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Faith of My Father

Edmonds, Washington

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MY FATHER'S GRAVE IS ALMOST A STONE'S THROW FROM ROSARY Heights, on a grassy hillside in Holyrood Catholic Cemetery. A seagull's cry coming from the bluff might echo there. The spot, which he and my mother chose when they decided to buy a burial site years ago, has as its neighbors an eclectic population of Asians, Italians, and nuns, and it overlooks a busy thoroughfare—all highly appropriate for a man who never cared much for solitude.

The marble grave marker is the design of the moment at Holyrood, with the beads of a rosary cut into the background. It's a very tasteful headstone, although my father never liked saying the rosary. Liturgical repetition annoyed him; it made him restless.

Before the service, the funeral director, wreaking of piety and cologne, approached me and whispered in my ear that he had taken the liberty of placing a rosary in my father's hands just before he closed the coffin. I solemnly thanked him and inwardly grimaced. Sorry, Dad. If only I had known. At least we succeeded in convincing the organist not to play "Amazing Grace." She seemed stunned and insulted by the request. "Amazing Grace" is a mainstay at funeral Masses. Who wouldn't want such an uplifting hymn played? My father, that's who. He hated "Amazing Grace." He thought it was too Protestant. My mother insisted on that one point: "I will *not* have 'Amazing Grace' played at your father's funeral." I was grateful that the organist respected our wishes. My brother Tom, fresh from the wilds of Alaska, threatened to "take the organist down" in midnote if she began to play it.

I started to write this book several months before my father's death, and he was delighted with the idea. Dad's love for the sisters was uncomplicated. They could do no wrong in his eyes. As far as he was concerned, nuns were one of the best things about Catholicism. Although he had initially been wary when they changed to secular clothing, it actually served to bring him closer to the sisters he met at church and through his work. It relaxed the relationship. His best pal in later years was the elderly Sister Pat, who lived alone in an apartment in Edmonds and did good works for Saint Mark's Parish, in spite of being well into her eighties.

My father wasn't raised a Catholic. Richard Schuler was a World War II convert. While serving in the navy in the icy nether regions of the Aleutian Islands off of Alaska, he met a Catholic priest named Edgar Gallant. Father Gallant was larger than life—literally. When he occasionally visited our home in later years, we children were most impressed by his legs. They were so long that he could wrap them around each other like a rope. With that trick alone, he had our rapt attention. For my father, a lonely young man in an isolated corner of a long war, an only child whose father had died young, Father Gallant was a charismatic presence. My father had never had the opportunity to meet a priest before, and Father

Gallant had the qualities of zeal, humility, and good humor that appealed to him. Had Edgar Gallant been at all remote or pious, the connection would never have been made. Above all, my father cherished a down-to-earth quality and good humor in people—the ability to reach out and relate to someone else in a warm and genuine way.

Father Gallant also sparked a dormant intellectual curiosity in my young father. He began reading about the church, and he was most affected by *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Thomas Merton's moving account of his conversion to faith and, finally, monasticism. Although my father wasn't one to talk openly about the experience that precipitated his own conversion, I imagine he felt it as something like a calling—not to a life of religious vocation, but to a religion itself.

He returned from the war a newly minted member of the Roman Catholic church, and almost immediately met my mother. Janet McArtor was the second daughter of a Scottish Protestant family with a traditional dislike of Catholics. There was still a tremendous reservoir of distrust toward Catholics in the Pacific Northwest, dating back to the late 1800s, when the working-class Irish and Italian immigrants first settled there. Catholics were viewed as low-class and vulgar. For one thing, they bred like rabbits. While most modern women were trying to control the size of their families, Catholic women were encouraged to have as many children as they could—to fill the ranks of soldiers in the army of Christ. There was a time when the Archdiocese of Seattle announced that if a family had twelve children, the twelfth would be baptized by the bishop—and many good Catholic couples actually tried to increase their efforts in an attempt to reach this mark. Roman Catholics also celebrated their Mass in an indecipherable babble of Latin, which sounded threateningly occult to outsiders. This strange foreign liturgy heightened suspicions that Catholics were not "true" Americans, because their first allegiance was to the Pope. When John F. Kennedy ran for president in 1960, his greatest barrier to election was his Catholicism. He addressed

the matter head-on. Kennedy made it clear that if he was elected, the United States government would *not* be run from the Vatican in Rome.

