

My Refuge

by Anne Therese Chandler (Troy, MI)

“I’ve got good news Nick, although there’s what might be a wrench thrown into the mix,” my real estate agent, said with a sly grin.

“Well, Mike, might as well give it to me about the wrench first.”

“It’s a cabin about five miles north of a small town called Carter, and about sixty miles north-east of the city. A hundred thousand for the cabin. Twenty acres of land stretches from the lake to the nearest country road. It’s a wooded, lakeside getaway. Worth twice the asking price. Secluded, except for one stipulation.” Mike looked up, eyeing my reaction. “There’s a very small residence close to the water about two stone throws from your cabin. A seventy-year-old retired nun, lives there. The family has drawn up papers which allow her to stay as long as her health holds up reasonably well.”

I plopped down in the chair, amazed. “And?”

“That’s it, except family members would be allowed to drive their jeep through a trail in the woods up to her door to take her to mass on Sundays, or in case she needs anything during the week. Her married nephew lives in Carter. They also require a complete background check and three personal and professional references. The buyer won’t be responsible for her welfare in any way, and complete privacy will be assured beyond the points brought forward. Want to see it, and meet Sister Agnes?”

“What’s to lose?” I asked.

We left at two-thirty, which landed us at her hut around three o’clock, just in time for tea, the first of many more to follow. I was blessed. Yes, as angry as I’d grown toward almighty God, I could not describe it as anything by blessed to become quite well acquainted with such a remarkable lady. She led me during those teatime reveries, spiritually, and with unadorned Christian love, to view life in a new light. There was one afternoon in particular which I realize as a turning point for me.

It was the morning of the anniversary of my most tragic memory, the first to be endured in my new quarters, when I felt a strange ambivalence as to whether to visit Sister Agnes for tea. It was a struggle between two halves of myself regarding whether to visit her, or curl up into a ball and suffer alone. Later, the sun came out from behind the clouds, warmed my spirit, and led me on in my desire to be in her loving presence.

Soon, I was knocking on the door of her little hut which she opened promptly.

“I just set the kettle on, so I’ll grab your cup. How good to see you, Nicolas.”

Maybe it’s the way she called me by my full saint’s name, or how she swished so gently and quickly to serve my tea, or the way she turned her chair subconsciously toward me before sitting down, that quickly brought tears to my eyes. It wasn’t long before they fell noticeable down my cheeks with muffled sobs close in chase.

“Nicolas, a man with a big heart is sure to be brought to tears from time to time in this world of pain and sorrow. Even Jesus shed tears when Lazarus died. Do you want to tell me what burdens your heart, what so often make you sad and tired??” The words were spoken in a most gentle whisper, opening the floodgates of my soul.

“First, Sister Agnes I must confess I’m so angry with God I haven’t been able to pray for a very long time, and so I have no consolation for what I must endure. As for the sadness and fatigue, I will open my heart and tell my story. Perhaps it will help you understand me better, since you know of my profession as a neurosurgeon in the past.”

Flashbacks of the terrorist attack visit me unpredictably in short bursts during the day, and mock my attempts to sleep far into the wee hours of the morning.

It started on a chilly November night. Voices carried crisp and shrill as they echoed far beyond the emergency room into the city streets. Flames licked the Eastern edge of a star-studded sky, giving light to buildings where other doctors were sent to work in feverish desperation in an attempt to save victims pulled from the refuse. The scene before me was so surreal that I stood mesmerized for several seconds.

My thoughts snapped quickly into focus as a small girl was wheeled before me on a gurney. She had a rag doll appearance with her right eye dilated while bleeding from a head injury, yet it was her dark red wispy curls and freckled face that made my stomach turn. I felt helplessly shaken by her profound resemblance to Vickie Lee, my five-year-old daughter, who had been molested and murdered three years ago. I had taken a leave of absence for three months to be with my wife, Clare. Afterwards, our therapist suggested I restrict my surgical practice to adult neurology patients only. He reiterated how my vulnerability and feelings of inadequacy, however, unrealistic, might resurface while providing care or performing surgery for a child. I was acutely aware that the constant, calm confidence of the surgeon was just as vital for success as the sterility of steel instruments, and the capabilities of a good surgical nurse. Under almost any other circumstance there would have been another doctor available, but in the midst of chaos and terror, I was the only one present who was potentially able to save the child’s life.

I pushed all emotion out of my awareness and envisioned myself as a well programmed surgical machine, determined to perform meticulously and save her life. The surgery was extremely delicate, located next to the area of the brain that controls the body's basic life functions. Her vital signs remained stable as I moved the instruments deftly, not a fraction of a hair's breadth away from where needed to repair the damage.

The thought of violence without mercy stole into my mind, and a quick glance at her small freckled face tore at my heart just long enough to cause my hand to falter. Nobody seemed to notice my split second moment of distraction. Blood gushed just before the heart monitor displayed a flat line. The full spectrum of crash cart activity was implemented for over a half hour with no ensuing revival. I knew I had not been negligent, but had failed because of my own weakness, because within my psyche the little girl had become my little Vickie Lee for the span of one fatal moment.

A somewhat normal life had only begun to develop for my wife, Clare, and I. It was torture going over our loss in therapy, and trying to go through the motions of daily life, more often just daily existence. That's why she couldn't take it when the nightmares returned, and I had to take another leave of absence from work. I couldn't face going in to surgery, just couldn't risk slipping up, so she gave up on me and filed for divorce.

“You see Sister, I'm a doctor, a surgeon, who has run away from his profession, from his fears, from his pain, like a little boy.”

“Isn't your heart in your writing, in your legal work doing medical reviews that supports physicians who are being sued? If so, then you have done nothing wrong. You are still using the gifts God has given you to help others. You need a place and time to heal. You can't work as a doctor again until you are whole,” she said with gentle wisdom.

Her words brought new awareness and self-acceptance, which laid the groundwork for my inner healing to occur. One afternoon she handed me a rosary and I was surprised by a great sense of peace while saying the prayers. Afterwards, the rosary always accompanied our teatimes together. I also started to seek God's grace as I began to attend mass every Sunday.

One day I noticed Sister Agnes struggling with the teapot, so I asked her to sit down while I served her instead. Soon, I began to take meals to her during the week, wash her clothes, and sweep the floor. I had just finished the process of changing my specialty to that of internal medicine, so when her cancer became terminal I was able to assess her symptoms and prescribe medication to alleviate her pain and distress. Her family members stayed in my cabin during her last week. I thank God she died in peace.

Now, I see patients in town on Monday through Friday from eight o'clock till noon. I write when inspired, and do paralegal work when passionate about the case. However, I never let any of these activities keep me from an occasional teatime at the hut, rosary in hand and memories in tow.

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