



MICHAEL ROCHE

BIBLE HOCKEY

SYBIL SMITH

I started working at the prison only recently, and I'm not used to using the intercom yet. When I tell the inmates to come and get their medications, I hear my voice everywhere, loud but tentative. I park my nurse's cart by the half door, and the inmates line up outside in the hall, where they shuffle and shout. They use the word *fuck* so often that it doesn't sound like a curse anymore but like the call of some flightless duck.

Paul is first in line this evening. It's Christmas Eve, and he has to set up for the church service. Paul does not say *fuck*. He is born-again. He has a neat, monk-like beard, short hair, and earnest blue eyes. He smiles a lot, and softly, as if he had a happy secret — which he does. Jesus has filled his heart, and all Paul did was open the valves and let him pour in, like a fine, lightweight oil. Now his heart beats evenly and smoothly, with no rubbing or wear. He is either a saint or a fool. Often I think

the two are one and the same.

Paul is in jail because he assaulted a man and stole a gun in order to shoot himself. He told me he sat with the gun to his head and was just about to pull the trigger when he realized the pain was not in his head, but in his heart. He moved the gun to his chest and fired. The bullet hit a rib, went through a lung, and exited out his back, missing his heart. It seems to me that there should be a provision in the law that says you can't be punished if you stole a gun to kill yourself.

Paul senses my pain. He wants me to be born again. He talks to me when I give him his meds. He says it is easy, as easy as opening a door. How can I explain that for me it is impossible? The door I must go through is locked, and I don't have the key.

When I hear the evening Christmas service announced over the intercom, I wander out of my office and look through the windows of the classroom where the inmates have set up a makeshift chapel. The room is packed. The preacher stands in front, holding a guitar. On a whim, I signal for the guard in the control room to open the automatic door. It buzzes, and I go in.

I did not expect to cause a sensation, but the preacher is hungry for signs of God's love tonight, and I, in my hospital scrubs, am the embodiment of mercy. I do not say this sarcastically. Aside from the pint of vodka I drink in secret every few days, I am, I think, a good person.

The preacher turns in my direction and freezes with his arm out as if he were a bird dog and I were a quail.

"Who are you, sister?" he booms.

"I'm the nurse," I say.

The inmates, with their tattoos and mohawks and empty piercing holes in their ears and noses (they are not allowed to wear jewelry), turn toward me, curious and friendly.

"Welcome," the preacher says. "Hallelujah. This lovely lady could be home, but she's here taking care of you. Do I hear an *amen*?"

The crowd choruses, "Amen." Someone hurries to find me an empty chair. I sit down and turn off my two-way radio.

The service moves me deeply. Willy, the preacher, is clearly of the Pentecostal ilk. The inmates all have photocopied carols, and Willy asks which one they want to sing. A man near the front says, "Amazing Grace." Willy plays a chord on his guitar and asks if anyone knows the story behind the song. I do, but I don't raise my hand.

"It was written by a slaver," Willy says, "a man who carried slaves from Africa."

The few African Americans in the room straighten self-consciously.

"He was a man of many sins," Willy goes on. "But during a violent storm one night, he heard the slaves singing down below, and his heart opened. He saw that they had something he did not: they had faith, and he wanted it, too. He accepted Jesus. He stopped selling slaves, and he wrote this ageless song."

I am intrigued by this explanation, because the slaves certainly did not believe in the Christian God. Is Willy saying the source of their faith didn't matter? Or is he saying, as I would,

that it was simply their fear and evident humanity that freed the captain's shackled heart? I also want to know if the captain turned the ship around and brought them all back to Africa. I tend to complicate everything.

Willy plays his guitar, and the inmates sing:

Amazing Grace

How sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me.

I'm surprised how many men sing, letting go of their macho posturing long enough to be what they are: hurt children. I sing, too, and cry, quietly.

Next we sing "Silent Night." Willy pauses here to describe baby Jesus in swaddling clothes, tender and mild. Then he says that when Jesus comes back, he won't be a sweet child. He will be riding a white horse, and there will be a sword coming out of his mouth. (This sounds awkward to me, more like a side-show trick than the end of the world.)

When we sing "Silent Night," I think of my English grandfather on the Western Front in France, 1914. He took part in the famous Christmas truce: On Christmas Eve, the Germans began to sing "Silent Night," and from across the way the English joined in. One saintly fool emerged from his trench with a tree lit by candles. The next day, they all climbed out, slowly at first, and then more of them. All along the front, soldiers emerged into the quiet day and met in no man's land, by the corpses of the men they'd shot. They played soccer and exchanged tobacco and food. A cross marks the spot where the Christmas truce began. Was it the work of God? Was it the devil who sent the men back the next day to their guns? Willy believes in the devil. It is the devil, he says, who is making cocaine and whiskey and fast cars. It is the devil twisting us by the tail.

I won't lie: I want to be born again. I want to fall on the floor and have Jesus lift me up. I want to be cleansed of doubt and sin. But my scientific, intellectual nature stops me. *It's all neurotransmitters*, reason says. *It's all escape from a world in which there is no master, no rhyme or reason.*

Even so, it is beautiful. I imagine rays of light radiating from that room, touching the guards, soothing the men in segregation poring over their girlie magazines, in which naked women are posed with all the loving care of Mary in a Nativity scene.

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