

SARAH SARAI

The Devil Is Her Friend

Pearl Miller can't positive-think her way out of anything, not split ends, not adolescent obscurity, not her parents' fights. Not even a flaming heat rash. Worse for the increasingly gloomy teenager is her observation that her mother Angelette's religion, Christian Science, a New England concoction, makes her body seem like a detachable accessory to life, like there is the Real and Eternal, as Mary Baker Eddy wrote, and there is Pearl's life. So Pearl takes a stand. "This isn't making sense, I don't want to go to Sunday School any more."

Angelette's face crushes with hurt, and Philburn Miller, a Jew, demands, "Go to Sunday School with your mother," but adds, "Eh, who knows what's right?" He's wise when sober. Pearl begins spending Sunday mornings with Philburn at Hi's Deli, sharing lox and bagels. She secretly develops a personal liberation theology.

Christians and Jews react to Pearl's divided self; she sees it in their eyes, an almost imperceptible registration of unfortunate information—distasteful?—the merest of blinks on hearing that Pearl is what they are not. She is accustomed to arrogant avowals that she is on the right side: the Christians insisting, "Really, you're not really Jewish, not you;" the Jews, liberals anyway, assuring her with a shrug, "It's in us." She shrinks when a possessing arm squeezes her shoulder, when a knowing hand grips her arm; becomes tender to the touch of a glance.

"I'd think all people would want me on their side," she writes in her journal. I'm pleasant looking—brown hair that's long but not a hippie cliché, and a peasant face round, and cheery when the occasion demands. I'm of standard height, have all my teeth—whose else would I have?—and strive daily to better my mind."

From her late teens to her Up With New Age period Pearl scorns the routine and in her naivete wants to partake of divinity as did Hasids and desert fathers, for there to be no line or shape to show fool surveyors of the human soul that Pearl begins here, right where the Lord, God, the many-named unnamable, ends. The occasional joint aids this merging with the eternal.

She studies history, geography, psychology, philosophy, anthropology, mathematics and child development at the university, spends six years earning a B.A., soon adding a secondary credential. Teaching seems a respectable way to continue learning and so she teaches social studies for five years in the public schools, enjoying the blood sport, but when financial cut-backs escalate she is forced into subjects she dislikes: The administration asks her to teach English. "As if I care to deflate the joy of reading by explaining character, plot, theme, symbol," Pearl snarls to Angelette in one of their many phone conversations. The mother-daughter bond deepened when Angelette divorced Philburn.

And then Pearl is underpaid by \$500 for three months running and not allowed to inquire after the errant \$1,500 but has to submit her complaint—complaint—in writing to a staff which knows less of communication than her hapless charges. She marches out of Alighieri High, finally and in disgust, parades the five blocks to St. Joan's, a small school of 400, small and quiet with its fenced green lawn and a smooth white statue of its namesake.

As she pulls on the heavy wooden front door of St. Joan's High School, a fuzzy woman glides past. Pearl thinks she hears the small frazzle of hair and unmemorable clothing speak. The fuzzy woman, Pearl learns after she is hired, is Theresa, who spent her final faculty meeting contemplating sun spots—or so the faculty conjectures—or invisible wisps of saints or tabloid hunks, and when the meeting was almost over, with its afternoon's worth of loud scheduling and pronouncing, shared the fruit of her reveries. "I balanced my checkbook last night," Theresa whispered. "All by myself."

Mrs. Bernard, the school secretary, takes to Pearl on sight. When not constrained to her bed with fear and grief, Pearl is a sunny woman. Mrs. Bernard taps on Sister's door, Sister Mary Mark Margaret, the Principal, and announces a prospective social studies teacher has arrived. "Isn't that remarkable," Mrs. Bernard fusses.

And Sister agrees that Pearl's unsummoned appearance is propitious. She reaches a reddened hand to pull Pearl into the office. Pearl talks. Sister listens: a shrewd interview technique. Pearl chats on, telling Sister about geography and history and methods of instruction.

