

Press Pass Gazette

‘Not All Those Who Wander Are Lost’

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I sit with legs swinging in unison, hands clasped together in my lap. Eerie whispers slither into earshot, under thresholds and through door fissures. The overwhelming stench of wood polish attacks the senses. I watch, as nurses pass briskly, wearing faces that suggest sucking on a lemon: lips puckered in disdain, brow creased deep in thought. A droning voice disturbs my thoughts, ‘You can see her now’. Ushered down an ominously silent corridor, our footsteps resound in echoes.

Stepping foot past that threshold is like stumbling through a veil, my vision enveloped by a sheet of glorious technicolour. An assortment of photographs plaster once barren walls, sharp pigments stinging my eyes. Candles line the window sills, their small flames twinkling brightly while a collection of smooth porcelain animals lay adjacent, features frozen and perpetually calm. A vibrant display of beautiful glass rosary beads hangs on slender bedposts, deep amber, olive green and cerulean blue. A fragrant exotic incense lingers in the stagnant air.

Soft spears of golden light stream through the treetops of the towering oaks outside and dapple the battered armchair, once rich red velvet fading to a dusty rose. Propped up, golden spectacles twinkling, sits my great aunt Claude. The silence is interrupted by a chirpy squawk, an unexpectedly boisterous volume from such a seemingly frail woman. Birdlike in posture, slightly stooped frame, she masks an overwhelmingly animated character. Immediately her striking blue eyes crinkle at the corners, her leathery skin stretching into a warm smile. Grasping my palms, her grip surprisingly firm, she zealously exclaims; ‘I’ve been waiting!’

While my granny politely nibbles a scone, I teeter on the edge of the stool, teacup poised in mid-air. I stare in wonder as my elderly

aunt becomes youthful once again. Handing moving in intricate patterns and elaborate motions, she regales me with tales from her journeys across the world. A long pointed finger reaches out and, with a delicate flick, twirls a small globe. The world whizzes past me, a colourful smudge of bright greens and vivid blues. As head of the Presentation Sisters, Claude paid visits to convents worldwide, from the sandy expanse of Israel to the wide-open prairies of Australia. Her exotic incense transports me to her days tirelessly exploring the vast plains of Africa underneath the blistering sun, visiting schoolchildren in a tiny village of Zambia by day and sleeping on rough straw mats on the earthy floor under the starry veil of midnight. It was in Africa that she consumed nothing but bananas and nuts for 9 months, returning as thin as a whippet. ‘Local dishes didn’t agree with me’, she quips dismissively, ‘I hankered for a good slice of beef’. Her wistful appetite for travel is palpable. She tells me of the food markets she encountered in Peru and India. Hustling and bustling stalls nestled in narrow alleyways, the sweet aroma of curry wafting by. Tables concealed by bowls of golden grain and multicoloured jewels of fruits. Barely capable of breathing in the balmy air, unable to move, it is here she felt her happiest. My eyes fixate in astonishment at sun-bleached photographs: My aunt beaming down from a camel’s back, it’s whiskery chin slick with drool. Wiping a sheen of sweat off her forehead before debating with Tibetan monks under the shade of a palm tree. Cross-legged on the floor, I was presented with various precious objects from her tropical voyages. A gorgeous leather bracelet, a straw purse, a tiny Russian doll. ‘They’ll be with you longer than me’. A sad smile passing her lips, she would let slip a throaty laugh of fearful recognition that I never quite understood.

When I step inside that door today, there is

no longer an exuberant greeting. Instead, a brief introduction, a poignant and dismal exchange. What once seemed a glorious array of invaluable objects from far-flung countries, now seem like clutter. The porcelain creatures that were once fastidiously polished now gather dust in disarray. The most harrowing transformation is my great aunt, gazing contently out the window, an expression of mild bewilderment stirring on her face. When I speak to her, prompting acknowledgement, her striking blue eyes waver for just a moment. There’s a split second, a spark, her eyes dancing in recognition as a memory attempts to surface. Then, the moment ceases. Vacant eyes return to turbulent thoughts. In a world of her own, she brazenly explores uncharted lands.

It’s not all contrite. She often gazes fondly at her photographs, capable of appreciating those memories even though they now belong to a stranger. I hear her humming to herself, an African tribal chant she taught me long ago, a haunting rendition. The dusty path snaking up to that dreary hospital is a challenging but comforting reminder; ‘Not all those who wander are lost’.

