

PASTS AND PRESENTS

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The Rose Garden

YOU HAD TO WATCH the young ones; they'd as soon trample on your roses as blink at you. They were bold as brass, with their lips an unnatural red and the skirts of their uniforms too high above their knees. Sister Adeline shook her head and bent over to examine the roses more closely. The older ones, the senior girls, weren't so bad. Often they said, "Hello, Sister," and smiled genuine smiles. But these young ones, the fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds, they were a dreadful lot.

She had caught three of them just now, doing who knows what, coming from who knows where. The three-forty bell had just sounded, marking the end of the school day, and all the other girls were clattering their way out of the main door, on the street side of the school. These three were alone in the courtyard that separated the school from the convent. As she emerged from the school, she saw them walking in and out among the bushes in her rose garden, as bold as you please.

"Get away from my roses!" The words had come out of her mouth, unbidden, in a screech. She had charged toward them, her head thrust forward, in one hand her purse and in the other her umbrella, held like a bayonet. You couldn't let anything go with these beauties, or they'd take quick advantage.

"*Get a-way from my ro-zzuzz!*" mocked one of the girls in a high-pitched voice. She couldn't tell which one had said it, but the three of them had gone off, giggling and lolling all over each other, a mangle of hair and big teeth and gangly legs.

Sister Adeline heaved a sigh and, stabbing at the pavement with the point of her umbrella, surveyed her rose garden. It was a

perfect little oasis, a surprise, a miracle in the midst of the unrelenting asphalt and brick of the courtyard.

She settled her purse and umbrella in the crook of her arm and continued making her way across the courtyard. She had found both possessions in the Poor Box, a large bin of items that came in regularly for the down-and-outers who often came to the convent door. The purse, black with a gold clasp and a single arm strap, held the key to the school's second-floor Home Economics room, an extra hankie, and a rosary. The umbrella was tall and black, with a curved handle and a long point at the bottom. She found that the umbrella served various useful purposes, like stirring up the dirt around the base of her roses, or picking up odd twigs from the ground and papers from the floor, or sorting down to the bottom of the Poor Box. Having an umbrella meant that she didn't have to bend so much, and this helped considerably, since her back was getting more and more stiff from arthritis. This way, too, she was never caught off guard whenever rain started to sprinkle as she was crossing the courtyard.

She entered the convent door and turned left to the kitchen. Sister Kate, the cook, was bustling about, half-walking, half-running, her white smock spotted with food stains, her black veil askew on unkempt, brown-grey hair.

"My God, Addie, is it that time already?" Sister Kate lifted a huge pot from the stove and took it over to the sideboard.

Sister Adeline allowed herself to smile with satisfaction. You could set your clock by Sister Adeline's exact punctuality. Every day at ten minutes to four she arrived in the kitchen for her afternoon cup of tea. She always arrived on the dot, not a minute before, not a minute after. Even her encounter with the girls just now had set her back only a second or two.

"They're getting more bold and brazen every year," she said, setting her lips once more in a stern line. She lifted the kettle from the back of the stove and headed toward the sink. "They have no discipline. I try my best to teach these girls what it means to be young ladies, but if the others do nothing, if all they do is get mathematics and science into their heads and pay no attention to the girls' deportment, what good are my efforts? The new-style religious instruction is useless at making the girls into even decent human beings, let alone good Christians. It means nothing to be a St. Monica's girl any more." Still holding her purse and umbrella in

the crook of her arm, she lifted the kettle, now full, with both hands and carried it back to the stove.

“Ah, poor Addie. What is it they’ve done now?” Sister Kate asked over her shoulder as she headed out toward the storage bins.

“They’re all over my roses.” Sister Adeline stood in front of the stove looking at the kettle.

She heard Sister Kate let out a whooping laugh from the back and immediately her body tightened. “I might have known it was interference with your roses that got you so worked up,” said the cook, still chuckling as she emerged back into the kitchen. “And aren’t they a fearless lot now if they’re doing that! I know for a fact I wouldn’t have it in me to as much as breathe on your roses. I’d be afraid of getting a smack with your umbrella.”

Sister Adeline drew in her lips and kept her eyes fixed on the kettle. Sometimes it was best to say nothing, to keep your own counsel. Sister Kate always had an answer to everything, even when you didn’t want an answer.