Years of training have habituated Sister to careful observation. Her hawk eyes assess Pearl. Under the duress of Sister's stare, Pearl confesses:

"I'm not Catholic, Sister." On the wall to Sister's right is a large crucifix, majestic and frightening. A color photo of the mayor shaking hands with the school board president hung in the office of Alighieri's principal. "But I certainly respect the Church—" Pearl nods truthfully, or more likely, half-truthfully, as she chooses to confuse the organized necessities of religious administration with the writings of Meister Eckert, the Teresas, St. John of the Cross, and Thomas Merton.

Pearl is hired. Her classes are not overly large; her students are tractable; the faculty jovial. In the faculty lounge, irony and the humor of exhausted teachers are sovereign. The faculty discusses students, the administration, movies, recipes, textbooks, and romance. No one bounds into the faculty room welling with anti-Semitism. Pearl is satisfied the world's injustices aren't kindled at St. Joan's, but she still can't say, "Hey, I'm half-Jewish."

Finally there is an opportunity. She is sitting on the patched couch in the faculty room, correcting papers, when Donald, a history teacher, bursts in. He wants to tell a Polish joke and cheerfully asks if anyone in the room is Polish. "I'm a Polish Jew," Pearl gulps, "a half-Polish Jew, well, all-Polish, but half-Jewish, no, half-Scottish, but the half that's Polish is Jewish." Donald gives her the same narrow glare he gives students who interrupt his lectures or adults who cut in on his jokes. In a shaking voice Pearl remonstrates; a Jew would know better than to plant a Cheerio in expectation of raising donuts.

Sure, there is a slight tremor in the lounge as the new information is factored in, but conversations don't suddenly cease when Pearl enters a room. Her second year at St. Joan's begins, and school commences as usual.

Then out of the blue, though not the blue of Mary's cloak, word comes from downtown that there is to be a mandatory faculty Mass each month to encourage the faculty's spiritual development. Even though there won't be students to supervise, faculty attendance is required.

"But only half of us are Catholic," Maura the math teacher protests.

"And some of us Catholics aren't particularly religious," Donald adds. "Or even believers."

Teachers are independent creatures and blessed, too. Yes, they want a kingdom to rule, and subjects. But what is the kingdom? A dusty room with blackboards and stubs of white chalk. And to

what end do they wish to rule? To instruct, to influence, to attempt an impossible perfection of the intellect. They rebel under instruction themselves, a not unsurprising paradox. No one rebels more than Pearl.

“It’s just not right.” She shuns the wooden chair in Sister Mary Mark Margaret’s office. “My soul is my own.”

“Of course it is, Pearl,” Sister leans back to catch Pearl’s eye. “But I need to send off a respectable statistic to downtown about this. Look here.” On her desk lay stacks of stacks of paper. “I’m burdened.” The V.P. is home recuperating from knee surgery.

“They have no right.”

“No right to what, Pearl?”

“You know I’m not Catholic.”

“I know what you are.”

Pearl doesn’t want to pursue that answer and demands, “How can you tell me to attend?”

“I’m asking you to comply with a rule.” She gestures to the chair and Pearl grudgingly sits.

“Don’t you care what’ll be on my mind when I’m in the church?”

“As a matter of fact, I do, and more than you realize. But you’re boxing yourself into a corner. Join us.”

“But, Sister . . .”

“It won’t do you any harm.”

“Sister?”

“You’d make a fine Catholic.”

“Sister!”

“Pearl, I tease.” Her eyes go to the gold chain lying across Pearl’s throat. Pearl wonders if Sister wants to dangle a cross from it or strangle her with it.

