



MARY IMMACULATE

Thelma Wheatley

That's not my real name. Well, it is in a way; depends what you call real. I was born Geraldine. What a clunker. Feminine of Gerald, appendix to the basic male form. It's what I was when I married Arnold. God, that's years ago too. I come across the old photos once in a while when I'm starin' at nothin' in this place where I live now and think I'll start talking to the walls, it can be that quiet. I gets them out of the old chest I always kept — it was a wedding present from his great aunt Nellie, golden cedar — You'll need it for your linens, she said.

. . . Arnold and I standing at the church, August 10th, Diggsville First Baptist, smiling at everyone. Oh gosh, there's young we look and sort of innocent, you know? I was nineteen and Arnold's twenty. I'm all in white, of course, a lovely princess-line dress, pure lace, with a frothy veil all over the place. And my bridesmaids — Lori-Lynn and Betsy Palmer — are in baby-blue organza with crinoline hoops under the skirts like two lampshades. Lights out, girls! It's the aunts who kill me, all them aunts standing in a row clutching their purses out front like a row of suitcases, waving at the Reverend. Arnold is hanging back a little, probably sozzled, in a navy suit and one of them ritzy ties the boys wore then — Elvis Presley — his hair in that big greased roll on top of his head, short at the sides, "Ain't nuthin but a hound dawg-h. . ."

Trouble with Arnold he was a soaker, a lush, pissed to his eyes in it. It's why we never had any kids, it had liquefied his balls. But that's not what bugged me in the end. Not his booze, or all them nights out with the boys down the Langley Club, me in on my ownsome knitting layettes for other people's babies, or even his darts matches and bowling teams, but the fact that he still went to his mother's every day for his dinner. Actually it was what I got him on in the end, in court, you know? Mental cruelty. Even the judge — Judge Percival of Durham County — agreed it was a bit much after ten years. But anyways it was an amicable divorce, uncontested as they say. Arnold just took the stereo and the T-Bird and most of the furniture, and I got the money in the bank (he'd never worked much anyways, he was a clerk in the LLBO). I took off right away for the big city, that's right, Big T, and straight away pow got hit by Joe. He was the part-time supervisor at the apartment building — I had this really nice one bedroom on the third floor and

for the couple of months I had it to myself. You could say it was the happiest time of my life, with that balcony and there was this big tree outside, a real big one, it could of scratched my window. Anyways, there was Joe on the diving board. Big muscly curly-headed Joe. I guess for him — lying there at the side of the pool (I can't swim) in my string two-piece, the kind that looks like a spider's web all over your back and my blond hair I'd let grow out to my waist — I must've looked like Diggsville Dairy Queen. (His folks were from a clump of stones out in the Azores someplace). Anyways he was gaga over me. I was five years older than him too, but that only piqued him on, and even Arnold he took in his stride. Poor besotted fool, he'd murmur. Only thing got to Joe was I wasn't a Catholic. "You'll haveta become one, Geraldine," he said; for his family like. "The family that prays together stays together" sort of thing. Well one thing led to another and I went along to the priest and got enrolled. Joe held my hand, he'd come along for moral support, it being the first time. "This is Father Sebastian," he said. Joe had on his best suit and tie to see the priest, and I had on my good skirt and blouse buttoned to the throat. " — And this is Father Marcus, and Sister Veronica. . ." Christ, was I nervous. Arnold and I hadn't gone to church once we was married, just for other people's weddings and funerals — great aunt Nellie had died soon after — and here I was sitting in the Church of the Sacred Bleeding Heart. Father Marcus was the one in charge. There was six of us girls and one man, and we sat in a circle in the priest's office and learned pretty well everything every week for six months. What it meant to be a Catholic, and the sort of responsibility it entailed, and how we were returning to the one true church and it was cause for rejoicing. And what it meant to be a good Catholic parent, especially a mother; that was stressed. Of course they got on to birth control and that and how the *rhythm* method was better as it wasn't an act against God, and how the best place for mothers was at home with their children. Hell I'd already given in my notice to Firth and Fernside — I was a pool typist — as Joe wanted me home once kids came along, and that was OK by me, I'd already spent ten years of my life supporting Arnold. That was another problem: Arnold. We had to tell Father Marcus, but somehow

