

Hildegard von Binghamton

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I did not so much awaken as slowly regain consciousness. It must have been another blackout. There was no recollection of my going to bed, even in the recesses of last thoughts. Each pulse in my brain resounded like a wooden hammer on stone: dull but declarative. My eyelids fluttered open as though too heavy or too sticky to rise all at once.

A rectangular outline of light shone weakly at the edge of the window shade where it did not cover the sash. Through a hole in the battered shade, a ray of golden light illuminated the portrait of the Sacred Heart on the opposite wall. I tried to move, but felt I would either puke or fracture into pieces. A sliver of more diffuse light beside the Sacred Heart widened gradually until it filled the entire wall and washed away the room.

“Sister?” came the whispering voice.

I had no recollection of being anyone’s sister.

“Sister Hildegard?”

Ah, yes. *That* Sister, much as I tried forgetting her.

“Mother Superior would like to have a word with you when it’s convenient.”

“It will never be convenient and I doubt it will be a single word,” I told the sweet voice. “My God. It’s nearly the crack of noon. Help me up.”

“I must be in the chapel for the *Angelus*,¹ Sister Hildegard. Shall I raise the shade for you?”

“Only if you seek martyrdom,” I warned her.

As she shrank back from the window, Sister Bertrille,² or whatever the heck her name was, knocked into an empty bottle and sent it skittering and spinning under the bed, where it clanked into another.

“Oh, dear,” she said. “You were singing last night, Sister.”

¹ A Catholic, Anglican, and Lutheran devotion commemorating the announcement by an angel to the Virgin Mary that she would bear the Son of God. It is recited three times daily at six a.m., noon, and six p.m.

² The lead character in *The Flying Nun*, an American situation comedy that ran from 1967 to 1970. It was based on the book *The Fifteenth Pelican* by Tere Rios.

“Why can I never remember the good parts—only the hangovers?” I muttered.

The dear Sister knew enough of my routine on mornings-after to tiptoe out and gently urge the door closed.

Luckily, I lay atop the tightly-made bed still in my rumpled black-and-white habit and avoided the agony of getting dressed. But my shoes—sturdy, matronly high-heels known as oxfords—eluded me. My shoes provided much merriment to my fellow inmates at Saint Monica’s, this dry-out tank for anonymous nuns who were a little too fond of altar wine, consecrated or not. My sister Sisters said they were nurse’s shoes or, worse, librarian’s shoes. They called me “High-Clopper Hildy.” If they knew my epithets for them, their ears would melt.

At last I found my shoes on the outside window ledge, hanging by their heels. No doubt some devil-may-care terpsichorean fantasy accompanied my singing. I was pleased to remember none of it. I’d never attempt any of these daredevil feats when sober. Angels are said to protect children and those of my persuasion: drunkards. I hoped so with all my heart.

The delay in finding my sturdy, practical footwear meant I did not reach Mother Superior’s office until nearly one o’clock. My balance had not yet recovered from the night’s unremembered escapades. I knocked, and waited for the invitation to enter.

The only items on Mother Superior’s desk were a pair of tightly-folded hands, the knuckles white. Her gold band, as a bride of Christ, gleamed in the coruscating sunlight. By contrast, each time I got a new ring, I wound up pawning it, though it was never for booze. I never touched alcohol quite on purpose.

“It was reported, Sister Hildegard, that there was boisterous and bawdy singing in your ward last night. By process of elimination, I fear it was you again, Sister.”

“Perhaps it was,” I offered.

“Have you no recollection, Sister?”

Though striking a more sympathetic tone, Mother Superior did not invite me to sit down.

“Not a jot or tittle,” I confessed. “Wiped clean.”

“And have you no recollection of what I warned you would happen after just one more incident?”

She unfolded her hands and raised a finger in the sign for “one,” as though I might be a dunce. She had made the same gesture to add emphasis to her warning of last week. I hummed a thoughtful tone and nodded my head.

“Before I dismiss you, Sister Hildegard, you will provide me the names of your accomplices in smuggling contraband into this institution which was founded in opposition to alcohol.”

I began to open my mouth, but was preempted.

“Yes, yes, I know. You’re going to offer me the patent lie that the quantity of wine you imbibed was changed miraculously from water when you touched the bottle. I’ve heard it before.”

“Mother Superior, I may be a drunk; I may be stupid, overweight, and vain. But I do not lie.”

