FICTION

Maisie Prayed

Elissa Minor-Rust

DID I DO THE RIGHT THING? Maisie Clay is forty-three years old and here she is, sitting on a tombstone in a cemetery, in the middle of the night. She is here because she wants to ask the woman a question. Her friends have told her the woman will be here; thousands of people have seen her. How could you live in Salt Lake City all these years and never have seen her? they ask. Maisie isn't sure. But here she is, sitting on a plot of earth, her back against the cold stone, on which the name was etched so long ago it can't be made out, with a skinny red flashlight in one hand and a backpack in the other. She's been here for hours. Inside the backpack: two sandwiches, salmon and cream cheese on wheat grain buns, and a full sports bottle of freshly squeezed carrot juice. She hasn't touched either of the sandwiches, but the juice she's sipped slowly since she got here, keeping it hidden in her backpack like a wino, so as not to startle. Startle what? She doesn't know. Supposedly the woman takes a while to appear (to warm up to you?), but she will, she will. Maisie's friend, a woman from her book club, told her that you must sit with your back against this one tombstone in particular, the name says Priscilla something, and she'll appear right in front of a tree near the gate of the cemetery, dancing. It is nearly ten o'clock, and Maisie feels ridiculous, watching the tree for any sign of her, wishing she'd brought a book. There is hardly even a breeze, summers in Salt Lake are hot, hot. The leaves on the tree are barely moving. The bark is solid and in large chunks, like puzzle pieces, like buffalo chips.

Maisie has heard so many stories about who the woman is and where she has come from that she doesn't believe any of them. This ghost is the city's legend. There is this: she was a pioneer, third wife of a faithful Latter-day Saint, and she lost six children as infants as they crossed the plains in order to arrive in Utah. Zion without children? Impossible. So here she is, dancing, swaying, waiting for them, because she can't bring herself to leave this land without having left anything on earth to show for herself. Some say it is the ghost of Eliza R. Snow, dancing to her own music, the hymns that Maisie notices virtually every week in sacrament

meeting because Eliza's name is on the bottom. Or try this: she was a young woman, a girl really, sixteen years old and already a mother, or a mother-to-be, pregnant though unmarried. This one is a lesson for the community. She couldn't forgive herself her sin and ended her own life, and even now she can't forgive herself, so here she is, stuck in the earthly realm, waiting—for what?—a pardon maybe, or someone to understand. Dancing.

Maisie doesn't buy any of these versions, staring at the bark of the tree by the looming gates of the cemetery. Someone deeper, she thinks, with something left to say. She's been thinking about this woman for months. Sometimes she imagines the woman is old, well over eighty, wearing a long navy blue cotton dress with small sprigs of lace running from the tops of each shoulder down in triangles to the middle of the pleat just above her breasts. She is dancing to a music so faint you have to strain to hear it; from the trees maybe? From her own mouth, humming herself in circles? Her hair, a thick, dark silver, is pulled tight into a bun on top of her head and her mouth is stern, dignified: her lips are so thin they are barely visible, and the lines that run softly from the edges of her nostrils to the ends of her mouth are the most distinguishing characteristic of her face. Or sometimes Maisie thinks the woman is young, dancing to no music at all but the wind. She is more contemporary, the last ten years maybe, wearing jeans and a tee-shirt and moving frantically around the tombstones, throwing her hands in the air and laughing.

Maisie works as the sole employee in a catering company she started herself. Her favorite days come when she has a huge wedding to do, maybe one in the Lion House that evening, and she has a whole day and the whole kitchen to herself because her husband is at work. She lays patterns out on several card tables in the living room and begins to work according to the menu. If the menu is her choice: first, the finger foods—small puffs of bread with shrimp tails coming out the ends, strawberries that she can dip in a chocolate vat on the stove and arrange in circles on the trays. Next, the main course: whole chickens set to roasting in the oven, huge, pink salmon cooking in tin foil. She would like to stay that way—food simmering in pots, smells mingling together, designs quietly working like masterpieces on the trays, chocolate, shrimp, veggie scraps, on the tips of her fingers—forever maybe. Food is not to eat; for Maisie it is to smell, or to rub between your fingers, or to look at.

