

This Is Your Body

THERE ONCE WAS A mean-spirited old lady who liked no one and was liked by no one.

The only joy she found in this life was in her contrary ways. She cooed during the renunciation of the devil at her baptism but screamed with all her breath when the water splashed over her furrowed red forehead.

On the day of her confirmation she refused to recite the Creed. The flummoxed pastor laid his hands on her anyway for the sake of the public. Later he warned her: “The ceremony did not take.”

In school she deliberately gave the wrong answer and argued when the teacher tried to correct her. In time, no teacher would call on her even if hers was the only hand in the air. This gave the girl deepest satisfaction.

When she left school, her beauty caught the eye of a handsome and mild-mannered fellow. He took her

contrary ways to be maidenly wiles and, thus deceived, married her, but she did not desist upon becoming a matron. Her husband became a very successful businessman since he was motivated to be at work as often as possible, and she gave him a measure of peace as long as she had full run of his money.

Only one child came of the marriage, a son who learned to keep his thoughts to himself and give his mother what she wanted. When he grew up, he went to live far, far away.

So the years passed, and the young woman grew to be an old woman with no friends, a defeated husband, and an estranged son. To strangers at the grocery store and in the library she spoke bitterly of the cruelties of this life and the impossibility of God in the face of all the evidence.

Her husband died; she lived alone; and the years crept past.

At last the old lady felt herself approaching death. She summoned her son, who came guiltily across the country to tend to her in her dying hour. She lay on the bed, her breathing labored, and instructed him to fetch a pastor to bring her the Lord's Supper.

The son was not a little astonished by this, for, as his mother had so often told him, she hadn't dark-

ened the door of a church since the day of her invalid confirmation.

But the woman was insistent, so her son went in search of a pastor.

Two days passed before the son could bring to his mother a willing pastor with a free moment. In that time the old lady worsened considerably. She was no longer conscious, no longer eating or drinking, only drawing loud but shallow breaths, one at a time. Her son expected each breath would be her last.

The pastor spent some time holding her hand and looking at her face. At last he said, "She cannot eat the bread or drink anything anymore. I'll just say a prayer to commend her to God."

But the son said, "Never in her life has she said one good thing about God or the church or anything connected with it. Even if she's lost her mind, I must see to it that she gets what she wants. She must have it."

The pastor shrugged and said, "I will put it in her mouth, just a piece of it."

So the pastor said the words and placed a small fragment of the bread saturated in wine inside the gaping mouth of the old woman. Not ten seconds after he did, her breathing stopped, and she died.

Then the woman found herself no longer on her bed at home, but standing at a gate guarded by an apostle.

The apostle said to her, "What do you want?"

The woman said, "I want to come in."

The apostle said, "Why should I let you in?"

The woman said, "I cannot tell you. I can tell only the Lord himself. Fetch him here and I will explain myself to him."

The apostle showed no surprise at the impertinence of the woman's request but retreated behind the gate. Some time later he returned, accompanied by the Lord in person.

"My friend tells me you wish to come in," said the Lord.

"I do," said the woman.

"He says you would like to tell me why I should let you in."

"I would," said the woman.

"Then tell me," said the Lord.

"I am a mean old woman," she said. "I have never loved anybody. I have never done a kind thing in my life. I scoffed at you and burdened all the people you sent to me."

The Lord nodded gravely.

"But if you do not let me in," said the woman, "you will never be complete."

The Lord looked at her. "How can this be?"

The woman opened her mouth and drew out the wine-soaked fragment of bread. “Here is a piece of your own body and blood,” she said. “If you do not let me in, I will keep it for all eternity. Then whatever joys you have in there without me, you will always know a piece of you is missing.”

The Lord lifted up his face and laughed. He turned to his apostle and said, “Behold, my friend, I have not found such faith as this in all the church!”

Then he turned to the woman and said, “I would not remain incomplete. Come in through the gate, leave your burdens behind you, and enter into the joy of the Lord.”

And the woman did just that.

Suitcase

A MAN STOOD BEFORE the gates of the New Jerusalem. As he had expected, for he was well-read in the Scriptures, it glowed like jasper yet was clear as crystal, four-square, adorned with every kind of jewel. Each of the twelve gates was carved out of a single luminous pearl, and a street of transparent gold stretched out from each pearl, wending toward the throne of God.

“Never,” said the man to himself, “have I wanted anything as much as I want to enter this beautiful city.” And he was pleased at the intensity of his devotion.

He approached one of the gates. An apostle presented herself.

“Welcome,” said the apostle.

“Thank you,” said the man. “I am ready to be at rest.”

“It awaits you,” said the apostle. Yet she stood at the center of the gate, such that the man could not pass.

“Excuse me,” said the man politely. “I cannot get around you.”

“You may enter,” said the apostle, “but that cannot enter with you.” She pointed.

The man was surprised. He looked down at his own hand, where the apostle was pointing, and discovered that he was holding a suitcase. “I don’t remember this,” he said. “I’m sure I didn’t bring it with me when I died. I don’t even know what’s in it.”

“In that suitcase,” said the apostle, “are many things you have loved.”

“God is love,” said the man.

