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For the Love of God

Marissa Hansen

Marissa Hansen's short story *For the Love of God* was written as part of a creative writing group using the theme of *Moving On*.

MOVING ON

Mari Hansen (English)

Jake Hjelmtveit (English)

Christopher Peterson (English)

Eric Hoffheiser (English)

Hans Hetrick, Graduate Student Mentor (English)

Richard Robbins, Faculty Mentor (English)

For our group, *Moving On* represented the emotional weight in fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. "Moving on" implies change, and all good prose and verse possess change. As creative writers, we explored this theme through subjects ranging from death of a loved one to loss of one's faith. By focusing on our theme, we examined our own lives and improved our own creative writing skills. We attained our goals through observation, discussion, information gathering, writing, and revision of creative work. We met frequently to discuss our work and ideas. We strove to bring each individual piece to a publishable quality and plan to submit our works for publication. In the hopes that others will gain from our awareness, we plan to present our writing at the conference, individually reading our work to the audience.

Marissa Hansen

For The Love Of God

Brother Theodore smelled of cheese. Not the cheese on a juicy quarter pounder, but the furry cheese in the back of the refrigerator with no wrapper. The kind that gives off a smell so rank that it coats the inside of your sinuses, irritating the back of your throat until all that comes out is a dry heave. How I got stuck with him, I don't know.

"Someone is coming," Brother Theodore said. "Are you ready?" He gave me a push.

"Excuse me, sir? Do you have a moment to talk about the Lord?"

"Um . . . not really, no, I'm kind of in a hurry. . ."

"Please, it will just take a minute of your time."

A sigh. "All right."

It always went that way. No one ever wanted to talk about God in public. We were supposed to work in two-man teams; the routine was to wait in the student union for people to drop in to run whatever errand they had. When we saw someone coming, the first person rushed out to greet them while the other checked to see if that person had brought any friends. Once you were spotted, there was no escape.

The most common reactions from people were to look away, pretend to talk on a cell phone, or escape into the nearest building. The poor souls who weren't able to look busy, and were too polite to run, fidgeted during the blessings and prayers, and fled, looking embarrassed when the mini-service was over. After the token prayer and handing out the little Bible, I always apologized for taking up their time before retreating to wait for the next victim.

* * *

It's Helen's fault I'm doing this. I met Helen my second year in the dorms; she was the girlfriend of the Community Advisor on my floor. She liked me because I listened to what she had to say, and I liked her because after she was done talking, I got some head.

It was a rumor on our floor that Helen had been in a porno. She was certainly hot enough—tall, dark eyed, a natural beauty—and it was a constant topic of speculation among my floormates as to whether this was true or not.

"I think I found it!" was a common call on our floor, followed by everyone running to whatever room the voice had come from to huddle around a computer monitor.

"There? See? Doesn't that look like her?"

"That chick's blonde, moron."

"Not her, *her!*"

"Oh, yeah, kind of looks like her, doesn't it?"

"That guy has a huge . . .!"

Of course, it never really was Helen, but it gave us something to do for fifteen minutes. It was the closest thing to a 'floor event' that we did all year.

It was a surprise when she started showing an interest in me. She somehow found my private e-mail address and we began a harmless correspondence, which turned into a close friendship, which took a turn when she stole her boyfriend's master key for the floor and met me at my door after class—naked. I tried to figure out why she wanted me,

but, as my daddy always said, “It’s a fool that looks for logic in the chambers of the human heart.”

We might have kept this all a secret if my roommate hadn’t been such a snitch. Or if the CA lived on a different floor. Or if Helen wasn’t a screamer in bed. But we had all of this working against us, and were found out.

This got me evicted from the dorms. The CA made some accusations and I was faced with being suspended or finding somewhere else to live. Helen and I found a place not far from campus, and for a while we were like two bunnies in the springtime. It seemed like things were going to work out. Then, Helen found God.

