

“When the Saints Go Marching In”

Excerpted from *Conversations with My Mother*

by Ronald-Stéphane Gilbert

Dressed in slacks and a light sweater despite the warm summer morning, my elderly mother lies on the den sofa, her phlebitis-stricken legs raised and clad in support hose to prevent swelling, while I scan channels with the television’s remote control and my sister Diane, Mom’s principal caregiver, studies her iPhone.

Noticing two thrushes that’ve landed on a shrub outside the window, my mother cries, “Look!” Frightened, one of the birds takes flight, but the other lingers for a moment, its head cocked and eyes set on Mom, before following suit.

Diane’s iPhone tings, signaling a new text message. “Oh my God!” she exclaims, “Pat Richards died this week!”

“What! Matt Richard died in his sleep?!” Mom asks, misunderstanding as result of her hearing loss, dementia, or both in combination.

Diane corrects her gently. “Not Matt Richard, our snowplow guy,” she says, “Pat Richards, your friend from Kennebunkport.”

Mom looks shocked. “She died in her sleep?!”

“I’m not sure,” Diane answers. “I only know she died a few days back.”

“When’s the funeral?” I ask.

“Later this morning,” Diane replies.

My mother rises shakily from the sofa. “We’re going!” she announces.

Diane and I are taken aback. “Are you sure? It’s not even in town.”

“I don’t care!” Mom retorts as she grabs hold of her walker.

While helping her up, I ask Diane. “Where is it?”

“At an Episcopal church in Kennebunkport—the one by the Bush estate at Walker’s Point,” Diane answers.

This revelation gives my mother, a lifelong Democrat, pause. “Do you think we’ll run into the Bushes?” she asks.

“Why? Afraid you’ll tear your support hose on them?” Diane quips.

I laugh. “I don’t think any of the Bushes will be at the service, Mom,” I reassure her. “It’s not as if they knew Pat personally.”

“How can you be sure?” my mother replies, heading toward the staircase, presumably to go up to her room and change into more appropriate clothing. “Pat was outgoing and knew all sorts of people! Remember when she threw a surprise anniversary party for your father and me at the Colony Hotel?”

Knowing the story by heart, Diane and I nod. Still, aware of how much Mom likes to tell it, Diane questions her. “Was that the time Pat ran into those summer-stock actors from the Ogunquit Playhouse? Wasn’t one famous?”

“That’s right!” my mother affirms, delighted, but then, with a frown, adds. “I can’t remember his name!”

“Was it Patrick Macnee, the star of *Sleuth*?” I offer, knowing full well that it was.

“*Oui, c’était lui ! Il était si gentil !*” Mom, who’s Franco-American, answers excitedly. “He sent champagne to our table!”

“And your point is?” Diane asks.

My mother frowns. “My point is that Pat was very friendly. She even gave the supermarket cashiers and baggers birthday cards! I wish I were so outgoing,” she concludes, getting to the heart of the matter.

“Did you envy that about her?” I ask.

Mom, ever precise with language, shakes her head. “No! I appreciated it!”

“She was a wonderful person,” I say, partly in appeasement but also because I mean it.

“I understand, Mom,” Diane concedes, “but Kennebunkport is a bit of a drive, especially in summer traffic.”

“I don’t care about the traffic,” my mother says dismissively.

“Plus, you’ve never been to this church,” I remark, hoping she’ll recall how she’s confused by unfamiliar places.

Mom glares at me. “How can I not go?” she demands. “I traveled to New York to see her off on the *QE2* when she went to France to help her son and his wife with their firstborn! I can certainly manage going to Kennebunkport to see her off now!” She gets on the chairlift and, with a wistful look, adds, “I still remember standing on the dock, waving as the ship’s foghorn blew and confetti streamed down.” The chairlift ascends, ending the discussion.

“I’d better help her get dressed,” Diane says to me.

When Diane and Mom return half an hour later, I’ve donned the black pin-stripe suit that I always bring with me on my visits in case my mother suddenly passes away.

