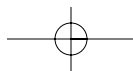
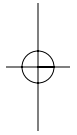
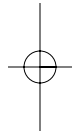


THE
WATER
WILL
HOLD YOU



PROLOGUE

I jumped in the first time when I was eight.

It was a hot day in the East Bay suburbs, on the other side of the tunnel from the San Francisco fog. Fathers juggled tall glasses in which ice cubes rattled, while mothers dangled their bare legs in the shallow end and called to the children to “Slow down,” “No running,” “Stop teasing.” My three-year-old brother, strapped into a squishy rubber contraption, bobbed like a cork in the shallow end.

“Look!” I called out, my toes curled over the end of the diving board.

My mother shielded her eyes with a flattened hand. My father stood in a cluster of chuckling men. Mom always watched, so getting Dad’s attention mattered more.

“Look, Daddy!”

He did.

Now.

I looked down. Water: familiar, hospitable, heated to a comfortable eighty-four degrees. I’d been in it all afternoon. And yet, it looked different from up here: foreign, discrete. Sure, it was contained in the kidney-shaped concrete of a suburban backyard, but still.

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I looked up again. Daddy and the other men were still watching. I bit my lip, snapped my bathing suit over a slice of buttock.

“Go ahead,” my mother called. “We’re watching.”

My toes rubbed against one another.

“The water will hold you,” my swimming teacher had said. I had been four and learning to float by standing in the shallow end and leaning back. When my hands and feet scrambled in alarm, the water acted like water—liquid, as penetrable as air. But when I relaxed, as I gradually did, with Mrs. Ursula just a few inches away, the water didn’t give. I’d had to learn how, and once I had, I’d never forgotten.

I stepped back to the edge, looked down. The object of my longing lay before me, intact. Floating with my face just beneath the water, I’d looked up through its surface so many times, enthralled to be *in* what I was now looking down on. The surface was just that, a surface; what lay beneath was something else, another realm entirely. I bent my knees.

“*Daddy!* Look!”

He rattled his glass. “Tell you what,” he called out. “Let me know just before you hit the water, okay?”

“Jim!”: my mother, half chiding, half humored.

Next thing I knew, I’d plunged through, breaking the surface. I’d carried water in a bucket when Dad washed the car. I knew it was heavy. And yet my body cut it like a knife. I’d broken that mesmerizing membrane, that scrim between air and underwater. I was in. Water slid against my skin, my suit pulled up like a wedgie, water forced up my nose. I couldn’t grab hold but I didn’t need to. It held me.

CHAPTER ONE

*I lift up my eyes to the hills;
From where is my help to come?*

PSALM 121: 1

Prayer changed my life.

But first I had to start praying.

One Sunday in 1996, I walked into All Souls Episcopal Church. I didn't know what I believed. I didn't know *if* I believed. I just knew I felt worse than I'd known I could feel. I'd woken at four A.M., the way I'd been waking for months, to stumble down the hall as my stomach twisted in knots, and then to get back in bed and pull the covers over my head. I dreaded the light that pressed against the windows. All I had to do that day was laundry and paper grading, and it felt unbearable. At dawn, the squirrels who lived in the crawl space overhead began to tumble and cavort. I pulled the pillow over my head. No good. My mind was awake, and it wasn't letting go.

The clock ticked toward 7:30. And then, at 7:50, I got up. I kicked back the covers, stepped onto the rug that never felt quite

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clean no matter how frequently I vacuumed, and pulled on jeans and a turtleneck. I swished water around in my mouth and ran a comb through my hair. I grabbed my coat, stepped out of the apartment, and locked the door behind me. Within three minutes, I was there.

I passed All Souls every day, admiring its neatly tended bed of cyclamen and the simple sign announcing Hours of Worship. I considered its A-frame architecture part of my new neighborhood's landscape, no more significant than the blowsy pine tree in front of my building or the yellow house at the corner. I hadn't met many people or made any new friends in North Berkeley, but I'd become familiar with the terrain of overgrown gardens and jasmine-tangled fences between Black Oak Books, Peet's Coffee, and my apartment. I'd moved in during August; on October 1, I thought, *It's my favorite month of the year. I'll shake this funk off any day now.* Now it was early December, and I felt as anxious as ever. SUNDAY EUCHARIST AT 8 AND 10, the tasteful lettering read.

