



"BLACKBIRD SPHERE," ANDRÉE GENDRON

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## The Bless Day

Imagine you're a Yankee transplant in the checkout line at a Barnes and Noble in eastern North Carolina, waiting to buy a copy of Machiavelli's *The Prince* for a friend, when you hear the cashier say, "Have a Bless Day." Bless, used as an adjective, replacing Blessed: A Bless Day. Your friends at the university where you work have explained it's a cultural thing. A friendly gesture of inclusion. And you get this. But the truth is that you've been thinking about this "Bless Day" business for a while now. And you conclude, standing here in this line, with the musicality of that skipped second syllable lingering in your mind—the missing "ed" of the Bless—that you can no longer tolerate people who impose their relationship with God onto you.

So begins the smolder. A Bless day? What right does this cashier have, you think, to bless strangers in a bookstore? Your arms fold into your chest, Machiavelli tight in your grip, as you drum up something smart to say when she attempts to bless you next. Something mean and juicy, laced with that special brand of Southern female pleasantness that will—bless her heart—put this Bless Lady in her Bless Place.

Finally, it's your turn. You steel yourself and step up to the register, feeling smug about how the cashier's silver Peter Pan haircut frames her sagging owl glasses, how the gold cross winks from her neck. A Bless Day, indeed. Then, when she hands you your Machiavelli in a shopping bag and says, "Have a nice day," followed by "Next?" you blink. You blink because the transaction is over. You blink because, by her lights, there's no "Bless Day" for you. And, in spite of yourself, you leave the bookstore wondering. Why didn't that lady bless me? What did she see that made me unworthy of her bless? Was it the Machiavelli? And, besides, who is she to choose who has a right to be blessed?

That's when you realize that the person with the problem is not the cashier at Barnes and Noble, but rather, you. Or should I say, me? Did I actually want to be blessed? Did I want to be included in

someone else's idea of God, or not?

It's possible that the bookstore salesclerk, and quite a few people I encountered in Eastern Carolina, used the certainty of Jesus as a crutch for all that they could not explain. It's also possible that my skepticism with faith, perhaps my unwillingness to fully trust in that which I cannot see, serves a similar purpose. Because at the core of this investigation lies the question: do I believe in God? Someone asked me that once in an interview for a documentary about my hometown of Southbridge, Massachusetts, where I was a reporter. It took a full thirty seconds—every moment of it captured on film—before I answered. And what I told them, finally, was No. But the thing is, I'm not sure that I gave the right answer. For who am I to deny the possibility of a divine creator? On the other hand, how can I not take to heart Ronald Reagan's words that have become the credo of every self-respecting journalist? "Trust, but verify." Just in case, right? And maybe the skeptic in me will never be satisfied, because what I ask for is impossible: a sign, or perhaps proof, that we are being held in this moment. And this one. And this.

I am a product of the middle seventies, born into a family of Massachusetts Catholics, a few months before the resignation of President Nixon. Until the early eighties, Southbridge was home to the American Optical, famous for producing a good share of the nation's lenses for microscopes and spectacles. For decades, the factory jobs attracted immigrants from all over, and with them came their Catholic churches. St. Hedwig's was the Polish Church. St. Mary's, the Irish, and later, Hispanic. Notre Dame, the town's great marble cathedral, was the French-Canadian church. My mother, before she converted to Roman Catholicism to marry my father, belonged to the Albanian denomination among the town's three Orthodox churches. My father's father, a retired postman and wartime Merchant Marine, attended Mass daily at Notre Dame. Seven AM in a three-piece suit and fedora, Pepere would kneel and pray for all of us. I'd join him sometimes in the summer, or on weekends, when I was a little girl. Sometimes he'd rally for Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, and I would join him. During mass, as my grandfather went inward to pray, I went outward, taking in the marble spires bearing stone angels' faces. I studied the stories in the frescoes, admired the dark varnished pews and the bodies that filled them, and sang with vigor during communion. Sometimes I considered God, his likeness in my mind a child's painting of a bearded man holding a pen. Taking notes. Nothing to be afraid of. But mostly, I wasn't thinking about God. I just wanted the post-Mass donut at the bakery across the street.

My dad, who'd dropped out of seminary to become a mechanic, inherited few of his father's pious qualities. Of course, my family went to church weekly—first to St. Hedwig's, and later, to St. Mary's, but with the attitude that attending Mass was akin to eating

vegetables: not exciting, but good for you. Yet for all those Sundays in the pews, the holy moment that sticks with me most took place at our kitchen table.

