2002

The beautiful gate: my journey to the monastery

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The beautiful gate:

My journey to the monastery

by

Columba Timothy McNeill

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
  David Hunter
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Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2002

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Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the master’s thesis of

Columba Timothy McNeill

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signature redacted for privacy
In thanksgiving ...

-to Sheryl St. Germain, who guided me on this writing journey and nudged me to revisit cloudy landscapes.

-to my workshop colleagues at Iowa State University: I am grateful for their openness.

-to Leo and the staff at Café Beaudelaire, who let me sit at table three for hours and days as my past spilled onto paper.

-to my parents, for introducing me to the mystery of faith.

-for the support of my confreres: Abbot Barnabas and the monks of St. Benedict's Abbey. I am most blessed to belong to this God-seeking community.

This memoir is dedicated to my sister,

Kimberly Ann,

who always stood by my side,
even when I had lost my way.
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“Look at us!” Peter said. The cripple gave them his whole attention, hoping to get something. Then Peter said: “I have neither silver nor gold, but what I have I give you!

In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean, walk!”

Then Peter took him by the right hand and pulled him up. Immediately the beggar’s feet and ankles became strong; He jumped up, stood for a moment, then began to walk around.

He went into the temple with them—walking, jumping about, and praising God.

When the people saw him moving and giving praise to God, they recognized him as that beggar who used to sit at the Beautiful Gate of the temple. They were struck with astonishment—utterly stupefied at what had happened to him.

Acts of the Apostles, 3:4-10
Preface

When I began my graduate studies in creative writing at Iowa State University, I didn’t set out to write a memoir. I usually wrote poetry and fiction. Most of my work incorporated images from my past: smoky nightclubs, glittery brooches, art museums, brightly patterned rayon shirts, quiet church interiors. My only foray into creative nonfiction had been an essay about having high hair in the 1980s. My undergrad professor counseled me to stick with poetry. But something within me stirred during the first few weeks as a grad student in 2000. I had begged Sheryl St. Germain to let me into her already-full nonfiction workshop. I felt I needed to explore nonfiction, to go beyond a witty essay about hairspray and blond highlights. A desire arose in me to eschew the veils of poetry and fiction, to present the bare narrative of my life. The time had come to tell my story.

Sheryl's class was entitled “Infected by Place.” Most students wrote about landscapes: the damp coast of Ireland, a Christmas tree farm in Iowa, a waterfall in Vermont. As I set out to chronicle the changing tides of my past, I found it difficult to submerge myself in one place. My story hopped around like a jet-setting rock star on a three month-forty-six cities tour: Connecticut, Colorado, California, Missouri, New Haven, Denver. As I wrote each essay, I came to realize that my tale wasn’t so much about place, but of being a displaced person, a person who glided through landscapes until I reached a final place, a monastery in Kansas.

My narrative became an exercise of being infected with the nooks and crannies of memory. I spent hours sitting in an Ames Brazilian bistro, Café Beaudelaire, writing with such intensity that I barely noticed the youthful passersby or the red brick dorm across the street. With a pint of Bud Light inches from my notebook, a cigarette resting in the ashtray, I plunged into the varied places of my past. The words gushed forth like water from a rock.
I follow in the footsteps of a great company of spiritual memoirists: St. Augustine, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Patricia Hampl. These writers provide moving testimonials to the torrents of grace lavished upon a soul experiencing conversion. As I join the ranks of these autobiographers, I cannot help but feel a kinship with them, for we traverse along similar arcs: a youthful embrace of the flesh, a spiritual epiphany, and a turning toward God. But as my past took shape on paper, I quickly realized that I differed from other writers: I went into much greater detail about those instances when I strayed from the straight and narrow. My candor set me apart.

In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine acknowledges his concubine and his illegitimate son. When he writes about the passions of his youth, however, he resorts to lyricism and theology to veil the particulars: “At one time in adolescence I was burning to find satisfaction in hellish pleasures. I ran wild in the shadowy jungle of erotic adventures.” Thomas Merton’s *The Seven Storey Mountain* uses similar language when he describes his sinful past, employing rhetoric about hell and the abyss rather than explicitly stating that as a Cambridge student, he fathered an out-of-wedlock child. In *The Long Loneliness*, Dorothy Day recounts how she and her lover ended their relationship shortly after the birth of their daughter. Nowhere in Day’s memoir does she include the fact that as a young woman, she had had an abortion. Patricia Hampl’s *Virgin Time* offers fleeting mention of past lovers and taking her first birth control pill, but her piece focuses on the journey to belief in God, the quest for community and contemplation. Whatever their reasons, these writers choose to not dwell on certain matters.

In my nonfiction workshop, I immediately realized that I could not hide behind metaphor. One of the first pieces I presented to Sheryl’s class had to deal with a horrific event in my life that happened after I had a moped accident. My Inquisition-like colleagues pounced on the proliferation of white spaces between the lines: I was holding something
back, the piece didn't make sense. They demanded more: something was missing. I
awakened to the fact that to effectively portray my spiritual journey, I'd have to stand naked
before my readers. I felt as if I was leaping from metaphor to neon-glare honesty, stepping
from the comfort of a Broadway theater and onto the set of the Oprah Winfrey Show. To be
true to my story, I had to divulge both the calm waters and the crashing waves of my past.

I suppose questions could be posed: why bother recount a past peppered with
youthful folly? Shouldn't a monk fix his gaze on the future? Does the whole notion of
“looking back” entail a desire to return? Look at what happened to Lot's wife! As I peered at
the landscape of my life, I did so not to drown in the past, but to acknowledge God's
handiwork in guiding me to the monastery. I think Thomas Merton's insight fits me: “For the
saints, when they remember their sins, do not remember the sins but the mercy of God, and
therefore even past evil is turned by them into a present cause of joy and serves to glorify
God.” Hardly a saint, I approached my memoir with a desire to bear witness to God's
merciful touch. Like Patricia Hampl, “I write about the past because I want it to be the past.”
I may be infected by memory, but I do not wish to relive the past. I simply like to marvel at
my journey.

A consequence of my honesty, however, is that I will not be able to publish this
memoir. After reading an earlier manuscript, Abbot Barnabas, the spiritual father of St.
Benedict's Abbey, said, “I enjoyed your work immensely, but you cannot publish it. I'm
concerned about your privacy.” When he told me this, I was crestfallen. My pride had been
piqued by the accolades of my workshop colleagues: “Brother, this will make a great book!”
and “Brother, you have to publish this!” Father Abbot's pronouncement dashed all visions of
book signings and public readings. I confess that I even daydreamed that I could go on
Oprah's show, my work a selection for her book club. After prayer and reflection, my pride
eventually washed away. I came to peace with the abbot's decision. As a monk, I have taken
a vow of obedience. All things are possible with God, even the bending of one’s will. And so I can accept my lot with a joyful calm. Perhaps naked monks are not to be held up to the scrutiny of a society that does not understand the cloister.

In any case, I do hope that someday these pages will be published. Perhaps time will bring about a change in the abbot’s decision. Or maybe this work will become a book after my death. The when does not concern me; only hope that at some time in the future, a wider readership will have the chance to encounter my spiritual journey. The crux of this piece lies in a desire to live the Benedictine motto: *That in all things, God may be glorified.* I have every confidence that I have written something that glorifies God. For ultimately, this is a love story, a recounting of a wayward son who returns to the embrace of his Father. Along with my conversion and my entrance into the monastery, this memoir is an act of prayer. And so, I am at peace.
It's only natural for a former dancer to fill the monastery with 80s dance music. Even the cloistered deserve a bit of verve, you know what I'm saying? I bless the brethren with a daily dose of disco when I shimmy on the treadmill. The ground floor exercise room has carpet on the floor and walls, but I'm pretty sure Madonna carries down the hall. A thin layer of dust coats the weights and machines; it absorbs some sound, but not much. The community room is directly above the exercise room, so monks reading *The Kansas City Star* can feel the Eurythmics.

I know, I know. If I were charitable, I would trot my stuff in silence. Believe me, I've tried. I've done the rosary and contemplation thing, but the beeping treadmill and all that sweat are just too distracting. I probably should use headphones, but I prefer surround sound. Concentrated music gives me a headache. If I were more monastic, I would listen to classical or soft jazz. Oh please! After two minutes I'd get so bored I'd quit and go outside for a cigarette. Sweat has a beat, a loud beat. Not even an abbey is immune.

There's a pretty good stereo in the exercise room. The first one we had didn't sound so hot. When Father Mark went into a workout frenzy for a few weeks in the Summer of 1999, he talked our business manager, Father Maurice, into buying a new stereo. It's great because it has a remote control and takes three CDs, so my workout doesn't have to be interrupted. When I regale my confreres with my daily ritual, I begin by loading up the CD tray. I turn on the treadmill and drape my towel on the handrail. Beeping in my program, I begin to pad in place. Music pulsates through the room. As the incline increases, my feet keep time and I can't help but click my fingers. I settle into a stride and my arms swing. The
music is hot and so am I. My T-shirt and shorts stick to my skin. There's no pain with this gain; rhythm is its own ecstasy. I tell you, it's the vibrating music that makes it.

In a matter of moments I am transformed. The view beyond the two large windows, the East lawn and the Missouri River, fades away. As sweat tickles my temples and runs down my back, I'm whisked away from the exercise room. The Material Girl is my madeleine. With the swipe of a hand, I'm five hundred miles away in Denver. It's a Sunday night tea dance at Tracks, a warehouse-like nightclub in a decayed lower downtown. Urban glitter in a bag lady neighborhood. The large dance floor is smoky and rocking. I'm there in my long black coat and fleur-de-lis rayon shirt: it's the 80s so we're rudely decadent, sporting sparkling brooches while we guzzle Long Island Iced Teas. Next I'm at Rock Island where a premier hair salon is having an invite-only party. Large cubes are interspersed on the dance floor where stylists cut hair above the throng and we dance around them and the red brick walls radiate heat. Then I'm at the Metro wearing a black suit with a red turtle neck and red beret and a big clock brooch but someone steals it right off my lapel so I stage a lament and then laugh because I'm stoned and George Michael is singing we gotta have faith, faith, faith. Next my sister Kim and I are at the Grove but we call it the Grave and we're drinking pitchers of Coors and both of us are Madonna wannabes with rosaries around our necks and I'm in paisley pants and we don't notice anyone else except when we laugh at their outfits. So then I'm at the Midnight Sun in San Francisco dancing in a sea of Asians to New Order and my hair is dyed pitch black and it's high because Aqua Net does the trick and high hair is in and the strobe lights match my heartbeat because I'm doing speed. Then I'm with Kim at Fort Ram in Northern Colorado. It's larger than a gymnasium and is filled with heavy metal chicks getting down on Bon Jovi and tobacco-spitting dudes but we look fresh in our Esprit polka dots. They finally interrupt that Bon Jovi crap and play the Pet Shop Boys so Kim and I clear a table and dance on the table and our arms are flying and feet are stomping and heads
swaying and we got attitude. Next I'm at the Copa in New Haven where the air hangs and shirts come off and Yalies try to look less Yalie and the bodies gleam in the smoke. And then I'm on the pier in New York and it's a hot June night and the music pounds on the Hudson River as the Empire State Building lights a lavender way and I'm sentimental drunk and want the dance to last forever and there are hundreds or thousands of us and it's all so fabulous. All those nightclub nights fuse into one and the exercise sweat becomes dance sweat. The music carries me and my arms pump and my hips sway and I'm drinking and smoking and losing myself. I'm a dancer and I hit that perfect beat and lose myself and it's glorious.

The treadmill beeps stop and I'm facing the grey carpeted wall of the exercise room. I'm back in Atchison, Kansas, and this ain't no dance club. I'm wheezing and gasping and drenched, but I cannot stop; my feet won't let me. I bounce off the treadmill and start dancing, hips pumping, arms flying, my eyes fixed on the door. I don't want to grieve any monk who might barge in: exercise disco is one thing, but dancing to it is quite another. Who ever heard of a dancing monk?

When the song is over, I turn off the music. The silence rings in my ears and I welcome the cloistered calm: the transition from frenzied memories to monasticism is not too large a leap. After all, this is my home. Despite the excitement of the memories, the music takes me to a past I don't wish to revisit; I go back in time to marvel at how far I've come. If I were glib, I'd say it's a Virginia Slims thing: "I've come a long way, baby." I towel my face and neck, gazing at the East lawn to see if there are any rabbits or walkers out and about. As I gather my senses and CDs, I say a thank you to God: Thank you for not letting me have a heart attack during my workout. The night images fade for another day.

I turn off the lights and quit the exercise room. The ground floor hallway, soothed with blue carpeting and blue walls, is longer than a football field. I should walk its length and then up the four flights of stairs to my room, but I'm exhausted and head for the elevator.
run into Father Hugh in the hallway and he asks, “Brother, why do you play that music so loud?” He doesn’t seem too angry, so I laugh. “I need it loud to keep me going!” I gleefully exclaim. “And besides, I’m trying to regain my dancer’s body!” I offer him a big grin as I get on to the elevator.

Of course, I never had a dancer’s body. I was never a professional dancer. I’m a bit theatrically inclined, a slightly paunched sloucher with a penchant for posture. I’m a Benedictine monk stuck in a Reagan-era boogie wonderland, a contemplative who owns a dramatic past and revels in memory. I’m a grotesque who thrives on epiphanies. It all makes perfect sense to me.

Don’t get the wrong impression. I’m using “grotesque” in a good sense. I suppose it’s a term that conjures up images of deformity or monstrosity, a freak. The term is derived from the Italian word for “grotto,” or those cave paintings of exaggerated figures. Grotesques are characterized by comic distortion. That’s me, past and present. Growing up with deep religious convictions, studying to become a Catholic priest, then turning away from the Church and diving into an underworld of flesh idolatry, then finding my way out of the nightclub haze to enter a Kansas monastery. If that isn’t grotesque, I don’t know what is. I can sit in my monastic cell and reflect on Scriptures, and then eagerly pick up the latest issue of *Vanity Fair*. Riddled with comic distortions and exaggeration, I am like a character in a Flannery O’Connor story.

I am a cradle Catholic, born and raised in a tradition that is at home with the mystery of Faith. I think I’ve always recognized that as humans, an all-loving God has given us the gift of free will. But we are like the Israelites who wandered around the desert: they had seen the parting of the Red Sea, the column of fire, but they made a golden calf to be their god. Later, they complained that they would have been better off in Egypt, where they had had plenty of food and drink. Those ancient Israelites, our cousins, are prototypes for the mystery
of being human: that despite the infinite graces lavished upon us by God, we freely choose to either accept or reject those gifts. Catholicism allows me to chuckle; for I, too, have been known to complain, “I am sick of this manna!” The mystery of Faith isn’t so much about wonder, but about the marriage of flesh and spirit.

In an undergraduate creative writing class, I once wrote a story entitled “Salvation Won’t Be Delayed.” It was about a preacher man who walks to his town hall to legally change his name to John the Baptist. His jaunt is peppered with exclamations about the sinfulness of the world around him, and how people wouldn’t know salvation if it fell on them from the sky. When he gets to the town hall, he trips, hitting his head on a bronze bust of John F. Kennedy. Falling to the stone steps, blood gushes from the gash in his head. Just before he dies, he realizes that for all his ranting and raving about the sinfulness of the world, salvation is about to visit him. It wasn’t a particularly original story, very O’Connoresque. But I mention it because of what I originally wanted to entitle it: “Ain’t Nothin’ Mo’ Important Than Salvation.” I think that sums up the way I look at life. When push comes to shove, it’s all about salvation. I can only see through the eyes of faith.

I must confess I’m always a bit surprised when others fail to grasp the mystery of Faith. I am at home with mystery. It’s as natural to me as the skin on my bones. It seemed perfectly normal, for instance, for me to baptize my best friend. We were both in the third grade. Upon learning that he had never been baptized, I explained the Faith, asking him if he wanted to become a child of God and be baptized by me. He gave his wide-eyed consent, and we marched up to the second floor bathroom in his apartment. I filled a Dixie cup with water, had him lean his head over the sink and proceeded to baptize him “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

I am often asked, “Why would you do that? What would make a third grader want to baptize someone?” All I can do is shrug: “How can anyone not be baptized?”
Faith and the Church are my passion. I suppose it’s due to the fact that I’m quite sensual. When I was a novice, or beginner monk, I was in a liturgy class one day and the discussion focused on church art and architecture. The brother monk who was teaching the class ecstatically extolled the virtues of our 1950s minimalist abbey church: “The lack of art represents what we do as monks; we look within and enter into contemplation.” “Lack of art” was an understatement. The abbey church is a mammoth structure of concrete, brown bricks, a high ceiling, and dust colored marble floors. The pews in the nave are a darker shade of the floor, the choir stalls are a deeper brown, and the windows are clear and square. Color rests on the ceiling tiles in an orange rust, yellow, and grey configuration that can be described best as “What’s up with that?” Against the wall above the entrance to the monastery is a giant fresco depicting the Trinity and scenes from the life of Saint Benedict and our founding monks. It’s gotten some rave reviews and is featured in the Catholic Encyclopedia as an excellent example of modern frescoes. It’s all right, but most of its colors are greys and browns and blacks.

“I prefer churches that have more art,” I proclaimed to the monk who was canonizing our prayer space. “Give me lots of statues and stained glass, paintings galore and flickering candle, icons and robust stations of the cross, ornate columns and Gothic altar raredos that lift your soul to Heaven!”

“Brother, you a sensualist.”

I suppose that I am. But I do not think it’s a paradox for a religious person to be a sensualist, to be passionate. God, the Eternal Word, became flesh. I belong to a religious tradition that embraces senses in its worship, everything from incense to Communion to making the sign of the cross. Life is hope in the resurrection of the dead. As a child, I embraced religion with a passion. I suppose I embraced a life of sin with a similar passion. Such is the lot for a sensualist.
My story of a grotesque can be understood only in the light of sin. How did a baptizing child become a nightclub dancing queen and then find his way into a monastery? This is my journey from spiritual cripple to Chant boogie-boy leaping through the Beautiful Gate. This is not a coming out story, nor is it a coming of age saga; it is a conversion story. I am the object of this tale, not the subject. Like some conversion stories, mine is a bit gritty on the edges. I am one of those grotto figures come to life. Seduced by the wiles of Vanity Fair, this is the story of how I eventually shook its dust from my sandals. I am a grotesque who has found life in the rushes; I am a living stone of St. Benedict’s Abbey. Miracles still happen.
Sin is Behovely

*O mighty one, gird your sword upon your thigh;*  
in splendor and state, ride on in triumph  
*for the cause of truth and goodness and right.*  

*Psalm 45*

On a moist New England night, when July anticipated August, as my parents' bodies pressed together, my mother whispered into my father's ear, "Let's do it without protection." A little square package fell to the floor, and I came to be, a child of abandon.

My parents regularly attended church. Raised in working class Bridgeport, my father's Catholicism was as everyday as St. Peter's Church down the street. Crowded into the first floor of a two-family home, he and his three sisters knelt before the radio each night during Lent, reciting the rosary with their parents. My mother, from suburban-like Stratford, wore white gloves to Easter services and sang in the Methodist Church choir. My father, Kevin, with a dark crew cut and Buddy Holly glasses, worked in the technical materials department at Avco. Sharon, my mom, a petite secretary in tight calf-length skirts and ruby lips, caught his attention immediately. One date led to another, and then another, and then to that July night in 1963.

Both came from Irish backgrounds. My father prided himself in his heritage: a grandmother directly from the sod, apostrophied surnames like O'Connor and O'Brien. My mother's maternal grandparents hailed from Belfast: staunch Protestants who disdained card playing and the drink. Although my mother's father had German and English ancestry (and a minister in there somewhere), the Luce of her last name was almost like an afterthought, as her mother's Northern Irishness swallowed up everything else. Except Catholicism, which was spat out with contempt.
On the evening of my conception, my parents joined another couple and feasted on prime rib at the Fairfield Inn. After dinner, the four of them went to my father's friend's house, whose parents were out of town. The foursome split up after a while for couple intimacy. This was a few days before my father was about to leave Connecticut for a trip to the open spaces, the mountains, out West. Perhaps my mother's desire to forgo protection had something to do with hoping my father would return.

He did return to Connecticut. And several months later, he learned about me. Happy with the prospect of fatherhood, there was no question about marriage: of course he and my mother would marry. They loved each other. But when my father mentioned that they should go to their parents to give them the good news, my mother refused. Vestiges from the past, when her parents had warned, "Don't you ever, EVER, come and tell us you're pregnant without being married!" kept her from wanting to tell anyone the good news. She talked my father into eloping in New York. They'd tell the family after the deed.

Unfortunately, their timing wasn't stellar. They ran away and married the day after John F. Kennedy's assassination. As my two sets of grandparents gazed at their TVs in black and white mourning, they received telegrams informing them that my parents had been married by a justice of the peace, and would return in a few days after a honeymoon weekend in Vermont.

My maternal grandparents, who had also eloped in New York (without a pregnancy, though), seemed more displeased with my parents' timing. Dad's parents were hurt: saddened that the marriage had been clothed in secrecy, and hurt that my parents hadn't been married in a Catholic church. Since my father was a confirmed Catholic, no wedding would be valid in the eyes of the Church unless witnessed by a priest. Both sets of grandparents remained mum about my mother's pregnancy.
Mr. and Mrs. J. Kevin McNeill moved in with a married couple in Milford. Dad went to mass on Sundays, while Mom continued to sing in the Methodist choir. When she started to show, she stopped attending services. In February 1964, my parents had a small wedding in a Catholic church, attended only by the maid of honor and the best man. My mother’s family refused to step foot in the church. Afterwards, my paternal grandparents held a small reception in their home, and my mother’s parents attended. For years, though, my parents received two sets of anniversary cards: some in November from my mother’s family, and others in February from my father’s family. Two Irish faith traditions separated even in New England.

By the time of my birth on April 6th, my parents had their own apartment on Barnum Terrace in Stratford. My father, as obsessive about cameras as he was with the West, captured my homecoming with a single photograph: my mother holding me, standing before their door with a sign on it reading “Welcome Home Mom and Tim!” The child who had been the product of a night thrown to abandon was about to cross the threshold of nuclear family life.

When it came time for my baptism, there was no question as to which church it would take place: St. James Catholic Church. At the time of my parents’ February wedding, my mother had had to sign some form agreeing to raise her children in the Catholic faith. I suppose that’s how it was done back then. In any case, on the day before my entrance to the Church, as my father dropped my mother’s mother off at her house after a shopping run, he leaned over and said, “Tomorrow is Tim’s baptism at St. James. Sharon and I would like it if you’d come.”

My grandmother puckered her lips, opened the car door and hissed, “Never!”

After the blessed event, my father’s side of the family threw a party. No one from Mom’s side of the family attended. When my parents reached the door, one of my father’s
sisters whisked it open and beamed, “Welcome to the family, Tim!” She snatched me from my mother’s arms. As I was carried into the house to the oohing and ahhing of relatives, and as my father smiled broadly, my mother was left to shuffle in alone.

Years later, when I was a teenager, my mother would sometimes talk about having to raise her three children as Catholics. Her face would invariably get stony, and she’d purse her lips. Although she seemed to be in awe of Catholicism’s rich ritualism, I think a part of her resented having to sign that piece of paper. Throughout my childhood (and, indeed, to this day), she wholly supported the faith lives of my sister, brother and me: she attended our First Communion and Confirmations, and for several years, she went to Sunday mass with us. At one point, she seemed on the verge of converting: she knew her way through the missalette better than I, and talked about taking catechism classes. But something held her back. Perhaps it was her mother’s anti-Catholicism. Or that piece of paper. In any case, she never became a Catholic, and in all of my childhood, she never went to the Methodist Church. A faith-filled person, she seemed to be in limbo. But in raising three Catholic children, my mother never wavered: the pillar of her support stood firm.

It amazes me a bit that from this out-of-wedlock passion and religious turmoil, a child would emerge and go on to become a monk. As I gaze back at those years, I am in awe at how well my parents juggled their two religious backgrounds to raise three children in a faith-filled home. And I am humbled at my mother’s sacrifice, her willingness to eschew her family’s anti-Catholicism. Her willingness to sacrifice her own faith life.

In time, my mother’s parents softened. Although they never attended any of our baptisms, First Communions, or Confirmations, they have attended their great-
grandchildren's Catholic baptisms. And they have wholly supported me in my pursuit of religious life. Given time, dark feelings can drift away as easily as shadows in the dawn. And so, a child was born and would mature with a deep yearning for the Divine. But like my parents, I, too, would eventually abandon myself to the flesh. I am convinced that if a monk can arise from an out-of-wedlock union, there are no bastards. Only children of God. For He, too, had a hand in my creation.

While my mother remembers me as a child who always had to be the life of the party, standing in the middle of the living room to entertain relatives with the latest songs from Romper Room, my father has remarked that even at an early age, I seemed to have betrayed a sense of solemn wonder when I attended mass. Dad started taking me to church when I reached two and a half. Unlike other toddlers who squirmed or played with toys, I sat still, gazing at the stained glass windows, trying to peer over adult shoulders to view the priest in the sanctuary. I vaguely recall those Sunday mornings; my bare knees jutting out before me as I sat clad in shorts and bow tie outfits. Perhaps the calm impressed me. The silence. At home, I thrived on making people laugh, my hands waving gaily as I performed, but peace of flickering candles and statues in church quieted my soul. It may have been a sense of other, The Other, that not only pacified me, but also awed me. In any case, after mass, a parishioner or two would invariably approach my father and exclaim, "Sir, your son is so well behaved!" My father would smile in thanksgiving as I stood beside him, my eyes focused on the crucifix, listening with the ear of my heart.

My father also tells me that I readily took to prayers: I relished kneeling by the bed with him, hands clasped together, my tinny voice intoning, "God bless Mommy and Daddy and Kim and Brian and..." I caught on quickly to the Our Father and the Hail Mary. It was almost as if I enjoyed prayer, focusing on Someone beyond me, beyond my family: a
presence as distant as the clouds, yet as close as the buttons on my Snoopy pajamas. As real as my grandfather down the street or Poppy in Bridgeport. That Presence who laughed at my entertaining ways and listened intently to my rambling.

I also seemed to have had an affinity for religious habits. One of my father’s sisters was a Sister of St. Joseph during the 1960s. One Sunday a month, my family would join my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, and we’d all trek up to the convent in West Hartford. Sister Ann Kevin, as she was known in religious life, would greet us at the entryway, eyes smiling beneath the black veil. Scott and Chris, my elder cousins, terrorized the place, running all over the wide lawns, shouting and screaming, wrestling until clothes tore. As babies and toddlers, none of my cousins liked being held by my aunt: they’d cry and whine and try to get away from her. Perhaps the black habit scared them. But not me. I was the only niece or nephew who didn’t make a fuss. I’d giggle, my eyes taking in the yards of black fabric, the starched white wimple. I returned her wide grins.

Similar to the quiet peace inside a church, the convent-ground’s hush was a place of peace. When Scott and Chris weren’t yelping or their mother yelling after them, a soothing cicada hum rose above the oak and elm trees. As the brides of Christ glided along the grass with their families, the rustling of their habits seemed to match the gentle waving leaves. The very stones of the convent seemed to breathe a tiny whispering noise, as if years of Chant seeped through their pores. I am convinced that those trips to the convent initiated me into the mystery of religious life.

I was a happy little boy: gregarious and inclined toward the Divine. But my mannerisms also betrayed effeminacy. My father has home movies of me as a toddler sitting on the grass, my hands and arms raised away from the prickly blades, a look on my face that seemed to scream: Get me out of here! I developed an aversion to dirt and grass, choosing to
sit pristine in my bow ties and hardly-scuffed white shoes. My mother used to exclaim, “He’ll probably be a ballet dancer.” Some of my earliest memories are those in which I knew, somehow, that something set me apart from other boys. I distinctly remember feeling that a wide chasm separated me from my cousins Scott and Chris. Whenever we visited them, they’d roughhouse and wrestle while I stood by, immaculate in shorts and knee socks. I preferred to play with Laurel, their sister. At only four years old, I knew that I was not made of the same mettle as them. Something in the way I walked and carried myself must have been distinctive: perhaps I had a limp wrist even back then. In any case, my uniqueness did not bring me sorrow. I quietly accepted it.

Perhaps it was at this time that seeds of introspection were planted. Standing against a bedroom wall as my cousins tore into each other, I’d silently reflect on my singularity. Not only did I not want to romp around like other boys, but I also had a yearning for the Divine that they didn’t seem to share. Neither my cousins, nor the boys on Catherine Street, had a desire to talk about prayers or church like I did. So in a sense, my grotesquerie began at this time. Not only was I Christ-haunted, but I also exhibited an effeminate theatricality, a desire for the adoration heaped at the performer’s feet. And I would reflect on this peculiarity, keep it in my mind and study it from different angles. I would always come away feeling as if I had viewed a big picture, not a jumble of paradoxes, but a framed whole. An exaggeration of the worldly and the religious. Laughter and prayer. At such a young age, I abandoned myself to both the physical and the spiritual.

In first grade, I attended St. James Parochial School. I remember the hardwood floors, the crucifix above the blackboard, statues of Mary, the Infant of Prague, and St. Francis of Assisi. The girls wore plaid skirts and knee socks, while the boys donned blue shirts and clip-on ties. Our reading books did not contain Dick and Jane, but rather, Mary Frances and boys
named Paul or John. The teachers in these books were nuns, and scenes depicted such real-life scenarios as the parish priest paying a visit to the classroom. I was thoroughly enthralled by the religiosity of it all: the books, the change of liturgical seasons, stories about the saints, the sisters standing before the blackboard, flecks of chalk on their habits. Each day during October and May, we'd sit in a circle and pray the rosary, our child voices like a crown of flowers around Our Lady's head. I wasn't an exceptional student: I didn't do so well in math, but I did adequately in reading and writing. I received my highest marks in religion and manners.

On the last day of first grade, Sister announced that we would have a drawing for all the statues and religious articles in the room. This was in June, 1971, and I assume this stripping of the classroom was an outcome of Vatican Council II. We all cursived our names on pieces of paper and Sister placed them in a basket. I said a silent prayer that I would win the Infant of Prague. I loved the figure: the child Jesus stood with right hand held up, his left hand holding a small globe. A glorious gold crown sat on his head. With each liturgical season, we placed different colored robes on the Infant: royal purple, velvet red, green, white, and gold. I so enjoyed changing his frilly robes. When it came time for Sister to pull a name from the basket, I held my breath.

"Kathleen gets the Infant of Prague!" Sister beamed. My heart sank.

I ended up with an eight-inch porcelain statue of the Blessed Mother, ringed at the base with plastic greenery and pink flowers. I smiled and thanked Sister, but I couldn't help glaring at Kathleen, whose red pigtails waved with glee as she hovered around her statue, changing its robes. When I arrived home that afternoon, my parents gushed about my beautiful statue of Mary. Yeah, I thought, it's nice, but it isn't the Infant of Prague.

This incident provided me with one of my first feelings of guilt. I knew that I should have been happy with my statue, but I wasn't. I yearned for that which was most pretty. The
plastic flowers surrounding Mary seemed so tacky, so cheap. I wanted the velvet robes and the lace, the golden crown. I loved the Blessed Mother, of course, and so I chided myself for my ingratitude. But despite my silent prayers, asking God to forgive me for not being happy with what was given to me by lot, I still felt a twinge of guilt. I still would have preferred the Infant of Prague.

* * * * *

In the summer of 1971, my father’s pleas to my mother finally prevailed, and she agreed to move to the West. Ever since my father’s trip to Wyoming and Colorado in 1963, he had longed to escape New England and settle in a landscape of mountains and plains, sprawling ranches, and a sky so vast and blue, one feels deliciously small. Cramming four-year-old Kim, soon-to-be three Brian, and myself, into the backseat of a ’57 Chevy, we headed for Colorado in late July. We settled in Loveland, a relatively quiet city on the Front Range. From our front door stoop, the Rocky Mountains seemed only a stone throw away. Dad entered the Police Academy and joined Loveland’s force. Mom stayed at home, overseeing Kim and Brian as they played in the apartment complex’s sandbox. I entered second grade.

St. John the Evangelist School lacked St. James’ old-world charm. The flat roof, rows of metal-framed windows, concrete walls, and beige tiled floors made it an icon of 1960s functionalism against the grandeur of the foothills. The teachers were polyester or wool clad laypersons. The only sister left in the school was the principle. I leaped from a pre-Vatican II-tinged environment to a school that had shed its iconography in favor of modernist sensibilities. After my first year there, the school eschewed uniforms: no more blue shirts and clip-on ties, plaid skirts and knee socks. Television sets were wheeled into classrooms so we could watch The Electric Company. In third grade, we viewed live coverage of troops returning home from Vietnam. St. John’s brought me into the post-modern world that had
merely lurked beyond the windows at St. James in Stratford. But the Colorado school hadn’t lost its mission: crucifixes hung above green blackboards, each student participated in religious education, and Christmas pageants always focused on the birth of Christ. Still, I did sense a loss of beauty, a loss of mystery.

The church was also a contemporary building. From the outside, it resembled what I imagined Noah’s Ark to have looked like: the wood planked roof swept up from the walls to a flattened peak. Stained glass windows offered a kaleidoscope of figureless colors. The altar stood in the middle of the sanctuary, the priest’s chair against a wall covered with a drape. The first time I walked into the church, I was convinced that Jesus, Mary and Joseph lived in a room behind the drapery. The tabernacle had been placed in a wall to the right of the altar. Round and gold, it shot forth spiky rays along the cream wall, a sun in the nave. I knew the Lord was in the Eucharist in the tabernacle, but the idea that the Holy Family resided behind a drape seemed much more appealing. During mass, I’d try to picture Jesus, Mary, and Joseph in the small square room, gazing at all of us in the pews. Or perhaps they watched that clown on Blinky’s Fun Club. I never saw anyone pull aside the hanging folds of cloth, but I convinced myself that the priest probably went in there after mass. I wanted to be like that priest, to sit in a rocking chair and visit with the Holy Family.

As I prepared to make my First Holy Communion, my well-meaning father coached me with a Pre-Vatican II theology.

“Make sure you don’t eat the host.” We sat in the living room. From the stereo, Johnny Cash crooned about a burning ring of fire. “Let the host dissolve on your tongue.”

I nodded.

“Make sure you stick your tongue out far enough, like this.” My father opened his mouth, his tongue jutting out from his lower lip. “You got to make sure you open your mouth enough. If you barely open it, the priest won’t have any place to put the wafer.”
I opened my mouth and stuck out my tongue. He nodded. Johnny Cash filled the apartment: “And it burned, burned, burned…”

“Try not to let it get stuck on the roof of your mouth. That’s the worst.”

“Well?”

“You don’t want your tongue playing with the Lord. Keep Him on your tongue, where he can melt easily.”

I coughed. “Jesus melts?”

“He does.”

The only person I had seen melt was the Wicked Witch of the West.

“And remember, DO NOT CHEW!”

I made my First Communion on Easter Sunday. Several other second-graders sat in the first pew with me. A bit sweaty in my new suit, I watched the mass unfold, eyes fixed on the priest. When the Host was elevated during the Eucharistic Prayer, my mouth dropped open: Oh God, I’m about to eat you. My stomach churned with nervous anticipation. When it came time to receive, I filed into the aisle with the other kids. We felt a bit special because we got to go ahead of the rest of the congregation. My parents proudly sat on the other end of the front pew, their eyes focused on me. I walked up to the priest.

“Body of Christ.”

“Amen.”

I held out my tongue like my father had showed me. The Host fit just fine, and then I closed my mouth.

I returned to the pew and knelt next to my mother. I relished the chalky taste of the thin wafer. My sister looked at me with wide eyes. As my father and others left to receive, my mother leaned over and whispered, “I saw you chew!” My face got hot. It was true. It
seemed perfectly natural to chew. After all, I certainly didn’t want Him to get stuck on the roof of my mouth. So I didn’t feel guilty. I was too happy, excited to have taken in the Lord.

After church, my parents presented me with a Mass book and rosary beads. The book featured color photographs of a priest celebrating the mass, with text on opposite pages. Black vinyl covered the book, with a zippered pocket for the rosary. For years, I cherished those gifts: I’d stare at the priest’s green chasuble, his hands extended over the host, the chalice, and I’d wrap the beads around my hands, fingering the crucifix. The objects linked me to the Blessed Sacrament, they reminded me of the mysterious gift I received each Sunday morning. Easter 1972 will always hold a special place in my heart: it’s the day I fell into the Eucharist.

Shortly after we had settled into our Loveland home, my parents became friendly with the parents of a boy who was a year older than me. He was a rough and tumble guy, one from whom I stayed away. Vance went to public school, so we rarely ran into each other. One night, both of our families went out for pizza at Shakey’s. I had been a bit apprehensive before we left: what would I have to say to Vance? We seemed so different. But we ended up getting along very well. On the way home, Vance and I sat in the very back of our station wagon. I proceeded to tell him about the Church and God. Not raised with much religion, he was mesmerized.

“I made my first Communion last month.” I told him in a hushed voice.

“What’s that?” Vance leaned toward me. Our parents chatted in the front and second seats, but Vance and I whispered, not wanting to share our conversation.

“The Body of Christ.”

Vance’s head bobbed as we hit a bump. “Whaddya mean?”

“Ya know. Jesus’ body.”
Vance grimaced.

“At the Last Supper, Jesus had some bread and said ‘This is my body.’ We’re supposed to eat him.”

“Why would he want people to eat him?” Vance grabbed the back seat as the station wagon turned a corner.

“So he could live in us. So we could be like him.”

“What does he taste like?”

I chuckled. “He doesn’t taste like anything. He’s bread. He melts in your mouth.”

Vance and I sat in silence for a few moments, vaguely listening to our parents discuss how pizza in the West paled in comparison to East Coast pies.

“Do you believe in the devil?” Vance’s eyes darted nervously from my face to his lap.

“Yeah,” I nodded. “Do you wanna know what I used to do when I was a first grader in Connecticut?” Vance’s eyes were wide. I leaned toward him. “When Sister wasn’t looking, I would take my middle finger, you know, that bad one we’re not supposed to stick out by itself? Well, I did stick it out, but not up. When Sister wasn’t looking, I would stick my big finger down. To the devil.”

Vance’s mouth puckered in awe. I had gained his respect.

As my spiritual life continued to deepen, I found that I could get along well with other boys. I may have differed from Vance, and another neighbor, Todd, in that I wasn’t interested in sports, but I could form friendships with them. We could explore the fields near the apartments, pick cat tails and try to burn them, or make bird houses out of empty milk cartons. And we could talk. About music, or TV shows. Or God. Sometimes they’d talk about girls, and I’d nod my head. It didn’t strike me as odd that I didn’t feel the same way
about girls as they did. Some of my best friends in school were girls. I seemed to be quite at ease with my friendships, with both boys and girls. Happy.

For fourth grade, I transferred from St. John's to a public school. My sister was entering first grade, and my parents could not afford two kids in private school. We both went to B.F. Kitchen, a flat-roofed brick structure with very few windows. It differed greatly from Catholic school. As a third grader at St. John's, I had been in the lowest math group and the middle reading group. At B.F. Kitchen, I was bumped up to the highest reading section and the middle math group. I suddenly felt a bit smarter. While I missed taking religion classes, I found another interest: writing. I was the first person in fourth grade to get a Super Star on an essay. Miss Simpson posted the one-page piece about my family on the bulletin board for a week. I proudly gazed at it from my desk. I still have the essay, my pencilled handwriting large on the faded yellow paper, the Super Star still taped to the top, its edges folded over.

Three quarters of the way through fourth grade, my family moved to Wellington, thirty miles north of Loveland. My father had quit the "cop shop" and worked for Hewlett-Packard. We settled into a new bi-level home with two bedrooms, an unfinished basement, and spacious front and back yards. Some of the town streets were still unpaved. Wellington would be the landscape that would largely define my sense of uniqueness, of feeling different from others. And it would be in Wellington that I first fostered the notions of a vocation.

It was a bit queer growing up a grotesque in a small Northern Colorado town. Wellington was a quaint farming community of 1,200 when we moved there in 1974. For Connecticut Yankees longing for a Rock Mountain high, it seemed the quintessential place to raise a family of three kids. Just shy of the foothills on the rolling Eastern Slope,
Wellington's streets ran North-South, East-West. The traffic light-less main street, flanked by grimy gas stations, had an all-American name: Cleveland Avenue. A mom and pop market, the post office, an ever-busy liquor store, and a greasy spoon and bar named the Duke of Wellington lined the main street between the gas stations. The Duke of Wellington entertained coffee-drinking, gossiping farmers each morning and Wrangler-jeaned town folks who chugged Buds at night. The side streets were filled with kids on bikes and dogs that never ceased barking. Wellington boasted of its favorite son: Supreme Court Justice Byron "Whizzer" White grew up and went to high school there, although he was usually quoted as saying he was from Fort Collins, the city ten miles to the south west. Wellington's shady quiet was interrupted only by blaring train horns or the occasional piercing whine of the fire alarm to call all volunteer firefighters. It was pure Americana of white bread friendliness. Except for a sissy-boy like me.

My first day at school as a fourth grader proved to be quite a secular revelation. Wearing polyester slacks and a bright striped Western shirt with shiny snaps, I stood apart from all the Levi-clad boys. My mother always insisted that my younger sister, brother, and I always dress nicely in public, so on my first foray to a small town school, I looked as smashing as a ten year old could. My attire raised eyebrows. At recess I was scandalized to hear fellow classmates shout "Fuck you!" and "Shit!" I had never heard adults use such language, let alone ten year olds. I was clearly not cut from the same cloth as the country boys. Even my language set me at odds with others. I drank soda, not pop. I had aunts, not ants. An aversion to sports did not help me. After my first P.E. class, I became one of those who is always picked last to play on a team. It took only a day to be labeled a sissy. My effeminacy stood out like blinking railway-crossing lights.

My spirituality set me at odds with many of my classmates as well. I wasn't a pre-teen Bible thumper, but I made no bones about my deep religious convictions. Most kids
didn’t give Faith the time of day, but I had no qualms about discussing God. Those who did wish to talk about the Divine tended to come from fundamentalist backgrounds and wanted to rhapsodize about being saved: “You’d better accept Jesus or you’ll go to Hell.” I knew about hell and salvation, but I desired to talk about God’s goodness. How Jesus loved us enough to die for us. I yearned to regale others with the story of little Bernadette, who had been visited by the Blessed Mother. While some kids spewed “shit” and “fuck” on the playground, and others spoke of damnation, I craved to sing the glories of Faith’s radiance, how that little Communion wafer allowed us to take in God. I desired joy discourse. But not many kids seemed interested.

