

MSM

Smiling Faces,

Take A Peak

Behind The Mask

Sometimes

..... A Riveting Anthology

1 of 27

MADINAH SLAISE, MSN, RN

SMILING FACES, SOMETIMES

A RIVETING ANTHOLOGY

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"Don't take no wooden nickels."
Lottie B. Peterson

PROLOGUE

We all have at least a baker's dozen worth of short stories hidden deep within the recesses of yesterday. My Spirit is *moved* to compose, share, and access an innocence in humanity that is so easily forgotten.

Smiling Faces, Sometimes is a short story anthology that delves behind the mask of civility to reveal that which lies beneath, us. Please enjoy.

CHAPTER 1

THE CURSE_OR

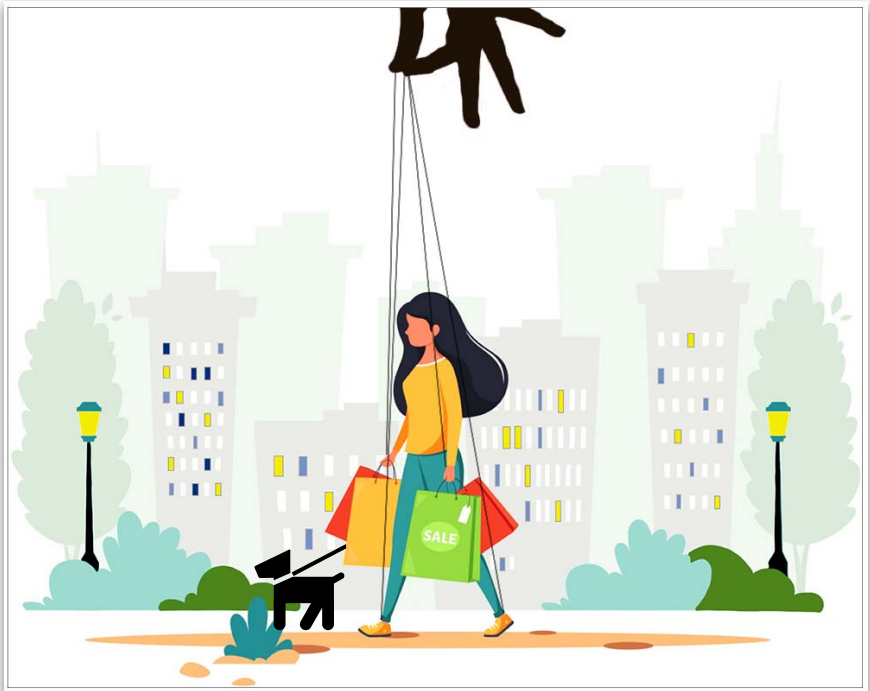


“Don't Take No Wooden Nickels.”

The blinking black cursor was such a small and seemingly innocuous movement on a screen overflowing with whiteness. For the fourth time this week she found herself primed and ready to strike with the stroke of a pen, courtesy of an abysmal online review. From service workers, to retailers, baristas and hospitality partners, no profession was spared from the venom.

In fact, the inflammatory statements that Kelly managed to fashion, by way of what most would consider chance encounters, left a trail of destruction that was difficult to reconcile. The adrenaline rush that typically accompanied complaining to corporate executives had long lost its luster. After all, demeaning an apologetic and often times exceptionally polite call center representative in the Philippines seemed beneath her station. Moreover, there was something about clicking the golden one star that truly sealed the deal when an email simply would not do.

Having returned to the forty-eighth floor condominium in downtown Seattle with several oversized shopping bags, her opulent purchases were aimlessly tossed into a far corner of



the sprawling flat. One would surmise that those who designed the olive-drab Gucci prints swaddled with elegant maroon ribbons planned more for its new owner.

The burgeoning balance on her Nordstrom account was little more than a conduit; physical purchases that laid the foundation for a house built upon deception and revenge. Even worse, the looming danger of fellow parishioners stumbling upon such online indecency lit her anxiety and paranoia ablaze! For the first time in three decades, a smiling, congenial public facade was beginning to crack beneath the weight of a private life that was spinning out of control.

