

VESPERS

Evening Prayer from the Office of the Dead

a monastic mystery by

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Also by Brother Bernard Seif and a part of this series:

(2001). *Office of the Dead*. Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, Inc.

(2002). *VIGILS from the Office of the Dead*. Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, Inc.

(2004). *MORNING PRAYER from the Office of the Dead*. Martinsville, IN: Bookman Publishing. [*MORNING PRAYER* was republished in 2008 by iUniverse, Inc.]

(2006). *DAYTIME PRAYER from the Office of the Dead*. Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, Inc.

This book is a work of fiction, based on seminal ideas drawn from the life of the author. The characters and situations in this monastic mystery are the product of the author's creative imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any medical or psychological information provided herein is a part of this fictional work and is not presented as a form of diagnosis or treatment.

To Mike and Dolores, my dear brother and sister-in-law, each of whom has found a unique path to God.

PROLOGUE

That person makes my blood boil! The others do too. All that Holy Roller talk. I'm sick of it. There are going to be some changes made.

Water softly lapping at the shore offered a gentle contrast to the inner storm that was raging. Disjointed thoughts continued to feed an ever-increasing inner fire.

What about me? I've got some spiritual qualities too. What's the difference between what I do and what that type of person does? It's clear that I need to take things in hand and not just wait for them to change.

A huge pile of gray boulders, darkened with age and ceremonial use, appeared timeless and immovable in the path of the more-than-agitated person. They loomed above, outlined by the rapidly fading daylight.

Faith can move mountains; certainly these boulders can be moved. I can also move a few people, perhaps to another dimension. Praying them out of my life may do it--just like magic! There are some other options too.

A storm was brewing. Gathering clouds obliterated any hope of seeing the sun finish setting. Palm branches began wobbling in the breeze like scores of drunken kites. They slapped against the trunks of the trees over and over again.

My shrink says I have ego problems. What a laugh! She's the one with the problems, not me. The last one said that I was threatened by the success of other people in my life. I'm the one who has been successful. What do I care about them?

A jagged spear of lightening vaulted through the sky and illuminated the beach for miles around. The thought came in that instant also.

Maybe I'll have to kill someone. That might just fix everything.

CHAPTER 1

It wasn't a great Abbey church but a simple monastery Oratory. The chant did not resonate within the stones of a cavernous edifice, but rather reverberated gently within the wooden panels of the small building. The arched hip roof of the barn-like structure seemed to gather the voices together and then offer them back to one another in unison.

“O Wisdom, O Living Word of God, you touch all of creation with your strong yet tender care. Come and show your people the way to live good and holy lives.”

Advent--the monastic community was already well into another new liturgical year--and soon Christmas would follow. The community loved the “O antiphons,” as they were called. One was sung each day in the octave prior to the Solemnity of Christmas—Christ made human in Jesus and in each person.

Evening Prayer, more commonly known as “Vespers,” was chanted together or prayed privately, when necessary, at each sundown. Before and after “Mary’s Canticle,” which was sung in gratitude for the graces of each day, a brief phrase or “antiphon” was chanted. During the eight days prior to Christmas every ancient antiphon always began with the word “O,” thus the name O antiphons.

Each O antiphon added a name for the Messiah after the O. On December seventeenth, the beginning of the octave, the Messiah was honored as Wisdom.

The monastic community of about five monks and nuns needed all the wisdom they could muster. The monastery numbered *about* five members because life happens—even in a monastery. People move in for a while to test their vocations—to see if they truly belong—and

may move out again. Sometimes they are voted out. This is a painful process but usually the candidate eventually realizes that his or her dismissal is for the best.

Guests who come for retreat or for a simple day of prayer change the number too. Friends of the monastery sometimes visit or pray with the community, which adds to the ebb and flow. Life happens, and sometimes death happens, but let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Toward the end of Morning and Evening Prayer there is a series of petitions or intercessions, prayers for the various needs of the world. Those who celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours (the "Divine Office" or simply the "Office" in older parlance) are called by the Church to remember all the needs of God's people in a special way at these times.

