

1. Our God

Lunette's ribs jerked. She kicked the accelerator, and suddenly her hair was in my mouth. I smelled gasoline. Dust whipped my face. We flew around the track, through the dappled shade. Then sunlight exploded around us as we left the forest canopy and careened past the vegetable garden, the pink and black beans her father would never let us pick. On the lawn by the house, Lunette's bowl-cut older brother yelled, "Ten more minutes." We passed him, and Lunette leaned over the rubber handles of the four-wheeler. I clung to her, my cheek pressed to her spine. She revved the engine. I thought surely I would be thrown from my seat, into the sky. And I knew -- certainty beyond certainty -- I wanted to be Mormon.

On the miniature racetrack in the back yard, Lunette slowed the four-wheeler, bumping past the vegetable garden again.

"That's it. Dinner time," her mother called, and her father added,

"Tell Karelia she'd better head home, and I want this garage cleaned up. Tomorrow is Sunday!"

It was October and the days were already so short. We were eleven and our lives were still ruled by the sun. I played at Lunette's house, or she at mine, until the first fingers of twilight settled on our forested suburb. Then Lunette and I walked to a white address post, halfway between our houses, and parted. She ran the quarter mile back to her ranch home, her shared bedroom, and her three siblings. I ran the quarter mile back to my quiet parents, my ancient grandmother, and the solitude of my room under sloping cedar walls of our A-frame house. Even on Saturdays, when Lunette and I met early in the morning, it seemed we had only a moment between grasping each other's hands and the night that separated us.

I leaned into Lunette's hair.

“I could go to church with you,” I whispered.

The rule in Lunette’s house was that Sundays were reserved for family members and the occasional church friends. I was not even allowed to telephone on Sundays.

“Tomorrow,” I pressed. “I could come over afterward.”

Lunette revved the engine one more time, shook her hair out of my face.

“I don’t know.”

From somewhere beyond the motor boat parked in the garage her father yelled,

“Get in here, Lunette. I mean now.”

“Come on,” I said. “I want to be Mormon.”

At my house, Saturday and Sunday were indistinguishable. The weekend was a single, golden globe, the yolk of an egg tipped back and forth between half-shells. “We lived,” as my mother would say, translating an idiom from her native Estonian, “in the old way.” A quiet life.

Every weekend, my mother tidied her gray hair and drove ten miles into town to do the grocery shopping. Every weekend she passed through the same small farms, each claiming their acreage in “The Grass Seed Capital of the World.” Every weekend she cooked a pleasant meal, a potpie pie in thin broth. Every weekend, the malamute threw her steel bowl up and down the deck stairs when it was dinner time. Every weekend, my grandmother, Mimi, called her friends in Oakland and drank chamomile tea in the kitchen. Every weekend, I played in the forest and read novels in my pajamas. Every weekend, my father emptied the household trashcans into a black garbage sack, quoting as he went, “*I am the old leech-gatherer.*” Every weekend, every year, every sack - *I am the old leech-gatherer.* Every weekend, but it made no difference whether it was Sunday or Saturday.

At Lunette's house, Sundays were as clearly defined as Mondays, but without the sighing yellow school busses and the smell of pencils. On Saturday, we called each other, breathless on our kitchen phones, then raced to the white post. The road between us was shadowed with trees, its inhabitants hidden at the end of gravel driveways, and the sound of my own sneakers frightened me until my hand clamped Lunette's on the post and everything was *sweetness and light*. We watched He-Man and She-Ra, then lay on the bearskin rug in the living-room examining the sheen of moisture that still seemed to cling to its open mouth.

"Lunette," I would say, lying on my back, the fur of the dead bear brushing my neck, "what if we say that we're orphans."

"Only our parents are still alive," she continued, "they just can't find us."

And the story would roll into the garage and across the lawn, into the pine-thick lots behind her house, until we were not making up a story but living it deep in the forest, beyond the gaze of the ranch windows.

Then Sunday would ease into the house. "*I am the old leech-gatherer.*" And a potpie. And a novel. The malamute would throw her bowl down the stairs. But Lunette was nowhere to be seen. She was somewhere in a stark church on the edge of town, three posts of differing heights planted in gas-station landscaping. Afterwards her family returned to their house for "family time" wherein Lunette spent hours brandishing GI Joes with her little brother Adam, a boy who I would have happily seen crushed like a gnat. He was small and red-haired and, as an infant, had been dubbed Adam Bomb because of his explosive diapers; years later, I thought I could still smell the lingering fart. It pained me to think of Lunette chortling as he drove his dump truck over G.I. Joe. It was worse to think that on select Sundays friends from church - girls from other schools who had never run to the white post or picked clovers from the grassy perimeter of the Mountain View Elementary School playground -- were allowed into the inner sanctum of Lunette's Sunday.

