



## See Anything but Me

by Kristin Lieberman

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“Would you like me to convert to Judaism?”

Laura smiled neatly as she poured Michael a cup of coffee on Sunday morning. Their son, Charlie, sat at the kitchen table spooning whole wheat Cheerios and two-percent organic milk into his mouth while squinting at the front page of the Sunday Times.

“No,” Michael said. “Not really.” He was dressed for golf.

He looked at his gold watch. “Christ, I hate these late tee-offs.”

“Michael, we were married by a rabbi.”

“A Zen rabbi.”

“We could be Zen Jews.”

“That’s too off-the-wall for me.”

“What about the temple in Burbank? We went to services there once.” She was prepared for church in a peach shift, her blond hair combed back into a French twist.

“Yom Kippur.” Michael twisted the Swiss watch on his wrist. “They say it’s reformed, but it’s not for me.”

“So what are you looking for?” she asked, fingering her long strand of white pearls.

“I don’t know what the fuck. Why do you keep asking?”

“Watch your language.”

Her eyes slid over to Charlie. “You belonged to a temple in New York.”

“My parents’ temple. Why all these questions? Is it that hard being a Catholic in Pasadena?”

“Episcopalian,” she said. “There’s a difference.”

“I’ve been to your church, Laura. They say Catholic.”

“Little ‘c’ catholic. Like in universal.”

Michael shrugged. “What’s the difference?”

“Do you want to come with us this morning?”

“I’ll take a pass.”

“You’re running out of passes. I want him to go to that school.”

“I know. I’ve heard it all before.”

Charlie reached for the orange juice and knocked over the milk carton. He stood up quickly as the milk spilled onto the Spanish tile floor. Laura kneeled down on the floor with kitchen towels to clean it. “It’s okay,” she said to Charlie. “No problem. We’ll clean this up in a jiffy.”

“There’s time to figure this out. He’s only four,” Michael said.

“Are you kidding?” She stood up quickly, her face flushed.

“What the hell?”

“Around here, most families decide about religion, schools, all this, before they get married. He’s four. We’re well behind the curve. He won’t have a school at all at this rate.”

“I don’t really give a damn, Laura. I went to public school.”

“Public school,” she said. “How can you even think of sending your only son to public school?” Her hands reached for her pearls, twisting them.

“Don’t get hysterical. There’s still time—and stop fingering those fucking pearls.” He grabbed his golf clubs and walked toward the door.

Charlie stared at Michael. “Are you mad, Daddy?”

Michael stopped, his hand clutching the doorknob. “I’m sick of this crap about Catholic schools. Synagogues have schools too.”

“Just say the word, Michael.”

“I’ll be home late,” he said and walked out the door.

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At eleven o’clock, the parishioners of St. Bartholomew’s

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Church gather for the regular sacrament of worship. St. Bart's is a small church that leans against a studiously maintained private school lying in the foothills just outside of Los Angeles. Nobody noticed the church; their eyes always shifted to the school. Appearances counted here, and shrubs of Belle Amour roses, ruffled, cupped and smelling sweet, wrapped around the school's iron gates. Vigorous red Albert la Blotais climbed up its walls. Pasadena was known for its roses, and they were present in all varieties at St. Bart's Parish School.

The school was surrounded by five acres of playing fields and bordered by a grove of aging oaks. The main building was a stately old California Monterrey colonial with a red tile roof. Inside, thick carnelian carpets graced the classrooms, and varnished oak floors glistened in the main building. The lobby was airy and bright, and smelled of fresh coffee.

The church was impoverished by comparison. The red carpets in the narthex were faded and boot-worn. Old wrought-iron chandeliers in the sanctuary squeezed out dim light. At the newcomers' tea, the rector's wife, an elderly Anglican woman from Bristol, whispered to Laura, "It is as close to a country church as one can find in Los Angeles. You'll be comfortable here."

"Yes," she smiled. "I'm sure we will."

The school was St. Bart's greatest draw, but, of course, no one would say that. Young families would make appointments with the rector, explaining that they were drawn to the great "youth programs" at St. Bart's, when what they were really angling for was admission to the school. That was the quandary in Pasadena—expensive houses and lousy public schools.

