

THE RELIGIOUS WOMAN

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 Every day, the religious woman said a prayer for her dead parents, and for her dead grandparents, and this was the only remembrance done for these people who had been forgotten by any other living person. She did it while she was slicing the bread for breakfast. Sometimes it was rushed and sometimes it was absent-minded and sometimes, when the morning was quiet and the children weren't demanding her attention, it was serious and made the morning light around her glow with special purpose.

The religious woman liked the feel of all books but Bibles often had those lovely gold-rimmed pages, that crisp onion-skin paper delicate as lace. The old ones had that musty wonderful smell from the special mold that only grows in books and the new ones had the crisp acrid smell of fresh ink. In hotels she always opened the night table drawer and reached in and always a Bible was there, black softcover, fragile pages, always the same spidery text. She traveled often for work and every time she pressed her nose into the binding and took a deep inhale, remembering the smell of every other Bible she had ever pressed her nose into. They were a comfort. They were like the secret underground mesh of the universe, the system that made everything else make sense. She thought about the dog telephone system in the movie *101 Dalmatians*, all of London's dogs spreading secret messages in an unbroken chain across the city, and

the hotel Bibles were like this. She pressed her nose into the spine. She stroked and fanned the pages. The loneliness of hotel rooms, her job, her life, eased a little, and she shut the Bible away in its drawer. The religious woman took care to cover her head whether she was entering her own mosque or when a coworker asked her to a baptism or a bar mitzvah. She thought that God was present in these places and the best way to show respect for Him was to keep something of herself private, so that only he could see it. She thought religion was what happened to you when you were all alone. It came when you were walking down a dirt road in an old country or when you were on a bus and no one was looking at you and a voice spoke to you in your most private inner place.



The religious woman made crosses everywhere the bad could get in, just as her mother and grandmother had taught her. She made a cross whenever she opened a window and when she lifted the sheets to get into bed. She crossed the bread and crossed the dinner when she opened the oven door. She crossed her family whenever they opened themselves to danger. She crossed her husband when he headed off on a business trip and simply when he was going to the store for milk, if there was a storm coming. She crossed her son when he went off to school each morning and when he put on his helmet for hockey practice and clattered off on his skates, wobbling in the pile of the rug. When her son told her he was depressed, she crossed him then too, and meant it as a protection, because now she understood he was vulnerable to hurt and pain. He laughed at her, the way so many people did. He said, you think you can protect me from this. Well, okay. That was the role she played. He had to know that she was praying for him. He had to know someone believed in his soul.



The religious woman sometimes worried for the state of the souls of her children. She brought them to church even when they whined and complained. But she knew that by taking them to church, by teaching them the hymns they'd sing to themselves when they were walking alone in the woods or casting about for a lullaby for a crying baby, she was

giving them a gift. She was giving them a special language that they would always be able to speak.



The religious woman did not attend Friday prayers. It was not required for women, and anyway, it made her nervous, this one place in her life where at the door the women and girls were shunted away behind a wall and down a hallway and could only look at the Imam through a metal screen. It was a beautiful screen, punched through with the most elaborate and lovely geometric designs. And it made light look beautiful when it filtered through. But still, she did not like the thought of God coming to her only as dappled light through a screen. Her daughter knew how to tie a headscarf for a yearly visit. But she did not want her daughter to know anything more.



The religious woman was a prized voting demographic. Look at the mailings that came to her door from her church list, from her internet searches! Look at the way politicians sought after her! It was enough to make her feel flattered but also queasy. The religious woman knew they smelled loyalty on her. She was the kind to stay in line, to act in a predictable and governable way. To hold certain beliefs. Because one day of the week you are known to be thinking about God, it is also known how you will vote, what you will think about health care, foreign policy, income tax rates. You were a cudgel to be swung by others, a sharpened sword.



The religious woman was supposed to not like naked bodies, and to make love in the dark. See how she surprised her first boyfriend, when after Friday prayers with her family she humped him in the backseat of her car in the church parking lot, hiking up his silky patterned shilwar kameez. See the things she knew to do! The religious woman knew about hot showers with hose attachments and about leaning into the hard

corners of tables when no one was looking. The religious woman liked pain and how pain plus time and endurance could often become pleasure. She knew how her body worked. First you make the bruise and then you press it like a button.



When her son died, the religious woman did not go straight to church. In fact, she stayed away. She did not want to be reminded that her grief was not unique, that right now other candles were being lit by other grieving people. She did not want acquaintances to press her hand and say, I know how you feel, or, God never gives us more than we can bear. Mine! Mine! She wanted the grief to be selfishly hers and hers alone. She went to a movie theater instead and looked back at all the people's faces in the dark. Look at all the people who could not see her face, who did not know.

In the dark she talked to God as she often did and she said, All right, fine, I believe in you, but I don't have to love you. I can think you are fundamentally shitty. All that faith requires is that, faith.



