Raised in a lively and complex Catholic kome the author enters a Dominican convent in time for the 1960's to turn her world and her church upside down. A compelling and unflinching spiritual memoir and a tale of the times.

The Doubtful Salvation of Sister Bernardo

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A Spiritual Memoir

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For the Love of God

In Mrs. Malachy's classroom at Holy Name School, mothers were primping their white-clad second graders before mass. The apple trees were crazy in bloom, so Mom had rigged a corsage for me of pale pink blossoms from our back yard. It would not have occurred to us to buy flowers when something free and readily at hand would do. As Mom pinned the flowers to my dress, I eyed covetously the girls who wore white shoes with straps and long white stockings, elegant compared to my bare legs, anklets and brown oxfords. We did not wear veils for First Communion. Mom told me to stand still and tightened the barrettes that anchored brown poofs of home-permed curls on either side of my head. She twisted my tiny pearl rosary beads around my folded hands, and tucked another pin into the precarious corsage. I knew the fragile blossoms would probably turn brown before the end of mass.

Mom left to join Dad and my siblings in church. The first communicants trailed behind Sister St. Anthony out of school, down the sidewalk and into church. Our families waited in the pews, clumped towards the center aisle and straining to see their child in white. As I passed before them I wondered if anyone could tell what love for Jesus I had in my heart. I remembered the story of Blessed Imelda, who had begged to receive communion but was too young, even though she was living in a convent, a sort of child nun. My copy of *Little Pictorial Lives of the Saints* showed her as a child wearing a habit and veil. In those days you had to be fifteen to receive communion. Blessed Imelda longed for Jesus. She wept with desire. One day at commun-

ion time, the round white host rose from the priest's hand, floated through the air, and hovered miraculously above Imelda's head. The priest, who could take a hint, went over and placed the host on the little girl's tongue. She knelt on that spot, transfixed with joy all through the rest of mass. Everyone else left. Imelda remained motionless, bowed over her prie-dieu in thanksgiving. Hours later, when someone finally went to rouse her, she was stone dead—had died of joy! Maybe because of her child status, Imelda had never been declared a saint, but seemed forever stalled at the rank of Blessed. To me, she personified the same all-consuming love of God that burned in my heart.

I didn't really expect a miracle like Blessed Imelda's on my First Communion day, but I secretly dreamed that God might give some little sign of his love for me. When it was my turn to approach the altar rail, I knelt, presented my tongue, breathless that the moment had come to touch God. I felt the featherweight of the host on my tongue, and welcomed Jesus into my mouth, where I was careful to cradle the host until it dissolved. You did not chew the body of Christ.

The priest stepped on to the next child. I stood and followed the stream of other solemn children back to the pews, and knelt in my place among them. I covered my face with my hands to shut out all the world except my awe that God himself was physically present within me. How many times, just like Imelda, I had wanted to be this close to God.

All the other children were now back from communion and the adults were filing up to the communion rail. The thin white wafer had melted away in my mouth, and I finally let myself swallow once, then again, sorry to let this taste of God vanish. At the end of mass, I marched out of church just like the other children. Boys squirmed impatiently to be free of their little starched collars and ties, or smirked under the spotlight of gazes from their doting families. Girls smoothed their white skirts and sent shy glances towards the clicking

Brownie cameras at the church door. Surely my devotion was a flaming sun compared to theirs. Yet as I stepped blinking into the May sunlight, I felt no different than before.

Mom and Dad stood beaming in the crowd of waiting parents, Mom with her box Brownie in hand. As soon as we got home from church mom posed me in front of the big evergreen at the corner of our house, where countless family events were documented. The tree towered over me. "Look up at the camera," Mom said, as my eyes fell on the apple blossoms pinned to my dress. They were drooping and tinged with brown.

It is an open question whether the homes of childhood are what save us or what we must be saved from. In my case, three different houses formed the arched bridge of my beginnings. The St. Cloud house, shadowed in memory like its name, where we lived until I was four, when the children numbered only six and Dad's insurance business was still good. The Minneapolis house, a sturdy two story stucco with reasonable brown trim, on a high terrace overlooking Park Avenue South, the home where four more little girls were born and the Cashmans claimed the trophy for being the perfect big Catholic family. Or so we seemed. And ten years later, in Faribault, fifty miles south of Minneapolis, the tight little ranch style house that clung to the edge of town, where we moved in a hurry because business was bad and Mom and Dad had woes they never told us.

It is also an open question whether during those bell-curved years of youth our faith was what buoyed the family up or what weighed us down and held us submerged in waters we took as normal. Being Catholic was simply the warm supporting sea in which we all were spawned and on which we fed, a privilege that set us apart from our nice but less fortunate Minnesota neighbors, most of whom were marooned on the desert islands of Protestantism, while a few languished in the badlands of unbelief.

The back yard of the St. Cloud house boasted an array of yard

adornments made of cement set with small colored stones, blue, red, and black. A shallow cement fish pond, where the stones sparkled through the shallow water; a birdbath with sharp bright stones up the pedestal and round the rim; heavy stone benches and a curved cement sidewalk, all crusted with the jagged bright stones that cut my knees when I fell. I used to run my baby hands over the hard bright shards that would scrape my skin at the slightest bump, carefully caressing the beautywhich made our backyard clearly superior to that of any neighbor. When Dad was promoted to General Agent and we moved to Minneapolis, we brought the birdbath and benches with us, but the fishpond and curved walk stayed behind, a little Camelot lost to me forever.

My very verbal family managed to record only two brief stories of my infancy. My Aunt Kay told me once that on my baptismal day, someone from out of town stopped on the way to pick up road kill, rabbit perhaps. That was all there was to report—these stories were always short on details. Mom and Dad recounted a time I drank fuel oil from a can under the stove, but with no information about how much I drank or if I got sick or any measures taken to purge me. The story used to come up in the general context of childhood mishaps, Tommy's bloody noses or Danny's broken bones, misadventures and tragedies that time soon gilded with a patina of comedy.

Only one scene remains to me from inside the St. Cloud House. I am in the kitchen, where, perhaps as a result of the fuel oil incident, I am sitting confined in a very large cardboard box, like the ones that came with toilet paper, which Dad always bought in huge quantities to get a bargain. The steep sides of the cardboard box tower above me, and I cannot reach the top. Above the walls of my containment I see a high corner of the dusty yellow ceiling, the paint dimmed by dust and kitchen grease. Across the ceiling stretch bare white clotheslines, very high up, hard for even a big person to reach. I could never reach them or even the top of these cardboard walls my mother has put me in. It is daytime, but the light is thin and gray as though winter has

seeped indoors. If there are any people around, I don't hear or see them. If there are toys in the box, they fail to interest me as much as the high ceiling and those unreachable white cords.

Leo, Nancy and I were all born in St. Cloud, and for the next five years the family sustained a configuration of "the three big kids," Tommy, Margie and Danny, and "the three little ones," Rita, Nancy and Leo. On the hot August night when Leo was born, Mom had given Nancy and me, as the two youngest, the privilege of sleeping out on the front porch in hopes that some whiff of breeze might help us sleep. I was three. Mom spread a sheet for me on a rocking metal glider, and fitted up a bed for Nancy, who was only two, on a daybed nearby. Nancy seemed fast asleep in seconds, but I lay awake in the dark. I knew Tommy, Margie and Danny were asleep inside, but I could hear the adults astir. I lay still, listening undetected to the soft commotion in the house, people moving around, whispering, trying not to wake us. The door of Dad's black car out in the driveway opening, then closing. Another car door, opening, closing. The engine sputting to life, fat tires crunching on the gravel drive. The sounds trailing off. Then I heard only crickets sawing their wings. I knew mom was having another baby tonight. Our hired girl, Lois Woolsey, was somewhere in the quiet house. I lay awake in my solitude, letting the weight of new life press on me in the warm dark air.

Our new house in Minneapolis seemed big in 1945, though it would prove much smaller when we chanced to see it as adults. My four-year-old's eyes searched for the novelties that might console me for the loss of the backyard stonework in St. Cloud, and the new house did not disappoint. It had heavy dark wood arches and wood trim around the ceilings, a fireplace with a high wood mantel, and on either side, built-in dark wood bookcases with small paned glass doors.

The upstairs offered a boys' room for Tom and Dan and the girls' room, shared by Marge, Nancy and me. The first floor had Mom and

Dad's room, and a baby's room, initially occupied by Leo. These arrangements would be shuffled many times over the ten years we lived in that house as children got bigger and four new babies came along. Tom eventually built himself a lair at one end of the basement where he could play his hi-fi and even smoke until Mom put her foot down. I sometimes slept in the girls' room, sometimes in with the baby, and I remember long stretches of making my bed on the living room couch, a spot which actually gave me the most privacy, because I had the room to myself once everyone else went to bed.

Dad painted the concrete basement floor brick red, which we gradually chipped away with our tricycles and kiddie cars that we drove in circles around the ping pong table, where Tom and Dan spread out bits of balsa wood and tissue paper and decals for their model airplanes. At the front of the house, French windows looked down the terrace and across Park Avenue to a city park two whole blocks in area, with trees and bushes ringing a huge ball field that became an ice rink in winter, a field house that was seldom open, a shallow bathing pool that was rarely filled with water. We lived on the swings, monkey bars, and teeter-totters, or prowled through the bushes playing cops and robbers or pioneers and Indians. The park would prove the scene of many raucous adventures, some ending in tears and blood.

The new house had a wonderful square clothes chute from the first floor to the laundry, just big enough to accommodate the slender body of my oldest brother Tom if Mom and Dad weren't home and the rest of us ganged up on him to take revenge for his meanness. Our loud cheers drowned out his screams as we stuffed him into that chute and shoved him down, having made sure there was at least a little laundry at the bottom to break his fall. Broken bones would give us away. The house also had a slim broom closet by the back door, and we often speculated that Tom would just fit inside. When we decided to test the theory, a day Mom and Dad weren't home, we joined forces, overpowered Tom and stuffed him kicking and screaming in

with the broom and mop. He pounded and yelled from his prison, while outside the latched door we danced around with nervous glee, aware that eventually either Mom and Dad would come home or Tom would expire. At last we unlocked the door and ran like hell. Tom spilled out red-faced, spewing threats as we scattered to the corners of the house hoping we wouldn't be the one he caught and pounded.

Our manic attacks on Tom felt wrong to me, but mob spirit took me over, took us all, even Marge, my older sister, who was usually the model Catholic girl. Perfect Catholic children have a lot of pent up wildness to release when their parents are not home.

When Mom and Dad were home, and usually it was just Mom because Dad worked so much, we were most of the time a model family. One Christmas we had our picture in the local paper gathered round the kitchen table spread with dough and rolling pins for making sugar cookies. We wore aprons and had flour on our hands, a tableau of domestic cheer. When company came, we shed our jeans and wore Sunday clothes, and after dinner Marge would play piano in the living room, while Tom gamely scratched out tunes on his violin and the rest of us chimed in to offer a raggedy Ave Maria or Whispering Hope, which the guests politely enjoyed. Many nights after dinner we gathered in that living room to say the family rosary before the enthroned picture of the Sacred Heart on the mantel, and the blue and white plaster Virgin Mary. Marge and Nancy and I lit vigil lights before Jesus and Mary. In summer we added tiny vases of lilies of the valley that grew wild in a crack between the sidewalk and the house, or apple blossoms from the tree in the back yard.

Even when Mom was home, that living room could transform into the arena for wrestling matches or balloon bounces or my personal favorite, a competition to see who could traverse the circumference of the room without a foot touching the floor, but entirely by hanging or climbing from the wooden arches, the fireplace mantle or other furniture. Mom was forever intervening when she'd had enough.

"You kids stop that right now!"

"Tom, downstairs to do your homework."

"Marge and Dan, here, sit at the dining room table with your books!"

"You little ones do your coloring!"

"Rita, come help me dry these dishes!"

In that house I learned to work. Weekly I scrubbed the downstairs bathroom floor, every single tiny hateful white hexagonal tile, reaching back at mom's insistence under the claw-foot tub to the wretched corners where silverfish slithered away from my rag. I vacuumed, dusted, helped with laundry. I learned to bake cookies and cakes from scratch and make a decent pie dough using Crisco and ice water. I learned to make tapioca pudding—the secret was to whip the egg whites before adding them. I could cook tuna casserole made with Campbell's mushroom soup.

When the four little girls began to appear in the family line up I learned to change diapers, warm a bottle, test it on my wrist, and burp a baby properly, always supporting her little wobbly head. Mom made sure her girls learned the essentials any woman should know.

Babies were considered a great joy in our family. When Colleen was born, Mom designated me to stay home from school and care for Rosie, who was two. Marge was in high school by then, and Mom reasoned that I could catch up in geography or long division easier than Marge could make up Latin and algebra. I was proud to be seen as capable of this responsibility. And I felt it my obligation to spread the good news of Colleen's birth. So I bundled Rosie into her snowsuit, put on my coat, and headed out to tell the neighborhood. I went to every back door on the block, knocked or rang, and announced, "Mom had another baby!"

"Isn't that wonderful!" they would say, no doubt restraining sighs of dismay or rolling eyes, which I wouldn't have noticed anyhow given my conviction this was great news.

"What does that make, seven?" they would ask.

"No, eight," I proudly corrected them.

Dad was good-natured, genuinely nice, unless of course he was tired, hungry or mad. Years later he discovered it was low blood sugar, but then we only knew to keep our distance when he was grumpy. Dad liked people, and they liked him. My little cousin Peggy once wished she had our dad not hers. He was a provider, bringing home entire cases of canned peas, bargains like the broken pogo stick he found at a garage sale, or, on a lucky day, big tubs of ice cream and giant jugs of Dad's Root Beer so we could all make floats. He took us swimming at Lake Harriet, or to the office to help him on Saturday, or to the Minnesota State Fair where we trailed after him through the hippodrome and hog barns, before we got to the ferris wheel and other rides. Dad was often on the road selling insurance, and occasionally took one of us along, to eat in restaurants and stay over night in a motel, an indescribable privilege to the chosen child. When in town, Dad often came home from the office, tired and gray-jowled. Anticipating his need, Mom would rev up the younger children who danced and chanted, "Daddy's coming! Daddy's coming!" When he came through the kitchen door lugging his thick briefcase, the little girls besieged him with hugs and kisses. Dad laughed his booming laugh and gamely dragged their clinging little bodies with him into the living room, sat in the big green chair and let them pile on his lap. But within a few minutes, he'd reach for his newspaper and soon my sisters left him to the classified ads, which when they were particularly interesting he sometimes read aloud to any hapless bystander. The want ads or obituaries were significant portions of Dad's contribution to family dialog, along with "Don't upset your mother," and "Ask your mother," even if she had just said, "Ask Dad."

In spite of his basic good nature, he lacked patience and any knack for giving comfort. Our tears would just as often evoke from him a flare of anger, and he'd say, "What have you got to cry about? Here, I'll give you something to cry about," which was followed by

quick, stinging swats on the bottom from the flat of his big hand. Of course, it only made us cry more.

Mom was more sympathetic, at least for minor physical pains. For most of my grade school years, I seemed to skin my knees almost every day, and had to turn to Mom for Mercurochrome and Band-Aids. At the time I believed this happened so much because I was always running to get home for lunch and back to school on time. Later I would come to see those quick trips into the bathroom to wash and swab a skinned knee were a rare opportunity to enjoy her complete attention for about two minutes.

Graver injuries evoked a more complicated response from Mom. One evening I hit my head hard on the corner of the piano bench—we had been chasing a balloon in the living room—and when I rubbed the spot I felt hot blood on my hand. Mom dutifully called a cab and took me to the emergency room for stitches. As we rode together in the back seat of the taxi, Mom pressing a dishtowel to my bleeding head, the silence between us spoke volumes about how much trouble I had caused, the expense of the cab and hospital, the worry of having to leave the other kids alone. She didn't say any of it, but I knew.

When it came to purely emotional injuries, Mom paid less heed.

I learned this early in my grade school years. One night after dinner dishes were done, I sought her out as she was folding clean laundry at the chrome and Formica kitchen table. It seemed like a good time to try to talk, as she would be in one place until her task was done.

It took some courage for me to blurt out, "Mom, I think Mary Burke likes Delores better than me. She tells Delores things she doesn't tell me."

"Oh, that's normal, dear," Mom said without looking up from the towels she was folding and stacking. "That's nothing to worry about."

"But Mom, it feels so bad," I said, fighting down the tears.

She was mating up two navy socks of Dad's. "Those are just little

problems, dear. Just wait till you grow up. Then you'll know what real problems are."

Her voice was kindly, and surely she was right. Why was her answer so disappointing? Why did it set my stomach twisting?

Through my gathering tears I watched her fold the navy socks and tuck them into a little ball.

"Oh," I quavered, pretending to see her point, battling my tears, which would only make things worse. I edged away from her until I was around the corner, then ran upstairs to the girls' room and flung myself on the bed sobbing in deep, wrenching, voiceless heaves, muffled lest anyone hear me and know of my distress. Tears poured down my face onto the chenille bedspread, and soon I was pounding the bed with my fist. Even in my rage I was wary about being overheard as I whispered a hoarse, stifled shout, "But I am little, so they are big to me!"

And so, given that Mom wasn't a reliable source of comfort, I sometimes gathered my courage to tell my troubles to Marge. Five years older than me, she always listened sympathetically. "Oh, honey, I know how you feel, I feel that way too sometimes," she would say. "It will get better." She offered what advice she could. It was never enough, but it took the edge off my misery. I remember comforting myself many times by saying, "At least I have Marge," without ever noticing how this refrain pointed to some huge, nameless deficit inside.

It never seemed odd to me that tucked in the heart of this normal, no—perfect—Catholic family, which others so admired, and of which we were all so proud, I often cried alone. I seemed suffused with secret woes. Even with Marge as my substitute mother, I felt the need of a more fundamental solution. Actually I worked it out at a very young age. The answer was so natural and obvious. It was God.

After all, I was repeatedly assured, God was my father. And God loved me. And God was perfect. That meant God was my perfect father who loved me perfectly. God, big, powerful, almighty. God,

who was infinite and perfect. And with all that mighty perfection, he loved me! In a very conscious decision, which I would renew many times, I claimed God as my own perfect father. As the true mainstay and comforter of my life. It seemed only He was up to the job. He was always present. He saw everything. He understood perfectly. His love would surely be enough even for my starved heart.

Once I worked all this out, I felt better. How could I possibly be lacking in love, when I had God? Mom and Dad loved me of course, but they didn't understand. Even Marge couldn't really know the depths of what I felt. But I had God. All the other disappointments were surely cancelled out by his perfect and infinite love.

As soon as I could read, I became fixated on the stories of the saints. I saw how many of them viewed God not only as a beloved father, but as a spouse and lover. I devoured *The Little Pictorial Lives of the Saints*, and *Little Queen*, a child's biography of St.Therese of Lisieux, who once grabbed the Pope's knees and begged him to let her enter the Carmelites at age fifteen. Bystanders were horrified at Therese's brashness, but the Pope consented and she got her way. Therese entered Carmel, quickly became a saint, and died young.

