

THE DEACON

THURSDAY: THE GREAT SILENCE

We drove in secret to Camp Beaver Cross in the forest, the Episcopal retreat center, which was the site of my Cursillo* weekend--a movement, an immolation actually--in Christian renewal. I was a Cursillo candidate driven there, according to the method, by a former Cursillista whose mission it was to buy me dinner along the way at a restaurant of my choice. Actually she chose the restaurant, a beef house, so she could eat a steak; I ate a salad with almond slivers. I learned nothing of what to expect at the camp; instead we talked about antidepressants. I came because I was sponsored by my priest with whom I was enthralled.

The Cursillo team leaders formed a reception squad in the doorway, double rows of women who slithered me through their line, up the stairs, devotedly patting different parts of my body. This reminded me of a recurring dream I had: I was outside under a chill gray sky on a road at one end of a long tight double line of naked men. I was naked too and my job in the dream was to proceed through the canopy of men and avail myself to the crush of penises brushing my thighs. Needless to say, I was discombobulated by the sudden memory of it in association with this greeting.

My Priest, called simply "Mother," was a church-law lawyer who was born again in Jesus. She waited for me in my assigned room with two other women who sat on a single bed in the middle of the room surrounded by double bunks. Mother pointed to a top bunk and said, "I hope you don't mind, you are the youngest." No, I thought, I didn't mind because I liked being the youngest, especially since I was actually pretty old. "Can I have your cell phone now for safe-keeping?" she asked. I laughed and handed it over.

"What if I need it?" I asked.

"You won't need it," Mother said. Phones were off limits at Cursillo because we were supposed to be immersed in something.

"Have any questions?" Mother asked.

"Yes, I do." I said and pointed to the doorway. "Why is that woman lying on the floor?" There, surrounded by a huddle, a woman lay flat on her back in spasms. Her face, hewn from a gray crewcut, was polished like a piece of clear sea glass and her blue eyes were big as tea spoons.

"That's the Deacon," Mother said, "and she's been under some stress, but she'll be fine in a minute; in fact, you can meet us downstairs in the Great Hall."

I unpacked my stuff, two books, The Heart of the Antarctic and Snow Camper's Guide, lip gloss, a flashlight, a bottle of water, all the medications I would need, and tucked them into the space between the mattress and the bunk frame. Downstairs, in the Great Hall, I heard a commotion. I went down there and waited in the hallway.

The Deacon giggled and ran out of the room where the women dinned evangelical songs. I held back, flat against a wall. The Deacon snorted and kicked the bathroom door, a joke that evoked laughter from an overweight woman within. The Deacon came back and clapped a tambourine in time to dual guitars, one played by Mother, the other played by a woman who said she was a NASCAR fanatic. The

women undulated, arms held high, and sang, "You should not be surprised when all the world despises you, for the world despised the son of God and He has been raised up."

The Deacon yelled for an encore and the chorus started up again, only this time she hammered the tambourine toward the door, cocked her head for the two twelve-string guitars to follow, and the trio played in the hallway while the group inside repeated it a cappella. I flattened myself against the door jam and braced for a stampede while Mother, the NASCAR fanatic, and the Deacon serenaded Polly, the woman in the bathroom. The Deacon sounded farts through her mouth, pop pop, in time to the beat. Polly finally came out of the bathroom, red-faced in a tight white tee shirt--and the Deacon--hyperventilating perhaps--fell on the floor and blew a long finale fart.

The NASCAR fanatic segued the trio into a new song, "Amazing Grace," and they came back into the room of women. The energy was gentle then; the women swayed, the words and music were a lullaby. I relaxed and entered the group. A woman slung her arm around me and we rocked and crooned the words, "How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed." What did I believe? I believed in this: these voices raised in sweet agreement and arms slung from shoulder to shoulder. The NASCAR guitar player, I noticed, wore little powder blue Keds that struck the floor hard as she danced. She had a big butt in tight jeans, an oversize tee shirt with the slogan "Chicks for Jesus" and a sharp crew cut; otherwise she was muscular, small, and attractive. She and Mother faced each other and dipped their guitars in a jazzy way as they strummed a new song, a closing song, "I will change your name. You shall no longer be called wounded, out-cast, lonely or afraid. I will change your name. Your new name shall be confidence, joyfulness, overcoming one, faithfulness, friend of God, one who seeks My face."

The group leader--or hostess--since I thought of Mother and the Deacon as leaders, was the same woman who sat on the bed in my room; she was, I then noticed, flat and straight as if she had been ironed, with blue hair, brown pumps, and a checkered jumper that cinched her knees. Her rope necklace clattered with junk--crosses, plastic ducks, laminated cards, wooden sheep, a blue cloud. She spoke meekly but clearly over the resonant guitars: "I gave up newspapers in order to read the Bible....did you ladies bring your Bibles?"

Women lifted their arms, palms to ceiling, and gurgled, "Alleluia. Praise God," in stammered chorus. At first the sounds were pleasant, like brook water, but they escalated into moans and I felt trapped, conspicuous, and rigid. Once, when I was a depressed teenager, I tried to be born again in Jesus, but I felt stupid and self-conscious gesticulating, as if the rhetoric of evangelism was identical to the language of sex play or singing in the shower. I danced and sang praises to the universe alone in upright tanning booths but I would not want anyone to watch. Was I uptight? Suddenly I felt defective, which I guess was the point of being here. If I did not feel incomplete, how could they get me to swoon to this music and fill me with... something.

I watched Mother in her white collar and her big skirt and Guatemalan wool vest and her laser sharp eyes that drilled the air with intelligence and joy and I wanted her to like me. I watched the Deacon who seemed so idiotic, but she was giddy, rascally; her voice was low and articulate. I did not want Jesus, whatever it meant to want him, I wanted the love of women; but if Jesus was love, I guess it fit to want him too.

We went around the room and said why we were there and what we did for work. An old woman in a pink sweat suit cried as she told of being a grandmother to seven; her taupe hair fizzled to the point of opacity. Other women looked at the ceiling and murmured yearningly of their children, especially their daughters, and of their roles in the Episcopal church. When it was my turn to speak I said that Mother asked me to come. A collective gasp rose in the room as if to affirm I was the Chosen One; indeed, I even bragged about her sponsorship of me, a hopeless case. The women chuckled delicate sounds of chimes. I said I was 43, an English Professor in a doctoral program, yet forgot to say that I had three children. A few more women shared sweetly about motherhood; I wanted to jump up, interrupt, shout "Wait!" I have three young boys, "and... and they are God's great gift to me!" but I of course I didn't because that was not my voice in my head, it was theirs.

We lined up against the wall with flashlights and rain coats; some of the coats smelled like cigarettes. Mother put a life size wooden cross in my arms. "Is this your cross?" she asked. It was April, a black night, wet with slush, and we were processing the stations of the cross outside. The stations were crisp laminated credit card size pinups on tress. We stopped at each and recited a prayer. The women were cold and solemn. Rays of flash light fell on a few faces, hooded masks without makeup that were robust, ascetic, and clean, white marble ovals of angular beauty. Suddenly I was in love with... something.

Inside, snacks were on the table: pretzels, potato chips, apples, and coke. Some women heaped chips into napkins, their hands dipped into the piles like little cranes that lurched toward their mouths. I ate an apple and strode around the foyer. Paintings covered the walls, one of a lone man in a canoe made me want to jump into the scene; in other paintings, a snowy road that led to a little house in the woods; a startled deer by a cobbled blue brook; and beavers by their dam--but nothing of Jesus--this really was a camp.

The Great Silence began with Compline, the last service of the evening celebrated daily in convents and monasteries. I liked this service, especially here, because it was structured and dignified and at the end, no one could talk, which meant that I didn't have to engage in stupid conversations with these overwrought women. We recited a Psalm in tandem--a living poem actually--I felt a tingle of joy: "Tremble then, and do not sin;/speak to your heart in silence upon your bed."

FRIDAY: DAY OF FAITH

In the morning the Mother, the Deacon, and the NASCAR guitar player strolled into our room and sang "Let us break bread together on our knees. When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun, Oh, Lord have mercy on me." This was our wakeup call. The Deacon walloped a drum and swaggered; she reminded me of "I Love Lucy" when Lucy put on chaps and a black mustache and sang "I'm an old cow hand." They stood below my bunk and serenaded me, just me. I sat up and giggled; I felt playful. It was good to be alive in that moment.

The Deacon officiated Morning Prayer. She wore a white robe that made her face look white and smooth as stone; I expected her to quiver from the strain of formality. Her voice was low, intelligent, the opposite of her frolic and spasm. Together, the many rows of women seated in pews as in a boat, recited the Psalm:

"O let the earth bless the Lord;/O mountains and hills, bless the Lord;/O all green things upon the earth, bless the Lord." This must be a good world, I thought, to wake up and read a poem about dews and frost, ice and snow, whales and cattle, all the creatures and phenomena of nature, eager to praise the Lord. Mother sat next to me; she asked me to read the lesson and told me to find it in the Bible. I made jokes about not having a Bible but she didn't believe me. "I know you read the Bible," she said, "I know your head." She was tired, she leaned into me and I rested my face in her hair. It smelled of gel and I loved her. We recessed and someone in the lead lifted the life-size wooden cross, held it high enough to hit the ceiling, and we sang "Who will bear My light to them? Whom shall I send? Here I am Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard You calling in the night. I will go Lord, if You lead me. I will hold Your people in my heart." The hostess told us not to leave or enter a room without the cross because we were supposed to carry our burden or...something.

