

If Cleanliness

by

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DESCRIPTION

It is 1894, and young Brigid Yeats, working as a stitcher in a workshop and a maid in the rectory, has a revelation about water, Emma Goldman, and our blessed St. Brigid.

CHARACTERS

- BRIGID YEATS, a slight woman of 19—she is suffering from a mild form of byssinosis, a respiratory disease, and has trouble breathing easily
- ST. BRIGID, a statue dressed as a saint with a halo
- THE PRIEST
- MRS. ITA RILEY, housekeeper, a woman of some size and strength—dressed with an apron with big pockets

TIME

- August 1894

NOTES

- Brigid, Mrs. Riley, and the Priest all speak in an Irish accent. St. Brigid, especially after her transformation, can be more American but still have a “lilt.”
- The height/weight difference between Brigid and Mrs. Riley must be distinct, Laurel-and-Hardyish.
- The poster of Emma Goldman held up by Mrs. Riley should have the photo of the actor playing St. Brigid.

* * * * *

A Catholic church, a holy water font. BRIGID goes to bless herself but sees something in the water that disgusts her. She picks up the bowl and lets out a wail/scream that brings the PRIEST and MRS. ITA RILEY running in. Whether by accident or on purpose, BRIGID splashes the PRIEST, then, breathing heavily, half-swoons into MRS. RILEY’s arms. Blackout.

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The PRIEST's office: two chairs, a kneeler, perhaps a desk, and a full-size statue of ST. BRIGID with halo holding a cruet of water. MRS. RILEY settles a struggling BRIGID into a chair.

MRS. RILEY

Sit calm, Brigid Yeats, or you will never see the age of twenty!

BRIGID is breathing heavily and shallowly, as if she can't quite catch her breath.

BRIGID

I don't—take orders—from a cow.

MRS. RILEY

Even half-fagged for breath, you still have a sharp mouth. Sit still and wait for Father.

BRIGID

By Cúchulain [KOO KHUL-in]—

MRS. RILEY

If you're Cúchulain, missy, then I'm going to be your Queen Medb [MAYV], and I'll make sure your little farts of blather to the Father won't add up to a stink worth smelling!

BRIGID

What can you expect from a pig but an oink?

MRS. RILEY raps her as the PRIEST enters. He is calm, the king in his castle.

PRIEST

If you ever leave me as housekeeper, Mrs. Riley, I'm sure you could job out as a warder at the Tombs.

MRS. RILEY

Such spite and vinegar deserves—

PRIEST

(stopping Mrs. Riley)

A little charity, Mrs. Riley.

The PRIEST pulls up the other chair. He looks at BRIGID closely while BRIGID catches her breath.

PRIEST

Still having that trouble breathing?

BRIGID

Lately I can't get anything down deep, Father.

PRIEST

That's okay, child, just take your time and tell me what happened out there.

BRIGID

I'm truly sorry about that.

PRIEST

Don't apologize—just tell me the troubles troubling you because I know you're troubled—I've seen it. I've felt it.

BRIGID

I see your suit is dry, Father.

PRIEST

You gave me a St. Brigid, Brigid—did you know that?

BRIGID

I suppose I did, Father.

PRIEST

(to Mrs. Riley)

She doused me the way our patron here would salt her healing water over rich and ragged alike.

(to Brigid)

Your parents named you well.

BRIGID's face goes sad at his mention of her parents.

PRIEST

Now I'm sorry.

BRIGID

A lot of good their naming me Brigid did for them, Father, if it's water you're talking about.

MRS. RILEY

Watch your tongue.

PRIEST

I know you're in deep pain, Brigid, but St. Brigid didn't bring the cholera to your family.

BRIGID

I never thought she did—but she didn't stop it, either. And the water's not gotten any better.

PRIEST

Is all that weighing on your mind?

BRIGID

Like lead.

PRIEST

But you know they're resting in Heaven.

BRIGID

I don't even know where their bodies are, Father—
(tapping forehead)
—up here, that day is still fresh like it's today, them taken away in canvas bags—you trying to say the last rites while they're loaded into the wagon like cut turf—

MRS. RILEY rolls her eyes. The PRIEST frowns at her.

PRIEST

It has not been easy for you.

