

I ALWAYS FELT LIKE I WAS ON PRETTY GOOD TERMS WITH THE VIRGIN MARY, EVEN THOUGH I DIDN'T GET PREGNANT IN HIGH SCHOOL

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I. The Preparation

A lot of girls in our parish did have babies—and, like Mary, out of wedlock—so wasn't Mary just so lucky that her baby actually turned out to be the second person of the Holy Trinity. The chances of that are, literally speaking, exactly one to every other person who has ever been born or will be born on earth. I suppose the odds could be upped to three to everyone else if the Father and the Holy Spirit decided to be born again too. Only you knew they wouldn't. It didn't seem to be part of their personality to be so physical. The "word made flesh" was just not where they were at.

Finding out that Mary's baby was God must have caused her neighbors to stop gossiping (at least publicly) for fear of what He might do to their own kids. The parishioners at St. Michael's could have taken a lesson from them. There was no way that her parents would have threatened to throw her out, like the parents of the older sisters of three girls in my class did. Or that her boyfriend, Joe, would beat her up, which happened way too often when St. Michael's High School girls' boyfriends found out that they were going to become fathers. Or, the absolute worst, that her mother would get so frantic about what the neighbors would think that she'd have an aneurysm pop in her head right then and there and fall to the floor and die, and it would be your fault, and you would go to hell, and the Blessed Mother wouldn't even care because, by prematurely becoming a mother yourself, you didn't honor your own mother. None of us could believe that when Joan, a really innocent and fairly malnourished-looking girl, suddenly discovered herself to be "with child," that her own mother would *actually* die. Poor Joan. Talk about guilt. That and everyone saying, "You killed your mother," like Joan could control her mother's blood flow. She didn't have divine powers. She just had sex.

Other girls and their parents at St. Michael's dealt with pregnancy in what was clearly a much healthier, if slightly sinful way: they lied. The girls' parents would issue an announcement in the parish newsletter that their daughter and the guy had actually been secretly married for a year, but because they had been underage when they married, despite the full consent of both sets of parents (and, often, grandparents as well), they could not publicize the marriage. So, the baby was not only legitimate but, because they were Catholic, to be expected. Because everyone knew that worse than having premarital sex was using birth control. So it all made sense, and everyone was relatively happy, even if a few dates had been tweaked. And then there would be a baby shower. And the "husband" would have to go—the first in a long line of unacknowledged punishments for him for getting her pregnant in the first place. He would sit there,

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the only guy except for the girl's father who was just there to ensure that he didn't leave. The guy was totally embarrassed which made us, somewhat perversely, exclaim even more over each and every shower gift from little, shamrock-green booties to tiny Red Sox bibs. So, apart from Janet's mom, the fact that Mary got pregnant through her ear before she and Joseph had had a chance to get married (even secretly) was no big deal to anyone in our parish.

Plus, Mary was female. That was such a relief, especially to all of us girls at St. Michael's. Because Mary was so important, you felt that no one should be disappointed by having a girl instead of a boy, or, if they were, well, they might just discover one day what a big mistake they'd made. Mary showed the world that girls shouldn't be underestimated. And since we always were, that was a comfort.

Not to mention that it did God the world of good to have Mary in the picture, just from a PR standpoint. If we're going to be brutally honest, the Trinity was a pretty abstract notion. Comprehending the Trinity was like thinking about the infinity of the universe. Sort of there and not there in a time-space continuum. But once you got a woman into the picture, and a mother, well, it humanized God, didn't it? You could just connect to Him, knowing that he had a mother.

