

Thursday Girl

Because we all need something to believe in.

Camilla Martin believes in God. She says that He made the whole world in seven days, turning dust and darkness into a teeming menagerie of life. Javier Ricardo believes in the United States of America. According to his daddy, his ancestors were Puritans. They came to the New World, seeking religious tolerance and kindness.

“Did they find it?” I wanted to know.

Javier nodded, tearing open a carton of pudding.

“Damn straight. They tolerated the shit out of this place. They made whole communities of tolerance.”

I was impressed. “That sounds pretty cool.”

He nodded. “Yeah. They were baller.” He eyed my uneaten Chips Ahoy! cookies. “You gonna eat those?”

I shook my head, pushing the baggie away. “Tell me more.”

“About what?” he asked between chocolate mouthfuls.

“The communities. I mean, anyone could go live there?”

In my head, romantic notions had taken root. I imagined a circle of smiling folk, stirring a communal soup pot and bidding strangers welcome. For some reason, all of the women looked vaguely like my kindergarten teacher. Go figure.

“Well, yeah. I mean, ’cept for Jews.” He paused. “And Injuns.” He paused again. “And blacks and Catholics. And *certainly* not Quakers. The damn pussies.”

I frowned. “What happened to them?”

“We shot ’em.”

“Oh.”

Ronald White has a different sort of belief.

“It’s kind of like this. First there were the Red Sox. Then there were the Yankees.”

We were standing on the kickball field, shivering in gym shorts and Planet Hollywood tees. Although it was early March, a thin film of snow blanketed the playground.

I waited politely. “Yes?”

He stared at me, looking mildly surprised. “What more do you want to know?”

Before I could reply, the bell rang.

“What about you?” Camilla asked curtly, unwrapping a neat stack of Pepperidge Farm crackers. A juice box sat at her elbow, decorated with what looked like a mutant strawberry. I had just told her that the Seven Days of Wonder story, while good entertainment, was a tad unpersuasive, and she was feeling sore. “I mean, what *do* you believe in?”

I thought for a long time. And then, realizing that they were waiting on me, I said the only thing that made sense. “Thursday.”

A moment of silence followed. Then Camilla exploded into laughter. “You must be joking!”

Javier and Ronald joined in, looking smug.

“You can’t believe in a day!” Javier said.

Ronald nodded. “Now that’s just silly.” As he said this, he stuffed a Hostess cupcake into his mouth, not even taking a bite first.

I opened my mouth, ready to argue. But for some reason, something held me back. Instead, I shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

A moment later, the conversation turned. Like usual, the new subject seemed to be the Pilgrims.

“They were on the first boat. It was called the Columbus.”

Camilla frowned. “I thought that the first boat was the Mayflower.”

Javier frowned back, cold chorizo halfway to his mouth. “Whatever.”

At the next table, Sarah Stanwick, who was small, blonde, decently attractive and new to school, turned around. “Are you sure about that? I didn’t know that they *had* Hispanic Pilgrims.”

In the silence that followed, three people quickly hushed her.

“*You can’t say that!*”

“*Why not?*”

“*’Cause his family’s quite—*” There was a delicate pause. “*Sensitive about that.*”

“So?” Sarah persisted. “They ought to know the truth.”

“*Yes.*” Pause. “*But his daddy’s got a gun.*”

“What’s that?” Javier asked suspiciously, glancing from face to face. A chunk of chorizo was stuck on his chin, looking vaguely like a brown booger fallen astray.

The others, not saying a word, just beamed back. “Nothing!”

Over the following weeks, I became more and more convinced. Thursday was the day that my parents had been married. I had been there, holding an enormous bouquet of yellow daffodils. It was a spring ceremony, and the guests were standing on our lawn. My mother was beaming brightly, green eyes shining in the sunlight. Behind her, the whole yard was a mass of flowers and vanilla cake and yellow frosting. She loved the color yellow.

Thursday was the day that my brother had made Pee Wee A football, making my father glow with pride. It was the day that I had started school, trudging to kindergarten in pants that were carefully hemmed. And most importantly, it was the day that my mother set aside just for me. It was a stolen evening of homemade cookies, jammed onto a glass platter and hidden beneath a paper napkin. My father at bowling league, my brother at his game, Thursday was just us. It was fairytales of every description and length, all whispered guiltily beneath my quilt.

