well-spoken, dark skinned, 5'2" 112 lbs. Negro woman in her late thirties," states the letter from the New York Foundling Hospital. She'd placed three older children in an orphanage while she attended college and taught music and waitressed. Latty's father, the letter continues, "was White, 5'7", 153 lbs., had a fair complexion and was of Irish background."

Almost a quarter century later, Latty, 54, has finally discovered the identity of her biological mother and, in the process, reopened a startling mystery about the identity of her father. Circumstantial evidence strongly suggests her father was a priest.

The Rev. Francis E. Ryan -- the priest from Foxborough long whispered to be the father of the children of Anna Maria "Ria" Franklin Senna -- looked like the man the foundling hospital described.

The two met in the 1930s when he was pastor at the Alabama church where she played organ before eventually moving to Roxbury in 1954. The brothers Latty never knew she had -- and who knew nothing of her -- say the priest shared their mother's bedroom during visits to Boston. They remember finding condoms during at least one of those sojourns.

Latty had stumbled into a story of faith and race, of secrecy and scandal and shame. Uncovered at a time when the Catholic Church still staggers from revelations of pedophilia, the tale illuminates another troubling corner of church life: the hidden families of priests, susceptible to both the emotional and financial fallout of their clandestine existence.

An estimated 25,000 men in the United States have left the priesthood, most to marry and raise families, but there are no statistics on how many clerics remaining in their positions have children they do not publicly acknowledge. A website launched this year, [childrenofpriests.org](http://childrenofpriests.org), gets about 1,000 hits a month, according to its founder, 39-year-old Timothy Gemelli of Connecticut, who says he learned in high school that his father is a priest.

"Secrets are always destructive, especially when they hide a blatant hypocrisy," says Richard Sipe, a former Benedictine priest and author of six books on celibacy. "There's no question it's destructive to children. And it's destructive to the whole texture of the clerical system."

For years Latty, an attorney with a municipal workers' union in New York, imagined her father as a married man, a professor perhaps. Now she struggles with a different scenario.

"It's pretty mind-boggling," she says. "It just upsets me that the children weren't taken care of the way they should have been."

At least two of Ria Senna's four children -- Latty and her 61-year-old brother, Adrian Senna -- share both mother and father, according to DNA tests conducted in July. Another brother, 62-year-old Carl Senna, learned, to his and Adrian's surprise, that they are only half-siblings. A 59-year-old sister opted not to be tested (or to be interviewed for this story).

Long after the deaths of both Ryan and Ria Senna, Latty and Adrian Senna yearn for proof of their connection to the priest, but Ryan's surviving nephew, they say, has refused to take part in a Y-chromosome test that traces male lineage. (The nephew, Thomas Ryan, and his wife, Kate, declined to speak with the Globe.)

"We asked a number of times, from our mother, for the truth about things," says Adrian Senna, a semiretired actor and musician in British Columbia. "That's all we wanted."

"I just want to know who my father is," says Latty. "I just want to know."

#### An elusive past

Latty, sitting on an oversize floral sofa in her living room, fingers two photographs. One is a baby picture of herself, round-eyed and apple-cheeked, taken shortly after she was adopted. The other is a snapshot of the Senna siblings, taken in Montgomery in 1949, shortly before their mother placed them in the Zimmer Memorial Home, a Catholic orphanage in Mobile.

"I look a lot like Adrian," Latty says.

The photos are testimony not only to the children's shared history but also to their divergent paths. While Latty spent her entire childhood in one home in Queens, the Sennas experienced no such stability.

Ria Senna told the orphanage she'd been abandoned by a drunken husband. "She felt that an education would enable her to get a good job and eventually be able to provide a home for her children," states a 1992 letter to Carl Senna from Catholic Social Services of Mobile.

The children lived at Zimmer, where, Carl recalls, his head was shaved for ringworm and nuns showed little warmth, until a cousin brought them to Montgomery in 1952. Months later their mother returned. By then, she'd studied at Xavier University in New Orleans and played music in New York and given birth to a baby girl. Ryan spent those years assigned to parishes in Washington, D.C., and New Orleans.

Much about Ria Senna remains shrouded in uncertainty. Boston-bred novelist Danzy Senna, daughter of Carl and the poet Fanny Howe, who is white, used a 2004-05 fellowship from the New York Public Library, a press release noted, to "work on a book about the life of her elusive African-American grandmother."

Ria Senna and Father Ryan were separated by both race and a 12-year age difference. Where she was inhibited, he was outgoing. He was affiliated with the St. Joseph's Society of the Sacred Heart, which has ministered to African-Americans in the South since shortly after the Civil War. From 1930 to 1939, Ryan was at St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Montgomery, near the house where his devout young organist lived.

"Father Ryan was a very physical person. He liked to hug and put you on his knees. He smoked cigars. He drank whiskey. He was a very convivial, friendly person," says Carl Senna, a former Providence Journal columnist who now lives in New Brunswick.

"I think my mother was tortured emotionally," he says. "She was nervous all the time. She smoked a very strong cigarette and drank strong coffee and lived a very abstemious life."

