

PILGRIMAGE IN THE MODERN WORLD: COLLECTED STORIES

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford

May 2018

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the efforts of Dr. Bondurant, my advisor, for guiding me through this process and helping me to become a better writer. Thank you!

I would also like to thank Professor Beth Spencer and Dr. John Winkle for being on my thesis committee and advising and supporting me in all of my writing endeavors.

Lastly, I would like to thank the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College for providing me with this opportunity as well as an excellent undergraduate experience.

ABSTRACT

CATHERINE PAGE LAGARDE: *Pilgrimage in the Modern World: Collected Stories*
(Under the direction of Dr. Matthew Bondurant)

This thesis seeks to creatively explore various aspects of the modern pilgrimage in a collection of two nonfictional personal essays and one fictional short story, all of which are thematically linked. It is a study of faith, doubt, journey, and their intersection and manifestation in the modern world. It is inspired both by personal experiences as well as the works of various authors, most notably Carlos Eire, Walter Macken, Dodie Smith, Sharon Creech, Sigrid Undset, St. Thomas More, and St. Thomas Aquinas. This work seeks to give modern context and understanding to traditional understandings of “pilgrimage,” as described in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Far from changing or turning away from this traditional understanding of the word, this work serves instead to uphold it within a modern context.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
The Gratitude Project.....	10
5 Proofs.....	29
To Thaw.....	66

Introduction

When I first decided that I wanted to pursue a thesis in creative writing, I did so with a specific topic in mind: pilgrimage. My plan at the time was to hike the Camino de Santiago in Spain, transform my life, and come home with numerous interesting and inspiring stories to tell. The trip was planned (multiple excel spreadsheets were involved), the flights were booked, and my route was mapped. I had all of my equipment, so I was ready to go – or so I thought.

Last minute illness prevented me from making this pilgrimage, and I had the added dilemma of reimagining my thesis as well. Pilgrimages still fascinated me, but the circumstances forced me to examine the topic in a different light. Camino was out of the equation, as I have always been advised to write “what I know.” So, I had to ask myself the question: what aspects of pilgrimage do I know enough about to further explore and, eventually, write about?

In this way, I began to consider the accessibility of traditional pilgrimages to Americans. Europe and the Middle East contain numerous sites of devotion, hundreds to thousands of years old, that the faithful regularly visit on pilgrimage. (This holds true for many faiths, but for my purposes, I have chosen to examine this as it relates to Christianity – more specifically, Catholicism.) Examples include various sites in The Holy Land, the site of the Marian apparitions in Lourdes, France, the Paris-Chartres pilgrimage made at Pentecost each year, the “Pilgrim’s Way” to Canterbury (made by the fictional characters in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*), and, of course, The Camino de

Santiago, which ends at the tomb of St. James the Apostle. The list goes on. America has fewer (and the ones that do exist are far less popular) for the simple reason that Christianity came to this continent at a much later date. As a result, the culture of pilgrimage that exists among the faithful in Europe does not hold the same prominence in America, where the equivalent seems to take the form of spiritual retreats, in which participants retreat from their regular routine for a time to examine and rekindle their faith, without the distractions that are present in their daily lives.

It now becomes necessary to define exactly what I mean when I say “pilgrimage,” which is separate from “retreat.” “Pilgrimage” has two distinct but related definitions. The first, a journey a pilgrim takes to a shrine, describes the obvious meaning of the word. The second, the course life on earth as a journey toward Heaven, points to a broader meaning that actually forms the basis for definition number one. “The course of life on earth” is the ultimate expedition that, for the pilgrim, culminates in eternal life. Heaven, the most sacred of places, is the destination, and the lifetime spent on earth with all its trials and tribulations is the journey. The Catechism of the Catholic Church mentions the word “pilgrimage” twenty-four times, and of the twenty-four, fourteen are in reference to the journey of life with the destination of Heaven. Nine refer to an earthly journey to a shrine or holy place, and one is neutral, referring to both.ⁱ Not counting the neutral reference, this means that roughly sixty-one percent of the references, a majority, point to pilgrimage as an earthly journey leading to Heaven. All this is not to discount the other definition, but merely to emphasize the importance of both. Pilgrimage is primarily our earthly journey toward eternal life, and smaller

pilgrimages that we make to holy sites along the way merely serve to aid us in this journey to our ultimate destination.

This is why sacrificial or penitential journeys to holy sites mirror our ultimate pilgrimage in a way that spiritual retreats, however beneficial for one's spiritual life, cannot. According to the Catechism, "Pilgrimages evoke our earthly journey toward heaven and are traditionally very special occasions for renewal in prayer" (CCC 2690.49). They also mirror the struggles and tribulations of our time on earth in pursuit of Heaven and are "signs of penance" (CCC 1438).ⁱⁱ

With all of this in mind, I began to think about what a nontraditional pilgrimage, one that mirrors our ultimate pilgrimage by leading us to heaven but one whose immediate destination might not include a physical shrine, might look like. My focus was more on the interior journey to holiness accompanied by an outward journey, with all the struggles that this would entail: physical, mental, and spiritual.

I began to think about recent pilgrimages in my own life, thus far. The one major traditional pilgrimage I have had the privilege to make was a trip to Lourdes, France, which I visited during my semester abroad. This setting inspires the fictional story, "5 Proofs," which is second in this thesis. Apart from this experience, however, most of my experiences with pilgrimage must be classified as nontraditional (they do not lead to a shrine, but rather are journeys that seek to advance life's ultimate journey to heaven), and they form the basis for nonfictional stories one and three: "The Gratitude Project" and "To Thaw," respectively.

“The Gratitude Project” is based on my experiences working abroad at The American School in Switzerland (TASIS) in the summer of 2017. It also deals with my personal experiences working through depression. This interior journey, as well as the physical journey to Switzerland, which included many small journeys that take the form of morning walks in the foothills of the Swiss Alps, comprise this pilgrimage. The two become intertwined, as the narrator learns to use gratitude in answer to depression and other difficulties. This gratitude is ultimately directed toward God through prayer, and this is what transforms the journey into a pilgrimage. This is made manifest in the daily morning walks that the narrator describes. Each walk, though only spanning a small portion of each day, is measured in prayer. The path is uphill for a great part of the way and though the narrator does not even know the physical destination of these walks (she goes farther and farther each time but never reaches the end of the path), it is clear that their ultimate goal is interior healing and holiness.

“The Gratitude Project” also has a great deal to do with the children that the narrator interacts with at TASIS, and in this regard is greatly influenced by the work of author Sharon Creech, a former TASIS teacher. In her fictional children’s novel *Bloomability*, Creech tells the story of Dinnie, a middle-school girl from a dysfunctional family who finds that she has been given the opportunity to attend the school. Ashlyn, though a real person, reminded me of the *Bloomability* character Lila, Dinnie’s friend, in several respects. Though apparently spoiled, one learns to have compassion for her when one begins to discover and understand the complications and sadness in her life at home. I read the book as a child, and when I found myself living the experience in the

capacity of camp counselor, I was drawn to give it a second look. The descriptions of the children – their diverse backgrounds and economic circumstances, as well as the descriptions of the breathtaking scenery in which I found myself – all proved accurate. Not only did *Bloomability* influence my understanding of my campers, but it was the driving force that made me curious about this school as a child and that would later propel me to apply for a job there.ⁱⁱⁱ

The final piece in this thesis, “To Thaw,” is a simple essay that describes an Outward-Bound dogsledding trip in Boundary Waters, Minnesota that I took with my scholarship cohort in the January of my freshman year. The writing of this piece is inspired in part by *The Kristin Lavransdatter Trilogy* by Sigrid Undset. In the second book of the trilogy, Kristin makes a penitential pilgrimage to atone for her sins.^{iv} While my journey was not a penitential one in the sense that I made the journey for that express purpose (in fact, it was not initially intended to be a pilgrimage at all; rather it became one out of necessity, as I was forced to rely on God, through prayer, for the strength to continue), it had the similar theme of purification through pain. Kristin walked barefoot, wearing rough clothing that chaffed her skin, and carrying her baby.^v The narrator in “To Thaw” takes a journey that is extremely painful; she experiences frostbite due to the extreme cold, and it is ultimately through her simple prayer, “God give me strength,” that she is able to find the courage to carry on. The ending is one of hope.

The reflection behind “To Thaw” also draws a great deal of its inspiration from St. Thomas More’s *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*. More wrote *A Dialogue* while imprisoned in the Tower of London by Henry VIII in 1534, contemplating his own

impending death and suffering. It is meant as a spiritual reflection on the value of suffering and tribulation; one can take comfort in suffering because it has the strange and seemingly paradoxical capacity to draw the sufferer to God through prayer. The mere idea of knowing this truth can bring comfort to the sufferer in his tribulation, but this comfort is made all the greater when the relationship to God through constant prayer becomes strengthened over time because of this suffering. One is also able to take comfort in tribulation when one realizes that one's suffering can mirror that of Christ and therefore further unite one to Christ and bring the sufferer closer to eternal life.^{vi}

The remaining piece in this thesis is placed second, and it is also the longest. "5 Proofs" is the fictional short story set in Lourdes, France. It tells two stories simultaneously: the first is through the lens of sixteen-year-old Victoire, who aspires to be a writer and records her thoughts and experiences in the form of "proofs" loosely modeled after St. Thomas Aquinas's proofs of God's existence by reason alone in his *Summa Theologica*.^{vii} Victoire's approach is different; she seeks to give empirical proofs for God's existence by finding physical examples of the good, the true, and the beautiful as she experiences them in her own life. While these "proofs" are not always totally logical, they are more of an appeal to emotion and represent the sentiments of a young person in search of the truth. Victoire writes four proofs before her untimely death prevents her from finishing the project.

The second piece to this story is the evolution of the relationship between Victoire's parents, Michelle and Antoine, and how they come to terms with their grief.

Victoire's journal is discovered ten years after her death by her father, Antoine, and later on the same day by her mother, Michelle. The unexpected finding of this journal begins a process of healing and forgiveness for them both, and this turns out to be the missing proof.

