

*Elizabeth Brewster*

## **The Conversion**

The year was 1953, the date a few days before Christmas. It was also a few days before Holly Dewar's twenty-fourth birthday; and, as she had been working in Ottawa for nearly a year without a visit home, she was looking forward to seeing her family on their farm near Fredericton.

Ottawa had not been as exciting as she had somehow expected it to be. She worked as a typist in a government office, surrounded by other similar girls. Her salary was not large, and in order to manage on it at all she had to keep constant track of expenses, adding them up in a little black notebook which she carried in her purse. She had a clean but claustrophobic room in the house of the genteel widow of a civil servant, Mrs. Murdoch. There was one other roomer, a kindergarten teacher in her early thirties. Holly prepared her own breakfast in Mrs. Murdoch's kitchen, and normally shared a dinner with Mrs. Murdoch and Lydia Duncan, the kindergarten teacher. She had lunch in the staff cafeteria with two or three of the other girls. She had met almost no men and had had only one date since coming to Ottawa, a depressing date with a creep named Al who kept telling her how many other girls wanted to go out with him.

It was good, then, after a dull year in Ottawa, to be lining up in Union Station for her seat on the train, carrying a fat suitcase with her clothes and presents and a handbag with a few books to read overnight. She was going coach class, as she could not afford a berth. She did not especially look forward to the trip, partly because she tended to get sick on trains, but it would be worth the discomfort to be home again.

The first part of the trip, as far as Montreal, was pleasant enough. She sat next to a middle-aged woman going to visit her married daughter for Christmas, and chatted with her now and then. When the woman was drowsing, Holly read a Graham Greene novel. She felt, in a

way, like a character from a Graham Greene novel because she herself was in process of being converted — the only excitement of her year in Ottawa. In her bag were several more soberly Catholic books than the Greene novel, including a little catechism for inquirers; but she felt self-conscious about bringing them out when she was sharing a seat with another passenger.

Closing her eyes, she could see Father Cameron's office in the rectory, which she had been visiting once a week to take instruction. It seemed a foreign world, with its crucifix, carved figure of the Blessed Virgin, and portraits of Pope Pius and lesser clergy. Her father, an old-fashioned New Brunswick Orangeman, would never, she feared, approve those paraphernalia of an exotic faith. She herself was half repelled by them — they contrasted so much with the bare walls and plain doctrines of the Baptist Church that her parents attended — but she was also attracted. Rosaries and incense. The chanting of the Latin mass. The elaborate genuflections.

It wasn't just that, though — the strangeness, the tourist attraction. It was something more; and, now that she was on the train and had the whole night to think about it, she must decide what it was and whether she truly believed.

A going back to childhood belief, was it? Something miraculous, almost magical? Immortality absolutely true, a tangible fact? Sin and forgiveness, the sacraments. Eating salvation. Confession and absolution. Not that she had much to confess. Embarrassingly little, in a way. She wasn't a Great Sinner in the Graham Greene manner. Sex, she somehow gathered, was the chief possible sin, aside from eating meat on Friday. After all, she was not likely to murder anyone or forge a cheque, or even (since her mother had brought her up very strictly) speak a blasphemous word or two. But, as far as sex was concerned, men had never pursued her in any very whole-hearted way. Of course, as the catechism explained, you could sin by giving in to Impure Thoughts, and Thoughts were as real as Deeds. But less satisfying, somehow, even to confess.

Still, the great thing was not confession any more than it was incense or the rosary. Incarnation. That was it. The word become flesh. Spirit coming into the world, so that all those dead material things — houses, statues, houses, government offices even — were transfused with spirit.

She had to change trains at West Montreal, and paced up and down

the platform in front of the small station waiting for her train to be called. It was a brisk, sparkling, December evening, just pleasantly cold. The stars, high and yet somehow tender, lit up the dusting of snow on the ground and on the station roof. The people waiting for the train seemed to have a kind of Christmas sparkle about them as well. One nun in a black habit with a white pleated frill about her face seemed to Holly exceptionally beautiful and serene; but there seemed also to be a kind of serenity, a magic about the whole scene and all the people there.

Incarnation, she thought. The light shining in darkness. That's it. The whole world – the universe – all those stars out there – the nun's face – everything was the incarnation of the spirit. She wanted to cry with a sort of ecstasy of illumination.

She got on the train slowly, in something of a daze, lugging the suitcase. This train was more crowded than the other. She had to walk through several coaches before she came to one that had room, and it was a rickety old car, obviously brought out from retirement for the Christmas rush.