Yes, I knew Thursday. I knew its smell, melting of candle wax and the perfume that my mother wore. I knew its feel, the rough wool of my coverlet, offsetting the cool silk of her nightdress. I knew that it was mine.

“But you can’t believe in a day.”

“Why not?” I asked.

Camilla frowned. “Because days can’t do anything special. They can’t make day and night. They couldn’t divide the heavens and the Earth.”

I considered. “Well, it divides the week. Isn’t that something?”

Camilla frowned again, drumming her fingers on the table. “But it can’t punish you, can it? It certainly can’t smite.” Judging by her tone, this was a particular drawback. Smiting was apparently a big deal.

I shrugged. “Well, it can rain. On *some* Thursdays, it even snows. That’s punishment, isn’t it?” I thought for a moment. “Especially if you haven’t got good boots.”

By now, Camilla was growing desperate. “But it never gave you anything special, now did it? Manna in the desert. A plague of frogs.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Why would I want a plague of frogs?”

“Just answer the question!”

“Well, it gave me cookies. Does that count?”

Camilla sighed, making the sign of the cross. I was a born heathen.

My twelfth birthday came on a Thursday. It was perfect. My father was at bowling. My brother football. Like usual, my mother and I had the house to ourselves.

In an hour, the salon was transformed. A white tablecloth was thrown across the coffee table, turning mundane into majestic. Tiny cups and saucers created a web of delicate china and milky tea. There were cucumber sandwiches, combining softened cheese and Wonder White with the crusts removed. There were dishes of fresh strawberries, ready to be dipped into melted chocolate and cream. There was a platter of bagel pizzas, topped with black olive eyes and green pepper mouths. And in the very center, filling the room with a heady aroma of chocolate decadence, there was a platter of gooey cookies.

We were queens. A crown on my head, I used my fingers to gobble the bagel pizzas, smearing my face with tomato sauce and cheese. Though twelve, I felt like a child again, a toddler lost in imagination and laughter. Then, quite suddenly, the door of a car slammed. My mother froze, every nerve growing alert.

“Go to your room.”

I wanted to protest, but there was no way. I had no words. The stairs took me hours and hours to climb.

Behind the door, I could *almost* not hear the argument that followed. I could *almost* not hear the sickening thuds and falling knickknacks. I stared at the ceiling beams, tracing the whorls and knots with my eyes. As I lay on my bed, stuffed bears and lifeless unicorns pressed against me, keeping me company. In the darkness, I forgot that I had outgrown them. I hugged them to my chest. And I prayed.

I prayed to the only God that I knew. I prayed to Thursday.

I prayed that He would come again soon.

Later that night, my door opened. I stayed perfectly still, my body nearly frozen. She climbed in beside me, her nightdress cool like always. I felt her long hair, so silky like a summer cornhusk, sweep against me. I began to cry.

“Shhhhh.”

She wrapped her arms lightly around me, the thin hands and wrists gently clutching mine. Breath hot against my ear, I felt, more than heard, her song.

Seasons changed. Spring became summer. Summer became fall. Soon I was entering junior high school, carting textbooks about American history and human biology. Looking back, it was a year that would try us, *all* of us, making us question everything that we knew. Ronald came first.

After taking first place in the American League East, the Boston Red Sox again failed again to capitalize come October. They were defeated in the opening round, losing pitifully to the Cleveland Indians. Ronald was crushed.

“Big Papi didn’t do so well.” I said it quietly, not wanting the teacher to hear. At the blackboard, the teacher was babbling about algebra. No one was listening. In his notebook, Ronald was drawing a cartoon of Superman.

He shrugged. “There’s always next year.”

I nodded, glancing at his sketch. For some reason, Superman looked a lot like Big Papi. Unable to help it, I smiled. Well, Ronald was still a believer.

Where Javier was concerned, the test was more dramatic. In November, his grandpa moved to town. His grandpa, we soon learned, was a Mexican farm worker who had previously been doing day

labor in San Andreas valley. When he had an accident, dislocating his spine on a stubborn weed, he decided to retire his hoe and head East, a sort of reverse Manifest Destiny that left him unemployed and penniless on the Ricardo front doorstep. He was a short man, sporting black hair, brown skin and twinkling eyes. He spoke not a word of English.