Seeds of discontent flower; or grow like weeds. What fixes in Pearl’s mind is a herald, a front-runner of emotion, a waving banner whose color gradually becomes clear and the color is red and Pearl is furious, in a rage and outraged and this rage is too well rooted to be ignored. She will not be a statistic which might be interpreted as a statement of faith on the charts of religion. Maura who, along with all other faculty members is complying with the archdiocesan edict, tells her that she takes this stuff too seriously, and needs to learn to brush it off, think her own thoughts, plan classes during Mass, fantasize, get her mind out of the church and the rest’s not important.

She is right. And Pearl is doomed. Because she is sure, certain, that downtown, the hierarchy, the administration, the archdiocese, the bureaucracy, is being unjust. Right or wrong, her contract is plain. Pearl checked. She does have to go. She isn’t worried about dismissal; it isn’t likely that such a big bureaucracy will invest the time and money a court battle would require. But she signed the contract. There it is.

So she plans a small protest. She is going to read during Mass, fade away behind one of the pillars of the church, quite real structures.

“You really have to rally?” Angelette massages her feet on which she’d stood all day in a department store. Life as a divorcee is not remunerative, though it is peaceful.

“Mom, I’m hardly rallying.” Pearl holds the phone in front of her face in disbelief. “You want me to go to a Mass?”

Angelette was surprised when Pearl started teaching at St. Joan’s, and while she isn’t thrilled about her daughter attending Mass, neither is she pleasantly electrified by Pearl’s move towards insubordination. “Dear, God’s not going to care.”

Philburn isn't much help, either. "You have to go to the place, the church, the Mass. I thought you liked incense, you were always burning it in your room," he remembers, "though I think you were smoking something, right?" Of greater importance to Philburn than a little marijuana is the hot kimchee he is wolfing at Hi's Deli which has been bought out by Koreans; he dabs a napkin at his sweaty forehead and looks toward the kitchen for his fire beef, pulgoki, to appear.

Pearl hadn't been able to tell her father she preferred Thai to Korean food and now can't explain why she is so upset with Sister Mary Mark Margaret. "I mean I'd think you'd want me to protest."

Philburn asks for more napkins, and winks when the waitress says, "sweetie," not realizing she means "sweaty."

So much for the tensile strength of a dual upbringing, Pearl thinks. "I'm on my own," she tells her rear view mirror as she drives home. She is hurt and annoyed. And determined. Her only decision is what to read during the faculty Mass. The choice will be everything.

The night before the first scheduled opportunity for faculty salvation, Pearl is on the phone with Angelette. "I'm not a literature teacher," she explains needlessly, "but I sure to like to read it."

Angelette has trouble following Pearl's mental wanderings. "Your Sunday School teachers said you were a good reader." She sips Sanka while cradling the phone on her shoulder and thumbing through an article on "Spirituality in the Cubicle." "Be careful."

Makes sense; Pearl is a little nervous. After saying good night, she sits cross-legged in on the Persian rug in front of her bookcase. Her apartment is small and spare, but for the solid oak book cases and treasured carpet. What to read, who to read. Which author can be brought into a church? Well, any and all, but which one will approximate a religious experience—that's what she is looking for. Immediately her choices narrow: Emily Dickinson or Anton Chekhov.

Atop a list of Ten Best Artists the World's Ever Known, which Pearl and her friend Roger, who she met in a literature class at the university, compiled, Pearl places Emily. "Dickinson, my dear Rog, is pure energy, crystal, zircon, an emerald diamond. Her poetry is equivalent to the cipher which the space adventurers in a movie find in the obelisk, which has the key to a galactic understanding and peace." Roger hadn't argued.

In the end, however, Pearl settles on bringing in a collection of Chekhov's stories. She hasn't read the entire volume because every time she opens the book her heart starts beating so rapidly, she gets scared. The air will thicken, and Pearl finds herself lying on her bed, or once, putting her head down on a tabletop at MacDonald's while a girl scooping fries into a red cardboard container shouted to bring some water to the lady who'd passed out. Chekhov indeed. Isn't there God and religion and a philosophy of hope in such artistic construction? At least. And if she faints, the Mass will be cut short.

