

Welcome to the Christian World

by Marguerite Alcazaren de Leon

“Please don’t get mad.”

I looked up from the slab of photocopies I’d been reading. Likha, home from school, was standing at the other end of the sala. She was still in uniform, her backpack still on her shoulders.

She looked nervous about what she was about to say, which was strange. My daughter had never had a reason to be afraid of me. I liked to think I wasn’t like Likha’s friends’ moms, who seemed to have rods of varying lengths up their asses.

“There’s something I want to do,” she continued, walking slowly up to the table. “I’m not sure if you’d allow me.”

I had no idea where this was going. Likha was 12, admittedly a volatile age for most kids, teetering as it was before the lava pit of adolescence. But she was so much more level-headed than a regular tween; she was more level-headed than I was.

What could she possibly want to do? Date a classmate? Drink a beer? Smoke? I doubted it was any of these, and it wasn’t because I’d forbidden them—because I hadn’t. I’d raised Likha to know that she could explore the world on her own terms. I only had two requirements: that she let me know what she was doing, and that it wasn’t something that could hurt another living thing, like handling a gun or experimenting on a hamster.

And so far, this freedom had actually tempered her; because most adult things weren’t contraband, they didn’t seem to seduce her at all. She was a person of simple joys: K-pop; online Scrabble; all things salted caramel.

So to see the dread in her eyes was heartbreaking, like all my efforts to be the decent, unproblematic adult figure in her life had not turned out to be enough.

“You can tell me,” I said in earnest. “It’s okay.”

Likha sighed.

“I want to get baptized.”

I was right. I had no idea where this was going.

“Baptized as in Catholic-baptized?” I asked, trying not to sound incredulous.

“As in, in the church, yes,” she answered.

“Uh-huh.”

Likha gestured shyly to the chair across from me, as if she had just come in for a job interview. I waved at her to sit.

I didn’t know how to proceed with the conversation. This had never come up before. I didn’t raise Likha on any kind of faith; I had stopped being Catholic a long time ago, and knew that I never wanted to impose it, or any spiritual belief, on my would-be children. This wasn’t to say that I forbade Likha from religion; I just figured, she could realize the things she chose to realize on her own, and that I would only gently guide her away in case she got into a doomsday cult.

“So. How did you get into that?” I ended up asking. I’d enrolled her into secular, co-ed schools from the very beginning, so it was a reasonable question.

“Josh,” she said.

“From Frisbee club?”

“Yes, from Frisbee club.”

Josh was a classmate of hers, and I knew they would hang out sometimes after their Friday Ultimate Frisbee games. He hadn't seemed like a particularly significant friend. There was no hint that he and my daughter were close, much less had such a serious influence on her worldview.

Likha, clearly sensing my confusion, explained that Josh's parish was near the field where they played, and that this was where they would wait for Josh's parents to pick him up. Having never really been inside churches, she would ask Josh question after question about the statues and the paintings and the fixtures—especially of the giant, near-naked man looming over them, seconds from dying on a nightmarish contraption. She knew this man was Jesus, but that was as far as her knowledge went.

Josh would patiently accommodate her, and as the Catholic Church was a centuries-old institution with a dramatic history, there always seemed to be more and more for her to learn. There was the wide-ranging army of saints, each with a niche superpower and strife-ridden origin story; there was Mary, a teenager who agreed to be impregnated (sex-free!) with a man who was also a god, but also definitely a man, and also a holy spirit; there was the sacrament of communion, where Jesus' renewable resource of a body was turned into wafers for people to eat once a week, like a feeding program.

But more importantly, Likha said, she learned that all this strangeness was in support of a powerful truth: that there was someone far greater and wiser than all of us, and that he would always be on our side and give us the strength and guidance to do good things.

Her look of hesitation had morphed, as she spoke, into one of joy. But it was a kind of joy I had never seen before. Normally, at her happiest, Likha was very animated. She flailed, she squealed—very physical demonstrations of her state. This time, it was the opposite. She was still as stone, and the joy was concentrated on her face: the glowing eyes, the flushed cheeks, the smile that slipped out now and then. And I was supposed to be happy to see her so happy, but instead was frightened and confused.