An awkward silence. The PRIEST does not know what else to say.

PRIEST

(pointing)

As you know, St. Brigid's waters cured the lepers—

The PRIEST stands in front of the statue.

PRIEST

One of Ireland's three great saints you're named after.

MRS. RILEY

St. Ita, my namesake, was no slouch, Father.

PRIEST

No, Mrs. Riley, no “slouch” at all. But St. Brigid, her sacred waters restoring life, punishing pride, heading off violence—born with that fire around her head—I am sure your family is safe with St. Brigid—

MRS. RILEY

And St. Brigid knew her place.

PRIEST

So were you trying to “cure” something when you showered us all?

MRS. RILEY

Answer Father.

BRIGID

I think maybe I was, Father, though maybe without much thinking it through.

MRS. RILEY

That’s no surprise.

BRIGID

Did you—did either of you see what was in the holy water dish? Did you? A lunger. Someone had crouped up a hawk and spit it—

MRS. RILEY

It must have been a Protestant—or a Jew!

BRIGID

White and slimy, and almost dipping my fingers into it—God!

PRIEST

Brigid, it’s all right—

BRIGID

I just couldn’t take—

PRIEST

Brigid, breathe slowly—

BRIGID

Just couldn't take such filth anymore! And I grabbed the dish like I was in a blindness before it could disease anyone else—I never intended for you—

MRS. RILEY

She makes losing control sound like an act of charity, Father.

BRIGID

I was angry! Water has not been my friend!

MRS. RILEY

Oh, the angels weep—

PRIEST

I can understand your anger, Brigid, coming from your grief, but you have to hold it back, "like the waters of strife"—

BRIGID

That's why I can't breathe, Father, I hold it back so much. I stitch in a workshop that smells like a pit privy—the streets horse-shitted—

MRS. RILEY

Oh!

BRIGID

—ankle-deep, turning to spew when it rains—where I live—my stinkard relatives—every surface greasy, reeks of cabbage and sweat—try to clean your clothes in water as grey as ash because you'd otherwise have to hump a rinse up five flights to soap them out. And the stink of us all, all the time! Once, Father, once, I slaved a nickel from work, for myself, a nickel—do you know how long that took?—and I took myself to the People's Baths. Soap and a towel—and heaven. I couldn't scrub hard enough, I felt so dirty to the bone—but afterwards—my bones felt clean and light.

PRIEST

You must calm yourself, Brigid.

BRIGID

Father, forgive me but I can't, not when someone's spat into the holy water! You telling me the world makes sense at that point? Nothing makes sense anymore. I got the ward bosses asking to buy my vote, the Irish Liberator whipping me to hate England, the Holy Father telling me to be St. Brigid, my fat goat of a boss telling me to be more American—which means to him a lift of the skirts and a tickle—I got a full choir up here and I can't think straight! Sometimes I think that if cleanliness is next to Godliness, then I am next door to hell by the mucky way I live, neither fish nor fowl, neither here nor there. She's right, much as I hate to admit—spite and vinegar, that's me.

PRIEST

You are next to Godliness, Brigid, even if you don't have all the Croton water at your command—your heart is clean, that much I know—come, Brigid, all's forgiven—let us pray—Mrs. Riley, join us now, a gesture of friendship and charity.

But BRIGID does not move.

PRIEST

Brigid, let us pray.

BRIGID

There's something else—you asked me to tell you my troubles.

MRS. RILEY

Just be more spite, Father—let me get her out of here.

PRIEST

Wait—there's more?

BRIGID pauses: if she speaks, she will cross a line.

PRIEST

Brigid, you must talk to me.

BRIGID

Father—if all that ever worked before with me—the praying and stuff—it all doesn't seem to work now, much as I want it to.

PRIEST

Even more, then, the need to pray and accept my forgiveness and be obedient. You can't let your grief—

MRS. RILEY

You're favoring her again, aren't you?

PRIEST

Mrs. Riley—

MRS. RILEY

Aren't you, even though she's as much as just spit in your face?

BRIGID

I did not spit in his face!

MRS. RILEY

I thought you'd let her off scot-clean, as you always do—

BRIGID

I'm not asking for anything except to be heard out—

MRS. RILEY

So look at these!

