

# Blue Plaid

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At the school of Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrow, we were required to always mind our appearances. We each wore a blue plaid pleated skirt, a shirt with a white Peter Pan collar, a royal blue cardigan, and royal blue knee-high socks. Every morning after the pledge of allegiance, we got down on our knees, and Sister Adeline would walk the room with a ruler measuring how far our skirts were from the ground. We were allowed no more than two and a half inches. Earrings were prohibited. Our fingernails were checked for length and polish. Clean, unpainted, and short were the requirements. Our hair was to remain simple to avoid causing distraction. We were to come as God had made us.

We learned to recognize temptation early. We learned to identify the snakes that tempted us to eat forbidden fruit. We learned that the fruits were called sins and we were born with them. Our baptism cleansed us of the sins which marred us at birth. Then we spent the rest of our lives collecting them again. Sins were everywhere. On TV behind the scrambled signal, in our older cousins' tape collections, in locked cabinets in the living room, and on the top shelf of the magazine rack at the corner store, marked "Adults Only." God was also everywhere watching everything we did, including using the bathroom and showering. With our parents on Earth, God above, and the Devil below, we were tamed by fear from all sides. This fear was meant to keep us pure and assured us a pathway to the gates of heaven.

We began this path with Reconciliation, when we confessed our sins to Father Stephen, telling him of the forbidden fruit we had eaten. We were only six years old when we disclosed to him the sins of children. Daisy, forever weight-conscious, confessed to

sneaking Hostess cupcakes in the middle of the night. Jocelyn told Father Stephen how she threw a kickball at her brother's face on purpose. Rochelle, the most God-fearing among us, confessed she stole a pen from the Hello Kitty store. Ailyn revealed that while her mother showered she would often try on her lipstick. Eva told us she made up her sins. She said she felt weird about telling her secrets to an old man she barely knew.

After confessing, we were to recite the Act of Contrition, an eight-line prayer of penitence. Ailyn forgot the words. Daisy scrawled the prayer on various parts of her arms and hands. Jocelyn used a tiny scrap of paper. Eva managed to fit the whole prayer on the sides of her pink eraser. Some of us were completely distracted by the golden cups and ornate robes in the confession room. Some of us laughed at Father Stephen's bad wig. Some of us were afraid and cried. We all did our penance. We were all forgiven. We all sinned again.

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Our first formal trip of many down the aisle of the Church of Perpetual Sorrow happened when we received the Sacrament of Communion. We were offered the Eucharist, a perfectly circular wafer that symbolized the body of Christ. When ingested, it was supposed to nourish our souls and bring us closer to God. The Eucharist was only administered to those who were worthy to receive it. It was withheld from those who were too young, not of the faith, those whose transgressions had yet to be forgiven, or worse, those whose sins could never be absolved.

On Communion Day, with our heads held high, we marched forward before the congregation wearing dresses and veils akin to bridal attire. The boys wore suits, and their hair was slicked to the side with gel. They were little men, future husbands. It was hard to believe these were the same terrors from the playground who would try to throw sand in our hair. Wearing our most solemn faces, we received the Eucharist and walked back to our assigned seats. Our hearts fluttering inside of our chests, we were excited to finally join the rest of the congregation in this ritual. Eva, however, seemed unimpressed. When we knelt down to pray, she cupped her hands over the railing of the pew in such a way that it resembled the outer lips of a vagina. We had to bite our lips to keep ourselves from laughing out loud. We were seven years old then.

We took turns being photographed at the small wooden pew near the altar after the mass. We posed with Father Stephen. We posed with our parents and grandparents. We were not sure what we had accomplished, but they were proud of us nonetheless. We received fancy rosaries and personalized Bibles. We counted our money to see who got the most.

