

My Sisters the Saints: A Spiritual Memoir

COLLEEN CARROLL CAMPBELL

A poignant and powerful spiritual memoir about how the lives of the saints changed the life of a modern woman.

Chapter 1: Party Girl

I still remember the sundress I was wearing that morning; it was black, scoop-necked, and short. Its thin fabric hung loosely on my frame, thanks to punishing daily workouts and a scrupulously fat-free diet, but I felt uncomfortably warm. Perched on the windowsill of our fourth-floor apartment, I dangled my legs in mid-air. I couldn't believe it was late October. Milwaukee was usually chillier by now, already beginning its slouch toward the interminable Wisconsin winter. As the sun baked my skin, still bronze from dutiful visits to the tanning salon, I squinted and squirmed. I didn't want to be here. I had just come home from the night before and was suffering the start of a monster hangover. My head throbbed and my itchy skin begged for a shower. Tom Petty was wailing from the stereo speakers: I'm tired of myself/Tired of this town. In the parking lot below, I spotted empty beer bottles and stray partiers trudging home from after-hours revelry and drunken couplings.

Behind me, a couple of my still-drunk college roommates were singing and dancing like banshees before the large open windows in our living room. The place stank of stale beer and cigarettes from a party we had thrown the first week of our junior year and from the many rowdy weekends that had followed. Although we were only two months into the fall semester, our brand-new apartment complex already bore vomit stains on its hallway rugs and fist-sized holes in its plaster walls — proof of how most of its student tenants spent their weekends.

I liked this vantage point, looking down from a distant perch. It made me feel removed from the chaos. I always had felt somewhat separate from the campus party scene, even as I indulged in many of its pleasures. I was a scholarship student carrying a near-perfect GPA, on track to land a prestigious summer internship in Washington, DC, and serving as editor-in-chief of the campus magazine. I had a resume packed with honor society memberships and evidence of a properly raised social consciousness. As for the Catholic faith that had dominated my life in elementary and high school, well, that had taken a backseat to other priorities. I still considered myself a better-than-average Catholic. Since my freshman year, I had been active in all the right social justice organizations, devoting at least one afternoon or evening each week to busing tables at a nearby homeless shelter or feeding vagrants through a campus meals-on-wheels program. I attended Mass every Sunday. When it came to sex, I abided by the letter of the law I had been taught in my Catholic home — no sex outside marriage — though not its spirit. My true zeal was reserved for more concrete concerns, like obsessing over

my body to make sure I stayed thin and fit. Unlike the other party girls who devoured late-night pizzas and hid their beer guts under loose-fitting flannel, I told myself, I was in control.

But lately my pride at compartmentalizing my life so completely — being a good girl on Sunday morning and a wild one on Saturday night — had begun to give way to something new, a dawning realization that I was as immersed in the chaos as anyone. Maybe I was even worse, because I was leading a double life. At least the potbellied partiers down the hall were consistent. They were not spending their lives keeping up appearances and juggling personas, playing the role of perfectionist honor student for one crowd and reckless reveler for another.

Looking back over my shoulder into our apartment, I saw my roommates sprawled on the couch, now drowsy and listless after a long night of carousing. I realized that living with them, and living like them, no longer made me happy. Nor did my relationship with the brooding rugby player who routinely rounded up his friends to meet me at whatever bar my friends and I were patronizing that night. I could not call our random meetings dates, and I could not call him my boyfriend. There were no names for such romantic entanglements, no rules of engagement, and most of the time my friends and I had no idea what to make of the men in our lives. We were unconstrained by customs of courtship or social norms. We could do whatever we wanted. Yet the awkwardness, confusion, and disappointment that marked our encounters with men made me wonder: Was our unfettered freedom just a trap in disguise?

This was not what I had envisioned when I set off for college. I had thought I would spend my Saturday nights discussing Aquinas over coffee and dating the kind of men who send roses, open car doors, and pay for dinner. I ran into a few of those men during my college years, but I had become so inured to the anti-dating ethos of campus life by then that I quickly dropped them and rejoined my friends on the party circuit.