The Vesper liturgy allows for a pause wherein those celebrating this Office can offer spontaneous prayers for the sick, the dying, the needs of others. These are offered in a general way but people can add specific names to the intercessions if so led.

"For all the sick, especially for our Brother Benedict," whispered Sister Scholastica in her soft but distinctly clear voice. Her salt and pepper hair tucked neatly under the band of her simple dark blue veil, Sister Scholastica measured "close to five feet on a good day" as she typically put it. The veil, gray tunic, and blue scapular which was worn over the tunic, were a mix of ancient and modern. The garb on the body of the monastics dated back to the Middle Ages; the modified veils of the nuns an expression of Church changes since Vatican Council II.

Sister Scholastica entered the monastery in her forties and had taken her solemn or perpetual vows only months before. She seemed so very happy. It must be admitted that one or two of her sisters and brothers in monastic life sometimes wondered about her background prior to entrance, but the nun was rather tight-lipped about that.

She had taken a Postulant (a candidate who has already made a one-month Observership and who returned to try out the life in earnest) under her wing last year and even this person, Anthony, didn't get anything specific out of her.

Just as Clare, a woman on retreat for several weeks at the Salesian Monastery, was opening her mouth to pray for the needs of the poor, a bell frantically rang out in the distance. The only other bell in the complex of three buildings was in the main house. The Oratory was a separate building and there was a bell there to call the community to prayer but it was the *house* bell that was clanging.

Sister Jane de Chantal was Prioress, in charge of many things, especially when Abbot Francis was away. She calmly and quietly slipped out of the Oratory to check on the reason for the sounding of a bell which usually called people to meals or to community meetings (called "Chapter" because a chapter of the Rule was read at the beginning of the gathering). The others continued praying, a bit distracted but trying to remain faithful. Such is the stuff of monastic observance.

Usually cool and unshaken, Sister Jane returned hurriedly and whispered something into the Abbot's ear. An Abbot or Abbess is the leader and symbol of unity in a monastic community. A Prior or Prioress assisted in the process.

Brother Francis, the Abbot, was just giving the final blessing at the end of Vespers. He left immediately rather than staying after the ceremony for a few moments of quiet prayer as was his normal custom. The others followed, perhaps more out of unmortified curiosity than in an effort to help if needed.

There was indeed an emergency. Brother Benedict was lying on the floor by the stove in the kitchen area of the monastery great room, just below the bell rope.

Sister Jane and Brother Francis could see that the little monk was breathing. He had wandered out of his room, just off the great room, which contained kitchen, dining area, and living room, and then stumbled. Brother Benedict had lost about fifty pounds during the recent months of his illness. His short gray beard, which used to give him a gnome-like appearance, now added to his elderly *persona*.

“Let’s check for broken bones before we move him,” mumbled Brother Francis, more to himself than to anyone in the now filling room. He gently prodded and poked the man who was his senior by about ten years in age, but much his junior in monastic life. Brother Benedict had been married and a father to one child prior to his entrance into the monastery about fifteen years ago. This was unusual but not impossible, especially after the changes ushered in by Vatican Council II.

“Everything accounted for?” quipped Sister Jane. She had a way of dealing with important matters without over-reacting.

Brother Francis nodded and then addressed Brother Benedict: “How are you feeling?”

“Just a little light headed but I’ll live.”

As if reading the Abbot’s mind, Sister Jane turned one of the small refectory benches which Brother Benedict had made on its side as Brother Francis lifted the monk’s legs and propped his feet up with the pine bench.

“That’ll get the blood back into that thick Irish brain of yours.”

Brother Benedict smiled. “You say the most consoling things, Abbot.”

Everyone in the room let out a collective sigh of relief. It looked as if the crisis was resolving—for the moment. When would the next one occur?

Five minutes passed.

Young and strong, Brother Matthew gently lifted Brother Benedict up upon the Abbot's instruction. They slowly and carefully walked toward Brother Benedict's room. The door was open and the light was on. His old wooden rocker, dark with age, had a copy of a Mrs. Pollifax mystery book on the floor next to it.

"I see you're still into heavy theological tomes Brother," joked Brother Matthew.

