

Blood

From Brother Jesse's Tale, "Monk In The Cellar"

www.monkinthecellar.blogspot.com

I was not sleeping well, fitfully tossing to and fro as my mind refused to leave the problem of whether we should stay at the farm or go elsewhere, but where I didn't know. As the new abbot I wasn't making much headway toward a solution. Unable to sleep, I dragged myself around the big farm house half the night and finally stretched out on the large table in the center of the wash room across from the kitchen. I wriggled about in my sleeping bag and remembered a visit to Uncle Hank's farm when I was a boy. Perhaps where I lay brought back the memory. The massive seven by ten foot surface was held up by six stout legs that I'm sure would support a small truck. Above me on racks hung large round wash tubs and an array of huge cooking pots. From the knife marks and wide gouges beneath me on the gritty surface, I guessed the heavy block table had been used for butchering, to carve up large animals after shooting the poor beasts outside in the yard. Hauled inside and up where I now lay, the carcasses would be cut up and parts could be tossed into various pots and set to boil. Afterward, the workers' bloody shirts and pants were scrubbed on the table surface with sand and thrown into other pots to boil before washing in the big tubs. This was the farm's indoor abattoir and laundry, no doubt a useful combination when the old house served as a home to a large crew of farm hands. I lie there imagining myself as a sacrifice, waiting for the haruspex to cut me open and to divine the future from my entrails. At this point I might be willing to undergo the quick but

gory method of determining our prospects. Only slightly less painful would be asking my Brothers for their advice, but I wouldn't ask because I didn't want them to think I couldn't figure it out.

Twisted up in my sleeping bag like a victim strapped to the table, I lay there thinking of blood. Isaac, the son of Abraham came to mind. His father had been willing to sacrifice the boy on an altar, a holy butchering block, as he played Chicken with a God who demanded a loyalty that bordered on mania. If you love me, kill the one you love.

Blood can mean death, but also birth. Blood is sacred. In dreams it can signify transformation. When it begins to flow in a young woman, it is the dawning of her adult life. When it stops, it's the beginning of a new life. Down through the ages, one squalling infant after another, blood has lived on through the unions driven by a joyous clasping of boys and girls together, a more effective design than the careful plans of their elders.

What is it about the blood? Despite those awful 19th Century church hymns with dripping names like Covered With The Blood and Fountain of Blood, there does seem to be what one song says is Power In The Blood.

On the long ago visit to Uncle Hank's farm, after the ladies left the living room he told a story about himself and Aunt Eva butchering a pig. My father coughed uncomfortably as I lay on the floor and continued to read a comic book, pretending my ten year old ears were not listening. Uncle Hank said he and Eva were third cousins and hadn't any romantic interest in each other until one afternoon their parents asked them to butcher a pig and they found themselves smeared with the pig's blood. Uncle Hank was nowhere near as graphic as my imagination, but I saw them shedding bloody jackets and then shirts on a warm September afternoon as they worked far in the back of the barn. With a wink in his voice, Uncle Hank said an interest in each

other arose rather quickly. I now understand the blood somehow acted as a catalyst, and while the rest of the family was in town that afternoon, Uncle Hank and Aunt Eva found their way to ecstasy as easily and quickly as every one of their ancestors had, back to Adam and Eve.

"Well," sighed Uncle Hank, "we went right down to the minister the next day and told him we wanted to get married. The old fellow asked me how soon? And I said, 'Before the train comes in, Pastor.'"

My father chuckled and Uncle Hank continued, "The Pastor looked at me and he said, 'Buying your ticket a little late, ain'tcha son?'"

The men in the room laughed. I wasn't sure I understood the punch line and I kept my face in my comic book. Even if I thought they would have offered an explanation, I wouldn't have asked, because I didn't want them to think I couldn't figure it out.

In my sleeping bag, I flipped over on my other side, trying to get comfortable. I wanted us to stay on this farm at Mucky Run. Though we'd only been here the past two weeks, I was captured by the rolling hills and green pastures. To have such open space around me was a great blessing after being closed away for so long in the woods of West Saugerties. But I wanted to choose a course based on what was best for all of us and what God might want us to do in his service. After all, I was the abbot.

Frankly, I didn't know if the Creator of the Universe cared about our puny efforts. I wanted Him to know we were willing to be His hands, but as Augustine said, there isn't anything He really needs from us. Yet the great disappointment of my life would be if I found that none of my efforts had mattered. My Golgotha would be to see my work crucified.

It seemed to me I was wasting time and I wanted to have a plan for us and I wanted an answer as to where we should go. I wanted to buy my ticket before the train arrived. But sometimes the train never comes. Uncle Hank and Aunt Eva got married and built a house with many rooms. But Eva was never able to have any children.

"We were disappointed to have not been blessed with little ones," Uncle Hank said on another occasion. "But the only thing to do in life is the next thing waiting to be done," he said. "Otherwise, you might start thinking you're in charge."

I could live my life working toward my laudable goals without knowing if they would bear fruit. Or like the old song I hate, I could cover myself with the blood. The red blood I carry in my veins links me all the way back to my ancestors who were so like me and who I will never know. Their blood runs in me and with it their faith bangs around in my heart. But the blood I carry in my soul was shed for me by the one who redeems me from myself.

Lying on the butchering table I remembered how easy it had been in the past when I simply did as I was told by my superiors. Now, as the abbot I had to advise the others what to do, but only after I offered my will as a sacrifice.

I didn't need a plan. I needed a lot more humility and trust. I would wait and listen.

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