My mother's family found it hard to resist Dad. He was tall and ruggedly handsome, with wavy blond hair, had a thousand-watt smile, and radiated a charm and decency that was seductive and comforting all at once. Even so, they didn't like the fact that he was Catholic. When my mother converted, too, they made their dismay clear. But my mother let them know that she and my father had fallen in love not only with each other but with a shared faith.

My parents believed they had a calling to raise a big family of good Catholic children. For that, they sacrificed any personal dreams they might have had. In particular, my father had to set aside his art. He was a gifted artist, capable of painting almost anything—from delicate watercolor ocean scenes to corny cartoons to wonderfully realistic portraits. Each of his children received drawing lessons from him. Every Christmas throughout our childhoods, he painted a sweeping nativity scene on the large horizontal mirror in our living room. To this day, whenever I'm home and look at that mirror, I can still see Dad's nativity mural. But the instability of an artistic career didn't really suit his ultimate calling. Once my dad and mom chose their path as Catholic parents, Dad realized he couldn't support a large family, or afford to send his children to Catholic schools, on an artist's salary. So he became a workingman. He never complained about it, or behaved as if he'd been deprived by having to give up something he loved. He possessed, as did my mother, a pure sense of vocation. For many years, he drove one of those familiar milk trucks from the fifties for Foremost Dairy, the kind packed with big blocks of melting ice and with metal racks filled with cold glass bottles—pints of cream and quarts, half gallons, and gallons of fresh milk. Dad delivered cases of them, along with cottage cheese, sour cream, buttermilk, eggs, and ice cream to the stores and schools around Seattle. It was during that time that he started becoming friendly with the nuns. He'd chat and joke with them when he made his school deliveries, and

take them “surplus” blocks of cheese and gallons of ice cream for the convents. Of course, the nuns loved him. Later, Dad was promoted to a salesman for the company, and he created a network of goodwill. To him, selling meant service. Each of his clients—be it the smallest mom-and-pop grocery or the largest supermarket—received his full attention. There was never a Christmas morning when Dad didn’t receive a call from some store or another that had run out of eggnog, or Foremost’s special brand of peppermint ice cream. My father would drive to the dairy, load up his car, and then go to the market and restock the empty shelves. My mother always frowned and said, “Can you imagine? Who would call a man away from his family on Christmas morning to deliver five quarts of eggnog?” Dad would just smile, give her a quick kiss, and head out into the cold—often with a couple of kids in tow. Some of my favorite childhood memories are of those times when I was allowed to accompany my father on his Christmas-morning drives to the dairy.

I was born in 1950, the first daughter, and the third of nine children, five boys and four girls. My parents named me after Saint Catherine of Siena—or so they said, although I always suspected that they just loved the name Catherine, and that I was actually named after Katharine Hepburn. Whatever the source, Catherine was a very serious name for the small curly-headed imp that I was. It was a religious name. In those days, priests would only baptize a child who had been given a saint’s name, or the derivative of one. Names such as Ashley, Tara, Fawn, or Cody would never have made the cut. My parents encouraged me to read about my patron saint in the large gold-leafed *Lives of the Saints* that sat on a shelf in our living room, next to the Holy Bible. One quote about Saint Catherine stayed in my mind: “She walked among us like a smile.”

We were the prototypical Catholic family of the fifties and sixties. We could fill an entire row at Sunday Mass. My brothers and sisters and I all wore the itchy brown uniforms of Assumption grade school, and my brothers were altar boys. For a time, I had the honored assignment of laying out the priest’s vestments for Mass.

until Father Felix caught me sampling the Communion wine and banned me from the sacristy.

