Exile

Mary Frances Coady

paperbytes

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Exile

TWO STORIES

BY

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O Come, Emmanuel

Sister Lucy hurried down the corridor toward the novitiate with anxiety in her steps. Inside, she picked up a sheet of paper from a stack on the long brown table, sat at her desk and began to write.

"Dear Mum and Dad and Charlie. I'm writing this letter a day ahead of time. Instead of writing our letters home on the first Sunday of the month as we usually do, we're writing them today because tomorrow Advent begins, and we – " She paused and then began to write again: "we're – " She was about to write "we're not allowed" when just in time she realized she mustn't use the word "allowed" because it suggested that external constraints were being placed upon

the novices, when in fact they were learning that inner discipline was the key to following the rules of religious life. She wrote instead: "we're not writing home during Advent."

She stopped and sat back, feeling for a brief second a sense of self-mastery. She had been in the convent eight months now, and it was good to feel from time to time that she belonged. It was no longer a matter of being allowed to do this, or not being allowed to do that. She was one of the nuns now – well, not exactly one of them, she was still only a novice and thus wore a white veil rather than a black one, but she wore the habit now, and anyone from the outside looking at her would call her a nun. Even her mother's letters now addressed her as "My dear daughter, Sister Lucy". She no longer belonged to her family, even though of course she loved them. But she had joined the band of women who were the Church's flowers. This had been a recent declaration of the Pope, according to Mother Alphonsine, the novice mistress. "The Holy Father," Mother Alphonsine had said with

pride, "has called nuns the flowers of the Church."

Sister Lucy opened up the top of her desk and pulled out a slip of paper. It was the envelope from her mother's last month's letter on which was written a list of four items: *St. Stanislaus feast; joke about Rudolph; tablecloth; Advent & Xmas.*

She had begun compiling a list every month of things to tell her family because when letter-writing Sunday came around it was difficult to know on the spur of the moment what to write about. So little happened in the novitiate that was out of the ordinary. The list helped her remember the few events in her life that might prove interesting to her family.

The novices had been told not to write of matters that concerned internal dealings of the convent. Mother Alphonsine, the novice mistress, said that people who still lived in the world didn't understand the spirit of religious life. Once, Sister Lucy had written to her parents that she was wearing holes at the knees in her stockings from

kneeling so much. "We even kneel when we're eating sometimes!" she had written, intending it as a joke (even though this was a practice that actually took place once or twice a week as a penance). Mother Alphonsine, who read all the novices' letters, incoming and outgoing, had asked her to write the letter over again and to write nothing about knees and holes in stockings. She had complied without protest, her face burning with humiliation. Although Mother Alphonsine had spoken kindly to her, Sister Lucy felt she had somehow shamed herself in her gauche way of trying to write something light-hearted. She had replaced the offending passage with "We're sure doing a lot of praying." Then she had added, lest Mother Alphonsine think she was complaining, "We pray for our families especially, and also for priests in the foreign missions."

She now began to write again. "We had a really nice surprise on November 13. It was the feast of St. Stanislaus. St. Stanislaus is the patron saint of novices. He was a novice in the Jesuit Order, and he

died while he was still a novice. We had jam for breakfast and we didn't have to do chores in the morning or the afternoon, we spent the morning having a sing-a-long and the afternoon playing Scrabble. The nuns fixed up the novitiate for us, to look like a garden, with flowers all over the place. Was it ever pretty!"

Sister Lucy looked ahead at the white veil of the novice in front of her. The novice's head was bent, the middle crease in the veil folded just so, then opening and falling over and down her back. Sister Lucy followed the crease with her eyes. What more could she write about the feast of St. Stanislaus that would be of interest to her parents and younger brother? They had no idea what it had meant to come upon an unexpected oasis in the midst of a barren landscape. Not that life in the convent was barren: on the contrary, the simplicity and starkness of religious life spoke of the one thing necessary, which was to love God and Him alone, to pare yourself down to nothing but essentials, to gird yourself and follow Jesus. That was the whole point of giving

up your life in the world, and saying goodbye to your family and your dog and your bedroom with the frilly pillows and your collection of stuffed animals. That was the point of six hours in chapel each day, of learning the Holy Rule of the Order.

