

JULIAN OF NORWICH
a contemplative biography



AMY FRYKHOLM

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JULIAN
of Norwich



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*This book is dedicated to my mother,
MICHELE JOHNSON,
who has faithfully modeled
attention to the
lowly and simple things.*

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Introduction

IN THE MIDST OF WHAT HISTORIAN BARBARA TUCHMAN has called the “calamitous” fourteenth century—marked by war, famine, plague, and unrest—one woman wrote a book. It was the first book composed by a woman in English and remains one of the greatest theological works in the English language. So little is known about this woman that even her name—Julian of Norwich—is in question. Yet her achievement is extraordinary. Very few people—male or female—at that time wrote anything in English. As the language of the common people, English was rarely used for literary purposes. But Julian’s achievement isn’t just in having written a book in English, but in the nature of what she had to say.

Playfully and subtly maneuvering amid political dangers and social limitations, with open curiosity and dry humor, Julian took a heavy world of religious obligation and turned it on its head. In her book, which is both an account of visions she received and a book of spiritual direction and theological reflection, she wrote, “The soul must perform two duties. One is that we reverently marvel. The other is that we humbly endure, ever taking pleasure

in God." In Julian's understanding, the right relationship between God and the soul was not primarily guilt for sin, but wonder, release, and unity. She wrote that the righteousness required of us was simply this: delight in God's good world.

This delight travels a hard road through Julian's writing, as it did through her life. To reach delight, Julian had to traverse the suffering she saw all around her and experienced herself, and then actively choose compassion. Eventually, she saw that God and the soul shared something so intimate that even sin could not disrupt it—the soul and God were one.

Perhaps even more strikingly, Julian saw herself, a laywoman, as representative of all Christians, and she believed that the visions she had received were meant for all. Her writing, of necessity, took on a prophetic tone as she tried to peer forward to a time when God would use her writing for his own "honorable, marvelous, and plenteous" work.

At last in our own day, Julian's writings have reached a wide audience. Dozens of current translations, devotional books, and anthologies suggest that Julian's words reach the present with striking urgency. We are hungry to understand this God whose love encloses us. We ache to understand that the soul is intricately "oned" both to the body and to God. We desire to act in the world as full creatures, wholly loved. Julian becomes, almost inexplicably, a teacher for our times. Yet we experience discomfort in confronting Julian's suffering Christ. For contemporary readers, Julian's declaration that at a young age she "desired . . . a bodily sickness" coupled with her gory depictions of Christ bleeding on the cross are off-putting and impenetrable. This contradiction has made Julian both a welcome voice and a

distant one. To overcome that distance, we must gain a better understanding of her life.



THE REVOLUTIONARY ACT OF REENVISIONING the relationship between God and the soul and then writing it down was done quietly, in solitude, on the far eastern coast of England in the river port city of Norwich. In her book, Julian writes that at the age of thirty, she became seriously ill—so ill that she and all of those around her thought she would die. In the midst of this mysterious illness, Christ appeared to her as in the passion of his crucifixion. And over the course of several hours, Christ revealed to her the mystery of his compassion.

During her visions and for decades afterward, Julian wrestled with understanding what she had seen. The God of her visions and the God of the church to which she was devoted contradicted each other, sometimes painfully. The church in Julian's time was beginning to take violent measures to protect its power. By the time Julian took up a pen putting words to parchment, the church hierarchy had actively banned the use of English in religious contexts, except in sermons, confessions, and other practical matters. People were carried out of the city gates of Norwich and burnt if an English-language Bible was discovered in their homes.

In this context of fear, the crucified Jesus taught Julian that she was utterly safe in his love. Safety did not come from bowing to the forces of fear. Instead, it came from submitting oneself

in love to the one who is love. As if reflecting on her precarious position—as a woman writing a religious book in English—Julian wrote that love itself kept her safe. “And thus will I love, and thus do I love, and thus I am safe.”

A sense of spiritual safety alone was not enough for a woman in the Middle Ages to undertake the writing of a book. She needed to seek solitude and relief from everyday burdens. One of the few things we know for certain about Julian is that in the middle of her life she went to live in an anchorage—a small solitary cell—next to St. Julian’s church in Norwich, dedicating herself to prayer and dwelling next to the church until the end of her life. Perhaps she took her name from this church; perhaps the similarity is mere coincidence.

