

Forty Days

By Andrew Bertaina

She reached out and slid his palm between her fingers. It was soft in the middle and had calluses below his fingers. She slid her arms around his sides and felt his heart beating.

He's here. He's here. Brian Radkin died on the first day of November in Colby, Kansas, at the age of thirty-three. He was wearing white overalls and helping to install a low-slope slate roof on the old post office. He had shaggy blond hair that curled behind his ears, and a tattoo that said Philippians 1:21 on his right shoulder. Brian loved to smoke cigarettes: he loved to light one, hold it in front of his small brown eyes and watch the lit end, really see it, feel it, resting comfortably between his index and middle fingers. The taste at the back of his throat he would savor later, but he loved the quiet moment he shared first with the burning end.

His body was stringy, like the clothesline that stretched across his mother's backyard in Agra. On this day, he stopped working, pulled off his gloves, his hard hat and ear plugs. He bent down with his hand cupped to shield his cigarette from the wind, which was bitter cold and suggested snow. Below the glow of his cigarette, he could almost see the veins in his hand beginning to freeze. He dragged the smoke into his mouth and blew it out. The smoke mixed with the fog of his breath. His mind dipped back to the antiseptic white tiled hospital room and his father's slowly rising chest. A stray get-well balloon, half-emptied of helium floating an inch above the floor. He shivered and mumbled, "It's so damn cold."

He rose up, flicked his cigarette at his feet and stepped on

it with the heel of his shoe. He heard boots crunching fall leaves on the street below and moving hurriedly through the cold. A delivery truck in front of the general store backfired, and Brian turned too quickly, losing his balance. The truck's blue exhaust was the last thing he registered as he fell past the women in hats and the men in coats in front of Jim's Feed Shop. He landed on the cement in front of the post office and a dog started barking as the wind lifted the clothes on the lines. And lights began to flicker on down the center of Main Street.

His funeral was held that Sunday at the Episcopal Church on Second Street. The church was a large white building with a towering spire that cut across the dark sky. In front of the church was the cemetery of parish members from the last two hundred years, the gravestones growing moss and collecting mold while, underneath, the bones waited for the flesh of the second coming.

Mary, Brian's wife, shuffled in, wearing a black dress and a veil. She entered through the west door, to slow organ music, and walked past the baptismal font without looking to her left or right to the front pew. The church pews were wooden and hard, the carpet a deep red, and Jesus was suspended as usual, from a wooden cross on the wall behind the altar, his head down, a crown of thorns on his brow, no resurrection in sight.

The preacher was a middle-aged man with a beard and small blue eyes that focused above the congregation as he prayed for the repose of Brian's soul. A baby in the fourth row cried incessantly and Mary heard it over the slow hum of the preacher's voice intoning the liturgy. Mary sat next to Margaret, her mother-in-law, who sat ramrod straight and used tissues on her red, runny nose. But Mary's eyes were dark and safe, half-closed little slits of silt that kept out any unwanted light.

Mary's thoughts wandered throughout the service, from

the sunlight streaming through the stained glass and making swirling rainbows on the floor, to Brian's fingers in her hair and the smell of his skin.

"When God came down from heaven, it was to slay death," the preacher said. "He became one of us, to reconcile us to this life, so that when it is over, He may dwell in us and we in Him. Not even one of the lilies of the field passes without His notice. How much more do you think He will do for each one of us? For Brian, who is now in the house of His Maker?"

Mary looked around at the women in black who were staring at the floor, and smelled the clean-shaven men. She stared at her husband, slender and tired looking in the casket; thick hair slicked back, fingers laced together over his chest.

"But He rose again. His disciples did not recognize Him on the road to Emmaus, nor did Thomas believe until he put his fingers in Jesus' palms and felt the wounds in his flesh. Nevertheless, He rose. He rose again, so that we might all have the hope of eternal life. Amen."

The service ended with the mourners singing "Amazing Grace." The ladies in veils and muted lipstick sang the praises of eternal life with God.

"When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun/We've no less days to sing God's Praise/Than when we've first begun."

During the hymn Mary's mind drifted off and she lifted her head to ask God, *Did you really need him in your eternal choir? Ain't you got enough angels singing your praises? All I've got left is years piling into years.*

The reception was held on the lawn in the back where no graves had yet been dug. Several circular tables were set up on the grass with folding chairs around them. They had white table cloths on them and pictures of Brian and Mary, taken on their honeymoon in Lawrence. In the picture, Brian

is leaning into Mary, his lips brushing her cheek as she looks straight at the camera, her hair curling in the wind and her upper gums showing in a surprised smile.

