

Lauri Ylönen

"Maria Teresa Teresa Maria"

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Last spring, I spent a week in a convent in the Midwest. I'd been invited there to do a series of seminars on language. They'd gotten my name from a list in Washington, from a brochure that described my work as "deals with the spiritual issues of our time", undoubtedly a blurb I had written myself. Because of this, and also because men were not allowed to enter the convent, they asked me to come out. The night I arrived, they had a party for me in a nearby town, in a downstairs lounge of a crystal lane's bowling alley.

The alley was reserved for the nuns, for their Tuesday night tournaments; it was a pizza party. And the lounge was decorated to look like a cave: every surface was covered with that spray-on rock that's usually used for soundproofing. In this case, it had the opposite effect: it amplified every sound.

Now the nuns were in the middle of their annual tournament playoffs. And we could hear all the bowling balls rolling very slowly down the aisles above us, making the rock club stalactites tremble and resonate.

Finally the pizza arrived, and the mother superior began to bless the food. Now this woman normally had a gruffed low-pitched speaking voice but as soon as she began to pray her voice rose, became pure, bell-like, like a child's. The prayer went on and on increasing in volume each time a sister got a strike, rising in pitch "Dear Father in Heaven".

The next day I was scheduled to begin this seminar on language. I'd been very struck by this prayer and I wanted to talk about how women's voices rise in pitch when they're asking for things, especially from men. But it was odd. Every time I set a time for the seminar, there was some reason to postpone it: the potatoes had to be dug out, or a busload of old people would appear out of nowhere and have to be shown around.

So I never actually did the seminar. But I spent a lot of time there, walking around the grounds and looking at all the crops, which were all labeled. And there was also a neatly laid-out cemetery, hundreds of identical white crosses in rows, and there were labeled "Maria", "Teresa", "Maria Teresa", "Teresa Maria", and the only sadder cemetery I saw was last summer in Switzerland. And I was dragged there by a Hermann Hesse fanatic, who had never recovered from reading ###130414, and one hot August morning when the sky was quiet, we made a pilgrimage to the cemetery; we brought a lot of flowers and we finally found his grave. It was marked with a huge fur tree and a mammoth stone that said "Hesse" in huge Helvetica bold letters. It looked more like a marquee than a tombstone. And around the corner was this tiny stone for his wife, Nina, and on it was one word: "Auslander" - foreigner. And this made me so sad and so mad that I was sorry I'd brought the flowers. Anyway, I decided to leave the flowers, along with a mean note, and it read:

Even though you're not my favorite writer, by long shots, I leave these flowers on your resting spot.

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