

Devil Child

By Patricia Favreau

My little sister Renée is making her First Communion tomorrow morning. Since she's only seven and new to this, she asks me what the Body of Christ tastes like. I tell her the thin hosts that look like the sand dollars we found on the beach last summer taste like cold pizza.

Renée is confused, saying she thought they'd taste more like Mémère's homemade bread or her poutine râpées, those boiled potatoes stuffed with pork that look like brains and are only served on holidays.

"Christ really likes cold pizza," I tell her. "If God the Father let Him, He'd eat it every single day."

Then I tell her I see things after taking communion, like angels and saints and our Pèpère who died when I was five years old.

"But only good kids see things," I say. "If you don't have a vision it means you're secretly bad and will go to Purgatory."

Now Renée is really confused. "Do the visions appear when the host touches my tongue or when I swallow it?" she asks.

"When you swallow," I say. "But be careful – if the host gets stuck on the roof of your mouth, you'll scare Pèpère away."

We spend the rest of the afternoon playing Holy Communion and take turns sticking out our tongues and feeding each other little pieces of mashed up Wonder Bread. I tell Renée I see a blurry vision of Saint John the Baptist carrying around his bleeding,

chopped-off head. My mom once told my Aunt Yvonne she prays to St. Jude because he's the patron saint of lost causes, so I pretend to see him, too. Renée says she sees St. Nicholas with a sack of toys over his back. I tell her she's being silly because everyone knows he only comes around on Christmas Eve. But she says she'll see him for real tomorrow after her First Communion.

I'm beginning to feel bad because Renée believes my visions are real. I want to tell her it's all a lie, but Mom calls us to dinner. And then Dad calls. Mom pulls her ear away from the phone. She doesn't look very happy when she tells us he has to work late and won't be home for dinner. I want to talk to Dad but she won't hand me the phone. So I start singing the alphabet at the top of my lungs. She tells me to be quiet so I start screaming the letters. I'm up to V when I finally get to tell Dad I miss him. I swear I hear music and yelling and singing in the background before Mom takes the phone away. I hope I have a job like that someday.

We sit near the front row of the church the next morning to watch Renée and her Catechism class taste their first hosts. Mémère, who is sitting next to Mom and Dad, doesn't like Renée's new spring dress. She says in her day all the little girls receiving their first Holy Communion wore white dresses and veils because they were brides of Christ.

"If all the mothers sitting here today were visiting the Queen of England you had better believe they'd be wearing their most beautiful gowns," she says in her low church voice. She gives Sue LeBlanc's mom, who sits across from us wearing jeans, a mean look. "Why dress in anything less before the King of all Kings?"

“I thought the King of all Kings was Elvis,” I whisper to my mother. She pokes me in the ribs and looks straight ahead with a very serious face.

Then Renée and her class walk down the aisle inside the huge church filled with flowers and fat, drippy candles that make the statue of the Virgin Mary look like she’s wearing a dancing halo over her head. My Aunt Yvonne and Uncle Allard are sitting behind us and I can hear them oohing and ahhhing over Renée. I don’t remember them oohing and ahhhing over me when I made my First Communion two years ago.

My Aunt Zoe gets ready to take a picture of Renée as she comes up the aisle. I lean into the picture and almost fall out of the pew. Aunt Zoe winks at me. I don’t care if Mémère says Aunt Zoe is too fat to ever find a husband and will end up living alone with her two fat calico cats. Aunt Zoe never gets mad at me the way other adults do, so she can stuff her face as much as she wants for all I care.

Mom pokes my father who is falling asleep. Dad woke up with a headache this morning and this made Mom really mad. She was telling him off something fierce in his study. I know this because I put my ear up against the closed door to hear her better. She said he should be ashamed going out the night before his little girl’s First Communion and that he hasn’t heard the last of it. Boy, I’m glad Mom doesn’t yell at me like that when I have a headache. I usually get toast and ginger ale instead.

I want to laugh out loud when the priest finally blesses Renée. As he places the host on the tip of her tongue, she makes a funny face and swallows my make-believe saints. But then she looks kind of sad, and I don’t feel very good. It’s just like the time I broke one of Mom’s little statues by mistake and hid it under Renée’s bed so I wouldn’t get yelled at.

