

**Kate Leary**  
from *Holy Family*

He connects his accident to one of the readings in his Sunday homily. It's self-serving, a way to explain his injuries and avoid questions. He'd be embarrassed if any of his colleagues heard it, but this is the kind of laziness he's sunk to. And the parishioners laugh in spots, tell him how much they like the sermon as they shake his hand on the way out of Mass. "Under five minutes, Father," one of them even says. He can hear the beep of the man timing him with his watch at the beginning and end of his sermon every Sunday. That's the kind of thing Paul has to let slide.

He sees through the propped-open door that it's a beautiful day. The air is crisp but not cold, and the leaves are a chaos of vibrant colors, just beginning to lose their grip on the trees. It's mid-October and the semester is in full swing without him. The sky is blue; the clouds white and downy. He's grateful for the perfect day, and for the fact that the parishioners seem to be warming to him.

He spots Julia, hanging back near the font of holy water, wearing a simple blue dress that accentuates her leanness. She catches his eye and smiles and waves, and he feels a shock of pleasure that he's led her to church, even if only for one day. She stays at her place until he's shaken the last parishioner's hand, as if she's waiting to greet an athlete after a big game. She comes forward, and he smiles at her and clasps her hand when she offers it.

"I'm so happy to see you here," he says, then releases her hand. He's suddenly self-conscious about the bandage on his cheek, though she's the one person he doesn't have to explain it to.

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“I’m relieved to hear that you think I’m a perfectly nice woman.”

“Oh yes,” he says, embarrassed, “you are.” He recounted the incident in his sermon. She stares at his face, and it’s disconcerting until he realizes she’s only inspecting his injuries. He looks away from her appraising eyes, at her feet, then at her bare legs, pale stems below her skirt. He swallows and forces his eyes back to the asphalt.

She’s attractive — the type Paul tends to develop crushes on. Medium height, slim build, delicate features. She exudes competence, which he responds to. He’s usually drawn to glossy-haired brunettes but finds her unruly red hair exciting. When he was a novice, his mentor provided him with the word “crush” during their talks about the normal feelings a priest would face. Paul adopted the word, even used it in confession. He understood that the infantile word choice was deliberate — a way to ensure that the feeling would never grow into something more adult.

He’s been here before and come through it.

“That bruise must be tender.” She reaches out to touch his face, but he steps back too abruptly, aware of his parishioners, though they’ve mostly dispersed.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.” She clasps her hands, as if she’s afraid she might do it again.

“It’s all right—just—they don’t know who you are.”

“Who am I?”

He freezes. What he meant was: *someone who’s allowed to touch me*. He shakes a lot of hands. Every year a doctor examines him, and twice a year he has his teeth cleaned. He hugs his

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mother, sister, and nephews when he sees them. There is no one in the world who would reach out and touch his face. His mother hasn't done it since he was a kid.

"There isn't any oozing?"

He shakes his head.

"No pus?"

"It's all healing fine," he says. "I'm not as pretty as I used to be, but I don't suppose anyone is."

"It would take more than a shopping cart to ruin that face."

A blush starts up his neck and spreads across his face, even as he wills it not to.

She laughs. "If there's any oozing at all, call Don."

Don is her friend, the PA who stitched him up. About her age, friendly and professional. *Oh man*, he'd said, *This is quintessential Julia. You should see her drive*. Paul had expected a woman, had wondered what Don was to Julia.

She seems to be out of medical questions, and he can feel, as the silence grows, that she'll excuse herself if he doesn't speak. "You came to church," he says.

She nods. "I did."

"Why?"

"I wanted to see how you were doing."

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But she could have called. She might be looking for something he can help her find. He thinks of her sudden sadness in the grocery store bathroom, the edginess that flares up. Maybe they've both sensed God's hand in their accident.

“Would you like to come up to the rectory for a cup of coffee? I have an hour between Masses.”

She seems surprised. She traces a circle on the pavement with her toe. The mannerisms and the crown of copper hair make her seem adolescent, and then she looks up and he sees the lines at the corners of her eyes again. “Why not?”