we got over that one, too — seemed since I hadn't been a Catholic at the time, I had not really been married to Arnold all those years, just living in sin, and twenty Hail Mary's and prostration before the Holy Virgin of the Sepulchre absolved me. Father even said we didn't *have* to tell Joe's family either, now I had confessed and been absolved. It was up to us, something between God and us. I chose my new name, "Mary." I was Mary now, our new sister in Christ, smiled Father Marcus.

That was how I gone down the aisle a second time in white. Satin this time, with one of them medieval caps over my head — froth was out by now — all demure. Joe's uncle gave me away (dad had died by now, but ma did turn up the last minute, though she was scared to death all the way through; when the priest begun to swing the incense she almost screamed). There we was down the aisle, Joseph and Mary. Hell flames! That's when it hit me. *Joseph and Mary*, and me already pregnant with little Luke, though we didn't really know that then. I'd always had a thing for that name, Luke, but Joe's family wouldn't hear of it, they was set on Pasquali. Seemed they'd always been a Pasquali, which sounded to me like something out of a storm at sea. Talk of the crucifixion, how it all turned out! When I started bleeding at seven months, Joe dropped me off at the nearest hospital and never come back. That's it. Took off with the temporary help at Papa Joe's Pizza. Someone called Elaine. She was an atheist too, though she *said* she was a Free Thinker. You know the type, lives on bean sprouts and water. Well, I won't go into the gory details of my hysterical weeks strapped down in the psychiatric wing of St. Boniface Hospital with the Sisters of Mercy, and how I had to go on welfare first when I come out — I was breast-feeding like they'd advised in the Catholic Motherhood seminar — and eventually managed to get back into Firth and Fernside, first as a temp and then permanent. Luke went to a baby-sitter, Mrs. Maharias, 1128 Dungalli Road. Joe was taking off out west by now with Elaine, but before they left, I went round Elaine's apartment one night, in this duplex. I rang the buzzer and said my name and she was hesitant to let me in at first, but I said I'd come as a friend and I had. I sat down on her Scandinavian teak chesterfield and accepted a coffee, and said, Look Elaine, I've come only to warn you for your own good. . . I then pointed out that she could have Joe if that's what she wanted in life, only was it really what she wanted? After all, a man who would cheat on his wife and desert her when she was in hospital having his baby wasn't likely to be faithful to her, was he, Elaine? Every time he left to take out a pizza to somebody's place Elaine would never know, would she, whether it really was pizza with everything on it he was delivering. . .

Talk about the Jesuits!

Then I went round to Joe's. He was still in our

old apartment at 1496 Coghnam Road and he turned peuce when I walked right in. But, as I pointed out in a real Christian way, I had forgiven him — as long as he paid his alimony — I had come as a friend. He could have Elaine if that's what he wanted. But was it what he really wanted? A girl like that, who would go to bed with a man whose wife was in St. Boniface Hospital — dying, hemorrhaging — having her first baby, well. . .

I had my payments regular at first. Oh there'd be the odd month he'd miss, sickness, or off work, or something, and then there'd be a double cheque. His family too helped out at first, I'd grant you that. They'd been shocked, numbed, his mother never left the sanctuary; the priest came, and Sister Veronica, and the officer from the Catholic Children's Aid, but then somehow they sort of dropped away. I think Joe's family was glad when I finally moved out of the Coghnam Road area to a place nearer my work. I could get back earlier to the baby-sitter and pick up little Luke and spend that much more time with him.