That afternoon my parents have a party at our house. Mom cuts into a cake shaped like an angel. I tell her Renée's piece of cake is bigger than mine. Mom says it most certainly isn't and that I'm being sill. But I notice these things.

We play chase with some Protestant kids from down the street. Mémère starts whispering in Mom's ear, and suddenly we get called inside so Renée can open her presents. There's more oohing and ahhhhing and picture taking as my little sister tears away purple and gold wrapping paper. It's sickening. Aunt Yvonne and Uncle Allard give Renée a silver charm with the date of her First Communion etched into it and a bracelet to hang it on. Aunt Zoe gives her a stuffed angel doll with two little girl dolls wrapped in her soft wings. I make a list in my head comparing her gifts to the ones I got when I made my First Communion. So far we are about even. Renée opens a long box from Mémère. It's a new Sunday dress, and that makes me feel even better. I never like Mémère's presents. Last Christmas she gave me wool socks, a sweater, and barrettes.

But then Mom holds up a sheet and Dad brings out Renée's gift from the other room. I can't believe my eyes. Behind the sheet is a new bicycle with pink streamers on the handle bars. A bicycle is a gift you might get on your birthday or at Christmas or maybe even Easter if you were extra good. But it's not something you're supposed to get on your First Communion.

This is proof that Mom and Dad love Renée more than me all because she's the baby of the family. I heard Mom calling Renee this to Aunt Yvonne one time when she was talking on the phone in the kitchen. Dad had forgotten to lock the study so I picked up his phone and listened to Mom go on and on about all the cute stuff the little brat was doing. She never talks about me this way. And then Mom's voice changed and she

sounded all worried. She told my aunt that Renée was sick again the other night. I was hoping Renée threw up or something gross like that, but before I could find out, Mom and Aunt Yvonne started talking in French. I hate when they do this. Mom and Mémère talk in French together all the time so I won't know what they're saying. I try real hard to understand, but it sounds like made-up words to me. I tried making up my own language with Renée once to get back at them but we kept messing up our sentences and finally gave up.

I think Renée pretends to be sick so she'll get extra attention from Mom and Dad. I could be moaning and groaning and bleeding out of my eyes but they still wouldn't worry about me the way they worry about Renée. At least I know all my multiplication and division tables and that the capital of France is Paris. I'm two years older so I will always know more than Renée.

There's more picture taking and more hugging. Aunt Zoe finally leaves with Mémère, and Dad goes to bed early because of his headache. Mom is still upset about this. I wonder if they are going to start yelling at each other again. Instead, she starts throwing away wrapping paper, empty boxes and paper plates covered with chocolate frosting. I'm so busy thinking about all the gifts Mom and Dad never gave me that I don't have time to stop Renée from whispering in Mom's ear. Mom's face sure looks angry.

"Madeleine, get over here right now!"

Renée stands behind her and puts her little hands on her little hips. She looks just like Mom. I jump on the living room couch and throw the red and green quilt Mémère made us for Christmas over my head and pretend it's a force field. I can see their mad faces between the holes in the stitching. I say a Hail Mary in my head.

“Young lady, this isn’t just any little white lie. This is a lie against God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost. *Shame on you!*”

On Saturday I walk into Our Lady of the Holy Rosary Church to ask God to forgive me for making up stories about pizza hosts, scared angels, and seeing our Pèpère who passed away when I was five years old. Most kids I know go to Confession once a month, but Mom makes me go after I’ve done something bad. So I go to Confession every weekend. I guess you could call me a regular. That’s what the waitresses call my dad at the Sunset Bar and Grill down the street when we all go there for dinner on Fridays. Except that people wave and smile at you when you’re a regular at a restaurant. That seems a lot nicer than being a regular at church.

Mom says I should try harder to be good because the priests will figure out how often I go to confession and this will make them sad. But she doesn’t know I use different voices so they’ll never guess it’s me. You can’t see the priest in the confessional, and he can’t see you. It’s like being stuck in a dark closet except you have to kneel and this little window slides open with a screen across it. You know the priest is on the other side because you can hear him breathing or you can smell the peppermint candy Old Father Jacques likes to chew on. That’s the signal to start talking about your sins.

