

CLAIRE DEWITT  
&  
THE CASE OF  
THE BLOOD ON THE SNOW

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Father Billy was getting old. His hair had gone from black to silver to white to yellow. His skin, once taut and firm across his high Billy Dean Stanton cheekbones and regal Irish nose, had sunk down to hollow out his eyes and his cheeks.

I'd met Father Billy on a case. A case like the one that had put me in the hospital this time. That case put me in the hospital too – one of my first extended stays. But that was years ago.

I don't know how long I was in the hospital this time before he came to see me. It would be months before I got the chronology of those first few weeks all sorted out, and some of it is still hazy.

He'd come a long way to see me. Maybe because he knew I needed it. Father Billy was a New Yorker of the type they didn't make anymore. Born in Gowanus to an Irish-Italian-Polish-Puerto-Rican family of five kids; three dock workers, back when there was still work on the docks, Father Billy, and the baby, Angie. Their mother raised the kids, kept the house spotless, and cooked breakfast, lunch and dinner for the family. When the kids got a little older she got a part-time job as a cashier in a diner in Brooklyn Heights, just outside the A train, to "keep busy." The Father's father was a dock worker who also sometimes drove a cab and also sometimes helped out with the numbers in Carroll Gardens.

But in the end all their busyness and work and protections didn't add up to much. The docks closed. Most of the boys went into corrections or security, where they met a whole new level of brutality and the drugs to find relief from it. Father Billy lost the Brooklyn parish he and his family had put every spare penny into for a hundred years, although he was given a new one in Manhattan. And Angie – well, Angie's long, sad, story is for another day.

When I woke up in the hospital for some reason I wasn't surprised to see Father Billy there next to me.

I sat up. I was alive. I wasn't sure if that was a great thing. Billy gave me water and a doctor came in to explain to me that I was royally fucked but could, with all the king's horses and all the king's men, could likely be

reassembled. Wouldn't be as good as new but then again, how good was that, really?

The doctor left. Billy took my hand.

"Now, I want to tell you a story about Mary," he said after a while. "Not that Mary. This Mary was a prostitute down on Allen Avenue. You remember. We had the truck that would go out with condoms and needles and some food. You remember. There was a woman worked with me on that – Sister Martha. She was one of those hard nuns, you know, made of steel and bones. Scared the hell out of the other nuns and you should've seen her with the kids! The women on the street were scared of her too, at first. But most of them warmed up to her once they came to see what she was about. No big soft heart under that tough exterior. She was rock-hard all the way through. You could lean on her all you wanted and you could know she'd never fall down. That's a rare and beautiful woman. One with no softness at all.

"So Mary was one of the women working down on Allen Avenue, and the first time Sister Martha approached Mary to see what she might need, Mary spit in Martha's face. Mary didn't like Catholics very much, obviously, and especially not the clergy. She had good reason, too, as it was a priest who'd ruined her life, taken everything from her, all of her trust and her faith and her health, and no one believed a word from her about it. Her family came to hate her and she left home very young, couldn't find any kind of work, and ended up just where we met her. She lived in a little hotel on the Bowery. The people there, they had a little bit of a community – we knew many of them in the hotel, spent a lot of time over there. So she had a little bit of a home, and some friends, which is more than many have. But still not very much.

"Now most of the women, they were happy to see us, happy to take some hot coffee and some supplies, happy to talk for a minute to someone who didn't want anything from them. But Martha goes up to Mary and starts her little talk about is she hungry what does she need and Mary spits right in her face. Says, you ever talk to me again I'll cut that fucking smile right off your face. So Martha says OK, God bless you and I'll keep my face, thank you very much, and takes off.

"Now these women, just to paint the picture, they didn't look like the streetwalkers in movies. They didn't have fancy clothes and wigs and high heels. Mary was small, she had dark hair. Bad luck had taken its toll on her. Barely thirty and she used a cane to walk – nerve damage from the drugs. Most of the time she just wore jeans and a little coat.

These women weren't so young, and their services were not inexpensive. A lot of scars. A lot of limps. And a lot of predators preying on them. They were people who were left behind by the world, and for a violent man, it was really just a playground. The women would get beaten, raped, killed, and sometimes, many times, just disappear. All the worst impulses men had, this was where they could carry them out. Thanks to Jesus, sometimes we could be there to help when the women were hurt.

"But there was a lot of fun, too, believe it or not. I'm always amazed by how people have fun in the darkest places. People were friends. They made families. We made a lot of friends out there. We made some mistakes but I like to think, I hope, we helped a lot of women.

"But Mary, she didn't want our help. Plenty of others did. A few years went by and Mary still wouldn't have anything to do with us. Maybe she was just as tough as Sister Martha. Hard all the way through. If we got close to Mary, even by accident, she'd start spitting and cursing all over again.

"Now Sister Martha, you could see she worried over Mary. She knew better than to try to talk to her, of course – she wanted to keep her face! But every once in a while I'd catch Martha just staring at Mary. Just watching her. And every year Mary got thinner, and more exhausted, and more beat up by life. Martha would try to give one of the other women a meal or a cup of soup or some candy to give Mary, and tell her not to say where it came from. But somehow Mary knew. She always knew. Mary would take that sandwich and very slowly, very carefully, piece by piece, throw it onto the ground and grind it down into the filthy gutter, looking right at us the whole time. She'd rather go hungry than take even a little bit of food we had touched. And who could blame her?