I pressed Lunette, and I pressed my parents. I wanted to be Mormon.

Then one evening, the doorbell rang. My parents glanced up from their dinner like startled cats. The worst thing that had ever shown up at our front door was my mother's uninvited second cousin, an Estonian man with the mannerisms of an American car-salesman. Still, ten miles out of town, in the forested suburb, we lived far from the Girl Scouts and the Fireman's Charity Drive. We received few unexpected visitors, and we greeted every doorbell with the same hesitation, as though for a moment we all wondered: *What should we do?*

My father pushed his chair away from the table and went to the front door, his "hello" a challenge from the vantage of his own foyer. I peered around the corner and watched them, two women in plastic raincoats and my father bending over as he gripped the malamute's collar.

"She deserves this opportunity."

"She obviously feels drawn to the community."

"Do you go to church?"

The women held their ground on the doormat, and did not look at the dog, their modulated voices pressing forward.

"This is something she is interested in."

"What are your reservations?"

"We'd like you to come too."

"She's a lovely girl. Lunette's family really thinks there is a place for her in the Church of Latter Day Saints, and she's felt it too. Has she talked to you about her faith?"

Oh! If I had had words for my faith, I would have described the smell of dust pressed into Lunette's t-shirt. I would have explained my arms clasped around her waist, our bare ankles squeezed together on the pedals of an ATV, inches away from the hot engine. I would have talked

about speed and the fierce independence of children, about love that comes before sex and foreshadows it. I would have talked about Lunette's silk-blond hair in my mouth, and those rain-slickered matrons would have spat.

But childhood saves us from such confessions, and I said,

“Daddy, Daddy, who are they?”

“They're no one we know,” my father said.

The matrons finally glanced down at the benevolent – but enormous and slavering – malamute. One of them pushed a book into my father's hand.

My father took the book and closed the door in one motion. Handing the book to my mother he said, “*The Book of Mormon.*” It was the size of a pocket dictionary and encased in a white, vinyl jacket with a zipper running along three sides. My mother unzipped it and flipped the pages without reading.

“It might be interesting. It's a growing religion,” she said.

My father took the book back from her and placed it on the sideboard.

“Hmmm,” he said with mild suspicion.

I returned to the curly edges of my lasagna, and, after that, was excused to play in my bedroom. Had I realized the women came from Lunette's church, I would have grabbed my father's wrist with both hands and hung from his arm, begging, “Pleeeeeease. I really, really, really, really want to go.” I would have piled on “reallys,” as though syntax could tip the scale of my father's opposition. I would have planted my bare feet on my father's large sneaker and clung to him until he said yes. But the two women in plastic raincoats seemed so far from my Sunday dreams, so far from Lunette's blond hair tangled with burrs and the smell of gasoline and dust. I tapped the book with one finger on my way out of the living-room. *The Book of Mormon.* Then I retired to my room

to play with Glow World, a world of tiny collectables I had arranged on top of the chest my father had build to fit the space between my bed and the slanted wall of my bedroom.

As it turned out, I never did make it into Lunette Geary's Sunday. For a few weeks, Lunette and I attended Wednesday night Girls' Club where we painted water-sensitive coloring books and learned to hold dolls the proper way. We changed them, rocked them, and sewed tiny, felt booties. The other girls said, "Oopsy daisy! Won't these feel good on his little feet-sies." I concurred and bounced my booted baby on my knee, although the last time I had played with a doll I had tied a shoestring around its neck and swung it in wild circles above my head. I liked to watch it fly into the air when I released the string.

While we worked, our teacher, a childless woman with a doublewide full of dolls, told us stories about Joseph Smith. He fit easily into the history of the world I learned at school. Like my own turkey handprint painting on a burlap wall, I recognized him: a pilgrim, a Lewis, a Clark, a Jonny Appleseed sprinkling good cheer across the continent. He was a Santa Clause, a George Washington, an Abraham Lincoln walking up hill both ways in the snow to return a cherry tree to his one room schoolhouse. He was a pal, and he was a hero, like all the uncomplicated men and women in our holiday-centered history reader.

I finished my booties and took up my water painting, turning the page and watching Jesus's hair turn yellow beneath my brush.

