

Father-Mother God

Every night, after my mother kisses me good night, after the lights go dark, I slide from my bed to the rough carpeted floor, and I kneel there, palms pressed tightly together, leaning my forehead into the hard lumps of the chenille bedspread. This is how praying children look in my Little Golden books, silent and still, eyes closed and earnest. In my family, we say grace at dinner most nights, but no one comes at bedtime to teach me how to pray, alone, by myself.

But I do want to pray. It looks like it's important.

I see children praying on TV—in *Davey and Goliath* or in old movies—and in the Sunday comics—*Family Circus* or *Dennis the Menace*. I watch what those plucky kids do when times get tough and they really, really need divine intervention. They fall to their knees. By their beds. Solemn and devout.

I am a good mimic. I can do the same thing.

My mother hung a picture on my bedroom wall. “Grandma Betty gave this to your sister. She’s too old for it now. You can have it.” Blue and green, laminated on a hard board, it is a prayer bordered in cobalt. Behind the prayer, a peaceful scene: a field at sunset, a stream, a willow tree, birds in the sky fading with the day. I am old enough to read, so I read it every day. When I kneel beside my bed in the dark, chenille hard against my head, this is what I say:

Father-mother God, loving me, guard me when I sleep. Guide my little feet up to Thee. —Mary Baker Eddy. When I ask who Mary Baker Eddy is, my father just snorts. “Oh, her. Never mind about her.”

No one else in my family kneels down at night to pray. I wonder about that, but how could I know how it is for them, how it was for them? How it was for my mother, whose father went to church only for funerals and weddings, whose mother had fled fast from the dour Finnish Lutheranism of her own childhood. Or how it was for my father, his spine twisted by the

tuberculosis that his Christian Science parents tried to imagine away. No, my parents were never going to be kneelers by the bedside.

I say the *Father-mother God, loving me* prayer anyway, night by night, using the words of the woman my father does not want me to mind about. Snow on the cedar bush outside reflects soft light on the white walls of my room. The bedspread rises above me like an iceberg. The furnace clicks on, roaring from the basement, but my room is still cold.

Father-mother love. Softer, more reliable than my parents' teeter-totter love: "You-are-so-wonderful-no-you-are-so-naughty." Stronger, safer than the hot, electric sparks of love they set off in their rage. "We fight because we love each other so much," my father said once. I did not understand what he meant. I did not understand, at all.

In the distance, in the living room, my parents' voices rise and fall. Another argument. My older sister, too old for this little prayer now, there in the middle of it, giving it back to them, louder and harder.

Guide my little feet up to Thee. Somewhere in this prayer lay a promise. It was a hand held out in the darkness. It was a gateway, opening into a wider, kinder space beyond the coldness of my square, white room.

I am in my room. The door is closed. The prayer hangs upon my wall. The carpet is real. The bumps on the bedspread are real. My hands, pressed tight, warm and moist, are real. Is God real? The shouts from the living room are louder now. So, I start again: *Father-Mother God, loving me. Guard me while I sleep. Guide my little feet up to Thee.*