

When Sister Joan Opens the Door

By

Patricia Schultheis

I am a white male.

I am an alcoholic.

I am twenty-six years old.

I am a long way from home.

I am driving toward Las Cruces, where the Organ Mountains shoot like granite geysers into the dawn. An odd, fierce wind churns through the slotted crags and hits the eighteen wheelers broadside, rendering the grim men at their wheels merciless. The one barreling up my ass blasts his horn. I'm about to give him the finger, but instead press the small Zuni fetish in my pocket hard against my thigh.

The trucker passes, and I return to grabbling with the problem that's dogged me since last night. My sister Amy called. She's gotten engaged and wants me to be in her wedding party. But I don't know if I'm ready to go back East. My sobriety is new, and I don't know if I can handle returning to the land of green trees and good people, people who truly mean what they

say when they tell you that they only want “what’s best for you,” but whose minds can’t grasp how living in the shadows of saber-toothed mountains sets your soul ticking toward eternity.

On the other hand, I don’t want to disappoint Amy—she and I were the compadres who played beneath the heights our older sister Juliette scaled.

I turn off the highway and park behind the warehouse for Mani’s Movers. Mani is already inside . . . Mani is never not already inside. I know he has a wife, three children and a German shepherd named Zapata, but Mani’s true home is his warehouse. From one borrowed truck, a rickety dolly, and six balls of twine, he built the company into one with ten vehicles and thirty-six employees. Since dropping out of the university, I’ve had dozens of bosses, but none as unflappable as Mani. Nothing deters him, nothing distracts. Plus, he’s unfailingly fair. I’ve never seen him fire anyone who didn’t deserve it.

He’s where he always is, on his phone, squinting at his computer. He thrusts the paperwork for today’s job at me, then puts down his phone and looks at me hard. He only hired me because my AA sponsor recommended me. That was two years ago, and I’ve never disappointed him, but he’s never stopped appraising me either. The company’s his life. One screw up and I’ll be gone. Today’s job is seven rooms, and the crew seems small, just me, Geraldo, and the new kid, Connor.

My sponsor gave me the fetish in my pocket. He chose a bear because the bear has the power to ease transitions, and few transitions are as unsettling as a move. I thrust my fist into my jeans and wrap my fist around it. “Just the three of us?”

Mani’s expression doesn’t change. “Yeah, they don’t have much.”

“Pick up Connor at the usual place?”

“Yeah.”

“Geraldo’s got the address?”

“He’ll meet you there.”

I turn to leave, but Mani adds, “Three will be fine. It’s all going in storage. You don’t need more. You’ll be fine.”

Las Cruces has two basic populations: transients, mostly university students, in and out in a few years. Their stuff is usually cheap, sometimes pathetically so. But if they’ve maybe gotten themselves a nice fellowship to graduate school somewhere, they’ll indulge themselves by hiring a mover. The others are older people who’ve lived in the same house for decades and accumulated a lifetime of clothes, tools, cooking gadgets, Christmas ornaments, knick-knacks, all of it vested with memories. In those places, you take a snow globe from a table, and I swear you hear a rip like a deep-rooted rosebush pulled from a side-yard garden. Stuff for some people is what drink is to alcoholics. They crave it so they won’t have to look down the street and see the mountains they never got around to climbing.

Two blocks from the university, the kid’s waiting in front of Starbuck’s. The wind beats his baggy pants against his legs, the same ones he wore yesterday . . . I suspect he’s homeless. But he’s also holding a Starbucks coffee, so he’s getting money somewhere. I’m not surprised. Even when I lived in the shelter I always had some cash. Most the men did: getting robbed was a bigger worry than finding clean clothes or a hot meal.

Connor climbs in. “So?”

“Odd one . . . seven rooms, but only three of us.”

“So who’s the third . . . Geraldo?”

“Yeah.”

The kid drinks his coffee. The one cog in Mani's smooth moving machine is Geraldo. Mani only keeps him i because he's his wife's cousin. But he's a bastard to work with: sullen and never far from his thermosful of vodka. Plus, he hates Connor and me, white boys . . . some college . . . younger . . . stronger. Through my jeans, I press my bear into my thigh.

Geraldo's shiny red truck's already parked at the low, stucco house. I'm pulling into the driveway when he comes out the front door, signaling me to stop and pressing a finger to his lips.

I roll down the window. "What?"

He shakes his head to keep my voice down and motions that we should follow him inside. There, he points through the dining room's French doors to a woman sitting cross-legged, her face toward the rising sun; her hands on her knees, cupped to catch the light. Around her, wind-driven mesquite pods skitter over the graveled yard.

