

The Patron Saint of Broken Glass.

Cathryn Molloy

Eleanor's rituals were simple and elegant. Each morning after returning from the 5 am liturgy, she went to her room. The sun came in pale and languid through the slits in the blinds. The bed took up most of the space on the hardwood floor and Our Lady of Fatima hung on the wall beside the plastic crucifix that she'd had since she was an infant. Other than these small adornments, the room was as bare and solemn as a monk's cell.

After stretching out on the bed to pray and meditate, she listened for the clanking of her sisters' oatmeal bowls and the clunking of compulsive low heeled feet on the hardwoods to cease for two minutes and not a second sooner; then, Eleanor got down on her hands and knees on the floor, stretched her bony arms to their modest length and pulled from beneath the bed a wooden trunk with a gossamer cover of rotting leather. Eleanor extracted a key from beneath the undergarments in her top drawer and opened the lid to reveal a neatly folded lacy wedding gown that had belonged to her mother. Methodically removing every article of her church suit, she laid them each in its place on top of the bedspread and tucked her modest undergarments under the pillow.

As she lifted the gown over her head in order to avoid disturbing the half ripped - zipper, she savored the feel of the lace on her chest. If the sensation of the scratchy inside caused pain, she offered it up to her Jesus.

She put on the tiny wedding heels which are kept in the inner pocket of the trunk and stood on top of the even spread. The oval mirror, since it is always free of dust, revealed her figure from the neck down. She tilted her head this way and that so that she could thoroughly enjoy the sight of her bride tears and then she pressed her eyes closed

until Jesus her bridegroom appeared beside her. The gaping wound in his chest flowed down his naked body and formed a puddle in his crotch. He was purifying himself for her, just as she had purified herself for him. He took a bit of flesh from his hand and fed it to her like wedding cake. Wiping a finger across his body, he put a bloody finger in her mouth so that she could taste his blood wine. Eleanor knew that one day Jesus will come to her as more than an apparition; he would appear to her in a human form and he would be hungry for her virgin milk. She would be the first woman since the Blessed Mother to fulfill this holy intention and she would be a well-remembered saint one day.

Eleanor rose promptly at 3:45 each morning so that she could attend 5am liturgy at the seminary. She never attended the 8am with her sisters because she used the time that they are away to perform her rituals and she really preferred the seminary anyway. It was a much more serious liturgy; she considered the weekday mass at the local church to be distastefully rushed. Besides, she enjoyed nothing more than sneaking a probing glance at a new seminarian in order to see if he harbored any impure thoughts; such things were always evident in the way one held her hand too long during the kiss of peace. From there, the symptoms progressed: the furrowed eyebrows, front teeth massacring the bottom lip and all other manners of discomfort. She was kind enough to approach such a one after communion and remind him of his duties to Christ, she knelt down in front of this one or that using her church veil to wipe at her tears as she explained the finer points of doctrine to the newer seminarian.

As a consecrate virgin, she considered herself somewhat of a Christina Mirabilis, a well-remembered medieval virgin of Christ and so often envisioned Jesus himself suckling at her breast, which not surprisingly for its 30 years of sacrifice had managed to

churn out a sort of holy manna juice or virginal milk at the touch of his lips. Eleanor aspires to live up to Mirablis's ascetic ideals, she felt inadequate and vain for being unable to crawl into bread ovens or swim in icy lakes in winter yet; she couldn't even bear to cut her hair though she knew it was vain to want it so long. Her rituals were her purist moments and though Christina had fed herself on her own virginal milk, Eleanor would take the thing to the next level and feed *Christ* who had fed the masses again and again. And although the virgin milk did manifest itself physically, Jesus had not yet come in the form of a physical body. Eleanor suspected it was only a matter of time until he would come and drink what was his.

No, her sisters Mary and Sabena would not understand. They would try to take the rituals away from her. Mary, for one who had recently given up on her commitment to her consecrated virginity by accepting a marriage proposal from her ugly missionary best male 'friend', would be absolutely wretched with jealousy at her ability to fulfill such a pure and worthy calling. They wouldn't understand how fortifying the rituals were for her; they fed her body and soul. They were always whining about her fasting because they didn't understand that Jesus fed her nearly every morning from the flesh of his hand.