"Oh yes, Mrs. P. has a beautiful soul, not to mention her skills at solving mysteries. When I was a young boy and wondered about some spiritual matter I would ask the Sister of Mercy who came to town to teach us catechism on Sunday mornings in central Pennsylvania various questions. I'd ask about what happens when we die, for example. Usually Sister would tell me that 'it's a mystery.' That gets old! So have I, come to think of it. Anyway, Mrs. P. has a way of helping me understand spiritual and earthly mysteries. But I think I'm soon to discover the mystery of what happens when we die very personally."

Matthew, tall with short brown hair, was in his late twenties and did not have a lot of pastoral experience. He did, however, possess barrels of compassion and common sense. He tried not to interrupt the older monk's flow of conversation, even though it made him personally uncomfortable.

"Please tell Brother Francis that I was just stretching my legs while you folks were at Vespers and got dizzy. No need for him to make a special visit. I have this little hand bell right here, plus a telephone, if I need anything more this evening. I'd like to take a little nap now."

"Sure thing Brother. Sleep well."

The same large bell that disturbed Vespers less than twenty minutes before rang out with three loud peals. It was time for the evening meal. Brother Matthew closed the door as Brother Benedict pulled the covers up close to his partially bald head.

The community had gathered in silence around a long oak table. After the food was blessed everyone sat down; someone turned on a DVD player. Some nights soft music played as they ate without speaking. Sometimes a spiritual talk boomed out of the boom box. Tonight was a spiritual talk night.

The topic was a commentary on the Salesian *Spiritual Directory*, a small guide for the inner attitudes suggested for the various activities of the monastic day, i.e., rising, meditation, Liturgy of the Hours, Eucharist, meals, recreation, silence times, etc. This five hundred year old manual was utilized as a spiritual tool by the various branches of the spiritual family of Saint Francis de Sales and Saint Jane de Chantal, the Salesian family.

The speaker was talking about the attitude a community member was encouraged to develop toward the sick, especially members of one's own monastery. The members were encouraged to regard the sick person as someone through whom the community was given special graces. They were to do their best to provide for the needs of the ill monastic and reverence Christ in him or her, specifically the suffering Christ.

All of this was specifically mentioned in their rule of life before it had been updated; now it was simply implied more than directly written about. No one thought that such an attitude toward the sick was un-monastic or improper, but somehow it was to some degree left out of the "new" Rule.

Sister Jane stifled a laugh as she swallowed her peppered mashed potatoes. She was having a flashback to a comment Brother Benedict had made shortly after the revised Rule was handed out to the members. It was more streamlined and the book itself was thinner, having been purged of the barnacles that creep into a five hundred year old document over the years.

“Maybe next time we can just publish it with perforated pages. That way we can just rip out what we don’t want as time goes by.”

The nun’s thoughts turned to her monastic brother’s illness. He was probably dying. No one wanted to say it out loud. They might even need to look into Brother Benedict’s placement in a nursing home. He was getting harder to care for and perhaps the incident this evening indicated that it was dangerous for him to continue living at the monastery. He, of course, would remain a member of the community unto death.

Her musings ended when the CD player was turned off and the community stood up to offer the final prayer of thanksgiving for the meal just received. Sister Jane couldn’t quite shake, however, a slight feeling of foreboding, especially with the Abbot about to embark on one of his journeys. She would be in charge and the burden felt heavy on her apprehensive shoulders—unusual for her.

CHAPTER 2

After dinner activities included doing the dishes and setting the table for the morning meal by those who had not cooked that evening. Those who did were able to wash up a bit, and eventually everyone joined in community recreation. A few played Uno, a high-spirited card game which allowed the monastics to let out their competitive sides and even seek revenge—for an hour or so. Clare, at the monastery for an extended retreat, sat contentedly in a ratty overstuffed chair and sketched in her large spiral-bound art tablet with colorful acrylic pencils. She was gifted in many ways, and might become a permanent gift for the community.

A few snores wafted down the hall from Brother Benedict's room every now and then. Sister Scholastica remembered a Saturday afternoon when about twenty Associate Members were gathered at the monastery. During their gathering they spent a half hour in meditation. The same sounds came from Brother Benedict's room during the meditation period that day as now—only then he was fit and hearty.

