

INVIDIA

by Adriana Renescu

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A Short Story

When I opened the door and looked through the grille separating the lightless enclosure from the visitors' parlor, I found her standing under the massive crucifix, looking up at the pale and bleeding Christ.

I remarked silently that most visitors preferred, while waiting, to contemplate the quiescent statue of Saint Therese of Lisieux that stood at the opposite wall. The young woman waiting for me that morning—older than those who usually came to our door seeking entry into Carmel—was instead staring up at the suffering Christ, apparently absorbing every detail of the deep, dark gashes and dripping blood vividly rendered with resinous, glossy paint. She held her arms straight at her side, her hands clenched. There were traces of rain drops on the shoulders of her green raincoat and the floppy hat was drenched, a few wet wisps of dark hair plastered to the nape of her neck. A purse made of some flowered fabric was slung on her shoulder. Then I saw a red rose on the table under the crucifix. The flower had not been there before this first visitor of the day.

She seemed deaf to the sound of the door, but when I purposely let the beads of the rosary hanging at my waist clank against the back of the chair, she flinched visibly and actually spun around. I stood just beyond the dappling of light falling through the grille so that in my dark brown habit and black veils I was nearly invisible.

Her gaze eagerly searched through the wooden lattice to meet mine. Her eyes shimmered with tears and her cheeks were flushed.

I always disliked such display of religious fervor. I dislike religious fervor. Period.

I took my time to come into the patch of light dribbling on the chair facing the grille. In those days a Carmelite still covered her face with a black veil when meeting strangers in the parlor of the convent. I sat down, bidding her to do the same. She faced a blank veil, which saved me from having to compose my face to conceal the dislike I felt for her.

"Reverend Mother," she spoke first and bowed to me before sitting. "Thank you for receiving me. I didn't sleep a wink last night out of joy. My heart has been dancing ever since you agreed to see me."

Nice, little rehearsed introduction. Had she written it down on a small piece of paper and secreted it in that flowered purse?

Her face—a winsome round one with hooded dark eyes, miniature mouth and surprisingly sharp nose—was luminous with excitement and anticipation. However, her hands were relaxed in her lap, the long fingers expressing great calm; her shoulders conveyed no doubts.

"I would take that hat off," I said, "before you catch a cold."

Her smile gleamed and she took off her hat, rolling it up and stashing it away in her purse. Her short hair was wet under the hat, flat on her head.

"Is that you who put the rose there?" I asked and inclined my faceless head towards the crucifix on the wall.

She lowered her gaze. "Yes, Reverend Mother."

"That was very pious of you."

Her face flushed.

"Dear Mother..." a voice breaks through the images of my distant, yet so vivid memory of that solitary red rose and the young woman's face flushed with pleasure at my supposed approval of her rose. She had missed the acrid note in my voice; and my face was covered by the veil.

Naturally. She was one of those blessed, or cursed, beings that had been born oblivious to the nastiness of the world. Or she was a great actress, completely deluded by her own acting.

"Dear Mother," the voice intrudes again.

I open my eyes with difficulty and look upon the face of Sister Martha, her chubby face encased in the white veils of a novice. With the vague light of dawn shearing through the window, comes a sharp, searing pain that cuts through me. I hear the cloister bell calling for Lauds. It as well causes me pain.

Sister Martha puts the reading glasses on my nose as my hands are too swollen, the fingers red like angry sausages, the black beads of the rosary twined around them. She raises the open prayer book for me. I shake my head. The very act of reading sends hot needles of pain through my skull. She nods and when the bell delivers its last tinkle, she starts to read the prayer aloud for me in a slight falsetto chant. I turn my head on the pillow smelling of my illness and humid with my dreams' sweat, to gaze at the patch of grey sky in the window screened by the leafless tree growing alone in the middle of

the cloister garden. The branches look like talons scraping at the surface of the heavens. It had been but a small tree when I had come to this Carmel--

"Is it today?" I ask, although I know the answer.

