

## **Motherlines: Love, Longing and Liberation**

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### **Excerpt from Chapter 1**

Madison, Wisconsin. It is 1960. I answer the phone in the small student apartment I am sharing with my boyfriend, Morris, a Jewish pre-med student from New York. I am a townie student, using my parents' Madison address to escape those watchful eyes overseeing the University of Wisconsin's *in loco parentis* policy. I am twenty, neither privileged nor underprivileged. I support myself, pay my own tuition, and in my mind this gives me the right to choose how I live.

My mother is on the other end of the line. Twisting the black umbilical curl that connects the phone to the receiver, I think I know what's coming. I am the oldest of her six children. My mother does not like my living arrangement at all. She is Catholic. To her mind, I am living in sin. She suspects I am having sex. She doesn't know how much, or that I have no legal access to birth control. I can't possibly tell her how sexual pleasure is the key to everything. I have no memory of our conversation, except for her last question: "Patty, what about your spiritual life?" I had not expected that. "I don't need a spiritual life!" I shoot back and hang up on her. I was raised Catholic.

The first three years of my education take place in the basement of St. Bernard's, the century-old fieldstone church in the village of Middleton, Wisconsin. Upstairs, the church is saturated with the smell of incense and beeswax, the stations of the cross march along the side walls, the suffering crucified Christ hangs on the cross front and center, the Mass is said in Latin, and the handful of nuns who are my teachers sit in the front pews in their voluminous black habits, great chains of rosary beads hanging from their waists. At age seven I make my first communion, dressed in a white dress and veil. But before that, I am required to go to confession. One wonders what sins there are for me to confess.

By the time I am eleven, I confront my first ethical dilemma. I kneel in the pew waiting for the confessional to release its current occupant. I am supposed to examine my conscience. The laminated sheet that lists the menu of possible sins suggests "impure thoughts and deeds." I try to fit my body's sensations into that category and confess this mysterious dimension of my being to the priest, semi-visible behind the confessional grill, whose breath smells of cigarettes and alcohol. "How many times?" he asks. "Once," I lie, and never confess my private exploration again, knowing full well that receiving

communion without a complete confession is a mortal sin. Each Sunday, I doom myself to hell, until my ingenious body devises a way out; like clockwork, right before communion, I faint. If it isn't the summer heat, cheap perfume, and human perspiration that brings me down, it is staring at the beady eyes of the winter mink biting its tail as it circles the collar of the heavily upholstered woman in the pew ahead. Soon cold sweat, ringing in my ears, and the inevitable blackness envelops me. I have no control over this event. Someone always guides me outside, where I spend the remainder of the Mass on the entryway steps. There I can be alone, breathe, see the sky, hear the birds. No one inquires about the odd timing; fasting before communion tends to make people woozy. Little did I know I was on a collision course with this religion of my childhood.

During the fainting years, when I am still in grade school, my mother and I make May altars in my bedroom. May, the month of Mary. From some unknown provenance, we have acquired a two-foot plaster statue of the Blessed Virgin. To my child's eye she is much too pale and ethereal. With no objection from my mother, I use my paints to give her a makeup job—bright red lips, rosy cheeks, a little mascara, and a brilliant blue mantle. On the cedar chest altar I arrange scraps of fabric, special stones, a small skull with a few loose teeth I found in the woods, and a bouquet of violets. Every night before bed we kneel and pray in front of this altar: "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus." The word "womb" is only ever used in this context, but it carries a secret charge that has to do with being a woman, something I suspect my mother knows but never speaks about. Having her to myself, making an altar, a holy place in my bedroom with the tarted-up virgin, is extraordinary in the dreary, impoverished days of the Eisenhower fifties, and says something about my mother's level of toleration of what are clearly my pagan tendencies.

The May altars shut down once I enter high school. I no longer faint in church. I confess and take communion with impunity, no matter that I had spent hours the night before making out in the backseat of someone's car. The collision between my heat-seeking body and the church's opposition to its desires is well underway. I was not willing, although I struggled some, to give up such powerful feelings. Confession and communion become a hollow exercise necessary for appearances at home and school. These empty gestures never compare with the sensual reality of my body's response to being touched. I understand it is a choice, and I do not choose to go down on my knees for an abstract idea. No, I do not want or need a spiritual life that requires that kind of sacrifice.

In the Demeter-Persephone myth there is a compelling third figure, Hecate. A female spirit guide, a not-mother, who travels the upper and lower realms, she is the one who hears Persephone's cries from the underworld and goes where mother Demeter cannot. It is Hecate who carries the illuminating torch that lights Persephone's journey out of captivity. She is the enabling one who repairs the broken circuitry in the motherline. Enter Ruth, a most unlikely guide, my mother's sister, my aunt, a nun.

