

140 Characters

Liam Callanan

The old nun, Agnes, who keeps to herself.

The old nun's friend, Frieda, because even old nuns who keep to themselves keep at least one friend and that's who Frieda is, and why not, because she, too, is an old nun but also a former one, and was happy to drive over this fine summer evening and help Agnes root around the front yard looking for Joseph, who's not a nun but a saint, or the plastic replica of one, buried upside down somewhere here in front of the convent, the two old women are sure of it, because the building is for sale and tradition holds that this is what you do: hire realtor, plant sign, bury Joseph, hello buyer.

Suzanne, who doesn't go to church anymore—Sundays are for open houses—but happily retweets the odd biblical passage she comes across and keeps a trunkful of St. Josephs rattling around in her car to give to clients: *hey, you never know....*

Her clients, the nuns, specifically Mary Pat and Mary Grace, two of the three women remaining at the old convent in the inner city, who are wondering when Agnes, the third, is going to come back from that walk she claimed she was taking, what that high-pitched sound is, whether their hearing aid batteries need replacing, who will pay for that, and if they really should ask Hector to bury the statue of St. Joseph in the yard, because they haven't yet.

Hector, who installed the smoke detector that's confusing the nuns, and who has buried the following things in his own backyard: five mice the poison killed, two the cat killed, and the cat; a chicken neck, a votive candle, and a picture of someone he hated; a chicken heart, a votive candle, and a picture of someone he loved; Mrs. Reynoso's business card with the bright red palm; two Pic-n-Save Supermarket bags, one inside the other, encasing a Glock he was told didn't work; 300 U.S. dollars and 2,000 Honduran lempiras in an old pickle jar; a startlingly large dead crow he found Tomas and Angelina playing with one morning as he was headed to work at the convent he knew would close soon.

Gladys Reynoso, who attends mass every Sunday in the old convent chapel, sitting high up in the loft, the designated seats for the laity, looking down at the long empty pews below, the designated seats for nuns, wondering where those nuns are, wondering if they buried the secretly extra-special statue she gave that woman Suzanne, whom Gladys told would die very wealthy, but not that she would die next year, nor that this one particular St. Joseph, which Gladys gave to Suzanne to give the nuns to give to Hector to bury to sell the convent, had a teeny, tiny curse on it that would render it useless.

Father McGreevy, who says the mass for the nuns and Gladys Sunday mornings, or thinks he does, he's eighty-eight now if a day and has retired thrice—once as pastor, once as principal of a small and beautiful school in Hawaii, and most recently as chair of the Monday Afternoon Inner-City Interfaith Golf Council, the collection of priests, rabbis, and pastors—three Toms, one Marc, one Mark, a John (on-and-off), an intolerable Sven, and toward the end, that Angelique—who all spent a cleric's most blessedly empty day of the week, Monday, golfing, and for whom the group's acronym, MAGIC, was a source of great ironic pride, though Father McGreevy can't remember why or how the acronym worked, because it doesn't, not really, and neither does he, and the golf in Hawaii was so much better, or so he'd read in the Michener book, which was so long he couldn't remember the characters from one page to the next or whether he himself was in the book or not.

Alice, the librarian around the corner, who checked out the Michener book to Father McGreevy, though no longer remembers doing so because it was eighteen years ago and she's never taken an interest in Michener's books coming or going, much less distinguishing between the books themselves.

Grace Paley, whose death Alice still mourns, in part because she had a ticket to see her at the auditorium in 1980 but had to cancel to take her husband Ralph to the hospital for chest pains that turned out to be heartburn; in part because Paley writes so lovingly

of libraries and librarians in her story “Wants,” wherein the narrator returns an Edith Wharton book that’s also eighteen years overdue, is charged \$32, happily pays and says of the librarian, whom Alice has always liked to imagine is her, “Immediately she trusted me, put my past behind her, wiped the record clean, which is just what most other municipal and/or state bureaucracies will not do”; and in part because Paley’s character immediately checks out the book again.

Ralph, Alice’s husband, who has never read Michener or Paley or Wharton or the man Alice’s library is named for, Walt Whitman, and who wonders every Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday night, the nights the library’s open late, why Alice hasn’t retired yet, because she’s eligible, they’d planned for this, she’s put in her time, and they were going to go on a cruise because that’s the one kind of trip where they don’t care how heavy your luggage is and Alice always brings books and Ralph would like to go to Hawaii.

