

though I know such delusions just delay
 the truth I hear my traitor tongue say,
Forgive the faithless daughter I have been,
 as I bless my blessed mother yet again.⁹

And then I left for home. After a few days of proximity
 to her, I found myself having to practice the Sacrament of
 Distance once again.

Chapter 3

THE SACRAMENT OF BEAUTY

*Late have I loved you,
 Beauty so old and so new.
 Late have I loved you.*

—St. Augustine

These celebrated words of St. Augustine constitute a poem and a prayer of thanksgiving. In his *Confessions*, Augustine discovers that even in the period of his life when he believed himself to be avoiding God, he was actually pursuing him. Augustine's passion for the things of this world was motivated by his love of their beauty. Without his knowing it, beauty was a means through which God lured and led him toward the Good. Ultimately, the saint's conversion came about as a consequence of this love of beauty.

In his powerful book *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*, philosopher, priest, and poet John O'Donohue reminds his readers of the urgency with which beauty interrupts ordinary life:

In Greek, the word for "the beautiful" is *to kalon*. It is related to the word *kalain* which includes the notion of "call." When we experience beauty, we feel called. The Beautiful stirs passion and urgency in us and calls us forth from aloneness into the warmth and wonder of an eternal embrace. It unites us again with the neglected and forgotten grandeur of life. Beauty calls to all of us, and does so at odd and unexpected moments. Speaking in whispers and glimpses, it makes itself known to us at the best and the worst times of our lives, and then it inevitably fades, leaving an aura behind it. Beauty visits—it does not linger—but for the few moments it is present to us, we feel renewed, refreshed, transformed. It is a visitation of grace.¹

One of the epiphanies that came to me during my mother's illness was the discovery of the degree to which her life had been predicated upon the call of beauty. She pursued beauty in its many forms as eagerly as St. Augustine did—desiring and acquiring beautiful clothes, cultivating her own personal beauty, falling in love with handsome men; even her move to Florida, late in life, was the result of her having visited and fallen in love with its palm trees, its blue sea and sky, and its dramatic sunsets.

I simultaneously became aware of the fact that the pattern of my own life, as well as those of my sisters, had been shaped by the pursuit of beauty, too, though we heard its call in other ways. This commonality that we shared, despite our many differences, became a *lingua franca* for us during the final days of my mother's life. We would cultivate beauty, practice it as the sacrament it is, and embody it in our speech and gestures and in our handling of ordinary material objects. We all understood, tacitly, that beauty was a good, redeeming presence

in our lives both past and present, and that we would do all we could to invite and pursue it, even—and especially—in the face of imminent death.

KAIROS: TIME REDEEMED AND BEAUTIFIED

In tragedy, there is often a moment in the play or film shortly before the final disaster when the audience is deluded into hoping for a happy ending. This moment—wherein we hope Juliet might awaken from her feigned death before Romeo takes his life, that Hamlet might finally take his revenge upon his murderous uncle and live to tell the tale, that Michael Corleone might outwit his enemies and save his family and himself from a violent end—is a "false dawn." The dramatist provides just a hint of light on the dark horizon, and the audience almost believes it to be the rising sun; however, we also know in our hearts that it is not. So powerful is our desire for this happy ending that we sometimes find ourselves rooting for it even though we have seen the play before and we know exactly how it must end.

The seemingly successful surgery performed on our mother and her brief recovery afterward proved to be a false dawn for us. The difference was that this was real life, *our* life, rather than the imagined lives of characters on the stage and screen. I long ago learned that art imitates and, in some ways, prepares us for life—but somehow a lifetime of reading literature and experiencing hope and disappointment vicariously does not spare us the inevitable pain these powerful emotions cause. There is no inoculation against grief.

My mother did eventually die from her initial injury—but, strange as it seems, I am grateful for the extended false dawn our family experienced between her surgery and her

final, precipitous decline. For a period of nearly three weeks, our mother progressed from a state of unconsciousness and dependence on a ventilator to one of full awareness, independence from life support, and engagement with the world immediately around her. The mere husk of a woman I encountered when I first saw her in the ICU returned almost miraculously to her former self. More accurately, the Marion who came out of surgery seemed to me to be an earlier version of our mother—before alcohol had altered her personality and robbed her of the pleasures of everyday life.