As it turns out, Pearl's reading causes at least few eyebrows to adapt a concrete arch, as at the Sydney Opera House, not graceless but strong. The reaction might have been no more than consternation, but circumstance prevails against her, because the church is reserved for a confirmation, and can't be used by the faculty. Instead they meet in the chapel, twenty-five of them in twenty-five chairs, metal folding chairs scraping up against each other, each visible to each. No pillars. No shadows. No hush. Just twenty-four bodies, a priest and Pearl, hunched. No one asks what she is reading.

For the next two months Pearl is a pariah; she is told:

"I am really angry with you for what you did during the Mass."

"What about Father Bob? It wasn't his fault. You hurt him."

"Would you let a student read during Mass?"

“How dare you. You of all people.”

“Your aura is darkened.”

This statement can be credited to the good Sister.

Pearl says, “What?”

“I want to tell you this. You don’t seem to realize how you’ve been affecting the rest of the faculty.”

“What have I said to anyone? I’ve kept quiet for a month.”

“You do seem to read lots these days,” Sister comments, and then, “You have a large aura. It casts shadows. You make people tense whenever you’re in the room.” That auras cast shadows is a new one for Pearl. That people are influenced by these quanta is no news to one of her generation. That she is responsible for the faculty’s atmospheric absorption, well, that’s ridiculous.

“Sister, what’re you saying?”

“It was rude of you to read during Mass.”

“It was rude of you to force me to go.”

“You wouldn’t be harmed by an hour’s worth of worship. It might have done you some good.”

Pearl stares. Then, “Were you trying to convert me? You really didn’t need that full-bodied statistic for downtown, did you?”

“Is it so wrong to want to share something good?”

“You just don’t get it,” she says.

Pearl doesn’t want to be told how to worship; she isn’t going to convert. She is a rebel and her rebellion is ecumenical. She does have a big aura, probably because she reads so much. Big books make for big auras. If anything, her aura is plumped from her reading *Anna Karenina* before and after school—and during lunch as she is an outcast from the faculty room. She wonders if Tolstoy would agree that family-type units such as a faculty, are as interesting and painful as family families.

But neither conjecture nor Tolstoy deflect her anger which becomes a tumbleweed collecting detritus as it lopes across her soul. Among the scraps of information it collects is the fact that Pearl is an outsider. Christian Science is a dangerous cult, a rogue of Christianity; certainly some Christians perceive Judaism to be an outsider theological art. Her parents are divorced. She isn’t married. Her friends think she overreacted to the mandatory Mass. When the detritus of anger reaches critical mass, not a religious experience, Pearl feels a lump of sadness.

“Do something with yourself, Pearl,” Angelette urges, and gives her a book on homemade cosmetics. Pearl reads it in an hour, and although she enjoys the avocado-oat facial she concocts from ingredients found in her very own kitchen, she doesn’t think the endeavor has legs. She has too much time to think, and so takes a class at the university extension, on the effects of scientific and technologic breakthroughs on daily life. Well, there aren’t many, and that, in Pearl’s estimation, summarizes the class.

“Pearl.” Sister stops her in the hall a week before the end of the semester. “What’s bothering you now?”

“Sister, have a great summer.”

“Dear Pearl,” she responds. “You know we all love you.” Her aura is smaller than Pearl’s, and her voice isn’t warm enough to win Pearl over, but Pearl suspects Sister regrets the whole Mass mess as much as she does.

Sister writes Pearl a decent letter of recommendation and the faculty assures her they'll miss her. She is headed back to the public schools. With summer imminent her last month at St. Joan's is happy. There are no more faculty Masses. Pearl doesn't know if the archdiocese relented or if Sister doctored the figures. She returns to the faculty room and shares in intense analyses of money-stretching modalities over summer vacation. The final faculty party is held in a banquet room at The Flank. Through computer error in assembling a mailing list, Ms. Barely There, Theresa, the teacher Pearl'd replaced when she'd first joined the faculty two years ago, is invited.