As the water in the kettle began to boil, Sister Adeline walked over to a shelf and took down a brown teapot. She placed it beside the sink, and with both hands, poured water from the kettle into it, then slowly swished the water around the inside of the pot and emptied it into the sink. She measured out a heaping spoonful of tea leaves from a can, put them into the pot, poured water over them and stood by the sink as the tea brewed. No one else could make tea to Sister Adeline’s satisfaction as well as she did herself.

After her tea had brewed and she had poured it into a cup with milk, she moved over to a kitchen stool near the door. Carefully, she leaned the umbrella against the wall, and still holding her purse in the crook of her arm, she balanced the cup as she sat down on the stool.

Sister Kate continued to fly about the kitchen. She made tasty meals, Sister Kate did, but she tended to be uncouth and offhand, given to calling the nuns nicknames of her own devising. She also tended to be untidy, something that galled Sister Adeline, who carefully inspected every single item of food that passed through Sister Kate’s hands. She knew that sooner or later she would find, strung somewhere through the food, a brown-grey hair from Sister Kate’s head. It was simply a matter of time.

She was proud of her own appearance—too thin, perhaps, but well-groomed and tidy. Her plain black suit was always pressed

and free of lint, her white blouse always clean. Her hair, mostly covered by the black veil, was a dark grey. She felt pleased that her hair had retained its thickness through all the years of wearing the undercap of the old habit. It was quite pretty hair, actually, unlike the unfortunate wisps on the heads of some of the nuns, and certainly nothing like the bird's nest that was Sister Kate's hair.

"The buds are perfectly formed," she said into the silence. "The rain has done its job on them."

"Ah, that's good, Addie," said Sister Kate. The cook knew nothing about flowers, of course. She knew only about kitchen matters. "Will you have a slice of soda bread now?" she asked. "It's freshly baked."

Sister Adeline shook her head. "I can't eat. My stomach's in knots. Those bold things!" She pursed her lips and took a sip of tea. "And of course the precious Queen Bee does nothing but smile and talk on about the Catholic education authorities."

"The Queen Bee" was Sister Kate's nickname—which Sister Adeline had adopted—for Sister Beatrice, the rose-cheeked, patrician principal, who was forever lost in her own importance and her administrative claptrap. She was always quoting Monsignor So-and-So or Father This-and-That. The clerics in question were now the experts on the newfangled education nonsense out of the Vatican Council. Never mind that the nuns had built the Catholic schools from nothing. Never mind that thanks to the religious vows, the nuns' lifeblood poured through the classrooms and school corridors year after year. Never mind that all the Catholic lawyers, doctors, priests—even the bishop himself—the nuns had educated every one of them, wiping their noses, giving them lessons in elocution and debating, coaching their games, drumming grammar and mathematics into them. But oh no, the Monsignors now knew best about how to run the schools, and pretty nuns like Sister Beatrice blushed and bowed their swan necks to them like simpering school-girls while they huffed and puffed about the education apostolate.

"In my time it wouldn't have been like this," said Sister Adeline, looking at her teacup. "In those days it was the children who counted—making them into decent people, not the snippy things they've become nowadays. They could take a lesson from—" She stopped, feeling Sister Kate's eyes upon her, and stared down at the milky brown liquid in her cup. She compressed her lips. Certain matters were not to be spoken of.

Sister Kate walked toward her, wiping her hands on her apron. She stood close to Sister Adeline. "When all's said and done, Addie, isn't that always the way? In your day—"

"I'll thank you to leave my day out of it!" Sister Adeline snapped. "I didn't have a day. I have only the wretched time of it now, trying to teach youngsters how to cut out a pattern and sew a straight seam, and putting up with their impudence. And to what purpose? To what purpose, Sister Kate? So they can remember the crotchety old thing they laughed at as youngsters?"

"Addie, when they're grey like you and me, when life has taken a bite out of them, they'll understand, so they will. They'll be sorry." Sister Kate moved back across the kitchen.

Sister Adeline was silent. There was nothing more to be said. She finished her tea and washed her teacup, shook the pleats of her skirt, picked up her umbrella and left the kitchen.

