

VESPERS

Julia Mahon

Dusk again, and she watches the neighborhood children run home carrying red saucer sleds bigger than their bodies. She lets the curtain fall back. Motes of dusk are disturbed in a slant of late sunlight where she stands. I really should start spring cleaning, she thinks, before I need bifocals. She catches herself holding the *Catholic Monitor* at armslength these days. She used to know the medical term for middle-age loss of close vision. Something . . . opia. Opia something. Opia . . . opia . . . opia she says to herself. The kettle whistles.

"MOTHER! Come out and have something to eat! MOTHER! The kettle's boiling!"

The small house is silent. She walks into the bedroom a little too fast. "Mother? Mother?" She whispers to the old woman, touching her softly on her pink robe. The old woman's glasses are under her chin and her hearing aid is hanging out of her ear like a tiny telephone off its hook. "Eh, what?" the old woman turns and says. The other's heart stops pounding. Not yet. Not today, she thinks.

"Mother, supper is ready."

"I don't want a thing. I couldn't touch a bite of food."

"Well, come try, won't you? Just some tea?"

This is their twilight ritual: the mother wanting nothing; the daughter coaxing her to eat; the mother picking at a chop with her claw fingers and clicking her dentures as she chews her meat; the daughter feeling the wave of nausea come as it always does when she hears that wet click; the daughter turning the small TV in the kitchen on full blast so the old one can hear the news and she can't hear the teeth. But it's dusk now and the daughter washes the few dishes. I will plant impatiens this spring, she thinks. Maybe thirty flats. I'll get them tomorrow and start them in the basement.

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"What ever happened to that nice nun that used to live here?"

"What did you say, Mother? I couldn't hear you. The TV's too loud!"

"I said what ever happened to that nice nun that used to take care of me? This one can't cook worth a darn."

"Mother, I'm your daughter. I'm the nice nun. I took a leave from the convent to be with you. Don't you know me?"

"Did you steal Papa's Ford? Who stole Papa's Ford?"

"Mother, what are you talking about?"

"I would of give it to you if you'd of just asked. Didn't have to steal it."

Her mother's eyes are huge, accusing, slowly blinking glaucous blue. It is as if a grey-haired octopus were watching her through fat magnifying glasses. One minute her eyes are suspicious and then, after she feels her chest for the tobacco sack she keeps her money in and finds it all there, her eyes retreat, forgetting all.

"Mother, the Pope is in New York. Here. On TV."

"What?"

"I said, THE POPE IS IN NEW YORK!"

"What dope? That doctor gives me too much dope. I don't want it. I won't take it. You can't make me. You can't kill me that easy."

"Oh never mind now, Mother. Let's go say the rosary, okay?"

It's dusk and the daughter helps her mother soft-shoe into the living room. The old one passes gas with each step and the wind blowing out seems to help her move forward. A kind of propellant. Snow, heavy and wet, falls outside the window. Hail Mary. Our Father. Hail Mary. Glory be to God. Hail Mary. The black-boughed tree out front loses its lines in the

fading light. Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. They sit across from each other, their hands in their laps. The beads slip one by one through their fingers. The mother keeps her legs apart. Her daughter can see the tops of her hose held by fat red rubberbands pressing into those thighs. Red vessels like spider webs entrap black bruises on her mother's legs. Her mother reaches down and scratches under a roll of stocking. Amen.

"So we don't kneel down to say the rosary anymore, do we? Getting too fat to get down there, eh?"

"Mother, you can't kneel that long with your rheumatism. You know that."

"I'm talking about you, missy. You look to be healthy enough eatin' me out of house and home like you do."

"Oh Mother. Let's not. We just said the rosary."

"And when did you start in wearing a pants? Doesn't that beat all? Nuns in a pants."

"I bought these to keep warm. And I'll need them for gardening in a few weeks."

"I put twenty dollars in the powder can last week. It's gone. Would you be knowing where it is?"

"I didn't take it, Mother. You probably forgot where you put it."

"Does that place pay you good for staying with me?"

"Nobody pays me for staying with you. I'm your daughter. I took a leave to care for you. I'm your daughter. Please don't talk that way."

"Did you steal Papa's Ford? Why ain't it in the garage?"

"You gave it to Johnny, Mom, fifteen years ago."

"Johnny my ass. Help me to the bathroom. Earn your keep, sister."

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The daughter cleans the refrigerator vegetable bin and listens to the news on TV. She lets these tasks go too long lately. Slimy brown celery stalks stick to her finger. She shakes her fingers hard against the sink but they cling. She scoops up the black pulp of a rotting avocado, too late to salvage the seed. A nun is on the news, calling for the Pope to grant freedom and respect and dignity to all nuns and women throughout the world. This makes her laugh. She throws a lettuce leaf at the screen and it sticks covering the foolish nun's mouth. Loud noises come from the bathroom. It's her mother's rotting insides protesting the tiny death within. It always starts within, the long decline. The daughter is fifty-five years old. She can feel it beginning inside her. Planting impatiens will not help. She holds a potato. Shriveled. Spongy. Sprouting bumps on its thick skin. It needs a pair of glasses and a hearing aid, and it could be her mother, she thinks. Her mother calls for her.

"Yes, Mother. What is it?"

"Help me wipe. I can't reach behind me no more."

She helps her mother and tries not to gag. Thin stool runs into the older one's stockings and over the toilet. She can hear the nun on TV saying, "We will not be content to only serve . . ." Her mother bends over a bit more and holds her doughy cheeks apart. She runs a bath for her mother. The sun is gone and it's dark outside the small window in the bathroom. She kneels to run her fingers under the faucet. She turns the hot knob until it burns. Oh yes. It burns.

"Come, Mother. Your tub's ready."

The old one steps in. "OH! OUCH! OOOOOOW! IT'S HOT!"

"Get down in, Mother."

"I'm burning!"

The daughter feels a sharp tingle between her legs as her mother yells. It is not an unpleasant sensation. She folds her arms tightly across her breasts.

"Hush, Mother. I'll add some cold."

She kneels again and lets cool water in. Dusk recedes and their night begins.