

2004

Confessions of a Catholic

Molly J. Rose
Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd>



Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), and the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rose, Molly J., "Confessions of a Catholic" (2004). *Retrospective Theses and Dissertations*. 202.
<https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd/202>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa State University Capstones, Theses and Dissertations at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Retrospective Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.

Confessions of a Catholic

by

Molly Jo Rose

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Program of Study Committee:
Sheryl St. Germain (Major Professor)
Stephen Pett
David Hunter

Iowa State University

Ames

2004

Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the master's thesis of

Molly Jo Rose

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signature redacted for privacy

Major Professor

Signature redacted for privacy

For the Major Program

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	iv
1. Introduction	1
2. The Hagiography Junkie	5
3. When She Stops Chasing Him, He Catches Her and Other Things Learned in the Confessional	15
4. How to Dress for Your Sister's Funeral	21
5. The Meaning of Memory	27
6. Between Sex and Prayer	38
7. A Body of Faith	49
8. Obedience and Pebbles	63

Acknowledgements

I should thank God, and I do everyday, for my mother – for her love and support through times when lesser men would run.

I don't even know where to begin in thanking Steve Pett for his guidance, both paternal and academic, over the last two years. I am ever grateful for his level-headed wisdom, the windfall of opportunities he has dropped in my lap, and for always taking time and a genuine interest in my life. Thanks to you, to Clare, and to Josie for refuge and a home away from home.

I am grateful for the gentle guidance and grace of Deb Marquart, in both the written word and in her person.

Special thanks to Jim Coppoc for shaping the writing culture in Ames and for letting me be a part of the adventure with him.

And lastly, thanks to Colin for his support and his commitment to all things fun.

Introduction

Once, the priest of my mom's parish began Mass by asking each of us to greet the person next to us by sharing our name and admitting we were sinners.

"Hi, I'm Molly," I said, shaking the pruned hand of the white-haired man behind me. "I'm a sinner." And then to my right, I turned and repeated the words. "I'm a sinner." The growing din of the church peaked with nervous laughter, the noticeable discomfort of a congregation owning up to its imperfections. Sweaty palms exchanged the accounting of sins.

Every Sunday as a Catholic I am called to a public confession, but this priest's tactics were highly unusual. In the Liturgy of the Word, the first half of the Mass, the congregation rise from our pews and in unified voice professes: *we confess to Almighty God, and to you my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned through my own thoughts, my own words, and my own actions.*

The significance of the public confession is often lost on me, even as the words stumble out of my mouth. I am distracted easily, thinking about my plans for after Mass. Or sometimes the repetition of the Mass lulls me like a mantra, making the comprehension of individual words nearly impossible. Which is why Father's request at the opening of Mass was so jarring. I couldn't slide through the words without considering the meaning, without owning up to my faults so nakedly in front of strangers. My best friend sat next to me at that Mass, and I watched as her eyes narrowed with resentment at Father's request. *I'm not doing that*, her eyes spoke. I was too bewildered to be resentful, giggling with others while exposing my sins. She kept to herself, shaking hands but remaining silent.

The origins of public confession reach as far back as A.D. 140. An early document known as *The Shepherd of Hermas* suggests reconciliation resides in the entire community of believers. To be reconciled by God, one must be reconciled with their community. The distinction between *confession* and *reconciliation* must be made clear. I confessed my sins to the people sitting around me at Mass. I am reconciled by their love and continued acceptance. But I have found that I cannot do this outside of my faith. The expectations from others are too great. My slate must remain clean and pure as there are some who cannot bear the dichotomy of a Christian who sins.

After several drinks on the outdoor veranda of a local bar one evening, a friend of mine who was raised in a particularly strict version of Catholicism exhorted to me that I was not really Catholic. He refers to me as a *new and reformed* Catholic because I do not fit into the narrow view of religion he was raised in and has since left. I've tried explaining to him that a Catholicism that allows a father to force his son to his knees for hours in repentance is not Catholicism. I've tried to show him that Catholicism is not about perfection, but about love and forgiveness.

"I can settle this," one of our colleagues listening in on the conversation interrupted to play the part of mediator. "I can tell you whether she's Catholic or not." I was intrigued. Was there one magical question that could prove my commitment to the faith? Leaning forward in her wrought iron chair, she whispered like a dirty secret, "Have you had sex?"

I was too stunned to answer. That was it? That was her question? This was going to prove my faith one way or another? My hesitance drew laughter from those sitting around the table of half empty gin and tonic glasses. My inquisitor laughed the loudest. "You're not Catholic!" she howled. The son with the rug-burned knees only smiled.

It is experiences like this that fuel much of this writing. I am struck with a need, or maybe a calling, to explain myself and my faith and how the two are undeniably fused together. In my society of academia, a place not often associated with the dogmatic practice of traditional faith, I become a symbol of something, rather than a breathing person. I become a collection of beliefs, rather than a flawed human who still struggles and questions. This writing is an attempt to humanize Catholicism. If for no other reason, this writing is proof that there are young Catholics out there who are still committed to exploring a faith often left behind by our contemporaries.

These essays are my public confession. They are an attempt to widen the box of understanding of Catholicism to allow the concept of struggle. I want it known that Catholicism is a faith of inquiry, a faith that supports questioning and expects struggle. Our model struggled to the last, not wanting to let go of a life only thirty-three years in the making.

St. Augustine started the tradition of confessional literature and in their own way, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath followed his lead in their confessional poetry. Each of these publicly confessed their struggle for catharsis and connection with a world outside themselves. I read Augustine and feel the blood of his struggle. His words are physical. They ache. It is the same with Sexton and certainly with Plath. They agonize over the struggle of life and death and the torment in between. But where Augustine finds peace, the poets find deeper torment. Buddhism teaches there are two kinds of suffering. The first is a suffering that releases us from our suffering. The second only leads to further suffering.

I am between these. My confession is this. I struggle as a Catholic. I bear my anger like Plath, yelling to my bastard father that we're through. But as in her work, the love is the

negative space surrounding the trial. The purpose of the confession is to connect with others on the most basic level of struggle. It is our common denominator. I am Augustine. I am Sexton. I am Plath. And you are me. It is all one, universal, *catholic*. We confess that we do not understand. We confess that we are not serving the greater purpose we are called to. We confess that life spits us out and leaves us wet, disoriented, confused, angry.

I am the humanity of the Church. I am its sins. I am everything that is wrong with it. I admit it. I confess it. Every day I turn to the person next to me in class, or on the bus, or in the line of the grocery store, and I say it. I tell them the truth and then I move on in the struggle with the grace of absolution. My faith has room for it.

The Hagiography Junkie

When I was seven, I desperately wanted to be like Jacinta, Francisco, and Lucia. My family took a pilgrimage to the site in Fatima where the Virgin Mary appeared to this brother, sister, and cousin. It is here where the sun is said to have hurled down to the earth toward the crowd that gathered in fascination and disbelief as Lucia carried on a conversation with a woman no one else could see but her. Some in the crowd testified to smelling roses near the place where the three children kneeled, a common sign of the Virgin Mary. Jacinta and Francisco could hear the lady in blue, but they could not see her. And when the secrets were divulged, they were to Lucia alone.

I devoured all of the literature on Lucia. I hungrily searched for details of her later life when she became a cloistered nun, telling the hushed secrets only to Pope John Paul II who was to reveal them at the times instructed in the visitations. The story is riveting, but to me at age seven, I was more fixated on the piety of the childrens' lives than on the fantastical story of the sun. I learned their stories by heart through little 3x4 books my mom bought me at a hotel in Portugal. I had a book for each of them in both English and Portuguese. I pored over them, memorizing their lives in both languages. I desperately wanted to be like them, tending sheep, serving piously, living their simple life so extraordinarily altered by Mary's visit to them.

When I finally reached the whitewashed home where Francisco and Jacinta lived as children, I threw up in front of the shabby wooden door. Their uncle still lived there, and was seated on a rock in front of the white stone structure as I heaved. His skin was coffee-colored with thick wrinkled lines framing a long black moustache. I looked up to see his

fingers pulling at the corners of the moustache, watching me so inattentively I assumed I was not the first to become overexcited in this place.

When we returned from the pilgrimage, my sister, who was also taken with the stories, joined my crusade in begging my mom to buy us books on other saints. A good Catholic mother, she easily relented, purchasing several that took permanent residence on my bookshelf. My favorite, *The Life of Catherine Laboure*, was bound in blue. Its edges grew soft and feathery after years of use by me and my sister. We took it to bed with us like a stuffed animal. I so wanted to be a saint like the little French peasant girl in the book, who so perfectly respected her parents in all things. The hagiography of Catherine Laboure was like many of its kind, sentimental and rife with easy and succinct platitudes.

After her mother's early death, the eight-year old Catherine took over the household and raised her sixteen siblings. As a nun later in life, Catherine had a vision from Mary who asked her to have a medal struck in the image that was shown to her. I envied the ease of Catherine's holiness, her seemingly effortless obedience. I wanted to know more. I wanted to know how to become a saint myself, their lives so rich and meaningful. Their paths, as told in the usual hagiographic format, were so clearly constructed and beautifully determined. In the romantic agony only a third grader can experience, I was willing to do anything to become one of them.

My days of martyrdom were sooner in coming than I could have imagined. I was nine-years old when my third grade teacher asked me to stay behind after class. I watched as my classmates uniformly shuffled out the room, looking behind like little spies as they left. When my mom walked in, I knew things were not looking good, but my sin was yet unknown to me. I unfolded my divider, the long sheet of cardboard scored in two places

used to create privacy at our workspace. I propped the trifold up around me when I saw my mom walk through the door of my third grade classroom. Mothers didn't belong in classrooms. It was so out of place, like seeing a TV star at the grocery store, only scarier. The air of the classroom was hot and quiet. Chalk dust danced in the window light as I pretended to be hard at work multiplying, dividing, lining up fractions on the page like little soldiers.

"Hi Dianne." Most of my teachers called my mom Mrs. Rose. Ms. Linda was casual with her bleached blonde hair and jeans. She always acted like she was better than third grade. Like her radical seventies beauty belonged in superior digs than St. John Vianney elementary school.

"Hel-lo ..." Mom used her friendly voice, the one she uses when she answers the telephone.

Pulling out one of our tiny blue chairs, Ms. Linda offered my mom the seat. Mom sat down, her knees nearly reaching her chin. She made an effort to retain her adulthood by crossing one leg over the other and leaning over her knee. Ms. Linda sat tall in her desk with a big show of white teeth. "Thanks for coming in today. It's not a big deal." She looked in my direction smileless. "It's just that we're having an issue with Molly on library day."

Mom uncrossed her knee and sat back in the tiny blue chair. She waited for the worst. Ms. Linda was bent on delivering it.

"She's checking out books that I don't find appropriate for her age." I ducked down behind the divider when I saw my mom's eyes dart in my direction.

“Really.” It wasn’t a question. The flat anger of my mom’s voice made her sound like a stranger. “Well ...” her anger floundered momentarily before landing on a new target. “What does the school library have that would be inappropriate?”

It was Ms. Linda’s turn to flounder. “What I mean is, she’s checking out books beyond her reading level.” Ms. Linda reached below her desk and pulled out four hard-cover books. They dropped before my mom with a delicious thud. “Books like these.”

Mom leaned forward in her chair. I curled my neck around the side of the divider to see the books in question, watching anxiously as Mom slid them toward her, reading the titles one by one. She shuffled through them looking for the offensive book. The dissatisfaction in her search was apparent even to me several table lengths away.

“These are all books on lives of the saints.”

“Yes. They are.” Ms. Linda’s chin rose until I could see all of her neck. “They are at seventh and eighth grade level. I told Molly she may not check out these books.” Then with her neck lowered conspiratorially and with her big toothy smile spread, “I wanted to bring up this up with you, Dianne.” She looked at me like she’d sucked on a lemon. “Because she’s checking them out anyway.”

Mom slid her purse over her shoulder and grabbed the stack of books from Ms. Linda’s desk. “She reads ahead of her grade. She can read these.” Then turning to me, “Get your coat.”