As a child, Eleanor took her baby doll's clothes off and wrapped him in swaddling clothes so that she could rock him until the wise men and shepherds came to offer gifts. Sabena, being the oldest, had a sense of propriety that did not include ritual re-

enactments. Upon discovering this particular ritual, she made Eleanor put the proper clothing back on the doll in order to show that she had appreciated what mother and father had spent hard-earned money on; the baby doll dress shouldn't lie in the corner where the cat could piss on it or shred it up into oblivion.

Mary, second in line, stood in the doorway to Eleanor's bedroom with skinny arms crossed over her lumpy prepubescent chest and nodded in solemn approval as Sabena yanked off the 'swaddling clothes' (a dish towel smeared with mud) and put the white dress back on the baby doll. Mary and Sabena left with satisfied smiles to each other and Eleanor listened as they continued to criticize her out front to the neighborhood kids who always were around to play with *them* and never her. Eleanor wept into the muddy towel.

On the day after her mother's funeral, while Mary and Sabena were out at church, she had her revenge. She found the dress before they knew it had been saved. After her mother passed, Sabena supervised what would go into the trash so that she could take over the bedroom. She had designated the trunk as 'garbage' because the dress was slightly yellowed and all three girls had already decided to remain unmarried in order to have their virginity consecrated, so it would not be used anyway. Eleanor would not give up the dress just because Mary changed her mind! It would have been trash if she and Christ hadn't saved it! She had lost her mother at only 17. It was fitting that God should offer her a way to deal with her 17 year old inner turmoil. It was around that time that she

had begun to be curious about the shape of a penis-was it simply a cylinder? Was it fleshy or hard? She had also begun to notice a throbbing between her legs and a stiffening of her tiny nipples every time she passed a naked statue of her Lord. She could not think of a way to alleviate the intensity of the sensations and knew from her mother that she must overcome any temptations to touch herself.

She found the wedding dress trunk in her mother's closet, brought it to her room and began to think about the lives of the visionary saints. She closed her eyes and had a vision of her own; Jesus was kneeling down in his gleaming white heaven clothes asking her to be his bride. She made her vows that day and Sabena and Mary were not around to stop her.

It was around the time of Mary's pending unfaithfulness to her consecrated virginity when Eleanor was nearly 30, that she needed the strength of her rituals more than ever to remind her that she was on the one true and holy path towards sainthood. On a morning early in Lent after Mary's great announcement, a season of the year that evoked particularly intense ceremonies anyway, Eleanor came in from liturgy especially hungry for her comforting ritual.

After coming in the door and hearing the clunk of the crucifix as she pulled it closed, she went to the table with the hair brush and mirror. The dark paneling behind her reflection gave her hair a wild and unkempt look. She yanked out the rubber band that had been holding together her bun and began to furiously brush at the wavy mess. She

could feel the pinch of each hair that the furious brushing was pulling out and thought about the suffering needed to get ready for Christ, especially during Lent. She finished it off with a splash of the holy water hanging on the wall.

She had another hour before her sisters would be leaving for liturgy. She walked heavy-footed through the living room hoping to wake them; maybe they would leave early to light a candle for the souls in purgatory. She came to the dining room table which sat in its usual crooked way with the mismatched spray painted chairs tucked neatly beneath. The worn playing cards lay precariously close to the edge. The whole house was silent. Above the table, the painting of Mary holding the bloodied and naked body of a grown Jesus began to wail. She walked over to the table to savor the sound. She knew not everyone was privy to such miracles. Her urge to perform her ritual became even stronger as she examined the lines and slopes of his body. She touched the painting and closed her eyes. It had been a gift from her godmother for her first holy communion and her family had insisted that it was too extravagant to go above her bed, so they had hung it above the dining room table where everyone could enjoy it; it remained even after her parents passed. Falling to her knees in front of the painting, she began to say the rosary slowly and rhythmically, rocking back and forth with each syllable. If she could only get through the next hour, she would have some relief from the spiritual aching.

When Mary came down in her translucent nightgown, Eleanor could not help looking up and staring at her round belly and sagging breasts. Soon, her body would be naked and sweating and doing all of those mysterious things Eleanor suspected people did during intercourse. Sabena followed with her tattered robe and her fat callused feet.

Eleanor bowed her head and tried to focus on her rosary and her fasting-she would allow herself a glass of water in the afternoon and maybe a piece of bread for dinner.