I glanced back down at the readings on the table. My highlighter pen was drying up; the last few sentences I'd swiped were an anemic yellow, barely distinguishable from the paper. I had thought my report for Comm Theory was what was going to burn me out in the coming days, but it turned out I had more complicated things to think about.

Likha had stopped talking. When I looked up, I found her staring at me expectantly. It seemed that now that she had gotten things off her chest, she had also gained a certain confidence that I would respond in her favor. Hadn't I, after all, always been the supportive mother?

"Is that okay?" she asked.

"You've really thought about it?" I heard myself saying. "This is something you really want?"

She nodded.

"This means a lot to me."

Couldn't she have chosen something more blatantly unwise, so it would be easier for me to say no? Like free solo rock climbing? Or flat earth theory? Yes, Catholicism was ridiculous, but it was so prevalent that it had slipped into this kind of gray area. It was, in this godforsaken country, both an influence and non-influence on people's morals. It was easy to acknowledge it was there, that it was everywhere, and still manage to ignore it.

And Likha had said that it would help her to be good. I doubted she meant she would hole herself up in a convent, or start protesting at pride parades and health clinics. She probably meant it as a prompt, an extra nudge, a little memo hovering over her head, to be good. And who was I to say no to that?

"Well," I started to say slowly. "If that's what you wan—"

She leapt out of her chair, squealing.

"Thank you! Thank you! Oh my god, I'm so happy! Thank you!" she cried.

Who was this strange child, and what did she do to my daughter?

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The neighborhood parish, La Nuestra Señora dela Abundancia, was a standard church building. The outside was painted in an innocuous cream and tan, and there was a giant styrofoam 10 Commandments fenced in on a tiny patch of grass.

The smell of sampaguita, candle wax, and old wood hit me as I walked through the double doors—the smell of veiled and shriveled women, the smell of hushed voices and lowered eyes. And despite many lights being on, it was still dark, the bulbs straining to glow amid the thick pillars and beams and the high, yawning ceiling.

Then the statues. Multiple Virgin Marys, ones smiling faintly, ones looking up in a mix of anguish and exasperation, as if they were absolutely *done* with standing around doing nothing. The male saints that shared the exact same face but had different hairstyles: bald with a goatee; bald with a beard; curly hair with a goatee; curly hair with a beard; bald but with a single, inexplicable ring of hair around the head. And Giant Jesus: nailed onto his giant cross, wearing a crown of thorns woven like barbed wire, an open gash on his side, looking to the ceiling with puppy dog eyes, begging, miserable, bleeding—a scene from a horror movie rendered 3D, far larger than life for all the world to see.

On the left side of the building was a doorway marked “Parish Office,” and I walked towards it as quickly as I could, doing my best to avoid any of the statues. It seemed silly, but I guess I’d never gotten over how creepy they were to me. There remained in me a kernel of my childhood fear that they would move when my back was turned to them, or that they could hear my thoughts and knew for sure that I had a special place in hell.

But just when I thought I’d gotten past all of them, it turned out the worst of the lot was right next to the parish office door. Corpse Jesus. Human-sized, lying in an ornate glass coffin, hands folded over his torso as if at a wake. I’d forgotten all about him, but the second I saw him, memories tumbled right in of me as a child, panicking that my parents would choose a pew near the Corpse Jesus of our old church.

I couldn’t understand it. What was it for? Why did they have to make it so scary? Yes, the crucifix was also scary, but seeing Jesus dead in a see-through box upset me more. I was taught that he was immortal, that he had died once but had risen. Plus, there was nothing in the Gospels that said he was placed in a coffin. So that meant people had consciously decided to make a statue of him as a corpse. But why? How was that going to help? What good was that going to do?

I knocked on the office door a little too loudly, my back turned to the corpse, trying to ignore the weight of its presence. Fortunately, someone told me to come in, so I slipped in quickly and shut the door.

It was a small, air-conditioned room with a counter separating visitors from staff, like at a government office. A faintly smiling, mid-sized Virgin Mary was on a table over on the staff side, and I was only too glad to see it given what I had just dodged seconds earlier. On the walls were framed images of the Pope; of a calm, not-dead Jesus in three-quarter profile; and of men I assumed had served as priests in the parish.