I avoided Ms. Linda’ eyes as I shot my arm triumphantly through the puffy pink sleeve of my coat. I didn’t want her to see my pride. I wanted to play the part of the subservient child saint. I wanted to be holy. I felt just like Lucia must have when her mother berated her for lying about the apparitions of Mary. Lucia could not yield to her mother,

because it would have been sinful to deny what was true. Her father threatened her with violence, but Lucia stood her ground, her eyes lowered curtains of deference to their authority. I averted my eyes and swallowed my smug grin.

It was not so strange that I could read at a higher level, though it's true that many of my classmates were not as interested in stretching themselves as I was. But I'm convinced that being raised Catholic gave me a natural advantage over other students of literature. In what other world does a 7-year old child have a working knowledge of words like *transubstantiation*, or the other meaning of *assumption*, as in, Mary was assumed into heaven? Don't get me started on the amount of Latin I knew before I was able to do my times tables. And my ache to be a saint developed a natural resistance to everything. My resistance bred questions that I demanded answers for. It is just short of hyperbolic to say that I engaged in more theological battles by the age of eight than most will endure in a lifetime.

But everything changed in fifth grade. I can put my finger on the exact moment when I realized that I would not be a saint, and it had everything to do with a girl named Laura Grahs. Laura was one of my classmates at St. John's. She was short with auburn hair and round features. She had a wicked look, grinning like she'd just stepped off the stage of a school play with her Wicked Witch makeup still caked to her face. Her look was all the more sinister since she had plucked out all of her eyelashes for reasons never explained to any of us, despite our ruthlessly questioning. She delighted in teasing me about how deeply I bowed before the Tabernacle when we went to All School Mass (a Mass the whole school attended once a week during classtime). Her shallow cackle reached every corner of the

playground when she mimicked me with her eyes closed, prayerfully approaching the altar for communion.

Laura's taunts that day were nothing out of the ordinary, nothing I couldn't toss onto the ever growing scrap pile of martyrdom I was mentally saving. We were in the classroom alone. I don't remember why. I think maybe Sr. Lorenzo had asked me and Laura to sort some papers for her. Despite how mean she was outside of the classroom, Laura had fooled the nuns into thinking she was a nice, sweet Catholic girl. When Sister Lorenzo left the room, Laura's lashless eyes gleamed.

"What did you say to Mike about kissing?"

"I don't know." I knew it was best to not engage.

"You said it was sex, didn't you?"

"No ... I ... not exactly. But they're related." Laura howled in delighted laughter as I grew red and defensive. "It *is* related!" I told her, though in truth, I was very naïve as to *how* they were related. "We shouldn't be talking about this."

She practically hiccuped with laughter. "Kissing is not sex, Molly!" I knew she was preparing to expose my gross innocence to the rest of the class even as she and I spoke. I was terrified of being found out.

"I know that, Laura! I *said* I know that." I realized, too, that my anger was more incriminating than my words. I tried to laugh it off, but my laugh came out forced. "I was just saying that as a joke." Laura's smile curled in pure wickedness. By the end of the day, I was the proverbial laughing stock of the school. Even my best friend, Michele, glanced sideways shiftily as she strolled right past me in the school hallway.

I stopped wanting to be a saint at that moment. The torment and ridicule were too much and I was being made fun of for something I found absolutely intolerable. This was worse than any religious taunt; I was being strung up for my ignorance! It was more important to me to be known as precociously smart than it was to be considered holy. I couldn't bear being exposed as ignorant even about sex.

I was determined to change my image. At the next All School Mass, I broke new ground by cracking jokes until the pew shook with my classmates' laughter. What the jokes were, I cannot recall. But to be honest, it isn't difficult to distract bored fifth graders at an All School Mass. One need only do something as uncreative as intentionally sing off key, or exchange a few carefully chosen words in the recitation of the Creed just out of Sr. Lorenzo's range of hearing. She was in her early 70s when she was teaching fifth grade. Most things were out of her hearing range.

My attempts at performing a Madonna-like identity change (the singer, not the Mother of God) were only mildly successful. The truth was, I was still bent toward the religious life, entertaining the idea of the sisterhood in the dark corners of my mind, unilluminated to Laura. I still loved to read about the saint's lives. By seventh grade, I was on to St. Augustine, the man who walked the streets of Babylon, a sinner like everybody else. In truth, his confessions were beyond me, so rich in philosophy and deep in theology. I was finally guilty of Ms. Linda's accusations, but I plucked away at them anyway, stowing quotes in reserve for future demonstrations of my holy intelligence.

Augustine's life parted from the romanticized stories I'd grown accustomed to. He grew up in wealth, suffered no great disadvantages that haloed him as unearthly or holy. But he believed and I still believed. If nothing else, I had faith to move mountains, and yet, I

couldn't stop sinning. I fastidiously attended Sunday Mass and regularly went to Confession. One might even say I was religious about it. But everyday, every year, I slipped further away from St. Catherine. I struggled to understand St. Theresa of Avila's ecstasy. I could not reach the pinnacle of Thomas Merton's Seven Storey Mountain. The devotion of my youth was crumbling under the weight of high school angst and an intelligent college boyfriend who touted atheism (in the corner of Denny's with black fingernails circling his eighty-three cent coffee). But there were saints around me, lesser known, whose lives were open for me to read if I would only look in front of me.

*

When I was nineteen, an employer of mine asked me why my mom was melancholy all the time.

"Is she?" I hadn't thought about it.

My employer looked as confused as I was. "Well, yeah. You think she's happy?"

Just like one never realizes their mother is fat, or talks funny, or makes peculiar lunches, we don't recognize what we see every day of our lives. My mother is definitely not fat. She doesn't talk funny, nor does she make peculiar lunches. But she is melancholy. Sad even, and she's always been this way, a survivor of life more than someone who celebrates it.

Every morning before everyone in the house wakes up, my mom can be found sitting on the couch with a rosary woven between her fingers and a towel wrapped around her freshly-washed hair. The romanticized version of my mother's life would go like this. She grew up the middle sister of three girls, the alcoholic father's least favorite. When her father yelled *which one of you did it*, her head bobbed up and down, nodding, agreeing to the charge. It didn't occur to her to stand back and let the guilty sister take the punishment.

When the father told her to fetch a switch for spanking, she came back with a large one. She turned around and pulled up her petticoat, dutifully waiting for the undeserved spanking.

As a young mother of four, she tended to her dying mother, the absence of whom created a deep need for a spiritual mother in Mary. She raised her children in the faith as hard and fast as she was able with a husband who did not share in her spirituality. When his parents came to visit their newlywed home, he hid her statue of the Virgin Mary in a drawer so as to not offend his Lutheran parents. They said things to her face like, *I can't believe he's marrying a Catholic*. She endured. In her fifties, she endured more, the loss of her oldest daughter, her own diagnosis and painful treatment of cancer, her young grandson's struggle with leukemia.

It is no wonder my employer found her melancholy. But more than melancholy, she is deeply prayerful. The hagiography of my mother would dwell on this. On her faith. No, Mary never appeared to her. And no, she has not had a private audience with the Pope. But she does have that acceptance, that ease and seemingly effortless obedience I so coveted in Lucia and Catherine Laboure.

Sister Lucia, the extraordinary child and mystic, lives on for me in a place that isn't exactly real. Her story is a fairytale replete with the battle of good over evil. She vanquishes the demon and lives happily ever after. The golden-curved peasant girl from my favored blue book also remains inhumanly sweet and charitable. In truth, the real person of Lucia undoubtedly struggles and has moments of resistance and suffering. Catherine Laboure probably did not enjoy losing her childhood so early on. But that is not their stories as I recall them. To me, they remain in that romanticized original form. But my adult life demands more from a saint.

Living with my mom, watching her struggle, I witness the reality of the life of a saint. It isn't easy. It isn't rife with succinct platitudes and easy epiphanic moments. It has nothing to do with haloed moments of euphoria. It isn't about mystical visionary experiences that convert the disbelieving Thomas. It is this. It is surviving life and death and still believing God has a plan that is buried beneath the weight of grief and heartache. It is loving rude and unkind in-laws and making their favorite meal whenever they visited. It is everyday, waking up before everyone else, ticking off Hail Marys on a chain of beads with a towel wrapped around freshly-washed hair.

When She Stops Chasing Him, He Catches Her and Other Things Learned in the Confessional

Father Don leans forward in his chair. The air of the confessional is quiet, cool, and light.

The small Polish priest is in all black attire, save for the strip of white collar at his throat. He offers his hand to me. I take it in mine, soft. We briefly shake hands and I seat myself on the edge of the chair in front of him. I want to get in and out quickly.

“Hello, Father.” I smile at him, crossing my forearms and hands over my legs to hide how short my shorts are. He smiles warmly at me, and kindly does not take notice of my gesture.

“Welcome. How long has it been since your last confession?”

“Maybe a month or so, Father.”

“Okay. Let’s pray that you make a good confession.” He bends his head down, his soft hands folded at his knee. His muttering is nearly inaudible. I bend my head down, making up a prayer and finishing before him.

His gray white hair is slicked back, smooth and clean, with a razor-straight part off to the right side. His frame is small, suggesting he has taken the Lenten practice of fasting too far. His shoulders and chest are the same size as the 11-year old boys who tend to the candles and incense at mass. There is something about him. Humility. In his face. In the quiet bend of his arms. In the slope of his shoulders and neck. My shoulders straighten in his presence. I tug my shirt down to thoroughly cover my somewhat exposed midriff. Then I begin.

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned ...”

I first came to him when I moved to the apartment on Crescent Street. I called my mom to tell her how close I was to St. Isidore's. To its high spire shooting out of the highway only three streets away from my new home. *I can walk there*, I told her. I knew she would be pleased. The only other landmarks I lived near were the bars on Michigan street and the Dairy Mart where someone had recently been knifed. I didn't tell her how close I was to those.

It's an old church. One of the first in Grand Rapids. Its high cathedral ceilings and large stained glass windows brightly illuminate the life-sized Stations of the Cross circling the walls of the church. The inscriptions below them are in Polish, which looks to me like a language that uses w, s, and z too frequently and too often in succession. Most of the parish is Polish and they read in their first language easily.

I cannot read the Polish, but I don't need the Stations interpreted. The anguish in Christ's face as the weight of the cross crushes his right shoulder to the ground, the agonized twist of his mouth as his knees dig into the dirt. He has fallen for the first time. No words are needed to explain this Station to me. I often sit before it as I prepare for confession.

*

There is a bulb next to the door of the confessional. I wait for it to turn green. Red means someone is in the middle of confessing. Green means Father is available. I kneel at the pew and watch for the green light. Today, I am ready to confess my sins.

"I've been too intimate with my boyfriend," I will tell Father Don. It's always the same thing. Only last time, I wouldn't confess it. Not that I wouldn't confess it, because I said it out loud to him. But I wouldn't feel bad about it.

"I don't feel guilty about it, Father," I admitted with reluctance.

Father stopped fiddling with the rosary beads in his softly pruned fingers. I could see dents where the chain connecting the beads had left their mark. He was silent, looking straight at me, waiting for me to change my mind. It wasn't changing.

"What do I do if I don't feel bad about it?"

"Well," the beads began winding around his fingers again, "you accept that it isn't the right thing to do whether you feel guilt for it or not."

I thought about what he said. I wanted to do the right thing.

"I can't confess it, Father. I don't think it was wrong."

It was a dead heat. Father Don looked at me. I looked at him. The beads were still.

"Then I can't absolve you."

I shrugged and put my chin in my hand, examining the carpet closely. I knew I couldn't do it, so I stood up.

"Okay then." Father Don stood up, too.

"Come back and talk to me anytime." His voice was hopeful. His eyes were full.

"Okay, I will. Thank you, Father."

I walked out of the confessional that day, hoping I'd turned a new page. But I didn't. It wasn't long before I was back again with the same story. Only this time, I was ready to really confess it.

"I've been too intimate with my boyfriend," I tell Father Don. I am aware of how Victorian I sound. I wish I could use the word sex, but I think I'd die in the confessional if I did.

"Okay, okay." His eyes are on the carpet. His head bobs up and down slowly in understanding. He doesn't hold last month against me. I think he's relieved that I'm back.

He begins to speak slowly. "I visit the prison from time to time, you know. Priests are often called there," he tells me by way of explanation. But I already know this. He told me this three weeks ago, and three weeks before that. I know this story so well I could recite it. Instead I nod.

