

The Lady Who Is Grateful

Me? I'm not Catholic--we weren't Catholic--they sent me to Catholic school because the public school was rundown or leaked, something bad in their minds. They weren't religious. They were practical. They looked at other private schools, secular ones, but the money was crazy. Mom said, "We can't afford that." Dad said, "we don't want her hanging out with all those rich kids." I never knew if they chose Catholic School because we could afford it or because we were snobs. Whatever the reason, Our Lady of the Sacred Whatever got me.

Imagine you're six-years old; you have no religious experience and your Mom and Dad walk you into a strange building, and the first thing you see is a life-sized statue of what looks like a homeless man nailed to a cross. Is it any wonder I cried when they left me there?

Catholic school mostly was the usual reading, writing and arithmetic. And Hail Mary, which. I liked that because I was fast at memorizing and got high praise. And the Rosary was my only piece of grownup jewelry. Don't lose it. Don't let it get rusty. When I showed it to Mom and Dad, I asked will it bring me luck? Like a rabbit's foot?

Mom and Dad were decidedly disinterested in answering questions about my Rosary. Or my Hail Mary. This gave me concern. Because by then I knew about the "immortal soul." I wasn't worried about my one because I figured that was something you got when you were older. But theirs.

My parents.

Not Baptized. Didn't Pray. Didn't go to Church. Didn't own a Bible. Or a Rosary, much less know how to pray with one. Even though they were adept at changing the subject whenever I brought up souls, when they saw my worried little face and heard my worried little concerns, they hugged me hard and promised not to do anything to tarnish their souls and not to die for a really long time.

They were stalling until I was old enough to hear there's no Santa Claus. "What? What about all those thank-you letters you made me write to him?" It was important, they said, for me to show gratitude.

To them, it was all the same. No Santa Claus, no Easter Bunny, no Jesus-God. Oh, and December 25th? The Pagans chose that date so they could secretly celebrate Winter Solstice. Oh, and the reason we put up Christmas lights was to fit in with the neighbors.

They dumped all this on me when I was nine.

They were my parents. I loved them more than all things, people, or presents. I had to believe them. But what I didn't have to do was share this point of view with the Nuns. Instead, I secretly opened my eyes during prayer; I mouthed the words to Beatles songs during Rosary; I lined up for a wafer even though I hadn't been to confession.

Then my friend MaryJo McDonough jumped off the swing and broke her back. Ambulance, sirens, chaos. Possible paralysis. Big scary surgery. In assembly we all bowed our heads. The priest asked for Devine intervention as everybody but me silently prayed for MaryJo to walk again. So, six weeks later, when Mary Jo limped into school, I confronted my parents with this miracle. "It wasn't prayer," they said. "It was the miracle of modern medicine."

“But the whole school got to thank Jesus. I didn’t get to thank anybody.”

“If you want to thank somebody, you can thank her doctor.”

I did. I made a card, I got the address, I bought a stamp, while all my school chums glowed with an internal flame when they thanked the homeless man.

I have to admit; the prayer thing made me a little jealous. You didn’t even need to buy a stamp to send a prayer.

I became a scientist to rebel, not against parents, but against the glow of religious fervor of my Catholic school. Biology, to underscore my belief in evolution. Then Genetics. Genetics— Come on! CRISPR? We are curing Sickle Cell for, Pete sake. That’s where the real miracles happen. Under the microscope.

(pause)

Maybe.

My last year of graduate school, I drive home Christmas Eve. Christmas, of course it was Christmas. The house ablaze as if we’re believers, Christmas tree under which are a thousand wrapped boxes—my Dad loved giving presents. The parents are beaming—their daughter is home, and I have taken great pains to look as if I’ve been taking care of myself. Tomorrow we will start the day with mimosas, waffles and those too many presents.

So. Christmas Day, I wake up to the sound of this horrible hacking; it’s my mother in the bathroom trying to clear her throat. She’s a smoker. (quoting) “Not a ton, four or five, or six or seven or eight or nine cigarettes a day. (mocking) Not like it’s a whole pack.”

She tried to quit once. Years before when Dad quit. She lasted two days. The end of the second day she kicked in the glass of the china cabinet and began playing Frisbee with the dinner plates.

She was one of those people for whom quitting smoking was more like kicking heroin. Dad and I decided to believe that nine cigarettes a day wasn't dangerous. (mocking) Not like a whole pack.

So. Mom in the bathroom hacking up phlegm --Dad in the kitchen making waffles. I go to Dad.

“What’s with Mom?”

“What are you talking about?” He says not looking at me but beating the egg whites with the electric mixer.

“That cough sounds like she’s at death’s door.”

“It’s the same cough as always.” He says, still fascinated by those stiffening egg whites.

I take the mixer away from him and turn it off. I make him look at me and when his face falls I know it’s a lot worse than he’s letting on. I feel my heart rising into my throat.

“Oh, dear God, please, please.”

I say it out loud.

I don’t know. Is that a prayer?

Mom bounds into the kitchen, beautiful, beaming. Me and Dad change our expressions. Happy. Christmas. What could be better?

That night, dinner is great until Mom lights up and then I'm dying inside. Dad gets the coffee and brings in the dessert; not pumpkin pie which we all hate, but cheesecake like they make it in Brooklyn. I'm looking at the cake when I glance over at Mom who has been uncharacteristically quiet for almost a whole minute. She looks as if she's staring into the deepest part of outer space. Her cigarette is burning down in her fingers. The room is too quiet. I'm about to say something, give her a little poke, something when all of a sudden, her eyes focus, and her weight shifts like she just landed. She puts out her cigarette and takes the knife from Dad...to cut the cake.

Two days later I'm back at school. Dad calls to tell me that Mom hasn't smoked. She smashed her favorite painting and beat her pillow until the feathers flew. Oh, and he found her standing in a closet clutching her pack of Kents. But she didn't light up.

Her behavior is driving Dad crazy. I tell him to hold on and I'll be home for New Years. I have to get there before he can't stand her withdrawal weirdness drives him to the point where he forces a cigarette on her. I must prevent that at all costs.

At home, it's just like the first time she tried to quit, except this time, she's resolved. She's in agony but she's resolved. I am so supportive.

“Oh, shut the fuck up.”

(almost laughing) This is my mother. I've never heard this. I sit quietly waiting for the explanation, but really, I'm just too frightened to speak. She launches into her story:

“It was Christmas Night. Right before dessert. One minute I’m looking forward to my cheesecake and the next I’m going up. Up, not metaphor. I was going Up. A large hand has reached inside my body and grabbed ahold of my soul and consciousness and was taking me...up.

“It felt like the liftoff of a 747. Up to the ceiling, through the ceiling, through the roof, into the night sky, among the stars. There is nothing around us but sky and stars. Us. The hand was connected to a Being. The Being is draped in a shroud. The Being looks like how Gary Larson draws Death in his cartoons. But not funny! The Being is all around me, holding me up in the air. No escape, unless I struggle free and fall the two-thousand miles to the dining-room table below. The only sound is a ringing in my ears. The two of us, the Being and I, look down at the three mortals below, and all I know is ... I’m to quit smoking. No words are exchanged, and none are needed. I am returned to my body, returned to the table, I stub out my cigarette, and enter hell. I’m in hell. Do you understand me? This is hell.”

But, I say as benignly as a mouse, you’re not going to smoke.

She F bombs me again.

(Smiling)

But she doesn’t smoke. Ever.

She got better.

And Dad got plastic plates, but by then she had stopped tossing them.

Oh, and Me...I was—I am grateful. And there’s this funny thing about gratitude.

It has to go somewhere.

(the end)