CHAPTER 2

HIGH CLASS



"If You Can't Beat 'Em."

Two thousand and four was a very good year for Nurse Kelly Marshall. An unexpected offer for a six figure travel assignment to Seattle, Washington ushered a new season of opulence into the world of a quiet quitter. Sure, she showed up on time for shift change, provided satisfactory nursing care and eagerly assisted the growing trend of graduates. But ultimately, the bare minimum effort proved the full extent of her professional aspirations; nothing more, nothing less.

A once vibrant family advocate was reduced to increasing patient loads and mandatory overtime. Her body was riddled with the type of osteoarthritis discovered in long retired professional athletes or military Veterans, achy and atypically stiff. Jet-setting to the pacific northwest for a twelve-week assignment would be good for the soul and the bank account, not to mention a much needed reprieve from the sweltering heat and humidity of the South.

The living accommodations that accompanied her placement were exceptionally plush, fully equipped with

personal Concierge, twenty-four hour security patrols and the



most exquisite home offerings. Although reticent to admit the fact, Kelly was way out of her league surrounded by technology entrepreneurs and upstart whiz kids. Conversations about healthcare equity and affordable health maintenance organizations fell upon death ears, so she often just listened at social

engagements, glossy eyed and uninspired.

Working at the Veteran's hospital in the emergency unit for three months had fallen short of the altruistic glory that she so desperately desired. The constant flurry of competing with friends who volunteered for tsunami relief aid proved self-esteem sucking long before timelines and Instagram. Nurse Marshall felt bored beyond comprehension, marginalized and virtually invisible. Then, she strolled into the flagship Nordstrom retail store located less than five city blocks away from her fancy, albeit temporary, housing.

CHAPTER 3

YELP



“Locked In.”

There was not a single square on the retail floor that her tattered tennis shoes failed to touch during that initial whirlwind shopping spree. For the first time in Kelly’s young life, she was intoxicated by the energy of dotting retail workers and bespoke customer service. They, in turn, relished her overzealous desire and enthusiasm for haute couture.

Client Marshall was clearly not the type of woman who shopped for reduced priced runs and seasonal sales. No, she was a fashionista who deserved storing the most exquisite, and well, most expensive pieces aside until her next visit. It just sort of happened.

The autumn season ushered a colder, drearier and much less tolerant face of Seattle into her life. Social outings came around less frequently and hospital hours extended to cover the deluge of patients suffering from influenza symptoms. With the exception of interacting with one particular coworker, Kelly often endured weeks without sharing a meaningful conversation with another human being. At the peak of her financial and professional success, she felt a debilitating sense of loneliness most days, a need to be heard.

Which brings us back to our initial point, it just sort of happened. At the tail end of a fairly uneventful day, on the eve of an arguably mundane weekend, Nurse Marshall glanced downward towards her freshly manicured fingernails and smiled. New money eradicated the burden of choosing weekly groceries or a salon appointment as the cash flowed into her bank account. Albeit deserving of an all day spa treatment, she was pleased with the upkeep of her aesthetics overall. Yet, it wasn't long before the pleasantries were thwarted by furled eyebrows and the heavy striking of keyboard strokes.



Lately, her personality was becoming increasingly difficult to gauge and more erratic during transactions with service workers. Kelly was begging for something tangible, a connection beyond capitalist exchange.

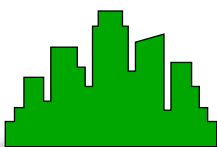
This was the third time in two days that Nurse Marshall found herself logged into the quirky dashboard, driven by a maniacal desire lodged deep within the pit of her belly. Such appetite would be quenched only by the poison from which it originated and Yelp provided the most delectable offerings.

I think we've all done it, at least once or twice. But, this was different, this was guttural on so many levels as the online fecal registry grew longer by the day. Kelly was trained in the art of doling out horrendous reviews and managed to

earn black belt status with little more than an internet connect and a credit card. Her voice mattered here. Her opinion carried weight in this realm. Those words were out there for the world to take note; and take note they did, indeed.

