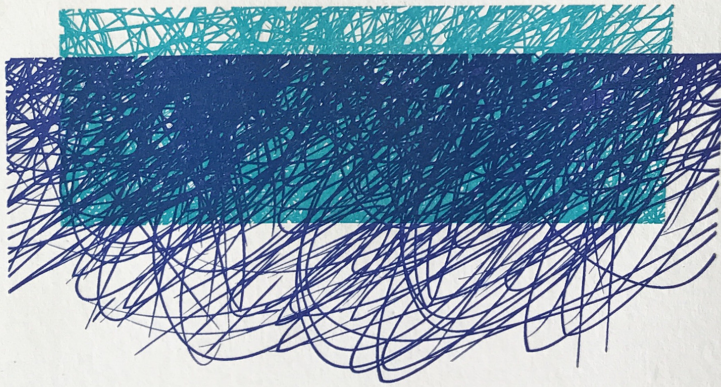




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GIVE IT UP TO JESUS

(excerpted from novel)

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GIVE IT UP TO JESUS [EXCERPT]

NIGHTLY MY MOTHER CAME to my room to read me bedtime stories of the saints. I watched her from my pillow as she leaned into the hardbound book, reading slowly, softly. The ceiling fan whirred above her head, three lights glowing around it, like the halos that crowned the saints on the page.

The stories she chose were of martyred young women; women who valued their chastity and celestial husband more than breath and blood. These women were beaten, burned, hung, decapitated. They had their eyes plucked out and their white virginal bodies dunked in boiling oil. Their heads were shaven, their limbs stretched, their goodness tried.

But their goodness won, their godliness won, my Mother would tell me. Be like Saint Cecelia. Be like Saint Lucy. Give it up to Jesus. Promise me, she would say, Promise me you'll be pure, any act of impurity makes the Blessed Mother cry. And she would kiss me and trace the blessings of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost into my forehead and lips and heart, pressing the sign of the cross into my skin.

My dreams after these stories were fearsome. A man in a black hood cut off my breasts, though they were so small and he had to saw at them with a narrow file, the way you might level a wart off the side of a finger. Jesus in a long white robe and red sash shaved off my hair in neat curving rows with an electric buzzer. My mother walked down a hall of stone columns, flanked by an eyeless Saint Lucy at her left and a boiled-red Saint Cecelia at her right. They would not look at me.

The Girl in the Photograph

There was a time when Taralynn was my friend. It was when my grandmother played bridge on Saturday mornings with the other W.O.W.s (Women of Wenceslaus) at the parish hall and my mother didn't want to leave me at home alone while she finished the night shift at Crystal Lake. Taralynn was

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FICTION

the only other girl in my catechism class, her mom sang in the choir with my mother, and so they arranged it one Sunday after mass. We were eleven.

Theirs was the biggest house in town. It was clear that Taralynn and the people who loved her lived in this house. The long mantle above the fireplace held layers of photographs of Taralynn, one perched in front of the other, all gleaming and brassy in heavy frames. She was on the walls in close-up, in silhouette, in tutus and gemstones, a little girl made up to look glamorous—and much older. Upstairs, she had a canopied bed and her own bathroom, everything in powdery pink—even the carpet. Taralynn plopped on the bed with a bounce, belly down, then sat back up and asked, “Want to see my costumes?”

She opened a closet door. Tulle and sequins and feathers in exotic colors bloomed from inside out. She pulled tutus and spandex suits from the hangers, held them out, generously, for me to pet. We spent the morning trying on the costumes. I watched how she pranced around the room, shimmying her shoulders and pouting in the mirror. I had never worn anything that bared my belly in front of someone else, but here was a neon pink halter-top that radiated bright against the whiteness of my stomach, and I had goosebumps from the air conditioning. My underwear bunched awkwardly under the sequin-lined tap shorts; the matching satin garter pinched at my thigh.

