

Scarlet Girl—A Memoir

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I. It's you in the yard, but who's in the window?

That's what the e-mail from my brother, Jerry, says. Apparently, there is an attachment which has disappeared, or I can't open. *Do you have an old computer? Confess.* This is what he says in his next e-mail, reminding me of how I hang on to obsolete technology. He has sent it a second time in a different format but once again it is—nowhere. I'm curious. *I'll send you a copy in the mail,* he writes. And now it's here, the photograph, on the table. It's me in the yard but who's in the window? I peer past myself, in, can't make out the shadowy face divided by a sash.

Is it Jerry?

Donnie?

Uncle Mike?

Dad?

It's male for sure. For a moment I even puzzle that it might be the devil, because he did show up on the day the photograph was taken, and maybe he was hiding in the house all the time. Outside, in the brilliant light reflecting from the new patio stones, I try to remember what the devil looked like, what his distinguishing characteristics were, the ways in which he was utterly unlike those familiar male relatives.

II. May • 69

That's the date in the left-hand border of the photo. I am eight but soon, after Our Lady drops the stone in the water that will make the bay warm enough for swimming, I will be nine. I have awoken early and been permitted to eat, there still being plenty of time before 11:00 Mass to get in the required hour's fasting.

It is a special day; its special clothes are hung carefully and waiting. There is a white nylon dress with a scalloped lace overlay. It slides on. Around my neck goes a fine chain with a small blue and white enameled medal of the Blessed Virgin, for May is her month, and even on

schooldays we wear blue ribbons in her honour. On my hands go thin white gloves. In them is a prayerbook ordered especially for the occasion—hard, shiny, creamy, full-colour picture on the cover, the pages edged with gilt, special. There are red and green ribbon markers to find my place, to return to a prayer if needed. Why two? I pray to not encounter a two-prayer situation. Perhaps two ribbons were so that you could compare, have a choice. Even then I am aware of contradictions; two ribbons are not a bad thing. On my legs are openwork white tights; the girl in the catalogue had worn them with go-go boots. The shoes have disappeared in the border and in time, but I know they are white patent leather with composition soles. In the photograph I am crowned—a veil of nylon, tulle and lace is pinned to my peter-pan haircut; a circlet of white organza flowers sits just back of my bangs. I am ready. My mother has borrowed a camera from someone. She says, “Come out in the yard and I’ll take a snap.” I stand on the salty beachrocks in front of the house. Snap. She catches also her own handmade curtains—café style, cotton, polka dots of hot pink, avocado, turquoise and gold leaping off a white ground. She captures also someone watching through the window. I cannot puzzle who. We often do not know who is watching us.

III. Her Face

In her face now I can see my own daughter and she is beautiful; therefore I must have been beautiful too. But what I remember is that I thought I was ugly. A couple of older girls at school had assured me this was true. When I drew girls, I did not draw girls like me. I drew them with uptilted button noses, wide blue eyes and mouths like rosebuds. I drew them with golden tresses down to their waists. I drew them all in vaguely medieval costumes, dresses with low necks and trumpet sleeves, dresses that flared from hip to ankle and that were adorned with waist chains of gold and piping of velvet. Sometimes I placed conical hats on their heads and suspended from them long nylon veils, though even I knew no nylon existed in the Middle Ages.

I sent these girls to tournaments where they watched jousts and were too brave to swoon at the sight of blood. I did not draw girls with peter-pan haircuts; I had cried when mine had to be cut because of the lice at school. Two nights of my head soaked in kerosene and confined inside an old step-in. If anyone saw me like that I would die. After, my mother said I'd have to cut it, she said, "you wouldn't want to go through that again, now would you? And who's the one sitting in front of you, spreading the dirt?"

I wouldn't say, but she had long hair with lights in it like my princesses had, and she liked to flick her beautiful, lousy mane back over the desk where I hunched over my exercise books. But despite the damage princesses could do, I drew no girls with dark hair, dark eyes and straight noses. I did not want any of my creations to hear what I had heard, "Where did your mother get you, you little Portugee?" Years later, when I saw the one who'd said it, I was ashamed that I was so pleased at how spectacularly she'd fallen to ruin.

IV. The State of Grace

On the morning the picture was taken, I was in the state of grace. There was not one black speck on my soul. I had made First Confession and I had tried not to sin in the interim. The state of grace was essential to making First Communion, which I would do shortly after my mother's snap in front of the house.

