

# Prologue



I VIVIDLY RECALL my mother's blood.

I am at sea now. The ship on which I sail lists badly, despite its ballast: casks once full of whale oil and corn, now empty. The candelabrum by which I write is mounted to this tiny table; its candles burn at odd angles; pools of wax spill over at the wick. There is a full and golden moon tonight, but its light does not enter my cabin, and the weather just now prohibits my going topside. So here I sit, in this dank and dreary hold, my body as troubled by the sea as my mind is by the story to come.

The day it began, all I had was life (some five or six years' worth), language, and a name: Herculine, inherited from a father . . . rather, from a man named Hercule whom my mother did not know well, and whom I knew not at all.

For many years to come I would have little else. Life, language, and a name. And always the memory of the blood.

The Day of the Blood dawns green and gold. It is late summer. Sunrays burn the morning mist from the fields that spread all around us, sizzling in the rising heat. A haze like gold dust in the air. Roadside, fields of hay have been harvested into cones twice my height. A distant barn. A brook runs along, mimicking the road. Far away there rises a black wall of forest.

No people. No sounds but the brook.

I am tired. The sun has risen since we left home, *Maman* and me. I don't know where we are going. I struggle to keep pace.

The road beneath our thin-soled shoes is baked golden brown, dry and dusty and cracked as bad bread. My perspiration falls to pock the earth. My mother perspires terribly; my small hand in hers is a wet rag; it would slip from her grip if it were to slacken at all, but she holds so tightly to me, so tightly.

Nearer now, the forest is not black but green, with its underglow of gold. The sun. The golden undersides of all green things. . . . Deeper, I know the forest is still dark, dark as night.

We walk on, beside the brook, which runs red, clogged with clay. Stones in the shallow water, the hunched and armored backs of ancient animals. The water whispers over the stones.

. . . My mother. Her face is a vessel that has been emptied, that has been broken, has spilled. Her eyes are melting ice. Her simple dress is dark at the crook of the arms, a triangle of dark spreads from her throat over her chest. Already the kerchief at her mouth is spotted red. I fear for her. I know she is not well.

I don't know where we are going. We have been on the road for hours. I have never been this far from the cottage.

Are we near the place we are going? Somehow I know we are. My mother's gait quickens, then steadies and slows.

Why am I in my one dress, with ribbons wound through my long blond plait? The church shoes hurt my feet. And why does *Maman* carry that satchel full of things drawn hastily from my drawer?

The day has been a secret since its start. She laid me down last night as she woke me this morning, with whispers and a kiss. Prayers, I am sure. Now she says nothing. The last of her strength is in her step. Yet she trips over a stone half-sunk in the road and nearly falls. She stops, stands still, and then regains her sickly pace. Her hand tightens around mine, tighter, tighter.

*Maman*, what is it? Please talk to me. Are you all right? *Maman*, why don't we rest?

I see her trembling lips moving in muttered prayer. I see her cross herself.

Suddenly she stops beside the brook and kneels. Down on her bony knees, as I have found her every morning of my life. But this is not prayer, no. She sways, her head in her hands; for the first time she lets go my hand. I am afraid she will fall forward, face first into the brook, dashing her head on a stone. Moments, long moments like this.

Finally I kneel beside her. I cup my hands and scoop water from the brook. *Maman*, drink. *Maman*?

Her hands fall heavily to her sides. She turns her face to mine, slowly. Her eyes roll back to show only their whites. She breaks at the waist. The water falls from my hands as I reach fast for her shoulders, to steady her. She grabs my hands, laps at them, her tongue taking the water that is no longer there. She holds to the empty cup of my hands. Then I see, I think I see, a strange shape come into her eyes, a blot of blackness, writhing, taking shape, and . . . And into my hands she spews and spits the upwelling blood.

Her chest heaves. Her nails dig into the flesh on the back of my hands, slickened and red. There rises a sweet acrid stench.

Blood from her nose. From her mouth. She cries out, tries to speak, but chokes on the blood.

Her eyes flutter shut. Still the blood wave comes, forces her sealed lips to split. While the blood wells again, she tries to speak. I cannot understand her. Her eyes are not her eyes; something else is at their center.

I hold to her. She is heavy. She slips from my blood-slick grip. Her dress tears and she falls on her back on the bank, near the brook. In the brook. I hold her head up. If she turns to either side she will drown.

Standing above, knee-deep in the brook, I cast a shadow over her face. Her eyes open. She focuses with the strangeness at the center of her eyes. The pupil transshapes. Twists and turns into a recognizable shape, but still I cannot identify it. Then her eyes roll back to the whiteness and there is nothing.

