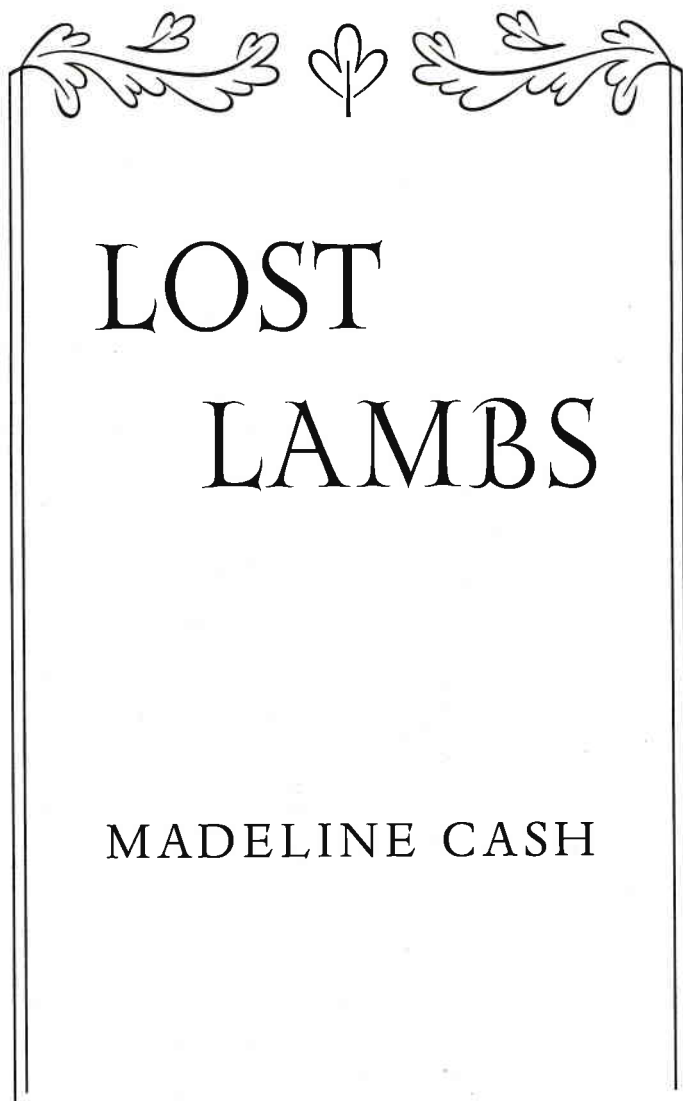


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doubleday

The gnat situation in the church was getting out of hand. It was Miss Winkle's fault, she had brought the gnats and this was unforgivable, not in the eyes of God but those of Father Andrew, who was unable to exterminate the gnats, not for lack of trying—he'd employed every trap, spray, and swatter on the modern market—and yet his efforts had little effect on the greater gnat population. If anything, it was growing. Father Andrew imagined that soon the gnats might attract a larger pest—gnat-eating spiders, perhaps—which might attract, say, frogs, which might attract rats, which might attract cats, which might attract coyotes, which might attract a larger coyote-eating mammal, and so on and so forth. It was Miss Winkle's fault because Miss Winkle had brought the plant into the church, "like God did on the third day!" Miss Winkle attended every church function with her brain-damaged child, who wore gun range earmuffs to mass—the organs startled her—and occasionally Miss Winkle brought plants from the nursery where she volunteered, tending the orchids. Surely she didn't know that the plant had fungal gnat

