

FAINT

My teachers kept pushing the idea that we were damned. There was little that we could do to save ourselves. It didn't help that we lived in the most inhospitable environment. In fact, most of the other students hardly paid a second mind to what they said. Only I seemed to take it literally. And I was the one with bigger dreams for myself. I didn't want to stay here forever. If that meant accepting the bleak myth, I was willing.

Since heaven was so hidden from our view, we needed to make an extra effort if we wanted to be blessed with grace. I hoped that grace would not be withheld from those who asked for it fervently. So I sought the gift with every ounce of my being.

It was obviously disquieting that I could put all my effort into something that could be so easily denied to me. Perhaps, that was the reason for such an end. If I pretended not to want it, then I had a better chance of getting it. Could creation proceed in such a devious fashion? I did not want to become overwhelmed by the capriciousness of a higher being. I needed to work out a number of basic principles that I could follow. I could measure my progress physically, and I could use this knowledge to project into the spiritual realm. Thus, I could overcome any confusion that I might have about the nature of the world.

Primary in my efforts was the need to curtail desire. If the body wasn't given to flights of fancy, then the soul would be ready for the moment of salvation. These bursts of energy that originated from our own concupiscence were the very thing that could derail a truly good spiritual life. I had seen others give in to the ways of the flesh. I was not going to go down that same road.

I had watched starlings harass smaller birds. They were the demons who disrupted the serenity of the young robin's quest. In my own life, I recognized similar disruptions. The starlings were moved by their own zeal. Nothing could impede them from chasing down their prey. Was I just as vulnerable? What was the order of the world? I started to wonder if I was not meant for heaven. I should have known that I was damned from the start. I tried to take my teachers' lessons in stride.

The main impulse behind the teachings of the Church was to get us to strive harder to combat our evil nature. We could not do that on our own. Prayer was the first step. But we needed to turn our lives around. Finally, we depended on grace. If we failed to receive the grace that we needed, then no effort on our own part would be successful. I needed to pierce the mystery.

What helped explain things was the very nature of our physical being. It was excessive in its character. The more that we gratified our appetites, the more that they needed to achieve satisfaction. So we were always susceptible of letting our lives get out of control. Faith was the only thing that could slow this process. But that was not enough. We needed to devote all our time to breaking down our desires so that they did not overcome us. We needed to be constantly working. My head was spinning around as I tried to figure out the puzzle.

I needed to step back from the craziness. But my retreat only made me more susceptible to the wages of sin. But if I got too deep in the world, my desires would take over. I couldn't find the balance that I needed. Everything was getting too explosive. I felt that I was going to go up in the blast. That was what sapped all my energy. I pushed further and further out there. But

it strained my resources. So I collapsed under all that weight. I needed to see things more clearly. But the light seemed so faint.

Why should I waste my time in earthly pursuits when I had a quick pass to heaven? Things were already going well. I would be crazy to mess up at this point. If I withdrew myself from the world now, there would be no chance of things getting worse. On the other hand, it would only be too simple to get myself in a fix. Then I'd be looking at the kind of situation that my mother faced everyday. The world would only drive me deeper in the ground, and I would have no hope of getting out. The promise of heaven would be outside of my grasp.

On the earth, my nature remained hidden to me. Sheer will could not reveal the spiritual plan that lay in store for me. I needed to discover the opening that would allow me to see a bridge to the other side. There, I could find out what I needed to do. As long as I could keep my wits about me, I would not be afraid of such an opportunity. I needed to be ready for my time. I did what I could to loosen the doors of perception. But there were so many distractions that I feared that I would never to reach the ultimate revelation. I stumbled around helplessly. All the while, I knew that I could find my way.

At this point in my young life, it was already clear what was the correct path for my future. If I got lost in the fray, then it would be too easy to succumb to temptation. I wasn't meant to indulge the pleasure of the body. I felt guilty enough eating dessert. Anything more than that, and my soul would perish forever. I needed to restrain my appetites at any cost. It was only natural to avoid the near occasions of sin. Over the centuries, the great plagues had been the punishment for those who enjoyed the pleasures of the flesh. I needed to learn the obvious lesson. There were enough vermin hanging around the barn. Fortunately, our archangel of a cat, Michael, could keep things on the up and up. I needed to do the same to protect my holy soul.

