

**home is always**  
**the place you just left**

A MEMOIR OF RESTLESS LONGING  
AND PERSISTENT GRACE

betty smartt carter



PARACLETE PRESS  
BREWSTER, MASSACHUSETTS

Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Bible.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Smartt Carter, Betty, 1965–

Home is always the place you just left : a memoir of restless longing  
and persistent grace / by Betty Smartt Carter.

p. c.m.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 1-55725-323-4 (pbk.)

1. Smartt Carter, Betty, 1965– 2. Presbyterians—United States—

Biography. I. Title.

BX9225.S474 A3 2003

285'.1'092—dc21

2003000167

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

© 2003 by Betty Smartt Carter

ISBN: 1-55725-323-4

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in an electronic retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Published by Paraclete Press

Brewster, Massachusetts

[www.paracletepress.com](http://www.paracletepress.com)

Printed in the United States of America.

*To Julie Sparkman, my teacher*



# **contents**

Introduction - vii

## **1**

Night Terrors, Button Jars

1

## **2**

God from the Other Side

16

## **3**

The Oldsmobile of Heaven

31

## **4**

Enter the Dragon

50

## **5**

Face to Face

71

## **6**

Exile

86

**7**

A Telltale Heart

103

**8**

Beauty

115

**9**

Walking in Shadows

128

**10**

The Path of Restlessness

142

**11**

Incarnation

163

**12**

A Pregnant Metaphor

177

**13**

Resting State

197

Notes - 211

Acknowledgments - 214

## Introduction

---

This is a story about how God revealed himself to me before I knew I was looking for him. I now see that God is always revealing himself to us: through family, through friends, through beauty, and, ultimately, through suffering. These are signs on the road, pointing us straight to the door of heaven. The door looks a little different to everybody, but that doesn't matter. By the time we get there, we don't care about anything but stepping through it.

I first learned about God in my relationship with my mother. She taught me the two most important points of theology: that God loves us and that he's good. As a five-year-old, I wanted to be crucified with Jesus, and once tried to do the job myself. Later I scratched Bible verses on sidewalks with chalk and declared I'd grow up to be a missionary. You'd think, given such a great head start, that I'd have found God early on: I'd have been glowing with spiritual fulfillment at least by junior high school. But the journey proved to be long and difficult. It's not finished yet, and I still resist it.

John Donne wrote in his *Holy Sonnets*,

*Batter my heart, three-personed God . . .  
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend  
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new. . . .\**

What is it like to be overthrown in order to rise and stand? How does it feel to be bent, broken, blown, burned, and made new? It feels like hell. God's battering is not easy; his burning is not quick. Many a day, I'd have preferred a nice aneurysm. And though now I see that the results of God's burning are good, I won't lie and say I'd do it all over again.

I don't know why God makes us go through suffering when he could heal us with a word. I don't know why we have to suffer the agonies, the indignities of this temporal life. I haven't figured it out yet, though I've heard plenty of theories, and met plenty of people ready to expatiate on the subject. Maybe the best I can do is consider what the question itself means, and then look to the cross, where Jesus himself cried out "Why?"

*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?\*\*\**

Those words are Christ's gift to all of us who've wondered whether suffering has any point. They offer no answer to the mystery of pain, only kinship in grief, and a rebuke to any human being who claims to understand why a loving God asks his children to endure hardship.

At times over the years, I've ached for the easy belief of my childhood. I thought I could deal with unhappiness if I could also have joy and passion. I wanted miracles. No such luck, since I was Presbyterian. I longed for beauty and mystery, and I'd given up hope of finding either in the tradition that formed me. Then when I warmed to God, I found the mystery and beauty of the gospel itself, which transcends but also inhabits all Christian traditions. For believers, the gospel of Jesus *is* beauty: beauty written into story. The cross is our treasure. It's our flame in the bush. It's the hot blood flowing through the veins of the Bride of Christ, yes even through her Presbyterian appendages.

