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Where There Is No Earth

There is no resurrection where there is no Earth.

—from a Welsh poem

We must never again talk about resurrection unless we include every plant, every animal, and the Earth itself.

—from a lecture by a member of Sisters of Earth

CHAPTER I

From the beginning of the cosmos . . . standing still is an unknown stance.

—Elisabeth A. Johnson

You can't tell where you're headed next, and that's the point. The path is convoluted, rich with asides. It's like listening to old relatives talk about the past, how they veer wide of the story they started, and take the winding roads of subplots and intrigues and I-tell-you's and right about when you've worn down, suddenly there it is—some pearl spun from the sand in their story's shoe, and it shines something on who you are and where you belong. But you've got to forget your agenda and just come along. Same with walking a labyrinth. You must step in and follow your feet.

I'm following someone else's feet. This is supposed to be a meditation, and I should be emptying my mind, empty, empty, but we've all taken off our shoes to walk the warm sand paths and I'm worried about the funky toenails of the woman in front of me. That would be ironic—picking up some fungus on a path toward enlightenment. Twelve of us gathered this morning to hear a nun talk about this 5,000-year-old metaphor for pilgrimage, for life; unlike a maze with its tricks, but very much like life, there is one way in and one way out, and many turns in between. This kind of labyrinth is open, without walls. Lines of yellow brick lie end-to-end to form intricate, sand-filled paths of wide arches and tight curves, all of which whorl within a large circle. The labyrinth meditation has three stages, the

nun said: walking in toward the center is called Purgation, when you quiet the mind, shedding what you no longer need or want or think; the second, Illumination, comes at the center, where you listen for clarity or insight. In the third stage, Union, you move back out into the world, stilled, perhaps, and more authentic.

We thread the path at discreet distances, at a common and unspoken pace, like animals scouting new territory. Four of the women in this group are nuns. I only know this because I happened to sit with them at lunch and asked them. Otherwise you couldn't tell them from any other well-scrubbed older women; for a long time now nuns have worn earrings and gotten perms and bought clothes off the rack. These sisters are from a branch of Franciscans but don't wear any insignia—a pin, a crucifix on a neck chain—that might identify them.

Sister Sophie walks toward me in the adjacent path, her eyes lowered. "Custody of the gaze" is what my school nuns called it. Sophie's probably in her early seventies; I'm sure she's had lots of practice at gaze control and is not busy looking at other people's toes. She's tiny but straight and solid, and looks like someone's pastel Irish grandma. Also like the kind of grandma who would pleasantly humor the doctor and then cure you herself with some homemade rooty tincture. We sat next to each other in the lecture this morning, where she introduced herself with a casual "Hi, I'm Sophie. I work here." Near us, several older laywomen chatted about grandchildren, and I wasn't sure if Sophie was one of them until I dropped my pen and had to duck under the table to get it. Her cropped summer pants gave her away. The skin of her ankles and calves was as smooth and unlined as a 20-year-old's. None of the long-term ravages of beach parties or Bermuda shorts—this woman had spent 30 years hidden under a habit.

The labyrinth lies toward the eastern edge of the White Oak Center's 70 acres, at the end of a long woodchip trail that begins at the two main buildings, curves to cross a wide 30 acres of restored prairie, and enters a run of forest. I was initially disappointed by how closely the town's outskirts bore down on the place. Just to the east of the property, a white municipal water tower with the town's bright blue logo yoo-hoos to everyone within miles. On the western side of the wire fence, across the road, a high red sign blares "GAS." Sharply angular mobile homes line the far border of

the prairie, looking like sets for a show scheduled to close with the next tornado.

At the convents and retreat centers I knew as a girl, guests strolled the manicured lawns and prayed their rosaries or read the mystics under elm promenades. Nuns and retreatants shuffled through the Stations of the Cross, stopping at the weather-streaked bronze or stone statues to reflect on Jesus' torture and death: ("Jesus is stripped and scourged; Jesus falls the first time; Jesus is nailed to the cross"). An outsider viewing the shaded mansions and deep green slowness of these places, the subdued visitors and heavily black-robed nuns walking among the morbid statuary, would have thought we were all sedated to aid in our recovery from some shared sorrow. But beyond the lawns, the air brightened and the hills took off at a gallop. Fields of waving brome grass broke out into giant fluffy mounds of *rosa multiflora* and then slipped into dense forests. There were walking paths along waterfalls and pooled brooks, but wherever the view grew too heady and threatened to saturate the senses, a crucifix or shrine to Mary would strategically appear to check that enchantment and channel it into proper Christian edification and reflection.

Nuns had a way of walking then. Their arms never swung freely but were held in front, tucked into their wide sleeves or under a layer of cape or scapular. A slight breeze followed them as they sailed through a room. They walked so devoid of personal sound or weight that you alerted to one coming up on your back by the light rattle of the long, black rosary beads hanging down her right side.

They taught us girls how to walk with collected, silent steps, keeping close to the wall to show humility. If you were good at that, you might become one of them, they said, as they watched us try to float alongside the walls. As if taking up as little space as possible were some evidence of faith.

Walking—humbly, but in the middle of things—is the only form of holy observance I've always kept, and surely the only one that kept feeling holy. It was my first path into a child's awe, back when the sunny buzz of our pastures drew me in and kept me alone for lost and lucky stretches of time. Every year I wandered further out, up neighboring hills and into woods, or miles along the soft green floor of the old Rockabye Railroad bed, reclaimed long ago by arching trees and their clinging belladonna and wild grape vines after

the iron rails that had carried local white-fleshed peaches were themselves claimed by World War I. No matter how far I walked, the angelus bells of one of the convents would find me, and I would drop to my knees and say the prayers of the angel's annunciation; later, as a teenager, as my family dressed up for Sunday Mass, I defiantly laced up my hiking boots, yelling back to my parents that my God lived in a field, not in a church, while my sister quietly offered to pay me five bucks if I would just shut up, throw on a skirt, and get in the car. As an adult living at the northern tip of Manhattan, hungry to be alone, but clutching my mace and watching my back in case I wasn't, I leaned into the scarred paths that rose up from the lower tiers of soccer fields, past Santeria sites of dead ash littered with chicken feathers and candle drippings, up to the reward of Indian caves, wild raspberries, and ancient tulip trees high above the Hudson.

I never thought I'd walk with nuns again.

I knew about nuns; I had even updated my view of them several years ago, moving from the knotted love and fear I felt during my years in their convents to something smoother, more adult and sympathetic. I had read how their restricted and lonely lives before Vatican II contributed to their notorious Torquemada-like disciplinary style, how they were forbidden to have "particular friendships" with other sisters, how many were denied permission to see their parents ever again, or to attend their funerals. I admired the political activism of those who had stayed in their communities after the post-Vatican II exodus, their commitment to living with the poor or going to jail for a cause. But I wasn't planning any reunions. They were still professional Catholics, after all, still servants of a church whose color and corruption fascinated from a distance, but whose beliefs I didn't accept.

Sr. Rita strides toward me in the labyrinth, lean and barefoot, with a loose farmer's gait, as if to reinforce that these sisters aren't the same ones I grew up with and I can go ahead and purge that belief. Someone has either finished her walk or is beginning it, and gently strikes the wooden clapper against the large Japanese bell at the entrance. The sound is soft and warm and rounded, like the paths under our feet.

I came to this labyrinth because a friend told me about the profound connectedness she had felt while walking one. I wasn't expecting

that much, just some salve for my alienation. I had moved to Iowa eight months before from the Northwest, where I had worked as a writer for an environmental public relations firm. The problem with that kind of work is that you learn too much—how sun-grown coffee threatens migratory bird habitat, how meat-based diets threaten the water supply, how lawn chemicals threaten salmon, how rayon threatens orangutan habitat, how sprawl threatens farmland. I felt like Cassandra, but had to sound upbeat about the future, telling people that doing the right thing would save money or effort. (Hey, Buddy! You, in the Dockers! If you take public transit instead of driving your 3-ton Lincoln Navigator all by yourself...good things will happen!) It was like trying to give kids fun reasons why they shouldn't eat Drano.

When we moved to the Midwest for my partner's teaching job, we left behind Seattle's urban sprawl and creeping traffic. We had a porch, and a yard with rabbits and deer and songbirds. Just outside our university town rolled green farm fields—eighty percent of which, I soon learned, grew genetically modified corn and soybeans, and all of which were heavily dosed with hormone-disrupting pesticides. I awoke one morning to find university caretakers spraying the marching band field next door with just the carcinogenic cocktail from which we had successfully weaned the City of Seattle; "we can't have dandelions," the caretakers said. When the university sponsored a biotech conference, hosting the corporations for which any environmentalist would reserve the hottest rung of the inferno, I quickly organized a demonstration, renting a bullhorn, gathering speakers, signs, and front-page news coverage. It was the last thing I wanted to be doing, and even though there were other good people doing it, too, we were so obviously outnumbered. I felt like someone who had been out in strong sun too long, who felt tight and hot to the point of blisters, and for whom each seam with that corporate world, each contact, no matter how minimal, set the nerves on edge.