“They are the things you ought not to have loved,” said the apostle, “and the things you loved more than the Most Lovable of all.”

The man was silent. At once he knew what was in the suitcase. Indeed, he loved the things within it very much.

“The suitcase cannot enter. But you can,” said the apostle.

The man turned away a little from the apostle. He regarded the suitcase for a long time. He did not want to leave it. He wanted still to love it.

“But they are part of me,” he said at length.

“They cannot come in,” said the apostle.

The man contemplated further. “I will not be complete without them,” he said.

“You will be more complete when you have lost them,” said the apostle.

The man stood for a long time outside the gate. He looked through to the golden city; he looked down to the suitcase.

At last it seemed to the man that the apostle’s attention was distracted. All at once he dashed toward the gate. Faster than the apostle he leapt through the pearl frame and landed on the gold street on the other side.

But the suitcase was no longer in his hand.

With a cry of anguish he turned back and leaned out the gate. The suitcase lay outside the walls of the city. He reached toward it.

“It cannot enter,” repeated the apostle.

The man pushed past the apostle, out of the gate and out of the city. He picked up his suitcase. He hugged it. He took a few steps away from the gate and sat down, leaning against the outer wall of the city, cradling the suitcase in his arms.

“I will never let you go again,” he crooned.

Night Cloak

A WOMAN APPROACHED THE gates of heaven. She was dressed in a cloak. It covered her whole body, from the hood on her head to the hem that swept around her feet. It was the color of night and kept her well concealed.

Slowly and cautiously she walked all the way round the city. It took her a long time, for the city was very large. Everywhere the gates stood wide open; anyone could see in. This distressed her. She could see the people moving through the radiant light inside. She could not see sun or moon or stars, but from the center of the city something bright, brighter than the sun but not painful to the eyes, shone out, sending its beams everywhere. Even the shadows in the city glowed.

At last she came back to where she'd begun. Not wishing to remain outside any longer but fearing the light within, she approached an apostle standing by the gate. She kept her head bent down. She tried to think of what to say.

“Come in, sister,” said the apostle in a kindly voice. “The door is open.”

The woman wrapped the cloak tightly about her, took a deep breath, and prepared to step across the portal.

“Sister,” said the apostle, holding up a gentle hand, “that cloak will be of no use to you within.”

“I cannot give it up!” she cried.

“I do not ask you to give it up,” he answered her. “You may take it in. But it will cease to be of use.”

“I will still be glad to have it.”

“You believe it will conceal you, but it will not. There is no night in this city. The cloak will turn to the colors of the day; nothing will be hidden under it.”

At this the woman shrank back. She stepped as far from the gate as she dared.

“No harm will come to you,” said the apostle in the same kindly tone. “No harm can come to you. It is all locked away forever.”

“I do not fear harm,” replied the woman. Still she would come no closer.

“Then what do you fear?”

For a long time she would not speak. At last she said, “I fear for the others who will see me.”

“As no harm can come to you, no harm can come to them, either.”

“But you have not seen me,” protested the woman.

“I am not afraid. Nor are the others.”

“You do not know me!” cried the woman in a piercing tone. “I tell you, I am terrible to see. For I am covered in scars. I have been wounded grievously and never healed. My eyes are rimmed with exhaustion and mistrust. My hair lies thin and lank on my head. In some places I bleed. The injuries in me carry the pain, and the memory of the pain, and they will not let it go, not even when I have pleaded with them to release and forget. I am ugly, ugly, ugly! The people within will look on me and know that harm has come into their city. They will hate me and send me out again. I can only stay if I am cloaked so that none will see what I have become!”

“In this city,” said the apostle, in the gentlest tone yet, “all things are seen. Nothing can be cloaked or concealed.”

“Then,” said the woman in the tones of deepest despair, “I should stay out. For it is better to keep out the bearer of misery than to have the peace of many be poisoned.”

“That is not the way we reason here.” The apostle stepped away from the door. He approached the woman very slowly. “If you like,” he said, “I can wrap you in my own cloak, and walk in with you, so that the people will see the apostle, not the sister who walks with him.”

“Will you stay there with me?”

“You will not need or wish me to stay,” he answered.
“But come now.”

She allowed the apostle to wrap part of his own cloak about her. It was the many colors of a sunrise. She winced when his hand touched hers, but then relaxed, for it did not hurt. He took a step forward. He waited till her step matched his. So they proceeded to the gate, and through it.

Within the city the woman cried out for joy and amazement at the colors of jade and jasper and carnelian and gold, the healing scents of the leaves on the trees and fresh-running water, the glories being sung in many tongues and by many choirs. She felt a heart’s ease that she had not known in all the earthly life that she could remember. She simply stood and breathed; she did not know how long; perhaps for centuries.

At last the apostle said, “You do not need my cloak.”

“But I still have my own!”

“You do. But you do not need it, either.” He stepped away, and his cloak fell away from her shoulders. Her night cloak was struck by the light from the center of the city. Its fibers trembled, grew, shrank, and all at once fell away like tiny, shiny feathers drifting to the ground. The woman was uncovered.

She looked down at her body.

She was whole and beautiful.
And all who gazed on her saw her beauty and loved
her, and she no longer feared their gaze.