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FICTION

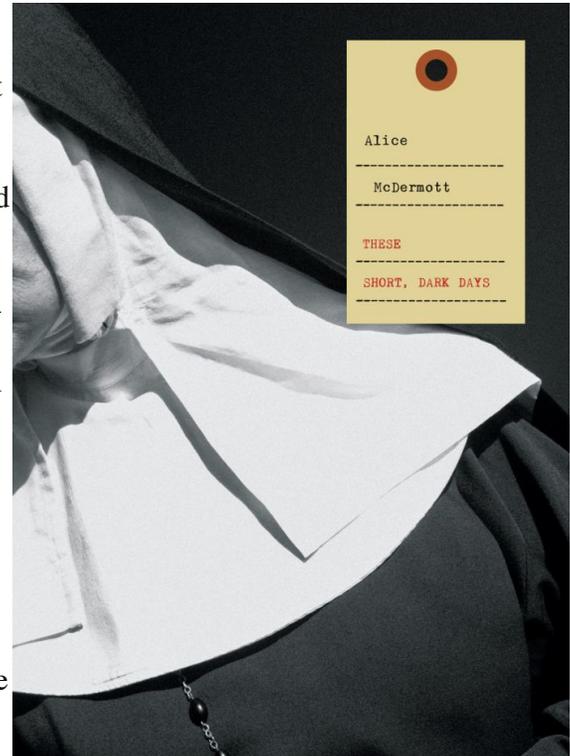
THESE SHORT, DARK DAYS

By Alice McDermott

February 3rd was a dark and dank day: cold spitting rain all morning and a low, steel-gray sky in the afternoon. At four, Jim persuaded his wife, Annie, to go out to do her shopping before full darkness fell. He closed the door behind her with a gentle wave. His hair was thinning, and he was missing a canine on the right side, but he was nevertheless a handsome man who, at thirty-two, might have passed for twenty. Heavy brows and deep-set, dark-lashed eyes that had been making women catch their breath since he was sixteen. Even if he'd grown bald and toothless, the eyes would have served him long into his old age.

His overcoat was on the hall tree beside the door. He lifted it and rolled it lengthwise against his thighs. Then he fitted it over the threshold, tucking the cloth of the sleeves and the hem as well as he could into the space beneath the door. There was a railroad flat: kitchen in the back, then dining room, living room, and bedroom in the front. He needed only to push the heavy couch a few feet along the wall to block his wife's return. He stood on the seat to check that the glass transom above the door was closed. Then he stepped down. He straightened the lace on the back of the couch and brushed away the shallow impression his foot had made on the horsehair cushion.

In the kitchen, he pressed his cheek to the cold enamel of the stove and slid his hand into the tight space between it and the yellow wall until he found the rubber hose that connected the oven to the gas tap. He pulled at it as vigorously as he could, given the confined space. There was a satisfying pop, and a hiss that quickly faded. He straightened up with the hose in his hand. The kitchen window looked into the gray courtyard, where, on better days, there were lines of clothes baking in the sun, although the floor of the courtyard, even in the prettiest weather, was a junk yard and a jungle. There were rats and bedsprings and broken crates, a tangle of city-bred vegetation. Once, Annie, sitting on the windowsill with a clothespin in her mouth and a basket of wet linen at her feet, saw a man drag a small child through the muck and tie him to the pole that held the line. She watched the man take off his belt, and, with the first crack of it against the child's bare calves, she began to yell. Leaning halfway out the window, she threatened to call the police, the fire department, the Gerrity Society. The man glanced up briefly, as if noticing a change in the weather, and then untied the sobbing child and dragged him away. "I know who you are," Annie cried. Although she didn't. When Jim ran into the kitchen at the sound of her



PHOTOGRAPH BY RALPH GIBSON FOR THE NEW YORKER / DESIGN BY CARIN

shouting, she was out the window to her waist, with only one toe on the kitchen floor. He'd had to put his hands on her hips to ease her out of danger. Just one more of what had turned out to be too many days that he hadn't gone in to work or had arrived too late for his shift.