If I put myself on a righteous path. I could turn myself around before it was too late. I was already close enough to a speedy rescue. I simply needed to heed the calling. I knew that it would be tough. But I had enough will to overcome any obstacle. What I couldn't do on my own, I could employ my belief to take me to the next stage. I had the power within myself to get things going. Then I could tap into a superior realm to sustain my ascendance. I knew how risky things were. If I failed, I would be completely vulnerable.

I didn't want to lose my opportunity while it was right there before me. I was not the first to have faced this dilemma, and the saints knew what had to be done. They passed up the earthly rewards for a more certain blessing from on high. I was no different. I didn't see myself as a saint. But I was fortunate to have learned from their example. I needed to put my understanding into practice.

There was no time to wait. If I gave in now, then my life would continue down the rocky road to hell. I needed to turn things around. I needed to commit myself to the straight and narrow. All that I had to do was deny myself, and I would be set.

I understood the tradeoff. I would consent to spend my time in a cell in exchange for a promise that I would be fast tracked to heaven. It was tantamount to being sentenced to prison. But how different would my existence be from the dread that I was already dealing with. I would no longer have to watch others fall victim to their own emotions. As it was, I had to circumscribe my space in an upstairs bedroom. I would be trading all this for a room of my own

even if it was meager. Perhaps, there were no windows so I would have no idea what I was missing. After a while, I would feel nurtured by my spiritual connection. There would be no more distractions. Each day would bring me closer and closer to my eventual goal. As I progressed, I could derive immense satisfaction from my success. I would no longer have to regret what I should have said or could have done.

It was a mystery how I could be punished for something that I did not do. This was the foundation of the sacred covenant. It was all about the mischief going on in the attic. If we were supposed to approach the Lord as little children, then our preparation needed to be more extreme than any penitent. It would never be enough to confess to our past misdeeds. That would only tide us over until the next occasion of sin. We needed to dig deeper into the heart of our being and rip up the very foundation where evil made its roots. I had hardly had time to enter into a deal with devil. But already the rot had corrupted my soul. I was somewhat at wit's end to consider what ill gotten gains had been my reward, but my hands had been idle enough to allow for some roguishness. I was like a wild Philly who needed taming for the track. I needed to accept a narrow rule to discipline my rebelliousness.

Perhaps my desire to escape the confines of this place was my greatest offense. Whatever I had done wrong, I would have to confess. I had undergone all the various poses of self-cleansing. I was willing to kneel on cold stone until I could no longer hold myself erect. Or I would fast until I would double over with the pangs of hunger. More than any physical submission, I needed to learn how to hold the soul open to the most intense scrutiny. There were a million ways that I would try to avoid final judgement.

If I got mad at my brothers and sisters, or I showed impatience with my mother, that was only the tip of the iceberg. Beneath the surface, I demonstrated an ill will. And that was even more grievous than any actual offense that I committed. It would be much more difficult to get to the source of my wayward nature. That was the intent of my religious upbringing. The spotlight shined ever so brightly in an effort to discover every aspect of my deviance. My churlish disdain needed to be permanently extirpated from the soul. My pride only hastened my fall. But it was too difficult to let go. I did not want to release the will from its self-admiration. This was a difficult route to travel. My vanity ran deep. Since I was not attracted by the chimeras of the physical world, it was not easy to admit how attached how I was to a stubborn certainty originating in the body. I didn't spend my time primping myself in front of a mirror. I wanted to look presentable. But I was hardly the glamor girl. That admission was not sufficient. This was hardly about a world of flattery. Worse, my intelligence offered a pretext for my depravity. I made too much of my own insights. I needed to yield more to the teachings of the Church. I could not rely on my own cleverness to guide me to the pearly gates.

I did what I could to feign a naive simplicity. This was the perfect excuse. I was only a child who had fallen under the influence of others. I needed to explore my lost innocence. More than ever, this was a question of my origins. I could trace my existence to sin, a sin that was original in its very nature. Even a retelling of the tale seemed to make light of this most inauspicious beginning. It was not simply a lapse that had caused Adam to consume the apple. He challenged the order of heaven. Wasn't that enough to condemn him forever. How could such pride ever allow forgiveness?