I looked for a back door to sneak in without having strangers press me with questions or quizzical smiles. No such luck. A tall, pale man stood inside the open double doors, and he'd seen me. In his blue suit and tie, his neatly combed damp hair, he seemed a proper parish representative, someone with whom I'd have little in common. He handed me a bulletin. I stepped inside. The light was still pale at eight o'clock, as the earth tilted toward the winter solstice, and I sat at the end of a pew near a narrow window. I pulled my sleeves down around my fists and tucked them under my crossed arms. Someone up front—an older woman, in neatly coiffed hair and a dress—cleared her throat, and the room felt incipient with a different kind of quiet from the ricocheting

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isolation I was used to at home. This quiet breathed nervousness, yes—but also expectation and potential.

My stomach grumbled and churned, and I clenched my hands. They felt so small, the bones moving against each other in the pressure of my grasp. Maybe I should leave, go buy the *New York Times*, sit at Katz's over a plate of eggs like a normal person on a Sunday morning. I took another look around: I was the only person under fifty. And then a man moved into the pew in front of me, and I felt relief at his youth. He wore a suit, too, its fabric reminding me of the down parkas, popular in seventh grade, that appeared black in most lighting but, outside, could take on the shimmer of beetle green. He glanced at me with large, moist dark eyes behind oversized, thick lenses, and I looked away. Where had he and the pale man and the coiffed woman come from? I never saw such attire on the streets of Berkeley. He pulled out a rosary and began to click through its beads, and my eyes widened in alarm. Wasn't this an Episcopal church? Weren't rosaries a Catholic thing, a hocus-pocus accoutrement, like a fully detailed crucifix over an iron bed in every movie ever made about Italian-Americans?

My doubts went inward. Would something in my stance or casual attire give me away as a lapsed Episcopalian, a doubter? I knew I couldn't take communion: It would be disrespectful and dishonest, since I didn't believe in all that it was supposed to mean. I'd left my wallet at home, I realized; I couldn't even put money in the plate.

I could leave, but I'd have to pass that tall pale man again. And besides, sitting in this space, quiet with the breathing of strangers, felt good. Better than being at home with the laundry

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and my anxiety. The church's bare wooden walls and innocuous beige carpeting and simple altar felt surprisingly reassuring, even with the oversized pastel banner quilted with a cross. A few more people arrived, although most pews remained empty, and when I turned around I saw the tall pale man lined up with another usher and two priests, and they all began walking down the center aisle. I stood along with everyone else in the congregative. Behind the procession, beneath the mezzanine-level choir (which was empty; eight A.M. service, I'd later learn, was said, not sung), lettering proclaimed ALL SOULS ARE MINE, SAITH THE LORD.

What was I doing there, anyway?

If asked, I might have said I was new to the neighborhood and looking to meet people. I might have told how I'd gone to college in Berkeley, twelve years earlier, but how my friends from those days were married or had moved away. I had family nearby in San Francisco—my parents and six-year-old nephew—but I hadn't found the sense of belonging that I'd thought returning to my native Bay Area would bring. I missed New York, where I'd lived for nine years before returning to California for grad school. Now I was struggling with shaping a life as a freelance writer and editor and part-time teacher after the security of a master's program and, before that, a full-time job.

I'm here, I imagined saying, *doing research*. I'd recently written a piece on East Bay swimming pools for a local paper; maybe I'd do similar reconnaissance on Berkeley houses of worship. I'd considered visiting the synagogue down the street, the Presbyterian parish up the hill, the boxy Society of Friends building a mile away. I'd been raised Episcopalian, I could have mentioned—but the fact of my upbringing held no allegiance beyond the fact that here, I thought as I watched the procession, I knew what to do.