The majority of anchorites (coming from the Greek, meaning “to withdraw”) in Julian’s time were, like Julian, women from the Norfolk region of England. Traditionally, an anchorage was a small cell—sometimes just one room—with three windows. These windows were the sole openings for the anchoress onto the world. One window opened to the church, where an anchoress could hear the daily mass. Another window opened onto a servant’s quarters, through which daily life transpired. A third window opened onto a small porch, through which the anchoress received visitors.

It was common practice for the people of the parish to support an anchoress with food, clothing, and shelter. They believed that her prayers, in turn, supported them. Indeed, the main duty of the anchoress was to pray for the people of the parish, both the living and the dead. Anchoresses also fulfilled another function. Through the small porch window, the anchoress acted as counselor, hearing people’s stories and offering advice.

It was in this context and for these people that Julian wrote her book, so that the guidance offered at the window would be ongoing in another form beyond her cell. Breathtaking for its daring, Julian's book was formed outside the structures of the church hierarchy, not for clerics or even for nuns, but for her "even Christians," the common people of the church whom she loved. At extraordinary personal risk and with extraordinary dedication, she wrote what reads, in ways, like a private and intimate letter to friends, but with such theological depth and stunning insight that six hundred years later we continue to be instructed and transformed.

Her language use, as it developed, was a mix of the spiritual and the material. Her images—hazelnuts, herring, pellets, eaves—were drawn from everyday life and were meant to remind her readers that we are united with God even through our physical being. Julian's language had the quality of finely made homespun. Crafted, yes, but refined, no. It had echoes of stories told around peat fires and the smell of their smoke, of rhymes and songs sung by mothers to their children.

This work, shaped by decades of prayer and meditation, was offered to the world through the small window of a solitary's cell. Somehow, even miraculously, it survives to delight and hearten us today.



IN JULIAN'S CASE, GAINING A BETTER UNDERSTANDING of her life is particularly difficult. As with most women in the Middle Ages, we have very little documentary evidence to work from. At the same time, all biography is an act of empathetic imagination. We read and write it to try to walk alongside someone who is far away from us in time and space. To walk alongside Julian, imagination plays a crucial role. Poet Denise Levertov has called Julian's life a "medieval enigma." We have little in the way of historical records to guide us. We do not know for certain if Julian married, if she became a nun, or if she had children. We do not know which social class she came from or how she received the education that allowed her to write her book. The centuries that separate us are a chasm.

Just as if we were approaching the anchorage window, what we see of Julian will be limited and even obscured. The "windows" through which we might see her hide as much as they reveal. And yet, every detail helps us to understand and imagine the world from which she came. Julian herself gives us permission, in a sense, for this inquiry, as she tells us that in the smallest detail—a hazelnut—the vastness of the world and its love by God can be known. In the hints that her text and the historical record give us, Julian steps forward.

In biography, we look for Julian first through her own texts. In what follows, I have chosen specific moments from her writing that are particularly revelatory of her life. I have called such moments "windows"—and fortunately, we have more than three through which we can look. Julian writes, of course, as a self-conscious artist, choosing carefully what details to give us. Hours and hours of meditation shape every

word she offers of her own experience. She does not intend for this manuscript to be about herself, but instead to point toward the God of love who revealed himself to her.

Her book, *A Revelation of Love*, was written in two versions. The earlier version is often simply called *The Short Text* because it lacks a title. In the only existing copy, included in a medieval compendium of devotional writings, a scribe begins, abruptly, with these words, "There is an anchoress—be the goodness of God," and then Julian's own arresting and personal voice tells the story of her visionary experience.

The second version of Julian's book is dramatically longer and theologically richer and more daring. God appears in this book as a mother, and Jesus' death on the cross is interpreted as childbearing labor. Julian also describes Jesus as both a gardener and an impoverished itinerant laborer. To produce this text, Julian writes that she spent twenty years meditating on her visions. In that time, a great deal of insight was granted to her. Between the two versions, Julian sheds fear and anxiety, both about her visions and about the act of writing. She writes with stunning freedom and peace. While there are excerpts from this book in another medieval manuscript, we have no medieval example of it in its entirety. Instead, we have three copies in all probability taken from the same original scribed by a group of Benedictine nuns living in France in the seventeenth century.