Helen always said that I needed more personality and less cynicism. I don’t think of myself as overly sarcastic; it was just that I could never hold a deep conversation with Helen. She was one of those girls who wanted to hear something profound and meaningful, and I just couldn’t offer evocative commentary without at least a touch of derisiveness. When she walked into the apartment, I was parked in front of the TV playing Halo. “How was your day?” I asked, not looking away from the screen. “Wanna be player two?”

“Why is it, when I’m trying to be serious, you’ve got something stupid to say?” She put her bag down and grabbed a soda from the fridge. She came in the living room and sat next to me on the couch. “You should have been at the library with me. I met some people today, and they had the most interesting things to say.”

“Hmm,” I said.

“They shared the word of God with me, and it was amazing! I never knew that He had so much to offer a person. I think we ought to stop living in sin and join this church.” She paused and looked over at me. I was still engrossed in the game.

“Would it kill you to say something?”

“I did.”

“You said ‘Hmm’. That’s the first thing you’ve said since I got home. I’m trying to share my day with you and you just sit there, not talking. Please, *please*, try not to strain your precious vocal chords.”

“I’ll try not to.”

When I looked up, she was sniffing. *Dammit*, I thought, pressing pause and putting the controller down. I hated it when women cried; I never knew what to do. “Helen, come on. Don’t do this.”

“I’m not doing anything,” she said, wiping away tears. “All I wanted was to join this church and to feel better about us and our relationship, and I wanted you to join with me so I wouldn’t be alone. And you can’t . . . you can’t even . . .” By now, she was crying so hard that she couldn’t catch her breath.

I sighed, knowing I had lost. Even when I know I’m being manipulated, I can’t win. “Fine, Helen. Just stop crying, and I’ll join this stupid church thing.” She stopped crying almost immediately.

“I love you,” she said, moving onto my lap and putting her arms around me.

After that, we had some pretty nondenominational sex--the kind you don’t see much written about in the Bible. Let’s just say that *missionaries* had no part in it. I just hope the apostles got the same deal.

* * *

It was getting late in the afternoon and I was starting to get lightheaded from the Limburger man. The early summer heat began to seep through the windows, making the smell even worse. It was like being in a greenhouse on fertilizer delivery day. I began to think of excuses to leave.

“Get ready, get ready . . .” Brother Theodore was hitting my arm and pointing out the window. I could almost smell his cheesy excitement.

“Look, Brother, I think I’m going to quit,” I said. “It’s my first time out, and I have homework to do.”

“All right, Brother. We had a good day. Why don’t you just run these Bibles back to the Church and we’ll call it square?” He handed me his keys. “I’ll see you tomorrow. God bless!”

“Yeah, same to you,” I mumbled, picking up the box of little green Bibles and backing away. “Later.”

After dropping off the Bibles, I wandered around the house that they used as a church. It was a fairly standard building, cheaply shingled and unkempt. The paint was peeling and the cement steps were chipping. I wondered briefly about the possibility of asbestos and thought that it would explain a lot. I was about to leave when I found the storeroom full of communal wine. Hell, it’s the afternoon, I thought as I opened a bottle and took a drink. *Fruity and aromatic*, I thought, swirling the bottle. *Delicious. Thank you, Lord.*

Most of the bottle later, I felt *damn* good. As I left the house, I started thinking of ways to incorporate alcohol into sermons. Use vodka instead of Jesus’ blood! Make Sundays into a BYOB! Take a drink when the altar people yawn! I giggled to myself as I wobbled around a truck parked in the driveway. That would be the best game ever!

I tripped over my shoelace and fell, skinning my knee. I leaned against the truck’s bumper and drunkenly tried to tie my shoe. I lost my balance when the truck began to back out. The last thing I saw was the truck’s license plate as it connected with my head.

