



War

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WAR

I am peace

and war has come because of me

Four women live in an old convent carrying on the missionary work of the Church in slipshod, modern but fairly effective ways. They have been known to take in wayward children upon occasion; to be available for bed-sitting the sick--although not over extended periods--and to receive a pregnant girl or two when nobody else would, or when the girl needed a place to think things out before deciding on what to do. But what the house is chiefly known for and appreciated for is the rumour that the four nuns pray fervently each day of the week for the people whose names they know and whose faces they remember. This prayer by name and not in abstract general terms endears them to the townspeople. Because they like feeling that four good women, pure of heart and clean of body, call out their names every day for succor and grace and, they think, very good luck, the people send them small gifts of money, food, supplies. Sometimes stopping by for a visit.

The convent, once occupied by a legitimate order, was to have been sold or demolished. Word was that the four women worked for the order, were not themselves ordained, but having no place to go and not wishing to go anywhere were permitted to stay on if they kept the place up and abided by certain charitable principles. In other words, the Church looked the other way. Another word, however, was that these four were solicited, approached, taught by a fifth woman who came to the Convent before they did and who was very close to the Sister in charge and was for a while the lone

survivor of this place. That she in turn gathered or perhaps received these four women [whose pasts were similarly unspeakable] and converted them. Upon the death [or flight] of this fifth woman, the four continued the way as she taught them.

One or two townspeople are not so persuaded. They have an unpleasant suspicion about the four, based originally on the fact that these women smoke hand-rolled cigarettes, and that tobacco is among the things they are pleased to accept from others. They seem not to have any other vice: they speak in low voices, smile at appropriate moments, have no bitter judgments of others to pass on, never proselytize or gossip, and come to minor and domestic emergencies as soon as called. Whether they are visited in the middle of the night, or at high noon, one always finds them at some task, quietly pursued, but never too busy to stop it and listen to the caller. The one other cause of suspicion from minds habitually attuned to the presence of discord and sin, is the manner of their dress. Of course they don't wear habits as such, but they wear a long flowing dress or robe made of linen--natural, hand woven, unbleached, undyed linen--of which they apparently have an endless supply for in all the years they have been there, twelve, their robes have been seen soiled as they work the gardens and tend the coops, but are never seen to fray or tear. Also, there is something about the cut of these rather shapeless dresses that suggest to suspicious minds the flesh unbridled underneath. That may be because these women are not old. The oldest appears to be around forty, the youngest in her late twenties. Obviously, the question arises, even if they are completely virtuous and highly

disciplined, what do they do about or think about carnality. Are they ever tempted to look upon one another with sexual appetite? Do they miss men? Do they manage, somehow, to have men?

This latter is more than an idle speculation because, at the beginning and again more recently men have lived among them. Not in the Convent itself, but in a cottage on the premises which was once the guest hall for bishops, priests, or visiting relatives when the place was watched over and guided by the regional See.

It isn't clear who the first man was, why he came or stayed, since that was in the time of the fifth woman--the one who tended the dying Sister and who stayed on to school the four who followed her. But the two men who came later--one was old, the other young, and stayed for a time helping out with chores around the place--were known in town. And there was something, oh, vulgar, sly, manipulative about the young one, and something cold, judgmental and angry about the old one.

Still, other refugees had stayed there. True hoboes who marked the place with an X; an ex-con or two, drunks trying to dry out so the liquor would have a fresh kick next time; girls not sure prostitution was all it was cracked up to be, and of course a succession of pregnant girls trying to make up their minds. Many if not all of these strays taken in by the four, were unsavory in some way to fastidious folk, and most of them lived there for six months or more. Why the last two men were so immediately alarming is still unclear. Perhaps the times had something to do with it: war time when everybody was depressed and anxious and longing for its conclusion in victory or defeat. At that point it did not

matter which.

But it could have been other things, anything. The superior quality of the pullets the four could sometimes be persuaded to sell or offer; the amazing even dazzling health of the four; the disease-free elms out-living and out-thriving a plague that had destroyed every single elm in the country; even the women's hair. More than the provocation of the loose linen on previously sullied, currently pure bodies, was the outrageous hair: unbound, untouched, maybe even unethical, the hair of each one of them, including that of the white one, brought Medusa to mind even to those who never heard of her.

The pregnant girls who came back from the Convent, having made up their minds one way or another, were clearly amused and fascinated by the hair, and if they regretted the decisions they had come to unaided by the four, they called them The Burrhead Nuns or, simply, Snakeheads. If they felt good about what they had chosen to do, they talked about the hair the way some people talked about sunsets--as though it were a living, endlessly changeable and quite spectacular thing.

Their names were Sarah, Elizabeth, Eve, and Mary, now. In their former lives they were called Fire-eater, Top, Royal, and Two-bits. The fifth woman had been called Lovey and was never known to have another name before she arrived, while there, or after she disappeared.

The attack on the Convent came at the end of the war and was, in a way, a mini version of it, containing as it did all the elements of human magnificence and idiocy. Hopelessness and

charitable murder; shame and mercy; motivated slaughter, comedy, rape, panic and unrelieveable boredom. And nobody won.

