

LOVE & FORGIVENESS  
Patricia Chadwick on her journey  
out of a religious cult

HARVARD OR BUST?  
How to stay sane during  
the college admissions process

# GREENWICH

Light a Fire 2019  
A CELEBRATION OF GIVING



SHERI WEST



GIOVANNA MILLER



REED EXHIBITIONS,  
YANCY WEINRICH, COO



A. REYNOLDS  
GORDON



TRACY  
MCHALE STUART



CATALINA HORAK



MICHAEL PARKER



PAM LEWIS



DR. NOLAN ZEIDE &  
DR. STEVEN ZEIDE



PURAB ANGREJI

WE RISE!





Patricia's parents shortly after she was born

# the ties that bind

**Patricia Chadwick** spent the first eighteen years of her life cut off from society and entrapped in a world of **religious fanaticism, iron-fisted control and abuse.** In her memoir, *Little Sister*, she shares her journey of being raised in—and subsequently cast out of—a cult, the only life she knew

CONTRIBUTED

BY TIMOTHY DUMAS • PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPH BY KYLE NORTON



The financial consultant Patricia Walsh Chadwick has been married for nearly thirty-five years; she and her husband, John, are the parents of adult twins, Caroline and Jim, and they live in a large, lovely house in Greenwich—a white-clapboard Georgian Revival adorned with topiary bushes and a formal garden. These facts may seem unremarkable. But if you have read Patricia's recently published memoir, *Little Sister*, and if you then pull up to the house to interview her, it may be the following passage that you recall: "For years, I had kept to myself my dreams of being married, having children and living in an elegant house surrounded by rose-filled gardens. I dared not share those dreams with anyone, not even my parents, because I knew such longings were delusional."

early years, growing up in a cult. A Catholic cult, based in Massachusetts, isolated from the outside world and innocent of such corrupting forces as movies and magazines, Elvis and The Beatles. "In the Boston area, we were known as Feeneyites," Patricia says, enunciating the word crisply. "And to be a Feeneyite was possibly the lowest of the low."

Patricia first considered telling her harrowing story about fifteen years ago. "I said to my parents at that time, 'Fifty years from now, there'll be no more eyewitnesses to what happened,' because it's changed. That whole upbringing we had no longer exists there." But when it came to writing it, she hesitated. "I didn't want to be in a rush to tell the story for a couple of reasons," she says. "One, I needed to learn the craft of writing, and I wanted to do it well." This is typical Patricia—smart, patient, disciplined, wholly unlike the legions of eager and untested

only bits of her not militantly managed."

The other reason Patricia delayed writing her memoir had to do with a highly developed sense of tact, a careful regard for older cult members still living. "I knew that my story, told from the standpoint of a child, would be a very different story from the one that any one of them might tell, and I didn't want to upset them," she says. "I really wasn't anxious to do it while a lot of them were alive. And, in fact, by the time the book came out, all but a tiny handful had died."

Patricia was encouraged by her parents, despite their complex roles in the story. Her father, Jim Walsh, died in 2007, but lived long enough to approve of the project; her mother, Betsy Walsh, read every word before she died in September 2018. "Parts of it made her sad, but she said, 'It's all true, and you need to publish it.' And so to have that blessing from her was far



Patricia's parents' wedding day in 1947 • Catherine Clarke and her husband, Hank • Patricia with her parents, sister Cathy and brother David

Why should such normal aspirations be "delusional"? And how did these once-forbidden longings come to be bedrock facts of her life? What happened? The front door swings open, and Patricia appears with a cautious smile. She is youthfully elegant, with her bright blue eyes, light auburn hair, pastel blazer and pearl necklace. She leads the way to a sun-filled living room, and begins to tell you all about her

memoirists out in America. Her approach paid off. Here, for example, is her vivid description of the cult's formidable founder:

"Sister Catherine, seated tall in the straight-backed chair at her desk, swiveled to face me, her strong rectangular body softened by fine wisps of reddish blonde hair that danced like flickering candles around her flawless white complexion. Those wayward strands were the

more important than worrying about whether some of the people who were still up there, in Still River, would be offended by the book."