We ate good food for breakfast in a cold room. One window was covered by a banner: Day Of Faith. The wait staff lit the stack of cedar wood they had arranged in the dining room fireplace and it cracked like gunshot. I felt giddy in the warmth of this simple pleasure and stood by it while I ate a buttered blueberry scone. I wore a necklace with some junk on it, a yarn and popsicle stick cross, a new piece added from my place mat where the leaders lay their daily treasures for the Cursillistas; it was placed over my head like a crown of thorns. Women dashed out of the dining room into the Great Hall where the guitars strummed up. I stood my ground by the fire, I wanted to drink more coffee in the cozy room. Some women touched me, sweetly. "Aren't you coming?" their voices went ting ting. I followed and picked up the cross which tottered against the door jam. It was heavy; I passed the Deacon near the Great Hall; she smiled at me and held my gaze with her cow-sized eyes. "Are you alright?" she asked.

I stared at her and nodded, slid into the Great Hall and stood against the wall. Why would she ask me that, I wondered. I must be starved for attention, I thought, because her question penetrated to the center of my longing. She passed and looked at me again, questioning, and I realized that she must interpret my lack of participation as a problem. As the songs escalated and the hands went up I became more uncomfortable. I scanned for the one other uncomfortable woman and we nodded from across the room; she stood as rigidly as I but without the support of a wall. She could have been a man with her cropped blond crew cut and blue eyes except for her bosom and the cargo shorts she wore, one leg held out with a silver brace. Maybe she was just in pain or maybe, like me, it hurt to conform to this silly fevered display. Why did this hurt, I wondered? She approached me later and lisped about our small city; she was a cook in the bakery where I had coffee every morning and our children went to the same school. Her mouth faltered to one side, which corresponded to her sea blue eyes, lily pad-round, that gazed in the same direction. We shared our anxiety about this Cursillo business; we both agreed that it was not our style. She faded back into the brine of women and we did not speak again.

We gathered into flocks of five at separate tables, each with a table leader, who passed us profiles of a female patron saint. We would be known at our table as The Saint Hildas. Each of us needed to summarize a portion of the saint's profile for the larger group of tables. "Hilda," I said, "was over 30 when she felt the call to a religious vocation, not unlike, ha ha, many women who wait until their biological clock goes off." Some of the women laughed but my table leader was aghast so I

spoke directly to her: "She founded a co-ed monastery in Whitby England and invited the poet Caedmon to live with them--pretty racy, huh?"

"Hilda was from pagan royalty and converted to the Church of Rome in the 7th century, so she was well-educated," Mother added, eyeing our leader who rose and left the room.

Some of the women seemed agitated. I realized that a lot of them probably came here to work something out. I watched our leader from the window. She had driven here in a trailer with a sheep dog and a nasty German Shepherd and parked the caravan in the small lot in front of the camp. The Shepherd dove at a screen from inside the trailer. The rusty tin screen door slapped shut behind her and she emerged in a moment with a cigarette and sat on the fold-out steps to begin a session of chain-smoking. Her bracelets clattered up and down her arms as she dragged the butt to her mouth. Her hair was burned a bleachy green and her face was hatched bronze. I wondered if she was an appropriate Cursillo role model now that we were alone and leaderless. I felt the urge to take control of the group, but Mother sent the Deacon to our table. She sat next to me and I slid my chair away to give her space, or to give me space, or...something.

Our next assignment was to go around the table and talk about our first experience in the Episcopal Church after which we were supposed to go outside and pray for something we always wanted. While the women talked I wondered if I should pray for a new Jeep Cherokee; then I wondered what kind of car the Deacon drove. I imagined her in a Ford Jimmy blasting a Barry Manilow cassette. A woman who shared about her baptism I pictured in a black Honda Accord jiggling to Madonna Christmas carols as she drove. She was tiny with thick sculpted black hair that crested above her forehead, her clothes were J.C. Penney's best, tight and black. I liked her, she sang the 23rd Psalm a lot as she walked, an a cappella tune that sounded like plainsong. A woman who could have been an old apricot poodle or a cream puff left on a warm blanket, drove a Buick luxury sedan, I thought, and she listened to the Jerry Lewis telethon, but secretly hated it. I was the last to share after a woman who looked like a skittish horse with a black mane who, I was certain, kept a Ford pickup with a broken radio on a one-horse farm.

"I was Lutheran until after my mother died when I was 16. I entered an Episcopal convent in New Jersey during my senior year of high school. It was an independent study into the nature of religious life. I liked it so much that I stayed and was confirmed Episcopalian in their chapel. Then the Mother Superior sent me away to college and said that if I was truly called to a religious vocation I could come back to them."

"Wow...so what happened?"

I looked at the Deacon and the other women and said, "I made a mistake--I got married instead--and just recently, again."

"Oh, congratulations," the women sort of giggled, but the Deacon didn't say a word. She looked stricken.

"Was it hard?" she asked.

"Yes, it was hard," I said, but I was not sure whether she meant then or now.

We proceeded outside to a hillside space of green lawn. In contrast to the previous night, this day was brilliant. Plants dappled with sunlight and leaves whisked in a soft wind. I brought with me my canoe chair that unfolded into a reclining mat. The five of us lay down in the grass, I on my mat, and the Deacon asked us to pray for something we wanted.

I thought of all the books I read over the past year about Arctic and Antarctic exploration, my infatuation with leadership, rescue, starvation, and extreme conditions, especially ice and the struggle to stay alive, to stay warm, in some cases to thaw frozen body parts. Shackleton did not lose a single man in his cross-continent-Antarctic expedition from the time his boat broke up in the frozen sea until he landed them in England. I identified with the urge to explore, to overcome obstacles and survive. I wanted to come to the edge of death and be rescued; I wanted to rescue...something.

I felt like ice despite the sunlight on my face. Crocuses bloomed where we lay. I noticed the other women seemed to be asleep, but the Deacon looked at me; I smiled and she came over and stretched out next to me, close. She smelled like Downey fabric softener.

"What did you pray for?" she asked.

"To feel warm," I laughed.

"I bet no one ever held you and told you they loved you when you were little, did they?" Her eyes were as big as soup spoons.

"What makes you think that?" I asked.

"I can tell these things. I know the ones to worry about," she said.

"You're worried about me?" I was suspicious as if this was her canned Christian speech.

"Do you mind if I hold you?" She nodded her head in pretend agreement.

I shrugged my shoulders and she moved onto my mat and put her arms around me; we could have been lovers.

"I want you to go back to when you were four years old," she said, "and I'm your mommy and I'm holding you. You're my special baby and I love you, K, I love you so much. I'm here for you. Now you're five and you fall down and I pick you up and cradle you...I love you even more, K, my special little girl. Now you're six and you come home from school and we bake cookies, my sweet honey, K, I love you. You're seven and I push you on your swing and sing a song to you: Beautiful Jesus, wake unto me...You're eight honey and I sing happy birthday to you and give you a special heart, my heart, Jesus' heart. Now you're nine and I tuck you in tight and sing to you: Sleep my child and peace attend thee all through the night./Soft and drowsy hours are creeping all through the night./In my loving vigil keeping all through the night."

I must have had a seizure because my body shook the way it did after childbirth. Something got through to me...I believed her, that she told the truth, as if she really loved me. She held me firm and true until the fit of tears subsided.

"Jesus loves you, K" she said.

I felt confused and I thought that maybe Jesus was the Deacon.

We left the Great Hall for the dining room and sang "We are coming, Lord, to your table./We are coming to eat and drink to remember you." The cross, I noticed, was left in the Great Hall. I sat down in front of a place mat that had some junk on it: a plastic whistle shaped like a cross and a card that said "Rejoice!" I put the whistle on my yarn necklace and moved the card out of the way. The Deacon sat next to me. I wanted to sit next to Mother but she was at another table talking to a woman whom they said had recently had a baby and was disturbed. I thought the woman, who looked like a wealthy thwarted artist in a pair of suede clogs, appeared more histrionic-like and that if she was disturbed it was probably because she was a

new mother. When I was a new mother I was numb; I would rather have been histrionic.

The Deacon did not say much at lunch and neither did I. She seemed sullen, actually, and played with little bread squares from the platter of cheeses, meats, pickles, and olives on our table. I put piles of the food between the bread slices and ate them in two bites. I was hungry after regressing so far into a childhood psychodrama of exhausting affectation. The Deacon poled her arm across our table and rested her head upon it.

"Soon you'll be ten," she said to me.

Everyone stopped chewing when the meek hostess yelled, "Who's got Rejoice?" We all looked at each other, at the tables, and suddenly I remembered the card that I pushed off my place mat.

"You mean this?" I held it up.

