

Twisted Stories

A New Decade

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House: New Buddha

“Six hours she’s been sitting there,” observed Foreman, reaching for the metal handle on the glass door.

Shaggy, sandy-haired Chase crossed the threshold into the conference room. “I haven’t seen her blink once. She’s catatonic.”

“Her fingers are drumming on the cane, so she’s fully conscious,” Thirteen noted, sipping coffee at the table.

“The movement’s almost imperceptible,” retorted Foreman, scratching his shaved head while glaring through open vertical blinds at the brunette female in Red Sox jersey and jeans seated on a contoured wooden bench across from House’s office.

Gregory House, M.D., to be exact. Finola Mason had heard every word the infamous diagnostic team uttered, and smiled to herself. She knew them by name, and their qualifications, from studying their licensure files in the New Jersey Medical Board database. Each had unnerving secrets, the combination of which endangered their patients.

Even though those patients survived 98% of the time.

Following multiple unnecessary tests, medications and procedures - including surgeries - proving the group’s “diagnostic” technique amounted to little better than scientific experimentation.

Thus, numerous complaints to the State Attorney’s office.

Why had Dr. Cuddy, enshrined behind louvered office doors, not seemed surprised by the announcement?

Mid-afternoon, and the scruffy leader of this rag-tag crew finally appeared from the elevator, limping on his right leg, supported by a store-bought wooden cane, far inferior to the hand-carved one she loosely gripped with her calloused left hand.

House paused outside the conference room, not glancing at Finola, but staring at the three faces peering past him at the mysterious figure. He spun counter-clockwise and squinted down at the motionless form.

“Is this another case Cuddy’s going to force on me?” he growled.

Chase replied, poking his head into the corridor, “No idea.”

“Better call Wilson. It may almost be too late for chemo.”

Finola sniffed. She’d expected as much.

As an animated discussion of her visible symptoms commenced between the team - within earshot of anyone passing - not a single muscle flinched in her

body. They were debating pancreatic tumors and lymphoma when she abruptly rose and hobbled away.

Stunned voices were audible. "Maybe she's just a visitor," muttered Thirteen, a lock of straight dark hair coiled around her index finger.

"Sitting there since eight this morning?" Foreman hissed. "Not likely."

"One of Wilson's jokes," concluded House, proceeding into his office.

Chase watched Finola disappear down an adjacent corridor. He scanned the bench where she'd sat so long, and plucked a business card from between the slats. His eyes widened as he followed his boss. "I... don't think so."

"Hmm?" House turned, reading the embossed lettering Chase presented. He stiffened. "Foreman, call Cuddy. See if this is legit."

An affirmative response merited a thorough search of Princeton-Plainsboro Teaching Hospital for the official. House himself located her near the Intensive Care Unit waiting room, standing completely still, listening to idle chatter from the nurse's station and watching a heart patient's steadily dripping I.V. through ceiling-high glass.

"A typical investigation involves devouring huge stacks of files and asking hundreds of inane questions," he stated, gazing over her head at a plaque honoring the wing's donors.

Finola countered, "I read the files months ago, and I see no reason to waste my time interviewing liars."

Her candor startled House for a brief second only. "Then, you've prejudged our guilt?"

"I've determined the accuracy of certain complaints regarding HIPAA violations..."

"HIPAA?"

"Former patients of this institution have been contacted, unsolicited, by attorneys wishing to bring cases before the court for malpractice. Research has concluded those attorneys found their potential clients by eavesdropping on your nurses and observing treatment through transparent walls."

House snarled, "You can't blame me for how architects designed the building..."

"But, I can blame you for denigrating patients' religious beliefs, causing them depression at the risk of their health."

"People who place their hope in religion waste valuable energy. You, being a self-righteous Christian, wouldn't understand."

"Another erroneous diagnosis, *Doctor*," breathed Finola, smacking his bad leg with her cane to force him from her path.

His interest piqued, he pursued the woman at a rapid limp around the corner. “You *do* have cancer, and it’s terminal.”

“I’m not a Christian.”

“Jewish, then.”

Her nose twitched. “I’m just this side of atheist, actually.”

“Agnostic?”

“I’m positive there’s no God, but there *is* a force...”

House’s orbs shot skyward. “Oh, no, not that New Age garbage.”

Finola slowed, favoring him with a withering frown. “You’re the one who’s judgmental. The force is nature, capable of decimating humanity - and almost ready to do it, given how we’ve ravaged the planet.”

Elevator doors parted, and she stepped into the empty car. House joined her, unbidden.

She bristled. “You intend to shadow my every move, now you know...”

“You *do* have cancer.”

“You’re like a dog worrying a bone about that, but you’ve not mentioned my leg.”

“A shattered kneecap, injury sustained some years past. You’ve grown used to the pain...”

“Or abuse vicodin, as you have for your own injury?”

House’s discomfort clouded his face for an instant. “How’d it happen?”

“A policeman’s baton had a disagreement with my friends and I during a college anti-nuke protest.”

“Not so long ago, then.”

“Twenty-two years, seven months and three days, but thanks for the compliment.”

She didn’t look that old, to be sure.

“A good orthopedic surgeon...” he speculated.

“I thought I was invincible in those days. Thought it would heal on its own.”

Finola Mason exited on the hospital’s ground level. House reached to press a button, instead glimpsing Lisa Cuddy surreptitiously signaling him from the entrance to her suite.

Her low-cut red silk blouse and clinging black skirt beckoned to him, as well.

“If you’re hinting I should ask you to the annual fundraising dinner, I’ve already made plans to be in Las Vegas that weekend,” House sneered, as she rounded her executive desk.

“Do you have to be so obnoxious every minute?” snapped the dean of medicine. “Did Ms. Mason give you any indication of her findings?”

“Something about HIPAA violations. She’s gone, so what does it matter?”

Cuddy sagged in her chair. “She’ll be back.”

“What makes you think...”

“Her report on those HIPAA violations, and certain other charges, could close us down... permanently.” Brown eyes bored into House’s soul. “You’ve got to clean up this mess.”

“It’s not my mess.”

“Oh, yes, it is! I’ve tolerated your unorthodox methods, because most of your patients live. Their families - and the insurance companies - obviously don’t appreciate the huge medical bills resulting from too many mistaken diagnoses before you hit on the right illness.”

The lanky physician shrugged. “What do you suggest? She’s cynical, like me. She’ll expect us to initiate damage control, showering her with insincere flattery, gourmet dinners and expensive wine...”

“Be truthful, for once.”

“She’s already branded us liars.”

Rising, frustrated, Cuddy snatched her wool coat off the rack and whisked out the door with the warning, “You’ve got 24 hours to think of something.”

Less, in reality.

Finola Mason hadn’t felt well in years. Both breast cancer and heart disease had prematurely claimed her relatives, but her reviews of countless medical facilities had created an abiding mistrust of doctors and hospitals. She had submitted to no tests to determine the origins of the incessant fatigue and persistent achiness. When her strength abandoned her two blocks from the hospital, she sank on a bus bench and buried her head in her hands.

Awaking in a stark cubicle, scented by antiseptic.

The first words she distinguished from the frighteningly youthful emergency room nurse: “Page House.”

Her companion replied, “I think he’s gone for the day.”

“I saw him ten minutes ago refilling his coffee mug in the staff lounge.”

Was it a sarcastic grin the diagnostician sported when he arrived bedside? Finola discounted the expression as a distortion of her tired eyes.

“The paramedics report witnesses saw you collapse,” he grumbled, reading from a metal chart.

“Brilliant observation, *Doctor*.”

“Interesting cane.”

“My grandfather made it for me, after...” She squirmed uncomfortably on the gurney. “I killed a man with it once.”

House tested its weight. “I can see how.”

“Watch the latch!” She grabbed it from him protectively.

Without touching, he examined it closely. “Latch?”

Gripping the scrolled knob, she flipped a hidden catch, separating the stem from a razor-sharp short sword.

Did House’s orbs flicker with envy?

“Why’d you kill him?” he murmured.

“His dental practice was suspected of insurance fraud. When I didn’t accept his bribe to bury the charges, he pursued... more drastic options.”

“Self-defense?”

Finola nodded; a stabbing sensation ripped through her torso. She must’ve grimaced, because House’s demeanor immediately transformed.

“How bad?”

“This excruciating ecstasy? It’s so integrated into my being, I barely notice.”

“Months?”

“A decade or better.”

He flashed a penlight in her eyes. “It can’t be cancer, then.”

“Or, it could be cancer, *and...*”

“Are you a doctor, yourself? Your business card didn’t...”

“The anti-nuke incident got me expelled from Dartmouth. Ever since, I’ve done a lot of reading and... first-hand research.”

House ran oddly gentle fingers over her arms and legs, which is when Finola realized she’d been stripped of her Red Sox jersey in favor of a thin hospital gown.

He listened to her heart, and lifted her into a sitting position to thump her chest. He appeared genuinely concerned with her well being, in contrast to reports she’d reviewed.

Her curly head once again resting on the meager pillow, he scrutinized her silently.

“Well?” she prompted.

“I... don’t know.”

“Admirable admission, Doctor. If you’ll return my clothes, I’ll be going...”

“You’re in no condition to walk, even with that cane,” he admonished. “If I had to guess, I’d say you have less than a week to live.”

“Without knowing the cause? I’ve heard your tactic is to order a battery of tests...” quipped Finola.

“When treatment is feasible, yes.”

“But, since my situation is hopeless...”

“All we can do is make you as comfortable as possible.”

“I’ve no plans to die comfortably.” She wrenched herself off the stiff mattress, shifting her legs over the edge while gritting against the agony.

He restrained her - easily - as she lurched toward the glass. “Do you have family in the city? I’ll drive you...”

“On your motorcycle?”

“I...”

“I’ve never ridden a motorcycle,” the investigator confessed. “With my knee, I was always too scared.”

“The way people drive their cars, I’m scared, too, some days.”

“Maybe you’re smarter than I thought.”

“I’ll have the nurse help you dress, and I’ll...”

“Honestly, Doctor, I have nowhere to go. My only cousins live in Kansas.”

“You were staying in a hotel?” queried House.

“No, I drove from Boston.”

“You work for the Jersey State Attorney, but you live in Boston?”

“A contract player, for hire by whichever New England entity requires my services.”

“It’d be a long, uncomfortable ride to Boston on my bike...”

“Once around the block would be enough, before I head north.”

“I can’t let you do that.”

“You can’t stop me.”

“I can have you arrested, if it comes to that. You’d be a danger on the roads - not only to yourself, but to others.”

“Trapped me behind the eight-ball, eh?”

“Get dressed, and I’ll run you to Wilson’s.”

“Wilson? I heard you mention that name earlier.”

“We share a condo, but it’s basically his,” House explained. “You’ll be my guest.”

“No, thanks. There are plenty of B&B’s, and I’m not some poor slob...”

“Then, I’ll be your guest.”

Weakness claiming her limbs, Finola slumped against the gurney. “What are you trying to do?”

“You shouldn’t be left alone.”

“But, you’re the *almighty* House. You leave your flunkies to tend the patients... Unless, Dr. Cuddy has ordered you to be on your best behavior...”

“Cuddy will be the first to confide my best behavior is nonexistent,” House acknowledged. “You’ve been honest with me, and I’ll respect that. I can’t just turn you loose on the streets and move on to the next patient.”

“You’ve done it to others.”

“Most people admitted to the ICU will do anything to stay alive, because they fear death. Others are so overwhelmed by their real or imaginary pain, they see suicide as the only form of relief. You... don’t seem to care, one way or the other.”

“That’s because I know, once nature decides to obliterate humanity, nothing we’ve said or done in our species’ fleeting history will mean a damned thing.”

House’s bearded visage tilted slightly. “You’ve got to meet Wilson. Listening to you will confirm I’m not as crazy as he thinks I am.”

Resigned, she sighed. “Get your coat. I’ll meet you in the lobby.”

The spring evening jaunt on a finely-tuned Triumph motorcycle revived Finola to a degree. Up the elevator in a renovated apartment building, House flung open the door on a bizarrely pristine living room, where a gas fire burned on the grate.

Wilson shuffled in from the kitchen, a striped tea towel around his waist substituting as an apron. “You were supposed to be home two hours ago...” He halted in mid-sentence, noticing the visitor. “What the hell...”

“Finola Mason, this is James Wilson,” said House with undisguised pleasure.

Finola crossed the polished pine at a dignified pace, extending her hand. “James, it’s good to see you again.”

Wilson clenched the woman’s fingers gingerly, drawing her into an affectionate embrace. “What are you doing here?”

House grunted, “Didn’t Cuddy tell you...”

“She didn’t mention Finola by name.”

“How do you know each other?”

“My mother and his attended the same high school,” commented Finola. “The debate club would hold their own reunion every few years, which included a family picnic...”

Wilson barely prevented her from crashing to the floor when she fainted. House assisted him in awkwardly maneuvering her onto the sofa, pulling a crocheted afghan over her shivering form.

“She should be in the ICU,” chided the oncologist.

“She was in the ER, but refused to stay. I give her a week. How ‘bout you?”

Evaluating her pulse and prying open her eyelids, Wilson groaned. “Maybe two days.” He straightened, wiping his hands on the towel. “She should’ve been sedated...”

“She’s more stubborn than I.”

“Then, she sleeps in your bed.”

“Yet, you hugged her like an old friend.” House poured himself a tumbler of whiskey.

“Ever since we were kids, I’ve felt sorry for her,” commented Wilson, retracing his steps to the kitchen when a timer sounded. “I remember her mother telling mine that Finola scored in the genius range on an I.Q. test. She couldn’t relate to others her age so, at those intolerable picnics, we’d play chess far from the sack races and softball games. I’d let her talk, and marveled at her insights.”

“Like nature retaliating against humanity?”

“No. Energy morphing into matter, the potential of space travel...”

“Sounds like she should’ve worked for NASA.”

“Last time I saw her, she planned to graduate high school at 16. Had a full ride scholarship to Dartmouth.”

“Where her knee was shattered by an overzealous cop during a protest rally.” House tasted marinara sauce simmering on the stove. “After dinner, break out that carved marble chess set. If you can get her talking, maybe we can figure a way...”

“She’ll be lucky to sit up, much less eat.”

“Don’t underestimate her. From what Thirteen told me, she sat outside my office for six hours until I showed.”

Wilson acquiesced. House preened in triumph when Finola limped from the sofa to the dining room table.

“Something smells delicious,” she hailed. “I don’t get many home-cooked meals.”

“It’s important for... someone in your condition to eat healthy and regularly, even if your stomach rejects the idea,” advised Wilson.

“I try, James. Lately, though...” Raising a fork to her mouth, she savored delicate spices. “Who taught you to cook like this?”

“His ex-wives,” House muttered facetiously.

“Then, you two aren’t...”

Both men laughed at the unstated accusation.

Finola apologized, “Sorry, I didn’t mean...”

“No offense taken,” Wilson chuckled. “You’d have no way of knowing how many women House...”

“Shut up,” rumbled the diagnostician.

Finola exhibited sufficient strength to help Wilson wash the dishes, before settling in the living room where House had arranged chess pieces on the inlaid coffee table.

“You still play?” she inquired.

Wilson replied, “Not many worthy opponents these days.”

“What about you, Dr. House?”

“I’m more into video games.”

“Nonsense. I’ll play you both.”

House squinted. “How...”

“Everyone who owns a fancy chess set has an old cheap one tucked in a closet somewhere. Right, James?”

Wilson nodded.

While bishops, rooks and pawns moved with precision - awing House and Wilson - the conversation flowed freely.

“You want to know what I’ve been doing?” Finola snickered. “I could recount the sordid details of the past twenty-odd years, James, but why? My life is a mere speck on the fabric of time. Some might rate their significance by their loves and losses; love is the greatest fallacy, compounded by the hypocrisy of religion.”

Wilson prodded, “When last we spoke, you were studying Buddhism.”

“Buddhism, as a philosophy, is sound. Siddhartha had sensible ideas about many aspects of life - right thinking, in particular. A person who clears the mind of extraneous crap can accomplish anything. Unfortunately, the Buddha’s followers skewed his teachings and added prayers, rituals and deities. They - like every organized religion - rendered simple truths incomprehensible, smothering them with bullshit.” She knocked House’s queen off its black square. “Checkmate.”

“In seven moves?” House protested.

“She’s done it in less,” affirmed Wilson.

Finola grinned, pointing toward a baby grand Steinway in the corner.

“While I finish off our mutual friend, here, why don’t you play something?”

“How do you know I play?” House wondered.

“Because James doesn’t. His talents lay... in other areas. And, the callouses on your fingertips suggest you have a guitar hidden somewhere, too.”

“You make my callouses sound disfiguring.”

“They’re obvious during... examinations.”

House rose. “What would you like to hear?”

“Gershwin.”

“I don’t...”

Finola wilted distinctly. “Damn. I scheduled the trip here specifically to coincide with tonight’s symphony concert. They were playing Gershwin’s *Concerto in F*, which I absolutely love. Because of... this uncooperative body, I’ve missed it...”

Wilson extracted the daily newspaper from a magazine rack. He selected the entertainment section and scanned the pages. “As I remembered,” he beamed.

“What?” asked House.

“Tomorrow, the symphony is presenting a matinee. We’ll get tickets and go together.”

In that interval, Finola made her final move to checkmate Wilson’s king. “Grand idea, James. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’d better call it a night.”

Wilson escorted Finola to House’s bedroom, loaning her a pair of his own pajamas. Rejoining House in the living room, he was met with an annoyed scowl.

“You know those matinees are for senior citizens from the nursing homes,” House remonstrated.

“I know.”

“You can’t buy tickets without showing I.D.”

“Isn’t the orchestra’s music director on the hospital board?”

House paused. “I never noticed.”

“If he is, Cuddy can pull a few strings.”

“For you, maybe. Not for me.”

“True.” Wilson plucked the cordless phone off the end table. “When she learns you brought your latest patient home...”

“Technically, I’m doing what Cuddy wanted: sucking up to the woman who could close the hospital’s doors.”

An unexpected crash shook the floor, and both men moved toward the bedroom. Wilson pushed open the door to see Finola - baggy pajamas drooping off bony shoulders - propping up a shelf with quivering arms. A ceramic statuette had shattered on the maple chest beneath. House limped past Wilson, dropping his cane and hoisting the shelf back onto its brackets.

Finola blushed. “Sorry. I stumbled while changing and bumped...”

“Your eyesight has deteriorated in recent weeks?” he probed.

“Especially when I’m tired.”

“Let me help you, then.”

Wilson withdrew, leaving House to guide their guest to the bed, which he turned down for her. Once she stretched out on the mattress, he tucked the quilt up to her neck.

“You must’ve been a good father,” Finola remarked wearily.

“I’ve... never had children.”

“Too bad.”

“The pillows okay?”

“Perfect.”

House retrieved his cane. “See you in the morning.”

“Greg!”

A desperate note tinged Finola’s vibrant contralto, prompting the physician’s head to whip toward her. “Can I get you something?”

“If I go to sleep, will I wake up tomorrow?”

“I can’t guarantee *I* will,” he responded lamely. “I thought you weren’t afraid to die.”

“Up to now, I knew I wouldn’t. It’s possible to hold on until you connect with the one person who understands truth the same way, because you want to be sure the wisdom doesn’t die with you. For me, you are that person.”

House drew a pensive breath.

She relaxed. “You’ve seen people die. What happens?”

“Their heart stops beating, brain activity ceases, and they stop breathing.”

“Then?”

“Then, nothing. Most times, we wheel them to the morgue for an autopsy.”

Finola managed a tiny smile. “You’ll want to autopsy me, won’t you?”

“Yes.” He might’ve been confessing to felony murder, the word ripped from his lips under torture.

“Too bad I’ll never know what killed me.”

“Does it matter?”

“Not really. From the moment of birth, we begin to die. Every action we take contributes to that end.”

House sat near her feet. “Then, why live at all?”

“I’ve puzzled over that question for thirty years. We have no choice in being born. Most people don’t realize their existence means nothing - no differently than wild animals. Lions live to eat, sleep, defecate and mate. As they

bask in the African sun, they don't know it's all futility..." Her eyelids fluttered and closed.

House smoothed the quilt on reflex, his core shaken by Finola's harsh take on reality. Such notions had to be sparked by depression, a depression resulting from protracted illness.

"She's talked like that for years," Wilson stated, folding the faded chess board and tucking it in a cardboard box with the meticulously positioned plastic pieces.

"Lucky she never wound up institutionalized."

"She spent a summer in treatment when she was thirteen."

House shuddered, dropping onto the sofa, where he'd be sleeping that night. "After the concert tomorrow, I'll take her back to the hospital."

"I called Cuddy. You can pick up the tickets at the will-call window."

"You're not coming?"

Wilson smirked evilly. "She's *your* patient."

