

Memoirs of a Reluctant Baby Boomer

By Kathy Dee Saville © 2007

I am peering out through the narrow wooden bars of an old-fashioned baby bed, watching in amazement at some people who looked vaguely familiar rushing around, back and forth and in and out of my line of sight, trying to get ready to go to work or school or something for which they were obviously late. It is early morning and things are frantic in the household, as usual. No one pays very much attention to me, lying there in my personal little prison. I am just an observer, taking notes on the bewildering human behavior playing itself out in front of me. Or at least I would have taken notes if I could have, but I didn't, because I was just a baby: a wee baby in a crib.

I was born into a complex, chaotic, eccentric, and yet remarkably repressed middle-class Irish Catholic family, in the middle of the twentieth century in the middle of America. It was 1953 to be exact. The internet was unheard of, we had a party line, there were no cell phones, no computers, and hardly anything electronic at all, unless you counted the giant ugly boxy television set dominating our living room, that only reluctantly (and rather begrudgingly, I thought) could be persuaded to display its fuzzy black and white images of a world beyond our home. That monstrosity's main, and most important function, however, was to serve as a focal point and pedestal for a large plaster statue of Jesus. The statue presided over our living room for many years, until one day, I accidentally knocked it over and watched in horror as it fell to the floor, bounced once, and neatly broke off at the neck. After blistering my behind for the unforgivable crime of beheading Our Lord, Mom set about attempting to repair the damage. She tried all sorts of glues and adhesives, none of which seemed to work very well on the exposed plaster surfaces. Finally, in desperation, she resorted to scotch-taping the head back onto the body with one long piece of tape. It was an imperfect solution that, despite its rather strange appearance,

nevertheless managed to somehow (miraculously?) hold the sweet, sad visage of Christ fairly well in place over his toga-tied shoulders. After that, if someone unwittingly jiggled the TV set, His head might bobble a bit, like one of those little nodding novelty toys you sometimes see in the rear windows of cars.

The statue stood like that for another decade or two, until the scotch-tape had hardened, cracked and yellowed. And then came a day in the mid-1970's, I believe, when the plaster Jesus was finally retired, about the same time my mother refurnished the living room. Unable to bring herself to simply throw the statue away, instead she relegated it to a spot on a metal shelf in the basement. There it stood for the next 30 years or so, standing guard over a collection of old *National Geographic* and *Reader's Digest* magazines, the Lord's gentle and melancholy gaze fixed upon a nearby badminton table, until my sisters and I found it in the process of cleaning out my parents' home. A part of me likes to imagine that perhaps the Statue enjoyed its well-deserved, low-key retirement, hidden away as it was in the cool, dark cellar and far removed from the craziness of the family life above. I hope so.

I was the fourth and last child. The Baby of the Family, they called me. I hated it when they called me that, although now I think it was probably meant affectionately. How could they possibly have known I'd be writing about being called the Baby of the Family, and analyzing consequences of this early label, fifty-odd years later?

A brother had already died in infancy due to the fact that he was premature and his heart valves had not fully formed yet and the doctors lacked the capacity to fix this problem in preemies back then, with a procedure they have since developed to address the problem and now utilize it quite routinely. But my older brother, whom I never met, because he was born and died two years prior to my own birth, nevertheless lived on as a potent, unseen presence in our lives the whole time we were growing up. And whenever my mother spoke of him, she who was normally tough as nails and no stranger to the spanking of our tender bottoms with the dreaded "switch" in order to teach us a lesson when we were bad, she the mighty avenger and punisher would unexpectedly burst

into tears, revealing a tender wounded side of herself that was heartbreaking to behold. I suspect she may have resented me, as the next (and as it turns out, the last) one to come along after the tiny malformed brother's untimely demise, for turning out to be yet another ungrateful and unruly girl-child, instead of a son who could carry on the family name.

My mother was now stuck raising three high-spirited and generally rebellious female offspring, none of whom showed any interest in behaving well in church or anywhere else in the world, for that matter, nor in conforming to any of her pre-existing expectations of what good little Catholic girls should look, act, or be like. We'd pretend to go along with her demands for as long as we could, but at some point, all three of us would inevitably brake down and bolt from the herd, in a big way. But it wasn't like our mother didn't try. She meant well, but spare the rod and spoil the child was her mantra. And our mantra was the polar opposite: how do we figure out a way to get around her rules once again, and yet avoid getting spanked or punished in the process? Yes, it was an era in which spanking your child was not only socially acceptable, it was quietly encouraged. Our goal was to literally save our asses (from being spanked). Sometimes we won and sometimes we lost. Playing out this ever-changing dynamic kept all of us very, very busy for many, many years.