It's also fair to say that it took time for Patricia herself to fully come to terms with her material—to see it with ruthless clarity. "It was my daughter who came home from college one weekend and said, 'I want to tell you two things. First, stop everything until you finish this book.



And second, you have to accept the fact that you grew up in a cult.” The word hit Patricia with force, but she knew that it was right.

## BENEATH THE SURFACE

The cult began innocently enough. In 1940 Catherine Clarke, a married Catholic laywoman, founded the Saint Benedict Center in Cambridge as a gathering place for Catholic students at Harvard and Radcliffe. Especially after the Second World War, the center teemed with young intellectuals who were intensely serious about Catholic life. This postwar energy coincided with the arrival of Father Leonard Feeney as the center’s spiritual director. Feeney was a Jesuit priest widely admired for his oratory, poetry and essays. But in middle age his rhetoric grew strident and his bigotry uninhibited. The

What earned Feeney outlaw status, however, was his rigid view of the Catholic dogma “*extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*”—outside the Catholic Church there is no salvation. Feeney held that if you were a Protestant or a Jew or a nothing-in-particular, you were doomed to roast in hell for all eternity. The eight-year-old Patricia, meanwhile, sensibly deemed the “no salvation” dogma absurd. When she asked a cult elder how people who lived on distant islands with no chance of converting to Catholicism could be damned, his reply was, “If they were of good faith, God would have sent them a missionary.”

Rome could not deny the dogma’s authentic Catholic pedigree. But, at a time when religions were moving toward peaceful coexistence, Rome could, and did, take issue with Feeney’s severe interpretation. Instead, Church authorities interpreted the dogma to mean that Patricia’s distant islanders could indeed

1949), expelled from the Jesuit Order (October 1949), and finally, excommunicated from the Catholic Church (February 1953).

But Feeney and his flock, “The Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary,” continued undaunted in Cambridge. The fifty-one adult members pledged “blind allegiance” to Feeney, an act so defiant that Patricia’s readers experience a chill of foreboding: Clearly we are not dealing with a wholesome religious order. The peculiar name of the sect was supposed to denote spiritual freedom through “slavery” to the Virgin Mary, but it manages instead to strike an Orwellian note (“Freedom is Slavery” is, in fact, a slogan from Orwell’s 1984).

“For me personally as a child, the notion of ‘slave’ anywhere was abhorrent,” Patricia says, traces of her Boston accent still evident. “I didn’t want to think of my parents as slaves, and I didn’t want to think of myself as a slave. I



Patricia at two months of age with her mother • Patricia with her grandmother, father, sister and brother • The Walsh siblings Peggy, Patricia, David, Cathy and Veronica

British novelist Evelyn Waugh visited Feeney in Boston and pronounced him “stark, raving mad.” A journal Feeney edited, *The Point*, published articles sporting grotesque titles like “The Jewish Invasion of Our Country: Our Culture Under Siege”—this after the Holocaust. In another article Feeney accuses Jews, led by Pablo Picasso, of ruining art—nevermind that Picasso was a Catholic.

be saved—that anyone with an “implicit desire” to be saved could be saved, the phrase vague enough to embrace anyone who had not actively rejected the Church and had “a good disposition of the soul.”

Feeney, like a nervy private countermarching his generals, disagreed, and would not be brought to heel. For this and other acts of disobedience he was stripped of his priest’s rank (April

hated the name ‘Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.’ I was embarrassed by it.”

The married adults and their thirty-nine children lived commune-style in seven houses behind a tall red fence off Putnam Avenue, not far from Harvard Square. At first life behind the red fence, in Patricia’s lively telling, seems almost idyllic. The adults are “Big Brothers” and “Big Sisters,” the children are “Little



Brothers” and “Little Sisters,” and together they comprise a tight-knit family united in their devotion to “orthodox” Catholicism. “My earliest memories are filled with the sounds of laughter,” Patricia writes. “The men and women of the center became an array of ‘uncles and aunts,’ with someone ready at any time of the day to play games with me, read to me, or take me for a walk.”

