VOICES AS BELLS

Hadley Duncan Howard

They told us she'd be dead by morning. Just like that, "dead by morning," as if they were speaking about mail delivery or some such. To them, she wasn't yet emergent. She was just another patient, another assessment, another case to file before the end of shift in this thrumming ER.

They told us she might last as long as forty-eight hours, through the weekend, if we checked her into the psych ward. Is that down in pediatrics? I asked. No, I was told, there is no pediatric psych ward. It's for all ages and all conditions. Can I go with her? my husband asked. She's only eight years old. No, they replied. No parents allowed.

We told them if our young daughter was going to die, she wouldn't do it alone in the terrifying, reverberating hell of a psych ward.

They nodded and wished us well.

She first introduced herself to me three weeks after the birth of her sister. I'd had several miscarriages, a horrific pregnancy, and a near-death delivery, and we'd decided to cut our losses and gratefully accept the gift of one child. No more, we agreed. Never again. She must have known we meant it, and would have none of that nonsense. She wanted to join us, and she clearly had no intention of being denied.

She took matters into her own hands, as it were, and made her presence very much known. She got in my face, almost literally.

She was considerate about it, this supernatural loitering, staying just out of my direct line of sight, at about ten o'clock, on my left side, about an arm's length away. Hi there, she said, gazing steadily, as if to twinkle with a shared secret. She presented herself to me less than a month after her sister was born, and stayed right there at ten o'clock,

all day, every day, until she, too, was born, three and a half years later. Another gorgeous girl, all ours.

Somehow, it wasn't strange, this heavenly haunting. I knew, immediately and always, who my visitor was: I knew she was ours, and I knew she was a girl. And through the nature of our introduction, I knew she had a powerful spirit capable of giving orders to time and space, capable of bridging realms of eternity, and doing it with humor and good manners. She was the dearest Pick Me ever.

And we did pick her. Inviting her to join us was a deliberate choice, extended with the love we already had for her. We didn't want another baby; we wanted *her*. We wanted her because we knew her. She wasn't a stranger. She was ours. She was us.

Oh, but that first pregnancy, that delivery. The courage required to do it all again. We told her she had one chance, a Friday night in late September, the sole opening we had for her. It's now or never, friend, we promised. This invitation is for one night only. Now's great for me, she eagerly replied. I can't wait.

Thanks very much, she said, and made good time.

While we awaited her arrival, she declared her own middle name, in all its import, to me in a dream. She was to be called Bell, she said, in reference to her "clear, distinct voice, used with purpose." Absolutely, we agreed, that's just the thing. It sounded just like her.

We knew exactly who this girl was long before we met her in the flesh. She was and is in every way our better, an empathetic and engaging force of life. A lover. A creator. A leader. Herself.

A spirit of immense strength. A voice, clear as a bell and all her own, that cannot be silenced.

It was eight years later, and my husband had given me a priesthood blessing every Sunday night for the last twelve months. I'd been working for a man so toxic, so narcissistic, so delighting in the misery he

Emily Christensen McPhie, *Madonna and Child* (2019), oil on panel, 16″ x 20″ (image courtesy of the artist)

caused, that a regular call upon heaven was needed to simply survive the week ahead. The buttressing, the fortitude: I had never been closer to God as I sought His unceasing assistance to endure. Every week, He told me I was being strengthened for a reason. That Sunday night, hands laid on my head, I received not comfort but the urgent, unmistakable instruction to resign.

Do it first thing tomorrow, God said. Walk away now, He said. Do not delay.

I did as I was told. I gave two weeks' notice and was directed to "enjoy" those two weeks as PTO. What was offered in spite was received with relief.

That very same afternoon, when my husband picked her up from school, she was trembling and covered in vomit not her own. In the last hour of the day, the child in the desk behind her had heaved forward and lost his lunch. It covered her back, her neck, her hair. The teacher, busy with the sick boy, left her to stew and retch and cry alone.

She was eight years old, powerless in her own body, unable to protect herself or exert control. She was wearing the sick of another, but the horror and humiliation were hers.

The next day, much too close to the one prior, she lay on the sofa with blankets and popsicles and a bucket nearby. The next day, too, and the one after that. She overheard a neighbor say that an empty stomach prevents vomiting. Better an empty house than a bad tenant, he said.

It didn't matter that the neighbor was wrong. It didn't matter that the neighbor was talking about something else entirely. A plan, unformed and nowhere near understood, was hatched in her grade school mind. To avoid horror and humiliation, to exert power and protection, the body must be controlled, the stomach must be empty.

And that was that. She stopped eating. But it wasn't about her stomach. It was about control.

