

Sister Cliodhna's House Warming

Sister Cliodhna (klee-OON-a) never considered herself a virgin even though she most certainly was. In the culture of her native land the term virgin connoted much more than how close she kept her legs together. The nun was anything but a demure wallflower. She was proud, boisterous ... when not in chapel ... and she loved life to the fullest.

She also loved children, puppy dogs and welding. Before joining her order of nuns she had been an iron worker on the bridges of Belfast for three years following high school, but lost her job as The Troubles in Derry swung into a higher gear. . Cliodhna was laid off as more men became available in Belfast, men whose real motive in moving from the country had been to come to town and shoot at each other or blow up each other's families. On the surface, the main issue between the mobs appeared to be a theological debate their ancestors had thought important enough to kill over. But the real reasons lie in class and money. Losing the job was particularly unfortunate for Cliodhna. Her strong physique and can-do manner meshed nicely with the welding occupation and she fit in well with her burly co-workers. But in addition to the loss of a career she loved, she was now broke.

In the poverty that was Derry, Cliodhna looked in her wallet and then at the Irish boys surrounding her. Discarding the idea of marrying any of them, she decided to become a nun. Such was a fairly common ticket out of poverty for many of the Irish and they often worked on overseas assignments. Shipped off to America by the Sisters of Hope (whom she often referred to as the Daughters of Drudgery) Cliodhna came on a June day in the early 1960's to the Anglican Children's Home of Our Savior at Utica, where Our Savior was hopefully planning to save the building from collapse.

When she arrived, the orphanage was in chaos, steered crookedly by less than a dozen nuns who were terrifically disorganized. Younger children ran around half dressed, meals were tantamount to bedlam and the

nuns had no idea who was in charge and often argued about whose job was whose.

At the sisters' community meeting on Cliodhna's fourth night at the orphanage, after volunteering a particularly apt summation of the problems she saw, the ironworker from Belfast was elected Mother Superior. "But I've only been in the Habit for 3 years and I'm the youngest here," she said to the outgoing Sister Superior Alfred who would now gladly lay down her scepter of power and with it all the complaints, petty arguments and normal bickering heard in any convent. "Sissy-shit," Cliodhna called it.

The nuns at the orphanage were unique in the mostly working class Catholic city. Called Episcopalians by the townspeople, the sisters were actually professed in the Church of Ireland, a close cousin to Anglicanism. They had been enlisted at the turn of the last century by Utica's upper crust Protestants to run the orphanage built by a local benefactor. Though Our Savior's charges were mostly Catholic children, the bourgeoisie had been very happy to find Protestant nuns, even if they had to be imported.

It wasn't long before the home was running like a well adjusted time piece. It turned out that Sr. Cliodhna had just the right touch with people, nuns especially, knowing when to cajole and reason and when to scream and kick ass. When the new Superior was in a mood, the sisters would step sprightly through their chores and work harmoniously together even though they had been arguing only 30 minutes earlier.



At night when she retired, the young nun worried about how she could lead the women in their care for the children, dealing with the individual tragedies that had brought each child to Our Savior's door. From where would the money come to fix the sagging floor under the dining room? Was she helping her sisters to live a life of service? And helping them to a closeness to each other and to God?

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September always brought the bittersweet combination of chaos and relief as the summer ended and the children went back to school. Not that the nuns would take a vacation. With the children no longer underfoot in the daytime, floors were to be scrubbed and waxed, rooms painted and other chores accomplished against the coming winter.

Sr. Cliodhna spent the final week of August ensuring each child was enrolled in either a public or Catholic school. Sister Romula at the nearby Catholic elementary spoke of the possibility of having to charge tuition to Our Savior's orphans in the coming years to cover expenses. The bitch, thought Cliodhna.

Cliodhna's conversations with various institutions in the community from whom she tried to enlist financial support became more urgent. On a Wednesday morning she visited the middle-aged president of a local bank where she voiced a need for money to fix the sagging floor in the dining room. Mr. Bentingham nodded his head sagely as if he had a great understanding of floors and orphans, but didn't appear to be forthcoming with cash. "I'm sure it's a struggle," he said

Cliodhna's blood boiled. A struggle? This blue-blooded ijit hadn't the slightest idea what happened in the real world of broken lives, orphaned children and dwindling finances. She fumed inside.

The nun stood and squared her shoulders, then loomed over the man. "You're coming with me," she said. She took him by the ear and told him they were going for a ride. Half laughing, he left the bank babbling about how he hadn't been pulled out of his seat by the ear since his mother died ten years before.

In her medieval Habit with a 3 foot Rosary hanging from her waist, Sr. Cliodhna declined the banker's offer of a two martini lunch and led him straight to the cellar under the sagging floor. She pointed up at the steel beams that ran from the brick foundation across the expanse of ceiling above the dirt floor.

"The beams are partly rusted, Mr. Bentingham" she told the banker.

"Call me Brent," he said.

"We've stopped the rainwater leaks. All I need are lots of diamond-plate steel butts to scab the beams and a few lolly columns for temporary support."

"How much money?" asked Brent.

"About four hundred, maybe."

"Including labor?"

"No," she said.

Sr. Cliodhna knew she needed more than donations. She wanted people from the community to invest themselves in the Children's Home of Our Savior. Not just for the money. The home had no friends. Sister Cliodhna looked at Brent. He appeared in decent physical shape.

"Me?" asked the banker.

"You could use the exercise, Brent. You do the lifting and I'll do the welding."

Brent brought along men friends from his club the following Saturday. They were dressed in their old clothes, last season's tennis tops and shorts. Cliodhna sent them home to put on long pants, concerned about the flying sparks. It was enough to worry about setting



Our Savior ablaze while welding without having to be concerned about tender shins. Cliodhna wore her nun's headpiece and coveralls buttoned to the neck. It was difficult managing the welder's helmet, but she succeeded. She allowed Brent to try a little welding and transferred the hood to his head, but soon realized he was messing up his lap joints and she relegated him back to carrying steel plates.

Wives arrived at noon bearing dishes of food for the workers. Brent proudly told everyone of his welding work. After the club lunched in the cellar on the dirt floor, sitting on broken furniture and overturned ash cans, a few wandered upstairs to visit with the children.

Sister Cliodhna was relieved to have the floor shored up and to have members of the community helping out. She hoped that eventually she would attract a mix of people here and not only the tennis club. It would do them all as much good as it would the children. She realized that a new facet of Our Savior was being revealed: the orphanage as a focal point for those who had a heart to be with the children and hopefully with each other.

Brent was quite proud of himself. He would never admit it, but it was the first honest labor he had done in his life. Smiling broadly, he asked Cliodhna, "So, did I do well?"

"Yes," she replied, "thank you so much."

"How about my welding," he asked, "what would the Belfast bridge welders say about it? Good, huh?"

The nun looked around to make sure no one would hear.

"We would say, 'For a banker, me son, you've got quite a pair of iron ones.'"

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