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A Liturgy of Hours

The bell above the chapel does not ring anymore. Midnight comes and goes with no herald. Sister Mary Monica is used to silence, but she misses the bell.

She doesn't need it to wake her. After fifty-seven years, her body knows its schedule—Matins, then back to bed until five. Morning Prayer and meditation before mass. Breakfast, work, midmorning prayer. Midday prayer before lunch, then work until Vespers. Supper at half-five, free time until Compline, then bed at nine. For fifty-seven years, she has prayed seven times a day, every day, beginning with the Matins at twelve-thirty every morning.

She eases out of bed with a grimace onto sore, swollen feet. They puff grotesquely over the sides of her practical black shoes as she limps her way down the hall, footsteps echoing in an irregular rhythm. For fifty-seven years, she has prayed Matins at exactly half-past twelve, but tonight Sister Mary Monica waits an extra five minutes in the cool, dark chapel. She doesn't know why. No one else joins her anymore, not since they stopped making Matins mandatory.

No one comes. Of course they don't, she thinks a little bitterly. Most of the sisters are of a newer theology, where structure and rules and restrictions do not matter as much. It never used to be this way. God used to be something you feared. Finally, she makes the sign of the cross and begins the first antiphon.

"O Wisdom of our God Most High, guiding creation with power and love: come to teach us the path of knowledge!"

She has sung these verses for years, but it never used to be alone. Her own voice is unfamiliar, uncomfortable in the empty chapel. She finishes quickly, returning to bed and to silence.

The bell still rings in the morning at five. The sisters join Sister Mary Monica in the chapel for Lauds. They are a young group, almost all under

fifty, and the familiar way they talk about God baffles Sister Mary Monica sometimes. Sister Cecilia, young and indecently freckled, shoots Sister Mary Monica a smile over folded hands.

“Good morning, Sister. Sleep well?”

Sister Mary Monica says nothing, of course. Sister Cecilia smiles, but she is already turning away like she never expected an answer. Sister privately thinks they find her unsettling, a remnant of a past era where God was something you feared and venerated, not someone you mentioned in everyday conversation like a mutual friend.

Sister Mary Monica leads the sisters in the sign of the cross, then lowers herself painfully to her knees as Sister Gabriel Jesu begins the first hymn.

Sister Gabriel Jesu is their youngest sister, barely more than a postulant. She’s got a sweet, broad face and a lilting Filipino accent. Her voice is not strong, but when she sings, a soft light comes to her face. Watching her, it is easy to remember how it felt to be so young, so filled to the brim. Sister Mary Monica used to wait in eager anticipation for those seven canonical hours of prayer, those seven times a day when she could sing and speak aloud. She thought her voice was something that could die from neglect.

She is older now, of course. She has grown to love the silence, the simplicity of a life locked away from the world, framed between hours of prayer. She barely has to think as she sings back each response. She knows all the words by heart. After Lauds, mass is said. They end with the blessing and the final hymn—“Thanks be to God.” Sister Mary Monica gets painfully to her feet, faltering briefly as her knees groan and threaten to give way.

Sister Cecilia gives her a look of concern, a steady hand at her elbow. Sister Mary Monica shakes off the hand, but smiles a little to apologize for her brusqueness.

“You know, Sister,” says Sister Cecilia quietly, “if you wanted to sit during prayer, rather than kneel, no one would object. These kneelers—”

Sister Mary Monica shakes her head. She has knelt every day, seven times a day, for fifty-seven years. To stop now would be to devalue that. Her knees ache, but they will not fail. Sister Cecilia, as always, is perturbed by her silence. She smiles, nods limply, and departs for breakfast.

The other Sisters chatter as they work. A few sing hymns, taking turns singing harmony. It never used to be this way. Most of the Sisters who joined the Order with Sister Mary Monica, back when being cloistered meant taking a vow of silence, have passed on—to the Lord or to the nursing home. Sister Mary Monica is grateful for the young Sisters, especially with postulant numbers dwindling every year, but she misses the quiet. Back then, silence meant

devoting every waking moment to prayer, to constant communion with God. The air of the convent used to practically hum, crackle with that silent prayer.