To make this into some kind of logical puzzle was the very stuff that had condemned

Adam in the first place. The solution would not come by reasoning through the problem. That would only serve to complement the problem-solver. But this was not about rewarding ingenuity. I had taken my common sense to the limits of its usefulness. That might have been a blessing in itself. But if I really held to my superiority in this regard, I was looking askance at the glory of heaven. I needed to surrender my reason to a power greater than myself. I felt intimidated by this requirement. How else could I make myself available to true salvation. I could not simply wish myself into heaven.

I started to recognize how easily we could become submerged in the temptations of the world. Once we were completely out to sea, there would be no trace of our former life so there we would be unable resist. At the church social, I had stood back and watched everyone frolic. I was still anchored so I was not tossed back and forth by the currents of desire. But for the others, they were all long gone. They no longer had any reference point to their own self-control. Their excitement only led to more excitement. In the midst of such joy, pleasure became their only concern.

I understood the lure. I was offered simple rewards that would only lead to more and more commitment to the physical world. I wouldn't be able to catch myself. I could feel myself falling. No one was there to help me. I picked myself up by my own accord. And I promised myself that I wouldn't fall again.

I could sense how young people tried to create this world in and of itself. They sought to escape the watchful eye of adult supervision. More than that, they were doing what they could to suppress their own conscience. It was ironic that such behavior only prepared them to assume the roles of their parents. They pretended that they were escaping. But they were doing nothing of the sort.

I wanted to get out of here once and for all. I couldn't imagine the burden of the heart that would drag me back to this life. I had seen it time and time again. We weren't like the barn animals. We didn't have to remain in the same habitat. I took the opportunity for what it was. But it would be difficult with all the obstacles in our way. Everything tried to bring us back to the same lifestyle. I just wanted to get out once and for all.

If I had to remain lost in childhood, I was willing to accept that fate. My brothers had done what they could to protect me. I wasn't going to get forced by some guy to follow his direction. So the boys just eyed me and pretended to themselves that they could win my heart.

The girls seemed to mock me for my arrogance. I didn't want to give in to the imperfections of desire. I wouldn't allow myself to moon over some guy. That was what movies were for. They helped us externalize our desire so it would not overcome us. And even the movies contributed to our romantic inclinations. That simply made us more vulnerable. But I liked the magic of the silver screen. This was one indication that I was not cut out for the contemplative life. I wanted to follow the lively music.

In the meditative silence of the church, I could smell the burning wax of the candles. This reminded me of the solemnity of the quest. It was a real contrast to the sparkling majesty of sweet perfumes. I needed to avoid getting caught up in such pursuits. That was why the incense burned so bright on days of prayer. The incense helped us purge our attraction for more delicate smells.

I had trained my senses to find delight in utter simplicity. I was feasting on the rocks that dotted the countryside. This was the first step in the total transformation of my being. We had not been made to enter the kingdom of heaven. Our basic instincts made us servants to the ways of the world. We needed to break down these desires so that we could discover our higher nature. Others may have found me aloof as I went about the business of enriching myself spiritually. Did I really have any choice? If I became too dragged down by material pleasures, I would never reach my promised reward. The earth could never sufficiently provide for my needs. My questions ran much deeper. For that reason, I was betting everything on my spiritual achievement. At times, it seemed as if I didn't have much. But I made something out of this scarcity. I had the fortitude to persevere.

Even as I made a pact for my eventual religious liberation, I realized the temporary nature of my solution. I would lie perfectly still on the bed and pray for some kind of revelation to honor all my wonder. I wasn't in pain. But I felt a spiritual disquiet. I believed that my recognition gave me special access to the secrets of the universe.

I had spent years in darkness with the hopes that I would find a sign of my imminent salvation. If sin made its way in the activities of everyday, I believed the only way to resist its influence was to remain perfectly still. I did what I could not to stir the waters. These moments of rest were what I needed to get away from all the deleterious effects of the daytime. It wasn't so much that I was meditating on my state. Instead, I was trying to shore up my defenses. That may have explained my problem. I was so preoccupied with getting rid of the demons that I didn't understand what it took to create a positive face for my faith. I was constantly teetering at the edge of hell because I was not making the necessary steps towards heaven. It wasn't enough to have a clean soul. I needed to do good things for other people.

