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11th grade

Foothill High School

Conversations With God

We learn to pray in Mama's bedroom after dinnertime, when our nightclothes are on and the sky outside has faded to a muted purple. Fingers still slick with chicken grease from supper, we fold our hands together just like Mama. Close our eyes, bow our heads. I sit still, but Joseph is never able to. He's young but already big and bumbling, picking at his clothes, shifting his weight from knee to knee, restless, all the while.

Mama tells us praying is like having a conversation with God. First, we listen. Wait in silence for His presence, think of God's word before putting in our own. Then, we talk. Whisper our questions, our hopes, our fears. Always end by thanking God for our many blessings so He knows our gratitude.

Joseph and I pray along with Mama until we're hip-high, tall enough and old enough to say our evening prayers alone.

Every Sunday, we walk to church with Susie Meadows from next door. She has sunshine yellow curls and a pretty smile, and in the summertime she brings baskets of home grown peaches for all the families. She has a little daughter too, not yet old enough to walk, who likes to tug on her mother's curls when she needs something. Susie's husband died in a car accident while she was pregnant, and now she is all her baby has ever known.

I help Susie tend to her garden after service. Mama says that garden is how Susie grieves. She spends all her spare time there, caring for fruits and vegetables and greenery of every kind. There's a small patch in the soil of carrots and cucumbers and tomatoes. Two cherry trees in the back that litter the ground with pink blossoms every spring. Thick, winding grape vines growing on the fence that separates our two backyards. But my favorite is the tall plum tree I helped plant so many years ago. It was so sickly at first we worried it wouldn't produce much of anything, but now its thin branches droop low every July, heavy with swollen fruit, my very own miracle.

One day in late spring, I help Susie in her kitchen. We picked raspberries from her garden all afternoon, and now she's making her famous raspberry pie while I watch, bringing her ingredients as needed. Her baby sits in the high chair, red raspberry juice dribbling down her chin.

"Susie?" I say, leaning against the countertop. There's something delicate I want to ask and I know she won't make me feel like a child with her response. I trust Susie with most everything, especially my questions about God. She never misses Sunday service and her kind, open nature makes her seem to me the best person to come to with my worries.

"What, baby?" She asks. She swirls powdered sugar into the mixing bowl with her spatula and looks to me, brushing a stray yellow curl out of her eyes.

"Sometimes," I start nervously, picking at the hem of my shirt. She hears my hesitation and stops mixing instantly, giving me all her attention. I take in a deep breath. "Sometimes I wonder if God hears me when I pray. If my thoughts reach Him."

My mind feels easier having asked her, and Susie bends down a little so we're at eye level. "Prayer is your hotline to God," she tells me firmly. "He is always listening." She licks sticky raspberry filling off her index finger and gives me a smile, sweet and pure.

The summer of my fourteenth year, I spend my mornings in Susie Meadows' garden helping her pick peaches and plums to sell at the town fair. I wear a thin cotton tee and one of Joseph's baseball hats, because even at nine AM the Georgia sun is blazing down on us. It doesn't help that the air is thick and heavy with moisture and I can't step outside without wanting a cool bath.

Susie's little girl is too young to be of much help, but she always stays outside with us still. She skips around the garden in a polka-dot dress and matching bow, plucking June bugs off her mama's peaches. She blows them off her fingertips and giggles when they fly away clumsily.

By the time we finish and the fruit is all loaded into Susie's car, my skin is sticky with sweat and my face is pomegranate red from heat. "Tomorrow will be cooler," Susie always says before she drives off, a smile on her lips, and it makes me laugh, because she's always wrong.

I spend the rest of the day at the ice cream parlor on Main Street. I go there partly because it's one of the only shops in town with air conditioning but mostly because Ryan Westman from church works there. He has floppy brown hair and shiny gray eyes and always smiles hello to me when I walk in the door. I always sit at one of the booths in the back, and every once in a while, he'll come and sit with me on his breaks. My heart beats faster and my hands turn clammy whenever he does, but I try my best to appear perfectly calm and composed.

Sometimes we'll talk about the book I'm reading or his favorite band's new album, and sometimes we won't talk about anything at all. He'll sit across from me in silence, doodling

away in a brown leather journal while I read. I don't mind either scenario, because just his presence is enough to make me feel warm. Always, before he leaves, he smiles a smile only for me. It's something boyish, sweet, and makes me think in the moment he feels for me what I feel for him.

One evening, a few weeks before the start of school, Mama sits us down on the couch and tells us Susie Meadows is sick.

