Faith Journeys

Hege A. Jakobsen Lepri

San Antonio Review

Published on: Mar 19, 2023

URL: https://www.sareview.org/pub/vpl8yp7b

License: Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0)
The parking lot outside the mega-church was only half-full. Behind it a big sky, almost uncluttered by high-rises. Ruth didn’t even know this area existed until a couple of months ago. Now the drive up here had become their new rhythm, and she made sure she didn’t miss a beat. She drove here, dropped Melody off, went grocery shopping, and returned in time for pickup.

From her spot in the third row of cars, she could see the entrance and still have space on both sides. They must have built the church thinking they’d expand, attract new members and more cars. But growing is never as easy as you think. Land was cheap out here, but there was no public transit nearby. So you either had a car or you’d have to walk ten minutes to the nearest bus stop.

Ruth’s shopping list had been shorter than usual, and now she had twenty minutes of freedom before Melody would be released. She lowered her seatback and turned Jazz FM up a notch. Even here, it didn’t take much to make her feel at ease. Some Coltrane and a few minutes to herself did the trick almost every time.

Jazz was her one indulgence—a carry-over from her crush on the high school band teacher—four years trying to impress him by memorizing trivia about Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, and Coltrane—his favorite. The jazz
stayed when the crush passed.

Ruth had been inside the church only once, the first time, still worried about Melody losing her way and going down that tunnel of despair once more. She had stayed in the Welcome area, but if the rest of the building was a match, there must be room for at least a thousand. The space made it easy to assess the crowd: 2-300, mainly working class and recent immigrants it seemed, no-one that made her alarm bells go off.

Ruth was gradually getting less watchful, easing into this new life. Picking up her sister twice a week from church was a low price to pay.

Melody had been off meth for five months and on Jesus for about the same amount of time. Ruth was never sure if it was the meth that turned her sister to religion—or if she had looked around for a substitute for her old highs after she got sober. Whatever the case, Ruth never argued if something worked. If this is what it took to hold Melody steady, Ruth could go on doing it forever. Melody had put on a fair bit of weight. Her face turned rounder and younger again. Now you could only guess she’d been a meth-head when she exposed her teeth. That would take time and money to fix.

“My Favorite Things, Coltrane’s incredible take on this tune from the Sound of Music,” the radio host announced. And there Trane took off on his long wrestle with every element of the song, until all twirls had been turned inside out and back again. Ruth closed her eyes and let the music wash over her. She knew Coltrane would deliver her safely through.

She may have dozed off, because suddenly Melody was there, knocking on her window. Ruth blinked a few times before remembering to unlock the door for her. Melody just held the open door. She looked excited but didn’t get in the car.

“Can you give a friend of mine a ride? It’s along the way. Shouldn’t take any extra time,” she said.

Melody had no sense of direction. She never got her driver’s license, and the holes in her brain left by the meth all seemed to be in the compass area of her mind. Sometimes she would take the wrong turn when going to the bathroom at home. But Ruth said yes. Knowing who Melody spent her time with calmed her. Or at least it prepared her for the next disaster. And this parking lot was no place to leave someone without a ride, good or bad.

Yacoub seemed nice enough. Tall, well-mannered, but dressed as if he were conceived and born in a mega-church. Black shirt and a purple tie with tiny black flowers or maybe insects. She couldn’t tell which from the rear-view mirror. Black pants. Well-shined shoes, she imagined. Melody was beaming. All her conversation was directed at him.

“Ruth?” he said, looking at her. “That’s a nice biblical name. Such an example of faithfulness.”
Ruth cut him off. “I was named after an aunt in Guyana.”

“Still a great name,” Yacoub said, trying to meet her gaze through the rear-view mirror. Ruth started the car, frowning as she noticed a new, ominous noise from the engine. As she started driving, the sound seemed to subside, or maybe it was drowned out by the final notes from Miles Davis.

“You don’t mind if I change the music, do you?” Melody said, her finger already on the tuner. Ruth did mind but nodded her assent. It took more to ruin her day than a bad soundtrack. “What do you prefer, Yacoub?” Melody asked. Maybe it wouldn’t be rap after all.

He directed her to a Christian radio station. Soon, charismatic male voices took turns with ethereal praise choirs and pop-songs, where the same words seemed to repeat themselves in an infinite loop: Jesus, sin, sacrifice, saved, cross.

I love that song,” Melody said.

Yacoub smiled at Melody, then waited just long enough to create anticipation before he spoke.

“That’s a real old-timer — Keith Green—he died before we were even born,” he said.