"5 Proofs" draws its inspiration from multiple texts. The first is Dodie Smith's *Capture the Castle*, whose main character, Cassandra, inspires the character of Victoire. Both write journals and are generally very charismatic, caring characters who are around the same age. Lastly, both seek to discover and write about the truth that they observe in their daily lives.^{viii}

Another significant influence is Carlos Eire's memoir of his childhood in Cuba before Fidel Castro took power, *Waiting for Snow in Havana – Confessions of a Cuban Boy*, which presents nontraditional "proofs" for God's existence. While man has contemplated this question for far longer than this (Aquinas's proofs from causality were written in the thirteenth century), Eire's proofs are unique in that they are comprised of events or moments from his childhood that "are based on similitude and the ways in which all things relate to one another, and to our limited yet eternal minds" (92).^{ix} "5 Proofs" does something similar in that the proofs in both are a posteriori; they are drawn from experiences rather than reason alone. The role the proofs play within the framework of this story, however, is very different. In "5 Proofs," the proofs are Victoire's entire reason for writing the journal in the first place, and she is much more explicit in her explanations of them. The third proof in particular, "Miracles," is a much more obvious and direct proof of God's existence than Eire's childhood anecdotes,

which use paradoxes, metaphors, and coincidences to understand God's hand and man's placement in the natural world.

The idea to end the journal before the fifth proof could be written was inspired by Walter Macken's short story, "God Made Sunday." "God Made Sunday" is a series of letters written by a simple Irish fisherman, Colmain, to the traveler, Pól, to explain, through his life's story, what compels him to believe in God. Pól spends two weeks convincing Colmain to undertake the task before Colmain agrees.

No, he said, I go to you. You are important. You live with the nerve of life. You are what's known as the common man, but you live on the bosom of the sea and over your head there is a great sky. You are not confused by lights and buildings and screaming noises. I want you to talk to me.^x

Like Colmain, Victoire is a "normal" person who lives a fairly simple life. She goes to school, helps out at her parents' shop, and begins taking swim lessons. Her faith is simple and compelling, but, as Macken says in "God Made Sunday,"

Each man in his own life has to pass through a period of great doubt. It's a personal thing. God cannot be an obscure something dealing with millions in the mass. He must be personal to each man. Therefore each single person...must be individually challenged. It's not that easy.^{xi}

Both Colmain and Victoire are "challenged" in different ways, but faith triumphs for

both. Both also have their letters/entries cut short before they finish their stories.

Colmain's letters are organized by the days of the week. Each day tells of an important life event, and at the end of Saturday, he is about to leave in his boat to fetch a doctor from the mainland for a local lady who is having complications in childbirth. It is stormy and the sea is unsafe, but Colmain is determined to go alone. He never gets to write the "Sunday" entry.^{xii}

The reader takes comfort, though, knowing that “Sunday” is the greatest “proof” of all – one of sacrificial love. The twist at the end of “5 Proofs” functions a bit differently; the fifth proof is not found in any of Victoire’s actions, but in those of her parents as they learn to cope with grief through forgiveness and mercy, both to each other as well as to Élise, the homeless woman they “adopt.”

“5 Proofs” takes place in Lourdes, one of the most famous pilgrimage destinations in the world, with over six million pilgrims coming to drink and bathe in the restorative waters each year. Victoire visits the “piscines,” or pools, on her own pilgrimage. Though she, like Colmain, experiences her own period of doubt, she is firm in her faith at the moment of her death, leading the reader to believe that she has indeed reached that ultimate destination of the pilgrimage of her life on earth.

The subject of pilgrimage is both an old and on-going topic of discussion, of which I have addressed only a few aspects. My stories are therefore very limited, as they focus entirely on the pilgrimage stories of young women in a modern setting. They address the limitless themes of journey, faith, doubt within faith, and gratitude, in their own limited way. There are many other aspects related to this topic that are not addressed here but that are also important, and I hope that, in years to come, others will continue to experience, reflect, and write on this topic, in all its beauty and complexity.

The Gratitude Project

As a fledgling writer, I sometimes feel as though my life is composed of sentences. Syntax is fascinating, and how we piece words together to communicate stories and ideas that are important seems to have become the central focus of my undergraduate studies. I learn languages, I read literature, and I write, a lot. Some of what I read and write is forgotten the next minute, but occasionally clusters of words, some phrases, a select few sentences, become etched in the forefront of my mind and flavor the other thoughts and perceptions that occur there. Not that I choose to narrate the actions of my life as I live them, but certain sentences that I've read or written in the course of my twenty-one years have stuck with me and become important insofar as they inform my way of thinking. Perception is, after all, more important to our overall happiness than any circumstance could be, and I do want to be happy. This is why I've come to set great store in examining and changing for the better the relationship between my thinking and my emotions. Some call this cognitive therapy, but I think that the heart of it all can be summed up in one simple word: gratitude.

"I am so thankful that I am able to feel thankful again."

I remember clearly the day I wrote this last sentence, in the fall of my sophomore year. I had been walking through the Grove at Ole Miss to return to my dorm, where I had RA duty after class. The outside atmosphere had changed overnight

to become gloriously fall-like, with brightly colored leaves that danced in the air as they fell. At the time, I was writing an admissions essay for a summer study abroad program in Ireland. The essay prompt had read, simply, “Describe yourself.” I was stumped. I’d felt lost because I didn’t know myself well enough to begin to answer the question, and that this somehow reflected badly on me, personally. The problem with this was that I was basing my perplexed feelings on two assumptions: (1) that this would be an easy question for everyone except for me and (2) that everyone else filling out this application was taking the prompt as seriously as I was – it would have been easy to simply write about one’s favorite hobbies. But I’m a perfectionist, and I felt that it was my duty in this task to completely communicate who I was in two pages or less – a challenge for even the most experienced of writers, I think. My point in all this is that I don’t think most nineteen-year-olds (or most twenty-one year olds, for that matter) do know themselves really well, and I know now that I certainly did not.

I had to ponder the prompt (I am of a temperament that loves to ponder), and I decided that I was frustrated with the usual admissions essay format in which students brag about their accomplishments and successes. To me, those seemed one-sided to the point of dishonesty, and I was not in a mood to tolerate this at all. So I told all.

I am so thankful that I am able to feel thankful again...

There had been a time when I couldn't feel thankful. I couldn't *feel* anything. I wasn't moved to prayers of thanksgiving by a beautiful day, and the realization of my blessings never made me happy because I never did realize them. I didn't care deeply about much, really, nor did I even pay much attention to my surroundings; I seemed to be drifting in and out of myself. Actually, that was a phrase I had written in a poem at the time, *drifting in and out of myself*. When I returned home for summer vacation, I was so worried that my family would worry about me, as of course they did. I was slow to move, and I couldn't sleep. It's a funny thing when you realize that *you are not enough*.

I turned to Netflix binge sessions. Friends, The Office, Parks and Rec, Arrested Development, and Frasier flooded my consciousness, and then were over and gone in an embarrassingly short amount of time. I played the desperately passive role of observer as Frasier Crane, counseling a depressed caller on his radio show, told an anecdote about his father's dog's bout of depression. As in every episode, Frasier gradually came to realize in the span of twenty minutes that he himself actually suffered with the diagnosis he had given to his caller. In the end, Frasier, along with Niles, Martin, Daphne and Roz, contemplated the insipidity of their lives and the inevitability of death, before reaching the cheery conclusion that they had only to get over their perceived misfortunes and enjoy life's simple pleasures. As Frasier proclaimed over the radio, "Life is too short to dwell on every bump in the road. Try to take pleasure in the simple things." I watched. I clicked. *Play next episode*.

Are you still watching Frasier? Yes, Netflix, I'm still watching.

Talk was exhausting. My mother tried to help.

“The very worst thing you can do is feel sorry for yourself. When people feel this way, they have to come out of *themselves* to snap out of it. Always ask yourself: how can I *serve*?”

But I didn't want to hear that. “You don't understand,” I told her. How could I serve others if I couldn't even serve myself? I didn't want to feel this way. No, that was not it at all.

Two years passed, and it was summer once again. I was working for the middle school summer program at The American School in Switzerland (TASIS), which was a semi-academic summer camp where kids from all over the world came to learn English. Each morning I would jump out of bed because every day contained the promise of activity and purpose; I loved devoting my time and energy to playing with and caring for the kids.

One morning near the beginning of the summer, I got up, got dressed quietly so as not to awaken my roommates, ate my morning chocolate square, took my pills, grabbed my laundry bag, and practically bounced out the door, bounding down the three flights of stairs (taking them two at a time), before I made it outside.

I found myself standing on top of a ledge on a terrace crowned with red flowers above a stone staircase, but it felt like I was standing on nothing at all; only when I

turned my head to look behind could I see the solidity of the structure that supported me.

I stood on air. Beautiful, crisp, blue air, like the blue you could only see on a postcard of Lugano, Switzerland. Below the air that supported my firmly planted feet, but before the lake, I could see palm trees. Farther up and farther out, there were snow-capped mountains. The contrast in the scene before me was striking; how could something so tropical as a palm tree coexist with glaciers, and all within the scope of a photo that could be taken on my phone? Before my summer as a counselor ended, I knew that I would climb one of these mountains. I had never understood the meaning of *awe* until this moment.

A large green lizard darted across the stone. I climbed down from what I would later call “laundry look-out” and walked to the building next door to drop off my laundry. It was 8AM, and I had all the time in the world - until 11, that is, when the work day would begin.

Most mornings, I would walk up the hill, outside the TASIS campus, past the construction site, the red bench, and the Hermann Hesse museum, and into the town of Montagnola. Some days I stayed in the town to do a little grocery shopping or write on my laptop while sipping tea at a sidewalk café; other times, I followed the Via Minigera leaving town in the other direction. I had no idea where this road lead, but I was curious. Each time, I woke up a little earlier and made it a little farther before my careful timing dictated that I turn back in order to make it to morning meeting. I wondered if I would ever reach the end. Was the end reachable?

The walks were a good time to think clearly, free from distraction – every other waking hour (and some of the sleeping ones) were devoted to my campers. In a way, the kids never really left my mind, and so it was inevitable that I would think about them during these walks, too. They were an enigma. It was all too easy to assume that because they came from wealthy backgrounds, they were spoiled; but this was simply not the case. Some were relatives of employees, and some, though wealthy, didn't really have a place they could call home. These were constantly being shipped away from international school to international school. It only occurred to me later to consider what they were being shipped away *from*.