“Eleanor, get off the floor and do something useful. We’ve got to clean up around here. The new priest from St. Monica’s is coming over for dinner. I don’t think you’ve met him; he’s only been assigned weekday masses so far. He’s agreed to perform Mary and Gregory’s wedding ceremony next month, so we are having him over to thank him. You know, Gregory will be back from his missionary work just a week before the wedding, so we need to help Mary with details.”

Eleanor ignored Sabena until the last ‘Glory Be’ was completed, then she pushed herself dramatically up from the floor, sending balls of dust scattering in her wake. “Why do you invite dinner guests without asking me first? You always act like this is *your* house, but mom and dad left it to all of us! I don’t have time to plan any wedding. I have enough of my own matters to attend to...”

“Well, you don’t pay any bills, do you? And you barely work; you can stand to help a little more!” This was a common retort for Sabena and Eleanor was always silenced. She had never been able to hold a paying job for very long because she found one thing or another in the job duties beneath her. Volunteering to pray with the sick at the hospital was entirely noble and she couldn’t see how this kind of work did not warrant pay. If only you could make a living purifying your heart. If only she could stand to beg through the streets as Claire and Francis had done. She had thought about the convent, but worried that she would never have the privacy necessary for her very necessary rituals. God had reserved them for her and she would be committing sacrilege

if she did not enact them. Mary's silly wedding with ugly Gregory paled in comparison and besides, it was nearly a month away!

“So,” continued Sabena, “you can't say anything. Run the vacuum and set mom's china out before we get back, will you? We'll be out a little longer; we're going to the market to get a turkey and fixings to cook after liturgy and we're going to look at cakes for Mary's wedding.”

“Okay, I'll set and vacuum, but don't come home and give me a whole other list of things to do because I have to go to work for a few hours this afternoon and want to get some meditating in at some point today.” Eleanor reasoned that she could still have her ritual because her sisters would be out longer for the market and the bakery. She could do the setting and vacuuming quickly and still have time to have her ritual. She would not do the ritual first because having mundane tasks hanging over her head could be the kind of thing to ruin a ritual.

The wall clock had already struck 7. The priest (was it Fr. Bob?) was late. Eleanor sat playing solitaire trying to remember if she had known of a priest from St. Charles Barimeo seminary who had recently received holy orders. She could only think of the small fat one whose bald head went red with shame every time she dropped her rosaries and bent over hastily to get them. She was nearly certain that he was going to be stationed in a suburban parish. If it *was* him and she was mistaken about his placement, she would at least entertain herself through the dinner with measuring his devotion to celibacy. Eleanor attempted to close off her thoughts from the smells wafting out of the kitchen in thick plumes. She was determined to fast and only have water and bread through dinner.

A priest would have to understand such sacrifices. Perhaps he would even be a bit jealous of her devotion.

When the knock came, Sabena and Mary screamed in unison, “Eleanor, answer that!” She could hear them fumbling around with the serving dishes and became a bit repulsed by the thought of Mary, whom she already believed to be overweight, piling huge lumps of food that she did not need into her mouth. Would Gregory actually *want* to touch her on their wedding night? She took her time stacking the cards and walked slowly on her way to the door because he could wait. He was here getting fed, almost like a saint begging alms. His patience would be appreciated by the Lord.

She opened the door and the crucifix fell from its perch on the sideways nail. When she looked up, she saw *him*. Not the fat one, him from the painting, only he was cleaned and dressed all in black with the gleaming white collar. But was it *him*? Was this the second coming? She tried to control her breathing. Of course, the hair was shorter and the face was fuller, but yes it really did look like *him*, Jesus - the Jesus of the rituals who came to hold a hand reserved for only him and to kiss a tear stained cheek or feed a hungry soul.

Eleanor felt a thickening in her midsection; her heart beat visibly fast. Her breath became shallow and deliberate. It *couldn't* be him. He would never look so opaque. He would have to be glowing or floating. He would have to send her floating to the ceiling and then call her down to do his will on earth in a new and enriched physical form just like Christina Mirabilis. But yes, otherwise he *did look* like him, a lot like him. Eleanor realized that she had been staring without saying a word for at least a minute. He looked embarrassed for her as he began to speak,

“Hello, you must be Sabena and Mary’s younger sister. They’ve told me about you! It’s very nice to meet you! As you know, I’m new to St. Monica’s, I’m Father Masiah, but you can call me Fr. Bill. That’s what I’m having the parishioners call me. I mean, it makes me feel so *old* using my last name.” He paused and waited for her to respond. Eleanor couldn’t bring herself to speak. She had never seen a *fleshy* person who so resembled the painting. She wanted more time to contemplate how similar his mouth was to the one that appeared beside her nearly every day for the past thirteen years. It really was uncanny and she couldn’t find a thing to say that would not reveal her astonishment.

