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AN
UNQUENCHABLE
THIRST



A MEMOIR

MARY JOHNSON

"A wonderful achievement . . . Johnson opens the window on a horizon of spiritual questions [and] takes an unflinching look inside her own heart." —The Christian Science Monitor

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THIRST



FOLLOWING MOTHER TERESA
IN SEARCH OF LOVE, SERVICE,
AND AN AUTHENTIC LIFE



MARY JOHNSON

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I chose these stories from many. So that the reader may enter more seamlessly into my experience, I've reconstructed conversations; dialogue is not meant as a direct quotation. No one who appears in these pages expected that I would one day recount conversations and events that they assumed would remain private. Out of respect for them, I've sometimes disguised names and identities. Missionaries of Charity who in these pages held elected or appointed office appear under their real names, as do others who played largely public roles.

*All people hunger for love,
whether they are Christian or Muslim, Hindu or atheist.*

–MOTHER TERESA OF CALCUTTA

I came that they may have life, and have it to the full.

–JESUS OF NAZARETH

INTRODUCTION

SUMMER 2007

I was in New York on my way to meet a literary agent when Mother Teresa's stubborn brown eyes stopped me at a newsstand on West Twenty-third Street. I handed five dollars to the guy in the kiosk. If I'd still believed in signs, this would have been a big one.

Mother stared out from the cover of *Time* magazine with nearly the identical expression her face had borne the last time we'd spoken, a little over ten years earlier. I saw the disappointment in her eyes. Mother would have no more approved of the meeting I was about to have than she would have approved of the cover of that magazine, which promised to reveal her "Secret Life." Mother's secrets weren't the type normally associated with magazine covers—no adulterous affairs, no shady financial profiteering. Mother's were secrets of the soul.

Though Mother Teresa was one of the most admired women in the world, she always kept her inner life close. She discouraged questions about her original inspiration or about her prayer life, usually by simply smiling in response. She instructed us to keep quiet, too, especially about events in the convent. When I was handed two sheets of paper to write my first "home letter" as an aspirant in the Missionaries of Charity, the sister in charge issued detailed instructions: "Write an uplifting letter. Don't tell your family of your difficulties, and never mention what happens in the community. Urge your people to pray the rosary every night." My letters home were so boring I was sometimes ashamed.

The fine print on the cover of *Time* read, "Newly published letters reveal a beloved icon's 50-year crisis of faith." Mother Teresa's spiritual crisis was not news to me. Several years earlier, I'd read a report of the "dark night" Mother had described in letters to her spiritual directors. Some sisters had been shocked to imagine that the sweet certainty we'd heard of in Mother's prayers had been the result of stubborn faith, not ecstatic vision. During my days as a sister, nothing had wrapped me more surely in the presence of God than Mother's steady voice intoning, "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" as she traced the cross over her sari.

Yet I hadn't been too surprised to learn that Mother sometimes wondered where God was, even whether God was out there at all. Desolation in prayer was not uncommon, especially when one lived and served among the desperately poor, slept less than five hours a night, as Mother did, and deliberately deprived oneself of human intimacy as we all did, or were supposed to do. Mother's feelings of desolation distressed her all the more because they contrasted so dramatically with the consolation she'd known when she heard Jesus ask her to found a community of sisters to care for the poorest of the poor. Mother eventually came to see the feelings of abandonment as a gift, a way of sharing Jesus' passion. She often referred to herself as "the spouse of Jesus Crucified" and to suffering as "the kiss of Jesus."

On my way to the literary agency that day, I crossed West Twenty-fifth Street and glanced again at the magazine in my hand. As I looked at Mother's frown, I remembered another *Time* cover, some thirty years earlier.

I had first met Mother on the cover of *Time* in 1975, an image that rendered Mother in watercolor under the headline "Living Saints." When I'd spotted the magazine in my southeast Texas high school library, I'd dropped into a chair to read it, skipping French class drawn by the magnetic call of the nun's soulful eyes. I read of the desperate needs of the poor dying on the streets, of babies abandoned in dustbins. The photo that impressed me most showed a young Indian nun peacefully bent over a man whose legs, nowhere thicker than a baseball bat, were bound in rags. The man's ribs formed prominent ridges on his bare chest while his eyes, sunk deep in their sockets, were riveted on the face of the nun cutting her nails. I felt as if the world had suddenly opened itself and revealed my place in it. Since my preparation for First Communion, I'd known that loving others was life's most important calling. That conviction had grown through the years as I'd experienced love's power, and the pain of its lack, for myself. There in the library, with a seventeen-year-old's clarity, I knew that I was meant to follow this nun in Calcutta who loved those most in need of it.

That week I wrote my first letter to her, addressing it simply *Mother Teresa, Missionaries of Charity, Calcutta, India*, begging her to take me as one of her own sisters. Eighteen months later, in a convent in the South Bronx, over my parents' objections, Mother pinned a crucifix to my blouse, saying, "Receive the symbol of your Crucified Spouse. Carry His light and His love into the homes of the poor everywhere you go." I did just that for twenty years.

I tucked the latest issue of *Time* under my arm and climbed the agency's front steps. I uttered no prayer. Through years of wrestling with my own dark nights, I'd replaced my marriage to God with a different sort of integrity. I reached to ring the bell, ready to tell my secrets to the agent and to anyone else who would listen. I would have told them to Mother if I could. Mother Teresa would have called my secrets blasphemy, but I call them freedom. I even call them love.

