

Pie Jesu

“Mom, is music really like talking to God?” Mekhi asks.

I put my son’s lunch into his backpack. “Where did you hear that, Khi?” He often shares thoughts I find surprising for an eleven-year-old.

“I saw it in a video on YouTube.” Mekhi becomes his age again. “But Papa says that’s sacrilege. What’s sacrilege, Mom?”

My father, the killer of dreams. I grit my teeth against the words: if my son’s thoughts are surprisingly mature, my own are permanently stunted with the resentment and rebellion of a teenager. “It means—” I say, but I can’t finish my thought. To believe in the idea of *sacrilege* as a violation of the sacred, you first have to accept that there are things that are holy, things that are divine.

The school bus arrives at the bottom of our driveway, saving me from answering the question. “Hurry up and put on your shoes,” I say instead. Offering maternal fussing in place of theological reasoning, I add, “do up your zipper—it’s chilly today.” I watch Mekhi lope to the curb and blow him a kiss I know he cannot see.

I head up the stairs to get ready for work, remembering how last weekend Paul took Mekhi and me to the concert hall to see the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra play. It was the first time any of us

had been there, and I felt conspicuous in the crowd of white-skinned, white-haired people. But Mekhi displayed no such discomfort. He leaned forward in his red plush seat, his body moving slightly in rhythm with the brassy swell filling the space around us. The violinists' bows moved in almost military precision, yet the notes that swirled upward were otherworldly. I struggled to hold it all in my head, but I could see Mekhi nodding, his lips curving into a slow smile.

“He loves it,” Paul whispered as he squeezed my hand. “I knew he would.”

Thinking of Paul must be what causes my phone to vibrate with a WhatsApp message from him: Good morning, beautiful. Have you thought some more about what we discussed last night? I stare at the screen and try to visualize Mekhi and I leaving my parents' house to live with Paul in his townhouse. Moving across the city, Mekhi changing schools, leaving the teachers and friends he has had for almost seven years. Allowing Mekhi to grow attached to Paul and find in him the father figure he has never had in Devon, risking the wrenching that will occur if things fall apart. The judgmental stare of my father, the sorrowful one of my mother, the humiliation if I need to come slinking back.

I lift a finger, wanting to reply but not knowing what to say, but my phone pings again. This time it is my newsfeed, announcing that the virus has finally reached Winnipeg; the coronavirus so named for its shining red crown, a bright halo of disruption. Before

I can absorb that information, a second alert pops up to inform me that due to the declaration of a global pandemic, all Manitoba schools and daycare centres will close one week from now.

Mekhi, I think. My son has suffered with asthma and other lung issues all his life. A baby born too soon, he was so tiny that I could hold him in the palm of my hand, his skin colourless under the harsh lights of the neo-natal intensive care unit. The doctors cautioned me not to expect too much from him, that his development might be compromised. But Mekhi dug his roots down and pushed his shoots up through the dirt of his life. School and daycare nurture him while I am at work, filing and answering phones: a job that pays my bills, but carves away a little more of me every day, like water running across limestone.

My mother is doing the dishes, wearing the purple satin headwrap that keeps her pressed hair straight. Even though she is at home, she has already slid on lipstick. I assume that my father is closeted in his study as usual, writing his Sunday sermon, inventing new ways to exhort the people of Dayspring Baptist Church to ever greater heights of piety.

“Mom,” I say, “the schools are closing next week. Can Khi stay with you while I’m at work?”

“I’ll have to check with your father,” she says, as I knew she would. Her feet stomp up the stairs and then snatches of his gravelly voice roll through the ceiling—always coming from a pulpit, if only in his mind.

“Absolutely not... inconvenient...her responsibility... selfish...”

My mother returns, her head drooping. “I’m sorry, Abigail,” she murmurs.

“She make she bed, let she lie in it!” my father bellows down the stairs, sounding especially Jamaican today. “And boy did she lie in it.”

I roll my eyes. “Compassionate as ever, I see.”

“Don’t you take that attitude!” my mother snaps. “He is still your father.” Then her voice softens. “We have to ask God for a cure.” I gaze at the maple tree in the backyard, its leafless branches stretching to the sky in a tangle of arms, their bones interlocked. That same tree stretches past my bedroom window. It witnessed my triumphs and I told it my sorrows through the glass pane separating us. I winged my supplications upward through its trunk. The last time I ever prayed was the morning I learned I was pregnant.

“Only God can heal us,” my mother says, and I press my lips together against the obvious retort.

“He thinks you should quit working and raise your own child,” my mother adds, as if my father hasn’t made that clear hundreds of times by now.