"Es monja. . . monja," Geraldo whispers. He waves his hand in back of himself to the area beyond the dining room, where armchairs cluster around the living room fireplace and a primitive but graceful Madonna stands on the mantel. Then, he leans in toward me as though he were confiding a sacred code. "Todas son monjas . . . todas son monjas."

"Nuns," Connor says. "He's telling us that we're moving a houseful of nuns."

"Si, nuns. . . nuns."

I don't recognize this awestruck Geraldo. Where's the one who's never not sullen and is frequently drunk? This Geraldo acts as if the sight of the meditating nun were balm for his soul.

I look at her, too, and suddenly realize what she's doing — gathering herself for change. Every move means someone's unsettling themselves. The table where they've eaten, the chairs they've rested on, the lamps they've lit, everything bears the imprint of their touch. In turn, the proportions and textures of the objects have imprinted themselves on the owner as well.

That's what I try to bear in mind: possessions must arrive intact. People finding themselves in unfamiliar settings must be able to touch familiar things in order to reset their internal echolocators. . . to know where they have landed.

"Go to the van and get the dollies and pads," I tell Geraldo and the kid.

They leave and I survey the place. The house isn't exactly spartan, but it's not overly furnished either. So many chairs at the dining room table, so many in the living room. No couch, thank God. Everything solid but comfortable. A few tchotchkes, a painting of dark cacti silhouetted against the orange sunset. Large black and white photographs of petroglyphs. Nice baskets. Not the jittered transience of students, but not the cluttered sentimentality of older people either. Mani's calculation was right: the three of us can do this in a day.

I go up the hall to check the bedrooms. Three with stripped twin beds, blankets folded on bare mattresses, the fourth with a single bed. Above it, a mural of a seaside village, white houses hug a cove where sailboats bob beside fishing boats. On the lip of sand around the shore a woman holds onto her straw hat and watches a little girl build a sandcastle.

"Poor Margaret."

I turn and the woman from the back yard is standing behind me. She's what my mother would term "handsome": slim, long-boned, thick dark hair dashed with silver, clear hazel eyes. Halfway down her chest, a dark wooden cross hangs from a braided orange cord. She smiles at the mural. "Margaret's from Maine. She says she's got ocean rhythms in her blood, so the community suggested she paint this. But maybe that was a mistake. Now, we're moving, and poor Margaret will lose her ocean twice." She puts out her hand. "I'm Joan."

"Lukas . . . Lukas Holbrook." I nod toward the mural. "My sister Amy paints . . . she'd like that . . . she's getting married." An instant memory tsunami surges—Amy painting hearts

on her headboard and our mother getting angry because the bed was half of a matched set. Another wave: me making Amy a crib sheet for her freshman algebra exam, but making it wrong, so she failed anyway. And our father, just before the divorce, driving me to school in silence as deep as my plummeting grades. And him drunk at my last basketball game. And at my graduation. Oh, God . . . all that back there in the East, where I will have to return because my little sister Amy asked me to.

I finger the bear in my pocket. “Should I call you Sister Joan?”

“Joan’s fine.”

I hear Geraldo and Connor in the living room. “I think we should probably start with the dining room. That will give us a staging area so to speak.”

“Good . . . fine. Some of the kitchen is already done. I’ll leave the rest to you. I have to get to the bank and make some other stops. Just one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“The Madonna on the mantel? She’s been with me a long time.”

“Right . . . we’ll take extra care.”

When the nun leaves, I tell the kid to pack the rest of the kitchen stuff, and Gerald to detach the dining room’s monster tabletop from its base . . . I’m hoping to wrap it and roll it into the van. But he can’t do it, so, we have to wrap the whole table, including the base, which means we may not have enough pads. I tell him finish padding the table as best he can, while I turn the van around. I come back to help Geraldo with the monster table, but it’s wider than the French doors are high, which means we can’t roll it through. Plus, we have to angle it, and it’s so heavy that I call Connor to help. It takes the three of us to get the thing through the door and into the van. But once it’s there, it’s too big to fit snugly against the side, which means it has to tilt.

Which creates a triangular gap that eats up space. I've learned from Mani that every move is a puzzle. So much space . . . so much stuff. To optimize the space you calculate the size of the stuff, but that triangle is too small for anything like a dresser, and too big to waste on anything soft like a bagful of towels, which can be squeezed in anywhere. I tell Connor to get some of his boxes from the kitchen, but he's only got three filled. His baggy pants are polka dotted with Styrofoam popcorn, plus his eyes hold a hunger that I recognize isn't for food. I tell him to get cracking and go up the hall. Until I've checked the medicine cabinets, I don't want him anywhere near the bathrooms. Same for Geraldo.