So I became an actor. Harking back to toddler days when I stood in the middle of the living room to regale relatives, I became an entertainer. In fifth grade I beat out all the sixth graders to land the role of Charlie Brown in You’re A Good Man, Charlie Brown. It was a defining role. I couldn’t kick a football, but I could sing and dance up a storm. I must have been a perfect blockhead; even as a high school freshman, strangers would still come up to me periodically and say, “I remember you! You’re Charlie Brown!” In sixth grade I wrote plays. Gathering around me a troupe, we performed for classmates. Art became an outlet and a shield; I could write and create as a substitute for being a jock or a farmer. Writing and acting took center stage, while “sissy” and “religious nut” waited in the wings for periodic appearances. I think it was in Wellington that I became “fabulous.” I began to wear my mother’s Mrs. Bridge sense of social decorum to my advantage. Attire became costume, an extension of my theatrical personality. On the last day of elementary school, my classmates showed up in shorts and T-shirts. I arrived decked out in checkered polyester pants, a wide matching bow tie, and platform shoes. A persona was born.

While I may have been goody-goody, I was no saint. In sixth grade, my friend Anna and I went shoplifting one late spring afternoon. She had done it the previous day, and I
wanted to get in on it. We nonchalantly walked into Pauline’s Market. Pauline was at one end of the crowded, rectangular store, stooped behind wooden and glass counters stuffed with fifteen cents candy bars. The mammoth register *kachinged* as she rang up a customer. Pauline was hunchbacked and in her 70s, her yellow frock hung on her bony body. Her face resembled a creviced, thin moon. The bald-headed bulk of her husband busied himself at the opposite side of the store behind the meat counter, white apron stretched over a pot belly smeared with blood.

Anna and I wandered along the crowded aisles, sauntering past boxes of Kotex and Hamburger Helper.

“We can’t look suspicious,” Anna informed me as she squeezed a loaf of Wonder Bread, leaving it deformed. Anna was my friend from Boxelder Court, the same age as me. Her brother Ricky was a year ahead of us, athletic and rowdy, so I steered clear of him for the first few years I lived in Wellington. But Anna and I had become good friends.

“This looks good!” Anna reached for a can of Duncan Hines white frosting. We stood in the cake mix section of an aisle. She stuffed the can into her windbreaker pocket, the bulge clearly, roundly, noticeable.

“What should I get?” I asked, feeling wimpy and nervous.

“Here. Take this!” Anna grabbed a half pound bag of chocolate chips. I took it out of her hands and crammed it into my jacket pocket. I had to keep my right hand in the pocket to hide the protruding yellow Nestle wrapper.

We wandered throughout the store for a few minutes, and while Pauline gossiped with a customer, we slowly walked out of the store, careful about not making a mad dash to arouse suspicion. I’m quite certain my face was scarlet.

We practically ran down the main street, stopping at a bench before an abandoned storefront half a block from Pauline’s. We laughed with confidence as Anna pulled the top
off the frosting. I yanked my bag open, chocolate pieces cascading onto the sidewalk. We lounged in the afternoon sun, dipping index fingers into the frosting, globbing our mouths with the sugary cream. Cupping our palms, we took handfuls of chocolate chips and rammed them into our mouths before they melted. We sat along the main street, waving at passing cars and glorying in our glucose highs. We eventually discarded the remnants of our thievery in a nearby trash can and walked home, buzzing with a sense of accomplishment.

Later that night, my parents sat me down in the living room. Stiff-backed on the couch, they pursed their lips. I lounged in the cushioned chair.

“What is this I hear about you and Anna stealing stuff from Paulines?” my father asked. I instantly started to sweat.

“Um. What?”

“Tim, we know,” my father asserted.

I was quiet for a few seconds, my face on fire. “How did you find out?”

“I have my ways!” my mother snapped. Her eyes narrowed, so all I could see was blue eye shadow and mascara.

Years later, sitting at a kitchen table surrounded by empty beer cans, my sister and I asked our mother how she found out about all our childhood indiscretions. Did mothers have some sixth sense that enabled them to know their children’s indiscretions? My mother rolled her eyes and puffed on a Lucky Strike. “You kids were so stupid! I could hear everything you said on the phone to your friends! Voices carry, you know.”

But I didn’t know that at the time. I felt like disappearing into the chair as my parents stared at me.

“What do you think you should do about this?” my father asked. I wanted to smack the smirk off my mother’s face.

“I dunno” I shrugged.
“Well. You know what you did was wrong, don’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, we’re not going to punish you. You’ve really disappointed us, Tim. I never thought you’d do such a thing.” My father shook his head. My heart sank. “Your guilt should be punishment enough.”

I nodded, sighing. I began to feel some relief.

“But,” my father said, “you will have to go to confession this Saturday.”

I blinked hard. “But, I haven’t made my first confession yet,” I reminded them, my body tensing. As a fourth grader in Loveland, I had practiced for the Sacrament of Reconciliation in CCD classes, but we had moved to Wellington before I made my first confession.

“I suppose now it’s time,” my mother proclaimed, lighting another cigarette. I settled into the chair with a subdued unease. My mother blew a puff of smoke in my direction. “Frosting and chocolate chips!” she spat, shaking her head. I said nothing.

Helen, a classmate from across the street, gave me a short book about making a first confession. I was supposed to study it before Saturday, but I didn’t. It sat on my dresser.

After lunch on Saturday I perused the book. Besides the customary “Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned,” I had to memorize the Act of Contrition. And the order of the Sacrament, when to say what. Cherubic cartoon characters graced the pages, illustrating the kneeled experience of the confessional box. Since I hadn’t read the book, I proceeded to write down the main points, the sequence of events and the prayers. With nervous confidence, I folded up the piece of notebook paper and put it in my pocket. I would read my way through confession.

We stepped into St. Joseph’s, the church hushed with afternoon quiet. The confessionals stood near the front entrance, a big wood box with three narrow doors. A red
light shone above the center door, the priest’s. A few elderly women knelt in pews toward the back of the nave.

“Kneel here,” my father instructed, ducking into a pew. “Collect your thoughts for a few minutes.”

I put my sweaty palm into my right Toughskins jeans pocket, fingering my “how to” sheet. Oh God, I prayed, let me get through this! Rosary beads clinked against the wooden pew three rows ahead of us, a woman whispering Hail Marys.

“There, that one’s free,” my father nudged me, pointing to a woman leaving the left-side confessional. I quickly crossed myself and stood up, my right foot catching beneath the kneeler as I lunged into the aisle. I almost toppled over. My father rolled his eyes and shook his head. The Hail Mary woman turned to give me a quizzical look. I salvaged my foot, making my way to the box, my heart quickening. A tan colored cushion on a kneeler before a metal-screened window: just as I had expected. I took out my instructions and stepped in, closing the door behind me. It was pitch black.

I gasped in surprise. No one had told me it would be dark. My instruction booklet had made no mention of blackness. When I had practiced Confession in CCD, we had taken turns kneeling before the window, but the door had remained open. I had not thought it would be dark. It took a few seconds for my eyes to adjust before I noticed a tiny light near my feet. Smaller than a night light, only a few inches from the floor, a light cast off less of a glow than a candle flicker. I swayed in the dark, sweat beading on my forehead.

My hands traveled the wall until I felt the narrow shelf below the screened window. With lead-like feet, I inched forward slowly, not wanting to trip on the kneeler. When my shoe-tip stubbed it, I clenched the shelf and knelt down. I unfolded the damp piece of paper, placing it before my eyes. I could see nothing. What was I supposed to do? I could hear the priest talking to the penitent in the other confessional, a gentle, unintelligible mumbling. I
glanced down at the little light near the floor, grabbed the shelf with my left hand, and leaned my torso toward the glow, my right hand holding the instructions, reaching for the light. But even with the paper situated just below the light, I could barely make out my writing. And even if I could have read it, my head was nowhere near the window: how could I talk to the priest with my face plastered against the wall, nearer the floor than the window?

The plastic cover on the other side of the metal mesh rattled open and I snapped up to face the window. I could barely make out the outline of a head; obviously, the priest had a light in his confessional. My paper crinkled as I clutched the shelf.

"Yes?" the voice prodded from behind the screen. A few needle points of light filtered in from the priest's box, but they did not illuminate my notes. Sweat goosebumped down my back.

"Yes?" he said again.

"Uh. I'm here for confession." I blurted out.

"All right. Go ahead." The priest's words seemed light, relaxed. But my mind raced. Wasn't I supposed to start a certain way?

"I've never, uh, done this before."

"That's OK. Tell me your confession."

"Well. You see." And then I remembered something my father had told me. "BLESS ME FATHER FOR I HAVE SINNED. This is my first confession." My voice ricocheted off the walls, shrill and megaphoned.

"Yes," Father said. I thought I could detect a small chuckle. "Now tell me your sins."

I licked my dry lips. "I was, mean to my brother and sister. I think I lied to my parents. Um." My heart raced so fast, I thought I was going to die in that black box. "I... I've played strip poker before. Well, not poker. Spin the bottle. But we didn't have a bottle, so we used a spatula." Where was this coming from? I hadn't planned on confessing this.
“Did you take off your clothes?”

“No. I still had on my underwear. But my friends got naked.”

“Who are these friends?”

“Kids on the street.” I could barely breathe. Would he ask for names?

“Well, the next time they want to play this game, suggest something else. Our bodies are gifts from God, so we have to treat them as holy. Do you understand?”

I nodded. A few seconds passed by.

“Anything else?”

“Oh yeah. Well,” the paper crackled beneath my shaking fingers, “I stole from a store.” My face felt like a furnace.

Father sighed. “Were you alone?”

“No. I was with a friend.”

“What did you steal?”

“A can of frosting and chocolate chips.”

Through the screen I could sense a smirk. “Why?”

“I dunno,” I shrugged in the dark.

“Do you know why it’s wrong to steal?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s wrong.”

Father sighed again. “Yes, but why is it wrong?”

“Because I took some stuff that didn’t belong to me?”

“That’s right. How would you feel if someone took something of yours?”

“I wouldn’t like it.”

“Exactly. Now, why else is stealing wrong?”
I bit my lip. Silence loomed for a few seconds. My knees ached.

"It’s wrong because it’s um, a Commandment?"

"Yes, and the Ten Commandments are meant to help us live as God wants us to live."

I nodded. More Silence.

"Do you have anything else to confess?"

"I don’t think so. That’s it."

"All right, then. For your penance, I want you to say five Hail Marys. Ask the Blessed Mother to help you, especially when you and your friends get together. And I want you to do something nice for someone in your family."

"What?"

"Do a something nice for someone in your family."

"Like what?"

The priest sighed. "Oh, maybe if it’s your sister’s turn to wash dishes tonight, you could do them for her."

"My mom does the dishes."

"OK. Maybe you could do the dishes for your mom."

"I think we’re going to Shakey’s tonight. For pizza."

"Then tomorrow. Tomorrow you can do the dishes for your mother. Or maybe you could give your brother and sister a hug and tell them that you love them. I’ll let you decide."

The priest sounded a bit weary. "Now, make an Act of Contrition and I’ll give you absolution.

Panic again. My mind swirled as the paper crunched beneath my palm.

"What?"

"The Act of Contrition. Do you know it?"

"No." I felt like slinking out the door.
“Well, are you sorry for what you’ve done?”

“Yeah.”

“Then say you’re sorry and I’ll give you absolution.”

“I’m sorry. I’m really, really, really sorry.”

On the way home, my father asked, “Well, did it go OK?”

“Yeah.”

“Just one thing, Tim. You might wanna talk a little more softly the next time.”

“What?”

My father kept his eyes on the road. “You were speaking so loud, I could hear every word you said, and I was on the opposite side, in the other confessional.”

I sucked in, my face reddening.

“Don’t worry,” my father looked over at me, “I put my fingers in my ears, so then I couldn’t hear anything. You musta been really nervous.”

I gazed at the alfalfa fields as we raced toward Wellington, my embarrassment as thick as frosting, the ball of crumbled paper soggy in my pocket.

* * * * *

My life changed when I entered Wellington Junior High. Neither my artistic nor my religious inclinations shielded me. Perhaps all children lose a sense of innocence with the advent of puberty. Junior high school is an abyss of whacked-out hormones and peer pressure. At the beginning of seventh grade, my classmates introduced me to the confusing world of sexuality.

“Hey Tim. Are you gay?”

We were in shop class and the teacher had his back to us, explaining planes to a pimply boy. I blinked before the four or five classmates circling me. Their voices seemed
sinister. A gaggle of students several shop tables away shushed as those around me asked again, "Are you gay?"

"What?" I asked. I twisted my mouth.

"Are you gay?" They wore tight smirks and gauchos and flared jeans, hair feathered a la Farrah Fawcett. My hands shook as I pasted a postcard of a mountain vista onto a board to give to my parents. All I wanted was to be left alone so I could shellac.

I put down my glue and started to press. Gay? I didn’t know what they were asking. They had pregnant leers and narrow eyes, so I knew I was being put on the line.

"Uh," I muttered, "are you asking if I’m happy?" I paused for one of those eternal seconds. "If you’re asking if I’m happy, then yes. I’m happy."

The throng rolled their eyes and giggled and disbanded, scurrying to the other classmates to relate their finding. I didn’t know what to think, so I resumed my pressing.

Karrie Brickham came up to me.

"Tim, they’re asking if you’re a homosexual," she whispered. Her face, stone serious, nodded gravely. I watched her head go up and down, but wondered what she meant. What was homosexual? I’d never heard of homosexual. She stood before me, eyebrows slanted toward her nose with concern for me.

I nodded gravely back to Karrie Brickham and said "Oh. Oh-h-h!" with wide actor’s eyes. I didn’t have a clue as to what any of it meant, but I had a feeling that it wasn’t good.

Several weeks later, on Christmas Eve, I broached the subject with my parents. The previous evening, a television program about Castro Street in San Francisco had caught my eye. Levi-clad men walked down the sidewalk holding hands. I had a premonition that the word gay had something to do with those shoulder-to-shoulder men. Those images, coupled with the classmates’ questions, gave me courage to seek my parents’ counsel. My brother and
sister had already gone to bed, so just my parents and I sat in the living room. Tinsel sparkled on the tree.

"Mom and Dad, what does gay mean?"

My parents shifted uncomfortably on our floral patterned couch while I faced them in a lumpy chair. They looked at each other nervously.

"Gay is when two men sleep together. Or two women sleep together." My father's voice cracked. He nodded gravely and my mother nodded knowingly, just as Karrie Brickham had done. They didn’t offer any other details. My mind raced. What did two men do together? What did two women do together? I didn’t know what any of it meant. My parents looked stern.

I feigned acknowledgement and Oh’d. We all nodded and my father wiped his forehead. I remained in the dark, but acted like a trooper and showed disdain.

"Maybe we should put on a Christmas album," my mother suggested to my father. "The one with John Denver and the Muppets." She lit a cigarette.

Dad jumped up and went over to the stereo. He picked up the album. "Sounds good!"

As "The Twelve Days of Christmas" filled the room, I shelved the gay issue to a corner of my brain. It obviously had to deal with sex, but since it evoked such grave nods, I knew it had nothing to do with being happy.

I suppose that by today’s standards, my parents’ lack of detailed explanation might seem odd. But this was 1976, in a small town in Northern Colorado. Homosexuality was like the invisible man. Perhaps my before-wedlock conception also fostered my parents’ avoidance to talk candidly about sex. In any case, I remained naïve. Since sex was not something to discuss, I never thought to look elsewhere for answers. I simply accepted their explanation. I think, too, I was a bit afraid to find out what two men did together. Could I possibly be like that?
The next morning, crouched on the floor in a mountain of wrapping paper and boxes, I anxiously watched my parents open my gift to them. Their faces lit up as they gazed at the mountain vista postcard in the stained and shellacked frame. I hoped they didn’t notice that the postcard was crooked.

My spiritual life, however, grew by leaps and bounds. In seventh and eighth grades, I went to CCD classes in preparation for my Confirmation. I started to read the Bible, mostly the Gospels. I prided myself on being able to follow the whole mass through the missalette. In French class we studied Mont Saint Michel, and I longed to go to that craggy monastery, to listen to the damp cold of the stones. I didn’t pray novenas or the rosary, but I was faithful to my night prayers.

As transplanted New Englanders, my parents cherished excursions into the Colorado countryside, both mountains and plains. We’d pack coolers and blankets, pile into a 1962 Willis Jeep utility wagon my father painted bright blue and gold, and start driving. I particularly enjoyed our excursions to the Pawnee National Grasslands, east of Wellington. My father would put the jeep in four-wheel drive and we’d take off onto the open spaces. We’d stop on a whim, near a decayed homestead or on flat land where we could easily lay a picnic blanket. Kim, Brian, and I would roam the terrain in search of arrowheads or strangely configured rocks. Poking our heads into weather-warped abandoned shacks, we’d finger rusted ironing boards or indiscernible kitchen utensils. We were like voyagers, trying to salvage a time and people foreign to us, and yet, so close. After exploring, we’d return to the jeep, where Mom cooked steaks and baked potatoes on a small grill. As we ate, it was as if we took pieces of the vast sky in every bite.
When I got older, the prairie took on a different meaning for me. I didn’t scrounge the ground anymore; I savored the quiet. I’d take a book and a lawn chair and situate myself a few paces from the jeep. There is nothing like sitting alone, the wind a gentle *whoosh* in the buffalo grasses and chokeberry shrubs. But it was the sky that captivated me. Clear and pristine, it made me feel like a mere speck on the horizon. In the distance, thunderheads rose to the stratosphere, purple and white cathedrals of constant change. The sky always sent my soul to heaven. I’d soak up the panorama and offer it up to God as wordless sighs. The immensity of landscape and sky humbled me. It made me think of the Eighth Psalm:

> When I see the heavens, the work of your hands,
> The moon and the stars which you arranged,
> What is man that you should keep him in mind,
> Mortal man that you care for him?

All I could do was marvel at the miracle of creation. As I contemplated Nature, I’d invariably whisper, *Thank you, God. It’s all so gorgeous.*

Once when some relatives from Connecticut visited, my family took them to the mountains. Roosevelt National Forest didn’t have the droves of tourists that flocked to Rocky Mountain National Park: it offered winding dirt roads that led to remote ponds and groves of aspen trees. My father found a picturesque valley for our picnic, complete with a glassy stream, plenty of pines, tall grasses and all that clean air. After lunch, my parents and aunt and uncle decided to go on a short hike to savor the Rocky Mountain silence. My siblings and three cousins declined the offer to trudge up steep paths. We wanted some freedom from the adults. We stayed by the cars, content with the valley. After playing paddle ball and badminton, we became bored. I decided to spice things up by having a revival. With the command of a fourteen year old, I sat my cousins and my brother and sister in a semi-circle behind our jeep. I stood before them, assuming the posture of one of those TV evangelists who grace Sunday morning programming, and went into Baptist mode.
Friends, I’m here today to tell you about Jesus. Do you believe in Jesus?
Yes.

WHAT WAS THAT? I CAN’T HEAR YOU.
YES!

Now you know, my brothers and sisters, that there’s a whole lotta sinnin’ goin’ on in this world nowadays. Awful lot. Say amen.

Amen.

But we gotta stick wid Jesus. Now why would that be, sister?
I dunno.

Of course you do sister! We gotta stick wid Jesus cuz he’s gonna bring us to da Promise Land! Say amen brothers and sisters!

Amen.

Y’all can do better’n that!

AMEN!

All righty now! And what did Jesus do for us? Can you tell me, brother?
Um. I dunno.

Y’all gotta get some religion. JESUS DIED FOR US! He let them Romans nail his hands and feet to that cross so’s he could save us. Now what did Jesus do?

He died for us.

LOUDER!

HE DIED FOR US!

AMEN brothers and sisters! Y’all gotta get fired up! Now why did he die for us?

Because he loves us?

Say it louder, sister, you got it goin’ on!

BECAUSE HE LOVES US.
AMEN HALLELUJAH! Now you say it.

AMEN HALLELUJAH!

Oooh-ee! PRAISE THE LORD!

Oooh-ee! PRAISE THE LORD!

I screamed and shouted, spit flew from my lips and I worked them into a frenzy. Hands were a-flyin’ and heads were a-shakin’. It was great. My voice rocked the hills. We ended our revival by taking from a collection plate, a Tupperware container filled with homemade brownies. No revival is complete without Mom’s cooking.

“Jesus, Tim! We come up to the mountains for some peace and quiet and all we could hear was your big mouth!” My father wasn’t a happy camper when the adults returned from their hike. But my cousins had had a grand time, and my aunt and uncle were amused. It had been a glorious afternoon. I don’t know what inspires an eighth grader to hold an O’Connoresque revival; perhaps it’s chutzpah. But I do know that religion without drama is breathless.

Shortly after the revival, I had my first and only kiss with a girl. I met her at summer camp. Actually, it was called the Summer Enrichment Program for Gifted, Superior, and Talented Youth, political correctness not being an issue in 1978. I didn’t know why my Biology teacher recommended me to go; I wasn’t all that smart. To deflect “sissy” and “faggot” cat calls from fellow students, I had fostered a reputation for being studious. I took on the role of being a brain, even though my grades hovered around average. I spent my spare time sitting beneath the cottonless cottonwood in our front yard, engrossed in Mary Stewart, Phyllis A. Whitney, and Stephen King. Early King. An open book can be an apt panacea. So I was a bit anxious to be going to a summer camp filled with “brilliant” teens from across the state. But my fears turned out to be unfounded; I spent an enjoyable two
weeks at the University of Northern Colorado with other nerdy misfits. We took classes in creative writing and leadership building. On the weekend we went up to the mountains, near Estes Park, for a camping trip. It was in the mountains that I paired off with Chris Dalton.

Chris was part Japanese-part American and from Denver, a city girl. Her skin had a soft brown hue, and her dark hair hung loose on her shoulders. She wore large-rimmed glasses before Sally Jesse Rafael made them popular. She loved art, dancing, and the Bay City Rollers. She seemed exotic and cosmopolitan. I was just little ol’ me with my wire rims and turquoise cross choker, but we quickly became close. She fascinated me with stories about going to museums in Denver and attending a large inner-city school. I knew right away that she was much smarter than me: she excelled in English and in math. Her vocabulary made me feel like I was a yokel from Green Acres. But we laughed a lot. And when we did get serious, we’d often talk about religion. Not raised with much of a faith life, she seemed intrigued with my recent Confirmation. At five days old, our relationship deepened. We held hands. I put my arm around her. We mirrored what a lot of the other couples were doing.

When I kissed her, we were sitting at a picnic table a bit removed from the camp. I had a mild case of the jitters; I had a premonition that this would be “it.” Other campers had already coupled and bragged about their first kisses. Since Chris and I had become an item several days previously, I knew that this was the time to make my move. But I had never done it before. Would she be able to tell that I had never kissed a girl? I looked around to make sure no other campers were nearby. It was one of those After School Special moments: the Rockies shone a blue-purple behind us, pine trees swished in the breeze, chipmunks scampered, and birds gossiped on mossy boulders. We made small talk for a while, marveling at the woodsy, pure air. But my mind raced with questions: was I supposed to keep my lips closed? should I open them? what was I supposed to do with my tongue? My heart pounded. I chided myself: why agonize about all this—just do it! As I leaned over and my
lips met hers, the right lens in my glasses popped out. It landed in the crevice between our pressing legs. I never had the chance to taste her kiss; I pulled back quickly, searching for my lens. I wanted to fade away into the hillside. But Chris was a sport and we laughed about it. We held hands as we walked back to camp, my world a little off center with only one lens.

We were much better dance partners. One of the camp counselors had spent some time in New York, so she knew all the latest Studio 54 disco moves. Chris and I became her eager pupils. To top off the two-week camp, the counselors staged a dance contest. Hands waving in that John Travolta style with fevered kicks, Chris and I strutted our stuff on the groove line, easily winning first place. Our prize was a half pound of M&Ms each, but it was looking fabulous on the dance floor and winning that made it all so glorious. On the day of departure, we pecked each other good bye, exchanged addresses, and took home some new steps. I felt very metropolitan.

Several months later, Chris moved to San Francisco and we kept in touch. One of her letters included a photo: in one hand she held a sign which read, “I love you!” and her other hand was draped around her dog. When my family vacationed in California the following summer, I invited her to have lunch with us at the Cliff House Restaurant. It was one of those perfectly misty San Francisco days; the ocean foam looked cold, the breeze cut through our light jackets, everything draped in grey. Sea lions shimmied on the rocks. We had a nice lunch with my family and a short walk around the sea wall. When we dropped her off at her house, I gave her a quick kiss on her right cheek. My brother and sister “Eew’d!” from the car. That’s the last I ever saw of her; our correspondence eventually ceased.

I never pined for Chris like a love-struck teenager. Our relationship was more of a very close friendship. I liked her for her wit, intelligence, and for the conversations we had. But I never had any desire to do more than give her a quick kiss on the cheek. She was a pretty girl, but I didn’t feel attracted to her physically. Strangely, it never occurred to me to
question why I didn’t have romantic feelings for Chris. We had spent two weeks together at camp, corresponded for a little more than a year, and that was that. Romance didn’t seem to interest me.

* * * * *

My high school years found me in close relationships with girls, but they were friendships. Wellington didn’t have a high school, so we were bussed to Poudre High in Fort Collins. Right away, I became involved in Debate and Forensics. In junior high, I had competed in a speech contest sponsored by the Optimists Club. My speech focused on the marvels of technology, touching on such future wonders as bar codes on grocery items and advances in medicine. I won first place at the contest and went on to a district competition. I didn’t do as well the second time around, but my interest had been tapped: I thoroughly enjoyed talking in front of people. When I joined the high school debate team, I competed in both Original Oratory and Poetry Interp. Most of my new friends were fellow speech nerds. For the most part, we were an innocent group; at parties we drank Mountain Dew and watched stupid videos like Attack of the Killer Tomatoes. We had grand times playing a game called Pig Mania: points were tallied as we threw down two little plastic pigs and accrued according to how the pigs landed; certain points for landing on their feet, snouts, sides, or backs. The most daring thing we did was drive around one night and steal “For Sale” signs from front yards.

Although I was religious, I tried to tarnish the stereotype of a holy roller. I wanted to “fit in” with my peers. In my Junior English class, I did a dramatic reading of Chaucer’s “The Miller’s Tale.” I didn’t do it for an assignment, I did it because I liked poetry and performance. My teacher, Mrs. Duncan, pulled me aside a few days before my debut.

“Tim, are you sure you want to do this?” She took off her large-rimmed glasses, placing one of the arms between her teeth.
"Sure. Why not?"

"Do you understand the ending?" She titled her head down a bit.

I shrugged. "Waddya mean?"

"The line ‘God save all the rout.’"

"What about it?" I rubbed my nose and glanced at the October sky.

Mrs. Duncan inhaled, placing the glasses on her face. "It really means, uh, I don’t want to shock you, but you should know. It means ‘God save a good fuck.’"

My eyebrows moved up my forehead, my cheeks hot. Mrs. Duncan stifled a giggle.

"Do you still want to do it?"

I bobbed my head and smirked. "Sure."

"The Miller’s Tale" was a hit; Mrs. Duncan had me perform for several classes. The students chuckled at the appropriate times. When I enthusiastically closed with "God save all the rout," my fellow students blinked at me blank-faced while Mrs. Duncan laughed hysterically at the back of the room. Perhaps it was the dramatic reading of Chaucer which set me on a course for defying a religious stereotype. Happy with my spirituality, I also enjoyed a flair for drama. I was on the way to becoming a boundary-breaking traditionalist who relished surprising others.

In my senior year I competed in Duet Acting at speech meets. My best friend ReNae, a heavy-set, devout Mormon, shared my enthusiasm for religion and drama. We did a scene from Lewis John Carlino’s *The Exercise* in which two actors do improvisations on a stage. They had once been in a relationship, and in the course of the improvs, it was hinted that the female character had aborted a child the male character never knew about. It was intense stuff for the early Eighties, and we won several trophies at various meets, including first place at a tournament at Regis High School, the Catholic boys’ school in Denver. ReNae and I also appeared in several plays together and we hung out with the theatre crowd. We didn’t
smoke or drink or have sex. My sassy sister called us Drama Fags, but I didn’t mind. We had clean fun.

Besides competing in Duet Acting, I also participated in Poetry Interpretation. Judy Lane, the Forensics coach, suggested I take a look at Leonard Bernstein’s *Mass*. Written in the 1960s or 1970s, it was a choral performance piece. She loaned me the album and I listened to all of it. I decided that “Credo” would be great for competition. For Bernstein, the Nicene Creed, recited each Sunday at mass, became a tool for questioning faith: “I believe in God, but does God believe in me? ... I’ll believe in any God, if any God believes ...” It’s an anthem of having faith in music: “I believe in f-stops, I believe in ti.”

I listened to “Credo” for hours, diligently writing down the words from the album. For competition, I interspersed lines from the Apostle’s Creed with Bernstein’s text. The effect was one of belief, tinged with doubt. As a performance piece, it did not reflect my feelings, but I recognized its dramatic tension.

While I concentrated on Duet Acting with ReNae, I succeeded in qualifying for the State meet with my poetry interp. I did well in all of my rounds, except for the last one. The judge was a short, shriveled nun with grey bangs beneath her veil. I did not impress her; I received my lowest rating in that round.

Interestingly, the speech meet at Regis High School had a profound effect on me, and not only because ReNae and I won first place. Another duet team, two guys from a Denver high school, presented a scene from Martin Sherman’s *Bent*. Depicting a relationship between two gay men in a Nazi concentration camp, the duo captivated me: it was the first time I had ever heard about pink triangles. As I watched the scene, empathy consumed my fast-beating heart. I had been branded “sissy” and “faggot” for so many years; I could feel the characters’ pain. I didn’t know anything about loving another man, but I could relate to suffering. For me, *Bent* put a face on homosexuality.
Although ReNae and I were best friends, she had a habit that bothered me: she frequently used the word “faggot.” If a driver cut in front of her, she’d scream, “You faggot!” If she didn’t like someone, she’d say, “He’s such a faggot.” Faggot this and faggot that. Perhaps the scene from Bent awakened in me a courage and empathy I hadn’t previously known. One day, I presented ReNae with a small bundle of sticks, tied together with a string. Attached to it I had a small sign: MY FAGGOT. She never used the word around me again.

* * * * *

It was in high school that I received my religious calling. It came out of the blue. One Saturday afternoon in my junior year, I knelt in the nave of St. Joseph’s, praying my penance after confession. The church was bright with Indian Summer sunlight; I gazed at the bronze relief of St. Joseph and the Child Jesus on the wall above the tabernacle. I basked in a post-confession peace. Traffic murmurs, shouts, and rumbling trucks droned beyond the beige windows. All was still in the church, except for the occasional clicks as penitents stepped in or out of the confessionals. I knelt in a pew near the sanctuary, letting my thoughts wander. And then it happened.

Be a priest.

It wasn’t an audible voice outside of me, but something within. I blinked several times and held my breath.

Be a priest.

Goose bumps tingled my arms. I could feel sweat beading up at my brow.

What an odd invitation. I was religious, but I knew nothing about the priesthood. I had never been an altar boy, nor had I ever been involved in parish activities other than CCD classes. Besides hearing confessions and celebrating mass, I didn’t know how priests spent their time.

Be a priest.
The words were as soft as rain on a meadow. My heart galloped and I gulped in air. Me be a priest? Why me? I was sixteen years old with the world in front of me.

I knelt in the nave for an eternity. The whispering voice in my head was firm yet gentle, like a nudge. I could only marvel at its origin. I let “Be a priest” take root in me, nurturing it while I fixed my gaze on the tabernacle. As the afternoon waned and the priest started setting up for evening mass, my heart calmed down. A prickly warmth shrouded me; it was weird and wonderful at the same time, fear and peace at the same time. I let out a loud sigh and silently whispered back, “OK.” After genuflecting to the tabernacle on my way out, I decided to proceed slowly with my discernment. I left St. Joseph’s that day not intent to flee to religious life, but to glide gracefully. As I squinted in the hot sun, I knew that my life had been altered by those three words: Be a priest.

I waited a while before I told anyone. I didn’t want to be hasty; I was somewhat aware that a religious calling required a lot of prayerful consideration. I figured that if the “voice” in my head wasn’t God, then the idea would eventually dwindle away. But Be a priest fell on fertile soil, and the seed shot forth a shoot. The feeling grew stronger.

A month later, I approached my father. It was a cold November night, and Mom and my siblings had gone to bed. We sat at the kitchen table, my father labeling a batch of recent photographs. Simon and Garfunkel’s Bridge Over Troubled Water played on the stereo in the living room. “Dad, I think I might be called to be a priest.”

My father’s eyes widened.

“What makes you think so?”

I told him about my “calling” in the church, and how I had been praying about it ever since. The idea of being a priest hadn’t faded, it had intensified. The desire to devote my life to God and the Church became a quiet passion; the flames were small, but they hadn’t been quenched. “What should I do?” I asked.
“Well, I’m not sure. You should probably go talk to Father Meredith at St. Joe’s.” My father shook his head. “Wow, a priest.” He wiped his moist eyes. “I would certainly be proud of you, Tim.”

So I talked to our pastor, Father Meredith. He recommended that I seek a spiritual director. He gave me the number of a man just recently ordained, assigned to another parish in Fort Collins. I met Father Castro, and we hit it off well. He was short and pencil thin with a thick crop of dark hair. Father lounged comfortably in his chair while I sat upright a few inches from him. A cross bearing a resurrected Christ was nailed into a brick wall.

“Why do you want to be a priest?”

I leaned forward a bit. “I feel called.”

He smiled. “Yes, but why else?”

I sighed. “I don’t want to say that it’s because I want to help people or serve people, because I could do that without becoming a priest.” Father Castro nodded. “I mean, those things are part of it, but, well, there’s something more.” I stopped for a moment, not knowing how to put my feelings into words. I suddenly felt like an inarticulate boob. “I want to, um, preach the Word. You know, bring people to the Lord.” I could feel my face getting hot with embarrassment.

“And?” he asked gently.

“Oh geez!” I wiped my damp forehead. “I hafta tell ya, I don’t know much about being a parish priest. I’ve never been an altar boy. I live in Wellington, so my family has never been actively involved at St. Joe’s. All I can say is that I want to walk with people on their journeys to God, to bring them the sacraments.”

Father Castro smiled and leaned toward me. “That’s cool. You’re on the right track. What year are you in high school?”

“Junior.”
“Good. We’ll look at this time as a period of discernment. I’d be happy to be your spiritual director. As you get closer to graduation, then we’ll take some formal steps, if you still feel that the priesthood’s for you.”

I eased back in my chair.

“I was just ordained last year,” he said. “Seminary was a great experience for me, four intense years of prayer and study.” He looked past me, fixing his gaze on the cross. “I loved the communal life; praying, eating, studying together. I made some great friends.” His voice trailed off and we sat in silence for a few moments. He glanced back at me. “It’s a great life.”

I nodded.

“It’s quite a process to go through, you know,” he continued. “First you meet with the Vocation Director, who is in charge of interviewing you and starting all the paperwork. If you’re gonna be involved in the Church, you gotta know that there will always be paperwork!” He chuckled. “You have to have letters of recommendation, a physical, and a few psychological tests.”

“What kind of psychological tests?”

Father waved his hand in the air. “Oh, you meet with a psychologist or psychiatrist, whatever they are, who asks you questions about your past. You’ll probably have to take a test, geez, what’s the name of it?” His hand knocked on his head. “I can’t remember what it’s called, but it’s a test of 500 or so true and false questions. It’s no big deal, stuff like ‘People have it out for me, true or false?’” Father giggled. “Anyway, once the Archdiocese accepts you, you’ll be sent to a college seminary. They’re shutting down the college at St. Thomas in Denver. Low numbers.” He shook his head. “I’ve heard they’ll probably send the college guys to either California or Missouri. Then you’d come back for your four years of grad work at St. Thomas.”
“It takes eight years to become a priest?”

Father Castro laughed. “Yeah, but believe me, it flies by! They keep you busy with prayers and studies and pastoral work in parishes or hospitals. Man, before you know it, the bishop consecrates your hands with chrism, the holy oils, and then you’re a priest!”

I’m sure I must have looked a bit overwhelmed.

“Don’t worry,” he assured. “We won’t concern ourselves with that right now. Let’s meet every two weeks and work on your spiritual life, spend some time praying about this calling. Sound OK?”

“Sure.”

I started to spend a lot of time in St. Joseph’s. I savored the hushed afternoons kneeling in a pew close to the sanctuary. The red lamp flickered against the wall not far from the bronze-door tabernacle. Forearms resting on the pew in front of me, my back straight, I’d kneel and tilt my head up. I’d focus on an area above the tabernacle, above the bas-relief of St. Joseph and the Child Jesus, to a non-descript point where the wall met the ceiling. My thoughts, my conversations with God, would travel along my gaze.

Oh Lord, I want to love you, with all my heart, all my soul, all my body. Help me to surrender to you. I know that I am proud. Worldly. I like being the center of attention, especially when I go on and on with stories about myself. Or when I gossip about others. But Lord, I do want to give my all to you, and to love you in others. I’m sorry that I hold back, that my love is so small. Please help me to pray more, to love you more.

I’d kneel for a while, soaking up the silence, the gentle rumbling of traffic beyond the windows. And then, a voice could be heard in my head. Not necessarily distinctive from my own, the voice spoke from an unknown region, gentle and forceful.
Do not worry. I will accomplish all this in you. I simply ask that you pray. Always pray. I will do the rest. You know what you must do—love me wholly, love your brothers and sisters. Do not fear: I will bring you to holiness.

And then the voice would drift away. I’d be left with a warm calm, like sitting in a bathrobe after a long, hot shower. It was as if my body pined for God like a dry, weary land without water. My gaze would shift from on high to the tabernacle. Once again, I’d recognize footsteps on the sidewalk outside, or a honking horn.

Often, my heart would fall when I heard the church doors open, ushering in the street for a moment. And the click click click of heels on the stone floor. I felt as if my sanctuary had been invaded. With the selfishness of a child on a playground who tries to hide a bulging pocket full of candies, I’d sigh as the intruder behind me genuflected and plopped down on a kneeler. I’d wait for several moments, hoping the other prayer would make it quick and go about his or her business. If the unseen stranger stayed for a long time, I’d roll my eyes and shake my head.

Sorry, Lord, for wanting to hog you.

I’d make the sign of the cross and stand, my knees cracking in the shadows. I’d genuflect in the aisle and smile at the tabernacle.

Thank you, Jesus.

I’d walk down the aisle toward the heavy wood doors, glancing at the huddled soul kneeling midway in the nave. And I’d smile. We all need alone time with God.

I met with Father Castro the rest of high school. He guided my prayer life, encouraged me to join a Bible study group at my parish, and served as my link to the vocations office for the Archdiocese. In my senior year, I applied to the Archdiocese of Denver, taking a battery of psychological tests, being interviewed, seeking recommendations. I was accepted.
My parents provided cautious support. One of my father’s childhood friends had entered the Jesuit order in the 1960s and left before being ordained. His sister had left the convent before making final vows. My parents guided me to apply to other universities besides the seminary. I was accepted by the University of Denver and Marymount College of Kansas, a small Catholic school known for its excellent Theatre department. But I knew I belonged in the seminary. After months of fervent prayer, I could feel it in the deepest part of my heart: an ache to serve God and his Church as an ordained minister. When my parents saw my resolve, and how I had seriously considered other options besides seminary, they were proud and happy for me. I think in some ways, my mother was more pleased than my father. Although she remained a non-church-going Methodist, she respected the Catholic Church’s beautiful liturgies and its priests. I think she may have been a bit awed at my desire to be a priest. I felt fortunate to have the support of my parents. After graduating from Poudre in 1982, I was assigned to study at St. Joseph’s College Seminary in Los Altos, California.

Just before I left for seminary, my parents invited Father Castro to our house for dinner. My mother, a bit anxious since we had never had a priest in our home before, didn’t know what to expect.

“Don’t worry, Sharon,” my father said. “Priests are regular people.”

And it was a regular evening. My mother made her monster beef stroganoff which could charm anyone. The red wine flowed; Father Castro laughed and my parents laughed and stories were swapped. My brother and sister sat in wonder, twirling their noodles. Actually, I didn’t say much. I was happy that Father and my family got along so well. He stayed quite late, but no one minded. He seemed comfortable in our home.

Months later, when I came back from the seminary for Christmas vacation, I met with Father Castro again. For a while he didn’t say a word; I gushed with excitement as I told him
how I loved seminary, the liturgies, communal life. He seemed genuinely happy for me, but not overly enthused. After I ran out of things to say, he leaned toward me.

“Tim, I have to tell you something.” His face was tight. “I’m leaving the priesthood.”

I gasped.

“I know this will upset you, but I hope it won’t affect your vocation. I know you’ll make a fine priest.”

“But why are you leaving?”

He sighed. “I’ve been agonizing about this for a long time. In fact, this past summer was hell for me.” He paused, glancing at the resurrected Christ on the wall. “I just don’t think I’m called to celibacy.”

I didn’t know what to say. So I just nodded as my eyes got watery.

“Ya know, the only bright spot this past summer was when I went to your house and had dinner with you and your family.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” He sat back in his chair and ran his hand through his hair. “I had felt so alone for weeks, agonizing about all this. Then I went up to your place in Wellington. It was a perfect night; I hadn’t been so relaxed in months. I’ll always be grateful for that night.”

When I left his office, I drove to St. Joseph’s and knelt in the front pew. I felt weighed down with a profound sadness. Father Castro was such a great priest, well loved for his gentle humor and spiritual zeal. How could he just walk away from the priesthood? What about all those years of training, those years in the seminary? As I flung my questions toward the tabernacle, I eventually calmed down. With a deep breath, I surrendered Father Castro to God: Lord, only you know his heart. Bless him with your strength and mercy as he goes forth. And please protect him. Stay with him. Maybe he’ll come back. Thank you.
Father Castro left the priesthood and settled somewhere near Seattle. I later heard that there was a woman involved in the scenario. I was crushed.

I cannot help but smile when I consider the divine comedy that led me to the seminary. Out of the embers of a passionate night between two unmarried persons, I came forth like a spark intent on dancing for the Lord. And for others. I became a little fireball who adored both the crackle of laughter and the gentle flickers of silence, a melding together of the worldly and the spiritual. Be a priest did not arise from a saintly glow, but from the ashes of confessed sins, from the whispers of penance. As Father Castro turned toward the stirrings of the flesh, I burned for celibacy. To wholly love God and souls. In August of 1982, I abandoned my life to God and the Church, the words of Psalm Eighty-four blazing in my heart: "My soul is longing and yearning, is yearning for the courts of the Lord."
Up from the Shadows

It is he, the Lord Most High, 
who gives each his place.

