

Adoration

By Dan Willbach

Jason first saw her listening to folk music in Washington Square Park. A scintillating halo flickered around her long black hair and he moved out of the sun to see her better; she was sweet looking, wholesome, without makeup. She wore old sneakers, khaki pants and a tucked-in flannel shirt, all simplicity and modesty – prevalent in this crowd, which favored the old, acoustic music as opposed to the electrified rock and roll Dylan and other turncoats had recently begun to play. Not that Jason was such a purist. He loved all kinds of music. In fact, he was an excellent classical pianist. But we're all poseurs here, he thought. He was a perfect example, in black jeans, t-shirt and shitkicker boots, curly black hair, parted in the middle, down to his shoulders.

Greenwich Village, 1966: Joan Baez and John Sebastian, among others, had already played and sung here before they had become famous. Scruffy-looking singers laid claim to the hobo's life à la Woody Guthrie. Guitarists, bass players, banjo pickers and fiddlers played the people's music in faux cowboy outfits and idealized coal miner's garb. On Sunday afternoons there was an influx of high school and college kids, many from the suburbs, sensing they had better get down to the fountain before that next singer was discovered.

As he watched, she loosened the twine around a bundle by her feet and pulled out a handful of thin newspapers. She began to talk to those around her and give away or sell a few copies. Ah, that's it! She was a member of one of the Red sects, like the Socialist Workers Party or Progressive Labor. This cult of simplicity could be one of their guises. Any crowd drew them like flies. Not his politics, although if pushed he would declare himself a socialist. In the last month he had begun a Ph.D. program in sociology at NYU. He wanted to find out if an egalitarian society was possible.

The girl sat down on the low, circular marble wall around the fountain. He watched as she lifted her head to the sun, with a half-smile and a dreamy expression, enjoying the warm,

Writing Raw

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late September day, a lease on summer. Look at how peaceful she is, Jason thought, able to live in the moment even if she is a Socialist Worker. He hoisted his bag over his shoulder and began to make his way towards her, skirting the clumps of listeners around musicians, the crowd around a juggler. He was a few feet away when she glanced up.

“What are you selling or giving away?” he asked.

“‘The Catholic Worker’. It’s a penny. Ever heard of it?”

OK. He’d been wrong, twice. “That’s the one with the cool woodcuts,” he said, sliding his bag off and sitting down next to her on the warm marble. “I did a paper on the Catholic Worker in high school. Is it Peter Maurin who does the woodcuts?”

“You know it,” she said in surprise. “It’s not Peter Maurin. He was one of the founders, along with Dorothy Day. It’s Fritz Eichenberg.”

“Any success?” he asked, indicating the papers.

“We don’t usually sell like this,” she explained. “I was on my way over to the Eighth Street Bookshop with these and got waylaid by the music.”

“We’re in the same boat. I’m supposed to be in that library over there,” Jason said, pointing to a brick building on the park. He congratulated himself on not being there, since he was now sitting next to the prettiest girl in the world. He took out his pack of Kools, pulled out a cigarette, offered one to her. She put up her hands and shook her head.

“You go to NYU?” she asked.

“Yeah. Jason,” he said, nodding to her.

“Maria. So how come you wrote a paper on the Catholic Worker movement in high school?”

Jason lit his cigarette, took a drag and tried to remember. He wasn’t sure how he had chosen the topic.

“I don’t know. My parents were on the Left. I was brought up in Catholic neighborhoods.”

“Like me,” Maria said. “I mean, I’m Italian Catholic – Antonelli.”

“Like most of my friends before we moved to Great Neck. They weren’t like you, though. Catholic Workers are anarchists. But putting together ‘worker’ and ‘Catholic’ feels weird. How does religion come into it?”

“My faith involves everything I do. We all live, eat and work together at Maryhouse. We practice voluntary poverty and run a soup kitchen.”

“I know that from writing the paper, but what’s it got to do with Catholicism?”

“It’s a different take on Catholic practice.” She laughed, turning toward Jason, bringing her knees up in front of her and hugging them. Her sneakers, resting on the marble, almost touched his thigh. “We try to create a family. We own almost nothing. This society,” she swept her hand in front of her, “it’s so materialistic, individualistic. People have a hard time understanding us. Volunteer for a meal. Check us out.”

“Where exactly is it?” Jason asked. He pulled a notebook out of his bag and searched for the pen in his pocket.