I was especially fond of the tales of women saints who consecrated themselves to God, and were given to demonstrating their love by extreme forms of self-affliction. They fasted, wore hair shirts, flogged themselves, slept on cold stone floors. But in return they experienced ecstatic visions of Christ himself claiming them as his own and returning their vows of love. St. Catherine of Sienna, St. Margaret Mary, even St. Rita of Cascia—their stories of bloody agony mixed with their visions and ecstasies, their blissful intercourse with their divine lover.

Even better than the virgin ascetics were the virgin martyrs. I read with ardor every tale of torture and dismemberment, and imagined myself enduring all manner of agonies like Lucy being set afire and stabbed, Cecilia lingering three days after a botched beheading,

or Apollonia leaping into the fire rather than surrender her chastity. Alone in bed, or when Nancy was asleep, I made up elaborate scenarios of martyrdom. I was the slender virgin stripped of her gossamer gown to have her tender flesh whipped with thorns. I was stretched on the red-hot rack over blazing coals, my breasts were torn with red-hot hooks. The images enfolded me in a miasma of longing and desire. As I composed the details of my torture, I would lie in bed, face down, bunch the blankets up between my legs, and move gently on the mounded blankets as the scene unreeled, until a small sweet turning over happened in my body. Then I slept.

Once I had decided to belong totally to God, it was only a short step to the decision that I would become not only a nun, but a saint. Not necessarily a famous canonized saint, but in my own way, I would be a blazing light of holiness and one day shine in heaven. Of course, my plans required a certain discretion. It was acceptable at school, even praiseworthy, to hint of my interest in becoming a nun, but I knew enough to keep my designs on sainthood private. Yet I did drop clues. I went to daily mass and communion, often walking the eight blocks to church in the dark, then eight blocks home for breakfast, then eight blocks back to school. Hundreds of times in all of Minnesota's drastic seasons I made the trek not only to mass but also to weekly Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, and on Saturday afternoon to confession.

I usually walked with my sister Marge but on occasion other siblings walked with me. I remember a rare excursion to Saturday confession with my oldest brother Tom. On the way we agreed to save time by walking in silence and thinking about our sins. Tom commented to me that I surely didn't have much to confess, not like him. He had real sins. I dared not ask him what they were, though I thought of his shouting, tearful fights with Mom. ("Why can't I?" "Because I said so, because I'm the mother!") And I thought of impurity, with the vague understanding that it was more challenging for boys.

For me, confession was not only a time to whisk away the petty

dust on my soul, it afforded me a few moments of delicious individual attention from the priest. Of course we were anonymous in the confessional, but surely over time the priest came to recognize the regular penitent by her style of confessing, her particular blend of sins, her whisperprint. Every week or two gave me the opportunity to subtly impress him with the obvious delicacy of my conscience and the clear depths of my virtue, as attested by the minor quality of my sins. Yet I rarely felt the priest discerned my superior piety. And I suffered any time I had something more substantial to confess, not a mortal sin, of course, I never had mortal sins, I'd have died of mortification to have a mortal sin, but just something beyond the usual being mean to my brothers and sisters, or disobeying my parents. Something like sneaking dimes or quarters from Mom's coin purse when she sent me out to Wilharm Pharmacy to pick up her prescription, and stopping to buy a candy bar or on bolder days, a root beef float at the fountain. Of course, the amounts were so small, I didn't think it could be considered stealing, and I sometimes forgot to confess it.

I struggled with my practice of bunching up the blankets between my legs when engaged in my naptime fantasies of martyrdom. Once mom walked in on me and in spite of my instant immobility, she picked up on what I was doing, scowled and said, "Don't touch yourself down there." Mom's reaction left me with a vague unease, the main result of which was to make me more careful not to be discovered. Occasionally, as I knelt in church on Saturday afternoon before confession, it would filter into my consciousness that I had *touched myself down there*—albeit through a bunched up chenille bedspread. In spite of my embarrassment, I slipped into my list of routine sins that I had "touched myself where I'm not supposed to." It never crossed my mind to mention that my rhythmic humping of the bedspread was accompanied by elaborate scenes of my own martyrdom. The priest would tell me to say five Hail Marys and to try to do better. I would step out of the darkened box feeling lighter, somehow ignoring my knowledge that I'd do it again.

Though I was fascinated by the suffering of the saints and martyrs, my attempts to emulate them were generally modest. In fact, I shrank from actual discomfort. The story of St. Therese of Lisieux reassured me somewhat. Once she was a young Carmelite nun, Therese practiced mostly little sacrifices, like not uncovering her foot when it was hot in bed, or being patient when annoyed by a sister who rattled her beads in chapel. Therese pictured God as someone like her own father. She recalled being a curly blonde two year old, too little to climb the steep staircase in their house. "Papa!" she would call from the bottom stair, and he would come down, a tall, shadow of a man, pick her up in his arms, and carry her on his shoulders to the top. Later, when Therese felt too weak to be a great saint, she chose to simply call out to God for help, sure that he, like her shadowed Papa, would rush down, pick her up and carry her in his arms to heaven. Therese called her way to heaven "the little way"—not easy, but more accessible than the ways of the big mystics and martyrs. I reread the story of St. Therese many times.

But the more dramatic sufferings of the saints and martyrs continued to enthrall me. Perhaps I received no visions or signs from God because I didn't do enough penance.

Around this time, fourth or fifth grade, I was sleeping in the first floor baby's room with Rosie. Mom trusted me to slip in to bed without waking the baby. One night I tiptoed into the bedroom after Rosie was asleep. I could hear soft baby snores coming from the high barred crib. Next to my own bed I knelt on the bare linoleum. By day you would see that it was a linoleum designed for a child's room with a pink and blue alphabet, red and green numbers, a blue BoPeep and her sheep, a fallen Humpty Dumpty with a surprised look on his broken face.

Kneeling on the cold hard floor, I extended my arms in the shape of a cross and prayed. I knew it wasn't a good idea to really expect some vision of Christ, but the usual secret hope flickered deep inside.

How I longed for him to show me he was real. Show me that my efforts for sainthood were not in vain. But nothing happened, except that in about two minutes my arms began to ache. They got heavier until they felt like lead, and the muscles burned. I held out for a half minute more, then let them drop. Feeling a true saint would have lasted longer, I crawled into bed, snuggled under the covers, and escaped into sleep.

The next night I decided to do better. While I lacked broken pottery to sleep on, and doubted I'd use it if I had, I could approximate it by sleeping on the hard linoleum. I crept into Rosie's room and in only my flannel pajamas, I stretched out on the cold floor. It was unforgiving, and I turned from side to side in the general neighborhood of Humpty Dumpty. I scooted sideways a foot or so to maneuver myself under my bed, as though being in a smaller space might provide some of the missing comfort. It did not. Finally, I reached up and pulled my blankets down on the floor with me, telling myself Mom would kill me if I got sick from sleeping on the cold floor.

I was still twisting around in the blankets when Mom opened the bedroom door to check on the baby. Spotting me instantly in my tangle under the bed, she hissed, "What are you doing down there!" It was more an accusation than a question.

"Nothing," I mumbled, grabbing my blankets and scrambling into bed, my chilled flesh suddenly flaring with heat. Mom backed out and closed the door. I heard the latch click softly. The room was dark. With a mixture of relief and guilt, I sank into both the welcome softness of my bed and the vague, familiar sense of having fallen short again. I was sure St. Rose would have stood her ground with her family.

My taste in reading was not confined to the lives of the saints. I was partial to pioneer stories, horses, and anything in Tudor England. But after forays into *My Friend Flicka* or *Johnny Tremain*, I regularly returned to the lives of the saints. I remember being upstairs in the girls' room, the Hoover upright roaring idly next to me as I sat on the

edge of my bed, transfixed by my book. From time to time I would absently push the moaning machine back and forth over the same patch of grey carpet, to create the illusion of progress for Mom downstairs. I turned the pages hungrily as St. Catherine knelt on the stony floor of her cell, and Jesus appeared to her, his feet planted on the cold stones. He told Catherine, "I have claimed you for my own. You are now my bride," and he held out a gleaming golden ring. Ecstatic, Catherine could barely keep from swooning. She held up her hand, and Jesus slipped the gold band onto her finger.

A sudden pounding noise broke in on me. Bam. Bambam. From downstairs Mom was pounding the ceiling with a broom handle. Then she came to the foot of the stairs and shouted up, "Rita, I haven't heard that vacuum cleaner move for twenty minutes!" She was too pregnant to climb the stairs, but the ceiling pounding expressed her sentiments precisely.

I jumped to my feet and quickly moved the vacuum to a neighboring patch of carpet. "It's moving, Mom," I yelled back. "I'm almost done." With a twinge of guilt over the marginal truth of my claim, I tossed the book on my bed and raced the vacuum through the upstairs bedrooms and hall, then wound up the cord and lugged it back downstairs. As I set out plates and silverware for dinner, the scene of Catherine's divine nuptials still held me rapt.

Many of the women mystics and martyrs were said to have had a physically passionate love of Jesus. They vowed their virginity to Christ, their mystical lover, and he rewarded their years of subduing the flesh through hair shirts, self-flagellation, sleeping on broken pottery with visions and ecstasies. Now I wonder how the writers knew so much about these women's intimate lives. Then I wondered what virginity actually entailed. Clearly it was something secret, physical, mysterious. I never felt like asking Mom, rationalizing my shyness by telling myself that she would enlighten me when it was time for me to know.

After my own abortive attempt to sleep on the floor, my peni-

tential practices had become more mundane, like giving up Hershey bars for Lent, or kneeling on the hardwood floor at the edge of the carpet during the family rosary. But in about seventh grade, I fixed upon a new way to belong to God. I decided to make a vow of virginity.

Somehow I never considered actually trying to enter the convent early, as St. Therese had done. Probably I knew that would be a losing battle with Mom if not the church. She wanted her daughters to be nuns, but on some level I also knew she needed our help at home for our teen years first.

But I could vow myself to God now. Seal the contract. It would be a private affair between God and me. Yet such a monumental step seemed to require some official sanction or witness. I decided I should discuss it with our angular Norwegian pastor, Father Garvey. It was one more opportunity for me to subtly demonstrate my holiness to the priest whom I considered my confessor. But of course that was not my main motive.

All the saints had confessors—a specific priest they always went to for spiritual guidance, and for some time now I had gone regularly to Father Garvey, though he probably didn't know he was my official confessor. Father Garvey and I had got off to a rocky start back in third grade, when old Father Crowley left our parish and Father Garvey took his place. I was not long out of second grade, where we had been taught to make our confessions standing on the kneeler in the confessional, because if we knelt down on it we'd disappear below the screen. So one Saturday in third grade, I stepped into the confessional and stood waiting for Father Garvey to finish with the person on the other side. When he opened the little window on my side he peered up at my shadow through the white fabric screen.

"Why are you standing up?" he asked. "Kneel down and begin your confession!"

I fell to my knees as though I'd been shot. Suddenly it was obvious. I had grown, but no one had told me when to start kneeling

down. My list of sins flew out of my head. I stammered the formula, "Bless me father, for I have sinned, it has been two weeks since my last confession," and I fell back on old standards. "I disobeyed my mother five times, I was mean to my brothers and sisters five times."

Nevertheless, over time it was clear that Father Garvey was the logical choice for my regular confessor, since the only other priest at Holy Name was Father Sullivan, who exuded the scent of alcohol and was so hard of hearing he would yell through the screen to "Speak up! Speak up!" and you had to shout your sins at him.

I wasn't sure how exactly my vow of virginity would work, but I had a vague picture of some little ceremony with Father Garvey as my witness On Saturday afternoon, I entered the confessional, knelt in the dark and waited. When Father Garvey opened the little screen, his shadow was visible on the white cloth between us.

I blessed myself, and began. "Bless me father for I have sinned, it has been one week since my last confession. I have a special matter to discuss with you today, Father."

"And what would that be?" he asked, with his careful Scandinavian sculpting of the words.

Suddenly my heart was beating fast, my breath hard to come by, and I had to force it out: "Father, I want to make a vow of virginity."

I had the impression of a thud on the other side of the screen, then a long silence. At least he hadn't fallen clean out of the confessional.

I held my breath, bursting with excitement and fear.

Finally Father Garvey inquired, "How old are you?"

"Twelve, Father."

"Have you discussed this with your parents?"

"No, Father. I wanted to talk to you first." Discuss this with my parents? Unimaginable!

I heard him take several deep breaths, and shift in his chair. I imagined him stretching the muscles of his face and jaw as he often did.

"Well, this is a very serious decision," he finally said, "and not to be rushed into. I think you should wait a few years, and then come back and we'll talk about it then."

"Yes, Father," I said, fighting for composure. Any starch for argument was completely wilted.

"Do you have any sins you want to confess?"

I managed to mumble a few sins, wasting time, being distracted during my prayers, impatience with my brothers and sisters. He told me to say four Hail Marys, absolved me, and I rushed out of the confessional trying to hide my tears. I took refuge in the far front of church where there were no people, knelt and buried my face in my hands, engulfed by a massive familiar misery that had no words. I tried not to let my sobs shake my shoulders. It was bad enough to feel this way, but it would be even worse if anybody saw.

My vagueness about sex did not prevent me from being keenly tuned to the changes that began to take place in my own body and to the subtle shifts occurring in my interactions with people of the male persuasion. Like Uncle Tony, though in fact nothing concerning Uncle Tony was ever subtle.

Each time Uncle Tony came to visit, Mom always said, "Now for heaven's sake, don't go wild." But long before the doorbell rang, we were always revved to high gear, running around the house chanting, "Uncle Tony is coming! Uncle Tony is coming!" The minute he appeared at the front door, we were all over him, with shrieks of delight. He would lumber into the living room, trailing children of all sizes like extra appendages, and within seconds, he was sprawled on the rug where we climbed and rolled and laughed, risking his tickles for the sake of a few moments of total abandon.

Uncle Tony wasn't really our uncle, he was Mom's cousin, and was about halfway between her age and ours. Children weren't supposed to call grownups by their first names, so Mom said to call him Uncle Tony. No other guest stirred us to such a frenzy, and from no one else

would Mom tolerate such roughhousing. When Mom entered the room, drying her hands on her apron, Tony would spring up to his feet and roaring, "Hi, Annie!" He'd engulf her in a massive hug, then he'd step back, scan her up and down, and boom, "You're prettier than ever, Annie! Those other guys don't know what their missing!" Once he gave her a hearty smack on her bottom! Mom blushed, and said, "Oh, Tony!" disapproving, but with a smile. No one else could have ever gotten away with such general mayhem. Mom made allowances for Tony because, as she told us privately, he had come back from Korea with something called shell shock, which caused him to wake up screaming with nightmares about the war.

Tony came to visit not long after my abortive effort to make the vow of virginity. I spotted him from the front windows as he parked his green DeSoto at the curb and climbed the many steps up to our house. I raced to let him in, calling, "He's here! He's here!"

I was wearing a new pink sweater that showed the little bumps erupting on my chest, and which made me proud and shy. As I flung open the door, Uncle Tony's eyes went straight to my chest.

"Hi, Rita, you little sexpot!" he boomed out for everyone to hear, and then howled with laughter as he barged through the door to face the onslaught of small bodies. I hoped no one else heard what he said, that it got lost in the din. I hung back a little as Uncle Tony's words tumbled in my mind. Sexpot! He called me a sexpot! It sounded so naughty, and yet I knew he was just kidding. And I felt a surge of pleasure, in spite of my almost immediate wave of worry. Maybe the sweater was too revealing. Maybe it was wrong to wear. But no one else made remarks, not even my brothers. In fact, from then on, I wanted to wear the sweater more than ever.

It had taken my nipples long enough to start to swell. A lot of the other girls in seventh grade had actual breasts and wore bras. Posing alone in front of the big mirror in the upstairs bathroom, I tried to arch my back to make my little rounded cones look bigger. Any hint of encouragement that I was pretty or feminine I sucked in like a

starved vacuum cleaner. Attention from a boy would have been the ultimate triumph, but I didn't actually expect that.

But one day I came close. It was a Saturday afternoon in the spring, warm enough to be out without a coat. I was walking the six blocks to Mary Burke's birthday party, feeling pretty in my frilly white blouse and Marge's long yellow cotton pique skirt that floated in tiers almost to my ankles, where it nearly brushed my saddle shoes. Mom had even let me wear a touch of lipstick for the party. I wished I didn't have to wear my thick glasses, but that couldn't be helped. The day was mild and sunny, and leaves were just beginning to bud out. Feeling quite pretty, I walked south on Park Avenue and waited to cross the street to head up 40th Street. A car was coming, and as it passed I heard a loud wolf whistle. I looked around. It took me another second to register that the whistle was for me, and a third beat to realize that the old gray Dodge rattling past was driven by Joey Little, a friend of my brother Dan. Joey waved and smiled. Just a tad off beat, not completely sure if I should act friendly or insulted like women in the movies did with men who got fresh, I chose to wave and smile back. Then to be on the safe side, I kept walking as though guys whistled at me all the time.

The rest of the walk was a tumble of excited, conflicting opinions about the event. Did he really mean it? Was he just playing around, kidding his buddy's kid sister? Or worse, was he really making fun of me? I told myself it wasn't really such a big deal. I remembered the sound of the whistle, the thrill of realizing it was at me, the lift of my chest at the thought: Could it be that he really just thought I was pretty? More likely, after seeing me in peddle pushers and tee shirts, maybe he was simply taken by surprise by the yellow skirt. For the remaining five blocks to the party, I examined every permutation of meaning this event might have had, and rehearsed ways to casually report it to my friends.

My inner life became more secret. The kids at school thought I was a holy joe for running to church all the time, and I knew enough

to downplay my piety. But it continued, unabated. So did my desire for a sign.

One day after school I slipped into church near Mary's side altar. With a quick glance around I saw that I was happily alone. I knelt in the aisle on both knees and bowed low to the floor, something I'd never do if there were anyone to see. After a few moments, I rose and moved to the communion rail, knelt there, leaned my chin on my hands and gazed at the tabernacle. Behind those small golden doors Jesus Himself was physically present, alive. My closest friend and confidant. I rolled the idea around, relishing the divine presence.

The church's stillness enfolded me. Dust danced in the light that filtered through the colored glass. Breathing in the scent of incense and candles, and Easter lilies banked around the altar, I prayed. "O God, I know you love me more than I can imagine. But, I long to hear your voice, to see your face."

I recalled Sister Marie Natalie telling us years ago that God gives such visions as pure gifts, not because you are better than anyone else, not because you earn them. They were simply God's free choice.

Regaining courage, I pressed on: "Sweet Jesus, come to me. Be here now, come stand before me for a moment. Let me see you, even just your feet."

I moved again, this time, over to the side aisle, which was more obscure, and knelt on the hard ridged floor mat, which cut into my knees. Once again, I bowed low, my forehead almost touching the floor, a corner of my mind on guard lest someone enter the church and discover me.

The impulse came to prostrate myself flat out on the floor, but the thought of so many shoes and germs deterred me. Bent deep, in my mind's eye, I saw Christ standing before me, radiant and alive, a soft gauzy image. But I knew that this picture was a construction of my own imagination, an amalgam of all the appearances of Christ to the saints I'd seen as I read their stories. I didn't want to see only my mind's phantasm of Christ, I wanted to see Christ himself. My vision

had to be not just wishful thinking, but God's unarguable gift.