Brother Matthew was flourishing. It was obvious to everyone that the monastic life agreed with him. He remembered the prayerful support of his older brother in monastic life, Brother Benedict. His novitiate was far from ordinary and the trauma of the events that occurred during that period was just about healed. It was Matthew's turn to support Brother Benedict now.

A bell pealed and everyone put aside what he or she was engaged in and gathered in the community room, that part of the great room containing a sofa, some chairs, an enormous peace lily that seemed to have found the fountain of youth, and a wall full of spiritual books.

The Abbot asked Clare to offer a spiritual thought. It was a Salesian custom to ask someone to do so at such gatherings. Clare's rosy blush complemented her short blond hair.

"Be who you are and be that well," she said quietly, as if quoting something from one of their founders, Saint Francis de Sales, was really something only vowed members of the community ought to be doing.

There was barely a hint of Clare's hearing challenge detectable as she spoke. Years of lip reading, and an overwhelming sensitivity to the non-verbals and moods of others, had made Clare almost psychic—certainly highly intuitive. Most of the time the members of the community, and people in general, did not know that Clare was almost totally hearing

challenged. The woman radiated a peaceful determination, probably the fruit of struggling to interact with a largely hearing world.

The retreatant's response triggered a wisp of a memory in the Abbot's mind. He was now in his early sixties but still remembered a research study on the social skills of folks who might now be known as "little people." They have above average social skills. He remembered teaching such a wonderful person when he was a high school instructor. Abbot Francis' experience with the boy bore out the conclusions of that study. He said a brief prayer that the challenges of life might evoke strength in others, not bitterness and anger—an understandable but sad response in some cases.

The monk's own brother had recently died after living his life with Cerebral Palsy for more than seventy years. Perhaps his brother's life in some way had motivated him into his present life of--though not always producing miracles--body, mind, and spirit clinical and pastoral practice.

"Earth to Brother Francis," broadcasted Brother Matthew through his cupped hands. The community had grown used to their Abbot's lapses into thought now and then. The lapses didn't last long and were the result of a mind filled with many things, along with a creativity and curiosity which seemed to grow with the years, rather than diminish.

Brother Francis just smiled along with the community and slowly shook his head as if to say, "Oops, I did it again."

"Thank you Clare," Abbot Francis responded. "It is a joy to see that our spirit is rubbing off on you. Don't pick up any of our bad habits though, just the good ones. We are all delighted that you are spending time with us."

She placed her palm-to-palm hands in front of her heart and bowed, turning her upper body slowly from left to right, so as not to miss anyone in the room, with a gesture of grateful blessing.

It was a good time for the community, with the exception of Brother Benedict's illness. There was an especially peaceful flow and interaction among the members these days. Yes they had their little squabbles, what family didn't, monastic or otherwise? They had been through a lot together and it had bonded them--a kind of renewed "Bond of Perfection" which the Rule encouraged them to create through the quality of their lives.

"As you know, I leave for Hawaii tomorrow," the leader of the small community announced in his soft voice. Most of the time people could hear him well. Once in a while someone had to ask the clinical psychologist *cum* Doctor of Natural Medicine to repeat himself. Clare never had a problem understanding the Abbot. Her keen intuition was finely honed to pick up on Brother Francis' strong *qi* field.

Qi is a concept from Chinese Medicine. The Abbot specialized in this ancient branch of healing. Not all aspects of the five thousand years of clinical application of Chinese medicine was researched, but there were indeed thousands upon thousands of studies to support and document the effectiveness and safety of Chinese healing.

Perhaps because the United States Food and Drug Administration could not patent the ancient formulas used in the herbology aspect of Traditional Chinese Medicine, or TCM as it is often referred to, the FDA has little interest in researching the field. Some say that if they found a way to change a formula or even a molecule, and could then patent a particular treatment, the FDA might have more interest.

Be that as it may, the Abbot had a type of dual mind. One side immediately asked, at least internally, for people to “show me the science” when claims were made about any approach to healing. The other side of his mind didn’t let his Lehigh University and Arkansas College of Natural Health training stop him from going *beyond* the science when clinical experience or intuition encouraged him to do so, as long as the strategy would not endanger his patient.