Our family life revolved around the church, and of course my parents held the hope that they would be giving at least two of their children to God—one to the priesthood and one to the convent. My eldest brother, Greg, was the natural choice for the priesthood. He was an excellent student, respectful, well behaved, and ardent about his faith. Greg was also blessed with a clear, strong baritone, and he loved to raise his voice in song. So, at the age of fourteen, he left home to pursue his religious training at Mount Angel, a Benedictine seminary in Oregon. Greg finished his high school education at Mount Angel, and there he stayed until his freshman year in college. Then, on a summer vacation at home, he accidentally discovered girls. All bets were off after that epiphany.

It seemed that I was the daughter anointed to be the nun. Although I had a clearly rebellious streak and wasn’t entirely the “type” most sought after, I was the eldest daughter of a large Catholic family, and I did love the nuns as a child. I was naturally drawn to them out of a pure and unabashed curiosity. I was endlessly fascinated by what I imagined as the mystery of their lives. What did they do when they weren’t teaching us at school? They prayed, they ate, they worked, and they slept. What else went on behind those convent walls?

We were taught by Dominicans—the order to which Catherine of Siena was vowed in the fourteenth century. Inspired by the nuns, I formed a romantic attachment to my patron. She was so bold and daring, so holy and humble—mystic, servant of the poor, and political activist all rolled into one. Also, she was radiantly beautiful, at least according to the holy card I carried in my missal. I especially loved the story of Catherine’s calling, which she was said to have received at the age of six.

Catherine and her brother Stephen were returning from doing an errand for their mother. They were passing near the Church of the Preaching Friars in the Valle Piatta when Catherine saw the sky open. Revealed before her was a sumptuous chamber spun of gold

and jewels, lush with beautifully colored fabrics. Catherine saw Jesus Christ seated on a glowing throne, dressed in garments fit for a king. On his head sat the bejeweled miter of the Pope. Standing by his side were the apostles Peter, Paul, and John. Catherine, staring deeply into the eyes of Jesus, was transfixed. Then Jesus raised his right hand and blessed her. Only when her alarmed brother Stephen tugged at her sleeve and brought her back from her reverie did the vision fade.

And that was Catherine's calling—at the tender age of six. She told no one of her vision or of her avowed dedication to Christ. When she was twelve—and of marriageable age—her brothers found a suitable bachelor for her to marry, but she refused. It was then that Catherine stated for the first time that she was already betrothed—to Christ. Determined that she make herself unattractive, she cut off her beautiful long dark hair, and so was spurned by her potential suitor. (It is said that other committed mystics of that period—especially those cursed with youth, beauty, or a dowry—went so far as to slice off their lips and noses to avoid marriage.) When she was eighteen, Catherine received the habit of the lay order of Dominicans. She did not join a community, but instead made a cloister of her small room in her parents' house, where she daily spoke with her Divine Lover. One holy card in my possession showed Catherine walking hand in hand with Jesus on the garden roof of her home, as if he had been invited as a lunch guest.

In time, Catherine would leave her self-imposed cloister and take on a healing mission. This young woman with no formal education would ultimately be responsible for shaking a corrupt papacy to its roots, and she would become the most famous Christian activist of her time. Catherine and Saint Teresa of Avila were the only female saints ever to receive the further distinction of being elevated to Doctor of the Church. In 1997, Teresa of Lisieux joined their elite circle.

I was pleased that my patron saint was such an independent, passionate, and powerful woman. As I read *The Lives of the Saints*, I found many of the female saints too passive and saccharine for

my taste. I was especially unmoved by the virgin martyrs, whose only claim to sanctity was that they allowed themselves to be stoned to death, burned in boiling oil, pierced with a hundred arrows, chopped into pieces, or beheaded, rather than suffer the loss of their virginity. Since none of us knew at that time what virginity was, and since the nuns made no attempt to explain the details, the virgin martyrs' insistence on preserving it created quite a wellspring of confusion. Whatever virginity was, it was obviously worth dying a horrible death to keep. But it seemed to me that if they'd been clever and resourceful like my patron saint, Catherine, they might have found a way to spare themselves such a pointless fate.