Somehow I stumbled on these nuns having a labyrinth workshop, not far from my home, in a refuge their website said was dedicated to "environmental spirituality." I didn't know if we would agree on what that meant, but I at least trusted their simplicity: unlike other groups whose "alternative" spirituality events I had attended,

I knew these women had spent too many years in coifs and veils to be interested in costumes.

This place is quiet, but plain; the labyrinth is tucked away in a clearing of bur oak and hickory. Off to the side is the first religious symbol I've seen all day: a crucifix of weathered sapling logs almost camouflaged by trees, less noticeable than the realization that there are enough trees here to hide it. We are in woods—granted, the Great Plains version of woods: small, defiant stands filled in with modest bushes and vines and an occasional relic from another time, like the mammoth old trunk of basswood we passed on the way in. These woods aren't deep enough to get lost in, not like the remnants of the tangled deciduous pelt of the Eastern Seaboard or the black fir empires of the Northwest, but they are welcome nonetheless in this landscape splayed open by the plow.

Getting lost here is not the point. There is no splendid isolation for releasing the mind, no Mahlerian mountains or painted desert cliffs. This land just outside a Midwestern town could easily have become a U-Store-It warehouse or some strip mall with a tanning parlor, sub shop, and insurance agent. Or, like the places I knew, it could have become a monument to a 2,000-year-old religious story, where we would walk along some straighter path from shrine to shrine, connecting ancient events in a far away place to an even more distant eternity. Instead, the focus here is on current, earthly miracles. The prairie plants are returning; signs appear in the woods naming the native species of trees, or are posted outside the two adobe hermitages asking us to reflect on the alchemy of sun and water and land at work: "wetland septic," "straw bale construction," and "solar energy."

It's late afternoon, and the shadows cool scattered patches of sand. Small trees and bushes bend toward the outermost circle of yellow brick, and release leafy scents, small clouds of gnat hatches, or a squawk from a jay. Twelve women are now walking the labyrinth at once, and we come very close to each other while minding the slim brick line between us. This Chartres type of labyrinth borrows its 28 turns from the lunar cycle, the nun said at her lecture; 28 times you reverse direction in order to move forward. We travel like planets in our slow and elliptical orbits: sometimes I walk so closely beside someone I can feel her breath, and a minute later one

of us has swung out to the periphery and gone retrograde, facing the opposite way.

I talked with the sisters over our lunch break, before we went out to walk. We sat in the Center's main building, the kind of airy, wood-and-glass structure that (minus the meditation room) might house a nature education center or a park headquarters. Rita, Sophie, Sister Celeste and I sat near the indoor koi pond and started talking about a second Bush oilman poised to take the Republican nomination.

"He's like a lot of people who would call themselves religious," Sophie said, "but it only goes so far. They don't see that caring for the Earth is a spiritual matter."

"But the Vatican doesn't seem much better," I said. "The pope travels around in a Humvee telling people not to use condoms, and sabotages population programs in the U.N."

"The Vatican is an old boy's club," says Rita. "Who knows what they're thinking? Of course we need to control population."

"Not very orthodox."

"That's the Vatican," Sophie says with a smile, "and we're not them. We're the church in the true spiritual sense."

Rita adds, "Years ago, we used to stay up late talking about the hierarchy. What about the hierarchy? What about the hierarchy? Night after night." She throws up her hands and laughs. "Now we sleep right through them. We're busy with other things."

They share a lighthearted irony about the official Church, as if they're talking about some defanged tyrant of a grandpa who shakes his cane at you while being too deaf to know what you're saying.

"But couldn't Rome shut you down?" I ask.

"Sure," Rita says. "But religious sisters all over are doing things that would probably make the Vatican blanch—if they knew about it."

"Like what?"

"We have a shaman coming in for a workshop. They wouldn't like that too much, or the mandalas."

Sophie added, "We had a visit from the bishop's office because someone complained that we had pictures of goddesses on the walls. But this bishop is pretty relaxed, so we didn't have any trouble."

"The old boys are comfortable with us running hospitals and schools," Celeste said, "but other people do that now. We asked ourselves, 'Where is the greatest need?' And we believe it's in our

relationship with the Earth. The Vatican issues pronouncements about the environment, but they're not doing anything about it, not really—they're not willing to change. But we are—we changed long ago. And we recognize that to reconnect with the Earth, we need the wisdom of other spiritual traditions."

"And for once," Sophie laughed, "we're lucky that the Vatican ignores us because we're women."

As we finish walking the labyrinth we head back across the prairie path in twos and threes. Sophie picks up where we left off at lunch. "Have you read Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme? They say that the old story we all learned won't work anymore. Most of the culture we've grown up with is based on ideas that science shows us isn't true. We're not separate from Nature; we *are* Nature—we and everything else in the universe come from the dust of exploding stars." When we get to the Center she runs inside and a minute later hands me a book called *The Universe Story*. It's been decades since a nun has handed me a book. "This is the new story that we're learning. Come back and let me know what you think."

CHAPTER II

"Take this to the convent, and tell them it's for Sister Annunziata. She is ill. And then give one of the sisters this note for Sister Benigna Paradiso. She will give you a needle and thread." Sister Carmelita, my first-grade teacher, hands me a small green cloth-bound book with faded edges and a half sheet of paper on which she has written instructions in her firm and perfect hand.

I am being sent to the nuns' private quarters because I am unfailingly obedient, and because I can read and write. Obedience is the coin of our schoolday realm; however, my reading and writing skills, which I vaguely recall learning from my older sister, are problematic. With fifty children or more crowding each classroom, we catch on quickly that uniquely timed needs will not be brooked; too often, for example, a classmate caught between desperations will wet his or her pants rather than risk Sister's wrath by asking for an individual trip to the bathroom. When it comes to learning, we are also expected to progress at the same pace, like loaves rising and browning in an industrial bakery. So for the hours devoted to

reading, spelling, and writing, and until we turn to arithmetic or science or geography, about which I am as clueless as the next kid, Sister Carmelita doesn't know what to do with me. She has started trading me with the other sisters to correct spelling tests or, worse, to prop me up in front of their classes to drill the catechism while they sneak off to their parlor TV and watch Dr. Joyce Brothers give marriage advice.

But lately they have been sending me on errands: collect the absence sheets from each class—remember to knock, count to three, then open the door and say, “excuse me, Sister”—and bring them to the office; find one of the janitors—Ralph might be in the shop out past the tractor barn, so get your coat—and ask him to install a new fluorescent tube at lunchtime. Catholic school kids never travel alone; we march everywhere together in straight, silent lines, but suddenly they have cut me loose from the formation of shuffling saddle shoes as they spin me further and further afield through the sprawling Tudor mansion and its grounds. I do not dawdle or take advantage; I walk as fast as possible without running to my mark. I am not alone, but under the sight of God, they tell me before they send me out, as if I am heading into tempting or uncharted territory.

Down hallways of classrooms, clutching the book and directions, silently down the marble and cast-iron staircase. On the first floor I duck inside the doorway of the empty auditorium and examine this book that a nun would read when she is sick. The title page says *The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila by Herself* and *The Interior Castle*. A quick and guilty riffle through the pages—no pictures of castles, but a photograph of a nun. I have never seen a nun like this. She is a marble statue of a nun sitting on a jagged rock, but not sitting in idleness or comfort; she is falling back against it. The rock catches her, her bare feet dangle, her elbows feel for purchase on the ledges. Her eyes are closed, her mouth agape, her head thrown back. She is not sleeping or sick—if she were sick she would not be outside, barefoot on a rock, but in bed like Claire of Assisi or Therese of Lisieux in my *Lives of Saints*, or like Sister Annunziata in the convent. She is struck. She is gasping. It is all too much for her.

When we see our nuns, their habits fall in straight, orderly drapes, like the Blessed Virgin's robes, and their black shoes are laced up tight. But this nun is awash in roiling veils and skirts and sleeves,

her body is lost in them, except for her fingers seeping against the rock like meltwater, her feet tucked into shadows like crags of the rock itself. Her face floats full and smooth in the light, still taking something in. The edges of her robes darken and fold into the current of rock. She is returning; this nun carved from glossy marble is a wave breaking up, and the raw, wild rock is taking her back.