His trouble was with time. Bad luck for a trainman, even on the B.R.T. His trouble was that he liked to refuse time. He delighted in refusing it. He would come to the end of a long night, to the inevitability of 5 a.m., and, while other men, poor sheep, gave in every morning, turning from the pleasures of sleep or drink or talk or love to the duties of the day, he would continue as he willed. "I'm not going," he'd murmur. "I won't be constrained." Two weeks ago, he'd been discharged for unreliability and insubordination. The man Jim was inside—not the blushing, humiliated boy who'd stood ham-handed before the bosses—had shaken off the blow and turned away. But Annie had wept when he told her, and then said angrily, through her tears, that there was a baby coming, knowing even as she said it that to break the news to him in this way was to condemn the child to a life of trouble.

He took the tea towels she had left to dry by the sink, wound them into ropes, and placed them along the windowsill. He carried the length of rubber tubing through the living room and into the bedroom. He slipped off his shoes and put the tube to his mouth as if to pull smoke. He had seen this in a picture book somewhere: a fat sultan on a red pillow, doing much the same. He sat on the edge of the bed. He bowed his head and prayed: *now and at the hour of our death*. He lay back on the bed. He noticed that the room had grown dimmer still. *Hour of our. Our hour*. He remembered his mother, the picture book spread out on her wide lap. Within this very hour he would put his head on her shoulder once again. Or would he? Would this effort to prove himself his own man—to prove that the hours of his life belonged to himself alone—bar him from Heaven? Did he believe in Heaven? There were moments when his faith fell out from under him like a trapdoor.

He stood up. Found his nightshirt beneath his pillow and twisted it, too. Then placed it along the edge of the bedroom window, again pushing the material into the narrow crevice where the frame met the sill, knowing all the while that the gesture was both ineffectual and unnecessary.

Down in the street, there was a good deal of movement. Dark coats and hats. A baby buggy or two, the wheels churning up a pale spray. When he turned back to the room, the light had failed in every corner, and he had to put out his hand to feel his way around the bed to his own side. He stretched out. Playfully lifted the hose to one eye, as if to see along its length the black corridor of a subway tunnel, lit gold at the end by the station ahead. Then he closed his eyes and swallowed. Outside, a mother called to a child. There was the slow clopping of a horse-drawn cart. Something dropped to the floor in the apartment upstairs—a sewing basket, perhaps. There was a thud and then a scratchy chorus of wooden spools spinning. Or maybe it was coins, spilled from a fallen purse.

At six, the street lamps gave a polish to the wet windowpanes and the scattered black puddles in the street. Lamplight was reflected as well on the rump of a fire truck, and on the pale faces of a gathered crowd, with an extra sparkle on those who wore glasses—Sister St. Savior, for instance, a Little Sister of the Sick Poor, who had spent the afternoon collecting alms in the vestibule of the Woolworth's at Borough Hall. She was now on her way back to the convent, her bladder full,

her ankles swollen, her round lenses turned toward the street light and the terrible scent of doused fire on the winter air.

The house where the fire had been looked startled: the windows of all four floors were wide open, shade cords and thin curtains flailing in the cold wind. Although the rest of the building was dark, the vestibule at the top of the stone stoop was weirdly lit, crowded with policemen and firemen carrying lamps. Sister St. Savior wanted only to walk on, to get to her convent, her room, her toilet, but still she brushed through the crowd and climbed the steps. There was a limp fire hose running along the shadowy base of the bannister. Two of the officers in the hallway, turning to see her, tipped their hats and put out their hands as if she had been summoned. "Sister," one of them said. He was flushed and perspiring, and even in the dull light she could see that the cuffs of his jacket were singed. "Right in here."

The apartment was filled with people and the heavy drone of whispered conversation. There were two groups: one was gathered around a middle-aged man in shirtsleeves and carpet slippers who was sitting in a chair by the window, his face in his hands. The other, across the room, was tending to a woman stretched out on a dark couch, under a fringed lamp that was not lit. She had a cloth applied to her forehead, but she seemed to be speaking sensibly to the thin young man who leaned over her. When she saw the nun, the woman raised a limp hand and said, "She's in the bedroom, Sister." Her arm from wrist to elbow was glistening with a shiny salve—butter, perhaps.

