

The Love of God

At the Holy Family Retreat for Roman Catholic Teens, in the Chapel lit with accidentally sexy red candles, we are asked to revisit our latest mistakes and ask Him if He can find it in His Sacred Heart of hearts to forgive us.

Forgive me, Lord, for my poor judgment in consenting to attend this cornball retreat. I was led astray by my friend, Jess, and her ever-lethal good intentions. I know that's no excuse, but believe me, my blunder has been its own punishment. There is nothing else that You can possibly do to me.

Here at the retreat, we sleep two to a room in the nunnery dormitories. As you would expect, the twin beds are very narrow. There is no air-conditioning. It is June in the convent somewhere in the middle of the woods and already hot as hell, which in my mind isn't giving us much incentive to behave like angels.

This morning, Peggy, the chief nun, woke us by banging pots together in the kitchen—a much more dulcet sound than her screechy and—even worse—earnest coloratura:

*Holy, holy,
ho-ob-ly Lord!
God of power, God of light!
Heaven and earth are filled with
yore glor-ee.
Ho-SAH-na, in the high-EST!
Ho-SAH-na!
HO-SAH-NUH in the high...
EeEeEeEeEeEe-EST!*

The noise was violent and tremendous, like Earth being made. But no. Just breakfast. Somehow Jess managed to sleep through the whole goddamn thing. On the Third Day, She overslept. She was pissed that I didn't wake her, but she knows like I know from years of sleepovers how impossible she is to wake. Her hair rippled and tangled across the pillow in a way that she could not have planned. Her open mouth, buried in her hair, drooling in it, her hair spread across her pillow like light. I couldn't possibly wake her.

"You sleep like a dead person," I told her in the afternoon. "She is risen!"

"Is this how it's going to be in the fall? Are you going to let me sleep through my college exams and stuff?"

"Exams, yes. Stuff, no."

"I mean it. Can I count on you to wake me in the future?"

"Sista, iamb yore roommate knot chore keeper."

"You at least could have tried."

"How do you know I didn't?"

Jess was fined one bracelet for her tardiness. We receive colored bracelets for random acts of kindness performed within eyeshot of nuns and chaperones. Whoever collects the most WWJD bands receives some kind of Christ-themed grand prize, which, like Jesus, is necessarily shrouded in mystery. I'm not sure that the nuns realize how old we are. We are to record each good deed in the black composition books distributed at the beginning of the retreat. On the blank line on the cover of hers, Jess has printed her name, and on mine I have written, "Holy Shit." I have sixteen bracelets, and now Jess has three.

I've had a few close calls. Whenever Peggy says, "God is good!" we are expected to rejoin in chorus, "All the time!" When she says, "All the time!" we are to respond, "God is good!" Very early in the morning. I only move my lips along with the others because I don't want to risk reprising embarrassing slipups such as "God is time!" and "All is good!" It's like she's *trying* to confuse us. It's like how at Mass they changed the words of the response from "And also with you" to "And with your spirit" to see who was really paying attention.

We are encouraged/required to wear the bracelets for the duration of our week-long stay at the nunnery: wearing not on but *over* our sleeves the tacky, neon, twisted, dirty, fraying friendship bracelets that represent the contents of our hearts so that they may be subjected to the loving scrutiny of our brothers and sisters.

Despite or because of all of those loving stares, morning Mass does not put Jess in a forgiving mood. At recreation hour, she ditches me to play dusty Chinese checkers with a klatsch of true believers. The rec room is a deconsecrated chapel furnished with mismatched couches that were probably never intended to be orange. In their faded state, they almost look like they could match. I wander to the retired organ in the corner. I would sit down and play it, were it not conspicuous as well as likely verboten.

On the organ bench leans an unplugged karaoke machine. It's old with a big-ass boombox attached and it takes cassette tapes. I guide the plug to an outlet behind the organ, and I rewind, searching for a song I know.

I may not be able to hit the high notes, but to compensate I sing "Killing Me Softly" with as much latent sexuality as I can summon at such short notice. I dedicate it to Jess because she is pretending not to know me. Jess's face flushes, but the archdiocese in-residence actually loves it. The bug-eyed, fuzzy-sweatered priest responsible for today's homily on purity takes me aside for a private conversation with my breasts about how my Gift of Music can be used to Glorify the Lord. I honestly can't tell if he's perverted or just short. Two more bracelets for me: one from Fuzzy Sweater and one from Peggy because these people clearly don't communicate.

Take that, Jess.

I'm not even the one who wants this.