CHAPTER 4

THE GIG'S UP



“Don't Start None, Won't Be None.”

As one could imagine, Kelly found herself in an overwhelmingly dark place when the travel contract entered its final days. Things changed, or at least that was the story that was privately rehearsed and regurgitated to the one coworker with whom she occasionally chatted. He was cordial in wishing Nurse Marshall safe travels, all the while prayerful that the next traveler was an introvert with a good work ethic.

There was no mention of the Starbucks barista who confronted her about an online review after she posted a scathing rebuke of the in-store music playlist. Ironically, Kelly never considered the possibility that someone would recognize her amongst a sea of tourists and disinterested transients. However, they did recognize her, quite a few in fact.

Practically shut-in and increasingly suspicious of her surroundings, the once gregarious traveller eventually bid the Seattle metropolis adieu. Her departure went unnoticed throughout the hospital before the contract was signed by yet

another gregarious nurse eager to live in the downtown Seattle.

The luxury condominium was terminally cleaned and groomed to welcome its newest resident with all the trappings of finery and hospitality. Concierge stacked fresh Vitamin waters in the stainless steel refrigerator; chocolate mints were placed atop feather down bedroom pillows. Upon returning home, Kelly fashioned a wonderfully picturesque narrative of her adventures throughout the Emerald City.

(PART II)

The anthology continues as we explore the complicated life of Sister Margaret Latham and her bizarre, early morning appearance at the Saint Ignatius Emergency Department. This particular acute visit, unlike the others, will illuminate a deep seeded problem that will forever change her life.

CHAPTER 1

DYING TO LEAD

“One sixty-six over one-twenty.” The triage nurse appeared concerned.

“One sixty-six over one-twenty?” Margaret regurgitated the numbers in a haze while battling to reconcile her presence in the Saint Ignatius emergency department at two o’clock in the morning.

“Yep. That’s really high. Has anyone ever told you that you should be on blood pressure medicine?” She placed the manilla folder inside a plastic receptacle stacked outside of patient room four and casually flipped the sign on the door to occupied.

“Thank you, Ma’am.” Margaret managed to flash a weak smile towards the nurse, halfway hoping to convince herself that the lightening pain in her chest had subsided since checking into the facility. In fact, the discomfort was beginning to impact her vision, which was not necessarily a new occurrence, but rather an increasingly frightening prospect.

She muttered aloud “Calm down before you stroke out,” and closed her eyes while imagining the kitschy Lisinopril advertisements featuring happy Black seniors immersed amongst the fondest adventures. Ball rooming dancing presented little to no challenge for the Metoprolol Mavericks

who glided across the television screen. Margaret occasionally allowed herself the small pleasure of glancing upward from a makeshift office space when the familiar jingle wafted throughout the cold apartment. Retirement, for all intents and purposes, seemed increasingly elusive as actionable items were added to her sanctified to-do list daily.

“I bet they couldn’t even run my ministry. Ahhh!” A dreadful streak of white-hot lightning erupted in the back of her head, igniting a series of unpredictable dry heave episodes. Margaret found herself waist-deep in a contactless trash bin when the attending physician knocked on the door.

“One.. moment, please.” Semantics and appearances above all things, neither stroke nor heart attack would divest her of the proper polity.

“Let me know when you’re ready.” Doctor Hughes patiently awaited an all-clear signal from the voice behind the door for no less than ten minutes. His familiarity with patient Margaret Latham was longstanding (and long-suffering) following eight successive emergency room visits within a two-week span of time. The initial zing that accompanied her nasty niceties struck him with less irritation if empty beds were bountiful and the ambulance calls were few. By comparison, the present four-hour backlog of agitated clientele seated in the lobby may have enhanced his brashness with the elderly client.

“Ms. Latham, press the call button when you’re ready.” His departure was swift and she was none the wiser.