My walk each morning began with prayer, transforming this mini-gira into a mini-pilgrimage.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

I measured my progress by the landmarks I passed. The first major one was the red bench, indicating that I had just made it past TASIS campus and had reached possibly one of the best views of the valley.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Many of these landmarks were stationary, but others changed. Each day, I passed the same wooden bench, but one day this bench had a pair of red high heels resting on top. What Cinderella left her evening slippers on this random bench in the middle of nowhere, Switzerland? I wondered. Did she need to make a quick getaway, thus necessitating the leaving behind of the shoes? No, they were perched too carefully atop that bench; these shoes were not discarded by someone who needed to run.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

I reached the next landmark, a stationary bike with its front wheel in the air, overgrown with ivy and flowers. Behind the bike and beyond the shade of the trees, you could see bits of the lake and the mountains and the sky.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.
Amen.

Later that night, the awe from earlier transformed into quite a different emotion: exhaustion. We were all there: Liz, Karolina, Lauren, and Rose - waiting in our little corner of the hallway on the second floor of the girls' dorm. By nighttime, De Nobili had begun to cool down a bit, but the air was still thick and heavy with an ever-present moisture that came, we knew, from our proximity to Lake Lugano. The centuries-old building lacked air conditioning, a detail that was a non-issue during the school year but that certainly became one for the summer-sessioners. We talked about finding time, somehow, to take one of the vans down to the shopping center and buy tank tops and gelato to keep in our freezers. Anything to make the heat more bearable.

Things had begun to settle. The counselors were sitting in this corner because we were all on "super-duty" for the first week of the session (meaning we all had to stay up until midnight and resolve problems that might arise while keeping a detailed account of

the goings-on of the dorm). The kids weren't allowed to have their phones at all the first week, so our duties were made both simpler and more complicated. We didn't need to distribute and monitor phone-time, but we did have to console disgruntled, phoneless children.

Quiet-time was fast approaching. I was still so new to the job, and I really felt antsy just sitting there, with the GO-GO-GO attitude still so fresh in my mind. The only problem with this was that I hadn't the faintest idea what it was I should or could be doing. The returning counselors seemed so content in their perches in folding chairs or on the floor, until a kid would approach with a problem, launching them into robot mode. These returners would become machines who knew the exact procedure for any given situation: who to call, what the phone extension was, where to find ice. They had the confidence in this job that I currently lacked. So, not knowing what to do, I would take a lap every so often down the hall and back, chatting with the campers and making sure nothing was glaringly wrong. If this didn't make my presence and contributions vital to the program, it at least made me feel somewhat useful and quelled the anxiety of my inactivity. I was nearing the end of one of these rounds, when I heard a sound that gave me pause: faint sobbing from behind a closed door.

I opened the door. Alex, a twelve-year-old girl I had encountered but hadn't really gotten to know yet, was alone on the bottom bunk in the dark room. This was a double room, with two bunk beds, two windows, and a bathroom; but her roommate was elsewhere. I took a deep breath and stepped inside, seating myself next to Alex on the bed.

“Hey, Alex,” I said. “You okay?” I hesitated. “Are you missing your family?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine, though,” she said and shied away. “It’s really, um, not a big deal.” Just outside the doorway, three Russian girls raced down the hallway, shrieking and giggling. I closed the door.

“It’s okay to miss them,” I said. “Pretty much everyone here does. I really think it’ll help you to hang out with the other girls.”

“I don’t want to make them sad,” she said.

“Okay,” I said. “Well, let’s just talk about it.”

I suggested a walk downstairs to get some water, and after she had some, we took a seat on the cold stone stairs outside the chaos of the dorm hallway. We could have been in a staircase from another time, what with the rod iron banister and stained-glass windows; De Nobili had either been very well-preserved or authentically renovated to appear antiquated. It was quieter here, and easier to talk. We talked about Alex’s stage fright in the TASIS musical theatre class and her family issues back home. We talked about her abusive father who was to be released from prison in a few days and her worry for her mother at home in California. We talked about how to face these things; we talked about courage. Alex eventually felt ready to go back to the dorm to join the others. She made friends whom she cried about leaving by the end of the session. My mind was not as easily settled. This was not to be the last or most difficult time I consoled a suffering camper.

The next week, after an afternoon on the archery field, I found myself cradling a sobbing ten-year-old in my arms. Our group was part of the bus's first pickup after the afternoon sports, so we waited, and I tried to console the poor girl. The noise in the stopped bus mounted as the soccer club climbed in, and the air conditioning, as if anticipating their entrance, blasted currents of cold air from its vents. I suddenly wanted to sing to her, like I used to sing to my baby sister when I would rock her to sleep, but I didn't want to make the situation even more embarrassing. Kids were already whispering.

I opted instead to rub her back and try to calm her down. Eventually, the sobbing stopped, and I saw that her eyes were closed. Wondering if I should file an incident report, I reviewed the events in my mind in order to achieve a little clarity.

The day had been particularly hot, and there was little to block the sun on the archery field. The one spot that offered any shade at all was an umbrella table in the back corner, which was currently occupied by a cluster of girls who were, they said, tired of shooting. I stood on the periphery, between these girls and the archers.

"Do you believe in God?" Nina had asked the group in the shade.

I had always wondered what these kids thought about faith; we were, after all, an international melting pot of kids from many cultures and religions, at an American school. I did feel that I had to be careful about bringing it up to them, though. Here was my chance to listen.

"Yes," Caroline answered. "And I believe in mermaids too."

A chorus of eleven-year-old agreement followed, and I, slightly disappointed, remembered who I was listening to. I really should have been encouraging this corner clique to participate in the activity at hand. The Chinese kids (Wifi and Miku) and the Swiss (Georgio and Marguerita) were the only ones shooting. Mohammed had wandered outside the gate to get to the water hose, no doubt with some mischievous plan of his own. Last time he had sprayed Nina and Liam, and then became angry when Liam dumped the contents of his water bottle on his head. Liam's little sister, Ashlyn, was sitting on the bench with the mermaid crowd. I ambled my way over to join them.

Ashlyn was trying to explain to the other girls why *Moana* was, objectively, the greatest Disney princess ever, and she decided that the best way to convey her point was to sing the heroine's signature song, "How Far I'll Go."

Nina rolled her eyes, then turned her knowing gaze to meet mine. I tried to give her a look that said, "Please just humor her. Don't awaken the savage beast."

Ashlyn was the smallest kid at camp, and, if I'm not mistaken, the youngest as well. She was a boarder at the TASIS summer program, but her older brother Liam was a day student; he lived with his mother (who came all the way from Hawaii) in the hotel suite she had reserved for the summer. Ashlyn, per usual, was dressed all in pink, this time with a picture of a cat on her tee shirt. She loved to sing, much to the chagrin of her roommates.

You see, it seemed that merely humoring Ashlyn would never be enough; she required the undivided attention of an adoring audience. Nina and Caroline, however, soon tired of the high, squeaky rendition of "How Far I'll Go," and inched their way out

of the danger zone and into the archery field to pick up their bows and continue shooting.

I inserted myself into the scene on the bench next to Ashlyn. The wood was hot, and when I fiddled with the archery pads strewn across the table, I could tell that it was splintery, too. I'd have to warn the kids about that. "Hey Ashlyn, don't you want to break the record you set last time?" I asked.

Her nose wrinkled like she'd smelled something bad. "No, I don't. Liam took my bow."

This was not going the way I'd hoped. "But, Ashlyn, look. There are lots of other bows you can use. Come on, I want to see how many points you get this time!" I reached across the table and over the archery stuff to grab my water bottle, which was sweating profusely. Forty-five five minutes ago, it had been filled to the top with ice. I took a long swig.

She offered no response, except for the slight protrusion of her lower lip and furrow of her brow.

"Here, take this - you can shoot against me!" I handed her the bow, hoping against hope that my gesture would be accepted.

"Teacher, can I go and get some water?" Nina asked. Was that the fifth time this afternoon? And where was Mohammed? Why hadn't he come back yet?

I left Ashlyn to cool off for a minute so I could check on my other campers. Wifi and Miku had given up their spots by the quivers to Nina and Caroline, and they were

lying on the ground, apparently performing some type of skit. In a dramatic gesture, Wifi pushed Miku away.

“Rose! Rose! Leave my body! Leave my body, Rose!”

Miku responded, “I don’t want to leave you Jack, I want to stay with you *forever!*”

It dawned on me that they were performing the final scene of *Titanic*. I was about to open my phone camera when I was interrupted by a shriek.

“Liam always gets the best things, and I always get the suckiest things!” came the shriek.

Heads turned, and the sound of arrows hitting targets (or not) ceased, though only momentarily. I tried to speak soothingly.

“Okay Ashlyn, if you really feel like you need that bow, I bet Liam will share it with you. We’re *all* sharing the bows here.” I called over to Liam, “Hey Liam, could you please let your sister use this bow when it’s not your turn?”

“Okay, sure, Ash-leen.”

“Don’t call me that! He *knows* I hate it when he calls me that, and he still does it *anyway!*”

I put my hand on her shoulder. “Hey Ashlyn, let’s calm down, okay? Do you want to walk over to the water fountain with me and talk about it?” I asked.

She pushed away. “NOOOOO!”

I spent the next hour trying to dispel four-year-old grudges, like “One time he stole all my money, and my mom didn’t even *care!*” and “He broke my iPad and then he

broke his own, and my mom only got *him* a new one!”. It seemed that my best efforts only fed the flame, however, and Ashlyn became more and more enraged. Her tan skin became flushed, and each time I said anything, she would recall her refrain of the hour: “Liam always gets the best things, and I always get the suckiest things!” (Sometimes this refrain varied: “Why do I *always* get the suckiest things?”, but the sentiment was the same.)

The archery lesson ended, and I herded the kids up the hill to the bus. I took Ashlyn’s hand, slowing my pace as I pulled her along, and we brought up the rear. Halfway through our mini-trek up the steep concrete driveway, she pulled her hand away and began hitting me with it. “You’re supposed to make me happy, and you’re *not doing your job.*” I took her hand back, and this time, I didn’t let go.

I released her hand as we entered the bus and were greeted by a conglomerate of foreign tongues (mostly Italian, some Russian, a little Chinese), each one shouting loudly so as to be heard over the noisy din. The kid that had been hitting me two minutes ago now wrapped her arms around me and lay her head in my lap. That’s when the sobbing began.

