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## The Lie

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# The Lie

I tried to pretend it wasn't there. Paper scrolls bound together on a wooden rod, hung to the wall by a thick white cord. It was meant to be art, images of levitating saints. Mary, the Virgin Mother, is in blue robes standing on clouds, her beautiful face washed of any emotion. There must have been twelve scrolls, with a scene on each side of the paper and the proud consumer could flip between images depending on one's religious mood. On one page, God the Father reigned triumphantly upon a throne. The throne sat stoutly on a carpet of clouds and the sky behind was blue, flecked with white like a Dutch piece of crockery. God sat with his legs spread far apart, his feet firmly planted on his cumulous carpet, muscular thighs covered by a white toga. He had flowing white hair, thick and curly, and a well-trimmed beard. His skin was tanned and his biceps shapely. Had I been older and more accustomed to gym-sharks and their culture, I would have said that God had glamour muscles. As it was then, I didn't know the anatomical or cultural terms for gorgeously developed musculature, the rock-hard pecs, the round shoulders, the long, sensual fingers, and strong, veiny hands. All I registered, as a five-year-old, was that God was one hunky old dude.

I stood on my twin bed, wearing a little purple sweater with a kitten silkscreened across the chest. It played with a ball of yarn in a coquettish way, with large eyes and a seductive turn of its head. I cocked my own head as I examined the images and flipped up the scrolls to look at the ones behind. After God the Father, there was the Holy Family: a blonde baby Jesus (alarmingly Aryan-looking considering his Jewish heritage) cradled in Mary's arms, with Joseph standing next to her in green robes. Joseph had short, curly brown hair and a beard. He looked demure, even feminine, compared to God on the previous page. So was this Mary's boyfriend? I had heard from my mother that the Annunciation was when God made Mary pregnant with

Jesus. I didn't know what that meant, but I knew babies could only grow in ladies' tummies when they were married. My mother had told me this with great emphasis, and I assumed that marriage was a special time in a lady's life when she could wake up one morning, ripe and round, and a baby popped out that day like a wonderful surprise. So if God made Mary pregnant, he had to be her husband. I flipped between the scrolls of the two different men and decided if I had to pick between them, I would definitely choose God. Joseph didn't look like he had much spunk, but God looked like he knew how to push around a lawnmower.

I pinched two pages in my fingers and lifted the scrolls as high as I could, holding them above me like a canopy of grace. I took a deep breath and looked at the scene in front of me. The top of the painting showed the underside of heaven, a hint of clouds, the last hope before despair. The painting lowered into shadows. At the vanishing point, indeterminable shapes dropped and fell, some head first, some with legs spread akimbo, starfish shadows falling into flames the color of Cheetos. The figures trapped in perpetual decent reminded me of pineapple chunks stuck in the middle of red Jell-O; they looked as if they ought to finally touch the bottom but never did. Figures danced around these falling shadows holding pitchforks, arms raised high in cheers. To the very bottom of the painting, curled up and close to the frame, looking patiently out at the viewer, sat The Devil. I assumed the cheering figures farther back were devils too, but this one, closest to the viewer, seemed to be The Devil. His skin was jet black and lacquered, white highlight painted on his shoulders and head to make his flesh appear as patent leather. His eyes were yellow and a forked tail, like a serpent's tongue, curled upwards behind him. He looked out, but he wasn't smiling. If he had at least been smiling or grimacing, he would have appeared garish, a cartoonish caricature of a demon. But he sat in stoic elegance, almost gracefully. His eyes, as they gazed into mine, had no message, and it was the fact that he didn't seem to care at all that scared me the most. In the midst of all these flames, he was as immovable as ice. There appeared to be no reasoning with someone such as this. At least if he howled or bellowed, he would evidently be capable of passion. One could appeal to extreme emotion: scream, beg, and writhe for mercy because the cloven master was himself capable of extremes, even if it was heated hate—but he was frigid.

We didn't have cable TV growing up because my mother didn't want us to be tempted or educated by modern media. Instead, she ordered VHS tapes through the mail made by a company called CCC, which charted its stance as "pro-family in the entertainment industry." The VHS tapes were a mini-series of lives of the saints. One afternoon, I begged my mom, "Please can I watch a CCC?"

She plugged one in called *The Day the Sun Danced: The True Story of Fatima* and set up her ironing board beside me. I sat on the carpet at the foot of our large wood paneled TV while the iron gasped steam and sizzled on my Dad's plaid work shirts. The story of Fatima tells the tale of three children: Lucia, Jacinta and Francisco between the ages of seven and ten in Portugal in 1917. While they were herding sheep, they saw the Blessed Mother and conversed with her. She appeared to the children over the course of the next six months as word spread and crowds grew. On the last day, a crowd of approximately 70,000 people gathered and claimed that the sun moved towards the earth in spirals and zigzags. While the sun danced, the three children received visions from the Blessed Mother and reported on them after. The children reported a vision that the earth opened before them and widened into a large chasm; black shapes fell into a landing of flames. The VHS did not hold back, and I sat with wide eyes as 1980s cinematography showed shadowy, dancing demons leaping among flames the size of a grown man while the bodies fell, screaming and shrieking into hell. The split earth slowly closed and the children returned their gaze to the ever-serene Mary.