The only other person in the room was a terse-looking middle-aged woman manning the counter. Upon seeing me, she nodded at me to come over as if I’d been in line for hours.

“Hi, I’d like to schedule a baptism?” I said, hoping that this was how these conversations started.

“Resident?” the woman asked, a touch of doubt in her voice.

“Do you mean, am I a resident here? Yes, yes. I live in this barangay.”

I fished out my college ID to show her my address, but instead of being appeased, she stared at me with growing confusion.

“You’re a student?” she asked.

I felt a jab in my chest. I hated this question.

“Well, yes,” I said carefully. “But, I mean, I’m 31. I had to stop school for a while. So...I’m an undergrad, but I’m older than most of my classmates. Which, I mean, that’s not super abnormal. It’s not like there’s an age limi...”

I cleared my throat to shut myself up. Why was I so nervous all of a sudden? I felt like I was at the principal’s office. Was I going to have to defend every one of my life choices to this lady today?

“You’re the mother? Or the sister?”

“M-mother,” I replied. “I’m the mother.”

She stuck her hand out, still looking at me warily.

“Birth cert.”

Another jab in my chest.

“Oh! Of my daughter?” I asked. “I-I didn’t know I had to bring it with me. Oh gosh, I’m not even sure where it is; it’s been so long.”

At this point, the lady had a full-blown look of suspicion on her face.

“What do you mean it’s been so long? How old is your daughter?”

“She’s 12.”

Her eyebrows shot up.

“I think you may have confused baptism with confirmation?” she asked.

“Oh no, no. Not confirmation. She really hasn’t been baptized.”

The lady paused for a moment, clearly taking all of the information in, polishing and finalizing her moral judgments of the situation.

I threw her a sheepish smile. *Yes, lady, you guessed right! I stopped college 12 years ago because I got pregnant! With a baby! Through intercourse! I’m just your ordinary sinner here, sinning her way through life; sin, sin sin—that’s me, doing all the sins.*

“Okay,” the lady finally said. “Please find your daughter’s birth cert as soon as you can and come back here for scheduling. I assume you also didn’t bring your marriage certificate? You’ll also need to bring that.”

She looked at me pointedly.

“Unless...of course...you’re not married?”

“W-well, n-no, no I’m—”

“—If you’re not married,” she cut in, “we’ll also need to schedule your interview with our parish priest, Father Bartolome. It’s a requirement for single parents, common-law couples, and live-in couples. We can choose a schedule for that when we schedule the actual baptism. And how about the ninongs and ninangs? Have you chosen them already?”

I had to stop myself from swearing.

“Oh my gosh. I’m so sorry. I completely forgot about that.”

“Minimum one ninong and one ninang. You’ll also have to get their baptismal or confirmation certs so we can input their names into your child’s baptismal cert. But if they’re not Catholic, we can’t put the names in, and they will only be considered witnesses to the baptism. But technically they will be the ninong and ninang—just not in the cert. We wouldn’t recommend this, of course.”

My head was swimming from all the information. There was suddenly so much I needed to do on top of all the things I already had to do for school.

And who was going to be Likha’s ninong and ninang? I supposed Cholo, the blockmate I was closest to, could be one of them. He had gone to high school at a pricey Catholic boys’ school, which very likely meant he had a baptismal certificate stashed away in his house somewhere. My other

blockmate friend, Patricia, had also come from a very religious and expensive all-girls school, but her parents recently hadn't allowed her to leave the house save for classes, ever since a bizarre incident with her dad's pet ostrich.

I also realized Likha hadn't interacted with many adults besides myself and her teachers since her father and I broke it off years ago. Most of my friends had been Bryan's friends first. We met in college—the first time I went—and barely had any other social circles.

And when I got pregnant with Likha, I couldn't bring myself to interact with anyone out of shame. Then it got worse after I had to drop out of school. I had preeclampsia dangerously early in pregnancy, so the doctor said it was best I stay home for the remaining months.

I was physically sick and emotionally worn out then. Most days I couldn't tell which was which.

And it wasn't like Bryan left after knocking me up. Quite the opposite. He only ever left our tiny apartment for his classes. And when he was home, the only thing that mattered to him was that I was comfortable and healthy. He didn't let my dark mood get to him. He said he understood it was a pregnancy thing.

