

*Bible*FROM *The Atlantic*

IT WAS DARK when Maureen left the Hundred Club. She stopped just outside the door, a little thrown by the sudden cold, the change from daylight to night. A gusting breeze chilled her face. Lights burned over the storefronts, gleaming in patches of ice along the sidewalk. She reached in her pockets for her gloves, then hopelessly searched her purse. She'd left them in the club. If she went back for them, she knew she'd end up staying — and so much for all her good intentions. Theresa or one of the others would pick up the gloves and bring them to school on Monday. Still, she stood there. Someone came out the door behind her, and Maureen heard music, and voices raised over the music. Then the door swung shut, and she tightened her scarf and turned down the sidewalk toward the lot where she'd left her car.

She had gone almost a block when she realized that she was walking in the wrong direction. Easy mistake — the lot where she and the others usually parked had been full. She headed back, crossing the street to avoid the club. Her fingers had gone stiff. She put her hands in her coat pockets, but then yanked them out when her right foot took a skid on the ice. After that she kept them poised at her sides.

Head bent, she shuffled in tender steps from one safe spot to the next — for all the world like her own worn-out, balding, arthritic mother. Maureen allowed herself this thought in self-mockery, to make herself feel young, but it did not have this effect. The lot was farther than she'd been aware of as she strolled to the club with Molly and Jane and Evan, laughing at Evan's story about his manic

Swedish girlfriend. She'd had an awful day at school and was happy to let the week go, to lose herself in jokes and gossip and feel the pale late sunshine almost warm on her face. Now her face was numb, and she was tense with the care of simply walking.

She passed a hunched, foot-stamping crowd waiting to get into Harrigan's, where she herself had once gone to hear the local bands. It had been called Far Horizon then. Or Lost Horizon. *Lost Horizon*, it was.

She scanned the faces as she walked by, helplessly on the watch for her daughter. She hadn't seen her in almost two years now, since Grace walked away from a full scholarship at Ithaca College to come back and live with one of Maureen's fellow English teachers from Saint Ignatius. It turned out they'd been going at it since Grace's senior year at SI — and him a married man with a young daughter. Maureen had always tried to see Grace's willfulness as backbone, but this she could not accept. She had said some unforgivable things, according to Grace. Since when, Maureen wanted to know, had a few home truths become unforgivable?

She was still trying to bring Grace around when Father Crespi got wind of the whole business and fired the teacher. Maureen had not been Father Crespi's source, but Grace wouldn't believe it. She declared things at an end between them, and so far she had kept that vow, though she dumped the luckless fool within a few weeks of his leaving his wife.

Grace was still close to Maureen's mother. From her, Maureen had learned that Grace was doing temp work and keeping house with another man. Maureen couldn't get her mother to say more — she'd given her word! But the old bird clearly enjoyed not saying more, being in the know, being part of Maureen's punishment for driving Grace away, as she judged the matter.

Maureen crossed the street again and turned into the parking lot — an unpaved corner tract surrounded by a chainlink fence. The attendant's shack was dark. She picked her way over ridges of frozen mud toward her car. Last summer's special-offer paint job was already dull, bleached out by road salt. Through a scrim of dried slush on the window, Maureen could see the stack of student blue books on the passenger seat — a weekend's worth of grading. She fished the keys from her purse, but her hand was dead with cold and she fumbled them when she tried to unlock the door.

They hit the ground with a merry tinkle. She flexed her fingers and bent down for the keys. As she pushed herself back up, a pain shot through her bad knee. "Goddammit!" she said.

"Don't curse!" The voice came from behind Maureen, a man's voice, but high, almost shrill.

She closed her eyes.

He said something she couldn't make out; he had some sort of accent. He said it again, then added, "Now!"

"What?"

"The *keys*. Give them to me."

Maureen held the keys out behind her, eyes pressed shut. She had just one thought: Do not see him. The keys were taken from her hand, and she heard the door being unlocked.

"Open it," the man said. "Open the door. Yes, now get in."

"Just take it," Maureen said. "Please."

"*Please*, you will get *in*. Please." He took her arm and half pushed, half lifted her into the car and slammed the door shut. She sat behind the steering wheel with her head bent, eyes closed, hands folded over her purse. The passenger door opened. "Compositions," the man muttered.

"Exams," she said, and cringed at her stupidity in correcting him.

