
L I N D S E Y C R I T T E N D E N

The Water Will Hold You: A Daughter at Prayer

I KNEW nothing of prayer when, as a child, I watched my mother disappear. Sitting next to me on a wooden pew in St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, she leaned forward to pull down the prayer bench, slip onto her knees, press her palms together, and bow her head. Her wool dress and stockings, her black patent-leather purse upright and open next to her in case she needed to reach for a pressed handkerchief, her shoes and hair and arms all remained recognizably *Mommy*, but with her face hidden—she didn't rest her head against her hands as much as *in* them, to shut out everything else—she became other. No longer mother or wife or Sunday school teacher, but her *self*, gone somewhere else, somewhere that—it seemed—had nothing to do with me.

She went there again, years later, when she was upset and I tried to comfort her. Weeping in a deck chair, she pushed my arms away and clutched her hands to her chest when I bent to hug her. She and my father had argued, I recall; I don't remember the specifics, but their disagreement would have played the recurring tape loop I'd heard my whole life—she was oversensitive and he was callous, she was a spoiled little girl and he an unfeeling boor. She wanted, now, to be alone. "Leave me be," she said, and hunched further into herself.

She went there, too, the summer she was dying, as we both stood in the shallow end of my parents' swimming pool and she mentioned how, sick with tuberculosis at age nineteen, she'd been sent to a chiropractor by my grandmother. "My God," I said. "Why?"

"Oh, I've told you that before," she replied, splashing water with her hands.

"No, Mom, you haven't. And whenever you say you've told me something before, it's something you never have."

"Oh." She leaned back on the steps and kicked her legs. "Aren't you funny?"

She distrusted hovering concern, loathed wringing hands. The worst word, I learned early on, wasn't a four-letter curse or the taking of the Lord's name in vain (whatever that meant). No, the word that our household, under her domain, did not allow, was *pity*. My mother didn't want any, and—she'd announce, in case you had any doubt—she wouldn't be handing any out, either.