



### GOD'S TEETH

Miriam had always believed in God. His presence in her life had been a fact since she was a small child barely able to speak. She remembered looking up from her crib—she could not have been more than a year old—and seeing his face shimmering in front of her as he looked down and smiled, showing his magnificent teeth. She'd made the mistake of telling a friend about it once in high school, and the girl had laughed at her, saying it was her dad or her uncle or big brother she'd seen. There could be no other explanation. Miriam said, No, it was God, and her friend asked how she would know the difference when she was only a baby then.

“I just knew,” she said. “I knew my father’s face, and my uncle’s face and my brother’s face, and this was not it. This was bright and . . . what’s the word? . . . *luminous*, self-luminous, illuminating. It made its own light, his face, and the smile was so big I was part of it, like it covered me, and I reached up —”

“This is pretty detailed for a baby’s dream,” the friend said.

They had been sitting on the steps outside school during lunch. Miriam was wearing a summer dress with roses on it, and her friend Emily was wearing blue jeans and a pink blouse. Miriam’s memories always included what people were wearing. It was a visual cue, like a smell or a sound that came attached to the memory.

“It wasn’t a dream, I told you. It was late at night, like the middle of the night, and it was just the two of us in the little room where my crib was. Me and God.”

“There’s Joe,” Emily said, dropping the subject when the school’s star quarterback walked by with his group of friends. All very popular, all beyond the grasp of girls like Miriam and Emily.

Miriam sighed, grabbed her books and headed down the steps. Emily was clearly not interested in her personal encounter with God. It was the last time she ever told anyone about it.

Now Miriam was a grown woman of thirty-six, with a husband, Hal (not *Henry*, just Hal), and two sons, Bobby and Hal Jr. The years had passed by like a breeze, here and gone, but she still remembered that moment in her crib, that ecstasy of looking up and knowing she was not alone in the universe. It may seem self-evident that we are not alone, what with several billion humans shuffling around the planet, but there is a distance between people that can never be fully bridged. Making love could come close, as could having a baby wriggle its way out of a mother’s womb. Holding a son when he’d hurt himself falling from a bicycle, or sitting beside a mother’s bed as she took in her last few breaths. But always there is some small distance. Not so when Miriam had seen God. There was no distance at all. She was part of him, like one of his thoughts, and she knew he had never forgotten her.

Until now.

Miriam worked as a receptionist in a law firm on Water Street. She’d been answering the phones with her trademark cheer for eleven years. Everybody loved Miriam—the clients, the lawyers, the bicycle messengers, Sid the freight elevator man. She took great pleasure in knowing she was like a moment of sunshine in their lives, bursting through the clouds when she showed up, or when she answered the phone, “Jennings, Fleet and MacElroy, this is Miriam speaking.” She always identified herself. It was the professional thing to do, and Miriam was professional. She wore modest skirts, usually pleated and always to the knee or below. Stylish but comfortable shoes for walking the six blocks from her home in Ridgewood, Queens, to the subway stop—walking everywhere in fact, in a city ruled by pedestrians. She kept her strawberry blonde hair styled in a perm, as it had been for many years now. (Not for

Miriam the monthly changes she saw other women trying, no dyes from light to dark—just a little something for the few gray strands that had started to sprout like weeds.) The only jewelry she wore was her wedding ring, complemented by a slim gold bracelet her son Hal Jr. had given her one Mother's Day, and a locket around her neck that had her husband's picture on one side and her mother's on the other. This was Miriam: the picture of a very agreeable woman with a bright disposition and enough sense in her head to know her place and appreciate it. Every office, she knew, should be so fortunate as to have someone as reliable and presentable as Miriam at the front desk. Every husband should be so lucky to have a wife, every son to have a mother, like Miriam. It was her destiny to make other people happy, and in doing it to find her own happiness.

Had things gone along like this indefinitely, Miriam would have lived a long and contented life. But as with comets occasionally colliding into planets and lightning every now and then striking someone who was just minding her own business, life threw a large rock at her and hit her squarely in the chest. It was a Tuesday morning, two years after the World Trade Center attack. She'd lived through that without a scratch. A deep sorrow for all those people pulverized and incinerated, certainly, but no personal harm. Her office had closed for a week while they waited to see if another attack was coming, and while they decided whether or not to move. But they were Americans, damnit, and they would stay where they belonged. This bolt from the sky came much later, when she awoke on a morning just like a thousand mornings before it. The sun was out, winter had surrendered to a warm spring, and she could hear birds outside the window of their duplex. Her family lived on the upper floor, and a tree just outside her bedroom had given her shade and rest all the years they'd lived there. Birds liked this tree and made it their home, and Miriam would wake up to the sound of their chirping well before the alarm clock went off.