I was fortunate to visit her for six days during this remarkable transformation, a period that was all too brief but that became for me and my sisters a graced time. It was a form of *kairos*—time that is not measured by the calendar or clock but stands, instead, as a still moment outside of *chronos* and its endless succession of sequential time. As opposed to *chronos*, often portrayed in poetry and art as an ugly devourer of human life, *kairos* is portrayed as a beautiful child, full of potential and possibility. *Kairos* implies cessation, a brief reprieve from the demands of the tyrant time. This stillness— or, as writer Andre Dubus terms it in his essay, “On Charon’s Wharf,” this “pause in the March” toward mortality that we all engage in—offered us the extraordinary and unexpected opportunity to redeem past actions and set a new course for the future.²

In the course of six days, we three sisters received a great gift: occasion upon occasion to demonstrate our love for our mother, affirm our relationship to her as mother and daughters, and heal some of the deep wounds that had marred our family life for decades. Six days may not seem like a lot of time, and there is a part of me that wishes our *kairos* had been longer. But another part of me knows that six days is sufficient

time to accomplish a great deal—to create a new universe, in fact, as Genesis reminds us. And that is, in some ways, what we were able to do.

THE SHOCK OF RECOGNITION

When I arrived at the Indian River Nursing Home on January 13, my sister Charlene led me down a long, bright corridor, cheerfully chattering about Mom’s anticipation of my visit. Charlene described the colorful sign she had made and propped on my mother’s food tray as a daily reminder of something to look forward to. (It moved me very much to see that sign when I ultimately entered the room: “Angela is coming soon!” I thought of the Benedictines and their hospitality, the directive to receive all guests as if they were Christ.) She also told me Mom had requested that she be dressed in her new robe and even asked to wear her wig in honor of the occasion. (Wigs and hairpieces had long been part of Mom’s “big hair” aesthetic, an attempt to augment her less-than-abundant black hair.) Always attractive and always preoccupied with her appearance, Mom wanted to look her best for my arrival.

The hallway was lined with old people seated in wheelchairs. Many of them were slumped down in various states of near or total unconsciousness; a very few were erect and alert enough to show interest in our passing and follow us with their eyes. I remember one white-haired, blue-eyed woman in particular, who smiled sweetly as I passed. I looked at each face, expecting at any moment to encounter my mother’s—and then I saw the signature black wig on a woman whose back was turned to us. The familiarity of her outline and posture sent a surge of joy through me—to see her upright after having seen her entirely prostrate just weeks before—but as I rushed

inability to recognize her was, in reality, a refusal to admit the beginning of my loss of her, and ultimately the inevitable loss of myself. I don't believe I can ever fully understand my motivations or articulate the revelations that came to me in those few seconds of time. But I do believe that moment was significant in ways that will continue to reveal themselves to me as long as my memory retains the image of her terribly altered face.

THE PURSUIT OF BEAUTY

One of the many ways in which I misunderstood my mother, in the course of our lives together, was my mistaking her lifelong preoccupation with her appearance for simple vanity. My mother was part of a generation of women who had been conditioned by American culture to consider their worth as human beings to be commensurate with their physical attractiveness and measured by the attention they received from admiring men. During the years of her childhood and young adulthood, female film stars such as Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor established the norms for female beauty, and many women tried to achieve these standards by emulating the makeup, hairstyles, dress, and demeanor of their idols. (Because she was dark-haired and dark-eyed, my mother's particular models were Taylor and Sophia Loren. In fact, she identified with the former so thoroughly that when Elizabeth Taylor died about a year after my mother did, I grieved as if I were losing her all over again.)

This behavior was not a part of the culture of my childhood. The economic and political strides made by the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s offered girls and women in subsequent generations choices and alternative ways of

round the front of the wheelchair to greet her, I stopped dead. The woman who looked up at me was a complete stranger—her small black eyes appeared unnaturally bright and nervous, and there was no hint of recognition in them. Thin as she was, her facial features were extremely pronounced: the nose seemed a comically exaggerated version of my mother's noble Roman nose, the brow prominent and stern, and the mouth wizened and shapeless since it lacked teeth to give it definition. This poor woman, who was obviously in a state of acute anxiety, gave the impression of a bright-eyed bird of prey. She looked mildly insane.

I was stunned at first by this apparition and then immediately relieved, for I was certain that this woman was not my mother. A terrible mistake had been made, and I'm ashamed to admit that I was grateful not to have to claim her as kin. But my sister confirmed what I had hoped was not true, because she said to this woman, with her characteristic enthusiasm, "Look, Mom! I told you Angela was coming—and here she is!"

It's difficult to describe in any orderly way the chaos of conflicting emotions that accompanied this shock of recognition. My mother's face remained emotionless—a hard, impassive mask—as I dutifully bent down to hug her and to kiss her cheek. And I wondered if this was her response to my obvious confusion, alarm, relief, and renewed horror upon discovering who she was or whether she was as mentally confused as her appearance suggested. I felt guilty, as though I had betrayed her in some way by not knowing her. But, in truth, she seemed to have become someone else. My beautiful mother was no longer beautiful and would never be beautiful again.

Looking back on this moment (which still pains me whenever I recall it), I sometimes wonder whether my seeming

distinguishing themselves that were not widely available to women of my mother's era. No longer confined to using their sexuality as the sole means of empowerment, women began to steer the course of their own lives by developing their intellectual capabilities through education and claiming economic freedom by taking jobs and preparing for professions that had previously been open only to men. As a child of this new dispensation, I relished going to school, enjoyed the challenge of academic endeavor, and excelled as a student.