I held the image of Christ in mind, willing his actual bodily presence to be there when I opened my eyes. A twinge of fear nibbled at the corners of my soul, fear that I was headed for one more disappointment. "I must have faith," I told myself. With a final heave of longing from my heart, I opened my eyes. The dark ridged rubber mat was inches from my eyes. Nothing else. Slowly, I straightened up to kneel upright once again.

The church was still and empty. The sunlight still filtered in through the red and blue of the robes of Jesus and Mary. The space before me in the aisle was bare as a wind-scrubbed mountain top, void like a bottomless well. Perhaps I had been foolish to ask, I thought. The signs are not important, it is the love that counts. I argued the point with myself in vain.

Yet there were times when in spite of God's remoteness, I felt something, a pressure or swelling of emotion, a quiet flood of joy. At Thursday night Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, when the consecrated host was displayed in a golden case, I liked to climb the wooden stairs to choir loft, kneel where the organ blocked me from Mrs. Nelson's view as she played and warbled out the *Salutaris Hostia* for the handful of worshippers below. I looked down at the mostly empty pews, relishing the cozy feeling of being hidden high above. On the altar, in the white host surrounded by glass and a sunburst of gold, Jesus seemed to hold out his arms in welcome. "Here I am. Out of love for you. Here with you."

Mrs. Nelson ground out the *Tantum Ergo* on the organ, the sprinkling of people downstairs sang feebly with the organ, and the priest, bowed low, then swung burning incense at the body of Christ. My gaze carried me straight down to the altar, and into the white host, into the heart of Christ. There was no distance between us, just the love of Jesus shining out to me. My love returning to Him. A single, all-engulfing ray of light between us. I felt holy. I must be holy to feel this way.

"Don't think about whether you are holy or not," I told myself. "That is pride." But the sense of the light connecting me to Jesus was almost something I could taste. If I reached out my hand, I could touch it. I placed my hand over my heart, to hold the light to my chest.

"Am I just kidding myself?" I wondered. I knew pious feelings were not the measure of true holiness — it was unselfish love and a virtuous life that mattered. Yet I loved this moment of sheer joy, the beauty, the glimmer of hope that I might be worthy after all.

December 8th was a school holiday and holy day of obligation, the feast of the Immaculate Conception. I was in eighth grade. The day broke upon the world wearing a thick, spotless mantle of new snow. The sun was out with blinding force when Leo, Nancy and I set out for 11:00 A.M. Mass. The clean, cold air froze our nostrils and we squinted in the dazzling light.

"Look, they've plowed!" I cried. "There are mountain ranges all the way to church!"

I picked up a handful of snow in my mittens and waded it to a solid mass. "And it packs perfectly!"

Leo climbed a hard ridge of snow, four feet high, that the snowplows had left lining the length of the block.

"I am king of the mountain!" he decreed.

"And I am queen," I shouted, scrambling up beside him.

"I'll be a princess in purple dress," Nancy declared, and we were off, traveling the high ridges block by block, changing our identities from royalty to pioneers getting their covered wagons over a treacherous pass, and then to Lewis and Clark fending off the Indians with snowballs.

We arrived at church about half way through mass, and tiptoed into a back pew, flushed and damp. Immediately, I began to calculate whether we had arrived on time to satisfy our obligation for the holy day. No. We had missed the Sanctus and the Consecration by a few

minutes. Technically, we were too late. And this was the last mass of the day.

Rapidly I assessed my situation in great detail. "I know it's a mortal sin to miss mass on a holy day—but—it was so much fun—I wouldn't have missed it for anything."

"And really," I reasoned with myself, "how could God send someone to hell for playing in the snow?!"

At communion time, I went up for the Eucharist, as usual, though I still felt some qualms about my status with God. I was pretty sure I'd never yet committed a mortal sin, and had planned to be one of those saints who never did. Now I faced the appalling possibility that I'd done it. The possibility that I'd broken my "no mortal sins" record bothered me more than an actual fear of hell, not only because I could get it forgiven in confession, but because sometimes I just wondered about the whole idea of hell. If God was so all good and all merciful, as I believed he was, he had to be—he was perfect wasn't he?— then how could he send anyone to hell for a mortal sin? And how could playing in the snow be one?

I supposed I should confess it just in case, but it seemed so humiliating. Over the next weeks, I could not bring myself to do it. I put the event pretty well out of my mind, and continued going to daily mass and communion as usual.

A year later, as I was vacuuming the carpet upstairs in the girls' room on a Saturday afternoon, the thought that I might be in the state of mortal sin broke the surface of my mind and loomed up like a Loch Ness Monster. The punishment still seemed way out of proportion, but there was the real possibility I was in the state of mortal sin. If I died, I'd go to hell. Even worse, everything I had done in the past year, all the prayers and masses and communions, were not only worthless, but each Holy Communion in a state of sin was another mortal sin. Suddenly, I saw my soul piled with mortal sins — while another voice inside continued to argue that this was just not sensible. Which voice should I listen to? The one that agonized? The one

that tried to be reasonable, but might really be my spiritual pride speaking? I couldn't take a chance.

I turned off the vacuum, headed downstairs and got my coat and scarf. "I'm going to confession," I called to mom.

"I thought you just went last week, " she called back from the kitchen. She kept track of such things.

"Oh, maybe I did"—I pretended not to be sure—"but I want to go again," and I rushed out the door and walked that eight blocks as fast as I could.

Now I was faced with the dilemma of confessing to Father Garvey, who I was pretty sure knew me by my voice and whom I still considered, in spite of everything, to be my spiritual director, or going to Father Sullivan who shouted at you to "Speak up! Speak up!" Today, there were few people in the church to overhear, so I got in line for Father Sullivan.

Kneeling in the dark box, I started at a volume I hoped was just loud enough to avoid the yelling. "Bless me Father, for I have sinned. It has been a week since my last confession." But then my pride took over, and I was simply unable to accuse myself of living a whole year in sin. I decided to go generic. "I missed mass on a holy day of obligation—well, I didn't really miss it, I was just very late," I confessed, omitting that it was a year ago, omitting that I'd been going to communion all along. It just wouldn't come out of my mouth. Father Sullivan told me to say a whole rosary, the biggest penance I'd ever been given, and he gave me absolution.

I left the confessional feeling somewhat better. If God sent people to hell on technical fouls, well, now technically I had confessed it and was forgiven. But I hadn't gone all the way, and wearily I felt the nagging of a new chorus of doubts, answered by a proud-and-or-sensible other voice.

Beyond all my inner debate, I knew that my confession was as far as I would go. So I just endured the soft assault of conscience until it tired, and in a few weeks, it mostly faded from my mind.

That same year, as I entered eighth grade, the first of Mom and Dad's chickens left the roost. My sister Marge entered the convent. Becoming a religious had always been held up to us as the greatest thing you could do with your life. Mom's sister Betty, who was deaf, had joined an order of nuns who taught the deaf in Cincinnati. Regularly, Mom would hand us pencil and paper and say, "Here, write to Aunt Betty." No doubt it was a ploy to keep us occupied for a few minutes, but she surely had ulterior motives of exposing her daughters to the nun in the family. Mom herself exchanged flowery Victorian letters with Betty, covering small lined tablet pages with her perfect Palmer method hand. Each page bore at the top the letters *AMGD*, standing for *Ad Majorem Gloriam Dei,* "For the Greater Glory of God." They both began each letter with "Dearest Sister mine!" Aunt Betty answered the letters Marge and I sent her, exhorting us to pray daily for a religious vocation and avoid the temptations of the world. When Aunt Betty had the misfortune to see a film showing hula dancers, Betty was horrified at such wickedness—women dressing so scantily and moving so lewdly. Mom let me read the letter, and I wondered if Betty was right. Hula dancing didn't seem so awful. But Aunt Betty carried a lot of weight in the family. It was she who sent Marge the book, *Little Queen,* a small red bound volume with gilt edged pages. It was the children's life of St. Therese of Lisieux, which Marge and I both consumed repeatedly, and where I learned about Therese's battle to become a nun at age fifteen.

Mom and Dad had clearly been called by God to the lay state, as we called it, an honorable if second rate condition they couldn't help. However, having so many children did raise their status considerably in Catholic circles. Each Sunday we all trooped into Holy Name church for 9:00 mass, boys with hair slicked back and girls wearing headscarves over our rag curled hair. At communion time, the entire family (except those who were too young) marched up to communion and back, kneeling afterwards with our faces in our hands to make our

thanksgiving. At the end of mass, we emerged from church into the crackling Minnesota air, where Father Crowley stood, green vestments flapping in the wind, and the grade school nuns lined up beside him, their gauzy black veils fluttering, and voluminous skirts ballooning in the wind.

"Good Morning, Father. Good Morning Sister," Mom and Dad and all of us chimed out a raggedy chorus.

Father Crowley, ruddy and jowled, crowed back, "Wonderful. Wonderful ... My what a wonderful family. God must be so pleased with you."

Sister Joseph Marie or Sister Peter, both straight from the old sod, inseparable companions, echoed the priest. "Surely God will choose some of you for himself," Joseph Marie would croon. "A vocation is a great gift from God."

"I pray for that every day," Mom would say, smiling her wide perfect teeth, her brown eyes gleaming in the ecclesiastical light.

In offhand comments, Mom sometimes wished she had been a nun, which was slightly jarring to any of her children who heard, though we knew what she meant. A vocation was the greatest gift you could have.

The closest Mom and Dad would ever come to being religious was to join the Third Order of St. Benedict, which made them lay members of a religious order. It must have been in the early fifties, and probably was Mom's idea, and Dad went along. Mom had loved the Benedictines since she worked as a teenager in the laundry at St. Ben's in St. Cloud. Working with the nuns made the grueling labor okay with her. Joining the Third Order meant Mom and Dad began to say the Divine Office, the daily prayers and Psalms that the monks and nuns are obligated to pray. They managed it most days, at least when Dad was in town. It took invention. Usually, Mom in her flowered dress and apron stood at the kitchen sink still cleaning up the pots and pans from supper. Dad, in his sleeveless undershirt that stretched tight over his potbelly, would kneel bent over a kitchen

chair, the Office book in hand. Leo and Nancy and I were around the corner in the dining room with instructions to be quiet and do our homework. We could hear Dad intoning the first prayers.

"Our help is in the Name of the Lord," he would say.

"Who made heaven and earth," Mom answered, for she knew a lot of it by heart.

Then we'd hear Dad's deep baritone droning out the Psalms. At certain points he had to switch around in the book, and sometimes he got lost. Bent over our math problems or spelling words, we'd hear him say, "Praise the Lord all ye—What the heck?—Well, I'll be switched! Holy Mackerel! Oh, here it is. Hear me, O Lord of Hosts ..."

We lived in Minneapolis, and the convent Marge was entering was across the Mississippi River and partway through the old city of St. Paul. I don't really remember saying goodbye to Marge. I only know Dad drove her to the old red brick convent of the Good Shepherd in St. Paul with her black trunk full of old fashioned underwear and long black stockings, where he handed her over to God.

We were thrilled and proud that one of us was now in religious life, yet after Marge left, a sadness hung over the family as though she had died. Though eight busy children remained, and another was on the way, I remember a dark, hollow feeling to the house without Marge's ready chatter to fill it up. I do not remember anyone talking about how we felt, and probably we couldn't reconcile our bereavement with our pride. For me, speaking about it would have only made me cry and feel worse. Besides, now that my confidant Marge was gone, to whom would I speak?

Marge had entered a semi-cloistered community. She would never come home to visit, though we could go and see her on a very stringent schedule. It was several months before we were allowed to visit. My anticipation was enormous as I chose to wear a favorite dress I had inherited from Marge, deep blue cotton with a softly pleated skirt, hard pleats down the bodice, and a white cotton collar. I wor-

ried it would make Marge sad to see me in it, make her miss nice clothes, but I loved the dress and my eagerness to wear it won out over my concern for Marge's sensitivities.

We piled out of the station wagon at the old brick convent building on a chill November Sunday. A sister greeted us at the door and ushered us into a small auditorium, huge windows framed with heavy beige curtains along one wall, the linoleum floor neatly set with twelve big circles of metal folding chairs. As other smaller families claimed their circles, we encamped over near the windows. Mom and Nancy and I busied ourselves removing mittens, hats, jackets from the little girls, who climbed around on chairs or sat swinging their white-stockinged legs. The room was hushed, like people gathering in church.

Colleen and Rosie tumbled around our feet, and Mom held Janny on her lap, such as it was, for the new baby was due in six weeks or so. At the far end of the gym a door opened and eight postulants filed in, wearing long black skirts, their hands tucked up under waist length black capes, their eyes downcast. As if by radar, they scattered toward the eager families. Margie, the fourth in line, walked toward us in a measured pace. As she neared, her stride grew faster, and she ran the last few steps while we all rushed to her and she threw her arms around Mom, then Dad, then both of them, then all of us, and we were all hugging her at once, little kids grabbing at her skirts, till she leaned down and picked them up each one to hug and kiss and squeeze, and they couldn't get enough of her, while Leo and Nancy and I hung at the edges of the action and I waited for her to see me.

"Rita, honey, there you are!" she cried, and reached for me, and I stepped into her arms and hung on for a moment, my throat aching with the effort not to cry, hoping no one would notice my eyes. No one did, and Marge turned to hug Nancy and Leo, who were shifting from foot to foot.

As though uncorked, Marge was full of words and ready laughter: "Oh, Rosie, how you've grown! Leo, you've cut your hair. Rita—the

dress looks so great on you—it was always a favorite of mine! Are you wearing lipstick? It looks very grown up." I was embarrassed and thrilled to be noticed, and relieved that she seemed to take my wearing the dress in stride, in fact she approved.

Marge settled into a chair, Janny, the youngest, on her lap, and we peppered her with questions. What was it like, what did she do all day, did she miss us? Only years later would she tell me candidly about how homesick she was, how painful those days were, as she imposed the strictest standards of perfection upon herself, and found she constantly fell short. That day, though the sky was heavy with snow threatening to fall, her news was all sun.

When Janny crawled back to Mom's lap, I noticed Marge sat without crossing her legs, and kept her hands tucked under the black cape. She told us who the other postulants were, what cities they were from, about classes in spirituality and scripture, housework she was assigned each day, how they rose at 5:30 A.M. and had a set times for recreation and a walk outdoors each day. She was learning to pray the Divine Office, singing the Psalms and prayers that monks and nuns have used in their monasteries for centuries. We were not allowed to see where she really lived, the little bedroom she called her cell, the refectory where the sisters ate, the community room where they gathered for recreation and the only time in the day when they could talk freely. It sounded rather strict, especially the silence and getting up at 5:30 in the morning. But I was leaning toward a less strict teaching order anyhow. And I supposed if she could do it, so could I when my turn came.

We visited for precisely an hour. Then Marge took us to tour the part of the building that houses the girls the sisters care for, troubled young women who needed a place to live and straighten out their lives. Marge wasn't allowed to work with the girls yet, since she was still learning how to be detached from the world. But she showed us a dormitory with rows of beds with perfectly tucked pastel covers, and the gigantic mangles in the institutional laundry, where the girls work to help pay for their keep and their schooling.

The climax of the tour for me was a trip to the chapel, where we saw the nuns' long rows of choir stalls, with little seats that were lowered for sitting, and raised to make space for you to kneel. In a stage whisper, Marge pointed out the discreet sections of stalls for the postulants, the white veiled novices, and the black veiled professed sisters. To the right of the high altar with its massive crucifix was a large grille, through which we could see another whole wing of stalls. "That's the Magdalenes' chapel," Marge explained. "They are our cloistered sisters, who have almost no contact with the outside world. Like the Carmelites of St. Therese." The Magdalenes were former girls from the home who chose a life of prayer and penance. I noticed that the angle and bulk of the grill partly obscured their view of the altar, and I figured they must have accepted this deprivation as one more penitential practice.

I gazed into the dimly lit wing of chapel behind the Madgalenes' grille with special curiosity, thinking of the saints, Rose, Catherine of Sienna, and Therese of Lisieux, my favorite cloistered heroines. Pale light filtered in through high clouded glass windows, as though the sisters had renounced the even the pleasure of stained glass. I could just make out the form of a sister in a brown habit and black veil kneeling motionless with her arms outstretched like a cross before the altar. This is the real thing, I told myself, with a twinge of awe and fear.

"Rita, we're leaving," Mom summoned me from my reverie. Everyone was filing out of the chapel. Marge was allowed to walk with us to the car, and there was another round of hugs and kisses, these more subdued as our separation loomed. As I hugged her my throat tightened up again, as though someone had it in a vise. I had to turn my eyes away.

Dad guided the station wagon slowly down the winding driveway, craning to see her, long after the trees and curves hid her from view. No one spoke. The sky was darkening. We headed down Summit Avenue toward the river, and crossed the Mississippi in a rare, strained silence. I kept my face pressed against the cool glass window

of the back seat. "Father of waters," I thought, as I always did when we crossed the Mississippi. The car wheels whined on the metal bridge and I glimpsed the angry black river swing past below the bridge.

My throat still hurt. At the railroad tracks Dad slowed down and took the car as gently as he could over the bumps, and Mom braced herself. All through this pregnancy, riding in the car made her tense, though exactly why I was not sure, and since no one volunteered the information, I never asked.

Squeezed in the middle seat with Leo and Nancy, I saw Mom drop her head, and her shoulders started to heave. Soon she was sobbing audibly, grabbing Kleenex from her purse. Dad just kept driving, and we rode on, engulfed in this dark and wordless something. My throat ached as though my own tears were stuck inside. As though Mom's weeping was already more than the car could hold.

II

Smoke Gets in My Eyes

In the late summer after my freshman year of high school, the family moved precipitously from Minneapolis to Faribault, about fifty miles south of the Twin Cities. Mom and Dad downplayed the fact that moving from general agent back into selling was a demotion. They said it would be less stress for Dad, as his income would no longer depend on the sales of other men.

Surrounded by rolling fields of beans and corn, Faribault, population 15,000, sat near small bluffs that once housed cheese caves above a dwindling river whose name I never knew. The town boasted a canning factory for peas and corn where high school kids sweltered through summer jobs. Migrant workers, whom I heard of but never saw, apparently gathered near town each fall to help bring in the harvest, There was a school for the deaf, a private academy for rich kids, and the Faribault Blanket company which we were told was famous. Catholics had three churches to choose from, the German, the French, and the Irish, which we chose not just for reasons of loyalty, but because it had the best grade school, and it was next door to Bethlehem Academy, a coed Catholic high school. BA was a major selling point that Mom and Dad used to convince us this abrupt uprooting was something good.

In spite of my grief at leaving the girlfriends of my freshman year, Jennette, Katie, and Diane, I was enticed by the idea of living in a house that was smaller but newer, more in style. And by the adventure of making who knows how many new wonderful friends, and not least, by the opportunity to be in school with boys and all the possi-

bilities that implied. I missed or ignored the suddenness with which Dad left his office in St. Paul, Mom's tight lips and the fatigue in her face. It was easy to consider these hints just the normal wear and tear of moving a big family to another town.

