

Mary Primadonna

Bangambiki Habyarimana wrote in his 2016 *Birds of Eternity*, “We are all sinful. Trouble is that some men consider themselves less sinful than others or holier than others.” Every day, my mother found a way of saying this—but in different fonts. In the way she’d flick the ash off her cigarette atop cemetery soil, the silence of her gulps when she took in liquor as holy water, the sway of her hips outside the downtown credit union bus stop. At what age can you decipher the notion of the holy—the pristinely pious psalms of the absolved—amongst the tainted, their tar molar pulling all light in them as a great empty black hole? If Mary Magdalene was a saint, bare enough, ripe enough, for Christ himself to bestow a child upon, a child who would bear the lashes of his shadow throughout his life (or, what measures to life as a being ever beyond this), then my mother was Mary Primadonna. I couldn’t help but contemplate this at the bus stop, sweat sinking back into my pores under the oppressive beam.

A few feet away from me, my mother inhaled nicotine like it was the last oxygen in a dystopian future where trees disintegrated from global nuclear combustion.

“Didn’t the doctor say you had to stop smoking like...*yesterday*?” I asked her—reminded her.

“I could give a flying fuck what that cracker says. He worried about me, he can barely tuck the fat in his belt—too busy pigging out on hot dogs and candy hogs. By the time I get cancer from these,” she raised it in the air, before taking another quick puff between words, “diabetes would’ve been and bit him in the ass.”

I shook my head.

“Aye lil nigga, didn’t judge me. Mama’s gotta have a life too.”

“What about our life?” I asked, my grip tightening around my baby sister’s hand. “Me and Kya won’t have a mama at the rate you’re going.”

“Devin, you too grown for your own good, you know that.”

This wasn’t a question, but I responded with a signature witty remark, more so out of habit than for the sake of conversation. The bus was never on time, but neither were any of us—except the occasional fiend who seemed to yield some psychic connection with them, sprouting up from the bench seconds before the fumes took over our senses. They were usually the ones strung out on meth, or crackheads who truly weren’t crackheads, just an unfortunate population of citizens who needed a fix every other day.

As I waited, a tree held my gaze for a long while. Cemented me in place. Nothing, in particular, was worthy of such attention, as the branches were oddly naked for it to be a Midwest July. The bark was the same soil ocher, in accordance with all the rest, and the trunk was firm in the faint wind. Nothing, in particular, was worthy of such attention—except, everything about it was peculiar. At a second, third, nineteenth glance: the bark was laced with moss-evergreen, the roots protruded out of the earth as Jesus in Brazil, the creme pencil in Washington, the rusted lantern lady with a crown in New York. It smelt of sap, though, not the sticky, bee-attracting, syrup of the summer—but rather the dripping nectar from honey bees in Canadian springs. Above all, however, what truly caught my attention was the odd shaping of the top branches—two boughs curved outward, with a swirled twist in the middle. They soared high, as to tempt God. In correlation with the bole, the tree eerily resembled

the Baphomet. And not a sigil of the demon, which would've been much easier to denounce and move forward with my day, but the physical reincarnation of him into our world. I held its sight for the duration of The Great Three Days, and it held my gaze too.

"Who needs Jesus today!" a nearby voice shouted. My body convulsed at the power, and a sense of shock washed over me when finally I looked away from the tree. A small, elderly lady carrying a bible in her hand was the source of the voice. "Praise his name! The superior savior! The mighty messiah! The righteous redeemer!"

She was clothed in a white get-up: heavy white gowns with intricate floral designs, a thin white hat brandishing a tilted bow on top, and white 3-inch steppers. Something about her, though, was unnatural. Besides the occurrence of such a burgeoning voice flowing out of a woman as small as her, the way she moved was stranger. Her legs didn't walk, they skirted. Her body didn't flutter as a winged angel; rather, it was uncontrollably skittish. Likewise, her bible was closed, and she used it to scratch her palms every minute or so. Finally, she inched up to us, seeming to bawl even louder now.