Soon the tone darkens. Patricia notices Father (Feeney is always simply “Father”) holding court like a lord, reclining in his red leather armchair as the women sit at his feet or kneel at his side. She notices Father and Sister Catherine using fine china, crystal goblets and silver cutlery at their white linen-bedecked dinner table, while the rest sit at long wooden tables with their stainless steel utensils and cheap melamine dishes. She notices the Slaves discarding their colorful “worldly” clothing in favor of austere

Slave—foiling Patricia’s innate curiosity about people and their stories. Father also inhibits the Slaves from associating with family members who live “out in the world” beyond the red fence. So ends Patricia’s trips to see her beloved Grandmother Walsh: We are now unambiguously in cult territory. Father, naturally, is a hypocrite: He takes the children to visit his parents’ house, where Patricia notices, in the crepuscular gloom of the front hall, a vase of dead hydrangeas—a portent of things to come. Things grow darker still. In 1953, when Patricia is not yet five, Father decrees that the adults should shed their worldly names and assume Catholic ones of his choosing: Patricia’s parents, Jim and Betsy Walsh, are henceforth Brother James Aloysius and Sister Elizabeth Ann. “Only in the privacy of our apartment could I still call them Mama and Daddy.”

Father soon starts in on the children’s names.

banks of the Charles River to pick flowers. One day Patricia realizes Betty is nowhere evident, and that night she quizzes her mother. “She’s gone, darling,” comes the unsatisfactory reply. But why? “Because she wasn’t a good girl.”

## DIVIDE TO CONQUER

Nothing, though, prepares Patricia for the cataclysmic “glorious day” that Father proclaims in November 1954. As a prelude, he gives a sermon recounting how the Virgin Mary’s parents relinquished her, at age three, to the care of the priests at the Temple of Jerusalem. (The story does not appear in the Bible proper, but rather in the apocryphal Gospel of James.) Later that day, as Patricia climbs a willow tree out in the yard, Big



The members of the center (1953)

black and white uniforms. She notices the world outside fading away (the walks cease), since it’s populated by “bad people,” Jews and Protestants and “pious frauds”—Irish Catholics who sided not with Father, but with Boston Archbishop Richard J. Cushing.

Events take a creepy turn when Father hands down an edict forbidding discussion of one’s “past life”—the life one led before becoming a

The quite Catholic “Mary Patricia” would seem to be safe from change, but one morning Father intercepts her: “How would you like to be called Anastasia?” he asks. Patricia knows she must hold her tongue. She is Anastasia now.

Are there signs of dissension in the ranks? Yes, but they’re quickly smoothed over. Patricia’s favorite “Angel,” or babysitter, is Betty Sullivan, the woman who had taken her on walks to the

Brothers come to remove her parents’ bed and armchair from the family apartment; so it goes at the other children’s apartments. “In stunned silence, we watched as the furniture from our homes was carried off, piece by piece,” Patricia writes. “What did it mean?”

It meant the families were being split apart.

From that day forward, children three and older were all housed together like orphans



in a dormitory. Patricia still remembers the day as the worst day of her life: she, her four-year-old sister, Mary Catherine, and her three-year-old brother, David, are essentially cast out of the family bosom (the two youngest Walsh children remain with their parents). And what of her parents? Where do they stand in all of this? In 1947 Jim was a twenty-eight-year-old budding philosophy teacher at Boston College (he would be fired in 1949 for his continued devotion to Feeney), and Betsy was an eighteen-year-old beauty with brains to match. They met at the center in March of '47, and Father married them six months later.

Patricia renders her parents with love and sympathy, but their story, at least in the early stages, is distressing. It's one thing to believe in old-school Catholicism, and quite another to submit to the nonsensical rules of a cult. Readers find themselves urging Jim and Betsy

baths and the bedtime stories, the "Good night, my little princess," that Jim bestows tenderly on Patricia—and now we witness its abrupt end.

