

1



The priest stands to the side waiting for the piano to quiet then walks to the pulpit. I always marvel at his height and wonder if he gave up an NBA career for the cloth, or if perhaps he heard the calling because he was a foot closer to God than most mortals.

I sit between my children – Addie, four, on my right, her white-stockinged legs sticking straight out on the pew, her patent leather Mary Janes swishing like windshield wipers; and Drew, eight, on my left, dressed in his pressed khaki pants, his psalm book on his lap. My husband, Gordon sits beside him, his eyes intensely focused on the altar, devoutly waiting for the gospel to begin.

We look like the perfect family, and I'm happy to pretend.

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Father Kimball looks down at his parish. “Welcome my brothers and sisters in Christ, beloved children of God...”

Beside me, Drew squirms. Gordon’s firm squeeze of his knee stops the squiggling. I take Drew’s hand in mine to keep him still. No one in our small clan has an iron bladder. I slide my eyes in a sidelong glance at Gordon. His jaw is set tight. He won't be happy if Drew gets up in the middle of the sermon. Of course, he’ll be even less happy if Drew wets himself.

“During the first reading from the *Book of Isaiah*, we heard that the Lord God said, 'Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.' When the Lord God spoke these sacred words, He was commanding His children to set aside the past in order to open the door to a better future...”

I sigh. I don’t want to hear about forgiveness, not today.

On the cross behind Father Kimball, Jesus poses in his final moment of martyrdom. On his right, St. Catherine, namesake of the church, angelically smiles down on us, chiseled of marble and more beautiful and flawless than she ever could have been in life.

I smile at her as I have just about every Sunday for most of my life. She died almost a decade younger than I am now, but her legacy has lived almost a millennium, an impressive achievement for a fourteenth-century peasant.

Catherine was the twenty-fifth of twenty-six children born into a poor family in Siena. At seven, she claimed to have had a vision of God and, because of the experience, consecrated her virginity to him. She spent the next dozen years in a nine-foot-by-three foot cell praying, fasting, and scourging herself three times a day until Christ visited her and placed a ring on her finger (visible only to her) and she was told to end her years of solitude and enter into the service of God.

The Dominicans at Rome still treasure her body in the Minerva Church, and her head's enshrined in St. Dominic's Church in Siena.

Below Catherine's image is an engraving of her writings: *If you will wreak vengeance and justice, inflict them on me, poor wretch, and assign me any pain and torment that may please you, even death. I believe that through the foulness of my iniquities many evils have occurred, and many misfortunes and discords. On me then, your poor daughter, take any vengeance that you will. Ah me, father, I die of grief and cannot die!*

I stare at the holy face gleaning down on me and think, *today you would be diagnosed as a delusional bipolar narcissist with a masochistic streak who probably became that way because you were the twenty-fifth child and your parents were exhausted, and therefore, you didn't get enough love or attention, and you would still be given a cell*

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in which to pray and starve yourself, but it would have padded walls.

This is what happens with all the unlikely stories of the Bible – my over-rational brain dissects and reassembles them until they make sense and hold no magic or mysticism at all – *the walls of Jericho tumbled down because of an earthquake, Jesus was actually walking on a patch of floating ice common in the Sea of Galilee, Mary was naughty and didn't want to confess.*

Yet, even with that much cynicism, I believe. I clasp my hands tight and pray for guidance and mercy. When I see the ocean, I attribute it to God. I aspire to create in His vein, trying feebly to emulate His perfection. He haunts my decisions and the rules of His church guide me. And I have faith He will help me.

Drew's hand moves from mine back to his lap. His legs are crossed, his knees knocking together.

Father Kimball is still going strong with no sign of slowing. The rancor of the audience rising with his words, each amen growing in fervor until the parish almost sounds Baptist.

"Go," I whisper in Drew's ear.

Gordon's eyes shift. Drew looks from me to his father, and his fidgeting stops.

I sneer at St. Catherine.