He knew his stuff. Wherever you went, there was stuff to know, stuff that meant something only there, in that particular place. Quotes, and dates, and names, and dress codes that revealed if you were in, or out.

Melody even forgot to hide her teeth when she smiled at him. Ruth instinctively moved her left hand to cover her own lips.

Like waking up from the longest dream, how real it seemed—until your love broke through. Yacoub was singing along, closing his eyes. He had a clear, well-modulated tenor voice. Ruth watched him through the mirror, trying to figure out if this was some kind of Christian flirting.

They dropped Yacoub off slightly north of Sheppard Avenue.

“I’m so happy to see your sister in church every week,” he said with a warmth that was either genuine or very professional. “God has great plans for her, I’m sure of it.”

Back on the road, Melody couldn’t stop talking about him. “Isn’t he great?” she said over and over. “He wants to become a preacher.” Ruth’s body stiffened against Melody’s enthusiasm. If there ever was a pattern to Melody’s life, it was this: Passion would soon be replaced by the smell of something burning. And Melody was no Phoenix who soared by herself from the ashes. Both hands on the wheel, Ruth kept her eyes on the cars ahead and said nothing.
They were driving down Bathurst and the street was lined with Orthodox men wearing dark clothes. On the radio, someone was talking about being saved from a life of drinking and despair, and then another Jesus-song. Ruth wondered what Orthodox Jews turned to for their addictions.

The days of the following week flew off the calendar soothingly similar. She went to work. Melody went to her training program. They came home. Ate. Watched a movie. Went to bed. No improvised changes. Ruth still woke up in the middle of the night all sweaty, but she only needed a single tune to fall asleep again. Her light stayed off. The bookmark in her book didn’t move.

For the midweek praise service, Melody had found a friend with a car, who drove up there from Midtown on Thursday nights so Ruth could stay home. Ruth was still on high alert when there were friends she hadn’t met. Melody had an inner magnet that drew her to companions with leaden baggage, and from there, then it went downhill fast. Ruth’s heart beat fast and hard for the three hours and forty minutes Melody was gone. She had opened a tax file but kept losing track of where she was. She turned off her Thelonious Monk CD after a few tracks because his humming got on her nerves.

This time the friend turned out to be a woman in her fifties, who had lost a son to drugs and just wanted to help. Ruth slept a full seven hours that night—no nightmares, no sweating, no calls.

On Sunday it was Ruth’s turn again. She was in the parking lot, halfway through Oscar Peterson’s *Body and soul* when Melody appeared. A different Melody, dressed up as something she couldn’t quite figure out. Something someone must have given to her in church. Melody still wasn’t allowed to carry more than small change, part of the aftercare, so she couldn’t have bought it herself, not even at Goodwill. Last time Ruth saw her wear a skirt was the year she got herself expelled from Catholic school.

“New look?” Ruth said, half-smiling.

Melody ignored her. “Can you give Yacoub a ride?” she asked, then as soon as she saw a nod, ran back across the parking lot on black patent heels, yelling “Yacoub, Yacoub”.

The black skirt suited Melody, hugged her hips. The bright fuchsia shirt, not so much. Someone in the congregation had thought it appropriate to help Melody follow the unwritten dress-code. Ruth imagined Melody wiggling herself into these clothes in one of the bathroom stalls, anxious to fit in. As she and Yaboub were buckled up in the car, Melody started turning the tuner, knowing what to search for this time. Peterson’s last tones were lost in the blur between stations.

Yacoub loosened his tie. Then he leaned forward from the back seat to ask Ruth if she wouldn’t like to join them sometime in church.

“The Holy Spirit is really moving there now, lots of people are being blessed particular ways,” he said, “Anyone can need a blessing.”
She started the car and navigated slowly out of the parking lot.

“I leave that part to Melody,” Ruth answered, keeping her eyes on the road. She expected him to continue and braced herself for the question about her relationship with God, but Melody jumped in, talking about a miraculous healing and how she felt God in the room today when that woman kneeled. She turned around to exchange glances with Yacoub, and Ruth watched them lock eyes for a few seconds.

There was a sting of irritation. Ruth thought of their mother scrubbing her way through life. Offices, hallways, atriums, room after room. How she had worn her knees out kneeling to pick up and clean after others. Not a lot of God-presence in those rooms, Ruth thought, closing her lips tightly. Not a lot of miracles. Just calloused knees and a wayward daughter.

