Introduction
In a Field of Tall Grass

I am not sure if I can establish a direct correlation between the two events, but about the time that my second-grade teacher, Sister Anna Maria, told my classmates and me the story about how a bull once charged her father—by her account the most famous matador in all of Spain—and, with one flick of the bull's horns, launched him into the air and completely out of the stadium, where he landed on his feet unscathed, I began to think that maybe I could be a superhero, not unlike Superman. At my insistence, my mother one day sewed a beach towel onto a tee shirt of mine on which I had already painted an *S* with a colored marker. So you might imagine how amazingly fantastic I looked that Saturday morning, when I put on my superhero outfit and ran into the street, confident that no one would recognize me—as was the case with the real Superman—without my thick glasses on.

What prompted Sister Anna Maria to tell us that story about her father the bullfighter, I'll never know, but she was at the time preparing us for our First Holy Communion, and she was, in fact, telling us all sorts of impossible stories that captivated us and kept us cooing and well behaved. A virgin from a Podunk Palestinian town gave birth to the Son of God, the boy King. Choirs of angels serenaded shepherds, and Magi from the east came bearing gifts. Sister told us things about Jesus that we second graders could scarcely imagine but tried to anyway: He walked on water, she told us. You don't say. He fed thousands with a few loaves of bread and a couple fish. Love it. One day, she told us, Jesus extracted a legion of demons from one tortured, banished soul who lived alone among the tombs (you can imagine how much we all loved *that* story—including Sister) and cast them all in a flock of swine that then proceeded to stampede off a cliff—much to the amazement of

the crowd and to the horror of the swineherd. She told us about the Last Supper, of course, and what followed—a sad story we knew by the somber tone of Sister's voice in its retelling: his numbing anguish in the dark garden; the betrayal and denials and desertion of all his friends and family save a loyal few, his suffering and death on a cross, his words of mercy piercing the thick darkness forever. I remember walking the three miles home from school around that time and seeing, I thought, in a field of tall grass near the fire station, Jesus looking at me. I thought I saw him once in the meat section of Romley's Market, across the street from the fire station. And once more peeking from behind a tree near the school's incinerator. Everywhere I turned, it seemed, I was seeing Jesus, as I imagined him, smiling, relieved.

I can't speak for my classmates, but Sister had me eating out of her hand with those stories of Jesus. She put me there in the boat on the raucous sea, in the hungry crowd on that high plain at dusk. She had me hiding in the graveyard that day near Gennesaret, too afraid of that man in chains to venture out. She had me in the upper room on that Holy Thursday and later in the garden and then on Golgotha. I was there at the foot of the Cross looking up as Jesus looked down. At me. And of course I was there at his tomb—got there earlier than anyone else—to see those brawny, giggling angels pushing the huge stone away from its entrance as if it had been made of Styrofoam, to see Jesus walking out, smiling, stretching his arms as one who had awakened from a long, deep slumber, his face magnificent and refreshed in the dawning light. I think now it must have been in second grade, while I sat enraptured by a great storyteller with a heavy Barcelonan accent, that I consciously began to believe in Jesus Christ and began to believe that it was possible to do great things, impossible things, noble and generous and courageous things, and that on my way to imagining myself as Christlike, I could, intermediately, see myself as Superman.

Perhaps this is how the gift of faith is effectively given to us human beings: first comes our ability, and our willingness, to

imagine—to see with a painter's eye, to hear with a poet's ear, to smell and taste with an epicurean nose and palate, to touch with the fingers of a clay potter the created world—and to so be moved by the encounter that we can, in an instant, actually experience ourselves slipping into a dimension we never before knew existed, where time and space evaporate into an eternal now and here, where, in what we might call a mystical moment—think, for instance, of a stroll at sunset, the cradling of a newborn, a lover's kiss, the letting go of a grudge, or, dare we dream, a Chicago Cub's World Series championship—in that eternal here and now, the impossible becomes possible, the lines of division become porous and unsustainable, and we become, perhaps for only an instant, the people we always hoped we could be.

