

FREEDOM'S PRICE

CATHERINE RHODES

1

From my earliest memories my life was shaped by the pursuit to develop my soul into one worthy of a heavenly reward. My first realization of this came during Mass in my grandparents' makeshift chapel. In the dim light, four life-size statues loomed over the four corners of the altar. The carved hands of the Virgin Mary gently folded over the head of the child Jesus, but the engraved expressions, cold and hard, were far from what I imagined these heavenly figures to be. The musty smell of incense wafted slowly over the room as my tiny body angrily reacted to my sister seizing a book. I was quickly snatched up without warning and marched out the door. The stony look on my mother's face was a preview of what was to come.

2

My frequent need for discipline was often blamed on my fiery red mane. Sitting alone in the gloomy hall outside the chapel, I would stare through my tears at the carpet. It was shaggy, probably from the 70s, and speckled black and red that looked like the very place I was taught to avoid. Hell had been mentioned on a number of occasions and even described in detail by my older brother in an attempt to scare me. It worked. When Mom came back to say I could reenter the chapel it was as though I was being rescued from the very cusp of hell.

3

The daily rhythm rarely changed throughout my childhood. I would wake next to my older sister Lisa in the room we shared and dress quickly as Mom called, "Girls, come eat!" Immediately after breakfast was the hour long morning rosary, followed by a reading from a saint's book: St. Francis of Assisi, Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, or my favorite, the fearless Joan of Arc. Academic schooling was limited. "Government indoctrination!" my father would say. Anyways, I preferred to practice on the upright piano which stood solemnly in the corner, whose keys never had time to acquire dust. I loved the deep melodies of Beethoven

and the romantic style of Tchaikovsky. Classical music was all I knew.

4

Evenings resembled a Broadway theater production filled with singing and acting in the living room by my little brother, Lisa and I. Together Lisa and I would belt over the cassette player, joining hands and dancing to “Shall We Dance” till the floor trembled. Often I would be cast in male roles since they fit my tomboy attitude. The “audience” would just have to imagine the trousers on my scrawny legs since they were forbidden for females.

5

The list of things we couldn’t do, see, hear and watch was long. We couldn’t let our wrist, knees or the indent on our necks show. We couldn’t listen to music or read books not approved by the church. We couldn’t speak to anyone who left the church. We couldn’t date anyone who was not a member of the church, and friendships with outsiders were discouraged. The pages of rules kept in Mom’s little wooden desk held sacred words etched by his holiness, our self-elected pope. To question any of his infallible words was grounds for excommunication.

6

The mirages hovering over the asphalt marked the season as I followed Lisa’s fairy-like frame through Goodwill in search of a “new” outfit. This was the hardest season for us to fit in to society. There were cold stares from other youth that we pretend to not see. Together Lisa and I held hands and sifted through the long skirts.

“Hey are you from the 70s?” There is giggling from behind and both of our faces simultaneously turn red.

I could not think of an answer but always quick with the tongue Lisa managed, “It’s how God wants us to dress!” and we hurried away to find Mom. “It’s good for us, you know,” she said, trying to comfort me. “Suffering only makes us more worthy of our reward.”

7

We sat by the open window at dusk as smells of summer drifted in to play with our senses. Fresh-cut grass, car exhaust, and the viburnum bush outside the window; moments like that made life worth it. Lisa’s perfectly petite silhouette outlined by the dying sun. She was my

confidante to share desires and gossip with. We made plans for the future. What type of home we would have, how many children, who our husbands would be? We would call every day, just like my mother and her sisters. We could share everything.

8

Our conversation turned to the meaning of life, a deep conversation at our age.

“If any of us were to leave the church, it would be you,” she said. I squirmed, staring intently at the paint-chipped windowsill to avoid her piercing gaze. I wondered what that accusation stemmed from. Maybe because I questioned the new rules issued by our pope? “If you had gone to public school, you would have been the bad one. Your resolve is not as strong. You need to have more faith.”