Ruth concentrated on the road and listened to Melody’s muffled laugh, realizing the effort involved in not showing her teeth. She softened; she wondered if Melody prayed for new teeth, for a miraculous restoration of her enamel while she was in church. Did she feel at peace there, with all the loud music and swaying and spontaneous hallelujahs? Maybe this was the place that could contain her twitchy body.

It had been years since Ruth had been in a church full of people. She preferred empty cathedrals and her head filled with no-one’s questions but her own.

After they had dropped Yacoub off, Melody sat quietly, listening to Carrie Underwood sing Jesus take the wheel. Then she turned and asked, “Do you think I could ever be acceptable as a pastor’s wife?”

“What do you mean?” Ruth replied. She thought of Yacoub’s well-ironed shirts, that wide smile he so often displayed, and that she found so hard to trust. She should be happy her sister seemed to be attracted to a different kind of person, not someone from the usual maelstrom of self-medicating addicts. Her gaze drifted briefly over to Melody’s side; she saw her legs at peace, no tic or nervous movement. She recalled the constant trembling and jerking while driving her to the rehab centre.

Traffic was smooth. The song on the radio was upbeat. Ruth started counting Jesuses. One- two-three-four; one every verse; three every refrain. At the end of the song she said, “I’m sure you could become anything you want, Melody, in time. But why on earth a pastor’s wife?”

Melody didn’t answer but looked out the window at some point only she knew. In the last kilometer before they got home, Ruth counted thirty-five Jesuses.

On a drizzly Wednesday afternoon, the car broke down. The oil pump. With the history and age of the car, it had to happen sooner or later. Ruth was late home from work. It was tax season, and everybody put in long hours. She kept calling Melody while she waited for the tow truck. Disaster never came alone. There was barely enough money to have the car towed, but she’d have to wait for the next paycheck to get it fixed. Ruth’s
emergency fund had been her pride, her prize for being careful and dependable, but the emergencies had been so frequent these past few years, only a gaping hole was left.

Even without the car, Melody kept to the program and made it to church by transit and occasional rides. It took her an hour and a half each way, and the second carless week, she decided to skip the Sunday service. She had been to church on Thursday, and lots of people only went once a week. The two of them went for a walk along the lake instead. First time in years.

The Lakeshore was their mother’s favorite place. She’d take them there and talk about the ocean where she grew up. “See this,” she’d say. “You think this is big? This is just a small taste of what the ocean is like.” Sometimes she’d bring sea salt and have them sniff it. “So you know what it’ll smell like when I take you back to see it,” she’d say.

Ruth forgot to bring the salt, and it was probably too early to invoke their mother’s memory anyway. Instead, they walked through the parkland lining the western Lakeshore. The wind blew into their coats and made them into sails, ready to set out to sea. They held on to each other and laughed. Ruth joked, “Guess this is what it feels like to be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Melody laughed, showing her teeth. The sun was right behind her, and for an instant, she appeared to have a kind of halo around her head. Melody’s teeth suddenly seemed like ordinary bad teeth, no longer stigmata of past sins. For a few moments, the Melody from the last four years was gone. They were just two sisters enjoying their Sunday together. Melody talked about her high-school diploma, how maybe in a year, she’d have enough credits. Ruth felt light, like the breeze lifted a weight off her shoulders.

In the evening, they tried to make their mother’s chicken patty recipe—but Ruth never kept any Crisco in the house, and with only butter and margarine, the dough was first grainy, then tough. The chicken filling turned out better, just as spicy as their mom’s, with a nice texture of fried, ground chicken breast. But inside the dough, it became trapped, and the first few patties turned out rock hard.

They bit into one each and found their teeth stuck in unchewable fried bread, grease dripping down on the sides of their mouths. Then, like an eruption, they laughed, a roaring laughter that came from the belly and bubbled all the way up to the nose. They laughed and laughed while they extracted the patties from the hot oil and threw them into the trash.

Then Ruth took the rest of the filling and spoon-fed Melody with it, laughing and running after her around the kitchen with the spoon in her hand.

“Just like when you were a toddler,” she yelled, “If it weren’t for me you would have withered away before you turned two.”
When they calmed down, they fell onto the sofa almost on top of each other, Melody’s head resting on Ruth’s shoulder like it used to before it all started. Occasionally a wedged giggle made it up to the surface.

“I’d forgot you could be like this,” Melody said.

“This, how?” Ruth replied.

Ruth leaned her ear against the top of Melody’s head, feeling her sister’s skull through her braided hair.

“This free,” Melody said, “I like it.”

