

Keeping Up With the Lord

Daddy always said we had to listen to holy music on Sundays. I remember that he'd never let me sit in the front between him and Momma because I would always play with the black plastic knobs on the radio, my stubby fingers fumbling for another station. The white circled dial on the tarnished radio remained all the way to the left those mornings. All the way to AM 89. Or as the announcer would say, his vibrant voice traveling amidst the static, "KLIF, the life of our Savior." Momma said it was the only station to broadcast live Sunday morning vigil from that church in downtown Chicago. The one on State Street with the stained glass windows. The one with the gold dome and big paintings on the walls.

Momma called this her "church information." I'd try to pay attention to her, as she'd note this or that of such and such a church. I knew she found that interesting. I'd often see her making little notes in her black steno pad that she kept in her leather purse. She'd write it all down. Every detail, commenting on a different church structure, dating a specific work of art. Momma said that Daddy thought it was good to keep up with the Lord. Consistency. Order. Momma liked to be on top of things.

"Marcy," Momma would say, her subtle voice chanting in a comforting tone, her long index finger pointing at me, encircling the air as if she were conducting. "You know that in this family it's only appropriate to follow the ways of Jesus," she'd continue.

My parents were devout Baptists. Raised from strong Baptist families, they found it necessary to live the day in peace. Reflecting on their worship, reciting a prayer.

Daddy had been raised in a family of four girls. He was the doctor, the handyman, the paperboy. Daddy was the protector. His father, a clergyman, had sent him to the Ministry to "seek direction" after college. He wanted Daddy to practice his faith. He thought it would be good to satisfy God's word to the Burrell family.

Daddy had been dating Momma for three months before he left. They were quite serious. He'd given her his college ring as a symbol of their love. It was their unity. Then it was months that she heard from him. She'd be writing up to three letters a day, urging him to come back. She feared he'd be left in Germany forever, practicing his faith, establishing solemnness. Daddy called her his "sweet baby Jane." To be his girl again. She wanted him back.

Then one day Daddy showed up at her door, disheveled, his weary green eyes showing his overworkedness. He gave her a hug. And they embraced for a long time. Feeling the warmth between their tight bodies. Yearning for togetherness.

Momma said Daddy had a breakdown over there. Said he became too obsessed with the Scripture. He'd spend all hours reciting the Bible, preaching

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God's word. Praying in solitude. The clergy thought it was best for him to seek another profession. He left a short while later.

I never paid much attention to the pastor's voice that echoed above the chiming bells on the radio in the Ford. I was usually too busy staring out the passenger window, glancing at the cars. Red ones, blue ones, yellow Buicks. Searching for the first sight of a VW, the Slug Bug I had appropriately named. My discovery was often encountered with a loud thump on the glass, followed by a quick shrill of excitement.

Daddy never seemed to notice what went on in the back seat, he appeared too caught to the radio scripture — his back erect against the smooth vinyl, his head slightly tilted to the source psalm. He would sometimes talk quietly to himself, mumbling out several words I could never fully understand. Momma pretended not to notice, I guess, she kept herself busy, sweetly humming the Lord's prayer. Daddy must've been praying, because Momma never bothered him. But sometimes he'd turn to Momma, reciting the radio pastor.

"Jesus is the light of the world," he'd say under the deepness of his breath. Momma would nod her head in compliance. Agreeing to the scripture, agreeing to Daddy.

We lived in Chicago then, on Belmont Avenue. It was the seventies — Mommy, Daddy and me. Just the three of us. Our house was the typical Chicago bungalow that one would find driving through the south side of the city. Red brick, a large vertical window on the second story. A slanted roof. Our block had been noticeable around the area for some time. Ol' Miss Czarnecki decorated the front of her lawn celebrating the most familiar holiday with the most familiar things. Pink plastic Easter bunnies in April, lighted reindeer in mid-November. She had vibrantly displayed her cherished holidays. She'd collected figures and slogans from every department in every craft store one could find. Momma said she lived for those "day-after" sales.

Our house was one block north of the Jewel, two blocks south of the train. Momma used to send me there to get green peppers and tomatoes — ripe ones, for her spaghetti recipe. We always had spaghetti on Tuesday. That's when Grandma came. She liked it spicy. Grandma expected things.

"Jane," she'd tell Momma in an affirmative tone. "Please tell your daughter Marcy to pick up her toys," Grandma would say in a motherly voice. She's pace back and forth as she tidied up the kitchen. Momma would get mad at her for fixing her things around. It was Momma's kitchen. Momma kept things in her order, not Grandma's.

"Oh, Mother, please," Momma would say. "Marcy's just finished playing."