In no time, the secret was out. The Ricardos were a family of immigrants and wanderers. They had picked cotton in the late 1800s, patrolling the fields of southern Texas. Then they switched to grapes in the early 1900s, migrating to sunny California. During the Great Depression, the clan split. Half of the group made the long journey across the country, defying conventional wisdom to settle bustling New England. The rest of them, apparently Grandpa and his progeny, stayed in the vineyards, hoping fervently for better times.

The story was everywhere soon, kissing the lips of all ages and professions. The only people *not* to hear, in fact, were the Ricardos. After all, whatever the drama and intrigue of the Ricardo story, Papa Ricardo *still* had a gun. It was best to leave him alone.

My test was a little different than theirs. My mother had a rose garden, a fragrant band around our house, a bursting ribbon of red and yellow blossoms. There were mossy walls and stone birdbaths and narrow paths of crunchy gravel, winding through clusters of tiger lilies and hyacinth. Wooden birdhouses stuck out like sore thumbs, lending a trill of magic and birdsong to the little yard.

From my window, I could see the garden perfectly. I could see the green leaves and tender blossoms, filling the little courtyard. I could see the tiny bench, made of solid oak and wrought iron, filling a shady niche beneath the maple. As a result, I was the first to notice that the rosehips needed plucking. I ran to find my mother, taking a seat gingerly on her bed. In a flash, I told her what I had seen, expecting her to laugh and instantly race downstairs.

“Do they? How silly I am! I almost forgot.”

But in her pale face, there was no laughter. Instead, there was just a sad smile. Slowly, quietly, she reached into her nightstand, withdrawing a pair of scissors.

“Here.” Her voice was very soft. “You try.”

It was starting to rain then. A soft drizzle coated my hands and cheeks. As I looked at the little object, a dull metal against my palm, an old conversation came rushing back.

“You’ve got to cut them away. It makes room for the new ones.”

“But won’t it hurt them?” I asked.

“Maybe a little bit, perhaps for a moment or two. But the other flowers need a chance to bloom, don’t they?” Pause. “Don’t they?”

Outside, standing in the quiet garden, I listened. I listened to the raindrops. I listened to the wind. Then I raised my scissors, eyeing a nearby cluster of rosehips. I took a deep breath. And—

I froze. As I stood there, body numb, the scissors fell heavily to the ground, making barely a sound on the soft earth. And without saying a word, I ran inside.

They buried her on a Wednesday. I wore my best dress, black velvet trimmed with black lace. I stood in the autumn air, feeling dead leaves and twigs snap against my feet. It was surreal, a chapter from a storybook that I had never read, never *wanted* to read. Standing there, hearing the reverend speak, I knew that it would go away soon. I just had to be patient. There were just too many cookies to eat. There were too many cookies with golden tops and gooey centers, oozing sticky globules onto my hands and cheeks. We were a day early. Today was Wednesday. They had it was wrong.

The world had it wrong.

Camilla never had her faith tested, not even that year. She was more concerned with testing mine.

“My father says that you’re being silly. Believing in a day is positively *pagan!* It’s like worshipping false idols.”

I was standing at my locker, retrieving books from the top shelf. Chemistry. Geometry. English. My hair was a mass of unkempt curls now, lying heavily on my back. My secondhand skirt was trimmed unevenly, safety pins holding it in a few places. There was a run in my tights.

“Camilla.” Though my voice was patient, my jaw was tense. “You have no idea what false idols actually are. Give it up.”

Camilla colored. With a waterfall of golden hair, perfectly complementing rosebud cheeks and baby blue eyes, she had no *need* to know what they were. Even so.

“Why don’t you just admit that you’re wrong?”

“Because I’m not.” With that, I slammed my locker. Wordlessly, Camilla turned away.

They called me Thursday Girl. Maybe Camilla started it. Maybe it was Ronald White. Maybe it was Javier Ricardo. I was fine with the nickname. It was better than some of the other nicknames that filled our school, whispered snidely between class. Thursday Girl was me. In any case, with time, it became me.

Thursday was the day that school ended, following my junior year. It was the day that I started drawing pictures, chronicling the strange flights of fancy that consumed me. Stone cottages. Sprawling rose gardens. Princes. Princes. Kings. Loves. It was all there the moment that I closed my eyes.

