

AN ESSAY · ON RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATION

Altogether Beautiful

Reading “Assumptions” against the Catholic dogma of the Assumption—the antiphon of the feast, the fire over the water, the words the story refuses, and the habit that lets a household word carry the sacred without surrendering the ordinary.

The title carries two meanings at once. “Assumptions” names the small cruelties of a family that has already decided, before the beach trip even starts, what Peg is worth—“the homeliest damn woman” in the family, good for a joke, not much else. But capitalized, in Catholic usage, an Assumption is a specific doctrine: the teaching, defined by Pope Pius XII in the 1950 apostolic constitution *Munificentissimus Deus*, that the Virgin Mary was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory at the close of her earthly life, spared the ordinary corruption of the grave. The story explores the tension between these senses of its title, asking whether the second sense—a body received into glory rather than left to decay—can be imagined in relation to a body that has already failed every test implied by the first.

The epigraph is the antiphon of the feast

The verse that opens the story is not chosen for its sweetness. In the Vulgate, Song of Solomon 4:7 reads *Tota pulchra es, amica mea, et macula non est in te*. From the fourth century onward that verse, with Mary’s name substituted for the beloved’s, has been sung as *Tota pulchra es, Maria*—one of the oldest Marian prayers in the Latin Church. In the older chant books it is assigned to two feasts. One of them is August 15: the Feast of the Assumption, which is the day on which the story takes place.

So the epigraph is not a poetic flourish laid over a summer outing. It is the proper chant of the liturgical day the plot occupies. And it supplies the story’s single most important word. *Macula* means stain. *Immaculate* means unstained.

Now read the first close description of Peggy’s body on the morning of that feast:

“Her housedress, which had a pattern of tiny roses, shrouded a pair of small black boots; there were red stains at the end of her sleeves from where she had spilled some juice.”
—“Assumptions”

The epigraph promises a body without stain. The body arrives marked—in red, at the ends of the sleeves, which is to say at the wrists, which is where the nails go. The dress that carries the stains is patterned with roses, the flower of the Litany of Loreto and of the Passion. And the dress does not cover the boots; it *shrouds* them, three pages before the woman wearing it will need a shroud.

None of this is announced. The narrator supplies an innocuous explanation in the same clause—spilled juice—and moves on. One possible reading is that the story places sacred associations in the language of the shabby without having a character point them out.

Conversion without erasure

Before following the pattern through the beach, it helps to name the mechanism at work inside the story’s single words.

What happens is easily mistaken for symbolism. Symbolism ordinarily asks the literal object to stand aside once its figurative errand is understood; the object becomes a token and stops being itself. Here the literal is never spent. Window blinds remain window blinds while also becoming blindness. The word “awful” remains a complaint about ugliness while also recovering its older sense, full of awe. Neither sense is asked to yield, and the reader is given no instruction about which to prefer.

Call the operation conversion without erasure. It is the story’s characteristic gesture at the level of the single word, and once it is visible there it can be traced outward, into the images, the staging, and finally into what the story declines to say.

The story’s use of “awful” is exact rather than casual. On the surface it is domestic dismissal—a thing looks awful, a person feels awful. Beneath it sits the older register in which the awful is what cannot be looked at directly. The word therefore diminishes and enlarges in the same breath, and the reader is left holding both senses at once.

Blinds are among the plainest objects in a house. They are also the mechanism by which light is admitted or refused, and the noun cannot help carrying the condition of not seeing. The scene never pauses to gloss this. The blinds go up or come down as a person would actually raise or lower them, and the second meaning accumulates in the reader’s peripheral vision—which is, appropriately, how blindness works.

