

CAKE

4500 words

On Sebastian’s birthday, three weeks after the Christian Science retreat atop Mount Tamalpais, Florence was feeding a comma-delimited dataset into Excel when Magda asked her, a second time, for a favor.

“You can go back to San Francisco, but don’t you come off the mountain,” Magda had quoted her professor on her return. And she certainly had not; she’d set up residence there. Every morning at breakfast, Florence shifted the Christian Science Monitor Magda left beneath her plate, unread, to the farthest corner of the table, with a note reading *no thanks*, and every night she held in her pee too long, waiting for Magda to move into a different room so Florence could sprint to the toilet. Originally, Magda had registered for the seven-day package, but in a frantic phone call between the group exercises, she had begged Florence to take Jesse, her six-year-old son, to their cousins’, in exchange for fifty dollars off the rent. After years of flirtation with the faith, the extra week in immersion had shifted something essential.

Silently, Florence undid the hook-and-eye mechanism Magda had fashioned to lend the pretense of privacy. If she had known that the door lacked a knob and didn't close all the way, she never would have rented the bedroom at Lawton and 48th. But the Craigslist ad had elided that detail.

“Sebastian's cake for tonight,” Magda said. “Please, could you grab it from the shop?”

Magda urged the door open wider and pushed into the room. Blond, big-boned, with rubicund complexions, both she and Jesse, could have descended from Norse homesteaders. They spoke with harsh, booming voices and when they threw themselves on Florence's bed, they left deep wrinkles in her coverlet.

“It's just two stops after the university, in the Haight. With the hospital and all I've neglected so much around the house. And Jesse—”

“It's fine,” Florence said.

Since Sebastian's party was slated for seven, if Florence left promptly, she'd still have all day to visit, as she had promised Alex, who'd fretted all summer for her elder sister's social media accounts, the so-called marvels of the city, and could afford to pick up a silly cake on the way back. If not, Magda would undoubtedly propel herself into paroxysms. The slender walls of the pink stucco rowhouse meant Florence had overheard every call which had occurred between May, when Florence had moved in, and mid-June, when Sebastian, Magda's eldest son from her first marriage, who was still working his driving job and living in Marin County, landed in the UCSF Medical Center for the third time in as many years. Magda had sobbed and shrieked her way through each fluctuation of his condition until Florence understood why Sebastian had moved out as soon as he turned eighteen.

When Magda didn't leave, Florence flipped through the hangers in the closet. "Yes?"

"You know, he was going to be in there—"

"Listen."

"But on the mountain—"

"Magda." Florence selected a hooded Gore-Tex shell and a sweater. The temperature wasn't supposed to exceed sixty that day and, as always in the Bay Area, the prospect of rain loomed. An open backpack slumped on her floor, along with a water bottle, map, sun block, travel pass, and itinerary. "I'm glad he's okay and everything, but—"

"Sorry, I know." Magda fell back against the bed, wiping her arms around as if making a snow angel. "Not your thing. I'm just so proud. He did it." She smothered her giggle with her hand. "Well, God did it."

"God is great," Florence said, crossing her fingers beneath her armpit. She sneaked a look at Magda who, from the angel position, had reined in her limbs to hug herself, rocking back and forth. Florence played with the straps of the backpack. "Cake. Haight. Got it."

When Magda still didn't stir, Florence locked herself in the bathroom.

#

In the five years since Florence had first left for MIT, there had been no time for vacations. Christmas was for family, spring break for volunteering, summers for slavery in wet labs. All of it lubricating a long pipeline which ended in medical school, until a semester volunteering in the emerg at Mass Gen, covertly retching at the sight of blood and pus, changed her mind. Grad school she never seriously considered, fearing it might turn out to be the same unresearched

mistake. But what else could you do with a pure science undergrad these days? Her summa cum laude and valedictory speech meant nothing outside of the ivory tower. And so, unemployed, and divested of all ambition, she had returned home to Evanston, where she spent her days reading and chauffeuring Alex, at fifteen, still too young to drive, to the movies. Florence gained ten pounds and didn't open a job search site more than twice.

