ALL GOD’S CHILDREN

BY

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Dedication:

To John and Isabella, this story was originally written for their joint birthday party, which I couldn’t attend. Also, to all the babies with Down Syndrome who were never born yet who could have graced this world with so much love and joy.
“It is only from the deepest silence that the most beautiful sound emerges.” Here, sitting in stillness on the sand, Sister Theresa was surrounded by sound and movement as the thought came to her. The waves roared onto the beach, their geometric curve a delicate balance of shore line and gravity; their energy, a memory of distant winds and wild seas. The gulls called to each other, arguing and posturing. An onshore wind tugged gently at her hair. She was surrounded by sound and yet she knew it came from that vast silence that lay at the heart of all things. She sat still, in the midst of constant movement, yet she knew a stillness more profound than her own.

She opened her eyes to notice a gull eyeing her curiously. “No,” she said softly. “I’m not dead yet and I don’t have any food for you.” The gull hopped away to a more cautious distance. “Actually,” she said drily to the vacant beach. “I don’t have any food for me either, and I’m hungry.”

She got warily to her feet, using her staff as a support, and pulled the hood of her cloak low over her face. Her prayers over, she continued on towards the fishing village at the far end of the beach, where long, concrete groins marked the entrance to its harbour. There was a narrow lighthouse at the end of the southern groin, its automatic light now forever dark. Along the sand dunes were empty houses, full of forgotten dreams; waiting for the holiday makers who would never return.

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The main street of the town was typical of many that she had visited. It had once been paved but was now a muddy and rutted track where the remaining scraps of bitumen were more a hindrance than a help. In places, repairs had been made with rough cobbles. These also did not really help those on foot. The harbour behind her was crowded with boats and festooned with fishing nets; all repaired many times over and handed down as family heirlooms from the time before. The main street, however, was largely deserted.

The first shop she came to was boarded up, with a large red cross painted on the door. It was mcareless and ugly. She stood in silence for a moment, considering the sign and the abandoned shop.

“Yes, we have them here. Can’t get rid of them. They breed like rabbits,” said a voice behind her.
She turned to see a short, balding man whose clothes strained to contain his girth. She frowned involuntarily as she caught his body odour. “Who do you have?” she asked.

“Christians,” the man said contemptuously. He spat on the ground. Sister Theresa looked at him quizzically. “Well, they’re a bloody menace, aren’t they?” he leaned closer in. “They won’t do what needs to be done when…” He paused and finished in a whisper, “…you know what happens.” He stood up straighter then and said loudly, “That’s why we have to mark their places. It’s a public safety measure. You don’t know what they might be hiding. You never know what sort of thing you might find.”

“I see,” Sister Theresa said coldly.

His eyes narrowed as he looked at her. “I don’t think I caught your name, stranger.”

“I don’t think I mentioned it,” she replied. She turned without paying him any further attention and walked further into the town. The man watched her suspiciously for a while, then he came to a decision and hurried away, across the street.

In the centre of the town, she found a baker who would accept the capital’s coins. There she bought a surprisingly good vegetable pasty, which she ate sitting on a small patch of green in the shadow of a statue of an overweight man in a long overcoat and broad brimmed hat. This was liberally, almost festively, frosted with bird droppings. She wondered briefly if this was nature’s revenge on whoever the worthy gentleman had been.

There was a neat, weatherboard house across from her with a large sign out the front. It read;

**Mariton Medical Centre.**

*Did you have a problem birth?*

*Let us do what needs to be done - quietly and humanly.*

*Reasonable fees. No fuss.*

*We handle all council requirements.*

*Avoid unnecessary repercussions.*

Sister Theresa frowned as she considered the sign’s implications.

A man in a black robe sat down beside her. “Sister Theresa,” he said, “it’s good of you to come. It can’t have been an easy journey.”
She nodded. “Father Patrick, it’s been a long time.” She gestured towards the sign. “I had no idea it had gotten this bad.”

Father Patrick shook his head. “I’m afraid that sign’s old. Things are only going from bad to worse. There have been raids, forced abortions, even mob killings.”

