

THE OPEN SECRET

The woman, to begin with, never should have been standing in the entrance to the bar. Not Clair, a Sister of the Sacred Blood Religious Order. Nevertheless, as she stood in the entrance to The Lost Weekend, smelling the ripe, rich aroma of spilled drinks and stale beer, she was hooked. Almost inside the doorway, Clair believed that the inside looked remotely familiar; however, how could she possibly be acquainted with such a place, she thought? As Clair peeked into the darkened bar, she was sure no one could possibly know her. Still hesitant, the smartly dressed woman, wearing a dark blue Chanel suit with matching purse and heels, unsnapped her purse. Gently, Sister Clair placed her hand on the black-blue object at the bottom of her handbag.

Out of her habit and in her street clothes, Clair resembled a modern executive killing time before her next meeting. Her appearance gave every indication of a woman who would soon be off to the suburbs, her kids, and an equally powerful husband. However, for Clair there was no house, or husband or kids. No, for her there were thirty-two other women who, for reasons known only to themselves and God, had forsaken the pleasures of this life for the promise of a passionate intimacy with Christ in the next.

Gathering the courage to enter, Clair moved through The Lost Weekend with the grace of a princess. Her heels, barely touching the well-worn finish on the floor beneath her, she bore the countenance of royalty; certainly not that of a cloistered nun. Like a new student entering late for class, she nervously looked for and quickly located the safest and darkest booth in the place. There were only four other patrons inside the gloomy Weekend, five if you included Sammy, the bartender. Clair was edgy and ill at ease as she waited for the burly Sammy to ask for her order.

Looking at her bargain-priced Timex, each tick of the second hand seemed to produce a need that was greater and more intense than the one preceding it.

On the Formica tabletop, pealed away in spots exposing the dirt and grime below, Clair's fingernails began to tap faster and faster. Like a deep sea diver under far too long, lungs ready to burst, Sister Clair was in need of that first gulp of something pure and clean, but it wasn't air. No, Sister Clair Ignatius Harrington, a servant of Christ for almost thirty-seven years, needed that first gulp, a drink! Her hands were trembling when she finally rose and walked over and faced the barman.

"Please," she said in a low, trembling voice, "may I have a double Yukon Jack on ice?"

"Are you sure?" Sammy replied. He was deeply concerned and the expression on his face showed it.

"If you don't mind me saying: Are you OK? I ain't much in the brain department, but are you sure?"

You want to take a minute?" Sammy's words were brazen and disrespectful to Clair's thinking.

"Yes young man I am quite sure!" Clair answered in a curt, clipped voice as she placed four one dollar bills on the counter.

Turning, she looked back and shot Sammy an icy look of a teacher's disapproval. Upset by the barman's insolence, her head held high, she continued on to the security of her booth. Once seated the Nun studied Sammy as he readied her drink. Sure he was not looking in her direction, she squeezed her pocketbook tightly, just to be sure the object on the bottom was still there. Still gazing at the Sammy, one of the other patrons left out the front door, creating a wind-flow as he slammed it shut. The airstream caused a few of the hanging wine goblets to sway and move. The movement let off a white-light shimmer that had a sort of hypnotic effect on Clair.

She had seen it, that sparkle, many times before coming from the priest's chalice held high at Mass. The dazzling beam drew her back to when she and the other Sisters would rise at 4:00 a.m., drop to their knees asking Him to forgive their many shortcomings. Her denial of self, along with the sheer intensity that life inside the walls of St. Monica's produced, brought forth a feeling of triumph for Clair. From the first day behind the walls as a Novice, dressed in the virginal white habit, she recognized the resonance of a clear and precise direction to her life; one she had never been aware of or known. Clair had discovered, seemingly, the meaning of her being alive: service to Him. Still lost in thought, she barely noticed Sammy delivering the drink and placing a single dollar in front of the nun.

"That's three dollars, the same as always. You paid too much", the barman kindly reminded Clair.

Sister Clair did not know what to make of the barman's comment. With brows knitted and a look of genuine puzzlement, Clair stared hauntingly at Sammy. That phrase he used, "The same as always," alarmed and unnerved the Nun. The tremors in her hands returned and were noticeable to the other patrons. Speech at that moment was impossible for Clair. On her second attempt, she was victorious.