Just after she had settled down, a whole crowd of soldiers burst into the carriage. Back from Korea, they must be. The Korean War had been concluded in the summer, but soldiers were still arriving back. They were joyous, highspirited, full of youth and animal vigour, some of them also full of more buyable stimulants. They took over most of the carriage, calling out to each other as they settled into their places and put up their rucksacks. Some of them looked in Holly's direction, but she put one of her books in front of her face in nervous self-protection, and they turned away from her, so that she kept her seat, and the seat directly opposite her, to herself.

Once they were settled down in their places, however, she felt that it was safe enough to observe them covertly. They too, like the Catholic Church, had the glamour of the unknown; you could even say that they were a sort of Order, a Secret Society, with a prescribed habit and a Communion of their own. Pretending to read, she listened with curiosity to their scraps of conversation, reminiscences of Korea, the strange country, fighting, girls they had known.

She turned again to her book. This one was an anthology of early Christian writers which she had bought in the Catholic bookstore downtown only last week. Before she had left Ottawa, when she was

looking into it, it had seemed rather difficult and remote; but now, in the light of her recent illumination, everything seemed easy. Of course she believed. God, man, salvation, life, death, the universe, suffering — it all made sense. Any book she had picked up, even if it had been the Almanac, would have spoken to her in the same way. Like St. Augustine when he heard the children chanting, “Take, read,” and picked up the scriptures, and there was the word, the very word, that he needed.

She was reading from Dionysius “On the Divine Names”: “Let us then press on in prayer, looking upwards to the Divine benignant Rays, even as if a resplendent cord were hanging from the height of heaven unto this world below, and we, by seizing it with alternate hands in one advance, appeared to pull it down...”

In her mind, just as it had on the station platform earlier, the light of the divine Rays illuminated everything, the railway car and the soldiers lolling in little groups. They too were clothed in Divinity, sacred, part of the Incarnation.

Four of them not quite directly across the aisle from Holly had been playing a card game, but had come to the end of a game and were bored. One of them, the goodlooking tall boy who looked a little like Holly’s cousin Matthew, leaned back and began to sing, and the others joined in. Army songs, drinking songs, sentimental love songs, some in foreign languages that Holly did not know. The tall boy was much the best singer of the group; also he was the one who had been drinking least. He sang joyously, in a warm tenor, with a sort of operatic fervour. Holly could not help turning her eyes towards him in half-acknowledged admiration.

As if he realized he was leading a performance for the benefit of a civilian audience, he turned to Christmas carols. Here he was sometimes the only one who knew all the words.

“You’re showing off, Chris,” one of his friends told him good-humoredly; yet they continued to join in the chorus as he led them through “The Twelve Days of Christmas.”

Gradually the men became tired, stopped singing, drifted off to sleep. Young Chris continued to sing for a while by himself, finally concluding the little concert with “Adeste Fideles.” Holly was surprised by the Latin words and surprised by the feeling, the hushed tenderness, with which he sang the hymn. He was looking in her direction when he

finished, and she could not resist a slight, shy inclination of her head in acknowledgment of the pleasure she had felt.

With the singing over, and people settling down for the night, Holly's spirit of exaltation began to evaporate. The lights had been dimmed and she found it difficult to read. Also, the swaying of the train was finally beginning to make her feel sickish. She curled up on the seat and tried to sleep, but could not manage to. Restlessly, she shifted her position.

The conductor came by as she sat up.

"I think there's a seat vacant now a few cars up, Miss, if you find the boys too rambunctious," he said to Holly. "I could carry your bag."

Holly hesitated. The other car would probably be more comfortable. But she was feeling too nauseated to move.

"I don't feel very well," she told the man finally. "I don't think I want to walk that distance. It's quiet now anyway."

The conductor shrugged. "Suit yourself, Miss. I just thought you might be more comfortable, that's all."

He moved off to the next car, and Holly lay back again.

She opened her eyes when the young soldier, Chris, came back from the washroom and stood beside her with a paper cup in his hands.

"I heard you say you were sick," he said. "Would you like a drink of water?"

She shook her head. "I don't want anything to drink."

"It's just water. You don't think I've spiked it or something? Go ahead. It'll make you feel better."

After all, it was silly of her to refuse. He was just a kid, probably younger than she was, and he looked like Matthew. What harm could he do her? Just a nice kid, meaning to be kind.

And she did feel better, just a little, when she had drunk the water.

"You're going home to New Brunswick too?" he asked.

"Yes. Fredericton Junction. Or near there."

"Yeah? I'm from Saint John myself, but I have relatives in Fredericton. Will I ever be glad to see my folks. I hope we didn't disturb you with our little singsong?"