Agnes had even pointed out one day when we'd been sentenced to detention for skipping gym and were supposed to say the whole rosary before we came out of the locker room, that if you compare the words of the "Hail Mary" with those of the "Our Father," you can see that Mary was so much more "of the people" than He was. "Blessed art thou among women." Who can't relate to a line like that? It's just saying that you are one holy chick and everyone, even God, is totally into you. Put that next to "Thy will be done on Earth as it is in heaven." Oh, come on. First off, he's bossy—and bossy across that nebulous time-space continuum. Agnes said he sounded exactly like her father—and mine too and probably a lot of other fathers—who acted like they wanted everyone to do their will across all time and space. And we were sick of it. We needed a female who was relatively normal. Just before Sister Angelicina came in and gave us a double Saturday detention for talking rather than saying the rosary, Agnes, who was really warming to the topic, which Sister Angelicina might have recognized if she weren't so narrow-minded, said that she thought Mary was a kind of biblical Princess Di, friendly and warm, who'd stare right into your eyes when she talked to you. Unlike all the males like St. Alphonse Liguori or St. Charles Borromeo who looked constipated or like they had a load in their pants. I thought Agnes went a bit too far, but I could see where she was coming from and agreed with her general principles.

And Mary had a favorite color—a really pretty blue. Christ, how ordinary is that? Anyone could relate, even if their favorite color was brown or some disgusting shade of purple that looked like the color of organs in the science museum. The important thing was that Mary had taken the time to choose and

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had somehow managed to get it recorded so that all of us girls would know that she wasn't too high and might not to be into colors.

As we got older what we discovered about Mary only got better and better. She not only liked blue. She liked clothes, and her fashion sense was to die for. In our religious art class, we learned that Mary posed for more painters than virtually any other person who ever lived. She started with St. Luke, who knew so much about her most intimate details, he must have had a thing for her, but I was sure that she hadn't realized it because she wasn't the type to cheat on Joseph. You could really see that she had an eye for art because she started time traveling to sit for much better painters than Luke, especially the Italian ones, and her dresses were so beautiful and not all of them blue either. I mean, sometimes they were color-coordinated with the wings of the Angel Gabriel who'd come to give her the happy news about her bun in the oven. Talk about "studied casual" or "dress for success." It was like she could see into the future and know in the morning that it was going to be a day requiring maroon brocade. All the Bible stories suggest that her house was small, but it must have had some kind of basement closet space because—and here you just have to think of Princess Di again—she had the right thing to wear for any occasion. And she always knew what to wear.

As beautiful as she was, you knew, too, that Mary was a good girl, except for just the one time (and who knows how any of us would respond to an angel—I mean, a real one, not some horny idiot like Joey Pease that Janet had gotten involved with). And if I ever did get in trouble, I hoped that I'd find someone like Joseph, who was the type of guy my grandmother would call "a good egg." He married her, and probably the kids they had together—which the Bible talks about, even if Sister Angelicina yelled that only Protestants believed that and they would burn in hell—didn't really look like Jesus. It was lucky for them that the camera hadn't been invented because you know some nosey Barrett would have gone and done close-ups with some kind of wide angle lens hidden under a bushel basket that would have shown that their third child had a big nose, or that the second one had a wart on her chin. With hairs. And that none of them were tall and thin with wavy brown hair like Jesus. Those photographers probably would have tried to get Mary when she was sunbathing or washing, just like they did with Princess Di (again!). But anyway, they didn't, and she lucked out once more. So much of luck is being born in the right time and place.

What was not to like about the BVM? The mother of God. Good-looking. Well-dressed. A good person. Knew how to make the absolute best of a situation. And never uppity about any of it.

Mary was also into making appearances, what Sister Angelicina told us we should call "apparitions." At first, I felt these were a bit show-offy because she was flaunting her ability to time travel. Also I didn't think that she should have left her family quite so often. But when she wasn't dropping in on famous painters,

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she usually appeared to groups of children with a higher percentage of girls. I liked that—mixed play groups with girls dominating. The kids were also playing together in some town in Europe or South America that really needed the money that her appearance could kick off. A shrine requiring builders who'd been out of work. A well which needed diggers to make it bigger, and priests and nuns to make it Christian, to bless the water, and to collect the entrance fees. A commemorative spot, perhaps with flowers, around which bed and breakfasts, tea shops, stores selling relics of every kind—prayer books, holy cards, medals, and statues—most made by locals, helping tourism along again.