Psalm 87

The first mass at St. Joseph’s blew me away. Accompanied by a piano, bass, and several guitars, male voices boomed “Let us build a city of God” with a gusto I had never experienced in a parish setting. The music and voices vibrated through my body; it was like being at a rock concert. Awed by the immensity of spirit, I couldn’t help but get teary-eyed.

The mass, as all daily liturgies, was held in a large, rectangular room with tall windows along three of the walls. Painted in a dull beige with dingy curtains, the room was a liturgical-minimalist’s wonderland. Drab, barren, and functional, the chapel reeked of Vatican II gone bad. The room housed a plain wood altar, a lectern, and wooden chairs. But the music and zeal overshadowed the lack of physical aesthetics. As the rector celebrated the liturgy, the response from the seminarians betrayed a soulful joy: “The Lord be with you. AND ALSO WITH YOU. Lift up your hearts. WE LIFT THEM UP TO THE LORD. Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. IT IS RIGHT TO GIVE HIM THANKS AND PRAISE!” I felt right at home.

St. Joseph’s was set in the hills north and west of San Jose. Eucalyptus trees lined the long drive up to the front of the seminary. A massive edifice built in the early 1920s, its ruddy walls were topped with red tiled roofs and a large bell tower, a heavy Spanish-style structure with large, peering windows. A courtyard in the middle of the seminary gave it a cloister-like quiet, and the surrounding hills and nature paths lent it an aura of peace. At the end of one of those trails, on a brown grassy hill, one could marvel at the Silicon Valley
panorama glittering all the way from San Jose to the only-on-a-clear-day twinkling of San Francisco skyscrapers. But St. Joseph's was in an Eden-like sanctuary. I loved it from the moment I stepped through the heavy doors into the marbled, shadowy entrance hall.

I settled into the seminary routine. Our days began and ended with communal prayers, the recitation of the Psalms of the Divine Office. Classes were held in the mornings and afternoons, with mass around 5:15 p.m. It didn't take long for me to relish community life; the prayers, meals in a refectory large enough to be a church, drinking wine with classmates on Friday nights. After the first few weeks, I chose my spiritual director, Sister Veronique, a Holy Cross sister from Indiana in charge of our liturgical music. She had short dark hair, large glasses, and usually wore navy or black skirts and white blouses. Some of the seminarians admired her shapely calves, but I resonated with her gentle demeanor and her serene happiness.

About ninety seminarians from around the Western states and the Pacific Islands attended St. Joseph's. I had entered a community of rich diversity: I studied and prayed alongside men from Vietnam, the Philippines, Guam, and Mexico. My Wellington-bred world expanded. I took trips to San Francisco and spent that first Spring break with several classmates in Southern California. We celebrated Tet in February and the Vietnamese made the best spring rolls I've ever had. Cinco de Mayo became an extravaganza of spicy Mexican food and a Mariachi band mass. I involved myself on the newspaper and yearbook staffs, later being voted in as Student Government secretary. In the rich liturgical, cultural, and academic opportunities, I flourished.

Since this was the early 1980s, liturgical experimentation was *de riguer* at St. Joseph's. One year for Advent we stepped into the chapel to find it almost completely barren. The lectern stood near the door and the altar had been moved to the far end of the room. There wasn't a chair in sight. To fully identify with a "desert experience," we sat on the floor
for the Divine Office and the readings at mass. For the Liturgy of the Eucharist, we all got up
from the floor, knees cracking, and walked over to the altar, standing in a semi-circle as the
priest consecrated the bread and wine. While such creative license challenged my traditional
spirituality, the experience certainly had a dramatic impact. Each Advent, even now, twenty
years later, I cannot help but think of that long ago season when we sat on the floor in the
chapel, living the desert motif.

This also happened to be the era when liturgical dance was in swing. One day at
morning prayer, as we sang “Like a deer that yearns for running water,” Paul from Guam
suddenly appeared. Clad only in black tights and a white flowing surplice (a short white
robe), he leaped to the front of the worship space, more like a frenzied gazelle. Graceful and
flowing, sometimes a bit jerky, I found him terribly distracting. Merely mouthing the words
of the Psalm, I concentrated on Paul and his fluttering fingers. Liturgical movement didn’t
aid my reflection, it hindered it.

One night at evening prayer, a slender stand stood before us with a large bowl on top
of it. When we sat down to pray Psalm 133, four seminarians came from the sacristy and
positioned themselves as four corners around the bowl. As we recited

    It is like precious oil upon the head
    running down upon the beard,
    running down upon Aaron’s beard,
    upon the collar of his robes

the foursome approached the bowl, dipping their hands into it. They scooped up handfuls of
oil and smeared it on their faces. Wesson oil dripped from their eyelashes, noses, and chins,
splotching their surplices.

I gasped aghast. “That’s disgusting!” I whispered to the guy on my right. “If they
make the rest of us do that, I’m walkin’ out!” I had enough problems with blemishes, I didn’t
need to compound the situation with canola oil.
My neighbor shushed me. After a while, I realized that the rest of us wouldn't have to partake in the oil dip, so I settled down. But once again, I could not concentrate on the rest of the Divine Office. Like a passing motorist slowing down to peek at an accident, I could not pull my eyes from those gleaming, drippy faces. Too revolted to pray, I settled for thanking God that I did not have to smear oil on my face.

I suppose that with all my enthusiasm for theatre, it's ironic that I did not resonate with many of these creative liturgies. While I admired the spirited singing, the dances and gestures made me cringe: they seemed so contrived. Rather than enriching my liturgical experience, they took my thoughts away from worship and focused them on performance. When two seminarians acted out the story of the Prodigal Son at a reconciliation service, the words of Scripture bounced off me: all I could do was smirk at how such over-acting would be perfect in a soap opera. Perhaps my aversion to these spectacles betrayed an affinity for liturgies more conducive to contemplation. Sometimes, silence is drama.

Once I took a weekend trip to Santa Barbara with three other classmates. Ponchie was a Franciscan; he had attended St. Anthony's High School at the Santa Barbara mission, and he persuaded Mark, James, and I to make the trip down south to spend several days steeped in the Franciscan charism.

A lovely white-washed example of Spanish architecture, the mission stood surrounded by lush gardens of multi-colored flowers and prickly cacti. Because of declining enrollment, the high school seminary was virtually empty. For some reason, we were sent to the top floor to sleep. A large room filled with rows of unmade beds, the top floor was a throw-back to antiquated religious dormitories. The mattresses were teenaged-boy stained, grungy and yellowed. I bit my lip to suppress my revulsion, managing a half smile as Ponchie fluttered around with Franciscan hospitality, doling out sheets and pillow cases.
Although attracted to Franciscan ideals of poverty and simplicity, at that moment I knew I could never become a member of St. Francis’ order.

The highlight of the weekend was when we bought a large pizza to go and a gallon jug of Carlo Rossi wine. We found our way to the breakwater, a breath-taking vista of the Pacific and boats before us. Seagulls alighted on the metal railing near us, water sprayed below us along the break water, as we munched on pizza and shared Chablis.

Midway through our meal, a homeless-looking couple straggled up to us. The man wore a grisly grey beard and a stained, brown jacket. The woman had straight, greasy hair, frayed Levi’s, and a tight-fitting T-shirt.

“Whatcha doin’?” the man asked. He eyed the pizza in our hands.

“Just eating and having some wine,” Ponchie said cheerfully. Mark, James, and I sent silent words of discomfort between our glances. The woman licked her lips, pushing back a strand of black hair from her cheek.

“Would you like some?” Ponchie asked.

“Well sure, if it’s no trouble,” the man offered.

“Oh, it’s no trouble. No trouble at all! There’s plenty for everyone!” Ponchie opened the pizza box. “Tim, would you pour them some wine?”

I reached into the paper bag and produced two clear plastic cups.

The man and woman wolfed down several slices of pizza between generous gulps of Carlo Rossi, wiping their lips and chins with their shirts. Despite my initial chagrin at being beside two unseemly vagrants, the evening turned out to be a gem. We laughed and chatted with the couple, discussing everything from the cool weather to Ron and Nancy Reagan. My inhibitions soon subsided. Santa Barbara, city of two-storied opulence, tile roofs, and mansions dotting the hills, looked on as we ate, drank, and conversed with two of its homeless.
I had a glorious Franciscan weekend in Santa Barbara. I’m not sure if St. Francis would have approved of our getting tipsy on the breakwater, but he surely would have admired our sharing.

* * * * *

Before I had left for college, my father had sat me down for a going away heart-to-heart talk about what to expect.

“You know, Tim, there probably will be some homosexuals in the seminary.”

My eyes got big and I shifted nervously on the couch.

“I don’t want to scare you,” my father continued, “I just want you to be prepared.”

I didn’t say anything. I simply nodded. But I wondered why my father had brought up the subject. Did he think someone would make a pass at me? With my double chin and sporadic blemish outbreaks, I couldn’t imagine anyone finding me attractive. And anyway, seminarians were celibate. My father’s words didn’t scare me, they confused me.

It took only a day or so for me to observe that there were indeed some effeminate seminarians. I didn’t know if that made them gay, but a small band of guys dressed from the pages of GQ magazine. They had close-cropped, perfectly coifed hair, faint lisps, and they constantly quoted Joan Rivers’ comedy album What Becomes a Semi-Legend Most. They weren’t a marginalized group; they held key positions in Student Government, the liturgy committee, and the yearbook staff. They were a bunch of cacklers, erupting into good-natured laughter on a whim. And they took me under their wings.

I remember going to a mall one Saturday with this group. I had been in the seminary for only a month or so. As we walked back to the car through the wet parking lot, one of them exclaimed, “Oh daisy! I almost fell on my gay ass!” Everyone laughed gleefully and my face reddened. I was shocked. What upset me wasn’t so much my friend’s campy
proclamation of his orientation, but that he felt comfortable to say it in my presence. It was like he wholly included me in the group, as if I were a member of a club I had previously viewed somewhat peripherally. I had heard the occasional “honeys” and “girlfriends” bantered in my presence, but no one had ever mentioned the G-word. I accepted it all with nervous detachment.

Some time after this I learned that this group had christened me Ruthie Mae. One afternoon I chatted with Richard, a seminarian in his junior year and a member of the “circle.” We shared similar small town backgrounds, although he was from Wyoming. He had creamy Hispanic skin and horn-rimmed glasses. I don’t recall how the topic came up, but he’s the one who told me.

“The other guys call me Ruthie Mae? Why Ruthie Mae?” My voice cracked.

“Oh Tim, don’t get upset.” Richard patted my knee. “It’s just because, well, you know. You’re from a small town. You dress like you’re from a small town.”

I looked down at my polyester pants and pullover sweater. After all those years of considering myself as fashion forward in Wellington, I suddenly felt like a hick.

“But don’t worry,” Richard comforted, “it’s a term of endearment. There’s nothing wrong with being a Ruthie Mae.” He giggled. “You’re a country girl, that’s all.”

I was mortified. And confused. How was I a “girl?” I knew that I had effeminate mannerisms, but I didn’t think I swished as much as some of the guys in the close-knit group. After leaving Richard’s room, I made my way to another friend’s room and sobbed. Years of being called faggot and sissy and fairy gushed forth. “Why do people think I’m gay?” I asked my friend. All he could do was offer a few lines of comfort and listen to my cries. “And where did they get ‘Ruthie Mae’? Ruthie Mae? I’m not country. Couldn’t they come up with anything better than that?” My friend gave me a puzzled look.
As the year progressed, I became less scandalized. I started to review my life, and for the first time, I seriously questioned my sexuality. Could it be that I was gay? Effeminate, yes, but did that make me gay? Rather than focusing on outward stereotypes, I began to look deep inside of me, to see who attracted me. The guy in the room next to mine got along pretty well with me. Big and muscular, he had been a football star in high school. He often made disparaging remarks about the swishy seminarians: making fun of them by affecting their effeminate ways. He’d stand in his room wearing only tight gym shorts and rub his bare chest, joking that all the fags wanted a piece of him. I laughed at his jokes, but something within me stirred: I realized that I enjoyed watching his hands travel over the firm chest, his taut stomach. It confused me. I started to recognize that I had suppressed physical longings for years. Turned away from them for years. Ignored them for years. Toward the end of the second semester, I told Richard that I thought I might be gay.

"Tim, you need to get away from here and pray about it."

We walked on the drive leading up to the seminary. A warm May day, the eucalyptus trees fanned our meander along a rustling breeze.

"I think you should go home and pray over it during the summer," Richard advised. "There are a lot of outside influences here that may cloud your thinking. Pray, reflect, and see what happens."

So I returned to Wellington for summer vacation with one prayer intention. When not washing dishes at the T-Bar Inn (the Duke of Wellington had new owners and a new name), I spent a lot of time to myself, talking with God. I confronted my past. I slowly owned up to the fact that I had never been sexually attracted to girls; they were sister-like friends. Chris Dalton had been my first and only kiss, but I had never thought of doing anything more than giving her my awkward lips. I had avoided making friends with boys, always fearful they would think I was attracted to them. I had carefully shielded my eyes in the showers after PE,
not wanting anyone to think I stole interested glances at their muscled bodies. I had glossed over this for years, passed by it without reflection.

I recalled that in elementary school, I had been drawn to the Six Million Dollar Man; it was all that chest hair. In junior high, I sometimes caught myself staring at the athletic guys who slumped in their desks, their legs spread wide. And I remembered being attracted to the man across the street who was a family friend; a swarthy plumber, a man's man who exuded a raw sexuality, especially when he had had a six pack too many. As a senior in high school, while we watched Kenneth Clark's *Civilization* series in Humanities class, when a close up of Michelangelo's *David* graced the screen, a breathy “Oh!” escaped my lips. Half the class turned their heads to look at me and I tried to fade into the concrete wall.

That summer I evaluated my life. I wrote down all the yearnings and instances from my past that pointed to a homosexual orientation. In the quiet of my room in the summer of 1983, I prayed and reflected and gradually awakened to my homosexuality.

If a gay person shares his or her coming out journey with a heterosexual, invariably the question arises, “But how could you not know that you were gay?” I think that for many gays, growing up is akin to being in Plato's cave. Normative heterosexuality is almost shadow-like; the gay youth accepts all that society presents even though he or she has same-sex attractions. Gay desires are shoved to the recesses of the cave. I kept my gaze fixed on the shadowy forms, ignoring and repressing my attraction to other men. Supermodel drag queen RuPaul once mentioned that everyone around him knew he was gay before he did; it was the same for me. To grow up gay in a small town in the 1970s and early 1980s was to guard a secret and turn away from it. When those shadows incessantly label you as fairy or faggot, it's not so easy to escape the cave. Being gay is dangerous stuff.

When I came out, my eyes squinted in the bright epiphany. Nineteen years old, I didn't know a thing about being gay. I was a celibate seminarian and had every intention of
remaining one; I still felt called to the priesthood. In the blinding light of my new awareness, I embraced my homosexuality in a dramatic fashion, I wore it. I capitalized on my effeminate ways to become a stereotype; I affected a lisp and I started wearing pink, a color I previously abhorred because in Northern Colorado, it was a sure sign of being gay. I expanded my lexicon with "honey" and "girlfriend." I metamorphosed into a nellie queen, albeit a religious one. Of course I didn’t do this around the house; I only donned my gay apparel when I visited Richard, who was summering in Denver.

Comfortable in my celibacy, I didn’t give much thought to the Church’s prohibitions of same-sex genital acts. I was content to be ambiguous about gay-sex morality. My homosexuality wasn’t so much about doing something, but about being something. While I didn’t choose my orientation, I certainly chose to live it out flamboyantly. After all, I had a history of wearing personas.

* * * * *

I am aware that as a monk, I run a risk in coming out in this narrative. I do so only after much prayer and many sleepless nights. As I have previously stated, this is not a coming out story, but a conversion story. To give justice to my tale, I cannot hint at my gayness through shadowy metaphors; the pictures have to be painted, even if some readers may find them grotesque. Disclosing a homosexual orientation is heady stuff for a religious; my relationships with others cannot help but be altered. Society is mired in misconceptions regarding homosexuality; that it is a choice, that gay men prey on little boys, and that gay men want to sleep with every man they meet. I don’t believe that any of these are true, but they still lurk in our society’s psyche. To write about coming out isn't just to relate a past; it has ramifications in the present. I’m not sure that it happens to heterosexuals in the same degree.
There is a monk at my abbey who lived what can best be described as a colorful past. He fought in the jungles of Vietnam, he was married and divorced, and he dabbled in drugs. He experienced a conversion and eventually entered the monastery; a testament to the power of grace. When he made his Solemn Vows, the diocesan newspaper featured a front page article about Brother’s past and his commitment to religious life. And rightfully so. He is an inspiration for all of us. But Brother’s past does not overshadow his present; he is not labeled the divorcee monk, or the Vietnam vet monk, or the former druggie monk. He is a monk, plain and simple. That’s how it should be.

I don’t think it’ll be the same for me. Disclosing a homosexual orientation will change how both my confreres and laypersons will interact with me. In the minds of some people, homosexuality is synonymous with “sexually active.” I’ve been present with other monks as they’ve talked about someone they perceive to be gay: “I don’t care what he is. He better not try anything with me!” Every time I’ve heard those lines, I’ve had to practically bite my lip to keep from shouting, “Oh please! Don’t flatter yourself!” I doubt if anyone questions the divorced brother’s commitment to celibacy, but I can almost guarantee that a homosexual in a same-sex community is suspect. I will have to constantly wonder if a pat on the back will be misconstrued as an advance. Or if a look may be taken the wrong way.

I can only pray that the sharing of my orientation will be accepted for what it is: a part of me and not the whole of me. I hope, too, that readers will recognize that although I once made sexuality my all, that is no longer the case. I am as committed to celibacy as my brother monks. My story is ultimately a spiritual one, of a man seeking balance. I, too, am a monk, plain and simple.

* * * * *

I returned to St. Joseph’s for my sophomore year. I had come out of the closet, so I joined in on all the campy humor of the small group of gay seminarians. It must be noted that
the small group was precisely that, just a handful of guys. Our friendships were a source of support. More theatrical than anything else, giggling at our limp-wristed gesturing and fay ways, our campy humor was done in private, a boy's club where we could let our hair down. For the most part, we lived peaceably side by side with heterosexual seminarians.

Shortly after I returned to school, I went up to San Francisco to see Harvey Fierstein's Tony Award-winning play *Torch Song Trilogy*. The flamboyant main character, Arnold, had an unabashed chutzpah that mesmerized me. I had never seen homosexuality so gleefully paraded. In the third act, Arnold wore pink bunny slippers and a bathrobe. When I returned to the seminary, I regaled two friends with stories about the play. Several months later, these two friends bought me pink bunny slippers as a Christmas gift. We screamed with laughter and I appreciated their joke. Occasionally, I dashed from my room to the bathroom down the hall, eliciting a few perplexed glances from seminarians who weren’t in the know. Months later, I would learn that wearing pink bunny slippers would have repercussions.

Some time in November, St. Joseph's reeled as two seminarians were kicked out for carrying on a sexual relationship. Scott was a member of our group and one of the Student Government Co-Presidents. Alex, an e.e. cummings-quoting poet, had an athletic build and shied away from cliques. Both men, seniors, involved themselves actively in the communal and religious life of St. Joseph's. Their abrupt departure—there one day and gone the next—shook up our small, close-knit society. Many tears were shed. I don't think too many students harbored anger toward the rector or other administrators; seminary is no place for sexual relationships, straight or gay. But they were such nice guys, and their leaving proved to be a painful loss. Scott was a fellow Coloradan, studying for the Archdiocese of Denver. It was he who had once exclaimed in the mall parking lot: “Oh daisy! I almost fell on my gay ass!” When these two men left St. Joseph's to go their separate ways, their falling out reverberated beyond the seminary walls.
A few weeks after “the incident,” Father Marcian O’Meara, the vocation director for the Archdiocese of Denver, flew out to California. In a private meeting with me, he informed me that at the end of my sophomore year, he wanted to transfer me to Conception Seminary College in Northwest Missouri.

“I’m sending you to Conception for academic reasons,” he stated. He was a heavy man with a massive face. “Your grades are good: we may want to send you to Rome for graduate work. St. Joseph’s doesn’t offer Greek or Hebrew, but Conception does. If you study in Europe, you’ll need to have taken Greek or Hebrew.”

I was a bit overwhelmed. “I never thought about studying in Rome.”

He flipped through my chart, his chubby fingers riffling through papers. “Well, you may be a qualified candidate. If you do well in Greek or Hebrew, you will be able to extensively study Scripture.”

I let out a sigh. “But I don’t want to go to Conception. I’m happy here. I’m the Student Government secretary.”

“We’ll talk more about this during Christmas break when you’re back in Colorado.” He slammed the folder closed. “I’ll see you in a few weeks.”

Although Father O’Meara claimed he wanted me to go to Missouri for academic reasons, I was convinced that he wanted to pull me out of St. Joseph’s because of the fiasco involving the Denver seminarian who had been kicked out. Indeed, the diocesan gossip had it that Father O’Meara wanted to transfer all the Denver students to Conception.

I met with him during Christmas break, our talk a repeat of the previous one. I gave him my misgivings about switching schools, and he kept touting the studying abroad idea. I didn’t know what to think. I didn’t want to leave my friends, but I had to admit, going to a seminary in Rome sounded appealing. I was torn and confused.
In the Spring semester, Sister Veronique and I met frequently as I tried to sort out Father O’Meara’s proposal. After prayer and reflection, I decided that the best thing for me would be to remain in California. I bypassed Father O’Meara and wrote to the Archbishop of Denver, asking to stay at St. Joseph’s. A week later I received a letter from Father O’Meara: “Your transfer is not a matter of discussion. In the Fall of 1984, you will go to Conception Seminary College.”

The reply devastated me. I felt like a small kid whose parents abruptly yank him out of one school and send him to another. I didn’t want to leave my friends. Patient and caring, Sister Veronique listened to my cries. To help me deal with the pain, she suggested that I start a journal. “Putting things down on paper gives you a different perspective. It’ll be a way to sort out your feelings.” She gave me a blank journal which her community had given to her. Her self-giving touched me. Through my journal entries, meetings with Sister, and the empathy of friends, I eventually bent my will in obedience to the will of my superiors in Denver. It was a tough lesson, and many tears were shed, but through grace, I moved past the anger and peacefully accepted my new assignment. Missouri sounded foreign to me, but I decided to view it as a new beginning. After such an emotionally grueling school year, I looked forward to summer vacation.

Father O’Meara approached several other Denver students about switching to Conception Seminary, but he never forced anyone to leave St. Joseph’s. Only me. He stopped sending new seminarians to California; they were all sent to Missouri. After the remaining Colorado guys graduated, the Archdiocese of Denver was no longer represented at St. Joseph’s.

* * * * *

The summer between California and Missouri was a misery. Trouble had been brewing in my parents’ marriage for the past year or so, both of them drinking heavily and
spending time in the bar at the T-Bar Inn. Since I was away at school, I hadn’t experienced
the late night shouting matches my high school aged sister and brother had had to endure. A
bit before August, my mother took a cooking job at Red Feather Lakes, a small mountain
community northwest of Fort Collins. My parents felt they needed a temporary separation.
My father stayed in the house in Wellington with my siblings and me. The summer air
bristled with tension. Into this strained atmosphere, I came out to my family.

One afternoon my sister and I were talking in her bedroom, sitting on her bed. Although we are three years and a day apart, we’ve always been close. For as long as I can remember, we’ve been talkers; able to gab for hours about anything. Tired of hiding my sexuality from her, on this hot August afternoon, I took the plunge.

“Kim, I’m gay.” I held my breath and clutched my hands together, fearful that they might quiver.

Her eyes widened. The silence between us lasted a few thick seconds.

“I know.”

“What?” I shifted my legs. One of them had gone to sleep.

“I know,” she repeated.

My leg tingled. “How did you know?”

Kim rolled her eyes. “C’mon Tim! I’ve lived with you all my life! I’ve always known.”

“What do you mean?” My mouth twitched.

She shrugged. “I’ve always known. I didn’t admit it, I guess, but it was there.”

“Oh.” I looked at a pile of dirty clothes heaped in front of her closet.

“Heck, ever since elementary, people have asked me about you: ‘Is your brother a fag?’ ‘Is your brother a fairy?’ I’ve heard this stuff for years.”

“But that doesn’t make me gay,” I protested.
"No, but you are, aren’t you?"
I puckered my lips.
"Have you told anyone else?" she asked.
"I told ReNae at the beginning of the summer."
"How did she take it?"
"She told me I was being influenced by the devil."
Kim rolled her eyes and I let out a nervous chuckle.
"I mean, it’s not like I’m having sex or anything." I assured. "It hasn’t changed my desire to be a priest." We sat for a few moments, the leaves of the front yard cottonless cottonwood scraping the window. "I don’t plan on telling anyone else."
Kim sighed. With her right index finger, she traced a design on the lavender bedspread. "Mom and Dad already know."
"What do you mean?" I clenched my teeth and stiffened my back.
"Mom got a call a coupla weeks ago. Before she went up to Red Feather." She stopped her design and looked at me. "Some guy on the phone said he was calling to let Mom and Dad know that they had a gay son."
I could barely breath. "Who called? What did he say?" Sweat bunched on my forehead.
"I don’t know who he was," Kim’s voice rose. "All Mom said was that it some guy. He wouldn’t give his name. All he said was ‘Your son Tim is gay and I think you should know.’"
I sat on the bed, horrified. The afternoon heat suddenly seemed to choke me.
Kim shifted her eyes back to the bedspread. "Oh, and I forgot. He said something else."
"What?"
“He said you pranced around the seminary last year in pink bunny slippers.”
My jaw dropped. It was hot, but I shivered as goose bumps ran on my skin. The corners of my eyes puddled and I wiped them with a damp hand to keep it all back. I felt like Paul in A Chorus Line.

“Is that all?” my voice wavered.

“Yup. Mom and Dad sat me down later and grilled me if I knew anything about your being gay. They wanted to know if you’d said anything to me. ‘Course, I didn’t have anything to tell them.”

“How did they take it?”
Kim yawned. “They took it pretty hard. They were upset.”
I ran a hand through my hair. “Why didn’t they say anything to me?”

“Tim, they’re probably too afraid to ask you.”

“Oh my God” was all I could muster. A dog barked somewhere in the neighborhood.

“You gotta tell them, Tim,” my sister insisted. “They have to hear it from you.”
I sighed. “I know.”

Kim’s eyes were watery. “I still love you.”
I bit my lower lip. “I love you, too.”

Two days before I left for Missouri, I told my parents that I needed to talk to them about something important. My father and I drove up to Red Feather to meet Mom for dinner. I spent the drive through the pine treed hills talking about going to Conception, how I was ready to make a fresh start and how I looked forward to studying Greek. But my nervous chatter sounded hollow and my stomach churned apprehensively.

The restaurant a low-ceilinged log structure, had a weighed-down feeling. The thick log walls looked heavy. Dark wood tables were hulking masses that seemed to be
permanently planted to the pine planked floor. Hurricane lamps offered a meager glow at each booth. Even the silverware was chunky. I suppose to others, the restaurant had a rustic charm, but for me, it was foreboding. I felt like I had entered a cave.

We found my mother at the bar, and then a denim-clad hostess led us to a booth. My parents sat together across from me. They got along pretty well, gossiping about Wellington’s denizens. Once again, I chatted about my preparation for the new school year. But the sips from my Pepsi only intensified the rumbling in my stomach. After we had been served our rare steaks and baked potatoes, I made my move.

“Mom and Dad. I have something to tell you.” My hands lay clutched on my lap and my steak lay in its blood, the red meat glaring in the dim light.

My parents exchanged nervous glances and set down their forks. A piece of gristle clung to my mother’s steak knife. They sat silently.

“I, um. I just wanted to say that, well, I’m gay.” Sweat trickled down my back.

My father shifted on the bench and my mother picked at the knifed gristle. Clanking dishes and murmured chuckles enveloped the silence between us.

“What does that mean?” my father asked.

My hand shot for the Pepsi and I stuffed the straw in my mouth. I took a gulp. The soda seemed to foam all the way down my throat.

“What exactly are you saying?” my father repeated.

“That I’m gay. Homosexual. I’m attracted to other men.”

My father looked away and my mother kept her eyes fixed on her T-bone.

“Are you sure?” she whispered.

“Yeah. I’ve done a lot of thinking and I’ve prayed a lot about it. I’m sure.”

My mother started crying. Nothing loud, just quiet tears running down her cheeks and a few sniffles. My father put his arm around her and she molded herself onto his side.
“Sharon, it’ll be all right.”

I gazed at my Pepsi, studying the bubbles. It was an agonizing few moments, as Mom cried and Dad held her. I hated the dark room and I hated the customers laughing at the next table and I hated the pine trees that leered outside the windows. I wanted to disappear.

“There, there, Sharon,” my father said as my mother dabbed her eyes with her greasy napkin. “C’mon. It could be a lot worse.”

A flicker of anger rose in my chest. It could be worse? Yeah, my mind shouted, it could be worse. I could be dead!

I stifled the voice within me and doused the flame with a swig of soda. I couldn’t think of anything to say to break the tension. My mother put the crumbled, mascara’d napkin back on her lap, shifting away from my father’s side. She picked up her fork and knife and sniffled between steak bites. My father sighed and looked at me, shaking his head. His left arm continued to hang on my mother’s shoulder.

“What does this mean in terms of you’re wanting to be a priest?” he queried.

“Nothing’s changed,” I consoled, “I still feel called to the priesthood. I mean, I’m celibate.”

My father nodded and his posture softened slightly. He took his arm away from my mother and resumed eating. I picked at my potato. The waitress came to our table and asked if we needed anything.

“I’ll have another beer.” My mother’s voice sounded weary, thin.

“I will, too,” my father stated. The waitress left us.

I could barely choke down the potato. My shoulders slumped toward my plate. The three of us sawed our steaks in a quiet frenzy.

“When I think of gay,” my father broke the ice, “I think of weird men who hang out in parks looking for boys.”
I grimaced. “That’s pedophilia. I’m not attracted to boys. That’s gross. Sick.”

My father nodded.

“I had a phone call a few weeks ago.” My mother looked directly into my eyes.

“I know, Kim told me.”

“Tim, it was awful.” Fresh tears brimmed above her eyeliner. “He didn’t say who he was, only that you were gay.” She reached for a cigarette. Her lighter flickered before tanned face and she took a drag. Smoke shrouded the steaks and potato skins on our plates. “He wouldn’t tell me anything else, only that you pranced around the seminary in pink bunny slippers.” She spat “pranced” and smoke shot from her mouth and nostrils. She crumpled the napkin in her free hand.

“They were a gag gift from friends,” I explained, “a joke. I didn’t prance around. I wore them a few times. When I went to the bathroom. At night. That was it.”

My mother shook her head. Smoke billowed. “I never saw this coming,” she said, “I never would have guessed.”

From some unknown region in me, I wanted to burst out laughing. I coughed and drained my Pepsi.

After the waitress cleared our dishes and brought the bill, we lingered. I answered all their questions: When did you find out that you’re gay? Why didn’t you tell us sooner? Have you always felt this way? You’re not going to tell Grandmother and Grandfather, are you? Where did we go wrong?

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” I asserted. “I don’t know why I’m gay, but I know that it had nothing to do with how you raised me. I didn’t become gay, it’s just how I’ve always been.”

When we got up to leave the restaurant, my father put his arm around my mother’s shoulders again. Before we parted, he hugged her and said, “Sharon, you take care of
yourself. I'll call you tomorrow.” My mother started sniffling and then she hugged me. “You know I love you Tim. I always will.” For the first time all evening, my composure almost cracked. I fought back the tears.

“I love you too, Mom.”

As we walked out the door, my father put his hand on my shoulder.

On the way home, my father said, “You know, Tim, you’ll have to tell Brian before you leave for school.” I nodded in the dark. I dreaded the idea of telling my brother. Only a year younger than my sister, my brother and I had always gotten along well, but we weren’t as close as Kim and I. He was a sports fanatic; we didn’t have a lot in common.

“This will kill Brian, you know,” my father stated blandly. I just gazed at my reflection in the black window.

I don’t know where I got the strength to bear that night. If I had come out to my parents sooner, I may not have had the power to endure my mother’s tears and my father’s disappointed sighs. I walked away from that night with a strength I didn’t know I possessed. Years of being called faggot had toughened my skin. I suppose that my heart was now growing a protective coating.

I will always regret that I did not tell my brother personally of my homosexuality. As I ran around preparing to leave for Missouri, an opportune moment never came up. Perhaps I fled from opportune moments. When I left Wellington, I asked my father to tell him. They were close, so I was sure that my brother would take the news better from my father rather than from me. But I should have given Brian more credit; my sister told me that while he didn’t greet the revelation enthusiastically, neither did he freak out or shun me. True to his character, he accepted it quietly.

I have never found out who made that phone call to my mother. I think it might have been a seminarian from St. Joseph’s. But I don’t know what I could have done to someone to
warrant such an act. My sister suggested that my friend ReNae, who thought I had been influenced by the devil, might have put someone up to it. I had mentioned the bunny slippers to her when I came out. But I don’t want to think that she was behind it. After all, she was my best friend from high school. In any case, I was outed before outing was in, and I’ll probably never know who was responsible for that call.

As I prepared for Missouri, I reflected on how my life had changed so much in two years. From eager eighteen year old, hungry for God, to a weary twenty year old. I now squinted in bright light: not from the sun, but the light streaming from my own reflection. No longer focused on God, I became enamored with myself. My pain. I resembled a Robert Mapplethorpe self-portrait, a visage captured, eyes peering beyond the lens.
A Boy in the Band?

Why was it sea, that you fled,
that you turned back, Jordan, on your course?
Mountains, that you leaped like rams,
hills, like yearling sheep?

Psalm 114

The drive east from Maryville to Conception proved to be an eye-opening experience. I took a Greyhound bus from Denver to Kansas City, and then a Trailways bus from Kansas City to Maryville. A seminarian picked me up in Maryville to take me to Conception. Right away, I was struck by the landscape; I could see nothing but rolling hills of corn. A few tree-covered farm houses occasioned the countryside as oases in the sea of tasseled green. The sky was an ivory haze and the heat and humidity practically crushed my lungs. As the seminarian and I exchanged pleasantries about our backgrounds, I couldn’t help but look with dismay at the endless rows of corn. During the twenty minute drive to Conception, I longed for the San Francisco Bay.

“There it is,” he said, pointing ahead. The road dipped and rose, and at the end of the horizon, I could make out a large red building and church spires. “Pretty impressive, doncha think?”

“Hmm. Boy, this is out in the middle of nowhere, isn’t it?” I could think of nothing else to say.

He shrugged. “It’s not too bad. Nice and quiet.”

I puckered my lips at the waving fields of grain. This should be an interesting year, I thought.
Benedictine monks from Switzerland came to Missouri in the 1870s. From the beginning, the monks at Conception Abbey have been involved in educating men for the priesthood. A massive church serves as a focal point, with the monks living in the monastery to the right of the church and seminarians staying to the left of it. Monks staff the seminary, serving as professors, administrators, chaplains, librarians, and spiritual directors. The massive structure of red brick lazes heavily on a hill as a beacon above the corn. I clearly wasn't in California any more.

The routine at Conception mirrored the one at St. Joseph's: morning and evening prayers, mass, classes in the mornings and afternoons. But the monks valued discipline a little more than the Sulpicians at St. Joe's. If we wanted to leave the complex, we had to sign out on a piece of paper, letting the superiors know where we were going. In California, we could come and go as we pleased, provided we attended all communal functions. While weekends had been free at St. Joseph's, at the Missouri seminary, we had to stay on campus three weekends a month. Drinking was not allowed at Conception unless the seminarian was twenty-one, excepting periodic special events or dinners. While underaged drinking hadn't been advocated at the seminary in California, we all had done it. And besides having a spiritual director, everyone at Conception had a chaplain. The chaplains lived on the floors with the students and oversaw "character formation." They dealt with the nitty gritty of a seminarian's daily life; issues concerning the student's involvement in community life, studies, attendance at liturgical functions, and other personal issues confronting priesthood discernment. Right away, I sensed a "watchful eye" atmosphere at Conception. My chaplain, my "eye," was Brother Samuel.

I think that Brother Samuel was in his late 30s or early 40s when I arrived in August of 1984. A thin man of medium height, he wore wire-rimmed glasses, his sandy hair vaguely thinning. He had a knack for walking down the hall silently; we never could hear the rustle
from his habit until he suddenly appeared behind us. My first meeting with him set the tone for the rest of the school year.

“As I look at your evaluation from St. Joseph’s,” he said, thumbing through my file, “I’m a bit confused. It says here that you tend to act out in a stereotypical manner. What does that mean?”

Oh crap, I thought. We sat in the tiny sitting room adjacent to his bedroom. The air plastered my hair to my scalp and I crossed my legs nervously. I hadn’t been prepared for this.

“Well…”

“Does it have to do with sexual orientation?” Brother Samuel asked.

I sucked in my breath, startled by his straightforward style. “I guess so.”

“Hmm.” He poured over the papers in his lap. “I want you to know that that won’t be tolerated here. No campy stuff, understand?”

I nodded. “I’m, um, hoping this will be a new beginning for me,” I offered meekly.

“Good,” Brother Samuel asserted. “And I don’t want you telling anyone your sexual orientation. Got that? It’s no one else’s business.”

I gave him an OK nod.

And so I made an honest effort to make a fresh start. I didn’t say “honey” or “girlfriend.” I threw myself into my studies and made friends. On Saturdays I went to a nursing home in nearby Stanberry to sit with senior citizens. But Brother Samuel wasn’t happy with my progress. He told me that I was a bit “light” on my feet, that I swished a bit too much. He didn’t like the way I crossed my legs when I sat down. “Butch it up a little,” he told me. I suppose that having a framed photo of Mikhail Baryshnikov in my room didn’t help.
When I had first arrived at Conception, I had to undergo another round of psychological tests. There was the 500 question true or false test: I want to be a florist; True. I want to be a mechanic; False! After my results had been tabulated, I met with the seminary psychologist. He was an ancient monk with a leather face from years of chain smoking. I sat before him in his office.

“From your test, it seems that you have a homosexual orientation.”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to change?”

I was taken aback. The thought had never occurred to me.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Do you want to change?” he repeated. He leaned across his desk. “If you want to change, I’d be willing to meet with you on a regular basis.”

For some reason, I wanted to giggle. “I don’t think so,” I said. “I mean, I’m celibate, so I don’t think it’s an issue.”

The monk sat back in his chair. He seemed satisfied with my response.

“There’s one thing that puzzles me.” He started going through papers on his desk until he found my drawing. Part of the psychological testing entailed drawing two separate figures, a man and a woman. He picked up my artistically-impoverished rendition of a man.

“I just don’t get it,” he said, shaking his head. “Most homosexuals will draw a man sporting a neck tie. You know, a long neck tie. It’s a phallic symbol.” He raised his eyebrows. “But why is the man in your drawing wearing a bow tie?”

“He’s wearing a tux!” I smiled. “He’s going to the theatre!”

The monk gave me a quizzical look and shook his head again. “Hmm. That’ll be all.”

When I stepped into the hall and closed the door behind me, it took every thing in my power not to burst out laughing. I grinned all the way back to my room.
As the months passed, I poured out my frustration into my journal. The whole "butching it up" was not working well. For the first time, I started questioning my vocation. Was I really called to be a priest? I did enjoy community life, but I wasn’t too sure how I would fit in to the mold of a parish priest. I loved the Church and wanted to serve her, but I wondered how effective I’d be as a swissy priest. The weight of guarding my orientation seemed to be a heavy one. I began to reflect on how laity would react to me if I were their pastor. Would they be able to detect my orientation?

It took being in a play to make me realize that no amount of posturing could mask my effeminacy. The seminary staged a production of Fiorello! that year. Although I couldn’t sing well, Father Aelred stuck me in the chorus line because I could dance. The female roles were filled by women for Northwest Missouri State in Maryville. I played the part of one of the card playing men, and I even had a few lines. It felt good to be on stage again; rehearsals tended to be grueling, but I had tremendous fun. After one performance, as the cast stood before the stage to receive the accolades of the audience, a nun approached me.

“You were so good!” she gushed, her habit all atwitter. “I almost thought you were a man!”

I could feel my cheeks reddening beneath the make up. “I beg your pardon?”

“You were wonderful! You played your part perfectly! I almost thought you were a man!”

“But I am a man. My character is a man.”

Now sister’s face blushed. “Oh, I’m so sorry.” She scurried away.

I bit my lip. The woman couldn’t tell that I was a man? I felt like a nelly ass, and prayed that no one else had overheard our conversation.

I gave up trying to act manly. I didn’t revert to previous campy ways I had exhibited in California, but I no longer tried to stiffen limp wrists. With a sigh, I just let myself go and
tried to focus on my studies. Taking nineteen credit hours in the Spring semester, I didn’t have time to take a cinema class taught by Father Aelred. Since they viewed the movies in the evenings, Father agreed to let me sit in and watch. The first movie he showed was *The Boys In the Band*, an adaptation of Matthew Crowley’s award-winning play. I never figured out his reasoning for showing the film in a seminary: he claimed that it exemplified a supreme example of how a play translated well on the screen. I suspected he wanted to titillate a bunch of Midwestern seminarians.

The movie, about a gaggle of homosexuals in a New York apartment celebrating a birthday, is campy and bitchy. The film seethes with self-hating characters who are cruel to one another as the night wears on and they get drunk. It is both hilarious and haunting. When we finished watching the film, several students flocked around me.

“Tim, you’re just like Emory.”

Emory, the nelliest character in the movie, had the best lines. When one man, a math teacher, was introduced to another, Emory quipped, “Makes you want to go out and buy a slide rule, doesn’t it?” As a good-looking delivery boy arrived from a bakery, Emory shouted out, “Ask him if he has any hot-crossed buns!”

I didn’t know what to think as classmates started referring to me as this character from *The Boys In the Band*. While Emory offered wit and charisma in a film that eventually became dreary, he was also a pathetic caricature, a swishy stereotype. Did seminarian friends see me the same way? I laughed and blushed whenever they gushed about my resemblance to Emory, but inside, I was crestfallen. Did I come across as a buffoon?

Around this time, I found out through phone calls that my parents had indeed decided to get a divorce. It was devastating news. While they had been fighting a lot the past two years, they had still gotten along pretty well. Despite growing up gay and constantly called
faggot, I considered my childhood to have been a blessed one; my family had been happy. With the news that Mom and Dad were divorcing after twenty-one years of marriage, my world became all the more confusing.