There were questions boiling within me that contradicted the “live by faith alone” message I was constantly preached. Why couldn’t we date someone outside the church? Why couldn’t we talk to excommunicated members? When could we have any freedom? I was discomfited by these thoughts so I switched subjects. By the time we were asleep, we were best friends again. She was a best friend who has not been replaced since.

9

It had been three months since my last confession and the time came again to purge my soul. I knelt upright on the hard wooden pew. To kneel down or, God forbid, to sit, showed weakness and dishonored golden chalice which sat on the altar. Then began the mental preparation for confession. The men went first and one usually took a good twenty minutes. Had to mean abundant sins. My own sins flew through my consciousness and the decision must be made, which ones to tell? Some were so private, but if they were not disclosed, God would know and I would be devoured in fire and brimstone.

10

The sheep skin covering the pew did little to ease my aching knees. It had been two hours and the men were finally done. I slowly made the long walk to the tiny, dark room. “Bless me father, for I have sinned.” I told all but one. I only alluded to it. The priest knew I was holding back and probed. With crimson cheeks, I disclosed my darkest

thirteen-year-old sin, but when I left his presence to do my penitence, the shame had intensified because I was no longer the exclusive owner of it. My soul may have been cleansed but my guilt had deepened.

11

My daily rhythm changed when I met him. From first glance, I could think of no one else. Tall, dark, spiked hair, almond-shaped eyes colored like liquid chocolate, and that lip like a down-feather pillow. Denny was perfect, except he was a Bible-based Protestant.

12

I pulled back the stiff cover and flipped through the pages to Revelations, the most intriguing book in the Bible. I was curious to see what was so vital to change that God instructed our Pope rewrite the entire Bible. Our Pope was now incorporated in Revelations riding a white horse, sword gleaming, and leading God's army with zeal into the great city of Jerusalem. We were instructed to burn all the old Bibles and books not approved by our church and cut off contact with all "outsiders" except for business. Lisa's resolve in the church seemed strengthened, as if she was ready for the impending final battle between the devil and our Pope. There was an excitement in her eyes I did not share.

13

Denny was stunned.

"Do you just believe everything this man says without question?" I slowly nodded.

"It's faith, without faith we have nothing." I tried to keep the uncertainty out of my voice. There was disbelief in his.

"Read Revelations chapter 22, verses 18 and 19, in the unaltered Bible, then you will see why it is left out of your new one."

14

His Bible was old and worn, like a tired woman with penciled notes in the margins, but the verses were clear. They screamed out: if anyone changed the words of the book of Revelations, God would remove him from the book of life. False prophets would arise in the last days, performing great miracles and lead astray even the elect. And the one stating Jesus is the only mediator between God and man. Love your

enemies, do not shut them out. The verses kept coming. And then the news articles Denny found online. Sexual abuse scandals involving our priest. Talk of extortion and misleading parishioners. Like a crumbling building, my faith in the Palmarian Catholic church was failing.

15

I did not feel evil when I eloped with Denny, but I did know my Lisa would sever our relationship. The last time I heard from my sister was an email she sent, which said, "You had a choice, and you made it. I will only talk with you if you come to us repentant and wanting to come back to the church." I did not repent, and so she has not spoken to me since.

16

Three children and nine years of marriage later, my fast paced life never slackens, but I feel a piece of my soul is missing. She knew me better than my mother. I envied her qualities. Her smile, bright as polished silver, hair golden as a cornfield at sunset, and eyes like the arctic sea. I was shadowed next to her. She knew how to read others inner diaries. Her blunt honesty did not come off as rude. Unlike me, she had the bravery to tell others what she thought.

17

I am trying to remember all her little quirks, when I realize, after nine years I am losing them. What was that silly dance she did when she won a game? We had a nightly ritual: pray, hug, and then... it's gone. What is seared in my memory is the last glance of her slamming the door in my face, my last letter to her returned unopened, and that powerful last touch before I left. I am tormented by what she must now think of me. A sinner? A traitor? Will these tortured feelings end if the Palmarian Catholic church crumbles?