

Faith

She woke in sudden, sharp perplexity.

Glancing beside, three o'clock, she--then realized she was hot and sweaty.

Shamed, guilty, she lifted herself from the bed, careful not to disturb her husband's sleep, and knelt on the cold rug. *Forgive-me-Father-for-I-have-not-sinned*--she looked up in abrupt remembrance--*it was not that kind of dream. There was a word.* She knelt back on her heels. *But why so clammy and tensed, what was the word?* Exasperated at the typical elusiveness of a thing intentionally sought, she rose and went to the bathroom to rinse her face. She climbed back into bed. *Maybe in the morn--test. That's it. The word was test. That's stupid. I'm not going to write any tests.* At three-o-five it didn't matter. She fell asleep.

The alarm rudely buzzed. She reached out to--*test of fate.* The phrase appeared serenely. *Was that it? Test of fate? Yes, I think so--I think it was. Well isn't that curious. Test of fate.*

"Hey Kath--the alarm." He looked at her drugged expression. "The alarm. Turn it off. Turn off the alarm." His words finally made their way through, and she turned off the alarm.

"Good morning to you, too." She leaned over and kissed his bemused mouth.

Just then the sound of tiny, pyjama-clad feet down the hall announced the little boy's cheerful face at their doorway.

"Good morning to you, too," he imitated, and giggled. Then the sight of his mother seemed to trigger--he looked down and mumbled, "Mummy-I-wet-my-bed-I'm-sorry."

"That's okay, snookums." Resisting the smile that snuck to her lips, she added in a stem voice, "If you help me clean it up." Then she smiled anyway, "Let's go." She and

the boy left the room hand in hand.

"...which we are about to receive from Thy bounty through Christ our Lord, Amen." The bowed heads had just enough time to chorus the "Amen" before the littlest one bobbed up and declared, "Mummy 'n I are going shopping for my new school clothes and I'm getting new school shoes and she says I can pick them out if I can put them on by myself and we're going to buy a pencil case I want a red one--"

"Hold it there, shooter," laughed his father. "So you're getting ready for school. Think you'll like it?"

"Yeah, Mummy says there'll be other kids there, too."

"Joey, you'll have eggs and words coming out of that mouth of yours in a minute if you don't watch it." She smiled at the boy and then looked over to her husband. "Don't forget I have the Scripture Group tonight."

"Right. Got your notes prepared?"

"Oh sure. But it's a good class. They carry it quite well without my notes. I need only ask the right questions at the right time."

"Hmm--sometimes difficult." He kept on chewing.

"True. But I know what I'm doing." She was irritated. He was still unconvinced that a woman could do as well as a man in the matter of adult religious instruction. *Chauvinist! Conditioning or no conditioning, there's no excuse. Oh well. He'll see eventually. That's all. I'm strong, capable, intelligent. He'll have to see.* She cleared the breakfast table and started the dishes as he said his goodbyes to Joey and left for the office.

Test...test of... fate...test.....kill Ty....test...kill... Kathy snapped up in the darkness, and as soon as she did, the words stopped. She was very hot again. *Or is it the room that's hot?* She tried to recall the superstition about having the same dream twice in a row. *Same dream--who are you trying to kid. That was no dream. You know you heard*

words. *Well, some dreams can be that real, can't they? But somebody was speaking.* She cautiously got up to see if the windows were open. Feeling foolish, she returned to bed.

She stopped her car at another red light. Noting her watch, she realized she was a few minutes late tonight. *I shouldn't have let Joey model his new clothes again,* she chuckled. *That little guy. Such a ham already. That's one very eager student coming-- kindergarten class, make way!* Suddenly the car became quite warm. Automatically she looked at the indicators. All was normal. *Test...test...kill Ty...test.....kill Tyson...Tyson...* A honk jarred her from the daze and cut off the words. Eventually she noticed the green light and put her foot to the gas. *Kill Tyson? Who's Tyson? Was that what was said?* Then it occurred to her. *Two nights, okay, dreams--but in the evening on the way to church? Test of fate. Kill Tyson. What the heck does that mean?* It made no sense to her. Okay. *If it happens again tonight, I'll just lie 'here, hear it out instead of getting up, startled. Maybe that'll do it.*