eggs in its soil, but why bring a plant into a church in the first place? thought Father Andrew. It wasn't a botanical garden. A *monstera* plant too, meaning *monster* in Latin, assumed Father Andrew, although he wasn't sure, hadn't studied Latin at the seminary, majored instead in French Cinema. The plant topped his list of Reasons to Dislike Miss Winkle. Also on the list of Reasons to Dislike Miss Winkle was that she never dogmated to the quarterly fix-the-church-bells charity fundraiser but complained quarterly about the lack of church bells. And she was in the habit of saying "I'll say" when she hadn't, in fact, said anything at all. She had never, in recent memory, offered an original point or enhanced a conversation. She simply tacked "I'll say" onto someone else's conversational enhancement, which was disingenuous and obnoxious and probably indicative of a deeper character flaw, maybe even inherent evil dating back to Miss Winkle's apple-eating ancestor, or at least this was what Father Andrew told the state-mandated therapist. After that unsavoriness a while back with the priests and the altar boys, Our Lady of Suffering made some structural changes to its programming, such as weekly Consent through Christ workshops, an intimacy czar at every confessional, and mandatory psychoanalysis for the presbyters with the newly appointed parish shrink. The parish shrink often attributed Father Andrew's "latent misogyny" toward Miss Winkle to "repressed sexual desire," a diagnosis with which Father Andrew ardently disagreed. He was not repressing anything, had been with a number of women—thirty-three, specifically, one for every year of Jesus's life—before joining the seminary. Plus, he highly doubted that his masculine desires would express

themselves for Miss Winkle, whom Father Andrew often pictured to *dissipate* unhallowed urges.

On this day, the first of April, the rainless peak of the rainy season, Father Andrew was getting ready to leave and catch a *cinéma français* screening at the Vintage Theater when there came a knock at his office door from the youngest Flynn girl, Harper. She hadn't been to church since her parents opened their marriage. Father Andrew fancied himself a progressive priest, but the Flynn's marital "arrangement" seemed neither exploratory in the swinging-sixties sense nor justified in the new age liberal poly-whathaveyou sense but rather a creative avenue through which each spouse could inflict pain upon the other and their three daughters. Harper must have been twelve now, he thought, maybe thirteen.

Harper slid into his office. The stained glass window cast a rainbow palette across her little face. Her little freckles. Her slightly upturned nose. Her hair in twin French braids, rich and brown like a prayer bench. Like a well-kept horse. The three Flynn girls, Abigail, Louise, and Harper, no longer attended mass. They did not come to Sunday service and often skipped their school's Wednesday chapel assembly. They turned in forged notes from the nurse at Sacred Daughters Preparatory School to justify their absences: toothache, feminine troubles, whiplash, duress induced by spoiled milk. They were missing from the community performance of Noah's Ark and were later spotted in the parking lot, a lion, a fox, and a hedgehog, sharing a cigarette. They had not volunteered that year for the town's winter food drive, the Christians for the Cure walkathon, the three-legged race for three-legged dogs, Apple

Bobbing for Autism, or Knitting for Narcolepsy. There was no excuse, really, for poor attendance after the church's employment of digital devotionals. Father Andrew was a practitioner somewhat canonized for his adaptation to the digital age, his multivalence when it came to mass. All places of worship in the town had adapted to the changing times—Rabbi Hoffman had even instituted a mobile bris service: Take an Inch, Give a Mohel. Yet the Flynn girls, the whole Flynn family, were AWOL. Father Andrew reminisced about how they used to love Apple Bobbing for Autism, a real shame.

"Take a seat, Harper."

Father Andrew gestured toward the vacant chair before him. While biblically there were no coincidences, the family's long absence had been broken by their father, Bud Flynn, who'd knocked and taken that same chair only a few days prior.

"Take a seat, Bud," Father Andrew had said.

"Father, say hypothetically a friend of mine wanted to, say, terminate their time on earth. How would that play out, spiritually speaking?" Bud had said.

"*Play out?*"

"Like, would they go to hell—definitively?"

"Well, suicide is a deadly sin. God decides when it is our time. To deny Him of that is heresy—"

"And you're confident that nothing slides through the cracks? It's tight?"

"Like airport security."

"Heresy, huh?"

Father Andrew gave a stoic nod.

"That sounds serious."

“Perhaps your *friend* would like to explore this impulse further?”

“Yeah, perhaps.”