"K's got Rejoice!" the hostess yelled. "Get up and choose a partner!" Jesus, I thought--now what. The women hauled me up into the space surrounded by tables and told me to choose a partner for a dance. Oh my God, I thought. I can't do this. "Go! Go! Go!" They clapped and the guitars strummed up a song "The King of glory comes, the nation rejoices./Open the gates before him, life up your voices." I pointed to my table mate, the woman who sang the 23rd Psalm, and she danced in a frenzy--all I had to do was tap my foot and clap. Tomorrow I would know not to sit at a place mat with a card, but the hostess told us, not in these words, that any piece of junk might serve as a mark.

According to Cursillo method, Friday, the first day of our weekend, was the Day of Faith and the leaders were called to give their Rollos (any of the 15 structured talks given during the Cursillo weekend retreat). We were in the Great Hall at our group tables. Bowls of pansies were placed there as center pieces. The NASCAR guitar player gave the first talk. She said, "I am here to give the Ideal Rollo." I noticed, then, that she stood in front of a banner that covered the window behind her; it read: Ideal: The Call To Be Fully Human. At first I thought she meant that she would give the best Rollo. Why did they cover the windows with those banners, I wondered. She wore a dress. I looked around the room and noticed Polly wore a long black and white polyester dress with short sleeves; the skin above her elbows swaggered. Our leader who lived in the trailer wore a dress, too; apparently she had stopped smoking long enough to come inside. The Deacon and Mother were missing.

The NASCAR guitar player, short of breath, began her lecture: "This talk asks the question, what is it to be fully human? It holds out the key to happiness...to living fully...one's God-given talents...in order to do so, it is necessary to live for a unified ideal. It considers what an ideal does for a person's life...by asking the question, where do you spend your time, money, and what do you think about most?" Her words were canned, probably from an Episcopal Church pamphlet. What she said next arose from a deep confident breath: I learned what it means to be Christian by inviting my co-worker to church. I got the courage to introduce her to the message of Jesus. This was my goal in life: to convert the people I met by quiet example."

A few hands were lifted and some voices droned, "Jesus, Jesus."

"By quiet example," she repeated. "Introduce them to the message of Jesus," she whispered. "This was my goal," she roared. The co-worker, it turned out, was a woman with whom she had a fight. Jesus urged her to reconcile with this woman by inviting her to attend a bring-a-friend-to-church day. In between explanations of her full God-given humanity she inserted the refrain of "quiet example." She spoke

exactly like she sang, even her foot tapped out the melody of words. She ended by thanking Jesus for her sweet children, then she started to cry. I bet they'll all do this, I thought. Tears seemed to be the outward sign that "you got it" or got...something.

Discussions ensued after the Rollo according to the method. Our group leader was back. Despite her hair color, she looked incongruously rugged in white high heels and a dress with a lace collar. She asked us each to describe a situation in which we felt fully human. The rhetoric of this question struck me as so absurd that I burst out laughing. Our leader stared at me, fearful, I realized, that I might say something to get her thrown out of the room again. The woman who sang the 23rd Psalm said that she felt fully human when she was persecuted for her beliefs, as when she claimed her Christianity in public and people laughed at her. I might laugh at her, I thought. The skittish woman said she liked to go for long walks after a lamb dinner and that being in touch with nature made her feel alive, like Jesus during his forty nights in the desert. Except that Jesus nearly starved, I thought. The woman who looked like an apricot poodle said she felt fully human when she was most in love with her husband. Then I was interested, because this statement referenced a concrete that touched upon a core of personal shame: I was out of love with my husband and we had only been married for five months. In fact, I was desperately unhappy at home and did not know why. Mother had married us in my church; it was her first marriage as an ordained priest. I had to get a special dispensation from the bishop to receive this sacrament again because I had been married and divorced once before in the Episcopal church. I thought that I could never get divorced again from this husband because, 1. I could not let Mother down; 2. I would never get another dispensation. I thought that my allegiance to Mother would keep me in this marriage. She said to me in pre-marriage counseling: "This man will exhaust you. Are you prepared for that?" My husband, who was jealous and possessive, dependable, immovable, a boulder dug into his tiny hometown landscape, was rigidly predictable; I, however, was wily, light as a leaf, impulsive, depressed, and contemptuously artistic. My husband hung prints of covered bridges in a hop-across-the-wall pattern; I replaced them with a large original nude charcoal, a model whose black pubic hair burst into the picture and slipped around her body like mango roots. Suddenly I felt sad and bored; how could I endure another Rollo go-around, I wondered? A few tears rolled imperceptibly away.

Mother and the NASCAR fanatic appeared in the doorway with the Deacon, clothed in collar, propped between them. She might collapse, I thought, and wondered if she'd had a spasm. They pushed her forward and left her gripping the lectern like a walker. I felt as if a movie was about to begin, a sweaty thriller. She spoke in a low stuttering voice, "Grace brings us closer to God...we pay a high price for the gift of grace...it is the key to our happiness." What the hell is grace, I wondered.

"Grace is the manifestation of God's love, both in and through us," she continued. "If you feel loved, it is because you have received God's grace, and grace is a temporary exemption from sin, both for the giver and receiver."

Hmmm, I thought, does this mean that I can love and be loved by anyone without consequence, in fact, with God's sanctification? I did feel regenerated by love, I felt special, favored, pardoned. It sounded good to me, but I had to be careful to distinguish it from lust.

"Grace comes from a personal relationship with God...those who receive it do not deserve it," she said, and her lower lip quivered. "I...I did not think I deserved it..."

I was," she began to spasm standing up but gripped the podium, "severely abused as a child by an alcoholic mother. I was slain in the spirit."

Gasps rustled around the room and Mother, I noticed, raised her eyebrows, put her hands over her face, and shook her head. She made eye contact with the NASCAR guitar player and the two of them nodded and shrugged their shoulders. It looked as if the Deacon had strayed from the subject of grace; it looked as if, had she arrived in a trailer, Mother would have given her a time out in the trailer.

It turned out that the Deacon's mother, on more than one occasion, had gotten drunk and climbed into bed with her, had beaten her and thrown her out of the house where she wandered the slums of Schenectady by herself. But the Deacon always went back and often arrived in time to lug her mother, passed out on the stoop, into the house. Her mother, who lit one cigarette after another and left them to burn in ashtrays around the house, had on one occasion, caused a fire that nearly killed the stepfather. The Deacon loved the stepfather, who like the Deacon, left when he'd had enough and came back when he wanted more. This pattern persisted in present time but the Deacon seemed oblivious to her role in the struggle. I wanted to shout, have you heard of ALANON?

The discussion that followed the Deacon's Rollo bored me to death. The women abstracted the concept of grace from any concrete and not one of them mentioned alcoholism. Our Saint Hilda leader left again, sat on her trailer steps, and smoked. Her dogs lunged like prisoners at the inside screens. She returned, flanked by Mother and the Deacon who pouted like a little boy, to give the next Rollo.

"The laity Rollo," she began, "is about becoming a member of God's church." She staggered to the side of the podium. I thought it was because her high heels broke. She appeared to fall out of them. "I became a member of God's church when I became a wildlife biologist." What? A wildlife biologist? Since when? I thought she was a welfare case...well, she still might be, I cautioned myself, but the news was music to my ears. "I was the director of a bird sanctuary and there...I met God in his church," she slurred.

"Uh oh," I said to our table gang. "I think she's drunk...or something. Drugs maybe?"

"Yeah, I didn't smell alcohol on her breath," the 23rd Psalm woman whispered.

"Look at Mother," I pointed, "I think something's up, like they want to get rid of her."

Mother signaled to the NASCAR guitar player and mouthed what looked like "cut." The two of them left the room. The Deacon was out of the loop. They came back in a moment and leaned together against the wall. I actually liked what I heard from our trailer leader. I imagined her in a ranger outfit on a boardwalk raised above a swamp in the wilderness. She would count hawks and endangered song birds, then at sunset, kick back in a lounge chair in front of her trailer with a cold drink while her dogs sniffed the brush. What was she doing here? Her Rollo obviously had nothing and everything to do with the laity becoming members of God's church. The last thing she said before Mother and the NASCAR guitar player swooped her out was, "God is the wind that touches your skin." My teeth actually chattered in a chill of recognition--our trailer leader was right--the only referent for God was a concrete and she had identified God in an analogy I could understand. I loved the wind.

We had a fifteen minute break while we waited for the next Rollo. I went outside by myself in the startling sunshine and wandered out back to an outside deck with dining tables. It was such a relief to feel warmth, to smell the dirt thaw. Was the winter hard? I could not remember. I felt like ice for so long; at home I took baths to

change my body temperature. I thought again about the exploration books that obsessed me--in one the men ate their boots and their reindeer sleeping bags to stay alive; in another a group of men lived in a snow cave heated by seal blubber; starved men wintering near the north pole crawled on their bellies to a puddle of water and ate minute crustaceans. I was starved for...something.

The windows in the Great Hall were covered by three new banners; one read: Laity Transform The World; another: Faith Is God Calling You; the third: Holiness Is God's Witness. Then only one window admitted the light. What a shame, I thought, to obscure the light. Women ate from bowls of candy that appeared while I was outside; they could have been birds at a bird feeder. I heard some of them talking about bowel movements.

"Is there any chocolate?" I asked. No one answered. The leaderless women at my table seemed listless. Perhaps I could tell a few sarcastic jokes.