DAY ONE

SUMMER 1977

SOUTH BRONX, NEW YORK CITY

The cardboard box on the rack above my bus seat held what was left of my possessions. In a few hours they would belong to God, and so would I.

I watched the street outside, mesmerized as cars wove through eight lanes of traffic. On a billboard, an electric blonde advertised cigarettes, then suddenly morphed into a giant banana flaunting a reed skirt and long, dark eyelashes.

“You been to the city before?” A man with a black T-shirt waved his hands, brushing my shoulder with his too-broad gesture. He stared, waiting for an answer.

“Yes, I was here in January.”

“Really? You look like you never seen a city before. Where’re you from?”

I shifted in the seat. Was it supposed to be this personal between passengers on buses in New York?

“Texas.”

“Texas?” The man was loud. Other people in the bus turned their heads to look. “What’s a kid from Texas doing in New York?”

I wasn’t a kid. I was nineteen and I’d just finished a year in the honors program at the University of Texas, with good grades. I didn’t see why I should explain to a loud man on a bus that I was in New York because the only thing I’d been thinking of for the past year and a half had been coming to this city to give myself to God. But not answering would have been rude.

“I came to see some sisters.”

“Oh, you got relatives here.” He seemed satisfied, but his conclusion wasn’t accurate.

“Not those kind of sisters. Catholic sisters. Nuns.”

“You’re coming to New York City to see nuns?”

“To become a nun.”

He drew in a whistle as his eyes traveled my body, perhaps looking for some sort of deformity, or maybe, if he was Catholic, a halo. I possessed neither. I didn’t expect him to understand. Even my family didn’t understand.

The man grew quiet, and I grew less tense. Soon I didn’t see the buildings or the billboard anymore. I saw Mom, Dad, my five sisters, and my brother all lined up on the tarmac the morning after, waving their eldest off. Four-year-old Heather’s hand had never stopped waving—only she seemed to understand the joy of my adventure. Kathy, just thirteen months younger than I, had cried most of the night. She’d said, as she had for weeks, “Mary, you’re wasting your life.” I’d told her that I’d chosen the best life possible, a life of love, but that morning she’d refused even to look at me. Mom waved but didn’t smile. She’d been so insistent that

at least finish college. I'd explained that when God calls, you don't put Him on hold, but she didn't get that, either.

It had been even worse when Dad had taken me to the airport in January for the preliminary week the sisters called "come and see." The plane was delayed, and while we were waiting, he put his hand on my knee and looked into my eyes, then at my suitcase, the floor, then me again, without saying anything. When tears began to puddle in his eyes, he left without a word or a glance back.

The bus jerked to a halt at Grand Central Terminal. I reached for the rack above, but the man in the black T-shirt saw me and lifted the box before I could. "Best of luck, kid," he said as he placed the box in my hands, then added under his breath, "Pray for me, okay?"

I nodded and smiled, edging my way along the aisle. I told myself to be more careful about judging people in the future. As I stepped off the bus, a wave of heat slapped me—not the familiar heat heavy with refinery fumes and Gulf Coast humidity, but an undulating heat of asphalt, steel, and bodies. I looked for the man in the T-shirt, but he was gone. All I saw were swarms of people—hurrying, determined people who all seemed to know where they were going.

I knew where I was going, too. I'd taken a taxi in January, though the first three cabs I'd stop had refused to venture into the South Bronx. This time the sisters had sent directions and I'd memorized them: shuttle bus to Grand Central, the #5 subway, a five-block walk. *God, I prayed, lead me through this scurrying city. Lead me to You.*

I walked down steps that smelled of urine. On the platform, I flinched a little as trains rushed past, then marveled at their jackets of neon graffiti. I clutched the strings on my box. I'd heard stories of men with knives on subways, and lately the evening news had dwelt on the "Son of Sam." The serial killer, who police said believed he was possessed by the devil, had shot women with long dark hair. My hair was sort of dark but short. According to Walter Cronkite, women in New York had bought out the city's entire stock of blond wigs and were on the verge of panic. *God, take care of me. I'm working for You now.*

When the #5 pulled up, I found a seat and cradled my box. A suitcase would have been easier, but the sisters had said they didn't use them, or purses, either. *I'm going to live free,* I told myself, *like the lilies of the field and the birds of the air.*

The heat and the crowds and the news stories had made my stomach queasy. I checked my pocket for the envelope I'd safety-pinned there—my passport and money were safe. I'd collected the \$700 from my summer job as a technical writer, my savings, and money from selling my French touring bike and electric typewriter. The sisters had insisted on money for airfare to return me home if things didn't work out, or to send me to Rome if they did.

My friends had thrown a "penguin party" for me a week earlier, a beach party—"black and white dress required in honor of Mary's new wardrobe." These public school classmates of mine didn't even know my nuns wore white saris trimmed in blue, yet they squatted around the campfire debating the odds of my perseverance. Some claimed the girl who took on the school board in editorials was constitutionally incapable of a vow of obedience, that a star of the debate team, known for humiliating her opponents, wouldn't last ten minutes in a convent. Others countered that I was the kind of person who, once she decides something, will see it through, even if it means taking the layouts of the school newspaper home with her, working on them all night, strapping them to her bicycle the next morning, and

delivering them personally to the printer to avoid missing a deadline. They said once I put the habit on, I'd die in it.

