

I

She woke up to the sound of a kitchen chair scraping over the linoleum, and the thump-thump of bare feet as one of the kids climbed up to the cabinet to get the breakfast cereal. The TV was already on and the Looney Tunes music wound itself around her chest and made it hard to breathe. The bed felt like a ship on a hurricane sea. She didn't open her eyes. She knew better. It hurt to breathe. It hurt to move. It hurt to think. So Maxine lay still and felt her stomach roll with the waves of guilt as she listened to the girls get Petey breakfast. She heard Jenny say, "Sit down, Pete, or you'll spill your milk," in a passable imitation of her own mothering tone of voice. She knew Paul was already at work and wondered how he did it. He'd had as much to drink as she had last night, more probably, but he'd gotten up at 6:00, into the gray suit that she'd finally remembered to pick up at the cleaners last Friday, and out the door -- no coffee, not even a cigarette. He'd take the morning paper from the front walk and read it on the train to Center City, then he'd walk to the Sun Oil Building. She pictured him whistling a little as he threaded his way through all the gray-suited men in the station.

She reached her hand out and patted the bedside table to see if she could find her cigarettes without having to sit up or open her eyes. The cellophane over the pack of Newports felt slick and cold, almost wet. Her lighter was beside it. Maxine slit her eyes just a little to watch the flame hit the end of the cigarette and she closed them again and lay still a minute or two, listening to the soft clicks her papery lips made against the cigarette, waiting to see if the smoke would calm the shaky feeling so she could begin the day.

Then, she heard a thud and the unmistakable sound of cereal skittering across the kitchen floor. Jenny let out a long, high pitched wail, and Maxine heard Laura's voice saying, "Mommy

will be mad,” with something like despair. She couldn’t take it; she rolled to her side and sat up with difficulty, taking one last long drag on the cigarette before stubbing it out in the little tin tray. Laura, her second child, was Maxine’s favorite, though, of course, she never said it. Quieter than Jenny, with deeper eyes and a slow smile, Laura always seemed to stand one step away from the tumult and watch. Jenny was the one everyone noticed first, that head full of yellow curls, bright, bubbly, never at a loss for words. And Petey was the youngest and the boy. But Maxine believed that Laura was more her, like she had been as a child: ironic, shy, easily wounded, a believer in shadows. She heard Laura say again, more panicked, “Mommy will be so mad.”

Maxine wrapped herself in her robe and walked to the top of the stairs.

“What’s going on down there,” she called, her voice coming out more shrilly than she’d meant it to.

There was a long moment of quiet and then all three voices sounded at once: Pete’s in a sobbing cry, while Laura and Jenny both started urgent, unintelligible sentences that began with, “She told me to”

“OK, enough!” Maxine shouted over the din and took the first step down the stairs. She felt it with that first step, everything in her stomach and bowels revolted; the stairs beneath her spun crazily. She stepped back to the landing and grabbed the railing. “Jenny, sweep up that cereal and throw it out. Laura, bring Pete up here. You need to get dressed for school. I’ll be right down.”

Maxine backed away, grabbing her gut hard, heading toward the master bath, but Jenny’s voice stopped her.

“There is no school today, Mommy; it’s a holy day of odd-ligation. We have to go to church. Sister said.”

“Obligation,” Maxine corrected automatically. “OK, OK. We’ll go to church then. You still need to get dressed.”

Maxine leaned against the wall as her mind raced to reframe the day. Had she known about this? She must have. What was the date? What time was it? She held onto the bathroom door and looked at her empty wrist and then called down again. “Jenny, what time is it?”

She listened to her daughter’s feet padding across the tiles to check the clock on the stove. “It’s 8:00,” she said. “Well, really it’s two minutes and then it’s 8:00.”

“What holy day did Sister say it was?”

“The Feast of the Immaculate Conception.” Jenny and Laura said it in unison, in a childish sing-song that they’d no doubt practiced, each in their different classrooms.

“We have to hurry,” Maxine called, closing the bathroom door. “Chop, chop. Get ready, now, lickety split.” It was what her own mother had always said to Maxine when she had gotten her off to school, gotten herself to the National Biscuit factory. Her mother had never complained, never seemed sick or overwhelmed, never said “chop, chop” or “lickety split” like this -- desperate, sharp-edged.

After the chaos of lost shoes and socks, the calls of “Mommy” just as Maxine was trying to pull up her girdle or comb her hair, the tumble of clothes, they all arrived again downstairs, more or less ready, without much time. Maxine walked into the kitchen just for a moment to survey the damage: all the glasses from the night before -- the Sunday afternoon highballs that had become Sunday evening scotch and water -- three full ash trays, pastel colored cereal

brushed into the corners and under the cabinets. Just looking at it made Maxine feel exhausted, like she could turn back up the stairs and sleep for the rest of the day. She entertained the thought just for a minute, the luxury of closing her eyes against the December light and cold, burrowing back down into the warm bed until she felt human again.

Petey bent down to pick up a piece of the cereal and put it in his mouth. “Oh no,” Maxine said, holding out her hand. “No, you can’t eat that. It’s yucky. Spit it out.” And he did, his tongue sliding the slimy pink circle into her palm.

“Fruit Loops,” he said.

Maxine moved to the sink to wash it off, said, “OK, time to get your coats on” while she dumped some of the glasses into the sink with a little dish soap. The strong smell of scotch steamed up from the sudsy water. “We have to go,” she said, more to herself than the kids. Then she thought of Rita and picked up the phone.

“Mommy,” Jenny sighed, “we have to go. We’ll be late for church.”

“I have to make a phone call, Miss Bossy. Make sure your brother has his coat on. We’ll leave in a minute.”

“He does already,” Jenny said, just as Rita picked up.

“I’ll be late. I’ve got the kids.”

“You’ve got the kids? What the hell for?” Rita’s voice was a rasp, like she hadn’t spoken to anyone yet.

“It’s a holy day.”

Rita laughed. “That’s what you get for marrying a goddamned Catholic. So, bring them. They can watch TV or play or whatever and we can still have our usual Monday brunch.”

II

Maxine walked into the back of St. Agnes's and stood a moment to let her eyes adjust. Outside, the bright winter sun skated across the shining cars, the concrete walkway, the marble steps. Inside, the air felt even colder somehow and the sudden dark felt like stepping into a cave. The only light came from the stained glass windows, ribbons of green and blue that dyed the faces of the faithful sitting in the wooden pews. Up on the altar, the ladies auxiliary had begun decorating, hanging holly and ropes of pine. This week probably they'd add the red glass balls that looked like berries and the silver bows that brightened up the solemn greens every year at Christmas time.

Beside Maxine, the other latecomers stood guiltily shifting from foot to foot, huddled in their dark overcoats that still gave off the metallic smell of the cold air outside. Inside, perfumes and aftershaves mixed with old incense and dust to make the distinctive smell Maxine thought of as Sunday. She tried to move but the children attached themselves to her legs and hung on her purse. The only seats left were in the very front, behind the nuns. Maxine thought of their half-turned heads, the reproach in their squared backs as she shuffled the children in, late, right behind them. Instead, she moved back to the wall by the door and arranged the children around her.

"The first reading," the priest said, and the words floated back to her over the bowed heads of the congregation, "is a reading from the Book of Job."

The patience of Job. Her mother used the expression. Never about Maxine, of course, usually about some long-suffering woman who had too many children and too little money. But Job hadn't been patient, really. He'd demanded answers; he'd wailed and torn his clothes and fought with his friends. Maxine only found that out later, in