On most Sundays Charlie sat in the pew with Laura. He read a book or worked a puzzle, kneeling on the floor with his back to the altar, oblivious to the rituals behind him. Sometimes he grew tired of the singing, praying, standing, and sitting, and asked, "When will this be over?"

This morning Charlie sat on a green blanket at the back wall of the sanctuary, with a cadre of other small souls under the watchful eye of another parent. Laura sat in a middle pew, working through her thoughts, which turn toward Charlie and his schooling. Next year Charlie's friends on the green blanket will be old enough to go to Sunday school, and she wondered whether Charlie would join them. She can't even guess what Michael would say about that.

Michael was raised in a Jewish home, although he hasn't joined a synagogue since they moved here from New York. He didn't object when she joined this Episcopal church. He knew

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she was an Episcopalian when she married him, but he doesn't come to services anymore. He used to come with her once in a while, when they were first married, but now he never comes at all.

*I don't belong because my husband isn't here.* Then she remembered her first communion wafer, Rite 13, and Sunday school. She remembered that she belongs, and that, somehow, Charlie must belong, although they both belong to Michael.

As the music began, her eyes drifted to the stained glass windows, and she noticed one was missing. Instead, a blank piece of plywood was nailed there. She wondered whether it was broken, and wondered when it would be repaired. If it wasn't, and the plywood stayed, she knew she would be fine with that.

The service started with an obscure 18th century hymn so beautiful, that she flipped through the hymnal to find its name. There wasn't one, just number 495, the Nameless Hymn. There were hundreds of unknown composers in the hymnal, all with their nameless tunes. She wondered what these men—because they are all men—would be doing in the 21st century. Laura pursed her lips. *Rock stars*, she thought.

Then the procession started, and the crucifer, a lanky, fifteen-year-old boy with acne on his cheeks and oily hair, his white robe hanging too short about his ankles, lifted the ornate, brass cross, and led the clergy wide-eyed down the center aisle to the altar. The choir funneled behind the clerics and took their place on the right side of the congregation. Pastor Katherine, the day's preacher, took her seat at the pulpit, while the celebrant, elderly Father Brown, shuffled to the podium and began: "The service of the holy Eucharist begins on page 355 of the *Book of Common Prayer*. Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

"And blessed be His kingdom, now and forever. Amen."

The predictable chanting, praying, and singing soothed her. *Should it soothe me, when I just asked my husband if he wanted me to convert?* She knew Jesus was a Jew, and, somehow, that comforted her too.

Father Brown raised his hands. "Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone."

She saw Ginny across the main aisle looking out on the Congregation, her eyes searching for a friendly soul. Next to

her on the aisle was a baby carriage. Little Ian lay in her arms, and she held him swaying slowly, back and forth, back and forth.

Ginny wore a gray jumper with tiny flowers faded to almost nothing. Her pale, freckled face contained tiny, blue eyes that did not quite meet your gaze in conversation. Her frizzy brown hair, pulled up, looked like a bird's nest.

Laura met her in the guild room during coffee hour. Charlie was on his tiptoes just behind her, looking at some books on a table. Ginny stood alone holding her baby close to her body. He was a tiny infant with a tuft of black hair growing through the center of his scalp. Laura smiled and introduced herself. "How adorable," she said.

Ginny looked past her toward the cake table. "I had five, but I lost all but this one," she said.

"I'm sorry." Laura looked at the little boy. He lay quiet in her arms. *Perfectly healthy*, she thought. *A miracle*.

"The doctor put me on bed rest, and I prayed and prayed that I wouldn't lose those babies. But I did. Every one. Every one but him."

Ginny's eyes would not meet hers. "I named them all," she said, her eyes focused on Sarah Miller's chocolate cake. "Charlie, Ryan, Audrey, and Brandon." She rattled off the names like it were a grocery list. Peas, carrots, cheese, and a bag of celery. By the way, I have four dead babies.

"I loved that name, Charlie. I wanted to name him Charlie, but my husband said to let it be. My Charlie was gone. So I named him Ian."