Janice, the travel agent who’s amazed she still has clients like Ralph who still call travel agents.

Donald, her brother, who told her he was taking his share of what they’d inherited from mom and dad and investing it in a 1-800-We-Buy-Ugly Places franchise, for which \$100,000 bought you nothing but a call forwarding scheme that sent nearby calls from prospective clients to whatever primary number Donald gave the service, and he gave them the number of a prepaid cell phone he’d bought from a man named Zeni who ran a gas station, and if the primary number didn’t work, which it often didn’t, the cause of which was disputed by Donald and Zeni, then the automated marketing service rang the secondary, emergency backup number, which was Janice’s work number, which was fine, Donald said, because who calls travel agents anymore?

Silvia does, although she thought she was calling a realtor, or not that, but someone who buys homes cheap, fixes them up, and then resells them for a big profit to finer people, someone who would do just that for the old convent across the way, which is crumbling, not an expression, not a metaphor, she stressed in her letters to

the archbishop, the mayor, her alderman, the other alderman she wishes were hers since he's always in the paper giving a damn, and that pretty woman from Channel 4 who does the All 4 You consumer segments where they generally get The Man to *pay attention*, which is what Silvia wants, someone, anyone, to pay attention to the fact that the building is physically crumbling: a brick tumbled from somewhere high up one morning and landed within four feet of the stroller she was pushing Sara around in, which means that the building will go for sale so cheap that some students or pimps or meth labbers will wind up buying it and then there goes the neighborhood, unless someone looking to make some honest money buys it, fixes it, and—Silvia loves this next verb and she can't, couldn't, won't, wouldn't say why, because the reason is private and related to sex—*flips* it, whereupon the convent will go to someone who really cares, who will make it into apartments, bring some new families onto the block, which the block needs because Mr. and Mrs. Rodriguez aren't friendly, Mr. Pimentel is too friendly, the old white lady just strange, and the nine kids in the Christian commune or whatever it is are too eager, too excited, to be living in such a poor neighborhood that so clearly needs their help, particularly free toys at Christmas, which Silvia just wants to shove back at them, especially the stuffed white lambs, and say *no thanks* and *we don't need the dusty, dented canned food either* and *if you really want to give the neighborhood a gift, bathe more, wear socks*.

Orlando, who tells his grandkids Petey and Truman that the city in Florida was named for him, who reglazes the commune's windows for free because they're always getting broken.

Emilio, the plumber, who charges the commune 50 percent more than his usual rates because he doesn't like the neighborhood and because they never pay anyway.

Esther, the mail carrier, who buys a forty, just the one, each Friday, from José, from Iran, who runs the package store and doesn't drink, not since Frank died.

Ernest, Tom, Kevin, Chip, Rich, Reggie, and two guys who go

by nicknames, Legs and Red, who all used to shop at the package store, just sodas, always sodas, and always wondered about Frank, if he was a brother or a friend or—and now won't find out because the new lieutenant, whose rank is her name, came on board and said firemen shouldn't shop at package stores, not in uniform.

The lieutenant, who tweets as @number53, because she is, and because it's not about her, but the firehouse, which is home to Engine Company 53, and almost no one notices that she extends her sense of discipline to her tweets, which she limits to 53 characters: *Change of seasons = change smoke detector batteries.*

@firemom, the lieutenant's mother, who does notice and retweets her daughter's tweets to the world and/or the eighteen accounts she follows or who follow her—@purplerein, @chumash, @granny2go, @47northbargrill, @tl3442, @seniorctrparknrec, @halfoffTuesdays, @mortsmith7, @tellyouride, @cindyloowho, @29palms, @ladygaga, @sarahpalin, @smokey_bear, @readhead9, @firedad, whom she's never met, @number53, whom she has, of course, and @TideMom, for the coupons, and that video, which was funny.

Denis, the twenty-two-year-old tech geek the city hired, who doesn't follow anyone because tweeting is for old people and corporations and because he's too busy moving the closed-circuit TV municipal monitoring network online so police and firemen can access it more easily and see stuff like that tendril of smoke climb the screen, which Denis misses because he's under the desk looking for the other end of the yellow cable and finding instead a scratched Jackson Five CD, *ABC*, that someone apparently used as a coaster.

