companions: Donald, a pale-faced man of about thirty, who said nothing at all, but who, at Jacques' bidding, extended a hand that lay limply in my own as I tried to shake it. Freddie, described as a fine sea captain, wore a stocking cap and, after wiping his mouth with the cloth that he was also using to dry the dishes, smiled through his toothless mouth. I was then ushered into the Professor's room, where a wizened man lay at a strange angle in a Barcalounger. I would learn their stories soon enough, I was sure. Their fall from independent to dependent living might not have been as precipitous or chosen as mine—most had been on a long, slow slide over the tenuous edges of accepted society—but here we were, together, none asking the other how we had come to live together.

Donald and Freddie shared a bedroom, and I didn't note where Jacques slept. He brought me into a tiny room barely wide enough for the single bed that was to be mine. A colorful throw covered the blankets, two of them, actually, electric blankets minus the electric, but neatly smoothed in place. The throw, Jacques noted offhandedly, had been knitted by Dorothy Day over thousands of miles of Greyhound travel. I now had a home; I now could devote myself to the work to which I felt called.

∞

I never had the discipline or inclination to keep a diary, but we did keep a log at CHIPS so that we could follow up on our guests, as we called them. And today, as I leaf through those early pages of CHIPS history, I know that something very good was being born. We prevented the poor and disabled from being evicted. We secured jobs where none were to be found. We rescued battered wives and children from abusive husbands and fathers. There was a spirit among us outcasts—whether by choice or by fate—that our common destiny was just that: common. It is strange how, once you get past the smell and the many conflicting and sad stories—a good percentage of them true—there is a certain comfort in being with the poor. Pretenses, posturing, preening—the triad of New York literary life—had no place. You just could, as the lingo went, "get down to it."

A small coterie of people helped out at CHIPS. There was Mary, a glum, depressed teenager whose physician father once told her she was an abortion who lived. She would lie for hours on our sagging sofa, only to rise up magnificently to take a pregnant woman to Methodist Hospital up on Seventh Avenue or to soothe frightened children who appeared, suddenly homeless. Anne Enright, her neck caved in from a cancer operation, swathed her disfigurement with elegant silk scarves, and with equ panache served humble bowls of soup and outdated cookies as if s

her varicose veins bulging, but she never sat down. There was the breadboard, so long out of use that cobwebs had sealed it off from the world.

My mother.

You never helped with my homework, but you listened to my prayers. Night after night you sat at that table, as your own eyes drooped with the fatigue of tending your own house, in addition to the house of another woman, rich enough to play golf or tennis or bridge, none of which you knew or cared to know. You allowed me to speak to God out loud. You helped shape my soul, and now my soul was so hollow. Such a difficult child, I spoke back to you with so little respect. I was ashamed of you. And I was in such a hurry on that first day of May 1956, when my youthful inexperience took your life. I never saw them lay you in the ground. I never could shed tears on that freshly turned soil as I just did for your husband, my father.

I slowly descended the steps into the basement. I took an Erin Brew out of the case in the fruit cellar and stood on the cold cement floor in my father's tiny work area, his rusting cans of nails on the shelf, short pieces of wood stuffed into the rafters. "Butch, you'll never know when you'll need a piece just that size," he would say. He called blacks niggers, Jews kikes, Hungarians hunkies, Italians dagos, but he would work alongside and respect any man who respected his own tools, who didn't waste a nail or even the smallest piece of wood, who would put in an honest day's work. He knew his place, and would never aspire or rise to a position of power. He didn't want dominion over anyone else, understanding in such a profound way how infinitely different each life was, how uniquely each person was composed. He would have made a terrible reporter. He could never have written those pithy snap judgments we come up with so blithely. I didn't know what I as a son had given him, but I realized what he had given me.

Sitting there, sipping on a warm Erin Brew—my first drink in so many years—I realized that when I stripped away all the many pretenses I affected, I was his son after all. I knew for certain that I had his gratitude, gratitude that I had found work—not bringing buildings back to life, tearing out charred beams and walls as he had done, the work that had eventually killed him—but honest work nonetheless. Yes, I waited to see my name in the *Times*, or the *Atlantic, Look, Life,* but it was the work itself that brought a glow to my soul. That I had done it well, honorably, that I had given nine hours of work for the eight hours for which I was paid.

I finished the beer and slid the empty back into the carton. The shelves in the fruit cellar were bare. Once they had been filled with Mason jars of peaches and tomatoes, green beans and pickles that my mother had put up. But all that was gone now.

parish at the corner of Sixth and President streets only a few blocks away, who had been alerted by someone in the building. Thus the knock on the door, which opened onto hell.

J.C. and I, good Methodists, were introduced to Father Petroski, but I can't remember how. I certainly wasn't looking to come back to the Catholic Church—in fact had little interest in things Catholic. Father Petroski, a chain-smoker, was charismatic, troubled, and neurotic. But most appealingly, he had an offbeat, infectious sense of humor. He loved to tell of the latest exploits of the dachshund Nikki, who hovered near the face of his mistress—the septuagenarian, homebound Mrs. D'Angelo—as she attempted to quell her palsy and receive the proffered host from Father Petroski. With a swipe of his tongue, "Scccuuuulp," Nikki was sanctified, batting about .500 on the priest's weekly visits. Every time the priest told the latest chapter, he adorned it with details. "Nikki, Nikki, sweeta Nikki, give Father Breoski a chance. Sita down, Nikki, sita down. Thatsa Jesu, Nikki, Jesu Christa." Father Petroski had her Italian accent down perfectly. I just about gagged, laughing so hard. The priest was a rebel who had barely made it through the Brooklyn archdiocesan seminary at Huntington, Long Island, because of his unstinting antiwar and civil rights stands, and he was so unlike the priests of any parish I had ever known as to be almost of another church. Another planet. His tales of tending to the poor and ill of the neighborhood were laced with humor, insanity, and holiness. A young, idealistic priest on the streets of Brooklyn, nails bitten down to the quick, possessed with a love of the unlovely, he was a perfect subject for *Look* magazine. So I began following him on his rounds, and the Skellys came into my life. And they would not soon leave.

