

All that is in the World

“IN THE WINTER THE RIVER NEVER FREEZES completely; it’s always flowing underneath,” said Mother Alphonsine. “The ice is deceptive.”

The nun stood at the edge of the riverbank looking down at the mounds of ice covering the narrow river. She held a black shawl tightly around her head and shoulders, clasping it at her chest with a sharply-veined hand.

Clustered around her, staring down at the white expanse, stood four postulants, each wearing a long black dress and a cape that was topped with a Peter Pan collar. Each wore a black woolen shawl like Mother Alphonsine’s around her shoulders. Overhead, the branches of a giant weeping willow, heavy with the weight of newly fallen snow, drooped low over the group.

“When it breaks there, in the centre . . .” The nun took her hand from where it had clutched her shawl

and pointed out toward the river, her arm suspended in mid-air, “. . . down in there, when you can actually see the water flowing again, then, *then*, you know spring is here.” She looked around at them, her eyes smiling behind round wire-rimmed glasses. “In the meantime, we live in hope.” She looked around the circle again. “Shall we move on?”

She turned, clasped her shawl tighter and made her way back through the snow to the path. The postulants shifted and turned in ragtag fashion, stamping the snow from the rubber boots that fit snugly over their new black lace-up shoes, and fell in step around her when they reached the shovelled area.

The four of them had been in the novitiate less than twenty-four hours, having been admitted the day before, the feast of the Epiphany, six days into the new year of 1959. Melanie and Annette had arrived together. From the car, Melanie had seen Annette walking along the bridge and carrying a suitcase, a pale blue angora scarf wrapped around her neck. When the car reached the convent gate, Melanie retrieved her cello from the front seat. Her father opened the trunk and took out her suitcase, and was about to carry it up the steps when she stopped him and, with a hurried kiss and a wave to her brothers in the back seat, took the case from him, opened the gate and walked slowly toward the front door. There she waited for Annette, and together the two girls rang the doorbell.

The door opened immediately and Mother Alphonsine, the novice mistress, stood there, all

smiles. “Welcome to the last of our new postulants!” she said, kissing each of them on both cheeks. “Here you are, like the Magi, answering the call. Following the star. The two others are already here.” Another nun took Melanie’s cello, and Mother Alphonsine ushered the two of them through the green-curtained doorway of the cloister into a bare room where the other two postulants were struggling with unfamiliar black clothes. Their own clothes, the ones they were leaving behind, lay in scattered, colourful heaps on the floor. The novice mistress introduced the two newcomers, saying with a broad smile, “You’re strangers to each other now, but soon you’ll be fast friends.”

THEY NOW MOVED ALONG the newly shovelled path in jerky steps, still in a cluster around Mother Alphonsine. She led the way along the chapel side of the convent. “When it snows there’s good exercise in running a shovel along the walkways,” she said. She glanced backwards and her eyes settled on a chubby postulant with dark, wary eyes, who had been introduced as Carol. “Have you shovelled snow before, Carol?” She had a slightly teasing smile.

Carol reddened. “Not much, Mother.”

“Well, there’s lots of opportunity here,” the nun went on. “Not to mention weeding the garden in the summer and raking the leaves in the fall and washing windows in the spring . . .” She looked around the group, still smiling. “That’s all I’ll say about work for

the moment. After all, this is only your first day, and we have to ease you in gently.”

They rounded the back end of the chapel and came upon an expanse of lawn. “There’s the grotto of Our Lady,” she said, indicating a shrine at one end. It was made of rocks, and a statue was set in on a ledge. “And behind there,” she added, indicating a hedge to the left, “is the garden.”

“That’s a big garden, Mother. Do we have to look after it?” asked the fourth postulant, named Edith, whose pale face was flecked with freckles and whose hair even beneath the black net shone a brilliant red-blond. She smiled as she spoke.