“You want me to believe Our Lord would confer on you the power to turn water into wine as He did at the marriage feast in Cana? Why would He waste such a gift on *you*, and in such a place as *this*, where all spirits are strictly forbidden?”

“The Lord moves in mysterious ways?” I offered.

“I do not buy it, Sister Hildegard. First of all, I do not believe in miracles. The Church is a thoroughly modern institution. Secondly, God is not going to give *you* an ability He has denied *me*. It’s not possible.”

“I have not asked for this strange talent. Dear Mother of God, I have not. For reasons unknown to me, my oenophilic and other abilities are a matter of unearned grace, as are all the graces I’ve received from the Man Upstairs. At times they seem more like curses to me, Mother Superior.”

“Malarkey, Sister Hildegard. Your room will be reassigned on Friday. You may ask the porter to fetch that hideous valise of yours from storage. Good afternoon, Sister.”

The room grew hazy and absolutely still. I was certain I would faint on the spot, but managed to plod to the door and put it behind me. I returned to my room like a somnambulist, not recalling a single step or stair.

I fought back tears and, kneeling beside my bed, I prayed my ass off.

* * *

By Friday morning, I had packed and unpacked my suitcase numerous times until I got the lid closed and latched. I included one Benedictine habit beside the one I had on, but there was no room for the veil. Any piece of black cloth would serve. All the rest of my baggage was books and my notebooks of research. Each brought back a stream of memories: more laughter than tears on balance, I was pleased to note.

Twice I had my trove of correspondence with Stephen Hawking on the discard pile. Stephen, though he disagreed with my own formulation of the universal wavefunction, was a perfect gentleman about it. I could not part with his letters, and tossed my best non-clerical skirt, in shocking beige, instead. Likewise, I was unwilling to part with my research on the moon of dwarf planet Eris, for which my male competitor was named the discoverer, thanks to that good ol' boy International Astronomical Union. But Dr. Brown³ graciously accepted my suggestion for naming the moon "Dysnomia," *daughter* of the goddess Eris and known for her lawlessness. She had long been my pagan patroness when I was not feeling particularly Christian.

The Binghamton bus station was bleak, the epitome of Soviet concrete architecture in America, so unlike that grand pile of stones from which I was evicted, the former New York State Inebriate Asylum, known in my time there as Saint Monica's Home For Recovery and Redemption. Gag. We called it Saint Monica's Home for Soused Sisters. My God. Poor Monica. She suffered abuse at the hands of her son for years, but he gets top prize of Doctor of the Church.⁴ Another good ol' boy network.

I looked no more a misfit than my fellow passengers on the bus. An older fellow addressed me as "Sister" and offered me the window seat. His stubble could have abraded diamonds. I quickly put down any attempt at conversation by replying in German. The scenery was gray and drizzly. It seemed intent on switching to snow. Though the coach was toasty, I shivered, knowing it would remain November for the next six months.

I watched my reflected fellow passengers and gave them names and stories, but eventually my mind turned to worrying what I would do. St. Monica's had gotten comfy, despite my occasional relapse. But the routine had also grown tiresome. I needed a shakeup. But I would certainly miss their eighteen-inch Newtonian reflector, donated by some philanthropist robber-baron named Biggs in the 1890s.

The eight-hour bus ride to New York afforded me too much time for reflection. I talked myself into and out of leaving the Order a dozen times. The Benedictines had been good to me. I didn't have to work too hard and they paid for my extensive education. I hadn't wanted to end up somebody's wife or secretary, and the Order offered me an alternative. There was time for my private research.

I'd probably find a teaching position at a Benedictine parish school, but the salary would be meager and I'd have to find a second job. At the thought of that much work, I at last dozed off until the bus lurched leaving the Lincoln Tunnel.

The Port Authority reminded me of a modern Protestant mission church with signs pointing to salvation or damnation, each with its own escalator. I was a lost soul among a city of

³ Dr. Michael E. Brown, and his team, are the actual discoverers of Dysnomia.

⁴ The reference is to Saint Augustine.

lost souls—or at least misdirected ones. Every New Yorker, I was once told, gives wrong directions to out-of-towners. Thankfully, I'd briefly lived in New York before being shipped off to Saint Monica's. I was going to see my only friend in the city—perhaps in the world.

