

**ONE
CITY
ONE
STORY**

The Whore's Child

Richard Russo

2011

Introduction

The Boston Book Festival presents the second annual One City One Story, a project to spread the joy of reading for pleasure among the teens and adults of our city and to create community around a shared reading experience.

Our goal is to make a short story available to all free of charge. By distributing 30,000 copies of Richard Russo's story "The Whore's Child" and providing audio files, downloads, and translations on our website, we aim to ignite discussions that reveal the many perspectives and viewpoints of Boston residents.

We hope you will read, enjoy, and discuss "The Whore's Child" at local meet-ups, library events, and on our website. And if you are inspired by this story to write your own, check out the One City One Story writing contest on our website.

Visit www.bostonbookfest.org/1C1S to learn more.

Join us at the Boston Book Festival on October 15th to meet Richard Russo and take part in a Town Hall-style discussion of the story.

ONE CITY ONE STORY: READ. THINK. SHARE.

The Whore's Child

Sister Ursula belonged to an all but extinct order of Belgian nuns who conducted what little spiritual business remained to them in a decrepit old house purchased by the diocese seemingly because it was unlikely to outlast them. Since it was on Forest Avenue, a block from our house, I'd seen Sister Ursula many times before the night she turned up in class, but we never had spoken. She drove a rusted-out station wagon that was always crowded with elderly nuns who needed assistance getting in and out. Though St. Francis Church was only a few blocks away, that was too far to walk for any of them except Sister Ursula, her gait awkward but relentless. "You should go over there and introduce yourself someday," Gail, my wife, suggested more than once. "Those old women have been left all alone." Her suspicion was later confirmed by Sister Ursula herself. "They are waiting for us to die," she confessed. "Impatient of how we clutch to our miserable existences."

"I'm sure you don't mean that," I said, an observation that was to become my mantra with her, and she, in turn, seemed to enjoy hearing me say it.

She appeared in class that first night and settled herself at the very center of the seminar despite the fact that her name did not appear on my computer printout. Fiction writing classes are popular and invariably oversubscribed at most universities, and never more so

than when the writer teaching it has recently published a book, as I had done the past spring. Publishing the kind of book that's displayed in strip-mall bookstores bestows a celebrity on academic writers and separates them from their scholar colleagues, whose books resemble the sort of dubious specialty items found only in boutiques and health food stores. I'd gotten quite a lot of press on my recent book, my first in over a decade, and my fleeting celebrity might have explained Sister Ursula's presence in my classroom the first chilly evening of the fall semester, though she gave no indication of this, or that she recognized me as her neighbor.

No, Sister Ursula seemed innocent not only of me but also of all department and university protocol. When informed that students petition to take the advanced fiction writing class by means of a manuscript submission the previous term, and that its prerequisites were beginning and intermediate courses, Sister Ursula disputed neither the existence nor the wisdom of these procedures. Nor did she gather her things and leave, which left me in an odd position. Normally it's my policy not to allow unregistered students to remain in class, because doing so encourages their mistaken belief that they can wheedle, cajole or flatter their way in. In the past I'd shown even football players the door without the slightest courtesy or ceremony, but this was a different challenge entirely. Sister Ursula herself was nearly as big as a linebacker, yet more persuasive than this was her body language, which suggested that once settled, she was not used to moving. And since she was clearly settled, I let her stay.

After class, however, I did explain why it would be highly unprofessional of me to allow her to remain in the advanced fiction workshop. After all, she freely admitted she'd never attempted to write a story before, which, I explained, put her at an extreme disadvantage. My mistake was in not leaving the matter there. Instead I went on. "This is a storytelling class, Sister. We're all liars here. The whole purpose of our enterprise is to become skilled in making things up, of substituting our own truth for *the* truth. In this class we actually prefer a well-told lie," I concluded, certain that this would dissuade her.

She patted my hand, as you might the hand of a child. "Never you mind," she then assured me, adjusting her wimple for the journey home. "My whole life has been a lie."

"I'm sure you don't mean that," I told her.

In the convent, Sister Ursula's first submission began, *I was known as the whore's child*.