I enjoyed confounding their expectations. These were the people who had voted me Most Likely to Succeed. I wondered if they knew how little that title meant to me. That gathering on the beach was only the second party I'd been to since moving from Michigan when I was twelve. My first act at my new junior high had been to speak to a group of kids in a corner of the gym. Seconds later a spitball smacked my head and I heard—as did everyone else—a boom on the bleachers shouting, “Nigger lover.” No one, not the five black kids at school nor the seven hundred white kids, accepted any of my approaches for the next three years. When I started earning debate trophies some of my teammates began to tolerate my presence, and Kathy and Kelley and Monica seemed to enjoy working on the newspaper with me, but boys continued to spit on me on the bus, where I was the only rider over sixteen. My classmates all had cars or hitched rides with friends. The penguin party was a nice gesture, probably prompted by their curiosity about my choices, but I doubted these acquaintances understood my outsider's pride in values beyond the mainstream. They didn't know the secret thrill I felt on the streets of Austin when, watching couples walk hand in hand, I savored my relationship with the Creator of the Universe, who shared my every moment, awake or asleep. They didn't know that living the gospel of poverty and love with God constituted real success.

I got off the train at Third Avenue and 149th Street and began the five-block walk from the subway to the sisters' house. Pulsing Spanish lyrics pushed thoughts of home away. A fruit stand hawking mangoes and papayas caught my eye, until I sensed boys in front of an electronics shop eyeing me. I shifted my box nervously from hand to hand. *God, keep me safe*. I prayed.

A train passed overhead. Kids my own age break-danced under the el, their boom boom momentarily overpowered by the train. The smell of hot dogs increased my nausea. I stepped around some broken glass and turned onto East 145th Street. My heart beat a little faster when, midway down the block, I spotted a three-story building behind a high brick wall. Barbed wire coiled at the top, a small sign to the left of the gate: *Missionaries of Charity*. I opened the gate and stood before the door. I swallowed, and hesitated just a moment.

I juggled the box, smoothed my hair, then rang the bell, my hand trembling. Staring at the door, I saw Heather's last wave, Kathy refusing to look.

Dear God, I prayed, please send someone to open the door.

I set the box on the sidewalk—and the door swung open.

A short, dark woman with puffy cheeks, a blue apron over her white sari, smiled at me. “Welcome,” she said. The door clicked as she shut it behind me.

Sister Rochelle took my box and nudged me up a short flight of stairs toward the chapel. “Say hello to Jesus,” she whispered.

I knelt on the rough carpet. A large wooden crucifix hung behind the altar, with two words pasted on the wall next to Jesus' head. When I read them, I felt as though Jesus spoke those words directly to me: *I thirst*.

I'd barely begun my silent prayer when Sister Rochelle said, “Come now. We'll take your things.” She led me upstairs, climbing quickly. I heard chickens clucking. Nuns keeping chickens in the South Bronx—what surer sign of self-sufficiency and disregard of convention could I have asked for?

“This is the refectory for you aspirants,” Sister Rochelle said as we entered a room with a long wooden table, benches on either side. “These are your plates.” She pointed to a bookcase marked with numbers cut from calendars. Above each number sat a large white enamel bowl with a small plate, an enamel teacup, and a saucer. Everything was simple, clean, orderly. Above the shelf a plaque read, *The Aspirancy Motto: He must increase; I must decrease.*

“There are going to be twelve of you,” Sister Rochelle said. “You are number nine. There’d been nine of us at home. Nine was a good number.

Another bookcase stood nearby. “Your Bible goes here. Number nine.”

She took me up another flight of stairs. On the landing, we set my box down in front of a large wooden bookcase with a sheet hanging over its shelves. Sister Rochelle pulled back the sheet to reveal clothes folded more neatly than any I’d ever seen, each little pile above its own number.

“Number nine?” I asked, and she nodded.

The next door led to a room with a slanting ceiling, a linoleum floor, and thirteen cots crowded close, with barely room to walk between them. A bare bulb hung from a black wire, and simple muslin curtains covered the lower halves of the room’s three small windows.

“This is your bed, number nine.” Sister Rochelle smiled again as she patted a thin mattress in the corner. “I hope you brought your sheets,” she said, and I nodded. “The dormitory is a sacred place and no talking is allowed, but your mistress will tell you all that.”

Sister Rochelle headed for the stairs. Over her shoulder, she said, “Now unpack your things and feel at home.” Already halfway down, she added, “The bell will ring soon for adoration.”

I sat for a moment on bed number nine, eager to absorb the quiet. The attractions of the convent were pure, minimalist, essential—life without the additives. Everything about the convent seemed to proclaim: Only God matters.

I was stacking my clothes on shelf number nine, as neatly as I could, when I heard footsteps. A tall woman with straight, shoulder-length brown hair and sparkling green eyes rounded the corner.

“Hey, Mary!” she said, stretching out her hand. “Sister Carmeline told us to expect another aspirant today—I’m so glad it’s you.”