I confess, I still feel much shame when I look back at the past. It gives me no joy to recall how low I've sunk. Certainly it gives me no joy to reveal this sinkage before the world. I'd rather hold on to a little dignity, pretending to myself, to God, that I'm a naturally buoyant creature, that I've always kept my head above water, and these days barely sink at all.

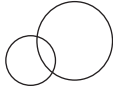
But what's the good of dignity if it's only a show? I remember that a few years ago I went to a little circus here in my hometown and saw a woman perform with trained poodles. The poodles danced in hoop skirts. One was dressed up like Scarlett O'Hara in the Atlanta jail scene: all in green velvet, with lots of fringe and little pompoms tied under a furry chin. It teetered daintily on nervous hind paws,

trying not to trip over its voluminous dress. Meanwhile a man walked around behind it with a shovel and scooped elephant poop off the concrete floor of the Leeds National Guard Armory.

Suddenly, I identified with the poodle. I sat there with my two nice kids, looking respectable enough, but knowing I was just a dog in a hoop skirt. I figured the poodle must hate the circus like I hated my life. I felt the most acute shame.

I've been freed from the worst of that shame, thank God, but I still see life as more or less a poodle show. Human existence is comedy within tragedy within comedy. Even at our very glorious human best—when we sing holy songs, write poetry, tell stories—we possess only a measure of glory. Our flesh is an old coat of fur that we cover up as best we can. But there's really no shame in that at all. God loves us. One day he'll give us new bodies, without the suffering and the sadness that cling to our old ones like grime. Until then, we should keep singing, keep writing poems, keep telling our stories—especially the stories of God's grace to us. This is mine.

1



The Smarrts, circa 1968  
Left to right: Danny, Mary, Kennedy, Betty, Matthew, and Ellen

## night terrors, button jars

---

*Lord, how long wilt thou look on?*

*Rescue my soul from their destructions,  
my darling from the lions.*

—Psalm 35:17

I don't know why I had to discover God in the particular way I did, through suffering. "Why" is a funny question, anyway. When things are bad, people go around asking it ad nauseam.

"Why can't I be rich?"

"Why won't he love me?"

"Why did I have to get sick?"

Everybody I know asks why. But a friend from India once told me that the question isn't universal: it pops up only in western societies, where reason and science have crowded out mystery. He said that Hindus, for example, don't naturally expect to find causes behind natural events. My flipping a switch in New Delhi doesn't make the light appear in the bulb, even if the switch has a large sign hanging from it that

says “Flip here to turn on light.” He told me all this at a party where he wouldn’t stop pretending to be an elderly secretary named Beatrice, until my husband nearly strangled him and threw him out the door. Under those circumstances, it was hard not to discount everything he said. I argued that even devout and mystically minded Hindus must sometimes ask why:

“Why does my wife always smile at the dentist?”

“Why is that dog wearing a sweater?”

“Why did you put a scorpion in my pajamas?”

Small questions lead to great ones:

“Why do good people do evil deeds?”

“Why in this beautiful world should there be so much suffering?”

Actually, “Why?” may be the most devout question any human being can ask, because of what it implies about God. If I ask, “How did the universe get here?” I’m showing curiosity. If I ask, “Who made all this?” I’m only admitting that some powerful being may be necessary to explain so much matter and energy swirling around in nothingness, like dirty footprints on a kitchen floor. But if I ask, “*Why* is the universe here?” or even “*Why* do I get canker sores after eating strawberries?” I show that I hope for order in this mess. I want to know whether God tramps through nothingness for a reason, and whether all this junk, this frenzied mud I wade through from one second to the next, is maybe a trail

that leads somewhere. To ask why shows that I have expectations, and expectations are the beginning of faith—however small, however many times crushed and reborn.