"But Martha, in her own way, never stopped trying. Never stopped trying to look after Mary. She would look in at the hotel and make sure Mary's bill was paid before her days off. She'd leave some extra clothes at

the hotel, give them to other women, and hope they'd make their way to Mary.

"Then one day, just before Christmas, one of the other women comes running in the van, all worked up. She says Mary got in a car with someone wrong – one of the girls recognized the car, but only when it was too late, when they were already driving away. Said the man almost killed her, but she got lucky and got out just in time.

"Of course Martha jumped into action. I promise you, if Martha had known how to find them, she would have gone right to that car herself. She wasn't scared of anything. But we didn't know where to go. Martha had a friend on the force, an officer who's aunt was a Sister. So Martha called him up and told him everything and begged, literally begged him, to help her look for Mary. So he came around and picked her up and they drove all the usual places. But it started to snow, and snow hard, and the desk sergeant called the officer in, so Martha came back to the van. Usually we would've been done for the night by then, but of course we weren't going home. Maybe not ever. We drove around ourselves for a while until the snow got too bad to drive. So finally Martha and me put on our coats and gloves and everything we can find and go out to look for Mary ourselves.

"Now, one thing you have to understand is that New York was different back then. The streets weren't so crowded downtown like they are now. In bad weather you could walk for blocks without seeing another person. So out goes Martha in her black habit and her long black coat in the snow, over a foot of it by then, looking down every block on the Lower East Side for Mary, me tagging along behind her.

"Many years later I found out something I didn't know at the time – Martha had, used to have, two older sisters. And both became addicts, and both died on the street, just like the women on Allen Avenue. And both died alone.

"We walked and we walked and we walked, Martha and me. My fingers and toes burned with frostbite. And then finally, just before the sun came up, we saw something red and dark in the snow, down at the end of a little alley almost in Chinatown.

"We rushed down and oh my God, was it horrible. Poor Mary was all cut and beat and blood was pouring out of her. She couldn't even scream. I

thought there was just a few breaths left in her. I ran off to find a payphone to call for help and Martha stayed with Mary. For some reason I remember so clearly how it felt to run on those burning cold feet, how adrenaline took me over. Funny the things you remember. I went and I called 911 and then I called the precinct direct and I don't know who else. When I'd called everyone I could think of, I ran back to Martha and Mary.

"Mary was still lying on the ground, bleeding so much you couldn't even think of what to do. Martha sat beside her, covered in blood, trying to do something about all those horrible cuts. Martha had taken off her coat and put it around Mary and now it was all covered in blood, too. And I heard Martha whispering to Mary, whispering over and over, 'Please, Mary. Please, just let me hold your hand. Please, just let me warm you up a little. Please just let me.'

"And then, with her last little bit of strength, Mary put her hand out in the snow, and let Sister Martha hold it. Martha got as close to Mary as she could, trying to keep Mary warm.

"By the time I reached them the ambulance was pulling up. Mary was almost gone. With her last breath, she whispered something in Sister Martha's ear. I don't know what. Martha sat there in the snow and held Mary like she was her own child until they took her away.

"The world is mysterious, Claire. Somehow, Mary lived. When I went home that night I had frostbite on the tip of every toe. Kept them all but one. We kept the van going for a while, but then the diocese cut the budget, and some of the parishioners thought we shouldn't be spending our money on that kind of person anyway – you know, the type our founder spent time with. Apparently the church, in its wisdom, had outgrown that.

"Martha went on a silent retreat after that, and after a few months of prayer and mediation, she left the Sisterhood. I lost touch with her after that.

"But many years later – this was when I was at my parish, in the Village, the same one I'm at now – I started hearing rumors about two women who were ministering to the animals in Central Park. They'd go out there every night and take care of the raccoons and the pigeons and the squirrels. These women made sure the animals were all fed, got help for the injured, settled any disputes among them, and read to the animals from the good book, of course.

"I don't know how I knew. But I knew. It was nearly Christmas again, maybe five years after the Christmas when Mary almost died. It took a few nights in the park before I found them, but there they were. Two women, all bundled up in second-hand coats and big hats. They were standing out by the lake where they play with the toy boats, the little pond there, and one of them was reading from the Bhagavad Gita. And I swear to God, Claire, around them were all the animals of the park – ducks, swans, hawks, cats, chipmunks – all listening to Mary and Martha read. I left without saying a word. The next day I started raising hell, and I didn't stop until they let me start up the van again.

"Now, I don't know if there's a lesson in that story for you Claire. If there is, I don't know what it would be. But I felt like telling it, and you're a captive audience.

"Now be a good girl and go back to sleep. There you go. That morphine is good stuff, enjoy it while you can."

The next time I woke up I reached out for Father Billy's hand, but he was gone. When the morphine wore off I remembered: he'd died of liver cancer five years back.

I went back to sleep for a few more days. When I woke up again, Nick Chang was there. He smiled when he saw me, and exhaled like he hadn't let his breath out for a month.

"Good to see you," he said. "You almost left us a few times there."

"I know," I said. "The welcoming committee came to meet me."

"Oh yeah?" Nick said. "What'd they say?"

"That I wasn't done yet." I said.

Tears ran down his face. Nick took my hand, and I took his.

## THE END