I am crying. My mother is dying, I know this. She spasms, coughs up a huge clot of blood. Flat on her back, she drowns not in the brook but in her own blood.

I pull at her. Try to pull her from the water. She is heavy, too heavy. To move her, to take hold of her twitching legs, I let go of her head and it sinks into the red water. Still I pull at her legs. She is too heavy. I pull and pull and she does not move. I see her red and wavering profile underwater. Bubbles rise from her mouth, and underwater I see a black skein of blood unravel.

I am in the brook now, standing knee-deep, trying to maneuver beneath my mother. Trying to shove her up onto the bank. Nothing. Then suddenly she turns.

I shove. Harder. She is on the bank now, on her side, spilling blood into the mud we have made, the bloody mud. She revives. It seems so. But everywhere the blood smell.

She spits, coughs. Tries to speak. And then, clearly, I hear, *Go to the Stone. Take this road to the Stone and . . .*

And with the last of her strength she raises her arm. It

hangs in the air like a crooked branch, one long twig-like finger pointing down the dirt road. *Go to the Stone.*

I follow her finger. There, on the horizon, I see it. Far away.

*Go*, I hear her say. A watery, eerie, deafening cry. *Go to the Stone.*

She rolls from the bank to the brook, and I rise up and run. I run and run and run. To the Stone.



# Book One

## The Night of the Senses

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Thou shalt not suffer the  
sorceress to live.

—*Exodus 22:18*



## 1

Early Life, Such  
as It Was

IN 1812, I went to “the Stone,” the holy house at C——, a village straddling the ill-drawn borders of Brittany and Normandy, dependent upon the grace of the Church. For the next twelve long years, the nuns who had taken me in made it plain: if I lived cleanly, devoutly, as they did, I might one day see the face of God. . . . But no; lately I’ve seen only Satan. The sweet girlish faces of Satan. . . . Ah, but I don’t mean to self-dramatize; I mean only to situate you, Reader, and so . . .

My world was the domain of C——, its sloping fields bounded by picket fences and, beyond, hedges and waves of mounded stones. That place was comprised of a series of outbuildings surrounding three larger, two-story buildings conjoined by galleries, some shuttered, others open. It was hewn of darkly mottled stone and gray slate. Surrounded by tall stands of deciduous evergreens, the place seemed to leech the very light from the sky.

Set loosely at right angles, and forming an inner yard at the center of which rose a statue of the Sacred Heart, the three main buildings were these: St. Ursula's Hall, a large and featureless space sometimes used for assembly, beneath which were the kitchen and dining hall; the dormitory, set above a bank of classrooms, nuns' cells, and offices as well as our Pupil's Parlor, where the girls received their visitors; and the third building, which housed the main chapel, Our Lady of Prompt Succor, as well as the sisters' chapel, the main library, and several lesser libraries. Beyond the chapel sat the dairy and the stables. Beyond the stables was a graveyard, where we buried our dead in private. Too, there was the laundry, a dovecote, a carpenter's shop, a smithy, and the building known as the Annex, which sat empty and unused all my years at C——. White pickets formed our inner borders; and it was within these pickets that we girls, twice daily, surrounded the Sacred Heart to take our exercise. The youngest girls formed an inner circle, so near the statue as to see our Lord's incarnadine heart amid the marble folds of His robes. If the weather was fair, it was in the yard, thusly circling our Savior, that we would stand with arms akimbo, bending at the waist, doing this and that, careful always to keep one foot firmly planted on the ground, "as befits a lady." In winter, we would crowd under the galleries and stretch and bend as best we could. My position in these drills was fixed: I had always to stand nearest the kitchen, lest Sister Brigid need me for some duty therein.

Understand: I was the sole scholarship student at C——, and I was made to work for my keep. Usually in the kitchen, sometimes in the laundry or gardens. Though Sister Isadore ran the Lower School, and Sister Claire de Sazilly the Upper (both answering to Mother Superior Marie-des-Anges), it was to old, enfeebled Sister Brigid that I reported. I loved her; she was kind. Kind too was the extern I knew from an early age, Marie-Edith, who came to C——from the village thrice weekly to help with meals; she also did our shopping,

as the sisters were suspect of all worldly commerce. Indeed, it was I who lately taught Marie-Edith to read in my room off the kitchen. . . . Yes, I lived apart, at Sister Brigid's request, and I did not mind. The cellarer, Sister Margarethe, however, did mind: not only did I occupy her pantry but I deprived her of the root cellar dug into its floor and covered over with boards. Though it was barren and cold in winter and damp in summer, with its walls in constant sweat, the room suited me. It was private; and it was privacy I craved above all else. No novitiates came to see that my Bible lay beneath my pillow as I slept. No one woke me harshly at first light. Neither did the candles I burned through the night attract attention. And, blessedly, a pump sat just outside the kitchen door, and it was from this that I drew my bath water, bathing alone behind my closed door.

