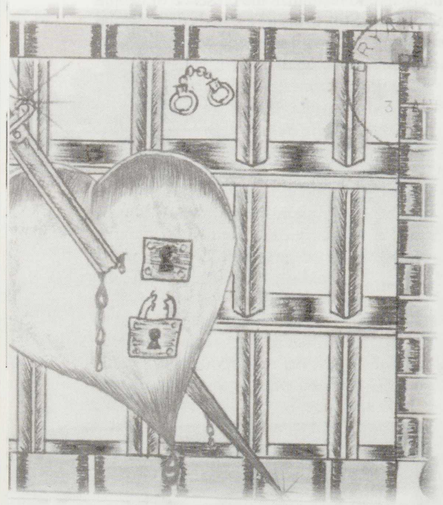
Judge Doris Buchanan then considers a report by the hospital's ethics committee. The committee, made up of various health care professionals, has voted 10-3 to deny Ronald Comeau food and water, and his attending physician supports the decision. Ruling that he is in a "helpless condition," Buchanan orders that food and hydration be terminated. By 7 p.m., November 9, the tube leading into his stomach is clamped off, and the stage is set. Like Brophy and Cruzan before him, Ronald Comeau has been given a death sentence.

Hardly noticed, Ronald Comeau has also been assigned a guardian ad litem, Raymond Betit, who is to represent him in any legal matters. Over the course of hospitalization, he has seen his charge only a half-dozen times. Apparently finding no reason to digress from the treatment plan to starve, Betit, a Roman Catholic, arranges for the last rites to be given Comeau. Later, he will claim to have merely taken a neutral position.

"A meddling minister"

November 10, over one hundred miles away, Mike McHugh takes a call from Vermont Right to Life director Frank Hassler. News on the radio and a story in the *Bennington Banner* newspaper about the court's decision had caused alarm among pro-life politicos and activists alike. Another call to the *Banner* brought a copy of their coverage slowly rolling out of the fax machine, confirmation that the court and hospital were engaged in euthanizing a man. His response to the story would eventually earn him the outrage of a community and editorial descriptions like "the meddling minister," and a "religious terrorist."

McHugh remembers his initial impression. "I was told that the father was uncooperative; that he didn't have any interest" in his son. "I believed them."



Attempting to intervene on Ronald's behalf, Michael McHugh left Essex Junction to travel to Bennington. Three days after Ronald Comeau had been placed on an enforced fast to bring about his death, his advocate was standing before Judge Doris Buchanan pleading for a change in guardianship and a change in the order to stop food and water. On all counts attorney Saltonstall, representing Joseph Schaaf, argued against the right of McHugh to interfere with the decision to kill Comeau.

Ruling that McHugh lacked standing—the legal right to express an interest in Comeau's case—and saying she lacked the authority to reverse her own decision, Buchanan refused to *stay* her ruling to starve. Instead, she pointed McHugh to the Bennington County Superior Court. Again, McHugh and another minister, John Guyette, were told they lacked the legal right to interfere.

Vermont Supreme Court Stays Order

Norman Smith, in a black and white photo, could pass for attorney Saltonstall's brother. Both wear their hair the same; have the same coloring; and both wear wire-framed glasses. Both are tenacious. But comparisons to Schaaf's attorney don't flatter Smith. He is Michael McHugh's attorney and another key player in the effort to keep Ronald Comeau alive.

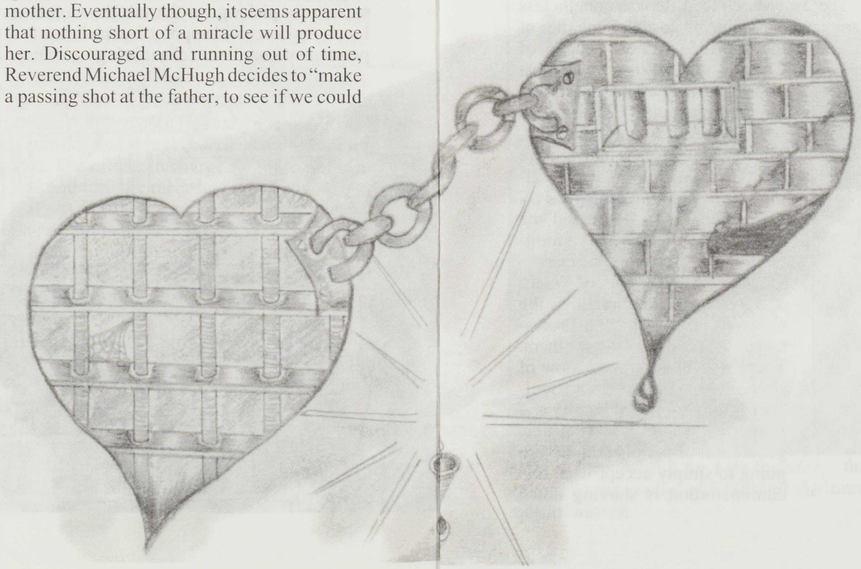
It is Chief Justice Frederic W. Allen who takes a call from Smith on the evening of November 12. Smith manages to acquire an emergency order from the Vermont Supreme Court Justice that will allow McHugh three days to do what the police, probate court, medical professionals, and a guardian said was impossible. In three days Michael McHugh must present the court with evidence that he indeed has legal standing or locate at least one relative to intervene for Ronald Comeau. An order is given to resume food and water at least until a hearing can be held before the full court on November 16.

