

MADELEINE'S MISDEMEANOR

*Compassion is understanding and caring about someone who is in trouble or has made a mistake.*¹

Fifteen-year-old Madeleine McNally had made a mistake. Well, not just a mistake—it was a huge, embarrassing blow-it, and she was in deep trouble. Actually, considering the reaction of her friends, peers, and overseers, it was more as though she had committed a capital offence.

She wasn't like ... my friend, or anything.

Compassion is feeling the pain of someone who is in trouble even if you do not know that person.

She wasn't even the type of girl I cared to hang around with, and neither was I the type who would fit in with her friends, which had been many due to Madeleine's physical attractiveness and outspoken, let-it-all-hang-out, daredevil nature. Now these traits had led her into trouble, causing her presumed friends to disown her. I supposed it served her right, really, but my mind kept wandering back to some points from a recent character-building class I had been studying at home, "Pity in Practice." ...

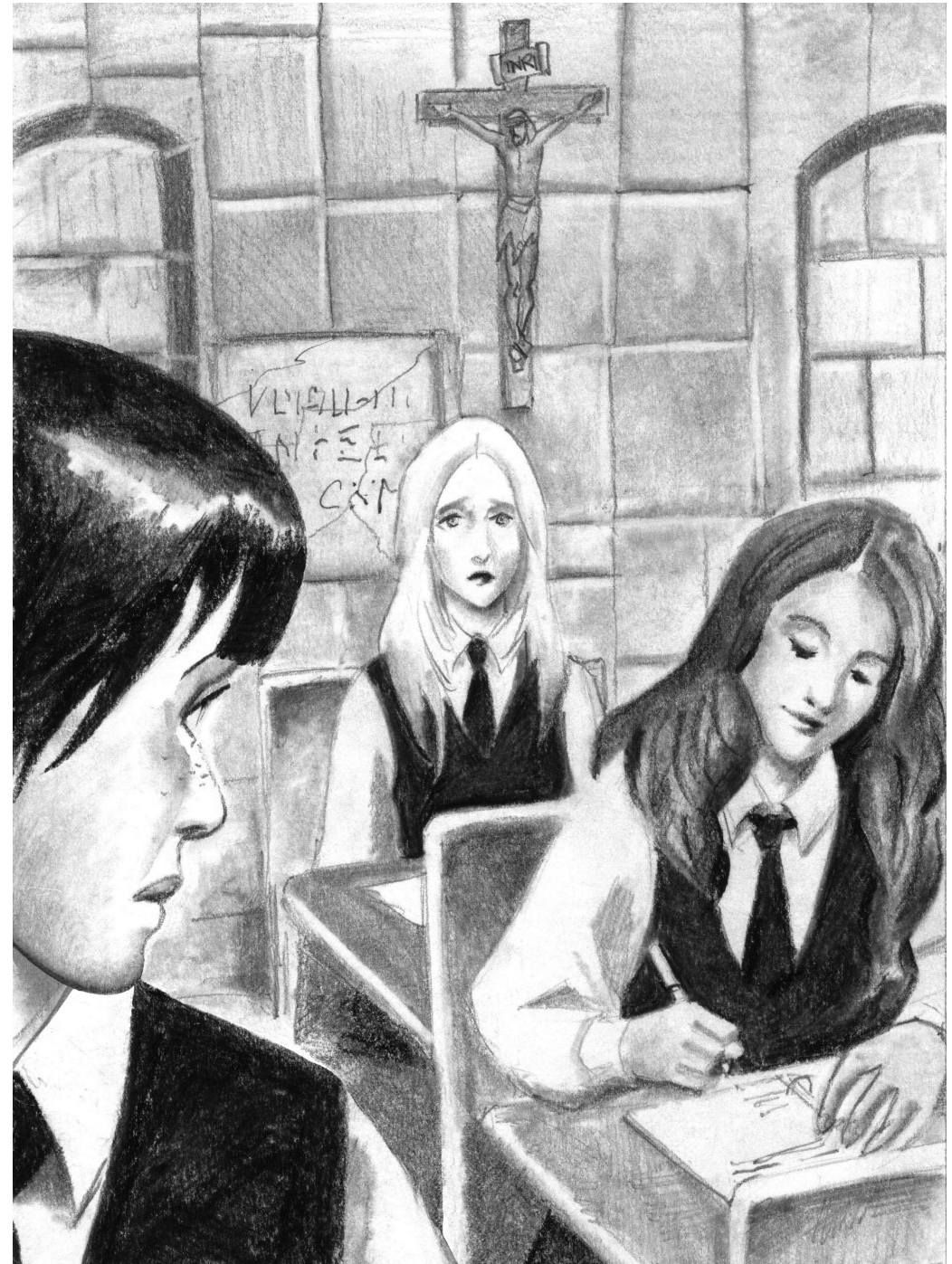
When people feel bad or find themselves in trouble, they usually feel very much alone. Feeling alone can make things even worse. At such times, people start to believe that no one understands or cares about them at all.