Miriam smiled—her usual first expression of the day—and lay listening to the birds. Then something troubled her. A sound underneath it, something she could not at first identify. She concentrated, clearing her mind. And then she knew what it was—not a sound, but the absence of sound. For the first time in fifteen years she did not hear her husband's breathing. Funny, how the sound of someone breathing on the next pillow becomes the background noise of a life. Always there, like the sound of the Big Bang echoing in waves beneath the silence of the cosmos. Miriam turned to Hal and stared at his back. She sat up and listened, sure she had missed it because her thoughts had been filled with the birds and what she would wear that

day. She stared at Hal, waiting to see his rib cage expand. But it did not. She reached over and gently poked him.

“Hal?” she said. “Hal, honey, you’re not breathing.”

Hal did not respond.

Miriam felt fear rising in her like something sexual, something hot and urgent. She gripped Hal's arm and rolled him over. In that moment her heart stopped. She could feel it stopping and she expected to die. Then it beat again, and she shouted.

“Hal! Hal, wake up!”

She shook him but he did not respond. He was dead, and had probably been dead since sometime in the night, hours ago, dead all this time on the mattress beside her.

Miriam lunged for the phone on the nightstand.

*Viral myocarditis*. A virus settled in the heart. Who ever heard of such a thing? Miriam had not. She thought viruses were caught from stairway handles and subway trains, touching all those places others had touched. Or from closed circulation in airplanes. She almost always got sick when she flew to see her sister in Albuquerque. But *a virus in the heart*? It was the stuff of medical shows, TV melodramas where the plots required twists and turns no one would ever believe in real life. But there she had found herself, sitting in the medical examiner's office a week after Hal's death, trying to make sense of the incomprehensible.

Hal had shown no signs of illness. He was twenty pounds overweight, but he was working on it, cutting down on bread and sugar. He'd been walking briskly every morning for several weeks, putting on his sweat pants and sweatshirt and heading out before breakfast to walk a mile around their neighborhood. Gosh, he'd had a physical just three months earlier and had been told he was healthy as a horse, *healthy as a horse* (whatever that meant, Miriam did not know; she just assumed, having heard it all her life, that horses were a particularly healthy species). And still his body had been invaded. Not just his body, but his heart, his bulls-eye, that indispensable center of him without which he would cease to be—had ceased to be. It wasn't like an arm that could be amputated, or an eye that could be lost and the loss adjusted to. Nobody lives without a heart. It is only barely possible to survive with a broken one, as she was discovering.

Life was suddenly like a movie whose reel broke halfway through. The picture on the screen she'd been watching for thirty-six years abruptly ended. The narrative of her life became non-linear, and in an instant, without warning, she was living another life. A life with two sons who were as perplexed as she was to have had a father and husband at bedtime and

to wake up without him, almost orphaned and definitely widowed. There was no time for preparation. No contingency. Dying had never been a serious possibility and had not entered any of the long discussions Miriam and Hal had over the years about raising a family and making plans. They planned for their sons' education. They planned to buy a house someday, a two-family home of their own where they could rent a floor out to pay the mortgage and live comfortably. They'd even planned to retire, often talking about places they'd seen on the travel channels and how nice it would be to settle down when the kids were grown and they'd put their thirty years in at a job (or jobs) and earned their leisure years. But never, ever, had they planned on one of them living on without the other. Now Miriam was having to grapple with these plans on her own. Funeral arrangements. Life insurance and retirement plan claims. Death certificates. Her sons' restlessness and the strange anger they were displaying. Miriam did not understand being angry. Hal would not have died had it not been God's will. Everything was God's will—except the bad things—she did not doubt that. She had seen God's compassionate face, his smile, his teeth, there above her in the crib so long ago. She had not doubted him then; how could she now?

She began to grow suspicious of God's beneficence when her pastor, Reverend Morris, could not cut his vacation short a day to officiate at Hal's funeral. Miriam had been attending Ridgewood Community Church for twenty years, longer than she'd been married. Longer than the reverend had been there, actually. She remembered the pastor before him, and the one before *him*. Reverend Paul, as he liked to be called, was a diminutive man of just over five feet whose voice was deep and could project to the back of the sanctuary without a microphone. He had very thin hair—almost like someone who was taking chemotherapy, like hair that should fall out of his head but seemed to be hanging on to prove a point. His wife, naturally, was six inches taller and very big-boned. Miriam had often gone to meet with Reverend Paul over his eight year tenure to talk about private things—her eldest son's questions about sex and how she should answer them, what to do one time when Hal was having a few too many beers after work. There was always comfort in talking to the man, always a sense that he was a conduit to God and that this was something she shared with him. She *trusted* him, just as she trusted God, and when she was told that the assistant pastor, a well-meaning but unimpressive man who had never married and whose sermons emptied the

pews, would fill in at Hal's funeral, her certainty began to crack. Her unfailing belief in the good reverend (surely he would come back from Florida a day early; it was asking so little for something so important), her unfailing belief in the church, her unfailing belief in God.

