

Confirmation Day

by Olive Senior

Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic orders?

Rilke, *Duino Elegies*

It rained the day of my confirmation. Red white and green slicks on the water which had gathered in the gutters played round my feet, winked green the gaudy tin signs of the weather-beaten shops.

EN OY APPLETON DRINK SPRITE

My aunt had made me a dress of white gipuire which I hated and when I went into the damp mildewed vestry and they placed the veil on my head I sighed and thought of the Foolish Virgins. The mildew of the vestry and the veil and the scent of orange blossoms mingled with the smell of bats' droppings from the nave. The bats always squeaked on Sundays, competing with the squeak of the old pipe organ as Miss Miriam pedalled furiously, her white hat bobbing unbecomingly as the fury of her exultation outsped us.

My grandmother, her creamy white hair constantly fuzzing from under her hat and the feathers slithering down her face like white rats tails, always sang off-key. My aunt who they said was divorced and unhappy and who always managed to sit at the window where she could look beyond the tombstones to the curving hills beckoning never sang at all. She was small and thin-voiced and always just on the edge of our consciousness. Now she was embarrassed because my grandmother was crying as she had done on other great occasions: The Death of King George and the Coronation and my Confirmation Day.

DRINK SPRITE the signs winked green DRINK SPRITE.

In the Vestry the Beadle murmured something which I did not hear, the world was in hush: dragonflies hovered over the pond outside, butterflies waited breathlessly. I could think

neither of the services nor the responses. There were six of us, all the girls in white and the boys in unaccustomed Sunday clothes and discipline wearing first-time large brown shoes that squeaked also.

The Bishop who had come to confirm us arrived in a big car, chauffeur driven. The driver did not look particularly Christian, I thought, as he leaned against the shiny new car chewing straw after straw. He had a silver-looking chain looped across his middle and from it hung a monstrously large watch which he consulted ostentatiously. He had this look of time on his face. "His watch doesn't work," whispered my cousin from behind her veil as she stood in the door beside me, "anyway I bet he can't read".

Outside, the Maguire twins whose father was the parson and who seemed the wickedest children we knew peeked from behind the vestry wall, their faces framed in flower chains. They had the same thought as my cousin for they began to sing:

One two three four
 Colon man a come
 With him watch chain
 A lick him belly
 Bam Bam Bam

Ask him for the time
 And he look upon the sun

Suddenly the flowers flew into the air and they ran screaming delight behind the wall as the driver advanced toward them...

— EN OY APPLETON

... in my heart I know that the world of the outside should not today concern me for says my grandmother and my aunt and the parson today I will become a child of god yet I do not know what they mean for that summer during all the catechism classes we sat at the back of the church and I listened only to the bats squeaking cows in the graveyard chomping humming-birds whirring in the guava trees outside I had only wondered why the big urn at the back was called a font and when water

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was holy and the only time god ever spoke to me was on the lonely roads later as I walked home in the burning midafternoon and he raced in clouds of terror across the sky... clouds that became transformed transmuted into shapes of awe that funnelled into eternity and how could the bread and wine which my grandmother and the parson promise make me any stronger against the terrible reality of him chasing me in clouds of horror everyday...

For he always sat in the lurid church pictures of my childhood on the billowing clouds of white and his judgement was swift and terrible. He sat in the clouds on the walls of my mother's church which seemed far away and long ago... a tiny plaster church covered with pictures and showing many lands and many peoples, one repeated over and over inscribed with the words, "Light for the Lamps of Burma". I often wondered where Burma was and if it was dark there all the time unless we sent them money for lamps and I did not want to go there if they were poorer than we were...

... now we are in another time another church and the smell of incense mingles with the smell of the church and the smell is the smell of the aged. What happens to the young after their Confirmation Day? I used to wonder. Once I knew a girl who had been baptised and she had caught pneumonia and died so maybe becoming a child of God and dying were the same thing. But now the smell of starch belongs to the world of the young who never return to church after their Confirmation Day because of the terrible reality of Him. And the smell of the church is the smell of the aged and the moth balls of priests' raiments and they all belong to the other side of the world and all are in league with the clouds of terror.

And I think as the Bishop stands there in robes trimmed with gold chanting words that sound as if he speaks in a foreign language that the Confirmation will transform me too, utterly. And the smell of the church will be transformed into the smell of the bats in the nave of the church, into a world of fonts and gravestones. You get everything so mixed-up in your mind my grandmother says again and again. My mother says in no other

church is there God and she is not talking of the church I am in no other my mother said one day long ago by a riverside sunlight sparkling reeds foaming round the bend... and God should have been there another day down by the same riverside when the brothers and sisters dressed in white robes who were not my brothers and sisters and the priest just a man of the people with no fussy car and driver with a watch chain to pull in and out but a man of the people took them in his arms and baptised them. But I in my white shift not gipuire but cotton my knees trembling with the early morning cold went down and fought with all my might not to go a second or third time for in the bottom of the river I had seen the mud and the reeds and the terrible reality of His existence and knew that if I went down three times I would be obliterated by His greatness. And the day became a day of the brothers and sisters who were not my brothers and sisters singing and praying praying and singing for me and my mother crying for me Oh-Oh-Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhoo-WAH mortified down by the waterside on the morning of my baptism which was not my baptism.

(Yet when she had to go not even the God of the man of the people could save her O the suffering).

This time I know that it is not easy for me to escape. The formality of my grandmother's church has woven a pattern from which it is difficult to break out, reject, just as my grandmother's life - the big house, the fixed mealtimes, the daily ritual and the necessity of Confirmation and other observances in the Book of Common Prayer created a mould into which the crazy-mad fragments of my other, disordered life were being squeezed. And so I know it is no longer a dream.

I know that I am saying the words of the Confirmation Service somewhere in my head my cousin's white dress rustles as she shifts on the velveteen cushion... and the Bishop holds a finely-wrought silver cup. He begins at the other end and I think of Oil for the Lamps of Burma which are perhaps of finely wrought silver too and the reeds in the river my mother on a sunlit day washing and my grandmother crying as she does on all great occasions and my aunt staring out the window and all

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the people... and the cup is too hard against my teeth it is too large and I want to cry out and the Bishop gently forces my head back and I hardly taste the wine at all and it does not taste like the Blood of Christ. And the bread! – such a tiny little bit like eating blotting paper I squeeze my eyeballs too tight and the flames are blue and green and red and god on a cloud one day. I saw him on a cloud halfway down the road and I hid in a field behind a stone wall until the clouds finally broke into nothingness halfway across the sky.

And the congregation sings all except my aunt who remains small and sad and reminds me of saving pennies to light the Lamps of Burma and I think of lighting these lamps one by one but they remain only pinpoints of light in the darkness and I open my eyes to see if there is any light any more and the bread and wine which I have taken seem so inconsequential, so ordinary and everyday that I know I am safe. I am in a large old church with peeling plaster and damp water stains on the walls and the bats squeaking along with the squeak of the old pipe organ. And my grandmother cries as she does on all great occasions.

And standing now, facing them, I catch sight of her face in the singing congregation and she looks happy and shining. And I know it is because of me, she believes that I have been saved, become a Child of God, believes in some truth in me.

I love you grandmother but I cannot tell you. I'd rather be a child of someone else being a child of god is too frightening...

But once outside those doors I see the Bishop's car as nothing but a small black beetle in a vast green world. I am shocked to discover a new power in myself. All that has gone before has no occasion, no meaning. I know instinctively that not the reeds in the river nor the wine nor the blood of Christ nor the Book of Common Prayer can conquer me. And not a single cloud of god is in that sky.