

MOVING VIOLATION

By Melissa Hardy

Beyond the wrought-iron grille of the Lady Chapel, Father Pat knelt beside the sarcophagus of Flavia Buck in an attitude of prayer. With one hand he cupped the marble breast of the recumbent statue forming the lid of the dead patroness's tomb; the other he pressed over his own heart. One potato, two potato . . . he counted the skittering beats. He felt it advisable to do occasional spot checks to determine whether he was still alive. He was an old man, after all. Opening his eyes, he stood . . . cautiously, for his joints were getting stiff . . . brushed off his threadbare cassock, re-buttoned those buttons which the swell of his belly had popped and peered about him. "Wax!" he murmured, inhaling. Votive candles for the soul of Bette Malone guttered in the racks before the prayer rail, the tips of their flames tinged with black. Pat blew them out with all the satisfaction an act of vengeance begets. "Purgatory for you, Bette," he whispered.

Patrick Augustus Garrity had been drawn, shrunken and cauled, from Rose Garrity's spacious womb in 1925 -- the lady happened to be in Baltimore at the time. A certain amiability had characterized the priest as a youth -- a relentless, often unwarranted optimism, an aimlessness coupled with an intellect rather dull than keen. He was eight years old when the incident that suggested he might be suitable for the priesthood took place. On the playground of the parochial school he attended, a nun had observed Pat to stand stock still while a schnauzer, struck by his resemblance to a fire hydrant, urinated up and down his leg. This willingness to sacrifice his own well-being to ensure that of others -- the schnauzer in this instance --- surely indicated a vocation, or so the nuns counseled Pat's parents. Accordingly, when Pat turned seventeen, he was deposited in a seminary, whence he emerged eight years later, not much the wiser, a diocesan priest. Then the Bishop of Baltimore traded him to the Bishop of Raleigh at a eucharistic convention for a half dozen cartons of Lucky Strikes and a bottle of Dry Sack, which was how he had come to be at St. Mary's all these long fifty years.

The one noteworthy relationship of Pat's life began a year or two after that trade, when his wealthiest parishioner, Francis Buck, married a woman many years his junior, Flavia Carley, whose catechism, as she had not been born into the Catholic faith, Pat was requested to undertake.

Once more Pat glanced towards the sarcophagus in the Lady Chapel, the chilly likeness.

Flavia had been beautiful, of course, rather equine in features, it was true, with a long chin and nose and somewhat sunken cheeks, but her complexion had been cream, her green eyes translucent, her teeth big, even and white, and she was impeccable, the cleanest, neatest person Pat had ever seen. Her skirt was never wrinkled, her shoes never soiled, her gloves were spotless. And yet, for all her impeccability, she looked as if she was made only to be touched. . . .

Of course he had fallen in love with her. Well, who wouldn't have? He should have known better, however than to confess this to the Bishop of Raleigh. Not that Pat had told him everything, the old snoop. He smiled. The Bishop had been struck dead on the toilet off the cathedral sacristy just last year, his episcopal crook propped up against the urinal. Pat laughed aloud. Ha! Live long enough and vengeance will always be yours!

But now Bette Malone's face glowed up at him from the half-opened coffin before the high altar. She had never looked so good. It was that new aesthetician the undertaker had employed. "She does their colors first," one of the Legion of Mary ladies had explained in a whisper. "That's her secret!" But what did that mean – 'their colors?' He glowered down at Bette. He would never forgive her for dying at the very height of the *Veni Creator Spiritus* Easter Saturday and stealing his thunder.

Dear Flavia, he thought next -- for his thoughts hopped around, from this to that but always back to Flavia. He leaned against the prayer rail and gazed down at his grey woolen slippers. His housekeeper Clorette had knit them for him last Christmas to replace those of the Christmas before. (Perhaps Clorette could tell him what a woman's colors were. Or did black women, being *of color*, have color?

It had been so many years ago now. He had not been in his first youth even then and his body's cells had changed over several times since he lay with Flavia at Lourdes. Surely he was a different man now, connected only by a slender thread of memory to that other man, that alternate Pat Garrity. The image he harbored of their love might have been a racial memory stamped upon his brain as he lay coiled in his mother's womb or a dream he had dreamed as a child or the story of another man's love, heard in confession, which had left so deep an impression on him that, in these, his advanced years, he imagined it to have been his own. Who could say whether what he remembered had ever happened?