She wondered where Hal had gone. When Bobby, just six years old, asked her where his father was, she expected to say "heaven." She had always assumed she would answer a question like that with the obvious. But it stuck in her throat. Maybe it was the way Hal had died, like a snap of the fingers. Maybe it was the cruelty of his death. Maybe it was simply that she stopped for the first time to think about what she was saying, and heaven suddenly had no meaning. Miriam realized there was no way to describe it, and that it had always been presented as some kind of Club Med for the soul, the ultimate retirement community. An idea that struck her now as incredibly silly and self-indulgent.

She had been good all her life. No one had needed to reprimand her or teach her to be on her best behavior—it came naturally to her. Where her sister Ruth was impetuous and rebellious, Miriam was pliant and obedient. Where her brother Tim pushed the boundaries of his parents' patience (and eventually the law), Miriam was all but invisible unless you were looking straight at her. She was shy, she was polite, she kept her opinions to herself, especially when they differed from the company she was in. She attended church every Sunday even when her father would have none of it and her mother begged off half the time with headaches and psychosomatic illnesses that kept her bedridden at least one week each month. Miriam would get up on Sunday mornings and dress herself without any prodding, taking great care in her grooming and her choice of clothes—always something bright but modest, something to bring a bit of cheer to the Pentecostal congregation that leaned toward the severe and the dramatic. (Miriam never really believed in speaking in tongues, especially after Sister Applewood tried to teach her how to do it, making it seem more like a silly and embarrassing exercise in abandon than any channeling of the Holy Spirit; as Miriam read the scripture, the tongues that were spoken on Pentecost were actually foreign languages, like French and Chinese, not gibberish.)

She had considered herself pleasing to God all these years. Not out of fear. No, Miriam did not *fear* God. How, and why, does one fear he to whom one turns for love and comfort? One does not fear one's mother, in most cases. One does not fear one's closest friend and confidante. One does not fear love, but falls into it, giving oneself to its luxury and its promise.

Such is God, Miriam had always believed. She dressed and acted and spoke and thought (as best she could) in ways she believed would be pleasing to him as if he were indeed her Father, her best friend, her solace. So it was, with absolute shock, that she found herself feeling betrayed. *God does not do the bad things. God does not take anything away.* She had never blamed God for anything. God was only to be credited. The rest, as they said, was *mystery*. *But really, Miriam, this is beyond the pale. Don't you think God could have taken a moment to stop this? The reverend may not have a day of his vacation to spare, but surely God could pay attention for five damn minutes—hell, five seconds—to keep Hal's heart pumping. Is that asking so much?* She shook her thoughts away, aware suddenly that she was sitting in the front row in the funeral parlor's chapel. The assistant pastor had just finished saying what a wonderful man Hal had been and how he would be missed, and Bud Connor, Hal's best friend of twenty years, was getting up to sing "I Surrender All."

There was a good turnout. Maybe God was paying attention after all. Maybe he couldn't do anything about the heart attack, the virus, but he could move people to show up, and about a hundred of them had. Miriam shifted around in her chair to look at everyone. She was surprised to realize how many friends they had. Neighbors they'd lived with for almost two decades. Men to whom Hal had waved when he mowed the lawn in summer and shoveled the driveway in winter. Women who had traded recipes with Miriam and who had turned to each other through the trials of parenting. Colleagues of Hal's from the post office, and several friends of Miriam's from work. Her parents were there of course, and Hal's father had come from St. Louis. (His mother was sedated and could not make the trip, paralyzed by the loss of her only child.)

Maybe this was the point of it all, she thought, the import. Not what we accumulate between the past and the present (for there is no future, she knew that now; the future is only the present moving forward). Maybe the measure of life was not how many dollars we can count and save, or children we can have, or objects we can acquire, but how many people are sitting in the rows of folding chairs at the funeral home when we die. Miriam wanted to believe this, that Hal's death was balanced—made up for—by all these faces torn in loss. If it was not proof of God, it was surely proof *to* him, evidence that a human soul had counted and mattered and that its disappearance from the world had left a hole. Into this hole all these people stared,

awed, wondering at the strangeness and the terrible incomprehensibility of this one soul's absence.