I know what this is, I am sure of it. Beauty has pierced her, more than she can hold; she is bursting and dissolving away. I long for this, and have only come close.

The white page behind the nun's picture says "The Ecstasy of St. Teresa"; I don't know what "ecstasy" is, but it isn't death. The priest smudges our foreheads with gritty ash and tells us we will die and return to dust, but this St. Teresa is not dying and is not dust; She is alive and has gone beyond herself.

I must close the book and go. My note says to take the underground tunnel and turn left. We walk through this tunnel during bomb drills, and each time the sisters warn that God eyes us through the skylight in the middle. We pass quickly, gripping our rosaries, as the white marble walls, cool and neutral as Pilate, feed us blinking through the light. At the other end we turn right down stone steps and kneel in the old mansion's emptied wine cellar whose cement floor still smells dark purple.

No classmates buffer me as I approach God's eye. Was it a sin to open the book and stare at the picture? Disobedience? Sister didn't tell me not to open the book. Stealing? Are only nuns supposed to know about the mystery in the picture? The tunnel is freezing without the usual baffle of warm children in plaid wool, and the floor pitches more steeply. Beams of light pour from the eye, the way they do from the eye on the dollar bill or from clouds in heaven. I balk and close my eyes, afraid of what might happen, but then as I come under the eye I feel its warmth. I stand in its center as motes float through the light around me and move with me, some sign of grace, I am sure of it.

I turn left down a hallway lit only with a hanging red votive light and rap the knocker in the center of the iron crucifix that quarters the dark wooden door. A housekeeping nun answers, not much taller than me, wiping her hands on her full white apron. "Come eena, come eena," she whispers, and a gold tooth peeks through her smile. She reads my note and pats my cheek as she murmurs

something in Italian; unlike our teachers' hands, hers are chapped, and something white and soapy gums up the little crucifix molded into her wedding ring. She leads me into a wide, windowed parlor flooded with sunlight, motions toward one of the plump chairs convened on an oriental rug, and disappears with the book. French doors stand open to banks of hyacinths and narcissus that spill down to a fountain. Beyond the fountain and its hedges, a field falls off to wave after wave of budding hills. My parents say that nuns have taken over so many of these old estates because they don't have to pay taxes, but they must need this land for protection from the outside world, for the solitude to sink deeply into their spells.

Nuns slip in and out of doorways with mops and buckets and trays of candles; if they see me they nod silently. A chant rises and falls from a vacuum nearby. We never see these nuns at school; they are like a hidden colony of bees who tend the inner chambers of the hive. They are doing the same work our mothers do, but they don't play the radio and sing along with Eydie Gorme; there is a hush to this, some different intent hovering over it. They wear bright white aprons, and their veils, pinned back like a duck's folded wings, reveal the stiff white coifs that ring their necks.

The sugary hyacinth scent gives way to the early stages of spaghetti sauce, strangely masculine with its pungent onions and oregano and browning meat. The Italian sister returns without the book; by now Sr. Annunziata has it. Perhaps she is collapsing back against her bed. I follow the Italian sister on to our next errand; unlike the teaching nuns, who are acutely aware of where children are each minute, and whether or not they should be there, the Italian sister is the first of the housekeeping nuns who will absent-mindedly, or perhaps for company, let me trail them through their living quarters when I am sent. We cross ourselves as we pass the open door of the chapel and the dining room where a statue of Jesus monitors the ladderbacked wooden chairs and long, dark confectionary tables. We pass a study with leather armchairs and wine-red rugs, through a living room where for the first time I see stained glass windows with colored flowers instead of saints.

The Italian sister and I spiral up the broad, ornately carved wooden staircase. At each landing large windows look out to brick and stone mansions on other mounts, their turrets and many chimneys stiffly alert, waiting for spreading foliage to seclude them

again. I recognize two of the mansions as convents, both retreat houses where regular women go to be quiet and pray. The others are private estates. My father shoes the horses there, and brings me with him during school breaks to hold the ponies. I play with the horsemen's kids in the brass-and-brick stables, ride in pony carts with Irish grooms, and hold my father's hand as we walk up to the big house to pick up his check. These houses are not pressed into humility as convents are: a library with tooled leather walls still smells like after-dinner cigar smoke, not like votive candles.

The houses are grand, with their honeyed antiques and carpets, but chatter buzzes around them like flies on a windowsill. A cook will cluck her tongue and tell my dad how Mrs. Cadwalader made *her* cook return a 29-cent package of cream cheese to Foodtown after it took on a month's worth of mold in the fridge, what with all her millions. Down at the stables, my dad talks racing with the horsemen and grooms: I'll be damned if that colt can go a mile and a quarter with that much lead in the bag; Teddy's broodmare's not much to look at, but she's by a Native Dancer sire out of a Fort Salonga mare and her last filly, now she could run. Rich, bony blondes, tanned with no make-up, dismount from their rides and light up cigarettes and tell my dad in their drawn Far Hillian accents about their horses' problems. As soon as they leave the horsemen talk about how the gelding's not the problem—Mrs. So-and-so can't ride in a boxcar with the doors locked and the hip flask sure doesn't help. No one seems to notice where they are, the slice of red-winged blackbirds that just tilted up nearby, how silent it could be.

We have left the carpets and sprawling sunlight two floors below. We turn into an alcove off the landing, and as Sister knocks on the door I crane my neck toward the other side, where statues of Mary and Jesus face each other down a long hall of unmarked wooden cell doors. I know we're not going down that hall, just as I know not to rummage in my parents' bedside table.

A seamstress sister opens the door; as we enter the vaulted, narrow room, she and the Italian sister nod to each other and handle the note. The seamstress sister's apron glints with straight pins, and her black sleeves are rolled back to her elbows and pinned. The bright red measuring tape draped around her neck like a priest's sacramental stole is the only color among the tall spools of white and black thread, the bolts of white cotton and black wool serge.

Behind her several habits hang like cocoons whose inhabitants have attained holiness and flown. A glossy black sewing machine juts like a jetty rock from pools and falls of soft white cotton.

Is this what they wear underneath the black? Or at some special time, after we've gone home on the bus and they have all this land to themselves? We wear white for some of the sacraments, at least girls do, for communion and confirmation and marriage, and babies wear white baptism gowns, and some eternal change takes place within us. I don't remember how I felt before baptism, and a few hours after my first communion I had to remind myself that I was changed. St. Teresa, in her marble white, will never be the same.

I have come close on my own, when I lie cupped in an apple tree breathing blooms, and the ants crawl over me as if I am a limb, or I meet a fox in the woods who holds me in the current of her calm amber eyes until she turns slowly and casts me back to myself. When the red-tailed hawk loops high over our pond and my sister has left her watchful post to rustle through the blackberry bushes, and the dogs pad around and around the banks hunting snakes and I float in that liquid lap, and the frog on my bare belly breathes like a tiny bellows as my own breath rises and falls.

The seamstress sister winds black thread onto a tiny bobbin and tucks a needle into it for Sister Carmelita. The white cotton lies flat along the table as it approaches her stilled machine; it tightens under the machine's overhead light and its piercing needle, and then releases and cascades into yard after yard of folds and waves.

CHAPTER III

Our first real snow, light and late this year, and the window thermometer says eight degrees. Waking up in a single bed always feels like childhood or like being put up in someone's home while traveling. Unlike childhood, I took the liberty last night of removing the crucifix (small and abstract, but enough to feel watched) from the wall facing the bed and sticking it in a desk drawer. Like a traveler, though, I slept that dark-curtained, dreamless sleep in which the brain lolls after paying attention to something new. I pile on my winter gear, grab a handful of almonds from the guesthouse table, and walk out in the early light to the labyrinth.

Snow has filled in its pathways without obscuring the brick borders. It feels like some Graumann's Chinese Theatre stunt to step in and make so showy a mark. A man's lug-soled bootprints show through bald streaks of underlying sand where the snow shied away. I saw a man pass through the guesthouse yesterday around dusk; they're rare at White Oaks and they stand out.

With the trees bare, the stream down the hill is visible right where it horseshoes through the frozen ground in a cold, black arc. The sun isn't up far enough yet to warm things, doesn't look too eager to do that anyway, so I fasten down my hood like some Thinsulate monk and confine my ears to the cell of my own breathing.

I am not the first one here today. Animal tracks enter the labyrinth's outer edge from nearby trees and bushes. Two deer and a squirrel. They don't merely cross straight through from one edge of woods to the other, as if their animal business were more direct than mine. Instead they join the path from the back, and follow it as it curves. They may step past the bipedal business of the tighter turns, but move with what could only be deliberateness, intention, as they keep to the arching design.