Her parents, who had hefted her diploma with pride, welcomed her to her face, but privately fretted. They exhorted her to accept when, Dr. Raab, her former professor, now tenured at UCSF, had offered Florence a summer position in his new lab. "It's San Francisco," they said, her father tantalizing her with tales of wooing her mother when they both attended Stanford, the plays and concerts they'd caught in the city, the time spent by the sea, in the Muir Woods, on Lake Tahoe. "It'll be amazing."

Yet here Florence was, and with the amazing, she had done nothing. She had neither stomped the scenic climbs overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge, nor squished into a cable car. She had not chewed on the famous sourdough, nor sailed to Alcatraz, nor gorged on Ghirardelli chocolate on Fisherman's Wharf. When she should have roamed the lush topiary gardens at the California Institute of Science or caught a Giants game in nosebleed seats open to the sea, she spent hours lying on the carpet watching the ceiling fan spin.

She had given some thought as to what to say if others asked what was wrong. She could say it was all fantasy, that this wasn't the California of hunky boys playing shirtless volleyball in the Stanford Oval or marbled sand hot enough to flay your feet. That everybody carried sweaters in their bags "just in case" and something or other about the shape of the Bay caused the godforsaken weather that was more Seattle than L.A.

She could also be “too busy,” though that was neither here nor there. The work was boring and repetitive, not difficult. She manipulated p values and spreadsheets, first sharing a desk with her boss’s assistant, before they placed her down the hall, alone, in a windowless chemistry lab stacked high with bunsen burners and mildewed flasks. On a typical day no one, not even Dr. Raab, spoke to her. The UCSF campus, ringed by tiers of gloomy arrowhead pines and oppressive mist, discouraged exploration and exercise, so that even at lunch Florence restricted herself to slouching over a stool in the food pavilion, deliberately picking Panda Express over quinoa bowls, and, with her thumb and pointer finger, pretending to shoot shivering professors in rain jackets drawn around their chins. Then she took the MUNI home and brooded.

One afternoon, Magda said, as Florence poured milk in the kitchen and Jesse sprawled before the television, “You never go out.”

Behind her wooden worktop, surrounded by bolts of cloth, Magda stood up slightly so that her head just cleared the roof of the sewing machine. A self-taught seamstress, she sold clothing for children out of an Etsy shop online and had converted the back quarter of the living room into an atelier. Her latest collection incorporated inspirational messages in unconventional ways, such as a bugle skirt whose pockets bore the interior embroidery, *everything you need is inside your pocket*.

Florence, nearly spilling, steadied the milk carton, and asked, “Do you?”

“Nope,” Magda said cheerfully. “But lived here all my life. Seen it all.”

Jesse, who had turned away from his cartoon to listen, said, “Have you been to the beach, Florence?” He pronounced her name like the beginning of *flower*. ““Bastian, when he gets out, is going to take me to the beach!”

Shielding her mouth with a fabric swatch, Magda whispered to Florence, “We haven’t gone in almost a year.” But to Jesse she said, “That’s right, Babydoll!”

“And he’s going to be a Christian Scientist too!” Jesse added.

“Oh, really?” Florence said innocently.

The last thing Sebastian had yelled at his mother had suggested the young man’s conversion was anything but complete. Over the phone, he’d threatened to smash the pebbles and shells Jesse had arrayed, during visiting hours, on the windowsill of the hospital room, in the rough sizing and order of planets in the solar system. Jesse had purloined an orange for the role of the sun.

“He’s on his way, anyway,” Magda said, flushing.

“Good luck,” Florence said.