“He doesn’t have student loans,” I say, as I have also done hundreds of times before. “He isn’t paying for my car, or Mekhi’s medications, or night classes.”

“What will you do?” my mother asks. But it is too late for tenderness. She can no longer fix my problems by letting me nestle close to her warm, cocoa-butter scented skin or by making me a cup of bush tea with condensed milk.

“What I’ve always done,” I say, my throat burning. “I’ll figure it out.”

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I know it is useless, but I do it anyway: when I get to work, I text Devon. Can u or ur mom watch Khi when the schools shut down? As expected, my phone screen remains still and black as the night sky.

I skipped classes to be with Devon. I used my student loan payment to buy him a computer. When a stranger approached me in the bathroom and announced that she was sleeping with him, I told him the story as a joke, expecting a laughing denial. But he said, “a man has needs, Abby. I love you. Those cheap girls don’t mean anything to me.”

“They do to me,” I said.

A month after I broke up with Devon, I learned I was pregnant. He wouldn't take my calls and in desperation, I went to his house and told his mother.

“How do you know it's Devon's?” she asked.

“He's the only one I've ever been with,” I replied.

“A likely story!” she said, and shut the door in my face.

An hour later, my phone lights up when my mother calls. “Have you asked Devon to help?”

“Mom,” I chide, my voice heavy with the tears I will not weep.

“It was just a thought. Alligator lay egg, but him no fowl,” which I know is her Jamaican way of saying things are not always what you think they are. I imagine the twigs of the maple tree scratching at the kitchen glass as she cuts up onions and garlic for whatever she is making for supper—maybe her famed jerk chicken, the toast of the church potluck circuit.

“I have to get back to work.”

“All right. Love you.” Her words are mechanical, spoken by rote. My mother's love has always depended on my achievements. When I brought home exemplary report cards, my mother bragged to the church under cover of thanking Jesus for bestowing His

blessings upon her. During my high school years, her mouth made round Os of delight when I placed in the top percentile of every mathematics contest I entered.

“People will think you are going to fail because of the colour of your skin,” she often told me. “Prove them wrong.” Getting pregnant at the beginning of my third year of university was not proving them wrong, it was proving them right. While my father lamented my loss of respectability, my mother mourned the end of my singularity.

I haven’t answered Paul’s question yet. I type him a message: Still thinking about the move. Will let you know soon.

He messages me back, Take your time, Abby.

His dependability brings me, again, to the brink of tears.

§

When I get home, Mekhi runs to greet me, exulting, “my concert is this weekend.” Smaller than the other kids, my son has no talent for sports. When his music teacher at school discovered his gift for singing, I worried his lungs were not up to the task, but singing has strengthened them. This past fall, a local choir sought a treble for their gala concert, and out of thirty boys who auditioned, my son was chosen.

“Mekhi, I don’t think it’s a good idea,” I say, the words sizzling on my tongue. “You have asthma. Breathing problems. There’s a virus in the city that’s very dangerous for kids like you.” The setting sun slants through the crystal-edged windows in the hallway.

He pouts. “But it’s important to me, Mom. I’ve worked really hard.”

“I know, baby,” I say. The tears I have kept at bay all day burn my eyes. “I’m just keeping you safe.”

“No you’re not! You don’t care about me at all!” he shouts, runs upstairs and slams his bedroom door.

I shouldn’t have said anything. The concert is probably canceled anyway.

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I am wrong about that. The next morning, my inbox chimes with the choir director’s decision. People will need hope in these troubling times, he says, so we will enjoy some beautiful music while social distancing. My thumb hovers, and I prepare to respond that Mekhi cannot participate. But I think of how my son babbled with excitement after his first rehearsal. Sometimes I hear his voice wafting past the closed door of his room, high, clear, and sure. He told me I cannot hear the whole piece until the concert, so it will be

a surprise. *There aren't many cases in the city yet*, I try to convince myself, as an image of my son, blue in the incubator, flickers before my eyes.

I look around the room that has been mine for my entire thirty-two years. The soft pink walls, so coveted when I was eight, are still marked with the holes where at twenty-one I took down the wooden cross my father hung years before. The tree branches fill the window, as they always have.

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I return from work to find Mekhi in the living room. “Mom,” he says. his thin brown face pinched and fierce. “I have a rehearsal tomorrow.”

“I told you it’s not a good idea.”

“Well, I think it is.” His eyes hold me, challenge me, consume me. “It means so much to me, Mom. I’ll be careful. I promise. But please let me do this.”

My chest tightens as I watch my boy slowly becoming a man, the years unfolding before me. I have delayed my dreams because I fell for Devon, because I believed his empty words over the ones in my textbooks. I have sacrificed so Mekhi can still have his dreams. “Yes,” I say. “You can sing in the concert.”

