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Songs of Willow Frost

A Novel

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Sacred Hearts

(1934)

William Eng woke to the sound of a snapping leather belt and the shrieking of rusty springs that supported the threadbare mattress of his army surplus bed. He kept his eyes closed as he listened to the bare feet of children, shuffling nervously on the cold wooden floor. He heard the popping and billowing of sheets being pulled back, like trade winds filling a canvas sail. And so he drifted, on the favoring currents of his imagination, as he always did, to someplace else – anywhere but the Sacred Heart Orphanage, where the sisters inspected the linens every morning and began whipping the bed-wetters.

He would have sat up if he could, stood at attention at the foot of his bunk, like the others, but his hands were tied – literally – to the bed frame.

‘I told you it would work,’ Sister Briganti said to a pair

of orderlies whose dark skin looked even darker against their starched white uniforms.

Sister Briganti's theory was that bed-wetting was caused by boys illicitly touching themselves. So at bedtime she began tying the boys' shoes to their wrists. When that failed, she tied their wrists to their beds.

'It's a miracle,' she said as she poked and prodded the dry sheets between William's legs. He watched as she crossed herself, then paused, sniffing her fingers, as though seeking evidence her eyes and hands might not reveal. *Amen*, William thought when he realized his bedding was dry. He knew that, like an orphaned child, Sister Briganti had learned to expect the worst. And she was rarely, if ever, disappointed.

After the boys were untied, the last offending child punished, and the crying abated, William was finally allowed to wash before breakfast. He stared at the long row of identical toothbrushes and washcloths that hung from matching hooks. Last night there had been forty, but now one set was missing and rumors immediately spread among the boys as to who the runaway might be.

Tommy Yuen. William knew the answer as he scanned the washroom and didn't see another matching face. *Tommy must have fled in the night. That makes me the only Chinese boy left at Sacred Heart.*

The sadness and isolation he might have felt was muted by a morning free from the belt, replaced by the hopeful smiles the other boys made as they washed their faces.

'Happy birthday, Willie,' a freckle-faced boy said as

he passed by. Others sang or whistled the birthday song. It was September 28, 1934, William's twelfth birthday – everyone's birthday, in fact – apparently it was much easier to keep track of this way.

Armistice Day might be more fitting, William thought. Since some of the older kids at Sacred Heart had lost their fathers in the Great War, or October 29 – Black Tuesday, when the entire country had fallen on hard times. Since the Crash, the number of orphans had tripled. But Sister Briganti had chosen the coronation of Venerable Pope Leo XII as everyone's new day of celebration – a collective birthday, which meant a trolley ride from Laurelhurst to downtown, where the boys would be given buffalo nickels to spend at the candy butcher before being treated to a talking picture at the Moore Theatre.

But best of all, William thought, *on our birthdays, and only on our birthdays, we are allowed to ask about our mothers.*

Birthday mass was always the longest of the year, even longer than the Christmas Vigil – for the boys anyway. William sat trying not to fidget, listening to Father Bartholomew go on and on and on and on and on about the Blessed Virgin, as if *she* could distract the boys from their big day. The girls sat on their side of the church, either oblivious to the boys' one day out each year or achingly jealous. But either way, talks about the Holy Mother only confused the younger, newer residents, most of whom weren't real orphans – at least not in the way Little Orphan Annie was depicted on the radio or in the

Sunday funnies. Unlike the little mop-haired girl who gleefully squealed ‘Gee whiskers!’ at any calamity, most of the boys and girls at Sacred Heart still had parents out there – somewhere – but wherever they were, they’d been unable to put food in their children’s mouths or shoes on their feet. *That’s how Dante Grimaldi came to us*, William reflected as he looked around the chapel. After Dante’s father was killed in a logging accident, his mother had let him play in the toy department of the Wonder Store – the big Woolworths on Third Avenue – and she never came back. Sunny Sixkiller last saw his ma in the children’s section of the new Carnegie Library in Snohomish, while Charlotte Rigg was found sitting in the rain on the marble steps of St James Cathedral. Rumor was that her grandmother had lit a candle for her and even went to confession before slipping out a side door. Then there were others – the fortunate ones. Their mothers came and signed manifolds of carbon paper, entrusting their children to the sisters of Sacred Heart, or St Paul Infants’ Home next door. There were always promises to come back in a week for a visit, and sometimes they did, but more often than not, that week stretched into a month, sometimes a year, sometimes *forever*. And yet, all of their moms had pledged (in front of Sister Briganti and God) to return one day.