In *that* soil of undying, heart-thumping hope, I think, the seed of faith is planted. Perhaps this explains the encounter Mary had with the angel Gabriel at the annunciation. Mary's first reaction to the angel's request was a skeptical one. ("How can this be?" the virgin girl said. Today, she might have said, "Say *what*?") She could, though, with a little divine prompting, imagine for herself that, as highly improbable a virgin birth was, nothing was impossible for God. She could, in her own flexible mind and heart, see it happening. And so she said yes. Thus was established, at least in Matthew and Luke, at the outset, a leitmotif that will recur over and over in all the gospel accounts: Jesus confronting a skeptical, sometimes jaundiced world, a people too tired, too defeated, too cynical, too blind or unfocused or distracted to believe that the impossible was possible. Jesus, in short, came to teach us adults how to imagine once again and to see, in this opening wide of the senses of our souls, the beginning of our salvation.

This might help to explain why Jesus told so many stories (and why I love hearing them over and over) and why he said that, so far as he was concerned, the only way any of us adults can ever hope to enter the reign of God is to somehow reclaim our childlike wonder and awe at life—that is, our ability to imagine.

Because isn't it true that every day each of us wakes up to a story that we have titled "My Life" and that, beginning with our birth (or—why not?—our conception), each of our lives has been marked by a narrative arc extending from here to eternity, and that, on our good days, enjoys a seemingly infinite number of plot twists, and is filled with fascinating characters and settings, conflicts and resolutions, tensions and a denouements, which will in the end (as St. Paul wrote to the church of Corinth), dazzle us to no end and leave us breathless?

Every day, we awake to a world of possibility, armed only with our wits, imagination, and faith that remind us, when we most need to be reminded, that what was begun in us so long ago will be brought to completion. Surely this is a happy ending if there ever was one. These holy weapons in the hands of believers can defeat the deepest darkness and steel our spines for those moments when we embark on that daunting journey into the depths of our soul (a place D. H. Lawrence called "the deep vast forest") where the Deceiver comes stalking and tries to sell us the Great Lie: that we have no future, that hope is childish, and that we are alone. With faith and imagination, we become resilient instruments of hope in the hand of God. This makes me think of a conversation a priest friend of mine had with a young woman once. "Father," she said, "You know what kind of woman I want to be?"

"Tell me," he said.

"I want," she said, "to be the kind of woman who, when she gets up out of bed in the morning and her feet hit the ground, she hears the devil say, 'O, crap, she's up.'"

Imagine a bullfighter being tossed out of an arena by a bull's charge and the flick of his horns, and imagine him landing on his feet safe and sound. I suppose, in our universe, tethered to our particular laws of physics, this imagining is nothing more than fanciful and entertaining, a campfire tale. But imagine another universe in the multiverse (which, in fact, many theoretical physicists

are doing—imaginatively—this very moment) where the laws of physics are more accommodating, and there you have it.

I remember coming home from school that day in second grade and telling my older brothers about that story, and they got a good laugh out of it, which angered me because they seemed to be implying that Sister Anna Maria wasn't telling the truth. Perhaps her story unwittingly served the Truth in a different way; perhaps the story's purpose was intentionally hidden from me back then and was, in its own way, a shovel turning and loosening the soil of my imagination. Maybe Sister Anna Maria was giving me permission—the way the angel did for Mary—to believe that nothing is impossible with God. And to see now the crucial role the human imagination plays in the calculus of faith. Without it, faith becomes staid, predictable, and safe. With it, faith becomes muscular, defiant, surprising.

I'm reminded now of a seventeen-year-old Chicago boy I knew years ago whose faith, I was to discover, was sinewy and taut. One day, in a small Irish village, he gave a baseball cap—his treasured, smelly, tattered Notre Dame baseball cap—to a wee Irish lad who had a scar on his face, the remnant of a swipe his drunk father had taken at him years before with a box cutter. The older boy could have more easily given up his left lung, I suspect, but somehow it became evident—tangibly and hauntingly—that what was being asked of him was something more important than a lung. Somewhere deep inside him, he must have heard a voice telling him, *Love that little boy the best way you know how*. He hemmed and hawed interiorly. His brow furrowed at the thought. And then, on a grey morning, he placed his baseball cap on the boy's head—a boy who had been coveting that cap for ten straight days—shook his hand, and left. I watched this all from my rearview mirror. It was a little death—a letting go—playing out under the klieg lights of hope. Even now, still, I hear angels sing.