The religious woman thought of herself as an endangered species. Not one of the rare and lovely things, the birds of paradise with the aquamarine tails, but rather something ugly and plain and disappearing fast. Something unloved that held up the world, that without which, whole ecosystems might fail. A tree frog the color of mud, climbing its determined way up the side of a leaf. A worm that looks like any other worm.



The religious woman had more deeply embraced her faith after her son died. She had the excited, fluttery feeling of falling in love: what is known as the convert's zeal. She shaved her head and wore the wigs that you could only get in certain parts of Brooklyn. She policed the food that entered her house and her body with the vigilance of a parent with a

child with lethal allergies. She brought paper plates to her friends' houses so she could eat on plates that had never touched non-kosher food. She had a closet full of colorful tishels and long skirts and knee-high socks with special geeky prints: pac-men, glasses, cats. On Fridays the house filled with a changed and somber light and she let the dark come without touching a switch or pressing a button or turning a knob of any kind.

But when she dated other zealous men, she was always disappointed. The orthodoxy of others seemed so boring, so rote, so tediously dogmatic. She listened to them solemnly recite the reasons for their practice with a long inner sigh. She wanted to find a man who was in awe of her pure inner light, but was a little sinful himself.



Everyone thought they knew what the religious woman was thinking when her son died. Her husband, her daughter, both wept the same way she did. But they were jealous of her, because they thought she had a secret source of comfort running like a vein of gold under a rock. They thought, this loss is not so hard for her to bear, because she knows she will see him again in heaven.



The religious woman thought often of what one imam had told her when she said she wanted to be a writer, that she wrote murder mysteries. He told her that at the end of all things, in the last judgment, she would be judged for characters she created as well as for her own deeds. If she let loose a murderer into the world of her imagination, it was just as terrible as if she had given birth to one and nurtured his sick inner workings. The religious woman liked this point of doctrine but couldn't explain why. She pictured the Prophet tilting his head as he examined the golden scales that would weigh up her life. And this one, here, why did you make him? He'd ask. She'd have to explain. She'd say, He filled a need.



The religious woman was pretty sure that her father was one of the boys molested by the family priest, but she would never be completely sure. There were things said, expressions used in the house, attempts by her mother to make sure she was never alone with him as a child, that made her think this. Back then it was considered something catching. If her father was damaged, he might damage others. But if no one knew, then perhaps the virus could stop with him. More than anything, it was the things not said that convinced her. The way silence around some subjects crept like a cat around a corner.



The religious woman noticed how religious language had, step by step, been excised from her daughter's language. She signed every email to her daughter, love and prayers, but she only wrote love. She said "god bless you" and the daughter said "gesundheit." Still, she persisted, refusing to adapt. Wasn't that what she wanted from her mother anyway — this calm inertia? Maybe her being religious was what her daughter was counting on. She had to be the bedrock that her daughter could return to.



The religious woman wasn't fooling herself or anybody else. She knew faith was not a moral equation with goodness, or peacefulness, or compassion, or fortitude. Faith had not stopped her first husband from beating her up once in a while, when she failed to laugh at his jokes at a party, or deliberately did her own laundry but left his clothes strewn all over the bedroom. Faith had not made her own mother more kind. It hadn't made her more #blessed than anyone else or protected her from pain. Faith existed in its own category. Faith was the thing you were stuck with. The thing with chains. A second skin that zips all the way up the back. A lens over each eye, through which you see your life and all its joys and limitations.



When her daughter, always with that nosy, curious streak, asked if she believed in god, the religious woman at first did not know what to say. She went to church, didn't she? Wasn't that enough of an answer? Wasn't she the only one in the family who bundled up and walked down the hill to make the early morning Mass?

But the daughter was clever and sly. She knew already that there was a difference between doing and believing.



In college, the daughter tried to explain to her first girlfriend that she wasn't religious. "But your family is Muslim," the girlfriend asked earnestly, trying to figure out where to place her, whether she could be considered. Or was she just playing around a little before the arranged marriage, the nice Muslim boy in her future? The girl said she didn't want that for herself, but she couldn't explain what she was and what she wasn't. "Your mother is religious, right?" the girl asked. Because that was what mattered. It would be the mother who would decide what shape her daughter's life would take.

The daughter said, "If you asked her, she would say yes." That was true, but she knew that would give the wrong impression. She wanted so badly to make her girlfriend see. Her mother was religious, yes. She would not hesitate to call herself that the way she was doing right now. But she was not one of those Muslims. That was what this sweet girl from Georgia would never see. Even as she thought that thought, she hated it, because this, too, was a betrayal of her mother, of her brother, lost years ago, of something larger than herself.

When the religious woman died, the daughter knew what to do. It had been done before. It was written in the book. There were these songs to sing and these prayers to be said. There was a beauty to the rituals that the daughter had not seen in many years. Everything laid out, the steps of grieving and loss circumscribed so you could stumble ahead with your life in your own confused way. The daughter could see now, that was her last gift to her: to provide her with shoe prints in the snow, the right dance steps to take—first this one, now that one, slowly at first, then faster, surer—until you were dancing.

