My Mother’s Commandments

1. My mom says going to church will build my relationship with God;

And I've gone to church for as long as I can remember, but my relationship never felt as strong as she proclaimed. I attended every meeting with my ears ready for angels to sing in them and be my muse. To my disappointment, I only heard the pastor's raspy voice trying to stay on key.

Was I doing something wrong?

I wore the white ribbons in my hair like my mom wanted me to. I clasped my hands, making sure my right was over my left. I shut my eyes during prayers.

Maybe it wasn't enough.

Perhaps my ribbons weren't tight enough. Perhaps I didn't clasp my hands hard enough—maybe it was left over right. Perhaps I didn't lock my eyelids enough and ensure each eyelash on my lower lid intertwined with an eyelash on my upper.

If my ribbons, hands, and eyes weren't tightly enclosed, how could I expect a tight relationship with God?

I pulled my ribbons harder; some strands of hair ripped from my scalp. I gathered my hands together firmly; my palms were always red. I shut my eyes with force; my eyelids hurt.

Are relationships always this painful?

Still, as I watched everyone fall to their knees, their hands raised, waiting for God to grab them, I was still and silent.

Shouldn't I be feeling something at this point?

2. My mom says there’s a hierarchy when it comes to loving those around you;

And she would remind me every day of my youth. Love the skies before you can love the ground. Love the stars before you can love the glints in your loved one's eyes. Love the universe before you can love your house. She was quite romantic. She loved God before she loved her family.

7-year-old brains are quite the filter for life. My mom never said she didn't love me; she only said she loved someone before me. But as a child, knowing there was a possibility of someone stealing my mother's heart first left my own feeling alone.

She tried to ease my envious sobs by saying she loved God and me equally. God was only placed first for reasons of the church. But if she loved us alike, why differentiate us?

Why must I fall second to the sky, the stars, and the universe?

I always loved my family more. As a kid, when I scraped my knees and looked up into the sky with teary eyes, I was crying for my mom's frame to appear, not God's.

I felt guilty.

3. My mom says to imagine what it would feel like if someone used your name in spite;

And I pondered the idea. "Oh, my Tafarah." I didn't feel the venom that would have stung my eardrums. Instead, I felt the warm, soft whisper of each syllable brushing against the ridges of my ear. It was endearing. Someone took the time to think about me.

My mind flashes to the time I supposedly wounded God's ears with my wisping tongue. My mother stared at me in shock. It was the first time she told me I was going to hell.

My mother never walked with her words. In most situations, her mouth would leak poison as she said the lord's name.

It was hypocritical, but for her sake, I thought of her spites as endearment so she wouldn't go to hell.

I only wish she did the same for me.

4. My mom says she opened me to a world of religion;

And I say she took away my right to choose. Every attempt from her to strengthen my spirituality was forceful. She would say, "Do this, or you're going to hell."

I can't tell if she wanted to save me from the fires below or save herself from the thought of her daughter going to hell.

But threats make me revert.

Why would I want to engage in something so frightening?

5. My mom says to appreciate the life you have and want nothing more;

And I do. I was grateful someone so high above was looking after me, but I always thought that was supposed to be my mom's job.

It may be selfish, but I wish I had more personal connections with my mom growing up. If we were to have any conversation for more than ten minutes, it would be within the walls of a church.

I'd rather have some of my conversations with my mom within the white-painted walls of her room. Even if it were for a second over ten minutes, I wanted to know what it felt like.

I was always jealous of my friends who boasted about communicating with their parents—telling them every secret. They were their best friend and someone to vent to.

They were greedy.

6. My mom says listening to your parents is the best thing you can do;

And I disagree.

I'll never forget the first time I tried to converse deeply with my mom for more than ten minutes outside the church's walls. Her first response to the problems I relayed to her was, "Maybe we should go to church."

Was my call to her transferring to God that fast?

But maybe my desperate pleas would finally let me know what God's voice sounded like. Was it sweet, or was it raspy? Was it deep or more monotone? Was he soft-spoken, or did each syllable have a resonating booming sound?

We ended up going to church.

I have had a lot on my mind lately. I felt stressed, but the pastor told me not to worry, so I didn't worry. I felt sad, but the pastor told me God would wipe away my tears, so I didn't cry.

I was lying.

But I realized lying was a sin, so I stopped pretending.

I was worried, and I was sad.

Where my mom felt she transferred my calls for help to God, I felt I was left on hold.

I stopped listening to her conversations about religion after that.

7. My mom says I should confide in God and God only;

And I started to question her role in my life. I couldn't tell if she wanted me to talk to her.

I don't think my calls made it through to God, though. The universe is expansive, and my cell service could only go so far. It gets tiring leaving voicemails.

Besides, were my thoughts even my own? Every worry I had needed to be relayed to God first before I could decide how I should feel. But with no response, I never knew how to feel.

What if one day I kept a thought to myself? A simple "How are you?" Was that blasphemous?

I tried it once secretly.

I ended up answering every voicemail I left.

I never realized how much I had been holding in, but I realized how much I could have said aloud.

I wish my mom knew how to pick up the phone; that would have saved me the minutes.

8. My mom says I’m crazy;

And I think she’s hypocritical. She judges me for relying on someone else, but isn't that all we've been doing?

My mom never clarified what type of Christianity we were. We've passed through protestant churches, catholic churches, and Jehovah's Witnesses. It didn't matter to her as long as she had a place to pray, and my sister and I could build a relationship with God.

How were we sure we weren't worshiping a different God each time? They are all God but in many ways. One God doesn't mind if you miss church some Sundays; the other thinks that one is crazy. One God loves when you appreciate your family first; another feels envious coming in second place. This God would scold the other if he heard he was letting children find their voice without their parents—but he's not in the right either because his scolding would be spiteful to the other God's ears.

How did she know her standing with God was stable in this regard? She would make every other god jealous with each switch we made in religious buildings.

She says I'm crazy for keeping a picture of someone I admire on the back of my phone, but I don't think she's crazy for appreciating different variations of the same God.

She needs someone to look up to.

I only wish she felt the same for me.

9. My mom says religion can solve all your problems;

And she lied.

I think she wants to convince herself more than me. She says she's happier these days going to church and venting her problems to ears above, but I never missed her defeated facial expressions every time we came home.

But it's ok that she lied to me. She didn't want me to lose faith in God.

I lied, too.

I told my mom I still attended bible study lessons when, in truth, I blocked the numbers of my spiritual tutors.

I didn't want her to lose faith in me.

10. My mom says she mourns for her ribbon-haired daughter;

And she thinks I've cut the thin white fabric tying her hair together.

The ribbons didn't suit her, though.

They were either too loose that her hair became disheveled or too tight where it took away strands of coils.

I didn't cut them, I unraveled them for her.

Letting your hair breathe is the best thing you can do for your scalp and mind.