

LEST LEVITATION COME UPON US

Suzette Haden Elgin

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Suzette Haden Elgin is a linguist, writer, and folk singer known both for her science fiction and fantasy novels and her tall tales and musical performances at fantasy conventions. Some of her best fiction suggests her concern with feminism in a style free of rhetorical jargon, as with this witty and, perhaps, subversive tale in which the wife of a prominent lawyer discovers to her dismay that she seems to have become a saint, miracles and all. As her miracles become gaudier and seem likely to hurt her husband's prominence, she decides something must be done about them.

If it had been only her circumstances, her own convenience, only her own *self* to be considered, Valeria thought she might in fact have been able to manage. There would have been adjustments and accommodations, but she was a woman; and, accustomed as all women are to adjustments and accommodations, she would have coped somehow. If nothing else, she could have let a tale be leaked, one bit of trivia at a time ... little note cards in a spidery hand with weak excuses on them, and the word going round of a chronic disease. Nothing fatal, and nothing ugly; but something that would have made coming by to see her a chore to avoid, while at the same time explaining why she was never seen in public anymore. And pretty soon she would have been forgotten, one of those enigmatic and eccentric Southern ladies with a decomposing corpse to protect in the cupboard ... the teenager who delivered her paper, and the elderly man who could still be hired to deliver groceries if the order was kept to just a bag or two, they would have set things down on her front porch and made hasty tracks. For fear of what they might see behind Valeria Elizabeth Carterhasty's spotless white curtains.

But it was *not* like that, as she was no longer a Carterhasty, nor could she consider her own self. She was much-married, mother of three, wife to Julian B. Cantrell, up-and-coming attorney-at-law, and consideration of self was far down the list of her priorities, somewhere below keeping the flea collars up to date on the requisite dog and pair of Siamese cats. Clearly, she was going to have to think of some way to deal with this inexplicable affliction an unknown deity had seen fit to visit upon her.

That Julian had been furious the first time it happened seemed to her entirely reasonable; after all, a lawyer does not maintain a practice at \$100,000 a year and support a family without maintaining a certain image. The elegant home, with the redwood deck. The pleasant wife with the knack for noncontroversial conversation. The matched set of well-groomed and well-behaved children, each with a hobby that might in time become a profession. Daryl, with his microscope and his white mice. Philip, with the ranks of labeled shoeboxes each containing an electronic something-or-other, and the lust for a personal computer—even without a printer—that Julian sternly refused to satisfy. "When you have earned and saved half the money for it, I'll match that with the other half, young man." That was Julian's way. And Charlotte. With Charlotte it was ballet. Charlotte had not really wanted to take up ballet ... had wanted to go into baton-twirling, actually ... but when it was explained to her that there would be a problem making that fit into Daddy's image, she had sighed, and exchanged glances with her mother, and gone dutifully into the ballet classes as requested. Whether she ever took out the wooden baton with the gold dust and the red tassel and the cheap silver cord, won at a carnival and put away in her closet, Valeria did not know and was careful not to ask.

They had been at the Far Corner, she and Julian and a Mr. and Mrs. Tabbitt from Memphis, right between the cocktails and the trip to the salad bar, and Valeria had known Julian was satisfied by the way things were going. He'd leaned back a little in his chair, and the tension in his hands that came from trying to quit smoking had relaxed a bit. The light was dim enough to make everyone look attractive, but

not so dark you couldn't see what you were eating, and the Muzak was doing "Rhapsody in Blue," when it happened. Mr. Tabbitt ... Wayne? ... she thought he had been a Wayne ... had leaned forward and peered at her, his eyebrows a little vee of intense interest, and remarked that however she achieved the effect it was surely very becoming. And when she'd asked what effect, he had said that he was talking about the way she glowed.

"Glow? Do I?" Valeria had turned to Julian and pointed out how nice it was of Mr. Tabbitt to pay her the compliment, and found him staring at her too, and all the relaxation replaced by the kind of tight-strung attention he paid to juries he wasn't sure of yet.

"It must be the light in here," he'd said slowly.

"Must be," agreed the Tabbitts, especially Mrs. Tabbitt, whose name Valeria could no longer remember.

"It would have to be," Julian added. "I wonder how they do it? They should make a fortune at it."

Valeria sat there, fiddling with her glass, wondering; and the murmurs from behind their table began to work their way through to her conscious attention. And about that time the rose petals started falling, and that was really the last straw. Julian was a patient man ordinarily, for the stress that he was under, but he took her out of there as fast as if she'd thrown up on the table, and the Tabbitts not only didn't give him their malpractice suit to handle, they were practically at a full run by the time they reached the parking lot.

Julian's main concern, after the loss of the Tabbitts, had been for the publicity.

"How the hell are we going to keep it out of the papers?" he had demanded, handing her brusquely into their Mercedes in a way that made her elbow ache and coming very close to slamming the door on her white silk skirt. She only just managed to snatch it free in the nick of time.

"Keep what out of the papers, Julian?"

"Oh, come *on*, Valeria!"

