

# CHURCH THINGS

BY AMANDA SLAVIN

*M*ystery rain, it should be called, a friend  
once joked. It's ninety degrees, sunny,  
and annoying droplets graze your scalp,  
threatening your ice cream. You look up,  
wondering where the water is coming from,  
and see an Athenian widow swathed in black,  
sweeping the afternoon's abluion off


a balcony onto the unsuspecting pedestrians  
below. Her pots of basil are appropriately  
verdant, and my plain white shirt is newly  
decorated with a smattering of muddy  
specks. The 'rain' is no mystery, after all.

(shortfiction)

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ILLUSTRATIONS  
BY LEANNE HAUG



A painting of a blue pillar with a yellow anchor. The pillar is a vibrant, saturated blue and stands in the foreground. A yellow anchor is wrapped around the base of the pillar. The background is a soft, hazy yellow and white, suggesting an outdoor setting with light filtering through. The overall style is impressionistic with visible brushstrokes.

Young back-packers brush past me sporting matted hair, burnt faces and peeling shoulders from a weekend in the islands. They've come to Greece for a vacation ... I've come to Greece to recover. I step into the shade and wipe my brow, glad to be out of the moving river of people. Earlier in the year, I had lost my husband in a freak accident. A car ran a stoplight and hit him, killing him instantly. We had planned a trip to Greece, a second honeymoon, and I had never canceled it, keeping the ticket with his name on it in a file, looking at it from time to time. Everyone told me not to come; they said it would be too painful, too lonely. In the suffocating months following the accident, I had a realization: when you're too numb to feel anything, it doesn't matter much where you are.

I breathe a mixture of suntan lotion and fish as I exit the open-air market in the Monastiraki section of Athens. Sidewalk vendors bark at me to buy their wares: cold drinks, skewered chunks of roasted lamb, lottery tickets. The windows are filled with the flotsam and jetsam of the tourist market place: chalky replicas of Cycladic idols, pornographic pots and postcards, baskets of milky blue "evil eyes" staring up at me.

Then I stop; I have been looking all over for these tiny religious portraits. I peer into the shop; the walls are lined with icons of all sizes. Before I enter I glance at the name of the store and laugh. The owner has translated it into English, a poor substitute for the Greek. He calls it Church Things. I like the sound of it better in Greek: Ecclesiastica. I circle round a painted blue post in front of the store; a rusted anchor is shored up against it.

He's a burly guy who greets me warmly. "Sit down, please," he indicates to a stool next to him. A woman is sorting through some items at the table, and when I see them I take in a sharp breath. Even more than the religious icons, I have been looking for these, too. "What are they called?" I ask, pointing at the tiny, hammered squares of silver depicting eyes, arms, legs, ears, Volkswagens. "Tamata," says the man, stressing the first syllable; he introduces himself as Anastasios. "Whatever you want to pray for, there is a tamata for it. I have many, many more,"

he says, dispatching a young man to the back room who fetches two more small plastic bags. He spills them onto the table when he returns. "Ahhhh, c'est tres jolie, tres magnifique," the woman gushes with delight, fanning them out like a deck of cards.

Whatever you need to ask God for, you can use these," Anastasios explains. "You want to heal a broken foot, you hang a tamato of a leg on the iconostasis – the screen in front of the altar of a church – and pray for that. He pauses and smiles gently, offering me a sheet of silver with a flaming heart punched into it. You want to heal a broken heart," he says softly, "you use this."

He is a happy man, or so he seems. I ask him how he got into this business, this shop selling religious artifacts surrounded by the kitsch of lumpy Aphrodite statuettes, cheap sandals and acres of T-shirts.

"A miracle," he answers flatly. "Years ago," he begins, "my wife and I tried to have a child, but were not successful. I began to think we will never be able to. We visited fertility specialists, doctors of all kinds," he goes on. "My wife was told she could not conceive, so she began to pray to the saints."