Take *cure*, a word with a long devotional history—the holy well, the shrine, the miraculous bath. Here is how the story first uses it. Peg hesitates at the water’s edge and her neighbor loses patience: “For Christ’s sake, Peg! The point is to get wet. How else are you going to get the cure?” The oath in the first clause is not reverence, and the cure being urged is a dip in the Atlantic at Nantasket. The sacred sense of the word is present, but it arrives inside an irritable command, wrapped in a blasphemy, and attached to nothing more numinous than cold water. The story keeps the theological freight and refuses the theological tone.

The same procedure governs the story’s images. Tanning oil, applied for vanity, is also anointing—unction performed by people who would deny they were performing any such thing. A stain, in the ordinary sense of a mark that will not come out, is also stigmata, the wound that testifies. Baldness—illness, exposure, humiliation—becomes a crown. The punitive heat of a Catholic childhood’s instruction becomes ordinary sunlight. Crossed arms, the posture of withholding, become an embrace.

In each pair the ordinary term keeps its full force. The oil is greasy; the stain is a nuisance; the bald head is genuinely diminished; the crossed arms are genuinely defensive. The story does not redeem these things by replacing them. It canonizes them by leaving them exactly as they are and letting the second meaning stand alongside the first.

The sacramental sequence disguised as a day at the beach

Once the pattern is visible, the Nantasket excursion reads as a sequence of sacraments performed by people who would be astonished to hear them called that. Tanning oil is rubbed into a bald scalp, forehead, and neck—and oil poured on the head is what makes a king, a priest, an *anointed one*; it is also what the woman with the alabaster jar did at Bethany, of which Christ said she had done it beforehand for his burial. Peggy dies within days. And the word the story chooses for her afterward—she “shone like a miniature sun”—is itself a pun: *sun* is also *son*. The woman anointed with oil is an anointed one, *Christos*, and the noun that names her shining quietly names her as the Son.

A gust lifts her wig; a child catches it and holds it up “like the head of John the Baptist”; the narrator smooths it and buries it in a paper bag with a stone he has found near the water. A head, a shroud, and a stone: an entombment, performed as play, on the morning of the feast. What is buried is the false hair. What comes out of the sea an hour later is the true head, anointed and shining. And the gesture is the title in miniature. The sentence is literally an assumption—“a gust had lifted Peg’s wig into the air”—part of her carried up into the sky on the morning of the feast, while the thing carried up is a comic prop to be chased and buried in a paper bag. Taken up and taken for granted in one motion: the story enacts both senses of its title before either is spoken.

A mourning dove starts from a cleft in the rocks, rises, and then descends over the water at the exact spot where two women are wading in. That is the Baptism of the Jordan, and the cleft in the rock is Song of Songs 2:14. A wave nobody asked for knocks both women flat and leaves them kneeling in the surf, laughing until they cry—a total immersion administered by force, arriving at the posture of prayer by accident. And when a boy reaches down and she takes his hand, the sentence reads: *she rose from the sea*.

A fire that does not consume

“The waves beyond glimmered like sparks from an unquenchable fire.”

—“Assumptions,” the *Galway Review*

Unquenchable fire is not neutral diction. In the Gospels it names a fire of judgment: Matthew 3:12 and Mark 9:43 give the phrase its threatening force. In “Assumptions,” the words are assigned to the shimmer of waves at the moment Peggy and Helen walk into the sea. The effect is not that judgment disappears. The story retains the phrase’s danger while setting it beside water, help, laughter, and a later rising. Its fire is therefore a contested image, not a decorative synonym for light.

The image belongs to a larger sequence. Peggy’s opening face is described through arid land, watercourses, and “red seas”; gorse burns yellow at the edge of the story’s Irish folk material; late-summer lightning flashes behind a gray curtain; and Titian’s *Assunta* is remembered in

colors of “fire, flesh and blood.” These details do not prove a single hidden plot, but they prepare the reader to register the sea’s fire as part of an eschatological vocabulary rather than as beach scenery alone.

