

and old furs. I tried items on, layering one on top of another, and paid two dollars for all my loot.

Back home I experimented with various outfits, finally settling on a pink satin nightgown, oodles of jewelry, a wide-brimmed hat, and matching gloves. Awestruck by my metamorphosis in the mirror, I decided to give myself a new name: "Madam Modipuss." Little Janie was invisible; Madam Modipuss was flamboyant. Little Janie was mute; Madam Modipuss was bold. Little Janie always did what she was told; Madam Modipuss had a mind of her own. Little Janie took matters very seriously; Madam Modipuss, quite frankly, didn't give a damn.

Looking for a safe place to reveal the new me, I went to see the three-year-old boy next door. "I am Madam Modipuss!" I announced when they answered my knock. The boy just stared at me with his mouth open, but his mother invited me in. I spent many hours there and in time became known affectionately as "Modi."

Sixty years later I am driving through Little Italy on my way to see my granddaughters, who are sitting on the steps in front of their row house. When they spot my pumpkin-colored car, they shout the only name they know me by: "Modi, Modi, Modi!"

*Jane B.
Baltimore, Maryland*

MY FATHER WAS A JEHOVAH'S WITNESS; my mother, a Baptist. They couldn't agree how to raise their children, so my family attended church only on rare occasions. We sometimes listened to Baptist church radio and had home visits from Witnesses, who read to my siblings and me from a large book of children's stories with colorful pictures of lions and lambs frolicking together after the End of Days.

When I was a senior in high school, my boyfriend found religion, and I followed him to a small Pentecostal church on the South Side of Chicago. After a strident sermon and some fervent singing, I found myself walking hesitantly up the aisle, kneeling before the pastor, and professing that I had accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.

Along with six or seven others who had

done the same, I was led to the church basement, where we were asked if we wanted to be baptized. Yes, I said, not realizing that they were asking if I wanted to be baptized *that day*. Church women dressed all in white descended upon us and handed us thin gowns to change into. Looking around at the small group of newly saved, I noticed that many were as deer-eyed as I was. Did getting baptized mean that I was joining this church? Should I wait? Did I need my mother's permission?

A half-hour later, I was standing in the baptismal font to the right of the altar. I was submerged three times: "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." The white gown stuck uncomfortably to the curves of my naked body, and each time I was raised from the cold water, my hands instinctively went to cover my nipples.

Afterward the other converts and I were led back to the basement, where we dried off and dressed. Then we were brought to a small room upstairs and told to "tarry" (wait) on the Lord to come through us and give us the gift of speak-

ing in tongues. Newly baptized and clearly bewildered, we huddled in a small seated circle while a half dozen sisters and brothers of the church began praying close to our ears. So passionate were their prayers that soon several of us were speaking in unintelligible utterances, peppered with the occasional "Thank you, Jesus." After a while I began to worry that if I didn't start speaking in tongues I would be deemed an impostor.

Whether it was the strength of the hot prayers in my ears or my longing to belong, I finally opened my mouth, and words rushed out faster than I could think to form them. I could feel my body in the chair and hear my utterances in my head, but a part of me was somewhere else, in a formless expanse where my doubts and fears didn't exist.

On the long bus ride home, I was already beginning to doubt what had happened. Did I want salvation so badly that I'd simply pretended to speak in tongues? Or had the Holy Spirit come through me that day to profess the glory of God?

*Sauda Burch
Oakland, California*

Portraits

MARK IRWIN

Mother came to visit today. We hadn't seen each other in years. Why didn't you call? I asked. Your windows are filthy, she said. I know, I know. It's from the dust and rain. She stood outside. I stood in, and we cleaned each one that way, staring into each other's eyes, rubbing the white towel over our faces, rubbing away hours, years. This is what it was like when you were inside me, she said. What? I asked, though I understood. Afterward, indoors, she smelled like snow melting. Holding hands we stood by the picture window, gazing into the December sun, watching the pines in flame.