MRS. RILEY pulls a pamphlet and a poster from her apron. She hands the pamphlet to the PRIEST. As the PRIEST reads, he looks troubled.

BRIGID

(sotto voce)

You sow.

MRS. RILEY

Found these in her locker—

(to Brigid)

I have my job to keep this rectory clean of filth, too, especially this kind—

MRS. RILEY holds up the poster with a photo on it.

MRS. RILEY

And she carries the face of the anti-Christ!

The PRIEST takes the poster.

PRIEST

What is all this, Brigid? Don't give me any flip, I won't abide it in my house.

The PRIEST hands BRIGID the pamphlet.

PRIEST

Read.

BRIGID

Father—

PRIEST

Read your impertinence.

BRIGID

(haltingly)

"In honor of the release of Emma Goldman from Blackwell's Island"—

MRS. RILEY

Consorting with criminals—

PRIEST

And where? Read it!

BRIGID

At the Thalia Theatre.

PRIEST

(dismayed)

At the theatre. A theatre. Listening to an anarchist—an atheist who professes free love and the hatred of authority! Is that what this country has done to you, made you forget your values, your faith, your duty?

The way BRIGID fidgets shows she has more to say.

PRIEST

You did something else, didn't you?

BRIGID

I followed them to a saloon—they went to celebrate—

MRS. RILEY

May the Lord bless the beasts in Byzantium!

BRIGID

I met the owner, Justus Schwab—

MRS. RILEY

A German!

PRIEST

And another anarchist.

MRS. RILEY

Probably a Christ-killer, too!

PRIEST

Mrs. Riley! Did you drink there?

BRIGID

I did not. I didn't need to.

(another line crossed)

Because I was laughing.

PRIEST

Laughing.

BRIGID

I laughed and laughed, and I never lost my breath. They were so funny! And I danced, danced until I felt clean.

PRIEST

Why were you even there? Whatever possessed you to—

BRIGID

Accident—mostly. I work over there, stitching, saw the crowd—

MRS. RILEY

You left your job, then, to go!

BRIGID

That job was nothing but slavery anyway—it gave me these lungs—and the overseer gropes us like bear bait.

PRIEST

I gave you work in this household because you were an unattached young woman without her family—you would've been a “handkerchief girl” under the El Train—or worse!

MRS. RILEY

She's halfway to “tart” anyway!

PRIEST

(waving pamphlet)

And this is how you reward me?

BRIGID is going to cross the last line.

BRIGID

Father, I don't mean disrespect—I don't—though it's probably going to come out that way, but since when is listening to common sense from a smart woman—at least Miss Goldman seemed smart to me—when did such listening turn into a sin?

PRIEST

Emma Goldman is an enemy to our faith, to our lives!

MRS. RILEY

You cannot get let her get away with this!

PRIEST

She's the worst this country has to offer.

BRIGID

But everything she said made sense of everything that wasn't making sense to me—more sense than St. Brigid or any of it—about our filth, about our being slagged over by reechy men, about the way this city burns us up like coal then dumps us out like—like—crap on the ash heap!

With an unpredicted ferocity, the PRIEST sits BRIGID roughly into her chair. This momentarily shocks BRIGID. Then anger kicks in.

PRIEST

You are losing your faith, you are losing your heritage.

BRIGID tries to rise, but MRS. RILEY slams her back.

MRS. RILEY

Sit down and listen!

PRIEST

You are letting this country take away the good sense that God gave you, and it's time, in the name of your dead parents and Ireland and your soul, to re-learn what you need to respect.

They lock eyes. BRIGID stands, shrugs off MRS. RILEY.

BRIGID

I don't care for any more lessons.

The PRIEST goes to slap her but stops himself. BRIGID staggers, as if hit, and the PRIEST reaches out to steady her. But BRIGID regains her balance on her own. She moves to leave.

BRIGID

(defiant but sad)

I won't be needing this charity any more.

PRIEST

Brigid—

BRIGID

(with regret)

I don't have a home here anymore.

MRS. RILEY

You think you can just walk away!

MRS. RILEY, with a warrior's cry, grabs BRIGID and bear-hugs her until it is clear she intends to break BRIGID in half.