Maria waited, then dictated: “Fifty-five East Third Street, at Second Avenue.” She pointed to the southeast corner of the park. “If you head over on Third, it becomes Great Jones Street between Broadway and the Bowery. Just keep going, it becomes Third again. You live around here?”

“Yeah, NYU high-rise, over there.” Jason pointed toward the south side of the park.

“It’s a ten minute walk east,” Maria said. “We serve dinner at six.”

“I’m not Catholic, I’m Jewish. Not really religious.” He shrugged. “Atheist.”

“You don’t have to be Catholic,” Maria said. “I’ve got to deliver these papers,” she added and bent down to collect them, the full curve of her buttocks anchoring the triangle of her back and shoulders. Snapping up the papers in her long arms, she rose and swung around to face him, big-boned, lithe and agile.

“Anyway,” she said, “it’s not a religious service.” She waved goodbye, smiling. “It was fun talking.”

She turned around and walked away. Jason continued to watch her until she

disappeared in the crowd.

He walked down the Bowery looking for Great Jones or East Third. On this gloomy fall day, in the late afternoon light, it appeared rundown and vaguely threatening. He had lived in Manhattan for four years and didn't remember ever being here. Men and a few women of indeterminate age, wearing layers of filthy old clothes, slumped on the sidewalk or stood in groups, some swaying, holding paper bags with bottles in them, some shaking, alcoholism in extremis. The Bowery stereotype seemed to be true. Daily News headlines screamed about heroin addicts and Puerto Rican gangs, but this looked old, like something out of the nineteenth century.

He found the brownstone on East Third with a line of people outside. Above the entrance hung a wooden sign, a carved floral pattern around "Maryhouse." A man with a red complexion and a shock of white hair, sitting at a desk in the entryway, welcomed the new volunteer. He got a quick tour of the rooms set up for dining and was put to work in the biggest one, which had a cross with a suffering Jesus high up on one wall, and on the other a large picture of a radiant Mary looking at baby Jesus in her lap.

A bell rang and the people outside trooped in, some sitting and others standing. A group came in from the kitchen, Maria among them. She caught his eye and gave him a thumbs up; his out-of-place feeling subsided a bit. When everyone was seated, one of the men said grace. "We thank You, Lord, for this abundance of food on our table. It nourishes both flesh and spirit. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen." An echoing "amen" rose up around him, people crossing themselves. They sat down to eat while the overflow lined up in the hallway to the kitchen.

Maria motioned for Jason to follow her. As they walked into the kitchen, she explained, "I'm in charge of serving and clean-up. I'll fit you in."

He ladled out stew next to Maria, who kept giving him little smiles of encouragement. He was continually aware of her, amid the heat and humidity and the smell of beef and carrots

mixing with the odor of the people he served. An elderly Black man with a white beard was effusive with his thanks; after Jason gave him the stew, the man put his bowl down and insisted on shaking his hand.

After the meal and the cleanup, she showed him around the house: the common rooms, the back garden. He followed her up four flights of stairs to her communal bedroom.

“You can come in for a second,” Maria said. “This is one of the women’s bedrooms but there’s no one here right now.”

Jason stepped inside. Maria’s bed was among four in a row with little space for personal possessions. A poster of Baez and Dylan together at the Newport Folk Festival was next to a “US Out of Vietnam” placard over the bed. A pair of sneakers rested on a braided rug in front of a night table, with a lamp and a ceramic statue of Mary on it. “That was a gift from my mother,” Maria said, pointing to the statue. “Her family brought it from Italy. She gave it to me when I moved in here.”

“A year ago?”

“Yeah.” Maria sat down on the bed and invited Jason to sit next to her. He sat down and the rest of the world disappeared for a second as he caught a glimpse of long black eye lashes, a little dark mole on the outer edge of her upper lip. He was aware of her shampoo smell and sweet body heat.

“I spent a year at Iona College in New Rochelle and began to volunteer here,” she said. “By the spring I knew I was going to do this full time.” She got up to search through a stack of books piled underneath the little table, then returned, shaking her head. “It’s not there. I thought I had Dorothy Day’s autobiography. Anyway,” she went on, pushing herself around so she could face Jason. “It was difficult with my mother. My father died when I was little. My older brother was in law school and I was dropping out.” Palms out, eyebrows raised, she shrugged. “What could she do with me? Anyway, after all our struggles, she gave me her family’s Mary. It meant she understood.”

“Why?”