The appended Duffy poem offers a useful comparison. Duffy’s mother returns from the water “cheated of your surprise,” and his consolation is deferred. Mulhern uses similar language of being cheated of a surprise before Peggy reaches the sea, then sets the beach scene beside forceful water, collective laughter, help, and the sentence that she “rose from the sea.” The medical outcome remains unchanged: Peggy dies soon afterward. The story does not treat the day as empty.

That restraint matters to this reading. Fire in this story neither consumes every sinner nor guarantees a cure. It shifts familiar imagery of judgment into an invitation to look again. The failing body, the family’s casual cruelty, and the shabby setting remain fully visible. The glory, if the word is warranted, is not a substitute for them. It withholds a final verdict from contempt.

Judgment’s imagery, reissued to mercy

One striking element of the story is not simply its use of religious imagery but its altered emphasis. Nothing abject is removed; the shabbiness stays, and the sacred language is laid over it rather than in place of it.

The reissue is visible in the very first picture the story gives of Peg, which is not a portrait but a child’s drawing: “Spindly, awkward limbs stuck out of a round body, like you might see in a kindergartner’s rendering of a person.” The figure is crude on purpose—a round torso with stick limbs, seen the way a boy sees—and the last paragraph repaints that same round, awkward body without correcting a line of its anatomy. The unskilled rendering is the true icon. Glory arrives without improving the drawing.

Even the grandmother’s smallest complaint is doubled. Knocked flat by the wave, she says her “permanent is all ruined” while she fusses with her hair—a hairdo, and also the word for the everlasting things this feast day is about. Peggy, bald beneath the wig, answers, “At least I don’t have to worry about that,” and they laugh harder. The woman with nothing perishable left to protect is the one free to receive the permanence the word half-names, and the story leaves the joke standing as a joke.

Two darker images run the other way, and the ending needs them to. Peg’s delirium tremens produces a counterfeit summons—she is “telling crazy stories about monkeys calling her up on the phone”—and in medieval iconography the monkey is the *simia Dei*, the ape of God, sender of false visions; in a story about being called home, this is the one phantom call. And the single explicit passage through cloud belongs not to an assumption but to a drowning. Remembering the schoolgirl who mocked her, pushed off a cliff by the wee people, Peg murmurs: “What must she have thought as she fell through that cloudy air?” The medium that bears Mary up in Titian —“a cradle of thunderhead gray”—carries a child down here, into Achill Sound. Neither image is cancelled. The rising at the end is an answer to them.

The word she uses about herself

The clearest evidence that the story knows exactly what it is doing sits in Peg’s own mouth, hours before the beach. Asked to hurry, she answers: “It will only take me a moment to get ready. I have to use the little girls room and put on my fancy wig and makeup so I can look divine for my Jim over there.”

Divine, in that sentence, is pure kitchen-table idiom—the word a woman uses about a wig and a lipstick. It carries no theology whatever. Now set it beside the story’s final sentence about the same woman: “Completely awake—laughing, altogether beautiful, and divine—she rises once again to sing her favorite song.” The last word the story grants her is the word she used about her own makeup. Nothing has been imported from outside; the vocabulary of glorification was already in her, used comically, and the ending simply declines to keep treating it as a joke. And the word is earned by sound before it is earned by sense: its long *i* is threaded through the paragraph in advance—“eyes,” then “divine,” then “shines,” then “child’s”—so that by the time “divine” arrives it is already the paragraph’s vowel, already heard, and the story’s single word beyond the epigraph’s “altogether beautiful” lands at the peak of the rising beat. The name does the same work. “My Jim over there” fuses the living boy with the dead husband who shares his name—“over there” is the other side—and the wave that “razed” the two women on the sand is the same word the Assumption uses for being raised up, so the knock-down and the lift-up are one motion.

The same holds for the doctrine. Peg is not a passive object of the story’s theology—she states its premise herself: “I believe miracles sometimes do happen, Helen.” And it is the grandmother, not the narrator, who supplies the liturgical calendar, “all the while explaining the importance of August 15th to Beth and me.” The framework never arrives as authorial commentary from above. It is what these women say in kitchens.