Somewhere along the way, I stopped having expectations. Even in the worst of my adult unhappiness, it didn't occur to me to ask "Why am I alive?" or "Why do things have to be like this?" To remember faith—to remember how to ask why—I must return to an April morning in 1965, when I enter the world as we know it. A circle of church women welcomes me with Jello-mold hairdos and pale cotton dresses. Their warm Virginia voices surround my mother's shoulders. They shower her with gifts for "the late baby." A few weeks later, I kick my fat feet in the air, a sock flutters down like a fuzzy bird, and a warm, wet hand settles over my matted hair. A voice says, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." I squint at my earthly father, who smiles at me from several feet away against a backdrop of chandeliers and balcony rail, and then at my mother, who glances nervously at my brothers and sister on the front pew to see whether they're behaving themselves. I leave the hands of the guest preacher who has just baptized me and is probably wondering whether my mother will have roast beef or chicken for dinner after Sunday school.

Looking like a drowned cat, I go forth into the loving arms of my parents and the congregation. I am now *in*—a bona fide member of the Covenant Family, Southern Presbyterian

branch. The next step will be to make it through my toddler years and then learn the Westminster Shorter Catechism, watered down for late-twentieth-century preschoolers.

“Who made you?”

“God.”

“What else did God make?”

“All things.”

“*Why* did God make you and all things?”

“For his own glory.”

A few years after my baptism, my mother teaches me these first few questions from the Children’s Catechism. I don’t remember the exact evening, but I see that she kneels with a yellow booklet tilted back against her chest. She’s around forty-three. The cultural revolution of the 1960s is in full swing, and fashions have begun to swing, too, even for pastors’ wives. Her lipstick is pale purple and shines on her lower lip like new paint on a windowsill. Her knees show under her dress. She still has her hair permed each month (by Miss Helen Price), but the style is smooth and loose. Her eyes are blue and large. She has a strong nose: sometimes I pull it to make sure she’s really Mama. (Mr. Harshbarger next door has told me a story about an alligator that disguised itself as a certain woman and stole into her house to eat her children. The way you check to see if your mother is really an alligator is by yanking on her nose, which I do, as often as the story comes to mind.)

I have a music box by my bed with a ballerina that stands up and pirouettes when you turn a key underneath. Lying there, I turn the key almost to the stripping point, and then Mama and I watch the ballerina for a couple of quiet minutes, admiring the glow of yellow light from the lamp on the bedstand.

“Betty,” she says, returning to our catechism questions, “*Why* did God make you and all things?”

“For his own glory.”

“That’s right. And how ought you to glorify God?”

“By loving him and doing what he commands.”

“Yes, that’s right. By loving him and doing what he commands.” About now, Mama may be thinking how God created me for his own glory when she hadn’t meant to create me at all. Three children had always seemed like plenty to her. But I came along by accident, and this only confirmed to her that God made me for a special purpose, apart from any plans of her own. Not that she’s all that Presbyterian in her theology: she complains to herself (if not to Daddy) that our kind of Presbyterianism is too intellectual. She misses a particular camp in New York State. It’s the place where she found Jesus, and up there the Holy Spirit was so present that you could almost see him moving through the chapel at night, when people gathered to pray. At that camp, they talked about the Christian life as constant warfare against the devil, which is exactly how Mama sees it. She’s on

the lookout for Satan. She knows that to love God and do what he commands means to endure afflictions from the Prince of the Power of the Air: suffering and catastrophe such as one can only bear with the help of the Spirit. She's already borne some of it herself, with the death of her dearest brother (when he was eighteen) and then her father, several years ago.

About now I'm certainly not considering why God made me. That seems so obvious since I, tiny and pale and lying under my soft sheets in my cotton nightgown, am absolutely necessary to the flow of the universe. My mother revolves around me like the sun around the earth, casting her golden glow. God is far above us both, watching, and of course we're here because if we weren't, why should anything else be here, either? We are essential. We are (together, not separately) both the event and the cause for the event. Why should the ballerina dance in the box? Why should a train whistle blow behind the trees outside my window? Only for us.