The bi-modal aspects of the Abbot’s brain in some ways reflected the very physical structure of all human brains—the left side being more linear and analytic and the right side being more intuitive and able to “see between the lines” of a given situation.

A physical structure called the corpus callosum connected the two hemispheres of the human brain with one another. One might picture it as a thick bunch of cables bringing wholeness to the human personality. Some people are more dominant on the logical side of life, while others are more intuitive and live by their gut impressions. Life situations push us to develop the less preferred style of interacting with the world so that by middle age we can do some of both, but still have our logical or intuitive preferences.

“My dear friends Lily and Dominic have invited me to give a workshop at the retreat house they created. I’m also supposed to speak at an ecumenical Martin Luther King celebration later in January. Even though that is a one day event, and the workshop lasts much longer, it’s the MLK event I feel most excited about. Lily and Dominic have also arranged for me to do a few private health consults while in Hawaii too, and have some time to myself for quiet and relaxation.”

“Aren’t there several Hawaiian islands?” asked a weak male voice. Brother Benedict was standing just inside the community room at the end of the hallway connecting to his room and some of the guest rooms.

Everyone was startled to put it mildly. They had wondered only two hours ago if he was alive and now Brother Benedict was up and trying to join in with the community as it met to organize life in the monastery.

“Have a seat Brother, and I’ll tell you what I know about where I am going, even though I don’t really know that much. I’ve been told that the Hawaiian Islands make up the most remote chain of islands in the world, more than two thousand miles from the nearest land mass.

“I believe that there are eight major islands and one hundred twenty-four minor islands, shoals and reefs, which string out across the Pacific ocean. The island called ‘Hawaii’ is also known as the ‘Big Island.’ That leaves us with Kauai, Molokai, Lanai, Kahoolawe, and Niihau.” The Abbot ticked off the list of islands with his fingers. “I think I have that straight.”

“You’ve been studying up,” Brother Benedict responded. “You still have not told us what island you will be on.”

“That’s him,” Sister Jane de Chantal added. “Our Abbot has a tremendous grasp of the subtleties in life but sometimes misses the most obvious.”

“Thank you Sister,” Brother Francis answered with smiling face and bowed head. “Community life certainly keeps us honest. Be careful Clare! This crowd doesn’t let anything slip by.”

Sounding a little like a response on the Jeopardy television show—which none of them had seen in years—the Abbot answered the question. “I’ll be on the island of Kauai.”

“Ah, the Garden Island,” added Sister Scholastica softly.

Brother Matthew gave her a quizzical look. “Have you been there, Sister?”

“In my dreams,” the nun responded somewhat evasively with a far away look in her eyes.

“Molokai, Molokai,” mumbled Clare reflectively. “I think that’s the island where Father Damian worked with the people with leprosy about a century ago.”

“Right you are. He was a member of a religious community devoted to the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary and received permission to devote his life to the care of the very sick. Mother Mary Anne Cope, a Franciscan Sister of Syracuse, New York, joined Father Damian in that ministry.”

“Today we call leprosy ‘Hansen’s Disease,’” explained Sister Scholastica.

The nun continued more excitedly. “Leprosy has been known since biblical times and its symptoms include disfiguring skin sores, damage of nerves, and debilitation over time. It is caused by contact with an organism but is not as contagious as we once thought. Due to Hansen’s long incubation period, it is sometimes difficult to determine where and when the disease was first contracted.

“Children are more susceptible to the disease, but because of modern treatments and greater understanding, there is no longer a need for special ‘leper colonies’ for people who contract Hansen’s.”

Sister Scholastica opened her mouth to continue. It was obvious that there was much more information in her brain. She saw the startled looks on the others in the room and shut down with an almost palpable thud.

No one tried to pry into the source of this information from their rather private sister in community. They knew that it would get them nowhere.

The community meeting, called “Chapter,” ended with the members shifting gears into “Grand Silence.” This nightly period of greater silence lasted until after breakfast each morning. Their recent weeks of special peace now had the slight tinge of something unknown mixing into it.