The child met Laura's gaze with dark, somber eyes. She called Charlie over and introduced him to Ginny. "This is my son, Charlie."

"Handsome boy," she said. "Excuse me while I get a piece of that cake."

Father Brown put on his oval spectacles. "The first reading is taken from the book of Genesis."

"Glory to you, Lord Christ."

"And the Lord said, 'I will certainly return to you according to the time of life, and behold Sarah your wife shall have a son. Now Abraham and his wife were old, well-advanced in age;

and Sarah had passed the age of childbearing.”

Laura grasped the smooth, wooden pew in front of her. *Oh, come on, not this one.* A small noise erupted in her throat, and she turned away. An older man to her right cocked his head and slipped her a disapproving glance. She jerked her head to face the altar.

After Charlie was born Laura had a miscarriage, and then a second. Afterward, she was more determined than ever to have another child. She was already forty, and she felt like this could be her last chance.

“It would be nice if Charlie had a sibling,” Michael said one morning soon after she found out she was pregnant. He was making Kona coffee. “But if something happens—”

“Nothing’s going to happen this time,” she said. The smell of the coffee made her nauseous. “I’m doing everything right.”

“Sometimes things just happen.”

“Don’t worry.” Laura walked over to him and pressed her cheek against his dark, morning stubble. “We want this. Everything will be all right.” She put her arms around him, but he gently pushed her away.

He turned around and poured himself a cup of coffee. “I’m late for work.”

Two weeks passed and, one day, she felt a pain in her belly. She called her doctor who advised her that it wasn’t uncommon to have one or two pains. “Call me if it gets worse or you have any bleeding or cramping.”

“I know something’s wrong.”

“You don’t know that,” he said. “The best thing you can do for your baby is to be calm.”

He hung up, and in the background she heard Charlie laugh. Maria appeared in the door of the living room. “I’ll take the boy to the park.”

“Thank you,” Laura said. She let herself relax and fell asleep on the sofa.

An hour later she sat up and felt something warm run down her thigh. She went to the toilet and pulled down her pants and found blood. She kicked them off and sat down and peed. Only a little trickled out. She wiped herself and found a clot of blood.

She walked over to the bed and curled up in a fetal position. She picked up her phone and dialed. "Michael?" Her voice faltered, and she burst into tears. Sobbing, she dropped the phone.

"How are you feeling?" he asked in the car. It was late afternoon, and the traffic down Allen Street to the hospital was slow and dense.

She felt every lurch at each stop sign. Her baby was falling out of her. "This was not what I planned, not what I want."

"It's not what anyone wants."

"I should have called an ambulance." Tears ran down her cheeks and onto her floral, silk shirt. Her breasts ached, and her shirt was ruined. Michael drove on in silence. He wouldn't look at her. She turned away and looked out the window and watched the palm fronds waving in the breeze as they inched toward the hospital.

"You have an ectopic pregnancy, a pregnancy outside of the uterus," the surgeon said. "The fetus is in your right fallopian tube, and its growth caused the tube to rupture." As she was wheeled through the corridor for emergency surgery, Laura looked in the surgeon's tired, steady face and pleaded, "Can you save my baby?"

He glanced at Michael, who shifted uncomfortably. "Once a woman has one tubal pregnancy, she is statistically at risk to have a second. She should have her tubes tied while we're in there."

"No."

"Laura," Michael said.

"It doesn't make any sense."

"Nothing does."

She let the memories fall away. She remembered that she never named her three lost children. She wondered what she would have named them, and she came up with nothing. She realized that they were gone, and the time for naming had passed.

Father Brown leaned against the pulpit. "And Sarah said, 'God has made me laugh and all who hear will laugh with me.'"

Her mouth pinched as she stared behind the pulpit into the

choir.

For months after the surgery, she would shake whenever she saw a newborn. Baby product advertisements on television would make her eyes tear up. She felt angry and cheated, but she kept her feelings to herself. She didn't talk to Father Brown or Pastor Katherine or anyone else for that matter. She knew they would say to be grateful God had given her one.