Maisie doesn't have any children, just a husband whose name is Paul. She never thought she could handle children, the time was never right, though Paul pushed her and pushed her. *It is God's work,* he would say, *a commandment,* though Maisie never felt ready. Her role as a traditional Mormon mother? Shot, according to everyone else. And yet. And

yet she has the food part down pat, the obsession with food that might have come from her ties with the Relief Society, with the women in her Utah neighborhoods, growing up. To these women there is no problem food can't fix. Maisie used to laugh about it. Husband diagnosed with cancer? Dog put to sleep? Not to worry. At least ten women are bound to come along and leave casseroles (tuna noodle or shepherd's pie) on your front porch step, lime green Jell-O with grated carrots set inside on your counter top, banana bread wrapped in green Saran wrap, or enchiladas with the tin foil on the top, ready for your oven, 350 degrees, half an hour only. Yes, Maisie has that part down, and when a woman in her ward is sick and unable to cook for herself, she is among the first there, though her foods are different: gourmet, no casseroles or zucchini bread from her oven, no way. Only the finest, as if just the sight and the smell of her art on a tray could cast out even the worst of spirits.

Last month Maisie started to dream about the woman in the cemetery. She tried to tell Paul about her dream, how it happened over and over, but he wouldn't listen through to the end. He told her she was obsessing over nonsense and that he was worried about her.

In her dream Maisie would walk to the graveyard in the evening, just as the sun was going down. She wore a brown sweater and a long broom skirt, the kind she'd seen teenagers and college girls wearing around town, carrying nothing but her backpack. All of a sudden the woman would appear, young and beautiful, wearing a silk nightgown and dancing her way around the cemetery, smiling. Maize stood watching her and soon the woman would begin to change; wrinkles would deepen on her face, her pink nightgown would darken in color and the fabric would grow thicker, until an old, old woman in blue cornsilk was standing before her, not smiling, the exact image of Maisie's great-grandmother, Fanny Luella. She would not smile, but would move slowly with invisible partners, a waltz, or maybe a stern jig or trot, to no music at all. And Maisie would try to run forward to her, to apologize for not being around more when her great-grandmother was old and dying in the nursing home downtown, but Granny Fan would ignore her. And there Maisie would stand, in the middle of the cemetery, crying, pulling food out of her backpack, offering it to the woman who looked just like Granny Fan but would not listen to her.

Maisie has one set job, every week, a man downtown named Kent Messamer who pays her to cook for him each Friday. She catered his daughter's wedding and since his wife left, it's been television dinners and Top Ramen noodles, every day. For a hundred dollars a week, Maisie cooks elaborate meals for him. She loves his kitchen. It is so large she felt the first time she was there she could get lost in it; she imagined herself

crawling inside the giant cupboards, hiding in giant soup vats, the garbage compactor, the refrigerator. And clean. The place is spotless because he never cooks there, and there is nothing Maisie likes more than messing up a clean kitchen (streaking sauces on the counters, leaving carrot tops on the floors, flour on the shiny black stove top). When she was a child, she would sit on the counter next to her mother as she stirred dough in a bowl or kneaded bread, her hands covered with flour, and Maisie would stick her own hands in the flour and make handprints on her clothing and on her mother's back before her mother noticed and got angry. She loved the sight of her mother's bread pans, black like tar or the sky at midnight, because her mother never cleaned them, left the residue of hundreds of loaves on the metal sides because she said it made the crust taste better.

Kent Messamer loves bread. Every meal she cooks him, whether stew or fancy salad, something Indian with curry or a Japanese noodle dish, comes with a loaf of nut and herb bread, delicious. Three Fridays ago Kent came into the kitchen as he walked in from work and sat at the table on the other side of the counter, watching her. He was never a friendly man, and this day was no exception. He watched her toss herbs, some fresh, some from bottles, into the dough in the big metal bowl on the counter.

Is that the same bread you always make? he asked her.

Why would I change now, with no reason? Maisie said.

Good point. But I'm sick of that kind.

