

# Saisé

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**I** am here by none of my own doing. I have done nothing to get to this place.

An overnight bus ride, trying to sleep with my head ducked in a carpeted cabinet to have dark and quiet, waking with my heart flabby. Then sitting up to the front window, heart sloshing, hanging over the driver on the top of a double-decker bus. Out the window: tender, growing, pink-topped hills, the sunrise like a settling pashmina. Rose, lavender, sage, buttercup. Each color every color. And tender grapevines reaching across the fields, leaves like children's hands, tendrils like a child's finger, reaching, reaching for a small warm touch of assurance.

There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand: a flowered meadow, silence, Easter, and loneliness. In the midst of four months studying literature abroad, I have ended up at a monastery in Burgundy, spending a week in silence in the days before Easter. It's been raining for three months: England. And now I wake up in pink sun over hazy lavender and yellow flax fields and visit a chapel full of flame. I eat crusty bread with sweet butter and skim the skin from bowls of dusky hot chocolate. I drink lemony tea in the afternoon, my reflection quivering in the amber scooped from a hot silver tub. I sleep alone in a barrack room, on a top bunk, with other women, in their twenties and in silence, in rooms around me. I pray, in common, in chant, three times a day. It's the only sound I make. I walk in the afternoons past white cows with stout horns and wet noses in green fields. I eat with women from Holland, Germany, Canada, and Spain without speaking, passing and seasoning simple meals without words. I paint, with a child's box of watercolors, spongy swamps of pigment and a plastic brush, whatever flowers I find. I don't ask why I do any of it. It's here, and I am, and that seems enough.

This morning I woke in my rocking metal bed to the monastery bells and went to shower in a common bathroom. There are eleven of us women here in silence and other young people all around the monastery, meeting each other and talking about faith. Our home while we are silent is a square of barracks around open grass with a common room on one side and a bathroom on the other. They all have steel corrugated roofs and concrete floors.

Clutching my toothbrush, toothpaste, towel and soap, I walk across the open grass, the hem of my pants getting licked by the dew. As I brush in front of the chipped and murky mirror, two other women come in and prepare to bathe, balancing towels on hooks and shower rods and checking the curtains for spiders and webs. I step in a shower after them and undress, hanging my clothes carefully in backward order on the hook out the door, my puny hand towel balanced on top like a mop wig.

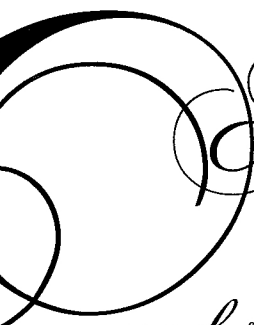
In succession, each of us flip on the water with the fill and burst spray of uncovered pipes. Three loud consecutive commands for quiet: Shh. Shh. Shh. I suck my naked body back against the wall,

pressing my lungs up and pulling my hips back. The cold water spatters on the skin of my stomach. I flip my hand in and out of the stream waiting for the heat. The backs of my legs hover near the cold concrete. Flip: Wait. Flip: Wait. I think we simultaneously give up.

One by one, the sound of the water splashing on the floor deadens as our bodies jump in the flow. Icy water smears down my shoulders, breasts, and hips, and slathers my stomach and thighs. Novocain cold streams down my scalp. Cells chill. Air thrusts from my lungs.

Lined up in a monastery bathroom, we gasp and pant: a line of dignified, seeking women slotted in shower stalls. Together we suck air and utter little cries of shock, no one covering the experience with words. With only the whimpering presence of body, we pant and chuckle, together in our freezing flesh.

This place is all mornings. Even on the way to evening prayer, the bells clang and peel, tumbling up and out like a sunrise even as the sky is beginning to settle and smolder. I walk alone from our square of barracks onto the noisy gravel path. By now the others here know by sight who's in silence, and I can move in a bubble of



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low through the flute  
and something in my gut stretches and pools.*

solitude even in the crowd. The permission in silence is astounding. I am allowed to watch and absorb without responding or entertaining. I'm basking in the relief of this release.

I walk to the left entrance of the chapel, a low, plain building without stone or a steeple, and drag my fingers across the bushes by the door. The leaves pass their aroma and make my hands smell of dust and rosemary. The smell itself is like a ritual, accessible but rooted in something ancient and mysterious. Rosemary, for remembrance, and dust.