After the surgery she changed doctors. Her new gynecologist was young and fresh-faced with long, dark hair pulled back at the nape of her neck. "If you still want another child, there are other options," she said. There was in vitro, surrogacy, adoption. "Would you like to speak to someone familiar with these issues? Just for a little while, to sort your feelings out?"

Laura took her glossy, color brochures and the name of a therapist, but she never called.

When she had time to think, she thought about something, anything else. She planned her parents' anniversary party, took vacations, spent time with friends, and helped out with a local charity. By the time another year had passed, she had moved on. Now she was preoccupied with Charlie's education. It was a reasonable concern, and no one here thought it odd. Everyone here planned out his or her children's futures carefully. In those concerns she was no different than anyone else, and she liked that feeling.

Michael's job started to take him away much of the time. Somewhere along the line, they stopped finishing their conversations. Sex became perfunctory and short. It was like a chore that needed to be done, like brushing teeth.

"Let us give one another a sign of the peace." Father Brown raised his right hand. The congregation turned to their neighbors.

"Peace of the Lord," they said.

"Happy Sunday," said others.

Couples gave each other a quick kiss. Older women embraced each other. The ministers, the acolytes, and choir came up and down the aisles, from the altar to the narthex and back, shaking hands.

"The peace of the Lord, Laura." She looked up. Pastor Katherine, holding Sara Thistlewaite's newborn daughter, smiled at her. The baby was sleeping in her arms. It was the parishioners' custom to put their children in the clergy's arms as they walked down the aisle. It was a strange custom, a

custom of trust. Laura understood it, but she would never do it—or would she, she wondered. She had just asked her husband if he would like her to convert. She might do anything.

“Peace of the Lord,” she said, her mouth twisting the words. She hadn’t felt this way for a long time, and it was disconcerting. Pastor Katherine hesitated for a moment, then, without comment, moved on, making her way back to the front of the church.

Laura walked toward Ginny. “Peace,” she said, offering her hand.

A second passed, and then she smiled. It was the first true smile Laura had seen on Ginny’s face.

She pushed up her glasses, one arm holding Ian to her breast. She held out her hand and grasped Laura’s. “Peace,” she said.

Charlie ran to Laura and hugged her around her legs. She bent down and pulled up his cotton pants and straightened up his striped shirt. The backdrop of the altar illuminated his face, beautiful and dark, so much like his father’s. She held him close as he struggled to slip away and rejoin his friends.

“Mom,” he said. “I can’t breathe.” His eyes looked past her. She thought of Michael’s eyes as he drove her to the hospital that day. Eyes that wanted to see anything but her.

No one wants this.

She let Charlie go, and he ran off.

He didn’t look back. She turned toward him and stumbled to the floor. Her pearls fell off, and the necklace broke. They didn’t make a sound as they rolled around under the pew and down the aisle. She gasped and burst into tears. She knew she should get up and gather the pearls, but she couldn’t move. Pastor Katherine called the parishioners to communion. They sidestepped her in the aisle. Ginny placed her hand on Laura’s shoulder and, holding her baby, looked around for another hand to help. The churchgoers moved past her toward the altar. Laura wanted to go home, but she had no idea where home would be.

She closed her eyes and felt her heart beating hard. In a moment, she felt Charlie’s arms around her, the murmuring voices of strangers and acquaintances, the shuffling of feet around her. Her eyes were closed and she felt alone, even here, everywhere. A church, a school, a synagogue, at home—suddenly, she knew it didn’t matter. She would have to make

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her own peace. No one could make it for her.

She braced myself, ready to rise. She put her hand on a pew and took Ginny's hand. In the middle of the church she wondered whether she would ever be able to stand up with grace again.

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**Kristin Lieberman** has a BA from Simmons College, a JD from Albany Law School and an MFA from Antioch University. She was a Finalist for the James Kirkwood Literary Prize at UCLA Extension, and was nominated for Pushcart Prizes in 2012 for her essay "Thin-Skinned" and her short story "Salty Water." Her work has appeared in *New Madrid* and *Recovering the Self: A Journal of Hope and Healing and Epiphony: A Literary Journal*. After living for years in Pasadena, California, she recently moved to Corvallis, Oregon with her husband and three children.

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