Not only did I have to work for my keep—and countless were the potatoes peeled, the corn shucked, the fish scaled and gutted . . . —I had to succeed academically. If I did not—and this was intimated, if never stated—I might be sent away to an orphanage or some lesser facility of the Ursulines.

And so I became an excellent reader at an early age. In time, no text was beyond me. And the books at C——. . . . So many wondrous works, though I remember too some particularly hateful theology and sheaves of impenetrable poetry. . . . I was perhaps ten when I began to study Greek under the tutelage of Sister Marie de Montmercy. I immersed myself in the language; but only until I discovered Latin, to which my allegiance shifted. Here was the language for me! So sensible, the construction of its sentences as satisfying as a puzzle perfectly done. I don't mean to say that I rambled about C—— with Aeschylus and Cicero tripping off my tongue, but fluency did come in time. Additionally, there were the hours devoted to the perfection of our French, of course—and her sisters, Italian and Spanish. I worked diligently on English and German in private; quite similar, the two, though I loved the myriad exceptions of the

former and detested the guttural rattlings of the latter. For this, I relied solely on texts and guesswork, for none of the nuns spoke English and only one spoke German (ancient Sister Gabriella, as likely to nod off as to assist me with the nuances of pronunciation).

Mathematics, penmanship, geography. . . . These were easy and unexciting subjects, which I easily mastered. (Immodest, but true.) Yes, scholastically, I further set myself apart and eventually won access—for one hour each day—to the private library of Mother Marie-des-Anges.

That library! . . . The rich, supple bindings of Cordovan leather. And the thin blue cloud of smoke that seemed always to hang in the air (Mother Marie-des-Anges favored an occasional Spanish cigarette, *en vie privée*). Sunlight seeped into the library through two large windows of Bavarian stained glass. That pied light was enrapturing. I would position myself to let the multihued light swim over whatever text I read. . . . Those hours in the library of the Mother Superior are my finest memories of C—; and it pleases me to have them, for all my other memories of C— are of the Chaos that overtook order there.

Order? Oh yes, life at C— was well-ordered. Our days were divided into canonical hours, those times appointed for an office of devotion: Matins, followed by Lauds, then Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline. After Lauds we studied for one hour, at which time a bell would summon all the girls to a breakfast of white bread (wonderfully warm on Monday and Thursday), thick pats of cold butter, and coffee. We ate in silence, seated on benches before long oak tables. We wore our gray work pinafores, white puffs of tulle at the sleeves (so extravagant that seems now!); our hair was wound into braids or tucked beneath caps of white chamois.

Breakfast lasted a half hour. A Low Mass might follow; typically, classes would commence directly. Then Terce, or

High Mass on holy days. Followed by more study. Occasionally, the younger girls would be granted a fifteen-minute recess during which they would receive black bread and water. Thrice daily, at the discretion of the Mother Superior, the Angelus bell would sound and we would gather to commemorate the Incarnation.

We ate our primary meal at Méridienne, or high noon. This meal—dinner, we called it—consisted of vegetables grown in our gardens, perhaps a stew of game, or seafood that Marie-Edith had begged from a fisherman “of the faith” down on the quay. Wine was often poured from the vast store kept by Mother Marie-des-Anges. We ate well, owing, I think, to her presence: she had a taste for . . . for life’s finer things. (At our meals, I served, eating only after the other girls, and in the company of various externs and aged, infirm nuns. This did not shame me, though it was often suggested to me that it should.)

Dinner was followed by exercise, rest, or prayer—the decision was not ours. Then None. More study. Vespers. Meditation. Study. Collation: a light meal of fruits or cheeses. Compline. And finally, sleep. Our routine was only slightly more relaxed during summer recess, when the great majority of girls left C—— to vacation with their families; many nuns, too, went on summer retreats of one kind or another.

. . . Regarding my time at C—— . . . I endured. Took refuge in the orderliness of the convent school, the ceaseless tick-tocking of that canonical clock, every day the same, same, same. . . . And I tasked myself with study.

. . . Ah, but of course there is more to say. I do not wish to say it, but I must, and will.