One of my earliest memories consists of being carried up the street in my father's arms as he briskly navigated the one and a half blocks from our house to church. It was stone cold outside and Dad was wearing his big brown overcoat with the fur collar that smelled of tobacco and Old Spice and I think he might have been sporting his natty fedora as well. He was a handsome man with a long chiseled face, a square, well-cut jaw, and dark wavy hair framing a pair of piercing blue eyes. But you had to watch out for those eyes, because even though they could sometimes glow with an uncanny softness, they could just as easily flash without warning and blaze up into a spontaneous wildfire of anger, the kind that would scorch the ground and take no prisoners. When you saw that coming, when you saw those icy-blue eyes start to flash you knew you'd better run for cover, fast.

Dad was a good, hardworking, God-fearing man trying to be a good Catholic husband and father and he wanted only to do the right thing for our budding little souls, in order to save us from the fires of hell. And to his way of thinking, in accordance with the same way he'd been raised himself by his poor sainted Irish mother, this meant indoctrinating his daughters in the service of The Church at the earliest possible age. There was no time to lose and he couldn't afford to take any chances, because after all, God could be fickle and vengeful and angry, and you had to move quickly and cover all your bases. Because hadn't He already seen fit, for some unknown reason, to take one of Dad's little babies for who knows what sins or transgressions of Dad's from the past? And so, arriving at the church exactly on time, with the bells ringing far above, and still firmly toting me in his arms, Dad doggedly climbed the broad cement steps at the foot of the east-facing red-brick façade and pushed through the big heavy wooden doors into the warm hushed fragrant darkness within.

Inside it was like returning to the womb, drowsy and hypnotic with repetitive chants coming from somewhere that seemed to mesmerize the mind. The air was heavy and still and thick with the sweetish musk of beeswax candles and incense. The interior was densely claustrophobic, and all lit up and ablaze with candles and glinting golden surfaces catching and reflecting the light all over the place. A deep booming voice rang out from the altar in some strange tongue and how could I have known right then that it was Latin, an archaic language I was destined to make a very close acquaintance with in the coming years. I remember staring down at the lush red carpet under my daddy's feet and then looking up at the large plaster statues of the saints positioned like silent melancholy soldiers all around us, commanding the walls of the church with their collective iconic presence. They gazed back down me with their big sad plaster eyes and their long, delicate saint's and martyr's hands frozen in a variety of elegant gestures. I wasn't sure if I liked them or not. They were kind of scary.

We slipped into a pew right next to a large white pillar that soared up towards Heaven and eventually connected with a high graceful arch that in turn curved up into an even higher and more distant gothic ceiling, designed to lead

your gaze right on up to God's doorstep, I guess. It seemed like the air could get a little thin way up there. But then, something wonderful on the sprawling curving surface of those proud gilded arches caught my attention, something that turned out to be the best part of my entire church-going experience. My eyes were drawn to an unexpected flourish, a witty tendril, a whimsical curl, a painterly bulge of juicy purple, a forest-green leaf edged delicately with a hint of gold, calling to mind my grandpa's wonderful garden and orchards. Somehow these arches, high as they were and already halfway to the steeple, had been meticulously and lovingly painted in a glorious tangle of lush and meandering vines, interspersed with fat juicy bunches of ripe autumn grapes, a bumper crop of faux-fruit looking good enough to eat. Those untamed vines seemed to tumble and roll across the ceiling with an unbridled pagan organic gladness that seemed a shocking contrast to the spare, decorative tone dominating the rest of the church. That was my very first impression of Church, and the experience burned itself into my mind like a hot iron brand.

Throughout the next ten years or so, I sat weekly contemplating (and soaking up) the glorious irony of that wondrous and sensual Bacchanalian flora surrounded by an army of pious, tee-totaling virgin saints. Those grapes and the tumbling vines always brought to mind a strong suggestion of fragrant, fertile fields full of frolicking peasants that would be far from the disapproving eye of the Church. But didn't Our Blessed Lord Himself indulge in a bit of the vino now and then, at weddings and last suppers and such, as documented right there in the New Testament? And didn't He even play wine-maker Himself one time, conjuring up a lovely batch of what I imagined to be a nice fruity Pinot Noir for someone's wedding, right out of thin air? He had to love the fruit of the vine to go to all that trouble, the way I figured it. I loved those grapevines, too.

I loved the way they were rendered so lovingly and energetically and with such wit and care that you could almost imagine the twinkle in that artist's eye as he or she had worked, balanced precariously on the top of some tall rickety ladder, working away in a labor of love. It was a gift to future generations of church-goers, trapped in their seats, half-asleep and ready to faint from hunger,

having fasted since midnight the night before in order to receive Holy Communion, and maybe casting about for some visual relief to distract them from their growling stomachs, in those pockets of downtime during the Liturgy when the priest turned his back on the congregation, absorbed in working his magic over the hosts.

