

THE ALTAR

By Shanna Dodd

I kept a white linen runner on my kitchen table.
I liked the stark purity against the dark mahogany.
I'd set the table for this special occasion with only the best.
Aged whiskey, 18 years old, Macallan double cask
A Waterford tumbler, a white Wedgewood bowl
A dark amber plastic bottle filled with promises.
I picked up the bottle. Bit my lip as I struggled to open the child-proof cap.
At last, it opened. I tossed the cap away with a sigh.
I cupped my hand and tapped the bottle against my palm.
Black and teal capsules tumbled into my trembling hand.
Small and unobtrusive. Slick. They slipped through my fingers.
Clattered like hailstones on the cold stone floor.
I gasped and fell to my knees, chased the damn things
under old wooden chairs crowded against the thick table legs
scratched and dented from years of abuse.
I scooped them up with a gentleness reserved only for delicate things.
I searched each crevasse and corner. Dug into the cracks where the baseboard met the floor.
Scraped my fingers on the rough granite tiles until raw pain sang out.
I pinched each stray capsule, one by one, between thumb and bloodied finger.
Placed them carefully in the white bowl on the table.
I searched the floor unblinking while my eyes burned, forgetting to breathe.
You see I had to be sure. I needed to be sure. I needed
absolute certainty beyond all doubt both reasonable and un-
that I had found them all. Every. Single. One.

I pushed myself, bruised knees, bleeding hands, quivering muscles up from the floor.

I closed my eyes. Clenched my fists. Felt my heart pounding. Pounding.

“Breathe in. 1..2..3..4.. Breathe out.”

“Breathe in, you stupid bitch. Breathe out.”

“Breathe in. 1..2...3...4... Breathe out.”

On and on this mantra went until

my heart rate slowed.

Warily, I opened my eyes.

There, on the old kitchen table, sat the white bowl filled with pills.

Relief rushed out in a whimper.

The chair screeched in protest as I pulled it out. Flopped, boneless, onto the seat.

I licked my chapped lips and poured whiskey into the glass.

It smelled of aged oak and long dark nights and empty promises.

I took three pills. Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Held them in my mouth. Rolled them around against tongue and teeth.

They tasted waxy and malleable. Alien in their smoothness.

I lifted the heavy glass of whiskey and held it as a cold kiss against my lips.

I drank deeply. It stung my lips.

The pills, like stones, tumbled down my gullet.

I closed my eyes. My head rolled back.

Savored the heat as it radiated through me.

For a few blissful moments, I floated

without thought or feeling.

A yearning rose in me filling all my nooks and crannies with need.

I reached out and grasped

Emptiness. Yawning and hollowed.

I lurched forward, eyes wide, and swallowed a scream.

I grabbed fistfuls of pills, shoved them into my mouth.

Gorged myself. Guzzling the whiskey.

Choking, gasping. Saliva and tears and whiskey running down my chin, dripping.

I swiped my arm across my face and kept swallowing.

Again. And again. And again.

Until I had swallowed every pill.

Every.

Single.

One.

I threw the glass then.

It shattered shrieking.

Shining fragments scattered glinting.

A calmness came over me.

A queer sort of stillness settled. I listened

to the echoing around me.

Waiting for the emptiness to fill.