“The children?” she asked.

He looked around to make sure no one else could hear. “We can protect most of them; a bit of dye in their hair, special glasses to hide the gold tint in their eyes. They can pass on a casual inspection and we keep them hidden away as much as we can. We train them not to use their abilities in public, except in a very limited way and only when it’s necessary for their own protection.” He hung his head, shacking it slowly. “It breaks my heart to restrict them like this but, short of leaving the village altogether, we can’t think of any other way to keep them safe.”

“You haven’t thought of leaving?”

“Most of our people have, They’ve moved into the farms in the hinterland. The fishermen need the harbour, however. So, they stay on, and there’s a few remaining shopkeepers.” He pointed at a nearby shop marked with a red cross. “It’s hard for them and getting harder.”

“How has it come to this?” she asked. “They’re all such wonderful gifts. It’s a whole other way of being human.”

He looked up at her with eyes the pale blue of a summer morning. “The villagers are afraid,” he said. “Everything is falling apart and they don’t understand what’s going on. They just want their children to be safe, but most of all, to be normal. You mix those two, fear and concern for their children, and it doesn’t take much for panic and hysteria to run wild.” He sighed. “Do you know the story of the *Midwich Cuckoos*?”

She nodded. “It’s an old book by a guy called John Wyndam.” She gave a wry smile. “In some ways, it’s remarkable in its prescience.”

The priest grunted. “I think unfortunate is more like the word you’re looking for,” he said. “We have a pastor of the Age of Reason Brotherhood here and he tells that story all the time. He’s good too, very dramatic, makes sure people understand the ending.” He took a deep breath. “He really likes that ending. It suits his program perfectly.” He shook his head. “Fear and wild preaching; it’s a dangerous mix.”

“In your letter, you said there was a particular child, one who needs my assistance?” Sister Theresa asked.
“There’s a particular child,” the priest agreed, “one we can’t hide.” He got up to leave. 
“Mass and Vespers are in the old church, down by the river, just after sunset. I’ll introduce you then and we’ll talk some more.”

She watched him as he walked away. She knew that the bishop had offered him safer, less stressful positions but he had refused, afraid that no one would be sent in his place and that his people would be abandoned. As he walked past the large hotel, she heard the calls ring out;

“Hey, priest, we know you. We know you’re hiding ‘em somewhere.”

“Keep walking if you want but don’t think you can just walk away. We know where you live!”

“Don’t sleep too soundly, priest. It’s only a matter of time and those old wooden houses burn real well.”

These calls were then repeated, along with others, in different voices and often laced with expletives and obscenities. They only stopped when Father Patrick was out of earshot.

There were still a couple of hours before sunset, so Sister Theresa finished her pasty and set off to explore the town, carefully avoiding the hotel and its surrounds. No need to chase trouble when trouble had a habit of finding its way to you. As she expected, the town turned out to be like so many others that she had visited. The public buildings were still functioning, but all showed clear signs of neglect; paint was fading, and minor structural damage was still to be repaired. In the main street, many of the shops had been abandoned, and many of these were marked with an ugly red cross. Even some of the shops that still functioned had their plate glass windows broken. These had not been replaced, but had been boarded up with timber or stone. Even the private houses needed painting and had roofs that needed repairing. The town simply didn’t have the size or the expertise to sustain the infrastructure that had been built so easily before and, like the road, all of this was now slowly falling apart.

Down by the harbour, it was clear that much of the technical skill of the town had gone into rebuilding and maintaining the fishing boats on which it depended. Some of the smaller fishing boats from before had now been rigged with masts and sails while the larger boats, boats that were designed for an engine, that would be too slow and cumbersome under any reasonable amount of sail, were left, cannibalised and rotting, in one corner of the harbour. At the same time, some boats that had clearly once been recreational sailing yachts had now converted to working fishing boats.
Even so, all the boats were old. They all came from before and the town clearly had no way to replace them. The town as it was now was dying and it was too far from the Capitol for anyone to care. Sister Theresa wondered if something else, something more sustainable, would grow up in its place. Perhaps it would. The harbour was a serious asset.