The little ten-year-old ranch house out on Ninth Avenue Southwest, nearly the edge of town, was virtually new by south Minneapolis standards. Large elms and box elder trees lined the street, but the wide, deep lots dotted with little flat houses were mostly just empty stretches of grass. Marge was in the convent, and Tom and Dan had stayed in Minneapolis at the University of Minnesota, leaving me at fifteen the oldest at home. Mom and Dad and the four little girls filled the three small bedrooms on the main floor. Leo inhabited an alcove at one end of the basement just past the laundry, while Nancy and I made a bedroom at the other end, next to the small rec room that barely contained our ping-pong table. Dad put up a swing set beyond the garage. He planted a honey locust tree closer to the house. It looked like a dwarf in the big flat yard.

During that first year in Faribault I came home from school one afternoon, and trotted down the stairs on my way to the basement bedroom Nancy and I shared. Mom called to me from her post at the ironing board in the laundry.

"What is it, Mom?"

She put down the iron and turned to face me. "Dad has to go into the hospital," she said.

She hesitated, then added, "He is suffering from depression, and the doctors want to give him shock treatments." Suddenly tears welled up in her eyes and she reached into her apron pocket for a tissue. Her shoulders heaved for a moment, and she sobbed out the words. "People are going to say he is crazy and he isn't!!"

The tears were streaming now, and she blew her nose.

The rest of the event is gone from my memory. Did I touch her arm, try to comfort her? Did I freeze in my own fear and grief? Did I simply block out the week or two that Dad was gone—or did these

weeks blend in with the many other weeks he was away on business anyway? I think I asked the nuns at school to pray, but maybe not. Maybe we hid it. Or was I so sure that nothing really bad could happen to our superior family that I simply blocked out this terrible peril, as the only breadwinner for nine people teetered on the brink of disaster?

When Dad came home, he was tired all the time but had trouble sleeping. He got up in the morning, put on his suit and tie, and headed out to work. By ten in the morning he was back home again, too tired to call on prospects or deliver that policy. He told Mom he would forget things, got confused about rates and premiums. At ten thirty in the morning he was stretched out for a nap on the living room couch, his face to the wall. The drapes were drawn, cutting out daylight, and in the dimness, I saw his oxfords sprawled on the carpet and his black suspenders criss-crossing the back of his white shirt.

Dad gradually regained some ability to function, but from this time on money was even tighter. "There are too many bills," Mom used to say tearfully to me, when she thought no one else could hear. "I just don't know how they'll all get paid."

I never had any answer for her.

All of us continued to babysit or work paper routes or summer jobs, doing whatever we could to have a bit of pocket money. I'd come home from babysitting to find Dad still reading the paper in the living room. "How much did we earn?" he asked, pretending it was a joke. I squirreled my dollar bills away in a mayonnaise jar in my underwear drawer and saved up for new saddle shoes or an angora sweater like the ones other girls had.

At school, I was the smart-with-glasses type of girl. I often cried alone about my meager wardrobe, stubbornly flat chest, and the ill fate that had bestowed on me Dad's Roman nose. People noticed that my sister Nancy was pretty, but they never applied the word to me. Instead they stammered hastily, "Rita has such a nice personality." The distinction was not lost on me. Even when I was younger, back in

Minneapolis, I used to lock myself in the upstairs bathroom and practice various smiles and angles before the big mirror, hoping to discover one that minimized my nose and made me pretty. I caught glimpses of beauty, maybe if I smiled just so, but I knew the world would not limit its view of my face to that elusive angle, and ended my research sessions with sighs of resignation.

Being in a coed high school had limited benefits for me, for Mom wouldn't let her daughters date until they were sixteen. Publicly I moaned about her unreasonable caution. Secretly, I appreciated the fact that her policy sheltered me from the fact that no one asked me out. I certainly wasn't boy crazy like some of my friends, I was sensible and got straight A's and still went to mass and communion every day. But I cared. Things got worse when I turned sixteen, and still no one asked me out. I was student council treasurer, edited the school paper, ran around with my brainy girlfriends. But the boys in my class were just not interested.

Truth be told, none of the boys in my class seemed very interesting, and my disappointment was more on principle. I did have a sophomore year crush on a dark eyed junior, Jim Langevin. I would hover in his vicinity any chance I could, observing him from a distance while he remained oblivious to my existence, except for one day when I was watching him unwrap a piece of Dentyne gum near his locker. He was smiling and laughing with his buddies as he wadded the paper gum wrapper into a tiny ball. Suddenly he turned, walked eight steps over to me, said "Here," and dropped the wad into my hand. Then he walked away. He did it all so good naturedly, it never occurred to me that it might have been an insult. It was attention. I carried that crushed gum wrapper in my wallet for months.

When it came time for my junior prom, determined friends fixed me up with Lewis Sudak, a non-verbal senior who had pimples and danced even worse that I did. I had finally had my first date. Secretly I hoped this watershed event would prime the pump, break the ice, release some logjam of unspoken invitations waiting to flood my way.

It didn't. My girlfriends and I assured ourselves we were simply more mature than the boys. And except for Pat Hruza who dated sporadically and had been known to make out, we weren't "fast." We took credit for our virtue even though it never been tested. We consoled ourselves with writing hilarious features for the school paper, or holding slumber parties at Donna Studer's house where sleeping girls might wake to find their hair streaked. We cruised Main Street on Friday nights jammed into Karen Vogel's antique Model T, on our way to Dorkins Drive Inn for burgers and malts.

You might think that since I was determined to become a nun, dating was not so important to me. In fact the opposite was true. Back in Minneapolis I had watched my sister Marge, who had planned all her life to enter the convent, put on her beige nylons and high heels, apply make up and go out with a sandy haired boy named Ed. From a distance, I watched her fall in love with Ed, though I was sure it was a chaste love, for Marge was very big on purity. She belonged to the Catholic Youth Center, where she won leadership awards and she led the local chapter of a group dedicated to promoting teen purity which was called—after the sixth and ninth commandments – "The Fighting 69th" — an irony I failed to appreciate back then.

When Ed went into the Navy, Marge would rush into the dining room to capture the ringing phone, stretch out its long cord to the stairway, and shut the door to talk with Ed in hushed tones. At night, in the upstairs bedroom that she shared with Nancy and me, after we seemed asleep, Marge knelt beside her bed and buried her face in her hands in long, ardent prayer. When she broke up with Ed, the prayers were mixed with tears, and she would climb into bed to cry into her pillow, big wracking muffled sobs. I lay stock still in bed, avoiding any hint that I saw her grief. After she graduated from high school, Marge went into the convent.

In spite of my plan to be a nun, in fact because of it, I felt the need to taste as much of the world as I could, like Marge had, and then give

it all up for God. Dating, at least a little, was essential to this plan. What good was it to renounce the world if the world didn't want you anyhow? God chose the best for himself, not just the world's rejects. Besides, I believed the nuns who helped students the most were those who combined a love of God with a deep relish for life, who knew the world and the flesh to some degree, and could relate to the challenges of their teenage charges. I wanted to be this kind of nun, worldly and holy, pious and cool. I also just plain wanted to squeeze into these few years of high school as much worldly living as I could because it was my last chance.

Mike Thomas appeared at a BA football game on one of those early dark September Saturday nights in my senior year. Wearing his red and while BA letter jacket, his hands in his jeans pockets, he strolled casually over to where I sat with my girlfriends in the bleachers. The evening was cold and the ground was hard and damp. I noted he was cute. Dark hair, keen black brows, and even features set in swarthy skin only softly marked by acne scars.

He appeared. "You're in Marty's class, aren't you?" he asked, referring to his brother who was also a senior.

"You're Marty's brother, aren't you?" I said. Our conversations sparkled like that from the beginning.

I'd always considered my classmate Marty gorgeously handsome, but he struggled to get C's and was definitely shy or immature, and he had never paid any attention to me. Of course I never had the slightest idea how to let him know I might welcome said attention. Mike, his older brother, had similar dark, beautiful eyebrows, and soft brown eyes, and other assets as well. He was thinner than Marty, and around me at least, quieter. He was obviously more mature, three years out of high school, and worked at the local dairy. And he had the distinct advantage of being more tangible than God.

Mike asked if he could call me and I said yes, trying to suppress my ecstasy.

The next weekend, Mike pulled his blue and white '57 Chevy

with high tail fins to the curb in front of our house. I jumped in the front seat, and we went to the movies. Afterwards, we drove up and down Main Street for a while, the chief recreation of Faribault teens. Mike honked and waved at a couple of his older friends cruising in their cars, and they saw me next to him. I prayed that my friends would pass by, but it didn't matter, for they'd get my full report at school on Monday.

For homecoming I wore my favorite blue glass pendant on a silver chain, which perfectly set off my new blue angora sweater, gray felt poodle skirt, tan nylons, and penny loafers. Mike's eyes lit up when he saw me come in the room, and my heart jumped. The school gym had been blessed with dimmed lights and abundant garlands of twisted crepe paper streamers. We muddled our way through a few fast dances, faking a lindy to fast numbers like *Hound Dog* or *Heartbreak Hotel*. We danced every single slow dance. I rested my cheek on Mike's shoulder as we rocked blissfully in one spot through romantic ballads like *Red Sails in the Sunset* or *Deep Purple*. With each slow song, I felt myself drawn closer to his body, felt his hand against my waist, his warm, Dentyne gum breath on my forehead. I wondered if it was a sin to dance so close, but I clung to him like a drowning person to a log. He smelled of maleness, aftershave and hair tonic, a little spicy, a little musk. We had little need to talk. When the Everly Brothers' honey harmonies wafted to a last lovely note, Mike squeezed me even closer for a moment and I felt a sweet, soft turning over in my belly. The music had stopped, but we stood still stealing a few extra seconds of bliss.

Later, when he pulled the blue and white Chevy up in front of the house to drop me off, I was sitting with careful calculation half way between him and my door, not too close, which would have seemed fast, but not too far away, which might seem prudish.

He took my hand and said, "I really hate for this night to end so early. I'm still the newest guy at the dairy, and I keep pulling the two A.M. shift."

Then he leaned toward me, and kissed me lightly on my lips, a tender kiss that felt like velvet. I smelled the spicy aftershave, felt the soft brush of his cheek against my skin. I felt a little thrill run through my body, but at the same time pictured all the movie kisses I had seen, and marveled that I had now engaged in this mysterious activity. We said goodnight. I drained out of the car in liquid form and flowed into the house as he waited till I was safely inside. Then he drove off to the graveyard shift at the dairy.

When I went to work at the drugstore after school, I invented ways to watch for Mike's car out on Main Street. At Christmastime I offered to wrap gift items using the bow-making machine near the front window. Or I climbed the high ladder that moved on rollers along the walls and dusted the high shelves of boxed trusses and ace bandages, Epsom Salts and Carter's Little Liver Pills, and dark blue boxes of Prince Matchabelli talc and cologne. Out of the corner of my eye, I scanned the traffic passing by out in the street. Sometimes his blue and white Chevy sailed into view, paused for a moment while the light stayed red, and I watched him sit gazing straight ahead, except he was really scanning for me too, because just then I'd see his hand make a low arcing wave in my direction as the light turned green and he glided out of sight.

Mom thought Mike was nice, but she still disapproved.

"He's too old for you, Rita," she said. "He's going to want to get serious." Little did she know that her worst fear was becoming my ardent hope.

But I just said, "Oh, I don't think so, Mom. He's a nice boy. His sister is a nun."

Still, Mom worried excessively about my soul and my vocation, and discouraged too many dates. Mike and I managed to turn up at some of the same places without her knowledge. Like the party at Gillen's farm, where the farmhouse was bright and filled with music and noise, but we slipped from the house, traversed the bright circle cast by the yard light and drifted into the dark.

"Here's a place to sit," Mike said, and he gave me a hand onto a flat bed wagon near the barn, then hefted himself up beside me. We braced our feet on a wooden fence, held hands, and our long lulls in conversation left plenty of room for kisses. At some point the blend of Mike's aftershave and my cloud of contentment was penetrated by another scent, not one I could name immediately. I heard sounds, some kind of movement close by. And then, maybe with eyes more accustomed to the dark, we noticed that our romantic perch directly overlooked the Gillens' pigsty. At our feet were a dozen big sows snorting softly and stirring in the mud as they dreamed. We laughed.

"You take me to the most romantic places," I said.

"Only for you," he said. But we found the ambiance no deterrent to further kissing.

They were chaste, closed mouth kisses. Long, but limited in scope. We were Catholic. I was still planning to be a nun. I had mentioned this possibility to Mike early on, but we never dwelled on it. He was not a great talker, but we explored the usual themes, our families, parents, friends, his job, my school, movies we saw. Once he turned up with a cigar, which he smoked as we drove up and down Main Street. He offered me a puff, and I accepted. I still don't know how I managed it, but I took one big draw on the cigar and found my mouth coated with soot. I choked for blocks, tears streaming down my face. Mike's initial laughter turned to concern, until we both saw I would survive. The experience helped confirm me as a non-smoker, of cigars at least. Nevertheless, I added this event to my catalog of life experiences I was glad to have had.

That was the year Sister Brenda came to our school to teach Senior English, and quickly became my favorite teacher and mentor. A lot of the nuns were OK, a few were crabby and a few were cool. Sister Peter Sanz was cool, but since I didn't take history, I really didn't know her too well. She was the faculty sponsor for Sodality, and a small circle of the more pious girls—including me, of course— met after school in her classroom in a circle of one armed desks, said some

prayers to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and talked about life. During one of these sessions, Sister Peter Sanz won my lasting admiration for telling us a story from her own college days, before she entered the convent. Her roommate was quite uninformed about sex, and apparently one day discovered how intercourse was accomplished. Amazed and appalled, she rushed back to her dorm room and blurted out the whole story to Peter Sanz (who undoubtedly had a real girl's name at the time). Shocked by what she had just learned, the roommate concluded her breathless report with, "But of course Catholics don't do it that way!" We howled until we fell out of our desks and wet our pants. Sister Peter Sanz laughed as hard as anyone. When she could talk again she quipped, "I wonder what she thought Catholics did," which set us all off again. I laughed right along—at the story, and to hide my own still foggy grasp of the mechanics of intercourse. And I laughed out of sheer delight that a nun would acknowledge the existence of sex. It was one more clue that supported my belief you could be both holy and worldly wise, as I was determined to be.

Sister Brenda was the coolest of the cool nuns. Her tight white cap framed a great flat face with blonde eyebrows and bad skin. She read Shakespeare or John Donne to us in an angel's voice, worshiping at the shrine of language with every line, and we learned to adore with her. Yet she could bark out assignments like a martinet, prick us with clever sarcasm, tease and kid around, and was always ready to roar with laughter. Her red pen assailed our essays mercilessly for flaws of grammar or logic. She believed that you learned to love reading by reading, and you learned to write by writing, so she assigned us all the task of keeping journals, which were never graded or even read, she just had to see us putting words on paper. And every Friday she gave us the whole class period to read whatever we wanted. I discovered the glory of *War and Peace* and suffered with Raskolnikov through *Crime and Punishment*, courtesy of Sister Brenda's gift of time to read. I loved her.

Like Sister Peter Sanz, Sister Brenda too had gone to college

before entering the convent, and while she spoke little about it, we could sense that she understood the allurements of the flesh. In the course of many evenings after school or Saturdays working on the school paper, she got to know about my dates with Mike and my convent plans. She seemed to understand at a deep level how important it was for me to explore the world I would soon renounce.

But by spring, Sister Brenda began to ask me, "Have you written to the Mound yet?" The Mound was the pet name for the sisters' motherhouse, which rambled acrossan old glacial hill in northern Wisconsin. My girlfriends were sending off college applications. I'd been offered a four year scholarship to St. Kate's in St. Paul, a thrilling honor, but I didn't plan to accept. Going to college just didn't seem real compared to my years of fantasy about life in the convent. And while Sister Peter Sanz and Sister Brenda had managed to go to college and still get themselves to the convent afterwards, I didn't think my vocation would survive if I delayed entering. My resolve might weaken, and I might lose my vocation.

I put it off for weeks. Finally, with Sister Brenda's persistent nudges, I forced myself to sit at the dining room table one night after dinner, with children shushed for homework time, and I wrote my letter requesting admission to the Dominican Order. My letter had to make the right impression, and maybe win some points with Sister Brenda, so I brought it to her to review, expecting her usual voluble crows of approval. But the next day she called me over after class and handed my letter back lacerated with red ink. Choking with humiliation, I went home, rewrote the letter, and sent it off.

Weeks passed. One evening I come home late from my job at the pharmacy. As I walked through the front door, I saw it. On the upright piano directly across from the front door, propped up against a lamp, sat an envelope addressed to me from the Mound. I could imagine Mom's excitement at pulling it from our mailbox and placing it where I would see it instantly as I got home.

I shed my coat on the nearest chair, seized the envelope, and

headed straight downstairs to the improvised bedroom Nancy and I shared in the basement. I sat on the carpeted cement floor, in the narrow space between our two beds, squeezed down within their enclosure as though into a cave, into needed fortification. I tore the flap, with a surprising twinge of hope they might have turned me down. They had not.

Woodenly, I read the words welcoming me into the postulancy. Entrance date was September 8th, the feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary's birth. They had enclosed a full page with two columns listing a multitude of items to bring—twelve pair long black stockings, eight white tee shirts, eight pair of white underpants, two long white flannel nightgowns, a bible, one rosary, and much more, like a list for a pious Victorian ladies' summer camp. I had watched Marge collect a similar trousseau five years earlier. I refolded the letter, put it back in the envelope and tucked it safely in the back of my underwear drawer.

Then I climbed back up the stairs to the kitchen. Mom was waiting, pretending to be putting away leftovers. Without a word, I picked up a plate and started toward the stove to dish up the food she had kept warm for me. I didn't want to look at her.

She was unable to bear it any longer. "Well? What did they say?"

I froze in the middle of the room. Without meeting her eye, I said, "They accepted me!" and burst into tears. I flung myself into her arms, and dumbstruck, she reflexively received me. I allowed myself to cry for a moment, then pulled away and reached for a tissue to blow my nose.

"Margie was never like this," she said.

"I'm not Marge," I said, pulling away from her. I scooped spaghetti and meatballs onto my plate, sat at the kitchen table, and made myself eat.

As I remember that scene, I marvel that it plays out in my mind as though Mom and I were the only people in the house. But that can't have been. True, Tom and Dan had stayed in Minneapolis at

the U, and Marge was in the convent in St. Paul. But seven more kids and Mom and Dad lived in that little ranch house. By now Nancy was a junior at BA, and Leo a freshman. The four little girls were now nine, seven, five and three. So where were they all when I was discovering my letter from the Mound on the piano, when I secreted it away downstairs, or during that rare moment of weeping in Mom's arms and declaring I was not Marge? Did I simply block out the constant tumble and confusion of children playing in the living room or doing homework at the dining room table? Was the old floor-standing black and white TV playing *Gunsmoke* when I walked in? Was Nancy on the kitchen wall phone laughing with a girlfriend? Could Dad have even been in the house—or was he out on business calls as he was so many evenings? Or had Mom somehow orchestrated things so that this momentous event would be hers and mine only? Had she exiled children to their bedrooms or the rec room in the basement? She was capable of that. I only know that I remember the scene as I have described it to you. Only Mom and me.

