

## **Count on Me** (Renamed *Pray for us Sinners*)

Once again, I find myself in a strange place where nobody knows me. I am naked. And drunk on Jack Daniels and fucked up on Quaaludes and coming out of another blackout. The blackouts are coming more frequently now since I am drinking on a daily basis. Because of the blackouts, I'm never sure where I'll wake up. Or with whom. A sorry state of affairs for a convent-bred, Roman Catholic girl raised in the shadow of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

I crane my neck from the bed to figure out where I am this time. I know I'm in Memphis where, as a native New Yorker, I feel like a foreigner. It's November 1974 and I'm a sophomore in college. Everyone on campus is partying before they disperse for the long Thanksgiving weekend. I don't tell them I'm staying behind. On campus. By myself. They see me as a party animal, always surrounded by people, not a care in the world. I don't tell them my parents can't afford the plane tickets home or that I have no place else to go. I don't need their pity. I need to belong.

I'm in a waterbed. Not just any waterbed, but an unheated waterbed. I must be at Ty's house. He's the only person I know who's dimwitted enough to buy an unheated waterbed. I am chilly, lying uncovered on damp sheets.

As the bed moves beneath me and the waves make swishing gurgling noises, I realize I am not alone. The pungent scent of patchouli oil overtakes me even as the wave motion makes me sea sick and nauseous. Not to mention I am overwhelmed by disgust that I may have gone to bed with Ty. I think I may throw up. I look for a spot on the horizon to stabilize myself, just as my mother taught me to do when we were seasick on ferry rides to Block Island. I find a spot on the wall where I can focus—a forlorn picture hook without a picture hanging from it.

Surrounding the picture hook, the late afternoon sun bleeds through the sheer cream curtains, leaving behind ribbons of amber on the white walls. A gentle hum vibrates in the background. Through my Jack Daniels haze, I think I'm hearing Cole's movie camera rolling. I am vaguely aware that I shouldn't be here, that I don't want to be here, in this bed with, I realize slowly, not only Ty, but Lance too. The two of them are enjoying themselves by working me from different positions. I start to hyperventilate, and, in my panic, I look for Cole. These three always move in a pack. He is at the foot of the bed, the only one who is fully clothed. He is more quiet than usual, concentrating on filming our every move.

The pay phone in the dorm rung and rung and rung. It must have rung thirty times before someone finally picked it up. Finally, there was a knock on my door followed by a muffled voice telling me my mother was on the phone.

"Hi, Mom," I said, "What's up?"

"There's no gentle way to say this, so I'm just going to spit it out. You know your father and I have been having problems for a while now. But things improved when he went to look after your grandmother. First, he was only supposed to be gone a week, but then it stretched to two, then three. It was so peaceful without his constant drinking and our bitterness and carping at each other. So...I decided to tell him not to come home for Thanksgiving. Actually, I told him not to come home at all."

"Ever?" I asked.

"Ever... It's better for everyone. I'm really sorry to have to tell you this way."

The hallway pay phone felt very exposed. There was no privacy. I bit my lip and started sweating. My legs felt weak and I slid down the cinderblock wall. From my low crouch on the floor, I put a fist to my mouth to stifle the animal groan, like the plaintive, feral wail of a cat in heat, rising in my throat. Girls walked past me and stared.

"Where will he go?"

“Your father? I don’t know and frankly, I don’t care. He’s not going to milk me or this family for money any longer. I’ve had enough.” I heard her growing defensive and waited for her to do what she always did when she was defensive—shut down the conversation. We had a long history of unfinished conversations.

“I know you’re going to take his side,” she said. “You always do.”

“That’s not true—,” I tried.

“You do too. Well, I’ve had enough.”

She was right of course. I did take his side most of the time because I couldn’t deal with her neediness. Instead of inducing my sympathy, it alienated me. It probably alienated Dad too.

“Well, I should probably say good-bye and let you go. I just wanted to let you know before you called home and talked to your brothers and sisters.”