"You might leave off with that grease," Sister said. "Unless you're determined to be basted." The young man turned at this. He wore a gray fedora and had a milk tooth in his grin. "Have the courtesy to doff your hat," she told him.

It was Sister St. Savior's vocation to enter the homes of strangers, mostly the sick and the elderly, to breeze into their apartments and sail comfortably through their rooms, to open their linen closets or their china cabinets or their bureau drawers, but the frequency with which she inserted herself into the homes of strangers had not diminished over the years her initial impulse to shade her eyes. She dipped her head as she passed through the parlor into a narrow corridor, but she saw enough to conclude that this was the home of a Jewish woman: the woman on the couch, she was certain; Jewish, she guessed, because of the fringed lampshade, the upright piano against the far wall, the dark oil paintings in the narrow hallway that seemed to depict two ordinary peasants, not saints. A place unprepared for visitors, arrested, as things so often were, by crisis and tragedy, in the midst of what should have been a private hour. She saw, as she passed by, that there was a plate on the small table in the kitchen, that it contained half a piece of bread, bitten and stained with a dark gravy. A glass of tea on the edge of a folded newspaper. In the candlelit bedroom, two more policemen were conferring in a corner. There were dark stockings hung over the back of a chair, a gray corset on the threadbare carpet at the foot of the bed. There was a girl on the bed, her face to the wall, her dark skirt spread out around her, as if she had fallen there from some height. Another woman leaned over her, a hand on the girl's shoulder.

The policemen nodded at the nun, and the shorter one took off his cap as he moved toward her. He, too, was singed about the cuffs. He had a heavy face and bad dentures, but there was

compassion in the way he gestured with his short arms, toward the girl on the bed, toward the ceiling and the upstairs apartment, where the fire had been, a compassion that seemed to weigh down his limbs. Soft-hearted, Sister thought, one of us. The girl, he said, had come in from her shopping and found the door to her place blocked from the inside. She went to her neighbors, the man next door and the woman who lived here. They helped her push the door open and then the man lit a match to hold against the darkness. There was an explosion. Luckily, he, the policeman, was just at the corner and was able to put the fire out, while neighbors carried the three of them down here. Inside the apartment, in the bedroom, he had found a young man on the bed, dead. Asphyxiated. The girl's husband.

Sister St. Savior drew in her breath, blessed herself. "He fell asleep, poor man," she said gently. "The pilot light must have gone out."

The officer glanced over his shoulder, toward the bed, and then took the Sister's elbow and walked her out to the narrow hall. Now they stood in the kitchen doorway. "He killed himself," the officer whispered, his breath sour, as if in reaction to the situation he was obliged to report. "Turned on the gas. Lucky he didn't take everyone else with him."

Sister accepted the information with only a discreet nod. When she looked up again—her eyes behind her glasses were small and brown and caught the light the way only a hard surface would, marble or black tin, nothing watery—the truth of the suicide was both acknowledged and put away. She had entered the homes of strangers and seen the bottles in the bin, the poor contents of a cupboard, the bruise in a hidden place, seen as well, once, a pale, thumb-size infant in a basin filled with blood and had bowed her head and nodded in just the same way.

"What's the girl's name?" she asked.

The officer frowned. "Mc-Something. Annie they called her. Irish extraction," he added. "That's why I thought to call for you."

Sister smiled. "Is that so?" she said. They both knew he was lying. No one had called for her. She had been on her way home, merely passing by. She dipped her head again, forgiving him his vanity—hadn't he said, too, that he'd put out the fire himself? "I'll go to her, then," she said.

As she stepped away, she saw the milk-toothed young man, still in his hat, approach the officer. "Hey, O'Neil!" he shouted. No courtesy in him.