During free time, the Sisters knit hats and blankets for the premature babies born at the nearby hospital. As a cloistered order, they cannot leave the monastery, but once a month volunteers come and collect the little woolen hats, knitted to fit impossibly small skulls, half-formed, still sickly-squishy in the middle. Sister Mary Monica, silent, thinks of those tiny baby skulls, soft in the middle, as she knits. She makes her stitches tight and even, perfectly rounded, so that not a touch of cold can creep through to press against that soft spot.

Sister Mary Monica was a mother once, at sixteen, and then for twenty years she was a Mother Superior. Now, relieved of that charge, she is aged and outdated and unimportant. Her feet ache and the skin falls in loose folds over her knuckles when she prays, but she still makes the tiniest stitches and the best hats. She still has that.

Sister Augusta bursts into laughter, startlingly loud. “Gabriel,” she says, “what kind of head are you shaping that hat for?”

Sister Gabriel Jesu looks up, laughs back good-naturedly. “It’s not a hat,” she says. “I am trying something new. Booties.”

Sister Mary Monica finds herself looking up from her rows of perfect stitches. Sister Gabriel Jesu is sitting on the floor across the room, holding up a tiny knitted mass of blue yarn. It doesn’t look like anything at all, really, but Sister thinks of tiny baby feet, waxy-smooth on the bottom.

Sister Gabriel catches her looking, laughs again. “Sister Mary Monica is laughing at me,” she says teasingly. “I know they are not very good, Sister. I am only practicing. My mother has promised to bring the pattern when she comes to visit today.”

Sister Mary Monica frowns, unsure what to do with Sister Gabriel’s teasing. She goes back to her hat. She has made hats for fifty-seven years. They are much more practical than booties.

Usually after midmorning prayer and lunch is another period of work. Today is a visiting day, however, and so work is put aside for the afternoon. According to the rules of a cloistered convent, family may only visit four days a year. Many of the rules have relaxed in recent years – such as mandatory midnight prayer—but this one remains. The sisters take turns in the visiting room all afternoon, talking to loved ones through the grate that cuts the room in half.

Sister Mary Monica takes the opportunity to escape outside into the enclosed property of the convent with her knitting and a letter from her sister. She walks down the grass towards the lake, past the little white cottage where they hold retreats in the summer. The grass never grows properly so close to

the lake, where the soil turns sandy. It rises in little yellow patches, to the eternal chagrin of their aged groundskeeper. She sits down on the little stone bench by the grotto of the Virgin Mary. The lawn was recently mowed, and there are grass clippings sprayed across the Virgin Mary's marble cloak. Sister brushes them off respectfully, and then takes up her rosary beads.

The first time Sister Mary Monica's family came to visit after she joined the Order as a postulant, she was still allowed to speak. She would not take the vow of silence until next year when she became a novitiate, but even then the words came slower, the sound of her voice losing its familiarity. That voice had sung and laughed too loud and challenged the boys to races. That voice had cracked irreparably with her screams in the hospital. She did not want it anymore.

Her parents were uncomfortable with these new silences, shifting in their chairs as she considered her words for full minutes before she spoke. Sometimes she wondered if they had understood the permanency of their actions when they'd put her here. If they'd come that day half-expecting her to sob and beg for forgiveness and come home chastened and penitent. They left quickly. She wanted to ask about the baby, but she couldn't find the words.

Her parents came dutifully, four times a year, until they died. They did not enjoy it, but they came, and so Sister Mary Monica prays for them every night. The last time she left the convent was for her mother's funeral, twelve years ago. Her sister lives in a retirement community in Florida now. She sends letters sometimes in her spidery script. Sister Mary Monica likes to save them up for visiting days. Then she reads them all at once and says an extra rosary for her family—a decade for her father, a decade for her mother, for her sister, and for the baby—before going back to her knitting.

