Sister Cecilia

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Abstract

I stood outside her door in the music building, the same place I had stood once a week since the fifth grade...
I STOOD outside her door in the music building, the same place I had stood once a week since the fifth grade. Funny that I should feel the same strain that I always felt before I met her. This time there weren’t any neglected arpeggios or any measures I hadn’t quite memorized. This was simply a social call, the annual call before I went back to school in the fall. Still, I was afraid to push back the door.

The old clock across the hall jumped to three o’clock. My signal. I slid the door back and stepped in. Just one step and wait for her to see you. That had been my rule for eleven years. That was my rule now.

There she was. Officially, Sister Mary Cecilia, Professor of Music. The first day I had called her “The Lady in the Black Mail Box” because I had never seen a nun before. I couldn’t figure out whose sister she was. Finally I decided she was Jesus’s sister. Later she was “Slave-driver” and “Old Bat” and finally “Dear Sister Cecilia.” To her face she had always been “Sister.”

She stood on a folding chair, watering her African violets. There were rows and rows of them now, all direct descendants of the plant her brother had sent her from the Chilian Embassy. She gave each plant its daily allotment, peeked under its leaves and cooed to the blossoms. I remember once I said, “My mama can’t raise flowers like that.” “Your mother raises children,” was all she said.

When she came to the end of the row, she saw me.

“Little Margaret,” she cried and she flew down from her perch. I was surprised that she was so little. Not over five foot two. She had seemed taller than that when she sat next to me at the piano with her red-blue pencil ready to rap my knuckles. Still “Little Margaret!” I guess she didn’t want me to grow up. I was the only child she had been near since her days on the fruit farm in Michigan. There she had been the second mother to thirteen younger brothers.
and sisters. There were no children in the cloister in Alma. There were no children in the novitiates' residence. I was the only child she had known at the school.

Suddenly she kissed my cheek. The rest of her body seemed to pull away, but she kissed my cheek. It was as though she was stealing something. She hurried over to her chair, sat down stiffly, and began twisting her rosary around her square fingers.

I was afraid to choose the topic of conversation because I knew she would ask me a question I couldn't answer. If I mentioned school she would ask me if I were taking piano lessons. If I said something about the family she would ask when my sister was coming home. How could I explain that she didn't come to visit because she was still afraid of Sister Cecilia? Afraid to talk. I just sat there.

"Margaret, you've had your hair cut. I liked your braids. And the plaid ribbons."

Listen, woman, I'm twenty years old. And I'm not a Chippewa princess. Short hair has come into its own. Or haven't you noticed.

"I used to have long braids when I was a girl. I lived on a fruit farm in eastern Michigan. I was the oldest girl and we used to . . ."

The story of the fruit farm. I should have known! This was the fifth time I had heard the story of the mincemeat, head cheese, and the apple bin. In fact every time I paid my social call, she told it to me. I didn't even have to listen anymore. Instinct told me when to smile and when to say "How nice." If she talked about her life, why didn't she tell about her forty-dollar music lessons in Europe or her good friend José Iturbi? José called her by her given name, and he came down to see her whenever he was in Minneapolis. She admired him as a person, but she scolded him because he tried to play boogie-woogie. It would spoil his technique.

"In those days we older girls did all the house work so that Mother could spend all of her time in the kitchen. Every fall she would get the stone crocks out of the cellar and make mince-meat. I never got her recipe, but I can remember . . ."

Yes, Sister Cecilia, and I can remember when you taught me my fractions . . .
"This note gets half as many counts as this half note. What kind of note is it?"

I didn't say a word. I just sat and stared at the black spot with the tail.

"Now, honey (She always called me "Honey" when she was losing her patience.), what is half of a half?"

I glanced up at the clock on top of the piano. Fifteen minutes more of this.

"It isn't written on the face of the clock. What is half of a half? What is half of a half a dollar?"

I was saved. I knew an answer.

"Twenty-five cents," I lisped through my braces.

