

BAPTISM

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Before, there was a Once and an Always, a smooth envelope with a clean sheet of paper inside. The Future appeared mathematical, province comprised of formula and calculation. Consider, for instance, this geometry: row of weathered shoes, vintage green vacuum cleaner, apartment indifferent to its solitary inhabitant. The hypotenuse of Before is Then. *Then*, she cleaned vigorously. She removed her shoes when passing through the door. It was a rite of passage, this return to sameness, to silence, to the soft plush carpet beneath her newly nubile toes.

Then, she studied discrepancy, unlikeness. *Then*, she aspired ardently toward assimilation. For a long time — since childhood, or even longer — she had been an accountant of failures: her own mostly, occasionally others'. Her words formed a ledger. She kept tidy columns that balanced on both sides. She washed every dish she ate from the moment she finished eating and sat on the sofa watching a red wand sweep dust from the clock's dark eyes. Everything gleamed hypothetical and golden. She tied the laces of all her laceable shoes before sleep. This brought her inexplicable enjoyment, so much so she regretted the shoes without laces, which could never be properly finished, their gaping mouths desperate and poignant behind the closet door.

Always, she sensed there was something she should do: start doing, stop doing, continue doing at an accelerated pace. It was her first time living alone. She kept expecting someone would come to check up, make notes, report back to her parents, who lived two hours away. Once, in fifth grade, her mother came to parent-teacher conferences expecting to be praised — praised for the good daughter she had raised, the extraordinary student. Instead, Mrs. Kolbe said, arms akimbo: "I'm worried about your daughter. She seems almost *desperate* to please."

Her father was supposed to come, but his car had broken down. Later, her mother screamed — "What do we even *have* a Honda for? They're built to be reliable. If you can't trust a Honda, what *can* you trust?!" Then, her face contorted like a clown's, drenched

in make-up, the brown gutter-wash of mascara raining down, the lips purpled, trembling and swollen to twice their size. She told the father how humiliated she had been. "It's plain to see the woman thinks we're *dysfunctional*."

"Who? You and me? Our — *family*?" She pilfered tissues from his palm while he sat quietly and frowned. "I just don't see why that would be."

"She says Julie is always seeking approval, stays after school every day to clean the chalkboards..."

"That's just being helpful, I think," he replied. "Like we taught her. Helpful is all that is and all it should be taken to mean."

The daughter is listening in the hall. She understands why they rationalize, why they punch the dough of sadness into story. The daughter knows there is more to this story. They have cut off the crusts and fed the fluff to each other slowly, which is in the end its own kind of kindness. The daughter is ashamed, vaguely, but wishes she didn't have to be. She cannot stop seeking grown women's company. Once, at Katy Parker's house, she cleaned the whole living room and rearranged the chairs. When Mrs. Parker returned, she looked so happy. "Katy never helps with the housework," she sighed, "let alone with the decorating. You have a remarkable eye!"

So it was, always, with the other girls' mothers, and also the teachers, so long as they were young and new. Even that same year, the year of Mrs. Kolbe and the letters that she wrote, lauding the teacher's beauty: *I love when you curl your long, luxurious hair. It looks so lovely.* She had found "luxurious" as a synonym for "elegant" in her thesaurus, a fact she thought Mrs. Kolbe would appreciate. Or *should*. She wrote lies sometimes too, signing her notes *Julianna* because Julie seemed too plain and then explaining that Julianna was in fact her real name. It wasn't of course, but she felt it should have been.

Even that same year, there was a boy who liked her, a boy who walked her home from school and fed her Aplets & Cotlets from his mother's secret candy cupboard. They sat at the table facing each other, powdered sugar dusting their hands and faces, and then he would want to go upstairs to the big bed where his parents slept, and she would want to stay there in Rosemary's world, stirring

things in silver bowls and afterward, licking the spoon.

Even then, as early as then, she understood about rituals, how the world was comprised of them. There were rituals between women and men like what she had witnessed between her mother and father. It was the mother's province to cry, the father's province to comfort. Together they constructed an edifice sturdy as a castle surrounded by a moat, though it was hard to reach them. More and more so, she wondered if it was also hard for them to reach each other — if, in building their castle, they had inadvertently walled themselves in separate turrets. Or if something had. Desire?

At Joy's house, she witnessed another ritual. Melody and Ken were always fighting. In person, they cursed and collided with walls and let dishes clatter to make a point. They got hot in their anger, and the windows opened, and the fans came on, and she heard them from the backyard under the deck where the children tramped, and from upstairs in Joy's bedroom over the radio blaring, and from downstairs in the family room, even over the sound of the hard piano-clang and her own tinny voice trying to sing. They were the sledgehammer bodies, drilling into walls, making the bed skid across its surface, the pictures shake as if a train passed through the navel of their house. Fury seemed to have as much to do with it as love. They were desperate for something, even if no one understood what it was. "Is that the best you can do?! God, I can't even *feel* you! *Harder! Harder! Harder!*" All afternoon, their incessant, desperate music...

As she grew older, she became more contained. She drew herself in and then slowly unfolded, intricate ship in a seemingly translucent bottle. She learned she was meant for display. People believed they saw her, but at best, they were gazing at her reflection in a glass.

So it was that all day she practiced the ritual of learning. She moved one foot before the other, tried not to look down, listened carefully as her teachers and students spoke. She always kept a notebook on hand for documentation. But this was not her real life. How could it be? This was the methodical graphing of life, the matching of her own coordinate points — skills and interests — and their alignment with expectations on an axis.