"Sweetheart, if you don't look at the road once in a while I don't see how you can drive—it can't be a good idea."

"Well, damn it, Valeria, just look at yourself! Go on—*look* at you!"

She had held her arms out in front of her, obediently, and sure enough, she did glow. Not just the rosy glow of health, or the metaphorical glow that came from the right sort of cosmetics and a good hairdresser. You could have read a newspaper by her.

"My goodness," she said. "How embarrassing for you ... I'm sorry, Julian."

"Yeah." Julian swerved viciously around a dog that wasn't bothering anybody. "Your goodness. What the bloody hell is going on with you, anyway?"

Well, she didn't know, so far as that went. What it reminded her of more than anything else was one of those white plastic statues of Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild, that came for \$6.98 from a radio station that broadcasts all night long from the very depths of Texas. The statue, according to the preacher hawking it, not only glowed in the dark with the light of *Truth* and the light of *Salvation* and the *everlasting* light—provided you put the batteries in, presumably—it also could be made to revolve slowly on its stand. Valeria was grateful that she was not revolving, either slowly or in any other manner. But the glow was really in very bad taste. It was not soft, it was *bright*, and it was the same shade of gold as the stuff glued to the top of her daughter's carnival baton. And it spread out from her skin to a distance of a good two inches or so.

Tacky, thought Valeria, and brushed off a rose petal that Julian had missed while he was hustling her out of the restaurant.

"My dear," she said, genuinely concerned because she could see that he was, "you don't need to worry about the papers. Really."

"I don't, eh? I suppose you think people are *used* to going out for a quiet dinner in an expensive

restaurant and seeing the woman at the next table light up like a damned Christmas tree, not to mention having rose petals rain down on her from the ceiling. For God's *sake*, Valeria ... I mean, the people who go to the Far Corner are reasonably sophisticated, but they won't have seen *that* number before."

"Julian."

"What, Valeria? What?"

"It won't be in the papers," she said.

"The hell it won't."

"It *won't*," she insisted.

"One reason why not, Valeria—just one!"

"Because, when people see something like that, they won't admit it. Not to each other, not to themselves ... not to the papers. By the time they've all finished eating they'll be convinced they didn't see anything at all, or they'll think it was a stunt for my birthday with the waiters throwing roses at me or something. I assure you."

"You think so?"

"Julian, if any of those people were to suddenly look up and see an angel, twenty feet tall and with a wingspread like a 747, you know what they'd say? 'Biggest damned bird I ever saw,' that's what they'd say. And then they'd order another strawberry daiquiri."

"You really think—"

"I really do, dear heart. There's absolutely nothing for you to worry about. Even the Whatsits—"

"Tabbits. They were a damned good *case*, Valeria."

"Even the Tabbits ... they won't be three blocks away before they've convinced themselves they didn't see anything either."

She saw the tightness go out of his shoulders. She patted his hand, and waited.

When they pulled into the driveway he finally asked her, tentatively, if she could—maybe—explain it.

"No, Julian," she said calmly, "I'm afraid I can't. But I'm sure it won't happen again."

"Like those stories you read about it raining frogs."

"Something like that."

Valeria was quite wrong. It happened over and over again. The children didn't appreciate rose petals in their breakfast pancakes when it happened while she was cooking. Julian set out for her logically the reasons why, since he differed from almost every other American husband by not snoring, it was unfair and unreasonable for her to keep him awake by glowing at him in the dark. Her protests that she had no control over it at all, and no warning either, didn't help matters, and Julian suggested to her that she stay home as much as possible until they could work something out.

She *was* at home when the cookies thing occurred. It was Charlotte's turn to have Camp Fire Girls, and Maryann Whipple's mother was supposed to have sent the refreshments; but, Mrs. Whipple being the sort of woman she was (not Maryann's fault, and a nicer child you couldn't have asked for), there weren't nearly enough cookies to go around. There Valeria was with a plate of cookies—store-bought, too, and not a bakery, either—with only one dozen cookies on it. And seventeen Camp Fire Girls holding glasses of Kool-Aid and looking at her expectantly.

She had just opened her mouth to excuse herself, meaning to go to the kitchen and see what she had in *her* cooky jar, when she heard Charlotte make a funny little strangled noise and cover it with a cough.

"Oh, how nice of your Mama!" the child said—she was one quick thinker, was Charlotte—and before Valeria could say anything to confuse the issue, Charlotte had whisked the plate out of her hands and was passing it around just as bland as you please. If any of the girls had seen the one dozen

nondescript lemon supermarket cookies on that plate suddenly become a pyramid of dainty little cakes, each one with its own icing and its own trim of chopped nuts or candied cherries or silver sprinkles, that girl hadn't mentioned it. So far as Valeria knew, it was just herself and Charlotte who had seen it happen, and Mrs. Whipple would never remember that she'd sent a plain white plate and gotten back good china with a narrow rim of gold, and that made two things to be thankful for.

"*Really*, Mother!" Charlotte had said, when the door closed behind the last of the Camp Fire Girls. "*Really!*"

"You handled it very well, dear, I must say," said Valeria. "I was impressed."