The chunky wooden rosary beads that hang from her hip are worn silky-smooth from the oil of her fingers, from years of prayer. She crosses herself, then starts in on the first decade.

"Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee—"

She's halfway through her third decade when she is disrupted by Sister Augusta tripping down the grass. She is a clumsy sight in a habit that is just slightly too short, exposing skinny ankles encased in black, but she sings beautifully and prays with sincerity. Sister Mary Monica can't find it in her to be exasperated.

"Sorry to interrupt, Sister," she says as she draws near, squinting in the sun behind silver wire glasses, "but you've got a visitor!"

Sister Mary Monica stares, fingers poised on the second bead of her third decade.

"A visitor for you!" Sister Augusta says again. "Well, she asked for an Annie McDaid, actually. We had to look you up in the book."

Sister Mary Monica frowns, but she lets the rosary beads fall to her side, and follows Sister Augusta's awkward ankles back up the patchy grass into the convent.

The visiting room is a sunny, dated room with yellow wallpaper and squashy couches. It would be perfectly comfortable, except for the criss-cross wire grate that cuts the room in half. On one side of the grate there is a middle-aged woman in a crisp, white sweater. She has a pretty, crafted face and short, stylish hair, a little gray at the roots. She sits with her purse on her lap, poised, but stands when Sister Mary Monica enters.

"Hello," she says. "Sister Mary Monica? That's what the other Sister said you were called now."

Sister Mary Monica smiles politely, unsure, and inclines her head.

Sister Augusta hesitates in the doorway. "She doesn't talk," she says. "It used to be that you took a vow of silence when you joined a cloistered convent. They changed the rules now, but Sister Mary Monica is old-fashioned."

"So she *can* talk?" the visitor asks sharply, eyebrows going up.

"Technically, yes," says Sister Augusta, smiling like an apology, "if she chose to. But that is between Sister and God." She bows out of the room with another smile. The woman exhales, sucks in her cheeks, and then sinks back down onto the couch. There is an air of grace about her. When she takes in a breath, Sister Mary Monica can see a flash of green gum under her teeth. It should be garish, but instead it seems elegant. The room smells sharply of mint.

"Alright, I guess we can skip the small-talk, then, can't we? I don't know if you—" She pauses, then starts up again with more confidence, slightly rehearsed. "My name is Eleanor. Eleanor Kenney. My birth mother was Annie McDaid. She gave me up for adoption in 1960, and then her parents sent her to a convent." She shifts in her chair, produces a laugh. "I did one of those genealogy searches. Contacted the hospital."

Sister Mary Monica stares. She imagines there is a pulse beating, suddenly, at the top of her head, just beneath her habit. Her skull has gone soft there.

Eleanor keeps talking. "My adoptive mother passed away a couple months ago, and I'd never really thought of you before that." She stops, starts again. "Well, no, that's not true. I thought of you. I just never thought I'd actually—" She swallows.

Her eyes are brown. Sister Mary Monica held her daughter for three, maybe four minutes before the nurses took her away, but she never saw her eyes. They were screwed shut under wrinkly, red-mottled skin. She was so loud when she cried. She hadn't expected that.

"You *are* Annie McDaid, right?" Eleanor asks, slightly louder. "Or—you *were*, I mean. I know nuns change names when they— I did some reading. Are you really not going to say anything?"

Sister Mary Monica flinches at her accusatory eyebrows. She thinks if she opens her mouth, she would rattle like a dying thing. Perhaps her postulant fears were not unfounded; her voice has withered down to a husk at the back of her throat. She cannot speak, but she manages a nod. She was Annie Mc-Daid, once. She had red hair and she laughed too loud for a nice girl.

"Okay," says Eleanor finally. She hugs her purse a little tighter. She straightens her shoulders. "So you're not going to talk. That's okay, I can talk. I'm Jewish. Isn't that funny? My husband's Jewish. I converted when we got married. I have two boys, both in college. They don't know I'm here."