Ironically, the story on Brooklyn street priest Father Ronald Petroski never ran. *Look*, a grand, once-fat, general interest magazine, folded under the pressure of the 1970s onslaught of specialized magazines that delivered exactly the right audience for the right product. It was a sign of the times. A lot of "general interests" were fading—marriage, fidelity, having children, trust in authority among them.

I wanted to experience every part of Father Petroski's life, so I attended one of his conventional Masses at St. Francis. I then learned that the priest also conducted a weekly "folk liturgy," a foreign term I dutifully recorded in my reporter's notebook. It was scheduled to begin at ten o'clock, and I arrived at the designated place a few minutes early. I took a seat beneath a basketball hoop at the back of the yawning St. Francis Xavier school gymnasium. Teenagers—the girls wafting clouds of fresh, fruity perfumes, the boys trailing Old Spice aftershave and underarm dampness, all of them madly chewing gum and exuding hormonal

and who's going to climb those stairs to hug and kiss that woman with shit running down her legs?"

His eyes, rheumy for obvious lack of sleep, searched the still rafters for an answer. There was not a sound. All was silence. My hand was frozen over the notebook.

At the Consecration, Father Petroski extended the loaf of Italian bread in his outstretched right hand and slowly, mesmerizingly, almost tauntingly, passed it in an arc that encompassed everyone in the gym. He did the same with the chalice. The Mass moved on. Although I knew its trajectory, to hear the words in English that were no more than small print italic under the Latin I never mastered in my ill-fated altar boy days was to hear them for the first time. "Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us. . . . This is my Body, given for you. . . . Do this in remembrance of me." Then, the impossible barrier that I knew so well: "O, Lord I am not worthy to receive you," followed by the ladder to vault a soul over it, regardless of the height, words that had never quite registered before: "but only say the word and I shall be healed."

A line was forming to take the bread and wine, to receive the Body and Blood of Christ. Before I knew what was happening, I was standing. I set notepad and pen on the folding metal chair behind me.

Moments of conversion are, of course, not the result of rational decisions. There had to be millions of tiny blips of unconnected desires and terrors, admonitions and invitations floating around in my subconscious self right then. And the moments of conversion that are the most exquisite for most of us are not dramatic experiences, vaulting from bad to good, for few of us are Saul on the road to Tarsus or Augustine leaving his sybaritic life behind. We dimly become aware that we are no longer satisfied; something has been clamoring at the back of our mind for attention. Our needs—which we have convinced ourselves had been met—had not been met at all. We had been deluding ourselves. And then, subtly but surely, unconnected experiences coalesce, the unformed is formed, the oily residue of rationalization through which we had been trying to see is suddenly wiped away. We see so clearly after all. Was it not always so, we ask ourselves? Wasn't it always this obvious?

I joined the line of teenagers, their eyes cast down, who looked as if they had aged at least a generation in the last hour. Father Petroski extended the loaf—now ragged and unseemly from so hands taking from it—and I tore off a huge piece. I had not been to Confession in almost ten years. I was using birth control. I was masturbating. I never bought but lustfully looked at *Playboy* and *Penthouse* whenever I could get my sweaty palms on them. I was, for all to see, a Methodist and therefore

the Gospels were peeled back or blatantly ripped asunder to reveal a vibrant, living, caring God in the person of this man called Christ. This Christ was not the Christ of the St. Benedict's altar, of the Baltimore Catechism, of high school religion or college theology courses—places where others more astute than I was may have found him richly alive. My own shell had been too thick, my soul too literal, my mind too regimented to make this breakthrough. Now I could see, after all, that it was the Christ in the sad eyes of that Maryknoll missioner from China, in Brother Adolph's sly grin, in Thomas Merton's poetic reflection.

With Vatican II—and during my decade-long absence—Catholicism had blinked. The "one true Church" admitted there were other paths to God. The assembled bishops of the world had effectively upended the top-down, hierarchy-knows-all model to enfranchise the lowly lay person. The predictable, formulaic march to salvation was now reconfigured as a faith-driven wandering of a pilgrim people. Musty, fusty practices that had been with the Church since the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century were taken from the attic and set out on the curb, discarded. With Father Petroski I could begin to see the dim outlines of something extraordinary, even beyond the new and revolutionary practices—the use of English, the altar ripped off the back wall and set before the people, the more relaxed informal vestments. It was something at once enormously appealing and frightening. Exhilarating and freeing. Demanding. Uncharted. Liberating. Father Petroski kept calling for an all-or-nothing commitment, part his theatrical rhetoric, part gospel reality. A summoning to greatness, a greatness in Christ.

After all, wasn't this exactly what I wanted for my life, what I had first read in *The Seven Storey Mountain* so many years before? That there was no other worthwhile objective in life but to be a saint? But had I pursued that great calling? Had my life showed this? No, it did not. Hard-drinking, foulmouthed high school and college student, I hadn't gone on those mission trips to help the less fortunate. I *was* the less fortunate, I had convinced myself. My Navy days, my early newspaper jobs—yes, I had tried to serve my country with honor and to write, when I could, about issues that mattered. But all that was so tepid, so half baked, so lacking the passion and commitment I saw in this priest. I was good, generically good. And so woefully inadequate.