"No, it was fine, just fine. I enjoyed it," she said.

"Too bad you're not feeling well. Look, I bet this window would open. It's a real old carriage, before air conditioning. Do you want me to try?"

He tugged away at the window, and suddenly it opened and a blast

of fresh air blew in from outside. Holly gulped the delicious cold into her nostrils, and immediately felt less nauseated. She sat up straight and shook her head, clearing out the cobwebs.

Chris beamed. "Feel better? I knew that would help you."

She thanked him and smiled.

He lingered near her chair and said, "Would you mind if I sat here for a while? The others are all snoring away there, and I can't get to sleep. It passes the time to talk."

She hesitated. She did not want to be picked up. But he seemed a nice boy, not at all fresh, and he had sung "Adeste Fideles" with such feeling. Probably he was a Catholic. She nodded, a bit dubiously, and he sat down.

He began to talk, about Saint John, about his mother, who was a widow, about his army experiences, about Korea and his homesickness, the fighting, the ricefields, the girls. "You wouldn't believe how lonely I got sometimes," he said. "The other guys went out with the Korean girls, but I wanted some nice girl from home. And you wouldn't believe how much a guy needs someone gentle after fighting."

Some unspoken horror in the boy's eyes stirred Holly's pity. He did not move physically in her direction, but the air around them seemed to unite them in sympathy.

He fell silent, and they sat for a while without talking. Without the distraction of conversation, Holly was once more overcome by a slight feeling of nausea. She closed her eyes.

"Are you cold in that draught?" the soldier asked her solicitously. "Would you like my overcoat?"

She did not answer, but he leaped up and brought his khaki army overcoat, which he wrapped gently around her, his hands touching her shoulders.

Again they lapsed into silence, but now Holly was conscious of his physical presence enveloping her, and her nausea departed. It was not a surprise when he reached out his hand, almost timidly it seemed, and touched her hand. But surely there was nothing wrong in just holding hands for a while. It passed the time.

Eventually he shivered. "Do you mind if I share the overcoat?" he asked. "That's really a cold wind."

She did not answer, but she found him sitting close to her, with the coat nestling snugly around both of them. She ought not to have

allowed this, she thought, but it seemed so peaceful. And she remembered at home on a sleigh ride, sitting close under a blanket with a boy, but that was all that happened.

His arm was around her now, and he began very gently to stroke her breasts. The pressure was so light, it was as though butterflies were brushing her nipples. Nobody had ever done anything more than kiss her before, and that very clumsily. Sometimes she thought she would be an old maid and never be alive at all. A virgin over ninety years old, like that song one of her uncles sang. Her twenty-fourth birthday was so near. This butterfly pressure was reassuring. The hands were under her blouse, unfastening her bra, sweeping soothingly over her belly.

"I don't know your name," he whispered. "What's your name?"

"Holly. Holly Dewar."

"Chris and Holly. Both Christmas names. Kiss me, Holly."

She felt his tongue in her open mouth, and a flood of warmth went through her.

Feeling the searching hands stroking her thighs, she knew she should pull away now if she was going to, and she nearly did. But then a curiosity that seemed almost chilly overcame her. She wanted to know what the next move would feel like. Her mind, she thought, was calm and reasonable and in control. She would wait until the last possible moment and then she would pull away. But she ought not to wait. After all, she was in the midst of being converted. In her mind she began to repeat the Hail Mary, her attention only partly concentrated on the feel of the hands on her flesh.

It was at the point when he took her hand and guided it towards his open fly that she realized her control was not as perfect as she had thought it was. She gasped at the feel of the solid flesh, and pulled her hand away hastily. But not herself. She felt as though she were in a current being carried away from shore, and nothing could prevent her drift out into deep water.

Or so she thought. What prevented her continuing drift was that he moved too suddenly. She found herself all at once spun round, placed on her back with her legs jerked wide apart. She was startled back to herself, wrenched herself up and away. He let her go, gulped "Sorry," and turned to one side. After all, he was not really a rapist. She watched his solitary overwhelming convulsion with a mixture of feelings. She had never seen an orgasm before, and was terrified at the

same time that she felt a kind of pride. Was it really herself, Holly Dewar, who had caused that turmoil? She could not be as sexless as she had feared.

There was no need now of moving. She knew instinctively that he would not touch her again. Soon he was asleep, his head fallen away from her, and she looked down curiously at his face. She was surprised that it was so remote and placid, almost as though carved out of marble, like the face of an archaic god. But she did not share his serenity. She must somehow calm herself, get rid of her panic trembling. She stared ahead of her, tidying her hair and trying to think of her conversion.