One April day, sitting in Math class, I doodled on a piece of paper. Not mathematically-inclined, I tuned out the professor’s lecture about fractions. In a burst of creative energy, I wrote a poem:

the spring of my life
is growing to be
in newness I drink the sun

the bursting forth of my be
coming is fresh is sweet
o’ life o’ love
how long will spring reign?

all is empty save the
dance of I and the dance of you
us

the spring of my life
is growing to be
of I and god
and you and me

I was genuinely puzzled at what I had written. Who was the “you” of the poem? Could I be questioning my embrace of celibacy? The poem had no literary merit, but it certainly made me wonder if I longed for a physical relationship with another. My parents’ divorce, my inability to don a macho persona, feeling alone in the stifling corn fields; I was buoyed about in a tide of confusion.

I met with Brother Samuel just before Easter break.

“I don’t know if I’m called to be a parish priest,” I told him.
“Why not?”

“Oh, I dunno.” I sighed. “The whole gay thing. I don’t know if I’d be effective as a priest. What would happen if someone called me a faggot?”

I could sense some empathy coming from Brother Samuel’s usually steely face. “Tim, this is a turbulent time for you, with your parents’ divorce and all. Don’t make any rash decisions. Take time to pray about it. We’ll discuss it when you get back from Easter break, when you write your self-evaluation.” He offered a smile. “Have you ever thought about joining a religious order?”

“You mean, like the Benedictines?”

“The Benedictines. Or Franciscans. Have you ever considered it? You don’t have to go into parish ministry as a member of a religious order.”

“Actually, I have,” I said. “One of my friends at St. Joseph’s is a Franciscan. I spent a weekend at their provincial house in Santa Barbara, and I liked their sense of community. But even though I have a great love for St. Francis, I don’t think I’m called to his order. It’s all that brown they wear.” We both chuckled.

“Well, think about it and we’ll talk when you get back.”

But my Easter week at home felt like a foray to Hades. I don’t remember who lived in the house in Wellington at the time, my father or my mother. My family had splintered: my parents off doing their own things and talking about one another in biting terms; my sister preparing for high school graduation, spending as much time away from home as possible; my brother at home, engrossed in the TV. As I watched the unraveling of my family, my life seemed to shatter as well. The thought of going back to Conception for another year depressed me. I didn’t want to be butch or hide my sexuality.

I wrote my self-evaluation during the break, stating that at the end of the school year, I would leave the seminary. I cited my sexuality: I wanted to “live in the world and take
some time off from seminary studies." Twenty-one years old and itching for an urban landscape, I planned to move to Denver. I just wanted to be me. I don’t think I wrote it in my evaluation, but I also wanted to leave to pursue a gay lifestyle. I wanted to go dancing.

When I met with Brother Samuel again, after he had read my evaluation, his face reminded me of a cold, marble bust. He did not bring up the idea of joining a religious order.

“Well, due to this evaluation, even if you wanted to stay in the seminary, the counsel of chaplains would not recommend you to go on.”

I winced.

“What will you do in Denver?” Brother asked.

“Oh, get an apartment. Find a job. Maybe I’ll go to the Fashion Institute.”

Brother Samuel’s face showed nothing. “Are you planning on living a gay lifestyle?”

I looked down. “Yes. I want to find out who I am. I wanna have some fun.”

“You know,” he said, “you will not be happy.”

My head bounced up. His eyes fixed on mine. “You will not be happy.”

I left his room fuming. I couldn’t get over his audacity. Who was he to tell me that I would not be happy? That was ballsy of him to judge. I quit the seminary.

As the Missouri cornfields faded behind me, I embarked on a journey to prove him wrong.
The Queen City of the Plains experienced a burst of growth in the early 1980s. The oil business boom transformed this cow town into a bonanza of skyscrapers and sun-seeking non-natives. Downtown’s Sixteenth Street became a mile-long pedestrian mall of shops, eateries, and department stores. Buildings rose, newcomers flooded the ski slopes on winter weekends, and the suburbs sprawled. And then the oil business went bust. That’s when I moved to Denver. It was the summer of 1985 and I was twenty-one.

For a few months I stayed with Carl and Scott, two other ex-seminarians. Scott was the one who had been kicked out of St. Joseph’s. They lived in Capitol Hill, so I got a bus schedule and filled out job applications for downtown retailers. I quickly found a job selling women’s accessories at The Denver. It was arguably the region’s finest department store; five block-long floors filled with name brands and topped with the Tea Room, a luncheon institution on the sixth floor. It’s a shame that most downtown department stores have now closed up shop and moved to suburban malls. The Denver was exciting! When the doors opened at 10:00 a.m., little old ladies would invariably be there, change purses in hand. During lunchtime the store would fill up with business people scurrying for those items they had ‘hidden’ on racks until they went on sale. Suburbanites usually sauntered in on Saturdays or late afternoons. I sold hats and gloves and scarves as fashion shows were staged in Men’s, as Estee Lauder reps transformed faces, and fragrance specialists sprayed the air. With the store closing at 5:00 each night, it was the perfect place to work; evenings were free.
My life became an adventure of learning my way around the city. Standing at bus stops. Going out to dinner with Carl and Scott, my roommates. They introduced me to several gay bars and dance clubs. We watched videos on weeknights: Divine movies, *Eating Raoul, Eraserhead, 1984*. I went to mass once or twice, but that was it. I tried to save money so I could get my own apartment, but I spent a lot of it on beer. Clothes. Highlights in my hair.

As I turned away from the Church, my conversations with God became less frequent. Then, in August of 1985, I experienced something from a darker realm. A dream.

I had been working at The Denver for a month, sleeping on the floor in Carl’s bedroom. A friend of mine from Oklahoma, who had just graduated from Conception Seminary in Missouri, came out to Denver for a visit. He was set to depart for a major seminary in Rome in September. My two roommates and I took Jeff out to dinner his first night in Colorado, and then to a bar. Jeff had a grand time, and we all got a bit tipsy. When we returned to the apartment, Jeff and I settled in to sleep on the living room floor. Covered with sheets and a blankets, we tossed and turned for a while, trying to adjust to the not-so-plush carpet. Eventually we both drifted off to sleep.

At some time during the night, a dream took hold of me. All I could sense was a dark presence, a bodiless force, trying to overshadow me. I couldn’t see anything, but I knew that I was sleeping on a floor. This force pounced on me like a panther. I tried to wake up, but I couldn’t. It felt as if something evil and heavy was trying to get in me. The weight upon my body kept me from moving. I tried to scream, but nothing escaped my lips. Pinned down by a fury that can only be described as infinitely cold, hateful, I reached out for God. I could not form pleas for help; my brain felt like it was being crushed. All I could find were the words to the Lord’s Prayer: *Our Father who art in heaven*... The prayer raced through my head non-
stop as the dark presence tried to take hold of me. Seep into me through my pores. I thought that my heart, soul, and mind would be taken over by this force. It tried to claw its way into my very being, crushing me under its weight. For a second, I thought that the prayer was not going to work, that I would be overcome. I had never known such horror.

And then it was gone. Departed. The heavy pressure had been lifted away in an instant. I told myself to wake up. I opened my eyes, moved my fingers, legs. The air conditioner hummed and tree shadows waved on a wall. I glanced over at Jeff. Lying on his stomach, he softly snored. I sat up, sweaty and shaking. I didn’t know what to do. Turn on a light and awaken Jeff? Run to the bathroom? I cupped my face in my hands and wept silently. My mind gushed, Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Lord...I sat for an hour or so, afraid of sleep. The dream seemed so real, but made little sense. As the early hours passed and I succumbed to fitful sleep, the Lord’s Prayer rattled in my head like buckler and shield.

The dream still puzzles me. Although it felt like a late encounter with the Enemy, I wouldn’t label it as demonic possession. In a sense, it foreshadowed a lifestyle I was about to adopt: drinking, drugging, the surrender to pleasure. As I turned away from God, I stifled my conscience. Perhaps a hint can be found in Psalm Thirty-six: “Sin speaks to the sinner in the depths of his heart.” I don’t know where the dream originated, nor do I care. But I never want to undergo such a frightening experience ever again. Even to this day, I sometimes fear sleep.

I found my own place, a studio apartment on Capitol Hill, a neighborhood a short walk away from downtown. It’s an area filled with Victorian homes and brick apartment buildings housing drag queens, yuppie families, queers, walker-carting senior citizens, and glassy-eyed drug users. My hardwood floor studio was on the first floor of a rambling house which had been converted into apartments. It had one room that could fit my bed, a garage sale plaid loveseat, a small black and white TV, yellow kitchen table with the kitchen nook
on the side, and a small bathroom with a stained glass window over the tub. On the first night in my new place, I celebrated my freedom as an apartment dweller by drinking a bottle of champagne, crying as I watched The Times of Harvey Milk. By the time Dynasty came on, I giggled at Alexis’ antics. After living in seminaries and with friends, it was comforting to be alone to laugh and cry on a whim, to drink champagne and feel as grand as Alexis.

I embarked on a crusade of nightclub hopping. A part of me looked for love, and another part of me wasn’t convinced that I wanted it. Still ambiguous about the morality of gay sexual acts, I went out at night to thrive on the energy of the gay bar scene. I had met a coworker at The Denver, Randy, who became my closest friend. Not yet twenty-one, he had a fake ID and introduced me to the metropolitan night life. Randy was the epitome of 80s hipdom: he wore WilliWear shirts and jackets, smoked cigarettes, and had a hair cut modeled after Simon LeBon of Duran Duran. He was cool and laid back, his sentences as measured as his long, graceful strides. While Randy was subdued, I threw myself into the latest trends with a garish abandon. I began to wear glittery brooches and three Swatch watches on my wrist. Each night became an adventure of choosing a new outfit as Randy and I hit the clubs. The Metro, Tracks, The Grove; we conquered them all and I became a convert to the nightlife. I thrived on the smoky, strobe-lit dance floors, arms swinging with glee. I took up cigarettes because they complimented my ensembles, and Randy introduced me to the twenty-something party scene. Sometimes we’d smoke a joint if he found some pot.

The funny thing is that I was the saint of celibate sensuality. I drank. I smoked. I danced. I sashayed in my outfits. But I did not have sex. A part of me wanted to be like all my friends and acquaintances who thought nothing of jumping in a sack with another. But I just couldn’t do it. Somewhere deep in me lurked the thought that I was called to celibacy, even as a layperson. I suppose it’s difficult for non-celibates to understand that. Some people choose to abstain from sex because it just feels right. So I became an icon rather than
succeeding to the masses. I became a persona, a partying, faintly religious model of superficiality. I personified an era. I was a caricature; a cigarette flicking, brooch-wielding, sometimes-praying beer swiller in Nancy Reagan red. I became my own fashion—virginity as extravaganza on the catwalk. I was an Andy Warhol.

* * * * *

"Tim, we'll come over tomorrow night. Just a little holiday get together."

I hung up the phone. I thought it a bit odd that Larry had invited himself and several others over to my place, but I didn't mind. Larry had also been a seminarian at St. Joseph’s, a year behind me. He, too, had left. We got together periodically and saw each other regularly in the clubs. I didn't know why I hadn't thought of throwing a holiday gathering; I was always game for playing host. I reached for a pen and piece of paper. If I would be entertaining, I needed to go shopping after work before they arrived.

Friday was frigid, the city blanketed with a pre-Christmas cold front. After a day of selling gloves and scarves, I cashed my paycheck and walked to Larimer Square. One of the oldest sections of town, Larimer Square was a block of quaint brick buildings housing upscale clothing stores, trendy restaurants, and boutiques. I stopped at Williams-Sonoma to purchase a cork screw. I had decided to offer my guests wine and cheese, something simple yet festive. After buying the over-priced cork screw, I made my way to the Market, a cheese and desert emporium. Pastries, salamis, baguettes, and espresso were the fare at this monstrous downtown deli. I bought several foreign cheeses and two loaves of French bread.

It was a bitter night. I danced from foot to foot waiting for my bus. Christmas carols blared from store-front speakers, cars rushed by in the glittery night. Clutching my bulging shopping bag, I trudged onto the bus, plopping into a near-the-door seat. I stopped by a liquor store a block my apartment, loading my arms with several bottles of Chablis and rose. I didn't know much about buying wine, but at least it wasn't Carlo Rossi.
In the warmth of my studio apartment, I put a Mitch Miller Christmas cassette into the stereo and sliced bread, arranging pieces in a sunflower pattern on a yellow plastic plate. I unwrapped the cheese, placing the several mounds on blue plastic plates, complete with butter knives. My Auntie Susan had given me some wine glasses, so I set them out on the yellow table, near the holiday-print paper napkins. I didn’t have any decorations, but I was pleased with my makeshift festivity. The room had a Cratchet feel, sans the holly or family.

Larry arrived alone. “Danny and Fred should be here soon” he announced, flinging his coat onto my bed. His hair was poufy. We sat down, munching on cheese and French bread, sipping wine. But Larry was distant. Incessantly looking out the bay window, gazing at the street, he seemed distracted. Every time a car passed by, he’d crane his neck to scrutinize the headlights.

“Larry, what are you looking for?”

“I’m on the watch for Danny and Fred. They should’ve been here by now.”

I pushawed. “Don’t worry! They’ll get here when they get here!”

Finally, a car pulled up before my building. “There they are!” Larry yelled, jumping from my plaid love seat. “I’ll go get them.”

I stood up in surprise. “Get them? They’ve been here before.”

But Larry dashed out the door. His heavy steps thumped down the porch stairs. I went into the kitchen nook to open another bottle of wine. As the cork came out, I heard trampling on the steps again, and then the door swung open.

“Merry Christmas, Hon!” Larry shouted. I turned with the wine in my hand to see Danny and Fred shoving a pine tree through my door, with Larry behind them.

“What’s going on?” I asked stupidly.
"We knew that you didn’t have enough money to go out and get a Christmas tree, so we brought one to you!" Larry cheered. "And we even brought a stand and all the decorations." He held up two heavy Broadway Southwest shopping bags.

I stood open-mouthed, goose bumps forming on the back of my neck. I blinked a few times to keep the tears away. I had never dreamed anyone would do such a thing for me, show up with a tree and all the trimmings.

"Don’t just stand there! We need to set this thing down. Where do you want it?"

I snapped to attention. "Let’s put it over here," I said, gesturing toward a windowed corner.

We spent the evening decorating the tree. Larry had thought of everything: stand, multi-colored lights, blue bulbs and pink bulbs ("A queen’s gotta have pink balls," he explained), tinsel, and even a red fuzzy skirt to fan over the stand. A star blinked at the top. We drank wine, ate cheese, listened to Christmas carols, threw tinsel on each other. The tree took shape, squat and glittering in the cramped apartment. Rockefeller Center didn’t hold a card to my tree.

I was genuinely surprised by my friends’ charity. I couldn’t imagine why they had done it. Why me? I wasn’t an extraordinary person to merit such a bountiful gift, just a pudgy, drab scarf seller. Still a virgin, I could not contribute to my friends’ conversations about sex and dating. I was a troll-like, flush-faced, tweed jacket-wearing dullard with brooches on my lapels and Swatches on my wrist. Like a decorated pine tree. And I wasn’t a great friend. I didn’t call on the phone enough. I didn’t make enough money to buy drinks for others at the bars. And yet, these guys thought enough to buy me a Christmas tree.

It never fails that each year during the holidays, my mind wanders back to that first Christmas in my apartment. Even now, as a monk, I like to spend a few moments alone with
the Christmas tree, gazing at the lights and bulbs. And like that night, after Larry, Danny, and Fred had left, I echo the words of Tiny Tim: "God Bless us, everyone." It’s terribly sappy and cliché, but it suits me.

That night was a shining moment, a repast, as I continued my foray through a night life underworld.

* * * * *

The first time I did Ecstasy I was at a CIA party. CIA as in the Colorado Institute of Art. It was at some dingy apartment on Sherman along Poet’s Row. The couch sagged, chairs mismatched, and the hardwood floor was grimm and sticky. The kitchen and living room were packed with artsy types, and Billy Idol sang about a white wedding on the stereo. As I regaled the crowd with stories about bitchy customers, Trevor came up and asked if I’d like to do Ecstasy. His chest glistened through a slightly unbuttoned flannel shirt. His Jack Daniel lips alternated between Marlboro puckers and lush grins, chestnut bangs wreathed along a damp forehead. I had a weakness for Trevor. I had heard that Ecstasy was the ‘touching drug’, but had never done it. Not one to purchase illegal substances, I certainly didn’t have a complex against receiving them from the kindness of others. From a little square of folded up paper, Trevor poured a white powder into my 7&7, swirling it with his finger. I was about to take the trip of my life.

After only a few moments, the whole apartment suddenly seemed lovely; the couch inviting, the crowd too small, the sticky floor sweetly grounding. My heart began to race, but I was filled with nervy, relaxing warmth. I could not stop smiling. I glided from cluster to cluster, person to person, engrossed in every word uttered. All I wanted to do was touch and be touched. Not in a sexual way, just touch. It had everything to do with feeling. The feel of an arm, a taut back, a clasped hand. Thoughts whizzed through my head faster than I could
catch them. It was fabulous. I buzzed and grinned and smoked my Yves Saint Laurent cigarettes like they provided me breath.

As the party ended, Randy and I stood on the sidewalk talking with my sister and her roommate, Kerry. I crowned my trip by going up to Kerry, grabbing her left tit and proclaiming at the top of my voice, “You know, I could learn to love a woman!” Kerry grabbed her breasts in horrified “Fuck yous!” and my sister shrank into the shadows. I laughed hysterically and Randy forced me into his car. Not everyone understands ecstasy.

After working at The Denver for almost a year, I took a job as a manager of a women’s shoe store in Westminster, a northern suburb. A typical strip mall store, flanked by a Dairy Queen and a sporting goods store, Gussini sold most shoes for $13.88. I wasn’t qualified to be a store manager, but perhaps my seminary past impressed the district supervisor. I had to take two buses to get to work, so twelve hour days dragged into fifteen hour days. My employees included a high school Mormon hipster who craved the Cure and New Wave, a stout German grandmother who would bring in banana bread from time to time, and a peroxide blond named Candy. We all got along famously.

One Saturday afternoon in 1987, shoppers crammed the store. Shoes from the wall racks and tables littered the floor. It was after Christmas, a typical 60 degree January day in Colorado. My employees and I ran around the store trying to tidy up and help customers. A woman and her twelve-or-so year old daughter came in and plopped some boots on the counter at the register. I left the loafers and headed toward them.

“May I help you?” I gave her a genuine smile.

“I want to return these.” The woman had a blond pixie cut and a pinched face. She pointed at the boots. They were cream, mid-calf high. And scuffed.

“What’s wrong with them?” I stood behind the counter.
“They didn’t fit my daughter.”

“Do you have a receipt?” I inspected the soles. Pebbles were lodged in the grooves. She exhaled indignantly. “No! They were a Christmas gift. I can’t find the receipt.” Her voice had risen a few decibels and eyes from the selling floor looked our way.

“Without a receipt, Ma’am, all I can do is exchange them for another pair, or some other shoes.”

Her eyes squinted. “But I don’t want another pair. I want my money back.”

The tuna sandwich lunch rumbled in my stomach. “I’m sorry, but without a receipt, all I can do is an exchange.” I pointed to our prominently-displayed return policy on the wall behind the register. “I’d be more than happy to exchange them.”

The woman’s eyes became venom. “I don’t want an exchange. I want to talk to a manager!”

Sweat began to trickle down my back, I could feel the beads on my forehead.

“I’m the manager. Ma’am.”

Her eyes narrowed to slits as she took me in. I wore a plaid shirt with a brooch at the neck. “I want to talk to someone who isn’t a faggot!” she shouted.

The whole store hushed. I heard Candy gasp from somewhere.

“I, uh, beg your pardon?”

“You heard me. I WANT TO TALK TO SOMEONE WHO ISN’T A FAGGOT!”

All I could do was grip the counter top to stop from swaying. My right leg began to shake. I couldn’t look at the daughter. I was vaguely aware of my employees storming from the selling floor toward the register. But for an instant it faded.

In the blink of an eye, all I could see before me was Shug Avery. I was Miss Celie standing at the door, and there was Shug, dripping in drunkenness. “You sure is ugly,” echoed in my head. “You sure is ugly.” I almost lost my grip. I shook my head for clarity.
“Ma’am, you had better leave right now. Or I’ll call the police.”

Her eyebrows rose to the middle of her forehead. “You’d call the cops on me?”

“Ma’am, if you don’t leave immediately, I’ll call the police.” My right hand shook towards the phone.

“This is bullshit!” she screamed. “Someone’s going to hear about this!” She grabbed the boots and her daughter and fumed out of the store. I watched from the register as they peeled out of the parking lot, and then I told my employees that I had to go out for a cigarette. I couldn’t fight back the tears.

During this time, my prayer life seemed to be a one-way barrage of questions: Why are people so cruel? Why doesn’t anyone find me attractive? Sometimes I’d pick up my breviary and try to pray the Divine Office, but I’d never get past two or three days of morning and evening prayers. I rarely went to mass. Strangely, the only times I offered up what could remotely be described as decent prayers, were when I walked home drunk. After a night in the bars, I swayed through the darkened streets of Capitol Hill, asking the Lord to protect me, and then singing songs I remembered from seminary. I didn’t sing loudly, just enough to be heard over the clicking of my shoes on the sidewalk: “We hold a treasure, not made of gold, in earthen vessels wealth untold...” In my giddy state, I praised the God whom I had turned away from. I hadn’t wholly forgotten God.

Several months after the incident in the shoe store, I lost my virginity. Sitting alone on a balmy early Spring night, I decided to go to the Triangle, a leather bar. I had been there a few times with friends; open until 4:00 a.m. on Fridays and Saturdays, it was a big hang out after the other clubs closed. Of course, the door man wouldn’t let anyone in unless they had the proper butch attire. Every time I had been there, my friends and I had to shed brooches
and bracelets and shoulder-padded jackets in the car. Once they wouldn't let us in. It was cold, so I wore my long cashmere black coat.

"You gotta wear leather," the lumber jack door man spat.

"But I am wearing leather," I exclaimed. "My gloves are leather. They're Fownes Ultra-Naturals!"

He took one look at me and said, "I don't care if your underwear is leather. You're not getting in."

My friends and I walked away shrieking, "Oh puhleez, girlfriend! Get over it!"

On this warm April night, I didn't take any chances. I put on a pair of black leather boots, tight Levi's, and I wore a black jacket with no shirt, exposing my hairy chest. It was definitely an "Oh puhleez!" outfit for me, but I felt restless. I went out that night with the set purpose of picking someone up. I was weary of being a virgin. Everyone around me engaged in sex, and I felt out of the loop. Sick of worrying about what it would be like to be sexually intimate with another, I ventured out to the bar that was a sexual jungle.

The Triangle sat on a downtown Denver corner on a seedy block. I never got a clear image of the inside because it was darker than any bar I had ever been in. After getting past the door man, there stood a large bar where machos ordered bottles of Bud. Behind the bar was another room, where ledges ran the lengths of the walls. Ledges are paramount in butch bars because posturing is everything. Adorned in sleek leather vests or flannel shirts, chests bared and some nipples pierced, Triangle guys stood erect along the walls, tight Levi's or leather pants accentuating bulged groins. Most of the men had short hair and mustaches, some wore leather caps or leather collars. Limp wrists were starched for the evening and fay cackling had been left at the door. It was exactly like John Rechy's *The Rushes*; an underworld of grotesque sexual preying.
I ordered a beer and found an empty place along a wall in the back room. I tried to muster a manly stance, but the disco music plagued me. The Triangle played some of the best dance music in town, but dancing was not allowed. Too effeminate. Anyone caught dancing would be kicked out. Every time I went to the Triangle, I went through a little agony: it was difficult not to start bouncing or swaying with the music. Men could make out with one another, and God knew what else, but they could not shimmy. So the music pounded through me and the cigarette smoke and I tried to stifle my bouncing toes. I hadn't been standing there very long before a short Mexican-American approached. He wore tight Levi's, a western shirt with silver snaps unbuttoned to display a smooth chest, and black boots. He had short hair and looked to be in his early forties.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” I returned.

“Can I get you a beer?”

I looked at my almost empty bottle I had been desperately clinging to. “Sure.”

“I’ll be back.” He made his way through the parade of studs toward the door leading to the bar. He was plain-looking, with a slight beer belly. I waited a bit apprehensively.

“Here you go,” he said, offering me a perspiring Bud. I took it and thanked him.

We made small talk about the music and the warm night, and then we talked about what we did for a living. He was a mailman. At one point in the conversation, he asked me if I was dating anyone.

“No,” I replied, running my hand through my chest hair. “Actually, I’m virgin.”

“Really?” he asked. His eyes traveled my body.

“Really.”

He licked his lips. After listening to the music for a while, he asked, “You wanna get outta here?”
My stomach twittered. "Sure."

We set down our empty bottles on the ledge and made our way out of the Triangle. "Where would you like to go?" he asked once we stepped outside.

"I live in Capitol Hill. Would you like to come to my place?"

"Sounds great." His voice was eager.

I won't go into all the details, but I lost my virginity that night. I have to admit, it wasn't a great experience. Scared and nervous, my mind raced the entire time, just like it had when I kissed Chris Dalton in the mountains: What was I supposed to do? Am I doing this right? Does he like it? Do I like it? It wasn't a stellar evening; I kept thinking: So this is sex? What's the big deal? It all seemed so shallow, such a big let down. He was a nice guy and all, but I didn't enjoy it. It was too surreal, like being that Salvador Dali figure, the one whose breast is being squeezed. A disproportioned detachment.

I saw him again the following week; he showed up unexpectedly at my apartment door one night. We did the business again; I wanted to see if it would be any better. But it wasn't. He seemed to have a grand time, but my mind continued to race: What the hell was I doing?

My friends were all happy for me that I had finally lost my virginity, and I put on an act that I was glad to have finally lost it. But I lied. Those sexual encounters had left a bad taste in my mouth; they were awkward moments of fumbling with a stranger. Sex hadn't been liberating for me at all.

I didn't get together with the mailman a third time. He called me, but I kept putting him off. Years later, after I had left the gay life and returned to Denver from Connecticut, I saw him walking down Seventeenth Street. I recognized him right away, a little heavier, a little less hair. We walked by one another and I held my breath for a few seconds, wondering if he'd recognize me. But he didn't.
By late Spring of 1987, my life seemed to be in limbo. I had quit my job at Gussini Shoes in April. After the encounter with the woman who called me a faggot, I had no enthusiasm to take two busses to a suburban landscape peopled with such cruelty. Although I continued to wear a nightclub diva persona, the bar scene began to weary me. For all my bravado and banter and style, I felt as isolated as a figure in an Edward Hopper painting. My journal entries lamented my shallow existence. I wanted more. I partied and had a grand time, but I was not happy. Something was missing. I didn’t know what I wanted. Love? A better job? A quieter life? I had the music and the dance, but now I ran from the mirror. I could not face my hollowness. The woman in the store, the litany of boozy nights, the smoke-stale apartment, all those frozen pizza suppers alone, they all took a toll. I felt I was going nowhere.

I decided to escape. I arranged to move in with another ex-seminarian friend who lived in Stockton, California. I told myself that I needed another new beginning. Maybe I’d be able to find some missing pieces in California. Little did I know that I was entering my Inferno.
Dying is an art

The dead shall not praise the Lord,
nor those who go down into the silence.

Psalm 115

From the summer of 1987 to the end of summer 1988, I lived my dark night of the soul. Indeed, this is the most painful chapter of my life. I should have known it would be a bad year right from the beginning. I didn’t have much money to get to the Golden State, so I took a Greyhound bus. Our last stop before Sacramento was Reno. Since we had an hour layover, I went searching for a liquor store. Buying one of those drinks that come in cans, I went to a park by the bus station and smoked a joint. It was broad daylight. I sat on a bench in a downtown park, drinking a canned Long Island Iced Tea, smoking a doobie. When I got back on the bus, I felt fine. The Sierra Nevada vistas played before my window like a movie, but I was wholly detached from the natural beauty around me. When my friend David picked me up in Sacramento, I grinned like a fool. I threw my two suitcases into his trunk and then we headed for Stockton.

The Big Valley was an enigma to me. A landscape of flat fields, water channels and Gallo vineyards, on the surface it’s a peaceful place of warm hazy days and starry nights. Because of its proximity to San Francisco, it is home to commuters who cannot afford the staggering mortgages in the Bay Area. But it is east of Eden. Per capita, Stockton has one of the highest crime rates in the state. There are Mexican gangs and Vietnamese gangs and loads of drugs. I would find the Valley’s dark sides.

David and his twin brother lived in the house that once belonged to one of their grandmothers, a small bungalow-type house with two bedrooms. I slept on a hide-a-bed in
the dining room. David and Paul spent a lot of their energies on their perfectly coifed back yard; velvet-green grass ringed with shrubs and flowers and marijuana plants. They were kind enough to take me in with the plan that I would save up enough money to get my own place. With my previous experience, I soon landed a job selling shoes at J.C. Penney.

All was kosher for a while. I sold shoes and then came home at night. The three of us would sit in the back yard getting stoned, talking for hours. Being native to Stockton, the twins had a vast array of friends who frequently stopped by. Oftentimes we went to a nightclub on the outskirts of town. They were gracious hosts, opening their home to me and letting me come and go as I worked and made friends.

One weekend David and his brother went on a camping trip with their family. I sat home alone on the Friday night. I decided to get stoned. I picked some pot, dried it in the oven, and then found an empty Diet Pepsi can. Crushing the can in the middle and then poking some holes in the crevice, I put the crumpled pieces on top of the holes, lit up, and inhaled through the hole on the lid. It did the trick. Drinking I don’t know how many beers, I began to feel really good. Not wanting to waste my high, I decided to make a stab at finding my way to the bar on the edge of town. David said that any time I wanted to ride one of their mopeds, I was welcome to do so. I had never driven one, but on this night, it didn’t seem like it would be a big deal. If I could get it started, I figured, everything else would fall in place.

Donning a pair of jeans and a black jacket, my Triangle outfit, I hopped on the moped and gave it a try. It started easily. I moved onto the street and found that although I was a little shaky and jerky, I could drive it. At first I confined my ride to the neighborhood. I putt-putted on winding residential streets. Elm and maple trees canopied my jaunt and through large bay windows, I could catch fleeting glimpses of people watching TV in their stately Victorian homes. The wind rustled my chest hair, I admired my black boots on the pedals,
and I thought I had it going on! It was all so exhilarating! I drove around for a while, trying to get my bearings. The streets twisted and all the houses began to look the same. I eventually realized that I didn’t know how to get to the bar, and I wasn’t doing too well on making turns. I wobbled a bit. I decided to return home. After some time, I found my way out of the residential maze and onto a main thoroughfare I recognized.

Stopped at a red light at an intersection, I prepared to make a U-turn. When the light turned green, I thrust the throttle or whatever it’s called, made the turn, but went too wide. I smashed into the sidewalk curb. I flew over the front of the moped and fell onto the concrete. I blacked out. When I came to, people stood over me saying, “Don’t move, the ambulance is on the way.” I looked at the corona of faces, felt something sticky seeping from my lip and mouth and cried out, “Why are all of you staring at me?”

Rushed to the hospital, I was given stitches on my upper lip and handcuffed to the bed because of my beer breath. A police officer stood by my side the entire time, waiting to arrest me. The cuts on my face and arms were slathered with Vaseline-like gunk that burned. When I asked for a mirror, I grimaced at the sight: my face was puffed purple and blue and parts of my two top front teeth were missing. Those two teeth were jagged and pointy, like fangs. Not a pretty picture. After an hour or so, the physicians released me to the officer.

Read my rights, put into the back seat of a patrol car, I was carted off to jail, my hands cuffed behind me. It was more surreal than sex. All I could think about was how I had left the lights on in the house. And for some unknown reason, I hadn’t locked the doors.

I do not know what the Stockton jail looks like from the street, as it was night when I entered. Ushered into a room where a heavy metal door clanked behind me, light came from naked bulbs hanging from the ceiling. At the counter at the end of the room, an assisting guard fingerprinted me; the cold ink made me wince. After being given a tissue to wipe my hands, I was situated before a camera. Standing on a black line and against a wall, I posed
front and center, side to side. Feeling the tingling of my oozing cuts, I did not want to imagine the horror of my mug shots. I handed in my watch, wallet, and rings; I was given an orange top and pants ensemble and some flip flops. I changed under the watchful eyes of a guard.

After my booking, several officers looked at me and shook their heads. “We can’t put him in a regular cell,” one of them said, “he’ll never last.” They nodded knowingly; I supposed they could see that I couldn’t stop trembling. “Are you gay?” someone asked. I nodded. They assigned me to a cell and gave me an escort. Led through a door which clanged behind me, I followed the guard down the row of cells. We were on the second tier on the left side, a communal area lay below us, with more cells to the right. I felt like I was living in a movie, only I was walking in it. I could hear yelling and screaming. Someone shouted, “Jesus, what the fuck happened to him?” I didn’t look at anything but the guard’s neck bulging above his blue shirt.

I was motioned into a dark cell at the end of the block. The drag queen cell. The pink palace. The copa cabana. The guard pointed to an empty cot and the queens peered at me from behind their military-thin blankets; the ching of keys and the opening of the bars had awakened them. When the officer left with an echoing clank, my new roommates bounced off their cots to greet me. There was Victoria, a short, thin Mexican-American, and Edwina and Kenya, two soft-spoken African-Americans. They looked at me wide-eyed; perhaps they had never seen the likes of a bruised mess like me. And I had never seen the likes of them. Kenya wore his shirt as a halter top, baring navel and chest. Edwina wore his boxers bunched up as short shorts. They all had three day old stubble and ratty hair.

After explaining my scratched face to the threesome, I settled onto my cot, hiding under the blanket. It took forever to get to sleep; my thoughts plagued me. I was a respectable shoe salesman, and here I sat in jail. Young and bright with the world in front of
me, I couldn’t believe that I lay in a jail cell. I was an ex-seminarian, yet I shivered behind bars. The shame scarred me more than the blotches on my scabbing face. I had never known such hopelessness. What would my parents think? I couldn’t fathom the thoughts. And like the man in the temple, I kept repeating, “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Sleep came on a wet pillow.

Morning broke with the breakfast call. There were no windows in our cell; hours were approximated according to meal times. Two guards wheeled a cart and shoved trays through a vertical opening in the bars. I was given a small box of Corn Flakes, some juice and milk, and a soggy-looking fruit I gave to Victoria. As my flakes became limp, I took stock of my surroundings.

The cell consisted of two sets of bunk bed-type cots along two of the three concrete walls. Only a few feet divided the cots. Iron bars flanked the only opening to the row. At the end of the cots, along the bars, was a sink on one side and a toilet on the other. The porcelain was stained beige in both. Privacy didn’t seem to be an issue.

My new confères, gracious as church greeters, fawned over me. Victoria had some mentholated tobacco and rolling papers and shared them with me. I couldn’t roll well, so he did it for me. The cigarette was awful; with no filter, it burned my throat. It was way too strong, but it offered some comfort. An inmate next door, just a voice and a forearm, would pass his shirts and underwear through the bars to Kenya, who would lovingly wash them in our sink. Victoria loaned me some tawdry action novel to read. In between reading and meals, we chatted. I learned all about my fellow inmates, of their escapades of drugs and prostitution in downtown Stockton. “Honey, I hang out in the parks,” Victoria told me as we smoked, “not like Miss Kenya and Miss Edwina who walk the streets. I sits on a bench and watch them married
white mens circle roun’ an’ roun’ in them BMWs. When one parks for a while, I goes over and say hello. The rest is her-story!” She hacked with a puff and laughed. “And chile, not only do I like the BMW cars,” Victoria continued, “I like the BMW mens: Big Mexican Weenie!” She screamed with glee. I nodded knowingly. I did more listening that weekend than I can ever remember. Tales of johns and coke and dresses and makeup tumbled from their lips quicker than the calls and shouts from inmates along the row. There is no silence in a county jail.

The worst part about the weekend was taking a shower on Sunday morning. When it was time for the queens to shower down, guards locked all the other inmates into their cells. The cat calls started before we were led out onto the balcony. As we awaited the guard to unlock our cell, Victoria pulled me aside.

“Don’t look at the cells.”

“Why not?”

“Honey, this is the thousand gun salute. You might not wanna look.”

I must have seemed puzzled.

“You’ve heard of the twenty-one gun salute? Girl, this is bigger and better. Them mens will be shovin’ theys bizness out to you.”

A shudder went through me.

“Chile, we be walkin’ along, and all them dicks will be stickin’ outta the bars! Whew! But don’t you pay them no mind. You just keep on walkin’ and stay close to Miss Kenya and me. Don’t get too close to the bars.”

I never did see the thousand gun salute. I could not peel my eyes from Kenya’s back as he waved to the throng like Miss America. My three cell mates relished the hoots and hollers and sashayed like super models in front of the cells, making comments like “Mr. Man, you’re lookin’ good!” or “Honey, put that small thing away!” But I could not feel
jovial. With my scabby face and all the shouting around me, I was scared to death. I bit my lower lip to hold back the torrent that threatened to come crashing from my eyes. I was in hell.

I will always be grateful for Victoria, Edwina, and Kenya. They were my Virgils. Their kindness and support guided me through the worst few days of my life. Who would ever have thought that such a grace would come through drag queen prisoners.

When David picked me up on Monday morning, I couldn’t quit the jail fast enough. Blinking in the blinding sun, I never looked back. To this day I do not know what the Stockton jail looks like from the outside. All I know is that the lights are shadeless on the inside.

Perhaps one day I may be a Beatrice for Victoria, Edwina, and Kenya.

After my jailbird song and dance routine, I had pretty much worn out my welcome with David and his brother. July turned into August and I did not have enough cash to get my own place. Commission shoe selling wasn’t all that lucrative in Stockton; what I did make I spent on cigarettes and going to the bar. I had nowhere to go.

A seminarian friend from Manteca, several miles south of Stockton, suggested that I return to the seminary. I had fleetingly entertained the notion of returning to religious life during the two years since I left priesthood studies, but those were usually instances of drunken sentimentality. Or loneliness. When I had left Conception, it was with the idea that I was “taking some time off” from my vocation discernment. At least that’s what I had told myself. I had wanted to explore the gay lifestyle, with the vague idea that it might be temporary. While my actions of drinking and partying said otherwise, I still recognized that calling buried deep within me. Pointing out that I had no money, no apartment, and a
mediocre job, it didn’t take long for my friend to convince me that I could once again make a
go of it in the seminary. Feeling trapped with nowhere else to go, I allowed myself to give in
to my friend’s whim. Perhaps it could work. I became like a puppet, allowing him to make
the arrangements with the vocation director in Stockton. Upon my friend’s recommendation,
I was ushered through the interviews and paperwork process in a matter of two weeks,
finding myself studying for the Diocese of Stockton. By the middle of August I was back at
St. Joseph’s in Los Altos, a seminarian once again.

That first semester I did put forth an honest effort. I was faithful about attending
prayers and my Philosophy classes and made a stab at fostering my spiritual life. As the
semester waned, however, I realized that I had returned to religious life for the wrong
reasons. I had come back because I didn’t know where else to go. I still wanted to go out
dancing and partying. My enthusiasm for studies dwindled after the first month and a half.
Philosophy was beyond me; I preferred English, but was a Philosophy major because of my
previous credits. When I had transferred from St. Joseph’s to Conception back in 1984,
Conception didn’t offer an English degree, so I had switched to Philosophy. Kant, Plato’s
cave, and Harold Bloom just didn’t do anything for me. I got by solely on my ability to write
good papers.

Why didn’t I just leave? I felt obligated to the Diocese of Stockton, which had
invested in me. I didn’t know what else I would do. Sell women’s shoes? Where? I didn’t
want to return to Colorado because my family was so happy that I had finally found
something constructive to do again; they were pleased to see me in the seminary. They were
glad that I had turned from my decadent ways. I couldn’t go home.

Several weeks into the second semester, I knew that I was not in the right place. I
yawned my way through Nietzsche and Descartes and sometimes missed prayers. I went
through the motions of religious discernment, but I found myself giving lip service to my
spiritual director: “I’m doing all right. I have good days and bad days.” I read novels and
smoked cigarettes and drank Carlo Rossi wine at night.

The only bright spot in that semester was my Humanities Seminar. Entitled “Myth
and the Underworld,” it was my kind of class. We read Homer and Dante and Jung. We were
graded on two projects to be presented to the class, a report on someone’s view of the
Underworld, and our own view of the Underworld. For a theatrically-inclined person like me,
it was manna from heaven.

Some of the seminarians chose to report on myths which reflected their cultures; an
Hispanic explored Mayan myths and a Vietnamese presented a study of Southeast Asian
myths. I chose Sylvia Plath. Donning a black turtleneck and a jacket, I stood in a darkened
classroom, the only light being a spotlight on me. I did a dramatic reading of “Lady Lazarus”
and the suicide-attempt excerpts from The Bell Jar. Plath’s fascination with suicide seemed
like a postmodern underworld experience; her comic despair chilled me. Not drawn to
suicide myself, I could relate to Plath’s feelings of being trapped, of having nowhere else to
go. I did Sylvia justice.

When it came time for our final projects, some students created elaborate haunted
house-like journeys that we had to walk through. One did a slide show of being a Vietnamese
boat refugee. I chose to be a drug addicted, drag queen prostitute.

Borrowing makeup from his sister, my Manteca friend made me up. With Lancome-
esque artistry, he transformed me into a pretty good looking drag queen. I didn’t wear a
dress, but a flowing pants and top outfit with a billowing silk-like jacket. And a dirty brown
wig. I looked like a younger, shorter version of Bea Arthur on The Golden Girls. The
community room was transformed into my theater, the institutionalized comfort chairs facing
a plaid couch and a coffee table. I entered from a side door, sitting on the couch before them.
I welcomed them to my apartment, they being guests waiting for my roommate Miss Racine. I was there to entertain them with friendly banter as they waited.

I don’t recall all I said, I hadn’t written a script. It was all improv. I brought out a sandwich baggie of flour and made cocaine lines on the coffee table as I talked and snorted. I used the experiences of the drag queens I had met; those in Denver who used credit card fraud to buy their sequined dresses, those who had gotten beat up by johns when penises were discovered in their panties, and I talked about walking the streets and landing in jail. I took all their late night pains and sufferings and rolled them into one. I sat on the couch carrying on like the last drag queen, hands twittering as I snorted lines. When I took my bow, the enthusiastic applause surprised me. One of the priests who team taught the course rushed up to me and gushed, “If you don’t become a priest, you must be an actor!” For some reason, the Vietnamese seminarians clamored around me, enamored. They wouldn’t leave my side. I guess I was a hit.