My mother put her iron down and said, "You know, Bernadette, more people go to hell for sins against purity than any other sin."

I turned my attention to her and watched her. What were sins against purity? What was purity? I returned my focus to the TV for the culmination of *The Day the Sun Danced*. What happened was the usual course of events for a CCC narrative: the little saints undergo persecution for their spiritual communication. Sometimes, they landed themselves in prison or sometimes the town simply pointed their fingers and laughed. Then, a jolly man with a moustache, usually carrying a basket of baguettes, would experience a small miracle; his mystifyingly shriveled hand would plump up to a healthy limb, or his decrepit, barren wife would swell with pregnancy, and they would have a baby and decree that the children were in fact correct, and then the whole town, once again in unity, would sing the children's praises and become believers *en masse*. The narratives concluded so simply; faith was a communal experience. If a neighbor believed, why not you too? And the answer seemed to be, okay.

I remember sitting with my mother on the sofa one evening as she read me a children's story of Samson and Delilah. In cartoon depiction, Samson was a long-haired stallion, a character I would later see repeated in more detail on the cover of Harlequin Romance novels. He lived in a town that had all the tropes of a cartoonish Holy Land, and he was "friends," my mother said, with a woman named Delilah. My mother liked to stop reading to add her commentary.

"She was a very immodest woman, Bernadette. She would walk around in (and here she whispered) *see-through* clothing." She pointed towards our

curtains, white and sheer, long panels which fluttered across the carpet when she vacuumed beneath them. “Her dresses looked like our curtains.”

We had two lovebirds in the living room, and their cage sat next to the curtains. Out of boredom, they had a habit of nibbling at the curtains until a good foot of the paneling was picked through with little holes. I looked at the holes and wondered if Delilah’s dress would be considered more immodest with holes or if being see-through made it immodest enough.

The story told how Samson was invincibly powerful and men in the town were jealous. His hair was what endowed him with supernatural strength and God made him promise to never cut it as a contract: long hair for strength. I thought of God the Father on the scrolls in my bedroom and thought of his own long curls and figured this made sense. The jealous men in town found out about his hair and convinced Delilah to cut Samson’s hair.

“She managed to trick him, Bernadette, because of her see-through dresses,” my mother explained, speaking softly into my ear.

And so, poor Samson’s hair got chopped while he was sleeping: an image clearly depicted of Delilah, in her sexy dress, smiling wickedly with scissors at the head of the bed while the innocent Samson slept. I couldn’t imagine for the life of me why Samson was having a nap in her bed. Why didn’t he go home to his own bed? But this was not explained to me by my mother or the book. In the end, Samson loses his strength, getting blinded in the process, and when his hair grows back along with his might, he goes to the pillars of the temple and pushes them apart so that they collapse atop him and all the hypocrites within.

Once in a college class, my professor quoted Rilke: “Man is the liar but woman is the lie.” I have since tried to find which poem or letter this quote is attributed to and cannot seem to find its origin, indeed of Rilke or anyone else. Maybe it was her quote and I misheard her. I’m not sure, but the quote itself has stood with me for years. Woman is the lie.

I remember later in my childhood, around eleven, again I sat on the couch with my mother, and she read a different book. At this point, I was quite capable of reading on my own and very fond of the activity, but there is something cozy about having someone else read to you, and so I found myself again nuzzled against her. She read to me a book about a princess who had a pearl that was precious to her. Princes from all over the world came to her and begged for her hand and, as an addition, the pearl too. She meekly refused them all until one prince arrived, led her to a chapel with a priest, and they entered, as my mother phrased it, “the sacrament of marriage.” I remember thinking that the priest looked too modern in a setting of stone castles and capes trimmed in ermine fur. I thought, “He looks just like our priest,” complete with black, ironed slacks, a white cube of Roman collar and a neat little side part. After the anachronistic priest let them go as husband and wife, the

page turned to show the princess giving her pearl to the prince, a curved smile planted on his face. Without being able to state it, I had a gut feeling of the symbolism of the pearl and of conflict: “Why didn’t the princess get a pearl from the prince too?”

Years later, my mother found my diary tucked away and discovered from reading it that I had lost my virginity to a beloved and committed boyfriend. She followed up on this information with weepy phone calls and texts encouraging me to go to confession, to break up with him. These phone calls went on for months. One afternoon on the phone, in the midst of gasps and cries, she said to me, “How could you give yourself to him?” I was twenty nine. My brothers’ virginites were never cried over. In fact, I don’t think anyone, my mother included, really cared. Granted, they didn’t write about the experience in their diaries, partially because it didn’t seem too remarkable to either of them, and for the larger reason, they didn’t even keep diaries. Their sexual experiences were part of boyhood, a chapter in the bildungsroman of their ascents to manhood; mine was a grief, something wept over by my mother, as if it were also hers and she had not been consulted on the subject. Something to be confessed. Something that should terminate the relationship.

