

CHURCH OF THE DRAGONSLAYER

Any idiot can play Greek for a day, and join a sorority or write a tragedy.
- Rilo Kiley

At the turn of the century we become Greek Orthodox people. The church is so beautiful, all goldleaf and curvature, the women too, Chanel blazers and sweeping coats — all memory of this church is in winter — and jewels knotted to their fingers. I'm too old for believing. I'm young enough to lament it.

A decade and a half later I am moving to Montana. I'm back in Michigan for three weeks, the longest span of time since I moved to New York, packing boxes, saying goodbyes. My mother frets the time difference, two hours, prohibitive. My yiayia has me over for a bean soup lunch and writes me a check, holds the checkbook firm in her old hands. She will not pass it. It's not a check. It's a message.

She has been thinking about dying since 2013, the year Papou goes, the year of their 60th anniversary. I come home for the party; instead there is a stroke, a funeral. Just waiting out her body now, which refuses to betray her.

One year at Greek camp there is a priest from Australia. He is very old, so old. He wears one of those hats that seems fake for TV priests, or the popes of the past. I sign up one evening to go to his confession and he will not give it. He won't even talk to me. It's 2003. I'm three months from sixteen. I do not believe, but. I'm interested, I tell him, in Orthodoxy, in understanding. You're unbaptized, he tells me, a fact he discovered through trickery: asking for my baptismal name. You're not Orthodox, you're nothing.

In college I am lucky, I fly many places. Athens, Raleigh, New York, Edinburgh, Paris, Barcelona, London. In nearly every checked bag, and often in both directions, I find a long thin sheet of paper: I have been randomly chosen for a routine search. For a while I collect them but all together they become unfunny.

Before returning to St. George, the church of her childhood, my mother takes us to a Lutheran one, three years, also compulsory. Her aerobics friend is the wife of the pastor. They are a whole family of sandy five-foot-nine people, homogenous, placid. I have, immediately, a crush on the son of the pastor, on his full mouth and his Backstreet Boys haircut and his wholesale disregard of me. Magazines and media have already explained why I am not interesting to him: heavy brow, hairy arms, sprouting hips. I look him up on the internet this year. He has a little light daughter and a motivational blog full of the kind of ideas

geared toward people who have never read a motivational blog before, never thought about their own ideas, not once.

The check is for a thousand dollars. It's too much money. I badly need the money. There is furniture to buy, there is gas to power the car across the country, there is the monthly lease on the car, there are 5 more weeks before my stipend checks begin to come. The money makes me feel infantilized, like I need to call my mother before I take it.

On Halloween in 2003 Marissa's dad sets up a lawn chair on their front walk and pretends to fall asleep with the candy bucket on his lap, head hung back, snorting animatedly, starting awake when the little kids try to sneak a full-sized bar, his delight maybe even larger than theirs. Marissa and I stand at the end of the driveway with our full pillowcases and our not-totally-above-it costumes — goth 80s girl, school-spirit 80s girl — looking up at the stars and asking each other how it was possible to be at war and at Halloween at the same time. At camp all summer the Orthodox Life classes had come back to ways of steeling our hearts and minds against this new religious enemy, as we had done against the Ottomans, a metaphor so inept I bothered to be vocal about it. Angry about it. I was brought in front of the camp director, was told if it was too hard to accept their beliefs then this was not a place for me.

End up having a crush too on the son of the St. George priest, already in college, who wears leather and teaches me, one afternoon in senior year when I know I look good, with a plastic spoon from the kitchenette and a lighter from his pocket, the mechanics of freebasing.

My parents are not free to marry in this church, Abbu having refused a baptism, a conversion. His religious life ends, age 16, when his own father is hospitalized, not from the waning Liberation War but a heart attack. Some uncle pulls Abbu away from the bedside to the mosque and while they pray for his abstract life, my grandfather dies.

She says don't worry about the money; it's my getting-married money. Since you don't seem to have any plans to, she says. So then I do reach for the check, because she's being rude but rude in a way I can't fault, coming from a woman born in a mountainous village in the 1930s, a woman who came to America in 1953 able only to say please, thank you, and excuse me, such nonintrusive, offensively patriarchal language that I can swallow this rudeness for a grand. She folds the check over its crimped edge, tears it away in short, careful little pulls. She hands it to me, but she keeps a hold on her side.

Everybody at camp has known one another since infancy or childhood, has been coming to Rose City each summer since they were eligible at

six. There are gaggles of cousins, friends from the different churches or from the regional basketball league, kids of community leaders and priests and important donors. I come at age twelve, awkward and near-friendless, encouraged by a few girls in my Sunday School who then put me through the most ordinary and harrowing teen gauntlet imaginable. My swimsuit is nunnish, have I never heard of deodorant. I come home two weeks later with three disposable cameras full of pictures of myself smiling elatedly with all my casual tormentors, knowing I've just left the best place in the world, knowing the only thing that will ever matter again is becoming part of their parea.

Every culture has parea but, like everything else, the Greeks believe they invented it. It is the Platonic ideal of the friend group, which becomes better together than they could ever be apart, capable as a unit of every metric of expansion. Everyone inside becomes a supreme wit, a conversational star. Parea will build up your material worth through connection and opportunity. They will loan you a dress, a ride, a bump. They will, for example, plan trips to Windsor when you're all finally nineteen to buy legal 30-racks of Molson Ice and handles of Skyy, enough so you just laugh when your crush who's had his Roman nose pressed against your face all night takes his hand out of your skirt and gives it to a dancer in a private room at the strip club you've all drifted to. The laugh is honest; the laugh is for all of you. You have wanted so much to be easy in a group like this, all your life. All twelve of you sleep

in one hotel room, your crush curled up behind you on the floor. The best place in the world.