“No wait.” I didn’t want her to hang up yet. This call tethered me to the way it used to be. When we were still intact as a family. Once I hung up, it would all be over.

“I could come home, Mom. Be with the family through this. I could help.”

“No hon. It’s sweet of you to offer. We can’t really afford to fly you home just for the weekend. You can thank your father for that by the way. The only reason we still have a roof over our heads is because of *my* family trust fund.”

I didn’t take the bait. “It’s not just any weekend, Mom. It’s Thanksgiving. And it’s going to be hard on the kids.”

“I know, but it’s not long until Christmas.”

“Ok, Mom,” I said. Compliant as always. “If that’s what you want.”

“You’re a good girl,” she said before hanging up.

I continued to squat on the dormitory floor, numb. The silence was abruptly ended by an electronic busy signal—AT&T’s indelicate way of telling me the other party had hung up. The tether to the old world was now officially broken.

In a fury, I rose and hammered the handset against the black call box with its shiny, stainless-steel square of push buttons. I hammered until the casing of the mouthpiece cracked. Many of the girls

came to their doors to watch. I registered their worried stares and fled to my room, leaving the handset dangling from its stainless-steel lanyard cord.

I don't know why I felt such a strong attachment to my father. He lost interest in me shortly after I entered high school, except to "borrow" the occasional twenty for his booze and cigarettes. As if I had money to spare. I worked at the corner deli for an off-the-books, hourly wage. One time I asked, "If you're going to buy yourself cigarettes, could you pick up some tampons for me?" His grimace, intense with displeasure, left me to decide if he was offended by my bleeding womanhood or by the inconvenience of an extra chore. Either way, he neglected to get the tampons.

Another time, when I overdosed on a tab of acid—orange barrel sunshine—my mother told my brother to wake my father, who had passed out hours before. My brother finally roused him, and Dad asked, "Have you called the doctor?" When my brother said yes, my father said, "Then why do you need me?" My overdose, like the tampons, was one more inconvenient chore.

Lance straddles me and awkwardly fondles my breasts, tracing my nipples repeatedly as if he's never seen nipples before. The repetitious movement irritates me.

"Stop that," I say. "It's annoying."

"Ah! She wakes! You've been out for a long time." He is still kneading my breasts although he has stopped that bit with the nipples.

Lance kisses me, his soft tongue gently teasing mine. Rolling us over so that I am on top, he runs his fingers up and down my rib-cage as if he's playing a tune only he can hear. He taps out the beat on my ribs. And a one. And a two. And a one-two-three. The tapping is oddly therapeutic. But then it stops, and his hips grind urgently into me.

Vacantly, I allow it. He can take my body. What difference does it make now? My father is gone, he will not be back. My family is broken beyond repair. Thank God I'm so wasted. Maybe I won't remember this in the morning.

I must have passed out because suddenly I feel someone slapping my face, trying to revive me.

“Hey, hey, you still in there? Try to sit up.” It was Cole, his arms around my shoulders, a concerned look in his eyes. “Are you with us?”

“Cole, so good to see you!” I slurred and tried to smile at him.

“Stay with us, ok?”

“This bed is too crowded,” I protest.

“Lie down, Big Apple,” Ty laughs.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Lance scolds.

“This bed is perfect just as it is,” Ty draws. “Lance, get the lady another drink. Or a lude. Maybe she wants another Quaalude.”

“I’m kinda busy here, Ty. Hey Cole, you do it.” Lance laughs. They both laugh. Even their laughter has a southern drawl to my New York ears. Slow and lazy. The kind of slow that dawdles and lingers and moves without purpose.

Cole says, “I think she’s had enough.” He sounds unexpectedly short with them.