Returning my gaze to the bleak scene beneath my window, I realized how much things had changed — how much I had changed — since I first arrived at my freshman dorm that muggy August move-in day. I had lost something. I didn't know what it was or how to get it back. I only knew that this aching emptiness in the pit of my stomach had grown unbearable.

Suddenly aware that I was shivering, I swung my legs back into the living room. I stood up, slammed the window shut, and strode past my roommates, now sleeping soundly despite the earsplitting music.

It was time to shower, to eat, to put on something warmer. It was time for a change.

Blame It on Patriarchy

I did not know it at the time, but I was taking the first steps on a journey upon which many women in my generation have embarked, women asking the same questions that I asked that morning: What is the source of that gnawing sensation inside me, and why does my pursuit of pleasure and success only intensify it? Is it true that there are no real differences between the sexes, or does my femininity — and female body — have something to do with my desires and discontent? If the key to my fulfillment as a woman lies in maximizing my sexual allure, racking up professional accomplishments, and indulging my appetites while avoiding commitment, why has following that advice left me dissatisfied? Why do my friends and I spend so many hours fretting that we are not thin enough, not successful enough, simply not enough? If this is liberation, why am I so miserable?

About a year after I first began pondering these questions, I enrolled in a course on feminist thought. I knew that the women's liberation movement had played a large role in shaping the world that my friends and I inhabited, so I wanted to know what its leaders said about what makes a woman distinct from a man and how a woman can find freedom and fulfillment.

I had never given feminism much thought before that course. It was simply the air I breathed as a girl growing up in the 1970s and 1980s and coming of age in the 1990s. Like most women in my generation, I was wary of associating myself too closely with the passe image of man-hating, bra-burning radical feminists. Yet I vigorously supported the basic feminist premise of equal rights for women. I was drawn from a young age to stories about heroines and suffragettes and had embraced the feminist conventional wisdom that I should spend the first few decades of adulthood establishing myself in a career and squeeze in marriage and motherhood when I found time. As for differences between the sexes, I always sensed that they existed but avoided acknowledging them aloud, lest that acknowledgment be perceived as a sign of weakness or an excuse for underachievement.

Now I was ready to take a closer look at sex differences and feminism itself. In my course, I eagerly devoured the first few readings we were given, manifestos of early feminists who demanded equal educational opportunities, the right to vote, and humane working and living conditions even as they acknowledged the uniqueness of women. As the semester progressed and we worked our way through more contemporary feminists, though, I grew increasingly uneasy with the theorists we were reading. Many seethed with resentment at men. Others raged against their own femininity. The more I read, the more I found myself bristling at their views of men and women, marriage and motherhood, and God.

I had met my share of chauvinists, and I knew that I enjoyed opportunities denied to earlier generations of women, including the chance to take courses like this one. I also knew that feminism comes in many forms. Yet most of the feminist writers we studied struck me as shrill and hyperbolic, with their denunciations of housewives and stay-at-home mothers as "parasites," as Simone de Beauvoir called them, or inmates in a "comfortable concentration camp," as Betty Friedan put it. It bothered me that so many theorists we read succumbed to one of two extremes: Either they allowed their

insistence on the equality of men and women to obscure the differences between the sexes, or they allowed their emphasis on the differences between the sexes to obscure the equality of men and women.

Neither extreme made much sense to me. Nor did I find in what I was reading any viable blueprints for happiness in the real world. A friend who took the course with me felt the same way. “If all else fails,” she would groan as we walked out of class together, “blame it on patriarchy.” She was a convinced atheist and I was a churchgoing Christian, but we agreed that the theories we were learning did not address our most pressing questions and concerns.

There was another problem with the secular feminist thinkers we studied. For all of their criticism of men’s fixation on money, sex, power, and status, most of these women obsessed over the very same things. They harped on which perks and privileges men had that women did not. I could see the logic behind some of their complaints, but their materialistic worldview felt stifling. There was no transcendent horizon, few references to truth, beauty, goodness, or God. It was all about what you could see, taste, and touch. I found nothing that spoke to the thirst inside me that material pleasures had failed to slake.

