



Nine Ages of Woman

BAGLADY

Christina Manolescu

Illustrations *Mary Fitzpatrick*

THE BAGLADY CHRONICLES

Nine ages of woman

DOWNWARDLY
MOBILE

My career as a

Baglady



Prince Chameleon Press

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An excerpt from the novel, *BAGLADY*, was short-listed for the Eastside Stories Competition, sponsored by News International in 1998.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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Thanks to Mary Fitzpatrick
for her whimsical imagery

To Trevor Lockwood
for believing in
Baglady,
for inspiring author publishers
the world over
and for keeping the faith

To my eminent critics

This work of fiction disclaims responsibility for promoting or undermining causes: Feminism or Chauvinism, Militarism or Pacifism, Spiritualism or Materialism, Imperialism or Communism, in short, the entire race of isms.

It strives neither to wage war on polluters, nor disarm nations. It is powerless to prevent wars, feed the hungry or alleviate suffering. It pretends neither to shed light on the mystery of the human journey, nor conquer Satan. Although such attributes may be sought and found in nobler fictions, this modest book aspires to none.

Baglady

Introducing Ashley Grimes, born again ‘Cendrillon’ or more aptly, Grimm’s ‘Ashputtel’, whose adventures and misadventures we pursue from the comfort and safety of our padded armchair.

From her fledgling ‘drop flight’ from the family nest, her adoption by a saintly missionary, her macabre marriage, scattered motherhood, romantic scribblings and ill-starred business ventures, her peace & love adventures, brief stints in the military and other nameless hazards wherein we witness her valiant rise and fall, rise and fall in a dizzying descent—as Baglady.

Follow us on this dark-humoured romp through the hazardous sixties, austere seventies, bleak eighties, and leaner meaner nineties.

It’s a down-at-heel memoir, imbued with the ghost-beauty of the city, both ruin—and renaissance-in-waiting.

Reader Reviews of 'BAGLADY'

Looks like another lively ride, *Iain Sinclair, British novelist, Author of 'Downriver' London, U.K.*

Very appealing, it's a memoir that bites back at its own history with every carefully crafted word. It deserves to be read, carefully and thoughtfully. This is literature. It will stand the test of time. *Trevor Lockwood, Publisher, Braiswick Publishing, Community Radio Host, Felixstowe, U.K.*

Truthful, witty, her style is impeccable, *Raquel Rivera, Author, Reviewer, Montreal, Canada.*

This darkly comic saga of loves and losses, adventures and mishaps chronicles anti-heroine Ashley Grimes's gradual arrival into a 'career' of homelessness and vagrancy. A memoir of disenfranchisement and defiance. Baglady is populated by a wild and eccentric cast of characters spanning the last decades of the 20th century, *Concordia University Magazine, Montreal, Canada, Autumn 2006.*

A joy to read, *Kay Turner, Retired School Librarian, Montreal, Canada*

What a wonderful book...Wickedly funny from beginning to end, a hugely astonishing yet believable cast of characters, chock full of devastating psychological insights and many scenes verging on the downright brilliant! I love it! *Angela Leuck, Poet, Publisher of Haiku, Montreal, Canada.*

I just couldn't put it down, *Judy Isherwood, Publisher, Shorelines, Montreal, Canada.*

The language is rich and fluid, the characters are fascinating. Each chapter allows Ashley to voice her opinions of the world and events and also the characters that appear and disappear at such a rapid pace. After sharing Ashley's hardships and adventures for a time, returning to one's own perhaps more orderly life and world can be a relief of sorts, *Dr. Peter J. Forbes, M.D. Montreal, Canada.*

What a tough, but varied, life Ashley leads! The detailed "word drawings" of characters and situations are quite remarkable and the poems...provide a stimulating beginning to each chapter. A very well-presented volume...I look forward to your next, *Joan Plunkett, Teacher, Actress, London, U.K.*

It has tremendous energy, *Cecile Ghosh, former Reference Librarian, Roxoro and Beaconsfield Libraries, Montreal, Canada.*

Bravo for your wonderful book, *Manon Morin, Producer, Dialectes Program, McGill Radio CKUT, Montreal, Canada.*

It is so witty, so captivating, yet seemingly effortless, full of humor and a way with words. I enjoyed the unexpected turns in the story, such a wonderful unique style. The artist truly captured the essence of the book, a prize-winning cover it is! *Leila Peltosaari, Publisher, Tikka Book, Verdun, Montreal, Canada.*

I haven't stopped chuckling, I couldn't put it down; it's a gem, top class satire, and good to the last drop, a joy to read, *Jeannette Moscovitch, Culturama, Montreal, Canada.*

Loved it! Jack Locke, *Writer, Poet, Radio Host CKUT, Montreal, Canada.*

I'm loving your Baglady novel, a very enjoyable read! *Ingrid Style, Artist, Ste. Hilaire, Quebec, Canada.*

It reads beautifully, and so funny!! *Cristina Perissinotto, PhD, Italian Studies, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada..*

It takes me to new worlds, *Leslie Lutsky, Host Interviewer, Radio Centreville, Montreal, Canada.*

Baglady's...cast of characters are still popping in and out of my imagination. Those people, who you so cleverly "flesh out", are great reminders of persons we have met or of others whom we can be grateful that we never met! An enjoyable, well-written story. Congratulations! *Maddy Cranley, Publisher, Montreal West Island, Canada.*

A blackly comic novel...Grimes's saving grace is her wry sense of humour...which provides the novel with a disarming thread. Mary Fitzpatrick's soft, romantic illustrations add considerable charm, *Montreal Review of Books, Montreal, Canada, Spring, 2006.*

I really *really* enjoyed your book. You are a very gifted (and funny) writer...the imagery is so textured and wonderful, *Gabrielle Maes, actress, singer, playwright, Singapore*

A hilarious, finely written and ultimately disturbing tale of downward mobility in the late twentieth century, *Ann Diamond, Author of My Cold War, Montreal, Canada*

What a romp! Is there a sequel coming to that wonderful *BAGLADY*? *Len Richman, Teacher, Scholar, Author, Actor, TMI Institute, Montreal, Canada.*

Certainly Ashley Grimes bears no resemblance to the perfectly appointed heroines of most modern writing but she touched my senses more nearly. She reminded me of a little girl whistling bravely as she passed so many graveyards in her inevitable march to the street. So many incidents made me laugh out loud but sometimes I felt the tears not far away...Original, fascinating...Surely a sequel is already in the works. *Christina Lundrigan, Newfoundland, Canada.*

I absolutely enjoyed the book. The perils of Ashley Grimes are related with wide eyed, tongue in cheek wonder and make you laugh and cry at the follies of life. There, but for the grace...go I.
F. Tobin, British Columbia, Canada.