His voice is quiet and slow. He is patient with his delivery. "For my security and for my safety, a guard is present and between the inmate and I is a table. You see, the table separates us so that nothing can happen to me. He cannot reach me across the table."

I nod again and twist the ring on my index finger around and around. I want to look as humble as he looks.

"That's how it should be with your boyfriend. Do not be alone with him. And always keep a table's length between the two of you." Father Don rolls his eyes slightly at his own words. It's an effort to let me know that he realizes how silly I find this. "Then nothing can happen."

We exchange grins. We know I am an adult woman and we both know how his advice sounds. But he wants me to follow it anyway. His eyes seem to beg *just try it. I promise it will work!* I nod appreciatively. This time I will do just as he says. I want him to believe it.

"Anything else?" he asks. I continue with my confession.

*

Father Don perches in the chair of the confessional waiting for me. It's been a month since I saw him last. His head is bent down to his chest when I walk in. I wonder if I have to wake him.

“Father?” I call out timidly. His head shoots up from his chest. He comes to life, and smiles full at me.

“Hello! Come. Have a seat. Welcome.” His voice is still soft. Still warm. Still full of humility. I hope he recognizes me this time. His smile suggests he does.

I begin. “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It’s been about a month since my last confession.”

I explain to him how it is with men. How it isn’t working. How I want to get married. How far my boyfriend is from being ready. Father nods. The light streaming through the windows falls between us. I watch a ballet of dust in silence.

“Uh-huh, uh-huh. I see. My sister is a nun, but she did date before. Do you know what she always tells me?”

I do. I know because Fr. Don has already told me what she always tells him. I don’t know how to answer him. Do I lie and play dumb? In the confessional? Or do I tell Father that he’s already told me his celibate sister’s dating advice. I hesitate, my mouth slightly open. I tug at the hem of my skirt. It rides up past my knees if I don’t watch it.

“Have I already told you about this?” There is a light in his eyes. A band of recognition.

“Uh ... I think so.” My skirt lays over my knees now. I look straight ahead at him.

“Oh, oh ... so you know. But it bears retelling. She says ‘A woman chases a man until he catches her.’”

This is one of Father’s favorite things to say. You can tell. His eyes gleam. I know he loves how clever this phrase is. I want to think it’s clever, too.

“That’s good,” I say, smiling at its cleverness.

“When she stops chasing him, he catches her,” he repeats, jabbing the air at every syllable for emphasis. “So you need to let go. Let him catch you.” He smiles his shy smile.

It’s impossible for me to not like him. Even if he sent me away without absolution before. Even if he never remembers me. Maybe he does remember. I come in every month with the same stories, the same sins. I keep falling the same way. Why can’t he tell the same stories?

My penance is to sit in front of the altar. To contemplate God. On God’s will for me. I silently slip into a pew two rows back from the altar. The air smells like Murphy’s Oil Soap and incense.

The Polish Stations surround me. They are enormous. Bigger than life-size. *Jesus falls for the second time. Jesus falls for the third time.* I let my knees rest on the cool kneeler. The cushion exhales as it adjusts to my weight. I brush the seat of my skirt to make sure it isn’t riding up again.

I hear a click from the back of church. In the cavernous quiet, it echoes. I hear a swishing. A padding of feet getting closer, moving swiftly. I do not turn around because this is church. I’m supposed to be praying. I run my fingernails through the grooves in the wood of the pew, and look up just in time to see Father Don. He nods to me as he passes by, careful not to interrupt my prayer. I smile at him, then fold my hands around my face to pray. I can smell the spicy scent of the pews in them.

How to Dress for Your Sister's Funeral

I stand in front of my closet trying to decide what to wear to my sister's funeral. I have at least twenty dresses and none of them are right for Andie's funeral. I have to wear something meaningful. Something I will look steady and strong in so no one can come to me with one of those pathetic looks on their face that makes me want to scratch their eyes out.

I have a long purple dress with short sleeves and an empire waist that I hardly ever wear. The dress is a deep shade of purple, the color of royalty. It seems like the right thing for today. No one will give that tiresome look of sympathy to a person of royalty. I hang the dress from the door of my closet to put on before my family and I leave for the church.

Before we leave for Andie's funeral.

I am dressing for my sister's funeral, I have to keep telling myself. But I don't know how to accept that reality. *I am dressing for Andie's funeral*. What else do I need for the funeral? What do I need for *Andie's* funeral? Shoes. I need shoes, and I need nylons, I need a scarf, and I need to not cry. I'm not ready. I slump down on my bed and fold up into a ball to cry. To avoid the dressing that starts the whole day in motion.

My brother's son walks into my room where I lay slumped on the bed.

"Why are you crying?" His hands dig deep into his pockets. His is the voice of a confused, nervous child who rarely sees an adult cry.

"I don't want to get dressed."

"I know what you mean." He stares at his black socks. "I didn't want to wear this suit today." We both stare at his socks. He turns to leave, dragging my bedroom door behind him. The sound of it swishes against the carpet before clicking shut.

I return to the closet, force my listless arm to pull my only pair of black shoes from the shelf. I hate these shoes. Black slingbacks with meshed leather. I bought them for my cousin's wedding, and I hated them even then. I am loathe to wear formal shoes for any occasion, but today I have no choice. They drop with an unsatisfying thud below the hanging purple dress.

I stroll over to my green dresser. The same dresser I've had since I was seven when Mom and Dad bought Andie and me our first set of bedroom furniture. The dresser wasn't green then. It was cheap lacquered wood with brass handles. I painted it green when I was in high school. The drawers are a lighter shade of green. Andie's furniture is still in her old bedroom. It's still lacquered wood with no paint to cover its cheapness. Some of her clothes are still folded in its drawers. Scratch-n-Sniff stickers still line the sides of it.

I pull the brass handled top drawer, the narrowest drawer, and grope around in it for a pair of nylons. My hands feel the netted thinness of them. I pluck them from their resting place. I hate wearing nylons almost as much as I hate wearing formal shoes.

From the narrow drawer, I feel for the cold slickness of a slip. My fingers glide over something unnaturally smooth – the last of the articles of clothing that I never wear. None of this is me. The shoes, the nylons, the slip – uncomfortable, binding pieces of clothing that belong in unreachable top drawers rather than on my body, my legs, or my feet.

I plop down on the bed, point my toes in preparation for the encasement of the nylons. I stretch out the middle band in two wide yanks and jimmy the meshed material up my legs, stopping only to twist and straighten the toes at the bottom and to snap out the gathering behind my knees. Once up over my thighs, I stand up and yank the constricting waistline over my stomach before sitting down to watch the forced rolls appear.

Snatching the slinky slip from its coiled nest on the bed, I straighten it and let it slide down my raised arms, past my shoulders, down my body. I pull it straight down at the hem to smooth it out. Goosebumps form under its liquid steeliness.

The shoes wait expectantly below the hanging purple dress, but I'm not ready to feel the prickly web of leather over my feet. I reach for the dress instead, grabbing the right sleeve to force it off the hanger. The hanger clanks against the closet door as it falls. I swing the dress upside-down, fanning out the bottom with my outstretched hands. In one fell swoop, the dress is over my head. It shimmies down the glossiness of the slip and slides down my hips. The dress is polyester. It slides like water, leaving no wrinkles.

A rust-colored sweater lays across my antique trunk of sweaters, pulled out and selected by a cousin who guarantees it's just the right color for me. That's important today, on the day of *my sister's funeral* – wearing just the right color.

I'm freezing. My bedroom over the garage is always the coldest room in the house. The wool sweater, though scratchy at the neck, is comforting over the raised hairs on my arms. My cousin left a long purple scarf for me. A different shade of purple than my dress. The cool tone of it complements the dress and the rust-colored sweater. I wind it loosely around my neck before stepping in front of a full-length mirror. My reflection looks back at me. I am tall and serene.

My self-admiring glances are interrupted by my mom's voice from the bottom of stairs, but she isn't speaking to me.

"Marge," my mother speaks chidingly, as if to a child. "Marge! You know Andie wouldn't have liked any of this." I hear the woman named Marge crying.

“I know, I know,” Marge whimpers. I can tell from their brief exchange that Marge’s tears are not because of Andie’s death. She is crying because Andie’s in-laws are fighting for grief rights and she is losing.

I want to run down the steps and slap her – slap all of them. But I’m not ready to go downstairs yet. I haven’t put on any makeup or earrings, and my cousins have left out such pretty pieces for me to wear.

I walk past the voices at the bottom of the stairwell, into the bathroom where the amethyst earrings and necklace are laid out on the white stretch of bathroom counter. My fingers touch the cold hardness of them before I pick up the necklace and fold it around my collarbone and neck.

I wrestle with the scarf for a moment, allow the rose pendant of the necklace to fall just right before snapping its clasp with a sharp click. I cock my head and poke an amethyst earring through my right ear. Flipping my hair in the opposite direction, I poke the other earring through the left.

Down the stairs there are twenty or thirty people on the main floor of my parents’ house. I can hear their chatter. They are like geese at a pond. They are the same group of people who came to my sister’s wedding reception only two years ago. The geese jabber away like they’ve come for a wedding reception. They are here again too soon.

From the bathroom cupboards, I slide my blue makeup container out. I rummage through the glossy compacts, the mirrored eye shadow cases, and the smooth plastic lipstick vials until I find my powder. With a large brush, I sweep the white contents across my face, the darkened circles under my eyes, along my pink nose, and then smooth out the blotchiness of my cheeks.

I select a dark purple shadow for my eyes to match my dress, brush it along the line of my eye like eyeliner. An orange color for my lips, I apply it carefully with a skinny brush, puckering close to the mirror to apply it evenly.

I am ready to go downstairs to face Marge and the chatter of the sympathetic geese.

“Are you okay?” the geese will ask when I walk among them. Every time they ask, Andie will slip further away.

“Oh, sure,” I will say, my voice coming out as a whisper through my perfectly-colored lips. “I’m fine, thanks,” throwing my shoulders back to emphasis the lean breadth of them in my purple dress.

I am dressed for my sister’s funeral.

I pull the rust-colored cardigan together with one hand, and fly down my parents’ steps as I have always done. I clutch the last post of the stair railing, and make my entrance into the throng of mourners, the quacking geese at a pond who behave like they’re at a wedding reception.

Marge and the rest of the geese jerk around at the sound of my exuberant entrance. They smile their grim smiles. They remember that today is not a celebration. Today is my sister’s funeral. My brothers stand in dark suits with their strong hands on their wives’ shoulders.

I stroll through the mourners mourning my sister’s death. In their black and gray, they give my colorful dress a wide berth. I pass each of them, smile at their grim, sympathetic smiles. I am royalty in a sea of black costume. I am untouchable with my artfully drawn face.

I pull my disheveled sweater up over my shoulder with a quick yank to perfect my ensemble. I face the gathered mourners in their black, colorless clothes. They are quiet. There is nothing they can say about how I look. I stand out. I am flawless with steel posture and stilled tears. I am too perfect to be touched. I am ready for the church and for them and for this day that changes everything.

The Meaning of Memory

1. the mental capacity or faculty of retaining and reviving facts, events, impressions, etc., or of recalling or recognizing previous experiences.

It begins with footsteps, hurried and anxious. Outside my bedroom door, scurrying feet and my mom's heaving sobs break my slumber in two. I jolt upright in bed, yelling, "Mom!" No answer. The clock reads 2:11 am.

I didn't hear the phone ring. It was my brother-in-law, Brian, screaming into the phone, "Pray! Pray! Pray!" Like a crazed evangelist, he screamed his mantra, shaking my mom and dad out of their sleep.

"What is it, Brian? Is it Andie? Is Andie okay?"

"No! She's not! They're trying to bring her back! Just pray!"

Click.

I run down the stairs to where my parents stand in the kitchen. Mom's hands cover her face as Dad tries to comfort her. They're out of their pajamas, wearing jeans and sweatshirts.

"What is it, Mom? What's wrong?" Through broken sobs, she relays Brian's confusing message. I stand before her in disbelief. How could she be so silly as to believe it? I was sure Brian was just having some bizarre dream. "It's going to be okay," I tell her, withholding my opinion of the obvious error in judgment she was making.

But they don't agree. "No." Dad's croaks. "It's not."