And the song she is given to sing is a bridal song. In the cellar, before the beach, Peg sings “When Your Old Wedding Ring Was New,” a Jimmy Roselli ballad in which an old couple looks back at the day they were married—the ring that is old now and was new then. It is a bridal song in the secular register, which is exactly the point: the epigraph of the story is the Bible’s bridal song, the Song of Solomon, and Peg is its Bride—she speaks the Bride’s idiom (“my love”), she wanders the night streets after her Beloved and is beaten by the watch. So when the story needs a song for her, it hands her the Cantic doubled by a ballad, the sacred and the shabby as the same song in two keys. She sings it “dreaming—longing for her husband Jim,” which is the Bride of the Cantic exactly: “I sought him whom my soul loveth.” And the final sentence returns her to it—“she rises once again to sing her favorite song”—so that the ballad she sang badly in a cellar becomes, in glory, the wedding song of the Apocalypse. The story also catalogues a second song it never lets her sing—“You Stepped Out of a Dream”—whose title is the plot in six words: the beloved who steps out of a dream into waking is exactly what the ending does to Peg, “dreaming—longing for her husband Jim” all story, then “Completely awake” at the close.

The words it never says

There is a way of reading Catholic fiction that consists mostly of spotting the furniture. Count the candles, note the priest, tally the Latin, and declare the work devotional or subversive depending on the total. It is a poor method, and “Assumptions” defeats it completely—not because the story is short on religion, but because its religion is almost entirely conducted in words that no such inventory would flag.

And yet: in a little over five thousand words, the following do not appear once. *Altar. Amen. Baptism. Canonization. Forgive. Mercy. Rosary. Sacrament. Sacrifice. Resurrection. Veil. Worship.* Not one of them. Nor, more surprisingly, do *grace* or *spirit* ever occur as nouns. The story permits only “gracious” and “spirited”—the adjectives, kept down at the level of manners and temperament, describing how people behave at a beach rather than what moves in them.

The near-misses are the most telling part of that list. *Gracious* does occur, exactly once, and look at what it is doing: “Of the people who listened to our tale of woe, most were gracious and polite.” Paired with *polite*, governed by *most*, applied to strangers being decent about a fraud—the word has been demoted from a theological condition to a standard of manners. *Spirited* behaves the same way. The story lets the adjectives in and keeps the nouns out, which is a precise instrument rather than an oversight: it can describe how people behave without ever claiming to describe what moves in them.

What stands in place of the missing nouns is folk speech and plain speech: “Mary’s blessing,” “a cure,” “miracles,” “Lovely Peggy,” and a practical, repeated vocabulary of getting wet, helping, and rising. The ceremony happens; the ceremonial nouns are refused entry.

Even the family’s kindness to Peg comes as a name. The grandmother invents “Lovely Peggy” after “a sermon the priest had given on the power of names and the mystery of the Word,” hoping that if they think lovely things about Peggy, “she would feel better,” and the boy at first says it “mechanically,” as a duty. By the time Peg rises from the sea, the name no longer sounds recited: “Then Lovely Peggy reached for me.” The boy who once spoke the words because he was told to now seems to speak them because he believes them. In a bald, drenched, failing woman laughing in the surf, he has seen the loveliness the name had only claimed. The change follows the path of faith as a Catholic childhood teaches it. Like the prayers a child memorizes, the words are learned by rote and said long before they are understood, until one day they are meant, and what was repeated as a duty is spoken as belief.

Once you notice the absence, the presences reorganize themselves. The words doing the sacred work in this story are household words, and they always arrive in their compromised sense first.

White is the clearest case, because it can be counted. It appears five times in the body of the story, and the first is this: Peggy “suggested that she could take off her wig and tell the people ‘just a little white lie’ about her dying of cancer.” A white lie—the most domestic, most compromised use the word has. The last is this: “my grandmother and Peggy waved to us, transfigured figurines on the earth below, their clothing white as snow.”