Sister Loretta, who said she was named after Our Lady of Loretto, would often on Fridays show us her enormous collection of silver and bronze Blessed Virgin medals, most of which she said were related to Loretto in some way. I had two favorites. One was a big silver medal with the BVM praying over an airplane. I had not realized that when Mary was acting as Our Lady of Loretto, she was the patron saint of pilots (which Sister Loretta's brother was—hence her interest) and of all who fly. Talk about keeping up with the times. My other favorite medal featured Mary as Our Lady of the Sword in which she is depicted as killing pagans. Sister Loretta always brought a big magnifying glass with the medals to help us see the details more clearly and often to see bits of prayers written in foreign languages on the back. One Friday, she let me take the Lady of the Sword medal over to the window with the magnifying glass so that I could try to read some really tiny print that none of us could decipher. "It's in English," I called out as it came into focus. "It says 'Made in China'." At first Sister Loretta thought I was lying, but when she saw the words for herself, she explained to us that God would have anticipated that the communists in China would create technology that could make medals, rosaries, and plastic figurines really cheaply, and He was willing to temporarily forgive them for not being a democracy and for being pagans if they were willing to sell these holy goods to us at a fantastic discount, which showed us that God, like everyone else, will go out of His way to get a good deal on something He really needs. Who doesn't like a bargain?

II. The Test

Agnes and Janet and I were all painting our nails a pale blue in honor of the Feast of the Annunciation on March 25. We were also avoiding studying for the Diocesan exam the following morning. Diocesan exams were given at the end of March to students in Catholic schools throughout Massachusetts from the fourth to the twelfth grade. You had to answer four out of seven essay questions. A typical question would go something like this:

Theologians speculate about whether Christ actually appeared to His disciples after He rose from the dead. Is the scripture clear on this? Discuss, with reference to the different gospels and their variations, and to different theological interpretations.

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Short of traveling the time-space continuum to get interviews with some of the more loquacious disciples or memorizing the Bible or learning about “theological interpretations”—whatever they were—we were doomed. Doomed to failure by every single one of the seven questions on the exam.

On the test day, the exams appeared in a tightly sealed envelope on each nun’s desk. The envelope could be opened by the nun in front of the class only in the presence of the Mother Superior, which led to some significant delays in the test-starting process. The boys tended to fart a lot, too fearful to expel air from their mouths, I suspect. The girls rolled their eyes. A few nut jobs of both sexes fingered their prayer beads. “Good luck!” I’d cynically think. We’d take the exams, do miserably, get yelled at, but at least know that they were over for another year.

The only one that ever bothered me—and it bothered me a lot—was the one in the ninth grade which had a question on the Blessed Virgin. At that point in my life, I had been feeling the Virgin’s presence so strongly that I really took the question and the reaction it caused in me very personally. “I recommend that you all answer Question 5,” Sister Angelicina stated sternly.

5. Our Lady has blessed children all over the world by appearing to them. Today she has chosen to appear to you alone. Describe, step-by-step, what you would do—particularly what you would say to her and then what you would do after her visit to preserve her memory, carry out her wishes, etc.

Out of all of the hundreds of kids in St. Michael’s school taking the damn test, I was the only one foolish enough, fearful enough, obedient enough, stupid enough to actually try to answer Question 5.

As I read the question over and over, my whole body began to sweat. What if the Virgin appeared to me? It was all well and good her showing up in Fatima or Loretto or Walsingham or remote places we’d never heard of. But if I looked up and saw her, perhaps slightly translucent, floating around the picnic table in my backyard, I would, no questions asked, run like hell until I couldn’t see her anymore. Why would the Virgin appear to me? Yes, I’d shown her love and devotion and felt her presence, but I wasn’t expecting to actually run into her on the street or anything. “Go away! Our economy is fine here in the greater Boston area. I think they need you in Peru.” My mother would have an embolism and die if she saw the Virgin or saw me seeing Her. I’d be like Janet, except it would have been the Virgin who murdered my mother, not me. But who would believe that? I was breathing really fast. Sister Angelicina came over to me. I think she was a little afraid that I might actually be having a vision. I should have said I was, and maybe I’d have gotten out of the test.