The main character has tremendous insights...how she fares in another world would be interesting. *Richard Tardif, Editor-in-Chief, Montreal Hype Magazine. Montreal, Canada.*

I found 'Baglady' to be a thoroughly flowing read. The author's taste for summarizing people really shines through, *René Ghosh, PhD., Engineering, Paris, France.*

I don't think I ever got a chance to tell you how much I enjoyed Baglady! It was wonderful, *Virginia Manning, Literature Student, Editor, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada.*

It was a real joy to read. Truly appreciated, *Suzanne Charland, Programming Coordinator, Radio Centre Ville, Montreal, Canada.*

I have been enjoying your book- it is very creative and engaging!
Andrea Paré, Writer, Journalist, Toronto.

The...writing style is...full of perceptive, clever and oh so witty metaphors, *Alexandra Delgado, Singer-songwriter, (Alexandra and the Herrings) Montreal, Canada*

Throughout the novel, supporting roles are divine caricatures taken from daily life (mindful of Dickens) that make you want to pause and take a good look around at how eccentric many of us have become in this technologically fraught Millennium. Thumbs up for Baglady it's a grand slam success, *NAT Grant, Author of the Race Series, Montreal West Island, Canada.*

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Woman

*You will know her by
Her ash-blond halo
Her trimmed thighs encased
In slim blue jeans
Her gauzy neck fichu afloat,
Her deep-creamed satin skin and spidery lashes,
Her ornamental lamée lips.*

*You will see her push her loaded cart
Between the steep and sloping Vales of Plenty
Where every shelf is stocked
With packaged manna, milk and honey,
And all her little heart's desires
Are on the instant...granted.*

*You will pass her as she wheels her way along the side street
To her own brick-layered little box
Her shadow gleams along the terra cotta tiles
Steeps heaven's wax-glow in the polished stairs
Is trapped at last inside the Looking Glass.*

*You may glimpse her, nestled in a pearl-drenched nursery
Of picture-pasted turrets, gnomes and dragons
Sheltering from this crumbling eggshell world
Her one-point-decimal-five children.*

*You will know her when the evening falls
And from the glazed verandah of her soul
She stares and smokes and sits alone
And thinks this must be all
That she was born for.*

Ashley's COPE BOOK for Stepchildren

Autumn, 1968

I should have known it would be a bad day. First, it was the dense fog all the way to the airport. And then, of course, the car heater wasn't working and so, to keep warm, Father and I cradled a brown paper wrapper of steaming fish and chips on our laps. Droplets of oil oozed from his lower lip as he chewed his way through our impromptu feast. His plump fingers, bedecked in gold and New Age crystals, gripped the shuddering steering wheel. Like some Mediaeval mystic, he strove to divine the inscrutable road ahead.

"Damn!" he muttered, irritable and morose. Of course, he knew, he absolutely knew that the plane would be late. This was yet another gratuitous prediction blithely to ignore. Occupational hazard, I suppose. Unavoidable. As veteran salesman for ZODIAC PRODUCTIONS, he couldn't resist dragging home the occasional chipped crystal ball, cracked Ouija board, dog-eared Tarot Cards, or shopworn paperbacks entitled, *Baleful Influence of the Stars*.

In fact, over the years, Father had worked hard to master the mathematics of 'Foresight.' Many a time, I'd watched him crunch the numbers and then sketch his own celestial blueprint on ZODIAC office stationery. It was not an edifying sight. I couldn't make sense of the squiggly Suns and Moons and Venuses littering

his life's Occult Plan. It seemed to depress him an awful lot though until, with the help of some creative accounting and thoughtful number jiggling, he custom-designed his horoscope to suit himself. But there was no sense in finagling the positions of today's planets in the Ephemeris. What else could you expect on a night when Saturn was in square formation to the Moon? Nostradamus, roll over—Stepmother's plane was going to be late.

And, of course, it was late. At first, they postponed it for an hour, and then two. So, Father and I whittled away the time drinking coffee in the tea room, laughing greenly about the good old days when I was a pert and sassy young miss who had sabotaged the very short-lived relationship with his last live-in girlfriend. He went on to warn me, with a ferocious smile, to be nicer to 'this one.' This was my very last chance, or else he would ship me straight home to Mother.

How did Father get custody of me? Well, he kidnapped me one day, guessing that Mother wouldn't notice my departure for several days. When she did, she wept copiously, cried foul, and tried to engage a lawyer. But she soon ran short of energy and funds and, eventually, was obliged to give me up for lost. The normal day's work was exhausting at the best of times. Just opening her eyelids each morning required a heroic effort. It was an Olympian feat, a repeated miracle. And when she was up and about, for the first few hours she shambled around in her mind, swilling down oceans of tea.

There was one sacrosanct rule in our house: bring your ragged, bony body home alive before midnight. Mother hardly ever knew where I was, or what I was up to. She spent a lot of time drooling over the otherworldly colours of a sunset or the seductive sheen of a Spanish onion.

“Darling—” I shall always remember her calling, whenever she heard me slam the front door and run inside to forage into our near-empty larder,—do mummy a big favour and make a pot of tea.”

Father had had a succession of disappointments in his search for a life partner. As he approached his mature, not to say declining years, he decided to go the fool-proof route. His new mail-order bride hailed from some mountainous hamlet in Eastern Europe, neither of whose unpronounceable names (bride or hamlet) he could remember. But what did it matter? Zsuzsa’s black-and-white snapshot and her ‘curriculum vitae’ charmed him into a state of expectant bliss. She had all the necessary virtues he required. She was young, thin, beautiful and fully domesticated. She scarcely spoke a word of English, into the bargain. Father seemed to regard this not as a handicap, but a prime stroke of luck. Of course, being a salesman wine-aged in duplicity himself, he had pored over the contract-to-purchase before signing below the prominent block letters which promised: 100% SATISFACTION OR REPLACEMENT. RETURN FREIGHT GUARANTEED.