Each night at my bedside—as a Catholic or, for fewer years, as a Methodist—I knelt and examined my conscience, replaying the day, detailing my failings, noting the occasional triumph of will or grace, and praying that the next day would find me a better person. I looked at the gulf that separated me from those who believe enough in God to truly trust him to guide them, provide for them, comfort them. And each

hardly new. But for the newly awakened Catholics, it was novel and intoxicating. When I was growing up, the unstructured reading and discussion of the Bible was discouraged, if not forbidden, because of a fear that we wouldn't fully understand. Our priests had to ladle out a tiny portion from the lectionary each Sunday and then tell us exactly how to digest it.

I was not alone in this conversion process; it was happening to many Catholics. The equation was being upended. More and more Catholics were better and better educated. Many priests were finding that their seminary education had been pitifully shallow and that their degrees were but worthless pieces of paper from unaccredited institutions. Their rote Sunday sermons were no longer sufficient. Catholics were becoming more inquisitive and assertive, putting behind them the idea of a Sunday "obligation" or accepting predigested spiritual gruel. Catholics began to see that this was a faith far deeper than novenas, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, and unthinking obedience to even the slightest utterance from Rome. The drumbeat, week after week, grew stronger. Stop playing games and mouthing pious phrases. Start living the faith. Vatican II had exploded the myth of the Church's being the "perfect society," complete in itself with little need to interact with the rest of the world. There was a new marching order: go into the world and sanctify it.

My faith life was awakening, and my writing life was taking off. I had landed a first book contract to conduct a yearlong study of the prototypical average American family. The rest of my life was handily falling apart. I was on a collision course that would spew wreckage for years to come.

Pounding headaches that had built in intensity over the past few years reached such an excruciating point that I became an outpatient at the headache clinic at Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx. It was the first such clinic in the world, the virtual Vatican of headaches. I begged for relief. Tensions at home? I was asked. "Well, yes, my writing does create its own strains. Surviving as a freelance writer is a high-wire act, but I've learned to live with that." Tensions in your personal life? "The usual stuff, nobody's perfect, you know, but generally doing just fine. Got a great marriage, thank you." Sex? "Sure, sure, as much as I want," I lied, "when my head isn't pounding," which it was a lot of the time. Fiorinal, a concoction of two standbys, aspirin and caffeine, and then a handy-dandy barbiturate, butalbital, banned in many European countries, was added to the mix. Ergotamine. Nothing helped. I could dodge those questions at Montefiore because I was so expert in kidding myself about my life in general, our marriage in particular.

I did have a perfect marriage, in the way that a department store window is perfect. Dustless, unwrinkled, smooth, on display. But on a closer

In Karachi, in Mayport, had I fallen in love with a person or with the *idea* of marriage? Had I married at what seemed to be the right time in my life, but to the wrong person? To the woman who had once seemed an ideal life partner? We were so much alike. But were we, really, or had we lopped off pieces of ourselves in order to fit snugly, smugly together? Had we failed to "grow together," in the popular parlance? Were we changing in different ways, going in different directions? What had happened? Where did we begin to go wrong? Whose fault was it? All foolish questions; I knew that. Each night I ardently prayed to God to lead me. But I wonder if God was just my front man at a time when I simply wanted out of a marriage that had died.

∞

I stood in front of the padlocked entrance to 219 Sixth Avenue. The storefront's dingy aluminum door had been battered by a series of break-ins, and a thick piece of poorly painted plywood had been crudely nailed into the frame, behind the shattered glass. When I had toured the space the week before, two menacing Puerto Rican men had stopped me. It was their private—read "drinking"—club, and if I took possession, I would answer to them. I handed the landlord $125 in cash, the first month's rent. He gave me the key. Our intentional community had talked and prayed about having a "street presence," where we could leave the comfort of our living rooms and actually serve the poor. Well, here we were.

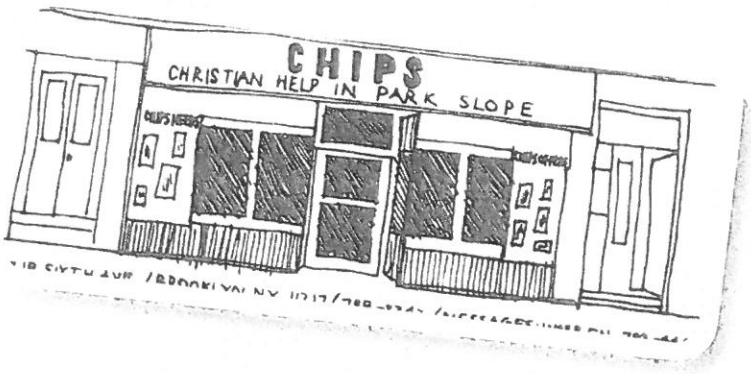
The place was filled with so much trash, old furniture, and rusting fixtures that it would take weeks to clean, and even then, this foul, dank storefront with windows that didn't open, radiators that didn't heat, outlets that didn't work, and a toilet that wouldn't flush would just barely qualify as habitable. But to me, who lived a half-dozen blocks away in a *House and Garden* townhouse, it was my field of dreams. We used a hot plate in the St. Francis Xavier rectory basement to heat our first pot of soup, little more than some cans of Campbell's supplemented with whatever vegetables the members of our little community had in their refrigerators. We swung open that battered aluminum door and offered the soup and ourselves to whoever walked in.

Christian Help in Park Slope—CHIPS—was born.

I had given myself the chance to live as a saint, the saint I was once again telling myself I wanted to be.