PRIEST

Put her down!

But MRS. RILEY ignores him, fully into her revenge.

PRIEST

Mrs. Riley, she can't breathe!

BRIGID's struggles get more limp.

MRS. RILEY

Get away with sinning like there's no tomorrow?

PRIEST

You'll kill her!

MRS. RILEY

No one gets away with anything in this life!

BRIGID goes unconscious. MRS. RILEY drops her.

MRS. RILEY

"Crap on the ash heap," to quote a saucy colleen—

A sudden light change, isolating BRIGID and the statue of ST. BRIGID. The PRIEST and MRS. RILEY exit. ST. BRIGID begins to move and stretch. She snaps a crick out of her neck.

ST. BRIGID

Feck.

ST. BRIGID looks at BRIGID, thinks, looks again, ponders, then takes the cruet of water and pours it onto BRIGID, who wakes up almost immediately.

BRIGID

Oh my Christ—oh my bleeding Christ—it's fucking St. Brigid!
Listen to that tongue!

ST. BRIGID

The things I can do with water.

BRIGID

But you're a statue.

ST. BRIGID

In that other real world, I am.

BRIGID

So I'm not resident in the "real" real world?

ST. BRIGID

You're talking to a statue who talks back to you.

BRIGID

So I'm as mad as a shithouse rat.

ST. BRIGID

No, not quite—you're just a translated shithouse rat.

BRIGID

I'm bughouse, is what I am.

ST. BRIGID

Come on, stand up for yourself and help me.

ST. BRIGID doffs her garb and halo to reveal EMMA GOLDMAN.

BRIGID

You!

ST. BRIGID takes a poster from her pocket, opens it.

BRIGID

Emma Goldman the anti-Christ can't be St. Brigid, too!

ST. BRIGID

She can when Brigid Yeats is conjuring.

BRIGID

What?

ST. BRIGID

Back there you're a half-breathing heap in grief with Mrs. Riley ready to squash you under heel and the Priest like a feckless idiot. So you're calling out for help, like any wounded creature.

BRIGID

But I can't hear myself. I can't—hear—what—

BRIGID looks genuinely puzzled and frightened by being so perplexed. BRIGID takes the cruet.

ST. BRIGID

Open your mouth. Stick out your tongue.

ST. BRIGID pours a drop of water on her finger-tip and places it on BRIGID's tongue.

ST. BRIGID

What word do you taste?

BRIGID tastes—then tastes again. Amazed.

BRIGID

Want.

ST. BRIGID puts another drop on her finger.

ST. BRIGID

Forgot something. Here.

BRIGID sticks out her tongue, then tastes again.

BRIGID

I.

ST. BRIGID

And?

BRIGID

Want.

ST. BRIGID

I—

BRIGID

I—

ST. BRIGID

Want—

BRIGID

I want.

ST. BRIGID

Now say what you want.

BRIGID

To say what I want—

ST. BRIGID

Yes.

BRIGID

As if I could actually get what I want—

ST. BRIGID

Yes.

BRIGID

God, it's like you've set this bug loose in my brain! You're cruel, just like them, because when I wake up, I'll be back to an Irish drab from County Fart under Mrs. Riley's thumb and the shoe of the Priest. There is no growing out of that for me—

ST. BRIGID

Snap your fingers.

BRIGID

—that's all there is for me—

ST. BRIGID

Snap your fingers—go on. Snap.

Puzzled, BRIGID snaps her fingers, and in walks the PRIEST as CÚCHULAIN and MRS. RILEY as QUEEN MEDB, dressed mythologically. They hold quarterstaves and do a bit of quarterstaffing to show off.

ST. BRIGID

Ah, just in time. She was about to pity herself to a nubbin.

BRIGID

Father—I've called you back as Cúchulain? Why did I do that?

ST. BRIGID

Because we all need whatever it takes to buck us up tall.

PRIEST

Fresh from the Cattle Raid of Cooley comes Cúchulain, Ireland's warrior nonpareil—

MRS. RILEY

Oh, shut up.

BRIGID

And you as Queen Medb? I must be really desperate.

MRS. RILEY

Yes you are.

BRIGID

You slagged thirty men in a day—listen to that tongue!