But after giving birth, I still felt bogged down. I thought that my parents, who'd been furious with me for getting pregnant, would thaw out once they saw their granddaughter, but I still sensed a lot of guardedness and frustration from them whenever we'd visit. Their smiles would be tinged with disappointment; their parenting advice would be helpful yet snide. They'd send money but would always remind me that it was a loan and they were keeping tabs. And this passive-aggressive demeanor had spread to my other relatives, like a disease. Eventually, I decided that I wanted nothing to do with any of them, but this also made me feel worse.

Bryan was also good to me during those years of depression. After landing a job at a huge foreign NGO soon after graduating, he found a larger apartment for us, the one I continue to rent now, for a really good price. He also took care of all the practical stuff so that I wouldn't be more troubled than I already was.

And Likha was an amazing little thing. Even when she was a baby she was calm and agreeable. I'd feared that I would resent her; I'd read that it could happen, especially if the baby wasn't planned. But I felt nothing close to this. Instead, what I felt was simpler: it was important to me that she was clean, and fed, and smiling. Over time, her happiness had become my relief.

Soon, I started showing signs of improvement, of possibly functioning as a proper mother, and partner, and maybe something more. Likha was also solidifying into someone genuinely smart and wonderfully kind. Bryan and I also talked more often, instead of me just griping and him listening. I even wound up with a part-time job writing copy at a small agency. I actually reached a point where I could bring myself to think of the future.

And that was when Bryan told me he was leaving. I could take care of myself again, he said, in a way I found achingly cold. At first, I thought that this wasn't like him at all, that it was so uncharacteristically cruel of him to do this. But it didn't take long for me to realize that he'd just been holding back this resentment the whole time, and had been waiting for the right time to act on it. He'd wanted to escape so badly for so long but couldn't kick me while I was down.

Whatever confidence I thought I'd built back up collapsed. The goodness he'd shown me turned out not to be love, but a dogged patience.

I begged him not to leave, of course, but he refused. And to be clear, he showed no actual anger when he talked to me, but that somehow made it hurt more. It meant his mind had long been made up.

Likha was five at that time. He said he would send us money regularly—and to this day, he has.

I wonder a lot about what kind of person Likha would have been if he hadn't left. Would she have wanted to be Catholic still? Bryan was non-practicing, but he wasn't a non-believer like myself.

“Did you get all that?” the lady at the counter asked, barging through the fog in my head. “I can write it down for you.”

“Oh, um, yes, sure, that would be really helpful.”

“You’ll also need to attend the seminar,” she added as she pulled out a notepad and pen.

“There’s a seminar?”

“Yes, there’s one here every Saturday at 2:30. Come with the ninongs and ninangs. It’s a quick seminar, just three hours.”

I was about to ask her what the seminar was about, but then I realized, did it matter? I’d still have to go. I’d been pretty much under duress since this whole thing started.

The lady finished writing and handed the note to me, which I quickly folded up and stashed away in my bag, averting my eyes from what seemed like a sea of cursive.

“The fee is 500 pesos, and you can pay it after the baptism proper,” she went on. “But the candles are free of charge.”

I nodded at this offer of extreme generosity.

“Okay, thank you,” I replied, stepping back from the counter in the hopes of concluding things. The lady didn’t appear to have anything else to add, so I just slipped out the door and proceeded to zigzag my way back to the church entrance without looking at any of the statues again.

As I waited for a tricycle to get me home, I could feel the note of requirements and instructions weighing my bag down like a rock. There was a part of me trying to cheer myself on, trying to assure myself that I could tick off every item in that note if I kept calm and focused. *Just do it. You’ll get it done. One thing at a time.* Then there was another, much greater part of me that had completely buckled under the stress and was telling myself to trash the whole thing. *It’s stupid. It’s stupid and oppressive. It’s stupid and oppressive and impossible.*

I knew I couldn’t disappoint Likha. But after what had just happened in that office, it had become even clearer to me how much I hated this. I needed us to somehow meet in the middle instead, but what would that even look like? How could I possibly give my daughter the faith she wanted without feeling sick about it?