That evening, Florence, partially to spite Magda, carrying her flip-flops, made the laughably brief walk from their stucco to Ocean Beach. She rounded the front yard to the corner of Judah and 48th, passing similar houses on La Playa, and crested a small hill to the curb of The Great Highway, a four-lane artery which, every year, closed for a few days due to blowing sand from the dunes. A car slowed to let her pass.

On the other side, a berm covered in tallgrass, brambles, and wildflowers shielded the beach from view and gusts of loamy salt wind crackled the vegetation like castanets. Florence plunged forward in her sneakers. Halfway up the berm the grass conceded to more and more sand, until at the top the long sweeping concavity of the beach grimaced against the waves, ending about a mile away in a promontory crowned by a pale structure like a neoclassical palace, repurposed as a roadside restaurant. The trip had taken her ten minutes.

Sebastian, Florence had gathered from the calls, had been born prematurely at thirty-three weeks, severely underweight, with mucus in his lungs. Twenty years later, Magda still tried to avoid saying the words “cystic fibrosis” as though the mere phrase would invoke further disaster. Instead, she and Jesse said his nicknames over and over—Seb, Seba, Bastian, or Bash—concatenated with phantasmagoric plans that never seemed to materialize. Named after the saint who was sliced through with arrows but did not die, Sebastian was marked from birth for a miracle. That was what all this Christian Science was really about, Florence suspected—the *healing*, trumpeted by thousands of testimonials online, men and women failed by traditional medicine who had prayed their way to resurrection. Florence knew the type: Magda thought if she leaned into it hard enough, her son would be healed.

Florence dropped to the dunes. The red marble of the sun had rolled towards the promontory; the water was knit with froth. A single surfer paddled out on his board, his wetsuit a charcoal smudge on the waves. With the time difference it was just after eight in Chicago, yet she didn't feel like calling her parents and they, knowing her, wouldn't expect her call.

Goosepimples punched out through the skin of her legs. She thrust her toes into the sand, imagining, for a moment, sending long struggling shoots deep into the earth. Plants always knew, proprioceptively, which way was up, rich, good. People much less so. This way to suffering, this way to sustenance. She was envious of the ability, the certitude, some internal inducement, when, to her, each re-rooting could hide behind it the same rolling reprimand, an insufficient beachhead to nowhere.

Florence took several photographs that afternoon of this and that to prove she'd been.

Alex had said, "You've not posted any pics on Insta. You might as well not even be there. Tree, woods, no one around. Just saying'."

"Fine, I'll get you your pictures."

Florence consulted her map and, for the next few hours, followed the route she had carefully charted with a pencil. Aside from that one time, Magda no longer made mention of her renter's movements or lack thereof. What Magda didn't know was that a single earlier attempt at tourism, back in June, had aborted at Market Street when Florence's wallet had landed in mud after a surprise rainshower. This time, Florence forced herself to go further. Already, she had visited the soulless retail shopping area around Union Square, before wandering beyond the dragon gate of Chinatown, skirting men with skin like crumpled paper sacks hunched behind fruit stands warning customers to desist pinching the wares. Cutting southwest, Florence strolled the marina in South Beach, counting the yachts of rich people at anchor. She followed the fragrance of marijuana smoke and the calling of "Giants! Game tonight!" emanating from ticket scalpers outside of Oracle Park. A burrito served as a snack, before she circled back to a modern art exhibition at the Yerba Buena Centre, where Florence made sure to photograph, just for her sister's benefit, an enormous goldfish bowl labeled "Ten Years of Toenail Clippings."

The city in July was gauzy with a sulfurous tint behind the color of her sunglasses. The humidity, as she huffed along the hills, thieved breath without quite returning it. In the Castro, she idled behind two naked men walking hand in hand, until the first reprieve of rain mottled her map, the sunblock in her pack laughably unnecessary. Florence checked the time on her phone; it was a bit early, but she might as well grab the cake. At MIT, Florence had been ten minutes early for every class. She had told herself that every student and professor depended on her, was

watching for her entrance, the attention and pose in her seat. For four years, she held on to the strange affectation. As though she were tending her “socials,” as Alex termed the practice, long before that even became a thing.