There came a sharp squawking from a couple of feral parrots. The birds had escaped a rich collector of exotic pets some years ago and nested in the church rafters. Father Andrew had hoped the parrots might take to eating the gnats, a gnatural solution to his problem, but they seemed content with foraging for nuts, the shells of which they dropped on the altar like mock offerings.

“Thank you, Father.”

As Bud Flynn fled the office, he deposited a five-dollar bill and a Mango Rooney’s punch card into the collection basket. It was one stamp away from earning a free smoothie. Now Harper assumed his seat, folding her hands in her lap. Her wrinkled button-down fell flat upon her chest, a body that had not yet begun its journey from girl to woman. Of course, Father Andrew was not thinking about Harper’s body’s journey from girl to woman as that would be wrong and no doubt prompt further visits to the parish shrink.

“*BlessmeFatherforIhavesinned,*” said Harper Flynn.

“You wish to confess something, Harper?”

“Yeah. I’ve broken the ninth commandment.”

“You bore false witness?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I lie all the time, actually. Every day, multiple times a day. Whenever I can and about things that don’t matter, like, if my dad asks what we had for lunch at school I’ll say pasta salad and fruit when we had chicken nuggets and celery sticks.”

“Perhaps we should examine the impetus behind your compulsive storytelling.”

“I’m a creative.”

“Let’s dive a little deeper. How are things at home?”

“I think my dad’s trying to kill himself.”

“What makes you say that?”

“He was looking up *least painful ways to kill yourself* on the family computer.”

“I wish that you and your sisters would come back to mass. We are more susceptible to darkness during times of hardship.”

“We’re reformed.”

“I think you’d find the general sentiment resonant.”

Harper liked being spoken to like an adult. Father Andrew could see the cogs turning behind her eyes. He felt tenderly for the little lapsed Catholic.

“Wait, I’m not finished confessing.”

Harper pulled a pink electronic cigarette from her jumper and took a long pull. It gave a gratifying crackle. “I’ve been stealing Mr. Friedman’s Trizoletin from the pharmacy and selling it at school. Sometimes I light small fires behind the laundromat. I started Father Hayworth’s nickname—Father Gayworth—and it’s really caught on. I sent a video of Nordic pornography to everyone in my dad’s work email—it’s a really specific genre, lots of pelts involved. I stabbed a pocketknife into the tire of the church van in the parking lot on the way in here. I have been teaching myself Latin to mess with my school’s Pentecostal group, burning my hands with a magnifying glass and claiming stigmata. I’ve racked up significant debt shopping Korean wholesale websites on my mother’s credit

card. I stole some mousetraps from the Squeaky Mart. I don't know what I am going to do with them yet. Last week I freed a lobster from the lobster tank at the Golden Dragon and left it in my sisters' bathtub. And I cut off Missy's braid in the locker room after tennis and put it in her mother's mailbox."

"That's quite a litany," said Father Andrew, maintaining an even tone. He'd always had his suspicions about Father Hayworth's sexuality, they all did. "But it's not lost on me that you prefaced this visit with your penchant for untruths."

"You're right. I just made all that up to get a rise out of you."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"You're a precocious girl."

"If I had to guess, gun to my head . . ."

"No one is holding a gun to your—"

"Gun to my head, I'd say, I'm incredibly, painfully, mythically bored."

"I see. The disobedience of banality."

"I am a victim of neglect."

"We're offering a virtual Sunday school—"

"I don't want to go to virtual Sunday school."

Harper hit her vape.

"Have you renounced your faith?"

"My virtue is post-theocratic."

Sometimes, in profound silences such as the one that befell Harper and Father Andrew, he swore he could hear the ocean as it labored against the concrete pier at Alabaster Harbor™. But, considering the church's distance from the marina, this

was, of course, impossible. A trick of the inner ear, like listening to a shell, he thought.

“So am I going to hell?” Harper asked.

“No, Harper.”

“Excommunicated? In *latae sententiae*?”

“That’s not for me to say.”

“It’s literally for you to say.”

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” Father Andrew swatted at a gnat irritably. He had mercy on the Flynn family.