The shortest path between two points is never exactly a straight line, said Einstein. His theory of general relativity claims that especially over great distances, or where there is great mass, space "bends, twists, even circles in on itself," because of the relation of every mass to every other mass, explains Corey S. Powell in *God in the Equation*, one of the center's books that I read last night. I can't say I grasp the physics, but this makes sense to me—how much of anyone's life progresses straight ahead? What in nature is perfectly linear? As cosmologist Brian Swimme describes it, the universe's originating burst of energy still reaches outward, while the bonds between the beings in the universe curve it inward. This curvature of space and time holds us—everything—in the crook of its arm.

"When you look at the story of the universe, all those billions of years evolving and unfolding, redemption—in the usual sense—just doesn't seem to fit," Sophie said yesterday as we sat in her office under her framed prints of Egyptian goddesses. "The church is still teaching that we need to be redeemed because of original sin. Another of Augustine's bad ideas." She laughs, and turns very pink. "If we all evolved together, where did this breach of original sin come from? And what kind of father would demand blood for it,

anyway?" Sophie speaks without heat, as if she just finds it curious that people still think this way. She looks me straight in the face and smiles. "We don't need redemption."

Bingo. And from a nun. "So where does Jesus fit in?" I ask.

She pulls a book from the packed shelf that covers the wall and hands it to me. *Is Jesus God?* asks the cover.

"It was banned in Australia, but it sold really well," she laughs. "If Jesus was God or he wasn't doesn't matter; it's his message that counts: love and include everyone and everything. Very simple idea, but very hard to do."

I've been hopscotching over bricks, trying not to cancel out the animal tracks. By the snow's accounting, I have walked half of the labyrinth. The same distance I've traveled in life, assuming it just boils down to genes. Half over, and yet part of what originally brought me to this labyrinth and to the nuns, and keeps me coming back, are beliefs I no longer follow, haven't in years. Instead, they follow me, like shadows. I stub my foot against a lopsided brick and remember something my father told me when I was little and we were watching the races on TV, which we did every Saturday afternoon as surely as we attended Mass every Sunday. Why do some horses wear lambswool over their nosebands, I asked him during the post parade. Because they spook at shadows, he said. Because millions of years ago, there was little eohippus, the dawn horse, no bigger than a fox. All he could do to protect himself was run. But he didn't have hooves, just soft toes. If he stepped on something sharp and hurt his feet, a sabertoothed tiger would get him. Deep down, he said, horses remember being small and soft. So sometimes if they see shadows, like the quarter pole near the finish line, they'll slow down and collect themselves to jump them. The lambswool blocks the shadows. Keeps them on their business.

Still catching something dark and vague, still straining to clear it while others pass by on their business. In the years since I left the Church, at any hint of that umbral, lurking thing that loomed so heavily as a child, I have slowed to amass evidence, to synthesize sets of histories that stare down what I learned. There are stacks of spiral pads on history and theology, books with notes crowding the margins (in some of the earlier reading, just "Ha!"), disks with facts and quotes and page numbers. With each idea, I gain more distance:

The gospels, like the Christians of their era, don't agree on who Jesus was—pre-existing god? man? a healer like many of his time?—or on what he did and in what sequence he did it, and Christians have fancifully explained those inconsistencies since Roman pagans like Celsus first took them to task. The four gospels and Paul became the “canon” only after years of well-documented political wrangling and name-calling among the early elite. Current scholars in the Jesus Project, viewing new archeological evidence, suggest Jesus was probably buried in a mass grave—there goes the rolled-away stone and what rolled it; original sin became a formally accepted belief after Augustine bought votes with 100 Arabian horses.

To hear a nun say it: We don't need redemption; it doesn't matter if Jesus was God or he wasn't; everybody finds her own way.

The tracks appear again as I near the center. They rest there, in the illumination circle. The cloven hooves stand evenly weighted; a slight brush in the snow marks where the squirrel's tail rested. Were they together? Have they come before? I still love that legend that late at night on Christmas Eve, animals are granted speech in thanks for warming the stable. I used to check with everyone in the barn—goats, horses, chickens, cats—when we returned from Midnight Mass, but no one spoke to me. These prints do, in their own language. Denise Levertov wrote

What is this joy? That no animal
Falters, but knows what it must do?

I leave the center of the labyrinth to them. After some spell of time only they know, the deer and the squirrel followed the crook in the path for awhile, along the same curve the booted man had walked before and that I would walk after, and then moved on their way.

CHAPTER IV

On the return trip home, gazing towards the stars and the planet from which I had come, I suddenly experienced the universe as intelligent, loving, harmonious.

—Edgar D. Mitchell, astronaut

The universe is the primary revelation of the divine, the primary scripture, the primary locus of divine-human communion. . . . It's all a

question of story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story, the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it, is no longer effective. Yet we have not learned the new story.

—Thomas Berry

This is a story imagined over the past 150 years, about a universe that began 13.7 billion years ago. Scientists continue to cobble together this story, this inkling, while looking for clues to the A440 of the universe, the one vibration to which everything, no matter its song, is tuned. It's the story told by the books the nuns gave me; it's the story that the nuns taught to groups of us gathered in rebuilt farm sheds hung with photos of supernovas and trees and a floating planet Earth. How much science do we need for this? we asked. Enough to be amazed, they said. This is the story as I understand it, anyway, while understanding that like everything in the story, the story itself could change.

We were waiting. All of us—you and me and the T-Rex and the quark, and the flatworm and the King of France. The sugar maple, the volcano, the parking lot, the black hole, the penny, and the Pleiades. The rainforest and a billion galaxies and the drip clinging to the faucet. All waiting together. Of course, we weren't ourselves, not yet, just options, possible turns in possible roads, squeezed together with whole worlds of other choices in a cosmic egg smaller than a proton. We were nowhere, because there wasn't anywhere, not yet. Thirteen-point-seven billion years ago, before there was time. (Stay with me. It gets reachable.)

So. Silence... Nothing... Nothing... Nothing.... Then YES! NOW! We streak forth, a fireball beyond bright, a trillion degrees hot. Time begins. Space unfurls and foams out a colliding chaos of particles.

A million times our fireball convulses, creates, destroys, creates again. Every plan, choice, question rushes forth in all directions, skids along a razor's edge of cosmic stakes: Like this? Like this? If the universe expands one trillionth of one percent faster, everything will speed away without connection; one trillionth of one percent slower, and it will all collapse into quantum froth.

It holds. The chaos lasts a millionth of a second, a whole era, and then sets into gravity, electromagnetism, and the forces that rule

the nucleus. In that millionth of a second, the universe teaches itself how to act. Billions of years before they will appear, trees learn how high they can grow, canyons learn how deep.

The flame shoots shimmering particles that fill the void, and they meet other particles who kill them both. After just one second, a massive extinction hits: only one billionth of the particles survive, and they cool and process onward in a black wake. Electrons and protons join and cling and create a transparent universe of drifting gas.

A billion years float by in the dark. The universe shivers. Breathes. Itches. Takes in cosmic stitches that ripple and then wave and roll, until it fractures itself into a trillion clouds of hydrogen and helium. The clouds collapse and fold inward, glowing hot like fluorescent roses, until the heat and pressure clench into ever-tighter fists and punch through the dark into stars. Light! These primal stars, fat, atom-crushing kitchens, roll through the universe cooking with gas, all burners high and licking, pots spilling over, and then explode into supernovas that blaze for weeks and splatter space with oxygen, carbon, iron, calcium, gold, silicon, the flesh and bones of new stars that wheel off into billion-star galaxies.

The galaxies spin away from each other, a hundred billion whirling dervishes, their starry arms arched in meditative dance. Five billion years ago, on one sparkling sleeve of the Milky Way, toward the wrist, energy waves stoke a drifting cloud, urging it to glow and burn. In half a million years, when the core hits ten million degrees, our sun ignites.

Cooler gases swirl around the sun and spin themselves into planets. All nine start out with the same stardust, the same forces, the same scale of notes, but their music plays differently. Mercury, Venus, Mars and Pluto are too small for their weak gravity and electromagnetism to get the molecules up and dancing: on these planets, elements sit on the sidelines with a few others they know and harden into rocks. Meanwhile, on the large planets Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune, the music plays so loud and fast that molecules flail about alone. These planets start out gaseous and vague, and stay that way. But on Earth, the music is different: the forces play a lively reel, so the planet can arrange and rearrange the seas, the skim of solid land and the molten core beneath. Earth's molecules meet and connect and move on to new partners—now forming water, now jade, now sunflower—as if there were a caller.