I'd been accepted, but I still didn't have to go, I reminded myself. Yet I knew I would. God wanted me, called me, and his call was the most precious thing in my life. Besides, as much as I thrilled to Mike's gentle squeeze at the end of a dance, his chaste, closed mouth kisses that made up in quantity what they lacked in daring, much as I relished the aroma of romance, I knew deep down we didn't have a future together. If my path did not take me to the convent, I would go off to St. Kate's for college, and our lives would grow apart. A young man who worked at the dairy and had never gone to college would not hold me through four years in the big city.

That spring I savored each bite of worldly life like a death row prisoner eating her last meal. I went to Minneapolis to make a weekend retreat at the Catholic Youth Center, where Marge had done the same when we lived in the city during her high school years and we lived only a mile or two farther south on Park Avenue. I used to love

riding with Dad when he went to pick her up from the CYC, an old red stone mansion, set among rangy oaks and maples behind a fence of stone and iron. Returning here felt like a step back into the past, and into a rarified sanctuary where I could sort out my feelings about the monumental step I was preparing to take. Sixteen high school girls attended the retreat, which was directed by a young, hip, craggy-handsome Carmelite priest, Father Richard Madden. He wore a brown habit with a rope belt and sandals with bare feet, though the weather was still cold. Four times a day we gathered in the dark wood paneled upper room, once a library perhaps, now a chapel housing the small altar and dancing red votive candle that signaled the presence of Christ in the gold tabernacle. Father Madden's preaching could have made a rock weep, could have made Satan repent. He made us laugh with stories of his own bewildered youth. He leaned forward and spoke of God's love for us in a husky whisper. Or his voice would swell and build to a full outcry, his brown robed arms outstretched like Christ's on the cross. His passion engulfed us. Teenage girls are full of tears, and he gave us a way to release them. In the first talk it took about twenty minutes before the first girl began to openly shed tears, and soon others joined in. With each subsequent talk, it took less and less time for the first quiet tears to start falling and gradually build into a symphony of weeping, until a crescendo ofwailing when one or two girls would run sobbing from the room.

Father Madden's looks and intensity were the powder in the keg that gave him power over us, but his sense of humor was what lit the fuse. The last afternoon he shared a poem with us that he himself had written back in high school, his first, unpromising literary effort. He built up to the poem for quite a while, whetting our appetite, and stoking the curiosity of the would-be writer in me. Maybe his early efforts would inspire me, give me encouragement. I held my breath in anticipation as with great aplomb he finally began to recite the poem, which I would never forget. In its entirety it was:

Roses are red,
Violets are blue,
My father drives a red truck.
Can you swim?

Shrieks and tears and cries of laughter rocked the little chapel and all but raised the old mansion from its foundation. We laughed until we couldn't see straight, we fell over howling, Mavis Burke ran howling from the room.

Later, after the last session of the day, when most of the girls had drifted off to bed in silence, I stayed behind to pray alone in the cozy stillness of the chapel. My eyes were entranced by the candle flame dancing in a red glass lamp, just below the twisted body of Jesus on the cross, gleaming coppery in the dim light.

An old familiar shiver ran up my back and arms as I felt the quiet comfort of this womb-like chamber. My body ached from kneeling and sitting too long without exercise, but I didn't want the night to end. I closed my eyes and heard my self thinking, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus ..." The words melted into the old hymn Mom used to sing to her babies as a lullaby while she rocked them to sleep:

Jesus, Jesus come to me,
All my longing is for thee,
Of all friends the best thou art,
Make of me thy counterpart.

The familiar words and melody warmed me. Then I had no words at all. Just my full heart, opened out like a fine oriental carpet full of jewels, unrolled before this God whose love was all I wanted.

"Let me give you everything," I whispered. "Let me belong completely to you."

A wistful memory of Mike's sweet kisses in his latest Chevy, a '59, floated past. The scent of Old Spice. The soft brush of his cheek against my forehead as we danced slow.

"I do love Mike, but I love you more," I told the Lord. "If you really want me, I will give it all up—Mike, my scholarship to St. Kate's,

college life—If you really want me, I'll go to the Mound. Please just help me know. Help me love you. Help me be a saint."

I felt a delicious immersion in God's love, even sweeter with the pangs of grief at leaving Mike. I reveled in this rare moment of connection with the divine presence. Then a new twinge of anxiety nibbled at the edges of my pleasure.

"Am I taking too much pride in my prayer?" I worried. I reminded myself that feelings of comfort are only "consolations"—gifts God gives us to keep us encouraged—but they are not the essence of holiness. One can love God just as much when feeling dry and bored and distant from him. But I basked in the warmth of this magical time.

Was this sense of the divine just my imagination, I wondered. Just my wishful thinking? I didn't want my piety to be a self-induced delusion. But at the moment, it was too delicious to question much. I knelt for a few more minutes in the stillness, permeated with the deep joy of God's call, joy spiced with the pangs of anticipation of my big sacrifice. Finally, with a profound sigh, I rose and headed for bed.

Back home, it was time to tell Mike. We were parked on Main Street in his blue and white Chevy on a Friday night. Half the town's youth were cruising past us in the gathering dark, their headlights a passing blur.

"It's decided." I told him. "I've written to the Mound, and they've accepted me."

He had a sister in the Dominicans, so he knew the drill. He'd known all along that I was contemplating the convent. Now it was official.

I wondered if he would be emotional, half hoped he would.

It was a perfect moment for Mike to play the part of heartbroken love, to deliver an "Oh Rita" speech to me, like the melodramatic "Oh John" monologues I used to improvise in the bathtub as a girl, hearing my husky voice echo against the tile walls, pouring out my heartbreak in dialog that consisted entirely of repeated exclamations of "Oh John." If I ever chose to go on stage, Sara Bernhardt would be toast.

But such was not Mike's style. Instead, he stared blindly straight ahead through the windshield into the dark. He spoke in his usual quiet voice, "Well, I guess I want what I want, and you want what you want."

His understatement was almost a disappointment. Yet perhaps it was just as well. I wasn't sure how I could bear it if he had begged me to stay.

At least I had the prom ahead of me, one more chance to dance in his embrace, place my head upon his shoulder, smell that fragrance by Old Spice. My renunciation was still some months off. For the Senior Prom I wore a borrowed a white strapless organdy gown with tiny purple flowers embroidered on the skirt. Out of modesty, Mom sewed a white satin shawl-like addition onto the dress, which didn't look too awful given my lack of cleavage and had the advantage of helping me hold up the front. My friends said that Mike would no doubt bring me an orchid for my wrist corsage, but he turned up with white roses. I didn't care very much. His eyes shined when he saw me in my dress, makeup, hair done, without my thick glasses which I shed for the night. The school gym was transformed through dim lighting, cardboard trees and crepe paper streamers into a Deep Purple landscape of romance. My lack of glasses gave it a soft focus that made the night even dreamier. We danced slow and sweet to the Platters singing "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," and "Unchained Melody."

> Oh, my love,
> my darling
> I hunger for your touch ...
> Mike held me tight, and I clung to him.

Summer came. Long, bright days with languid evenings when the sunset afterglow tarried in the sky. By day I worked at the drugstore, in the evenings, joined the family for supper, helping mom corral the kids and post them around the kitchen table. They filled up the table,

so I took my plate to a corner of the counter near the dining room door, sat on a high stool, and ate there. If someone spilled milk or we'd forgotten ketchup, I could help. If the jumble of conversation got interesting I could tune in. But I could also perch my ever-ready book beside my food, tune out the din, and read while I ate, which I preferred.

After kids were tucked into bed and dishes done, I talked on the phone with Sue or Llona or one of the two Donnas. I might drift out of doors to stand in the big back yard, not too many years past being a cornfield. I walked over to the small locust tree Dad had planted and fingered the tiny webbing of leaflets on each frond. Their complexity and abundance mirrored the stars overhead. A warm breeze caressed my body and smelled of rich earth, and distant lakes, with overtones of corn pollen and goldenrod. Grasshoppers sang. Behind the garage was a swing set for the little girls, and I walked across the dewy grass to sit on a swing and drift gently back and forth, gazing at the heavens. Heat lightning flickered in the east, and an occasional jagged flash cut across the cloudless sky. My time here was ending. Soon I would be in another world, but under the same night sky. Enfolded by the same dark overarching majesty of God.

As my senior year advanced, mom had pressured me more than ever to break it off with Mike.

"A girl headed for the convent has no business going steady."

"Mom, we're not going steady. We're just dating."

"What does Sister Brenda think? Surely she's opposed."

"Mom, she dated too before she entered. She understands," I argued, adding, "Besides, this year is the last chance I have." The impending renunciation made it all the more vital to squeeze out every drop of life.

Mom was unconvinced. "No point in driving in two directions at once," she reasoned. "It's not fair to him, either."

There was no changing her mind once she had made it up, especially around matters of right and wrong. She had always summed up

her approach to morality by telling us, "Black is black and white is white, and there isn't any grey."

In spite of her, that last summer at home I sneaked out to meet Mike any chance I had. We found each other at the county fair, and I slipped away from my girlfriends to walk with him among the rides and booths. He took my hand, and I felt happily claimed. At the funhouse, we lingered in a nook near the exit. No one was around. Mike pulled me into the corner and kissed me once, then again. A while later we emerged from the dark with a private cloud of passion circling just the two of us, setting us aside from all the mere mortals on the midway. At the end of the evening, I left him once again, tearful, determined to stay my course, and noticing my own valor as I did.

On Saturday nights, carloads of teenagers converged on Jewitt's Point, fifteen miles west of town, where the band cranked out country, rock and old time music, the burgers were thick and juicy and the frosty beer foamed. Management winked at age requirements, and with a delightful sense of mischief we entered this adult club to carry on our adolescent practices, munching fried onion rings, trying a few puffs of someone else's cigarette, drifting from booth to booth to visit people we knew or meet new ones. Out on the worn wood dance floor people of all ages stomped merrily through polka or schottische or the occasional country two step. Dancing here was playful and fun, anyone could do it, and you didn't need a date or often even a partner, all of which gave my self-consciousness great relief.

The night I am remembering, my friend Llona got to drive her dad's Pinto, and she, Sue, the two Donnas and I infiltrated Jewitt's Point, largely in the hopes that I'd run into Mike. Our quest was not in vain. Sue thought she glimpsed him across the noisy dance floor, standing near the bar with some of his buddies. My heart jumped to know he was there. I craned to see beyond the milling crowd and found him. We were separated by a row of booths, wooden rails, the stomping ranks on the dance floor turned raucous by the "Beer Barrel Polka," crunched out of an accordion. Even from this dis-

tance Mike's eyes appeared to have a blank, wet surface.

Over the din my friends and I shouted our assessment of the situation. "He doesn't look too great," Donna noted.

"Seems kind of wobbly."

"I think he's looking our way."

"Probably broken hearted 'cuz he can't see you," Llona theorized.

I was thrilled. Not just to see him, but because I had never before seen someone I personally knew drunk, much less drunk to kill the pain of losing me. This was *life.*

With Sue, Llona and the two Donnas following at a discreet distance, and not knowing what I would say or do, I made my way toward him through the tangle of revelers. I longed to dance with him, which I already knew was unlikely given his condition.

"Hi, Rita, I'm drunk," he announced. We were shouting above the noise.

"So I see," I replied, trying to act as though this happened all the time. I was not the kind of girl who would be shocked. I wouldn't scold. I could disapprove a bit and still be sympathetic. After all, he had good reason to try to numb his broken heart.

"Can we talk?" I shouted.

"Let's get out of here," he replied.

As we headed for the door, he said, "I don't think I can drive." I called over to the girls, "Llona, I'll have to drive him home. Follow me."

Mike sat slumped against the passenger door as I drove the blue and white Chevy through dark country roads toward his family's farm. Twice he had me stop the car and he stumbled out to throw up in the weeds, and then crawled greenly back into the front seat.

"You're a real pal, Rita," he said as I waited patiently for him to reassemble himself.

I agreed, feeling noble and thrilled. He really was heartbroken. He did love me. And I was driving him home because he was drunk. A man got drunk over me. Drunkenness and breaking someone's

heart were now parts of life I had encountered. Somehow, my family and I had the sense that on September 8th, the moment I stepped across the convent threshold, everything would stop for me. My brother Dan, on a visit home from the University of Minnesota, stayed up late one night talking with me on my bed, telling me about meeting homosexuals, about actually having two of them make love on the same bed where he was sleeping one night. "You don't talk to nice girls about these things," he commented, "but since you're going in the convent ..." He understood my need to pack in all the *life* I could. He was a great brother.

We reached the long driveway into Mike's farm, and he mumbled, "Pull over—I'll take it from here." He didn't want his mother to notice two cars and a switch of drivers. I stopped the Chevy on the shoulder, slid over next to Mike, and kissed his clammy forehead.

"I do love you," I said. "It's just that I really know God wants me."

I didn't tell him that I also knew I would never marry him even if I didn't go to the Mound. Much better to let him lose me to God.

So as he slumped over to my place behind the wheel, I simply said, "I'll see you to say goodbye."

"Deal," he groaned. "Thanks."

I lingered to watch him roll his car gingerly up the long drive toward the farmhouse. Llona was hovering in her Pinto out on the country road. I walked back to the car, jumped in, and bit down hard on my tears.

Llona dropped me off at home around one o'clock in the morning, well past my curfew. Mom had left the porch light on, and the light on the piano in the living room. Hoping everyone was asleep, I slipped in the front door and tried to lock it without making a sound. I was still barely containing my tumult of feelings at all that had happened, and at leaving Mike. Then I heard Mom padding barefoot down the hall from her bedroom, gathering her pink chenille bathrobe over her flowered flannel pajamas. Her face was puffy with tears and rage.

"Do you see what time it is?" she opened in a hoarse whisper.

"Mom—I had to get a ride with Llona, we weren't doing anything wrong!"

I selected the portion of the story I could reveal, but she had a way of sensing if I had been with Mike. Mom had a way of knowing things she had no right to know. Nancy could smoke a cigarette in our bedroom downstairs, and mom would sniff the air, say, "Hmm, smells like smoke," and then just let it drop. If I took two drags on a borrowed cigarette miles from home at Jewitt's Point, a day later she'd confront me: "You were smoking Saturday night." I never figured out how she knew. Some things she probably read in my diary, but others stuff—she just knew.

Tonight her fear was up like a nasty storm.

"You don't know what I go through when you're not back on time. How afraid I get. Why, anything could have happened to you!"

Her voice was a whispered shriek, lest the others be awakened. The house could have caught fire and out of longstanding habit, Mom would have tried to fight the fire and evacuate us all without waking the babies.

Already conditioned to the whispering, and just as eager to keep my ordeal private, I rasped back, "Mom, why can't you trust me?" I was crying too, like I always did when I fell from favor. Tears of frustration and guilt and unpermitted anger.

"I'll trust you when you get home on time, that's when I'll trust you."

And then the most stinging lash of all: "Marge was never like this."

As soon as I could escape, I fled down to my bedroom, and wept my fury into my pillow, trying not to wake Nancy, who probably pretended to be asleep as I used to do with Marge.

Inwardly, I shrieked my outrage. How could Mom be so unreasonable! She had no idea what I had just been through! And if I told her, she would ground me for life. To win her trust, I'd need to always do

exactly what she would do. But in my opinion, that wasn't trust at all! If she really trusted me, she would let me use my own judgment, to be different from her, from Marge, and she would trust it to turn out okay!

If I were a mother, I would never be like that. I'd never worry myself into a frenzy if my daughter stayed out after her curfew. I'd trust her to go to Jewett'sPoint on Saturday night, and I wouldn't be worried if she took a few puffs on someone's cigarette. I'd trust her to date her boy friend, right up to the day she went into the convent. I wouldn't tell her she was trying to drive two directions at once.

Dorkin's Drive-in sat out on a curve in the highway at the edge of town, with a big yellow and brown sign on its roof that lit up at night. I had carhopped there in my junior year, taking orders, balancing trays of root beer floats on trays that hooked on car doors, clearing the trays. It was hard work, cold and wet or blistering hot, deadly boring or frantically busy. But the only part of the job I really minded was an injustice that had all of us carhops seething. The owners' brother-in-law, who worked inside filling our orders and making change, often shorted us money. We could never prove it, but at the end of the evening, we'd have to make it up out of our tips. I don't remember being very vocal about this injustice, but maybe I was. Anyhow, the very night when I had lined up my job at the drugstore, and came in to work planning to quit, that very night the owner and I must have tangled about the money shortage, and he fired me for my attitude. If I hadn't been planning to quit I'd have been flattened. As it was, I cared mostly about being robbed of the chance to quit. I had no idea the experience of being fired was a portent of things to come, or that someday I would be grateful it happened, and wish I could remember better how I had ticked the owner off, so I could take credit.

Returning to Dorkin's as a customer was always doubly gratifying, as I loved the greasy food and loved the fact that someone else had to

hang a tray on my car. One night near the end of my last summer, I sat with Sue, Pat and one Donna in the back seat of Karen Vogel's dad's Oldsmobile, watching another poor carhop hook a tray of burgers and fries on our window. Enjoying the ever-seductive smell of hot grease and cigarette smoke, I was remembering the unfairness, and the pleasure of hanging up my brown and yellow apron for the last time.

Elvis was on the radio being "All Shook Up" when a car full of boys from the public high school peeled off the road and lurched to a stop on our driver side. Every head in our car turned to scan the occupants, who scanned us in return. Their shotgun rider rolled down the window and called out, "Hey, what's up?"

"She's going in the convent," Karen yelled over the din, jerking her head toward the back seat.

"Who's going in the convent?" asked a loud boy with a dishwater blond ducktail.

"She is," Karen repeated, now pointing over her shoulder. I grinned self consciously and adjusted my black rimmed glasses, which sported tiny colored glass chips at the upswept brow and wide black sculpted bows adorned by white pin striping and more colored sparkles. I had impractically selected the glasses only a few months earlier, suspecting they were not exactly convent style, but they were so beautiful I couldn't pass them up. I had rationalized they were black and white, Dominican colors.

"You? You're going in the convent?" the boy addressed me.

"Damn right," I answered, to howls of laughter.

"No. You can't be. Are you really?"

"Hell yes," I replied, reaching for more french fries from the tray at Karen's window.

I was pleased at his incredulity, which I fed as fast as I could. It meant he found me an unlikely convent candidate. Maybe, now, just at the end, I was finally succeeding in my campaign to pass for a normal person.

"Here—trade places," he commanded, opening the car door on the far side and pulling Pat Hruza out the door. Pat headed happily for the back seat of the boys' car and he slid in beside me.

"So what makes you want to go join the convent?"

"I feel called," I answered, foolishly believing we could have an actual conversation. Suddenly a tray of malts arrived and someone cranked up the volume on the car radio for Elvis singing "You ain't nothin but a hound dog." We howled and arfed to the song.

The blond boy had a pack of cigarettes rolled in the sleeve of his white tee shirt. He took one out, lit up, and offered me a drag. I faked a puff, knowing if I inhaled I'd choke for fifteen minutes.

"Do you really think you can go to bed hugging your pillow for the rest of your life?" he asked.

