

Author's Note

Whenever I want to understand something really tricky, or if one of life's biggest questions is plaguing me, or if I am grieving or heartbroken or all of the above, I put whatever it is to my writing. I use the confines of a book and all the space it offers to try and come up with an answer, to get over the thing that has me hurting and lost, or to bring a little light back in if my days have grown particularly dark. Writing helps me to be in a mystery, and it functions a bit like a therapist's office at times—or as a confessional if the subject fits.

At the heart of this particular book is life's biggest riddle of all for me:

In a house like the one where I grew up, with parents like mine, with a mother who I've come to imagine as a kind of saint up in heaven—and as someone who went and got her doctorate in religious studies and theology—how in the world did I end up as a person without faith?

People talk about the mystery of faith. Well, for me it's pretty literal. Faith is an actual mystery, like in a novel where someone

goes missing and we spend the next 300 pages trying to find out what happened, where they've gone, and if they're still alive or dead. I always tell my writing students to use the books they're working on to help solve something really important to them; that their book will take shape naturally if they write toward something they truly care about, even if that something is on the lighthearted side. Like, if you're working on a rom-com, make the love interest that guy you crushed on so hard in high school who never looked your way. In the novel version of that story, he falls madly in love with you! Or in the book inspired by your high school years, you get to vanquish the bully who made your life difficult and right the wrongs of the past. I mean, how good does that feel? Or best of all, you can conjure the people in your life you miss the most and experience them as alive again in the span of a couple hundred miraculous pages.

Books are miracles, they are grace, if we allow them to be.

I actually say that to people. I believe it's true. Reading books changes us, of course, stories open our minds and hearts and worlds. But writing them does, too—or it can, if we let ourselves be that open and vulnerable on the page. If we come to our books each day willing to lay our whole hearts out on the table, and bare our souls to ourselves. In my own life I've used the books I've written to do all sorts of important things—to ask for forgiveness, to engage in the conversations I missed out on with my mother when she was alive, to grieve painful losses, even to try and understand how I ended up an abuse victim at the hands of a Catholic priest. To ask, why did he pick me?

But throughout all my adult life, I've wanted to solve *my* mystery of faith. Why did I lose it? How did that happen? At what point did it go missing?

If I go back to the scene of the crime and go over all of my steps carefully enough, where I've been, *exactly*, first as a child, then as a teenager and college student, and eventually as a grad student and married person, will I be able to pinpoint the source of the

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disappearance and follow the trail of clues? If I interview enough witnesses on the page, and identify the relevant evidence over the course of my life that led me to the place I am now, still searching for what happened, will I finally figure it out? Will my faith be waiting there for me, after all this time?

I honestly don't know. And because of this, I've always been afraid to put this mystery to a book. What if I finally let myself try and solve it, only to find out I'm too late? That what I'm searching for is over and done with and gone forever? Like a cold case that plagues a detective, but one who worries if she finally solves the crime, it will only lead to more pain for everyone involved? A kind of hollowness at the end of the road?

But now here I am, after so much resistance, and after trying to put this mystery to bed for a few decades without having solved it. I'm going to do what I always have and write toward an answer because I can't seem to turn away from this file in the storage room of my brain. I don't have to imagine my faith has gone missing like in a novel, either, because it's been absent for decades in my very real life. And even though I'm a little afraid because the stakes couldn't be higher and I'm not sure what I'm writing toward, I'm going to put my detective hat back on in this effort to find my answer once and for all: At the end of this road, will I find a faith with a still-beating heart, however faint, or something long gone and impossible to resuscitate?