March 16, 1962

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Abstract

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Mrs. Dempster was one of the first people I met when I moved to my grandmother's house, after my parents died in the car accident. That was when I was five. She had waddled into the tiny bedroom which was to be mine and pressed a black, plastic-beaded rosary in my palm. She touched my forehead lightly with her pudgy paws and whispered hoarsely, "Pray, Kathryn. Everything will be better if you pray." Being five, I didn't know what "prayer" was and the beaded string looked like a necklace so I just smiled at her and hoped she wouldn't kiss me.

But living with grandmother soon taught me the uses of the rosary Mrs. Dempster gave me. I remember grandmother cried on the day I was baptized by Father Paul and she didn't cry often. That was right before I went into the first grade. Mrs. Dempster was there too because she was one of my sponsors. Grandmother had called her my "godmother" and I thought she said "God's mother."

I was in second grade when Mrs. Dempster told grandmother and me that the world was going to end. It was a Saturday morning and we were walking to eight o'clock Mass. This was a daily routine for my grandmother and Mrs. Dempster, but one I had only on the weekends. I usually walked ahead of them, for even when I tried to walk as slowly as they did, I couldn't.

I remember the day being bright and shiny. The streets were wet from the rain of the night before. The air was cool and moist and flocks of birds rustled in the trees as they left their night perches behind in search for food. I remember Mrs. Dempster complaining about the mess on her sidewalk.
under the maple tree from the birds. She called it "bird droppings," and I laughed.

I had skipped about a block ahead of them and then decided to skip back to see how long it would take them to reach the tree in front of Mr. Kelly's house. I skipped around the tree in a wide circle when I reached them. My sneakers were soaking from the wet grass and grandmother hadn't even said anything to me. She was listening to Mrs. Dempster and nodding.

I didn't really care about what they were saying. They usually talked about the quilts they were sewing for the Mission Society or about the noise that the older kids made when they drove so fast down our street and screeched to a stop at the stop sign. I decided to skip ahead again.

"Kathryn, come here. I guess you might as well know about this too," Mrs. Dempster called out to me. She was all bundled up in her heavy brown winter coat, a black woolen scarf tied around her head, and black rubber galoshes met the edge of her coat. In her gloved hands she held a worn, leather-covered prayer book just like my grandmother's.

"Oh, Esther, are you sure you should tell Kathryn? She's just a little girl," my grandmother said to Mrs. Dempster.

"Yes, Clara. She is old enough to know between right and wrong and the power of God," Mrs. Dempster decreed.

"Kathryn, the world is going to end on March 16." Mrs. Dempster said this so matter-of-factly that I had to laugh at her. I didn't mean to laugh but I couldn't help it. Mrs. Dempster tried to straighten up but she sagged under the weight of her heavy winter coat.

"If you think you can laugh about it, Miss Kathryn Whealon, go right ahead. But your little black soul will find no place to laugh in the fires of Hell!" Her watery blue eyes burned into mine and her fleshy fingers bit into my boney arm.

"Esther!" my grandmother's voice was barely audible.

Even when she let go of my arm I could feel where her hand had grabbed me. A cool breeze whipped the ends of my hair into my face and for the first time that morning I felt the red-zippered sweatshirt I wore was not enough for a cool March morning. My toes squished uncomfortably inside the clammy Red Ball Jets.
I'm sorry, Clara," and then I felt her look at me, but I looked at the ground. "I apologize to you too, Kathryn. But you must realize this is no laughing matter. About a week ago I had a dream that the world was going to end soon. Since then, I've had the same dream every night. And now, last night, God told me when it would happen . . . March 16."

She stopped and waited for me to say something.

"What we must do is pray," my grandmother said. "We must trust that whatever God's will is, we shall trust and follow."

I couldn't believe what I had heard my grandmother say. It sounded weird coming from Mrs. Dempster, but from my grandmother . . . I couldn't believe it. Did she really think that the world was going to end?

"But Grandma, the world just can't end. I mean that's only a few days away. What's going to happen? What's going to make it end?" I asked.

My grandmother looked down and held her prayer book with both hands. Her face was so wrinkled, the sagging flesh held up by the fragile bones underneath. At that moment she looked so very old. I remembered how her hair used to be striped with coal black hair where now it was all gray.

She looked at me and started to say something, but Mrs. Dempster broke in.

"You must understand, Kathryn, that the world has become a very black and dirty place. God made the world to be good and clean. But people have destroyed it. Now God must destroy the world. Can't you see that?"

I had been standing between the two old women. I was listening to all the talk about how the world was going to end. I didn't like it. I didn't understand it. And then I started running. I heard my grandmother call once, but I wasn't going to stop until I had to.

