



Booth

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## Medjugorje

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## Medjugorje

### Abstract

In the summer of 1988, when Jake Asher was twelve, his mother traveled all the way to Yugoslavia to meet the Virgin Mary. She returned a week later, heartbroken. The Mother of God was nowhere to be found, only tourists and peddlers of holy relics.

### Keywords

religion, faith, spirituality, prayer, parents, love



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January 13, 2012

## Medjugorje

A Short Story by Charles Booth

In the summer of 1988, when Jake Asher was twelve, his mother traveled all the way to Yugoslavia to meet the Virgin Mary. She returned a week later, heartbroken. The Mother of God was nowhere to be found, only tourists and peddlers of holy relics.

Mrs. Asher had been filled with a giddy, child-like joy when she arranged to visit the small town of Medjugorje, where the Virgin Mary was said to be vacationing in those days. It was as if the dark spell cast by her husband's suicide a year earlier had finally lifted.

"I've been praying so long for this, Jake," she said, holding his hands to her chest. It surprised him how fast her heart was beating. "It'll be wonderful. Just wonderful."

But when she returned, all the pain of the last twelve months fell heavier upon her shoulders, causing Mrs. Asher to slouch as she shuffled up to her bedroom. Jake's grandmother, who had stayed with him during his mother's absence, kept her own head down as she packed her suitcase. She

left without a word, hesitating only briefly at the front door before getting in her car and driving the 12 hours back to her home in Louisiana.

That night, Jake tucked his mother into bed, noticing as he brought the sheet up to her chin a few bald spots in her normally long, blond hair. Her face looked older, thinner, than when she'd left, her voice deeper, but the strangest change came when Jake tried to hand her the rosary for her nightly prayers.

"No," she said, turning over and groaning. "Not tonight."

She had said a rosary every night since his father died, and when she finished, she fingered the beads dreamily and whispered how nice it would be to meet the Virgin Mary, like those lucky children in Fatima years ago. But the night she returned from Medjugorje, she asked Jake to leave her alone. When he shut the door, he heard it lock behind him. She stayed in her bedroom for a week. Sometimes at night, Jake heard her walking through the house scavenging food or crying out to Mary to please come save her, but during the day, everything was silent.

This being late July and the middle of summer break from school, no one suspected the depths of neglect Jake was experiencing. The boy had always been a well-behaved child, maybe a little too shy and a little too dependent on his mother—but his big, sad blue eyes were enough for most people to ignore his personal flaws. In that week inside the house without his mother's presence, he stopped bathing and stopped brushing his teeth. He didn't eat nearly enough, and those sad eyes gnawed their way deeper into his skull, so that they hid in little, shadowy caverns in his face.

He watched television, searched the cabinets for food and tiptoed into his father's long-closed home office to catch a faint wisp of the lingering Brut deodorant in the air. But on most mornings and afternoons, Jake simply hid under the dining room table and, listening to the ticking of the grandfather clock, let his boredom guide his hand into his underwear.

On a muggy Friday night, after he finished touching himself, Jake heard footsteps and the rustling of cloth approaching the dining room table. Expecting to see his mother, he hurried to wipe his belly dry with the elastic band of his underwear. He stood, his back aching from where he'd been hunched over, and, smoothing down his thick, oily hair, was

surprised to find someone other than Mrs. Asher standing before him.

It was a girl, also about twelve years old, with brown eyes and freckles scattered across her chubby, prepubescent cheeks. She wore a white robe with a blue shawl wrapped around her head. Jake blinked his eyes tight and then squinted, trying to figure out if the Virgin Mary was really standing only a few feet from him. She didn't waver or disappear. She remained close to him, like a statue, but it wasn't until he smelled the sweat on her body, the dried dirt on her feet, that he realized she was real. Small pinpricks of fear tingled up his sides, and he felt as if a block of ice had lodged itself inside his chest.

Jake took a step back and pointed down the hall.

"She's down there." Immediately, he regretted saying this. In his terror, he confused the Virgin Mary for the Grim Reaper, and he believed he'd condemned his mother to death.

