

The Catalpa Tree

The note was on her dresser when she walked into her room just before lunch. It was addressed to her. It said: “Sister Agnes, please see me after you close the shop this evening.” It was not signed, and didn’t need to be. Mother Michael knew it.

The convent opened its doors at ten each morning to visitors wanting to buy the cheeses and yogurts made by the sisters. Sister Agnes arrived at the shop a few minutes before to turn the lights on and move the older goods, near their expiration date, to the basket that would then be taken to the kitchen for the sisters’ own consumption. The shop closed between noon and two, and then reopened until five.

In the mid-day break, Agnes and the rest of the sisters had lunch, attended matins, and then had an hour for private prayer. But for the past month Sister Agnes would use the private hour once a week to walk ten minutes to the graveyard behind the church down the street. She would go only a few yards into the graveyard and sit on a stone bench

under a catalpa tree that offered the best shade from the August sun. There had also been a catalpa in the backyard of her parents' house in Vermont. Its large, lime-green leaves were totally unlike those of the common oaks and maples. It looked tropical to her, as if it didn't belong where it had rooted.

At thirty-four, Sister Agnes had been in the order sixteen years. Her final vows, into the Sisters of Ignatius Loyola in the Adirondacks of New York, had been at age twenty-six. It was then she had stopped being Claire Donahue from Vermont. When the habit requirement had been dropped the next year, she had continued to wear it, until she became conspicuous among the sisters. She did not want to risk the accusation of pride.

She saw two people now enter the graveyard through the church door. It was an older couple, married, she thought. She saw that they walked apart from one another, the woman, in her fifties, ahead of the older man by a few feet. He had his head bent, eyes on the ground, arms crossed in self-absorption. They ambled up the path towards her, and as they passed she noticed the woman's eyes red from recent tears, the man's jaw set in anger or frustration.

Agnes looked intently into the woman's face, smiling, trying to engage her. The woman tried to smile at Agnes, but couldn't manage it. The couple walked on to the sidewalk. Agnes looked at them until they disappeared behind the hedge near the gate, disappointed that she had been left without a cordial human connection that could be casual, and not necessarily sustained. She wished she could follow them and ask them what had made them so distressed.

The pattern of wanting to probe into the lives of people, even strangers, who appeared unhappy was a recurring one. At the convent she would gravitate toward any sister that exhibited sadness or withdrawal and try to engage them in discussion. When she succeeded in making things better for them, or getting a smile from them, she felt a satisfaction she wished she got from her prayers. There were times she regretted not having studied psychology in college, as she had thought to do at one time. Instead, she had majored in botany, which she thought would be more in concert with the contemplative religious life she had chosen.

Mother Michael came around from behind her desk to sit on a chair next to Agnes, who had come directly from the shop, not going to her room first to prepare for vespers at five-thirty. Mother Michael wore loose tan slacks and a brown shirt, a common outfit for her that echoed the old habit. Close to seventy, she was nearly the oldest sister, and by far the kindest.

“Sister Agnes, come closer, bring your chair closer,” she said, taking Agnes’ left hand in both of hers. “You’re leaving the house every Friday for an hour,” she said without preamble, and almost enthusiastically, as if she were describing a desirable event.

Agnes looked away, but then looked at Mother Michael openly. It was not something she had intended to hide. Indeed, she could not have. The community comprised only eleven sisters.

“Yes. I started a few weeks ago.”

“July tenth was your first outing at mid-day.” She paused and looked at her square on.
“What’s going on?”

Agnes did not answer immediately. She had found, in the shade of the catalpa, a place that was not just peaceful, but conducive to a deeper meditation than she could achieve in the convent. But she had not yet understood why.

“Agnes,” Mother Michael finally said. “Why the silence? Are you having doubts?”

Agnes took her hand back gently, and put both hands under her thighs.

“Yes, Reverend Mother.” Her voice was barely audible. She felt the cousin of embarrassment surging in her head, as she admitted this change so far along into her religious life.

“Doubts about your life here? Your faith?”

“Not about being here. I love this community. It’s my faith that seems to be slipping away.”

“It happens to all of us. That’s not to say it isn’t serious. Let’s take some steps.”