I was certain Brian had called in his sleep. I'd read about something like this in TIME magazine, something about men having violent, realistic dreams they physically act out on. I

decided this was the case, but my parents drove directly to Brian and Andie's home to take care of their three kids so Brian could go with Andie in the ambulance.

They were out the door in a matter of minutes, leaving me a cell phone number in case I heard anything. I was alone then with my swimming head for company. Sleep clung to my shocked body. I plopped down in the middle of the kitchen floor, confused, bewildered, incredulous.

No sooner had I convinced myself of Brian's awful nightmare, then I knew it wasn't a dream. Just like that. I knew if I looked up, Andie would be standing before me to say good-bye. I didn't want to see her. My eyes focused on the ground as I shouted at her would-be image, "No! Go away! You can't come here!"

I was still shielding my eyes when the phone rang. I scrambled to my feet, answered it mid-ring. My hollow voice screamed a frantic hello into the phone.

A pause on the other end, then, "This is Joe, the paramedic. Is this Dianne or Jerry Rose?"

"No! Is Andie okay?"

"Who is this I'm speaking to?" asked Joe the Paramedic in a calm, but not calming voice.

"This is her sister!"

"I'm sorry," he began, "We were not able to resuscitate her ..."

*2. this faculty as possessed by a particular individual:
to have a good memory.*

“It’s my turn!” I shout when Jon picks up the dice and shakes them in his cupped palm. My family circles the boardgame, *Trivia Adventure*, on the long dining room table after Sunday dinner. Jon hands me the dice and I roll.

“What is the capital of Hungary?” Robb asks, covering the back of the card to make sure I can’t read the answer. I shrug and giggle in embarrassment. Andie sulks in the corner muttering *Budapest* under her breath. The next question is for Mom.

Dad reads the card. “What does NATO stand for?”

“Hmmm ...” Mom hesitates. “I don’t know.”

Andie nearly chokes on full tears. “It’s not fair! Everyone else keeps getting easy ones!” Mom and Dad look at each other and laugh out loud. Andie darts out the room with arms folded like a pretzel.

“What’s the answer then?” Jon hollers as she storms away.

“NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION!” Her words reach us from the top of the steps where she escapes to her room.

“Well,” Mom smiles in amusement. “North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Everyone knows that.”

*3. the act or fact of retaining and
recalling impressions, facts;
recollection: to draw from memory.*

When she was in my life. As if there will come a time when she’s not in my life. I have memories that defy sorting. We fought viciously over clothes, despite our different sizes. We didn’t like the same music. She was a goody two shoes and I, well, I wasn’t. But

we both liked to draw. We both could pen calligraphy, poring over parchment paper for hours writing *the quick brown fox jumped over the six lazy dogs*.

What do I do with that? What do I do with the memory of the crown of her head bent over with a feathered quill in her hand? What do I do with any of these memories?

Every look, every conversation becomes more. Or maybe it doesn't. Maybe it's all just a random collection of images and words and feelings. I don't know what to do with them.

*4. the length of time over which recollection extends:
a time within the memory of living persons.*

My mom is completely incapable of operating electronic devices. I am her hero in this way and this way only. I can read VCR manuals without breaking down into tears. On this day, I am especially her hero. I connect two coaxial cables from our 8-millimeter hand-held camcorder into the television so that she and I can watch a home video from Christmas, 1997. It's an important tape because it bears the last images we have of Andie. It's November of 2001 and we have not yet watched this tape.

In the week after my sister's death, I developed every roll of film I could get my hands on, from her house and mine. I longed for any last image that would become part of a shrine to her. Any glimpse of her in a photograph that would delay the inevitable continuation of life without her. But all the rolls were duds. Fuzzy pictures of her children at the zoo, taken with the used Pentax I found for her at a garage sale. She never learned how to operate a manual camera.

But we do have this video, and I did the filming as I always do. Having studied photography for a number of years, I'm the official family chronicler. It is my job to capture

our lives on tape or on film, creating and constructing our memories with each close up and fade out.

Now I sit here, four years later, finally watching the video filmed one month before Andie died. How could I have waited so long? I could have figured out the coaxial cables long before this. What does the heart know that the mind will never understand?

She wasn't sick. The video my mom and I brace ourselves to watch was not shot in a hospital with Andie on her deathbed. She just didn't wake up even after her husband called the paramedics, even after they had tried to resuscitate her, even after her ten-month old son cried out to her. Even after her two-year old twins tried to wake her up as she lay in her coffin. "Get up, mommy. Get up."

*5. a mental impression retained;
a recollection: one's earliest memories.*

"No. I mean it. What you dream comes true."

"Nuh-uh," I retort in first-grade fashion. "No it doesn't."

"Yes, it does, Molly. If you dream about monsters, they'll come true." Andie's face is straight as a poker. Her voice is monotone.

"I don't believe you," I say, stealing glances to see if she's joking.

"That's fine, but I think you should tell Mom about it."

She struts ahead of me, her backpack bobbing behind her. My voice is shaky when I admit, "I also dreamed that I was adopted."

"Huh," she says. Her face shows no sign of lies.

"... and I'm not adopted."

"Okay."

“I’m NOT adopted, Andie. You’re lying.”

“Okay.”

“I’m telling Mom!” I take off running ahead of her. Andie picks up her pace behind me, but I am faster than she is.

“You can’t tell Mom,” she shouts behind me. “If you tell anyone your dreams, they’ll come true. I just remembered that part!”

“You’re lying!” I don’t stop to look behind me.

“I’m not lying, Molly! I’m not!”

This time I stop to look at her. To decide if I can trust her or not. She’s panting, but I’m too angry to be tired. Her face is still straight. I don’t know what to believe. Sometimes sisters lie.

*6. the reputation of a person or thing,
esp. after death; fame: a ruler of beloved memory.*

She is it at the center of the video. “Brian!” Andie shouts. “Brian! Can you get me the diaper bag?” Her voice rises over Jon’s guitar playing, over the din of the football game in the background offscreen. I focus the camera on Andie as she lays her infant son down on the ground and unpins his diaper. Brian enters from off camera. He silently lays the bag beside the baby before returning to the game.

“Hey, Mom!” Andie shouts again. Her voice pierces through Jon’s music. “Mom! Where’s the diaper ointment?” One of her children tumbles into the frame and she grabs him, zerbirting into his neck, the wet smacking sound drowning out Jon completely. “Hi, D.J.!” she exclaims. “Hi, D.J.!” He giggles as she zerbirts.

Jon continues to play, the melody of Christmas carols strums out on his guitar as he sings softly. Everything is quiet and calm in the post-present letdown of Christmas Day. Except for Andie. She continues to talk over everyone, to squeal at her children, to sing above everyone else.

I watch my mom as we watch my sister. I can hear her. I can see her. She's alive on the tape. For a moment or two longer. I can remember her in my life. I remember her. I have memories of her that have to be relevant somehow. I want them to be relevant. I *need* them to be relevant. I want them to take shape and have meaning so that her death has shape and has meaning. But they don't and it doesn't. It's all just a random collection of images and words and feelings. And then nothing.

I don't remember her being this loud.

7. the state or fact of being remembered.

I'm in the center of the picture in a shiny pink bathing suit, lined with blue shiny trim. I look too sophisticated for my seven years, and my poise is in stark contrast to the intentional silliness of my friend Mark as he plays next to me. He is goofy with his wet, matted hair, his eyes rolling in two different directions.

Andie sits just beyond us in the whirlpool – in the background. She notices Mark clowning for the camera, and me, as I raise my chin to just the right level for the woman taking our picture at Shanty Creek Ski Lodge. We will be used in their promotional package, she tells us. Me and Mark eagerly oblige her with our own ideas of how the ski resort should be promoted.

Andie moves away, assuming she is not meant to be included in the promotional picture. Despite her effort to remove herself, she's in the picture with us, the memory of her red-and-white striped bathing suit with its diagonal lines meeting at the center forever caught on film. It's the kind of suit overweight girls wear to mislead the eye into thinking they're thinner. She's only ten, wearing her overweight girl's bathing suit, and she's not really much overweight – ten pounds, maybe ... but enough, I guess, to make her think she's not promotional material.

I am not this self-conscious in my shiny pink suit with the blue lining. I look like I've been waiting for this woman to come along all day. I'm calm. I'm poised. I look like a professional children's model.

Andie passively waits for the lady to leave and for our afternoon in the whirlpool to continue without this woman's unwanted presence. The next moment after the photograph is shot, she reanimates, playfully flicks hot tub water into my face, matting my hair.

I remember one more picture of us at Shanty Creek, this time in the swimming pool. She is the other girl – the one who appears just after the photograph is taken. I stare directly at the camera, looking coy and thoughtfully expressive. My sister surges in mid-air behind me, a spray of water anticipating her leap as she tries to dunk me. In the picture, I am unaware of what will happen to me next. My only thought appears to be committing my seven-year old beauty to everlasting film. My sister isn't thinking of her red-and-white diagonally-striped suit. Her only thought is the several joyful moments that will follow when my head returns to the surface and I angrily sputter water and seven-year old obscenities. That joyful moment when the afternoon of play recommences, and no one remembers the difference between my shiny pink suit and her red-and-white one.

8. a person, thing, event, fact remembered.

The Sunday dinner table is long. Three high-backed chairs sit on either length of it. The armed high-backed chairs stand guard at the head of the table. Dad sits at one and Jon, the eldest son, sits opposite him. Andie and Robb sit on one side of the table and Mom and I on the other. Every Sunday dinner is the same meal.

“Molly, will ya’ pass the rice,” Robb asks. I pass it across the table to him. Without looking, he hands me the broccoli. The roast sits as centerpiece on a large white platter with scalloped edges. After spooning a big portion of broccoli onto my plate, I fork a couple slices of pork roast onto Andie’s extended plate.

“Should we pray?” Dad’s voice booms more of a demand than a request. We join hands around the table and Andie and I avoid looking at each other so we won’t giggle. She rolls her eyes at Dad. Mass went long and we were hungry. We were so ready to dig in, we forgot we had to pray first.

“Our Father, who art in heaven ...” The rest of us follow suit, joining him in prayer.

“... For thine is the kingdom the power and the glory ...” Dad adds on the Lutheran ending to the prayer, and we, his Catholic family say it with him. It’s the only actively Lutheran thing he does.

“Rub-a-dub-dub! Thanks for the grub! Yeah, God!” Dad sings the silly part I always finished with when I was little. At *rub-a-dub-dub*, he knocks his knuckles on his head like Tarzan on his chest. Dad and Jon laugh in my direction when Dad raises his hands victoriously into the air at the end.

“Do it, Molly. ‘Yeah, God!’” Jon and Robb raise their hands champion-style just like Dad, trying to prod me in the way only siblings can. I sneer at them and dive into my

broccoli pretending I don't hear them. Andie knuckle thumps her head and sing-songs the 'Rub-a-dub-dub' prayer, taking the embarrassing sting out of it by making it her own.

I join her at end. "... *Yeah, God!*" I remember she stuck out her tongue at Jon and Robb and smiled at me before devouring a forkful of roast dipped in applesauce.

9. commemorative remembrance; commemoration.

In the parking lot after church, Andie and I sing, walking a couple feet apart from each other in our Sunday dresses. It happens every Sunday. We can never get the Communion song out of our heads. *We remember how you loved us, 'til your death. And still we celebrate as you are with us here ...*

We don't look at each other as we swing open opposite doors of Mom's station wagon and file in. Our older brothers, Jon and Robb, try to ignore us.

Andie slides into her seat in the middle of the car and smooths down her ivory sweater dress over the knees of her ribbed off-white tights. Our singing doesn't stop. My dress is pale kelly green, with a wide bow that ties in the back. I pull the back of my dress down flat beneath me to avoid wrinkles. Despite himself, Jon hums along with us while Robb fiddles with the radio dial.

And we believe that we will see you, when you come, in your glory, Lord. We remember, we celebrate, we believe!

When we finish our song, quiet seeps into the car like water. Each of us stares out the car window. We watch the houses, the golf course, the stores flicker by on our way home for early Sunday dinner.

10. the ability of certain materials to

return to an original shape after deformation.

