

Hungry

A long row of tongues protruded from our nine-year-old mouths as we knelt in a straight row at the altar. Easter Sunday, 1960. The boys wore suits and the girls a rainbow of pastel dotted-Swiss dresses molded into half-domes by petticoats that made us look like bowls of sherbet.

"Take eat," Reverend Gene Colette repeated softly as he moved slowly in front of us placing hard kernelled rectangles on our eager tongues. "This is the body of Christ who died for you."

I was the lime-green scoop on the right with a ponytail. Reverend Colette's baritone voice lulled me trancelike: Take, eat. Take, eat. Take, eat.

A good little Methodist, I had studied for this day and was eager for a bite of Christ and a swig of his blood. My nine-year-old bones quivered expectantly as my petticoats scratched red marks on my holy little thighs and my plastic lime-green headband bit into my skull.

Reverend Collette placed the small rectangle in my mouth, and I felt the warmth of his hand and noticed dark hairs on his knuckles. The kernel glued itself to my tongue. I dared not disturb the body of Christ.

"Take, drink," Reverend Colette came down the row again. "This is my blood that I shed for you.' He carried tiny glasses of blood in a round metal holder that clanked as he walked. I drank down the blood and the taste slowly registered in my brain.

"Grape juice," I gasped to myself, "and not even Welch's."

I closed my eyes and bowed my head, trying to look holy, but inside I was reeling. Store-brand grape juice? I had tasted Welch's Grape Juice at my neighbor's house and it was much grapier than the cheaper imitation brand we had at home.

Jesus, I thought to myself, should be Welch's worthy.

When we got home from church, I bolted from the car, and bee-lined for my bedroom. I stripped off pastel and petticoats, unbuckled and flung my patent leather shoes and white socks, yanked that hard plastic out of my hair and pulled on my Bermuda shorts. The 40-foot elm tree in our front yard was calling my name.

The tree and I grew up together. I took to climbing into its branches as soon as my arms and legs could shimmy up its rough bark. My body knew every curve and limb and the scuff of my skin against bark felt like home. My little-girl bones soaked in its bark-borne wisdom and relaxed into the strength of its limbs.

That Sunday, with the taste of cheap grape juice still on my tongue, I hooked my leg over the lowest branch and pulled myself up. Gulping in the green of the leaves, I blurred my eyes so sky, leaves and limbs, both mine and the elms, blended into a single whole. Climbing higher, my heart pumped, sweat dripped and my hair freed itself from the rubber band.

I skinned one knee on the way up and droplets of blood dotted my skin that I ignored as I climbed higher, spotting through the branches the San Bernardino Mountains a few blocks north of my house. They were part of a ring of mountains that surrounded our valley providing a bracelet of safety.

I settled into my favorite branch near the top, rubbed the blood with my index finger and licked my finger clean. I tasted warm and metallic. My body. My blood. The holy-sacred jolt that failed to find me as I knelt at the altar praying hard jolted through me. "I taste good," I thought to myself, and felt smug and proud.