The school at C—— was attended by girls of a particular sort, and it seemed to me that by some cruel act of Providence I’d been cast there to remind them of their many advantages. They were lace to my linen, jewels to my gimcrack. Upon maturation, they would *ascend*. Their fa-

thers had made fortunes in commerce; the daughters of these men, though derided as “common” by the girls of bluer blood, were rich. They spoke of dowries and diamonds and what Papa and Mama were doing with whom and where— polo with a crowned prince, horse racing with the Raj, brunch in Paris with a Swedish baroness, et cetera. It was a language I could not speak.

That no beribboned packages from Paris came for me was fine. True, I would never spend summers where another language was spoken. I would never “take the waters” here or there. No pieces for violin and pianoforte would be commissioned and played to mark my birthday. About this, nothing could be done.

Though shy and unseen by the other girls, I, at an early age, became a favorite of certain nuns. Sometimes the attention accorded me in the classroom was an embarrassment. One nun in particular seemed almost smitten. She would stare at me, every question was asked *of* me, every answer presented *to* me as a gift. These attentions decreased over time; still, I would sometimes stare at my hands (so despicably large!) or at the bank of fir trees beyond the classroom window so as not to meet a sister’s gaze. There was one nun in particular . . . Of course, I’d no idea what this nun sought, if anything; now I might hazard a guess, for I know things about the lives of cloistered women, things I’d no inkling of then.

Perhaps the nuns’ small favors encouraged some enmity among the other girls, but I didn’t care. Let them say what they will, I thought. Did I revel in their envy? Perhaps. I hadn’t their wealth, their graced and easy lives. Let them envy my learning.

Yes, the more attention I received from the nuns, the farther I was distanced from my peers; it was an unfortunate equation. I did not fight this; indeed, I simply studied harder. For me there was nothing but the books. I *lived* in the learning.

Yet, some years after arriving at C——, I began to

sense . . . things. Sense the reason I lived life at a remove, distanced from the other girls, distanced from my true self. . . . In later years, I began to notice certain changes taking place as regards my body. My appearance began to change in ways that shamed me. The other girls were changing as well: some sprouted early into womanhood. None of the changes I noticed among them mirrored my own, and this alarmed me. I waited vainly for my figure to become fuller; but I remained . . . unendowed.

Of course, the majority of the girls must have been simply made; but to me they were perfection. Delicate as dolls in their lacy white dresses; one, I recall, wore a cameo of her mother, deceased in childbirth, on a ribbon of apple-green silk; another, pale and sickly, was sometimes let to wear the pearl earrings sent to her from the Azores by her father—and those adornments, like calcified tears, seem to me now to be emblematic of the girl. It was to her that I was most drawn. (Pride bars me from naming her here. And to deem her a “friend” would be inaccurate.) Frail and often ill, she lived her life at a remove from the sorority. Our physicality set us each apart: she was weak and I was . . . *alors*, I was me. . . . She was kind to me on occasion; unaccustomed to such and ever-wary, I took her kindnesses and tried to spend them in turn. . . . No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever forgotten; this I believe. It becomes an emotional currency, remaining in constant, universal circulation. As for the opposite of kindness, which I have known well, it deserves no name.

. . . Yes, the girls were the manifestation, the literal embodiment of my dreams. They were what I wanted, impossibly, to be. Understand: I hoped then that I might change. Hoped that I might yet ripen into an approximation of what they were: beautiful girls. But I was . . . indelicate, graceless, and overgrown. In time, I lost that hope and reconciled myself to my fate, to my physical state . . . my particular, my *peculiar* physical state.

I had always been tall, but by thirteen or fourteen I stood a full head taller than any other girl at C——. My form lacked the roundness, the suppleness of the other girls. I was angular where they were curvaceous. I was lean where they were plump. My limbs were embarrassingly long, and I possessed an uncommon strength. (How I would flush with shame when asked by Sister Brigid to reach down a jar from the cupboard, or force a stuck door, or pull a swollen cork from a jug of wine!)

