

EARTH CHANGES

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(4,800 words)

*"Earth changes, but thy soul
And God stand true."*

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Maisey wanted to believe it was a sign, a divine revelation. It was time to return. She had been quarreling with herself over going back for some time now, months. Years, actually, but for the past three months intensely. Last night had convinced her.

She knew it could be explained away as an optical illusion. The mystery could be erased with a simple scientific explanation. But the timing of the vision was what made it so special. Wasn't she then kneeling by her bed, ignoring the stabs in her brittle knees, praying that night as she had not prayed for fifty-five years?

She had known when she opened her eyes and saw the moon—she must go back and ask for forgiveness. Of course, when she had looked through the half of the window without the screen, the moonlight cross had disappeared. But *that* was the beauty of the message—had she not been praying, looking through the screen, she would not have seen the cross. It had to be a sign. Divine Intent, if such things were still expressed.

Underneath her bed that night, among the many shoe boxes stashed there, she found her "Holy Items" box, filled with her rosaries, the blue cut-glass beaded rosary that had belonged to her long-dead mother and the olive seed rosary, the seeds from the Mount of Olives worn smooth from hours of devout handling; her Bible, with the family tree filled in with her childish scrawl; several lace mantillas she had worn as a child; and the holy cards with a prayer on one side and, on the other, the gentle faces of the popes. It had been so long, but she knew each face as that of an old friend.

How could she have allowed fifty-five years to pass? Would she even be accepted back? Surely, if she were truly penitent. She had to try. Time was so short,

the remaining years so few. Even that was an assumption. She must do it now, for perhaps not even a single year remained.

Downstairs at the desk of the retirement villa the following morning, Maisey informed the receptionist of her intention to go to Mass on Sunday. Would they please have the van driver include her into his scheduled church runs, to the Catholic church? And tomorrow, she continued, she would be riding the city bus to the same church, to confession.

The staff suggested she ride the van tomorrow. No, she would ride the bus. They objected that her church was on the other side of the city, better to take the van. She refused; she was not so old and addled that she could not ride a bus across town on her own. She ignored their peevish expressions and shake of heads.

For goodness sake, she thought, this is a retirement home, not a girls' school. She would do as she pleased; she did not need young fool kids governing and judging her every action.

Next morning, she rose early, having decided to call and find out when confessions were heard, and to leave in plenty of time to arrive without haste. Of course, she would need plenty of meditation time before she actually went into the confessional. Fifty-five years encompassed a great many transgressions; she would need time to think back over them. Perhaps cataloguing them would be the best method for the telling. She could decide on that when the time came.

Confessions were being heard all that day, Saturday, until five p.m., the telephone recording said. She would plan to be there by one o'clock. It was now eight o'clock: figure an hour for breakfast, an hour to dress, an hour for the bus ride and waiting time ... that would make it twelve o'clock. High noon. Appointment with Destiny.

Funny how she had no appetite. Rather than sit at the breakfast table pushing her French toast around her plate, she would go to her room and dress. She excused herself from the table, to the great concern of her villa friends. No, Maisey assured them, she was feeling quite well. Her excuse of fasting satisfied them. They divided her breakfast.

She knew precisely the dress she would wear. Her smoky-blue, long-sleeved dress with the black orchid print and white cuffs and collar. The same one she'd earmarked for her burial. Well, it was her favorite, and most flattering. And with it, her navy blue low-heel pumps. No orthopedic gum shoes today.

As she pulled the dress down over her head, her glasses removed and carefully placed on her bedside table so as not to catch on the dress, she looked at her reflection in the full-length mirror. The vapory form of a young girl stood before her: skinny arms and legs, slightly concave posture, and long thin neck holding a too-large head. She put on her glasses. Gone then was the little girl, and in her place the deflated figure of an eighty-five year old woman.

She moved closer to the mirror to examine the face. The thick auburn hair of her youth, remembered almost as having belonged to somebody else, had long been replaced by the fine white hairs now slightly tousled from the efforts of dressing. She removed her glasses again and pressed her nose to the mirror; hard to believe those sunken, watered-blue eyes had once sparkled impishly, as one beau had described them.

And the pug nose, her greatest embarrassment in youth, had not improved with age—a shapeless sandbag hanging between the eyes. She pinched her nostrils and breathed in hard, then released her nose. With the nostrils vacuumed in tight against the sides, ...it looked like a bar of melting clay.