The girl took a step closer, and, before he turned his head away, he thought he saw her roll her eyes.

"I'm not here to see her," she said.

The Virgin led him to his room, and she sat heavy on his bed, causing the springs to squeak. Her fingers carefully removed the shawl from her head, and she shook out the brown hair that fell to her shoulders.

"God, it's burning up in here," she said. "Why don't you shut that window and turn on some AC?"

Jake swallowed. He kept his eyes to the ground and strained to keep his legs from shaking. His fear wasn't from seeing a ghost, or possibly the touch of death she must possess, but rather from being so close to a girl his own age. He blushed, and when he looked in her direction, he found that he was unable to speak. The Virgin Mary, in her attempt to cool off, had removed her robe and sat on his bed in her white panties and a white tank top. Her back was to him. Her spine bulged down the middle of her shirt.

"Mom says we can't afford to keep the air on," he said. "My dad didn't take care of us like he should have, so we can't waste money."

The Virgin Mary let out a harsh, guttural laugh that frightened Jake.

“*Mom says.*” She mocked his high-pitched voice. “You’re such a momma’s boy.”

Her pronouncement stunned Jake. He felt the accusation against his nose, and the pain throbbed up into his eyes. But he didn’t cry. He flushed, balled his hands into fists.

“No I’m not.”

But even he didn’t believe what he said. There was no conviction in his words, and the Virgin Mary laughed again.

“You’re helpless, Jake,” she said. She bit her fingernails as she talked and spit them on the floor. Jake watched her stand and roam around his room, picking up rosary beads and baseball gloves and tossing them aside without any care or thought about their worth.

“What’s this?” she said. She stood by the battered dresser, covered in baseball cards, and picked up a plastic toy snake. “Where’d you get this?”

“My dad bought me that.” Jake didn’t like her touching it. He wanted to grab it from her hands, but he stayed put.

“Really?” She smiled. “Where?”

“Last summer. He took me to Atlanta. We went to a Braves game and to the zoo. He bought it for me at the zoo.”

“I like it,” she said. She put the snake gently back on top of the baseball cards. “It’s the only thing in this house with any character.”

She went back to the bed and sat down. She kicked her legs, and didn’t try in the least to hide her boredom.

“So, what do you do now?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“What do you normally do at night?”

“I go to sleep.”

Jake laughed, but stopped short because of the look she gave him.

“You mean you go to sleep with your mom,” the Virgin Mary said. “I know. I watch you.”

Jake again felt the little pinpricks of fear across his body. He didn’t like being watched. He thought about all the time he spent under the dining room table, listening to the ticking of the grandfather clock.

“You lay in bed together and she rubs your hair and sometimes you draw on each other’s backs with your fingers,” she said.

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## Medjugorje

Jake swallowed.

“That part looked like fun,” she said.

He glanced at her and was relieved to see a slightly happy glint in her eyes. It was surrounded by the sharpness of her personality, but it was there, a small, patient and loving glow.

“I want to do that,” she said. “Let’s draw on each other’s backs. I’ll go first.”

She patted the open space in the bed next to her. Jake didn’t know how to feel. His heart beat fast. It seemed wrong to be so close, to touch so intimately the Mother of God. There was also guilt. His mother was the real disciple of the Virgin Mary. Shouldn’t she at least get to meet her? But, in spite of all his trepidation, he knew he’d slide into bed next to her and draw on her back. He wanted it more than anything he could recall in his life. He craved to be close to her, to smell her sweaty, dirty skin, to touch her soft body. It was wrong, he knew, and that knowledge, along with his desire, caused his chest to burn as he got into bed.

“Take off your shirt,” she said, and he obeyed. Jake lay, bare-chested, face down on his bed with his arms stretched over his head. He closed his eyes



and felt the tip of her finger graze across his back. In his blindness, he saw that fingertip as a bright light, something like a firefly, forming shapes in the fading white trail it left behind. He almost fell asleep and could have slept for years, Jake believed, but the light went black and a voice whispered, "Guess what it is?"

He had no idea, and told her so.

"You're no fun," the Virgin Mary said. She pushed him and then collapsed on her stomach, and said, "I drew your stupid toy snake. Now, it's my turn."

