

Sisters attend a wake for Sister Patricia on March 4, 2010. The Sisters of Charity established the Convent of Mary the Queen in 1958 as a residence for senior sisters who could no longer take care of themselves.



MARY THE QUEEN

THE WORK OF MAE RYAN

BY SAYZIE KOLDYS



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The residence housed approximately 80 women, including (from left) Sisters Jude, Mary, and Helen. Sister Jude knew she wanted to be a nun from a young age. "As a teenager, you think you would rather do that or go out on dates or have a binding engagement or something like that. There wasn't any attraction there for me. God will draw you to where he wants you, unless you step in his way."



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Sister Marilda Joseph Aeillo sits in front of a portrait of Elizabeth Ann Seton, who founded the Sisters of Charity in 1817. According to other sisters in Mary the Queen, Sister Marilda got sick many years ago and vowed never to take the habit off if she recovered. She died at Mary the Queen on August 26, 2014.

IT BEGAN WITH A FUNERAL. On her first visit to the Convent of Mary the Queen, a nursing home for the Sisters of Charity in Yonkers, NY, Brooklyn-based photographer Mae Ryan found herself taking pictures at a mass for one of the nuns. She quickly recognized that a number of the women inhabiting the convent were close to death, and that Mary the Queen was the place they came to live out their last days, to reflect, and to contemplate what they might find on the other side. Ryan, who is driven by narrative, knew that this was a story she wanted to tell.

Ryan studied architectural design at Stanford, and photojournalism and documentary photography at The International Center of Photography. She's now senior video producer at The Guardian US and uses film and photography to explore people and places she wouldn't have access to without a camera.

"I'm drawn to getting in deep with people to understand their motivations for living the life they live," she says. "I work on projects where I can connect with my subjects."

In the past five years, Ryan has connected with a Pentecostal rehabilitation group in Russia, parole officers and parolees in California's prison realignment program,

and women who are pregnant in prison and caring for their babies behind bars. The stories she chooses to tell are often provocative; Ryan offers a nuanced view. Although she was initially drawn to Mary the Queen because she had a sense that it was "from a different era," Ryan came to see the nuns not as throwbacks to another time but as leaders in their communities.

"Many had lived very full, professional lives," Ryan says. "In fact, some of them seem like the original career women of the 20th century, since they didn't have families and could devote themselves to helping others, teaching, and running hospitals." Now, at the end of their lives, they're questioning whether their devotion to God will transfer to the afterlife.

Ryan captures both their uncertainty and their devotion by photographing everyday moments. She spent months forming relationships with the sisters— at the hair salon, in the chapel, and in their living spaces—becoming a regular presence in their world "without always taking photos," she says. The pictures are intimate, and Ryan's occasional technique of shooting through windowpanes and glass doors reveals more than it obscures. The women—

