

FICTION

MARY FRANCES COADY

Meditation

OUTSIDE, light from the chapel windows caught the dirty snow piled up along the eastern extension of the convent. Long icicles pointed down from the overhang like a row of dark spears. February was just about the worst month of the year.

And tomorrow was Ash Wednesday. That said it all. It meant that for the whole of Lent there was nothing immediate to look forward to, like flowers in the chapel and chocolate at Sunday tea and three-part motets at Benediction. Everything nice seemed so far away. Sister Lucy took a deep intake of breath and let it out by parting her lips slightly rather than heaving a sigh as she would have liked. She pulled her attention back into the room.

The fifteen novices sat in a semicircle on straight-backed chairs, each in a long black habit and white veil. They held their bags of needlework on their laps. Facing them at the top of the room was a schoolteacher's desk, on which sat the black bag that contained the novice mistress's needlework. The group made smiling glances to one another in silence. Sister Lucy usually loved this moment of expectancy just before the beginning of recreation. This evening, however, she opened her needlework bag without enthusiasm and spread her flowered dustcloth across her lap.

Footsteps sounded outside the door, and the novices turned and rose to their feet. Mother Alphonsine swept into the room in a swish of black serge, the rosary that hung from her belt swinging from side to side. She wore the black veil of the professed nun.

"Praise be to Jesus," she said, smiling and making her way to her desk.

"Amen! Good evening, Mother," the novices sang in a giggly chorus that always reminded Sister Lucy of a bursting dam whenever the novice mistress gave this signal that they could talk. Mother Alphonsine looked like she was continuing to say something, but the sound of chairs scraping against the floor and the chorus of voices drowned her out.

"Those pancakes at supper, Mother," said Sister Mary Alma. "A sure sign, wouldn't you say? We're fattened up now for the rigours of Lent." She looked around the group. "Are we ready for the forty days in the desert, the fasting and penance?"

Mock groans sounded around the semicircle. Sister Lucy bent over the leaf she was embroidering in long-and-short stitch, light green against dark. The cloth was puckered at the edge of the stitching. She wasn't sure she wanted to laugh along with the others about something she dreaded so much; Lent meant plain hymns and a drab chapel without flowers, uninteresting meals with butterless bread and milkless tea, morning meditations on the suffering and death of Jesus. "In meditating on the death of Jesus we learn something about life," the novice mistress had told the novices during her instruction earlier in the day. "It's one of those Christian paradoxes that can't be explained." The instruction had left Sister Lucy feeling empty.

"We're not as strict as some orders, you know," Mother Alphonsine was saying now. She was working a crochet hook through a piece of white lace. "The Trappistine have very strict Lenten fasts, and so do the Carmelites. As a matter of fact, you could say that the Carmelites live a kind of Lent all year round. They always sing only the plainest of chants, even on Easter Sunday, the day when we outdo ourselves in making glorious music. And of course each Carmelite meditates before a skull in her cell every day. How would you like to have that reminder of your death every day of your life?" She stopped, and then threw up her hands, pretending to be shocked at herself. "But my goodness, why are we talking about such things at recreation? After the pancakes we've just had, do you think we're not going to eat again for the next forty days?"

"In school we used to have fortunes inside our pancakes on Shrove Tuesday," said Sister Catherine. "I remember mine two years ago said, 'You will meet someone tall and dark who will change you forever.' Is this Jesus, do you suppose? Or a new priest in confession?"

“Maybe it refers to Reverend Mother,” said Sister Mary Alma with a straight face. “She’s tall. And wears dark clothes. And what do you suppose she will say that will change you forever?” She lowered her voice a tone and shifted her body into a stiff position. “I’m sending you to Timbuktu, my dear Sister. To teach the pagans and convert sinners in the deepest, darkest regions of nowhere.”

