

God is a Soprano

As children, this is the one night a year we are allowed to stay up past ten.

I stand on the snowy stone steps, my thin white tights doing nothing to guard my legs against the cold. There is no wind tonight, but the cold settles deep beneath the skin. I pull my lime green ski jacket closer, wishing my grandmother didn't care about pretty hair so I could wear a warm hat.

Suddenly, a bell swings to life from high above, its deep song echoing throughout the stone courtyard. Another bell joins, then another, until a choir of voices high and low ring out from the belltower. The crowd waiting below shuffles anxiously, sensing that warmth is only a few moments away. I press closer to my mother. She sways from side to side, my youngest sister draped over her arms. Emily is not sleeping; she stares down at me with eyes glazed over from exhaustion. I reach out and shake her leg.

"Don't fall asleep yet," I hiss. She blinks slowly in reply.

The wooden door at the stop of the stairs creaks open. A long yellow rectangle spills out onto the sidewalk below, catching stray snowflakes as they drift by. People who have been huddled into their coats like statues suddenly come to life. They press forward, eager to be out of the biting cold. I know my mission. I dart ahead of my family, wriggling through the sea of wool coats and ski jackets. I pop out in the aisle. Quickly, I dunk my fingers into the glass bowl of holy water and splash it on my forehead, my chest, my shoulders. Then I stride towards my family's favorite pew, my black shoes clicking on the marble floor. Already the long wooden benches are filling up with old Catholics and their large families; I have to move quickly. I squeeze around Martin, the WWII vet, and dance past old Lorennia, who gives me a sour look.

Finally, I make it to my pew of choice. I shrug off my jacket and stuff it at the far end of the bench. Then I sit at the opposite end, claiming the entire row as my own.

Gradually, my family filters in. My mother and Emily sit beside me. She places herself deliberately between my other siblings who enjoy fighting loudly when the Mass gets boring. Next my two grandparents slide into the pew, followed by my uncles and aunts. Sitting side-by-side, we take up the entire row.

It seems strange, but there was a time when my family didn't sit in the third row of Holy Ghost Catholic Church. My grandparents were married in 1974 in upstate New York. They went on their honeymoon and not even a month later, my grandfather got a job in Denver. He and my grandmother packed up what little they had and drove out to their new home in Aurora, Colorado. They had no friends or family west of the Mississippi, but they quickly found the Catholic community that was more than willing to take them in. Most of their neighbors were Catholic, and they and my grandparents all attended St. Pius X Parish, only a couple blocks away from their neighborhood. All their children were baptized there. Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, my grandparents and their family attended church in Aurora every Sunday.

At the same time, Holy Ghost Catholic Church was advertising their services in the Denver Catholic register. One year, they televised their Midnight Mass, hoping to draw Catholics from every corner of Colorado to their mass. My grandfather happened to have the television on that night. He watched in awe as the camera panned steadily over the magnificent decorations. The hairs on his arms rose as the orchestra. He fell in love with Holy Ghost that night. The next morning, as his children squealed over their Christmas presents, he brought the idea of attending Holy Ghost to my grandmother. She agreed, and they began to spend Easter, Christmas,

Pentecost, the Christ the King Mass, and the St. Cecilia Mass at Holy Ghost, just to get a taste of the traditional beauty of the church. Five masses a year turned into fifty, and just like that, Holy Ghost became our family's home parish.

As the orchestra begins to tune in hushed cadence, I sweep my gaze over what I have known since I was born. The smell of incense is heavy in the air and clings to my hair and clothes. Delicate wisps of smoke curl lazily up towards the painted ceiling. Red and green banners sweep down from chandeliers, gleaming in the warm light. A cluster of pine trees and red flowers press in around the altar. A boy dressed in red and white picks his way delicately through this forest, leaving a trail of lit candles in his wake.

"What time is it?" I asked my mother in a hushed voice. She adjusts my sister to glance at her watch.

"11:56," she says. I fight the urge to yawn. This year, I am determined to stay up until two in the morning. My ears prick up as the musicians suddenly fall silent. I twist myself around in my seat to stare at the stone balcony high above. I can see my father, a small doll in a rumpled suit, stepping up to his conductor's stand. He raises his hands. The entire orchestra takes a collective breath. All eyes are on him, an escaped project manager from a local oil company, as he waits for some signal only he can see. Suddenly he waves a hand through the tension, and the church bursts to life.

The heavy wooden doors at the end of the aisle swing open to reveal priests dressed in swirling robes of crimson and gold. They glide by, heads held high, looking so much like my mother who had swept down this very aisle in her silk wedding gown only eight years before. A parade of altar boys follow close behind. One carried a golden cross that seems to float above the

crowd. Another swings his incense lamp from a thick chain, filling the air with great clouds of sweet smoke. I eye them jealousy and wonder if their tight white collars are more comfortable than my suffocating red dress.

The priests arrange themselves neatly at the altar, each knowing exactly where they should be. They wait with bowed heads for my father to finish the procession hymn. Then Father Tom raises his hands and begins to speak.

Apart from the songs and decoration, Mass proceeds the way it has always proceeded for thousands of years. The religious meaning is lost on me at eight years old. I am too focused on staying awake and remembering when to stand, sit, kneel, sing, and speak. Every action has a time and place. Even my bathroom breaks are strategically planned so that I can wander around the basement during the most boring parts of Mass.

At least tonight I have something to look forward to.

Communion is the most holy Sacrament. Every Mass, each parishioner approaches the altar and receives the Body and Blood of Christ. Given the size of Holy Ghost, this part of Mass can feel like an eternity. But at one o'clock on Christmas morning, after everyone has moved up the aisle to place the wafer in their mouths, they return to their seats and the lights dim. The world is cast into darkness. It is not the frightening shadow of a bitter winter night. It is the darkness of a cozy room when the lights are finally turned off, save for the flickering candles and glow of Christmas lights from just outside.

In this darkness, the orchestra plays the first measure of "O Holy Night." Their instruments are gentle, tender. I close my eyes, savoring every note. **Even at my young age, I am entranced by the music, understanding** why nine years earlier, this was the music that had

captured my father's attention. He had been raised in Mississippi by a Baptist family, and everything about Catholicism was new and strange to him. My mother had asked him to drive her to Mass at Holy Ghost every Sunday, and every Sunday he sat in the third row with my mother's family and listened to the haunting beauty of the choir. Later he would become interested in the philosophy, the history, and the mysticism of the Church, but it was the music that had brought him here. The music of God.

This is the music that fills the church in the darkness. A single soprano begins the first verse of the hymn. As she sings her first note, it cuts through the atmosphere with a chilling edge of perfection. Her voice rises above the strings, the woodwinds, the brass. It soars towards the heavens as though lifted by the plumes of incense that reach for the painted ceiling. The orchestra grows louder, encouraged by the strong hand of my father, and the soprano still seems to drown them in her song. More singers join in, but her voice is the loudest, the strongest. When she reaches the highest note, the climax of the song, the marble pillars seem to shiver. She is all of the brilliance of the angel Gabriel who spoke to the Shepherds. She is the tenderness of Mother Mary as she held her only child. She is hope, she is beauty, she is light. Through her I can hear the very voice of God. God is a soprano.

When the hymn is over, there is silence for a long time.

The lights come back to full brightness, and the audience sits forward, shaken from their trance. The Mass ends gracefully. The final carole plays the priests down the aisle and out of the church. People applaud the orchestra, the choirs, the priests, each other. The spell was broken when the lights came on, but now the effects have truly worn off. Warm conversation fills the church as families make their way out onto the cold, dark street.