Putting all my energies into my Humanities seminar, I let the other classes slide. I had been accepted to graduate theological studies at Menlo Park, just up the road, with the stipulation that I would take Economics and Spanish in the summer to complete my course requirements. I was allowed to walk through graduation, capped and gowned, with diploma pending. I went through the exercises, but I hadn’t even finished writing the papers for my Philosophy and Theology classes. I was granted permission to stay at St. Joseph’s for two weeks after graduation to finish my assignments. Instead, I took day trips to San Francisco with my friend Randy from Denver, who had come out for the graduation. After he left, I spent my days laying out in the sun on the fourth floor patio. One day some friends and I went horseback riding along Half Moon Bay. I had no money, no car to take summer classes, so I knew that I wouldn’t be getting my degree. Why should I waste time writing papers?
I walked away from it all. When I left St. Joseph’s, I had an A in my Humanities seminar and F’s in everything else. A former Dean’s list student, I flunked out, packed my bags, and hit the high road. I didn’t want to attend graduate seminary, I didn’t want to study. I didn’t know what I wanted. I moved in with my friend in Manteca, getting a job as a clerk at a 7-11. Graveyard shift. From seminary to 7-11: such is the life of a grotesque.

That summer of 1988 in Manteca mirrored the previous summer in Stockton: a walk on the dark side. When not working at 7-11, I spent money at a club in Modesto. The friend I lived with had graduated from St. Joseph’s but he decided not to pursue his religious vocation. So we partied and started doing crank. Not crack, but crank. I still don’t know exactly what crank is, but it was a white powder like cocaine, only the high lasted for hours and hours. It was similar to Ecstasy, without the desire to touch. When I buzzed on crank, I thought the most wonderful, amazing thoughts, but they came and went too quickly to ponder them. It was at this time that I also dyed my hair. I wanted to lighten it, but when my friend finished applying the L’Oreal, my hair turned out yellow. I decided to darken it. He told me to buy black coloring. We sat in the kitchen one night drinking and getting stoned, and when he was through, my hair was pitch black. I wore black and my hair was black and I was strung out a good deal of the time during that summer.

Everything came to a head after an incident at work. One night at the 7-11, three beefy high school-aged guys came into the store. They wore baseball caps and shorts and T-shirts, wandering aimlessly down the aisles before deciding to buy some bar-b-que potato chips. As they walked around the store, they would look in my direction from time to time and nod their heads. They stood at the counter and regarded me with narrow eyes. When I returned their change, one of them sneered, “What time do you get off work, faggot? We’re gonna kick your ass.” I shut the register drawer and said nothing. My face became
embarrassed hot. “Did you hear me, fairy?” he shouted. “We’re gonna sit out there and wait till you get off work. Your ass is ours.” They laughed and punched one another as they left the store. Through the windows, which advertised Slurpees! and Corndogs!, I watched them get into a car. They sat in the parking lot. Customers came and went, but the guys remained in their car, eating potato chips. I mopped the floors and cleaned the nacho cheese containers. They never took their eyes off me. One of them came in and bought three Pepsis. “We’re waiting’!” he grinned as I put them into a plastic bag. They sat in that car, feet propped through the rolled-down windows, yelling “Faggot!” from time to time.

I had never known such terror as I did that night. While jail had been frightening, I had been safe with the drag queens. But these young toughs were another matter. I didn’t want to call the police because I had snorted two lines of crank before coming to work. I was a jittery mess, and I knew the police would notice my dilated pupils. The hours slinked on the clock: 1:00 a.m., 2, 3, 4, 5:00. The young thugs stayed in the parking lot, waiting for me to get off work. Waiting to kick my ass. Having never been in a physical fight, the threatened violence petrified me.

As the sky became grey and less sparkly with pre-dawn, the boys remained in their car. Shadows faded to amber. I checked in the milk delivery. Mexican field hands came in to load up on coffee and donuts. Bleary-eyed party dudes bought packs of Camels. My 7-11 logo’d smock stuck to my back and my lungs screamed for a cigarette. I didn’t dare step out the door for a smoke. I was scared to death that they would actually wait until I got off work at 7:00. I scurried around the store like a laboratory rat. As the sky brightened and the sun burst forth with a new day, my stomach churned with dread.

They finally left at 6:45. I almost cried with relief as they screeched out of the parking lot. They raised their fists at me, and I could hear one yell, “We’ll get you. Just you wait.” By the time the woman on the day shift arrived, I was a crank coming down, sweaty
basket case. I practically ran all the way to my friend’s house, constantly looking over my shoulders. And praying. Although it wasn’t jail, my night had been a prison of fear and crank. And a hatred I could not comprehend.

Appalled at my misery, I couldn’t believe that I had allowed myself to sink so low, that I had placed myself in such a frightening landscape. It was as if I had become that drowning woman in the Lichtenstein painting who says, “I don’t care! I’d rather sink—than call Brad for help!” I finally realized that I needed help. A day or so later, I called my aunt in Sacramento and asked her to pick me up. I was through. The drugs and scraping by on pennies and the constant drinking had taken their toll. I had had enough with East of Eden to last me a lifetime. The threat of violence finally broke the monkey off my back. I wanted to go home. My aunt rescued me and my father agreed to pay for a plane ticket to Denver. They knew nothing about the drugs or jail or flunking out of seminary. How could I possibly tell them? They accepted an abridged version of my story: I had made a mistake in returning to the seminary; priesthood wasn’t for me. Since I had been working at a 7-11 and going nowhere with my life, it would be better to come home to a fresh start. All they knew was that I had had a rough year; they didn’t ask too many questions. I think sometimes people don’t ask certain questions when they have an intuition that they won’t like to hear the answers. They were supportive.

In a phone call, I had warned my family that I had black hair. I wasn’t prepared for their shock: when I walked off the plane at Stapleton Airport, my father, sister, and brother stared at me wide-eyed and with opened mouths. Dressed from head to foot in black, my hair Aqua Netted straight up, I stood at the gate with a nervous grin and a gold stud in my left ear. No one said anything to me. After a few seconds and a sheepish “hello” from me, my sister finally hugged me. “Oh my God, Tim! You look like a punk rock star!” That broke the ice,
and my father and brother followed suit with the hugs. Their reticence didn’t bother me too much; I was so relieved to be home.

The next day I went to a salon in Wellington and had the stylist wash the black from my hair. With the various hair colorings and cheap hair spray and teasing, I was surprised it didn’t all fall out. But my hair didn’t return to my natural light brown. It came out a dusty, purgatory red. As the dye swirled down the drain, some of the California horror began to ebb. I had made it out. I was home. Like Lady Lazarus, I rose from the ashes with my red hair. To eat shame like air.
When I returned to Wellington, just my sister, brother, and I lived in the house. My father stayed with his girlfriend, Connie, in Windsor. Several months later, he married her. Mom had remarried in 1986, to a man named Alan. I had never been around the lanky Texan much, but after two years, they separated. My mother now lived on the other side of Wellington. Two weeks after my homecoming, Mom asked Kim and me to bring her one of the suitcases from the basement. She said she planned on going away for the weekend. We gave her the suitcase and several days later our grandmother called. “Did you know that your mother moved to Texas to be with Alan?” she asked my sister. We were dumbfounded. Alan had abused my mother, so she had left him a year earlier. My family and I had rejoiced when Mom and Alan separated and he moved back to Texas. And then, without a word to us, Mom had left Wellington to be with a man who once threatened to kill her. As our parents lived their separate lives, Kim, Brian, and I drew closer together. We had to rely on each other for family.

I got a job at Johnson Publishing, a subsidiary of the phone company that published city directories. My sister was a librarian for the company, and I quickly worked up to a lower-lower management position. In other words, I didn’t have to try to sell directories over the phone. My best friend from high school, ReNae, also worked there. The meager wage
didn’t wow me, but it was a job, and I enjoyed the communal bond among the office workers.

Some time after the first of the year, my father sat my siblings and me in our living room for a chat. He had come up to Wellington after work to pick up his mail.

“You guys, you’ve been living here rent free, and I haven’t had a problem with that, but I think it’s time to move out. I’m gonna put the house up for sale. I’ll give you until May.”

We were shocked. My brother Brian didn’t even have a job. He had been diagnosed with epilepsy when he was a teenager, and due to his heavy medication, he had never held a job for very long. Twenty-two years old and jobless, he kept up the house. He watered and mowed the lawns, planted flowers, vacuumed and cleaned the house, and often made supper. The three of us got along well and our lives were finally running smoothly. We had finally regained some semblance of family life. When Dad told us that we had to move, we were hurt.

One Saturday in March, Kim, Brian, and I sat in the living room trying to figure out what we would do. Apartments in Fort Collins were expensive, and we hadn’t started saving any money yet.

“What about moving back to Connecticut?” Kim threw out.

“Connecticut?” I asked, disbelieving.

“Yeah. Why not?” The idea forming in Kim’s head excited her. “Johnson Publishing has an office in Cheshire. You and I could transfer there, Tim, so we’d already have jobs lined up. All we’d have to do is save money for the apartment!”

It was an intriguing idea.
“Hell, we’re still young,” Kim asserted. “We were kids when we moved out to Colorado, why not move to the East for a few years? It’s not like we have to stay there for the rest of our lives. And besides. We’d be getting out of the house, just as Dad wants.”

We set about putting our plans into motion. Kim and I went through the paperwork of transferring to the Connecticut office. In a New Haven phone book, we found an apartment building and sent away for information. Liking the floor plans, and calling our cousins back East to drive by the building to check it out, we settled on a place to live. Kim and I worked and saved money, while Brian stayed at home packing, carefully labeling and numbering each box. We were a great team.

My father wasn’t thrilled at the idea of having his three kids move two thousand miles away, but he was supportive. He allowed us to stay in the house until the end of July. I think he admired our sense of adventure; it was similar to his desire to move from New England to the Rocky Mountains. When unforeseen moving expenses threatened our plans, Dad loaned us money. Helping us load a rental truck and my sister’s Honda Civic, my father snapped pictures as we made our departure. After we left Wellington, Dad raced on frontage roads to an overpass several miles north of town. He had hung a large sign which read, “Good Luck Tim, Kim, and Brian,” and stood above it, waving. It was a bittersweet moment as we drove below him.

When we arrived at the Hamden Apartments several days later, some cousins had placed a “Welcome to Connecticut” sign on our new refrigerator. We had decided to move to Hamden, a suburb of New Haven. Our relatives had warned us that the Elm City was crime-ridden, so we opted for the suburbs. Actually, the apartment building was on the New Haven-Hamden line, just up the street from Southern Connecticut State University. The building looked like General Hospital, surrounded by two cemeteries, a gravel pit, and West Rock
Bluff. Our unit was on the sixth floor, overlooking the gravel pit. The place wasn’t too big; a kitchenette next to the front door, a decent sized living/dining space, and a bedroom on either side of the living room. Brian and I shared a bedroom. The walls were shiny white, and we were excited to finally live in air conditioning. Kitty-Kitty seemed to like it, too. She sat on the window sills, gazing at birds.

It took only a few days before Kim and I realized that we didn’t want to work at Johnson Directory’s Cheshire office. The only position they offered Kim was phone sales, which she hadn’t done for several years. I was offered a management job, but during the evening hours. I called in sick after my first week, and went looking for a job in New Haven. With my heavy retail experience, I headed right for Macy’s. In a matter of days I was hired to sell women’s shoes. Kim eventually got a job as a receptionist at a car dealership in Milford. And my brother, who hadn’t been able to hold down a steady job, got hired on in the warehouse at the Sears in Hamden.

But after several months, our threesome started to lose some of the cohesiveness we had fostered in Wellington. I began my forays to happy hour every night as I started to make friends. Kim met a Jewish guy at the dealership, and they started dating. Many evenings, Brian was left home alone with Kitty-Kitty. Not as gregarious as Kim or I, he didn’t make many friends. While my sister and I mirrored our parents, going off and doing our own things, Brian must have been lonely. He stayed in Connecticut for two years before moving back to Colorado.

When I had interviewed for the job at Macy’s, I didn’t want to work in the shoe department. I wanted to work at the Fragrance counter. I supposed it would be unrealistic trying to sell colognes and perfumes; I’ve never had a sense of smell. But I liked how fragrance and cosmetics salespersons carried themselves; they always seemed to have a
cosmopolitan, “I look fabulous,” look. But with my prior experience, I was a shoe-in for women’s shoes. Besides cosmetics, it was the only commission department in the store. I would get a 9.5% commission on all shoes I sold.

Macy’s New Haven opened in 1963, so its design was functional rather than the brick and wood charm of older downtown department stores. The interior, a supreme model for minimalism, had bland tile walkways, light mocha carpeting threadbare and dirty, a high ceiling of fluorescent lights, and white walls. The north entrance was across the street from the Chapel Square Mall, a scary place in the afternoons when baggy-jeaned teens swarmed and the police had to break up fight after fight. The south doors were across the street from Malley’s, a department store that had gone out of business. Its windows and doors were boarded up and scrawled with graffiti. The bulk of Macy’s business occurred during the lunch rush. From 11:30 until 1:30, men in jackets and ties and women in dresses, skirts, or pants suits, streamed into the store. After 5:30, most people flooded out of downtown. Although Macy’s New Haven wasn’t attractive, it had a downtown feel. Customers were regulars.

Women’s Shoes, next to the south entrance on George Street, was filled with light mocha carpeted cubes. Display pumps, flats, sandals, or boots topped these cubes. Along the walls, glass shelves housed more shoes, and depending on the time of year, sale shoes crammed the racks and littered the floor. I quickly learned that to be a women’s shoe salesperson was to constantly pick up after women. When there were no customers, time was spent rearranging displays and picking up shoe boxes and white tissue paper.

My co-workers were young and artistically inclined. Richard had studied the flute at the Peabody Institute, but he really wanted to become a pop or rap star. Aileen was an artist; she designed colorful Afro-centric T-shirts. For a while Allison Downey, Robert Downey Jr.’s sister, worked in our department. She and her mother lived in New Haven, and Allison
claim to be a writer and involved the film industry. Bob was a professional organist; he had a large organ room in his house. And then there was Jan. I don’t think she had any artistic aspirations, but she was THE party girl and a slave to fashion. She always looked fabulous. None of us wanted to sling shoes forever, but the money was good.

Selling women’s shoes is an adventure in a non-Al Bundy way. Women clamor for new shoes, no matter how many pairs are stacked in their closets at home. After gathering a base clientele, I would hold styles for certain customers I was sure they’d like. I quickly learned how to balance boxes on my arms as I came out of the stock room and passed out shoes to a variety of customers. On big sale days, we could average $25.00 an hour.

Of course, a handful of customers were a challenge. Some we strove to ignore. Carmella was one of those. None of my co-workers could handle her, but I seemed to have been graced with a certain degree of patience.

“Tim, I’m looking for a pump,” Carmella would proclaim when she came into the department. She was a short Italian spinster with a bouffant, her lips perpetually lipsticked a bright cherry red.

“What kind, Carmella?”

“Well, Tim. I have a navy suit, so I’m looking for something smart. I need a smart pump.” She had a nasally voice and tended to accentuate her p’s. My co-workers scattered every time they saw her. “I need a low heel, Tim. Only an inch high at most. Do you have any Naturalizer pumps?”

I led her over to our display and picked out a shoe. “How’s this?”

“Well you see, Tim, that’s nice, but I was looking for something a little more smart.” Her t was a tuh. “I need a Naturalizer because they’re so soft. I can’t wear most shoes, Tim, because of my corns and bunions.”

I nodded and picked up a navy and white spectator.
“Now Tim, that is a smart pump. I could wear that with my navy suit, and I could wear it with some other outfits. See, Tim. I’m going to a luncheon with the Daughters of Isabella next week, but then I have a niece’s wedding next month. Something like this could work for both occasions. Do you have a size six and a half?”

I returned with her shoe, and stood by her side for over half and hour. When Carmella visited the store, I didn’t wait on other customers. Cramming her feet into the shoes, she stood before the mirror, holding up her polyester pant legs.

“Oh, Tim. This is a splendid shoe. Do you see how smart it is? And so soft. I need that for my corns, you know. And bunions. Do you mind if I walk around the department?”

Carmella pranced and stood before the mirror, she took them off, put them on, studied their soles and insides, and finally placed them in the box.

“Tim, they’re exactly what I’m looking for. Low-heeled and lovely. I can wear them with many of my things. How much are they?”

“$29.99.”

“My goodness, Tim. Naturalizer pumps are getting so expensive. I’m on Social Security, you know. Will they be going on sale?”

“I’m not sure,” I said, eyeing a blond businessman walking past the department, “but we’re having a store-wide sale this weekend. If you like, I could hold them for you and give you a call if they get marked down.”

“Oh, Tim, that would be splendid.”

Several days later I gave her a call.

“Carmella? This is Tim from Macy’s. Your shoes will be going on sale tomorrow. They’ll be $19.99.”
“Tim, that’s lovely. I still think that’s a bit high for a Naturalizer pump, but I’ll have to make do. I don’t have time to be picky. I’ll stop by tomorrow. And I’ll try them on again, just to be sure. You thought they looked all right, didn’t you, Tim?”

“Yes, Carmella. They looked very smart.”

Such is the life of a shoe salesperson.

When I wasn’t running around the shoe department, I went out to the Pub. Located on York Street across from the Yale Repertory Theatre, the Pub was in a basement of a brownstone. A long, narrow room with brick walls, it had a Greenwich Village feel. A restaurant was off to one side, and at the back, a door led to a patio. When crowded during Happy Hour, and later at night, there was only a small path between the bar and guys poised along the wall. The place had a cellar-like darkness, a smoky murk where the music was a jukeboxed background during the day and a vibrating dance music at night. Mirrors lined the wall directly behind the dark wood, etched bar, so important in a gay establishment where looks can be everything.

The Pub had a neighborhood bar charm; everyone knew everyone else. Never silent, laughter and conversation traveled on the smoke and music. But what I liked best was the patio. The rear door opened to a concrete patio, enclosed by brownstones and high wooden walls. A lone tree stood in the center, home to birds and scampering squirrels. I spent countless warm weathered afternoons on that patio, sitting at a table with a limed Corona, writing in my journals, writing poetry. The patio became my urban sanctuary; a dash of green and respite where traffic noises were close, but not too close. Basking in the sun, the rumblings of the city and the chattering birds; it was my place to be alone. And it was at the Pub that I made most of my friends.
Miguel had moved to New Haven about the same time I did. From San Juan, Puerto Rico, he was a librarian at the city library. We became fast friends; meeting at the Pub, going dancing on weekends at the Copa Cabana, and weekly suppers at a Chinese restaurant a few doors down from the Pub. We both enjoyed exploring New Haven and meeting new people. After a night of dancing, we would sometimes sit on a bench on the Green. As the city quieted down, we savored the rustling elm trees, lit office buildings, and the darkened churches along College Street. Cars lazied down Chapel Street, Yale University looking on it all in its fortressed glory. Miguel and I liked to just sit and watch the shadows, relishing the city’s New England cosmopolitan quaintness.

I also started making train trips down to New York. The first time I went down, I was a little apprehensive. When I stepped into Grand Central Station, the scramble of thousands was a bit overwhelming. I didn’t know what to do first. I decided to go to Macy’s. I knew that I could walk down Fifth Avenue, make a right at the Empire State Building, and then I’d hit Macy’s. It was a cool September day, and I was decked out in total black, proud of a new pair of shoes with a buckle on the side that I’d never worn. As I walked down 42nd Street, a homeless person yelled out, “Hey, it’s Elton John!” I felt very cosmopolitan. I turned left onto Fifth Avenue, marveling at the buildings, honking cabs, the fast-paced passersby. As I walked in front of the Library, I tripped on something and fell flat on my face. I felt like I had “hick” written all over me. A woman ran up.

“Are you all right?” she asked, helping me to my feet.

“Oh yes, thank you,” I assured, dusting myself off. “I knew I shouldn’t have tried to walk without my crutches.” I had no idea why I said that, it just came out. I chuckled to myself as I renewed my jaunt. Until I looked down at my feet. My brand spanking new shoes were scuffed. I sighed.
I loved going to New York. Working in retail afforded me days off during the week, so I’d go down to MoMa or the Metropolitan Museum of Art, hang out in the Village, have lunch at Macy’s, or go window shopping in SoHo. I was drawn to the calm streets in the Village and to the bars on Christopher Street. I relished the incessant honking traffic along Fifth Avenue and trying to find my way through the subway system. I experienced a rush of excitement when I hailed my first cab; arm outstretched as I stood on the sidewalk, announcing “Grand Central Station!” to the driver. I used to love to take the commuter train back to Connecticut; it had a bar car. Smoking wasn’t allowed on the trains, but everyone lit up in the bar car. When the conductor came through the door to punch tickets, butts were extinguished, but he had to pass through a dense fog of smoke. Once he went out the door at the other end of the car, everyone reached for a cigarette and lit up again. It was great.

My partying became more frequent as the months passed. I thought nothing of getting off work, marching over to the Men’s department, buying a new outfit, and then going out on the town. I bought shoes galore. I wore a size five and a half in men’s shoes and hardly any store carried my size. So I wore women’s shoes. Not pumps, but loafers and oxfords. I used to joke: “At Macy’s, we don’t just sell women’s shoes, we wear them!” I sported bolo ties and bright rayon shirts and black jackets. George, the night bartender at the Pub, christened me ‘Stella Stunning.’ Every time I walked in when he worked, he would yell out, “Stella, you’re stunning! Let me see your shoes!” Once again, a star was born.

And once again, I wasn’t all that happy. I enjoyed myself, but I danced the same shallow dance I had done in Denver. I spent afternoons on the Pub’s patio, savoring my aloneness and the city sounds, writing in my journals. Despite my good job and vast array of friends, I still lacked something. The word ‘more’ crept through my journals. But I still couldn’t figure out what the more was.
In July of 1991, ‘more’ suddenly came into my life. At the Pub one night, I struck up a conversation with the man sitting next to me.

“It’ll be my birthday in a few days,” he told me.

“Well happy birthday!” I cheered, “may I buy you a beer?”

“That would be very nice of you,” he laughed. He had an infectious laugh, good-natured, robust, and full of mirth. Beneath his baseball cap, I could spy black hair. He worked for a pharmaceutical company and was also a graduate student in social services. In his forties, Robert was short and stocky. Whenever I said something he agreed with, he’d invariably shake his head and say, “Mm—Mm! You better believe it!” We bantered for several hours, sparks of attraction hot between us.

“Are you seeing anyone?” he asked as the night wore on.

“No,” I smiled. “I don’t date much. I go out to clubs, but not many dates.”

“Why not?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Just haven’t met the right guy.”

We bantered for a while. He started rubbing my leg. I moved closer. Then we started kissing. His lips tasted like beer and tobacco. I couldn’t get enough.

Robert took me home that night. We sat in the parking lot of my building making out for quite some time. We exchanged numbers. Our first date a few days later led to another and then another, and then I realized that I was seriously dating someone. I think it was on the third date that I ended up at his place in West Haven. In any case, I couldn’t conceal my joy: with friends I gushed about what a terrific guy I had met. How for the first time in my life, I knew love.

“Kim, I’m seeing someone.” We were on our way to Stop ‘n Shop to pick up some groceries. After going out with Robert for a few weeks, I knew I had to tell my sister. All-nighters at Robert’s place had become more frequent.
“Oh?” she asked, keeping her eye on the road. She didn’t sound too curious.

“Yeah. I met him at the Pub. He’s a little older than me. In his forties.”

“What does he do?”

“He’s a supervisor at a pharmaceutical company. And he’s working on a Masters degree in social services.”

“Hmm.”

We stopped at a red light. “And, well. He’s black.”

Kim glanced over at me. “Wait’ll Mom and Dad find out about this!” she giggled.

“Do you think it’ll be a big deal? That he’s black?”

Kim was silent for a moment. The light turned green and we rolled forward. “No. Now that I think about it, I don’t think his being black will be an issue. They just won’t be able to get used to the idea of you seeing someone. I mean, c’mon. You’ve never really dated anyone.” We pulled into the supermarket parking lot. “I’d like to meet him.”

As the weeks passed, I spent most of my weekends at Robert’s place. When he went to church each Sunday, I stayed in his apartment, frantically cooking up a storm. By the time he got back, the table would be spread with flowers and a bottle of champagne. The dishes were heaping masses of steak and eggs, bacon and hash browns, cantaloupe and toast. When Bob cooked, we’d have a spread of chicken and ribs, macaroni and cheese, cornbread and green beans, or pork chops and rice, mashed potatoes and gravy, corn and dinner rolls, wine or champagne. Much of the relationship focused on food, preparing large dishes for one another. When Kim came over for dinner one night, she took one look at the table and said, “Oh my God! Do you guys always eat like this?”

We went to jazz concerts on the New Haven Green, attended parties, popped in at the Pub or Cavallero’s, one of Robert’s favorite haunts. As Summer fell to Autumn and Autumn slid into Winter, our relationship intensified. For Christmas, Robert gave me a typewriter. I
had been writing a lot of poetry, and I didn’t want to keep them bound in my journals. I gave him a copy of John Boswell’s *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*. I had read it several years previously. I wasn’t wholly convinced by Boswell’s thesis that Biblical prohibition of same-sex sex was solely a matter of hospitality, but I found it fascinating.

Robert and I got along famously; we rarely fought. After a few months, he started bringing up the idea of living together.

But one aspect of the relationship troubled me. Robert wanted to engage in anal sex, but I just could not bring myself to do it. We tried many times, but I could not give in. I could not cross that line. I started to feel that something was wrong with me.

In the recesses of February, something in me started to cool. If we lived together, as Robert suggested, it would require a total commitment to a particular way of life. I would no longer be Tim living with his sister, I’d be Tim living with another man. I wasn’t sure I wanted to make that leap. The dreaded word ‘more’ persisted in plaguing me. I had met a great guy who loved me, but I was uncomfortable about something. ‘Something’ is a vague word, but that’s how my feelings were, vague. Perhaps some of it had to do with sex. As I reflected, I realized that I didn’t love Robert. At the beginning of the relationship, I had thought I felt love. But now I knew that I hadn’t ever loved him. I had loved the notion of being in love. I had kept an important part of me back. Deep within my heart, I wasn’t wholly happy. I was living a lifestyle that I had tried to make my own, but as time went on, I began to feel more and more like a detached observer.

With the rolling over to Spring, I knew I had to end my relationship with Robert. But I kept running away from it. I told him that I wanted to end it, that I had met a guy at the Pub, and I was troubled because I found him extremely attractive. It was true: the guy was a New York Italian, and I have a weakness for Brooklynese. But I think I used the Italian as an excuse. At the same time, I also told Robert I had a feeling that I was supposed to be celibate.
He looked at me like I had dropped in from another planet. "You wanna be celibate, yet you’re attracted to another guy?" It didn’t make sense. Conflicting emotions swarmed in my head like a Jackson Pollock, and I couldn’t piece them together. I was as puzzled as Robert. But I knew that I had to end it.

I will always regret the pain I caused Robert. He was a gentle, caring man, and I hurt him deeply. I was sorry that I could not articulate the reasons for breaking up with him. In the Spring of 1992, I continued to run from myself. I did go on one date with the Italian guy from New York, but it was all wrong. He, too, wanted to engage in anal intercourse, but I could not. During the next year, I dated fleetingly: a Yale professor, another African-American, and a drifter. All one or two night stands. Perhaps I’m just a bit thick-headed; it took a while before I came to grips with what I truly wanted: to be celibate. And it saddens me that I greatly hurt someone before I came to that epiphany.

* * * * *

While my brother had stayed in Connecticut for two years before returning to Colorado, Kim and I had enjoyed living on the East Coast; Kim had a new boyfriend she had met at the Knights of Columbus where she worked, and I still partied with my friends and took day trips to New York. After Brian left, Kim and I moved to New Haven. We found a first floor apartment on Elm Street near the Boulevard and Whalley Avenue. It was in an older house, with two units on the ground floor, two above, and a wide porch running along the front. Kim and I instantly fell in love with the hardwood floors, the fireplace in the living room, and that extra perk, a pantry. The landlord informed us that the neighborhood was safe; a community of Orthodox Jews owned most of the houses on the block, and the turn-of-the-century brick school building on the corner served as their synagogue.

On Friday evenings, Kim, her boyfriend Paul, and I would often sit on our porch. We’d drink beers and eat pepperoni pizza from an Italian place a block away. The Jewish
families walked by on their way to synagogue, the men somber in black overcoats, black
suits, black hats, and black ties. The women wore bonnet-like hats and cotton, calf-length
dresses and sweaters. Little boys with ringlets and little girls in dresses clamored around their
parents. I don’t know if we scandalized them as we chugged beers and wolfed down pizza,
but they always smiled at us. Some of the younger children stared at us as if we were exotic.

One winter Friday evening, Kim and I were startled by a gentle rapping on our front
window.

“Excuse me,” a Jewish woman said when I opened the door. She was wrapped in a
threadbare coat. “Could you please come to our house and turn off our stove?”

Perplexed, I shot a glance at my sister. Kim sat on the chair near the door, smoke
from her cigarette wafting toward the woman. Mary Hart and John Tesh yukked it up on the
TV.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Would you come down to my house and turn off the stove?”

“Uh. OK.”

I grabbed my jacket and followed her to a house two doors down from ours. I kept
thinking, what do I know about stoves? Children and adults filled the living room, chattering
happily. They nodded and hello’d my way as I was hurried down a hall to a kitchen. The
table was filled with platters and plates of food I didn’t recognize while pots and pans
bubbled on the stove.

“Could you turn the knobs to off?” the woman asked.

“Just turn them off?”

“Yes.”

I leaned over the steam and flicked the knobs to their ‘Off’ positions.

“Thank you,” she said with a smile.
She led me to the door and I was thanked again by the chorus of voices in the living room. When I got back home, Kim awaited with baited breath.

“Well? What did she want?”

I shrugged as I sat down and lit a cigarette. “They had stuff on the stove. You know, pots of stuff cooking. I had to turn off the burners.”

Kim leaned toward me. “That’s it? That’s all they wanted?”

“Yeah.”

Kim called up her ex-boyfriend, a reformed Jew. He told us that our Jewish neighbors religiously observed the Sabbath. Having started cooking before sundown, they could not turn off the burners once the sun had set. Turning the knobs would have been considered work. Ringing the doorbell would have been considered work, hence the knock on the window.

I turned off their ovens and stoves several times each winter. Once they gave Kim and me a plate of food; we didn’t know what it was, but it was delicious. And they always offered warm “Hello’s” when we sat on the porch during the summer.

Contrary to what our landlord had told us, our neighborhood was not safe. Several months after we had moved in, we were robbed. It was on a Saturday afternoon. Kim and I had returned from an Irish festival to find our VCR gone. Our bedrooms had been ransacked. We put extra locks on the windows. On a night several weeks later, while Kim talked on the phone in her room and I hung pictures in mine, she suddenly screamed.

“Tim! Tim!”

I ran to her room. She stood against a wall, pointing toward a window, her face pasty.

“Some guy was out there looking at me!” She panted. “I was on the phone. I looked up. And I saw some guy. Just staring at me!” She was shaking and crying.
I ran from the room toward the front door, grabbed an umbrella, and dashed outside, jumping down the porch steps, scrambling on the gravel driveway alongside the house and Kim’s room. All was quiet in the shadowy night, except for my yelling: “Where are you, mother fucker? What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Of course, I never found the guy. And I don’t know what I would’ve done had I found him. I’m sure I didn’t look too threatening with an umbrella.

A month or so later, I was at home recovering from having my wisdom teeth pulled. After four lazy, drugged days of scrambled eggs, Jell-O, and Oprah, I returned to work. As I stood waiting for the bus that morning, I had a strange sensation that I hadn’t locked our apartment front door. The bus was coming down Whalley, I could see it, but the feeling persisted. I turned away from the bus and walked the block home. I grabbed the front door handle, only to find that I had, indeed, locked it. I would be late for work, but I felt better knowing that I had double checked the door.

Towards the end of my shift, the phone rang. I was standing at the register, a little bored.

“Tim?” It was Kim, and she was crying.

“Kim, what’s wrong?”

“Oh my God, Tim. We’ve been robbed again! I just got home. They took everything. The TV. The stereo. The bike. They even ate our cookies.”

“I’ll be right home.”

The police dusted for finger prints, but the robbers were never found. One of the back kitchen windows had been open, secured with a safety lock; only a child could have squeezed through the narrow opening. Drops of blood had dried on the linoleum.

New Haven is a Jekell and Hyde city. Yale University rests as a bastion of blue blood tradition in the heart of the city, a bulwark of spires and stones and courtyards. But only a
few blocks from Yale, to the northwest, west, and south, the neighborhoods are battle zones. Graffiti’d ghettoes ring the ivy league. On Dixwell Avenue, I remember praying that a bullet wouldn’t come smashing through the window whenever I was on the bus. Never had I seen so much wealth surrounded by so much poverty.

Kim and I soon grew accustomed to hearing gunshots at night. If they were close, we’d fall to the floor, wary of bullets zinging through the windows. One night we witnessed a group of young toughs stealing a car in front of our apartment. We turned off all the lights so we wouldn’t be seen as we peered through the blinds. Kim talked to the police on the phone as I gave a second by second account of the robbery in progress. The police didn’t get to our place until half an hour after the car had sped off, the boys whooping and hollering. The car was found the next day, smashed into the wall of a building in West Haven. The robbers were never found.

New Haven’s novelty soon wore off for Kim and me. We knew we’d had enough after we spent a weekend up in York Beach, Maine, where we had gone for a distant relative’s wedding reception. After we had arrived, Kim and I were chatting with our cousin Krisa in her hotel room, planning how we would spend the day. Out of the blue, several rounds of BAM! BAM! BAM! rang out below the hotel window. Kim and I dove for the floor.

“Oh my God! What are you guys doing?” Krisa leaned toward us from where she sat on the bed. She was from the suburbs. “It’s only fire crackers!”

Kim and I knew that we had to get out of New Haven. Because of our apartment lease, we would have to wait another year, but we itched to return to Colorado. New Haven had theatre and art and glorious eateries, but it was a scary place to live.

Toward the end of January, 1993, I decided to call my friend Randy in Denver. He had phoned me just before Christmas, but I hadn’t been home. Kim had been on my case for
several weeks, reminding me that I should call him back. So now, a month later, I called his number.

A woman answered. "Hello?"

"Hi! Is Randy there?"

Silence.

"Hello? Is anyone there?" I asked.

"Uh. Who is this?" Her voice sounded shaky, thin.

"This is Tim. Randy’s friend in Connecticut."

"Oh."

More silence.

I played with the phone cord. "Randy called me around Christmas, and I’m just now calling him back." Why tell her all this? I knew she was one of Randy’s sisters, but I had never met her. The silence unnerved me.

"Well," she paused, "I don’t know how to tell you this. Randy was found dead this morning."

My mouth fell open. "What?"

"He was at a bar last night and never came home. A worker found him this morning in the alley behind the bar. He had been stabbed to death." Randy’s sister started crying.

"Oh my God." I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

"Listen, I have to go. Keep Randy in your prayers."

"Of course," I said. "I’m so sorry. If there’s anything I can do, let me know."

"Thanks."

As I hung up the phone, I yelled to Kim, who was in her room, "Kim, come here, quick!"

She ran to the living room. "What’s wrong."
“Randy. He’s dead.” I bit my lip.

Kim sat on a chair. “What?”

I told her what Randy’s sister had said. We sat silently for a while, crying.

“I just can’t imagine how horrible it must have been.” I blew my nose in a hanky.

“Being stabbed to death, and then left in an alley? Poor Randy. He was so gentle. So friendly.”

That night, as I lay in bed, I thought about my friend. Not only had we been bar buddies, but I had brought him to picnics at my grandmother’s house. And he had come out to California for my graduation ceremony. Not only was I deeply saddened by his death, but I felt guilty for not calling him sooner. Why couldn’t I have picked up the phone in December?

My family in Colorado sent newspaper clippings about Randy’s death. Apparently, Randy had met some guy at a bar on Broadway, and they had left together. That was the last anyone had seen him, until the morning. Eventually, the killer was picked up in Texas and brought back to Denver, where he was found guilty for Randy’s death.

A week or so later, Kim and I were talking about the whole dreadful mess. After a lull in the conversation, Kim looked at me and said, “You know Tim, that could have been you. You’re always out late at night.”

I nodded and said nothing. She was right.

* * * * *

I liked Mark, a co-worker, because of his burly, in-your-face, Italian chutzpah. Bridgeport-area bred, black hair thick atop a meatball face, mustache bristly and gut doughy, he peppered his lexicon with “Geez” and “What da fuck?” With heavy eyelashes and a thick ass, he slopped around, a mass of raw sensuality that reminded me of Marlon Brando. Fat Marlon Brando. He electrified me.
Mark rambled in the shoe department in 1-don’t-give-a-fuck boredom. When a customer asked to see a shoe in her size, Mark would invariably sigh, roll his eyes, and trod off to the stock room. Sandwiched between shelves of shoe boxes, he’d grunt, “What da fuck? This bitch thinks she’ll fit her hoof into a size seven?” He’d return to the selling floor, plop the boxes next to the sitting customer, and gaze at the business men walking past the department towards Men’s. If the woman asked for the shoe a half size larger, he’d shake his head, saunter off to the stockroom, and grab his crotch.

It was a mystery to me why Mark was such a success at selling shoes. For some reason, his non-committal care and overt rudeness registered with the customers. I would gush compliments and fawn over a customer who would leave a semi-circle of scattered shoe boxes and tissue paper, not purchasing a thing, while Mark lumbered up to the counter to ring up a sale. Perhaps women were also drawn to his sexuality.

One February night, Mark and I bar hopped in New Britain, of all places. It was Mark’s idea, a center-of-the-state change of pace. I donned a spectacular black rayon shirt with pin-point white polka dots, Mark wore a threadbare blue oxford shirt and tan Dockers. I looked as fresh as a Long Island Sound breeze, Mark resembled a bleary-eyed drunk. I knew the night would be eventful; as we drove up I-91, Mark took a bottle of Valium out of his bomber jacket and popped a few pills.

The bars reeked of a suburban banality; Eddie Bauer-clad patrons chuckled in bunches, fingering hot wings. Candied pop music seeped from speakers while CNN flickered from ceiling-hung TVs. And these were supposed to be gay bars. We always sat at the bar, exhaling smoke toward the J-Crew bartender. I sipped bottles of Bud Light while Mark sloshed down Manhattans, he’d offer a “This place is fuckin’ lame” after each drink. I’d giggle and guffaw, my right leg crossed over the left, my black sequined foot lightly tapping the oak bar. When Mark got bored, we’d go to another bar.
Mark’s Bridgeport attitude magnified with each cocktail, his tongue jelling as the night waned. Saddled up to the bar, he’d play with his cherry, eventually biting into it, the stem a swivel stick cocked in the corner of his mouth. When a nearby barfly said anything inane, about the weather or UConn basketball, Mark would tilt his head, slit his eyes and snort, “What da fuck?” He’d grab his bulging crotch and lean inches from my Carmexed lips: “I’ll give ‘em somethin’ ta talk about!” New Britain’s wide-eyed us, I’d flutter over my cigarette and try to peel my eyes away from his crotch.

Whizzing through the Connecticut woods, the car weaved between the lines on I-91 on the return home to New Haven after hours of drinking. Mark popped Valium like Juicy Fruit, the bottle cradled between his legs, his fingers fondling the lid, his pants. I gazed at the black February, a cigarette scissored between two fingers, my free hand cleaved to the upholstered armrest. Madonna’s “Respect Yourself” blared from the speakers, the radio lights dim in the smoke. The car rocked back and forth.

I chirped like a caged bird, my cigarette tip crimson at the slightly cracked window, careful to avoid a stray ash on my rayon slacks. Mark’s eyelids drooped, his head jerking at intervals, tongue rubbing his lower lip, anxious for the next Valium. I slipped a “Maybe I should drive” into my chatter, my heels clicking to the music. It had been years since I last drove a car. After my jail stint in California, I swore off driving, relying on public transportation and the kindness of my friends. My suggestion was perfunctory; Mark’s drunken, drugged stupor frightened me. Since I felt fairly tipsy, I wasn’t insistent about taking the wheel. Prison images still haunted my memory.

Mark puckered, reached between his legs. He threw a pill into his mouth. “I’m fuckin’ fine” he slurred. The car careened. I flicked an ash out the window.

But in a few eye blinks, the car veered from the left lane, jagging across lines. I gasped a “Mark!” as we headed toward the right shoulder, gravel crunching beneath the tires.
The car scraped along a silver guardrail. Sparks streaked by my window like frenzied fireflies. The door screeched. At the impact, my cigarette ricocheted off my leg to land next to a sparkly shoe. The bottle of Valium bolted from Mark’s crotch, hitting the dash like a baby rattle. We traveled along the road’s edge for twenty-five feet, waking the Connecticut calm.

When we finally stopped, I could hear only panting and the wind. Mark offered a “Whew!” into the ringing silence. I snatched the glowing butt from the floor and speared it out the window crevice. It bounced off the guardrail, into the dark. Sweat beaded on my Shiseido’d forehead. The door creaked. My mind rilled: Thank you, God. Thank you for not letting me die. I could feel my heart.

“Fuck man! You all right?” Mark teetered his head near mine. His stubble grazed my cheek. I nodded, yanking my hand from the armrest to light another cigarette. “Fuckin’ wild!” Mark hooted, hand plunged into his shirt, rubbing chest hair, circling a nipple. I coughed up fog, my cherry tip twittered. Sliding into drive, inching forward, Mark guided the car away from the rail. I wiped the smudge from my pant leg, leaning away from the door. The scraping of door against rail gave way to the purr of crushed gravel. He turned off the car, leaving the lights on.

Mark shrugged his door open. “I’ll be back.” His husky frame tottered before the headlights, casting wavy shadows on the cold-grey freeway. I dabbed my forehead and clicked off Madonna, wiping my hand on the seat’s edge. Mark “Humped” by my window, giving a glassy eye to the car’s side. He swayed. “Only a few scratches” he garbled into my crack, lips moist between the window edge and the doorframe. I offered a smoky sigh. Thank you God replayed in my mind.

Mark turned his back to the window, resting his rump on the door. It creaked slightly. I heard the zip of a zipper, and then a steady stream of piss stretched toward the guardrail. I
leaned closer to the window. Steam rose. He arched his back, twisting his head to glance my way. He grinned and winked. I stubbed out my butt in the crowded ashtray.

Mark opened his door, lunging toward the gas pedal. He grabbed the Valium with a hearty “There you are!” He shook his head, chuckled, plopped into the seat. The car door clicked closed and echoed. He gently pressed the bottle top open, placed a pill between his closed lips, and sucked it in.