* * *

After lunch, the nuns lead us through the herb garden and into the woods and ask us each to pick out a rock. They are obviously running out of things to do with us. We return to the nunnery with rocks. We form a circle. Holding rocks, we conduct a group discussion about how Jesus is our Rock. A guest speaker, the guitarist with a self-destructive-looking buzz-cut who plays at our Masses, talks about his struggle with cocaine and miscellaneous addictions and how Jesus is also now his Rock. He is holding a magenta geode. He keeps looking at his shoes like a bad kid, hiding under the ghost of his former long hair. He is inarticulate in the way that you are when you are being nothing but honest. He shares more details about his addiction than the nuns probably commissioned—but as he talks, that stupid rock keeps catching the fluorescent light and honest-to-goodness glistening.

"It was like everything was singing to me, you know what I mean," he says to his shoes, "but then I got over it." He must miss it something terrible.

More than anything, my rock looks like a potato. If I had known the point of this exercise in advance, I would have selected a small smooth one like everyone else. A worry stone. A pocket rock. A skipping stone.

On the rock that rests in Jess's fist, there is a white ladybug that is as compact and perfect as a pearl earring stud. It matches the whitehead at the corner of her nose. She does not see the ladybug. I touch her shoulder lightly and whisper to her to look. Jess, being Jess, shrieks. She shakes and beats at her rock, which is less efficient than dropping it but is also more cinematic. Punitive action is once again taken against her jewelry.

"I thought it was a maggot," she whispers.

"It had wings."

Jess shudders. "I know."

* * *

We are excused to return to our rooms to change for the evening service.

I can tell right away that Jess has another one of her migraines. She's making that face like she's anxious about what her eyebrows are up to. Without saying a word, she sits on the floor in front of my cot. I sit down on the edge and bend forward to rub her neck. Where her spine meets her nape—that works every time. She makes pained noises and nudges her back against my hands.

"I think the nuns stole my panties," she huffs.

"What?"

"The ones from yesterday! I can't find them!"

"They're over there on the lampshade. How the hell did you manage that?"

"I was in a bit of a hurry this morning."

"You're still mad about that?"

"It's just that it bothers me," she said, "that you don't seem to be taking this retreat all that seriously."

"Hell no!"

"Val!"

"I'm sorry. I'm uncomfortable."

"You didn't have to come."

"I came because you asked me to."

"I needed this, to do this with you. Don't you get that?"

"That wasn't a question. How am I supposed to answer it?"

"I need this. I'm not you. I'm not—"

"Not what?"

"Not, like . . . laminated."

"What?"

I do know what she means, though. She thinks I'm impervious—which hurts.

"Oh, for the love of God," I say, and Jess says, "Fine, Val. You turn this into a word game and you are always going to win. Is that what you want?"

One of Jess's nostrils is bigger than the other. It gives her face drama, constant conflict. She's self-conscious about that, but me, I love it. Her face is so like her. How often does a person like that happen? I say, "That's not what I want."

* * *

Jess and I met at religious education in middle school. Her mother taught our class; her mother's hated me From The Beginning. They were serving us a snack in the gymnasium, bowls of stale pretzels and plastic medicine cups of pop. I was downing Diet Cokes like shots and pretending not to notice Jess's long pale disapproving face looming over my shoulder. I could see it reflected in the waxed gym floor. I remember thinking, "Now that is a girl who is self-destructively conscientious."

Jess was never one to waste time on friendly greetings. Within seconds, she was in my face like *60 Minutes*: "Did you know that drinking Coke is worse for your teeth than drinking battery acid?"

"Does battery acid come in Diet?"

She blushed. "I read that on a Snapple lid. A regular Snapple."

She looked healthier when she blushed, though also sadder. She was inclined to fear, faith, migraines, and outbursts. They were always melodramatic but she didn't know that—because she meant them. They made me laugh, but they also made me never want to stop watching her.

My face is ruddy, so even if I blushed, no one would ever be able to tell, but I was mortified that night at religious education when I was asked to recite the Apostles' Creed by myself and I pronounced it Pon-tea-is Pilot. "What I envy about you," Jess said to me, "is how you don't care."

* * *

Standing in the chapel tonight, even I have to admit that it is a Moment: those red candles, the epiphanic scent of polished

silver, the sound of dripping wax and muted music, the licking of acoustic guitars and the repeated lines, like a mantra, “Holy spirit, come into our li-ives. Holy spirit, make us truly wi-ise.” Amazing the cheesy sentiments you can get away with when you accompany them with beautiful music—and Jess is on her knees, literally on her knees, weeping, weeping real tears. Everyone asks me what’s wrong with her. Everyone somehow knows to ask me. “I don’t know,” I say. “I don’t know.”