At this moment, the Cubs are playing the Houston Astros at Wrigley Field. Both teams are in the cellars of their respective

divisions. I imagine that Chicago kid I knew is there. He'd be about thirty years old now. Perhaps he's married and has a few kids of his own by now. I see him rooting for his beloved Cubs in the way Cub fans do—that is, with a resilient and bruised heart. Whether he's bought a replacement cap I don't know. But what I believe is this: every so often, that fellow thinks of that Irish boy with a scar on his face wearing his baseball cap. And somewhere in Ireland, I hope, is that grown-up boy who has that cap still and who every so often thinks of that American kid who did what he thought was impossible: that one day he reached across a great divide and touched a scar, healing a deeper wound. Every so often I imagine they are thinking of each other at exactly the same moment. And that moment must surely be what heaven is like.

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I'm thinking about heaven more these days. I guess I shouldn't be surprised. I've turned fifty—an age those of us over fifty refer to as "the new thirty." But to the younger set, I've already crossed some unbridgeable river. I'm closer to one eternity—the one inaugurated by my death—than to the other one that ended with my birth. So time, for me, as the Steve Miller song goes, "keeps on slippin', slippin', slippin' into the future." And I am mostly trying to hold on. Perhaps this explains my interest these days in Einstein's special theory of relativity that proves, among other things, that time is, in fact, flexible. I want to slow time down and *sacar el jugo* ("to squeeze the juice" as they say in Mexico) out of life. I want to slip, slip, slip into the *now*, the place that exists somewhere between my cells and soul, a kind of Neverland, where I depart from every morning and return to every night. I am, always, the boy in a man's body.

I'll admit it: I'm not one of those who pine for heaven. I am—sadly or happily, it really depends on the day—tethered to life on earth. For sure, some days I anticipate the moment when I see God face-to-face with the excitement my mother had once when we

were driving home from Mass. Having gotten her terminal cancer diagnosis a few months before, she knew her days on earth were numbered. Her impending death didn't seem to bother her, though, and this intrigued me more than it distressed me. (How can you *not* be afraid of dying, I sometimes said to her silently. I was twenty-six years old at the time and still petrified of my own demise.) "Sometimes," she told me as she gripped the steering wheel with her tiny hands and then loosened them, "I think, I get to see your father and my mom and dad and Baby James and . . ." She stopped talking and I looked over; she seemed to be looking not *at* something far away but deep *into* something. "I . . . I . . . sometimes, I can't wait to get to heaven," she said.

I want *that* kind of faith, the kind that replaces sorrow with hope. The kind that loosens the tight grip we too often have on life. The kind that believes in something more sustaining than oxygen and earth. I suppose I do have a bit of that faith, but it always seems fragile and flighty to me. I seem to need to hold onto something tangible. So I often console myself with the words that Jesus once said to his disciples, about how a little faith ("the size of a mustard seed," he proffered) can do impossible things. With a little faith, I can believe that my life now is a lovely thing—good work and good friends, a health plan and a warm bed, a fierce tribe of a family and shared memories, books and films and Oregon wine and Irish ballads—an embarrassment of riches. But I can also—with a smidgen of faith—believe that something better awaits. "Eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love him," St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, paraphrasing the poet-prophet Isaiah. The Isaiah text said at the end, "for those who *wait for* him." There's the rub. Love (and thus faith, necessarily) demands patience and trust, two virtues I often find myself in short supply of as I grow older. But I know I *want* to trust God. I want to loosen my grip and let go. And I know that this desire—a gift from God as valuable as

faith, I think—suffices for now. Perhaps this holy desire—the soul panging for God—is what makes us most human.

On warm October days such as today I sometimes look down from my third-floor office window and see students tossing a Frisbee around or playing bocce ball in the late afternoon. The mild and soft sunlight casts them always in a most favorable light. And I'll admit, I can become wistful, even nostalgic, in those moments. Mostly, though, I enjoy watching them enjoying their youth. I'm thinking now of Walt Whitman's poem "Youth, Day, Old Age and Night":

> Youth, large, lusty, loving—youth full of grace, force, fascination,
> Do you know that Old Age may come after you with equal grace, force, fascination?
> Day full-blown and splendid-day of the immense sun, action, ambition, laughter,
> The Night follows close with millions of suns, and sleep and restoring darkness.

Whitman got it right. The line that seemingly separates young from old, day from night, is an illusion. A line, after all, has no width.