When I finally emerged from the tubes and tunnels, I climbed the steps from the L train station at 1st Avenue. It was only a few blocks to my friend Shakti Pat's restaurant in the East Village. The thought of food was terribly appealing. My laden suitcase grew heavier by the block. It began to snow, lightly, covering up the city's grime.

Lit only by dim candlelight, the *Café Kundalini* looked closed at first. But there was a crowd inside which I could see through the steamed up windows. My stomach growled like a ravenous beast. I set down my suitcase to reach for the door. It was immediately pulled open by my friend.

“Sister Hildegard: Hildegard von Binghamton. Welcome. Right on time. This way, please.”

I felt I could be nourished by the scrumptious aromas alone. They changed whenever I thought of some other dish for which I had a taste.

Shakti Pat stood beside a table with a “Reserved” sign on it in gold lettering. I had told no one where I was going. He bowed and said, “Namaste.”⁵

“Namaste,” I said in return.

Shakti Pat produced a steaming bowl containing every ingredient over which I'd been mentally salivating. I did not see where he brought it from. The sign was gone. Though one-hundred-thirty-eight years old, he was way too fast for me.

“Busy night, Sister,” he remarked, but vanished before I'd raised my head from the first delicious spoonful to reply.

Seated in a corner, I could see everyone's reflection by turning my head. The walls, which showed plaster cracks and the remains of wallpaper, contained dozens of framed works of art: prints, watercolors, oils, photographs—every last one of them a picture of clouds. They ranged from lurid sunsets to demon thunderheads from which sparked fierce lightning. They arrested my attention. I forgot to eat. I felt I was floating. The clouds changed shape and moved across their frames. At the corner of my eye, lightning flashed, and a snow squall descended the jagged watercolor mountains. I was swept up in the catalogue of clouds.

I realized my bowl was empty.

⁵ A greeting in Hinduism which means “I bow to the divine in you.”

“Good for you, Sister Hildegard von Binghamton,” my friend said, glancing down at my bowl. I knew how much he detested wasting food.

“Snappy jacket, Jeeves,” I told him. It was black satin cut in a Nehru style with red satin piping and buttons.

“You, too,” he remarked, “though the black-and-white is getting to be a habit.”

I laughed a little too loudly and heads turned. Shakti Pat loved punning to me. He said the ability to pun meant you truly understood a language. English was the thirty-somethingth language he’d acquired over the years, living all over the world.

“Forty-third,” he said, vanishing behind my slightest distraction, as though it were a screen.

Deciding to savor my second bowl of gallimaufry stew, I ate slowly, looking up now and again between spoonfuls to survey my fellow diners in their gray reflections. There were two motorcycle bikers in black leather jackets and tight blue jeans. The one reminded me of my cousin Mitch whom I hadn’t seen since high school. To me, they smiled at each other quite lovingly, despite their scruffy faces. I guessed they were more than friends.

Two tables over, at one of the bay windows onto Avenue A, sat two late middle-aged women in woolen winter coats and hats, Upper Eastsiders, I was sure. Friends of long-standing. I voted for their discussing the inevitability of divorce and whose ex was spotted where. The less demonstrative of the pair could have been a stand-in for my Aunt Dotty.

A beautiful Persian-looking boy of about twelve came into the *Café*, jostling the bell over the door. He stomped his feet and shook the snow from the shoulders of his thin cotton jacket. *Basim*, they called him. His name meant “Smiling.” He was given two packages in brown paper bags stapled shut. The boy nodded to the omnipresent Shakti Pat and left, jingling the bell again.

The pictures of clouds again snagged my attention, and I watched them march from frame to frame. The next time I heard the bell ring, I was the last person in the place. Shakti Pat sat across from me, smiling.

“I need a drink,” he said, handing me a tall tumbler of water.

This time my hand did not yet reach the water vessel when the contents turned into what looked like a deep claret.

“Sherry,” he said. “For tomorrow’s roast duckling.”

The cook came from the kitchen, bowed and thanked me, and retreated with the tumbler of sherry.

“Very good, Hildegard von Binghamton,” Shakti Pat said, beaming. “You are attentive to the needs of others. Likewise I. Here is the key to my apartment. You will please take the couch, Sister. Stay as long as necessary. When you are hungry, a friend will bring you food. Good night. I must prepare for tomorrow.”

He bowed to me with folded hands.

