

PAROCHIAL HABITS



KATHLEEN BRYCE NILES

*For Sr. Hortense & Sr. Wilmet, I.H.M.
who scared the hell out of me....*



**Her habit was a shroud
about those fragile bones
that moaned aloud
when edging from a seat to kneel.**

**Others heard her body genuflect,
joint against joint,
tearing the tiny frame,
forcing them to reflect
upon the ease with which they prayed.**

**Sometimes the swish was heard too late.
Black drapes swung into our circle
crushing us
in gabardine swatches of hot fabric...
Wrapping about our ears
and filling our noses
with the sweet odor of
very clean nun.**

**And, our lobes,
trapped between thumb and forefinger,
our feet,
if touching,
were so only by the tip of patent leather,
and our bodies
were transported to this class or that
on black flying wings.**

And, we never guessed they loved us so.

**In the courtyard,
just behind the convent doors
in crisp summer air,
they hung the clothes from separate lines
fastened there.**

**The one displayed,
all white and loosely hung,
substantial undergarments,
sturdy, of course, and parochial.**

**While from the other fell
huge ebony gowns,
flowing lightly down caressing the grass,
a virgin's lover on sabbatical.**

**The really old ones
always
taught ancient history
and
lectured in a voice
that
sounded suspiciously
like
Gregorian chant.**

The rumors there were never stilled.

One smoked, they said.

Caught behind the convent door,

non-filtered.

Another chilled "Blue Nun"

in the tank, behind the toilet,

near the chapel, down the hall.

A third, they claimed,

a sinner in her youth,

must have strayed...

only the homely

are left unclaimed.

We wondered what she knew of men.

And we sometimes

caught the giggle,

the soft, quick glance,

a flash of woman,

a twinge perhaps,

or might have been,

when a new priest

stepped through the classroom door.

**She laid claim
to a genuine relic,
a bone,
she said,
of St. Someone,
martyred by fire,
but no one called
forensics
to verify origin.
Relics are hard to acquire.**

**Pneumonic knees battered gabardine
in tune,
in harmony,
surreptitiously defying silence.**

**And, someone,
with no music in the soul,
closed the windows tight.**

**When Viva took off all her clothes
and posed for Warhol in Manhattan,
her father, the judge,
so it was told,
bought all the magazines in the county,
though some were sold.**

**And, the nuns at the Most Holy Rosary Convent
and School gasped when students,
bold and in great danger of mortal sin,
stole in and posted the centerfold somewhere
within the quarters where the sisters lived.**

**She was the only one left
who refused to give up the habit.
What was the sense,
she said,
of being what she was,
if no one knew.**

**Her body was
covered like winter furniture.
In layers of cloth,
her crucifix,
hung huge and heavy
from breasts secured
behind black sheets,
and her ropes were
knotted tight about the waist,
tying off thought from sense.
Yet, none of it saved her
from he who took her on
the path that led to chapel.**

**We adored the ones
who had visions
and wished these images
had spoken prognosticating
weather or horse races.**

**Everything is easier
to believe
when we aren't forced
to rely upon something
as arbitrary as faith.**

**They had separated them,
the charge,
they hedged,
was “particular friendship.”**

**If still together,
they would have laughed,
but neither
ever knew the other
well enough
to mention it.**

**They had an all black station wagon,
a rolling apostolate,
from whose sanctuary
they sprinkled dispensations,
like holy water,
to the general masses
when in heavy traffic.**

Sometimes they rode bicycles.

Habit,

tucked up into the belt,

black, puffy, miraculous

pantaloons...

Women from a Turkish harem,

secretly enjoying,

when no one else could see.



**We were quite sure
they all had been taught
to put both hands
beneath
the scapular
or
to keep them
folded behind
the back.**

**We thought that if Sr. Hortense
ever analyzed her God-taken name
quite the same as we,
she'd have changed it that very day
with all holy intent
and without the Holy See.**

**She was a bird-like woman,
stick person,
dressed in yards of black,
picking at food,
a crow,
long since full,
scratching at plates
out of habit.**

**The day before the palms
were strewn,
the old nuns harped mercilessly
on avarice...**

**Still a fist-full of palms
seemed reasonable to most.**

**Both her names,
she had chosen two,
belonged to men.**

**We wondered why
she chose to be known
as something she was not.**

**At eighty, she still had nightmares
of when they first took her long,
silky hair between calloused fingers
and threshed it like a wild field.**

**Her finest feature,
young men had said,
when years before,
they cultivated her.**

**Superior's control was never relinquished,
but rather, imposed in degrees...
imprimaturs that always came in decrees
keeping us on our toes
and seldom off our knees.**

Incense

always made her weak

and the Mass assigned her

abounded with funerals.

How would she ever know

if the buckling of her knees

was rapture?

**She never took the vow,
she stole it,
and hid it beneath the heavy habit.
No one will find it there.**

**After all the mea culpas
were pronounced,
she wasn't always sorry.**

**Whenever one left
there was a dull sadness
in the others.**

**For some,
a longing to be strong
enough to follow...**

**For others,
a yearning to be strong
enough to stay.**

**They were the greatest mystery
of our youth along with sex,
of course.**

**And, both drew equal time
for quite some years.**

**Celibacy was easier
for some than others.**

**And, she,
often lonely and inquisitive,
wished she was one of the former.**

**They had a difficult time
teaching extreme unctio
given our life expectancy
at the time...**

**And, then, we lost one of us
to an accident
or a suicide
or some disease...
and all too soon,
we learned it very well.**

**When she died,
her name
was printed on
the back
of holy cards
which pictured
some obscure saint.
They had gotten it
quite backwards.**

**They chased us down
every avenue of sin,
black sheets flaunting the miles
haunting our darkest thoughts
and covering our eyes from doubt.**

**And, in those hours
when we locked them out,
and left the psalm strewn paths
to lose ourselves in worlds
they never knew,
we'd wait for them
to catch up
to take the lead
and find for us our long way home.**



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