



TANIA DE ROZARIO

There Will Be Salvation Yet

1993. That's when it happens. Two months after your twelfth birthday. It's a sweaty afternoon. This day which blisters with possibility. This day you learn that there are demons inside of you.

You're on your way home from school. You know something is wrong the minute you get off the bus. Your mother waits at the bus-stop, teary-eyed. Your relationship has grown monosyllabic, but the tears feel like a warning, so you ask.

What's wrong?

It is when she smiles that something inside you unravels. You realise hers are happy tears. But her smile is vacant. Placid. A Stepford Wife smile. The tears fall but there is nothing behind them. She's a mannequin crying on command. A talking-doll with electronics scrambled.

You don't have language for this yet.

She grabs you, holds you tight: *Nana has been saved!*

Till that point, Nana, my grandmother, had been a devout Catholic her whole life – that she converted was a shock to everyone.



In the 80s, my mother broke away from the Catholic Church at the urging of a close friend who convinced her she was following a false god. She found herself swept up in evangelical fervour, and when the tide took her, she pulled me along.

Ours was one of the first evangelical churches in Singapore – one that sprouted from religious revivals in the US in the 1920s. Our pastors were white missionaries whose brand of fundamentalism favoured the Old Testament.

My mother's fervour reached a fever point in the early 90s. Home became an open field upon which she rained fire and brimstone on the daily. Every week, she badgered my grandmother to remove her statue of the Virgin Mary from sight: *No dirty idols in my house*. Every week, Nana cried as she placed the statue back in the cupboard. We weren't allowed to have objects or paintings that portrayed faces, in the house: *The next to go will be that Last Supper painting of yours*.

The day James and Sharon, my mother's church-friends, dropped by without prior notice, my grandmother was grieving the loss of her brother who had died of unknown causes. He had been sent from doctor to doctor with excruciating headaches, before passing away in a hospital bed.

They told her that god had sent them. That they had had a vision of her brother in a hospital bed, screaming in pain, cobras on either side of his head crushing his skull. They told her it was because he had married into a different religion and that this was a curse his wife's family must have put on him. They told her that god loved her and that he sent them to save her.



Nana, devastated and broken, believed them.

When you first see your grandma that day, she does not notice you.

She is sitting at the dining table. *The Last Supper*, which usually hangs above heads at mealtime lays flat in front of her. Broken glass is strewn across the dining table. The scene is a puzzle of elements you try to piece together.

It is then you notice that she is carrying a hammer, and you realise that she has smashed the painting. The symbol of her faith - in shards.

Give in to Christ, James says, hand on her shoulder. *You don't want to cling to idols.*

She bursts into a howl of tears that makes your hair stand, and takes a second swing. It splinters glass across the room. The action is, in part, shocking because your grandmother has never been anything if not gentle all the time you've known her.

She puts the hammer down, looks up and notices you. She wipes away her tears. She wears your mother's vacant smile.



It took me years to realise that perhaps the reason I love horror is the fact that I was subjected to it.

The first time I watched *The Exorcist*, it never occurred to me that demon-filled Regan was also 12-years-old when she was exorcised. Like me, her single mother did not know what else to do with her daughter's deviant behaviour.

I love many things about the film – its questions concerning faith, caregiving, the limitations of science. What I enjoy less is watching a young girl's body used as a battleground for the wills of male authority figures: doctors declaring disease, demon defiling flesh, a pair of priests fighting over her body in the name of a male-god-head. Through all this, Regan's mother waits, watches.

The further into the movie we get, the less her body is seen as her own. The further into the movie we get, the more fraught and violent her relationship with her mother becomes.

There is nothing like a horror film to reveal the cultural anxieties of one's time and place. And if horror has taught me anything, it is that nothing has been as enduringly terrifying across time and place as women's bodies.

I learned in church that when it comes to possession, women and children are the most vulnerable. What doubly devilish potential a girl-child must pose – this evil body, this heinous vessel, in need of emptying out.

What they do not understand when they come to your house is that you have lived your whole life with ghosts. The father who leaves your mother before his body is found hanging from a



ceiling fan. Your half-siblings who are strangers living in a commune two countries away. Your mother who decided she had to lose herself to god in order to be whole - lose herself to an invisible man who would be by her side after every other man had left.

No wonder they come to your house looking for ghosts. Ghosts are spilling out of the walls.

Once they are done with your grandma, they tell you to take a shower and put on some fresh clothes. You emerge from the bathroom in a shirt and berm. You stand slouched, thumbs in your pockets. They look you up and down. In that moment, you know what they're here for.