This means that the version of Julian's words that has come to us has passed through many hands before reaching ours. Her manuscript was hand copied and recopied perhaps dozens or hundreds of times. We cannot be certain that what we

have is exactly the text created by Julian herself. Furthermore, unfortunately, we have nothing written in Julian's own hand.

Yet when we read *A Revelation of Love*, we hear Julian speaking to us directly, without intermediaries. Her voice is unique, personal, and intimate. The chasm of six hundred years suddenly closes, and we have no doubt that the woman speaking to us lived and breathed, and that her voice was as meaningful in her own day as it is in ours. The immediacy and relevance of her words startle and amaze. The uniqueness and power of her voice awaken and stir us.

IN ADDITION TO JULIAN'S OWN TEXTS, we have a slim historical record that confirms at least the outlines of Julian's life. Medieval people believed that the prayers of the living helped to propel the dead from purgatory to paradise. Those who could left money in the form of bequests to remind the living to pray for them after their deaths. Anchorites, in particular, received this money because their prayers were considered especially effectual. In addition, anchorites offered much-needed solace and advice for the living, and gifts of gratitude were offered for spiritual direction and teaching.

Julian received four such bequests, an unusually small number for a woman who lived many years in the anchorage and who has had such an extended and profound influence. Of course, only the wealthy could leave a record of their gifts, and likely dozens of other grateful, but poorer, parishioners left more perishable records of their appreciation. What the four bequests left for "Dame Julian" tell us is that she was

enclosed in the anchorage by 1393, around the age of fifty. This is the date when she received her first bequest. She died sometime after 1416—the date of the last bequest. While the number of bequests is small, their variety is remarkable: a countess, a lawyer, a chantry priest, and a rector. In other words, though she lived enclosed as a solitary and we have no record of anyone reading her book in her lifetime, her life touched people far beyond her cell.

We have one other outside confirmation of Julian's life from her own day. Not far from Norwich, a woman named Margery Kempe wrote, via scribes, an autobiographical manuscript. Thirty years younger than Julian, Margery was the daughter of a government official and the wife of a merchant. A restless spiritual seeker, she embarked on pilgrimages all over the medieval world and consulted endlessly with spiritual guides and counselors.

Early in her book, Margery described traveling to Norwich to visit some of the great spiritual lights of that city. At Julian's cell, she conversed with the now-aged anchoress. Once again, Julian's resonant voice arises unmistakably through the pages. Margery's account allows us to envision Julian as counselor and guide, a woman who greeted her guests with generosity of spirit and no small amount of truth.

While this historical record offers little, medieval historian Carole Hill notes that women's history nearly always has to be told this way: through the cracks and fissures. In any given medieval document, women's activities and lives are concealed. If we are going to tell their stories, we must make choices based on sometimes paltry evidence. Two things are crucial: that we

proceed with humility and that we do not imagine the people of the Middle Ages to be less human than we are.

I have occasionally made controversial choices. Since the first widely distributed modern version of Julian's writings in 1901, most people have assumed that Julian was an extraordinarily well-educated aristocratic woman. Many believe that she was a Benedictine nun. Other scholars, however, have objected to this assumption. The historical record and Julian's writings suggest more persuasively that Julian lived what was called in the fourteenth century a "mixed life" combining contemplation and prayer with the demands of the secular world. She was not a nun, though at midlife she sought to devote herself more completely to prayer and thus took a vocation that was open to laywomen: enclosure in an anchorage.

As for social class, Julian was most likely a member of the "parish elite"—neither aristocratic nor impoverished. In this role, she would have had opportunity both to seek out what education was available to a woman in sophisticated and dynamic Norwich and to develop close connections with the people of her parish, who would have come from a variety of social backgrounds. This is not the only conclusion that students of Julian's life can draw, but to my mind, it best suits the evidence we have.

