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The Astonishing

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The Astonishing

Batavia, New York, 2010

The light felt heavy, an early morning burden that made Vivian blink hard. She wished she was still in bed, rather than walking up to the doors of the retreat center. Willis Seminary stood before her, a large building with many small windows and a domed roof. Rows of early spring buds peeked out from the mulch lining the path, which diverged briefly to encircle a large stone cross. Flowers had yet to bloom, and most leaves had not grown back, leaving the light to draw itself, unyielding, through the bare trees and grasses. The retreat began at nine o'clock and wouldn't end until the afternoon, much to Vivian and her classmates' dismay. But it was mandatory. If they wanted to be confirmed in the Catholic Church, they had to attend the retreat.

Once inside, Vivian found that most of her classmates had yet to arrive, late risers who begrudged the early start to a Saturday. From across the room, she saw Liz, and that was what mattered. As Vivian began to walk over, relieved and feeling more awake, she saw someone sit down next to her friend. It was Matthew, and a smile broke across Liz's face. They both started laughing about something.

Matthew was one of the older kids. Sunday school classes were small; three classes from different parishes had combined in order to make their Confirmation. At sixteen years old, Matthew seemed to be everything Vivian wanted for herself. He was confident, knowledgeable, and seemed to know an endless number of other cool and worldly kids. He would come into Sunday school with tales of sneaking into abandoned buildings to party, complete with the names of his abundance of friends.

From the little that Vivian knew, Matthew seemed like an adventurer, always having fun, and so sure of himself. In another two years, she imagined that she'd be the same way. Sixteen would mean no uncertainty about herself, and no doubts over faith, identity, and desires. She'd have everything figured out by then.

"Hey, Vivian!" Liz called, waving her over. Her voice sounded higher and sweeter than usual. Its newfound smoothness seemed malleable, somehow accommodating.

Matthew turned in Vivian's direction and grinned. She paused, wondering what she'd say to him. She had wanted to tell Liz about last night's dream, of flying over the school and florist shop and church with wings the color of sunsets. She thought Liz would get a kick out of that, as someone who often dreamt of flying, but never with wings.

But now she couldn't—Matthew was there. He'd probably find the dream silly and dismiss it with a sixteen-year-old's sense of what was really important. And maybe Liz wouldn't care, either. She suddenly seemed older than Vivian, sitting there next to Matthew and laughing along with him.

Mimicking Liz's radiant smile, Vivian walked over and sat beside her friend. In her head, she briefly imagined forcing her voice upwards and wondered what it would feel like from the inside. She thought of laughing, enough to seem fun and engaged, but not too much. It was important to be collected as well.

"Hey, Vivian," Matthew said. "Sucks we have to be here so early."

Vivian did what she had imagined in her head: she leaned back a bit as she laughed, short and casual, and then, in a nicer, sweeter voice, said, "I know, right?"

"Have you guys chosen a saint yet?" Matthew continued. "We have to write that paper soon, right? About who we're taking as a patron, and why."

"I'm going to choose St. Paul," said Liz.

Matthew laughed. "Come on, Liz," he said. "You don't really want a *man's* name, do you?"

For a brief moment, Vivian saw Liz's face flash in discomfort. It was the same look she had when a soccer ball hit her in gym class, right in the stomach, and the boy who had kicked it said *Get out of my way next time*. In that moment, Vivian had glared at him as pointedly as she could, but it had gone unnoticed.

Liz's face beamed right back into a smile as if it had never wavered at all. Vivian could feel her own grin growing tight.

"No, not really," Liz said, agreeing with Matthew. "But neither do my parents, so a man's name it is."

She and Matthew laughed. That wasn't what Liz had told Vivian before. St. Paul was the patron of writers, and Liz wanted to be an author one day.

Vivian knew that Liz's parents didn't care which saint she chose, as long as she made her Confirmation. It was the same with her own parents, and Vivian welcomed it. Church and Sunday school were as much a part of her life as a trip to the grocery store or doing homework. The independence to choose a patron for herself was exciting.

"Have you decided yet?" Liz asked Matthew.

"Yeah," he answered. "I'm going with St. Augustine. You know he's the patron saint of brewers? That means he's basically the patron of beer."

Vivian joined in the subsequent laughter, but her hands wrung together in uneasiness. If Matthew asked about her saint, she wouldn't have anything funny to say.

"How about you, Viv?" Matthew said. No one had ever called her *Viv* before.

"I think I'm going with St. Christina the Astonishing," Vivian said. She paused, and Matthew stared back at her blankly.