Maureen heard the blue books thud onto the floor in back. Then he was on the seat beside her. He sat there a moment, breathing quick shallow breaths. "Open your eyes. Open! Yes, now drive." He jingled the keys.

Looking straight ahead over the wheel, she said, "I don't think I can."

She sensed a movement toward her and flinched. He jingled the keys beside her ear and dropped them in her lap. "Drive."

Maureen had once taken a class in self-defense. That was five years ago, after her marriage ended and left her alone with a teenage daughter — as if the dangers were outside somewhere and not already in the house, between them. She'd forgotten all the fancy moves, but not her determination to fight, for Grace or for herself — to go on the attack, kick the bastard in the balls, scream and kick and hit and bite, fight to the very death. She hadn't forgotten any of this, even now, watching herself do nothing. She was aware of what she was failing to do — was unable to do — and the shock of understanding that she could not depend on herself produced a

sense of resignation, an empty echoing calm. With steady hands she started the car and pulled out of the lot and turned left as the man directed, away from the lights of the commercial zone, toward the river.

"Not so slow," he said.

She sped up.

"Slower!"

She slowed down.

"You are trying to be arrested," he said.

"No."

He made a mirthless laughing sound. "Do I look like a fool?"

"No . . . I don't know. I haven't seen you."

"I am not a fool. Turn right."

They were on Frontage Road now, heading upriver. The night was clear, and the almost-full moon hung just above the old tanneries on the far bank. The moon made a broad silver path on the smooth water in the middle of the river, glimmered dully on the slabs of ice jammed up along the sides. The moonlight on Maureen's bare hands turned them ghostly white on the steering wheel. They looked cold; they *were* cold. She felt chilled through. She turned up the heater, and within moments the car was filled with the man's smell — ripe, loamy, not unpleasant.

"You were using alcohol," the man said.

She waited for him to say more. His knees were angled toward her, pressed together against the console. "A little," she said.

He was silent. His breathing slowed, deepened, and Maureen felt obscurely grateful for this. She could feel him watching her.

"Over seventy dollars is in my purse," she said. "Please just take it."

"Seventy dollars? That is your offer?" He laughed the unreal laugh.

"I can get more," she said. Her voice was small and flat — not her voice at all. She hesitated, then said, "We'll have to go to an ATM."

"This is not about money. Drive. Please."

And so she did. This was something she could do, drive a car on Frontage Road, as she'd done for almost thirty years now. She drove past the Toll House Inn, past the bankrupt development with its unfinished, skeletal houses open to the weather, past the road to the bridge that would take her home, past the burned-out house with the trailer beside it, on past the brickworks and the

quarry and a line of dairy farms and the farm her grandparents had worked as tenants to escape the tannery, where, after several years of learning the hard way, the owner sold out and a new owner found more experienced hands and sent them packing, back across the river. When she was young, Maureen and her sisters had picked strawberries with their mother on different farms, and Maureen had marveled at how her mother could chat with a woman in the next row or just look dully into the distance while her fingers briskly ransacked the plants for ripe berries, as if possessed of their own eyes and purpose. At the end of a day she'd look over Maureen's card (punched for a fraction of the flats she herself had picked), then hand it back and say, "At least that mouth of yours works."

Maureen drove on past the harshly lit 7-Eleven and the Christmas tree farm and the old ferry pier where she and Francis, her ex-husband, then a sweet, shy boy, had parked after high school dances to drink and make out; on through pale fields and brief stands of bare black trees that in summer made a green roof overhead. She knew every rise and turn, and the car took them easily, and Maureen surrendered to the comfort of her mastery of the road. The silent man beside her seemed to feel it too; it seemed to be holding him in a trance.

Then he shifted, leaned forward. "Turn right up there," he said in a low voice. "On that road, you see? That one up there, after the sign."

Maureen made the turn almost languidly. The side road was unplowed, covered with crusty snow that scraped against the undercarriage of the car. She hit a deep dip; the front end clanged, the wheels spun wild for a moment, then they caught and the car shot forward again, headlights jumping giddily. The road bent once and ended in a clearing surrounded by tall pines.

"You drive too fast," the man said.

She waited, engine running, hands still on the wheel, headlights ablaze on a Park Service sign picturing animals and plants to be seen hereabouts. The peaked roof over the sign wore a hat of snow. It came to Maureen that she'd been to this place before — a trailhead, unfamiliar at first in its winter bleakness. She had come here with Grace's scout troop to hike up to the palisades overlooking the river. The trail was historic, a route of attack for some battle in the Revolutionary War.