The inside of the chapel is dark and open. Thin green carpet covers the ground and skinny steel pillars hold up the ceiling. Down the center, two rows of boxes form an aisle. The boxes are planted with the rosemary-smelling bushes. Bach is playing. Across the room four stained-glass windows punch color into the dim. They are square and monochromatic like four lit jewels set in the wall: blue, red, green, orange. The front of the chapel blazes. Triangles of orange fabric leap to the ceiling, open squares of clay stack and scatter across the floor like burning coals. The candles in them flicker. Together they ripple and pulse.

I find my spot on the floor next to the bushes, close enough to the front that all I can see is the flame. I sit large to preserve my space as others walk in and settle. I cannot open when surrounded. I hate that the practical things make such a difference. And am disappointed.

I slide off my shoes, pulling the back strap over my calloused heel, and sit hugging my knees staring at the cratered soles and cracked leather, waiting for them to transfigure into a spiritual lesson. The only one that comes to mind I've heard before. The brothers walk in and I hear the rustle of their white robes as they kneel in the aisle. Bach stops and there's a pause while the hidden musicians prepare to begin the service. I keep staring at my shoes. I know there's a digital sign in the left corner; its red numbers showing the location of the first song. It's so practical. I hate it, when I don't need it.

The songs begin: simple repeated chants in all the languages of the world. The sound seems to come from everywhere, blooming out of the air above my head and glowing there. A haunted line breathes low through the flute and something in my guts stretches down and pools. It's time to begin my prayer.

I turn my legs and kneel on the thin carpet, dirt poking into the skin on my knees and forearms, my forehead resting in my palms. I try to pray in silence, directing words at God from the back of my bowed skull. I feel my knees and palms and elbows. I can smell my own breath. I see an hourglass of dark between my knees and hanging breasts. My hair is spilled on the gritty floor around my head. The chants continue to float above me, a cantor breaking through like a message bearer, his tenor voice open like a bell.

I fold my knuckles and lay my forehead on the ground to try and mouth my prayer. "God,—. Lord—." Neither of these are right. "El Roi." It feels strange to shape the Hebrew words, artificial, appropriated. *The God who sees me*. I feel my legs and toes begin to tingle. They'll be numb soon and standing will be clenching and difficult. Songs continue to open in the air. A man reads in French from one of the gospels. The chapel is silent. The silence rings in its emptiness. Full of bodies and candles and dirt. Rings in its openness. Full of body and sandals and hurt. "El Roi." El Roi. This uses all my faith, is my entire prayer.

I spend my afternoons in the meadow enclosed by our barracks. It's full of perfect weeds: white puff dandelions, yellow buttercups, tall tiny daisies. I sit with my back against an adolescent poplar, slender and strong as a young girl, or lying in the grasses looking through their green hollow and fibery stems floating with white and yellow orbs. I feel like a small bird from here, hidden, with my big, glassy eyes. I think I could be content to eat seeds.

All afternoon I read and write. I've made a new journal of cheap paper, stitched together with a sewing kit and covered with one of my simple watercolor flowers. I write long rambling entries, dreaming about marriage and motherhood, open to femininity and hope uncut by intellectualism and practicality. I blow dandelion seeds and make wishes. For the first time in my life I write without embarrassment about the softness of the air on my skin and the feeling of my hips when I walk. For the first time I think it might be worth it to be a woman. For the first time "bride" sloughs its puny, girlish pettiness and becomes regal, self-possessed, and crowned. For the first time, I think lovingly about the word "daughter" and the music of "Our Father who art in heaven."

Each morning Sister Anne stands with us in the common room and gives us scripture for the day. She wears simple wool skirts, flat brown sandals, and blouses with pockets. She speaks to us in English, reading from the gospels or of Jonah or Deborah with her head uncovered, speaking like these men and women were her family, saying "Jesus" with her soft French accent, *jesah-see*, "easily, like he is among her friends. I picture over and over again the women at the tomb and keep thinking her name is Mary. She is so much like one, in wisdom and peace, who's finished crying.

We don't speak among ourselves, except to translate. Esther takes in the English and in quiet intercessions speaks to one of the other women in Spanish. Esther reminds me of the other Mary, somehow both young and wise.