"I assembled a team and focused on finding his mother in Cranston, Rhode Island," McHugh says. Again, it is his assumption that authorities have told the truth in reporting that Ronald's father is uncooperative and uncaring which causes him to disregard a search for Renald DuPuis. Instead, at 1:30 in the morning he is knocking on the door of a Mary Comeau, one of several in Cranston, hoping that the house at which he has arrived is the same one Ronald left just three days before his arrest in Bennington. He "comes up dry" as he explains it, but the woman who has been rattled awake in the middle of the night is gracious. McHugh spends the next two hours trying to track down the right Mary Comeau by making calls from her telephone.

"The first time he saw his father, his eyes got bigger and bigger and bigger." Patty Comeau

Passing shot pays off

It is now Monday, less than twenty-four hours before the court is to consider the Comeau case, and much of the day is still spent in an effort to track down Ronald's mother. Eventually though, it seems apparent that nothing short of a miracle will produce her. Discouraged and running out of time, Reverend Michael McHugh decides to "make a passing shot at the father, to see if we could sway him." At 5:00 p.m. McHugh makes the last of several phone calls before hitting the road for Biddeford, Maine.



"We called the Biddeford Police Department to see if they could hook us up with Mr. DuPuis," he tells me.

Getting a better response than he had hoped for, McHugh is told that authorities would contact Renald DuPuis and have him waiting at the station when McHugh will arrive in town. Two hours later contact is finally made with Ronald Comeau's family. Renald DuPuis and an uncle, Raymond, meet with him to talk about a son who—based upon a conversation with a doctor wanting permission to take organs—Renald DuPuis was convinced had died.

Patty Comeau recalls her father-in-law's amazement after finding out his son is still alive. He tells her about his conversation with a doctor only one day after Ronnie was arrested.

"He said, 'I get this phone call from the hospital. They tell me this is Doctor So-and-So. He's got my boy. He's been in an accident, and he wants his body parts. He wants his organs. I told him *No*! *What if it's not my Ronnie Comeau. What if he's somebody else's son? How can you ask me such a question?*' Then he looks at me and says, 'I said to the man, *If it is my son, how dare you ask me such a question?!*' He was very, very upset."

Her father-in-law, she says, "is a simple man. He's hard of hearing, and he thought that Ronnie was dead." All that he heard from the hospital after that phone call was that they wanted money. A bill for several hundred dollars was sent to the man that officers of the court had sworn could not be reached.

It is somewhere around 9:00 p.m. when Michael McHugh and Renald and Raymond DuPuis start out for Bennington, and it will take until four or five in the morning before they can stop at a hotel. It is from there, in the wee hours of the morning, that attorney Norman Smith receives a call to let him know that his client has finally located family. After alerting local media who have followed the case, more to crucify McHugh than to determine the truth, there is just time for a few hours of sleep.

Last minute reprieve

It is only moments before the Vermont Supreme Court will hear testimony concerning Ronald Comeau when McHugh presents his family on the steps leading into the courthouse. Amidst the rush of conversation to prepare them for the journey to Bennington, McHugh finds that he knows very little about these men, and they are still unsure of him. News reports claim he is a religious fanatic, a grand-stander, and a minister who has crossed the line professionally.

The operator of a Bennington abortion mill has even thrown her opinion into the fray. Michael McHugh is said to be "exploiting a very emotional issue." The well-known east coast rescue leader has come to the attention of the baby-killing industry on other occasions, and, as before, it is claimed that here again he is quenching the freedom to choose. Judge Doris Buchanan, Joseph Schaaf, a hospital ethics committee, and attorney Stephen Saltonstall are all in agreement. Ronald Comeau's "choice"—in their substituted judgment—is to die.

The court, needing to verify that these are indeed relatives to the man whose life is hanging by a cord thinner than the blanket ribbing that police say was wound around his neck, rules that the family may have one week to ascertain the identity of the man called Ronald Comeau.

Healing close to home

On November 22 the Vermont Supreme Court and the lower probate court recognized the legal standing of Comeau's family to make choices for his care. Brothers living in Worcester, Massachusetts who read about the dramatic effort to locate Ronald's father came to Bennington to help protect Comeau from those who had tried vigorously to kill him. And eventually his older brother Renald was granted guardianship.

Finally in January, after a tangled battle with the Vermont Medicaid system —a story of abuse in itself—Ronald J. Comeau was transferred, one day before his thirty-first birthday, to a rehabilitation facility in Brighton, Massachusetts. ■

All Drawings are by Ronald Comeau.