“Louise! Great to see you.” Louise had been in charge of the catechism program at St. Rita Church, just next to the convent, and we’d met in January. She was just a few years older than I—a recent graduate of the University of Virginia—and played the guitar at Mass. Her hand was warm in mine. “What’s an aspirant?”

Louise laughed, throwing her arms up in the air. “I’m developing a new vocabulary. We’re aspirants because we’re aspiring to be sisters, or something like that.”

We walked together to the dormitory, and Louise pulled back the blue and white checkered bedspread on number nine, revealing a homemade mattress, not more than an inch and a half thick, resting on the cot’s iron netting. As we stretched out the bottom sheet, the smell of fabric softener reminded me of home. “You mean you’re joining the sisters, too?” I asked Louise. “I thought you’d decided not to.”

“Yeah, well, I talked to Sister Andrea about it a lot. It’s been great to work in the parish, but I do feel something missing. I want to give God everything, and I guess it’s worth a try.” Louise pushed the tiny pillow into my way, too big pillowcase and fluffed it up as much as she could. “The sisters are excited that we’ll be the first group of aspirants in the U.S. Till now

they've only had a few American vocations, and they've all gone to London for aspirancy."

Suddenly a short woman stepped up so close that I nearly lost my balance. A finger to her lips, small crucifix pinned to her blouse, she shook her head with its closely cropped black hair and whispered with a light Hispanic accent, "The dormitory is a sacred place. We do not speak in the dormitory."

I froze, but Louise shook her head and laughed lightly. "Sister Elvira," she said, "this is Sister Mary. She's just come, and I think we ought to say hello."

Sister Elvira turned on her heel and walked away.

"Don't mind her. She's on her second round of aspirancy and thinks she knows everything. She's helping us become holy, making sure we keep all the Rules."

As Louise spoke, five bells sounded. I pushed the box with my remaining things under the bed and we made our way downstairs for adoration. Outside the chapel door, an Indian nun stood, arms folded across a generous chest. Her dark eyes looked right through me. Louise pulled my arm and whispered, "The mistress."

"You must be Sister Mary." The nun forced a smile, her arms still folded.

"I'm Mary Johnson. I arrived a little while ago." I extended my hand, but she kept her arms against her chest. I let my hand fall limply.

"Welcome. We are having adoration now. Jesus is waiting." She unfolded her arm, revealing a piece of black lace in her hand. "This is for wearing in the chapel," she said, handing the lace to me as she turned and walked through the chapel door.

Louise pushed me in, guiding with her arm around my waist. The chapel had no pews. Sisters and nuns in saris knelt in three neat rows on the left side of the chapel. Louise steered me to the right, where seven young women in skirts and blouses of various colors knelt on the carpet, heads covered in black lace mantillas. I set the mantilla on my head, where it swiftly slid to one side. "We'll get you a bobby pin later," Louise whispered. I hadn't worn a mantilla since my First Communion. The lace on my head felt strange, like I was an old lady in a movie. I knelt on the carpet.

A tall, elegant sister—the superior, Sister Andrea—approached the front of the chapel and genuflected before the small gold tabernacle. In a series of fluid gestures, she rose, knelt, bowed. She removed a golden canister from the tabernacle, fixed her gaze on it, and carried it to the altar. Again she knelt, bowed, rose. She removed the canister's lid and lifted the Eucharist into the monstrance: the Body of Christ in the form of bread, the center of every Missionary of Charity's life, Jesus Himself. Everyone prostrated and I joined in, head to the ground, arms stretched forward, hands flat to the floor in an expression of complete surrender. The mantilla slid off, and I replaced it as gracefully as I could.

The gentle song of the sisters mingled with the street sounds floating in from the open windows: the Grateful Dead, cars backfiring, jump rope jingles, an ice cream truck. I hoped that on the other side of the windows, they could hear our song: *Jesus, my Lord, my God, my all, how can I love Thee as I ought?*

The sisters pulled out rosaries from their saris, the aspirants taking theirs from their pockets. In that moment I panicked. I should have remembered to bring a rosary, but in my family we didn't pray the rosary—I was more accustomed to the Mass and to quiet prayer with the Bible. Louise noticed my confusion and fetched me a string of blue plastic beads from somewhere in the back of the chapel.

As I looked at the Host and repeated the prayers, my knees grew tired, my nausea increased, and my lower back began to ache. I leaned on my heels, and the mantilla slid off again. As I reached for it, I realized I was the only one in the chapel not kneeling. Directly in front of the altar, Sister Elvira knelt as straight as a steel rod. I wasn't sure I liked her. I wanted to get along, to fit in. I struggled back to my knees and prayed for strength, strength not only for my knees but strength to live this new life well, the life I had yearned for, a life of love.

After the final hymn, I followed the young women to our refectory without a word. They lined up on either side of the table, facing a print of Jesus—the one with His flaming heart. To the left, His hand, one of my least favorite images. To the right was a picture of Mother Teresa, with a little homemade plaque: *I will give Saints to Mother Church*. Some of the women smiled and made space for me in line. I felt part of some solemn ritual on a peaceful planet, where everyone but me knew the script. After grace, they all turned to me, singing and clapping their hands: “We welcome, welcome sister, we welcome, welcome sister. We welcome, welcome sister from our he-a-rt.”