Sometimes Sister Anne reads the scripture in French as she knows it, letting each of us find our way to the text in our own language. "Jean, chapitre vingt et un, verset vingt-cinq: Jésus a accompli encore bien d'autres choses. Si on voulait les raconter une à une, je pense que le monde entier ne suffirait pas pour contenir tous les livres qu'il faudrait écrire."

Esther whispers, "Jesús hizo muchas otras cosas también. Si cada de una fueran escritas, me imagino que aún el mundo entero no tendría espacio para los libros que serían escritos."

Later today I stand among tables of the pottery the brothers make to support their community. Each piece has a small stamp on the bottom, TAIZÉ, because none of them take personal credit for the work they do. I stand before the cash register with a wide-bowled oil lamp in my hands; its purchase both a recognition that I will have to leave this place and a weak, material effort to carry away a piece of its flame. I am trying to buy a symbol.

As I wait, I think of the scripture Sister Anne has given us: a library in heaven. I stand with the clay lamp in my hands, elbows akimbo, passport pouch across my shoulders, and a scene drops into my head: A young man with dark skin and wavy hair stands in front of a shelf full of books. This man, the Son of God is sliding one book back onto the shelf, smiling. *I have books in God's library. If God has a library, my name is in the pages.* I stand in line for the cash register, my arms full of clay, lashes laced in blinking tears.

Today is Maundy Thursday, a day named for washing feet. I have never been able to feel guilty or joyful enough for Easter; have always felt less like a believer this time of the year than ever. So I try to ignore it, even here. Especially here. Where expectation for miracle, for magic, for transcendence is so easy. Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Week. The labels bring back my skepticism, my intellectualizing, my nuancing. My oh-so-sophisticated realism. The core becomes a hard gunmetal marble, a flint, a scrutinizing mirror.

During afternoon prayer I analyze the parts of the service, categorize the ecumenical into traceable influences from denominations, countries, orders, hemispheres. The icon on the cross from the Russians, robes from the Benedictines, urgent social intercessories from the liberation theologians, thin green carpet from the Americans. I pray as I should: dignified, orderly, focused on the articulatable needs of others. "Be with Megan and Mindy as they are deciding what to do with their lives." "Be with Mom and Dad as they prepare to have an empty house." "Be with Betsy and Brian as they grow in their relationship." After climbing the stairs of personal petition, I reach a higher plateau blooming with words and diction. "Be with all those suffering: the mothers trying to care for their children, the children without food or protection, all of those living in wars." I begin to walk around the plateau, harvesting the waving, pre-assembled bouquets. "Burden the powerful with mercy and the powerless with strength. Grant sustaining beauty to refugees and exiles. Free prisoners from unjust jailers and use just jailers to free prisoners from themselves. Heal the sick and wounded, both in body and in spirit. Provide balm for the abandoned and the lonely. Shine wisdom on the leaders and infuse grace in their actions." I have no trouble filling the hour.

After prayer, I sling on my shoes and duck out of the chapel. The sun stamps my retina, slams into the back of my eyes. My pupils wince and squeeze. Insects buzz in the brightness, humming over the rosemary-smelling bushes. The feet of those in front of me munch on the gravel as they walk toward their tents in knots of three or four, walking like philosophers leaving the Akademeia. I walk along the road thinking of how much I accomplished during prayer. The insects keep buzzing.

I leave the main road, crossing through the low, snapping gate that marks the area for those in silence,

and look especially into the bush of orange pompoms in front of the sisters' quarters. The bugs are so loud today I guess they've gathered between the branches. I walk around the sisters' house toward the entrance to the meadow and turn the corner toward the line with our shower towels rocking in the breeze.

There are no bugs. A man is mowing down my meadow.

A riding lawn mower is lapping the square, rolling over the dandelions, slicing the buttercups. Clouds of dandelion seeds rock in the air around the mower.

They are mowing my meadow. They are mowing my meadow.

The rasping of the motors files the inside of my ears. The buttercups bend forward as the mower rolls over them, clump limp behind the blade. The exhaust spits more rocking seeds into the air.

No.

I feel like I'm shivering. The man gets off his mower and rakes up the stripe behind it. He scoops up the flowers and dumps them in a black trash bag.

No.

There's an open spot in the top of my head, a space left where something small and hard evaporated.