The sunlight was plentiful and useless, a cold wind blew the tablecloths wildly and only the framed photographs kept them from falling off. The men, mostly co-workers of Brian's, traded the tears of the morning for afternoon malt liquor and talked softly with one another or their wives. A few solitary red leaves hung from the maple, and brown leaves dry and crumpled scattered around a gnarled old oak. Mary took a sip of the drink in her hand without really noticing. A man walked up and touched Mary softly on the elbow.

"Mary, how you holding up?" He asked.

"As good as can be expected," she said to Harold Russell.

"I'm sorry." He took his hand from her elbow and looked at the ground between them.

"There's nothing for you to be sorry about. I don't remember you doing anything."

"I'm just sorry bout all this," he said, sweeping his hand in a circle.

"The good Lord giveth and He taketh away."

When the funeral gathering ended, Harold offered Mary a ride home that she declined. She declined all the rides, happy to be alone. She was there after everyone else had left, sitting on a bench, her legs crossed, looking out at the sky turning violet, a windmill in the foreground. She sat there, staring at the shapes of things, until she could see only the dark windmill, distant in the fading light.

Mary walked home in the cold November wind, only noting one footstep after the other. The small two-bedroom house that they had shared for the past eight years was a half-mile walk down an unlit dirt road. She reached home, her fingers cold, mind empty. The lawn was mostly dead

and the row of purple prairie clovers that used to have blooms were desiccated.

She opened the door and put her jacket on the chair in the living room. She didn't turn on any lights; just lay down slowly on the cold and dusty floor. She ran her hands across the oak boards and watched the moon slip through the window and settle beside her. Her hands moved back slowly and she began to unbutton the back of her dress. When the buttons were undone, she slid it off and lay on the cold, smooth floor, bathed in moonlight.

The first time she met Brian, nine years earlier he had come in late to the diner. He was wearing a hooded sweatshirt, ripped jeans and a beat-up hat from which his hair flipped out in the back. Mary had been surprised at the attraction she felt; a man hadn't turned her head in months. She had grown tired of looking time and again in dingy bars at the same faces she had grown up with. The hostess seated him at a table and he looked out the window into the dark instead of at his menu.

"Not a bad looking boy," the pudgy cook whispered and pushed Mary towards the table. She stood at his side for a minute and cleared her throat when it seemed that he wasn't going to notice her.

He turned to face her and flashed a slightly lopsided smile. "How are you doing, little miss?"

The evening after the funeral he appeared for the first time. Mary had stopped crying and was reading *Good Housekeeping* in the comfortable arms of an old chair. She heard boots pressing on the floorboards and she looked up from her magazine, strangely unafraid. She watched him moving slowly across the room, his eyes deeper and darker. He held his index finger to his lips, motioning her to be silent. He

knelt down in front of her and took off his boots. She always hated the grime he tracked in after a day of roofing. He unlaced them and slipped them underneath the couch to his left. Mary sat silent, the magazine folded in her lap.

She leaned forward in her chair and said, "Don't you try and shush me. I've been crying all day, but I'm doing fine right now. I don't think you are supposed to be here though. I remember you falling off the roof and putting you in the ground. I watched the dirt fall on your casket. I combed your hair and washed you. I cut your fingernails and held your cold hand in mine. I bathed that body of yours in my tears."

She stood up from the chair and faced him.

"I can see you, but I'm not done being mad at you. I don't know why you left. Why you didn't ever buy a suit that fit you properly? Why we didn't ever have any kids? I've got nothing to hold on to in this house. It's so damn quiet."

She laid her hand on his chest and fanned her fingertips across it to feel the rise and fall of his breath, warm against her ear. She was lifted up and cradled tightly and she lost herself in the smell of sweat on skin. The floorboards squeaked as he carried her into the bedroom. Her dark eyes welled with tears as she was eased onto the bed spread. His fingertip brushed lightly across her lips. She trembled in anticipation and felt a longing in her stomach she hadn't felt in years. *Butterflies*. She shut off the light and only the silent moon was watching.

Mary woke late the next morning. The sunlight moved slowly through the blinds from her ankles to her face. She rolled over as it warmed her cheek across an empty bed. She rose slowly and slipped on her bathrobe as she called out his name into a silent house and went to the kitchen to put water in the tea kettle. When the water started to boil, she poured herself a cup of tea and put her feet up on a rickety wooden

chair.

The snow started around noon, as Mary watched from her kitchen window; a white blanket settled over the afternoon. The last of her annuals were buried and she paid them a silent tribute, lifting her glass of tea. *Have to buy new ones next year, they won't be pushing up through dirt again.*

Around three o'clock, she watched Ethel Richardson struggle out of her car and move towards the house in a jacket that made her look like a marshmallow. Ethel waddled across the cold cement, with a vase of roses lightly dusted with snow. She tapped softly at the door, and Mary set down her second cup of tea and opened it.