It was still two more blocks to the church and I ran all the way. I ran up the steps and pulled the outer door open. The lights inside had not been turned on yet and sunlight flooding through the east windows provided the only light.

I stood in the back of church catching my breath. There weren't many people in church yet. But there were never many people here on Saturday mornings anyway. Almost all the people were old.

I watched as Mr. Reilly tried to genuflect before he went into the pew. His cane got in the way but his knee reverently
touched the wooden floor and he made his way back up. Mrs. Keene was lighting a candle in the back of church. She dug around in her purse trying to find change and then one at a time, three coins tinkled into the offertory box. The huddled form of Mrs. Williams was bent over in the back pew. A whispery drone came from her as she held a prayer book close to her face with a hand that would not stop shaking.

The church was cold inside and even the sun shining through the windows didn't make me feel any warmer. The light was frozen and defined into specific small shapes and colors from the windows.

I walked back outside to wait for my grandmother. I could see that they were still about a block away, so I sat on the steps and watched the man across the street take the storm windows off his house. At the house to the right of his, a paper boy rode his bike up onto the lawn with his empty canvas bag. The boy let his bike fall to the ground and then he ran into the house slamming the door behind him.

What were you supposed to do if you knew the world was going to end? At the bottom of the cement steps, Mrs. Davis started her long climb to reach the top. Both of her hands were riveted to the metal bannister for support. She went to church every morning just like my grandmother. She twisted her face into something like a smile when she saw me.

I thought about how I knew almost all of the old people in the church and how they all knew me because of my grandmother. Across the street, the paper boy ran out of his house again. Except this time he had a fishing pole in his hand and a tin can in the other. He said something to the man taking off windows and they both laughed. I had seen the boy many times throw papers at our step and the man usually sat behind a desk at the bank. But I didn't know their names.

My grandmother and Mrs. Dempster were almost at the church now. My grandmother saw me sitting on the steps and she tried to smile a reassuring smile, I thought. When they got to the steps, Mrs. Dempster took hold of the railing and grandmother held onto Mrs. Dempster's arm for support.

I looked down at the cracks in the cement. I didn't want to watch. I didn't want to feel sorry for her. I thought about the picture of my grandfather sitting on her dresser. There was a picture of my father on the dresser too. They looked a lot alike.

The world couldn't end. My grandmother had promised
me that this August I could go visit my cousins when they went to Atlantic City for two weeks. And we were going to ride bikes on the boardwalk and dig for clams and eat salt water taffy. I pulled on a delicate green shoot that was growing out of the crack.

She had promised I could go. So why did she want to believe Mrs. Dempster that the world was going to end?

When they reached the top of the stairs where I was sitting, my grandmother stopped and held out her hand. I looked up and she was smiling again. I looked at Mrs. Dempster and she was trying to smile too. But only one side of her mouth would turn up anymore.

I took my grandmother's hand and let her lead me into the church. The lights were on now inside and altar boys were lighting the candles on the altar. Mrs. Dempster walked to a pew towards the front of the church and we all knelt to say a prayer before Mass.

I said a prayer hoping that Mrs. Dempster was wrong, that the world was not going to end on March 16, 1962. I told God about all the things I still wanted to do, and if he had to end the world would he please wait until after my eighth birthday which was March 17. Then I sat down and waited for Mass to begin.

My grandmother and Mrs. Dempster didn't say anything about what had happened after we got out of church. I thought maybe they would keep right on about how the world was going to end. But they started talking about Mr. Hoskins who had died in his sleep and how that was such a peaceful way to go.

When I woke up on March 16 and looked out the window nothing looked changed. But the sky was gray and it looked colder out than it had the past few days.

Grandmother still didn't say anything to me that morning at the breakfast table. But she did give me an extra hard hug and a kiss on the cheek when I left for school. When I crossed the street and looked back at our house I saw her watching in the kitchen window and she waved.

At lunchtime Sister Mary Perpetua made us stay inside and listen to her tell stories from a book about Jesus. Outside, rain pounded the windows and lightning cracked the black sky open. I kept looking out the window. Her voice droned on
about what a good little boy Jesus had been, even when the thunder forced her to talk louder. I wondered if she had talked to Mrs. Dempster. I waited all afternoon and when the bell rang the world still hadn't ended.

When I got home from school and opened the porch door, I could hear praying coming from the living room. I walked into the room and there I saw Mrs. Dempster and my grandmother kneeling in front of the sofa praying on their rosaries. Their eyes were closed and their faces were turned upward. I thought they would stop when they saw me, but they continued their monotonous litanies with their eyes closed.

I walked into my room and plopped down on my bed. I listened to the wind moan outside and to the voices pray. And each time the wind sounded louder or distant thunder rumbled their praying got louder. I sat on my bed and listened for a long time. And then I just stuck my fingers in my ears and waited.