Nice opening, I wrote in the margin, as if to imply that her choice had been a purely artistic one. It wasn't, of course. She was simply starting with what was for her the beginning of her torment. She was writing—and would continue to write—a memoir. By mid-semester I would give up asking her to invent things.

The first installment weighed in at a robust twenty-five pages, which detailed the suffering of a young girl taken to live in a Belgian convent school where the treatment of the children was determined by the social and financial status of the parents who had abandoned them there. As a charity case and the daughter of a prostitute, young Sister Ursula (for there could be no doubt that she *was* the first-person narrator) found herself at the very bottom of the ecclesiastical food chain. What little wealth she possessed—some pens and paper her father had purchased for her the day before they left the city, along with a pretty new dress—was taken from her, and she was informed that henceforth she would have no use for such pitiful possessions. Her needs—food, a uniform and a single pair of shoes—would be provided for her, though she would doubtless prove unworthy to receive them. The shoes she was given were two sizes too small, an accident, Sister Ursula imagined, until she asked if she might exchange them for the shoes of a younger girl that were two sizes too large, only to be scorned for her impertinence. So before long she developed the tortured gait of a cripple, which was much imitated by the other children, who immediately perceived in her a suitable object for their cruelest derision.

The mockery of her classmates was something Sister Ursula quickly

accommodated, by shunning their companionship. In time she grew accustomed to being referred to as “the whore’s child,” and she hoped that the children would eventually tire of calling her this if she could manage to conceal how deeply it wounded her. During periods of recreation in the convent courtyard she perfected the art of becoming invisible, avoiding all games and contests when, she knew, even those on her own team would turn on her. What she was not prepared for was the cruelty she suffered at the hands of the nuns, who seemed to derive nearly as much satisfaction from tormenting her as their charges—beginning with her request to exchange shoes. She had not merely been told that this was not permitted, but was given a horrible explanation as to why this was so. The chafing of the too small shoes had caused her heels to bleed into her coarse white socks and then into the shoes themselves. Only a wicked child, Sister Veronique explained, would foul the shoes she’d been given with her blood, then beg to exchange them for the shoes of an innocent child. Did she think it fair, the old nun wondered out loud, that another child, one who had not only a virtuous mother but also a father, be asked to wear the polluted shoes of a whore’s child?

Worse than the sting of the old nun’s suggestion that anything Sister Ursula touched immediately became contaminated was the inference that trailed in the wake of her other remark. The innocent girl had not only a virtuous mother—Sister Ursula knew what this meant—but *also a father*, which seemed to imply that she herself didn’t have one. Of course she knew that she did have a father, a tall, handsome father who had promised to rescue her from this place as soon as he could find work. Indeed, it was her father who had brought her to the convent, who had assured Mother Superior that she was a good girl and not at all wicked. How then had Sister Veronique concluded that she had no father? The young girl tried to reason it through but became confused. She knew from experience that evil, by its very nature, counted for more in the world than good. And she understood that her mother’s being a prostitute made her “the whore’s child,” that her mother’s wickedness diminished her father’s value, but did it negate his very existence? How could such a thing

be? She dared not ask, and so the old nun’s remark burrowed even deeper, intensifying a misery that already bordered on despair.

Sister Ursula’s first installment ended here, and her fellow students approached the discussion of it as one would an alien spacecraft. Several had attended Catholic schools where they’d been tutored by nuns, and they weren’t sure, despite my encouragement, that they were allowed to be critical of this one. The material itself was foreign to them; they’d never encountered anything like it in the workshop. On the plus side, Sister Ursula’s story had a character in it, and the character was placed in a dire situation, and those were good things for stories to do. On the other hand, the old nun’s idiom was imperfect, her style stiff and old-fashioned, and the story seemed to be moving forward without exactly getting anywhere. It reminded them of stories they’d heard other elderly people tell, tales that even the tellers eventually managed to forget the point of, narratives that would gradually peter out with the weak insistence that all these events really did happen. “It’s a victim story,” one student recognized. “The character is being acted on by outside forces, but she has no choices, which means there can be no consequences to anything she does. If she doesn’t participate in her own destiny, where’s the story?”