Worse, parental love is replaced by the cold, regimental ways of Patricia's new house mother, Sister Matilda. She seems a character out of *The Handmaid's Tale*. "From now on," Matilda announces, "you may no longer hold the hands of the younger children." It has been Patricia's practice to hold hands with her own baby sister, Veronica, during brief recreation periods in the yard. One evening when she thinks Matilda is not present, Patricia can't resist breaking the new rule: "As I led [Veronica] across the yard, her tiny feet making progress with my guidance, I glanced up and caught sight of Sister Matilda watching me from the second-floor window..." A paddling with a shoe brush ensues.

There is hope when the Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary pick up and move to

meetings" on Sundays). Children can no longer talk to children of the opposite sex. There are no more birthday celebrations. Married couples must take vows of celibacy. Finally, husbands and wives are physically separated—marking the total dismantling of the Saint Benedict Center families. These last edicts do rouse the Walshes' ire (perhaps especially since Sister Catherine spent three nights a week with her husband at their house in Waltham), which Patricia overhears in the form of her father's angry voice emanating from the office of Father Feeney. "You had no right..." she hears him saying, only to be countered by the raised voices of Father and Sister Catherine.

Jim Walsh—Brother James Aloysius—believed in the mission of the center, but it becomes clear that his faith in its directives is thin. "The Walsh family, the five of us children, were enormously benefited by the fact that our dad always



Jim Walsh (third from left) on the day he was fired from Boston College. • The Little Sisters (1963) • The Walsh family (1972)

to shake off Feeney's terrible spell as if they're trapped in a Stephen King novel, oblivious to the dark forces gathering.

Even the family separation they seem to accept with passivity. "You and Mary Catherine and David are big girls and boys now," Betsy explains to Patricia in a tone that somehow is the worse for its gentleness. We have seen the nightly happiness of the Walsh family—the

a bucolic eighteen-acre property in Still River, thirty miles west of Boston. It is 1958, and Patricia is nine years old. In Still River there will be gardens to tend, animals to raise, and fields and woods to explore. "This was surely the beginning of a new and wonderful life," Patricia writes.

But the decrees fall faster and stranger. Children can no longer talk to adults, not even their own parents (except in "community

let us know that he loved us," Patricia says. "So did our mother—but he did it by breaking the rules." He did so in small but important ways—wishing Patricia happy birthday, or giving her an affectionate wave of his little finger when she passed by the center's garage, where he worked as a mechanic. "Those things were the glue that held me together through those long periods of silence from them." »

Sister Catherine is the memoir's most unnerving character, chiefly for her capriciousness. The girls never know which side of her they were going to get. Here she covertly brings them dolls to play with; there she devises a brutal new form of abuse she calls "the Big Punisher." "It will be unlike you have ever experienced before," she tells the girls, her green eyes aglint. "It's for the good of your souls."

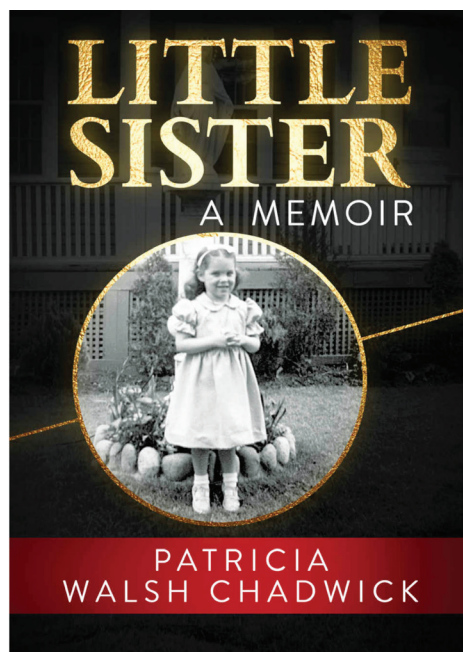
The Big Punisher was a section of garden hose kept in a black leather bag, the better to preserve its aura of secrecy and terror. When it's used on Patricia, she has no idea what her offense was, though the grave accusation is that she laughed "with" a boy during a games period, when it appears she might simply have laughed at the same time. "The first shock of pain practically brought me to the floor," Patricia writes of the Big Punisher's initial blow.