Well, she comforted herself, gasping a bit, no one expects an old lady to be pretty. Too late, if they do.

She combed her hair and carefully pinned a white lace mantilla over her feathery curls, the Spanish mantilla given her by her father for First Communion. How many years ago? Seventy-eight. That many. Hard to believe her childhood had ended over seventy years ago. Ended. Best not to dwell on it.

Down at the front desk, she asked for the bus schedule. She had twenty minutes to wait for the nine-fifty-two bus, and don't we look nice today? Did we have a date? The question merited no answer.

She sat on the edge of her chair, cane, and purse and prayer book resting on her knees, and stared out of the window, into the garden. At two minutes before the

scheduled arrival, she stood by the wooden bench of the bus stop, coin purse out, right hand ungloved to fetch the money.

A dollar and twenty-five cents fare, a dollar for senior citizens, the placard on the accordion door informed her as the bus drew to a stop. Highway robbery! She scaled the corrugated steel steps, deposited her dollar in the fare box, frowned in disapproval at the driver who merely looked through her, and turned towards the seats. Full bus, packed tight in front. She inched her way towards the back of the bus.

"You wanna find a seat sometime today?" the driver yelled back.

She glanced to both sides. Indifferent faces staring straight ahead. The bus jerked into motion. She grabbed a seatback handle and swung into somebody's lap.

"I am so sorry."

"Yeah, right." He let her rise on her own.

She found a seat behind him. "Most gentlemen would give their seat to a lady," she admonished quietly in his ear.

"I guess I ain't no gentleman, huh, Granny?" Several young people around her snickered.

One woman across the aisle did not laugh. A middle-aged woman. Her eyes offered no comment, no sympathy.

Maisey stared at the pocketbook in her lap. Funny how her heart was jumping around inside of her, and how her face felt hot. Just calm yourself, Maisey, she chided herself. You're on the bus, on your way.

She watched out of the window at the store buildings streaming past in a steady flow on both sides of the bus, at the cars and trucks and buses and bicycles crowding the streets, passing, stopping, weaving in and out in a montage of color.

She told the young woman who sat next to her that she remembered when that part of town was considered the country. In fact, this very area had been known as Darby's Swamp when she was a little girl. Her church had been far out in the country.

Some people might have been interested.

In her mind, to pass the time, she waded through memories of the people and places back then. These street names passing by on the signs, she had *known* the De La Guerras, and the Carillos, and the Castillos. The names had belonged to *families* in those days, even if today they were only street names.

She asked her seatmate whether they were nearing the junction of Olive and El Cielo. The shrug was no help, so Maisey tried to look at the street signs through the window. There was no chance to focus on the green and white shingles before they sped past.

The front seats showed some patches of graffiti on green. Empty seats. Perhaps the driver would help her. At the next stop, she made her way forward, against the exiting tide. She secured a seat beneath the stenciled notice, "Please reserve forward seats for the elderly and handicapped."

Begging his pardon, she asked the man on the seat next to her whether they were nearing the intersection of Olive and El Cielo. He might not have heard; at any rate, he did not answer. She asked the woman across the aisle and received a shrug in answer. Perhaps she could get the driver's attention.

A man seated next to the woman across the aisle said this bus would not take her that way; she had to transfer to Bus 8, at the transit center. Downtown.

So then that was not Darby's Swamp. They had been headed into downtown rather than across town. Funny she had not recognized the area. It had grown, she knew, but she had always thought she would recognize her native town. Still, her circuits in the van were limited to familiar areas; she rarely went more than a few blocks. Never had she imagined herself isolated from the changing world, but perhaps she had been. She resolved to get out and about more often. Downtown now, to the transit center.

She asked the man the number of the bus she needed. He repeated: eight. And the one they were on? Twenty-four. She wrote it down on a notepad from her purse. She would need to know that to get back.

The bus slowed into a lane of buses and stopped. She assumed this to be the transit center. The man nodded. She followed the crowd out of the doors at the middle of the bus and into the round transit center. Charts covered the walls. She examined the maps and the colored bus routes; they meant nothing to her. No line showed a path across town to where she wanted to go.

She went to the Information desk.

Could they help her?

Yes, she needed a ride to Olive and El Cielo, on Bus 8, she suspected.

