The Holy Order

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My day begins with a prayer. Eyes pursed, warding off cursed distraction; I stumble over a childhood verse. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, I give you my heart and my soul. I repeat the prayer in quick succession, hoping that the repetition will convince me that I truly mean these words.

The angry sun glares through the eyelet curtains, highlighting my iconographic surroundings. Tiny pictures, clipped from magazines, cruelly display all of the food which I have denied myself. I gaze adoringly at images of ambrosia (steaming entrees, decadent desserts), all glinting with Byzantine shimmer. As if these could satiate my never-ending hunger. With my fingers, I gently trace the outline of my ribs. I don’t want to crawl from under my covers, to meet another day with the phony smile that threatens to crack my face, all so that I can make others believe, make myself believe, that all is well. Before me stretches another day, filled with food I cannot eat, and I cower beneath my comforter once more — reluctant to proceed to the kitchen, where my nose will be assaulted by the scent of forbidden pancakes and banned bacon. I reluctantly slip out of bed, pulling my light blue sheets and butterfly-speckled comforter taut against the headboard. Padding to the bathroom in bare feet, I furiously brush my teeth, eager to rid my mouth of the rancid, fruity taste which has haunted it as of late. I splash cold water on my face, then lean close to the mirror to examine the purple shadows beneath my eyes. In my “youthful vigor” of sixteen, I already represent a greater likeness to my nursing-home bound, senile grandmother, than to the unmatronly beauty of my mother. Although I hold an aversion to make-up, I apply some beige cover-up to these creases, only to realize how much worse this color looks in contrast to my sallow complexion. I tissue it off, rubbing vigorously and cursing myself for looking so unbelievably hideous. A renegade tear escapes, and as it trails down my cheek, I greedily catch it with my tongue — pretending that its salinity satiates my empty stomach. Now is the hour for mourning.
The Sacrament of Communion

My nose is instantly assaulted by the fetid stench of adolescent sweat and Wilson rubber. I sit alone in my high school gymnasium; alone except for a solitary boy who shoots one brick after another into a far-away basket. I blush with embarrassment at his inaccuracy, but hope that he won’t take notice of me. The creaky wooden bleachers are splayed out amidst some scattered debris, the walls are covered with vibrant but sloppily-constructed renditions of our mascot (the tiger) and various trite slogans, words of ineffective inspiration. I imagine that they would have held some motivational power — were we students in the fifties, but “Go get ’em, Slugger!” just doesn’t hack it anymore. Why, you may ask, do I choose to visit a place which I hold in such obvious contempt? Fact is, I can no longer bare to eat in our cafeteria. The obnoxious cacophony created by my classmates overwhelsms me, makes me feel claustrophobic. A mere five minutes in that God-forsaken slop-hall is enough to set a dull pain, which pulsates like a heartbeat, humming in my head. Besides, I had grown tired of the stares, the inquiries, the ridicule. “Is that all you’re going to eat?” Worse than this, however, is the inevitable silence that soon became the pervading order of things; my “friends” grew tired of my strange habits and found it much easier to ignore me, pretend that I wasn’t there and hope that I would eventually go away. Well, they get their wish.

Head bowed in reverence, thin strands of thinning hair framing my view. I examine a mousy-brown strand; the once-celebrated luster has departed and in its place was left this brittle scrap of straw, ravaged with split ends because it breaks so easily. Each night, my brush acquires the appearance of a Chia pet — even my cat can’t cough up such admirable hair balls. At first my mother tried to remedy my unsightly appearance, took me to a veritable regiment of hairdressers, who clipped away and sighed in lispy disgust. Eventually, she gave up her goal of making me look even remotely presentable; and yet, she periodically pauses mid-sentence to frown and ask why I don’t make any effort to “do something” with myself. “Look at Kristin; you could be as pretty as she is, if only you would wear some make-up, cut your hair....” Et cetera, et cetera. What I didn’t tell her was that Kristin (a childhood playmate of yore) has already had a nose job, dresses like a whore, and is notorious for performing fellatio on any interested fellow at parties. Is this what you want me to become, mother? What I never understood was, how come she can’t act interested in other parts of me? Why can’t she ask me about my writing? Why do all of our conversations inevitably
revolve around the social activities of school? She always asks who is dating whom — whether in ignorance or emphasis of my unattached state, I never know. Maybe I don’t want a boyfriend, maybe I would rather be forever alone than surrender myself to one of the many creeps which run rampant among the academic halls, maybe I don’t want to be groped and inevitably become a real-live blow-up doll. But apparently, this concept is beyond her.