"Thank you, Mother," said Charlotte, tight-lipped and fuming, her arms folded over her chest just exactly like Julian.

"Charlotte," Valeria chided, "that's not attractive."

"I don't care if it's attractive or *not!*" wailed Charlotte. "*Really*, Mother—what are you going to do *next???*"

"Ah," said Valeria solemnly, "if I knew that, I would be much more comfortable about this whole thing. I could plan ahead, you see, if I knew that."

"And you think *that* is attractive?"

Valeria raised her eyebrows, thinking that Charlotte had more than a touch of the Cantrell temper from her father's side, and that puberty was going to be a storm-tossed sea for the child, but she said nothing. She only looked, until the girl's eyes dropped and a high flush spread over her cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Mother," said Charlotte. "That was sass, and it was uncalled for. I know you don't do it on purpose."

"I surely don't," Valeria answered.

"Can you stop, do you think? I mean, that's not sass, Mama, it's just that I want to know. Do you think you can?"

Valeria sighed.

"I think it will stop of itself," she said slowly. "The way everybody around a town sees UFO's or hears mysterious thumps or something for a week or two ... and then it just stops. Provided you don't pay a lot of attention to it."

"And if it doesn't stop?"

"Well! If it doesn't stop, then I will have to get some son of help, naturally. We must wait and see."

She stayed home more and more that summer, and Julian went so far as to let the word get out that the doctor thought she might be just a touch anemic and ought to stay in bed a good deal. But there were times when she really did have to go out, and no way to avoid it. When your next-door neighbor is in labor, and there's not a single soul around to take her to the hospital, and her husband's away in Atlanta on business and her parents clear off in California ... might as well be on the moon as be in California ... ! Well. Valeria had yet to see the day when she would send a woman off to the maternity ward in a taxi, always supposing they could have gotten a taxi, which was not anything you could have counted on. Before it was over she was to wish fervently that she had called an ambulance, or delivered the baby herself (which would have been no great shucks, though the mere suggestion had nearly sent the mother into hysterics); but at the time, her duty had been as clear to her as the freckles over the bridge of her nose. And she had bundled up Carol Sue and the suitcase and headed straight for Skyway Memorial without giving it one more minute's thought—as would any other woman, under similar circumstances.

That time it did get in the papers. Never mind what people might have thought they did or didn't see. The traffic helicopter that was doing the feature for the six o'clock news about the tangled mess at the intersection by the defense plant got pictures that had nothing to do with subjective impressions. There was the Mercedes, on the six o'clock news, and her, Valeria Carterhasty Cantrell, at the wheel, rising

into the air every time there was a little bit of a knot in the traffic and just wafting right over it to the next empty space before settling sedately back into the row of cars and their flabbergasted drivers.

It got them to the hospital in record time, and the inconvenient glow got them past the Admitting Office without one word about insurance *or* money, which had to be a first, but if it didn't mark the baby it would be a miracle. And nobody was speaking to Valeria. Not her husband, not her children, not Carol Sue, not Carol Sue's husband (back from Atlanta) ... Carol Sue's parents, flying in in great haste from California, had been threatening to sue until they learned that Julian was an attorney.

Julian once more had a good deal to say about last straws. Not divorce, of course; Cantrells did not divorce. Divorce, furthermore, would do nothing for his carefully made plans to move one day into the Governor's Mansion. It could be added that he was truly fond of Valeria, and aware that she could not be easily replaced.

Valeria, who appreciated both his concern for her and his concern about her, came to the rueful conclusion that it was not just going to go away of itself as she had hoped, like a spree of UFO sightings. She would, she told Julian, do something about the problem.

"The problem."

She did not like the way he was looking at her; it had overtones of *naming* the problem, perhaps *defining* the problem. Valeria did not think that would be in Julian's best interests.

"This afternoon," she said quickly. "I'll see to it."

"How? What?"

"But right now, Julian, you are late for the Jaycees Luncheon. That Municipal Center thing."

"God, I forgot all about it!"

"Well, you'd better go, dear, hadn't you?"

"I'm not sure I have the guts."

"I beg your pardon, Julian?"

"I am going to hear one hell of a lot about what they saw on the six o'clock news, Valeria. And the ten o'clock news. *This* time, it's a horse of a different color. Television cameras do not imagine they see ... what they saw."

"Mmmmm."

"Valeria?"

"Julian," she said, tapping her lower lip with her finger, "I suggest that if they bring it up—which would be extraordinarily rude of them, I must say—you tell them that we are bringing suit against Mercedes for one million dollars. And another couple of million on behalf of Carol Sue and her baby."

Julian stared at her, and she could have sworn there was a flash of admiration in his eyes.

"I never would have thought of that, darling," he said, grabbing his briefcase.

He wouldn't have, either. Valeria had explained to Charlotte, on the single occasion when the child insisted on knowing what was the *matter* with men, anyway, that they lacked motherwit; and that this was an inherent deficiency that could not be held against them.