At 9.45 p.m., I wandered into the airport restroom and scrutinized my pale larval features in the depressingly truthful looking glass. Would Zsuzsa like me, I wondered, or would she reluctantly take me in, a grimy stray, at the tips of her fastidious fingers? To my dismay, I had stumbled into the butt end of a fairy-tale. Perhaps you’ve heard of the swan that turned into an ugly duckling? It is I. The most pampered and adored of children, with gold-leaf skin and cornsilk hair, had been transformed, seemingly overnight, into a mal-coordinated giant that thumped and bumped into the protuberances of tables, chairs and staircases. And had my very life depended upon it, I could not

manage to keep my muddy thatch of hair out of my squinting eyes. Mother said I was at the awkward age, a fuzzy caterpillar suffering the longest winter of its discontent. Perhaps that's why my features were still indistinct, a half-finished bust of clay some artist was puzzling over with muddy hands. My starry eyes had lost their lustre, hidden behind the ugly spectacles I'd acquired last year. And my once-satin skin was marred by stubborn blemishes over my cheeks and developing Pinocchio nose. Sad to say, I was no longer the little darling I once had been.

When I got back to the airport lounge Father had, at last, located his Beloved-to-be. She had wandered into the airport terminal with a scruffy name tag around her neck, trailing behind her the scent of marigolds and looking desperately lost. Her hair, even her skin was rough and exotic, like cinnamon bark. Her dark, angst-ridden eyes scanned the crowd, and she glanced at me with a hostile air as though I represented the competition; no doubt, because I clung as possessively as she did to Father's other arm. At first glance, I didn't like her either. Most likely, the feeling was mutual. I wonder if Father dared hazard a prediction on that?

Nonetheless, during the next few weeks, I did all I could to welcome Zuzsa into our hearth and home. But after surviving her first gastronomical flights, and crash landings, we realized that the glossier a brochure, the less trustworthy it may be. Fully domesticated Zsuzsa was not! And she became tearful with each fresh defeat. For one thing, she wasn't accustomed to using our electric stove, she said. Labour-saving mixers, choppers and blenders intimidated her with their tangle of sticky wires and cryptic codes. Neither could she lay hands on her customary ingredients, yellow peppers, sausage tripe, pickled herring at our

nearby supermarket. Well, that's what we thought she was trying to say as she struggled on, dictionary in one hand, pepper shaker in the other.

And so, she laboured over cauldrons of stew that tasted like dog offal, twisted bread rolls reeking of netherworld spices, gelatinous soups on which floated nuggets of blubbery flesh, sea-weedy broths, and rock-solid pastry marbled with rancid nuts and syrupy glaze. To be honest, though, in my 'salad days' I suffered less from Zsuzsa's dietary régime than Father did. At least, I complained a lot less, my mind being consumed with things of greater import, ladder-proof nylon stockings, for instance, and rain-proof mascara, the upcoming Chemistry exam, and Zsuzsa's cherished new familiar, the family dog.

Mornings, I would watch in fascination as it cocked its slim leg, as expertly as a ballet dancer, against our ruined fence. I swear the pampered little beast could smell the panic fear on me, as soon as I thumped clumsily up the staircase. That's when it would charge straight at me, snapping at the hem of my nightgown, gnawing the brand-new slippers right off my feet. Later on, when I was safely out of the house, it would roam downstairs and sniff around my desk and closets. With its intelligent snout it would aim directly for any loose-leaf scraps on which I scribbled sloppy love poems and intimate diaries. These it would chew all the way up the stairs and deposit, in a drooling inky mess, at Zsuzsa's feet.

But by this time, I was already lunging into the home-room class, whispering to my soul-mate, Monica, as Miss Hennessy sat serenely ticking off our names in the attendance register of her golden book. Seated on her throne since the dawn of Time, she seemed to bask in airy goblets of desiccated petals and missal dust. A

crop of dry curls ranged her pale forehead. Her sapped upper lip was dwarfed by a row of oversized false teeth. Her scant, yet decorous frame reposed quietly under an English cardigan. Long woollen skirts she wore, always decently slit below the calf. But her truly invincible psychic armour was a sublime indifference to our girlish hatred of her. Indeed, it was her Manifest Destiny to cast us into the forge, gazing on benignly as our adolescent flaws were burned away, our little knots unkinked.

Miss Hennessy taught Moral and Religious Education. She lectured about the 'Married State' which, she said, was lower than (but not inferior to) the 'Single State' which was lower than (but not inferior to) the 'Religious Vocation.' She droned on for a while about the sacred duties of a Wife-and-Mother-of-a-Family, blessed states which, she trusted, most of us would one day attain. Surreptitious, cryptically worded notes then began traveling between the desks (no easy task under the vigilance of Miss Hennessy's omniscient eye). Our ears perked up, though, as soon as Miss Hennessy lowered her voice. She was obliged to digress for a moment, she told us. Although she hesitated to mention the subject, duty compelled her to bring a widespread spiritual danger to the attention of her girls. She then rustled through the pages of her Bible for pencilled references which warned against the evils of—sorcery and necromancy. Although such dangers as she described appeared remote, it was disturbing because I had never before connected the illicit Raising of the Biblical Dead to Father's collection of occult paraphernalia, his crystals, Tarot Cards, and table rapping gear. I felt furtively guilty, determined never to speak of the Devil's playthings which we harboured under our roof. When our teacher at last departed, I

felt like a gladiator released from a fishnet. A surge of delirious liberty infected the air.

