

Confessions of a Non-Believer

by Jennifer L. Lopez

“So.” He takes a long sip. “Any plans for the day?”

“I don't know. I need to start getting things together, but I don't know where to begin. Maybe I'll start going through his clothes.”

Luke shakes his head. “Don't do any of that today. Don't go home. Sleep. Or go shopping. Watch TV. Forget.”

“Is that what I'm supposed to do? Forget?” It doesn't seem right. Whatever happened to keeping memories alive? “Is that how you get through the day, by pretending you never had a brother?”

“No, that's not what I— ”

“Well I can't do that. How am I supposed to ignore three years of my life? He was my life, Luke. I don't know anything else.” I thrust my feet into my sneakers and rummage through my bag for a sweatshirt.

“It's your life. It's always been your life. Carl was just a part of it and you have to learn how to deal with that missing piece.”

Angry tears well up and I clench my fists with the effort to hold them back.

“I'm sorry I haven't learned as quick as you.” I throw my keys in my purse and head for the door. Luke hurries after me.

“This isn't easy for me, either.”

“Well you fucking fooled me!”

He grabs me by the shoulders.

“The rest of my life - and your life - will keep going, with or without us, even though Carl's gone. I don't want to spend my time angry at god knows who.” He releases me. “And I don't want to spend it fighting with you.”

I'm not ready to let it go yet, but it's clear he isn't going to respond to my temper. I'll have to fume elsewhere. I open the door.

"Bree, wait."

"I thought you didn't want to keep arguing?"

He shakes his head and opens a kitchen drawer. "I won't be home 'til ten." He tosses me a key.

"Fine." I slide it on my key ring and storm out, fully intending to keep hold of my anger, however irrational it may be. His suggestion, misguided though it was, didn't warrant my reaction.

I'm accosted by an unseasonably cold wind when I step onto the sidewalk. I shove my hands in my pockets, turn left, and start walking. I'm tired of people trying to talk me out of my anger instead of letting me own it. It's my anger, damn it. I'll be irrational with it as long as I please.

St. Mary's Catholic Church is a block away from Luke's apartment building. Instead of passing by, I walk right up the granite steps and push open the door, almost daring god to knock the bitterness right out of me. The amber glow of lights reflecting off the wooden pews, gold-flecked tile floor and rich-hued stained-glass windows creates an otherworldly bubble of warmth compared to the outside. The smoky-woody scent of incense is subtle, not overpowering. I've always assumed the scent to be either frankincense or myrrh, though I can't say for certain which, or if, it is.

There are a few other people in the church. An older man seated in the front, head bowed and resting against his clasped hands. A woman about my age, in an expensive skirt suit with a leather shoulder bag - she could *be* me - lights a candle and turns to leave. I sit down in the back and wince when the pew creaks, as if announcing the presence of a blasphemer. No one else seems to notice.

Closing my eyes, I try to breathe it all in, absorb the divine presence that is supposed to be here. Faith by osmosis. I guess it doesn't work that way.

God has to be here. Why else would these people be here? Why else would the congregation return week after week, unless god is actually here? And yet I can't feel it. Whatever the parishioners feel,

I can't feel it. I never have. No joyous epiphany, no tearful repentance. Not even a calm realization of divine presence.

I've been to many different churches, some with childhood friends after Saturday night sleepovers, some with college friends who insisted I try as many as possible so I could find the "right one for me". If there really is one true God, like they all believe, then shouldn't *God* be right for me? It doesn't make sense that I should have to search building to building, faith to faith, for something supposedly so free and abundant.

The soft release of a door latch draws me out of my searching. To my left is the confession booth, and a middle-aged man has just stepped out, wringing his hands. He kneels beside a nearby pew, crosses himself, then sits and bows his head. My attention returns to the confession booth.

I'm not even Catholic. I have nothing to confess except a disbelief in everything the waiting priest holds dear. But maybe my salvation lies just on the other side of that door.

After ten minutes, no one else has entered the booth. How long does the priest stay in there before deciding he's done for the day? I stand and take a few steps toward the booth. It's now or never. With a sweaty palm, I turn the handle and step inside.

It's dim and quiet. I can hear the gentle breaths of the priest on the other side of the privacy screen— the privacy screen which leaves a bit of privacy to be desired. Pressing myself as far back on the seat as possible, I try not to look toward the priest, convinced by the juvenile notion that if I never see him, he won't see me either. I stare at my hands.

Okay genius, you're in. Now what?

After a minute, the priest speaks. "How can I help you?"

"I— oh, um... I'm sorry."

"Do you have something to be sorry for?"

"Well, I..."

Law school trained me for public speaking under pressure, but I can't manage an anonymous conversation in a church. Go figure. Okay. Deep breath.

"I don't really know how this works. I've never been to confession. I've never even been to your church before. And I'm not Catholic." Under the influence of The Booth, I blurt this out in one long, run-on sentence, confessing all the reasons I shouldn't be here, all the reasons he should kick me out. I bite my lip, afraid I might suddenly feel the need to confess the time in college when my very hot, very female roommate planted a kiss on me in the middle of a bar. That night could be explained away by too much alcohol, but the rest of the semester could not.

Hellfire and brimstone can't wait to get a hold of me.

"What has brought you in today?"

Exhaling, I'm relieved to find out The Booth doesn't give the priest mind-reading abilities.

"I was supposed to get married in six weeks. My fiancé and I bought a house a few months ago. Then he died. Two weeks ago."

"I'm sorry. You must be feeling very lost right now."

Yes! How else does a good Jewish-girl-turned-atheist end up at confession?

"I've been feeling really angry."

"That's normal. It's part of the grieving process."

"It's really normal to be mad at my dead fiancé? After I feel angry, I feel ashamed of thinking that way."

There's a short pause before he responds.

"When people die, we sometimes assume that makes them off-limits for negativity, but it shouldn't. If we had real reason to be upset at someone while they're alive, that doesn't simply go away when they pass. Let me explain why."

Another pause.

"Often when we're angry with another person, the reason has less to do with them than with ourselves. You shouldn't be ashamed of those feelings or push them away, or you'll never get to the real root of your problem."

If he asks what my real issues with Carl's death are, I don't know what I'd say. But he's probably right. If Carl were alive, I'd still be angry and confused, just not as sad.

“Are you angry at God?”

The question catches me off guard. If it's natural to be angry at the deceased, it must be natural to be angry at god. I've never considered it.

“I'm not sure I believe in God,” I say, ducking my head in case lightning strikes anyway. “At least not the same way you believe.”

“And yet here you are.”

Yes. Here I am.

Neither of us speaks for at least a minute and it's the first quiet, uncomplicated silence I've had in weeks. It's a shame to break it.

“Thank you for listening.”

“I hope I've given you some things to think about.”

I rest my hand on the door knob but don't open it. “That's it? Aren't you going to say God bless you or anything like that?”

“Would you like me to?”

“Not particularly.”

“I thought not.” I can hear the smile in his voice.

“I just figured it was standard procedure.”

“I needn't say it aloud to believe it, and neither one of us need believe it for it to happen.”

I leave the church carrying a small piece of warmth somewhere deep in my chest that cushions me from the chill in the air.