An Open Door

Near the end of the first semester of my senior year, I found myself standing in the back of the cavernous neo-Gothic Church of the Gesu on Marquette University’s campus, wondering where to turn next for answers. It was a Sunday night and I had dragged my new graduate student boyfriend to the “drive-through” 6 p.m. Mass. It was a popular one, tailored to the many students too hungover to make it to morning Mass, too apathetic to worship for a full hour, and too guilt-ridden to skip their Sunday obligation altogether.

Attending Mass with a boyfriend was new for me. Having a boyfriend also was new, as I had dismissed my last real boyfriend midway through the first semester of my freshman year. This current relationship had taken root not because of any great reformation on my part but simply due to my growing boredom with the campus party scene, from which our weekly dates — at real restaurants, complete with real conversations — relieved me.

Like nearly every man with whom I had been involved in the previous three years, this one was a nominal Catholic but practical atheist. On this particular night, he initially had agreed to attend Mass with me, then begged me to skip it and lounge on the couch with him instead. In the end he succeeded only in making me fifteen minutes late for a thirty-minute Mass.

There were no seats left by the time we stepped through Gesu’s massive wooden doors, so we huddled in the back of the nave with the rest of the stragglers. As my

boyfriend leaned in to whisper a wisecrack to me, I brushed him away and strained to see over the crowd and catch a glimpse of the altar. We had missed the Gospel reading, missed the priest's abbreviated homily, and now he was well into the Eucharistic prayer. Feeling flushed and irritable, I wondered how my once-ardent childhood faith had been reduced to this. Was there a connection between the malaise that had settled over my spiritual life and the nagging discontent I had first noticed on that window ledge?

It had been a year since I recognized that emptiness, and I still had no clue what to do about it. My feminist theory class had not helped. Nor had the series of cosmetic changes I had made recently: switching apartments and roommates, cultivating a more temperate group of friends and an older boyfriend, devoting more attention to my freelance writing career and an application for a Rhodes Scholarship and less attention to aerobics classes and barhopping. I had worked hard to get my life into better order, to make myself into the kind of woman who indulges her desires with discretion and never feels as lost and desolate as I did that October morning.

Still, I could not shake that aching feeling in the pit of my stomach. As I stood in the back of church that night, I realized that my lingering melancholy might be connected to the intimacy with God that I had abandoned shortly after arriving at college.

For more than three years, I had given God the scraps of my time and attention, put him last on my list of sources to turn to for answers and fulfillment. Now, after having chased my every whim and put everything and everyone before God, my spiritual life consisted of just that: scraps.

When Mass ended a few minutes later, I found myself caught up in the herd of students barreling down the church stairs and into the frigid night air. My boyfriend and I were halfway down the snow-lined block before I stopped and turned to him.

"I need to go back into church," I told him. "I left something behind."

"Okay," he said. "I'll go with you."

"No!" I snapped, a little louder than I intended. "Just go ahead. I'll catch up with you later."

His brow furrowed and I could feel him staring at me as I turned and began pushing through the crowd to get back inside. I probably looked crazy, and I didn't care. My eyes blurred with tears as I fought my way up the stairs, this time moving against the tide of surging bodies. When I finally cleared the crowd and stepped inside the empty, unlit nave, I did not quite know what to do. Feeling a mixture of anger and despair, I knelt in a nearby pew and let the darkness engulf me.

I lingered there for fifteen minutes, allowing myself to feel the full force of that hollowness I had been trying to paper over and outrun for more than a year. So this is it, I thought, as the tears ran down my cheeks. This is life without God. Something about the frank desperation of it all felt good. I was no longer sleepwalking. I finally felt awake.

Words slowly began to come, silent pleas from a soft, vulnerable voice I had not heard in years: “I want you, Lord. I want to know you. I know there’s more to life than this. There’s more to you than this. There must be. But you have to show me. I’m opening my eyes, finally, but you have to show yourself to me.”

I paused, waiting for a thunderbolt or a warm wave of consolation. I got neither.