Mother Alphonsine looked at Edith with a gaze that was half quizzical, half smiling. “Do you mean, ‘May we look after the garden,’ Edith? Here, we always look for opportunities to be generous.” She paused. “Two of the nuns have charge of the garden, but as I have said, the novices and postulants are most useful as weed pullers.” Edith’s smile remained stiffly in place. The group moved in silence onto the path that crossed the lawn, more scattered now. Annette lagged behind, scraping the pink pearl nail polish from her fingers with the edge of her thumbnail. Melanie turned and waited for her.

“Did you ask her about your cello?” whispered Annette.

Melanie shook her head and put her finger to her lips.

“I’m ready for a nap.” Annette dropped her head to one side and closed her eyes, simulating sleep. Then

she grinned, revealing uneven teeth and a dimple low in her right cheek.

The five-thirty wake-up bell had sounded like a fire alarm in the corridor outside the large dormitory where they slept in assigned beds surrounded by white cotton curtains. Bodies thudded to the floor, and some moments later the postulants stomped down the back staircase one behind another, bleary eyed, emerging at the chapel door. Mother Alphonsine ushered them to the pews in front of the novices. The chapel was in semi-darkness. The red sanctuary lamp hung in its gold casing before the tabernacle. On the side altar straight ahead, in front of the statue of Our Lady, light from a votive candle danced against a brass pot of yellow chrysanthemums. The occasional cough and rustle of skirts and rosary beads broke the cold early morning silence.

The group had by now reached the tall hedge that separated the convent grounds from the buildings beyond. Behind them, a bell sounded inside the convent.

“Oh, my goodness,” said Mother Alphonsine, reaching inside past her shawl and pulling out a watch that hung from a black strap. “It’s time for the examen.” She turned abruptly and began to walk back toward the building. Again, the postulants shifted and followed her.

She spoke more quickly now. “The examen is that time of the day – there are two times, actually: now, just before noon, and at the end of the day after night prayers – it’s the two times when we look at how we

have spent this day so far. We examine our actions, our thoughts, our motivations. It's a time to reflect on whether or not we have been pleasing to God. This is when we render an account to Him."

She strode toward the door by the side of the chapel, increasing speed. The postulants tried to hurry behind her, awkward in their bulky clothes. Annette stumbled on her skirt. She looked at Melanie and grinned, the dimple on her cheek deepening.

The two had been school friends for almost two years, ever since Annette had caught up with Melanie on the street after an afternoon concert on the feast of St. Monica, the school's patron. Melanie had played her cello at the concert: a solo piece called "Humoresque" and, accompanied by another girl on the piano, "The Skye Boat Song."

"What is that big violin thing?" Annette called, hurrying up behind her.

Melanie stopped and set the cello case on the sidewalk while she adjusted the books she was carrying in her other arm. "A cello."

"I've never heard of it before. It was real nice what you played. It sounded like someone singing. Singing without words."

"Well, thanks. I've only been playing a couple of years. My father thought a cello would be good for me to play. He plays the violin, and I guess he thought that with my two brothers playing the violin and the viola, we'd make a string quartet. It didn't work out that way, because my brothers aren't even remotely interested in playing an instrument. All they want to

play is football.” She laughed. “But I like the cello. Even though it’s hard on my arm.” She moved her right arm back and forth, her face in a grimace.

“But – ,” Annette gave Melanie a sly sideways glance. “Nobody ever told you it was unladylike having your legs like that while you’re playing? I mean, putting your legs around the cello?”

Melanie gave a small laugh, her face blushing. “Well, playing it with the uniform on did seem kind of strange.” She looked down and moved her feet apart until her legs stretched her burgundy uniform skirt to its full width. “I usually play it with a wider skirt on, so it’s not so bad.” Still blushing, she reached back and twisted her dark ponytail.

Annette deepened her voice and lowered her chin until it almost touched her chest. “A girl from St. Monica’s! Spreading her legs! I’m shocked!”

They both laughed, Melanie pink faced with embarrassment. She picked up her cello in its case and together the pair went off to Connie’s Coffee Shop, the favourite after-school haunt of St. Monica’s students. This excursion became a daily routine; as many girls as possible squeezed into one of the booths, joined by two or three boys from St. Paul’s Boys’ School, and ordered Cokes and milkshakes. On Friday evenings, a group of them often crowded into a car belonging to one of the girls and drove to the drive-in theatre.