Sister Mary Monica nods. It is all she has, but Eleanor looks frustrated. She tries again.

"This is delicate, I guess, but the hospital didn't have any record of my father. I'd love to meet him. I was hoping maybe you had a name or—" Eleanor purses her lips. "I don't want to make assumptions."

Sister Mary Monica stares. She can recognize, then, another face in the curve of Eleanor's chin, in the arch of her upper lip. She resents it, selfishly. He did not come to the hospital. Her parents would not allow it, and she was glad of it. For those four minutes before they took the baby away, she was entirely and completely *hers*. He started college that fall. He didn't give away his voice. The baby was never really his.

Three years back, her sister wrote that he'd died. Sister Mary Monica prayed for him, but she didn't grieve like she did for the baby. He never mattered the way the baby did.

"I guess that's a no. Okay. I—I don't even know why I'm here. I guess I hoped—" Eleanor stops. When she speaks again, it's strained. "I guess I don't know God like you do, but I don't see how you being silent helps Him. I'm sorry. I don't mean to question your religion, but I'm fifty-seven years old, do you know that? I waited fifty-seven years to meet you, and I thought maybe you'd want to meet me, too."

Sister Mary Monica wants to give her fifty-seven years' worth of little woolen hats. She wants to hand over her rosary beads, let Eleanor feel the way they've worn smooth. She doesn't know a better way to explain that this silence is the best she can do. She gave up her voice long ago, promised it to God if only He'd let the baby be okay. She had done a terrible, sinful thing and she would pay penance for that. Just let the baby be okay.

"I had a good life. I had a dog and a swing-set, growing up. I wasn't—I've always been really happy and I've been very successful in life. So in case you ever wondered about that, there you go," says Eleanor.

"I'm not mad at you for giving me up, but I thought you'd at least want to apologize," says Eleanor.

"Maybe it was unfair of me to put all these expectations on you. I'm fifty-seven years old. I don't know what I thought was going to happen here," says Eleanor.

"I don't mean to bother you," she says finally, smaller. "I just thought—"

She doesn't finish. She waits a little longer. Sister Mary Monica thinks of sitting in the chapel at night, waiting for someone to come. She wants so badly to speak, but Sister Mary Monica's body knows silence like it knows the bell above the chapel, like it knows the hard wooden kneelers against her kneecaps. There is a solid knot of guilt that has swollen, gestated in her stomach for fifty-seven years. If she speaks now, what has this all been for?

"Oh," says Eleanor, less stiffly. "Oh, no, don't cry. I didn't mean to—I'm sorry." She fumbles in her purse. "I don't have Kleenex, I'm so sorry. I—want a piece of gum? Is that—are you allowed?"

Sister Mary Monica holds out her hand obediently. She feels bewildered and young. Eleanor hands her the stick through the grate. She's got a wedding ring and beautiful fingernails and her skin wrinkles a little around her knuckles. Sister holds the stick of gum in her hand, wrapped in shiny green foil, but makes no move to unwrap it.

"Look," Eleanor sighs, "I don't know why I thought we'd have anything to say to each other. I'm sorry. I'm a middle-aged woman, not a child." She tenses like she's going to stand, and panic slaps up against Sister Mary Monica's esophagus. She is back in the hospital bed and they are taking her little red-mottled baby away.

She remembers her sister's letter in her pocket, folded tight to keep the spidery script from crawling off the page, and tugs it from beneath the layers of her habit. Eleanor's eyebrows come together. She takes it in her elegant hands, reads silently. Finally she looks up.

"Is this your sister?"

Sister Mary Monica nods. Eleanor nods, then reads the letter again, lips moving silently.

"If I wrote to her, do you think she would be able to help me?"

Sister Mary Monica nods again. She gestures to Eleanor that she can keep the letter, smiling when Eleanor tucks the letter into her purse, relieved to be understood.