At the end of the class we placed the dolls on the shelf, cleaned our water cups, and each ate an Oreo cookie off a poinsettia shaped platter. Then Lunette and I went outside to wait for her mother behind the tall grass that grew out of the gutter.

"Let's say your mother never comes to get us," I said.

It was growing dark. We stood waist-high in the grass.

"We have to live here," she said quietly.

“We become missionaries to the animals.”

“And eat grass and drink rainwater.”

“We build a house out of reeds.”

I believed it. *Oh, I believed it!* I believed we could live on twigs and sleep in the rain like deer.

“Lunette, I can hear the horses,” I whispered, because we had imaginary horses whom we rode through the blackberries and poison oak behind our houses.

I had known Lunette forever. She was the first stranger to emerge from the milk-scent of childhood. At age four or five, I recognized my mother, father, and grandmother, and at school I recognized poor Chrystal-Anne because she had been so badly burned in the car fire, but the other children were a blur.

Then, suddenly, I was running toward Lunette’s turquoise coat on the playground. Our hands clasped and we were off. And, almost as soon as we started to run, we heard hoof-beats. Behind us a stampede of phosphorescent horses. We never had to say, “Let’s pretend we have magic horses.” We simply turned around, and there they were. “I hear the horses coming,” Lunette would say, and we would mount them, our hair tangling with theirs, their glittering shoulders carrying us over the roots and rocks that tangled our woodland lots, our sneakers riding high above their sharp hoofs.

“Lunette, I can hear the horses,” I said again.

Lunette cocked her head and wrinkled the bridge of her nose. Then she put a fist in front of her, as though on a pommel, and with her other hand whipped an imaginary flank.

“Giddy up, boy. Giddy up,” she said.

I did not have words for the blasphemy. Our horses did not wear saddles. They were not creatures to be beaten and fed sugar cubes.

I stayed in the Girls' Club only briefly. My parents learned what the boys did while we babysat Cabbage Patch dolls and baptized Jesus with our cheap paint brushes. They withdrew me from the class. Standing in the hall by the bathroom, my nightgown brushing my feet, I heard my mother say,

“The boys are studying scripture.”

My mother had been one of the most brilliant U. C. Berkeley graduate students of her generation. A Medievalist, at one time, she could translate Latin, German, French, and Old English. My father was a tenured physics professor at the local university. On the weekends, when it was too rainy to garden, he folded his long frame into a chair in front of his desk and wrote chapters for a textbook on an obscure subset of physics called Lie Groups. When I asked if he would try to publish, he said, “Oh, I don't know. It's just for fun, really.” These people would not allow me to babysit dolls while the boys learned the books of the Bible.

“Women of the church must have a life of the mind,” my mother said.

From my vantage point in the hallway, I heard my father pop a beer can and pour the beer into a glass.

“They are such good friends.”

“Is it time we find a church of our own, Roger?”

Wednesday arrived without Lunette. I did not run up to her house. Her mother did not honk in our gravel driveway. And I did not expect them.

When Sunday came and my mother handed me a plaid skirt, I went docily.

“There is nothing wrong with being Mormon,” she explained as I sat at the kitchen in baggy pantyhose and a good outfit. “But we're Lutheran. That's the church I grew up in. That's the Estonian church, and that's going to be our church now.”

Attending Grace Lutheran wasn't like riding a four-wheeler into the warm twilight of an October evening. It was not like being Mormon. But I liked the church. I liked the dim, wax-scented sanctuary. I liked the high ceiling and the stained glass windows that seemed to depict a hundred shifting pictures. Now a woman weeping. Now a dragon. Now a flock of birds that my mother said was the Holy Spirit. Plus, the Lutherans had better crafts than the Mormons: macramé bracelets, egg-carton caterpillars, and crosses built out of wood pieces my father cut on his rotary arm saw. And they had a music hour, and I was asked to hold the tambourine because I never rattled it out of turn.

Every Sunday, as we slid into our pew, my father turned to us, as though in surprise and consternation.

"This place is lousy with Lutherans," he whispered. Every Sunday for our long tenure at Grace Lutheran. "This place is lousy with Lutherans!"

"Hush, Roger," my mother said, and folded her hands carefully over her hymnal.

I copied her, but I glanced at my father who winked. After church, we went to the Black Swan Buffet. Perhaps filled with Christian charity or perhaps simply relieved to be done with another Sunday, my mother watched and said nothing as I piled my plate with éclairs and hominy.

At school, I told Lunette about Grace Lutheran, but I told her that we were still part of the same church. I tugged on her arm as we walked across the playground toward the four-square courts.

"God is like a big dome," I said.