#

At Powell Station, Florence caught the MUNI westbound to Cole and followed the arrows on her phone to Haight Street, once the epicenter of the Summer of Love, where now only a smear of counterculture remained. She felt she must be close when the word *love* started to appear in places where it shouldn't, in neon signs and graffiti murals done in radioactive paint. She passed walls of posters advertising concerts at The Fillmore and the The Independent, fluttering her fingers along the bubbles raised by heat and moisture, the colors bleached and bled out. Some of the sidewalks collapsed inward. The vintage stores' glossy vitrines reflected her face, and again she was startled at how much it had filled out since graduation.

When she found the bakery, a whitewashed unit wedged between a hairstylist's and a jewelry shop, a young man who looked about eighteen, wearing a bright red apron, sat on the stoop smoking. As Florence watched, he blew out two bluish streams of smoke from his nostrils.

“Heading in?” he asked. “Sorry.” He extinguished his cigarette, coughing, and held the door open.

“Hold on. Could you take my picture?” she asked. “Just in front.”

He let the door fall shut again. “Sure. Visiting?”

“From out east.”

“Smile.” He motioned for her to approve the roll. “What's out east?”

Florence slid her thumb along photo stream, but went too far in one direction, pausing at a flash of red. She enlarged the photo, which depicted Jesse's face proudly smeared with cherry Jell-O that he had made himself, his teeth bared, tongue wagged. The muscles in her face twitched. Magda had screamed when she saw Jesse that day, thinking he was bleeding, and had put him in the bath for half an hour, until he complained his fingers were pruney.

Florence rubbed her temples. "Chicago. That's what's out east."

"Not all the way then. Never been, but always wanted to." The boy gestured to the photo. "Cute kid. Yours?"

"Him? Never," she said. "No, my landlord's son. I'm picking up for her."

"Shoot, could've fooled me."

They both entered the shop. An electronic jingle emanated from the ceiling. The interior imitated a fifties' style diner with checkered black and white wallpaper and round stools beneath the main counter in red leatherette. The air smelled like butter.

"Last name?" the boy asked.

Florence asked the boy to look up *Magda Woodward*.

He snapped his fingers. "Ah, I remember, the lady with the pamphlets. Kind of Viking-looking, right? Triple chocolate with ganache?"

The boy disappeared in the back room. She heard the thump of a fridge being opened, and when he returned, he presented a cake beneath a plastic cover. Florence had expected something tawdry, a rainbow panettone with Mary Baker Eddy's face in bas-relief, but in fact the boy unveiled a modest single-tier affair with plain white icing spelling *Stay healthy, Sebastian*. Not a single allusion to his age.

"She's like a doctor or something?" the boy asked.

Florence laughed. “She’s...an evangelist. I’m guessing you didn’t read the pamphlet.”

“She told me to change my thinking,” he said, tapping his forehead. “So I tossed it.”

“The key to healing, apparently.”

“Healing?”

“Tumors, infections, heart disease. Anything.”

“No kidding. And you live with this kook?”

Florence picked at the cover with a fingernail. She wouldn’t exactly use that word; for some reason, *kook*, along with words like *crank* and *crackpot*, were distasteful to her. Magda didn’t believe in atheists, but she never called them names.

“It’s economical,” she said. “Not awful.”

Breakfast always convoyed with the Christian Science Monitor, the case even before the mountain—eggs, pan-crisped tortillas, and the magazine. The rent was more than attractive, even for a MUNI ride away from work. But there was more to it than that. In May, Magda, teetotal since Sebastian’s first sonogram, and Florence, having downed her last gin and tonic at convocation, had verged on friendship. Several times, dragged folding chairs to the balcony, drank juice from matching sippy cups, and watched the sun skate over the rooftops of the Outer Sunset. When Magda went quiet, Florence knew she was praying with her eyes open.