But November seemed to drag on forever, each day like the day before it, grey and drafty, with no feast day to bring new flowers to the chapel and a special dessert for dinner. And then on the night of November 12, a day which means nothing to anyone, a handful of nuns had left night prayers, and in the convent's great silence had transformed the bare novitiate into a parkland. They had strung garlands around the room, hung baskets heavy with flowers, created a rock garden and cobblestone paths by artfully crumpling brown paper. And at the top of the room, replacing the novice mistress's desk, a huge box had been transformed into a horse and carriage. On each novice's desk was a small pot-pourri, in the middle of which sat a tiny piece of paper rolled up. Inside was a message, individually

typed, from St.Stanislaus that Sister Lucy supposed Mother Alphonsine had composed. Her message had read, "Dear Sister, May God fill you Himself, not according to your fears and weaknesses, but according to the measure of His Love. May He increase your confidence, that it may enlarge in you the capability of more fully possessing Him and of loving Him more deeply."

If she wrote about such things in her letter, she could imagine her father shaking his head and muttering, "What are they doing to her in that place?" Her mother would smile a sweet, sad smile, and her brother Charlie would stamp out of the room with his finger shoved down his throat. They could not begin to understand.

She looked at her list and began to write again. "Here's a joke one of the novices told us. It's a little early for Christmas, but here goes. Question: *What is Santa's* other *reindeer called?* Answer: *Olive.* Do you get it? (Clue: Olive = 'All of')" She continued: "Do you remember the tablecloth I told you I was embroidering at recreation? Well, I'm

almost finished it, and it has light blue flowers and pretty red baby cardinals."

She looked up again from her letter. Around the room, the other novices were bowed over their desks. At the front of the room stood the novice mistress's desk, an old-fashioned teacher's desk that might have come out of a one-room school. On the desk was a Bible and the black-bound copy of the Order's Holy Rule. Behind the desk and the empty chair of the novice mistress hung the large picture of the Sacred Heart, Jesus pointing to his heart with his eyes raised to heaven. To the right, facing out to the room, stood a statue of St. Roch. He wore tattered clothes and both legs were bare, and on one thigh was a red gash. Beside him, on the same plaster base, stood a statue of a dog.

Mother Alphonsine had told the novices the story of St. Roch: During the great plague of Europe he had helped look after the sick with tireless devotion until one day he himself took sick and was turned out of town. Alone and friendless, he had crawled into a forest,

where a dog licked his wounds, nursing him back to health. Sister Lucy thought that it wasn't quite nice that St. Roch's wound was so high up, and it shocked her that the statue should stand in front of them all in the novitiate, where every day they knelt and prayed the "Come, Holy Ghost", with nothing else to look at except the picture of the Sacred Heart and the thick red line at the top of St. Roch's leg. He was a great saint, however.

Mother Alphonsine had gone on to tell them how he had healed a former Reverend Mother of tuberculosis. She had been near death as a novice, spitting blood and gasping for air. Someone had placed a relic of St. Roch on her chest. The next morning her lungs were clear and she lived a long and saintly life, dying when she was ninety.

Some of the novices had been skeptical about the story. "What was the relic, Mother?" Sister Pauline had asked. "A piece of bone? It would be pretty dried up, I guess. And how would they know it came from St. Roch if the only friend he had was a dog?"

"Maybe the relic was a piece of cloth dipped in the blood that dripped from his wound that got licked by the dog … ," said another novice.

"That came from the house that Jack built," finished Sister Pauline in a mock sing-song voice. Titters rippled through the group. Mother Alphonsine said nothing.

Sister Lucy had thought the story of the miraculous cure was inspiring and she felt confused by the other novices' banter. She had imagined herself as the pale, tubercular novice lying on a simple cot, deeply serene in spite of wracking pain. Sister Pauline tended to be a little disrespectful, perhaps even irreverent at times, she thought, but in spite of herself, Sister Lucy liked her. Sister Pauline had a twinkle in her eye and an easy smile. Sister Lucy had decided to disregard the remark about St. Roch's relic, as Mother Alphonsine had done.