Fuzzy Sweater gets down on Jess’s level. Even he thinks that her penitence is excessive. “My child, what could you possibly have to be so guilty about?”

Jess’s voice sounds underwater. Her eyeliner is smeared. “I’ve done some really bad things.”

Fuzzy Sweater frowns, and I can see that he, at least, knows exactly how old we are. He is positive that he can see where this is going.

* * *

Jess collects men named after the Books of the Bible. She’s already had John, Luke, Ezra, Joshua, Daniel, Obadiah, Mark, and a duplicate Mark. Me: I opt to put my mouth all over a guy with a name like a progressive verb. Darren, Collin, Ryan, and Ryan again: the stages of courtship.

I was only kidding about Obadiah.

We all hate when Jess has a boyfriend. It means we never get to see her, and when we do, the boy is there and she’s acting like such an airhead, it doesn’t count as Jess being there. She develops a prissy almost-accent and a delicate appetite.

Jess blames me for scaring away the original Mark. She had asked him to finish her salad at prom because she was feeling peaked. “Yesterday,” I said, “Jess called me to tell me that she just ate nine Tagalongs. She called me for that express purpose.”

“Don’t *tell* people that.”

“Who’s people?”

* * *

Ryan and I haven’t decided yet if we’re going to break up this summer or try long distance, but Jess and I will be at Minnesota,

and he'll be all the way over at State. I wanted to meet new people. Jess was the one who practically begged me to be her college roommate. She said that she had forgiven me for both Marks.

Jess skipped Senior Skip Day to see a movie with the Second Coming of Mark. The rest of us were barbecuing and drinking together on the beach at the park and pushing each other into the disgusting water. It was one of the last times we were going to be able to be together.

I supposed that our friends could feel it too—the way Jess has of being conspicuously not there, to the extent that her absence becomes a presence that overshadows everything else. Like God, I guess, for unhappy atheists.

Liz was the one who suggested that we leave the barbecue to go after Jess; Brit was the one who drove. Liz bent back the passenger seat of the two-door sedan so that I could stumble into the back. From this isolated seat, I offered snarky commentary so that they would not forget to talk to me.

Brit, who worked at the movies, bribed her coworker with a coveted Saturday night shift to persuade her to show us the security footage of Theater 11. Jess and Mark 2.0 were the only two people in the theater. They were holding hands, not making out, and not even holding hands in a cute way—more of a “whoops, I rested my hand on the cup-holder but yours happened to be there already” way.

Stacy, the coworker, was overweight and middle-aged and single and pimply like a teenager and enjoying this as much as Liz and Brit were. “Want to see another camera angle?”

“Do you perverts always sit at the concierge desk and watch people watch movies?” I said.

“Except when we catch couples making out. Then we're supposed to go in there and break it up, if necessary.”

“Interesting.”

Liz smacked me and giggled, “You're bad!”

“What constitutes necessary?”

“We never actually, like, do it,” said Brit.

“Theater 11 will be to your left and down the hall,” said Stacy, pointing. She winked. “Enjoy your show.”

“You too,” said Liz, then she giggled. “Whoops!”

We wore tubs of popcorn as top hats and crawled between the rows of seats so that only our disguises were visible from above.

I was not wearing capri pants like the others and my hands and knees got sticky.

On the screen, Cameron Diaz and Ashton Kutcher's heads and shoulders appeared to be having passionate sex. The shaggy back of Ashton's hair was bobbing in ecstasy, and Cameron's bra straps were falling down her forearms, the cast-off elastic looking sort of lost. The shot was always cropped based on her nipples, always cut off right above them. Her mouth made suggestive shapes.

When they saw us, Mark 2.0 laughed and chucked Peanut M&Ms at our faces, and Jess began to scream. Her seat rolled up with a thud as she ran at me.

"Stop following me! You're scaring me!"

Liz and Brit looked alarmed. I never got blamed for anything.

"Hey, hey," said Liz. "If you're going to be mad at anyone, you should be mad at me."

"It wasn't even Val's idea."

"The popcorn tubs were."

"Okay, except for the popcorn. That was totally Val."

"Stop following me!" Jess screamed at me, stomping past our friends. I uncrossed my arms and she lunged into them, crying. "Stop," she murmured, "it's scary."

The others were more surprised by my reaction than by hers. They would expect this kind of thing from Jess, but they were surprised to see me hug her without making fun. My hair smelled like charred hamburger and my wet bikini had soaked through my t-shirt. When I let go of Jess, she tripped forward a little. On her shirt, there was a wet mark that matched mine under her breastbone—because she's so tall.

"Jess." Brit broke into shrill, nervy giggles. "You look like you have two sets of boobs, Jess."

