

The Grotto

A.W. Hill

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IN MEMORY, the Grotto retains all of the fearsome sanctity of my first trespass, in spite of its recent debasement by suicide and tabloid scandal. I'm one of the lucky ones who came upon it unawares and wondered afterwards if what I'd seen was real. It was constructed, they say, in 1929, in a grove of spruce on the back ten acres of the Bethlehem Academy for Girls, and yet, when I pushed my bicycle into that grove in the Summer of 1977, I beheld it as if it had sprung up overnight, fully formed from the fabric of a schoolboy's dreams.

It is a shrine, a thirty foot mountain of concrete, chicken wire and native stone dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, but the stirring I felt on first glimpse was as much in my loins as in my soul. Although the icons and images are Christian, the set and the setting are pagan, and other goddesses haunt the grounds, as well. I was sixteen, and not two-hundred yards away in a broad field beyond the trees, a group of Catholic schoolgirls in plaid skirts turned cartwheels on the newly mowed grass. One of them, with skin as white as the Virgin's and a mind as dirty as Lily Langtree's, was Mona McCaffrey.

I work now, twenty-five years later, as a reporter for the New Hebron Herald, where I cover local politics and crime, as well as any conjunction of the two. Though I did go away to school, and travelled a bit in my twenties, there was never any doubt that I'd return to the town of my birth. This is where I lost my youth to Mona, and where my callousness caused her death. Even if I wanted to escape her ghost, I couldn't: she would follow me to Timbuktu and she will follow me to Hell.

She comes to me on nights when the harvest moon hangs like a transfigured sun over City Hall, and on the gunmetal grey dawns of November's first, wet snow. In late August, when the fetid heat of the day lingers well past midnight and I lie in my bed like a corpse at wake, finding relief only in stillness, she draws down the sheets and takes me into her mouth, just as she did that first time, on the day of my seventeenth birthday.

The bodies of six teenaged girls have been taken from the grotto over the past twelve months, all of them apparent suicides, all of them with hallucinogens in their blood. This has caused the good people of New Hebron to react with both denial and profound puzzlement, but then, most of them have memories shorter than mine.

In one of those great circular ironies that inevitably trap men with something to live down, the “Grotto Suicides” have put my byline on the front page and granted respite from chronicling city council squabbles and vending machine vandalism. My articles have been picked up by papers as far away as Cleveland and Kansas City, and I have been interviewed on *Good Morning, America*. I have covered the story with the same dispassionate objectivity I once brought to reporting of the mayoral race, and I have good reason for leaving my own feelings aside. I am, you see, partly responsible for the tragedies I have been assigned to cover.

On an Indian Summer day in 1977, three months after I’d first laid eyes on it, Mona McCaffrey caught me at the Grotto. I had just entered my junior year in High School and had left school that afternoon with a consuming itch to return to that weirdly hallowed ground. I would describe it as a religious feeling, except that it was also laden with adolescent sexual desire and the throbbing guilt that accompanies it. I hopped on my bike and tore the ten blocks to the edge of the wood on the north perimeter of Bethlehem Academy, then hid the bike in the brush, just inside the broken gate, and walked the quarter mile to the Grotto. The day was hazy and fragrant with the scent of burning leaves, and the autumn sun was low in the sky, making the woods appear as if draped in successive curtains of old lace. I crept into the clearing and approached the cavern-like entrance to the monument in a state of breathless excitement. My bowels shifted when she spoke.

“Halt! Who goes there!” she called, in a playfully forbidding tone.

I froze. The voice came from the trunk of a nearby spruce, but all I could make out was a ray of gauzy sunlight gilding the needles on a low bough. My impulse was to run, but then she stepped from behind the tree, one plaid strap fallen from the shoulder of her white blouse. Wine-colored curls framed an impish and still-freckled face.

“We kill boys and eat them for dinner,” she said. “And tonight is mystery meat night.” She grinned at the sight of my red face and took a step closer. Two other girls materialized, wide-eyed and wary, from the haze behind her -- one was broad and doughy and the other pale and scrawny as a medieval penitent. “Should we kill him now, girls ... or torture a confession out of him him first?”

“We shouldn’t be here,” whispered the skinny one.

“We should get back,” the dumpling agreed. “Sister Beatrice would kill us.”

"You two go ahead," said Mona, her double-barreled stare trapping me like a frightened rabbit. "I'll meet you in the caf." The girls hesitated. "Fifteen minutes," she said. "I promise." Once her sidekicks had skulked off, glowering back at me as if I'd intruded on Eden itself, Mona came fully into the clearing, scooped the loose strap back onto her shoulder, and parked one saddle-shoed foot against the rough, rocky shell of the shrine. "So," she said. "What's your name?"