"Thank you," says Eleanor. "Really, thank you." She starts to stand again, and then she stops. "Would it—would it be okay if I came back some time? You can say no. Or, shake your head or something, I guess."

Sister Mary Monica can only stare for a moment, incredulous, unbelieving. Then she nods until she has to stop, for fear of knocking her habit off, for fear of rattling her brain right out of her skull. Eleanor smiles a little and Sister soaks it in greedily. The arch of her upper lip is his, but everything else is gloriously hers.

In the hour before nightly prayer, the Sisters go back to their knitting. The room is more subdued than usual with most of the Sisters content to work quietly, basking in the comings and goings of the day. Even without the vow of silence, there is something foreign and draining about visiting days. The outside world creeps in and presses against all the soft spots.

Sister Mary Monica's hands are particularly arthritic tonight. She works slowly, but her stitches are not as small and tight as she'd like them. She begins to tug at the yarn, unpicking the oversized stitches. The work is simple and repetitive, so she lets her eyes wander.

Sister Gabriel Jesu's mother has brought the bootie pattern, as promised. There is already a blue woolen bootie lying complete in her lap. The second is taking shape under her needles, impossibly small. Sister Gabriel looks up, catches Sister Mary Monica staring again, and smiles kindly.

"My mother brought the pattern. I am getting better. Would you like me to teach you how, Sister Mary Monica?"

Sister Mary Monica finds herself nodding for the second time today. Sister Gabriel smiles and crosses the room to sit beside her, rosary beads clicking at her waist. "I will show you. It's simpler than you'd think."

It is simple. After the first few rows, Sister Mary Monica's hands find the rhythm and Sister Gabriel Jesu goes back to her own knitting. Every time she laughs at something one of the Sisters says, her shoulder brushes Sister Mary Monica's comfortably. The little wool sock comes together faster than a hat, but Sister's hands are tired today. She is seventy-three years old, and she feels it. She finishes the single bootie, but then she lets her hands fall still.

Midnight comes and goes with no herald, but Sister Mary Monica wakes anyway. She makes her way to the chapel on swollen feet, knees creaking as she genuflects before the altar. She waits an extra five minutes, listening for another set of practical shoes on the hallway floor, but no one comes. She begins the first antiphon.

"O Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light, sun of justice: come and shine on those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death."

She finds herself listening, tonight, to the sound of her own voice. The hitch of her consonants, the rounds of her vowels. It feels so intrusive, so unfamiliar that she stumbles over the words of the familiar hymn. She stops singing. It goes quiet.

She wonders what she is supposed to pray for now. She can't think of a single thing, and eventually she makes a decision. She gets to her achy feet, puffing out of her shoes, and leaves the chapel. She closes the heavy convent door carefully behind her. It's a warm night, and if you listen you can hear the hum of traffic and air conditioners and television sets from the world outside

the convent walls. Inside there is just the click of Sister's wooden rosary beads, the scrape of heavy cloth as her skirt swishes.

She unwraps the piece of gum Eleanor gave her, carefully tucking the creased foil back into the deep pocket of her habit, placing the gum on her tongue like the Holy Eucharist itself. It tastes sharp and sweet, so minty her breath seems to burn when she exhales.

At the edge of the lake, where the grass goes patchy and yellow, Sister Mary Monica stoops to ease her swollen feet from their sensible leather confines. Next come the heavy black socks. She tucks a sock into each shoe, leaves them lined up neatly by the Virgin Mary's marble feet, and walks barefoot down the sand.

The lake water is shockingly cold, even after the heat of the day. Sister Mary Monica's feet give a final agonized throb, and then the pain lessens considerably. She stands there in the dark, ankle-deep with her hem held just above the water's reach, chewing. She snaps the gum loudly, then tries for a bubble. It takes a couple tries, but then it swells like a balloon. When it pops, Sister Mary Monica is startled into laughing aloud.