"I always knew..." some of them were declaring during our school lunch break. Vera Jennings, Madeleine's best friend who usually ignored me, even sat down to eat with me and to inquire if I'd heard. I told her that I had heard a *little* something, but nothing specific.

"Well, Christina," Vera lowered her voice, which only further drew the perverted interest of others around her, "not bein' one to gossip, mind ye, but *apparently*..."

I felt icky listening, but the debatable "details" were temptingly juicy, and the resultant whispering and wincing that accompanied us girls from the dining hall to the classroom after lunch break faded into uncomfortable silence once Madeleine McNally entered. With a blush that belied her attempted nonchalance, she made her way to her desk at the back where she usually "held court" with her admirers until the teacher arrived.

Now it was apparently excruciating to face these once-upon-a-time admirers, who were now literally turning their backs on her and stifling giggles. I imagined it would be almost as unbearable as having to face her parents once she arrived home that evening, knowing that they would have received a report from the school's principal.



It was not that Madeleine's mother and father had instilled much moral principle in her, though, as they were hardly at home. But, being rich, active socialites, they would be furious, because by the weekend, the members of the local Men's Club and especially the Irish Countrywomen's Association would be fully informed of Madeleine's misdemeanor.

I didn't know why, but throughout afternoon class, I kept turning to look at Madeleine. Maybe I was curious why someone would do something like she had apparently done, and I even wondered if it could ever be in my nature to do the same.

I smugly concluded that it wouldn't. I honestly couldn't relate to it. Nevertheless, I continued casting clandestine glances her way until she noticed and parried one of them with an icy stare. I turned my attention back to the class and, like her, tried to concentrate on the blackboard and Dr. Brennan's monologue.

Being compassionate tells a person that they are not alone. It makes you a friend when someone needs a friend.

After a few minutes, I ventured yet another glance at Madeleine McNally. She caught my eye, and I mustered up a smile of acceptance in the face of her scowl. This time tears welled up in her eyes, and she stood up.

"B-bathroom," she muttered and strode toward the door.

"But, sir, Miss McNally didn't raise her hand and ask to be excused," one of the girls piped up.

"Let her be," said Dr. Brennan softly. "She would probably appreciate some inner search time right now."

Fifteen minutes later, Madeleine returned with resolve on her chin but pain in her red-rimmed eyes.

Without compassion, the world is a hard and lonely place.

Before long, the afternoon class was over, and we were gathering up our pens, books, laptops, and bags. As we straggled out of the door, I looked back. Madeleine had remained seated, and Dr. Brennan had a knowing twinkle in his eye as he shoveled papers into a well-worn leather satchel.

"Not leaving just yet, Miss McNally?"

"No, sir. If that's okay."

"Take your time, take your time. I'm getting meself a cup o' tea, but I'll be locking up in ... hmmm ... half an hour or so."

With compassion, we are all connected, and hard times are much easier because others understand and care.

Silently praying for the key to understanding her, I stepped back into the classroom and hesitantly made my way toward Madeleine.

"Okay with you if I sit down?"

Madeleine shrugged, and stared straight ahead. Despite my inclination to

walk away, I sat at the desk next to her, and she asked me what I wanted.