I hadn't thought of this before I spoke, but that was not unusual. It seemed to me that my ideas never clarified themselves until I spoke to Lunette. As I spoke, I saw the dome clearly. It was like the night sky, dark and star-specked, only the stars were windows. At these windows, separated from each other by great distances, people sat watching. Lunette was at her window, my mother at

hers, my father at his, I at mine. And millions and millions of strangers, peering through, looking into the dome at God, for God was in the dome. He was also in the inter-galactic darkness behind the dome, and in a way He *was* the dome. But the way we looked at Him was by sitting at our windows, and because our windows were all in different places, we all saw Him from different angles.

I tried to explain this. The image had occurred to me instantly, and it seemed utterly true.

“Everyone has a window in the dome,” I said. “It’s like the planetarium, only we’re on the roof, looking in, only it’s not really a roof. And we’re all looking at the same thing, but just at different angles. Maybe people from one church, like Mormons, all have their windows in the same area, so things *kind of* look the same to them,” I rambled on, pulling Lunette’s elbow, jogging beside her. “And then also, sometimes, people look in the dome and see someone else’s window, far away. Then they think *that person* is part of God too. Or maybe, if I was on earth looking up, I’d see everybody else looking at God, and they’d look like stars. But it’s always the same God.”

Lunette wrinkled the bridge of her nose and tied her lips into a little knot.

“I don’t know. I think Mormons have to believe in our own God. I’m going to play four-square.”

From somewhere in the distance, a boy named Brian Grispy yelled,

“Hey Lunette, play four square with us!”

After all the hours we had spent riding the perimeter of the playground, after all the Saturdays we had laid in the backyard our hair fanned out on the new grass like a single halo, she called back, “You bet,” and skipped away.

I couldn’t stand it. I couldn’t stand how easily she strode away from me, her eyes fixed on the game in the corner of the playground. I glanced around and saw tiny Chris Pettrier bouncing a ball across the asphalt.

“Chris P.” I yelled. “Hey Lunette, now we’ll call him Chris P. Shrimp. Cause he’s so short. Chris. P. Shrimp. Lunette! Hey, listen! Guess what we’re going to call Chris Pettrier?”

Lunette turned, and I saw her in slow motion against the gray sky, her white hair swimming around her face, her intelligent nose and bright freckles frowning at me.

“What are you doing, Karelia?”

I was losing her. I was in love, and she was leaving me.

“Chris P. Shrimp.” I yodeled. “Like at a restaurant. Waiter, I’d like the Crispy Shrimp Platter.”

Although I was a gentle child and usually sensitive to other people’s feelings, I chased Chris Pettrier around the four-square court. I persisted for the entire recess, the 20-minute interval of children running, screaming, scrapping their knees, and slipping in and out of the wilderness of dirty rhymes and sawdust beneath the jungle gym.

“Chris P. Shrimp. Chris P. Shrimp.”

After that, I started to play four-square – poorly and half-heartedly – but faithfully every recess. I made new friends, and after my birthday, the girls who had spent the night at my house said that my parties were the very best. In sixth grade, Lunette met a girl named Mandy, and the intimate marriage of our best-friendship dissolved. Lunette and Mandy took riding lessons.

One morning my father drove our family to church – my mother in the front seat, me and Mimi in the back seat staring out our respective windows. I don’t know what my grandmother saw on her side of the car; she was an immigrant and an eccentric and even then, as lucid as she would ever be, her thoughts were a mystery to me. But I know what I saw that morning. We drove through the low-hanging valley fog, so tangible and localized that I could mark the exact moment we entered its marshes, the exact moment we exited into the sharp-edged world of stop signs and pick-

up trucks. In one of those half-seconds between fantasy and reality, I saw the phosphorescent manes of my first horses disappear. The sun caught on every droplet of moisture in their hair; they were so bright. Then I blinked, and they were gone. I never saw them again, although sometimes I heard their hoofs, an echo of an echo, in the dim, wax-scented sanctuary.

As for the book of Mormon, it stayed on the mantle for a long time, its pearlescent white cover an anomaly in a house where all significant furnishings – from carpet to refrigerator - were green. Eventually my mother picked it up.

“It doesn’t seem right to throw away someone else’s sacred text,” she said. “But we’re never going to read it.”

Sidestepping that ethical dilemma, she donated it to the University Women’s Thrift Shop where perhaps it was housed on a shelf labeled “Religious” next to some Bibles, *Understanding Islam*, and *Praying Your Way to a Happy Future*, each book quietly gazing through its window, peering into the dome of God.