House stiffened. "It's your job on the line, too. Besides, if she collapses, I can't hold on to her and keep myself vertical..."

"I was just kidding. Of course, I'm going."

The diagnostician's muscles unknotted, and he reclined on the cushions. "I won't enjoy it."

"Don't underestimate Finola. Music is her one joy, and that joy is infectious."

"How would you..."

"Those reunion picnics. They'd usually have a band playing part of the afternoon. She radiated happiness listening to the old songs."

"At least, she'll die in a good mood."

Wilson groaned. "You never change."

"It's part of my charm."

Saturday dawned bright and chilly. When House wandered groggily into his room, the vacant - albeit rumpled - bed didn't immediately register as odd. He'd fully dressed and was pouring himself a cup of coffee before Finola's absence broke through to his conscious mind.

He burst in on Wilson, showering in the steamy bathroom. "I thought I locked the door," the oncologist bellowed.

"Not much of a lock, if it can be jimmed with a bent paper clip."

"I do like some privacy, House."

"She's gone, Wilson."

A dripping brown head poked between the curtains. "What?"

House merely shrugged.

The pair spent an hour searching the neighborhood and interrogating taxi drivers. No one had seen a limping woman in Red Sox jersey and jeans. By chance, passing the library, they noticed her brunette head bent over a computer keyboard.

“We were worried sick,” scolded Wilson, sidling up behind her while House lingered near the entrance. “What in hell are you doing?”

“Finishing my report.”

“How can you, when your assessment is incomplete?”

“As long as your precious Princeton-Plainsboro remains open, do you really care? Besides, this last pay check will cover the cremation expense after you guys are done rummaging through my innards.”

House approached. “Finola, don’t...”

“Greg!” When she swiveled on the chair, her curl-framed, drawn countenance beamed. “I owe you a huge debt of gratitude!”

“For what?”

“Your bed. I haven’t rested so well in months.”

“Yet, you were up quite early,” he declared solemnly.

“I’m always up early. It’s the only time of day I have my full strength.”

“You don’t have to falsify your data out of gratitude to me.”

She chuckled. “I’m not falsifying anything. Compared to some hospitals I’ve seen, Cuddy simply needs to remind the nurses not to discuss patients within earshot of strangers. You, personally, need to be more careful how many holes you bore into people’s skulls without being certain it’s necessary.”

“I’ll... take that under advisement.”

Finola shifted toward the computer and typed a few last notes on the screen. Clicking “Submit”, the entries blinked and vanished. She logged out, and clutched her cane. “Full strength doesn’t last long, these days,” she lamented.

Wilson and House offered their assistance, and she let them lift her off the molded seat. His companions limping on either side, the oncologist suddenly felt like sandwich meat.

Preparing for the concert at the condo, Finola borrowed one of House’s dress shirts to replace her jersey. “It’s my tradition to dress to the nines for these shows,” she explained. “I bought a new outfit specifically...”

“And forgot it at home?” pondered House.

“Oh, no. It’s in the trunk of my car, parked in the hospital lot.”

“Give Wilson your keys, and...”

“No need. It would... take hours to get into it... now.” She fumbled with a button; House completed the task.

“Wilson made reservations for lunch before...”

“I’d rather have a bowl of soup here. A large meal will put me to sleep before the conductor takes the stage.”

The trio chatting at the kitchen table, House detected a tremor in Finola’s hands as she forced herself to hold the spoon. Wilson’s ringing cell phone prematurely ended their conversation.

“I have to go,” he announced, snapping closed the device’s cover. “One of my patients developed a severe infection...”

House’s withering stare didn’t faze his friend. Draining a glass of orange juice, Wilson made good his escape before House could accuse him of engineering the call.

“It’s just us for the concert, then,” he stated.

“Good. We can take the motorcycle.”

The pair discovered Wilson’s machinations upon their arrival at the lavish auditorium. Only two tickets awaited them at the will-call window. House nearly shredded them in irritation. Emaciated fingers laid upon his arm brought his eyes in contact with serene green orbs.

“James and I have opposing views of life. He knew his presence would make me uncomfortable. I’m sorry if you’re distressed...”

Uncharacteristically, House patted Finola’s wrist. “It’s not that. His... jokes get on my nerves.”

“We’ll forget about him, and enjoy the music.”

Presenting the stubs to an usher, they were escorted to the sixth row center, two on the aisle. Their canes became tangled between the seats, and hit the floor with a clatter which brought the angry stares of elders on all sides.

House finally slipped his beneath his shoes. “I’m curious, Finola.”

“About Gershwin? There’s a decent biography included in the programme...”

“No, about you. If what human beings do has no meaning in the final analysis, why do you love music?”

“There is beauty in nature, which is transitory but undeniable,” she whispered as the lights dimmed. “It will outlast our species and be appreciated by the next to evolve. Music is beauty of a different kind, equally transitory and equally undeniable. It, too, will last, whether as a melody on the wind or the chirping of birds, who can say?”

Though the theatre remained dark except for the stage, House could see Finola's delighted smile throughout the performance. She squeezed his arm eagerly as the guest pianist attacked the ivory keys with gusto.

Those last ounces of her strength dissipated before the standing ovation. She couldn't join the enthusiastic crowd hailing the musicians.

"I'd better get you back..."

"To the hospital," she stammered, tears of desperation dampening her sallow cheeks.

"You don't have to..."

"I've been enough trouble for you and James. Time for me to conform to standard practices for those in my condition."

House glared at her while the audience shuffled toward the exits, en masse. "Why, after a life of nonconformity, would you knuckle under at the last?"

"Greg, I would like nothing better than to find a sturdy tree, sit at its base, and expire with my eyes open to a gorgeous spring afternoon. The authorities wouldn't look kindly..."

"To hell with the authorities."

The Triumph motorcycle meandered through the city, braking at an expansive park. Birds busily fluttered between the trees and ground, snatching bits of twigs and trash to create their nests. Finola dismounted from the saddle and hobbled unsteadily toward a budding walnut, where a wrought iron and wood bench caught the full afternoon sun.

"Sit with me," she urged House, who pretended to wipe water droplet stains from the British flag painted on his gas tank.

He didn't make it to the seat. Finola hadn't been settled thirty seconds when a flock of sparrows descended, surrounding her. They sat on her lap, hands and at her feet. One even perched on her left shoulder. She managed a peaceful glance toward House and a final inhalation of fresh air before her shoulders sagged and her curly brunette head drooped.

Simultaneously, the sparrows burst into flight.

An ambulance transported Finola Mason to Princeton-Plainsboro Teaching Hospital, the gurney wheeled directly to the morgue. Wilson joined Foreman, Thirteen, Taub and Chase as House performed the autopsy.

Usually placid and insensitive, the team saw him swallow hard during the examination of her organs.

"She should've been dead five years ago," he reported. "Her tissue was decaying from within, as if she were already buried."

Chase interjected, "That extent of damage occurs only from high voltage electrical shocks... or being struck by lightning."

"What kept her alive?" asked Thirteen.

"Her mind," House responded. "A very unique application of the Buddha's right thinking." He contemplated the cranial MRI film illuminated by fluorescent ceiling fixtures. "She went on until her brain deteriorated to the point she couldn't maintain control of her body."

Wilson countered, "If she viewed life as a futile journey toward death, why didn't she just..."

"She wanted to pass the truth of the music to a kindred spirit."

Taub neared the table, intrigued by the blackened arteries and heart. "This is something totally new. The medical community..."

"Write a paper on it," scoffed House.

Leaving surgical instruments projecting from the corpse, he exited the chamber. The remaining doctors silently deliberated this uncharacteristic reaction.

They couldn't have guessed House had been deeply moved by a woman his equal in intelligence, who clarified his own spiritual skepticism in ways no book could have done. He would've given anything for another day - or a few hours - in her company.

At Wilson's condo, he hung her carved sword/cane over his bed.

Re-union

Receiving the silver key and torn sheet of paper in that Saturday's mail puzzled Tom Connors, especially since he'd only visited the address scrawled on the faded lines once, five decades earlier. He vaguely recollected the plantation-style mansion overlooking Lawrence Lake, where he'd almost drowned.

He doubted anyone else recalled that day. Seated on the balcony of his lush New York apartment, he gazed down at Central Park. The family friends who'd lived in the old house must've long since died. Or, having no children themselves, had they bequeathed the upstate property to him in their will?

Had that been the case, the key would've been delivered with a plethora of legal documents, not a jagged scrap from a spiral notebook.

Still, his curiosity aroused, he showered and dressed, requesting the valet prepare his Porche for the drive north.

Such a gorgeous spring morning, the breeze refreshed Tom as he meandered country roads, trying to reconnect with the main thoroughfare after taking a wrong turn. Landmarks had changed in fifty years, but he didn't mind being temporarily lost, given the glorious landscape of rolling hills dotted with blooming wildflowers.

Finally steering onto the potholed gravel drive, a metal mail box crooked on its post, Tom swallowed a lump in his throat. The fears of an eight-year-old boy knotted his stomach, and he contemplated stopping the car to vomit in the bushes.

No other vehicles occupied space in front of the columned structure. Curtains hung open on the windows, and furniture was visible within, but no movement.

No human movement.

A tiger-striped cat sunned itself on one sill, seemingly the home's sole resident.

Climbing stone steps to arched double doors, Tom knocked, not expecting an answer. When he slid the key into the deadbolt, the tumblers resisted. Hinges squeaked when he pushed the heavy wood panels inward.

The entry hall reeked of cleaning fluid, and not a speck of dust marred the polished finish of antique chairs and tables. In that instant, Tom thought someone might be playing an elaborate joke on him; still, he ambled from room to room, inspecting bric-a-brac and family photos in ornate gold frames on fireplace mantles.

He discovered the notebook on the library's desk blotter. Matching the address with the remnants of the first page might've been the last piece of a puzzle.

Instead, it was the first.

Page after page of neat script qualified as neither a chronological memoir nor idle ramblings. Tom sat in the purple velvet chair for two hours, perusing this philosophical text, awed by the insight of the unknown author.

One profound quote: “Rather than nurture wholeness within their own selves by connecting with the universal consciousness, 99.99% of human beings refuse to accept their specific reality. They resort to alcohol, drugs or other addictions to dull their perception, embark on shallow relationships or shun responsibility in favor of the blind faith required by organized religion.”

Mention was made several times about “jolts of enlightenment”, compared to being struck by lightning. Tom, never imagining himself a spiritual man, shuddered at the realization he’d experienced that exact sensation the day he’d been rescued from death’s door a mere 100 yards down the slope.

Closing the tattered cover, he migrated toward an enclosed porch, running the dwelling’s entire length and offering an unrivaled view of the lake. The decor here differed from the European fixtures inside: starkly beautiful oriental paintings, vases of tulips and daffodils, and a life-sized statue of a meditating woman.

He contemplated his reflection in the spotless glass. He looked far older than just shy of sixty - thanks to a receding hairline and mostly white beard. Deepset wrinkles around his brown eyes and along tanned cheeks compounded the problem.

The heart attack he barely avoided when a quiet contralto spoke aged him another ten years in a flash. His knees buckled; he gripped the moulding to keep himself vertical.

Yet, scanning his surroundings after a few deep breaths, he couldn’t determine the source of the greeting.

“This isn’t my idea of funny,” he barked.

“It’s not meant to be.”

The statement wasn’t transmitted through hidden speakers; the absence of even slight electrical interference made that impossible. Tom paced the length of the terrace twice, locating no one nor anything to account for the voice.

He groaned, “I’ve finally gone mad.”

“That’s encouraging.”

His head whipped around in time to detect a miniscule shift in the statue’s posture. He crossed the tile floor in three strides, bending to glare at the white robe-clad figure atop an oversized red pillow.

She blinked, and he staggered backward.

“Damn you, woman!”

“Sorry. I thought you knew...”

Tom recovered quickly, fists clenched. “What’s your game?”

“Life is no game.”

“Ain’t that the truth!”

“I figured you were past due with yours.”

“With my what?”

“Your life.”

He headed for the door. “I’m not into verbal gymnastics, and I don’t have time...”

“Tom, wait.”

He paused as she stretched supple limbs and rose. She floated like a butterfly toward him, taking his hand in hers. “Give me five minutes.”

“Okay,” he reluctantly agreed.

She led him outside, along a stone path to the water’s edge. “You remember this place?”

“Too often, it haunts my dreams.”

“You remember what you saw when you opened your eyes after...”

He ruminated briefly. “It wasn’t so much what I saw, as what I felt. My brain was a complete blank, like the water had washed away everything I knew...”

“You were one with the universe for a split second, before your ordinary conscious mind reclaimed dominance.”

“What’s your point?”

She sank on the sand. “Tom, very few people ever have the experience you did. Siddhartha Guatama, better known as the Buddha, sat beneath a tree for 40 days, starving himself, to achieve it. He tried to teach others, only to have his wisdom mutilated by those who could never understand the union’s sublime beauty. Others fear the implications, ignore their potential...”

“That’s why you dragged me two hundred miles...”

“I didn’t drag you anywhere. I sent an invitation, and you accepted.”

“Who *are* you?”

“Names and labels are so limiting. Suffice it to say I’m a human being.”

Her continued evasiveness increased Tom’s frustration. “What do you *do*, then?”

“Very little, so as not to disturb the tenuous balance of nature.”

“Are you saying you’re unemployed?”

“Can you honestly say being employed benefits the world in any way, besides circulating worthless goods and currency from hand to hand?”

His jaw dropped, but he decided against prolonging the argument. Some of what he'd read in the notebook - hers? he wondered - touched the depths of his soul, mired in the twisted ethics and legal wrangling of corporate investments. He frequently ended his days with a glass of wine, pondering whether the repetitive routine meant anything in the greater scheme of things...

"Trust your gut," she advised. "If you feel the need to walk away from the office in favor of truth, there's always a place for you here."

A tempting offer. "But, why me?"

"Of all the people I've encountered, you came the closest..."

"How did we... *encounter* each other?"

"Think about how you nearly drowned."

Again, a pause. "There were a bunch of kids playing volleyball in the water. I wanted to play, too, but my dad told me to stay near the picnic table. I waded into the shallows while my parents were in the house, and slipped on a rock..."

Still uncertain, he stared at the woman.

"I was one of those kids. I held your head above water until two friends carried you to shore. Had I reached you quicker, you wouldn't have..." She shrugged. "I owed you this."

"Owed me? I don't..."

"My priorities changed that day, how I lived my life. I worked my fingers to the bone for charities and schools, aching to give my life purpose. The harder I tried, the less changed. That was when I realized I could only change myself. I came back here, and have never left."

"You want me to do the same?" Tom retorted.

"Wasn't that event your underlying motivation to amass fortunes for people: to make their lives more fulfilling?"

"I... suppose."

"Didn't work, did it?"

"No. I'm constantly hearing how unhappy my clients are, how they need more and more money to buy a bigger yacht, new cars, another house..."

She queried, "Have any of them died?"

"A few."

"What happens to their money and possessions?"

"They're sold, or passed down to ungrateful children who share the same greedy attitude."

"Like dogs fighting over fresh meat."

"Exactly."

"Be a human being again, Tom."

She patted his arm, and he gazed into twinkling violet orbs.

“I... can’t.”

Without reentering the house, he returned to his Porsche. Not once did he glance over his shoulder to see her reaction.

He’d sped an hour south before pulling into a gas station to refuel and buy a soda. The sugary carbonation tasted sour on his tongue. For a split second, his mind went blank, and he grasped how sour every aspect of his life would be from that point forward.

Unless he reconnected with the peace of that moment a second prior to spewing brackish water from constricted lungs, knowing he wouldn’t die.

He cranked the steering wheel 180 degrees and pressed the accelerator.

A simple dinner awaited him on the terrace and, together, they watched the sun set over a mirror-calm lake.

Disconnected

Hannah Richter scoured bird droppings off the wrought iron balcony railing. French doors wide, the master bedroom received an influx of fresh air as a summer breeze wafted over the verdant hill crowned by its fairy mound. This early in the day, absolute silence reigned across the Irish countryside, except for birds twittering and the occasional lowing of cattle.

And Gershwin blaring from stereo speakers in the kitchen.

Music lightened the burden of polishing and mopping, and no one lived close enough to complain.

The joys of living alone.

The middle-aged woman's sole regret about her situation: the dwelling's size. When she'd accepted the housekeeping position, she thought United States Senator Gregory O'Keefe had been joking about his family's "ancestral manor house". Even the most affluent Irish citizens of centuries past had occupied modest homes; this stone edifice dwarfed them all.

Furnished with antiques bought new, Hannah hadn't bothered to remove dust covers upon her arrival the previous winter. The Senator retained ownership of the estate per his father's dying wish, but seldom visited. Rather than let the buildings fall to ruin, he hired someone to reside on the property and maintain it.

Previous employees had quit after a year or so, disheartened by the imposed isolation. Well off the beaten track in County Cavan, between Cootehill and Tullyvin near the junction of the Annalee and Dromore Rivers, opportunities to meet far-flung neighbors were rare. Without a predisposition toward solitude, circumstances proved intolerable.

Hannah, though, had yearned for a hermit's life more than two decades.

Dropping her cleaning rag in the soapy bucket, she grabbed the broom and headed indoors. *Rhapsody in Blue* reverberated through lifeless rooms, and she smiled. The consummate tempo to wing-step down a wide marble staircase to the ground floor...

She preferred that descent to sliding down the carved bannister.

Which was why she wore old dancing shoes around the house, instead of sneakers or sandals, and her favorite space was the expansive ballroom.

Perfectly in time with the beat, not a splash landing on the stone, she recreated a routine performed on a college stage in her youth. Five steps from the bottom, however, she halted awkwardly and lost her balance.

A man - resembling more an aging bantam rooster with his squat physique, wavy red mane and rugged visage - stood in the foyer, gazing suspiciously at her.

Quickly recovering her composure, Hannah snapped, "What the devil are you doing here?"

"I'm the guest of Senator O'Keefe," replied a gravelly baritone above the music.

"Impossible. I've had no word..."

"Because your phone is disconnected, and you obviously don't check the mailbox." He tossed a pile of envelopes on the oak sideboard.

Hannah blushed. "I..."

"Never mind. I'm tired after me flight and the drive from Dublin. Is there a bedroom with clean sheets..."

"All the bedrooms have clean sheets," the housekeeper barked. "There are even towels in the bathrooms, and hot water."

"No need to be snippy."

"I have every right to be snippy. You could be a burglar, concocting a vast lie in order to rob the place..."

Stubby fingers extracted a folded sheet of paper from his double-breasted suit. "This is a copy of the Senator's invitation."

"Does me no good. I've never seen the Senator's signature, so I couldn't tell if it's forged."

"A real hard-ass, aren't you?"

"No, just protective of the boss' belongings."

"Would it make a difference if I told you me name is Tom Plunkett?"

"Not unless you have identification to prove it."

He did - both a passport and Illinois drivers license. Hannah, still doubtful, set aside the bucket and broom, and wiped her hands on the backside of her jeans. Removing the black bandanna covering her tawny curls, she inspected the documents for signs of tampering.

She conceded their authenticity. "What reason would the youngest winner of the Nobel Prize for Physics have to come here?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but I just finished a seven-year research project at Purdue University, and I need a rest."

"I apologize for being so... obnoxious. There hasn't been so much as a knock at the door in the eight months I've held this post."

"It's okay." The gruffness in his voice diminished. "After everyone from government flunkies to lobbyists and ambitious scientists pestered me day-in, day-out, a little peace and quiet will help me nerves."

"Why were they pestering you?"

“Because I perfected a technique to destroy buildings without killing human beings.”

This statement stunned Hannah. She stammered, “Do you... have any luggage?”

“The taxi driver left me bags under the portico.”

Fetching them, she led him up to the master bedroom. She pointed out the bathroom along the corridor, then retreated toward the servants’ stairs.

“What time is lunch?” he called.

She spun. “Whenever you feel like fixing yourself a sandwich.”

“You don’t cook?”

“It’s... not part of my job description.”

“I’ll pay you to prepare me meals.”

So much for her own peace and quiet. “I don’t cook for myself.”

“Nearest restaurant I saw was five miles down the road, and you don’t have a car. How do you live?”

“Peanut butter and jelly.”

“I’m allergic to peanuts.”

“Figures, you being from the Bronx.”

Plunkett’s right eyebrow arched. “Brooklyn.”

“Close enough.”

“How’d you know...”

“I grew up in Queens.”

“You don’t sound like it.”

“I went to college in California.”

“I’ve traveled around the world. It’s not that easy to lose the accent.”

“For you, maybe,” Hannah scoffed. “The first rule for communication majors who want to go into radio: no accents.”

“You were in radio?”

“Sure. My moniker was ‘Tokyo Rose’.”

With that, she shuffled down the narrow stairs, leaving Plunkett totally confused.