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I'm here because I need somewhere to go, I thought as I watched the priest bow low before the altar and then turn to face the congregation, her arms outstretched—but I couldn't imagine saying it. I couldn't imagine telling the truth of what had brought me to All Souls that December day, because I couldn't admit it to myself.

Spiritual longing was not in my vocabulary. I had nothing against religion per se; we went to St. Stephen's Episcopal Church every Sunday of my childhood. I'd helped my mother prepare for the Sunday school classes she taught one year, scooping nut meat out of walnut halves to place a pulled-apart cotton ball and a tiny plastic baby inside and glue with a strap of gold cord, as Christmas ornaments for the kindergarteners. I'd attended youth group in seventh and eighth grades. Then our priest went through a divorce and my parents sided with his wife. Youth group lost its appeal after Julie Bassett announced to everyone on a summer retreat that I'd gotten my period. In high school and college, I set foot in churches only for a wedding or a funeral. I'd gone to Easter services a few times during my years in New York, sitting in the back in various Greenwich Village parishes and considering myself superior to the people in their frilly dresses and huge pink and yellow hats; we were all there because it was Easter, I knew, just as we'd all show up on Christmas Eve, too. At least I didn't pretend to be a faithful regular by taking communion.

My first Easter in New York, I'd walked home past a glorious tulip magnolia just in bloom; *That's my religion*, I thought as I relished the feeling of sunshine on my bare legs after my first East Coast winter. I was willing to consider the existence of a divine deity, but I could not imagine putting aside my rational mind, my

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doubts, to swallow the more far-fetched tenets of religion. Not to mention all the horrors done in religion's (or God's) name. Church might provide a quiet place on a Sunday morning, a way of meeting neighbors. I didn't think beyond that.

And then the congregation spoke. "*We believe in one holy and Catholic church.*"

We do?

There was more.

"*Only son of God.*"

"*Born of a virgin.*"

"*Died and rose again.*"

No surprise, really—after all, I was in *church*. But I couldn't imagine suspending my critical faculties to swallow those amazing claims. Nor could I imagine wanting to. My stomach churned.

This isn't for me.

But I stayed. I didn't take communion. I wasn't going to partake in something I didn't believe in. My fingers worked one another like beads. I crossed and uncrossed my legs, rested my shoes against the kneeling rail and then heard my mother's voice telling me not to put my feet on the furniture. During the Peace, I shook the hands of the people around me and let myself be stiffly embraced by an older woman who called me "dear." During the passing of a polished-brass collection plate, I stared at my lap and pretended to have found a fascinating spot on the knee of my jeans.

During the sermon, I wept.

The priest, a pleasant-looking woman with cardboard-colored hair and rose-tinted glasses, started by talking about *call*, a strong inner prompting, often interpreted as divine vocation. She men-

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tioned Moses and Abraham and Joseph, and then cited secular, real-life examples, enumerating the inherent risk and opportunity for connection in following a hunch, in taking a chance. I thought of moving to New York City when I was twenty-two and knew only three people there; I thought of coming back to California for grad school; I thought of writing. I felt my hands unclench, and I listened as intently as I had a week earlier at a reading at Black Oak Books.

“I’d like to read from Rilke now,” the priest said.

Rilke? I sat up straight, stretched my neck to see her open what looked like a well-worn volume. I felt chastised for my earlier, uncharitable thoughts about the hokey banner. The poem, called “The Annunciation,” fit the gospel reading since that morning was the first Sunday in Advent, although I didn’t know that yet.

“*He looked,*” the priest read, from Rilke’s description of the appearance of the angel Gabriel to the teenaged Mary, “*and she looked up at him, their looks so merged in one . . .*”

Every pore in my body seemed to open, every word to chip away at something inside me. “*The world outside grew vacant suddenly, and all things being seen, endured and done, were crowded into them.*” I thought of my therapist’s office, of moments with friends and lovers when I felt most intensely the struggle to open up, to be seen. I thought of my brother. As the priest finished the poem—“*Just she and he—see, this arouses fear*”—tears ran down my cheeks. The poem had stunned me.