Another of CCC’s marvelous productions was a VHS called *If You Love Me... Show Me!* It was marketed to teens and told a thinly-veiled story of two teenagers who fall in love. He takes her to a look-out in his car and pulls out of his pocket a wrapped yellow condom. The first time I watched it, I thought it was a lollipop missing its stick. The message of the story is that real love waits for sex until it is blessed within the sacrament of marriage. One maternal character in the film smiles as she pours a pot of tea and says, “We decided to save that for our wedding night.” As I grew and moved away from my mother and her couch of stories, I took the term if you love me, show me a little more literally than CCC intended. My experience was a happy one, where love and sex intertwined into a harmonious, instinctual experience of togetherness. My childhood education taught me to mistrust myself: myself as a sexual being and myself as a woman. Delilah was a traitor but at least she showed emotion and action. The Blessed Mother, the only woman depicted to young girls, was completely stripped of affect. I had a pearl which, according to my mother, I gave to an unworthy recipient in an inappropriate way because it wasn’t blessed by a man in ironed black slacks. Therefore, by that logic, the relationship was doomed. I think there was power in the decision. The image of a pearl speaks of commodity, who is the highest bidder? Who is most worthy? I decided that outside of a stone church, and I gave it willingly. I was in love, so I showed it.

I went to Church recently after I woke up with a strange longing to go to Sunday Mass. I get the same ache to occasionally drive by my childhood home or flip through photo albums in my parent’s basement with stickers

on their spines dating 1989, 1992. With that nostalgic urge, I opened the front door of the church and sat in the last pew, deliberately several minutes late so I wouldn't have to deal with the cheerfulness of a church greeter. The pew creaked uneasily beneath me, and I looked out at the sprinkled congregation, sparse between the gaping rows of pews. Many women had their heads covered by mantillas, and the elegant statue of the Blessed Virgin was also veiled. All around me, the luxury of women's hair was modestly covered while my own hung long down my back as it usually does, and I felt strangely inappropriate, even sensual, despite being bundled in a winter coat, and I was glad again to be so far back. I felt like a voyeur in a world that had once been my center; I remembered the times I brought the hosts or the wine and water up during the Offering of the Gifts. I remembered when I had my first communion, standing in the center of the aisle, veiled, dressed in white from head to toe. My mother had gone to Sears the day before and purchased tiny, white pantyhose so I would literally be in all white. I remembered my Confirmation, countless Saturday afternoons in line for confession, masses where I felt moved, I felt kindred to the message, the organ, the communal responses. But now I felt like I had forgotten the language, lost my appetite for its fervor, lost my nose for the incense.

At the time of communion, the parishioners rose and filled up the aisle to receive the Eucharist. In the Catholic tradition, the faithful are not to receive the Eucharist if they are not in the state of grace, meaning they have committed a grave sin. I knew enough from examinations of conscience before confessions that sex outside of marriage was a grave sin. Out of respect for the tradition, I stayed in my seat and watched as the line inched its way closer to the priest dressed in green vestments, reverently offering each person the host: "The Body of Christ" to which one responds, "Amen." I watched jealously as parishioners gently chewed the host on their way back to their pews, solemnly lowered the kneelers, and bent their heads. I felt like I was little Bernadette again, from the albums of 1989, 1992, who was denied Neapolitan ice cream for smacking her sister. The message: you behaved badly and now you don't get your treat. But what is grace if not the undeserved favor of God? If God is everything, can he not see past my sin and welcome me?

There I was, the fallen woman in the last pew, with her long, lustrous hair hanging down uncovered, my lust trickling off of me like oiled perfume. Didn't Christ come for me too? Even more so, if one reads the Gospels correctly. I wanted to say "Fuck it," march up the aisle and hold out my hand; "The Body of Christ" and give my "Amen," but I didn't. I don't know if it was fear, shame, or the inertia caused from feeling like an outsider that stopped me. Instead, I walked outside. Away from the incense, the dim lighting, the polished pews; I felt one again with the concrete, the barren trees, and the busy hum of cars. Why must the state of grace be defined by someone else?

Even the term itself is faulty. I don't think grace can be a state because state implies territory, boundaries, and barriers. I believe that grace is fluid as liquid, porous, and permeable, and no sin is strong enough to stop its balm. I was not the fallen woman because my sin, measured against the barometer of my own conscience, was no sin at all. I realized that the Rilke quote struck me so profoundly years ago, and lingered on in my memory, because I instinctively knew it was wrong. I paused and looked down the downtown street, at the liquor store sign, the traffic light blinking red to green, and carefully combed my fingers through my long hair. There are lies, but I am not one of them.