

DITMAS PARK
by Erica Mann
(Writing sample)

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Emily goes to the iHome and turns off the music. When she turns around she sees Anne standing in the kitchen doorway.

EMILY
Jesus!

ANNE
Sorry to alarm you, dear.

EMILY
That's okay, I just didn't hear you come in through the—

A slight pause.

You didn't come in through the front door...

ANNE
No.

A slight pause.

EMILY
Then how did you get in here...?
You have a separate entrance to your apartment...

ANNE
I do.
But there's also a...passageway.

EMILY
A passageway?

ANNE
Behind the tea rack.

A slight pause.

EMILY
Okay, so, um...
Why did no one ever mentioned this?

ANNE
Oh, probably because secret passageways suggest intrigue. And in this case, there is none.

EMILY
Uh-huh.

A slight pause.

ANNE
Would you like to see it?
We could have tea in my apartment.

EMILY
Uh...sure. Edward had to go into the office, so...

Anne takes Emily by the arm and leads her toward the kitchen.

ANNE

It's really not all that exciting. You'll see.

Anne and Emily disappear into the kitchen.

There is an impressive sound effect—like some Indiana Jones shit—as the unseen tea rack opens to a passageway.

Anne relays the following in a very casual way.

The passageway has always been here. So Edward tells me. There are all sorts of rumors about what it was used for. The attic was used as a crypt. It was the meeting place for witches. People stashed sex slaves up there. Blah, blah, blah. But I've never seen a sex slave in New York, have you?

EMILY

I don't think we'd know if we had...

Lights come up on Anne's attic apartment and the rickety wooden staircase leading up to it.

ANNE

But me, I just think it's your typical, run of the mill, secret passageway. The previous owners probably had it installed because they thought it was fun. Come along now.

Anne beckons Emily to follow her up the staircase. Emily hesitantly begins to climb the rickety stairs.

Don't look so frightened, dear. It's really nothing once you're used to it.

She takes Emily's hand.

That step fell away a few years ago so be sure to take a big— There we go. Smooth sailing from here.

The wooden stairs continue to groan ominously as they climb up to Anne's apartment. If you can call it that. It's a bed, some shabby furniture and a stove from like, 1950.

Here we are. Not exactly the Ritz, I'm afraid.

EMILY

No, it's...nice.

Emily is fixated on a large crucifix hanging on the wall. It's noticeably crooked.

ANNE

I'll put some tea on. Make yourself at home.

Emily sits in one of the armchairs. It sinks precariously under her weight. Anne puts a kettle on the stove. She has some trouble lighting it.

It's old so it's a little finicky.

EMILY
Must make it hard to cook anything.

Anne finally gets the stove lit. She sits in the armchair opposite Emily.

ANNE
So.

EMILY
So...

ANNE
Tell me—how are things with you and Edward?

EMILY
They're...good. Yeah.

ANNE
Have you "DTR'ed" yet?

EMILY
Uh...sort of?
We're definitely on the same page—

ANNE
And what page is that?

EMILY
That we...have feelings. For each other.

ANNE
Feelings are lovely.

Emily smiles warmly.

EMILY
Yes. They are.

A slight pause.

And how about you? Did your date go well?

ANNE
Not particularly.

EMILY
Oh. I'm sorry to hear that.

ANNE
Yes, well.
Dating men at my age... Most of them are damaged. Bitterly divorced or too dysfunctional to be married to begin with. And most of them are more interested in finding a housekeeper than a wife.

EMILY

Surely there are a few good ones out there—

The kettle whistles. Anne gets up to pour the tea. Emily becomes fixated on the crucifix again.

That's a beautiful crucifix.

ANNE

Thank you, dear.

A slight pause.

EMILY

Have you...had it long?

ANNE

A few years.

Anne brings Emily her tea.

EMILY

I hope you don't mind my saying, but it's a little crooked. I could help you straighten it.

ANNE

No need. That's just the way it is.

EMILY

Oh.

Emily shudders. She tries to warm herself with the tea.

ANNE

Are you cold? Let me get you a sweater.

Anne gets up and opens her wardrobe. Amongst all the mothballed items, a nun's habit hangs in plain sight. Emily sees it and sits bolt upright in her chair.

Would you prefer a turtleneck or a fisherman's sweater?

EMILY

I, um...

ANNE

The fisherman's sweater is probably more cozy.

Emily gets up from the armchair.

EMILY

Would you mind if we took a raincheck on the tea, actually?

Anne follows Emily's gaze to the nun's habit.

ANNE

Is everything all right, dear?

EMILY

I, um—

I'm not feeling well suddenly.

ANNE

Perhaps you'll feel better once you put on a sweater.

EMILY

It's not the cold. It's my stomach.

I had some leftover Chinese earlier and I don't think it agreed with me.

Emily attempts to casually move toward the staircase while Anne attempts to casually pursue her.

ANNE

The tea will help with that.

EMILY

I think I'm beyond herbal remedies at this point. So sorry to have to—

ANNE

Emily. Come now.

A slight pause.

EMILY

Come now what...?

ANNE

I know you see the nun's habit in my wardrobe.

EMILY

Is that what that is?

ANNE

You've been asking a lot of questions about the crucifix on my wall.

EMILY

I'm...into antiques—

ANNE

You think I'm part of this alleged neighborhood cult. Don't you?