My heart was saddened as I sat there on the bus, playing with Ashlyn’s hair and rubbing her back. I couldn’t make assumptions about her life at home with her family, but there was clearly something lacking. Why was she so upset? What was the deal with her brother? And why had she never been taught how to behave around other kids? Also, *was* I doing my job? I began to understand that there are different kinds of poverty.

The next day, I woke up with the sun, only slightly more fatigued than the day before, and I prepared for my walk. I got dressed, went to the bathroom and locked the door before I took my daily medication and stowed its bottle safely back into my personal cabinet. I grabbed some breakfast downstairs and ate some chocolate. As per my morning ritual, I stopped to begin my prayer by laundry lookout.

The uphill trail of Our Father's, Hail Mary's, and Glory Be's left me panting in the heat, but somehow this made my prayer more real. I felt as if, in my small way, this physical exertion united me more to Christ through his suffering. In no way was I walking to Calvary, but I had to let myself believe that small sacrifices were important, too. Otherwise, it would be very easy to become discouraged. What would be the point?

My prayer couldn't help but begin with feelings of thankfulness: for the awe-inspiring natural beauty before me, for the people in my life who have taught me to love, for the opportunity to be where I was in Switzerland. "God bless Nina, Caroline, and Ashlyn. God bless Wifi and Miku, Marguerita and Georgio, Mohammed and Liam. God bless Alex..." I tried to remember the names of all my campers and fellow staff and ask God to bless them, Fraulein Maria-style. I prayed through the mysteries of the Rosary, through Jesus' Incarnation, ministry, Passion, death, and Resurrection. As I forced my legs to climb onward and upward in the shade of the tall trees and foliage

lining my path along the steep mountain slope, I tried to understand in its entirety what I could not, and I was left with only my awe.

I never quite made it to the end of the Via Minigera, but I did make it to a stopping point where all that remained were a set of stone stairs leading down. The foliage concealed their precise destination, but I have always since imagined that they go all the way down to the bottom of the valley, reaching the lake. Whether or not this is the case, I'll have to wait and see – I never found the time to investigate. But I did have time to pause for a minute at the top and cherish the awe that the moment inspired.

4 Months Later

I'm back at school, back in my normal routine. After the summer, I'm feeling confident – so much so, that I decide the time is right to make a change.

It's Tuesday. I pull my brand-new pill-cutter out of its packaging and pop one of the small white disks into the center of the tippy top of its point. The guillotine comes down, deliberately and gently, slicing the disk in two. I lift it back up, pluck one of the nearly perfect halves from its platform, and pop it into my mouth. I don't need water anymore to help me swallow.

The other half of the pill will be left alone in its chamber, untouched, along with the small dusting of white crumbs, until Wednesday morning.

It's Thursday. I battle tears.

It's Friday. I can hear the voice of the college-student-turned-lector annunciating the words of what I assume to be the first reading. I am late. Today, this is a welcome realization.

I step gingerly into the sanctuary, ensuring that the door closes silently behind me. Before me are the rows upon rows of wooden pews, culminating in the stone altar at the front of the chapel. Today the altar cloth is red; it's the feast day of a martyr. The priest, also clothed in red, sits in his chair to the right. The lector is reading at the lectern to the left, and in the center of it all, behind the altar, is the Tabernacle, containing the Body of Christ. I glance toward it, implore the Lord's help with my silent prayer, "God give me strength," and scan the pews in my immediate vicinity. I want space in which to hide from observation or confrontation. I slide into the last chair behind the last row of pews. Almost no one else is sitting on this makeshift last pew with me, only a semi-stranger at the opposite end: Zach was his name, I think, a guy I'd seen before but never talked to.

I feel weak. I cannot will myself to kneel, so I have to satisfy myself with sitting with my head bowed down, resting on my knees and wrapped in my arms. The air feels thick, and my face is hot. Do I have a fever? Am I sick?

The Eucharist is consecrated, and the congregation kneels, preparing to receive Communion. "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed." The habitual words are spoken in unison, but for

me they are uttered barely above a whisper, and I find that I'm unable to control even the tone of my voice. The tears creep back into my eyes, unbidden and unwelcome.

I know rationally that I have no reason to be sad, that this is due to a temporary chemical imbalance of the brain, but the realization almost makes the reality worse. Why, then, can't I keep it together? Why does so much depend upon half of a small, chalky white disk?

"The Mass is ended, go in peace."

"Thanks be to God."

It's Sunday. I wake up, pad across the carpet to my dry erase board attached to the back of my bedroom door, and write down three things I'm thankful for.

Socrates apparently once said that the unexamined life is not worth living. I would say that I agree with him, but I would add the caveat that the unexamined life is not worth living *for those without gratitude and the heart of a servant*. For me, this came precisely in that order: examine, thank, serve. Shortly after I began weaning off the medication, I went to see a speaker talk about a student group who visited the elderly at the nursing home each Sunday. I was drawn to his words and decided that I would go.

Contentedness with what we have allows us to be happy; it allows us to be *enough*. It also allows us to serve, which then adds to our contentedness and happiness.

Now, when I visit my friends at the nursing home, I come away each time more joyful and energized than when I came.

Depression is cyclical, but happiness is, too. It's a lesson I would have learned long ago, if only I'd been receptive to my mother's words; but this was something I believe I had to live through in order to learn for myself: a small bit of the process of this pilgrimage. Now, when I think about the sentences that compose my life – the ones that matter, that stick with me – the one that holds the most prominent place in my mind and colors the way I perceive my surroundings comes to me in the gentle voice of my mother: "How can I *serve*?"

5 Proofs

Antoine and Michelle Delafleur were both ready for bed, or at least, tired enough that they ought to be. Darkness had made its gradual descent on their little neighborhood, blanketing the houses, shops, and hotels. All was calm. Silence reigned at this time of night, if it can be believed, even on Rue Sainte-Marie, with its seven hotels. It was all quiet, that is, save for the one disturbance coming from the small house behind the Saint Thérèse of Lisieux gift shop.

The kitchen in the Delafleur house would have been considered outdated twenty years ago. The dishwasher worked when it had a mind to, and the cabinets, while not original to the old house, were beginning to show wear and tear, despite the Delafleurs' efforts to keep a fresh coat of paint on them. Michelle had whitewashed them, but Antoine had spent hours covering them with elaborate decorative designs in brightly colored paint.

Michelle was scrubbing the remnants of burnt rice from an old copper pot with a piece of steel wool. She dumped the blackened rice that would fall freely into the sink and ran the garbage disposal before returning to her steel wool to continue the scrubbing. Her husband Antoine stood behind her, not doing anything in particular.

"But Michelle, we promised when we married that we'd give our children a better life than the one we were given. Swimming is a *life* skill!"

"What *good* would it do, Antoine?" She scrubbed harder.

“It could save her life one day, Michelle.”

She turned to face him. *He* was in earnest; *she* couldn't believe he was serious.

“For heaven's sake, she isn't going to drown. I need her in the shop, and she's happy there. Isn't that enough?”

“I think she should learn. And you should just put *that* to soak. You're not going to get anywhere with it tonight.”

Michelle threw her worn-out bit of steel wool into the sink. She was hot and tired, and she had had enough. “You're being selfish! Have you even thought about what this will do to me? Victoire's help and company after school is the only break I ever get in the day. I'm exhausted as it is, and I just can't keep doing this, not alone.”

The clock displaying an image of Our Lady of Lourdes chimed eleven. Michelle sighed.

“But Miche, we all need to make sacrifices for the ones we love,” he pleaded.

“Can't you see that?”

“I do. And I make them, every day.” She paused, and her face softened. “It wouldn't be a bad thing for Victoire to learn. But will you *please* hire someone to help when she's out?”

“You know better than I do that we can't afford that right now.”

“And my sanity can't afford to take this anymore!” she snapped. “You're never here when I need you!”

“I will be more from now on, I promise,” he said. “Oh, and good news, before I forget – the new rosary shipment came in today. Should be ready to put out for tomorrow.”

“Right.”

“Michelle, I --”

“You don’t care about me at all,” she sobbed.

“You know that’s not true. I love you.” He put his hand on her face. She drew away.

“Don’t touch me,” she said quietly. For a minute, that original stillness weighed upon them. Michelle turned back to her steel wool and started working on that pot again. “You can sleep on the couch tonight.”

In the next room, a sixteen-year-old girl lay awake in bed, writing in a composition notebook and trying not to listen. But noise travels fast through thin walls.

Ten Years Later

In the foothills of the French Pyrenees, there is a small town called Lourdes. Around the town, mountains soar high, pointing to a sky that hosts a sun that answers back by sending down its shining rays. Like most cities founded in times of antiquity, a

river runs through the middle. Like most cities existing today, so does a railroad. But commerce in this particular town is centered around neither.

An immense cathedral seems to grow out of the side of a cave, its three spires pointing, like the mountains, to the sky. On the cave-side of the cathedral, a small chapel has been built into the grotto. A statue of the Virgin Mary is nestled in a nook that nature carved into a focal point in the rock, and a freshwater spring runs along the rock, fueling the water taps to the left and the bathing pools to the right. Every year, six million pilgrims journey to Lourdes to drink water from the taps and bathe in the pools. This is the place where Antoine Delafleur would come each Sunday to light a candle for his daughter, Victoire.

The immediate area of sanctuary is pristine. Meters away, Catholic gift shops bustle with good business. Storefronts display rosaries, holy water containers, crucifixes, prayer cards, 3rd degree saint relics, scapulars, key chains, jewelry, sweatshirts, candles, calendars, books, aprons, paperweights, saint medals, chocolates, and much, much more.

At the end of the row of shops on Rue Sainte-Marie, a neon sign illuminates the storefront of the shop dedicated to St. Thérèse of Lisieux. Inside, past the rosaries and water jugs, crucifixes and calendars, Antoine Delafleur surveyed his storeroom in the back and sighed. He resolved that it was time at last to do a thorough spring-cleaning.

First, he decided, he would tackle those boxes on the top shelf in the back-left corner that were covered with the thickest layers of dust – boxes that would probably be filled with yesteryear's Lourdes sweatshirts or oven-mitts of unpopular design. Who

knows, maybe what was ugly ten years ago would be trendy now. It was all the same in his mind. Perhaps there was a profit to be made from this rubbish that only collected dust and took up space. But Antoine was a man of small stature, and he didn't know where to find the stepladder.

