

Transubstantiation

You know you can always get free booze on a Sunday morning if you go to Mass. Do you really want to wait until after noon and have to pay for the stuff? This was my father talking, I could hear him clear as if he was in the room with me. I wondered if I had also woken up dead.

“You aren’t even Catholic” I muttered into my damp pillow. I felt fine for now, but I knew this was just the palliative effect of being half-conscious. As soon as I got up, the headache would press bony fingers behind my eyes, my stomach would start shadowboxing, my intestines would slither and squirm. I wanted to sleep it off, wake up when my body had magically restored itself. Instead, I heard the voice again.

Nope, but I’m sure you remember your way around the rectory. Hah! This old joke. He always laughed as my mother gathered us up in our scratchy church clothes, sleepy eyed and scabby kneed kids who wanted to stay home too. “I know y’all are big fans of the body of Christ but why do you gotta worship from his asshole? Hahah!” “Asshole,” my mom would repeat in a whisper, like a plea, like a prayer.

I pushed myself up on my elbows and blinked, looked for the voice. I was alone. On the nightstand next to me was the half glass I’d left there the night before. I liked to know that I could keep myself from finishing the bottle. And it was nice to have something to wake up to.

I drank it in one gulp, almost too much for my mouth, a small drop escaping down my chin, the stale syrup clinging to my viscid teeth. I sat up the rest of the way, head back against the wall.

The voice was quiet but what it had already said joined the discord in my brain. I cleaned up and went to Mass.

What the hell was I doing here? The smell of the incense alone was enough to make me glad I'd skipped breakfast. If they burned this for the baby Jesus to cover up the smell of animals and shit, what did that say about us, lined up in these pews? There was the sitting and the standing and the kneeling, the recitation that still came almost as naturally as breathing. I shook hands and was sure I didn't want peace if it had to be delivered on the sweaty palms of strangers.

At least you get to stand in line for your little reward at the end! My father's voice again. Had he ever been in this church? How did he know what happened here? He didn't even know the right name for the place. I wondered if mom had ever made him come with her before she had us to drag here instead.

Funny that I was the drunk but your mother brought you here every Sunday morning and gave you booze. She sure got you started on the habit young. "Shut up!" I whispered aloud, fists at my temples, turning the heads of the people around me, my face florid with shame. My pew was lining up for our turn, the wafer and the wine, that despite its appearances, was now holy because it was blessed by the man at the front of the room. How many other things had I believed were special, despite my disbelieving eyes, because a man had told me they were?

I bet it tastes extra good after that stale cracker. That's how they get you. Hell they even have you drinking that same cup with all these gross fucking people. You think I was bad? At least I

had my own goddamn glass. I took the wafer, put it in my mouth, crossed myself. I walked to the wine line, to a woman I recognized as a once younger woman, her chemically floral scent a rival for the incense. She didn't seem to notice me, focused on her job, wiped the chalice, put it in my hands. I took a big gulp. Her eyes flashed her alarm and then went calm. Surely this wasn't the first time she'd seen this. Hell I'd seen her enthusiastically swill the leftover transubstantiated wine after Mass. You can't just pour Jesus' blood down the drain, it needs a body to belong to.

After the wine I didn't return to my pew. That was the trick, make sure you have all your things when you go to take communion, then instead of returning to your seat just keep walking to the back and out the door. The people around you will notice the empty space, but who cares about the ones who are left behind when you're the one leaving.

I had hoped I'd feel better outside, but the humidity licking my skin and Jesus' boozy blood and wafer body sloshing around in my stomach weren't helping. Had being one with God always felt this nauseating?

I knew I could wait around and then join the congregation for that second communion of glazed donuts and styrofoam cup coffee, but I couldn't risk the woman with the wine finally recognizing me as one of her former CCD students. I didn't want to be perceived by anyone, least of all the woman who scolded me weekly for parroting my dad's opinions about how God was just Santa Claus for adults and Catholic Children's Detention was a waste of time when I could have been practicing my jump shot.

I sided with him of course. I didn't want to be there either, clad in itchy dresses and shiny shoes that I couldn't run or climb in. Not that running or climbing was an option, just sitting, standing, kneeling, speaking only when I was told what to say and when. My sister and I went with my mom every week, and we sat with her two best friends and their kids, who became our best friends, no dads whatsoever in our pew.