That is Revelation 1:14 and Matthew 28:3 arriving at a Massachusetts amusement park, and it works only because of what came first. The reader has already spent the story with the other whites—the lie, a flare of white light, a cloud that turns out not to be “a soft fleecy white” at all, a white and gold sundress. By the time the clothing goes white as snow, the word has been used for weather, for clothing, and for untruth. Nothing asks the reader to forget the lie. The transfiguration is built out of the same five letters that told it, which is why it reads as earned rather than announced. Had the story reached for *raiment*, the effect would have collapsed into pastiche.

The same discipline governs the rest. *Body* is a judged physical body, remarked on by relatives, long before it is body and soul. *Cross* is mostly a verb, for getting over a street or a threshold. *Wine* is never consecrated; it is a smell in a kitchen. Each word carries its sacred sense in reserve and spends its ordinary sense first.

One of those ordinary words does the most work of all. *Cross* is a verb of getting about—crossed the street, crossed the threshold—until the last paragraph, where the Father’s crossed arms are the Cross, and the word that has meant movement all day quietly names the instrument of death. The pun is not local. It is the same crossing that runs through the poems—the doorways, crosswalks, and thresholds of *Crossings*—so that the word that ends this story is the title of the collection, and every passage between the living and the dead is a crossing.

And the phrase the story lands on is not a private coinage. “White as snow” is Scripture’s own wording, and Scripture applies it to two things at once. In Isaiah it is the promise of forgiveness: “though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (Isaiah 1:18), and in the psalmist’s confession the prayer for it: “wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow” (Psalm 51:7). In the Gospels and the Apocalypse it is the body of glory: the transfigured Christ’s raiment “exceeding white as snow” (Mark 9:3), the angel at the empty tomb in “raiment white as snow” (Matthew 28:3), and the risen Christ whose “head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow” (Revelation 1:14), and the Ancient of Days on the judgment throne, “whose garment was white as snow” (Daniel 7:9). The same three words name the soul made clean and the body received into glory. The woman who opened the morning with red stains at the ends of her sleeves closes it in clothing white as snow: Isaiah’s scarlet and the transfiguration’s white are one sentence, and the story lets them meet in her.

This seems to me the honest account of how the story works, and it is more interesting than the alternative. “Assumptions” is not sacred language draped over a shabby afternoon. It is household language put under enough pressure to bear a sacred reading, without ever

conceding that it is doing so. The dogma is named once, in a grandmother’s explanation, and then the story goes back to sunburn, sandwiches, and family unkindness—and does its real work there.

There is a reason a writer might proceed this way. The vocabulary of official holiness is exhausted; it arrives pre-interpreted, and a reader who distrusts it stops reading. The vocabulary of a bad afternoon at the beach arrives with nothing attached. If a woman is going to be declared altogether beautiful at the end of a day in which she has been called the homeliest in the family, the declaration has to be built from materials the reader has already accepted. Anything grander would simply be a claim.

The evidence, and its limits

Four things hold this reading together, and it is worth being exact about how far each goes.

The doctrine is quoted rather than gestured at: the language of the 1950 constitution surfaces inside a short story, alongside Mark 15:33–34 and Song of Solomon 4:7. The images recur across three decades of work—the Feast of the Assumption, a seawater cure, a wet silvery scalp, a crown. And revision runs toward the sacred rather than away from it: a poem that ended, in its 2024 printing, “When I wake, I find that he has gone” was revised in the 2025 *Crossings* manuscript to “At dawn, he was gone,” trading the survivor’s waking for the hour at which the women came to the tomb, “at the rising of the sun.”