Sometimes I missed school, frequently for several days, even a week. No one asked why. No one wanted to know. When I came back, no one looked too closely. They never asked why I wore long sleeves or why my eyes stayed downcast when I returned. They never mentioned the way that I sat down

stiffly, slowly, every movement seemingly painful. After all, denial was a tradition in Tamarac Village. We lived on it, feasting on it like bread and chocolate. Denial was easier than the truth.

My aunt visited occasionally. Her hair was long and curly, just like mine. I thought that this would make it easier to tell her. One night, my father upstairs, I took her aside and showed her. I rolled up my shirt, showing her the dark bruises that lay beneath.

For a moment, just a moment, she looked at me. Her gaze met mine. Blue eyes met brown hair. Then she looked away, shaking her head. I was Thursday Girl. I was a spinner of fantasy. No one believed Thursday Girl. Without another word, I fled.

And Thursday was the day that I met Him. I was scurrying to school, head bowed against the wind. He was walking the other way. He stopped, looking like He meant to say something. Blushing red, I hurried past. But the next afternoon, walking down the corridor, he called my name.

“Caroline?” Though hesitant, there it was. He knew my name. How? No one knew my name.

In reply, I just shook my head. “My name isn’t Caroline.”

Even so, I started to watch him. He watched me. He noticed the doodles that filled my notebooks, the childlike images of faraway places and princes and princes and creatures that only I could see. And when I went missing from school, he made sure that I came back. He watched me, brown eyes big and shadowed, and I watched him in turn.

One day, when I was passing the auditorium, I heard a strange sound. It was piano music. There it was, out of place, almost comical beside the peeling posters and dirty floors and orange lockets. I froze. For anyone else, it was probably a song. For me, it was melting candle wax and silken nightdresses. It was the music of gooey cookies and tea parties. It was magic. And when I looked into the room, sure enough, it was him.

After that, I returned every afternoon. I sat in the way back, slunk low in my chair. It was perfect. Though no one could see me, I could see everyone. I could see the stagehands, making ready for the spring performance of Phantom. Watching them, a baseball cap crushing my curls, I wondered that they could be so calm. I wondered that they, too, were not transfixed by the music.

I took walks nearly every day. Coming home from school, I carefully discarded my drab skirt, falling to pieces now, and changed into torn jeans and hiking boots. Then I would set off, the traipsing fields and hills of Western Massachusetts. Lost in a world that hovers between imagination and reality, afternoon would slip into evening. Stars would appear.

Some days, I would pass his house. By then, summer had come. The windows were open, white curtains spilling into the night. He was beyond view just now, but I knew his song. Even here, leaning against the fence, I knew well the drifting notes and perfect pitch. How could I not? His was the song that matched my drawings. It was the song of Thursday.

Behind me, the waters of Tamarac Lake lapped against the shore, a gentle pulsing in my ear. A warm wind blew my hair.

So engrossed in the music was I, I almost forgot to notice that the song had stopped. I shook myself, glancing up. And when I did so, I saw him. He smiled. And for the first time, I smiled back.

It was thus that a friendship started. It was a friendship that had no names. At least, not for me. He was John. He was Eric. He was Bobby. He was William. He had a thousand names. For some reason, I found it easier that way. I, however, had just one. Whatever happened, I was always Thursday Girl.

“Is what they say true? *Do* you believe in Thursdays?”

By this point, fall had come. We were sitting on the wooden bench that was directly behind the bakery. A warm rolls lay in my hand, smelling like butter and all things heavenly. I stiffened slightly, awaiting the mockery that would come next. At this point, I knew the drill.

As though sensing this, he shook his head. “No. I mean, it’s not like that. I’m not here to make fun. I was just wondering—”

I waited, looking at someone leave the bakery. She, too, was holding a roll. It, too, smelled like heaven.

“What?” I asked.

“Do you take converts?”

Senior year was halfway over. It was two weeks before Christmas, and there was a thin sheen of snow carpeting the land. White lights were strung across town, illuminating the play of countless children. Carolers were traversing the streets, clutching mugs of hot coffee. My hands were crammed with oddly shaped packages.

“I have something for you.”

I turned to him, a lock of chestnut hair escaping my hat. As I did so, a flake of snow dropped hit my nose, melting almost instantly. I frowned at him, readjusting one package on my hip. “You didn’t need to—”

Before I could finish, he leaned over and kissed me.