At the conclusion of the service, the congregation followed the altar party down the aisle. The priest stood in a receiving line just beneath ALL SOULS ARE MINE, SAITH THE LORD. I rehearsed a two-line introduction and, as my turn came to shake her hand,

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readied my face into a bland expression as I said my name and that I lived up the street.

"I'm Pamela Cranston," the priest responded with a smile, her blue eyes keen. "Are you new to the neighborhood?"

"A few months."

"A student?" she asked, a logical question given our proximity to the UC campus.

"No," I said. "I'm a writer."

She nodded. "Berkeley has a lot of writers. I'm one too." She gave a little chuckle, one that felt more inclusive than dismissive. "We should talk. I'm in every Wednesday afternoon. Come see me." Other congregants waited for their turn; I could sense their breathing behind me. I gave a quick smile and said, "Okay."

TEN DAYS LATER, walking again down Cedar Street to All Souls, I wondered what Pamela and I would talk about. Yes, I'd been moved by her sermon, but loving Rilke was such a cliché, as though I were still clutching my pink-highlighted paperback of *Letters to a Young Poet*. I was reminded of college in more ways than one: I'd never attended office hours because I never had a specific enough question for the professor or TA.

I'd always been good with authority figures, but I didn't always know how to bridge the gap of formality with them. My father had seared my young consciousness when, in fourth grade, I brought home a C in math and he told me, "There's no excuse for carelessness." I'd spent the following twenty-six years being careful, but I didn't always know how to be myself.

And she was a *priest*. She might see through me to the anxious woman, the skeptic, the little girl who'd once blown spit bubbles

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in church and raised her hand in Sunday school to say that Christ was Jesus' last name. Church meant patent-leather Mary Janes, which I swung from the hard, wooden pew until my mother's hand pressed on my legs to quiet them. It meant my father growing restless during the liturgy and sermons, as he grew restless everywhere except the garden and the kitchen. It meant watching him take my squirming brother by the hand as an excuse to go outside, where Mom and I found them after the service—Blake climbing a tree, Dad smoking and chatting with the senior warden. It meant learning how to blow raspberries on my arm in Sunday school, and it meant youth group humiliation. Around the time we stopped attending St. Stephen's, my mother started saying things like "God is in nature" and "Organized religion is full of hypocrites." Even Dad—such a stickler for detail that he once jabbed the Rite of Marriage page in the Book of Common Prayer during a wordy wedding homily, stage-whispering, "It's all right here, good enough for the kings of England"—would look sage and offer only that "Faith is a personal thing."

And, above all, church meant doubt: doubt about belief, doubt about how to package myself, doubt about what I was doing walking through the basement doorway of All Souls. Admitting anxiety felt contrary not only to the way I'd been raised but to my instinct. I didn't want pity, especially from someone who might foist God on me. And I certainly wasn't looking for God, I reminded myself as I tapped on a door.

Pamela opened it with a smile.

"Welcome." She took my hand in both of hers. "Come in." She gestured me toward a low chair near a wall of overflowing bookshelves and sat down in a swivel chair next to a desk, crossing plump legs beneath a denim wraparound skirt. With her

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floral blouse, brown pumps, and twinkling eyes, she reminded me of a librarian in a British mystery.

“So,” she said, “tell me what brings you to All Souls.”

The upholstery of the chair felt scratchy as I heard myself repeat the line about being new to the neighborhood, about wanting to meet people. “I’m not sure I’m ready to attend church,” I admitted. “I’m not sure what I believe.”

She nodded. “One of the great things about the Anglican church is its acceptance of questions.”

Had I made a mistake, wandered into a splinter cult? I remembered the rosary of the man in front of me the previous Sunday. “I thought this was an Episcopal church.”

“Episcopalianism is the American branch of the Anglican Communion, which has its seat in the Church of England.”

“Oh,” I said. “Henry the Eighth and his divorce.”

“Yes, in part.” She sighed as though she’d been over this many times. “There’s a lot more to our church than one king’s battle with the Pope.” She cited several books that provided a helpful summary of church history, and I dutifully wrote their titles on a notepad. I was on familiar terrain, taking notes, asking scholarly questions, even as I doubted I’d ever set foot in the theological union bookstore to which she gave detailed directions.

