

# The Bumblin Mystic's Obituary

*a spiritual memoir*

CONSTANCE MEARS

## where ya headed?

The squelch and static of the police radio triggered adrenaline, but somehow I resisted the urge to run. I lifted my head, quickened my pace, projecting a sense of purpose. I was walking—no crime in that.

In my peripheral vision, I watched the car make a U-turn.

*It couldn't end yet. I'd barely started. I wasn't done.*

"Hi there," I heard a male voice say.

I turned to see an officer adjusting his baton, leather boots creaking as he walked around the front of the squad car. He stepped onto the curb, gaining another 6 inches, and stood in front of me.

"Where are you headed?"

Well, now, that was the question, wasn't it? Where *was* I headed, and what did it all mean?

"To the end of Katella," I said, as if answering a history question. I was pretty sure he didn't mean "in life."

"My eighth-grade class chose Disneyland for its graduation trip," I said, maintaining steady eye contact, "but I just went with my family and didn't want to go again."

That much was true, and I said it with the conviction of one who followed all the rules, which, up until the left turn on Edwards Street instead of a right, had always been the case. I like to walk (true). I want to see where Katella Ave. ended (kind of true). Yes, my parents know where I am (not true at all).

"What school do you go to?" he asked.

"Blessed Sacrament."

I couldn't have made up a better answer.

I'd never talked to a policeman, let alone lied to one, but I must have pulled it off, because he said "OK," hesitated, then warned me about some tall bushes up ahead.

I had nothing to worry about—I wasn't afraid of tall bushes.

Why would he think I had run away? I didn't have a knapsack or suitcase like kids on TV. I didn't have food or a map, or a sleeping bag. What I had were questions—lots of them—and \$6 I borrowed from my sister. I knew I needed to follow Katella to the end, then cut north to the San Berdu mountains. The rest of my "plan" was as blurry as the umber foothills in the distance, where the suburban grid dissolved into layers of soft mounds. An hour later, up close, the lovely landscape was sparse chaparral and scrub grass swaying in the June sun.

In a way, this was Mr. Olsen's fault.

Oh, don't get me wrong, he smelled like chocolate chip cookies. Not only that, he wore a caramel-brown corduroy jacket with leather elbows. Dreamy, tall with a dimple in his chin, he would clear his throat and toss back a thick crop of chestnut hair before addressing the class. His first name, which all the cool girls knew, was Randy. Someone said he was 22.

This was Randy—I mean, Mr. Olsen's—first year teaching, so he surpassed the nuns in enthusiasm as well as good looks. We would have studied algebra in Latin under Mr. Olsen and spent the better part of class writing notes to that effect.

I stood outside the classroom waiting... for what, I wasn't sure. I had never been in trouble before. Well, except last year when my mother called me "too big for my britches." Now this. A wash of queasy unease spread through my body, flush with an anxious shame.

I heard the door open and footsteps. *Yep. Chocolate chip cookies.*

“This note shows a lot of intelligence,” he said, holding up the confiscated contraband. *Oh, God. Please tell me he didn’t read it.*

“It took discipline and imagination to encrypt it the way you did.”

*“Oh, gawd.”*

After that all I heard was the teacher’s voice in Charlie Brown movies: “Wah, wah, wah-wah, wah, wah”—that is, until he used a word I didn’t know. I was a straight-A student, Spelling Bee champion. I wrote poetry. I was pretty sure I knew all the words—but stagnate? I knew its cousin “stagnant,” but that was used in reference to water.

*Was he calling me pond scum? —In such a nice tone of voice?*

Stagnant was an adjective; stagnate, a verb—as if he was saying I had made a *choice* to be like pond scum, that somehow this was my responsibility. No adult had ever implied I had a say in how my life unfolded.