Even the features of my face began to change; imperceptibly, of course, but to me the changes appeared sudden, drastic. My forehead grew more prominent, and the planes of my cheekbones seemed too high and angled. My eyes embarrassed me: they seemed the portals to some secret place, and I was loathe to meet anyone's gaze. (My eyes are well-shaped, and of an uncommon blue-green. . . . I will say that I have recently been told they call to mind the shifting shades of shallow seas.) My nose, which had been pug, slightly upturned, matured to its present shape—Roman, one might say, well-shaped; at the time it seemed to me grotesquely long. My lips grew full to frame an overly large mouth. My skin—unblemished, fast to blush—bore a natural pink tinge; other girls used powders, or pinched their cheeks to achieve a similar effect. As for my neck, it seemed an aberration: spindly, too long and thin. My hair was like straw to me then, unruly, brittle and thick. I wore it in a tight plait that hung down, bisecting my back. I would wear no ribbons. I did nothing to attract attention. . . . My feet? What horror they stirred in me! Laughable now, really, but at the time I strove to conceal them. I, like Cinderella's stepsisters, tortured myself with shoes whole sizes too small. And I wore gloves to hide my hands, which seemed to me those of a giantess.

*Enfin*, every detail of my physical being embarrassed me. My stomach was in a constant state of upset, so scared was I

that someone would tease me, or even talk to me. The nuns and girls had the power to mortify me with a single word, uttered innocently or not. I lived in a state of abject discomfort . . . physical, social, and emotional discomfort. I wanted to disappear, dissolve into imagined worlds, the worlds of which I read.

The nuns at C—— knew where their charges were headed: back into the bourgeois homes from which they'd come—having left one as Daughter, they'd enter another as Wife. And so the requisite skills were taught them. "Parlor skills." I had no aptitude for such. I hated those long hours engaged in inane handicrafts: the spinning and whittling of little masterpieces destined to gather dust in drawing rooms; the making of fabric-covered buttons intended to bedazzle a maiden aunt or adorn the waistcoat of a younger brother. . . . We were schooled in the mending of lace, taught to paint mini-portraits on ovals of ivory with single-bristle brushes (the worst!), and shown how to tie off needlepoint knots so that the back of a canvas was as tidy as the front. Never in my life have I felt more keenly the passage of time, its utter *waste*.

I managed to turn my scholastic success to my advantage; it seemed a matter of my sanity! I petitioned for and was granted time away from those handicrafts to study independently. It was tacitly held that I would have no use for such skills; what parlor talents I'd acquire would never be put to practice, for the wars of my life would not be waged in parlors. I'd need no such arsenal to back my efforts at securing a husband or subordinating a servant.

And so on those afternoons when all the girls strove to acquire the arts requisite to their success as ladies, I wandered the gardens alone. In dire weather I took refuge in the Mother Superior's rooms, at a tiny table inlaid with roseate marble.

I read while the others darned and sketched and sang. In

time, I came to long for books physically—the ink-scent of a new book, the musk of an ancient tome. I would finger the threads of the sewn bindings; and how luckless I felt if a favorite book did not have gilt-edged pages. These works transported me; and the leather-bound pages forged a shield behind which I hid.

Such friends I made: Mrs. Radcliffe and the Scotsman for romance. Their novels were read by the light of pilfered candles in my pantry-room, or slipped between the leaves of some more suitable work. They were scandalous, not the proper pastime of a girl. . . . Ah, yes . . . It was in the works of those two novelists that I lost myself, wholly and happily. What a world they conjured, filled with love affairs, sly mistresses, persecuted ladies fainting in lonely country houses, post-riders slayed at every relay, horses ridden to death on every page; there were dark forests, mountain vistas, palpitating hearts, vows, sobs, tears, kisses, skiffs in the moonlight, nightingales in thickets, and gentlemen brave and virtuous as God. In my dreams I was the chatelaine in the low-waisted gown whiling away her days with her dainty elbows at rest upon the casement, chin in hand, attendant upon the white-plumed rider who'd gallop toward her across a windswept moor. Sometimes, too, I was the white-plumed rider. (Of course, I didn't know a skiff from a barge and I'd never set foot upon a moor, windswept or otherwise, but that mattered not at all.)

I had Browning for beauty, Shakespeare for the lot of life. I committed whole soliloquies to memory, treating stands of trees and inquisitive squirrels to my theatrics. I favored Hamlet's indecisiveness, Prospero's pained anger, and Lear's loneliness. I attempted Lady Macbeth's crazed strength, but I could never quite achieve it.

Quieter hours were passed with Pliny and Plutarch. (Nothing rivals the romance of a fallen empire—the intrigues of statesmen and debauched emperors, daggers

drawn from cloaks, and poisons tipped from rings into gem-encrusted goblets. . . .) . . . It was Ovid and me. Horace and Homer. Plautus, Pythagoras . . . any philosopher I could get my hands on. I read everything. One long weekend, I recall, I even read a collection of papal bulls!