Squeezing his eyes shut, Pat conjured what of her he still could: the faint outline of a face glimmering through the grate of the confessional, how she caught at his elbow when she stumbled in the street, the way they would sit in the greenhouse up at her husband's palatial house on a winter day, their fingers woven together, their bodies painfully close, praying -- so they said -- and him in such a white heat that he could think of nothing but her body stirring beneath the elegant clothing -- even foolish men know desire -- and then at Lourdes.

It was late afternoon on an August day. She had asked him to accompany her to the Pyrenean shrine; she had not said why she wished to make the journey, only that she did, and everyone could see that the priest was a harmless sort of fellow, a suitable companion for a wealthy Catholic matron bent on pilgrimage. (Flavia's husband was, as always, tied up with business.) They had been out shopping for souvenirs, for Lourdes lozenges, plastic bottles for water from the sacred spring molded into statuettes of Bernadette Soubirous in shepherdess dress, and postcards of the ecstatic lying in her crystal coffin at Nevers. He carried Flavia's parcels to her room and, intending to take a nap before dinner, bid her goodbye and turned to leave.

"Stay a minute," she said. Her voice was light, gravelly. It rasped over the drum of his ear like the tongue of a cat. "One of my migraines coming on and your hands are cool."

Touching was permitted them. They had tested one another over the years and found it was allowed -- hands that brushed in passing; feet that found other feet beneath a table and did not on this account alter their position.

Flavia sank down on the bed. "Here." She patted the coverlet next to her. Pat sat. "Now here." And taking his hand in her cool one, she pressed it to her forehead and lay carefully back onto the bed, closing her eyes.

"Better?" he asked after a few moments.

"It feels like . . . broken glass inside," was all she said and stirred. Then she reached up and took the hand he held against her forehead by the wrist. Bringing it to her lips, she pressed a kiss into his palm, then one against the vein beating in his wrist. Her eyes opened, filmed with pain. "Oh, God," she murmured and, tipping back her head and closing her eyes once more, she pressed his hand against the hollow of her throat.

Pat was frightened. He told himself: 'I am terrified.' Yanking his hand away, he started to his feet, turned to run away and tripped over a corner of carpet instead. That could have been deliberate. Catching hold of the edge of a dresser, he listened to the dry rasp of his gasped in breath, felt his heart rock his body. Then slowly the ticking of the bedside clock penetrated his consciousness -- sharp pinpricks of sound

bursting the bubble of his terror; he heard the languorous drip of water into the sink, the sibilant drone of peasant voices from the street below as kerchiefed women haggled reverently over cut-glass rosaries and illuminated madonnas.

"Pat," she said.

He turned to face her. She was sitting up on the bed now, very pale. She stretched out her hand to him. He took it, let her draw him to her, let her undo the first button on his cassock. He caught her hand then. It was what he wanted, but he was so afraid. I am afraid, he thought. But she only untangled his fingers from her wrist -- she knew his desire -- and, laying the palm of her hand against his breast, she pressed gently against it for a moment, as if to steady him before going to undo the next button.

The late afternoon sun wound through her hair like strands of gold. He remembered this. He had taken her gleaming head in his hands then, as if it were a coffer of jewels, and held it there against his abdomen as she unbuttoned the cassock -- this very cassock that I have so lovingly preserved all these years, that I wear even now! He thought -- button by button.

Pat's eyes blazed open and he stared, terrified, over the half-opened coffin into the darkened nave -- melted candles squirmed over the wrought-iron candelabras like alabaster snakes. Lifting his hands to the two pinkish tufts atop either ear -- all that remained of his gingery hair -- he caught hold of them and hung on as if for dear life. Then, picking up the hem of his cassock in both hands, he tottered behind the altar and into the sacristy. He shut the door carefully behind him and leaned against it, sliding his eyes from side to side, rapidly at first, then, as the furnishings of the sacristy -- the great carved wardrobes and glistening plate -- began to separate themselves from the gloom and assume a familiar aspect, more slowly.

She had the cancer even then, he thought, his available hair standing on end.

Pat sat slumped in the old, claw-armed episcopal throne in the shadow-haunted sacristy. In terror's wake he felt very old, very tired and increasingly -- he sat up straight in the chair and looked about with small, sharp eyes -- crotchety.

On his right, next to a stack of collection baskets, stood a mound of dog-eared holy cards. He picked up one and glared at it: Padre Pio, sparkling in an aura of golden light like an Egyptian Pharaoh, arms akimbo the better to display the ruby red stigmata on his palms. What irritated Pat, however, was the depiction of Pio not in his chair but hovering several inches above it. Levitation. That's what Pat needed to get up and down those steep rectory stairs. Garrity directed his thoughts towards God. You should award more of your servants these powers! Tilting his face heavenwards, he jutted out his lower jaw. Oh, I've some bones to pick with You, all right!