The pattern can also be absent, which is what makes it a finding rather than a lens. One story in *The Weight of Small Mercies* lacks the apparatus entirely—no ghost, no rite, no transfiguring image—and it is the bleakest thing in the corpus. The machinery is not applied everywhere; where it is withdrawn, the difference shows. It is also narrower than it can look. The story’s Marian repertoire is fixed—Assumption, Annunciation, Nativity, and an inverted Pietà—and it stages no Station, no Deposition, no Last Supper. Nor does every noun carry a second life: in the same two sentences that load the starfish and the stone, the “dark clumps of seaweed” and the “small crabs in the sand” are simply beach, and mean nothing at all. The doubling is a habit of this writing, not a law of it.

It is worth resisting the tidier version of the claim, too. There is no functioning priest in these books who does what a priest is for; the sacramental work is done by grandmothers, aunts, neighbors, and children. Characters who deny God outright still grieve in Catholic language. What the stories suggest is not a devotional program but people for whom Catholicism has become the available grammar for loss—used fluently, and often without belief.

The story’s texts

A reading this close depends on knowing which “Assumptions” is being read, because the story has a history as a text. It began, in the author’s account, as “Lovely Peggy,” published in the *Emerson Review* while he was a student at Emerson College; that issue is not independently

available, and the version is not collated here. “Assumptions” first appeared online in *Fiction on the Web* in 2015 and was collected the following year in *Assumptions and Other Stories* (Silver Current Press, 2016). It returned to periodical publication in the *Galway Review* in 2020, and a further revised text opens *All We Ever Needed* (Silver Current Press, 2026).

The clearest variant is a cut, and what it spares is as telling as what it removes. The 2020 *Galway Review* text drops a line asserting that non-Catholics are damned to hell, the paragraph joining the feast of the Assumption to the harvest festival of Lughnasadh by way of the god Lugh, with its image of the mother’s body beneath “dusty harvest loam,” and the whole description of Titian’s *Assunta*. It also shrinks the papal definition to a phrase: Pius XII decreed that Mary was “assumed into heavenly glory,” without the “body and soul” on which the bodily reading depends. Yet the shortened text keeps the epigraph, the December “bright star” chasing “a crescent of moon,” the sermon on “the mystery of the Word,” Peggy’s look “as if she felt cheated from a surprise,” a phrase taken from the appended Duffy poem, and the closing sentences word for word. What a writer keeps when he cuts is the best record of what he thinks a story cannot do without, and here it is the frame and its hinges rather than the ornament. The cuts may reflect a magazine’s length or a broader readership, whether requested or self-imposed. The fuller text, with the full definition and the Titian passage, stands in the 2016 collection and returns in the 2026 *Useless Things and Other Stories* text, which suggests that the author preferred to state more in book form, where an introduction and the surrounding stories can carry some of the interpretive work.

The 2026 text is also more than a restoration, because its frame has changed even where its sentences have not. The introduction to *All We Ever Needed* places the story first in a sequence of eight and names the “seawater cure sought on the Feast of the Assumption” as the first instance of a water motif that returns in “a bath drawn for an aging mother” and “at last a rain that leaves a man drenched to the bone.” This reading quotes the 2015, 2020, and book texts where this essay compares them; a full word-for-word collation of all four public texts, including the 2016 first edition, remains to be done, and the account here claims no more than the shape of the variation.

Not catharsis. Conversion.

Catharsis purges; this work converts. The stain stays and becomes a wound. The drunkenness stays and becomes Pentecost. Even the visual grammar refuses the sentimental option: describing a painting of the Assumption, the narrator notes that “the cloud, which you’d expect to be a soft fleecy white, is a cradle of thunderhead gray.” That is the method in one clause—the expected softness named, then denied, and the glory delivered in a darker color than the reader was promised. But the two words also do quieter work. *Fleecy* is the Lamb—the *Agnus Dei*, the sacrificial Lamb of God—so the cloud that bears Mary up is described as the Lamb that was slain. And *cradle* names the manger: the cloud that carries the Virgin is the cradle that held

the infant Jesus. The two words together identify Peg with Christ at both ends of the Incarnation, the Child in the cradle and the Lamb on the Cross—and *cradle* returns in the last sentence, in the Father’s hands, where the dead woman is cradled as a child.