Bathrooms can reveal everything you want to know about a person: their constipation, their incontinence, their sleeplessness, their depression, anxiety, ADD, nasal congestion, earaches, headaches, toothaches, and cold sores. Turns out, nuns aren't any different from the rest of us. There are prescriptions for Susan Massey's Adderall, Helen Holder's Xanax, and Margaret O'Neil's Lorazepam. That's the one I want, something to bring me down. I've been touching my fetish all morning, but the little blue bear is husbanding all its calm for itself; none has reached my soul. Between Amy's call and this son-of-a-bitch move, I'm choking on wads of worry.

I need something, just a little something. Except for the Lorazepam, I pack all the medicine into a small carton. But the Lorazepam I stuff into my jeans with my bear. I seal the carton, but don't put it in the truck. For one thing, Geraldo or Connor might take it. For another, I might. I shove it under the sink.

In the bedrooms, Geraldo's been dismantling bedframes. I tell him to step it up, and go get a dolly. When I pass the kitchen, the kid's sitting in a sea of Styrofoam peanuts and has managed to pack just three more cartons. I take two and push them into the triangle the table's

created, but there's still some space. When I go for the third, he's peering into a pie plate. "Do you know it must be four years since I had a piece of pie? My grandmother Agnes made the best pies. Peach was my favorite."

I try to keep my voice Mani-firm. "Connor it's nearly ten-thirty and we got a shitload."

He looks at me as if he knows he's supposed to know me, then salutes. "Aye, Aye, Captain."

Every time I pass through the living room, the Madonna on the mantle seems to have grown more fragile. Sure as fuck, we'll drop her. When we're synchronized, a move has a natural rhythm, a flow, but this one is all push, no give. Geraldo's supposed to be finishing with the bedframes, but I can't find him anywhere. I look out the window. He's at his truck. With his thermos. Which means he's already drinking. Oh, Christ. I tap the window, and he grins his "Come- join-me" grin, gauging my surging desire, ratcheting it up even while mocking me. I knock harder and he comes in. I tell him to start padding the dressers, while I finish the last bedframes and take them to the van.

Somehow the furniture seems to be multiplying. Those two desks and that small hutch, where did they come from? When Geraldo's finished wrapping the dressers, he and I start padding the living room chairs. I can tell he wants to hit his thermos, and I sure as hell want to join him and follow it with a Lorazepam chaser.

Joan comes with bags of tacos for lunch. The four of us sit on the living room's padded chairs. It's awkward. Both because the tacos are messy and because, well, it isn't every day you eat lunch with a nun.

I ask her about the Madonna on the mantel and immediately regret it. The nun from this morning radiated calm, but my question opens a memory hole, and suddenly her soothing

presence has withdrawn. She looks toward the slim figure on the mantel. Clearly it means something to her we three movers can't see.

“Oh, I've had her a while,” Joan says. “Twenty-seven years to be exact. The day I took my final vows, my father gave her to me. He didn't really approve of my being a nun. I had gone to Vassar. He wanted me to be a lawyer like he was. I guess she was his way of letting me know he'd come 'round. But I don't think he ever really understood . . . not really.”

All the time we've been eating Good Geraldo has been listening attentively. But Bad Geraldo has been thrusting his thermos at Connor, smirking at him until the kid takes a drink.

I ask Joan why the community is leaving Las Cruces, and suddenly she's back in the present. She smiles. “Oh, we're not leaving. We think of it as going. We're going to Zuni pueblo. They've invited us . . . there's a school.” She waves her arm over the jumble of cartons and scattered popcorn. “Who knows. Maybe we won't ever need all this stuff . . . maybe we'll leave it in storage and make do with whatever we find on the pueblo.”

Connor has handed to thermos back to Geraldo; he takes a swallow and hands it back to Connor . . . mother fucker, he knows the kid's a step away from falling off the rim of whatever life he has. I should declare lunchtime over, but then Connor asks Joan, “By any chance, you from New Jersey, Sister?”

If Joan notices his words' slurred edges, she doesn't let on. “All these years . . . and you still hear my Jersey bray? So, you must be from Jersey then too?”

Connor rests his elbows on his knees and holds the thermos with both hands, staring into its silver mouth. “Princeton . . . fucking Princeton . . . oh, excuse me, Sister, I didn't mean . . . “

“It's all right . . . I've heard worse.”

