

Killing Time in "Day-Old Baby Rats"  
Student

Julie Hayden's short story "Day-Old Baby Rats," published in *The New Yorker* in 1972, takes place in the span of one day, from morning to night through the eyes of a woman living in Manhattan. Everything she does during that day can be seen as killing time through mundane tasks – she runs errands and reads the newspaper, yells at the delivery man and takes a cigarette break. However, throughout the entirety of that day (and the entirety of the story from the very first words to the last), her experience is colored with religious imagery and language. She is a woman killing time in order to avoid the demon of religious guilt, which manages to suffuse almost every detail of her day. At the story's climax, when she finds herself drawn into St. Patrick's Cathedral inside a confessional, finally confronting her guilt and fear over her sin – her past abortion – she is met with a chilling response that colors her relationship with religion to the very end of her day.

Religious imagery pervades the story from the get go. As soon as she opens her eyes in the morning, the items in her apartment are reminiscent of those of the Catholic church: "There's a lot of January light crawling from beneath room-darkener shades, casting mobile shadows on walls and ceilings. The mobile is composed of hundreds of white plastic circles the size of Communion wafers. As they spin they wax and wane, swell and vanish like little moons" (28). The religious imagery of the communion wafers occurs alongside the larger image of her waking in a bed underneath a mobile, just as a small baby would. Indeed, she had woken up imagining she were a baby. She "wakes up, immediately flips over onto her back...She thought someone was calling her 'baby'" (28). Her baby-like posture and the religious imagery hanging

above her as soon as she wakes brings to light just how present babies and religion are to her, how religion is literally hanging over her from the moment she wakes.

Images of religion follow her throughout her day (thoughts of St. Anthony as she loses items, the Pope in the newspaper's headlines, Goodwill Exterminators, Buddhists peddling Hare Krishna). Religion itself is a shadow that lingers from her own past. As she passes St. Patrick's Cathedral, she sees an old woman hobbling up the stairs and thinks of the religions women from her childhood: "The nuns of her youth floated like blackbirds. Step. By step. By step, the old lady is guided through a small door set into the heavily ornamented bronze ones" (32). The nuns of the past are thus enjambed into the very same rhythmic sentence with the woman entering into the church. Step by step religion re-enters her life. As she enters the cathedral, she muses on how "It has been years since she was in church. And what a church!" (33). Of course, she could have not picked a less imposing, grand emblem of religious power than New York City's St. Patrick's Cathedral. Her body responds automatically to being in church: "Her uncovered scalp prickles dangerously" (33).

That dangerous prickle is prescient as she draws closer to the confession booth. From the moment she wakes to the moment when she finds herself at the steps of the chapel, religious symbols have been haunting her at every turn, have been foreshadowing her confrontation with sin. Finally, during her conversation with Father Kleinhardt does she begin to speak honestly about this oppression: "'Father Kleinhardt, I am frightened,'" she says on page 33. Then later, after he first ignores her, she repeats: "'I am frightened to death, Father.' But he chooses not to hear her" (33). She quickly says, ambiguously either to Father Kleinhardt, or to God, or to herself, "'Oh my God, I am heartily sorry,' and slips out, leaving him committed to

the end of his Latin prayer” (33). In the moment she confronts her sin, which had been haunting her all day, she is ignored, unredeemed by the messenger of God.

The actions she performs throughout the day seem trivial, quotidian feats to kill time. In the story, it may seem as though nothing else changes except the hours of the day. But as time passes the religious imagery adds up and builds to a climax that results in her confession at church, with her proclaiming the one vulnerable and honest line she speaks all day. In fact, even in the moments when she’s explicitly “killing time,” she is haunted by children, by religion. “Killing time, she stops to light a cigarette and is nearly swept over by an energetic group of tiny children chattering in the half-light of Central Park” (34). Her day – indeed all of these moments that constitute her day – are constant reminders of her guilt.

**Works Cited:**

Hayden, Julie. “Day-Old Baby Rats.” *The New Yorker*, 15 Jan. 1972, pp.28-34.