My mother's response to my success in school was less than enthusiastic. For one thing, it established a division between us, yet another form of distance separating us. As she confessed to me, years later, she felt it strange that she never needed to help me with what she termed "your lessons." Looking back on incidents in my childhood, it seems at times that my intelligence was a threat and an affront. One day after school when I was in the third or fourth grade, I came home excitedly to report to my mother that I had earned straight one hundreds on my report card. My mother greeted this news with an uncomfortable silence. She didn't even glance up from her task but, instead, continued working at the kitchen stove, carefully scouring the white porcelain top. After a few seconds (though it seems much longer in my memory), she broke the silence. "Angela, 'He that is exalted shall be humbled, and he that is humbled shall be exalted.'"

I was floored by this response. First, I was struck by how little stock she put in the academic accomplishments so many other parents actively tried to cultivate in their children. Second, I had no idea where she had heard such elevated language. This was not my mother's typical idiom, and I knew it. Though I never solved the first conundrum, within an hour I was able to understand the second. I happened to glance at

the calendar that hung on our kitchen wall—it was a Catholic calendar, a free gift given out at our parish church every January, and each day of the month listed any Church holidays, the liturgical season, saints' feast days, and finally a scripture passage for the day. My eye lit on the date, and there I saw the passage from the twenty-third chapter of Matthew that my mother had just quoted to me (without attribution, I might add).

I still remember the strange commingling of sorrow and delight I felt at discovering this. If this was a game of cat and mouse, I was definitely winning. But this was small consolation, for I never wanted to play the game in the first place.

Among my siblings I had earned a reputation as "the smart kid" (deserved or not), and perhaps I enjoyed this distinction more than I ought to have. This might account for another of my mother's characteristic attitudes toward me. From my childhood through my young adulthood, whenever there was public knowledge in my family of a mistake I had made—buying the wrong item at the store or losing a valued possession—my mother would inevitably intone, "For such an intelligent person, Angela, you certainly are stupid!" I felt its sting—but not because I believed what she said was true. I somehow knew her insult came from her own insecurity and distaste that she had developed toward me.

At the time, I did not understand the degree to which this mother-daughter conflict was grounded in our generational difference. But I've come to recognize it as operative in our relationship almost from the very start. This is not to say I did not value my mother. When I was a child, I was proud of my mother's beauty—proud of the fact that when she came to school to visit, she wore a dress and high heels, rather than the dowdy housecoat and the clumsy work shoes so many of the

it seemed to also be a sign of her desire to achieve a kind of elusive perfection.

In my own life, I was fortunate to discover learning and, ultimately, writing as a means to the beauty I desired—just as in the lives of singers music becomes the means to that end, and in the lives of artists painting or sculpting stone becomes their obsession. In fact, I believe that at some level my mother possessed an artistic temperament, along with an innate love of beauty, but that she had not been encouraged or trained to seek or express that beauty beyond the conventional cultivation of feminine attractiveness. Indeed, as a child she had taken tap-dance lessons as well as singing lessons, and these made her happy. (One of our family's prized possessions is a professional studio portrait of our mother at age ten wearing her tap shoes and dance outfit. The camera seems to have caught her just as she finished her routine with a flourish, her hands extended at her side in a gesture of victory. "Here I am, world!" she seems to be saying, an announcement made emphatic by her confident eyes and beautiful smile.) My mother kept her tap shoes well into old age. Eventually, family circumstances forced her to give up both dancing and singing. The void left behind had to be filled in some way—and so it was.

I narrate this history in an effort to demonstrate the degree to which the concept of beauty was a painful subject and a cause for separation between us rather than a source of unity, as it is for many mothers and daughters. It also highlights how strange and poignant a fact it is that at the end of her life, during the six days of our *kairos* time together, our love of beauty in its various forms became a source of consolation. The very quality in her I had long disliked gradually had become, for me, a sign of a passion we held in common, and a relationship broken by beauty was about to be repaired by it.

other mothers would wear. Ours was a blue-collar community, and many of these mothers were beset by too much work and too many children to lavish attention on themselves. Our mother, by contrast, seemed self-confident, elegant, and sophisticated, despite her five children, her ailing husband, and the fact that she worked hard both in and outside the home. She would never dream of leaving the house wearing stockings with holes in them or going to the market without first putting on lipstick and makeup. (Unlike the woman in the wheelchair at the nursing home, *this* was the mother I had been proud to claim.)