It was now close to sunset and she set off back through the town towards the old church. She became aware of two men following her. As she passed near the hotel, another stepped into her path. He was balding and in his late thirties or early forties; dressed in rough pants and a sleeveless shirt; tall and heavily built but seriously overweight. He walked towards her with a casual arrogance. A fourth man was leaning nonchalantly against the hotel, carefully watching. He was dressed in a sky-blue robe with a golden sun on each breast.

Sister Theresa stopped and was still. She let her mind quiet and her senses expand, reaching out to the silence and the stillness of the gathering evening, aware of the movement of the men behind and in front of her.

“Well, well,” the one in front of her said, “if it isn’t the priest’s girlfriend. I didn’t know they were allowed that sort of thing. I thought they had other preferences. Naughty, naughty father.” He stretched out his arms in front of him, flexing his still prominent muscles. “You know, folks around here don’t particularly like strangers and they don’t particularly like Christians. You should be more careful.” He gave a mocking smile and shook his head.

“Next town you go to, be more careful. Here, it’s too late.”

He clenched his fists as he continued to walk towards her. She sensed the sudden lunge of the men behind her as they reached forward to grab her arms. In one fluid movement, her staff swung back to catch one of the men between his legs and was then thrust sideways to catch the second just under his cheek bone. Then she was once again still. If it weren’t for the two men lying in pain on the street, you might have thought she had never moved. The man in front of her hesitated, then rushed at her. She stepped to one side, fainted with her staff towards his head and then swung towards his soft belly. He went down winded and gasping for breath.

She walked over to the man leaning against the hotel wall. “Did you really think that the bishop would send a poor, defenceless woman into a cesspit like this? You underestimate us.”

The man shrugged. “Whatever. You are a hangover from a past that has long since gone. No matter what you do, the future belongs to us.”
Sister Theresa leaned in close and spoke so softly that it was almost a whisper. “Unlike the past, the future is unknown, but history is not on your side.” She turned then and walked down towards the river, through the poorer part of town.

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The old church was a simple, A-frame construction of concrete and steel. Originally, its front wall had all been coloured glass but that was now all broken and the lower portions were boarded up and covered in graffiti. She made her way to the main door. This was sealed and padlocked.

She was wondering what to do, when a small boy seemed to appear out of nowhere. “Around the side, Sister,” he said, pointing. She thanked him quietly and made her way around to the side he had pointed out. There, Father Patrick was waiting at a small and unobtrusive door.

She looked around nervously as she approached. Father Patrick smiled. “Don’t worry,” he said. “This church is well protected. Come on in, we’re about to get started.”

The well kept inside of the church belied its rundown exterior. It was lit by oil lamps placed around the walls and by large beeswax candles on the altar. Father Patrick vested and began vespers. Sister Theresa joined a small group of people in the responses and, as they moved into the mass, she relaxed into the familiar rhythm of the prayers: word and silence, action and stillness. It was real. It was eternal. The world might fail but this would stand.

After mass, Father Patrick gestured for her to come over and meet a couple with a young child. The man was dressed as a fisherman, his brow was creased from squinting at the horizon and his hands gnarled and callused from the nets. His wife was surprisingly young, her face marked by that mixture of fear and defiance which is the truest form of courage. They were typical of the congregation gathered in the church that night.

Their child, however, was exceptional. About two years old, slightly built, her hair was purest white, and her eyes were bright with the colour of gold. Sister Theresa drew a deep breath. She had never seen the mutation so strongly expressed.

“Has she shown any preternatural talent yet?” the nun asked.

The parents shook their heads.

“Not yet,” the priest said, “but it’s only a matter of time. We can’t hide her forever. No dye will stain her hair and the filtered glasses would just turn her eyes black. We urgently need to get her somewhere safe. Unfortunately, we only have one Liam.”
“Liam?”