"I don't see why not," Charlotte fretted. "They could learn ... they learn law stuff and medical stuff and how to blow up the whole world, don't they?"

"Not the same thing at all."

"What's motherwit?"

"Motherwit is what makes you notice the messes men get themselves into, Charlotte Rose. And what gives you sense enough not to let on you notice."

"And to clean up the messes after them."

"Precisely. And we will never mention this again."

"Can I tell Judette McElroad? We've been best friends going on three years this March."

"No."

"Not even Judette? Mama!"

"Not even Judette. It's up to Judette's mother to tell her."

"Like the Curse."

"We do not say 'the Curse,' Charlotte. It's tacky."

As was this situation.

"Can you just give me a simple description of your problem?" the priest had asked her, no doubt wondering what a nice Methodist lady like herself was doing in a place like his, crucifixes on the wall and candles flickering in niches, and him with his long black gown.

She had tried, beginning with the disastrous dinner that had lost Julian the Tabbitts case and going straight on to the end, with the trip to the hospital and the Mercedes.

He looked at her, when she paused, in precisely the way she had expected him to look, and she knew he had not watched the news. He looked at her dubiously, for which she could in no way blame him. And then the look in his eyes changed abruptly, and his fingers flickered through the sign of the cross, mutter-mutter-mutter, and she assumed she must have begun doing something convincing. Glowing. Rotating. Levitating. Whatever.

"—and the Holy Spirit. Amen," said the priest. Adding, "Oh dear. Oh dear me."

"Why, rather?" asked Valeria, as reasonably as she could after the dreary recital of her humiliations, and feeling as if she had a bit part in one of those Italian movies about devout peasants with flocks of goats. "It seems to me that I am the one who should be saying 'oh dear.' "

The priest, to her astonishment, lowered his head to his hands and gripped it fiercely, all ten fingers buried deep in the thick black curls of his hair, and he moaned. Moaned!

"Father?"

Valeria waited, and then tried again.

"Father!"

From the depths of his hands came a muffled "Please allow me to compose myself" and some mumbling about not having believed it even if the call *did* come from the Bishop, but now he'd seen it with his own eyes, and "Please forgive me," and then he was at last looking at her. Or perhaps through her. Beads of sweat on his upper lip and forehead, and a bit shocky-looking, but no longer in a state of collapse.

He cleared his throat twice, and folded his hands, and said, "Mrs. Cantrell, I fear I am in over my head."

"As if I needed an ophthalmologist and you were an oculist."

"An excellent analogy, dear lady."

"Nevertheless," said Valeria, "we could *discuss* this. It is, in some sense of the word, your field ... and you are the expert, isn't that right?"

"A most inadequate expert, I'm afraid."

"That's twice now you've said you were afraid. You have nothing to be afraid of."

He shook his head vehemently—he did have beautiful curls!—and crossed himself again.

"Oh my, oh my," he said. "You're wrong there, Mrs. Cantrell."

"In what way?"

"Either you are a visitation of the Dear Lord, in which case I have good reason to be afraid—I was never in the presence of a living saint before, you see, and I don't have the remotest idea how to behave.

Or you are a visitation of the Evil One, in which case I have good reason to be terrified right out of my cassock, if you'll pardon a feeble joke."

"Is that possible?"

"Is what possible?"

"That all this might be the Devil's doing," said Valeria. "It never occurred to me, but it would surely simplify things."

His jaw dropped, and then he shut his mouth in a way that made his teeth click.

"I don't see it, I'm afraid ... there, I've said it again. But I *am* afraid. And I don't know why you would prefer the workings of the Devil to the workings of the Almighty."

"Because," Valeria pointed out, "if I am bewitched, or possessed, or whatever the label is, there's a cure for that. You just haul out your exorcism kit and fix me up, and I can go home to my family and tell them life is normal once again. I would much prefer that, Father, to the other thing."

"Tell me again," he said flatly.

"All of it?"

"All of it. This time I will be able to listen more carefully, since I know what's coming. Please don't leave out anything, not the smallest detail."

She told him again, feeling bored and hopeless, while he steepled his fingers and peered at her over them and, every now and again, made a soft noise like a half dozen bees.

"Mrs. Cantrell," he asked when she got to the end of it again, "have you always been a devout woman?"

"Never," she said promptly.

"Never!"

"Never. I'm a Methodist. I went to Sunday School when I was a child because my parents made me go, and I go to church now because my husband's law practice would suffer if I didn't—and I make my children go for the same reason. I suppose my mother made *me* go for the sake of my father's medical practice, come to think of it."

"Do you pray?"

"Of my own accord, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Father Genora—if there is a God, a matter on which I'm no authority—I would certainly have better taste and better manners than to think that He or She was interested in the kind of things I have to pray about. Can you imagine a God that would be interested in my profound hope that my daughter won't have to wear braces on her teeth? Can you imagine a God that would be concerned about that rash I get when Julian tries a different aftershave lotion ... Father, I don't think for one moment that God doesn't respect my ability to manage my own affairs. And I have an equivalent respect for God's ability to run the celestial mechanics, so to speak."