Not having taken the beginning and intermediate courses, Sister Ursula was much enlightened by these unanticipated critiques, and she took feverish notes on everything that was said. “I liked it, though,” added the student who’d identified it as a victim story. “It’s different.” By which he seemed to mean that Sister Ursula herself was different.

The old nun stopped by my office the day after, and it was clear she was still mulling the workshop over. “To be so much . . . a victim,” she said, searching for the right words, “it is not good?”

“No,” I smiled. Not in stories, not in life, I was about to add, until I remembered that Sister Ursula still wasn’t making this distinction, and my doing so would probably confuse her further. “But maybe in the next installment?” I suggested.

She looked at me hopefully.

“Maybe your character will have some choices of her own as your story continues?” I prodded.

Sister Ursula considered this possibility for a long time, and I could tell by looking at her that the past wasn't nearly as flexible as she might have wished.

She was about to leave when she noticed the photograph of my daughter that I keep on my desk. “Your little girl,” she said, “is a great beauty?”

“Yes,” I said, indicating that it was okay to pick up the photo if she wanted to.

“Sometimes I see her when I am driving by,” she explained. When I didn't say anything, she added, “Sometimes I don't see her anymore?”

“She and her mother are gone now,” I explained, the sentence feeling syntactically strange, as if English were my second language, too. “They're living in another state.”

Sister Ursula nodded uncertainly, as if deliberating whether “state” meant a condition or a place, then said, “She will return to this state?”

It was my turn to nod. “I hope so, Sister.”

And so I became a Catholic, began the second installment of Sister Ursula's story, and again I scribbled *nice opening* in the left margin before hunkering down. I'd had students like Sister Ursula before, and they'd inspired the strictly enforced twenty-five page limit in all my workshops. I noted that for this second submission she had narrowed her margins, fiddled with the font, wedging the letters closer together. The spacing didn't look quite double, maybe 1.7. Venial sins.

Having had no religious training prior to entering the convent, Sister Ursula was for some time unable to recite prayers with the other children, further evidence, if any were needed, of the moral depravity inherent to being the offspring of a whore. She discovered it was not an easy task, learning prayers to the cadence of public ridicule,

but learn them she did, and though the rote recitation was, in the beginning, a torment, it eventually became a comfort. Most of the prayers she fought to memorize were adamant about the existence of a God who, at least in the person of the crucified Christ, was infinitely more loving and understanding and forgiving than the women He'd led to the altar as His brides.

To be loved and understood and forgiven seemed to Sister Ursula the ultimate indulgence, and thus she became a denizen of the convent chapel, retreating there at every opportunity from the taunts and jeers of the other children and the constant crowlike reprimands of the nuns. She liked the smell of the place—damp and cool and clean—especially when she had it to herself, when it wasn't filled with the bodies of stale old nuns and sweaty children. Often she could hide in the chapel for an hour or more before one of the side doors would finally creak open, momentarily flooding the floor with bright light. Then the long dark shadow of a nun would fall across Sister Ursula where she knelt in prayer at the foot of the cross, and she would have no choice but to rise and be led back to her torment, often by a twisted ear.

In addition to the authorized prayers she'd memorized, Sister Ursula composed others of her own. She prayed that Sister Veronique, who had suggested that she had no father and who worked in the convent stable, might be kicked in the head by a horse and paralyzed for life. She prayed that Sister Joseph, who used her command of the kitchen to ensure that charity children were given the poorest food in the smallest quantities, might one day slip and fall into one of her boiling vats. Required herself to spend most holidays at the convent, Sister Ursula prayed that the children who were allowed to go home might perish in railway accidents. Sometimes, in an economical mood, she prayed that the convent might burn to the ground, and the air fill with black ash. She saw nothing wrong with offering such prayers, particularly since none of them, no matter how urgent, were ever answered. She felt a gentle trust in the Jesus of the Cross who hung above the main altar of the convent chapel. He seemed to know

everything that was in her heart and to understand that nothing dwelt there that wasn't absolutely necessary to her survival. He would not begrudge her these prayers.