I really made an effort to help. But we were poor so it wasn't as if I could create some kind of magic for the rest of the world. I could feel my resistance crumbling. All this self-doubt only set me up to be like everyone else. This was how it started. As my doubts became greater, I could feel my confidence slipping. I didn't want to surrender. I needed to maintain my sanctity. Unfortunately, I didn't have the skills to be any better at this. When I reached the highest level of devotion, I would just fall asleep. How did the saints get any closer to the Lord? What were the words that I was missing? I had done enough to deserve a miracle. Perhaps a visitation from an angel would be trick. It would confirm that I was doing the right thing. And it would give me the strength that I needed to carry on.

I couldn't imagine myself going from house to house distributing food. We had just enough for ourselves. And my smiling face wasn't going to be sufficient to get me into heaven. I knew all too well that the road to hell was paved with good intentions. And I was getting lost on the gravel roads around here.

I was convinced that no one else knew what it really took to reach heaven. The priests were too busy encouraging people with their families. And my teachers all seemed frustrated in their pursuit. If I was going to be successful, my search needed to reflect the true joy of his word. I was getting stuck in these barren landscapes. Where could I find the excitement that I needed to carry me to the next level? My total dedication to the spiritual realm had guided me this far. I couldn't turn my back on my calling. It would be a mistake to give too much of myself to the world.

Each day, I would bring a special vigor to my chores. I was too exposed out here. I needed to retreat as quickly as possible. I had been so efficient in my work that I could find a little comfort in my rest. I used the calm for my benefit. This was difficult since there was so many of us in the house. And they always had questions to ask me. I did my best to play along. But I had a higher purpose. I needed to get back to the serious tasks. I wasn't short with anyone. I simply made myself clear, then I found a place that I could be by myself. I even used books to create that necessary wall between me and the rest of the world. That way, there was no interference in my way.

I felt as if I was getting stronger and stronger. And I had developed new techniques to deal with all the obstacles to my salvation. I wasn't supposed to be so lucky. No one was. But that didn't stop me from trying. I was inching along. I was existing on a microscopic level. And I found a unique success by making myself so small.

Preparing for communion was like getting ready for an operation. We weren't supposed to consume any food after midnight. This meant that we were rushed off to Mass hungry. This was supposed to be the state that the Lord needed to come into our bodies. Food was another form of corruption. Our stomachs needed to be empty for the moment that the communion wafer entered our system. This was a very severe requirement. Many mornings, I needed food to give me strength. I was sent to church weak.

I would sit in my seat and pretend that I was about to be served a meal. I had abstained from eating for the specified period. I felt worthy of receiving the wafer. But I imagined that a Sunday dinner was about to be brought to me. Perhaps, it was a most severe form of sacrilege to contemplate such a reward. But in the story of the loaves and the fishes, the crowd's needs were met. I was willing to accept the terms of this agreement. Was my hunger not severe enough? Of course, I had eaten the day before. So that meant that I would have to wait for a real meal.

When the communion wafer touched my tongue, I believed that it offered more sustenance than it did. Here was the bread of life. It was meant to satisfy all my needs, physical and spiritual. Indeed, I imagined that I was feasting on a full chicken dinner. And I asked for an extra helping of mashed potatoes just so that I would be sure that I had enough.

The priest gave me a strange look. He looked in my face and wondered if I was all right. Did he know what I was thinking? He wasn't going to cast me out because of my unholy thoughts. I'm sure that he thought the same thing. Of course, he had the wine to sustain an illusion of his own. Maybe, his head was a little dizzy from the after effects.

I worked my way back to my seat. I had participated in the ritual. The feeling wore off quickly. And I was again reminded of my hunger. I had been fooled by the taste. This only made it worse. The wafer made my stomach twist and turn in the hopes of a real meal. I would have to wait until we got back home. And Mass was still not complete.

I wanted the priest to speed it up. He could just mumble the rest of the Latin. Then we could live out the days of our youth unencumbered. I no longer thought about my inherent guilt. I had put those thoughts behind me. I wanted to eat. I didn't want to fall down from exhaustion. I looked around. No one else felt the same. How could they do it? I was with a congregation of camels. They were all venturing in the desert together.