“My father was a physics prof” Suddenly the kid lurches and gags. Clots of vodka-scented taco hurl all over a padded armchair. Oh, Christ . . . oh, Christ. He hurls again, then stumbles out the French doors into the gravel yard. Oh, Christ. The three of us stand, bolted to the floor. Then, Joan goes out to Connor. And I grab the stinking pad off the chair. “Don’t just stand there, asshole,” I bark at Geraldo. “Get some garbage bags.” I rip up another pad and start wiping the floor. The stench is overwhelming, but familiar.

The first time I got piss-assed drunk, our parents had gone out. Juliette was supposed to be babysitting me and Amy. But Juliette was being her usual bitchy self and had holed up in her bedroom to study. So Amy and I watched TV until I got bored. I thought I’d do what my father always did whenever he wanted to “liven things up.” Have a drink. At first I thought of raiding the “company” liquor cabinet, but our father never touched that stuff. I think he regarded the liquor in the cabinet as almost sacred, something to be drunk with company, something reserved for family and friends. Liquor-cabinet liquor was not the booze that made our father throw a plate of spaghetti at our mother, or drive our car through the garage door, or run over Adam, our cat. That booze he hid in a tool chest under a workbench in our basement. That was the booze I took my little sister down the stairs for. Vodka.

I remember Amy’s solemn curiosity as she watched me tilt my head back and drink. And I remember, too, how I dropped the bottle top and it rolled under the workbench. And how I handed her the bottle, while I got down on my stomach to retrieve it. And how I had trouble getting the top back on and more trouble climbing out of the basement.

Juliette had made popcorn. She passed it to me and we watched TV. But the aroma turned my stomach. At the third commercial, I went upstairs and puked. I remember looking at myself in the mirror and thinking that I should start shaving. I was thirteen.

Geraldo comes in with a couple of garbage bags and starts stuffing the putrid padding inside. He holds the bag out to me, but I tell him, "It's all yours, Asshole. Stink up your own goddam truck. And here's what you're going to do. You get back to the warehouse and get more pads, and if you're not back here in forty-five minutes, I swear I'll rip your balls off."

When he leaves I open all the windows and let the wind blow in. I call Mani and tell him that Geraldo spilled some soda on a couple of pads. And that I've sent him back for more.

"What kind of soda?"

"What? . . . I don't know." I know Mani's speaking a coded language, and that's important that I understand. But I don't. I press the fetish in my pocket.

I am the black bear.

I guard the West.

I watch the East.

I see what's to come.

"Couldn't 've been Coke. Geraldo hates Coke, especially Diet," Mani says.

I press harder. "No . . . no . . . it wasn't Coke."

"His thermos?"

"I think so."

"Maybe I'll have to dock him for the new pads."

"Maybe that's a good idea."

"Other than that, how's it going?"

"It'll be tight." Silence. "And have Geraldo bring back a tall carton, the kind we use for pedestals . . . there's this tall Madonna."

“Yeah, Sister Joan’s Madonna. She told me about that. You need to wrap that good.” .

We hang up.

Sister Joan sits with Connor on the rim of a dry fountain in the middle of the gravel yard. She’s talking, talking, and he’s nodding. I start wheeling the padded dressers into the van. When I wheel out the one from Margaret’s room, her mural looks like a wall of blue longing. Only her bare mattress remains.

Connor and Joan have back come in. She says she has to leave; she’ll be back at five. Connor looks almost clear eyed.

“Finished with the kitchen?” I ask him.

“Only pots, nothing fragile.”

“Hurry it up. God knows when Geraldo will be back.”

The sun is now streaming through the French doors. The wind through the open windows sends the Styrofoam popcorn on the floor skittering in all directions. Geraldo comes back with fresh pads, the tall carton, and cans of ginger ale. I should chew him out for stopping somewhere, but the ginger ale is meant to make amends, so I tell him to finish wrapping the living room chairs, while I start on the little knick-knacks on the hutch’s shelves: small clay pots, wooden candle holders, two crucifixes. I open the lower doors, and almost cry. If the shelves had been full of dishes, they would have had to be wrapped too, a real time suck. Instead, I find a neat stack of Indian blankets. I should leave them there and tape the hutch shut, but then they’ll be stored away if the nuns need them. Desert temperatures can plummet thirty degrees in an hour, so I put the blankets on the mantel, beside the Madonna. Connor is helping Geraldo finish with the chairs. I wheel the last dresser into the van and then put the box of knickknacks into the hutch, tape it shut, pad it, and wheel it in, too. The desks are next, but they eat up room.

“Put them top-to-top,” Geraldo says. “With the legs up.” I wait for him to make some remark about how that’s how he likes his women, but he doesn’t. The momentum in the house has shifted in favor of the move. A sense of vacancy permeates every room.