What I am considering is whether this pretty woman who seems to be my mother might really be an alligator (even though I've now checked a couple of times), or whether a bony, bloody hand might poke up through my mattress once she's left the room—I'm always worrying that there's a hand in my bed. If it's there, I figure it must be the hand of Satan himself, a claw of that same devil my mother's always looking out for when catastrophes befall us.

I interrupt the catechism to ask for a clarification. “Isn’t it kind of proud for God to want people to glorify him all the time?”

Mama looks a little taken aback.

“It’s bad to be proud, right? You said pride is a sin.”

“Oh no,” she answers in a gentle, shocked voice. “Pride isn’t a sin for God. It’s all right for God to want glory because he really deserves it. He’s eternal. He never makes mistakes and he never changes. He has no beginning and no end.”

I try to imagine what it means to have no beginning, and I can’t. The thought frightens me. I don’t want the world or even time itself to be much bigger than my own house. I like the idea, though, that God will never change. I picture him as an enormous, white mass circling the earth like a glacier, holding it all intact.

We pray, “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.” Then my mother kisses me and before she goes, we argue about which of us loves the other one more.

“I love you a bushel and a peck,” she says.

“Well,” I say, stretching out my stick arms, “I love you a thousand bushels and a thousand hundred million pecks.”

And that’s supposed to be the end of conversation for the day. She pulls the door slowly to, leaving a thin crack, and

cuts off the light so that the room changes utterly. I don't really mind the dark until she's gone from the doorway, out of sight, like the sun going over the edge of the world. Then I'm alone in this black place with a tiny tickle in my spine, the tip of a knotty finger.

My heart begins to race. My eyes open as wide as saucers. The black of the room turns to orange-gray, like crumbled ash. A warm wind swirls in the windows and curtain shadows leap up the wall. I roll to the very edge of the bed, trying to escape from the bump in the middle, but now I remember that there are demons, right down there on the floor! Every evening they coil up like snakes in the tumbleweed dust, waiting. Then when the light goes off, they slither out from under my bed, looking for tiny feet. I couldn't possibly put my feet down, not on that floor, not for anything, not for a million dollars. But I want to. The truth is, I can hardly help myself! I might do it! Oh, please Jesus, help me not to get out of this bed!

"Mama!" I yell. "Mama, come here!"

A few seconds pass and then she glides in, leaving the door open wide, and smiling sweetly. Her face is bright, even in the shadows. She already knows why I've called.

"Yes?"

"Mama, I'm afraid of the dark."

"Oh dear." She sighs and kneels by my bed to pray with me again. "Lord, help Betty to trust in you. Help her to

know that you're always with her, watching over her, that you see everything, that you're more powerful than any of her fears. . . ." She keeps talking for a while, until I lose track of the words and forget to close my eyes. On "Amen" I snap them shut again, quickly.

"You'll be all right now," she says. I open my eyes. She stays for a minute, kisses me, and then leaves.

I wait a while to see if the prayer took. I wait a good five minutes or even ten minutes. In the living room, two walls away, the rest of my family sits down to watch television, everybody except my invalid grandmother, who's also been put to bed early. Even with my door almost shut, I can hear the tinny applause from the old black-and-white television. My father and mother and brothers and sister suddenly burst into warm laughter. Oh, how can they be so heartless, making all that happy noise while I lie in here alone?

Suddenly something crashes in the closet by my bed. So! The prayer didn't take!

"Mama!" I yell. "Mama!" I keep yelling until she shows up at the door again with her hands on her hips.

"Yes, sweetheart? Did you call me?"

"There's something in my room."

"No, sweetheart, there's not."

"I hear something. Look in the closet."

She walks past my sister's bed and opens the door in the corner. "No, there's nothing in here. It's all clear."

“Could you pray for me again?”