"Who's next?" I asked, and unwrapped a rope of red licorice; it felt like a snake in my mouth.

"Polly," they agreed. "Mother and the other women are praying for her now," they said.

"What could they be praying for? So far the Rollos have strayed from the subject don't you think?" I asked.

The woman who sang the 23rd Psalm said, "Nothing could be as bad as the last one...she was a mess."

"This is like boot camp," I said, "they break you down and build you up, but when? When do they build us up? Especially when they give us broken down leaders." I felt like I was demanding something in which I was not willing to participate.

Polly came in with the meek hostess on one side of her and the NASCAR guitar player on the other. I guess they were like soldiers of Christ. Polly smiled.

"I'm so glad to be here," she said. "When Mother asked me to give the Faith Rollo I said to myself, God knows exactly what I need to give back, because the call to faith has been my biggest struggle." Her voice was a strong alto.

Polly was happy. I felt safe listening to her, as if a person could believe in God without acting crazy in the way of the self-absorbed Deacon and the staggering wildlife biologist. She had a clear message and that was that prayer created faith and faith called her to mission work where God's love was imparted to a Dominican orphan. She told her husband she was bringing the baby home until the baby could be adopted. I appreciated her story, a story which aligned her with something greater than herself, but I was not there. I was stuck in the personal story, the one that called for attention and affection like the stories the Deacon and the wildlife biologist told. Was I as broken down as they sounded? I wondered.

Polly left the room and our leaderless group asked me questions about Mother.

"What's it like having a woman for a parish priest?"

"Well we also have a man," I said, "the real priest who will fill the post when Mother is reassigned. He's kind of bumbling while she's the intellectual heart of our church. I love the combination because it's like having a substitute mother and father--I go to her for female issues and to him for practical concerns, like how to pronounce a word in a reading, or rescheduling, or can I come to a church supper without paying."

"You're so lucky," they said.

"Yeah. She's a church law lawyer, you know. She was assigned to our church to bring down the shyster priest who was laundering money from our fifty-million-dollar endowment."

"We heard about that," they said and shook their heads.

All the women loved Mother, and the men, too, I suspected. She came from royalty--an island in the Arctic ocean was named after an uncle who was a king. She was hard--I once heard her correct the grammar of the mayor in the middle of a church service; she was beautiful--her angular face leanly carved and set with eyes the color of black polished glass. She was a role model for weak women and a challenge for lazy men. I was deeply attracted to her brilliance and I knew that none of what I admired had anything to do with religion. She was a priest in a male culture and that in itself appealed--she could have been a firefighter or a pilot--I was interested in her words which were like granite. Her rare moments of emotional accessibility quickly and efficiently closed. This frustrated me because I wanted to be her friend, not her parishioner.

Mother entered the Great Hall by herself while her escorts, our trailer leader and the NASCAR guitar player, watched from the doorway. Polly and the Deacon were not present.

"My job today is to give the Holiness Rollo," Mother said.

"Oh, a holy roller," I laughed, to no one in particular. A few eyebrows were raised.

"Because I'm the priest I'm supposed to give the sacraments Rollo as well. I want you to know that anything outside of church can be a sacrament if it is infused with God's will...cookies you bake for the nursing home, clothing you give to families in need...because the root of the word means to consecrate, to dedicate to a sacred purpose. These gifts bring us into communion with our neighbors. They are an outward sign of God's grace that Jesus ordained, ordained that you should imbue your gifts with God's love. How do we do this? It starts with holiness--which means to make more whole. It starts with living as a witness of self-confident love."

Mother, who once sang the mass, spoke in clear contralto, and her tone occasionally rose to soprano for passionate emphasis. The women in this room needed her. I watched the histrionic woman in clogs, glossy with tears, gaze desperately at Mother. Who was Jesus if not a symbol we clung to in the people we chose to save us? Mother was taciturn and that deterred me from choosing her as a hands-on savior. What the hell I needed saving from I did not know. I looked around the room for the Deacon. I pined for her zany excitability.

"I'm going to tell you a story," Mother said, "that emphasizes our recognition of sacramental gifts, how they enrich our lives and encourage self-confident love...A man named Johnny Lingo arrived in a tropical village...he was wealthier than any man on the island...a rumor spread that he would purchase a wife for five cows, which was the maximum price, so they expected him to choose the most beautiful desirable woman in the village. The bidding began and women appeared in grass skirts with flowers in their hair and gems in their noses. Johnny scanned the auction and the villagers thought he might be looking for a bargain when he alighted upon Mahana, a homely woman with plain hair in a muddy dress. Johnny Lingo said he wanted Mahana, which shocked the villagers and particularly her father who said he'd be lucky to get a dry cow for her. But Johnny said, 'For Mahana I will not pay five cows, I will pay eight.' They thought he was crazy but the deal was struck and the two were married and left the island. A few years later Johnny and Mahana visit the island again, but now Mahana was lively and lovely with fluffy hair and a silk

chemise. 'What happened to my Mahana?' her father asked. Johnny said, 'I have loved Mahana since we were children. I did not want her to have to compare herself to the other women in the village...I wanted her to be able to say that my husband paid eight cows for me...I wanted her to think of herself as an eight-cow woman.'

Laughter tinkled like tiny bells around the room; I loved the sound of many women laughing lightly. Mother had made these overweight older women in pink polyester sweat pants feel like they were precious, and in case they hadn't made the connection yet, she would make it for them.

"I want you Cursillistas to know that you are worth more... you are worth ten cows, that Jesus would pay ten cows for each of you, that he already has paid ten cows for each of you by dying on the cross. You are witnesses to his love and this demands that you acknowledge your fearless self-esteem. Do not doubt yourselves... Jesus has already paid the price for you to have self-confident love. Now commit yourselves to living as holy examples of his love...because you are ten-cow women."

Mother received a standing ovation for this Rollo. She left the room with the other Rollo women. An unaccompanied song initiated: "And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes they'll know we are Christians by our love." I actually clapped my hands in the roar of voices until the song mellowed down and I shouted, "Pass It On!" And the women scintillated: "It only takes a spark to get a fire going./And soon all those around can warm up in it glowing./That's how it is with God's love once you've experienced it: You spread His love to everyone./You want to pass it on." Someone lifted the cross and we marched out the front door and down the road, smiling and singing.

I was loafing on my top bunk, reading about mountain glissades and how to arrest an unexpected slide with a snow axe, when I heard a hubbub in the hall. The Deacon was on the floor again in a spasm, only this time she lay on her stomach in the threshold of the chapel. She wore a coarsely knit vest of multi-colored flower buds. It was beautiful; the buds seemed to undulate into blooms as her body wrangled the spasms. Mother, Polly, the NASCAR guitar player, and the wildlife biologist laid their hands upon her and prayed. I thought they wanted her to get up. I wondered if the Deacon was gloriously conscious of the all the attention. I thought, what difference did it make? It was psychodrama and that was an exorcism, a purging reenactment. The Deacon's fits were as intense as her gags; I liked the entertainment.

I heard a howling behind a closed door nearby. What was going on here? Those Rollos had scared up a lot of turmoil. Mother and the guitar player ran into that room and left the door ajar just long enough for me to identify the sacristy and the woman with the brace. She sat on the floor with her head in her hands and begged Mother to let her go home. Release was against the method; the leaders were supposed to reconstruct the candidates: tear them down and build them up--at least that's how I saw it. This was a surreptitious job: to be born again in Jesus. Clearly the woman with the brace had been deconstructed too soon and I did not believe that Mother had enough time to devote to the reconstruction job. Her sidekick leaders, except maybe for Polly, were not capable. I wondered how long they would make her suffer before they called her husband. I got back on my bunk and read Snow Camper's Guide. I should avoid a meltdown; I was glad to be icy and bemused.

A male priest came in the front door and stood next to a new pot of pansies in the entryway. Vases of fresh carnations, roses, and daisies hopped down the stairs. A just out banner that said Pray For Healing hung from the canoe painting; I wanted to see the little man in the canoe. The priest, who was slouched and bearded, was there to conduct a healing service along with Mother and the Deacon. Each would have a station and a helper where, when the spirit inspired, a candidate might approach and receive a laying-on-of-hands, possibly a holy oil anointment, and if she was lucky, some kind of bloodletting with Jesus in which she was purged, recharged, and born-again. At least that's how I saw it.

Mother explained that some of us have gifts: the gift of tongues, or 'prayer language' for example, in which a healer receives the word of God but may or may not have the gift of interpretation, in which case the healer will not understand what she has said, but someone else who has the gift of interpretation will translate. The laying-on-of-hands gift heals illness through touch. Mother had the gift of tongues and the Deacon had the gift of laying-on-of-hands.

Our tables were pushed against the walls in the Great Hall, chairs arranged in circles of three, and in rows where we might sit as if we waited for a barn dance. Women carried fistfuls of chips, pretzels, peanuts, soda and juice in from the foyer. I sat in one of the rows and listened to the priest tell a joke about fat women at Cursillo. I also heard him say he was a former salesman. With his red beard and sloppy posture I wondered what he might have sold; I pictured him in a drafty building at a metal desk with a vinyl folder full of life insurance forms--until he decided that Jesus was the best investment.