We sat for a moment, eavesdropping on the wind. A lone semi churned by, rattling the car. Mark placed his right hand on my knee. Warmth traveled up my thigh. “You OK?” He pressed tenderly, “I would never want to hurt you.” I warbled a smile, my face reddening. My heart picked up a few beats. Mark narrowed his eyes, licked his lips. He inched closer to me, his breath bloodshot. I sucked in.

“You want me,” he whispered, voice deep. “You’ve always wanted me.” His hot hand moved up my leg, squeezing. Mark opened his mouth to take mine.

I blinked hard and swung my head toward the window. “Fuck you, Mark,” I sputtered. I leaned toward the door, reaching for the Valium between his legs. He tried to grab my hand, but I was too fast. He held his crotch.

I popped open the bottle, shoved a pill into my mouth. “Fuck you!” I hissed, and then gulped.

Mark smirked, took his searing hand from my leg, started the car. I cradled the Valium between my legs and lit a cigarette, following the smoke as it drifted through the window crack. I kept my eyes on the scratchy Connecticut woods.

It was after that night with Mark, just a few weeks following Randy’s murder, that I started to take stock of my life. I had evaded death in a moped accident and while driving with a Valium-hyped friend. I had escaped from numerous threatening situations, such as the thugs at the 7-11 in California. How many times had I left a bar with a man, knowing nothing
about him except that he wanted sex? I had walked home from nightclubs in the early morning hours through some rough neighborhoods, stumbling and mumbling drunken prayers that I'd get home safely. I had to make some changes in my life.

* * * * *

In the Spring of 1993, bankrupt Macy's restructured and decided to close the New Haven Store. I had worked there for almost four years. Selling women's shoes had become a chore: I dreaded coming to work each day. Complaining customers wearied me, and I was tired of marching into the stockroom to bring out armloads of shoes that a woman probably wouldn't purchase, tired of being friendly. When it was announced that we would close, I was both relieved and saddened. Relieved to be forced to look for another job, saddened that a thirty-year institution would have to close.

When Macy's New Haven locked its doors in June, I gladly went on unemployment. I had several weeks of severance pay besides my unemployment checks, so I decided to take the summer off. I needed time to relax and sort out my life. I wanted to rest and write. I had stopped going to the bars so frequently. Instead, I sat at home writing in my journals. I went to the beach a few times. I was still trying to figure out what 'more' I wanted.

When summer finally ended, I didn't look for a job. I continued to collect unemployment. Money was tight, but I could still pay rent. That Autumn I decided to quit smoking. I could no longer afford to puff away. Little did I know that eschewing cigarettes would lead to my conversion.

I kicked my habit in a way I hadn't yet tried: I threw myself into prayer. I had tried to quit smoking on several occasions: cold turkey, gradually, I even chomped on that dreadful nicotine gum that made me dizzy. But I never got past a week. I could not handle the constant cravings. The first cigarette-less day would find me jittery, my lungs screaming for a smoke. If I made it to the second day, my lungs actually hurt. By day three, I would be a
wreck; I would not be able to think of anything save snagging a cigarette. I had to have a cigarette. I'd tell myself to not think about it, but I couldn't help it. My mind, lungs, and throat all clamored and clanged for a fix. It wasn't mere withdrawal from a habit, but something painfully physical. It was almost as if I was drowning: if I could just get one gulp of air, I'd be fine. If I could just get one cigarette, I'd be fine. In all my attempts to quit smoking, I had never gotten past a week. I could not bear the suffering.

So as I approached the idea this time, I knew I had to rely on a higher power. Left to my own devices, I would undoubtedly resume smoking. With workless days stretching before me like an ocean horizon, I began to pray, waddling into the crashing waves, my gaze lifted toward the sun. Each morning I got up and said morning prayer. Although I hadn't prayed the Divine Office, the recitation of the Psalms, in years, I had kept my prayer book. Those ancient poems were like buoys and I clung to them: *Reach down from heaven and save me: Why are you cast down my soul? Why groan within me? Hope in God, I will praise him still, my savior and my God; I cry aloud to the Lord. He answers from his holy mountain; O God, make haste to my rescue, Lord, come to my aid!* The rhythm of the Psalms gave voice to my groanings. They also directed my heart toward God. Though the swirling waters of nicotine withdrawal rose to my neck, I did not sink.

I started to pray the rosary. I must confess that I had never been a big rosary prayer previously. Many adult Catholics recall family rosaries: kneeling before a radio as the Hail Marys traveled the airwaves, fingerling beads with Mom, Dad, and siblings. But my family had never prayed the rosary together, probably because my mother was a Protestant. I had been given rosaries as a child, but never encouraged to use them. So I wiped off the dust from a pre-Vatican II missal my father had given me. At the back of the book, a “How to Pray the Rosary” section listed the mysteries, the prayers. Each mystery was accompanied with a colorful drawing: Simeon lifting the eight-day-old Jesus in the temple, his parents
looking on; a Roman guard whipping Jesus, the savior’s exposed back bloody; a dove
hovering over the Blessed Mother and the apostles, tongues of fire dancing above their heads.

When I prayed the rosary, I had to use the missal to fix in my mind the mysteries. As
I interiorly said the Our Fathers, Hail Marys, and the Doxology, I meditated on the life of
Christ and on his mother. I looked past the colorful pictures and focused on a spot in my
bedroom where a wall met the ceiling. In my mind I saw Mary visiting her cousin Elizabeth,
Jesus carrying his cross, Christ ascending into heaven. I poured my cravings for cigarettes
into the rosary, images flashing before me.

From another missal, one that I had bought at Conception Abbey, I read the Scripture
selections for that day’s mass. But I didn’t just read them. I sat with them. Let the words
linger in my head. Savored them like a hard candy. I read a sentence, then stopped.
Reflected. Like the rosary, I tried to visualize the scene. Jesus writing in the sand as
onlookers dropped stones, the adulteress left alone. Jacob wrestling with an angel. As I
contemplated, the Word became physical, concrete. Images to hold on to.

I structured my days around prayer. Morning prayer, rosary, reflection, lunch,
readings from the mass, evening prayer. When my sister came home from work, I put away
the prayer books and beads. We suppered in front of the TV, laughing at Seinfeld in
syndication, Inside Edition, and whatever Prime Time had to offer. My lungs yearned for
cigarette smoke, but I didn’t give in. Of course, it helped that Kim smoked. I came to relish
her second-hand billowing. But I stuck to my guns. And to help reduce the cravings, I
drastically decreased my consumption of alcohol. Sometimes, on a Friday night, I’d have a
beer or two with Kim and Paul, but that was it.

Before I went to sleep, I examined my conscience: How had I sinned that day? Had I
gossiped on the phone with my friend Bob? Did I over-indulge at lunch, stuffing my face
with a plate of pasta, trading in cigarettes for gluttony? After looking over my day, I sat in
bed and recited Psalm 51: *Have mercy on me, God, in your kindness. In your compassion blot out my offense. O wash me more and more from my guilt and cleanse me from my sin.* After turning off the light, I burrowed into the covers, thanking God that I had made it through another day. That I hadn’t drowned.

As I surrendered my days to prayer, a change came over me. I wanted to go back to Church. I had attended mass sporadically the past few years, mainly on Christmas and Easter (yes, I was one of those), but mainly out of duty. After a few weeks of smoke-free prayer, I realized that I needed to be reconciled with the Church. Not a simple going back to mass, but a reconciliation.

Through the Divine Office, Scriptures, and the rosary, I reflected on my life. My past. I had plunged myself into a lifestyle of excess for a long time; the drinking, the drugs, needless shopping sprees. Party after party after party. Happy hours rather than holy hours. Adoration of the flesh. And yes, the sex. In my bedroom sanctuary, missal, beads, or breviary in hand, I slowly awakened to the fact that I had sinned sexually. It wasn’t just a matter of the Church’s prohibition against gay sex, but the revelation that I was called to celibacy. I had always been called to chastity. I reflected on various sexual escapades from the past: one-night stands that had made me feel as disfigured as a Salvador Dali painting. The recognition that even when I had been in a committed relationship with Robert, the sex had left me feeling uncomfortable. That I had been wading against the tide of my conscience.

I longed to return to the Church. Not on my own terms, but in accordance with Church teaching. I could have easily sat in the pews and then received Communion, confident that my life had been transformed. But I knew that I needed to go to Confession. Why? Because I had sinned. And sacramental grace could restore me. Prayer and spiritual reading had led me to confront my past. Put it in perspective. Take responsibility for my actions. I craved grace.
After I made the decision to go to confession, I decided to do it up in my typical dramatic fashion. Although Kim and I lived only a block from St. Brendan’s Church, I didn’t want to go there. I wanted to make a pilgrimage out of my reconciliation with the Church. I made an appointment to see a Franciscan priest at a downtown parish in Hartford. I had been in Hartford the previous year to see a Robert Mapplethorpe exhibit. This time I would travel to the insurance capital for a different reason. The Amtrak train ride lasted a little more than an hour, which gave me time to prepare. I wrote down the items that I would confess. It was an impressive list.

I met the priest in his sunny office. I was thankful for the face-to-face confession; I wasn’t a voice in the dark. The priest was comforting and compassionate, we must’ve talked for an hour or so. His eyes didn’t widen too much, nor did he look shocked at what I had to say. A penitent is often fearful that he or she will scandalize the priest, but most of my priest friends tell me that they’ve heard it all. My confession in Hartford was a healing experience, not an emotion. It was a pilgrimage of coming back. I was ready to receive the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament.

When I returned to New Haven, I started attending daily mass. I usually went to St. Mary’s, the Dominican parish on the Yale campus. I attended Sunday liturgies at St. Brendan’s. I started going to confession every two weeks. I stripped myself of the past and put on the garment of splendor, for God had brought me forth into freedom. I became a new man.

* * * * *

I am wholly convinced that the alleged apparitions of the Blessed Mother in Medjugorje, Yugoslavia, played a role in my conversion. I had first heard of the obscure hamlet in the summer of 1987 when I lived in California. My Manteca friend’s mother had a newspaper devoted solely to the apparitions. The various articles recounted a fantastic story
of the Mother of Jesus appearing daily to five teenagers. The supposed apparitions had been going on since June of 1981. Color photographs chronicled the thousands of pilgrims who descended on the little village. Briefly scanning the articles, which reported the Blessed Mother as calling for the conversion of sinners, I threw the paper onto the coffee table, rolled my eyes, and announced to my friend, “Oh God! More sightings of Mary.” I thought no more about it. I suspect my skepticism was rooted in my lifestyle. This was the summer I went to jail, the summer of drinking, pot smoking, bar hopping, and crank. My soul was hardly fertile ground.

But as I spent several hours each day in prayer during the early Fall of 1993, my devotion to the Blessed Mother began to flower. Meditating on the mysteries of the rosary opened me up to the magnitude of Mary’s faith; visited by an angel and told that although she was a virgin, she would bear the Son of God, her response was one of absolute faith: “Let it be done unto me according to your word.” I was mystified at her trust in God. What did she think when she was about to give birth to this child in a stable? Mary’s acceptance of Divine Humility awed me.

One afternoon I took a bus to a Catholic bookstore in West Haven. I found a copy of Janice T. Connell’s *The Visions of the Children: The Apparitions of the Blessed Mother of Medjugorje*. Something within me stirred. I picked it up and purchased it.

Connell’s book is a series of interviews with the five young people who witness the alleged apparitions. These apparitions include messages to be shared with the world. Connell notes that these messages are summed up in five words: prayer, fasting, reconciliation, peace, and conversion. According to the visionaries, Mary is calling post-modern humanity back to God. A heavenly messenger, Mary points to her son Jesus, imploring a secular, materialistic society to return to lives centered on faith, on God’s will. The Blessed Mother wishes to be known as the Queen of Peace.
The book profoundly affected me. The simple messages resonated in my heart of hearts. As I turned away from the nightclubs and drinking, I embraced the invitation to be reconciled with God, to live a life wholly focused on the Lord. Although I did not travel to the Southwestern Yugoslavian village, I became a pilgrim of Medjugorje.

A second book also proved to be instrumental in my conversion. On another trip to the Catholic bookstore, my hand had fallen upon a copy of Sister M. Faustina Kowalska's *Diary: Divine Mercy in My Soul*. A thick paperback tome of over 800 pages, I had heard of it from some other books I'd been reading. Its size intimidated me. I leafed through it briefly before replacing it on the shelf. Once I got home, I had the nagging suspicion that I should have bought it. On my next trip to the store, I purchased it. I am convinced that the Holy Spirit led me to that book.

Sister Faustina was a nun who lived in Poland between the two World Wars. Graced with a mystical relationship with God, she started receiving messages and visions of Jesus and the Blessed Mother. Although she was poor of health and oftentimes could barely lift a pen, Jesus instructed her to keep a diary, chronicling His messages and her growth in the spiritual life. With the permission of her mother superior, and under the scrutiny of a Jesuit spiritual director, she obediently filled notebooks with theological insights well beyond her limited schooling. Her message from Jesus to the world: Wholly trust in the fountain of God's mercy.

Sister Faustina’s diary propagated the devotion to the Divine Mercy. She wrote that human-centered modernity needed to turn away from sinful ways and return to God. Even if one's sins were a deep scarlet, one always had recourse to the cleansing mercy of an all-loving Lord. During one of her visions, Jesus appeared to her wearing a white robe, one hand raised, the other pointing toward his Sacred Heart. Rays of red and white light burst forth from his heart, symbolizing the blood and water that gushed forth from Christ’s side when he
was pierced by the soldier's lance. Jesus asked Sister Faustina to commission an image of this vision to be venerated, with the words, “Jesus, I Trust in You” written at the base of the painting.

The Devotion to the Divine Mercy includes a novena of prayers recited from Good Friday until the Feast of Mercy, the Sunday after Easter. The prayers implore mercy upon all humanity: the devout, those who do not believe, those whose faith has become lukewarm. Sister Faustina also wrote of a chaplet of prayers to be recited using rosary beads. On the Our Father beads, one prays, “Eternal Father, I offer you the Body and Blood, the Soul and Divinity of Your dearly Beloved Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ, in atonement for our sins, and those of the whole world.” On the Hail Mary beads, one says: “For the sake of His sorrowful passion, have mercy on us and on the whole world.” One ends the chaplet with “Holy God, Holy Mighty One, Holy Immortal One, have mercy on us and on the whole world,” recited three times. The devotion focuses on trusting in Christ's saving passion, death, and resurrection.

Like Connell's book about Medjugorje, Sister Faustina's diary inspired me. Besides reciting the rosary and the Divine Office, I began to pray the chaplet of Divine Mercy. As I struggled with the agony of quitting smoking, I filled my days with devotions, scripture reading, and contemplation. Like the Prodigal Son, I, too, returned home. A peace I hadn't known for years embraced me. My long dormant soul stirred; in the quiet of that Elm Street apartment, vestiges of a sinful past fell from me like Autumn leaves. For the first time in years, I brimmed over with joyful hope.

As I returned to the Church, I stopped going to the Pub. I no longer went to nightclubs. I didn't drink as much as I once did. Keeping in touch with all my friends, I didn't see them as often. And I stopped writing in my journal. My life became peaceful, so I
didn’t have the need to pour out angst upon pages. I didn’t have angst. I slowly recognized the ‘more’ I had been searching for. My surrender to God.

During this time, I went back to work. After six months of living on unemployment, I got a part-time job as a bank teller. I continued to faithfully read Sister Faustina’s diary, on the bus and during lunch breaks. Frequently, I returned to the Catholic bookstore in West Haven to load up on prayer books. What I saved by not smoking, I spent on prayer.

Whenever I tell people that quitting smoking led to my conversion, they almost always seem disappointed. It sounds so mundane. Where was the thundering voice from heaven? The falling off the horse? The earth-shattering revelation? You came back to the Church because you quit smoking? Yes, as undramatic as it sounds. But I realize that I was ripe for conversion. So unhappy with the shallowness of my life, Randy’s death and the experience with Valium-popping Mark helped me to awaken to the need for change. To finally be honest with myself. Death helped me recognize that for so long, I had been running away from God. I recalled what Brother Samuel had said when I had left Conception Seminary in 1985: “You will not be happy.” He had been right. But now I knew joy. The Lord used my weakness, my addiction, as a catalyst to seek Him. In any case, my life changed irrevocably.

I started smoking again several months later, just before Kim, her fiancée, Paul, and I, moved to Colorado. But I had returned to the Church. I was home.
Snowed in with Mary and Mother Cabrini

_In his own body he carried our sins to the tree,
that we might die to sin and from death be set free._

1 Peter 2:24

It felt a bit odd returning to the Capitol Hill neighborhood. Still a haven of twenty-somethings, popular culture had changed a bit since I lived there in 1987. Many of the young people sported garish tattoos and body piercings. The Victorian homes, the rows of stately apartment buildings, the constant siren wail, the corner markets, and the booming music vibrating through open windows were the same, but I was a different person in the summer of 1994, no longer a nocturnal partygoer. After landing a job as a bank teller at the downtown First Interstate Bank, and staying with my Auntie Susan in Southeast Denver for a few months to save money, Capitol Hill offered the prospect of cheap rents and a short walk to work. I regarded the Hill as a place to live, not a place to party. I had the luck of finding the perfect apartment on the 1300 block of Ogden.

"Nice and quiet here," Greg the landlord told me. We sat in the manager’s living room, a claustrophobic’s nightmare of plush, dark chairs and a sofa, tables galore, and Indian-feathered fetishes hanging from the walls and crowding the table tops. The forest-green walls and drawn drapes gave the place a macabre feel.

I had just been shown the apartment directly across the hall, a sunny, spacious one-bedroom unit with a large living room and a yellow-cabineted kitchen. The dining area window overlooked Ogden Street, while the side windows in the living room and bedroom gazed at the white brick house next door. The blue-grey carpet looked clean, as flat as the indoor/outdoor carpeting found on patios. Like the Macy’s building back in New Haven, this
building betrayed a 1950s functionalism: a brick, three-floored rectangle with a flat roof. What it lacked in charm, it made up for in price: $350.00 a month.

"Is this a safe building?" I asked Greg. We sat on the edge of the fluffy couch. He was slight, with dark hair and pasty skin. His accent sounded Eastern European.

"Oh yes," he assured with a waving hand. "The inside door is always locked; no one can get in unless you buzz them in."

I nodded my approval. A black cat emerged from the room's shadows and rubbed against my leg. "Hi Kitty," I said, reaching down to scratch between its ears.

Greg glanced at the San Damiano pin on my collar. While I used to wear a pink triangle pin when I lived in New Haven, I now wore a small gold cross. He shifted uneasily.

"This is a hate-free zone."

The cat purred and arched its back under my fingers. "OK," I said.

"You know," he asserted, glancing again at the gold cross on my collar, "a hate-free zone. Hate-Free."

A voice within me wanted to say: Honey, don't worry. I know what you're saying. Instead, I nodded. "Sounds fine. Great. I'm against hate."

After a few signatures, a check, and a handshake, the hate-free zone apartment was mine.

The building was also child-free; most of the tenants were singles or gay and lesbian couples. They were all very friendly, but I quickly learned that the walls and ceiling were porous; sound carried like nobody's business. The gay guys upstairs didn't get going until 10:00 at night, when the dance music drowned out the news on my twelve-inch TV. I enjoyed their choice of music, but I had a hell of a time trying to get to sleep. The rocking bedsprings overhead and the moans didn't help.
The lesbian couple above and catty-corner from me was worse. They each weighed at least 250 pounds, manly women in flannel shirts and butch hair cuts. When they had sex, their “Ah-h-h-hs” and “Oh-h-h-hs” were so loud that they woke me up. Both of them were screamers, and their moans ricocheted off the house next door, through my opened window; it was like they were in my bedroom. Even in winter I could hear their every pant. It was awful; they went on for hours. All I wanted to do was scream, “Get over it all ready!” But of course, I didn’t say a word. After all, I lived in a hate-free zone.

Since the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception was only a few blocks away, I settled into a routine of attending 7:30 a.m. mass before walking to work. The Cathedral stands as an oasis in the graffiti and grime of Capitol Hill. Its twin spires are overshadowed only by the Capitol’s gold dome, a block and a half away. It is a French Gothic structure, with white walls, ceiling, and an ornate high altar. The white can be a bit dizzying. A burgundy carpet contrasts with the white-marbled sanctuary, and the German stained glass windows flood the interior with blues, reds, yellows, and greens. It’s a magnificent building; kneeling in a pew, one can almost feel one’s soul lifting up through the multi-colored air. The parade of cars and buses and shopping-carted homeless are reduced to a dim murmur once one enters the Cathedral. It’s an urban peace, where statues of the Blessed Mother and the resurrected Jesus on the side altars smile, and the flickering candles keep time with the muffled din.

A friend from my seminary days at Conception was a priest assigned to the Cathedral parish. Father David became my spiritual director. At his gentle prodding, I involved myself in the parish. I started counting money twice a month, Sunday mornings and afternoons going through the mass collections. I became a lector. I got involved in R.C.I.A., the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults. Father David taught the Wednesday night classes for those
wishing to convert to Catholicism; I attended the classes and became a sponsor, one who’s like a god-parent for those wishing to enter the Church. For the first time in my life, I actively participated in parish life.

Joseph Cavaliere was my fellow money counter. In his late 70s, balding, short and slight, suffering from emphysema, he carried an oxygen tank. A life-long bachelor, he had lived on Capitol Hill since the end of World War II. Joseph had once been a novice Benedictine monk at Holy Cross Abbey in Canon City, Colorado, but he had left before making first vows. The slaughtering of chickens, one of his tasks while he was a novice, didn’t agree with his delicate features. He, too, had thrown himself into the Cathedral parish; besides counting money, he opened the church each weekday morning and lectored at mass. He had a gravelly and high-pitched voice; when he read from the lectern, his accentuated syllables shot throughout the church like firecrackers.

"Now, when we count money, we open the money bags and separate the paper money from the checks." We were in the counting room in the rectory, which was slightly larger than a closet. Joseph was training me to be a money counter. We sat side by side at a long table, file cabinets lined the wall two feet from our backs. Joseph’s oxygen tank rested by his right leg. A clear plastic tube wound its way from the tank, up to Joseph’s nose. He sucked in air like his life depended on it.

"I’ll go through the money and you can go through the checks," Joseph instructed. "You have to stamp the checks with this." He handed me a stamp. "At the top of the check, and on the back, push down like this." He turned over a check, placed the stamp at the top, and pushed down with all his might. His veiny hands wobbled. "You see! It says ‘For Deposit Only’ and has our account number on it!"

I drummed my fingers on the table top. "OK."
“We count each mass separately,” he explained, sitting in his folding metal chair.

“We list the amounts on this paper,” he waved a piece of paper before me, “and then we add it all together. Do you think you can do that?”

I had to force my eyes from rolling. I suppressed a yawn. “Yep. I can do that.”

“We worked for a while in silence, the only sounds coming from the tank, Joseph’s gasping, and the crinkling noise as he flattened each crumpled bill.

“My, you’re quick!” he exclaimed after a quarter hour or so. I had stacked the stamped checks and started helping him with the paper money.

“Well, Joseph, I do work in a bank.”

“Oh yes, yes.”

We counted money and Joseph opened up. It would be the first of many similar conversations that would take place during the next three years.

“You know, the Good Lord took Thomas Merton at the right time.”

“I beg your pardon?” I asked, keeping my eyes on a handful of ones and trying not to lose my count.

“Thomas Merton, you know, the monk.” Joseph wheezed. He dropped coins into a metal box, the pile clinking loudly. They would be counted last, dumped into a coin machine.

“Thomas Merton was doing many a good thing at that monastery in Kentucky, writing those books and all. But then, he got into all the Eastern religion stuff.” Joseph’s wiry eyebrows slanted toward his nose. “Before he got too far into it, the Lord called him home. Electrocuted in his bath tub while he was in India. He was a monk, for God’s sake! He had no business being in India.”

“I think he died in Thailand.”

“Oh, wherever. He should’ve stayed home.”

I gave a non-committal nod and moved on to the fives.
“And that sister from Covenant House!” He growled, spittle flying onto the money mound as he scrounged for twenties. I knew that Covenant House was a shelter for runaway teens in New York. The priest who had started it was forced to resign amid allegations of sexual misconduct with some of the teenaged boys. A nun now ran it. “After that priest got in trouble with young boys, I stopped sending money to Covenant House. I wrote a letter to that sister, but she pays me no mind. She still asks for money!”

I counted the fives and wrote the total on the tally sheet.

“And don’t get me started on those Sisters of Loretto!” he rasped, shoving the oxygen tank tube further into his nostrils. “They had that beautiful Loretto Heights College, but then they took off their habits and put on floral print dresses! It’s no wonder they had to sell that lovely college to the Japanese and move to a place farther down the street.” He turned to me and pointed his knotty index finger. “And do you know what they do now?”

I shook my head.

“They’re screaming to be ordained priests! Mother of God! There’s hardly a habit among them!” His voice shook the room.

“Oh?” I kept my eyes peeled toward the tens.

“Yes! It’s a shame! They’re a bunch of witches!” He flung his words at the money.

I choked on a gulp of air that was both surprise and a nervous chuckle. “Joseph, that’s a bit harsh. I’m sure there are many wonderful sisters at the convent.”

He waved his hand and went back to the pile of tens. “Well, that’s true,” he conceded, “but all you ever hear about are the ones who stir up all the trouble.” He paused for a moment, jingling the tube that led from the tank to his nose. “I don’t want to sound harsh, but that’s how I see it. The Church is filled with too many angry people. Too much screaming going on.”

I finished my fives and helped him with his tens, gathering them so he could count.
"I don't know," he sighed, "there's too much confusion in the Church today. Everything is so fuzzy." He leaned back heavily in his chair.

I poured the coins into the counter. A whining rattle filled the air for several minutes, the *ker-chinks* too loud to carry on a conversation. When the coins had been counted, I listed the total on the sheet and dumped them back into the metal box, placing them on a shelf in the safe. Joseph rubberbanded the money and stacked it into another box, handing it to me to be placed with the coins. The safe door closed with a click.

"Was it confusing when you were in the seminary, Tim?" Joseph placed a fedora on his head and reached for his sports coat.

I stood for a moment, looking past him to a painting of the Annunciation on the hallway opposite the opened door. I sighed. "Yes, Joseph. For me, the seminary was a bit fuzzy." We stayed for a few silent moments in the little room.

"Would you mind helping me up the steps?" he asked. "I need someone to carry my tank."

We walked up the stairs slowly, Joseph clinging to the rail and gasping as I lifted his oxygen tank. We went out the back door of the rectory, savoring the late Autumn sunshine as we strolled through the parking lot to his car. I placed the tank on the passenger seat of his Toyota.

"Bye Joseph. I'll see you at mass tomorrow morning."

"Oh yes, yes!" he said, fumbling to get his key in the ignition. "See you tomorrow, Tim. Thanks for your help!"

I sauntered off down Grant Street. When I was no longer within eye site of the Cathedral, and of Joseph who sat gasping in the parking lot, I lit a cigarette.

* * * * *
My life of mass, work, and prayers was mundane but peaceful. After coming home from work and eating before the TV, I'd spend the rest of the night reading Scriptures and praying. But after my first few months in the apartment, I recognized that my routine had to change. It became increasingly difficult for me to pray at night as the dance music filtered through the ceiling from above. Honking horns, laughter, and shouts filled my space as Generation X came alive at night and roamed the streets anxious for parties and nightclubs. Noises seeped into my quiet realm. By the time I said my prayers and went to bed, I'd invariably have to listen to the sexual escapades of those lusty lesbians. I had a peaceful lifestyle, I liked my apartment and its proximity to the Cathedral and downtown, but the noises were just too much. Something had to give.

So I started going to bed each night at 8:30 or 9:00 and woke up at 2:30 a.m. I rose from sleep and began my day as the clubs closed and partygoers crashed for the night. Since I went to bed so early, I was usually in a deep sleep and didn't awaken when the lesbians had sex or the guys upstairs played their music. I set my coffee maker to click on at 2:25 a.m.; its gurgling helped usher me out of bed after my alarm had sounded. With a steaming mug, I sat in my living room and said my prayers: the Divine Mercy chaplet, the rosary, Divine Office, reflecting on Scriptures. After two hours of prayer, I took my shower and prepared for the day. I started going to the earlier 6:45 a.m. mass. It was a routine that I kept for as long as I lived in Denver.

I don't think there was anything exceptionally virtuous in getting up at 2:30 in the morning to say my prayers. I did it for pragmatic reasons. It was the only quiet time I could pray without distractions from the building or the city. I regarded it as something I had to do. My prayer life was so important to me; I willingly sacrificed my evenings, sacrificed sleep. I cherished the silence. Now I recognize that my hunger for prayer was a grace from God; he
planted the desire to commune with Him. The Lord had placed a marvelous love in my heart, and I yearned to spend time with him, taking sips from my coffee as I said my prayers.

My life remained a litany of prayer, mass, work, coming home to watch Seinfeld reruns as I ate a microwavable supper, and going to bed. I usually spent my Saturdays with Kim, going to malls, lunching at Applebee’s, or watching videos. Sundays were for counting money or reading the Sunday newspapers. There’s nothing like spending a winter Sunday afternoon drinking coffee, reading the entire paper, and lounging in sweats. Oh yes, I was decadent every once in a while. On some Mondays, I’d race home to cook up a pound of chicken livers. My Auntie Susan had gotten me hooked on them when I stayed with her. I floured them and fried them in lots of sizzling butter. Filling an entire plate, I would grab a bottle of White Zinfandel and sit on the couch to watch Melrose Place.

Fridays evenings I spent with David. He was a friend from the Cathedral, also a money counter. Three years older than I, David had spent a year in a seminary in his upstate New York after converting to Catholicism. Slight of build with short, greying hair and round wire-rimmed glasses, he always wore navy slacks and navy cardigans and drove a navy Oldsmobile. Whenever anyone questioned his penchant for blue, he’d gleefully exclaim: “Blue is the color of Our Blessed Mother!” David was a sacristan; he set up the altar and vessels for the daily 5:00 p.m. mass and the Sunday 10:30 mass. Each Friday, I would walk from work to the Cathedral, where David would be locking up the church. We habitually suppered at Annie’s, a small 1950s style diner off Colorado Boulevard. I would normally have a burger and two beers, while David ordered French toast or pancakes and coffee. We would sit in a corner table in the two-tabled smoking section, laughing and chatting for hours. Annie’s was a bustling place of yuppies and families and gay and lesbian couples. The waitpersons were young and hip, muscled and toned, pierced with nose or eyebrow rings. David and I must’ve been a sight; two frumpy guys in Izod cardigans, one smoking and
drinking beer, and the other asking for more butter to slather on his French toast. We added to Annie’s diversity.

Shortly after I met David, I, too, became a sacristan at the Cathedral. Poor Joseph Cavaliere could not manage setting up for two daily masses, lugging his oxygen tank around the altar. I was asked to open up the Cathedral each weekday morning: turn on lights, set up for mass, and make sure there was toilet paper in the restrooms. I usually got there at 6:15 a.m., taking my time to set out vestments for the priest. On holy days and special feasts, I changed the altar cloth and lectern banners: red for martyrs and apostles, white for virgins and holy men and women. When I unlocked the doors at 6:30, a shivering homeless person usually greeted me, looking for warmth. At mass, I lectored, served the priest, and distributed Communion if there were a lot of people in the church. I thoroughly enjoyed my early mornings at the Cathedral; they were as much a grace as my 2:30 awakenings. I was most happy when I was in church alone, before I opened the doors. The shadowed calm was serene.

* * * * *

“You’ll be praying about your vocation, won’t you?” David gave me a piercing gaze as he turned off the car. We were in the parking lot in front of the convent for the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart. I was about to make a five-day retreat, so David had graciously offered to drive me.

“David, we’ve talked about this before,” I sighed. The convent was a modern brick structure, the chapel roofs sloping toward the golden hills. September sunshine bounced off the sisters’ windows, giving a corona to the white statue of the Blessed Mother which stood near the entrance to the gift shop. “I don’t think anyone would take me back into the seminary. Like, hello! I’ve been in and out of the seminary twice now.”
“Tim. I’m praying that you’ll discern your vocation while you’re here. If anyone should be a priest, it’s you.”

I rolled my eyes. There was no movement from the convent; all was quiet. “Oh David! I’m 31 years old, too old to go back to the seminary!” I chuckled and opened the door.

“Don’t give me that!” David jumped out of the car, opening the back door to yank out one of my bags. “There are a lot of guys going into the seminary older than you. Just promise that you’ll pray about it.”

I grabbed a bag full of books. “Yes, Sir!” We made our way toward the ground-floor gift shop entrance. The sixty degree Monday afternoon rested peacefully.

We were at Mother Cabrini Shrine in Golden, about twenty miles west of Denver. Set in the grassy foothills, the Shrine had originally been the site of a summer home for Denver orphans, founded in 1906 by Sister Frances Xavier Cabrini. Known as Mother Cabrini, this Italian immigrant nun had established schools, orphanages, and hospitals throughout the United States. A stalwart woman dedicated to the poor and young, Mother Cabrini had a stone, two-storied house built on a tract of land in Mount Vernon Canyon. The front porch offered a breath-taking panorama of the Denver metro area and the Eastern Plains. About a mile west of the house was a large hill. Mother had walked up its steep slope to have lunch with several orphaned girls. She instructed the girls to gather white quartz stones, and with them she formed the outline of a heart, surmounted by a cross: the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Since there wasn’t much water on the property, professionals were hired to search for water beneath the ground. On her last visit to the area in 1912, Mother Cabrini pointed to a rock at the base of the large hill and said that water would be found there. Sure enough, a spring trickled forth from the dry spot. Mother Cabrini died in 1917, after having founded 67 charitable institutions. She was canonized a saint in 1946, the first United States citizen to be
canonized. After her death, her summer orphanage in the hills of Golden became a shrine and retreat center, staffed by the sisters of Mother’s religious order.

The convent was tucked away between two gentle rolling slopes, west of the stone house and north of the highest hill. A grotto stood at the base of the hill; trees, shrubs and flowers circled the rock from which water sprang. Three spigots stuck out of the massive rock, with a paper cup dispenser bolted to it. Pilgrims could oftentimes be found filling up empty two-liter Pepsi bottles for the water. Overshadowing the trees stood a slate A-framed structure. It looked a little like a rest stop restroom facility from the outside, but its interior housed a statue of Mother Cabrini in a room of rough plank pews and hundreds of flickering candles.

A steep hill graced the highest point of the shrine. A concrete path of 373 steps led to the summit, where a colossal white statue of Jesus had been erected behind the stones fashioned by Mother Cabrini. The Christ figure wore the garments of the resurrection, and his hand pointed to his chest, to his Sacred Heart. Lining the path and steps to the crest were fourteen crosses with mosaics depicting the Stations of the Cross. After the crosses, fifteen graveyard-like rounded monuments represented the fifteen mysteries of the rosary. A pilgrim could pray the Stations and the entire rosary while ascending the hill. At the top, the view was intoxicating: mountains and plains, twinkling cities and suburbs, golden slopes and the Colorado sky. The traffic hummed from nearby I-70. I felt safe on that hill, a feeling that Jesus looked down on the Denver metropolitan area.

David and I walked into the gift shop, a small room of statues, candles, and glass counters holding rosaries and medals. To the left was a large conference/banquet room filled with rectangular tables and metal folding chairs. Opposite the gift shop entrance, a carpeted stairway led to the convent and the chapel. To the right of the stairway was a replica of
Mother Cabrini’s room, a small cell consisting of a short bed, a simple wood desk and chair, and a crucifix on the wall. The room was enclosed museum-style by a smudgy, fingerprinted glass wall.

With my modest income as a bank teller, I couldn’t afford to take a trip during my vacation. I had decided to spend five days in quiet contemplation, away from the city. David and I had visited the Shrine several times; I liked that it lay outside of Denver, but not too far. It seemed like the perfect place to pray, relax, and read. I didn’t arrive with an agenda or program, nor did I set out to discern a religious vocation. I was there to draw closer to God, to deepen my prayer life.

Sister Bernadette greeted us and led us up the stairs to a wide gathering space. The chapel was to the right and the sisters’ quarters to the left. The superior of the Shrine community, sister had grey hair and wore a blue jacket and suit skirt with a white blouse and spongy-soled black shoes. I could tell that they were Hush Puppies. Sister took David and me behind the chapel to a door which had a plaque on it: Priest’s Quarters. David raised his eyebrows.

“This is where the priests stay if any need to spend the night,” Sister explained. We walked into a narrow hallway. “We don’t have anyone staying here on a permanent basis, so I thought you’d be comfortable here. This is the kitchen,” she pointed into the room, consisting of a few appliances and a table, “but you won’t need it. You’ll be eating with the sisters and staff. The living room.” We poked our heads into a white-walled room, noticing the frayed couch, recliner, TV and VCR. “And this is your bedroom.” It was a simple space, adequately providing a bed, a desk and chair, and a dresser. “The bathroom is through that door.” She pointed to a closed door at the end of the room. “Make yourself at home!” Sister Bernadette was cheerful, her chubby cheeks ruddy. “Prayers are at 5:00 in the chapel, and
supper is right after that. If you need anything, let me know.” She walked out of the room and down the hallway to the door. “I’ll leave you so you can unpack. Have a blessed retreat.”

“Thank you, Sister.” I closed the door after she had left.

“Oh Tim, this is perfect!” David squealed. “It’s not an accident that you’re in the priest’s rooms. I think the Holy Spirit is behind this!”

I rolled my eyes. “We’ll see, David. I’m here to pray and relax. C’mon, I’ll walk you to your car.”

David gave me a hug. “I’ll pick you up on Friday afternoon. Have a grand time with the sisters!” He released me and jumped into his car. I waved and then walked back into the convent. As I returned to my rooms, I knelt down in the chapel for a few moments, surrendering my retreat to the Lord. I told him that I had come to the Shrine for the next few days to listen, to become more intimate with Him. The silence was grand.

When it came time for supper, I followed the sisters from the chapel to their dining room. Round tables dotted the airy space as windows looked upon the slope of a hill. Trays of steamy food rested above burners on tables along a wall. There was one table reserved for pitchers of milk and lemonade, and bottles of Carlo Rossi Chablis.

“Go through the line and pick up your food,” Sister Bernadette instructed, “and if you want some wine, it’s right over there.”

“Oh Sister,” I said, affecting my best pious tone, “I’m on retreat. I shouldn’t have any wine.”

“Go ahead!” She waved her hand. “Let the Spirit move you!”

I chuckled, loading up my plate with pork chops and au gratin potatoes. I set my plate next to Sister Iggy, then headed for the wine.
I spent the next day praying along the hillside. Clouds had moved in and it was chilly, but I kept toasty in a turtleneck and a Hard Rock Café sweatshirt. I prayed the Stations and the rosary on my journey to the summit. I took a long walk to the grotto and drank some of the water from the rock. In late afternoon, I drifted to sleep while lounging in the recliner, a book opened on my lap.

At supper that night, Sister Bernadette asked, “Have you seen Mrs. Doubtfire?”

I took a sip of wine. “No. I haven’t seen it yet.”

Sister slapped the table with both hands. The salt and pepper shakers rocked. “Oh, you have to see Mrs. Doubtfire! It’s a hoot! We have a copy of the video. I’ll give it to you after supper. All the sisters have seen it several times.”

“Well, I’m on retreat, Sister,” I said, reaching for my glass of Carlo Rossi. “I don’t know if I should watch videos.”

“You’re here to relax, aren’t you?” Sister boomed. “Let the Spirit move you!”

So I sat in the priest’s living room that night, drinking wine and laughing hysterically through the movie. The brother of Robin Williams’ character was played by Harvey Fierstein. It was Fierstein who had written Torch Song Trilogy, the play I had seen twelve years previously in San Francisco, the play that featured the pink bunny slippers. I had a grand time watching Mrs. Doubtfire, guffawing aloud. It proved to be a most relaxing evening.

I awoke late the next morning because my alarm clock didn’t go off. When I looked out the window, a thick blanket of snow covered the hillside. It was September 19, and a freak storm had dumped snow on the Denver Front Range area. Power had gone out throughout the city and foothill communities; the heavy wet snow had snapped green leafed tree branches onto power lines. It was a late summer, winter wonderland, and the convent lay silent. It was glorious.
I opted to stay in the convent for the day, not wanting to trudge through the snow to say my prayers. I sought shelter in the chapel. Cool and dark, the glow of a few candles offered the only warmth and light. It was a modern church, probably built in the 1960s or 70s. Against the wall behind the altar was an artistic rendering of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. A white-robed Christ stood above a blue and brown globe, his hand pointing toward this Sacred Heart. It was garish, a glittering masterpiece of hideous modern church art. But in the snowed-in black-out, the shadows consumed it. I fixed my attention on the tabernacle, the small box on a pedestal to the left of the wall figure. I savored being alone in the church with only a few wavering candles and the Body of Christ. I felt right at home.

I spent the better part of the day in the chapel, alternatively kneeling in prayer and then sitting on the pew. I prayed my customary prayers, as well as some others I knew by heart. And I listened to the wind beat snow flakes against the roof. From time to time a sister came in, clutching a cardigan around her neck. But usually I was alone, quiet in the Lord’s presence, gazing from time to time at a statue of Mary to the left of the tabernacle.

Some time during those hours, a sensation flooded me with goose-bumply warmth. I didn’t hear a voice in my head; it wasn’t a Be a Priest experience. But it was just as strong. No sudden revelations, only a feeling in the depths of my being that I was to once again pursue my religious vocation. In the quiet of my heart, I knew that God had never ceased inviting me to a vocation in the Church. My awakening to this fact I felt to the marrow of my bones. Yet it was as gentle as the candles glowing in the chapel.

When I realized that I would seek a religious vocation for a third time, I couldn’t help but shake my head and laugh a bit in the shadowy stillness. But who would take me, Lord? I silently asked. Look at my past! I’ve been to hell and back, and that’s nothing to take lightly. Can my past be overcome? And what about my age? I’m too old, too checkered. There was
no response, no answer. Only the snow and flickering candles. I looked at the tabernacle. Lord, to whom shall I go? The peace was lovely.

Power was restored the next day, and the East Slope went about shoveling out. I ventured down to the grotto. Tree limbs unnaturally bowed beneath the weight of the snow, while others had snapped, strewn on paths, shrubs, and rocks. The way to the water at the rock was completely blocked by a jungle of bark, snow, and leaves that would never turn bright colors. The statues of Mary and Saint Bernadette stood still, white-clad oases in the sea of frosted destruction. It was terribly beautiful.