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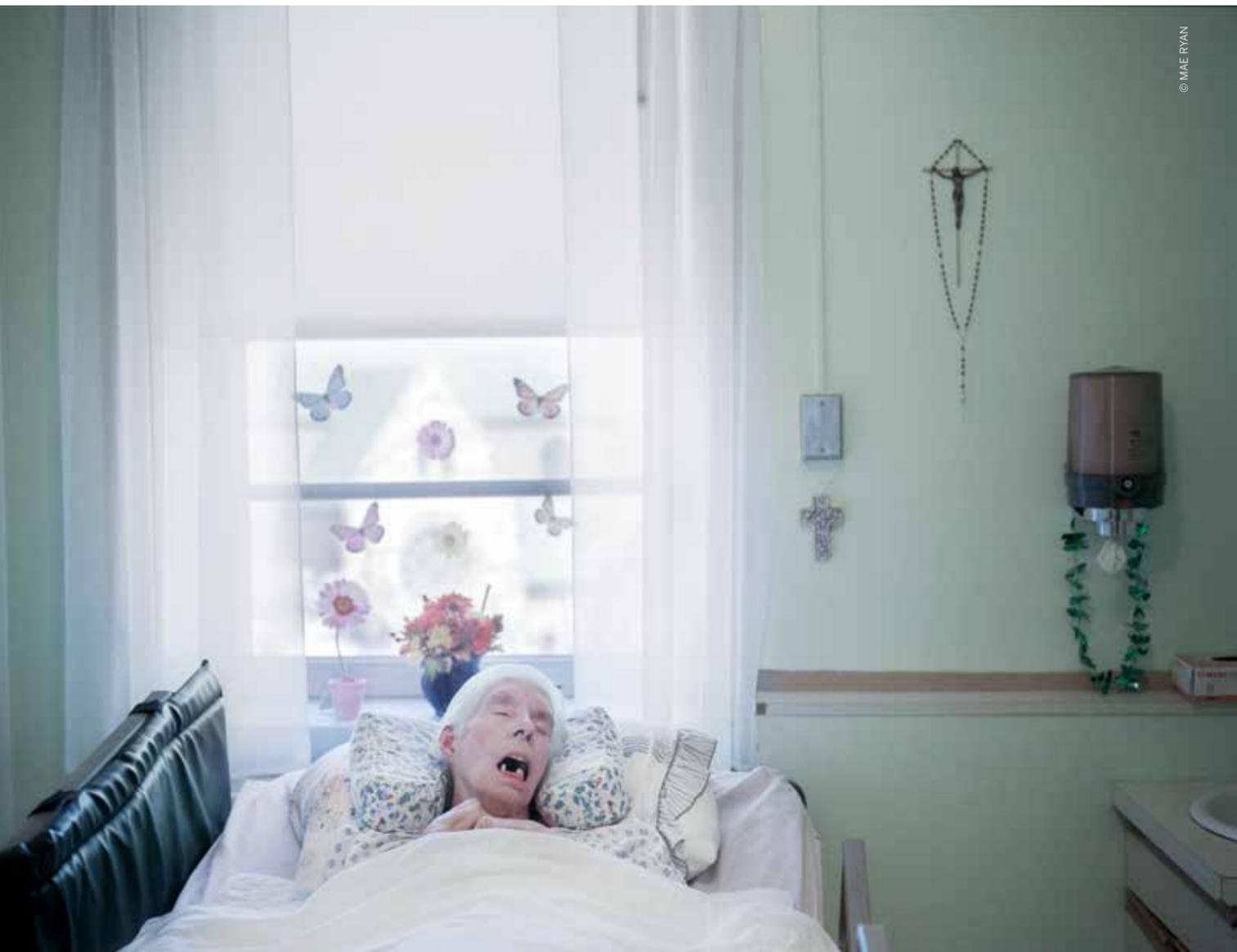


Sister Helen Callahan was a dedicated teacher and entered the order when she was 19 years old. "I sat in the chapel the other day and I just looked up in front of me and there were seven sisters sitting in their places," said Sister Helen Callahan. "I looked and I counted each one, and each one is afflicted with this Alzheimer's... but then you thank God and you say, 'Why? Why, God, are you sparing me?'" She died on July 22, 2015.

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Like many of the residents at the home, Sister Mary J Walsh suffered from Alzheimer's disease. Once sisters entered Mary the Queen, they rarely left the premises except for doctors appointments.



Nuns who came to Mary the Queen knew that it would be their final resting place. Since these photos were taken in 2010, Mary the Queen closed and all of the sisters moved to other nursing homes.



Sister Anne Golden, who broke her hip days earlier, screams out in pain for nearby nurses to assist her. Golden said she admired nuns since kindergarten. "I always looked up to the sisters, and I used to say to my mother, 'I'm going to be a sister.'"

bedridden, wheelchair-bound, or bent over walkers—are found behind reflections in the glass. The reflections evoke the ethereal, and at times suggest the world outside from which some of the subjects are withdrawing.

In one image, a sister with a walker stands in a stairway landing and looks up at a flight of stairs bathed in hazy light. Soon after the photo was taken, the woman had a stroke and later died. For Ryan, the image “is about her contemplating death.” In a complementary photo, a sister faces away from the viewer, and the focus is on a pair of glasses draped across her back. She’s “looking backward at the life that she lived,” Ryan says.

