

Case Study: Theresa – I Don't Pray, I Paint
Bioethics Forum, Spring 1993

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It was a school night, after 9:30, after the glorious mysteries and the rosary, and me and my sister Mary Margaret were in bed. My father had put the damper on the stove and was sitting in the kitchen with the light off in his pajamas eating his bread and milk and sugar. My mother had just tucked us in, and she was walking out of the bedroom into the hallway when, that late, our telephone rang.



"Long distance," my mother said after she picked up the telephone.

My father pulled the kitchen light on above him. On or off it was the same sound when you pulled the string. Off, the kitchen was one big shadow. On, the shadows in the kitchen swung back and forth until the light bulb stopped swinging.

The shadow of my mother talking on the telephone long distance swung from my feet under the covers to the bedroom wall and back, then back again, and back.

"Hello," my mother said, then: "Alma!" she said, "Oh yes, that would be great!"

Then: "Oh yes, of course, yes, yes!"

Then my mother didn't talk for a while, then she said, "O.K. Goodbye."

"It was Alma," my mother said to my father, her shadow finally still. "She and her friend, Theresa, an artist from Portland, are driving down to Idaho. They'll be in Blackfoot Friday and here on Saturday and spend the night."

"Saturday?" my father said. "Saturday," my mother said.

Neither one of them said anything after they both said Saturday. Then my father pulled the string and turned the kitchen light off.

My maiden Aunt Alma lived with another woman, not Theresa, in Portland when we had visited her the year before. I don't remember my aunt's roommate's name, but I do remember she was not an artist, was blonde and that I fell down her basement steps looking for the bathroom.

At the bottom of the steps, Aunt Alma held me against her. I remember she turned on the light at the top of the stairs, ran down the stairs after me, and sat on the cement floor holding me. I remember her telling me not to cry, and then she told me that we would go shopping in downtown Portland at a big department store with an escalator.

"Steps that move all by themselves," she said, "All you do is hold on."

In Meier and Frank, Aunt Alma held my hand as we went up the escalator. I stared at my feet. I stared at Aunt Alma. I stared at the ribbed stainless-steel steps and the smooth black revolving bannisters. At the top of the stairs, however, was something even more mysterious. More mysterious than falling into a dark basement, more mysterious than Portland, Oregon, or shopping in a big department store, more mysterious even than an escalator.

At the top of the stairs stood a boy, my age, my size, wearing a baseball cap same as me. What was different though about this boy, and what was mysterious, what I had never seen before, was skin, black skin, the deep black skin of this boy's face and hands.

I rushed up to the boy, put my hands on his shoulders, and staring into his eyes, yelled, "Aunt Alma! Aunt Alma! Look! It's a chocolate boy!"

My mother and my sister and me spent the next three or four days, before Aunt Alma and her friend, Theresa, arrived, cleaning, scrubbing, sweeping and polishing. My mother even washed the windows, and when she got done with them, washed the window curtains, then stretched the curtains out on curtain stretchers.

We cleaned every part of that house, including soap and water and a scrub brush on the baseboards. Took the front room carpet out and beat the carpet and then laid the carpet back down rotated so it wouldn't wear all in one place. Even washed the light bulb in the kitchen.

When we got done with the house, we started on the Buick - vacuuming, washing, waxing. My mother bought a can of stuff at Brennan's Hardware and sprayed the stuff in the Buick so it would smell new.

My father bought a new Stetson, my mother bought a new housedress and lipstick, and me and my sister got new shoes. Besides that, for the kitchen there was a new coffee percolator, a new tablecloth, and a silver gravy boat with a silver ladle.

That Saturday afternoon, when Aunt Alma drove her Chevy coupe into the dusty yard, Boots and Toby started barking, and the cats started running every which way, and then the dogs started chasing the cats.

I ran to the window and when I saw my Aunt Alma's red hair, I turned on my heel, ran to my mother - Aunt Alma's little sister who was scrubbing the bathtub for the third time - and yelled here to Christmas that Aunt Alma and her friend had just pulled into the yard.

