

# I Prayed to Santa Fe

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Led by the Sisters of Loretto, the Loretto Chapel was constructed around late 1870 in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The Sisters of Loretto were a group of nuns responding to a request from New Mexico's Bishop to educate the young women of his territory. With the assistance of a prestigious French architect, Projectus Mouly, the Loretto Chapel slowly came to be. The outside is influenced by gothic architecture. Its ceilings stand twenty feet high; arches rise to a point. The quadrilateral supporting structures that protrude from the sides of the church, the *buttresses*, are a slightly warmer beige color than the walls themselves. The entire church is made of sandstone. If one were standing directly in front of the Loretto Chapel, like I am during a vacation in the driest heat of June, Our Lady of Loretto's likeness would look down on them atop the building's center protuberance, rock robes shaped to be forever rippling in the kind of breeze New Mexicans scarcely experience. My parents take pictures, my siblings' interests are glued to their phones, and I busy myself by challenging a circular window above the chapel's front door. Sizeable, and as on-display as Our Lady's statue, its panes are webbed like that of a single veiny eye; I find myself in a staring contest with it, the Cyclops-church, shuffling my sandals on the sidewalk beneath me as I squint in the sun. Our two-week trip has led us here, and I feel nothing yet.

As a child, I'd flip through my mama's scrapbooks, page after page of shiny, rectangular photographs developed from disposable cameras. Once, a snapshot of their wedding day stopped me. Mama and Dada's beaming smiles radiated through the plastic scrapbook sleeve, wide and white and young. I'd carefully slid the picture out and held it closer to my eyes. Behind them was an altar with a priest's chair. My dad's suit was grey; he wore large, round glasses and was just starting to bald. The sheen on the photograph made my mother's dress glow a rosy pink. I figured they were in a "*church*," a type of the various (they did not have a regular church when I was young due to frequent moving) grand buildings our family would visit some years on Easter, where we children had an obligation to sit quietly.

Growing up, my parents did not venture so much as to even place a Bible in my lap. The few times I visited my friends' churches (my friends' parents had rules like sleepovers on Saturday included attending mass on Sunday, but I never held any friend, thus this ritual, for long), I refused communion because I didn't know what a "body of Christ" was and I was scared to stand afront a priest. I moved my lips to hymns I did not know and responded only with "thank you," in response to any churchgoer's well-meaning "God bless you." In high school, my friends would post on social media about their love of God, yet I found every

different carved pair of eyes on a church's Jesus shrine not to be sorrowful, but indignant of the things He must have known I was doing: thinking of sex at night, of kissing girls and boys; flipping my parents the bird every time their backs were turned. My parents are flawed as parents, as people, and I resented them for justified reasons, but in my high school years, I was pigheaded when it came to any type of forgiveness. Now, in a way, I pity them. My mother's parents emigrated to the States from Mexico. She grew up in Chicago, one of seven kids, a poor Mexican family. My father is from Vermont, and his parents have both passed. His father killed himself when my father was about to start college. My father's mother lived for a long time but died from a lung cancer so bad that when her doctor found it, they stitched her up and sent her home. Neither of my parents have had easy lives.

I do not know why my parents did not teach my siblings or I about religion. They expected us not to sin, but failed to ever explain what a sin is beyond something bad; they did not explain God beyond someone *you'd ought to respect*. When my siblings and I reached adolescence, old enough in my father's eyes to make our own decisions, "God" was only said in conversation between my parents and I as an exclamation before a door slam. I'm not sure if my siblings ever privately pushed my parents to teach them the word of God, but my siblings are about as religious as I am. Right now, my teenage sister has a scowl on her face; on the car ride from the hotel to the chapel, she'd leaned over to me and whispered that churches make her uncomfortable.

Religion is only one aspect of my parents' and my tumultuous relationship. The summer before I started college, I wanted to leave our small house in Bristol, Indiana, which was the catalyst of a screaming match that ended with my father telling me I wasn't his daughter anymore. Since then, we have mended, but in the way a patch is sewn onto a torn pair of pants: the stitches are newer, obvious, and the pants don't look like they did when the price tag wasn't cut off yet. A patch is never like the original finished product. But such is life, and even that, and all the times I wished my parents dead in my adolescence, could not prevent me from yearning for my mother's powdery kiss on my cheek and my father's throaty laugh when I was in college. My parents were nearly two hundred miles away from me. After my sophomore year, when I was twenty, they asked me to come with them, my younger sister, and my older brother on a two-week trip to Santa Fe, New Mexico. Eager to rebuild a relationship (certainly more eager to travel to a state I'd never been to), I accepted.