A tricycle finally turned down the street and started pattering towards me. The closer it got, the more I could see the holographic Jesus stickers and Sto. Niño stickers and Bible verse stickers plastered across its windshield. The stickers pulsed, disco-like, with every rattle of the chassis—like a sign to me from god.

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Likha loved surprises. They could be as elaborate as her 10th birthday party, when I managed to round up some of her school friends for a videoke night/sleepover at the apartment, or as simple as a pack of cookies I’d buy at random from the college cafeteria. She’d tell me that I shouldn’t have, whatever it was, but her smile would always betray her.

She wasn’t smiling now. Instead, she was giving me this look that I guess tried to appropriate gratitude and joy, but of course I could tell she was just trying to be polite.

Because she was polite. Had always been. And kind.

The home “baptism” had seemed like a great idea. Or maybe it just seemed that way to me because I was desperate. I’d figured, wouldn’t it be nice if Likha could get what she asked for, but at the same time be veered away from what I felt were the more problematic—and strangely bureaucratic—aspects of her request?

I had found a ton of Disco Jesus stickers and other non-somber Catholic décor on Shopee—crucifixes encrusted with plastic jewels; neon and glow-in-the-dark Mama Mary figurines; cardboard Holy Spirit doves with metallic rays of light—and turned our living room into a psychedelic shrine.

I then had Cholo, who turned out not just to be Catholic, but a sacristan back in high school, to serve as the “priest” for the ceremony, as he was more or less familiar with the general behavior of these men and was up for mimicking one.

As for the ninong and ninang, I had her two favorite teachers—Mr. Asuncion, who taught Science, and Ms. Fajardo, who taught Reading and Literature. Just like Cholo, they were both technically Catholic, but were more than happy to set aside any moral conundrums in order to help me out. In fact, I don’t think any part of the plan even bothered them, really; they knew what I was trying to do. I had lucked out that these were the kind of adults present in Likha’s life.

I had dusted off Likha’s old, inflatable kiddie pool, which was just big enough to dunk a pre-teen in, placed it on top of towels in the center of the living room, and filled a third of it with water. I’d also sprinkled some glitter in, and wound old Christmas tinsel around the rim of the pool.

It had taken a lot of effort to set things up quickly while Likha was out with her friends, but this was the kind of task I could actually do for her, unlike that weirdly tedious procedure from the parish. What did god care about seminars and paperwork, anyway? Was he sitting behind a mahogany desk in the clouds, frowning over his humans’ files?

But in the end, the surprise was lost on my daughter. Yes, she had squealed with joy when she walked through the door, but anyone would have, what with the kaleidoscopic décor and the glitter pool and the cheering guests. But I knew this joy had morphed once we started explaining what was going to happen. Likha still nodded and clapped and grinned as if she were thrilled, and the others probably thought things were going as planned and that she was loving every second, but I knew. A mother knows. I could see the very slight furrow in her brows once she understood what the pool was actually for, could see the whites of her knuckles as she clutched the fluffy “baptismal bathrobe” Cholo presented to her as a gift. She was doing everything in her power not to look as disappointed as she felt.

I steered her into the kitchen, pretending I was going to help her with the robe and her hair. And as I’d feared, the second she sat down at the table, she burst into tears.

“I’m sorry, Ma. I’m so sorry. I don’t feel well. I don’t like this. I’m so sorry.”

“No, no, I’m sorry,” I said. “Look, I know this isn’t what you wanted. I was being stupid. This was a stupid idea. So I’m going to cancel it, okay? I’ll tell them to go home. I’ll tell them; they won’t mind. I promise they won’t mind. It’s going to be okay. This was all my fault.”

“But you worked so hard on it, Ma. You don’t have to cancel it. You don’t have to. You worked so hard. I’m sorry. This was really nice of you.”

“But this isn’t okay. I can see I made a mistake. I’m sorry. You shouldn’t do this if this isn’t what you want.”

The apologies ping-ponged between us a few more times before Likha stopped crying, at which point I sat next to her and patted her face dry with the robe.

“I just want to do it right,” she said after a while.

“Okay. I understand. We’ll do it right,” I replied. “But if it’s okay with you, I just have a question. I honestly just want to know, okay? I just need to know what you think.”

“What is it?”