While we may lack historical fact, we do have a rich, lingering material record of the fourteenth century to draw on. The people of England in the late Middle Ages were extraordinarily busy—war and plague aside—creating the world with their own hands. They left a remarkable record of their art and craftsmanship. Drawing on what we know of daily life, we can begin to trace the spiritual and cultural influences on an ordinary woman who was

propelled from “unlettered creature,” as Julian calls herself, to extraordinary theologian. Gathering together both material and theological understandings, we begin to picture her in the act of writing itself—an act at once so daring and so simple.



Prologue

PICTURE JULIAN. She sits at a plain oaken table in front of an upright writing desk with parchment attached to it by iron clips. She has brewed ink from crushed oak galls and rainwater, aged with an iron nail. The dark and murky liquid waits in a horn fitted to the desk. The parchment of finely scraped animal skin also waits.

For days, months, years, now even decades, she has been meditating on and crafting the words she will write on the parchment. Next to her, bound in leather, sits the first attempt that she made to tell her visions. She wrote it when her understanding was less full, when she had less courage, when her knowledge of words and their power and her trust in God's love were not as strong. This first attempt isn't wrong, but she has shaped its improvement through prayer, through long pacing across the reed-strewn floor. She has gained maturity and confidence in what God has shown her. Through the intervening years, accompanied by God's gift of unending love, she has shaped these words like a sculptor working over a body of clay, like perhaps God himself first formed humankind from the mud of the earth, giving his imagination form and then

breath. That labor now behind her, she must shape the words on parchment without error.

I say "picture Julian," but how? We do not know what she looked like. We have several artists' renderings: a stern and studious Julian carved into the limestone entrance of Norwich Cathedral, standing across from St. Benedict with a book in her hand; or the sweet, upturned face of Julian imagined by the creators of more than one stained glass window. We have an elderly, almost ghostly Julian imagined by contemporary Australian painter Adam Oldfield. But as we read her six-hundred-year-old words, each of us creates a personal rendering of Julian that these images may not reach. And the problem is not only with visual images and versions: the scholarly rendering of her life and work is also conflicted.

Yet we can begin to step closer to Julian's mystery if we picture her at this writing desk. In one hand she holds a goose-quill pen, in the other, a penknife that can quickly scratch out mistakes and sharpen her quill when it becomes dull. Her first task is to record where and when her journey began, to say something carefully of the person she had been when the visions first came to her. She breathes deeply, checks the steadiness of her hand, focuses her mind just as she does for hours of prayer, and begins. This writing, too, is prayer.

JULIAN OF NORWICH
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*These revelations were shown
to a simple unlettered creature
the year of our Lord 1373,
the 13th day of May.*





The First Window
THREE DESIRES

*“This creature had once desired three gifts from God:
the first was minde of his passion;
the second was bodily sickness in youth;
the third was to have of God’s gift three wounds.”*
A REVELATION, CHAPTER 2

THE CITY OF NORWICH. LENT, 1355.

THE RAIN CASCADED OFF THE EAVES OUTSIDE.
The clouds were thick and unyielding.
“Benedicite,” Julian said, kneeling in front of the priest.
“Dominus,” the priest answered.

Every year during Lent, Julian confessed at her parish church. Confessing only once a year was a difficult task for both parishioner and priest. The parishioner sorted through the many deeds and thoughts of the year past to extract those worthy of the attention of the priest. The priest listened for hours to common complaints, petty jealousies, secret burdens, and heartwrenching uncertainties. Both speakers needed to be comprehensive, so the soul could walk away unburdened;

and brief, because lines were long and neighbors impatient. Behind Julian, a crowd waited. Some muttered and clicked their rosaries, some chatted, others prayed.

Candles flickered and gave off a balmy smell of wax; the rain cooled the stone of unpaned windows.

"Have you had any envy to your neighbor or to your even Christians?" The priest led Julian through the seven deadly sins, sins of the five senses, and the dishonoring of the Ten Commandments. "Have ye been glad of her harms or her evil fare and loath of her good? Have ye backbited and disprised your even Christian or told evil tales of him to another?"