She looked back at her letter now, turning her pen over in her hands. She was wasting time. Soon the bell would ring and the novices

would have to hand in their letters and then scatter to do the rest of the day's chores. It was easier to think, to reflect, than it was to write.

Then she remembered one more thing about the feast of St. Stanislaus and once more began to write. "We had a record of songs by Mario Lanza while we played games in the afternoon." The songs had been an unusual intrusion of worldliness in the silence of the novitiate. Sister Lucy now remembered how Mother Alphonsine had moved smoothly over to the record player as Mario Lanza was belting, full-throttle, "Be my lo-o-ove, for no one else can fil-l-l this year-r-rning …" and had lifted the needle and turned the record over, saying in a bland voice, "Perhaps we'll hear the other side now." Something had lurched inside her chest at that moment and for no reason she could explain to herself, her eyes had burned with sudden tears. Then the moment had passed and she had returned her attention to the Scrabble board as in the background familiar organ music swelled and Mario Lanza's voice burst into the *Ave Maria.*

She now sighed a deep sigh and sat back in her seat, filled with self-disgust. She had almost exhausted her list of items and had filled little more than half a page. It was a boring letter, it said nothing of what she really wanted to say. Just then an ancient, melancholy melody came to her mind and she began whistling it quietly through her teeth. It was a piece of Advent music the novices had begun practising yesterday afternoon. Mother Estelle, the brisk music mistress, had swept into the gloomy half-light of the basement music room with an armload of sheet music and had plopped herself onto the piano stool. The novices were already seated, their chairs in a large semi-circle around the piano.

"Advent," the nun had announced. "We're preparing for the coming of the Lord." She began to trace a melody on the piano with her right hand, then swivelled around to face the novices. She fixed her eyes at a point on the wall behind them.

"This is glorious music," she said, "magnificent in its simplicity. 'Veni, veni, Em-man-u-el.'" She said the words slowly, exaggerating

the syllables. "'O come, O come, Emmanuel.' It's the cry of longing for the Saviour. In the flow of the music you can feel the centuries of exile and sadness."

Sister Lucy looked out the window at the bare bushes that seemed stuck into the earth like sticks against the grey November sky. Nothing was visible beyond them. She longed for either sunshine or darkness. Sunshine always made things seem bright; darkness brought bedtime and the oblivion of sleep. The grey half-light made her feel empty and desolate.

"'O come, Thou Day-spring from on high. Dis-perse the glo-o-omy clouds of night.'" Mother Estelle recited the words as if they were poetry, her eyes roaming back and forth along the wall behind the novices. Sister Lucy stared at her with resentment. She had hoped they'd practise Christmas music, something pretty that would make her feel better. She hated the intense look in the nun's eyes, the deliberate slowness of her speech.

"We'll be singing it in Latin, of course," Mother Estelle went on, "but you almost don't need a translation because you can feel the yearning here, in the rise and fall of the chant itself. Do you hear it?"

She turned away from them, facing the piano keys, and again played the melody with her right hand. She turned her head around as far as it would go and looked at the floor over her shoulder as she sang, "' – and death's dark shadow pu-u-ut to flight.'" She stopped suddenly and turned around again, this time looking directly at the semi-circle of faces.

"Does any of you know what 'Emmanuel' means?" she asked, her eyes moving from one novice to the next. Sister Lucy ran her tongue over her bottom lip. It was dry and cracked.

"'Emmanuel,'" the nun said to the silent group, "means 'God with us', and this is what we're praying for, for ourselves and for all people during Advent: we're praying for God to be with us. We're in lonely exile, every one of us, and we long desperately for the link that will

unite us with the divine. The simplicity of this music helps us to express that longing like nothing else can. Now let me hear you sing." She rearranged herself on the piano stool and once again her hand came down upon the keys.