I felt my face flush. The sister who had given me the mantilla sat squarely on a stool at the head of the table, her arms crossed over her chest again. Louise nudged me toward her, saying, “Go sit near Sister Carmeline.”

The others filed in on either side. One of the women placed a large aluminum dish—almost a handleless bucket—in front of Sister Carmeline.

“How was your journey?” Sister Carmeline asked with a lilting Indian accent as she ladled soup into her enamel bowl. Carrots and potatoes swam in the red broth; bloated tortilla chips and something—it looked like little pieces of scrambled egg—floated on top. Just from looking at it, my nausea doubled.

“Mother says”—Sister Carmeline lifted the ladle—“a good appetite is the sign of a good vocation.” She filled my bowl.

“Thank you, but I'm not hungry,” I said. “My stomach is upset, from the heat and the ride, you know.”

Sister Carmeline scowled.

“You should eat it,” the woman on my right whispered, with a heavy accent. “She won't let you up until it's done.”

Some hard French bread came next, and I took a piece. The rough, square woman on my right touched my arm and introduced herself as Jeanne Dubois, from Quebec. She spoke in a Quebecois hockey, which engaged another woman two places down. Soon three or four lively conversations increased the noise level considerably.

I was left with the soup, my first test. I took spoon in hand and, according to Jeanne's advice, swallowed the lukewarm concoction quickly, trying not to think about it. When I took the last spoonful, Jeanne nodded. Louise stretched her hand out and said, “Congratulations.”

Sister Carmeline stood, and all conversation stopped immediately. After another prayer, everyone filed out of the room, plates in hand. At the bathroom sink we silently washed our plates with a homemade plastic scrubber and some yellow bar soap, then dried the plates and took them back in the refectory, one woman handing the dish towel to the next. Each woman moved in a silent file. Each plate had its place. I stacked mine on place number nine. My soup had settled.

and seemed as though it would remain. So, I thought, would I.

Aspirancy Timetable, Summer 1977

Monday through Friday

4:40	Rise
5:00	Morning Prayer and Meditation
6:00	Bed Making
6:10	Housework
6:30	Washing
6:50	Mass at St. Pius M, T, W; St. Rita Th, F
7:40	Breakfast
8:00	Apostolate
12:00	Lunch
12:40	Midday Prayer
1:00	Rest
1:30	Tea
1:40	Common Work
2:10	Study
3:15	Instruction
4:15	Spiritual Reading
4:45	Instruction
6:30	Adoration
7:30	Dinner
8:10	After Dinner Prayer
8:30	Recreation
9:00	Night Prayer
9:20	Bathing
10:00	Final "Praised be Jesus Christ"
2:00	Tea
2:20	Recreation

3:20 Father's Talk

4:00 Adoration and Confession

5:00 Study

6:00 Common Work

7:00 Dinner

7:40 After Dinner Prayer

8:00 Recreation

9:00 Night Prayer

9:20 Bathing

10:00 Final "Praised be Jesus Christ"

Sunday

The same as above except:

1:00 Rest

2:00 Tea

2:15 Spiritual Reading

2:45 Hospital Visiting

6:00 Adoration

7:00 Dinner

7:40 After Dinner Prayer

8:00 Recreation

9:00 Night Prayer, etc.

Saturday (Our Day In)

4:40 Rise

5:00 Morning Prayer and Meditation

6:00 Personal Hygiene

6:15 Common Spiritual Reading

7:00 Mass, Convent

7:50	Breakfast
8:15	Housework
9:15	Washing
10:15	Bed Making
10:30	Choir Practice
11:30	Free
12:00	Lunch
12:40	Midday Prayer
1:00	Rest
2:00	Tea
2:20	Recreation
3:20	Father's Talk
4:00	Adoration and Confession
5:00	Study
6:00	Common Work
7:00	Dinner
7:40	After Dinner Prayer
8:00	Recreation
9:00	Night Prayer
9:20	Bathing
10:00	Final "Praised be Jesus Christ"

BOOT CAMP

SUMMER 1977

SOUTH BRONX, NEW YORK CITY

As the rhythm of my new life took over, I came to think of aspirancy as Missionary Charity boot camp: six months of total immersion, sink or swim. The eleven women with whom I ate, slept, worked, and prayed became my new sisters. From me, age nineteen, to the eldest aspirant at thirty-five, we came from every region of the country, as well as Puerto Rico and Canada. Louise, already familiar with the Bronx and the sisters, was our levelheaded leader. She'd majored in English literature, and sometimes I talked about books with her. I was happy with these good-natured women and felt ready to give myself to the poor.

Our aspirant mistress had another agenda. Sister Carmeline was determined to form us into the two true essentials: discipline and humility.

She taught us to jump out of bed at the first stroke of the bell at 4:40 every morning, to kneel on the wooden floor next to our cots, and to recite the day's first prayers loudly and with joy. We threw our sheets over our heads as a modesty tent while we wiggled into skirts and blouses. After brushing our teeth, we hurried ("Waste no time, but never run—you are not wild elephants") to the chapel for an hour of vocal prayer and meditation, then half an hour of housework—squatting awkwardly to swab the floors with an old potato sack and water, a trick I found hard to master—then twenty minutes to scrub our clothes in the same five-gallon plastic buckets we'd used for housework. At 7:00 we had Mass, sometimes in one of the parish churches close by and sometimes in the convent chapel with a visiting priest.