Maybe she wasn't insane. Maybe she was brilliant. A master manipulator and con artist who, recognizing her

lowly status in life, realized at a young age the perfect escape, and praying on the superstitions and fears of her brethren, masterfully elevated her lowly stature as the twenty-fifth child of a peasant to that of a saint.

I return to my churchgoing pose – eyes on the pulpit, lips moving in sync with the audience – while inside I think of Drew holding tight beside me and pray for the sermon to end.

“...I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins. Amen.”

A glorified united “Amen” from the audience and the pews begin to empty into the day. Drew runs ahead of the throng and into the anteroom before everyone else. I gather Drew’s sweater and trail behind Gordon and Addie.

St. Catherine’s is set into the hills of Laguna and overlooks the Pacific. The morning is quintessential Southern California spring gorgeous – the ocean stretched to a seam of blue sky, a light breeze gently swirling magnolia and jasmine in the air.

Gordon herds us to the car. He needs to sleep. He works tonight and Drew has a Little League game this afternoon which only allows him a couple hours to rest.

Frozen smiles, polite nods, a few princess waves and we’re in the car and on our way.

A beautiful day. A beautiful family.

I’m happy to pretend.

2



Gordon's home.

Like a silent alarm, I jolt awake, alerted by a presence I don't see or hear. Nine years have honed my senses so I'm aware of him even before he pulls onto our street or into the garage.

The door to our room, left unlatched so he won't wake me, pushes open and the smell of beer and something feminine that's not me haunts his almost silent footsteps. I peer through slits to see the numbers on the clock – six, five, eight.

His shift ended an hour ago. The drive takes twenty minutes. Familiar disappointment and hurt well behind my veil of feigned sleep.

I struggle to keep my breath even so I won't feel compelled by pride to confront him or humiliated by shame

when I don't. Though the shame decimates me just the same.

The safe opens, and his gun and holster clunk softly as they're laid inside, then the dial clicks secure. His watch, wallet, and badge are placed on the bureau. There's a sigh as he sits in the chair beside the dresser and removes his Bates boots. My eyelids glow with soft light as the closet door opens and the boots are placed in the precise row of shoes beneath his hanging clothes. The toes are out and the tips aligned. Across the spread of carpet, my shoes mirror his, aligned just as precisely – men's shoes and women's shoes faced off in perfect ranks, prepared to advance against each other in an epic battle.

His trousers and shirt slide down the dry cleaning chute, his undershirt, boxers, and socks down the laundry chute. The door closes, and despite my efforts, my heart pounds. If the drawer opens to retrieve his pajamas, it will be okay.

Naked footfalls on the carpet. I can't tell which way they travel.

The sheet pulls open, and as the draft whips across my skin, my mind races. I need to decide whether to resist. It's a complicated question. One for which there isn't time.

He grunts more than speaks his disapproval at my grotesqueness, and already, tears fill my eyes. Then, before I can blink them away, his hands grab beneath my arms and I'm half carried, half dragged, from the bed and dropped to the floor.

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I land on my knees and palms, but fall flat when my pajama bottoms are wrenched from my hips. With one hand, he rips them from my ankles, with the other, he rolls me to my back.

My eyes blink rapidly to bring the moment into focus. He's on his knees, his chest looming over me. His beard, blonder than his rusty hair, breaks the smooth line of his jaw. His mouth is set in a sneer, and I wince at his hatred. His eyes, during the day, light as glass, are dilated and dark and scan my body to assess how much more I've disintegrated.

"Gordon, please," I manage, my hands instinctively flying in front of me to cover my face. They're too slow, and heat rises to fill the void where the sting of his palm was a second before.

I bite back the next protest and the hurt and every sound in between as he enters me, his erection at half mast – the alcohol, my repulsiveness, and the fact he performed minutes earlier with someone else making the encore challenging.

"Fuck with me and you get fucked," he says as he pounds against me.