"Who?" he asked.

Vivian began to laugh, but stopped short. It sounded fake and forced. Could Matthew tell?

"She's the patron of mental health workers," Vivian explained. "And I want to go into that field one day. People tell me I'm a good listener, so I think I'd do well."

"That's cool," Matthew said. "What was she like? I've never heard of her."

"Well, she was a bit wild. Kind of like if..." Vivian hesitated, searching for the right words. "The only ones who existed in the world were her and God."

Before Matthew could respond, the retreat director, a colorfully-dressed woman around the age of Vivian's parents, walked to the center of the room and began to introduce herself.

"Good morning, everyone! I'm happy to see so many faces here," she said, her cross-shaped earrings dangling with matched enthusiasm. "I'm Kathy. I've been leading retreats at Willis Seminary for a few years now, and I'm excited to help you prepare for your Confirmation."

After standing for an opening prayer, the class sat down at tables while Kathy handed out paper and pens.

"For this first exercise, you're going to write down three things you want," she explained. "It can be anything, but make sure they're things you really want in life. It could be related to school, relationships, work, sports, and so on."

Vivian picked up the pen and numbered the page. She was already overwhelmed by the prospect of high school, which would start in less than six months. She considered her anxiety over making new friends, and whether she should join the yearbook club or the writing club, which ran at the same time. Then she wrote:

*To do well in high school and get into a good college
To make lots of friends and never be lonely
To get a good job in mental health services*

Kathy cleared her throat and began to talk in a softer, more serious voice than before. "Now, consider the things you wrote down. I'm sure you want them very much. But what if God called you in a different direction? Would you be willing to sacrifice the things you want in order to follow Him?"

Across the table, Liz was rereading her list. Matthew was whispering to someone else. He looked back at Vivian and smiled. She felt his bright eyes on her and tried to match the curve of his mouth with her own. The feeling that another pair of eyes were watching grew, and Vivian wondered if they were God's, or perhaps her own gaze looking from the outside.

Brustem, Belgium, 1181

She was ablaze once again.

Her mind had been struck with fire, and her body soon followed. Howling, she tumbled in and out of the high flames, consumed by the blistering fury of the heat and her own skin.

A man new to the area stood nearby, transfixed in horror. He was training for the priesthood, and to him, this public display of penance was so ferocious that it bordered on demonic. He winced as a shrill cry went up with a flurry of sparks and winced again when the penitent's dress slipped downwards.

An old woman standing nearby reached out and touched his shoulder.

"Any wounds she gets will disappear," she said in a reassuring tone. "They always do."

The trainee listened as the old woman began to recite a prayer. It began quiet and slow, but grew louder and stronger to meet the wails hardening in the air.

"On Earth as it is in Heaven..."

Christina crept around the back of the millhouse, listening intently. She paused, pushing tangles of hair away from her face, bracing against the late autumn wind. Yes, there were the voices of men once more, and they were drawing closer.

Looking to her right, Christina noticed a tree with good branches for climbing. She dashed over and gripped her way up it wildly, the grime on her bare feet aiding in sturdiness and speed. The rough bark scraped her palms and cut through her clothes, but she continued to climb, compelled by a mix of desperation and determination. She finally settled on a perch high above the ground, and from it the church could be seen, as well as the pastures where she had once worked with her sisters.

“Christina? Is that you?” a voice called. Two men were standing at the base of the tree, looking up at her.

“Of course it is,” said the same man, answering his own question. “Why are you up there?”

Christina peered down, focusing on the speaker. She recognized his bright eyes, the ones that never seemed to blink enough, always taking in all that they could. It was the priest. Beside him stood the trainee, who had witnessed her flame-driven penance earlier. Christina didn’t recognize him, and narrowed her eyes, unable to piece together a distinct face. Was she too high up for treading the unfamiliar? On top of roofs and perched in trees, the world and its people blended into one palmful of dust. It was nothing to her, not when the sky was suddenly so much closer, and so pure.

While still looking at the trainee, Christina called down, “I can’t bear the stench of your sin.”

There was a pause, and then the trainee cried out, astounded.

“That’s the woman who threw herself into the fire!” he exclaimed. She was hard to see, up high and shielded by a clump of browning leaves. Whether her burns had disappeared or not, he was unable to tell.

“She came back from the dead some years ago,” the priest said. “I was there, at her funeral, when she stood up from the casket.”

The trainee stared at the priest, waiting for him to elaborate. When no further explanation was given, he sighed and began to walk away.

“Maybe she’s just mad. When did God command such acts of self-harm?” he said, and disappeared around the millhouse.

