

Saint Monica

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Saint Monica

Memorial: 27 August

Mother of Saint Augustine of Hippo, whose writings about her are the primary source of our information. A Christian from birth, she was given in marriage to a bad-tempered adulterous pagan named Patricius. She prayed constantly for the conversion of her husband (who converted on his death bed), and of her son (who converted after a wild life). Spiritual student of Saint Ambrose of Milan. Reformed alcoholic.

Born 322 at Tagaste (Souk Ahrus), Algeria.

Died 387 at Ostia, Italy

Patronage: abuse victims, alcoholics, alcoholism, difficult marriages, disappointing children, homemakers, housewives, married women, mothers, victims of adultery, victims of unfaithfulness, victims of verbal abuse, widows, wives.

-From the *Patron Saints Index* online

For all the girls with names that begin with M .

SAINT MONICA OF THE GAUZE

The room is red with iodine. Her ears stop
and her thighs slacken against
the bed. The owls would like to unwrap

her, as owls do, always looking
for the next loose shutter, the goldfinch
bathing in a pile of spilled parmesan

in the convenience store parking lot.
She explains a few things. Static
wracks the telephone line, a dry tornado

on the helipad after a freeway crash.
The linoleum has seen years of other feet
and beds rolling in and out, how

they hauled her from the gurney as if
she weighed something other
than what was left. They ask: but what

about your Cleveland flowering pear
trees, or the creeping vinca, the clematis
your husband promised to burn if it

came back? They say that she will get out.
There will be time and muscle
enough for hanging wet towels on a line.

SAINT MONICA OF THE THAW

No, they would never find her under the ice like a lost scarf snowed away for months and replaced. There would be no need to donate her record collection to the library or avoid her bedroom window after dusk. She would never stare up at the rafters for any other reason than to spot bats exiting through the base of a ceiling fan.

In fact, she didn't even know the cold, had to lie when friends asked about her bare legs under a kilt, the muslin slips she slept in, her windows always cracked in January while the rest were huddled, hot bricks at their toes. When she fell into the icy river, she climbed right out on her own, before a teacher and a rope

somersaulted down the crusted ledge. Monica did not even peel off her coat before untangling Miss Nells, brushing the snow from her pin curls, flipping her skirt back over her knees. How did she keep quiet about the dingy pantalets, red garter hidden under all that wool, the way the rope knotted itself around them both?

SAINT MONICA STAYS THE COURSE

One year at Saint Joseph, the girls who had first names beginning with M were invited to walk in the May Crowning procession. The Blessed Virgin stood at the side of the altar waiting to be topped with vines and lilies of the valley. Sister Cathleen instructed the girls in the correct way to proceed. Everyone had to wear white, of course, and no eyelet lace unless it was lined underneath. No ribbons in colors other than blue, for the Virgin. Monica's mother had stayed up all night stitching an empire-waist smock with puff sleeves that were perky but not bulbous. Sister Cathleen measured hems with a metal ruler beforehand. Sister Cathleen said: whatever happens, do not stop marching. Do not look into the pews to smirk at your best friend or your brother. Keep your eyes on the Virgin. Clasp your bunch of daffodils, but don't clasp it too hard or else the heads will shoot off and distract the other girls. Monica practiced this, the hard enough but not too hard, on a limp feather duster at home. Sister Cathleen instructed: do not stop the procession, whatever happens. If Molly Grace faints on the steps and suffers a concussion upon impact, breaking her glasses, keep marching. If Maeve erupts in her first period like a water balloon tossed on a bed of thumbtacks, keep marching. If Meaghan and Melanie collide in front of the altar, white Mary Janes interlocking, proceed as planned. Magdalena may vomit up her cornflakes once she is seated in the pews. She has done this before. Keep your eyes to yourself. If you fear you may have explosive diarrhea during the ceremony, say two Hail Marys and one Glory Be, and get over it. Monica, if Father places the wreath in your hands, keep your fingers open like a sparrow's wings and do not scuff your shoes as you walk up to the Virgin. Surrender the crown to six-foot-tall Maureen, star of the Lady Irish. Whatever

