The Sale

Laura Yeager*
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We're having a garage sale. I keep calling home to see what's been sold. My mother and I have never spoken to each other as co-workers. All she says is: odds and ends. I come home to her ushering two strange men around the house with: Is there anything else you'd like to buy? She lets them explore her jewelry boxes. She sells our medicine cabinet. I keep her from selling the antique desk with a swear word that jars her. Our bread box disappears.

She thinks she needs to do this to buy me a car.
That's the excuse.

She sells me to an old man. “You need a car,” she says. I remember, vaguely, in Tijuana, a Mexican tried to buy me for a joke. The chess set for your sister. She packs my bags. I go through suitcases, making sure she hasn't forgotten anything. She's packed all my favorite clothes. How did she know?

The man sells brake systems over the phone. He wants me to cook for him. He is, I think, 70, and uninterested in the sins of the flesh.

On Good Friday, I cook fish, and he hangs himself on a cross. I must change the TV channels. It's actually just a board, a pole, with shoelaces for wrist-holders. I ask him why he's doing this, and he says, “You're my wife.” Then he says, “HAIL MARY, HAIL MARY, HAIL MARY,” twelve times. By some feat of the imagination, I understand what I'm supposed to do and gently take him off the cross at 5:00. I wash his face with a baby washcloth and pure soap, hoping to bring him out of this trance and back to the phone to sell a brake system. He only gets more confused and asks me: How many miles to Bethlehem?

We act out the New Testament for 12 straight days. “Revelations” is a blast. I play the sorrowful maiden, and he, the dragon who snatches my baby, a long zucchini in a napkin. I am John, Zebedee, Simon, all of them, rolled into one. He commands me to put down my net. I drop 12 Kleenex, and we rejoice. I don't have time to cook. We eat ready-prepared meals I purchase for this occasion. We pop them in the microwave in a fitful state of prayer, and in three minutes, are amazed. Such manna. I wonder if he'll hypnotize me before he sends me back. Maybe he’ll just kill me. I know this is a common practice because I've discovered Polaroid snapshots of his co-stars of the past.

If my mother knew any of this would be going on, she would have given me her car.

How can he cause the sky to grow dark?
He's actually a nice person. At our intermissions, he dresses up like a rich

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man and speaks to me as though I were a theater-goer. He tells me he’s walked to the theater and just eaten a lunch of tuna and a whole bag of crackers. We do not discuss which parable we’ll do next. He usually takes off his hat and with a key phrase—Now, on the second day—I know it’s time to start. We do the Stoning of the Sinner Woman. He prepares to toss a stone at me, and with the other hand, pulls it from the sky. “Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone.” Then, he walks away. I don’t know what I’m quite supposed to do after this, the Bible doesn’t say, so I begin to belly dance and we go back to Sodom for a brief moment. Then, I pick myself up and change miraculously into a dying woman. I touch his undershirt and am saved.

After 12 days, he picks up the phone and begins to sell again. I realize it’s time to boil lasagna noodles for his favorite meal. The year goes the same until the next, when he runs through the whole ritual again.

After three years, he releases me from my duty, saying he’s served me well. He tells me I’m free to stay, or I’m free to go. I go. As I am leaving, he opens the garage and, there, in the grease, is a car. A Chevy. What more do I have? For the past three years, I’ve been serving this man, and he has become my life.

He sires my first child.

I take Marsha to see her grandmother. My mother has been weeping since I left and is down to skin and bones. Marsha rejuvenates her, and she says, “That man? That man is the father of this beautiful child?” Mother, then, realizes she’s done the right thing, the only thing, and throws off her rags. We go to lunch. Marsha loves her grandmother who gives her a red suitcase full of toys and brushes her hair for hours. We decide to take a trip to Lake Erie. Marsha has never been to a hotel and loves the miniature soap. The tiny bars are perfect for her little hands. We go exploring the rocks and, at night, gaze at the ocean-like lake. We pretend it is an ocean. There are gulls.

Marsha never wonders why her daddy is so old. He claps loudly for her at school plays. Often, he spends the intermissions outside, looking up to the sky, knowing he’s not long for this world. He’s been sending her away to his sisters’ when the ritual rolls around. This year, he says, Marsha is old enough. We have one more person, and it’s much easier.

He dies. I try to bury him, but he’s gone. Marsha, then, understands the meaning of death. He’s left for work the way other daddies do.

My mother is selling her rosary. It, too, could go at a minute’s notice.

—Laura Yeager