Stereo volume lowered, Hannah dumped murky water from the plastic bucket in the overgrown garden. She heard the guest’s side of a heated dialogue through open windows above. “Damned cell phones,” she grumbled.

Plunkett appeared in the kitchen an hour later, showered and wearing a gold Purdue sweat suit. “If you tell me where the TV is, and when you eat, I’ll try not to interfere with your daily routine.”

Seated at a well-stained, hardwood table, Hannah swallowed a bite of green salad. “In Ireland, like Britain, to legally receive television signals, there’s a licensing fee. Not worth the expense.”

“What do you do for news, or weather reports?”

“Tuesdays, I walk to the village for supplies and buy a paper.”

“Today’s Thursday...”

“You’re welcome to make the hike. The terrain is gorgeous, and the incline not too steep...”

“I wouldn’t make it half-way.”

“What, no sense of direction?” she quipped.

“Bum knee.” After lengthy deliberation, he laid a Blackberry on the counter. “Call Greg. He’ll explain everything.”

“I don’t know how to work those gizmos.”

Plunkett pressed a series of buttons on the device; Hannah could hear ringing through the speaker. A male voice crackled, “Hello?”

She rose and spoke toward the thin metallic console. “Senator O’Keefe?”

Her companion assumed an intimidating posture - feet spread, blue eyes smoldering and teeth clenched - during the conversation. She kept glancing at him while her employer related details of which she would’ve rather remained ignorant.

The brain of Thomas Plunkett, Ph.D., had been designated a valuable commodity by the U.S. government. Between the expiration of his NIH grant in May and a Pentagon symposium scheduled for early September, the physicist was not only rejuvenating his frazzled nerves, he was in protective custody to prevent unauthorized leaks of information to... unfriendly elements. CIA agents had the estate under surveillance around the clock.

“Keep him comfortable, Hannah,” concluded O’Keefe with forced cheerfulness. “There’ll be a healthy bonus in it for you if he’s returned to us fat and happy.”

“Damn your bonus, and damn you,” she snapped.

But the official had already broken the connection.

“Neither of us has a choice,” Plunkett declared.

“Bull. I can quit any time.”

“Not now, you can’t.”

Hannah stormed, “What?”

“Even though your security clearance was checked before you were hired, Greg divulging the purpose of my visit has changed the dynamic. If the boys see you leaving with your suitcases, you’ll be detained in federal prison until the Pentagon conference ends.”

“Bastards!”

Fists raised to pummel him, he caught her wrists in an iron grip. “Look, I don’t intend to get fat, and it doesn’t take much to keep me happy: decent food, cable television and a warm bed. Walk with me to the village, show me around, and you won’t have to worry about doing me shopping.”

She inhaled deeply, anger gradually draining from her. Plunkett released her, and she rubbed the vivid prints on her skin. “What about your knee?”

“I’ll strap on me brace.”

“You’ll have to do without the cable. It’d take a crew two weeks to run the lines from the nearest junction box.”

“Maybe I can buy a portable DVD player and rent some movies...”

“Not using your real name.”

“Could I borrow yours?”

Hannah slumped on the chair, despondent. “Why is it always me who gets shit on?”

“Shit on?” Plunkett hovered over her. “Nobody’s shitting on you.”

“Like hell, they’re not. Senator O’Keefe promised me absolute seclusion.” A persistent scratching roused her. “Except for that fool dog.”

A black and gold spaniel mix puppy bounded across the tile, no more had the kitchen door been cracked. Attempting to stop - without traction - it slid and smacked its head on the wall.

Hannah scooped it up and rubbed its sore noggin, nuzzling the soft fur.

“So, beneath the bluster, there *is* a heart.”

“He was born in the barn,” she snarled, glaring at him. “In a litter of nine, he didn’t fight for one of eight teats. I couldn’t let him starve.”

“What happened to the others?”

“The bitch’s owners caught up with her and took them home.”

Plunkett stroked the squirming canine. “What’s his name?”

“Sancho.”

“Huh?”

“Years ago, I took up a futile crusade. The media dubbed me a modern Don Quixote. Cervantes gave his character a sidekick; the dog is mine.” She crossed to the sink and filled a water dish, setting it on the floor. The pup greedily lapped the liquid. “Give me ten minutes to change, and we’ll get started.”

“Will I need a jacket?”

“You’ll be shocked how humid it gets in these parts, even on cool days.”

“I’d have been better off in Arizona.”

“I won’t argue with that.”

Hannah slipped into what must've originally been the servants' quarters; Plunkett watched Sancho expend much of his energy running in and out of the dining room. Finally, he nestled in a tattered blanket near the stove, his slightly curled tail sole evidence of his presence within the lump.

A leisurely stroll along the Annalee preceded the jaunt into Cootehill on the berm of a paved highway. The tiny settlement boasted mostly pubs, with assorted other shops including a Chinese take-away.

Hannah introduced Plunkett - using the name Tom Richter - to the bespectacled librarian, who staffed the reference desk in the modern edifice. A pile of historical and mystery novels was exchanged for more, with this "brother" approved to use the computers or check out volumes on his periodic solo excursions.

"Don't check your e-mail, though," whispered Hannah between the stacks. "I... can't be entirely cut off from civilization."

She sighed. Working in administration at San Diego State to earn extra cash while an undergrad, she'd eavesdropped on conversations between technicians assigned to monitor student access to message boards and university accounts. She also discovered how little the instructors - professors immersed in their particular field of study - understood about the internet.

"You send one colleague a message, and every I.T. expert will be able to track your location."

"You're kidding."

"You want to risk it?"

Guiding him through the grocer's, they purchased cuts of beef and pork, lunch meat, soda, soup and cereal, none of which the housekeeper ate.

"There's a bait shop, if you want to go fishing," Hannah indicated as they toted their parcels homeward, perspiring in the afternoon heat. "I recommend you stay away from the betting joints."

"Why? It's obviously no crime to wager on the horses."

"No, but one wrong word, and the whole county will know who you are. For the Irish, gossip is more popular than video games."

"That sucks."

She smirked, shifting her bags from left to right. At least, she'd voluntarily taken up residence in the remote mansion. Plunkett had fallen victim to his own genius.

Hannah couldn't afford to pity him. On how many occasions had she lowered her defenses, offering her time and talents to causes and organizations, her efforts ignored, ridiculed or supplanted by others with greater wealth and

influence. The shallowness of humanity disgusted her; she'd eventually erected an impenetrable fence around her emotions, locked the gate and lost the key.

"Don't you miss your family, being alone so much?" Plunkett repeated the question, jarring her from her reverie.

"Don't have any family. My mom died of cancer in '89. My dad suffered a massive heart attack ten years ago."

"No sisters or brothers?"

"One brother, but we haven't spoken since he moved to Texas after college."

"No husband, or kids?"

Her neck jerked toward him so abruptly, the bones popped. "You're not so blind you can't tell: I hate people. Why would I commit to a relationship and be saddled with them 24/7?"

"You were very polite to the librarian and the grocery clerk..."

"I was very polite to the customers I served working at the mall, too. Doesn't mean I'd go out for dinner and drinks with them."

"Why the antagonism?"

"Think about it, Doc. You had jerks bothering you at inopportune moments, and it drove you nuts. Multiply that by my life, and you might be able to empathize."

Up the gravel drive to the house, Hannah paused, frowning.

Plunkett continued on, then stopped and peered over his shoulder.

"What's wrong?"

"Someone's been here."

"How can you tell?"

"I locked the front door before we left. The deadbolt's undone."

Tentative fingers tested the knob, and Plunkett easily pushed the walnut panel inward. "Crap."

"You aren't packing, I suppose," ventured Hannah.

"Packing?"

"Come on, Brooklyn, you know what I mean..."

"Ah!" He patted his chest and rear. "No."

"You got a way to contact those CIA bozos?"

"I've got a number programmed into my phone."

Hannah crossed the threshold. "Have it ready, just in case."

A thorough, slow inspection of the structure, Sancho yipping playfully, revealed no disturbance and nothing missing. Depositing the groceries in the

kitchen, however, the housekeeper detected one cabinet ajar. She squinted into the empty space.

“What is it?”

Holding a finger to her lips, she signaled him outside. Ten yards past the garden, she let fly a string of expletives.

They were not directed at Sancho, excitedly chasing a baby rabbit.

“Is there a problem?”

“Calling the CIA won’t do any good,” she hissed.

“Why?”

“They’ll be listening to every word we say.”

“Bugged?”

She nodded her tousled, tawny head. “Probably every room.”

“I don’t...”

“Their justification would be to prevent you being kidnaped by night. If they can hear us, they can hear an intruder...”

“You don’t believe that to be the case?”

“Hell, no. They think you’re going to spill something important, and they want to have the evidence to convict.”

“But, you’re the only one...”

“I could be a Russian spy.”

“Your clearance...”

“Do you know how many spies have U.S. security clearance?”

“No.”

“Ask your buddy, the Senator, sometime. From what I’ve read, he’s chaired a few of the congressional investigations.”

Plunkett scrutinized the trim woman, equal to him in height, features ordinary. “Do they think you’ll seduce me?”

She caught the sarcasm in his baritone and groaned. “Thanks for that.”

“Sorry.” He reddened, cheeks matching his fiery hair.

She laughed at the sight. “More likely, I’d ply you with massive quantities of whiskey...”

“I don’t drink.”

“Neither do I. There isn’t a drop in the joint.”

“Then, what...”

“With their overactive imaginations, who knows? As far as I’m concerned, if you have anything important to say, we can crank the stereo to mask the discussion, or come out here.”

“Very good.”

They moved toward the door, Sancho romping past with hay matted in his coat. Hannah bent to clean him. "Silly dog."

Plunkett observed, puzzled. "What if it wasn't the CIA who bugged the place?"

"Who else knows you're here?"

"No one."

"You never can tell."

"So much for sleeping tonight," he growled.

Together, they unpacked the boxes, cans and jugs, stashing them willy-nilly on the shelves.

"You really don't eat much, do you?"

"I've never liked fancy food." Hannah selected a milk carton from the refrigerator, filled a glass and stirred in two heaping spoons of chocolate powder. "This sustains me quite well." She removed the Gershwin CD from the stereo en route to the servants' wing.

"You play that classical garbage a lot?"

"Every day, all day, and it's not garbage. Grieg, Wagner, Tchaikovsky, Mozart - they'll revive your soul, I guarantee."

"I concentrate better when it's quiet."

She poked her head around the corner. "Concentrate on what? Your research is finished."

He shrugged, digging for a can opener in a cluttered drawer.

Hannah didn't see the domicile's other resident again until the next morning and, then, not by choice. She woke with the sun and was scrubbing the grand staircase when she heard his persistent coughing.

"You dying?" she hailed, entering the master bedroom without knocking.

He choked, "What's that horrible odor?"

One sniff brought a chuckle from her throat.

"You think it's funny?"

"It's a fact. Somebody's spreading slurry."

"And that is..." he prompted, lying on the pillow.

"A liquid fertilizer applied to the fields after the silage is processed."

"Silage?"

"The farmers cut the hay and mix it with some concoction that causes fermentation. More nutritious for the cattle, I guess."

"Sounds - and smells - disgusting."

"They do things differently in Ireland." She waited for another coughing fit to pass, then laid her palm on his forehead. "Damn."

“A fever?”

“A high one.” She retraced her steps to the door. “I’ll get you some aspirin.”

“Just what I need.”

“Different set of germs from Indiana, Doc. You want some juice and a couple slices of toast?”

He moaned in reply, lurching onto his side.

High school classmates who’d become nurses had entertained Hannah at reunion dinners with tales of uncooperative patients. Their stories paled in comparison to Thomas Plunkett’s behavior in the days which followed.

He almost constantly complained of hunger. Yet, when Hannah served bowls of chicken noodle soup or beef broth, he refused to eat. His thirst unsatisfied by ice water, he demanded milk shakes or fruit blend smoothies.

She stripped off his sweat-drenched muscle shirt the second evening, having found striped pajamas in the top drawer. Sponge bathing his barrel chest, which tapered slightly to his waist - fit but not excessively sculpted - she had to bat aside his flailing hands.

He might’ve been delirious; she didn’t care.

“When did you have time to work out, locked in that lab of yours?” she wondered.

“Racquetball, Tuesdays and Thursdays, five A.M. with me post doc.”

“You any good?”

“Why, you got a court?”

“The ballroom could double as one.”

“You don’t play.”

“You’ll need plenty of distractions if you’re going to spend three months here. Maybe you can invite the off-duty CIA stooges...”

She lifted his limp torso off the mattress, maneuvering his arms into the pajama sleeves. Recognizing signs of impending nausea, she yanked away the fabric and leaned him toward a bucket on the floor.

Accepting no protests, she made him rinse his mouth once his stomach ceased heaving. By the time she’d buttoned him into the clean garments, he was snoring.

Hannah didn’t wander far, though. The bucket disinfected, she sank on what must’ve been a long-dead Mistress O’Keefe’s green velvet divan, a quasi-love seat sporting half a back. She laid her head on the scrolled arm and dared to sleep.

To be roused by gunfire.

“Damned poachers. The Celtic Tiger is tamed, and they take their frustrations out on innocent animals...”

That’s when she noticed Sancho cowering under the sofa.

And Plunkett absent from the bed.

Adrenaline pumping through her veins, she leapt off the cushions and dashed into the dark corridor. The bathroom was vacant, none of the other rooms on that level disturbed. She scurried down the marble staircase, using the polished lion’s head at the base of the bannister to alter her trajectory 180 degrees, toward the rear of the dwelling.

Only to swerve suddenly, avoiding a collision with the scientist, carrying a platter heaped with spaghetti.

Hannah slammed into the sideboard and collapsed on the floor.

Plunkett set his load on the bottom step, offering his hand to the startled housekeeper. She righted herself under her own power.

“What’s the rush?” he queried.

“I thought you were dead.”

“Once I eat a good meal, I’ll be fine.”

She snatched the plate from him. “You eat this, and you’ll vomit for a week.”

“I’m *hungry*, Miss Richter.”

“Your brain thinks you are, but your stomach has other ideas.” She shoved him up the stairs. “Get back in bed. I’ll bring you some jello.”

“Strawberry?”

“Lime.”

“No, thanks.”

“You’ll eat it, and like it. If you can keep it down, we’ll see about some toast in a couple hours.”

Meekly, Plunkett ascended. In the kitchen, Hannah transferred the spaghetti to a storage bowl before scooping a small portion of green gelatin into a gold-bordered dish.

“You’re mean,” scowled her patient when she presented the spoon.

“You’re sick. I may never have had kids, but I know you don’t stuff yourself with heavy starch in such condition.”

“Well, excuse me. I haven’t been sick in years, and I’ve never had to take care of any kids, either.”

“I could tell.”

“How?”

“If you’d ever been married, your wife would’ve nagged you into shape.”

He swallowed the congealed liquid, grimacing. “I *am* in shape. You said so, yourself.”

“Not when it comes to dealing with people.”

“Look who’s talking!”

“Shut up.” She tested his forehead. “Still feverish. When you’re done, try to sleep. I’m going to do the same.”

“Hard, with that pistol popping.”

She glared at him. “How could you tell it was a pistol?”

“Me dad took me deer hunting a few times when I was young. I... acquired an ear for the sounds.”

Sinking on the divan, she let Sancho lick her chin, idly scratching his hind quarters. She contemplated whether the shooting might have been CIA agents scaring off an intruder, or an attempt on Plunkett’s life through the open French doors.

What a pain in the ass! she cursed mentally, closing her eyes.

A bigger pain: pealing bells summoning locals to Sunday 9:30 Mass.

Normally, Hannah would stifle the noise with a pillow; she had none.

“What the...” came groggily from the four-poster bed.

“Pay it no mind. It’s the church across the river...”

“Catholic?”

“What else?”

Plunkett kicked off the sheets and overshot an upright position, landing on the carpet in an ungainly heap.

The housekeeper reluctantly stood. “Are you crazy?”

“I haven’t missed Mass in 42 years...”

“There’s a first time for everything, and you won’t go to hell for it, because there’s no such place.”

Unfocused blue orbs displayed horror. “How can you say...”

“You’re a scientist. You should know better than to believe in myths.”

She hoisted what basically amounted to dead weight - given his illness - clumsily onto the mattress and tucked up the covers.

“Stay put, you nit,” she directed. “If you’re that damned pious, next time I’m in the village, I’ll fetch the priest to hear your confession.”

Though she was joking, Plunkett must’ve taken her at her word. His body relaxed, his eyelids drooped.

Hannah longed for a thermometer to accurately assess his temperature. She estimated the probability of cooking an egg on his scalding hot skin.

He needed a doctor more than some religious mumbo-jumbo.

Why, though, should she bust her gut?

Because a diagnosis of pneumonia, or an equally serious malady, would land Plunkett in hospital and out of her hair... and put him in grave danger.

Easier for the CIA to guard him, she rationalized.

"I'm so cold," parched lips whimpered in a hoarse child's voice.

"I'll get another blanket."

Trembling fingers clamped on her arm in desperation. "Don't leave me!"

"I won't be a minute..."

"I could use some of that jello and... apple juice," Plunkett hinted contritely.

"Then, you'll need to let go." Hannah pried herself loose and patted his hand, uttering a phrase she'd often heard her father use to soothe her mother during the final stages of her bone cancer: "Everything will be all right."

Plunkett's energy drained, she fed him from the bowl and aimed a bent straw from the glass to his mouth. A cool towel wiped droplets from his furrowed brow as he rambled about his wasted life.

"What about when you won the Noble Prize?" she speculated.

"I was 29, too young to appreciate the honor. I spent the money stupidly. Since then, all I've done is invent a means for governments to wage wars without casualties."

"This... Purdue research?"

He nodded. "The original premise was to reduce waste generated by the demolition of old buildings. The method would be ecologically beneficial and save thousands in costs."

"How'd the government get their mitts on it?"

"Greg O'Keefe's daughter was one of me post docs the last two years."

"So, he's not really your friend."

"He's an idiot. A greedy, ambitious idiot. He's urging the Pentagon to cut off future funding if I don't sell me prototype to a defense contractor who contributed millions to his campaign."

His agitation increasing, Hannah ended the conversation. "You need your rest, Doc."

"Are you staying?"

"I've nowhere else to go."

"Good."

Lightly, she brushed a damp auburn curl off his forehead, noting how even men in their fifth decade resembled angels when they slumbered.

The fever broke in mid-afternoon. The intervening hours were less than tranquil, peppered with spells of Plunkett thrashing about like a wild man. Initially, Hannah attempted to restrain him but, even ill, his strength far outstripped hers.

A fact the patient acknowledged upon viewing his nurse's shiner. "Oh, God, I'm sorry, Miss Richter."

"I've had figurative black eyes from a variety of projects gone bad," she snickered. "This is my first real one."

He ate a hearty supper, showered and donned clean jeans and a polo shirt, spending the evening lounging on the balcony. He enjoyed the northerly breeze, and watching Sancho chase the tennis ball Hannah tossed on the lawn.

Until it began to rain.

"I saw a t-shirt at the Dublin airport," he recalled while she dried the puppy with a towel in the kitchen. "It depicted the seasons in Ireland with a sheep holding an umbrella for winter, spring, summer and autumn. I thought it was a gag."

"No gag. The only place I ever traveled where it rains more is Guam, an island much smaller in the middle of a huge ocean."

"What business did you have out there?"

"I consulted on a revitalization project for the native villages."

"A housekeeper?"

Hannah straightened after Sancho abandoned her in favor of his food dish. "I took this gig for the location, not the job description."

"Then, what..."

"Long ago. Doesn't matter. Tomorrow, if you're feeling stronger, you can help me mow the grass."

"I... haven't pushed a mower since I was a kid."

"This is six acres, Doc. You can ride the tractor."

He exhaled in relief, and Hannah laughed.

"When will we go fishing?" he inquired.

"We?"

"Don't you..."

"I don't like worms." She gathered a stack of plates in the sink and squirted soap into the water stream. "Why don't you ask the CIA boys if they'd like to dip a line? I hear there are some impressive trout in the Annalee."

"Have you actually seen any of them?"

"Nope."

"I wonder if Greg lied..."

"Wouldn't surprise me a bit, but there's a way to be sure."

“Which is?”

“Grab a suitcase and hoof it toward the main road. See how long it takes them to arrest you.”

“No, thanks.”

Covert agents converged on the mansion at dusk, without any provocation. Plunkett had settled in his room with a first edition from the gloomy study while Hannah blasted the *1812 Overture* in the servants’ wing.

Hustled into the foyer at gunpoint, the pair shrugged at each other in silent explanation.

“I’m not going one inch further until you knotheads spill the beans,”

Hannah protested, despite the pistol barrel shoved between her ribs.