"Michelle!" he called into the store, "Where have you left the ladder?"

"How should I know?" came the shrill answer. "It's only you who uses it!"

That was probably true. His wife *was* a good head taller than him, a fact which he had gotten used to but which still bothered him in instances such as this. Locating the stepladder in the closet off the kitchen, Antoine reached for the boxes on the top shelf, and as he pulled the first one down, something slid off the top, hit his head, and fell to the floor. Dust exploded in the form of a big mushroom cloud, and Antoine sneezed in double succession. He dropped the box on the ground and shifted his gaze to the object that had caused the disturbance: an old exercise book that he instantly recognized to have belonged to his daughter, Victoire.

No one had thought to look for it, not here.

Antoine picked up the notebook, opened it to the first page, and lowered himself slowly onto the dusty floor.

January 16, 2007

I ran into Père Joseph after school today on my way to the shop, and he said something that rather struck me. I haven't been able to get it out of my mind ever since, and I bet it'll be one of those things I'll remember for the rest of my life, a core memory. When he saw me walking, he waved and said hello, and we just started chatting: I filled him in on my family and how I was enjoying my classes since I was in his Sunday school class last year, and he told me about the class he was teaching now on The Church and the Modern World. He asked what I wanted to study at university after I graduate, and I told him that I was thinking about becoming a writer. He paused when I said that (he is normally such a chatterbox that even the shortest of pauses seems significant), and there was this peculiar look on his face. He said he hoped I knew what a responsibility that was.

Responsibility – the word certainly carries a lot of weight. He went on about how writers and artists have a special gift, that with their gift they have the opportunity to heal the brokenness in our fellow man and inspire him to greatness. I don't remember exactly how he put it, but he has such charisma that whatever he says sounds better than my poor attempts at paraphrasing. But, he said, they can also cause a lot of hurt,

and that I had to be careful. “Be certain that you know exactly why you want to write.”

By that time, we had made it to the street corner across from our shop. The old beggar lady who usually worked that corner in the afternoon was sitting up against the lamppost. She was wearing the same rags she always had on, with the addition of a brand-new sky-blue beanie over the hood of her jacket. She recognized me and said nothing, but to Père Joseph she held out her cup and said, “Please, Père.” He reached into his pocket and knelt down to place a five-euro bill into her hands. Then he stood up and made the sign of the cross over her, saying, “May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you and give you peace.” After that I had to go help out at the shop, so we said goodbye and he continued on to the Cathedral.

It was good to see Père Joseph again, but I sure hadn’t expected the conversation to take such a serious turn. For some reason, there were butterflies in my stomach, and it was only later that I realized that the conversation had shaken me, a little. I didn’t know why until I understood that it was because I wasn’t able to answer his question – I *don’t* know exactly why I want to write. It was just something that I enjoyed in class. And I always did love reading – every time I read a new book it’s kind of

like a lesson on understanding other people and other places. And it is only in understanding others that I can really understand myself and my own place...

Wow, I can't believe I wrote that last line – it seemed a lot more profound at the time! (I had to leave and help Maman with the dinner clean-up.) It's clear to me now, though, that I need to work harder to avoid being so cheesy, if I'm going to write a journal that won't embarrass myself if anyone ever finds it! I've had a lot of time today to think about it all though, since the shop was so quiet, and doing dishes is mindless work. Not many tourists come to town on a Thursday afternoon in January. Anyway, all this thinking has made me think about starting a journal with a *purpose*.

Is pure reason, without experience or empirical knowledge of any kind, sufficient to know the truth? Maybe. To understand it? Probably not.

St. Thomas Aquinas had five proofs for the existence of God by reason alone. They make a lot of sense to me (I learned all about them in Père Joseph's class last year), but I don't think they would have convinced me

to believe in God if I'd been an atheist. And I want to figure out why that is.

We can know truths without fully internalizing them. I guess there are different levels of knowledge, and reason won't get you far below the surface. I don't think reason would touch someone's heart – well, maybe it does, I don't know. But I think there's another element that's necessary. It's not emotion, exactly, though that's part of it. I'm talking about the difference between *savoir* and *connaître* – the difference between knowing a person's name and *knowing* a person.

Come to think of it, though, *savoir* is a necessary element of *connaître*. You certainly don't know a person if you don't know the person's name. Names matter. Why is it that the name Michelle seems to fit Maman so perfectly? And Papa is such an Antoine. Every now and then, though, I run into someone whose name doesn't fit them at all. Why is that? Those people have every right to their names. I can't very well say, "I'm sorry, but are you sure your name is Martha? I know I just met you, but you seem very much like a Mary." How absurd that would be! What's in a name?

But I digress.

I'm after a purer knowledge, one that's experienced in life and offers a real understanding within the soul. This knowledge is acquired through encounter and implies relationship. I see the world around me, and what I see confuses and (occasionally) disturbs me. (Was I wrong to do nothing when I saw the beggar woman? Today and every day when I pass her? God, I don't even know her name, and she's been sitting against that post for as long as I can remember. But why doesn't she work? She seems capable enough, and Maman says that to give her money is only to encourage her laziness. Yet I still feel bad about it...why is that?) How can we find beauty amidst what is sordid when the two seem so intertwined? How can we know which is the truth?

I think I've found my reason for writing. I need clarity; I need to dispel this confusion, and writing about it will help me distinguish the good from the bad – because I do want to see the good in everything, I really do. I'm convinced that it's there, and I've reserved this copybook for the purpose of discovering and recording it. I know I'm no Aquinas, not even close; but I am going to attempt to give five empirical proofs for the existence of God: the true, the good, and the beautiful in this world, as filtered through the eyes and pen of a hopeful one-day writer.

Antoine stopped for a minute; he could hear the sound of footsteps approaching. When his wife opened the door to the storeroom, he set the notebook down casually and quickly turned to the dusty box, opened it, and pulled out a child-sized red felt cape with a Maltese cross embroidered on it.

“I heard a loud crashing sound and then nothing for a while,” she hesitated. “And I wanted to make sure everything was alright. What are you doing?”

Antoine grabbed a pen from his pocket and flipped to a back page of the notebook, writing something down. “Inventory,” he said, looking down at the paper.

“Oh,” said Michelle. “Good.” She left the room. Antoine once again closed the book, carefully stowing it back on the top shelf, on top of one of the other dusty boxes. He then found a piece of scrap paper and commenced doing what he said he had been doing: counting, sorting, and pricing those red capes. He would place them on an outside rack in front of the store at a 30% discount. They could still turn a profit. He grabbed a spare rack, along with the box of capes, and walked through the shop to set it all up.

“What are you doing?” Michelle hissed. “Don’t walk through the store with all that dust! Use the backdoor!”

Almost through the front doorway, Antoine turned around, walked back through the store, and took the side door to walk around the building to the front – all the while leaving more dust in his wake. Michelle sighed and reached for the broom and dustpan.

Antoine dropped his stand on the pavement and began to hang up his red capes, arranging them by size and positioning the least faded in the most prominent spots. It was then that he saw the lamppost.

The object that he had passed every day, multiple times a day, for the last thirty years, at least, suddenly seemed to hit him with more weight than if it had fallen on his head and knocked him out. Victoire! The beggar woman! Her name had been Marie-France, and three years ago, she had stopped appearing by her post. After about a week of her absence, the Delafleurs learned from Père Joseph that she had died.

Now, a new lady worked her corner. She was much younger than Marie-France had been, and some days, she had a small child with her. Antoine approached the lady and handed her a few euros.

“And how are you today, Madame?”

“Well, can’t complain. Thank you, Monsieur.” She grinned, putting the coins into a small change purse in her pocket.

He nodded and stepped back up to his store front to return to business, bending down to pick up the capes from their box before arranging them on the rack.

“You should put that one in the back,” said the lady. “It’s more wrinkled than the others.”

Antoine looked at the cape in his hands and turned around again. “You’re right, um--”

“My name is Élise.”

“Yes, well, thank you very much, Élise.” He hesitated. “Élise, would you by any chance be looking for some hourly work for pay? We could use some extra hands in the shop, and I can see you’ve got a pair of sharp eyes.”

“That would be great,” Élise said and jumped up. “I’d love that!”

“Well come inside and we’ll get you started.” And Antoine brought Élise inside to share the good news with his wife.

~Five Proofs for the Existence of God~

February 3, 2007

My First Proof: A Poet in the Pool.

Wholeheartedly is one of my favorite words. I don’t know who came up with the idea to put the two words “whole” and “heart” together and make them into an action modifier, but I love the concept. I think that we

should always put our whole heart into whatever we're doing – that can be the test. If we're unable to do it wholeheartedly, we either shouldn't be doing it or need an attitude adjustment.

The word is almost poetic. I like to think of myself as a poet, but I don't think my poems are ever good enough to share. I'll have to copy some of them into this book sometime.

Papa has decided that I should learn how to swim (it's a life skill, Victoire!), and he's suggested that I take private lessons. He has a buddy who told him that they're offering free swim-to-live lessons for anyone interested at the indoor hospital pool. It was actually a subject of contention in our house earlier this week, and I couldn't sleep. Maman and Papa were pretty loud. For my part, I'd rather stay and help in the shop, but I couldn't say that after all that's passed. And it is pretty absurd that I never did learn as a kid – everyone else in my family did, but when I was the right age for it, Maman had a bunch of babies to care for, and the shop, and everything was just so busy.

It's harder than I expected. I came into this only knowing the doggy paddle, and now I'm working on my free style, breaststroke, and

backstroke. I go to the pool every day after school, and I just finished my third lesson today. I'm getting better, but still *really* struggling.

I shouldn't be surprised about that, though – I've never been athletically gifted or coordinated in any way, so physical exertion has always been a challenge – much more so than academics ever were. At the same time, I couldn't help but think that maybe, maybe this would be different.

Maybe I would naturally be really good at it. The prospect itself was invigorating.

That, unfortunately, did not turn out to be the case, but it is good to add a little change to my routine. Once I started to get used to the strokes, I could see that there's such a rhythm to the whole thing. My arms push and my legs chop through the water. My head comes up to breathe. Push, chop, breathe. Push, chop, breathe. Except my rhythm is usually disturbed because I can't breathe correctly when I'm doing it, at least not for very long. I struggle to the surface for a hasty breath before cutting off short and being forced back down under the water. I never get enough air. When I do finally reach the end of the lane, it's hard to stop my hands from shaking.