She takes a deep breath. “When we trust in Jesus, we have nothing to fear. Repeat to yourself ‘Perfect love casts out fear.’”

I think that’s easy for her to say, since she’s out there watching *The Price is Right* while Satan himself bangs around in my closet. But she’s said what she could, and that’s all she’s going to say for now and I know it. She leaves again, and I’m alone.

The third time I call her she appears after a minute, thrusts open the door quickly, and says, “Now, you must go to sleep!”

“But I can’t.”

“Obey Mama. Go to sleep.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s bedtime and little girls need sleep.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so.”

“But *why*?” I ask in my most logical voice, as if I really care about the reason.

“Because I said so.”

I start to cry. “Why can’t I sleep in your bed? There’s plenty of room in your bed.”

“You must not call me again.”

Oh, actually, I must. A fourth and then a fifth time. Around the sixth or seventh call, my father enters the room

like Zeus on a thundercloud, and I don't call my mother anymore because if I do I'm sure to have the devil spanked out of me right here, right now. No more pleading tonight. I lie in the dark asking God to take away all the bad things and protect me from evil spirits. An hour later, my ten-year-old sister comes to sleep in the bed next to mine, bringing a little peace. She tells me a story to help me sleep. She lets me roll up at the foot of her bed, wrapped in the end of her spread.

But in the middle of the night I wake up and it starts again. I have to pee! I try to hold it, but I can't. I don't want to wet the bed. So while everyone else is sleeping, I put one foot on the floor, and I'm sure I'm about to feel cold demon fingers around my ankle. I wait. No fingers. I put the other foot down. Still no demons. But as I walk the long, black mile to the bathroom, I hear a voice. . . .

“Betty. Betty.”

I stop, because a voice is calling me in the darkness. It's a woman's voice, floating down from above my head. No, it's not my mother's voice, or my sister's or even my grandmother's, but it sounds gentle enough and friendly. I don't feel a bit afraid. So I turn, expecting to see a face, and I see nothing but blackness. I am all alone in the hall. Completely alone.

I know I shouldn't call my mother again! But I push myself forward, down the hall toward Mama and Daddy's

bedroom, still trying not to wet my nightgown. Every step is an effort. I feel my way along the smooth paint of the wall, running my hands over a picture frame. The hall is so long and wide.

“Betty,” calls the voice again.

I gather all my breath. “Mama!” I yell in a voice loud enough to wake up the whole house. “Mama, I want you!”

My cry hangs in the air for a moment, and then suddenly I see the most joyful sight. A warm band of light flicks on under my parents’ door. Suddenly, I have the strength to whirl around and thump back to my room, panting. I leap over the end board, onto my pillow, and slide into the sheets.

A few seconds pass. There are stirring noises down the hall. I wait, grateful to be here, but also pretty sure it will be my father who comes, paddle in hand, scary as a nightmare. Then the door opens and . . . miraculous to tell! My mother strides into the room in her thin pink gown, pressing the curlers deeper into her hair. Her eyes are sleepy, but at least she’s here. She climbs into my bed, pats me, and lies down with her back against mine, not saying a word. I sigh a deep sigh. The golden light shines again. Darkness has fled. I finally go to sleep again, not to wake till morning.

When morning comes, she’s gone. I walk down the hall and into her room, where she sits in her flower-print chair reading her Bible, as she does every morning. I crawl up in

her lap and run my finger down the thin paper on the page. She gets out her jar of buttons. I try to match them on her bed—thin disks of blue and pink and black and gold and silver, some covered in satin, some stamped with anchors, daisies, or ribbons. I imagine all the dresses and coats and blouses my mother wore in those unimaginable years before I was born, in those days when I hadn't even been thought of yet. I'm glad my mother came first: I'm glad she's stronger than I—strong enough to protect me in the middle of the night.