My mind spins to figure out the offense I've committed. For three months, he's been good; we've been good. I've been so careful.

It hurts.

His hands wedge beneath my butt to assist the hammering. “Fat. Disgusting and fat,” he says as he grabs my excess skin so hard I cry out. I grasp at him to dislodge his grip, my left hand latching onto his shoulder, my right swiping his cheek below his eye with a nail before finding his chest.

The reaction causes him to pinch harder, turning the flesh in his clamped fist.

I remove my hands, bite back the next cry, and pray for it to end.

He slips out, and fear pools in my throat. I reach to reinsert him, but it’s too late.

“Fucking, disgusting cow.” The blow to my ribs is much harder than the one delivered to my face, which is how I know he realizes what he’s doing. A bruise beneath my shirt won’t be seen.

I roll and try to curl, but his left hand cuffs my wrists above my head and his right clamps down on my neck. I gag and my eyes bulge, and the memory of a year ago returns with sheer terror. He grins more than smiles, lightens his grip slightly so air whistles into my lungs and, with renewed strength, thrusts violently back into me to finish the job.

I lay gasping for air, but otherwise unmoving.

When he’s done, he removes himself, delivers a brutal departing kick to my thigh, and stumbles toward the bathroom. A second before the door closes, something

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light and hard is thrown beside me, the corner nicking my ear.

“Lie to me again and I’ll fucking kill you,” he says. The latch clicks, and the shower starts.

Tears and semen drip as I push my trembling body to sit.

The thin morning sun through the shades allows just enough light for me to understand. Beside me on the floor is an empty tampon box.

The box had been hidden in the toiletries bag of my workout duffle. It had concealed three doses of Next Choice, otherwise known as the morning after pill. It’s the contraceptive I’ve used for the past six months. Unlike birth control pills, I can get it over the counter, and there’s no record of it for Gordon to find.

He wants more. I can’t handle what I have.

I stumble from the room, lock myself in the guest bathroom, and try to wash the past half hour from my body. The red bruises on my ribs and thigh and the finger streaks on my butt can’t be washed away, but the other evidence – my tears and his seed – I scrub until the skin is raw.

The metallic tang of blood touches my tongue, and I realize my lip is bleeding. I press a tissue to the wound to staunch the flow.

Gordon’s shower stops, and I squat in the corner, stare at the door, and wait. I rock hugging my knees to my chest – scared, nauseous, exultant – grateful I’m alive. I obsess

on my beating heart, the blood pulsing in my veins, the oxygen filling my lungs.

Until you've almost died, you don't appreciate the tenuous tether you have to life, but when you come within a breath of your mortality, suddenly you become very aware of its precariousness. And as insane as it is, and I acknowledge it's insane, I'm never so grateful for my life than the moment I realize Gordon didn't kill me.

My ribs throb, and I'm cold. I wrap a towel around my bare bottom and continue to wait.

Fear does a strange thing to time – a minute or an hour, I can't be sure – but a door different than the one I'm listening for opens, and I leap from my huddle and dash into the hallway.

“Mommy...”

My hand slaps over Addie's mouth so hard my towel disengages and drops to the floor, and instantly, my baby starts to cry. My hand muffles the noise, and I pray Gordon doesn't hear. I carry Addie back to her room and mule kick the door closed. I run to the far corner where her stuffed animals crowd on a beanbag and set her down, pulling her to me to calm her.

“Shhh,” I soothe, as I pray she won't begin to wail. Her eyes are wide with hurt and fear.

“I'm sorry, sweetie,” I say and stroke her red curls.

She whimpers, and my heart breaks.

“Why you do that?” she asks.

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I shake my head, unsure if the gesture is because I can't explain, or because I'm too ashamed to explain, or because the explanation is too burdensome for a four-year old.

"I didn't want you to wake Daddy," I answer honestly.

Her head tilts slightly then rights itself, satisfied with the explanation. "I need to go potty." Her tears have stopped, and she seems to have already moved past the moment.