"Lady, can you shut the fuck up! You're scaring my daughter," said my mother.

Kya clung to my leg, her eyes peeking out through the space between them.

"Oh, sister!" the woman directed to my mother. "Isn't he great! Won't he do it! Tell me, sister, what has the lord done for you? Because I know he's done something, lay it on me, sister."

"Well, he ain't done shit yet—you see the bus anywhere?" My mother and I looked to both our sides—nothing.

"Oh, my sister, but look what the lord has done for you already." She grabbed my shoulders, not having to lean down much, as I was nearly as tall as her. "Two fine chil'ren, as beautiful as Christ himself, son of Mary Magdalene. Won't he do it?"

My mother rolled her eyes, "Huh—well he sure ain't giving me no money to feed these BéBé's kids. You can have the little one."

"Mama!" I protested. "You can't give her to no crackhead." I eyed the lady, heel to head.

"Hush, boy."

We waited for the lady's response—but it never came. She scurried away, carrying on with her gospel. She stopped in front of the liquor store at the corner and exchanged something (money for dope, surely) with a guy leaning on the wall.

"Now ma, you was gone give her away to a crackhead?"

"Boy, shut up," she responded as Kya rushed up to her. She whisked the chick up into her arms and laid a kiss on her cheek. "You know I can't live without y'all bad asses."

"I'm not bad!" I protested. She scoffed in a way only a mother could.

My attention turned back to the tree—but I couldn't find it. Where once was Lucifer, staring me down, there was nothing now. Just a plain old tree.

Finally, the bus screeched to a halt a few feet past us. It smelt like Hiroshima (or Nagasaki) post-nuclear desecration. I tried to hold my breath as my mother rummaged through her pockets for change. The heat won, I took a quick breath, and there, as we boarded the bus, Lucifer made himself known once more.

Later, the bus passed the church we'd usually attend.

"Ma, isn't that the church?" I asked.

“Yeah,” she responded.

“Then where are we going?” Kya, sitting between us, dangled her feet back and forth, oblivious to the motion around her.

“To a different one.”

I asked her why, considering this was the third time we’ve switched churches within the past year.

“Because, we ain’t been to Healing Spring since Lassie was a puppy.” I pondered this for a moment. Doesn’t the church preach welcoming all, no matter what? Wasn’t Christianity founded on the notion of acceptance and freedom? Would we be outcasts to show up now, after seemingly falling off the face of the earth? After ignoring repeated calls from the church on Wednesday night when we’d miss Bible study, or the first Sunday of the month when we’d miss the congregation feast?

“Why are we even going?” I asked finally.

She looked puzzled and stared at me for a while. I felt like she was looking for something in the youth of my eyes, the faint negligence of my tongue, or the rippling rapture of my ideals (or what’s measurable to such as a child). Beyond this, I could see she was looking for an answer to this question, for her own consciousness to come to terms with the question.

“Because, my mama took me to church every Sunday, so imma do the same. I may miss a few Sundays, but I be having to work.” She looked past me out the window, perhaps at the reflection of herself in the glass (despite the painful glare of the daylight searing her gaze). She confirmed, “Besides, we’re children of who?”

“*God*,” Kya and I responded in unison. This small inclusion in the conversation served as the only indication my baby sister was listening to us. She was off in her own world, slaying a dragon, kissing a frog, and dancing with the prince who transformed right after. She remained in two worlds—reality and the fantasy. I wondered if it was hard to decipher which was which.

“That’s right,” Mother confirmed. “And as children of God, we gots to praise him.”

“Ma, how could we be children of God? All the stuff we do?”

“Devin,” she sighed, “everybody sins! Some people just like to act like their shit don’t stink, and it do!”

Mother pulled the yellow line overhead, and the bus screeched to a halt. Outside the church, she quickly examined us: licked her thumb, and wiped the crust from Kya’s eye.

“I thought I told you to watch yo face,” she said to Kya. She didn’t respond.