I thought that when her mom came in to call us for lunch she would be upset at the mess. But she clapped her hands and catcalled, “Get it girl!” as Taralynn spun a pirouette on the bed. Then she pulled out a big purple tackle box—bigger even than the one my Uncle Kenny kept in the bed of his pickup truck. Tiered rows of eyeshadow and blusher accorded from the box when she opened it. My mother only wore makeup on Sundays; “Just enough to be beautiful for Jesus,” she would say as she carefully blotted on light pink lipstick from a gold tube.

Taralynn went first. I sat on the edge of the bathtub as Mrs. Hershe did her up. With deliberate strokes, the Taralynn from the mantle downstairs slowly emerged—round cheeks contoured slim with terra cotta bronzer, eyes fringed heavy with mascara. Her hair—gloriously, red—teased high on her head. Then it was my turn.

I slowly hoisted myself up to sit by the sink. Mrs. Hershe stood back and looked me over. The counter was warm from the curling iron, but also it held the heat from where Taralynn had sat. Now she was in the other room changing the music.

Mrs. Hershe looked me over, squinting. “Lily, honey, you’re a winter. You got your momma’s peaches and cream complexion. That pink number you got on is doing nothing for you.” Her hands were deft, working the tangles of my hair through the curling iron, and her breath warm and soft on my cheek as she brushed on mascara with tiny, lapping strokes. She stood close and smelled of roses and something spicy, thick. She stood close and I had the urge to lean into her, to rub my cheek into the hollow at the base of her neck.

When she finished, she offered me her hand and I jumped off the counter. I almost didn’t want to look, but she was so happy and so I smiled, too.

I looked nothing of myself as I knew me. I looked like I belonged on the mantle downstairs, my red-lipped smile smiling from the walls of a house where girls were pretty and petted and wanted.

Mrs. Hershe posed us in front of the windows. I watched Taralynn from the corner of my eye, following her posturing. Hands on hips, hips jut heavy to one side, shoulders back, chest up, chin down. Blow a kiss. And Mrs. Hershe cheering “Sparkle, baby!” from behind the camera. Loving us.

I had been careful to rub away the make-up with cold cream and tissue. Mrs. Hershe thought my mother and grandmother would want to see me all done up, but already there was a clench in my stomach and I knew that they wouldn’t.

The Saints Will Keep Her

A couple of Sundays later, after mass, my mother called me downstairs. She was sitting at the kitchen table. She told me that I would no longer be going to Taralynn’s house. I would spend Saturday mornings at Crystal Lake reading to the residents with her instead. Father Phineas suggested I perform this act of charity as penance.

“Penance for what?”

"I think you know." She handed me the envelope of photographs—glossy duplicates Taralynn's mom had made from our photo session weeks ago. My mother nodded at the garbage can.

"You may put those where they belong."

I did. And later that night, when the house was still and dark, I dug them out from under the cold mounds of oatmeal, carrot peels, the morning's soggy coffee grounds. I was careful and took just one photograph from the envelope. When I got back to my room I studied it carefully by the yellowed light of the lamp.

The only other photographs I had of myself were the yearly school portraits, in which I was a girl who could just barely make eye contact with the camera, whose grandmother told her not to smile with teeth because too many of them were missing, and what ones were there were big and raggedy-edged.

Here she was, sparkling. Getting it. Rocking the camera. Or, at least, pretending to. She was a girl who wanted to be seen.

My mother was right. That girl didn't belong in this house.

Under my bed I kept a shoebox filled with holy cards—playing card sized images of the saints with eyes upturned to the sky; Christ sitting in a green field with children and lambs at his feet; the Blessed Mother looking down on the world with sorrow. These cards were given to me by Father Phineas, my catechism teachers, my grandmother's friends. They pressed them into my hand, telling me to be a good girl.

Often I would take the cards out and carefully lay them in a grid on the floor. I would whisper the litanies printed on the backsides, words that, once spoken, were to be lighted up to heaven on the wings of the angels, like a celestially-chained game of telephone.

I looked at my photograph, at the girl who was me in the photograph, and I kissed her, softly. A smudge clouded her face and I rubbed at it with the corner of my nightgown. Kneeling on the floor, I shuffled the photograph in with the holy cards and pushed the box deep under my bed.