The next I recalled, I was turning the key in Shakti Pat’s front door. I had only the dimmest recollection of walking the four blocks to his apartment, and even less of lugging my book-laden suitcase up six flights of stairs in my winter wool coat. Buttoned to the top. There was not a drop of sweat on my brow.

Shakti Pat’s living room was furnished like a monk’s cell. His “couch” was a camouflage surplus cot hiding beneath a scratchy Hudson’s Bay blanket. Two lumpy pillows, no doubt filled with corn husks, served as armrests for his “couch.” A lopsided table, on which a large candle burned, and a single wooden chair, stood opposite. It felt like home, and I relished every nick and detail.

I lay my heavy coat across the back of the chair and opened my suitcase on the floor beside it, taking out my thick flannel nightgown and my toothbrush. On my way to the bathroom, I stuck my head inside Shakti Pat’s bedroom. Candles burned everywhere. The fire marshal in me shuddered. An enormous four-poster, festooned with richly-patterned silks and brocades and velvets, and piled high with silk pillows, occupied three-quarters of the room. The walls and ceiling were also draped with silks and tapestries, and thick carpets covered the floor, no pattern matching or style agreeing, yet all of it integrated. It was a pasha’s palace, and his sole extravagance, as far as I knew. He lived the rest of his life like his living room: spare, verging on ascetic. My friend went way up in my estimation of him.

On that thought, my head hit the pillow, and the next I knew daylight peered from the opening between my friend’s threadbare curtains.

Shakti Pat told me he’d coaxed Einstein into autographing those curtains back in 1949. Their pattern was faded stars and moons and suns and galactic swirls, and it was the only material good in God’s universe that I coveted, but I never mentioned that to my friend. Besides, before I needed curtains, I needed a pot to piss in and a window to throw it out of.

The cot creaked, but I did not, having spent the best night’s sleep in weeks, despite the worst arrangement for sleep since my novitiate. I stood up easily. I showered and unpacked clean underwear. I was ready to hit the pavement and hoped there was a teaching position for me somewhere. Preschool to postdoc, I was not fussy. I’d taught them all. But before then, I realized, I was as hungry as a raven. It was again nearly noon.

I hated to dip into my life savings of forty-four dollars so soon after arriving in New York. I’d be broke by Tuesday. So what did Shakti Pat mean by, *When you are hungry, a friend will*

bring you food? I was hungry now and my taste was specific: a New York style pizza with the works, but especially anchovies, and an extra thick crust. I caught a whiff of hot food, perhaps a hot sandwich or pizza, wafting under the apartment door from the hallway. I opened the door to investigate.

Standing less than an inch away was a pizza delivery guy with a large cardboard box. *ESPizza*, it read. *We know what you want.*TM I found the fellow so handsome and his blue eyes so fierce that I could not say anything. This had never happened before. It was hard to breathe.

Breaking the spell, the deliveryman lifted the lid of the pizza box, thereby blocking his smile. I recovered my whereabouts and looked down. The extra-thick crust was piled high with goodies. A school of anchovies were arranged in the Hindu symbol for *Namaste*.

I felt faint and stepped back inside, cradling the pizza box. It was spooky how spot-on it all was. I invited the deliveryman inside while I looked for my change-purse. For a second I pictured myself locking the door and helping him out of that ridiculous striped company shirt. He looked like a referee. They never served pizza at St. Monica's.

"That's OK, Sister. Shakti Pat sends his best," he said. His voice was deep but sweet.

"I might have known," I replied. "But how did he figure out exactly what I craved and have it at the door not a minute too early or too late?"

"It wasn't Shakti Pat, Sister. It was me—I mean *I*."

"You?" I asked. I was channeling Mother Superior. "I mean..."

"It's a strange little talent I possess. I know what toppings people want on their pizzas whenever they develop a taste for one, sometimes even before *they* know it. They don't need to phone in their order. That's why I'm *ESPizza*. I'm the owner, Oscar Diggs. I'm at their door with the goods as soon as they open it. I'm never wrong and I'm never late. You're a Benedictine sister, right, Sister?"

"Yes, Oscar," I said. "How come...?"

"St. Monica's Grade School, East Village, all eight years."

"She gets around," I told him, and saw a cloud of puzzlement cross his face. "Why don't you join me, Oscar?"

It gave me a warm feeling to say his name. I suspected I knew what was happening, but was never going to tell myself what it was as long as that could be avoided..