PART THREE

UNMAKING IT



lunch at a fancy midtown restaurant with a *New York Times* editor, and that afternoon sit on a bench at the Brooklyn House of Detention with a young expectant mother whose current boyfriend had tried to dice her former suitor into small pieces. The hobnail cross was the touchstone I needed, something to remind me of what wasn't yet a commitment but an urge—constant, uneasy, uncomfortable—brought into being by a force I couldn't understand or escape.

Like any Catholic exposed to seventeen years of religious education, I could recite the words of Matthew's Gospel from memory: "for I was hungry, and you gave me to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink; I was a stranger, and you took me in, a prisoner and you visited me." These mandates had been only words up to now, obviously directed far over my wretched head. But now the words were embodied in the people who came to us at CHIPS. It didn't escape me that even though I was wearing the symbolic nails that held Jesus Christ to the cross, I was no more than a day tripper into the world of poverty. I could leave misery behind at will, safe in my clean, warm brownstone. The people I served did not have this option. They were the crucified ones. They were held fast by virtue of their birth or skin color or lack of education or balky X and Y chromosomes that had not been apportioned properly. Their lives were so precarious, each day a trek in the wilderness, each day a study in survival. There was never enough money for food *and* heating oil *and* clothes *and* rent. Medical care was occasional and often too late to prevent deeper sickness or permanent damage to their bodies. Their children had ear infections that went on painfully for days, while the children of my Park Slope friends were on amoxicillin and on their way to recovery almost immediately. "The asthma" was considered so common that if only one member of a family suffered from it, they considered themselves lucky.

I had no grand plan as each day unfolded. I simply wanted to listen and respond as best I could, with the limited time, abilities, and resources I had.

When I was honest enough to face it, I realized that my life—at least my life after the Navy—had been a parody of conscious living. Connected with God? Hardly. I had grown so self-satisfied, so sanctimonious. We, the alleged "pioneers" in Park Slope, had been brave enough to take the subway to Brooklyn. There, we diligently scraped paint from our wainscoting, sanded our hardwood floors, refinished the elegant sliding doors and put them back on their once-rusty tracks, while valiantly seeking just the right plaster rosette for the ceiling of the living room or the most "original" tin ceiling pattern for the kitchen. And only then could we rest from our punishing labors with a little brie and Carr's Table Wafer

families, though unwanted and looked down upon, knew they were embraced and held precious by a God that transcends the immediate.

At first I was sheepish and tentative about begging from local merchants, but soon that melted away as something welled up within me. I am a reporter, used to marshalling facts, yet it was something I could never quite understand or explain, even today. It was a power that I had never experienced before. "Ask and you shall receive." Yes, that was exactly what was happening. Bolder and bolder, I asked and—amazingly, but true to scripture—I received. I went to the local toy store, and the employees emptied out a storeroom of toys that had fallen out of favor, providing us with boxes of little presents we could give to the kids who came with their bedraggled parents, who patiently thumbed through our racks of donated clothes. The dry cleaners gave us the clothes never picked up. I asked anyone who would listen to clean out closets and bring castoffs to CHIPS. If bell-bottom trousers or fuchsia blouses or herringbone vests or wide collars were the rage last year, they were our stock-in-trade this year. If someone needed a stove, one miraculously appeared. Money for a bus ticket or gas bill. Just the right sympathetic case worker to cut through the bureaucratic red tape. Again and again. Improbably. Predictably.

CHIPS was scheduled to be open only a few afternoons a week and on Saturday mornings, but I found myself turning the key in the door more and more frequently, a glass door now, replaced by one of our "clients," who was a very good handyman when he wasn't on a binge. The walls were painted with a rainbow of donated colors and within was a motley assortment of cast-off chairs, a desk, shelving for canned goods, racks for clothes, and an old refrigerator that sounded like a sputtering Piper Cub taking off. All in all, a pretty ragtag place. But to me it was home, and each time I opened that door, I felt the power once more.

With a certain single-minded tenacity I took on whatever was at hand. The neighborhood kids came running in one afternoon and led me to Eddie. He was sitting on the curb at Fourth and Sackett, sobbing, drunk, with urine-stained trousers, a filthy shirt, one shoe, no socks, and thoughts of suicide. He was off his Antabuse, he mumbled, and certain to be fired from his job. He took out a picture of an elegantly dressed Manhattan doorman who bore just enough resemblance to the man before me to convince me they were one and the same. I put on my best sports jacket and crisply ironed trousers and convinced his boss to give him another chance, meanwhile finding Eddie a rehabilitation program that his insurance would cover. I visited him weekly, bringing along his favorite chocolate chip cookies.

monolithic, unchanging, and unchangeable Church, only to find that in my absence, through the Second Vatican Council, I had been crowned as part of the royal family, one of the "people of God," each of whom had been duly appointed to sanctify the world. And that I had been given the option to model a life on Christ.

I was living a strange mix of what were once discrete and mutually exclusive vocations: marriage—and a very middle-class marriage at that, complete with a country home on a Pennsylvania lake and frequent trips abroad—and an ever-stronger calling to live and work with the poor in a life of voluntary poverty. *Voluntary poverty.* This term had leaped out at me from the pages of the *Catholic Worker,* a monthly newspaper that had fallen into my hands. And I had just as quickly suppressed this concept. Too much, too great a commitment. But I couldn't get it out of my mind. The best I could do was to view myself as a strange hybrid, a sort of contemplative and unauthorized monk, one who lived in the world, who happened to be married and to earn his daily bread as a writer, yet whose real "work" was at CHIPS. It certainly was confusing, but I couldn't go back to what I had been. I didn't really know what lay ahead.