Sometimes I say mine in a really high-pitched voice like Mickey Mouse, and sometimes I make my voice go really low so I sound more like my dad. Today I decide to talk with a lisp like Cindy Cote, a girl in Mrs. Boudreau’s class. Since I think I sound just like her, I make up an extra sin. I tell Father Jacques I played Doctor with a boy in my class. This is supposed to be a pretty serious sin, which is stupid, if you ask me. I play Doctor with Renée all the time, and it’s kind of boring. But I say it anyway.

When I come out, the light above the box turns green. Marty Pierre, who is five-and-a-half months younger than me, is sitting in a pew with his mother. She whispers something in Marty's ear and smiles at me before going into the box, making the light turn red. I wonder what type of bad adult things she's done. I sit in the pew in front of Marty so I can say my three Hail Marys and two Our Fathers that Father Jacques gave me for my penance. It's the same thing he gave me last week even though I made up an extra sin this time. I turn around. Marty looks scared.

"You don't do this very often, do you?" I whisper to Marty.

He shakes his head.

"I've been in there so many times I can't count." I keep my voice low so the adults in the pews ahead of us won't say anything. "The priests like it when you tell them a lot of sins because it gives them more to talk to God about. That's their job, you know. Gabbing with God."

"My mom says I have to confess to stealing a pack of gum from the supermarket," says Marty.

"Not bad," I say. "What else?"

"I hit my cousin during a fight, too."

"Did you hit your cousin really hard?"

Marty sighs. "No, not really. Does that count?"

I shake my head. "You'll need at least five sins or maybe one really big sin so the priest won't get bored and start snoring or slide the little door shut in your face."

"What should I say then?" asks Marty.

Then I think of something really, really bad.

“You should tell the priest you committed adultery.”

Now I don't know what committing adultery means but it's on the Ten Commandments list of things you aren't supposed to do. And that makes it a mortal sin. Once you do something that bad you won't make it into Purgatory, never mind Heaven. If you commit adultery you'll go straight to Hell with all the Democrats and naughty Protestants.

“Yeah, that's a good one,” says Marty. I don't think he knows what it means either.

“Or you could say you murdered someone,” I say. That's another big one on the Ten Commandments list.

“I think I like murder better,” says Marty.

“Maybe you could tell the priest you buried a dead body in your backyard.”

Marty's eyes get big. “Who would I kill and how did I kill him?”

“You killed your long lost evil twin brother with a shovel,” I say. “Or maybe a secret potion. That's it, you made a secret potion and you poisoned your long lost evil twin brother.”

I put my hands around my neck and make choking sounds. A woman four rows ahead of us turns around and raises a long, wrinkly finger to her mouth. I give her my nicest smile.

“That's stupid,” whispers Marty. “I don't even have a twin brother.”

“But he's long lost,” I explain in my low church voice.

We look back at the confessional box behind us. Marty's mother has been in there for a long time.

“I bet adultery is worse than murder,” I whisper. “It’s got the word ‘adult’ in it.”

“I think I’ll go with adultery then.” We laugh out loud. I stand up to go before the lady with the wrinkly finger can turn around and tell us to be quiet again. I walk out into the bright sunshine. It hurts my eyes.

I ride my bike up Sunset Road to my house. Renée is showing off her new bicycle to her dorky friend Anne Levesque. They ask me if I want to ride bikes with them, but I tell them I want to play hide-and-seek instead.

“But you’ve got to try harder because you’re always too easy to find,” I say.

This makes Renée and Anne all mad. I tell them they need to hide somewhere in the neighborhood instead of around our house. I tell them I’ll give them extra time, too, by counting to one hundred and five starting *right now*. Renée and Anne scream and run down the drive way. I make sure to count nice and slow, adding a Mississippi in after every number. I yell *ready or not, here I come!* as loud as I can. Then I head into the kitchen through the back door to see if any of Renée’s chocolate angel cake is left.

I hear Mom on the phone in Dad’s study. I pull up a kitchen chair to check out the big white cake box on the second shelf in the cupboard. I’m in luck. The angel’s head and one wing are left. I reach up and grab the box and open it on the counter so I can taste the frosting. It’s as good as I remember. I don’t think anyone will notice if I eat some of the wing.