"One day she traveled to the island of Tinos," booms Anastasios, continuing. "She prayed for five days on this very holy island. My wife, you know..." he sweeps back a stiff handful of graying hair, "She came home." He stops suddenly, then adds in a stage whisper, "My son, he is just turning ten now." He is beaming, this man who appears to be about sixty years old. In a culture steeped in traditions that are not always politically correct, there are few things more meaningful to a Greek man than to be able to produce a son.

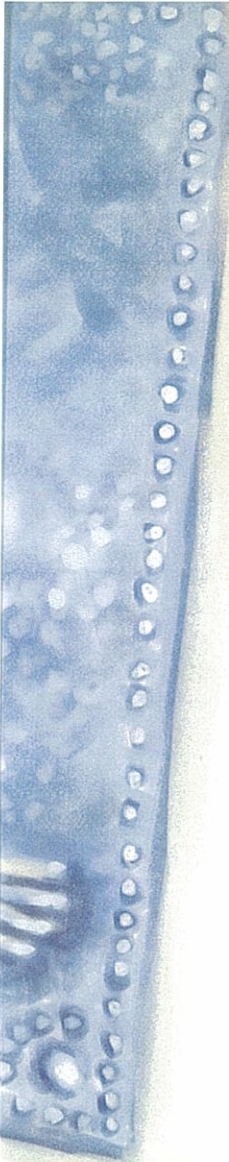
"He almost died at birth," he says, gesturing to his throat. "The doctors had to open his airway to help him breathe ... he has a little scar there now, still..." He stopped talking for a moment, "I knew he wouldn't die, though," he says finally. "God would not have gone to all this trouble to give me a child just to watch it die..."

"In the night, sometimes, in the shop I worked at before, I would hear noises," he murmurs. "My old shop, I sold tourist things, you know, vases, post cards, key rings, all that stuff. But at night, I would sleep in the shop because my wife was so unhappy. I would pray before I went to bed. The night my wife returned from Tinos I slept at the shop," he paused. "...and was awakened by noises." His face contorted suddenly, as if struck by a vision. In an

agonized hush, he leaned in to whisper in my ear, "you know, the heavens, they open up every night between two and three in the morning."

Crossing the room, he sits down, exhausted. I am enraptured by an image of light hovering above his shop when he speaks again. "The next day, my wife felt funny. Three weeks later, the tests confirmed. She was pregnant."

Half-listening, I sit and ponder the nature of these peculiar metal squares. Anastasios' naivete reminds me of how kids play telephone with tin cans and string: here's a direct connection to God – ask for anything you want, and with this lucky silver card, you'll get it! What do you ask for, I wonder, when you don't feel anything anymore; when love has been annihilated. I watch a dove land on the blue post outside the shop, shrug, and adjust its feathers. It peers in the window, its pebble eyes drawn to shiny frames catching the late afternoon sun. Startled by a noise, it lifts off into the guazy Athenian sky. Silently, I admit to myself that somewhere, somehow, if it were possible, I would ask to find my heart again.



"It was God himself, standing here and speaking to me," Anastasios is going on, oblivious to my wandering attention span. "I felt him near me, like it was a real man," he indicates, shaking my shoulders. "At that time, at that moment, I knew what I was to do. I opened this store, selling religious items, portraits of saints. Church things, you know?" He smiles.

I feel dizzy; perhaps it's the heat, and I can't choose which ones to buy; arms, legs, torsos. I tell Anastasios that I'll return tomorrow morning and finish my shopping. Slowly, regretfully I push away the heart into the Frenchwoman's pile.

Getting up to leave, I ask him how his miracle is doing in school. "Fine, fine," he assures me, "he is a good boy. But his mother worries about him all the time," he adds, looking suddenly older and ashen. "Since he was so sick at birth, she feels something else might happen, so he sleeps in her room every night."

"In your bed?" I ask, wondering how a man of his size, his wife and a ten-year old child can all fit into a typical Greek double bed.

"Yes, in our bed, but without me there," he indicates, pointing to the floor. "That is where I sleep now."

"On the floor!" I echo, incredulously. "How long has that been going on?"