But we're getting ahead—because so far that music is playing to a crowd of molecules and rocks. Earth is busy boiling for half a billion years and getting slammed by meteors. One blow tears a piece from Earth's side and hurls it into space, but it stays close and pines, tugs at Earth silently—remember? remember?—and looks into her windows as it passes by at night.

Finally, four billion years ago, the bombardment ends, and the first rain falls on a cooling, hissing sphere. But there is no peace. Mountains heave up and boil down again and sink beneath the filling seas. And then the lightning—primal, raw lightning flays Earth for a hundred million years, zapping ions, prodding and pushing the seas to their chemical limits. A tiny click: elements and molecules like tumblers falling into place, the final digit divulged by a meteor's seed, perhaps, and finally, suddenly, the sea renders up life. A bacterium. A single cell. Microscopic, even. Not exactly the ta-da! on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, you say, but wait: this is a whole new order of being, sacking its inheritance of lightning and chemicals and saying, "I'll take it from here!" handing off life by splitting in two. Four billion years later, these prokaryote cells still cover the planet, still stake life's claim in the gapes of volcanoes and the deep yawns of Arctic ice.

Always, it seems, the universe is just a bubble off plumb, just unstable enough to open a crack for something new, for a curve to keep the story going. The cells multiply—billions, trillions, quadrillions—and churn out some misfits along the way. Most find no niche and perish. But some mutations arise just as conditions shift, or the mutations shift conditions themselves. One cell learns to eat sunlight, reuniting Earth with the sun, cousins from the elemental fireball 10 billion years before. Others develop a taste for carbon from erupting volcanoes; others suck up oxygen, keeping the atmosphere from bursting into flames.

By a billion years ago, the seas are chemically sapped, an ozone scrim filters the sun, and the lightning has long ceased. The crucible has calmed, and life scouts a new survival tactic. A cell goes rogue, surrounds another cell, and swallows it whole and alive. The mouth has arrived, and with it, wanting, and capturing, and killing. There are teeth in the future, and the cocked, wary ear, and crouching stealth, and desperate speed. A new and intimate bond forms, of predator and prey.

The mouth opens a new level of desire, not just for survival, but for taste, or fullness, or contact. Once open, the mouth doesn't shut, and the Earth asks a new question: will you evade the mouth, fight the mouth, or be the mouth? And creatures choose. The mouth discovers consequences: Somewhere in the seas, a primal mouth devours another cell and now must live with two nuclei; maybe they clash until the cell dies. Maybe they bore each other and life goes on unchanged; but just maybe they speak to each other and agree. When the time comes to split off, the cell shuffles its two genetic decks, splits the code in two, and separates. But now each of those cells must find others like them to help relay their message. When two cells meet, each tells a slightly different story, and as they pass on their combined memories, Earth's narrative branches wider. A billion years ago, the beginning of sex, and the Earth starts searching and asking, are you the one?

So there are mutations, and stresses that challenge the mutations, and some live, some die. Isn't this what we learned in seventh grade? Where's the mystery here, the revelation? One facet of the mystery lies in one mutation's interest in even asking the question. Once that mutation evolved to the point of inventing supercomputers, it figured out the odds of life on Earth. Mathematically, getting the mood just right for the proper atoms to meet and randomly form one molecule of an amino acid—just one brick of a protein—would take about 150 billion years. And here, in just 14 billion, in one tenth of that time, we're way beyond amino acids into drama, into life, with mouths and DNA, having sex.

Maybe this is the time to bring up cosmogenesis. One revelation here is not just that the cosmos has built a cosmos; humans have always looked up and around them and felt some stirrings of belonging to a larger order. They have lived by stories of gods and ancestral forces creating that cosmos out of clay or breath or nothingness or the corpses of Ur-goddesses, and have marked with shudders or celebrations the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. The revelation is ironically made possible by humans feeling detached enough from the natural world to pick it apart and pry loose its secrets, and the revelation is this: that we are not moving in a cyclical cosmos but are spiraling ever outward in an irrevocable series of transformations, in a cosmogenesis. The stars are not in fact circling around us, or fixed overhead, but speeding away, as they have been

for 14 billion years. The Earth is not a stable place, but one prone to violent upheaval and painful labors, even if they ultimately birth ecstatic beauty. Nothing and no one was installed here, and never in the scheme of things was creation perfect, paradisiacal, and deathless. We all—granite, human, sponge, desk, wolf—came up the hard way from the same ancestral stardust, in a process that has always included demise.

If the universe is a story to live by, the Cosmogenetic Principle is the subtext: As a cosmologist puts it, “The form-producing dynamics at work here on Earth are also at work, or at least latent, everywhere in the universe.” Those dynamics will create differentiation, consciousness, and communion. In other words, the universe will always crave a great variety of beings, and each of those beings, animate or not, will have its own voice and sentience as well as a kinship with everything else in the universe. Electrons of varied particles spread across great distances will respond when one of them is stimulated. Unmistakable kinship patterns—as identifiable as an inherited family nose—appear at widely varied stops in the universe. The same dynamic, open-ended, asymmetrical spirals appear at all scales: in telescopic photographs of galaxies, in electron micrographs of accelerated particles, and in nautilus shells that wash up on shore.

We know this in part because many millions of years ago, some cells decided to try something new, and the whole organism agreed, and they got together and started work on something that could some day study particles and patterns. Six hundred million years ago, the eye opens. How did it know there was something to see? In the beginning, the light on Earth was harsh, so unflattering, bleaching everything out to a sallow gray. Even once an atmosphere calmed the light and opened it to color, there wasn’t much of a view—rocks, mostly—and not much need to view it. Everyone was still in the sea, getting along (or not) through currents, bumps, pokes, vibrations, float-bys, maybe even smells and sounds; things knew other things were out there, but once you can see—well, then you realize that other thing is definitely not you. How long did Earth primp and dress herself in a blind world? For 100 million years at least, cells had been negotiating, collaborating, becoming jellyfish and flatworms that would be visible, if there were eyes to see them. Was there a moment, a cosmic “I’m ready for my close-

up, Mr. DeMille” and then the Primal Blink? And then what did the first eye see? Perhaps it was the image of love, or terror, or just some blurry blip relayed to a ganglion somewhere. But imagine the pressure to create enough allure to convince the eye it was worth staying! And once different beings had eyes, the stakes rose: suddenly there was witness: The lobster looks back as you lower it screaming into the pot. You spot the tick embedded in your thigh. And 600 million years after the first eye sees, the eye will look at Earth’s past, and figure out when the eye began.

Once the eye opens, the Earth is no longer blind; it’s also about four billion years old, nine-tenths of its current age, and still can’t get its kids out of the pool. They invent all kinds of plants, fins, brightly colored shells, jaws to crush the shells. Then 425 million years ago, one plant rides a wave into land and is able to survive the crush of gravity. The wood cell leads other plants ashore (the things with eyes pop up, catch a glimpse of the baked landscape and pass). Plants invent seeds and start their march inland. Millipedes come ashore, and Earth learns to walk. Some grow as long as Cadillacs, others grow wings to cool themselves, and the Earth starts to fly. Fish with air-breathing lungs haul themselves onto shore for the food, and the spine arrives on land. The march speeds up: Forests, swamps, insects, amphibians big enough to pull a combine.

And then—wiped out. Ninety percent of everybody. Maybe from comets, maybe from climate. It wasn’t the first time, and wouldn’t be the last. As much as an organism might think “well, that’s settled!” there are no guarantees that something useful or beautiful or tasty will make it. Six times in Earth’s 4.45 billion years, catastrophes have all but wiped the slate clean. Falling asteroids the size of Everest unleash earthquakes, 300-foot tidal waves, and sunless eras of fire and sulfuric clouds; continents shift toward the poles and freeze out their tenants. Everything these beings knew and felt, their angle on life, is erased with a broad swipe. On the periphery, a few chalky loops and dots of “i’s” and assorted smears remain, and they collect themselves and sometimes slowly, sometimes fast and furiously fill the board with a new script that just needed some space to tell its piece. The last externally caused catastrophe, the Miocene impact, was 15 million years ago; monkeys, apes, whales, and antelopes already existed, and survived. We are in the midst of the seventh great extinction: at the current rate, half of all species

will disappear in the next 40 years—not because of asteroids or tectonic plate shift, but because of a bipedal primate that, cosmically speaking, hasn't even hung up its coat yet.