Catherine was also a great feminist—although that term hadn't as yet appeared. She lived and died on her own terms; she fought against the tide of convention and outwitted the most powerful magistrates and princes of the church. It was this same spirit of feminist independence that attracted me to the Dominican Sisters who taught in my school. It may seem odd to call them independent; they were, after all, bound by the strict rule of canon law, and their vow of obedience would seem to mitigate against any show of independence. But the nuns were the strongest women I knew. Their power was supreme. When we were schoolchildren, they ruled us as surely as a general ruled his troops. It was useless to even try complaining to our parents about a problem at school. No matter what, Sister was always right.

In spite of their common dress, each of the nuns wielded her power in a unique way. To this day, my brother Greg pales at the mention of Sister Austin, the school principal, who believed godliness had to be whipped into children. She carried her metal ruler like a sword. At the slightest infraction, she would march down the classroom aisle, drag the miserable culprit from his seat to the front of the class, and slam the ruler down so hard on his naked palms that the crack reverberated through the hallways. When I think back on it now, it was the boys who were usually singled out for physical punishment—not just beatings but also more creative

torments, which we could only imagine as having been taught in the convent. The Special Punishments for Sinful Parochial School Students course must have been packed. I particularly remember a perpetually stern old nun named Sister Martina, whom we nicknamed "Sister Martini," for no particular reason other than silliness. If a boy was talking in class, she would call him to the front of the room, draw a circle on the floor with chalk, and order him to stand in the middle of it, bent over and clapping his ankles, for a full hour. In today's world, this would be called child abuse. But at that time, it was an acceptable practice.

If they received an excess of punishment, the boys were also the objects of an excess of fawning. The nuns just loved boys. It was perfectly clear. The eighth-grade teacher, Sister Manette, so adored my brother Greg that she tormented every Schuler sibling who followed behind him. When I struggled with geometry, she simply shook her head in disbelief. She couldn't imagine that the sainted Greg's sister could be so imperfect, so unlike her brilliant brother. I can still feel the sting of her red marker pen cracking against the top of my head whenever I gave the wrong answer to a math problem. "Greg was so good at math," she wailed, perplexed by my inabilities. I never resented my brother for Sister Manette's behavior. It wasn't *his* fault that she loved boys.

A friend who attended Catholic school in Lima, Ohio, recalled that her fifth-grade teacher, Sister Benedict, had an unusual custom that she called "boy of the day." This was during the late fifties, when *Queen for a Day* was on television, and she would use the same tune as they did on the show. Each afternoon, toward the end of the class period, she would sing a little ditty: "Boy of the day, who will it be . . . ?" Then she would name the boy who had pleased her the most that day. The chosen boy would have to get up, go to the front of the classroom, and kiss Sister Benedict on her cheek. Apparently, there was an unfortunate episode when the boy of the day refused to cooperate and tried to jump out a window rather than press his lips to Sister's hairy cheek. She dragged him

back from the window's edge by his hair, took him to the front of the room, and beat him soundly.

Girls were often spared the worst of the physical tortures, but we weren't excluded by any means. We still carried the burden of our sin. My first-grade teacher, a young woman with the oddly glamorous name of Sister Loretta, strongly impressed upon us that earthly life was nothing more than a ladder to heaven, which we were called on to climb. Our entire lives were to be spent trying to get to heaven. Each sin we committed—lying, stealing, cheating, being disobedient, giggling in church, talking back—caused us to slide backward down the rungs of the ladder. The more we sinned, the deeper we would fall, until finally the weight of our sins would send us plummeting into the fiery flames of hell. This had a powerful effect on a six-year-old! For a long time, I was sure that I was doomed. After I stole a candy bar from the local market, I was mortified. I cried myself to sleep that night with the knowledge that I might die in this state of sin and be sent to hell. The worst part of it was that I couldn't undo my sin. I had already eaten the candy bar.