In the night, I do not dream of being young. In my dreams I'm always young. I fly and breathe underwater in my dreams. In my dreams I take in the world with the visual acuity of a tomcat, the ears of a greater wax moth (who, after all, has to contend with a bat's finely tuned echolocation tracking device), and a bloodhound's nose. I leap as does a child in my dreams and touch things with a spider's nimble, delicate tarsal claw. Old Satan, I think now, wouldn't stand a chance on this planet if we approached our waking hours with the same childlike verve and imagination that we so easily employ when we are asleep. *O, crap, she's up*, indeed.

Isn't this what the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation—and from this the Catholic understanding of sacraments—wants us to

do? Namely, to look more carefully at this world of ours and see treasures buried in plain sight. To place our hands to the earth and feel its thumping, living pulse. To listen for God's voice in the rustling breeze, the child's sob, the cheering throng, the lapping wave. To taste God on wet lips, in a sip of Oregon Pinot Noir, and in salty air. And to smell the aroma of God in a nose-pressed baguette. God in the flesh and bone and blood, telling us, showing us, that he has never left us. Sacraments point us toward these bridges that span the infinite divide between heaven and earth, these swinging bridges on which angels skip with news too important for our human happiness to be kept secret: God is with us.

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Sacraments are stories that pinch the human mind awake. What was it the Catholic writer Annie Dillard said about us when we go to Mass? We shouldn't be wearing those soft, frilly hats. No fedoras at Eucharist. "We should all be wearing crash helmets," she said. "Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return." Part of me cowers at the thought. I wish not to awaken an angry God or give him any reason to think that I'm up for anything remotely dangerous. I recoil at discomfort generally and rather like my wide-screen television.

But part of me wants to be taken to a place from which I can never return. This impulse—which has to be holy, because it's both thrilling and terrifying to consider—must be evidence of the Holy Spirit at work in the world, this holy fire, lit under our behinds that gets us up and moving again—a flame that flickers the darkness away. Faith means going to dark, unfamiliar places—in our minds and hearts, for sure, but also in our souls. And nothing, it seems to me, can be more fraught with danger than that adventure. It's a high-wire act without a safety net. It's God's call of Abram who would become Abraham: *Lech-lecha!* Get up and go! *Where?* we

might ask. Don't ask. Just go. And so the story of our faith began, not with Adam and Eve, but with Abram, who would become Abraham, who on one ordinary day heard the Lord say to him, essentially, don't worry about anything. Just get up and go with me on a journey, a journey into the lovely dark where sometimes even God seems to disappear. What a wild ride this is for us. The only one we can hold onto is the very one who is telling us to let go.

Another memory of my second-grade teacher, Sister Anna Maria, comes to mind now. It is afternoon recess, and Sister has commandeered one of the bikes from the bike rack. She is, to the squealing delight of her young charges, riding it all over the playground, darting in and out of kickball and softball games, her long, black woolen habit blowing in the wind. Several of the older sisters, their hands tucked primly within the outer folds of their habits, appear unamused. I am dumbfounded. I am seeing something wholly unexpected bordering on the preposterous. I am seeing, though I couldn't have put it in these words, an untethered soul. I had no idea how the story unfolding that afternoon on the playground was going to end. But I was riveted by the danger of it all. I still am.

1. Baptism

When it's sin versus grace, grace wins hands down. All sin can do is threaten us with death, and that's the end of it. Grace, because God is putting everything together again through the Messiah, invites us into life—a life that goes on and on and on, world without end.

So what do we do? Keep on sinning so God can keep on forgiving? I should hope not! If we've left the country where sin is sovereign, how can we still live in our old house there? Or didn't you realize we packed up and left there for good? That is what happened in baptism. When we went under the water, we left the old country of sin behind; when we came up out of the water, we entered into the new country of grace—a new life in a new land!

That's what baptism into the life of Jesus means. When we are lowered into the water, it is like the burial of Jesus; when we are raised up out of the water, it is like the resurrection of Jesus. Each of us is raised into a light-filled world by our Father so that we can see where we're going in our new grace-sovereign country.

Could it be any clearer? Our old way of life was nailed to the cross with Christ, a decisive end to that sin-miserable life—no longer at sin's every beck and call! What we believe is this: If we get included in Christ's sin-conquering death, we also get included in his life-saving resurrection. We know that when Jesus was raised from the dead it was a signal of the end of death-as-the-end. Never again will death have the last word. When Jesus died, he took sin down with him, but alive he brings God down to us. From now on, think of it this way: Sin speaks a dead language that means nothing to you; God speaks your mother tongue, and you hang on every word. You are dead to sin and alive to God. That's what Jesus did.