She rolled up her shirt, revealing a thin, pale torso that rose and fell slowly with each breath.

"Make it something elaborate," she said.

Her voice was heavy with sleep. Jake knew she'd fall asleep soon after he started, so he didn't bother to think up a picture. He merely drew circles around a mole on her lower back and then connected it with a line to the three freckles clustered around her right shoulder blade. He kept telling himself he shouldn't be drawing, but her skin felt so warm and soft. A few times she moaned, and he was thrilled by her delight.

"Do you think," the Virgin Mary said while yawning, "do you think your mom might have killed your dad?"

Jake stopped. His body felt hollow, and he heard himself say in an unfamiliar voice, "No. He killed himself."

"I know he killed himself. I saw him tie the rope and slip his head into it, and I watched him hanging there in the garage for a long time."

She yawned again, and said, "gosh," trying to wake herself.

"But I wonder," she went on, "if your mother caused him to do it. You know what I mean? She wasn't very nice to him."

"No," Jake's strange new voice said.

“She yelled at him a lot. From what I saw, she tried to make him unhappy.”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“It might have been what she always wanted – him killing himself. Now, she’s just pretending to be upset so no one suspects her. She obviously never loved him.”

“No, I don’t think she did.” Jake couldn’t believe what he had just said. His mind didn’t feel as if it were working properly. It seemed altogether separate from him. He’d never once suspected that his parents didn’t love each other. Now the thought not only existed, but something in him agreed with it.

“Hey, keep going,” the Virgin Mary said. She shrugged her shoulders to get his finger moving again. Jake resumed his meaningless drawing, while trying to remember any signs of love between his mother and father. He searched hard through his memories, but found none.

After a while, he heard the Virgin Mary snoring.

“Hey,” Jake whispered. She didn’t react. He kept drawing, however, tracing shapes all across her back. He knew he should stop, but it felt so good to touch her, especially along her sides and across the soft edges of her budding breasts.

The next morning, when Jake woke up, the Virgin Mary was gone, her robe and shawl no longer in a pile on his floor. He worked hard to suppress any memories of what he’d done the night before, and each time one did creep into his head, he bit his finger, sometimes drawing blood, in order to keep his mind clear.

Jake tried to go on with his day as before, but knowing something might be watching kept him from his normal routine. A few times during the morning, he walked into the dining room and slowly circled the table. He looked underneath it, and his face flushed as he considered risking all danger and indulging himself. But he held back. And so the morning progressed slowly. By lunch, when the familiar hunger pains loudly attacked his stomach, Jake went upstairs and knocked for the first time in a week on his mother’s door.

No response came from within the room. Jake tried the doorknob and was surprised to find it unlocked. The door creaked open. All was dark inside the bedroom. The blinds were shut. Jake had to squint to see anything.

“Who told you to come in?” his mother said. Her voice was raspy, and the mere sound of it caused the boy to feel thirsty.

“I’m hungry,” he said.

“Then go eat.”

“There’s no food left.” He’d finished off the jar of maraschino cherries for breakfast.

“There’s got to be something. You just don’t want to eat what there is.”

“There isn’t anything. I looked.”

His mother sighed. In the dark, he could see movements but not details, and in the direction from where her voice originated, something moved frantically. A soft scraping noise accompanied the movement.

“Call your father then,” Mrs. Asher said. “Ask him to stop by the grocery store on the way home.”

“Dad’s dead,” Jake said.

“What?”

She turned on a lamp next to the bed, and the dim, dirty yellow light briefly blinded Jake.

“Who’s dead?” his mother asked.

Jake recovered his vision but was unable to answer. He didn’t recognize the woman in the bed. Was this his mother or some demon impersonating her? If it was a devil, he had donned a poor disguise. The emaciated, yellow-fleshed creature in the bed looked nothing like his mother. It more resembled a vulture because of the way it craned its thin neck and looked

at him with one eye shut and one eye wide open.

“Dad’s dead,” Jake said. “He hung himself.”

“Oh. Oh, I forgot,” she said.