“Okay, so...so if god is real, and good, and loving, wouldn’t he have been okay with this, too? With this kind of setup?” I pointed to the door to the living room, where I hoped that the three guests were just sitting around and chatting, not minding the long wait. “I know the Church has its rules. You know I grew up with them. But you understand what I’m saying, right? You know you don’t need these rules to be good. You just choose to be good, right? It doesn’t matter if it’s on a piece of paper.”

“But I’m not good, Ma.”

“What? What do you mean you’re not good?” I cried, feeling my heart drop. “You’re such a good person! You’re always so kind! How could you say that?”

Likha shrugged in reply, looking even more sullen than before.

I felt devastated. I never knew she felt that way about herself. Was it a puberty thing? Was that it? It didn't seem like it was. As far as I knew, she liked going to school and being around people. She got good grades. She liked team sports. She was even class treasurer three years in a row, which meant people trusted her. And until that moment in the kitchen, the last time I saw her cry was when she had mumps a few years back and couldn't go on a beach field trip for science class.

Watching her now, it was like the whole of her had gone dim. I had never seen her this unhappy. It was breaking my heart. But at the same time, it didn't look like she was new to feeling this way. There was an air of tiredness, of frustration, about her that meant she had been through this before and hated that she was going through it again.

Had she been hiding this part of herself from me? I only realized then how possible this was. I rarely disturbed her in her bedroom because I wanted to respect her privacy. When I'd ask her how her day was, she only ever brought up stuff she learned in class, or the silly things she and her friends got into. If we ever talked about anything serious, it was only because I had brought it up, and it was inevitably about me: my decision to go back to school; the time I thought I had a lump in my breast; when my father died from a heart attack.

As I pieced things together, it started to occur to me why my daughter was feeling the way she was. It wasn't about something only she avoided talking about with me; it was something even I didn't want to bring up with her. It had to be Bryan.

She knew her father sent money regularly to support her, and that he lived somewhere in the Visayas now, but that was it. Since leaving, he made no hints towards seeing her in the future, or having anything else to do with us. Even I wasn't sure why, but I didn't want to push him for an answer; the less I dealt with him, the less I would remember.

Maybe, because of this—and I felt like kicking myself for only realizing it now—Likha thought he was ashamed of her. Or even blamed her. She grew up in a time when people were more open about their non-nuclear families (we were downright boring compared to some of her classmates' families), but I guess there were just too many unanswered questions about Bryan for her to feel comfortable with her own situation.

It was my fault. Even when it made sense that I bring her father up in conversation, like when I was explaining to her why I wanted to go back to college after all these years, I would always try to slip around and away from having to mention him, like a criminal giving empty details to the police to deflect from the real score. I'm sure I was always too obvious about it, but Likha never let on, and I suppose I let her play dumb all this time since that was just so much more convenient for me—to the point that I'd forgotten how much this could actually hurt her.

Likha glanced at the door to the living room.

"They're still there, aren't they? I feel so bad," she said.

"No, no, no, don't worry about them," I replied, sitting up. "I'll tell them to go. It's okay. Don't worry about it. They're going to understand."

To my relief, when I opened the door, the three guests really were just sitting around and talking as I'd hoped. The décor and the candles and the pool were all still there, the living room still pulsing with rainbows and neon and glitter.

As I explained to them that we would have to scrap the whole plan, I could sense in my peripheral vision all the Marys and Jesuses and Holy Spirit doves staring at me, glum despite their hues and intensities, as if to say, "We told you so! We told you so!" like they were traitors all along.

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In the end, we made it to church. It took about three months since Likha had first asked, but we got there.

As expected, all the requirements were a pain. The separate sessions I had to attend with the priest—the interview for the single moms, and the seminar about the sacrament—were what delayed things for the most part, since it was hard to slip them in in between all my classes and exams. For the seminar, in particular, I also had to wait for Mr. Asuncion and Ms. Fajardo (who, fortunately, were founts of kindness and agreed to be “legitimate” godparents, too) to find the time to go with me.

I was very honest during the single mom interview. I figured, since I’d gone out of my way to go there and field questions from a priest about the most painful parts of my past, I would share every sordid detail with him—my sex life; my preeclampsia; my depression. Every intimate morsel and every strange, dark thought. It was much easier than being guarded and polite. Fortunately, Father Bartolome seemed only slightly shaken by my candor, or had employed a poker face well-honed after decades of confessions.