Sister Martha interrupts her off-key chant. "Yes. It is right now. Our dear Mother Celeste will call us as soon as it happens and we will ring the bells right along with the ones in Rome." Her voice is now breathless with excitement. She smiles beatifically.

The young ones wear that smile a lot around a cloister. That will pass as well.

As for Mother Celeste—Mother Celeste of Jesus, to be exact, the current Mother Superior: this day is her day as well; she has made this day, worked for it for fifty years. It should be a day of great consolation. She must be gorging on it while wallowing gloriously in a choreographed battle with pride. She does hide it well, though, behind a sour face of humility.

I take in a thin breath. I'm on a roll today.

"Oh, how I wish to be there for our dear rose," Sister Martha's voice drills into my skull. She looks at me intently with the hope born of an untroubled mind. "I wonder what will happen at that very moment—" She doesn't finish, too timorous to voice her hopes. "We prayed for it, all of us."

"What do you think will happen?" I slash at her against a surge of pain in the very core of my being. "The sun will stop in the sky and everyone pimples will be cured?"

Sister Martha averts her eyes and the pimples on her forehead and chin turn redder. But she smiles as she looks down on her

prayer book. Ah, one brownie point for you, Sister Martha, to add to that garland you're keeping hung on the gates of your imaginary heaven; the one you tend to so carefully, adding a pathetic flower of virtue every day.

Sister Martha looks at me with that look of compassion and love that drives me batty. "Perhaps, Reverend Mother, she will bless us with a sign for you and—"

"Curing a ninety-year-old nun," I say before she can finish her sentence, "is an un-necessary waste of a miracle, Sister Martha."

"She loved you much, dear Mother," she says soothingly. "She said that she would work hard for us to be with her. You are gaining heaven, Mother. She wants you with her, to accompany you in the presence of our Lord."

"You think?"

Sister Martha lowers her gaze on the book again. My thoughts drift back.

I was the Novice Mistress when she entered Carmel. Mother Bernard of the Trinity, the Superior at that time, had been reluctant to accept her. She never said why. The other nuns, the other twelve, who always closed ranks around their beloved Mother Bernard, did not welcome the new addition either. The reason being voiced was that a Carmelite community should not have more than a dozen or so professed nuns and a few lay sisters. She would've brought our numbers close to the canonical twenty. Perhaps that had been the real reason; but I doubted it. I was the only one who insisted that we accept her. Being her champion was for me the first battle in my long war to overcome that insistent dislike for her; one I would not be able to name to the end. Also I needed the victory of the argument with Mother Bernard of the Trinity.

Cloister politics.

A year later she started the long Carmelite path under my guidance. She hung on every word I spoke, she followed the Rule at every step, both its letter and its spirit. She obeyed and she was full of cheer. In a few months' time, she ended up being liked by everyone, gaining over even her greatest doubters. Even Mother Eustache of the Blessed Sacrament, who tolerated no one, accepted her.

There's a Mother Eustache in every cloister: old, crippled, slightly mad and waiting to meet her heavenly Groom with a very bad disposition. My new novice—now all content and glowing in her white novice veils—took on the care of Mother Eustache. She brought flowers in Mother Eustache's cell; she woke up long before Lauds to help the burdensome nun start her laborious and slow day; and that was after spending most of the night at Vigils, in front of the Holy Sacrament. She spent hours of the grand silence keeping Sister Eustache company; she performed with a smile on her face the loathsome job of changing the bandages and tending to the horrible open sores and destruction of the long drawn disease.

Everyone seemed to conspire to let her. Probably because they abhorred so much dealing with the old nun. On the other hand, the bean counters of heavenly prizes also realized that by giving her exclusive rights to Mother Eustache, they were letting her gain those special points in heaven and too many praises from visiting confessors. Within one year, she gained the cloister's instinctive and submerged hostility for showing them up by gaining the affection of Mother Eustache of the Holy Terror.

A cloister rises and falls on the shifting sands of those submerged feelings.