She emerged into the courtyard again and made her way across toward the school. This was a lovely moment of the day, one she didn't want to miss with talk that went nowhere. In the few years since the Vatican Council, everything had been turned topsy-turvy. Nothing was predictable any more. The modified habit was welcome, as was the freedom to have an afternoon cup of tea, to watch television, to do a modest bit of shopping the odd time. But when it came to other matters—the lax attitude toward the girls, the believe-what-you-want-to approach to doctrine, the glibness of the younger nuns who were being educated in the Church's new ways of thinking—these things agitated Sister Adeline. Everything you could count on was being thrown out, she was convinced of it. Only her rose garden remained constant.

The courtyard was still. The girls had all likely gone home, except for a few diligent ones who had stayed behind to do extra work, the ones you could be proud of. There was free time now, quiet time before evening prayers. Passing her rose garden, Sister Adeline did a careful half circle, examining and poking with her umbrella. The roses were indeed in the first flush of their beauty, ready to open their petals: deep pinks, brilliant reds, and a few yellows with pale creamy tips. She smiled down at them.

As she approached the school door, she heard a young girl's voice from inside. The voice was laced with giggles. "She looked like a witch. Oh, Sister, you should have seen her. She came at us like this—" The voice stopped and was immediately followed by a chorus of adolescent laughter.

Another voice continued: "And she got hys-*ter*-ical. We were—" The first voice joined in again, and an explosion of laughter prevented Sister Adeline from hearing anything further.

She drew herself up straight and prepared to walk into the building when a bland adult voice broke in. "You don't really mean to make fun of Sister Adeline, do you, girls?"

Sister Adeline looked up toward the open window from which the voices came. It was Sister Donaldda's classroom, the first one off the corridor on the first floor. The girls liked Sister Donaldda. She was soft and mamby-pamby. She made no demands. Her classes were a dog's breakfast, all talk and no discipline. "The poor kids," Sister Donaldda always said, wrinkling her forehead with worry every time Sister Adeline complained about the lowering of standards in the school. With Sister Donaldda it was always kids this and kids that. Her language had so deteriorated that it was now on a level with that of the pupils. "They're so mixed up these days," she always went on with a weepy drip in her voice. "They have to make decisions about things we never even imagined. They have to decide whether to take drugs or not. They have to decide how far to go with their boyfriends. These decisions are forced on them at far too young an age."

Once, only once, Sister Donaldda had even said the word "sex" as she mooned away on the joys and sorrows of the brazen beauties, her brow furrowed as usual. This happened at the dinner table, if you please, in the middle of dessert. "Girls nowadays have much more freedom to talk openly about sex," she said, or something to that effect ("freedom" was one of those words Sister Donaldda loved to bounce up and down like an India rubber ball). She, Sister Adeline, had immediately risen from the table, her dessert half eaten, collected her purse and umbrella from the back of her chair, and with these two possessions clanging and bumping against the chairs of the other nuns, had stamped out of the refectory.

"You don't really want to be mean to Sister Adeline, do you?" she was saying now in a pleading voice. Sister Adeline could imagine the furrows between the eyebrows, the pale face, the yellowish fringe of hair held in place by the black veil. The girlish voices were silent. "She's been through such—"

Sister Donaldda's voice stopped suddenly. Sister Adeline stood rigid, her feet like lead.

There was silence above her. Then one of the girls spoke, in an inquisitive voice this time. "What do you mean, Sister?"

“Well, I really shouldn’t say.” Sister Donaldda’s voice was hesitant. “But Sister Adeline was once the principal of St. Peter’s in the east end of the city, back in the days when poverty was rampant out there. She started the school from scratch. She was a wonderful” Her voice faded in and out. “How unfortunate it was, you know, in those days ... and then Sprucewood”

Sister Adeline sucked in her breath and, with her right hand, held on tightly to the smooth curved handle of her umbrella, still tucked in the crook of her left arm. She watched, unseeing, as on the brick wall of the school a spider made its way up through the crevices and crumbling bits. Reverend Mother’s blurred nose appeared. That was what Sister Adeline always saw when the moment returned in her memory: Reverend Mother’s nose. Her face had been turned toward the window, the black veil that fell over the side of her face hiding everything except the protruding nose, brown and motley with blackheads and little bumps.