Scripture says that perfect love casts out fear. Mama's love may fall short of perfect, but when she's with me, I fear nothing. This is the closest place to heaven I know, and later in life, I'll long to come here again, back to this house and to these almost perfect moments. I will look for this comfort everywhere, and I'll find it nowhere, until the search itself begins to torment me worse than a bony hand in a box spring, a floorful of demons, a hall of ghostly voices. But the search will also bring God down that hall—mighty but gentle, scattering my evil visions and bringing peace.

And what about the voice? My adult self wants to know what actually happened that night on the way to the bathroom. I take the rational and perhaps Western approach: I observe a result (voices and visions, waking dreams) and search for a likely cause (a sleep disorder? latent schizophrenia?). I think that maybe the voice I heard was only static in my child's brain: echoes from dreams and night terrors. Actual

demons sound unlikely (since when have they bothered about Presbyterians?). On the other hand, maybe an evil spirit *did* make the hair stand up on my neck that night. Even a supernatural cause is a cause, and to uncover a cause always brings enlightenment.

As a child in the hall, I knew better. In the glow of the lamplight I had asked my Mother, “Why can’t I sleep in your room?” It was a good question in its own right, showing that I trusted her to protect me. But in the dark, that babyish trust turned restless and then urgent. “*Why?*” became simply “*You!*” No other hope existed in the world: only the light under my parents’ door.

During the last few days, both of my children have been scared to fall asleep alone. My older daughter has read Jesus’ prophecy in Mark about the end of the world. Tonight, when I’ve finally found a quiet minute to talk with my husband, she yells for me, “Mama!” I get up from the couch (complaining) and go to her room to comfort her. In a bumbling way, I try to explain all the things I want to write about here. I tell her how important it is for us to call out to God for help; I tell her that he takes care of us and that nothing can ever separate us from his love. I quote a long Bible passage to that effect—

“Okay!” She interrupts me. “I got it, I got it.” She folds her arms over her quilt, then scans the room with a wide,

nervous stare. She looks at the closet door and sighs. I wonder what nightmarish thing she imagines behind it.

“Could you please stay for a minute?” she asks, showing faith much stronger than mine. She knows unconsciously what I’m working so hard to remember.

“For a few minutes,” I say, and stretch out beside her till I know she’s asleep.

2

god



## from the other side



The sanctuary of West End Presbyterian Church,  
Hopewell, Virginia

*It was to be trampled on by men that I was born into this world.*

*It was to share men's pain that I carried my cross.*

—Shusaku Endo, *Silence*

My father, in spite of being a Reformed Presbyterian, gave lots of altar calls. When I was little, we had about as many altar calls as the Southern Baptists. Every other week or so Daddy invited people in the congregation to accept Jesus into their hearts. Sometimes he used the words, “Come to the cross,” which meant, in a physical sense, to come up front and pray with him to be saved or else to repent of sin. It seems to me now that I got up and went forward each time the call came. Sometimes I went all by myself, other times with the girl who had a hole in her heart and wore the same white crocheted shawl every week. We marched past the pastel stained-glass windows and pews, all the way to the Remembrance table with the cross sitting on it, toward the man in the seersucker suit, who happened to be my father. I wonder now how he felt about seeing me come every week.

I don't guess I was very good advertising for his evangelism methods.

We heard a lot about the cross at church: "Let us then trust in Jesus' shed blood on the cross," "Take up your cross and follow Christ," "Leave your burden at the cross." We sang about it in many of our hymns:

*On a hill far away, stood an old rugged cross,  
The emblem of suff'ring and shame . . .\**

*At the cross, at the cross where I first saw the light,  
And the burden of my heart rolled away . . .\*\**