There she is on camera. I hear Mom suck in air sharply. Andie's wearing a new outfit Brian bought her for Christmas. An ivory sweatshirt with a patch of flowers on the front and floral printed stretch pants that match the shirt. She whispered to Mom after settling in on Christmas morning, "It isn't very flattering, is it?" It wasn't. Having three children in two years hadn't helped the girl in the red-and-white striped swimsuit. But she looked happy. She always looked happy, her white gapped teeth flashing every time she smiled. She never wore make-up. Her ash blonde hair hung in limp curls at her shoulders.

She talks so loud on the video. I don't remember her being this loud. I don't remember her talking this much. She was quiet, I thought. Submissive. Wasn't she? How could I have forgotten this about my sister? I monitor my mom with attentive sideways glances to see how she's handling this. She's crying and I knew she would be. Shouldn't I be crying? Shouldn't this be hard to watch? And it is, but not in the way you might think. It's hard because I can't believe she was ever *in* my life, not because I can't believe she's *not in* my life now. It is the absence that shapes my memories of her. The author, Arundhati Roy would call it the *Andie-shaped whole in the universe*. It's the black hole of memory, where everything sinks into itself. I cannot shape these things, form them into meaning. They slip out of my reach, gone forever.

Between Sex and Prayer

I lost my virginity at 17 on the cold cement of a laundry room floor. Cuffs of long-sleeved shirts and hems of hanging dresses curtained me and my boyfriend in a corner where it finally happened. I remember the nakedness, the chill of his basement hands.

In sixth grade, my teacher taught the class that sex was meant to be both love-giving and life-giving. He was one of the few male teachers at St. John Vianney elementary school, and I wondered how comfortable he was with the obligation of teaching sex ed to thirty twelve-year olds. He stood at the front of class, trying to calm us down. Trying to get all of us to stop giggling.

“Of course you’ll want to have it,” he said. “You’ll want to show someone you love them. But it has a dual purpose – it is meant to be procreative.” Then he started using scientific terms to soften the impact of the material he had to teach. My class was taught that doing anything to intentionally stop the sperm from reaching the ova would be taking God’s master plan into our own hands. No pills. No condoms. No diaphragms. No birth control allowed. He didn’t talk about Natural Family Planning, which was probably for the best. It was all too much already.

Years later, I endured countless renditions of Monty Python’s parody on the Catholic view of sex. “Every sperm is useful. Every sperm is great!” Friends, roommates, boyfriends sang to me, boastful in their comfortable, enlightened worlds where contraception was allowed. Every non-Catholic knew this song and they all took a perverse joy in parading its silly lyrics in front of me, singing the chorus over and over again.

I had sex in high school when I was 17. I hadn't forgotten my 6th grade teacher and God's master plan. Instead of avoiding sex altogether (which seemed totally impossible), I tried to circumvent the issue of contraception with a popular method used by sexually active high school students who can't afford condoms. We kept going until he was just about to climax, then he pulled out, his sacred sperm wasted, pooling on my stomach or seeping between my legs. It wasn't pretty and its effectiveness is questionable.

That's the method I used at 17, lying on the concrete floor of my boyfriend's basement, our awkwardly tangled bodies hidden by hanging garment bags. My first time would never be found in the pages of a romance novel. I moaned quietly at the appropriate times to encourage him, while his brothers played Nintendo in the next room. He came, his useful sperm interrupted in its procreative duties, dripping on the cold cement floor.

"You okay?" he asked, still stunned by the power of the event, his entrance into manhood. His eyes hardly focused.

"Sure." I tried to sound positive, satisfied, but a voice rose up inside of me. Not the voice of guilt that every non-Catholic assumes runs the lives of the practicing Catholic, but one of disappointment. *This is it? This is what I've been waiting for? I've surrendered myself on a laundry room floor with the plinking, beeping sounds of Zelda echoing off the walls for this?* It had to be a joke.

He handed me a washcloth from the top of a laundry basket near the dryer. I wiped down my stomach, gathered my clothes, giggled in discomfort at my nakedness. I knew the difference between nude and naked. Nude was a choice, naked was uncomfortable. I was definitely naked.

I adjusted the waistband of my skirt, rolled it to the front, and pulled down my sweater. In the distorted reflection of the aluminum-paneled furnace, I saw myself blurry and upside-down. I backed away and joined my boyfriend and his brothers in front of the Nintendo. It was the sixth level of Zelda.

His 16-year old brother paused in the middle of his game to look at me. It was only a momentary glance, not even long enough to require him to pause his game. He turned back to the screen with one side of his lip curled into a smirk.

My brother and his wife went a different route.

They dated for eight years before marrying. I followed them on their private walks together. Far behind and out of sight, I watched them lean up against a tree, hold each other, and kiss for what seemed like forever to my 13-year old sense of time. But that's all they did, the kissing. They remained virgins until their wedding night, a fact my sister-in-law never tires of bragging about.

She gets that glow when she brings it up. She clasps her hands together and starts her sentences with corny phrases like, "Ohmigoodness!" Then she proceeds to tell me how beautiful it all was because they waited for each other, how scared they were, how the waiting made everything so right.

When she does this, I smile at her and try to say the right things. I want to say *Oh, that's so great*, or *way to go*, or something like that. But mostly I want to tell her to shut the hell up.

I didn't wait. I won't ever have that moment with my husband, standing before him in a negligee a friend bought me at a pre-wedding personal shower. I won't see his anxious

eyes dance for the unfolding of a secret only he will know. I've been unfolded already. I've told my secret. I am used, even somewhat damaged goods. Regrets? I have a few.

But having sex didn't squelch the desire, the *need* to share my faith with someone.

That was the struggle. I wanted there to be a gray area where I could combine sex and faith and still feel good. I drove men crazy with frustrating behavior. I placed demands and constraints one minute, played seducer the next. It wasn't working! Nothing worked no matter how hard I tried. It wasn't a fit to play the perfect virgin and it didn't feel right being sexually active.

In the beginning of a relationship, it was always different. With the excitement of something new, I was able to let loose. I had to. *Needed* to. I loved the wantonly blissful period of time when nothing mattered but the exploration of two newly-joined bodies responding to each other. I loved finding out how our hips lined up, if his ears were sensitive, if he was easier to sleep next to, if he knew things I didn't.

But then the time comes, always inevitably, when the hunger of the spiritual side pokes at me with sharp jabs. Sex, with or without some form of birth control, does not feel good anymore. It gets in the way, makes my spiritual hunger stronger, more pressing. I pull away, fruitlessly trying to explain something I don't understand myself. The guy either accepts or he doesn't. He's patient or he's not.

I try to give him what he wants and still get what I need, though I doubt I ever know what that really is. At one point in the month, the aching shouts of my body drum out the spiritual request for abstinence. I give in then only to pull away a week later. I try to regain footing, to feel pure enough to receive communion on Sunday.

I was in the middle of this agonizing period of frustration when I met someone new in a writing class at the community college. He was great looking. Better looking than any guy I'd ever dated before. He was handsome with a rugged beard, clear blue eyes, and a compact strong build. He was a writer. He was Catholic. He was a virgin. In short, I was ready to marry him.

On a walk together, much like the walks my brother used to take, I told him that I was not going to sleep with him. I said it straight and flat. I held his hand as I said it, and looked directly ahead at the changing leaves lining the path like a map to the world. Things would be different this time. He squeezed my hand to square the deal.

Finally here was someone I could share the conflict with, someone who would understand the struggle for abstinence and support me in it. Someone who would fill the space in the pew at church next to me. We recited the Profession of Faith in union with each other. *I believe in one God, the Father almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth ...*

We tried to toe the line of abstinence, to treat each other with the dignity the Church requires. We took more long walks. We watched movies with his parents. We went out with groups of friends. We avoided being alone. And if we were alone, we were conscientiously alone. We played Scrabble, the letters filling my mind to distraction. We shot hoops at the basketball court down the street. I focused hard on the dribbling.

We were as pure as we could be, but sometimes I curled up next to him on the couch and the desire to be abstinent was lost.

“We’ll just figure it out as we go along. We’ll stop before we go too far.”

“Right,” he says. Long kisses and the frustration of roaming hands would begin. But it always stopped, as we were dedicated to abstinence no matter how much we shoved at its boundaries.

We were a team in our dedication, but we slipped.

It happened quickly, unintentionally in my apartment twenty minutes before he was expected at work. We lay frozen next to each other after, waiting for the other to speak. It was his first time, and I did the worst thing imaginable. I rolled away and took refuge in the solitude of the bathroom.

He called to me from the other side of the bathroom door. “Come on out. Talk to me. It’s okay.”

“I know it is.” I whimpered through the door, trying to sound positive, an echo from my own first time several years before. “I’ll be right out.” I stood over the sink and splashed cold water on my face. I was afraid to see my reflection in the mirror. I was afraid to see that image again, distorted, blurry, upside-down.

When I came out, he pulled me toward him, told me he loved me, then left for work. I watched him walk out the white door. I listened to his boots down the steps. We knew without saying anything that we’d go to Confession the next day. We’d start again.

The priest heard my confession with impatience. I have heard that many priests tire of serving as sex therapists to those confessing. The young priest before me was no exception. We sat in a well-lit room, not a confessional. I looked across a table as I told him what I’d done. I was terrified of what he would think of me.

“Is that it?” he asked after I had asked for God’s forgiveness through the power passed down to the priest through St. Peter.

I hesitated. Was that it? Had I done something else? Disrespected my parents? Used God's name in vain? Nope. Just the sex.

"Yes, Father. That's it."

"Very well. Love seeks union. Your sins are forgiven you. Go and sin no more." The priest stood up from the table and stretched his arm across the brass bar of the door, holding it open for me. I sat dumbstruck for four whole seconds, then stood quickly and rushed out into the light beyond the open door.

My boyfriend waited on the front steps of the church. Father had heard his confession first. *Love seeks union*. I couldn't get it out of my head. *Love seeks union*. Of course it does. I wanted that union with him. I needed it. Then why did I run to the isolation of the bathroom when I got it? Why couldn't I face the mirror?

The easy answer is guilt. That ugly thing that lies between sex and prayer. Just like every non-Catholic thinks they understand Catholics because of Monty Python, every non-Catholic thinks they know about Catholicism because of guilt. It's the magical answer to everything that's wrong with the Catholic faith. But it is much too simplistic of an answer.

It was fear that I was messing everything up. It was fear that I really was abusing myself and my boyfriend. It was fear that I wouldn't end up in a marriage as stable as my brother's if I had premarital sex.

"Do you feel guilty?" I asked him.

"After just leaving confession? Nope."

"No. I mean before."

He took a long time before he answered. "Eh ... I don't know. Sometimes."

I was quick to get to the point of what I really wanted to know. The words rushed out. “Isn’t guilt an intellectual response? Isn’t it something we feel when we do something we’re told is wrong?”

At that moment, I had to prove it wrong. My relationship with God is not an intellectual one. It can’t be. My mom has taught me through countless parables of peasant faith that no one can approach God intellectually. As I go further and further in my education, she’s stepped up the reminders. She’s terrified that I will replace God with the golden calf of intellectualism. She needs me to understand that people of simple minds, people who are mentally slow can understand God better than many PhDs who let intellect get in the way. I believe her. I understand her. But it wasn’t helping to solve the problem I was facing then.

The question of premarital sex is not an intellectual one. It rests somewhere between the spirit and the mind, because sex feeds both of these. It is a complicated mixture of emotions and physical longing and intellectual satisfaction. I cannot answer the question with guilt. It’s too big for so small an answer.

“Hmm ... I’m not really sure. I mean, yeah ... you’ll feel guilty if you hurt someone, right? But I guess it’s understanding when you hurt yourself. That’s what you’re talking about, right? Like, keeping your soul intact?”

Was my soul intact?

It’s the soul where He is present, where He speaks to us. Every soul has an equal ability to commune with God. I knew there was something in my soul that led me to the bathroom after that first time. But I couldn’t pinpoint it.

Love seeks union. There it was. It was that easy. My soul was healed. I was forgiven. In my earnest to live well spiritually, I abandoned my need to live well physically. There was no balance. Which is not to say that people who have chosen a celibate life are unbalanced. They are given a grace to manage it. Their choice feeds them spiritually. It gives them a freedom that would otherwise be divided by spouses, lovers, or children. I wasn't making a choice. I was letting it be made for me and there was no grace in it. The graceless struggle was gnawing at me, tripping me, blinding me to the fact that *love seeks union*. I am human. I have a body. It will want things. I might choose to not give it these things, but *I choose*.