I don’t understand, Mother. You mean I’m leaving tonight?

On the nine o’clock train. Your trunk has been packed. A car will be at the station tomorrow morning to take you to Sprucewood.

There had never been a chance to say goodbye, especially to the children she had taken under her wing. The little slow boy with the brilliant sister—what was his name? Gregory?—the one who followed her around and for whom she had set up special lessons. Whatever happened to him? And the janitor whose wife had that dreadful disease. There’d been no chance to alter the school accounts after she’d slipped the couple of hundred dollars to him. She never knew if the absence of that money had ever been found out.

You know very well you’ve taken liberties far beyond what’s allowed. You’ve violated the Rules of the Order. Mingling with the secular teachers. Visiting families in their homes. Giving the children a day to play games without permission.

Yes, Mother.

She needed to be reined in. Our Lady of the Spruce—known as Sprucewood—would do the business. A secluded boarding school deep in the countryside—a finishing school, really. A school that would teach snobbish girls to be young ladies. To learn the proper fork to use at meals. Sprucewood was the legacy from a wealthy industrialist, and even though the nuns’ quarters were in the basement, which was often dampish, the house and grounds were beautiful indeed—a far cry from the pavement and roughness of the

city. But still There she had languished until her move to St. Monica's as a teacher of—of history? mathematics? English? She could have put her hand to teaching any subject, and taught it well. But oh, no—a teacher of sewing. The final turn of the screw of humiliation.

There were moments, brief only, when she felt that doing some fine handwork, like the smocking on a child's dress, or teaching a girl to thread a machine and turn up a straight hem—moments when whatever she was doing was all that mattered, as important in its own way as lifting an underprivileged child out of ignorance. After all, everything done under holy obedience was of equal importance, no matter what it was. Nothing really mattered except God's will, and God's will was made known through the voice of the Superior. Nowadays, though, obedience didn't mean the same thing. Nowadays, obedience seemed to mean doing what you wanted and then scratching your brain for reasons to justify it.

Sister Donalda's voice continued in an inaudible drone. What more had she said to these young things? What right did she have to divulge anything at all? Sister Adeline whirled her umbrella down, and it skidded to standing position on the ground. She opened her mouth as if to emit a roar, squared her shoulders, and then marched toward the school door.

As she reached the first-floor landing, the staircase door opened and hushed voices became suddenly silent. She kept her eyes down as she rounded the landing, and saw only some thin bits of legs and knobby knees. The girls stood aside to let her pass. She mumbled her thanks, and as they clambered down the stairs they began whispering again between themselves.

The door to Sister Donalda's classroom was open. She was alone at her desk. At the entrance, Sister Adeline struck the floor with the point of her umbrella, the sound reverberating down the empty corridor.

"You have no right to say anything about me to those girls!" Her voice sounded like a screech. Her body felt tight, her face muscles taut. She felt herself swaying and clutched the curve of the umbrella handle more tightly.

Sister Donalda looked up in surprise. Her marshmallow face went all soft and silly as her jaw dropped and her mouth fell open. She looked like the village idiot.

"Oh, Sister," she said finally, after her lower lip had lifted so that it no longer sagged. "Oh, Sister, I'm—"

"Those girls will be the death of me. They do nothing but taunt me." Sister Adeline's body was shaking now.

"No, Sister, they're silly girls, that's all. They're no different from the hundreds of silly girls you and I have taught for the past thirty years. No different. They'll mature into quite lovely women, just like others have done before them. What's different is perhaps that you and I are getting older. Their young energy is beyond us." Sister Donalda smiled, her dull teeth giving her face a beige look.

"That's all well and good. But you have no right to be talking about my business to the girls. You leave my affairs alone!" Sister Adeline had lowered her voice, but she could hear the tremors in it.

"You're right, I shouldn't have. I just thought—"

"It wouldn't have been like that in the old days. Back then we protected each other. No one would have said a word about another community member, especially to one of the girls. Now there is no loyalty to anyone anymore. A person doesn't know where she stands at all." Her voice was now a wail.

"Sister, sit down. You've been upset," Sister Donalda cooed, as if she was trying to soothe a baby.