When she professed her final vows, I was Mother Superior. As we replaced the white veil of the novice with the black one of the Carmelite she looked radiant, her eyes shining the same they had on the day I met her in the parlor. There was no one for her in the visitors' pews. No family or friends came on the day she made her final vows. As far as I knew, she had none; or none that cared to see her become a Carmelite. It gave me pause and a momentary flicker of understanding. It did remind me of my family's absence when I had taken my vows.

She took the name of Mary of the Rose of Sharon. It was an unusual name, one that spoke of a beloved bride. The fact that she chose to use the word 'rose' instead of the 'Blessed Virgin', was an indication to me of disturbing cleverness. As she pronounced the choice of her name as a nun, I finally decided that she was a great actress. Mother Mary of the Rose of Sharon did not prove me wrong.

The perfect novice became the perfect nun. Mother Mary of the Rose of Sharon, or as everyone now called her, Mother Rose, never complained in a world where complaining was an art; she performed her duties faultlessly, her every move as if choreographed; she was 'fun,' her sense of humor without bite or irony; she was humble, giving deference to the most insufferable among us. She offended no one and she spoke no words that gave umbrage; this in a world where one innocuous word would become the eye of an acidic storm that eroded the walls of the soul. In a world seen through a magnifying glass, there was no such thing as a passing offense. Mother Mary of the Rose was the shiny jewel of our convent. She was like a bright mirror; and she was just as smooth.

Sister Martha stops reading the prayer and the sudden silence draws me out of my thoughts; and reminds me of my pain. I whimper in spite of myself. I am not dying of anything as horrible as Mother Eustache, but it is equally painful and lingering. At least I do not have to endure anymore the cloying kindness of Mother Mary of the

Rose. Sister Martha is, blessedly, a simpleton and her kindness is just that: simple kindness.

I never thought the kindness and joy of Mother Mary of the Rose were simple; I always suspected—was convinced—that they came from other than religious fervor and devotion to the Rule as an act of sacrifice that imitated Our Lord. I believed from the very beginning that it came from a consuming desire to be first, to be the center of attention, to be a bright and shining copper penny in the middle of tarnished ones; it was both vain and judgmental of others. However, such consuming thirst could only be quenched temporarily by the attention of others, becoming more parching with every praise and gesture of attention to the point that our little, humble Carmel could not contain it any more. One wondered why someone of such ambitions and desire—as I saw it to be—would choose life in a cloistered religious order, especially a Carmel, where there was nowhere to go on that path. I observed how, when she did not garner enough attention, when she was not on everyone's mind, when she was not the subject and center of every conversation during recreation when we were allowed to speak, that she seemed in pain, a pain that turned into the manipulative need to be in control of the others' feelings, to ensure herself of her place in their heart.

That the others didn't see the real Mother Mary of the Rose—although down deep, instinctively they knew; I could sense the flashes of dislike—it angered me and deeply disappointed me. That Mother Superior did not see what I saw convinced me of her inadequacy and even—may God forgive me for the thought—stupidity.

Then the day came when I was elected Mother Superior by my sisters. Mother Rose championed for my election. I knew it to be another attempt at manipulating me with her pretend love and

devotion to her old Novice Mistress; I was the last of the cloister, who had not fallen in her net of sticky psychological strings.

Once elected Mother Superior, being now responsible for the souls of my daughters in Christ, I was obliged to take action; I had to teach all my daughters the way to perfection, but I had to teach in particular Mother Rose, who was the greatest burden on my soul, a hard lesson.

As Mother Superior I held court. This may sound strange and even perverse in the humility of the Carmelite life. What one must understand is that in a cloister, in the closed world of a dozen or so isolated and confined women, where one-on-one friendships were forbidden, where the human need for affection and attachment was to be channeled exclusively towards the spiritual and invisible, the few permitted social interactions were the source of intense, disproportionate agitation, strife and personal heartache and angst. A discerning Mother Superior was expected to be aware of these undercurrents and be in control.