I looked at my boyfriend as he sat on the steps, elbows on his knees, fiddling with his hands. He smiled, a warm and charming smile.

"Hey." It was one of those all-encompassing heys. One that means how are you doing, I'm right here beside you, it's a pretty day, life is good, I think you're great, and babe, don't worry about a thing.

"Hey."

"Coffee?" He rose, reaching for my hand, pulling me from my perch on the church steps.

"Isn't Father great?"

"Totally. Love seeks union." He repeated the priest's words with a nod. The priest must've told him the same thing.

"I love that. It helps." He unlocked the passenger side door and let me in the car.

"Yeah," he said with assurance. "We'll be fine."

And I am fine, more or less. I slip from time to time, but *love seeks union*.

When I looked at my reflection in the mirror that day, there was a glow after all. My soul was intact, though shaky with questions of faith. But I was in love. *I sought union*.

My brother and sister-in-law struggled when their doctor recommended birth control pills to abate the painful migraines that send my sister-in-law to the hospital nearly every other week. They practice Natural Family Planning as opposed to using contraceptive methods that the Church does not allow. After praying about it endlessly and trying every option available to them, they succumbed to the pill.

They have a new son, six-months old, conceived despite the pill that my sister-in-law conscientiously took every day.

All the science and intellectualizing in the world cannot overrule God when He has a plan. I've tried it. I've tried to work around Him. I've tried to hide from Him, to circumvent Him, to fool Him, to do anything that would help me escape the intolerable demand that I not have sex. My questioning nature still stands in conflict with it, but I haven't given up trying to understand. I still stand before God like a child with a hand on my hips, yelling, "Why, why, why?"

I stomp my feet before the tabernacle of church where the body of Christ is present, and when no one is around, I shout, "But I want to!" He doesn't answer in the way that I want Him to. He whispers to the soul, which means I have to slow down and be quiet enough to hear it. On my knees, corporeal being that I am, I find grace in the smooth chill of the church floor. I listen with my heart and heed what I can with my body, my fingers intertwined and aimed at heaven. We are still having it out, God and me. I'm not ready to

give up the physical pleasures of life and live as a celibate. He is not ready to accept the compromise. He is not a deal maker, but He is patient.

A Body of Faith

I.

Her wrinkly skin clung to her head like a swim cap. Sherry was all bones. Of all the people Mom taught us to help, I liked her the least. Her thin dishwater hair shot out from her scalp making her eye sockets sink even deeper into her cavernous face. At age seven, I hated delivering food to her. I wondered what the point of giving her food was since she obviously didn't eat any of it.

We delivered food to her on Fridays and picked her up on Sundays for Mass. Mom would prod me into going up to the door of her crummy looking apartment to ring the bell. My sister and I fought over who had to do it. If I lost, I'd shuffle up the broken sidewalk to the yellowing door, ring the number of Sherry's apartment, and wait for her to slowly make her way down. I held her arm to steady her as she walked, avoiding the larger cracks in the cement and trying not to think about the bone so readily beneath my fingers. She was beyond gaunt. She was grotesque.

If my sister Andie lost the fight, I tried to hide my horror as she led Sherry to the car on her shaky, spindly legs. "Why doesn't she eat the food we bring her?" I asked the same question over and over.

"She's a very sick woman. We have to pray for her," Mom said. She shook her head and dug through her purse for a cough drop or a velamint. "If she doesn't get well this time ... well ..."

"Well what?" I leaned forward in the seat, squeezing my narrow shoulders between the two front seats so that I could see my mom's face.

“She’ll die. Just pray for her so that doesn’t happen.”

I grew up in a house more Catholic than the Vatican. The walls drip with oversized rosaries, the crucifix aesthetically arranged, falling perfectly next to a holy water font. The Blessed Virgin looks down with sorrowful blue eyes from the top of the stairs on the second floor and from the wall of the room where we prayed the rosary every night. All of the books lining the two solid oak bookshelves in the sitting room are written by C.S. Lewis, St. Augustine, Mother Theresa, Pope John Paul II, and new Catholic writers like Peter Kreeft, Scott Hahn, and Karl Keating.

I knew by age five my mom was a saint. She was everything a saint should be. Pious, suffering, holy, and faithful. At age five, it was the coolest thing in the world to have a saint for a mother. By age eleven, it was another story.

“So there’s going to be this party at school ...” I’d begin addressing my mom as she sat on the couch peering over her reading glasses. I could see my defeat even before I’d begun. “It’s the eighth grade party ... our end of the year party. It’s at the Y, and Michelle and Diana can go, and it’s an all-nighter.”

She set her book, *The Lamb’s Supper* by Scott Hahn, on the cushion next to her and removed her glasses.

“You mean to tell me they’re holding an all-nighter for eighth graders? No. You’re not going. You won’t have anything to look forward to when you’re older if you have an all-nighter now.” She may as well have said it. I couldn’t go because we were Catholic. The same reason why I couldn’t watch R-rated movies with my friends, or hang out with boys in the evening, or shop on Sundays. Because we were Catholic.

It bothered me, coming from a house that was so Catholic and I hated it. I was always on the outside of things, always left of center. As much as I struggled to be normal, to act like someone who came from a house where people watched MTV even when their parents were *home*, I could never pull it off. Being Catholic was too much a part of me even when I didn't want it to be. On Sunday mornings, my brothers and sister and I always remained behind after Mass to arrange the books in the pews so that the gold *Glory and Praise* songbooks were on the left and the brown *People's Mass Books* were on the right. That was how it was. That was normal.

My mom ran God's Pantry, too. While other girls my age spent their Saturdays at the mall or had boys over to their house, I rummaged through the non-perishable goods in the back of church and bagged them up for delivery. We'd load up Mom's station wagon and deliver to the families in our parish who needed extra help. Every week, Mom carefully selected plastic bags of dried prunes for the elderly and cans of Spaghettios for the families with children.

My mom taught me how to eat. I can't be sure she did as I can't remember it exactly. But since I do a fairly decent job of it now, I can only assume that she's the one who started me in the right direction. The question is when did I stop knowing how to eat? When did I stop recognizing hungry and full? When did I start to understand how Sherry could die in a fruit rollup nation?

In sixth grade two of my classmates, both girls of course, were the first to forget how to eat. Robin started to disappear first, then Jenny. They lost the bulk of their weight, their hair, and then their skin turned gray.

In sixth grade, we were eleven years old. Eleven is when girls start to mature. At eleven we notice the differences between us and the boys. Mike DeMario was shorter than last year while my legs grew awkwardly long. And while their voices started to shift uncontrollably, the glands underneath our arms became swollen and tender. We were all becoming monsters.

I stopped being a string bean at age eleven. When Robin and Jenny started to disappear, I wanted to disappear too. Even my hands seemed disproportionate to the rest of my body. For the first time in my life, I didn't want to try on a bathing suit. I couldn't bear to see my misshapen girlish body in the mirror. I appeared awkward and ugly and more of a freak than the rest of the girls in my class because everyone called me Sister Mary Molly.

At a pool party on my twelfth birthday, the girls of my class arrived with presents and towels securely wrapped around their unfamiliar new bodies. They wore t-shirts over their swimsuits when they swam. Nobody ate anything until my mom brought out a bowl of fruit.

"No thanks, Mrs. Rose," Jenny declined my mom's offer of cookies. Michelle resisted, too, then Diana, then the other Jenny and the rest of us. Mom snapped the cookie tin shut and carted it back inside. She returned with a Tupperware container full of cut fruit. We all dug in as though we were racing through a light that had finally turned green.

It was 1986. We didn't have the thin role models so prevalent on television and in music today. A pre-yoga Madonna bounced around on MTV with unsculpted arms that shook as much as the bangles on her wrist. Demi Moore was the epitome of brat pack beauty with her normal, natural sized body that had not yet been redesigned by a talented surgeon in Beverly Hills. Instead of *Baywatch*, we watched harmless family programs like *Growing Pains*, not knowing then what we do now about Tracey Gold's rapidly fluctuating weight.

But we did have a book and we all read it. It was our guide. A training manual for anorexics disguised as a book called *Left of Center*. I set aside a book on the *incorruptibles* – the saints whose bodies never decomposed – to read about someone who sped up her decomposition by not eating. The book chronicled the disappearing act of a girl my age who fasted her way to the hospital where she eventually learned how to eat again. We weren't very interested in the last part.

How many of us read the book, internalizing the story before Robin's mom snatched from our hungry hands? Before she ratted us out to our mothers. I don't remember my mom and me talking about it. I don't think she had any idea what was going on. I had just turned twelve, and she was more concerned with my preparation for Confirmation.

But I remember the contents of the book. I remember the girl hiding food. I remember her non-stop gum chewing, her breaking saltines into eighths. I remember all of her tricks to fool her hungry stomach. Too, I remember how she felt too meek and unlikable to ever take center stage, how she always felt left of center.

II.

When I turned eighteen, I left the Catholic home my mom had fastidiously built with prayer and holy water. I lived in an apartment in a large blue house with peeling white trim. The neighbor to my right let me know he used to be a hitman, so I'd be safe with him around. On the other side of me sat a convenience store that was frequently robbed.

The apartment was a sinkhole, literally. If I let a marble go near a wall, it would roll into the sinking center of the room. The gray carpet was coarse in parts and the linoleum of

the kitchen curled up at the edges. My friends and I painted the words *Den of Iniquity* on the window, and it was as far from the Catholic place I had come from as I could get.

I was a fat girl then. Or I thought so anyway. I am confronted with evidence to the contrary when I pull out pictures of myself from that time. But the self image occupying my head was inflated. Engorged, almost. Whatever I was, it wasn't what guys wanted. When I cut my hair, a male friend of mine told me I looked cute.

"I don't want to look cute," I said, the offense thick in my voice.

"You don't?" His question seemed innocent enough.

"No, I want to be ravishing."

He laughed. "Alright, then. You look ravishing." He tried to sound genuine, but I knew a girl who outweighed his girlfriend by at least thirty pounds stood little chance of being described as ravishing.

My new haircut and I started going to the gym. Just a couple mornings a week. Maybe three. Sometimes four. I began running through the heritage district of my downtown neighborhood, rollerblading down the path behind the zoo. And working out at the local community college gym. Always working out at the gym. I ate like a normal person. I worked out like an Olympian.

I would watch myself in the mirrored wall as I squatted, the barbell forming a cross with my body. I heaved the weight on my shoulders up, then down. Three sets of twenty. All in slow motion. My eyes shifted from thighs to face. Steady. No quivering. With a clank, I released the barbell back onto the mount after the third set. I was the only girl working out in the free weights room. The room where the serious lifters lifted.

III.

The fat therapist leans back in her chair, lacing her fat fingers. She shrugs her football player shoulders as if to say, "It's up to you. Your move."

But it's not my move. If it were my move, I'd be able to leave without signing a "Will Not Harm" contract. It sits between us on the table right next to her Diet Coke. I have no intention of signing it.

I shrug back. We sit in silence.

"If you finding yourself coping in *that* way, you'll come in, right?" The fat therapist is eager to hear me say yes.

"Maybe."

Wrong answer. Her office is cramped with her children's drawings covering one wall and a shelf lined with books and knick-knacks on another. On top of the shelf next to me is a basket of candy. I snag a tootsie pop every time I come in just for good measure. I spin on my white chair, stopping my feet at a 45 degree angle so I can always see her.

"Well, I can't let you leave then. I am not *allowed* to let you leave."

I stare at the poster of the eagle flying above her desk. "I didn't have to come here."

"But you did and it was the right thing to do and you know it. Are you still menstruating?" I visualize the eagle crashing into the deep blue cresting waves of the poster.

I won't lie to the therapist. It's my life. She can't have control of it.

She has me guess her diagnosis. If I were to diagnose myself, what would I say?

How much time do we have?

Let's see. If I were to diagnose myself, I would say I'm selfish. Terribly self-centered. The world is all about me and no one else but me, me, me. I'm chronically boring.