I told her.

"What are ya doin' here? You could be punished really bad, you know ..."

"I like this place," I said, and it was the first time I'd spoken of the grotto to anyone. "It's beautiful and ... sort of spooky, like something from a fairy tale." I was speaking of the place, but I was looking at her. Picture one of those early movie stars, like Norma Shearer or Hedy Lamarr, playing *Jezebel* in a Catholic schoolgirls uniform. "It feels a million miles from anywhere."

"I like it, too," she said. "We're not supposed to come here, except on saint's days and special occasions ... but I do anyway." She flipped the curls from her face. "It's holy ground, you know. Are you a Catholic?"

"Uh-uh," I replied. "I guess I'm a Presbyterian."

"My Daddy teaches Ancient History at Holy Cross College ... you know, the all boys' school in Joliet?" I nodded, though I'd never heard of it. "You know what he told me?"

"What?"

"He told me that in ancient Greece -- way before Jesus -- they had places like this ... holy places where people would come to know their future. Women called sybils with second sight lived inside and spoke to them from their dreams. And there were *really* holy places -- the holiest was called Eleusis -- where hundreds of people came once a year, at harvest time ... this time ... and went into the grotto for a secret ceremony. And when they came out, they weren't afraid of dying anymore."

The fine hairs on my neck bristled. "Wow," I said. "I never heard that."

"But there's some stuff he didn't tell me," she continued, raising one henna colored eyebrow, "and I had to look it up myself. Weird stuff."

"Like what?" I asked, dry-mouthed.

She dropped her chin and then raised her eyes to mine, the corners of her mouth curling naughtily. She nodded to the entrance of the grotto. "Come inside."

On every night of my life since then, at that liminal moment when I lie suspended between waking and sleep, I have seen that face and heard that invitation, and I accept it as I did on that day. "Okay," I said. "If you're sure ..."

The interior of the grotto is a single chamber, roughly circular and only about sixteen feet in diameter. To the left and right of the entrance portal are twin spiral stairways, like those found in castle turrets, leading to pulpits twenty feet above the forest floor which face the clearing and a rustic amphitheater of benches. The dank walls of the main chamber are inset with crucifixes and statuettes of the Virgin at every level, and hung like a Hindu shrine with the offered rosary beads of a hundred penitent schoolgirls. She sat cross-legged on the stony floor and I followed suit, my eyes on the freckled pink of her bare knees.

"I snuck into my Dad's study one night," she continued, "when he was out doing a lecture, and read everything I could find about Eleusis." She swallowed hard. Her eyes were wide and moist, and flashed in the fading light. "I wanted to find out why the people who went there weren't scared of death afterwards." Her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper, as if the Virgin herself -- or Sister Beatrice, at the least -- might be listening in. "It was all about this story ... a myth ... how Hades, the god of the underworld, captured the young maiden Persephone -- who's also called *Kore* -- and took her below to do his nasty stuff, and then her mother, Demeter, had to rescue her by making a deal with Hades. But it's really about how things never die. *We never die*. But since that's pretty hard for people to believe, they put on this whole crazy show to prove it. Everybody drank a potion called the *Kykeon*, made from fermented wheat with this really disgusting mold growing on it. Guess what the mold was ..."

"I dunno," I said, so entranced that I hadn't realized she had her palm pressed against my chest. She followed my line of sight down to the inner thigh now revealed beneath the hem of her plaid skirt, but made no effort to cover it. When I began to get a hard-on, I was sure she could sense it, because the naughty smile curled her lips again.

"LSD," she said. "The mold was *ergot*, which is what they make LSD from."

A bead of water, condensed from the moisture on the grotto's ceiling, fell at that moment onto her thigh with a soft *splat*. She rubbed it into her skin without breaking stride, inadvertantly -- perhaps intentionally -- urging the hem a little higher.

"Everybody got *really* high," she continued. "I mean like ... mystical, spooky,

sixth sense kind of high. And the priest ... the *hierophant* ... led them all in a huge orgy ...” She paused and leaned in as if to sniff the scent coming off me: to gauge whether it was adolescent fear or a young man’s desire. “And then the hierophant chose one of the girls ... one of the *Mystai* ... and took her below. And when he came back, he had a little baby in his arms, and he called the baby *Brimos*. And the people who saw *Brimos* became *knowers* ... they became the *Epoptai*.” She pronounced the exotic word like an incantation, with the accent on the middle syllable, and when she said “*pop*”, I smelled strawberries on her breath.