Distractedly, Jess whined, "I don't! You guys!"

"What did you think I said?" Brit repeated herself and Jess cried, "Oh!" Then she stopped crying and started cry-laughing. All was forgiven. Once again. For the moment. As always.

This was not the first time that Jess had told me to stop, nor would it be the last. In sophomore English class, when we had to write character sketches of our neighbors, I may have mentioned how when she laughs, she looks like she is standing against the current of a warm summer wind: how her asymmetrical little nose flattens against her face and she throws her head back as though

she wants to feel your joke running through her hair. I was the one who told her that Jordan was cheating on her. I let it slip to Landon that her father had performed a background check on him because he was black. This is what I do; I tell other people's truths.

At her graduation party, I screamed and screamed at the DJ, "Play 'Alejandro'! Alejandro, Alejandro!" until he glared and listened. Marching in rhythm with that bouncily militant dance beat, all of our friends and classmates came running down the hill into the temporary backyard dance floor. They were cheering and waving their drinks over their heads and chanting, "I know that we are young and I know that you may love me, but I just can't be with you like this anymore...Alejandro!" Jess wouldn't speak to me for weeks, though—like I told her—to everyone else, it was nothing but another perfect song to which one could freak.

"People are going to think something happened between us," was her argument, and mine was, "Something did." Drunk at prom, we had ditched the dance and her prick of a date and my parents who were chaperoning, and in their empty house, she kissed me, letting me pull gently on her hoop earring, stretching her earlobe. I said, "That was something."

At graduation, because my name came after hers in the alphabet, I walked across the stage behind her. "I'm following you," I whispered, as we shook our way through the procession of important hands, and she told me that wasn't funny.

She was right. It wasn't. It was cruel of me. Redundant. I have been following Jess since before we met, and I'll be following her for long after the fights that we will have in college, in which we will scream awful, accurate things at each other. I have always been, and will always be, what Jess is afraid to see when she looks over her shoulder. The two of us, so young and gay, as they say.

* * *

According to Fuzzy Sweater, all of us have our gifts. I guess drama is Jess's, and mine is advanced evasive maneuvering—and who better to understand God-given gifts than the Genius who believed that they were such a good idea in the first place.

By the end of the retreat week, I will be wearing a nickel rosary around my neck, because I had the most bracelets. Jess would break out if she wore it because, even if she had won, she's

allergic. It's an injustice, really. You can't be good all the time; no one sees everything, and Jess is unlucky. Unlike her, I have excellent instincts for when I'm being watched, which is probably the reason why she believes in God and I do not.

In our cell after the chapel service, I hook contraband headphones into the stolen big-ass boombox from the rec room to listen again and again to the song that they were playing. It's stuck in my head, and I can't get it out.

"I can hear you listening to that song over and over again."

I start and pull the sheets over me. I thought that Jess was asleep.

"You can hear me listening?"

She sighs loudly enough for me to hear.

"Shut up," I say, "I'm trying to pray."

Jess sighs again. Under the covers, I am writing in the composition book of Holy Shit:

Dear God, Please forgive me for loving her best when she is on the verge of unraveling. When she is miserable, I will keep her misery company. I shall be the flesh that she wraps around her bones, but I will let in a draft so that she shivers and pulls me tight about her. The Father, the Son, and all the other holy men, who, based on what I have heard about them, have no blessed clue what I mean and would not approve, amen.

Jesus. God. I know it's hokey, but I'm trying. Don't laugh at me.

I can tell that Jess is not asleep, only pretending. "Val?" she whispers.

I roll over and close my eyes and we are back in the chapel with the glow of the red candles making us blush and blush, except for Jess, who is kneeling and shadowed. My foot has fallen asleep on the kneeler. When I try to stand, it is so numb I can't feel the floor. I fall on my face. Jess takes my arm, and I stumble out of our pew with her, laughing with pain as the feeling returns, and I am ashamed not because I believe in any of this shit but because I couldn't even give her that one moment, this one week, this one thing. The retreat frowns on makeup and Jess has cried off the little that she was wearing. In the glow of the candles, her face is nude, lunar. Her arms are bare. I could never do what she can, not in a week, not in a million years. What must it be like to believe in someone who will love you no matter what?

"I'm—" I start to say.

“You’re what?” Her tone sounds tender because, in this sacred context, she must whisper.

I don’t say sorry; I say nothing. I say it out loud: “Nothing.” As long as she has to keep forgiving me, she can’t forget me—and I couldn’t do that to her. In the beginning, when He was in such a giving mood, I don’t think the creator planned on people like me who are always going to be sorry.



Ashley Inguanta, photograph