In truth, Jesus on the cross reminded Sister Ursula of her father who she knew had never wanted to see her packed off to the convent, and who missed her every day, just as she missed him. Like Jesus, her father was slender and handsome and sad; and unable to find work and married to a woman who was his shame. He was, like Jesus, stuck where he was. Yet if the prayers she had struggled to memorize were true, there was hope. Had not Jesus shed His crown of thorns, stepped down from the cross to become the light and salvation of the world, raising up with Him the lowly and the true of heart? Sister Ursula, when she wasn't praying that a horse kick Sister Veronique in the head, fervently prayed that her father might one day be free. The first thing he would do, she felt certain, was come for her, and so every time the chapel's side door opened, she turned toward the harsh light with a mixture of hope and fear, and though it was always a nun whose dark silhouette filled the doorway, she held tenaciously to the belief that soon it would be her father standing there.

One Christmas season—was it her third year at the convent school?—Sister Ursula was summoned to the chamber of Mother Superior, who told her to ready herself for a journey. This was a full week before any of the other students would be permitted to leave for the Christmas holiday, and Sister Ursula was instructed to tell no one of her impending departure. Indeed, Mother Superior seemed flustered, and this gave Sister Ursula heart. During her years of secret, vengeful prayer she'd indulged many fantasies of dramatic liberation, and often imagined her father's arrival on horseback, his angry pounding at the main gate, his purposeful stride through the courtyard and into the chapel. Perhaps Mother Superior's anxiety stemmed from the fact that her father was already on his way to effect just such a rescue.

At the appointed hour, Sister Ursula waited, as instructed, by the main gate, beyond which no men save priests were permitted entry,

and awaited her father's arrival. She hoped he would come by a coach or carriage that then would convey them to the village train station, but if necessary she was more than happy to make the journey on foot, so long as she and her father were together. She had better shoes now, though she still hobbled like a cripple. And so when a carriage came into view in the dusty road beyond the iron gate, her heart leapt up—until she recognized it as the one belonging to the convent. Inside sat not her father but Sister Veronique, who had not been kicked in the head by a horse despite three years' worth of Sister Ursula's dogged prayers. When the carriage drew to a halt, Sister Ursula understood that her hopes had been led astray by her need and that she was to be banished from the convent, not rescued from it. She did not fear a worse existence than her present one, because a worse existence was not within her powers of imagination. Rather, what frightened her was the possibility that if she was taken from the convent school, her father no longer would know where to find her when the time came. This terrible fear she kept to herself. She and Sister Veronique did not speak a word on the long journey to the city.

Late that evening they arrived at a hospital and were taken to the charity ward, only to learn that Sister Ursula's mother had expired just after they had left the convent that morning. A nun dressed all in white informed Sister Veronique that it would be far better for the child not to see the deceased, and a look passed between them. All that was left by way of a keepsake was a brittle, curling, scalloped-edged photograph, which the white nun gave to Sister Ursula, who had offered no reaction to the news that her mother was dead. Since arriving at the hospital, Sister Ursula had lapsed into a state of paralytic fear that it was her father who had fallen ill there. Instead, it seemed at least one of her prayers had been answered: her father was free.

But where was he? When she summoned the courage to ask, the two nuns exchanged another glance, in which it was plain that the white nun shared Sister Veronique's belief that she had no father, and Sister Ursula saw, too, that it would be useless for her, a child, to try to convince the white nun otherwise. Her fury supported her during

their train ride, but then, when the convent came into view from the carriage, Sister Ursula broke down and began to sob. To her surprise, if not comfort, Sister Veronique placed a rough, callused hand on her shoulder and said softly, “Never mind, child. You will become one of us now.” In response Sister Ursula slid as far away from the old nun as she could and sobbed even harder, knowing it must be true.

“Are we ever going to meet the father?” one student wanted to know. “I mean, she yearns for him, and he gets compared to Christ, but we never see him directly. We’re, like, *told* how to feel about him. If he doesn’t ever show up, I’m going to feel cheated.”