The Deacon wore her collar in a stiff black shirt. I caught her eye and she puckered her lips in a kiss. I cocked my head like a nine-year-old and reciprocated. Huh? What the hell was I doing? She shared her station with the meek hostess who stared at her own hands held in prayer.

The NASCAR guitar player strummed lightly and women whispered delicate songs. I asked her to play "Come Down O Love Divine" and I went in the hallway and sang it by myself. I did not know why I did this except to say that I loved the song and wanted to hear myself sing it with unabashed pleasure. I was startled out of my private serenade by Mother who took my hand and led me to her station. I was flattered, but nervous, and I burst out laughing.

"I know you want to be healed," she said. "What can we do for you?" I looked at Polly, her helper (this was good--I had the two best authorities), then back at Mother; finally I shrugged my shoulders. They bowed their heads and waited. My mind went blank, I felt numb, and I was embarrassed to the point of making something up, as if I owed Mother a topic for coming to get me.

"I'm cold," I said. Polly offered me her sweater. "No, I mean I feel numb, like ice...I am ice. I can't feel anything. No one can feel me. I want the ice removed." I wanted to cry but could not, so I made my face look very serious. I looked at Polly; she was roly-poly. I thought about polar bears, outfitted with a double layer of fur, girdled by four inches of blubber that almost completely prevented heat loss.

"Hmmm," Mother said. "Okay. I know what we need. We need the Holy Spirit. We need the fire of the Holy Spirit." She stood up and enfolded me with her left arm, tight. Polly held my hands. Mother called upon Jesus the healer, used a lot of words about flames and then she babbled. I think there were words, but the words ran together and became one long continuous sound punctuated by heavy sighs. She pressed her hips into my breast bone and trembled. I wondered if this was a prayer

that she had recited so many times it became like the hurried pitch of an auctioneer. But no, there was no rhetoric; rather, there was resonance as if she was a vibrated string. The babble trailed off and then she repeated the words, "The fire of the Holy Spirit loves you....the fire of the Holy Spirit loves you," on and on until I felt... something. I felt hot. I felt self-conscious, too, of (I confess) my head tucked under her armpit. There was a decrescendo and she loosened her grip; Polly let go of my hands.

"Jesus came down as the flame of the Holy Spirit," Mother said, "and he loves you."

Maybe the heat I felt was love, but I was once again confused, for I was sure that it was Mother who loved me, that religious words must be metaphorical. I also felt repulsed by my participation, like unwanted sex, or as if I had handled snakes at a southern church.

The four authorities, Mother, Polly, the NASCAR guitar player, and the wildlife biologist plus a backup band of all the leaders who were not Cursillo candidates--table leaders, expeditors, the meek hostess, and even some of the drivers--burst into our room that night before Compline and sang "De Colores. Living colors embrace all of nature with love in the springtime. De Colores. Living colors adorn birds that sing cheerfully day and nighttime. De Colores. Living colors envelop the rainbow in heavens above. That's the reason I like all the colors that brighten the life of the things that I love." The team leaders clapped and danced around the room. This simple stupid song was a staggering pleasure. The women, I noticed, wore exposed multi-colored socks--like munchkins, and I also noticed that the wind from the open windows smelled like wet dirt. I turned red when Mother threw a bag on my bed. The team leaders put bags on all the beds but I was alone in the room and this come-a-courting was for me.

The bag had my name on it and was filled with 'palanca', the Spanish word for intercessory prayers, in the form of notes and doodads. I dumped the junk onto my bunk and sifted through maybe five-hundred pieces of personally addressed cards, including one from my husband, my parish Father priest, one from each of the authorities and all of the team leaders from this and many other Cursillo movements around the country. I had never seen my name, spelled correctly, so many times in one place. It was a jolting event to collect these notes, many of which referred to an experience within the last twelve hours. Mother gave me a pair of yellow chick socks and a chick PEZ container. The Deacon gave me a carved wooden cross. There were so many notes from so many people I knew or had met, I actually drooled, agape with faith in human benevolence, which is all I ever wanted.

SATURDAY: DAY OF LOVE

We gathered outside for a group photograph and squinted into sparkles of tree-filtered light. I stood in the back, taller than most of the women and the only blond amid blues and grays and auburns. My face was gaunt and I looked bored. The Deacon was a few rows forward; hers was the only head turned sideways to the camera. Mother posed in the front row in priestly black and smiled ubiquitously. Polly was on one end of the front row because she was short; she looked like a fat flower in full bloom. The woman with the brace was absent. I saw her get into a car, slide

next to her husband, and drive away. Most of the women in the photograph I could not identify by name, although they knew my name and did not forget it.

Mother and the Deacon officiated the afternoon Eucharist. The Deacon wore white wildly embroidered floral vestments and stood aside the altar, hands clenched together at her waist. She read a passage from The Book of Common Prayer that said: "We commend to your continual care the homes in which your people dwell. Put far from them every root of bitterness...Knit them together in constant affection those who, in marriage, have been made one flesh. Turn the hearts of the parents to the children, and the hearts of the children to the parents; and so enkindle fervent charity among us all that we may ever more be kindly affectioned one to another..." and it was poignant to the core of my disturbance: I was married to a man I did not love--I was bored to the point of rage--and rage was a condition I treated episodically and secretly with large doses of prescribed narcotics. I was disabled by dread. I exploded with remorse for my unconscionable acts and desperate isolation. It could not be contained in that moment, especially without narcotics, and I began, quietly at first, to spasm. When the tears came I made a lot of involuntary noise. Mother continued her incantations at the altar and the Deacon marched forward, sat down next to me, and hugged me hard--what a relief--the sounds of dread were muffled in her flowery garments; but my outbreak was contagious as several other women in the room began to tremble and cry. The histrionic new mother clomped out of the room in her suede clogs and slammed a side door. I was glad to be contained by the earnest Deacon.

She returned to the altar and doled out the wafer flesh of Jesus while Mother tipped the cup of wine blood. When it was my turn to partake I opened my mouth, the Deacon placed the wafer on my tongue and slid her fingers along my lips. I admit: I was aroused, but by what? Was this a psychodrama of repaired romantic tenderness? I did not know what to think in my frantic intellectualizations, so I tried to relax. I looked at Mother and wondered if she saw my Deacon-tingled lips. I did not drink blood-wine so Mother did what she always did: she held the cup for me to touch, I slid my fingers along the silver as I always did, and we smiled.

We sang "Day By Day" and my table mate who looked like a horse carried the cross slung high like a hefty leather saddle. We advanced to the dining room for dinner; a fire popped in the hearth and lit the cozy room. The windows and walls were completely covered by new banners that read: Jesus Is Formation: Change Yourself In Him; Encounter Christ In The Sacraments; Evangelization: Sharing Jesus; Christian Leaders Overcome Obstacles. A cardboard cloud was attached to our junk necklaces by team leaders. We ate lemon chicken with a dill cream sauce, sliced raw vegetables, fresh crusty bread, aromatic caper rice, and mocha pudding with splinters of dark chocolate. The NASCAR guitar player closed one door and stood in front of it; Mother closed the other door and stood in front of it; the dining room was totally dark except for the amber fire glow. Women talked like chickens over the suspense of the blocked doors and black room. Eerie choral sounds crept outside the walls like witch trial chants.

"Hush," someone said. "Do you hear that?" Polly put her ear to the wall. "I hear music," she said. "Listen." The authorities blocked the doors. The voices crescendoed in roaring a cappella hymns, so familiarly beloved I swooned. This serenade was really loud and unexpected. The women were raptured by the surprise--it was more than the histrionic woman in clogs could handle--she flailed against Mother who finally opened a door. What a shame, I thought, to lose Mother

during this exquisite experience. We listened, frozen in space, until the sounds ran distant like minnows swimming away from a boat.

"Oh my god," I said. "What was that?"

"You liked it?" Polly asked.

"Who was it?" I joined in the chicken clatter, too; I wanted answers--what was this ghostly gig? Was it a spontaneous sing-along amongst the waiters and gardeners? Was it a weekly Christian jamboree? Was it part of The Method? How did they do that? Why? Whatever it was, which was not forthcoming, was chillingly lovely.

Saturday was skit night. Each table was instructed to select a rollo topic and enact it, sort of like Charades, except that we were expected to create props and a screenplay. A behind-the-scenes expediter passed armloads of craft materials down an assembly line of team leaders who dumped them at our tables. The Saint Hildas decided to reenact the Sacraments Rollo; I insisted. I was manic with sarcasm. I beamed with flights of thought about the best costumes. I wrote and assigned scripts to the four of us and made a list of props which the wildlife biologist and the expediter hunted down: two black shirts, white plastic, a large bowl filled with water, the life-size cross, a shot glass of olive oil, cookies, a bottle of purple grape juice and a cup, also a hair brush for me because I left mine at home. Why my table mates let me boss the skits I never understood. Somehow, I swept them up in an aggressive caustic riot of farce. Even the woman who looked like an old apricot poodle, to whom I gave the part of laity along with me, was frisky. The skittish horse woman played the part of deacon and the 23rd Psalm woman played the part of priest.