“Mom, you’re the best!” He launches himself at me, wraps his arms around me.

§

“Are you crazy?” my father thunders when Mekhi and me put on our jackets to leave for rehearsal. “You’re exposing that sick boy to germs. Bringing them home to us.”

My mother chimes in in softer tones, “are you sure it’s safe?” I gulp back the bubble of rage bursting in my chest. This is the woman who shouts “By the blood of Jesus, we shall be protected,” as she drives unseeing through blizzards to the church. Who marched with a bucket of Bibles into the roughest part of Spanish Town on her last trip home to Jamaica, because God had called her to be a fisher of men. The son of God is worth it, but my son is not.

“They’re social distancing and we have hand sanitizer,” I say.

“You are shirking your duty as a mother,” my father proclaims. Then he adds, “I am disappointed and disgusted.” They are the same words he spoke when I broke the news of my pregnancy, and, then as now, the words cut deep into my soul, twisting into me like the nails that pinned the cross to my bedroom wall.

I hustle Mekhi through the door before the scene can further escalate, but the damage is done. “Why is Papa so mad?” he asks, his eyes now mournful that so recently flashed with hope.

My own decision is forming as blossoms sprouting from a twig. If my son is becoming a man, it is past time that I become a woman. I must pull my feet free of the mud of guilt, fear, and hopelessness that has kept them planted in my childhood home years after I should have left it behind. I must uproot and transplant myself to allow my branches to spread, my leaves to uncurl, to provide proper protection to my young sapling. We cannot grow in my father's house.

"Khi," I ask, "how would you feel if we went to live with Paul? If I quit my job and studied online?"

"Would Paul be my dad?"

"No. You have a dad. But Paul wants to be your friend."

"I want Paul to be my dad. I like Paul."

From the beginning, I told Paul, "I have a son, and he comes first."

Paul said, "of course. I would expect no less of a good mother. But I can help with that load on your shoulders."

I'm in, I write to Paul as I wait in the car while Mekhi rehearses. I'll tell my parents tonight.

Paul calls right away. "Abby," he says, his voice rippling toward me like clear, cool water, "I think you should wait to tell

them until after the concert. In case it doesn't go well. This is such a big moment for you and Mekhi."

I am sure it won't go well. I remember when I announced my pregnancy how my father yelled, "even Jesus told the whore to go and sin no more!" as my mother dabbed at her eyes with a frayed Kleenex. "You're right," I agree. "The day after the concert, then." My stomach roils and heaves at the thought.

I know it is useless. But after Paul hangs up, I text Devon: Mekhi has a concert on Saturday. 7.30 St Thomas church. My phone screen remains as still as dark lake water.

§

On Saturday, Paul's and my dark faces are again conspicuous in the audience. As the concert is about to begin, Mekhi appears at the front of the church, tiny and solemn in his new suit. His eyes flicker around the room seeking me, and I give him a little wave. The smile that spreads across his face is an image that I will store with the other pictures forever seared onto my heart.

More dark faces enter the room. I don't recognize them from a distance. Then my breath catches at the sight of Devon and his mother, my mother and father, shuffling down our row. The thought seizes me that I don't want Mekhi's triumph marred by the anxiety of waiting, and as soon as my parents sit, I whisper to my mother, knowing my father can hear, "Mekhi and me are moving in with Paul tomorrow."

Paul jerks forward. My father glares at both of us. My mother's eyes dart sideways to my father and shutter momentarily before she pats my knee and whispers back, "probably for the best."

We are silenced by notes from the piano dropping into the sanctuary, and then Mekhi's voice is a cascade of sound pouring out above us as he sings, *Pie Jesu, qui tollis peccata mundi, dona eis requiem*. I follow the translation in the program. *Dear Jesus*. The notes of the melody fall and then rise; aching, tantalizingly climbing to the heights before tumbling back down, only to rise again. *Who takes away the sins of the world*. Each note from my son's mouth is a drop of water that hangs shimmering in the air, a wisp of wind against my cheek. I glance sideways at my mother; her lips have formed the O they used to make when I brought home my math competition certificates.

Dona eis requiem. Grant them rest. I am at rest, even though there is plenty to worry about: a virus that races through pleura and bronchioles. The move. My job. But in this shining moment, all that exists for me is the music rushing forth from Mekhi. It is a silver river washing over me, bathing me in all the pain and pleasure of the past eleven years. The music conjures up a vision of the maple tree that once received my prayers. My long-ago pleas and the notes that wing from my son stream together from its branches and crystallize into a ball of darkness and of light that I almost feel I can reach out to grasp, that I can hold in the palm of my hand.