Ryan’s juxtaposition of the black habits and iconic Catholic statuary that have changed little over centuries with modern magazines and St. Patrick’s Day decorations encourages us, too, to contend with the lives of these women as much as with their deaths. They are women who adapted to change, both in the secular world and in the church, whose stories are a living history.

But Ryan learned that not all of them had family nearby or regular visitors with whom to share those memories,

so she listened as well as photographed. Some of her favorite stories came from a nun named Jude, who was in her mid-nineties and was from Greenpoint, Brooklyn, where Ryan was living at the time.

“She would tell me about her childhood there and all the trolleys that used to run in the streets,” Ryan says. “It gave me perspective on the history that surrounds me.”

And as it turns out, Ryan’s photographs captured a piece of history for the nuns. Unbeknownst to anyone when she embarked on this project, she was documenting a final chapter of the nursing home. Traditionally, the Sisters of Charity have cared for each other as they aged, but no one in the US has joined the order in the past twenty years, and according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, there are now more nuns over age 90 than under age 60. The old model isn’t working anymore. In 2014, the diocese announced the impending closure of the Convent of Mary the Queen, and in 2015, the nuns were relocated. The Sisters of Charity now reside in the Jewish Home Lifecare facility in the Bronx and are once again adapting and ministering to a broader community. ●

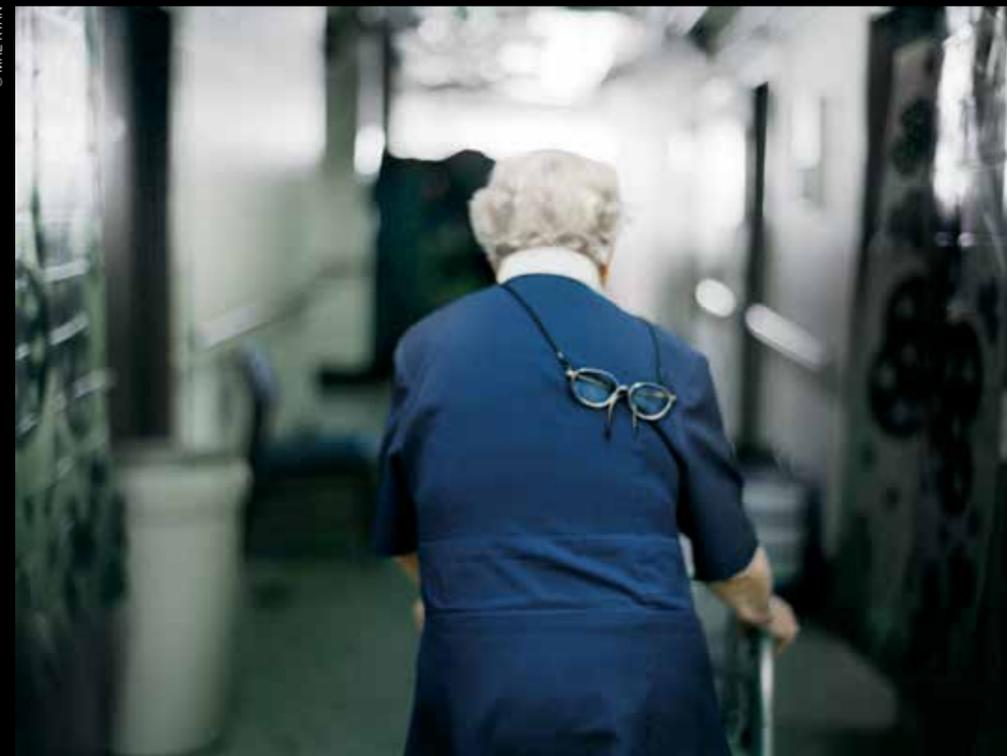
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Sister Kevin Marie MacDonald worked as an elementary school teacher throughout her 46 years of active ministry. She died on January 26, 2015.

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Sister Rita Moon leaves the craft room in the basement of Mary the Queen. “I used to be frightened at the thought of death, and then all of a sudden one day, I didn’t have that fear...the end is when God calls you home,” Rita said.