Mother Michael stood, took both of Agnes’ wrists in hers, and gently pulled her up to standing. “Sister Gregory is our spiritual counselor in these matters. I’d like for you to meet with her twice a week, in the evenings, after vespers, before dinner.” She led Agnes to the door by the hand. “Go get ready for vespers.”

Too tall, too thin, and unfashionable in her dress, she had not been wildly popular in high school in Vermont, but had not been a recluse, either. She had just two friends,

Maria and Judy, whom she saw some weekends. She would go to the occasional party only if they were going also, and had had only one date, early in her senior year.

The young man, Robert, one of the better students in her class, had looked uncomfortable asking her out, and had remained stiff the entire evening. She had felt no attraction for him, but had accepted the invitation to a date because it was the only one she had ever gotten, and thought she was overdue to have the experience. She also wanted to be able to join into the conversations that Maria and Judy had when they talked about boys.

“He’s kind of quiet,” Maria had said when Claire told her about the scheduled date with Robert, “but he seems nice.”

“Quiet is not necessarily dead,” Judy had said with a knowing smirk.

All evening she had hoped that Robert would not try to kiss her or touch her unnecessarily. Her fears proved to be unfounded. The young man shook her hand on the sidewalk in front of her house at the end of the evening and said, “I had a nice time, Claire,” looking very sad and relieved all at once. When it was clear that he was not going to try any of the advances Maria and Judy had talked about, she responded to his sadness.

“Are you O.K.?” she asked. “Is there something you want to talk about?”

“Not really. But thanks. See you.”

Over the following few days Claire hoped she would see him and have the chance to talk to him again. She wanted to find out what had made him so sad, and thought that if they could just talk she would be able to help him with whatever was troubling him.

“Forget him, Claire” Maria said. “A handshake? He’s gay.”

“I don’t want to go out with him again, necessarily. I just feel sorry for him. I hate seeing people so sad.”

“You can’t fix the whole world. Maybe you should study psychology in college,” said Judy.

The matter was dropped. Claire saw Robert in school from afar and did not pursue him or orchestrate running into him, but she knew that if he approached her, even casually, she would invite him to talk over a soda after school.

Maria and Judy had become involved in the autumn senior play, and had asked her to join them painting sets after school and helping out with rehearsals. After a late session one evening, Judy’s mom, Rachel, was driving them all home.

She envied Judy having a mom like Rachel: pretty, with a stylish haircut, always with lipstick and good shoes. If Judy wanted to go to the movies, she would often ask Rachel to come along, and she would fit right in with Judy’s friends. Claire would make sure to sit next to her in the movie theater so she could smell the good perfume that Rachel always wore. Often, after school, Claire would sit with Judy and Rachel in their kitchen and have tea and homemade cookies with them, a habit Rachel had acquired as a student

in England. Rachel took an interest in what Claire was doing in school, unlike her own mother.

“Everybody buckled in?” Rachel had said that evening as she put the car in gear and pulled out of the school parking lot.

Claire, in the back seat alongside Maria, had not yet done so, and she struggled to find the seatbelt buckle buried between the seat and the backrest. In doing so she found a strange cylindrical object, three inches long, as wide as a pencil.

“What’s this?” she asked Judy in the front seat, showing her find.

“Oh. That’s a mezuzah, a religious thing we do,” said Judy.

Rachel explained. “We’re Jewish. It’s a tradition to place a piece of parchment with a prayer on it in a container like that, and place it on the doorsill at the front door of the house. That one’s been missing for months. Thank you for finding it.”

Claire was amazed that this small, ceramic object held a prayer handwritten on parchment. She hung on to it tightly, a precious object in her charge for now.

A minute later, as Rachel elaborated to Maria and Claire about the nature of the prayer in the mezuzah, the car crossed some railroad tracks where the street barriers and flashing lights had stopped working, and was hit on the driver’s side by a fast-moving freight train that did not sound its signal due to a town ordinance. It killed Rachel outright, and badly maimed Judy, who remained quadriplegic until her death, two years later. Claire suffered a broken leg, Maria some bruises.