Sister Lucy laughed in spite of her gloom. She liked the silly talk at recreation every day. An intense silence filled the rest of the day, which flowed from early morning meditation and Mass. The novices had been instructed to carry in their minds throughout the day the images and prayers from their meditation, so that at every moment as they dusted furniture or peeled vegetables or washed dishes, their thoughts were supposed to be lifted to the things of God. It was impossible to think about God for all that length of time, however, and Sister Lucy’s face burned whenever she remembered the time the Sister Cook had upbraided her for leaving dried bits of porridge on the sides of a pot. She had been gazing at the crooked, water-stained picture of St. Anne and Our Lady above the sink as she swished the washrag around the pot. Our Lady was about six years old in the picture, golden-haired, and she held a book in one hand and a lily in the other, and already wore a halo. Drying the pot, Sister Lucy thought about herself at the age of six, dressing her dolls and making mud pies, knowing nothing about God. Then, as she watched the dishwater swirl down the drain, wondering what things Our Lady would be thinking about at that moment, the cook, who had a fiery temper, thrust the pot at her and told her to clean the blessed thing properly. It wasn’t too much to ask of a novice, was it, that a simple pot be scraped clean? The cook’s words hung in the air as Sister Lucy’s eyes stung with tears and her small piece of steel wool scratched against the dried porridge on the inside of the pot. Sometimes everything was so hard.

But at recreation the novices laughed and talked nonsense. Although she herself was always a little afraid to speak out much lest she say the wrong thing, she loved the easy laughter and felt an anxious thrill whenever Sister Mary Alma used slang words like “darn” that weren’t allowed, or skirted the edges of what seemed proper to talk about. Like the time she had said, “Does anyone know the joke about Jesus and the woman caught in adultery?” Sister Lucy had stiffened and sucked in her breath, but Mother Alphonsine had simply looked over the top of her glasses at the

novice and said, "Edification, Sister, edification," and had smoothly changed the topic, telling the group about some boring old thing the bishop had just written in the diocesan paper.

"What if," said Sister Mary Alma now, still carrying on, "the tall dark stranger is the devil-l-l—," she lengthened the word dramatically, "—tempting you?"

The next morning Sister Lucy knelt briefly at the back of the chapel. Around her, other nuns and novices were also kneeling, in no particular order, and then each in turn bent forward to kiss the floor before getting up and making her way to her place. Sister Lucy bent and touched her lips to the polished wood of the floor. A faint smell of paste wax mingled in her nostrils with the tingling sensation of dust. She breathed a sigh of relief that she wasn't on chapel cleaning duty this week and thus wouldn't be the one to hear from Mother Alphonsine about the poorly mopped floor. Then she stood and walked up the side aisle. A bare light bulb burned at the back. The rest of the chapel was dim, and at the top, the sanctuary was in darkness except for the shadows cast by the red sanctuary lamp hanging in front of the altar and the votive lamps that flickered at the side altars of Our Lady and St. Joseph. The main altar stood bare, devoid of flowers, and even in the dim light Sister Lucy could tell that the curtain covering the tabernacle was a dull purple, the color of penance and mourning.

Normally, Sister Lucy loved this time in the early morning. Every day at five a.m. the shrill sound of an electric bell rang through the corridor outside the dormitories. In the novices' dormitory, the novice whose bed was closest to the light switch bounded up at the sound of the bell, turned on the light, and called out, "Praise be to Jesus." All round the dormitory, muffled by sleep and the white curtains that separated the beds, came the response, "Amen," as feet hit the floor. She couldn't honestly say she liked that particular moment of springing out of bed, but once she was up she felt happy. She loved the early morning silence, the hushed sound of nuns hurrying to morning prayer and meditation, the darkened corridors, the grey winter light of the chapel. She loved the prayer of adoration in the silence of her own heart, followed by a kiss on the floor. It was an earthy act, humble and simple. The whole early morning ritual reminded her of the early Christians making their way to the catacombs of Rome in the dead of night.

Today, however, was Ash Wednesday, and she felt the same flatness inside that she had felt yesterday evening. It was as if there were no joy or beauty anywhere; everything was drab and colourless. At the end of Mass the nuns and novices would file up to the communion rail, where the priest would move from one to another dipping his thumb into a crystal dish of black ashes, his wide purple vestment like a board against his back, white sparse hair limp on his head. His thumb would inscribe a gritty cross just below the white band that stretched across each forehead as he mumbled a Latin phrase that meant, "Remember, man, that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return." She sighed and knelt down at her place, looking ahead at the bare and darkened sanctuary.