My mother rinsed the tub, ran out of the bathroom, looked out the window, ran back into the bathroom, looked in the mirror, and put the orange exotica lipstick on her lips that she'd bought special at Le Vine's in the Bannock Hotel -where Aunt Alma always shopped when she came to

Pocatello. My mother blotting the lipstick with toilet paper, making sure none got on her teeth. My mother at the mirror tying a ribbon in her hair, a blue one, then tearing the ribbon out. In the bedroom, my mother shouting "Just a minute!" to her older sister and her friend, Theresa, an artist from Portland, coming up the back steps. My mother whispering loud, "Help me zip this up!" to me, meaning her new dress with the tulips on it and the zipper in the back.

After we got my mother ready, me and my sister Mary Margaret, in our bedroom, scrambled to get our Sunday good clothes on and, as Mary Margaret put it, "That hair of yours," meaning mine, combed and parted.

Mary Margaret walked into the front room first, leaving me to walk down the hallway, into the front room, alone.

I almost didn't go in the front room. I almost ran outside to get my father in the field.

But I didn't run outside. I walked into the front room.

The afternoon light was coming in through the clean windows, making things look gold.

What I remember was they were all women in the front room, even my sister, and I was not.

What I remember was the women in the front room were gold in the light. Gold and something else you feel on your neck and down your arms.

What I remember was Aunt Alma and her friend, Theresa, were wearing pants and smoking. My maiden Aunt Alma and her friend, Theresa, an artist from Portland, were sitting on the davenport in our front room in the light and they were wearing pants and smoking Herbert Tareytons. Besides the cigarette smoke, they smelled of perfume. Midnight in Paris my mother whispered when I asked, the both of them.

Aunt Alma's lipstick was red on her lips and on her cigarette. Her hair was red, too, and her sweater fit tight.

Aunt Alma took my hand as she introduced me to her friend.

"Thomas," Aunt Alma said, "I would like you to meet my friend, Theresa. She lives with me in Portland."

"Pleased to meet your acquaintance," I said, shaking Theresa's hand, still looking at Aunt Alma.

"You have sensitive hands, Thomas," Theresa said, "Are you an artist?"

That's when I looked at Theresa. She wore no lipstick. Her hair was pulled off her broad forehead in a Marcel wave. Her eyes were too big to look into, so I looked at my hands.

I didn't know how to answer. Seemed like my hands were always in the way, so I said, "Dad says I draws flies."

I ran out past the barn into the field. *Sensitive hands* and *artist* and *draws flies* were running through my head as fast as I was running. I ran to the field in the north forty by the stand of cottonwoods, where my father was combining wheat. I ran alongside the combine, then jumped onto the step ladder on the side. When my father saw me, I yelled over the thrashing sound and engine sound that Aunt Alma and her friend were at the house. We finished the round together, dumped the wheat into the truck, me pulling the dumping lever, and then my father shut the John Deere off, and me and him drove to the house in the grain truck, me sitting on a gunny sack so I wouldn't get my good pants dirty.

At the house, my father dusted himself off with his hat. As he walked in the back door, he said loud, "If I knew you were coming, I'd a baked a cake!"

The women in the front room laughed.

Aunt Alma hugged my father, which surprised him, I think. Then Aunt Alma introduced her friend, Theresa. Theresa stood up and was as tall as my father. She shook his hand firmly. My mother had made tea by then, and we all had tea, even Mary Margaret and me, and oatmeal cookies.

Supper was always at six, so at about five, I changed my clothes back to my work clothes, and me and my father went out to the chicken coop, and we caught two fryers. My father knocked their heads against the stump and chopped their heads off. My mother had the water boiling by the time the chickens got done flopping around the yard. Me and my father plucked the feathers and then he singed the chickens' skin with his pocket lighter. My mother gutted the chickens in the sink, while Aunt Alma and Theresa sat at the kitchen table, lighting one Herbert Tareyton after another.

It was fried chicken, peas and spuds, coleslaw, coffee and apple pie for supper. Aunt Alma sat at the end of the table where my mother usually sat. Theresa sat next to Aunt Alma. My mother on the other side of Aunt Alma, then me. Mary Margaret sat across from me next to Theresa, then my father at the head of the table. The new tablecloth was on the table, and so was the silver gravy boat with the silver ladle in my mother's chicken gravy, and we ate off my mother's wedding dishes that had the puritans on them having turkey dinner with the Indians.