I take her hand and lead her silently back to the bathroom, retrieving my towel sarong as we go.

I sit beside her as she does her deed.

She looks sleepily at my face. "Why you bleeding?" she asks, her shoulders sloped in boredom as she waits for her bladder to remember why it woke her.

A question with no answer.

3



"Eat," Gordon says, "You need to be out the door in half an hour."

My body protests as I push to sit up against the pillow. He hands me a plate with a slice of whole wheat toast and a soft boiled egg.

He doesn't mention the reason I'm in the guest bedroom and neither do I.

It's moments like these I wonder if I'm the one who's crazy and if maybe the nightmare didn't actually happen.

He pats the comforter over my abdomen, and my battered ribs flinch at his touch reminding me with no uncertainty that the nightmare was, in fact, real.

"Morning, son," he says with a celebratory grin, as though his earlier performance were a glorious triumph of

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baby-making to be rejoiced. On his cheek is a red scratch barely an inch long, a pitiful testament to my lack of resistance.

This is how it goes, an unexpected explosion after months of calm. Always, just as I start to relax and believe I'm safe, just as life resumes its hum and I'm lulled into believing it wasn't as bad as I remember or that it isn't going to happen again – that he's changed, I've changed, we're good now – bam! It happens again, worse than I remember, always scarier and worse.

Addie bursts into the room. “Daddy, youw’re home!”

Gordon scoops the galloping four-year old into his arms, plants a kiss on top of her red curls, then twirls her back to the ground.

Addie’s feet touch the carpet, and she spins to me. “Mowrning,” she says as she jumps onto the bed and wraps a hug around my neck, then pulls back, her freckled face widening into a huge grin. “I got you a bewrthday pwresent.” And as quickly as she appeared, she vanishes.

Gordon sits on the bed beside me and places his hand on my belly. “I'd be happy with another girl as well,” he says, and I will myself not to tremble.

Addie’s back. In her hands is a lump wrapped in taped-together magazine pages.

“Open it. Open it,” she says, her energy buzzing like a hornet in heat.

I peel off the wrapping.

“I made it myself.”

I hold up the long strip of yellow and blue plaid flannel. It’s about five feet long and varies in width from a few inches to a foot. I recognize it as a piece of one of Addie’s baby blankets.

“It’s beautiful.”

“It’s a scawrf.”

“Oh.”

“For in case you get smudges again.”

Addie’s eyes sparkle, Gordon’s recede, and mine fill as I swallow the emotions back inside. I didn’t think she remembered. I hoped she’d forgotten.

Scotch tape patches the edges of the scarf where it frayed.

If I speak, the tears will escape, so instead I nod and wrap the soft gift around my neck as the memory replays – almost exactly a year ago, my life darkening as Gordon strangled me. Then after, the “smudges” – swollen red, bruised blue, vermilion green, then jaundice yellow – a month of color changes ringing my throat before they disappeared.

“How you get smudges?” Addie asks.

Gordon pats his thigh, and Addie climbs on board and wraps her pink arms around his neck.

“Sometimes Ad, someone gets real mad or real sad,” he says, “and by accident they hurt themselves. And that’s

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what happened to your mommy, but then your daddy showed up and stopped her, and she got all better.”

A thousand jolts of electricity couldn't shock me more.

I stare at my husband as he spins his horrible tale, my fear and shame teaming up to squelch the pride and outrage that rise like a fist in my throat.

Your father strangled me. Your father tried to kill me. Your father is insane. The smudges are from his arm wrapping around my neck and squeezing so hard I couldn't breathe.

My mouth doesn't move.

Addie sits on his knee, her left hand on his massive shoulder. Her right pokes the dimple on his chin, and she studies him with a hero worship that can't be shattered with the truth.

Dragging footsteps then the shaggy head of Drew appears, followed by his spindly body.

He plops himself onto the foot of the bed.