One day, as the two of them were walking home along the sidewalk where the high brick wall enclosed the convent grounds adjacent to the school,

Melanie confided to Annette that a priest in confession had asked her if she ever considered entering a religious order.

“Did you tell him where to go?” said Annette.

“Well, I was kind of surprised, but then I started thinking about it.”

“Wha-a-t?!” Annette stopped and stared at her friend.

“Well, I am.”

“Are you crazy? How can you lock yourself up like that?”

“First of all, you don’t get locked up. Does Sister Zelig look like she’s locked up? Or Sister Donald? You know these nuns better than I do. You had them ever since you started kindergarten. I’ve only had them at St. Monica’s.”

“Yeah, I really liked Sister Ruth Ann. But anyway, what about your cello?”

“I might still be able to play it. But if I can’t, the bigger the sacrifice you make, the more grace you get. That’s what the priest said. What good does it do to give your whole life if you’re going to hold something back?” She tossed back her ponytail. “Anyway, I said I’m only *thinking* about it. There’s nothing wrong with *thinking*, is there?”

They reached the back gate of the convent. “Let’s see if there are any novices there,” said Annette. Her dimple flashed. “If you look through the crack between the gate and the wall, you can sometimes see them.” She ran over and peered inside. “Nope.”

They dropped the topic until several weeks later,

when St. Monica's held its annual students' retreat day. A young priest stood alone on the stage of the auditorium as the classes filed in and took their seats. He had dark wavy hair and wore a white robe with a hood at the back, and a flowing black cape. One of the nuns said he was a Dominican.

"He looks like a pelican," whispered Annette to Melanie as they came in the door.

"Or a magpie or a penguin," said another girl nearby.

The school principal, Sister Beatrice, introduced the priest as Father Raymond. He strode back and forth across the stage, taking long steps in heavy black shoes, his black cape swishing around his white robe every time he turned. "It's my guess," he said, "that perhaps ten of you in front of me, give or take a couple, have a vocation to the religious life." He shaded his eyes with his hands and pretended to peer out at the assembly and then resumed walking back and forth. "Oh, I know you may not like the idea of becoming nuns, and you might find yourselves fighting the very idea of it, but you must listen to God's quiet voice. Because if God is calling you to the religious life, there is nothing you will be able to do to get away from that call. I know. I did everything I could to avoid entering religious life, but it all came up empty for me. So finally I said, 'All right, God, you win.' And do you know what? From that day on, I've felt such peace, felt such joy."

There was not a sound throughout the assembly. The nuns who were standing in the side aisles had

tiptoed to available chairs. “Now I just want you to picture yourself for a moment,” he continued. “In a nun’s habit, sailing away on a boat, perhaps toward Africa or the Far East. You’re leaving all that’s familiar to you, your language, your climate, your family and your sisters in community. You’re off to learn a new language, to adjust to a new climate, new people, people who are not even Christian. And – ”he paused and looked around, “you are going to a leper colony. ‘I wouldn’t do that for a million dollars,’ says someone. And what do you reply?” He stopped suddenly, his cape swirling around him, and looked back and forth across his audience. “You answer, ‘Neither would I.’ Because you are giving your life in this way for a spiritual reward that is far, far greater than any material reward.” He folded his arms and strode back and forth, staring down at the stage floor.

“Or again,” he said, stopping in mid-stride and once again facing his audience, “picture yourself going into an enclosed monastery, cut off from the world. Perhaps you never see your family again, and if you do it’s through a monastic grille. You get up at four o’clock every morning and you spend six or seven hours a day in prayer, but this is not self-punishment.” He paused, his eyes intent on the assembly, as if searching for someone. “It’s a sacrifice that you carry out for a greater good – to win souls and to make up for all the sin in the world. Or again: teaching or nursing here at home, pouring your life out. Why do it? To escape from the world? No, and if you do, it will soon be found out, because the life will