I told her I’d been baptized Episcopalian. She told me she’d been a nun—another discovery for me; I’d thought nuns an exclusively Roman Catholic enterprise—and we shared memories of Grace Cathedral in candlelight. “I did youth group in junior high,” I said, shifting again against the upholstery. She nodded politely. “My mom taught Sunday school. My dad was on the vestry.” Was I trying to impress her? Or was I just searching for common ground?

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The room ticked with silence. Glancing around, I observed photographs, framed icons, more books, a small cross on the wall. A window opened onto a parking lot, which All Souls shared with the apartment building next door. It wasn't much of a view—a Cyclone fence, the tops of trees—and yet Pamela's office felt cozy, conducive to work and to quiet, productive thinking—the antithesis of what I'd been encountering at home. My mind went blank as I searched for more facts to dredge up, more comments to bridge the silence.

"I'm looking to meet more people." My mouth was dry, and the words felt like marbles. That reason, I knew as soon as I spoke it, wasn't even a minor factor in what had brought me to All Souls, but I kept talking. "Especially single people. Men."

"Let me think," she said, and I turned the page in my notebook, pen poised. "We don't have too many single folks. There's Jerry, who's going through a divorce. Very painful time for him. Saint Mark's, on campus, has more single people." But I'd already given up at her use of the word *folks*.

"I haven't been with anyone for a while," I admitted, thinking of my last relationship, if I could even call it that—a fling with a grad student. "If ever. I mean a real relationship." I'd been covering this territory in therapy, and I heard myself articulating some of the phrases my therapist had offered up, phrases I'd resisted from the couch but now parroted back. "I haven't always been straightforward about what I want. I have a hard time trusting."

"Yes," Pamela said. "Trust is tough."

My eyes returned again to the icon above her desk, next to the cross. Mary, I assumed—the Virgin or Magdalene, I wasn't sure which. Her large black eyes seemed to mirror an endless

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patience, a willingness to wait and see that I couldn't imagine feeling. There was something else, too, something I *could* relate to: an unstaunchable sadness.

"I lost my brother."

She sucked in her breath, and I continued. "He died—was shot, actually . . ."

"I'm so sorry to hear that. When?"

"Almost three years ago. January eighth, 1994."

"Oh. So you're working through the acceptance."

She must have read something in my face, because she quickly added, "Not that it happens in four neat stages. I lost my brother, too. Also at Christmastime. Christmas Eve, in fact. It ruined Christmas for me."

"We went out of town the first year over the holidays, so as not to be home."

"Smart move. How old was he?"

"Twenty-six."

"Older or younger?"

"Younger. Five years."

She sighed. "The world doesn't always recognize that pain, does it? There's a lot of attention to the parents, the spouse, the children. But siblings are often overlooked."

Staring at the floor, my eyes filled. We'd found common ground. And yet what did all this have to do with church?

"Death's a bitch, isn't it?"

Surprised, I looked up and met her gaze. I knew then that I wasn't going to get a catechism drill on Life Eternal or a request to sign on the dotted line of a Returning to the Fold form.

"Yes," I said.

She asked about my writing and said she was working on

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a mystery novel. I told her I'd worked at St. Martin's Press, a publisher of many mysteries, and gave her suggestions about submitting queries. I no longer noticed the upholstery.

"You're lucky," I said. "You have this office." Its space was feeling more and more appealing, and in it I could imagine not only focus but a kind of intellectual approach to spirituality that I had never considered. There were crosses and prayer books and icons, yes; but there also were tomes of poetry and analysis and thought. There was no sign of squirrels or unpaid bills. I told Pamela about my job teaching high school English, as well as the freelance editing I was starting to do. And then I heard myself say, "I've been struggling a little."

"Grief," Pamela said, "takes a long time to work through."