In our little community, Mother Superior is the focus of the nuns' affections, dislike, fear and devotion. As a strong and just Mother Superior I was loved by the nuns and they sought me out at every occasion. A good word from me brought my sisters joy; a cross word gave them great sorrow and anguish. A word from me either gave them consolation or robbed them of their peace. Those I included in my circle of advisors and helpers were grateful and contented; and happy. During those rare social interactions allowed by our Rule, such as the daily hour of recreation and work performed as a community, I gathered my circle around me. When I had important visitors, I asked my trusted nuns to be with me and share in the moments. When I was ill, or could not be up and about the convent, I allowed visits to my cell. When one of my Carmel daughters was troubled, I opened my door and heart to her. I controlled by

generously giving of myself; or, as some would put it later, by the hot and cold of my capricious personality.

Call it as you wish, but this is how I took control of Mother Mary of the Rose.

In all my years as Superior—I was voted to be the Superior many times over—I never included Mother Mary of the Rose in my circle. For many years I isolated her with the novices. Never asked her advice, never asked anything of her. She received none of my approval; or disapproval.

She never showed that she was troubled by my coldness towards her. She obeyed and performed her duties; never complained, never asked to be granted any exceptions from the Rule, although I was granting little digressions to the other nuns quite generously. The exceptions were like little gifts and meant much in a cloister of little lives. My long time trusted assistant, Mother Celeste of Jesus, disapproved.

Mother Mary of the Rose showed me unwavering deference and when the other nuns gossiped and complained about me within her hearing, she would defend me fiercely. She was unaffected by my games. Her will was strong and I admired her for it. However, I had been too long in a cloister not to know the heart of even the most secretive. I sensed her dismay and even sorrow in the way she glanced at me in the silent corridors and how she passed me, hugging the wall, her eyes downcast. This is how a Carmelite is entreated by the Rule to move through the corridors of the convent; but in her case, it was too perfect; it was contrived to shield her. I could picture her awake at night in her cell, her thoughts churning around my every gesture and word. I knew that she paced outside my room, desiring to speak with me, in tears that I was so cold to her, but not daring to knock on my door. She knew that even if I received her, it would be she who would have to break the silence.

To teach her further humility, I would summon her without cause and inquire into her well being. I knew it was torture and that she would return to her cell in tears and great turmoil. She found herself tongue-tied in my presence, which only made things worse. I also knew that she was tormented in her pride by the idea that she was leaving me with a false impression of her.

Not everyone agreed with my view of Mother Mary of the Rose. Little bits of gossip reached me that Mother Celeste of Jesus disapproved of my approach. I concluded with sorrow that Mother Celeste was simpler than I thought and apparently easily manipulated. The lack of discernment of my trusted assistant disappointed me. I could not allow her to interfere and supplant the long years of struggle with the pride of Mother Mary of the Rose. I appointed her to the secondary role of assistant Novice Mistress and thus removed her from my immediate circle and influence of Mother Mary of the Rose.

“Who could've imagined this?” Sister Martha breaks through the brittle screen of my memories. Then she says, squaring her shoulders: “The bells should ring soon.”

I turn my gaze away. “Go and join the others in the chapel. I don't need anyone.”

“Dear Mother ordered me—”

“I am tired, Sister, of all this kindness. Go.”

I let out a long sigh as Sister Martha disappears into the corridor outside the door. It sounds lamenting in the sudden emptiness around me.

I survived Mother Mary of the Rose by fifty years.

Mother Mary of the Rose died after just ten years in the convent, young and out of turn, too many years ahead of old crabs like me. She died well; spectacularly, I would say. As in everything she did, it was perfect. It was the feast of Corpus Christi—the feast of the Body and Blood of Christ. She was kneeled at the rail atop the two steps to receive communion from the hand of the priest and as she bent in great reverence over the Host and rose up, she tripped and fell backwards down the steps. I actually heard the crack of her skull. The blood came quickly and pooled around her head in a crimson halo. She died with her eyes opened, staring at the crucifix; and she died as His Body mingled with her soul, before it melted on her tongue and before any thought could soil the moment.