Their relationship apparently stirred scandal, Danzy learned during a trip South last year. She declined to comment, but her father shared e-mails from her with the Globe. When Ria's uncle Lucien Pierce discovered the affair, Pierce's daughter recalled, he threatened to shoot the priest. "Enough drama ensued," Danzy wrote, "that Father Ryan was removed" from the church.

The Rev. Edward Chiffriller, head of the Josephites in Baltimore, declined to speak with the Globe, but the order's archives, plus an e-mail Carl Senna sent relatives in May summarizing a conversation with Chiffriller, bolster that story. A chronology of Ryan's career jumps from his 1939 departure from St. John to a posting in 1942 in Louisiana. In his e-mail, Senna recounted Chiffriller's account of unspecified complaints against Ryan in Montgomery.

"Ryan," Senna wrote, "was dismissive, according to Chiff, who said that Ryan wrote that the complainants were a disgruntled small minority."

While some relatives quietly suspected Ryan was the father of Ria Senna's children, she claimed their father was a Mexican boxer named Francisco Senna, whom Carl Senna met briefly as a toddler. Though there's no evidence they ever wed, Ria used his name.

From conversations with relatives and Ryan, Carl believes his mother met the boxer when she traveled north

to work and to play music. She apparently moved to Louisiana, where Ryan was posted, in 1944, pregnant with Carl. Ryan signed the baby's baptismal certificate. Adrian was born in 1945.

From Louisiana, Ria Senna returned to Alabama, then lived in Washington, New York, and again in Louisiana before coming to Boston. Even though Ryan was never posted in Massachusetts, Carl suspects his mother chose Boston because of the priest's connections to the area. She worked in traffic court and played organ at St. Francis de Sales Church in Roxbury. "Vivaldi. Bach," Carl recalls. "We used to sit and listen to her play classics in the church where I was an altar boy."

The Senna brothers, then in middle school, remember Ryan staying with their mother in the Whittier Street public housing development for a week or two in the summer, apparently unbeknownst, Carl says, to relatives in Foxborough who thought he'd returned South after visiting them. Occasionally Ryan sent money.

The priest was the only overnight male guest the brothers remember their mother receiving. In addition to the condoms they found, Carl discovered a steamy letter from Ryan accidentally left on a bureau.

"There was not much left to the imagination as to the nature of their relationship," Adrian says. "I saw the church as a bastion of hypocrisy. It was the brunt of our humor -- what we were learning in school and what was really going on."

"He slept in my mother's room. I asked her about that, and she was embarrassed," Carl says. "It was very disturbing."

Carl asked his mother on her deathbed, in 1972, if Ryan was his father. Two decades later he asked a tearful Ryan, by then retired and living in Florida, the same question. Both times he was told no.

"They may have been telling the truth," Carl says. "I did not ask about my brother and my sister."

On the trail

Latty, meanwhile, was growing up in Queens, the second of 10 children of a police detective and a homemaker. When she wondered why she was smaller than the rest of the family, she was told she resembled her great-grandmother. "They showed me pictures," Latty recalls, "and she was petite." When she was 30, acting on a hunch, she asked her parents if she was adopted.

Latty found her birth certificate and learned she'd been born Bernadette Senna. In 1999 she and Crescentia Coutinho, her companion, bought a list of 500 Sennas and sent inquiries across the country. A Rhode Island woman suggested she contact Danzy Senna, whose first novel, "Caucasia," was published the previous year. After learning Danzy was about 30, the child of a white mother and Mexican father, Latty didn't pursue the tip.

Last winter Latty engaged the genealogist Pamela Slaton, who'd helped rapper Darryl "DMC" McDaniels find his birth mother. In April, Slaton called with news. Latty then telephoned Carl, who forwarded a photograph of their mother.

"To see her face," Latty says. "I was reeling."

Carl thought he also knew who her father was. With that, Latty and the Sennas embarked on a quest to solve the puzzle of their births. They contacted the Josephite leader Chiffreller, who, according to Carl and e-mails he provided, called Ryan's family and researched DNA testing.

Carl had met Ryan's surviving nephew, Thomas Ryan, and his wife, Kate, in 1995, when he attended Ryan's funeral as a family friend. Now Carl telephoned Kate Ryan. "She was flabbergasted," he says. "They revered Father Ryan." They never answered a letter Adrian sent to their Florida home in September.

In May, Carl and Danzy Senna met Latty in New York. They talked over ribs and burgers at Blue Smoke. "I felt very much at ease," Latty says. She canceled plans to spend Thanksgiving with Adrian in Vancouver because her adoptive mother has been ill. "We talk quite a bit," Latty says, "but it's not the same as actually meeting." She heads next month to Martha's Vineyard to see Danzy and meet other relatives, including Fanny Howe, Carl's former wife, who knew Ria Senna well. Latty has also contacted a lawyer in Florida, who referred her to a Boston attorney to explore what legal options she has to determine definitively whether Ryan was her father.

"There's a James Baldwin saying," Latty says. "You must know from whence you came. The possibilities are endless once you know where you're from." ■

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