



the miracle of faith

Now and then, you see something that alters how you view the world.

Here, author **J. COURTNEY SULLIVAN** explains how an unexpected sighting caused her to expand her views on religion—and changed her for the better.

In June 2003, shortly after college graduation, I was on vacation in London when my mother called with the news. “Something amazing has happened,” she said. “They’re even talking about it where you are.” Indeed, a story on the BBC News website revealed that a cloudy white image of the Virgin Mary had appeared on a window at Milton Hospital, two miles from my parents’ house in Milton, Massachusetts. Hospital officials attributed it to condensation inside the sealed window, but no matter: My hometown was abuzz. About 25,000 people visited the site in the first weekend alone.

I can’t say I shared their enthusiasm. For one thing, I was preoccupied with planning my move to New York City. And although my family was (and is) deeply Catholic, I have never been religious.



Strangers were sharing food and stories and laughter and the notion that this odd event meant something. They had come on a pilgrimage but stayed for the opportunity to bond with one another.

Even as a child, I was a recalcitrant churchgoer. I would secretly skip confirmation classes to watch *General Hospital*. And once I grilled a priest on all sorts of inappropriate topics over our family's Sunday roast. So, true to form, when my mother told me about the visitation, I made a joke about the Virgin Mary's tendency to pop up in bowls of soup and peanut butter sandwiches around the globe. "Really, where does she find the time?" I said, laughing. From my mother's reaction (stony silence), it was evident she did not find this amusing.

My mother adores the Virgin Mary. No offense to the Father, the Son, or the Holy Ghost, but she raised me and my younger sister to worship the Blessed Virgin Mother most of all. My mom recites the Rosary in traffic on her way to work and is probably the only member of our parish's Legion of Mary under the age of 80. In our yard, there is a statue of the Virgin. Her picture hangs over our kitchen sink. To this day, whenever I hear an ambulance siren, I reflexively say a Hail Mary in my head.

In my mother's view, the vision on the hospital window (the office of an eye clinic) was a true miracle. That belief was shared, as it turned out, by many other people. Within a few days, the story was reported in the *New York Times*. The hospital, overwhelmed by the volume of spectators, decided to limit viewing to evening hours. The rest of the time, a tarp hung over the window. It didn't deter a soul. They stood outside the hospital anyway and cheered when the tarp billowed up in the wind, allowing even the slightest peek.

UPON MY RETURN FROM LONDON, my mother insisted that we drive straight from the airport to the hospital. Too jet-lagged to protest, and slightly curious to see what all the fuss was about, I went along.

When we arrived, the parking lot was packed full of cars, which spilled over onto a grassy hill. Flowers were heaped against the wall of the hospital. Votive candles flickered in the gentle breeze, and plastic buckets overflowed with donations. A floodlight shone on the window. I looked up.



about the author

J. Courtney Sullivan's new novel, *Maine*, comes out this month. She is also the author of the book *Commencement*. She lives in Brooklyn.

"Do you see it?" my mother asked, hopefully.

I had the urge to make a snarky remark. But I didn't. The truth was, I *did* see it. There, improbably, was the Virgin Mary in a flowing robe, a baby in her arms.

I nodded, without a word.

For the next hour or so, hundreds of people milled around us: Prayer-group members, nuns, teenage couples. I met a dozen Haitian immigrants from neighboring Dorchester and a family from Singapore who had settled in Quincy. I had never before seen such diverse groups interact in my homogeneous hometown. Strangers who would have otherwise passed one another in the street without exchanging glances were sharing food and stories and laughter and the notion that this odd event meant something.

Yes, they were mostly Catholic, and had come together through their faith. But many of the conversations I overheard had surprisingly little to do with religion. These people had come on a pilgrimage but stayed for the extraordinary opportunity to bond with one another. I had never before witnessed that sort of communal spirit. I was excited to be a part of it. I felt uplifted, hopeful.

In the days that followed, the local diocese tried to determine whether to declare the sighting an official miracle. In order to do this, they had to rule out all natural explanations. Everyone in the crowd had a theory for why Mary had come. Some said the apparition was the answer to the prayers of a patient awaiting surgery. Others thought it had to do with the fact that the country was at war. A few saw a metaphor in the placement of the image. "She's in an optometrist's window," I heard someone say. "She's asking us to open our eyes."

My mother and sister visited the hospital often. They took photographs, afraid that the image might fade or disappear. One time when I joined them, there was a

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group of mothers with their children in the parking lot, some of whom were severely disabled and in wheelchairs. I saw one woman touch her son's legs to the brick wall beneath the window. When I used to hear about such things, I would get upset, worrying that the church was giving people false hope. But seeing these scenes in person, and the boundless faith that motivated them, made me feel differently. Perhaps being in the presence of the window will help them, I thought. Who's to say it won't?

IN LATE JULY, as the total number of visitors approached 50,000—nearly double the size of Milton itself—the Boston archdiocese stated that no miracle had taken place. Natural causes could not be ruled out. The number of visitors began to dwindle then, but the image remained on the window. It's still there today.

For the remainder of that summer, up until my move, I found myself drawn to the window time and again. And even more so drawn to the atmosphere I found there, which was suffused with expectation, joy, and emotional connection. I didn't alter my religious perspective, but the experience left a lasting impression nonetheless.

In the years since, I have sought out other impromptu communities, in the hopes of witnessing the same sort of connection. But all too often the impetus for coming together has been something negative—a natural disaster or a senseless act of violence that has led people to support one another.

That summer in Milton we were lucky to be brought together by an image of hope. My mother says she doesn't care what the church decided. She still considers it a miracle. Our definitions of that word may differ, but I'm pretty sure I agree.

Right before I went off into the world, when perhaps I needed comfort the most, this event showed me the value of faith,

reminded me what was good about life in a close-knit town, and taught me that even in a place you think you know like the back of your hand, something unexpected might come along any day to change the way you see it.

Recently, when I was visiting my family, I drove to the hospital to visit Mary again. My boyfriend came along, and we both peered up at the image through the rain. He couldn't quite see her. But I could. In the parking lot, with no one else around, I swear I could feel the warmth of a thousand people standing right beside me. ■

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