“Mowrning, Dwrew,” Addie says, “You see what I got Mom for hewr bewrthday?” She points to the scarf as I start to unwrap it.

“Youw're not gonna weawr it?”

“Of course I am.” I rewrap the boa, my neck sweating in protest.

“It's a cutup blanket,” Drew says.

“It's a scawrf.”

“It's stupid.”

“At least I got hewr something.”

Drew toes the ground.

“Time to get dressed,” I announce, shifting the tides. Addie trots off, and Drew shuffles behind her.

"Eat," Gordon says. "Eating for two."

With another kiss to my belly, he follows them out.

This is how it goes, the initial shock absorbed like a wave, disappearing in the chaos of the day – ignored, pushed aside – remembered in every breath and bruised movement, but overwhelmed by the responsibilities of life, buzzing in the shadows of my mind and creating a cloudy numbness that, by day's end, will progress into paralyzing fear.

The pattern's so familiar it's like *déjà vu* before it's happened.

For the next few weeks, I'll obsess on preventing another attack, catering to Gordon like he's a king – loving him and worshipping him with abject devotion. I will work out, wear sexy lingerie, attempt to be more beautiful than I am. I will smile and purr, forsaking my dignity, my pride, and any sense of self that remains, all in a vain attempt to prevent it from happening again.

Like now, though I'm nauseous, my system wrecked and in no condition for food, I force the breakfast Gordon's given me down my bruised throat in an effort to please him.

This will go on for a while, perhaps a few weeks, until exhausted, I give up in despair, slipping into an antipathy

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so deep that a chill shudders my spine to remember it. Waking up, breathing, existing becomes a chore – bathing, grooming, eating, out of the question.

It is a dangerous time – a time of feeling nothing, wanting nothing – a time when I'm no longer afraid. So I tempt fate, taunt Gordon and my mortality with sloven disregard, inviting and inciting my own destruction.

Two years ago, I accidentally-purposely left the stove on and nearly burned down the house. Another time, I half-intentionally released my parking brake taking out a parking meter and the trunk of my car. And a year ago, I had an affair – Russian Roulette with five bullets in the chamber.

I choke down the last piece of toast, closing my eyes and willing it to stay put.

If I survive, if I don't destroy myself, eventually Addie and Drew will bring me back from the ledge, and thoughts beyond the present will begin to break through as I think of their future and what will happen to them if I don't pull it together and figure out how to make things right. And as the bruises fade, my resolve will grow, and I will become determined to reclaim my life.

Gordon senses this, instinctively knowing when I begin to regain my strength.

As we lie in bed, my head spinning with thoughts of escape, he will turn to me. "Jill, you know how much I love you."

I will nod.

"And if I ever lost you..." His voice will trail off and he will shake his head, then he will look at me fully so I can witness the veracity in his eyes. "...I'd go crazy."

He is crazy. I already know this.

"You won't leave me," he will say. "You wouldn't do that? Do that to me and the kids?"

And my heart will twist in terror for Addie and Drew.

This is how it will happen. This is why I've stayed.

I set the empty plate on the nightstand, and numb and sore, hobble toward our bedroom.

I limp as I walk and try to force my left leg to bend, but the battered muscles refuse to cooperate.

Each step aches. My pelvis is bruised, and my ribs pulse so acutely I wonder if they're broken. Halfway there, I stumble into a gimpy run, lunging for the bathroom and getting there just in time to vomit my efforts into the bowl.

I flush away the evidence, and my head spinning, pull myself to the seat. I rest my forehead against the cool edge of the vanity. Below me, the trash can holds the empty tampon box, and the pain intensifies as my breaths deepen with despair. I can't be pregnant. I'm already at my breaking point.

Gordon's hand on my neck was a warning, its loosening, a show of mercy. I close my eyes and feel his fingers tightening, the thin stream of air whistling to my lungs.

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If I stay, he will kill me. If I leave, he'll destroy Addie and Drew. This is the impossible catch-22 I'm left with.