There was silence for a few moments. The sun seemed to fizzle out; a cold wind goaded forth a mass of dark clouds, spreading across the sky with the threat of rain and the promise of winter. The priest moved closer to the tree and placed his hand on the trunk.

“A tall one,” he said quietly. Christina was on her way down and could hear him better. “This tree must be quite old. Do you need a ladder? It’s harder coming down than it is going up.”

“No,” said Christina, pausing on a low branch. “Coming down is easy. I feel like I have claws, ready to sink in and steady me. Going up is hard. I don’t have wings, no matter what people say.”

It began to rain, and the lingering leaves of the tree provided little shelter. The millhouse wheel grew louder, as the churning river water was joined by the sheets of rain. Christina lowered herself onto the ground, a chill passing through her body.

“It’s getting colder,” the priest said. “Do you intend to stay outside all winter?”

“I’d rather pray for sinners from a distance,” Christina answered, turning toward the woods.

“Well, before you go,” added the priest, “excuse my companion’s remarks. He’s training for the priesthood. He probably felt disheartened to find his efforts pale against your own fiery dedication.”

Christina paused and looked once more at the bright-eyed priest, whose mouth held the hint of a smile. She nodded and then went on, fading into the misty rain and the last of the dark, shuddering leaves.

“I’m struck by a woman called Christina,” said the trainee to a small group of people. He had joined them as they were gathered around a well, discussing the upcoming winter. The water drawn up was growing colder, causing their breath to cloud the air as they talked. “She must live somewhere, right? Or does she stay in a tree, even when it gets cold?”

A dark-haired man shrugged. “I don’t know what she does. I think she’s mad.”

“Maybe possessed,” said an old man, laughing.

“She could be holy,” suggested a woman. “Or all three. A trinity of strangeness.” She smiled at the trainee. He noticed her teeth. Curving. Dull. Sharp.

“I heard she survives on her own breast milk,” mentioned the dark-haired man.

“But she’s never had a child!” a heavily pregnant woman protested.

“That’s just it!”

The smiling woman leaned in close to the trainee. She was young and smelled like wood shavings and sheep. There was a piece of stray fabric caught in her hair.

“Why do you ask?” she said. “Did you see her during a spiritual ecstasy?”

The trainee nodded, looking at her teeth again. They somehow reminded him of a woman he had known, the one with whom he’d sneak out into the field.

He thought of the priesthood and God, and the relief that traveling and putting distance between him and the once-lover had brought. He thought of fire, and if being consumed by flames was worth it.

Batavia, New York, 2010

Halfway through the retreat, Kathy suggested the class take a break outside.

“We’re going to watch a short video, and I have to get the TV ready. Why don’t you take a little walk around the pond in the meantime?”

Right behind the Seminary was a pond, framed with rippling grass and a few small trees. It was man-made and unnaturally round, but still murky and tinted green. Now and then, the subtle movements of fish gliding below the surface could be seen.

“Hey, is that one dead?” someone asked, pointing to the other side of the pond.

The class wandered over to the area. There, a tree stood with spindly, twisting branches, overlooking a dead fish that had washed up against the springy grass.

“I don’t think Kathy can see us from here,” Matthew said, glancing at the Seminary. He grinned and turned to the group. “I dare someone to throw it into that tree.”

The class laughed, and kids pushed and pointed at each other, trying to convince a friend to follow through with Matthew’s dare. Vivian thought of how bold Liz always was. She could talk to anyone, wasn’t afraid to sing with abandon in front of others, and never hesitated when someone dared her to do something. It seemed like Liz was figuring it all out. She’d be ready for high school, no doubt, and Matthew definitely liked her more. Why wouldn’t he?

Thinking of her list from the first exercise—*to make lots of friends and never be lonely*—Vivian walked up to the edge of the pond, and the class excitedly moved in closer. The fish glistened. It had probably once been silvery and sparkling, but now it was gray and dull, its dead body softening into the mud. Vivian slipped her hands under it, trying not to make a face of disgust at the smell. As she moved towards the tree, her gaze shifted outside of herself. Levitating above her body, watching her feet march and her hands gingerly hold the fish, she couldn’t help but feel astonished. What was she doing?

As Vivian flipped her burden up towards the tree, a scale sliced across her thumb, jolting her back into her body. The dead fish didn’t come back down. It had been caught in the branches, just out of reach from even the tallest kids.

“Yeah, Viv! That was great,” Matthew said, laughing along with the rest of the class. “Way to bring some life into this boring day.”