But then again -- now he looked downcast -- what was the point in climbing the stairs, in going to bed? To lie all alone in that narrow bed in that narrow room in the dark. . . . Why do they build the bedrooms of priests in a shape so reminiscent of the coffin? The strips of flypaper fluttering in the slight wind that blew off the graveyard as he waited for the repose which had once stolen upon him when he was not looking, but now came with so heavy a tread that he was aware of it the moment it entered his room, the instant it overtook his body.

He replaced the card on top of the heap of other cards.

Once he had fallen asleep whole, but now he fell asleep bit by bit: toes, calves, thighs. Last of all his terrified head. It was as though sleep had grown old beside him and become in the process increasingly infirm. Too much like death for his liking, sleep. He had watched his parishioners go like that, feet first as often as head first, complaining of the creeping cold with their last breath.

The old priest stood haltingly. "I'll live a long time yet," he said aloud. "Years and years. Forever, maybe." And I will, he thought, shuffling towards the back door. That is, if all goes well. (Meaning, if he didn't die, a thing which he didn't expect to happen, but things did happen unexpectedly.) You can never be too careful.

Pat opened the door and carefully negotiated the steps to the graveyard. Light from the rectory illuminated its skyline, which consisted of gravestones as various as the parishioners whose names they bore. Pat sighed. These were his friends, six feet under. Elongated puddings of decomposition, or else, if they had died very long ago, bones ornamented by patches of cloth, buttons, wedding rings. . . .

He teetered on the graveyard's edge.

God's little acre, he thought. He rubbed his wafer-thin hands together. And I should know. I'm the gardener. I've plowed it, seeded it, gone so far as to carefully label, as I went along what was what so that there could be no confusion. Here a Donlan. There a Ward. On the last of days I should harvest a bumper crop of Catholics. He eyed the graveyard warily. More and more it seemed to him to have about it a restive,

expectant air. He retreated a step, wagged a finger at it. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? he inquired of the earth. "Me too? Greedy, greedy!" Carefully skirting its edge, he made his way towards the rectory, singing:

*The worms go in. The worms go out.
The worms play pinochle in your snout.
Your body turns a sickening green,
And you go dribbling down the stream.*

What stream? He wondered. The question had never been answered to his satisfaction.

Gripping the rickety banister, he pulled himself up the back porch steps. His shoulder hurt. "Bursitis," he informed the moths circling the saffron colored light bulb. "The Christian martyrs whom the Romans hung from the door lintels by their wrists must have felt like this. *Ooch! Ooch!*"

Covering his eyes with his hand to protect them against the white glare of the kitchen light, he flung open the torn screen door and passed through into the parlor where he lay down on the lumpy sofa in his old cassock, his dear cassock, his relic. The pillow with the orange crocheted case made his bald head itch. He tried to ignore it. He couldn't. He lurched upright and extended a palsied hand towards the telephone of the end table, thinking of how, even though it was late, he might call his housekeeper Clorette -- what was her number? -- and tell her . . . ask her . . .how hard it was for him to climb the stairs these days, what with the pain in his legs . . . and what did it mean, the undertaker's aesthetician had done Bette Malone's colors before giving her her final makeover?

If his parish loved him, it would take up a collection, get him one of those lifts that attach to the side of a staircase. He'd seen them advertised in the back of *House Beautiful*. Then he'd not have to sleep on an uncomfortable sofa with crackling springs and this prickly pear of a pillow! If it loved him. . . .

It didn't love him. Nobody loved him.

But Flavia, he thought. Cool, monumental, marmoreal in moonlight and shadow. . . .

But that was not Flavia, he reminded himself. Flavia was dead, dead all these many long, long years. She has no features to her face. She is like all of these here about him, these "flowers" of a Christian "gardener" -- clotted dust. And trying to remember her now was like trying to

remember a song once heard -- enchanting, but at what a distance!
Had she ever lived?

He reared up one last time, extended a frail hand towards the phone.
Clorette! His lips formed his housekeeper's name.

Then suddenly, mysteriously, miraculously, Father Pat began to rise, to follow his outstretched hand as he lifted off the couch to a position several inches above its surface. Astonished, he hung suspended, his mouth open. Outside on the Jeff Davis Highway a speeding truck slowed to take the long curve past the rectory on two wheels. Its headlamps probed the darkness ahead like white fingers anxiously searching, as Father Pat blurted out, "Well, if it isn't. . . Well, I'll be! I never! Hot Damn!"