Finally, he stopped talking and I thought I was off the hook, but that night, while washing dishes, I overheard my mother on the phone say, “Oh, hello, Mr. Olsen.” She twisted the black curly-cue cord, and said “uh huh” about 10 times, and one “yes, thank you.” She hung up the receiver, glanced at me, then called my father into their room at the end of the hall.

I could hear them murmuring for quite a while. First her high-pitched murmur, rising and falling with emotion, followed by my father’s low retort. It was parental Morse code and my ears strained to pick up every intonation. The murmuring turned to footsteps, and suddenly my mother stood right in front of me.

“We want to talk to you,” she said. Never a good sign.

I followed her into the room and sat down on the bed. My father shut the door. *Holy shit! For being stagnant? Why hadn’t anyone warned me about this?*

I expected my mother to whip out the wooden spoon, but no.

“Mr. Olsen is recommending you skip seventh grade and move to Sister O’Dea’s class,” she said.

I was a sharp one, but I didn’t see that coming.

At the time, I didn’t know one choice could change your whole life, but if I hadn’t moved to the eighth grade the Monday after Thanksgiving, I never would have made friends with Nikki and Patti’s eighth-grade sisters, Stacy and Kathi. They never would have given me a copy of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. And I probably wouldn’t have run away.

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The Mears clan spanned an entire pew. Irish Catholic—four girls, two boys and the parents—we piled into the Fairmont every Sunday headed for Mass. We'd genuflect in the aisle—kind of a curtsy to God—then fingertips to the forehead, heart, shoulder, shoulder. The residual malaise of grief and guilt lingered in the rafters, mixed with the sickly-sweet perfume of widows in furs and heavy powdered foundation. In good times, we could light a candle, which cost money—but you hardly needed the prayers then. The red and amber ones held magic, but felt tragic, like a long-shot negotiation. My favorites were the cobalt blue ones, like tiny full moons caught in a jar.

After Mass, we'd squeeze back into the car, not caring anymore if our dresses got wrinkled. We'd always stop at Stater Brothers so my mother could perform her weekly shopping: two loaves and frozen fish sticks—it was always the same miracle.

My father sat in the car with us kids, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel, under the jurisdiction of a plastic St. Christopher who presided over the dashboard. Dad fiddled with the radio dial, hoping for an Angels' or Orioles' game, while we wrestled with impatience, and eventually each other. He'd fish through his repertoire of games, tossing them into the back seat like candy. I Spy kept us guessing for a few minutes, but his favorite and mine was "Who Could be the Quietest?"

I could—I did, by rolling down the window of myself. At first I would surface randomly, in a boulder on the road's shoulder. In time, I learned to leave and return like the eye of a needle, disappearing, emerging, weaving threads of participation, baste-stitching myself to this world.

At home the only place you could be quiet was the aqua-colored bathroom of our four-bedroom rambler. Long before I could slip into anything close to contemplation, somebody would pound on the door in a panic. I could wait a bit, until I heard my father's gentle knock and his warmth simply coaxed me out, but then I'd risk having my mother come—leaving the kitchen unattended—irritated at the interruption, irritated at life. She had been a mean Marine, she liked to say, with a shout loud enough to rattle your bones. Any gains I'd made toward inner peace shattered with the pounding of her fist on the door.

"Constance Ann, you open the door this instant!"

A year ago, I had only two questions: "What's for dinner?" and "Can I go out to play?" But suddenly, questions started popping up out of nowhere, like my breasts had done the

year before. No one warned me about those, either.

“What are we doing here?” was not dinner-table conversation.

The nightly family sit-down meal was a verbal free-for-all of wisecracks, crosstalk, and interruptions. My sister could rattle on for 20 minutes about the run in her nylons. I sat silent for most of it, diving below the surface mid-sentence—somewhere after finding the clear nail polish, because that’s the only thing that will stop a run in its tracks and—*glub, glub, glub*. I submerged into a private, albeit murky world, poking into the teeming reef of Mystery, where I’d find treasures, and sometimes eels, until I heard my name and I’d surface in time to answer the pertinent question:

“Did I or did I not want a hot dog?”