Bus 8—due to arrive in fourteen minutes, and she could wait for it out the door and to the left. Did she have her transfer ticket? The driver should have given her one. No? Well, here was one and she should be sure to ask for another on the return route.

Out the door and to the left, she waited. She took a long breath and held it and squinted around the parking lot. She recognized where she was now, only because of the JC Penney's and Rodenbeck's stores on the far side of the lot. They had both been part of downtown since the early twenties. The town had certainly grown.

Bus 8 was a minibus, the driver responded to her exclamation about its size. Minibuses were used for the smaller routes, for economic reasons. Maisey approved. She liked the clean interiors and the large windows. One did not feel so helpless on a minibus.

Would he be kind enough to tell her when they reached the junction of Olive and El Cielo?

Sure, it wasn't for a ways, but he'd tell her.

She settled into her seat. Out of downtown now, she could see the mountains, stark against the cloudless blue sky. The sandstone peaks were covered with pine now, not like they had been when she had first seen them, so long ago. She could not remember when they had changed. How many hours had she gazed at her mountains and not noticed?

Surely the bus would stop soon. They must have been driving for miles. Three more stops, he told her. She checked for her purse, cane, and prayer book. What time

was it? With all this driving and having to wait for buses and changing buses, it must be one o'clock or later. She had no watch.

The young boy in the seat ahead of her had one. He told her the time: ten forty-three. Could it be? Perhaps his watch was slow, or had stopped. He listened to his wrist. Nope, it was right. His friend agreed.

She certainly had made good time. This was her stop. She said good-bye to the driver, thanked him for his help, and descended the stairs. She had arrived.

Across the street, its white walls and marble statue of St. Raphael shining brightly in the sun, her church. It was different from what she had remembered. New wings had been added on either side, she decided. Of course, she should have known it would have changed.

St. Raphael stood solid and serene as ever at the entrance, waiting to greet the faithful. Maisey hesitated. Now that she had arrived, she was not so sure she could just walk in. She needed to think. She sat on the bus bench.

Fifty-five years suddenly seemed an eternity. Who was she that she could just walk into the church and say, I'm here, I've returned, bless me, amen?

How did one return to the Church? Why hadn't she asked on the phone when she called? The recording certainly could not have told her. Why hadn't she called a priest to find out? There were priests in the church now, go ask. It would be so much harder to ask in person. What if she were told no, she could not come back? She had to think this out.

What about the prodigal son? He was welcomed back. And for so many years she had been faithful, wouldn't that be taken into consideration? Why had she left? None of the answers, alone or combined, seemed reason enough now. For each excuse, an easy solution came to mind, had come to mind then, too, but now could not be ignored. She had wandered for no reason but sloth and, well, call it what it was, boredom.

How could she have been bored? She thought back to her childhood when Sundays had been the most exciting day of the week. She and her sister and cousins, all the relatives, in their best dresses and suits, had driven to morning Mass. She

remembered even now the smell of the candles and incense, the musty smell of the adobe church and of the pews and kneeler cushions, and the sacred light shining through the stained-glass windows making colored patterns on the hardwood floor of the aisles. And after Mass, they would gather at one of the family's houses for Sunday brunch.

She had heard that changes had been declared in the Church. She remembered discussing some of the shocking changes from Vatican II after she had left the Church. One could eat up to an hour before Mass nowadays. She disagreed with that; the long fast from Saturday supper to Sunday brunch had been hard, she remembered the taste of the acid burning in her throat and mouth during each Mass, but oh how good the food tasted when one did eat, how easy the sacrifice seemed then. No, she did not care for that change.

She had also heard that the priest now faced the congregation and spoke English. Though she had liked the mystical sound of the Latin, she accepted those changes on the principle that Mass would mean more to the faithful if one could see what the priest celebrated, and understood each word, rather than just the general idea. As a child, she had prayed with the adults, hissing sibilants and thrumming syllables, in imitation of what she heard of their speech. How mature she had felt to be praying with the grownups. It wasn't until she was a young adult herself that she had understood the prayers. Children would understand the prayers in English. It was a good change.