Mr. O'Doherty then stepped, actually, he stumbled into the classroom. A ripple of demonic laughter greeted his arrival. It sprang from somewhere near the back row—Mr. O'Doherty could not pinpoint the source—and it rang out like an echo of itself, swelling louder and louder until the entire class erupted in a synchronized howl of illicit glee. Our schoolmaster flushed. Instinctively, he raised his hand to fondle an electrified strand of hair shooting aloft, like a salute, from the crown of his head. Foot-shuffling and giggling, we followed him through the heavily guarded frontier zone leading into the Boys' School where the Laboratory was housed.

However, as it happens, one mischievous spirit named Miriam lurked among us. She roamed to the far end of the Lab and began puttering around with test tubes and beakers, mixing copper filings with sulfuric acid, as instructed, murmuring incantations over her potion of incipient blue crystals and stirring with her long narrow spoon. Having scribbled out her Lab report early, it seems she amused herself by rifling through the unlocked drawers and cupboards to see what other fun she could steal. Here she discovered a treasure-house of chemical fascinaria: silver beads of mercury, various oils, emulsifiers, odoriferous granules, and a rainbow range of chemical powders stored in glass and plastic jars.

Mr. O'Doherty wasn't watching any of this very closely. Satisfying himself, during his preliminary tour of the Lab, that each student had conjured up the required crystals in her beaker, he whiled away the rest of the lesson yawning, scratching, and chatting up the buxomest nymphets in the room. It was the series

of small explosions, a chemical popcorn factory, which brought him to his senses. But it was that eerily familiar laughter that made his blood run cold. Crashing into a row of stools, he stormed to the far end of the Lab, wrestled off his Lab coat and tossed it over the foot-high flames crackling merrily atop a Bunsen burner. Test tubes full of various powders and crystals had been mixed together in unorthodox experiments, then dumped into the sink. An unidentifiable compound that reeked stronger than horse manure was drizzling all over the floor.

Perhaps it was the maniacal quality of Miriam's laughter that touched a sensitive chord in Mr. O'Doherty. As soon as he laid eyes on the culprit, he became like a creature possessed. He dragged the maleficent fairy, literally dragged her half-way across the room by the hair. But Miriam was a power to be reckoned with. She managed to pull free from her teacher's grasp, ferociously scratching, biting and spitting. He then lost all control and slapped her. In response, she disarmed him with a charming knee jerk. While he was down on his hands and knees braying like a wounded ass, she seized a wooden Lab stool and flung it at his head. Then she snatched up her satchel and vanished through the back door in a plume of malodorous smoke.

The following day, Miriam and Mr. O'Doherty were summoned by Mother Superior to explain their unseemly behaviour. She strutted arrogantly, he hobbled into the office. Any other student would have risked immediate expulsion, but Miriam did not appear cowed. Her family owned vast tracts of land all over the city. Furthermore, her father—a generous benefactor to the school's coffers—also presided over the Parents' Association, thereby wielding considerable influence behind the scenes. It was fortuitous, too, that

Miriam had managed to explain her version of the incident to her father's satisfaction, before appearing to defend herself here today.

Biting her sallow lips in suppressed fury, Mother Superior opened the letter, hand-delivered by Miriam from her father. What kind of teacher, he demanded, left dangerous chemicals lying around? Failed to supervise hazardous Lab experiments? Spent more time ogling his young students than instructing them? On behalf of all concerned parents, Miriam's father demanded a full investigation of Mr. O'Doherty's teaching methods, his moral code and, since he appeared to be hovering on the fringe of madness, the state of his mental health as well. Meanwhile, their family lawyer was already filing charges of assault and battery against O'Doherty. He was to be relieved of his duties at once (without pay, of course). Miriam's father would engage a private tutor for her in the interim. As for her fellow graduating students, better to have no instructor at all than a deranged, immoral and incompetent one.

Well, after our schoolmaster's abrupt departure, Sister Saint-Perpetua of Jesus was dragged out of retirement to replace him. She hadn't expected to have to take on this emergency assignment so close to the end of term, and understandably she was none too pleased. For one thing, she had never studied the subject which she was now required to teach. Her faith in her own ability was invincible, however—her faith in the Almighty, absolute. She got hold of the teacher's manual with the intention of cramming four years of high school Chemistry into one weekend.

Unfortunately, Sister Saint-Perpetua was troubled by an instinctive distrust of the subject. She regarded Chemistry as an updated, slightly more respectable version of the mantic arts, the deluded search for the

Philosopher's Stone. In her view, man's desire to feast on the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge proved how shallow was his Christian faith. His feeble attempt to penetrate and manipulate the veiled mysteries of God's Creation was no better than searching for heavenly auguries in the entrails of animals, just as the blasted heathens did. Did it not suffice that the earth, sea, sun and moon were created by the Almighty for the exclusive benefit of mankind?

Who the hell needed to know anything more, for Christ's sake?

So, thought Sister Saint-Perpetua, as she pored over the Table of Elements and grappled with the concepts of valences, chemical compounds and atomic theory. Her synapses exploded in tiny flashpoints. Her grey cells laboured and strained. Her capacity for understanding was stretched to its outer limits, then snapped. Deliberately, she closed her Chemistry books. True faith needed no scientific rationalization. She vowed that she would personally crown (and not in a good way) the first teenaged infidel who dared pose too impertinent a question—if it was a question on which God Himself was silent.

And thus, on Monday morning, Sister Saint-Perpetua stepped briskly into our classroom, clutching her power-rosary on its shiny silver chain. Her complexion was pink and shining behind her rimless spectacles. Under her unassuming black robe bristled the shoulder muscles of a football player. One warning thump of her fist on the venerable oak desk struck terror into our hearts. So, not surprisingly, her bumbblings at the blackboard went unnoticed or unreported for weeks; we became the dunces, the almost brain-dead, taught by Sister Saint-Perpetua of the Iron Rod.

At least once a day, Sister got stuck in the middle of a demonstration at the blackboard and had to dart into her office to consult her notes. That was when Monica, desperate to relieve the tedium of the long afternoon, delved into her desk for her fake eyelashes and champagne-blonde wig. But a sudden hush choked the giggles in our throats. Our hands returned instantly to our note-copying and a wave of studiousness infiltrated the room. Monica's feathery wig rose up in one last triumphant number, then abruptly dove for cover, burying itself under a mound of paper scraps and pencil shavings. Its flushed owner sought refuge in an innocent-looking notebook. But Sister Saint-Perpetua's crooked finger, which beckoned from the doorway, and the grim smile on her face, not altogether displeased (almost malevolently gleeful) boded ill fortune to the wig wearer.