However, as I grew older, I came to regard my mother's preoccupation with her appearance—and the appearance of others—as a sign of her shallowness. I didn't like her brutal assessments of others, especially of other women. I also resented her evident disapproval of me—not only because I was "too smart for my own good" (her phrase), but because I was not as feminine, as conventionally attractive, or as interested in my own beauty. As I grew older, I dressed as I pleased, and she was clearly unhappy when I gave up wearing makeup during college. My standards and my tastes were not my mother's, and she sent signals, in a thousand different ways, to let me know that she disapproved of me. To further add to this division between us, my older sisters did conform more closely to my mother's ideas about feminine dress and behavior. As a result, the three of them seemed to be part of a "girls' club" from which I had been involuntarily exiled.

It is only in recent years that I have been able to understand my mother's obsession with this limited form of beauty differently, more charitably, and (I hope) more wisely. In some ways, her perspective was practically inevitable because of the time and circumstances of her formation as a woman, and

BEAUTY IN THE SICK ROOM

After the initial disaster of our reunion, the first day of my visit with my mother went remarkably well, as did the five days that followed. Though my sisters and I never consciously stated this, the goal we had in common was to make our mother as comfortable as possible and also to try to restore a sense of normality. Mom always enjoyed being the center of attention—one of her favorite expressions was “I’m the important person here!”—and though this selfish quality in her had driven us crazy for many years, we were more than happy to oblige her in these particular circumstances. This might explain why a restoration of her sense of beauty—both her own and beauty in the space around her—became an unspoken priority for us.

It may seem pathetic, from some perspectives, that an old woman just returned from death’s door would care about whether she looked pretty, but I found this deeply poignant. I remember one moment in particular that struck me powerfully. An hour after my arrival, one of the doctors caring for my mother stopped by the room to check on her. She was a beautiful, young Indian woman named Anna, a name very close to my own. Anna had thick, black hair; smooth, coffee-colored skin; and brilliant, black eyes. Most arresting of all was her smile, which lit up her face and the drab sick room around her. As she stepped into the room, greeted us, and began speaking with me and my sister Charlene, my mother looked sheepishly up from her wheelchair, interrupted us, and announced loudly: “Look at the three of you! You’re all so beautiful. And look at me—I’m a mess!”

Startled, we all paused and, for the first time, attentively looked at one another. I was wearing my sleeveless black dress,

my best leather boots, a black beret, and a long, red scarf. My sister was wearing a black skirt, sling-back heels, and a striped white jacket. Dr. Anna wore a hospital-issued white coat, but such was her beauty that she looked lovely in everything. I suddenly realized that my mother was right—given the freedom and time to prepare ourselves to encounter the world, we each looked our best, while she, ruined by her poor health and marooned in her wheelchair, looked her worst. Since she had been used to a lifetime of being one of the most attractive women in any room she entered, how painful it must have been for her to recognize that this was no longer so.

This incident set her, and us, on a quest to return her to her former self—or, at least, toward some semblance of that. The processes we would engage in during the next few days had a practical end, in some ways. Helping Mom to feel better about herself and the space around her would encourage hope and nurture her resolve to recover and her will to live. But I realized, even as we were enacting these beauty rituals, that their primary goal was spiritual in nature. We wanted to nourish and nurture our mother’s love of beauty, the one virtue that was powerful enough to pull her out of herself, take her beyond the realm of suffering, and enable her to set her eyes and her heart on the possibility of joy. Just as I am convinced of my mother’s artistic temperament, I am also convinced that beauty was the means through which our mother most readily apprehended God. Beauty is a conduit of grace, and the absence of the one in her immediate circumstance seemed to imply the absence of the other.

Many saints and holy people have acknowledged the role of beauty in leading them to God. In the opening of this chapter, St. Augustine offers a justly famous paean to the transient earthly beauty of creation as an incarnation of the eternal

beauty of the divine. This flawed saint's relentless appetite for the beautiful led him, ultimately, to God.

If this can be true of the Bishop of Hippo, then why not my mother? I reasoned. Surely she was no more sinful than he, and surely God loves her no less. As for the seeming folly of finding beauty in the sick room, *If not here, where?* I wondered. The sick room is, in a sense, the suffering world in small, and we all need beauty, even—and perhaps especially—in the face of death.

THE VOCATION OF BEAUTY

Just as I have discovered in recent years that the love of beauty was common ground that my mother and I shared, I have also come to discover that my sisters share it as well. All three of us practice professions and vocations that enable us to bring beauty into the lives of others. My oldest sister, Rose Ann, attended cosmetology school as a young woman—not so much by choice as by my mother's insistence, since that seemed a profession she could master quickly and, thereafter, derive a steady income. (Immediately after our father's death, we children had to help my mother hold the household together, financially and otherwise, so attending college and taking time to choose one's own profession was a luxury unavailable to my older siblings.)