Compassion is caring deeply and wanting to help—even if all you can do is to listen and say kind words.

"To talk, maybe," I said offhandedly. "Or listen. Or just be silent together, if you like. Or I can just simply buzz off! Up to you."

"So, now that I'm someone to be ashamed of, ye want to associate?"

"It's not like that. Just wanted to be a ... er ... friend."

Madeleine laughed. "That's weird."

"Weird? Why?"

"Well, when I was 'queen bee,' ye seemed to keep yer distance."

"I did?"

"Aye. I figured ye were jealous."

I chuckled and blushingly acknowledged that maybe there was a grain of truth in her observation. Madeleine unflinchingly continued.

"So it's easier for ye now that I'm cut down to size and the playing field is leveled, right?"

Tempted to recoil from such scathing skepticism, I again silently prayed for understanding. "Of course not. I just couldn't relate to being popular and the crowd you hang out with ... I suppose."

"Correction—*hung* out with. So much for my 'love me, love my dog' philosophy. Now they've seen my 'dog,' they *hate* me. So, what's *your* take on my ... um ... 'dog'?"

"We all make mistakes," I replied. "And there's lots ickier stuff in our hearts we need to be forgiven for, if the truth be known."

Madeleine laughed. "*Forgiven?* By whom?"

"God," I said.

"Hmm. Like what ickier stuff?"

"Oh ... envy, hate, pride, self-righteousness. Stuff like that. ..."

"The seven deadly sins, right?"

"I suppose."

Madeleine chuckled and her face softened. "Well, guess what? I ha' been watching for your reaction to what I did. Ye'll ne'er believe this, but it means a lot to me. I don't really know why, 'cos the gossip about yer family being religious and ... ye know."

"Gossip...", I said with a groan.

"Aye, talk about it. Join the club! Anyway, I wanted to get to know ye, but I kept my distance, too, not because I felt any better 'n ye. Wanna know why?"

"Because of what the others might think?"

Madeleine snorted. "I don't usually give a darn what others think. Never have. I wonder if that's what made me popular!"

"No," she went on, lowering her voice. "I avoided ye, because I knew ye would show

me up, sort of. I felt comfortable around ye, yet ye bothered me. Weird, no? Hey, isn't this something? It takes being at the bottom to get real!"

"God's way up is down," I bravely remarked.

"Ye truly believe in God, don't ye?"

I nodded.

"Hmmm, it's obvious. Do ye pray much?"

"I talk to Jesus," I said. "It's more than just asking Him for things."

"I do too," said Madeleine. "Like a friend ... or *more*. Then I think 'hey, I should be in church,' and I get cold feet and shut up. Ye go to church?"

"One time at Christmas when I was a kid," I said. "We sang there."

Grabbing her satchel, Madeleine stood up. "Look, er ... Christina, it's Friday evening, and I usually stop off with my ... *ha* ... 'friends' for pizza. Looks like it's just the two of us. Wanna come? On top o' that, I'm in no hurry to go home and meet me parents."

A few of those "friends"—Vera Jennings being one of them—who no doubt had been wondering what had transpired between us,

were lingering by the front gates of Christ King Girls' Secondary School as Madeleine and I walked out arm in arm and smiling.

"It's okay, Vera!" said Madeleine, pointing up at the school's sign. "He's forgiven me."

"Who?"

"The King Himself! And He will forgive you too, if you ask Him."

I must say Vera looked puzzled at Madeleine's declaration, and I told her that I would explain it to her in time.

So from that evening forth, you will be happy to know, Madeleine and I became inseparable friends.

Oh, and by the way, I suppose throughout my story you have just been dying to know exactly what Madeleine's misdemeanor was. Well, at the risk of sounding rather impolite, I have to say that it is really none of your business.

Congratulations! You are practicing compassion when you notice when someone is hurting or needs a friend.

The End

¹ Quotations throughout this story are excerpted from *The Family Virtues Guide (Plume, 1997)*, Linda Kavelin Popov with Dan Popov, PhD, and John Kavelin.