The man sniffed, sniffed again. "Beer," he said.

"I was having a drink with friends."

"A *drink*. You stink of it. The great lady teacher!"

That he knew she was a teacher, that he knew anything about her, snapped the almost serene numbness that had overtaken Maureen. She thought of his seeing the essays. That could explain his knowledge of her work, but not his tone — the personal scorn and triumph in his discovery of her weakness, as he clearly saw it.

A small dull pain pulsed behind her eyes, all that was left of the drink she'd had. The heat blowing in the car was making her contacts dry and scratchy. She reached over to turn it down, but he seized her wrist and pulled it back. His fingers were thin and damp. He turned the heat up again. "Leave it like this — warm," he said, and dropped her hand.

She almost looked at him then, but stopped herself. "Please," she said. "What do you want?"

"This is not about sex," he said. "That is what you are thinking, of course. That is the American answer to everything."

Maureen looked ahead and said nothing. She could see the lights of cars on Frontage Road flickering between the tree trunks. She wasn't very far from the road, but the idea of running for it appeared to her a demeaning absurdity, herself flailing through the drifts like some weeping, dopey, sacrificial extra in a horror movie.

"You know nothing about our life," he said. "Who we are. What we have had to do in this country. I was a doctor! But okay, so they won't let me be a doctor here. I give that up. I give up the old life so my family will have this new life. My son will be a doctor, not me! Okay, I accept, that's how it is."

"Where are you from?" Maureen asked, and then said, "Never mind," hoping he wouldn't answer. It seemed to her that the loamy smell was stronger, more sour. She kept her eyes on the Park Service sign in the headlights, but she was aware of the man's knees knocking rapidly and soundlessly together.

"*Never mind*," he said. "Yes, that is exactly your way of thinking. That is exactly how the great lady teacher destroys a family. Without a thought. Never mind!"

"But I don't know your family." She waited. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"No, you don't know what I'm talking about. You have already forgotten. Never mind!"

"You have the wrong person," Maureen said.

"Have you told a lie, lady teacher?"

"Please. You must have the wrong person. What you're saying — none of it makes sense." And because this was certainly true, because nothing he'd said had anything to do with her, Maureen felt compelled — as prelude to a serious sorting-out of this whole mess — to turn and look at him. He was leaning back into the corner, hunched into a puffy coat of the vivid orange color worn by highway crews. In the reflected glare of the headlights, his dark eyes had a blurred, liquid brightness. Above the straight line of his eyebrows the bald dome of his head gleamed dully. He wore a short beard. A few thin patches of it grew high on his cheeks, to just below his eyes.

"I have the right person," he said. "Now you will please answer me."

She was confused; she shook her head as if to clear it.

"No?" he said. "The great lady teacher has never told a lie?"

"What are you talking about? What lie?"

A sudden glint of teeth behind the beard. "You tell me."

"Any lie? Ever?"

"Ever. Any lie or cheat."

"This is ridiculous. Of course I have. Who hasn't, for God's sake?"

He rocked forward and jabbed his head at her. "Don't curse! No more cursing!"

Maureen could see his face clearly now, the full, finely molded, almost feminine lips, the long thin nose, the dark unexpected freckles across the bridge of his nose and under his eyes, vanishing into the beard. She turned away and leaned her throbbing head against the steering wheel.

"You can lie and cheat," he said. "That's okay, no problem. Who hasn't? Never mind! But for others — poof! No faults allowed!"

"This is crazy," she murmured.

"No, Mrs. Casey. What is crazy is to destroy a good boy's life for nothing."

Her breath caught. She raised her head and looked at him.

"Hassan makes one mistake — one mistake — and you destroy him," he said. "Understand this, most esteemed lady teacher, I will not allow it."

"Hassan? Hassan is your son?"

He leaned back again, lips pursed, cheeks working out and back, out and back like a fish's.