. . . And through all the reading, I held to a false belief: that this was living. I know now that books are but ashes to the fire that is life. Still, I do not regret a single moment spent reading, not a one. I am thankful for the diversion the written word afforded. I don't know what I would have done otherwise, for my life was horrid. Horrid and unlivable. Yet I lived it, I survived. Granted: I do not speak of cramped quarters, consumptive girls sleeping four to a bed, or meals of chestnut gruel. . . . No; I speak of things far less common than that, and far, far stranger.

. . . I am trying to summon courage here. There are things that must somehow be said. Yet I hesitate. It's not that I grasp for words—the opposite really: I'm afraid that once I start telling this tale I won't be able to stop. No, I know the words will come; it's controlling the rush of recollection that concerns me. But there is a story here to tell, and I have sworn myself to tell it truthfully. To tell it even though the facts are preposterous; they strain credulity and will be, for some readers, beyond belief.

. . . But please, you must believe me, or I cannot go on. And you, Reader . . . well, there is a reason you hold this work in hand, no? Perhaps that reason is clear to you now; if not, trust in this tale of mine and all will come clear in time. I promise you that.

. . . We return to C——.

Long years passed. I remained apart from the others. Apart from life. No one touched me, and I touched no one; no mother's touch, no sister's touch, and certainly no lover's touch. True, I excelled at my studies, and was eventually let to determine my own course of study. So I would retreat into

St. Augustine, or lose myself in the labyrinth of Latin grammar. . . . Books, books, and more books. It was all ash; no fire; and no warmth.

Finally, one morning not long ago, while I was rolling dough in the kitchen, Sister Isadore came to request a moment of my time. We quit the kitchen together. We walked in silence through the gardens near the kitchen, traced with our steps the narrow paths of flagstone; the whole of the garden was bordered by boxhedge, and geometries of box within the garden kept our herbs from overtaking the cellarer's vegetables, kept the tomato stalks from leaning too far into bright batches of begonias, dahlias, fleur-de-lis, oleanders, marigolds, purple ageratum, and gray artemises. . . . Sister Isadore asked how I was progressing with my studies. Well, said I. Did I enjoy my kitchen chores? Yes, I lied; she said she was glad. Silence ensued, and I broke it, as I knew I ought, by expressing yet again my thanks to the Order for taking me in when I, as a child, had run crying to their door. Sister Isadore bowed deeply to accept my thanks.

"Confirmation is fast approaching," said she, finally. She stood straight-backed and tall, weaving her long spiderish fingers into a web. I stared up into her colorless eyes, for already I knew a pronouncement was in the offing.

"Yes," I said. All those younger girls who were set to be confirmed were busy with preparations, as were we in the kitchen. "In July, no?"

"July the sixteenth, to be exact. Mere weeks away. After confirmation, as you know, there is always a . . . a reordering of the girls." Sister Isadore fell silent. I understood when finally she said, absently, more to herself than me, "Of course, there's the slight matter of the exam . . ."

"Yes, Sister," I said.

"But surely *that* will not trouble *you* at all." Sister Isadore congratulated me, assured me that this was in my best interest—which meant, of course, What else was to become of me? I'd come from nowhere, and had nowhere to return to.

Evidently, she deemed me unworthy of a sacral marriage to Christ. What else was I to do but teach?

Yes, I was to be sent up. To the Upper School. There I would be trained to teach.

My only thought was this: that I would have to live in the dormitory, among the other girls. Sister Isadore confirmed this, and congratulated me again; she added that less would be expected of me in the kitchen, though I was still to serve at mealtime. She looked at me incredulously when I asked if I might remain in my room. No, said she; clearly the cellarer had succeeded in her long campaign to win back her pantry and root cellar. I begged to remain in my room and Sister Isadore grew impatient. In the end, she walked away.

When next the test was administered, in the week preceding confirmation, I sat for it. I had already filed my birth certificate at the office of the superintendent. (Actually, as I have no birth certificate, I presented a letter from Sister Isadore.) The mayor of C—— endorsed a certificate of good morals on my behalf, though he knew nothing of me, let alone my morals. I more than passed: I answered every question correctly, thus earning for myself the unframed picture of the Virgin that had long hung in the laundry.

The day of confirmation—16 July—came quickly and passed slowly. At day's end, with the greater part of the girls gone, I was to move into the dormitory.

Twenty girls dressed in white formed a procession that wound through the house and yard toward the chapel. They were slick with perspiration beneath their decorative dresses, lace-fringed confections. We older girls, confirmed in years past, sat shoulder to shoulder in the back of the chapel, among mothers, sisters, aunts, and grandmothers busily fluttering fans before their flushed faces. (No men were allowed within our precincts. They waited at the gates.)