“I think I invented it,” Magda had said. “This method.”

Florence doubted that.

“In any case, there’s no special way to do it,” Magda said, “Except to do it. Again and again.”

Magda had explained how, south of Golden Gate Park, the streets running east to west were named alphabetically from Judah, where one caught the MUNI, to Wawona, where the

Jesse attended Ulloa Elementary. She had shown Florence sketches of a new pattern for pairs of sheer summer socks. Breaking popsicles down the middle and bumping them together, they had toasted the new orders, the Etsy shop gaining traction while bemoaning the lack of trees, the prices at Safeway. When Magda worried about Chinese factories ripping off her designs to resell on AliExpress, Florence consoled, “They misspell everything anyway.”

But with June came Sebastian’s admission and discharge, and following that, the mountain. Thereafter, juice wasn’t possible without a side of proselytizing. Magda slung Eddy’s *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* everywhere and argued for process, a series of dialogues with oneself refuting illness, disease a lie. Rather than subject herself to those proofs to which she could never be sufficient, Florence bought a box of orange creamsicles and ate them in her room alone.

“Money’s not everything,” the boy continued, wrapping up the cake in a cardboard box with silky bow. “I lived with my mom in freshman year, but she kept bringing terrible boyfriends over. I was like, screw it. I have a job, I can pay. Now I’m in the dorms and it’s way better. She can pursue true love without involving me.”

“True love,” Florence repeated, absently. “I guess you have to believe in something, right?”

The boy grinned and pointed at the cake. “I believe in sugar.”

She showed him the fat on her cheeks. “You could say the same for me.”

#

Florence balanced the cake briefly on the table by the coat rack, expecting Jesse to arrow out of the living room and into her ankles. Yet the house was silent. From the entryway she saw Magda's unoccupied stool, the sewing table swept clean, the clock overhanging the sliding door to the balcony and fire-escape showing half past six. Maybe they had run down to the bodega on Noriega.

Rounding the corner, Florence swerved to avoid hip-checking the dining table pulled out from the wall, its oaken surface transformed by a tablecloth upon which plates of sandwiches, pasta, and potato salad waited. She tapped the side of a bowl of taco meat. Still warm.

Magda had probably assigned Jesse to decorate. A grape cluster of balloons quivered above the table and out-of-season paper snowflakes salted themselves over the floor and furniture. Gashing from one end of the room to the other, on nails, a pink satin sash proclaimed HAPPY BIRTHDAY in crooked lettering, as though it had been hung first and then the words applied while the boy swayed on a chair.

After setting the cake on the table, Florence entered the rear hallway. As she approached, she heard a keening. A blue energy-saving bulb shone from the bathroom.

“Jesse?”

She placed one sneaker over the border where the carpet switched to tile, then stopped. At first, she saw only Magda's feet, bare and slightly red, the heels cracked, and then her silk skirt against the bathmat. Magda knelt with her head to ground, her hair obscuring her face, balls of used tissues hemming her in upon the floor. An errant crust of crepe paper had stuck to her elbow, which she had not bothered to remove.

Jesse bent beside his mother, insisting at her sleeve, his small brows shirred. He wore a collared shirt, the wrists clean. His mother had dressed him with care.

“Momma,” he urged. “Momma, get up.” He lifted his head. “Florence, help Momma. She won’t get up.”

Florence chewed the inside of her cheek. She didn’t know if Magda would want to be touched.

“Florence,” Jesse said.

There was no helping it, then. Florence squat, and with just the tips of her fingers, rubbed Magda’s back. “Magda, it’s Florence. I’ve come back with the cake.” She tugged several tissues from the box and held them under Magda’s nose.

Magda did not move. “There isn’t going to be a party,” she said. “He called earlier. He’s not coming. His friends are taking him out instead to a titty bar.”

Florence sat back on her heels.