Kathy lay in bed anxiously, expectantly. *This is absurd. But she was sure. I am not imagining.* She folded her hands behind her head and reconsidered. *Here I am, lying in bed waiting for something to speak--anything else go bump in the night?* She rolled over. *Test...test of...Stay put don't move a muscle. Test...test...* The room became hot. *Of faith... as test of faith--faith, not fate, the word was--test of faith...kill..* She was trembling now, trying desperately to hang on to her calm. *Faith...kill...* The words were very clear now, she noticed...*of faith...kill...thy son--Oh my God.* In a spasm of shock she bumped the alarm to the floor and kicked her husband. The words were gone. She was shivering. *Oh Lord.* She felt the soaked bed with shaking hands and started towards the bathroom. Suddenly she turned and half ran to Joey's room. He was asleep in bed and breathing normally. *The voice was distinct and I was awake all the time.* She sat down in the chair

beside his bed and dropped exhausted into a deep sleep.

Her husband looked at her from across the breakfast table. Then he looked out to Joey in the backyard. He turned back to her, having heard all she had just told him, and simply said, "Well I don't think there's a need to be upset, dear. I mean, it was just a dream." He paused, searching for a way to reason or reassure. "All the tensions--the Scripture Group and--you know. They all get into your sleep," he ended lamely. Then continued with a little impatience. "You studied Freud. Doesn't he call dreaming a release outlet or something?" She turned away. He didn't believe her. He just didn't believe her. Her husband, joined with her in the sacrament of matrimony in the sight of God, dismissed these words of His as a Freudian twist. She told him she was terrified and ashamed of the fear, and he thought it was nothing to get upset about. She got up and stood by the window. *Scripture Group my foot.* She turned to see him pick up the paper again. *I feel no tension from them.*

"Yes, Kathy, come right in. How are you, and how is the Scripture Group coming? I've been wanting to speak with you."

She stepped through the doorway into the rectory. "Hello Father. I'm fine, thank you, and you?"

"Oh, I'm fine, too. The Council has okayed the new addition and the youth choir is on its way. Now tell me, how is that group?" The priest led her into his study and motioned to a chair.

"Oh, it's doing very well." She sat down. "I was just telling Peter, they do most of the talking. It's turned out to be quite a lively bunch. As a matter of fact, in a way, that's why I'm here--"

"Oh, too lively for you?" The priest smiled.

"Too lively for me?" She was on the defensive. "Father, you recall--" before she

saw the twinkle in his eye. She laughed and returned the rib. "I was baptised by you. How can anything be too tough for me?" Without allowing a retaliation, she leaned forward and went on. "But tell me, what does the doctor of divinity"--the priest smiled at this nickname--"say about contradictory principles in the Bible?"

"Oh you've opened up a mean can of worms with that one, Kathy. Give me a for instance."

"Well, say the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' and the so-called 'Holy Wars'. The commandments were given by God, were they not? And as such, the absolute word of God. Yet he more or less blessed those murders, didn't he?"

The priest paused before he replied. "I don't..." He thought once more before attempting to answer. "I don't really know. I've pondered that one often." He looked straight at Kathy and continued slowly. "But two things have always remained. One is the knowledge that God does have mysteries--fantastic mysteries--that we cannot begin to understand. And that is just one of those mysteries. We cannot understand it now, but we must be strong and have faith. And secondly, we believe firmly that whatever, *whatever*"--he stressed the magnitude of the word--"*God's will be done. You know,*" he chuckled now, "the Lord works in wondrous ways."

Kathy looked at him. Suppressing her disappointment, she exchanged a few more pleasantries with the priest then left the rectory.

She went directly to the church. After passing through the expansive mahogany doors and blessing herself with the holy water in the marble font, she entered the nave, genuflected, and slumped into the second last pew.

Okay, let's take Freud a bit further. Could it be more than tension? Could it be a murmur, a message of sorts, from my subconscious?