Soon I'll be dead, Yiayia says in the kitchen, and I want to see you in heaven. But I don't know where Muslims go when they die.

Sophomore year of high school a Pakistani kid comes up to me at lunch and asks why I have an Arabic last name. My dad grew up in Bangladesh, I tell him, and he laughs. You guys picked the wrong side of that one, he says.

Junior year a girl in choir with a Black dad and a white mom asks me how it felt when I realized I was a mixed kid. I don't know what to say to her. That moment is the moment I realize I am a mixed kid.

The one church service I love is Good Friday at midnight. The whole week before it is spent preparing the kouvouklion, symbolic coffin covered in flowers and overlaid with the epitafio, blessed cloth representing the slain body of Christ. The kouvouklion is carried out of the church and processed around the courtyard three times, the whole congregation behind it, holding candles, breathing incense and the liminal air of late March or April. I remember helping to prepare it one

year after the dome above the sanctuary was redesigned to be completely papered in gold leaf around a portrait of Jesus in stunning blue, and new screens shielding the altar from the congregation were made with the portraits of the saints, which in Greek Orthodoxy only ever look superior and long-suffering, be the torments mental or physical. Remember padding along the velvet carpets of the nave of the church to pin expensive blooms to that cosplay coffin, day lilies and violets and special variegated tulips, swinging my young body around that space it was not usually allowed to be, and the priest sees me, pulls me over, says he heard I've been pushy in Sunday School, nagging at questions the teachers felt they had answered, saying casual blasphemies, suggesting new worlds. He says perhaps I should be quiet and if I can't be quiet, stop coming.

Don't know or even believe, actually, that these things really happened the same day, but it's good storytelling. Rather; effective. It's a way of really making you see how it felt, to belong to something one minute and have to leave it the next. Not so much loss of faith as reinvigoration of its absence.

A favorite photo of myself as a baby: at Christmas, red dress on those same shallow plush steps up to the nave, clustered with the gold and copper and silver bulb ornaments my parents still trim their tree with. I

was elated, originally, organically, to be attended to in that space, before anyone knew to bar me from it.

St. George killed the dragon but it was hardly a charity, according to some legends. Convert and be saved, he said to the people, or persist as you have for all the many years before I arrived here by chance and die. That's your St. George the Dragonslayer, I'll say one day in a lecture. St. George the Colonizer.

And I only liked Good Friday, anyway, for how transparently pagan it was, how dependent on magic.

When she calls me a Muslim this all seeps back in. Things that ache, deep and teenaged, hurts I thought I had healed. You're not dying, I tell her, and I'm not Muslim. Don't know why my instinct is to distance, like it's as bad as she thinks. But I will never be baptized because I will never be anything but a nonbeliever to everybody. Each narrative of joining hides another of rejecting.

The year after Papou dies my mom builds a memorial garden in the small woods behind Yiayia's condo. She rakes and hauls leaves away, clears brush and felled branches, reserving the lovelier birch ones for

phase two of the project. For this she evicts wasps and garter snakes and likely billions of ants. After the clearing she drags back the birch and buys flagstones, designates meandering walkways and ovular flowerbeds, places a bench at the entrance and lays a wreath over. A mundane place made sacred; one of the only ones I understand, in my body, what prayer means to some people.

After the Australian priest tells me I am nothing, the son of the camp director gives me an emergency baptism, right there at the picnic tables outside the arts and crafts room. He spills a water bottle over his fingers and wetly crosses my forehead, says Greek prayers I don't need to understand to know the meaning of. He holds my shoulders and looks me straight in the eye. We're laughing a little but what he is doing, what he has offered, it is deadly serious and necessary. He saw something I needed and he knew how he could give it to me. We are, it bears reminding, every minute of not-yet-sixteen years old. I never tell anyone in my family that this happens. Too tender a thing to be explained what was wrong with it.

I don't remember, really, how the interaction ends. There's some impression of having made her feel sheepish, some guilt for having done. I'm sure that I tell her I will never be baptized; worked too hard for too long to lie by omission about something so central, even to my poor grandmother in her late 80s. Like she has every time anybody's left her

house, Yiayia opens the garage for me and comes out to stand in its maw. One side is swept immaculately clean, with brightly woven chairs unfolded on a beige rug, her personal concrete beach. On the other is the car she isn't allowed to drive anymore. All my life there's been some same but different white sedan in that garage, as Barbra Streisand has always had her same but different small white dog.

She waves me out until I beep the horn, another tradition, unshakeable. I get around the corner before lighting a cigarette and seeing if I'll cry. She's loaded me down with a bag of culinary prizes — bean soup, spanakopita, kourabiedes — and, yes, the check. I look down at the tupperwares, all Sharpied with "Shella" at the corners. Another twist of guilt. Her real name is Efstathia, from a root that means stability and steadfastness in the faith — you can't make these things up — and when she immigrated someone in her family, some uncle or cousin, decided Sheila would be a sensible Americanization. But no one knew how to properly spell it, I guess.