

## We Are Not Saints

A woman I'm not supposed to name offers me donuts and muffin-tin cheesecakes like my mother used to make for Sunday potlucks. She'd let me put the Nilla Wafers at the bottom of the paper liners, but this woman—two years sober, today—says she used graham cracker crumbs. They have coffee in two pots, one with an orange rim and handle, but a man I'm not supposed to name tells me not to mind the colors. *All the same*, he says.

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My scalp tingles and the Lake is in my ears. At night, I hear the waves from my bedroom, but it's three in the afternoon and this is different. They're crashing at my door, at the windows, working to weather this ancient apartment glass into chips of fog.

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Bob was set to pick up his fifteen-year chip when he died, not too suddenly, of something that made sense for a man in his seventies who'd started smoking in his early teens and spent a few decades of his life three sheets to the wind. Bob's son, Richard, took him to his first AA meeting, which was fitting, as it was he who, during his teenage years, had borne the brunt of his father's alcoholism. Roger, the oldest, joined the Army at seventeen, and Rhonda was just a girl during the worst years. So that left Richard, wearing too-small hand-me-downs because Bob's paycheck rarely made it to the bank, waiting up on school nights to see whether his father would find his way home or need to be shouldered from the corner pub.

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I wish I could remember the moments beyond the black, but maybe that veil is the mercy of the Universe, saying, *You shouldn't see yourself like this. You shouldn't know all the ways you've been seen.* There's a verse in Corinthians I've heard countless believers reference; it says a child of God will never be burdened with more temptation or tribulation than

the Lord knows they can handle. And what is God but the Universe?  
Who am I but its child?



*I hated being around Bob when he was drunk, Donna says of her father-in-law. He was horrible to Betty [his wife], but he would get all mushy with me.*

When she speaks about him she makes the same face she does when someone chews gum with their mouth open or says they like cilantro.

Donna's own mother, Mary Ann, was raised by abusive alcoholics, and when she was fifteen, they signed for her to marry Dennis, a twenty-three-year-old Navy submariner who, as he tells it, looked Mary's father dead in the eye and said, *I can take better care of her than you can.*

Mary was pregnant by sixteen and had three children by her early twenties. Dennis was out to sea at least six months of every year, and when he was home, he was angry and impatient, violent. A drinker, sure, but it was the smoking Mary picked on; it was the black cherry pipe tobacco she threatened to leave him over. Donna loved her father for their early-morning fishing trips and for the nights they couldn't sleep and met in the kitchen to talk life, back before he was sure of all the answers to it.

He's a deacon now, of a small-town Baptist church in southwest Missouri. He's a cancer survivor who lives in overalls and leads a men's Bible study from his chair at the head of his dining room table. He worries for the soul of his granddaughter, Donna's only child, whose heart has been hardened against the Spirit by sex and booze and questions she thinks the Bible can't answer; the granddaughter who no longer closes her eyes when he prays to Heavenly Father before Sunday lunch.



Was it consent if I don't remember giving it, in the morning waking up next to a man I know I didn't want? Trying to recall whether or not he and I kissed before we fucked; scanning the floor, digging through his bathroom trashcan, feeling at my stomach and thighs for evidence of protection or pull-out precaution. But even if I do find what I'm looking for—a limp, stretched skin or slick crust in the hairs below my bellybutton—for the next two weeks, every baby will scream louder in the coffee shop while I try to read; my boobs will be more tender than they usually are when it's just PMS; and I'll take a pregnancy test that reads negative the day before I stain another pair of underwear.



I pour coffee into a cup because I know how to pour coffee into a cup. Everything else feels foreign. The two-year woman is plating sheet cake as a couple more people trickle in—one, a fellow twenty-something, quiet and unassuming, wearing a Carhartt jacket and a long ponytail. He takes a seat at the empty corner of the table and politely declines a piece of cake.

*Celiacs*, he says.

The meeting is held at a small rehab clinic, in a room behind a particleboard door that feels, unmistakably, like church-basement Sunday school. Another man I'm not supposed to name arrives with a box of donuts, and again, the twenty-something says, *Can't*—says, *Celiacs*.

Three laminated posters in a row on the wall illustrate the effects of cocaine, alcohol, and marijuana on color-coded organs. Dog-eared, bookmarked, bound, and blue-covered copies of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, Fourth Edition, have been pulled from purses and oversized jacket pockets and set on the foldout table like the Bibles I'd grown up with, grown out of.

*A worn-out copy of the Good Book, tattered and falling apart at the seams, is usually owned by a man who is not*, said one of a dozen pastors I don't remember from my childhood.



The Lake, at its deepest point, reaches 1,336 feet. But this Lake is not a lake; she's a body, hungry for wood and canvas, bone and last breath. She is a body, aged and ageless, and I wouldn't have to ask for her to take me in and down and through, into the void. She'd fill me with a thorough quickness, but I'd be different from all the ones who came before, who live lifeless in her belly, in her womb. I'd give her the most of me.



There was a special game I only played at Bob and Betty's, but it wasn't a game to me then—it was a test of faith; it was eternity. Underneath the stairs, I would write letters to God telling him how much I loved and trusted him and wanted his will for my life, and how desperately I also wanted a sign that he was listening. I would seal each letter in an envelope, place them one at a time on the shag-carpet landing and, running back underneath the stairs, pray with my eyes squeezed tight for God to disappear them, a sign of his omnipotence and a testament to my unshakable faith. People at church had spoken of miracles, and I wanted my own.