When morning prayers were finished, the reading of the first point of meditation began. A nun, standing at the back of the chapel under the burning light bulb, read from a meditation book. Her voice was clipped and precise. "Place yourself with Adam at the moment of his condemnation, as he hears the humiliating words, *Dust thou art and unto dust thou shalt return.*"

Sister Lucy tried to picture Adam and Eve leaving Paradise. "We always begin our meditation," Mother Alphonsine had said, "by establishing the composition of place—that is, we use our imaginations to place ourselves in the middle of the scene." From the time she had first heard the story of Adam and Eve, Sister Lucy had always pictured Paradise as the backyard of her family's home. The tree of good and evil from which the pair had eaten the forbidden fruit was the large oak tree that had cast shade over the lawn in the summer, had served as home base for hide-and-seek, and had been the place where every spring a robin's nest appeared. She saw Adam and Eve, heads bowed, getting up from a spot under the tree, walking out the gate of the backyard, wearing leaves as clothes, their hair long and unkempt, their faces and limbs covered with dirt. "Unto dust thou shalt return." She looked at the dark sanctuary, the dull purple of the tabernacle curtain, the shadows cast by the vigil lights. There was nothing else to think about. What a shallow meditation. What if Mother Alphonsine asked her about it during the instruction period today? She would have nothing impressive to reveal. She thought back to yesterday's meditation review.

The meditation review always occurred during the novice mistress's morning instruction. The long table, moved to the back of the room during recreation, stood in its normal position, stretch-

ing down from the novice mistress's desk. The novices sat on either side of the table, their heads bowed and their hands folded on their laps. Yesterday, as Mother Alphonsine talked, Sister Lucy had looked as she usually did at the patterns in the brown oilcloth covering the table. A configuration of dots in front of her formed a straight line that ended in the join of two curves. It reminded her of the pipe stuck in between the toothless gums of Popeye. Another curve of dots underneath could be taken to form the sailor-man's soft jowls. She remembered how she and her younger brother used to fight over the Sunday comics after the nine o'clock Mass, often tearing the pages in their tussle so that the pieces had to be spread on the floor and placed together like a jigsaw puzzle. A small series of dots above Popeye's pipe now looked for all the world like the outline of his sailor cap. She wondered why she hadn't noticed him in the oilcloth before.

Mother Alphonsine had then broken into her thoughts: "Will someone now please review a meditation from last week." Sister Lucy could feel the novice mistress's eyes moving down one line and up the other. She clenched her hands together in her lap. "Sister Geraldine," Mother Alphonsine intoned.

Sister Lucy relaxed and, her head still bowed, glanced across the table at the novice who had just been singled out. Sister Geraldine had a pale, expressionless face that reminded Sister Lucy of a plaster cast. Her chin receded into the folds of linen underneath.

"Mother, the meditation I remember from last week was on the healing of the woman with the discharge of blood, from chapter eight of St. Luke." Sister Geraldine had turned in her chair to face the novice mistress. There was an intense tone in her voice. "The crowd around Jesus is huge, and they're all trying to get close to Him to hear what He has to say, so they're kind of jostling each other, and you can imagine that He's having trouble walking, just getting ahead, with all the people on all sides of Him." She paused.

"Yes, I like the sound of this. Go on," said Mother Alphonsine.

"And then there's this woman who barges up to Him. And, Mother, can you imagine what it must have been like for her? She sees Jesus ahead of her. He's an important man, too important for her to talk to. Maybe she's a peasant woman, of a lower class. Maybe she's not very well educated and doesn't know what to say. Maybe no one knows about her disease. Or else maybe it's impossible to control and she always has embarrassing blood stains that she can't do anything about—you know, Mother?" Sister Geraldine's

face looked pleading, as if she were desperate to convince the novice mistress.

“Thank you, Sister. That is a very vivid composition of place,” said Mother Alphonsine. She sounded less enthusiastic than she had been earlier. Sister Lucy tried to keep her head bowed, but her eyes were riveted on the other novice’s face.

