

SAINTS PRESERVE US!

or

You'll Never Walk Alone

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My mother had this thing about saints. She knew what each one's specialty was and never hesitated to call upon them. They were as much a part of her life as the phone company or the police . . . or a detective agency. Whenever Mother lost her keys, which was about twice a day, she would stand in the middle of the room, clasp her hands together tightly and pray.

"St. Anthony—please, where are my keys?"

It never failed. The keys always turned up. Mother never did anything without the saints. When she baked bread, she never failed to invoke St. Honoratus, patron of bakers, and it always turned out perfectly. When she couldn't remember whether she had turned off the iron, she didn't cut short her shopping trip and return home to check, she merely closed her eyes, clasped her hands and turned the matter over to St. Barbara, who was in charge of fire prevention. Mother never trusted a baby sitter, no matter how well-recommended, but consigned my brother and me to the care of St. Nicholas, patron of children, before leaving the house. He was the real sitter as far as she was concerned.

But it was when I got to high school that Mother really put the saints to work on my case. I'd gone to St. Mary's in the Woods for the eight years of my primary education but our small town didn't have a Catholic high school and I had to go to Devington High. According to Mother, Devington High was only a notch below Sodom and Gomorrah and she wasn't about to let her innocent little lamb be corrupted—not if the saints could help! So Mother started a prayer campaign to keep

me pure and unspoiled. I always suspected that the reason St. Thomas' could afford that new stained glass window was because Mother burned so many candles on my behalf.

After a while, I came to resent this interference. Every time I wanted to do something interesting or exciting I had this odd sensation as if someone were watching over my shoulder.

I pleaded with Mother to leave me alone. "I've got to grow up some time," I argued. "How can I learn to cope if you always sic the saints on me? The other kids do alright without a bunch of haloed greybeards looking over their shoulder!"

"Oh, Kathleen, I knew it—that terrible place is teaching you to blaspheme!"

"Mother, please!" I ground out between gritted teeth, "Just let me alone! Call off your damned saints!"

Mother, in despair at such unheard of defiance, threw up her hands and called on St. Agnes to take over.

"I leave her to you," she said, rolling her eyes to heaven, "Seeing as how wayward girls are your province!"

St. Agnes, the fink, did a good job for mother. No matter how often I swore to myself that I'd defy Mother and stay out until 1 a.m. 'round about 11:30 or so I'd get these odd little nudgings in my mind and an uncomfortable feeling which wouldn't go away until I was safe in my bedroom—well before midnight.

It was pretty awful. Most of the kids at Devington had their parents on their backs about something or other but me—I had to cope with all the saints of heaven as well. It just wasn't fair.

Things came to a head the week of the Junior Prom. Along with about twenty other girls I wanted to go with Bub Burchowsky, the Football Captain, but I settled for Danny Durell. Danny and I had gone through St. Mary's together and Mother looked relieved when I told her who my date was. I decided this was a propitious moment so I added . . . "and we're going to stay out until dawn."

"Oh, that's much too late, Kathleen, the dance ends at 1—you can be home by half-past."

"But Mother," I wailed, "nobody, but nobody comes home right after the Prom. Everyone goes somewhere to eat, then they make a bonfire on Partridge Hill and watch the sunrise. . ."

"You'll be too tired," she said, "from dancing all night. I'll give you an extra half-hour, but you must be home by 2."

"Mother!" I protested, "Everybody will be at Partridge Hill!" but she was unrelenting.

"I'll show her," I vowed to myself, "I'll stay out until dawn no matter what. She can ground me for a month if she likes, but I'll show her!" But I reckoned without the saints.

I kept a low profile all week and said nothing more about when I'd be in from the Prom. The night of the Prom came and I was all sweetness and light as I got ready. I didn't want Mother to get upset and call in reinforcements.

"Oh, but you look darling," she cooed as I twirled around in my baby blue off-the-shoulder formal. "Danny will be smitten, I'm sure. Now have a good time, dear, and be sure to be home . . ."

"I think I'd better comb my hair again," I interrupted and skittered back into my room where I secluded myself until I heard the doorbell ring.

"Oh, hi Danny, let's go, or we'll be late . . . 'bye Mom," I called, hardly giving Danny time to shove the gardenia he'd brought me into my hand.

"What's the hurry? We've plenty of time."

"I don't want Mother to saddle me with a saint tonight. I want to have a good time without St. Agnes breathing down my neck," I explained. Being an alumnus of St. Mary's Danny understood about St. Agnes. His mother occasionally set St. George after him, but Danny seemed to have come to an understanding with that slayer of dragons which I hadn't been able to achieve with St. Agnes. Why is it that men always stick together whereas we females just love to trip each other up?

The Prom was absolutely dreamy! I got cut in on four times—once by Bub Burchowski himself, which made up for Iggy Untermaier who was a genius at algebra but an absolute shlemiel on the dance floor. It seemed that the evening had hardly begun when the band was suddenly playing "Good Night Ladies."

Danny was helping me into the car when Bub and a bunch of graduating Seniors passed by.

"Hey, Danny-boy, you two comin' up to Partridge Hill tonight?" he called. "I've got some refreshments stashed away. . ."