"Damn right," I said, to more gales of laughter. I was always happy to overwork a good line, and unwilling to admit how fast he was cutting to the quick.

"We're splitting, Denny," a voice called from the other car.

"I'm coming," he yelled. He jumped out of the car, then turned back, leaned in and said to me, "You are going to last fifteen minutes."

He dived into the battered Plymouth just in time for it to peel away. I grabbed a malt and took a long, slow sip.

He was wrong. In fact, I would last ten years.

III

In the House of the Lord

I bolted up in bed and blinked at the painted concrete block wall of the small bedroom Nancy and I shared in the basement of the Faribault house. My heart pounded. This was the day. Today, at last, I would give my life to God. September 8, 1959 was the feast of The Blessed Virgin Mary's birthday and exactly five years since Marge had entered Good Shepherd. I remembered nothing of the tears Mom shed back then, or the pain I swallowed when Marge left. Had I recalled it, I wouldn't have imagined my absence mattering quite so much to the family. At any rate, my attention was focused on the drama of renouncing Mike, sacrificing the familiarity of home and family, and taking this long awaited leap into the arms of God.

Above me the tentative light of early dawn sifted in through a high window over my bed. A foot away from me in the other rollaway Nancy slept open mouthed, her head thrown back, dark hair tossed around her face. Her tranquility couldn't have contrasted more with my adrenaline-lit veins. She might as well have been miles away. In spite of so many years of reluctantly sharing a room with her, I still felt a reflexive twinge of loss that this was the last morning I would ever wake in this room we shared.

With rare alacrity, I jumped out of bed and knelt in the narrow space between our beds. "Today, Lord, I give myself to you entirely," I prayed silently into my cupped hands. "From today forward, I belong to you."

In typical fashion, God's end of the conversation was indiscernible, but I was used to that, and today too excited to care. I leapt

up and quickly started pulling on the clothes I had laid out the night before, my favorite outfit, a full pleated cotton skirt with a yellow and white geometric print, a delicate blouse of white lisle, white ankle socks, and my beloved gray and white wedgie saddle shoes. As I tied the laces, Nancy opened one eye and sat up in bed to give me a groggy hug. All she could muster was "See ya," before she sank back down to sleep. The unnaturally early hour and our entrenched family reverence for sleep made this seem normal.

Upstairs, the four little girls were still asleep too. With many hugs and kisses, I had tucked them into bed for the last time the night before. Mom was in the kitchen making ham sandwiches for the trip. We exchanged only essential whispers lest we wake the others, as I ate a bowl of Cheerios and milk. The house felt still, blanketed with sleep. When the time came, I went out the back door to Leo's pup tent in the back yard. A freshman in high school now, he was an avid Scout. In good weather he liked to sleep outside, presumably to win merit badges that required sleeping in tents and eating campfire smoke and dirt. I knelt and stuck my head through the tent flap. "Bye, Leo," I said, wondering if he would hear. He stirred, squinted up from his sleeping bag, saying "Yeahhh, well, bye." Then he closed his eyes again. I rose. Beyond Leo's tent stretched a deep open yard, scattered trees and neighbors' low roofs, over which the sun was mounting its gentle assault upon the sky.

Mom followed me from the house carrying a brown bag containing the sandwiches, chocolate chip cookies, plus a Coke for me, and a thermos of coffee for Dad. The green Ford station wagon with faux wood panels on the sides idled in the driveway, already gassed and washed that morning. Dad had loaded my new black footlocker into the back. It held everything on the Mound list, items of clothing we had ordered from a religious goods house or bought or made—black wool skirts and capes, thick black stockings, long white nightgowns, white cotton briefs and tee shirts (no bras), unbleached muslin to make aprons, black oxfords. A new Bible. A small plastic statue of

Mary, monochromatic tan, in good taste. A five-inch crucifix, wood and brass. My crystal rosary with the silver chain and cross, the only item not spanking new. Never in my life had I acquired so many brand new possessions at one time, or even cumulatively, perhaps, which added a strangely materialistic pleasure to my embarkation on a life of poverty.

In her flowered dress and bedroom slippers, Mom hovered at the car door. She reached out and gave me a quick tight hug. Then she traced the sign of the cross on my forehead, saying the same words of blessing the priest used at the end of mass: "May the Blessing of Almighty God, Father Son and Holy Ghost, descend upon you and remain with you forever." Somewhere Mom and Dad had learned that parents should bless their children, and this was a family ritual at life turning points like leaving home.

"Amen," I answered.

Mom's hands rested for a moment on my bowed head, and I tried, but failed, to feel the full import of the moment. When I looked up, she wore a teary smile, which I suspected reflected her satisfaction at finally shipping me and my soul off to the safety of the convent. We hugged again for a moment, her small body wired and hard in my arms. We swapped quick kisses on the cheek, and then I got into the car. But as I reached to close the door, a wave of nausea came over me.

"Wait, Dad—" I said. I jumped out of the car and dashed back into the house.

"What the he—?" Dad said, stopping as he always did somewhere between heck and hell. I raced to the bathroom, grabbed the bottle of Pepto Bismol from the medicine chest above the sink, and took a long swig straight from the bottle. No time for niceties. I paused uncertainly over the sink, barely breathing, and eyed the toilet warily. I hated throwing up. Dad was waiting, the car engine running. A scene now would only make this harder. Long experienced at hiding inner turmoil from the world, I willed the churning in my stomach to subside.

Trying not to breathe too much, praying the Pepto Bismol would work, I headed back out to the car and climbed in. Mom stood wet eyed in the driveway smiling and waving as Dad backed the station wagon into the deserted street. I smiled and waved back at her, my other hand hidden, gripping my uncertain stomach.

Postulants arrive at the convent gate in a wide range of conditions. Mary Mahoney, one of my crowd (as we called our class of entrants) had driven from Ohio with her mother and father and brother, and all four of them had cried the entire breadth of three states. Some women had taken the bus or train by themselves, bringing from home only stony disapproval. One group of girls from Visitation High School on the south side of Chicago came together on the train and decided to celebrate their last day in the world by ordering vodka tonics, a drink someone had heard was good for a hot day. But the train was out of ice, and the warm vodka tonics were disappointing. The drinks sat neglected until shortly before the train got into East Dubuque, when everyone stood up to get off the train. At the last minute one of the girls decided it was a shame to waste those drinks and finished them all. A car waited to take them to the Mound. Twenty minutes later, it drew up to the back door of the Motherhouse, where Mother Benedicta and her council stood in a receiving line gathered to greet them. The girls emerged from the car in their pill box hats and white gloves to be greeted by the waiting dignitaries. The last one was the girl who had finished all the drinks. She stepped from the car, extended her gloved hand to the Mother General, said "Hello, Mother Benedicta" and promptly crumpled to the ground at Mother's feet.

My arrival was less dramatic, as Dad drove the station wagon through an open iron arch and up a curved driveway to stop at the front entrance of the motherhouse. The long jumble of brick and stone buildings of varied vintage stretched like a crooked smile about half way up the face of the wooded hill. Below spread an apron of corn

and hayfields patched with green and gold, and dotted with scattered white farmhouses and dusty red barns. The Mound sat in the southwest corner of Wisconsin, and from its rounded top you could see into Iowa and Illinois.

Car trips with Dad had always been a chance for adventure, eating in restaurants, seeing more of the world, and being for a time the sole recipient of parental attention, even though it was fairly non-verbal attention when Dad was concerned. We had driven the four-hour trip southeast from Faribault in long silences, interrupted by awkward attempts to converse. His contributions consisted mainly of comments about the state of the alfalfa crop or the size of that Holstein herd, and my part was to feign interest in agriculture while being grateful I had not got sick. Only once did we edge near the scary slopes of actual communication.

"It's a nice drive, but Good Shepherd is a lot more convenient," Dad said. "Couldn't you have chosen a convent closer to home, like Marge?"

Good Shepherd was barely thirty minutes from home. This was a four-hour drive. I took his statement as a question, and I was preoccupied with how to answer. Even being compared to Marge and found wanting did not rile me.

"Dad, that's like asking why I don't marry the boy next door instead of the one I love," I told him, which left him silent.

He could never have said, nor could I have heard, what was really behind his question, that he was sorry I'd be so far away, that he would miss me. As usual, I took him very literally, and missed the hint of affection I so hungered for.

The Mound was a string of brick and stone buildings of varied vintage strung along the side of the glacial Wisconsin hill. Dad and I decided the main entrance must be the more ornate door in a Victorian era brick building that fronted on a small round driveway with a fountain that spewed red petunias in lieu of water. A novice in white materialized on the front steps to greet me and directed Dad

round back to drop off my trunk. Before he drove away, he stepped out of the car and gave me the same blessing Mom had, his deep voice droning out the words, "Father, Son and Holy Ghost …" He ended with his heavy hand resting on my head. His touch and the ancient rote words were both formal and intimate, a strange blend expressing what we could not manage any other way. I hugged him for the last time, and aimed a kiss at his cheek but he moved at the same moment and the kiss faltered, then landed at the corner of his mouth. Then he climbed back in the station wagon and drove off, and I followed the white robed novice up five cement stairs and through the heavy door.

Sister Gertrude, my white angel, guided me through long muted halls and up three flights of stairs to one of several dorms. For the moment, we were the only people in a large room that held about thirty narrow white cots divided by a grid of iron rods on which hung white curtains. Speaking softly, Gertrude told me the curtains would be closed only for dressing and undressing, but stayed open all day, and open as we slept. The novice consulted a chart on the door and led me to a bed. "This is your cell," she said, adding "Cell is the monastic term for a bedroom." I nodded and did not let on that I already knew from my visits to Marge. I noted the white painted chair and tiny bed table on which sat a shallow enamel bowl and a pitcher. I'd heard about these, heard tales of rising in the dark in December, having to break the ice in your water pitcher before a frigid morning wash. Today the dorm held all the day's heat collected from four floors below. Gertrude led me on a quick tour of a communal bathroom at the far end of the hall. It had a wall of sinks and toilets in old painted wood stalls. She pointed out two "tub rooms" each containing three or four aged bathtubs, also enclosed in wooden stalls, everything perfectly clean and tidy. Back in my cell, I changed into the black skirt, blouse and cape of a postulant, and handed my gaily printed skirt and dainty blouse to Gertrude to store away. The slightest twinge of regret at parting with my favorite clothes lay well buried

beneath the pleasure of stepping into my new garb and life.

Dinner was in the postulants' dining room, set with aged wooden tables and chairs for 90, and located on the half basement level, which gave it a slightly musty smell. Big old window casements along one wall were wide open, but there was no breeze, and the air felt heavy and damp. We had no reading during dinner that night, so in silence we passed platters of cold cuts and bread and made sandwiches. We handed around bowls of potato salad and stewed plums in sauce. I ate ravenously, as though I didn't know where my next meal would come from, as in a sense I didn't. Feeling the loss of control over being able to eat whenever I wished, I took comfort in large chewy chocolate chip cookies served for desert. I would gain twenty pounds during my time at the Mound.

After dinner we filed in a long line up one flight of stairs to join the nuns in chapel for Compline, an evening prayer of Psalms and chanting. Not yet trained to participate, we sat like new immigrants in black and observed. The professed sisters in black veils and white habits, and the novices all in white, stood in choir stalls facing the center aisle and sang the ancient texts, bowing low at the end of each Psalm, like a slow, deliberate dance, grace in every movement and note. Finally a cantor intoned the word "*Salve*" set to four lovely notes, and all the rest joined in with a long fluid *"Regina,"* each syllable stretched out in a cascade of liquid chant: "Hail, queen, mother of mercy" they sang in Latin to the Virgin Mary. Slowly they all filed into the aisles, and led by two novices bearing lighted candles, the women in black and white processed through the chapel, bathed in a golden light. Their voices rang beneath the vaulted chapel roof like a heavenly choir. My heart overflowed with the beauty of it, and I felt tears of joy welling in my eyes. From this day forward, I would end every day of my life with this chant.

After Compline, we assembled on the second floor in the postulants' room, with its big bay windows framed by open shutters. The windows looked out on the sloped front yard and magnificent dark old

fir trees that towered like guardians stationed on the hill. Beyond the bank of trees I could just glimpse the softening light over the farms across the road. The room had a hardwood floor, several large framed paintings of saints and a plant or two, but it was dominated by the dozen long heavy library tables with chairs on both sides, where we each had an assigned place and drawer for pencils and class assignments. This room became our classroom, study hall, recreation room, and the scene of daily assemblies with Sister Marie Eugene or other visiting dignitaries like Mother Benedicta or the Novice Mistress, Sister Marie Walter, who held sway in the novitiate, a similar room just down the hall.

We numbered about ninety, most about my age, just out of high school. A few came with some college or had their degrees. Three women were middle aged, starting to gray. I wondered what their stories were, and how they would tolerate our boarding schoolish regimen. Sister Marie Eugene, our Postulant Mistress, stood tentatively before us to deliver a welcome. In a soothing, alto voice she outlined schedule and logistics. Dinner at 6:00. Compline at 7:30. Assembly from 8:00 to 9:00, when we'd have instructions or study time. Retire to the dorm at 9:00 in silence. Curtains closed for changing into nightgowns. Curtains open and lights out at 9:30.

She had a gentle, nervous smile, liquid brown eyes, rimless glasses. I had heard she was a musician.

"After 9:30 we observe profound silence," she continued. "No one speaks unless in dire need. But even during the day we maintain silence most of the time."

"Just as a woman in love is always thinking about the one she loves, we seek to live in the presence of God, always ready to turn inward to Him," she explained. "Therefore, we avoid the distractions of idle conversations, and speak only as necessary most of the day. We also have places of silence—the dorms, hallways, the refectory where we eat our meals, in order to create an environment conducive to recalling the presence of God."

I'd never thought about keeping silence, and I felt a wave of rebellion run down my neck and chest. My willfulness. Marie Eugene must have seen a sober reaction on many faces.

"You may have been in schools where our sisters spoke freely, as the job required. You may not have known that when they went back to the convent for lunch or on days off, they too observed monastic silence."

Her hands moved gracefully as she spoke. I had the sense that she'd prefer teaching piano or maybe even digging ditches to her job of molding us into nuns. But under that soft exterior I sensed a steel resolve to do her best with us.

"But we have daily recreation, often with walks outside when weather permits. On feast days we will have parties or picnics, when we speak at meals. And silent meals allow us to listen to reading from an inspirational book, so we get to nourish body and spirit together." She gave a little smile.

Even though I did not yet know how attached to speaking I was, my belly hardened with resistance, not so much to the silence itself, for that sounded idyllic, a chance to commune more fully with God, but at the constraint, the challenge of curbing my tongue. For all my fantasies of asceticism, being confronted with the actuality of this simple discipline was daunting. I had not bargained on such a monastic regimen. Cloistered nuns, even semi-cloistered orders like Marge in Good Shepherd, had such rules. But the jovial sisters who taught me in Faribault had not betrayed this side of their observance.

Sister Marie Eugene encouraged us. "The postulant year and novice year are your best opportunity to live a fully monastic life and lay a strong spiritual foundation for your work out on the missions."

Missions. Momentarily the word distracted me from my resistance. I'd never heard the sisters refer to the schools as "missions," but I liked the word. I looked forward to the time when I could reach out to unhappy adolescents and lighten their pain, provided the community chose that mission for me, which in a blatant lack of detachment I fervently hoped it would.

When we filed upstairs to the dorm at 9:00, the rustle of skirts and rumble of shoes on the red linoleum stairs the only sound, my spirit still shrank from the weight of what I had taken on. But I was here now, here to stay. I would never consider turning back. "If the sisters at BA could do it, if Marge could do it, so can I," I told myself. "This is where God wants me, so this is what I must do."

The next morning two of our number had already gone home. I imagined the awkwardness of returning home after so many months of preparation. How would they face such defeat? They couldn't have been serious, I thought. Yet their departures and those of other girls in coming months always sent a shock through us. We never said goodbye. People simply vanished, leaving an empty bed in the dorm, empty place at a table. By evening we had all moved up one place, closing the gap. The departed postulant might have chosen to leave or havebeen found unsuitable and sent home. Unless one of them broke the rules and confided in someone, we never knew.

Every Sunday afternoon we spent an hour at our tables in the Postulants' room writing letters to our families. Writing home was required, an act of filial piety. We were also given guidelines about what was appropriate to include—discussions of our classes, the picnic on Saturday, spiritual reflections—and what was not appropriate—gossip about any sister or the other girls, complaints, requests for gifts, and details of our more monastic practices that families might not understand, things like lining up in the evening to ask Sister Marie Eugene for a new tube of toothpaste or to confess breaking a dish.

If you had asked me then, I would have told you that I took to convent life like a cat to a warm sidewalk. My weekly letters home conveyed this sentiment. I waxed piously poetic over my joy at dwelling in the house of the Lord, physically living under the same roof with Christ present in the Blessed Sacrament. After years of walking those eight blocks to mass each day, years during which I

developed a bodily hunger for Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, I was now able to just walk down the hall for mass or prayer, or pop in to say goodnight to the Lord on the way upstairs to bed. Even during classes or housework, I took a newlywed's delight in this proximity to my beloved Christ.

And I loved the college classes we had, taught largely by nuns retired from college teaching or faculty from the Mound's academy for girls. It was a typical liberal arts freshman year for that day, English comp, world history, French, logic, metaphysics, with the addition of healthy doses of scripture, Gregorian chant and Thomistic theology. I loved all my classes, especially theology. St. Thomas confirmed my longstanding insistence that believing in God did not violate common sense. Theology classes were like a rich banquet, where I could wash down the bread of reason with the sweet wine of faith, in perfect complementarity.

I delighted in making new friends from among the stewpot of characters fate had gathered in our crowd. With the fascination for people I inherited from my dad, I marveled at the mix. The opera singer, the competitive swimmer, the petite ballerina who also had a black belt in karate. The two much older women, in their forties, one a crusty east coast lawyer, the other a midwestern librarian. A worldly young strawberry blonde with the gravelly voice that sounded like cigarette smoke, and who spoke French as well as I spoke English. A gifted pianist my age, Kathryn, whose beauty dazzled me as much as her intellect. The Viz girls taunting each other with jokes like "you're ugly and your mother dresses you funny," which I thought hilarious given the fact that we all dressed the same, all funny.

But beyond the love of learning, and the delight in new friends, was the satisfaction of finally digging into my spiritual garden. I wanted to plant well so I might reap the fruit of holiness. As I wrote across the small white pages of my letters home, I remembered the stories of the saints, my visits to Marge at Good Shepherd, the glimpse of the nun praying with outstretched arms behind the Magdalenes' grille.

Perhaps now I too would attain the bliss of being God's beloved.

My brother Dan later told me I wrote great letters home, in spite of the fact that at the end of each one I always "threw in a bouquet"—some pious flourish to end on. Mom loved these fervorinos and returned letters with her own. "God is so good to us. We must pray always." It was as though through both Marge and me she was living the vocation she had somehow missed out on. My letters did nothing to cloud her fantasies of a peaceful life spent gliding gracefully between prayer and study and joyful communion with my sisters.