The priest urged Julian, a girl of twelve, to be more diligent in prayer, to remember her daily Paternoster and five Ave Marias, and to visit the sick more faithfully. After she rose from her knees, she lingered in the church in front of a painting of the crucifixion that depicted the women who had witnessed it gathered at Jesus' feet. Sometimes she felt as if the figures in the painting, so vivid their colors, might come to life. She wished that she could step into the painting and join them—to be with them and suffer with them. She lit a candle to Mary, who was almost as young as Julian when she became the Mother of God. After confession and devotion, she pulled her hood over her head and stepped out into the spring's wet.

She would do all that the priest asked of her, all that Holy Church taught. But sometimes she felt the priest was standing in her way, just a little. If he would move to the side, she thought, she might see God better. This was a thought she should confess. It was a sin of pride and a sin of impatience, but was it a sin to want to see God better?



AS A CHILD OF THE "COMMON TEACHING OF HOLY CHURCH," Julian attended mass daily, lifting her eyes to watch when the bell rang and the priest raised the host. On Sundays, she and her mother carried a basket of food to a neighbor whose hands had been crushed in a quarrying accident. Surrounded by her neighbors, she prayed before saints, danced in the parish hall, and ate the white round loaf of Eucharist once a year at Easter. She memorized psalms and the Hours of the Virgin, tried to discern her future sweethearts on St. Agnes Eve, joined the procession on Candlemas, and brought apples to be blessed on St. James's Day.

The ordinary life of the church came in bright colors, intimately made by the people's own hands. Vivid wall paintings, imaginative and witty corbels fitted at the joists of the church, and finely wrought stained glass told the sacred story that bound the people together. The parishioners lived together a deep common life, knowing intimately one another's welfare—whose bones ached in the cold, who had painful boils, who had been scalded as a child with malt. They knew about each other's marriages and children and relatives. With that kind of intimacy came the difficulties of individual personalities: gossipy neighbors, people who talked too loudly during the mass, those who drank too much, the self-righteous, the haughty, the mean-spirited. There would have been people she was eager to see when she went to

church in the morning, and people she might secretly have hoped stayed home. Human character was sometimes, as Julian later writes, "good and gentle" and sometimes "cruel and oppressive."

The parish church was the center of life, and most parishioners believed in both God and the devil. They wanted to remember the saints' days and observe feasts and fasts as best they could. During daily mass, when only the priest partook of the bread and wine, they wanted him to hold the bread up high when he said, "*Hoc est enim Corpus Meum*," so they could see it. They thought the end of the world was near and that they might assuage the wrath of God by giving to the poor and avoiding swearing. But their days were occupied with other matters as well. They bought bread and brewed beer. They wondered if the leather merchant was trying to cheat them. They fought with their neighbors over errant pigs and who was responsible for potholes on the street.

Though Julian learned from the church and saw it as her mother, she also came to want something more, something "beyond the common use of prayer." In this way, she was not an ordinary child, and as her faith formed, it contained a seed of longing for a closer vision, a deeper understanding, only—she later wrote—if it was within God's will. During her youth, Julian developed what she called in her writing "three desires." These desires are strange to modern understanding, but they would not have been extraordinary in her own day when life often centered around devotion to the church and ordinary piety contained hints of the mystical.

Her first desire was to have a "minde" of Christ's passion—a sensual recollection of what it would have been like to be with

Christ while he suffered on the cross. The second desire was a "bodily sickness" in which she would draw as close as possible to death's door without passing through it. The third desire was perhaps the most sophisticated of the three. She desired three "wounds," an idea that she picked up from hearing the story of St. Cecilia in church. She called the three wounds "contrition, compassion, and longing for God."

Julian's theology has its starting place in these three succinctly, if mysteriously, expressed desires. If we understand Julian's social and religious environment, the mix of spiritual and material that made up her everyday life, we can perhaps begin to understand what these desires meant to her and why she held on to them for so many years. They offer a small opening into the life of the young Julian.



JULIAN'S HOME CITY OF NORWICH THRIVED on the banks of the River Wensum. Its wealth came from its abundance of sheepwalks and production of wool. This far eastern part of England, called East Anglia, was located in close proximity to the North Sea. Trade with Zeeland, the Low Countries, and France accounted for its prosperity and sophistication.

Norfolk County dipped into boggy wetlands, rich with bird life, and then sunk farther into sandy, reedy sweeps of coastland. Agricultural and rural, it abounded in woodlands, grazing lands, and fields of wheat. Hawthorn and hazel, nettles, elderberry, foxglove, and oak dominated its intimate lanes and formed its ancient hedges.

