**Rock-Solid Proof of God’s Love**

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Like most Southerners, when it comes to God, I grew up always on the lookout for signs and miracles. In my youth, I remember miracles happening all over the place. People were struck down, lifted-up, led to lost objects, had visitations from dead relatives, saw rashes disappear, and headaches mysteriously vanish. Rain came when prayed for and stopped when somebody said, “Enough!” And we had Oral Roberts healing the blind right on TV!

It seems everyone was looking for a sign, praying for their very own customized miracle, proof that God took a personal interest in their lives. When no miracle appeared, some considered even that as a sign God loved them enough to test them, which is like a consolation miracle.

After you had your miracle, you could relax. You had been redeemed and had an irrevocable ticket to heaven.

The first miracle I remember occurred when I was about five, and my father’s Aunt Mary came to stay with us for a couple of weeks.

As a rule, my mother couldn’t abide having any of my father’s family in the house, and she was depressed for days after they left. They openly resented Dad for getting an education and wanting to do more with his life than scratch out a living on a barren patch of ground, existing hand-to-mouth, and living in a shack with 50 kids. Getting above his raising they called it.

They thought worse of Mom, believing that her flighty ways, the stylish way she dressed, her fancy manners, had led my father astray.

One notable exception was my great Aunt Mary. She was the only relative proud for my father, applauding his ambition. She thought my mother a fine match for her favorite nephew.

I adored Aunt Mary.

She could hold half the world’s sorrows within the deep creases of her lightly powdered face. Her love was a powerful thing. As far as I could gather, she was the only gentle and loving presence in my father’s past, besides his mother who died when he was only 6 months old. Aunt Mary had done what she could to shield him as a child from the mindless violence and neglect that engulfed him.

She married my Uncle Preston, a divorced, one-legged arsonist who had spent time in prison for burning down the house of the man his first wife left him for. Aunt Mary’s long-suffering brand of love transformed him into the nicest person you could ever meet. Uncle Preston even stopped smoking. Which I’m guessing was an especially hard thing for an arsonist to do.

Like the rest of our family, my aunt had never been a Bible-reading, middle-of-the-week Christian, but those few days she stayed with us, she sat out on the porch for hours on end, preaching aloud to Mom and me. I can see her now. Her grey-black hair, which like Samson’s had never been cut, was braided, and piled high on her head like a coil of rope.

She sat in a straight-back chair, hunched over a Bible as big as a tabletop, her finger moving like a desiccated divining rod across the paper-thin pages. She had a soft, trembling voice which when hitched to a Bible verse sounded quite ominous.

She read mostly out of the New Testament, as most folks do at the small end of their lives. They are doubling their bets on a merciful and forgiving God, having no further interest in calling down Old Testament fire on neighboring cities and plagues on their enemies. She was looking for an expansive God of love, a gracious conferrer of miracles.

When my brothers and I would begin playing too rough, she would lift her solemn face from her Bible, her finger frozen on the page.

“Jesus turned the other cheek and healed the lepers!” she called out sweetly, her finger still pointing at the big book, as if she had just found those very words printed there in red.

If God ever has anything to say to me, he would get a lot further if he spoke in Aunt Mary’s love drenched voice.

I asked my mother about Aunt Mary’s newfound passion for reading the Bible.

Mother told me Aunt Mary was going in for an operation soon, so maybe she is asking God for His help. Which was true. The next day she went in for gall bladder surgery.

When they were done, she asked the doctor for her gallstones. She kept them in an empty jar of mentholated rub and held on to them until the day she died.

I never noticed Aunt Mary crack open another Bible. Never heard her talk religion again. I visited her a week before she passed. She was in her nineties, and even then, she wasn’t trying to lasso heaven with prayers woven from psalms of praise and supplication.

I think I know why.

If she ever needed proof of God’s love, she had only to look at her gallstones.