A slight pause.

EMILY

No...

ANNE

You really are a terrible liar, dear. Now stop trying to slip away and allow me to explain.

Anne takes Emily's arm guides her across the room.

EMILY

You really don't have to. I don't judge. If you think about it, religion as a whole is kind of a cult. Not that I

necessarily think that but... I'm actually very open to all beliefs—

ANNE
Emily.

Anne removes the crucifix from the wall.

EMILY
But at the same time I don't want to be initiated. Whatever that entails—

ANNE
Do you see how the wood is warped on the back? It's impossible for it to hang straight.

EMILY
Oh...yes. I do see that.

ANNE
And the nun's habit is for Halloween. I always pick out my costumes a little early.

EMILY
It's good to be prepared!

ANNE
Oh my, you did give me a good laugh.
Imagine me. In some female nun cult!

Anne laughs a little too hard. Emily joins her.

EMILY
It guess it was a silly of me...

ANNE
There's always an explanation for everything, dear. You mustn't let your imagination run away with you.

EMILY
No I mustn't...

Emily studies the nun's habit. Her expression becomes uncertain again.

ANNE
What is it?

EMILY
If it's a new Halloween costume why does it have mud all over it?

A slight pause.

ANNE
Does it now?
Damn used Halloween costume store...

A slight pause. It's clear Emily does not buy this.

EMILY
You know, I actually *do* feel nauseous...

I really should probably go—

ANNE

Emily, sit.

Emily obediently drops into the armchair.

I didn't want to tell you this. But now you've forced my hand.

Anne begins pacing.

And you're not going to like this. You're not going to like it one bit. You better sit down.

EMILY

I'm...seated.

ANNE

The nun habit doesn't belong to me. It belongs to...

Someone else.

Someone who was very important to Edward—

EMILY

His sister?

ANNE

Edward doesn't have a sister.

EMILY

Agnes? She's in the Peace Corps.

A slight pause.

ANNE

Oh, yes, of course. Agnes in the Peace Corps.

I was just...confused. Because Agnes is his stepsister. Technically.

EMILY

I didn't know his parents were divorced—

ANNE

Edward doesn't like to discuss it. Painful memories.

EMILY

Of course, I understand. All too well.

ANNE

So as you can see, because it's the only possible explanation, Agnes left the Peace Corps.

EMILY

She dropped out?

ANNE

Yes. She must have. It came as a great surprise. Agnes. And her dropping out of the Peace Corps.

EMILY

Edward did say she was troubled.

ANNE

Yes. She is troubled. So the great surprise isn't so much that she dropped out. It's...that she's been stalking about in a nun costume.

A slight pause. Emily covers her mouth with her hand.

EMILY

Oh my God. She joined the cult.

ANNE

I'm afraid she has. Yes.

You know how cults operate. They prey on wayward members of society. People looking for something to cling onto in this crazy world...

EMILY

Poor Agnes.

ANNE

She wants to see Edward, that's why she's been...hanging around. But she's ashamed. Ashamed of dropping out of the Peace Corps. Ashamed of falling prey to the crazy nun cult. Which is why she came to see me. We'd met before—once or twice—before she left the country. She needed advice but didn't know who else to turn to. Poor, troubled Agnes.

A slight pause.

EMILY

Do you think we should tell Edward?

ANNE

(Overly forceful)

No. We most definitely *should not* tell Edward.

EMILY

Why not? He's her brother, she needs help.

ANNE

But Edward won't help her. He'll...

A slight pause.

EMILY

He'll what?

ANNE

There's not telling what he'll do.

A slight pause.

EMILY

You're afraid he'd...hurt her?

ANNE
In a manner of speaking.

EMILY
But Edward is kind. He's good.

ANNE
He is! Of course he is! Don't get the wrong idea—

EMILY
But you said he might hurt her, in a manner of speaking.

ANNE
I meant that he might...institutionalize her.

EMILY
What?! Why?

ANNE
Because she's troubled! Like Edward said! And like I *know*.

EMILY
Then maybe she does need help...

ANNE
No, Emily. Just...no.

Anne kneels down in front of her and takes her hands.

What Agnes needs is time. To get herself together. She's delicate. An institution would crush her.

EMILY
Then perhaps she could do some...intensive therapy.

ANNE
Agnes doesn't trust therapists.
Or people in general. Surely you understand a little something about that.

A slight pause.

What she needs is love. And understanding. Like what Edward has done for you. When Edward found you he didn't say—go to an institution. Seek intensive therapy. He opened his arms and his heart to you. And that's what helped you. Did it not?

EMILY
It did.

ANNE
So I have my arms and heart open to Agnes. Give me time to help her.
I will help her. You do believe me, don't you?

Emily nods.

Good. So you won't tell Edward anything about our little conversation?

EMILY

I won't. You have my word.

ANNE

Good, dear. Very good.

Anne gives Emily a pat on the cheek and returns to her armchair.

EMILY

But what do I do if I see her again?

ANNE

Pretend that you don't.

EMILY

And if Edward sees her...?

ANNE

You'll tell him not to worry about it. That the cult has their meetings near here, someone probably got lost, etcetera. You're capable of thinking of something, aren't you?

EMILY

Of course.

A pause.

Agnes picks up her tea.

ANNE

Have some tea dear. Before it gets cold.

Lights fade to black.