As he left the church that afternoon Father Andrew weaved through the pews, collected some nutshells, returned a few songbooks to their pouches, emptied the ashtrays from the alcoholics’ meeting. He locked the great doors and strode through the parking lot, where he knelt and plucked a pocket-knife from the left rear tire of the church van.

Bud Flynn took four Trizoletin he'd pillaged from his daughter's bedroom, masturbated into a tea towel, and prepared to drive the minivan into the sea. The passenger seat was piled with a global shrine of take-out containers—Mexican, Thai, Indian, Chinese, Ethiopian, fare from the independent island gnation of Tuvalu—the collective weight of which amassed to what the car's internal system mistook for a small person, and it chirped at the containers to fasten their seat belt. He thumbed a wrapper once containing a candy bar, a kind that blended milk and dark chocolate. *Bitter Makes It Better*, quipped the label. The cruel hoax of marketing, thought Bud, assuring the consumer that the introduction of adversity into something otherwise pure and good only enhances said pureness and goodness. It was of general opinion that chocolate was already good, why did it need to be better? And why would change, markedly negative change, achieve this goal? *Pretty Good As Is*—that would be Bud's slogan. *Fine, consistent, mostly reliable* Flynn.

Bud caught a glimpse of himself—his halo of hair loss—in the rearview mirror; it was the face of a man who hadn't been cool for several presidential administrations. A man who, in his youth, had contemplated but ultimately decided against three different ironic tattoos and a man who, like his hair, still clung to certain material fantasies that for all intents and purposes no longer existed. Despite his deteriorating exterior, his insides were as reliable as the engine of a German car. A recent colonoscopy, endoscopy, and colorectal cancer screening had all come back clean, which meant he would not soon die, not naturally anyway.

Bud usually didn't care for talk radio. It felt like he was eavesdropping on someone's conversation. But now an anchor was reporting the latest on two men who'd escaped a local prison using only a permanent retainer, and it was, admittedly, compelling content. Not compelling enough to change the evening's chartered course but enough for him to loiter in the driveway awhile. Yet when he drove into the sea, Bud wanted to listen to something of the power ballad variety, those musical vanguards who described thunder as "velvety" and sang of being "guided by light." But, for the life of him, Bud could not understand how to access the car's Bluetooth capabilities.

"Hit 'pair with device.'" His daughter, the middle one, what was her name again—Louise!—was at the driver's window.

"You snuck up on me, honey."

"I've been standing here for, like, a minute and a half!"

He beckoned her to come inside the car. She dawdled, orbiting the vehicle like a minor planet before shoving aside the takeout and assuming the passenger seat. Women are ethereal

creatures, thought Bud, always one foot in another world. The radio skipped onto a program called *Social Light*, about young celebrities who find Jesus. Bud disliked the program immensely. He twisted the knob until he landed on the hard rock station.

“This,” said Bud, “is my guilty pleasure.”

Though any pleasure, thought Bud, was a guilty one.

Louise Flynn sneezed serially into her elbow, spraying the dashboard. Children never failed to leave a residue. Like little snails.

“Bless you,” said Bud.

“What are we doing for dinner?”

“Can you have Mommy order Fabio’s?”

“Fabio’s closed. Like two months ago.”

“Kid. Can’t you just hop into the kitchen . . .” Bud clocked female scorn burgeoning in his daughter’s eyes. “I mean that in a strictly feminist sense. Like, regardless of your gender you should know how to boil some water.”

Bud wondered if, despite this misstep, Louise would once more show him how to work the Bluetooth.

They seemed to be having trouble building a dialogue. So instead they stared ahead at their house, the one bought by his wife’s parents, who used to remind him of this fact often. It was in need of a repaint, the lawn a sodding. The wraparound porch was badly eaten by wood mites, buckling in places. The wind chimes from which Catherine had, as a therapeutic art project, hung the children’s baby teeth, gave an unsettling jingle in the breeze. Bud found them horrific but decided to employ the axiom *pick your battles*, as there would inevitably be something worth digging his heels in over later, such as the color of the