"Since he was born," he answers flatly. "Most of the time I sleep in the shop," he continues, "it's more comfortable here." He looks up at the ceiling, puzzled. "Sometimes I still hear noises between two and three a.m."

I thank him for the story and offer my hand; he takes it, clasping and shaking it heartily.

"I wish you luck with your child," I offer weakly, unsure of what to tell him. "I'm sorry

you have to sleep on the floor," I add.

"Oh----no! No problem with that," he answers reassuringly, squeezing my hand a moment longer before releasing it. "No trouble, really ... sleeping on the floor is a blessing," he says as he walks me out onto the street.

"You know the secret about miracles?" he asks softly, as though not to offend the saints who might be listening. He pauses for a moment; a look combining bliss and surrender breaks over his face and takes away the ten years.

"If you ask for a miracle..." he steps back into the store, framed by the door and resembling, just for a moment, a saint himself, "don't ever question the manner in which God delivers it."

That night I lie in bed, listening to the traffic outside my hotel room. Anastasios' words about miracles repeat in my mind, and I find myself wondering where mine is. I've never questioned God. Perhaps I should.

I return to purchase the tamata the next morning with a special one in mind. I can't know who gets selected for miracles, as Anastasios tells me, but maybe I can improve my chances with a silver heart. Facing a return to my life, my emptiness; I am willing to try anything.

Rounding the corner, I watch for the window filled with saints in tiny metal frames. Three shops down, I realize I must have passed it, retracing my steps to check the name of the street. 29 Pandrosou, the exact address, I note, looking up at the shop number. Instead of the icons, the shop in front of me is a typical tourist one, filled with guidebooks, leather passport cases, key rings. I peer inside; a woman sits behind the register, finishing a transaction. I look up at the sign again, then around me. There's the blue post, I reassure myself, and the rusted anchor. "What's going on?" I ask out loud, beginning to feel a little disoriented.

The woman looks up from the register and smiles at me, tilting her head that she doesn't understand English. Just as I am about to ask where Ecclesiastica is, a young boy darts our and brushes past me, accidentally knocking my backpack onto the street. He stops and turns around, about to help me pick it up. He lifts his face to mine, handing me back my pack. There, on his neck, is a small purple mark. Aware of what I am looking at, he smiles complacently and digs something out of his



back pocket. He hands it to me and then turns, skipping off down the street. I stand there until someone stops and asks if I need directions. Shaking my head, I lean against the wall. Taking a deep breath, I look down at my palm and see sunlight glinting off a shiny surface; it feels warm to the touch, comforting. In my hand lies a small silver votive, a flaming heart hammered into it. My fingers open slightly, cradling the heart, protecting it.

I blink my eyes several times and look around, wondering if I'd gotten too much sun. Inhaling, I can smell the fish and suntan lotion. Several pairs of peeling shoulders pass by, a wall of T-shirts flaps in the breeze; I hear a vendor hawking souvlaki. I look at my hand and there is the votive, still war, still shiny. I tuck it into my chest pocket and carefully lift the pack onto my back.

As I step out onto the street, I feel a trickling on my shoulders. Looking up, I shield my eyes against the searing white light. There, on the balcony, broom in hand, is an old woman. Grinning toothlessly at me, her black dress flaps like a helpless crow against the cibachrome sky. While people brush past me I stare at her for a long time, filled with thoughts of loss, of the piercing depths and heights of life. She is alone, but she has her work, a meaningful rhythm of day, a purpose. Instinctively, I reach for the heart against my chest and wonder; maybe I can find mine, again, too.

Checking my watch, I'm lurched back into the

present; children are scrambling over a soccer ball in a nearby alley, a caged canary sings, a blur of butter, in a shop doorway, a train whistle in the distance reminds me I have a plane to catch. Slowly, I get my bearings, adjust my pack and once again join the moving river of people. At the end of the street, I turn back to look; the old woman is no longer on the balcony. Something compels me to wave at her anyway; I lift my hand above my head. It's a tentative salute, I suspect, to loss, life, to miracles, rain ... a salute, in fact, to mysteries; both those which can be solved...

and those which are not meant to be.