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Like the rest of us, Eva lived within arm's length of the church her entire brief life. She had a huge family that filled about ten pews of the church if you put them all together. Though more like a tribe, they never all sat together. They were scattered about the church in different sections with no discernible pattern. None of us could quite understand who was related to whom. Eva's father always sat in the first pew of the farthest right row of the church with his wife, who was more Catholic than most. They had one child still in the arms and another just starting to walk. Eva could always be found in the back of the church, the farthest left row, sitting with just her mother in a dark corner.

Eva's mother, Clio, carried herself with a slight air of royalty. She was a woman of small stature, but we could almost see the air move around her as she walked. It was clear that this tribe was not Clio's family of origin. They were of relation to Eva and her father, who also lived within their tribal village. Clio didn't resemble them at all. They were mostly fair-skinned with wide, heart-shaped faces. Clio's features were more mysterious in origin. Perhaps she had more Spanish blood in her. She had hazel-colored eyes and slim, delicate features atop a glowing brown complexion. She had a small frame, but her body exuded strength. She emanated sex. She had small, round breasts, which were perfect for her size. What she lacked upfront, she made up for in the back. She gave us hope that we didn't need to have the big boobs we were hoping God would give us. She dressed creatively with second-hand dresses, jewelry collected from various parts of the globe, lipsticks of every shade, and fine rings acquired at estate sales. She never let us call her Miss or Tita. She preferred only her first name.

"Oh, please! Do I look like your Tita?!" she would often say.

We were entranced with Clio, but our mothers were particularly obsessed with the idea that she was a witch. Her house was filled with the gods of many people. When any of us

would visit, Clio introduced us to the different statues she had in her home, as if they were people. The Buddha greeted us first and was followed by Mazu, a Chinese sea goddess. Erected in the living room was an elaborate altar comprised of crystals arranged in various patterns. There was yet another altar adorned with peacock feathers, seashells, and sunflowers. In the hallway, there was a figure of Kali with her many arms, and by Clio's bedside, there was Santo Niño, or the Filipino baby Jesus, with whom, of course, we were already familiar.

“There are many gods, you know. Not just the ones you all learn about at school,” she would tell us. We were mostly confused by this because the first commandment told us there was only but one God. Maybe this was why our mothers didn't like us to go to Eva's house.

While most of our houses were decorated with nondescript artwork, rattan, and various larger-than-life wooden spoons and forks, Eva's house was unique. It was brimming with color and textures. There were a variety of paintings, some with erotic suggestion, small sculptures, and textiles from around the world. However bright and magnificent we found the house to be, there were still peculiarities about the house that were not decorative in nature. A few walls and one door in the hallway had holes the size of a woman's fist. There were times when the house was impeccably clean. Everything organized meticulously. Shelves and desks were lined with little containers that each served a particular purpose. A container for stray hair ties, another for lost earring halves. At times Clio could be found immersed in a new art project, which required her focused attention; other times, the house would be a jumbled mess. Clothes strewn everywhere, dishes unwashed. During these periods, Clio was always very tired. Sometimes she would pick up Eva wearing pajama pants, no makeup, and an oversized sweatshirt. On those days, we did what our mothers taught us to do. We'd pretend that we didn't see her but then gossip about it later.

The other thing about Clio was that she was always out of town. During those times, Eva would be in the care of her grandmother. She had what our mothers called *makating paa*, itchy feet, which meant it was hard for her to stay in one place. She wasn't a nurse, caretaker, or admin person like most of our moms. She was studying the “healing arts,” as she would tell us. These studies required her to travel often to other countries. Clio didn't have a family of her own to help with Eva. Maybe her parents had already died. She didn't

have any siblings whom we knew of. All she had was Eva and the community in which she had become enmeshed.

Sometimes we eavesdropped on tsismis about Clio from our mothers. They wouldn't bother to lower their voices when they gossiped. In fact, they always squawked so loudly we could hear them clearly from the living room as we pretended to work on our projects after school. None of us spoke Tagalog, but we understood it. Though our mothers knew this, somehow it seemed that speaking in Tagalog offered them some kind of barrier to our prying American ears.

