

Rebecca Cook

Lucky

Lucky, so lucky God loves her, so lucky he formed her in the womb. Verily I say until you that that girl always believed, she always did her best, but from the moment she knew her own body, from the moment a boy was inside her there was never enough room for her and Jesus in the same space and all the thick dark of the empty church opened its mouth and swallowed her, the whole world of the world opened its arms and she was one with the world and still trying to hang on to God, but only a half God, a diluted God, watery and uncertain, bearing down on her while she's kneeling at the altar rail, knowing that as soon as church is over she'll drive with that boy somewhere and fuck, knowing that God, as sure as the I am that I am, will show his displeasure and so she runs on ahead of him, being the first to pray, the first to witness, the first to ask probing questions in Bible study. How did it happen, how did she move from the little girl pressing her eyelids in the dark, watching the yellow-green light and knowing God was there? How did she move from the girl in her Sunday school teacher's little red-rimmed mirror full of the girl that Jesus loved to the girl spread open on the car seat, naked, a sacrifice of blood and bone?

Once on a Thursday night, alone in her room, she opened her heart to God, wide open to Jesus, *Come into my heart, save me*, and then she was shot clean through with goodness, her chest both light and heavy with God's terrible love bearing down on her in the dark but she was saved now, safe, secure in God's love and wondering why her chest wasn't lighter, wondering when the *peace that passeth understanding* would come upon her, wondering why her heart was still evil, poring over the picture of the devil in the big Bible, his muscles rippling, his loin cloth haphazard across his middle. She sits comparing the devil to the sissy Jesus with his syrupy look, soft lips and eyes, elegant fingers knocking at the door, knocking at her heart and she had let him in, he was in there, but she didn't feel safe, she didn't feel right, only heavy and guilty, so guilty for all the sins of the world.

And all those times she had to open her mouth to speak the word, the terrible word, so heavily her Christian witness came from her mouth. She tells Alesia that God loves her but Alesia doesn't want to hear it and she doesn't want to say it but she has to. She has to be camper of the week at Camp Joy, the best girl, the best Christian. She has to learn the most Bible verses and to be carefully good, watching the long line of girls being baptized but she was sprinkled as a baby, it was already done for her, and when she was ten she was sprinkled again, the drops of water cold against her hair. But see how the preacher dunks the girls under the water, a real baptism, the water so clear that surely Jesus is watching the whole time, surely the Holy Spirit opens the sky and doves fly out because when she was a little girl the whole world was in the Bible story book, the whole world was in Moses and the bulrushes, the whole world was in Sampson's long hair curling against the pillow and God was watching everything she did, impossibly large in the sky. She played in the yard and God was there, standing in the garden, knowing her, down to her bones, knowing her thoughts, the dark inside of her, the storm in her head.

She can still smell the church, can still feel the hush of it, the rustle of bulletins, the rasp of money on money, the organ, the piano. She can still trace her fingers along the raised swirls in the green seat cushions that her granddaddy donated to the church. She can still lie down and put her head in her granny's lap, such a long sermon, such a long time before it's over and it's hot, so hot, the flies swirling around the room, fans swishing this way and that while she lies with her head in her granny's lap, looking at the little gold ring on her finger during the long prayer, her hands folded just like the pictures in the big Bible, and after it's over she's still so desperate to catch them because they're playing tag and she's always it, always running in straight lines while those mean boys run in circles and God doesn't love them, no, God doesn't know them like he knows her because she's special inside God's love, more special than any of the other kids who don't take God seriously, who whisper during Sunday School lessons, who never find the Bible verses in Bible drills, who never understand how serious God is, how serious hell fire is because it's yellow bright hot and the demons stick you with red hot pokers. Your skin falls off in pieces and she doesn't want to go there so she believes in Jesus, because her mother told her to, she believes in Jesus, in his power to save her.

It's because of her that her father is going to hell. The man came to witness to her father and she wouldn't stop whining and distracting him, she wouldn't be quiet and go play and so her father finally gave into her, but not to God, his soul doomed to hell fire because of her and now she prays every day, every night, *please save my father*. But does she really believe he'll burn, does she really believe everything they tell her? How far she moved from that little, frightened girl with her big God everywhere, in her ears, in her pockets, God filling up every space. How quickly she became the girl denying god. "You're not a Christian, are you?" the boy asked and she said "No," the words burning into her, a hole in her stomach. You're not a Christian are you and yes, she's forty-four now and the

past is so far behind her that Jesus is a shadow, a dream she once had and God is empty-handed, reaching for her from a long way away, reaching for who she once was, for the girl reciting the books of the Bible, as fast as she can, trying not to trip over the middle of the New Testament, trying to beat her own record. He's reaching for the girl with her collection of Bible tracts, cartoon pictures of the demons squeezing the baby's toes so he'll cry during church and distract the worshipers. Cartoon pictures of Jesus in heaven, sitting on a throne, preparing to judge everyone. He's reaching back for the girl with the brand new, pigskin Bible that her mother just bought her, how proud she is, a study Bible with a zippered cover. She still has it, flowers pressed in the middle from church retreats and Christian summer camp.

Yes, she's forty-four now. It's been years since she tasted the grape juice in the tiny glass, how she used to suction it to her tongue, trying not to make a popping noise when it came off. *Hush, people are praying!* It's been years since she sang in the choir, her voice lifted up to heaven in harmony. It's been years since the Second Chapter of Acts, years since she still believed even though she'd discarded so much of what she'd once been taught, discarded hell fire and brimstone, discarded creationism, discarded the closed-off, closed-minded religion of her youth. But, even then, she still believed, still talked to God, still prayed over her food, prayed for forgiveness for her sins, in Jesus name, Amen. And she can't forget, even now, how she was standing in the kitchen, washing dishes, and a white, searing light shot through her chest and out her back, she could see herself standing there, filling up with light. And she can't forget the dream that God sent her, telling her not to get that job in the bar downtown, telling her to choose another path so she wouldn't be lost, so she wouldn't be in danger, and that's how true it was, how it *must have been true* because she really believed it, all those years, she really tried to know him, to reach out her mind and connect with him, in the dark of her head. She must have really believed. And she's glad, glad that God found her in a lump

in her winter bed, glad that her mother told her to get saved, to ask Jesus into her heart, glad that she went to church suppers and Vacation Bible School, glad that she got upset when she saw the Pledge of Allegiance with “under God” removed. She’s glad that her head was full of God, that she prayed obsessively, over and over again, before every meal, after every sin. She’s glad that she was always the winner in the Bible drills, that she was the one to beat, the one all the grownups admired, how she even brought her Bible with her on church retreats, the only pious teenager, the only one poring over her Bible at night, the only one going to sleep with a prayer on her lips. She’s glad that she crawled under the church benches trying to get away from Skipper, glad that the splinter got stuck in her shin, glad that it festered, glad that she tried so hard to understand Jesus’ suffering but she never could because she’d heard about the man that Ivan the Terrible tortured to death and surely that man suffered more than Christ. She’s glad that she belongs to God, even now, because it was real and someday he’ll take her back, when she’s tired of all this, when the world is too dark or too full of light. Some day when the time is right, he’ll call her back and she’ll go to him, at last, back where she belongs.