Maisie stood there, annoyed, wondering why he was watching her, heckling her while she was working. She stopped what she was doing and shifted her weight to the other side of her body, running her hands down the front of her apron (maroon and forest green plaid, cotton) to clean them off and looked at him.

There are no ... *creative juices* flowing in this kitchen with you scrutinizing my work, she said to him as if offering a reason for the abrupt stop in her preparation, though he had not asked her. Kent got up and shrugged, left the kitchen, and Maisie watched his back as he walked out of the room, wondering if she should stop and leave now, infuriated as she was by his behavior, though not quite. Not quite. As he walked down the hallway that led to the study, the white dress shirt on his back crumpled up in lines, sticking to his skin. His shoulders, she noticed, were quite broad.

Maisie's great-grandmother was not a pretty woman, even when she was young. Maisie knows, she's seen pictures. Granny Fan was short and thick in the waist and thighs, like Maisie is now. Maisie has a picture on her dresser of her mother and Granny Fan when her mother was just two

years old that she thinks about now, as she sits in the cemetery, waiting. In the photograph Granny is bending over slightly, a bit off-kilter maybe, trying to hang onto the child in the grass in front of her, who looks likely to dart off at any moment. Granny Fan's face is turned towards the camera and she is smirking, yes smirking, Maisie thinks, but definitely not smiling. The picture makes it clear that her nose was sharp, long with a bump in it that Maisie did not inherit, and would have been the dominant feature in her face if it weren't for her eyes which were a deep hazel green and wide, wide; always in the expression of surprise.

Granny Fan looked that way even at age one hundred and three in the nursing home when she died. One Sunday afternoon Maisie and Paul went to visit her. Maisie will never forget the way the place smelled, especially that day: the sweet scent of medicines and sick bodies mixed with the buttery smell of microwave popcorn coming out of the nurses' break lounge. It made Maisie feel sick. When they got to Granny Fan's room, Paul set the basket of flowers on the wooden stand beside her bed. Granny was less aware of them than usual, almost delusional, talking just to hear the sound of her own voice. At first Maisie didn't pay much attention, but soon she began to listen. The old woman was telling them a story about something that had happened when she was just a child, no older than eight, right after their family had moved to Salt Lake City. She said she remembered sitting with her mother on the carpet of their living room because she could not sleep, when there was a hard knocking on the door of their house. Granny's mom, Emmaline, opened the door and two women whispered to her for a full five minutes before she took Fanny by the hand (the older children were already sleeping and could not watch her) and they left the house, Emmaline carrying a lantern in her free hand. Later Fanny learned that the women had told her mother one of their children was sick and close to dying, and the elders had been administering to the little girl but the girl was growing steadily worse. The women decided to run and get Emmaline, they told her, because they had seen how close she was to the Spirit, and it was the sisters' turn to try.

Granny Fan told Maisie and Paul that afternoon that she would never forget watching her mother as she knelt by the bedside of the little girl, who was sweating and feverish. Along with the two other women, she repeatedly soaked a wash rag in a bin of warm water and ran it along the girl's body, as if washing the sickness off her skin and sending water and faith down through her pores. Her arms and legs must have been cold to the touch, like ice under their rags, and Fanny remembered the girl's gaze was set in one spot in the back of the room, not moving. The women next placed their hands on the child's head. Emmaline gave the actual blessing, and though Fanny couldn't remember all the words she

said that night, she remembered how she closed the blessing *in the name of Jesus Christ* instead of *in the name of the holy priesthood* because it was a sister's blessing. Although she was only five, Fanny watched as blood started visibly pulsing harder through the veins of the young girl—before the blessing was even over, the girl had moved her eyes and was focusing her attention on Emmaline, whose eyes were closed and whose words, she later told Granny, were coming from God and not from herself. Before morning the girl's fever was gone.

Maisie wasn't sure she believed her great-grandmother's story that afternoon, but still she thought it was beautiful. But now, in the cemetery, her clothes sticking to her body with heat and her back against a tombstone, waiting for a ghost: Sure, why not, she thinks. Why on earth not?