Inside the shadowed bedroom, the neighbor woman who stood at the bedside had her eyes elsewhere, on the gloaming at the far side of the cluttered room. No doubt there were children waiting for their dinner, a husband to be placated. A woman with a family of her own, with troubles of her own, could not be expected to attend to the sorrows of another indefinitely. The nun motioned to her: they would exchange places.

When the woman was gone, Sister reached inside her cloak and took the small basket from under her arm. It was a flimsy thing, woven of unblessed palms, and much the worse for being crushed against her body for so long. She straightened and reshaped it a bit, catching as she did the green

scent that the warmth of her flesh and the work of her hands could sometimes coax from the dried reeds. She placed it on the table beside the bed and untied the money pouch from her belt. It was all coins today, mostly pennies. She placed the pouch in the basket and then sat carefully on the side of the bed, her kidneys aching, her feet throbbing inside her shoes. She was sixty-four that year, and the stiffness in her back and her knees and the arthritis in her hands on these damp days had begun to limit her usefulness. More and more she was sent out with her basket to beg, rather than to nurse. She kept her dissatisfaction with the arrangement to herself, which meant that she complained only to God, who knew how she felt. Who had sent her here.

She looked at the girl's dark form, the length of her back and the curve of her young hip. Suddenly, the girl turned in the bed and threw herself into the Sister's lap, weeping. Sister St. Savior put her hand to the girl's dark hair. It was thick, and as soft as silk. She lifted the heavy knot of it and then brushed a strand from her cheek.

This much the nun was certain of: the girl's husband had cherished his wife with the beautiful hair. Love was not the problem. Money, more likely. Alcohol. Madness. The day and time itself: late afternoon in early February, was there a moment of the year better suited for despair? God Himself was helpless against it—Sister St. Savior believed this. She believed that God had held His head in His hands while the young man in the apartment above was slipping off this gray life—collar and yoke. God had wept, she believed this, even as she was getting off her chair in the lobby of Woolworth's an hour before her usual time, even as she was climbing the stone steps, footsore and weary and needing a toilet, but going up anyway, although no one had sent for her.

“What we must do,” she said at last, “is put one foot in front of the other.” It was her usual introductory phrase. “Have you had your dinner?” she said. The girl shook her head against the nun's thigh. “Are there relations we can call for you?” Again she shook her head. “No one,” she whispered. “Just Jim and me.” Sister had the impulse to lift the girl's shoulders a bit, to take the pressure of her weight off her own aching bladder, but resisted. She could endure it a little longer. “You'll need a place to stay,” she said. “For tonight, anyway.”

Now the girl pulled away and raised her face to the dim light. She was neither as young nor as pretty as Sister had imagined. It was a plain, round face, swollen with tears. “Where will I bury him?” she asked. In her eyes, the nun saw the determination—not a result of the Sister's admonition but, rather, what the woman herself was made of—to put one foot in front of the other. “We've got a plot in Calvary,” the girl said. “We got it when we were married. But the Church will never allow it now.”

“Have you got the deed?” she asked, and the girl nodded.

“Where?”

“Upstairs,” she said. “In the sideboard.”

Once, early in her novitiate, the nun had been sent to a squalid apartment filled with wretched children, where a skeletal woman, made old, discolored, barely human, by pain, was in the last throes of her disease. “There's nothing to be done,” Sister Miriam had advised before they

opened the door. And then, as they entered—there was the tremendous animal odor of decay, the woman’s hoarse moans, the famished children’s fraught silence—she added, “Do what you can.”

“Your man fell asleep,” Sister St. Savior whispered now. “The flame went out. It was a wet and unfortunate day.” She paused to make sure the girl had heard. “He belongs in Calvary,” she said. “You paid for the plot, didn’t you?” The girl nodded slowly. “Well, that’s where he’ll go.”

In her forty-seven years of living in this city, Sister had collected any number of acquaintances who could help surmount the many rules and regulations—Church rules and city rules and what Sister Miriam called the rules of polite society—that complicated the lives of women: Catholic women in particular, and poor women in general. Her own little Tammany, Sister Miriam called it. If it was all done quickly enough, Sister St. Savior knew she could get this woman’s husband buried in Calvary.