“Well,” he continued, “I brought you ladies this bottle of wine to go with dinner, may I,” he raised the bottle which was still wrapped in brown paper and dropped it down when it too did not break Eleanor’s silence, “May I come in? You look a bit pale, are you okay?” He stepped closer and looked into her eyes and she recoiled.

“Fine, fine. I’m fine,” she managed, “Yes, they’re in the kitchen, um, nice to ah meet you, I have a headache and so that’s all.”

At dinner, he sat directly below his likeness. Sabena, fat fingers resting on his arm, asked him to say the grace before meals.

When he tilted his head to tell a story or drink his wine, the resemblance became almost unbearable.

“I’ve known that this was my calling since I was 16 or so; the Blessed Mother came to me in a vision and told me to pursue the cloth. I have always dreamed of performing a wedding ceremony and am delighted that you’ve asked me, Mary!” He looked at his plate as if in a moment of reflection. Eleanor sat watching and listening,

chewing on the edges of a bread crust monitoring her breathing while Mary and Sabena asked him questions about the ceremony with their mouths full of food. He answered each of their questions politely and ate a modest amount of food himself. Eleanor's throat became parched and she began a coughing fit that rendered her doubled over her bony legs. She reached for her water and gulped it furiously. She could feel his eyes on her and her face flushing blood red. She looked up and deliberately looked over his shoulder to avoid eye contact and found herself looking instead into the face of bloody Jesus.

“Eleanor, are you okay? You look so pale and you haven't said a word for the whole meal. Do you feel alright? You haven't had anything to eat except for that bread.” She sensed in her peripheral vision that he was contorting his face into a sympathetic expression that was so like her Jesus when she cried during their wedding ceremonies. She half expected his hand to reach across the table and wipe at her cheek. Had he really been that attentive to her, noticing her fasting and silence? She had spent many miserable meals listening to Mary and Sabena bickering or chewing loudly and ignoring her. Other dinner guests who came through ignored her as well; they had been kept busy and entertained enough with Mary and Sabena's chattering and questioning and not noticed her sitting there quiet and hungry.

“I'm fine,” Eleanor's voice cracked and she felt the heat intensifying in her cheeks, “I just needed some water.”

Mary wiped her greasy mouth with her napkin and put her hand on Father Bill's arm, “Father, Eleanor is under the mistaken impression that she must always be fasting. You ought to tell her otherwise, because she doesn't listen to *us*, that's for sure! Anyway, Father, tell us about some of your plans for our parish! We're interested in starting a

lady's guild for, you know, ladies to have outings and things for fun and we could sponsor events at the church hall like chastity talks for wayward teens. What do you think? I really want to stay involved this month while I wait for my fiancé to get back from his missionary work abroad." Mary adjusted her sagging breast so that they were literally resting on the table. She leaned forward, her breasts dipped into the gravy on the edge of her plate and looked at Fr. Bill eagerly waiting for his response.

"Um, that's great, yeah, sounds good. Eleanor, I hear you volunteer at the hospital. I'd love to accompany you some time, when do you work next?" Father Bill kept his gaze fixed on Eleanor's face as he spoke. She was determined to get him to stop talking to her so that she would not embarrass herself any more than she suspected she already had. Why was he so interested in talking to her? Did he feel sorry for her?

"Oh, tomorrow afternoon I work and you can come if you'd like. They always need extra help. The hospital's on Huntington Pike-Holy Redeemer and Sister Regina's in charge." Eleanor was *not* working tomorrow, but she did not want to be in the same room with this man again if she could help it. He made her so *uncomfortable*! She couldn't even look at him anymore! Sister Regina would put him to work; she was always short on help. She looked down at her bread crust; she had twisted it in her thin fingers without realizing it. She wrapped it into a napkin and pretended to be intensely interested in her drinking water. Eleanor wished she could force herself to go and start the dishes, but she was too shaky to do much more than focus on her breath and sip her water. She would be better tomorrow when she could perform her ritual and talk with Jesus about Fr. Bill. Maybe he was a fleshy test of her devotion to her holy vows.