She did not eat for thirty days. Not a bite or a nibble or a slurp for thirty days. Her father and I spent that month tempting, cajoling, begging. Praying and blessing, praying and blessing endlessly; not fasting. She did not go to school, but stayed with me, her newly unemployed mother, at home to care for her. In the earliest days of the month, we'd taken walks and done puzzles, but as the days passed, and only ice chips crossed her lips, her demeanor changed. Starvation changes a person.

The twinkle disappeared, and then the light in her eyes went missing altogether. Her hair was dull and thinning, her skin was sallow. She looked ravaged. She did not sleep, night or day. She read no books, watched no shows, did no projects, saw no friends. She took to rocking back and forth, muttering. Dad, my stomach is hurting, she said, over and over again, with increasing distress. Her agitation grew each day, each hour. Dad, my stomach is hurting. Dad, my stomach is hurting.

It was as if she was surrounded by invisible vultures, furiously pecking.

By day thirty, we were desperate for intervention. The doctors we'd seen had told her to cheer up and have a snack. No one took us seriously, believing that our daughter had not eaten a single bite in days, then weeks. Surely not, they scoffed. You've miscounted days, they assured. She's eating in secret, they said.

But we hadn't and she wasn't. Her frantic rocking, the rocking, that rocking back and forth didn't cease, the fevered chanting, that incantation, Dad, my stomach is hurting, did not end. My husband and I took turns keeping vigil; our older daughter watched in soundless dread as her sister faded maniacally, frenetically away.

The next day, Sunday, was my husband's birthday. We spent it driving aimlessly for hours around the county, a panicked, ineffective plea for calm and respite and salvation, our daughters strapped beside one another in the backseat of the car—one dying, wound within her frenzied mind; the other, wide-eyed, gaping at death as it ripped and slashed and mauled her only sibling.

Unhinged, untethered, we again begged for help at the emergency room. We can take her from you, they offered. We can strap her down and force feed her when it becomes an emergency. She'll be dead by morning, they said.

We'll take her home, we replied.

I sat with her in the dark all night, on the sofa in our family room, my husband not sleeping down the hall. Our baby was still for a few moments; death was coming for her. With her head in my lap, and in a state of exhaustion I've no way to describe, I entered into a meditative state, a twilight of the mind. In the hush I felt a question: What have you learned in the temple about mental health? it asked.

Come again? I returned. What have I learned in the temple about mental health? Nothing, as far as I know, I said, and I'm in no frame of mind for a quiz.

Again, I felt a question: What have you learned in the temple about mental health? it asked. Fine, I sighed. Let's see, well . . . I've learned . . . that . . . I think I've learned that . . . now that You mention it, I've learned that our spirits can be messed with and made vulnerable through our bodies, I answered.

And what can be done about that? it asked. We can use the priesthood, I said, to straighten these things out. Tell the vultures to stop their pecking.

Yes, it said. Yes, you can. You can do that.

You can do that.

In the morning, quite early, my mother called from out of state. Hear me out, she breathlessly implored. I have to tell you about a question I felt in the night. What have you learned in the temple about mental health? she said.

We're on it, I said.

We gathered our daughter, our dear, dear Bell, the girl who made herself comfortable in my peripheral vision for more than three years, the girl who named herself, the girl whose spirit is so broad and so deep and so tall, whose soul is so strong and whose voice is so clear that metaphysics takes orders from her; the girl who so much wanted a body that she carried and bore herself into this mortal sphere—we gathered this girl in our arms, flailing, wailing, howling, so precious to us, and carried her to a living room chair.

She was shrieking, keening, rocking, rocking, rocking, faster, faster, wild. Chanting, shouting, groaning, Dad, my stomach is hurting, Dad my stomach is hurting, Dad, my stomach is hurting. Chanting, Dad, my stomach is hurting.

We laid our hands on our perfect daughter, my husband and I, both of us bearers of priesthood power. If ever there were a time to claim heavenly authority for myself, this was it. My husband spoke the words of liberation. It took only a moment, just a couple of sentences, but required such faith that he collapsed onto the floor behind the chair.

Instantly, there was stillness, utter quietude. Miraculously, there was peace.

Our magnificent child, the girl who hell cannot overcome, the girl whose voice rings like a bell, clear, distinct, full of purpose—breathe and receive the grandeur of the miracle!—our glorious, faultless daughter spoke in a soft voice.

Dad, she calmly said, my stomach is hungry.

Yes, it is, he murmured. Would you like something to eat?

And on that Monday morning, early, with the power and protection of angels all around her, she ate half a sandwich, and lived.

HADLEY DUNCAN HOWARD is a Utah-based writer, editor, and creative. Her professional work is word-centric and cause-based, and her writing focuses on themes of family, identity, and faith. Find her on X: @notingthebeauty.