Monica returned to class after her chastisement, a fitting example to the others, appearing as stunned as a torture victim after a stint on the rack. But although Sister was renowned for the success of her mind-bashing techniques, graduation was fast approaching and we were all in danger of failing our Chemistry Finals. Parents would be enraged. There would be another investigation. Sister Saint-Perpetua prayed to her patron saint for a solution, which soon came. Somehow, through an oversight, an advance copy of the final exam questions happened to find its way into the Lab notebook of Sister's favourite student. She was a small girl with twinkling braces, a rodentesque smile, and an ostentatious medal that identified her as a member of the Sodality of Mary. The thriving black-market system which was already in place ensured that, for a price, most students were able to obtain a bootlegged copy of the circulating document which, by week's end, had become more valuable than the Dead Sea Scrolls.

And such is life!

When came the long-awaited day of my Graduation Ball, I hoped my fairy godmother would surprise me with a beautiful gown. Instead, Zsuzsa, my fairy stepmother, came bustling back from the dime-store sale with a cinder-grey tulle garment crushed up in a bag. Being too loose, it had to be fastened at the bosom with a rhinestone brooch, then weirdly complemented by a raggedy sash and crimson-striped winklepicker shoes.

I was, at that time, ardently fickle; that is to say, I routinely tumbled into long-distance love with first one, then another incarnation of the male gender. However, they remained a tribe of aliens with whom we females were rarely allowed to fraternise, other than across the chain-link fence of the off-limits sector of the schoolyard where they were penned up after lunch. There were the russet or sandy-haired Anglo-Saxons, steadily chewing gum like pale, freckled cows. Or else, there was the hothouse variety, those swarthy Latinos, rippling with charisma, who seemed capable of devouring my chaste little corsage with one gulp.

Now, Denis Mahoney, my 'chevalier servant' was a nice, intelligent, sensitive boy. But how on earth was I to respond to his bashful invitation to the graduation Ball? I found myself staring in fascination at the rampant tendrils that shaded both eyes, the darkling gnomish allure, the ungainly limbs as long as stilts. I recall that Mother had always insisted that looks are not important when the soul is allowed to shine through (an affectation which, I assume, sprang from creeping senility). But all that aside, time was swiftly passing; it would probably have to be Denis—or no one at all. So, imagine my chagrin that momentous evening when, all trussed up in my cinder-grey garment, my

ash-blond hair bouncing freshly out of its curlers, the rosy aureole of a blemish erupting on my cheek, I picked up the phone and heard Denis's plaintive tone. By now, he should have been standing on the doorstep, spiked with a white carnation and all, ready to escort me away.

"What do you mean, you don't think you're coming! You've failed your Chemistry exam? (Being a habitual loner, poor Denis must have been the sole student who knew nothing about widespread intellectual theft.) So what, who cares?" I said. "Just come over here right now, Denis, I am waiting for you."

Well, Denis continued his soul-searching for several hours, pincer'd between the agony of appearing at the Ball under false pretences, or else staying home in disgrace. I, therefore, partnerless and full of angst, hailed a taxicab and went alone. Upon entering the school building, though, my imagination demanded a powerful suspension of disbelief. Our club-fisted Parents' Committee had vetoed the expense of a live orchestra and a rented hall. As I hurried past the familiar rows of battle-ship grey lockers connected to the gymnasium, the odour of chalk dust and decomposing sneakers did its utmost to dispel the illusion of a glittering Ball.

And how did I explain away my invisible consort? Well, circulating amongst the elegant white tuxedos and frilly organzas, I pretended that the ubiquitous Denis had just popped into the Gents, that he was dancing with his cousin at the extremity of the ballroom, that he was fetching me another glass of strawberry punch. Midway through the evening, by all accounts, boorish Denis simply got bored with the party and left. By a cruel twist of Fate, my girlfriend, Monica, got sick from over-feasting at the banquet table. By the time she left,

heaving and retching all over her party gown, she was the exact shade of pickled cucumbers she had been noshing on all night. Her bereaved partner, Norman Somebody-or-other, came wandering in my direction and, by default, he became mine.

All this time, I was unaware that Denis had stayed home all evening, drinking double gins laced with soda pop. By the time he arrived, at the precise stroke of midnight, many of the revelers were already departing to continue the 'real' party elsewhere. I was having the time of my life, gyrating on the dance floor with my new-found partner, Norman, when Denis materialized before me. In all honesty, he had no business getting angry, but logic held no sway in the face of what he perceived to be a 'double humiliation.' Before I realized what was afoot, a scuffle broke out between my rival beaux. Lanky Denis grabbed Norman by his white lapels, as though he intended to impale him on a stake. I heard hoarse shouts, some screams from the girls. No one had had the foresight to engage a bouncer and, so, the tussle continued unabated until the contestants wore themselves out. Denis staggered backward, suddenly feeling the cumulative effects of the evening's melancholy bibbling. Norman, to his credit, put up a gentlemanly fight. The sorry mess ended in a blur of split lip, black eye, and bruised jaw. I recall seeing Denis, sinking stupefied against the banquet table. As I was hustled out of the building by brave Norman, the wonky heel of my winklepicker shoe got wedged, and remained behind in a grate.



Looking back, this was hardly a milestone to recall with nostalgia. Yet, humiliating though the event had been, like all else it faded into the past. Life gradually returned to normal. The new normal, that is. My stepmother, Zsuzsa, as it happens, had finally begun to acquire a smattering of English. She even made some friends in the neighbourhood, one of them being Bishop Aleph, Founder-in-Chief of the Church of Love and Light. This venerable pastor was a cross between an Irishman and a Montagnais Indian, and he was proud of the two mystic traditions coursing through his veins. His followers formed a congregation of about seven or eight souls, all living within three city blocks.