The ceremony progressed with all the pomp and severity a holy house can display on such occasions. Afterward, the double-parlor beneath the dormitory was opened to receive

the girls and their female relations. There were hugs and kisses and introductions, invitations to meet here or there during the recess. I stood idly by in a corner for nearly an hour, still as the portraits hanging above me, and having no greater role to play in the day's events than they. Finally, unable to bear that society a moment more, I made my way back to my room. It was dark and dank and undecorated, but it was mine, and I was loathe to leave it. From my tiny trunk, I unpacked a simple shift. I slipped from the kitchen through a back door.

I did not know of my destination until I arrived there: a faraway, neglected grotto. This tiny structure built of stone had long ago fallen into disuse and disrepair: it sat too near the dairy and the fetid perfume of our few cows wafted over it when the wind blew just so. I loved the grotto for its seclusion, for its lichen-covered statues, for the pocked and friable faces of its unknown saints standing sentinel beside the Virgin. There was a rusted stand of wrought iron, intended for votives, which stood on bowed legs, brittle and thin. Sundry ferns, seemingly borne on the air, grew from between the mounded stones. There, in the grotto, I had often spread a shawl on the bench beside the Madonna and sat reading for hours. That day, I sat staring at the Blessed Mother and the idling saints. When I began to pray—rather absently, I confess—my prayers fast dissolved to tears, and for a long while I sat crying for reasons I could not have named.

The day had dawned brightly, the summer sun falling down like bolts of golden cloth, the sky cloudless and perfectly blue. But as I fled the high-pitched din issuing from the double-parlor, as I stole away from the house proper that early afternoon, a bank of low clouds slid in, occluding the sun. The clouds were grayish-green, laden with rain. I heard the rolling groan of still-distant thunder. A warm wind rose up; a lone shutter slapped against the casement, crisply.

The skies were darkening. The air, redolent of rain, of turned earth and decay, was cooling quickly as I hurried on to the grotto.

In time the cloud cover settled squarely overhead, infusing the sky with light the color of a new bruise. The wind grew stronger, till the trees spoke for it with rattling green tongues. Though the thunder rolled ever nearer, there was no sign of lightning.

Already I heard the first of the coaches rumbling away from the convent, bearing down the packed-dirt road that passed not far from the grotto and led from C——; the celebrants would hurry away before the coming rain rendered the road impassable.

I remained.

Then the rain came. First a few drops, falling on the thin canopy like nails on tin. When the rain fell faster, harder, the green covering caved. The grotto sat in a recess of lawn, saucer-like; soon, the rain pooled at my feet.

Not long after, the lightning came. Only then did I rise to leave, and I did so unhurriedly.

I was still some distance from the front door when Sister Isadore swooped down upon me, unseen, like a dark and winged thing. How unlike me to leave her wondering and waiting, worrying. Had I lost my mind, dallying beneath a summer storm? Had I forgot that I was to serve our guests? Ahead of us, beside Sister Claire de Sazilly, Head of the Upper School, stood the cellarer Sister Margarethe (who seemed to exist in the Head's shadow) and Mother Marie-des-Anges, beautiful Mother Marie, who'd always been kind to me and with whom I would converse on those occasions when she'd discover me in her library, lost in thought. It was she who welcomed me to the Upper School; and it was she who pointed out a faraway rainbow, its arc complete.

"Rainbow, indeed," dismissed the Head, adding, to me, "You'll find that your trunk and whatever else was yours has

been delivered to the dormitory. As for your room," said she, turning to her great and good friend the cellarer, "its restoration to a pantry has already begun."

"Shelves," breathed the cellarer, leaning nearer the Head, "remember, Sister, you promised me shelves."

"And you'll have your shelves," said Sister Claire. Which assurance caused a smile to spread over the pinched face of the cellarer, whose pink cheeks oozed from the tight white wimple she favored.

In the company of Mother Marie, I made my way to the dormitory. She suggested I change from my wet dress, but I declined. She insisted, kindly, and as I was shivering I did draw from my trunk my second shift. Refusing the Mother Superior's help, I slipped behind a screen of white tulle and shed my soaked clothes like a skin; they lay lifeless on the parquet floor. I did not strip off my stockings, and I donned again my sodden shoes.