I had to collect myself. This was a test. All I had to do was write something that sounded plausible. And religious. And normal. Not “I would run

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like the devil!" Not "I'd shriek to Her to go away!" Not "I'd implore Her to explain why on earth She'd chosen *me*." I tried to picture the Virgin in her lovely dresses, especially in the portraits she'd had painted in Italy. Slide after slide that we'd studied in Religious Art. Red silk. Blue brocade. Green velvet. I breathed in and out slowly, imagining, with increasing tranquility, the feel of those beautiful fabrics in my hands and against Mary's body. I saw her, serene, as the Archangel Gabriel gave her tidings of the great joy to come. Peaceful, as her pregnancy began to show, sitting in exquisite maternity dresses with her mother, St. Anne, or her ladies in waiting. And then composed and maybe a little proud as she held the baby Jesus on her lap.

Then my mind went back to the day we'd discussed the DaVinci annunciation. Mary was resplendent in a pale red silk empire-styled dress, gathered right under the breasts with a blue velvet ribbon. Her wrap, a sumptuous blue silk lined with gold satin, covered one shoulder, her lower body, and trailed along the tiles of her terrace where she was reading. I had asked Sister why, while Mary's slender right fingers held down the page, her left arm was raised up, palm forward, suggesting surprise or even a desire to protect herself from Gabriel, to stop his message. Sister had shrieked, "Stop talking, Ruth!" inadvertently putting her left arm up, palm forward, as Mary had, crying out that I was a blasphemer and that my classmates should block their ears so that my words could not endanger their souls as they were surely blackening my own. I stopped speaking, but I also stopped listening to her—hearing only vague threats of Saturday detentions and suspension—and went back to looking at that slide. Mary's eyes gazed at Gabriel, but she seemed to want to get back to her reading. Her lips pursed slightly, I thought in disapproval of having her reading interrupted. "Wonderment," Sister had said, which was what had led me to raise my hand in the first place. It wasn't just amazement that an angel was in her garden. The slight tilt of her head, her expression, her lips, her eyes, her hand, all suggested polite resistance to Gabriel's disclosure. She was weighing her options.

In detention, Sister asked me to talk about why I would want to even imply that Mary was anything less than an obedient servant of the Lord her God, why I would want to raise doubts for the whole class about Mary's awe at being told that she was to become the Mother of God. I tried to explain that I wasn't suggesting how Mary really felt but only how she looked in the painting. I had to clap the erasers out the window and clean the blackboards for three months every day after school, with soap and water. Sister told me that perhaps cleaning the blackboard would remind me that I needed to clean my soul as well as my mind and evil tongue.

Now, staring at Question 5, I realized that Sister was right. My reaction to the thought of Mary's appearing to me resembled what I'd said was her reaction to the Angel Gabriel. She saw Gabriel and, dressed in red silk and blue satin, with a lovely view of Florence from her garden, said, "No! Go have the baby

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yourself.” So maybe Mary didn’t want to have the baby. And suddenly she was there in another slide, breast-feeding Him in a light-green satin dress. I could tell from the look on her face that she felt that parenting Jesus was, after all, no picnic. I mean you have a baby, and it turns out to be God. Where does that leave her? She couldn’t even discipline Him. And talk about on-demand feeding. He was God, for heaven’s sake. What He wanted, He had to be given. Her breasts must have been bleeding, never mind His Sacred Heart. She must have been so chapped and exhausted and overwhelmed. And what did she do during the terrible twos? How long did it take to toilet train Him? Did she believe in spanking? Even if she did, you probably don’t hit the Son of God on his bottom, even lightly, even if He’s been a cranky brat all day. Could she send Him to bed without His supper?

