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Kevin O'Hara: The angelic nuns at Christmas

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By Kevin O'Hara

PITTSFIELD — "The nuns turn into angels after Midnight Mass, and they stay that way till Christmas Morning.

"I would have paid little heed to such a claim, except that it came from the lips of a lovely 5th grader named Maureen - who was almost a goddess to a measly 2nd grader like myself."

That's preposterous!" exclaimed her classmate, Peggy - a very big word for our small schoolyard at St. Charles.

Maureen tugged at her mittens in annoyance. "Oxen are known to kneel on Christmas Night, donkeys speak, and bees hum holy hymns. So why not our Sisters turning into angels? Besides, Neddie Nertney, an 8th grader, swears he saw Sr. Theresa Gabriel flying around the steeple last Christmas."

"Oh, please," chided Peggy. "If Neddie Nertney was Pinocchio, his nose would be three times longer than a yardstick."

I stopped dead in my tracks to eavesdrop on their conversation. It made perfect sense to me that

nuns could turn themselves into angels. Holy as any saint, they spoke about angels like longtime pals and buddies.

Maureen spotted me snooping about, and called me into their company. "You're the janitor's son, right, and have a birds-eye view of the convent from your parish quarters. Isn't that so?"

I fidgeted in my metal-clasped boots. "Yep."

"Have you seen any flying nuns?"

"Nope. But I saw them sweeping their front porch once."

Maureen patted my beanie-covered head: "Keep an eye out this Christmas, and report any findings to me in January."

I bit my lower lip in determination, for I'd never been called upon to do anything so important, especially for one so pretty. "Y-you bet."

That Christmas Eve, after Midnight Mass, I eagerly took up my post in our upstairs bedroom, armed with my Jolly Roger toy telescope. From my crow's nest, I watched the black-robed Sisters - quiet as falling snow - shuffle back in pairs from the church to the convent. In moments, I espied a single candle flicker to life in their chapel window.

"What are you doing?" my older brother Jimmy complained. He was tucked in bed, trying desperately to sleep.

"The Sisters are about to turn into angels, and I've got to report my findings to my brand-new girlfriend. I figure they'll fly out their attic window, just like bats. Neddie Nertney saw one of them zipping around the church last Christmas."

Jimmy sat up on his elbows: "Neddie's nuttier than a Payday! Do you really think he spotted Huck Finn rafting down the Housatonic River last summer?"

Foolishly dismissing my brother's advice, I stayed at my watch until drowsiness overcame me. Soon I tumbled into bed, a sad scout, with nary a thing to report to charming Maureen but the lone candle in the old convent's chapel window.

During the magical week that followed - Christmas to New Year's - I concocted an elaborate story; a tale so utterly convincing it was sure to win me great favor with my bonny colleen.

"Maureen," I'd begin, "the nuns flew into the starry night shortly after Mass, where they perched on the lofty bell tower. There they cooed like doves, where I noticed that Sr. Helen is actually afraid of heights, and Sr. Boniface has had her wings clipped a time or two. Suddenly they flew off in a clap of wings, and circled the steeple like a flying circus. And guess what? They were all wearing Buster

Brown shoes."

But as the holidays drew to a close, I thought it unwise to fib about the nuns; a fib that could reap dire consequences in both this lifetime and the next. So I decided to tell the truth and shame the devil and, alas, I disclosed my woeful findings to a crestfallen Maureen.

Many years later, I had the chance to ask Sister Theresa Gabriel directly. She'd always been a favorite of mine, and the kindly old nun replied ...

"Me, an angel, heaven's no, though a few Sisters of St. Joseph were worthy of joining the ranks of Seraphim. But I'll never forget my first Christmas as a young nun at St. Charles; the splendor of the church, the welcoming priests and parishioners. And your father, of course, ringing the midnight bells to herald the Savior's birth."

The venerable Sister paused to catch her breath.

"After Mass - when you believed we'd become angels - all the Sisters gathered in our chapel, where a candle was lit to guide the Holy Family. We sang a solemn hymn followed by our closing nightly prayer. Next thing, our Superior motioned me to place the Christ Child in its manger. Trembling at the honor, I picked up the Holy Infant whereupon an inexplicable joy enveloped me - a bliss I dare say only the angels in Heaven might know. And when I laid the Christ Child gently into His crib, I knew indubitably that He was the only child I ever wished to call my own."

Kevin O'Hara writes an annual Christmas story for The Eagle.

Photo caption

"The Convent Choir" by Jehan Georges Vibert, 1865.

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