

17 Hail Marys

A mother has promised to be faithful. She clasps her hands together and begs, her knees covered in raw sugar burns from the crackling church floor. She has burned every skirt that collects two inches above her knees, pulled her hair into plaits that hide behind her ears—tugging at her skin and making her look pure once again. She lets her face stretch like this though, allowing an erasure of every line on her face—one line per sin—one sin for every year she’s been alive. She hides her shame between these lines.

The mother has promised her daughter will be faithful, too. She glues her daughters’ hands together until she closes her eyes in sermon, she sews golden thread on her skirts to cover her calves, and weaves her hair into taut braids until tears soak her collar.

And yet, she can’t look her daughter in the eye when they pray together. This is because her daughter is the flesh and lungs of her illegitimate love. This is because the tug of her hair strands can’t erase this stubborn line, etched into her skin, reminding her of touch, of sweat and salt, of fingers lacing without colliding wedding bands—a body of her greatest sin.

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My mother doesn’t believe in God, but she clutches the necklace that hangs against her heart every time our plane motions for takeoff. The golden charm in the middle of her fist pokes in all four directions, with long legs and a short torso: a cross.

My mother cries for the girls no older than me, dressed in black linen, echoing the chants of a priest. She rolls her eyes at people speaking of their Gods, but she wraps a scarf around my neck and buttons up my collar in the candlelit church.

My mother doesn’t pray, but she tucked a wooden figure of Mary between the folds of my suitcase last night while I was sleeping. It hid under my red miniskirt and a box of birth control.

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what is it like to be a woman listening in the dark?

You wouldn’t know, would you? You’ve never been in the dark; you’ve always been placed on a glistening pedestal with silver trimmings, your head resting upon a metal sun. You’ve always been drenched in light. The saints have placed flower petals at your feet and bathed you in honey. The children have pressed their palms against the ground, stardust and science slipping through their fingers, waiting to feel your gaze warm their pale cheeks. The children were always waiting for something from you, so they choked out one prayer for each year they were alive.

You wouldn't know what it's like to be a woman listening in the dark. Because you're the woman whose voice they've been hungry to hear every time they've been in the dark. You're the woman who is honored for feeding her baby in front of the world, but the rest of us need a cloak? You've never been in the dark because you've never been touched by a man's unwanted hand, or even a wanted one. And the world pours its light onto your flesh for this; because to them, an untouched woman is pure, and another woman's pain always falls into the shadows.

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Every time I cough, my grandmother raises her hand to my forehead and traces a cross with her thumb: *up down left right*. She wants to make sure my soul didn't escape through my mouth or something. When I ask her why she gives me her blessings even though I didn't sneeze, she tells me God is watching at every moment.

Every time we trail through our village in Greece to share an ice cream cone, her attention is instead drawn by the church light behind the lampposts. I slip a euro into the slot by the candle stack and dip into my grandmother's existing flame. The candle illuminates specks of dust that line the benches after a lack of Sunday masses. On the way down the main hall, depictions of Mary and Jesus decorate the walls. I look down at my feet, but my grandmother insists I kiss each portrait, so I press my lips against the cool glass of each frame and hope I don't get a bacterial infection. When I ask her why I must kiss all of them rather than just one, she tells me God is watching at every moment.

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If God really is watching at every moment, why has he let all the hurt of the world slide through his grasp? Why are 828 million people starving in the world? Why have 1 in 6 American women experienced sexual assault? Why are coat hangers covered in blood? Why is Elmer's glue banned from elementary schools? Why do I have to cover my body? Why do I have to hide my shoulders? Why do I still cry?

If God really is watching at every moment, he must hate me, because I only acknowledge his existence when I need something. When I guess on an exam question, I stare at the ceiling and piece together the fragmented prayers I still remember. When I want someone to like me back, I squeeze my eyes as I fall asleep and repeat their name under my breath. When I have cried out every liquid in my body, I intertwine my fingers and mumble prayers for forgiveness—one per year I've been alive:

Hail Mary full of Grace, forgive me

1. for crying
 2. for putting your face by my birth control
 3. for showing my chest in front of your son's portrait
 4. for questioning my grandmother
 5. for speaking only of my mother's religion and leaving my father's to wither with his faith
 6. for lying to my mother about the lines on my arms
 7. for eating too little or too much
 8. for forgetting how to say "window" in Greek
 9. for being a bad friend
 10. for listening too hard
 11. for not praying before meals
 12. for not sleeping in my own bed
 13. for kissing girls
 14. for not flossing every night
 15. for flipping off the bible
 16. for pretending I care about you
 17. for not believing in God
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A daughter holds her mother's hair in her hands. She folds the right strand over the middle and wonders when she will start wearing her own hair like this. There are no lines on her face to hide yet. She folds the left strand over the middle and feels the salty wounds on her knees fester with the anticipation of prayer. She pulls the three strands to tighten them the way her mother tugged the golden thread into bows at the foot of her skirt.

The daughter wants to rip out these bows and add more of them all at once. She wants to bandage the sores on her knees and make them bigger. She wants to kiss Mary's glass hands and rip out every page of the bible. She wants to brush her mother's hair and rip it all out. Instead, she loosens the strands of the braid in her hands and softly pulls it apart, leaving her mother's hair to drape her shoulders. She brushes it with her fingers, now salty with her tears. The daughter crouches to match her mother's level.

She tells her she's beautiful.

She tells her they can't pray together anymore.