“Madeleine!”

I’m so surprised I turn around too fast and knock the box off the countertop. The cake hits the floor.

“Marty Pierre’s mother just called me. She says you told him to tell the priest he committed adultery.” Her face looks mad. “How do you even know what that adultery means?”

She lifts up the box and we both look at the upside-down chocolate cake with its smooshed angel wing. Mom starts to cry.

This is very, very bad. I have never seen Mom cry except when P  p  re died when I was five years old. It makes me feel scared.

“I’m sorry, Mom. Please don’t cry.” I jump off the chair and wipe away a tear running down her face. Now she has chocolate frosting on her cheek.

She laughs and then she makes her serious face again. “It’s not your fault, honey. Mommy’s having a very hard day.”

Mom dumps the poor angel cake with its smooshed wing into the trash can. She hands me a wet paper towel and together we clean up the frosting on the floor. Then she cleans the frosting off of me. The whole time she is quiet. Just when I start thinking I’m off the hook she tells me I have to apologize to Marty and his mother tomorrow after Mass and then confess to the priests about making things up about Confession.

“And Madeleine? No dessert for you tonight.”

I want to say all the swear words I know but it might make Mom cry again. I’ve learned that saying Goh-ram and Jeezo Crow is okay, but Goddamn and Jesus Christ is not. You can say Jesus Christ when you’re happy or when you’re praying, but you can’t say it when you’re mad because it hurts His feelings and makes His sacred heart bleed something fierce. Ren  e and I say the word *falcon* when we get mad at each other instead

of *fucking*. That way, Mom and Dad never know we're secretly swearing at each other right in front of them.

Instead of swearing, I go back outside and get on my bike. I ride twice around the block. I always feel better when I ride my bike really fast. When I get back to the house, Renée and Anne are standing in the driveway. I forgot all about them. They have evil looks on their faces.

"You jerk, you forgot all about us," says Renée.

She sticks her tongue out at me and dorky Anne does the same thing. Before I can stop myself, I kick Renee's new bike so hard it makes a thud when it hits the concrete. One of the pink plastic streamers comes off.

"I HATE YOU!" screams Renée. "You're a *devil child*. That's what I've heard Mémère call you. A devil child!"

Before I can call them falcon idiots, Renée picks up her bike and rolls it away. Anne runs off behind her. If I know Renée, she'll go screaming to Mom with that stupid pink streamer in her hand, saying I wrecked her stupid bike. Then I'll have to apologize to her and the priests and God, and I probably won't get any dessert tomorrow night either.

I get back on my bike and ride around the neighborhood. I need to plot against my sister. Riding my bike really fast helps me think better. It takes me two-and-a-half loops past the church and up and down Sunset Hill to come up with a really good bad plan.

Since Renée thinks I'm a devil child, I'll become a devil child for real.

I've always wanted to dress up as a devil on Halloween. I remember giving candy bars out to my first devils when I was even younger than Renée. They all had big red

horns, mean-looking faces, capes, and long red tails. And they got to carry really cool pitch forks for poking people. Last year, when I was only eight years old, Aunt Zoe took me and Renée shopping for Halloween costumes. We were so excited we took them out of the boxes and dressed up right in the aisle. Renée chose a fairy princess costume and Aunt Zoe started making those oohhing and ahhhing sounds like the ones she made during Renée First Communion. I surprised Aunt Zoe by jumping out from around the corner dressed as a devil. She screamed and then let out a really loud laugh. She let us wear the costumes out of the store after paying for them and all these kids were pointing at us like we were really important. When you're dressed like the devil you can stick out your tongue at anyone you like and no one yells at you for it. Because that's what devils do.

But when we got home Mom said I couldn't dress like the devil on Halloween night after all.

I cried and cried but she wouldn't change her mind. She said it wasn't nice to dress up like the devil, especially when you're a true Catholic. Mémère would be especially upset, too, and she's the first house we visit every year. Aunt Zoe felt really bad and we drove back to the store that same day to buy another costume. But the department store wouldn't take the devil suit back because I spilled soda on it in the car. We found a monster mask with one bloodshot eye, but it just wasn't the same.

