

The Least She Can Suffer

What she once basked in terrifies Elizabeth now; she will take it, it would be cruel not to take it, the two-hour phone call of tears and despair from a friend over a break-up, a loss of a parent, a betrayal of another friend, events that break crucially into our stuffing, the soft inner workings of human malfunction, but it scares her; her once touched, once hopeful voice false while her unflinching, unbearable sound good judgment comforts the human; what was once alive as she spoke convulses inside her converting compassion into varnished ornate caskets, words that hold soulless solace. An archaic throwback to another time in her life, a time when she innocently believed she was effective; still, she knows exactly what to say, so she says it. The heartfelt thank-you, “You never *judge*, you just listen,” means nothing. Less than nothing: she doesn’t want it anymore, associates nothing with it but her own pain. At times, when she feels lost, weak or unable to cope, she wonders why, no matter what happens, she endures? Why is she always the last one left standing? But not for too long because the inherent fabric of endurance is stability, transfixed.

She is not cruel she is numb. The death of a ten-day-old baby. The drunk driver who killed an innocent; the young college woman raped on campus on her way home from the library; the wreckage of homes in a storm back east called *Sandy*: the lack of power. After a while, they all hit Elizabeth, fifty-five years old, the same way; in other words, they bounce. She is skin, once porous, now shellac, unable to absorb. She is not as raw as she once was, nor is she as giving; that had proved, at times, an excruciating way to live.

Her son, Theodore, eleven years old, Theo for short, gets the best of her now, and this is easier. So this early Saturday morning, November 3, 2012, the week of the above-mentioned events – ten days after the birth and three days after the death of the baby of a man who works for her in her bakery, Elizabeth readies to go to the funeral like a trouper, like a saint because it is the right thing to do. Theo, at first wanted to come with her, and then said, “I can’t, it would be too sad.” Instead, he decided to clean his room to earn \$5.00 to contribute to the collection she had taken up (\$464.00) and put in the card she bought, signed by everyone. It was the least she could do.

Throwing Lego parts into a beat-up shoebox already filled with hundreds of pieces, Theo says, “It’s nice that you’re going,” and she feels a pang of phoniness – simply hearing that word *nice*, yet allows that he sees her in that *light*. Meticulously put together Lego projects that fell apart because of one loose piece, the remains seem to multiply on their own like magic at night while they sleep; Elizabeth, constantly on Theo to pick them up, is tired of stepping on them, crying out in pain.

Dressed in her gray suit she only wears to funerals, her forest green silk blouse and uncomfortable dress shoes she doesn’t wear for anyone anymore, mistakenly thinking she

is ready for this brutal morning, she leans down to say good-bye; as she has always done since Theo was a baby, her fingers tight in a gentle fist, she rubs his cheek for a few seconds until she feels the heat it generates, the comfort of the warmth. “True,” she said. “Too sad for you.” She agreed. “Stay.”

A little girl with worn sneakers that light up when her feet secure ground and a pale blue dress that twirls when she spins crouches in a pew three back from the coffin. It looks like a child’s toy chest, simple, painted white with small gold handles. Jorgina, eight-years old, has never seen a coffin this small. Neither has Elizabeth, watching her. Both are afraid to venture up and look, though others have. Both watched the two young men – along with the father of the dead baby – carry it in and place it on a small stand. And open the lid. God (and the people who have had the courage to go up and look, including the mother of this child – now sobbing in her husband’s arms) knows what horror lies in it.

No matter how Elizabeth tries to re-imagine God, the entity introduced to her as a Catholic child materializes immediately, though Catholicism is no longer her faith. The greater good and never-ending abundance of the Universe is her *god* now. This belief, she is sure, brought her son into the world. Along with the collective prayers of family, friends, and even strangers, random customers as well as regulars of her bakery who believed in any form of *god* allowed her greatest gift. She vows: there is no way I am looking in that coffin.

The little girl vows she will.

Is the child smiling or crying? Elizabeth, whose tears poured right out of her eyes the instant she saw the little box, cannot tell. The Hispanic girl, smiling now, intrigues her, as the child is intrigued by the white doll's box that holds no such thing. Jorgina wants to look, peeks, takes a few steps towards it, and then retreats back into the pew. No one is paying attention to either person.

It is a small church, basically in a strip mall kind of place with doors that open wide in the front and rear, Christian, but not Catholic, and, unlike any church Elizabeth has ever been in before. This is the funeral of a Hispanic baby; Elizabeth cannot speak the language. She is here because she is fond of the father; even if she weren't, she would be here representing his place of employment and relating as a parent. Theo, hard won, born to her late in life, at times, she has thought that she appreciates him more than other parents appreciate their children: because it had taken her five years and every obstacle that could come up came up. Everything that could go wrong went wrong until she stayed in a relationship with science, and then blatantly communed with pure faith. Her head falls in prayer.