“Just let me lie down... for a few minutes... to catch my breath.” Margaret slowly walked to the twin-size bed and reluctantly piled herself atop the thin fitted sheet. The absence of a suitable pillow was easily resolved by a leather bucket purse filled to capacity. Despite the incessant buzzing of her cell phone patient Latham drifted into a deep sleep for the first time in what seemed like months.

“If I’m gonna die, ain’t no better place than here.”

CHAPTER 2

A RAM IN THE BUSH

A bright red hue emitted from the giant LED precision clock that was plugged into the far wall of the room. Years past, Margaret would have fawned at the amalgam of colors that converted the lackluster patient room into a bizarre Pepto Bismol pink box. Things were simpler back then, before the committees, mandatory meetings, and the incessant deluge of church bureaucracy that complicated her personal life.

Although reticent to acknowledge the fact, Sister Latham was not simply drowning in ecclesiastic duties, instead, she had unwittingly succumbed to the tsunami. A resting heart rate of two-hundred and forty-five beats per minute, coupled with profound bouts of paranoia, triggered that initial emergency room visit. In the weeks following beeping hospital machinery and the occasional overhead page lullabied her to sleep in a safe space that was void of responsibilities.

The nighttime dream world was comparatively languishing to endure during the off chance that Margaret disconnected from reality long enough for mindful rest. She naively concluded that sweat-soaked bed linen and night terrors came with the territory, so to speak. Admitting that the emergence of symptoms was a direct result of her new position at Pilgrim Baptist Church seemed provocative, albeit plausible.

"Make time for yourself, you're running ragged." The cautionary guidance felt like a military order versus a warm suggestion. Months past, Elder Dottie scribbled the barely legible words on a small envelope and passed the note to Margaret during the benediction. Her effort to bolster the troops was not well received by a woman existing on less than two hours of fragmented sleep. That was the first time that Sister Latham realized the inherent significance of keeping up appearances and vowed to do so if it killed her. Less than six months after gleefully transitioning into office, Margaret had become an unrecognizable shell of her former self. A house of worship that once served as a spiritual reprieve had somehow morphed into a prison of expectations that was ruled by sanctified guards.

An obnoxiously loud car alarm jolted patient Latham from the impromptu slumber as her eyes adjusted to the magenta darkness that engulfed the room. Peeling her face from the sticky brown leather required more intention and energy than Margaret was willing to muster at four o'clock in the morning. Apparently the odds were stacked as shifting purse contents conspired to cause a crick at the base of her neck. She clumsily slid beneath the thin sheet before muttering towards the entryway "I just need to sleep a little while longer, Doctor Hughes."

Under different circumstances, the janitor who was mopping outside of room four may have asked a nurse to assist the beleaguered woman. Thirty years of faithful service at Saint Ignatius afforded more than enough opportunities to cry foul over the mistreatment of ailing Black patients, particularly the elderly. Cleaning services were privy to the comings and goings of the emergency department and Margaret was slowly becoming a late-night sensation. An oath to protect

patient privacy was not necessarily a promise to uphold one's dignity and water cooler talk about "the kooky church lady" ran rampant.

Instead, Michael gently shut Margaret's door and vowed to stroll by the room until she was discharged from Saint Ignatius or his shift ended; whichever came first.

CHAPTER 3

KEEPING UP

Peer pressure: noun

: a feeling that one must do the same things as other people of one's age and social group in order to be liked or respected by them

Source: Merriam-Webster Dictionary

The culture of obligation that awaited Margaret upon her return from the present dream state serves as a warning tale about the multifaceted nature of church folks. With less than two months of official membership under her belt, the offer to head the Sisters Ministry was presented by Elder Clara Bowman following an intense Bible study.

“You have so much potential and I know that you would be a great person to take over.” Sister Clara leaned forward and grasped Margaret’s hands in a warm, double-cupped embrace. Her lengthy white tresses were neatly tucked into a high bun and secured by no less than seventeen neatly concealed hairpins. Spanning an enlightening eighty-two years, former La Presidenta Bowman had developed a Job-like patience that served her dictatorship regime well. Yet, the emergence of virtual pandemic meetings and a lack of member accountability proved unsurmountable for the seasoned saint.