The nuns believed that the best way to set young children on a godly course was literally to scare the hell out of them. The major event of first grade was the preparation for our First Holy Communion. It was exciting. We got to wear frilly white dresses and veils that made us look like tiny brides. But it was scary, too. Sister Loretta loved to tell horror stories about children who broke the rules surrounding Communion. The main rule was that we were not to bite the Host. We were to hold it on our tongues until it melted of its own accord. She soberly told us of the young boy who bit into the Host. Blood spurted from his mouth in rivers—he was eating Christ's crucified body, after all—and he choked on the blood and died. There was also the little girl who decided she could keep Jesus, so she took the Host out of her mouth and wrapped it in a handkerchief. On the way home from Mass, she was struck by a bolt of lightning. Fortunately, the priest saw her fall

and managed to rescue the Body of Christ, which he returned to the tabernacle.

My second-grade teacher, Sister Camilla, introduced us to the best protection from our own evil instincts—our guardian angels. Today, guardian angels are ubiquitous in our culture. They are pictured as gentle, benevolent spirits that hover about trying to keep us from harm's way. But the guardian angels of my childhood were more ominous and demanding beings. Their role was not so much to surround us with light as it was to knock us over the head if we started to sin. According to Sister Camilla, our guardian angels were perched on our right shoulders. She forced us to sit on the far left edge of our seats so that our heavenly protectors would have room for their substantial wingspans. This seating arrangement made it difficult to sit, much less to write. Our desks were the old-fashioned one-piece style, with the curved armrest on the right. You'd slide into the narrow chair from the left. I, unfortunately, was left-handed, so the armrest was of no use to me. It simply provided my guardian angel with additional room to lounge. Since I was squeezed over to the left side of the chair, my writing arm hanging out into thin air, I was forced to perform a near-acrobatic act to get my hand over to the page. Sister Camilla was constantly cracking me on the head with a ruler because my lettering was so erratic. It never occurred to me to blame my guardian angel for hogging the seat. It never occurred to Sister Camilla to move my guardian angel to my other shoulder so I could get closer to the desk. As I'd been reminded many times before, the left was *sinistre*, sinister, bad. I was lucky they let me use my left hand to write.

The nuns didn't seem to make any effort to protect our young psyches from the hard truths. Sister Camilla also informed us that we shouldn't bother making friends with Protestant children. After all, they wouldn't be going to heaven, so we might as well nip any relationships in the bud. Only Catholics went to heaven. She never warned us away from Jews, but maybe it was because there were so very few of them in Seattle that the chances of befriending one

weren't that great. Because of Sister Camilla's warnings, I felt compelled to break the terrible news to my next-door neighbor Randy Minkler that I couldn't marry him after all. I was devastated when he shrugged indifferently and informed me that he had a new girlfriend at *public* school. It was my first experience with the quixotic demands of the heart and the vicissitudes of love.

My parents, in part because they were converts, were by-the-book Catholics who shared this stern attitude toward Protestantism. When I was eight and reading every book I could get my hands on, I once checked out the biography of Martin Luther at the library. I didn't know he was a heretic. My parents soon set me straight. They wouldn't have that book in their house. I had to take it directly back to the library—which I did, crying with shame that I could have made such a terrible error.

The nuns never let us forget that we were soldiers in Christ's army. We had an obligation to reject the evils of atheism and fight the nonbelievers. In the third grade, we marched around the circumference of our classroom, singing the battle song of the Catholic youth crusade:

*An army of youth,
Flying banners of truth,
We are fighting for Christ the Lord!
Heads lifted high,
Catholic action our cry,
And the Cross our only sword!*

From our earliest years, we were subjected to intense recruitment drives to the religious life—especially during March, which was designated Vocation Month. Each day, we would say the Prayer for Vocations, and at the final line—"Grant to our youth true generosity in following thy call"—Sister would try to make eye contact with a deserving young girl. My friend Mary Anne Dwyer always got many meaningful looks during Vocation Month. She was sweet-tempered, a very good student, and the niece of a nun.