She closed her eye and rested her head back against the pillow. The scraping sound Jake heard earlier resumed, and he saw his mother scratching violently at the scabs on her hands. Before visiting Yugoslavia, Father Bill had invited Mrs. Asher to come to his office and discuss her trip. She had left the house elated that morning, expecting the priest to give her advice on how to receive the holy mother. But that evening, she had returned home with her hands bandaged. When Jake asked her what happened, she only said, “I broke his window.”

The wounds now bothered her, and she clawed at them, smearing thin strings of blood across her hands.

“What else do you want?” she asked. “You look like you want to say something.”

Her eyes remained closed, but she turned her head towards him as if she were looking at him. Jake did want to say more. He saw the blood under her fingernails and her frantic scratching, and he wanted to tell her about the previous night’s visitor. He wanted to say, “The Virgin Mary was here, in this house, Mom. She was here.” But then he’d have to explain how she spent the night with him. And his mother would easily read on his face that he did something wrong, that he behaved poorly, that he defiled the one thing she held sacred. He couldn’t tell her, even though the knowledge of this mysterious presence might ease his mother’s suffering.

“Can I stay in here with you?” he asked.

“What?”

“Can we take a nap together?”

She opened one eye slowly and looked at him. It was red and yellow, this eyeball, and Jake swallowed when he saw it gazing at him.

“Fine,” she said. “You can sleep in here. But not in the bed. I can’t breathe with you on top of me.”

Jake wanted to lay under the covers with her, maybe draw on each other’s backs like they once did. He settled for curling up in a ball in a corner of the room with an old, musty smelling blanket and pillow from the hall closet.

They slept all day, until it was dark outside, and Jake didn’t know he was awake until his mom turned on the lamp and he realized his eyes had been open for some time. He yawned and patted down the hair sticking up on the back of his head. His clothes were wet from sweat, his cheeks pink.

“How’d you sleep, sha?” his mother asked. That was her nickname for him. It meant “dear” in Cajun French, but she hadn’t used that word since her return from Medjugorje. Jake blinked at his mother and noticed she was staring at him with both eyes – not just one. She licked the bad taste of sleep from her mouth and gave him a somewhat weak smile. It was safe, he realized, to ask her what he’d been thinking about before he’d knocked on her door that morning.

“Did you love Dad?” he asked.

Her smile faded, but she didn’t seem mad or sad. Only annoyed.

“What kind of question is that?” she asked. “I just woke up. Of course I loved him. You should ask if he loved us, considering what he did.”

Jake wrapped his arms around his legs and rested his chin on his knees. He watched his mom lick the dried blood off her hands, while the pangs of hunger again rippled in his stomach.

“How’d you and dad meet?” he asked.

“Why do you want to know this now?”

“I don’t know.”

He asked the question without having considered it before, without ever caring, but now he needed to know. When she said, “I can’t remember,” he

pressed her until she closed her eyes and, rubbing her forehead, recalled the last night of 1969.

“It was a New Year’s Eve party,” she said. “We lived in New Orleans, and I was dating a boy named Carl. He wanted to marry me, but...” She didn’t know how to express her distaste for Carl other than shivering, as if someone had touched her bare back with an ice cube.

“Your father and his roommate were throwing the party. I think Carl knew the roommate. I can’t remember. Anyway, your father came up to Carl before midnight and asked if he could kiss me.”

The voice shed its raspy tone like a dead skin, and the new sound emerged soft and shiny, tickling Jake’s ears as if the words were being whispered to him.

“Your father’s date just stood there with her arms crossed. Carl didn’t know what to say, so your father kissed me.”

She laughed and then rubbed her fingers across her lips.

“The girl with her arms crossed said, ‘Oh come on, Henry. You can do better than that.’ So, your father kissed me again.”

“He kissed you twice?” Jake asked.

“He did. And he did a better job the second time.”

Mrs. Asher allowed herself, for the first time in months, to laugh freely. But she must have lowered her guard during this burst of happiness and let the long suppressed image of her husband’s hanging body re-emerge in her mind, because she stopped suddenly, punctuating the end of her gaiety with an abrupt, “Hmmm.”

