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# The Strange Redemption of Sister Mary Ann

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Human understanding relies on models, and it's not always clear which one is closest to truth.

*She lay in Bill's arms, his soft snoring merging with the chirping of crickets and croaking of frogs. They'd slipped out of the cabin to make love under the full moon. Now he was asleep and she was warm. Even after twenty years, she floated on the love she'd felt for him the first moment she saw him.*

*As she cuddled closer to his chest, the arm he'd thrown over her brushed a breast and her nipple grew hard again. She felt a sneaky smile growing, along with a lot of other things, and considered how she might wake him up. Up was such a nice word when the kids were asleep.*

*"Mommy, play with me now," came with that blend of plea and demand babies got so good at. But the kids were almost seven and she was more often Mom than Mommy.*

*And the voices were all wrong.*

*She glanced around the moonlit yard. Below her a frog plopped into the lake. Around her the first of summer's fireflies flit. No. Those weren't bugs.*

*At the heart of each little light, a tiny baby wiggled. "Come on, Mommy. Play with us a while. Please," a shrill voice demanded.*

*"Mommy can't play with you," Mary Ann said, the warmth of Bill's lovemaking lost to a chill. "You were never born, little ones."*

Sister Mary Ann came awake with a start as the cancer eating her gut shot a pain through her that almost knocked her off the kneeler. The other nuns were so solicitous of her, come late to the convent after a full life in the world and now so sick. They insisted she use the *prie dieu* to save her knees.

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With a shrug, Mary Ann, slipped off the kneeler and onto the cool tiles. That should keep her awake, keep the dreams at bay. Mary Ann had volunteered for the two a.m. shift of this forty-hour devotion as her penance, though she hardly counted staying awake any sacrifice. She slept little these days.

And here, in the early morning, the crickets humming in the dark outside the thick adobe chapel walls reminding her of other times. The scent of the unworked wood that made up the ancient-style roof above her head brought back memories.

These were the smells of the house by the lake that she and Bill took the kids to for a week each summer. And late at night, when the exhausted children were abed at last, she and Bill would make love on the couch, the windows open to the chirp of crickets, the aroma of pine cones and evergreens mixing well with the scent of their lovemaking.

Sister Mary Ann recaptured her wandering thoughts and herded them back to familiar prayer, asking a loving God to look after the four children she had given life to, loved and cared for and who now lived busy lives of their own with wives and husbands, children and maybe even a grandchild. Those were easy.

It was more difficult to ask that same loving God to forgive her the sins she had let science commit on her body. Here, her scientific training still battled with her faith. This close to death she tried to simply submit to Holy Mother Church's decree. Still her mind questioned. With a sigh she once again forced down her doubts and said her penitent's prayers.

The last prayer was the most difficult of all. How did she pray for children she'd never known, the ones that had vanished so quickly across death's door, if indeed they had ever lived? *Oops, don't argue. Submit. That cancer won't wait forever.* She had no names for those little ones. She didn't even know how many they were, a hand full, dozens? She had never bandaged a knee for them, shouted at their ball games, cried at their weddings. They were the hard ones to pray for, so she tried to pray for them the most.

Sister Mary Ann did not bother praying for herself. The cancer held her tight in its embrace . . . it would not let her go. The cancer's pain didn't bother Mary Ann all that much. She had lived long enough; she'd sinned as much as seemed convenient. Now her body offered her a painful penance. Penance and sacrifice had never been a part of her life, not around Bill and the kids. Now it demanded center place and she approached it more from curiosity than anything else. Life had taught her many lessons; what was she to learn from this?

Most lessons she learned the hard way. Like putting off and putting off. Finally happy with life