During breakfast, one of us read aloud from Mother Teresa's *Instructions* while the rest of us gnawed on stale bread and Crisco, which I couldn't swallow without a generous sprinkling of salt. We washed it all down with weak coffee, the milk and sugar already added. Though poverty was difficult, I found its simple strength attractive. Sharing the poverty of the poor proclaimed that God and love were what mattered.

Obedience was less alluring. In the summons of the convent's large brass bell we were to hear "the voice of God" and obey without delay. The *Constitutions*, the Rules, and our superiors were also God's voice and governed when we could speak, what we could read, how to sit, walk, or kneel, sometimes even what to think.

By 7:50 we aspirants joined the professed sisters for apostolate, serving the poor and proclaiming the Gospel as Jesus' original apostles had. We were to accept our assignments cheerfully, for they, too, came from God. I was good with kids and longed to work with the children. But while the other eleven aspirants scattered to summer day camp or to one of the homeless women's shelters, Sister Carmeline assigned me to the convent kitchen. Alone, I concocted soup from rotting vegetables donated by the local supermarket, then sorted food and clothing, and other donations in the go-downs.

A plaque in the basement proclaimed Mother's words: *Do little things with great love.* I understood this to mean that my activity didn't matter as much as my attitude. Still, I wanted to do big things: feed the hungry, comfort the dying, perhaps even bring the Gospel to Communist country—or at least work with the kids at the day camp.

Every afternoon we aspirants sat around the refectory table, trying not to slump, while Sister Carmeline, at the head of the table, instructed us in the ways of the Missionaries of Charity. When we weren't engaged in work that required speech, we observed silence. The quiet seemed to root life deeply in God, and the Grand Silence after Night Prayer at 9:00 until breakfast the next morning brought a small measure of privacy to life in cramped quarters. The simplicity of our life mirrored the life of Jesus in the Gospels, and for the most part I liked it. The minor irritations were nothing in light of God's call. God had a plan for me.

One day Sister Carmeline passed out sheets of paper. "I want you to write why you want to be a Missionary of Charity," she said. "Not many sentences, no big words. Our life is simple."

How did one write about electromagnetism? That's what the pull had felt like, ever since that day I'd spotted the nun with watery eyes on the cover of *Time*. I'd read the article over and over, until I had certain sections memorized. After that I read everything I could about Mother Teresa. Though my parents thought I was too young for the convent, as a high school graduation present they gave me a trip to the International Eucharistic Congress in Philadelphia, where Mother Teresa would speak. My mother and I packed ourselves into a friend's station wagon. I urged Mom's friend to drive faster and make fewer stops, but we missed Mother Teresa's first speech. I had to find her. I scanned the crowds for a nun in a white sari. Mother's image hung everywhere—smiling from posters in barbershop windows, swaying on key chains at souvenir stands, hugging babies on mugs and plates—but I couldn't find her.

One morning I squeezed myself against the back wall of a packed auditorium when Archbishop Hélder Câmara of Brazil stopped his speech to kiss the hands of a small woman in a sari. Everyone rose, clapping wildly as the tiny nun stood. I could hardly believe it—I was in the same room as Mother Teresa! She stepped behind the podium and disappeared. Someone brought her a box to stand on. The applause continued. Finally, her strong, deep voice hushed the crowd. "God loved the world so much that he gave His Son, Jesus—the beginning of Christianity, the giving. And Jesus kept on saying, 'Love one another as I have loved you.' Every human being created by the loving hand of God has been created in His image to love and to be loved."

"One of our sisters, she had just joined, and the next morning they had to go to the home for the dying.... They went, and after three hours they returned and she came to my room and said, 'Mother, I've been touching the Body of Christ for three hours.' Her face was shining with joy. I said, 'What did you do, Sister?'"

"Well, just as we arrived they brought a man, covered with maggots. He had been picked up from a drain. And for three hours I was touching the Body of Christ. I knew it was He." "

As Mother spoke, my desire grew. I wanted to be the sister who tended Jesus' wounds.

"I ask you one thing," Mother continued. "Never be afraid in your giving, and don't give from your abundance. Give until it hurts. It hurt Jesus to love you and me. Never turn your back to the poor, for in turning it to the poor, you are turning it to Jesus Christ."

My throat tightened. Mother Teresa's simple words came straight from her heart, with unwavering conviction. While everyone stood and applauded, I pushed my way to the front where I told the two men blocking the stage that I had to speak to Mother Teresa. "You are eight thousand other people," one of them said.

Back home, I sent another letter to Calcutta. The day I finally received an envelope with *Missionaries of Charity* in the upper lefthand corner, I slammed the mailbox shut and rushed onto the streets of Austin. I didn't know where I was going and I didn't care. Envelope in hand, I sang as I ran, revising Simon and Garfunkel for the moment, "Jubilation! He loves me again! I fall on my knees and I'm laughing." I ran past a Moonie selling carnations at the corner, past couples holding hands, past the physics building, and around the fountain in Gregg Park. As I crossed the overpass, the wind threw my letter against the overpass' wire mesh. I grabbed it back, folded it tightly, and shoved it in my jeans pocket. The sunset that evening was a particularly vibrant orange and pink and purple—it seemed as though the sky knew my secret—and I stood for a long time on the overpass saying, *Thank you, thank you, thank you*. Finally, behind the biology building, under the streetlight near the goldfish pond, I opened the letter.