At night, the shoes came off, and with this action, a small surge

of power. She cooked adequately, read the newspaper, responded to messages, called her boyfriend at the end of his working day. This always happened at the same time and in the same way. She punched in the numbers on her telephone card, and he answered, "I love you, darlin'," then hung up quickly and called her back on his cell. She still let it ring twice so as not to seem too eager. They exchanged observations from the past twenty-four hours. He complained about the shoe business, how he'd have to get out *one of these days*, and she'd tell him he could always come there to stay, and he'd say he would soon enough, and she'd assure him — little clench in her throat — "Don't you know I'm looking forward to that day."

It was not fury between them, and not likely love. Rather, they had been so reliable, trustworthy as a car that wouldn't break down. If he said he would pick her up at ten p.m. in the JC Penney parking lot, then by God, he would pick her up there. They were punctual, cordial, attentive, concerned. He asked about her classes; she asked about his customers; they laughed about the ways they were the same. Then, he said he missed her, and she said she missed him, and she was ready to let the conversation drop like a fish line going down beneath the surface of the sea. She had other plans. She had the bath she had been thinking of all day, which was better than a body beside her in the bed. Could it really be that simple — that she wanted water and he land?

"C'mon, stay on a little longer," he'd coax. "We could even . . ." as if it were still a surprise . . . "take off our clothes."

She never told him that she never undressed. Sometimes she gazed at the muted television or flipped through a magazine. "Where is your hand?" he'd ask, and she'd tell him what he wanted to hear. Sometimes she'd smile to herself at how easy it was, stirring this batter of words: *thrust, stroke, rub, glide*. How did she not erupt with laughter in his ear? Stirring, stirring. She didn't have to think. "Are you touching yourself too? Do you feel me touching you?"

"Oh yes . . ." She poured herself another cup of tea and placed her face close to the steam. It soothed her. Finally, after a long day, she could let go. She could sink into herself again.

"Am I pleasing you? Am I pleasing you?" *Urgently*, wanting to be gracious, wanting to be kind. And then his voice would crack — a sudden trailing off — followed by the low, deep, satisfied silence. She was pleased that he was pleased. She had, like her father, always wanted people to be happy. She was just being helpful after

all. Helpful was all it was and all it should be taken to mean.

Now is her hour. *Now* is her word she never believed she would own a piece of. At best, *Now* belonged to someone else and could be loaned out, for a nominal fee, to weekend renters, vacationers in a world of public access and personal autonomy.

She begins to draw a bath. The water comes smooth and slow from the faucet, the steam fogging her mirrors, shrouding the small tile island in cloud and mist. The baptism of water, as she learned in Catholic school, was the only “true” sacrament of the three forms a baptism could take. She adds the salts now, smelling of lavender, perfuming the bathroom purple, and strains to recall . . .

There was the baptism of blood, better known as martyrdom, which the nuns had emphasized strongly was *not to be sought, but was meant to be endured*. She had not sought suffering, though she had endured it — the deep and ever-widening rift with her family, the progressive isolation from her “true” self, banished for its discrepancies, unlikeness. She had failed to assimilate well into the heterosexual world, even as she followed — moving one foot before the other, trying not to look down — her certain lover toward their future altar.

But she was not dead yet, far from it, and she had read in one poem *I choose not to suffer uselessly*¹ and in another, *my life is a non-negotiable demand*,² and the voices of these women carried torches for her, lit a path. They were strong and resonant with resistant truth. They would not be easily shaken. Rumpled by vapors like wilted flowers, the words clung to small strips of paper posted on her bathroom mirror, so when she stopped to study herself, she saw these words also and grew increasingly resolved. She would not allow sacrifice to subsume her. She would not kill herself trying to be good.

And then this other baptism, baptism of repentance or desire. How were they related, she had always wondered? *Repentance* was no synonym for *desire*, and surely no antidote to *desire's* power.

She takes off her clothes, allows them to crumple to the floor instead of folding them at once and stowing them away. This is her freedom, exerted in small ways. This is the lure of the bath.

¹ From Adrienne Rich's poem "Splittings."

² From Marge Piercy's poem "Right to Life."

Sinking into the water, she cross-examines herself. Were people expected to apologize for desire, repent of it, ask to be cleansed? The desire to be baptized alone carried with it a moral obligation. Henceforth, the person would be different. Henceforth, the person would be initiated into a new way of knowing the world.

She wonders if she should feel guilty for this, for the fact that no man has ever brought her the pleasure of a bath. Or was it she — had *she* failed? Were lovers co-authors of pleasure, or was one intended as writer, the other as a version of the story? She had not allowed herself to be written the way she would like to be told. Her body did not sing beneath a man's the way it sang when the faucet poured over her with a dark and deliberate motion.

All her life she had been afraid to touch her body. The impulse, cultivated by her upbringing, was to cleanse, yet to cleanse the body was to touch it also, and somewhere she had learned to presume a correspondence between the tactile and the unclean — as if the act of touching herself was what had made her unclean to begin with, yet further touching was required to make herself clean again. Was this tautology? Was this madness?

But then she discovered it — the deftness of the drip, the stunning surprise of the spigot increasing in flow, in force, and she too came to understand the low, deep, satisfied silence of an After. Think of the seduction of After, for a woman who has only known Before. *It's late*, the Poet said, *but everything comes next*.³ Oh, how she wanted everything! She craved what seemed the impossibility of that arrival, there on the other shore of knowing — where no one else could take her and where she wouldn't mind living alone.

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Why love, she wonders, *which is always filling the chalice of someone else's heart?*

It is the most cumbersome question of her life. She fears she will capsize beneath the weight of it. *Why love?* Sinking, submerging her head. Elliptical, unknowable. *Why love?*

³ Naomi Shihab Nye