Maisie had gone to her bishop's office a few weeks before. She sat in the big, cushioned chair, covered with deep maroon upholstery, that sat on the other side of his desk, trying to avoid eye contact with him. He had on a suit and tie, neat and clean, as always, and his hands were sitting one on top of the other on the edge of the desk, waiting for her to speak. Above his head (two, three feet) was a picture of Jesus from the neck up, the air around him painted to look—just maybe—like clouds. She told him she was thinking of sleeping with Kent Messamer, though she didn't say his name, she just said *with another man.*

Have you done this before? Adultery, I mean, Bishop Cleegan asked.

No.

You realize what a serious thing this is?

Well.

Sister Clay, you realize how much I love you. I want to help you. If you go ahead and do this thing, so calculated, there would be a disciplinary hearing, a board would meet. For your own self, your standing in the church would be endangered. You have been through the temple, you have made the covenants. Let's get to the deeper problem here. Would you bring Paul in? Let's talk together, the three of us.

Maisie said maybe. Maybe. Maybe what? She didn't know. As she rose to leave, Bishop Cleegan said, This thing can't make you happier, I can promise you that. She smiled and thanked him, gathered her purse and book from where she'd placed them on the edge of his desk and began to leave.

Maisie?

Bishop?

I'm glad you came to see me.

What happened, in short: It was nothing like before, when Kent asked Maisie to cook for him every Friday. Not very direct, like before when he didn't expect her to say no. Maisie was holding one of her mother's old

bread pans in her hand, coated with that dark, dark residue, and Kent walked in from the hallway. He was trying to be polite, started telling her how much he liked her food, liked the feel of her soup on his throat when it coated it, hot, when it went down. Liked watching her from the door of the study (this she never knew before) when she fried tortilla shells or fry bread for tacos in hot oil on the stove, liked watching the sweat start to bead and drip off her forehead, liked the way the house got warm.

Emmaline, Maisie's great-great-grandmother, was not always spiritual. Maisie learned this in the weeks following her first visit to Granny Fan. She learned that Emmaline was the first member of her family to join the church, which amazed her because it never occurred to Maisie to think how it all started. She had assumed that her family had been members of the church from the beginning, that even when God took the rib from Adam's body to create Eve, there was a message deep inside the bone written just for them that said: *This family will be Mormon.*

Emmaline joined the church because she fell in love with a Mormon man when Fanny was still three years old. Fanny said that he lived in her town, a farming community in Colorado, high in the mountains. It was right after Emmaline's husband had left her for another woman and told her he wouldn't be back, stranding her with seven children and a small farm to look after. The man showed up on her doorstep with a basket of squash, corn, tomatoes, and fresh corn bread muffins that his wife had made and asked him to bring over to comfort her. Emmaline saw the basket and burst into tears right in front of the man, and he stood on her doorstep awkwardly, his hands in his pockets, watching her cry. All he could think to say was, Can I help you with your fields or something? and Emmaline started crying even harder, something she had never done before or since in front of anyone, stranger or no.

The man came back regularly, sometimes with his wife, sometimes alone, and sat with Emmaline while she sewed or baked. He helped her know when to turn her fields, and brought her news from town. His wife sent with him recipes and sometimes freshly baked pies or biscuits, so pleased that her husband was righteous enough to want to comfort Emmaline and help her get through her rough time.

Do you have a testimony, Sister Clay? Of the gospel? Asked Bishop Cleegan that day.

I don't know.

Maisie, are you in love with this man?

That's ridiculous. This isn't about love. It's about food.

Food?

Food.

Maisie was crying.

It was late at night when the man came to Emmaline's door, and she had been expecting him. She'd put aside the heavy black skirt and white cotton blouse she always wore and instead put on a dark green dress, full from the waist down with lace on the sleeves and the collar, that she'd been sewing herself for the last month. She loved the way the dark fabric looked against her bright red hair, pinned back modestly against her neck. As she walked around the house in it, hoping he would come, the fabric was stiff and scratchy against her skin, so she sat down to avoid getting a rash. She could feel warmth radiating out from her face as if from a lantern, her face hot then cold, like sudden fires come and gone.

