

An excerpt from *Pieces*, by Mary Ann McGuigan

INTERCESSION

1993

When Maureen Donnegan first moved into the apartment in Brooklyn, her neighbors used to stare at her window, nearly level with the brownstone's stoop. Even then, it was no more than a shabby frame for the assortment of saints that lined the shelves pushed up against the glass. Their faded robes are cracked now, separated from countless days of sun and rain only by the loose, filmy glass and curtains too flimsy to do their job.

Maureen can see some of the neighbors standing on the sidewalk, but she is sure they can't see her sitting at the kitchen table, not far from the open window, listening to what they're telling the man who was just inside, banging on her door like a federal marshal.

He's Charlene's father, Mr. Robinson. He spoke his name like a threat, pounded it into the door, said he was looking for his daughter, shouting finally when he got no response. Maureen didn't want to speak to him, or even see his face. She knew he wouldn't look like a monster. He'd look like a tired, hard-working black man, and nothing about him would show that he has no use for the girl, no love.

"He never talks to me," Charlene told her early on, right after the pregnancy test. They'd finished eating dinner, the girl's first taste of corned beef, and she was at the sink, washing the dishes. "He knows I'm around, but he never looks at me."

"What do you mean never?"

"He's tired. And sometimes he works nights." Charlene gave a weak shrug, a movement that seemed to discount any worth she had. "I ain't much to see anyway."

"Don't talk like that," Maureen scolded. She wanted to tell her she was beautiful, because she was. Not just the dimples and the flawless skin, but the grace she had, the discipline of her gestures, the way she received the world as if its indifference were no danger to her. But such talk was not Maureen's way. "What about your mother? Can you talk with her about what to do?"

She shook her head. "She's pretty angry most of

the time.”

Maureen wanted to hold her then. No one should feel so insignificant, not to your mother and father. They’re supposed to protect you when the monsters come. Maureen was never able to make her own children feel safe from their father, no matter how often she stood in his way. The pain of that never left her.

The voices drift in from the street. “We don’t see much of her,” someone tells Mr. Robinson. Maureen recognizes the nasal voice. It’s Mrs. Bogavitch, from 3C. “She used to have a dog,” she says, “a tiny thing. Always growling through those pointy teeth. Even chewed on the living room window shade when she left it alone in the apartment.” She knits her crooked fingers together, looking pleased with herself.

“It was a nasty creature,” someone else agrees, and Maureen knows most of them think she is too. She isn’t. She has merely had her fill of people. Somewhere back in her late fifties—almost twenty years ago—she finally gave in to the long-held suspicion that people by and large are a greedy, reprehensible lot who lie for sport and mostly smell bad. Certainly her husband and at least two of her sisters proved the rule, and she’s no longer willing to pretend otherwise. She’s always civil, but she refuses to listen to people brag about what they do or what they own or endure tales of thankless children or cheating husbands. She keeps her greetings to the point and never lets discussions of health or the weather get taken too far. She’ll talk, but only about things that matter. On Thursdays, she nods to Mr. Norman, the superintendent of the building, if he spots her watering the long, spindly philodendron that grows unevenly from St. Jude’s backside. But otherwise she keeps to herself.

And she prays. She prays mostly in the kitchen, where the saints are. She doesn’t address her prayers to them, although she can recite from memory all of the petitions for their intercession; she simply likes their company. She admires the good sense behind the notion that if someone cuts your head off or boils you in oil, they aren’t necessarily getting the better of you.