But I have to keep trying, wholeheartedly! If I don't, then my words lose their power because they are without meaning. My upper arms ache as I push through the water; it's difficult to complete the full stroke, but I try anyway. I can see the black tile cross in the pool at the end of the lane through my foggy goggles, and that gives me courage to keep going.

The whole time I'm dizzy, and when I climb out of the pool I start to black out. My coach, Damien, says I'm probably dehydrated, which I find ironic since I'm in the water. He has me sit down and hands me a water from the vending machine. I told him I would pay him back tomorrow, but he wouldn't hear of it. Such a kind man.

Anyway, I decided to make this my first proof because if I can learn to swim, anything must be possible! Just kidding. But there can be something very beautiful in struggles, and this is an idea I want to explore more. Why is that? Why would anyone volunteer to struggle unnecessarily? I suspect that it all leads back to the intent of the struggler, but to what end am I struggling? Do I believe that this struggle will make me a holier person? Can something so simple as swimming lessons do that?

Antoine decided to take another break, and so he closed the book again. He had been sitting on the outside stoop by the back door, but he knew that he had better get back inside to direct Élise. Michelle had taken the news as a bit of a shock at first, but after a few moments' reflection, she welcomed the prospect of an afternoon off, saying she was sure that *he* would know best how to train his new employee. She was "out" now (Antoine didn't know where), and Élise was manning the shop. He, supposedly, was taking a cigarette break. He walked back inside to check on her and stopped in the storeroom to deposit the notebook in its hiding spot. While there, he spied some of those old sweats and tee shirts that had never sold, depicting the image of the apparition of the Virgin Mary on the front. Selecting some that he judged would fit Élise, he brought them out to her.

"Here," he said. "It's the uniform for shop employees. I think the size is right – let me know if it isn't. You can go to the bathroom and change now if you'd like. I'll stay out here."

And Élise had new clothes for the first time in years.

February 20, 2007

Second proof: a boy and a horse.

I don't ever know quite how to describe my little brother Théofile. I don't want to assign him with a diagnosis or anything because, well, people get the wrong idea when they hear the word "disability." Théo's smart and very articulate – it's just that (a) he's an incredibly picky eater and (b) there's an apparent emotional disconnect between him and other people. He eats frozen chicken nuggets for dinner every night like an American. He's definitely not one to wear his heart on his sleeve, but I think that's okay; that's just how Théo works. The fact that we can't see them doesn't make his feelings any less real – the reality of which took me a long time to understand.

I've seen him cry once, and it came out of nowhere, if all you were looking at were his facial expressions. I still feel terrible about it.

He was six and I was twelve. I was doing the dishes and belting out Disney songs at the top of my lungs. I could hear him from across the house.

"Stop singing!!!" He walked into the kitchen.

I ignored him. *"Look at me – I will never pass for a perfect bride, or a perfect daughter. Can it be –"*

"STOP," he bellowed, "SINGING!!!"

“No! I’m working, so I get to sing. Go outside if you don’t like it. *Can it be – I’m not meant to play this part?*”

“I could still hear you out there!”

“Just try it Théo.”

“No! I know I’ll still hear you!”

“Now I see that if I were truly to be myself, I would break my family’s heart.”

“STOP SINGING! STOP SINGING! STOP SINGING – “

“Théo! If you go somewhere else, instead of standing right next to me, I promise it’ll be quieter than it is now. Just go away and let me do the dishes in peace!”

His face had turned beet-red. “Please stop,” he said.

“Who is that girl I see, staring straight – “

Théo ran away. I kept singing, and he came back with his toy samurai sword (which was padded, in his defense – thank goodness!) and hit me repeatedly on the head. I grabbed the sword from him and pinned him to the wall.

I don’t remember exactly what I said to him anymore, probably because the memory produces too much shame, but it was something to the effect that he was so mean and selfish and a terrible person and that he

must not love me. To my surprise, my words produced a tangible reaction— next thing I knew, Théo was crying actual tears. Silently. Big beads of water rolling down his face. Mine crumbled in the realization of my shame.

I know now that I've been suppressing that memory for a while, whether consciously or not. I wonder, does everyone try to hide the bad parts of themselves, even from themselves?

Yesterday the whole family paid a visit to the Dubois family's farmhouse. The Dubois's are some of my parents' oldest friends, as well as my godparents. They have kids in my sisters' classes at school, and they're all close friends. They're younger than me, though, so I often find myself awkwardly floating between them and the adult group when we visit.

What I really love so dearly about the Dubois's farm are the horses. Brand new stables, the likes of which I've never seen anywhere else, house fourteen of them! When I walk inside, the first thing I notice is the smell of hay. Always. Somehow, the Dubois family always manages to keep the barn stocked with brand-new fresh hay.

Yesterday the horses were out when we drove up to the house. I could see Théo watching them from the car window. When we got out, he made his way over. I went inside the barn so that I could see everything from up in the loft. I watched as Théo would slowly gravitate towards them – not all in one bound, but every few minutes or so, he'd inch his way a little closer, as if he was experiencing some kind of secret gravitational attraction – he didn't want to be discovered, but I don't think it was a conscious desire. I watched him watch their faces, intent upon their every move. They were looking at him. He was looking at them. A current of honesty flowed between their eyes, as boy slowly approached horse. Horse snorted. Boy stopped. Boy started again. Horse laughed, or so it seemed. The trace of a smile crept upon Théo's lips. He never smiles.

It was beautiful.

He understood those horses like I've never been able to see him understand another person. It was as if there existed a language between them that was more real to him: a language that consisted of constant eye contact and the offering of a hand, palm up. Those horses trusted Théo, and I know that he trusted them by the apparent lack of his habitual anxiety. My kid brother was the horse whisperer.

I wanted to run up to him and give him a hug, but I could not. I stood there, almost paralyzed, unable (or unwilling?) to move from my perch by the barn loft window. I wanted so badly to just give him a hug, to let him know that everything was alright between us, even though I would let him get on my nerves. (The dishes debate was a recurring one, though usually without such drama at the end.) He wasn't a terrible person, and I loved him. Love him.

Michelle returned from her afternoon outing through the back door. She took off her coat, hanging it on one of the hooks by the door, and looked in the mirror hanging on the wall next to it. Running her fingers through her freshly cut and styled hair, she smiled. It had been many years since she'd found the time to go to a salon; usually she'd just cut her hair herself. It was cheaper that way, anyway. But if they could afford to hire an employee, she figured, then she could afford to have a real haircut.

Michelle wanted to do something for Antoine. As she walked through the back hallway, she spied the light shining through the crack under the storeroom door. She resolved that she would continue his work of that morning, since he was sure to be busy training that new employee of his. She was a much better

organizer than he was anyway, and she was very pleased with how thoughtful he had been today, even though this new employee may not have been the best candidate he could have chosen for the job.

When she entered the room, Michelle used Antoine's step ladder to reach that top shelf and dragged the top box from the dusty stack down to the ground. There was a notebook on top, and Michelle saw that this was the very same notebook Antoine had used earlier to take inventory. She wondered why he had put it back up there, and she opened it to figure out where his work had ended. What she found astonished her.

Michelle sat on the concrete floor of the storeroom and began to read. Memories of her daughter and other times flooded back into her mind, but still, Michelle resisted tears. She read to the end, until she found what Antoine had written at the end of the journal only a few hours ago: "***Forgive me.***"

Michelle grabbed for a pen and wrote something else at the notebook's end. Stoney-faced, she then slowly stood up, lifted the box to place it back on top of the dusty stack, and put the journal back where she had found it.

She exited the storeroom, closing the door gently behind her.

February 28, 2007

Third Proof: Miracles

I feel like I'd be remiss if in this little journal I failed to mention the many miracles around me as a proof for God's existence. Miracles are phenomenon that the laws of nature and science can't explain: events that are fruitful, good, and welcome to us. Given where I live, I guess it's surprising that this wasn't my first proof. But here miracles are discussed so often that they don't present themselves to me as something out of the ordinary, which is funny because by their very definition they are rare occurrences that break the normal rules for how things work. Here, miracles (or talk of them) are as common as the air we breathe every day.

Of course, there are fake miracles. People who fake cures on purpose or who truly believe that the waters have healed them, when they haven't. Or sometimes lots of people really think they've been cured, but the miracle just can't be proven due to a lack of documentation or evidence, so they're unofficial. We hear about them pretty frequently at school; the teachers will become excited if someone's case looks convincing, but it's actually pretty rare that the miracles are proven. Only 69 cases have been recognized as miraculous by the Church since St. Bernadette first dug into the dirt in the grotto and the spring appeared in 1858. I guess by some standards, that's a lot of cures, but it's miniscule compared to the

numbers of people who come here to bathe in the pools, whose cases never made it through to the end of the process.

None of the ones currently up for debate have happened in my lifetime; the last one that still has a shot in the validation process actually occurred three years before I was born. But they do happen, and I firmly believe that they're signs from God. In 1858, everyone thought Bernadette Soubirous and her visions were crazy until the miracles started happening. Then they brought their sick to bathe in the spring and suddenly the blind could see and people with incurable diseases were cured.

Our little town is still a destination for the sick. The Malades are everywhere, being pushed around in wheelchairs by the Knights and Dames of Malta. Not every cure is physical, though. People bathe for reasons of mental health all the time, which I find fascinating. How do they ever really know if they've been cured? Wouldn't they second guess themselves every time they had a bad day? The sick are all around us, whether we realize it or not.

The other day, I was walking to my swim lessons, when I saw Père Joseph again. He asked where I was headed, and I told him, "To the pool." He

thought I meant the bathing pools at the Basilica, and he said he hoped everything was okay with me. I assured him that I was fine, that I meant the hospital swimming pool for my lessons. He laughed when I said that and wished me luck.

Swimming actually hasn't gotten any easier lately, even though I'm practicing almost every day. I drink a lot more water now, but I'm still dizzy and exhausted in the pool. I feel like my body has been used as a punching bag after every lesson. I guess I'm just a naturally weak person. Maybe I *should* bathe in the grotto pools.

