

You Can Find Me in My Church

John Slade

Synopsis

Literary fiction, 43,554 words, 107 pages of text.

Laila, an eighteen-year-old high school student, stands on the end of a pier reaching into a lake called Sognsvann, an oval of clean, cold water about a kilometer long, wrapped by a forest of spruce and birch in the northwest corner of Oslo.

She feels so close to nature here that she calls the lake “my church”. Looking out on a summer day at sunlight sparkling on the black water, she writes in her notebook,

“Sunlight glitters on the water.

The breeze sweeping across the lake plays with sparks of energy
That have just spent eight minutes and twenty seconds traveling from the sun.

Dip your cup and drink from the mystery

That gave you life.”

“Yes, here I was, in my church, reaching back eons of time to that extraordinary moment when light touched water on a tiny planet circling a star in the vast expanse of the universe . . . and somehow, somehow, light touching water created life. Little green cells which were able to feed from the light, from the energy of a star, began to fill the seas of that tiny planet.”

But, like every teenager around the world, Laila knows that planet Earth, and her future, are severely threatened by the blanket of carbon pollution that grows thicker every year. As a Norwegian girl who does her own research, she knows that the Arctic—one-third of Norway lies north of the Arctic Circle—is warming four times as fast as the rest of the planet.

She does not escape into fantasy or science fiction. Her classes in high school are superficial and boring compared to what she can learn online about her dying planet, her blighted future. Feeling helpless, her teenage emotions churn between deep sadness and growing anger. A doctor tells her that she is suffering from

depression, and prescribes medication. She tells him that she is not the one who is sick, and refuses to take a single pill.

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Birgitte, eighty-four years old, a former history teacher, now a resident in a nursing home, arrives in an ambulance at a hospital, where the doctor tells her that a Pacemaker would greatly improve the unsteady beating of her heart.

My doctor says that he wants me to have a Pacemaker installed, to bolster my poor old worn-out heart. “What for?” I asked him. “So that I can watch daytime television while seated with an audience of warm cadavers? So that I can listen to the evening news about so many wars I can’t keep up with it all? So that I can stare at pictures of forest fires that are burning on every continent of the planet? I should have a Pacemaker . . . so that after eight-four years, I can watch the end of the world?”

Birgitte is awakened in her hospital bed during the night when nurses wheel in a patient and lift her onto the second bed in the room. Birgitte sees that the patient is an unconscious teenage girl, and learns that she has tried to kill herself.

A nurse put a white knit wool hat over the girl’s head, snug over her ears. She was connected by several wires to a screen on an elevated stand which monitored her heart with a green zigzagging line that pulsed, so it seemed to me, a bit slowly.

I lay back on my own pillow and closed my eyes. I had spent a long and rich career as a teacher, a profession which requires the mastery of a certain subject, in my case history, and something more. A teacher must be alert to the talents—the often *still hidden talents*—of every student, so that she can encourage her flock of delicate teenagers, guide them, kid with them and make them smile, as they go through those difficult years of trying to discover who they are, and who they might become . . . in a sometimes cruel and hostile world.

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And so begins an extraordinary friendship. The reality of the Climate Crisis, the failure of COP28, and the barbaric wars in Ukraine and Gaza, never diminish in

the background of the story. But when Birgitte insists, the following morning, that an orderly swivel her bed around so that the women can face each other as they talk in their own “little café”, Laila finally finds the guidance that she has so desperately needed. The two orphans meet the dog which found Laila unconscious in the dark snowy forest. They meet refugees from the war in Ukraine—a group of women, many with children—who sing at a Christmas concert in the nursing home. Birgitte knits a sweater, raspberry red, for the girl who is emerging into a brave and determined young woman.

Laila will graduate from her boring high school in her boring town in June. Birgitte, ever the teacher, guides Laila toward both her purpose in life, and her next destination, the University of Tromsø, 350 kilometers north of the Arctic Circle, the northernmost university in the world, where Laila will find a team of people who are deeply concerned about the Climate Crisis, and who will welcome her to join them.

She will never feel lonely again. She can combine an undergraduate degree in marine biology with a graduate degree in environmental law. And she will develop a network of international colleagues who will support her as she fights to protect and nurture her dying world.

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The story, set during twelve days in December, 2023, is divided into two parts: **Coming Out of the Darkness**, and **Moving Into the Light**. Though set in Norway, the themes resonate with teenagers around the world who have joined Fridays for Future, who have held up their placards at demonstrations, but who still feel helpless.

How do we encourage them, what do we teach them, and how can we guide them toward careers that will enable them to repair the unprecedented wreckage that has been dumped into their laps?

How do we help these beautiful young people to launch the Renaissance of the 21st Century?

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