The black-suited, blond beanpole stated, “Just a routine debriefing, ma’am.”

“My ass.”

“Standard procedure when transferring subjects,” added his comrade, dark and stocky.

“Whoa!” Plunkett exclaimed. “Who authorized a transfer?”

“You’ve violated the terms of protective custody, so you’re being moved to more secure quarters at Leavenworth.”

“Violated how?”

“By disclosing sensitive information to unauthorized parties.”

Hannah’s shoulders sagged. “Damned bugs.” She plopped, cross-legged, on the floor. “I’m not losing utopia because a guy babbled about a secret weapon in the throes of a fever.”

“You have no choice, ma’am,” said Blondie, replacing his gun in its holster in order to lift her off the marble. “On your feet.”

She shook off his grip. “Drop dead.”

Inspired, and still exhausted in the aftermath of his illness, Plunkett squatted beside her, whispering, “They’ll just call the others...”

“Not if we shut them up.”

“Eh?”

Blondie commanded, “Ma’am, I’ll give you ten seconds...”

“Mr. Plunkett,” advised the other agent, “your cooperation is expected.”

Hannah nudged Plunkett. “You’ve got a powerful left hook. How ‘bout defending yourself?”

“And you?”

“I can take care of myself.”

On that note, Hannah seized Blondie's ankles and yanked. He pitched backward and struck his head on the sideboard, cracking his skull.

Plunkett sprang up and punched the other agent in the jaw, knocking him cold. He wedged his throbbing fist beneath his right arm, teeth grit in anguish. "I boxed in college, but I *must* be out of shape..."

"Evidence to the contrary," quipped Hannah, fingering her swollen eye.

They jogged to the rear of the house, pausing to open the pantry door where Sancho had been confined.

"They were going to take us, and leave this poor thing to starve?" Plunkett gasped.

Hannah clipped a leash to the puppy's collar as they ran out the door. "They're heartless bastards."

"How do we escape?"

Past the weed bed which had once been a vegetable garden, the housekeeper scanned the hillside. "With the fairies to help us, we should get away clean."

"Fairies?"

"Old superstition in these parts." She saluted a grassy mound at the summit, then yanked him toward a stone out-building - the old stable. "You ride motorcycles?"

"You're saying you *don't*?"

"I used to, until I laid my Harley under a Bronx bus."

Plunkett chuckled, "It figures."

"Yes or no?"

"Yes."

"Good." She kicked aside a warped plank door. The last rays of sunlight reflected off a vintage BMW.

"Is there gas in it?"

"The can for the lawn tractor is half-full."

Before the CIA agents regained consciousness, the motorcycle was speeding down the country road. Sancho whimpered in a pet carrier on the luggage rack; Hannah clutched Plunkett's waist for dear life.

"Where to?" he yelled against the wind.

"East on the highway to Cootehill."

The physicist didn't argue her logic until the bike stopped beside a fuel pump at the village's sole convenience store. "Do you think this wise?"

"Tank up, so you'll be ready for tomorrow," she replied. "I'll buy a couple cans of dog food."

His iron grip prevented her from moving. “Won’t they catch us...”

“Once they discover we have wheels, they’ll move the search beyond the county. They’ll assume we’re trying to put as much distance as possible between us and them.”

He acquiesced. Their errand complete, Hannah guided him to the White Horse, a traditional Irish hotel. She directed Plunkett to push the motorcycle around the structure to the courtyard gate. “After I check in, I’ll come and unlock it, so we can park this heap out of sight.”

The hotel lobby was deserted, but the adjacent pub teemed with activity and music. Hannah greeted the desk clerk like an old friend.

“You’re out awful late,” the balding figure commented.

“Have you a room available?”

“The plumbing again?”

“A rupture under the mop sink.” She’d counted on rumors regarding the O’Keefe estate’s antiquated piping making the rounds. The librarian had told her husband, who’d passed the news to his brother, an amateur handyman in addition to working nights for his uncle, the White Horse’s owner. “Should be cleaned up by Tuesday.”

“In the back sufficient?”

“Grand.”

A minimum of red tape - her signature in a ledger - and Hannah strode down the hall, past the formal dining room, slipping through the courtyard door. Pitch dark, she groped toward the gate, unfastening the latch and assisting Plunkett in maneuvering the motorcycle through the gap.

“What now?” he queried when they’d settled in their plain yet homey accommodations.

Hannah was disconcerted by the absence of a second bed. “I’m... not sure.”

Sancho, for his part, didn’t care. He’d been walked and happily slurped gravy from a can of canine-style beef stew.

“You can have the bed. I’ll sleep on the floor,” remarked Plunkett.

“Anyway, that’s not what I meant. Where do we go from here?”

Shifting her attention, the housekeeper straddled the desk chair.

“Tomorrow morning, I head back to the house.”

“Do you want to end up behind bars? The whole place is bugged...”

“Finding and grinding them into pulp will be a welcome distraction from chasing cobwebs. In the meantime, you’ll ride south and hole up in some village where the pub offers cheap rooms. I’ll contact O’Keefe and clear up the matter.”

“How? There’s no phone at the house, and you said e-mail can be traced...”

“Not if you hack into someone else’s account.”

Plunkett’s jaw dropped. “You know how...”

“A chance meeting with an ex-con a few years ago.”

The mention of criminals led him to nervously pat his hip pocket. “I left me wallet on the nightstand. How will I pay...”

“Help yourself.” Hannah extracted a wad of bills from her jeans.

His blue eyes bulged. “Where...”

“I don’t trust banks. One of the peanut butter jars in the pantry serves just as well.” She yawned. “Are you positive about the bed?”

“It *is* queen sized. Plenty of room for two.” His minuscule grin irritated Hannah. “Unless you’re a prude.”

“Not a prude, just not interested. Sex is overrated.”

“I agree with you there.” He sat on the mattress edge and kicked off his sneakers. “Should we request a wake-up call?”

Hannah stretched out, fully clothed. “I’ll be up with the sun. You can sleep as long as you like.”

Both stared at the ceiling for a long time, the hotel gradually quieting. Ultimately, Plunkett spoke. “Who are you, Hannah Richter?”

“Why ask now?”

“I want some cohesive memory of the amazing woman who rescued me from death’s door...”

She rolled toward the window. “God, what nonsense!”

“Think what you will. Who are you?”

“I’ve knocked around my whole life, trying to find my niche. I’m what some would describe as a ‘jack of all trades’.”

“That accounts for your diverse knowledge.”

“I consider every situation a learning opportunity. Never can tell when an odd fact will come in handy.”

“Confined to me own field, I’m the same. The professors who taught at M.I.T. never realized I gained more from hanging out with them at the local bars than in the classroom.”

“Then, you’ll learn a lot traveling around Ireland. Forget you’re a hunted man, and enjoy yourself.”

He propped himself on one elbow, staring at her through the gloom. “An odd statement, coming from you.”

“What?”

“Enjoy yourself.”

“Nothing odd about it. I enjoy myself every day.”

“Alone, in the middle of nowhere?”

“The best way to do it. Nobody to inflict their puerile opinions on me...”

“Only the CIA to bust in...”

Hannah tugged the blankets around her neck; Plunkett jerked them off her. When she spun to retrieve them, the pair lay nose-to-nose.

He kissed her briefly. When she didn't recoil, he repeated the gesture more passionately.

Earning a slap for his boldness.

“What in hell...” she sputtered.

“Since you'll be gone before I'm up, I wanted to say thanks.”

“You're welcome.”

Both huddled on their own side of the bed, they slept.

Hannah took Sancho for an early romp in the courtyard, departing by the gate and hiking six miles home. Greg O'Keefe continued to send her monthly salary, and nothing was ever printed in the Irish or international media about Tom Plunkett or his research.

As long as he - or anyone else - never darkened her doorstep again, she'd live contentedly in blissful solitude.

The Church of Equality

The flyers mysteriously appeared that April, tacked to utility poles around the city. “Faith Gathering for Independent Thinkers,” stood out in 96 point Times New Roman. Smaller letters added, “Sunday, 10:00 AM, near the drooping oak in Kennedy Park. Bring your own lawn chairs or blankets.”

A diminutive redhead, wearing a Gandhi-quote t-shirt and faded black jeans, rose from a Native American woven blanket and faced the diverse handful that first day. “I will not speak long - the point of inviting you here is to encourage open sharing of faith by all. Over time, I’ve found organized religions do not encourage such sharing or, if they do, the hierarchy discount the experiences of the ‘laity’ as inferior or naive, and continually attempt to correct supposed errors while shepherding everyone into mindless conformity.

“The hierarchies derive their authority from writings they deem sacred, which have been selectively edited over the centuries to fit their warped need for power. The five books of Moses - which factor into Judaism, Christianity and Islam - have been shown to be written by a number of different authors. Those wishing to claim power saw a need to consolidate doctrine, to organize the people, so stories were created and rules set in stone. Mostly, it was a gimmick to convince the masses of their authority.

“Stories of the Buddha have been similarly manufactured to justify various schools of that religion. The need for a teacher - using a variety of titles - to have a ‘lineage’ plays a major role in gaining power - especially in the West - which is then often abused.

“Two passages from the Christian New Testament come to mind in this regard: first, when Jesus told his followers, ‘Do this in memory of me,’ during the Last Supper. The approved version of this story claims only twelve were present in the upper room, all men. Written decades later by men who knew the men in that room, the passages justify the superiority of men in ministering to the people. Other accounts claim there were women present, however, treated as equals by the man cited elsewhere as sensitive to people of all cultures and beliefs, but these tales have been spurned as inauthentic or heretical.

“Second, the statement, ‘You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church.’ Beside the fact Jesus only gave these men authority to forgive sins in subsequent verses, those who recorded the incident most likely twisted the phrasing to give credence to their behavior. Jesus was an observant Jew, and he didn’t come to start a church. His words were meant to inspire people to look at their own faith and live more fully, nothing more.

“Over the centuries, nonetheless, sect after sect has manipulated simple concepts in order to wield an iron fist over their congregations. And, for the most part, people seem to have little problem being told how to think and act by these self-styled leaders. For example: atheists are seen as having ‘no moral center’, yet proponents of world religions are guilty of the most heinous crimes. Worse still, blind faith has caused people to be led into wars against other human beings who don’t hold the same beliefs, or convinced to commit horrendous acts of bigotry and discrimination in the cause of ‘right’.

“Fact is: no one - whether anointed with special oils or professing antiquated vows - is superior to anyone else. They do not have the right to claim only they can perform certain rites, or have certain powers to transform a disk of bread or cup of wine into something spiritual.

“No one has the right to tell you what to wear, what to eat or how to think, pray or behave. If you need housing assistance or a meal during difficult times, you shouldn’t be forced to accept a particular version of ‘salvation’ to obtain it.

“No one has the right to interpret scriptures - regardless of their origin - and force others to hold that interpretation inviolate. No one has the right to shove their beliefs down your throat in an effort to earn their redemption, or threaten hellfire and damnation if their skewed doctrines are not obeyed. Nor does anyone have the right to denigrate your beliefs, because they have a theology degree or spent decades living a comfortable life far removed from the trials and tribulations of most human beings. No set of beliefs - be it in one god, many gods or no god - is any more valid than another.

“So, what we will do here is share our faith on an equal basis. There will be no pastor, no elder with inflated credentials. Anyone who wishes to stand and share stories of their spiritual journey will be welcome to do so, without being criticized. Conformity to a common goal will not be required. All will be respected in this space, and no one will be asked to donate even one cent for the privilege, or to pay for upkeep of a building. Thank you.”

The woman resumed her seat, and silence encompassed the group for a time. Then, a graying gentleman in a green polo shirt and Dockers climbed from his braided lawn chair. “Twenty years ago, I abandoned the Baptist church, searching for deeper meaning to existence. Now 54, I’ve realized living faith is more important than practicing religion. In the process of making that discovery, though, I’ve felt isolated, misunderstood and depressed. Neither clergy nor professors wished to engage in serious dialogue about the revelations I had experienced. I’ve been waiting for a group like this so long,” he sniffed back tears,

“I can’t say how glad I am I drove in from the farm yesterday and saw the posters.”

“Too bad I didn’t bring my camcorder,” lamented a blonde young matron, snuggling her cherubic six-month old son. “Ideas like this should be posted on the internet.”

A middle-aged Latina announced, “I got the whole thing on video with my cell phone.”

All eyes fell on the first woman.

“Do you plan to create a webpage?” asked the matron.

“You can do as you please,” she replied. “My only concern about creating a group or some type of social network is how those who aren’t serious may join, and then disrupt the honest efforts of the members.”

“No group, then,” offered a bespectacled man toward the back of the gathering. “Just upload the video, and let those who wish view it and be inspired, like we were.”

“I only ask you to not include my name or the location.”

“Agreed,” the Latina and the matron responded simultaneously.

A ruddy teenaged boy in black muscle shirt and jeans wondered, “When will the next meeting be?”

“Whenever you wish,” stated the woman.

“But, somebody needs to keep things organized,” the boy countered.

“Why?”

Dumbfounded, those present glanced at each other and shrugged.

“Why not be spontaneous?” the woman ventured. “Life isn’t organized, as much as we’d like to think it is. If someone sees the need to get together, just hang a notice on the utility poles, and set a time. Those who wish to come will come.”

And, so they did. Periodically, the signs would appear, drawing the original group and a few others to whatever site was available. In other towns across the country - and around the world - similar events transpired, as well. The woman would attend as her schedule allowed, but never spoke again. She let others share their experiences, and listened to encouragement from those close at hand.

Though their numbers may have exceeded 100,000 globally, they never communally wielded any religious or political power. They grasped the futility of fighting the status quo beyond the boundaries of their own lives.

They lived as independent individuals, their personal spiritual journeys intact, connecting with those of like mind for edifying conversation and

comraderie, leaving the rest of humanity to wallow in ignorance through a meaningless existence.

Caribbean Exile

Affixing the last tile of meticulously crafted cocoanut shell, Beni Johnson straightened and rubbed her aching spine. She brushed temperamental brown hair off her cheek, using the back of her hand.

She'd long since experienced the pain of washing home-made glue from the strands.

Six years and a hundred sculptures later, the woman tired of finding uses for cocoanuts on the tiny Caribbean island. The sole blessing: she didn't have to eat them. A supply ship delivered fresh food and staples every two weeks.

It still didn't compensate for the intense isolation. This time, the U.S. government had taken the witness protection program to extremes.

Beni cursed her ex-husband. If that idiot hadn't outed her as a CIA operative during their divorce proceedings - in addition to accusing her of sleeping with every foreign agent in Europe - she could've been living quietly in Hoboken or San Diego.

She'd never been to Europe; her territory had been Asia and Australia. She'd exposed drug trafficking rings, illegal arms smuggling networks, and a few stray terrorists. Repayment for 18 years faithful service: a post as caretaker for some Hollywood big shot's winter retreat.

She only saw the entourage - never the man himself - two weeks at a stretch in November and March. The rest of the year, she occupied her thatched beach hut alone, no one to talk to but herself. A solar powered radio provided music and news; she lacked a phone, a computer and television. Nor did they allow her a pistol to defend herself against wild animals or aggressive sharks.

Worse than prison.

After grabbing a bite of lunch, Beni sprawled on the sand which comprised her front yard. Barefoot, the water lapped on her toes, while a tropical breeze cooled her face. She dozed, unafraid of a sunburn; her skin had grown so tanned and leathery, it could've been made into a motorcycle jacket.

The yacht approached from the north, shielded from view by a stand of palm trees. When a small skiff was lowered from the port side and five men rowed ashore, Beni was jolted awake by their deep voices.

She scrambled upright, brushing off her jean shorts and t-shirt. "What the hell..."

The tallest of the quintet hailed her with a broad grin. "Hello, Beni. The boss decided to hold the brainstorming session for his next movie somewhere the paparazzi couldn't pester him. Is the hacienda livable?"

“No,” she admitted.

“Can you whip things into shape before he arrives?”

“I’ll try.”

“Lou and Pete will help.”

She led the younger men a quarter mile inland, where the six million dollar dwelling - constructed of indigenous materials - rose on a hill and boasted incredible views in all four directions. She unlocked the front door, a necessity even here with the resurgence in pirate activity, and ushered them into the sunlit great room.

“Damn!” gasped Lou, a redheaded, beefy athlete.

Beni commented sarcastically, “Who says money can’t buy happiness?”

Opening screenless windows and removing drop cloths from expensive furniture left only sweeping hardwood floors and stocking the kitchen.

And the liquor cabinet.

“Are either of you carrying a radio?” Beni inquired.

Pete unclipped a cell phone from his belt. He activated the short-range transmitter and passed it to her.

“What’s up?” crackled through the speaker.

Beni replied, “If the boss and his crew plan any serious drinking, they’ll want to bring whatever’s on the yacht.”

“Gotcha.”

She left the staff to their duties, once satisfied her employer would have no complaints about the structure’s condition. Not that he paid her; she kept an eye on the property as a courtesy, and because she had little else to occupy her days.

A second, larger vessel appeared on the horizon in mid-afternoon. A motorized raft shuttled guests to shore until sunset. Beni recognized some of the older women - gently aging stars whose films she’d seen when she’d had access to civilization. They were dressed in high fashion, while their companions might’ve been hobos picked up off the street.

Only one had a bearing and dignity suitable to the surroundings; he towered a head above the others, with closely cropped white hair, arched dark eyebrows, and deep creases in his face. He’d spent years outdoors, evidently.

He also carried a pistol in a shoulder holster beneath his windbreaker.

The boss’ new bodyguard.

He noticed her scrutinizing him from the hut’s entrance, and crossed the beach with a scowl. “You live here?” he rumbled with a definite accent.

“No, I swam from Key West for the hell of it.”

“Where’s your ID?”

“Why, you writing me a speeding ticket?”

“It’s my job, bitch.”

“Your job doesn’t involve harassing the neighbors.”

“Some neighbor,” he scoffed, poking a cocoanut mobile dangling from a roof beam.

She had his arm pinned behind him in a split second; he groaned in surprise and agony. “Don’t touch the artwork,” she growled.

“You call this art?”

“It’s my own... unique style.”

“It’s trash.” He rubbed his shoulder when she released him. Before he could press the matter further, Lou whistled shrilly from the path to the house. He hastened toward the noise, with a final warning, “Don’t get up my nose.”

Beni saluted with her middle finger.

Sinking on the bamboo threshold, she sat in contemplation until pink accents above the clouds faded in the west. Why had the boss hired an armed attendant for this outing? Had something happened stateside to warrant such protection?

Making a point to steer clear of the ongoing revelry - naked women chased into the surf by amorous males, drunken character actors vomiting in the underbrush - the former CIA agent debated the authenticity of the “brainstorming” excuse. The crowd partied all night and slept through daylight hours; when did they work?

The bodyguard, haggard and bleary-eyed, must’ve wondered the same thing. He shuffled down to the beach the third morning, shoeless, trousers cuffed above his shins. He waded into the high tide; from her vantage point fifteen feet above - plucking green cocoanuts for a new project - she expected him to dive in fully clothed.

“I saw a shark this morning,” she called.

His head whipped left. “Drop one of those on me, and you won’t see tomorrow.”

“You’d have to catch me first.”

“Not a problem.”

“You plan to shoot me?”

“Waste of a bullet.”

She shinnied down the trunk, gracefully jumping the last six feet. “You a cop?”

“None of your business.”

“You’re too... distinctive to be undercover FBI or CIA.”

“Should I take that as a compliment?” he grunted. “How would you know what a Fed looks like?”

“I used to be one.”

He squinted brown orbs at her. “Not in my lifetime.”

Beni muttered an expletive in Mandarin.

“That you’ve been to the Orient doesn’t prove anything.”

The discussion ended when a scream originated from the mansion. Both sprinted up the path, side by side, only to discover a mouse had crawled in bed with an unmarried couple.

The pair laughed together on the west terrace.

“I’m Beni Johnson.”

“I know.”

Through grit teeth, she hissed, “If you knew, why rattle my cage?”

“It’s my job.”

“Hell of a job for a guy who’s old enough to retire.”

“Don’t let the hair fool you. I’m still young enough to handle what’s coming.”

“What’s coming?” Beni echoed.

“None of your business.”

With a deft motion, she flipped him over the bamboo railing onto the packed earth. “If something’s brewing, I want to know, so I can protect myself.”

Chest heaving, he propped himself on one elbow. “You don’t have to worry on that front.”

She leapt onto the ground beside him, yanking his shirt collar tight around his throat. He countered by seizing both her wrists with thick, powerful fingers, thrusting her backward against the stone foundation. She aimed a punch at his torso; he spun out of range and stomped her sandaled toes.

His roar of laughter as she hopped on one foot brought sleepy residents to their windows.

“Sorry, boss,” the bodyguard apologized. “Training exercise.”

“Keep it quiet, will ya?”