A few days into our trip, my family and I were seated for dinner in the long booth of an Italian restaurant. (My dad said we'd had enough of this Mexican food, at least for one night.) Our talk was of the sights we'd seen, the adobe houses and cactuses and the preachers on the dusty cobblestone streets of Santa

Fe. Santa Fe oozes religion. From the dozens of churches to the lasting influence Catholicism has on native culture, Santa Fe is a holy city, and my parents, whose eyes had lost their shine for God in raising four children, were starstruck. They were giddy. Only recently before the trip had they returned to attending church in their small town.

“And do you know the story of Juan Diego?” My mother asked. Her pixie cut was a dark, dyed magenta. She’d told me my father picked out the color. Our waiter’s arms, bright and crisp in his pressed white dress shirt, suspended over us as he balanced our large pizza on the metal C-shaped pizza stands. I held my tongue from saying something mean (“How, Mama, on Earth would I know that, since you’ve never told me?”), instead just shook my head, raised my eyebrows for her to continue, not prepared for the story of a miracle she’d share with us over the clinks of silverware against dinner plates and ice cubes in water glasses.

*The Virgin Mary appeared in Mexico in the 1500s to an Aztec farmer named Juan Diego. Her skin was coffee-colored, like his, and a ribbon was tied around her swollen belly to show she was pregnant: the holder of immaculate conception. She pleaded for him to go to the local bishops and have them build another church so her children could pray. It was the first time the Blessed Virgin appeared without fair skin, and she did this so she would be familiar to Juan Diego and the indigenous people of Mexico. This apparition is now referred to as Our Lady of Guadalupe.*

“So she was brown?” I asked, picturing the white Marys that result from a Google Image search. Across the table, my father was on his phone, looking at pictures of lizards he’d taken on the walking trail outside our hotel. I thought of Juan Diego, how he might have reacted if Our Lady had appeared with a snowy pallor, like a ghost. I didn’t want the story to end.

“Yes, she was brown... so was he.”

My mother speaks Spanish fluently, and as soon as I was old enough to understand she was speaking on the phone to her sisters in a language I did not know, I was envious of her understanding and wished to speak in her mother's, and my mother's, tongue. Even after expressing my interest to her, I wasn't taught much more than *pendeja* (stupid; of a feminine subject) or *cállate* (shut up). Ignorant of the Spanish language as I was, I have my mother's Latina nose, dark hair, and olive skin, so my role models were of those sorts, Selena Quintanilla's music and the poems written by Pablo Neruda that I did not understand but cried to anyway. In a way, I am an imposter of my culture, admiring those who are Mexican than I was, never becoming more Mexican myself.

Full of pizza and magic stories, we returned to our hotel, where my father announced that he had decided what the family would be doing the next day: visiting the Loretto Chapel of Santa Fe. I was angry because my request to go to

art museums had been denied, so I bummed one of my mom's cigarettes, crept outside, heard my tie-dye lighter's spark ignite into flame. Shadowy mountain-scapes greeting me under a star-studded Santa Fe night, I tell you, is like how it feels to take the first drag of a cigarette after thinking about having one all day. I watched as the smoke curled and billowed in front of me, the air around it dead, before slowly dissipating against the range of bluffs. My mind was on Juan Diego, and on my mom, the way her eyes glittered when she'd say, "Our Lady of Guadalupe," the way her accent swallowed the *G* and made the sound of a *W*. Our Lady gifted Juan Diego a tangible miracle, guiding him to the top of Tepeyac Mountain where a bush of roses grew in December. He piled them in his coat, his tilma, and when he revealed them to the bishops who didn't believe him the first time, Our Lady's likeness marked the tilma like paint, and the bishops fell to their knees. I pondered on Our Lady's apparition, if she appeared to Juan Diego in a cloud of smoke or if she just popped on and off like a lightbulb. I wondered what I'd have done if I were Juan Diego.

