

FICTION

The Keepsake



SARAH ALLISON

Editor's note: Last summer, *Liguorian* ran a fiction contest through Catholic universities. Writers of the top three entries are being awarded a cash prize and publication of their story. *The Keepsake* received first-place recognition. Sarah Allison is a senior at Franciscan University of Steubenville (Ohio).

Up until now, the three girls had the church playground to themselves—a tenuous privacy. Outside the playground fence, a grounds worker ripped weeds from a flower bed surrounding a Lourdes statue; a few parents chatted by the church door waiting for catechism class to end; and an old couple in wheelchairs at the neighboring nursing-home property gazed at ducks on the lawn.

At the sound of the gate opening, Melinda sat up straighter in her swing. She had been daydreaming, stirring her toes in the mulch, and now the swing swayed a little, forcing her to dig her feet back in to steady herself. She recognized the first entrant as a girl from youth group. A tall girl, Lizzie or Lexy, she couldn't quite recall which, marched out carrying a clipboard. Melinda watched as she herded a second-grader to a picnic table. "Can you say the Glory Be, please?"

"They're testing the second-graders on prayers again," said Melinda. She tugged at the charm bracelet around her wrist—a simple stainless-steel bracelet, hot where the sunlight touched it, that held only one charm—a little cartoon angel.

Unconcerned, her friend, Agnes, flung the swing forward, sending her toddler sister into high-pitched fits of laughter. Agnes squealed back to her in baby talk, even though it made Melinda cringe. She and Agnes were both fourteen, and the squealing was drawing unwanted attention.

Melinda could have easily disliked Agnes Petty, who was possibly the most dedicated student of their parish catechism program without even having to try. But despite herself, Melinda enjoyed sharing the playground with Agnes after youth group. She liked the fact that they carpooled, even if they had to wait an hour for Agnes' mom to finish the third grade's class lesson for the day. And even if it meant they had to babysit one or two of Agnes' seven younger siblings.

"When did Lexy start volunteering?" asked Agnes, nodding toward the tall girl, who now checked something off on her clipboard.

"Oh, *that's* her name. I'm not sure."

"Have you finished yours yet?"

"No," said Melinda, shuffling her feet. The form for youth group was still very much blank, not to mention tucked into a forgotten desk drawer back home. "I've still got a few hours to go."

"Really? How many? I finished mine, but we can volunteer together."

Melinda held up her hand and watched the angel charm bobble. "Three hours."

Agnes looked over in alarm. "But the year's almost over!"

Just then the toddler wailed, demanding to go to the sandbox. Agnes helped her out of the swing, continuing to look toward Melinda. "We'll find something. You could weed the gardens!"

"Sure, I just love being around ants." Melinda envisioned herself crouched in a flower bed, stabbing at weeds with a spade while Agnes stood guard with an EpiPen in one hand and bug spray in the other.

Agnes situated her sister into the sandbox. The toddler banged a plastic truck against the gritty wooden ledge; Agnes plunked herself down a few inches away. Melinda brushed some sand off to clear a space on the ledge and joined her.

Placing her chin on her hand, Agnes cut the pose of a thinker. "You could do what Lexy's doing and test kids on their prayers. Or we could clean out the classrooms."

"No."

"Then we could...." Agnes' gaze traveled back and forth, scanning the church grounds.

Melinda leaned her chin on her hand and stared ahead. She glanced to the side. A nurse was wheeling the patients back into the nursing home one by one.

"When was the last time anybody went over to the nursing home?" she asked.

"I don't know," said Agnes.

"I know I haven't been there since last Christmas. No, the Christmas before that."

"Oh, right! I remember that now."

"You remember the cards and the singing?" Melinda could recall her younger self, in a dark red dress studded with strawberry-seed beads, poised next to the piano and hoping desperately for the end of *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* so she could get her candy and go home.

"It was really nice," said Agnes.

"It was creepy and smelled bad," Melinda replied. "Not to mention awkward, I didn't know what to say to anybody. And I remember I got one of those weird, rainbow-colored candy canes. You know, the ones that aren't *really* peppermint."

Agnes looked concerned. "You should have told me. I would have traded you. Anyway, the point wasn't the candy; it was to brighten people's day." She turned to the toddler, catching her chubby wrist in one hand and pointing at her with the other. "Cecelia, no throwing sand."

Melinda watched them and batted at the angel pendant with one finger to make it swing faster. "I bet you made a ton of cards."

"Six," said Agnes. "I got in trouble for using a whole bottle of glitter. How many cards did you



make?" Her eye fell on the bracelet. "Hey, where'd you get that bracelet?"

"It's Mrs. Durand's." Melinda traced the angel's happy smile. "She left it in the church a while back and I found it. I've been bringing it to church to give it back to her, but she hasn't been around since... since February. Wow! It's been almost five months. I've gotten into the habit of wearing it."

"She had a stroke," said Agnes.

Melinda stopped playing with the angel pendant. Its little metal face kept smiling serenely at her. "Is she OK?"

"Yes, but I don't know where she is now. She might still be in the hospital."

Melinda couldn't imagine being stuck in one room all day, especially now when it was warm outside. Missing the smell of grass in the air and the sound of swings squeaking as the breeze nudged them. It was bad enough being confined to a classroom during youth group.

