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FICTION | SPRING 2021

## A Life

By Beda Higgins

Sister Margaret had said she'd come with her, but Sister Josephine preferred to go alone – she didn't want to stand out as someone different, and Sister Margaret always wore her full habit. In a pink room, Sister Josephine took a seat and avoided eye contact. She picked up a magazine; the pages were full of bouncing healthy bosoms.

The nurse called, "Anne Connor." She felt a flicker of rebellion. She was the same as other women waiting, rather than a Sister. She stood, brushed her skirt down, and glanced at the row on remand still waiting. One lady gave her an encouraging nod, which nudged Sister Josephine on, to be brave and step forward.

The consulting room was small and stuffy. The window, tall, thin, and triple-glazed, muffled noises. Life was on hold in this room. The doctor, a ruddy-faced man, smiled and waved her to a seat while he flicked through notes on his desk. Sister Josephine waited and prayed to Mary, a kind lady in blue who wouldn't lie. The doctor told her that the incidence of breast cancer in childless women was higher than the average. She wondered if he thought it was her fault. He was plain speaking and grunted vowels. Sister Josephine knew that St Agnes had cut her breasts off and offered them up to God, she'd served them on a plate, nipple up. Sister Josephine understood: *Let me live and they're all yours*. The doctor explained what would happen but not how many strands of her hair would be lost. She touched her head, knowing it shouldn't matter.

Her hospital room was a pale sunny yellow, and warm – warm enough to sit up in her nightgown and not need another layer. Her convent room was often cold. She liked the new sensation of being able to move her limbs easily without the heaviness of blankets. There was an abstract painting opposite the bed. She didn't know what it was meant to be, but the pink and green swirls were cheerful. Her walls were bare in the convent, except for the small crucifix over her bed. She ran her hands over the top sheet, which was neatly folded over. It was white and smooth. Her convent sheets were bobbly with washing.

A young nurse came to see her. "Hello, my name is Penny." She carried a clipboard. "Before your surgery, I need to check your personal details. First of all: what do you like to be called?" Penny kept her head down while writing.

Sister Josephine frowned. "I'm not sure what you mean?"

Penny looked up. "Do you like to be called Mrs, Miss or Ms? Your surname or your Christian name? Do you have a nickname you'd prefer?"

Sister Josephine had spent ages considering a complicated menu for her evening meal: it came down to shepherd's pie and sponge and custard. Decisions seemed very hard. "I'd like to be called....." she hesitated. She'd been christened Anne, but her chosen name when she took her vows was Josephine. She wondered what it would feel like to be Anne again. She decided it would be like divorcing herself from Jesus and that might be bad luck. "I'd like to be called Sister Josephine."

"Are you a nurse?" Penny asked looking up, suddenly interested.

"No, I'm a nun."

"Oh right. " Penny grinned. "I've never met a real nun before."

Sister Josephine said nothing, she was good at that. People often asked to have their photos taken with her when she was out and about. It was a phenomenon a lot of the nuns shared – comedy props.

"Not Josie then?"

"I prefer Josephine."

Sister Josephine watched Penny writing. She had coffee coloured skin and curly hair. Sister Josephine hadn't seen a black person until she was fifteen, when she first went to Dublin with her parents to visit the convent. At sixteen, she joined the order.

She'd been cycling home after milking the cows. The sun was setting, "a majestic beauty," she'd rapturously told her Mammy later. She'd stopped, hypnotised by the fiery glory, sinking slowly and enveloping her in a blanket of peace. Pressing her hands together, she'd thanked God for sharing such a moment. A wide-winged bird flew overhead and called to her: she'd felt blessed.

Her vocational calling had delighted her Mammy; it made her proud and reflected well on her good Catholic upbringing. Her big sisters already promised Mammy plenty enough grandchildren.

Penny added a full stop with a flourish.

A WRVS trolley lady, who was trim with pearly lipstick, asked Sister Josephine if she'd like anything from the trolley. Sister Josephine told the lady that she wasn't to eat, it was her operation day. The lady smiled. "I hope it goes well for you my dear." The lady had chevron eyebrows, as if life was a constant surprise.

Sister Josephine was to dress in a green gown, loosely fastened at the back with ties. She was nervous and had to keep going to the toilet. She caught sight of herself in the mirror: her mother had always said green wasn't her colour but didn't tell her what colour did suit her. She was acutely aware of her nakedness underneath the gown as she lay on the trolley bed with a blanket laid over her. A porter pushed her along the hospital corridor whistling. She could see up his hairy nostrils, so she counted the strip lights to theatre instead. They turned a corner and swung through swing doors into a bright shiny room. She was asked to shuffle onto a different trolley and tried to move like a mermaid with her legs together – no cracks on show. She could feel her skin burn, thinking how they'd talk about her, and how they'd laugh about her virginity. No one had ever seen her naked; she even avoided looking at it herself. It wasn't a sin, but still.

After surgery, Sister Josephine had to have chemotherapy. They hooked her up to red liquid that was to destroy the cancer cells. She watched it drip from the intravenous infusion. It felt as if Satan was snaking through her bloodstream, destroying everything in its wake. She'd shake and vomit, defeated by fatigue, poleaxed by poison. After, she looked in a mirror at herself and stared at a big baby; she was left bald and sexless.

Her physical recovery was uneventful, but, for Sister Josephine, something else had been chopped off. Often, in the middle of the night she tried to pray, but there was only darkness. Discharged from hospital, she stepped out alone, she'd always had Jesus by her side before. The traffic roared and pavements cracked as if trying to trip her up. She fretted her crucifix, holding it for courage, but felt none. She didn't want to be a martyr.