I quickly murmur a blessing over my lunch — residual from my Catholic upbringing — and finally lift my head to look upon the contents contained within my brown paper sack. In my hands I hold a most dear treasure, a saltine cracker, the very bread of life packed carefully that morning. Tenderly, I break off a tiny morsel and piously suck upon this host, wistfully recalling days past, when holy host was tainted with peanut butter or ham, oil and flesh, grotesque gorging of gluttony. There once was a time when I could down an entire large pizza by myself, and, if I concentrate hard enough, I can almost feel the steam from a freshly opened box as it caresses my pores, taste the tantalizing concoction of mozzarella, marinara, and meat. I shove aside this sordid thought, washing it and host away with bottled water of life. Imaging myself to be grateful, purified, full. I feel my face go hot and I feel the wooden floor dig reproachfully into thinly padded haunches, and carefully shift positions, allowing tailbone its time for penance.

Brushing the few crumbs from my lap, I look up to notice that the future Larry Bird has thankfully exited the premises, and that he has been replaced by a group of flesh-bearing, cosmetically-caked freshmen. The three of them perch on a bleacher at the other side of the gym, talking loudly and laughing even louder, pausing only to look around and see if any boys have taken notice of their fatally feminine charms. I feel a grimace teasing the corners of my mouth, but focus my attentions on rummaging through the contents of my book bag. Moments later, I detect that their giddy giggling has ceased. I nonchalantly lift my head and turn in their direction. They are looking straight at me, hissing in one another’s ear. Then one of the girls — the one wearing the least amount of clothing, I believe — lets out a snicker of laughter, which, of course, sends the others into peals of snorting as they fall in heaps over each other. I feel my face go hot, and promptly spring from my seat on the bleachers, hoping to make a quick escape. Only I had forgotten to close my book bag in my haste, and its contents cascade to the floor, scattering in a million different directions. I leave everything there, and run for the door with howls of laughter in quick pursuit.
Feast Preparations at the Temple

I used to be a hedonist, as most children are. JFK would have been horrified at my mantra: “Ask not what you can do for others, but what they can do for you.” How’s that for altruism? And yet, as ashamed as I am of this previous mindset, I must consider that all children display egocentrism to some degree, if only because their budding brains cannot grasp the concept that there are other points of view besides their own. Still, my innate sowish tendencies were already manifesting themselves by the time I entered kindergarten. Though the focus of this gluttony did not wield its authoritarian reign on food alone, but cancerously spread to all areas of my existence: I became adept at gulping air, tearing huge chunks from the loaf of joy — devouring life itself. Every night was a feast, a ravenous, remorseless spread; every meal eaten as if it were my last supper. The source of my identity lay in my now-unsavory ability to inhale enormous quantities of food. My father would gently pat my pudgy belly, had christened me “Daddy’s little piggy.” My mother would watch me eat with a barely-suppressed expression of disgust. But, like all transgressions, this, too, is freely given, but briefly lived. Now is the time for contrition. It is my lent of eternal fasting, yet the devil assails with his legion of temptations. Many of his most vile snares presented themselves as innocuous, prosaic events — proverbial wolves in sheep’s clothing. Dates, parties, the theatre — all veritable mine fields of ignominy, all activities centering around food to which I must not allow myself to succumb.

And yet, do not be fooled by my hauteur; for I am the temptress as well as the tempted. . .

Extravagant banquet, prepared with ritualistic solemnity within my fiercely protected sanctuary (the kitchen), equipped with glass chalice, pantry nave, and frigidaire altar. With rigorous intensity I concoct heavy, sumptuous fare; a succulent spread befitting those of the bluest blood. These offerings I present before the high priest and priestess, my parents, who eat, not out of hunger, but for heartsick love of their wasting disciple. I watch them dutifully shoveling mouthfuls, my eyes shining with satisfied covetousness. As though I never left the womb, I derive sustenance from their sustenance; an invisible cord binds us still. We have come full circle and I demand that they once again eat for me. By watching them dine, I may pretend that I, too, am a participant in what has now become an illicit act. While they blossom into saddened buddhas, stuffed with the food I prepare, I become Majnun, starving in a desert mirage of plenty.
Sacrament of Reconciliation