Maria sat up straighter, lifted her chin up. “This is Mary’s house – ‘Maryhouse.’ I like to think she rules us like a Queen.”

“I can understand being guided by a wonderful woman, but give yourself some credit. Why do you have to invent someone to take credit for what you do?”

She looked at him, frowning and smiling, shaking her head. “You’re a tough cookie. Here, I’ll show you.” She motioned to him. “Not that you have to do this or you have to believe.” She pointed to herself, saying, “This is how it works for me,” and got up to kneel down on the rug facing the figurine. Pressing her palms together in front of her, she addressed Mary: “Mother of God, perpetual caretaker of those ground down by a cruel system. Teach me how to love. I ask for your aid and comfort in this struggle.” She crossed herself, turned and looked up at Jason.

“That’s beautiful, Maria,” Jason managed to say, shaking his head, startled by a performance that had won him over: so simple, eloquent and heartfelt. “Is it from some catechism?”

She got up and sat down again on the bed. “They’re my words.” She smiled. “In high school I used to pray to her before swim meets. Now I love her in a different way.” She leaned toward Jason. “Catholicism’s not just reading the catechism, you know.” She raised her eyebrows, shaking her head. “Don’t get me wrong, it was reading that helped get me here.”

“What do you mean?”

“When I began college I had pretty much lost my faith. I was like you, except depressed about it. Then I read Simone Weil in this philosophy course. Have you ever heard of her?”

“No.”

“She was a French Jew, a lefty in the Thirties, like Dorothy Day, an anarchist. She came this close” – Maria held up her palms an inch away from each other – “to Catholicism at the end of her life. She convinced me that God is active in His creation and I need to work full-time on His side.”

It was 10:00 AM and Jason had missed his social change class again. He couldn't stand Professor Weintraub. Some of his classes, like methodology, he found boring, but this guy was the biggest disappointment. He had written a brilliant account of the origins of the early civil rights sit-ins in the south, but he turned out to be a terrible teacher. He was at least sixty-five if he was a day, and it seemed his day had passed.

Jason sat down at the piano and began the first movement of a Schubert sonata that he had played since he was fourteen. He closed his eyes and remembered the old mansion in Vienna where he had performed the piece when he was in high school, on a European tour with the Juilliard prep players. At the beginning his right hand floated while his left gently pounced, but when both struck the majestic C Major chord, he entered the huge entrance hall, ablaze with light.

After playing he lit a cigarette and nursed his second cup of coffee. He'd worked at Maryhouse almost every evening for the last month, but many mornings had been spent on musical trips. He'd missed a lot of sociology to play the piano. Last year he had debated his future: between sociology – to repair the world – and music – simply because he loved it. He had decided the needs of a damaged world wouldn't allow him to enjoy a music conservatory, but it wasn't working.

He felt more at home at the Catholic Worker. He had made a friend there, Sean, a senior at City College, an aspiring actor. After dinner one night, Jason had gotten drunk with him at Stanley's, on the corner of 12th and Avenue B. In the course of the evening Sean had imitated everyone at Maryhouse.

"I want all the washers over here and those putting-away there and we will get this done in forty-five minutes." His version of Efficient Maria. But all echoed the praise that she gave them more free time in the evenings.

He could become a Catholic. He was surprised that he would entertain such a notion, but Maria had said, "Judge us by our actions." Indeed, the people of Maryhouse led admirable

lives that they shared with the poor. They put their lack of money where their mouth was. These people were tough as well as loving. You couldn't be as poor and happy as they were without being tough.

By the third week at Maryhouse, Jason knew he was going to drop out of school. So what if he disappointed his father. His father had disappointed him. Close to the Communist Party in the Thirties, he had inherited a printing business after the war and was now a wealthy businessman. He had become a Republican and recently voted for Goldwater. Jason felt betrayed by his father's repudiation of the egalitarianism he had been taught as a child, and he vowed he would never flip-flop like that.

He stubbed out his cigarette and took another sip of coffee.

The bigger problem was the draft. That bridge he would have to cross if he left NYU looked different after working at Maryhouse. Maybe he was a pacifist. He could join the Catholic Worker, apply for conscientious objector status and do alternative service. He would have to convince his draft board that he opposed all wars, based on religious belief.

It would be a difficult sell. He was a Jew, an atheist, who talked about Catholicism and had no obvious history as a pacifist. Who was he?

A young man going on his first demonstration with the Catholic Worker. He'd begun to participate in the planning. Along with other pacifist organizations, in two weeks they would try to shut down the Selective Service Induction Center in lower Manhattan.