Sister Ursula dutifully noted this criticism, but you had only to look at the old woman to know that the father was not going to show up. Anybody who felt cheated by this could just join the club.

The day after Sister Ursula’s second workshop, my doorbell rang at seven-thirty in the morning. I struggled out of bed, put on a robe and went to the door. Sister Ursula stood on the porch, clearly agitated. The forlorn station wagon idled at the curb with its full cargo of curious, myopic nuns, returning, I guessed, from morning Mass. The yard was strewn with dry, unraked November leaves, several of which had attached themselves to the bottom of Sister Ursula’s flowing habit.

“Must he be in the story? Must he return?” Sister Ursula wanted to know. As badly as she had wanted her father to appear in life, she needed, for some reason, to exclude him from the narrative version.

“He’s already *in* the story,” I pointed out, cinching my robe tightly at the waist.

“But I never saw him after she died. This is what my story is about.”

“How about a flashback?” I suggested. “You mentioned there was one Christmas holiday...”

But she was no longer listening. Her eyes, slate gray, had gone hard. “She died of syphilis.”

I nodded, feeling something harden in me too. Behind me I heard the bathroom door open and close, and I thought I saw Sister Ursula’s

gaze flicker for an instant. She might have caught a glimpse of Jane, the woman I was involved with, and I found myself hoping she had.

“My father’s heart was broken.”

“How do you know that, if you never saw him again?”

“He loved her,” she explained. “She was his ruin.”

It was my hatred that drew me deeper into the Church, began Sister Ursula’s third installment, the words cramped even more tightly on exactly twenty-five pages, and this elicited my now standard comment in the margin. As a writer of opening sentences, Sister Ursula was without peer among my students.

In the months following her mother’s death, an explanation had occurred to Sister Ursula. Her father, most likely, had booked passage to America to search for work. Such journeys, she knew, were fraught with unimaginable peril, and perhaps he now lay at the bottom of the ocean. So it was that she gradually came to accept the inevitability of Sister Veronique’s cruel prophecy. She would become one of those whom she detested. Ironically, this fate was hastened by the prophet’s untimely death when she was kicked by a horse, not in the head as Sister Ursula had prayed, but in the chest, causing severe internal hemorrhaging and creating an opening in the stable. During her long sojourn at the convent, Sister Ursula had learned to prefer the company of animals to that of humans, and so at the age of sixteen, already a large, full woman like her mother, she became herself a bride of Christ.

Sister Ursula’s chronicle of the years following her vows, largely a description of her duties in the stable, featured several brief recollections of the single week she’d spent at home in the city during the Christmas holiday of that first year she entered the convent school. During that holiday she’d seen very little of her mother—a relief, since Sister Ursula dreaded the heat of her mother’s embrace and the cloying stench of her whore’s perfume. Rather, her beloved father took her with him on his rounds, placing her on a convenient bench outside the dark buildings he entered, telling her how long he would be, how high a

number she would have to count to before he would return. Only a few times did she have to count higher. “Did you find work, Father?” she asked each time he reappeared. It seemed to Sister Ursula that in buildings as large and dark as the ones he entered, with so many other men entering and exiting, there should have been work in one of them, but there was none. Still, that they were together was joy enough. Her father took her to the wharf to see the boats, to a small carnival where a man her father knew let her ride a pony for free and finally to a bitter cold picnic in the country where they ate warm bread and cheese. At the end of each of these excursions her father promised again that she would not have to remain much longer in the convent school, that another Christmas would find them together.

The installment ended with Sister Ursula taking her final vows in the same chapel that for years had been her refuge from the taunts of children for whom she would always be the whore’s child. There, at the very altar of God, Sister Ursula, like a reluctant bride at an arranged marriage, indulged her fantasy of rescue right up to the last moment. When asked to proclaim her irrevocable devotion to God and the one true Church, she paused and turned toward the side door of the chapel, the one she’d always imagined her father would throw open, and willed her father’s shadow to emerge from the blinding light and scatter these useless women and hateful children before him.

But the door remained shut, the chapel dark except for the flickering of a hundred candles, and so Sister Ursula became a bride.