I was then in my midthirties, and I found myself believing more and more that I could go through the rest of my life without recognition and acclaim. The hollow feeling on seeing my byline in even the best publications was evidence enough of how shallow the writing life had become. My foolish shouts on the George Washington Bridge that New York would someday know about me were so far behind me now. Power? Influence? I had never known these benchmarks of New York life, so nothing would be lost there. Material goods? These never mattered that much; I'd come from so little that I could live that way again.

As for my marriage, sexual intimacy had imperceptibly ebbed so much that we never spoke of it. Nor did we speak of having children. We were now almost like shadowboxers, afraid of any sort of contact, afraid it might be taken as a sign that we'd be obliged to go further. After being derailed so many times between first touch or kiss and making love, I had become chary and tentative. And unsure. It was I who was doing something wrong, I was sure. Sex was so excruciatingly complicated to transact that both sides had given up in exhaustion, and negotiations had simply broken down.

But I was married, and I had promised "for better, for worse." If my faith meant anything to me, I couldn't let this slip away. I prayed fervently as I lay in that king-size bed night after night, watching the slits of

13

PRESENT

THE BRONX STOREFRONT COMMUNITY AND CHIPS were part of a very informal network called the Catholic Worker movement, which was started on New York's Bowery in 1933. The founders were an unlikely pair: Dorothy Day, an ex-Communist, anarchist, radical journalist, and unwed mother who had embraced Catholicism; and Peter Maurin, a French-born itinerant preacher and philosopher. At the height of the Depression, they had a vision to create a newspaper that would promote Catholic social teaching, meanwhile founding "houses of hospitality" where the poor would be treated with dignity. Through the *Catholic Worker*, which began at a penny a copy and has that price to this day, the movement rapidly spread. People flocked to the Bowery and started houses in other cities to live with the poor, in radical and religious poverty.

If one were to draw a flowchart of twentieth-century Catholic social activism, the Catholic Worker house would be a way station for thousands upon thousands of lay Catholics who wanted to apply gospel values to overcome real-world injustices. Unionists, civil rights workers, community organizers, idealistic college students, priests, and nuns came to the Worker to see the gospel lived out. And so I was just the latest in a long line in fall 1973 when I took the F train from a very clean Brooklyn station, got off at the Broadway-Lafayette stop, which reeked of urine and garbage, and made my way over to 36 East First Street.

Even though it may have been one of the more famous addresses in Catholic America, 36 East First was very much in keeping with the Worker. It was a pitiful-looking former storefront, with panes of glass shielded by rusting, heavy grates. The paint was peeling, the front door appeared ready to come off its hinges. On the sidewalk in front were a motley lineup of street people, to polite society the dregs of humanity, but here Christ's precious ones. This was a time before such drugs as crack,

work with the poor. It required and called forth, she maintained, "a harsh and dreadful love," Dostoyevsky's famous line in *The Brothers Karamazov*. I knew the line well. And I knew its context, which came uncomfortably close to summing me up. A wealthy woman comes to the monk Zosima, waxing on about her dream of a life of loving service to others. She will live in holy poverty as a Sister of Mercy; such a wonderful thought brings tears to her eyes. But then it crosses her mind: the poor will probably not thank her for her great sacrifice; they'll complain that the soup isn't hot enough, the bread not fresh enough, the bed too hard, and the covers too thin. She confesses she couldn't bear such ingratitude, to which the wise monk replies with that resounding line: "Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams." There would be no stage lights to enhance the face of the poor, only pitiful, hand-me-down fixtures that never worked right. No sweet odor of grace, but their ripe smell. No applause for work well done, just howls and screams.

So what was it I saw in Dorothy Day that night? I can only describe it this way: she was *present*.

It was not about grand or dramatic presence. Dorothy Day was there, slightly stooped by her seventy-six years, standing solidly on the pock-marked floor, entirely, completely present to that moment in that place. Alert, aware, with an unspoken understanding that even as she had nothing at all to say to me, there was nothing that needed to be said just then. The room might grow quieter or louder, Bill might lash out again or not; whatever the needs of the moment, she would face them. For she was confident that she was not standing there alone.

Dorothy Day disappeared into the crowd, and I leaned against a wall. I didn't know what the days ahead would bring—if I could be loving in the face of ingratitude, patient when attacked, kind when others were unkind to me. As for living a harsh and dreadful love, that was something I would leave for another day. I didn't know what I could be in life.

But, looking at her that night, I knew one thing for sure. I wanted to be *present*.

∞

I sat, head down, trying to be present to this moment. It was a Sunday morning, not long after my evening at the Worker, in the St. Francis Xavier gym. All was still as Father Petroski's voice echoed through the vast space with the Gospel reading.

14

THE PILGRIMAGE

I SQUINTED UP AT THE FLICKERING MAZE OF YELLOW NUMBERS on the poorly lit board high overhead. At first I had a hard time picking it out: *Short Line 801. Yes, that was it. Or was it?*

I always arrived just in time for planes and trains, cavalierly stepping on board just as the door closed. Today I was an hour early, the sign of a man unsure of his destination or, in my case, of a man who needed TIME to reconsider going at all. I set myself and my knapsack down on one of the long, wooden benches clustered at the center of the main concourse. Passing in front of me was a blur of fast-walking commuters, streaming toward their working day. Those of us "on the bench" were of a different breed, not in much of a hurry. On my right was a snoring man, whose head was resting on a huge bundle. On my left, a woman was in animated conversation. With herself.