“How long were you and Jim married?” the nun asked. She understood that there was some small resurrection in just speaking the man’s name.

“Two years,” the girl said to the ceiling. And then she brushed her fingertips over her belly. “I’ve got a baby coming in summer.”

Sister nodded. All right. God had His head out of His hands now, at least. He knew the future. There would be a baby to care for in the summer. And, for once, she would not foist the diapering and the spitting up onto one of the younger nuns. She nearly smiled. Out of the depths—the phrase came to her like a fresh scent on the air—comes the promise of a baby. A green scent coaxed out of dried reeds.

The girl raised one hand from her stomach and clutched the crown of her hair. “He lost his job,” she said. “They let him go. The B.R.T. He was at odd ends.”

The nun lifted Annie’s hand from her hair—it was a mad, dramatic gesture that would lead to mad, dramatic speech—and placed it once again on her middle, where her thoughts should be. “It might be best,” Sister said, “if you don’t move tonight. I’ll speak to the lady of the house. We’ll get something arranged.”

In the parlor, they all turned to Sister St. Savior as if she had indeed been summoned to direct the proceedings. It was agreed that the lady of the house—Gertler was her name—would spend the night with her sister-in-law, across the street. Since the gas had been turned off, and would not be turned on again until tomorrow, most of the building’s occupants were clearing out for the evening. In the vestibule, neighbors were coming down the dark staircase with bedding and small satchels. Sister sent word with one of them to the owner of a boarding house nearby: the middle-aged neighbor would go there. The thin young man in the hat had already left, so she asked Officer O’Neil to knock on the door of one Dr. Hannigan. “Mention my name,” she said. “He’ll roll his eyes, but he’ll come.”

It wasn’t until they’d all cleared out, and well before Dr. Hannigan arrived, that Sister allowed herself to use the toilet. Then she helped Annie undress and get comfortable in Mrs. Gertler’s

bed. When Dr. Hannigan came, she held a candle over his shoulder while he examined the girl, put a stethoscope to her belly and her rising chest. As he was leaving, she asked him to go by the convent to tell them where she was—“So they don’t think I’ve been murdered.” And to, please, as well, go by the morgue to tell them that Sheen and Sons Funeral Home would be making the arrangements. She bent her head back to see him better, to make sure that her small black eyes were right on his own. There were some details, she added, that she’d ask him to keep to himself.

Later, two of the sisters from the convent arrived with more blankets and two hot-water bottles wrapped in rags, and a dinner of biscuits and cheese and hot tea, which Sister St. Savior ate in the chair she had pulled up to the side of the bed. Then she dozed with her rosary in her gloved hands and dreamed, because of the cold, no doubt, and the familiar, icy ache of it in her toes, that she was on her stool in the vestibule of Woolworth’s. She startled awake twice because, in her dream, the woven basket, full of coins, was sliding off her lap.

When the darkness had lifted a bit, she stood and walked into the parlor. The two sisters who had brought the supplies, Sister Lucy and a young novice whose name she couldn’t recall, were still there, side by side on the couch, asleep, puffed into their black cloaks like gulls on a pier. No suitable image

Slowly, Sister climbed first one flight, then the second, until she found the apartment that had burned. In the growing light, it was difficult to say what had ignited in the blast, though the smell of smoke and burned wool was strong. And then she saw on the floor a man’s overcoat and the sodden cushions of a high-backed couch, and the black traces of a large burn across the waterlogged rug. In the kitchen, there were the charred remains of a pair of muslin curtains and an arc of soot along the oven wall. She ran her finger through it, only to confirm that it would be easily removed. What would be difficult to remove, she knew, was the terrible odor. The smell of wet cinders, doused peat, damp stone, and swollen wood. Fire, shipwreck, the turned earth of graveyards.