Last night the organizer, Charlie Foley, the man who had welcomed him as a volunteer, had brought up the question that was on everyone's mind: who was going to block the entrances and get arrested? This meant jail time, since those arrested would refuse bail. Maria had volunteered immediately.

After the meeting he and Maria stopped at the Ukrainian bakery down the street and he bought some sweet pirogi, which they ate as they walked over to the park along the East River.

"I envied how quickly you volunteered tonight," Jason said. "I'm so torn." Maria handed him the pirogi and they stopped while he bent over so he could eat it. "I hate this war," he

continued between bites. “But I’m afraid of going to jail. I feel like a coward.”

“Don’t put that kind of pressure on yourself, Jason. You’ve only been involved with us – what has it been? Six weeks? No one expects you to get arrested.”

He finished eating and they talked under the streetlight, waiting to cross Avenue C.

“I want to do the right thing,” he said.

“‘The right thing’ isn’t the same for everyone. You’re in school, a load of demanding work.”

“I’m probably going to drop out.”

“Why?”

“I’m barely going to school.”

“Really? I didn’t know that,” she said.

The light changed and they crossed. Walking down the block, he tried to explain.

“School was supposed to be the way to a better world, but sociologists aren’t even interested in how to get there.” He indicated Maria with his hand. “You create a little model, here and now. It’s impressive. I seem to have chosen the Catholic Worker.”

“So I won’t be the only drop-out,” Maria said, smiling at him. “You know how we began speaking about ‘the right thing?’ I certainly didn’t do it tonight.”

“What do you mean?”

Jason had been washing dishes instead of serving up front with Maria.

“I accidentally dripped some hot pea soup on this guy’s arm. I started apologizing and he muttered something. I caught the word ‘bitch’ and I said ‘fuck you,’ back to him.” She stopped and covered her mouth with her hand, looked at Jason and winced. “I couldn’t believe it. It was embarrassing.”

“It sounds like a normal, spur of the moment reaction,” Jason said.

“You don’t understand. I’m trying to be abnormal,” she said. “If I want to follow Jesus and turn the other cheek, I’ve got to become more thoughtful about my own behavior.”

“I guess I understand. But there’s a difference between cursing at someone and going to

war.”

“Yeah, I’m trying not to get too down on myself. But I don’t think the difference is that great. King’s right. We need to love everyone” – she spread her hands out and began delineating groups in front of her – “not just the nice people, the people we know, but our enemies halfway around the world.” She looked at him. “I could at least show my love for this poor man face-to-face.”

Maria was so unusual: she took herself seriously. Maybe Catholic Workers had found the right way to live. Maybe it did start with the person next to you. He reached out and took her hand.

They crossed the footbridge over the East River Drive, found their favorite bench along the water and sat down. Brooklyn winked at them in the distance. Further downtown the lights on the Manhattan and Brooklyn Bridges formed two graceful necklaces over the water. Right in front of them the river looked black in the dim light. Jason remembered the first time they had gone here at night and he had questioned how safe the park was.

“I don’t think I would come here at night without you,” Maria had said. Jason thought about how he wouldn’t be able to protect Maria at the demo and certainly not in jail.

“I know I’m being selfish,” he said, “but I don’t want you to go to jail. I imagine being with you at the demo. It’s going to be difficult to stand by and see you arrested. And then I’m going to miss you.”

Maria took Jason’s hand, pulled it into her lap and squeezed it. “That’s so sweet of you to say.”

“I worry about you going to prison,” Jason continued. “What are you thinking about it?”

“I keep thinking it’s lucky I’m a woman. Maybe I’m fooling myself but I think there’s less violence among them. I’m also thinking it won’t be more than a month and that I’ll be with Sally and Pru, but who knows?”

“The lawyers say a month. It’s going to be really hard. I want to be a help to you.”

Jason and Maria leaned towards each other, shoulder to shoulder and thigh to thigh,

and they kissed.

Maria unhooked her hand and twisted around to face him. "I can't sleep with you, Jason," she said. "Before things go too far." She pointed her hands towards herself. "It's something I decided when I entered Maryhouse."

"It's not a Catholic Worker thing?"

"No, no." She frowned and shook her head. "Sean certainly isn't celibate. Anyway, after Pope John and Vatican II, most of us expect celibacy to end. For some of the nuns it's already over."