Romans 5:21–6:11

Open Wounds

Until relatively recently—say, within the last ten years—it always struck me as odd, and a little unsettling, that when the resurrected Jesus appeared to his disciples, he still bore the wounds of the cross. Death had not defeated him, and yet his wounds remained, gaping and exposed. This never made sense to me. Had *I* been in charge, I would have made sure those wounds had healed. The encounter Thomas (and others, I suppose) had with the wounds of Christ, then, must have been catechetically instructive to the early followers of Jesus and the early Church, and must be for all of us baptized Christians now. By Jesus' wounds we were (and still are) healed. There's no way around those wounds. They seem to want to say something crucial about who we are as human beings and about the redemptive power of the risen, wounded Christ. The sacrament of Baptism—in the days of our ancestors we adults would have taken off all of our clothes and let the priest submerge us into the water—becomes a visible act of surrender, of capitulation to God's complete self-gift of love. Baptism is a sacrament of Christ's wounds that heal, and of the joy and freedom and hope they promise. It is the shadow of the Cross touching the edge of the empty tomb. It is letting go of our old, tired, self-absorbed, anxious, wounded selves and claiming a new identity in Christ, one no longer beholden to fear, shame, and regret. With baptism, we join the Church—a ragtag, astonished, and grateful band of wounded believers—who no longer sees our wounds as something to hide.

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Around fifteen years ago I saw, for the first time, a man without a nose. Where his nose should have been was a gaping, triangular cavity, a smooth opening to a tiny cave. He was drinking a beer alone at the far end of a dank Portland bar. He wore his thinning gray hair in a neat ponytail that fell to his shoulder blades. His long shirt sleeves were rolled up, exposing a tattoo on his drinking arm. The bartender stood cross-armed at the other end, watching

a game on the television bolted to the far wall. From across the bar I pretended to look at a point between them, but I couldn't help stealing looks at the man's hole. What an awful thing, I thought, to lose your nose. Without a prosthetic, he appeared reptilian.

Perhaps this explains in part why a few years ago that Taliban husband pinned his fleeing eighteen-year-old Afghani wife down and cut off her nose and ears. He hoped, I suspect, that he could rob her of her humanity. More than any other appendage, the nose seems to make us recognizably human. The ancients understood the symbolic power of the nose. That virtually every Egyptian statue in antiquity is missing its nose, for instance, is no coincidence. Marauding armies chiseled off those noses to send a message to the defeated: your gods can't save you. What divine power those statues exuded was cut off at the nose.

At the time of my encounter with the nose-less man, I was a young Catholic priest working in parish a few blocks away. The idle and addled parked their bikes and shopping carts in our church lobby, drank our strong coffee, and ate our day-old donuts. Many slumbered rainy mornings away curled up in the dry pews of the church, their arms tucked snugly between their legs. At the moment of consecration at the daily noon Mass, the Sanctus bells would jingle and the groggy would hoist their aching heads; watch me lift the host, then the chalice; and then fall back asleep. One time a Native American fellow the size of a refrigerator interrupted me while I was preaching. He stumbled to the steps of the sanctuary, fell to his knees, stretched his arms out, and yelled, "Father, am I going to hell?" I stopped Mass, went to him, leaned down, and whispered that no, he was not going to hell. He thanked me and returned to his pew.

In other words, back then I lived with, around, and beside wildly broken people, this loose confederacy of stragglers: a few armless, a couple legless, and others booze-pickled and brain-muddled, an unanchored throng of mostly loveable misfits, all of their bodies in one way or another saying, "Look at me. Please." They

knew, the way a wounded child knows subconsciously, that if they could get you to look at them for a few seconds, you would have to help them. You couldn't look at someone suffering and just walk away. Or if you could, then there must be something wrong with you.

I'm beginning to think there *was* something wrong with me back then. You can, I think, walk away without actually walking away. While sitting in the bar that afternoon, I couldn't see beyond that man's hole. He seemed a nice enough fellow. At one point I stood beside him and ordered another beer. I nodded at him. He nodded back and took a swig. I peeked at him. I was disturbed by his hole in a way I had never been disturbed before. It tugged at me, dared me not to look away. Later, the man looked into the mirror behind the bar and caught me staring.