I am slick with perspiration and feeling queasy. Perhaps Ty is right and I should just lie back down. I roll on to my stomach and the room starts spinning. The sticky-sweet smell of sandalwood incense assails me. I think of the celebration of the Mass and the consecration of the Eucharist. *Hoc est enim Corpus meum. For this is My Body.* The incense symbolizes the prayer of the faithful rising to heaven. I raise myself on my elbows and somebody repositions me on all fours. I think it might be Ty, but I’m no longer sure who is where.

The film is rolling again. I am being rocked back and forth with thrusting movements from behind. Resting my head on my forearms, I look back through my spread thighs. My thin, anorexic thighs like scrawny bird legs. If I concentrate on my bird thighs, like the stable point on the horizon and the empty picture hook, I don’t mind the dry, relentless pain as much.

The dieting started for my Dad, so I could win his love. When he told me how good I looked, I stopped eating altogether. I stopped eating until I could knead the deepening valley between my clavicles, feel the sharp protrusion of my hip bones, count the ribs on my back.

It became ritualistic—this rib-counting exercise I now repeat throughout the day. I undress and bend over in front of the full-length mirror in my dorm room. I observe my skeletal shape, the skin and bones in my reflection, like a pathologist examining samples of body tissue for forensic purposes. I feast on my reflection and count each rib from one to twenty-four as if expecting the number to be different than the last time I counted. I like the ritual because it reminds me how little one actually needs to survive. A tablespoon a day of small curd cottage cheese. A cube of cantaloupe. A wedge of pink grapefruit and the slightest positive attention from one's Dad.

I am raw between my thin legs. Torn. And very sticky. I see that Ty's sheets are all bunched up at the foot of the bed and the pillows have been tossed to the floor. His sheets are soft, made of the finest high thread-count, Egyptian cotton. His mama buys them for him, just as she buys everything for him: his matched sets of chocolate brown velvetine towels, his chrome and glass coffee tables and lamps, his Mr. Coffee drip coffee maker, his Panasonic stereo sound system and Sony television with remote control—even his leather interior, scarlet red Triumph TR7. Ty is a mama's boy. It's one of the many things I hate about him.

Lance, naked, reclines in the leather armchair, one arm behind his head, relaxed. His chest is hairless, his genitals, shrunken in repose, are uncircumcised. I've never been with someone who is uncircumcised. He is smoking a Marlboro although he looks too young to smoke, like an innocent little boy, smoking to look cool. When he exhales, the smoke drifts upward past the s-shaped scar that marks his upper lip. I would like to ask him how he got that scar, to get to know him better, but I can't work my mouth around the words.

Beyond Lance, I watch the muted television. The headlines suggest that a teenage girl was violently abducted in Salt Lake City by a man driving a Volkswagen. Incredibly, she was able to get away.

Ty grabs my hips from behind, pulling on me, riding me harder, faster, with what feels like hostility. I concentrate on the TV girl—the one who got away.

My silent tears fall through yesterday's mascara onto Ty's Mama's sheets. Finally, with a great heave and sigh, he is finished. I am sickened by what I allowed them to do to me. Operative word "allowed." If only I hadn't had so much to drink.

As Ty pushes himself out of me, he signals that we're done by flinging a used towel at me and directing me to clean myself up.

When I return, they are immersed in a conversation about Greg Allman and the Eat a Peach album.

The Kappa Sigs have purchased several advance tickets to an upcoming Allman Brothers' concert.

I wish someone would invite me to go.

The sweet perfume of marijuana mingles with the sandalwood incense and permeates the room. Ty, Lance, and Cole are sharing a joint. They hardly notice my return.

"Hey Lance," I ask quietly, waiting for his attention. "What happens with the film now?"

"We thought we'd feature it during Home Movie Night at the House," he laughs. He nudges Ty with his elbow and passes the joint.

They always refer to the Kappa Sigma House as "the House."

Ty continues, chuckling, "It'll be just us guys, but you're more than welcome to come as guest of honor if you like. You earned it. Some of the guys might ask you to star in another." In that moment, I hate him even more than usual. I hate them all.