Not until I sat in my cell at the end of the ceremonies for a dead Carmelite, alone, speaking to the night and felt a sense of liberation that broke over me like a great wave, did I realize how much her presence, ever since that day in the parlor, had oppressed me. I felt my own self return to me, unhindered and free of her watching eyes. I was looking forward to the cloister to forget her, as she no longer passed through it, no longer spent those insufferable long hours in prayer in the chapel, or tended endlessly to her namesake in the garden, the roses. As years went by, forgetfulness seemed to finally settle in my heart and in the community. Her ghost faded, the memory of her turning more and more pale, until it seemed to be no more.

Until the day the Devil's Advocate appeared on the doorstep of our Carmel.

Mother Mary of the Rose had kept a secret spiritual journal; a secret from her superiors and her confessor; a defiance of the very essence of a Carmelite's transparent soul; an act of disobedience so deep that it made me tremble. But this knowledge came too late. It was out of my control. In spite of my vigilance, paranoia, as some

called it, I had not fully discerned the insidious peril to the souls of my community. I had failed.

As the Devil's Advocate informed me, someone—he gave me no name—had found the journal in her cell after her death. That 'someone' had kept the secret from me as well. That 'someone' had to be one of the nuns for whom I cared so much while Mother Superior. A deep distrust and resentment seeped into my heart and as a result, in the cloister. The feeling of betrayal was bitter poison. Loneliness closed around me.

Only when all records of the inquiry into the life of Mother Mary of the Rose were released did I learn that it had been Mother Celeste of Jesus who had found the diary. It was she who had read it, kept silent about it and then sent it out of the convent to be examined by priests and men of learning. Mother Celeste became the promoter while I was the persecutor of Mother Mary of the Rose. The events that followed brought, through her, glory and praise to this convent. My work and toil had been discarded.

I had forgotten, in my proud security, how deadly the submerged thoughts of a cloister could be. That the existence of the journal, its contents and its fate had been kept from me for all those years, meant that my belief that I was much loved and respected had been a sad illusion. That the priests and bishop would take the diary and what it said seriously, was a shock to me so strong that I broke down. My ranting and flights of temper, my erratic behavior, all meant to awaken them all from their madness, threw the community in confusion and near anarchy. That her name reached Rome and be called Blessed, undid me; it was the very hand of God that took the hammer and anvil to break me.

What had she done that had been more heroic than any other Carmelite? Didn't we all pray? Haven't we all sacrificed our freedom and even such simple indulgences as warm slippers in the winter for

the sins of the world and for the love of God? Haven't we all suffered the intense life of a cloister? Why was Mother Mary of the Rose so much better than any of us?

Our superior, the bishop, had to step in and order me to rest and recollect myself, to find peace. He removed me from my post of Superior and placed Mother Celeste in my place.

Cloister politics.

Years later I looked into the eyes of the Devil's Advocate—a Spanish Dominican priest who carried with him the smell of rooms filled with old books—and I told him: “She was a Carmelite nun who did nothing much in her short life.”

He smiled. I knew that he understood.

“Have you read her spiritual journal, Reverend Mother?” His hand was on the cover of the published version of the diary.

“I suppose she did do something in addition to any of my dear daughters in Carmel,” I answered. “She wrote a diary. In secret.”

The Devil's Advocate, true to his calling, countered, “So did Saint Therese of Lisieux.”

“How does she compare with St. Therese?” I asked tartly.

He didn't answer immediately. He was on my side, I knew. He didn't like Mother Mary of the Rose either; the same visceral dislike. In a while, I said, “St. Therese of Lisieux was ordered by her superiors to write down her spiritual thoughts.”

He nodded.

I spoke again. "As her novice mistress and then as her superior for many years, I saw a good natured, cheerful and loving daughter and sister. I must admit that I thought it all came too easy for her—prayer, obedience, love. There seemed to be no sacrifice, no struggle, no dark night of the soul; no doubt."

"Have you read her *diary*, Reverend Mother?"

"No," I answered. "I don't see any need. She wrote it in secret, therefore not for my eyes."

The Devil's Advocate smiled that thin, comprehending smile of his. "Nevertheless, I entreat you to read it now."