After a couple of donuts as reward for being still and small in Mass, we were shuffled to a classroom to learn how to be Good Catholic Children. At six years old, I wanted to be one of them even more than I wanted to live inside Candy Castle, but I didn't want to be just good, I wanted to be perfect. I had seen what guilt looked like and I wanted no part of it. So when Sister Edith asked us to keep track of all of our sins for the week, I decided I simply wouldn't do it. Sin, that is. How hard could it be to go one week doing everything you were told?

It was a shock to my small body when I went back the next Sunday, proudly telling the class of my accomplishment, only to find out I was born an infinite knot of transgressions that I could never untangle or drop the threads for. After that I learned to read my responses to the Sisters' questions from the walls of art made by the kids rich enough to have to go to school there. I trusted that anyone who was exposed to their own shame every day knew how to speak the Sisters' language. And when that began to feel too cloistered for my thorny adolescence, I put on the caustic habits of my father's language instead.

When my surprise brother came along, my dad finally put his foot down. No son of his was going to be raised in the Catholic Church. My mom, too exhausted to argue. So that was that, once he was old enough to be fun for my dad to hang out with, no Mass, no CCD, no nuns, no

scarred knees dug painfully into wooden kneelers, just freedom. I could have had that too if I had just been born a boy.

I was sweating out all of these memories in the heat and deliberating what to do next, when I felt a buzz in my pocket. A message from my brother. A picture of my dad. Jake had been going through some of his old things, a pile of hoarded computer parts and history books and old Amway products and paraphernalia. Photos too, apparently. "You look just like him in this one," he wrote. "Probably around the same age?"

It was true, I saw. The way he leaned on the brick exterior of our old house, high forehead, cheeks already hinting at jowls, the shadow of a paunch in the stomach. The eyes especially, already so tired.

"I told you to just set fire to all that junk", I typed. "I don't look like that. He has a mustache."

Jake's quick reply: "Yeah and last time I saw you it looked like you were working on one too." I rubbed my fingertip across my upper lip, felt the fuzz coming in. I did need to take care of that.

"Fuck you" I wrote back, mumbling the words as I sent them.

A hand on my back jolted my posture upright.

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that! Is everything alright? I thought that was you when you came through for communion! I said to myself, is that little Catherine Ryan all grown up? And sure as the Lord rises on Easter Sunday it is! I can’t believe it! How are you?”

shit shit shit shit shit was all I could think through her endless greeting. The one thing I wanted to avoid. Why did I have to come here? I could have driven the extra 20 minutes to Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrows and not seen a single person I knew. Why did I still live so close to this godforsaken institution anyway?

Another, “Honey, are you alright?” snapped me out of it.

“Oh yeah, sorry, just talking to my brother about what to do with my dad’s stuff, now that he’s dead and all.” That usually shut people up. “Sorry about the cursing, I know you always hated that. It’s good to see you Mrs. Murphy, you look just the same.”

“Oh I don’t know about that. But you sure have changed. You’re all grown up now. I’m sorry to hear about your dad. I’m sure he was a good man. I hope you being back here today means we’ll see you around more often?”

I gave her an embarrassed half shrug, half wave; my tongue felt too big for my mouth. I couldn’t walk away fast enough. What had compelled me to come here in the first place? Why would I ever want to come back?

I lurched back to my car. It smelled slightly of the mildew that always seemed activated by the rain. I wasn't going to do anything about it. No one else was ever riding with me. When I sat down and put my hands on the wheel, it seemed a little wobbly. I closed one eye and that didn't help. I closed the other and that just made me dizzy. How strong were they making Jesus's blood these days?

It's after noon now, liquor stores are open for all the good churchgoing folks. You should get there before it gets too busy. This day's already shot anyway. I groaned. What was it about him that made me know I was always going to do exactly what he said?

My stomach surged. I opened my door and leaned out, letting the half-digested savior's body and blood splash onto the pavement. Fuck, I thought, wiping my mouth and driving away before the donut brigade could see my blasphemy, I really am becoming my father.