That is why the story reads as canonization rather than catharsis. Catharsis requires a purge, after which the pressure is gone. “Assumptions” withholds that release. Nothing is discharged. What changes is the status of what remains: the same objects, the same slights, the same bodies, now understood to have been holy while they were being endured.

Marian dogma supplies the story’s spatial grammar. Beneath the realist surface runs an axis of ascent and descent, and the narration keeps returning to it: raised and lowered blinds, a body lifted or laid down, a gaze directed up or away, the difference between the ground and the light falling onto it. The Assumption is a doctrine about a body going up. The story is largely about bodies being taken down—by illness, by shame, by the ordinary indignities of family management—and about the counter-motion available to them.

And the state the story grants her at the end is named with the same economy. To be “Completely awake” is not only to have risen from the dead; it is to be filled with the Spirit. At Pentecost the apostles were mistaken for drunkards—“these men are full of new wine”—which is the very accusation the story’s world levels at Peg. To be awake, in “Assumptions,” is to be awake to the realm of the divine: the boy who spots “flying Mary’s everywhere” is awake; the neighbors who shut their doors are asleep; the pagan god Lugh “tried to wake us all up” and failed, because the sleep he could not break is spiritual, not bodily. Peggy dies “in her sleep”—the Dormition—and wakes “Completely awake,” which is Easter and Pentecost at once: the sleep of death and the sleep of unbelief are the same sleep, and the last paragraph breaks both. The wakefulness can also be read against a literary precedent. Joyce ends “The Dead” with Gabriel’s soul swooning into the snow that falls “upon all the living and the dead”; “Assumptions” moves in the opposite direction, from descent to rise, its narrator pairing “the pang of grief” with “a sweet happiness” and leaving Peggy “Completely awake”—the anti-swoon, consciousness that stays awake through death rather than dissolving into it.

The grief works the same way. When the news of Peggy’s death arrives, the narrator reports: “I felt the pang of grief, but a sweet happiness, too.” Not consolation instead of grief, and not grief cancelling the sweetness—both held inside one sentence, which is the nearest thing to a thesis the story offers.

The mechanism finally turns on the title itself. By the end, the story has quietly indicted its own ordinary meaning. The assumptions of the household—about who is difficult, who is failing, what a body signifies, what God requires—are shown to have been the ordinary machinery of unkindness. Against them stands the other Assumption: the possibility that a body treated as a burden was, throughout, being taken up.

The story does not choose between these readings, and the refusal is not evasion. It is the argument. The ordinary explanation is never withdrawn, because withdrawing it would place the sacred somewhere other than the kitchen, the beach, and the sick room—which is precisely where this fiction insists on finding it.

In 1950 a pope closed a document with the words *we pronounce, declare, and define*. The story closes: “Completely awake—laughing, altogether beautiful, and divine—she rises once again to sing her favorite song.” That formulation is spoken by a boy about a woman his family has treated unkindly all day. *Tota pulchra es*, said of the homeliest damn woman in the family.

That closing line is not a flourish left in a single draft. It appears word for word identical in every printing this story has had—the 2015 magazine publication, a 2020 reprint five years later, and the version collected in the book. Across three separate venues and five years, an author revising his own sentences elsewhere left this one exactly as written. A few sentences earlier he did revise: the 2015 “my mother came to my room and woke me” becomes, in the reprint and the book, “my mother would come to my room and wake me,” the tense of memory rather than report. The line the whole story is built to earn is the one line nobody, including its own author across three publications, has touched.

Every passage quoted here has been checked verbatim against its published source. Where the connection is inference rather than direct quotation, that is said plainly rather than implied.