Hassan. She liked him, too much. He was tall and graceful and broodingly, soulfully handsome. Not very bright, Hassan, and bone idle, but with a sudden offhand charm that amused her and had distracted her from dealing firmly with him, as he well knew. He'd been getting away with murder all year, fudging on his homework, handing in essays he obviously hadn't written, and Maureen had done nothing but warn him. She hated calling people on their offenses; her own raised voice and shaking hands, her heart pumping out righteousness, all the rituals of grievance and reproach were distasteful to her, and had always held her back, up to a point. Beyond that point she did not spare the lash. But she was slow to get there. Her sisters had pushed her around, she'd spoiled her daughter. Her husband's gambling had brought them to the point of ruin before her cowardice became too shameful to bear and she began to challenge his excuses and evasions, and finally faced him down — "ran him off," as Grace liked to say when she wanted to cut deep.

A similar self-disgust had caught up with Maureen this morning. After months of letting Hassan slide, she'd seen him blatantly cheating during an exam, and she'd blown — really blown, surprising even herself. She'd pulled him out of class and told him in some detail how little she thought of him, then sent him home with a promise — shouted at his back — to report his cheating to Father Crespi, who would certainly expel him. Hassan had turned then and said, evenly, "Stupid cow." And now, remembering that betrayal, the advantage he'd taken, his insulting confidence that he could cheat in front of her with impunity, she felt her fingers tighten on the steering wheel and she stared fixedly in front of her, seeing nothing.

"Hassan!" she said.

"I will not allow it," he repeated.

"Hassan has been cheating all year," she said. "I warned him. This was the last straw."

"Warnings. You should give him help, not warnings. It's hard for Hassan. He wasn't born here, his English is not good."

"Hassan's English is fine. He's lazy and dishonest, that's his problem. He'd rather cheat than do the work."

"Hassan is going to be a doctor."

"Sure."

"He will be a doctor! He will. And you won't stop him — you, a drunken woman."

"Oh," she said. "Of course. Of course. *Women*. All our fault, right? Bunch of stupid cows messing things up for the bulls."

"No! I bow before woman. Woman is the hand, the heart, the soul of her home, set there by God himself. All comes from her. All is owed to her."

"Now you're quoting," Maureen said. "Who's your source?"

"The *home*," he said. "Not the army. Not the surgery. Not the judge's chair, giving laws. Not the discotheque."

"Who's your source?" Maureen repeated. "God, is it?"

The man drew back. "Have some care," he said. "God is not mocked."

Maureen rubbed her scratchy eyes and one of her contacts drifted out of focus. She blinked furiously until it slipped back into place. "I'm turning the heat off," she said.

"No. Leave it warm."

But she turned it off anyway, and he made no move to stop her. He looked wary, watching her from his place against the door; he looked cornered, as if *she* had seized *him* and forced him to this lonely place. The car engine was doing something strange, surging, then almost dying, then surging again. The noise of the blower had masked it. Piece of shit. Another paycheck down the drain.

"Okay, doctor," she said. "You've got your parent-teacher conference. What do you want?"

"You will not report Hassan to Mr. Crespi."

"Father Crespi, you mean."

"I call no man father but one."

"Wonderful. So you choose a school called Saint Ignatius."

"I understand. This would not happen if Hassan were Catholic."

"Oh, *please*. Hassan can't speak English, Hassan needs help, Hassan isn't Catholic. Jesus! *I'm* not even Catholic."

He made his laughing sound. "So you choose a school called Saint Ignatius. With your Jesus on the cross behind your desk — I have seen it myself at the open house. I was there! I was there. But no, she is not Catholic, not Mrs. Maureen Casey."

Even with the heat off, the air in the car was stale and close. Maureen opened her window halfway and leaned back, bathing her face in the cold draft of air. "That's right," she said. "I've had it with clueless men passing on orders from God."

"Without God, there is no foundation," he said. "Without God, we stand on nothing."

"Anyway, you're too late. I've already reported him."

"You have not. Mr. Crespi is out of town until Monday."

"Father Crespi. Well, I'm impressed. At least *you've* done your homework."

"Hassan is going to be a doctor," he said, rubbing his hands together, gazing down at them as if expecting some visible result.

"Look at me. *Look at me*. Now listen." She held the man's liquid eyes, held the moment, not at all displeased that what she was about to say, though true, would give him pain. "Hassan is not going to be a doctor," she said. "Wait — just listen. Honestly, now, can you picture Hassan in medical school? Even supposing he could get in? Even supposing he can get through college at all? Think about it — Hassan in medical school. What an idea! You could make a comedy — *Hassan Goes to Medical School*. No. Hassan will not be a doctor. And you know it. You have always known it." She gave that thought some room to breathe. Then she said, "So it doesn't really matter if I report him or not, does it?"