Patricia says that Saint Benedict parents were "truly, truly, oblivious to the abuse" visited upon their children. "I will tell you, many of the kids suffered from PTSD, and many of them have been in therapy. I did not suffer from PTSD. I think I'm a very lucky person that way. Even within my own family, among my siblings, there are those who have much harsher feelings toward the center, toward people there."

It's a measure of Still River's gravitational pull that the "children," Patricia included, still meet there each summer. "We had a reunion just this past Saturday," she says, the first since *Little Sister's* publication. Those who had read the book, to Patricia's surprise, applauded its honesty and thanked her for writing it. The official reaction? "They were not happy," Patricia says of the Saint Benedict community, still extant but in somewhat splintered form. "They have their own belief system about Sister Catherine and about Father Feeney. That's their prerogative. And so they have chosen not to comment officially on the book—in fact, they have chosen to remain silent—but their silence has informed me."

## A DOOR OPENS

There is much more to Patricia's story. We see the great changes of the sixties roll in—Father



even plays a snippet of The Beatles to show the children what "the music of the devil" sounds like. We see the first glimmer of Patricia's sexual awareness, for lack of a better term, since life has not prepared her to comprehend why she's drawn to boys and men. She develops a crush on a Big Brother, thinking it's a secret, but apparently it's all too obvious. "Brother Sebastian has complained about you," Sister Catherine informs her. "He says that you're chasing him." Patricia is all of twelve years old.

The long-range intent for the children of the Saint Benedict Center is for them to become priests and nuns, holy people who carry forth the "no salvation" doctrine. But Patricia is not cutting it. Her infatuation with worldly things, her (principled) disobedient streak, and her next big crush (on the married Brother Basil), are all duly noticed by the hawk-eyed Sister Catherine and her spies, and make her a poor candidate to be a "bride of Christ." On the very day she graduates from high school, in 1966, she is exiled from the Saint Benedict Center.

And so she is saved... right? Because this is a complicated story, we see a young woman whose dreamed-of freedom is simultaneously a nightmare, separated as she is from everyone she knows and loves and forced to make her way in the swamp of evil that is "the outside world." We see that life in the cult was not all negative: Patricia emerged with a fine education, a robust

work ethic and a strong moral compass. And we see people she meets out in the world sometimes behaving as wickedly as Sister Catherine had promised they would. But we also see Patricia enjoying the stuff of freedom, from the black leather miniskirt she wears to parties (she had worn nineteenth-century-style blouses and skirts in Still River) to "Crimson and Clover" playing on her phonograph.