Sabena frowned. “Eleanor, you should at least *eat* that bread crust if it’s the only blessed thing you are going to put on your plate this evening! It’s no wonder you don’t have more energy to be interested in Mary’s wedding planning! Lord knows we only have less than 30 more days!”

Eleanor awkwardly stuffed the twisted crust into her mouth and later spit it into her napkin when no one was looking.

Dinner was over and Eleanor followed her sisters to the door. Eleanor stood back from the goodbyes and listened to the swishing of the tires on the wet black street. Above the mantle, a portrait of her parents kept watch over the little house and its inhabitants. When Father Bill kissed Mary and Sabena’s cheeks and thanked them for dinner, Eleanor stiffened. What would she do if he tried to kiss *her* cheek? She couldn’t react fast enough to stop it. Father Bill stepped toward her, grabbed her hand and brushed her cheek with his lips before walking out the door into the rain.

Eleanor had managed to survive the dinner, although the kiss had kept her up all night. She was overjoyed when she heard her sisters leaving for their liturgy the next morning. She quickly got into the dress and prepared for her ritual. After such a troubling night, she needed more than ever the spiritual cleansing. When she climbed to the top of the bed and closed her eyes, something happened which had never happened before. She couldn’t *feel* him! He wasn’t there! Here tears, usually those of a happy bride, were filled with a hot, shocked hatred. Where *was* he?!

Eleanor lifted the skirt of the dress as she flew down the stairs, tripping in the shoes; by the time she was down stairs, she was on her hands and knees crawling toward the painting. She reached a shaking hand up to the bleeding wound and closed her eyes to pray to Jesus and ask him to come to her,

“I’m so lonely that I can hardly speak, I haven’t even figured what you want me to be and I swear I’ll give you everything that I have, my arsenal, if that would be enough for you right now.” She gulped hard on her sobs, “If you don’t want to, just say so, but God knows I want you right now!” Eleanor fell to her knees with spread legs and continued to pray; she hadn’t heard the door opening. “Please! Not when I need this so badly! How can you take it away? I didn’t even *look at him* through the entire dinner!” Was He punishing her? She tore at the dress’s neckline until it ripped a jagged diagonal hole into the top; her chest was exposed to the drafty room. She dropped her head into her lap and wept. When she felt a hand on her back, she thought perhaps it was the most vivid appearance yet! Jesus was answering her prayer! She knew he wouldn’t desert her! She reached back to feel for her Jesus! At last he had come to feed on her virginal milk! Her nipples hardened in anticipation and turning to him, she thrust her chest into his face.

When Father Bill backed away in horror, she realized that she was mistaken. Jesus really *had* abandoned her!

When she stood up quickly and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror on the cellar door, she couldn’t believe how unholy her bride dress looked. It had never looked so cheap and yellowed. Eleanor choked on her sobs and couldn’t even scream. She couldn’t get away from the confused look on his face. When she had managed to calm

herself down enough so speak, all she could say was “Get out! Get out! Get out right now!” But he didn’t move.

When Mary and Sabena walked in the door from their liturgy, there she was breasts exposed with dripping virginal milk and the priest looking pale standing near her. She could hear the muffled sounds of their voices in commotion; she had heard the tones and pitches all before. The room became smaller and smaller. She heard her head hit the floor right before she passed completely out.

The entire living room was draped in purple as if the red from the painting had managed to bleed off and travel through the gray of the house rendering everything muted and infected with dark. The flower arrangement on the table (a tribute to the Lenten season), wept in a sullen purple heap. Everything was in mourning. The window glass was smeared with steamy rain. Eleanor imagined her body had been made of glass and that she had shattered onto the polished floors. She wanted Christ to crawl down from the crucifix on the door to fit the pieces into a tabernacle box, his bloodied hands could work frantically with the jagged edges, his tear-stained cheeks would crinkle in concentration. They simply wouldn’t fit and eventually the pieces would turn to a red liquid. Couldn’t Christ drink them in? They could no longer form a solid. Could he use them to fortify him for the long journey to Calvary?

When Eleanor was fully awake, she opened her eyes to find Mary and Sabena in side by side chairs leaning against each other sleeping. The scene in front of the painting with her breasts exposed and dripping came back to her and all she felt was hatred.

Standing as quietly as possible, Eleanor tiptoed over to the door, ripped the crucifix from the wall and threw it with such force at the mirror that it cracked into an intricate pattern and splintered her reflection.