The state of grace was to be guarded, like virginity, a thing I had barely an inkling about but found fearful. It was a thing some martyr women had died horribly for in the olden days, even before the Middle Ages. Some of them had their heads and even—their female parts—cut off, their innards hauled out. Virginity would be an awful thing to have to defend, even if you were made a saint after because you died to keep the state of grace. In the state of grace, one looked in and saw one's own spotless soul shining like a white enamel sink. The soul I imagined was somewhere in my chest cavity, protected by the rib cage and keeping company with the heart. On that May morning in 1969, I had done, I thought, everything in the world to safeguard my soul's purity; I turned my eyes backwards and looked and saw it in there, shining, beautiful.

V. Occasion

As we walked to church, we joined a crowd going up the steep, rocky lane. Other new communicants bloomed among the crowd, the girls' veils fluttering. I'm not near as pretty as that one there, I thought, but I certainly have one of the nicest communion dresses; you wouldn't know but we were shopkeepers. I pressed the prayerbook in my hand to push such sinful thoughts aside.

The church was decorated in white and blue—white for purity, blue for Mary, the mother of all of us who I wanted to love more than my own. There was something else in the church, something that made the air shimmer, the statues in their niches blur. So many candles burning in the huge votive stand; could they be consuming all the air? I must remember to light one later for Aunt Katie Turner in case she was still in purgatory for being prone to fits of temper and for working in a supper club in America.

I sat between my parents and tried to breathe. The Mass went on and on, Father Murphy's hands trembling and fluttering like fat white birds, flitting and alighting on gilded things. So many things to pick up and put down, he was like a queen in her kitchen. The consecration bell rang and we fell to our knees. Light flashed off a brass sun. Red and blue pinpoints of light dropped from stained glass windows. Some landed on my knees, hot like sparks. My mother said, "Go on up now." I looked up and saw the priest's fat little birds beckon us to the altar rail. I walked on someone else's feet, stiff and unfamiliar as if I had drawn them on one of my medieval beauties.

This was it—the moment. Christ's body, now flat and small and white, would dissolve in my mouth and travel through my tight gullet to some mysterious place where it would unite with my white soul. The priest's immaculate hands held the moon that was Christ under my nose; it smelled like cardboard boxes. Delicately, I extended my tongue to receive, then slowly slid it back into my mouth. The host stuck, which I had heard was a sign of unconfessed sin, to the top of my mouth. Near the back. I felt the gag reflex rising.

The priest gave me a queer look, then moved on. It was taking Christ an impossibly long time to melt. Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy and melt. There, done. The line of communicants all served now, all possessed of Christ in the breastbone. There, there. A blessing was cast over us; a prayer swelled; a hymn ran like a river. And the one at the end of the line was prodded, moved, creating a chain reaction that brought us back to our seats. I managed to get to mine before the faint took over. I did not fall; I simply dissolved into the pew.

VI. Instruction Preceding First Communion—Official and Unofficial

1. If you remember a sin you did not confess, please do not take the host. To accept the Lord knowing you have a sin on your soul is a mortal sin. A fellow did it once and his tongue turned all black and rotten.

2. Under no circumstances chew the host. The Lord Our Saviour is not a stick of gum.

3. The host will be dry, but under no circumstances spit it out. This would be a rejection of Our Lord Jesus Christ. The priest will kill you.

4. Do not say, “Thank you father.” The priest says, “the body of Christ.” You say “amen.” That’s all.

5. Did I mention avoid all occasions of sin between First Confession and First Communion? Thoughts are as bad as deeds.

6. Don’t be thinking about how nice you look in your new outfit. This is pride, and it is one of the seven deadly sins.

VII. Go in the Peace of Christ. Thanks be to God.

This was the view from the point of escape: the long gravel descent of lane, the eye-hurting lime of new leaves on fire in Mrs. Margaret's rose hedge. A ditch with mudpies baking along its rim. Fences of bleached longers, houses too brightly stepping down to the shore where the sea undulated in an amazing blue dress covered in diamonds. Our house seemed very far away. Someone ran into me, one of the boys careening from relative to relative collecting coins. Quarters and five- and ten-cent pieces flashed in the air and descended into pockets. A crooked uncle said, "Go away, I'm beggared, I got nuttin' only coppers." My mother was saying something to me but I kept stumbling forward. Then she bent down and looked right into my face. Her rhinestones blinded me. Her red lipstick hurt. She said very gently, "You don't look right."

