

Wayward Souls

by Foster Trecost

Based on length it looked like a note, lacking the deeper illustration found in full-fledged letters, but also missing were condolences and considering the subject, such sympathies might have seemed appropriate: *Dear Mr. and Mrs. Madison, Katie is dead. Sincerely, Monsignor Monteroni*

* * *

I hoped the room was empty but there she stood, talking like a teacher, telling me all the bottoms were taken, so I pulled my suitcase from the lower bunk and swung it up to the one above, then introduced myself, but it wasn't returned. I'd later learn her name was Jess, and with evenly cadenced words, almost military, she said the church cleared everyone out by ten but they came back to the same beds. An unwritten rule. And all the bottoms were taken. She asked where I was from and though my standard answer lacked accuracy, it's all she got: "Just a small town." I expected a press for details and readied my deflections, but they weren't needed. "I bet you're hungry," she said. "They give out soup down the street, I'll take you."

She led me from the shelter and we turned the corner, but that's as far as we got. Never had I heard so many sounds at the same time. They landed like a stampede and I stopped for fear I'd be trampled. "Don't worry," she said, sensing my apprehension, "I'll teach you everything you need to know." And in her tone I could tell she would. We locked arms and continued on.

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It was a warm morning but a steady breeze tempered the heat, steady like something funneling from an invisible fan. A scrap of trash danced down the sidewalk, followed by a paper cup, each making its own melody yet somehow fused into a single sound.

"It feels good when the wind blows," said the paper cup. "It's going to rain."

"That's okay with me," said the scrap of trash. "I like the rain."

* * *

We sat near an open window, talking and not talking. I liked not-talking better, especially when she asked if I planned on going home. My dad asked the same question the night he brought me to the bus stop, but he already knew the answer. My mom didn't say anything because she wasn't there. "One day when I'm dead she'll wish she'd said goodbye." neither of us said anything else, but I couldn't let go of that closing notion. When morning came I knocked at the rectory. A clergyman opened the door, asked if he could help me but I didn't need his help, just his name, so I asked what it was.

"Monsignor Monteroni."

* * *

"Such a nice note, Monsignor." No response. "So thoughtful to write her family." The envelope was addressed to Katie's parents. "It just won't be the same without her."

And that was enough.

"-Cut it out Jess, you never know when to stop."

The paper cup quieted and handed a stamp to the scrap of trash.

It was a warm morning but a steady breeze tempered the heat. Katie found a big, blue mailbox, loosened her grip, and let the letter fall. Simple as it was, dying made her hungry and she suggested the soup kitchen. Jess responded with a smile. They locked arms and continued on.