Mom washed the devil costume and gave it to Marty Pierre's mother. I guess that means they're not true Catholics, like us. When Marty showed up at my house that night dressed in my costume I gave him a piece of fruit instead of a candy bar.

Mom is very surprised when I tell her I want to apologize to Renée for kicking her bike. Then I tell her I want her to drive me to Marty Pierre's house so I can apologize before tomorrow's Mass.

"You're a good girl, Madeleine. I'm very proud of you," Mom says.

Little does she know this is all part of my plot. I am very nice to Renée when she finally lets me into her bedroom. I don't even complain when she yells at me and tries to push me to the floor. This makes Mom mad and she scolds Renée. I turn my head so they can't see me laughing.

When we arrive at Marty Pierre's house I am extra nice to him and his mother. I tell them I was just playing make-believe and didn't mean to get Marty in trouble and I'll never do it again. The adults are all smiles and Mrs. Pierre asks my mother to come in to look at something in her kitchen. Marty is all pissy looking until I pull a Hershey bar out of the pocket of my sweatshirt.

"Put the devil costume my mother gave you last Halloween in a bag behind the hedges in your back yard and there'll be more of these waiting for you," I say.

I keep a secret stash of chocolate in a lunch box in the back of the toy cabinet in my bedroom. Most kids eat the candy adults give them right away, but I always save some of mine. Sometimes, when we're visiting other adults, I'll find a whole bag stuffed in a cabinet while they're busy gabbing. I'll only take two or three pieces so no one notices. Then I'll eat one and save the rest. And at Halloween I always sneak some of the good candy bars out of my plastic pumpkin before Mom goes through it. Same thing at Easter when Mom gives us baskets full of chocolate Easter eggs and marshmallow

chicks. Then I use all the candy and chocolate to get things I want from other kids at school.

Marty's mom is really strict and hardly ever lets him eat candy so he's really excited to help me. He says he'll pull the costume out of the closet in his basement and will hide it behind the hedges at three o'clock sharp. Marty likes Hershey bars and peanut butter cups best of all. I promise him he'll have both. We're friends again.

Mom is in a good mood when we get home and promises to make us a very special dinner that night. This gives me time to bike over to Marty Pierre's backyard. It's a longer ride to Marty's house than I thought. A barking dog jumps out in the road near the pond and chases me all the way to Cross Street. But it's all worth it when I find a plastic bag with the costume in the exact spot behind the hedge where I told Marty to leave it. I put three candy bars on a tree stump and cover them up with crinkly leaves.

When I get home, I tell Mom I'm tired and need to take a nap. "The Madeleine I know hates taking naps," she says. "Go rest before the spell wears off."

Up in my bedroom I put a chair against my door knob. Then I try on my devil costume.

I must have grown a lot since last Halloween. The costume is tight and my arms poke out past the sleeves. It's the same with the pant legs. One of the devil horns is bent and the tail is a little crooked. I look in my mirror. I don't look very scary.

At least it will be dark when I jump out on the side of Renée's bed closest to her bedroom door with my red mask on and a flashlight under my chin. She won't have time to notice my tight costume or my droopy horn or my crooked tail. Then I realize Marty forgot the pitch fork, which is all wrong because real devils always carry pitchforks. I put

my jeans and sweatshirt back on and head out to the shed to see if I can find Mom's garden hoe.

Dad is sitting on the back porch in his rocking chair drinking cold tea. My dad sure does like drinking his cold tea. Cold tea doesn't smell anything like the hot tea Mom likes to drink with Mrs. Antoine and Mrs. LeBlanc when Dad isn't around. They put little white blocks of sugar in their cups, eat tiny little sandwiches, and talk about other adults in the neighborhood. Dad doesn't put anything into his cold tea and likes to drink it at barbeques and baseball games, and sometimes when he sits in the rocking chair on the back porch all by himself.

Marty Pierre once told me he heard his mom say my dad liked drinking beer too much and that it wasn't good for him. I told Marty that if my dad says he likes drinking cold tea then that means he's drinking cold tea only, end of story.

But sometimes Dad's cold tea sure does smell funny. And sometimes it makes him act kind of silly.

Today he is humming a tune. I tell him I want to do some gardening and need to find a big hoe. This makes him laugh really hard. At least he leaves me alone and I'm able to find a rusty hoe in the back of the shed.