"And, you know, Eva is just there with her Lola nearly every day? Poor Lola Pilling! She's so old, and she has to take care of that wild girl! Did you know that she even has to pay for Eva to go to the school?"

"Talaga!?" the choir chimed in amongst the sounds of clinking coffee spoons and sizzling fish.

"Clio never offers Lola Pilling a dime! She spends all her time and money gallivanting around town and going on trips with her boyfriends, or whatever they are."

"Have you seen her newest one? I think he's some kind of lawyer. He drives a Mercedes. E-Class. Very nice."

"And did you see Eva with that necklace? Where do you think she got it? Looks so expensive."

"You know, Jocelyn told me that Eva thinks she can do magic with it. Bruha!"

"Neh Neh is from the same town. Clio's relatives are all witches, and some of them can tell the future."

"And can you believe? She even takes Communion! And her house! All kinds of . . . I don't know what! So messy. Naku!"

Even though our mothers thought Clio was the anti-Christ, we thought she was extraordinary. We didn't consider the mood swings Eva would tell us about or the mornings that Eva said her mom hadn't come home. We were smitten with her whole lifestyle. She seemed to know a little something about everything. French cuisine, Greek mythology, human

anatomy, jazz. The house was a small library with books ranging from *The Communist Manifesto* to *The Merck Manual of Medical Information*. Besides those times when it seemed she was unable to leave her bed, she was bursting with life. She was a bolt of electricity. What we failed to see, however, was that Eva didn't always feel the same.

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Like our mothers, we also held our own court. We used to sit in the middle of the baseball diamond at lunch. The school couldn't always afford to hire someone to maintain the field year round, and the weeds were nearly as tall as we were, their spiky fronds leaning about in every direction. We didn't mind. It was the closest thing to adventure we could find on school grounds. Sometimes we'd play tag, or we'd pull the spiky seeds off the weed stalks and throw them at each other like darts. With our socks pulled up as high as possible to avoid the itchy prickles, we worked at tamping down an area right in the middle. We then laid out our cardigans, creating an island of royal blue in the middle of the pale-yellow overgrowth.

It was there that Eva revealed her most prized possession: the necklace, which she had never taken off since the day her mother bought it. She probably wore it in the bath. It was much too elegant to wear on just any day and much too fine for such a young girl to wear, but she didn't care. We were not allowed jewelry at school, so she wore it underneath her blouse.

We were yearning to adorn ourselves with anything we could get our hands on. Makeup, dangling earrings, charm bracelets, rings. These things were the contraband of the fifth grade, and we went to great lengths to obtain them. Rochelle was obsessed with Hello Kitty anything. Daisy had a collection of nail polishes she was only allowed to wear on her toes. Ailyn had a collection of mood rings. Jocelyn was into choker necklaces. Anything to make us feel like we were women.

Clio found the necklace at the estate sale of the old lady on Wilde Street who had recently passed away. She was one of the few Italians left, and her house was one of oldest houses in the entire neighborhood. We thought it was haunted. The necklace looked like it was from a Dracula movie. It had several quartz stones surrounded by filigree and was held together by an intricate web of silver chain. It was creepy and beautiful.

“My mom says that anyone can be a witch,” Eva told us as she loosened her collar. “You don’t even have to know spells. You just have to put your energy into it. If you want something to happen, you just have to believe it will.”

“But isn’t that the same thing as praying?” Ailyn asked.

“Yeah, I guess it is.”

She told us about the healing properties of quartz and all the things that it could cure. She took off the necklace, and we took turns wearing it. We closed our eyes and thought of the things we wanted most. We wished for our crushes to reciprocate our admiration. We wished for bigger boobs, for finer noses, or lighter skin. We wished for Sister Adeline to catch some horrible disease. We lifted our faces to the sky and opened up our chests to the sun. Eva said the sun energized the crystals that way. We attested to the power of the necklace. In that moment, we caught a glimpse of the powers that lived inside of us. We believed.