By the time of Julian's birth in 1342, the city was six hundred years old. Early Anglo-Saxon immigrants built timber-framed houses, planted root vegetables and wheat. Danes brought knowledge of cheese and dairy production and made honey drinks. Normans imported wine and built massive stone monuments that directed and defined city life. Everyone raised sheep. The city was built in concentric circles radiating out from two central points: the castle and the cathedral, both built in the eleventh century following the French invasion of William the Conqueror. The French facilitated a long-lasting trade that brought people from all over the European world.

In Julian's early childhood, Norwich had a population of ten thousand. The second-largest city in England, it was growing fast. The wall around the city, made from local black flint stone and caulked with lime, had been finished the year of her birth, a proud symbol of self-sufficiency. Two imposing arches on either side of the River Wensum meant travelers knew when they had arrived to the city limits, and lines of carts snaked into the countryside every day as people waited to pay tolls to enter the city and join its marketplace.

Waking early to a morning mist, Julian would have heard the Angelus bell that signaled the end of the night watch. In the gray light, she heard the chatter of the first women on their way to draw water from the city wells, and the rattle and clang as butchers and blacksmiths welcomed first customers. In the churches, sleepy priests started mass early for travelers, workmen, and pilgrims headed out beyond the city walls. The noisy snuffles of pigs and lowing of cows filled the streets as children released animals from their pens and drove them out through the city gates to pasture.

After the first chores, but before breakfast, Julian left her house with her mother for church. They heard morning mass and offered their own prayers. Afterward they made their way to the market for the day's meat. Perhaps as they walked the streets, they saw boats and barges arriving from the port city of Yarmouth that carried sea coal, barrels of iron from Sweden, herring and onions, wood from Riga, Flemish lace, and light dry Rhennish wine, the color of sun through white curtains. The boats sent back fine wool, leather, latten, and wheat along with the proud products of the city's artisans—stained glass, intricately carved wood, illuminated manuscripts, and jewelry.

Goods arrived into port south of the city in an area called Conesford and came up the part-cobbled, part-mud *Via Regina* to the marketplace in carts and on sleds. Julian and her mother would have avoided this main thoroughfare and made a more convoluted route through the haphazard streets. Finer merchant homes stood tightly next to peasant cottages, tradesmen's workshops, and stone monasteries. Sometimes householders paved and maintained the streets; sometimes they left them to sink into pits of mud. Down the center of the streets ran a ditch into which people threw slop water and the remains of supper. Julian knew which streets to avoid, where butchers threw smoking animal entrails into the ditch and animals wandered unattended. She also learned to avoid the rayker, who from early morning started his route with a shovel, filling his cart with animal dung and refuse to carry outside the city walls.

But avoiding rank smells was impossible. Norwich was caught up in construction of new churches and chapels, along with thriving industries of dying, tanning, and fishing. Norwich stank

of raw fish and acrid dye; the ripe scent of butchering and the dung-soaked hides of the tanneries added to a thick stew of human and animal stench: sweat, rotting standing water, lime, dripping animal tallow, and malt.

At church, the liturgy was recited in Latin, and in the marketplace, many of the merchants spoke French. But together, arm in arm avoiding puddles, Julian and her mother spoke English. English was a more carnal language than French or Latin, a language of the earth and of the body. Because it came from the countryside and from the people, some thought it impoverished and inadequate for expressing abstract thought. Yet England, now at war with France, had begun to assert its own identity, and the English spoken in Norwich would become the standard, a decade later, when the King made English the language of his courts. People were increasingly proud to speak English, and a certain disapproval had begun to creep into transactions conducted in French.

For Julian, English was primarily the language of home. With currents of Danish, Anglo-Saxon, Frisian, French, and Latin, this homespun English had never been formalized into a language of power. It had no set spellings or grammatical certainties. It was a language in use for practical purposes, constantly adapted to individual needs and contexts. In the evening after the curfew bell rang, people used English to tell stories and sing songs. English was the language of gossip; it was the language of the mystery plays that taught the lives of the saints. In English, a mother scolded her child, a child tended sheep, tanners shouted to each other across an alley. In other words, English was the language of the "lowly and simple things." For Julian,

these limits eventually became a gift; in English she found a language that could exude both intimacy and power, a language in which the rules were not so well established that they couldn't be broken.