“I’d love to stay, Sister Hildegard. My teacher, Shakti Pat, said you and I ought to compare notes. But someone’s working up a craving for a cheese deluxe with olives. I’ve gotta run. Just holler—you know, think hard—when you get hungry.”

I left the door open a crack and watched him until he disappeared down the stairs. I had to keep reminding myself to take the next breath. I knew what an attraction was; I had them as a girl. This was much more. I suspected this verged on lust, and I hadn’t a clue how to stop it. I prayed, but only saw Jesus as the pizza deliveryman in ever shorter tunics.

The aromas from the pizza brought me back. It had been ten years ago when I’d had my last slice of pizza—at a joint on Broadway across from Columbia University. I was twenty-five and at work on my second doctorate, this one on the Directional Factors Pertaining to the Gamma Ray Burst of Wolf-Rayet Hypernovae. No one else liked anchovies, so I ate alone and took the uneaten slices home. Shakti Pat’s spartan apartment was a lot like my dorm room.

Before I’d realized I was counting, there were only three little fishes left, though the crust was fairly intact. The anchovies made me thirsty and I picked up the bottled water Oscar had left—the bottle my Oscar had touched. I drank more than half of it before the taste registered as not only wet, but also wine. Once begun, my binge had no brakes, only an accelerator.

From somewhere in the vicinity of Shakti Pat’s apartment, I’d found a red 1940s Bakelite radio with a cloth cord and cranked her up. There were no complaints until Brief Heavy Downpours came on. I didn’t care for them myself, but that’s the problem with radios: they play what *they* want to play. I turned it off and danced to my own music, a sort of chant with drums, ala *Missa Luba*.⁶ I kicked off my high cloppers and twirled across the highly varnished floor in my black stockings. I danced like David for the Almighty; I danced a slow dance with Oscar. He removed my veil and wimple. I let him, and opened a button on his shirt. A sprig of hair emerged. Then I awoke on the floor beneath the cot, the blanket draped over it, forming a pup tent and sealing out daylight.

I crawled from beneath the cot and looked for signs of damage. Seeing none, I toddled off to the bathroom. After my shower, I’d intended to go down to the *bodega* on the corner and buy a newspaper. But, first, I needed to eat, to quell the warring forces in my head and stomach. I hoped I’d left a slice or two in the pizza box.

The pizza had been restored somehow, though not with the other toppings, only with the anchovies and thick whole-wheat crust. The design of the small fish was now more like a wagon wheel. I tore off a slice and wolfed it down. Knowing to stay away from water, I searched the tiny kitchen for something with which to wash down my breakfast. Apparently, Shakti Pat had come and gone, and had made a pot of coffee for me. It was still warm.

⁶ A 1965 recording of a Latin mass sung in Congolese style with drum accompaniment.

I returned to the living room. Opening the box again for the next slice, I saw the pizza was once more whole. I retrieved two slices this time and closed the lid, then lifted it up quickly. It was fully restored. I found I could eat *all* of Oscar's pizza, and still the anchovies and the thick crust reappeared—or reproduced—or whatever they did. In the process of testing my theory and its permutations, I was sure I'd devoured three entire pizzas—everything but the cardboard. The coffee pot was empty, too.

I looked everywhere for a telephone. Maybe there was a pay phone down the hallway. I got my change purse and opened the door, nearly running head-on into Oscar.

"You're a wizard, Oscar Diggs," I exclaimed. "Your pizza never runs out. I'm stuffed and upholstered. I'm sorry you brought more food."

"It's not for now, Sister Hildegard," Oscar said, raising the pizza box. "I got your call, but you didn't sound hungry. I thought maybe you'd like to talk or something. It's my day off and I just phone in any orders I get to the shop, and tell them when to get it there."

"Come in, Oscar."

I couldn't quite believe I was inviting him in, knowing my attraction to him. In his civvies of jeans and turtleneck sweater, he was even handsomer. I opened the pizza box to show him how my pizza had been restored. The anchovies were now in yet another pattern: a circle with sixteen rays, four in each of the cardinal directions.

"That's not my doing, Sister. I get the orders by telepathy, I guess, but I still have to make the pizzas the old-fashioned way: with flour and water and all the ingredients a person might crave. This one must be your doing, Sister Hildegard."

"I? I don't know how to do that."