That was the beginning of a long slow process, but she finally taught me my fractions. . . .

"Mother would boil the pig's head in spices for two days on the back of the range. Then she peeled the meat off the bone and put it into a press. Father always had to run the press, and that was the only time during the year that he was in the kitchen. After it was pressed. . . ."

What was it about this little woman that was so mighty? The girl who had her lesson before mine would run out of the room in tears almost every week. But the next Monday she was always back for more. We slaved all week for just a simple "That's better" or "Some improvement." When I was a senior in high school, I was supposed to give my last recital. Sunday evening, a new formal, and baskets of lilacs on the stage! I got strep throat ten days before. Saturday morning the doctor told Dad that I wouldn't be able to give it. That afternoon I had to get out of bed to answer the phone.

"This is Sister Cecilia over at the college. I just wondered if Little Margaret would like to start the program a little later because of her illness? Say eight-thirty instead of eight o'clock."

Something in that voice! I said that eight-thirty would be fine and that I would tell Margaret. I practiced the Gershwin the rest of that afternoon. And I gave the recital at eight-thirty with a temperature of 102. It was worth it. Sister Cecilia said I had done well.

"We didn't have pressure cookers like they have today, so we dried the fruit and stored it in the apple bin. We
used to keep six barrels of apples for ourselves. Six different kinds of apples. In a good year we could have apple pie at Christmas time."

That was almost the end of the story. I had to think of some way to get out of there. Forty-five minutes was a nice respectable time to stay. Dentist appointment? Help Mother? Help Mother. That always touched her.

"Well, Sister, I think I'd better be going. I have to go help Mother. A man brought her a bushel of beans to can, and she wants me to snap beans."

"Your mother cans! How wonderful! Not many women do now, you know." She stood up and pulled her outer sleeve over the patch in her dark brown blouse.

"I have something for you, Little Margaret."

Just the same. That first year she always saved her breakfast fruit for me. Five grapes in a piece of tissue paper or half a brown banana. One lesson, *The Happy Farmer*, Sister Cecilia and I put in an especially bad hour. The notes were blurred and tears were dropping onto the keys. When I left she said, "Here is an orange for you, honey." I ran out to Mom in the car, threw the orange in the back seat and said, "Take your old garbage."

Now Sister Cecilia pulled open her bottom drawer and brought out a bundle of tissue paper.

"It has been in the family for years. Grandmother got it from Great-grandmother. Mother got it from Grandmother. As oldest girl I got it from Mother."

She held it out to me. "It has been on my altar. It prays for me. Now I want you to have it."

I took her treasure and started peeling away the tissue paper. An ivory madonna. Slender and graceful. With heavy lids and a gentle smile on her face.

I looked into the little woman's face. For the first time the woman was separated from the black habit. She was no longer professor of music. She was more like the lady next door or like my own mother. I felt as if I could tell her anything. I could tell her that I didn't take piano lessons at college. I could even tell her that I had been afraid of her.

"Sister Cecilia."

She smiled slowly but her eyes were wet. She put her hands over mine as I held the madonna.
“Now I want you to have it, Little Margaret.”
She reached up—was she going to kiss me again? She stepped back. As if some authority had whispered in her ear. Reminded her that she was a Franciscan sister, married to the church and serving God.
“You’d better get home to those beans,” she said. I slid the door back. “Goodbye, Sister Cecilia.”
“May God bless you, Little Margaret.”
—Margaret Mattison, H. Ec. Sr.

End of a Phase

If you had asked (as you did not)
What I felt,
I could have replied only with what has been heard before,
For all that I imagined has been imagined before.

But were you to ask (as you will not)
What I feel now that it is over,
I think I should reply that it is like the time,
When by accident my friend broke my model airplane,
The finest one that I ever made.
I did not feel angry,
But neither was I very forgiving,
For it seemed that what was now gone
Had never been,
And I was only numb,
And did not feel deeply about anything,
And I never built another airplane.
—George Cowgill, ’53