"Well, when I was a kid I never..." And Grandma would continue into one of her depression stories, her "growing up years" as she called it. Her strict Baptist parents, her spanks for having an untidy room. I'd hear them all. Her stories often

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made me scared. I got away with a lot as a child, and the mere thought of spanking sent a chill up my spine. Momma liked to yell at me, but I can never recall her hitting me. Susie Winter used to come to school with bruises on the sides of her hands. The deep lavender marks stood out quickly on her freckled skin.

That was in the fourth grade, when my teacher, Miss Rollins would ask Susie on occasion how she got those violent marks on her fingers. Susie, an avid gymnast as she was, would simply tell her that she fell on her front lawn doing cartwheels. I knew it was a lie. I'd been over at Susie's once playing with or Muppet dolls in the basement. Her mother called Susie up the stairs, and before I knew it, Wham! Bam! Susie came running downstairs, crying hysterically. I tried to calm her down, but she avoided me and went on with her business. She refused to talk about the incident at the top of the stairs. But I remember the crying. The screams. The slap.

Daddy would come from work about six or so. He was an English teacher at the university on Fullerton Avenue. It was a Spanish neighborhood. I remember the foreign signs at the markets, the "Viva La Mexico" banners prominently displayed during the street fiestas in late July. The red sombreros hanging from the street lights, the dancers with the sequined skirts. Daddy would take me there to have a whack at the toy pinata that stood on the grandstand. I'd cry for not having it cracked open upon my hit with the baseball bat I was provided.

Daddy taught an English class to Hispanics. It was an ESL class, "English Second Language," as Momma would say. She said he was a people person. She said he was good to those who listened. Once he came home from work with a large white vanilla cake. On it, the words "Gracias Theodore" were written in a vibrant pink frosting. It was delicious. His graduating students had given it to him after the completion of their ESL exam. It came with a card, too, but Daddy wouldn't let me read it. He said I wouldn't understand the language.

Grandma didn't like foreigners. Mexicans, Italians, Chinese. They all bothered her. She hated going to the market and not being able to understand any one of them. They got her mad. Grandma called them "intruders."

"Intruders don't belong here," she'd tell Daddy in a suggestive tone. "This is America, for Americans."

Grandma could be stubborn at times.

"Mother, these people come here for good jobs, for a good education. You can't find that in many of their countries."

"Aagh, my country, your country, that's enough," and she'd drop her hands along the side of her smock, adjusting her wire-framed glasses.

But Daddy enjoyed teaching. I could tell by the excitement in his eyes as he walked in that door. His whole face would glow.

Singing a Spanish ballad, Daddy would walk in the living room while I was watching TV. My body would be comfortably stretched out on the sofa.

"Jesus es tu hombre, es el Savior, es el hombre."

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He'd tell stories of each one of his students. Pablo, a twenty-eight year old Cuban whose dream was to open a restaurant in an old warehouse. Tiny Christina Perez, a widow with four children that worked nights in a bar.

And Daddy would ask me how my day at school was. My classes, my friends, my teacher. He'd want to hear the whole day. Everything I did at school. He always told me that I should be more aware of my surroundings. He told me that I should always pay attention to the teacher. What she said was always important, Daddy'd say. And I'd sit there on the corduroy sofa, feeling the patterned grooves with my hands, staring at Daddy. Paying attention to my protector.

Daddy'd get upset if I didn't respond in an enthusiastic tone to his school questions, but sometimes I just had a bad day, and I didn't want to talk about school.

"School was fine today, we read a good book in Language Arts."

"What book? Who was it by? What was it about?" Daddy would want to keep drilling me, his voice would question over and over.

"Oh, some old author. I forget his name, but he won some big prize. There was a silver seal on the cover."

"You know Marcy, baby, people write books for reasons. To understand what the books is about is the main reason."

"Yes, Dad. I know." My voice would diminish to a soft shallow tone.

"Well, let's hope that you are more aware of the books you read next time. My students read a book a week, and are given an assignment on every one."

And Daddy would tell me the fabulous book reports that a student would write, or the new foreign language he wanted to study. He couldn't tell this to Grandma, though. Grandma only listened to American languages. She said other languages spoke too fast. Daddy said she would purposely talk louder when an "intruder" walked by, because she wanted to avoid them. She said these people spoke too fast.

Momma said that Grandma never sat next to Daddy at the dinner table because he would never let her speak. She said he ran conversations. Grandma didn't agree with his ways, she'd say. Meanwhile, I'd sit back in my mahogany chair, the one in the middle, resting my hands gently on my lap, avoiding the stern looks that were given from Daddy and Grandma at the dinner table.

And on Tuesdays, the spicy aroma of herbs filled the house. The hot buttered garlic bread toasting in the oven, the savory smell of steamed tomatoes. We'd all sit in our places. Daddy, Momma, me and Grandma. She always sat on the end. She had a favorite chair. Each in the right order. Waiting.

Daddy would begin. His head bowed, a soft prayer whispered beneath his breath. And I'd follow him. Blessing my food. Attending my faith.