"Ethel, it's rare to see you wander down these streets. What brings you here?"

"Well, I just thought, what with the funeral yesterday," Ethel answered. "I thought you could use some roses to cheer you up."

"Let me take those from you, and your coat. Have a seat."

Ethel sat, rearranging her dress so it covered her ankles. She was a solid, middle-aged woman, the secretary at the Baptist church.

Mary sat across from Ethel in an old brown chair. "I appreciate the sentiment. I really do. But as it turns out, I don't need any flowers."

"Oh," Ethel answered, glancing nervously at the broken wall clock, the second hand stuck and repeatedly ticking on five after one.

"You see, he came back!"

"Really?" Ethel's eyes darted frantically around the room and fixed on the vase of flowers wrapped in muted light. "I'm afraid I don't quite know what to say."

Mary stared straight into Ethel's eyes. "I know what you're thinking. He looked dead as a doornail just yesterday. But he was here last night, I saw him."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Ethel said. She put her old, wrinkled knuckles to her face and started crying. "I'm so sorry."

"You don't have any reason for tears. We should be celebrating, not bawling. If you don't believe he's here then you must know he's with the Lord"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," Ethel whispered "I've got to go now, one of our parishioners..."

"It's all right, you can go. I appreciate the flowers."

Mary waited for a moment after Ethel left, then went to the cast-iron kitchen sink and dipped a sponge underneath warm water. There was a simple beauty in moving her hands through the water and guiding the sponge smoothly along the rim of her tea cup. When she finished, her hands were dry and cracked. She sighed and noticed that the floor had collected dirt in the corners. She leaned down on joints that burned slightly and began scrubbing with hard circular motions to rub out the dirt and tears.

"Ain't any reason to be crying," she murmured. "He was here. I saw him. She doesn't know."

She slid mittens over her sore hands and put on a jacket. The snow wasn't really falling anymore, besides occasional flakes that blew up and down before disappearing into the white landscape. The only flurries occurred when the wind shook the snow from the bare limbs of trees where it hung, heavy and thick. Mary walked down the street, her boots crunching in the snow. When she arrived at the grocery store, she went to the vegetable aisle. The only things she could find that looked remotely appealing were rutabagas. *Rutabagas, he doesn't like them at all.* She looked half-heartedly at the dirt-encrusted carrots. *Can't that farmer at least wash his stuff off?* The storeowner walked by and placed his hand on

her shoulder.

"I'm sorry about your loss, ma'am."

"It's all right. I just need to get some food for dinner."

"Mrs. Radkin, if there is anything I can do to help, let me know," he said, stepping away from her and looking at her as though she might break down.

"Okay, okay," she said and quickly left the grocery store empty-handed, annoyed at the grocer.

He's got no right to touch me. I don't need any help. My husband not even two days in the grave.

As she entered the house, the wind slammed the door behind her. She sat on the old couch Brian had carried home in his truck three years before. She sank into it and drifted off to sleep. A soft knock at the door woke her.

She rose and looked through the peephole. A tall man stood in the doorway, a hat pulled down low, a grocer's apron around his waist and two paper bags in his arms. Mary opened the door and he walked inside.

"Did that grocer send you over?"

"He noticed you didn't take anything from the store, Miss. He said he knows you can't get by without your husband's work. There's no reason to turn down his charity. Don't be too proud."

"I didn't say I wouldn't take it. Don't rush off now."

The man placed the two bags of groceries on the counter. "Need any further help, Miss?"

Mary's first instinct was to shout, "No." She wanted to slam the door in the face of the pity that wasn't doing her any good.

As if sensing her anger, he asked, "Can I help you put it

away, Miss?"

"Sure, those bags of flour and sugar are probably heavy and a little company won't be the end of me."

He moved confidently throughout the kitchen putting the items away without asking her where they went.

She watched him appreciatively with her dark eyes. When he finished, she said, "Thanks for your help, sir."

"No problem, Miss, you have a good day now." He flashed a smile as he disappeared into the afternoon.

I know that voice Lord, I know that smile. Why couldn't I see until now? Mary crumpled to the kitchen floor and prayed "Lord, I don't know your ways. I can't see past this moment. What are you doing, Lord? It's cruel to give hope and then take it away."

All night the wind rattled the freezing windowpanes but Mary was slick with sweat. She felt it trickling behind her knees and sliding down her calves. "Where are you going, Brian?" she cried out in her sleep.