She answered the question as quickly as it had formed. *Nonsense. I don't have any hidden desire to kill my--to kill Joey. God, to think it horrifies me. He's my son, my flesh and blood. I carried him, gave birth to him, almost lost--no God, let me, let him,*

gave him my milk, he's-- She started sobbing, cries in a silence.

She made another attempt to order the chaos.

As a test of faith, kill thy son. I'm sure I heard those words. Distinctly. Clearly.

Sure, you may believe you heard them.

No, I know.

What's the difference? Something tottered precariously. I mean, are you the seat of objective knowledge? Don't presume. Kath--

But--

You hear what you want to hear. Face it. You interpret how you want to understand. Shall we then perhaps contemplate the sin of pride instead of murder?

Oh come on--

Surely you don't really think yourself pure enough to be selected, chosen by God for this special test?

She felt a brick fall from the wall inside. It was a long way.

Okay, if I'm not chosen, then I'm wrong even to assume the words were spoken by God!

My point exactly. That was your imposed interpretation.

But if the devil or some evil entity issued them, why say as a 'test of faith'?

Well, my dear, think he's going to expose himself? That would defeat his purpose. Think he's stupid?

But if he can deceive me into believing he's the voice of God, what chance do I stand? How do I know?

The very mortar seemed to be melting...*lead us not into temptation...*

Okay if it happened at all--

You're saying if. Would you kill your son on an if?

Of course not. I'm his mother. I--

But isn't that what faith is--an if?

Yes. No. I know God exists. I know that He--

Do you?

Oh God! How can I be sure? Give me a sign--

Oh come on, Kathy. What more of a sign do you need? Three consecutive nights and once on King Street before nightfall. That's no coincidence.

But it's no proof, either. Was she on the other side of the wall now? How--

But the heat. Every time He was present--

You were hot. The flushes come and go. You can't deny that. It's a normal occurrence in your life now--

But--

If the heat meant anything, it meant temporary delirium.

The wall began to sway.

As a test of faith, kill thy son. Why am I trying to escape this? If I were strong in my faith, I--

But that is such a clumsy way to communicate--especially a command of such weight. Unbecoming in a supreme being, a god. God! If he wanted me to do it, he'd tell me in no uncertain terms. He'd erase any doubt.

But then it wouldn't be a test of faith. Would it?

Now the floor was buckling, giving.

God commands. I obey. Thy will be done or--

Or what? What have you got to lose? If it is God and you don't do it, there's eternal damnation or something. If it isn't God and you do do it--well, if it isn't God and you intend to do it under the belief that it is His command, then surely he'll intercede and prevent you from doing it. Right?

Right.

The floor settled a moment.

But it isn't that straightforward. It's a test of faith and I'm turning it into a test of

fear. If I do it I must be strong and sure. The minute I allow a flicker of doubt, of hate, of panic, or of hope for reprieve, then I will have failed, I will have been guilty of a terrible lack of faith. I must be willing, with my whole heart, to kill--

She cried out and the sound echoed up to the painted arched ceiling. It returned just as uttered.

...Thy will be done, Father said. Thy will--

But which will? 'Thou shalt not kill,' remember. His will is contradictory. It's irrational.

Ah--faith begins where thought leaves off. Remember Kierkegaard. It's precisely because it's unreasonable that you must believe. Do not cling to reason.

All right. Contradiction aside, it's still murder!

Yes, but again call on Kierkegaard--it is murder ethically. Ethics is social, relative, a duty to man. The issue here is of duty to God. It is universal, absolute. You must suspend the ethical for that.

That's all very nice and maybe if it were my decision alone I could make that leap, but this concerns Peter and Joey. I can't prove my faith at their expense. That's selfish. It's unchristian.

Nonsense. It can't be unchristian to do God's will.

She was confused. Which supports were strong? And which wall did they support? How many walls were...

Thy will be done--

Thy will is--

Kathy groaned, sweat and tears running down her face. Then she slowly looked up at the altar, to the crucifix hanging there.

Do I want to worship a God who would order such a thing?

She sank against the wooden back of the pew. She stayed a long while later, in prayer, battling again to keep the wall from crumbling completely.