"Forgive me Father for I have sinned," she prays to a God that she, in theory, no longer believes in. The man in the paintings who loves her no matter what she does; forgives her, as long as she is truly sorry for her sins.

In the aisle again, twisting at her waist, watching her dress swirl, scowling clearly, Jorgina plays out her own drama in her own world. She gets closer. Almost. A few steps, she stops. Her heel lifts. Her sequin-covered toecap twinkles pink – like a spring, as opposed to winter Christmas tree; her calf strengthens into a strong muscle, frozen, then relaxes and weakens as she withdraws again. It reminds her of a treasure chest she

coveted at a yard sale once, but her mother said \$10.00 was too much. Her mother scolds her often about her desires, telling her that she is never happy and that as soon as she gets something she wants, instantly she desires another thing.

“No, mama, for real, this is all I want!” she pleaded.

“For now!”

The seller wouldn't go down; he claimed it was hand-made for his own daughter, grown now, so her mother said, “Walk,” to her father. As they did, loudly so the man could hear, she said, “Yesterday's treasure is today's junk, everyone knows you bargain!”

The man yelled after them, “One person's trash is another person's treasure!”

As Jorgina gets closer, “Forgive me, for I have sinned,” Elizabeth tries again, this time omitting the Father. Jorgina retreats. Quickly, another child, smaller, maybe four-years old races up, peeks in, makes a horrific face, and then runs down the aisle and out the back door to play with all the other little children, so fast if you weren't paying attention, and only the woman and the little Hispanic girl were, you wouldn't have seen the look of fright on her face. Inciting a neck crane out into the aisle from Jorgina.

If she looks then I will, Elizabeth vows.

Struck by the other child's audacity, Jorgina does it this time. Boldly, then hesitatingly she moves to the coffin, takes a cold look, then runs away, laughing softly.

“What are these children *seeing*?” Elizabeth thinks. Children. Children of all ages run around before the service officially begins, maneuvering between parents, using them as a leg to hide behind before they take off again. Struggling late in the *female-cycle* of her life to conceive, fertility drugs deep in her bloodstream, the self administered needle

in her thigh freshly stinging, Elizabeth drove to work – every day – through a Hispanic neighborhood, noting that, unlike other neighborhoods in town where you saw a few here and there, this one was filled with – more accurately, she thought *swarming* – with children. She drops her head and feels, in the strain in the nape of her neck, a rush of hope.

The next minute, the service begins and all children with legs able to carry them scatter. There is no altar, just a podium, and a microphone. A translator stands behind the pastor. Song after song in un-translated Spanish, everyone sings and Elizabeth stands respectfully, thinking about the wide face of the little girl who laughed. Years of working on her feet have ruined them; they swell with ache on the uncarpeted cement, but she stands, tempted to sit, coming up with excuses why it would be okay: she could concentrate better, give herself over more to the service if she were off her feet. She remains standing. This is the least she can suffer. Thinking about the little girl, she decides to smile was the girl's bravery, the translation of her fear into action. The laughter: the relief.

The pastor mostly talks about the baby being with God. God is in control. God chose to return the baby to "Him in heaven." This (along with the sexual abuse scandals, the blatant discrimination against females, the refusal to accept the use of condoms while people die of aids) is the kind of behavior that self-excommunicated Elizabeth from what she can only view as a man-made hoax. People, she has noticed, who have taken this job on earth can rarely resist the temptation to, knowing they have an audience, get a bigger message across; this pastor is no exception. He, she decides, cannot help himself: this

bitter, specific funeral becomes about people in general, about directions to live their lives so that they, too, can be with God. The parents are part of his flock: *his*. If they don't believe him, they can have no peace.

“If we want to be with those He has already chosen we must live *good lives*.”

Writhing, trying to remove the hurt as quickly as it is being inserted, the mother weeps this way and that, unable to find a bearable position to grieve in the comfortless pew. Crying into her husband, yanking away and crying into the end of the pew; finally she drops to her knees, cries forward and into her own arms. Elizabeth, stiff and dumb to his words, thinks: “He is nothing but a religious thug with his religious threat.” Though he has been at the parent's side, he tells everyone, “Every day through all of this. The way,” he continues, “a friend of mine was by my side when I lost *my* brother.”