“Isn’t there a lot of misogyny in this story?” observed a male student who I happened to know was taking a course with the English department’s sole radical feminist, and was therefore alert to all of misogyny’s insidious manifestations. By stating this opinion in the form of a question, perhaps he was indicating that the distrust and even hatred of women evident in Sister Ursula’s memoir might be okay in this instance because the author was, sort of, a woman.

At any rate, he was right to be cautious. What would you expect, a chorus of his female classmates sang out. The whole thing takes place in a girls’ school. There were only two men in the story and

one was Jesus, so the statistical sample was bound to be skewed. No, read correctly, Sister Ursula was clearly a feminist.

“I *would* like to see more of the mother, though,” one young woman conceded. “It was a major cop-out for her to die before they could get to the hospital.”

“You wanted a deathbed scene?” said another. “Wouldn’t that be sort of melodramatic?”

Here the discussion faltered. Melodrama was a bad thing, almost as bad as misogyny.

“Why was the daughter sent for?” wondered someone else. “If the mother didn’t love her, why send for her?”

“Maybe the father sent for her?”

“Then why wasn’t he there himself?”

“I know I was the one,” interrupted another, “who wanted to see more of the father after the last submission, but now I think I was wrong. All that stuff with her father over the Christmas holiday? It was like we kept hearing what we already knew. And *then* he’s not there at the hospital when the mother dies. I’m confused.” He turned to me. “Aren’t you?”

“Maybe somebody in the hospital contacted the convent,” another student suggested, letting me off the hook.

“For a dying prostitute in a charity ward? How would they even know where the daughter was unless the mother told them?”

Everyone now turned to Sister Ursula, who under this barrage of questions seemed to have slipped into a trance.

“I don’t care,” said another student, one of the loners in the back of the room. “I *like* this story. It feels real.”

. . .

The fourth and final installment of Sister Ursula's story was only six and a half pages long with regular margins, normal fonts and standard double-spacing.

My life as a nun has been one of terrible hatred and bitterness, it began. I considered writing, *You don't mean that*, in the margin, but refrained. Sister Ursula always meant what she said. It was now late November, and she hadn't veered a centimeter from literal truth since Labor Day. These last, perfunctory pages summarized her remaining years in the convent until the school was partially destroyed by fire. It was then that Sister Ursula came to America. Still a relatively young woman, she nonetheless entertained no thoughts of leaving the order she had always despised. She had become, as Sister Veronique predicted, one of them.

Once, in her late forties, she had returned to Belgium to search for her father, but she had little money and found no trace of him. It was as if, as Sister Veronique had always maintained, the man had never existed. When her funds were exhausted, Sister Ursula gave up and returned to America to live out what remained of her life among the other orphans of her order. This was her first college course, she explained, and she wanted the other students to know that she had enjoyed meeting them and reading their stories, and thanked them for helping her with hers. All of this was contained in the final paragraph of the story, an unconsciously postmodern gesture.

"This last part sort of fizzled out," one student admitted, clearly pained to say this after its author had thanked her readers for their help. "But it's one of the best stories we've read all semester."

"I liked it too," said another, whose voice didn't fall quite right.

Everyone seemed to understand that there was more to say, but no one knew what it might be. Sister Ursula stopped taking notes and silence descended on the room. For some time I'd been watching a young woman who'd said next to nothing all term, but who wrote long, detailed reports on all the stories. She'd caught my attention now because her eyes were brimming with tears. I sent her an urgent telepathic plea. No. Please don't.

"But the girl in the story never *got it*," she protested.

The other students, including Sister Ursula, all turned toward her. "Got what?"

I confess, my own heart was in my throat.

"About the father," she said. "He was the mother's pimp, right? Is there another explanation?"

"So," Sister Ursula said sadly, "I was writing what you call a fictional story after all."

It was now mid-December, my grades were due, and I was puzzling over what to do about Sister Ursula's. She had not turned in a final portfolio of revised work to be evaluated, nor had she returned to class after her final workshop, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't erase from my memory the image of the old nun that had haunted me for weeks, of her face coming apart in terrible recognition of the willful lie she'd told herself over a lifetime.

