



S T I G M A T A

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Photo: John Milisenda

TEN years ago, before my mental illness, I saw a story on *20/20* about a girl in Texas who had stigmata. They brought her to an auditorium so the true believers could see the blood drip from her palms, and she walked carefully up to the stage, wearing her long, shiny black hair neat and straight like the schoolgirl she was. And no one to wipe the blood away, or put her hands up to their face and hold them there, or run her hands under cold water until the bleeding stopped. She dreamed of crosses while other girls told secrets and drank milkshakes. And no one told her not to think of such things, that there was no God, no Jesus in heaven, no law that said she had to be good. I wanted to tell her, *Live a little*.

Her parents sat in the first row, rosaries in hand, and beamed. It was a miracle that their daughter had achieved this communion. The pope, remote in Rome, thought he had the market cornered on the divine, but there, in their very house, the mystical walked in shoes they'd bought. Surely goodness and mercy would follow them all the days of their lives. I thought their religion impractical and hoped, for the girl's sake, that they hadn't raised a martyr. Still, I felt a certain reverence when the camera stopped on her lowered head, her thin arms. I wondered if, lost among all that dogma, there wasn't a grain of truth.

The announcer on TV said the girl's condition was probably psychosomatic, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Poor girl, indoctrinated at such a young age, so impressionable. But she'd be OK; it was only in her head. Maybe in her teen years she would learn to rebel against the strictures that confined her, as I had. The skin, it healed itself — until it opened again to reveal a wound. And I wondered what her real wound was, if it could ever be healed. I was angry with her parents, but her I wanted to hold, lay her gently down in her bed, pull the covers up under her chin.

IN seventh grade, I became a devout Christian and converted to Seventh-Day Adventism. Someone at my sister's school had converted her, to save her from a life of drugs, and I, the little sister, had tagged along. At my new church, I was taught that Jesus might come any minute and take all the saved to heaven, and the rest . . . well, the rest would burn in hellfire for a thousand years. The number of saved was so small, and I looked around me uncomfortably. Was he saved? Was she? Was I? I stopped eating meat, wearing pants, telling lies, and hating everyone (even though I had to want Jesus to make the sinners burn). I felt holy. At Wednesday-night prayer meetings, when I prayed in a circle with the others, a golden light surrounded me, and I felt peace. Jesus was close; he loved me. It was as if I could feel him looking down on me with love.

I walked from door to door asking for money for church charities, but our mission was really to save the wicked before it was too late. I don't know why we were trying to convert people when the number of saved was only 144,000. We should have been encouraging our fellow church members to sin to give ourselves a better shot.

I lived with the knowledge that the town of Springfield and everyone in it was going to fry. I thought we, the saved, should build a bomb shelter and prepare to hunker down and weather the storm. But, no, Jesus would take care of us. We only had to have faith. When the time of trouble came and Armageddon began and the plagues descended and people started to go crazy, we would be protected by the Holy Spirit, who would guide us to safe houses.

I was a terrible converter. When it came time to witness, I could never get the words out. Staring into a skeptical, unfriendly face, I would simply ask if they wanted to donate. How could I tell them of their fate and that I would avoid it?

It was hard being surrounded by the damned. I had the truth, but others refused to believe it. What could I do? Even my mother was damned, because she didn't go to church with us. I felt bad about that. But she was a reprobate, secular through and through — no use trying to convert her. When I sat reading my Bible at the kitchen table, she just looked at me as if I were crazy. I recited, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son," and she made more noise putting the dishes away. Hopeless. But I comforted myself with the thought that at least I was not going to fry in hellfire for a thousand years. No way. I even had a dream about the end of the world and being lost in the rubble looking for a safe place to await my flight into the clouds.

My favorite Halloween was the one I spent in church. Safe and warm inside the sanctuary walls, I listened to stories of witches out there somewhere in the dark, performing blood sacrifices to their king, Satan. The occult forces were gathered in an ecstatic orgy, a celebration of evil. It was a night for the holy to take care. What horrors lurked in the woods, on the tops of steep hills, in the heathen shack just across from the church? This talk scared me, but I was comforted by our brightly lit, wood-paneled room with its musty smell and red carpet, the hymnals neatly stacked, the pews polished, my fellow churchgoers, so kind and good. Together we heard stories of Evil, but it did not touch us. Oh, to be so holy again while the fiendish, the ungodly roamed in the shadows. Richard, accountant and weekend warrior for God, saw me safely home with his interminable smile and his small green hatchback, and I tucked myself in and waited for the night to turn to bright, shiny day.