Happily, my sister excelled at her work and also proved to have an excellent head for business, enabling her to start her own salon and earn a very good living at her profession from an early age. My sister has been working with some of her clients for decades, helping these women, as they slowly age and lose their youthful, natural beauty, to compensate for that loss and to discover in their changing faces and hair colors

and textures a new version of themselves—one they can live with happily and confidently. I have seen women enter my sister's salon looking depleted and worn and then leave afterward seemingly revived, restored, and ready to do battle with whatever difficulties life may send their way. I have also seen her turn an ordinary-looking young woman into a spectacularly beautiful bride, filling her wedding day with joy for her and for all who beheld her.

My second sister (our middle sister), Charlene, has an eye for beauty along with clever hands that enable her to practice it. Having married a painting contractor at a young age, she and her husband founded a business together, and among her many roles (including decorating consultant and business manager), she became highly skilled at the art of hanging wallpaper. Charlene delights in color and design and is able to provide expert advice (as well as execute the practical labor) that turns an ordinary room into a beautiful living space. She has transformed many spaces in the homes of people all over south and central Florida, making thousands of people happy and grateful for the contact with beauty they enjoy on a daily basis.

As for me, my pursuit of beauty has long taken the form of reading literature and writing poetry, but I have loved the arts in their many forms. Nothing delights me more than going to museums to see the work of an artist's imagination represented through paint and stone, going to concerts to hear good music performed by gifted artists, attending plays brought to life through the voices and bodies of fine actors, and watching movies created and orchestrated by visionary filmmakers. These experiences of beauty make me feel intensely present in the moment and more fully *alive*. I feel as if I am in the immediate presence of the creative genius who created the

object I am beholding and also, by extension, of the God who has authored all the beauty in the world from the beginning of time to the present. In addition, I am blessed to work in a profession that engages my vocation. As a literature professor, I earn my daily bread by offering works of great beauty to my students for their consideration in an attempt to engender in them the same love and appreciation that my mentors once engendered in me. Thus, observing, making, and sharing beauty is my way of being in the world, just as it is for my sisters and was for my mother as well, after a fashion.

THE PRACTICE OF BEAUTY

When my sister Rose Ann arrived at the nursing home a few hours after my arrival, my mother let her know that she was late. All afternoon Mom had complained about the fact that her hair was a mess and that she needed a manicure badly, and her expectation was that as soon as my cosmetologist sister arrived, she would take care of these needs. My sister rose to the occasion—much as she had throughout the many years she had been practicing her craft on our mother. Moments after she entered the room, she took out her scissors (a tool she never travels without) and asked Mom what hairstyle she wanted. Though Mom had been vociferous about wanting a haircut, her high level of anxiety and also the lingering pain she was feeling in her hip didn't permit her to think clearly or articulate what specific style she wanted. At that point, I suggested a bob—something short, youthful, and playful to give her a jaunty air and to militate against the deadly serious atmosphere of the nursing home.

Rose immediately went to work and cut her hair expertly. As the hair fell past her shoulders onto the floor, a new outline

of my mother took shape. Gradually, she lost resemblance to the crazed woman wearing the too-big wig I had seen a few hours before. Instead, her features were softened; her hair, now tamed, framed her face rather than overwhelmed it; and it struck me, as I watched this transformation, that I had never seen her look quite as chic as she did in this simple haircut. She reminded me of women of the flapper era, defiant of traditional modes of beauty with their startling, new, masculine hairstyles. It made me see her, at this advanced stage of our relationship, in a whole new light.

One of the primary ideas that characterizes Catholic theology is the intense emphasis on incarnation as the medium of our lives—as fleshly creatures living in a material world—and as a powerful informing influence on our relationships. The ways in which we hear, see, touch, and experience one another shape and determine our understanding of the mystery of the other as well as of the mystery of our own complex self. Physicality is inextricably tied up with our spiritual being, and through our senses—those doors of perception—we get glimpses of the invisible and eternal I AM that animates us all. These may seem heady thoughts to emerge in response to a haircut, but these are the thoughts that entered and stayed in my mind as I beheld my mother and the remarkable fact that, even after nearly fifty years of knowing her, there were still hidden mysteries being revealed to me.

Mom seemed pleased as we all admired her new haircut, and I was grateful to my sister for her skill and the ease with which she was able to quell Mom's anxiety about her appearance. I was also moved as she took on the task of carefully filing, trimming, and painting our mother's fingernails and toenails. As I watched her put Mom's hand in her lap, gently reposition each of her swollen feet, and deliberately apply the brightly

colored polish to all twenty of her nails, it struck me that the act of touching the body of a sick person in an effort to ameliorate her condition spoke powerfully of love and solidarity.

These simple actions assured my mother that she was loved, that we were there for her, and that no harm would befall her while we were there to stave it off. For the sake of completeness and truth, though, I have to confess that a few hours later, when Mom actually looked in the mirror, she was not happy with what she saw. In fact, she was distressed at the haircut “we” had given her, claiming it was too short and made her look ugly, and she would remind us of this failure to please often in the days to come. But this did not bother us since we were accustomed to her complaining about our handiwork, and her dissatisfaction did nothing to diminish her stylish new look. Whether Mom appreciated the Sacrament of Beauty my sister had administered or not, it was efficacious in important ways, and the lift it gave her spirit was obvious, even in the energy of her disapproval. The old Marion was back.