The time she spent healing from the multiple surgeries on her tibia allowed her to reflect on the accident and her recent past. Having remained alert throughout the accident, she had witnessed the carnage of Rachel's body destroyed, and of Judy's neck and torso twisted at an impossible angle, like a cloth marionette. The horrible details of the scene reappeared in her memory daily. She was furious, without knowing exactly where to direct her anger, that people who were kind and had led good lives could die so violently while they were still young. She could not fathom being part of a world where this much unjust suffering could occur.

Her parents had laid the foundation for years. Mistrustful of others, they had no friends, and encouraged her to be wary of anyone who was nice to her, to look for an ulterior motive for any offer of friendship that was extended. The date with Robert, the rehearsal for the play, her interactions in school — they had all been painful at some point, as her parents had warned. Perhaps they were right that the world was treacherous and unpredictably dangerous, but she could think of no options except to carry on with college after high school, as she and her parents had planned.

Right before Christmas her physician told her that she would be able to start school again in January.

She had been on crutches for most of the winter, doing schoolwork from home. When she was well enough to go to school with the cast still on, her mother drove her, and she enjoyed, shyly, tentatively, the attention she got from the classmates who previously had

little reason to seek her out. She hoped this new, modest popularity would linger after the cast came off.

In the early spring, the first day she was strong enough to walk home from school without crutches, she passed by the Catholic church she went to on Sundays with her parents. She had seen these structures many times before: the church itself, the school, and the adjoining convent with its ten foot walls. On that day in March she captured the purpose of the barriers around the convent.

The next day she entered the church, so familiar to her, but felt awkward alone with the statues and the burning votives. Without the ceremony and the other congregants, it held no meaning for her. She went around to the rectory and rang the bell.

Father Sanchez was writing a sermon when she interrupted him. He was annoyed with her for barging in, even more so when she blurted out that she wanted to enter a convent, but he asked her to sit down in his office and heard her out. He questioned her about how long she had thought about this decision. She told him about the accident, her social difficulties in school, her fear of going to college with new surroundings.

“I don’t think I can live in the world as I have been. I hate it. I want to try a religious environment, away from the things I have known. I don’t see another solution.”

“That’s no reason to enter a convent, Claire. You go into the religious life because you get a clear message from God that it’s where you belong, not to run away from the world you fear.”

She persisted, and did not take his suggestions that she think about this for a year and talk to her parents about it. She ended her plea with “I think I will be happiest living in a convent. I want to at least look into it.”

“A convent is not an escape. It’s a commitment to a religious life, no matter which religion it is. Go away now. Go home and do your homework. Talk to your parents about this first.”

She left, but by the time she got home she had a plan of action.

Her parents, both devout Catholics, could not have been more surprised when she told them that afternoon, and her mother remained especially skeptical. She had gone to a Catholic school run by nuns and did not have good memories of their disciplinary techniques. Indeed, she sounded angry when she talked about her years in that environment and the punishments she had received for the slightest infractions.

Her father, having gone to public school, was less negative, but did not look at all happy with the news. He expected a traditional path for her.

“You have to be sure about this, Claire,” he said. “This is a life-long sacrifice of the things that make most women happy: a husband, children, a career in the world.”

She went back twice more in less than a week to see Father Sanchez, and he relented. After telephoning her parents first, he arranged for a meeting with the Mother Superior of a convent on the other side of town, and by then she had read enough about religious motivation to sound convincing and begin the path she had envisioned.

Her meetings with Sister Gregory began in a small office, but as Agnes described the meditative peace she felt in the graveyard, they began to stroll there and had their discussions under the catalpa.

Gregory probed gently at first, and Agnes described her doubts in more detail during their fourth meeting, after Gregory had become more familiar with Agnes' previous life.

“Now tell me specifically what you are doubting. Is it your commitment to religious life?”

Agnes had no doubt that she wanted to remain withdrawn from society. It was her lack of conviction about the sanctity of her life in the convent that gnawed. She went through the motions of prayer, observed the rules, and contributed her share of work, but felt no religious passion. There was no spiritual command, no message, as Father Sanchez had said, and as she had heard throughout her novitiate and postulant years. It was a pretense she had enacted to herself. The only things she cherished deeply and sharply in the convent were solace and protection.