“Sure.”

He spun toward Beni, who connected with a stinging backhand across his jaw.

“Shit!” he drawled.

“Training exercise, my ass.” She stomped off, mumbling under her breath.

Once her anger subsided, she knew she’d have to grill the bodyguard about the forthcoming situation. She’d been safe for years on the island; none of her prior

contacts, upon discovering her true identity, had been able to pursue her, given her swift removal from the general public. If they were coming now...

Why bring the boss and his groupies to the island, placing them in harm's way? It had to be something to do with their presence...

A rustling outside the hut roused her at midnight. She rolled off the lumpy straw mattress and wedged herself in the darkest corner. Illuminated by the crescent moon, a tall silhouette approached the door; she seized her fishing pole as a weapon.

The fiberglass rod came within two inches of the bodyguard's ear before he blocked it. "You're pretty good in hand-to-hand combat. You know how to use a gun?"

"Ask another stupid question."

"Okay. How do you feel about dying?"

"Hadn't planned on it for awhile yet."

"Good. Come on, then." He strode behind the hut into the woods.

Beni followed. "Why?"

"We've got work to do."

"We? What's this 'we' shit?"

"You come highly recommended for the task at hand."

"Which is..."

"Later. Right now, we've got to size up our defenses."

"A lot depends on what we're going to be defending."

"Good. I was hoping this enforced sabbatical hadn't dulled your wits."

"Sabbatical? It's exile, you jerk."

"The name's Jacob Malone."

She had to jog to keep pace with his long gait. "I didn't ask you that. Why worry about my wits? Who sent you?"

"Nobody sent me. I signed on at the boss' request."

"He dug you up from a graveyard?"

She heard him exhale in frustration. "I saved his life, and he showed his gratitude."

"Saved his life, how?"

"During one of those fancy dress to-dos at Scotland's National Galleries. He choked on the haggis. I... was the only one not afraid of ruining my designer suit."

"How would you rate an invitation..."

"There'd been a rash of jewel thefts, so they hired additional plain-clothes security."

“A private firm?”

“Dragged us over from the University of Edinburgh.”

“So, you were some gate guard?”

“No. Guest lecturer.”

“What subject?”

“British jurisprudence.”

“A lawyer?”

“Retired Scotland Yard.”

That explained a lot for Beni. Still, “So, you used the Heimlich maneuver on the boss. That’s no big deal.”

“Except, he spat the chunk on some princess’ gown, and she keeled over in a dead faint. Had to catch her before she hit the floor.”

“Hilarious.”

“Shhh.”

He halted so suddenly, she collided with him. “What?” she queried.

“Boats.”

“How many?”

“Two that I can see.”

“You think there are more?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Why?”

“When the mob sends a team on a hit, they don’t want to have to try twice.”

She practically squealed. “The mob?”

“Pissed about his last film. Don’t want him to make the sequel.”

“What a crock of…”

“Shhh.” He thrust a semi-automatic pistol into her hand.

Reluctantly accepting the weapon, she peered between palmetto leaves at the black-clad ruffians hunkered in a 12 foot row boat, powered by an electric motor. “Must be off a larger ship.”

“Good call.”

“Don’t patronize me.”

“Women aren’t suited for some professions.”

“Chauvinist.”

Movement on the shore silenced their bickering. Eight figures crept into the shadows, toward the main house. Malone paralleled their course.

“You cover me,” he instructed.

“Bull. You cover me.”

“Are you nuts?”

“They won’t expect a woman to kick their asses.”

He sighed. “We’ll go together.”

Just enough moonlight allowed the pair to pounce on these intruders and, without disturbing the indoor festivities, decimate their ranks. Only one eluded capture, fleeing in the boat to whatever craft awaited him offshore.

With the dawn, helicopters descended on the island, American police assuming custody of the well-trussed prisoners. The lead detective congratulated Malone on his excellent handling of the situation.

Beni might’ve disputed the point, had she not sequestered herself in her hut with a quart of whiskey. Malone found her in a drunken stupor when he came to bid farewell.

“Figures.”

“Figures, what? I suppose you didn’t celebrate after we hog-tied those assholes and locked them in the pantry.”

“I took two aspirin and went to bed.”

She held up the mostly empty bottle. “This is my aspirin.”

“You’ll need some for tomorrow’s hangover.”

“I don’t get hangovers.”

“Lucky you.” He lifted her off the floor and shook her into full consciousness. “They want you back to work.”

“Who?”

“The CIA.”

“I knew it!” she howled. “You’re a stinking liar, telling me no one sent you!”

“Word came down after the cops filed their report. It had nothing to do with me.”

She pummeled his ribcage. “Liar!”

“Think what you will.” Loosening his grip, she plopped on the dirt floor. “If you’re ever out west, look me up.”

“Not likely!”

He stomped from the hut, a skiff waiting to transport him to the boss’ yacht.

“You forgot your gun!” she bellowed, groping beneath her make-shift pillow.

Malone reclaimed the silver Glock. “If you feel a need to keep it...”

“I’d just waste the bullets shooting trees.” She averted her gaze. “Or, myself.”

Grasping her shoulders, he forced her chin upward. “You don’t have to stay here. They want you at Langley!”

“I can’t do it, Jake. You were right; I’ve lost my touch. The sum total of my ambition these days is having somebody to talk to once in awhile...”

“From what the boss told me last night, he’s planning to sell the place. No telling when anyone will come ‘round...”

The tears flowed freely from her eyes. “Crap.”

“Pack your things, now. Boat’s waiting.”

“I... can’t. You ever been in prison? This is just as bad. Readjusting to society will be impossible...”

“Only because you’re such a hardheaded bitch!”

“Gee, thanks.” She wiped her face on her sleeve.

“If I knew you better, I’d put you over my knee,” he threatened.

“That, I’d like to see.”

Malone reached for her; she blocked and swept at his leg. He raised her into the air, then brought her level and kissed her roughly.

Beni groped on the table behind her, grasping an artist’s chisel, fashioned from a discarded stainless butter knife. Malone detected the movement and wrestled her 180 degrees.

She pushed off, landing in a heap. “That’s worse than a spanking!” she protested.

“Either way, you needed it.” Hearing Lou’s signature whistle, he headed for the door. “Stay here and be miserable, if you like.”

Not one to knuckle under to intimidation, Beni remained motionless. Malone was already in the skiff, oars dipping into the whitecaps, when she raced across the sand and jumped onto the bench beside him.

“What about your belongings?” he puzzled.

The explosion of the hut and the surrounding coconut artwork substituted for an answer.

He chuckled, “You didn’t have a gun, but you had gunpowder?”

“Left over from one of the boss’ special effects experiments.”

“Damned resourceful. I’m surprised the CIA didn’t recall you sooner.”

“Screw the CIA. If you can get hired as a bodyguard in Hollywood, so can I!”

Malone could only shrug and stare at the woman as they bounced through choppy waters.

Sullivan's Legacy

Johnny Maggione knelt in the first pew, fingers twined in a prayerful pose. Had he reached out his right hand, he could have touched the modest oak casket resting on a bier in the center aisle.

His mother's casket.

An organ sounding a solemn melody, Monsignor Jerome Connolly processed from the sacristy to an altar alight with tall beeswax candles, accompanied by two nervous boys wearing cassocks and surplices. Connolly's black vestments trimmed with gold thread made Johnny cringe. The young man remembered the last time he had seen them.

There hadn't been this crowd of neighbors in the parish church. Serafina Maggione would've never suspected she was this revered during her days operating a rooming house on Dock Street. Often, she'd had to threaten her tenants with eviction if they didn't pay their rent. Then, there were the hoodlums who loitered on the front stoop and brought the police into the building almost every Saturday night.

En masse, the congregation rose when Monsignor Connelly commenced the Latin ritual, only his back visible. Few understood the words he chanted; most of the women muttered entirely different prayers, counting beads on their rosaries. A slender hand slipped into Maggione's calloused paw, and he smiled tenderly at his wife, Ann.

She'd been his high school sweetheart, and had waited for his discharge from service in the Navy, shelling Nazis in North Africa from a destroyer floating on the Mediterranean. Rather than share the cramped first-floor apartment with his mother after the wedding, they had moved to the third floor - Number 24 - to have a little privacy.

It still allowed Johnny to handle the odd plumbing repair or paint job Serafina demanded, while keeping the two women from constantly bickering.

Now, he owned the brick dwelling, and he didn't want it.

He'd seen much of the world; he wanted to share the adventure with his wife, and live quietly far from the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge.

Beyond that behemoth, it wasn't necessary to worry about petty thugs and loan sharks, or ethnic disputes between Irish and Italian. Newlyweds could buy a house, furnish it and raise a family in peace, sending their children to good schools where they got an education, instead of black eyes from bullies.

Not like here.

Monsignor Connelly, an angled scar vivid above his right eyebrow, approached the pulpit to deliver the scripture readings; everyone sat. Johnny recognized the string of ancient passages, though his brain could not translate them into English. They'd been the same verses used in an almost empty All Saints' Church ten years earlier, when a simple pine box rested at the base of the sanctuary steps.

Johnny had donned the miniature black robe as acolyte that day. One woman followed the rubrics in a missal, tears flowing freely. There'd been no parade of automobiles to the cemetery afterward, either. A dented hearse transported the coffin to its final resting place, where a last sprinkle of holy water consigned ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Jerry Connolly hadn't told the teen who they'd buried until they parted at the parish house. Johnny, having envied the street gang now devastated by a coward's death, didn't fully grasp the event's import.

Rocky Sullivan, notorious gangster and murderer, had been given a Catholic funeral after his execution. Connolly had kept the Mass private, knowing such a ceremony would bring the wrath of Brooklyn's bishop down on his head. Being Sullivan's friend, however, and having walked the last mile with him, he could do no less than help his childhood companion get right with God.

The priest, too, would've been labeled quite the hypocrite by the press. He'd been the one to expose Sullivan and his associates' illegal activities, and the government corruption which turned a blind eye.

Connolly had been named Monsignor as a reward for his successful crusade, and transferred from the parish to the bishop's staff.

The Irishman's brown orbs, nonetheless, continued to shine with an indefinable sadness, as if his soul had been ripped from within him.

Connolly's homily lauding Serafina Maggione's faith and perseverance in the face of many difficulties brought sobs from some in the rear of the church. Johnny suppressed a grin; the priest hadn't witnessed the worst of it, transpiring after he'd moved from the neighborhood.

Still, it was an honor to have the Monsignor celebrate the Mass. He'd called Johnny after reading the obituary. "I could always count on you when I needed a server," Connolly stated. "I hope you know you can always count on me."

Guilt, perhaps? Within months of Sullivan's death, the recreation center Connolly had founded was closed and padlocked, because the new pastor preferred golf to making sick calls. Soapy, Swing and Crabface - members of the old gang - barely finished high school and were drafted into the Army, casualties of

the D-Day invasion. Hunky, Pasty and Bim took jobs in a factory and moved across the river. Johnny heard rumors Bim drank heavily, getting himself fatally knifed in a bar brawl.

The sole loose end: the woman who had attended Sullivan's funeral. She'd lived across the hall from Johnny and his mother. Her name was Laury Ferguson. She'd grown up on Dock Street as Laury Martin, returning to her roots after her husband was gunned down in a shoot-out with the cops.

She'd grown fond of Rocky Sullivan, who had rented Number 24 in Maggione's building following his release from prison. His subsequent arrest for killing crooked attorney Jim Frazier and underworld kingpin Mac Keefer had devastated her. She'd lost her job as a hostess at the El Toro Club - a cover for the gambling and extortion racket run by the three hoods. Eeking out a living at Nadler's Pharmacy soda fountain, she hadn't visited Rocky during the trial, or on death row. She'd vanished the day before he went to the electric chair.

Johnny's reverie was disrupted by the recitation of the Pater Noster. Another series of mumbled prayers preceded Monsignor Connolly bringing a ciborium of hosts to the carved wooden railing, where devout parishioners knelt for Communion.

To Johnny's left, his wife, a petite blonde angel in contrast to his lanky, dark earthiness. On his right, a youthful nun in stiff white wimple, black veil and habit. He'd seen her on Dock Street in recent weeks, talking with truants, and mothers sedately puffing cigarettes outside the vegetable market.

She rode with him and Ann in Monsignor Connolly's car to St. Mary's Cemetery, immediately behind the hearse. Only a handful of those who'd attended the Mass did likewise - homes and families waiting; business to resume.

"You remember Sister Theresa?" asked Connolly, the black Olds dodging potholes.

Johnny leaned forward from the rear seat. "Nope."

"Of course, you do, Johnny," she chimed sweetly. "I used to help your mother manage the rooming house."

In the glare of the late morning sun, the young man squinted at subdued green eyes, pert nose and full lips framed by starched cloth. All nuns looked alike to him. Furthermore, since Laury Ferguson left, Serafina had relied on Johnny to do the odd chores. Unless...

She squeezed his hand graciously when he acknowledged the truth, and commented how Dock Street residents thought her a traitor for abandoning them. This late reappearance - after the war's tribulations - struck them as a hollow gesture.

Johnny tried to ignore the hollowness in his stomach when, his mother's casket being carried by six pall bearers to the gravesite, he passed a low, rectangular stone etched, "William Sullivan." The ill-gotten wealth and numerous headlines Rocky had garnered during his lifetime merited no more than that.

It didn't surprise him when both Monsignor Connolly and Sister Theresa paused at the spot on their way back to the car.

"What's going on?" puzzled Ann.

Her husband whispered, "Paying respects to an old friend."

The Olds retraced its route to All Saints, where the couple would attend a traditional post-funeral feed in the church basement. Thanking Connolly for his kindness, Johnny added, "Will you come back in six months to baptize our child?"

The cleric's jaw gaped. Hearty congratulations accompanied his promise to officiate at the rite. A cheery wave, and he steered into mid-day traffic.

Ann and Johnny strolled along Dock Street two hours later, foil-covered casserole dishes of leftovers forced upon them by hovering Sodality members. Rather than climb warped stairs to their room, Johnny unlocked his mother's door and they settled on the battered sofa.

"You're in no condition to walk up and down so many steps every day," he advised his wife. "Would you mind if we moved down here?"

"No, as long as we get rid of the bed."

"Mom's bed?"

"I wouldn't be able to sleep, knowing she died there. Besides, I like the brass frame and the mattress we've got. It's comfortable."

Despite his exhaustion, Johnny Maggione dragged himself to the third floor. He convinced his neighbor, Sam O'Leary, to join him in lugging boxes of clothes and personal items from Number 24 to the building's foyer. Ann refused to allow any items into the apartment until she removed her mother-in-law's belongings and thoroughly scrubbed the floors and walls.

Sam excused himself for dinner while Johnny hunted up tools to unscrew bolts holding the bed together. Ornamented brass gave the impression of being thick and heavy; he knew from experience - rearranging the furniture time and again for Ann - the posts were hollow.

The mattress propped in a corner, he awkwardly dislodged rusting springs from the frame. Off balance, the footboard crashed to the floor.

One of the crown-shaped decorative caps popped off, rolling toward the door.

Aggravated, Johnny fetched it.

When he raised the footboard to wedge the fitting in place once more, what he saw nearly caused him to drop the scrolled brass on his foot.

A roll of cash had been stuffed inside the post.

Gingerly, he leaned the footboard against the wall and freed the cluster of bills. They spilled on the table and floor - hundreds and fifties - in a rain of green.

Johnny could merely stare at this bounty. He gathered it into stacks, without counting it. Curious, he pried the caps off the other three posts, discovering similar stashes.

Ann's lilting voice echoed strangely from below. "Are you coming down to eat?"

He poked his nose onto the landing. "I'll be down... in a bit."

Guessing, Johnny estimated \$20,000 lay before him. He had no idea how it had come to be hidden in the bedframe, which had been in the room as long as he could remember. The few bills he inspected had been issued in the early 1930s, so some former tenant must've...

But, what tenant, possessing such wealth, would've lived in the ramshackle tenement?

Hastily, Johnny stuffed the money into his wife's jewelry box, toting it down three flights with some towels and sheets.

"What took you so long?" Ann scolded. "The chicken is cold."

"Who cares about chicken, when we can have caviar?"

The pretty blonde glared at him. "Huh?"

He sat her on the sofa before displaying the newfound treasure, to prevent her from fainting and injuring herself or their unborn child. Unable to form any words, Ann remained motionless, stunned.

The question of what to do with the windfall - \$97,000 in all - kept the couple awake through the night. Johnny searched his memories, trying to figure out which tenant could have left the fortune...

No one had died in Number 24 since his mother had operated the rooming house.

Most post-Depression occupants stayed a few months, then relocated when their finances recovered sufficiently.

During the war, women and children had rented most of the rooms, totally dependent on their soldier spouses' monthly allotment or, tragically, death benefits.

Sipping a mug of tepid coffee, Johnny pondered the coincidence of passing Rocky Sullivan's grave that very morning. He vaguely recalled Jerry Connolly's campaign against corrupt officialdom stemmed from some illegal transaction involving \$100,000.

If Soapy had still lived upstairs, Johnny could've asked him.

Instead, "We have to phone Monsignor Connolly."

"What?" erupted Ann. "You're not going to turn this over to the church?"

"No, but he may know who has legal claim to it."

"Trust me, love. Like every other priest on the make for donations, he'll try to convince you the most good can be done by tossing it in the Sunday collection."

"Father Jerry's never..."

Ann caressed her midsection. "This money can give our child a bright future. We can divide it into four or five bank accounts, so it doesn't raise suspicion..."

"Darling, if you found a hundred dollar bill on the sidewalk, would you keep it, knowing someone else might need it to pay their rent, or buy food?"

She averted her gaze.

"I'll call Monsignor Connolly tomorrow, and see what he says."

"What if he..."

Johnny gently embraced his wife. "I promise, I won't make any decisions without you."

Twice in 24 hours, Jerry Connolly's Oldsmobile parked at the curb near All Saints' parish house. Johnny ran his hand over the sleek metal surface as he approached the structure's front steps; maybe he'd buy a car...

Connolly glowered at the young man when he entered the book-lined study. The expression made Johnny reconsider every plan he'd made during the sleepless night.

"I'm sorry if..."

"You told me it was an urgent matter of money," grumbled the Monsignor. "When we were arranging your mother's funeral, I mentioned you'd need to consult a lawyer about any inheritance or past due bills..."

"This is... different," Johnny clarified.

"How different?"

Closing the door to ensure he wasn't overheard, after first checking the hall to be certain no one would listen at the keyhole, Johnny crossed a frayed and faded red carpet to the maple desk. He leaned toward the cleric in conspiratorial fashion, causing Connolly to shift on the wobbly chair.

"It's Rocky Sullivan's money."

The Irishman blanched.

Silence engulfed the room for nearly a minute. Johnny watched Connolly's brown eyes move side to side, evidence his brain was struggling to assimilate this information.

“You must be wrong, John,” the bishop’s aide finally murmured.

“I don’t think so, Monsignor.” Relating the tale of the bed, he recognized acceptance tightening the muscles around Connolly’s mouth. “We counted it three times. It’s over \$97,000.”

“Before he died, Rocky claimed he’d given the police every scrap of information about the criminal operation,” recalled the former parish priest.

“Not this, evidently.”

“Even though it was tainted, he saw it as his due for spending three years in stir, instead of Frazier.” Connolly sighed. “By rights, it should be surrendered to the authorities.”

Johnny straightened. “You don’t believe that any more than I do, Monsignor. Sullivan dead ten years, they wouldn’t care. Some corrupt captain would get his hands on it and buy his wife - or his mistress - furs and diamonds.”

“What are you saying?”

“Better to use it to brighten the future of the children.”

“Whose children? Yours?” accused Connolly.

“Finders, keepers.”

“What about donating it...”

Johnny cut him off with a smirk. “Ann knew you’d suggest that.”

“It’s filthy, John. Blood stained. Rocky was a murderer...”

“He was also your friend.”

Connolly’s head bowed remorsefully.

A light tap on the door announced a beaming Sister Theresa. “I just heard you were here, Monsignor...” She stopped short. “I... didn’t know you were...”

“It’s all right, Sister,” said Connolly. “Come in. This may concern you, as well as us.”

“How?” Johnny objected.

“Laury cared deeply about Rocky, John. If Rocky had been able to... straighten himself out, they might’ve married.”

Moisture clouded the nun’s green orbs. “I... try not to think about that anymore, Monsignor.”

“It’s true, regardless.” He summarized the discussion for her, concluding, “Couldn’t the Mercy Sisters use a sizable contribution?”

“Of course we could, but once Mother Superior learned the source, she’d refuse.”

“See?” Johnny challenged. “The Church doesn’t want blood money.”

Sister Theresa continued, “If we used it to help those in the neighborhood...”

“Without telling the bishop, or your superiors?” retorted Connolly. “If only Rocky had left a will...”