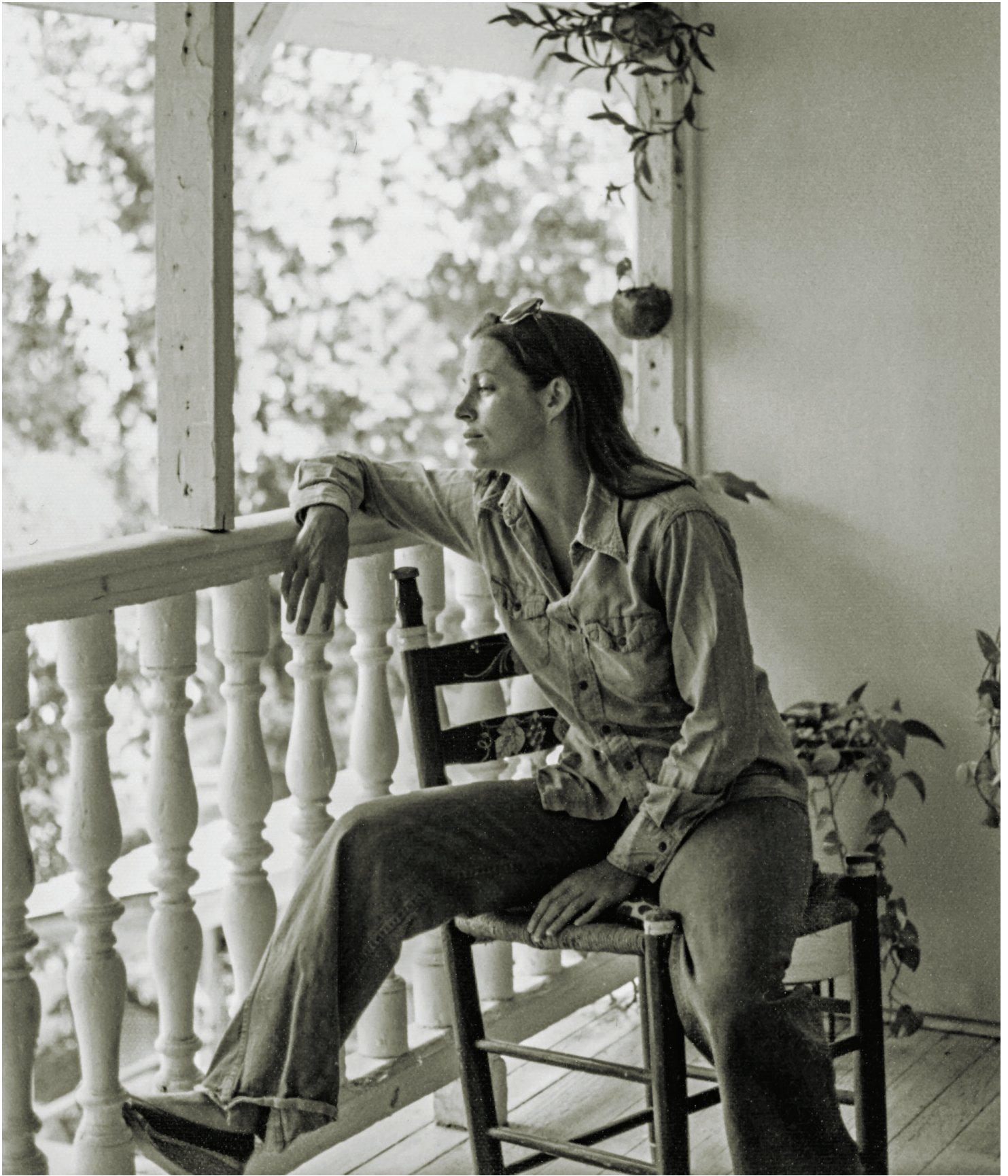
In the end, Patricia's story possesses a sense of cosmic justice. The Saint Benedict Center devolves into unseemly squabbling after Sister Catherine dies in 1968. Patricia takes her first hesitant steps toward fulfilling her dreams—the once-impossible "delusions" of her girlhood. Jim and Betsy Walsh leave the cult and settle in Watertown, where their house becomes a happy refuge for the kids of Still River. Patricia never presses them to explain how they came to be swept up in cult life, but Jim does mention the "snowball" effect of incremental change: By the time you realize what's happened, you're in too deep.

"My father said they didn't want to live the life that was ultimately imposed on them," Patricia says. Decades of family happiness follow Jim and Betsy's departure from Still River. This return to wholeness is why Patricia stresses that her book is not in the vein of *Mommie Dearest*, the memoir of abuse written about Joan Crawford by her daughter Christina. "It is a love story. It is a love story about a family that could not be broken."

Neither could Patricia's faith be broken. She remains a devout Catholic, but not a dogmatic one. She tells a story to explain her faithful uncertainty. "My son, when he was thirteen or fourteen, said to me, 'Mom, I have something to tell you. I think you should know that I'm an atheist.' He's very scientifically oriented. Space, the planets, the age of Earth—all of those things are things that he's always loved. And I said, 'You know what, sweetie? It's all a mystery.'"

And I think that it is all a mystery. That is why we have these religions. They're only man's or woman's interpretations, maybe for their own benefit, and that starts to get into the rules, the regulations. I am free of all that, fortunately. It took a long time, but I am completely free." **G**





CONTRIBUTED

Patricia in Haiti in 1978