So I'd decided to pay her a visit at the old house where she and five other elderly nuns had been quartered now for nearly a decade in anticipation of their order's dissolution. I had brought the gift of a Christmas tree ornament, only to discover that they had no tree, unless you counted the nine-inch plastic one on the mantel in the living room. Talk about failures of imagination. In a house inhabited by infirm, elderly women, who did I suppose would have put up and decorated a tree?

Sister Ursula seemed surprised to see me standing there on her sloping porch, but she led me into a small parlor off the main hall. "We must be very still," she said softly. "Sister Patrice has fallen ill. I am her nurse, you see. I am nurse to all of them."

In the little room we took seats opposite each other across a small gategleg table. I must have looked uncomfortable, because Sister Ursula said, "You have always been very nervous of me, and you should not. What harm was in me has wasted away with my flesh."

“It’s just that I was bitten by a nun as a child,” I explained.

Sister Ursula, who’d said so many horrible things about nuns, looked momentarily shocked. Then she smiled. “Oh, I understand that you made a joke,” she said. “I thought that you might be... what was that word the boy in our class used to describe those like me?”

I had to think a minute. “Oh, a misogynist?”

“Yes, that. Would you tell me the truth if I asked you do you like women?”

“Yes, I do. Very much.”

“And I men, so we are the same. We each like the opposite from us.”

Which made me smile. And perhaps because she had confided so much about herself, I felt a sudden, irrational urge to confide something in return. Something terrible, perhaps. Something I believed to be true. That my wife had left because she had discovered my involvement with a woman I did not love, who I had taken up with, I now realized, because I felt cheated when the book I’d published in the spring had not done well, cheated because my publisher had been irresponsibly optimistic, claiming the book would make me rich and famous, and because I’d been irresponsibly willing to believe it, so that when it provided neither fame nor fortune, I began to look around for a consolation prize and found her. I am not a good man, I might have told Sister Ursula. I have not only failed but also betrayed those I love. If I said such things to Sister Ursula, maybe she would find some inconsistency in my tale, some flaw. Maybe she’d conclude that I was judging myself too harshly and find it in her heart to say, “You don’t mean that.”

But I kept my truths to myself, because she was right. I *was* “nervous of her.”

After an awkward moment of silence, she said, “I would like to show you something, if you would like to see it?”

Sister Ursula struggled heavily to her feet and left the room, returning almost immediately. The old photograph was pretty much

as described—brown and curled at its scalloped edges, the womanly image at its center faded nearly into white. But still beautiful. It might have been the photo of a young Sister Ursula, but of course it wasn’t. Since there was nothing to say, I said nothing, merely put it down on the small table between us.

“You? You had loving parents?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“You are kind. This visit is to make sure that I am all right, I understand. But I am wondering for a long time. You also knew the meaning of my story?”

I nodded.

“From the beginning?”

“No, not from the beginning.”

“But the young woman was correct? Based on the things that I wrote, there could be no other... interpretation?”

“Not that I could see.”

“And yet *I* could not see.”

There was a sound then, a small, dull thud from directly overhead. “Sister Patrice,” Sister Ursula informed me, and we got to our feet. “I am needed. Even a hateful nun is sometimes needed.”

At the front door, I decided to ask. “One thing,” I said. “The fire... that destroyed the school?”

Sister Ursula smiled and took my hand. “No,” she assured me. “All I did was pray.”

She looked off across the years, though, remembering. “Ah, but the flames,” she said, her old eyes bright with a young woman’s fire. “They reached almost to heaven.”

About the Author

Richard Russo has written seven novels, including *Empire Falls*, for which he won the Pulitzer Prize. Much of Russo's fiction takes place in the Northeast—from upstate New York to coastal Maine—and his most recent novel, *That Old Cape Magic*, is set largely on Cape Cod. In addition to his fiction, Russo has written screenplays and adapted his own novels into films. He and his wife Barbara spend their summers in Maine and winters in Boston, where Russo is a beloved member of the literary community.

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