MRS. RILEY

And that was nothing but a tide-me-over until I got to fight him!

They quarterstaff a bit. BRIGID stands on a chair.

BRIGID

Stop it! Wait! I got one of Ireland's greatest saints doubling as a free-love anarchist in America. I got Ireland's greatest warrior, and I got the blazoned Irish queen—and you all stand there as if you're delivering an answer to me. So, what is it?

They watch her, waiting, amused.

BRIGID

I am now completely daft and fucked over, thanks to you all.

ST. BRIGID

Thanks to yourself.

(to Priest and Mrs. Riley)

Go on.

The PRIEST throws ST. BRIGID his staff, grabs MRS. RILEY's so that it forms a cross-bar, and together they lift BRIGID aloft and move her around the stage.

BRIGID

Oh my Christ! Oh the bleeding sacred heart of Jesus H. Christ! I'm aloft! Put me down!

ST. BRIGID

Don't you dare! You wanted an answer, and you've got it!

BRIGID

Oh my God. Oh my God. Don't—don't—don't you dare—don't you dare put me down! Whee! Yee-haw! [and other exclamations of delight]

They deposit her on the stage. ST. BRIGID gives the staff to the PRIEST and puts her clothing back on.

ST. BRIGID

Brigid—your health is coming back to you.

PRIEST

With a warrior—

MRS. RILEY

And a queen—

ST. BRIGID

—and a fecking anarchist—you now have to go back to what everyone else thinks is your proper mind.

BRIGID

No!

The PRIEST and MRS. RILEY cross staffs, salute, exit.

BRIGID

Don't leave me!

ST. BRIGID puts one last drop of water on BRIGID's tongue before she takes up her statue pose.

ST. BRIGID

You do have to go back—but you don't have to stay back when you go.

Lights change—BRIGID isolated, tasting the drop.

BRIGID

My God—oh yes—of course!

She swoons into the same position as before the dream. MRS. RILEY rushes on with water and a cloth, ministers to her. The PRIEST hangs back a step.

BRIGID

I am fine. Please. Don't drown me.

BRIGID sits up, takes several deep and satisfying breaths, and begins laughing.

BRIGID

Thank God—thank God—

PRIEST

What?

BRIGID rises, carefully wipes her face, then stands before them ultra demure.

BRIGID

Father—

PRIEST

Yes?

BRIGID

Father, you were right—

PRIEST

About?

BRIGID

I have been remiss about my spirit. Mrs. Riley—you, too, have reminded me of my disobedience and what it is I have forgotten about my place. You have. From now on, I will take my namesake seriously and work for the betterment of my spirit.

PRIEST

Well—well—you gave us a fright. We thought we didn't know our Brigid any more. She's come back to us, Mrs. Riley. I guess then we have reached some new stage of—understanding. Would that be what this is, Brigid?

BRIGID

Oh, yes, indeed, Father—a whole new stage of understanding what understanding is all about.

MRS. RILEY
(dubious)

Well—

BRIGID takes the pamphlet and picture from the PRIEST and tears them in quarters, then puts them in her apron pocket.

BRIGID

Trust me to get rid of them.

PRIEST

Well, I am satisfied. And I should get back. Brigid, I'm glad to see you come to your senses. If you lose your faith—

BRIGID

Father, I have definitely come into my senses.

PRIEST

Good. Good. Well, Mrs. Riley, better that we lose 99 sheep and bring back the one that has strayed. Thank you, Brigid.

The PRIEST exits. MRS. RILEY circles BRIGID, who is the very picture of humility.

MRS. RILEY

You won't get away with this.

MRS. RILEY exits. BRIGID goes to ST. BRIGID, takes the cruet, turns it upside down as if to confirm the truth of her "journey," then carefully re-fills it.

BRIGID

(as if a prayer)

By Cúchulain, Queen Medb, and the evil lovely Miss Goldman.

She replaces it, then speaks to the audience.

BRIGID

I have heard that Caaalliiiiiffoooooorrrnniiiiiaaa—California—I have heard it is a good place wherein to re-make one's soul. And that the waters of the ocean are as clean as creation. And so I begin.

With her arms outstretched, she spins in place as the lights go to black.