*Jesus, stop them. Jesus, please stop them.*

The man gets back on the mower and continues cutting. Another man rides into the meadow from the back corner by the shower. They shout to each other in French, one pointing to a pocket in the corner of the square, the other nodding and gesturing that he'll cut around the poplar.

Someone has kicked me in the chest, their foot punching my sternum inches into my lungs.

They are cutting my buttercups. They are throwing away my wishes.

The second man finishes clearing the far corner. The first man is still circling, putting edges on the meadow and shrinking the wild, growing space. He's turning the meadow into an English lawn. I feel like my blood is draining out the bottoms of my feet.

*Jesus, stop them. Jesus, please stop them.*

*They are mowing my meadow.  
They are mowing my meadow.*

The second man rides up next to the first. They talk, the first nods at something the other has said then jumps off the mower and rakes up the stripe behind him while the other man leaves. What's left will be no trouble for one mower.

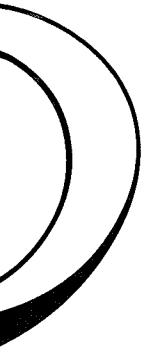
Clutching the slouching black bag, the man gets back on the mower. He swings the wheel wide to slice through the middle of the square, but instead of looping, he keeps going.

Without looking back, he rides off to the corner, leaving the job unfinished.

I stand staring at the square of flowers in front of me. A banner of dandelion seeds trails, rocking, to the ground.

*Thank you. Thank you.*

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A young woman moves among the flowers stooping and gathering in plain khaki shorts and a white t-shirt. She's not old enough for her movements to be poised or precise, but she's past the teenage awkwardness of arms and legs moving in visible intention. She's young and a woman; her body is as noticeable to others, slim and taut, and as transparent to herself, unpaired and unmanaged, as it will ever be.

She walks carefully through the patch, picking buttercups with her right hand and placing their thin stems in her left, holding them openly in a ring of her thumb and finger, their bowing heads brushing the tan skin at the base of her thumb and the curl of her knuckle. The very tip of her tongue has snuck out the right corner of her lips. It's difficult to tell if this is a genuine slip into unselfconsciousness or a plotted action to move her mind toward a certain childlikeness.

Her long brown hair is wound at the back of her head absorbing the sun as she picks only the best blooms, still careful not to leave any single spot bare. Finally, she steps high over the grass and walks into a common room to wrap the bottoms of the stems in cool, wet paper, a brown speckled swaddling to rest in her palm. She leaves the common room and the square and walks down the road toward the chapel, her sandals scuffing the gravel, the flowers carefully unremarkable at her left side. They are a private gift.

Inside the chapel she finds her place and kneels on the gritty floor, her forehead in her palms, the flowers on the thin carpet in front of her shoulder. She drops into prayer like a contraction, single-minded, her spirit laboring and unspooling like a ribbon pulling from her chest out her throat. She prays water, sunlight, comfort, and armor, pushing them from her chest, laboring to birth them, against gravity, from the muscles of her heart. She prays until her spirit is so tired that she weeps.

When she's finished, her eyes are wet and her breathing is settled. She wipes the clinging water from her eyelashes and sits. In the aisle, between the bushes, others are gathered around a cross lying in the center. She sees them from a distance as people kneeling around a piece of painted wood, medieval and superstitious. She feels foolish, but determines to give her gift anyway, tired of letting self-consciousness and practicality close every window.

Stepping quietly, she walks to the cross and kneels behind the people around it. Candles flicker at the head and feet and at the tip of each nailed hand, casting a sheen on the lacquer. Having grown up in a church without images, she doesn't know how to look at this cross with a face, but she understands symbol. She holds the buttercups in her hands and bends her body forward, her mind full of space after the emptying of her prayer. She's not used to giving things like this, so she only opens her hand and lets the flowers to the floor while she marks the gift in herself with a wordless sort of space, an open sphere of acknowledgement. The flowers lay by his right open hand.

She sits up again, looking down at her shadow from the candlelight, sand pressing in her knees and tired, and an unthought phrase opens in her. *I'll take them with me.* She smiles in the candlelight, in disbelief or wonder. Maybe both.

That night while she's trying to express her experience, she writes, feeling foolish and humble and honest, "I just wanted to give him something for his kitchen table."

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