"You don't want to be any trouble to Him," said the priest gently.

"Or Her. As the case may be."

The priest winced visibly, but Valeria did not apologize.

"My dear child," said the priest, "there really isn't any question about it. I don't think there has been any question, from the beginning. I don't *understand* it—but then I don't understand Job, either, or Judas, or Biafra. My Bishop would have my head on a platter if he heard me say this, but I would be a coward if I didn't—my dear child, you are ... for some utterly unfathomable divine reason ... a saint. Not a *certified* saint; for that you have to be dead. But a saint all the same."

"Father Genora, couldn't you be mistaken? I think the Devil version is far more likely, now you've brought it up. The Devil's not nearly so choosy, as I understand it."

"If you were possessed," said the priest firmly, "you could not look me in the eye and talk of ... the Almighty the way you have. You wear the armor of holy innocence, and I can only say that in this situation I wish I did."

Valeria drew a long breath, and asked: "And do you have something in your procedures manual for that? You can cast out devils in the name of God—can you cast out angels, or whatever it is I've caught?"

He shook his head, and his fingers seemed to be searching in his cassock for someplace to hide.

"You must try to understand," he told her. "The Church cannot even imagine such a thing as wishing to be ... unsainted."

"Well, that's absurd. It's a terrible nuisance."

"I imagine it must be. The masses have always loved the saints, and their families have always hated them. Nobody wants to *live* with one ... some of them have done the most repulsive, stomach-turning, not to mention outright demented things. But if God picks you to be a saint, my child, the Church is assuredly not going to presume to question His choice. Do you see what I mean?"

Valeria was thinking hard. Here she was, with her marriage falling apart, and her children turning against her, and Julian's entire future on the line, and all this holy man could do was make excuses.

"Father Genora, what if you were to say the exorcism service backward? Do you suppose ... oh dear. Father, I apologize. I did *not* realize it would upset you so much—it's an entirely empirical question, you know. Put a car in forward, it goes forward; put it in reverse, it goes backward. Do an exorcism, you undevel the bedeviled; do an *anti-exorcism*, you might unsaint the besainted. But I can see that you wouldn't care to try that, so I'll have to manage on my own, won't I?"

The priest was pale and shuddering, but he managed to ask her how she intended to proceed. Valeria thought it best to be gentle with him.

"Father," she said, "you'll be far better off if you don't know."

"Mrs. *Cantrell!* How do you suppose that I am to live with my conscience, if I let you just walk out of here like this? A saint comes to me, to *me*, for spiritual counsel; and all I can do is mumble and sweat. You must give me an opportunity to discuss this, to see if there is not some solution, to ... "

She did not really like to cut him off in mid-stream, having learned long ago that a man frustrated in that way would tend to take it out on somebody else at the first opportunity, but she was tired. Tired, and disgusted; after all, she had not asked for this. She had *not* gone about doing good, trying to entice the birds and the squirrels and the butterflies to light upon her person, healing the sick and the maimed, praying and preaching. She had been going about her business, *mind*ing her own business, and not bothering anybody, and then to have this happen—it was a bit much. And this priest, this holy tinkerer who appeared not to know one end of a religious question from another, was a great disappointment to her. It just went to show how limited her experience had been.

"Father," she said carefully, "sainthood is something you get into by not sinning enough. I intend to go home and *sin* until I have become too wicked to be a saint. If you want to help me, you might save me some time by explaining to me what the *worst* sin is—that one against the Holy Ghost. I could start with that and skip some of the minor infringements."

There he went again. Oh dearing. Oh dear me-ing. It was more than she could bear, and to avoid beginning her career as a sinner by the wanton murder of a man of God, she simply left him nattering and went home. She was late in any case, and Julian did not like for her to be late.

Valeria believed in *system*. Flounder about, doing things at random, and you got nowhere. She began, therefore, with the Ten Commandments, although she was not quite willing to go through them in order.

The one about having no other gods was easy enough. Valeria went down to an import shop where

she was accustomed to getting those paper lanterns you put in the garden to help people wander around outside at parties without breaking their necks. She bought a Buddha, a Kwan-Yin, an Indian deity with far more arms than any god ought to need, a very badly done Venus, and something the clerk swore was a statue of Isis—if she was mistaken it didn't really matter, it was sure to be some minor god or other. That made *five* forbidden gods, all of them graven images (or cast images, which ought to be equally wicked, given the Almighty's own knowledge of how things had changed since Moses and that calf), and she set them all up in her sewing room, locked the door, and bowed down to each and every one of the five in turn. While she was at it, getting two commandments with one stone, so to speak, she took the Lord's name in vain repeatedly, feeling that the Lord had it coming anyway.

Sunday, instead of going to church with the rest of the family, she hemmed a whole set of curtains, carting them into the sewing room where she could sit surrounded by her heathen images and getting up every now and then to bow to each one of them. And on the off chance that the sabbath day mentioned in Exodus was Saturday instead of Sunday, she spent a Saturday in there, too, taking the hems out and putting them back in again despite the fact that they'd been done perfectly in the first place. When she found that she'd spotted one of the panels with blood, sticking her finger with a pin, she turned her face up to the heavens and said aloud: "God damn it. God damn it all the way to hell and back."