"That's fine. Thank you. How honest. You don't find many of our kind these days now, do you? And to save you the walk, I'll have another as soon as you're ready."

Reluctantly, Sammy slowly made his way back to the bar. The moment he turned away, in one seamless motion, she tossed back the drink. Instantly she felt the liquid heat coating her lungs and rendering the momentary relief she so desired. Stretching her long legs out under the table, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Sister Clair retraced the events of her morning. First, there was the bank deposit made for the monastery at the Bank of America. Next, the outstanding balance at Gleason's Grocery & Pharmacy. Money in and money out, she mused. Deposit to the B. of A. and the

balance paid at Gleason's Grocery & Pharmacy. Still to come was the one stop Clair dreaded each month-the appointment at Dr. McLaughlin's office! It was the visit to see the nice doctor that had Clair in a panic for days before. Light sleep was always interrupted by her fabricating reasonable excuses for her ever declining health.

No matter how calm and placid Clair tried to appear on the outside, it was impossible for her to camouflage the results of the blood panels. The prospect that the doctor could soon confront her and suggest that she was not being entirely truthful with her, usually caused Clair to drink even more heavily before her appointment. At her last visit, the doctor read to her the data from her panel: an elevated enzyme level, the likes Dr. McLaughlin had not seen since medical school.

Unfortunately, the doctor told her last time, "...and that reading was from the liver of a cadaver, Sister." Clair now displayed the indisputable marker of advanced alcoholism and liver disease. Doctor McLaughlin also knew that somewhere along the way, within the walls of the convent or those of The Lost Weekend, Sister Clair had lost her desire to serve the Lord, as well.

Like some creeping Jesus, Sammy appeared from nowhere with the second tumbler of Yukon Jack. Startled by his appearance Clair instantly reached for her purse. Holding it away from Sammy's line of sight, she fumbled through a set of keys, numerous slips of paper, Kleenex, an old hair brush, and a rosary until she located the wad of rolled up dollar bills. Holding the purse even farther to the side, she looked down at the cotton-covered gun, still neatly wrapped in a finely embroidered handkerchief. Removing the clump, she counted out four single bills and placed them on the table.

"Keep the change," the Sister arrogantly responded. "And since I have such a full afternoon still, let's make this one a triple shall we? And I'd like full measures this time, if you don't mind. Yes, a 'Hat Trick

of Jack' should help end this week on a high note, shall we say?" but now spoken in a gentle, innocent voice.

Clair's transformation into sudden kindness was too miraculous for Sammy's liking. Her change was just enough to motivate him to act. Collecting the singles from the table, he thanked Clair for her generosity. After the encounter, Sammy knew precisely what needed to be done.

Completely relaxed now and with thoughts of Dr. McLaughlin's appointment far from her thinking, she played with the cubes in her glass, moving them as if caught in a centrifuge. The pain in the last years seemed to follow her everywhere, it seemed. She recalled with great acuity the very first day inside the walls of St. Monica's. There was the ceremonial cutting of the hair and the removal of all mirrors throughout. The mirrors were taken away so as never to be tempted by one's own vanity. The monastery, well hidden in the foothills of Santa Barbra, was a spiritual oasis of which she had dreamed for months before entering. With each new Entrance Class the traditional rituals were followed: tonsuring, mirrors, and the final symbolic gesture of rebirth-the confession of a Novice's deepest secrets.

Inside the confessional box, Clair knelt as the wooden divider opened. Through darkened cloth, an older priest could almost be seen. He sat with his purple stole draped around his neck, a sign of the Seal of Confession. Speech at stressful times like this one was close to impossible for the novice nun.

"Take your time," the caring priest started.

Clair took a deep breath, and then blurted out what she felt was her most shameful sin.

"Three weeks ago, Father, a boy in my high school class, Steve, a football player, kissed me."

“My child, God intended for us to understand the wonders of the body. Is it not, after all, the same body that He created in His own image? You shouldn't be ashamed for kissing the young man. No, unless, of course, there is more you are not telling me?”

“As he was kissing me my body went all lose and limp...And he touched my bosom.”

“By accident, I am sure”, the Priest, wearing a half-smile answered from the other side.