It was dark by the time Kathy staggered up the steps to her door. Peter was waiting on the other side, worried.

"Kathy, where have--it's nine o'clock--the supper--Joey is in bed--" He stopped. "Honey, your shirt." He fingered it. "It's soaked." She looked up at him, puzzled.

"I was at the church."

He stared at her. "That's all you're going to tell me?" His concern became indignation. She looked at him helplessly.

"No supper," she added and distractedly climbed the stairs to fall asleep on her bed.

September passed, witness to the increasing turmoil Kathy felt. It was like a tumor in her side. Her nerves became thin, and thinner when she realized she wasn't what she should be to a little boy starting school. She felt like an old woman, a very old woman. *I've so looked forward to all of this and now.* Peter watched questioningly, silently, then bitterly.

"Two more days until the weekend." Joey's chatter was more subdued than it used to be. He continued trying to cut up his meat. "Is this Thanksgiving weekend, Mummy?"

"Yes, it is, by gosh," Kathy exclaimed with an attempt at enthusiasm. Then feigning ignorance, she inquired, "What's that?"

"It's-a-time-when-we-all-give-thanks-for-what-we-have." Joey looked at his parents for approval. Kathy smiled, almost.

"How would you like to go on a hike this weekend--to see all the coloured trees and birds and chipmunks we have to give thanks for?"

"A hike? In the forest, you mean?" Joey's eyes grew wide. He looked at his father for final decision. He nodded.

"We can take some tuna and peanut butter sandwiches for a picnic, too!" she said with effort.

"Whippee!" Joey yelled. His glass of milk went over. He quickly looked down as the sober words came out. "I-spilled-my-milk-Mummy-I'm-sorry." There was barely a pause. "Can we really go?"

Joey clambered over a few more rocks then sat down at the top. Kathy was right behind him, puffing and sweating a bit.

"Oh, Joey, you go too fast," she said when she reached him and tousled the boy's hair. Joey stood up and declared, "It's a good thing daddy stayed down because this cliff is too high for him with all the sandwiches on his back."

Kathy laughed. "Yep, I think you're right."

Joey wandered toward the edge to look down at his father. "Don't go too close, Joey. Be careful." She heaved to her feet to stand beside him, but stopped. *As a test of faith, kill thy son.* The words hadn't let her go. She looked over at Joey. The words gripped her tightly. *As a test--she started sweating anew and clenched her fists. No fear, no doubt...I must--Thy will be done. Oh God I do love thee. I love Joey. I--* She bit her lip. The blood sealed her cries inside. Her knees trembled. *No hate. Our father who art in heaven...* She feverishly began reciting. *Thy will be done.* She turned in a circle, a caged animal. Joey bent down to look at a fern. *Hallowed be Thy name Thy kingdom come Thy will be--Joey! no hope for--she gasped, grabbing for air, "Thy will be--"* Joey turned, hearing his mother's raspy voice. "Mummy?" She started to lunge at Joey, blinded. "God Thy will be--" her screams overpowered Joey's. "Thy will be--" her body struck, her hand reached--he went over. "--done."

They walked past the rest of the cells. Another two were occupied by women lying on their cots; in the last, a figure was bent, on knees, in the far and dark corner.

They passed through the gates and stepped into the office.

"That last one. Was she praying?"

"Roberts? Oh. Yeah," he replied in a voice that discouraged further questions.

"Do--do many go religious after being committed?"

Oh. No. Well. She's always been religious, that one."

The other man seemed surprised, but stubbornly persisted. "Well then, what's she in for?"

The officer stopped his purposeless shuffling and looked into the other man's eyes. "Murder. Pushed her son over a cliff ten years ago. Pleaded guilty. Got sent here and been prayin' ever since."

The man's eyes shifted uncomfortably around the room. The officer continued to speak, to the air rather than to him. "Strange case, that one. Everyone wanted her to plead temporary insanity. She woulda' been better off for sure. But she insisted like a rock on a plea of guilty." He scratched his head out of habit. "If she wasn't insane then, she sure is now."