FOR MOST YOUNG PEOPLE, ONE TREK A DAY to church with their families would have been enough, but in Julian's young life, she sought out the church and its teachers often. She loved the muttering of the priests in chapels and the quiet that seeped in between masses. Franciscan friars often taught in the naves of local parishes, offering advice on prayer and meditation. While other young women shocked their elders with headdresses large enough to bump their neighbors in church and wobbly enough to look like they might topple, Julian likely wore a simple braid down her back and a linen shift, covered by a well-made woolen kirtle. Wealth could be conveyed through cloth, especially in a city whose prosperity rested on the wool trade. How silky your linen, how fine the weave of your woolen garments and its colors spoke volumes about your status. While Julian's clothes were sturdy and well made and the quality of the cloth reflected her father's success, these markings interested Julian less than the question of how to bring her heart closer to God.

For Julian, the preaching and teaching of the friars were her bread and butter. Her mother had taught her the basics of

reading and writing. She had learned the creeds, the seven sacraments, and the orders of the angels. She knew the stories of many a saint's life. But she had few opportunities for more education, and she often felt restless, though she couldn't say for what.

In Norwich, friars of many different colored hoods abounded: Greyfriars, Blackfriars, Whitefriars. Each was connected to a specific monastic tradition, but they were freer than monks to reach out to common people and teach them. They offered sermons in their own yards, on street corners, and in local churches; they taught on morality, prayer, holy living, and salvation. They often read from the lives of the saints and offered instruction on how to keep the fasts of the church. A serious girl, Julian wanted to learn as much as she could. The most accessible teachers were the Franciscans. Franciscan teaching often focused on the crucifixion. The friars taught that one didn't seek revelation through prayer; one did not ask for special, secret messages from God. Instead, a person sought feeling, an alignment of the heart with God.

On a late spring day in Eastertide, when the sun shone brightly, the wind tormented the cloths drying at the tentagrounds, tied into frames. Julian prayed in her parish church, on her knees, practicing what she had been taught. Using her imagination to put herself as literally as she could at the foot of the cross, she tried to fill in details and truly feel what "Christ's lovers" might have felt. The images of Christ suffering, bleeding, and dying—sticky and oozing blood, flesh rent and sagging on nails—were supposed to open the heart to compassion, the friars said.

Julian wanted to free her heart to love Christ. To learn true contrition. To feel and not just speak her prayers. Yet, if she was

truthful, she still meditated on Christ's passion and felt cold. Barren. Dry. A thousand questions pricked her. Perhaps she did not understand what the friars meant by feelings. Perhaps she had not yet discovered Christ's true compassion. In the flickering wax light, the "minde" of the Passion still seemed far away.

What if she just couldn't feel anything no matter how hard she tried? How, then, could she learn to love God better? She heard no answer in the friars' teaching.



ALL THAT SUMMER, Julian spent her time in the garden with the gardener. She asked him a dozen questions as she watched him pull turnips from the black soil and toss them into a basket. How did he know that the turnips were ready? How did he get them up without breaking the stems? What happened to the turnip if it got too big? Would he plant turnips in the same place next year or somewhere else? He wiped sweat from his forehead and wiped his hands on his mud-spattered tunic. He smiled a deep sun-and-wind-creased smile and laughed heartily at her questions.

At his instruction, Julian pinched insects off the chard leaves. She noticed that the gardener took all manner of things—scraps, peelings and cores, rotting things and putrid things. He turned them again into dirt. She watched him "delving and dyking and sweating" and "turning the earth up and down." She saw that he sought the right moment for planting and for watering, as he carefully watched both sky and earth. As he worked, the plants

grew; their fruits formed. All that had been worthless and castoff was transformed into something valuable again. She carried his fruits to the kitchen in a basket.