Ruth clenched her teeth. She thought of the endless pile of tax files that would be waiting for her in the morning. Her knees were good, but her brain was already calloused. Then she put the full weight of her head on her sister, pushing her cheekbone against Melody’s braids. Ruth’s jaw let out a squeak, but she kept pushing as hard as she could. The Christian pop CD Melody had put on stopped, but Ruth kept pushing.

“You’re hurting me,” Melody finally said, and only then did Ruth let go. They didn’t say much as they prepared for the night. Out of breath and out of words, Ruth thought. She fell asleep touching her slightly swollen left cheek.

It almost felt like spring the next time Ruth turned into the parking lot by the mega-church. She had picked up the car on the Friday before, and with it back in her life, everything felt brighter. Three weeks had passed since the last time she was there. Many things could happen in three weeks, but this time they hadn’t. Things were good and steady. Melody was past the six-month mark.

The car was making a nice humming sound, as if it was happy to be back and wanted to stick around. Coltrane was performing his miracle of harmonic progression on the radio. Ruth was hoping she’d have time to listen to one more piece, but she had chosen the slow lane at the grocery store and now she was almost late. People were already flowing out of the main entrance.

It had started to rain. A heavy spring rain that would penetrate the earth and make things grow. Or it could continue for hours and wash all nutrients from the ground. You never knew once it started to pour.

She recognized the yellow police tape while looking for a spot closer to the door. People lingered around the church, hugging each other despite the rain. It looked like some kind of movie. The soundtrack on the radio was not right, though, and she couldn’t make out what kind of movie it was.

She kept watching the crowd and didn’t see Melody arrive. “Is Yacoub coming?” she asked when she heard the usual knock on her window. Melody didn’t answer, just sat down in the front seat, her face and shoulders wet. It took Ruth a couple of instants to realize she was weeping. They sat in the car without talking, the radio doing its thing as if nothing had happened. Ruth turned the ignition and started the car.
Out on the highway Melody said, “You know that Yacoub used to be a meth-head, just like me? Had been off the stuff five years. Five effing years.” She banged her fist against the dashboard. “And then last night he goes climbing on the roof of the church.”

Melody was sobbing aloud now. “The effing roof, like he thought he could fly or something.”

Coltrane was still playing. Ruth stretched out her hand to touch Melody, but the angry twitch was there and her hand bounced back.

“They keep saying everything is possible in the Lord. But nothing’s fucking possible, all you can do is stay low and wait for the next slip-up.”

Melody dried her tears on her shirtsleeve. Ruth thought about the insects on Yacoub’s tie. Neither said anything for a couple of miles. Ruth knew what would happen next. The twitching in Melody’s body would return. And the twitching would just be the first sign of things slipping. Ruth heard her own heartbeat in her ears. She kept her eyes to herself and avoided Melody. Coltrane was playing *Softly as the morning sunshine* and that too seemed fundamentally wrong.

Ruth couldn’t ask if it was the meth or the Holy Spirit that guided Yacoub to that roof, so she focused on driving. As the car picked up speed, she waited for Melody’s fidgeting to start. They kept putting on new Coltrane songs for the anniversary of his birth or death or something. Ruth turned up the radio. *Lonnie’s Lament* blasted out of the speakers; belching and humming—the lamentation burrowing through her gut. Every time she thought it would end, there were fresh yelps from the saxophone. The windshield wipers fell in and out of rhythm with the music.

“Where are we going?” Melody asked when there was a commercial break and Ruth turned the volume down.

Ruth gave her a sideways glance. After that first turn north instead of south, she had ignored the road signs. She had sped up. There were still dots of city around them, but trees and fields were taking over. The car growled, *Trane* was unmoored, and Ruth said nothing. She pressed the accelerator, pushed it into the darkness.

The last notes came abruptly. In the brief silence before the commercial break, Melody’s hand was on her thigh. It was a strong hand. No trembling.

“We don’t need to do this, we can still turn back,” Melody said quietly.

The rain was letting up and swarms of tiny bugs rose from fields along the highway. Soon the windshield was splattered with dead creatures.

Ruth was still pondering what to do when the sun broke through the cloud cover, hitting the read-view mirror. For a moment she was blinded by the light.
Hege A. Jakobsen Lepri is a Norwegian-Canadian translator and writer, recently relocated to Norway. Her most recent work is featured or forthcoming in Washington Square Review, Atticus Review, Grist, Room Magazine and North Dakota Quarterly. You find her at www.hegeajlepri.ca