“I want to stay in the order. I don't want to leave.”

“Are you having doubts about God, then?”

Agnes did not answer immediately. It came to her then that she felt no passion because it was God's goodness that she doubted, not its existence. The bewilderment and fear she had felt since the car accident had been rekindled with the recent death of her favorite member of the convent, Sister Mary James.

It had been a long, horrible death. Sister Mary James had been just a little older than she, and was also from Vermont. She had been a tall, beautiful woman, with a degree in the classics, and taught at the local college. When she was diagnosed with breast cancer, at the age of thirty-four, the community prayed and watched helplessly as the cancer progressed despite surgery and chemotherapy. It turned her, in just three years, into a withered twig, unable to care for herself. Washing her, cleaning her bedpans, and changing her sheets soaked in bodily fluids thick as resin were tasks the sisters shared, and Agnes liked doing it because it seemed to bring Mary James comfort. But she could not accept the rotting of this still young, beautiful and intelligent being, her transformation into a near cadaver, no longer able to speak, only moan.

She did not think that God could be benevolent and allow the events she had witnessed. It was at best indifferent, and maybe even cruel. She would not even honor it with a personal pronoun. If it did indeed exist, she thought, it was an abstract, inert entity that was probably no different than a cluster of galaxies, a mystery. So what was the point of faith? To believe in what?

Rachel, Judy and Mary James were horses on a slow carousel. All three had suffered ghastly and untimely endings to their lives, and the unfairness and sadness of it swamped her while she sat in the graveyard.

“I am afraid of being out in the world, away from the order, my sisters.” Not wanting to spell out her disdain for God’s holiness, she merely added, “But I am unsure about God.”

Sister Gregory looked at her briefly before getting up from the bench. “Let’s start back to our house,” she said. “We’ll continue this in three days.”

Over the next few weeks Agnes thought about her years as a novice and postulate, before taking her final vows. She remembered the dictum that the acceptance of cruelty, disaster, and human suffering was essential for the testing of the faith. Without faith, she had heard repeatedly, there was nothing. One didn’t belong in the religious life, but in the funnel clouds of society at large. Why hadn’t she responded to these teachings, and allow her faith to flourish?

She met with Gregory for the next several weeks, who tried to explore just that: God’s testing of faith, a test that weeded out the skeptics from those at least willing to follow and believe. Agnes held on to her anger, giving Gregory only hints of the persistence of her ambivalence.

“Today is our final meeting,” Sister Gregory said in late October. “We have come as far as we can in our discussion.”

Sister Agnes, in these final moments with Sister Gregory, felt gratitude and affection for her, and was compelled to be honest with her. She reached into her pocket and brought out the mezuzah.

“This contains a piece of holy scripture,” she said. “It is tangible evidence of faith, a symbol of a religion based on a common history, and genetics, and traditions. It is integral and inalterable for them, not a choice. And belief in a God that’s benevolent is

not a requisite for their religion. I need a glue that will hold me to mine, that will make me believe in my religion. I don't have it. I don't feel it. It's missing for me."

Gregory took the mezuzah, looked at it with mild interest, and rolled it around in her palm.

"I know what it is. It's no different than our carved icons and statues and candles. The objects and myths that furnish our faith are superficial embellishments, the frosting on the cake. What's important is the cake: that while you are here on earth, you live honorably, whether you are believer or not. And if you don't have faith, living a religious life is not honorable."

The leaves of the catalpa, now turning rust and ochre, were falling around them. The two women sat quietly as the evening got darker. A large leaf, bright green, fell on the bench in the space between them. Agnes had always wondered why a still-green leaf would not stay where it would be productive, attached to the tree, continuing photosynthesis. A premature death for the leaf, essentially. It made no sense. But she had complete confidence that her colleagues in botany would know the reason why eventually.

"Don't you have doubts, Sister Gregory?"

"Every day," Gregory said. "Sometimes I don't know what I'm doing here. As old as I am, I think of leaving." She stood up.

"Let's go back," she said to Sister Agnes.

But Claire stayed behind and watched through the twilight as Sister Gregory walked down the path alone.

The End