

Creative

Lady Saints

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Abstract: A meditation on the death of the author’s Sicilian grandmother that explores how a child copes with loss by transforming the grandmother’s vast collection of plastic and porcelain female saints into imaginary friends.

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When she died, my seamstress grandmother left behind a pile of whitework—doilies, linen tablecloths, stiff sheets embellished with cross-stitched violets and embroidered pillowcases that cheerfully announced BUON GIORNO, MIO CARO. She left behind poofy-petticoated dresses she lovingly had sewn—without a pattern—for me and my sisters to wear to nine o’clock mass. She left behind a fur stole strung with mink heads, whose beady glass eyes and snarly teeth terrified me, and a set of yellowed dentures, floating in a sickly-pink case, that never would bite down on a biscotti again.

Grandma also left behind a vast collection of plastic and porcelain saints.

In church the saints that stood in the alcoves all wore monk’s robes or loin cloths. And during the Eucharistic Prayer, our not-so-beloved priest Father Fatso nodded his double chin at this army of holy men as he recited, “We honor Joseph, the apostles and martyrs Peter and Paul, Andrew, James, John, Thomas, James, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Simon and Jude; we honor Linus, Cletus, Clement, Sixtus, Cornelius, Cyprian, Lawrence, Chrysogonus. . . .”

Grandma had no use for Linus, Cletus, Sixtus, and all the rest of these masculine whoever-us-es. Her saints—the lady-saints—stood sentinel on a hulking mahogany bureau we called the *o-stee-bone*, neatly lined up like the girls in a beauty pageant.

Or the Rockettes.

But Grandma’s lady-saints never smiled big toothy Miss Texas smiles. They never said, “Howdy, y’all!” Never dressed up in swimsuits and sashes and sequined evening gowns and three-inch heels;

never twirled batons or sang “Oh beautiful for spacious skies” as part of the talent competition. They never linked arms and kicked their legs in unison while the audience went wild with applause.

The lady-saints were too busy looking solemn and sorrowful and sacrificial. They never blinked. Or burped. Or slept. By day the eyes of the lady-saints followed me around Grandma’s bedroom (now *my* bedroom). In the dark—tinged by moonlight—their eyes continued to monitor my every movement. I imagined they were taking notes, reporting back to Grandma if I were *brava* or *cattiva*, a good girl or a bad one.

Every night I prayed my mother would box up these scary lady-saints—along with Grandma’s dentures and rosaries and holy cards—and put them in the scariest place of all: our dark, moldy cellar. But my mother made it clear that in honor of Grandma, the lady-saints would stand guard forever. Touching them was off limits, except once a week on Dusting Day, when I gingerly lifted a rag—called a *shoogamano*—out of the rag box. The *shoog*—thin, yellowed and frayed at the edges—was really a pair of my father’s old boxer shorts, ripped in half by my mother, then cut into quarters.

To dust a lady-saint with the remnants of my father’s limp elastic waistband or fly seemed like sacrilege. I hoped the ladies would not hold it against me. And I hoped I would not go to hell for accidentally blasting Our Lady of Mount Carmel with Lemon Pledge.

Our Lady and all the rest of the saints—with their mild, impassive, non-hairy faces—looked like they spoke English. But Grandma had spoken Sicilian. So I wondered how Grandma had prayed to them. Then I started to think: maybe she just had *talked* to them, the way I talked to my stuffed animals (Pandy the Panda Bear, Mooey the Moo-Cow, Hippy the Hippo). Maybe the saints hadn’t been Grandma’s idols, but her imaginary coffee klatsch, or bridge group, or sit-and-stitch circle.

So the lady-saints became less fearsome and more like friends.

Other girls—*American* girls—had Barbie and Skipper. I had Ann, Catherine, Theresa, Margaret, and Bernadette. After I dusted off my lady-saints with the *shoog*, I sprawled on Grandma’s old bed—now my bed—and imagined grand scenarios involving me and my new gal-pals. We traveled to Lourdes. Fatima. Medieval France. I didn’t just go to war with Joan of Arc. I became her, my sword at the ready for battle and my helmet cocked jauntily on my head.

From visiting the houses of my catechism classmates, I knew that most girls did unspeakably obscene things to their fashion dolls. They decapitated Barbie. Sheared off Skipper’s hair. Amputated Midge’s arms and legs. Melted Francie’s torso in the microwave oven. But that was never my plan for the lady saints. I believed my grandmother had left them behind (instead of taking them with her to heaven) to accompany me on my fantastic journeys. And so I held onto them not with my hands, but my imagination—which, after all, is the only thing in life that can cheat death.

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