A chronically inflamed gastric ulcer signaled that it was time to hand over the reigns greater than five years past, yet

recent midday chest pains finally sealed the deal. Unbeknownst to sleeping beauty, accepting the high visibility appointment was synonymous with welcoming the accompanying trials and tribulations of the post.

At the time, an edited concession speech was positioned in Clara's iCloud drive awaiting the perfect moment to release her from ministry perils. Surprisingly, she neither mentioned the four year old document nor personal health ailments once Margaret was locked in her crosshairs.

One particular Tuesday morning, while driving into the Pilgrim Baptist Church parking lot, the gravity of her mistake struck the newbie like a ton of bricks atop a foggy noggin. From the onset of service an antiquated list of deliverables claimed considerable stake in her mental real estate. The backlist of responses due to the National Baptist Council alone necessitated a concerted effort by church staff and inquisitive volunteers. Shutting off the continuous loop of what-ifs haunted her nights and orchestrated a majority of otherwise unremarkable days.

During the first of many abbreviated telephone conversations in her Nissan Maxima, a close friend once described the grooming process to Margaret as "jumping from the pot to the frying pan." By her own comparison Sister Latham would later offer the analogy of "attempting to drink from a fire hose while half asleep." Pilgrim Baptist Church overflowed with members who were floundering, effectively dry-drowning in leadership roles while clamoring to maintain outward appearances.

New members presumed that the exasperated group were once compassionate and dynamic before time overtook them.

Such collective assumptions could not have strayed further from the naked truth. Perpetrating an air of superiority in the midst of pandemonium weighed on their physicalities and minds during the golden era of life. Although hesitant to admit the fact, Margaret was drawn to their sinusoidal energy during a period in which a sense of purpose proved elusive. Purposeful devotions with the Messiah were growing increasingly challenging to navigate alongside an incessant need to be heard by humans.

“Misses Latham are you awake?” The sheepish female voice from behind the door startled Margaret from her deep slumber. She wiped a trace of saliva from her right cheek with a bunched cardigan sleeve and shifted towards the door in sullen anticipation.

“Yes, I’m awake. Please, come in.”

CHAPTER 4

DRY BONES

The melancholy streets of Seattle set the perfect backdrop for Margaret's sullen disposition as she drove home from the Saint Ignatius emergency department. In exchange for a hefty bill and severely bruised ego, Sister Latham was notified that the laboratory tests were well within the normal ranges.

"More than likely it was another anxiety attack." A final display of condescension from the discharge nurse left Margaret demoralized and embarrassed. "Doctor Hughes ordered some anxiety medicine that you can pickup this morning." She begrudgingly signed the paperwork as the oncoming shift hurried the forgotten patient out of the medical center and their hair.

Respectfully, Sister Latham had reached an impasse or spiritual crossroads, if you will. With the flick of a switch, the smartphone buried deep in her purse was primed to release a digital flurry upon its owner. Pulling up to a crosswalk, she realized that phoning a fellow parishioner for support while maintaining the sanctity of personal privacy was an absurd feat. Bad news spread like wildfire at Pilgrim Baptist Church and executive gossip was tantamount to an Australian bushfire season.

"Oh, I forgot to turn the heater on in the apartment. I wonder why she said "another." The intrusive thoughts rushed into her psyche like a broken pop-up window on a computer

screen. By the time her sedan parked in the assigned space Margaret had concocted a series of lies to substantiate her brief hiatus from church duties. The cacophony of email and text notifications that echoed about the cement walls in the underground parking garage serenaded her conscious.

A long awaited dopamine rush greeted Margaret as she entered the cold flat and tossed her belongings atop the marble kitchen counter. Preparing a decent breakfast and processing the good news was secondary to answering the mountain of emails in her inbox. Thus, she dutifully logged onto the iMac and typed her password into the rectangular box.

"I wonder why she said "another."

(PART III)

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