The wildlife biologist cut and affixed our costumes: The deacon, played by the horse woman, wore a black skirt and shirt with a white plastic strip cut from a bleach bottle snugged into the collar. The priest-and-part-time-bishop, played by the woman who sang the 23rd Psalm, wore the same except her shirt was tucked into jeans along with a towel vestment draped with a toilet paper stole. When a sacrament called for the bishop she wore a gold crown we made out of poster board and carried a cane that the meek hostess borrowed from one of the candidates. The poodle woman wore shorts and suspenders and a bow tie to look like a little boy. The wildlife biologist tied my hair in pigtails and gave me one of her lace shirts and a giant lollipop she found, unwrapped, in a kitchen drawer in her trailer. She told me not to lick it.

It never occurred to any of us, even the downtrodden wildlife biologist, that what we were about to perform was offensive. At the last minute I made the expediter bring us a colorful vest so that our priest would look like Mother. We found our deacon a pair of black hiking boots so that she would look like The Deacon, who, we were told, drove a Harley. We dragged our table to the middle of the room and set it up as an altar with our accoutrements. Then we began our renditions of the seven slap-stick sacraments.

Our priest and deacon came out from behind the alter with a party-size punch bowl of water. They carried it together and sloshed it on the floor. The woman who sang the 23rd Psalm stood on a chair and bent my face into the bowl; then she said, "Whoops, wrong end of your head," and staggered away with laughter. The poodle woman got the water thrown in her face as the priest and the skittish horse woman shouted, "I baptize you in the name of the mother, daughter, and holy ghost."

"Okay," I said, it's time for our Confirmations." I knelt on the floor with the poodle woman and we responded, "I do," to our bishop, who poked the cane at our

heads and said, "Do you reaffirm your renunciation of evil?" from The Book of Common Prayer. The bishop and the deacon threw holy oil on us from the shot glass and chanted "The power of Christ compels you!" from the Exorcist; then they held up the giant wooden cross and pretended to drop it on our heads and we fell backwards on the floor. Of course this was savagely funny to us and we paid no attention to reactions in the room, but I did hear a few women murmur, "Oh, how could they?"

"Be reconciled!" The 23rd Psalm woman announced. Our priest sat under the table and the poodle woman confessed: "I confess to God, to his church, and to you, Mother, that I have sinned in thought, word, and deed, in things done and things left undone; especially...I have fantasized about eating my priest instead of Jesus and...and then I can't swallow." The poodle woman's face was deadpan; I told her not to laugh, but our priest, who was supposed to say, "The Lord has put away all your sins. Go in peace and pray for me, a sinner," instead said, "Come unto me and I will refresh you." I heard one of the women in the room spit, "Jesus Christ, what will they think of next?" but I paid no attention and neither did the Saint Hildas or the four authorities. In fact, the Deacon, who sat on one of the guitar stools, was keeled over in laughter.

We needed a bishop and a priest to ordain the deacon, so I played the deacon and the poodle woman played the tambourine. In the old Book of Common Prayer the ordained is referred to as he, so I decided that the deacon should disguise herself as a man. I wore a black motorcycle jacket and a black magic marker sliver of mustache and sat sideways on a chair-Harley. "Vroom, vroooooom," I yelled and scooted around the room on the chair. The tambourine banged in time to the revving and we got the rest of the women, who finally seemed to enjoy the show, to clap. I heard the Deacon's laughter over all the noise, but Mother was dead-still, arms crossed. Can't take a joke, I thought. I throttled the chair-Harley toward our altar and our bishop yelled, "Lay down!" As was custom for the ordained, I prostrated myself on the floor in a dive pose, but not before I yanked the towel-vestment from our bishop and said, "Where's my red carpet?" (The truth was I didn't want to lay on the dirty floor.) Our 23rd Psalm woman-bishop canted, "Has he been selected in accordance with the canons of this Church? And do you believe his manner of life to be suitable to the exercises of this ministry?"

"Wait one minute," the poodle woman lay person pointed a finger at me. "That's not a man, look at that butt!" Our clergy team ordered me on my feet and demanded that I pull down my pants.

"Okay, we get the picture, you can stop now." This was Mother's first reaction to our show, but she smiled, so we segued into the next skit.

The Eucharist was our best display because the 23rd Psalm woman, now our priest, was a brutal actress. She actually sang the prayers, "The Body of Christ, the cup of salvation. The Blood of Christ, the cup of salvation." The horse woman deacon laid a cookie on our lips, then took a bite and yelled, "Um, not bad," dropped it on the floor and while she looked for it, stepped on it.

"You've got to eat that, now," I said.

"Yeah," the poodle woman said, "You can't crush Christ. You can't leave him there. And you can't expect us to eat him."

The horse woman walked around the Great Hall and offered cookies to the women. Some of them accepted, exchanged looks with each other, and put them down. Others kept their arms crossed as the plate went by, which reminded me of what I do when the offering plate is shoved toward me in church.

What happened next should have gotten us thrown out of the room, but remarkably, it did not. Our priest actress offered the poodle woman and me a sip from the cup of purple grape juice. "The blood of Christ, the cup of salvation," she sang. We each took a sip and she wiped the chalice cup with her toilet paper stole, then she slugged what was left in the cup and went back to the altar for the bottle. (I told her to do this.) She stumbled around with the bottle tipped up and guzzled the grape juice until it spilled out of her mouth in what looked like bloody rivulets. This time I heard some of the Cursillo candidates gasp. The Deacon stopped laughing when she looked at mother who covered her mouth with her hand and stared at the wall.

Our actress was a one-woman show: we stepped back to let her act as in a dance hall when one or two people rise to immaculate choreography and dancers circle round to watch. The woman who sang the 23rd Psalm let the grape juice drip down her chin, she careened around the room and slurred, "This is the blood of Christ...take him, and-feed-on-him-in-your-hearts...take him." She reeled back to our table-alter and garbled, "Let us bless the Lord," as she wretched and simulated spewed grape juice stomach contents.

The horse woman, the poodle woman, and I moaned with laughter. The wildlife biologist left the room when Mother looked at the wall with her dog-tired face. The meek hostess shook her head, and like most of the women in the room, stared, transfixed. We were too exhausted to finish the show and said we would do Marriage and Anointing of the Sick as encores. The Deacon clapped with gusto which sparked a ripple of reluctant applause around the room. I thought the women were too stupid to appreciate a good performance.

Our bunk room bathroom was communal, down the hall, next to the bedroom that Mother and the Deacon shared. I passed their room on my way to take a shower; the door was open, the Deacon flopped on the bed against the window, her collar thrown off, her shirt unbuttoned. Mother's two guitars, a six-string and a twelve-string, were propped against the wall. I envied the Deacon for her proximity to Mother. Did they talk across pillows in the dark? What would that be like, I wondered, to have an adult female slumber-party friend?

I wore my turquoise poppy flower robe and carried a towel. I arranged my soaps on the shelf, then I saw Mother's shoes behind a stall door. I stood absolutely still inside the shower stall and waited for her to leave; I felt like a cow in a stanchion. This was a case of embarrassed nudity like shy bladder. The stalls were tall and narrow, metal with cement floors. I choose the one by the window where I saw a few stars flicker. The water shot hard and cold out of a high shower head. I stood naked in the nook outside the stall and waited for hot water; it was okay for anyone but Mother, with whom I was enthralled, to see me in the buff--I guess because I felt nothing...or felt comfortable....or something. That is, until the Deacon entered the bathroom and looked at me.

I wanted to cover my face with the towel, never mind the rest of me. Suddenly I was in a panic of self-conscious torture. What the hell was wrong with me? Any other woman (besides Mother and then the Deacon) could have walked in there and I might have paraded over to the sink to brush my hair, exposed and at ease.

"I thought we could talk," she said.

I looked back and forth and stepped backwards into the hailstorm of water. "Who me? Are you talking to me?" I asked, stupidly.

She leaned against the sink counter supported on one elbow at a 90 degree angle. She wore dark stone wash jeans, a little too short, and a white shirt that hung crooked out of the waist.

"Yes--I wanted to see how you're doing. Are you ten yet?"

"Here? You want to talk to me here?"

"Is that okay?" she asked and peeked toward the shower stall.

"Um, I guess so," I lied. I had to reach outside the stall for shampoo. What if she saw me? What the hell was wrong with me? I felt like an infatuated little girl. Was I infatuated? How could she just stand there talking to me while I was nude inside a shower? It did not dawn on me that I projected my feelings onto her and saw them replayed...or did I? Did I love her? I thought I was supposed to love Jesus...or they faked love through Jesus or faked Jesus through love...or something.

I did not remember a word of what we chatted, but I did remember this: she waited for me to turn off the water and step out of the shower (I had no choice). She watched while I stuffed my ropy rats nest hair into a turban; she looked at me like a lover while I dried myself off. I swore I was unsettled and she was, well...beguiled.

"Meet me in the chapel and we'll talk some more," she said, and we left the misty bathroom together. A secret date?

I sat sideways in a chair-pew, one chair between us, and faced her in the quiet chapel. I wore silk shorts and a matching top, my Cursillo sleep-over purchase, and my turquoise poppy flower robe. My cold hair was wet, the ends dripped at my hips.

"Do you really drive a Harley?" I asked. I looked at her legs to see if they were muscular. They were.