“Merry Christmas.” His words were quiet, quiet like the snow, quiet like my heart. Then, before I could say a word, he walked away.

My brother saw. He saw, and then he told my father. The next day, I stayed home from school. Two days later, I packed my bags. I reached under my mattress, grabbing the cash that my mother had left me, not telling anyone else. Three days later, I ran away.

I was seventeen.

After I left, I ran from town to town, field to field, Laundromat to Laundromat, Thursday to Thursday. I saw mountains that touched the sky, and I saw rolling fields of crabapples and corn. I saw wheat silos. I saw the Grand Canyon and Death Valley. I had lemonade in Santa Monica and beer in San Francisco.

Everywhere that I went, I sent him a postcard.

Thinking of you.

Wish you were here.

Greetings from San Francisco!

In Tamarac Village, the postcards became a montage on his wall, splayed like posters above his bed. When he went to college, they moved with him.

He was the only one that I ever wrote to. He kept my secret.

Nearly a year passed. Soon it became two. And then, just like that, it was December again. I was sitting in a Seattle coffeehouse, writing another postcard. As I sat there, a street vendor poked his head into the room.

“Roses anyone?”

I stopped. Sure enough, there they were. White roses. Yellow roses. Red roses. Pink roses. I closed my eyes, memories wafting back. At the table just behind me, there was a couple conversing.

“It’s still hard to believe.”

“Well, it sure took ’em long enough. Eighty-six years! That’s a hell of a long time.”

“True.” Pause. “But they did it eventually. Isn’t that what matters?”

“Well, I guess so.”

“Curt Schilling ended up bein’ a real hero. He came up big.”

“Yeah, that’s for sure. But what about Big Papi? He and Manny were the real story. Those two were unbeatable.”

And then a different voice cut in, this one closer, speaking directly to me. “A pretty rose for a pretty lady?”

I opened my eyes. Not a foot away, a wizened street vendor was looking at me. His eyebrows were bushy. His skin was brown like a nut. In a moment, I was on my feet.

“How much for the whole lot?” I asked.

The man was taken aback. There I was, standing my feet, my expression earnest and my body quivering. He frowned.

“For you? Ten dollars.” Saying this, he pressed the bouquet at me. “Take them all.”

Without another word, I shoved a crumpled bill into his palm. Then I ran.

I ran to the airport, scrambling together whatever cash I had. There was just enough. I took the flowers on the plane, perfuming the whole cabin, making the felt seats smell like sunshine and summer. From the airport, I took a bus, wedging myself toward the front. By the time that I arrived in Tamarac Village Station, it was nearly eleven-thirty. Eleven-thirty, that is, of Christmas Eve.

There were no taxis that night. I stomped in the cold, glancing at my watch. Another bus pulled in, offloading a tall man, his face kind and his head bald like an egg. At first glance, he looked like a preacher. His clothing was simple, black pants and a black coat, and a prominent cross was displayed on his chest. A few seconds later, a car pulled up. In a moment, Camilla threw open the door.

“Darlin’! You’d best get in here. You’ll—” She stopped suddenly, catching sight of me. “What are *you* doing here?”

Her voice was more surprised, even curious, than accusing. After all, Christmas Eve is a hard night to be accusing. I glanced around briefly, taking in the golden garland and dull streetlamps and the shimmering Santa Clauses. I smiled. “Let there be light.”

When I said this, she looked at me, her gaze searching. Then she jerked a thumb at her Sedan “Get in.” I did.

On the way home, we passed the Ricardo house. As usual, it was easy to identify, mostly because it had an American flag stapled to its roof. As we passed, Grandpa Ricardo was sitting on the doorstep, glaring suspiciously at the snowy world. As I watched, Javier came outside to collect him. Fresh from training camp, he was still wearing his army uniform, pants green and boots black. In the doorway, his father tapped a large gun against his thigh, his sneer an open dare to potential intruders.

We passed my house. The lights were completely out, though this was to be expected. They had been for some time. Camilla looked at me uncertainly, apparently wondering whether I had heard. I just nodded. I *did* know. Even on the boardwalks of Santa Monica, the news had reached me. I had flown home, donned a black cap, given my father a single rose. Standing there, shivering in the cool air, I had said everything that I could say. Absolutely nothing. Then sun set, ending the service. My brother returned to the navy. I left again.

