

“Pray”

Anne knelt in the cathedral barefoot. She remained penitent before the cross, her knees hard against the cold marble floor and her head bowed up towards that harsh face. Jesus Christ, as she called him, implored her with his eyes, implored her to help him down, to take arms up against a sea of tyranny, to run from this place free... But Anne had no intention of doing any of those things. She clasped her fingers into locking fists, holding them before her heart, praying loudly without words. The other people who weren't there would have protested. They would have told her that such loud requests are only heard by the parents of martyred children. They would have told her she was a fool. But Anne kept her petitioning up because there was little else left to do. There was nothing else to do. So she prayed for Leslie

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Leslie, auburn hair on her bicycle at ten. It was pink and flew like the wind and she didn't feel guilty. Streaked with mud and smiling, she laughed as they shot through the moistened creek bed. Her hands holding the handlebars like the safety bar on a roller coaster, and her heart singing because it had nothing better to do. She had not yet learned what crying really meant.

Later, as she lay here in the hospital bed, Leslie thought she understood better. Joshua, her husband of the last three years was dead, had died here only a few hours ago. She had come back to find him gone, and the bed empty, as she knew it would be. So she lay down to join him in rest if only for a minute. He would have liked her as a little child, she was certain of that. He would have played hide and go seek, tag, whatever came to mind. He was always willing to play her games.

She bunched the blanket up in her hands, gripping it like women always do in the movies and hoped that this time things would be better. She knew what crying meant now, she knew she knew now.

But at ten, kneeling in front of a small statue of St. Therese, the little flower, she didn't understand. They told her to pray for, Christine, her grandma. So she did.

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Christine waited in front of the house. Charlie came for her today, or at least was scheduled to. She watched the rows of corn whisper to the soy field across the way. She listened to the sound of the golden sun raining down on them, and waited for him. He had taken her fishing two weeks ago, as he often did, and she stood barefoot on the rocks by the bank, flinging a line in. She had grace. Her hands nimble in the approach. He had been impressed and made love to her and she didn't think she understood why so she waited for him here today, because he was going to marry her many years from now after this dance was over and the town had grown so strong in their blood that they couldn't breath without speaking its name.

Christine saw the car off in the distance and waited for it. Tall, blonde hair cascading around her shoulders and back, sundress ironed, shoes in her hands, waiting for a light that wouldn't change, because that was her life. For a moment, she thought about crying, she could feel him there in that ancient tank of a car, coming towards her. Always moving towards her, but never arriving. At least he didn't turn around. He did have direction.

Then at eighty in bed, Christine looked out the windows, thinking Charlie might be sitting on the other side waiting patiently for *her* now. Today would be a good day to die, she thought watching the wind blow through the leaves outside. She prayed for the protection of her granddaughters.

Anne had reached such a flustered state that Father Mike thought he should remove her from the church. He had heard that her brother in law had just died, so soon after her own daughter's death. He wished he could help her, but his was not the place for that. Father Mike rested his hand on the head of Joan of Arc, flipping a mental coin.

Joan stood. Blood streaked her face and the sword fell again. She couldn't tell where the tears stopped and the blood began, they were both too warm, too real. "St. Catherine forgive me," she implored, feeling the lives going cold around her. So many threads being cut to wave loose in the wind. She shouted for her army to move forward, to press onward, and they followed her command. Joan was thirty now (an age myth would never allow her to become) and her back ached. How many times had she done this? How many more times would it take? She hoped that this at least made a difference, she hoped that maybe just once she had made a difference in at least one human life.

Father Mike's hand slipped off the statue and he walked away. Today he would allow it... but only today. After all, there was Anne's daughter to think of.

Samantha looked at the bright faces around her. It was Halloween, her favorite time of year. Her best friend, her mother, they were all pulling for her. She would compete in the biggest swim meet of her life tomorrow, with a chance at a championship, and they would be there to look at her and help her through it.

When her father had died of cancer, her grandfather had brought a piece of the "real" cross with him to try and stop the disease before it went too far. She remembered Aunt Leslie arguing about it, saying that it was foolish, but her mother hadn't minded, said it might help him through it. The old man took the hunk of driftwood (old from its years roaming the oceans of the world) and put it against her father's head. Dad died a year later, but that was the past and this was now. Her aunt's argument seemed long forgotten.

"Leslie, get out of the God damned bed!"

Leslie was screaming at herself silently, trying to make the muscles respond, but they wouldn't. She had been there when he died and he had said nothing. They always say something in the movies, or half of something that never gets finished, then things don't feel like they've come to a stop, just an end. Too many ends, too much family.

Anne knew she was losing it. She could feel the world slip away, her face locked on the image of her Jesus. He felt her, she could see that. The forlorn and serene look on his face. He knew that she would not heal from this properly, but that was what made her safe. In Matthew 5:5 it says something to the effect that one should always love their enemies and solve violence with peace. Anne didn't buy it, too many people die for that to be true. What did Matthew know anyway?

Mathue, the senior of the rabbi writing this text, liked that particular passage. He savored the peaceful message, so refreshing from the things usually thrown at humankind. So refreshing to hear that wars can be won with love. He didn't know if he believed it to be *actually* true, but at least *hopefully* true.

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Joan wished this war could have been won in another way.
But Sam stepped out in front of the car's headlights and never saw them coming.
And Father Mike just figured his taxes one more time.
Even if Leslie *was* waiting patiently for the answers that didn't seem to be coming.
Though eventually her grandmother did get into Charlie's Chevy.
Because Anne had continued to pray to her deity.

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Yeshu of Nazareth hung, tied by the wrists to this rude grouping of logs. He could feel the air constricting in his chest. This was such a horrible way to die. They'd thought up such horrible ways for us to be killed... *We'd* thought up such horrible ways. Yeshu saw his wife there, and their child. He saw the mish mash of followers watching him too. They were the only crowd, no one else caring. Just another Sunday execution. The nine men dying with him moaned loudly in protest, but he tried to stay silent for the family. He mourned for his wife.

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Anne would give up faith right here and now if her prayer didn't get answered. She didn't even know what the prayer was anymore, but it was about Leslie, or for Leslie, and her sister would survive this. She would.

So Anne told Christ. She told him directly, "You will save her. Can you hear me!?"

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Yeshu, dying at last, thought he heard a strange voice. He looked up, though his head no longer connected to his soul. Before him was a woman all in white, and she was saying something angry. Something about a sister and a family and the things that would happen to all of them a long time from now long after he had died in a hospital bed. Something about his daughter's death, and his brother-in-law. "Yes, I hear you," he grunted loud enough for the disciples to hear. And in that moment the apostle Paul shivered, catching a glimpse of two women.

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They were in the garden again, the one their father had started all those days ago. She turned to face her sister, happy. "Do you think...?" she began to ask quietly.
"What?"

No prompting was needed to finish the sentence. "Never mind," she completed the thought, bending down to pluck a rose. She couldn't kneel with the rose forever.

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Anne got up from the floor, her knees having left marks of perspiration. Jesus stared down from the cross no longer, his eyes having closed, or were they always like that? She didn't know anymore. The soles of her feet caressed the ground as she walked out among the pews, dropping her purse behind her. Father Mike would find it later. He would return it with the money still inside, after all, there was the loss of the daughter to think about.

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Sam was fishing by her grandfather who was not dead. "Is this heaven or the past?" she asked him in the innocent voice of a child.

He only smiled at her, giving her a knowing wink, throwing his line back into the water to see what he would catch this time.

-Aaron Black