Joseph frowns at her words. He's just come back from a run and his face is shiny and sticky with sweat. "Flu sick?"

Mama's face crumples. "No, baby," she says, and then she explains how Susie is sick-sick, has a rare kind of illness deep in her bones, and we should all keep her in our prayers while she goes through treatment. Mama doesn't outright say it, but from her manner of speaking, I know she's scared Susie won't get better.

I don't quite believe it at first. It can't be true; Susie would have said something if it were. I saw her just this morning, and nothing looked the matter with her. She was smiling like always, yellow curls tucked under a flowery cap, rosy color blooming in her cheeks. On television people always look pale and sallow when they're sickly and I've never seen Susie look anything other than perfect.

But Mama has no reason to lie to us, and after a few moments of trying to talk myself out of it, I give into the truth. Something heavy sinks in my stomach, like there are stones inside of me, and then I am crying.

That night, I talk to God for hours. I don't want her to die, and I know she won't because God can't want it either, but still I pray and pray and pray. I pray and ask Him to keep her here, if not for me for that poor little girl of hers, who wears pretty bows in her sunshine yellow hair and likes to pick the June bugs off her mama's peaches. By the time I fall asleep, my face is stiff with dried tears and the night outside is fading to day.

I ask Susie in the morning why she didn't tell me about the illness herself. We're sitting on a bench in the garden, watching her daughter pluck petals off a wildflower weed.

She won't look at me when she responds. "I didn't want to have that conversation more times than absolutely necessary." Then she turns to me, eyes a little watery but a small smile playing on her lips, and squeezes my hand tightly. "You don't need to worry, sweet girl. I trust myself, and I trust God. I will be fine," she says firmly, and I nearly believe her.

Susie dies in mid-February. I don't own a black dress, so I borrow one of Mama's to wear to the memorial. I put on a pair of pointy shoes and brush my hair until it looks presentable, then walk with Mama and Joseph to the church. For a moment, it feels like we're walking to another Sunday service, but then I remember it's not a Sunday and Susie isn't here to walk with us. Her absence sinks heavy in my chest and I have to squeeze my eyes shut when they start to sting.

Everyone from town is present. We all loved Susie. I spot her daughter sitting with an aunt in the first row. She moved in with relatives immediately after Susie's death. I think about going over to say hello, but I don't have enough strength.

The service lasts for a half hour, and then we all go outside for refreshments and to pay our respects to Susie's family. It was cloudy earlier, but now it's starting to drizzle, so I stay under the roof for cover while Mama and Joseph mill about with the other attendees.

I've been standing alone for a few minutes when Ryan Westman walks up to me, hands shoved in pockets. His hair isn't floppy today; instead it's styled back in a way that makes him look much older.

"I'm sorry your neighbor's dead," he tells me now, and he looks like he means it. "It isn't fair."

"Thank you," I say softly, and then my eyes start to water, because he's right, it isn't fair. Why would God choose to kill her? Why didn't He answer my prayers? I can't help but think for a moment that God must be either cruel or powerless, and how if that's true, I can't understand what He's good for.

Terrible shame crawls into my stomach the second after for letting the thought enter my mind, and I swallow hard, turning back to Ryan. His eyes are so clear and he looks so worried for me that it makes my heart hurt. My fingers feel numb and my head starts to ache and I have the sudden, overpowering urge to do something completely rash and impulsive.

"Do you want to get some dinner?" I ask before I can lose my nerve. I can't stay here in a place filled with God and Susie's memory and grieving people a moment longer, and it doesn't matter to me that we're dressed in funeral attire and there is food all around us. His eyebrows fly up and my cheeks burn at my own impropriety. I start to worry it matters to him, but then the corners of his mouth lift up.

"Yes," he says, and I feel calmer immediately. "I'd like that a lot."

So we walk to the diner a few blocks away. It's starting to rain a little harder now, and by the time we arrive my hair is damp and Mama's dress is dripping. We both order soup to make ourselves feel warmer and eat mostly in silence, breaking bread and soaking it in creamy tomato soup for flavor.

The next day, Ryan comes by the house to see me. I answer the door before Mama can and we spend the afternoon together, just the two of us.

A few months after Susie dies, Mama buys me a purity ring for my birthday. It's a thin, silver loop with a crucifix in the center.

"This is something every young woman should have in her life," Mama says. "My mama gave me one when I was your age, and it's about time I gave you yours." But I know she's also thinking of Ryan as she gives it to me, because we've been spending lots of time together lately, and she doesn't like him very much.