"I sold mine recently after I dumped it. I couldn't get it back up; I have carpal tunnel syndrome. So we bought a bigger Honda and now I ride on the back. We have suitcases on the sides." Her voice was so low, like a gentle motor.

"I always wanted to drive a motorcycle," I said, "but I thought I was too thin or something to balance one."

"I could get you riding one," she said. I imagined her running down the block with me, holding the side of my motorcycle, letting go, "That's it," she'd say, "you've got it now."

"My husband got really mad at me when I got a higher score on the volunteer fire department test than he did, but I decided to pamper his manhood and let him join instead of me." I think she said this to bolster her Harley macho.

"Than was manly of you," I nodded. Huh? Why did I say that? "Are you okay?" I changed the subject. "What happened to you after your Rollo?"

"I don't know exactly...I was really scared. I wasn't going to come to this Cursillo, but Mother really needed a deacon. This is a dangerous building for me...I was here last year during a marriage encounter Cursillo and was called to assist in the Eucharist. When I tried to enter the chapel, to pass over that threshold," she pointed to the doorway where I saw her spasm yesterday, "I fell down and had...I don't know...a seizure. It never happened to me before. There seemed to be a wall between me and the chapel in that doorway and when I tried to go through it, something pummeled me, something knocked me down and wouldn't let me in. Mother, the bishop, and my husband dragged me into that room. I almost died."

"Was it a possession?" I asked. I stifled laughter in case this wasn't a joke.

"Well I did finally visit a priest downstate who performed exorcisms. The bishop told me to try it after several of his exhortations and anointments failed--I

still couldn't get through the entrance to the chapel and I was very sick, battered actually."

I wondered if exorcism was a sacrament and was disappointed that we hadn't made a skit of the Deacon in the doorway. What a great attention-grabber, I thought--to be stuck outside the chapel thrashing with the devil.

"The priest downstate checked me out and said that I was not possessed."

Did he think she was whacked? I wondered. I thought probably she tried to work out something emotional. I thought that if she was possessed, it was with a kind of energy that was up for anything, like a wild drunken teenager. My robe fell off my legs and I readjusted it, acutely self-conscious.

"I was afraid it was happening again this time, so Mother worked very hard on me with prayers, tongues, holy oil, and laying-on-of hands. I felt better then, not like before. See...here I am." She smiled like a puppy.

"How can you do that, get so close to people like you did with me when I was on the mat?" I asked.

"I'm a healer," she said, "I heal with my hands." She wiggled her hands.

"Once, on a Girl Scouts camp out, a woman fell into an icy lake. She was hypothermic. I'm an EMT. I didn't waste a minute--I grabbed her, threw her down, stripped her and myself, and rolled us up in a sleeping bag. I didn't give her a chance to object--I didn't care--I saved her life. That's when I knew that I had a power I could transmit through skin-to-skin contact--healing, laying-on-of hands. That's my gift. That's why my parish priest asked me to become a deacon."

"I guess I felt that," I said, but skeptically. I thought that maybe we were both talking in metaphors.

"You felt the love of Jesus," she said, and moved closer, lifted a strand of hair off my face, and kissed me. If this was the love of Jesus, I wanted more. I had never felt such tenderness; perhaps she could teach me how to reciprocate.

SUNDAY: DAY OF HOPE

I woke up on the last day and thought about the Deacon. I realized that the affection she gave was what I wanted from Mother, perhaps because Mother was bedrock, appropriately grounded--she would never collapse her boundaries and become a tender friend of any parishioner. I craved close female camaraderie, but it was, I knew, especially hard for women to make it in the church male hierarchy.

I was distracted by the boring Rollo givers in the Great Hall. The expediter who got me the hairbrush was busy in a side room in the same corner as our table. She sat behind a door that opened in half like a barn door. She organized the junk we needed like a shopkeeper. I leaned over and asked if she could get ten plastic cows.

"Oh!" she said, "For Mother?"

"Yes, I thought we could make a gift of them when she does her wrap-up. Maybe we should get ten live cows?" This was an expediter ice-breaker, but really, it was a joke I might have arranged if I felt better.

The expediter thought it was a great idea and promised to find ten plastic cows. In the meantime, I wanted to know where our wildlife biologist was--maybe

smoking on her trailer stoop? I wandered rudely around the room while the meek hostess gave her Environments Rollo, something about how changing our own lives was not good enough, we had to end environmental warming by making personal contact with Christian leaders. Had my life changed since I got here? Had they deconstructed me? I had broken down and been hugged and warmed with tongues of flame and lots of junky gifts. I handled snakes, swayed and sang with fat women. Was I born-again and how would I know? I wanted to know.

I plopped down in my seat again and waited for the next Rollo to end, something about Christian Community, how we can't 'go it alone'. I didn't plan to go it alone; I was going to ask the Deacon to be my spiritual advisor, sort of like a slumber party girlfriend. My leg shook. My Saint Hildas table mates looked dull.

"Where's our leader?" I whispered.

"I don't know...she hasn't been here since last night. She detonated out of here while we were eating pretzels." the 23rd Psalm woman said.

We were supposed to discuss the last Rollo, Christian Life, the lay plan for conversion. This was when they asked for money, I thought. Three Rollos had passed and the Saint Hildas were not talking.

"Did our table leader do something wrong again?" I asked. Suddenly this question struck me as hilarious; after all, wasn't it the wildlife biologist who had given a drunken Rollo? What happened next was unexpected. Mother came to our table and lowered herself painfully into a seat. Mother was big, too, but not as big as Polly.

"Your leader is not coming back," she said. Big deal, I thought--it's Sunday and we get out of here in a few hours, and besides, the Rollos are over. "She was offended by your skits and withdrew from the group," Mother said, and looked at the table.

"Offended?" I said. "She participated. Offended? Were you offended?" I could hardly breath; my hands tingled. I didn't care what the wildlife biologist thought, I wanted to know what Mother thought. This was the moment of my conversion.

"The sacraments are sacred," Mother said, ever so gently, and some of the women took offense."

"Yes, but did you?" I was the only one who wanted to know, but my table mates were bulgy-eyed.

"It upset me," she said, slowly, and stared at the table, "but I didn't stop it."

"Oh great--now you feel not only like we offended everyone, like we're what--evil?--but now you feel guilty for not stopping it? Why didn't you tell us sooner? Why?" I spit. "The rest of those women left their brains out of the skits," I added.

"We should talk about this. Can we do that in a little while?" delicately, she asked. "I have to do a few more things here and then I'll meet you outside, on the deck? Okay?" I burned a hole in the air with budding rage. Fucking stupid people, I thought.

I sat there for about ten more minutes. The woman who sang the 23rd Psalm slammed her chair against the wall and left. Mother and the NASCAR fanatic strummed their guitars into a rowdy song: "I sing a song of the saints of God, patient and brave and true, who toiled and fought and lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew, and one was a doctor, and one was a queen, and one was a shepherdess on the green; they were all of them saints of God and I mean, God helping, to be one too." The poodle woman and the horse woman sang alone as if nothing was wrong. I was in an agony of anger. I found the expediter and asked her to get me my cell phone.

"I got the ten cows," she said. "I had to go to several stores, but I finally found ten plastic cows that matched. What do you want me to do with them?"

"Could you put them on the podium while we're at lunch?" I asked. Maybe a surprise would soften Mother up, I thought. This hope alternated with denial that I had done anything wrong and the anger sprang from this well of entitlement. I went to my bunk room with my cell phone and paced in front of the window. Several times I pressed the number for my husband and each time I thought, why call him? I felt more alienated from him than the women in the Great Hall. I stared at the driveway and imagined a husband who picked me up in our car and drove with his arm around me while I cried, one who understood my unspeakable grief.

Suddenly Mother and the 23rd Psalm woman walked into my imaginary driveway-scene. I saw them sit down on a bench under a tree. The 23rd Psalm woman covered her face with her hands and Mother patted her on the back. Was I watching a movie? Why didn't Mother walk into the fragrant spring day with me?

I knew how to make myself feel better in these situations: I kept a stash of narcotics in a little silver watertight key chain bullet that I used for camping. I opened the lid and popped three of these into my mouth, enough to kill the pain of a surgical incision. Take, eat, this is the bread of heaven, I thought.

I was back in my ice world when the Deacon knocked and walked in without permission. She came around to the window and sat down on the bed in front of it.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"What makes you think I'm not?" I smirked.

"Mother asked me to find you and talk to you. She said you would listen to me."

The Deacon and I burst into a brief scuttle about the skits. I accused her, like Mother, of being silent, of lying, on the matter of feeling insulted by our performance. It never occurred to me that I should apologize for anything. Mostly I accused her of using Jesus as an excuse to fake concern.

"I'm not lying," she said. "Mother and I were offended by the Eucharist skit, by the woman who acted drunk and threw up, but I can't think of anything you did that offended me. I thought the Harley scene was pretty funny."

"Yes, but I told them to do it," I said. I wanted to implicate myself and get forgiveness, but I didn't know how to ask for it directly. This was the source of all my pain. "And you don't love me," I sneered. "You use Jesus to make people think they're loved--or maybe you do love them and you're afraid to admit it." Oh my God, am I four years old again? I sank onto the bed and felt the narcotic rush.