Membership was growing by leaps and bounds, he told Zsuzsa. Many converts were attracted by his soothsaying gifts. If they attended religious services in his tiny basement, only to implore the favour of a winning lottery number as an added boon, Bishop Aleph saw no harm in their less-than-spiritual motives. Man's nature is temporal, as well as eternal, is it not? Besides, said the Bishop, he must be doing something right because his faithful parishioners came back week after week on route to the Arcades, the dog or the horse races, dropping hefty offerings into his offertory plate in return for a sneak preview through his clairvoyant's eyes.

One evening, Zsuzsa ventured to sacrifice half a week's grocery money in exchange for a visit to the Bishop's underground shrine, where she would try to make contact with 'The Beyond.' She missed her family intensely. Perhaps it had been a mistake coming to the New World. She wanted to contact her loved ones again, and her 'Dear Departed' were better than no family at all.

So, on the night of the full moon, Bishop Aleph greeted Zsuzsa cordially at the door. A large skullcap graced his grizzly-silver head; his venerable fingers gripped a glassful of amber-coloured spirits. Together, they padded silently down the carpeted staircase into the Underworld. It was a tiny sanctuary in the basement where the Bishop received his mystic-seeking clients. On the home-made altar were handfuls of dried field grasses, pussy willows, grimy little nobs of cotton, rosaries, plaster statues of the Saints, numerous rocks, crystals, pebbles, and vases stuffed with peacock feathers.

Bishop Aleph settled himself comfortably into a Lazyboy chair. He chewed on a black olive, then swilled it down with brandy. "You are very unhappy, my dear. You have a decision to make, about your freedom," he said, fixing Zsuzsa with his penetrating grey eyes, hooked owl-like under the brows.

Zsuzsa looked startled when she heard this. Her eyes watered. Her cheeks, all of a sudden, were scorched by a premature hot flash.

"There, there," murmured the Bishop, stroking her knee with his benevolent palm. "Someone is here. Someone close to you, your grandmother, no, your great-grandmother has a message for you—*Ouch!*" he yelped, as though something invisible had stung his ear. He snatched his hand from Zsuzsa's thigh.

Great-grandmother's Spirit seemed to hover around them like a cloud, a swarm of disturbed hornets. The Bishop flopped head-backwards into an instant trance. His voice was rough, gravelly and incensed. No longer as unctuous as olive oil, it rose like the roar of an infuriated Genie.

“Zsuzsa!” thundered the voice of the phantom Matrix Dominatrix through his pre-empted lips. “What took you so long to seek our advice? Remember the pride of your ancestors! How dare you bring shame upon our family?”

No reply from Zsuzsa, who was almost fainting in terror.

“Pride, Zsuzsa! Where is your pride? Whingeing and whimpering and allowing your dainty little rump to be kicked, and by a mere mortal, yet!”

An exotic stream of Transylvanian cursing then emerged from the good Bishop’s lips but, in truth, he was oblivious to each profanity he uttered.

“What are you, a mere scullion in your husband’s home, or are you Mistress?” crackled the voice of the Matrix Dominatrix.

The Bishop’s spirit-arm suddenly jerked up in the air. His clenched fist smashed down upon the wooden armrest of the Lazyboy. His eyelids flew open. It was some time before he realized where he was.

The following week, Zsuzsa tried to arrange another séance, but Bishop Aleph refused. A whole month’s grocery money could not entice him to repeat the experiment. He had fractured his pinkie on the wooden armrest. For several days afterward, he kept hearing a residual ringing or buzzing in his right ear. Not only that, but his dormant ulcer had been abruptly awakened from its slumbers. He told Zsuzsa that, henceforth, if she desired further communication with the netherworld, she’d be obliged to arrange it herself.

But Zsuzsa was now irrevocably hooked onto the occult. It was far more entertaining and spiritually nourishing than staring at television, a pastime she regarded with disdain. She eagerly prepared for the

arrival of the Spirits by altering the décor of our home. Wholesome Spirits were attracted to bright colours, she believed. So, she put away all the knickknacks and blissfully painted the cabinets pure white at midnight. Then, she began experimenting with our collection of substandard Ouija boards until she found one that worked.

One night, she succeeded in raising the spectre of the Matrix Dominatrix all by herself. The old crone was in an evil temper and wanted to do Father grave and permanent harm, but Zsuzsa was too soft-hearted to hear of it. All she wanted from her illustrious ancestor was a benign hex that would make Father tenderer, more generous, something to purge his choleric nature, a sort of mystic enema. For this, she was told to assemble a pot-pourri of outlandish ingredients, even more difficult to lay hands on than yellow peppers out of season. Given her nuptial distress, Zsuzsa was ready to give anything a try.

However, a storm erupted a few days later before she had the chance to cast her beneficent charm. I was sitting at the breakfast table, retching over the half-cooked eggs Zsuzsa had boiled for me, when Father came downstairs in a satanic mood. In his fist he gripped a wad of cashed cheques, drawn by Bishop Aleph (in compensation for his 'après-séance' medical fees) from their joint bank account. A lot of handwaving, screaming and shouting ensued. The door slammed shut, and Zsuzsa was left alone in a puddle of tears.

Father underscored his fury by staying out late every night for more than a week. Zsuzsa consoled herself by conjuring up the Matrix Dominatrix, who appeared night after night, like bottled misery, upbraiding her for not asserting herself more forcefully in her own home. Gradually, the old crone's malevolent stare

began to engrave itself upon Zsuzsa's features. In time, she too developed the waxy, liverish complexion and glazed eye of those who haunt funeral parlours. Bishop Aleph, who was able to read invisible psychic auras, told Zsuzsa that hers was now a shocking red-and-green eruption emanating from the crown of her head and trailing behind her in a foul-looking serpentine cloud.

Every so often, she would seize a pen and paper, and her hand would begin scribbling rapidly across the page as though impelled by an irresistible force. Later, when I retrieved the scrap of paper from where it had fallen, I could decipher nothing from Zsuzsa's illegible scrawl except the final calligraphic flourish in large black lettering—M D. Zsuzsa seemed to soak up her ancestor's Spirit, as well. She became as harsh and irritable as one of the Furies. Even I hardly recognized her any more. One night, Father came home unexpectedly early and burst in on Zsuzsa and me. She was mumbling 'in tongues,' lighting ceremonial candles and wafting her flame-red scarf around the 'enchanted circle' that she had poured in molten black wax in front of our fireplace. Father staggered backwards and almost tripped over the leather pouffe. His pallid lips were twitching with the onrush of sudden emotion.