The novices picked up their music from their laps and began to sing. In the unison of the voices around her, Sister Lucy thought of her mother, father and brother. She felt them with her now, each of them isolated in their separate longing, even Charlie who could be such a brat sometimes, yet all united in a kind of common desire. As the novices' voices rose and fell with the notes, she felt surrounded by longing and, with it, something that felt like comfort.

The bell rang now, startling her. Her quiet whistle fell silent. Around her, the other novices rose and placed their letters in unsealed envelopes on the novice mistress's desk. She watched Sister Pauline get up, the rosary at her side swaying jauntily against the perfect folds of her habit skirt.

Sister Lucy bent over her letter one last time. "I've got to go now. I pray for you all, Mum, Dad and Charlie, I pray that God will be with us all. I won't be with you for Christmas, but inside our hearts we'll all be together. By-by." She hesitated a moment, then wrote, "From your loving daughter, Sister Lucy."

As she folded her letter, she looked up and saw that Sister Pauline was trying to catch her eye. Then the novice winked, brought up her hands in a cheerleading gesture, palms facing front, and with a rhythmic movement did a quick skip backward. Sister Lucy's face stretched into a smile. Her cheek muscles felt strained for a second, then they relaxed. She realized it was the first time she'd smiled all day.

The Poor

Sister Kate bit into a slice of buttered bread. "Were you awake for Father Murphy's sermon yesterday, Lizzie?" she asked between chews. "How he says St. Patrick maybe didn't exist at all. That maybe he's only a symbol. A symbol of the faith of the Irish people." She brushed aside a wisp of fading brown hair and adjusted the band that kept her black veil in place. The veil, which had been slightly askew on her head, remained so. She wore a plain white smock.

"Ay, the blather," said Lizzie, a tiny woman dressed in the pale blue dress and white apron of the scullery help. She sat with her legs crossed and a handmade cigarette held between two bony fingers. "And if St. Patrick did exist, says he, he come from Checko-slo-vakia.

My God, Sister Kate, the priests is gettin' dotty these days."

Sister Kate laughed. Bits of bread were stuck between her teeth. "It's the Vatican Council, Lizzie. Them bishops in Rome told us we have to look at things differently now. Some of the things we were taught just weren't right. Like us lay sisters bein' lower class than the educated nuns. That wasn't right, Lizzie."

"Ah, Jesus and Mary, the bishops. They'll be after telling us next that God himself doesn't exist."

Sister Kate gave a hearty laugh. The two downed the dregs of their tea and moved from the pantry into the kitchen. Untying her apron, Lizzie walked over to where her coat hung beside the back door, and then stopped. Hanging beside hers was a man's heavy brown overcoat.

"Oh – ," she began.

"It's for Mac. He's due back. I won't be surprised if he turns up this evening."

"Ay, poor Mac. How long's it been now?"

"Nearly three weeks. But the winter will be comin' soon and he'll want to stay around."

"Poor Mac," said Lizzie, making her way to the door.

After Lizzie had gone, Sister Kate began to scurry about the kitchen. She went into the cooler and brought out a tray of eggs. At the table in front of the high black stove, she began breaking the eggs into a bowl with quick movements, humming as she worked.

The back bell gave a loud ring, then another. Her head shot up and she moved quickly to the sink to wipe her hands. "Yes, Mac, yes, Mac," she muttered to herself. She hurried toward the door and grabbed the overcoat.

Outside the back door was a tiny courtyard with two benches and between them a small wooden table. A brick wall and high wooden gate separated the courtyard from the street. Sister Kate opened the gate to face a man with a flattened nose and dark hair that clung in greasy curls around his neck. He wore baggy pants and an ill-fitting brown checked

suit. Holes in his shoes revealed a blue sock in one and a red sock in the other. His face was clean-shaven. As the gate opened, he swept his arm out and bowed low.

"Your servant William MacLachan," he said. Then he straightened and smiled. His eyes were dark and lively. He was missing a front tooth. "And how are you this afternoon, my dear Sister Kate?"

Sister Kate stood aside, briskly. "Come in, Mac," she said, and then sniffed. "And it's the drink again."

"'Tis a joy to see you again, to be sure, Kate," he said, walking into the courtyard.

