

The Wind

*From Monk In The Cellar,
a lamentation from Brother Jesse.*

It's cold tonight. When the wind whistles around the window frames and rattles the broken panes of glass, I think back over the years I've lived in this dump and wonder why past abbots didn't fix up the place.

I suppose we were always broke. Certainly we were blessed when the Jewish couple who ran it as a Catskills resort in the 1920s gave us the place so many years ago. An older Brother here says we were expecting an infusion of cash from their estate when the former owners died. But the heirs had been upset enough when Mom and Dad gave us the land and buildings, even though at the time the place wasn't considered of much worth. Today it's all but fallen down, but land up here on top of the mountain is valuable now. Those greedy bastards back in Ireland who run our Order of the Ardent Brothers want to sell our monastery to pay off their debts. What's to become of the eleven Brothers including myself has not been discussed. It needn't be. We all know we'll be kicked out and sent down the mountain..

Despite our eventual perdition coming into focus, we try to keep the main house from falling down. A Brother novice and I have taken on the project of halting the front porch from leaning too far away from the main building. Without the porch, the few visitors who stop by would need a step ladder to come in the front door.

The young Brother and I work well together. His professed name is Brother Saint Winifred of Gwytherin in Denbigshire. We can't imagine such a mouthful when we cheer him on in a softball game, so we have come to call him Kickstart. The nickname relates to his hitting the road to join a motorcycle gang after getting his doctorate in Late Antiquity. Seven years in a library will do that to a man.

I don't at all like outdoor chores after the first frost. It's damned cold out there and at seventy years of age my arthritis always flares up. I mentioned it to Kickstart but he wasn't listening. He worked beside me in a light jacket while I bundled up in a ratty old down coat stretched tightly over two sweat shirts.

I lay here tonight in my cot and can testify the extra layers were not enough. My hands ache and my

hips feel like I slipped on the ice and fell. But the wind howling outside our dormitory can't get to me beneath the bed covers and three old work robes piled on top. I am as comfortable as I'll be through this long night.

When I think of my conversation with Kick earlier today, my spirits drop and I'm sorry I was not of more help to him in his agony. His four years here as a contemplative have somewhat closed his eyes to reality. It happens.

"Jesse," he said, as we fit rocks under the main beam of the porch deck, "I think we're all doomed up here."

"You mean like we're going to be hit by a Protestant comet?" I asked.

"You know what I mean," he said.

"I do know what you mean, but I have no answer."

"They're going to throw us out. I know it," he said.

I didn't tell Kick, but that's exactly what I worry about.

"Where are you going to live, Jesse?" he asked.

I shoved a stone in farther beneath the beam.

"Maybe I'll apply for assistance or maybe I'll get a job in a store. Rent a room down in the village ... I don't know. After all, I don't have as far to go down the road as you, Kick. You have an entire life ahead of you."

"My life is here on this mountain," he said. "I'm staying."

"Well, you can't," I told him.

"In the woods," he said. "I'll stay in the woods."

I sneered. "A real Desert Father, huh?"

"Jesse," he said, "everything I learned about my life and myself and God is here on this mountain."

"God isn't only on this mountain," I said.

"What I know of him is," he said.

"Yes, but maybe it's time to know him in a different way," I said.

"God is unchangeable, Jesse."

"OK, but not in your head He isn't. Our vision of him changes as we grow."

I have a tendency to be dismissive of anyone's faith that doesn't agree with my mental conception of God and how He operates. That's nearly the same as defining Him. And given my capacity to make mistakes, allowing me to play God is probably a bad idea. If I were God, for example, the creation of the world would still be a great plan that I'd look into when I found the time on my busy schedule. Let There Be Light might get done, but not much else. Mountains and oceans and elephants would still be drifting around the universe waiting to be attached to

something.

Order and precision are what you'd expect from God. From me you'd get chaos. I once dreamed of a complicated theory I had proposed and written in careful and full detail on a sheaf of papers. A wind came from I don't know where and blew the pages off the desk, scattering them across the floor. Like a mad scientist I fell to my knees in a panic to gather up the papers, but they no longer made any sense. I realized I was dreaming, but could see the essence of a truly great idea and I did not want to lose it. I struggled up from my sleep and wrote a note on the pad I kept next to my cot. In the morning when I awoke, a minute or two passed before I remembered the dream. I quickly grabbed the pad and read, "defrost the refrigerator."

The wind is picking up outside. I love the sound of it. Hearing it whistle through the old shutters and moan around the eaves has always been like music to me. Such an appreciation comes from the heart, not the mind. And now I think that Kickstart was more right than wrong.

I have for too long been overly interested in my mind and my soul, more than my heart. But my mind is getting rusty and my soul will never be more than what it is. My heart is full of life, or could be. It's the part of me that feels someone else's agony. And the part of me that longs for God, rather than tries to understand or obey him. With a lot of work, that heart is the only part of me that stands a chance of leaving this world in better condition than when it got here.

On the other hand, I can easily make my experience of God a head trip, purely and conveniently a construction in my mind. Entire churches have done so. I forget He is *in* his creation, not just in our minds, He is here on the mountain in the streams and boulders and pine trees for Kickstart. And for me He is in my body, my heart, everything and everyone around me and even in my desires. When I long for Grandma's special gravy and biscuits from sixty years ago on a Sunday afternoon, God is somehow in that. I can't tell you how. I only know this to be true: after years of trying to meditate on His sacred mysteries, I more often see visions of chicken and dumplings. It must be what He wants me to see. You would never hear such nonsense from a theological council of any reputable church because it doesn't make logical sense ... to the mind. Maybe it doesn't need to. A church listens to logic. The people listen to their hearts.

God warned us a long time ago He wasn't going to wait around for mankind to catch up with Him as He continued to reveal himself. Jesus told Nicodemus. "Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above. The wind blows

where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes."

So here's what I've been laying here thinking on this frigid night when my mind can't even conjure up a vision of Grandma's chicken dinner. Here's my latest heresy.

If God were a short order cook, we'd never be hungry.

If God were an accountant, everyone would get what they deserved.

If God were a doctor, everyone would enjoy excellent health.

If God were a teacher, we'd all be worried about Report Cards. But from what I've seen in the world, not many are worried about their Report Cards.

If God were a policeman everyone would be in a lot of trouble and if God were a judge everyone would be damned.

But God is none of those. He is bigger than the familiar. He's larger than life. So I'm thinking He must be a cowboy. When you consider it, He almost has to be. He's extremely courteous and won't push himself forward unless invited. He's always mending fences. I see Him out on the range under a huge sky full of stars waiting for his doggies to bed down while he sings them to sleep. And only a cowboy would say, "There, there, little darlin'" when with tears in our eyes we get down on our knees to pray. Or more often to complain

You know, I've lived for 35 years up here on the mountain the Indians called *Onteora*, The Land In The Sky. So it appeared to them as they gazed up from the valley below. Tonight it may still be pleasant down there. But up here on the peak ... in cowboy land ... a white mantle of snow covers the blue-green hemlocks. The moon has risen and the bare maples glisten black in the cold damp air. Clouds scraped by the mountain top from the bottom of the sky drift away like ships leaving without us. Tonight my brothers and I lie shivering on our cots while sleet and snow pelt the windows, and the wind has its way with our creaking old house.

The spirit blows where it chooses and you don't know where it's been or where it's going.

But I know one thing. He is taking care of us as we bed down. And when the wind howls past the eaves and moans down through the holes in the roof, I know that God is singing us to sleep.

David Griffin

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