The daily judgment is at hand. I stand before mine enemy, stripped and humiliated beyond consolation. To me, this bathroom scale is no ordinary instrument; it is the scale of judgment, the one objective voice that will tell me — irrefutably — whether or not I have gained weight. In accordance with this chastening occasion I have abstained from all food and drink for the preceding twelve hours, have removed all extraneous clothing, save a bath towel to retain a small semblance of dignity — have taken all the precautions necessary to diminish my already-abundant mass. With the resignation of Christ, I mount the inch-high scaffolding. My wheel of fate spirals mercilessly towards deposition, and the needle harshly determines my day in a meaningless language of numerals. Ninety pounds.

Having evaded the purgatory of added bulk for one more day, I grimly step down. Sensing that this narrow escape stems only from the omittance of lunch from the previous day, I resolve to eliminate this extraneous meal in addition to the greatly-overrated breakfast. Lest I become neglectful with complacency, I am further chastened toward attainment of enlightened lightness. I stand before a mirror, plane of deception, and see not the painfully protruding ribs, not the sallow-sunken eyes, not the strained skin of limbs — see only an amorphous mound of faceless flesh, extending ever outward, engulfing everything. My cross to bear is composed of imagined adipose.

Penance

Later, contrition is commenced — a reckoning consisting of tabulations from my bible of nutrition; a brutally honest account for sins — calories — consumed. In a tattered notebook, I jot down the calories devoured that day. Still at 600. I silently chastise myself for breaking down and eating the additional handful of carrots. Atonement ensues soon after — the demand for a purging of calories through pores. I slip into frayed shoes and embark upon an eight mile run. Mechanical limbs flail into a rigid motion. My legs seditiously shake; I am weak with hunger but will not slacken pace. A tattered truck rumbles past, its cab filled to capacity with unkempt adolescents. They honk the horn emphatically, not forgetting to coat my ears with the residue of their vulgar words. Suddenly self-conscious, I tug down the tail of my billowing shirt, making certain that the enormity of my clothing conceals any obstinate
curves of femininity which have not yet been shed. Of course, this was not an isolated incident. And people wonder why femininity represents such an unhappy inevitability; what is gained by womanish attributes, save obscenities that make me feel violated, impure, as if I had done something immoral. To distract myself from the inescapable reality confronting me and my current state of prolonged agony, I stumble through past prayers, but all in vain, faithless wretch that I am. Miles later, as I stagger to an exhausted stop, I bend in half, hands on knees as I heave great gasps of air. Just before the familiar, soothing auditory roar and sightless unconsciousness of a blackout overwhelm me, I repeat my mantra.

before beneath this load i break
i pray the lord my soul to take

Weeping in the Garden

Surrounded by vain comforter and curtains of flowers I am bowed low — this is my garden of gesthemane. I weep with shame and mumble incoherently; my dark night of the soul sends me reeling into a hopeless expanse. Kneeling at my bed, before me sits a package of sweets, purchased benevolently by a worried mother. I speak in lost tongues, begging deliverance from this cup. Only mine is made of cake, covered with icing, sweet siren to my boundless hunger. Wicked pharisee — despite my arrogant fast, my daily sacrifice — I now stagger and stumble before, not a host, but a Hostess.

The Trial

As any other devotionalist, I am continuously persecuted, chastened for my fanaticism. They mistake my dietary dedication for compulsion, my perseverance for masochism. I stand before the keepers of the temple, our house; the priest and priestess raise their voices in anger and hurl hasty ultimatums at me. You are too thin, they shout. Why are you deliberately starving yourself? No, for God’s sake, you are not fat. They are reaching their wits’ ends because they are unable to comprehend my choice of destructive mysticism. I stand unmoved, never lifting my eyes from a soiled spot on the rug, my lips firmly set in a defiant line. Inside I am churning with remorse and want to scream, Can’t you see that I’m sorry, that I’m
not doing this too hurt you? I cry for you to love me unconditionally, to abandon these
demands of perfection which you place so harshly before me. But I don’t say this, for another
voice, an angry one, silences a need for sympathy with a lust for revenge. And now these
arbiters of my fate, under whose thumb I have spent countless years, are in a situation over
which they have no control. Unlike other areas of dictation — where I can go, what I can
wear, whom I can see — I am the wielder of power and I selfishly seize a piece of my life
back. Only I do not consider at what cost I triumph.