Minutes passed and my mind began to wander. I found myself thinking about my parents, about their various trials and tribulations through the years. They never had enough money; they were always struggling to make ends meet thanks to jobs in the charitable sector and with the church; and lately Dad had been acting particularly odd, forgetting things and driving Mom crazy around the house. Yet they were joyful together, full of laughter and love and confidence about the future despite their crises. They always seemed sure that God would care for their needs. And in the end, it seemed, he always did. I envied their deep-down, joyful peace. I wanted it for myself. I had experienced it throughout my childhood, but now it seemed to have disappeared. How could I get it back?

I thought of the spiritual disciplines I had seen my parents cultivate through the years: faithful attendance at daily Mass, daily contemplative prayer, and regular reading of scripture and spiritual books. I thought: I can do that. I will do that. I won’t tell anyone, of course; I don’t want anyone thinking I’m a religious nut. I’ll seek God again after all these years, but I’ll do it on my terms — in secret.

I waited in the silence for some divine confirmation of my resolution, but nothing came. So I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand, stepped out of the pew, and shuffled down the church stairs for a second time. I strolled out into the black November night with no answers, no miracle solutions, none of the can-do energy that had spurred me on after my earlier experience on the window ledge. I felt nothing at all, aside from a vague sense of anticipation. I had opened the door to God. The next move was his.

Saints and Superstars

Over the next few weeks I haphazardly hewed to my new resolutions, catching a weekday Mass here and a few minutes of prayer there, with precious little spiritual reading. My life did not otherwise change. I still partied every weekend, ranked my social life far ahead of spiritual pursuits, and continued an increasingly intense relationship with my boyfriend despite my sense that it was pulling me farther from God.

When Christmas break rolled around, I found myself marooned with my parents in St. Louis, a city they had moved to after I graduated from high school and in which I knew no one. Boredom as much as spiritual longing led me to accept my father’s invitation to join him each day for Mass at Saint Louis University’s Saint Francis Xavier College Church, a neo-Gothic structure in the heart of the city that looked a lot like Marquette’s Gesu. Unlike the spectacular sanctuary above it, the underground Chapel of Our Lady

where Dad and I attended 5:15 p.m. Mass was a simple space with a sole wooden crucifix and a few dozen wood-and-wicker chairs facing a plain altar. Its sparseness seemed to mirror something happening inside both of us, a stripping process spawned for Dad by his recent retirement from work as a lay hospital chaplain and for me by my experience in Gesu a month earlier.

During our drives home from Mass, Dad would rave about the biography he was reading, Marcelle Auclair's *Saint Teresa of Avila*. On Christmas Day he gave me a copy. "It makes Teresa come alive," Dad told me, leaning forward in his chair as he shook the fat red paperback before me, trying to convey its value. "Reading it, you feel like you really know her."

I thanked him and tried to look interested as I scanned its staid-looking back cover. Dad probably knew that I was more excited about the sweaters and jewelry my mom had bought me and the bouquet of red roses my boyfriend had sent. He was right. I still had a fairly anemic appetite for spiritual reading, and this book looked far too dry for vacation reading. I planned to toss it onto the same dust-collecting shelf where I had relegated all the other religious books Mom and Dad had given me since I left for college.

It wasn't that I didn't appreciate their gifts. It was just that they were always gushing about their favorite saints: Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Therese of Lisieux, and dozens of others. Dad and Mom read the saints' lives again and again, swapped dog-eared tomes about mystical prayer, and cheered whenever one bought the other some obscure book on one of their beloved holy people. From my earliest years, I remember seeing my parents huddled together, talking animatedly about new saints they had discovered or new insights on scripture that they had gleaned from people they referred to simply as "John," "Teresa" or "the Little Flower." Images of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph adorned every room in our home, and our bookshelves bulged with titles by and about saints and servants of God. The names on the spines were as familiar as old friends: Augustine, Ignatius, Francis de Sales, Francis of Assisi, Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day.