It was now late in the afternoon, and Antoine was still in the shop, training Élise. "Close, but you actually neglected to execute a really important step. Again." He was growing impatient.

"Oh," said Élise. "Could you show me what I missed? So I'll be sure to do it correctly next time?"

"Look, it was fine, but you can't forget that if the purchase exceeds 5 euros, you need to --" Michelle walked in through the back door. She looked different, somehow. Something had changed – he didn't know what.

"Hello," he said. "You look beautiful."

“You noticed,” she said. Her mouth twisted into a small smile. Élise stepped to the side and picked up a rag she had set down earlier to begin cleaning the front window.

“Your hair!” It suddenly dawned on him. “It looks great!”

Michelle laughed. She’d known it would take him a minute. “Thanks,” she said. “Look, if you want, I can take over in here. I want to get to know...”

“Élise,” he said.

“Yes, Élise. We should get acquainted so she can see my system of running things, too. You should get back to your inventory in the storeroom. I think what you were doing there is more important right now.”

Antoine glanced at her. She looked serene – she still wore that slight smile on her face and her new hair really did look great. Did she know? Had she seen?

“Yeah, okay,” he said. “Yeah I should get back to it. Thanks!”

Élise then approached the couple, gesturing back to the cash register and looking as if she wanted to ask a question.

“We’ll talk later,” said Michelle quietly.

Bewildered, he nodded and headed back to the storeroom. *She knows*, he thought. Or did she?

March 7th, 2007

Dreams

I had the most horrible dream last night. Though, on reflection, it doesn't seem so horrible when I tell about it. Really it was more of the experience of it that was so bad. I was running as fast as I could (much faster and much longer than I can in real life), and I seemed to possess this super-human power of being able to jump over any obstacle in my way – fences, trees, even buildings. Each time, the obstacles would get taller, and I would think, there's no way I'm going to make it over this next one. And then I did! It would have all been marvelous if I wasn't being chased.

The whole time I was running, I had this inexplicable, horrible, pervasive anxiety about me, until I realized that there was a mysterious dark entity I was running *from*. Funny, I didn't know it was there from the beginning. A bad guy, or something – it was rather ghost-like. I didn't know why I was running from him, only that I had to. And even though my speed was incredible and I kept moving faster and faster (I'm normally such a slow and deliberate mover, it really was exhilarating to go so fast!), it was never quite fast enough. It seemed like he was just about to catch me for hours. And then he got a little closer, and as he reached out a white, bony hand to snatch me, I woke up.

We always do seem to wake up before the worst ever happens in our dreams, don't we? I've never died in one, but I've been on the brink of death plenty of times. I asked Maman about it, and she couldn't remember ever dying in a dream either. Why is that? Can our minds not fathom what death would be like? Are we too afraid of it? Or is this God's way of protecting us from the worst nightmares imaginable, by cutting them short?

I've decided it must be the latter, so I am offering it up in this journal as a proof...

Is it really, though? Am I being naïve? Am I just listing good things when I find them and attributing them to God? Is that what this whole journal is doing? Does goodness prove the existence of God? Is God even something we can prove?

I am becoming so discouraged. Probably a combination of things – the swimming, the bad dream. And I'm so tired. I haven't truly lost my faith. It is still one of my most treasured possessions. Oh dear, I am possessive about it though, aren't I? Why do I call it a possession? Surely, it must be something that possesses me, if anything. I merely allow it to. I am exhausted.

I need to stop. Everywhere I turn, I come face to face with doubt. Doubt in my faith, doubt in myself. Mostly myself, I think. When I think about faith, I know that I have it. It is so much a part of me that if I lost it, I would find myself very

much lost and much more confused about who I am. I just feel so small and puny.

I'll say goodnight to this journal. There is absolutely nothing the matter with me that a cup of tea, a good book, and a hot bath won't fix!

Michelle surprised herself that afternoon by enjoying herself. She actually liked getting to know Élise, who had proven to be much smarter and more capable than Michelle had imagined. Her instincts were good. Michelle was curious about her past and why she had come to find herself in her present situation, but these were questions she couldn't bring herself to ask. She did find out that Élise's child was at the local parish's daycare facility – Père Joseph had offered to wave the fee. It felt luxurious to relax a little and let someone else handle the customers who would walk in, even though there weren't many. She was good with customers, Élise, good with people.

When a group of noisy teenage girls on a field trip finished making their purchases and exited through the front door, the two found themselves alone. It was almost time to close up shop, and Michelle figured they would do so a little early today; it had just begun to rain, and she knew that there would be no more customers.

"We're closing now," she said. She hesitated. "Have you...do you have a place to spend the night?"

“My daughter and I will go to the shelter,” she said. “You don’t have to worry about us.”

“I’m sure I don’t,” said Michelle. “It’s just that, our kids have all grown up, and they’re not at home anymore. They’re either in college or graduated or...gone.” Her eyes suddenly began to water, and several tears slid down her cheeks. “I’m so sorry,” she said, wiping her face dry. “My oldest, my daughter Victoire, she passed away ten years ago.”

“Oh.” Élise reached out to take her hand and held it for a few seconds, tight. “Oh, I’m so sorry. There’s nothing so sad as when you outlive your children.” The rain was now falling hard, and the two could hear it pounding on the roof. Élise glanced up.

“Thank you,” whispered Michelle. She cleared her throat. “But my point is that we have several empty rooms, empty beds. You’d both be welcome to stay here for a while. You can go and get your little girl right now,” she said, “And when you get back, a hot bath and cups of tea will be waiting for you both. Here, take my umbrella.”

March 15th, 2007

Earlier this week, I decided that I would go to bathe in the grotto pools. I didn’t want Maman and Papa to find out about it, though, because then I would have to explain why I was going, and I know they would be worried. I think they have enough troubles to think about already. So, I let Damien know that I had to miss swim lessons this afternoon, but I didn’t say anything about it to Maman or

Papa. I just told them that I was leaving to go to the pool, which wasn't a lie, technically. Was I wrong?

I decided to go because of the spiritual troubles I've been having. I know that I've been very anxious about a lot of things lately, and I used to be able to turn to prayer to sort them out. For a while now, this hasn't been of any consolation to me – I can't feel anything when I pray, no matter how hard I try, and things have just seemed very dark. It's completely destroyed my peace of mind, and for the first time, I've experienced doubt. I decided to bring it to the Lord in a more intentional and sacramental way – I scheduled a confession appointment with Père Joseph. Today after school, I confessed everything.

"Oh Victoire," he said when I had finished. "Everyone experiences these feelings and doubts you've described at some time or other in their lives. Your challenge is not to give in to them. Think about it this way: when you feel God's presence in prayer, that's His gift to you. When you don't feel anything at all, but continue to pray anyway – well, that's your gift to Him."

As always, Père Joseph seemed to have a way of putting things that hadn't occurred to me, but that made so much sense. And everyone gets tested at some time in their lives, I suppose. He said that for my penance I should bathe in the pools at the grotto, which had been my plan to begin with. I exited the

confessional and walked across the grotto to the line of people at the bathing pools, and I waited.

When it was my turn to go, I had to undress in the changing room and wrap myself in the sheet they had given me. Two old lady volunteers then told me to focus on my special intention, and then they lowered me into the water and pulled me out three times while they said their prayer for my intention. (Don't really know what they said – it was in Italian, for some reason.) The water was ice-cold, much colder than I remember it. I went back to the changing room with my sheet to cover me and changed back into my clothes. I didn't have a towel, but that didn't matter because suddenly I was very dry. A small miracle?

I think it is. And even though I'm still not feeling those warm, fuzzy feelings when I pray, I am so certain that they are important, that God hears them, and that things are going to be alright. I think I'm beginning to understand for the first time what faith really is. Fourth proof.

As Antoine sat on the concrete floor of the storeroom, with all its dust and dimness and clutter, he looked up from the journal and closed his eyes. For a minute, he saw the still image of a girl on the other side of the kitchen wall, lying awake in bed,

writing in the notebook he now held in his hands. His eyes opened. A single lightbulb hung from the ceiling on a thin wire with a little chain you could pull to turn it on and off. While this provided enough light with which to read the journal, Antoine's vision was temporarily clouded. He could have relocated to read the thing in a more comfortable room, but he didn't want to. Instead he pulled himself up on his knees on the hard floor, made the sign of the cross, and allowed himself to listen for any answers that might penetrate the deep silence that reigned within his heart.

April 1st, 2007

I know it's been a couple of weeks since I've written, but things have just been so busy around here that I haven't had time to write! And I don't have the time now, really, but I wanted to start a quick entry before my swim lesson this afternoon so that I'll feel compelled to finish it when I get home. I've found my 5th proof! I won't go into it now, but the last two weeks have taught me so much about myself, what I want for my future, and what prayer is capable of accomplishing in my life. It's hard to even imagine the darkness from those last few entries because I am now so filled with hope that I can't stop smiling all the time. My life is transformed. It's difficult to even express this joy – I feel like these pages can't contain it – but I'll definitely try to, after my swim lesson. I

almost want to skip it and just write, but I can't skip again, and a sense of duty calls me to the pool. Until later!

The journal entries ended here. Antoine finished reading and turned to the page he had written on earlier, the one with the words, "Forgive me." He looked underneath his words and saw that two new ones had been added, and that they said, "I do." He needed to find Michelle.

"Michelle!" He walked out into the shop. The room was empty. Surprised, Antoine glanced down at his watch – there were still fifteen minutes until closing-time, but Michelle was nowhere to be found. He could see the "open" side of the sign hanging in the glass door. Antoine stumbled over the back steps as he ran to check their living quarters. "Michelle!" he called again. No one was home. What had happened? And where was Élise?

Beginning to grow anxious, Antoine ran out the front door and into the rain. He ran up and down Rue Saint-Marie, with its seven hotels. He ran around their block, calling her name – to no answer. Panting, he crossed over to the Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary and then jogged around to the cave-side grotto chapel. "Michelle!"

And he saw her. A single flame flickered on a candle from the covered sanctuary of the cave-chapel. There stood Michelle, soaking wet, but sheltered from the downpour. Hearing her name, she turned. He jogged to join her.

“Michelle,” he breathed heavily as he came to a stop.

“For Victoire,” she said, nodding to the candle.

“I know,” he said. They were silent for a moment.