I find these extinctions comforting. Not the current one, because it's fueled by personal greed and cultural hubris rather than cosmic sweep, and probably, selfishly, because I feel it happening. I fear living through long years of goodbyes, of death watches for the orangutan and ocelot, the cactus pygmy owl, the Mallorcan midwife toad and river terrapin, the bastard quivertree and Sri Lankan rose and the legions of creatures we may never meet but of whom we are a part, one stilled pulse after another until, bound in our technological cocoons, we dangle alone from a torn web.

But Earth has regrouped in the past, and might still. When the universe creates and destroys, it's nothing personal. Flat against the ropes, the Earth rallies the survivors to try something unknown, to open new niches, to push for beauty and balance, undaunted by the fact that few beings will make the cut. Somehow, along stretches of time, sacrifices of immense scale produce lapidary delicacy: The catastrophic blast of a proto-star yields the lavender fields of Provence, the honeybee that feeds there, the tiny bones of the ear that tickle with the buzz. If dinosaurs still thrived here, mammals couldn't. "Unpleadable necessity," Brian Swimme calls this macrocosmic rearranging without regard for the individual. I've always liked that scene in *The Godfather* when the Abe Vigoda character, Sal Tessio, realizes his scheme to challenge the Corleones with his own family has been found out. He's being taken away for his last ride, probably to the Meadowlands or somewhere swampy where corpses wind up, and he asks Tom Hagen, the consigliere, "Tom, could you get me off the hook here, just for old times' sake?" and Tom says, "Sorry, Sally, can't do it," and Tessio walks calmly out the door to his death, because he understands it's nothing personal, just business. Some people take comfort in a personal god who will save them, who will bring home a 3-point sinker as the buzzer sounds, who will remove the tumor from their head. I wish I could. I take comfort in hearing a scientist say that it's within the realm of possibility that hurtling toward us this very moment is a tidal wave of space plasma so titanic it wouldn't feel a bump as it incinerated our entire solar system. I find this comforting when I need to get outside myself because I can't fit into a pair of pants, or can't seem

to write what I was thinking, or I can't face yet another push to drill in the Arctic. Somehow I have faith in a system that insists that no system deserves to live forever, and that some inchoate good may come of its demise.

CHAPTER V

The creed itself is overbalanced in favor of redemption. Thus the integrity of the Christian story is affected. Creation becomes increasingly less important. . . . The American version of the ancient Christian story is no longer the story of the earth. Nor is it the integral story of the human community. It is a sectarian story. At its center there is an intensive preoccupation with the personality of the Savior, with the interior spiritual life of the faithful, and with the salvific community. The difficulty is that we came to accept this situation as the normal, even the desirable, thing.
—Thomas Berry, *Dream of the Earth*

Time crawls. Shapes move slowly. Layers of black skirts and scapulars and veils, widows' dress from 800 years ago, weigh down the sisters and cloak their motion. Even when they wheel quickly to slap someone, the movement arrives in waves: first the cheek feels the hand, then the air trapped in the draped sleeve, then the fabric. Days inch by in controlled silence. We may talk for 15 minutes a day, during recess; otherwise we are silent unless spoken to or called upon. We are silent as we pull our books from beneath our desks. We are silent in the hallways and lined up for the bathrooms. We are silent as we walk to and from chapel and while we are in it. There is so little talk that we dry like sponges, prepared to soak in the only story, the one about our fall from grace and the blood Jesus shed to restore us. In this story, our true life is the next one, and to reach it God has taught the Church the rules we must follow. Every day we recite from memory a new group of catechism questions, building our guiding inventory of rules and tradition: the two kinds of grace, the three theological virtues and three types of sins, the four chief marks of the Church, the five sorrowful, joyful, and glorious mysteries, the six holy days of obligation, the seven sacraments, the degrees of indulgences, the parts of the Mass, the proper steps to examine the conscience. There are right answers and wrong

ones, as sure to us as the long division on the blackboard, and as provable: Christ had promised that the Church would last until the end of time. It had already survived almost two millennia, longer than any institution on Earth, and had shaped that Earth: when a pope drew his finger along a map of South America, the people on one side spoke Spanish and on the other, Portuguese, as if seas had parted. We had built the great cathedrals, created the great art, written the most glorious music; our missionaries had sown Catholicism worldwide, so that at any time of day, somewhere in the world, the same Mass was being said; even when Protestants and Communists tried to destroy it, the Church continued to grow. The rock of Peter would not shift or crumble.

When school lets out and we walk along Main Street towards home, we pass the Peapack public school kids, all bright clothes and waving arms and loud laughter. They are obviously having more fun than we are, but they are going to hell. Not that we are automatically headed for heaven—you have to be the right kind of Catholic, walk a fine line and focus on Jesus. The back cover of our catechisms show him on the cross and tell us, “SEE His bleeding wounds. SEE the nails in His hands and feet... SEE how much He loves us. HOW do you think our Lady felt? HOW should we feel?” Sorry. We should feel constantly sorry, and feel a love for him above all others. Sorry was easier. In a diary I kept in sixth grade, where I documented my fixation on Mickey Dolenz of the Monkees, I wrote down my goals for the coming year: 1. To love Jesus more each day; 2. To be true to the Monkees and watch their show every week. I wrote in number one leaden with duty. I had failed so far to summon that love, but I had to tell myself I was trying.

Part of the problem was Jesus’ personality. He was a marked man: even the sparkle of Christmas, months away from Good Friday, couldn’t disguise the fact that this baby was doomed. Jesus never smiled or laughed, and even when he rose from the dead he kept showing people the holes in his hands and feet, or exposing the thorns poking his heart, and you knew it was your fault, your fault, your own most grievous fault. And yet, in addition to feeling sorry and guilty, we were supposed to feel glad for his death since it had saved us. We were to trust and obey him because he loved us more than anything, but adults say that all the time. Jesus seemed cranky. Even when he was in the middle of exciting tricks like turning water

into wine or walking on top of the sea, he would criticize his mother or the apostles, saying “It’s not my time yet” or “Don’t you have faith in me? Where is your faith?” If he was so dissatisfied with his own holy mother and friends, I didn’t imagine he was going to cut me much slack.

My teachers seemed to agree. Every day, after we finish our silent lunch, and as if tuna sandwiches and Ring-Dings might have lured us too close to the rocky shores of the flesh, we return to our classrooms to say the rosary. Mother Superior often drops in beforehand to remind us that we will die. She is thin and beaky and she puckers her lips as if she just tasted sour milk. She usually begins with a speech about the hour of our death. “In the rosary, we recite the ‘Hail Mary’ 53 times, asking our Blessed Mother to intercede for us ‘now and at the hour of our death,’” she says. She raises her eyebrows and chooses kids to stare at. “When will your hour come? Or yours? Do not think for a second, ‘Oh, I’m just in fourth grade—it won’t happen to me!’ She puckers up at such delusion and raises her finger. “Woe to you if you get caught up in this world and forget that your task here—your only task!—is to secure your eternity in heaven!” She points at the clock. “Because *your* hour is on its way.” She always brings lots of proof: Khrushchev has vowed to bury us. The Russians are atheists who hate Catholic children, and they could be on their way to bomb us—right now! If we don’t instantly vaporize in the blast we will die slowly from the radiation, she assures us, after our hair and teeth fall out and sores pock our skin. At least then we’ll have time to make a perfect Act of Contrition, to ask forgiveness for our sins, not like that girl she knew, the one our age who had hair like Roxanne Sibia and laughed like Michelle Marelli and who was just sitting at home reading a book when she popped a blood vessel in her head and died.

Once she has trimmed our focus, Mother Superior sweeps out the door and Sister leads us in prayer. We each finger rounds of beads, crystal or stone or the sterling silver gifts from godparents, answering Sister’s lead with the second half of the Hail Marys and Glory Bes, saying the Our Fathers in unison. The rosary takes about 45 minutes, and everyone has to kneel for the first set or decade; those who remain kneeling will receive extra grace, which can only help when your hour comes. Year after year I stay bare-kneed on the tile floor for all five decades, the recitation of mysteries, and the closing

prayers: straight-backed and rigid, feet together, like the alabaster statue of Bernadette of Lourdes in the grotto outside. After the second decade my kneecaps burn and my back and thighs feel as if they are bound by a tight, rusty wire. I will usually be the last one kneeling as we end with the “Hail Holy Queen,” a plea to Mary to relieve our earthly diaspora: “To Thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve! To Thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears.” When I get up my knees will be red until school lets out. More than once Sister will praise my piety, even though it is nothing more than fear—the same fear that for years makes me vomit when I see the low-flying plane or the lightning storm or feel the blinding headache and wonder if my hour has come. God is always watching us, and I hope he sees that I kneel perfectly even though it hurts.