When Charlotte knocked on the door to find out if she was ever coming out to fix lunch, Valeria took a deep breath and said "Fix it yourself, God damn it!"

"Mother!"

"You heard me," said Valeria. "Now, God damn it, do what I told you. I'm very, very busy."

Next came dishonoring ... no, failing to honor was all that was required, thank goodness ... failing to honor her father and her mother. She took care of that and worked false witness into it at the same time, telling Julian's mother on the telephone that he wasn't home when he was standing right behind her. Valeria had never lied to Mother Cantrell before, and didn't enjoy doing it now, but putting things off wasn't going to help.

"No, Mother Cantrell," she went on, "I don't know when he'll be back. He didn't say. You know how Julian is, he does as he pleases, goes where he pleases, and shows up when the spirit moves him. God damn it."

Lies, all of it. Julian wouldn't have gone around the block without giving Valeria an exact schedule, and if he'd turned any one of that block's four corners later than promised, he would have stopped to call her and let her know.

Moving right along, she tried coveting. She coveted everything she could get at. She put her back into it and coveted an awful phony waterfall in Carol Sue's yard, along with the phony boulders that made its basin, and she hoped she was making a good impression.

Stealing was a nuisance, but she did it; she stole a girdle from Macy's, ostentatiously parading it through the store inside her blouse, and throwing it into a Salvation Army pickup box on the way home when nobody so much as questioned her about it. Killing was easier; she got an assortment of spray cans and killed everything that crawled or flew within the reach of her narrow stream of noxious chemical death. She stepped viciously on spiders she would ordinarily have carried carefully out to the rosebushes. And she reminded herself that each and every time she showered, each and every time she brushed her teeth, she slaughtered tens of millions of innocent bacteria and assorted bystanders. In the long run, it must count up.

Thinking that *combined* sins were more efficient, she went to see her father and his new wife, lied to the wife about her father's age, stole a crystal vase of her mother's, stunned both father and bride with her incessant string of "God damns," and resolutely flushed down the toilet a tropical fish that any fool except her father could have seen was swimming at that bizarre angle because it was sick and in pain. As the fish gurgled out of sight, Valeria said, "Thank you, holy Isis."

By the end of her first week as a dedicated sinner, Valeria felt fouled from the gut out and wondered

how the habitual sinner stood it, not to mention all the *time* it took. But it wasn't working. It seemed to her that the more she sinned, the more brightly she glowed and the worse the rose petals falling about her stank, and when Julian moved to the bed in the guest room she did not blame him one bit. In his place, she would have moved even sooner.

Somehow, Valeria had thought she would surely be excused from the last of the proscribed activities, but it clearly was not to be. Like Job, or Aristotle, or somebody, she was going to have to drink her nasty poison to its last dregs. And that meant adultery. It was not an interesting sin, but she could not think of anything wickeder, and the complicated arrangements it involved made it possible to drag in a number of associated sins in the false witness line along with it. She did it twice, with two separate willing strangers; and then to top it off she did it with a few of the husbands in the neighborhood. Afterward, she understood why so many of the women she knew were so cross and vicious, and she treated them with special tenderness. She had had no idea what they had been putting up with, or how lucky she was to have Julian competently sharing her bed—or at least visiting it.

And that didn't work, either. She'd run through the whole list, much of it dozens of times, and things were no better. Putting in tulip bulbs, and trying to keep her mind on doing that properly, Valeria fretted and wept and impatiently brushed away a herd of butterflies that insisted on settling around her, and swore terrible oaths.

"I will be *damned*, " she cried desperately in the general direction of the heavenly parapets, waving her trowel, "I will be damned if I will murder a human being just for Your satisfaction! I warn You, You will go too far, do You hear me? You hear me down here? I am *blaspheming*, damn it! Praise Isis! Praise Zeus! Praise Satan, for that matter!"

And when the pure white dove came out of the puffy cloud above her and flew down to circle over her head, Valeria lay down in the ditch she had dug for her flowers, heedless of the carefully worked-in manure, and wept in desperate earnest. And the burden of her complaint was: "My God, my God—what will it take to get You to forsake me?"

It was Maryann Whipple's mother, of all unlikely people, who finally solved her problem. Nobody would call Ruby Whipple a saint, that was for sure and for certain. A trollop, perhaps, a liar and a thief and an awesomely poor excuse for a mother *or* a daughter—but never a saint. Valeria, forsaken by everyone she loved and tormented by a god whose attentions she had never sought but could not now get rid of, went to Ruby Whipple and told her the whole story. Valeria was long past caring if Ruby believed her or not and Ruby, monumentally fortified with straight Scotch at ten o'clock of a Tuesday morning, was in no condition to doubt anything.

"Shoot, honey," said Ruby, leaning back on the pillows her couch was piled with and knocking half a dozen onto the floor, "you haven't been sinning at all."