I THINK I began to leave the Church the day I stood in my heels and my tight blue Sunday suit and realized that mine was not a little girl's body anymore. I had hips and breasts and nice calves. Amidst the God-fearing, there was no room for my sexuality, but it felt too good to exorcise it from my being. Boys had become interesting, maybe more interesting than God. I wanted to kiss one, but I wasn't supposed to do that until I was married, and even then I wasn't supposed to enjoy it. I fought hard to keep the faith, forced myself to feel guilty for longing to kiss Danny and Jude and the cute boy in my fifth-period class. But I wanted to make out more than I wanted to be good. God became remote. Like a fever,

my religious conviction was passing. Maybe everyone wasn't damned. Maybe Jesus wasn't coming. I didn't want to be a Bible-clutching, dress-wearing, knee-highed seventh-grader who couldn't talk to anyone. A girl at school dared me to say *fuck*, and I did. I went to a school dance. A boy came up and talked to me. We danced slow, and even though he was ugly, it was nice. He kissed me, and I was relieved to get my first kiss out of the way. Days later I was still running my tongue over the marks his braces had left on my gums.

I started hanging around the boys in my neighborhood. I would ride my bike down to one boy's house on Saturday night and we'd slow-dance with the lights off. He and his friends would get high, and soon, I would get high, too. I stopped going to church. When the church people called, I told them I was busy and couldn't talk.

The pastor and his wife came to my house to let me know I was missed. They looked more like brother and sister than husband and wife. I thought maybe they *were* brother and sister. It bothered me, how happy they seemed. They smiled ecstatically. Why should they be so happy? I had been happy like them once, but I could never again be safe and warm in my cocoon. I couldn't tell them that I wanted to slow-dance on Saturday nights; that, although it didn't make me smile ecstatically, it did something else for me. Mercifully, they left.

No more church. My mom was immensely relieved. She'd taught us not to believe in a deity. She'd taught us that when we die, we're dirt. That's it. And after my religious phase ended, I went back to believing that.

My father believed he was Ingbert Saint Ingbert and that my sister and I were Satan's daughters, not his. I knew he lived in a government-supported housing facility and that he was obese and dirty. He knew what country I was in and what my phone number was. He would call on Sunday and say, "Hello?" and I would say, "Hello?" There would be confusion at first — were we connecting? He would tell me his TV had broken, that he'd bought a gold chain. I would tell him I was studying, that I was watching TV. And then I'd say, "Goodbye," and he would say, "Goodbye." He called every Sunday, and all our conversations went like that.

WHEN I was twenty-eight, I ventured far out on an atheist limb. In my college writing class, I argued that we didn't need to be moral creatures. Morality was a construct designed to serve the culture. It was up to us as individuals to decide what we thought was right based on logic — if we even wanted to perceive reality in terms of right and wrong. After I spoke, a student named Mark turned to the teacher and said, "She's right." And I thought, *Maybe he's my soul mate*. And then I thought, *Why did I think that?* He looked at me for a long time — too long. I stared back. I missed what the teacher was saying. Something about Jehovah.

I was able to keep functioning for a few months after that, but the world had turned strange. Riding home on the bus a few months later, I got a message from God that I would never

have children. I was filled with grief, walked home with heavy steps and threw myself on the bed with my shoes and coat still on. I cried until I let my grief go, gave it to Him, and said, *So be it*. Then I stood, took off my coat and shoes, and made something to eat. It was one of the saddest days of my life.

By spring break, I was sitting in my rocking chair waiting for God to create a new Eden. I thought all I would have to do was walk out my door one day and the Garden would be there. So I drank coffee and prayed for the new world to come. Then God spoke to me. He said, *What, do you think I am just going to create a new world, just like that?* And I remembered what my Church had taught me about the time of troubles, when Christians would have to flee and wait in the hills. I became alarmed. The damned would all be out to get me, vengeful and murderous. What should I do? The apartment wasn't safe, so I jumped in my car and started to drive.

Somewhere inside me, the skeptic Carroll fought vainly against the new Saint Carroll. I barreled down the Pennsylvania Turnpike, shaking my fist in the air and yelling for God to prove he was real. I was so confused. I knew I was supposed to get together with Mark, but I didn't know how. I was hearing so many voices, I didn't know which one was God's: one minute the calm, knowledgeable voice was his, and the next God's voice was the one that sounded like a mad truck driver telling me to stick my ass out. My faith faltered. I couldn't summon it back.

And then it happened. My brain began to burn until my skull was on fire, and it felt as if my mind had opened to the universe and was trying to comprehend the incomprehensible. I journeyed into deep space and saw with eyes that orbited the sun. I was touched by a power greater than a human could understand, or withstand. There is no way to express that unfathomable presence. All I could do was recognize it. I felt it send a message into my unconscious, because my conscious mind couldn't decipher it. I knew then why they said one could never look into the eyes of God, for my spinal column quivered where it attached to my head and the weak tissue there threatened to melt down. The base of my skull vibrated. I screamed as loud and as hard and as long as I could, and finally the force relented. Then I pulled over and sobbed.

I took long, deep breaths until I became comfortable with the fact of breathing in and out. I was still flesh, still here in my small world. I was just a smart animal, nothing like what I had seen. I waited for my psyche to stop quivering, then I said, *OK, I believe in you*, and I drove home and slept for the first time in two days.

(end of excerpt)