We thought of that cross, first of all, as the literal place of Jesus' death. We'd heard again and again about the agony of crucifixion. Sometimes we felt as if we'd actually been at Golgotha to see Jesus die. Where would we have stood in the crowd? With Jesus' disciples or with his persecutors? It didn't matter, because the cross had become not our condemnation but our salvation: it was the place where we laid down the weight of our sins and took up Jesus' righteousness. This laying down was right at the heart of our evangelical Christianity. When we casually spoke about the "gospel," we referred to the fact that Christ had accepted the heavy blame for sin and paid the penalty for it, so that we no longer had to drag our guilt around like a steamer trunk, only to be

pulled down by it into the bowels of hell. *My chains fell off, went one of our greatest songs, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed Thee. . . .* We sang those mighty words Sunday after Sunday, so many voices joined in beautiful thunder. *No condemnation now I dread: Jesus, and all in him, is mine! Alive in him, my living Head, And clothed in righteousness divine.*\*\*\*

This freedom really was extraordinary news for many people, especially those who heard it for the first time as adults. They wandered into church (or maybe back to church) after a life of shame and guilt. At the cross, they found their burdens lifted. Hallelujah! But there was a problem: Could the whole thing still apply if you were raised in a devout family—especially a Presbyterian family? If you were baptized while still a baby, if you were taught to believe in Jesus and then made a “profession of faith” at the age of three or four (or even nine or ten), when and by what means exactly did you become aware of your guilt? Christ had supposedly taken that burden off your shoulders before you were old enough to understand how heavy it could get. And if you never felt the weight of sin, could you really feel grateful to Jesus for relieving you of it? How could you understand the gospel—that great cycle of sin/repentance/forgiveness that lies at the heart of Christian life?

There was, of course, the matter of ongoing sin—sin that needed to be confessed and repented of, every day. All

baptized, saved children had plenty of it. But even if you believed that you were a sinner, and wanted to repent, your experience of repentance never quite meshed with what you heard preached at church. For example, I learned at church that my sin grieved God and that I should be sorry and ask forgiveness. But I learned at home that, while my mother told me I should be sorry for grieving God by refusing to eat my peanut butter sandwich, I could make her stop talking and give me a jelly donut simply by *seeming* repentant. I wondered why my sin didn't move me to real grief; I decided not to worry about it. The temptation to manipulate my mother was strong, and anyway, at least I hadn't stolen anything, or taken the Lord's name in vain. Those were the bad sins, which I (a devout child of the Covenant, a small Pharisee) would probably never commit. I was inoculated against them the way other children were inoculated against smallpox and rubella.

As often as I heard the gospel preached as a child, I didn't quite get it. From the beginning I saw God not so much in the role of Redeemer as *Rescuer*. God was my hero, my protector from all things terrifying in the middle of the night, whether visible or invisible. When I prayed to Jesus for safety, I saw him not as a suffering Savior, but as a mighty defender—more or less a divine extension of my mother. Naturally, then, my mother also became my image of divinity

during the day. As portrayed by Mama, God was a selfless servant of small children, old people, and rowdy teenagers. He was a busy and efficient world manager who held everything together with tireless attention.

For how many unremembered and half-remembered days did Mama and my grandmother and I stay at home together while the rest of the family disappeared to work and school? A blanket of quiet fell over us as the door slammed behind the last pair of feet. Grandma sighed and went to her rocking chair by the front window, staring with sad, teary eyes at the passing traffic. She'd come from upstate New York to live with us (following a bad stroke) and never adjusted to the change; she seemed restless and unhappy. Mama, on the other hand, was busy and cheerful. Mornings sent her into high gear. The day was young! With the cool air blowing up the light yellow curtains, she baked and washed and sewed our clothes, telephoned the needy and the depressed, paid the bills, prepared Sunday school and women's prayer circle lessons, kept up with twenty different correspondents, and above all cleaned the house: top to bottom, mold spores to mildew, dust to dry rot, world without end. Her energy was godlike, Herculean. I followed her around, a small worshiper, doing everything she did in miniature. I had my own Dr Pepper bottle with a sprinkler stuck in the top for wetting the clothes before ironing them on my plastic board. I had my own clothesline and mop and broom. I had my