“W-what happened to the girl?” I asked, not making the mystical connection.

“She was dead but not dead,” said Mona. “She died in the act of being reborn.”

I don’t know by what magic of hers my hunger and fear and awe congealed into willfulness, because I had always been tentative with girls, but I suddenly grabbed a handful of her curls and pulled her mouth to mine. She slipped her tongue between my mouth without a moment’s deliberation, and put her hand against my zipper.

That was how it began with Mona and me, and it continued for exactly one year to the day. We never saw one another except at the grotto, and we arranged our meetings by notes left underneath a rock near the gate at the edge of the wood. Because she was, despite her pagan-ish ways, a good Catholic girl, and I was at heart a shy and reticent boy, we never desecrated the grotto with actual fucking, though in truth, that may have been more a factor of those cautious times than anything. But we did delicious things. She opened her blouse one day and guided my hand to her breast. On another, she slipped off her panties and let me put my finger inside her pussy. And once, while a summer rain soaked the sacred ground outside, she unzipped my jeans, felt her way into my underpants, and rubbed me until, raw and sore, I came all over her fingers. She wiped them dry on her plaid skirt. We conceived (with the aid of her father’s books) and wrote out a liturgy, our own version of the Eleusinian rite:

we, children of kore, come naked from the womb
 and naked we return to the telesterion to be reborn
 we come with reverence to the saints and the virgin
 because all are keepers of demeter’s holy flame
 we love as she loved and loves still, never dying
 no act is a sin which happens beneath her gaze

We made a scroll of the testament, tied it with a ribbon from her hair, and hid it in the grotto's wall, behind a bronze statuette of the Virgin so tarnished it was nearly black. One day, nearly ten months after our first meeting, she left a note at the gate which read: "Meet me on Thursday at 4. Make up something so your parents don't expect you home for dinner. I want to give you something special. XX Mona"

She was in her school uniform, but had put her hair up and decorated her eyes like an Athenian courtesan. When she stooped to retrieve our scroll from the alcove, I saw that she wore no panties under the pleated skirt. As always, we went to our knees to read the verse, and when we had finished, she smiled wickedly.

"Happy Birthday," she said. "Open your mouth."

I did as she asked, and she set a small tablet beneath my tongue.

"Body of Christ," she said. "Body of Kore." She closed my jaw with her forefinger, and then took a second tablet for herself. "The life everlasting," she said, kissing my sealed lips. "Today is the Beholding. Today we become *E-pop-tai*."

I knew without asking that a tab of acid was slowly dissolving under my tongue.

"Let's make a pact," she said, her expression absent of its usual whimsy. "For real and for sure. If anyone or anything ever tries to drive us from this place ... our place ... we'll meet here at midnight on the first new moon after ... and die to this world ... together." I nodded, because it all seemed part of her elaborate stage management, and I was then too poor a student of the female heart to grasp that for Mona of the laughing eyes and mischievous grin, some things were deadly serious.

Later, after we were rushing on the acid, after the statues had begun to whisper and the rosary beads to rattle in sympathy with our sighs, after my legs had turned to rubber and my belly ached with a sweet sickness that felt like the vertigo of deep space, she took my hand and led me to face the tarnished bronze Virgin.

"Keep your eyes on her," she commanded, and dropped to her bare knees in front of me. "While I suck your cock."

"Wait," I said in knee-jerk reticence. "Maybe we --" But she knew I wanted her to do it, regardless of divine sanction. She pulled my zipper down slowly enough for me to hear and feel every notch, and with each notch, I got harder. She was an expert at sixteen. I don't know how or where she had learned. She put her right hand through

my shaky legs and pressed her forefinger against my anus, urging my cock into her mouth one dizzying inch at a time. I looked down and saw that her eyes had rolled back to the whites, and my soul jumped out of my body in dread like some grinning *Punch* in a medieval puppet show. She pulled her mouth roughly away, and it burned.

“Watch her!” she admonished. I raised my eyes to the black Virgin, and saw that the statue was where my soul -- and Mona’s -- had gone. Her eyes, like Mona’s, were the color of milk, and flowed with thick tears of semen. I thrust my hips forward, pinning Mona’s head against the stone, and came until the Virgin’s eyes were dry and burned like molten gold. When the echo of my howl had died out, I heard urgent shouts and footfalls from outside the grotto, and I left the sanctuary of Mona’s mouth with the sting of shame in my groin and my solar plexus.