"It's more than grief," I said, although I didn't know what to call it. *Depression* seemed such an attention-getting word, such an exaggeration—even as I battled its symptoms and filled out its diagnosis code on my Blue Cross claims. I knew how it felt, the constant undermining that manifested itself in agitation and dry heaves, lack of appetite and a sense of tension so pitched I sometimes thought my fingers would snap off when I rubbed them together. Indeed, alone with my journal or sitting with my therapist or a close friend, trying to explain how I felt just made me feel worse. "What do you think triggered this?" friends would ask, and the pit in my stomach would seem a bowling ball. I thought of my mother's familiar retort: "I just don't understand," as though I were holding something back from her. "You're living where you wanted to live, you have the apartment you wanted, you have the teaching job you wanted, you're writing. Everything is going just as you wanted!"

I didn't get it, either.

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Friends offered advice. Go on meds; hang out at a bar; volunteer at a soup kitchen; find a fun, clean man for noncommittal sex. None of these options appealed. Not long before my visit to All Souls, a friend had presented me with a slip of paper on which she'd written the name of a psychiatric clinic at Stanford. Her concern had touched me, before it made me feel worse. Was I that bad off? I preferred the stance of another college friend, who listened patiently one morning when I asked if she'd drive me to an appointment because I felt too scared to get on the freeway, and then said, "I think it's something you need to do for yourself. You can, you know."

Sometimes, in my search for an answer, I latched onto one definable factor as the key, usually while listening to a public radio interview on melancholy or glancing at a women's magazine cover headline about learned optimism. I'd feel a brief flare of relief, usually followed by an hour of manic list-making on what I could do to fix the problem, until I woke the following morning to find the list totally beside the point.

Pamela's attribution of grief felt like one such graspable reason, but her predictable implication made me impatient. Hadn't I already spent close to three years "working through" grief? Didn't I already know the extent of pain I'd felt over losing my brother, pain that had—one morning six months after his death, as I bent to pick up my newspaper from a square of sunlight outside my front door—made me wonder how I could continue to live? If I'd learned anything in the previous two years, I'd learned about grief, and I knew that, as huge a part as my brother had played in my life, my anxiety had its source elsewhere.

"I'm doing what I want to do," I told Pamela, "but . . ."

I heard my therapist's voice: "You're taking a risk," Dr. B.

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would say, or, with heavy irony, “Oh, I see. Commitment is supposed to come anxiety free.” Everyone said I was too hard on myself.

Again, Pamela seemed to follow my thoughts. “Do you have a therapist to talk to?”

I nodded, gave a rueful smile. “Twice a week.”

“She must be good.”

“He. I saw a woman in New York, but now, well, I like him and I’ve had a hard time getting close to men, partly because of my brother, so it’s helping.”

She nodded.

“I just don’t know how much longer . . .”

This, too, was a familiar refrain: Was I such a self-indulgent mess I’d be in therapy forever? I’d already clocked three years in New York; now I was well into my third year with Dr. B. I’d had my first appointment with him two days after Blake died, although I’d made the appointment weeks beforehand. We spent the first six months talking about the loss before we got around to what had brought me in the first place.

“It takes what it takes,” Pamela said. “Depression is a disease. It’s nothing to feel responsible for, you know. You have a lot on your plate.”

I nodded. Hearing her use the word *depression* demystified some of its taboo. I blamed myself for not being able to pull myself out of the black hole, for not being resilient or strong enough, and when someone acknowledged what I was up against, I often felt defensive. Today, I blinked back tears. Pamela had given me a kind of permission.

“You know,” and she gave a wry smile, “we find God at the end of our ropes.”

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Her tone hadn't changed, but the tweed of the chair suddenly scratched more than ever. The silence ticked. Mary's eyes shone opaquely from the icon.

"But I'm a mess," I said. "I feel awful. I feel like shit."

"God doesn't mind." Her face looked calm and assured, not at all smug or preachy. "Have you tried prayer?"