On the second day of my visit, we addressed the next challenge in the makeover we seemed to (inadvertently) be giving my mother—her wardrobe. Mom had been brought from the hospital, so she had nothing to wear besides the hospital gowns (the kind that tied in the back) and the nice, new robe Charlene had bought her for her stay. Accordingly, en route to the nursing home the next day, we stopped at a local discount clothing store that happened to be on the way to choose some new outfits. Looking back on that day and the way my sister and I breezed up and down the aisles of the shop, pulling jumpers, cotton shells, flowered dresses, and colorful warm-up suits off the racks and loading them into our carts, it seems we might have been shopping for our young daughters rather

than our ancient mother. It was such a hopeful gesture—gathering these gifts, hoping she might like them, anticipating her delight when we arrived at her sober room with shopping bags full of crisp, new clothes for her to try on. The sheer amount of stuff we bought attests to the measure of our hope—clearly we thought she would be with us for a long time. In retrospect, this might be seen as folly, but I prefer to see it as an act of faith.

It is an old piece of wisdom that when one begins a new endeavor, one ought to put on new clothes. The clothing we choose to wear is one of the many ways we communicate without words. Wearing one’s best suit to a wedding or a funeral is a sign of our respect. Dressing meticulously for a job interview signals to our potential employer that we intend to do meticulous work—to both do and look our best—should we be invited to be part of their company. I have heard elementary-school teachers attest repeatedly that their favorite day of the year is picture day—the day their young charges show up to school wearing dresses and ties, sport coats and shiny shoes—because these typically unruly and inattentive children show up transformed into thoughtful young women and young men. They are more serious, more focused, more respectful of one another, and eminently more teachable. On picture day, teachers get a glimpse of the adults the children in their charge will become.

In keeping with its strong incarnational bent, the Catholic Church takes seriously the sacramental significance of clothes. The priest must wear his stole when he carries out his priestly duties—baptizing, hearing Confession, consecrating Eucharist, performing a wedding ceremony, and giving Last Rites. The monk wears a scapular of a particular kind, indicative of his order, and lay persons may wear smaller versions of these

as a demonstration of their devotion to a particular order or saint. The bishop carries his crosier—a version of the crook the shepherd uses to drive his sheep—indicative of his pastoral office and the care he exercises for his flock. The baby is baptized in white, indicative of purity and innocence, and a white garment is placed upon her as she receives the sacrament, symbolic of her new life in Christ. Similarly, a white cloth is laid upon the coffin of the deceased at his funeral. It echoes the garment received at Baptism, closing the circle of symbols, even as the departed is ushered into the final step in his lifelong journey toward God.

The color and kinds of clothes one wears also correspond to the seasons of the year in addition to the sacramental moments in life. The entire liturgical year is characterized by different-colored garments that the priest wears: purple for Advent and Lent; white for Christmastide and Easter; red for Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and martyrs' feast days; and green for ordinary time. None of this is left to accident or chance since clothing aids and assists us in celebrating the sacraments and observing the important moments in the Church year.

Knowing all of this, how could we not take seriously the task of arraying our mother for what would be her final days? Much to our delight, our mother loved the clothes we brought her. I pulled each outfit out of its bag, placed it against my body, conducting a mock fashion show, and then handed it to my sister Charlene, who neatly hung each item up in the demi-closet in my mother's room. We asked her which one she wanted to wear first, and she chose a short, black jumper with a white, cotton top.

After we helped her to put it on—more accurately, after we dressed her, much as one would dress a child—we marveled at how good it looked on her. I even took pictures on

my cell phone to allow her to see how she looked. I remember these few hours with particular fondness. They constitute a ritual every woman will recognize—the shopping and the homecoming, followed by the fashion show and the simple delight one inevitably takes in a lovely new object to call one's own. It's a celebration of beauty that is often maligned and trivialized by intellectuals and cultural critics (the professional world wherein I spend much of my life).

But such a vision is partial and denies a basic human pleasure that is real and life affirming. The clothes a person arrays one's body with do *matter*, just as surely as the body beneath does. I see the three of us in that room practicing the Sacrament of Beauty—giving and receiving while united in a common purpose—and feeling the force of gratitude and grace, knowing we are in the presence of love and therefore God. And all of this was on account of a few new clothes.