The Deacon wept and said, "You don't think I've suffered? Do you know what it's like to grow up with an alcoholic abusive mother? You don't think I understand your misery? Well, I do--that's why I can hold you unconditionally--that's why I can use Jesus to funnel my love for you. I do love you and I love Jesus and I want you to accept him as your savior. Will you do that with me now?"

"Over my dead body," I laughed. Go ahead, I thought--use your mumbo jumbo--I can't feel anything through anesthesia.

"Let's go for a walk," she said.

We left camp on the dirt road and walked a loop around the grounds on the narrow lake highway. I felt the water glare of sun as if it touched a floating layer of skin. I wore a long tight skirt that restricted my stride, so I hiked it above my knees. I smelled leaf rot and green as if through a tunnel; birdsong echoed far from its source in a tree above my head.

The Deacon spoke about her husband who stopped slugging her when he found Jesus, too, and then competed with her for the role of Deacon at her church; she won. She was still a victim of her mother's alcoholic behavior. Her sister was a horse trainer and wrestler who cleaned houses in the capitol city. Her daughter was a lesbian.

"How do you feel about gay clergy?" I asked.

"I'd be a hypocrite if I had a problem with it," she said.

"My mother had an affair with a nun," I said. I think that's why she committed suicide," I added, "because the affair ended abruptly right before my mother died."

The Deacon put her arm around me. "How old were you?"

"I was sixteen--remember--I already told you that. It happened on Thanksgiving. I hate holidays. That was the spring I lived in the convent--I thought I wanted to become a nun. One of the postulants there seduced me, showed me her hair and her breasts. It was weird."

"Come here," the Deacon said, and back inside the camp she led me into a woody nook off the dirt road. She pressed me up against a tree and put her hands on my face. "You will be my special friend," she said.

The drugs floated me above the moss and green shoots and tree buds because what happened next seemed utterly acceptable: The Deacon tugged my skirt up with one hand, put her other hand between my legs, shimmering her palm against my crotch where she held me hard, as if a stab of sunlight landed there. I felt the merest tingle, or at least I thought I did.

Mother stood in front of ten cows at the podium. She nodded to me and smiled when I came late into the Great Hall, but I did not acknowledge her gratitude. She had sent me a "special friend"; maybe I didn't need Mother anymore. My table mates and the wildlife biologist wrote checks; sure enough, Mother's afternoon Rollo was about the 'Ultreya,' or 'grouping', in which Cursillistas met for monthly reunions: It cost money to convert women to do the work of Jesus, so would we please write checks for \$120 to cover our expenses. Then, on the Fourth Day (the title of the last Rollo), Mother said, we would be called to evangelize the vision. Soon, she said, we would be integrated at our closing ceremony into a reunion of group reunions.

The wildlife biologist liked me, I think, or felt sorry for me, because she reappeared and gave me a copy of a prayer by Thomas Merton who she knew he was my favorite theologian. It said, For K: "God, we have no idea where we are going. We do not see the road ahead of us. Nor do we really know ourselves...we will trust you always though we may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. We will not fear, for you are ever with us, and you will not leave us to face our perils alone." I took this to mean that she thought I was lost and felt alone, which was true, but then I had the strange and exhilarating experience with the Deacon to relish.

We filed down the driveway to the Community Center; this was a graduation. The meek hostess carried the cross and we sang, "Bind us together Lord, bind us together with cords that cannot be broken./Bind us together with love./ There is only one God, there is only one King. There is only one body./ That is why we sing." The women carried Bibles in fabric covers with little handles like diaper bags. We lined up on bleachers inside the cement and metal center where each of us made a statement before priests, the Bishop, and maybe 200 Ultreya reunites about what we learned over the four-day weekend.

"I learned that healing is real, that a laying-on-of-hands can actually change you." I looked at the Deacon who nodded approval. I think I spoke in tongues, or metaphors. At the end we sang "Dona Nobis Pacem" in rounds, our best performance as a group. Outside on a crunchy brown football field the reunion of group reunions formed a huge circle through which we, the Cursillistas, were shunted for an endless round of handshakes. I did not like to shake so many hands; I wanted to wash my hands after each encounter, until I came to the Deacon's husband. My hand disappeared into his hand which was warm and stable. "I've heard a lot about you," I said, and blushed.

"Oh," he said, "all good I hope." Who's he kidding, I thought, as if he was the crazy one.

I saw a movie once in which an annulus of men assembled in a dark moonlit meadow around a woman who danced for them, took off her clothes, and masturbated. The men reciprocated. It was the most erotic act I had ever seen. I thought of that then, as if that circle was a consummation.

I drove home with Mother in her nail polish-fuchsia-pink Kia.

"I want to talk about what happened," she said, "after I stop for gas." She had driven me home once before, after I had surgery, and we stopped at Wal*Mart where she picked up my narcotic prescription for pain relief, the same drug that now anesthetized me. I watched her scoot around the car. My eye lids were heavy; I looked in the rearview mirror and saw that my pupils were black ink blots. She bought us sodas, a diet coke for her and a regular for me; she said I needed the caffeine and the calories.

"I'm sorry about what happened." Mother was erudite and tactful.

"I don't get it," I said, "how you do what you do--I mean, you're a lawyer and a scholar and a doctor--and you, you talk about Bible stories as if they were literally true."

"Well I'm a lawyer who just happens to believe that Jesus is the living God, that Jesus is my savior." She spoke slowly, weighed every word like a lawyer explains a briefing.

"I don't think I believe that. I don't think there is any reference for God except what we feel. It is semantics to call that God. For example, if I say Jesus loves you, what I really mean is that I love you, and I do--love you." I said that so she would know I didn't mean to hurt her feelings and hoped she wouldn't hurt mine by denying that was true. "I'm going to ask the Deacon to be my spiritual advisor," I added. I really wanted Mother to be my spiritual advisor and hoped she would offer. She didn't.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Mother said. "I think the Deacon may be, well, unstable. I did not want her at our Cursillo. She's one of the women who needed reconstruction and there simply wasn't anyone there who could do it. They're weren't enough of us."

"I thought so," I said. "The Deacon told me about the exorcism."

"Yes, we all had a rough time with that. It was a mess."

"But she's a hands-on healer--you sent her to me, remember?" I glared at Mother.

"I did and I worry about that...I don't know how appropriate it is to put your hands on people. I knew a priest who would not do it--too many liability issues. I think the Deacon oversteps her boundaries sometimes," Mother looked at me and I flinched. She took her eyes off the road and swerved onto the shoulder. "Sorry--I'm

pulling over for a second so we can finish this conversation." She stopped the car and turned sideways in her seat. "I knew a woman once, I was obsessed with her, so I know how that feels. At the time I thought, I love her, why not deepen the relationship? It seemed natural. But I didn't do it."

"Why not?" My voice shook, I wanted to cry but the drugs checked my emotions.

"Because I'm not gay and because I wanted to be a priest. In the priesthood, there are no consensual relationships. It is difficult even for this reason for a priest to marry--and that, by the way, is my next mission--to marry. We're not like your car mechanic or your hair dresser, your neighbor, or even your doctor. A priest administers the sacraments and facilitates absolution and eternal life ordained by God. No one, absolutely no one, can enter into relationship with clergy and be an equal in terms of the great responsibility of divine power."

"I understand," I nodded. She had put me in my place. In that moment I stopped longing for her friendship and accepted her authority. The Deacon, I knew, was an equal.

"So," Mother said, "I want to know, has the Deacon done anything inappropriate?"

"What if she did?" I asked.

"The Bishop would take steps. He would ask her to resign. There would be an inquiry, possibly a trial if she denied the allegations. She would never know that you were--"

"--the rat?" I said.

"There are no consensual relationships," she repeated. "The Deacon does not have the right to violate her vows which specifically forbid sexual relations with laity. If something happened, she must be removed."

I thought about Bill Clinton, the postulant, my mother, a few teachers, and many men I have known. I looked at this bulky woman in a black shirt with a white collar and her big skirt and Guatemalan wool vest whose short black silver-streaked hair smelled of gel, her laser sharp eyes that drilled the air with intelligence and joy--her impeccable brain--a woman with ten plastic cows on the back seat who drove a nail polish-fuchsia-pink Kia, and something in me changed. I decided to confess. I told her about the shower specifically and the rest I summarized and left to her imagination.

"Thank you for that. You did the right thing. I know your history remember--of all people, this should not have happened to you. You've been a victim for a long time, but no longer." We drove in silence for miles, then she said, "I will keep you informed of communications between the Bishop and the Deacon, just in case, so you know if she...shows up...she will receive an immediate restraining order." Mother pulled her little car up in front of my house, my house which loomed so...something...so urgently above the floodplains where we lived.

"I'd like to continue our talks," she said.

"The weekend was a lot like boot camp--you tore a lot of women down--who builds them back up?" I asked. "Seems like a dangerous business."

"You're right. No one at this Cursillo was strong enough and I was too busy running it to help all the wounded women. But you, you're one of the strong ones. I wasn't worried about you."

END

*Pronounced 'kur-see-yo' from the Spanish meaning 'a short course in Christianity.'
The first such weekend was held in the United States in Waco Texas in 1957 long before it was illegal to stockpile a few guns. Today the movement defines Cursillo as "a short course to leaven environments with the Gospel."