“He was never a happy man,” she said. “And he knew I wasn’t happy either. I guess we both should have found people who could have helped us be happy, but he argued against it. He said we both had suffered, and only people who truly suffered, who felt some agony in life, those were the ones who truly knew how to love. They understood loneliness and despair. You could feel it in their hugs and kisses, he said. Happy people take it for

granted. They don't know how to love. But because we were so miserable, we'd have the greatest love of all, he said. And then he thought we could end..." She stopped herself. She looked as if she wanted to say more, but she watched her son and decided to remain quiet.

"What about the Virgin Mary?" Jake asked. "Is that why you loved her? Because she suffered?"

"She watched her son die, didn't she? But I was silly. I was silly for going and thinking she could help me."

"Maybe she still can."

"No." Mrs. Asher inhaled deep. "They've all abandoned me."

Jake decided to tell her about his visitor. He closed his eyes and prepared himself to simply rush through the words building behind his lips, tell her everything.

"I'm tired, Jake," she said. "I'm going back to sleep."

"Can I stay here with you?"

"I want to be alone. Can't you just leave me alone?"

"What about food?"

"Jake!" she snapped. She pointed a bony finger toward the door, and she didn't drop her hand until her son closed it behind him.

Jake's hunger turned to nausea. The thought of food sickened him, and he was glad for this new sensation since there was nothing to eat in the house. He belched, and the taste of whatever spoiled morsel remained in his stomach almost caused him to vomit. He had to breathe deeply for several minutes to feel normal again.

But he didn't feel normal. He was so tired that when he grabbed the sheets to cover himself in his bed, his hands shook. It was such a strange feeling. He lifted his hands in front of his face and watched the involuntary trembles.

“What are you doing?”

Jake jumped at the question. He thought he was alone in his room, but there, lying right next to him in bed, was the freckled face of the Virgin Mary. She absent-mindedly stroked the plastic toy snake in her hands. Jake swallowed when he saw her holding it.

“Where’d you come from?”

“I’ve been here the whole time.”

She lifted the snake to her face and stared into its red eyes. Moved by whatever she saw, the Virgin Mary tilted her head like a curious dog and parted her dry lips. Then, waking from her daydream, she blinked and turned to Jake. She caught him looking at her shoulders and how the tank top hung loose around her neck. Her smile caused him no small amount of shame. He should not be looking at such things. Not on her.

“So,” she said, letting the word hang there seductively. The hissing sound it made tickled his side. “What’d your mom say? She admit she didn’t like your dad?”

“No,” Jake said. “She said she loved him, but that he might not have loved us. Because he killed himself.”

“Bullshit.”

“Why?” he whispered.

“She’s blaming your father when it’s her fault. That’s not right. What else did she say?”

“She told me how they met.”

“At the New Year’s Eve party?”

“Yeah.”

“Sounds like he sure liked her to me.”



“Yeah.”

It was as if Jake was hearing again the conversation he'd had with his mother. Now, he was picking up words and phrases that had somehow eluded him before. His father did sound as if he loved his mother. Why else would he have been so bold at the party? How had Jake missed that?

“I don't think I'd believe a word your mom says,” the Virgin Mary told him.

“You don't?”

“Hell no. The only reason you do is because you're still a momma's boy.”

“I'm not a momma's boy.”

“I'm not a momma's boy. You know what you should do? You should put this snake in her bed. It'd give her a nice, good scare and prove you weren't so in love with her.”

The suggestion surprised Jake because he had just been thinking that same thing. When she called him a momma's boy, he had looked down at the snake in her hands and thought, with a red flush of anger, “I'll stick that in her bed and show you who's a momma's boy.” But now that the thought was real, now that it belonged to her and was presented as a challenge, he became nervous. Did he really want to frighten his mother? She looked so weak, so fragile. It would hurt her, and the pain that had permanently settled as a grimace on her skeletal face would only tighten its hold, making her near impossible to look at.

Jake hesitated, and in this silence, the Virgin Mary reached her hand to him and lightly grazed her fingers across his forearm. Her voice, for the first time since their meeting, turned soft.