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But something happened to us around the time we turned twelve. Either it was forces around us or forces inside us. Maybe it was both. Gone were the days when we ran around the baseball diamond. We stopped believing in magic necklaces. Like hungry wolves fighting over scraps of meat, we tore each other apart for any slight deviation, any sign of individuality—whether it was the way we decided to wear our hair, what kind of shoes we wore, or even things we couldn’t help, like how dark or light our skin was. We excommunicated Donna for liking the same boy as Ailyn. Jocelyn was excluded for attracting so much attention from the boys for perming her hair. We made fun of Rochelle for never changing her hair ever. Ailyn was publicly shamed because of a rumor that she kept tampons in her backpack. Eva was an easy target. Being the poorest one of us, she got her school clothes from Sorrow’s annual uniform collection drive. As a result, Eva’s ensembles would either be too small, too big, or too old. After dozens of washes, her skirts lacked the same crisp pleats our mothers dutifully ironed. The Peter Pan collar of her blouse often fell limp. We often-times joked that she lived in one of the cement garbage cans out on the yard. It wasn’t that any of us were wealthy by any measure. It was just easier to pick on whomever seemed to be the weakest of the pack. None of us like to remember that time. Though we were only kids,

the pain we suffered at each other's hands was no less severe. The scars are buried beneath the layers of thick skin we've grown over time. You can't see them with the naked eye. But, if you press hard enough, you can still feel them. They are there. Just like Eva, a pain we didn't want to remember.

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Eva had to live with her father and her stepmother, Letti, for our last year at Sorrow. Clio had plans to study abroad, and she wanted to take Eva with her. We remember there being a long court battle about it and how our mothers had sided with Eva's father. They had gone to court, and ultimately, Clio lost the battle. It was decided that she would live with her dad for at least one year to graduate eighth grade and, more importantly, to make it to her Confirmation Day, our final initiation into the church.

It was a time of great change. Ailyn, who got her period years before we did, was already wearing an C cup, which she claimed was a burden. Rochelle had taken to shaving her legs, as well as her arms. Twice a day, according to her. Jocelyn got bangs to cover her bumpy forehead. Inspired by the waif look, Daisy decided she was going to lose ten pounds by only eating meat. Though her change was not so much physical, Eva seemed to change the most.

At lunch we usually gathered by the side entrance to the church. The entrance, used only by the altar boys, was obscured by bushes and beyond the view of the yard supervisor, Ms. David, who would make us do extra laps in PE if she caught us cursing or exhibiting any other unladylike behavior. (Considering she was the most masculine woman we had ever seen, we found this ironic.) We gave up hanging out in the field. Some of us detested dirt, and we were worried about the wind ruining our hair or scratching up our freshly shaven legs on the rough, unkempt stalks of the baseball diamond. We talked about the boys we knew from other schools. We lied about how far we had gotten with them. Some of us told lies to make it seem that we did more than what actually happened, and others of us tried to hide the deeds we actually did. We talked about getting married and how many kids we were going to have. We talked about what our wedding colors would be. We speculated how Father Stephen was probably gay. How Ms. David was maybe a man. We turned the Act of Contrition into a rap song. We laughed till it hurt.

Either Eva really hated everything, or she just liked to disagree with everyone. She hated our music, our clothes, the books we liked to read, even the damn snacks our moms packed us for recess. After school, she preferred to wear black, and she was vehemently against wearing makeup. What was most alarming about Eva, though, wasn't what she wore or what she hated. She would sometimes have cuts on her arms. Very exact cuts right in the middle of her forearm. We would see them when we changed for PE class. We all knew Eva was having trouble at home, but unfortunately, we were thirteen-year-old girls. We were all working on building up our impenetrable armors. Instead of asking questions and being kind, we fired rockets and launched grenades. We waged war on individuality, a hypocrisy on all our parts, since we had fought so hard to define ourselves. There were no winners.