The nightmares began the third evening after the funeral. Re-enactments, really, dreaming over and over what had happened. And she wasn't even given the brief pleasure of a different ending.

Miriam had realized very quickly that the rituals of putting someone in the ground, of having a wake, a gathering where people could commune in loss and sorrow, was intended to let them get on with their lives as quickly as possible. This was not something she could do. She had to sleep in the same bed she'd been in the week before with her husband. She had to rise in the morning and help her children off to school, without Hal there to herd them into the kitchen or make their toast. It was immediately evident that everyone could move on now *except* her. And the boys, yes, of course. Their father was gone. She must remember that and not horde her grief as if it touched no one else. But there were things to it particular to Miriam: the bed, the sounds of Hal sleeping next to her, sighing and snoring, the feel of him turning from side to side in the night. She could not possibly think of him reaching his hand to her belly or tracing his finger down along her spine. That would take months to face, years. For now it was the gaping silent void she had to deal with. She would rather sleep on the couch but she knew it would disturb her sons. They were already agitated, and her doctor had given her the phone number of a psychologist to call, a grief counselor, for all three of them.

Miriam did not want to see a grief counselor. She had no interest in joining a bereavement group, as her friend Nancy from work had done when her mother died. She could not imagine talking to anyone about her feelings. Except God.

God was her biggest problem right now. God was not listening. Miriam did not understand this. She believed God had always listened to her. When she was twelve and her dog was run over by a car in the street out front of her house, God listened to her crying. When they moved across town and she had to make new friends, fearful she would not be able to and that she would be alone for the rest of her life, God listened to her fears. *But did he talk back, Miriam?* When she lost her first child, before Hal Jr. was born, and her soul felt ripped in two pieces that could not possibly be reunited—*but did he ever, once, respond to you, Miriam?*—God

listened very closely to her, hanging on every word, even those she did not speak. *But did he REPLY to you, Miriam*, she thought, her mind circling itself as she lay in bed, her arm unconsciously stretched out across the mattress where Hal should be and her fingers flattened against the sheet. *No, he did not, not once, not a single time in my entire life. Why do you suppose that is, Miriam? What must you conclude if someone—but God is not someone, God is God, is God not?—to whom you have spoken for thirty-six years has never bothered to speak back to you? That he does not care? That you are of no matter to him? That . . . he . . . is . . . not . . . there.*

Miriam froze. Her fingers slowly curled into a fist. Her arm bent at the elbow, and she brought her clenched fist to her chest, pressing it to her. She had thought it at last. She had said it out loud, in a manner of speaking, in her own mind. *God is not there. There is not God. There is no God.* No Big G-od, only god, nothing more than that. Nothing more than a great big river god or a sky god or a peanut butter god. Nobody takes them seriously anymore. Nobody believes in Zeus or Osiris or what's-its-name the cat god. So why this one? Why Jesus? Why any god at all?

She turned on her side away from where Hal would have been had his heart not stopped like a dirty trick, and she cried herself to sleep.

In the weeks that followed, God disappeared from her life. It was a slow vanishing, as if he had been a bright image fading day by day, or a sidewalk chalk drawing rained upon that melted before her eyes. She kept praying, even as it became clear to her there was no one to hear her. She would utter her words, “Dear God . . .”, and observe them tumbling from her mouth out into the air. All those years she had thought they’d gone somewhere, but now she knew better. What she had believed was God’s response had been no more than an echo calling back to her from across a canyon.

The dent in her bed where Hal had slept did not reshape itself, did not flatten out. She flipped the mattress and there it was, as if by black magic, cursing her. She realized two months after the funeral that she had not been to church since, and with an awful satisfaction she knew she did not care. The pastor was welcome to his vacation days, and the assistant pastor could be as boring as he liked; Miriam would not be there to yawn through his sermons. Thus died a young girl’s witness to a miracle. As abruptly as it had come all those years ago, a vision of God smiling over her, it disintegrated, falling through her fingers like dirt.

Like Hal's heart stopping suddenly, without giving her the opportunity to say goodbye or to demand an explanation. God did not give explanations, and it was no longer acceptable to Miriam.

Two months passed, then three, and finally the only thing left of God was his teeth. They had chewed her up, ground her insides to a wet ooze, and now they were just there. Not smiling, not frowning, not grinding, not clicking, just yellow and chipped and disappearing until God was no more.