“You look nice!” Mom exclaims. “Why did you bring a suit with you to Maine?”

“I might have to go to Boston for a business meeting,” I lie, with the ease that comes from having an aged and easily perturbed parent.

My mother glances at me sharply. “You’re not half as good a liar as you think,” she says. “Thank God for that!”

“But enough about me,” I reply, resolutely nonchalant. “Look at you.” My mother is wearing a sleek Givenchy sheath, sheer white wrap, and black patent-leather slingbacks—which, these days, is the most formal shoe style she can wear without risking a fall. “Where does all this come from?” I ask, because, though it looks familiar, it’s not what she wore to her cousin Virgil’s funeral just a few months ago. “Did you go shopping?”

“Yes,” she replies, smiling. “In the 60s!”

“She never throws anything out!” Diane chimes in, rolling her eyes.

“A good thing, too,” my mother retorts. “That way, I always have something to wear.” She waves a white clutch bag at me by way of illustration. “I bought this in 1955—on my honeymoon!”

“It’s lovely,” I say to placate her.

“You should see what’s inside!” Diane exclaims. “A black-lace veil and matching handkerchief!”

“It never hurts to be prepared,” Mom says.

To move things along, literally as well as figuratively, I ask Diane which car we’ll be taking.

“There’s no gas in Dad’s old Cadillac, so we’ll take my Lexus.”

“The black car?” Mom asks.

“That’s right,” Diane replies.

“Good! It’s suitable!”

Diane rolls her eyes again. “It’s not like it’s a state funeral.”

“One should always rise to the occasion,” my mother remarks, deploying a favorite admonishment.

Since this is the last week of May and the summer vacation season has yet to start in earnest, the drive to Kennebunkport is uneventful. On our way through the village, my mother peers out the Lexus’s windows at the sailboat-filled harbor, picturesque shops, open-air

restaurants, and 18th- and 19th-mansions. “A penny for your thoughts,” I remark, as the car passes the columned portico of the Colony and starts down the seaside road toward the church.

“Aren’t they worth a little more?” Mom responds, without taking her eyes off the ocean and the summer estates rolling by behind the deeply tinted glass.

We both laugh.

“How did you get to know Pat?” I ask. “You don’t have any other friends in Kennebunkport.”

“She and her late husband were customers of your father’s. His company installed the heat in their summer house when they decided to live here year round.” She pauses. “Pat was a retired French teacher, and, when she found out your Dad and I spoke French, we hit it off.”

She turns toward me. “This is making me think of your father,” she says, “and the wonderful times we had. Back when your Dad and I were still young, it seemed like friends and family would last forever.” Her expression becomes serious. “But, now, everything’s past.”

“Not everything,” I say to console her. “Your children are still alive and a lot of your friends are, too.”

She retrieves the handkerchief from her purse and blots a tear. “Poor Pat—dying in her sleep! One moment here, then gone the next!” she says, snapping her fingers.

“Maybe that’s the best way to go,” I reply and instantly regret my remark.

“You think so?” she asks. “No time to say goodbye or make amends, a disappearing act where you just vanish, like the opposite of a rabbit coming out of a hat—you think that’s best?”

“Not really. I just wanted to make you feel better and stop looking back.”

She sighs. “I knew that,” she says and touches my hand. “Don’t worry—I’ll be OK. This is not *my* last act—today’s about Pat!”

A bird, its species rendered indiscernible in high-speed flight, hurtles toward the windshield then rockets upward into the bright, clear sky. Diane and I watch, breathless, but Mom is unrattled. “Pat loved birds,” she remarks. “She had birdfeeders everywhere—in the backyard, off her patio, on the front lawn, even in her flowerbeds.”

“Is that so?”

“Oh yes,” she affirms. “She loved birds almost as much as she loved people. In fact, she called them God’s little messengers.”

“That’s poetic,” I comment.