I spent the rest of my time at the Shrine reading, praying, and visiting with the sisters. On Friday, just before I left, I returned to the chapel. Turning away from the ugly art, I closed my eyes and talked to the Blessed Mother: O Holy Mother, you see how the Lord has called me to religious life. I give my vocation to you, for I trust that you will guide me along the Lord’s path and lead me to Him. Because of my past, it will take a miracle for me to be accepted into religious life. I trust in your prayers. I ask that you will implore Our Lord’s unfathomable mercy, upon me and those in the Church who will discern my vocation. O Holy Mother, I wholly trust in the words of the angel Gabriel—Nothing is impossible with God. I thank you.

After bidding heartfelt appreciation to the sisters, I clamored into David’s Oldsmobile. The snow covered the hillsides, but the sixty degree weather filled the air with gurgling Spring noises. I suspect that my face was ruddy, with a refreshed countenance. I plopped into the passenger seat with a cheery hello.

“Well?” David asked. He didn’t start the car.

“It was a wonderful five days,” I said. “Hey, did your power go out?”

“Who cares about the power!” David sputtered. “What happened?”
"I had a lovely time," I shrugged and grinned. "It was quiet and I spent a lot of time reflecting. We didn’t have any power for about 24 hours." David rolled his eyes. "Anyway, the sisters were wonderful, I had a grand time." David strummed his fingers on the steering wheel. I smirked. "And I decided to pursue my vocation again."

David slapped the steering wheel with both hands. "Oh thank God! I knew you would come to see the light."

"How so?"

"I’ve been praying about it all week," he explained. "Tim, I’m so happy for you. You’re meant to be a priest."

"I don’t know about that. I’ll take it one step at a time," I cautioned. "I’ll talk it over with Father David my spiritual director. I don’t know where the Lord wants me to go, but I’m sure he’ll let me know his will."

David started the car and pulled out of the parking lot. We made our way toward the stone house and the narrow drive down the hill. The summer snow slushed under the tires, but I was filled with an Easter-like joy. I resolved to follow my calling. The five days with the sisters at Mother Cabrini Shrine had born much fruit.

We made out way down the winding road. "What made you change your mind?"

David asked.

I smiled. "Oh, I suppose I let the Spirit move me."

* * * * *

Father David, my spiritual director, was happy that I had chosen to look into religious life again. We both agreed that I should pay a visit to the Vocation Director for the Archdiocese of Denver, to go back to my roots where I first began my discernment journey when I was a junior in high school. I made an appointment with the priest director and took a bus to the Archdiocesan offices on University Avenue. Fourteen years had passed since I first
walked through those doors as a wide-eyed seventeen year old with dreams of becoming a priest, yet it amounted to a lifetime and I knew I had a lot to answer for. My stomach was a bit queasy when I walked into the director’s office. He offered a professional welcome and gestured that I should sit in the chair in front of his desk. A closed folder lay before him, between us.

“What brings you here today, Tim?” He swiveled in his chair sideways so he could lean back, his elbows resting on the chair arms and fingers clasped together. He glanced at me from the corner of his left eye.

“As you know, I was once a seminarian for the Archdiocese.” My voice quivered, my hands clasped in a ball on my lap, feet firmly on the floor, careful not to cross my legs. “I kinda drifted away from the Church for a few years. Thankfully, I found my way back. Grew up a bit. I turned away from a partying past two years ago, and I’ve been meeting with a spiritual director for over a year now. Since I returned to Denver from Connecticut. After a lot of prayer, I’ve decided to pursue my vocation again.”

Father didn’t look at me, but kept his eyes focussed on the bland wall. He rested his chin on his clasped hands. I shifted in my chair.

“I decided to come here because this is where I started. I realize that I’m older now, and I never finished my degree, but I wanted to come back to my roots. Despite my past, I still feel called to the priesthood.”

Father glanced at me with his left eye. “Why didn’t you go back to college and finish your degree?”

I shrugged. “I never had the money to go back to school. I mean, I made OK money when I sold women’s shoes back East, but I never had enough to return to school.” I paused for a moment. The quiet was heavy. “I have to admit that I didn’t like majoring in Philosophy. I had to major in it when I switched to Conception from St. Joseph’s. I recognize
the value of studying Philosophy, but I wanted to get a degree in English.” More silence. I wiped my mouth with a clammy hand. “I know I don’t have many credits to go to finish my degree, but I figured, what was the point? I didn’t want to get a degree in something I didn’t like.” My thumbs twittered nervously in my lap.

Father took his hands from under his chin and swiveled in his chair to face me. He opened up the folder on his desk. “I went through your file before you came in. I have a few concerns.”

My stomach rumbled.

Father shuffled through papers. “I see here in your evaluation from Conception that you left to pursue a gay lifestyle. Did you do so?” He peered at me from above his glasses.

“Yes I did.” I shifted my eyes to my lap.

“Did you ever have a relationship?”

My face reddened. Oh shit, I thought, it didn’t take long for this guy to cut to the chase. “Yes,” I said, “I was involved with someone for nine months. When I lived in Connecticut.” I could feel the sweat forming on my forehead.

“How did it end?”

“I was the one who broke it off.”

“Why?”

“Well. It just wasn’t right. I mean, I eventually realized I was called to be celibate.”

“How did he react?”

“Well, he...It hurt him.”

Nodding, Father rifled through more papers. I stole a glance at my watch. I had been there for only a few minutes and all I wanted to do was flee. I wiped sweat from my forehead and ran my fingers on my pants.

“Any experience with other men?”
“Just some one night stands. Not much.”

“Have you been living the gay lifestyle lately?”

“Oh no!” I gushed. “I stopped going to the bars almost two and half years a go. I’ve turned away from all that. I spend my time working, saying my prayers, volunteering at the Cathedral. I’ve gotten very involved at the Cathedral.”

He sighed and leaned back in his chair. Father looked directly into my eyes. “You seem to have some issues with commitment. You left the seminary, then entered again, studying for the Diocese of Stockton. Only to leave a second time. And you never finished your degree.”

All I could do was nod.

“Have you ever thought about a religious order?”

“Yes I have,” I stammered, “but I came to the Archdiocese because this is where I began.”

“Yes, yes, you’ve already mentioned that.” Father closed the folder. “I would suggest that you go back to school. Get your degree. If you can do that, maybe we’ll talk again.”

“Oh.”

“And there’s another concern.”

I held my breath.

He ran a hand through his greying hair. “You know what’s going on in the press. The scandals involving priests. We wouldn’t want to cause scandal to the Church.”

I blinked hard and bit my lip. Scandal? But those priests were pedophiles. I was gay.

“You never know how your past can come back to haunt you,” he continued. “As an ordained minister, you’d be a prime target. We don’t want to bring more scandal to the Church.”

I nodded.
"Perhaps you could be a brother in a religious order. Where you wouldn’t have such a high profile. Where you wouldn’t be around so many people."

I blinked quickly, fighting back the tears. Scandal? It had never entered my mind. The thought that my past could bring scandal to the Church horrified me. I suddenly felt like the man in the Magritte painting whose face is obscured behind a hovering green apple.

"I’ll pray about it. Work with my spiritual director," I mumbled.

"Good." Father stood up and extended his hand across the desk. "It was nice to meet you. Good luck."

My knees shook, but I was able to stand. I shook his hand. He didn’t have a firm grasp. "Thank you for meeting with me Father, I appreciate your time."

As soon as I dashed out of the building, I lit a cigarette. It was only 11:30 in the morning and I felt as if I’d been put through the ringer. I exhaled a puff of smoke as I walked toward the bus stop. I had anticipated a difficult meeting before I stepped into his office. I had known I would have to explain my past. I hadn’t expected to be greeted with open arms. But the actual experience was much worse than I could have imagined: I felt dirty.

When I met with Father David later that day, he was upset.

"I’m sorry it didn’t go well, Tim," he said.

I shrugged. "It’s OK. If I’m not meant to be a priest in Denver, then so be it. I would’ve liked to stay here; this is my home. My family lives here."

"I think you should look into religious orders," Father David suggested. "You know I’ll hate to see you leave the Archdiocese. I’m certain that you’d make a fine parish priest. Because of your past, you have so much to offer people." He paused. "You know, religious orders are much more open to conversion than dioceses."

"What do you mean?"
Father David leaned toward me. “Religious orders usually tend to be more open
minded about conversion stories. I don’t know why that is, but in my experiences, it’s pretty
much the rule of thumb. They seem to be able to recognize a transformed person.”

I nodded. “Well, I still feel that my calling is valid. I won’t give up.”

Father David patted my shoulder. “That’s the Spirit!”

I returned to my routine of prayer, mass, and work. And I asked for some more help
from the Blessed Mother. I still believed in miracles.

* * * * *

Several weeks later, I went to a fair at my sister’s parish. The Church of the Risen
Christ was the second largest parish in the Archdiocese, so their fair was a sprawling mass of
booths, games for kids, and plenty of hamburgers and hotdogs. It was a warm October
afternoon; Kim and I wandered among the booths representing various parish associations. I
stopped at a table display for the Serra Club, an organization of laypersons devoted to
fostering religious vocations. The men at the booth handed out books which advertised
different religious communities: Dominicans, Franciscans, Carmelites, Norbertines, the
Passionists, Benedictines, and a host of others I had never heard of. Each community or
province supplied a postcard to be filled out by a person discerning a religious vocation.
Upon receiving the postcard, the vocation director would send out materials about his order,
his community. They were “Yes! Send Me Information!”
cards. I readily picked up one of the books. It was a small act which would irrevocably alter
my life.

The next day, I went through the ads. I knew I didn’t want to be a Franciscan. I had a
great love and admiration for St. Francis and his order’s dedication to the poor, but I didn’t
feel called to their charism. I didn’t bother with the Jesuits: I had heard that their formation
program lasted 12 years before they took final vows. And they were all intellectuals. I found
myself filling out cards to the contemplative houses: the Benedictines in Latrobe, Pa, and St. Louis, the Norbertines in Wisconsin, the Carmelites in Texas, the Trappists in Snowmass. And a Benedictine monastery in Atchison, Kansas. I chuckled a bit as I filled out the postcards to be sent to Benedictine monasteries. It had been eleven years since I’d left Conception, but those monks must have planted some seeds in me.

I looked up Atchison in my road atlas. It was along the Missouri River, between Kansas City and St. Joseph, MO. It was about 70 miles southeast of Conception. I thought it odd that I had never heard of St. Benedict’s Abbey during my year at Conception. The ad in the book stated that the Atchison Benedictines sponsored a college and a boys’ high school, and some of their monks were involved in parish ministry. I filled out the card, laughing to myself. Me in Kansas? It sounded like a long shot.

Within a week, large envelopes filled my mailbox. The different orders sent splashy brochures depicting priests and brothers ministering in schools, hospitals, parishes, homeless shelters, and in their own communities. The vocation directors included notes expressing their happiness at having received my postcard inquiries. The letter-sized envelope from St. Benedict’s Abbey didn’t have a brochure, just a pamphlet listing the monks and their places of ministry, and three color postcards of the abbey. A brief letter was signed by Father Meinrad.

Two nights later my phone rang.

“Hello.”

“Hello! May I speak to Tim McNeill, please?”

I didn’t recognize the voice, so I assumed it was a telemarketer. I braced myself.

“This is Tim.”

“This is father Meinrad from St. Benedict’s Abbey in Atchison, Kansas!”

My mind went blank. “Kansas?”
"Yeah. You sent us a postcard asking for information about the abbey."

It all started clicking. "Oh yes. That's right."

"I sent you some stuff in the mail. Did you get it?"

"I did." Frantically, I looked around my apartment for the pile of information I had received in the mail. I spied it on my desk.

"What did you think of the postcards?"

The phone cord stretched as I went through the envelopes, I found the one from Kansas and yanked out the cards he had sent. One was a picture of a church tower, another depicted a large tree standing before a bland, square building, and the last was a panoramic shot of a massive stone building against blue purple storm clouds.

"It looks like a beautiful place." I said.

"Have you ever been here?"

"No. Actually, I went to Conception Seminary for a year, which I think is not too far from you."

"When did you go to Conception?"

"In 1984 and 1985. I studied for the Archdiocese of Denver."

"Oh?"

I related my history, not going into too much depth. I provided dates and places for all his inquiries. He seemed impressed that I was actively involved at the Cathedral. We were both the same age; he had entered the abbey during his college years and was recently ordained a priest. We had a pleasant conversation. As our chat came to a close, Father Meinrad said he'd call me again in a few weeks.

"Have you read the Rule of Saint Benedict?" he asked.

"No, I haven't."

"I would suggest you get a copy."
“I’ll do that.”

“Great. Take care and God Bless.”

“Goodnight, Father. And thank you for calling.”

Father Meinrad called regularly, the only vocation director to do so of all the communities I had sent cards to. He told me about other discerning men who had recently visited the abbey, and I talked about the Cathedral, my family, and my prayer life. After several months of enthusiastic prodding, I finally agreed to fly out to Kansas for a weekend visit in the middle of June.

“Make sure you bring work clothes.”

“Work clothes?”

“Yeah, for working outside.”

“Uh, OK.” I silently groaned. Me work outside?

“And bring some hiking clothes.”

“Hiking clothes?” I was confused. Why would I need hiking clothes in Kansas?

“Yeah, we’ll go on a hike.”

I rolled my eyes. “OK, Father. I’ll see you in a few days.”

“God Bless!”

“And God Bless you, Father.”

As the United Airlines jet lifted away from Denver International Airport, I leaned in my seat to get a last look at the mountains. Spring snow separated the blue sky from the purple blue peaks. The Metro area spread out below me, shrinking each second. I gazed at the foothills. Somewhere down there a statue of Jesus kept watch over the city. As the jet
tilted and turned toward Kansas, I settled back in my seat. I opened my prayer book. It was the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.
The Beautiful

He has come to the help of his servant Israel
for he has remembered his promise of mercy
the promise he made to our fathers,
to Abraham and his children forever.

Magnificat

St. Benedict’s Abbey crops up on the Missouri River bluffs like a land-locked lighthouse sending out prayer-beacons over cornfields. The four-storied Tudor Gothic edifice gazes over a wide lawn, the river’s bend, flat bottoms, and the Missouri bluffs four miles away. Trees, shrubs, wildflowers consume the steep slopes to the river’s edge, a Kansas jungle teeming with rabbits, raccoons, and nighttime coyote yelps. Starlings nest along the abbey’s stone crevices, under porticos. Crows hover, ride the wind. Standing on the northeastern edge of Atchison, the monastery seems like a peaceful refuge on the edge of a post-modern sea of noises. There is only the wind, birds chirping, and male voices rising in prayer. The marriage of nature and spirit. Welcoming.

My first glimpse of the abbey, on that Feast of the Sacred Heart, was from the Missouri side of the river. Father Meinrad had picked me up at the airport, and as we drove along the stretch of river bottom, he pointed to a large grey building poking above the lush bluffs. “That’s it! That’s the abbey!” I held my breath. A tower loomed above the massive structure; I could barely make out a silver cross on top of it, glittering in the June sun. “Wow. Looks big.” I exhaled, bit my lip. Here I was at the threshold of what I hoped to be a pivotal weekend in my life, and the only intelligent thing I could say was “wow.” I glanced over at Father Meinrad. Only a few months younger than me, he seemed several years younger. Not
as many lines in his face as in mine. At six foot something, with dark brown hair, wire-rimmed glasses, and a creaseless face, he could have passed for a mid-twentysomething. We had talked often on the phone, but I didn’t know what to expect when I had departed the plane. Fortunately, he had worn his Roman collar, so I picked him out right away. Now, as we sped toward the abbey, I wondered if he thought I was some inarticulate boob who could only state the obvious: “It’s big.” But I couldn’t read his face. “Wait until we get closer,” he said, taking one hand off the steering wheel to push up his glasses, “it’s impressive.” I nodded.

We crossed the Missouri River, a sign reading “Welcome to Kansas” attached to a steel girder at the middle of the bridge. Atchison, small city of about 11,000 souls, lazily bustled, the Con-Agra plant spewing smoke, trains idled on tracks, the downtown valleyed in by bluff hills. Cobblestone streets and large Victorian homes graced the north side of town. We traveled up a San Francisco-like hill and approached a red brick church, its twin spires scraping the muggy sky.

“That’s the parish church,” Father Meinrad mentioned. “The original abbey used to be next to it, but in the 1890’s they built a bigger abbey behind it.” We passed the church and glided by the big brick structure behind it. With a boarded up front door and broken windows, it seemed dejected, sad. “We moved out of this building in 1929 and into the new one on the bluff’s edge.” I nodded. A pigeon flew out of a top floor window. We turned onto a drive, flanked by a “Benedictine College” sign. Father swept his hand above the dashboard, pointing to various buildings. “Cafeteria,” he said. I grimaced; it looked like a Safeway store from the 1950s. All the buildings seemed to be either 19th century brick or mid-twentieth century functional. The modern ones were drab. “This will be our new Student Union and gym. We’re very excited.” I nodded at the construction site. At least this modern structure had some grace, a Gothic arch. We traveled up another hill, past a plain rectangle dorm and
the concrete library. A diamond shaped lawn with clusters of trees lay to our left, circled by a
drive. To its left, a large limestone building with a flat roof rose several stories, topped with
the tower. “And this,” Father beamed, “is the abbey.”

Father Meinrad parked the car in front of a two-storied section of the complex.
“When the abbey was completed in 1929, we ran out of funds to build the church and guest
house. You know, the Depression.” We got out of the Ford Escort. I caught my breath as hot,
humid air pressed down on me. Father grabbed my bags from the trunk. “The church and
guest house weren’t built until 1957. To commemorate our 100th anniversary. They’re in a
different style from the abbey, but I think they compliment each other.” I gazed at the newer
structures jutting off from the main building. The old was grey, window paned, with pointed
arches. The new seemed flat, flesh-colored. As a whole, it seemed monstrous. Big.

I grabbed my bags and we headed for the glass doors. The heavier suitcase banged
against my leg, almost tripping me as we walked along the flower-lined entrance sidewalk.
As I struggled up the five steps, I chided myself for bringing half my wardrobe. Father held
the door open for me; I practically stumbled into the hushed foyer. A love seat sat on one
side of the room, walls painted a light green. A receptionist in a closet-like room to our left
had a telephone receiver at her face, a switchboard buzzing before her. We went down a hall
and came to more stairs. I struggled again, my dead-weight suitcase cramping my fingers. At
the top of the stairs was another door, with a plaque above it: “Monastery.” I lurched into the
abbey, shoving my bag before me.

The main floor hallway stretched longer than a football field, grey marble floor
flanked by light blue walls. Pieces of art hung between doors: watercolors of farm houses, a
large painting of Madonna and Child, a Cubist-like rendition of the Nativity. And the place
was as quiet as a museum; clicks from my shoes echoed. Halfway down the hallway, we
stopped before a bulletin board. I set down my suitcase, tried to wiggle my aching fingers.
“This is where we post assignments. Announcements.” I blinked at the many pieces of paper tacked to the board. “See, your name is on here.” I squinted as Father Meinrad pointed to a note which had my name listed as one of several weekend vocation visitors. “C’mon. I’ll take you into the church before we get you to your room.” I picked up my bag and followed him to a set of swinging doors just off the hallway. “You can leave your stuff here.” He pointed to a bench near the doors. I plopped them down and went through the doors, trying to flex blood into my hand.

The first thing that struck me was the ceiling. Yellow, grey, and deep ruddy-colored tiles made long lines on the flat surface. The ceiling looked like it should have been a floor. Flesh-colored brick walls blended in to the same-hued limestone floor. Grey stones, concrete-like, covered side pillars, the walls in the nave. We walked down an aisle, dark brown choir stalls to the right, left. Where the stalls ended, the wide sanctuary was crowned with a massive marble and brick altar. The nave stretched several steps down from the sanctuary, pews stained a bit darker than the floor. Hanging from the ceiling were silver lamps, each triangle flanked by two upside-down triangles. They looked like space ships.

“Wow,” I said. “Modern.” My face turned red. Couldn’t I have come up with something more original?

Father Meinrad nodded: “The architect studied under Frank Lloyd Wright. This is prairie school of architecture.”

I mouthed an inaudible “Oh.” With all the hills and trees around, I wondered where the prairie was.

“But this is what we’re most proud of,” Father turned to face the doors we had come through. I did an about face. Directly above the doors loomed a large fresco. A robed risen Christ stood in front of a cross, his arms outstretched. Above him was a dove, and above the dove, a bearded man in yellow, to match the yellow ceiling tiles. The Trinity. Angels
fluttered around the cross, instruments of Christ’s passion in their hands: nails, the crown of thorns, a lance. At the foot of the cross, on either side, were Saint Benedict and his sister, Saint Scholastica.

Well, at least the fresco brings some color to such a bland church, I thought.

Father went into tour guide mode: “On the right side, at the top, is a scene from the life of our founder, Father Henry Lemke. He was a bit of a renegade.” Father Meinrad chuckled. “He left the monastery in Pennsylvania without permission from his abbot and came out to Kansas with some friends. When the abbot told him to get back to the monastery, he told his superior that Kansas would be a great place for a new Benedictine house. The abbot eventually agreed, and now look at us,” Father swept his hands in the air, “we’ve been here for almost 150 years.” Father shook his head, “The Lord works through our weaknesses.”

I “Hmm’d” and looked at Father Henry sitting by a bedridden man.

“The bottom scene,” Father Meinrad continued, “shows what this monastery is all about: the priest represents our missionary activity; we’ve sent priests to parishes since we were founded. That other figure is a brother monk, a carpenter. And in the corner, a child is reading. We’ve always been involved in education.” I nodded. “The left side depicts scenes from the life of St. Benedict.”

We stood in silence for a few moments. “So, this is the church.” Father turned around again and faced the sanctuary and nave. “Do you see how the nave is wide by the sanctuary, then gets more narrow toward the back? If you were to look at the church from head-on, outside, it would resemble a ship. A ship to transport souls to heaven.”

I looked over the vast area. It did seem ship-like.

“C’mon. I’ll take you to your room.”
We went back into the abbey, headed down the hall. We passed a TV room, then a kitchenette. “ABC Room,” Father explained, “After Breakfast Club. Monks gather in there for coffee each morning before going off to work.”

I poked in my head, my gaze taking in a refrigerator, coffee maker, microwave oven, tables and chairs. Against one wall was a shelf of cubby holes, or cubes, with the names of monks written above each one. Some had coffee mugs in them, other were stuffed with papers, some had books. On either side of the coffee maker, large windows with panes looked onto a courtyard. We moved on.

“These stairs will take you to each floor of the monastery, basement to attic,” Father Meinrad pointed to stairs near an elevator, towards the end of the hallway. “If you go down one flight, you’ll come to the ground floor. You’ll see a big room right, the shoe room, and the back door. You’re welcome to use it.”

I blinked, wondering how I would know how to find the stairwell in the first place. I already felt a bit overwhelmed at the size of the monastery.

“You may want to take a walk after I show you to your room.” He glanced at his watch. “I’ll be tied up all afternoon at the college, but you may want to roam around a bit. You can get to the cemetery from the back door, just go through the parking lot and up the hill. You can’t miss it.”

“Sounds good.” It sure did sound good. My lungs were screaming for a cigarette.

When we came to the end of the hallway, we turned left and entered the refectory. It was big enough to be a church. A large crucifix stood against the wall opposite the main entrance. Stained glass windows filtered in colors along the yellow walls, greenish carpet. A buffet line stood in the middle, with rows of tables on either side. One long table stood at the foot of the crucifix.
“Abbot’s table,” Father mentioned as we walked past it and through a small side door. “You’ll be staying in the cottage. It’s a building attached to the refectory. When Mexican nuns used to cook for us, this was their convent, directly over the kitchen. Now we have lay people cook for us.”

We passed an ice machine. “How do you get the food from downstairs up here?” I asked, my suitcase almost scraping along the tiled floor.

“A small elevator. Used to be in a grain elevator.” Father pointed to a door. “But sometimes it breaks down. Then the staff has to take all the food carts out into the cloister walk, along the courtyard, and use another elevator.” He giggled. “They’re not too happy when that happens.”

We went through another door, and I wondered how I would ever be able to find my way through so many doors. We stepped into a small hall lined with open doors. We came to a room, “Here you go,” Father said. “I’ll let you get unpacked and settled in. Like I said, you’re welcome to take a walk.” He glanced at his watch again. “I’ll be back a little before 5:00. We have mass at 5:15. I’m sure some of the other guys who are coming will be here by then. The bathroom is down the hall, and there’s a small chapel where we first came in. I’ll see you in a few hours.” And with a hand shake, Father Meinrad scampered away. Silence boomed.

I sat on the bed for a few moments, trying to take in the barrage of information, the immensity of my surroundings. The place was so big, I felt as if I had entered a Medieval castle, and that it would take years to find my bearings. But the place felt peaceful, quiet. I liked it.

After unpacking my suitcase in a room furnished with a spongy twin bed, a small metal desk, a chair, dresser, and a metal closet, I peered out the window. A parking lot filled with Ford Escorts and Plymouth Acclaims lay one floor below me. Three garage doors were
open beneath the refectory. Beyond the parking lot, a grassy area let to a line of trees. The bluff. I could not get a glimpse of the river through all the greenery.

I retraced my steps, desperate for a cigarette. I found the stairwell and went down a flight. I practically bounded through the shoe room, which did not have any shoes in it, and out the back door. Once again, the humid air sucked my breath away. I went past the cars and toward the concrete path. Actually, it was wide enough for a car. Or a hearse. Shrouded on one side by pine trees, the pathway eventually leveled off to a large green lawn. To the left, grave stones in perfect lines peaked several inches above the grass. Behind them stood evergreens. To the right of the path, an wide lawn led to the edge of the bluff, with a view of the river. A bench sat at the end of the path. Although it was hot, I practically ran. I sat on the bench, took out a cigarette, and let smoke sigh out of my mouth. “Thank God,” I whispered.

I started to relax, to enjoy the silence. My black Esprit rayon shirt with pin-prick white polka dots soaked up the sun. Sweat trickled down my back, but I didn’t mind. My lungs were happy. I felt a bit naughty, hiding out in the cemetery, sucking on a cigarette. I had wanted to quit before I made the trip to Kansas, but like every other attempt, I had failed to kick the habit. I just could not endure the agonizing withdrawals. I had no idea as to what the monks thought about smoking, but I wasn’t about to sit on the front steps, puffing away. I felt ashamed of myself, a slave to addiction. I decided to not mention my smoking. It wasn’t something I planned to continue, anyway. For the weekend, the cemetery would have to suffice. After two cigarettes, I stood up, light-headed, and made my way back to the abbey.

At mass and supper, four other vocation visitors and I followed Father Meinrad’s lead like a flock of sheep. The other guys seemed nice. One was a graduate of the college, a big guy in Dockers and a non-descript button-down shirt. A second Benediction College alum currently attended medical school in Wichita. There was a Kansas State University
engineering student, swarthy from a farm upbringing. And a young man who had never been to college, who talked a lot about the Kansas City Chiefs. We seemed like a motley crew in a sea of black-cowled monks. The mass was simple, spare—baritone voices rose from the choir stalls, responses measured, slow. At supper, we sat at a guest table. We visitors heaped our plates in the food line: fried fish patties, French fries, corn, clam chowder, salad. Father’s fork and knife seemed to dissect his patty, rather than bringing any food to his mouth. “We have fish every Friday,” he mumbled. The rest of us ate heartily.

Vespers blew me away. We sat in the choir stalls with the monks, but in a separate section. The Psalms, sung in English, bounced off the walls, the multi-colored ceiling, the fresco. The stanzas alternated from one side of the choir to the other. I couldn’t get over how peaceful it was. The organ and the male voices lifted up like incense, wafting through my entire being. So sweetly tranquil. I had been praying the Divine Office for years, but my recitation was nothing like this post-modern chant: antiquated poetry set to contemporary motets. Although I could not sing, I let the music, the voices, carry me. It was like a scene from the book of Revelation: a multitude of voices praising God.

As I sat in my stall, I stole peeks at the monks. Most had their eyes closed or heads bowed during the quiet interlude between each Psalm. Many of them were old, bald. Some were so fair it seemed as if they never stepped outside. Some looked rugged, rough, as if they spent all their time in the gardens. The younger ones sat in pews nearest the aisle, next to the very ancient who left their walkers close by. As I gazed at them, I wondered if I could imagine myself one of them, sitting in a habit, intent on prayer. As their voices rose in the next Psalm, I knew that I could see myself in their midst. I had no idea as to what a non-degree holding bank teller could contribute to community life, but I did know that I could lend them my hearty prayers, my warbly voice. By the time we sang the Salve Regina at the close of prayer, I had to fight back the tears. It was all so glorious. Beautiful.
When Vespers finished, Father Meinrad informed us that the community would have a *haustus* that evening at 8:00. "*Haustus* is Latin for watering hole. A well. It's when we have beer and wine, chips and dips at recreation." The place was sounding better every minute.

Since I had some spare time before the gathering, I decided to sneak out for a cigarette. Once again, I made my pilgrimage to the cemetery bench, the nicotine a welcomed friend. As I headed back to the abbey, I stuffed my mouth with breath mints.

When I walked into the community room, opposite the refectory, I was pleasantly surprised. Besides a cart holding cans of Budweiser and MGD, and bottles of wine, a table had been set up, covered with an array of spirits: gin, vodka, rum, whiskey, scotch. This wasn't just a *haustus*, but a Super-*haustus*, the whole nine yards. On another table, there were plates of cheese and crackers, a tub of popcorn, and chips and dips. As I mixed myself a bourbon and Sprite, I smiled. Heck, I thought, I could get used to this.

I shimmied my way through the crowded room. Monks introduced themselves: "I'm Father Blaine;" "I'm Father Eugene;" "I'm Father Michael;" "Father Denis." A short man wearing a Roman collar approached me. "Hello! I'm Father Regis." I shook his hand.

"Hello," I said, "I'm Father Tim." He raised his eyebrows. "Not yet you are!" I could feel my face becoming Nancy Reagan red. "Oh, I mean, I'm Tim," I stammered. I wanted to fall through a hole in the floor. Father Regis laughed.

An uneasiness rumbled in my stomach as I mingled among the monks. Not only was I embarrassed about my "Father Tim" faux pas, but I quickly realized that these men were highly educated. Many of them had Ph.D.'s and taught in the college. I milled about the room, which became a crucible of constant questioning.

"What do you do for a living, Tim?" I think it was Father Blaine I was talking to.

"I work in a bank."
“Oh?” He raised his eyebrows. “Are you a loan officer?”

I took a swig of Bud. “Uh, no. I’m a bank teller.”

“Hmm.” Father pursed his lips. “And where are you from?”

“Denver. Well actually, I’m originally from Connecticut.”

“Oh! Where did you live in Connecticut?”

“Stratford when I was young, and then in New Haven for five years during my twenties.”

Father stopped the lifting of a potato chip to his mouth. “New Haven? Did you go to Yale?” The chip wavered in his fingers like a communion wafer.

“Oh my goodness, no!” I nervous-giggled. “I sold women’s shoes.”

He raised his eyebrows again.

“At Macy’s.” My voice sounded thin.

“How nice.” Father looked away, munching on his chip. He looked across the room.

“Do you see that young man over there?” he asked, pointing an index finger at one of the visitors. “He graduated from Benedictine College and now he’s in med school. We’re very proud of him.”

I gazed at the young man. He was surrounded by a host of monks, chatting amiably. He had short blondish-brown hair, a runner’s physique, a broad smile. For a split second I hated him.

“Yes, I’ve met him. He’s a very nice guy.”

“Indeed he is. I should probably say hello to him. Please excuse me.” And Father was off to the other side of the room.

The rest of the haustus conversations followed suit: “Where did you go to school?” each man asked me, “What type of a degree do you have?” Over and over I had to explain that I never finished college. “What do you do?” When I mentioned that I worked in a bank,
they invariably asked “Are you a loan officer? Are you in management?” And each time I sighed. “No, I’m a teller.” They’d smile politely and move on to the next vocation visitor: the sweet, but simple one who talked football and garden vegetables, the two alumni, the engineering student. I felt stupid.

When I finally left the party, I walked the length of the hall and went out the front doors. I had no desire to trek up to the cemetery in the dwindling light. I walked around the shadowy campus, swatting mosquitoes, smoking my cigarette. I felt like a lowly bank teller in an Esprit polka dot shirt.

The next morning, after coffee in the ABC room, Father Meinrad took us visitors to the third floor TV room for a conference with Father Eugene. The large-screened TV stayed dark as we sat in blue chairs around the elderly monk. Father Eugene, retired Biology professor, went into lecture mode: “Hell, I’ve been a monk for about fifty years. When I entered, things were a lot different, see. Back then, we were separated into groups. Those who would go on to the priesthood, and those who would be brothers.” He tapped his wooden cane on the blue carpet. “I was on the priesthood track. Got my degree, then studied Theology here. Then I went to the abbot. That was Abbot Martin Veth, a good man.” He paused for a second or two, his gaze traveling the decades. “I told him that I wanted to get my Ph.D. in Biology at Cornell University. That’s in New York state. He gave me the OK. The next day I was on the train. I arrived at Cornell and asked for admission papers. Heh-heh! I hadn’t even applied yet!” He shook his head and smiled. Father Eugene still had plenty of white hair, neatly slicked back. “But they took me in, and I got my Ph.D. When I got back to the abbey, I started teaching in the college. Taught for almost forty years.” He sat quietly for a moment.
"Course, things were different thirty years or so ago. I used to have it in with the dog catcher. Whenever he found a stray cat or dog, he'd bring it on up to me. We used them for live dissections."

I winced. "You used to dissect cats and dogs when they were still alive?" The question popped out of my mouth before I could stop it.

"Well hell, 'course we did. We gave the animals anesthesia. Didn't hurt 'em at all. I even made the dissecting tables myself. There's one next door in the pool room, if you want to see it."

I put on a polite smile. The thought of carving into a kitty-kitty made me want to puke, but I was mesmerized by Father Eugene's story.

"Anyway, where was I?" He fiddled with his cane. "Oh yes, back forty years ago. Things were different. As novices, we had showers only twice a week. Only twice a week. Didn't matter how hot and sweaty or dirty you got. It was no big deal. But nowadays," he shook his head, "some of these fellas are in the shower every day. Sometimes twice a day. Imagine! Heh-heh!" Father Meinrad stifled a giggle.

"Course, a lot of the changes came during the Revolution." Father Eugene paused. "That's what I call the 60s. The Revolution. Vatican Council II came, and made some changes that needed to be made. But then people started going crazy. There was talk for a while about doing away with the habit. You know, like the sisters did. We even had a fashion show one night. Monks paraded around the community in grey suits with grey ties. It was the dangest thing. I thought, well hell, if we're going to get rid of the habit, why not wear shorts and T-shirts in the summer? Heh-heh. But as you can see, we kept the habits. I call 'em uniforms." He smiled.

I felt comfortable in his presence. It was like listening to a grandfather.
“They were hard times. Confusing times. Guys left the monastery left and right.” He looked down at his black loafers. “My own brother left the community. Married one of the sisters from across town.”

I shifted in my seat.

“But we got through it. All the rooms in this monastery were filled at one time. Not any more.” He looked at each of us. “But hell, you never know. Maybe some of you fellas will enter.”

“You never know,” Father Meinrad said. He stood up, glancing at his watch.

“Thanks, Father Eugene. These guys have to get together with Brother Anthony now. He’s going to put them to work in the garden.”

“That’s great, men.” Father Eugene waved his cane. “You know, thirty years ago, the brothers did all the work on the farm. We had a farm back then, see, and the brothers didn’t have much education.”

Father Meinrad motioned for us to stand up.

“I thought it was a dang shame that none of those guys got degrees,” Father Eugene continued, “would’ve helped their self-confidence. Now take someone like Brother Francis. He worked for years in the chicken coop, and hell, you can’t understand a word he says. Talks like a chicken. Heh-heh!”

“Father Eugene, I have to get them down to the boiler room to meet Brother Anthony.”

“Oh yes. Yes. You go on now. Brother Anthony does a great job with the gardens. ‘Course, we don’t have chickens or cows anymore.”

We moved toward the door, but I wanted to stay. I could have sat there all day listening to this eightysomething monk. He slowly stood up, putting his weight on the cane.
"I'm old and rickety now. You fellas go on ahead. I'll see you at mass. End of lecture." We gave Father a round of thanksgiving and left the room, the old man moving at a snail's pace.

I don't know what it was about Father Eugene's talk, but all my anxiety drifted away during that hour. The revelation that he used stray animals for dissection had both revolted and charmed me. Father Eugene was no romantic notion of a monk, he was flesh and blood and spirit. His stories eased my fears about smoking, about being a mere bank teller. Father Eugene helped me realize that monks were more than mere figures draped in black fabric. I felt comfortable again, like I had in the chapel during Vespers.

On the way down the stairway, I told Father Meinrad that I needed to return to my room to change out of my black slacks and white Willi Wear shirt depicting the New York skyline. "Meet us in the boiler room," he said, as they continued down the stairs and I went toward the hallway on the main floor.

Of course, I didn’t have outdoor work clothes. I hadn’t worn jeans for years—all I owned were slacks. I put on some khaki pants, an Oxford shirt, and sneakers. But before going to the boiler room, I stepped out of the shoe room to have a cigarette. When I went back inside, I went through a different door near the back door and wandered down a hallway I had never seen. Like the main floor, this hall had blue walls and paintings. But it also had carpet. I passed yet another TV room, only this one had ashtrays in it. I poked my head in and noticed several crushed butts in one of them. Further down the hall, I found a room filled with low chairs, newspapers on a coffee table, and racks of magazines. I lingered for a moment, taking in the titles: *Sports Illustrated, Time, Newsweek, Sisters Today, Commonweal, America, Crisis, The New Yorker*. I wanted to stay. It seemed like a perfect place to hole up for hours in quiet reading, like spending a rainy afternoon in a corner of a library. But knew I had better get to the boiler room, if I could find it.
I retraced my steps, found the stairwell, and went down as far as I could go. I turned left and walked down a dark hallway. It didn’t seem to lead anywhere, so I turned around and went back to the stairwell, this time turning right. Sure enough, I found the boiler room. The basement. But no one was there. Large doors, large enough to be garage doors, opened up to yet another parking lot. How many parking lots does this place have? I wondered. I sat on a chair near the door, not knowing what to do. After several minutes, I heard the rumble of a pick up truck and a door slam. Brother Anthony stood in the doorway.

“There you are!” he said. “We thought you might have gotten lost!” He was a short man, with a bit of a paunch. He looked as if he lived in the sun, his arms and face were browned, a bit freckled. Greyish-brown bangs hung along his low forehead. He wore ratty-green pants and a bright yellow T-shirt that had GARDEN CREW in red letters.

“Well, I did kind of get lost.” I said, standing up.

“No problem. I have the other guys shoveling mulch around the rose bushes.” He looked me up and down. “But I have something that’ll probably be more your speed.”

I scrunched my eyebrows. More my speed?

“Hop in the truck.”

I did as I was told. We drove down the abbey’s back road, past the vocation visitors sweating in mounds of mulch. We headed toward the front of the monastery. He stopped in front of the guest house and jumped out of the cab, “Follow me.” We walked to the entranceway, to the steps leading to the glass doors. He dashed behind a side bush and came out holding a hose, topped with a sprayer.

“You see all this dirt on the walkway?” He motioned to clods of earth on the concrete. “Father Benedict takes care of the flower beds, but sometimes he gets dirt all over the sidewalk. Messy. I want you to spray the dirt off, into the street.” He took the hose. A
forceful stream of water pushed dirt and young flower leaves. “See? I think this should be perfect for you.” I managed a tight smile. Did the guy think I was a china doll?

“When you’re finished, just roll up the hose and put it behind the bush. Then you’re done.”

“That’s it?”

“Sure. It might not look like much, but you’re really helping me out. I can’t leave the front entrance to the abbey a mess. I really appreciate it that you’ll do this for me.”

I smiled warmly. “I’m happy to do it.” Watering dirt certainly sounded better than mulching rose bushes. I didn’t even know what mulch was.

“Thanks for your help.” He got back into the truck. “I’d better get check on the other guys.”

I waved as he drove away. I shot at the dirt, wiggling the stream. Water raced toward the street. I looked up to notice clouds gathering. It looked like it might rain. Heck, I can handle this, I thought.

Actually, it turned out to be the perfect job for me. As the clouds thickened and the air became heavy, I interiorly chatted with God: Thank you Lord, for this water-spraying job. I wouldn’t have known what do with mulch. And a shovel. I made watery curly Q’s on the concrete. And thank you, Lord, for bringing me here. It’s a lovely place. Monks came in and out of the guest house entrance, so I had a grand time chatting. A job that could have been done in fifteen minutes or so lasted an hour. Just as I started to wind up the hose, it started to rain on my wet sidewalk. Oh well, I thought, at least I hadn’t gotten sweaty. I went back to my room to change into my slacks and WilliWear.

Over a pork chops and mashed potatoes lunch, Father Meinrad announced, “We’ll take a hike at 1:30.”
“But what about the rain?” I asked, cutting a piece of fat off the chop.

“It’s stopped already. It should be a great afternoon for a hike to the pond.”

The other guys seemed to think it a smashing idea. I chomped on my pork.

I changed into my work clothes, which would now be my hiking outfit. After all, I was in Kansas, how involved could the hike possibly be? I decided not to worry about it. And heck, I walked to and from work every day. It wasn’t as if I was a total couch potato.

We marched on abbey grounds north of the monastery. The air hung and it had gotten hot. Extremely hot. I started sweating profusely as we walked through the cemetery. We traversed through a cow pasture, careful to dodge those fly-ridden pies. We went up, down, through a forest, out of the forest. Mosquitoes and flies swarmed around my damp neck and forehead. Father Meinrad chatted as if he were strolling through Central Park, the others next to him. I trailed a few yards behind. Several times I almost slipped on the grass. We finally arrived at a pond. I said a silent Thank You to God as I sat on a fallen tree, happy to catch my breath. All I wanted was a cigarette. Father talked about beavers and college students who had beer parties around campfires. Beer sounded good.

On our return trip, Father suggested we take a short cut. A barely-visible path led straight up a hill, brambles and bushes on either side. As we climbed, I thought I would die. My heart raced, sweat poured from my face, down my back and my chest, drenching my shirt. Branches scraped my arms. Burrs clung to my socks. The mosquitoes never ceased their attacks. Father Meinrad and the others had to wait for me at the top of the hill. When I finally emerged from the edenic inferno, Father asked, “Are you OK?”

Panting, I waved my hand around the buzzing by my ears. “Yeah. I guess I’m a bit out of shape.” I took out my handkerchief, blowing my nose. On top of everything else, my allergies were in overdrive. “Of course, at 32, I’m a little older than the rest of you.”