By the time we made it home, I wanted someone to carry me in. Everyone else was so jolly. I felt morose. My hunger had taken over. I wasn't mulling over any question of faith. My

body was ready to give out. So I could hardly give the Lord the devotion that he deserved. I was supposed to help get breakfast ready.

“Are you doing OK?” my mother asked.

If I was, I would have been up and helping. I simply shook my head. I stayed in my trance until food was put before me. I gobbled it up. Everyone thought that it was a little weird that I didn’t hang around after the meal. I just went upstairs and collapsed on the bed.

I wondered if this was the ultimate sign of my lack of worthiness for heaven. I was too immersed in the physical world. And my hunger was a sign that no spiritual communion would ever satisfy my longing. I didn’t want to be like everyone else. I had been promised a quick path to salvation. Now I was getting stuck on the basics.

I wanted to work my way through the conundrum. As a child, I felt able to deal with all the challenges of faith. Adulthood seemed more daunting. I would never be able to solve this great problem. It wasn’t as if I thought about food all the time. Maybe that was my downfall. I was too overwhelmed by the flavors of the world.

It wasn’t long before things became much worse. I knew what I had to do to attain heaven. And I was using all my strength to reach that point. But my own power had become an obstacle to my success. It only fed my pride. I needed to make myself even thinner if I was going to pass through that proverbial head of the needle. Why was I carrying so much baggage? I could see that I was becoming pale and wan. So I kept on with my regimen. I was ultimately hurting myself. But I couldn’t see this. I thought that I was getting closer to salvation.

If I stopped now, then I would have to settle for a shadowy existence like everyone else. I couldn’t do this. I was so close to some kind of resolution. If I had stripped myself down to nothing, then I was truly prepared for saintly life. It didn’t matter that I could barely remain conscious. This was how I was supposed to be if I was going to make it to heaven.

One day at Church, I felt that my head was really spinning. I stood up momentarily, then I came right down. I went out like a light. I hadn’t hit my head. My blood became thinner. I could hardly breathe. I had fainted.

When I came to, I was outside. Danny had carried me to the car. I was lying down.

“What happened?”

“You fainted.”

I had created quite a scene. Everyone was gathered around to see if I was OK. I smiled to reassure everyone.

I wanted to believe that this was the sign that I was looking for. I had gotten so close to heaven that the pressure took me over. I had been cast back at the last moment. From this point on, I needed to follow my lessons even more closely.

“You should eat before you come to church.”

“Danny, then I can’t receive communion.”

“You can put off communion for once. Maybe, you have the flu.”

“I’m OK. I’ve just been praying and fasting.”

“You’re as thin as a chicken. You need to eat.”

“I don’t want to do the wrong thing.”

“You were meant to have a life. Don’t be afraid to live it.”

Danny was so adamant in offering me his advice. But I wasn’t ready yet to give up on my

dream. I wasn't as if he had discovered complete happiness. He was simply able to reconcile the opposition better. I wasn't that good at coasting above the wave. I just got doused by it.

My mother's comments were critical: "What do you expect: you eat like a bird? You don't act as if you're one of us." I tried to keep out of her way. Nothing would be good enough for her. She was trying to preempt any rebellion on my part.

She was my mother, and I didn't want to bear her any ill will. But she was trying to cut me deep. She simply thought of herself as being honest. She was worried about my health. She just thought that she had the remedy. At dinner, she realized that she may have been too severe.

"Go on, child. Have some more potatoes. They'll toughen you up."

She had a good heart, but I felt more like poor Gretel being fattened up for the oven. After dinner, I was freed from helping with the clean up.

"You've got to get in bed early."

No one at all was upstairs. This was a special bonus for me. For a while, I could pretend that I was the baby. If that was how I was being treated, I could put away all the great theological issues. I was feeling better. After a good night sleep, things would be fine. I let go of all the great unsolved questions of my life.

If I had dreamed, I couldn't remember any of them. It was Monday morning so I was back to school. The year was coming to a close. This was the worst part. We all wanted to be out. But there were all these tests to end the year. I simply applied myself and forgot about the crisis.

The next Sunday, I ate before church. There would be no communion. I still became a little faint. I got up and went outside. The air invigorated me. And I waited for everyone else.