“When you come back, we'll draw on each other's backs. I'll draw on yours last so you can fall asleep.”

He tried to ignore the suggestion, but he knew what he'd end up doing. He didn't wait a full minute to depart with the snake, his desire so strong for their little drawing games. Jake tiptoed down the hall, found her door still

unlocked and, navigating carefully through the darkness of her bedroom, placed the snake under the sheets. He didn't once disturb her snoring, and when he returned, Jake marveled at how easy it was to play this prank.

The Virgin Mary and he then began to draw on each other's backs, their fingers sneaking beyond the normal boundaries of the flesh canvases, and each infraction was met with a coy glance or a muted smile, inviting more boldness to enter the activity. They only stopped themselves from going farther in order to crane their necks, to strain their ears and hear the faint screams of Mrs. Asher.

The Virgin Mary covered her mouth as she laughed, and Jake, looking at her, felt that he loved her more than anything on earth. He laughed too, and though deep in his chest a small fire smoldered, his headache and nausea and hunger were overridden by his joy. He laughed loud and hard, rolling onto his back, resting his hands on his chest and not stopping until he was out of breath and dripping tears.

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## Medjugorje

Jake woke up the next morning in a bad mood. It started with the return of his headache. The pain pushed his forehead down over the tops of his eyes, giving the world a low-hanging ceiling that caused him to feel claustrophobic. He stood, trying to find an open, freeing space, only to discover as he walked that the joints in his knees ached. Jake stretched the stiff legs, but that only increased the hot shivers up his spine. Sweat slid down his temples and he gnashed his teeth when the first twinge of hunger returned. The urge to yell came upon him. Not an animal cry of pain. That would only send his suffering straight up, allowing it to float back down and settle on his shoulders. His screams needed to be directed at someone. His mouth aimed at another person so that he could shoot them with his pain, relinquishing his ownership of it. He turned to the bed to yell something at the Virgin Mary (he didn't know what), but when he saw only the crease in the sheets where her body had lain, he paused, allowing loneliness to overtake his anger. This respite lasted only a moment – long enough for him to inhale and exhale. The seething rage flared up again, and, ignoring his aching knees, Jake marched down the hall, flung open his mother's bedroom door and switched on the light.

The sudden brightness invading her cocoon frightened Mrs. Asher. Her yellow, pasty hands gripped the bed sheet, pulling it up for protection, and she scooted as close to the wall as she could. Both eyes were squeezed

shut.

“Is it you?” she asked, gasping for breath. “Now you’ve come?”

“Yes, it’s me,” Jake shouted.

It wasn’t the response she was expecting. The wilted woman dropped the sheets and opened that one yellow and red eye.

“Jake?” she said, sounding both relieved and annoyed.

His nausea returned. He covered his mouth with his fist for a moment and then, once he suppressed the urge to throw up, he shouted, “You killed him, didn’t you? You never loved him and you blame him for what happened.”

As he yelled, Jake was aware his speech sounded unnatural, like a bad actor delivering dramatic lines. His mother, on the other hand, was a pro at playing her part, and he quickly succumbed to a state of awe at her ability.

“He wanted an abortion,” she said. “He wanted to kill you, but I stopped him, Jake. I saved you. No one else. He wanted you dead and I said no.”

She beat her chest with more strength than he thought was in those bony arms. The pain in his legs vanished. So did his sickness. The world’s low-hanging ceiling lifted, revealing a vast, cold and empty desert plain. Its desolation stretched for miles. The sight of it sent goose pimples across his arms and legs.

“But abortion is a sin,” he said. The sentence barely registered as a whisper.

“He wanted me to,” Mrs. Asher said. “He knew we were both doomed. We had to spare you. We were to finally end our two damned family lines. We were to be the end. The last.”

Her voice softened with the memories of her dead husband. Jake watched as her love for him inflated her frail body. Her scratching at the scabs on her hands turned into a gentle rubbing.

“He didn’t want you to be like us. When I held you for the first time, I got it. I understood.”

“That you loved me?”