THE SACRAMENT OF NAMING

The challenge of creating beautiful surroundings in my mother's sickroom proved to be more difficult than that of beautifying her body, but we did our best. Both of my sisters and I had brought in framed photographs of our family to arrange around the room. Mom enjoyed looking at the pictures of her grandchildren, of our individual families, and of all of us together, which had been taken at celebratory occasions. The latter, in particular, held her interest, since she would look at each face, name each person, and then remark on how beautiful or handsome he or she looked. This exercise served a practical purpose, to aid her failing memory, and also a spiritual one—to remind her that many people loved her and, even

though they could not be present, they were thinking of and praying for her.

These photographs took up a good deal of surface space in the room, but most of the hospital staff seemed not to mind, with several showing an interest in the people in the pictures, remarking on them and asking questions about their identities. This, however, was not the case with everyone. Three days after my arrival, a night nurse came in and became agitated over the photos, so much so that she began picking them up off the counter, tray, and shelving, stacking them on top of one another noisily, and handing them to me. "I've been working here eleven years," she clucked, "and I know what happens to things such as this. They fall on the floor, the glass breaks and goes everywhere, and I have to clean it up. Put 'em away!"

I was too stunned to respond to her unkindness and disrespect other than to dutifully place the pictures in some bags I had in the room where they would be out of the woman's (and my mother's) sight. Truth be told, Mom, in her state of pain, anxiety, and inattentiveness, seemed not to notice when they were missing. But the following evening, when that nurse did not return—and instead a kindly, young, male nurse came on duty—I took them back out of the bags and put them around the room again. My mother seemed delighted to see them (almost as if she had not seen them before), and we resumed the ritual practice of taking them in hand, identifying her loved ones, and remarking on their appearance. This Sacrament of Naming restored calm to my agitated mother, enabling her to focus on something beyond her own pain and predicament. I would not have anticipated that an object as ordinary as a photograph would provide such a healing balm.

THE RITUAL OF READING

Another ritual my mother enjoyed was one we referred to as the "Reading of the Cards." Mom received a number of get-well cards from family members and friends, and we arranged them around the room and on her tray so she might see and be cheered by them. Early on, in one of her difficult moments—when Mom's painkiller had worn off and she had to wait half an hour for another dose—I tried to distract her by reading each of the cards, showing her the pictures, and reading the names of each sender. This proved a delightful distraction and seemed to diminish her pain as well as her anxiety. Some of the cards were humorous, and it struck me as both sad and sweet that she would laugh at the same joke each time I read it as if she hadn't heard it before. I also felt a pang at the role reversal that was becoming familiar ritual by now—I was reading to my mother as I once did to my children, and she seemed glad and willing to assume this new role of childlike dependency.

THE SACRAMENT OF DIRTY DANCING

Our efforts to lift my mother's spirits through these accidental rituals brought joy, in glimpses. ("Beauty visits—it does not linger," as John O'Donohue reminds us.) Despite our hopes that our mother would recover, her health was not improving. The surgeons successfully replaced her broken hip, but ahead lay a long road of difficult and painful physical therapy.

My mother had never been a very good patient, and I suspect her pain threshold was not very high. Ten years ago, when she was much stronger, she underwent hip replacement and found the therapy afterward pure agony—so much so that the therapists on staff at the hospital (who are generally patient

people) took the unusual step of sending her home and letting her do her exercises with a privately hired, in-home therapist. Such a step was not possible now. Our mother was wheelchair bound—completely unable to care for herself in the most basic ways—and she needed to try to recover the strength and stamina to do the therapy. But she seemed to have no will for the task. Her efforts at physical therapy were feeble at best. During one particular session, we watched helplessly as the therapist assisted her in walking with her walker and our mother cried, “Help me, help me, help me!” piteously during the three minutes it took them to get around the room.

Though there were no major setbacks during this *kairos* period, each day brought a new struggle, a new symptom, and a quiet sign that she was not getting well. Because she was so immobile, she began to develop other symptoms, including the beginnings of bed sores and water retention. In addition, though she no longer needed a ventilator, she was still suffering from the effects of acute COPD, which contributed considerably to her weakness and vulnerability. These physical ailments were further compounded by the severe anxiety she was suffering, which no amount of antianxiety drugs seemed to allay.

Given all of this, we measured success by the degree to which we were able to help her forget about her pain, and the only way to do this for an extended period was to screen a movie on a portable DVD player and watch it with her. Television proved a poor distraction—since Mom had no use for it when she was well, why would she take to it when she wasn’t? But she did love movies and, in particular, she loved to watch a handful of her favorites over and over again. These included *Moonstruck*, *My Cousin Vinnie*, *Walk the Line* and, most beloved of all, *Dirty Dancing*.