New York's Port Authority bus terminal is an urban colossus, the world's busiest bus station, covering four city blocks, 1.5 million square feet embracing passengers, stores, buses, and subway trains, while allowing plenty of room for con men, pickpockets, male and female prostitutes, the homeless, and various lowlifes spilling over from the tawdry porno shops, peep shows, and bars rimming Times Square only a few blocks away. Every morning, Port Authority inhales a hundred thousand people as they stream into this hulking, sprawling edifice, their quick steps rapping out a determined rhythm, a murmured song to the bustling city itself. Nine or ten hours later, these people are exhaled, exhausted and stale, to retreat to their homes for the night.

The dreamers arrive at Port Authority in much smaller numbers and at less predictable times throughout the day. They walk much more slowly, for they don't yet understand the city's pace. Young girls who will be Broadway stars come with both terror and anticipation on their bright

rumbling in my soul now a deafening roar. In the past few weeks there had been a senseless, horrible death that put me over the edge. My head pounded. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't think. I couldn't pray. I couldn't write. I could hardly complete a spoken sentence. I needed to cut loose from everything familiar. I needed time and space to think.

As I sat there in Port Authority, I hid my face behind the morning's *Times*. Had one of my editors, briefcase in hand, bustling in from his New Jersey or Westchester home, come across this knapsack-bearing, almost middle-aged hippie, so sadly late for the revolution, I don't know what excuse I could have conjured up. I had a car; what was I doing taking a bus? And where exactly was I going? I didn't exactly know. For how long? Well . . .

Once on the bus, we whisked through the cool darkness of the Lincoln Tunnel before bursting into the brilliant sunlight, hustling past the hazy New Jersey skyline dotted with the belching smoke of refineries, and finally turning onto the Palisades Parkway. It was a lovely, clear day. The leaves on the great oaks lining the road were a vibrant, emerald green. The outcroppings of rock were as majestic as they were unexpected. If you forgot that you were speeding along on a ribbon of asphalt, it was hard to realize that you were just minutes from the city. Looking through the window of the speeding bus, I saw no sign that man had yet intruded. I was just minutes from my former life, yet already in another world.

It would be a sort of pilgrimage, I'd decided, the archetypical remedy for the restless, questioning soul. I had the addresses of some houses of prayer and monasteries in the Northeast and a religious community of lay men and women up in Canada. I hoped that in one of them I would find an answer to the question I was not capable of clearly asking. None of the places was near any major city, but somehow I hadn't factored that in to my hastily conjured travel plans. Still, I knew I had to leave the convenience of a car behind, denying myself an easy escape or quick return. It had been only a few days before that I had told J.C. that I had to get away and do it now. I was surprised when she quickly agreed to the non-plan of a man she knew planned out everything in his life.

After a phone call from the bus station at my intended first stop, I was picked up by a sixtyish man wearing a windbreaker and a pair of badly wrinkled khakis. It was a short, mostly quiet ride to the monastery of which he was a member. Once within the cool, dark chapel, I felt I could finally breathe easier. I sat there for an hour, sending a tirade of fervent prayers sailing heavenward in rapid succession. A bell rang, as if to stop me cold. The monk who had picked me up at the bus station, his work clothes now covered with a long white choir gown, filed in

toxic in the air. Not that being gay, which a good number of them were, was the issue. Looking back, there had been a devoted teacher at Cathedral Latin who enjoyed tucking his hand into the back pockets of the boys and giving a squeeze; effeminate priests at Marquette who were great professors and spiritual mentors. Father Petroski was most likely gay, and he had profoundly changed my life. But here, in this kind of enclosed life, the gay overtones and gay humor were corrosive, undermining the kind of esprit de corps needed to bond a group of men. Years later, studies would definitively show that a greater percentage of gays stayed behind in the post–Vatican II exodus from religious life that was now under way. For some, religious life would remain a calling; for others, a safe haven, a secure escape.

The same silent friar with the same wrinkled khakis took me back to the bus station a week after he had picked me up. I thanked him, and he mumbled a reply. He reached across for the door handle, slammed the door shut, and was gone, back to that sad place. I would travel on, undaunted and totally confused.

During that first week, the weather had cooled; an early frost glistened on the ground. I headed further north. The trees were tinged with the first blushes of autumn as I rode through the foothills of the Catskills. I read, I slept, I stared out the window. I felt like an impetuous fool. But the hum of the wheels was strangely comforting. I kept telling myself: my journey was just beginning.

not about to have this sick and tortured relationship ended by something as inconvenient as death. Somehow, in his confused mind, this too, would pass. Mother would awaken from another stupor, and they would go on as before.

Except for the drone of buzzing flies, all was still. Why didn't I come right away? Mary, you were little more than a bothersome note that I pushed from day to day. To say I felt a failure would be letting myself off too lightly. I looked down at what was left of Mary Skelly. "I'm sorry, Mary. I'm so sorry," was all I could say.

I had been a part of their lives. But in some way, I was not *present* in their lives. That was the true sin. I had not lived a harsh and dreadful love, but a love stingily apportioned, at my convenience. They were names on a list, another "case" to be worked on. I looked over at Peter. What *I* felt was unimportant right now; I sensed that. Peter was in no condition to do much of anything, but I knew I somehow had to get him in good enough shape to properly bury his mother. He had always been on the margins. This, he must do. I vowed that—for him. Then I called the police.

