

## **What Survives**

**By Maria Gray**

I was just shy of nine years old when I started my first business. Despite its ramshackle exterior and peeling chicory paint, Nilly Ways was a force to be reckoned with: a bakery on the wood-chip border dividing a grade school and the nearby nursery. Granted, its construction was the product of a grassroots movement. A rainboot-clad third grader could only do so much. A modest ceramic pig sorely limited my wares and profits.

So, I did what any smart investor would: I put my foot down, declaring that pinecones would replace bills as our currency. The customers eyed my mud pies and vegan-friendly tiramisu (the primary ingredient being dirt). They came in droves, as did the workers. I was Milly Ways, manning the register while Tilly Ways molded éclairs and Lilly Ways prepared intimate gravel arrangements atop tiny cheesecakes. There were others, too: Gilly Ways discovered a giant yellowed mushroom just yards from the bakery's westward-facing wall. As long as blood flowed through my heart, they'd be my blood sisters. The bakery was little more than a game, but it was as real to me as that unadulterated sisterhood.

Then the bell rang, unabashedly signaling the end of recess.

Nine of my earliest years were spent at a school where such games were embraced and encouraged — once, we were so entranced that our teachers spontaneously extended our recess by twenty minutes. Fairy house construction was penciled into the daily schedule, and we built woodland homes from mudslides surrounding our Saum Creek. Jewelweed, I found, ensured waterproof roofing; fern doubled as carpeting.

My first exposure to God did not come from a Catholic classroom. God was the way Saum Creek bubbled between my bare toes. He came in elusive, tiny wonders. If I could see

prosperity in pinecones, my belief had boundless potential. I made mud pies and saw nothing short of chocolate ganache. God is what I imagine, but that doesn't make him any less real. Just like childhood games.

As a sulky preteen, I labeled myself an atheist. I privately patted myself on the back for not being deluded enough to rely on some nebulous, omniscient entity nobody had seen. God hid from me, always in plain sight. It shouldn't have taken tragedy to center my spirituality. But it did.

My eighth-grade class boasted just 23 graduates. Here's the kicker: last February, this figure slimmed down to twenty-two and one container of ashes in the children's section of a nearby Catholic cemetery. Lilly Ways became Leila became a force I spoke of in the past tense and loved in the present.

She killed herself the Sunday after I turned sixteen. The protective curtain of believed invincibility couldn't protect me anymore. My childhood sister — Lilly Ways, with her chestnut mane and gapped front teeth she never lived to fix — was gone. She'd hurled herself out of this dimension with reckless abandon, the same way she'd gone about everything during her life. I would never hear her laugh again; never feign anger when she pounced onto my lap without asking; never split a greasy slice of pizza and offer her the smaller half. All my memories were faulty: a series of pictures, the same person cut out of each one.

The only thing I learned during the second semester of sophomore year is that loss is not an absence, but a presence. It's the step you miss on the stairs; the cartoon characters you both invented, realizing that you still draw them in the margins of your notebooks. When her spirit left her body, it infiltrated the leaves curling off trees; the spacing of sidewalk cracks; the Adele song playing inside Starbucks. My bedroom stank of the overwhelming effluvia of violent loss and

dirty laundry. No words encompass the horror of a friend updating her Snapchat story the night before she snuffs it.

I watched her Snapchat story after she killed herself. I just didn't know it yet.

At the funeral Mass, I was one of three friends designated to sing during communion. I boasted a spot at the front of the church. Near the end of the service, the priest addressed Leila's cause of death: suicide. A dirty word. "She had a brain disease." The words hung in the air, and I grasped onto their wily hope. "This was not a conscious choice. Leila passed away of a brain disease, in the same way a cancer patient might. Suicide is not a decision. Suicide is an outcome. Suicide victims do not go to hell for their outcome."

When I sang, I felt God shivering up my spine, as though he were sewing me shut with a thread of light. I shivered from the warmth I couldn't feel. My unerring heartache sent me reeling. That was the first time I felt God and put a name to that force, but my game had been changed — I had no one to play with. I'd never considered the gifts I needed to give away. Nilly Ways was gone, replaced with something much colder and clearer. I stopped being an atheist the same day I sent Lilly Ways into the next world. Forever fifteen, never to age. I don't know why that is. Maybe I believe in God because I can't afford not to, and maybe that's okay.

All I know is that last October, I walked outside and saw a double rainbow at sunset and knew exactly who had put it there and exactly which one of my friends it looked like.

Somebody once told me, "God is not death; God is what survives." God is that double sunset rainbow. God is the Leila I still have in my head: a charming teenage girl in a yellow polka-dotted bikini and French braids. She is making muddy cheesecakes, head thrown back in boisterous laughter. God is the imprint of her ballpoint pen in my old yearbooks and the age-old promise that she'll see me soon. She survives. I survive.