"Would you believe it—a coven of witches!" he whispered, and the timbre of his voice was as electrifying as a suppressed shriek.

And from then on, it was clear that Father was quietly terrified of Zsuzsa. The macabre ceremony he had witnessed preyed so much on his mind that he decided to speed his bride back to her tiny hamlet without further ado. Zsuzsa had turned out to be less than satisfactory, and that's putting it mildly. Father wanted to telex a vehement message to the

central offices of the mail-order agency, demanding an exchange. No, on second thought, a complete refund. But, as he pored over the minuscule print of his contract with a magnifying glass, he was reminded that the required thirty days had long since elapsed. He had no legal means of disposing of his bride, and the Matrix Dominatrix, embedded in Zsuzsa, had no intention of returning from whence she'd come.

Father then decided to meet fire with fire. For a hefty fee, Bishop Aleph was persuaded to try to conjure up an equally powerful Warlock from our side of the family. This posed quite a risk to himself, warned the Bishop. Hopefully, it would not result in even greater damage to his dignified person. As a precaution, he dressed from head to heel in pure white to fortify his etherical body and keep him from harm, he said.

Zsuzsa was out of the house that evening and so, the two conspirators met downstairs in our basement. It was a dark, low-ceilinged, inhospitable place, still reeking of dead fish and seaweed ever since Father's fish tank had sprung a leak last year. Slimy mushroom caps sprouted unbidden at the corners of our chronically damp ceilings. Filmy white peapods, the cocoons of sleeping butterflies, had taken refuge beneath the mildewed pages of books. Through the ground-level window grate above my cubbyhole of a desk where I sat scribbling, I stared at the ragged trails of mist, the sinister dark cloud mantle moving slowly across the moon. A stab of incense pierced the latrinish air. Into the den I barged, nose wrinkling, sniffing like an aroused watchdog.

"Get out, we're busy!" shouted Father. He, too, was decked in the necessary attire from ZODIAC's warehouse, a shiny black cap spiked with a rakish red tassel, a black armband, a black silk vest embroidered

with red-and-gold winged dragons. "Won't you ever learn to knock?" he cried.

"Oh, sorry," I said, shutting the door again. Well, almost! In fact, I deliberately stayed to peek through the narrow crack.

A worm-like collection of dried plant stems was spread upon the bamboo table in front of the two Sages. Nearby, were some bottles of oily liquid, a dripping red-and-black wax taper, a box of Tarot cards, a curve-tailed dragon painted around some mysterious lettering on a flat piece of wood. The pungent odour of incense seemed to center around the good Bishop. At the same time, a menacing shadow, like the plume of smoke from a volcano, hovered behind his chair. Although I did not realize it at the time, a tremendous contest was about to take place. Hereafter, it would forever be remembered in our family as the Battle of the Banshees. Barely a moment later, a demon Spirit seemed to have been let loose in our home.

Father let out a terrified cry. The lenses of his reading glasses cracked in front of his eyes and a surge of netherworld heat-energy rose through the soles of his shoes, warming, then almost singeing the hair off his legs. Zsuzsa's hound yapped hysterically from somewhere upstairs.

"The Entity is present," snorted Bishop Aleph, gripping the arms of his chair. His eyes began to tear. He coughed and wheezed, as though reacting to some unseen pollutant in the environment.

The irritated old phantom of a Warlock did not understand at first why he had been summoned, and it took the utmost of Bishop Aleph's skill to tame his fiery presence long enough to communicate Father's plea, which was to drive the Matrix Dominatrix from our hallowed home. Fortunately, or so it seemed at

the time, this bizarre request tickled the Spirit's fancy. His gleeful shade flitted around the basement, smoky emanations gushing like silent laughter from his ethereal lips. His presence, reeking of incense, was so palpable, we could almost track his progress around the room. First, jamming the hands of the wall clock permanently to seven minutes past nine—then, (as if to demonstrate his prowess) sweeping a handful of mouldy old books off the highest shelf.

"We must be very cautious with the Spirits," whispered Bishop Aleph. "Sometimes their enthusiasm carries them away, I've seen it happen before." He ducked, but still got thumped on the shoulder by a cascading hardcover which fell into his lap. "Heavens, this one does enjoy a little joke," he said, pointing an unsteady finger at the gilt lettering stamped onto the cloth-bound cover of the book.

I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE, it said.

In the weeks that followed, our household Spirits clashed with such force that home became a psychic minefield where even angels fear to tread. The tension grew unbearable. Zsuzsa, whose instinctive sympathy lay with the embattled Spirit of her ancestor, would be seized by uncontrollable rages. She would tear around the house, howling like an inmate released from the Tower of Babel, dumping Father's shirts, cufflinks and boxer shorts out of his drawers and closets. Then, she'd run downstairs and sling a couple of his prize porcelain ornaments against the wall. Some mornings, I would catch her vengefully steeping the tip of his soiled sock (which he'd carelessly dropped beside the clothes hamper) into his morning tea. Once, she even smashed his wristwatch against the marble chessboard. The malevolent glint in her eye left us no doubt that she wished it was his head.

And yet, despite his most earnest attempts, the phantom Warlock could not dislodge the Spirit of the Matrix Dominatrix from our hearth and home. It was unnerving for us all to have to witness the intensity and the fallout from their battles. The electric lights would flicker violently, then pop with sudden flash-fires in their sockets. Time and time again, every lamp, radio, and kitchen appliance would suddenly go dead, although the electric company reported no power outages in the neighbourhood. The upstairs telephone would ring even after it was disconnected. Dishes crashed to our feet as we opened cupboard doors. More than once without warning, the front door would blow open in a gust of psychic wind. Late at night, long after Father lay heaving and snoring, locked in his own bedroom beside Zsuzsa's, I would awaken to the Spirits' psychic tirades, shadow-boxing in the gloomy mirrors, shoving one another up and down stairwells. Their bitter arguments pierced the cardboard-thin walls, shrieked like an ill-wind up the chimney, rumbled louder than a thunderstorm on the roof.