It is February 1983, a few months before my first communion. Mom has left Dad in charge for the evening. My brother Danny and I are at the table eating Wonder Bread. With our palms we squish our slices flat onto our plates, crusts and all, before we butter and eat them. Dad enters the kitchen. "Might I join you?" he asks, always playful. One of the kids, my mom says. He grabs a slice of bread and squishes it flat. Then he lights up—an idea is hatching—and fetches a shot glass from the cupboard. He uses it as he might a cookie cutter to press out from the bread a half-dozen wafers. He impresses us by using the butter knife to crease little crosses into each.

"Communion practice," Dad tells us. "For both of you." He shows us how to cup one hand over the other like twin bowls, his fingernails dark with car grease.

"Now," he says. "When I say, Body of Christ, you say Amen." And we do. One at a time, he places the host in our palms. My brother and I feel the weight of this moment, for these wafers born of Wonder Bread seem as sacred as any we'd find at church. We practice receiving communion from Dad until the wafers run out, and then—of course—we begin to make more. We offer them to each other. "Body of Christ. Amen," back and forth, but we're not goofing around. We understand that we are tangling with something sacred. But then, Danny turns to Dad to offer him a host.

"Body of Christ," Danny says, holding out the wafer. It's then that Dad gets this sinister, Jack Nicholson grin on his face and cackles a Halloween cackle before he screeches, "Go to hell!" He gobbles the wafer, wolf-like, straight from my brother's fingers. Our kitchen communion turns to mayhem as we begin to mimic Dad, giggling every time. Our "Go to Hell" mantra does not get old. Later that year at St. Mary's, when I actually take communion from the priest in a white, homemade cotton dress, I can't get my dad's "Go to Hell" out of my mind. To this day, I still can't.

So, it's no wonder why I can at times be irreverent. Apparently, it's genetic. Yet isn't there a place for the divine in the irreverent? The "Go to Hell" we need to hear in that pious moment, just to remind us that our convictions may be wrong? Perhaps my grandfather, kneeling in his pew, did not need to question it. But what I learned sitting in Notre Dame—and at my kitchen table, and even in line at Barnes and Noble—is that there is something sacred, too, in the act of noticing, something sacred in that desire to make and then unmake, something sacred in seeing, and then needing to see, closer. And then creating from this engagement, a poem. A painting. A joke. A story. A prayer. A truth. And then there's the undoing. The ruination. The doubt. And maybe that's sacred, too. Embracing the impermanence—as the Buddhists teach—and the

questions that surface from it. Perhaps this is why my experience of God favors less my grandfather's certainty and more my father's "Go to Hell" boisterousness. Or why, in college and more recently, I turned to Buddhism for its mindfulness teachings that don't ask you to believe in a higher power. But there's more to it. Maybe it's this dis-ease with the divine that propels me deeper inward to ask: what do I really believe, and why? For what I've discovered, is that it's most often in moments of dissonance and vulnerability, rather than in ones of orchestrated harmony, that God (or something like it) tends to emerge, and assaults me, unsuspected.

Picture this: my friend Derek and I are in India, roaming the crowded, mazelike walkways of Varanasi, in search of a spice shop. But instead of spice we discover, in a side alley, a Ganesha Hindu temple. Delighted by our find, we remove our shoes and enter. Beyond the threshold is a busy courtyard with a small garden. I walk left, Derek right. Candle-lit shrines line the temple walls and bundles of sandalwood burn before the orange-painted statues. Soon Derek and I meet up before the great elephant-head statue of Ganesha toward the back of the temple. And *that's* when the Brahmins nab us. Before we know it, they've slapped vermilion paint across our foreheads. They touch our brows and shoulders and recite melodic Sanskrit chants. They douse water. Then, without warning, they pop into our mouths a piece of dirty dried coconut and a ball of rice.

"Eat it," one says. "It is the gift from God."

Our mouths are too full to protest. A gift from God? Ugh. As we chew and choke down the dried coconut and rice, we give the priests ceremonial "Namaste" bows of gratitude and make to leave. Not so fast, the Brahmins say. They want three hundred rupees each—about twelve dollars—as payment for their blessings. "We are the priests who pray for you," they insist. "This is our job."

We explain we hadn't hired them to pray for us. But, they say, we'd already accepted their blessing. We'd eaten their holy coconut. And if a holy man's prayers to God can be rescinded—right here, in front of the massive Ganesha statue, because of failure to pay—well, we don't want to find out. Derek haggles them down to two blessings for a single five-hundred-rupee note. We leave the temple with red sweat channeling down our faces from our discount blessing and try to convince ourselves we hadn't been hoodwinked. That we paid them not out of a fear of God—not exactly, at least—but more in the spirit of an insurance policy. Just in case.

After all, perhaps there is some unseen greater force at work in the universe. And maybe all we can do, as human beings, is—when it's offered—welcome a cashier's blessing, eat a piece of coconut, accept that shot glass wafer. Because underneath it all, aren't they endeavoring to stir what's divine in each of us?

