

Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones

By

Psychological Suspense

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It was Sunday, the Eve of the Epiphany of Christ. The nave glowed that January morning while we sang, "Hail to the Lord's Anointed." Seconds later shots rang out in the church. I dropped to the floor where, with my heart thundering and my face flat against the red-carpeted kneeler, I sniffed the scents of old shoes. The music had ceased, replaced by the sound of heavy breathing.

"Kate, are you okay?" My friend's shaky voice came from somewhere behind me.

"Yeah, you?"

A baby's cry muffled her response. Curiosity forced my head up to the edge of the pew. Two rows in front of me a woman stood erect, a gun held before her like a shield, her washed-out blond hair as bedraggled as ever. Her green eyes roamed from one side of the church to the other and her face registered nothing.

Maude Louise Fitch was a member of St. Peter's Episcopal Church for as long as I could remember. For years I'd watched her wade through the mechanics of the liturgy. She never talked to people. She merely stared straight ahead when others shook hands and greeted one another. She wore worn, over-used clothing, like hand-me-downs, her skin sallow, and her hair too long for a woman her age. Although I didn't know her age, she looked wrinkled and tired like her clothes. Her eyes never focused

on anyone; she rarely smiled. Not a small woman, she wasn't someone I wanted to meet in a dark corridor of the church.

Six months ago I joined twenty odd people and an instructor for a writer's group at the nearby university. To my surprise Lou Fitch (although I didn't know her name at the time) walked in and greeted several people. It was the first time I'd seen her smile or talk with others. I watched from across the room, amazed. Her appearance was unchanged; she wore a tattered coat and a wool sweater that stretched to her knees.

Lou launched into a reading. She spat her words out with anger, almost hatred. "The whore was abused by heretics. Battered by devil worshippers."

I listened to the garbled logic with the intent to find something of value. But I soon gave up, unable to make sense of her fantasy world.

"No one deserves savagery—no one deserves man's baseless inhumanity. No one." She described people in minute detail—page after page on one character's eyeglasses.

I checked my watch. How long would her recitation continue? Time ticked away. Finally the stream of illogical consciousness ended. Everyone in the room remained silent, including the instructor. Lou lowered her eyes and closed her notebook. Next to me, someone's stomach growled.

Wasn't anyone going to help this woman? Clearly what she wrote would never grace the desk of an editor. I took a long, deep breath before I spoke up. "Some of your descriptions are quite vivid." My voice shook. Several eyes shifted from me to Lou and then to each other; their glances carried a warning I dismissed. "You might want to

shorten some of the inner dialogue and include more action, and the descriptions are tiresome.”

Lou didn't look at me. She didn't nod.

Weeks passed, and I continued to go to the writer's group. Lou read every time, but no one responded to the substance of her work. People made benign comments like, “I loved the way you described the color in that painting” or “Your scenes are so vivid.” When others read, however, people shared their feelings and emotions or suggested ways to improve the plot or characters or ways to clarify references, history or point of view. Lou sometimes also reacted to someone else's recitation. Usually what she said didn't make sense, yet no one questioned her. I decided to find out what I could about this strange woman.

When I returned from one of these meetings, I telephoned Martha, a church friend, who knew everyone at St. Peter's. I described Lou, but before half-way through my description, Martha said, “For heaven's sakes, Kate, that's Lou Fitch, actually Maude Louise. She's a widow and quite disturbed, paranoid, I believe.” She told me Lou Fitch was often cited in the local police blotter. “Haven't you ever seen it?” she said in a voice full of disbelief.

Not a person who reads the police blotter regularly, I admitted my oversight.

“Well, she once went after her neighbor with a shotgun. Everyone knows that for a fact,” Martha said.

“Why?” I asked.

“She's just crazy. What other reason could there be?”

I shrugged. “Did she shoot anyone?”

My friend sighed as if that was of no importance. “No. But she might.”

I hung up the telephone and decided to steer clear of Lou Fitch. I didn’t want her coming after me with a gun. Perhaps that’s why the people in the group kept quiet whenever Lou spoke or why they turned away, reluctant to tangle with her, when she said something outrageous.

During the next meeting I finally drummed up the courage to share my work with the group. As I read a chapter from my manuscript, my heart pounded and my voice trembled. Across the room Lou’s gaze pierced through me, ready to pounce, to tear me apart.

I finished reading. Lou’s face held a frown, her eyes downcast, not piercing as I had imagined. Others began commenting: “I liked your dialogue,” someone said. “I could feel the place,” said another. “Did you mean to say tattering or tottering?” asked someone else. They probed me about my characters and the plot. I bubbled inside, anxious to get home to make the revisions. Lou finally said, “It lacks luster.” No one responded. No one challenged her. Luster, I thought. What did she mean by luster? I licked my dry lips and fell silent.

When I got home, I paced the house like an adolescent after a disappointing date. Others liked my work and gave me good ideas. Ideas I could use. Not something as vague as luster. Hard as I fought, in pit of my soul, I knew Lou was right. My story lacked luster. That’s what saddened me and held me prisoner. I kicked off my shoes, took a steaming shower, and tried to erase the memory of Lou Fitch.

In the weeks following, I focused on luster. I listened to others read. I watched their faces light up as they described characters. Words turned into feelings and

emotions. Actions so swift they took me with them. Lou listened with me and never commented about luster. Her readings continued to ramble about torments and tortures, abusers and pugilists, attackers picking fights with innocent victims. I heard more rage in her voice.

Lou wrote a letter to St. Peter's. She accused the church leadership of being instruments of the devil. She wrote with passion but without logic or order. She alluded to living with a violent alcoholic in poverty and in serious disarray. "I endured ten years of hunger, going to bed freezing, unwashed without running water or electricity, just hanging on by the sheer strength of my convictions which turned out to be right." Fear and pain rang from the pages like loud sirens in a big city. Lou was calling for help.

The following week I returned to the writer's group. I read another chapter from my book.

Lou huddled in a back corner, her arms crossed. Her hair looked unkempt and her face pinched. She had the expression of someone tormented. I read, and I looked up from the page for some sign from her. Nothing.

Now, while I scrunched between the pews and listened to the heavy breathing around me, wondering if members of my church might be lying in pools of blood, I regretted my apathy. Did I see something coming and ignore it? Lou mumbled quietly, "Take that, you pretenders, ye watchers and ye holy ones. I brought you to your knees, all of you to your knees. Do you hear me?" Her voice was flat, monotone. Sirens interrupted her rambling.

"Drop it," yelled a male voice.

A woman screamed.

Thump, a loud chilling sound reverberated throughout the church, and I caught sight of a flash of metal, the gun, perhaps? Footsteps. A faint odor of gun power lingered with the mixture of musky perfume and perspiration in the air.

I twisted my body to the edge of the aisle. People were sprawled out on the floor, men, women, children; the members of the choir lay flat against the pews, their kneeler pillows in front of them for protection and their eyes wide with terror, some crying. The candles on the altar burned with a gentle flicker. My neck ached. I peeked over the pew. Others had risen and were brushing the dust off their Sunday clothes. Lou stood erect, her hymnal resting on the edge of the pew, the gun gone. A tall, dark-haired policeman stood next to her.

She turned and caught my eye. I looked away as if stung.

People lay all around the church. None were injured. Murmurs, giggles of relief rippled around me. The priest stepped from the altar, took Lou by the elbow, and along with the police, escorted her down the aisle and out the door.

The organist burst into Bach's booming Fugue in C minor, and we resumed the dignity of the Episcopal service.