There was an uneasy silence in the moments that followed, as Clair decided that the genuineness of her vocation depended on her ability to be honest at this very moment.

“No Father, I moved his hand and allowed him to place it under my sweater.”

“I see. And did it stop there?”

“I didn't want it to...I am a whore, aren't I, Father? A "Bono-Roba," as Shakespeare called the sluts of the night. That's me, isn't it? Prostitute, a whore, slut, harlequin. Yes, I admit it, I enjoyed the feeling of his hand on my breast, caressing it and playing with my hardened Ni-Ni...I am ashamed, but Father there is more.”

“I understand your distress...”

“ His face came closer to my exposed bosom. I was excited, gulping air, panting. Then Father, his lips began to suckle my bosom, like a new born. I was euphoric! I did not stop him! His hand then began to

caress my other bosom. I was delirious. Oh God forgive me! I felt something, in my...below my...below my skirt, that place between my...my.. oh God, my legs. I wanted him to touch there, too. He tried and I stood up. With my bosoms exposed, I pulled my bra and sweater back down. Here is the most sinful art father: I couldn't stop thinking about him for days afterward. When I was alone, I touched myself... inappropriately, I mean...and enjoyed it"

With that Clair burst into a fit of crying, the likes of which the good Father had never before heard. No matter what the understanding Priest said or counseled, Clair felt tainted for enjoying the touch of a man. In her mind she was suddenly a slut, a whore, and completely unworthy of the love of Jesus. The days, then weeks and ultimately months following the encounter with the football player, Clair found herself drinking more and more. With each additional drink came a fresh wave of sensual feelings of the football player. By August 25th, entrance day for Clair's novice class, and having just celebrated her twenty-first birthday, she was a full blown and seemingly unstoppable alcoholic.

Those first few weeks inside St. Monica's were problematic for the new novice. Taking something away that her body and mind had partnered, made all the more brutal and ruthless when rising at 4:00 a.m. for prayer, would have easily broken any other young woman. It was an adjustment she had not anticipated. Resolute and unwavering in her focus, she was able to detoxify herself without arousing the suspicion of the other women. Slowly the old Clair began to emerge, and she quickly regained the confidence she had once known. Her life was simple again and she loved it that way.

Rising each morning before the first light, Novice Clair would dress and pray, then meet the other Sisters in the chapel for Mass. After a light breakfast, orphans from around the city were escorted inside the monastery, to a specially designed series of classrooms. These little scholars, were the

disfigured and discarded offspring, those no one else wanted. It was the one thing Clair loved most in the world these days: helping those humankind clearly seemed to despise and hate. After a full day of teaching letters and sounds, she was, on most days, able to find some time alone for herself. From her second floor room, outfitted with only a bed, sink, and a small dresser, Clair gazed down upon rows of beautiful roses. She would daydream sometimes, about her Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and also, Steve, the football player now long gone.

The garden below, she believed, was the true barometer of how she felt about the world, Christ, her vocation, the Sisters in the monastery, and her weakness for the occasional drink, or three. This respite, the metal imagery brought on by the absolute beauty below, offered Clair a momentary escape from the walls of St. Monica's that seemed to hold her more tightly in place these days; a prisoner she now believed. In the winter, Clair saw the inflamed loneliness and isolation of her vocation; during the spring her step was always lighter and filled with hope. As the summer arrived and the days grew longer and warmer, Clair could feel the growth of a life lived as spouse to the Lord. When fall came and the leaves began to turn, the reality of Death haunted her. Clair now understood that the desolation and emptiness of her yesterdays far outnumbered the enthusiasm and hope of her tomorrows.

The clink of the cash register opening returned Clair to the darkened bar and the moment. Realizing she was again in The Lost Weekend, the cloistered Nun grew suspicious of Sammy. and fixed her gaze on the barman. Clair focused on every move and turn Sammy made. Her eyes went up as Sammy replaced clean pint glasses to the top shelf, then down as he moved fresh kegs of beer below the bar. As if someone alerted Sammy to Clair's unusual scrutiny, he looked up and locked eyes with her. For the first time in Sammy's experience with the drunken Nun, there was something in her eyes that frightened the burly barman. Never taking his eyes off of her, Sammy walked down to the end of the bar and bent low, pretended to move something around. Removing the phone from its cradle, he began

to dial. Hearing the voice on the other end, soft and concerned, brought a sense of immediate support to him. Across the room Clair, opening her purse, removed the cotton layers, and shimmied out of the cubical. With her finger wrapped tightly around the trigger, she approached the bar with a look of calmness and composure. Standing, his back to Clair, the barman continued on with his call.