Mom had no idea that my letters to her were read before going out, and hers to me before I received them, and that not all our mail got through, and sometimes a postulant had to rewrite a letter home, though I was careful to avoid this humiliation. Mom had no clue about the hidden battles, the frustrations and failures that plagued me. The constant chafing against rules that ranged from the inconvenient to the absurd. Little things, like having to bite back a perfect witty remark lest I break silence. Like not being able to eat between meals unless a snack was served to everyone. Not being able to return to your cell for a forgotten handkerchief without the humiliation of admitting your forgetfulness and asking permission. Never seeing a television, radio, or newspaper. No permission to step out of doors for an unscheduled five minutes of fresh air, and no time to do it anyhow.

Time. Bells. Rushing. That was even harder than silence. Far from the tranquility Mom imagined and I probably had expected, I was forever rushing. Racing to get things done, be somewhere else, be on time. I was eternally pressured, constantly anxious about not being late. Bells governed every hour of the day. Rising bells, chapel bells, meal bells, bells for classes, recreation, assembly. Bells for climbing the stairs to the dorm each night, the last great bell for lights out and the beginning of the Grand Silence. Bells were the voice of God, and it was a matter of obedience to answer at once, breaking off a conversation mid sentence, leaving the needle in the stocking, the word on the page half written. Showing up at every event of the day was required.

Exceptions could be sought, but were sometimes denied except for extreme and obvious illness.

A sister was to use her talents fully for the Lord. One postulant with years of voice training had left all her music at home, thinking she had to sacrifice it. She was told to send for it at once. We did not give up our skills, but used them in God's service—depending of course on the will of our superior. And because all our work and study was an offering to God, and an act of obedience, each task required our best effort. We were to strive for perfection in all things. To this regimen I brought my native passion to excel, to be humbly and obviously good at everything. My theme became the phrase applied to the child Jesus in the temple: "And he did all things well." It was a perfect recipe for relentless, exhausting pressure.

But I was young, and I pushed through each day with all my might. At the same time, my logical mind knew the expectations were absurd—carrying nineteen credit hours with scarcely fourteen hours a week to study. My logical mind believed we spent an unwarranted amount of time each day doing housework, which was surely less important than spiritual and intellectual growth. I dimly understood that the institution was solvent largely based on the supply of free labor we provided, and with my family experience, I never questioned this, I just disliked it. We each had several daily assignments. Kitchen duty, peeling bushels of potatoes or scrubbing giant pots. Serving meals. Cleaning bathrooms. Laundry duty, sorting clothes into hundreds of boxes with names on them or feeding bedsheets into the giant industrial mangle, or scorching our hands as we caught them at the other end.

So against all odds, I tried day after day to do it all, and do it all perfectly. Fold the sheets with hems matching perfectly. Leave the stairs and hallway I cleaned each day spotless. Pull straight A's in every class. Anything less was failing, and I had little experience of that, having always avoided things I wasn't good at, like rollerskating or drawing or softball. Deep in my memory were a few searing exam-

ples of falling short that I'd do anything to avoid repeating. Things I'd never told anyone. The time Mom and Dad went to Virginia Beach for a week long Monarch Convention and Marge was busy with a high school play and the yearbook. I was about eleven. It fell to me to cook dinner and get the kids to bed. One night I tried to cut up leftover roast beef into cubes and make gravy, like I'd seen Mom do. But the flour and water turned to an intractable white, lumpy paste. I added water, stirred, but it still wouldn't turn to gravy. Panicking, I threw in generous amounts of salt and pepper, as though anything at all might help. Nothing did. The lumps of meat and white glop taunted me from the skillet. Finally, in tears, I hid the disgusting mess in the oven and pulled hot dogs from the freezer. In our family we did not make messes. We did not waste food. I went through dinner feeling clogged inside with failure as if I had eaten the pasty meat. I searched for any possible way to avoid just throwing it in the garbage, for wastefulness made my defeat even worse. After dinner while Nancy was helping get the kids into their pajamas, I sneaked the frying pan out the back door, slipped round the house and down the high stairs of the terrace, crossed Park Avenue and scraped out the ruined meat under bushes in the park. Maybe some dog would eat it, so it wouldn't be a total waste. Then on my way back across Park Avenue trying to carry the empty skillet nonchalantly as I could, I remembered all the salt and pepper I had added, and worried that the dogs who ate the meat would die.

I never told anyone about that night, or about the night Mom and Dad were out and the baby would not stop crying. It was probably Janny, and I was probably about twelve. I had fed her, burped her, changed her, checked to see that pins were not sticking her, walked her, rocked her, sang to her, and still the baby howled on in that inconsolable wailing that babies sometimes do. Finally, I sat holding her in my arms in the blue rocker in the baby's room, rocking her as she screamed on, and sobbing with her, crying, "Mama come home, Mama come home," powerless to comfort that baby or myself.

To explicitly label these events failures would have made them even more unbearable. I simply filed them away, unmentionable. Mom believed I could handle anything, and I would never destroy her illusion. I expected and demanded a supreme level of competence in myself and I craved having it recognized by others, an appetite mom had systematically whetted from my earliest years, when she praised my toddler efforts to help her dust or sweep. In grade school she made sure I overheard her telling Aunt Ann on the phone, "Rita is such a big help to me." Praise dropped like a stone into some dark hole in me and never hit bottom.

Dad fed the syndrome in a different way. He'd inspect a report card of straight A's, except for one A- in gym and joke, "What happened in PE?" I knew he was proud, but his way was to tease. I pretended not to care, hid behind a façade of humility for that was admirable too. Though I was shy, I craved the spotlight, like the time in sixth grade when I was chosen to play Mary in the Christmas play. Wearing a blue bathrobe and a white dishtowel on my head, I stood between the pillars of the Holy Name Church basement, before the gathered students and parents, and recited the entire Magnificat by memory, Mary's hymn of praise to God. With outstretched arms and all my Sarah Bernhardt eloquence, I intoned, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior!" And the other eight verses from St. Luke.

As a postulant, I still took secret pleasure in any praise that came my way. Usually it took the form of good grades. Once, it was more. When Sister Brenda, my high school mentor and confidante, stopped in at the Mound that year, we were allowed a brief visit, despite a rule that postulants normally didn't communicate with the professed sisters. The rule was to prevent unsanctioned influences on us. We were to be molded only by an approved molder. Sister Brenda found me in the dorm where I was running a wide dust mop under the beds. We hugged tightly for a moment, uttering involuntary greetings of delight in spite of being in a place of silence. We stepped over to the doorway,

as though into a liminal place where talking might not be such a major breach. I worried about it, but took my cue from her.

I had heard that she'd been ill. Her wide flat face was paler, skin still pocked, and her old exuberance muffled by a layer of fatigue. But her presence was pure milk and honey to my hungry spirit.

"They gave me permission to see you, and I came to find you because I'm leaving for the Villa in ten minutes," she said. "How are you?"

No one had asked me that since I came to the Mound.

"Oh, I'm fine," I said, sure this was the case. "It's hard, of course, but I love it."

"Good," she said, eyeing me with thin skepticism that I disregarded.

"Did they tell you that I've been in the hospital?" she said, obviously gauging how much to tell me without dashing my idealism. "I'm much better now, but I'll be at the Villa for a while to rest."

I could not imagine this strong woman really falling apart, and let my gift for denial shield me from the pain of it. Nor did I connect her story to the episodes of nervous breakdown both my parents had suffered by now. She helped me change the subject to news of Faribault.

"It has been a tough year for Nancy," she told me. "Life hasn't been easy for her, growing up in your shadow."

More information I could not process. Nancy was one year behind me in school. She had always been cute and popular, but just an OK student, but that was just Nancy. But to not be a star in a family of stars—it had never crossed my mind how painful that must have been.

"I couldn't help it," I said.

"I know," Sister Brenda said.

Then she continued. "I've got to go in a moment. But you are doing well. The novice mistress commented, 'Rita is so mature. She is such a good influence on the other girls.' "

She stopped, smiling, but her eyes were saying, "Enjoy it, but don't get carried away."

"She did?" I said.

I was surprised that the novice mistress even knew who I was, much less had any opinion of me. I'd never had a conversation with her. Our dealings were generally with Sister Marie Eugene, unless one was having thoughts about leaving or some other struggle, which I did not. I dropped my eyes in modesty, but I glowed with pleasure.

At the end of the day after Compline, we would return from chapel to the Postulants' Room, often for study time. I would sink exhausted into my chair aching for bed and fretting over how to read thirty pages of the Summa and finish a French assignment in only one hour. But too often I heard that instead of study time, we had an assembly with Sister Marie Eugene. I stifled resentment that felt like a clenched fist in my gut. Religious detachment included letting go of not just possessions, but freedom, letting go of plans, sometimes letting go of logic and even of good sense.

Sister Marie Eugene stood tentatively in front of us, bracing herself to deliver the next installment of our training as religious. Her instructions were often seasoned with suggestions or complaints we suspected came from higher ups, either Sister Marie Walter or Mother Benedicta herself. They were delivered in her halting but determined voice, and could be headlined with the theme, "Girls, we don't."

"Girls, we don't pound the hallway with our shoes when we walk, we don't dig our heels into the floor at each step. We don't whistle while we sweep the dorm. We don't look around in chapel to identify guests or gawk at the Academy girls we know. We don't pick and choose what to eat, but take some portion of everything that is served at every meal. We don't spend recreation with the same person every day, or form cliques or special attachments. We don't swing our arms as we walk, but keep them tucked up under our cape or scapular. We practice custody of the eyes as we walk down the halls, keeping our gaze downward and inward, so we can be mindful of God's presence at all times." During recreation the Viz girls quipped that only at the

Mound did you walk down the hall and nod to the statues but ignore the people.

By 9:30, I would fall into bed too numb to pray. I slept like the dead, rarely disturbed even by the snorers or occasional nightmare from another bed in the dorm. We had one gifted sleep talker among us, who one night was so tired she changed into her nightgown, fell into bed and went instantly to sleep well before the lights out bell. By the time it rang at 9:30 she woke up, mistaking it for the rising bell. Only half awake and still exhausted, she let loose a very entertaining string of expletives about the blankety blank bell, and what a completely inadequate night's sleep that had been. We lay in our separate beds, a wave of irrepressible laughter rippling though the dorm until someone decided charity trumped the rule of silence, shook the fuming girl lucid and told her to go back to sleep.

I knew exactly how she felt. Each morning the real 5:30 rising bell cracked through my brain like a shot. I started, but lay rebelling, still crushed into the mattress by the weight of my dreams. Around me, other postulants were scrambling out of bed. Thinking "we don't scrape the curtain rings on the metal rods," I heard the rasping of curtain rings as the more careless girls closed their cells to dress. Passing figures in white nightgowns brushed the white muslin walls of my cell. Through the curtain I heard Mary Mahoney in the next cell, pouring water from her porcelain pitcher into a shallow white enamel bowl. Then I heard teeth being brushed with vigor unwarranted by the predawn hour. Out in the hall, someone banged the door of a wooden locker.

I groaned, feeling sure I could die of fatigue, though I knew I usually didn't. Finally, I rolled out of bed and to my knees. "Help me do this," I prayed. Already, remembering Sister Marie Eugene's quite serious instructions, I had failed to rise as a good nun would, leaping from bed at the very first sound of the bell "as though your bed were on fire."

Soon, in my black cape, skirt and blouse, little black net veil with

the white headband, I groggily descended four flights of wide red linoleum stairs, each step of which I knew intimately from cleaning it daily on my knees. In the basement dish room, Suzanne Torcivia was already folding towels and Anne Marie Palmisano was stacking big carts with trays, dishpans, mops that would be used to wash breakfast dishes. After every meal, each table of nuns got a pan and washed all their dishes and silver in hot sudsy water, dried them without rinsing, and reset the table. What the system lacked in hygiene it made up for in efficiency.

Since it was still the grand silence, the three of us on dish cart duty communicated with looks and gestures about which trays still needed towels or dish mops. Anne Marie and Suzanne were friends, and exchanged knowing looks that I couldn't quite read. I wondered if they were breaking silence, which you could do without actually talking; it was a matter of intent. I felt grateful and a little proud that I was not included in this possible breach of the rules, and at the same time wished I were.

We finished setting up the carts and climbed back upstairs just in time to join the long line of postulants snaking through the third floor hall to chapel. In spite of our training to walk lightly, one hundred and sixty rubber soled oxfords made a low rumble along the dull red linoleum. Along the way we passed four claw-footed bathtubs lined up against the wall outside a bathroom that was being remodeled. The tubs had been in the hall for several weeks, but since the day before, someone had draped them with sheets and placed an out-of-order sign on them. It cracked me up, though of course still being in profound silence, I could only smile, as I pictured some elderly sister attempting to bathe in one, or at least fretting someone else would.

The novices and professed sisters had just finishing the chanting of the morning office as the postulants filed in and took our place in the front pews for meditation. For a half hour, we sat. Silent. Motionless. This was my time for communing with the beloved whom I had come here to encounter. Fatigue still fought me as I opened my

New Testament, and turned to one of the few passages from Saint Paul I liked, one that Sister Marie Walter used to read to us whenever she visited the postulants. "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

"You are for me," I whispered to the Lord, "just as you have promised." I sighed. I knew this without any trace of doubt, as truly as a tree root knows dirt. I savored the thought of God's ever-present love and support, rocking ever so slightly, imperceptibly, and I closed my eyes. I wondered if there would be a test in French today, and if I would have enough time to finish my essay on "Friendship in St. Augustine."

My head fell forward, deeper and deeper onto my chest, and my breathing slowed. Suddenly, I jerked awake. I had been asleep for—I didn't know how long. I straightened my shoulders and looked back down at the New Testament in my lap ... The words of Jesus to the apostles came to mind: "Could you not watch one hour with me?"

With a deep sigh, I aimed my attention once again at God's loving presence, God who in his immense love was simply there before me, within me. I tried to hold that awareness in my mind. Directly in front of me, Mary Mahoney sat, eyes closed, head dumped forward on her chest, every breath a muffled snore. Her body swayed precariously forward, and I wondered if people ever crashed to the floor during meditation. "Presence of God, Rita," I reminded myself. "Presence of God."

Why could my mind never stay fixed on God, even for a whole minute? If I closed my eyes I would fall asleep. If I kept them open, distractions pulled at me. In the sanctuary, Sister Mary Roque was setting up the altar for mass. Willing my eyes to stay open, I watched as if mesmerized the graceful precision of her every move as she placed the chalice on the altar, made a profound bow, and stepped back to the sacristy without a sound.

"If God is for us," I repeated stubbornly to myself. "You have always been here for me, Lord. Thank you ..." Suddenly the words felt overdone, like the tragic love scenes I used to make up as a young girl.

"No words," I told myself. "Just be with the Lord, be in his pres-

ence." I closed my eyes to make myself stop watching Sister Mary Roque, who was back at the altar now, turning pages of the big missal. I felt the presence of God in me, around me, the heart of Christ present there in the tabernacle, loving me. I breathed in and out, just staying with that awareness, Christ, here, Christ present, Christ, my love, and I was back in high school riding in Karen Vogel's model T with Llona and Sue, and we were laughing and laughing at nothing, at everything and Karen was tooting the horn at a car full of boys—when I jolted awake again, embarrassed not by the worldly dream, I couldn't help what my unconscious while I was sleep, but embarrassed at succumbing yet again into sleep. Wondering sheepishly how long I had been out, I slowly raised my head, as though I were just shifting position, not to be too blatant about waking up again. I longed for the day when I would have learned to meditate well enough to stay awake, to stay present, and most of all, to actually still my mind—a phenomenon I could scarcely imagine for myself. I easily pictured the saints and mystics losing themselves in the Lord, having time stop, being enfolded with the light, the love. I could even imagine myself enfolded in that light, but then I told myself, "It is just my imagination." I didn't want my encounters with Christ to be just my imagination. I wanted the real thing.

At last, from the back of the chapel Mother Benedicta's voice called out, "Our help is in the name of the Lord …" and three hundred women answered, "Who made heaven and earth." and with a wave of rustling fabric and rosary beads, we stood as one body. Ancient Father Walker appeared in the sanctuary to begin mass, scrawny and bald and beaked like an eagle. He loped across the thin carpet, his tall emaciated frame draped in vestments. He knelt with effort, bowed low, then rose with a little wobble, like a camel folding and unfolding before the altar.

At four each afternoon, the bell for recreation loosed an immediate torrent of conversation, as we made up for hours of holding back. I folded my unfinished essay on St. Jerome and slid it into the drawer,

wishing I had just five more minutes to work, but eager for the chance to talk and laugh with the other girls. Two postulants were setting out huge sheets of frosted cake on a table in the corner, and everyone was gravitating toward the sweet comfort of food like ants on a picnic blanket. Sister Marie Eugene appeared in the doorway carrying a pile of mail, which she proceeded to spread out on another table, and soon even the lure of chocolate frosting couldn't compete. The cluster of ants shifted from the cake table to the mail table, everyone craning to spot an envelope that bore her name.

Some families wrote constantly, and some girls got mail almost every day. My family got the idea that since I wrote them once a week, that was plenty often to respond. They took every rule seriously, never calling or sending packages, which other families did in spite of rules. But Mom wrote when she could, her perfect Palmer hand covering one side of a small lined tablet page. Sometimes she stuck in a note from one of my little sisters. Rosie, at ten, described selling Girl Scout cookies or helping sister after school. Or Colleen, then eight, scratched out a quick "how are you I am fine." Janny and Elaine, six and four respectively, generally produced crayon drawings, which Mom folded and tucked in. On rare occasions, Dad would scrawl a single sentence at the bottom of mom's note, "Hi, Rita, Hope you are OK. Love Dad." Marge sent a letter every month or two, matching mine bouquet for bouquet with pious encouragement. Letters from Tom or Dan, Nancy or Leo, were more like semi-annual events.

So I held back from the mail table, delaying the disappointment of finding none for me.

But there was a letter. Mom's hand. I picked it up, tore it open, and restraining my eagerness, walked calmly to my place at the table to read.

This one left me dumb with fear and worry.

Dad was back from the hospital, she wrote. Back? I had not known he was in the hospital. He had needed more shock treatments, but he was better now, she wrote. My stomach froze. Another break-

down. And I hadn't even been told. Had she, in all the turmoil I could only imagine, forgotten to tell me? Or decided not to worry me until now? Even if I knew how to ask about this, any answer she remembered to write back might not be reliable.

My mind grasped for reassurances. He was home again. He was better. That's what it said. But it had happened again. I remembered his first breakdown, during my sophomore year when we were new in Faribault, how I'd come home from school and skipped downstairs to my bedroom, only to have Mom call me over to her, and weeping, tell me he was going to the hospital. Memories of the awful pall that hung over the house. Dad, home again, going out to work and returning at 10 A.M. already exhausted. Sleeping on the living room couch, his back to the room. I remembered the more recent rendition of this pattern last year, during my senior year, when it was Mom's turn to falter, and she was hospitalized. How she came home on medication that made her face swell, and she couldn't remember things.

"Is everything OK?" a voice at my shoulder said.