For the next eighteen minutes (the father will speak for seven), he will tell his own story about the loss of an adult brother, and not a ten-day-old baby. Elizabeth desperately looks for the laughing girl, but she is outside now, with most of the other children, playing in the parking lot and waiting for the next phase: “There are food and drinks for all in the Social Room,” the pastor prefaced before he began, mapping out the service like a journey through a place anyone in that room could actually stand to go.

Compassionate. Generous. These are words that Elizabeth's friends use to describe her. Still. Which surprises her: what is seeping through; they see, what? Before trying to impregnate herself, she saved in shoeboxes, maybe because they named her, measured her as “the nicest person in the world,” letters, cards and thank you notes: without you, I wouldn't have been able to make it; you are an *angel* on this earth; if you lived in a different time you would be a *shaman*; knowing you *enriched* my life. But she always

understood that she thrived on it; her charitable deeds tethered to her insatiable desire to be revered.

In her fourth year (just before giving herself over to universal *faith*) of her five year journey to get pregnant and give birth to her son, she had grown to view the once treasured correspondences as her death sentence, as well as a sin: truly good people don't think about the results, crave them or solicit them.

Desperate, she burned every note, card and letter to prove worthy of a new life; destroyed the proof of her substitute for not living her own life, for being lonely and not wanting to answer the door when someone knocked, then answering anyway because it was better than being bone dry alone, and then feeding off the salvia of the praise of others. For aspiring to be a mere angel on this earth. Now, she doesn't have that kind of time on her hands.

There is no steeple on this church, but there is stained glass with the entire cast of familiar characters: Christ with blood dripping, his mother, Mary, and God the Father permit the light, transmit the warm colors bathing the space: purples, greens, yellows and red. Awash in their tinted glow that warms the otherwise cold room Elizabeth finds relief: she was born a sinner; always able to picture that soft, gray spot called *original sin* sitting on the soul she imagines floating inside, near her heart. She wrote in her first prayer book with the white leather cover on the mauve inside page: *I love God, not the devil*. What else can she do but imagine these things?

Now the father of the baby stands at the microphone. Many times during the baby's ten days on this earth, Elizabeth had checked in with him. This baby, Bella, was sick all along. Had two heart attacks and a seizure. He told her, when she asked one day how he

was doing (she realizes only now that he had come to work off and on because he was desperate for money) that he had to be strong for his wife, who was “falling apart.” Unintentionally abstaining engagement, Elizabeth unconsciously assumed that he was *not*. Delicately he explains – pure animal strength is getting him through this – how every day he had gone to see his baby daughter (some days before work) he’d been in pain because *she* was in pain. He says he would have – he hesitates, the translator hesitates . . . “Given my own *life* to give her a life.” The tears stream again, straight from Elizabeth’s eyes. She had not thought to bring tissues.

In Spanish translated into English for her and a very few others, he continues, “At the hospital, when the doctor asked me if I was ready to take the baby off . . .”

The Wednesday morning he called to tell Elizabeth that the baby died, that was all he said. “My baby girl died this morning.” Not one word about a *decision*.

“When they asked me about *disconnecting the baby* . . .”

Knowing they had never said it that way, powerless to fight the loss in translation, hands fixed to the pew, Elizabeth, her face drenched, nose running, frees her arm to wipe it with her fancy sleeve, now green with snot; the young girl outside laughing, playing . . . the baby unhooked forever from earthly existence with laughter at terror, forever cut off from the humanity of the parents who can do nothing but attempt to balance selflessness and selfishness, Elizabeth, Theo waiting for her at home and not some God forsaken place at the end of her life – if, that is – she lives it according to people like this pastor’s version of God, asks for forgiveness (from who, from where, she doesn’t even know anymore only that *in here* it must be somewhere) for having driven through that Hispanic

neighborhood thinking: *It's not fair how hard I'm trying, and these people just constantly keep getting pregnant and having babies . . .*

Her eggs, the carriers of her inspired dream, were “old,” one of the many doctors she employed said. Finally, tired of looking at her belly with guilt for having waited too long, visualizing eggs ransacked and dried up and trying to bargain with *Him*, promise *Him* anything if *He* will only give her a child, she went to a hypnotherapist. Her thinking: the two of them together in her subconscious, they could summon her baby. Instead the woman, a careful and gentle soul, said, “Oh, no, dear, we can't do that. All we can do is talk to the unborn baby, ask the baby if he or she *wants* to come into the world.” Desperate, Elizabeth succumbed willingly to a transcendent sleep she felt aware that she was in – until she awoke to find she had been *elsewhere*. “Do you remember what the baby said?” the hypnotherapist asked, beaming.

“The baby said *yes*, it's coming,” she sobbed.