Jackie, Jermaine, Marlon, Tito, and Michael, the Jackson Five, though Denis googles "CD coasters" instead and finds "the Coasters," whose four-man group (J.W. Lance, Primotivo Candelara, Eddie Whitfield, Dennis Anderson) is much more complicated than the five-man Jacksons, since there were sixteen Coasters who came before (Carl Gardner, Billy Guy, Bobby Nunn, Leon Hughes, Adolph Jacobs, Young Jessie, Will "Dub" Jones, Cornell Gunter, Albert

“Sonny” Forrest, Earl “Speedo” Carroll, Thomas “Curley” Palmer, Vernon Harrell, Ronnie Bright, Jimmy Norman, Alvin Morse and Carl Gardner, Jr.) *and what exactly is doo-wop anyway* Denis wonders and asks Google this, too, which means he misses the tendrils becoming a cloud.

Dave Montemeri, the Merry Weatherman of Channel 4, who once wrote a book for kids about clouds that Alice never displayed because he confused *altocumulus* and *cirrocumulus* and nobody caught it but her, which inspired her to do a display of novels with the word *cloud* in the title that she thinks of now as she begins to smell smoke, though it could just be the latest dinner retired Ralph has burned, still stuck in her nostrils, and maybe that should be next month’s display, the senses.

Danny, the census worker, who took the job because he needed and needs the money so badly he thinks twice before calling 911 because he worries it will count against his minutes and wonders, since he has limited voice but unlimited texts, if he couldn’t just text the fire department.

Rachel, the dispatcher who takes the call and knows she’ll get marked down on her weekly scoresheet because she failed to keep the caller on the line long enough to confirm his location, to explain to the caller that they can’t track cellular calls automatically like landline calls, not as fast, anyway, so she hits the blue light to summon her supervisor, Sonia, so they can both rewind, listen, rewind, listen, and take four minutes to parse what the caller said and thereby find the fire’s location, four minutes the fire takes to find the location of the boxes and boxes of candles that Dolores, long-dead, a miserly mother superior in the convent years ago, purchased because the feast day of St. Lucy, their patron saint, is celebrated with candle wreaths, and because the bulk price was so cheap, and because every lit candle meant one less electric light wasting money.

Teresa, the name Dolores gave to the baby who died in her arms before she entered the convent at 17. Edgar, the baby’s father, who betrayed them both.

Francis, the finish carpenter who built the cabinets in the kitchen. Adolph, who dug the first garden and argued that Francis should have put brass, not wooden, knobs on the cabinets because the ladies deserved it. Margaret, the girl the two men fought over eighty years ago. Dahlia, the grand-niece, who bought the fire extinguisher ten years ago and put it in the cabinet Mary Pat and Mary Grace are now fumbling to find.

Andy, the passerby who asks Agnes and Frieda, still outside digging for St. Joseph, if everything is okay.

Gilberto, another passerby, who interrupts to say that it's definitely not, and who interrupts Agnes agreeing that everything is not okay (though she means with the state of nuns today, the plight of historic convents) to ask if there's anything—anyone—worth preserving inside because the building, ladies, is on fire.

Marcus Anthony Taback, Ph.D, author of *A Short History of the Sisters of Saint Lucy in North America, including the Daughter Houses of the West Indies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Lighted Way Press, 1911), the final forty extant copies of which sit in wooden crates in the basement, next to the boiler, a location no one should ever have thought safe, but which is the safest place today as the building burns from top to bottom, meaning that if the firefighters arrive in time and manage not to flood the basement—doubtful—the crates may be later discovered unharmed, allowing the pages to flutter open to the story of Mother Annabelle Macalester, who founded the order with the mission of aiding blind and almost-blind children, and, having found them aid, found they needed schooling as well, and that, as she often said, was that, which indeed made for a short history.

Dr. Filipello, Taback's dissertation adviser, who advised him to write long histories about bigger topics, which Taback opposed: wasn't there freedom in restraint, and wasn't it Mother Macalester herself who said of religious life and study that it represented "the freedom and peace of a wilderness existence, a return to the desert that is also a recovery of (inner) paradise"?

