

**Excerpt from *Saint Ursula and Her Maidens***

**- Mary O'Connell**

NARRATOR: *Bands of winter sun filter through the skylight, striping the water with light. The pool's floor is the color of sapphires, a sunken treasure sparkling there beneath the moving water. Descending the stairs at the shallow end, I feel buoyed and cinematic. I am Esther Williams slinking into jeweled blueness, until the chlorine stings my eyes. My friends are already in the pool, floating or stretching. I walk, graceful as an astronaut, the water forcing me up on my toes. Then I raise my stiff feet, and for a second or two, the water holds me. There are just five women in my slow-movement aerobics class: yours truly has chronic rheumatoid arthritis and a newly discovered pregnancy; Marjorie, a retired nurse, has lupus AND ovarian cancer; Sister Barbara, a sister in the Catholic Order of St. Ursula, also has lupus; Carlin is in the Junior League and has a Range Rover and two children and an orthopedic-surgeon husband AND multiple sclerosis; and Heather, a nineteen-year-old with Crohn's disease. We are put through our paces by the water-therapy instructor for the day, who is perhaps fifty, in a navy swimsuit and red flip-flops, thin except for the heavily veined cellulite clumping on her thighs.*

INSTRUCTOR: Wave goodbye with your foot! Move like you mean it!

SISTER BARBARA; For the love of God. Does she think she's teaching the "hydrocrunch" class? Doesn't she know we're the slow girls?

INSTRUCTOR: *(yelling)* Arm circles!

NARRATOR: *Carlin falls back into the water, coughing, her hands slapping the surface. There is a slow second in which we all lunge toward her before she stands upright, sputtering.*

INSTRUCTOR: Miss, are you OK? Can you breathe, speak, or cough?

MARJORIE: Isn't that what you say when someone is gagging on a pork chop?

CARLIN: I'm fine.

NARRATOR: Are you sure you're okay?

CARLIN: Yeah. And anyway, I deserve it for staying down in the shallow end so my hair wouldn't get wet.... My balance is so terrible today. And I almost couldn't drive because the streets looked so wavy.

HEATHER: On the other hand, even wet, your lipstick still looks perfect.

CARLIN: (*Smiling weakly*) I've been in a flare-up for about two weeks now. I started feeling awful right after my high school reunion, which I went to because I'm a moron. You could tell the people who knew I had MS; they were like, 'Oh, Carlin,' with this delicious smile on their face. Then, when I was in the bathroom, I heard these two bitches in the stalls saying, 'It's so sad that she'll go blind, isn't it?' 'Sure is. God, by our next reunion she'll probably be in a nursing home.' 'Oh, let's not talk about it. It's too depressing.'"

SISTER BARBARA: People who aren't happy with their own lives feast on the troubles of others.

NARRATOR: If this is the world awaiting my baby, I think I'm going to home-school in the wilderness!

CARLIN: It's funny; everyone hopes the homecoming queen will turn into the Goodyear blimp, but I've given them so much more. As the night went on and the gossip about me spread, I could feel the mood in the room change. It was as if people were mentally comparing their life to mine – or what they imagined my life must be like – and they were coming out way ahead. I felt their joy at my fate. I have never, ever felt more powerful. I'm pretty sure it's how Jesus felt at the Last Supper when he said, 'This is my body, which will be given up for you.' ... Anyway, that feeling didn't last. On the drive home, I felt like shit. I wanted to stop and buy a pistol. If it wasn't for my kids, I would have blown my brains out the day I was diagnosed.

MARJORIE: You know, last night I was watching my husband at the dinner table, eating his chicken breast and baked potato. We've eaten maybe a million meals together, and I've never given it a second thought, but last night I was watching him chew his chicken, and I thought how it would be after I'm gone, how it would be for my Francis to eat his dinner all alone in our kitchen. And I thought maybe I'd sneak into the closet and get his hunting rifle and shoot him, so he'd never have to eat dinner alone, and I could stop worrying about him being lonely.

HEATHER: Oh you guys, I've been totally wanting to shoot myself all week.

INSTRUCTOR: (*clapping her hands*) Ladies, we need to get back to our exercise! Don't be such a bunch of sad sacks. Remember, when we feel tempted to indulge in self-pity, we must think of others who are less fortunate.

SISTER BARBARA: Saint Ursula, help us.

INSTRUCTOR: Think of Christopher Reeve. Just think of him! Superman sits strapped in a chair all day, completely helpless. He can't even lift a spoon.

SISTER BARBARA: Excuse me, miss.

INSTRUCTOR: Yes?

SISTER BARBARA: It is not right to use the misfortunes of others to cheer ourselves. It is an insult to Christopher Reeve that his recent tragedy would be used as a catalyst to brighten people's lives. You can be quite sure that your pity is of no use to him. You can be quite sure that, in the eyes of God, the greatest sin is gleeful, self-congratulatory compassion.

NARRATOR: *I wonder why I ever switched over to the Unitarians. Unitarians suck. The whole idea of a peaceful God sucks. How I miss my old Catholic God, capable of eternally punishing people for acting like assholes. The teacher is still smiling at Sister Barbara, but in a dazed, frightened way. She suddenly remembers a dental appointment and tells everyone to exercise at her own pace.*

SISTER BARBARA: *(Innocently)* Did I come on too strong? No one likes a bully.