“No, thank you,” I would say, the taste of salt water still on my lips. I’d disappear again: *What is the purpose of life? What are the possibilities? What is the highest use of a life? Glub, glub, glub.*

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I burrowed deeper into the foothills, hugging the center line of the two-lane road to avoid whatever kept rustling in the knee-high grass on the edges. A car approached from behind.

*Oh, no—not again.* I was well past the end of Katella by then.

I turned this time to see a station wagon with a perky mom in a blond ponytail, rolling down her window.

“Where ya headed?” she asked, as if we were already friends.

“Big Bear,” I answered.

“That’s 75 miles north,” she said with a rise in her voice that made my stomach tighten.

“Here, hop in the back,” she said, handing me a Dixie cup of apple juice.

In a split second I had to decide. Taking a ride from a stranger was not something a Mears kid was allowed to do. Not that running away was, but I wasn’t running away *exactly*. Riding in a car with three kids and a smiling Golden Retriever seemed less risky than limping to the nearest hospital with a rattlesnake dangling from my leg.

Now, why this mom didn’t ask more questions, I don’t know. Who knows? Maybe she wanted to run away, too—or maybe she had and met a boy, and now they had three kids and a station wagon. At any rate, I sensed a kinship, and on the other side of the hills she dropped me off at a gas station and pointed me toward the mountains.

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Like a shiny turtle, the 16-wheeler crawled out of the gas station and rolled to the freeway on-ramp where I stood. I opened the door, pulled myself up and into the cab without hesitation, the luxury of innocence.

“Where ya headed?” he asked, his big fist with chunky rings cupping the gear shift handle.

“Big Bear,” I said.

By this time, I had switched my story from “following Katella” to the truth: I was headed to the mountains to contemplate the meaning of life. Adults who weren’t policeman responded to that, nodding their head, then looking far off to the horizon. The standard commandments were fine as guidelines, but what the hell was I doing here? I needed specifics.

“Do you know who Jonathan is?” I asked.

“No,” he said scratching his graying beard. “Jonathan who?”

“The seagull,” I said. “Jonathan Livingston Seagull.”

“No, can’t say as I do. Why, what does this Jonathan guy do?”

“He transcends.”

I could tell by the velocity of his swivel that I had said something out of the ordinary.

What did I want to *be* when I grew up?—That’s what adults wanted to know. They didn’t mean what would you be—kind, courageous, original—they meant what kind of job would you get, what would you *do*? For girls, having kids, a ponytail and a station wagon was the sanctioned role, to be Mrs. Someone. Billie Jean King had just beat Bobbie Riggs, so there was that, but most girls my age wanted to be a nurse, a teacher, or if you were cool, a stewardess. I wanted something different. I wanted a mission, a calling. I wanted to be like Joan of Arc or Jonathan.

He leaned over the gearshift, his heavy brows crowding together. “Joan of Arc, the martyr?” he asked, his deep voice rising almost an octave.

I had gone too far. Just like always. I never knew where the threshold was until I said it out loud. I knew I had to diffuse it quickly.

“Or a stewardess,” I said sweetly.

“Joan of Arc or a stewardess?” he said, tilting his head the other direction.

It wasn’t the gruesome end I was after—that would be weird—it was her cellular-level faith. In the end, or at the end—when the stakes or the flames are high—you either believe it or you don’t. You can’t fake that kind of faith.

What I’d seen of church seemed more like Death insurance. You pay your premiums—

in the pew and on the plate— to avoid the angst of the Question Mark looming at the end of life. Religion simply put a Period where the Question Mark was, allaying the unsettled feeling that holding space for Mystery entails. The Period worked for all faiths, as long as no one got curious and started asking questions. Agnostics make do with an ellipsis, postponing the Question until the third dot, which buys you time to settle into the business of living. You can avoid the mid-week existential meltdown, but it leaves you to wrestle with the Big Questions as the credits are rolling.