The small boy who had directed her at the front of the church seemed to suddenly appear at the priest’s side. The priest smiles. “This is Liam. He has the sometimes-annoying ability of making people not notice things and even of making them forget things they may have recently noticed. He’s our guardian but we only have one of him and he needs to look after the whole community. We can’t assign him full time to look out for Clair.”

Sister Theresa squatted down to look the young girl in the eyes. “Your name is Clair?” she asked. The child nodded slowly, her eyes wide and fearful. “Well Clair, you and I are going on a trip. I know you’re scarred and sad, but I promise you; we’re going to a good place, a place where there are other children to play with and adults who will look after you. A place where no one will try and harm you. There are gardens and lots of yummy food, but we need to leave, and your parents can’t come. It’s not fair but you need to be a brave girl…” the girls eyes filled with tears and she turned sobbing into her mother’s apron, holding her tight. Sister Theresa stood up and looked at the parents. There were tears flowing freely down their cheeks. Still, this had been planned. This was the reason for her visit. This was the only way. They understood and they nodded but the look of devastation on their faces was more than she could bear.

She turned quickly to Father Patrick. “The paddle steamer *Lucy* is waiting for us at the landing above the falls. The captain and crew are solid. Once we get there we’ll be safe. They’ll take us directly to the Abbey Sanctuary. However, we’ll need a plan if we’re to make it to the Lucy. I’ve been noticed in the village and they’ll be on the lookout.”

“I will take you.” Sister Theresa turned to find the father standing as straight as he could, his voice gruff with grief. “I will take you up the river as far as the rapids at the foot of the falls. From there you need only walk over Harrison’s Spur to the landing. The track is well marked. We’ll go at night. No one will see us and there’ll be no trace for anyone to follow.”

“Good,” Father Patrick said, his voice also strained. “That’s a plan, However, if we’re to go tonight, we need to leave now. Are you ready?” The father nodded quickly. The mother dissolved into weeping, holding the little girl tightly and rocking back and forth in grief, her tears matching those of her daughter. “Let them cry,” Father Patrick said. “At least for now.” He went around the church extinguishing the oil lamps until only the red light of the sanctuary lamp and light of a small lantern the priest was holding was left. Then he went and stood by the door. “Liam, please come with us to the river. We don’t want to attract any attention.”
By this time the mother has recovered enough to pick up Clair and carry her out of the church. Her husband followed her, his shoulders now slumped, as if they were carrying something heavy. Sister Theresa came behind the sad little group and watched as they genuflected before leaving the darkened church; her heart breaking - as it did every time.

A boat was waiting for them down at the river. The father got in a fitted the oars to the locks. There he sat waiting, staring straight ahead. Strangely, Sister Theresa found herself moved more by the father’s stoicism than by the mother’s tears. He was doing what was necessary to keep his daughter safe and he would not turn from it, no matter what it cost him.

Sister Theresa settled herself in the stern of the boat and accepted the now quiet Clair from her mother. Liam and Father Patrick pushed the boat out into the river and the father started the long row upstream.

The trip up the river was surreal. Clair was soon asleep, and the only sounds were the dip of the oars and the occasional call of a night bird. At first, they were wrapped in the dark as if in a cloak. Then when they were well beyond the village limits and with the forest pressing on the river banks, the moon rose, and they were bathed in light, rowing on a river of light, surrounded by the dark. The father rowed through the long hours of the night. He never said a word and never once faltered in his rowing. It was an almost superhuman effort.

It was some hours before dawn when they pulled into a small beach at the foot of some rapids. “This is as far as I can take you,” the father said. “But I’ll wait with you here until dawn, until there’s enough light to see the path.” Sister Theresa nodded. He held out his arms in a mute request and she handed Clair over to him, careful to not wake her. Her sat cradling his daughter in his arms. He didn’t make a sound, but his eyes were full of tears.

Dawn came slowly, the sky brightening to a pale blue, the trees gradually taking shape from the darkness. Eventually there was enough light to see the path. It was time to go but Sister Theresa sat still, watching the father, until he made the move. He got up and stepped out of the boat onto the small beach, still carrying Clair. The nun followed. By this time Clair was awake and he set her down on the sand.

