

SOMETHING EVEN NON-BELIEVERS CAN BELIEVE IN

My neighbor, a tall lean man from two houses down, recently appeared at my door at dinnertime carrying a parcel that had been misdelivered to him. Sometimes, when I walk my dog Nellie at night, I've glimpsed him and his wife preparing dinner, but this was the first time we'd seen each other face to face. He introduced himself; I thanked him for the parcel. When I moved to shake his hand, he pulled away and gave me a fist-bump. "Sorry," he said. "I have a compromised immune system." And suddenly this neighbor, in his scarf, had not only a name but a life, a history, a story.

My new street is full of stories. On my side of the street only three houses are civilian houses; the others are church-related properties—spreading roots from the massive cathedral on the corner. Being animal lovers, Lynn and I both have a soft spot for Saint Francis of Assisi, for whom the cathedral is named. Nellie often seems to hesitate by his statue on the church grounds, where he is depicted barefoot, lovingly surrounded by a bird and a deer.

On early mornings I watch a nun descend the steps of her nearby house with a rubber-tipped cane. With the help of another sister, she climbs into a car to be spirited away. On the door of that house, handwritten in what looks like red lipstick is: 20+C+M+B+20. I've spent a long time standing on the sidewalk trying to decipher that cryptogram—and the sister finally explained it to me the other day. The 20s which bookend the cipher represent the year. The plusses are crosses, and the letters (C,M,B) represent the names of the Magi (Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar.) The letters also abbreviate the Latin blessing *Christus mansionem benedicat* which translates as *May Christ bless this house*.

Neither Lynn nor I is Catholic, and we've been continually amazed by the scope of community life that clusters around the cathedral—a hive of life, death, and the kingdom beyond. Both sides of the street are often packed with SUVs, disgorging children who attend the religious school and people of all ages attending the Mass. They arrive in shockingly large numbers and even more shockingly casual attire—sweatpants and shorts and flip-flops.

Every turning point in life is played out on the street: christenings, weddings, and especially funerals. All during the week the funeral directors stand on the front steps smoking; the coffins slide into the backs of limousines. Sometimes a bagpipe player in a kilt plays a mournful song on the steps of the church. The sound of the bagpipes makes Lynn cry. Sometimes we see massive gatherings of police officers and firemen saluting a fallen comrade.

We finally succumbed to our curiosity and ventured into the cathedral at Christmas for what we thought was a carol sing, but was actually a Mass. We felt like spies at a medieval rite: the priest carrying a gilded volume down the aisle, holy water gurgling in a marble basin; cabinets of ancient relics (bits of bone!); pyramids of red candles. Above us the sunlight illuminated 14 enormous stained glass windows—each pane telling a story.

As we returned home, one of the nuns was sweeping her sidewalk while another sat on her porch in what looked like a re-enactment of old-fashioned small-town life. I have the strong feeling that Lynn (my practical Protestant) may defect to their ranks when I'm not looking. I don't blame her. There's something appealing about the close-knit communal life we've observed here; maybe I can become a junior friar or honorary abbot myself. (Friar Chicken? Abbot Costello? ...Still working on the name.)