"I'm right here, I'm right here," he whispered and placed a finger over her dry lips.

In the morning, she pulled off the damp sheets and put them in the washer, a Kenmore they had purchased eight years before. It rattled a bit, but they never could afford to upgrade. The coffee table still had a leftover glass from her dinner the night before, and Mary removed the lip print from the glass. She came to a decision and walked down the hallway towards their room, her room, the bathrobe belt trailing behind her. She reached into the bureau on his side of the bed and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. Brian had always hated when she asked for a smoke.

"Ain't nothing for a lady to do."

Mary lit the cigarette with his lighter, took a long drag, and

nearly vomited. She took another, coughing and sputtering. She finished the first and lit a second as the sunlight reflected off the frozen ground. She looked at the blue sky and the bare tree limbs holding snow. The smoke drifted from her fingertips and disappeared into the wall. She sat on the floor and reached for another cigarette. She imagined herself in a cloud of smoke, the furniture and walls around her turning yellow.

“No use saving these for a sunny day.”

Around two o'clock Ethel came by with two other women from her church. Mary had gone there once, but had been disappointed at the jangling of drums and guitars that they called music. She could picture the baby Jesus covering his tiny ears at the noise and cracked a smile. Her mother had taught her how to read from the Bible. The names like Melchizedek and Barabbas had loomed large against her finger, but she'd met Jesus in those pages as well. She didn't put much stock in organized religion. She believed in a Bible on your lap and the crackle of a warm fire. She believed that the Apostles like Paul wouldn't like the mess that the church had created. She felt better keeping Jesus close to her heart and home than in risking Him to a preacher from out of town. She had kept Him close to her heart and in her mind for almost all of her life. The funeral had been held at the Episcopal Church because it was the nicest looking one in town.

Mary drifted back to the conversation. Had Ethel just asked her a question?

“I'm sorry, can you repeat that?” she asked with a smile she hoped was reassuring.

“Now, I don't want to scare you, just so you know,” Ethel said.

“What do I have to be scared of?” she asked.

“It's just, me and these ladies here. We just want to make

sure you're all right."

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"It's uh, just that, well, we just wanted to make sure you were...Okay?" she said with emphasis.

"I'm doing fine. Thanks for your concern."

One of the women, Judith, a white-haired spinster, leaned forward and laid her freckled hand on Mary's arm. "I had a sister over in Brewster lost a husband before his time. It's a terrible thing, to lose someone before they are supposed to be gone, even if they are in a better place."

"Apparently God can't think of a better place than right here," Mary said, her eyes drifting down. "Because I have already seen him twice since we put him in the ground, but far be it from me to question the motives of the Almighty," Mary answered her eyes drifting down. She knew they thought she was crazy. *Maybe I am crazy.*

"We just wanted to say we are praying for you," said Mrs. Sanders, who sang the only decent song during special music time when Mary had visited the church months earlier. She had on a yellow hat and a lacy, long-sleeved dress. The roses in the vase were already drooping.

"Thanks, I appreciate all your help," Mary said. "But I have lunch to fix and clothes to mend, so if you'll excuse me."

As Mary ushered them out the door, Ethel pressed firmly against her shoulder and whispered, "Really, if you need any help, don't hesitate to call."

"I won't," Mary answered.

Mary shut the door and wondered why everyone felt so free to touch her. *I don't bother them at their houses. I don't call them a liar and bring them pity. They can keep the pity.*

By five o'clock the sun dropped, and Mary curled up on the old couch. She awakened to him in the living room.

"You're making me sound crazy. I know the Lord giveth and he taketh away, but either you stay this time or you go. Those women think I'm crazy."

"Mary, it's me," he stretched out his arms for an embrace. "Don't you recognize me? Can't you see me?"

"I can see you, but I don't believe in you."

"Come here, a little closer, that's it," he whispered. "Go ahead, touch my hand."

She woke up at three A.M. with her chest heaving and her ear lobe still tingling. The bedspread was tangled with the sheet and pillows on the floor. He was gone for good, she felt it in the pit of her stomach. *Her fingernails, her fingernails, why didn't she ever think to rake at him, to trap some of his celestial skin? Then someone would believe her.* The world made little sense through the cold, dark, sinless night.

"Lord, do you believe me?" She shut off the light and watched the moonlight at her small white feet. In the morning, his scent was not even on the pillow. She walked through the empty house, running her hand along the furniture and walls, feeling the shape of things in his absence. "I didn't even get forty days," she muttered. Mary pulled out a pack of cigarettes and lit one. She took a long drag.

"Ain't no use waiting for a dead man to come back," she whispered to the cloud of smoke.

- Andrew Bertaina