She went to the single window in the narrow kitchen. The courtyard below was full of shadow; looking down into it disheartened her in a way that she was unprepared for. She sat on the sill, lifted the twisted tea towel that had been left there. Outside, most of the facing windows were still dark, only a small light here and there: an early worker, a mother with an infant, a bedside vigil. Reluctantly, she cast her eyes down into the courtyard again. The sun would have to be well up in the sky to light that gloomy tangle, but, even at this hour, there was a variation in the shadows that caught her attention. It was the movement of birds, or of a stalking cat, or a patch of puddled rainwater briefly reflecting the coming dawn, but for just a moment she thought it was a man, crawling—“cowering” was the word—beneath the snarl of junk and dead leaves, the vague early light just catching the perspiration on his wide brow, the gleam of a tooth or an eye.

She shivered, flexed her stiff fingers. She smoothed the towel on her lap and folded it neatly.

She could tell herself that the illusion was purposeful: God showing her an image of the young man, the suicide, trapped in his bitter purgatory. But she refused the notion. It was superstition. It was the Devil himself who had drawn her eyes down, who had brushed her heart with despair. That was the truth of it.

In the dining room, the sideboard was as big as a boat. She found the couple's lease and marriage license before she put her hand on the narrow blue folder on which someone had written—it was a man's severe script—"Deed for Calvary." She slipped it into her pocket.

In the bedroom, the windows were wide open, the shades rolled up; an ashen cord pull moved slowly in the dawn breeze. The bed was made, the blankets smoothed, no trace of fire in here, although there was more soot along the far wall. No trace, either, of where the husband might have lain on the bed. She knew immediately—it was the sympathy in his gestures, toward the girl on the bed, toward the apartment above—that it was the short police officer who had come back, after the body had been removed, to smooth and straighten the counterpane. One of us.

Sister lifted the two pillows, slipped off their cases, then pulled off the sheets and the blankets, and said to God, "As You made us," at the familiar sight of the rusty stains on the blue ticking of the mattress. She pushed the sheets into one of the pillowcases and wrapped a blanket around them. As she stepped away with the linens in her arms, she kicked something, and looked over her shoulder to see what it was. A man's shoe, broad brown leather, well worn. There were two of them at the end of the bed. Gaping and forlorn, the black laces wildly trailing. She nudged them with her toe until they were safely hidden.

She carried the pile of bedding down the narrow stairs. Sister Lucy was still sunk into herself, breathing deeply. Sister St. Savior dropped the linens on the couch beside her and, when that didn't get her to stir, she touched the Sister's black shoe with her own—and felt the keenness of the repeated motion, the man's empty shoe upstairs and Sister Lucy's here, still filled with its owner's mortal foot. "I'd like you to sit with the lady," she said.

In the bedroom, the young nun—Sister Jeanne was her name—had her rosary in her hand and her eyes on the pile of blankets and coats under which the girl slept. Sister St. Savior signalled to her from the door, and she and Sister Lucy changed places. In the parlor, Sister St. Savior told Sister Jeanne that she was to take the bedclothes to the convent for washing and return with a bucket and broom. The two of them were going to scrub the apartment upstairs, roll up the wet rug, dry the floors, and repair what they could, to soften the blow of the woman's return to the place where the accident had occurred, because return she would, with nowhere else to go and a baby on the way.

Sister Jeanne's eyes grew moist at this news. The tears suited her face, which was dewy with youth. Obediently, the young nun gathered the linens from the couch. Sister St. Savior went with her to the vestibule and then watched her walk delicately down the stone stairs, the bundle held to one side so that she could see her tiny feet as she descended. Sister Jeanne was small and slight, but there was a firmness about her, a buoyancy, perhaps, as she hurried away, the bundle in her arms, so much to do. She was of an age, Sister St. Savior understood, when tragedy was no less thrilling than romance.

Sister St. Savior then headed down the steps herself. Sheen's funeral parlor was only eight blocks over.

By the time Sister Jeanne returned, the snow had become steady and the sidewalk was slick with it. She carried a broom and a bucket that contained both a scrub brush and breakfast: a jar of tea, bread, butter, and jam, all wrapped in a towel. As she reached the building, Sister Lucy was just coming down the steps, pulling her cloak around her hips and turning down the corners of her mouth as if the two motions were somehow connected—some necessary accommodation to what Sister Jeanne saw immediately was her ferocious anger.