My sisters and I would take turns sitting and watching these with her, and one particular afternoon my turn had come round and the movie of choice was *Dirty Dancing*. As in most things, my taste in movies was very different from my mother’s, and this particular film was one I had not seen. Though it was something I would never have chosen to watch on my own, I felt happy and honored to sit beside her and see her favorite film for the first time. As the first scenes opened and the plot unfolded, I was drawn into the story, and the fact that it was about a young girl’s rite of passage and independence from her mother and family struck me as poignant. The character of “Baby,” the heroine, was headstrong and difficult—not unlike myself at her age. I was struck by the beauty of the actors—especially the young Patrick Swayze, who had died just a few months earlier. Here in this film he was young, athletic, and deeply handsome—so different from the cancer-ravaged man in the news so recently. I found myself mourning his loss, even as I felt the joy of his performance. This made an already emotional situation much more so—and then there was the dancing. Dance is always an expression of the inexpressible and is, therefore, a deeply moving art. The dance numbers in the film were passionate, beautiful pantomimes of the powerful emotions the characters were not able to articulate. I felt my eyes tearing up repeatedly at scenes that might seem ordinary enough, but in my emotionally raw and vulnerable state, they unfolded as achingly indicative of the pleasure and pain of life.

While I was wrestling with my emotions, trying to keep them in check, my mother was, too. At one point, midway through the film, when it seems as if Baby and the young man she loves will never get together, she turned to me and asked, in an agitated voice, “I wonder what’s going to happen?” I was

amazed. This is a film my mother had seen scores—perhaps hundreds—of times, and she had forgotten the ending. Her confusion and forgetfulness were clearly getting worse rather than better. The question rendered me speechless, until I murmured some words meant to comfort her, “I’m not sure, Mom. Let’s watch and see.” We both turned back to the film to witness a scene where Baby sits alone crying over her predicament. In response to the sight and sound of her tears, my mother, too, began wailing. At first her words were incomprehensible, but as she repeated them, over and over, I heard her say: “I miss my friend! I miss my Gene!” Then it became clear to me and to my sister Charlene, who had come into the room, that she was mourning her longtime friend and partner who had died the year before. My sister had helped her through a year of this loud, demonstrative grieving—it was, in fact, one of the catalysts that had provoked an increase in her drinking and led to her return to rehab. And now, after all of that supposed time and healing, she was back again in this place of sorrow. We allowed her to cry for a bit, to vent her feelings, and then tried and succeeded in pulling her attention back to the film. The plot unfolded, leading to the final, joyful dance, performed to the song “The Time of Your Life,” wherein the lovers lay claim to each other, her parents face the reality that she is grown up, and the ending promises a lifetime of love and happiness for the pair.

At the end of the film, I was utterly exhausted, and so was Mom. She asked to be moved from her chair to her bed and promptly went to sleep. I envied her that peace—and even her forgetfulness—for I knew she would awaken unperturbed by the film and the deep well of emotion it had opened up inside her. But I would not forget. This is what beauty does to us—the beauty of the story, the music, the dance, the human

body, and the human face—all of these remind us of the gift of art we give to one another to lift our minds and hearts, to open our eyes and ears, to enable us to perceive the beauty that lies in our own being, our relationships to one another, and our world. And this perception, beautiful as it may be, breaks us open and fills us with a longing we can’t quite name.

“Late have I loved you, / Beauty so old and so new. / Late have I loved you.” These words of St. Augustine describe the universal human search for God and the way in which beauty can lead us in the direction of the holy. In the six days of *kairos* in my mother’s room, we four women were led by beauty to places we would not have gone otherwise. A few months after my mother’s passing, one sacrament led to another (they are “seven times seventy,” as Andre Dubus reminds us), and I wrote a poem in attempt to capture the complex, beautiful paradox of these days I spent with my mother in pursuit of beauty. It helps me to remember—and when my memory fails, as it inevitably will, I hope the poem will continue to speak what those days taught me.

Watching Dirty Dancing with My Mother

in the sad sleep of the nursing home,
we are both surprised by beauty alone,

by Baby's newfound ecstasy,
the passion of young Patrick Swayze

as he moves her across the bare wood,
lifts her high toward the old god of girlhood

and sets her down, more sure of her charm
each step beyond his circling arms.

Nothing can soothe her father's frown
seeing his daughter as someone now,

no more the child she cannot stay.
Patrick, too, has passed away.

None of us the beauty we used to be,
my mother, those dancers, me.³

Chapter 4

THE SACRAMENT OF HUMOR

*The laughter of the universe is God's delight. It is the universal
Easter laughter.*

—Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God*

It may seem strange to identify humor, along with its twin sister, laughter, as sacraments. After all, the practice of the sacraments is a serious enterprise. We take Communion in reverence, mindful of Christ's sacrifice; we go to Confession humbled by our brokenness; we go to Baptisms and Confirmations properly awed by the welcoming of a soul made new in Christ and renewed by the Holy Spirit; we attend weddings and ordinations well aware of the powerful nature of the binding vows the participants will take before God and ourselves; and we witness Last Rites in an hour of darkness as death approaches. None of these solemn sacraments seems to have much in common with humor.