After communion William stood with a tasteless wafer still stuck to the roof of his mouth, waiting in line with the other boys outside the school office. Each year, Mother Angelini, the prioress of Sacred Heart, would assess the boys physically and spiritually. If they passed

muster, they'd be allowed out in public. William tried not to twitch or act too anxious. He attempted to look happy and presentable, mimicking the hopeful, joyful smiles of the others. But then he remembered the last time he saw *his* mother. She was in the bathtub of their apartment in the old Bush Hotel. William had woken up, wandered down the hall for a glass of water, and realized that she'd been in there for hours. He waited a few minutes more, but then at 12:01 a.m. he finally peeked through the rusty keyhole. It looked as though she were sleeping in the claw-foot tub, her face tilted toward the door; a strand of wet black hair clung to her pale cheek, the curl of a question mark. One arm lazily dangled over the edge, water slowly dripping from her fingertip. A single lightbulb hung from the ceiling, flickering on and off as the wind blew. After shouting and pounding on the door to no avail, William ran across the street to Dr Luke, who lived above his office. The doctor jimmied the lock and wrapped towels around William's mother, carrying her down two flights of stairs and into a waiting taxi, bound for Providence Hospital.

He left me alone, William thought, remembering the pinkish bathwater that gurgled and swirled down the drain. On the bottom of the tub he'd found a bar of Ivory soap and a single lacquered chopstick. The wide end had been inlaid with shimmering layers of abalone. But the pointed end looked sharp, and he wondered what it was doing there.

'You can go in now, Willie,' Sister Briganti said, snapping her fingers.

William held the door as Sunny walked out; his cheeks were cherry red and his sleeves were wet and shiny from wiping his nose. ‘Your turn, Will,’ he half-sniffled, half-grumbled. He gripped a letter in his hand, then crumpled the envelope as if to throw it away, then paused, stuffing the letter in his back pocket.

‘What’d it say?’ another boy asked, but Sunny shook his head and walked down the hallway, staring at the floor. Letters from parents were rare, not because they didn’t come – they did – but because the sisters didn’t let the boys have them. They were saved and doled out as rewards for good behavior or as precious gifts on birthdays and religious holidays, though some gifts were better than others. Some were hopeful reminders of a family that still wanted them. Others were written confirmations of another lonely year.

Mother Angelini was all smiles as William walked in and sat down, but the stained-glass window behind her oaken desk was open and the room felt cold and drafty. The only warmth that William felt came from the seat of the padded leather chair that had moments before been occupied, weighed down by the expectations of another boy.

‘Happy birthday,’ she said as her spidery, wrinkled fingers paged through a thick ledger as though searching for his name. ‘How are you today . . . William?’ She looked up, over her dusty spectacles. ‘This is your fifth birthday with us, isn’t it? Which makes you how old in the canon?’

Mother Angelini always asked the boys’ ages in relation to books from the Septuagint. William quickly

rattled off, ‘Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus . . .’ on up to Second Kings. He’d memorized his way only to the Book of Judith, when he’d turn eighteen and take his leave from the orphanage. Because the Book of Judith represented his own personal exodus, he’d read it over and over, until he imagined Judith as his forebear – a heroic, tragic widow, courted by many, who remained unmarried for the rest of her life. But he also read it because that particular book was semiofficial, semicanonical – more parable than truth, like the stories he’d heard about his own, long-lost parent.