"You're surviving," Danny said.

"The jury is still out," I told him.

"At least, I didn't have to carry you out this time."

I wondered if this was all that it took to make things better. I didn't want to admit to defeat so easily. I wasn't going to be excluded from the sacrament. What kind of statement would that be making about my immortal soul? There were countless stories of rivals to the Church hierarchy who had been refused communion. I felt like one of these exiles. I had been banished from my religious heritage.

There were cases where they were not so strict about the rules of fasting before communion. Health reasons precluded the application of such rigid doctrine. I might be able to get one of these dispensations. But I didn't want to be turned into some freak of nature. I had a fainting spell. What was the big deal.

For the next week, the battle inside me reminded me of one of the great debates over Church teaching. I could forever abandon my desire to participate in the service. On this view, I was offering a new way of interpreting my faith. I was breaking away from the Church for good.

Or I could again risk the ill effects to my health. I would cling to my beliefs, but there would be a cost. How could I do otherwise? I was meant to be a soldier for the cause. Others had accepted a far greater burden.

I hated the fact that my body would not support my desire. Martyrs faced such tribulations due to the actions of others. My enemy came from within. Any way that I looked at it, I was one who was rejected by the Church. I needed to find a way to make it back in the fold.

But there were such incredible risks to my person.

Why was communion so necessary? I already had my own means to reach the summit of my belief. I didn't even need a priest. I recognized how easily I was being won over to one of the greatest heresies. I could see the faults of my Church. But I did not want to overthrow its basic teaching. I could not survive on my own. I needed someone to mediate my contact with the high and mighty.

I needed to take communion. There were no two ways about it. I went to church so that I could be part of the ritual. Other denominations did not adhere as strictly to doctrine. I needed to maintain this link. I was ready to accept the sacrament. I needed to do what was necessary to prepare myself.

I had progressed too far to turn back now. I may not have had the fortitude of a saint. But I wanted to remain a believer. This realization was based on an acceptance of the sacraments. Without communion, I might as well keep my commitment on a mental level. Such was the basic teaching of the church. The material form of the bread provided a link to the spiritual presence of the Lord. Without such a direct link, there was no Church. Salvation was not a mental thing. It required the spiritual inherence in the body. Everything was held together by the sacrament. The signs opened the way to a real connection of the spirit. Thus the body was offered a spiritual invitation that could be renewed unto perpetuity.

I had the perfect opportunity. I wanted to chance it again. I ate a late night snack to tide me over until morning. When I woke, I felt none of the sluggishness of the previous times. I made it through mass with none of the strangeness as before. When it came time for communion, I again took it on my tongue as before. I didn't pretend that I was feasting on a meal. I simply swallowed the wafer. I tried to conjure up a mystical feeling to accompany what was going on. I was struck by the very materiality of the experience. There was no kind of opening to any kind of supernatural transcendence. Did I have to be on the edge of my cognitive awareness to allow access to this other world. I felt sad that I had been forced to compromise the intensity of what was happening. On the other hand, I was truly afraid of the sense of losing control. There was nothing charming about fainting. And I didn't want to repeat the experience simply so that I would gain special insight into the cosmos. At those desperate moments I really felt as if I was dying. I didn't want to have to die to be reborn. So I really believed these incidents were a thing of the past.

Maybe I had grown over-confident. Indeed, it seemed as if my technique to ward off the spells had been successful. There were some people who suffered more severe psychic disturbances. These neurological disorders made it difficult to function. In an effort to impress their lives with more consistency, they may have created these scenarios which put them on the verge of deeper revelation. But this belief was little consolation for the fantastic instability that these individuals endured.

I had no such illusions. But it was hard to let go of my vocation. I had trained my body to endure the most intense deprivation just so that I could feel closer to salvation. My fainting spells had been the ultimate expression of this understanding. I felt afraid to be better. This meant that I would no longer have a direct connection to the Lord. I would be like everyone else. We all struggled for the word. But we lived among the obscurity.

I tried to bring greater clarity to my existence. Who did I think that I was? Mere sorrow was not enough to transform a run-of-the-mill sinner into a saint. There needed to be even more extraordinary conditions to grant the saint her access. I felt that I was on the way to such an understanding. My body was being stripped of its allegiance to the world. It was becoming attuned to revelation.