I got my fair share as well, although the looks were far more ambivalent in my case, since I was something of a troublemaker. When we were in the fifth grade, Mary Anne and I, along with several others, were chosen to be in an archdiocesan vocation pageant, where boys and girls were dressed in the authentic habits of the various orders of priests and nuns. I was dressed as a Sister of the Sacred Heart, and I still remember the suffocating headdress. It fit so tightly that my naturally round cheeks bulged to bursting. The heavily starched edges cut into the sides of my face, and the crisp wimple squeezed my forehead into a perpetual frown. The guimpe was fitted around my neck with the force of a chokehold. In the photograph, which was published in the *Catholic Northwest Progress*, my eyes are looking into the camera lens reproachfully, my mouth is set in a tight line, and my face is very still. Perhaps I was afraid that if I moved too suddenly, the guimpe would crush my throat.

Needless to say, my father was thrilled with this front-page display of religious fervor, and he went around calling me “Sister Catherine” for a while. At the pageant, the bishop made it known that God had a plan for us and that the Lord was revealing part of that plan today. Those of us who had been chosen to wear the sacred habits should consider seriously whether it was a sign that God was calling us. We’d been chosen by well-meaning nuns and priests for this honor. Maybe they could plant the seed of inspiration, stir the latent desires of a couple of likely aspirants. A vocation to religious life was supposed to be that way; mystery and surprise were its romance.

God pursued his chosen ones like an obsessed lover. To paraphrase baseball legend Satchel Paige, a great favorite of the nuns: You could run, but you couldn’t hide. This theme was oft repeated by Sister Martina. She made all of her students memorize “The Hound of Heaven,” a poem by Francis Thompson, which I can still recite by heart:

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;*

*I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.*

The poem goes on at great length to detail the futile efforts of this poor soul to escape God’s clutches; how his life was ruined at every turn, his world collapsing around him, until finally he had nothing, at which point the running “Feet” catch up with him and God says:

*“Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,
I am He Whom thou seekest!”*

Sister Martina regarded her sixth graders through narrowed eyes when she read the poem, as if accusing us in advance of trying to run from God. She made being called seem like a curse. If you were chosen, that was that. Your life was no longer your own. And if you refused the call, God was going to wreck your life. Of course, we were all scared to death that we might be called. There was really no way of knowing in advance whose name might appear on his list. It was as if God ran a giant draft lottery, arbitrarily spinning the wheel of fortune, watching the numbered balls pop up.

The happiest day of Sister Martina’s life—short of the election of an Irish Catholic boy to the White House—came with the news that Dolores Hart was joining a cloistered order of nuns. This, to her, was proof positive of God’s powerful domination. He was using a young film star as one more example of his influence. Dolores Hart was the prototype of early 1960s beauty—shiny blond hair pulled back, her trademark bouncing ponytail—a cross between Grace Kelly and Debbie Reynolds. She had long, dark,

curling eyelashes that framed dazzling azure blue eyes, with a pert nose, lush lips, and flawless teeth. She also had a perfect figure, both demure and seductive at the same time. She was best known for the movies she starred in with Elvis Presley, who was treated as though he were some sort of a god himself. Their chemistry in the movies appeared to be so real that rumors spread about a love affair. Then, at twenty-four, Dolores Hart abandoned the movies and the glamorous life of a star. She even left Elvis behind. She disappeared into a Benedictine monastery and resides there to this day, now a still-radiant woman in her sixties.

Sister Martina showed us a picture of Dolores Hart, supposedly taken just before she departed for her life in the convent. The photograph was dramatically lit, as if a heavenly beacon were shining directly down on her. She was in a prayerful pose—her clear eyes lifted upward, her perfect mouth parted slightly, her exquisite face seeming to glow like polished ivory from within. Apparently, Elvis had been no match for the Lord Jesus Christ.