In the kitchen, young Julian watched the cook preserve medlar and pippens. The cook added rock salt to the kettle and stirred with a wooden paddle. "You see," the cook held out her hand. "I put in about the size of a hazelnut for each batch." She helped to seal the fruit into clay jars for winter while a servant swept the earthen kitchen floor to spread new reeds mixed with artemisia and bay. The kitchen smelled damp and smoky, and the door stood propped open despite the flies. Parsnips rested in a barrel. Sausages hung curing from the ceiling. Fresh bronze-colored herring from the market were spread out on the table.

Meanwhile, the world outside arrived in strange and surprising ways. A peddler brought salted lemons by the house and sent one through the squint for everyone to try. A pilgrim spent the night in the family's yard and told of Veronica's veil, seen with his own eyes in Rome. He said that the face on the veil changed constantly, sometimes seeming to be gently gazing with love, sometimes appearing fierce, sometimes deathly, sometimes kindly. He showed them his prized badge from Walsingham, shaped from pewter into a tiny house.



AFTER THE HARVEST HAD BEEN BROUGHT IN and the days grew shorter and the light gloomier, Julian watched from her window as the priest made his way to the bedside of a sick neighbor. He came through the dark streets with an acolyte carrying a cross. The parish clerk went ahead, holding a lantern and ringing a little bell. The priest carried the sacrament at his breast in a small box as though cradling a child. The night air filled with the soft tinkling. "Hail! Light of the world, Word of the Father, true Victim, Living Flesh, true God and true Man. Hail flesh of Christ, let Thy blood wash my soul," the priest called out. The lantern light flickered against oilcloth shades hung over narrow windows. Inside, people rose from their beds and pulled on cloaks to begin a sleepy procession behind the priest to their neighbor's house.

Julian knew because she had seen it many times: the dying man would be reminded that the Mother of God would offer to all, even the most wayward, shrift andousel. He would be anointed and asked for his last confession. He would eat the *viaticum*, bread for the journey, offer his last wishes, and reconcile with his enemies so that he could walk free into the land beyond. If he died, the town crier would bring the news of his death with the end of the night watch.

What was that like for a dying person, Julian wondered, to cross the very last threshold of Holy Church into the realm beyond all that was known? Once the bread was eaten, the priest moved aside and ahead was only the country of God. Did the dying know something about God, she wondered, that everyone else could not know? Was the better sight and better feeling of God that she longed for on that side of life? Perhaps,

as her mother said, she asked too many questions. It came to her mind, "freely without any effort," that she would like to have such a sickness so that she could know what lay beyond, in that far country where there were no longer any intermediaries between the soul and God.



IN NOVEMBER, after the trees had lost their leaves and the cold rains had begun, when all the grain was gathered in the cellar and her mother had counted and recounted the wooden barrels, hoping that they would feed the household for the winter, Julian and her mother went, as always, to church. That day, a priest told the story of St. Cecilia, a girl in ancient Rome whose family wanted her to marry. She objected, believing that God had a calling for her that was beyond the ordinary. But she was forced. On her wedding night, she converted her young pagan husband to Christianity and preserved her virginity. The two began to convert their friends and families. Word of their missionary zeal spread to the Roman authorities who killed Cecilia's husband and arrested her.

When she stood before the Roman provost, he asked her, "Know you not of what power I am?"

Julian thought Cecilia's answer shockingly but deliciously impolite as the priest read it out dramatically, "Your power is little to dread for it is like a bladder full of wind, which with the

pricking of a needle is anon gone away and come to nought." The people around her snickered at the rude metaphor.

At that the provost ordered Cecilia's death, but when the soldiers tried to cut off her head they were thwarted by the power of God. They struck three blows at her neck, the most allowed by law, but mysteriously did not manage to kill her. She lived on for three days healing and saving many people.

The priest ended the story: "Let us devoutly pray unto our Lord that by the merits of this holy virgin and martyr, Saint Cecilia, we may come to his everlasting bliss in heaven."

"Amen," the people answered.

But it wasn't the everlasting bliss of heaven that stayed with Julian as she left the church and walked home in the bracing gray cold. It was the power in Cecilia's voice and the three wounds to her neck. She, too, wanted three wounds. Many years later, pen in hand, she named the wounds contrition, compassion, and longing for God. These were her spiritual desires. These were both the gifts and the wounds that she would earnestly seek her whole life.