“I’ll be 32 in November,” Father quipped. I smiled, grinding my teeth.
By the time we returned to the abbey, I didn’t think I’d be able to walk for days. I made it to the shower, put on my WilliWear shirt for the third time that day, and went out for a smoke. But rather than sneaking out to the cemetery, I sat on a bench near a dorm, on the main road leading to the monastery. I didn’t care if all the monks traipsed by. I sat in the shade and enjoyed my smoke, too exhausted to hide my habit.

The rest of the weekend went a bit more smoothly. There were no more hikes. The four other vocation visitors left on Sunday after mass, so I had the monks to myself. I chatted with the brethren, getting to know them better. I still couldn’t tell any of them apart, but they were all so pleasant. And I spent hours praying before the Blessed Sacrament. I read a lot. The ache in my legs actually began to feel good, an “I’ve been exercising” kind of good.

By Sunday afternoon, I knew that I wanted to stay. I didn’t want to return to Denver. The liturgies enthralled me, sent my spirit flying. The monks were kind. I found myself relishing the quiet. No traffic noises. No gun shots or honking horns. No lesbians having sex. But the abbey wasn’t so much about turning away from something, it was if I could turn toward something. Toward God. A feeling came over me that I was home, where I was meant to be. In the ship-like church, I knelt before the tabernacle and told God: If it is your will that I return, then so be it. I love it here Lord. I admit that a part of me doesn’t want to go back to Colorado. But I’ll see what happens. Whatever you decide. I just want you to know that I would be honored to continue my journey to you as a member of this community. Your will be done. My eyes roamed over the corpus on the cross, the bowed head. As I let the silence envelop me, I realized that I felt a kinship with this two architectural-styles abbey: my faith, traditional and solid like the Tudor-Gothic abbey; my worldly personality, as post-modern and earthy as the Prairie Style church. I smiled at the tabernacle: Perhaps I could fit
in just fine here, Lord. The words of Psalm 118 almost spilled from my mouth: *Open to me the gates of holiness: I will enter and give thanks.*

As Father Meinrad drove me to the airport on Monday afternoon, he asked, “So, how did it go? Would you want to come back?”

“Oh yes!” I gushed. “Would it be possible to come back?”

“Sure.”

“How would I go about the admission process?”

“Well, you’d have to make a few more visits. Go through some interviews and psychological testing. You could come back in the Fall. Then after another visit or so, we could talk about you’re jumping on board. Maybe enter next Spring.”

Next Spring? I thought. It sounded so far away. I wanted to enter right away.

“Don’t worry. The months’ll fly by,” he said, as if he uttered them to others.

I nodded, gazing at a Missouri tobacco field.

On the plane, I sat back in my seat, gazed at the patchwork farms below me. *Thank you, Holy Mother,* I whispered to the window. *Thank you, Lord.*

* * * * *

A month after my trip to Kansas, I brought snap shops of the abbey to my sister’s wedding. My head still swimming in the incense of monastic holiness, I yearned to share my plans for the future with visiting friends and family. Against a backdrop of a picture-perfect Rocky Mountain wedding, I planned to regale a captive audience with photos of the Midwest. Relatives came from Connecticut and California, friends from all over the country, to witness Kim and Paul’s vows in a rustic stone chapel not far from Estes Park. Slightly snow-capped and grey, Mount Meeker loomed above the chapel. The reception, held in the
stately Stanley Hotel in Estes Park, proved to be a festive occasion of Guinness beer, 80s
dance music, and much laughter. The wide-window vistas looked out toward Long’s Peak.
Yet as I toted around my photo album, I noticed that my voice sounded strained. Detached.
As far away as Kansas. What was supposed to be a joyous day turned into one of raw
emotions for me. For I knew that nothing would ever be the same between me and my sister.

Kim and I had been a team for so long: we’d weathered our parents’ divorce, partied
and danced, cried in movie theaters. been saddened by our brother’s choice of a wife, and
had gotten together most weekends when we lived a part in Denver. She was my best friend.
Someone who knew me better than anyone else. With her wedding, I felt as if a part of me
was being severed. A persistent foreboding inched along my mind: everything will be
different now—Kim will start a family and they will take priority in her life, as should
happen. But I couldn’t help feeling a slight sense of loss.

Added to this was the fact that I wanted to join the monastery. I paraded my photos
before my relatives, who seemed both slightly interested, and slightly guarded. After all, I
had been in and out of the seminary twice. As I flipped the pages, pointing out the chapel, the
river, I realized that monastic life would entail leaving my family. Leaving my sister.

Emotionally, I distanced myself from the wedding events. I knew that if didn’t stuff
my feelings into the recesses of my mind, I would break out into tears. When I sat in the
sanctuary during the wedding mass as the acolyte, stiff in my cassock and surplice, I had to
bite my lip to keep from crying. The happiest day of my sister’s life filled me with a
profound loneliness. At the reception, I glided from table to table, chatting, laughing, beer in
one hand, photos in another. But it was as if the real me resided outside my body, watching
this shell of myself smile and have a grand time. I seemed deadened to everything except the
beer.
At one point during the afternoon, while I smoked on the wide veranda, I heard Billy Idol’s “White Wedding” booming from the dance floor. I flicked my cigarette on to the velvety lawn and ran inside, looking for my sister. When I spotted her across the room, I yelled “Kim!” and dashed forward. My left hand hit a wineglass and sent it sailing from the table, smashing on the hardwood floor. But I barely took notice. I continued to run toward my sister, mouthing Idol’s words: “Hey little sister, what have you done?” It never occurred to me to turn back and clean up the shards of glass. Nothing could stop me from dancing to “White Wedding” with my sister.

Some time later in the afternoon, the DJ played the B-52s’ “Love Shack,” one of my favorite songs. As the dance floor filled, I found myself jumping onto the three-foot stage. I gyrated in front of the DJ, my hips moving, arms flying, singing like I was Fred Schneider. All the dancers hooted and clapped. When the song slowed to “Bang, bang, bang on the door, baby—knock a little louder, sugar!” I stood still, knocking on an invisible door. The crowd shouted “Bang bang!” and I yelled, “I can’t hear you!” Then some of the burly guys stood below me, forming what looked like a hammock as they clasped forearms. “Jump! Jump!” the guys screamed, holding their arms to show that they would catch me. I laughed, shook my head no. But then everyone yelled, “Jump! Jump!” Raising my eyebrows, I smirked at the crowd, wiggled my ass for the DJ, took a deep breath, then leaned forward. The short fall felt exhilarating. I fell into their arms, standing up in time to join everyone else for “Tin roof, rusted.” It was a crowning moment.

I spent the rest of the afternoon dancing with abandon, all emotion poured into movement. Images from nightclub nights flashed through my mind: all the swirling strobe lights, smoke, hard bodies. My arms flailed, sweat stained my tuxedo, but I could not stop. It was almost as if I danced for my life. Or for a life that was ending. As the detached observer,
I could almost see myself on that dance floor, twirling with a crazed determination in my eyes. A determination to lose myself.

I realize now that the free fall from the stage was a last hurrah for me, a farewell to a past I had not dignified with a symbolic closure. Since my conversion had been gradual, my drifting away from Party-Boy Tim had lacked metaphor. The frenzied wedding dance allowed me to grieve for a past of excess, for a changing relationship with my sister. And the dance gave voice to the sadness that if I did end up becoming a monk, I would be separated from my family for the rest of my life.

At the end of the reception, I found my photo album on a table littered with half-empty pints of beer and cake crumbs. I walked through the lobby, up the grand staircase to my room. Jesus had performed his first miracle at a wedding feast. And his life was forever changed. The only miracle that had occurred at my sister’s wedding was the mass itself, two people vowing their lives to each other at the sacrificial banquet. But I knew that for me, too, life would be forever changed.

* * * * *

I had planned to get back to the abbey in the Fall, but I didn’t have the funds to pay for a plane ticket. I spent that Autumn and Winter keeping my usual routine of prayer, opening up the Cathedral, work, and quiet evenings in front of the TV. I talked on the phone with Father Meinrad frequently. My life seemed to mosey about much as it had before my Kansas trip, but in my heart, it was different. At Christmas, I could not help but reflect that it could very well be my last Christmas spent with the family. I cherished each time I spent a Saturday evening with Kim and Paul, pigging out on pizza and watching videos. In the back of my mind, I knew that it would all end some day.
In the middle of February, I made my second visit to St. Benedict’s Abbey. Unlike the June trip, there were no other vocation visitors. I didn’t have to take a hike along the bluffs, nor did I work outside. As biting cold winds lashed at the monastery, I spent four days reading, praying, talking with the monks. It was a Lenten slice of heaven. The tranquil days reinforced my desire to enter the abbey. At the end of the visit, Father Meinrad and I sat in his office to plan for the future.

“So what do I have to do to start the process?” I asked, gazing at an icon of the Blessed Mother on the wall.

“Well, you’ll have to get some letters of recommendation from your pastor, your manager at work, and another priest, like your spiritual director.”

I wrote this down in a notebook on my lap.

“We’ll also need a doctor’s report, describing your health.”

I nodded.

“Baptismal records. First Communion and Confirmation records.”

I scribbled furiously.

“And you’ll have to make one more visit. At that time, I’ll set up your interviews.”

I raised my eyebrows.

Father Meinrad laughed. “It’s not so bad. You’ll talk with four other monks. They’re on the formation committee.” He reached for a folder on his desk. “And we’ll arrange for psychological testing. We use a sister in the Kansas City area.”

Oh great, I thought, more psychological testing. I’d been there, done that.

“What is the time frame we’re thinking of?” I asked.

Father Meinrad stroked a beard he hadn’t had in June. “Let’s say you come back in a month or so. We could have you begin the postulancy in mid-May.”
I pucked my lips. Spring suddenly seemed so close. I thought of my apartment, of all that cluttered my apartment.

“There’s a guy from Omaha who has started the process. He was a seminarian at Conception, like you. After your time there.”

I nodded again and wrote “What to do with all my stuff?” on the notebook page.

“He’s a great guy. Very devout. Played football at Cathedral High. I think you two will get along well.”

What could I possibly have in common with a football player, I wondered.

“Perhaps you could come back for the Easter Triduum, at the end of March,” Father suggested.

“Sounds good,” I offered, closing the notebook.

I booked my flight for the Easter weekend when I returned to Denver. Three weeks later, I received a call from Father Meinrad.

“Tim? It looks like we’ll start the postulancy a little earlier than what I had said. Instead of mid-May, we’re looking at the middle of April.”

“The middle of April? But that’s only five and a half weeks away!” I looked around my apartment. “I have to give notice on my apartment. And my job.”

“We’ll talk about it when you get here next week.”

I sighed, happy that everything was falling into place, but also a little on edge: what would I do with all my things?

I arrived on Holy Thursday evening. Father Meinrad told me that he would take me to the nun psychologist the following morning. The series of tests that would last for three hours
or more. It felt good to be back at the abbey, but the thought of spending my Good Friday morning in a psychologist’s office didn’t thrill me. Oh well, I thought, I’ll offer it up.

Sister Doctor looked prim and proper in a tan skirt and jacket, white blouse, glasses and mousy hair. With a flair for no nonsense, she told Father to pick me up in three and a half hours and then sat me down in a chair facing her. The general interview consisted of talking about my past. I mentioned the happy hours, dating, my worldly lifestyle. I didn’t go into my affinity for flashy shirts, but I supposed she could pick up on that as I wore one of purple and red silk. I recounted my conversion, chatted about my prayer life, counted off my activities at the Cathedral. I gave a few perfunctory remarks about my job as a bank teller. She wrote it all down in a small notebook. I ended it with a “I guess that’s it” look on my face.

“Great,” she said, “Now for the testing part.” She rummaged through a folder on the table next to her. My heart rate picked up.

“I’ll show you a picture, and you have to tell me a story about the scene, whatever pops into your head. Got that? OK.” She held up a drawing of a woman lying on a rumbled bed, arm dangling limply off the edge, hair sprawled, breasts barely covered in a nightgown. A man, fully clothed, stood at the foot of the bed. “Tell me a story about what’s going on.”

I squinted at the picture. “Uh. He rushed into the room, only to find that she was dead.”

“Who is she?”

I shrugged. “His sister.”

Her mouth puckered. “Sister?”

“Yeah. When she didn’t show up for breakfast, the brother went to her room. Found her dead.”

“How did she die?”

What the heck is this? I thought. “She died in her sleep. Natural causes.”
Sister Doctor scribbled furiously, her mouth tight. Had I said something wrong?

She sighed. “OK, let’s move on. I’ll show you a set of black and white drawings and you tell me what’s missing from the picture.”

“What?”

“Tell me what’s wrong with each drawing.” She grabbed a stack of index card-sized drawings.

The first showed a cabin in a winter wonderland. Piles of snow rested on the roof, smoke rose from the chimney. A pile of wood lay in the foreground.

“What’s missing?”

I shifted in my chair, leaned closer to the image. Everything looked kosher. I didn’t see anything wrong. Seconds ticked by, but I couldn’t distinguish the flaw. I started to panic.

“I don’t know. It looks fine to me.”

“Are you sure?”

“I guess so.”

She leaned toward me. “There’s no snow on the woodpile.” She pointed.

What the hell, I thought, maybe someone had just brought the top logs into the cabin. I bit my lip.

“Here’s another.” It was a picture of a room. I narrowed my eyes at the couch, a table, a fireplace. Everything looked in order.

“I don’t know.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Take a closer look.”

“There are no flowers in the vase?”

“That’s true, but it’s not what I’m looking for.”

Sweat formed on my forehead. I bent toward the picture in her hand. Her nails were short, free of polish. I shook my head. “I give up. I have no idea.”
“The door!” she barked. “There’s no door handle!”

I leaned back in my chair, wiped my forehead.

“You don’t pay attention to details, do you?”

I wanted to slap her, but I shrugged.

She set the drawings on the table and took out a piece of paper from the notebook.

“Now I’ll ask you a few aptitude questions. Ready?”

My left leg started to shake. I placed my hand on it, pleading with it to please stop.

“Who wrote *A Tale of Two Cities*?”

“Charles Dickens!” I beamed.

“What’s the capital of New York?”

“Albany.” I started to relax.

“What is pi?”

“Huh?”

“Pi.”

I tried to run my fingers through my sprayed-stiff hair. “Uh. I don’t know. It has something to do with math.”

“That, and a Greek letter,” she said. Her eyes looked at me over the top of her glasses.

“All right. What’s the population of the United States?”

Oh fuck, I thought. And then I turned red. I hadn’t used the word fuck since my conversion. “150 billion?”

“ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY BILLION?” she screeched. “There’s only about four billion in the world!”

I slumped down in the chair. My gaze rested on the picture of the door without a handle.
“Well, that’s enough. I’ll send you into the next room to take the written tests. You’ll be in there for a few hours. Do you need to use the rest room first?” I nodded no. “You’ll want to pay close attention to the detailed instructions. Follow them. When you’re finished, knock on my door.”

She gave me a packet of booklets and answer sheets with ovals on them, and several number two pencils. I was led to a closet-like room with a desk and chair. “Good luck,” she said, smiling as she shut the door. I welcomed the quiet hum from the overhead lights.

The first test consisted of five hundred true and false questions. The same test I had taken three times in my seminary-switching career. Piece of cake, I whispered. As I made little dots on the answer sheet, I giggled when I came upon familiar questions: I want to be a mechanic. False! I want to be a florist. True! I answered them honestly and as quickly as I could. I just wanted to get out of there.

Father Meinrad picked me up a little after noon, and I practically dashed out of the office. Walking to the car, he asked, “How’d it go?”

“I feel totally stupid.”

“Why?”

I gazed at my black loafers, the concrete parking lot. “Because I said that the population of the United States is 150 million.”

Father made a whistling noise through his lips, and then chuckled. “Don’t worry. I’m sure you did fine.” He unlocked my car door.

I looked at suburban Kansas City as we got on to the highway. Oh Holy Mother, I silently prayed, I need your prayers on this one.

“Let’s get back to the abbey for the Passion service,” Father said.

“Geez. I feel like I’ve lived Good Friday these past few hours.”
Months later, I read Sister Doctor’s evaluation of me. I was happy to learn that she didn’t think I was stupid; she wrote that I had “average intelligence.” But she did mention something that confused me: she said that my faith life was “naïve.” Naïve? She failed to give an explanation, so I am left to wonder. I think she may have regarded me as a bit devotional, for I had talked about the rosary, St. Faustina, and the Chaplet of Divine Mercy. I don’t know if devotions make one naïve, but Sister Doctor’s opinion doesn’t bother me. My love for Mary and the saints, my litany of prayers, all help me grow in the spiritual life. They keep me focused on God. And if I wholly trust that all things are possible with God (which I do), then so be it. My monastic vocation bears witness to this.

The rest of the Triduum weekend went smoothly. The stark, simple liturgies offered a window to contemplation. I had my interviews with several monks, those on the formation team. But they were more like conversations. Father Blaine and I chatted about art and his trip to Europe. Brother John talked about rural Nebraska while I provided anecdotes about small-town Colorado. The monks tended to do most of the talking.

On the last day of my visit, Father Meinrad interviewed me. Once again, we sat in his office. Flying toasters traveled across his computer screen.

“So. How do you feel about celibacy?” He asked.

“I’m OK with it.” Oh crap, I thought, that doesn’t sound very articulate. “I mean, I’m comfortable with my sexuality and with celibacy.”

He raised his eyebrows.

My mind yelled: C’mon Tim. “I think it’s important to be an integrated person.” That sounded better.

“How so?”
“Well. I see celibacy not so much as renunciation, but an invitation to total self-giving. To God. To the Church.” I paused for a moment, then remembered something I’d heard in seminary. “Oh, and celibacy in religious life kind of mirrors the afterlife, where we will all glorify God.” I was on a roll.

Father nodded. “You have dated, haven’t you?”

“Yes. Back in my party days.”

“When was the last time you went on a date?”

I puckered my lips, searching my brain. “About four years ago.” Suddenly my face got red. What if he asked me the name of the person I last dated?

“So you’ve been living a celibate life for the last four years.”

“Oh yes,” I gushed. “Yes, yes, yes.”

Father leaned back. “Let’s move on. What do you see yourself doing as a monk?”

“I suppose I could see myself teaching in the college. English.” It sounded good, but I still hadn’t wholly convinced myself that I could do it. I still felt like a simple bank teller who hadn’t finished a college degree.

He nodded. “What about the priesthood?”

“Well, I’m open to it. I still feel my calling is valid.” Valid yes, I thought, but what about those F’s my last semester at St. Joseph’s? I shifted in my chair.

“You don’t have to worry about seminary and all that just yet,” he said, “first you’d have to finish your degree, which you could do here at Benedictine, then you and the abbot would talk about a vocation to the priesthood.”

I let out a sigh of relief.

“Have you thought about a name? You can choose a religious name when you enter the novitiate.”
I smiled. Recently, I had read an account of the life of St. Columba, or Columcille, the sixth century Irish monk. A poet with a great love for the Psalms, he founded monasteries throughout Ireland. Unfortunately, he got into some trouble with the king: a man seeking shelter in one of Columba's monasteries was forcibly taken away by the king’s army, a breach in the monastic mores concerning sanctuary. Columba waged a war against the king, in which three thousand men lost their lives. The saint’s penance: to suffer the white martyrdom, to set sail in the white mist, never to see Ireland again. So Columba took twelve men and founded a monastery on the Isle of Iona, off the coast of Scotland. He spent the rest of his life converting the Picts.

I admired St. Columba’s love for poetry, his missionary zeal, and the fact that he had not been perfect. But I had to admit, it wasn’t a well-known name. Brother Columba. I liked the sound of it, but I wondered if I’d have to spend my life explaining my name.

I looked at Father Meinrad and said, “Well actually, I have been thinking of taking a name. Since I’m of Irish descent, I’m partial to the Irish saints. Perhaps Patrick, or Aidan, or Kevin…”

“How about Columba?”

I sucked in. “Oh my God! I admit I’ve seriously considered it!”

“I think it’d be a great name. Brother Columba McNeill.” Father beamed. “I think it sounds good.”

I nodded. “Me, too.”

Father gathered up the loose papers on his knee and put them into a folder. “I’ll let you know in a few days or so if we accept you into the postulancy.”

“Sounds great.” My mind raced with all that I had to get done.

Three days later, around the third of April, Father Meinrad called.
"I want you to know that you have been accepted into the postulancy at St. Benedict's Abbey. Matt, the other postulant, will be here on the 20th."

I stretched the phone cord, trying to get a look at my kitchen calendar. "Well, I think that will be too soon for me. I have to give my notice at work. And to my landlord. How about if I get there on the 25th?"

"Sounds fine. We'll look for you on the 25th."

I hung up the phone, sat in my recliner. Oh my God, I thought, I've done it; I've gotten my foot through the door. Tears streamed down my face. After all the prayers, the worries about my past, the hopes, the fears, it was almost surreal to think that in a few weeks, I would be in a monastery. On my way to becoming a monk. Thank you, Lord, I whispered aloud. Thank you, Holy Mother. I had to sit for a few moments, letting it all take root in me. I thought of the angel Gabriel's words to Mary: "With God, nothing is impossible." Amen, I thought.

Wiping my face, I picked up the phone. It was time to call my family and friends.

The next few weeks were a whirlwind of activity. I put in my two-week notice at work. Informed my landlord. David came over one day to help me clean out my bedroom closet. He rifled through my shirts.

"This has got to go!" He threw my WilliWear shirt onto a pile on the floor. The St. Vincent de Paul Thrift Store pile.

"Oh, but I love that shirt! It's a WilliWear!" I picked it up, smoothing out the wrinkles.

"C'mon. You can't wear that in a monastery!"

I let it fall onto the pile.

"These slacks are out!"
“But those are my Too Legit to Quit pants!” I cried, grabbing them from his hands. They were black and tan checkered, baggy at the waist and tight at the ankles, à la MC Hammer.

David glared at me. I dropped it.

“This is atrocious!” David proclaimed, pawing my Andy Warhol shirt. The faces of Marilyn Monroe and James Dean smiled at me against a background of fuchsia, yellow, and electric blue.

“Don’t touch that!” I yelled. “That’s not going to St. Vincent de Paul. I’m giving it to a customer from the bank.” I carefully put the shirt on a hanger, hung it in the closet. I looked at it wistfully.

“Oh my God,” David squealed, “this looks like something a clown would wear!” He held a white rayon shirt with large black and white circles on the front, black stripes on the sleeves.

“I love this shirt! I bought it at Macy’s Herald Square.” Memories flooded my mind: high school reunion; dancing in clubs; dinner parties. I watched as David threw it on the floor.

“Thank God I’m here to help you with this,” David pursed his lips. “otherwise nothing would get done.”

I watched my past get crammed into garbage bags and dropped off at a thrift store. But they weren’t mere clothes or the past being cast off, they were parts of me, a persona I had nurtured for years. True, I had turned away from much of what those garments represented, but they also symbolized my affinity for drama, color. It was like my own skin was being peeled away from my body. The metamorphosis from past to future. I felt two emotions at the same time: nostalgia for the past and hope for the future.
That same night, as I sat on my brown plaid couch, I went through my journals. They dated back to 1984, when I had been told that I’d be sent from the seminary in California to the one in Missouri. Page after page chronicled the emotional tides of Tim McNeill: “I am happy with my sexuality...I hate being ugly...Why are people so cruel to queers?...I am in love...I have never been in love...I do not know what God wants from me...All I ever do is complain...” Me Me Me. As I perused the entries, I marveled at my self-absorption. It was heady. I grabbed the four volumes, leapt off the couch, and walked out of the apartment. I threw them into the dumpster behind the building.

As I let the lid slam shut, ricocheting off the alley brick walls, I could not help but shake my head. I recalled a September night in 1990, when I stood on a sidewalk in the Boston Common, glass splintered on the sidewalk next to my father’s car. Thieves had broken into it while my family and I had been in Cheers. Despite the fact that hundreds of dollars worth of camera equipment were stashed under the front seats, the robbers stole only my brother’s and my dufflebags. That long ago night, I had imagined the chagrin those thieves would feel as they opened my bag to find dirty underwear, socks, and a journal. All I had been able to think about that night, crying beside the car, was how my journal had probably been flung into a dumpster. And now look at what I had done: I who once lamented the loss of one journal now threw four away. I turned away from the dumpster and opened the door to my building. All I could manage to think was “Good riddance.”

When I returned to my apartment, I headed for my hallway closet. I might as well get rid of my albums. Most of them had been lost in previous moves, but I had still held on to a few. Kneeling on the floor, I pushed aside the Christmas tree box (my mother had said she’d take the tree and decorations) and yanked out the LPs. I dusted them off, leaned them against the wall, flipped through them. Michael Jackson’s Thriller. Donna Summer’s Live and More. Three ABBA albums. Paradise Hotel by Styx. The soundtrack to the movie Fame. The
recording of the Broadway show *La Cage aux Folles.* And hearkening back to my childhood, *You’re a Good Man Charlie Brown* and Marlo Thomas’ *Free to Be You and Me.* Like my shirts, the albums evoked memories. I sighed, gathered them into my arms, and marched to the dumpster. They fell on top of the journals. I remember thinking: I probably shouldn’t do this, they may be worth big money some day. But I didn’t hesitate to let the lid slam shut for a second time.

A week later, my family gave me a going away dinner. Held at a steak place in Loveland, everyone was there: parents, my sister and her family, my stepmother, stepsister, grandparents, aunt and uncle, great aunt, and my friend, David. The table was long and dinner lovely. I received gifts. Mom cried. Pictures were taken. But the entire time, I felt detached, like I was a customer at another table, watching the spectacle from a few feet away. It was the same feeling I had had at my sister’s wedding. I felt as if I had to keep my emotions in check, otherwise, I’d be plunged into grief.

The hardest thing about entering the monastery was the separation from my family. The shirts, records, all those *things* meant nothing in relation to my family. I watched them chatter above their steaks, laugh, have a grand time. But I knew that I’d never have another Thanksgiving dinner at Grandmother’s house. Or a Christmas morning opening gifts. No more birthday get-togethers, no more Saturday nights at my sister’s, chowing down on Chinese food, watching videos. I wouldn’t be going to tail-gate parties at Colorado State University football games with my father, sister, and brother-in-law (the games had never interested me much, just the time spent with my family). I would miss out when my sister’s kids took their first steps.

I knew that as a monk, I’d get back to Colorado once a year, but only for a few weeks. As I picked at my New York strip, I couldn’t help but think of Christ’s invitation to
leave father, mother, and follow Him. Material possessions, and even those snippets of
myself in journals, were easy to shed. But not my family. They meant everything to me. A
source of strength. Comfort. Familiarity. I pushed my feelings into a region where I could
manage them with a smile. I got through the evening just fine. The steak weighed down in
my stomach, the beer sloshed down my throat like medicine.

During my last few days at work, I happened to engage a customer in a conversation
about my future plans. The subject came up after she mentioned that she would see me the
next week.

“Actually, Friday is my last day,” I said, placing her cash on the counter.

“You’re quitting?”

“Yes.”

She stuffed the bills into her billfold. “A better job?”

“I guess you could say that,” I giggled. “I’m entering a monastery.”

“A what?”

“A monastery. To become a monk.”

“Really?” She put the billfold into her pocketbook.

“Yeah.”

“Is that Catholic?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.” Her eyebrows pointed toward her nose. Her face looked thoughtful. “So you’ll
be in the monastery next week?”

“Yeah. But I won’t get there until the end of the week. I need some time to get rid of
my stuff.”

Her eyes widened. “What kind of stuff?”

"What will you do with them?"

"I suppose take them to a thrift store."

She leaned against the counter. "My daughter just got a new place in Capitol Hill, and she needs furniture. It's her first apartment."

"Well, if you'd like to come over, I'd be happy to show you what I have." I leaned forward, lowering my voice. "It's nothing great, garage sale stuff, but it's all in OK condition."

She smiled. "That's fine. My daughter is on a limited income." She nodded. I nodded back. "How much would you be asking for, say, a couch or a chair?"

I waved my hand. "Nothing. I'll give it to you."

Her eyebrows rose. "Oh my God! Give me your number!"

Several days later, the woman and her family stopped by my apartment. They decided on the couch, coffee table, some bookshelves, and two living room chairs. I had taken all my dishes and glasses, bowls and silverware, pots and pans, and placed them on my dining area table, thinking that her daughter might be interested in those as well. Much to my relief, they agreed to take all the kitchen objects. They would return the next night with a pickup truck to haul it all away. After they left, I sighed and said Thank you, Lord. Not only would I be getting rid of my stuff, but it would go to someone who needed it.

When they arrived the next night, I was ready. I had spent the day packing dishes and glasses, wrapping them in the pages of The Denver Post. One man, the woman's son-in-law, asked about the books.

"I'm taking the religious ones and most of the novels, but you're welcome to go through the rest."
He sat cross-legged on the floor, pulling out all the books that had to deal with art: on Magritte. Another on Lichtenstein. Robert Mapplethorpe. A guide to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. When he reached for The Diaries of Andy Warhol, my heart beat fast. Was I willing to give it up? I turned away, letting him add it to his pile.

After their departure, I was left with a skeletal apartment. The bed, dresser, dining room table, and TV would be divvied up among my family. All I had left were a few books, some subdued clothes, and family photos. I had gotten rid of my major belongings in a matter of days.

On the 24th, my father arrived with his truck. Kim and Paul came over to help load the objects that would go to the family. As we made trips from the apartment to the truck, a heavy, wet snow started to fall. A perfect last day in Denver. When we had finished, I asked them to give me a few minutes to give the place a last look-over, to make sure I hadn’t left anything behind. As I stood in my bare apartment, nails jutting out of the walls like a post-Grinch visit to Whoville, I realized that I would never be an apartment-dweller again. Never have my own place. No more Sundays clad in sweats, spending the entire day to read the newspapers. No more chicken liver and wine suppers while watching Melrose Place. No more drifting off to sleep on my garage sale couch on Saturday afternoons in the Spring.

But then again... No more moans and grunts from the lesbians upstairs. No more getting on my hands and knees to scrub my kitchen floor. No more microwave pizzas-for-one. No more bills. No more grocery shopping and trying to get home before the bags burst on the bus or sidewalk. No more gunshots echoing along the streets.

I surveyed my empty apartment. It suddenly struck me that this “No more” business was a bit melodramatic. After all, I was embarking on a crusade to dedicate my entire life to More. To God and the Church. I shook my head and smiled. “You’re a sentimental fool,” I
said aloud. I made the sign of the cross. Thank you, Lord. I’m ready. I left the keys on the counter and walked out. Large flakes fell from the sky. They tasted good.

My father and I drove up to his place in Windsor, the heavy snow not causing any road problems, just blanketing the early spring with a shroud of purity. As we slushed our way through the city streets and then onto the highway, I fought to hold back tears. Saying good-bye to my sister had been emotional. As we stood by the truck, we embraced each other for several minutes, cold cheeks together. All I could manage to say was “Thank you, Kim. For everything. I love you.” It seemed so trite: the sum of years of sorrows and joys, being there for one another when our parents’ marriage had collapsed, the familiarity of a close friendship where we could lounge around lazily on weekend afternoons, wearing sweats, pigging out, watching movies on TV as it snowed outside; all these memories, experiences, reduced to a few words, a hug. A pinprick in time that did not allow for grief.

“You all right?” my father asked.

I wiped my eyes. “I’ll be fine.”

“Kim will really miss you.”

I nodded. “I’ll miss her, too.” I bit my lip.

When we reached my father’s house, we unloaded the few pieces of furniture that would go to family members, carrying them to a back yard shed. We covered the several boxes of books with a tarp, leaving them in the bed of the pickup. All my belongings now fit into two suitcases and some boxes. I wouldn’t be entering the abbey with just the clothes on my back, but with several statues of the Blessed Mother, some family photos, books, and clothes. Possessions not wholly stripped, but significantly scaled down.

The next morning, Friday the 25th, the Feast of Saint Mark, my father and I headed east. Munching on Sausage McMuffins with Egg, trying not to spill our cups of coffee, we
gazed at the thin coating of snow, the wide, clear, Colorado sky. As we turned on to I-70, I spent several minutes hunched in my seat, peering at the side mirror. My last glimpses of the Rocky Mountains. As I watched the mountains shrink in the side view mirror, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of loss. I wasn’t one for hiking, and I had never skied, but I loved the mountains both from a distance and up close. They never ceased to instill in me a sense of awe for creation. For me, an avowed urbanite at heart, the mountains seemed like art. God’s mixture of sculpture and brush strokes. Although I knew that I probably would return to Colorado once a year, I would still miss them. They were familiar to me as my family. And then they became a straight line on the horizon.

Since my father thrived on listening to Country Western music almost non-stop, I rifled through his set of cassettes to find Simon and Garfunkel, the Clancy Brothers, anything without a twang. I had been raised on Country, but in the 70s I traded all that in for disco, and in the 80s, I opted for synthesized dance beats. The thought of a ten-hour trip spent with Willie Nelson and Garth Brooks did not thrill me. Thankfully, my father and I both have a gift for gab.

“Are you nervous?” he asked.

I shrugged, peeling my eyes from the Colorado plains to look at him. “Not really. I kind of know what I’m getting myself into. You know. From having lived in the seminary and all.”

He shook his head. “You know, Tim, the family is very proud of you.”

My face reddened a bit. “I know. But it’s not as if I’m doing something extraordinary.”

“Of course you’re doing something extraordinary.”
"I don’t look at it that way." I took a sip of lukewarm coffee. "I mean, married people have to deal with the ups and downs of family life. I’ll have that in the monastery, only I won’t have a spouse or children. I have sixty other confreres."

"Still, you’ll be sacrificing a lot. Like money."

I straightened up in the bucket seat and turned toward him, my back to the door.

"Well, as a monk, I’ll have a budget. Only, I’ll have to go to the business office and ask Father Maurice for money."

“How much are the budgets?”

“My first year as a novice, I’ll get $500.00. When, and if, I make first vows, I’ll sign up for an amount that cannot exceed $1,850.00.”

Dad shook his head. "And that’s supposed to last you an entire year?"

“Well, everything’s provided for us—food, toiletries, the roof over our heads. The budget is for books, clothes, going to movies or out to dinner. Long distance phone calls. And vacation.” My gaze swept over the creviced horizon. There was no snow now, only faintly green grass and gullies.

My father glanced my way. “Well, Tim, I admire your desire to do this. It’s a big step.”

I reached for Simon and Garfunkel. “Do you mind if I put this in?” In a matter of moments, “Bridge Over Troubled Water” filled the cab. I settled back to let the music quiet me. To let the failures of college seminary seep back to the recesses of my mind. Colorado gave way to Kansas.

The rest of the day was spent chatting about the family. My father’s upbringing in Connecticut. The role of faith in the rearing of children. We stopped at a Burger King for lunch, drank sodas from the cooler. Munched on party mix my father’s wife had made. The
trip gave Dad and I a chance to talk in a depth we hadn’t been able to engage in the past few months at larger family gatherings. He had plenty of questions for me about monastic life. I talked about how monks centered their lives on prayer and work, ora et labora. When Dad asked about the relevance of monks in modern society, I explained that they didn’t just pray for themselves, but for the Church and the whole world. With my flair for dramatic hand gestures and my love for conversation, I likened monasteries to oases, oases of prayer and contemplation in a secular, busy society. Islands of prayer in the ocean of cell phones and ATM machines. The work of a monk being the work of God, the work of perpetually glorifying God.

We turned off I-70 and headed north. Gently rolling hills of pastures and barns, farmhouses and clusters of budding trees, whizzed by us. When we reached a town called Oskaloosa, my father quipped, “Well, we’re less than half an hour away from Atchison.”

My heart picked up speed. “Oh my God! I can barely breathe!” I gasped.

Dad looked over at me. “What are you talking about?”

I put my left hand to my chest. “I’m like freaking out!” I tried to sit back in the seat and relax, but the galloping in my chest made me lean forward. I couldn’t seem to fill my lungs.

“Geez, Tim, get a grip.”

I bit my lower lip. “I didn’t think this would happen to me.”

“Are you having second thoughts?”

“No. Just nerves.” God how I wanted a cigarette.

“But you’ve been going on and on about how this is what you’re called to do. About how you’re happy to be entering the monastery.”
“I know, I know. It doesn’t make any sense.” I reached for my handkerchief in my back pocket and dabbed my forehead. “A little anxious, I guess.”

“Are you going to be all right?”

I nodded. “I’ll be fine.” I gazed out the window for a few moments. Dad put in a Clancy Brothers tape. The hearty drinking songs matched my heartbeat. When the song about Roddy McCorly came on, I felt as if I was about to die with him on the Bridge of Toome. My chest heaved.

“All this green here in Kansas reminds me of Ireland,” my father said. I gave him a half smile.

After fifteen minutes or so, my breathing returned to normal and the thudding in my chest quieted. I relaxed into the seat. “OK. Now I’m fine.”

“What was that all about?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been hoping for this moment for a long time. To devote my life to God. And now that it’s actually here, only a few miles away, I guess I’m a bit overwhelmed.”

Dad took his right hand off the wheel and placed it on my lap.

My eyes started to water. “I almost can’t believe this is happening. After all I’ve been through, the ups and downs, twists and turns, and now I’m about to enter the monastery.”

The thought rolled around my head like a wine-tasting sip of Merlot. Lingering. The Clancy Brothers sang about Tim Finnegan’s wake, and I looked at fields tinged with soft green. My father’s hand was warm, comforting. “I guess it’s a lot like being a cripple, then suddenly getting healed. I’m on shaky legs, but I’m about to take my first steps.”

My father smiled. “You’ll be fine.”

“I know.”

As we drove into Atchison, I reached for the detailed directions from Father Meinrad. We passed the lazy downtown and headed up Second Street. “That’s St. Benedict’s Church,
the parish,” I pointed.” We turned at the Benedictine College sign and drove up the hill. I
gestured toward the many buildings dotting the campus, giving them their names: Student
Union, cafeteria, library, dorm. As we crested the hill, I pointed to the abbey. “And that’s the
monastery.”

My father slowed the truck, turned left into the front parking area. “Wow,” he said,
“pretty impressive.”

I chuckled.

Dad pulled into a parking space and turned off the engine. The just-after-six evening
sounds of grasshoppers and birds filled the silence. My father looked at me and put his hand
on my knee again. “Ready?”

“I’m ready,” I beamed.

I jumped out of the truck, standing on stiff legs. It felt good to stretch, to stand. As we
walked toward the double glass doors, I felt a lightness in my steps. Perhaps it was all that
Irish music, but my feet felt like they wanted to do a jig. I smiled. I didn’t know a jig from a
reel, but I did know a thing or two about losing myself in dance.
Closing Antiphon

Loving mother of the Redeemer,
Gate of heaven, star of the sea,
Assist your people who have fallen
Yet strive to rise again.

Alma Redemptoris Mater

The exercise room has a musty, clammy feel. I turn on the air conditioning fan, then drape my towel on the treadmill handrail. I put a CD in the stereo. Beeping in my program, I begin to walk and turn on the music. I’ve graduated from 1980s disco to Euro-techno. Alice Dee-Jay shatters the cloister calm, and my head starts to bop. I increase the volume, increase the incline.

My saunter becomes a New York clip. The beat beat beat fills the room, vibrates through my bones. My heart quickens as the treadmill pace picks up. My arms swing, I click my fingers: I am in synthesizer heaven. Soon I’m sweating and huffing and the music once again transports me to a different place.

It’s the day after my Solemn Vows. I’ve been a monk for four years. During my novitiate and the three years in temporary vows, I could have walked away from the monastery. But I didn’t. Yesterday I vowed to be a monk for the rest of my life. Like a wedding, the Solemn Vows mass was one of great joy and celebration. As the exercise music takes hold of me, images from the previous day flash before me.

The abbey church is half-filled. The monks and the congregation sing Morning Has Broken as I process down the aisle with the abbot. Like a bride, I smile at those who have come to witness my commitment: Benedictine College students, friends from Atchison and Kansas City, my stepsister and her three children, sisters from the convent across town. My
mouth gapes open when I see two friends from the Cathedral parish in Denver: they hadn’t told me that they would be coming. And I smile at the crowd from Ames, Iowa, where I attend graduate school: fellow creative writing students, two professors, a friar from the parish where I stay, some parishioners. What surprises me is the presence of a handful of grad students who are atheists. I am touched that they made the four hour trip to sit in a monastic church and watch me vow my life to God.

In the front row my parents beam, tears brimming in my mother’s eyes. My sister Kim holds her one-month-old son, while her husband shushes their two-year-old daughter. An aunt and uncle from Connecticut sit in the second row with my aunt from Sacramento, the aunt who had once been a nun. On the other side of the aisle, monks file into the front row. My friend from Denver, David, is there. Now known as Brother Xavier, he is a monk at St. John’s Abbey in Minnesota. As organ music fills the church, I take my place in the row of monks. Father Abbot reaches the sanctuary, and with the last note still ringing along the walls, mass begins.

At one point in the ceremony, I lie down on the floor. Two monks cover me with a funeral pall, and then the entire congregation sings the Litany of the Saints. Dying to my past, I rest my head on my hands, the shroud not too heavy, but a little hot. The church is filled with music and chant, and I squeeze my eyes shut as tears creep forth: I am so happy. Under the funereal canopy, I gaze at the twists and turns of my life, and I feel fortunate to be blessed with such numbing peace. I am where I am supposed to be, the school of the Lord’s service. I certainly have not attained holiness yet: I still smoke, I’ve gained twenty-five pounds in graduate school, my tongue occasionally bursts into the flames of gossip, and I cannot turn away from loud dance music. But I know that my monastic journey is just beginning; the road to perfection will traverse my entire life.
I do not know if I will be a priest. Those words uttered so many years ago, *Be a priest*, still stir in my heart. Because I have chosen to be so honest in my memoir, I may have dashed any possibility of becoming an ordained minister. I know that all things are possible with God, but my fate is also in the hands of the Church. Perhaps my past will not overshadow a priesthood vocation, and I will one day have the honor of bringing the sacraments to God’s people. But perhaps some circumstances aren’t meant to be overcome in this life. I do not fret. If it is Our Lord’s will that I become a priest, then it will happen. I am more concerned with my response to God, to love Him with all my heart, all my soul.

With the end of the litany, two confreres lift the pall. I rise like the beggar at the Beautiful Gate, my feet steady. I am new. My grotesquerie shines brilliantly.

As the music continues to rock the exercise room, rock the abbey, I smile and utter a simple prayer: *Thank you, Lord, for letting me be a monk. Thank you.* I abandon myself to the rhythm, and it is delicious.