

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/2

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SISTER

THE ELEVATOR DOORS SLIDE OPEN. The old girls look at us packed shoulder to shoulder and roll their eyes in resignation. More hip to shoulder in my case, beanpole that I am. Andree glances over with a teary smile, make that two beanpoles neck deep in grannies. Add to that they're in costume! The one next to me is a bug of some kind. Her coiled antennae bonk me whenever she turns her head. Directly across is the devil herself, and you know this one really IS a devil. Those baby blues brimming with mischief, trouble still, even with the walker. There's a bunny here and Frankenstein there and in back, Darth Vader in a pink chenille bathrobe.

Best of all, they're nuns every one, with us still though decommissioned, marking the time till they're called to heaven. And while they're waiting ... well it IS Halloween.

The doors take forever to close and the ones outside are looking at me, Raggedy Anne smiling coyly, Statue of Liberty with a pink paper torch. She whispers something to the scarecrow beside her and I blush like I do when the girls talk about me.

We take turns pushing buttons and the doors finally close and either the floors are too far apart or this is the slowest elevator ever. The old girls shout over their deafness, friends and sisters for a lifetime, so right they should finish together.

Muriel introduces us and they ooh and ahh while we smile and fidget, the two of us eight years old once again, though a decade, at best, from our own dotage.

Then the doors slide open and it's more of the same, a pair of pirates, a coven of witches, cowgirls in wheel chairs ready to roll, a few not quite with it but hanging in there, flapping their gums and scolding their IV bags.

The old nuns, bless 'em.

And we as lapsed as we can be. My last Sunday mass somewhere back in Latin, out of practice but slipping back into it. The nuns will do that to you. A softening of the spirit words can't describe, losing yourself in their good graces, the row house accents, the smell of soap.

The party's just starting when we hit the lobby and it takes a while to push through the crowd. And what a crowd it is! Wrinkled faces smeared in makeup, funny hats and fake moustaches, more Fellini than Fellini, the sort of thing you can't make up.

"The sisters really go all out, eh Muriel?" I guide her out the door.

"I think the full moon has a lot to do with it," she takes my arm.

"Are you sure you want to miss this?"

"Absolutely."

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Muriel, aka Sister Pascal, one of Andree's two surviving aunts and as close to a saint as I'm likely to get. Until recently she was a tiny tower of strength, but the years and the hip replacements have taken a toll. She walks like there's a bad connection, which, of course, there is though she's not complaining. Good as new is what she tells us, a real trooper, as Andree's dad would say.

We are here at St. Joseph's to take her to lunch. I can usually get out of this sort of thing, but Muriel is a favorite of mine and I could use the credit. The truth is I'm a sucker for the old folks. All of them have a story to tell and I'm the one who can pull it out of them. I ask away and Muriel always answers. Andree calls it interrogation but we think of it as banter. In her eyes I see Muriel knows my type well.

We cross the parking lot passed the statue that looks like a logo, our eyes are drawn to the face without features.

"Let me guess. St. Joseph?" I venture.

"So they tell me," Muriel grunts.

"His head looks like a donut."

"It's an abstract. It takes getting used to."

"..... You hate it, right?"

"It's controversial."

"... You hate it."

"Intensely."

She's the matriarch by attrition, from a time when each clan sent a few to the calling. Second oldest of five sisters, Port Richmond born and raised. Just 18 when she joined the convent and I think of her then and I have to wonder. Too young to vote or buy a bottle, old enough to vow it all away. An only photo shows a handsome girl smiling into the sun. A wide brimmed hat, her only extravagance, but quite the extravagance, I must say.

The sister who became a sister, the rest going on to boyfriends then husbands and their share of the baby boom. Like most nuns Muriel became a teacher and like most teachers she worked the circuit, transferred on diocesan whim, Broad Street to Bristol and points in between. Never long enough to become a fixture, at least that's what they must have figured. One of that army of savants and drill sergeants that made Catholic schools the best in the business. Sixty years at the head of the classroom, past middle age and onto the downside. Those husbands gone, some forgotten, five sister widows left behind. The last years spent in ill health and loneliness. Going, going, and they're gone.

Except for Muriel.

"My problem with St. Joseph is he gets no credit," I say as we turn into traffic. "I mean what was really in it for him?"

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"What do you mean 'in it'?"

"Well, he gets to be the husband but not the father, and then after Christmas you never hear of him again."

"Maybe that's the way he wanted it," Muriel smiles.

"But what do we know about him? I mean he's just a footnote."

"We know he was a carpenter."

"Well yeah, OK. He had a job, but the rest they skip over. He doesn't even have any lines!"

"I didn't realize you were a biblical scholar."

"Just basic Catholic school stuff, Sister. I mean was he a good carpenter or just the guy with the hammer."

"He was an excellent carpenter."

"Where does it say that?"

"In the epistles ... St. Paul. Corinthians."

"... You're making that up," I look to Andree. "She's making that up."