After the rosary we are supposed to close our eyes and pray for our own intentions, but my legs are asleep and it’s hard to concentrate, and Sister’s eyes are closed, so I steal looks at the front of the room. Charts of cursive script over the blackboard. Chalky traces of numbers from math class. A portrait of John XXIII in his red velvet robe with ermine trim. The rest of the people on the walls have died gory deaths. Front and center hangs a crucifix, of course, but at least it’s the kind where Jesus is all gold metal—the realistic ones with the painted blood make you feel so culpable. There is a serene-looking portrait of President Kennedy, whose brains splattered his wife’s pink suit as women in cat-eye glasses and pageboys screamed. Next to him, on a shelf, is a statue of St. Lawrence in his robes holding a barbeque grill: the pagans roasted him to death, but still he managed to joke, “I’m done on this side, turn me over.” Near the door is the full-color, pin-up sized Martyr of the Month calendar imprinted with “Compliments of Bailey’s Funeral Home.” Month after month, Roman soldiers with angry mouths shoot arrows into St. Sebastian’s naked, flexing chest and belly and elegant thighs. Or hard, hairy arms tie St. Catherine to a spiked wheel, although we know that the angels will shatter it and hurl it into the pagan crowds, and when they finally behead her she will bleed milk; small children and their mothers wearing torn-hemmed tunics like the Flintstones’ stand calmly chained together a blink away from leaping, bare-fanged tigers. Every nerve ending, every soft vulnerability is plumbed: skin flayed with tan-

ning knives or scored with wool-carding combs; breasts are hacked off, eyes gouged out, only magically to reappear. Teeth are pulled, throats pierced, but the martyrs keep on singing; tongues are sliced off and thrown into rivers, but the little tongues still shout God's praises as they float downstream. The martyrs never seem to suffer as Jesus did; they don't stumble or show fear. They went joyfully to their deaths, their stories say, as if to their weddings, because they knew their souls were pure. In all the pictures their eyes roll skyward as if they are in ecstasy—not after death, but while they are still on Earth, still in their bodies, pushed to the limits of their physicality. They are supposed to model how little the body matters when weighed against the soul; instead they witness that there is more magic to the physical world than we know, that the body is a miracle and perhaps even proof of the spirit.

Not all saints starred in prolonged death-spectacles, but they all had special powers, some of which we invoked daily to cure sore throats or find lost glasses or protect us in the car when my dad would drive with a snootful. I preferred saints who died of natural causes, who were holy but were also busy outdoors, taking a break from death—tending bees or cattle, traveling, making wine. Many of them had slipped through the borders separating humans and animals: St. Francis, of course, who befriended wolves, preached to birds, and could just crook his finger to have a wild bird light on it; St. Ailbe, who was raised by wolves and when he became an abbot sheltered his old wolf mother in the monastery; or St. Magnus, who used to hike and share his cake with a bear. This was holiness that opened up creation, the bright image latent in the cloudy negative. Over and over I knelt in the fields at home and crooked my finger without any takers. As emphatically as I was taught to be good so as to avoid driving nails into Jesus' flesh or going to hell, I might have tried just as hard if the reward for goodness were communion with birds and cake with bears.

Forty hours' devotion is over. Each class has taken its turn keeping the host company during the day, and townspeople, old Italian ladies and some men from the Knights of Columbus, have knelt through the night vigil, in memory of the forty hours Jesus spent in the sepulcher. Father has just said the benediction, and is draping his hands in a gold-embroidered stole of the same white watered

silk as his chasuble. He lifts the heavy monstrance and displays the host in its glass housing, a matte white disk at the center of a hammered gold sunburst. The six acolytes file down from the altar before him; four bear tall white candles in gold holders, and the older two in front rhythmically swing clanging brass thuribles toward the pews filled with students and some of the Italian ladies. At the height of each swing, the lid opens and releases a cloud of incense. Father sings “Tantum ergo Sacramentum” and we answer “Veneremur cernui,” beginning our long float down the repeated Latin verses, catching words here and there that sound like “eternity” and “majesty.” No one really thinks of the words; they produce a sensation, as if ancient phrases smolder in the thuribles and we sing out what we inhale. From the crowded choir loft we watch the priest and altar boys, and trace their candlelight as they circle up the center aisle and down the sides, as they are eclipsed under the oak beams and granite of the jutting loft and then reemerge. They sway slightly with the slow, spare phrases of our chant, as the incense thickens. This is the only air now, this sweet, heavy ether; some of the little kids hold their breaths or cough, but you just have to let go and breathe it in. The incense blurs the outlines beneath us, and only the glint from the candles and gold sunburst pierces the nebula that binds us together.

CHAPTER VI

We’re stuffed into the choir loft, rehearsing for the Easter Vigil and the High Mass. Christmas was our last Midnight Mass in Latin; since then we’ve had to memorize the liturgy all over again, in English. No more medieval chant, no more Renaissance Masses with their braided polyphonies and antiphons. The fine silver thread of “Et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis” has been reeled in and shelved away, and instead we sing a choppy “and peace to his people on earth,” to a tune that sounds less like a *Gloria* than a TV jingle for a muffler shop.

We also have a new altar. The ornate green marble and gold one still looms from the back sanctuary wall, with its rising pilasters that bear white marble doves and a gold crucifix. The small filigree doors of the altar tabernacle are closed, as they usually are except when

Father opens them for the hosts, but you get the sense that now they're closed for good. With this altar, we watched him from the back. He muttered secret words up there, gift-wrapped in his vestments, genuflecting while the altar boys rang tiny bells, sometimes moving his lace-covered arms in what appeared to be tight circles. But the focus has shifted forward to the new altar, which looks like a stone version of a dining room table. Now that Father faces us and speaks English, we realize what he was doing up there: Far away and in another language he was saying mundane prayers like "May this offering be reasonable and acceptable to you, O Lord." After the Consecration, he used to lower his head with his back to us, but now we see him drop his jaw and shove in the large, halved host, and we watch him chew it, knowing how dry it is and that it's probably sticking to the roof of his mouth. He drinks the wine in self-conscious gulps. And what looked from behind like esoteric arm gestures turns out to be clean-up: He pours water into the chalice, swishes it around, drinks it, wipes out the chalice with a special cloth, and then folds that up and puts it in a little envelope.

The nuns assure us that the Church remains ever constant, eternal, and true, and that these are merely outward adjustments that will help us understand and appreciate the Mass and our faith. But the mystery has evaporated, replaced by unadorned and official Church Mysteries: the transubstantiation, the Mystical Body of Christ, the unbloody sacrifice that is identical to the bloody one. Even the Latin Low Mass, which lacked the music and ritual color of High Masses or benedictions and easily veered toward boredom, left you some space to yourself, let you wander in and out of the lush folds of a language that, at our level of understanding, hinted but didn't demand; it was common, in fact, for many older ladies to go to Mass and ignore it, withdrawing into their rosaries.

Once the Church hauled away its antique language and furnishings, it left behind the bare walls of doctrine. The plaster is cracked, revealing the flimsy-looking lath and mudplaster underneath. The priest faces us, speaks our everyday tongue, and in responding we articulate the fine points of belief. This Mass, stripped of its baffles, keeps pressing "Don't you have faith in me? Where is your faith?"

In the weeks that we rehearse the new liturgy, the days will warm and lengthen. Father will bless us as the Easter Vigil concludes, "As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end,

Amen.” Outside, the cool night air will still hold the mineral musk of warmed soil and waking roots. In the greening trees small birds will rouse within their yolky, sky blue shells and begin to crack open those false firmaments.

Daytime’s nervous clutch has loosened, pried open by public high school and miniskirts and make-up and talking and moving in crowds through the halls and, most obviously, by having civilian teachers, both male and female, who are disinterested in our spiritual compliance and forbidden to hit us. No one talks about Jesus dying, about us dying—there’s a palpable assumption that we will all live. But at night the clutch tightens again around my chest and gut as I lie in bed beneath the crucifix and examine my conscience, more complicated now with classmates who swear and tell dirty jokes and a boyfriend who’s not Catholic and who’s a few years older. It still wrings cold sweats when I jolt awake, counting off the days until Saturday confession.

During my last years at St. Brigid’s the nuns wound our days more tightly than ever as we grew bigger, more curious, and harder to control. There was the day Kevin Byrd and Tommy Riley looked up “sex” in the dictionary while Sister was out in the hallway. We were in sixth grade and none of us really knew what it was. (I had asked my mother—it was for married people, she said, and I assumed it had something to do with the mortgage). Kevin and Tommy were just about to unlock the word for us when Sister flew back in and smashed her clipboard over their heads again and again, drawing blood as the metal clasp raked their scalps and foreheads, before sending them to the office for suspension. For taking part in this sin of—she never said: looking up a word in the dictionary?—we had to recite the Act of Contrition, which I always recited before bed anyway so I wouldn’t go to hell if I were suddenly taken.