No suitable image

“St. Savior’s got the body coming back tonight,” Sister Lucy said, and added for emphasis, “This evening. For the wake. And buried first thing tomorrow morning.” She shook her jowls. She was a mannish, ugly woman, humorless, severe, but an excellent nurse. “Tomorrow!” Sister Lucy said again. “Calvary. She’s got it all arranged. And why is she rushing him into the ground?” She shivered a bit, then declared, “You can’t pull strings with God. You can’t pull the wool over God’s eyes.”

A policeman and a fireman were conferring with another man in the hallway by the stairs. They all turned and nodded to Sister Jeanne as she came through the vestibule. The door to the parlor apartment was ajar, and she let herself in. She crossed the living room and entered the narrow corridor with its two portraits of dour peasants, and found Sister St. Savior in the tiny kitchen. Sister Jeanne placed the broom against the door and carried the bucket to the table where the old nun sat. The kitchen had been scrubbed; the only trace of Mrs. Gertler’s dinner was the newspaper that had been folded beside her plate. Sister St. Savior now had it wide open before her.

Sister Jeanne poured the milky tea into a cup and set it on the table. “It’s still awfully cold in here, Sister,” she said.

Sister St. Savior moved the cup closer without raising it. “The men have just been in to turn on the gas,” she said. “I asked them to carry out a few things that were damaged in the fire. They’re going to wash down the walls for me as well. So we’ve made some progress.”

Sister Jeanne took a plate from the cupboard, set out the bread and the jam.

“Mr. Sheen will get the body from the morgue this morning,” Sister St. Savior went on. “First thing when the lady wakes she’ll have to pick out his clothes. You can run them over for me. We’ve got a Mass set for six tomorrow morning. Then the cemetery. The ground, praise God, isn’t frozen. It’ll all be finished before the new day’s begun.”

“That’s quick,” Sister Jeanne said. She hesitated and then added, “Sister Lucy wonders why it’s such a rush.”

Sister St. Savior only raised her eyes to the top of the newspaper. “Sister Lucy,” she said casually, “has a big mouth.”

She turned the opened newspaper over, to the front page, straightening the edges. “Here’s a story,” she said and put her fingertip to the page. “Mr. Sheen mentioned it to me this morning. A

man over in Jersey, playing billiards in his home, accidentally opened the gas tap in the room, with the pole they use, the cue, it says, and asphyxiated himself.” She raised her chin. “His poor wife called him for dinner and found him gone. Day before yesterday. Mr. Sheen mentioned it to me this morning. He was pointing out how common these things are. These accidents with the gas.”

Sister St. Savior moved her finger up the page. “And now here’s a story of a suicide,” she continued. “On the same page. Over on Wards Island. A man being treated at the hospital over there, for madness. It seems he was doing well enough, but then he threw himself into the water and disappeared. At Hell’s Gate. It says the water covered him up at Hell’s Gate.” She clucked her tongue. “As if the Devil needed to put a fine point on his work.” She moved her arm once again. She might have been signing a blessing over the page. “And here’s another story, about a Wall Street man gone insane. Same day. Throwing bottles into the street, bellowing. Carted off to the hospital.” She leaned forward, squinting toward her finger on the page. “ ‘Where he demanded to see J. P. Morgan and Colonel Roosevelt.’ ”

Sister Jeanne cocked her head a bit, as if to read the page herself. “Is it true?” she asked.

Sister St. Savior laughed. “True enough.” Her smile was as smooth as paint. “The Devil loves these short, dark days.” She went on, “Mr. Sheen said, as a matter of fact, that he could show the article about the billiard man to anyone in the Church, or at the cemetery, in case there was a question. To show how common these sorts of accidents were. And how easily they could be misinterpreted. This New Jersey man, after all, had come home early from work. And closed the door. Had he been a poor man, not a man with a billiard table at all, they might have made a different report out of it. The rich can get whatever they want put into the papers.”