On a visit to a Hindu temple in North Carolina, I asked a priest why there were so many gods in his religion. He told me, "Imagine

an electrical current running through your house. In each room, you have outlets. And in these outlets, you plug in different appliances, depending on the room you're in. For example, you wouldn't use a blender in the bathtub. Or a curling iron in the kitchen, and so on. So, we pray to different Gods for different reasons, but in the end, like the electrical current, it's all just one God."

One God. Many manifestations. Many interpretations. Quakers and Kundalinis. Sufis and Sikhs. All one. More or less. It makes sense, really. For even in music, the same scales of notes can produce both symphonies and sambas, the madrigal and the heavy metal hit. The twenty-six letters in our alphabet combine to produce thousands of words in dozens of languages, each with its own rules and logic. And with this in mind, don't our words and how we express them reveal the map to our soul? And doesn't how and where we pray reflect our particular experience of the world and of the creator we might imagine to help us understand it? Perhaps, when we pray or write or sing, we are shaping how the electrical current runs through our bodies, to know better through self-examination who we are and what we need most.

I continually brushed up against this idea in 2009, while living on the Indonesian island of Bali. Bali is one of the few Hindu islands in an otherwise Muslim country. At the entrance of nearly every home and business is a shrine, where you'll see daily offerings of snakefruit and bananas, rice and sweets, assembled in handmade straw baskets. Fragrant incense smoke wafts from the offering, designed to attract the Gods and the legions of ancestral spirits that apparently inhabit the island. And there is no shortage of people who talk about the Bali magic. "Pray for what you want," they say. "Imagine it in your mind. And it will manifest."

Thus I found myself on this tiny tropical island, learning how to surf, practicing yoga, and writing stories from the perch of my Indonesian villa, wondering whether this so-called Bali magic would work for me. And the day before the Balinese new year—a holiday called Nyepi—it did. At least, it seemed to.

Nyepi is the day that Bali shuts down. The airport is closed. No lights or electricity are allowed. You can't even leave your house, by law, not for any reason. And why? According to the Balinese, Nyepi is the day that evil spirits fly over the island, looking for people to torment. If these spirits see no people, so the legend goes, they will think the island is uninhabited, and continue on to bother other people on other islands.

So here it is, March 25, 2009, the eve of Nyepi. I am anxious, and not just by the prospect of being attacked by an evil spirit should I roam from my villa the next day. Before I left North Carolina, I'd applied for several fellowships and jobs, including the Bennett Fellowship at Phillips Exeter Academy. So far, no word from any of them, and all I want is an answer about my future: after Bali, what's

next? I'd left a stable job and community, as well as a not-so-stable marriage, and I hoped that something would catch me in my leap into the great unknown. So, before the island goes dark, I decide to ride my bike three miles to the neighborhood Internet café to check my email. Just in case.

As I approach my bicycle at the villa's entrance, I notice something in the front basket. It's a poster of the Hindu Goddess Lakshmi—the goddess of fortune and luck—radiant in gold and pink with dark, kohl-smudged eyes, palms open with coins flowing from them. I glance around. Had it blown out of the open window overhead? I can't tell. In any case, it's not every day you find a Hindu Goddess hanging out in your bicycle basket. But there she is. "Let's go for a spin, Lakshmi," I say. I lean my computer bag against the glossy poster, so she won't blow away, and we ride to the Bali Buddha Café.

During my travels through South Asia, I'd watch householders make sidewalk shrines to Lakshmi during Diwali, painting red circles filled with offerings and a red line painted from the circle to their front door. Lakshmi's appearance on my bicycle, I decide, is a good sign. When I check my email, as usual, there's no word. When I return home, I see Ilu, the villa's caretaker and owner of the poster, who is as puzzled as I am to learn that the Goddess had somehow moved from her bedroom wall to my bicycle basket. We look up at the opened window of her bedroom one flight up. "It must have been the wind," she says. As I hand Ilu back her poster, the child in me whines, "finders keepers." But I know better: the goddess of Luck and Fortune can only be found. She cannot be kept.

The next day, as the entire island secludes itself from evil spirits and offers prayers to God, and as I imagine for myself a fellowship that would allow me to write fiction closer to home, an email from the director of the Bennett Fellowship from Phillips Exeter Academy arrives in my inbox notifying me that I am a finalist. It is an email, for many complicated reasons, most of them involving my lack of cell phone and easy Internet access, that I do not receive until a few days later. After an hour-long, hundred-dollar, long-distance phone interview, I receive a second email the following week: the Bennett fellowship is mine. Now, I know it's more than just luck or prayer or a random visit from a Hindu Goddess that brought me to Exeter. But isn't it a lovely thing to imagine that perhaps some divine force guided me to this school to spend the year writing, and by another cluster of lucky circumstances, to stay on and spend the next nine years teaching English? It's almost enough to make a believer out of me, isn't it?