Thinking of that man without a nose now, I wonder: would it have hurt if, while standing next to him for that brief moment, I had said something such as, "Excuse me, I noticed you don't have a nose. Can I ask what happened?" Why didn't I? Why didn't I introduce myself, ask his name, and buy him another beer? I don't think he would have minded. But then again, he might have. He might have told me to mind my own business and get out of his face. But I'll never know. I finished my beer, paid my tab, and left the bar.

Cancer. Cocaine. A knife fight. A bullet. A botched operation. A dog bite. I'll never know how the man lost his nose. Or how he felt about losing his nose. Or if he actually had a prosthetic but took it off because it chafed and, besides, he was in the company of people who knew him and loved him. I'll never know if he was a famous poet or a retired longshoreman. A convict or a saint. Or all of the above. I'll never know his story. Instead, I did the math: I put two and two together—gray ponytail plus tattoo plus near-empty bar plus hole in the middle of a face equals damaged goods—and steered clear of the man. There I was, a young priest *trained* to embrace such encounters ("Christ in distressing disguise," Mother

Teresa of Calcutta put it once) with soft eyes that could bridge distances, which said, in so many words, *Your wound does not frighten me.* Instead I left the bar feeling every bit the coward.

I recall now an encounter I had as a five- or six-year-old boy while at my town's swimming pool. A man without a leg sat on the edge of the deep end of the pool that hot summer afternoon and splashed his body with cool, chlorinated water. While he stirred the water with his good leg, his stump of cinched flesh which extended three or four inches from his swimming trunks, sat idle on the pool's concrete lip. I swam over and waded a few feet away.

"Can I touch your leg?" I said, pointing at his stump.

"No," he said, in a tone that seemed to suggest he might let me later. I said okay and swam away. Where was that boy when I needed him years later at that bar? This was not a rude or impolite boy but the boy who thought that a fleshy stump, far from being horrifying, pitiful, or sad, was yet one more fascinating encounter in a world brimming with intrigue, that boy for whom a stump was touch-worthy. I fear that boy sized me up a long time ago—noticed, sadly, how risk-averse I had become to broken people, how I steered clear of alluringly dark places instead of running toward them as I once had—grew weary of me and of my duplicity, decided he had had enough, packed up, and moved away. I'm not sure exactly what I did when I got home to the rectory later that night. I probably ate dinner, prayed for the man without a nose and for all the broken people I had seen that day, and went to bed, ready to meet them again the next day on my terms. I had gotten used to them without having to actually join their ranks. I thought I loved them, but how can you really love someone unless you're willing to bleed with him?

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Perhaps it was karmic payback that a year or so after my encounter (or my un-encounter) with that man with a hole in his face, I looked into the mirror and saw that some disease had struck

my forehead overnight, along with the edges of my nostrils and my upper cheeks, leaving them bumpy, reddened, scabbed, and painfully dry. I had no idea what was going on. It seems oddly hysterical to say it now, but I thought I was dying. I stared at myself in the mirror again and recoiled at my reflection. I looked hideous, leprous. Walking to work that day—I was now a Catholic high school English teacher on the edge of Chicago's Northside—I wouldn't have minded being invisible. I didn't want anyone to see how ugly I had become and how ugly I felt.

During the first few days of my affliction no one said anything. Maybe my ailment wasn't so bad, I thought. When no one was looking, I picked at the sores, hoping they would disappear. I scrubbed the infected patches with industrial-strength soap twice a day, coated my face with Noxzema skin lotion every night, and prayed that when I awoke I would be healed. But every morning, before lifting my body out of bed, I fingered my face gingerly for the telltale bumps and found them.

I could tell instantly when one of my students noticed my off-putting skin disease; when a colleague took his eyes off mine for a millisecond and glanced at my blotchy forehead; or when a parent scanned my nose, my cheeks, or the patch of infected skin below my left eye. I knew what they were thinking: *This fellow is unclean.* One day a freshman boy looked at me queerly, but not unkindly, and said, "What's going on with your skin?" I still had no idea, so I said something lame such as, "Oh, it's just a little skin irritation." A few minutes later I locked myself in the nearest bathroom, stared once more into the mirror, and nearly cried.

I began skipping dinners with my brother priests. I breakfasted alone and lunched in my office. My attitude toward overhead fluorescent lighting, which cast me—at least to myself—as a meth addict, turned despondent. I combed my hair down instead of over and kept my head down. I saw clean—milky-white or tanned—unblemished skin as a private country club to which I had once belonged.