We were busted, me with my pants around my knees and Mona with my cum on her face. Busted by her two companions, a security guard, and Sister Beatrice. I was no Catholic, not even a very good Presbyterian, but with the hallucinogen coursing through my veins and the nun’s fleshy face twisted up with indignation, I’d have sooner died then and there than face the judgement I knew lay ahead. It wasn’t *that* we had done it ... it was *where* we had done it.

Mona was to be expelled from the Bethlehem Academy for Girls: this I learned in a note she left at the gate after a week had passed. In that week, some new and callous skin sheathed my soul and dulled my humanity. I was spared an audience with Mona’s father (which, in hindsight, might have shed some light on her nature), but not the wrath of my own parents or the ridicule that made its way ineluctably from the lunchroom of the Academy to the locker room of my own High School. I can neither explain nor excuse how quickly a glacier of indifference iced over my feelings for Mona, because I *had* loved her -- though more as one loves a goddess than a girl -- and as a goddess, she was as much tarnished by our act as the statue in which our souls had briefly incubated. Something had hardened me in that moment of being *caught*.

During the month preceding her expulsion, she continued to leave notes for me at the gate, and I, cavalierly, continued to collect them as trophies. As they grew more desperate, more pathetic in tone, my own hungry ego grew fatter, as if feeding off her desperation. I think now that no penance is severe enough for one who willfully breaks a woman’s heart, particularly when that willfulness is born of spiritual cowardice.

I retrieved her last note on September 27, 1978. On October 1, her naked body was found in the grotto by the groundskeeper, wrists cleanly slashed, palms up on the cold floor, a megadose of LSD dispersed in the puddle of blood that surrounded her.

Mona's suicide was handled with the kind of Mafia-esque discretion only the Catholic Church could still muster in those wide open times. Not one mention of it appeared in the paper or on the local news (the New Hebron Herald had no crime reporter -- nor any need of one -- in 1978). But no gag order could keep the girls of Bethlehem Academy from gossiping, snooping, and finally, from giving rise to a cult of the Grotto and of Mona McCaffrey herself, inspired by her rumored discovery of death's fallacy. Her spirit was evoked from dormitory mirrors in candlelit rituals held long after Sister Beatrice had called "lights out", ecstatic conclaves in which the hysteria was fueled by communal masturbation.

It must not have taken long for some intrepid schoolgirl to find the scroll of makeshift parchment Mona and I had hidden behind the black Virgin, but it took twenty-four years for it to come back into my hands, and it did so only because I happened to ask for it. Teenaged girls, especially Catholic ones, are capable -- when they want to be -- of their own code of *Omerta*. But my years of ferreting out civic corruption have made me a diligent reporter. I have interviewed extensively the families and friends of the six girls who've died in the Grotto over the past year: three of them from Bethlehem Academy and three from the public high school. Behind each of these deaths, I'm convinced, is a cad like myself, who took the supreme gift of sexual love and then used it to devalue the giver. Nicki Donaldson had the scroll, and Nicki showed it to me because I told her that Mona McCaffrey had been my friend, and promised her that I would keep its existence a secret. It is well that I found Nicki when I did and gave vent to her despair, because she might otherwise have been number seven. Mona's cult is growing, and grows larger with each broken heart. I sat beside Nicki and opened the scroll gingerly on my trembling knees. Beneath our original inscription, Mona had scrawled the following, probably on the day she killed herself:

I loved him as a brother, I loved him as a son
I loved him as a lover, my only chosen one
But now he is a father, and judges me a whore
I will not live without him, so I will live no more

On every other Thursday during the months of September through March, a young woman comes to my house. For reasons of legal propriety, she is twenty-one, but she is dressed and mannered to resemble a Catholic schoolgirl of sixteen. She brings with her a cat o' nine tails, and has standing instructions to beat me on the naked buttocks until I cry for mercy. On rare occasions, the beatings lead to an ejaculation, but that is only when I am fully able to imagine that it is Mona who wields the lash. And when I do cry out, it is Mona's pardon I beg. I know that she hears me in her Eleusinian burrow beneath the fertile soil. She is "dead but not dead", and it is she who summons her scorned sisters to the Grotto, which -- like her own beauty and holiness -- has been fully restored in my shameful heart.

THE GROTTTO was recently chosen as the 2004 Eros/Thanatos selection by the acclaimed on-line journal, Absinthe Literary Review, and has also been featured in the U.K. print journal, IN THE BUFF.