“Thanks for taking the call Mother Superior,” Sammy whispered into the receiver. “I’m sorry I have to bother you, but I thought you’d like to know that Sister Clair has shown up here again. I ain’t no doctor, Mother, but I’ll bet season tickets this wasn’t her first stop. The good news is that she don’t seem to remember a thing from the last time and the brouhaha with them two women. I’m guessin’ but I’d call it one of them blackouts, a stupor. Soft as a grape she is right now.”

“Thank you for calling, Samuel,” the delicate voice of Mother Superior answered back.

“Please Samuel, do me a favor, and keep her there until we arrive. And remember: Sister Clair is a very sick woman.”

Looking up Sammy suddenly found himself eye-to-eye, only inches away, from Clair. Maintaining his composure Sammy continued his conversation.

“Sure thing there and don’t worry about nothing on this end. The place is slow now, but we’ll certainly keep our end of the bargain.” Unhurriedly Sammy placed the old black phone back on to its cradle.

“Can I help you with something, Clair?” Sammy asked, with a slight clumsiness to his voice.

Still engaged in the eye-to-eye confrontation with the Nun, Clair’s frozen look had the opposite effect

on Sammy. What he saw was something grotesque, and brought to mind a fiend, a demon. Removing the Glock from the bottom of her handbag, Clair slowly raised the gun and pointed it directly at Sammy. Stunned by the sudden turn of events, the barman could neither breathe nor move.

“I am very sorry to be the one to call Perdition down upon this Den of Inequity, but you are an evil man. It’s men like you, sin vendors, drink and poison sellers, that peddle your demonic wares to innocent people like me. You bring forth: daily, hourly, and by the minute those heinous liquids. You are Beelzebub himself, the Wicked One. You tempt children and women with your intoxicating substances! However, you know that already, don’t you, Mr. Barman? That you were created as the scum of this Earth-and must be stopped! Now.”

The front of Sammy’s shirt, now soaked with perspiration, saw rivulets of sweat rolled down from his hairline in a steady stream of moisture. Knowing he was soon to die, urine soaked his zipper, displaying his body’s response to the threat before him. His hands and legs, in perfect unison, quivered as he prepared himself for the final moments in this life. Reflecting off the bottles and glasses behind him, a single beam of sunlight made its way through the frosted window across the room. Outside it was nearing dusk, casting an irregular light on the maple trees lining the street. Only a few of the trees retained its summer colors. It was that time of year that Clair hated the most-fall!

“I can not judge your soul, and only our Lord Jesus has the capacity to know your heart. Nonetheless, you are a sick, repulsive creature”, Clair continued moving closer to the trembling Sammy.

“The world will be a better place for all without you,” the placid-faced Nun whispered in Sammy’s ear, moving the gun barrel closer and closer to his head. Sweat, tears, and urine became the colors of a pallet depicting: Samuel Alfredo DeScloretto, barman since nineteen, owner of The Lost Weekend since he was thirty-three, loving and faithful husband to Gina, and father of four girls beginning at twenty-

six. Sammy closed his eyes and prepared to die.

“Yes you’re immoral and Evil-but I am sicker! I am The Slut of Heaven, the Whore of Hell. May God have absolute mercy on our souls?”

With those words, a faithful servant to Jesus Christ for thirty-seven years, moved the barrel of the gun away from Sammy and placed the opening just below her chin. Had Sister Clair made it to see Dr. McLaughlin that afternoon, the Nun would have learned she suffered from vasovagal syncope, a condition where the heart rate slows, blood pressure drops, and the resulting lack of blood to the brain causes fainting.

“Good-bye” is what the three other patrons in The Lost Weekend heard. “Clicks, one after another,” the tallest of the three reported. Others entering later only saw the lifeless body on the floor. However, it seems that Sister Xavier Clair Harrington, that Faithful Servant of Christ, could clearly recall the names and amount of alcohol in each and every drink she ordered and consumed-but not the bullets on this day!