“And Mother—,” Sister Geraldine continued to look over at Mother Alphonsine, “—well, she has these embarrassing blood stains, and, well, you know, a lot of women have trouble with their periods when they get older. They have a heavy flow, and there’s a lot of pain sometimes, I know because my mother had a lot of trouble with it, and I bet that’s what this woman had—”

“Thank you, Sister,” Mother Alphonsine interrupted.

Sister Geraldine’s pale face had become flushed and animated. “You can just imagine, Mother, how hard it would be to ask a man for help for that kind of a problem. Not only that, but in those days women were considered impure during menstruation. So she should have been an outcast, and yet, here she goes and creeps up behind Jesus, she maneuvers her hand through the crowd of people, and she touches His cloak.”

“Yes, Sister.” Mother Alphonsine clipped the end of each syllable, her tone sharp.

Sister Lucy watched Sister Geraldine’s face as it receded once again with an impassive expression into the folds of linen. She had been gripped by Sister Geraldine’s meditation review. Try as she might to make up vivid compositions of place in her meditations, hers were flat in comparison. Listening to the other novice, she felt that she was right there in the crowd with Jesus and the suffering woman. But obviously, certain things were off limits in meditation. It was best to stick with Jesus Himself, keeping the meditation focus on Him, trying to see the expression on His face and the look in His eyes, trying to watch His actions and hear His words.

But Jesus didn’t appear in today’s meditation. She sat down, stared at the tabernacle curtain for a few moments, and then knelt again. “Dust thou art and unto dust thou shalt return.” What more could she do with it? How long did it take for a human body to become dust? She thought about her grandmother, now dead a year, lying in her coffin beneath the ground, her skin disintegrating, the eyes gone, the bones revealed, maggots crawling in and out of the body that had once been warm, that had held her as a small child. Her grandmother’s clothes had likely disintegrated too,

all worldly vanity torn and eaten by the small creatures of the earth, leaving only naked, rotting flesh. She shuddered and sighed deeply, blinking a few times. It was a morbid thought, but what else was there to think about on Ash Wednesday, that day above all others when you think about your own death and your decaying body that one day will be nothing but dust? She breathed a prayer of thanks that she had come here, to this place, where she was surrounded by women who vowed themselves to loving God and praying for the world. But today, even the glorious thought of heroism wasn't enough to lighten the grey prospect of Lent.

For the rest of the day the novices went about their tasks with the sign of ashes on their foreheads, and every time Sister Lucy looked at the others, she noticed the dirty smudge between their eyebrows, the sign of their death. She felt hungry all day; although their mid-day dinner was a normal-sized meal, they'd had only a piece of bread for breakfast, and for supper only bread and cheese. But at least Mother Alphonsine had not asked for a meditation review.

“Jesus walks into the garden of olives to pray at the start of His Passion, and there, as He lies prostrate in agony, His sweat becomes as drops of blood trickling on the ground.” The reader paused, her voice sounding precise and without expression from beneath the bare light bulb at the back of the chapel. “His agony was the more terrible and cruel because it was not the effect of physical exhaustion, but of an interior struggle between feeling and the will.”

Sister Lucy felt the stillness of the kneeling bodies around her. The points for meditation now, as Lent progressed, invited them all to follow the way of the cross, walking with Jesus step by step on the path to His death. The reader continued: “Imagine you see Him bathed in blood and beg for courage and perseverance in the spiritual combat.”

Sister Lucy knelt and stared awhile at the grey shadows cast by the early morning light in the sanctuary. It pleased her to have a concrete image of Jesus to think about. She pictured Him walking up the hill to the garden, the gnarled olive trees that she had seen in pictures giving the garden a dark and brooding cast.

She imagined herself describing the scene to Mother Alphonsine: “I see Jesus all alone in the garden, leaning against a rock, Mother. It's nighttime, so all you can see are dark shadows,

and Jesus is in a sweat, and the sweat becomes blood, and you can see His face now covered with it. You know how it is when you're sweating, Mother, how you feel sticky all over, and since Jesus is kneeling on the ground, it's probably dusty, and the dust and grime are getting clogged into His face and hands, and He can taste the awful taste of it, and His clothes are soaked with blood. It's nighttime, so the air is probably chilly, and when you get a chill with wet clothes, it's—well, you know what it's like, Mother. And there He is, all alone. His friends have all abandoned Him, and He's reaching out to God. He's weeping, and His eyes are red and swollen, and tears are streaking down His face, and He's stretching out His hands that are covered with blood." It was a vivid meditation so far. Mother Alphonsine would like it.