"Sure you do, Sister. Loaves and fishes," he told me, and we laughed ourselves silly.

Oscar added wit and a disarming smile to his many talents and possessions, both known and unknown. Confessing his hunger, he withdrew a slice from my pizza box, and marveled when it was restored. He ate two more slices and then confessed his thirst.

"Come with me to the kitchen," I told him.

I instructed him to fill two glasses with water and hand them to me. His mouth dropped open and then turned up into that wonderful smile. I had decided to listen to the whispers over my left shoulder. I wanted to keep Oscar in the apartment as long as I could.

He took a sip of the wine and pronounced it excellent.

“Salud,” I told him. I took a sip of wine and felt revitalized, as though I’d received a transfusion.

We returned to Shakti Pat’s living room and sat together on the rickety cot, gravity doing its best to bring us closer together. I could feel his heat and realized, for once, that I knew exactly what I was doing. It was too late. We clinked our tumblers full of wine.

* * *

My veil and wimple hung from the hook of Shakti Pat’s bedroom door. I lay under piles of silk coverlets, absolutely naked. My head ached only slightly. After the first glass of wine, I never had any recollection of how many followed or what else may have transpired. But I was certain I was no longer a Bride of Christ. One of us would be filing for divorce very soon.

The light from behind the curtains told me only that it was another gray day. I was famished. I wrapped myself in two of the coverlets and made my way to the bathroom. I was astounded by the handsome woman I beheld in the mirror, her auburn hair at her shoulders, her shoulders covered with colorful fabric in intricate swirls—the opposite of the Sister Hildegard I knew and loathed. There was something sticky on my inner thighs. It was blood.

I went to the living room—which looked intact—and lifted the lid of my pizza box. The pizza was once again whole, in its pattern of the circle with sixteen rays. I’d forgotten to ask Oscar what it meant. But the thought of more anchovies and whole wheat crust made me nauseated. I remembered the second pizza Oscar brought the night before. I hoped it wasn’t more loaves and fishes.

Inside the second pizza box was an enormous waffle, slathered in butter and dripping with syrup. Atop it were scrambled eggs, sausages, bacon, and fried potatoes, and garnished with whipped cream. It was still warm and steaming. I got my mouth around the corner of the first slice and closed the lid. *ESPizza. We know what you want.*TM

My Oscar sure knew what *I* wanted. God bless him, I prayed, and dove in for a second slice of his breakfast pizza. The syrup dribbled down my mouth and I licked it lazily. A recollection of Oscar licking my lips last night flashed before me. He’d wanted another taste of wine. It was a delicious feeling. I knew there was more, but the door was locked from inside. Absently, I reached for a third slice of pizza, but set it down. *What had I done?*

I wanted to ask Oscar; I wanted to know. He’d surely remember every detail and would not dissemble. *Oh, Oscar.*

A knock at the door made me drop the coverlets. I peered through the crack and beheld my Oscar, bearing yet another pizza box. He looked at me with his mouth agape, entered, and quickly closed the door behind him.

“You’re a quick study, Hildegard,” he said, breaking into a grin.

He draped one coverlet tenderly over my shoulders and knotted the second around my waist. He motioned for me to open the pizza box. It contained a gooey birthday cake.

“How’d you know, Oscar Diggs? You really are a wizard.”

“You don’t recall a thing, do you?” he chuckled. “We share the same birthday, remember? The same birth date, too. Same hospital and doctor.”

“But I’m two hours older,” I said, not sure how I knew.

Oscar led me to the cot and sat down beside me. I closed my eyes. He placed his arm around my shoulder and drew me to him, cooing reassurances. I rested my head against him. The lights went down in my mental movie theater, an old terra cotta palace of gold leaf and burgundy brocade and tiled fountains with goldfish. The Alhambra. The place was packed, but then I realized they were all me. Mother Superior came down the aisle with her flashlight, escorting a pair of bikers to the last remaining seats. One of them was my cousin Mitch.

The only credits were *Ad majorem Dei gloriam*.⁷ The subtitles were in German. I brought the refilled water glasses, now containing burgundy, back to the black-and-white living room. Oscar urged me to go slowly and insisted that I would remember everything as soon as I heard the word “birthday.”

By the third glass of wine I’d removed my veil and wound it about Oscar’s neck, tugging him towards Shakti Pat’s elaborately decorated bedroom. The back of the director’s chair was emblazoned with *Michaelangelo Buonaroti*. A cameraman crouched in the corner.