"I have!" Valeria was furious. "I have been sinning *so* hard—"

"Yeah, yeah," scoffed Ruby. "Sure you have. Honey, I am a Baptist minister's daughter, and I know whereof I speak, and I am here to tell you that you can't sin for *shit*. "

"Nonsense!"

"Nonsense, my rosy butt," Ruby said. "You tell me *why* you're racing around like a chicken with its head cut off, lying and stealing and cussing and hopping in and out of bed with anything that can get it up and plenty that can't! Not to mention bowing to Isis and Kwan-Yin and hemming drapes on both Saturdays and Sundays!"

Ruby lay back and laughed fit to burst, spilling Scotch down her front, and Valeria's heart ached for Maryann Whipple.

"Every one of those things," she said firmly, "every last one that you find so funny, is supposed to be a sin. Every single one has a special commandment all its own forbidding it. You *can't* say I haven't sinned."

"Valeria ... tell me *why*. You haven't been doing it because it was fun, have you?"

"Fun?" Valeria moaned as the priest had moaned. "I have never in my life done anything so tiresome and so boring as all these sins. Fun!"

"Then why?"

"Because Julian and the children are entitled to a normal wife and mother and a normal ordinary wholesome life, that's why, and I am determined that they shall have them!"

"Uh-huh," said Ruby emphatically. "That's the problem, sweet thing. You sin for the sake of those you love, you lay down your soul for your friend. Valeria, that doesn't *count*. You've been wasting your time, child."

"It's not fair!"

"No, it's not," agreed Ruby Whipple, "but then, nothing is." And she passed out cold on the couch.

Well, even a saint has limits to her patience, and Valeria came to the end of hers that day. She could see what Ruby meant, and was fervently grateful that she'd listened to Ruby before she took the next step she had been contemplating. True, old Mr. Hackwood would have been released from his misery, lying there with all those tubes and monitors and lights and buzzers in a strange place he hated, with nothing but his agony for company. True, his poor wife, not really well herself, would have been released from the seemingly endless burden of watching him die by fractions of inches and hearing him plead for release around the clock; Adam Hackwood no longer knew that the woman who'd shared his life for over fifty years was in the room, but he hadn't stopped believing that there was a Jesus somewhere who would step in and set things to rights if you only asked Him often enough and nicely enough. True, the nurses on the floor where Mr. Hackwood was would have had more time to spend with other patients who were *not* dying, and would have had to spend less time comforting the ones in the rooms nearby his who had a tendency to weep at what they heard from their "terminal" colleague. True, if the Bible were to be believed, Adam Hackwood would have traded a hard bed, with a stiff rubber sheet and every invention of misery a fecund modern medical science could provide, for residence in Paradise and nothing more uncomfortable to do but learn to tolerate the brightness of the Almighty's shining face and the duty of praising Him everlastingly. All true.

Well, let it be true. All of it. She, Valeria, was *not going to do it*. Let them all suffer, let them writhe and bleed and wail; she was going to grit her teeth and let it pass her by, because nothing she had done so far had helped one bit and nothing she had in mind along the same lines impressed her as having any greater potential for releasing her from *her* misery.

She hadn't the heart to go back and torment the priest further, but she knew what she needed now, and she thought she could manage. She needed a way to work within the system, instead of against it. She needed to break a rule that the High-and-Mighty would have no choice but to pay attention to. No more Mrs. Nice Lady, no sir ... not *this* saint! Valeria set her teeth and headed for the theology section of the University library. And it turned out that the books on fornication and adultery and murder and all their repulsive ilk weren't even *in* the theology section; if you wanted to read those, you had to go to the social science shelves, or family Studies. No doubt Ruby Whipple could have told her that.

She learned a lot in the theology stacks. She learned that women were the gateway to Hell. She learned that despite claiming that what they had seen and experienced could not possibly be expressed in words, the mystics went right on and expressed it at extraordinary length. She learned that the Vatican had curious problems, and that it was possible to commit a crime called "fishing in Papal waters." She learned vast amounts about things that not only did not interest her but clearly had not interested those who wrote about them, and it became obvious to her that if all theology were written in Latin it would be no great loss. Her frustration grew, but she did not let that distract her from her task, and would have been ashamed to do so; she was literate, and she had been a Carterhasty, and nobody was going to tell her that she couldn't get to the bottom of this.

And there came the day when she found what she was looking for. Lying and murder and other-gods-before-me and stealing and working your tail off on the sabbath ... those, she discovered to her amazement, were piddly little sinlets hardly worth mentioning. Those were such everyday common garden variety in the way of sinning that it was no wonder Ruby Whipple had laughed, and Valeria flushed along the delicate ridge of her cheekbones, remembering. The place to find out about sins was not in the Bible, it was in the books that mortal men had written *about* the Bible, and it was there that Valeria learned the name of the sin that would get you smacked no matter how well you might be doing otherwise.

"Hallelujah!" she said, right out loud and no reverence intended.

Who would have ever guessed that the Sin of Sins would not be something interesting like infant cannibalism, but simply *pride*? She shook her head, overwhelmed.

