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A LAZY EYE

By Mary Morrissy

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A quarter-century ago, one short fiction anthology labeled ours the Age of Anxiety, an era of angst modulated by isolation and fear. If so, Irish novelist Mary Morrissy's collection of deft stories captures the tune of our times.

Using a variety of viewpoints and techniques, Morrissy assembles between her covers a menagerie of wounded, haunted souls who endure, and often dish out, a perpetual diet of distress.

While many of these 15 stories employ so light a touch that readers may find them too thin to be engaging, the best of them put their finger squarely upon some facet of contemporary anguish, often with a quirky twist.

There's the young wife in "Plaque" whose husband has decided that their marriage is over. At the same time, her dentist delivers what he construes to be bad news: her neglected, yellowed teeth have come unhinged by gum disease, and she's likely to lose them. This information, however, inspires only a grin in a woman who realizes the smiles she will flash in her new, single life will be the lovely white of new dentures.

In the Hitchcockesque "The Cantilever Principle," a woman stands by a hospital bed tending her dying father "propped up on the pillows, his face ripe and waxy as a windfallen apple." Across from his intensive care unit, she sees a young man, her age, visited by his wife and cheered by his child's drawings. A bargain with God begins to form in our narrator's mind: "his life for one I valued more."

Some of Morrissy's protagonists are wistful, sympathetic victims, like middle-aged Grace in "Possibilities" whose "biggest fear was that she would dry up," leading her to an ill-advised affair with "the only man who had ever made her feel wanton," but a man too selfish to give her anything but disease, or the young mother in "The Playhouse" whose momentary inattention resulted in her child's drowning.

Among these victims is Bella Carmichael in the title story. All her life, Bella had hoped to be a glamorous, center-stage victim of tragedy, like Caroline Kennedy after JFK's death. Bella finally becomes a victim of sorts when, touring Europe by rail, she wakes on her berth to find her sheets soaked with menstrual blood, but her victimization yields only humiliation, not glamour. But she bares humiliation defiantly: "She was determined to be dignified. She had, after all, been waiting for this moment all her life."

The similarly needy narrator of "Moment of Downfall," perhaps the most insightful and meaty story in the collection, had been an ignored, unpopular schoolgirl who finds that only a public bid for shame can make her visible at all.

Several characters, however, proves less sympathetic. In the opening story, "Bookworm," a book kleptomaniac can find worth only in acts of destruction, her artistic nature distorted into a cynical despair. More menacing is the narrator of "Rosa," so fascinated by her macabre older sister ("I live on the edges of her dark, livid world until it seems that without her I would barely exist") that she helps her leave her baby to die in a department store manger over the Christmas holiday.

There are paranoiacs on Morrissy's pages who rant about the usefulness of war, and women who welcome obscene phone callers because they relieve the pressure built up from the harassing phone calls they've made to former lovers. There are people disfigured both on their faces and their hearts. And some wear their deformities like medals, like the women who boasts, "I have learned the power of imperfection. Others hide their flaws deep down and offer them as prizes for intimacy, while mine is here, right here, up front...I watch from inside a hollowed-out shell, quite cold and perfect."

Morrissy has a poet's knack for striking and evocative juxtaposition. In "Bookworm," a creative young woman's sense of accomplishment comes only from waste. Most chilling and effective is how the tenderest Christian imagery shrouds the murderous sisters in "Rosa" as they contemplate abortion and perform infanticide, like Michael Corleone solemnly reciting sacraments at the precise moment his lieutenants slaughter all his enemies.

At her best, Morrissy enhances her disquieting impressions with vivid, if caustic, brushstrokes: "He had the sort of looks that until a certain age seem handsome and then suddenly become malevolent--when a dark eye turns beady, an arched eyebrow becomes demonic and a strand of brilliantined hair or tufts escaping from the nostrils seem like small fragments of evil."

The world of these stories is far from cozy, but it is often engaging, inevitably intense and recognizably true.