"Mac, I haven't much time, now. Try this on," said Sister Kate, thrusting the overcoat at him. "It's the best one I was able to get from the poor box before Sister Angela took it off to the St. Vincent de Paul."

"Ah, Sister, the angel of – "

Sister Kate had already moved back into the kitchen, leaving the door open.

"I think it'll fit you, Mac. It'll be nice and warm for you this winter," she called.

A few minutes later she emerged onto the courtyard with a mug of tea and a stack of sandwiches wrapped in waxed paper.

"Well, and how is it?" she asked.

He stood up from the bench and turned slowly around. The coat hung long on him. "The King will receive you presently, Madam," he said, bowing again. His face held a mock-solemn look, but his eyes danced.

"It's just fine on you, Mac, it looks grand. Jesus, you're a fine cut of a man, Mac, you really are. Now if only – ." She cut herself short.

He took a sip of tea and opened the sandwiches, then sat back on the bench with his eyes closed. "Ah, bless me, Father, for I have sinned. Do I hear a sermon approaching?"

"Right you are, Mac. I caught myself just in time. There's enough sermons, isn't there, from the priests?" She sat down on the bench

across from him and leaned her arms on the table.

"Ah, Kate, you're a woman after my own heart." He took a bite out of a sandwich, chewed awhile in silence, then took a gulpful of tea.

Sister Kate smiled. "You're hungry, Mac."

He swallowed, then said, "Yes, you're a woman who understands me. You know when a man needs a sandwich, Sister Kate, and when a man needs a discussion. 'The universe is unfolding as it should', Sister, did you know that? I read it on a wall in the Newberry Street hostel. 'The universe is unfolding as it should.' And I thought to myself, I thought, now isn't that the truth. We discuss and have a great old time carrying on, and the universe is unfolding as it should, all around us." He spoke slowly, moving his hands in rhythm with the syllables, like an orchestra conductor. His fingernails were crudely cut and speckled with bits of grime. "Is that not a profound thing now? The government plots and plans, and the politicians speak of the economic disparities and the whatnots, and the businessmen carry on with their talk of stocks and

price fixings, and I tell you, Kate, there's a whole universe that we're part of. And is God not a wonderful Being now, to be seeing to it that every particle, every atom in the universe moves along as it should, and we're all part of this movement, you and me, and every one of us. And God has a plan for us all, and every single tiny thing we do fits into this grand plan. And there's a great, vast meaning to it all. Is it not a profound thing, Sister Kate?"

Sister Kate let out a hoot of laughter. "You're on a great roll now, Mac."

"And then I think to myself, 'William Joseph MacLachan, what are you doing here? What is your purpose in life?' Ah yes, Kate, I know the catechism answer as well as you. I am here to know God, to love him and serve him in this life and to be happy with him in the next. 'But is there not something else, William?' I ask myself. 'Have I not been missing something?'" He stopped again and took a huge bite of his sandwich.

"You're so full of blather, Mac, it's no wonder the old fellas – "

"I was thinkin' to myself the other day," Mac continued, ignoring her and talking as he chewed, "there's only three women I could fancy myself married to, and they're all taken. One's my cousin, but the Holy Father wouldn't allow it. One's my childhood sweetheart, and she's now long married, and the third is Kate, and she's a nun."

Sister Kate laughed. "Is that what you're thinkin', Mac? You're thinkin' it's time to settle down and have a woman to look after you. Well, it's a fine thought, Mac. But if the three women's taken, you'll have to find someone else. Why don't you ask Father Murphy now, and he'll find a fine lady for you." She laughed again.

He stopped chewing and looked at her, his dark eyes serious, his jaw slack. "No, Kate, a fine lady will do me no good now, not here where I've landed. I'm a failed man, Kate, I've reached the lowest point a man can reach. I know that I talk and discuss and carry on, but it's the hard, cold fact, so it is: mine is the very waste of a life."

He looked away from her and continued talking. "I'm the object of pity now, Sister Kate. The object of pity. I live on a park bench, I hold out my hand for pennies, and I brawl with the lads for a mouthful of bad whisky. I'm no good to a woman or anyone else."