There was a no-nonsense Irish landlady in Park Slope named Mrs. Linehan, who took in pensioners and the disabled as a business, and I prevailed upon her—not so subtly citing the Beatitudes—to waive the usual fee and help Peter Skelly get somewhat sober and cleaned up so that he could participate in the funeral. A few days later, Peter, the flaking skin from a face ravaged by a drinker's psoriasis fluttering softly onto the shoulders of an ill-fitting suit, his skinny neck rising startlingly out of a white shirt two sizes too big, his hands trembling with the DTs, stood in the first pew of the cavernous St. Francis Xavier Church. A handful of mourners, hastily gathered from our CHIPS family, stood behind him. Father Petroski told of a fine cut of a woman and her loyal son, with her until the end, an end he charitably didn't spell out. Peter put his trembling hand on the coffin as it was wheeled to the back of the church. We drove Peter out to the cemetery on Long Island, lowered Mary into the ground, and kept on driving to an alcohol rehab center further out on the island. I helped Peter out of his suit—which I promised Mrs. Linehan would be hers after this use—and into a pair of lime green hospital pajamas.

"Peter, you did her proud," I said.

○○

The Benedictines at Mount Saviour Monastery, a group of some forty hard-muscled, tough guys, resembled a Marine battalion ready to take the next hill. Twenty years before, four Benedictines had come to these

see the face of this hollow-eyed dreamer, for whom a Trappist monastery was not demanding enough. I can feel the day's blistering heat and the night's numbing cold inside his humble hut among the nomadic Tuareg in the Sahara's trackless waste. I can see the gun pressed to his skull, the finger at the trigger, a willing lamb of God about to be butchered by the very people he came to help. The wretched of the earth; de Foucauld would have nothing less. And for his devotion, they killed him. He died with not a single follower.

It is sometimes hard for those outside the Catholic tradition to understand our fascination with such people. But this was what we were raised on, the suckling milk of Mother Church, the stories of those who cast all reason aside to live—and, if required, to die—as Christ did, loving whomever God had called them to serve. Not that far from Mount Saviour, up the St. Lawrence River, Isaac Jogues felt called to bring Christ to the Iroquois, and they peeled his skin back, hacked off his fingers, burned him with hot coals, and finally bludgeoned him to death with a tomahawk. Damien went to serve the wretched lepers on Molokai, one day at Mass happily proclaiming to the colony "we lepers" after he had contracted the disease. He died the death he had invited. Saints like these were our spiritual heroes and adventurers extraordinaire, without a drop of pious sentimentality about them. They stood fearlessly against time and place with a purity of vision that brooked no compromise. And, to me, they lived lives that truly mattered.

When the predictable hangover came over me after such flights of intoxication, I groggily took stock. I was a married man, a writer, the founder of a tiny little upstart Brooklyn storefront that could close tomorrow. A fool on a fool's errand with a knapsack slung over his shoulder containing a change of clothes, plenty of Fiorinal, some American Express Travelers Cheques, and a Rand-McNally road atlas. What was I thinking about? At the end of this trip, I would be back in Brooklyn, back to my normal life. Where was all this heading?

I bid my Benedictine companions of a week good-bye with a tender and good feeling about them. Although it had crossed my mind that this could be a permanent place for me, that feeling quickly faded. No, I was not called to be a Benedictine monk. I was married. I headed further north, into Canada, to Madonna House in Combermere, Ontario, a professed community of lay men and women, who also ran houses of hospitality like CHIPS. As I rode on a bus through a sleepless night, I felt more and more energized by the thought: a lay person committed to a life of poverty and service. Yes. This is what I should be doing with my life. My path to God was about to be revealed, I was sure.

the ground more often than in a bed, eating whatever was put before him, but meeting everyone with a simplicity, grace, and gentleness that immediately embraced them. Tony was waiting for me the first evening at a small Indian restaurant on St. Catherine Street. He was in his midsixties then, with thick glasses that magnified his eyes, and a way of chuckling as he tucked in his chin that gave him the look of a little boy who knew he should be more serious about life, but simply couldn't bring it off. He didn't seem the least bit like his patron, Benedict Labre, or de Foucauld, as he dove into the spicy samosas, raita, and lamb curry. I introduced my impressions of Madonna House gingerly, but found that Tony agreed completely about the fussiness and too-serious piety of the place. Not his cup of tea, he admitted. I liked him immediately.

Although he had never married, our lives were not that dissimilar—at least when it came to our rocky and winding spiritual paths. He had known some success as a teacher on a marginalized, poor Indian reservation, but something inside him made him uncomfortably aware that even this was not enough. "I just kept getting the feeling to go deeper, deeper; and I didn't much understand what 'deeper' meant," he said with that characteristic chuckle. After years of painful soul searching and—if my diagnosis over an excellent dessert of coconut-ginger hung yogurt can be trusted—a nervous breakdown, he started Labre House. He now was a full-time itinerant, speaking where he was asked, staying for as long as it seemed useful, a spiritual director charting paths for confused searchers like me. Tony had that engaging ability to talk about the most serious subjects and never sound very serious at all. Everything he did was "small potatoes." He spoke of God as if God were a trusted and understanding friend. Living a life of voluntary poverty in service to the poor was a most desirable and attractive career path. His conviction showed in his dancing, mirthful eyes.

I didn't have to explain much to Tony; he could read between the lines. He knew exactly what had brought me to start CHIPS. He understood the conflict I was feeling between my comfortable middle-class life and the demands of life with the poor. My sentences that rambled into nothingness and my obviously contorted face (only years later would he tell me about his first impressions) were outward signs of an inward struggle.

"Don't force it," he said. "Go down and see Mark; he's a good person to talk to."

When told that Mark was Father Mark Delary at a Trappist monastery in central Massachusetts, I looked at Tony quizzically. Trappists were the silent ones; they didn't speak to anybody. What little plans I had laid for

He was a strange-looking man, a physician who had entered the Trappists some thirty years before. He looked like Jiminy Cricket, with a longish, insectlike oval face and yellowing buck teeth that shot out past his lips when he smiled. It was chilly in the room, which was amazingly elegant for a Trappist monastery, containing the paneling from a French mansion that had been bequeathed to the order. Father Mark pulled his black cowl up over his balding head. He listened to my ranting for a good while, then drew his hands from beneath the black scapular he wore over a long-sleeved white tunic. He looked intently at me, as if all that I had said had made perfect sense and that he saw clearly what my next step should be. I awaited the call, the call to greatness in service, the call to voluntary poverty, the monastic life, the marginalized life, a life of a castoff, with castoffs, the itinerant. Any call.