I remember staring at that picture endlessly, trying to read something in her face that would give me a clue. I wanted Dolores Hart's mysterious calling explained. How did she know she'd been called? The way I saw it, the problem with believing you had a religious calling was that there really wasn't any way of knowing. What if it was just what *you* wanted? What if God didn't want *you*? It used to be, in the good old days of mystical visions, that Jesus himself, or his mother, Mary, would appear before you and call out. "You. Yes. You." It was clear as a bell. But things had changed dramatically. The present-day calling, the nuns explained, could be hard to recognize; it could be a little tricky. Maybe it was a thought that wouldn't leave your head—God's name playing over and over like a broken record. Maybe it was as simple as sitting in an almost-empty church faintly resinous with the odor of incense, staring at the flickering votive candles, and being drawn into a state of dreamlike meditation. Maybe it was a deep craving of some kind, or a burning curiosity you just couldn't satisfy. Whatever the calling was—and it was apparently inexplicable—if you were called,

you'd know. For a long time, I did my best not to let God enter my thoughts, for fear he would hear me thinking about him and call me.

A couple of years ago, I asked my brother Greg how he experienced the calling. Did he remember what it was that led him into a seminary at the tender age of fourteen? He wasn't really sure what had happened. It had become an inevitability, a presumption that had gained surety over the course of the years. I had always assumed that Greg's desire for a priestly vocation had been a false alarm, since he decided to leave the seminary when he was nineteen, and later married and had children. But he told me that he never really stopped wanting to be a priest. He would gladly be a priest today if the church would allow priests to be married. It was a revelation to me. After all this time, it turned out that Greg still had a true calling.

Fearful as I may have been about the idea of being called, there was also a sense of intrigue. Like most young girls, I was impressionable, innocently romantic, and unintentionally melodramatic. And I actually believed in a personal Jesus—that was a crucial factor. One cannot underestimate the irresistible lure of a mortal yet transcendent God. And I wasn't alone in my love for Jesus. My classmates seemed to feel the same way. We were able to give Jesus all of the qualities of our most romantic dreams. He was strong yet sensitive, demanding yet compassionate—and, most important of all, he listened to everything we had to say and read our every thought. The idea that such an incredible being might single one of us out for special attention was enough to make us weak in the knees.

Such mystical fantasies also served to add excitement to an otherwise mundane life. My parents had created a stable, secure home for us, but it was a busy one, with constant chores. There was almost never a time when there wasn't at least one infant or toddler in the household, which meant my mother spent hours in the steamy basement, wrestling heavy wads of freshly bleached

diapers through the ringer of her manual washing machine with a large stick. These diapers, by the hundreds, it seemed, would emerge in clean piles for me to fold. As the eldest daughter, I was the utility caretaker, adept at all aspects of child care, including bottle-feeding, burping, and changing diapers. I loved the babies, and I didn't object to the work, but I also knew from a young age that I would never willingly choose my mother's life—saddled with a demanding brood, all personal wants and needs sublimated. In that respect, the nuns also offered a valid alternative to the life of wife and mother. They were well educated, respected, fearless, and dignified—fantastic role models for a young girl. For a long time, I believed that the only way to escape my mother's fate was to become holy enough to warrant a higher calling. There was only one major stumbling block in the carefully laid out path of my plans.

I wasn't very good at it. I had too much of my father in me to maintain a pious pose for long. Being holy seemed to require a level of submission I wasn't genetically capable of sustaining. I just couldn't stomach being submissive, no matter how hard I tried. Besides, I couldn't keep silent long enough to master the contemplative spirit. The Schuler household was a boisterous place, where everyone vociferously talked, argued, and laughed at a decibel level that could offend more delicate eardrums. Like everyone else in my family, I had not only learned how to hold my own; I loved to talk. A nun who taught me when I was fourteen recognized me instantly thirty-two years later: "Oh, Catherine. Yes, I remember you. You were *always* talking."

Holy Angels Academy, a high school for girls run by the Sisters of Saint Dominic of the Holy Cross, was not my first choice. It was located all the way across town in Ballard, a run-down blue-collar neighborhood of single-story houses and crumbling docks. It was a highly unusual eyesore in the beautiful city of Seattle. I would have preferred to attend Holy Names Academy, where my friend Mary Anne Dwyer was headed. An elite girls' school perched high

on Capitol Hill, it was run by the Holy Names Sisters, considered to be the cream of the crop among the many orders of nuns.