After supper, after the dishes were done, when the sun got pink and behind the Lombardy poplars along the road, my father went out to the barn and did the milking. My mother and Aunt Alma went in the front room again and sat on the davenport along with Mary Margaret. Wasn't long before those three were all laughing so hard their gums showed.

I was figuring on giving my father a hand, or maybe walking the river, when Theresa, my aunt's friend, asked me if I wanted to paint a picture.

"Picture of what?" I asked. "Whatever's out there," Theresa said.

What was out there, on every side of you, about as far as you could see, was tumbleweeds and sagebrush and wind.

I figured it would be easy painting what was out there. All you'd have to do was draw a line across the paper and color above the line blue with maybe some clouds, and under the line color in brown, or green in the spring, or maybe gold for the wheat.

So, I said, "Sure, let's paint a picture."

As we walked out the back door, out of the corner of my eye, I saw something on Theresa's shoes that shined. They were braces. What I saw as we were walking out the back door, was Theresa, Aunt Alma's friend, the artist from Portland and the braces on her shoes, then on up, poking out her pants legs. What I saw was Theresa limping.

"Polio," Theresa said, "Hand me my crutch over by the door, would you?" she said.

We sat at the picnic table, Theresa's crutch laying on the bench on the opposite side, Theresa's oil paints on the picnic table in two lines of round spots, colors I'd never known she carried in a wooden case. Before us, the flat stretched brown to the line, then above the line was blue and some pink, no clouds.

"Does it hurt?" I asked, "Polio?"

"Yes," Theresa said.

"Then you must pray a lot," I said.

"No, I don't pray," Theresa said, "I paint."

Sitting that evening in the flat world, at the picnic table, the narrow white house we lived in, the barn, the grain truck in the yard, the gas pump behind us, I watched her, Theresa, the artist from Portland, dip the brush in the round colors and put the colors onto a flat white canvas, painting what was out there, the mystery, painting what I had never seen before. Me sitting next to her, my elbows on the table, her with the gold, the green, the blue, me with the colors and her, the sun going down behind us, sun on my neck, sun on the back of my arms.

When Theresa finished the painting, she wrote in the lower right-hand corner, To Thomas, an artist, and signed her name.

I hung the painting in my room above my bed in the frame Theresa had given me too. That night it was Saturday, so Mary Margaret and me took our baths, her first. My mother and my father, and Aunt Alma and Theresa played pinochle, and we listened to the top ten hits on KSEI radio. We had oatmeal cookies and maple walnut ice cream before bed, me and Mary Margaret in our sleeping bags on the floor in the front room.

The next morning, we all went to nine o'clock Mass in Aunt Alma's coupe, me and Mary Margaret in the rumble seat in the back, me holding Theresa's crutch, my mother and my father, Theresa and Aunt Alma driving scrunched up together in the front seat. First time ever we laughed so hard on the way to church.

I still have the painting. The painting has hung on my bedroom wall in every house I have ever lived in. Even in Africa in the Peace Corps, when the wall was a tent. Even in New York City, the painting low on the wall, covering the blood stain.

And now, I have moved here. I live with my lover, a black man, an artist in Portland. The other day, me and him went to Meier and Frank. He stood and waited for me at the top of the escalator.

This time I have hung the painting in the gallery among the photographs of Tony, Silvio, Ethyl, Terenzio, Ignacio, John, Peter, George, Albert, Carl, Keith - all my friends who have died.

This time it's not polio.

When she finished the painting, I asked Theresa, "Where did the trees and the green mountains come from?"

"The trees and the green mountains are somewhere in the human heart," Theresa said, "That's what an artist does. She spends her life looking for them."

Then I asked, "Is the woman running, you?"

Theresa reached for her crutch. "Yes, she is me," Theresa said, "But she is you too. And your father and your mother and your sister. She is your Aunt Alma. The woman running is all of us."