An hour later, when Mrs. Gertler returned to reclaim her apartment, Annie was up and dressed and sitting in a chair by the window with one of Sister Jeanne’s handkerchiefs clutched in both hands. The two nuns walked up the stairs with her, Sister Jeanne ahead and Sister St. Savior just behind.

At four o’clock, the black hearse arrived and the coffin was carried up the stairs by Mr. Sheen and his assistants. The husband’s face was pale and waxen but it was, nevertheless, a lovely face. Boyish and solemn above the starched white collar, with a kind of youthful stubbornness about it as well. The look of a child, Sister St. Savior thought, confronting a spoon of castor oil. No suitable image

While Annie and Sister Jeanne knelt, Sister St. Savior blessed herself and considered the sin of her deception, slipping a suicide into hallowed ground. A man who had rejected his life, the love of this brokenhearted girl, the child coming to them in the summer. She said to God, who knew her thoughts, “Hold it against me if You will.” He could put this day on the side of the ledger where all her sins were listed: the hatred she felt for certain politicians, the money she sometimes stole from her own basket to give out as she pleased—to a girl with a raging case of the clap, to the bruised wife of a drunk, to the mother of the thumb-size infant, which she had wrapped in a clean handkerchief, baptized, and then buried in the convent garden. All the moments of how

many days when her compassion failed, her patience failed, when her love for God's people could not outrun the girlish alacrity of her scorn for their stupidity, their petty sins.

She wanted the man buried in Calvary to give comfort to his poor wife, true. To get the girl what she'd paid for. But she also wanted to prove herself something more than a beggar, here at the end of her usefulness. She would get him buried in Calvary if only because the Church wanted him out, and she, who had spent her life in service to the Church, wanted him in. "Hold it against the good I've done," she prayed. "We'll sort it out when I see You."

Only a few neighbors came to call, every one of them a little restrained in sympathy, given the unspoken understanding that the son of a bitch could have taken them all with him. A trio of red-faced motormen from the B.R.T. stopped by, but they stayed only a minute, when no drink was offered.

Later, the two nuns walked Mr. Sheen downstairs, in order to give the girl some time alone with her husband. On the street, he reached into the cab of the hearse and pulled out the day's newspaper. He folded back a page and tapped a narrow article. Sister St. Savior leaned forward to read, Sister Jeanne at her elbow. In the descending light of the cold evening, the two could just make out the headline: "suicide endangers others." It was followed by a full report of the fire and the man's death by his own hand. "There's nothing to be done, Sister," Mr. Sheen whispered. "Now that it's in the paper, there's not a Catholic cemetery that will have him."

Sister St. Savior pushed the undertaker's hand away. She thought of the young man with the milk tooth and the gray fedora. "The New York *Times*," she said, "has a big mouth."

The two nuns climbed the stairs again. Inside, they coaxed the sobbing girl up off her knees and into the bed. It was Sister Jeanne who took over then—no weariness in her narrow shoulders, no indication at all that she felt the tedium of too much sympathy for a stranger. With Annie settled, she told Sister St. Savior to go back to the convent to rest. She said she would keep vigil through the long night and have the lady ready first thing in the morning.

Sister St. Savior left the two of them in the bedroom. At the casket, she paused again to look at the young man's face. The stubbornness had drained away; it was only lifeless now. She went into the kitchen and glanced down into the purgatory of the back yard. At this hour, all movement was in the lighted windows above: a man at a table, a child with a bedside lamp, a young woman walking an infant to and fro.

Of course, it was Sister Jeanne who would be here when the baby arrived, Sister Jeanne who had been sent for.

She felt a beggar's envy. She envied the young nun, true enough—a new sin for her side of the ledger. But she envied as well the coming dawn, still so many hours away. She envied the very day, when those who have despaired lie trapped in the featureless dark, while the young, the believing, bustle on, one foot in front of the other, so much to do.

The baby, a daughter, was born in August. She was called Sally, but christened St. Savior in honor of the Sister's kindness that sad afternoon. The damp and gray afternoon when the pilot went out. When her young father, a motorman for the B.R.T. whose grave she never found, sent her mother to do the shopping while he had himself a little nap. ♦