As a little girl, I had shared my parents' attraction to the saints, particularly women saints. Sainthood seemed to me to be the premier career choice. Rather than being merely a successful writer or actress or artist or lawyer, I could be something infinitely more glorious: a person who enjoyed eternal bliss with God in heaven while being revered as a Christian superstar on earth. If I were a saint, I reasoned, I could someday do favors for my family and friends when they petitioned me from earth to intercede with Jesus on their behalf. And I could enjoy a level of renown far superior to the fleeting fame of a Hollywood starlet or bestselling author, since the esteem enjoyed by saints lasts for centuries, even millennia.

My favorite childhood saint was Rose of Lima, a stunningly beautiful Peruvian woman whose pint-sized biography in my children's book of saints was tattered from repeated readings. Rose practiced extreme penances to conquer her vanity, including rubbing her face raw with pepper so it would not inspire so many compliments. That struck me as a little creepy, but I admired Rose's love for Jesus and zeal for combating a

character flaw that I recognized in myself. I also liked the sound of her name, which is why I chose Rose as my patron saint for confirmation in eighth grade.

Like so much else in my spiritual life, my interest in the saints had fizzled in college. Fixated as I was on final exams and Friday-night plans, the last thing I wanted to read was some sugary tale about a snow-pure saint whose biggest sin paled in comparison with what transpired in the first five minutes of the average kegger. But Christmas-break boredom can make a college student do desperate things, and that December it made me crack open a forty-five-year-old biography of Teresa of Avila.

Once I did, I was hooked.

Meeting Teresa

The story of Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada begins in the early sixteenth century, with a pious Spanish childhood saturated by God's presence. Willful, bright, and passionate, little Teresa dreamed of sainthood and even convinced her younger brother to run away from home with her so they could fight the Moors and die as martyrs. Their plan was foiled by a vigilant uncle, who spotted the pair leaving the city. So the aspiring contemplatives settled for building homemade hermitages instead, where they prayed and read stories of the saints together.

As Teresa grew into adolescence, her beauty and vivacious personality blossomed, but her religious zeal withered. She lost her mother in her early teens and started spending more time with cousins whose superficiality fanned the flames of her vanity. A party girl with the gift of gab and no shortage of male admirers, Teresa became preoccupied by beauty regimens, romance novels, fashion, and gossip.

Her devout father noticed the change in his daughter and sent her away to a convent boarding school, where her faith began to flourish again. Although she initially felt little attraction to religious life, the idea of becoming a nun gradually grew on Teresa and she resolved to pursue it despite her father's objections. After returning home and enduring a debilitating, life-threatening illness for the remainder of her teen years, Teresa recovered and ran away from home again — this time to join a Carmelite convent.

The preoccupations with vanity, praise, and flirtations that had characterized Teresa's teen years resurfaced after she became a nun. Life in the convent was soft; sisters there freely mingled with men and women from the town, and the wealthier sisters enjoyed many of the same material comforts and perks they had known at home — from plush suites to in-room pets. Hailing from an aristocratic family and possessed of a keen ability to charm others, Sister Teresa of Jesus followed the relaxed rules of her order but focused her energy on winning honor from other people rather than honoring God. "I was fond of everything to do with the religious life," she writes in her autobiography, "but I could not bear anything which seemed to make me ridiculous. I delighted in being thought well of."

Teresa paid little attention to avoiding sin aside from the most obvious offenses, happy to take the advice of lax confessors who told her not to sweat her faults. She performed external acts of devotion “with more vanity than spirituality,” she writes, “for I always wanted things to be done very meticulously and well.” Her prayer life soon withered. As she recounts, I began, then, to indulge in one pastime after another, in one vanity after another and in one occasion of sin after another. Into so many and such grave occasions of sin did I fall, and so far was my soul led astray by all these vanities, that I was ashamed to return to God and to approach Him in the intimate friendship which comes from prayer. This shame was increased by the fact that, as my sins grew in number, I began to lose the pleasure and joy which I had been deriving from virtuous things. I saw very clearly, my Lord, that this was failing me because I was failing Thee.