That letter had invited me to the South Bronx, where, pen in hand, I sat that June day nearly a year later, answering Sister Carmeline's question: "Why do you want to be an MC?"

God is love. I believe that love is the most important thing in the world, without which life has no meaning. I want to love as Jesus loved, to show people who do not know love that someone cares about them. I believe God has called me, and I have given Him my life.

I put down my pen feeling very good about my essay. The good feeling continued even in my sleep throughout the night, to the next morning. I felt better about this tiny paragraph than I had about all the articles and editorials and research papers I'd ever written. The paragraph "in simple words" came straight from my heart.

The next day, our papers in hand, Sister Carmeline announced, "One of you has written beautifully." I prepared to be recognized.

"Jeanne, would you please read your answer?" My jaw dropped. I closed it quickly, but not before the others noticed, I was sure of that. Jeanne stood. Her skirt was too tight.

I come to serve Jesus and to be taught the ways of love. I am an unworthy sinner, but I trust the mercy of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to make me faithful of this great vocation. I pray that, living a holy life and doing penance, I will expiate my sins and the sins of the whole world. I want to pass my life in prayer and reparation. I pray to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, to make me meek and humble.

Sister Carmeline nodded. "You are here *to be taught* the ways of love. You don't know how to please God, but if you are simple and humble and try very hard, you can learn. I am surprised that only Sister Jeanne wrote that she is a sinner. You all need mercy from the Sacred Heart. Remember, without the Immaculate Heart you can do nothing."

I felt humiliated, judged. I knew I was a sinner, even if I hadn't written it down. Though I always considered myself a good Catholic—independent study of Vatican II documents when I was sixteen, daily Mass in Austin, always finding ways to serve my neighbor—I knew I was way behind on other things. I'd never even heard of "the Immaculate Heart," the sister

favorite way of referring to Jesus' Mother. The rosary, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, personal sacrifices (not only during Lent but every day), weekly confession—these essentials of piety had been absent from my life.

Had my life until then really amounted to nothing?

One day, not more than two weeks after I'd left home, Sister Carmeline handed me an envelope, raising her eyebrows. The envelope was addressed to Sister Mary God.

"The postmark is Beaumont, Texas," Sister Carmeline said. "We thought it must be yours."

I opened the envelope and unfolded a sheet of orange construction paper scrawled with purple crayon.

Dear Mom,

We miss you. Please come home soon. We are all hungry and Daddy cries all the time.

Love,
Angela

It was Kathy, trying to give me a laugh. Or hoping someone would intercept the letter and send me home. Sometimes I missed her so much it hurt. She still didn't understand that living for God was the best possible life. I slipped her letter into my Bible, where I looked at it every day.

Sister Carmeline announced that in a few days we would have a visitor—Mother Teresa! I had barely been in the South Bronx for two weeks and already the woman whose example had brought me here was visiting. We shouted so loudly that we drowned out the boom boxes outside. Sister Carmeline said Mother visited the mission houses whenever she could, to check on the sisters in person. She said we were very privileged because Mother would stay more than a week in New York. The thought of meeting Mother Teresa made the interminable kitchen work seem almost enjoyable.

But as the day wore on, my excitement gave way to unease. What if Mother didn't like me? If she was a living saint, as *Time* magazine hinted, perhaps she would have supernatural knowledge, like Padre Pio, the Italian priest with the stigmata who read people's souls. Mother knew I used to lie to get myself out of trouble and that I often thought critically of Sister Carmeline, she might send me home.

Even worse than Mother not liking me, suppose I didn't like her. What if she wasn't what everyone said she was?

On the appointed day, Sister Andrea and the other professed sisters went to fetch Mother from the airport. As the time for her arrival drew near, some aspirants went to the chapel while others lingered in the refectory. I staked out a perch on the staircase above the front door and hoped Mother Teresa would like my cooking.

When the door finally opened, my heart nearly stopped. I watched a short, bent woman press through a crowd of sisters straight to the chapel. "I must say hello to Jesus," she said.

When she stooped to unfasten her sandals, I thought of Moses preparing to walk on holy ground. Mother reached for the holy water and blessed herself. She genuflected with focused determination, bowing deeply, her chin resting on her chest. Though the boom boxes thrummed outside, in the convent the world stood still, as if existing only for this moment.

union with God. I felt myself enveloped in the presence of the Holy. I was ready to be a better person than I had ever been before, and all Mother had done was walk through the door.

When Mother finished her prayer, she emerged barefoot from the chapel and placed her wrinkled hand on the head of the closest aspirant. In a deep, throaty voice, she intoned, “God bless you,” then she smiled at the rest of us. Rooted to her spot just outside the chapel door, Mother waited for us to squeeze past each other so she could bless us individually.

As I pressed closer, I searched frantically for something to say—*I want to be like you, or Teach me to be holy, or I just can’t believe I’m here*. When my turn came, I looked into Mother’s eyes and said, “Welcome, Mother.”