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Paradise

Notes:

One of the women cut four records and the first two were very popular. She had a year or two of being outrageously famous. The third song was weak; the final one [the one she loved the best] was called the end of her career, and indeed it was since no jockey could be forced to praise it--the money didn't help the sexual favors didn't help, the generous parties didn't help either. The record never left the stores. Later she is convinced that it was quite true that the song was a bust--and nothing could save it because something had happened earlier--inside. She had loved the last cut the best because it was what she really "felt" about life and stuff--its miseries, its deception etc. But what she had really "felt" was that she could not take the heat. Which is to say she could not stand the gossip--the I knew her when stories from strangers, and people who had never mattered in her life. Jokes, gossip, and lies, criticisms, and even disdain from people close to her would have hurt or helped, in any case would have been seriously taken. But the idle speculations, the on the spot portraits from people she had simply sat next to at a cheerily cold hearted party; or the people who watched her eating in a diner; or take a dive in a pool--she could never be beautiful enough for their gaze; clever enough to return their provocation. It did not toughen her; it weakened her and she responded with a song that said she hated those people; used to feel sorry for them, but had changed her mind and now thought they were and should be buried in the heap where they lay like the putrid fruit they had become which is why they had fallen from the branch, and that only a gardener would find them useful. Thus name of the tune: Sly Gardener.

The people got the message [that the people who trashed her were trash] and trashed instead her tune instead.

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[The Thunder, Perfect Mind]

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Sarah. Formerly known as Fire-eater. Forty-four years old. Born in Memphis, Tennessee. Liked picalillie and tobasco on everything, including unadorned Wonder Bread, which was mostly what was available during the long afternoons sitting before the television set on a brown and yellow flowered sofa covered with plastic that had done its job of remaining permanent, indestructible and insufferable. Crumbs slid to the seam stitching, catsup and Yoo Hoo could be wiped up effortlessly from the sofa's glistening hide. If the temperature was high enough, the plastic loved her skin more than potato chip grease, but not more than the beer scent from the night before and the nights before that.

Ortega made a salsa, thick and chunky, labeled 'hot' that had made its way into the supermarkets of Memphis in 1968, but not in 1939 when the girl eventually called Fire-eater was fifteen years old. There was only something red in a jar called Sock'em! that was sufficiently hot for this, her first, addiction.

Elizabeth. Formerly known as Top. Or Topper to the girls in her private school, and later in college.

Eve. Formally known as Royal [as in kiss my royal ass]. At night, locked tight in sleep, she padded around the rooms of any house she lived in and some she did not. She was at her sweetest then: eyes wide open, a quiet smile, her whole manner was that of a graceful angel. Some ill-informed persons, relatives in charge of her while her parents were unavailable--woke her once or twice during these walks. At both times she woke raving and proceeded to break up the joint. They thought it best to let her return to her

own bed, after that in her own sleep time. During her waking hours, she was restless, sullen, and sometimes loud all of which was attributable to the pain she suffered as the daughter of brilliant clowns. As a very small child, it was scary seeing her mother and father turn from television parents into television animation. Later, it was delightful--having in-house entertainment at a moment's notice, being the guinea pig for all sorts of new material, having friends galore who loved her parents as much as they loved her. It was success that spoiled Eve and put her on the road to ruin. The clown-parents were asked to tour, appear in malls and at openings of amusement parks; they were wonderful at warming up crowds for political candidates, and giving gatherings an air of gentle family fun which was very important in 1953. Road life, of course, was not suitable for a fifteen year old daughter who should be in school and living a stable life in a good neighborhood, on a preferably tree-lined street among people of their own race. Eve was put into the care of the clown father's mother and sister--who lived together on just such a street. Very nice until the grandmother started courting again. It infuriated the daughter so she ran to a church denomination understood to be beneath the one the family had been associated with: a group of seers, healers, and charismatics who regarded sexual life as polluting. A trial to be endured in earthly life, but unnecessary in the hereafter. The strain was too much for Eve. Distant, touring parents with outrageous noses and impossible feet; a grandmother necking in the parlour and an aunt burning cleansing incense throughout every room once a week. She began to tear the

house down. Sleepwalking like an angel at night, breaking things during the day. Clumsy, said the aunt. Awkward, said the grandmother. Neither saw the plan. Everyday Eve managed to destroy, ruin or damage something: broom handle through the glass in the kitchen window; paint carefully peeled from the bathroom wall; door knobs loosened and came away in her hand; and there was no point in requiring her to do dishes because it was just too expensive replacing what she broke. She managed to give the toilet a perpetual hiss by the way she hit the handle, and on several occasions broke it completely. Things fell apart in her hands: the Nat King Cole 33 and 1/3 that her grandmother's boyfriend loved to neck by. Christmas ornaments the clown parents sent from Central City where they were auditioning for a kiddie television show. But most of all she liked to tear books. Like a tic, she folded the corners, fingernailed the seam and ripped. Then the margins; folded back in a straight line, fingernailed flat and tight, and ripped. Finally the print. The piles of squares, triangles and rectangles gathered in her lap while she sat on the porch swing, watched "Do You Believe This?" on television, day dreamed in study hall, and when she sat on the grass and talked to her best friend, Carol. When the books and magazines no longer soothed her, she moved into the rebellious phase with an command to the school librarian (who charged her two dollars for a totally defaced book and threatened to keep her from graduation if she did not pay) to kiss her royal ass. Her charismatic aunt was instrumental in seeing to it that the money was paid, and Eve given a high school diploma, but there was nothing she could do about the name Eve acquired,

especially since the girl not only liked it, but used it when she filled out applications on job interviews. Name: (last) Hudson, (middle) Ann, (first) Royal. Royal Hudson. It not only sounded good, it felt good.

Mary. Formally known as Two-bits; also Deuce.

Lovey. Formally and always, Lovey.

They sound like the names of street women, but, other than Mary who had actually traded, none of them was a prostitute and one, Sarah, has never known a man sexually.

Each handles a "crop": bird, fish, milk or honey. They are all responsible for bread and vegetables.

The old man who was there in Lovey's time was called Bacchus.

The old man who came after Lovey had gone, while the war was raging to a mournful end, was called Simeon, Simeon Nascimento de Sousa. A last name easily mis-heard in X as Susie.

The young man who accompanied Simeon Susie was called Pair-of-Dice, or Paradise, he corrected, but most regularly, Dice.

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