Routine back in the convent was a comfort. She bowed her head as if in prayer and got on with her chores, because in a world without God, food on the table and clothes on your

back seemed more important. Always there was fear: backache inched possible growth, flicker-eyes could be a brain tumour, pins-and-needles tiptoed spread.

At her third annual check-up the doctor offered her a tired smile. "Sister Josephine isn't it? " He was African. As a young girl, she'd liked putting pennies in the collection box for the starving babies in Africa. Now those babies were the doctors and priests of today. Mother Superior said this proved the miraculous power of prayer.

"How are you feeling today?" The doctor asked gently. He folded his stethoscope and put it in his pocket, sighed, and placed his hands near hers. "Do you want to have Mother Superior or one of the other nuns in with you today?"

"No, I'm fine alone."

"I'm afraid it's not good news." He went on to explain the spread and that further chemotherapy was not an option. The doctor was kind. She wondered how many people in a day he'd have this conversation with.

"We'll keep you as comfortable as we can, and make sure the nasty side-effects and unpleasant symptoms are controlled."

"So I'm going to die?"

He held her gaze and squeezed her hand, "We all are."

She liked his friendliness. It implied her normalness – it was a new way of being. She felt safer in his hands than God's.

"At least you're at peace with your maker," he said.

She nodded, thinking *with all his cleverness and he thinks it's that simple.*

She left and caught a bus back to the convent. She didn't get off at her stop; instead, she went full circuit, round and round. An old man talked and it was easy, all she had to do was nod.

At the convent she watered plants, drizzling hope on brown leaves and fixed a cheerful smile, deciding it was easier if no-one knew. She made pacts: diets, and meditation, additives and five litres of water a day. She puckered her lips, refusing to kiss the life growing inside. It was a pregnancy of pain.

When it became apparent that she was gravely ill, Mother Superior visited her room and patted her hand. "Your faith will sustain you." Sister Josephine nodded and closed her eyes. Mother Superior was old; she didn't want to argue.

They arranged for the priest to come. He asked, "Will you pray with me Josephine?"

She was weary and said quietly, "No, thank you," and turned her head to the pillow.

The day after she sent the priest away, Sister Josephine took a turn for the worse. The nuns who cared for her whispered, "It must be divine retribution."

She was taken away in an ambulance to the hospice.

She asked to be called Anne, and for the blinds to be left open at all times. She liked to see the sun rise and set, and she'd watch the moon at night thinking of the earth slowly turning on its axis. She listened to the nurses: young girls who sounded like herself and her friends at the convent when she'd first joined. All that enthusiasm for life; when did it ebb away? The nurses talked about the new series of *Strictly Come Dancing* while they sponged her skin and combed her hair. Their kindness always surprised her. Anne started watching *Strictly Come Dancing*. It was good to have something to believe in and talk about. She told the nurses who her favourite dancers were as they helped her sit up and rubbed her back, and they'd tell her who they liked. On Saturday nights, she was pushed in her wheelchair to the dayroom where the patients and nurses watched *Strictly* together. They'd sit next to one another, sipping

tea and talking about the dresses and swirls and there was only a fine line between the living and the dying.

When the WRVS trolley called to her room, Anne bought bars of chocolate flakes; she'd always been partial to them but rarely allowed herself the indulgence. A giggly nurse explained that the WRVS lady's face was Botoxed; explaining her alarming eyebrows. Anne smiled, letting the chocolate melt in her ulcerated mouth – she collected the small splinters that dropped, and thought how much there was to learn about life.

At night, Anne's waxy face melted goodbye in hard tears. Perhaps it hadn't been a great life, but it was hers. She was afraid of the dark: of nothingness. She clawed at the sheets, clutching blankets, her furry tongue licking the air like a baby hungry for the milk of life. She fretted and wished she could have more time.

She had another awful night where the blackness, like a caul, smothered her. She wiped tears, gulping, until a thin line on the horizon opened and the blur of the hospice gardens came into focus. As dawn broke, Anne's red eyes widened: a heron stood majestically in the hospice pond. It was still and silent.

The heron must've enjoyed eating frogs from the pond because he was there every morning as dawn broke. Exhausted, Anne would feebly prop herself up on her elbow to glimpse his silhouette. In those moments between day and night when there was only herself and the heron in the world, he told her bit by bit how her hurt, like water rippling, was life's shapes and colour, moving and whirling and always changing. As the morning light coloured and shaped him, he would raise his head high, wide wings open, and lift to fly. Anne liked to watch him soar, she felt calmer and comforted. She knew that as a girl she would've seen the heron as God talking to her and she wondered with fondness at the childlike innocence of her old self.

Anne was tired but she still liked Vaseline rubbed gently on her lips. She listened to the background thrum of hospice life: trolleys, gentle voices; the trailing scent of kind women who cared for her. She closed her eyes and thought of the solitary heron, flying free in the sky.

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**Beda Higgins works in General Practice in North England as a psychiatric and general nurse. She has two collections of prizewinning short stories published and her first collection of poetry OURSELVES was joint winner of the Geoff Stevens award 2020 and is currently short-listed for the Pigott Poetry Prize 2021. Higgins has run creative writing workshops and literary projects over the years: The most far reaching and successful project was following funding received from the Queen's Nursing Institute Award to pilot a project to use creative writing as a therapeutic tool with patients who have life-limiting illnesses. This project led to the establishment of creative writing sessions for patients at St. Oswald's Hospice and remains a successful and well-used service to date.**