"Do you even own a bible?" Muriel wonders.

"I can get one."

We'd planned to go to the Italian place but when we pull in the lot the sign says Closed. So we drive around arguing scripture until we spot a Beef and Ale with cars in the lot.

"What do you think?" I signal left.

"Tom, it's a bar!" Andree kicks me under the seat.

"Yeah, but they have chicken fried steaks! When was the last time Muriel had a chicken fried steak?"

"What's a chicken fried steak?" Muriel wonders.

"One of the great culinary mysteries," I turn in. "Think the Trinity without the Holy Ghost."

The place is done up like an English pub. We hang our coats on the booth hook and slide in beneath a fake stained glass window. Out the window is a picture of a deer grazing in a picture of a meadow. The jukebox is playing something by Ella and the barman has a walrus moustache. My kind of place.

"Give us three chicken fried steaks and a round of Guinness," I tell the waitress.

"None for me, thanks," Andree overrules me. "I'll have the garden salad."

I look to Muriel. "Just you and me kiddo,"

"Is it chicken or steak?"

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"It's both and it's neither. Trust me on this."

While we're waiting for our order Muriel updates us on the state of the sisterhood, a regular feature of our program and invariably dire. It's not something she'd volunteer on her own, so I make a point to ask. She speaks directly and doesn't flinch.

"So then sister, how are we doing?"

"Not well, I'm afraid. If you can believe it, we're down to four."

"Four nuns?!" Andree bugs her eyes.

"Four enlistees," I set her straight.

"Novitiates," Muriel sets me straight.

"Oh my God, that's awful," Andree tries to conceive of it.

"A widow, a divorcee and two young Guatemalan girls," Muriel breaks it down. "I'm beginning to think we're doomed to extinction."

"Beginning? That biological clock is barely ticking," I ignore Andree's kicks under the table. "What about the average age?"

"It's getting higher."

"Let me guess. The widow and the divorcee are no spring chickens. So that leaves the Guatemalans to hold down the curve. Sheesh! And they'll probably run off with, I don't know, leftist guerrillas or something."

"The numbers are discouraging, but it's the why that concerns me," Muriel says.

"Gee I don't know. Maybe because these days 18 year old girls have more than two options?" Wise guy that I am.

"That might explain a reduction, but a complete lack of interest?"

"Hey, check the seminaries. They're staying away in droves. But that's another story," which earns me another cautionary kick.

And just what does Muriel think of our predator priests? The blackest cloud we could ever imagine, the bad news in bunches that shocks even me, a confirmed infidel and practicing cynic. Muriel can be as candid as I am curious, but neither of us are going there.

"OK, average age then. Gotta be what? Sixty?"

"Sixty-four."

"Jesus, what's the average LIFE expectancy?"

"It's a crisis. What can you do but pray?"

"Well, for one thing they could let the clergy get married. Other religions allow it."

"Perhaps one day," she smiles. "When I'm gone."

"By then it might be academic. I'm just saying if you need more fish you should make the pond bigger."

"Yes. What would be the harm?" Andree shrugs off my clever analogy.

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"There's the matter of commitment," Muriel explains, "Celibacy is not a punishment. It's a discipline."

"It's asking too much."

"Yes well," Muriel shrugs. "You know what they say about old dogs."

I study a spotted spoon. "I have an old dog and he's not celibate."

Our food arrives and Andree toys with her salad while Muriel and I dig in. The steaks are superb and we nod and chew as Ella gives way to Dinah. I make a note to remember this place.

"What do you think?" I ask with my mouth full.

"Very good," Muriel nods in earnest. In between bites we throw back the Guinness. The old girl matches me measure for measure. Andree rolls her eyes and spears an olive.

"I suppose they'll be closing schools." I watch Muriel slather a french fry in ketchup.

"Whole parishes, if the cardinal has his way," she pops it in whole.

"And more believers slipping in every day. Can you imagine? A world without Catholic school."

"They can't close them all," Andree hopes against hope. "Where will the mob kids go?"

"That reminds me, Muriel. You ever see any of your old students?"

"Oh my, yes. In fact every Christmas I have dinner with three of them."

"So they made out OK? I mean what do they do for a living?"

She holds my eyes. "They're retired."

"You're kidding." But the math is easy. School kids to pensioners before you know it.

"There's a few more in Brigantine. I see them when we're down the shore."

"They put you up?"

"No, the order has a summer home."

"On the beach?"

"Why yes, we've been going there for years."

Visions of old nuns in bikinis come on before I can stop them, frolicking past until Andree kicks me. I try to recall seeing nuns at the shore, but the nuns in bikinis come popping up again and I excuse myself to grab a smoke. Out in the parking lot the nicotine hits me harder than usual and I feel all fuzzy and I think of the nuns. Catholic school. If you didn't go you have no reference. The stuff of countless novels and comedy routines cannot be known second hand. When I was a kid I envied my public school friends, but the older you get the more you cling to what defines you.

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Catholic school, which is to say the nuns.