"What are you reading these days," he said in a flat voice.

What was I reading? "Everything by and about de Foucauld, John of the Cross, just finished *Cloud of Unknowing*."

"No, no, outside that," he countered. "Novels? Nonfiction?"

I stared back blankly.

He was a great fan of Flannery O'Connor and Annie Dillard, neither of whom resonated with me. But, of course, that didn't matter. As the seasoned spiritual director he was, he knew the emotional roller coaster I was on and that although my intentions were admirable, my brain was overloaded with the steep climbs and quick drops. The latest experience or thought or religious book held The Answer. If I only prayed or fasted more, I would know it. I sat there, my elbows on my knees. I stared down at my hands, fingers intertwined. My knuckles were turning white.

"You realize that what you do is also important."

"Writing?" It was as if I were naming the most venal, profane occupation a man could have. "Father, writing just doesn't matter anymore. At one time, I wanted it so bad I could taste it. That's changed. I don't hear the call of the gospel in a *New York Times* story on the latest headline-grabber."

"Don't push this too hard," he said, strangely echoing Tony Walsh's words. "When the roshi was here last year, he reminded us that the Buddha told the seeker: don't seek 'it.' Let 'it' find you. As for looking for this thing we call 'God,' Lin Chi said, 'If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.' If I had an answer for you, you'd have to kill me." He laughed, closing his eyes, running his tongue over those buck teeth. "I wish it were easier. Only when we look back on our lives does it make any sense. We just have to keep slouching toward Bethlehem." He also

16

THE SOFA

BRIAN GAY'S REAL ESTATE OFFICE ON SEVENTH AVENUE had a slightly sinister air to it: a blousy, chain-smoking secretary at the front and Brian lurking somewhere in an inner room, engaged in other pursuits, beneath legal radar, my journalistic mind presupposed. It was a dusty place, with heavy oak office furniture firmly rooted in the 1920s. On being summoned, Brian would appear in the front, a slick-haired Irishman with a pasted-on grin, ready to be of service, providing the service did not take an extraordinary amount of time and for which he would be reasonably remunerated (preferably in cash).

Brian had sold the young, enterprising Wilkes couple their brownstone some five years before, the alleged "owner" being a fleshy-faced young man who smelled faintly of alcohol, whose last name was also, and not coincidentally, Gay. Brian was turning over the property, little doubt about it, having bought it a short time before from who knows what unsuspecting widow or older couple who were unaware that their neighborhood was now growing in popularity and price. J.C. and I had bought in partnership with Lou and Jane Gropp with the agreement that we would have the lower two floors, the Gropps the upper two.

My business this day fulfilled the first of Brian's requirements: it would take no more than a few minutes. His notary fee was $3, about the cost of a shrimp salad sandwich and a soft drink at Herzog's, the delicatessen across Seventh Avenue. With three quick sweeps of a pen—which he asked for as soon as I had lifted it from the third copy—it was finished. He applied an embossed stamp.

I was now both homeless and penniless.

would be such a thing many years ahead—just to be able to touch the flecks of green and know that the sea's salt had seasoned not only those stripes but their father as well. Books, notes, college and high school mementos. That precious Cathedral Latin letter sweater with quill. A few cardboard boxes and a battered suitcase were all the worldly possessions I now needed to worry about.

○○

Face down, the smell of stale beer lingered in my nostrils. A cloud of sweat—old, musty, private parts sweat—enveloped me. Something slightly lumpy, very old, and very fried was under my cheek. A smooth patch on the tufted pillow of the sofa, already worn to a glossy patina by years of use and abuse, had that familiar smell. Semen? I sat bolt upright. I spat out cat hairs that had clung to my lips during a fitful night's sleep. The first light of morning filtered through the slit between the stained curtains, hanging limply on a rod bowed at the middle.

It was Christmas morning, 1974, and there I was, sleeping on a filthy sofa in a third-floor walk-up. Gary Mesacar and Fred Melton were two Union Theological Seminary students, who had once stood in awe of the *New York Times Magazine* writer who had started a Brooklyn soup kitchen. They were not that surprised when he made a request: a bed for a homeless person. When told who it was, there was only a mercifully slight hesitation before they said yes. It was more shock than reluctance.

I had vowed to be a lily of the field, unconcerned with anything material. I succeeded brilliantly and biblically. I did not have so much as a place to lay my head when I signed that separation agreement. I trusted that God would provide me a place to stay, and through the goodness of these two seminarians, he had.

I awoke early that Christmas morning to an empty apartment. Gary and Fred had both left the city to be with their families. I boiled some water for a cup of instant coffee and took it and a piece of outdated Entenmann's pecan roll to the front window. The rising sun cast dirty shards of ochre-tinged light down Seventh Street, glancing off a rearview mirror here, burnishing the remains of a shattered wine bottle there, tiny sparks of life on an otherwise drab city street. The trees were bare, sidewalks silent. Lashed fast to a front door, a single evergreen wreath with flashing colored lights struggled to pierce the gloom. I was alone with thoughts of Christmas Present—or so I deluded myself.

Christmas Present was simple enough: an about-to-be-divorced man finally was living the life to which he had always aspired. He was alone, homeless, trusting in God, feeling at once profoundly sad on this festive