The reader broke through Sister Lucy's musings. "This bloody sweat makes us understand what was passing in the soul of Jesus during His agony; how violent was the struggle; the battle between what He felt like and what He was being called to! See how great is His love that He would endure such things."

Sister Lucy sat down. The reader's words echoed through her: the battle between what He felt like and what He was called to. What was she called to at this moment? She was called to sit with Jesus in His agony, knowing that He was heading toward death, clinging to the belief that His death contained the seeds of life. She felt lazy and worthless. In her meditation she had done nothing more than conjure up vivid imaginings of Jesus to impress Mother Alphonsine and the other novices. She was a charlatan and her meditation nothing but a sham. She was no better than Jesus's disciples who had been with Him in His agony and yet still betrayed and abandoned Him. Of what use was her being in the convent, with the sacrifices and the monotony of it all and the repetitive and boring existence, where one strived for perfection and failed at every moment? What use was it if she did nothing but make a show of herself? She imagined the face of Jesus, His eyes looking at her with reproach through bloody strands of hair. It was too much. There was nothing she could do. She might as well forget about meditation. She was nothing but a pile of manure crawling with worms and maggots. She closed her eyes and again in her imagination saw the face of Jesus, the blood pouring out of him now, and flowing over the small creatures that were making a feast of her body. His blood mingled with the blood of the woman with the hemorrhage, and the blood all flowed together, the blood

drained out of her grandmother too. The pool of blood was rising, and into it flowed all the blood of everyone, everywhere, all in a struggle between feeling and will, between death and life, all mingled with the blood of Jesus. She swallowed and imagined the taste of blood in her mouth. And then she knelt.

She kept kneeling, her eyes fixed on the dull purple of the tabernacle curtain, until the overhead lights went on and the bell rang to signal the priest's arrival for Mass. Her body felt light, weightless.

"Sister Lucy?"

Sister Lucy lifted her eyes from the pattern of dots on the brown oilcloth. "Yes, Mother?"

"Can you tell us about your meditation this morning?"

Sister Lucy swallowed and glanced across at the still bodies facing her, their eyes downcast. "Well, Mother, Jesus was suffering in agony." She struggled to think clearly. Her mind had been on an itchy spot on the side of her face, inside from where the starched linen held firm against her cheek. "His sweat was like blood," she began. "He was praying on his knees." She stopped, trying to remember the reader's words from this morning's meditation, but there was nothing but blankness. She looked down at her hands. They were clenched, the fingers of each pressed into the palm of the other. Around her the novices sat motionless. The room was filled with silence. "He was, uh, He was in the garden of olives."

The table swam in front of her, a mass of brown liquid. She unclenched her hands and lay them loosely on her lap. "I'm sorry, Mother," she mumbled.

After a moment, Mother Alphonsine spoke. "No one, of course, knows what goes on between God and the soul during the time of meditation, but one thing is sure: we must put all our human faculties at God's disposal. We must try and use our imaginations better, Sister Lucy." There was a weary, pitying tone in the novice mistress's voice.

"Yes, Mother," said Sister Lucy. Her hands were now resting open and relaxed on her lap. She was surprised that Mother Alphonsine's rebuke washed through her with barely a ripple. She had seen Jesus suffering in the garden, she had really seen Him, and that was enough.

She looked back down at the brown oilcloth. Once again the patterns of dots were evident. One set of dots seemed to bear a faint resemblance to the head of Dagwood Bumstead, several small dots forming lines like the two straight strands of his hair. Of all the comics, *Blondie* had been her favourite. Just below the dots were two dark spots that she imagined as Dagwood's oval-shaped eyes, set in perpetual astonishment. She thought of the crazy things he was always doing—getting caught in the bathtub, diving down the clothes chute, making a mad dash for the morning bus with his shirttails flying.

For a brief second she smiled, then brought her mouth back into a straight line again, her face in serious repose.