When she opened the door to him, he looked startled, told her she looked nice, was she expecting company? and walked into the house. He was carrying a book in his right hand and he sat on the couch and handed it to her. She sat next to him, too close maybe because she noticed him stiffen slightly at the neck, and asked him what it was.

It's the book I've been telling you about, he said.

Emmaline looked at the book in her hand. It was light brown and worn, and on the front cover in fading gold letters she could read, the Book of Mormon. It looked like it had been read so many times threads were coming undone from the sides of the covers, and it was rough when she ran her fingers gently over the top of it. She sat there beside him as he told her about his church and she watched his lips move as he talked, watched the sweat form on his upper lip and his breathing get more nervous. Who kisses whom first? Granny Fan doesn't know. Maisie doesn't know. But they both suspect Emmaline. She wouldn't even have to lean in much, because the two were talking so close. The man pulls back and walks towards the door. Emmaline follows him. He turns to her and asks her—passionately? defeated somehow?—if she would promise to read the book. But he doesn't come back. From then on until Emmaline moves her family to Utah, the man sends his wife with the food she has baked, along with his good wishes.

The only other time she sees him is when he baptizes her and all of her children who are old enough in the irrigation ditch on the edge of their fields. Granny Fan told Maisie about it; how she could remember every detail of the event. Maisie couldn't imagine her Granny Fan letting a strange man pull her rickety old bones completely underwater in the name of God. But of course she wasn't Granny Fan then, she was nine-year-old Fanny Luella, and whereas the woman Maisie knows would have given it to him hard in the stomach and cursed at him, she swears it was the most spiritual moment of her life. That when the man took her hand and waded with her into the narrow canal, all she could feel was the March coldness of the irrigation water and a fear that welled up in her stomach telling her to *run! run!* but for some reason her legs wouldn't

budge. And when he placed his arm so close to the bones in her back through her thin white dress, he smiled at her, said, You ready? And spoke the words that changed her life: *Having been commissioned of Jesus Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.* Still, though, Maisie cannot picture her going under without a fight.

When she came out of the water, dripping wet and gasping for air, Granny Fan told Maisie that the fear had vanished and she felt like a new person; that it was the hand of Heavenly Father himself on her back and his hand also pulling her body up out of the water. The man shook her hand, said, Congratulations Sister McCloud, and they walked back up onto the side of the ditch. She stared into the murky water and the ripples that ran across her face mirrored in the canal were like messages from her old self, the one left utterly behind and alone forever in that ditch, saying I'm gone, I'm gone. Before she could take it all in, though, Emmaline was at her side to take off the white dress, so carefully pieced together out of the purest cotton and Queen Anne's lace, so that her older sister Rosa could step into it, wet as it was, to be baptized in the same waters. There was no time to make more than two dresses: one for the girls, and one for Emmaline. The boys, of course, wore simple white slacks and tee-shirts.

After seeing the bishop, Maisie sat in her kitchen at two o'clock in the morning while Paul slept soundly in bed, holding her own copy of the Book of Mormon with the shiny black leather cover and gold lettering. She thought about Emmaline reading the same book after the man left, by candlelight or at the kitchen table in the middle of the day while waiting for food to come out of the oven. For the first time in months, Maisie tried to pray. She knelt down in front of the refrigerator, but found the pictures of her nephews and nieces and the food stains on the ivory surface too distracting. *Dear Father in Heaven,* she tried, but there was a red stain, deep like marinara sauce, staring her in the face. She stood next, and walked over to the kitchen table, pulled out a chair, sat down. Will it work here? she thought to herself. *I've been really confused lately.* But there was nothing for her hands to do, no place to put them. Fold her arms across her chest like they taught her in Primary? Lace her fingers together like an old Puritan saying grace? No thanks, Maisie thought. She walked over to the kitchen sink, glancing at herself in the window above the faucet. Her hair was pulled away from her face with two pencils and she noticed the weight in her cheeks made her look old. *It's about the thing with Kent,* another attempt. She reached down towards the second drawer beneath the counter and pulled on the hard wood until she could reach an apron to loop over her head and tie around her waist. She looked down: baby blue gingham, no stains. *Or maybe it has nothing to do with Kent,* she

told him. But soon she was pulling things out of the cupboards and pouring them into bowls. *I don't know if this is the thing for me anymore,* she chopped onions under running water, smoothing her fingers over the skins, *And then there's Paul,* she poured dry lentil beans into a huge pot on the stove, *The church thing I mean,* she lifted her huge wooden spoon and lowered it, and stirred, and stirred.