Vivian smiled, bending her stinging thumb beneath her other fingers.

“Wow,” Liz said, her face a vision of discomfort. “That was so gross.”

“I know,” agreed Vivian, as the filmy sensation on her fingers seemed to spread. “I need to go wash my hands.”

She parted from the group and walked back into the Seminary, heading to the small bathroom down the hall. As Vivian bent over the sink and turned on the faucet, the door clattered open. Kathy walked in, and stopped short when she saw the thin line of blood running down Vivian’s thumb.

“Are you alright? What happened?” Kathy asked, moving closer.

“I’m fine,” Vivian quickly said. There was no way she could tell Kathy about the fish and risk getting herself and the class in trouble. “I got a paper cut earlier and it started bleeding again.”

Kathy looked both concerned and unconvinced. “When you’re done washing, I have band-aids,” she said, and left to go get them.

Vivian stared at her thumb. She had just lied at a Confirmation retreat. A sin. And would Kathy get ahold of her parents to tell them about the cut?

The water rinsed away the dirty feeling on her hands, but Vivian began to feel uneasy inside, a tangle of guilt and discomfort to be waded through.

Brustem, Belgium, 1181

Dawn was breaking, slowly illuminating the wet and shadowy world. Spiderwebs stretched across blades of grass and between tree branches, trembling gently in the cold. The trainee paced back and forth outside the millhouse, plowing his feet through dozens of webs, kicking up glimmering droplets and sending little insects and arachnids scurrying.

The vision of Christina up in the tree, staring down at him with intent eyes, flashed across the trainee’s mind.

“After God brought her back to this world, she levitated up to the rafters,” the priest had told him. “Everyone leapt up and fled, except for her sister and me. She may seem strange, but Christina is doing what she feels God has called her to do. His miracles shine through her dedication.”

If Christina was as miraculous and monstrously committed as she seemed—and the flames attested to that—then she might know of his previous affair through whatever gifts she had. He couldn’t shake the feeling of her knowing gaze tearing into him. Would Christina tell the priest about his past? Was his life going to unfold differently than he had anticipated?

The trainee recalled the conversation from the night before. *Maybe possessed*, someone had said. If he pushed that idea far enough, it could be taken seriously. Would it work to his advantage and discredit Christina?

It was around a year ago that Christina had plunged into the icy river running through Brustem, letting the current carry her to the millhouse wheel. She still wasn’t sure what hurt more—freezing waters or licking flames. She now stood near the river, watching the gray water flow. A mist of rain settled over it.

Footsteps sounded up the path. Christina turned, and the priest came to stand beside her.

“Perhaps it’s time that you moderated your service to God,” he said quietly.

“Does he really think I’m possessed?” Christina asked. The trainee had been striking up conversations with people, needling in the prospect that Christina was not holy, but just the opposite.

“I don’t think so, but he’ll be resuming his training elsewhere,” the priest said, blinking a few times. “It’s easy though, to pin possession on you.”

Christina turned back to the water. “I try to do what God wants. I try to be good for Him. But being good is bad sometimes, isn’t it? Depending on who’s watching.”

Thunder cleaved the air, and the rain began to fall harder.

Batavia, New York, 2010

With a final prayer, Kathy dismissed the class from the retreat, assuring them that they were now all able to make their Confirmation. The class filed out, tossing their papers from the first activity into the trash as they left.

As Vivian headed for the door, relieved to finally go home, Matthew came up to her.

“Hey, Viv,” he said. “I’m heading out with some friends tonight. We found this vacant building. There’s a lot of cool old stuff in it. Want to come?”

Vivian’s thumb throbbed. The idea of hanging out with people she didn’t know made her nervous. She pictured herself smiling for new sets of eyes and wondered if it would give her a head start for high school. But either way, she knew her mother wouldn’t let her go. She’d rather spend the night with Liz, anyway.

“I don’t think I can,” Vivian said.

“Oh, okay,” answered Matthew. She couldn’t tell if he looked amused or disappointed. “That’s alright. You’re a good Christian. You got all that saint stuff figured out.”

Then he turned towards some other kids, called “wait up,” and was gone.

Good Christian, good Christian, Vivian replayed in her head. He had called her good, and it made her feel bad. Would she have lied if she was so good?

“Come on, Vivian,” Liz said, joining her. Together they emerged outside. The light seemed brighter than it had just two hours ago, clear and terrible, beautiful and blinding. It astonished Vivian, illuminating the sidewalk before her, tangling with the shadows of the large stone cross and the trees wavering in the wind.