“I tried to tell him everything is ready. Jesse’s waiting for him. But he got angry and said I’m so controlling. He said being with us in the hospital was bad enough.”

Jesse, in the middle of wiping his nose with his palms, tensed against the side of the bathtub. “He said he doesn’t want to be with us?”

Magda did not answer, so Florence said, “I’m sure he didn’t mean it. He was just upset. I’m sure he’ll come another time when he feels better. Right?”

“He’s already better,” Jesse said, mucus shining over his knuckles. “The hospital made him better.”

“Not the hospital. Even if he doesn’t think so,” Magda said. “He’s better because we prayed.”

Jesse held very still. All summer, Florence had seen him always running, sliding in socks. Many times, he had looked almost predatory, hunting explosions and spiders around

corners. But this time, he shrunk to the floor. Before, he seemed waiting to experience the solace of his mother's words. Now he looked as though he had collided with something immense and crawled away with an injury.

“What are we going to do now?” Magda said.

Florence squeezed her own wrist, usually a gesture of comfort, then dropped it. Its yielding texture made her recoil. What was it? She was aware of a feeling of power, a vestibular vertigo, for she had done something, yet her stomach struggled to churn against achievement. The only other time she could remember experiencing the like was at graduation, back in Cambridge, sitting on the dais before Killian Court, among the Chancellor, President, and pipe band, waiting to give her speech.

Magda bowed there, enshrined, on the floor, as small as Jesse. Her shoulder blades folded like the hinges of a triptych, inner panels hidden. Her face with its pale skin was lovely in its hardness. Tear peelings gathered to pendulums on her chin.

“Hey,” Florence said. “No, don't do that. We can still—” She didn't know how to counterweight the sentence. It kept sliding the other way.

She had done something back then, too, degree conferred. Yet she had already known she wasn't going to medical school. How calmly Florence had faced reverting from a future already rolled out like a red carpet. She'd spoken knowingly of other people's possible portals, all the while smilingly bricking hers over. Then the boredom afterwards, its own cure.

Florence examined her own unbrowned hands, which, instead of blood, cupped only darkness, the shape of her ear, as one shadow vanished another. Beside them, the toilet gaped. She sensed as though, in some brief part, she, as well as Sebastian, had caused this. As if Magda's belief had been undone, brutally, by someone else's disbelief.

For an instant, Florence badly needed to pee. Then an idea which, when it finally came to her, seemed to originate in a kidney. One, then the other.

“Never mind the party. Let’s go,” Florence said.

“What?”

Sediment crunched in her ears. Pressing on her kneecaps, the place where a resident had once shown her where to elicit the patellar reflex, Florence flexed her eyelids. A butterfly of pain landed over her sinuses, sinking its skinny legs into her nosebridge. She shook it off. “To the beach.”

Jesse and Magda both looked at her. “Now?”

Florence stood, sending the tissues nodding. “Now. You were going to go with him, right? I know it’s freezing and drizzling. But it’s right there.”

Magda rocked once. Her hands touched her salted face, angry hair, as if to make sure of their presence. Perhaps she were steering towards a verse. Then they moved to steeple, as though she had forgotten her own invention.

But before they could fully touch, Florence stayed them.

Jesse had levered himself up onto his knees, color engrafting his cheeks.

“Come,” Florence said.

“Florence,” Jesse said, voice high.

“Show me,” Florence said. “Where it is.”

“Can we bring the cake?” Jesse said. His was tongue crimson in his mouth. “Where is it?”

Magda trembled.

“Over there.”

All three of them looked towards the doorknob, the framed hall, almost through the walls, to the table, chocolate, and beyond.

They could hear the sea. It wasn't always possible. But sometimes, its unrest growled over the television, over crisping tortillas, through the front door, past the last rampart of the rowhouses, over the highway. Then it wasn't difficult to picture icing with sand specks therein. Sand maimed by water. Water the color of mucus.

Florence said, "It's right over there."