The driver got out and ran to see what he had hit. He was a big man with a five o’clock shadow and dark circles under his eyes. His uniform was a size too small and the buttons that actually made it into button holes were crooked. He looked as if he could have used a drink; I would have shared, had I not been lying on the ground. He swore and punched the truck. Then he swore some more for his broken finger. He kept eyeing me, but didn’t take any action, as though he hoped I was just pretending that he ran me over with his big, brown delivery truck.

“He ran out behind the van,” he muttered. “He’s drunk. He attacked me. They’ll believe that.” He shook his head. “No, wait. It’s the company’s fault; they didn’t fix the reverse warning beeper thing. That’s it.” He began to pace back and forth, nursing his finger.

My buzz was gone and I was pissed. My head spun and, drunk or not, I felt like throwing up. What kind of moron could just back a truck into someone? I expressed this sentiment, adding a few of my own original four-letter word combinations, but the driver just ignored me and started poking my body with the electronic signature taker.

I tried to pull him off me, grabbing his shoulders and yanking, but it was like we were on different planes. I could touch him, feel him, but the resistance stopped me from actually moving him. I kicked, bit, shouted, but nothing worked. I had to stop and pause, trying to pull forth the logistics of what was happening. I was lying on the ground, bloody

and boney, but I was also standing, looking down at myself. Nothing was making sense. Could I have been wrong about my buzz being gone? Was there something in the wine that I didn't know about? Could cults buy pre-drugged wine? I sat down on the driveway to think this through. Could I be. . .

"No. You're not dead. You're waiting." A man's voice.

A shadow was cast over me. I shielded my eyes but still couldn't see. "Who are you? What am I waiting for?"

"You're waiting for me." He stepped into the light. When my eyes finally focused, there He was. Complete with shag coat, white jeweled jumpsuit, platform shoes, and a 'fro, just like in my dreams. My Savior.

It was Hippie Jesus.

* * *

Someone had called the paramedics and my body was taken to the hospital where, Hippie Jesus explained, it would lay in a coma until I was ready to return to it. We sat in the church eating the altar bread that the FedEx man had delivered before hitting me with his truck.

"How come we can eat and drink, but I couldn't move the guy who ran me over?" I asked, uncorking more wine. "Isn't this the same concept?"

"This is holy," Hippie Jesus said. "It's been blessed, and for that reason it exists in both the physical world and in our world. We could eat cases of this and the normal people would never notice."

"This stuff's pretty tasty," I said. "The whole wheat variety would be great with some jam. You never bled that, did you?"

"You know, for someone who just got hit by a truck and is having an out-of-body experience, you're handling this quite well," Hippie Jesus said, smoothing out his multicolored shag coat. "Most people I see are much more upset when they find out, not wondering why they can eat and drink."

"Am I dead, then?"

"Not really," he said. He reached over and took a handful of bread from the package I was holding. He stared at the wafers for a moment and then cautiously put one in his mouth. "My God, you're right! These *would* be great with jam." He finished off the bread and took what I had left.

"So, if I'm not dead, then what exactly am I?" I asked, opening another package.

"You're indecisive," he said. "You need to identify with yourself and with your place in the world, so you can then identify with religion." He looked at me over round, mirrored sunglasses. "With a *real* religion, not a bullshit one like this."

I snickered. "Shit," I said. "Ha ha ha."

"Exactly," Hippie Jesus said, rolling his eyes.

"Hey, I identify with myself just fine," I said, wiping away tears. "I know my place in the world. It's just the religion part that I'm not sure about yet."

"Yeah? Do you really like that Britney Spears CD you've got in your backpack?"

"Well, no, not really," I admitted. "Helen put it there. She owns all the CDs we listen to."

"And what are you going to school for?"

“No clue. I think I’ll just dink around for a few years, and then maybe I’ll decide. I’ve got a few things in mind, but I really haven’t picked up anything interesting yet.” I paused, re-thinking what I just said. “Oh, damn.”

“Don’t worry about it, kid. That’s why I’m here.” Hippie Jesus took a swig of wine to wash down the bread. “You’re going to have a revelation, and you’re going to like it.” He turned to face me. “Tell me. Tell me about what makes you who you are.” He touched my forehead and we began.