Sister Kate sat up and brushed away a wisp of hair. "To me, Mac, you're good. I find you the best coat in the poor box, I save you the best leftovers of meat for your sandwiches, and it's not because you're an object of pity, it's because there's something in you that's noble and grand. I don't know what God thinks of you, and I don't know what the universe thinks of you, but I know you're a good man, Mac."

Before he could reply, an electric bell rang inside. Sister Kate jumped up.

"Jesus and Mary, Mac, that's the bell for the prayers. The nuns'll be down for supper in a quarter of an hour." She jumped up and started for the door, calling back, "Finish your tea, Mac, and make sure you close the gate behind you."

He rose, his lips turned up in a smile, his eyes lively once again. He bowed low, the coat still hanging on him, and said, "His Highness thanks you for the bountiful repast and the grace of your companionship." He then sat down again and picked up another sandwich.

A quarter of an hour later footsteps sounded on the staircase outside the kitchen. Standing by the stove with a large white cloth in her hand, Sister Kate opened the oven door and pulled out dishes of egg and tomato. Two kettles steamed on top of the stove and baskets of bread sat on the table.

The door opened and Sister Patricia appeared. She was neatly dressed, with soft brown curls held in place by her veil. She walked with brisk assurance toward the table, her black habit moving gracefully about her legs.

"Good evening, Sister," she said pleasantly, scooping up several baskets of bread.

"I'm a bit behind myself, Patsy," said Sister Kate, her face red from

the heat of the stove. "Brew the tea, will you?"

Sister Patricia put down the baskets and headed for the kettles. "Was it a busy afternoon?"

"Mac's back. I had a feeling he'd be back, and that's why I saved the best coat for him."

Sister Patricia spooned tea leaves from a tin container into two big teapots. "Oh, I'm glad. I'd like to see him. The director of the social work project is interested in him. They're wanting to do something with these poor men, get them off the streets, do something to rehabilitate them rather than just feed them. We have to look at the root causes of why these men are in this situation."

Two more nuns came in, gathered up the baskets of bread and the hot dishes, then disappeared out the door.

"If I'm here the next time Mr. MacLachan comes back, I'd like to talk with him, Sister." Sister Patricia headed for the door, a teapot in each hand.

Sister Kate leaned against the table, then picked up the remaining dishes. "Away with your social work, Patsy," she whispered to herself.

In the refectory, the nuns sat at tables of four. Dishes clanked as they served themselves in silence. At the top of the room, a short nun with glasses read aloud from a commentary on the Bible.

Sister Kate sat herself down on the chair nearest the door. She took a slice of bread, helped herself to a spoonful of egg and tomato and began to eat, looking down at the food.

The reading ended and the nuns began to talk. "The last of the roses are in bloom," said Sister Jeanne, who sat directly across from Sister Kate. "We must enjoy them while we can."

"It's a fine day to go for a sail," said Sister Bernarda, sitting to Sister Kate's right. "That's what we always used to do just before the winter came – we'd go out for a sail on one of the last autumn days when the sun was shining, and the feeling was in the air that perhaps you'd never sail again, that perhaps this was the last ever, and you'd best

savour every moment of it."

Sister Kate continued eating. To her right, Sister Patricia sat straight, eating in small bites. "We had a theologian talk to us today about the theology of the people. About the importance of finding the right ways of dealing with the poor. About how the poor are not given their rightful dignity when they are only given handouts at the door. He even said" – she paused and looked around the small table, from face to face – "he even said that if we were serious about feeding the poor, we should invite them to have supper with us. That is what Jesus did, after all, didn't he? He sat at supper with the poor. He didn't just feed them at the back door with the scraps from his own meal."

Sister Kate put her fork down. "You invite MacLachan in here for supper, Patsy, and he'll do one of two things. He'll fall down drunk at the door and be sick, and you'll have to clean up after him like I've had to clean up at the back. Or he'll sail right up to the top of the room and say, 'And how are you this evening, Sisters, and where's the

good Reverend Mother?' and poor old Maggie'll go all red in the face and he'll kiss her hand and embarrass her right down to her boots."