I go up the hall and bring the last mattresses into the living room. Mani and the kid get one into the van, then another. An easy rhythm finally has set in. We’re going to make it. Just the chairs remain.

But they’re oversized and there are a lot of them. We try one configuration, but it doesn’t work. Then another, but it’s no good either. Mani says he’s got an idea, and starts taking some stuff out. By laying it on its back, he manages to fit a dining room chair in the space between the desk legs, then, by fitting another seat-to-seat, he fits another.

“Good,” I tell him. He grunts. He and Connor buttress the whole stack with a mattress and I go into the bathroom. I get the box of meds out from under the sink, rip the tape off, and put the Lorazepam from my pocket inside. The tape won’t hold, so I just fold the flaps over so they interlock and put the box on top of the stacked blankets by the Madonna. Then I tell Geraldo to sweep up the place while Connor I load the last of the chairs and mattresses.

“Any peanuts, save,” I tell him. “I’ll need them for the Madonna.” When Connor and I are through loading, I lift her off from the mantel. In front of the fireplace, I lay her on a yard of bubble wrap. My plan is to bubble wrap her, then set her in the carton with enough peanuts to hold her tight. But I worry about her head. Her neck is long and graceful, and looks so vulnerable. Naturally, it’s narrower than the rest of her, so more of it will have to be protected by peanuts than by bubble wrap. But peanuts shift over time.

“Make an extra bubble wrap collar,” Connor says.

“Si, a collar,” Geraldo says. He’s drinking one of the cans of ginger ale.

“You finished sweeping?”

“Yeah,” he says. “Real clean.”

I check around. Everything looks fine, so I tell him, “See you tomorrow, then.”

“If Mani says so” When Geraldo opens the door to leave, I catch a glimpse of the mountains. The setting sun has washed them in orange and rose, but no bright light reaches their deep purple crannies.

“Jeeze, this wind,” Mani says and leaves.

Connor has cut a wrap collar to fit from the Madonna’s shoulders to the crown of her head. I interlock the flaps at the bottom of the carton and then tape them over just to be sure they hold. Next I spill a nest peanuts in and check my watch: Joan will be back in twenty minutes. I hold the carton upright between my feet. It’s four feet high. And Connor and I lift the Madonna — she’s heavier than she looks. And all the bubble wrap has made her awkward to handle and we have to lift her high to get her inside. It’s tricky because the carton’s too narrow to accommodate both her and our arms, so we have to lower her inch by inch, our hands moving up her body, until, at last she’s standing on the peanut nest.

I keep the carton upright between my legs. “Get the rest of the peanuts, and one of those blankets,” I tell Connor. “Pack them around her good.”

When he’s buried the statues in the packaging, he looks up. “She’s asked me to go with them.”

“Who?”

“Joan . . . when we were outside, she asked if I wanted to go with the community.”

“To the pueblo?”

“Yeah. She’d have to ask the tribal leaders, but she’s pretty sure they’ll say yes.”

The Zuni are notoriously private; to live with them is rare. I touch the bear in my pocket.
“Why’d she ask you?”

The kid looks like he’s going to cry. “I guess she saw what I am. It’s very peaceful there, you know. At least that’s what Joan says . . . very peaceful.”

“Do you want to go?”

“I don’t know. Sure as hell I don’t want to keep puking all over the place, but it’s so big out there. I visited the pueblo once. The Zuni have the darkest eyes. Like they’ve sucked all the light in the world into themselves. They see everything, but let out nothing.”

I interlock the flaps of the Madonna’s carton, and Connor seals them with tape. We lay the packed statue in front of the fireplace. Joan’s car pulls up.

“What are you going to tell her, Connor?”

“I don’t know . . . the way the Zuni live . . . what they know, it’s so deep, what if I get drawn in? What if I never come back?”

I wrap my fist around the bear in my pocket. “We all have to live our lives somewhere, Connor. Might as well spend it with good people.”

“I guess that’s one way of looking at it.”

When Sister Joan opens the door, the wind is thrumming through the Organ Mountains. Some people choke up when they look around the empty space where they’ve spent so much time and realize the value of the life they lived there was all in their minds. They ate, gardened, slept, watched TV, made love, maybe lived their whole life in a particular space. But the space was neutral; it never felt the value of what they did there. That was all in their minds.

Maybe Sister Joan knows that, because when she comes in and looks around the empty room she smiles.

The kid is on his knees beside the wrapped Madonna. He looks up at the nun and smiles too. "I guess we're just about all done here," he says.

I don't need to put my hand into my pocket to feel my bear against my thigh. The kid is right: we're done here.

I am the Black Bear.

I heed the wind.

I live the seasons.

I move where I will.