But Holy Names was expensive. Holy Angels was cheap—only three hundred dollars a year—so that's where I went. I never was able to get very far away from the Dominican Sisters.

Holy Angels was a modest plant, to say the least. The entire school was squeezed onto the top floor of a three-story brick building that primarily housed Saint Alphonsus elementary school. The aging structure always seemed to be in danger of collapsing. During the big earthquake of 1965, which struck in the middle of a school day, the ceilings and floors rippled with such ferocity that had the quake lasted five seconds more, the entire building, packed with students, would surely have been reduced to a pile of rubble.

But whatever Holy Angels lacked in a physical plant was more than made up for by the incredible spirit there. For the first time in my life, I was encouraged and allowed to pursue any goal I chose. For the first time, my education took place away from the shadow of the boys who had dominated my previous classrooms. It was freeing, even though the rules at Holy Angels were very strict. In many ways, it was the last of the old-style convent schools, run much like a novitiate, with a severe dress code, a rule of silence, and rigorous attention paid to the education of our souls.

Sister Edwina, the principal, ran the school in the manner of a Mother Superior, with an uncanny knack for appearing at the very moment you were misbehaving. She was extremely tough and rarely smiled, although there were occasional flashes of a soft heart. I had the impression that she was fond of me, although exasperated by my natural ebullience and gift for getting into trouble. Obedience was never my strong suit—then or now—and Sister Edwina believed in running a very tight ship. The rituals of her authority may seem benign today, but at the time, we took them quite seriously. The rule of silence was a near impossibility for three hundred teenage girls, but Sister Edwina enforced it strictly, as she did the insistence that our navy blue uniform skirts fall modestly below the knee. Miniskirts were the rage then, and at least some of us

tried to circumvent the rule by rolling our skirts at the waist. Often we would be forced to kneel on the cold wood floors of the hallway for a skirt check. (A properly modest skirt would touch the floor when you were in a kneeling position.) Sister Edwina walked along the rows with her ever-present ruler as we hurriedly unrolled the offending skirts. Brown loafers and dark kneesocks were also the look of the moment. But Sister Edwina insisted that we wear ugly brown-and-white saddle shoes with white ankle socks. Perhaps she thought it was better for our souls.

My two closest friends at Holy Angels were Bernadette and Tracy. They were both straight-A students, popular, and talented. Tall, thin, dark-haired Bernadette was warm, soft-spoken, and serious. Tracy was as effervescent as champagne, and she had a singing voice so high and sweet that it could bring our music teacher, Sister Carmen, to tears. To this day, I can see Tracy perfectly—a delicately boned girl with an angelic face, pale freckled skin, and long, thick strawberry red hair, who was transformed in song.

I provided a balance to their extremes—at times a serious, solitary writer, and at times bold, outspoken, and mischievous. We were content in our convent-school world, where all the challenges were manageable. But in our final year at Holy Angels, powerful dynamics shifted the solid ground beneath our feet. After graduation, the three of us went our separate ways. Bernadette became a nun. Tracy became a prostitute. I became a lost soul—and a nonbeliever.

My parents were stunned by my defection. It was disappointing enough that I didn't enter a convent, as they had always hoped. But to reject the church out of hand? It was the last thing they'd expected. They had sacrificed so much to make sure I was schooled by the nuns, and the result was a radical feminist nonbeliever. Filled with confusion and despair, they removed their remaining children from Catholic schools. They couldn't know, nor could I, standing on the shifting fault line of the late 1960s,

that it was all part of God's mysterious plan. But each Sunday, they knelt in church and struggled to keep their faith steady and their hearts focused on eternal truths as they sang:

*Faith of our fathers, living still,
In spite of dungeon, fire, and sword . . .*

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The Year in the Life of an Order of Nuns

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