“If he had, the police would’ve confiscated the cash, leaving nothing.”

“True.”

Johnny settled in an armchair, deliberating options. His companions had lived their entire lives within a few miles of their birthplace, while he’d traveled through Europe and Africa, courtesy of the armed forces. Though younger in age, he might have an advantage...

His Navy buddies, and the Marines transported on their ship, were closer than many families he’d seen growing up on Dock Street. Members of the squads and platoons watched out for each other ‘round the clock. If one was injured, his comrades guarded him until a medic provided treatment.

Or, they recovered the corpse, to be shipped home for proper burial.

A similar situation existed here.

“Didn’t Soapy, Bim and the gang have families?” he queried.

Connolly mused, “Bim was married at the cathedral, and I baptized his son before...”

“Soapy’s mom got a housekeeping job in the hospital and moved uptown,” added Sister Theresa. “I think Crab’s father still rents a room above Nadler’s Pharmacy.”

“Weren’t they as close to a family as Rocky had?” Johnny responded to the unasked question. “Maybe the money should be divided...”

Connolly chuckled, uncharacteristic for the seriousness of the meeting. “He’d given the boys a good bit of it before he was arrested...”

“And they wasted it down at Murphy’s Pool Hall,” snapped the nun.

“They might not want it, at any rate.”

“Why not?” puzzled Johnny. “None of them are rich...”

“They lost respect for Rocky after he went to the chair... yellow.”

The young man studied Connolly’s face intently. “You say that like you doubt it.” He rose. “You were the one who confirmed the stories in the newspapers, because you were there when they threw the switch.”

Sister Theresa restrained the clenched fist Johnny raised toward the priest. “Rocky couldn’t die their hero. They would’ve ended up in prison...”

Though never an official part of their gang, Johnny Maggione had been trusted by Soapy and his boys, feeding them tidbits of gossip overheard during his mother’s gab-fests on the stoop with assorted nosy biddies. They hadn’t slapped him around like they did others; he’d enjoyed how they tormented the beat cops, or dropped tomatoes on passersby’s heads from the fire escape.

No other trauma could've subverted their rebelliousness more than the notion Rocky Sullivan had been, beneath the bravado, a yellow rat. Johnny never saw Soapy smile after that. Hunky moped on street corners, an empty shell. Pasty had pitched his loaded dice in the trash bin, ending the occasional Saturday night crap games in the old boiler room hideout.

And, it had all been a hoax.

"What'd you do, buy off the reporters?" growled Johnny.

Monsignor Connolly steeled himself for the admission. "No, John. I convinced Rocky how important it was no boy - not just on Dock Street, but everywhere - idolized him. He did me one last favor." He adjusted the white collar suddenly strangling his neck; a bead of sweat trickled along the scar above his eyebrow. "But, I think distributing the money is an excellent idea. It'll take a week or so to locate the gang's relatives..."

"Forget it. Once it gets around what you did, you won't be welcome 'round here anymore. You, either, *Sister*."

"You... won't tell?" she ventured.

"Why shouldn't I? You lied. Both of you. You made Rocky pull an act..." He strode toward the door.

"We don't know if it *was* an act, John," said Connolly.

Johnny spun. "Huh?"

"He refused my request only seconds before we shook hands that last time. He'd been adamant until then. He might've actually been scared to die."

"You lied once. Who's to say you're not lying now? Who's to say you won't get those families into this room, and urge them to donate the filthy money to the church, to save their souls?"

Sister Theresa pledged, "Johnny, Monsignor Connolly wouldn't do that!"

"You're two of a kind, you two. And, I'm done with you both."

The young man trudged home, dejected and disillusioned. He'd rarely availed himself of the chaplains' services during his military tour, because none of them had inspired him like Jerry Connolly. He'd been on the verge of abandoning his Catholic faith before his marriage to Ann, and escorted her to Sunday Mass just to enjoy how everyone admired her beauty.

No more.

The couple spent the evening making phone calls and quizzing long-time Dock Street residents. By week's end, manila envelopes stuffed with \$12,000 - and a note proclaiming them heirs to an anonymous fortune - were delivered by special messenger to six apartments throughout New York.

Ann and Johnny Maggione deposited \$25,000 at First National Bank for their child's education.

Monsignor Jerry Connolly did not perform the infant's baptism - not because of Johnny's anger. The cleric succumbed to throat cancer a week before Ann gave birth.

Sister Theresa kept vigil at the hospital bedside during his final days, before leaving on assignment to the African missions.

Thrown Together

The pair were thrown together by a horrendous tragedy.

On a rainy prom night, a drunk trucker had plowed into oncoming traffic on a dark thoroughfare. An 18-year-old driver, en route to the dance at the country club, had perished. So had a couple, out enjoying their fifteenth wedding anniversary.

Lacking any close relatives, twelve-year-old Ann stood before a judge the day after her parents' exhausting double funeral. She dreaded the thought of living with an obese couple chosen by social services as her foster parents. Sean MacIntosh and his lawyer intervened at the last moment, offering her a loving, comfortable home.

Six witnesses testified to MacIntosh's parenting skills. His son would've delivered the valedictory speech at his upcoming graduation, and had earned a scholarship to an Ivy League university. The boy had never run afoul of the law, and enjoyed many friends.

"You're unmarried, sir," protested the judge.

"My wife died in childbirth, Your Honor. I was both mother and father to Jack; I can be as much for this wee lass."

Finally, hand-in-hand, the two left the courtroom, weak smiles commingling grief and joy making for an awful cover photo on the next day's front page.

Fortunately, the media left them alone after that. MacIntosh had no little trouble adjusting to a female in the house; Ann never complained, but her preferences in cereal, television shows, and shampoo rattled him during the first few months. When he caught her exploring the huge barn near the woods at the back of his property, he abruptly learned she had a knack for science and engineering.

She understood his explanations of the many inventions, from improved fuel cells for cars to sensors used in detecting solar flare emissions. Soon, she was spending every spare minute outside of school in a small lab he'd set up for her, devising her own creations.

Under the watchful eye of that damned android.

Ann despised the ensemble of wire and polished metal, wandering the barn performing simple tasks. MacIntosh viewed it as a substitute for a human maid. "If I had a real woman doing the cleaning, I'd never get anything done for the constant chatter and questions," he noted.

It unnerved the girl to hear him talking to the contraption, which he'd named Susan. As Ann matured - physically, emotionally and mentally - she grasped her jealousy of this odd relationship. Though confined to the barn, Susan's presence disrupted the routine in the main house, with MacIntosh muttering over the dinner table or an evening's read that he must remind the android of some unfinished task.

Susan was the sole frustration in Ann's otherwise idyllic existence. MacIntosh supplied the teen with everything she needed, without bowing to fleeting trends. They could converse as equals, rather than adult and child, and she learned more than any textbook could've taught her.

She grew suspicious, however, when a voluptuous, blonde social services investigator began visiting more and more frequently during Ann's senior year of high school. MacIntosh had not opted to file for formal adoption, so periodic assessments by state officials had become the norm. When Ann caught the couple in his lab, kissing passionately, the ongoing deception became clear.

"Is it wrong of me to fulfill my craving for affection now and again?" he queried, pursuing Ann when she stormed from the barn. "I've been without a woman for twenty years..."

Ann raged, "Is that the real reason you built Susan, and talk to her like she's your wife?"

"No, I..."

"But, her skin is cold aluminum, and she can't hug you, so you went looking elsewhere..."

"There's nothing wrong with that!"

Tears streamed down Ann's reddened cheeks, her brunette tresses blowing in the gentle breeze. She gazed up at MacIntosh, his dark eyes, shock of white hair, mustache and beard hiding much of his wrinkles, and the athletic physique of a former boxer. She murmured, "If that's the way you want it, I won't stand in your way."

In her bedroom, she grabbed her backpack from the desk and stuffed it with underwear, socks, shirts and jeans. Throwing in a bar of soap, her toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste for good measure, she bolted for the door.

Pausing only to snatch a padded envelope off the dining room table, delivered in that morning's mail. If MacIntosh wanted to concentrate on his women, he wouldn't be needing these transistors to finish his latest invention.

She hiked toward town, debating options. She'd never made many friends at school, unlike MacIntosh's real son; no resources in that category. While she had patented and sold a couple of her devices to electronic manufacturers in the

past year, those funds were in a college savings account at the bank. Her wallet boasted a total of thirty-eight dollars.

Crushing gravel underfoot on the road's shoulder, she ignored passing cars. When a pair of headlights veered directly at her, she spun and leapt sideways. The red Toyota braked a short distance away, and Sean MacIntosh scrambled off the passenger seat.

"What in hell are you doing?" he hissed, as the social services rep sped off into the night.

Ann mocked, "What, your girlfriend tired of you?"

MacIntosh raised his hand, as if to slap her, but restrained himself. "You had no reason to leave."

"I know when I'm not wanted."

"I never said..."

"You want female companionship of a more... suitable age. I don't fit those parameters, so I'm just an inconvenience."

He clutched her shoulders in an iron grip. "If I ever said anything you could misconstrue to mean *that*..."

"Lately, you talk more to Susan than you do to me, and then..."

"So, you took the parts to spite me?" he growled.

"Is that why you came after me?" She shook free of his fingers and unzipped the backpack, tossing the parcel at him. "Here! I hope you and your gizmos are very happy together!"

While he retrieved the package from the path of a speeding car, she jogged into a detassled cornfield. MacIntosh chased her, calling her name; she didn't answer. The longer she ran, the most lost she grew, having no sun to gauge her direction.

Finally, she sank on the damp ground and wept.

That's where MacIntosh found her, an hour later - almost tripping over her, as a matter of fact. He stooped and lifted her off the soil, carrying her toward the road.

"Let me go!" she struggled.

"No. We both need to go home and get some sleep. We can talk more in the morning."

"There's nothing to talk about!"

"Yes, there is." His calm baritone aggravated her further. He was treating her like a temperamental child.

Her fists beat on his chest. "Put me down!"

“No, Ann. When I got back to the house and you were gone, I started thinking. I realized I still see you as the little girl who clasped my hand so gratefully in the courtroom that day. But, you’re a young woman now, with a different set of feelings. My feelings have changed, too.”

“Yes. You hate me.”

“No. I thought... Miss Treadwell’s companionship would compensate for...” He gulped. “It hasn’t. She has the mental capacity of a toad. The reason I’ve been avoiding you lately is because... you not only arouse me intellectually, but also...”

Ann stared at MacIntosh’s quivering mouth. He’d never been nervous in her presence. Hoping to defuse the situation, she whispered, “Sean, I’ve been in love with you for years.”

He halted, and set her on her feet. “I... wanted to love you as my daughter,” he confessed. “I did, until recently. Then, I noticed how beautiful you’ve become - in every way.”

They kissed, and the emotional rush coupled with Ann’s exhaustion caused her to faint. MacIntosh transported her to a waiting Ford, driven by the android Susan.

When they returned home, the inventor deactivated the metallic maid. He and Ann married two days after her high school graduation.

The Foundation

“I can see why the heirs donated this place,” murmured Danielle from the edge of the gravel drive.

A mini-van taxi had dropped the five women on a rutted country road, backpacks their only luggage. They’d passed through the nearest town five miles east but, at the moment, they felt quite alone.

“Technically, it wasn’t donated,” clarified Teresa. “Mr. Carmody’s children offered it to us ‘rent-free for an indefinite period.’”

Elizabeth, with her hair-trigger temper, piped in, “Meaning they can reclaim it any time?”

“Exactly,” Teresa stated.

“That sucks.”

Pragmatic Beatrix ventured, “It’s practical, really. The housing market is depressed, so they can’t sell it. Once we’ve spent the time fixing it up, they’ll make a tidy profit.”

“Off our backs,” scoffed Elizabeth.

“Calm down, please!” Teresa admonished. “This is the perfect situation for our foundation. The plan was to emulate the Rules of 1221 and 1223, shunning the absolute security which comes with owning property, and trusting in Saint Francis’ original example.”

“I liked it better in California,” lamented Marie Paul, hoisting a bulging knapsack over one shoulder and following her companions toward the dilapidated two-story shingled house. “A roof that didn’t leak, a bed to sleep on, and regular meals...”

Teresa spun on her heels, brown eyes shining within her wimple. “Where’s your sense of adventure? Would you rather be a slave to bricks and mortar, or free to truly serve others?”

“But we’re Poor Clares,” Danielle said. “We’re cloistered, dedicated to prayer.”

“Saint Clare and her sisters were confined to a cloister because thirteenth century women weren’t allowed to actively participate in ministry. Things have changed since then. For instance,” she unfastened the long black veil and yanked it off her head, “we don’t have to wear these anymore.”

The other four gulped simultaneously.

“Are you serious?” protested Elizabeth.

“Do you seriously think we can refurbish this building, or grow acres of vegetables, wearing long robes and scapulars?” Teresa retorted.

“I... suppose not,” admitted Marie Paul.

“If you studied the Order’s history, you’ll remember these outfits weren’t anything special in the early days, merely a poor woman’s clothes. The equivalent today is flannel shirts and jeans.”

Beatrix pressed, “What about in chapel?”

“Do you believe it matters what a person wears when praying? If you do, you’re welcome to change from work clothes into your habit four times a day, wasting a lot of time in the process. It’s the intention of the heart that counts!”

Teresa led the way through a warped door into the sprawling, dusty structure. The others reluctantly mounted sagging porch steps.

“When I agreed to come on this foundation,” whispered Marie Paul to Elizabeth, “this was not how I envisioned her plan for ‘a new day.’”

“Me, neither.”

Twenty years, Teresa Whitcomb had yearned for this new day. Enduring an alcoholic mother, who died on her daughter’s nineteenth birthday, the young woman then had to contend with her father, left in deep debt. She’d had to drop out of college to work in the factory he owned.

Heartbroken, the man never recovered from his losses. Skin cancer took him three years later, and Terri faced the mess of liquidating a worthless business.

A full decade she labored to clear the ledger of thousands owed to vendors and banks. The final penny paid, exhaustion and depression consumed her.

A weekend retreat at the Poor Clare monastery in Santa Monica invigorated her soul. Becoming a nun had been the last choice on a long list of ways she planned to spend her adulthood, yet these women led a fantastic life. They worked and prayed, and enjoyed three meals a day, a warm bed and a roof over their heads. No debts, no worries. She could embrace such a lifestyle with ease.

Except, Terri found it too easy. Accustomed to challenges, the sedate horarium began to aggravate her long before she took the novice’s veil. She never complained, and hid the truth well.

Harder to maintain the illusion of contentment, though, when she began to doubt the existence of God.

Visitors brought their prayer requests to the cloister door; phone calls and e-mails extended the list posted daily at the chapel entrance. Terri saw the nuns storming heaven’s gates with petitions, and learned endless hours kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament still couldn’t cure the illnesses, mend the money problems or heal the fractured marriages.

She lingered within the stone enclosure, nonetheless. Her studies of St. Francis of Assisi, founder of a religious order of priests and brothers, and the Poor Clares, soothed her frazzled nerves. Unlike the Gospel stories of Jesus, proof of the Italian saint's existence could be readily traced through the Umbrian hills north of Rome. His example of simple living delighted Terri. She ached for a means to emulate it more fully.

The announcement of this bizarre donation and plans to convert the farm into a monastery came as she had nearly given up hope of remaining a member of the community. She'd professed her perpetual vows two summers previous, but the ideals of poverty, chastity and obedience meant nothing if the Rule which was the basis of the women's routine had been twisted beyond recognition.

Sister Mary Teresa discreetly volunteered to assist with the enterprise. Her background in accounting and management worked in her favor. Finances would be tight and, as the Franciscans had discovered many times over eight centuries, the strain on even the most sedate temperament could be overwhelming in unfamiliar surroundings.

"Holy cow," hissed Marie Paul, peering from the foyer into the living room. "What a mess."

From behind her, Teresa remarked, "It'll be our first priority. That's our chapel."

"But, there aren't any pews, no altar..." objected Beatrix.

"If you sit on a sofa or in a pew, will it affect the sincerity of your prayers?"

"Pain in my joints from kneeling on the bare floor just might," Elizabeth snarled.

"Then, use one of the throw pillows as a cushion." Teresa tested the lowest step of a curved staircase. "The bedrooms are upstairs. Pick yourselves one, unpack and change, then we'll get started."

"Change?" the others chorused.

Unzipping her backpack, Teresa pulled out a collection of shirts, jeans and sneakers. She passed a set to each woman. "We'll meet in the kitchen in fifteen minutes."

An assortment of buckets, mops and rags had been assembled near the sink when the group gathered, decidedly uncomfortable with their close-cropped haircuts and loud plaids. Teresa overcame their shyness by assigning tasks.

"Danielle, you'll sweep all the rooms, including catching cobwebs on the walls and ceilings. Elizabeth and Marie Paul will follow by scrubbing the floors.

Beatrix will remove the dust covers on the furniture and compile an inventory of tables, chairs and fixtures. I'll wash the walls. Then, we'll do the windows."

Not one protested these arduous duties. Poor Clares spent much of each day laboring, not dependent merely on the charity of generous donors. Their California monastery had opened a small gift shop, where modern, painted icons, hand-beaded rosaries and exquisite pottery were sold.

Teresa hadn't yet told these Sisters there would be none of that here.

Breaking for noon prayer, considerable progress had already been made on brightening the gloomy structure. Sunlight streamed through streakless panes on the lower level, and the scent of pine cleaning fluid replaced unpleasant musty odors.

Solemnly, Elizabeth hung a replica of the San Damiano cross - the image from which Christ had spoken to St. Francis of Assisi, commanding him, "Go, rebuild my Church, which has fallen into ruins." - on the north wall. Breviaries open, Marie Paul intoned, "God, come to my assistance..."

Their chanting of the psalms joined with countless other religious communities and laity doing likewise around the globe. It didn't matter the chapel lacked formal amenities.

Until after the final blessing.

"We'll need an organ," ventured Beatrix.

"Why?" Teresa countered.

"We can't sing without an organ."

"Of course, we can. A guitar will do just as well, if we can find one."

"Find one?" queried Danielle. "Why not buy one?"

"Because, we're going to use the barter system. We'll provide services to our neighbors and the community, and they'll reciprocate by supplying our basic needs."

"You're crazy!"

The words slipped out, and Elizabeth clamped a calloused hand over her mouth as soon as they escaped, green eyes downcast.

She'd expressed the group's joint reaction, however.

After an awkward pause, Beatrix spoke. "Sister, it's always been tradition that we maintain an environment where there's ample food in the cupboards, heat, light, shelter..."

"Whose tradition?" demanded Teresa. "Not Francis, not Clare. Those ideals were forced upon them by weak followers who lacked sufficient faith to risk not knowing day to day how their sustenance and lodging would be provided. This is a prime opportunity for us to rejuvenate our own spiritual journey. We'll

never know if Mr. Carmody's heirs will come knocking one morning with an eviction notice. By taking events as they come, without worrying for the future, we'll really be able to emulate our blessed founders."

The four were not convinced. They retired silently to the dining room, to eat a simple lunch of soup and bread around a polished oak table.

Marie Paul read an article from the *Franciscan Quarterly Journal* which, for some reason, always arrived at the California monastery in duplicate, with the extra copy thrown in the recycling bin. Teresa had salvaged a couple issues so this mealtime practice could continue, even without the resources of a huge library.

A particular passage from a treatise analyzing St. Francis' mental state made spoons pause in mid-air. "The most difficult act performed by a human being is to acknowledge every effort put forth in achieving a particular goal is, ultimately, worthless. This applies to Francis in that, once the Order had grown to hundreds of friars and the ideas of others took the fore, he was compelled to relinquish his control and admit defeat. In some ways, this can be viewed as reinforcement of humility in its most literal sense, but it is, in fact, the outcome of every endeavor, whether spiritually driven or not."

Teresa gazed at her companions. She could not readily see any condemnation of this declaration, renounced by some scholars as a liberal interpretation of the saint's frame of mind. She hoped they would not think of their present situation in light of the author's conclusion. After a hard day's work and good night's sleep, perhaps they would start adjusting to her reformed approach to their charism.

Elizabeth fingered the stiff collar of her shirt, her annoyance at the change of clothes barely constrained beneath her thick ebony mop. Beatrix's plumpness was more readily visible in the casual garb, with tight auburn curls framing her round face.

Perhaps Marie Paul should have been placed in charge of the foundation, Teresa speculated. In her fifties, she'd joined the Poor Clares right after high school graduation, during a period when many monasteries were emptied in the wake of Vatican Council II. She exemplified twentieth century interpretation of the Rule with her quietude and gentle nature. Her golden hair aptly crowned angelic features which showed no wrinkles.