Ultimately, I believed my mother was trying to impede my progress towards spiritual enlightenment. My body was not my greatest obstacle. It was her beliefs. I had learned to overcome this interference.

I didn't listen to her advice. I felt more and more inspired by the calling. Despite my new plan for communion, my fundamental weakness remained. This was the struggle for my soul. I wouldn't give in. Even though the body was nourished, the soul remained under siege. For this reason, I needed to fight back even more. Overwhelmed, I felt faint. I was losing myself. I passed out.

There was no easy solution to my dilemma. I was more careful about my diet. I stopped trying to challenge myself with such incredible tasks. And I gave up in the attempt to strip my spiritual being down to its rawest form. I maintained my composure.

There were times when my circulation seemed weak. The world was becoming too overwhelming for me. I wasn't getting enough blood to my brain. I would feel dizzy. Then I would just pass out. After that, my strength seemed to return. I couldn't predict why it would happen. The strain seemed most intense when I was in church. And I had thought that it was related to whether I had eaten the night before. That may have been a factor. But it still didn't explain things. My bouts were so intermittent that I couldn't discover any pattern. The same thing might happen if I was standing for too long. But the older that I became the more infrequent were the episodes. So I told myself that there was nothing chronic going on.

I had seen this exquisite glimpse of the other side. I had made me intoxicated. I really believed that I was on the verge of crossing over. I held myself suspended in a state between these two worlds. Some people might call these growing pains. But I liked to think of the effects as something that I created on my own. My suffering was a result of my need to penetrate the barrier that separated us from spiritual transcendence. But my efforts only made me more tied down to earth.

After my struggle, I felt as if I was making deals with the devil to get what I wanted. I tried to lead a charmed existence. And I felt inspired by my faith. But I was too anchored in the real world. So I needed to do what I could to get by. I never cheated myself. I just cut corners. I was convinced that matter had these rounded edges, and I couldn't let myself become entangled on its imperfections.

As much as I felt my descent into the physical, I was still fascinated by the spiritual. I learned that I would have to accept this great divide. There was the world of my physical existence. Try as I might, I could not escape its confines. Then there was the spiritual realm. Only there did I feel totally myself. And I could only attain this way of being through the deterioration of the physical domain. I risked my physical existence if I drifted too close to the spiritual. So both modes of being relied on maintaining my physical body. But that made me feel no more comfortable about my life. No matter what I did, I felt totally out of place in what everyone called the real world. And I recognized more than ever how I would have to

accommodate myself to a shared reality. I would gradually lose touch with my spiritual being. At the same time, my health would never allow me to forget my true nature. So there would always be some trace of my former life. From this point on, I knew that I would have to battle just to stay alive. In this way I discovered a real strength in myself that I cherished. Despite the enormous appeals of the spiritual, I did my utmost to sustain my physical existence. In the final account, that power offered me the greatest insight about my otherworldly being. After all I had to admit that I was no mystic.

I sat in the back of the church, and I contemplated the oneness of spirit. I was a guest in this world. Occasionally, the lights would flash more intensely than before. Then I would get drawn back to the concerns of the world. But I no longer feel as if I was damned. My spiritual quest had put such pressures on me. If I failed and succumbed to the material world, I believed that I would indeed become the devil's child. Now, I no longer had to abide with such a strict order. So I became accustomed to the ways of the world. If I needed to, there was still a place where I could withdraw.

I received communion without any complications. After church, I didn't feel as if I needed to take a rest. I was among the living. I wanted to celebrate my victory. Still, I had my doubts. And my circulation continued to be weak on occasion. I needed to dig deeper in myself to discover my own power to resist. I had enough of a groundwork to get me started. At the same time, I was young. I didn't have to figure out the mysteries of the world.

Outside the church, kids were jumping up and down and yelling. They reveled in their sense of liberty. It was like the cry of the baby who was learning how to breathe on her own. I wanted to scream out too. I held my cry inside. But I started running. It felt so good to feel the oxygen move through my system. I was truly alive. I didn't feel any fatigue.

As we got ready to go, I looked back at the church. I had made an agreement to with myself. I was no longer a daughter of darkness.