Earlier that day, I was studying with a fellow — male — classmate. We sat in an abandon
classroom, preparing for an exam which would take place the following day. An Adonis of
the school, I assumed that he was merely reaping the benefits of my academic excellence —
i.e., he was pretending to like me so that I could help him study. Eyes so piercing that his
glance could pierce my soul, I could not look at him as I talked, but kept my gaze fixed upon
the text at hand. The door to the classroom was closed to ward off after-school distraction,
the sun was quickly receding, the room darkened accordingly. I began to make an off-handed
remark about turning on the lights so we could see more clearly, when he closed his hand
over my own. Before I realized it, before I knew what was happening, his face was against
mine, his body pressing against my own. At first I struggled against him, but some deep-
seated demon within me began to respond, to move with his movement. The moment was
over before it began — its bliss not diminished by its brevity. He mumbled an excuse about
needing to be home, then left me, alone, in that den of debauchery. I could still feel where
his hands had pressed, probed, defiled. The filth was everywhere — on my clothing, on the
desk, on my body — unseen, but nevertheless present. What had I done? What had we
done? And where had this hidden harlot come from? I had always been so in control, so
resistant to desires of the flesh. And now this? And what could assure me that this episodic
evil wouldn’t repeat itself? That this wouldn’t happen again?

Despite all of my precautions, regardless of any preventative measures that I had under-
taken, I realized that I could no more conquer these lascivious longings than I could protect
myself within my corporeal palace of purgation. I dropped my head upon my arms and
sobbed. How could I possibly live with the heavy weight of this wanton transgression? This,
for me, was the beginning of the end.
Most of my days are spent in the company of myself. Carrying luggage too heavy for even the most diligent of companions, I am forced to trek this journey alone. At one point in time, I would have given anything to metamorphosize into what others wanted me to be. But now, I lack the energy I once lavishly spent upon pleasing others, and conserve this precious currency with exhausted relief. Only this survival mechanism — hours spent in my room, hiding from others — is arrived at too late and can no longer provide sustenance for a rich inner life. I have no strength with which to read or write — occupations which once filled my life with joy. I lie in languid prostration; each movement of the eye requires an enormous expenditure of energy. Too painful to see, too painful to be seen, I subsist within the recesses of my room, steadily slimming to purity. Yet this goal, this attainment of undeniable thinness, seems so far off, is no more than a hazy figure on a most distant horizon. The pallid light of twilight seeps through my window, and the shadows it casts seem silver-tongued sirens of the oblivion that I might attain, if only I can muster the courage. I close my eyes, and am immediately bombarded with frightful images: the hideously laughing girls; my frowning mother, who will never love me as I am; the unforgiving scale; the suffocating feeling of torment as I vacillate for hours over whether or not to eat something as small as a cupcake, the dark shame of that barbarous afternoon in the classroom. My mother would scowl at me, arrogantly uttering what has become her mantra: "God helps those who help themselves." But what if I can’t help myself? What if I am drowning beneath these sorrows, sinking slowly below the surface as the rays of reflected light grow farther and farther away? Then what? Before me stretches a vague and lonely future, a life filled with misery and isolation, all because I cannot handle the burdens I bear — irrelevant of whether I have selected this baggage or if it has been apportioned to me.

I flip on the small lamp on my nightstand and grasp the brass handle, pulling out the white-pine drawer. In a green plastic box marked "Pens" I retrieve the bottle of codeine from when I had my wisdom teeth removed a few months earlier. Always prepared, I had chosen not to take these fairly powerful pain-pills for my post-operative discomfort, having the pre-science that I might require their aid for a greater purpose in the near future. Reaching for a half-empty water bottle on the floor, I begin slipping the powdery white tablets into my mouth, pausing about a minute between each one, so as to assure that they will all go down.
Despite their bitter coating, to me, they taste faintly of candy, so sweet is the relief they promise. Having swallowed the last one, I return the empty prescription bottle to the box, close up the nightstand, and flick off my light. I pull my covers around me, and experience peace for the first time in years. As I gently inhale and exhale, I feel the approach of sanctity, can taste the divine blessedness of oblivion. My last thought before closing my eyes is how, with each breath, I lose a little more of this hideous flesh; its departure widening the window through which my soul may escape.