

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/2

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Found Wanting

I WANT THIS CLEAR: I do not like to struggle. I like to dwell deep – safe, smiling, secret – a pose made tenable by my habit.

A nun?

“A sister.” (I’ve been known to talk to myself.) Mine is a teaching order, although unlike other English faculty, I don’t care much about grammar or punctuation. It’s the stories I can’t resist. Some people call them literature. I try to be good.

Every night I return to the convent with the other sisters. I am not close to anyone here but I love my life, or at least I don’t regret it. After chores and chapel we have supper and then it is time to grade papers and plan next day’s classes. Read. Of course we watch television. We disagree, sometimes, and I am grateful a very useable black-and-white was recently donated as a back-up to our very useable color set. I do not always want to plan classes or grade papers, and at the end of the day I am too exhausted, even for fiction.

M.A.S.H. is my favorite program. I am sorry it will be off the air soon. I imagine myself part of the camaraderie of the “4077,” even as Father Mulcahey joined in with the hijinks. I also like *Fantasy Island*. The lay teachers at school laugh when they hear this, and I know they are right. It is a silly show, a glazed doughnut in the assorted dozen of nightly shows, but I have my fantasy. I will tell you later. The mention of Father Mulcahey, however, reminds me.

It was Pearl who showed me that our principal, Father Patrick Cayce, also has dreams and fantasies. Despite his priestly and – let’s face it – male power and the clear outlines of his life and physique (he’s a jogger), I have always known him to be as vague as I am. Vague does not work for the forthright leaders of the world, but I find vagueness a comfort, a protection against what’s out there and its appeal; it’s a protection against myself.

Pearl amuses me. She is not Catholic. I think she is still searching while she maintains she is always finding. “There are many paths, right?” Fine with me. Let her search.

“You’re programmed when it comes to priests.” As she pushes her glasses up her nose she looks less like a teacher than she does one of those cute kids in oversized eyeglasses. “I’ve got to corrupt you.” Her tongue is an odd color today, which means she’s back to eating Red Hots. “Without corruption you’re out-of-step with the world.”

Out-of-step? “But I’m supposed to be out-of-step.”

She reaches into her purse and comes out with a box of the candies. She shakes two into her mouth.

“That’s why I make the big bucks.”

Pearl looks at me the way cats look at humans when they are assessing us. “Booya, Sister. I didn’t know you had it in you.” Late afternoon sun

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shines through the classroom window, revealing a thin, slender hair growing on her chin. "Don't they make you repeat 'the sun moves around the earth'?"

"Ha hah." The rotation of the planets is irrelevant to me, although I congratulate the Church for catching up with that one. Clearly she hasn't heard about Father Fred at St. Sebastian's High School. She, of all people, would have mentioned the irony. Or the justice. After the complaints, he'd been told he was being transferred. He packed up, went out to buy a carton of Viceroy's, and walking back to the rectory for the last time, was run over. It was a hit-and-run but there were rumors. I wouldn't blame the boy's father. I wouldn't breathe a word of this to Pearl. History has been as kind to the church as the church has been in history – not so kind. But I wouldn't have joined an order if I didn't know that we do service, feed the hungry, and so on. Faith has its collateral lies and lies have collateral faith.

Pearl shows me a passage from a massive paperback, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* by Robert Burton, who lived in the Sixteenth Century. No wonder she lacks serenity; she reads more than I do. "Look at Pat. Do you think he's a happy man?" Pat. She won't use 'Father' and apparently even 'Patrick' is too acquiescent for her.

"Of course he is happy. He has his agonies, I am sure, but he is not unhappy."

"By agonies, you mean dark night of the soul, a fight with the devil in the Mojave. A little misery's a given for all of us, but for Pat I'm talking life. Desire. The world." She reaches out and shakes me, squeezing my admittedly plump arm (I do the admitting, not my arm) until I have to laugh. Her face becomes the puffy-cheeked sun on an ancient map.

"Have you seen him with that woman? Lucy Chiva's mother?"

Non-Catholics get giddy at the prospect of priests and their philandering. Catholics do too, of course. I've often wondered if the Buddhist priests who are monastic ever fall, and how their constituency feel about it. "Pearl—"

"No, really, Sister. Watch the two of them together, when Mrs. Chiva helps out at bingo. Well, you have to watch closely because Patrick is no fool, but one time," she looks over her shoulder, clever girl. "He unlocked the office so she could use the phone."

"Pearl—" I hope the value of repetition, effectively used in prayers and literature, gives her pause.

"You're not reading me. I'm not talking about sex. Who cares about that?"

She has my attention.

"If they do, they do, if they don't."

That's it?