There's nothing I can do but take it. "It's very nice, Mama," I say and slide it on.

I show it off to Ryan when we meet at the park. He's sitting at the wooden benches near the birch trees when I arrive, but he stands up when he sees me.

"What do you think?" I ask, wiggling my hand out in front of him. I explain about Mama and the ring, and he laughs softly. He pulls my hand up to see it. "Pretty," he says.

We spend the evening eating Ryan's homemade picnic dinner on the grass. He forgot to bring a blanket, and the blades of grass make our legs itch, so we take off our jackets and place them under us. When we finish dinner, I lean against his shoulder and he wraps an arm around me and we stay like that, silent, for a few moments.

“Sometimes I don’t know if I believe,” he whispers suddenly, so softly I nearly miss it.

“In God?” I ask, my voice filled with astonishment.

He nods and picks at his jeans, right where they’re fraying. “There is so much cruelty in the world,” he says. “I don’t like thinking there’s someone up there who can see it all, can do anything, but chooses not to.”

I swallow, something twisting in my stomach. I want to explain his doubts away, the same doubts that are in my mind, but I don’t know how. I try anyway. “It didn’t start like this,” I say softly. “Adam and Eve were banished from paradise when they disobeyed God and ate from the forbidden tree. That’s why the world is the way it is.”

He looks at me. “An eternally vengeful God?” He shakes his head. “I don’t want to believe that either.”

I don’t know how to respond to that, so I don’t.

In the autumn, a new family moves into Susie Meadows’ home. Mama makes them a cherry pie to welcome them to the neighborhood and has Joseph and me take it over one morning before school starts.

There’s a mother and a father, and they have two blonde boys too small yet to talk. The mother gushes over our thoughtfulness, asking if we want to come inside and have a piece before leaving for class. We tell her no thank you and hurry down the street to catch the bus before it takes off without us.

After that, the school day moves too slowly, so when I get a chance, I slip out of class with Ryan. We walk behind school to the grassy field overrun with wild dandelions, fingers

laced tight, bodies so close our elbows bump together with every step. I think of what Mama would say if she could see me now but instead of guilt I feel giddy, drunk on rebellion.

He presses himself against me, his body warm and careful against my own, and kisses my neck, my cheek, my mouth. His lips are soft, sweet like honey, and he is delicate with me, fingers pausing before they slip lower, asking *is this okay?* I tell him yes by the way I kiss him back, bolder and longer until we are nothing.

During church on Sunday, I can't make myself sit still. My eyes flutter open in prayer and my fingers tap nervous rhythms against my leg. I don't know what it is, but I can't make myself pay attention today. My mind is too noisy, too alive. In the middle of service, unable to concentrate, I find myself searching for Ryan in the pews behind me.

He catches me looking and smiles softly at me, something secret and pure that makes my whole body warm. My skin tingles, electric, the same dizzy feeling of rebellion from the day in the dandelion field washing over me. We haven't seen each other since cutting class together on Friday but when I touch my lips I can still feel him there.

Mama tugs on my arm gently when she notices me distracted, and I turn my focus back to the front quickly. I try to follow along with the rest of the congregation while the minister leads us in final prayer. But then my thoughts drift to Ryan again, to our conversation in the park that night, and something hard settles in my stomach. I've been praying to God my whole life. What good has come of it?

In that moment, I can't help but wonder if I've outgrown God the way I outgrew the pink pajama pants I used to love so dearly. He doesn't fit right with me anymore. Prayer feels like a chore, doesn't bring me the same comfort it used to.

I haven't felt like I have a hotline to God, haven't wanted one, really, for a while now. Not for months, not since Susie Meadows died.

I go into Mama's bedroom in the evening. I think of all the nights I spent here, so young and so new, talking to God. I think of how much easier my world would be if I were still that young girl. I know that I'm not.

I sit on my knees by the windowsill, right where Mama, Joseph, and I used to pray together so many years ago. I'm quiet for a few moments, watching a June bug crawl clumsily across the curtain rod. Tonight, I don't fold my hands together or close my eyes or lower my head, but I still want one last conversation with God.

First, I listen. I hear faint, bluesy tunes coming from next door. The new neighbors must be playing music. I hear the air outside hum with gentle wind. A sleepy night breeze drifts through the open window and the hair on my arms prickles.

Then, I talk.

"I don't believe in you anymore," I whisper to him, and God is silent.