“I almost drowned you in the bath several times. If you’d cried, I would have done it. But you never did. You were so well behaved. Even when I held your head underwater, you looked up at me. You trusted me. I do you love, but I should have done it. I’m so sorry I didn’t.”

For some reason he never understood, Jake told her it was okay. Then, exhausted, sick, aching, he shuffled along that desert plain back to his bedroom.

A warm, golden orb, like a miniature sun, rose from his chest into his throat. Its light forced his mouth to curve open, and it shone through his eyes, bathing everything before him in a bright, dreamy haze. He didn’t know where this joy came from, or why it suddenly chose to arise in him just after midnight, but he knew he must hold onto it. And to do that, he couldn’t grab it or cling to it. He had to let the orb float freely inside him.

“What are you grinning about?” the Virgin Mary asked. She was tucked against him in the fetal position, her head on his shoulder and her cold feet on his leg.

“Nothing,” he said.

“It doesn’t look like nothing. What is it?”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he ran his hands through her hair and then kissed her forehead.

“You’re strange,” she said. But she moved closer, wrapped her arm around his torso and held him tighter. The orb in his throat grew, and after a moment, he heard the Virgin gasp, “We’re flying.”

Jake looked down and saw they were both floating above his unmade bed. He tried to speak but only laughed. The sound propelled him through the air, which tickled his face with a coolness he hadn’t felt in weeks.

“Come on,” he said. His fingers interlocked with the Virgin’s, and they glided through the house, arms spread out like airplane wings. The rushing sensation tingled his heart and the two spun and flipped and moved freely through the rooms, touching nothing but each other. They moved by laughing, and occasionally they met, lips touching lips, hands grabbing flesh, only to break apart and twirl and dance unlike any dance ever before performed.

He knew he shouldn’t clutch at this moment, but the desire to prolong the power of that glowing orb overtook him. He could have laughed all night and into the day, but he didn’t want to chance it, to risk letting this happiness fade.

“Let’s go,” he said. He grabbed her hand tight and the two flew down the hall.

“Where are we going?” the Virgin Mary asked as they approached his mother’s door.

He felt her tug at his hand.

“Stop. I don’t want to see her, Jake.”

He overpowered the Virgin, pulling her into the bedroom with him.

“Who’s there?” a soft voice called out in the darkness. The bright light had gone out in his eyes.

“Jake, let me go,” the Virgin called. She struggled to free herself. She thrashed in the air, but he would not let her go.

“Who’s there?” the voice called again.

Mrs. Asher turned on the lamp next to her bed and with her yellow and red eye, gazed up at the two small bodies hovering above her. She opened her mouth to scream, but only air came out in a rushing, hollow sound.

“Look who it is,” Jake yelled. He held up the hand of the Virgin Mary. The girl floating next to him covered her eyes with her forearm. “Look who’s here? She’s been here the whole time, Mom. She didn’t want to see you!

She wanted me!"

The air seeping out of his mother's mouth gathered enough force to emit a low moan. It sounded like a cross between a "lo" and a "no," but it lacked the structure of an actual word, settling more for a wild, age-old expression for fear and pain.

"Please let me go," the Virgin Mary whispered. The sadness in her voice struck Jake, but he also realized that the golden orb had left his throat. He needed to laugh, or he would plummet to the ground.

"Look, Mom," he said. He let go of the girl's hand and flew to the dresser, where a porcelain statue of the Virgin Mary rested, bought from a peddler in Medjugorje. He picked up the small, white sculpture and laughed so loud it hurt his throat.

"She looks nothing like this," he shouted.

He held up the statue and turned to compare it with the girl, but she was gone.

"Jake," his mother yelled.

At the sound of his name, he lost his magic. He fell hard, crashing against her vanity, crushing her makeup, her hair spray, her fingernail polish. He moaned, still holding the statue, and stumbled from the wreckage to the door, looking for the Virgin Mary. She was gone.

"Jake," his mother again yelled.

She sat up in bed in time to see him hurl the statue at her. The white porcelain souvenir struck Mrs. Asher in the forehead, cutting a deep gash above her eyebrow that sent a thin stream of blood down over her lashes and stinging into her iris.

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