She had read of other changes, many of which she could not remember. She did know, and did not approve of the fact, that women no longer covered their heads in Church and that, in fact, some even wore shorts and slacks to Mass. Unheard of! Worse yet, her still-practicing Catholic neighbor, Gertrude Wimble, had told her that people now received the Eucharist in their hands, from lay ministers, as she called them, men and women who were not priests. Maisey found that hard to believe. For one thing, women were certainly not active in the Mass, never had been, never would be. It was a man's realm, as it should be. And, most importantly, one never touched the Eucharist. It was strictly forbidden. She would know for certain tomorrow.

If she made it to confession today. One most decidedly did not go to Mass without having gone first to confession. Maisey was sure that that was one rule which had not changed, would never change. The idea of going to a sacred dinner in a

sanctified hall without cleansing your hands or your person, and expecting to be welcomed and served—one would never think of such a thing. So it would be if one went to Mass without first having been cleansed in Confession.

She remembered her first shocked understanding of the concept of Confession, at the age of seven. Her mother and father actually told a priest all of their sins? both of thought and of deed? She couldn't imagine that she would ever be brave enough to bare her soul that way. No, the humiliation wouldn't permit it. Still, a year later, she made her First Confession on the Saturday before her First Holy Communion on Sunday, and had lived to walk out of the confessional.

After the fright of her first few attempts had worn off, she had come to love that moment when she would open the heavy wooden door of the confessional and step into the soundless, darkened interior, and hear the door close behind her with a soft thud of air. Then, she would kneel on the kneeler with the armrest in front and wait for the divider between her cubicle and that of the priest to slide open. Not the entire divider, but only the solid panel of little window, leaving a mesh window intact; she liked the assurance of secrecy offered by that dark partition.

In the moments of waiting, in the silence of the talk box, as she called it, she would say a prayer, asking that her recitation of sins be honest and complete. She would tick off on her fingers all of her sins, and later lower a finger as each sin was confessed. The panel would slide open, the soft light from the priest's sanctuary would filter through the close weave of the screen mesh, a voice would gently ask, Yes, my child? and her confession would begin. She would tell all her sins and be forgiven her transgressions, provided she said her penance with a contrite heart. And a new week would begin.

A new life, today. She would go in now and, in the dark, she would tell the priest that she had come back to the life she had abandoned so long ago. Surely, in the dark, she could find the courage to ask forgiveness, and to ask God to take her back.

She crossed the street and greeted St. Raphael. His nose had broken off and two fingers were missing now, but she remembered him.

She climbed the three steps to the door, walking slowly to calm her racing heart. Then, taking hold of one wrought iron handle, she pulled at the heavy wooden door.

It was locked.

She tried the other half of the double door. It, too, was locked. How could it be locked? Churches are never locked! She pulled again at the doors. Was it after five o'clock already? Surely she had not been sitting across the street for six hours!

Her eyes focused on the sign beneath the window. "Please use side entrance. Carpets being cleaned." Silly old woman, she chuckled, of course they don't lock churches. Not even these days. Other notices lined the foyer window sill. "Bingo—Wednesday nights, 7:30 - 9:30." "Marriage Encounter Group—Thurs. Nite, 8 pm." "Parents Without Partners—Saturdays, 7:00 - 8:30." She understood Bingo.

She walked along the camellia-bordered path to the side entrance.

Inside, especially after the glare of the noon sun, the church lighting seemed dim and inviting. She dipped her finger into the bowl of holy water and made the Sign of the Cross on herself. She glanced around. A new altar; no altar railings; an organ; many more pews, new pews with lower backs and thicker cushions; and new stained-glass windows, for the alcove additions.

An impressive church, no longer a small country church. Larger because of a grown congregation, she decided.

No one else in church. The white light lit over the priest's confessional cubicle; confessions were still being heard.

She walked to the front of the church, careful not to step on the carpet, a wine-red carpet up the aisle to the foot of the altar. She knelt to the left of the altar, at the foot of the statue of the Virgin Mary, before the flickering fan of votive candles. She would light one for herself, after praying.

Now that she was inside, she was anxious to be done. But, no, she mustn't rush. Each step must be carefully followed, sincerely performed. She bowed her head.

With rosary beads entwined on her fingers, she opened her prayer book before her, though once she started she had no need for the printed guide. The words of prayers learned with such diligence as a child now flooded her mind, faster than her whispering voice could carry them. She was enveloped in ancient traditions, her fingers

working the olive seed prayer beads by instinct, her mind reciting the mysteries from memory: Joyful, Sorrowful, and Glorious.