happens, proceed as planned. If your tuition checks are returned due to non-sufficient funds, show up at class anyway, until the Bursar walks you to the front door. If you feel like you will die after ten-hour shifts waiting tables, stray husbands pinching your ass and snapping your bra strap, say two Hail Marys and one Glory Be, and get over it. If your fiancé slams you against a wall and you suffer a concussion upon impact, breaking your glasses, keep marching to the bathroom with a bottle of Windex and a roll of paper towels and make that crooked mirror shine. If he appears above you in the middle of the night, reeking of Wild Turkey and Kools, do not push him away. Proceed as planned. You have done this before.

SAINT MONICA AND THE HATE

Because she didn't live in a trailer. Because she knew the answer, even before Miss Nells asked the question, hand darting up as soon as she heard the words *What year*. Because she always won the blue ribbon, and often

the red, too. All parents loved her, dropped her name when scolding about tangled hair, crooked hems. No wonder her girlfriends stabbed her in the back with knives, forks, hairpins, chopsticks, whatever was handy

and sharp. The girls stole a pair of Monica's Care Bear panties from her dresser, dredged them in mud, then hung them on the railing outside school. Caroline told everyone about the cyst under Monica's left arm, claimed

that Monica wrote all the answers on her thighs in Karo syrup, fingered the stickiness to guide her through algebra tests. How could they know that Monica's mother not only cut her own tri-color fettuccini by hand,

but counted how many strands that Monica was allowed? The naked weigh-ins, creak of the Sharpie marker on the back of her legs. The boys radiated around her like a bonfire because they wanted to know if the Tigers

would make it to the Series, or what kind
of fish had stolen off with their favorite lure,
and under which bridge to find it. She was no
threat to the spiral-perm crew, girls jamming
five legs' worth of thigh into acid-washed

mini skirts. Years later, they would hate
Monica for the brilliance of her peonies,
the straightness of her children's bangs.
For the way she *did it all*, and still baked
the best cherry walnut cobbler on the block.

SAINT MONICA AND THE DEVIL'S PLACE

At school they were too polite to call it *Hell*, though she heard the word on her mother's eight-tracks, seeping between damp towels in the bathroom, hovering in the silver of the old hall mirror. Monica knew who went there and why, regardless of time spent fluffing the chrysanthemums outside the rectory. She'd go to the Devil's Place herself if it meant one hour alone with Kevin McMillan in the falling-down barn. Sister Rita said it was hot, but Monica could live with that. Mrs. Dettweiler next door crushed cigarettes out on her daughter's back. She was on her way to the Devil's Place, along with the Simmons twins, and Monica's uncle who thought he could piss out an electrical fire, ended up burning down the Kroger instead. There were, of course, exceptions. If he was mean enough you could take a cinderblock to your husband's head in the middle of the night, as long as you called the police afterwards, produced the notebook of grievances when officers arrived. You could sign your husband up for a war, then dash your face with mauve lipstick on the night they handed him a gun. If you were married to one of the Simmons twins you could toss the car keys down a sewer grate, sprint to JC Penney for a white sale bonanza with the charge card, knowing you'd be safe until Randy or Ricky made it out of the sludge. Monica would not go to the Devil's Place over shoplifted Raisinets or hair gel, but she would sign away her soul for an afternoon swimming with Kevin McMillan in the pond at Raccoon Park, as long as they could both be naked and the water above 55 degrees. Perhaps there was hope for Monica's uncle, provided he sold the Firebird, wheeled the recliner to the curb and found a job. If they ever married, Monica would never torch Kevin McMillan while he read the newspaper in his slippers and flannel boxers, or dig a

six-foot, three-and-a-half-inch hole in the backyard while the children planted daffodil bulbs. She would not include the Devil's Place on her college application list, as Rhonda Phillips did the day she broke her sister's arm playing darts. When the Simmons twins winked at her, Monica looked away. When Kevin McMillan winked at her, Monica unbuttoned her shirt, showed the hot pink swimsuit underneath.