Still she held his eyes. His lips were working, he seemed about to say something, but no sound emerged.

She said, "So. Let's say I don't play along. Let's say I'm going to report him, which I am. What are you going to do about it? I mean, what were you thinking tonight?"

He looked away, back down at his hands.

"You followed me from school, right? You waited for me. You had this spot picked out. What were you going to do if I didn't play along?"

He shook his head.

"Well, what? Kill me?"

He didn't answer.

"You were going to kill me? Too much! Have you got a gun?"

"No! I own no guns."

"A knife?"

"No."

"What, then?"

Head bent, he resumed rubbing his hands together as if over a fire.

"Stop that. What, then?"

He took a deep breath. "Please," he said.

"Strangle me? With those? Stop that!" She reached over and seized his wrists. They were thin, bony. "Hey," she said, then again, "Hey!" When at last he raised his eyes to her, she lifted his hands and pressed the palms to her neck. They were cold, colder than the air on her face. She dropped her own hands. "Go on," she said.

She felt his fingers icy against her neck. His eyes, dark and sad, searched hers.

"Go on," she said, softly.

The engine surged, and he blinked as if in surprise and pulled his hands away. He rested them in his lap, looked at them unhappily, then put them between his knees.

"No?" she said.

"Mrs. Casey . . ."

She waited, but that was all he said. "Tell me something," she said. "What did your wife think of this brainstorm? Did you tell her?"

"My wife is dead."

"I didn't know that."

He shrugged.

"I'm sorry."

"Mrs. Casey . . ."

Again she waited, then said, "What?"

"The window? It is very cold."

Maureen had a mind to say no to him, let him freeze, but she was getting pretty numb herself. She rolled the window up.

"And please? The heater?"

Maureen drove back down Frontage Road. He kept his face to the other window, his back to her. Now and then she saw his shoulders moving but he didn't make a sound. She had planned to put him out by the turnoff for her bridge, let him find his own way from there, but as she approached the exit she couldn't help asking where he'd left his car. He said it was in the same lot where she'd parked hers. Ah, yes. That made sense. She drove on.

They didn't speak again until she had stopped just up from the parking lot, under a streetlight, in plain view of the drunks walking past. Even here, cocooned in the car, engine surging, Maureen could feel the heavy bass thump of the music coming from Harrigan's.

"Hassan will be dismissed from school?" he asked.

"Probably. He's spoiled, it'll do him good in the long run. You're the one I haven't made up my mind about. You're the one on the hot seat. Do you understand?"

He bowed his head.

"I don't think you do. Forget the prison time you're looking at — you haven't even said you're sorry. I said it, about your wife, which makes me the only one who's used that word tonight. Which strikes me as pretty damned ridiculous, given the circumstances."

"But I am. I am sorry."

"Yeah — we'll see. One thing, though. Suppose I'd promised not to report Hassan. Whatever made you think I'd keep my word?"

He reached into the breast pocket of his coat and took out a white book and laid it on the dashboard. Maureen picked it up. It was a Bible, a girl's Bible bound in imitation leather with gilt lettering on the cover, the pages edged in gilt. "You would swear," he said. "Like in court, to the judge."

Maureen opened it, riffled the thin, filmy pages. "Where did you get this?"

"Goodwill."

"My dear," she said. "You really thought you could save him."

He pushed the door open. "I am sorry, Mrs. Casey."

"Here." Maureen held out the Bible, but he put up the palms of his hands and backed out of the car. She watched him make his way down the street, a short man, hatless, his bright, puffy coat billowing with the gusts. She saw him turn into the parking lot but forgot to observe his leaving, as she'd intended, because she got caught up leafing through the Bible. Her father had given her one just like it after her confirmation; she still kept it on her bedside table.

This Bible had belonged to Clara Gutierrez. Below her name, someone had written an inscription in Spanish; Maureen couldn't make it out in the dim light, only the day, large and underlined — *Pascua 1980*. Where was she now, this Clara? What had become of her, this ardent, hopeful girl in her white dress, surrounded by her family, godparents, friends, that her Bible should end up in a Goodwill bin? Even if she no longer read it, or believed it, she wouldn't have thrown it away, would she? Had something happened? Ah, girl, where were you?