“It’s a fact,” my mother says.

The car turns into the church drive and pulls into a parking space on the lawn’s edge. Diane opens Mom’s car door and helps her out onto the uneven grass, while I retrieve her walker from the trunk.

“Can you give me my veil?” Mom asks Diane.

She dutifully retrieves it from my mother’s clutch, then drapes it atop her head, making sure it doesn’t fall over her face. “Is this all right?”

“C’est parfait !” Mom replies. “I’ll lower it if I start to cry. That’s what I meant about ‘being prepared.’” Glancing at her walker, she adds, “I don’t want to make a bigger spectacle of myself than I already am.”

Mom’s veil billowing in the wind, she, Diane, and I slowly advance up the flagstone walk past briar roses abuzz with bees and yellowjackets and ascend the ramp alongside the granite front steps. Once we’re inside the church, an usher greets us. “Friends or family?” he asks.

The first, I tell him. He motions us to the left and, in deference to my mother’s age, tells her, “Feel free to remain seated during the service, Ma’am.”

“Thank you,” she replies, her smile strained.

“The attention embarrasses her,” Diane whispers to me. “That’s why she’s stopped going to Sunday mass.”

Diane and I sit beside Mom as she settles into the pew. At the front of the church, Pat’s silver-haired son takes his place along the center aisle, where the coffin, adorned with white lilies and blue delphinium, sits amid tall candles. Suddenly, the sound of wings descends upon us as first one and then another starling swoop into the transept and dart back and forth amid its pewter chandeliers so fast that, from below, they are mere streaks of bluish black against the room’s white ceiling. Heads turn upward and the congregation’s women adjust hats and veils to guard against droppings.

The organist begins a somber Bach prelude while a pair of blond acolytes, their bronze tans testimony to the season, enter the sanctuary, a gilded crucifix held aloft before them. The female celebrant, white-haired and willowy in Pentecostal green vestments, follows.

“Nuns say mass now?!” Mom asks, nudging me.

“No,” I reply. “The Episcopalians have women priests.”

“Oh,” she answers.

Facing the crowd, the priest introduces herself. “Welcome! I’m the Reverend Millicent Ware. Thank you all for joining me in honoring the life of Pat Richards, our sister in Christ.” Glancing up at the starlings crisscrossing the transept, she adds, “In my 15 years as rector here, not one bird has flown into this church. So, I’m guessing that these two, like all Pat’s friends, are here today to pay their respects.” Laughter follows.

The organ emits the first notes of Fauré’s *Pie Jesu*, and Pat’s funeral officially begins, the familiar opening portions—the Greeting, the Penitential Act, and the Glory to God—proceeding at their immutable, solemn pace. It’s unusually hot for May and, as the service proceeds through the Collect, people fan themselves with whatever is at hand—the weekly hymnal, the funeral program, or, in my family’s case, hand-painted fans that I bought on a long-ago business trip to Seoul and that Mom, with surprising foresight, has brought in her purse. High above, the starlings, perhaps trying to find their way out, perform loop-the-loops and other aeronautical acrobatics under the peaked ceiling. Fanning herself, Diane frowns. “Someone should open the doors to let those birds out—and let the breeze in!”

I nod, raising a linen handkerchief to my forehead to wipe away forming perspiration.

In the sanctuary, the Reverend Ware, having completed the Gospel readings, takes her place at a lectern emblazoned with the obligatory St. Mark’s eagle. “Let us rejoice, for we are assembled this morning not to lament the passing from this earthly realm of Pat Richards but to

celebrate her rebirth in the glorious hereafter!” she asserts, the boldness of her proclamation belied by her waiflike appearance yet underscored by the eagle’s fierce expression.

Besides me, my mother lowers her veil in anticipation of coming tears.