Maisie prayed: I always know when it's going to rain, not because of the smell in the air (that's what most people tell me it is; they say, Maisie, you are probably just smelling the rain in the sky), but Heavenly Father it has nothing to do with the smell of the rain. It's something that comes from inside of me and things start feeling differently, under my fingers I mean, my foods feel soggy, rain drenched; my fingers feel wrinkled, prune-like. I hate doing weddings right before a rain. Once, when I was a little girl, I remember because it was when my mother started having me stay inside (my feet had already started growing soft, changing because the hard wood in the kitchen was softer than the dirt and rocks outside) and I was feeding my baby brother while my mom cleaned and I had that rain feeling, only worse. I had my hand on top of my little brother's head to steady it so that I could get the spoon between his lips, and he felt rough, rough like sandpaper or drying wood, but wet. My mom said he must just be sweating from the heat, but she wouldn't talk to me because my father was coming home and she wanted the house nice but I wanted to tell her that he wasn't coming home, my fingers had told me so, that must be what it was, and I sat there looking at my baby brother, afraid to touch him, my fingers curled in towards my palms when the clouds broke. It rained for days, Heavenly Father, and my father came home but three years later my baby brother died. There are times when I recognize that feeling before a downpour, but I haven't felt it that strong in years, and I don't feel it now, not that way I did when I had my hand on my baby brother's head, filling his mouth with food.

Was Emmaline satisfied? Maisie wonders. It's past three and she's still here, her back against the tombstone but her eyes have closed. Not for sleep, but because she is seeing things more clearly this way: stories on the back of her eyelids. She hasn't thought of Emmaline for weeks and here she is, thinking, That's it! That's it! Emmaline is the woman! But as yet, there is no woman.

Maisie called Kent Messamer's machine the day before and told him she wouldn't be cooking for him Fridays anymore. But all day, still, she has been thinking about it, wondering if some chance has brushed past her. She walked downtown this morning, spent all day there before coming to the cemetery, looking for someone to offer her question to: *Did I do the right thing?* She sat down on a bench in front of Temple Square, watch-

ing the people come out of the ZCMI center, thinking to herself, *This is Zion?* A woman came out of the main entrance wearing a bikini top and cut off jeans, basking in the Utah heat. Two small boys ran up to her and one of them was crying. It was obvious that the woman didn't know the children, but she picked them up in each of her arms and started chirping along with the crosswalk signal, a chirp, then a cuckoo, chirp, then cuckoo. Her imitation was almost perfect, and the boys looked at her amazed. The younger boy stopped crying automatically, as if she'd pushed an off button, his tear-stained cheeks turned attentively her way. Maisie saw that the woman was missing two of her top teeth. When the boys' mother came running out of the doors of the mall, looking frantically for her kids, she saw them in the woman's arms and froze, watching her chirp and cuckoo, watching the half naked stranger sway the boys back and forth. Then she took her children and left.

Did she do the right thing? Maisie gets up from her spot, surprised her back hasn't left a permanent groove in the woman's headstone, surprised her cotton blouse hasn't rubbed even more of the woman's name away. She pulls the sandwiches, still wrapped in thick paper towels inside of Ziploc bags, and places both at the base of the tree she's been watching all night. Maisie will come back. She'll come back every so often and feed the woman, she'll bring things hot from the oven in her best pans, she'll let sauces spill over onto the dirt and the other tombstones. She'll leave bread by the gates, sweet and sour meatballs in the shadows of the headstones, and thick lentil stew, onions galore, in the limbs of the tree, ready for supping. And she'll wait: for the women, for the sounds of consumption (the stealthy slurping of pasta noodles, the heavy sounds of swallowing). For the feel of hands, fingers dripping with chocolate fondue and shrimp juices, on her hair.