Ripped from her position as the Abbess' secretary, Danielle might be harboring a grudge against Teresa. The latter couldn't be certain by looking at intense blue eyes partially hidden by unruly brunette bangs. These were women, after all, not saints on earth. Each had distinct personality traits and emotions, which had led to fractious confrontations during recreation on rare occasions.

Anticipating this adventure would spark instant change would have been foolish on Teresa's part. She'd dealt with cantankerous union stewards and lax employees in her father's factory. A willingness to listen, to empathize, and still enforce the rules, would get her through the difficult times.

They hiked a mile the next morning to St. John's, a white-washed country church nestled in a cozy valley. Until - or unless - a chaplain was designated for the monastery, they would have to rely on the local parish to fulfill the obligation of attending daily Mass. Seated together in a rear pew - partly from embarrassment, Teresa surmised, and partly to negate expectations that members of religious communities had a right to prominent seats - she squinted at the man in white vestments delivering a rousing sermon to the small Friday congregation.

Tall and spare, his shaggy bronze mane cast him in the role of mountain man, with an oddly trimmed mustache and goatee, to boot. Something about the animated, hazel eyes struck Teresa as familiar. A closer inspection as she approached the sanctuary to receive Communion didn't jog her memory any further.

It wasn't until she consulted a copy of the previous Sunday's bulletin, posted on a cork board in the church vestibule, that the pieces fell into place.

"Well, Professor," she hailed him on the stone steps where he shook hands with his parishioners. "Long time, no see."

"No one's called me Professor in years," responded the priest.

"Probably because you left the university to pursue... this?" She lightly poked the Roman collar at his throat.

"Actually, I pursued *this* before I became a professor."

Teresa snickered. "Hard to imagine you were a priest, given your... singular approach to chemistry."

He studied her countenance, then broke into a broad grin. "I didn't often swear at my students, Terri, except when they tried to blow up the lab."

"Mea culpa, Padre. I'm good with numbers, not nitroglycerin." Teresa signaled her companions forward. "Sisters, I'd like you to meet Aeneas Destefanatos."

Rather than grasp his extended fingers, they nodded a greeting in unison.

"Call me Neal, please," he muttered, darting a questioning glance at Teresa.

She chuckled. "We're Poor Clares, starting a new foundation just down the road."

"So, you left the university for... this?" he mimicked.

"Not directly, but it's a long story. If you'll come to dinner some evening,

you can bless our chapel and we'll have a chance to catch up on old news."

"Deal." He fingered the cuff of her flannel shirt. "And, you'll have to tell me about these interesting... habits the Order has adopted."

He watched the five depart from the adjacent rectory threshold. Teresa felt his eyes upon her, and sensed his - albeit jocular - disapproval.

Hosing down the building's exterior that afternoon proved to the small community the superior's wisdom in shedding their habits for casual attire. Those who mounted ladders scavenged from the garage - to scrub stubborn dirt from the shingles, or rehang loose shutters - ended up just as soaked as those on the ground, on whom streams of filthy water poured en route back to earth.

They resembled wet rats when the job was finished.

Dripping on the foyer tile, they shared a hearty laugh. "Get showered and change," instructed Teresa. "After Vespers, we'll have dinner."

"Change into what?" Marie Paul wondered.

"I don't care if you come down in a bathrobe and pink fuzzy slippers. Remember, it's not about the clothes."

"What's for dinner?" asked Elizabeth.

"While you were cleaning the back of the house, a couple of St. John's sodality members brought over a huge pan of lasagna, fresh-baked bread and cupcakes."

Beatrix chimed in, "Who's going to do the laundry?"

"We'll hold the Chapter of Offices after we eat," Teresa promised.

Despite their exhaustion, they ate with gusto. Marie Paul continued reading aloud from the *Franciscan Quarterly Journal*, more insightful thoughts about their founder.

"The vows of poverty and chastity - or, for priests, celibacy - are the most difficult to live strictly, because those who choose to walk the path in religious communities are capable of finding many loopholes. Yet, the problem would be solved entirely, and these vows embraced with enduring joy, if human beings accepted one key tenet. Once they realize nothing actually prevents them from acquiring everything on the tangible plane - whether material possessions or any of a thousand intimate partners - they will reach an understanding how, deep down, they truly want nothing. Such did Francis discover as the son of a wealthy merchant."

The consensus when the dishes were cleared from the table: it was time for bed. While accustomed to physical labor, none of the five had exerted themselves to such a degree in ages. Still, they adjourned to what would have been the previous owner's family room, now designated for evening recreation.

The Chapter of Offices - or assignment of duties - took little preparation on Teresa's part. Once the Abbess in California had approved her as the foundation's superior, she hand-selected those who would accompany her. Beatrix had a green thumb, and would be in charge of the vegetable and flower gardens. Excess produce and blossoms could be traded at the local farmer's market on weekends. While everyone would have a chance to get their hands dirty in Sister Earth, Elizabeth would be in charge of the kitchen, Marie Paul would handle the laundry, and Danielle would serve as portress, welcoming any visitors and answering letters. A believer in the concept of "working managers", Teresa would clean the abode's three bathrooms, as well as maintain the ledgers and negotiate any business agreements.

"Being few in number, we must step up and help with the housework," she announced in conclusion. "We'll each keep up our own bedrooms, and be responsible for one room on the main floor. For Elizabeth, it will naturally be the kitchen. Marie Paul's will be the recreation room. Danielle will do the dining room, and Beatrix the chapel. I'll do the enclosed porch."

"I've seen some nasty-looking spiders out there," smirked Marie Paul.

"That's exactly why I chose it for myself. I need to overcome my fear of our eight-legged friends." She shuddered at the thought. "Also, to allow more time for prayer, we'll do a cold breakfast, hopefully prior to hiking to Mass, instead of it being cooked. Lunch will be the main meal, and dinner will be reheated leftovers or whatever is available from the garden."

Beatrix inquired, "Where will we get seeds and garden tools?"

"I saw a hardware store in town as the taxi drove along Main Street. We'll walk there on Monday and see what services we can offer to offset the costs."

"We won't be able to barter for the electric and gas bills," Elizabeth commented.

"Which is why they are being sent directly to California. Mother Abbess agreed to cover them for six months, so we must be careful with our energy consumption."

They shuffled to the living room/chapel for Compline, the nightly prayers before retiring.

Once the candles were extinguished, Teresa remained in the dark chamber alone. Knowing she would have to wake by 3:00 AM for Matins didn't matter. Nor did she suffer from insomnia. So exhausted was she, in fact, she nearly dozed in the leather recliner.

The persistence of her doubts compelled her - reliant on logic and dissatisfied with vacillation - to push herself toward final resolution. She judged

herself the hypocrite, mouthing the psalms' praises and lamentations in communal prayer, while her faith had plunged off a steep cliff.

"Francis, it's you I believe," she whispered into the gloom, trembling fingers running through short gray hair. "You lived in harmony with nature and, for the most part, humanity. You avoided the pettiness of politics and publicity. What should I do?"

Not that she expected an audible reply. She wasn't even sure if he could hear her, stemming from her uncertainty regarding the afterlife.

With a heavy sigh, she rose and trudged up the stairs to the master bedroom, collapsing fully clothed on the king-sized mattress.

Saturday was spent repairing the split rail fence which surrounded portions of the amply forested ten-acre lot. Lengths of treated wood had worked loose during strong wind storms and lay on the ground. Heavy lifting for the Poor Clares, but less so than building a completely new perimeter.

"We're not going to have a high cloister wall, like back home?" asked Beatrix.

"Why spend thousands of dollars on something we don't need?" Teresa answered. "In the past two days, how many people have driven past the house?"

"Not many."

"Besides, I'd rather have a view of the countryside."

Marie Paul added, "What about a sign?"

"What about it?"

"If we want donations, we'll want people to know we're here."

"We don't want donations. We want to work for our bread. If others, in their kindness, wish to offer us food or supplies, they'll find us, you can be sure."

"She *is* crazy," sputtered Elizabeth, helping Danielle wedge a log back in place.

Teresa heard the comment and grinned. Maybe she was, at that. Had the women been wearing their ankle-length brown habits and veils, they would've attracted all kinds of attention, and a lot of volunteer labor. Gestures of respect for their position, such as usually expected by religious congregations - an attitude often resented by the donors.

Reclothe those same women in flannel shirts and jeans, and no one came near.

Just as no one looked twice at the five when they arrived at St. John's for 8:00 Mass Sunday morning.

Teresa had witnessed this hypocrisy - on both sides - at the university, years earlier. The Sisters who shed their habits had still worn ornate crosses or

other insignia of their affiliation, to be adequately noticed and fawned upon in public. Others, who didn't recognize the pendants, objected to their preferential treatment.

St. Francis had proven, in the thirteenth century, each human being deserved equal consideration, whether they had contracted leprosy or lived in a town's most ornate palazzo.

The Poor Clares were struggling with this true anonymity. Within the California cloister, they had received packages of goodies from family and friends, free services from area plumbers or repairmen. Trips to the dentist's office or hospital for tests were brief, because they were shifted to the head of the waiting list upon their arrival.

These women had lost touch with the real world.

A harsh dose of it would open their eyes, in Teresa's opinion.

"I cleared my schedule for this afternoon," said Aeneas Destefanatos as the group descended the church steps after the final hymn. "Are we still on for dinner and a blessing?"

"Sure thing," Teresa responded absently.

"Do you have a grill?"

"We won't be having a formal cloister..."

"Not that kind of grille," the priest guffawed. "An outdoor grill, to cook burgers and hot dogs."

"Sorry, no."

"I'll bring my portable, then, and we'll have a picnic."

"Great."

"See you around 2:00."

Danielle welcomed Father Destefanatos as the living room/chapel mantle clock struck the hour. He presented an insulated cooler crammed with meat and sodas, and a handled paper sack with buns, chips and dip.

"Give me a minute, and I'll set up the grill around back," he noted.

Flabbergasted, the brunette merely nodded.

Elizabeth roused Teresa from a sound sleep for the festivities. The one day a week she could indulge in an afternoon nap, the 47-year-old found she needed the extra rest.

Chairs were moved from the enclosed porch into the open air, with the charcoal fire burning in the kettle-shaped grill a marvelous centerpiece. Neal tied his longish brown hair in a pony tail, to prevent it from being singed by leaping flames.

"You're Greek, aren't you?" queried Marie Paul.

“My grandfather emigrated from Athens to St. Louis during World War II.”

“But you’re a Catholic priest.”

“Any reason I shouldn’t be?”

“No. I…”

Beneath the mustache which extended past the ends of his lips, he smiled. “It’s okay. I grew up Orthodox, but felt the need for a more personal liturgy. I converted in college.”

Elizabeth blurted, “How do you get ‘Neal’ from ‘Aeneas’?”

“His little sister,” snickered Teresa.

“She couldn’t pronounce Aeneas,” he concurred. “She made it sound like ‘anneal’. Rather than being called a scientific process, my parents and I agreed on ‘Neal’.”

Stomachs filled with picnic fare, they relaxed in the May sunshine before Danielle brought a soccer ball from the garage and initiated a game in the grassy clearing south of the house, which would soon be transformed into a vast garden.

“I’ve got to admit,” Beatrix panted, guzzling water during a break, “it’s easier to play without the skirts.”

“You could still wear them on formal occasions,” admonished the lanky, perspiring priest.

“Like you do?” quipped Teresa. “I never once saw you wear your collar at the university.”

“That’s because you never went to the parish where I said Mass.”

“What, the cathedral downtown?”

“No, St. Isidore’s.”

“Thirty miles from campus. You kept your secret well.”

“They needed the help, and I spoke Spanish.”

“So, how’d you end up here?”

Neal snatched the ball from Elizabeth. “Second period begins now!”

Dishes washed and breathing restored to normal, Vespers began with holy water sprinkled in the four corners of the chapel, and prayers of blessing intoned. “I brought the Blessed Sacrament, too,” the guest declared, “but you don’t have a tabernacle.”

Teresa rose from her knees and hurried to the kitchen pantry. An assortment of oddities claimed one shelf, including a miniature gold-plated monstrance. “Will this do?”

“Temporarily.” The small host slipped into the sunburst’s glass compartment, the base positioned on the coffee table/altar between two lit candles.

The six concluded their prayers together, genuflected as one and adjourned to the recreation room.

“When are you going to outfit this place properly?” Neal inquired.

“It’s not ours to outfit,” acknowledged Teresa.

“Huh?”

“We don’t own it. It’s... complicated.”

“You’ll need a proper altar and...”

“Why? We don’t have a chaplain, so we won’t be having Mass...”

“What if I agree to be your chaplain?”

“The parish...”

“An interim position, after the last pastor died unexpectedly.”

Danielle delivered a pitcher of ice water, and Teresa offered to fill Destefanatos’ tumbler. “You had to be in the area for the bishop to assign you...”

“I was in St. Louis on an... extended retreat.”

“It sounds so mysterious,” giggled Beatrix.

“No mystery, really,” he growled. “I’d just been cleared of murder charges in San Diego.”

Four women stopped drinking and stared. Teresa managed to keep her composure.

“If you don’t want to talk about it...” she soothed.

“No. You’ve a right to know, if I’m going to be your chaplain. I’d been out with friends, and we’d been drinking. I got a call from the hospital about a dying parishioner. Driving there, I... hit a child who chased a ball into the street.”

“And they tried you for murder?”

“The child’s father was a state assemblyman. He wanted to make me an example of what would happen to anyone caught driving while intoxicated.”

“Were you... that drunk?”

“It doesn’t matter. I killed an innocent soul. If I’d been cold sober, I’d feel the same.”

Marie Paul probed, “Did this ‘extended retreat’ involve treatment for depression?”

“Very astute observation,” replied Neal. “They tried medication, but my condition worsened. My superiors thought putting me back to work might help.”

“Your superiors?” Teresa echoed. “You’re not diocesan?”

“You didn’t know I’m a Jesuit?”

The statement answered a lot of Teresa’s nagging questions. Jesuits had a reputation for being a very liberal religious order, their priests and brothers interacting freely with the laity, including drinking alcohol and smoking. Recalling

her days in his chemistry class, the woman suddenly recognized signs of his vocation in his words and actions.

She extended her hand to him. "Welcome to the misfit ranks."

"I'll call my provincial in the morning for permission."

"Where will he live?" protested Beatrix.

"I can stay at St. John's rectory. The new pastor will be glad for the company, I expect."

Elizabeth urged disdainfully, "Tell him about the money."

The priest's head tilted in curiosity.

"We won't be able to pay you," Teresa confessed.

"Will you be able to feed me?"

"Maybe."

Hazel orbs glared at her. "You doing the strict poverty thing?"

"We're observing the rule written by St. Francis and St. Clare," she corrected.

"Most other Franciscan communities do likewise, in spirit."

"The spirit isn't good enough. There's no reason to buy into the consumer mindset, whether communally or individually. We can make do with the basics, and meet any difficulties as they arise."

Neal unbent his achy knees, and the Sisters stood simultaneously. "A noble sentiment, Sister Teresa," he mocked. "I suppose you'll want these ancient muscles to help till the soil and plant the seedlings?"

"That's your choice."

He rotated his shoulder, and the joint popped loudly, making the women cringe. "It might do me some good. Since the trial, I haven't been exercising much, and I'm feeling old."

"You *are* old."

"Sixty is the new forty, or so they say," he shrugged.

The grill cool and packed in his Toyota SUV, Neal bid the Poor Clares farewell. Each recited Compline privately, a Sunday treat allowing those who were tired to climb in bed earlier than other nights. Every light in the house was extinguished by 8:00, and Teresa listened to the steady snoring until the wee hours.

After morning Mass, the SUV was commandeered for the supply run into the small town of Washington, Missouri. A fortunate circumstance, since the hardware store owner offered his roto-tiller free of charge for the day. The women transported boxes of seeds and starts, organic fertilizer, shovels and hoes back to the monastery, excited about the project.

Every moment they weren't praying in chapel or sharing a hasty meal, the

group labored in the garden over the course of the next two weeks. A full acre was converted from grass to rich loam in which peppers, onions, lettuce, carrots, tomatoes, cucumbers and other vegetables were planted. In exchange for a portion of the forthcoming crop, they obtained hoses of sufficient length to reach the farthest edge, to irrigate each row.

They celebrated with spontaneous dancing the morning the first shoots were glimpsed reaching into the daylight.

In the meantime, they didn't starve. Danielle, in her dealings with occasional visitors, discovered the bakery in Washington had closed when its owner succumbed to cancer three years previous. A generation which hadn't been raised cooking their own meals yearned for homemade cookies, muffins and cakes. Arrangements were made whereby patrons would deliver the initial flour, eggs, spices, and so forth. The Poor Clares negotiated for a booth at the farmer's market, and were paid for their heavenly sweets with canned goods, milk or meats.

By July, succulent produce dominated the displays.

The five so adapted to their new horarium, they didn't miss the traditional accouterments of the cloister. Then again, without the formal trappings of a monastery, fewer disturbances occurred. No one scaled non-existent walls as a high school prank, or bothered to ding-dong ditch the portress during spring break.

The word never came up in conversation during nightly recreation, which became more a time to unwind over a game of Uno or gin rummy after the day's toil. Aeneas Destefanatos sometimes joined them for the evening's leftovers, but left immediately afterward to give them their privacy.

Never did they guess that privacy would be rudely disrupted.

And by a horde wearing Franciscan garb, yet.

The men and women, each clad in hooded brown robe with a knotted cord at the waist, paraded up the drive that sunny August Tuesday as if they owned the property. At the fore, a broad-shouldered, bearded figure, his eyes hidden behind Ray Ban sunglasses. He hailed Beatrix and Marie Paul, weeding the zucchini bed.

Wide-brimmed straw hats tipped back, the pair gazed at these newcomers. Assuming they were members of the Order, they quickly removed their work gloves, and crossed the lawn to offer a welcome.

Teresa, recording results of the previous weekend's bartering on a green-lined ledger sheet spread across the dining room table, heard the voices and turned to peek through the curtains. She grit her teeth in anguish.

Reminded of the time county deputies tried to serve papers on her father's factory, raging into their midst in defense of the ailing entrepreneur, she'd ordered them off the grounds, backed by a dozen employees. She'd supposedly mellowed

since then, however.

Her churning stomach belied that assertion.

“Well, well, Brother William,” she called, emerging onto the front porch. “What brings you to these parts?”

“Do we know each other?” queried the man.

“Not personally. I used to have your albums.”

“Used to? Why no more?”

“Lady Poverty didn’t see fit for us to have a stereo.”

While the Christian musician’s songs were uplifting, Teresa had long since judged him a phony, a verdict confirmed when a panel truck carrying the group’s personal belongings braked on the gravel.

“You follow our beloved Father Francis?” he continued.

“We follow him,” she repeated, mumbling quietly, “you don’t.”

“We’re on a pilgrimage from Kansas City to St. Louis,” announced William’s lieutenant, who introduced himself as Brother Peter. “Raising money for a mission in Kenya. Will you allow us to camp on your property for the night?”

“It’s not our property, so you can do as you like. If you plan to hold any impromptu concerts or prayer meetings, just keep it down, will you?”

“Why the antagonism?” William prodded.

Teresa realized she hadn’t hid her emotions as well as she’d planned. “I apologize for being ungracious.” Her last words were barely audible. “Your... style of Franciscanism gives us all a bad name.”

One young woman, a daisy laced through long blonde tresses, pursued Teresa toward the house. “Why do you say such things about us?” she demanded in halting tones.

“You... heard me?”

“I read lips. I lost my hearing as a child.”

“If you’ve never really lived as a Franciscan, you don’t know how William has butchered the saint’s vision. Owning a huge complex on the outskirts of Des Moines, claiming to observe the vows, yet living like a king... Going on a ‘pilgrimage’, with every comfort of home at his fingertips...”

“He’s a good man. The Minstrel of the Most High.”

“He’s a good musician, and an opportunist.”

Someone must’ve been carrying a cell phone and alerted the media, because satellite trucks from St. Louis network affiliates converged near the split rail fence.

Teresa whirled on these interlopers. “No cameras!” she shouted.

“You said it wasn’t your property, and we could do as we like,” countered

William, approaching a lithe reporter bearing a wireless microphone.

“Do you really think St. Francis would’ve chosen publicity over solitude?”

“He didn’t live in the twenty-first century.”

“Excuses, excuses.”

Flipping his sunglasses onto his dark head, Brother William let his own volatile temper flare. He forgot about the red light on the SteadiCam, signaling a live feed. “Are you accusing me of deceiving my followers?”

“You should not claim to have ‘followers’. Francis never did. Those who joined him were his brothers, equal in every joy and hardship. Those who buy your CDs believe the tripe on the inserts, how you live in austerity and emulate the Gospels. When Francis walked to Rome with the first friars, they didn’t have an entourage. They relied upon the kindness of others for *everything*.”

“This... is a matter of security. Our lawyers...”