The dormitory, which I had visited but once or twice when charged with bringing a sandwich or such to a bedridden girl, was barn-like, huge, with no interior walls; its pitched eaves rose up into raw rafters in which small black birds nested. Later, I would see bats hanging head-down in those rafters. I learned quickly to sleep on my stomach—a safeguard against the falling excrement. Set into the angle of the roof were two huge skylights. It was through these panes of thick, yellowed glass that light (and rain) fell into the dormitory. This glass jaundiced the brightest dawn; through it the most perfectly pale and opalescent moon appeared waxen and flat.

At either end of the dormitory, capping the rows of closely spaced and scantily screened cots, were two beds overhung with white linen, each belonging to a novitiate whose job it was to guard the girls in slumber. Beside each of our cots was a small table with one candle (which we burned with care, for one had to petition the Head for an-

other). Above each bed was set a small crucifix of birch. At the foot of our beds sat our trunks, which were left open as (quoting the Head), "Christ's child has nothing to hide." Our sheets were of coarse linen, our blankets of coarser wool, and our pillows were filled (or so it was said) with the down from a single goose.

Mother Marie-des-Anges directed me to my place, and took her leave. I dragged my battered trunk to my cot, near the end of one row, beside two cots whose mattresses were rolled, their tenants already departed.

It was, of course, the lack of privacy in the dormitory that unnerved me. And it was the hour of rising, when that lack of privacy was most pronounced, that I would come to dread. I would hide myself within the sorority as best I could. I *knew* to. I was aware of . . . of *something*, something that shamed me.

Understand: I had been motherless nearly all my life. I was in many ways younger than my years, less mature. (I believe I am seventeen or eighteen now.) I had not known any woman well; no one had become that special someone—for most girls it is their mother, an older sister, an aunt or cousin perhaps. Nuns and girls had been my constant companions, yet among them something had set me apart. The nuns' interest in me was academic, sometimes spiritual; they sought to instruct or save me; none of them taught me what I needed to know. No, there was no one to whom I might address certain questions, questions of a *delicate* nature. . . . Must I be more specific? No; I will trust to your good sense. Think of those things a young girl, a young *woman* should know; and believe me when I tell you I knew none of those things. *None!* I was ignorant, pathetically so. What knowledge I had I'd gleaned from the girls. And often the information proffered by them was deliberately misleading; it was a game played against me, against all the younger girls at times.

That summer we remaining girls rose *en masse* in predawn darkness to dress and see to our toilettes. I can still hear that horrible bell shattering the silence of sleep. I can see the novitiates marching down the rows of cots, ringing that bell, banging it on the beds of the girls who lay in the deepest sleep. Its brass cup would send a shiver through the bed frame, through my very bones. . . . I lay feigning sleep, a sleep so deep I simply could not rouse myself from it. I lay listening to the sibilance of slippers shuffling across the floor, waiting for the novitiate or nun who would come and chide me with bitter breath. How skilled I became at deception! And for this I incurred their wrath, and chores beyond number.

On appointed days, a rotating shift of girls rose early to fill the tubs with tepid water for bathing (heating the water had been my job previously, when I'd been resident in the pantry). These days we were expected to don our thin bathing dresses and dip, two at a time, into the tubs. I could not do this. *I simply could not*. I would sneak into icy baths in the predawn hours, when all the others slept, or I would rise late and slip into a tub of dirt-darkened water.

Invariably, I would arrive late to Lauds. I would slide into a back pew beneath the heated, scornful gaze of the nuns, frequently disrupting the service. But I hadn't a choice: I would suffer what I must in order to keep my secret, a secret unknown even to me.

That first afternoon in the dormitory, Mother Marie had introduced me to several girls gathered around a certain cot. They knew me, and I knew them, but it was as if I'd come from another world. "This is Herculine," said the Mother Superior. "We welcome her to the Upper School, where she will train for the teaching certificate." There was snickering and bitter words; one girl estimated my height in hands, as one does for a horse.

I kept far from that gaggle of girls, walked toward the dormitory's far end. There was a broad window, giving out

to the sea. Through it, I saw that same rainbow. A great arc of pure color, its bands distinct. Earlier, outside, before Sister Claire had dismissed it, Mother Marie had averred that the rainbow was a gift from God and, in a whisper, she'd added to me how lucky I was to be in receipt of such, on "this of all days."

That afternoon, with the girls milling about behind me, I stood staring at the rainbow a long while. It was beautiful, yes, arching over the summer fields of hay cones and crops, the sky a deepening blue behind it, its colors as elemental and pure as the storm it trailed. But I closed my eyes, clenched them tight as fists so as not to see, so as not to cry. For this is what I knew to be true: the rainbow was no gift from God. It was a promise He could never keep.