Mom's special macaroni and cheese is the best I've ever tasted. Even though she lets us stay up past our bedtime to watch *The Wizard of Oz*, I can't wait until it's time to go to bed. I don't put up a fuss at all. Mom asks what's gotten into me. I tell her all the visits to the confessional box must be doing something. This makes her very happy. I wish she hadn't given me such a big hug and kiss when she tucked me into bed because now I'm starting to feel bad about the trick I'm going to play on Renée.

Once I hear her turn the TV on downstairs, I pull my flashlight out from under my pillow and sneak into the closet. I quickly change into my devil costume. Then I get back in bed and pull my blankets over me.

I really hope my parents go to bed soon. I need to wait until I hear my father making his big snoring noises before I can tiptoe across the hall into Renée's room and wake her up with moans and groans. When you hold a flashlight underneath your chin it makes your face look all dark and scary. And when she looks up at me she'll probably scream her head off. Then I'll turn off my flashlight and run as fast as I can into my bedroom and change into my pajamas. When Mom and Dad wake up and are busy making a fuss over Renée, I'll come out of my room rubbing my eyes and tell them her screams woke me up.

Downstairs the TV plays on and on and on. I decide to rest my eyes. The next thing I know it's really dark and I can't hear the TV anymore. But there's strange noises coming from Renée's room.

I put on my red mask and tip-toe down the hallway using my flashlight to see where I'm going. There's light at the bottom of Renée's door. The noises coming from her room get louder and louder. I push against the door.

I can't believe my eyes. Mom is holding down Renée who is shaking and shaking. Her eyes are rolling in her head. She looks like she's possessed by the devil.

"Madeleine, shut the door!" my father screams. His hair is sticking out every which way. He looks crazy.

I run down the dark hall. My foot hits against something. It really hurts but I don't stop. I find my door and turn on the light and tear off the devil costume as quick as I can.

Maybe I was sleepwalking and my costume scared Renée. Or maybe my thoughts did something horrible to my little sister. My poor little sister. I throw the suit into the closet and put my chair up against the door to keep its evil powers locked up. Then I jump into my bed and hide under the covers. Even with the light on I'm still scared.

Mom wakes me up in the morning. She runs her hand through my hair.

"Mommy, I'm sorry I made Renée become possessed by the devil," I say. I tell her about Mémère and Renée calling me a devil child, getting the devil suit back from Marty Pierre, and my plans to scare the livin' bejeezos out of my little sister.

Mom slowly shakes her head. She looks sad. But she tells me it isn't my fault. Renée had something called a seizure last night. She says seizures are very rare but can happen when your brain is extra cranky, and they can make you shake and your eyes roll. She says Renée had two others just like the one last night a few months earlier. "Daddy and I will have to bring her to a special doctor in Boston later this week to make sure she is okay," Mom says. "It probably isn't anything serious, though. We just need to make sure."

This doesn't sound good to me. Mom and Dad brought Pèpère to a special doctor in Boston when I was five years old. But he died anyway. I hold on to my Mom's hand.

She keeps stroking my hair with her other hand. It feels really nice. "In the meantime, please be nicer to your little sister," she says. "Renée is going through a lot right now. We all are."

I show my mother the devil suit in the closet. She squishes it into a little ball. The crooked tail pokes through her hands as she takes it away.

On Saturday morning I go to Confession before my mother says I have to go. And this time I use my real voice. When the little door slides open and the smell of peppermint fills the box, I tell Old Father Jacques that I've been very mean to my little sister. She isn't healthy, like me. I really don't want Renée to die even though most of the time I can't stand her. Because sometimes she makes me laugh really hard. And sometimes I'll tell her stories and she'll want to hold my hand. I guess I really do love my sister deep down even if she does get more attention than me. I ask God to forgive me and promise to try extra hard to be a good big sister in the future, even though this is very hard.

But as I walk out of the confessional box, my soul as white as vanilla ice cream, I know deep down I'll probably do something mean to Renée, if not this week, then maybe the next, and then I'll need to confess to the priests all over again.

So I sit a while longer in the pew at the back of the church thinking about my new vanilla-white soul while statues of saints with empty eyes look down on me, their heads bent forward from the weight of their stone halos.

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