‘Well done, Master William,’ Mother Angelini said. ‘Well done. Twelve is a marvelous age – the precipice of adult responsibility. Don’t think of yourself as a teenager. Think of yourself as a young man. That’s more fitting, don’t you think?’

He nodded, inhaling the smell of rain-soaked wool and Mentholatum, trying not to hope for a letter or even a lousy postcard. He failed miserably in the attempt.

‘Well, I know that most of you are anxious for word from the outside – that God’s mysteries have blessed your parents with work, and a roof, and bread, and a warm fire, and that someone might come back for you,’ the old nun said with a delicate voice, shaking her head as the skin beneath her chin shook like a turkey’s wattle. ‘But . . .’ She glanced at her ledger. ‘We know that’s not possible in your situation, don’t we, dear?’

It seems that’s all I know. ‘Yes, Mother Angelini.’ William swallowed hard, nodding. ‘I suppose, since this is my birthday, I’d just like to know more. I have so many

memories from when I was little, but no one's ever told me what happened to her.'

The last time he saw her he'd been seven years old. His mother had half-whispered, half-slurred, 'I'll be right back,' as she had been carried out the door, though he might have imagined this. But he didn't imagine the police officer, an enormous mountain of a man who showed up the next day. William remembered him eating a handful of his mother's butter-almond cookies and being very patient while he packed. Then William had climbed into the sidecar of the policeman's motorcycle and they drove to a receiving home. William had waved to his old friends, like he was riding a float in Seattle's Golden Potlatch Parade, not realizing that he was waving goodbye. A week later the sisters came and took him in. *If I had known I'd never see my apartment again, I'd have taken some of my toys, or at least a photo.*

William tried not to stare as Mother Angelini's tongue darted at the corner of her mouth. She read the ledger and a note card with an official-looking seal that had been glued to the page. 'William, because you are old enough, I will tell you what I can, even though it pains me to do so.'

That my mother is dead, William thought, absently. He'd accepted that as a likely outcome years ago, when they told him her condition had worsened and that she was never coming back. Just as he accepted that his father would always be unknown. In fact, William had been forbidden to ever speak of him.

'From what we know, your mother was a dancer at

the Wah Mee Club – and quite popular. But one day she made herself sick with bitter melon and carrot-seed soup. When that didn't work, she retired to the bath and tried performing . . .'

Performing? His mother had been a singer and a dancer. 'I don't understand,' he whispered, unsure if he wanted to know more.

'William, your dear mother was rushed to the hospital, but she had to wait for hours and, when they did get around to her, the admitting physician wasn't entirely comfortable treating an Oriental woman, especially one with her reputation. So he had her remanded to the old Perry Hotel.'

William blinked and vaguely understood. He knew the location. In fact he used to play kick the can on the corner of Boren and Madison. He remembered being frightened by the ominous-looking building, even before bars were added to the windows and the place was renamed the Cabrini Sanitarium.

Mother Angelini closed her ledger. 'I'm afraid she never left.'

When William finally arrived at the Moore Theatre on Second Avenue, the younger boys had forgotten about their mothers and fathers in the rush to spend their nickels on Clark bars or handfuls of Mary Janes. Within minutes their lips were smeared and they were licking melted chocolate off their fingertips, one by one.

Meanwhile, William struggled to shake the thought of his mother spending her final years locked away in a

nuthouse – a laughing academy, a funny farm. Sister Briganti had once said that if he daydreamed too much he'd end up in a place like that. *Maybe that's what happened to her.* He missed his mother as he wandered the lobby, looking at the movie posters, remembering her taking him to old photoplays and silent films in tiny second-run theaters. He recalled her arm around him, as she'd whisper in his ear, regaling him with tales of his grandparents, who were stars in Chinese operas.