"So, why?" he asked.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I don't want you to get too conceited but I'm attracted to you." Her hands grew more animated and she shook her head. "Sex with you would become too important. I need to focus on Maryhouse."

Jason was silent for a while.

"You sound like me, in a way," he said. "I can fall head over heels in love." He stared at Maria. "It's happening with you."

Maria nodded. "That's why I'm talking about it."

Despite her categorical "I can't sleep with you," Jason walked home that night in a state of bliss. Maria was beautiful, original and compelling. She was attracted to him. He had all but proclaimed his love. He relived the kiss. Love possessed him.

Worship like this was one of his strongest and oldest impulses. He could trace a line of similar feelings all the way back to the memory of a strange week in first grade. He had been at an assembly, a talent show for students in the lower grades. A first grade girl in pigtails, from another class, wearing red western boots and a buckskin skirt and vest, sang and danced to an addictive song, Buttons and Bows: "East is east and west is west. . ." He became obsessed with her for the next week, drawing pictures of her at home, speaking to everyone he could about her. He was unusually excited and happy and told his mother he was in love.

Jason carried his own sign: "Let your Life be a Counterfriction to Stop the Machine," a Thoreau quote he thought was apt.

"You have a choice. Don't go! Don't go! US out of Vietnam!" Jason yelled in unison with thousands of others hemmed in around him and the sounds echoed and reechoed in the canyons of lower Manhattan, across from the Selective Service Induction Center. A sea of cops in dark blue uniforms with brass buttons crowded in front of the main entrance. They wore black gloves; guns and billy clubs hung from their belts.

The two groups had been confronting each other for an hour already and Jason could feel the tension rising. Maria was scheduled to be among the first wave of blockaders.

A new chant began: "Swords into Ploughshares, Spears into Pruning Hooks." A contribution from his people, Jason thought, and took it up, a way to let out some of his nervousness. After many minutes of yelling rhythmically and repetitively at the top of his lungs, he had the strange sensation that he was making meaningless sounds.

People pushed forward around him, eager to see what was happening in the street. He didn't have a clear view but he caught a glimpse through the crowd: a few demonstrators making their way across the street and others sitting and lying down in front of the police. He pushed his way up toward the front and saw two policemen behind Maria, each holding onto one of her wrists with one hand and the other hand up in her armpit, half-carrying, half-dragging her backwards to a waiting paddy wagon. Television newsmen walked alongside filming.

It was now close to midnight. For the last six hours Jason had been sitting next to Sean on a hard bench in night court, on Center Street, up front with the other Catholic Workers. They were waiting for the arraignment of the hundred or so demonstrators who had been arrested. There was no knowing when this would happen. All the lawyers had been called and there

wasn't much to do. He'd only left once, to have a cigarette and grab a hotdog from a street vendor. He was tired and hungry and very nervous. They had already sat through an endless, depressing night-court scene: appearances by defendants in domestic abuse cases, non-payment of child support, petty theft, prostitution, disorderly conduct. The judge, with slicked-back hair and an olive complexion, overweight, squeezed into a judicial gown, had been pretty testy with the protestors watching in the courtroom. He frequently banged the gavel for order and had already arrested one of them for contempt of court for sitting on someone else's lap.

Finally, the first group of about twenty, including Maria, were led in by a court officer. The room came alive: press photographers crowded up to take pictures, lawyers ran back in and the judge began to confer with them.

Jason, at his wit's end, wrung out like a wet rag, had only one thought, one determination: to stand with Maria. He got up amid the flurry of activity and, excusing himself, shuffled past Sean and the rest of the people sitting in his row. Free of the bench, he felt light-headed and grabbed the end of it for support. He couldn't believe what he was about to do: he was convinced he would be arrested for contempt of court. He needed to be with Maria, to share in her sacrifice. Somehow, he propelled himself up to the front of the courtroom, climbed the few steps to the platform and stood with the defendants.

Astonishing! He'd done it without being noticed, stopped or arrested. He turned to Maria, standing behind him, who smiled at him with a quizzical look and reached out to touch him. They held hands for a second and he mouthed the words, "I love you."

He turned around to face the courtroom and the punishment he was about to receive.

The End

Dan Willbach bio: Dan Willbach has worked as a teacher and psychotherapist in the Boston area and has been studying and writing fiction for the last twenty years. This story comes from a linked collection. Two others have been published: "Rebecca's Gift" in *The New Orphic Review* and "Alaskan Two-Step" in *The Lightkeeper*.