The church was stately for such an impoverished area as Highland Park, Michigan. It was easily the most intact structure on Hamilton. The clerestory cathedral glass caught my eye first: the intricate, staccato designs—gold and plum, with deep crimson sprinkled throughout. Atop was a spire soaring higher than heaven.

We walked inside, and a faint warmth settled within me.

“Won’t he do it! Thank you, lord! Won’t he do it! You saved me, lord!” sang the choir, led by the pastor, clothed in white robes and a violet stole. As always, we were late, but I could tell not by much, as the children weren’t asleep yet. An usherette showed us to an empty seat. We sat facing the pastor, in front of the choir. Behind them were tall lancet stained-glass windows—the sun, drenched in

a colorful hue, shined through. The preacher convulsed as the song came to an end. Kya's patience was feigning, but my mother was undergoing a transformation of sorts. She stared straight ahead and simply listened: she didn't shout, she didn't curse, she didn't disagree with anything. Every request, every observation pointed out by the pastor, was met with an approving head nod and a "yes, lord," or a "hallelujah," or even an "amen, won't he do it."

She used a fan, with a church advertisement hot-glued to a wooden stick, similar to that of a popsicle, to battle the heat. I could feel cool air raining down on my head, lubricating the keratin in my braids, and yet the heat of the congregation kept summer hot. The pastor continued, and at his command, the organist started to play—the choir joined in soon after. This piece was particularly moving: even the oldest ladies, hunched over walkers or with one hand on the shoulder of their grandsons, sprang from the pew and waved their hands high. Something radiant moved throughout the space, the colored light through the lancet windows followed it as it stirred something inside one person after the next. Each one reacted differently: a forlorn widow, draped in all black, shed her misery and rejoiced in a sharp dance—contorting and twisting energetically. Another, a gray-haired woman, chanted in tongues.

"What's she saying, Mama?"

Kya asked.

"She's saying 'won't he do it,'" my mother responded—and at this, in an instant, it overtook her.

"I feel you, lord, oh I feel it in my soul!" she let out, a golden light forming around the crown of her head. None of the congregation recognized her, so the pastor stepped down from his platform and sang his way over.

"Oh almighty lord," said the pastor, "lay your head on this child! Wash away her sins in the lake of remorse."

"Oh, won't he do it!" my mother repeated, over and over and over and over again. These five seemed to not only be all the words she knew—but all the words in existence, as the entire congregation joined in. My mother fell to her knees, her palms greeting each other as she gathered them together. Her elbows rested on the pew in front of her as the pastor embraced her, placing his hands on her shoulder. She shook, she convulsed, and she confessed. Most striking, however, were the tears watering the moles on her cheeks. My mother never cried in front of people—so absent was the notion of defeat that I forgot she could participate in such an act. *It makes me feel weak*, she'd say. But here, it was a demonstration of power. Kya wrapped her arms tight around my leg once more. The entire congregation connected, placing their hands on each other until one was touching the pastor, who was touching my mother. Their shoulders rose and fell at the bellows of my mother.

I came to the conclusion that this was not my mother. If Lucifer, in the form of the Baphomet sigil, acted through the shape of branches attached to a tree, Christ performed through the wailing of my mother. Kya, frightened at seeing our mother so seemingly crazed, was now crying too. I stood as the only sane, the only grounded soul in the room (or at least, that's what it felt like). Then a feeling of guilt settled in. Why wasn't I touched by His grace? Was I too dirty? Was my ledger smeared with too much sin, I asked myself.

“Your sins are forgiven, my child, says the lord,” the pastor let out. Was this the answer to my question? Was God speaking through someone I would expect to rumble in a rhythm in the way my mother currently way?

“Yes, yes it is!” said the pastor—said God. “Let go of guilt, of shame, of fear! For Jesus has sacrificed himself for you, and as the Father pronounces, no sin is greater than the other! But forgiveness is open to all who shall seek...”

“Won’t he do it,” echoed the congregation.

“Won’t he do it,” said my mother.

“Won’t he do it,” I agreed.