Hands raised in surrender, Teresa bowed her head. “I pity you, William. If you had any guts, you’d walk to St. Louis by yourself, as a true pilgrim.”

Beatrix and Marie Paul watched in awe from the garden, while William’s companions scurried about erecting tents and unrolling sleeping bags. The camera lens focused on the two adversaries, thousands saw William’s bravado crumble.

“It... wouldn’t be safe.”

“It’s not safe to live in many cities, where children are shot at random through the windows by thugs speeding past in cars. It’s not safe to work in a factory, when a disgruntled employee brings a gun and kills the managers. Go to school, shop in a mall - everything is dangerous these days. Francis based his actions on trust. Why can’t you, if you claim to walk in his footsteps?”

“Can you?” William challenged.

“Sure.” As soon as the syllable escaped her lips, Teresa regretted it. Still, “To prove it, I’ll walk to St. Louis with you and, when you’ve boarded a bus to your posh Iowa compound, I’ll walk back here by myself.”

Elizabeth, listening through the kitchen window, raised her eyes heavenward. “She *is* crazy.”

Calling William’s bluff with this tactic served its purpose. “Some other time,” was his answer. Only then did he notice the camera. His palm covered the lens in disgust. “Turn that damned thing off already.”

Melodic and irritating ring tones reverberated through the hushed evening, while the Poor Clares tried to meditate before Compline. Teresa sat on the window seat in her bedroom until midnight, watching the numbers around a brilliant campfire dwindle, until only William and two Armani-suited figures remained.

They'd shown up within an hour of the broadcast, which must've been picked up by cable news programs. Flew in on private jets, no doubt, Teresa surmised, and shuttled to the site in limousines.

Ruddy face buried behind massive paws, William ignored the noise when Teresa strode over the dewy grass. She plucked a ceramic mug from a cardboard box, filling it with thick brew from an old-style coffee pot on a grate above the flames.

"Want a cup?" she offered, dropping onto the ground beside him.

"You've ruined me, bitch."

"Think of it this way: I've saved you from your own fame."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You were no more a Franciscan than my Jewish uncle."

"We had the bishop's sanction..."

"So long as you contributed ten percent of profits from your CD sales to the diocese. Now, your music will have a ring of truth."

"I'll never sing again," William lamented.

"Your choice." She emptied the mug at the base of a tree and rose. "You ever been to Assisi?"

"Once, with a tour group."

"You need to go alone, and sit in the chapel where Francis' tomb is visible, or in the Porziuncola at Santa Maria degli Angeli." Wistfully, she added, "In a corridor near the Rose Garden, there's a statue of the saint, with a live dove nesting in his hand. I never did figure out how it and its mate got in and out of the building."

"You serious?"

She nodded.

"That'd be something to see."

"And, maybe, sing about."

William straightened, lips taut. "I can't say thank you for this..."

"And I, in good conscience, must apologize profusely for what happened. As Poor Clares, we're supposed to be in the world, but not of the world. How others live really isn't our business."

"You don't strike me as the type to live in a cloister."

"You see a cloister around here?"

With that, she tramped to the house.

Two hours' sleep didn't fortify her for the ire of Aeneas Destefanatos after Wednesday's early Mass.

"Not vowed to silence, eh?"

“No.”

“A couple bishops wish you were.”

“What bishops?” she asked.

“Des Moines and St. Louis.”

“They’ve been interviewed by the press about what happened?”

“No,” replied Destefanatos, sipping decaf in the kitchen, a colorful dawn shining through the window. “The archbishop got an angry call from his fellow prelate, and then phoned my provincial, who proceeded to rip my head off in a tersely worded e-mail.”

“What, you’ve been appointed our keeper now?”

“That’s part of a chaplain’s role, to guide and instruct.”

“Then, William needs a chaplain.”

The priest exhaled in frustration. “Why’d you have to clash in front of the cameras?”

Teresa dropped onto a metal chair. “I didn’t know they were taping. Neither did he. His version of what it means to be Franciscan irks me something fierce - presuming he’ll be treated like a celebrity wherever he goes. It’s the same attitude nurtured by those who rely on their habits for special attention. Besides which, he’s never spent a day being truly poor in his life.”

“Isn’t that between him and God?”

“I think his music contract has become his god.”

“His music has inspired millions, bringing them closer to the divine. Your public criticism may cost him his audience, and cost our diocese a big settlement.”

Brown eyes wide, she leapt to her feet. “What?”

“His lawyers are threatening to sue for defamation.”

“What good would that do? No true Franciscan would go to court...”

“Whether he’s a ‘true Franciscan’ isn’t the issue. The issue is you making an apology, on camera, and retracting your statements.”

“I won’t do it.” Teresa stared at the sunrise. “What I said shouldn’t matter one tick to those who find comfort in his music. Do Rolling Stones fans like their albums any less because Keith Richards does drugs, or Mick Jagger is... ugly? Or Tupac, because he died tragically?”

“You know that, and I know that. Lawyers don’t think that way.”

“That’s why I fired them.” Brother William stood on the dining room threshold. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop. Sister Danielle let me in, so I could pray in your chapel.”

“Neal Destefanatos.” The two men clasped hands. “Let me offer my sincerest apologies, on behalf of the St. Louis archdiocese...”

“No need. Tell me, though, what’s with everybody wearing flannel shirts and jeans?”

The priest tugged his red plaid collar self-consciously.

“We work in the garden most of the day,” explained Teresa. “Easier to run these through the laundry. You’re welcome to join us.”

“Thanks, but no. Callouses are a big turn-off with the crowds my concerts attract. For some reason, they expect soft skin and trimmed nails. My manager has prohibited me from engaging in manual labor.”

“Him, you didn’t fire?” Teresa taunted.

“You think I should?”

Neal tugged the woman aside. “No, she doesn’t. You’re free to live how you choose, where you choose. Sister Teresa has nothing more to say on the subject.”

The beefy musician sensed otherwise, and chuckled. “With that tongue as sharp as a wasp’s sting, I wonder she ever runs out of things to say.”

Teresa shrugged and bit her lower lip.

A sudden lightning flash and rumble of thunder made the trio jump. Neal watched through the window as gathering clouds obscured the sun. “Looks like you won’t need me in the garden today,” he ventured.

“But the plants do need the rain,” said Teresa.

William remarked, “I’d best be on my way.”

“You’ll be drenched,” Neal objected.

“I like walking in the rain, singing God’s praises...”

“Go in peace, then.”

They escorted William to the door which, when unlatched, blew open with the force of a strong gust. A crew rushed to disassemble the tents erected the previous night and stuff them into the panel truck. The musician ignored them, setting off at a merry pace toward St. Louis.

He hadn’t yet vanished around a curve before two brown shingles fluttered past the porch. Neal groaned. “I finally remembered to bring a new tarp to replace the one that ripped. I don’t know if I want to be on the roof in this weather, though...”

“You can hold the ladder; I’ll go up,” Teresa volunteered. “If the leaks get any worse, the walls and floors will be completely ruined.”

She didn’t allow him an opportunity to protest, retreating to the kitchen for rope and scissors. The aluminum ladder’s lightness made carrying it easy, but served no purpose as winds attempted to whip it from Neal’s hands.

Both were soaked upon reentering the house twenty minutes later.

Smiling, plump Beatrix brought towels, but the only remedy was to strip off the wet clothes. Danielle led Neal to the downstairs bathroom, offering him a bulky terry robe to wear until the laundry could be done.

Teresa, in pajamas, joined him in the recreation room. Elizabeth served them steaming cups of hot chocolate. Having warmed his hands on the mug, the priest rose and signaled the others from the room.

“Excuse us, please,” he urged.

“What, I’m in trouble again?” bristled Teresa, shifting her position on the battered gold sofa.

“No, it’s good news, in a way.”

“That sounds like bad news.”

Neal settled in an armchair opposite. “The roof is being replaced next week. That’s good news, isn’t it?”

“Sure, but you make it sound like there’s a mob contract involved.”

“Nothing like that.” He hesitated. “The roof is just the beginning. The whole house is being renovated.”

“We don’t need...”

The way his elongated mustache twitched, coupled with the sadness of his hazel eyes, spoke the unspeakable.

“The heirs want the house back?”

“Carmody’s daughter bought her brothers’ shares. She’s giving it to her son as a wedding present.”

“How long have you known about this?” Teresa murmured.

“I got a letter yesterday from the Abbess in California. She asked me to see what I could do...”

“What, buy us airline tickets to L.A.?”

“Nothing like that. She wants you to succeed, and hoped the diocese - or the Jesuits - could find you a new place.”

The time for dreaming had passed. “How long do we have?”

“The contractors are due September first.”

Less than two weeks. “The others will be disappointed.”

“I know,” Neal agreed. “They’ve enjoyed this adventure.”

“I want you to know how much I appreciate you leaving me to break the news to them,” grumbled Teresa sarcastically. “You could’ve told us together...”

“Except, there’s something else.”

She waited for him to continue.

“You haven’t been taking Communion lately. If you need Reconciliation, I’m all ears.”

“No thanks.”

“A crisis of faith?” He sat through her silence. “A loss of faith?”

“I probably never had any to start.”

“Everyone who steps out boldly on the spiritual path reaches a point...”

Her furrowed brow and pursed lips made him lose his train of thought, so he made a second effort. “Many are the stories of saints - most recently, Mother Teresa of Calcutta - who endured extreme dryness of soul for prolonged periods, feeling God had abandoned them.”

“Neal, there is no God.”

The pronouncement so blunt, the priest’s goateed jaw dropped. “That’s... rather drastic.”

“Not really. Imagine growing up with a father who works six 16-hour days each week, who’s married to a woman who drinks a half-gallon of wine every day and beats you between glassfuls for the slightest infraction. Then, being dragged to church every Sunday in your best clothes, only to listen to her harp about what others were wearing, or how their personal lives were falling apart. In the quiet moments after Communion, begging for the hell to end, yet having to bear day after day of confusion and agony.

“The sole respite in all this proves to be the Kazantzakis novel about Francis of Assisi, found in a hospital E.R. admitting room while waiting to have stitches in your chin after being hit with a flying chair. This Italian saint preferred a hermit’s existence, and enjoyed nature. Unlike vague bible stories, this guy was real. He tried to change how people spent their lives in concrete ways. He honored Brother Sun and Sister Moon, and worked to preserve Sister Earth.

“Given those circumstances, would you believe in God?” she concluded.

“Francis did.”

“And that’s fine. I believe in Francis. That’s what keeps me focused.”

“The... connection between the two isn’t there for you?” Neal puzzled.

“Does it need to be?”

“To be a Poor Clare, it does.”

“Clare was inspired by Francis - a man, not a myth.”

“You’re calling Christ a myth?”

“Think about it, Neal. None of the Gospels are eye-witness accounts. That much has been verified by research. The ones which the early Church fathers accepted and included in the New Testament are severely biased from a male perspective, besides. Before I had to quit college, I took a comparative religion course. It seems, in many cultures, when the future looks bleak, someone creates a mythological figure to generate hope among the people. Those stories revolve

around the virgin birth, death and resurrection of a savior figure, no different from the Gospel plot line, except for the names and locations. Given the time frame the Gospels were written, I figure those who survived the second destruction of the temple around the year 70 looked to the Old Testament prophets and devised their own version of the myth to promote better days ahead.”

Neal bristled uncomfortably. “The resurrection is an irrefutable truth...”

“Would it stand up in court?”

“You’re saying you’ll believe only a truth which can be confirmed legally?”

“No, I’m saying Christians use the wrong word to describe the *tenets* of their religion. You can see concrete truth all around, though: nature retaliating against human abuse of the earth’s resources.”

“What about Paul’s letters to the Gentiles? You think those aren’t based on the truths revealed to him?”

“Paul was the biggest public relations guru of his age. First, he supposedly gets into stoning the Christians, then does a 180 and supports them? He went with the winning team, once the stories became popular.”

“You’re awfully jaded...”

“No, I’m a realist. I can tell the difference between fact and fiction.”

“I’ll have to write the Abbess about this,” he sighed.

“Why?”

“Because you’re violating every article of the Rule you vowed to observe.”

“Bull. I live in poverty, owning nothing, obey my superiors and avoid men.”

“What about prayer? The psalms which praise God...”

“To whom I pray is my own business. I shouldn’t think you’d care, as long as it’s not Satan - another myth.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

Teresa’s lack of a smile indicated otherwise. “The dynamic of good and evil is inherent to every belief system. When bad things happen, people want a scapegoat beyond their own stupidity, so they blame demons. They invent gods with human traits which mirror their own strengths and weaknesses, because they’re too lazy to solve their own problems, and want some ‘all-powerful being’ to handle the difficult stuff.”

“If, on the off chance you’re correct about this, what’s left?” Neal queried.

“Working the earth to grow food, living simply, and celebrating every day.”

Neal shook his shaggy bronze head, as if to clear a fog. “You can’t possibly intend to remain part of... this.”

“I take my vows very seriously.”

“But, when the others learn of your heresy...”

“Are you going to tell them?” she challenged.

“I...”

“Look. We’ll tell them about having to move tomorrow after Mass. We can post a notice at the farmer’s market about needing a new residence...”

“Don’t bother,” countered Neal. “I phoned the landlord of the building where the old bakery used to be in town. He’s offered the property, rent-free, as long as the supply of cookies and pies continues.”

“What would we do about the garden? There’s no yard...”

“Roof-top gardens are the rage in New York City.”

“And, our solitude? At least, here, we don’t have that many visitors, even without a cloister wall. If we’re running a bakery, we’d have to open at six and interact with people all day. It would disrupt the horarium...”

“According to your interpretation of poverty,” Neal drawled with a hint of derision, “don’t you have to take what you’re offered?”

“If you ask the Abbess, she’ll tell you of the many properties offered to us, which were politely declined as unsuitable. She would’ve done the same with this one, except I asked for the chance to try something different.”

Defeated, Neal sniffed, “I’ll make a few more inquiries when I get back to the rectory.”

Teresa rose from the sofa. “Your clothes should be dry by now.”

“I think it’s stopped raining, too.”

“Then, we can resume our normal routine.”

“I... don’t know. I’ve got to think about what’s been said here, before I make any decisions about the next step.”

“There’s no need for any ‘next step’.”

“Oh, yes, there is. If I can’t reconcile my conscience, I may need to resign as the community’s chaplain.”

“You, with your open mind and interest in new discoveries...”

“Scientifically, yes. When it comes to my faith...”

“Faith should always be open for new discoveries,” proclaimed Teresa.

“Faith set in stone eventually grows stagnant and dull.”

“Depends on the stone.” Neal crossed to the door, pausing with his hand on the knob. “Don’t discuss these... ideas with the others, huh?”

“I haven’t, and won’t. I respect their right to believe as they see fit.”

“That’s a point in your favor, anyway.”

With that, he made a quiet exit.

Teresa paused in the foyer, deliberating - as she'd done many times since stepping through the monastery's cloister door the first time - whether she should request a dispensation from her vows.

Then again, requesting a dispensation would mean she believed in the authority of the Catholic Church, and she really didn't. How could one not believe in God, yet respect an institution which had oppressed the masses in God's name for thousands of years?

Dejected, she climbed the stairs.

Marie Paul had laid Teresa's clean flannel shirt and jeans on the vanity stool, though her sneakers were still damp, airing by the open bedroom window. Shedding her pajamas, she descended to the chapel, hearing the chants of midday prayers through the floor. Nodding an apology for her tardiness, she knelt on the wood floor and joined the psalmody.

The others cast sideways glances at her throughout, and she noticed the furtive stares. The final blessing given, she didn't move. "All right, what's up?"

Four pairs of eyes averted guiltily.

"Were you listening outside the door?" she prodded.

Danielle confessed, "Only a little while."

"Long enough to hear about losing the house," added Beatrix.

"Will we have to go back to California?" Elizabeth wondered, green orbs moist.

Teresa replied, "Not if you don't want to go."

"Good."

This change of heart, from reluctance at the enterprise to enthusiasm, stunned Teresa. "The weeks to come may be difficult. You know how long it took the Abbess to agree to accept Carmody's generosity - albeit of a temporary sort. A suitable property might not be available for months, or years."

"Would we have to live on the street?" puzzled Marie Paul, her angelic countenance taut.

"I wouldn't subject you to do *that*. We could relocate to the bakery until something better comes along. We'd lose the garden, and even this quasi-solitude..."

The quartet ruminated options in silence.

"Look, there's no need for a hasty decision," Teresa stated, struggling to her feet. "We'll meet with Neal tomorrow after breakfast, and discuss whatever suggestions your meditation and prayers might bring forth."

A somber group sipped coffee at the dining room table Thursday morning. Neal's sole contribution amounted to negative feedback from polling St. John's

parishioners. “A few farmers would be willing to sell their properties, but not donate them.”

“And they shouldn’t be chastised for it,” remarked Marie Paul. “They must tend to the needs of their families.”

Beyond that, the five Poor Clares passed the next week in a haze of mild depression and grief. Not even a poster hung at their farmers’ market booth elicited any viable input.

“We’d better resign ourselves to the bakery,” grunted Elizabeth after Vespers on August 27th.

“There are still four days left,” beamed Danielle weakly. “Miracles usually happen at the last possible moment.”

Teresa reserved comment on that philosophy. “One way or another, we should do a thorough cleaning of the house, and start packing.”

Though the vegetable garden continued to produce in abundance, the necessity of plowing it under hurt each woman deeply. Beatrix hinted, “You don’t suppose we could leave it until...”

“I’ve a sneaking suspicion part of the renovations will involve extensive landscaping of the grounds,” responded Teresa.

“Damn!”

The dark cloud over their future did lift, nonetheless. Their moods were bolstered Saturday afternoon by a small crowd which gathered near the farmer’s market entrance to bid the Poor Clares farewell. Then, baskets of tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, carrots and lettuce which had not been bartered for other goods were dropped off at the local homeless shelter.

Neal’s SUV arrived at the temporary monastery with its occupants, stopping to allow Danielle to grab the last bundle of letters from the mailbox. A combination of prayer requests and junk mail were mixed with an official-looking envelope bearing the return address of the Brothers of Christ Crucified.

Danielle pulled out the sheet and unfolded it. The message was not long, but she had to read it three times so the contents would sink into her distracted brain.

“Dear Sisters,” she read. “Through some Jesuit friends, we heard about your unfortunate property loss. It is always difficult when a foundation is going well, then disaster strikes to seemingly undo all the good which has been wrought.

“We have also heard of your singular approach to the vows and religious life. Our own founder, in the late 1960s, hoped to transform the landscape of communal living and education. Unfortunately, our one great project - St. Andrew’s Academy - succeeded for less than a generation, before our numbers

made us unable to continue the ministry.

“Administration of the school, like many Catholic institutions these days, was passed to the laity. We still own the building and grounds, however, which includes the residence formerly used by the teaching brothers.”

Danielle’s voice grew more excited. The vehicle stopped half-way along the drive, so everyone could listen intently.

“We would like to offer you the use of this building as your monastery. It has been maintained in good repair, with ample space for a garden, walls to ensure privacy, a chapel and eight furnished cells, in addition to kitchen, refectory and four bathrooms. We would ask no rent, only that you include the school and our community in your daily prayers.”

“I think we could manage that,” quipped Elizabeth.

Beatrix queried, “Where is the school located?”

Neal had walked out from the house, and heard the letter through the open passenger’s window. “It’s about ten miles northwest of St. Louis. With a reliable vehicle, you’d still be able to bring your crop to our farmers’ market...”

“We’ll worry about a vehicle after we get moved,” Teresa stated. She took the paper from Danielle and handed it to the priest. “Will you call them, please, and accept on our behalf? Tell them we’ll arrive Monday afternoon.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Neal laughed.

“Shut up.”

“What about Father Neal?” asked Marie Paul. “He’s our chaplain. Isn’t he coming with us?”

“Of course, he is,” Teresa answered.

He shook his head. “You seem to forget...”

“Oh, right. Have you made a decision?”

“The decision’s been made for me. I’ve been reassigned to teach at St. Louis University. The semester has already started, as a matter of fact, and I’m to report no later than tomorrow night.”

This news shattered the women’s joy, and made their remaining hours in the old house unbearable. The most problematic aspect of poverty was the constant insecurity about the future. Just when a level of comfort was achieved, in the surroundings and the daily routine, the slightest upheaval could disrupt everything.

Aeneas Destefanatos already gone, St. John’s pastor offered to drive the Poor Clares to their new home in his Honda mini-van. The five stuffed their backpacks behind the third seat and bid a fond adieu to what had been a wreck of a structure when they’d arrived five months earlier.

“We always must remember to rest only in God,” muttered Elizabeth. “He is our one safe haven, not anything tangible on this earth.”

Three voices agreed with her.

Teresa stared out the window at the passing countryside, silent.