Two months and \$17,000 dollars later, an egg donor and a sperm donor embryo embedded in the walls of her womb “took,” and the ultrasound – the thriving off-white fetal mass nesting in the black splotch surrounded by cosmic looking white and grayish material floating at the tip of the triangle in the photo purified Elizabeth, erased regret. Later, a C-section she had resisted until they told her she wasn't even dilating, and it would be unsafe to leave him inside any longer, Theo successfully unearthed from her abdomen, she made one demand: “No eye drops for infection until we meet eye-to-eye.” Nothing had taken her as off-guard: the infant looked at her as if he had been around forever; as if she were the one just born.

The father finishes. His head falls all the way back, and not down. Already he is looking for Bella elsewhere. But the line to see him and his wife begins at the coffin and Bella, what is left of Bella, is in it. Still not knowing (though she had taken her second vow) if she will or will not look, she gets in line. She knows she will hug the wife hard, though they have never met. She knows she will not succumb to the priest's smiling face and hearty handshake afterwards (she sees him at the door - hears him, almost jolly, telling people to go and eat, have some food). What she does not know is what she will see when she peers into the box, or how it will affect her because she senses she will look. Because the children looked. Because the least she can suffer is to *look*.

Overripe with change, corrupt with fear, she does. But it is a quick look.

In her hot car, she craves Theo. Her first grade teacher Sister James Immaculate explained, God is one *invoked*: sacrificed to. No. None of this is true: early religion, late religion and hypnotherapy, are all bunk, all myth, and this dead baby no more said she wanted to leave than Theo said he was coming. She is a vilely lucky woman. She starts the engine and then sees the family outside with the hearse. She forgot about the card!

She has to give him the card. Through a co-worker, she heard he didn't have enough to pay for this small funeral. She gets out and moves toward the family but stops. They put the coffin in the hearse; she cannot conceive how he had managed work, how he will be back to work on Monday, which he will. She cannot move. She cannot feel her feet or imagine interrupting. A bawling baby in the arms of a mother gnaws hungrily on her forearm until a bottle in the child's mouth stops the crying. Elizabeth sobs again. There is no right time to do this. She errs on the side of wrong; she waits until the back door of

the black hearse is shut, then her feet move a few steps closer. This is not the time. She thinks of giving it to the pastor to give to him, then – because she can't resist her desire to look him in the face with her own make-up smeared face, stepping forward, she places it in his hand. He is grateful, polite, but she feels she is an interloper, as if he doesn't truly know her, and something lifts.

In truth, the father was preoccupied.

In spite of her blistered feet and the cold seeping through her thin dress-jacket, starving, she crosses the parking lot and enters the “Social Room” hoping there is something there she can eat – probably all homemade that she has never tried before. The sadness is gone in this room. Long folding tables of the food line every wall as women ladle it out onto the plates of people already in line. In the center, folding tables and chairs host the guests, eating and enjoying. Unheard of in her business, she will close tomorrow in honor of Bella; instead, take Sunday off and spend it with Theo. Awkward, not knowing a living soul, she holds her white heavy-duty Styrofoam paper plate in both hands while someone dishes scrambled eggs with beans and a pitch black sauce onto it, then stands lost until she sees a seat with the children. She takes the chair next to Jorgina – her plate full of sweets – sitting upright, bragging.

“It just looked like a dead doll,” Jorgina says, kicking her beat up princess sneaker against the leg of the chair. “It wasn't even the baby, you know that right! They put a *pretend* baby in there for today.”

“Where *is* the real baby?”

“I don't know,” she said, shoving a piece of fatty, sugary Mexican pastry in her mouth.

Only one true thing there that day, Elizabeth had to face it, so she looked. And what she saw never leaves her, without a clear picture of it in her mind, except the wildness of the lack of hair under the bonnet, the moment's silence in Bella's mouth un-cried out, the density of blue hue in her cold eyes, the glossiness of her gray skin salvaging one final brazen expression: death. Later, trying to conjure it up, Elizabeth can't, only some image that slides away and then back as a hard unreal thing. But it is similar to what the child saw: like Elizabeth's dolls when she was little, the body soft, stuffed and rag-doll like, but the face shiny plastic and painted. Like a face that could break and, back then, when she was a child, there were places called Doll Hospitals, where her mother took Elizabeth's own Baby Big Eyes when, dropping her on the cement sidewalk, she cracked. She hadn't thought about that in years, but thinking about it that day on her way home, she cried. She cried because barely anything was handmade anymore. Because Doll Hospitals were a thing of the past, and that was a shame because it had been so comforting, knowing it existed every time she drove by, just in case something happened – because dolls were not disposable, they were irreplaceable, and sobbed about that, as well.