

PARADISE FOUND

HEATHER KING

*There are nothing but gifts
on this poor, poor Earth.*

— Czeslaw Milosz

CONVERTING to Catholicism was the last thing I ever thought I'd do, and yet, ten years after the fact, it seems almost inevitable. I'd hungered and thirsted all my life: for answers, for meaning, for love. And though I had never thought of myself as religious, religious — which comes from the Latin *religare*, “to bind back; to reconnect” — is exactly what I was. I was on a search, however misguided, to connect with something deeper than myself. I hungered for some Eden it seemed I'd lost before I ever found it.

When I washed up on the shore of the Church, I was newly sober and didn't know how to live; I was scared of everybody and everything. As an active alcoholic, I'd slavered over my morning beers with the single-minded devotion of the faithful; slept around with abandon; succumbed to blackouts that were echoes, however crude, of the merging-with-God oblivion of the contemplative mystics. I wanted to redeem myself. I wanted to be *good*.

That first time I walked into Saint Basil's up on Wilshire Boulevard, I thought cringingly, *Am I even allowed in here? Will they kick me out because I'm not Catholic?* Then I saw Christ on the cross above the altar, and all my doubts disappeared. Not because I thought, *He died for my sins*, but because all the trappings were stripped away to reveal a vulnerable human being, and I was moved with pity for him. I saw that he understood my suffering and was with me. He made me see that I wasn't a product that needed to be improved, as the relentless culture of advertising told me, but a human being with a soul; that redemption wasn't about being good, but about coming fully alive.

Parts of this essay previously appeared in Commonweal, in Notre Dame Magazine, and on National Public Radio.

WHEN I was a child, my mother saw to it that I attended Sunday school and was baptized in the Congregational Church, but I wasn't the least bit interested. Coming of age in the sixties, I had no conception of God and no desire for one. After reading Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* as a freshman in high school, I adopted as my personal creed “Hell is other people.” I should have looked in the mirror, for the twenty-year bout of alcoholism that followed — coupled with the irresponsibility, the sexual license, and the loss of moral values alcoholism engenders — was as close to hell as I ever want to get.

Somehow during this period I attended both college and law school. This might sound good on paper, but getting good marks in class and functioning in the world are two entirely different things. For instance, I did not work a single day the whole time I was in law school. By going without new clothing, regular meals, or any entertainment besides a weekly stack of library books, I was able to survive on student loans and the hundred dollars my loving, unsuspecting, poverty-stricken parents sent me every other week. While the other students were currying favor with professors, I was picking up guys at sleazy bars. While the other students were taking summer internships, I was taking the Blue Line to Revere Beach, lying hung over in the sun for a few hours, then repairing to the Hi-Lo to swill \$1.25 vodka gimlets for the rest of the afternoon. I managed to graduate with honors and pass the bar exam, but instead of going to work as a lawyer, I was starting each day with seven or eight Sea Breezes in the company of the cirrhotic drunks at J.T.'s Place.

At the age of thirty-three, sick, demoralized, and thoroughly beaten down, I finally turned to family and other recovering alcoholics for help, and I stopped drinking. My “career” had never moved beyond waitressing, and though writing was the only occupation to which I felt drawn, in the sober light of day I saw it as an indulgence, a child's pipe dream. Ever since I'd applied to law school, nothing had terrified me more than the prospect of actually working as an attorney. Nevertheless, two



years sober and newly married, I moved from Boston to Los Angeles and found a job in a downtown law firm whose affairs were in a state of such stupendous disarray that I didn't take a lunch break for the first six months. I struggled to salvage cases that had been dismissed because the statute of limitations had run out, or motions that were unwinnable because no one had ever gotten around to conducting the appropriate discovery. The floor of my office was heaped with clients' medical records and rolled-up exhibits. The walls were marred with Scotch tape and nail holes, and the south-facing windows afforded, on rare smog-free days, a glimpse of the ocean. (During the 1992 riots they also gave me a panoramic view of the city going up in smoke.) I kept thinking, *When am I going to get to do some real legal work?* After a while, I realized this was what real lawyers did.

I also discovered that, for sheer mean-spiritedness, trial lawyers ran neck-and-neck with drunks. The senior partner observed with alarm my habit of promptly returning phone calls from opposing attorneys. "Screw them!" he said. "You think they'd do the same for us?" When I explained that I considered it a professional courtesy, he shook his head in disgust and said I was "too sensitive." This infuriated me, but of course he was right. For a litigation lawyer, sensitivity is a defect. We were held by no less an authority than the oxymoronic "canons of legal ethics" to advocate zealously for our clients, and the capacity to feel emotions acutely got in the way of that.

I carried with me always the secret of my alcoholism and the fear that it had rendered me unfit for normal life. Why couldn't I be more grateful? Why couldn't I fit in like everyone else? This job was killing me, but I had so little sense of myself and what possibilities there were in the world that I literally did not think I was allowed to quit; I felt as if I had to have permission. I had sat on a bar stool for so long, thinking of myself as wrong and the rest of the world as right, that I was floored by the depth of the duplicity, the greed, the obscene waste of resources I saw at work. It seemed somewhat hypocritical for a woman who'd spent most of her adult life in a blackout to condemn the civil-litigation system as morally bankrupt, but in the depths of my heart I knew that, no matter what parents and friends and society told me, I could not possibly have gotten sober for this.

MEANWHILE, soon after I'd quit drinking, I'd embarked on a vaguely defined spiritual journey. I went through a long stage in which I thought everything about the world was wrong. Now, having dimly grasped the concept of humility — and, naturally, taken it to its furthest, most unbalanced extreme — I thought everything about *me* was wrong. I was so devoid of theological grounding I wasn't even sure of the difference between the Old and New Testaments. In desperation I started reading random books about Christianity, by such authors as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Meister Eckhart, Romano Guardini and C.S. Lewis, Saint Theresa and Thomas Merton.

I even, bit by bit, read the Gospels. Ever since my childhood stint in Sunday school, I had thought of the Gospels as

stories about ancient men in dusty tunics. What struck me now was how precisely the Gospels spoke to my own situation. For example, they began to explain why I was so deeply miserable in the legal profession: The Gospels talked about giving, while the basic premise of the law is hoarding. The Gospels talked about letting go, while the law advocated hanging on for all you were worth. The Gospels said to lay down your arms, but in law all we ever did was gird ourselves for battle.

A turning point for me was when the firm took on Mrs. Prietto as a client. Mrs. Prietto was a recently bereaved widow whose husband had died during outpatient podiatric surgery. She had brought a wrongful-death suit against the hospital and several of its doctors. I was dispatched to "defend" her deposition against seven insurance defense lawyers. We gathered in the twelfth-floor conference room of the lead defense lawyer, a middle-aged man with a greasy red face. Without even bothering to introduce himself, he sat down, loudly snapped what sounded like a pack of gum in his mouth, and started firing questions at Mrs. Prietto: Did your husband have any hobbies? He played the guitar? What songs did he play? Where did he buy his strings? What was the name of the street the store was on? Were the strings plastic or steel? You don't *know*? How often did he practice? Less than three times a week? More than five? Which days? You don't *know*! How can we give you money for the death of a man you hardly knew?

Just being present during this questioning made me glow hot with shame. I was so intimidated by the overbearing interrogating attorney — and the six silently smirking others — that I could barely squeak out a tentative objection. *Tell him to take the gum out of his mouth!* I instructed myself in a panic. *Tell him to stop badgering the witness!* But I could hardly breathe, much less speak.

(end of excerpt)