And then the cheques started coming in dribbles. You know, he'd lost his job, he said in a letter, he was moving around. Elaine had left him. Then he got a trucking job, long-distance, and called in to see us one year, on a coast-to-coast run. Luke he didn't know who it was. Joe sat there on my living-room sofa with a teddy bear and a rattle in his arms. Luke was six by now and into Super Simon and Star Wars. He called Joe "Joe." Then I got a thousand dollars and an Atari set for poor little Luke on account of his leg. I made Luke sit down at the kitchen table, his leg stuck out front on a chair, and print a thank-you note to his father. Then I get this call long-distance a year later. He can't afford to send a cheque regular but he can make long-distance calls, person-to-person from the Yukon (he was supposed to be in lumber now) telling me to stop bugging him for money. Life had changed, he said, *he* had changed; he'd seen the light. He wasn't going to worry no more, but put his trust in the Lord. "The Lord is on my side, Geraldine." "Do you have another job yet, Joe?" I cut in. This call must've been costing at least twenty dollars right then with all that Born Again to Jesus drivel. "No but the Lord will see me through. . ." "Well the Lord hasn't seen you through the last three months, has he, Joe?" Was the Lord paying the bills? (Cause He sure as hell wasn't paying mine.) Then he actually had the cheek to suggest we get together again, remarry, only, of course, I'd haveta be born again first. "It's a wonderful feeling, Geraldine." I dropped the phone. Besides, there's Harry in my life now. . . fiftyish, bald, but very reliable. He has a kid of his own, older than Luke, good for Luke, helps him with his brace and things, but doesn't spoil him like. The only thing is, Harry is another Catholic, though he says a different sort. I said I thought a Catholic was a Catholic, but it seems

there's a kind now who don't believe in the infallibility of the Pope ("He only *represents* Christ on earth, Geraldine.") Who believe in women's rights over their own bodies, church-recognized divorce, homosexuality, Ban the Bomb; even in women being priests. Of course, Harry is tons more intelligent than me, I mean he reads *The Globe and Mail* and *The Catholic Times* and stuff (though every boss I ever had has always commented on my vocabulary — "Where do you get all those big words from, Geraldine?"). Harry said he wouldn't push me, but there was this new very interesting program starting now for people like me, a sort of revirgination scheme. For people who want to start over — to marry Harry, for instance — clean and renewed. Your past wiped out, clean as a slate: marriages, divorces, breakdowns, desertions, you name it, cleansed in Christ. Some people need that. I need that. So hell, here I am, sitting in the crypt of the Church of Mary the Immaculate. The door to the nave upstairs is shut. The drapes are closed and we are all in a circle under the light. This time at least half the people are men. Yes, men. One is a professor, one says he is an insurance agent who's lost his job, another is a data-computer technician from Xerox. The priest, who doesn't look like one, is smiling. Mike — we don't call them "Father" any more — is wearing a turtleneck sweater and black pants and a metal crucifix. He leans forward, his hands on his knees. "Yup," he chuckles. "That's right! Revirgination is for everyone. Because it's the symbolic meaning of it that counts for us, isn't it, the putting away of the past and starting anew. Yes, Geraldine?"

"You mean like not eating fish on Fridays any more?"

"Uh-huh?"

"But Father, what about all the people who *believed* all those years about eating fish on Fridays. . .?"

Mike's face tightens in a patient smile. Heck, he's probably heard this sort of question at least a zillion times since John XXIII.

"Yes, well, that's a good point, Geraldine, but that was the old days. I'm not saying what the Church said then was wrong, mind you, it was just how we saw it then. . ."

Sometimes in mass — yeah, I go pretty regular now, well, with Luke and his poor leg, like, almost every Sunday — I suppose it's the way it goes on and on sort of comforting, reassuring once you learned the right responses to the priest — and I'll look up, and maybe the priest is lifting the Holy Book and kissing it, or raising the Host into the air, but all of a sudden, I dunno, I'll get to thinking somehow of when I become a First Baptist with Arnold and we was standing at the edge of the pool they opens up for you under the stage and the water there is so still and Arnold and me one by one we gets immersed and the Reverend is saying, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, amen" sort of thing and we comes up saved; and we sang "Jesus bids me shine" afterwards in the chapel. "With a *clear clear* light. . ."

Thelma Wheatley lives in Port Credit, Ontario, where she teaches language to children with learning disabilities.

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