Happiness Is

Wayne Hunt*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©1970 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
Happiness Is

by Wayne Hunt

English & Speech, Sr.

THE SMELL of incense filled the air. A rough, pine cof­fin, with a simple cross etched on its surface, rested peacefully in the middle of the chapel. Brian knelt facing the altar. His eyes had previously studied the wooden box, and the crudeness of it startled him.

The chapel was familiar. Every morning, at six o’clock, he was there to serve Mass. Every morning he filled the cruets, dressed the altar and waited silently for the priest. Silence was all there ever was. There were no sneezes, no babies crying, no kneelers creaking; nothing to disturb the thick damp air, but silence.

Brian could remember the first time he served at the Chapel of the Carmelites. Alone in the church before Mass, he nervously went about his chores with the eerie feeling that someone was watching him. He imagined rows of strange eyes behind the two huge windows at the left of the altar. A large room could be seen through them, but it was dark because of the iron bars and thin black curtain that covered the windows. In this room the Carmelite nuns assisted at Mass. They wore crude brown robes, white slippers and black veils over their faces. They close to lead a life of se­clusion, poverty and silent obedience in penance for the sins of man.

Today, however, was different. All the candles were lit, and even the dark room beyond the windows was well lighted. Brian watched and listened as the nuns rang bells and sang joyously. Their black, ghost-like images were changed to that of crooked old ladies, because they did not wear the customary veils which normally covered their faces. Brian watched them carefully for the first time, and he saw
that their skin was old and their wrinkles were harmless. He felt at ease. It was the first happy funeral he had ever attended.

_I guess it's 'cause they figure she's in Heaven_, he thought as he followed the priest to the coffin. His eyes strayed about the chapel, avoiding the simple pine box, finally coming to rest on the flickering candle which he held before him.

The singing continued as Brian followed the funeral procession through a small door in the back of the sanctuary. It led outside into a garden. Trees and grass bloomed all in green and flowers laughed at the sunshine. _Looks like the yard of a millionaire_, thought Brian, and he stepped through another door into a room.

It was the nuns' singing room. But its dark ugliness could not be seen from this side. Instead, the room was all in white, completely free from dirt. Sunlight shone brilliantly through large picture windows overlooking the garden. The center of the room held a beautiful grotto in honor of the Blessed Virgin. Water trickled over bright stones and a smiling, marble statue of the Virgin sat atop it all. Brian felt that the coffin was out of place in such a beautiful room.

He saw the serene, peaceful expression that each nun seemed to have. But deep down in their eyes, he thought he recognized the same basic sense of fear that gripped him everytime he glanced at the coffin.

The procession continued down a winding staircase to the basement. To his amazement, Brian found himself in a laundry room. Washers and dryers lined the walls and clothes tables were scattered about. Brian looked at the priest in his black silk robes, and then at the altar boys reverently holding their candles. He struggled to keep from laughing out loud. The idea of a funeral procession in a laundry room seemed so ridiculous. However, his subtle smile suddenly disappeared when he glanced at the coffin. _She probably worked here_, he thought.

He forced himself to watch the simple, little coffin as it juggled by the washing machines and into a pitch black hallway. He thought of the old woman that lay inside, completely alone. _Wonder if she felt funny going through the laundry room, maybe she saw me grinning_. Candle light
flickered over the rough wood of the box and the coffin seemed as though it were floating somewhere far away. *Where is she*, he thought. He squeezed his candle holder tighter and the light almost died out when the steel door before him was pulled open.

Inside, was a strange, dirty room filled with cobwebs. It reminded Brian of the coal bin in his grandfather’s house. The spotty candle light revealed five or six grey tombs and one which was freshly opened. *They’re not gonna stick her in here*, thought Brian, *it’s too damp and black*. Brian looked at the priest in disbelief. He wanted to tell the holy man to stop this thing. He wished the coffin could remain in the beautiful grotto room next to the running water and the Blessed Virgin. But the priest was busy reciting prayers and he squinted at a large red book in the dim light, stumbling over words and beckoning for the candles to be brought closer.

The altar boys moved closer, forming a tight ring around the coffin and the priest. But Brian did not move. He felt too close to the dead body as it was, and the stale air was choking him. His eyes began to water from the heat of the candle.

Soon, it was over, and the door was slammed shut and sealed behind them. The procession began to retrace its footsteps, through the laundry room, the grotto room, and the garden. Brian watched as he walked. The shades in the grotto room were pulled and all the lights were off. Dim candlelight was all there was. The sun had slipped behind some clouds and the garden quietly waited for rain. Brian saw a tall, white iron cross standing in the corner of the yard, next to the wall. He stared at it as he walked slowly by and saw that there was no Christ figure hanging upon it. Yet, unlike the crudely carved cross on the pine coffin below, this crucifix glistened in the sun and stretched itself, high and free, to the sky.

Before he entered the sanctuary door, he lowered his head and whispered a small prayer for the old nun. “May she find eternal peace and happiness in Heaven.” Then he glanced up at the barren cross and added . . . “Please?”