The seminar with the godparents was actually more embarrassing. Even though Mr. Asuncion and Ms. Fajardo kept assuring me that they were fine—and also rolled their eyes when the lecturer brought up Adam and Eve and original sin, how this sin is a “state and not an act,” and how we are all “born with a fallen nature”—I still felt bad that I’d made them spend a perfectly good Saturday afternoon in that tiny conference room, listening to someone rationalize myths with a bunch of jargon.

But I got through that, too, and soon enough, Likha, the teachers, and I, plus Cholo for good measure, finally found ourselves by the church’s marble baptismal font one afternoon, the rest of the nave empty and calm, waiting for Father Bartolome to join us.

Likha was happy, of course. I’d bought her a nice white sundress—nothing frilly or formal, something she could wear anywhere again and again. Every now and then she’d point to a saint statue and share the person’s backstory with us, like a guide at a museum. But for the most part she was silent, gazing often towards the altar and the giant crucifix on the wall, deep in what appeared to be actual prayer.

It was my first time to see her pray. I wondered if she did it at home. I wondered what she prayed about.

It always felt strange to be reminded of how quickly she was growing, of how her understanding of the world was becoming less and less dependent on me, and that soon she would also go through all the hardships adults endure to figure out who they really were and what they really wanted. But I wasn’t worried about it so much as curious. Who *was* this human I made? Who would she end up becoming?

Father Bartolome finally arrived with altar boy in tow. I nearly gasped when Likha took his hand for a *mano po*, putting it to her forehead in the traditional gesture of respect. Sometime, somehow, unbeknownst to me, she had learned to do this and had done it many times since. Cholo noticed my surprise and squeezed my hand. I knew I shouldn’t have been shocked by then. I’d already had plenty of time to come to terms with things. But it was still different seeing all of the changes in my daughter in person. It’s like whatever crumbs of doubt I could savor were being taken from me.

At the start of the ceremony, Father Bartolome asked us adults present if we accepted responsibility for training and raising Likha in the practice of the faith. Mr. Asuncion and Ms. Fajardo said yes automatically, while I gave a tiny nod of assent. I didn’t know how serious the two teachers were with their pledge, but I was going to have to rely on their enthusiasm to carry me through. I also wondered if that question was the baptismal equivalent of weddings’ “Speak now or forever hold your peace,” and if I had just blown my one chance to be honest about what was happening—that I wanted my daughter to be happy, as happy as humanly possible, but that a part of me was still so frustrated (and frustrated I was frustrated) that this was the joy she chose.

Soon afterwards, Father Bartolome cracked open a tiny bible, telling Likha with a wry smile that the following would make a lot of sense given her age, then read a passage out loud. I thought I would be glossing over this part of the ceremony, but then he read:

“Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.’”

I am that flesh, I thought. That flesh is me. Likha was born of the sausage casing that was my body, of my padding plumped with fat and blood. I felt so self-conscious all of a sudden, so dumpy and exposed, even though I doubted Likha was thinking of me in that way at that moment. She wasn’t that petty or mean. She wasn’t petty or mean at all. If anything, I was the petty one. I was mean. I was the one bringing this on myself.

The reading was followed by a long string of prayers, including what Father Bartolome called the “Prayer of Exorcism,” which led me to imagine an irritable, demonic version of myself being wrenched out of my daughter and thrown into the garbage.

Father then traced a cross on Likha’s chest with some oil, followed by another prayer. And then, finally, the altar boy brought out a silver filigreed jug filled with water, which Father proceeded to imbue with the required mystical properties. But before the actual pouring could commence, he turned to us adults and announced that it was time for us to renew our own baptismal vows.

I had known this part was coming; I’d learned this from the seminar, at least. But it was only at that moment, right when it was about to happen, that I realized this was going to be the most difficult part of the process for me. I had thought it would be seeing Father pour the holy water on Likha, but I was wrong.

“Do you reject Satan?”

“I do.”

“And all his works?”

“I do.”

“And all his empty promises?”

“I do.”

“Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth?”