As he lingered near the marble columns in the lobby, he tried to enjoy the moment, greedily palming the silver coin he'd been given. He'd learned from previous years to save it and follow the smell of melting butter and the sound of popcorn popping. He found Sunny, and they put their money together, splitting a large tub and an Orange Crush. As William waited to be seated, he noticed hundreds of other boys from various mission homes, institutions, and reformatories. In their dingy, graying uniforms they looked shrunken and sallow, frozen in line, a fresco of ragpickers. The prisonlike uniforms the other boys wore made William feel awkward and overdressed, even in his ill-fitting jacket and hand-me-down knickerbockers that hung eight inches past his knees. And as he sipped his drink his gullet pressed against the knot of black silk that barely passed for a bow tie. But despite their differences, they all had the same expectant look in their eyes as they crowded the entrance, buzzing with excitement. Like most of the boys at Sacred Heart, William had been hoping to see *Animal Crackers* or a scary movie like *White Zombie* – especially after he heard that the Broadway Theatre had offered ten dollars

to any woman who could sit through a midnight showing without screaming. Unfortunately, the sisters had decided that *Cimarron* was better fodder for their impressionable young minds.

Gee whiskers, William thought. *I'm just happy to get away, happy to see anything, even a silent two-reeler.* But Sunny was less enthusiastic.

When the bright red doors finally swept open, Sister Briganti put her hand on his shoulder and rushed Sunny and him to their seats.

'Be good boys and whatever you do be quiet, keep to yourselves, and don't make eye contact with the ushers,' she whispered.

William nodded but didn't understand until he glanced up and saw that the balcony was filled with colored boys and a few Indian kids like Sunny. There must have been a separate entrance in the alley. *Am I colored?* William wondered. *And if so, what color am I?* They shared the popcorn and he sat lower, sinking into the purple velvet.

As the footlights dimmed and the plush curtains were drawn, a player piano came to life, accompanying black-and-white cartoons with Betty Boop and Barnacle Bill. William knew that, for the little boys, this was the best part. Some would barely make it through the previews, or the Movietone Follies. They'd end up sleeping through most of the feature film, dreaming in Technicolor.

When the Follies reel finally began, William managed to sing along with the rest, to musical numbers by Jackie

Cooper and the Lane Sisters, and he laughed at the antics of Stepin Fetchit, who had everyone in stitches. He laughed even harder than the kids in the balcony. But silence swept the audience as a new performer crooned ‘Dream a Little Dream of Me’ – staring wistfully into the camera. At first William thought, *She looks like Myrna Loy in The Black Watch*. But she wasn’t just wearing makeup, she was Chinese like Anna May Wong, the only Oriental star he’d ever seen. Her distinctive looks and honeyed voice drew wolf whistles from the older boys, which drew reprimands from Sister Briganti, who cursed in Latin and Italian. But as William stared at the flickering screen, he was stunned silent, mouth agape, popcorn spilling. The singer was introduced as Willow Frost – *a stage name*, William almost said out loud, it had to be. And best of all, Willow and Stepin and a host of Movietone performers would be appearing LIVE AT A THEATRE NEAR YOU, in VANCOUVER, PORTLAND, SPOKANE, and SEATTLE. Tickets available NOW! GET ’EM BEFORE THEY’RE ALL SOLD OUT!

Sunny elbowed William and said, ‘Boy, I’d do anything to see that show.’

‘I . . . have to go’ was all William could manage to say, still staring at the afterimage on the dark screen while listening to the opening score of *Cimarron*, which sounded farther and farther away, like Oklahoma.

‘Keep on wishing, Willie.’

Maybe it was his imagination. Or perhaps he was daydreaming once again. But William knew he had to meet her in person, because he had once known her by another name – he was sure of it. With his next-door neighbors in

Chinatown, she went by Liu Song, but he'd simply called her *Ab-ma*. He had to say those words again. He had to know if she'd hear his voice – if she'd recognize him from five long years away.

Because Willow Frost is a lot of things, William thought, a singer, a dancer, a movie star, but most of all, Willow Frost is my mother.