The next day, when I am inside the Loretto Chapel, the first thing I notice is a spiral staircase located in the back corner, known as The Miraculous Staircase. Miraculous it is. The staircase turns twice, lacks support railings, and is roped off with velvet crowd control barriers. Though shielded from my and every other tourist's reach, it glints from a glossy finish my fingertips ache to caress. The wood curves like flowing water. Beyond the staircase are double rows of mahogany pews and a golden *T*-spread Jesus statue, front and center. I tip my chin upwards to the ornate marble, see that inside, the veiny eye is a circular, stained-glass mosaic window that casts a rainbow projection on the floor. Carved, naked angels draped in stone satin sheets dance along the trimming. It is one of the most divine places I will ever stand.

A voice drones from surround-sound speakers set up at every corner. The modern technology, black and sleek, is out of place. I am reminded of Juan Diego when the voice explains how the staircase before me entered the chapel like a thief in the night. The Loretto Chapel was built without access to the second-level choir loft, and after the nuns prayed to the patron saint of carpentry, a man with a donkey appeared and built the masterpiece, then disappeared without leaving a name or taking a penny. I am fascinated to hear the staircase was built without nails, secured only with wooden pegs. The second floor of the Loretto Chapel is inaccessible because the church is no longer used for services, so the staircase's twirling steps are obsolete.

What might it be like to walk a staircase that has not been used in years? In this moment, looking up at the twisting helix, my dress tickling my ankles, my parents forming the sign of the cross in front of the sorrowful Jesus statue, I understand what nuns feel when they grasp rosaries; what preachers feel when

their voices echo during a sermon. I've always wanted someone to pray to but cannot forgive the exclusions in the Bible, the stories of Westboro Baptist Church and those like it; I cannot forgive my parents for never teaching me about God, never introducing me to the statues they prayed underneath and shaped their life around. Jesus is a stranger to me, but standing in front of The Miraculous Staircase, the staircase that was built by a mystery man who only meant to aid believers in singing their hymns, I think, *I could believe in this.*

At the front of the church, next to Jesus, is a vigil shrine with rows and rows of red glass votive candles. They're so small I could cup one in my palms, and some are burning, some are not. In front of the candles, on a podium, is a wooden box with a slit. The box dons a sign that declares, "Donations are welcomed." I ask my mom for a dollar, choose one of the many wooden sticks resting in the vigil sand, light it against a candle already burning.

"You need to pray when you do that," my mom says behind me. The stick glows like the incense I burn at night back home. "Pray to Jesus."

A portrait depicting Our Lady hangs on the wall to the left of Jesus. I hadn't noticed her when I first entered. I wonder why, in New Mexico, with street markets full of indigenous natives selling their copper ear cuffs and sand art, Our Lady of Guadalupe is not the one with the center shrine. Why Jesus is gold, and not dark with mestizo features like those that have stood in this church for centuries. Our Lady looks at the ground in her portrait; Jesus holds my gaze.

As I light an awaiting candlewick, I close my eyes to Jesus and think of how I want to believe in something good, and the staircase convinces me goodness is not an idea but an action one gives to others, something that I can achieve even with the sins that I've heard stain my soul. I am sixteen again, my mother crying, "*You have nothing to offer your future husband,*" after she finds out I am not a virgin anymore, and my sexuality bloomed like a daisy's petals: once they opened, there was no closing them again. I hear the Christmas carols that background the noise of our house in December, "Hark! The Herald's Angels Sing," fanfare over my father's spitting "*Fuck you!*" to his eldest son (who doesn't talk to any of us much anymore). I think of the Virgin Mary appearing to a confused indigenous man, mirroring his teak skin so she would not be a stranger to him, and I remember when a classmate in third grade called my skin dirty, and I didn't understand because I didn't know myself as anything but white. Then, I pray—the first time in a holy place, in the Loretto Chapel, I pray. I leave those moments in Santa Fe, where I pray to Our Lady of Guadalupe, even though I don't know how, and I bring with me The Miraculous Staircase and Juan Diego. When I open my eyes, the wick burns and builds, hot and smoking, then eases into a soft, orange glow. It is a miracle.