I looked up. It was Kathryn. Her voice was like music and her flawless face smiled down at me with a hint of concern. The first time I ever saw Kathryn across the Postulants' Room, I was enchanted by her perfection. She stood with her hands tucked demurely under her cape. The white collar set off the glow of her perfect amber skin, flawless features, almond eyes, perfect brows. Her black hair was pulled back at the brow and held by the white headband on the little net veil we all wore. It fell almost to her shoulders in a soft wave. I had never seen anyone so beautiful. I soon learned she was also brilliant and a gifted musician, which meant in addition to her class load, heavy as mine, she had piano and voice lessons and grueling hours of practice to somehow manage. I was prepared to discover her to be vain and disagreeable, but to my amazement, she was delightful. We were becoming friends.

"My dad. Mom says …" Just then Sister Marie Eugene rang her silver bell and announced we were going out for a walk. We all

streamed toward the door and as we crossed the threshold into the hall, fell silent for the trip downstairs, since halls and stairs were places of silence. Once outside, we fell into a long line like black ants trailing behind Sister Marie Eugene, who led us briskly out to West Campus, past the cemetery, and partway up a path that scaled the Mound. Kathryn and I were separated in the commotion, but I looked around and she was working her way forward to join me.

By the time we passed the Lourdes grotto, she was beside me again.

"Pray for my dad," I started again. "He's had another nervous breakdown."

"Oh no," she exclaimed in genuine sympathy. I could feel her compassion, and loved her for it, but it largely rolled off my shell of protection, which I needed to keep my own feelings under control.

Fighting back my tears, I filled her in on the history, just the facts, refusing to quite feel or say how awful it was.

"It's happened to Mom too," I said. "In my senior year. All of a sudden, she's off to the hospital in Minneapolis for shock treatments. She came home with some medicine that made her face swell up. "Moonface," she called it. It made her forget people's names. Once she told me that if she walked down Main Street and didn't recognize people, they'd think she was stuck up. But she just couldn't remember things. And when she told me this, she cried."

Just then Pat caught up with us and fell in stride on the other side of Kathryn.

"Kathryn, how are your lessons with Sister Edmond going?" Sister Edmond was a legendary musician in the community who was known as a terror except to the most able of her students.

I felt Kathryn's attention split, and resented Pat's intrusion. Yet Kathryn sensed that I also half welcomed the interruption, which gave me a chance to recompose myself. She cast me a quick glance, apology in her deep brown eyes. Then she let Pat carry the conversation off. I walked along pretending to listen, chiding myself for my

resentment. A good nun did not cling to one special friend. She mixed with everyone at recreation. Over the next few minutes the path grew steeper, and Kathryn and Pat fell behind as I climbed on. I felt the pang of loss, but I kept moving, letting her go. Soon I was chatting with LouAnne about a World History assignment, as though nothing were wrong.

It was the way in our family. The act of sharing our pain with another was one of deep intimacy—indeed for years I thought that was intimacy. But with the rest of the world, we hid the truth, and soldiered on through hard times. So except for Kathryn and one or two other friends, I talked little about what was happening at home. I never brought it up with my superiors, and neither did they. Perhaps they only spot-checked our mail and had missed that letter. For my part, it would not help my chances of staying in religious life to make a big deal of it, and there wasn't much anyone could do about it except pray. So I said nothing.

All these years later, I have no memory whatsoever of being torn with the possibility I was needed at home. Other women in our crowd encountered sudden illness or death at home and had to leave the postulancy to attend a funeral and return, or in a few cases, stay home and care for someone. But my family always made such decisions on the basis of sheer physical survival, never in view of such things as emotional need. I suppose that when Dad went to the hospital we all relied on the fact that Mom was home to hold the fort as she always did anyhow when he traveled. Nor would these circumstances cause my family to ask me to come home, which would be like throwing away my vocation, a precious family asset.

During Lent our afternoon snacks stopped and we fasted between meals. Ideally, we would also make two meals lighter and have only one full meal each day. But fasting between meals caused me to eat a little more at each meal as though for insurance that I would have the energy to make it until the next.

We also had no mail during Lent. I didn't think too much about it, didn't question rules a lot, since there was clearly no recourse. I found it easier to conform if I tried not to dwell on whether things made sense or not.

The final week of Lent seemed like a dive deeper into silence and solemnity. There were long hours of liturgy almost every day, as we commemorated the Last Supper, Good Friday, and the suffering and death of the Lord. I had always loved the chanting and drama of Holy Week liturgies, and gave myself over to the observance wholeheartedly. On Good Friday, I relished the idea of really spending the hours from noon to 3 P.M. in chapel, the time when Jesus was suffering on the cross out of love for us all, love for me.

Finally, at 3:00, the tabernacle was empty, the altar stripped bare like the wooden cross that once surrendered Jesus' dead body to the tomb. I left chapel feeling drained, as though emerging from a long tunnel. Sister Marie Eugene gathered us in the Postulants' Room and announced we were getting outside. It was early springtime, and for the first time we ventured out without our thick gray sweaters. My eyes had to adjust to the afternoon sunlight, and I felt the fresh damp air on my face like a splash. I breathed in the scent of wet wood and earth, and heard the first robin sing. We trailed behind our leader, about seventy of us now, past dark tree limbs with tiny green swellings, silhouetted against purple clouds, golden sun breaking through. As we began the climb up the Mound, Judy Stein, one of those girls who had played the lead in the musicals in high school, broke into song—and not hymns or chants, but pop hits from all the musicals of the late fifties, *I Could Have Danced All Night, Annie Get Your Gun.* She pattered out a little soft shoe on the dirt path, and launched into *I'm Getting Married in the Morning* complete with cockney accent. I laughed at the amazing contrast with our week of solemnities, at the irony of her choice of songs. My heart seemed almost bursting with the beauty of the day, the delight of her song. But tears welled up, and I was overwhelmed with unaccountable sadness. How

could I feel so sad in such a moment of sheer loveliness? Soon I was walking beside her again on our way downhill. Tentatively, not knowing myself what I felt, I began to talk of how sad I felt, how I couldn't understand why, but I felt myself sinking in a pool of darkness, pulled down by a mysterious weight in my heart. I didn't know why I felt this way, or why I felt Judy, whom I barely knew, was the person to tell. I just knew when she sang and danced that I wanted to.

Judy listened as we walked, then paused on the path and faced me. She took my hand and spoke with complete certitude. "Why, Rita, you're homesick!"

Her declaration jarred me. Broke open a streak of hope. Homesick! Oh. Just homesick! So this was how homesickness felt. I felt relief at the mere possibility. Yes. Of course. I must be homesick, I thought. I had been so afraid there was something deeply wrong with me.

In June the postulants were allowed a week of home visit, one last time to stay in our parents' house, sleep in our old bed, eat meals with the family, none of which would be permitted once we took the habit and veil. As professed sisters, we would visit home every two years, but only by day, and we'd be required to stay in a local convent each night. When families came to visit at the convent, they were warmly welcomed and served lovely meals, hospitality being a virtue Dominicans held dear, but the sisters never took meals with them. These old monastic practices were harder on our families than on us, for we at least understood the purpose—to remind us and safeguard our separation from the world and cleaving only to God. I accepted the restrictions gamely, and without question, as you would when joining the Marines or an athletic team.

The June home visit was in part a last chance for us to test our resolve. Though we were warned to maintain our monastic discipline, for that week we wore civilian clothing. Probably because the nuns were realistic about the likelihood of a few last hijinks, and felt it bet-

ter to avoid the vision of a postulant puffing on a cigarette or downing shots of whisky in a club.

While those temptations held no charm for me, I knew I would see Mike. On Friday night, I borrowed Dad's car and cruised up and down Main Street, my radar tuned to the memorable blue and white Chevy. We spotted each other at the same moment, and almost at once, Mike found an impossible opening in the traffic, flipped a U-turn, and fell in behind me.

Soon we were parked in tandem near Poirier's Pharmacy. I stood leaning against Dad's car, once again wearing my beloved gray and yellow full cotton skirt and white blouse. Mike leaned next to me. We both faced out, absently watching the stream of Friday night cars that passed as we talked.

"How's the job at the dairy?" I inquired.

"How long are you home for?" he asked.

"Thanks for the book you sent," I said. He had sent me *Christ at Every Crossroads*, a currently popular book on spirituality. I remembered unwrapping the brown paper package, finding the book, with a simple inscription "To Rita, Always, From Mike."

"My sister suggested it," he said, referring to his sister the nun.

Then he asked, "Did you get my letter?"

The question jarred me "No," I said, stunned at learning he had written and the letter was never given to me. I wondered what he had written. Had he made one last plea for my love, or just written harmless news as he knew he should. I felt my insides reaching for something I had almost been given, within reach, then plucked away irretrievably. I would never know what he said. I did not know how to ask, or was afraid to.

As we chatted and acted casual, I glanced over at his dark eyes and weighed his dispassionate tone of voice, trying to discern any remnants of love in him, or in myself. He gave no sign of heartbreak, but I remembered that very fast U-turn. Did he still think about kissing me and holding me in his arms? If he did, he had no proper way

of letting me know under the circumstances, and I could not ask. I dared not let myself dwell too much on the memory of dancing with my head on his shoulder, or the feeling of his lips softly against mine. All that was over now. I was sure that I belonged to God. But I still wanted Mike to want me too.

I would see Mike one other time, several years later, when I was a young nun under temporary vows. The high school in Faribault celebrated its Centennial, and all sisters who were either alumni or former faculty were invited to the celebration. We slept on cots and sleeping bags crammed throughout the dorms and convent at Bethlehem Academy. On Sunday night, in a rare exception to the rule, the sisters were even allowed to go "home" and eat with our families. Mom and Dad and the remaining kids had by now moved to San Diego, so I had no home to go to. But my sister Nancy and her husband had driven in from Iowa, and were staying with Nancy's old friend Judy, who was now married to my onetime sweetheart, Mike.

So that Sunday evening, I found myself in full habit and veil, riding in the car with Nancy and Bud to Judy and Mike's house for dinner.

In the driveway beside a white picket fence I saw the blue and white '57 Chevy I remembered so well. Zinnias and dahlias threw blotches of color across the front of Mike's modest white frame house. In the living room, a little blonde baby girl in a white diaper sat gumming a pacifier and happily pounding a small bunny against the faded flowered carpet.

This could have been my life. It would never have been, I knew, I'd have moved on, gone away to St. Kate's for college—but it could have been. For dinner we roasted hot dogs in the backyard, but mosquitoes drove us indoors to eat. Sitting around the formica kitchen table, I noticed that everyone else was talking more than Mike. Or me.

Across the table and at the far end, Mike attended to his baked beans and potato salad. Deliberately, I asked, "Would you pass the catsup, Mike?"

"Sure," he replied, handing it down the table, but his eyes never met mine.

❧

During my postulant home visit, one other landmark conversation happened on Faribault's Main Street. Dad and I had driven downtown to pick up Nancy from her job at the drugstore. We sat in the station wagon waiting. Dad's face was gray, his jowls slack, lingering signs of his stint in the hospital and shock treatments a few months ago. The depression had not proved to be a passing phase.

To my surprise, he began to talk. About himself. Maybe it was because he now saw me as an adult, or because I would soon wear the nun's habit. Maybe his ordeal had just beaten him open.

"I'm really scared," he said. "Business is still tough. I still have six kids at home. Mom's arthritis is worse all the time. We don't know where the money will come from."

From him it was a major outpouring. My heart ached for him, but my pain and worry were oddly laced with a quiet joy that he would confide in me.

I reached over and held his hand in mine.

"I just want to raise my family," he told me. "I just want to raise my family."

❧

I had to extend my home visit from the normal five days to ten, in order to have my impacted wisdom teeth out. The Mound gladly gave permission for the extension, wanting to encourage us to get medical or dental needs met while under our parents' insurance.

Even with permission, I felt uneasy, as though there was something dangerous about requiring special treatment. Never mind that the extra days were spent alone in bed, full of pain and self pity. I had never experienced such pain as I did during those days of lying in the dim bedroom, crying. I was unable to eat, but Mom would bring me ice cubes to hold in my mouth, or juice to drink through a straw. Still, I felt totally alone with my misery.

School was out by the time I was able to return to the Mound, and since Dad loved to drive and show us the sights, we made a trip out of it. Mom, Dad, Leo, Nancy and I all set out for the Motherhouse, I still nursing my tender gums. Mom was always nervous in the car, but she braved these highway trips with Dad because she believed in doing things for the family. Also, she loved the green rolling hills, fluffy with apple trees in bloom, and the clean washed spring air.

We stopped at tourist sights along the way—a house made of bottles, an old quaint stone gothic church with a German name in a town called Luxemburg. We paused for dinner at a roadhouse, then drove on towards the Mound, sure we'd be there by dark. Probably Dad was trying a new route, always curious to see what was down an unknown road. Soon we were terribly lost. It was now dark as we zoomed blindly down country roads that boasted few readable signs. The ones we glimpsed in the dark hinted we were close, very close—Dickeyville, Platteville, East Dubuque—but we could not get our orientation. We stopped to squint at a useless map under the car's inadequate dome light, and then charged off in the wrong direction once again, only to decide we must retrace our steps, and then had trouble doing even that.

With mounting anxiety, I felt captive in the car with my foundering family. I pressed my head against the window and stared into the moving darkness, wondering if some evil force was trying to slow my return. The extra five days at home, miserable as they had been, already felt like unwarranted and dangerous special attention. Being this late only aggravated my fear that I would end up in some kind of trouble.

Things close up early in the rural neighborhood where Illinois, Wisconsin and Iowa come together. We talked about finding a phone, but saw no place to stop. Anyhow, I had no idea how you'd call the Mound, who might answer, whom to ask for, especially this late at night. The whole nine months I'd lived at the Mound, I rarely

received a phone call and never made one. The idea of waking someone with a ringing phone during profound silence made me cringe.

It may have only been 10 P.M., but it felt to me like two in the morning when I saw the shadowed Mound rise in the night before us. I could not fathom that we had stayed lost for so long. We rang a seldom used doorbell at the main entrance. To my dismay, the novice mistress, Sister Marie Walter, answered the door. I always shrank from contact with the novice mistress, for in spite of her charming laugh and ready wit, she could register cutting disapproval or stony dismissal without uttering a word. How mortifying that she had to stay up and lose sleep because of me and this disoriented portion of my family.

"You must be exhausted," she said cordially, and waved us into the Academy building foyer, tile floor, old oils in gilt frames, an elaborate antique grandfather clock that chimed.

"Have you had dinner?" She shepherded us into one of the guest dining rooms, with a lace covered antique table set with silver candelabra and good china. Father Samuel Mazzuchelli, our founder, presided from a gilt frame on the wall, while on another, the child Jesus was busy teaching in the Temple. The dining room was reserved for bishops, visitors, or the priests who came in to say mass. I'd been in it only to dust one day when I filled in for another postulant.

Dinner had been hours ago, and we were starved. I sat at the lace covered table, looked with longing at the sandwiches and brownies, then ate some Jell-O with fruit in it, and gummed a few potato chips till they were soft enough to swallow.

"Can I get you a soft drink? Coffee?" Sister Marie Walter offered. Mom and Dad took coffee, and I accepted a ginger ale. Leo and Nancy devoured thick chewy brownies.

Dumb with fatigue, aching gums, and worry, I was astounded at Marie Walter's hospitality to us. The nicer she was the more nervous it made me, as though I would be made to pay later, though I had no idea why.

Sister Marie Walter made sure Dad had good directions to the

motel in Dickeyville, and I exchanged weary hugs with everyone as we saw them out the door. Then I picked up my cardboard suitcase and Marie Walter led upstairs to one of the private bedrooms near the dorm, rooms usually reserved for the sick.

"Sleep here for tonight," she directed me. "You won't wake the dorm, and they won't wake you in the morning. Why don't you sleep in till nine. You'll need it."

More exceptions being made for me. I mumbled a nervous and grateful thanks, and she left, pulling the door shut behind her. I tugged my clothes off and pulled on a long cotton nightgown, climbed into the narrow white bed and buried my misery in sleep.

St. Dominic's feast, August 4, 1960. Reception Day, at last. The day we received the Dominican habit and our religious names, and became novices. From now on we would be called Sister, though we were not yet under vows and could leave any time we or the community should so choose. For weeks we had been learning how to sew and wear our habits, the major pieces of which were assembled for wearing and disassembled for laundering each week. We had learned to stitch the long tunics to a yoke, baste on the long white wool sleeves, under which we would wear the close fitting "little sleeves" secured with elastic arm bands and removable for housework. We were fitted for the cotton cap that was starched and ironed to a peak in the center, so stiff it creased our foreheads. We hand-stitched a strip of crimped buckram into the white novice veil, so when we secured it to the cap with long pins, it bloomed out around our face in a heart shape. We were issued a black leather belt, a huge black rosary.

I folded each item of the habit as directed, and positioned my stack ahead of time on the altar rail in chapel. By 10 A.M., the day was hot but not yet muggy. All the fans were humming in chapel as the full community of sisters assembled, joined by many of our families. In our community, we did not wear bridal gowns for this day as many

other orders did, a simplicity that appealed to my practical side, while slightly disappointing the romantic in me. Still wearing our black postulant skirts and capes, we entered the chapel from the convent side. Just inside the doorway, I saw with surprise and delight the incongruous sight of my mom and dad, Leo and Nancy and my little sisters all sitting in the first section of choir stalls, where they would have a good view of the ceremony. They beamed at me with delight as I passed by towards the front pews, but I lowered my eyes, hiding my excitement behind religious decorum.

At the appointed time in the mass, we filed up in groups of twenty, stood at the appointed spot along the communion rail, and one by one Father Walker approached each one, saying, "Receive the white habit of St. Dominic. Wear it in purity and obedience. You will be called Sister Mary Bernardo." I had asked for this form of Dad's name, though I didn't care for it much, because the beautiful forms of Bernard like Bernardine or Bernadette were already taken. But old Sister Bernardo had recently died, making the name available. Bernardo was as close to one of Mom or Dad's names as I could get.

Each of us had invited a professed sister to assist us with the clothing ceremony. Sister Peter Sanz, my high school history teacher, happened to be at the Mound. She stood behind me, and helped me slip off the black veil and cape, and layer the loose white tunic over my other clothes, which I would change out of later. She helped me add belt and rosary, attach the white cape, like a large bib, at the neck. She tugged the starched cap over my head, pinning it shut in back. Never again would anyone see my hair. She pinned the white winged veil to the top of my cap, and straightened it. My cap bulged out a bit around the thick black bows of my glasses, and she tucked in a few strands of hair.

Last year's novices, who would make their vows the next day, were up in the choir loft.

Now we were clad all in white as well. As we processed down the middle aisle to leave chapel, the old novices sang the words of the

Psalm, *Quam Dilecta, Tabernacula tua Domine Virtutum*. "How lovely is your dwelling place, oh Lord of Hosts." The piece begins with a single line of melody, then blossoms into unearthly polyphony. Tears of joy sprang to my eyes, my heart was full beyond words. All the exhaustion and labor of the year seemed trivial at this moment. The novices' pure voices soared against the gothic ceiling, and I joined in the singing. "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts. My heart and my flesh are faint with longing for the Lord. I will dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life."

Raised in a lively and complex Catholic kome the author enters a Dominican convent in time for the 1960's to turn her world and her church upside down. A compelling and unflinching spiritual memoir and a tale of the times.

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