They speak to your mother, gesturing at you, telling her things she already knows. How you speak *like a boy*, swagger *like a boy*. Fit yourself into *boy*-clothes to be one of the boys.

It's the demons, they say, gesticulating manic. We need to get them out.

You want to run. But where do you run? You are twelve-years-old and anywhere you might go will end you back here.

You look at your mother, raise your voice over theirs: *Don't let them do anything to me*.

She ignores you.



Horror is laden with mothers trying to discipline their demonic daughters. Consider Carrie White, whose mother is convinced that her daughter's telekinetic powers are from the devil. She locks her in the closet, makes her pray for forgiveness. She projects onto Carrie her own shame – the humiliation of having had a child out of wedlock, of having her child's father leave them both in the lurch. She tells Carrie not to go to the prom. Warns her that no one could possibly love her, that she is being lured there by classmates who want to laugh at her expense.

She is not wrong. Carrie, after all, is the ultimate victim, bullied in school and abused at home. Wherever Carrie goes, she carries the consequences of her own body. In school she is “ugly”, awkward, repulsive to her fellow students. At home, her flesh is a repository of sin, blossoming with evil, ripe for the wickedness.

In the film's arguably most famous sequence, Carrie is crowned prom queen – a cruel plan to get her on stage- when a rigged bucket filled with pig's blood is emptied onto her in front of the whole school.

The crowd is stunned into silence, and then erupts into laughter. We see them from Carrie's point of view. Fragmented images of students and staff. Their unrepentant glee.

They're all gonna laugh at you!
No one's going to laugh at me, Mama.



Carrie stands on stage, hair dripping blood, satin dress drenched red. Her body revolts.

The gym doors slam shut. The harsh spray of fire hose forces everyone to their knees. Pandemonium. She descends from the stage, eyes bulging rage, arms stiff by her side. Whatever she looks at, she controls. The mic short circuits. The open current catches flame.

The start of the fire is the beginning of the end. She is the only one to emerge from the gym. Behind her, flames lick its insides clean. The exterior walls of the school are decorated with huge, silver stars. She looks like she is walking out from a nightmare and into a dream.

Mama was right. Carrie makes her way home. She wants her mama. She wants to cry. She wants to say sorry. She wants to be held.

Her mother waits for her at home. She carries a knife.

When I turn 36, my mother dies.

It is not a surprise. She has been dying for months and I've been getting texts and messages urging me to go see her.

Not counting my grandmother's funeral, I have not seen my mother in fifteen years. The texts come from church-members I've not seen in twenty. I block every person who finds me on social media, programme every phone number as "Don't Pick Up".



People tell me that death softens troubled relationships. This does not ring true with me. My resolve to not engage is fortified when I receive a message coaxing me to the hospital with the promise of my mother wanting to make amends.

The message comes from the same people who exorcised me when I was twelve.

After my mother dies, I go back to her apartment to clear out her things. Amidst three decades worth of accumulated life, I find a book about “how to bring your adult child back to Christ”.

I have never really believed in god, but I do believe in the ability of religion to magnify within a person what already exists. Perhaps that in itself is a sort of supernatural occurrence, a sort of otherworldly power.

When I meet with a cousin to discuss legal matters, she tells me that because I was not there when my mother died, my mother took the liberty of “forgiving herself” for what she did to me. Given that she clearly had no change of heart in all the time I was gone, I have no idea what she forgave herself for.

One of the most tragic mother-daughter relationships in horror occurs in Robert Egger’s *The Witch*.

17th-century New England: a puritan family departs from church and village over differences in opinion regarding scripture. 16-year-old Thomasin, her



parents and four younger siblings find themselves living isolated on the edge of a forest - a danger zone full of the unknown.

We will conquer the wilderness, Thomasin's father says. It will not consume us.

Over the course of the film, Thomasin's siblings are picked off one by one by unknown forces that her mother attributes to witchcraft. The deeper into the film we go, the more convinced Thomasin's mother is that Thomasin is the witch.

She is half-right.

As viewers, we know from the very beginning that there are witches in the forest who have afflicted the family with curses, stolen the children, ground their bodies into salve. We know they dash through the dark of the woods, run rife with magic and mayhem. But most importantly, we know Thomasin is not one of them.

Towards the end the film, her mother wakes from a dream in which she is breastfeeding her youngest child, to find a raven perched on her lap, pecking wounds into her breasts. She comes out of the cottage. Thomasin is the only one alive. Her remaining siblings have disappeared. Her father has been stabbed by the horns of the family goat.