The relatives were lined off on the daybed in the kitchen. My aunt and uncle from St. John's; that uncle, my godfather, giving me a whole dollar for my special day. Chicken sputtered in the oven, sent out a smell that nearly knocked me off my feet. A pot of potatoes boiled on the stove, loud as a skiff going out the gut.

"What's wrong with her?"

"She's white as a sheet."

"Must be all the excitement."

"Come here, honey dear, let me feel your head."

"Oh my God, i'nt she hot."

"Let me feel."

"Sacred Heart of Jesus sure, she's on fire."

My pale yellow room was cool. I took off my special clothes and folded them on the dresser. I watched with fascination the red spots breaking out all over me. I was trying to understand something, but thoughts kept running away like friends who suddenly

didn't want to play with me. I felt confused and sad. I lay on the bed in my vest and step-in and pulled the sheet up to my chin. Chill clanged against fever. I could hear voices far away as I fell in slow-motion, descended to someplace deep and dark.

"She's some sick."

"I don't know what come over her."

"Keep an eye on her is all you can do."

"Give her some aspirin."

"Should someone go for the nurse?"

"No, wait, it's liable to be excitement, that's all."

"No, she's right sick. She's after catching something."

"Well, at least there's one consolation. If God took her right now, this very day, she'd go straight to heaven."

NO! GO GET THE NURSE! I was yelling but no one heard me. No one came. Please, please, I tried to call. I had to get through to them. Because something was there to take me and it wasn't God. I tried to keep my eyes closed, but he was powerful and made me look.

VIII. In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, I Command Thee to Leave.

My arms, the sign of the cross on my chest.

Nights when vampires leered through a crack in the curtains, the cross and the invocation, something I heard in a movie, I think, were enough to send them away. I'd close my eyes until I heard the far-off flap of their retreating wings. But this was different. Here was the King of All Vampires, the Great Deceiver, the Commander of the Legions of Hell. The King of the Damned. He looked just like he looked in my Catechism. He crossed his legs, and his sooty muscles rippled. I noticed he'd brought his

own chair, a chrome one. He sat on it too near the bed. He raised a taloned hand and scratched a horn. If he leaned any closer, I'd die. I closed my eyes, but he was there too, silhouetted sootily against the red silk backs of my lids.

"Did you forget something?" he said.

"No."

"Did you forget to tell the priest something? In your Confession?"

"No."

"What about down in the weeds?" he said. "Did you tell the priest that?"

"It wasn't my fault he hauled down his pants."

"You looked though."

"I didn't, no. Anyone'd look. And anyway I ran."

"The occasions of sin are so many," he said. "How do you think you're going to avoid them all?" He clucked his tongue as if in sadness. "Poor little thing," he said, "you'd have a better chance with me."

My mother came into the room then, clutching a bottle of aspirin and a tumbler of water. "You gotta try to get some of these in you," she said. She bent over me; her bum was stuck up right in the devil's face.

"Mom," I screamed, "what's wrong with you? Don't you see him?"

"Here," she said, "drink the water."

"Watch out!" I yelled. I was choking on the water she pressed to my lips.

The devil was looking up under her dress where the tops of her stockings met her garters.

"Behind you, look," I croaked. A sourness rose in my throat. I hurled the aspirins in a sticky foam right past my mother and onto the bedspread. She took a cold damp facecloth from her pocket and rubbed my face with it. Then she cleaned the bedspread. She laid a cool hand on my forehead.

“If you can’t keep the aspirin down,” she said, “you’ll have to fight this off yourself.”

“Good luck,” the devil said.

“What’s wrong with you? Aren’t you listening to him?”

“Ah you poor thing,” my mother went on, “you’re raving, I can’t pick out a single, solitary word.”

“But Mom--”

“Shush-hush, sure the best thing for you now is a good sleep.”

I tried to grab her, but she folded the covers over my hands. And as she turned and left, I moved my beached-fish mouth and tried to call her back.

The devil said, “She’s a fine figure of a woman, your mother.”

“I’m going to sleep now,” I said.