* * *

God had always been an uncomfortable subject for me. My family had gone to church when I was little, but, mostly out of laziness, we hadn’t attended a service for quite some time. Once, I was talked into going to a church youth group by a friend who aspired to become a pastor. He went for the discussion, and I went for the free pizza and pop. There were only six other people there, including the two leaders, and all I remember doing was watching “The Ten Commandments” with Charlton Heston and reading some Bible passages someone brought along to discuss. Then they played basketball and went home. I thought it was boring, but everyone else there seemed to be having a great time talking about God. But this made me think of Chastity Isaacson.

My first girlfriend. Her name alone should tell you how far our relationship went. But at the time it wasn’t about that. Chastity was innocent, extremely kind and honest, and would have made a great girlfriend. If only she hadn’t already been married to the Lord.

Her family attended church twice a week and all the kids were involved in the church’s youth ministry. Her sister’s name was Hope and her brother’s name was Isaiah. I had gone to the “Ten Commandments” youth group night with Isaiah. Hope was older and was the assistant youth group leader. Not one of the Isaacsons could understand why I wasn’t as involved as they were.

“Don’t your parents attend?” Mrs. Isaacson would ask. “It’s the parent’s job to make sure the children receive the *right* kind of education.”

“They, um, used to go, but they haven’t, in a while,” I’d say, cowering under her gaze. Mrs. I was a scary lady—she had not-so-subtle ways of making people feel inferior. “Not enough time, you know how it is.”

“Well, that’s just terrible,” she would say. “You’ll just have to come with us to today’s service.” I knew she would never understand that we *chose* not to go to church, that it was a free-will decision. Instead, it seemed as if she’d deluded herself into thinking that we were third-world heathens who needed ‘just a dollar a day’, our own copies of the Bible, and a push in the right direction.

During the services, I always had to sit between her and Mr. Isaacson. I was never allowed to sit next to Chastity in church—God forbid we hold hands in the house of the Lord.

Our relationship went sour in just one morning. During a sermon, the pastor blessed the congregation and said, “May the power of Christ compel you.” I was reminded of a scene in *The Exorcist*, when the possessed girl vomits on everyone. Then I imagined the pastor doing the same to the people in the front of the church, and started to giggle. Everyone in the surrounding pews turned to see who it was. I received several matronly glares—and one from Chastity.

After the service, Chastity pulled me aside and asked what had happened.

“The Exorcist!” I said. “Great movie. You know, the priest says, ‘May the power of Christ compel you!’ and then the possessed girl says, ‘Your mother’s in here, Karras. Would you like to leave a message? I’ll see that she gets it . . .’” I drifted off, seeing her expression.

“I don’t think this is going to work out,” she said, frowning. “You’re holding me back from my relationship with Jesus, and at this point in my life, I can’t have that.” She turned and got into her parent’s car, leaving me at the church without a ride.

It’s funny—I didn’t cry once. I always thought I might have loved her, but it turned out I was mistaken. I liked Chastity as much as I was allowed to, but there was no place for me in her world. The only love she had to give was for Jesus and Jesus alone.

* * *

I sat for a moment, listening to Hippie Jesus tapping the last crumbs of bread into his mouth. He looked up as he realized I was finished.

“Mph. Sorry.” He brushed off his shag coat and returned his attention to me. “What were you talking about? Oh, yeah. So, this girl, Chastity. Would she have been different without being so religious?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I mean, it’s hard to tell. Who’s to say she would have lost both the prudishness and the sensitivity without it?” I scratched my ear. “If she had been that different, would I have liked her as much as I did?”

“Ah, there’s the key,” said Hippie Jesus. “Religion can be the key in making a person who they are. It’s just like how experience changes you. Religion is part of that experience. It’s a part of your heritage and a part of what makes you, *you*.”

“But what if other people can’t accept the way *you* are?” I asked.