She reads my expression but is not so callous as to trespass into the terrain of intimate relationships in my presence. I know about such things – but not really. Some pity me, not believing anyone would make the choice I did. I could never be a female commodity, though I'll tell you. If

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there were wage parity between priests and sisters, the world would jolt towards equality. There won't be and it won't.

"Listen." Mr. Sanchez comes in to empty the trashcan. Usually I'd ask about his family. Not today. I barely nod at him. What is Pearl telling me? He hurries out.

"Mrs. Chiva was calling home, to the babysitter or someone, to make sure Lucy was alright. Her husband died a while back, blah blah, you know that. Well, she paused when she picked up the receiver, looked around the office all confused, turned to Father and asked, 'What's my number?' And guess what—"

She's as dramatic as the girls in my homeroom talking about exploits of movie stars or their friends in public schools.

"Yes, Pearl, and?"

"He told her! Just like that, off the top of his head, Pat told Mrs. Chiva her phone number. Sister, what I'm telling you is that was an intimate exchange. It was husband-wife, one-half completing the other. Father, I mean Pat, okay, sheepish grin, anyway, he didn't put on his big public priest voice. He helped her. He simply, familiarly helped her."

She is blushing at the "Father" slip – she was almost respectful, the poor dear. As for her theory, I neither agree nor disagree and when she goes on about all the jogging he does, and the tennis, the energy expended or diverted, I admit I wonder. She's decided being a husband and parent would gratify Patrick. The need for more is clearly there. Phooey if she's not right again.

"I'm not criticizing. I would never criticize someone for human longings." She is almost thirty, unmarried, childless. She jokes about men and what she terms a quest. What she wants or thinks she does is right and natural. Assuming it will bring her peace, I want it for her, although I could as easily be talking about last night's episode of *Dynasty* – a world far from the world I live in. I admire her brand of suffering – directed, discrete.

"Ah, Sister, your sadness . . ."

My slightest mood change and she's on it. What made her so aware of others? She goes overboard in believing all understanding is within her scope. Talk about fantasies.

"I'm not sure of the word. Lingering. Amorphous. Having so little, maybe, you long for everything." Her hand speeds to her mouth to prevent more insight bursting out, which she clearly worries comes in the form of poisoned darts. It's okay, Pearl.

"Don't worry." I can't say she is wrong, or right though I feel that need to glaze over my emotions, make them shiny and finished like our girls' awkward pottery attempts, or quick swipes with lipstick as soon as school is over.

During the week our secretary is out with a flu that's going round. I help in the office during my free period, and have just finished explaining to Isabelle Trujillo that it is important to be prompt, and how we are

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instilling habits that will last the girls a lifetime. Father is in his office writing out checks. He is a haphazard principal. He does not have the eye for detail a sister does. Invoices are misplaced, supplied unordered. I send Isabelle on to class.

Mrs. Chiva walks in. She has long wavy hair like *M.A.S.H.'s* Hot Lips, but black, not blonde. "Good morning, Sister," she says. "I see you're helping out." She smells like a rose bush and a bright sky.

Father has heard her. He is boisterous, almost ceremonial as he bolts out of his office; he makes his ritual comment about bingo being a plague to priests. Following his gesturing hand, Mrs. Chiva enters his domain. The door is closed, a not-unusual or suspicious act, and I stand at the counter, looking out at the greenness of the lawn.

Third period bell rings and Father emerges, escorting Mrs. Chiva. He is tranquil – a rare and graceful state of being for our principal. Mrs. Chiva says something to him, speaking too softly for me to hear. Pearl may well have tainted my perceptions, but I do wonder as I watch the two of them. It is rude, but I am still staring as Mrs. Chiva leaves. Father's gaze also follows her. She is gone, the door is closed, and he turns around so quickly his expression doesn't have time to adjust. By chance or mistake, our eyes meet. I am stunned. His are aggressive, almost violent, with longing. For a split second we are comrades, like Hawkeye and B.J. Honeycutt hating war and the pencil-pushers that drive it. Then it is over and he is in his office.

The passage from *Anatomy of Melancholy* was in a section on love, or Love, as Mr. Burton wrote in the 1600s. Pearl xeroxed it for me. "There is an honest love, I confess, which is natural, a secret snare to captivate the hearts of men, a strong allurements, of a most attractive, occult, adamant property, and powerful virtue, and no man living can avoid it." She underlined the last six words.

I will tell you my fantasy. Someday I will meet some person, a man or a woman, this is not important. I will see an peculiarly familiar face and as I look closer I will spot recognition in their eyes, too. They will know me as I will know them – a shared intuition of true kinship. Without ever needing to speak, without explanation or cumbersome introduction, we will understand each other, as twins separated at birth are said to have homing instincts for their double. I will have a true and best friend always. This will happen. I believe it possible in this world. I hope Father Cayce has such a dream. It is hard to want.