I bore myself to absolute death with my channel changing and my complete inability to entertain myself for longer than a half hour. I'm self-righteous and ignorant. I have to be right even when I don't know what the hell I'm talking about. (Do you have a pill for that?) I have a severe case of impatience. I can't stand to wait for traffic lights to change colors, for friends to get up in the morning so I can talk to them, or for a latte to be made at a coffeehouse. I'm so insecure I can barely breathe sometimes. I'm sure everybody hates me and I stay up late at night constructing things people are saying about me, convincing myself of their absolute truth.

And I don't want to be fat. I am morbidly, tyrannically, utterly terrified of being fat. That's my diagnosis. That's what's wrong with me.

"I'm concerned about you," the therapist offers. "If you don't go for intense treatment now, you'll end up in the hospital within a month. You need to make a decision."

"I'll think about it"

She looms over me, waiting to pounce on me with *her* version of my diagnosis. I circle "mildly disordered" on the sheet she sets before me. She takes it back, looks down at my response and crosses it out. Her pen circles the diagnosis three lines up from "mildly disordered." In red ink, "severe anorexic."

It's much more succinct than the laundry list I had, but I know she's full of shit. Girls who weigh 123 pounds are not *severely* anorexic. Sherry was severely anorexic. Robin and Jenny were severely anorexic. I still get my period. That's always the marker in the anorexic's story on made-for-TV movies. I know because I've been watching these stories religiously since puberty. When the skinny girl stops bleeding, you know she's severely anorexic. Before that, she's just playing around.

“I eat everyday,” I remind her. “Three times even, and a bowl of cereal at night.”

“Right. I know you do. And how many calories are you consuming?”

I shrug. “I don’t know.” We both know I’m lying. She waits for me to change my answer. I don’t.

“1000 calories?”

“More than that.”

“1200?” I remain silent. “And how often are you working out? You will end up in a hospital and it’s almost Christmas. Is that what you want?”

I stand up. “I’ll think about it.” And I will, but I don’t believe her. I’m not sick. I don’t even come close to passing out like last January when I didn’t eat for weeks. Always hunger. So much hunger that I can’t think a single thought that doesn’t involve food. Now I eat all the time. I can’t even fall asleep without eating a bowl of cereal. The therapist doesn’t like that either. She doesn’t like the control of it. She’d rather I ravaged the cupboards, shoving everything in sight into my mouth.

“You have to sign this before you leave.” The clipboard with the “Will Not Harm” contract falls with a clack on the end table between our chairs. I grab her red pen and scribble my initials on the bottom line before rushing out of the office.

IV.

She wasn’t always like this. My mom’s devotion was divided before.

Every morning she sits as she does now, poised in front of a propped mirror at the kitchen table. She applies her dark Mary Kay blush to her high cheekbones. I’ve been watching her do this ever since I can remember. Now that I’m 29, I guess I must’ve seen this

several thousand times over now. I look back down at the photo album and try to force the images together, her now and her then. She really is a pretty woman. So ethnic looking that I wiled away many a childhood afternoon trying to convince her to admit that I, the very picture of Germanic descent, was not really her daughter. How could a woman who once resembled Sophia Loren with her jet-black hair, deep-set eyes and dark coloring, have given birth to me, a scrawny kid with red hair and pale freckled skin? She insists I'm hers.

I recognize her teeth in the pictures. These do not change. I couldn't mistake them, exactly like her mother's, my grandmother's. Long, straight top teeth, the bottom ones hiding behind her lip, invoking some of the melancholy that defines her.

But in these wedding pictures, her teeth are set in a face that is too angular. She is beautiful if severity is beautiful. Her needle-thin arms are sheathed by satin gloves that end just before her jutting elbows. Her gown is simple. White satin. It narrows to a point at her waist where it is cinched with a belt, the circumference of which I could nearly span with my two hands. Her veil is the perfect length, falling two inches below her pronounced shoulders.

She never smiles. Not in a single picture. If an outsider were to write my mother's story from looking at these pictures, they might get it all wrong. They might think she was a victim of her times, forced into a marriage that shut out any hope of an independent life. Or that she was getting married to escape her alcoholic father. Or maybe that she had cold feet and she should have run with them.

Or maybe the outsider would see the anorexia that was really behind the flatness in her eyes and the thin line of her lips that refused to smile.

No one saw my mother with her hands threaded behind her head, curling for the 200th sit-up, her tailbone raw and bleeding. No one knew she hadn't had her period for over a year.

"What did you weigh?" I ask as she continues her morning makeup ritual.

"I don't know. My dress was a size zero."

My chin drops. "Zero? Seriously?" She nods. In my skinniest moments, I have never dropped below a four.

"When did you start eating again? When you were pregnant with Jon?" Jon's my oldest brother.

"Yes," she tells me, glancing at the album across the table from her, taking no interest in the happiest day of her life. "But we didn't know about anorexia then. No one knew anything about it. Not like they do now. Don't you do it," she warns. "Don't let it get out of control like I did."

At home it's easy to avoid food. Mom never prepares anything I like to eat, and Christmas food – shaved ham, egg and sausage casserole, fondue – is not generally a feast for vegetarians anyway. Nobody notices my weight, not my dad, my brothers. I can't tell if Mom told everyone about the diagnosis or if they just know they shouldn't say anything. I cry alone in my room every night.

Before returning home from school for break, I came across a flier from a group needing volunteers for a study on anorexia and genetics. The group was looking for mothers and daughters who'd both struggled with anorexia. I kept the flier on my desk for a week, considering volunteering on my own without my mom. I knew there was evidence that

anorexia or at least the propensity for it was genetic. And I knew women who struggled with eating disorders were more likely to have daughters who struggled with the same issues.

Maybe I'd do a study on religion and anorexia. Make a connection between faith and fasting and the women who just couldn't stop. My mom and I would be the focus of the study. They'd name a condition after us. My mom taught me to eat. She gave me a faith that I cling to that usually has answers. She taught me to take care of others, to sort the books at church, to feed those who need to be fed, to listen to those who need consolation.

Did she teach me to stop eating?

Over cereal late one evening, my mom asks if it's her fault. We sit at the same kitchen table where she applies her makeup every morning, where I examined her wedding pictures. Again she tells me to not let it get out of control, and I know she still doesn't get it. Or can't get it. She didn't stop being anorexic when she had my brother. You never stop being anorexic. It's like faith in a way. It sticks with you even when you try to get rid of it.

The flier floats in the back of my mind when Mom asks me if it's her fault. But I can't possibly say yes. Besides, it isn't exactly true. This is something I've wanted since I was eleven. Before I even knew that she had starved herself for so long. I knew some of it, I guess.

I remember one of our neighbors saying my mom was *so thin*. Those are the words she used. *So thin*. I wasn't more than seven or eight when she said it, but I was old enough to know that the emphasis on *so* meant something.

And I remember the Dexatrim on the top shelf of the cupboard where all of the medicine was stored. My mom told me and my sister not to take any of them and we never did. With or without the diet pills, she didn't eat. I remember telling people that she never

ate. I would say it proudly. “My mom *never* eats,” emphasizing *never* because I’d learned that was important. Of course she ate. What I meant when I said that she *never* ate was that her portions of chicken, salad, and triscuits were so small that she *nearly* never ate.

We were a Diet Coke family almost as much as we were a Catholic family. When I had dinner at friend’s houses, their parents served us milk. At my house, we only had milk on our cereal. Diet Coke was the drink of choice for every meal. My mom drank almost a full 2-liter of it every day.

“I think it’s my fault. I should have been a better example for you girls.”

“But Andie never had any problems.”

She sighs, bores a hole into the kitchen table with her gaze. The suffering part of her sainthood has taken over.

“Okay, I’m ready.”

The therapist looks smug and I hate her for it. “Why now?” she asks.

“Because I know I need help. Because I don’t want to live like this.” Because I’m not in control anymore, I want to tell her. Because this isn’t how everything was supposed to work out. Because I don’t want to end up like Sherry. Because I don’t want to make my suffering mom suffer anymore.

“Did something happen?” She cocks her head to one side and appears genuinely concerned. It’s enough to make me cry.

I sit up straight and clear my throat. “No. Nothing happened. I just don’t want to deal with this anymore. I’ve got other stuff to think about. I’ve stopped weighing myself. And I’ve stopped going to the gym.”

She smiles broadly. “I’m impressed. That’s a lot of work already. How has that been for you?”

“Fine. It’s been fine. I mean, hard, I guess, but fine.” I just want to get rid of it. The fat therapist won’t shut up and tell me how to fix it. “What’s the plan?”

My mom asks me if it’s her fault, and I can’t possibly answer that question. How much do we learn from our mothers that we don’t realize we’re learning? What do we take from them without even recognizing it was there?

I try to pray like my mom. I try to join in church activities that help people in need. I try to be strong in my faith like she is and I try to keep the anorexia under control.

This is anorexia. Like faith. It never goes away completely, even when you try to abandon it. It lingers. It waits. It’s always ready to take over when you can’t handle things anymore. It jumps in with the answers. It says *I can absolve you from the sin of overeating*. I can change you and make you pure and good again. It’s no wonder my mom and I take so easily to it. It’s so similar to the faith that consumes us. Silent, yet the loudest presence in our lives.

I return to the gym. I straddle the bench in front of the mirror in the girls’ locker room. I don’t see me. I don’t see Robin or Jenny or Sherry or my mom or anybody. I shake my water bottle vigorously to make sure the protein powder is completely dissolved. I open the top and drink the chalky shake down in one sitting. It isn’t over. It never ends. As I swallow the last gulp, I mentally calculate – two scoops of protein shake, 175 calories. I’ll be fine. I will. I believe.

Obedience and Pebbles

*The pebbles lie still in the palm of God's hand,
content to just rest there. – Catherine Doherty*

They all looked like pebbles. Grays, greens, whites, yellows, blacks struggling against each other in the large glass jar. I dump several handfuls onto the lunch tray before me, separating bean from stone. When I scoot ten or eleven beans to one side, a hidden pebble that would break a tooth reveals itself. I pick it out and gather the beans I have rummaged through, then toss them into the glass jar labeled *Sorted Beans*.

The bean sorting was soothing after a week of picking rock and debris from freshly shorn wool, of refinishing wooden dining chairs, of folding sheet after laundered sheet from the 150 stripped beds slept in and dirtied by the men and women of the commune. But in the basement of the main house, my eyes glazing over the tray of beans and becoming less and less capable of differentiating between bean and pebble, I was finally, blessedly alone.

It was because I could not stop crying. Standing over a chair with five waiting chairs surrounding me in front of the white house with blue doors, my hands stopped working. I tried to bring them to rest on the back of a chair, to glide along the curve of it with sandpaper. My hands would not obey. They hung limp at my side, the sandpaper falling to the ground.

I cried. I broke down. The obedience had beaten me.

“What are you doing there?” A large woman called out to me, stopping in the middle of her work to stare. I was assigned to Pat that day. Every week it was a new person, a new assignment.

My first week at Madonna House led me to a woman who put me to work with wool. The men of the commune sheared the sheep, leaving heaps of yellow bristle for us to pick through, comb, bleach, pick through again, comb, and bleach before it was ready to become the batting of a quilt we would sell in the commune store.

The work with the wool was interesting at first. I felt lucky to be learning such a pioneering art. I watched the other women of the commune at their assigned task, sitting quietly in a circle around a stretch of wool. We were not allowed to talk while we worked. God was in the details and we were meant to listen for Him rather than talk with each other.

But I had questions. What were the other women doing here in Canada on a Catholic commune? I didn't know why I was there yet. Only that it had been suggested to me by a family friend and that at eighteen, I was ready for a change, but not ready to commit to the grind of college studies. Looking around at the silent, obedient women, I wondered how I fit in here. I wondered what God intended me to get out of this.

She had struggled, too, the woman who started the commune. Catherine DeHueck Doherty came from a Russian aristocratic family. Her high-born family fled Russia after Czar Nicholas and his family were murdered in fear of coming to the same fate by an angry country in the middle of a revolution. Catherine had her own revolution in mind when she came to the little town of Combermere, Ontario, with her husband Eddie Doherty. Here she opened the first of many Madonna Houses. Ours was a training center for the lay apostolate and everyone was welcome, provided they were willing to participate in the daily upkeep of a commune that supported over 150 people.