Each of Oscar’s protests was shunted deftly aside. It was a clever script, replete with double entendres of a slightly salacious nature, according to *Catholic Bulletin*. At last, in what is sure to become a classic scene of cinema, Oscar threw up his hands and said, “I give up. I surrender, Dorothy.”

In slow-motion I unbuttoned Oscar’s shirt, but, owing to a bad edit overlooked by continuity, it reappeared in the next scene, in which he first removed my white blouse. Soft fade. We came into focus under the silken bed covers and began telling each other about ourselves in German so festooned with prefixes and suffixes that I forgot what I was saying before I reached the end of the sentence. Oscar clung to the edge of the bed. There was nowhere further he could go except fall to the floor or climb atop me.

⁷ Latin, “For the greater glory of God,” the motto of the Jesuits.

Oscar's embrace made my skin tingle wherever we touched. I wondered for a moment how, with both his hands on my shoulders, he was tickling me between my legs. Special effects had us float high above our friend's bed, the bedclothes hanging over us and then slipping down onto the bed as Oscar performed his slow penetration. The candles flared up theatrically at the moment I ceased to exist as a separate human being. No wonder the laity liked getting laid. I understood how much I had been missing.

The candles dimmed and soft music arose, a cloister full of women's voices chanting in Latin. The heavy curtains drew closed and the audience applauded. The lights came up.

Returning more firmly to the present moment, I felt Oscar holding my left hand. I smelled a faint aroma of popcorn, but it did not last long. I opened my eyes.

"Yes," I told Oscar.

"But I haven't asked you yet, Hildegard. Clairvoyance is a drag at times."

I smiled. "Then you know I'm pregnant."

"No, but you can tell me over dinner and I can propose properly. We can stop at that second hand shop *Suit To Kill* and find you some civvies that fit, that do you justice."

I agreed to everything Oscar told me. Though I wouldn't tell him so, I looked forward to a meal that was not loaves and fishes—or pizza. I was sure we'd be going to *Café Kundalini* and suspected our mutual friend Shakti Pat would already be apprised of the good news.

* * *

Our wedding mass took place in May at St. Monica's Church in the East Village. I wore a flaming red silk dress from the second-hand shop and Oscar dressed in a beautifully cut tan suede jacket and white jeans that I could not wait to help him out of. But there was a proper procedure and we'd already skirted it as much as possible. Father McLarkin—Malarkey, I called him—insisted only that I not wear white since I would be waddling down the aisle great with child. He'd used the word "decorum," which is why I chose red and snug.

Though I'd hoped all of St. Monica's Home for Soused Sisters would respond to my invitation, only Sister Bertrille and another nun whom I did not remember—no surprise there—showed up. I could tell she was genuine in her enthusiasm for me and Oscar and whispered a few envious remarks in my ear concerning my new bridegroom. She wondered whether Oscar had a brother or was one-of-a-kind, and she felt even Mother Superior would not have been able to resist him. I did not set her straight on who had seduced whom.

The old church looked a little shabby, but the flowers on the altar from a funeral the day before were still fresh and suited our purposes. Between epistle and gospel, Oscar's Moslem

friend also named Basim, read a passage by the mystical Jewish rabbi Baal Shem Tov. It would have been difficult to be more ecumenical. Few eyes remained dry.

“From every human being there rises a light that reaches straight to heaven, and when two souls that are destined to be together find each other, their streams of light flow together and a single brighter light goes forth from their united being.”

The only thing missing that would have made the day perfect was the presence of our teacher, Shakti Pat, but he was busy doing his magic at *Café Kundalini* for the reception. The other absentees were my cousin Mitch and his boyfriend Jake who said they never went anywhere they were not welcome, meaning the Catholic Church. I would have loved seeing Father Malarkey roll his eyes at their strutting in their tight Levi’s and leather jackets.

Though Oscar’s parents had both died when he was just out of high school, he had kept his parents’ wedding bands, and it was those we exchanged, without alterations, at the big moment, when we stood before all those we loved and declared our affection and devotion. After the mass, Oscar’s other good friend, thirty-eight-year-old skateboarding champion Lance Parker, led the procession out of the church and down the steps on his hoverboard.