After suffering a series of illnesses and the death of her father, Teresa encountered a devout Dominican priest who convinced her to resume her prayers and pay closer attention to her sins. She did the former, though not the latter, and the result was a torturous feeling of living in two worlds: “My life became full of trials, because by means of prayer I learned more and more about my faults. On the one hand, God was calling me. On the other, I was following the world. All the things of God gave me great pleasure, yet I was tied and bound to those of the world. . . . I spent many years in this way, and now I am amazed that a person could have gone on for so long without giving up either the one or the other.”

Teresa spent nearly two decades locked in this dual existence, yearning for God yet clinging to the worldly pleasures, people-pleasing habits, and shallow conversations that kept him at a distance. A profound and frustrating emptiness gradually engulfed her as she grew weary of vacillating between her competing desires. She was living, she writes, “one of the most grievous kinds of life which I think can be imagined, for I had neither any joy in God nor any pleasure in the world. When I was in the midst of worldly pleasures, I was distressed by the remembrance of what I owed to God; when I was with God, I grew restless because of worldly affections.”

A breakthrough finally came when Teresa was thirty-nine. She walked into the chapel one day and came face-to-face with a statue of the suffering Christ, bloodied and bound as he awaited his Crucifixion. The image startled Teresa. She found herself overcome with regret for the years she had wasted serving herself instead of God. “I felt as if my heart were breaking,” Teresa recalls, “and I threw myself down beside him, shedding floods of tears and begging him to give me strength once for all so that I might not offend him.” Although she had shed repentant tears before, this time was different “because I had and was placing all my confidence in God.” Teresa told Jesus that she would not get up from the floor until he had given her the help she needed. “And I feel sure that this did me good,” she writes, “for from that time onward I began to improve.”

Teresa’s prayer life began to deepen, and her desire to spend time with God intensified. Around the same time, someone passed her a copy of Saint Augustine’s Confessions. The spiritual autobiography of this fourth-century playboy-turned-saint who spent years struggling with sensuality and sinful habits resonated with her. She was particularly moved when she came upon Augustine’s account of his spiritual turning point in the

garden, where he heard a child's voice inviting him to "take and read" a nearby Bible. Augustine opened the book and read the first lines he saw, from Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans: "Let us conduct ourselves properly as in the day, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in promiscuity and licentiousness, not in rivalry and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh" (Rom. 13:13-14).

Augustine did not need to read any further; he knew God intended those words for him. Reading his story, Teresa felt the same way. She writes, "It seemed as if the Lord were speaking in that way to me," welcoming her into the freedom from sin and intimate relationship with him that had eluded her for so long.

Teresa began to make swifter progress on her spiritual journey. Her prayer life grew richer and more rewarding, and her attachment to pleasure seeking and winning the admiration of others steadily declined. Her ascent to holiness did not happen overnight: The road to her famed prayer experiences, like her decades-long spiritual awakening itself, was paved with struggle. In the early years of her prayer life, Teresa writes, "I was more occupied in wishing my hour of prayer were over, and in listening whenever the clock struck, than in thinking of things that were good." She found that the times she persevered in prayer despite her natural inclination to do otherwise were those that left her with "more tranquility and happiness than at certain other times when I had prayed because I had wanted to."

Through her struggles, Teresa discovered the wisdom of the Catholic teaching that our bodies, and what we do with them, matter. She came to understand that while God wants us to treat our bodies with respect, excessive focus on perfecting our bodies or indulging their insatiable desires — including the desire to busy ourselves with good works to avoid the discomfort of solitude and silence — distances us from God. The same goes for social status, popularity, and professional achievement, things that are not evil in themselves but that can wreak spiritual havoc when we value them more than we value God.

Once Teresa broke free of such idols, she redirected to God the passion she had frittered away on the quest for material pleasures and social approval. Her intense love for Jesus and profound prayer life gave her the strength to launch a historic reform of her religious order, endure severe persecution from civil and religious authorities who resisted her efforts, and pen several classics of contemplative spirituality. Battling critics both inside and outside her order, Teresa refused to back down in her quest to transform her Carmelite convents from havens for spoiled socialites to places of genuine simplicity and prayer. She adhered faithfully to her religious vow of obedience, however, forgiving her detractors and attracting followers inspired by her to live for God alone.