I try to brazen it out. "Ha, ha, ha." That's what they expect of me after all. The brazen New Yorker.

"Thanks for the invitation, Ty, but I think I'll pass."

I really hope he was kidding about movie night. I need to make sure about that when I sober up.

Cole takes the joint from Ty. "Knock it off, you two," he says before pulling hard on the reefer. "Want some?" He holds it out to me.

"Thanks, but no. I'm wasted."

On shaky legs, I collect my belongings and wait for a break in the conversation. "Could one of you guys give me a ride back to the dorm?" The neighborhood between here and campus is a rough one.

They look at each other and then back at me. Ty answers first, "I'm running late for dinner with my Mama." I wonder what Mama would think of little Ty's behavior this afternoon.

"Lance?"

"I'm supposed to meet J.T. for a game of shuffleboard at the bar." He notices the wounded look on my face, so he says, "Well, sure. It won't take me that far out of my way."

“Never mind, Lance,” I say. “I don’t want to take you out of your way. It’s not a long walk.” He doesn’t try to change my mind.

Cole, who doesn’t have a car, says, “I’ll walk you if you want.”

*If I want.* Of course, I want. I want it very much. But I’m afraid of being needy.

A needy girl is my mother’s daughter.

A needy girl is a box of tampons.

A needy girl is another overdose.

A needy girl is an inconvenient chore.

“It’s ok, Cole,” I say. “Thanks for the offer. You go with Lance. Fresh air will do me good.”

The screen door bangs shut behind me. My heels sound loud and I lose my balance as I make my way across the front porch of the Craftsman house. I feel like they’re staring at me, laughing at me, as I try to creep away. I can barely walk because of the raw pain in my groin.

Alone and humiliated, the shadow of my shame shortens only because the evening sun is setting. My dorm room is my safe house. There are no shadows when darkness falls.

When I get to the corner of North Parkway, the unseasonal heat, humidity, and heavy scents of winter jasmine and sweet autumn clematis overcome me. I bend over the curb and pitch the contents of my stomach in a stream of steamy, rank, projectile vomit. After I finish, I stumble the rest of the way back to campus, noting house after house with chipped paint, front porches with rotting steps, clothes lines hung with wet laundry, and old cars without tires perched high on concrete blocks. Lights are switching on inside the houses and I watch whole families perform their evening dance. Most of the street lamps are broken.

The pavement is cracked with age and overuse. Walking as fast as I can, my toe catches in one of the cracks, causing me to fall and twist my ankle badly. I limp the rest of the way home.

Bellingrath dormitory. Third Floor, room 314.

Where I live alone.

Where I am so, terribly needy.

I walk past the phone, the handset still dangling on its cord. Nobody hung it up after my call with Mom. After I hammered the life out of it. The empty phone hook reminds me of the empty picture hook at Ty's.

The thought of Ty's house makes me panic. I can't catch my breath. I pounce on the phone. Magically, I think, if I return the handset to its cradle, it will rewind the clock, erase time, and change the narrative of the last forty-eight hours.

I run to the shower. I tear at my soiled clothes and stand under the scalding hot water—a baptism of sorts. With a bar of Dr. Bronner's pure castile soap I scrub my body, wash my hair, get the sticky off my anorexic thighs.

Wrapped in a towel, I return to my room and light an unscented candle. It feels healing, like the prayer candles I used to light in front of the statue of Our Lady after my weekly confession. The sacrament that they used to call Penance and now refer to as Reconciliation. The continually burning flames of the candle symbolized the ongoing and transcendent nature of our prayers, even after leaving the church.

Removing my towel and draping it over the back of a chair, I am naked. I bend over in front of the mirror to catch the reflection of my lean back. I count my ribs like they are rosary beads, one by one between my fingers.

Holy Mary, Mother of God. Pray for us sinners.

Holy Mary, Mother of God.

Holy Mary.

I count my ribs again and again. I keep counting until I feel safe.

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