There was the main house where we spent most of our time. A white clapboard with a blue door in honor of the Virgin Mary. Large enough to contain all of us, seated at long

pine tables three times a day for each meal. Large enough for a kitchen that prepared meals that served all of us. Large enough for a basement with a common area where we flocked around whoever sat at the piano plunking out a song after our last meal of the day together. Beyond the house was a lake. In the summertime, the women of the commune dip into the water from the dock furthest from the house. The men have a separate dock nearer to the blue door at the back of the house.

Not far from the main house stand several small wooden cabins that house some of the female Madonna House staff, women who devote their lives to the work of the apostolate. Three or four women live in each cabin. I never saw where the men lived, but I knew their cabins and dormitories were down the road past the graveyard on a hill.

A large rectangular laundry house stretches across the span of the yard and leads to a path beyond the outhouse. The dirt path is narrow and densely wooded. Following it as we did twice a day for morning lauds and daily mass led to the center of commune life, the Chapel in the Woods. The Byzantine chapel is an unusual site in the center of an acreage of woods in northern Canada. Its golden-peaked dome shoots out of the muted woods announcing its eastern exoticness. But its insides are sparse and hollow. There are no pews and no altar. The priest stands in front of hundreds of Russian icons as he says the Mass everyday. Because of Catherine's Eastern Orthodox background, Madonna House has deep connections with the Eastern Rite and is very involved with the movement to join the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church. In our daily lives, we had already done so, often sitting through the three hour service Bishop Raya of the Eastern Rite holds.

It is a beautiful place, and yet Catherine Doherty wanted to run away. She started her car time and again, trying to find the gumption to leave behind the spiritual place God had

sent her to start. She hated the quiet, hated the obedience. But she stayed, committed to God's plan for her and the people surrounding her – the people who made breakfast, lunch, and dinner with her, the people who washed the dishes from breakfast, lunch, and dinner with her, and the people who prayed with her before all of these meals. I stayed in the circle with the women because I knew as Catherine had known before me that I was meant to be there. I just didn't know why yet.

She wrote a book called *The People of the Towel and the Water*. That was us. We were the people at Christ's feet, washing and drying again and again, the dirty feet of Him and his followers. It was hard work, facing the feet everyday with towel in hand. Facing the stink of it all and embracing it in silence. I struggled against it every morning when I woke up and looked across the rows of beds of waking women, all followers of Christ, all feet washers, and, in a spiritual sense, all waiting to have their feet washed.

*

The wool made my fingers dry and itchy, so I was relieved when the following week I was moved to the laundry room. The commitment to silence was not so strong there and the girls and I made up dances to fold the sheets properly. *Together and back, and forward, one, two ...* We performed our minuets while the men of the commune strolled by to and from the farm. I watched them through the high windows of the laundry house as I folded their jeans and pressed their shirts. Sometimes they'd wave.

After breakfast one morning, I rinsed out yet another cup in a series of more than one hundred cups in the back kitchen with Leah and several other women. It was assembly line work mostly, and each week a new person was in charge of the process. Leah was a sweet Korean woman, pleasant to work with, and kind to everyone under her charge. She was

trying a new system of coffee cup cleaning that included pouring bleach in the cups, swishing the bleach around, then rinsing them thoroughly. This, like all of the work done at Madonna House, was done slowly and carefully, with dedication to the details.

Pat called through the window, gruffly snorting that she could use some help with the refinishing. "Ah ... I see," Leah responded. "Molly can help today."

And just like that, I was done working in the laundry room and with the dishes, and was in the front yard working with Pat. The quick transitions were always difficult for me. Not because I couldn't do the work, but the employment of me like cattle, wore on me.

Molly is free today, said Leah, so therefore I was free.

Leah smiled at me as she guided a dry cloth into the depths of a clean cup. Her smile was kind and benevolent. I couldn't begin to argue with her.

*

"You put your arm into it," Pat instructed, hovering over a piece of furniture, giving meaning to the expression *hunker down*. Her large frame was stuffed into a winter coat that had probably been donated by some smaller woman who had worn it nearly threadbare. She was one of those women who never bothered wearing hats or gloves as her size emitted enough heat to compensate for colder temperatures. It was mid-Lenten season as she told us how she wanted the chairs done, and in northern Canada, that meant it was thirty degrees or lower outside.

Lent is a time of spiritual sacrifice in Catholic life, when we focus on climbing onto the cross with Christ. I was tired of climbing. I was sick and cold, and terribly disagreeable. I knew Pat was a good woman despite her gruff demeanor, but I was starting to feel something well up inside of me. I didn't know what it was. Not anger exactly. Not sadness.

Something else altogether. I grabbed a sheet of sandpaper and began sanding, trying to shove the welling down.

A woman named Clare worked beside me. We slept near each other in St. Germaine's, the dormitory we women of the commune lived in. The dormitory was across the way from the commune shop and just across the road from the main house where Clare and I were working. We called ourselves the Germainiacs, though our tame behavior never reached anywhere near maniacal. Our favorite trick involved leaving candy on the bed of one of our dorm mates. The dorm mate had to figure out who had left it there for her. Every evening after a day of work, the unsuspecting girl returned to St. Germaine's to find more candy on her bed until she finally guessed the right person. It anguished one Russian woman who was on her seventh day of anonymous candy receiving. "Who is it?" she howled in her thick Russian accent. "Who is it left this candy for me?" It was Clare, the trickster of the dorm, who ultimately revealed her candy-giving identity through gales of laughter rolling around on her narrow bed.

In front of the blue door, Clare and I rubbed the spindles of the chairs in time, up and down, up and down. Then the bars of the chair support, back and forth, back and forth. The force of emotion welling up inside of me escaped in a frustrated, angry sigh. It stopped my work and made Clare laugh. Pat had wandered off to tend to other matters, so Clare and I were free to break the code of silence and talk as we sanded.

"The worst was when they asked me to empty out the salt-and-pepper shakers, wash them out, and fill them again. I really had a hard time obeying that one." Clare offered the detail with a laugh and a shrug. I was immediately drawn to her spirit. If she could survive the disciplined life here, then I could. I was hungry to learn everything I could about her.

She was 23 when I met her, a tall young woman, elegantly built with unmanageable bushy brown hair that was somehow very attractive. It matched the wildness in her green eyes. Clare had taken time off from her career as a social worker to spend a year at Madonna House. I knew the instant I saw her that she was different. Her spirit was bigger than everyone else's and you could sense how constrained she was living under the rigors of community life. Her eyes always belied a mischievous character no matter how subservient her actions.

I watched, because I needed to. I needed to understand why she was there, what had drawn her here as it had drawn me. Why had she left her home in Virginia to come here, as I had left mine in Michigan? Why did she stay? Clare seemed to have all the answers, or at least she seemed to be having the most fun.

In our spartan environment, Clare spun color. You could tell she was always trying to fight off her deviant side. The Madonna House staff had decided that any of Clare's requests should immediately be met with a *no* before actually considering its validity. She had a way of presenting herself with such charisma that an unsuspecting staff member might find themselves agreeing to all manner of chaos before realizing the impact of her request. She took their *nos* in stride, and continued to present her case to them in her least beguiling, least affected way, which for Clare, was still a heavily-loaded presentation.

She wanted a dance, a huge multicultural bash to take advantage of all the different nationalities housed under the commune. Bessie from Alaska, Gudrun from Germany, Ana from Russia, Jill from France. But we didn't have occasions like this, except for during Eastertime when a boy named Lawrence would joyously leap onto a dining table and sing, "Christ is risen from the dead . . .," waiting expectantly for the rest of us to join in. And we

did throughout the whole week. Whether in the bathroom combing our hair, or walking down the dirt road in our Sunday best to the larger church in the Combermere community, we'd joyfully shout out the rest of the song. "...Ransoming death from death! And to those in the tomb, lavishing life!!!"

But this was not the kind of celebration Clare was looking for. She wanted raucous fun. She wanted to hang upside down from tree limbs and wave to passersby. This is what she suggested. That we all climb up into the trees and hang there. She danced around the staff as she presented her plan. "And we can dress in curtains and draperies! Knee-length skirts, of course, for the girls! But it will be great! And we can sing as we swing!"

Her plea continued as Fr. Briere laughingly shook his head. "But we want our boyfriends and our hamburgers. Can't we at least have this?" She whined in a way that was annoying and winning at the same time. The staff would not allow the tree hanging, but next to that, the multicultural dance sounded downright tame. Fr. Briere gave in to the cultural dance where the men and women of the commune talked with each other socially, rather than simply waving to each other through laundry windows.

How she got around the system is what interested me. How she fused the two worlds together, the world that made room for her spirit, and the world that required the patience to clean out salt-and-pepper shakers. I needed to know how she had the strength to exist in both of them – that's what I desperately needed to learn from her.

*

The bikes in the tool shed were the old kind with no gears and wide handlebars. Baskets were fitted on the front of each of them. Clare and I threw our legs over the bicycle bars for a bike ride on a Thursday afternoon, the only hours of free time in commune life.

Racing each other up and down gravelly hills, through trees Clare might have hung from, I needed to know. We dropped our bikes in the grass, dust flying up around us, and fell to the ground in exhaustion and laughter.

“Why are you here?” I asked her after our laughter gave way to the work of regaining our breath.

“What do you mean?” She shielded her eyes from the sun behind me as she looked my way.

“At Madonna House. Why did you come?”

“Cause I said I would. ‘Devote a year of my life to something like this ... I can’t wait to go home.’”

“Then why don’t you go?” I asked, realizing in the same moment that unlike her, I did not want to go home. I couldn’t explain why, but maybe she knew.

She sat for a minute without speaking. “It’s different for everyone,” she said looking straight ahead. She gathered herself up, brushed off her backside, and hollered over her shoulder before mounting her bike. “You can’t look to me for answers. I don’t have any.” She sped away on her bike, waving her hand up over her head briefly as she set out on her own. She couldn’t stop long enough to answer my question, I knew. She needed to keep moving, to do anything to avoid being still.

But I could be still. I sat in the dusty grass and watched her go – watched her stand up on her pedals to force her wheels to spin more quickly, to get away from me and the quiet of the moment.

*

I was alone then, like I was with the tray of pebbles. I looked around at jar after jar of beans in the cool light of the basement. They stretched out before me like a Sunday afternoon. Brushing my hand over the tops of the beans on the tray, I felt their smoothness, their grace. My hand stopped only when it hit the jagged hardness of a pebble. I plucked it out, rolled it around in my hand before tossing it onto the tray of discarded pebbles.

Clare beat the system by not stopping, by spinning wildly through her self-imposed sentence at Madonna House. She exhausted everyone with her merriment, but none probably more than herself. I couldn't keep up with her in the end. I couldn't keep up with Clare and I couldn't keep up the slow pace of Madonna House either. The welling up inside of me was a testament to my desperate need to set my own pace, to make my own decisions, and to make my own employment.

Clare worked fastidiously at the chairs upstairs. She survived by sanding away the old stain and wear from years of use by the hundreds of people who sat in them every day. I was content to sit on a stool in the basement, picking through the pebbles and the beans.

This is faith, I realized. Being pulled in two different directions. Wanting one life and accepting that it isn't the right one no matter how much I want it. Faith is Catherine Doherty driving away in her car and turning the wheel back around, knowing that she couldn't escape a path God had sent her on. Faith is Clare committing to a year at Madonna House and seeing it through because something inside told her she needed to be there.

A faithful life is not a life of perfect peace. It is not sanctimonious. It is not serene. It isn't for me anyway. It is a double life filled with inconsistencies. It is a constant struggle between two worlds and two agendas. Faith is the large-framed Pat barking out orders in her

husky way even though she'd rather be home watching hockey. Faith is Clare sanding chairs when she'd rather be travelling through Europe with the first guy she meets on the Eurorail. Faith is me sitting in the basement of Madonna House, trying to accept that God wants me to sort out beans. I didn't want to sort out the beans. I didn't want to be at Madonna House. But I knew God wanted me there.

And people will ask how I knew. Because anywhere else would not have been right. That's how I knew.

Alone in the quiet, performing a task that I had some say in doing, (if breaking down and crying can be considered having say in a thing) I felt I had beat the system, too. At least until my next task, when I would once again struggle to faithfully follow God's plan for me, I was content to just rest there.