It would be rude to get up now. And yet, as much as I bristled with discomfort, a quiet voice said, *Stay. Hear her out.*

As a child, I'd learned "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." The mention of death had confused me: Was it that easy to slip away? My mother soothed me—of course I wouldn't die that night or anytime soon—but I lay awake wondering why, then, the prayer included such an option. As far as the Lord's Prayer, its petition to "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us" made me think only of the NO TRESPASSING sign in the backyard of the house I took a shortcut through on the way home from school. Those childhood prayers fell far short.

"I don't know how."

"Yes, you do," Pamela said. "You just admitted you feel like shit. That's a start."

My eyes filled again. I'd been crying out "Help" in the car and underwater in the swimming pool, where no one could hear. Desperation that blatant and raw felt embarrassing but oddly liberating and justified, too. But didn't supplication need an outside audience, the way I'd been teaching my students that effective persuasive argument did? In fact, wasn't prayer just another word for persuasive argument?

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As a child at St. Stephen's, I didn't understand what *messiah* meant or how Jesus could be a baby in a manger, a carpenter, the Son of God, and the Risen Lord at the same time. But I did understand that prayer was private, a grown-up thing. When the priest was done and the songs were over and we'd gone for our little flat wafer (I associated the word *host* with bags of favors and Musical Chairs), the grown-ups would assemble themselves into what seemed mostly a question of posture: hands clasped, eyes closed, back straight. My father genuflected, the only one in our 1960s Low Church parish to do so. My mother didn't press her flat palms together (the way she'd taught me to do) as much as lower her entire face into her open hands, as though to disappear. Where did she go? In her wool suit, her pumps, her pantyhose, she was still recognizably Mommy—but she became Other, too. Pure self. Sitting next to her, I first realized she had a life of her own, an identity beyond that of mother and wife. I felt awed and had to hold back the urge to reach out my finger and poke her, gently: "Mommy? You there?"

And then when I was ten and my cat was hit by a car, I discovered that prayer is born of need. "Please God, let Burmaspring Elizabeth live. I'll do anything you want," I begged every night into my Wizard of Oz pillowcase, which I always turned over so I didn't have to rest my cheek against the Wicked Witch. That was my first honest prayer. When my cat returned home with one cloudy blind eye and a wired jaw, though, I had no idea how to live up to it.

I still didn't.

"I don't even know if I believe," I told Pamela. Eucalyptus branches swayed on the other side of the window and, when a car backfired in the parking lot, she appeared not to hear.

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“God doesn’t mind.”

Her words went counter to the good posture I’d mimicked, the demeanor I’d always associated with belief. St. Stephen’s had not been a finger-wagging church, and I couldn’t recall any parental or priestly message that God was mean or vengeful. I’d been raised on a God of love and compassion. And yet I held the conviction that God was the ultimate grown-up and I’d better be on my best behavior—even if I wasn’t sure God existed. *For the sake of argument*, I thought as I searched Pamela’s face for a glimpse of irony and found none, *let’s suppose God is real. Well, then he’s an authority figure and as such he would spot carelessness. Or at least he should.*

“Doesn’t God have any self-respect?” I asked.

“Nope.” Pamela grinned. “God’s not proud. He’s just happy to see you.”

In a nightmare I had frequently as a child, I found myself naked in the middle of Bayview Avenue (where we lived until I was six) in broad daylight. My parents walked with me, and as I scurried to the curb to hide behind the big-finned cars, they told me not to be silly. “Come on,” they told me. “Nobody’s looking.” Exposure made me feel like hiding, even with people I knew and trusted. That’s what I was working on with my therapist, and that’s what had made me cry during Pamela’s sermon: Rilke’s recognition of the intimacy—the fear—of being seen, of opening up, and of doing it anyway.

I yearned for that release. I was crying for help in the swimming pool and begging friends to drive me to my appointments, after all. I couldn’t have it both ways.

Pamela was knocking down my objections, one after another. I kept coming up with more.