“I do.”

“Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified, died, and was buried, rose from the dead, and is now seated at the right hand of the Father?”

“I do.”

“Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting?”

“I do.”

“God, the all-powerful Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has given us a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and forgiven all our sins. May he also keep us faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ for ever and ever.”

“Amen.”

Answering Father out loud was the easy part. These were just sounds I had to make. The hard part was ignoring the great discomfort that had burrowed itself into my body.

Yes, I had lied to Father with every question, but it wasn’t guilt that I was feeling. I had no problem lying about something I didn’t believe in.

What I felt more was tired. The heavy, crushing kind of tired, the tired that blindsides you after a day on full speed. It was the intimate nature of the questions that brought it on. It made me think instead of the kind of questions I would actually have a problem lying about.

Why did you go back to college? How could you stand what he did to you? How much damage did he do? Was it worth it? No, seriously, why did you go back to college?

I had wanted to start over very badly, and going back to school was the obvious way of going about it. And for once, it was a challenge I had taken on willingly; it wasn't just part of the long string of trials that had been spooling itself out since my pregnancy. I wanted to study hard for exams, to deal with lazy groupmates, to lose sleep over a thesis defense. I wanted to spend four years working on a goal I could identify, instead of stumbling towards some vague spot on the horizon where I hoped things would, somehow, get better for me.

The past 12 years, I was just trying to get better without knowing what I wanted. When I found out I was pregnant, I felt trapped and scared, and as I carried Likha in my belly I just clung onto the idea that once I gave birth, my thoughts would clear and I'd know what to do next. But after giving birth, the relief only lasted so long. Soon enough, the harshness and crudeness of reality hit again, and the cycle repeated itself. It would repeat itself many times over.

It was terrible even when Bryan was still there to help me. So when he left, I was dropped into a whole new dimension I didn't think possible: an even lonelier struggle, more frightening and more taxing on my resolve.

The only thing that had kept me from buckling completely was the new human I had to keep alive. I had to figure it out for the both of us, whether I wanted to or not. And eventually, things kind of settled into place, kind of gotten to a point where I had some sort of grasp on my life and could foresee maintaining it—all while making sure Likha could grow and learn about herself on her own terms, the thing that I'd been robbed of when this whole mess started.

I couldn't wrap my head around how I'd survived all of it. And suddenly, I was terrified that worse things were waiting to pounce just when I was letting my guard down again.

Cholo took my hand and squeezed it for the second time. A few tears had slipped out after I'd said my vows, but fortunately, nobody else seemed to notice. Father Bartolome gestured at last to his altar boy to bring the water jug over, and then asked Likha to step up to the font and lean her head over it.

The position didn't look very comfortable; she looked like she was about to wash her hair over a sink, like in the movies when a criminal on the run tries to clean themselves up in a truck stop bathroom. But there was a big smile on her face, and though Father had told her to keep her eyes shut, she kept peeking, her excitement apparent.

"I baptize you in the name of the Father."

Gently, he poured the water over her head, and she gave a small gasp.

"I baptize you in the name of the Son."

He poured a second time.

"I baptize you in the name of the Holy Spirit."

He poured a third and final time, and then handed the jug back to the altar boy.

It was done.

The group clapped and cheered, and my daughter stepped away from the font, her hair dripping. Ms. Fajardo presented a small towel and Likha laughed as she took it. She looked like she'd come in from the rain, like she'd been caught at the start of the downpour and found it hilarious.

After patting herself dry, she ran up to me for a hug.

"Thank you," she said.

I gave her the tightest squeeze I could manage, terrified that she would sense any grief or hesitation from me. I told her that I was happy for her. She thanked me again, smiling. I told myself that our exchange appeared genuine.

As she ran off to hug the others, I slid into the nearest pew, exhausted by how nervous I was of my own daughter.

I looked up, and before me were the saints, and the Mama Marys, and the giant bleeding Jesus on the wall.

So what happens now? I asked their plaster faces. *How much will life have to change? What else do I have to do? And what if I still lose her? What do I do then?*

A few seconds passed.

You do nothing, they told me in reply. They shared a single voice, but their mouths were still painted closed.

It's over, they said.

It's done, they said.

There is nothing you can do. ●