By the time of her death, Teresa had established dozens of Discalced Carmelite convents, sparking a renewal of religious life that rippled across the Catholic Church and helped revitalize it in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. She became one of the church's greatest saints and mystics, a trailblazer in faith as well as works. In 1970,

Pope Paul VI named her a Doctor of the Church, an honor previously granted only to men. The distracted, vain woman who spent the first four decades of her life obsessed with looking good in the eyes of others evolved into a spiritual powerhouse who heroically lived the words of her famous poem:

*Let nothing disturb you,
Let nothing frighten you,
All things are passing away:
God never changes.
Patience obtains all things.
Whoever has God lacks nothing;
God alone suffices.*

A Desire Enkindled Reading

Teresa's story helped me understand for the first time why my parents had returned to her works so often and spoken of her with such affection. In Teresa, I found a woman of passion and purpose whose journey was all the more compelling for its detours.

Teresa's spicy, messy, and meandering spiritual journey cast my own struggles in a new light. Perhaps the discontent that had dogged me for the past year was not a spiritual dead end or a signal that I needed to work harder at tidying up my life. Maybe it was the opening chapter in a love story like the one Teresa had lived, a story in which a divine protagonist pursues his beloved with reckless ardor and ultimately wins her heart. Reading about Teresa's ecstatic prayer experiences — in which she felt Jesus consuming her with a love so sweet and piercing that she thought she might die on the spot — I felt a desire for divine intimacy kindled within me.

I also felt inspired by the discovery that Teresa's ardent faith had not squelched her natural boldness and originality but purified and intensified both, allowing her to use her gifts for a higher good. For Teresa, faith was a source of liberation, not oppression. She surely was a product of her times; her apologies for "womanly dullness of mind" make that clear. Yet Teresa defended a woman's calling to the same heights of mystical prayer to which God calls men and praised women for the special love and faith they showed Jesus while he was on earth. In an early draft of *The Way of Perfection*, she laments that the all-male ranks of judges in her day see "no virtue in women that they do not hold suspect," and she looks forward to the day "when everyone will be known for what he is . . . these are times in which it would be wrong to undervalue virtuous and strong souls, even though they are women." Slapping the feminist label on Teresa may be a stretch, but this trailblazer's single-minded focus on God's will led her to embark on adventures and undertake risks that would have intimidated most men of her day — and most secular feminists of ours. Through it all, Teresa retained her Spanish wit and zest for life, encouraging her nuns to join her for laughter, music, and dancing during recreation periods and delivering spiritual insights in an earthy, intuitive voice that reveals a uniquely feminine spiritual perspective.

Meeting Teresa marked a significant step in my nascent spiritual journey, though I did not understand its full significance until years later. Teresa was the first woman saint I discovered as an adult; she was the first to model a mixture of faith, femininity, and freedom that I could admire and appropriate for my own life. I had no plans to join the cloistered Carmelites and no illusions that my mumbled daily prayers would morph into ecstasies anytime soon. It did not cross my mind that I should forgo plunging necklines or an extra beer on my girls' nights out, much less don a hair shirt or maintain monastic silence.

For all the differences between Teresa's life and mine, though, I could see strong parallels: an aching hunger for meaning, boredom with worldly pleasures and success, a passionate and often prideful intensity that could be used for great good or great folly. In Teresa, I saw the kind of woman I might become if I ever took God seriously enough to try. And I found a friend to whom I could turn in prayer, someone who could give Jesus an extra nudge on my behalf when I needed help overcoming the temptations of superficiality and sensuality that Teresa knew well.