But although the battle took its toll on her etherical body and psychic nerve ends, the Matrix Dominatrix 'stood her ground' and defied Father's Warlock with such arrogance, it must have stuck in his phantom craw. Humiliated, when his magic proved impotent against the old crone's power, he resorted to devastating 'scorched-earth' tactics and went after Zsuzsa instead. She found that the antique iron she'd once stuffed with charcoal from her wood stove was safer than our state-of-the-art, technologically streamlined monster. The vengeful old wizard would push the heat-control dial of the steam iron into overdrive. One by one, Father's dress shirts acquired the familiar heart-shaped brand over the breast pocket before being ripped into

dust rags by Zsuzsa, who could not bring herself to throw anything away.

Dragging home her bags of groceries one day, she stood on the porch step and heard the warning yaps of the hound-dog, chained to a post in the backyard. She had left her beef stew simmering on the back burner, and the unexpected stench of charred meat and the horrific, smoky black billows oozing from the side window threw her into an ice-cold sweat. That was when the front door stubbornly refused to open. For some inexplicable reason, her key jammed, then twisted uselessly around and around inside the lock. By the time she ran toward the side door, the flames had leapt with a vengeance onto her open deep-fry pan of cooking oil and shot, like a thousand fiery spears, through the ceiling. Heart thumping, Zsuzsa withdrew a safe distance from the window pane, watching fatalistically as the whole house—and, with it, her future unhappiness—went up in smoke.

After our house burned to the ground, Father went to great lengths to retrieve and bury Zsuzsa's charred cooking pots, resembling funerary urns, in the garden. Thus, the visiting insurance adjustor was hard pressed to unearth a clue, much less determine the cause of the fire. Was it faulty wiring, a cigarette left smouldering, human error or an act of God? Bishop Aleph was brought in to bless the ashes, in the uncertain hope that the two warring Spirits would never again darken what was left of our door. According to the good man, whose sallow skin looked deeply jaundiced and whose opulent lips twitched under the strain of this final disaster, the invincible Matrix Dominatrix and her vengeful Warlock were safely back in 'The Beyond.' Yet, since neither of them could claim a decisive victory, they were fated to remain forever entangled, cursing, snapping and snarling at one another for all Eternity.

Father then made an heroic decision. He drained his emergency savings account and, with magician's flair, presented Zsuzsa with the last luxury he couldn't afford, a one-way ticket back to her homeland. He understood that she was lonely, even sympathized with her plight, but if she insisted on hobnobbing with the Matrix Dominatrix (who, undeniably, was family after all) he preferred that it be in some faraway place—a cave in the Transylvanian woods surrounding Dracula's castle perhaps. Bidding us both a tearful farewell, his Beloved flew the coop. A week later, Father divorced Zsuzsa in absentia, noisily lamenting her cruel 'abandonment,' whilst secretly praying that his absent turtle-dove would never muster sufficient funds to return.

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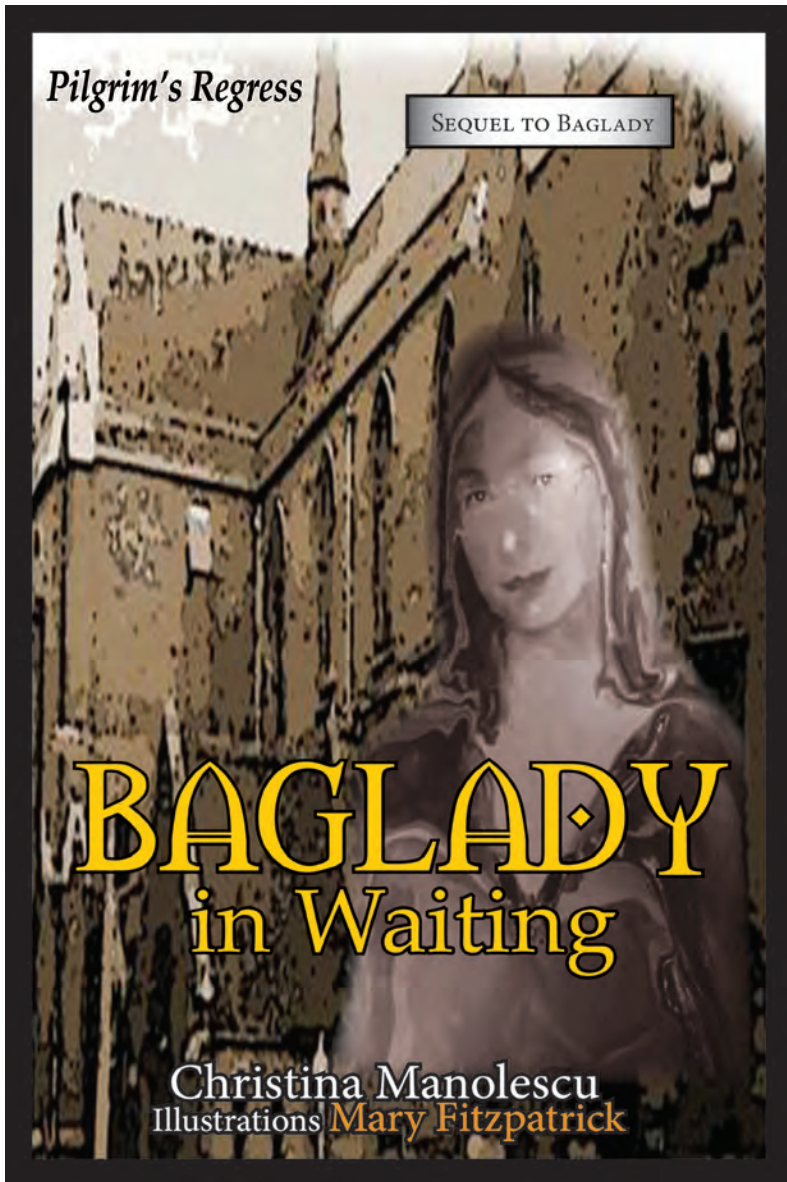
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