Danny looked at me and I nodded, trying to look sophisticated.

"Let's Danny, it would be fun!"

"What about your mother?"

I made a face. "Forget about my mother—for once I'm going to do what I want," I replied.

"O.K. whatever you say . . . but let's stop at the Silly Steer for a burger first. I'm hungry."

"O.K."

But the time we got to the Silly Steer it was beginning to drizzle and my heart sank a little. If this kept up there wouldn't be much of a sunrise to see, but I didn't say anything. The Silly Steer was crowded and we had to park on the shoulder. The place was full of kids from the Prom, all laughing and joking and jostling one another. The one counterman on duty had a glazed look about him as he tried to take orders, fry burgers and make change all at once.

Danny and I had just squeezed into a corner booth along with about eight other people when there was a roll of thunder and lightning ripped the sky. The trees outside the Silly Steer bent before the wind and the grinning sign swayed back and forth on its post.

"Oh, no!" we all groaned as the rain came down in sheets.

"Great! There goes sunrise on Partridge Hill!"

"Never mind—we can have a picnic here," called Bub. "Who's game to help me get the beer out of my car?" Volunteers weren't lacking and before you could say "Sodom and Gomorrah" they were back, soaking wet, but triumphantly swinging a case of beer.

"Yeah for Bub!" "Who needs Partridge Hill!" Someone started the Juke Box and the strains of "Tennessee Waltz" came pouring out. Bub starting throwing the beer cans midst shrieks of laughter from the crowd.

"Here, have a beer," Bub shoved a can into my hand.

"Are we supposed to . . . here?" I asked.

Bub shrugged. "Who's to stop us?" he indicated the counterman who was still trying to cope with the unexpected deluge of orders.

"Well . . . alright . . ." I said, taking a careful sip. I tried not to make a face at the bitter taste. I didn't want anyone to know this was my first beer.

"Hey, stow the beer, I've got something better!" It was Joe Zambini. He pulled a flask from his pocket and began passing it around. "Want a swig, Kath?" he asked.

"N . . . no thanks, I haven't finished my beer," I replied hastily burying my nose in my beer can.

"Hey, you kids can't drink in here!" The counterman had finally noticed what was going on.

"The hell we can't!" Joe replied. "You goin' to stop us?"

"Yeah," seconded Bub, "Just you try!"

The counterman didn't say anything, but went back into the kitchen. From where I sat I could see he was making a telephone call. Suddenly I got that familiar nudging again. I looked at my watch. Ten after two. Mother must have started praying. Blast St. Agnes anyway, couldn't she take one night off?

"What's the matter, Kath, you look funny . . . is it the beer?" Danny asked, a look of concern on his face.

"No—it's not the beer—it's St. Agnes . . . she's after me again," I whispered. I heaved a reluctant sigh. I knew when I was beaten. "I guess I'd better get home. Do you mind?"

Danny seemed relieved. "Sure, the rain seems to have let up a bit. Let's make a run for the car."

We got thoroughly soaked. The minute we left the Silly Steer the sky opened up like Niagara Falls but I didn't mind. St. Agnes must have been working overtime, for I had this irresistibile compulsion to get home.

Dan opened the door for me, then sloshed around to the other side and got in. He started the car. It made a lot of noise, but it wouldn't move.

"Oh, great, we're stuck in the mud!"

"What'll we do . . . shall I call home?" I didn't exactly relish the thought of what Mother would say.

"Let's try to get out first. Can you drive?"

"A little . . . I don't have my license yet."

"It's simple," Danny assured me. "Look—this is the gas pedal. You shift gears like this. O.K.? Now I'm going to try and push it out of the mud. When I yell, you give it some gas and I'll shove. For heaven's sake, don't shift into reverse, or you'll run me over. Got it?"

I nodded and slid behind the wheel as Danny got out. I glanced in the rearview mirror. To my horror I saw a revolving light coming down the road. As I'd suspected, the counterman had called the cops.

"Hurry, Danny, I think there's a police car coming—let's get out of here!"

"O.K.," Dan called, "Let'er go!"

I pushed down on the pedal. There was a tremendous roar from the car the wheels spun round, splattering mud, but we didn't move. I could see the revolving red light coming closer.

"It's no use," I wailed, "Oh, Danny, what shall we do!"

Danny shook his wet hair out of his face and leaned his shoulder against the car. "Try praying," he called, "and don't forget to shift..."

I could make out the form of the police car in the mirror now. Pray? Sure, but who was in charge of a situation like this? Not prissy St. Agnes . . . I was desperate . . . desperate . . . St. Jude! St. Jude, the saint of desperate situations!

"Oh, St. Jude, hope of the hopeless . . . Help!" I shifted gears and bore down on the gas pedal. The car lurched forward so fast I was halfway down the block before I could jam on the brakes and pick up Danny who was chasing after me. I slid over and he got behind the wheel. We skidded away just as the police car turned into the Silly Steer.

We were so wet and muddy when we got home that Mother was too busy drying us off to ask questions at first. Later she . . . but you'll have to excuse me. My daughter Sally is going out on her first date tonight, and I've just enough time to run down to St. Margaret's and light a candle. . . .

