

The Windswept Journal

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From the novel Monk In The Cellar

Sacrifice

Brother Jesse writes:

If you ever see a contemplative monk at a family funeral with a somber look on his face, take it from me: he's doing everything in his power to keep from bursting out and shouting, "Hallelujah! Food! People!" An Après-Funeral Finger Food Feast is terrifically appreciated by any starving monastic. Those little miniature hot dogs sure beat the boiled cardboard I normally eat.

And pretty women! Ladies who dress up when they go out. Not the girls deflated and worn out from a morning of laundry and house cleaning or a day at the factory or insurance company. Nor the women ironed flat and grey in a convent. But those modern lasses instantly shaped into temptresses by underwear made of space-age materials and designed by magicians who know how to direct the eye away from the real story. Women primped up and sprayed and painted and frosted with every modern chemical devised to make them appear ready for an evening of wild orgy. although such is the farthest from most of their minds. But not from mine. Even the grandmothers look good!

You're surprised I would admit it? I'm a man, for cripes sake, not a eunuch. I didn't become a monk because I thought women were boring. I became a monk because I believed I was called to this life.

But it's no surprise I've lusted over Lucy's ample figure. I'm just a man. Lucy, Immy, Sally are lovely souls, each one special in my eyes. But in one sense they're all the same to me as male. Carl Jung explained them as my anima. In "Two Essays in Analytical Psychology," he said, "The whole nature of man presupposes woman,

both physically and spiritually. His system is tuned into woman from the start, just as it is prepared for a quite definite world where there is water, light and air.” My anima is like a dress I began to stitch as a child. It’s sewn from my psycho-social-sexual dreams. From time to time I drape it over a woman and think I’m in love with her. That’s not a condition of the male psyche one gets over easily, if he gets over it at all.

I do have to constantly work on quelling the self, whether it be the greedy self, sexual self or just the normal inflated ego. We have a tradition in our order when we enter the cloister of reducing our self-importance. Our name is changed to that of a patron saint. Long ago someone in authority upped the ante by deciding brothers and priests would take the name of a woman saint. I suppose that’s no different than the thousands of nuns who to this day take a male saint’s name. But I’ll bet sixty years ago when the brothers heard their names would get a sex change, many were quite upset.

I’m sometimes asked if I did indeed choose St. Jessica’s name. Yes, I did. It was not given to me. We were left complete discretion in our choice. And frankly, I chose it because I wanted to be as anonymous as the saint. Not many Christians remember Saint Jessica of Galilee, the wife of Chuza, a steward to King Herod Antipas. She was one of the women who accompanied Mary Magdalene to the tomb on Easter morning. She may have kept her friends a secret from her husband.

Given my personality, I hoped Jessica’s name would help dampen my ego and leave me forgotten. Her name didn’t diminish my ego one bit, but it turns out I have been completely forgotten anyway. I’m a monk, so I guess that’s OK. But it would be nice to hear from my birth brothers once in a while. Not counting them, there are only two or three relatives left to die and then I won’t have any family funerals to go to. What a shame. I’ll miss the food.

At funerals I have stood innocently next to a pretty woman and pretended we were married. Just for a minute or so. I’d join a circle of men and women discussing one topic or another, usually having nothing to do with the dearly departed. There was always a brief patter of Hellos to me and What’s New? (Nothing is ever new in a monastery.) The group would resume their discussion and happily ignore me. I’d choose a woman in the circle, usually a lady next to me, and turn slightly toward her as men and women do if they are a couple. I’d steal furtive glances at her to fix a firm picture of the woman in my mind. And then I would let my imagination play with what she might say about her real husband, imagining myself in that role. Soon I’d have thoughts of driving home with her, picking up milk and bread at the convenience store and sitting around in the evening discussing the theology of Thomas Aquinas. It’s a little mind game I believe helps me through the lonely times.

If I had married someone instead of becoming a monk, this morning the woman and I might have shared our oh, maybe our 16,427th breakfast together. I wonder what we could have possibly talked about on sixteen thousand mornings. "Pass the butter" and "How about those Yankees?" 16,000 times would probably not help to form a scintillating relationship. But I may be wrong. The right woman might not care what we talked about.

Although my residence in a cloistered monastery makes it a little easier to deal with, I must acknowledge I'm a single male in a world dedicated to coupled males and females. Sex can be distracting and has caused much grief over the ages. but any evolutionist will tell you the invention of sex made the development of our world extremely efficient and sped up the process by billions of years.

I can't change my biology. Like monks have in the past, I live with it as best I can. But I don't totally deny it. I lay awake some nights yearning for a woman to lie beside me. To talk to, share my thoughts and dreams and to tell my fears. To lay my head upon her breast and listen to her heart beat, to smell her sweetness. To feel so close to another human being, another soul. And to have planned a life together, to have raised children and to have sat on a Sunday afternoon after dinner on a wide porch in the soft sunshine and watched grandchildren play on the grass. A woman to share my body on long walks in the woods and at night in the peace of our bedroom. To care for her in sickness and to hold her when she suffered pain or grief.

This is what I gave up to become a monk. I didn't fully appreciate my sacrifice when I decided as a young man to enter the religious life. I didn't know I was going against every cell in my body in remaining celibate. I knew I could live without the young woman I was involved with before entering the novitiate. Leaving her was in some ways a relief. But I didn't know life without any woman would eventually become a hell of loneliness.

My old abbot often worried I would one day in a funk fling myself off the roof of the Chapter House. But only once was I tempted to join the spirit on the horizon ... to step off the roof into her arms. It happened after a storm thundered down the mountain and pounded the Chapter House with blasts of wind and a torrent of rain. When it ended and the stained glass window of St. Lucy lit up with rays of sunshine through her colored glass, I went up the roof ladder hoping to see a rainbow. I popped my head out the trap door and swung my eyes west toward the late afternoon sun. There on the horizon golden edged clouds blazed, appearing pink and green against a pale blue sky. I made my way along the peak, crawling up to the edge of the roof. I became overwhelmed with yearning. It frightened me to suddenly feel something pulled inside my chest. A woman spirit seemed to be calling from over on the horizon, a place where we might live forever.

As the sun burst free of the clouds and began to warm the roof, the bell rang for Vespers and I headed back down for Chapel. I backed down from the peak to the trap door. Then I backed into the roof hole, closed the hatch and backed down the ladder. I backed down all the way. I'm always backing down.

When I go up on the roof and look out over the valley I often sense something that is feminine. I can't say why. It may be the lush fruitfulness of a summer afternoon as the haze rises from the river that runs through the valley to suckle the trees and grasses. It may be the wind whispering to me, playfully tousling me, wrapping its arms around me. It may simply be how the ineffable creator has chosen to remind me that I will always be incomplete and feel overwhelmed by a yearning I cannot explain. What I feel as a void in my life ... what I think of as my sacrifice ... may represent the deepest desire for an ultimate communion with the one who made me and yearns to have me home. She waits for me.

David Griffin

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