He knelt down beside her and took an abalone shell out from his jacket. “You’ve got to go now, Clair, and you can’t come back, but I want you to keep this with you. It’ll remind you of where you come from and that we love you very dearly. We’ll never stop loving you. Remember that we love you.” He looked up at Sister Theresa.
“She’ll remember,” the nun said. “I’ll remind her at every opportunity.” The man nodded then and stood, disentangling himself from his daughter’s arms. He pushed the boat off into the stream and jumped in, letting the current carry him downstream, using the oars only to steer. It wasn’t long before the river carried him from sight.

“Come on little one,” Sister Theresa said, as she bent down to pick up Clair. “We have a bit of a walk and then another boat ride before we get to the great place I was telling you about.” The child clung to Sister Therese’s chest as she carried her up the well-marked path and into the forest, her cloak wrapped around the both of them.

The path climbed in zig zag fashion up the slope of the spur, with the forest thick on either side. It wasn’t a long way, but it was steep, and with the extra weight of the child, who had again fallen asleep, Sister Theresa was breathing heavily and needing a rest by the time she got to a place where the path levelled out. This was probably why she didn’t have any warning that they were there, not until they stepped out from the trees.

There were seven of them; the three she had encountered earlier with another three to back them up and, of course, the man in the blue robe, the pastor from the Age of Reason Brotherhood.

The pastor smiled at her. “You know,” he said in a conversational tone, “the trouble with you people is that you are so predictable. Why would your bishop send an agent to a shitty little town like Mariton? Why, to rescue a mutant, of course. And how would you get the mutant out? Why, up the river, of course. You can’t use the roads, that would be too public, and the shore would be too slow. The thing is, we could use the roads and we knew where you were going.” He turned and looked behind him. “Those are your friends on that paddle steamer I take it.” He turned back to her. “Look, we’re reasonable men. There doesn’t have to be any trouble. Just give us the mutant and we’ll let you go.”

The men were spreading out now, surrounding her. She stilled herself, adjusted her grip on her staff, and slowed her breathing.

“Watchout,” one of the men said. “She’s pretty handy with that stick.”

“Yeah, but how good is she one handed, I wonder,” the pastor said. “Remember, she’s still carrying the mutant. If she puts it down, grab it and run.”

Clair had woken by this time and was wriggling to get down. Sister Theresa placed her on the ground and swung her staff around her head. “I have two hands now,” she said. “Let’s see what happens to the first one who tries to grab anything.”
The pastor, however, was staring open mouthed at Clair who was standing and looking around at the men, her white hair and her golden eyes bright in the morning sunshine. He drew in a deep breath and hissed his hatred. “Look at it! Look at it!” he yelled. “It’s a monster. Pure evil. Get it. Kill it before it eats your brain!” One of the men closest to them ran at the nun and the child, only to be laid flat by Sister Theresa’s staff.

Clair screamed; a childish, high pitched wail. Then…the men were gone – all of them. They were, simply, no longer there. Sister Theresa looked around, desperately trying to see what had happened to them. There was no sign of them until she heard some yelling from high above her. She looked up and there they were, all of them, hanging like improbable and overweight Christmas decorations from some of the highest branches of the surrounding trees. They were all trying desperately to make their way back to the trunk and the sturdier parts of their respective trees. The pastor, in particular, was clearly terrified that the branch he was clinging to was about to break under his weight.

Sister Theresa looked down at Clair, who looked back up at her with big, fearful eyes. The nun smiled, and then laughed. She picked Clair up and spun her around. Clair’s worried expression was replaced by a tentative smile, and then a laugh. The sound warmed Sister Theresa’s heart. “Oh Clair, you clever little thing. I think you and I are going to be great friends. Let’s go. If I know Captain Kavanagh, he’ll have a nice breakfast cooking on the boiler and I could certainly use a good, hot cup of tea.” She put Clair down, took her hand, and together they set off down to the river; to the paddle steamer; and to the long, slow trip up river.