Agnes jumped up. "I've got an idea!"

"Go visit the nursing home?" Melinda said chewing on the end of her ponytail.

"Yes!" Agnes hopped up and down excitedly. "A whole big group can go. It's a perfect idea."

"I don't think they do that now," said Melinda. "Whoever was organizing it stopped."

"We could organize it," said Agnes. She stopped to pick up the toddler, whose demands had been growing increasingly shrill. "Oh, it's Cecelia's nap-time. And it's almost time to go home. But next week we'll go to the religious-education office and ask."

"Uh, you'll do the asking, right?" quizzed Melinda. The office made her nervous. She hadn't been inside since her mother signed her up for a class in kindergarten.

"Come on," said Agnes, nudging Melinda with her foot. "No cleaning, testing, or ant bites, just some homemade cards and maybe some singing."

She checked her watch. Class would be over in a few minutes. Time to go.

The next week shuffled past. Sunday-morning Mass was followed by youth group, where they were trying to memorize the corporal works of mercy. Mrs. Durand's angel bracelet was nestled safely in Melinda's pocket, even though there didn't seem to be much point to carrying it any more. Agnes wasn't at youth group and the Pettys' van wasn't in the parking lot. It wasn't too unusual for them to be late, so Melinda didn't worry until the session ended and she was standing in front of the religious-education office, with no Agnes.



Melinda entered the office lobby and glanced at the shiny sign above the director's door. Right on cue, her phone buzzed in her hand. Agnes' name glowed on the screen. Melinda thumbed the green button.

"Hey, Melinda." Agnes sounded exhausted.

"Where are you?" demanded Melinda.

"I can't go into the office alone."

"The little kids have a stomach virus," said Agnes.

"Are you sick?"

"Not yet. I'll call you later and let you know what's going on, OK?"

Melinda shot a glance at the sign, which glinted like the desert sun and made her throat feel like sand. "OK, but what about the service hours?"

Agnes let out a sigh. "We'll have to ask next week. I have to go."

Melinda hung up and flopped into one of the chairs by the door—so much for *that* plan. Her throat felt like the Sahara Desert. She started to head for the water fountain and was almost safely out of view of the door when the office doorknob clicked and twisted. Melinda sank back into her chair as the door slid open, blocking the path to the water fountain. Out leaned a woman, her curly hair bouncing. She looked back and forth and gave Melinda a warm smile. "Hi, Melinda. What can I do for you?"

"Um...." Melinda gave her the side-eye for a moment before she remembered that this was the new assistant director. "It's not really important."

"Are you sure? We're here if you need anything."

Melinda turned around to leave and paused. As she fueled her lungs with a deep breath, she slid her hand into her pocket to grip the charm bracelet, spiny and cold. She slipped it onto her wrist and then she could speak.

"I was wondering if we could have a, um, group of people go over to the nursing home with...cards or something and visit the people, since we haven't done that in a while. It could count as service hours for the kids."

The woman didn't answer at first, and Melinda thought she should get out of the room as fast as possible before she got in trouble for bothering her. She glanced over her shoulder.

The woman was smiling. "That's a great idea! That fits right in with the lessons about the corporal works of mercy! Mrs. Durand used to organize those visits. Anyway, I'll check with everyone else."



What gave you the idea?"
 "Agnes thought of it," said Melinda.
 "Well, I'll definitely see what I can do."

Two weeks later, they visited the nursing home—a group of almost thirty kids with cards to hand out. Melinda tucked her own cards under her arm, knowing she'd soon have finished the three service hours she needed.

Part of the group split off toward the dining room, where people were already sitting. Agnes was already talking animatedly with a resident as Melinda passed by. She and some of the older kids handed cards to the people sitting in their wheelchairs along the edge of the halls. The rooms lay open, and teachers walked some of the students into individual rooms to visit residents confined to their beds. Melinda handed off her last card and put her empty hands into her pockets as she looked around.

The assistant director came out of a room not far away and smiled at Melinda. "Why don't you go in and visit?"

"I'm out of cards," said Melinda.

"Just go in and say hi," urged the director. "She hasn't had any visitors yet."

Melinda paused, uncertain, when something tugged her eyes to the sign by the door. It had an elaborate drawing of an angel with wise black eyes, shaded with

charcoal. Melinda toyed with the pendant on the bracelet and stepped through the door into a dim room, a sour smell beneath a mask of flowery scent. The nearer bed was empty. The one closer to the window held a woman, lying silently with closed eyes. Was she asleep? Why was Melinda supposed to go in here?

A bulletin board hung on the wall by the woman's bed. Crayon-covered get-well-soon cards hung all over the board, layered against each other like a nest. Melinda stepped closer.

"Hello, Melinda. I heard that you arranged this."

Melinda spun around. The woman in the bed had her eyes open and was smiling at her. Her smile was lopsided, but her eyes were a clear grey.

"Mrs. Durand?"

"In the flesh," said Mrs. Durand. She looked older than Melinda remembered, her voice slurred a little, but her smile was full of joy.

"I'm sorry," said Melinda. "I don't have a card. I...."

Her hand fell upon something in her pocket. A tiny wing poked against her palm.

"I do have something for you." She pulled out the charm bracelet so that the guardian angel charm swung, glinting.

"You forgot this." ●

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