“How do you mean?” Hippie Jesus asked.

“Like Tessa,” I said.

* * *

“Hey, I need to talk to you. Give me a minute?” My brother Ray waved me over to his room. It was the Thanksgiving before I went off to college and my brother was home for the holidays. He had just started grad school and, he had hinted earlier, there was a secret he wanted to tell. I went into his room and he shut the door behind me.

“What’s up?” I asked, sitting on the bed. He sat on his computer chair and sat for a minute, staring at the wall. I didn’t say anything; Ray liked to think things over before saying them.

“I . . . I met a girl at school,” he said. “She’s coming tonight for dinner.”

“That’s great!” I said without hesitation. Ray was the quiet type, and this was the first girlfriend he had brought home since his high school prom. He was good-looking, but had a stutter that sometimes made him seem jumpy and hyperactive. “So what’s the problem?”

“Grandma’s coming too, and . . . Tessa is Jewish. You know how Grandma feels about that.”

He didn’t need to explain. Our grandma was one of the people who insisted that the Holocaust never happened, and that the Jews had made it up to make the rest of us feel bad. When my brother was in ninth grade, he had to read the book *Night*. My grandma found out and, enraged, led a district-wide book burning that made the newspaper’s front page.

“Just don’t tell her,” I said. “She doesn’t need to know and ruin the holidays for you two.” I learned long ago that Grandma didn’t need to know a lot of things—like the fact that our family didn’t go to church, for example.

“She’ll have to find out sometime,” Ray said, reaching into his pocket. He pulled out a small octagonal jewelry box. “I’m going to ask Tessa to marry me.”

There have only been a few situations in my life where Ray has left me speechless. This was one of those times. The doorbell rang and Ray got up to answer it. I followed him, and was introduced to Tessa. She seemed nice and very attractive, but, I thought to myself, she looked very, very Jewish.

That night at dinner, all I could do was watch and, for once, be totally serious. Grandma was in her wheelchair at the head of the table while Ray nervously dug a hole in his potatoes. Tessa sat uncomfortably between them. Grandma stared at Tessa’s nose the entire meal.

Tessa fielded the questions lobbed at her, carefully sidestepping around her family background and instead impressed everyone with her education and intelligence. Everyone but Grandma seemed to like her. Although the meal went well enough, the bomb was set to go off during dessert.

Ray and I helped clear the table and then carried out plates of pumpkin pie. I saw him slip something into Tessa’s piece before giving it to her. I admired his smoothness until it became apparent that he hadn’t thought out the ‘ring-in-the-Cool-Whip’ idea. She choked on the first bite and nearly swallowed it, and my Uncle Will had to slap her on the back to stop her coughing.

As Ray sat next to Tessa and took her hand, my mother gasped and dropped a piece of pie onto my father’s lap. He just sat there, smiling like an idiot, not knowing what to do. When my grandmother began to curse, clutching her chest and screaming about blood betrayal, we all knew Thanksgiving was over.

The wedding never happened. Ray swore he wouldn’t let anything stop him from getting married, but when Grandma suffered two heart attacks in six months, Ray never spoke of Tessa again.

* * *

Thinking of those I had grown up with and what they had experienced, I felt a new connection to life. I looked to Hippie Jesus, but he was gone. The room began to spin and then disappeared as I was swept back into my body.

When I woke, Helen was there. Her clothes were rumpled and her hair desperately needed a wash. I never loved her so much. I turned to face her and was startled to see she was crying.

“Oh, Lord, why would you do this to me?” She was staring into the hospital lights and clutching a small copy of the Bible. “I’ve put my past behind me, but now You won’t let me move forward! Please, if you let him be okay, I’ll do whatever it takes to devote myself to You!” Tears were collecting on the tip of her nose and dripping onto her arms. She wiped them away but continued to pray to herself.

Jesus, I thought. She really believes in this. I took her hand and she nearly fainted. “Hel,” I said, “we need to talk.”