"Eva, did you pick your Confirmation name yet?"

Soon we would be anointed as young, consenting adults in the eyes of the church. We were tasked with picking the name of a saint whose life we would aim to emulate as we began our lives as willful Catholics.

"I was thinking about Magdalene."

"You know she was a prostitute, right?" Rochelle quickly retorted.

We busted up laughing.

"You guys are dumb. She wasn't a prostitute. She was a leader. The Bible is written by men, remember? What's the point of all this anyway? It's not like I'm going to be baptizing my kids or anything."

"So, I guess all your children are going to hell then," Rochelle said.

"If God loves us so much, then why would there even be a hell? They just want us to be good little girls who sit with our legs crossed and our mouths shut. They want us to be boring and no fun just like them. Anyway, I'm not going to hell. My mom told me it doesn't exist."

"Eva, everyone knows your mom is a crazy person." Rochelle quickly covered her own mouth with her hand like she was trying to take back her own words. But it was too late.

“If anyone is going to hell, if there is one, it’s probably you!” Eva fired back. “I see how you look at everyone while we’re changing. God doesn’t let the gays in, remember? You don’t know shit about my mom! None of you do. And I’m not stupid, you know. I know all your dumb moms went to court.”

She turned her back to everyone, her balled up fists relaxing at her side, and began to walk away.

“Whatever. You’ll all get what’s coming to you anyway. You’ll see.”

“You gonna put a spell on us? Why don’t you get out of here and take your voodoo with you?”

Rochelle picked up a nearby stone and threw it at her. It hit her on the right side of her face, leaving a bright red mark.

Eva didn’t turn the other cheek the way Jesus did. She went for Rochelle’s hair first and tore at anything she could get her hands on. It was hard to tell them apart. They looked like a crumpled mess of black hair and blue plaid. They made sounds like baby cubs rolling together on the ground. We were so shocked we didn’t even try to stop the fight. Both girls fought until they had no buttons left on their shirts. Eva’s necklace had become exposed. Rochelle reached for it and yanked until it broke. The delicate web of chain, filigree, and quartz was strewn about before us. Its power destroyed.

They stopped fighting. Eva knelt down to try and gather up what she could of her necklace, a thick stream of tears flowing down her face. Rochelle stood there in shock at what she’d done. We tried to help Eva pick up the bits that were left behind, but she wouldn’t let us help her. She looked up at us and growled like an angry animal. With nothing left to salvage, we turned around and walked away. Ms. David was on her way from across the yard, but it was already too late.

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It was never the same between us after that. Eva became distant, a loner. She spent most of recess and lunch reading in the field. She started hanging out with Marie and Trisha, girls from the public school up the street. Marie and Trisha both used to go to Sorrow in the early days, but they transferred out together in the third grade. They came by after school to

hang out with Eva. Sometimes a couple boys from the public school would accompany them, and we could find them smoking cigarettes by the dumpster. Jocelyn was the only one who still talked to her because they lived on the same block and had practically known each other since birth. But they didn't hang out at school. She told us Eva let one of those boys get to third base behind the infamous baseball backstop.

Eva's stepmother, Letti, made it her life's mission to save Eva's soul from the fires of hell. She was the kind of woman who attended church every Sunday without fail. She said grace at every meal. She practically lived in the church. Eva's interest in the occult, of course, did not sit well with her. She tried her best to exorcise Eva of the devil that lived inside her. She lit candles and prayed to Santo Niño every night to save Eva's soul.

What was going on with Eva was, of course, dissected and analyzed in our mothers' kitchens.

"You know, Eva is not part of their barkada anymore. Ever since she attacked Rochelle. They don't want anything to do with her."

"Did you know that Letti found her with a boy in her bedroom?"

"Diba?!" they exclaimed in unison.

"Yes, Letti had to chase him out!"

"What can you do when you have a mother who spends all her time gallivanting? We can't be too surprised. Letti made her get rid of that bruha stuff. The crystals, tarot cards, herbs, and especially that necklace."