“All of us gathered here today—Pat’s friends, family, neighbors, and fellow parishioners—know she was special!” the priest declares. “Who among us can say that, despite life’s tribulations, we greet each morning with joy and bid every evening farewell with gratitude for the love and beauty God has bestowed on us?” she asks rhetorically, and then, as expected, answers the question. “Pat—who was so full of life, love, and appreciation for the gifts of God and others—did exactly that, day in and day out, every day of her life!” The church is silent save for the flutter of waved papers, fans, and birds’ wings. “Many were the times she joined us here for sunrise services and evening vespers,” she continues, “worked in our community garden, and gave of her time to make and deliver meals for the elderly, infirm, or otherwise incapacitated. May we all strive to follow her example, and, like her, someday reap the reward of eternal peace and repose in the embrace of our Maker!”

As if heeding Reverend Ware’s exhortations, the starlings circumnavigate the nave, sweeping low over the altar in concentric arcs, then soaring upward, one landing amid the clerestory windows above the sanctuary and the other racing through the choir loft to exit via the steeple staircase. Startled as the passing bird nearly brushes her top of her head, the elderly organist grabs the keyboard and accidentally activates the automated rhythm function, causing a bass beat to resonate throughout the building.

Gasps arise amid the mourners, but Reverend Ware remains composed at her microphone. “And that,” she remarks dryly, “could be interpreted either as divine endorsement

or a coincidence,” eliciting chuckles from the congregants. “Whichever, it’s a good segue into the eulogy from John Richards,” she concludes, motioning to Pat’s son, who assumes the lectern.

“Well, this certainly is an unorthodox funeral,” he begins, looking up at the choir loft as the automated beat continues unabated.

“Why hasn’t that noise stopped?” My mother whispers.

“Beats me!” I reply, my pun eliciting only a weary sigh.

“But that’s OK,” John continues. “Because, as many of you know, Mom liked commotion.” Murmurs of acknowledgement ripple through the crowd. “Wherever she went, she was the life of the party—the person who always introduced herself and brought everyone together. She made more friends in an average year than most of us will make in a lifetime.”

My mother nods in agreement.

“In fact,” he continues, Mom acquired friends the way some collect people books or China. She had friends of all ages, kinds, and colors. A few she’d known since childhood, others she’d taught with, and a lot more she’d simply met in the course of her everyday life—while shopping, doing volunteer work, or taking her beloved dance classes. They included the young and the old, artists and professionals, the educated and uneducated. Some of those she met while traveling on vacation speak other languages like Japanese, Spanish, and Italian—I’ve received condolences from the world over.” He surveys the congregation. “I see a number of her friends here today—her neighbor Eileen Snow, her former principal Mary Eaton, and Joe Friedman who taught summer school with her.” Then, with a nod to Mom, he adds, “And, of course, Yvette Dallaire, with whom Mom liked to talk French, her favorite language.”

My mother's expression is inscrutable beneath the folds of her black-lace veil.

“Thank you all—the few of you I've mentioned by name and the many more I couldn't. Thanks for coming to this—Mom's final get together with her friends and family!” Turning toward the choir loft, from which a syncopated jazz beat still emanates, he gestures at the hapless organist. “So, as Mom might have said under the circumstances, ‘Go with the flow,’ Mrs. Anderson! Play something lively that'll allow Mom to dance her way into heaven!” As he pulls a handkerchief from his blazer's breast pocket to wipe his brow, he adds, “And, for God's sake, will someone open the doors and let some air in here, so that we don't all end up joining Mom on her trip to Paradise?”

Amid peals of laughter, the organist launches into a raucous rendition of “When the Saints Go Marching In,” while behind us, the usher opens the door, admitting a shaft of midday light and a strong sea breeze, which blows my mother's veil off her face. Unsettled by the tumult, the remaining starling abandons its clerestory perch, a single feather drifting downward, as the bird shoots through the nave toward the brightness.

My mother turns to me. “I've just seen Pat off for the last time!” she exclaims, tears glistening amid the fine lines and wrinkles of her face, which breaks into a smile. I touch her hand and smile back.

End