There's a third possibility, but I pretend I don't recognize it. I delude myself into believing my situation is typical and the obvious solutions apply – either stay and work on our marriage or call it quits, get a divorce, and become a single parent with shared custody.

But like an itch I'm afraid to scratch for fear it will fester and grow, I know the truth. This is not a normal troubled marriage and the obvious solutions don't apply, and so, no matter how much I try to ignore it or deny it, the third option persists. I turn from it, close my ears to it, drape it in a sheet – but like an elephant in the room, it cannot be disguised – it smells, it bellows, it takes up too much space.

NO! I scream. I refuse to acknowledge it, consider it. I push it back. It doesn't budge.

I pull on my clothes and turn on the faucet to drown it out.

Run, it whispers.

I apply my makeup, a heavy coat of foundation and a deep shade of lipstick to conceal the truth.

Take the kids and run. Hide where he can't find you.

Leave my job, my home, my parents?

I can't... I won't...

He'll kill you; he'll destroy them.

"Jill, let's go," a holler from downstairs.

SUZANNE REDFEARN

Mercifully, the choice will have to wait. Like all the times before, at this moment, my focus is on survival – survive this moment, this hour, this day.

"Jill!"

On shaky legs I stand, my time to decide is up.

#

Drew's lunch is packed and sits on the counter above his Angel's backpack that sits on the floor.

Gordon walks from the hallway wearing the off duty uniform worn by most of the cops in the department – white t-shirt, dark Levis 501s, and a blue windbreaker that conceals his Glock.

He pulls a banana from the stainless steel banana hanger and walks to the door. He's going to work out then he'll return to sleep a few hours before spending the rest of the day with Addie. And this afternoon, he'll coach Drew and the Laguna Beach Indians.

"Game's at six," he reminds me, his tone laced with warning.

I nod.

The door closes behind him, and I breathe.

I comb Addie's red curls, though they spring instantly back to an unruly mop, and finish just as the front door opens, letting in the crisp morning air along with my mom.

"Morning," my mom says, and that's all it takes.

Addie bolts to my leg, and the tremor before the eruption begins. The quivering starts with her lip then

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moves outward to her chin and cheeks, culminating in a blood curdling wail as she clings to my skirt to prevent my departure.

Drew pulls on his backpack and watches unimpressed. When we get in the car, he'll rate it on the Addie Richter scale. Friday was mild, only a six. Today's revving up to be a nine.

My mom walks past us and pours herself a glass of orange juice. Tantrum consoling isn't in her job description nor in her skill set. She sits at the counter sipping her juice and paging through the latest edition of *Redbook*.

I pry Addie's hands from my skirt and almost escape, but she lunges back sending a jolt of pain through my injured ribs.

"Damn it," I snap.

My mom scowls, annoyed that my expletive interrupted her reading.

"Addie, honey, you know Mommy needs to go to work," I try, though my stressed voice hardly conveys the sympathetic plea I was going for. My ribs throb, and the clock ticks.

Addie latches on tighter and screams louder, and I don't have time for this. Drew's going to be late, I'm going to be late. I wrench myself free from my sobbing daughter, grab Drew by the hand, and drag him out the door.

As we drive, the stress ebbs, and I glance in the mirror to see Drew sitting quietly in the backseat. His mop of

sandy hair hangs past his forehead and curls around his ears. His blue eyes are like Gordon's, his long eyelashes are mine. Since he turned eight, he no longer sits in his car seat, so my view of him is limited to his eyes which stare solemnly forward toward the road and the reluctant destination of school.

“Morning,” I say.

He smiles for the first time of the day, an anemic grin with no teeth.

“Red or blue?” I ask.

“Red.”

He always picks red, because red almost always wins.

We start to count. This morning blue cars are in fashion and I pull to an early lead, but then I miss a few, and when we pull into the drop off lane of his school, we are even. He unbuckles his seatbelt as a teacher drives past in a small red Mini Cooper.

“You win,” I say.