During those intervals, briefly liberated from the constant up and down, stand up, sit down, physical demands of the Mass, I looked forward to settling back in my pew and tracing those luscious green curlicues and ripe bursting grapes with my eyes. It was a rare meditative pleasure that always renewed my soul. And that, along with the enthusiastic (if not entirely tuneful) music that regularly blasted forth from the choir loft—with the help of a giant pipe organ and a hearty chorus of well-meaning songsters—was enough to satisfy my soul, in my early youth. And for some reason, when I was about twelve years old, I was even invited to learn how to operate that magnificent old pipe organ. After that, I was allowed the singular privilege of playing at 7 A.M. Mass; and on many occasions, I could be found bent over that imposing keyboard, pounding out a painful but determined *Kyrie* at some early hour. There might be three, maybe four, rickety old ladies who regularly trickled in for Mass at the crack of dawn, preoccupied with meeting their Maker fairly soon, and thankfully quite hard of hearing. Unfortunately (on the other hand) the parish priest could hear perfectly well; and I was often the recipient of a cold, glassy glare when, as I flailed away at those keys, struggling to produce some sort of passable liturgical noise, it would get so bad that the good Father had to actually pause in the middle of Holy Mass in order to shoot me The Look. Sometimes, I admit, it was also due in part to the fact that me and my equally irresponsible and untalented pal, Nancy Short, were simply goofing off up there. But what did they expect, leaving two middle-school-age girls to their own devices, alone and unsupervised in a vast, and suddenly inexplicably hilarious, choir loft? They never did let me (or Nancy) play at any of the main Services. Even so, I always thoroughly enjoyed the process and the privilege of playing music in church, right along with losing myself in the

magic of those wonderful painted murals. That was definitely something worth experiencing.

But for some reason, good things can never last. One fine Sunday when I was an adolescent, we went to the church as usual; but when I settled in and looked up expectantly towards where the vine and the fruits should be dancing about--Jesus, Mary, and Joseph and all the Saints--lo and behold--they were gone! Erased! Disappeared! Wiped out, without a trace, just like that. What the hell had happened to them?

It seems that in the intervening week, the grapevines had been painted over and completely obliterated with a thick coat of sensible flat eggshell white, in an apparent effort to "remodel" and update the church's interior, to trim off the old, tired, outdated and unnecessary embellishments, and lend the place a clean, fresh, no-frills, no-nonsense kind of aura. This was supposedly part of a campaign to inject the plodding faithful flock with a much-needed shot in the arm, a jump-start to the next level, with a push into a new, forward-looking, Vatican II era of enlightened streamlined, post-modern Catholic church-going experience, free of old-fashioned visual distractions.

Apparently St. Joseph's was overdue for a make-over and we all needed to be modernized, too. Because that's what the competition, the Non-Catholics, had been doing for a long time, and wasn't it plain to see how their numbers were continuously swelling and ours were falling? Witness those legions of deserters, sneaking out the back doors after Communion one day, never to return, and then showing up at the Lutheran Church down the street the following Sunday. So the Catholics had to wake up and get with the program, and focus on the long-term goals as well as the tasks at hand. After all, we're here to pray and chant and confess our sins and commune with the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost and beg for forgiveness and you can't do that as efficiently as you should when you are mired in the past, and daydreaming, and gawking around the church all slack-eyed, attention wandering from statue to statue and then finally fixating upon some quaint old murals that hinted at the earthly and dubious pleasures of wine-growing and wine-drinking and who knows what else. These things were

probably put there by Satan himself to confuse you, and clutter up your perceptions, which blocked your path to a better and more purified chastity of mind, body and spirit.

So I said goodbye to that sprawling, extravagantly rendered virtual vineyard of my youth, rioting away all these years in its juicy splendor right over the tops of the sober, piously bent heads of the *mea-culping* faithful in the pews below. The same faithful who seldom looked skyward and seldom felt their mouths watering in anticipation for this year's crop of glistening grapes, forever ripening under a golden painted sun right above their sinful noggins. Whoever painted those joyfully free-form, irreverent vines, way back when, had made them truly come to life by subtly investing them with a kind of ancient hidden meaning.

Oddly enough, the sudden destruction of the painted grapevines occurred right around the same time I stopped believing in church and started believing in some larger spiritual dimension. The life, the wonder, the sacredness, the enormity of it all and the cosmic magic and majesty as manifested in the tiniest curl of a common grapevine's tendril, all of this ancient mystical glory was slowly and deliberately being bled from the rich veins of Church tradition and replaced with a more antiseptic, less compromising picture that the church wanted to project of itself in the eyes of the world. Was it mere coincidence? Or part of a deliberate attempt to eradicate any lingering, paganistic subliminal suggestion that maybe God is in nature and nature is in God, or maybe nature really *is* God and God *is* nature. Was the image of that sensuous and sprawling grapevine just a bit too much for the powers that be, in that time that was coming to be? Or was it simply a matter of an aging church that hadn't had a fresh coat of paint in years, and needed one badly? I don't know. But I do know one thing: When the grapevines went, so did the magic, for me.