"They trample my roses, they look hard at me, they treat me like I'm nobody. They should treat me as I deserve—as someone consecrated to God! Does this fact count for nothing any more?"

"Times are changing fast, Sister Adeline." Sister Donalda turned and looked toward the window. Her veil was unkempt at the back. There were smudges of chalk dust on it. "We need to face the reality that we are no longer doing what we once did. That the relationship between teachers and pupils is changing—becoming more informal. Now that we have modified our habit, we have become more accessible to the children. We're not seen so much as creatures from another planet. We're looked upon as human beings. I remember you yourself saying when we got rid of the old habit, 'Isn't it a good thing that people will see that we have hair! Like normal people!' I remember you saying that."

Sister Adeline closed her eyes. It was too confusing altogether, this business of change.

Sister Donalda continued: "I remember you yourself saying that in the old days the demands of the Order were not even human, let alone Christian. Well, now we have the chance to try and be Christian—"

Sister Adeline was no longer listening. It was too much to bear. What if she was to leave, to just walk out the front door of the convent and not return? She'd do it with permission, of course. Nuns were getting permission to do any number of ridiculous things these days. She could go to her brother's in the country, where she'd be loved and respected. She wouldn't need much—only a room and a tiny plot to grow some roses. A few simple dresses. Nothing more. Her brother and his wife would look after her. She would still be known as Sister Adeline, of course, as anything else would be unthinkable after all these years. She would no longer have to put up with the likes of Sister Donalda, and she'd be rid of the girls with their mocking eyes and big red lips, girls who knew nothing of the ideals of Catholic womanhood. She would be in her own little world. Before leaving, she would destroy her rose garden, dig round and round the bushes with her umbrella until they were uprooted. Then she would stamp on each flower, crushing the petals into the pavement until there was nothing left but the roots sticking up in the air. That's what she would do with the beauty she had created, beauty that nobody appreciated.

She felt Sister Donalda's solid presence and opened her eyes to see the other nun in front of her, her hand reaching for Sister Adeline's arm.

"Sister, come and—" Sister Donalda began.

"Leave me alone!" she yelled. She lifted her umbrella, thrust it in Sister Donalda's direction, and began to thrash the air. She saw Sister Donalda flinch and swerve her head, a startled look in her eyes, her bits of pale yellow hair standing on end.

"Is anyone there?" Sister Donalda called out. "Come here! Quick! Help me!" Her voice rose in panic. At the same time, Sister Adeline felt herself falling over, losing her balance. Her umbrella was still jabbing the air. The scrape of a chair sounded from the next classroom, then footsteps in the corridor. "Help me get her to a chair," said Sister Donalda, now out of breath.

A pair of arms steadied Sister Adeline from the other side, and she saw then the face of one of the senior girls, a slightly heavy girl with blotchy skin. Blue kneesocks covered her legs. Sister Adeline felt the umbrella being pried from her fingers. The two guided her toward Sister Donalda's desk and sat her in front of it, in an old brown wooden chair with curving arms. The desk overflowed with papers.

“Stay with her until I get some more help!” Sister Donalda ordered the girl.

Still shaking, Sister Adeline put her purse on her lap and held onto the arms of the chair to steady herself.

She watched the girl move about her, calm and efficient, her face a bit on the ugly side, but pleasant. “If you give me your purse, Sister, I’ll put it over here,” the girl said.

Sister Adeline grabbed the purse and clutched it to her chest. “No!”

The girl gave a friendly smile, showing lovely white teeth. “Okay,” she said. The way she moved, unruffled, with youthful ease, reminded Sister Adeline of herself in the early years of her religious life. An open attitude, ready for anything.

Her shaking began to diminish. She was breathing normally again, and she stood up to leave. “I’m fine now,” she said. “I don’t know what kind of spell that was.”

The girl was at her side in an instant, with a firm hand on her shoulder.

“No, wait till Sister Donalda comes back.” It was a command, gentle but authoritative. She didn’t even say “No, Sister.” It was simply “No.” Sister Adeline sat down again.

They remained like that for she didn’t know how long, but as a matter of fact it felt rather comforting just sitting there, with the girl’s hand on her shoulder.