Thirty years later I watch the kids heading off in their uniforms and skinny ties and I know what they face. The rod, the rule, myth and ritual beyond comprehension, truth and faith mixed with wild yarns and glaring gaps of logic. You may not come out of it pure of heart, but you know right from wrong and your handwriting puts the heathens to shame.

What's special in Muriel is easy to see, too sharp to lose advantage and too quick with a laugh not to know how to use it. Every school had one, impish and disarming, passing down from brother to sister. The one who could strike sparks and reach the unreachable. I don't know what Catholic school is like these days, but I'm guessing innocence has taken a hit. Now the pulpit is the last refuge of the scoundrel and the Catholic Church has the scoundrels to prove it. Suffer the children, feed thy lambs, the wages of sin will flatten you.

The sisters taught us that.

"So, why Pascal?" I think to ask as we turn out of the parking lot. "Your official name. How did you decide on it?"

"You are the curious one, aren't you?" Muriel smiles via rear view mirror.

"I've always wondered. It's a great name compared to some. Sister Humphrey Aloysius comes to mind."

Even Muriel wrinkles her nose at that one. Sister Al, my third grade cross to bear, a name that fit her, warts and all.

"I don't know what the other orders do it, but when you're ready to take your vows they ask you to submit three names for consideration," Muriel tells us.

"Pascal?" I raise a finger. "Isn't he the one that blesses your throat?"

"He is."

"And what a quaint little custom THAT is. Kneeling there with candles crossed at your neck. Scared to death you'll choke on a chicken bone."

"It beats Ash Wednesday," Andree points out.

"He's been known to work miracles," Muriel reminds us.

"I don't know," I check her in the mirror. "I'll take Saint Heimelich every time."

"It's not just choking. Saint Pascal protects against disease."

"That's why you picked him? Or was it the sound. Sister Pascal. From France."

"I didn't pick it."

"What about the three names?"

"They assigned me Pascal. I'll admit it was disappointing at first, but I came to like the sound of it."

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"Did any of the others get a name they picked?"

"Not a one," Muriel shakes her head. "But it's funny. A few years ago I was walking around the convent grounds with Sister Margaret Louise and we passed through the cemetery. At the end, just before the gate we saw a grave marked Sister Pascal and behind it, another marked Sister Margaret Louise."

"You're recycled?!?" I yelp.

"Apparently, yes."

An unsettling tradition and clearly deceptive, but it's not like a cool name will get you somewhere. The next Pascal will have a tough act to follow. A namesake with a hundred year legacy, presuming Muriel isn't last in the line. There's a measure of comfort in this strange conveyance. Her tenure may be drawing to a close but a Sister Pascal will be always with us.

The party is down to diehards when we return to St. Joseph's. There's a lone figure signing into a dead microphone while the devil herself bangs out Chopsticks on the piano. There are no lyrics to Chopsticks that I know of, which might account for the dead mike and Sister Satan's devilish grin. Gangs of nuns are gathered at the elevator, gabbing like they haven't seen each other in years. Considering their varying degrees of immobility, it's possible they haven't.

We pile in the elevator and the crowd thins at every floor. Then it's down to us and Muriel's neighbor, Sister Immaculata, a name that never made a wish list. The two go back a long way and I can see the bond and I envy them for it. The years spent in the struggle, a lifetime holding up their end. It's a bond few men live to hope for, weightless as God's grace and stronger than a mother's will. In the end the priests were like our father's, distant and imperious, volatile but avoidable. Like our moms the nuns were entrusted to raise us using wisdom, guile and no more force than necessary. They saw us through the events that shaped us, from A-Bombs to astronauts, presidents to popes.

"You know," Sister Immaculata says to me. "For years people thought Sister Pascal and I were sisters."

"Biological sisters," Muriel explains.

"What do you think?" Immaculata shoulders up. They're both old and both tiny. Any further resemblance would be a stretch.

"Why, it's uncanny," I tell them. "Twin sister sisters."

"Of course, I've put on some weight," Immaculata says, though you'd never know it. The two of them could fit in my pocket.

We visit Muriel's room, an invite I couldn't pass up. The nuns were such a relentless presence it's hard to imagine what they went home to. When we get there I'm surprised to see a TV and remote control, an overstuffed chair, an electric coffee maker and yesterday's Inquirer folded on the bed. The room is small, just a cell really, but it's on the top floor and comes with a view. Add an ashtray and a beer cooler and it would do me

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nicely.

“Cable?” I wonder.

“Oh my, yes,” Immaculata assures us.

“A gift from Heaven,” Muriel concurs.

It's dusk when we bow out with hugs all around and a promise to return. I'm looking forward to keeping that promise. Like most things Catholic St Joseph's has that fade away feel and I can't deny the spirit suits me.. We circle the statue and head down the lane, the place lit up like a grand hotel. We pray they'll all meet again in heaven. And if there's a God who holds up his end, he'll see that they're happy forever and ever. Amen.