"Shh, Sister, keep your voice down," said Sister Jeanne.

"He will, Sister. That's what he'll do with your theology of the poor."

"The poor can't be just your apostolic work any more, Sister Kate," said Sister Patricia. "That was fine in the old days when it was the job of the cook to hand out charity at the back door to the poor men who came begging. But things have changed since the Second Vatican Council. We all must be responsible for finding ways to make the world a better place for everyone."

Sister Kate was eating rapidly. "That's a lot of book learning you've got yourself into, Patsy. You and Father Murphy and the lot of you, you read books and you talk to each other, and what good does it do a poor fella like MacLachan?"

"Mr. MacLachan is Sister Kate's personal project, don't you know?" said Sister Jeanne. "This is her property, her territory, and don't you

dare to trespass."

"It isn't," said Sister Kate. "I understand Mac, that's what it is. And I understand the other old fellas that come to the back door. If you start to talk your theology to them, and your Vatican Council and whatnot, they'll walk the ten miles away to St. Brigid's, where they can get a handout and eat in peace without a theology lecture."

"But that's the way it's always been, isn't it?" said Sister Bernarda. "Jesus said, 'The poor you have with you always,' didn't he? Perhaps we have to be content with small acts of charity. Feeding a poor man at the back door can be a very humble and kind thing to do, and surely pleasing to God."

"Yes, no doubt, Sister, but we have to look beyond these acts of charity," said Sister Patricia. "We have to look at society's actions toward these men. What makes a man have to live on the street?"

Sister Kate laughed. "I wish Mac was here right now," she said. "He'd have a few fine things to say."

THE NEXT MORNING the back bell rang as Sister Kate was scrubbing the stove. She hurried out to open the gate. Lizzie stumbled in, wide-eyed.

"Glory be to God, the commotion, Sister."

"What's happened, Lizzie?"

"All the people that's down the street aways. There's been a fight. The police come, and oh my!"

The two walked slowly into the kitchen. Lizzie hung up her coat, took down her apron, and slipped it over her head. Sister Kate went back to the stove.

"Did you see who was in the fight, Lizzie?"

"No, I couldn't tell. They took a fella onto the wagon on a stretcher with a coat over top of him," she said, tying her apron and walking over to the sink where bacon pans were standing upright. She turned on the water, then looked sharply over to the coat hooks. "My God, Sister Kate," she said, turning slowly around.

Sister Kate held a matted mass of steel wool in mid-air. "Mac – it's MacLachan, isn't it? You know by the coat it's Mac, don't you, Lizzie?"

"It was the coat that was hangin' there, Sister, yes, it was."

Sister Kate left the steel wool on the stove and moved toward the sink, her hands stretched in front of her. Lizzie moved aside.

"I was afraid this would happen," said Sister Kate, speaking over her shoulder as the water ran over her hands. "Mac gets himself into too many fights, Lizzie, especially when he's been into the drink. He forgets he's not the fightin' kind. He'd much rather talk than fight. But he can't just have a bit of a chat with the old fellas out there. He has to have 'discussions' as he calls them and before any of them knows it, they're listening to his palaver about God and society and the way the universe is run. You know how he blathers on, Lizzie. He's harmless really, and he's a gentleman at heart, but if someone sends him a punch to shut him up, he'll punch back. His nose has been broke I don't know how

many times. My poor Mac. I wonder if they've taken him to St. John's Hospital. I'll go and ask Maggie if I can run over there right now."

Lizzie's eyes were like two beads staring at Sister Kate. Water dripped from her hand. "Sister Kate, the coat was coverin' his whole self. Even his head." Her voice was quiet. "That means – . And the way the police was talkin' – ."

Sister Kate looked at her with her mouth open, her eyes dull. For a moment, the two women stood close to each other without speaking.

Then Sister Kate began to wipe her hands slowly, finger by finger. "You're right, Lizzie. I knew it would happen one of these days. He was awful smart, Lizzie, with all his talk and carry-on, but he didn't have the brains to get by." Sister Kate tapped the side of her head with her forefinger. "He had brains. But not the kind you need."