"Pearl." Maura, who is celebrating ten years of teaching math, whispers across the table as a fleshy waitress removes her dinner plate. "You've got to talk to her. Go sit next to her." They are finished with the main course and are splitting and sharing the sweets. The liters of wine are nearly empty and Pearl is smoking as she does when she drinks.

"Would you mind if I sat here?" she asks Theresa and settles in a shiny wooden captain's chair. "My smoking bothers that end of the table."

"Goodness no." The hall-of-famer shifts in her captain's—or maybe first-mate's—chair. "You took over my classes. How'd they go?"

Surprised at Theresa's lucidity, Pearl responds, "We made it through the textbook. I was amazed. I never believe authors of textbooks have been in a classroom."

"Who would want to be?" Theresa smiles. It is a tiny smile and Pearl sees it launch a peculiar ascension of spirit.

"You didn't like teaching, did you," Pearl asks.

"I need to seek," Theresa answers.

"I'm looking, too."

"I'm looking for God," Theresa explains. "I've been reading my namesake, Theresa of Liseux. And Buber. He's Jewish."

"So am I, I'm Jewish. Sort of."

Theresa grabs Pearl's hand. "How exciting."

"What?"

She rests her arms on the table and leans toward Pearl. "Well, I would think that if you really are Jewish, then—"

"—I said I'm Jewish." Pearl's voice is edgy.

"Of course you are. But there are different types of Jews. Different types of Christians, too," Theresa adds quickly.

As quickly, Pearl says, "I'm also Christian. My glass," she lifts a not-so-delicate tumbler, "is half-full, half-Christian and half-Jewish. And soon to be empty. Well." She takes a deep breath and releases it. "Lachaim."

Theresa giggles. Pearl turns to the rest of the table. "We're discussing religion," she announces, and then adds with a smile that feels so real she is thrilled with her own contentment, "We're all okay, gang."

They variously reply:

"We're stuffed."

"We're drunk."

"We're tired."

"We're waiting."

Pearl shifts her eyes in the good Sister's, Mary Mark Margaret's, direction and keeps them half-closed while waiting for Sister's contribution but Sister simply raises her eyebrows, pumps her head

up and down, and leaves to complete unnamed tasks at the convent. Pearl hopes she hasn't embarrassed Sister.

"Pearl?" Theresa brushes a fork's tines along her palm. She scoops chocolate pie into her mouth, and smacks her lips. "Have some."

"I won't resist." She clenches her teeth, curls her fingers around the flat handle of her fork and raises it high above her.

Again Theresa giggles. "You look like the Devil."

"The Devil?" Maura is behind Pearl, snitching a cigarette from Pearl's small stash and leaning over the back of a chair to light it off a candle lodged inside mottled red glass. "Now there's someone who doesn't care if you're Jewish or Christian."

"He's totally EOE." Pearl lays down her fork, and settles her hands in her lap.

"Probably gets government contracts." Maura inhales nicotine with obvious gratitude.

"Could be the relationship I've been looking for," Pearl speculates. "He can travel and meet interesting folk."

"The Devil indeed knows important people." Theresa shyly shrugs, and her eyes appear lit with the kind of little-devil glow easily quenched by devotion and sincerity.

Pearl's hands, still clasped, drift from her lap to her heart. "You know, folks." She Groucho Marxes her eyebrows a few times. "You're expanding my horizons. Meeting important people in high places has been a goal of mine for years."

"Right, right, right." Unimpressed, Maura flicks an ash. "Rebels like you inspire the Devil, sure, and maybe you two could be friends, but it's the hypocrites," she taps her chest then gestures down the table, "who fry."

A friendship with the Devil? Pearl decides she'll take it. Hasids, desert fathers and the Devil, yes, the Devil. "As they say: He's hot." She dares herself, as she continues in her explorations, to explore limits. The Devil? "Hell and yes indeed," Pearl cheers. "He could be a friend of mine."