I stiffened my back, but I obeyed.

I was right in my reluctance. It shattered the certainty of my convictions. I knew from where my dislike came. I never knew...

She wrote of herself, page after page.

How predictable. The center of the Universe...

She wrote from the beginning, starting with her first memory of herself. A memory of shouting father, crying mother, screaming siblings. Abandon and death. Foster homes. Misery and abuse. Loneliness. No love. Need for family and love.

How predictable.

It was a journal that revealed a profound struggle with faith and heroic endeavor to climb Carmel in spite of darkness, doubts and, as she put it, the loving trials imposed on her by *me*. Her most loving words were for me. "Dear Mother Ann of the Holy Face was the only one who understood my pride, my desire to be noticed and be first

among many. She alone took the anvil and furnace to make this weak body and soul fine steel, sharp like a sword against temptation and sin. God had granted me that she doubt me and that she would see deep into my soul. She understood as no one else in her great wisdom that I wanted people to envy my piety and saintly demeanor.”

I shudder still at those words. My breath becomes shallow as I once again think of that one, last sentence. I've turned it in my mind for two decades.

That is how long it took the Holy See to decide on the merit of the cause for Mother Mary of the Rose.

I flinch as the bells start ringing, loud and clear, their song drifting over the town and valley like a wave. I try to sit up, tears flooding my eyes and thoughts. Mother Mary of the Rose is now a saint in Heaven, elevated to the altars of the Church, declared so on the very steps of the Basilica of St. Peter in Rome, on the hill of the Vatican, where Peter himself is buried. I imagine the great shouts of joy of her devotees in the square, the waving of banners and her portrait hanging from the loggia above the altar, her face with hooded eyes, miniature mouth and startling sharp nose crowned by the halo of a saint.

“Well then,” I speak to her, at long last, “show time! Time for the sun to stop in the sky and for you to cure pimples.” I look intently at the ceiling.

The bells still ring. I wait.

If there is no heaven, it's all been a cruel joke.

The pain is still there.

If there is no heaven with Mother Rose a saint in it, all my righteous indignation has been wasted.

The bells stop.

I prod myself. The tumor is still there, as malign as ever, as brutal as before.

"I am waiting!" I speak to the ceiling. "Or was it really just a little girl wanting everyone to envy her and found the perfect fools to do so?"

Fools like me. I grasp the rosary with all my might and feel the metal links strain then loosen, as if breaking. I hear the tinkle of beads.

I close my eyes for a long while; or perhaps no more than a second.

When I open them again, the light of the day seems to approach noon and the silence left by the bells is deep. I look at the sun for a while as it glows motionless in the sky. I rise from my bed with unexpected ease and walk to the window. I let the blaze of the sun bathe my face. The branches of the tree are still, the air like gossamer, a lone dragonfly riding a gleaming thermal.

Suddenly, I am aware that my pain has drained away, all the discomfort of a body eaten by disease gone. With the tip of my fingers I push where the lethal mass of cells gone mad would push back. There is nothing there but soft and pliable flesh. Instead of the sharp bite of pain at my touch, I feel a mild tickle.

The rosary in my hand suddenly breaks apart, the beads scattering at my feet, rolling across the floor to where my bed is. I make to bend to gather them, but I stop when I see Mother Celeste

of Jesus come into the sickroom holding a lit candle, followed by the other nuns. They surround the bed and kneel. Their prayers rise in a soft murmur, the rosaries shimmering in the flicker of candles. Sister Martha brings white flowers from the garden and places them at the foot of the bed. She bends to pick up a stray bead, looks at it curiously and squirrels it in her pocket.

I see my own body on the bed, laid out in the choir vestments of the Carmelite, a garland of flowers on the waxen forehead. A broken rosary, one of its decades missing, is twined around the bloodless fingers. They all avert their gaze from my dead face, frozen in a livid mask of bitter distaste. I am certain that, as they pray, they think of Mother Mary of the Rose and her face upon her deathbed, the countenance serene and beautiful.

It is this last invidious thought that fills my eternity.

THE END