Fully convinced now that Thomasin has sold her soul to the devil, Thomasin's mother pounces on her daughter, pushes her flat onto the ground, accusing her of killing her family. She hits her repeatedly across the face and tries to choke her. Thomasin does not know what has killed her family, so amidst the blows her mother inflicts, she yells desperately through tears the one thing she does know: *No, mother. I love you.*



See how angry she is? they tell your mother. That snarl is the devil.

For some reason, this is what you remember most sharply from that day. Despite seven hours of being yelled at, of being manhandled. Of watching them burn your childhood belongings on the kitchen stove. Of being told: Your desire is the devil. Your clothes are the devil. Your body is the devil. Despite this, years later, what will make your skin bristle with indignation is the memory of being told that even your rage is not your own, not your right, not a natural conclusion to this madness.

That snarl is the devil. It is at this moment that something inside you shifts. Confirms in your gut that all this is *wrong*. As a child, you have no language to parse this feeling, but you know in your body that it is true.

Like so many other things your body knows to be true, but doesn't yet have words for. Like that feeling you had when you were nine and the pretty neighbour-girl on the eighteenth floor smiled at you in the elevator. Or when you saw two women kissing on screen for the first time when you were ten. Or when you went into your grandfather's closet when no one was home, and put on a pair of his trousers. They hung loose about you, looked ridiculous. But in them, you moved different, walked taller, sat wider, learned to take up space. You looked in the mirror, not knowing that your future would be full of these moments – moments in which something buried inside you would find its way to the surface, smile back at you.



That every single time, it would be like discovering treasure you didn't know you were looking for.

Thomasin is unable to fight off her mother's blows. She is desperate to live, so when her mother wraps her hands around her throat, Thomasin grabs the cleaver that lays strewn on the ground and swings it into her head. Thomasin weeps, sits in shock for the rest of the day, a girl by herself at the edge of a forest. A girl whose whole family is dead.

Hopeless, angry and tired when evening falls, she calls out to the devil, the conspirator her mother seemed so desperate to align her with, daring him to speak. You think the film will end there, but it doesn't.

In the silence, a deep, droning voice emerges from the darkness: *What dost thou want?*

Thomasin, calm, softly responds: *What canst thou give?*

The voice asks if she would like to live deliciously.

She speaks one word: *Yes.*

In the film's final minutes, Thomasin strides naked, deeper and deeper into the woods. She comes upon a clearing. There, women writhe naked in pleasure around a blazing fire, chanting indecipherably. She joins them. They don't require explanation and she does not offer one. She lets her body be consumed



by the moment. Together in their circle, they chant, they laugh. And together, like the moon, they rise slowly into the sky.

The film's final shot is one of Thomasin's face. In her laughter, there is bliss, wonder. As the camera pulls away, we see her in the air. All around her, the tips of pine trees. Suspended, she stretches out her arms, inviting the wilderness into her chest. She is delirious with joy. She is free.

Seven hours into the exorcism, you understand that you are gay. Before this day, all desire was a passing phase – something destined to fade with age. These people, what they think they have quelled, they have magnified. They've confronted you with your own reflection, explained you to yourself. What they call you, you are. And you understand that for this to end, you need to give in.

Do you understand that you are a sinner?

You speak one word: *Yes*.

What you keep to yourself is the fact that you don't care.

You are a sinner. And you don't care.

It is possibly the most adult thought you've had till then, and it is exhilarating - your first brush with feeling free. It transforms you. Intensifies your rage. Forces you unexpectedly into understanding. Between broken belongings and a broken heart, you learn quickly: when they say something inside you needs casting out, it is you they are referring to.



And that is fine. Because you will cast yourself from this place. You will conquer the wilderness and become it. You will revel in your rage, be consumed by the jaws of your own wild hunger. And it will be delicious. And there will be salvation yet.



BIOGRAPHY

Tania De Rozario is a writer, artist, and the author of *Tender Delirium* (Math Paper Press, 2013), *Somewhere Else, Another You* (Math Paper Press, 2018), and *And The Walls Come Crumbling Down* (Math Paper Press, 2016 /Gaudy Boy, 2020). She was the 2020 winner of the New Ohio Review Nonfiction Contest and the 2011 winner of Singapore's Golden Point Award for English Poetry. Her writing and comics can be found in journals including *The Malahat Review*, *Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, *Prairie Schooner Online Journal*, *Blue Lyra Review*, *carte blanche*, *Softblow* and *subTerrain Magazine*, amongst others. From 2006-2018, Tania worked as an adjunct at Lasalle College of Arts, where she taught various visual and cultural studies classes across the School of Fine Arts and the School of Creative Industries. She is currently an adjunct at the University of British Columbia, where she teaches Graphic Forms for the Department of Creative Writing's undergraduate programme.

NOTE

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