“Do you ever think you’re going to die in your sleep?” the devil said. “Do you ever jump up at the last moment? That’s what people do. They can’t help it. It’s their bodies doing it. People’s bodies love the world and don’t want to leave it, not even for God. But every time they fall to sleep, they don’t know if they’ll ever wake up again. So they jump, like this.” The devil did a startled jump, a pretty real-looking one. “Poor, poor humans,” he said, “I can’t say I envy them.”

But already I felt myself letting go, and no startle called me back.

Through red visions I moved, through worlds like the backs of my eyelids. Pulsating with light, worlds with no gravity. Green oceans crashed on violet shores, shattering the rocks. Horses whinnied. Sheet lightning split a black sky and showed Calvary on the rocks over the bay. Flowers of many colours throbbed and pushed out human limbs.

I’d wake to find him still watching with an expression of great patience.

“You’re not pure of heart,” he said.

“You’re one to talk.”

“Being saucy won’t help,” he said. “See, that’s part of the problem. You’d like to be good, but your thoughts are full of things you shouldn’t be thinking, and things you shouldn’t say are always on the tip of your tongue.”

A tidal wave full of writhing sea monsters crashed through the bedroom door and pulled me under. I fought, rose, felt it drop me in a dry place.

“Are you ready to come with me?” the devil asked.

“I am not,” I shouted at him. I was in the worst temper of my life. “I am not. I won’t. You’re not even real.”

“Oh, I’m real.”

“No you’re not, you’re a fake. I don’t believe in you.”

“Yes, you do.”

“No, I don’t. You don’t even look real. You’re a thing someone drew. You’re only out of a book. I don’t believe in you.”

“Oh,” he said, “maybe you don’t. But then that presents a problem. If you don’t believe in me, you can’t believe in God either. Do you see that?”

“No,” I said.

“See, God and me, well, we’re only two faces on the same coin.” He fetched a coin from somewhere and spun it in the air. “Heads *and* tails,” he said. “That’s the way it is. If you don’t believe in me, you can’t believe in God. Now, do you believe in me?”

“No,” I said.

He crashed his chair to the floor so hard it was like the time I kicked the nurse over when she tried to give me a needle.

IX. Scarlet Girl

The tail end of sunset. From where I lay, I could see the last red and purple streaks in the sky. I felt weak and tired, but cooler. When I was younger, I had been

terrified of those colours. I'd been unwisely taken to a sermon where a visiting Mission Father had told us what the end of the world would be like. Just like sunset. I was no longer afraid; I had been in school long enough to understand that science can explain sunsets and all kinds of other things. I loved science and the way it named everything; that spring I was learning the names of minerals and stars.

Scarlet fever. That was the name my mother gave me for the horrible illness I caught on Communion Day. I was the first of several cases and the quickest to recover. My mother said she didn't worry too much because I always caught things hard and then got better in a day. She said when I was deep in the fever and raving and shaking, I was *delirious*. I rolled the word around on my tongue, *delirious*, a nice round sound for such a mixed-up thing.

I never saw the devil again. How could I, since I'd told him I didn't believe him and sent him packing. But whatever he was, what figment of my worst fears and deepest dreads, he was right about one thing. I was an unbeliever, still am. A born unbeliever. All through those early years, as I struggled to take in the dark mysteries of Catholicism, its insistence on blind belief and the acceptance of contradictions, a logical part of my mind was steadily rejecting it. I could not believe in original sin, no matter how hard I tried. I couldn't believe that the Jews, after all they'd suffered, wouldn't go to heaven or that poor little babies, dead before they could be baptized, would go to a lonely place called limbo. I didn't believe that thoughts were sins, for how could we control our thoughts? I didn't believe that Confession could wipe you clean if you were bound and determined to do the same wrongs before next Saturday. But I was also afraid that it was all true, and that even by thinking those things, I was damned forever.

The girl in the photo. Fallen woman, scarlet woman, scarlet girl. How she must have felt on that morning of her First Communion. She wants to believe but she cannot. She is afraid because she cannot. Somehow, she knows it is wrong for her to kneel at

those gleaming altar rails holding her secret, unspeakable sin, the sin of doubt. For years, she will feel troubled and guilty.

I look at her now and try to imagine how she could have believed herself damned. There she is in her pretty dress. The sun is shining through her veil; she can feel its warmth on her hair. It'll be a nice enough day for popsicles and hopscotch. Her eyes are squinting a little in the May morning glare. She is smiling at her mother who loves her and who is holding a camera. She is the picture of innocence.