Lizzie stood still, as if paralyzed. Sister Kate went on: "But he won't need them now. He won't need anything now. He doesn't need me, he doesn't need the fine coat I saved for him. But I need to say to

him, 'Godspeed to you, Mac.'" She sniffed, pulled a handkerchief from her pocket, and wiped her eyes. "It's a terrible thing if a man dies alone, with no one to be sorry. I need to say to him, 'You're a good man, Mac, and I'm sorry you died.'" She moved about the kitchen with quick movements, opening cupboards and straightening dishes. "We'll give him a good send-off, Lizzie."

"You're very kind, Sister Kate, to have such thoughts for an old fella that lived and died on the street." Lizzie had her hands in the sink again. "It's the drink that's the death of them. My old fella, God rest his soul, he couldn't leave it alone. Lucky for him he had a wife that brought in a bit of money to keep body and soul together." She tapped her chest, looking at Sister Kate and nodding. "If it hadn't been for me, he woulda died on the street, just like poor Mac."

"What do the theology books tell us now about poor Mac with the coat over his smashed head?" Sister Kate stopped and leaned against the table. Her cheeks were wet. "'A waste of a life', Lizzie. That's what

he said to me yesterday. But it's not a wasted life, Lizzie, it's not. I don't know what it means, Mac's life, and I don't think Patsy's theology books and her posh social work people know what it means. He's just an old fella who lived and died and – "

"And sure isn't that what we all do, Sister, when all's said and done? We live and we die."

"But do you know what Mac had, Lizzie? He had dignity. If the Lord himself had walked by, he would have stuck out his hand and said, 'William MacLachan, my Lord, and isn't it a fine day?' And the two would have sat down for a good old chat."

At the end of the funeral Mass, two undertakers wheeled the white-draped coffin down the centre aisle of the church. Behind the coffin, Lizzie walked with Sister Kate, who was dressed now in her black habit. They were followed by Father Murphy, a tall balding man wearing his Mass vestments, accompanied by an altar boy who carried

the holy water container. The rest of the church was empty, except for a group of nuns at the front who formed the choir.

The small procession stopped at the back of the church. Father Murphy came around to the side, held up his book, turned a page, and read aloud, "'God our Father, into your hands we commend our brother, William, to – '"

At the foot of the coffin, Sister Kate cleared her throat loudly. "Mac, Father, Mac," she whispered, her voice impatient, her eyes fixed on the white pall.

Father Murphy shot her a quick look, then went on, correcting himself, "'We commend our brother, Mac, to paradise.'" The altar boy held out the holy water, and taking the sprinkler in his hand, the priest threw water on the coffin.

The organ started up and the nuns began to intone: "'May the angels guide you and lead you into paradise … '" Father Murphy returned the water sprinkler to the altar boy and joined the singing,

his voice a deep baritone. "And may all the martyrs come forth to welcome you home; and may they lead you into the holy city Jerusalem. May the angel chorus sing to welcome you, and like Lazarus, forgotten and poor, may you have everlasting rest." When the singing had finished, the organ fell silent and there was a hush.

Sister Kate made a movement with her arm, as if to nudge the priest. "St. Patrick, Father," she muttered up to him from her bowed head.

Father Murphy rocked quickly from one foot to the other, reddened, and then said softly, "And may St. Patrick shake your hand."

The undertakers glided back to the coffin, removed the white pall and together they folded it like a sheet. The coffin stood naked, a plain wooden box.

At the door of the church appeared a man with disheveled red hair underneath a woollen cap. His sweater and pants were too short for his limbs. He had several days' growth of beard, and his eyes were bloodshot. He weaved slightly.

"Who's the old fella?" he called in.

"Whisht," Sister Kate hissed at him.

He drew back and as the coffin wheeled past him and down the steps, he took off his cap and crossed himself.

About the Author

Mary Frances Coady lives in Toronto. Her stories have appeared in *The Antigonish Review* and *Whetstone*.