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Surely, if prayer didn't depend upon belief or posture, it still demanded the right words. Ad-libbing wouldn't work. I was working every morning on short stories and writing for a local newspaper, but I was also filling my journal and a computer file called "Ycch" with circular rambles that took me nowhere. Once my guide through any labyrinth, words had become either the reverberation of an anxious mind or a dictatorial imperative to figure myself out. Neither seemed a way to relief—or belief. I loved wrestling a long sentence into parallel syntax, loved sprinkling order onto my ideas with a semicolon here, a dash there. I loved losing myself in a world of my own divining; when the work went well, everything made sense at the keyboard, but the freedom and thrill I'd discovered as a girl of eight, sitting up in bed with a notebook propped against my knees and cinnamon toast crumbs on my fingers, now resisted me. I often jabbed out a series of letters that made no sense or stabbed a page with my pen.

"I wouldn't know what to say," I told Pamela.

"The Prayer Book has many good prayers." She'd already explained the various editions of the Book of Common Prayer, a staple in every Episcopal pew and representations of which sat just above my elbow on her bookshelves. "'Help' is a good start. You might try '*God you are here, God I am here.*' Or the Jesus prayer."

She paused, seemed to consider saying more, and then added, "It's really '*Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner,*' but you can just say 'Have mercy.'"

Not only wasn't I ready to acknowledge any son of the living God, but I had no interest in introducing the word *sinner*, or the concept behind it, into my already-all-too-eager-to-cast-

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blame mind. “I don’t really believe in sin,” I told her. Why not go the whole nine yards? This woman was solid. I liked her. More important, I trusted her. “I don’t think I have any,” I continued. “I mean, that’s probably a sin, thinking I don’t . . .”

She raised an eyebrow.

“I have trouble with the word,” I clarified. “It doesn’t feel like it pertains to me. I’m not saying I’m perfect or error-free, I just can’t think of any sin. It’s so laden, so Catholic-sounding.”

“Culturally, it’s a complicated word,” Pamela said. “It has a lot of baggage. But it’s really very simple: Sin means separation from God. We’re all sinners. It doesn’t mean we’re murderers or liars or cheats. Separation from God manifests itself in many ways. Society’s standards and God’s are very different.” She clasped her hands on her lap, gave a gentle nod, and then leaned forward, as though to emphasize a key point. “Start with prayer,” she said. “No matter what words you use, God’s love is there.”

I walked home wondering how she could know that. I walked home wondering where, exactly, was *there*.

THE NEXT MORNING, I woke at four A.M. as usual. The squirrels thumped overhead. Increasing gray pressed against the windows as I burrowed under the musty covers to will away the dawning day. No good.

Pamela had given me the words, but I had to use them.

How?

My stomach seized, and I curled into a fetal position. I saw myself as if from above. What was my problem? What was stopping me? I was alone in my apartment. No one could see me. No parental approval was at stake. The bed wasn’t going to liquefy

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or vanish beneath me. Quiet scared me, pressing emptiness back at me from the windows. Anxiety was awful, but it kept that emptiness at bay, replaced it with its own pressure. The trick, I knew, would be to keep my mind from making too much noise. My head swirled with doubts, but my heart craved solace. *Here goes.*

Prayer. I turned the word around in my mouth, as if tasting the idea. My stomach knotted again, and I tasted the sour trickle that signaled dry heaves. I dashed down the hall.

Back in bed, I tried again. *Prayer.* It was a lovely-sounding word, if I could think of it as just a word. Maybe it wasn't so different from what my parents had told me. *I find God in nature. Faith is a personal thing.* If I was going to find out, I was going to have to jump.

Undeniable daylight shone through the curtains. Time to get up, put on coffee, go into the shower, force down a spoonful or two of Cream of Wheat.

A bird trilled.

"You are there," I whispered.

That was true. The bird was there. The bird and I shared the same moment, in fact, breathed the same air. Light slanted in past the edge of my curtains, whose fabric billowed in a breeze.

"You are *here*," I whispered, and then, even more quietly, "I am here."

That's true, too, the room bounced back. *Keep going.*

I took a breath. "You"—the birds, the breeze, the air—"are here." I looked down at my legs, drawn up to my chest. My familiar knees, the scar on my calf from eighth grade when I picked a scab for months: "I am here." I left "God" out of it, as I repeated the simple statement. "You are here, I am here."