“Very good,” she replied, placing both her hands on my head. “God bless you.” She gently but firmly pushed me to one side so she could bless the sisters behind me.

Sister Carmeline ushered us to the professed sisters’ refectory for dinner. It looked remarkably like ours—long tables, benches, open shelves for the plates, pictures of Jesus, Mary, and Mother, without frames, covered in clear plastic—with the table pushed to the wall and old rugs scattered on the floor to make space for us aspirants to sit. Mother bowed her head low and began grace in a firm, commanding voice: “Bless us, O Lord, and these, thy gifts, which of thy bounty we are about to receive, through Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Amen.” She traced the sign of the cross deliberately over her forehead, her chest, and her shoulder—more deliberately even than a priest at Mass.

Mother sat at the head of the table, Sister Andrea next to her. I chose a spot on the rug close to Mother, but I couldn’t hear them talking over everyone’s excited chatter.

“Isn’t she just so cute?” an aspirant asked.

“Cute?”

“I mean she’s so small, and so old, and she’s in charge of everything, and she’s not making a big deal of it. She’s eating soup just like everybody else, and the way she holds her spoon—it’s just so cute.”

I could see her point, though I would have described Mother as focused, eager, happy, and humble. I was pleased that she ate my soup with what seemed like gusto.

After her last spoonful, Mother rapped the handle of her knife on the table, and immediately everyone was silent.

“I bring you all the love of the sisters in the Mother House.” Her voice was enthusiastic without any trace of tiredness. She gestured widely. “In the Mother House there are over three hundred novices.” She raised three fingers. “Three hundred—imagine that. And the sisters feed three thousand people in Calcutta every day.” Mother seemed to delight in the numbers.

“Take us to Calcutta, Mother,” one of the aspirants begged.

“There’s still time for that.” Mother gripped both sides of the table. “And Jesus is everywhere, also in New York.” Her smile and her eyes sparkled.

“We are visiting many shut-ins, Mother,” Sister Andrea said, “and we have many children in the summer camp.”

“*Ah cha*,” Mother said, looking down the table, nodding and smiling. I wondered if I would ever make Mother smile like that. The way Mother said *ah cha*—a Bengali expression meaning “well” or “okay”—really was cute.

Over the next few days, Mother took her meals with the professed sisters. Whenever Sister Carmeline took her plate downstairs, we all wished she would take us, too. I stole glimpses of Mother in chapel. At morning Mass, after receiving the Host, Mother bent her chin to her chest, palms together in prayer, gaze fixed on the floor. When she returned to kneel in her spot at the back, she remained very still. I had never seen anyone so deeply immersed in God.

One day Mother went to see Cardinal Cooke, the archbishop of New York. Another day she visited Eileen Egan, who worked for Catholic Relief Services, which Mother said provided rice and bulgur for the poor in Calcutta and in Africa. Every now and then someone came to speak with Mother in the parlor. I remembered how people had crowded around her in Philadelphia, and I was surprised that more people didn't come to visit. I supposed they didn't know she was here. Once Mother visited the summer camp, and she accompanied one of the professed sisters to visit an old, sick woman in the projects. She didn't come down to the kitchen, at least not while I was there.

A few evenings into Mother's visit, a tiny Indian sister with bright eyes took Mother away. Sister Nirmala had co-founded the contemplative branch of the Missionaries of Charity with Mother just the previous year. The house on Union Avenue, two rosaries north of us (we measured distances by the number of rosaries we said while we walked), was the first MC contemplative convent. The MC contemplatives dressed the same as the MC active sisters and followed the same basic way of life but devoted more time to prayer.

Mother's absence filled our house. I missed the sense of wonder and stability that had pervaded the convent as long as she had been around. When Sister Nirmala finally brought Mother back at the beginning of morning Mass, they both knelt quietly in the back of the chapel, and everything seemed right again.

A week after Mother had first arrived, I was in the hallway when I saw her climbing the stairs. Mother was coming to us! I nearly tripped over myself to make way. Mother sat down on Sister Carmeline's stool, at the head of our table, and we aspirants jockeyed for the best seats. Closing her eyes, Mother began, "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you." Those words had power and sweetness, as if she were speaking to someone she saw.

As we answered with the Holy Mary, Mother kept her eyes closed and folded her hands until her knuckles turned white. "Sisters," she began, "Jesus has chosen you to belong to Him. Imagine that. Out of all the people in the world, Almighty God has chosen you.

"God did not call your sister," Mother said. "He did not call your neighbor. God called you." Each word penetrated my soul. I was afraid to breathe, afraid some inadvertent movement might disturb the joy and conviction I felt growing within me. "You must give Jesus your whole heart and soul, your body, everything." Mother looked intently at each of us as she touched the crucifix at her shoulder, caressing Jesus' body.

"You have a choice: Stay and be faithful for life, or pack up and go home right now." Her voice was firm, her tone serious. Her words scared me a little, but mostly they excited me.

Mother held up a small book covered with brown paper and shook it at us. "This book is God's will for you. Put the *Constitutions* into practice and you will become holy, guaranteed. Certain passages you must learn by heart. Soon we will go to the chapel and Mother will give you the cross." Mother's references to herself in the third person, as *Mother* instead of *I*, emphasized mission over individuality. She was living the motto of the aspirancy: *He mu*

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