Pride. Pride! That was the one that wouldn't be tolerated and, from what Valeria read, it was a source of real difficulty for anybody fool enough to go out for sainthood, since the more good and pure and holy you were, the more likely you were to tumble into the pit of being proud of your own goodness. People might watch Valeria lie and cheat and fornicate (horrible prospect!) and learn nothing at all from that; the Almighty could afford to ignore that, what with everybody and his housecat doing it right and left all the day and all the night long. But pride, now! If Valeria were allowed to get away with pride—even to *seem* to get away with pride, especially now that they were trying to get her to go on television talk shows—that would set a precedent the Almighty wouldn't dare overlook.

Valeria slammed the book shut, chuckling to herself, and went straight home to call up the television pests and say she'd be delighted to appear on their fool show. Julian roared and swore she'd ruin him, and the children all threatened to run away, but Valeria was not to be budged.

"You just wait and see," she told them. "I know what I'm doing."

"You do not!" snapped Charlotte. "You absolutely do not."

"This time I do," said Valeria.

"Valeria, if you go on that television show and millions of people all over the country get a long look at your little bag of tricks—"

"Julian Cantrell," she said, thin-lipped and sounding almost snappish, "I said I know what I'm doing, and I do. Now, I don't want to hear any more about it, not one word. You just go on about your business, and I'll go on about mine. Daryl, I'm going to need your help."

"My help?" Daryl was bewildered.

"I need you to go shopping with me," she told him.

"Mother—"

"Valeria—"

"*Mother—*" That was Charlotte.

"Daryl will know where we should go," Valeria insisted, "he's the right age." And Julian threw up his arms in despair and went off to work.

"All right, Mother," sighed Daryl. "I don't understand, but then I haven't understood any of this yet. Sure, I'll go with you ... what are we going after?"

"Bumper stickers," she said. "And those little round buttons with the pins on the back that make a hole in your clothes when you wear them. And maybe a T-shirt, though I'd rather not."

"Oh, I see," said Daryl.

"Well, I don't," Philip muttered, and Charlotte declared that her mother had gone over the hill at last and should be restrained instead of taken shopping, which obliged Valeria to explain the difference between joking and Taking Liberties.

"You *will* see," she said comfortingly. "I promise."

She knew she had gotten it right when she appeared on the talk show and nothing happened. They were very nice about it, considering; they explained that they were always getting people who could bend spoons just by staring at them hard at home and in their friendly neighborhood bars but then couldn't do it on television.

"It's the lights," they said. "And the stress. You're not used to all this confusion around you, you know." And they assured her that they firmly and truly did believe that when she wasn't on television she had showers of rose petals falling around her and doves flying over her head and that she glowed not only in the dark but even in daylight.

But they didn't. It was obvious that they didn't. They just felt sorry for her because she'd sat there in front of all those people and nothing had happened. Valeria was encouraged, and she tugged at the button on her lapel to be sure everybody noticed it, and she threw a couple of handfuls of buttons into the audience, and left a stack of her bumper stickers in the studio for anybody who wanted them.

"I'm of the opinion," she said happily, "that it's over. I really think it's all been just ... an oversight."

And she was right. Valeria Carterhasty Cantrell is a saint no longer. The masses don't even know she exists. She is a mere codicil to a footnote in the obscure histories of religious phenomena. But her *family* adores her.

Daryl has a scholarship to Cornell, and will be going into law as his father hoped he would; he has given his microscope and his white mice to the Boys Club. Philip has just become an Eagle Scout, and he is only thirteen dollars short of the money needed to pay for his half of the computer. Charlotte is dancing in everything she can get permission to dance in and saving every penny to set up a school of baton twirling in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the minute she turns eighteen. All three children refer to Valeria's little episode as, "when Mother was so nervous," and are especially gentle and tender with her lest it happen again.

For their anniversary, Julian gave Valeria a mink jacket and a pair of diamond earrings and promised never to change shaving lotions again; for Christmas he is giving her a small vacation cottage on an island off the coast of Maine. He worships her; their marriage is the envy of every couple who knows them; he has not slept anywhere but in her arms (except on business trips) for two years. And last year he made \$350,000 *after* taxes.

Valeria, for her part, no longer feels obliged to wear the lapel button, and never was forced to buy the T-shirt or go on to the skywriting that she had saved as a backup if her first plan failed her. But she keeps the bumper sticker, and when it gets faded she has a new one made to replace it. Valeria does not intend to take any chances.

She doesn't drive the Mercedes anymore; she drives her own car. (After all, putting the bumper sticker on Julian's Mercedes would have been a bit much to ask of him.) It's the bright red sports car—with the shiny wheels and the ooga-horn and the fur upholstery and the quad sound system—that costs more than an average person earns in a year or so.

It's the car you see on the freeway with Valeria at the wheel, driving along flat on the ground like everybody else, tangled up in the traffic jams like any other sinner.

It's the car with the bumper sticker that reads, in giant Gothic letters:

hello there! i am a holy blessed saint! follow me!