Much later, she opened her eyes, surprised to find herself in church. She had drifted back in time during her prayers. Comforting past times.

She was prepared now, ready to enter the darkness of the confessional and unburden herself. She rose, kissed the feet of the Virgin Mary, and placed a folded dollar bill in the box among the burgundy-colored glass votive candles. Then, taking a taper, she lit a candle for herself and her deceased family. She turned and walked to the back of the chapel.

She opened the confessional door.

Perhaps she had opened the wrong door. The priest sat in a chair before her, glasses low on his nose, Bible on his knees.

He looked at her over the rim of his glasses.

She took a step back. "Oh, I beg your pardon, Father."

"No, that's quite all right." He beckoned her in with his book. "Come in. Come in."

"I wish to go to confession, Father. I'm so sorry. I thought this was the confessional."

"You've come to the right place, then. Come in, sit down." He motioned her to a cushioned chair facing him. She sat. The room in which she found herself was small and narrow, the size of a closet. And circumspectly lit. She looked at the priest.

He smiled. "You haven't been in the new confessionals, I take it."

No, she—was this the—she had not known—they had changed. Gertrude had not told her about this. Why would she have held back something so important?

The priest tried to soothe her; St. Raphael's had only made the change in the past few years. Many people had not yet grown used to it.

Why had they changed? she wanted to know. What had been wrong with the old way?

Nothing had been wrong, he reassured her. The Vatican was constantly seeking new ways to draw its children closer to the Church, closer to the Lord.

By exposing sinners? How was one supposed to draw closer to the Lord by facing the confessor in revealing light, speaking of one's sins out in the open, vulnerable?

He assured her that though the setting had changed, the act remained the same. She might close her eyes when she spoke, if she wished, or they could move her chair behind him and she could speak over his shoulder.

No more black security, no more sense of mysterious communication? Why change those traditions which had become so important to the faithful, to the faithful who have been brought up in the old ways?

The changes had been taking place gradually, over the last thirty or forty years.

Maisey ducked her head.

Had she been unaware of the changes?

No, she had heard of some of them.

He understood.

Perhaps she should leave? she asked. She was so far behind, so attuned to the old ways, perhaps she could no longer be a Catholic. Perhaps her beliefs were now archaic.

No, no. Beliefs are never archaic. Doctrines and beliefs perpetuate, though the settings and the applications might change, with the times. Times do change, he added with a smile.

Yes, she knew. Hadn't she seen enough today to convince her of that?

He asked what had prompted her return.

Would this now make the difference? What if her reasons were not acceptable? What if she had changed so much that she was no longer made of Catholic stuff? How was she to tell? Where to begin—what to say? She told him of her thoughts, of her emptiness, and about her vision, the moonlight cross on her screen. No, maybe that wasn't the thing to talk about. She sneaked a glance at him from beneath her bowed head, and saw no ridicule in his eyes. Finally, she told him of her fears. Her greatest fear of having abandoned the Church for too long a time, of not now being welcome to return.

She had no wish to die alone. She knew one did not have to. Except if it was too late, too late to regain the blessing of the One she had abandoned, turned her back on? Once lost, was the love of God ever restored?

It had never been lost, he assured her. These past fifty-five years, though she had turned away from Him, He had not abandoned her. If she were sincere, He would welcome her now, as He would have done at any time these past years.

And death? What if death were to take her before she could be fully reconciled? What then?

If she had one day, one afternoon, one hour, even a moment of re-commitment, she had all the time she needed. And if she had years remaining, so much the better for strengthening her faith, and for reaching out to others.

And it was as easy as that?

Easy? Yes, once the difficult choice had been made to commitment. After that, she had to walk the remainder of her life in His way. But, once truly committed, that was easy, yes.

She would re-commit! Why had she waited? Why had she dreaded this day? Her unfounded fears circled in on her, fears of an angry priest/God who would punish her, physical and mental tortures of penance she must endure, and the potent fear of rejection. Superstition, and an old woman's imagination.

The worst of the nightmare was going to be the confession. The revealing light and exposure to the priest. No darkness to cloak and hide her now.

She crossed herself, her eyes half shut, seeing the light but avoiding the face before her, and began, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been fifty-five years since my last confession."

The End