No, it was Thomas Merton.

Whom Mary Pat and Mary Grace met once in a situation not unlike the one they are now in, feeling their way down some darkened stairs through smoke, though then it was New York City and in that old hotel run by nuns down in Chelsea and they were saving money on lightbulbs or there was a blackout or someone hadn't paid the electric and Mary Pat and Mary Grace were delighted to happen upon Merton, whom they'd heard was in residence, but was suddenly, like them, out on the fire escape, smoking, another surprise, as he'd famously quit.

Lucas, the nine-year-old boy on the sidewalk outside the burning convent who overhears an older woman, red-haired, Russian, say *too many stairs* and *they are too old* and *there are too many stairs*, and Lucas thinks to tell her, *this is why I want a fire pole in my house, in any house I ever live in*, but he doesn't and walks on even though he wants to stay and watch and listen, because if he's not home by six, the bad babysitter, the one who comes on Tuesdays, will leave anyway and leave his baby sister Tamika, six, alone in the apartment.

Timothy, the news director, with the tough call to make: the murder investigation on the south side or the in-progress fire on the north side; the murder would fit in with the station's Our Deadly Streets campaign but the flames would be more exciting visually and the scanner says it's still out of control so he sends the Wolf Coach there first.

Ron, who drives the Wolf Coach—the tricked-out van any TV station needs to do live remotes—and hates the north side because the old buildings might as well be built of lead the way they interfere with the signal, no matter how carefully he aims the stinger, rising even now from the roof of the truck.

Devin, who rides a fixed-gear black bike he bought for half a month's rent and whose purchase he refuses to regret, whose AmeriCorps project is a hyperlocal community news-and-take-action video blog that he feeds seven days a week with his not-Apple smartphone,

and who, when he sees the convent burning, thinks *justice is served*, not for any particular personal reason but just because, Catholics, you know.

And Desmond, who does know, who is haunted still by what happened to him so many decades ago—and who knows, maybe the resulting splintered childhood is why he's living in this crappy neighborhood today instead of Hawaii, retired, with wealth beyond measure—and yet still feels a call to run up the stairs, ahead of the firemen who are only now arriving, and yank open the door and head for the central staircase calling, *let me hear you, let me hear you yell*.

And Trixie, which is not her name, just what Ron, Merry Dave, Timothy, Chas the weekend anchor, and most of the station call her behind her back, who hears Desmond calling and turns to Ron and says *oh God there's people in there, I can hear them screaming*, which Ron interprets as *hurry up, we're missing good audio*, and so he only says in reply, *give me a sec*, though he knows he'll have longer than that, five minutes, maybe, while she does her hair, finds someone to talk to, and then, just before air, per the new guidelines, tweets the breaking news.

Agnes and Frieda prise open the front doors in time for Mary Pat and Mary Grace to tumble out, followed by Desmond, who has rescued them, and in so doing, rescued some lost piece of himself before they all lose themselves in the crowd as the building burns, brighter and brighter and brighter.

Patricia, who knows they call her Trixie, but keeps this, and that she speaks three languages, was a Rhodes scholar, ate two bagels this morning, is six years celibate, all to herself, because not everyone needs to know every detail of every other individual's life, no matter how set the current world seems on disproving this.

Patricia, who finds no one to talk to, because she's busy staring at her station-issued, last-legs Blackberry, preparing her tweet, thumb-typing, untyping, retyping, trying to stay within the limits,

trying to stay focused, and failing, because for her the story is always elsewhere, like that woman walking down the other side of the street this very moment, ignoring them all and the cloudless sky from beneath her bright red umbrella: *and that's 139* she thinks.

Patricia, who looks up and sees the For Sale sign, and thinks *that's the story*, who sees the boarded-up school just beginning to burn next door and thinks *that's the story*, who sees herself bent to her phone, hands folded in front of her as if in prayer, and knows *that's* the story, and its protagonist is her one constant and most annoying friend, Anders, her name (and why don't others have a name?) for the pinched, angular cursor that endlessly, mercilessly blinks out at her from whatever screen she's staring at, as now, as she wonders, worries, marvels at what we miss, of this world, of others, of the one above, when we reduce our stories to 140 characters.