A Way Forward The immediate upshot of my encounter with Teresa was a change in my New Year's Eve plans. Ever since we parted ways for Christmas break, my boyfriend had been making daily long-distance calls from his home in Boston to convince me to join him there for the holiday. I thought it sounded fun at first, but the more absorbed I became in Teresa's story, the less the trip appealed. I knew that it would be an occasion of temptation, as his plan entailed me staying at his house, and I knew that he saw my visit as a way to cement our status as a serious couple. He recently had started quizzing me about his various postgraduation career options to see if I considered them lucrative enough to make him a good husband and provider. His affection was genuine, and I could tell that he had big plans for us. My cross-country trek would signal that I shared those plans.

The more I listened to my heart, and to God's voice speaking in it, the more I realized that I did not want to make long-term plans with a man who regarded God as a competitor for my loyalties and faith as something best kept on the margins of life. I had taken up with such men before, and I knew I would be tempted to do so again. Here and now, though, I had a choice: I could continue clutching this man as a placeholder until I found someone or something more satisfying, or I could surrender the relationship and take a chance on God instead.

I decided not to go to Boston for New Year's. And three days after I returned to campus in January, I broke up with my boyfriend. I offered a lame excuse about needing to spend more time with my friends because I was too cowardly to give the real reason, lest word get out that I had become a religious fanatic. I knew that on a Catholic college campus like mine, having a little faith was commendable. But having too much — the sort that led you to dump perfectly good boyfriends, spend your lunch breaks at noon Mass, or take controversial church teachings too seriously — was a recipe for social

isolation or at least ridicule. Better to be labeled shallow, stuck-up, drunk, or debauched — anything but devout.

After the breakup, my life did not change overnight. In fact, anyone watching from afar that semester would have noticed little change at all. I became more diligent about attending daily Mass and carving out time for daily prayer and spiritual reading, but I kept those habits hidden from even my closest friends. It had not yet occurred to me to return to the sacrament of confession. And though I felt a shaky sense of peace taking root in my heart, whatever was happening inside me was still not strong enough to curb my vanity and vices. It just made me enjoy them less.

Even the breakup brought me little comfort. I had assumed that my bold if badly executed act of obedience to God's will would result in a shower of blessings. Instead, I received some devastating family news shortly afterward that left me reeling with sadness and missing my boyfriend, who had since taken up with another coed, who looked like a shorter, skinnier version of me. I spent the rest of my final semester occupied by a down-to-the-wire job hunt that collided with my overloaded class schedule to make the spring unusually stressful.

After four years of doing whatever I wanted, I finally was trying to follow God's lead. And things seemed to be getting worse, not better. Reading Teresa's writings and tales from her life, as I did voraciously that semester, I felt a pang of painful recognition when I came across a story of the sick and exhausted reformer traveling to one of her besieged convents amid a fierce rainstorm. Her horse-drawn cart hit a pothole, and Teresa hit the mud headfirst. "Lord, if this is how you treat your friends," she quipped to Jesus, "no wonder you have so few!"

My awkward first attempts at resuscitating my relationship with God were not entirely fruitless. I later would come to see them as baby steps that helped me get my bearings before I tackled a host of more complicated problems relating to love and freedom, marriage and motherhood, the mystery of suffering, and my role as a twenty-first-century woman in a two-thousand-year-old church. My search for answers would span fifteen years, take me to places I never imagined I would go, and force me to reconsider nearly everything I thought I knew about what it means to be a liberated woman. It would be years before I recognized my efforts as a quest to understand my feminine identity in light of my Christian faith and contemporary feminism, to grasp the essence of what Blessed Pope John Paul II called the "feminine genius." Still, something important already had happened by the end of my college years: I had learned that the very saints I once considered irrelevant to my search could prove indispensable guides.

Teresa was the first. Although I still had no answers to most of the questions I had asked on that windowsill eighteen months earlier, Teresa's example convinced me that my journey to understand who I was and how I should live as a woman was inextricably bound with my journey toward God. Seeing her transformation from a party girl who chased pleasure and status with abandon to a saint who marshaled her prodigious talents and energy for service to God, I felt hopeful that my own natural intensity could find a nobler outlet than barhopping and resume building. Teresa's squandered youth

and stumbles on the path to sanctity reminded me that no matter how much time I had wasted in starting my interior journey, it's never too late to take the first step.