The spring coiled tighter. The nuns warned us repeatedly, out of the blue, “don’t touch yourselves!” but they never told us where. I caught my hand resting in my lap while reading the funnies after school and vomited. I started using a thick sea sponge in the shower, the kind we used to wash the horses, so I would not be able to identify any particular contours of my body. In class we had to sit silently, with our pencils in their pencil grooves, our feet flat on the floor, eyes front, just to practice obedience and control. If any-

one talked, if a pencil dropped, the whole class stayed after school. I wasn't accustomed to getting slapped at school, but I started laughing uncontrollably in class, and the more they slapped me the harder it was to stop. My legs started jiggling on their own. When we knelt in the church during devotions, concentrating on the crucifix, forbidden words like "Goddamn, Goddamn" reeled through my mind, right in front of Jesus. I smuggled a transistor radio in the waistband of my skirt, ran the earphone cord up my blazer sleeve and combed my hair over it, so I could drown out my sins with happy-sounding New York deejays playing top-20 hits. The nuns took the radio and made me stay there for hours to ask forgiveness, and there I knelt again, alone and sinning in front of the cross.

I asked my parents to let me enter the convent when I graduated from eighth grade, but they insisted I finish public high school first to be sure. I felt these scruples were a trial, and if I could just move to one of those hills, give myself over entirely, and lose myself under a habit as I walked through the woods, I could find relief.

What none of us outside those convents realized is that during those years after Vatican II, our teachers were being asked to look up from their gaze, to look around themselves at their rules and communities, at their own lives. There were obvious changes: they simplified their habits, shortening their skirts and veils, peeling the wimples from their faces. Some nuns who made that change can still vividly recall the first time in so many years they felt a breeze on the neck or the ankle, or had peripheral vision. We had no idea how many of our nuns were secretly struggling with what they saw, once they were finally allowed to look. Knowingly or not, many were readying themselves to leave, and the ones who stayed would start tearing down and rebuilding.

CHAPTER VII

We were caught in a drought, the horse latitudes of land, and it seemed every day the still, staring weather forced something else overboard: soft lawns, lush forests, our expectations of fat lettuces and melons and kaleidoscopic flower gardens. We said our nightly rosaries for rain, made novenas to St. Herbert, moved from 30-second showers and letting the grass go brown, down another notch

to paper plates and sponge baths. My sisters and brother and I normally spent mornings working in the vegetable garden, but we had cut back to only the hardest plants, kept alive with pot- and hand-washing water. The days bleached out and flattened. It was too hot to ride, or walk, or to do barn chores until evening.

As the water pipes rattled with air, we turned our focus from the blank sky to the ground. My father broke open the seal of our well, a 17-foot plunge hand-dug and lined with stone when the house was built, back when a distant king still ruled here, and then covered over once indoor pipes replaced pumps. Pop shone a flashlight down the well, and water still shone back. In a few days it didn't. Evenings he lowered a ladder into the blackness and climbed down into it. We lay on our stomachs with our heads over the mouth of the well, watching as his blond head darkened in the tight shadows of stones that no one still alive had ever seen. The well swallowed him and transformed him into a booming, stony voice punctuated by flinty flashes of light. He didn't say much when he came back up, but we could tell from his face how low the water was getting.

We found refuge from the heat down at the pond, and swam there every afternoon, but I burned too easily to stay as long as the others, and scouted some shade where I could read. In the front yard, not far from the well, a moss-veiled stone wall and our wineglass elm produced a geometry of cooler ground and live grass. For hours each afternoon I sat there in a long green-and-white webbed lawn chair and read—mostly books from the library, and then the book I bought, a small paperback called *Myths to Live By*. I had never heard of the mythology scholar Joseph Campbell, and certainly my parents hadn't. I probably thought I was settling in for a deeper look at the Greek mythology I had loved in freshman English. I was too young and narrow to appreciate Campbell's breadth; I'm sure entire sections of that book passed me by. But like a raven dropping stone after stone into a water jug, Campbell took myth after myth, from exotic-sounding cultures and from my own, dropped them into what I had been thinking was mere religious reluctance and raised its level within reach.

My religious beliefs were fictions, he said. He expressed this calmly, sympathetically, with soft humor and hard evidence from archaeology and anthropology, and without promoting some alternative brand of faith to fill the void. I had been viewing the world

through a straw: the stories, the rules, the prescriptions for salvation—salvation itself—what had kept me up at night in spasms of fear and failing were just one set of fictions taught to me as facts, and the human experience was full of them. I sat in that webbed plastic lawn chair, stunned to read that centuries before Christ, the Aztecs believed a virgin had given birth to a god/man hero who died and was resurrected—and so did cultures throughout India, ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria, and Greece. There were powerful serpents in those legends, Campbell said, and some crosses, too. These stories took root in disparate cultures, not because they were factual, but because they symbolically answered some common psychic need. Understanding that need was the crucial thing, he said, not believing the myths themselves.

What I understood Campbell to say was that Jesus, whom I had never been able to love, whose sacrifice I had never understood, had no more died for me than had Osiris of Egypt or Dimuzi of Sumeria. If Campbell knew this (and he made this knowledge sound widely available rather than esoteric), why hadn't I heard it before? Week after week, when I agonized over small and overly imaginative infractions in the confessional, why didn't the priest—an educated person—tell me to relax, take it with a grain of salt? "Lies are what the world lives on," Campbell told me, and that, among the many other ideas I read that afternoon, rang clear and true.

Campbell didn't clear away every obstacle over which I'd been stumbling and bruising myself—no one book or author could. I would spend years examining them, tagging them, clearing a path over or around them. But Campbell cracked my world wide enough, let in enough light, that I could see them for the human arrangement they were.

I finished the book after dinner, and left for a walk with it full in my mind and with crosses from the webbing still etched into the backs of my legs. A half moon took over the sky and tried to make amends for the burnt day. Men had just walked there the year before. I had wanted them to leave the moon alone; leave something untouched, for God's sake. The technology of the feat was striking, if comprehensible only to a group of men in Houston with short-sleeved white dress shirts and crewcuts. But the darkness! The darkness was revelatory. We spoke of God being "upstairs," people going "up" to heaven. But it was dark as pitch

up there—nothing puffy or pearly about it. I hadn't expected the astronauts to see heaven, somehow figured it hid from scientists, but this was stark. The Feast of the Assumption was coming in a few weeks, and we'd go to Mass (you had to, or it was a mortal sin) and celebrate Mary being taken up bodily from Earth into heaven. Christ had ascended that way, too. But where in that darkness did they go? Mary was a real human—how did she breathe up there? Of course, once you're actually airborne these other details might be secondary; but something Campbell had said insisted on more, that a healthy mythology show the universe "in accord with the knowledge of the time."

The well sputtered dry. Pop pulled up the ladder, put the lid back on, and we retreated to Plan B. Every evening we drove a wagon loaded with milk cans through the paddock and the lower gate to the pond. It was still full. The spring that fed it had never gone dry, said some of the old farmers whose families had been in the area longer than most of the roads. It was no wider than a washbasin, and not much deeper, but it was generous enough to send one narrow stream into the pond and to fork another, lined with watercress, down into the woods. A tiny hole in the silty bottom winked as the water bubbled up. Don't ever go in that spring, my father had warned us; it's quicksand and will suck you under. I'd drunk from it many times—the water was icy sweet with a mineral kick—but had never so much as poked my finger in the winking bottom.

When the nights were too hot we swam before we loaded up the milk cans. The water in that pond had always felt so soft that you didn't enter it but returned to it, and in the darkening evening the limits of skin blurred even further. The bats had always looped around our heads when we swam late, and others were now taking refuge here from retreating water levels. More frogs hugged the banks, more water snakes ribboned through our legs—harmless, but still worth a shiver; little snapping-turtle heads poked through the surface, which meant you didn't want to think about the big ones coveting your toes from below; the little green heron stood back in the skunk cabbage, waiting for us to leave. A muskrat might slink off when we arrived; there were prints from raccoons and foxes, hoof marks from deer, even from someone else's horse who had gotten loose and gone for a swim. Not everyone came here

to drink or cool off—the next day, we’d often see clumps of feathers or bits of fur, the ones who hadn’t made it through the night. That’s the way it was. This was no longer a recreational place for us, where some animals also happened to live. We—everything, everyone—gathered together in the dusk and the heat and uncertainty, and drank from the same clay-bottomed cup.