The gathering, except for Lance, walked the three blocks to *Café Kundalini*. The windows were so steamed up they were nearly opaque. The aromas had streamed nearly to St. Monica’s. Neither Oscar nor I had had an appetite—for food, at least—for the past two days. I would have foregone the niceties and dived right in, but, again, there were procedures and proper decorum.

Shakti Pat had set up a makeshift bar on which he’d placed three enormous clay urns—amphorae, actually—filled with water. I touched each vessel on its side and Shakti Pat filled a hollowed gourd with the wine and presented it to me and Oscar. We drank simultaneously to the cheering of our friends and teacher. Then the glasses were passed out and nearly everyone had a drink to our health and long marriage. Even our teacher took a sip—or appeared to—after which both wine and glass and teacher disappeared. He stood next right at my elbow.

“You have learned well, Mother Hildegard.”

“Mother?” I asked him.

“The child,” he explained. “Have you chosen a name?”

“Hypatia,” I replied. “It was Oscar’s first choice.”

“The Alexandrian philosopher and scientist, no?”

“Yes. Father Malarkey hated it, but then his camp had put in with Cyril whom they elevated to Doctor of the Church. That good-old-boy network. Her they dismembered and then burned the library down.”

“You have done the right thing, Hildegard. Only that matters. ‘The soul should always stand ajar, ready to welcome the ecstatic experience.’”

“That is beautiful and profound, Shakti Pat. Thank you. You may add ‘poet’ to your resumé.”

“No, that was Emily Dickens.”

“Dickinson,” I corrected.

“Yes, her, too.”

We laughed loud enough to attract Oscar’s attention. Shakti Pat was nowhere to be seen.

“I’m glad you’re in such a good mood, Hildy. May I have this dance?”

“Where’s the music?” I asked.

“Everywhere,” he said. “The cooks’ pots and pans, the dishes and clinking glasses, the talk and laughter. Everywhere.”

Someone in the crowd heard Oscar’s remark and began to sing the current Turkish techno hit “The Lucky Man’s Shoes.” It spread like wildfire. The cooks joined in with their pots and pans. Shakti Pat conducted from the waiters’ station.

Oscar put one arm around my waist and grasped my opposite hand, and twirled me into the largest unoccupied space, just large enough for tight circles. Applause and laughter ensued. I’d had but a half-glass of wine, but I was glad for Oscar’s support, both physical and moral. He’d taught me how to quit while I was ahead, to stop after enjoying one glass by having my last glass of wine first.

After my dance with Oscar, Shakti Pat next stood in his place, a nimble and fleet-footed dancer with whom I would not have managed to keep up even if I were drunk. He had the slender build of Fred Astaire, too. He twirled me around and when my brain stopped turning in my skull, I was in my cousin Mitch’s arms. Mitch proved another quite able dancer, even in his thick-soled biker boots. His boyfriend, however, added balance to the other end of the dancers’ spectrum.

At last it was time to sit down and eat. I wolfed it down in very lady-like fashion: a she-wolf. Oscar smiled at my enjoyment. The food, as is the custom at *Café Kundalini*, was whatever anyone wanted, no matter how odd or rare a dish. They didn’t need to order it, either. My Oscar read their wishes, the kitchen staff cooked it up, and Shakti Pat brought it to their tables. I’d never seen a happier crowd.

After the meal, one of the waiters, also dressed in a black jacket with red trim and buttons, brought a small package wrapped in brown paper to the head table and set it before Oscar and me. Our teacher encouraged us to tug at the opposite ends of the red ribbon with which it was tied. As soon as the knot came undone, the bundle puffed up to several times its former volume. Out tumbled the curtains from Skakti Pat's living room, the ones with the pattern of stars and galaxies, the ones autographed by Albert Einstein. I was dumbstruck, and burst into tears.

The cooks and Shakti Pat next brought a single-layer wedding cake from the kitchen. It was decorated in red frosting with the circle and sixteen rays that had been turning up in Oscar's pizzas. Before I could ask what it signified, the cake was cut and distributed, and the remainder looked like a child's rendition of the sun coming over a steep mountain.

"Always sunny in the Land of Enchantment," Shakti Pat declared.

Oscar put a finger to his lips.

"Pay no attention to the man behind the curtains," he told me.

I was not sure what either of them meant, but had no doubt I would find out sooner rather than later, and, as with all of my life, it was bound to be an adventure.