“I gave my umbrella to Élise,” she said. “She was going –”

Antoine interrupted, “I saw,” he said, “what you wrote.”

“I know,” she said.

“Oh Michelle, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she said, grabbing his hand. “You couldn’t have known. None of us did. You couldn’t have known.”

“But I wanted her to have the lessons,” he said. “None of this would have ever happened...”

“None of that matters,” said Michelle. She could hear the water from the spring flowing gently across the rock portion of the cave immediately behind her. She turned to watch it ripple along.

“It stopped raining,” he said. It was true; that was what had allowed her to hear the gentle flow of the spring at all. She reached her hand out to touch the rock.

“Do you know what?” she said. “I love you.”

“I love you so much,” he said.

He wrapped her in his arms, and they stood like that for a moment before Michelle, startled, jumped and said, “Élise and her daughter! I told her I’d have a hot bath and tea ready when she got back! Oh! I told her they could stay with us,” she added.

“Well, we’ll have to get back and get that ready for her, won’t we?” he smiled.

Antoine took Michelle’s hand in his, and together they started back toward their little house on Rue Sainte-Marie. “You know,” he said, “we never found out...I mean, I wonder what that fifth proof was.”

“Oh, I think I know,” said Michelle. “And I think Victoire knows too. All you have to do is flip that journal to the very last entry – you’ll only find four words, but they’re enough.”

And together the Delafleurs walked back to their house, drew a bath, and made up two beds with fresh sheets.

To Thaw

Breathe.

In the stillness of the early morning, bundled up in her two sleeping bags, she became acutely aware of this simple but vital motion of life. The warm, moist air traveled through her mouth and into her balaclava, creating the thin layer of ice that kept her lips cold and colorless. The water bottles at her feet were no longer hot, and she knew that there was no point in delaying the inevitable; she would get up now.

She arose into the pristine whiteness that blanketed everything within eyesight: the forest of overgrown Christmas trees, the lake, the dogsleds, and the sleeping bags containing all of her fellow voyagers. It occurred to her how curious it was that this very whiteness, symbolic of purity, could be so beautiful yet also the source of so much pain, for it brought with it the bitter cold that soaked deep into her bones.

The arduous task of dressing and preparing for the day would begin. Layer upon layer, synthetics, plastics, wool- all of these things were necessary to protect her from cold injury. They also weighed her down, making it difficult to move in the ways to which she was accustomed.

You finish your Nalgene already?

She was startled out of her reverie. That was Ned. Ned was a nut – and very intense. Even when he wasn't leading these expeditions, he chose to live alone in an unheated cabin in this wilderness. She was supposed to have drunk the entire bottle of water with its little bits of twigs and leaves inside before she got up. She hated this since it made her have to pee more, which was uncomfortable in these conditions, to say the least.

Not all of it. I'll finish it with breakfast.

Okay. Make sure you finish the whole cup of hot chocolate too. Are you cold?

Yeah.

Then get away from that fire. Go take a run to the top of that hill and back before you eat.

She groaned inwardly. Even though she just got up, her muscles were already tired and sore from the previous days.

Motion, she was told, would keep her warm – would keep her alive. The burning of calories produced the energy that was warmth, and the increased burning of calories

necessitated the increased intake of calories – about 5,000 a day, to be precise. She ate until she felt uncomfortable and worked far longer than she had imagined possible.

It was a traveling day. Half the team at the dogsleds, half with the packs on the skis. She was on the skis – her own personal Calvary. She was falling behind the others as they slowly but surely passed her up. They paved the way through the fresh, dry, somewhat crunchy snow, and she followed in their tracks. She trudged rather than glided, weighed down by a backpack that weighed more than two thirds of her bodyweight. She fell into the snow every few minutes, one, two, three. Each time it became more difficult to rise. As her wobbly legs straightened once again, she uttered under her frozen breath, *God, she prayed, give me strength.*

Prayer. It was something to which her senses had numbed within the past couple of years. She could no longer feel God's presence in her life, and hadn't for some time. When you pray and pray and hear nothing back, you eventually begin to pray a little less and a little less, until all that remains is a skeleton going through the superficial motions of something you don't truly embrace with your whole being. That was what had happened to her – she had become like a skeleton: hollow, devoid of that which truly gives life.

Motion was essential. She couldn't give up, no matter how much she wanted to. There was no out. Out here, the struggle of survival was unadorned with the distractions of

modernity. Move, or die. It was a struggle with nature and a struggle with willpower. Sitting by the fire won't warm you properly. Get up! Swing your arms like a propeller. Run up the hill. Do jumping jacks. Keep the blood flowing to the extremities. Move.

Sometimes it would become seemingly unbearable to her. Sometimes small mercies would be granted. Simon, one of the others on the voyage, noticed the frozen tears stained onto her face and comforted her.

Here, we can stop and rest a minute. It'll be ok – just let it all out.

His voice was so comforting and soothing to her. Here was a friend, someone who understood. She wanted so desperately to pull her weight and succeed, but the fact that she was currently failing in her mind was like a heavy rock placed in her already cumbersome pack. She was not used to failure, but then again she had never before tried anything that she felt she would be bad at. She was her high school's valedictorian, but she had never played a sport. He understood this, or at least she felt that he did. Simon had the demeanor of someone who cared and wanted to help.

I am so sorry. I hate that I'm crying. This is just hard. Thank you so much for waiting with me.

Oh, no problem at all. You're not the only one - this is probably the hardest thing I've ever done too.

She doubted that, but it made her feel better anyway. Whether he was pushing the dogsled or lugging around massive chunks of firewood, Simon was *always* cheerful and full of encouragement for the others less fortunate. And he was always given the hardest tasks. Somehow his abundant joy was able to penetrate the cold; he would even have to remove layers of clothing because he was working so hard. Simon was clearly a stronger person than she was. She wanted to be like him but didn't know how.

He exchanged her skis for his snowshoes and her backpack for a toboggan attached to a harness around her waist. Then he took up her load and walked with her, bringing up the rear. What relative ease was she now afforded! This was a burden she could bear.

Thank you, God. Thank you for Simon and his compassion. Give me strength.

This pain was completely voluntary. She had chosen this journey. Why? Why had she chosen this? A need for adventure? A need for something else?

She pondered this question as she lay in her sleeping bag that night, completely closed off from the outside world except for a small hole exposing her eyes, nose, and mouth. The stars sure were brilliant out here. She could see the aurora borealis shimmering exquisitely against the deep purple backdrop. This was like Purgatory, she thought. She

could see the true, the good, and the beautiful in everything around her while also experiencing purification through pain. And there was the whiteness...

Her musings were disturbed as her hands and feet suddenly grew numb. She shoved her hands under her armpits (the place on the body where the most heat is released) and kicked her feet violently within her sleeping bag to get the blood flowing and hopefully insulate some heat inside. She then drifted off to sleep saying her constant prayer.

Three more days. She could do this. *God give me strength*, she prayed.

There were sometimes joys found amidst the cold. She became adept in the chopping of firewood. With great precision she posed the ax above her head and swung into the wood, splitting it evenly down the middle. There was something satisfying in this, in a job well done. The dogs, too, gave her a sort of comfort. Though they certainly weren't the sweet, domesticated animals of her childhood home, they still carried with them the sense of loyalty she had always associated with dogs. They were wild. She could not go to these animals for the empathetic comfort she had come to expect from her own dogs, but she knew that they could be relied upon for protection and obedience. Caring for them became a chore that she awaited throughout the day with anticipation. She enjoyed sawing down the fir boughs to make beds to keep all eleven dogs out of the snow. She enjoyed Batman's blatant refusal to obey male voices and Thatcher's

stubborn insistence on leading the sled team. They were collaborators on the same pilgrimage. *God give me strength.*

Then came the time for the solo component of the voyage. The dread was building up inside of her. The team was charged with silence as each person was dropped off in a different location. Ned led her to a site on the edge of the woods and the frozen lake to try her hand at survival for twenty-four hours. She was left with two hot water bottles, a dinner to cook, her backpack containing her sleeping bags and the oh shit! bag (with changes of gloves and thermal underwear and a hat, just in case), a tarp, a saw, some twine, and matches.

After gathering birch bark and a mountainous stack of kindling, she began sawing down a small tree nearby in preparation for the fire she would construct. Gathering and assembling the wood took up the greater part of her day. When it was around lunchtime, she pulled out her water, knowing she should drink more. It wouldn't open, and no one could help her. Was this the first time she had ever been truly alone? Sinking into the snow, she slumped down and stared off into space. There was nothing to be done. Eventually, perhaps out of anger or perhaps because she couldn't sit in the cold any longer, she banged her water bottle against a nearby rock. Ice cracked. Startled by the unexpected, she tried the bottle again. It opened with ease.

Laying out the logs as strategically as possible, she packed snow into the cracks to make the structure more solid. She then constructed a lean-to shelter with the tarp and twine. While she worked she took advantage of her present state of solitude and sang. Singing was something she really missed. She had always been a member of the choir in school, and it had been an escape, a stress-release for her. So out here, alone in this frozen landscape, she made the conscious decision to sing hopeful songs to raise her spirits, all the while vaguely wondering if anyone could hear her voice swelling into the vast expanse of the icy lake.

That night was the coldest of all – negative forty degrees Fahrenheit. Her fire was going successfully for about half an hour, and she was able to heat up her meal and some water to drink while moving around the fire to avoid getting smoke in her eyes. Daylight was dying. She turned on her headlamp to make her way to the lean-to. There were no hot water bottles for her sleeping bag tonight. The leaders had told her to write about her feelings and experiences in her journal, but her fingers felt frozen: the beginnings of frostbite. She would say her prayers and try to sleep.

In the morning she awoke with the light of the Sunday sun reflecting off the snow's blinding whiteness – the whiteness to which she was beginning to grow accustomed. Much to her surprise, solo had been a peaceful respite from the turmoil that seemed to constantly gnaw away the insides of her stomach – but there was no time to contemplate or process this. She turned to the task at hand: leave no trace. She cleaned

up the campsite, throwing unused logs into a hidden ditch and covering the dregs of her fire with fresh, overturned snow. Then she gathered her things and made her way slowly towards home base, the leaders, and the dogs. The traces of smoke rising from the campfire in the distance were visible in the light of this perfect day. As she trudged along, moving forward, she paused and glanced back at her own smothered campsite. One more day.

I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

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