I noticed a picture clipped to the visor. “Are those your kids?” I asked.

“Kids?” he said, throwing back his head with a laugh. “Grandkids—Mark and Katy.”

He checked the mirror, put on the brakes, then maneuvered onto the dusty shoulder.

“Here you are, Joan,” he said. “Straight up this road—Rim of the World Highway.”

“Thank you,” I said, climbing down out of the cab, the most polite hitchhiker he’d ever met.

I turned to face the base of a steep incline, the road disappearing into a brown haze shrouding the mountains. Of course, it was just LA smog, but the opaque quality set an apt tone for a trek to the unknown.

There isn’t a word for a young girl who devotes herself to the spiritual, outside the confines of traditional religion. Earlier that year I had pledged Confirmation, third of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church. They had never asked me what I believed. They only wanted me to confirm what they believed, handing me their Period, like the hand-me-down clothes I was given to wear. At 13, I was not in a position to reject either.

Without the Question Mark, life became a Disneyland ride, pre-scripted, sanitized, without any real risk. “Please remain seated, keep your hands inside the car, until the vehicle comes to a complete stop.” Amen.

I pictured my classmates at Disneyland that day, clutching their E tickets for the Matterhorn ride, while I was deep in Adventureland, trudging my way to the Rim of the World. This ride was definitely off the rails.

I didn’t know if I could pull off something as ambitious as martyr, but if I was setting a trajectory, I wanted to aim high. I also wasn’t clear how to become one. I’d never heard of a National Martyr Association. Up until the brief moment you become one, you’re always something else: a pauper, a saint, or a stewardess.

Joan and Jonathan didn’t need lectures on stagnation. They set their own course and that’s just what I intended to do.

The sun had peaked, but being June, still held high in the sky. I had just passed a big brown sign that said San Bernadino National Forest. I swallowed hard, my throat dry as

sandpaper. The incline made walking difficult, but I kept a brisk pace.

*What would I say to a policeman now? I wondered. How would I explain being this far from home, heading straight for the mountains?*

Just then I heard a car come to a stop behind me. I listened for the squelch, but instead all I heard was rock and roll. The V-8 coupe kicked up gravel on the hot asphalt as young male voices throttled from inside the car. I turned around.

“Where ya headed?” asked the young male driver, leaning out the window.

*What luck! A car with three boys in it! My age. No mom this time, no paternal grandfather.*

“Big Bear,” I said.

This morning it sounded like fiction, but the closer I got, the more I believed it and the more I believed it, the closer I got. That was it—you just walk out your front door.

I hopped in the backseat, like Wendy teaming up with the Lost Boys.

“We’re headed for Blue Jay,” the driver said. “I’m Kevin.”

He, his younger brother and cousin had bolted out of school and, with their parents’ blessing, headed to their family cabin for a weekend getaway.

“Where you staying?” he asked.

Now that was a good question. The idea of heading out to meet Life head on had rooted in spring, but I focused more on the mystical aspects than the practical. My only resource was an abundance of trust that it would all work out. I never once pictured the alternative: me, shivering, hungry, scared. Worse.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“You can stay with us,” he said, our eyes meeting in his rearview mirror.

Had they stopped along the way, had I missed either one of my rides, we wouldn’t have crossed paths at all, and if so, I have no idea where I would have slept that night. I might have snuck from cabin to cabin, until I found one with access, otherwise known as breaking and entering, which technically would have catapulted me from bumbling mystic to juvenile delinquent. Laws like breaking and entering didn’t seem to apply in the forest. Snow White had done it. And Goldilocks. The forest seemed like the perfect place to transcend the ordinary.

Centrifugal force pulled me one way and then the other as the road wound around the curve of each mountain. Exhausted, light headed, I lunged forward as he slowed to turn into a dirt road leading to a ’70s style split-level cabin, tucked in the forest.