No wonder she often left her family on a whim to whisk off to have her nine thousandth portrait painted in some later century. Oh God. I didn’t want to think these things, though I saw that they were probably true. Poor Mary. Why didn’t *she* run like hell? Of course, she probably had, but who stands a chance against an angel who can fly? Who stands a chance against your own child when He turns out to be God?

So she got to have a favorite color. She got to time travel to visit painters so she could be famous across all time and space. But not primarily to honor her son. She just wanted to get a few hours away from Him. She must have been so harried. The painters probably made her look more beautiful than she actually was because they were hoping to sell the painting for a good price, and they were supposed to be depicting the Mother of God, after all. And even if she looked like crap, sweating, her hair not washed recently, her clothes stained in baby puke, they had to make her look good.

And then I had another awful realization. *She didn’t get to keep the clothes.*

And then more terrible. *They weren’t her clothes.*

And worse still. *There were no clothes.* The artists had pieces of fabric lying around their studios to get them started with a painting. When Mary would appear to each artist, she’d look sad and tired and so disappointed in how her life had turned out. She’d be wearing her faded blue, mended, layered-enough-so-they-weren’t-see-through old clothes. The painters, motivated not by God but by greed, would drape her with a piece of fabric or put her in some other woman’s dress and totally recreated her with vivid palettes and even more vivid imaginations. And then a fly would land on her nose, and she’d give it a quick rub.

And the painter would scream at her “Mother of God, can’t you hold still for ten minutes? Ten minutes. That’s all I ask.”

And ten minutes was all I had left for Question 5. I had learned a lot about Mary and about myself, but it was one of those situations where “the test wasn’t capable of measuring the test taker’s abilities.” Imagine if I had written

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something about glimpsing her pain and frustration or her sense of exploitation. I could probably be excommunicated.

I couldn't risk that. I picked up my pen and began to write as fast as I could. I said that if Mary appeared to me, I would kneel down and start saying "Hail Marys" (totally lame!) and that I would look down so that my eyes weren't blinded by her halo. She didn't get a chance to talk much in my essay. I was too busy praying at her. Eventually, I invited her back to my house to look at my holy card collection and at the statue of her and St. Anne that my mother had bought in white porcelain and painted herself. Anne's outfit was brown and organ red. Finally (even more obtusely), I wrote that she looked at her watch—which, of course, was absurd because people at that level of the holy hierarchy don't need watches. She said, "Bless you, my child," and stroked my cheek with a soft and gentle hand. I asked if she wanted me to set up a pilgrimage site, though our block was pretty crowded with three-family houses. She said no. I suggested a small holy store and even offered to sell some of my precious holy cards and glow-in-the-dark saints (made in China), but she said no. And then she vanished. My apparition—like my essay—was a total bust.

III. The Lesson

I still hadn't filled even one page. I bit on the end of my pen, knowing that I would fail, but figuring that I'd said enough to escape excommunication. So I decided that I could write my last paragraph for her and not the test givers.

She didn't even get to keep the clothes, and that was perhaps the least of the offenses committed against Her. Her sorrow is so deep. Everyone asks too much of Her. She is just a woman caught in a God's world. She is trapped in a domestic situation that is not of her own making. She didn't have a chance to write Her own story. Men have written it, and, as usual, they have elevated Her so long as She could be thought of as the Virgin—compliant, meek, obedient, cooperative, and humble.

I predictably did poorly on the test, which was totally immaterial to me, but unfortunately not to my parents or my teachers or to Sister Superior. I had to wash blackboards in the grammar school as well as the high school for the rest of the year. But I hardly minded because in writing that paragraph and in the innumerable times I had to read it and try to explain it to my parents, to various nuns, to Sister Angelicina, to Sister Superior, and, most embarrassingly, to Bishop O'Brien, who summoned me for a private audience, I realized that I might understand Mary more than I had ever imagined. And that while I wasn't expecting her or the Archangel Gabriel to appear to me, others would appear, with messages and demands, and some already had. Others, whom I would have to be wary of, less acquiescent to, and less trusting of than Mary was made out to be.

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