Here and now, I pointed beyond the dark house. “To the left and up the hill.”

Camilla nodded, instantly knowing my destination. Even as she did so, my heart began to race. It had been two years. Was it only that? It felt like more. It was two years that could have held anything for him. A whirlwind romance. A marriage. A honeymoon in Hawaii. New songs for new girls. I could have asked Camilla about this, saving myself the bother. But true to form, I lacked the courage to ask it. And Camilla, driving down the snowy road, said not a word.

As we approached the house, I glanced at my watch. It was eleven fifty-five. I took a deep breath, seeing a few lights. Were those candles? Yes. There were candles glimmering in the salon.

I closed my eyes, feeling a sudden rush of dizziness.

“Are you okay?” Camilla asked me, looking in the rearview mirror.
I nodded. Then, grabbing my flowers, I raced from the car.

There was snow on the walkway. It crunched beneath my feet, reminding me of plastic bubblewrap. I reached the wooden door, a little circle set in the dark grain. I rang it. I rang it again. When no answer came, I tried the handle. A moment later, I pressed inside.

The hallway was dimly lit, flickering candles forming a winding trail from the doorway. As I stepped forward, something slippery moved underfoot. When I reached down, my hand encountered a little postcard, saying—

Greetings from the Corn Palace!

Corny as it may be, wish you were here!

—Thursday Girl

I blinked, feeling my breath catch. It was the first postcard that I had ever sent him. A few feet ahead, there was another.

Welcome to Yellowstone National Park!

Each year, twenty-thousand acres of forest are burned in wildfires. Don't be part of the problem! Keep Yellowstone smoke-free.

—Thursday Girl

I smiled. That one had been a freebie. So I followed the trail through the hallway, watching it snake past family portraits and wooden baseboards. As I did so, postcard after postcard came and went. I gathered them to my chest, already knowing perfectly what each said.

All at once, a familiar smell caught my nostrils. For an instant, I stopped, my heart jolting strangely. A second ticked by. Another. Then the clock struck midnight, turning Christmas Eve into Christmas.

Turning Wednesday into Thursday.

When I stepped into the salon, there he was. In his hands, I saw my last postcard.

Hello from the Emerald City! Did you know that Seattle has the best coffee in the world? Come enjoy a cup!

Thinking of you!

—Caroline

On a table, perhaps a dozen feet from the glistening piano, a lace tablecloth had been elegantly draped. On it, there was a bowl of hot risotto and two glasses of wine.

He looked at me, saying nothing. In reply, my eyes devoured his skin, his hair, his eyes, his hands.

“But how did you know?” I asked him, my voice small in the near silence, my gaze turning again to the room and the candlelight and the food.

He shrugged, a smile touching his lips. “Because it’s Thursday.”

That seemed to say it all. He had known because it was Thursday.

And because he had never stopped believing.

We were married in late summer, holding hands in the garden, no longer overgrown, that surrounded my house. The roses had never looked so beautiful. Our cake was a massive platter of doughy cookies, dripping with gooey chocolate and buttery decadence. He played the music.

Camilla had her husband say the blessing for us. His expression somber and his head shining in the sunlight, he told us a magical story about Adam and Eve. Meanwhile, in the background, Ronald rehashed the American League Division Series from that year, preaching a familiar gospel of stolen bases and suicide squeezes. He was already counting down the days until October.

Most of Tamarac Village was there. Javier Ricardo was on tour then, visiting South Asia, but his family came. His grandpa indulged on wine, telling everyone bawdy stories about Mexican prostitutes and tequila palaces and the like. Since the stories were in Spanish, few people actually understood a word. Even so, we all laughed. After all, Papa Ricardo still had a gun.

And there, standing amidst everyone, were John and myself, holding hands, barely moving an inch, believing something that no one else may ever understand, much less share. It is, of course, a simple belief. It is a mundane miracle that happens one day from seven, bringing gooey cookies and rosehips in its wake.

Over time, little has changed. Camilla Martin still believes in God. Javier Ricardo believes in the United States of America. Ronald White still believes in Boston baseball and Big Papi. As for us, well, we believe in something simpler.

We believe in Thursdays.