And yet, my search continues.

It's late on Christmas Eve, 2009. I am nearly halfway through my Bennett Fellowship, and the perennial "what's next" question persists. I drive back from my grandparents with Mom and Dad when I decide to go to Midnight Mass. We'd left Grammy dozing on the sofa, Pepere next to her in a thin T-shirt, holding her hand, his face flattened stern

by stroke. In years past, he'd have been in that three-piece suit of his, recruiting us for the late-night service. And I want to go there now, partly because my grandfather no longer can. And because my parents, who have since left the church, no longer will. I want to go there because perhaps I'll find something I need—an answer?—in that marble cathedral with its endless candles, massive pipe organ belting out its rich notes, and the choir in full regalia singing "Silent Night" in French or "O Christmas Tree." All of it. I want to admire the frescoes and arched spires of my youth as someone recites the story of Mary's hunt for a manger. But when I get to Notre Dame, it's dark. The parking lot, empty. I consider returning home but find myself driving down the street toward St. Mary's. This is the church where I received my First—or should I say second?—Communion, the church where I met my future former husband, the church where his parents are still active and that I can now see is brightly lit for Midnight Mass. Should I go in? Yes, I should.

I park my car and enter the church. Fear won't rule me, I decide. Not tonight. I find a pew in the farthest corner of the parish and kneel to pray, eyes open. I have never cared for the Easter-hued wash of the stucco walls here, the oak-tone pews, the stages of the cross like kitchen cabinets aligned along the walls. Above me, the choir warms up as more people filter in. I listen, trying to find the alto part. I imagine myself in the balcony alongside the organ, for hadn't I once been among them, a child singing in the church choir?

As more people arrive, all I can focus on are the singers and their scales to keep me calm, because inside, my whole body thrums with fear. Fear that, every time the doors open with parishioners, I will see my former in-laws, or an old classmate, setting the rumor mill in action. Fear, when I see the priest cross the altar, vestments in gold and red, the big white book in his hand. Fear, because I have been in this space before with a man who I once called husband, but no longer do, and clearly the business here feels unfinished. Fear, that my up and leaving North Carolina for Indonesia, and now New Hampshire, is all a mistake. After all, I'm in a church. Alone. On Christmas. Looking for guidance instead of at home asleep awaiting morning presents. In a few moments, all that's good about my life disintegrates, and the guilt rushes in. The chaos presides.

This is not my idea of sanctuary. I leave St. Mary's, get in my car, and drive by two more closed churches. All the while, I fiddle with the radio—miffed by Burl Ives, then Celine Dion, then Foreigner, then Mariah Carey, then Pink. Really? Pink on Christmas?—and consider where to go next. And then I have it: St. Anne's Shrine in Sturbridge, just one town over. I anticipate the shrine as I remember it, lit by lines of glowing votive candles amid the glass-enclosed statue of St. Anne, Mary's mother, shrouded by letters of thanks and crutches and orthopedic boots and rosaries of those who'd been healed by praying in her miraculous presence. Yet the stream of cars

heading for St. Anne's isn't going toward the sanctuary, but rather toward a multipurpose building across the parking lot, to a room with fluorescent lights and moveable funeral chairs and a sea of ugly carpet: St. Anne's Annex. I can't bear to contemplate God beneath those harsh lights. Not tonight.

I drive on, frustrated by my fussiness. What am I looking for, really? The car clock reads 11:54. There is still time. On the road back to Southbridge, I see that the Federated Church is all lit up. I hadn't noticed it earlier and pull into the lot. Every last spot is taken. I give up after my second trip around and then pull into a driveway across the street. I roll down the window to let the cold air enter the car, and I try not to think that God has shut me out. I strain to hear music from inside the church. But outside there's only silence.

"I just want to hear 'O Holy Night,'" I say to the church. "Is that too much to ask?"

Apparently not. Because just then, as if on cue, Bing Crosby begins to sing his version on the radio. I listen to those first mournful, lilting notes of his tenor, the odd, eerie turn of melody. And then I join him:

*Fall on your knees! And hear the angel voices!*

*O night divine . . . O Holy night . . . when Christ was born*

Bing Crosby carries me through my drive back to Southbridge, and as I sing along with him, I can't help but think I've found what I needed on this cold and snowy—and dare I say Bless?—night, right here, right now, in my car. In myself.

And I decide to take the long way home, past the darkened cathedral of my youth, the Notre Dame, in case I'd overlooked something on my first visit there. Just in case. ❖