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Confirmation Day arrived. Each column of the church was adorned in red fabric embroidered with flaming crosses. The pews were packed with grandparents, great aunts, and second cousins. We donned formal heels for the first time. Some of us were allowed to wear lip gloss and paint our nails a modest, iridescent shade of pink. We curled our hair. We wore name tags bearing the names of the saints we chose to guide us through our lives as Catholic women. Eva's name tag sat there on the table as we lined up in the vestibule of the church. It was the only one left. We thought maybe Jocelyn would know where she was, but

she had no answers. We scurried into line as the church opened its door to our procession. We marched on, ready to enter as adults into the Kingdom of God. We did this without Eva.

We learned later that Eva had thrown herself off the side of the San Mateo Bridge on Confirmation Day. Their car had gotten a flat tire. No one noticed Eva standing on the railing, eyes closed, arms spread out like wings. Before anyone could stop her, she leaned forward.

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It's been a few years since we've been able to gather on the anniversary of Eva's death. We usually meet at the Road's End, the only restaurant in the neighborhood, owned by Jocelyn's uncle. It's a little harder now that we are married with kids. Most of us, at least. Jocelyn still lives in the house next to Eva's grandmother. She married Stephen, who was one grade ahead of us at Sorrow. She stays at home with her two kids and her mother, who suffered a stroke a while back and needs around-the-clock care. Ailyn married Rich, with whom she went to her senior prom. It was especially hard for her to get away because of the three kids she had back to back. Daisy kept her promise to herself to stay thin and get married to the cutest guy in her high school class. He has some high-level job in the Silicon Valley. They can actually afford to live anywhere in the city, but they choose to live in one of those huge houses in the new tract development on the hill right outside our neighborhood. Although she enjoys her large collection of designer purses, she is often alone at night, waiting for her husband to show up. She also drives a BMW. And, as far as we know, Rochelle has never really dated anyone, not seriously at least. We heard a rumor a few years ago that she left her mother's house and ran off to South America for a few months with another woman, but we don't ask her about that.

"My mom thinks she saw Clio the other day. Walking around downtown with another man. She didn't look too good."

"She comes back from time to time. I see her at Lola Pilling's. She stays for a few days, and then she's gone. She comes back when she needs money or a place to stay. Some people tell me they see her in SoMa late at night."

"It's like she's turned into a ghost. She is the actual white lady roaming around looking for Eva."

“Well, we know what she’s looking for—and it’s definitely not Eva,” says Rochelle, still holier than all of us.

“Clio used to be so cool. We used to wish we had a mom like her.”

“Not me,” Rochelle says with an eye roll. “Don’t you remember the times when Eva would come to school and look like she hadn’t bathed in days, her uniform so dirty? You don’t remember when we had to share our lunch with her because Clio would forget to pack her one?”

“Poor Eva.”

We sigh, sip our drinks, hope for the uncomfortable silence to break. Without saying a word, we recall the insults we hurled at Eva. The times we made fun of her because she was poor. We remember the times we threatened to throw her into the garbage can or how we teased her for her dirty uniform. We would let our classmates throw wet paper wads in her hair when she fell asleep in class, which happened often in those later days. We remember these things, but we don’t say them out loud.

All these years, we’ve been tied to one another, for better or for worse. As kids, we took turns ostracizing each other. We put each other down for being smart, fat, skinny, crafty, pretty, a good singer. Anything at all. Even as adults we still do this. We watched each other grow into our bodies. Some of us better than others at embracing that change. All of us ashamed in some way.

At the school of Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrow, and for the rest our lives, we admired the Virgin Mary, who was able to conceive a son without having sex. We tried to emulate her and failed always. We learned to live with guilt. We learned to relish in a secret life. We sometimes practiced magic. We baptized our children. We learned to serve our husbands. We went to brunch. We remembered our Eva.