Low lighting in the Oratory created an atmosphere conducive to the last liturgical prayer of the day. Compline completes the daily cycle of the Liturgy of the Hours each night.

CHAPTER 3

Christmas was almost here. Brother Francis, now alone in his “Hermitage,” a white mobile home just across the driveway from the Oratory and main monastery building, was in a reflective mood. He settled into one of the two green rocking lounge chairs in his office to do some *Lectio*, meditative spiritual reading. Such a simplistic definition of *Lectio* is a bit of a disservice to the ancient monastic practice of starting with the written word but ending wherever our Good God takes a person--sometimes to a very non-verbal form of contemplation.

The Abbot was praying with *My Life with the Saints* by James Martin, SJ. He had been using it for spiritual reading for months now. The point was not to get to the end of a spiritual book but to connect with God, thus the idea of *Lectio* being meditative reading. He found the book nourishing because it took canonized saints and other well-known people who struggled to find the Sacred out of their plaster molds and turned them into flesh and blood people. The book was humorous and serious, traditional and challenging.

The glass jar containing a mistletoe-scented Yankee Candle shimmered on his desk across the room, and then popped out a soft sound. The monk smiled as he thought of his sister and brother-in-law, who gave the family variously scented candles like this one each Christmas. He thought of his nephew who shared with the family his first real religious memory just last Christmas. It was of Velcro! That's right; his nephew thought of Velcro when he thought of nuns—really Sisters in apostolic religious communities—but everyone seems to call them “nuns.”

In early grade school this little boy, now forty-something, heard a ripping sound while in class. He and his classmates looked up to see Sister taking off her cincture, a belt, and refastening it on the outside of the long navy blue panel called a “scapular” which hung loosely down the front and back of her habit. She was protecting her garb during art class--not letting the scapular get smeared with paint.

“Don't worry children, it's just Velcro,” she explained. The room full of boys and girls truly thought that Sister was tearing her clothing.

Brother Francis' nephew by marriage added to the “faith sharing” experience. He explained why he calls one of the preachers at his parish “Gloom and Doom.”

“We know that the world is a mess,” the nephew stated with dry humor. “Just give us *one* hour; just give us an hour a week when we don't have to wallow in it. You know what his homily, if you can call it that, was about on Mother's Day? It was about cancer. Can you believe it? Just give us one hour a week. That's all I ask.” Some of the rant from this gentle giant was intended to get a laugh, but the gist of it was sadly true.

The monk decided not to ask his nieces what their early religious memories were about that night.

Another sub-clan produced by his married siblings had a son on his way to the Philippines for a visit. He had married a warm and wonderful girl from there and it was time to visit her family. Big and brave in the classroom where he taught math to both struggling students and the brightest, this nephew approached the plane with fear and trembling. Fortunately, all went well.

His nine nieces and nephews, along with even more great nieces and nephews, were all blessings to the monk. Not bad for a family that started out with more than its share of sickness and death early on. Those early days seemed to bond his family more closely.

Two siblings were had now gone to Glory—one from smoking, aka lung cancer, and the other after more than seven decades living with Cerebral Palsy. Both brothers were missed but life was still full.

The world invaded his monastic enclosure daily. Patients were in and out and the monk-doctor had a perpetual waiting list. E-mail had quieted the phone somewhat these days but both still demanded his attention.

Health insurance was one of Brother Francis' main challenges. Either there was paperwork to do in order to stay credentialed as a provider with one carrier or the other, or one or another of the electronic filing applications needed fixing—which meant hours on the phone with support people. Once in a while the Abbot figured out how to fix things himself—always a pleasant surprise—and sometimes a real timesaver.

Tonight was different. The outgoing phone message and automatic e-mail message told folks that he would be away for about a month and gave the names of other clinicians to contact if there was an emergency.

Candlelight and fatigue drew the drowsy monk into a light slumber. Sandals on the floor and feet propped up by the footrest on the chair, Brother Francis drifted away. He awoke around midnight with mixed feelings. Hawaii would be fun, but just having some time to himself here at the monastery would be wonderful also.

People who follow the Gospel and seek God through the Salesian charism try to embrace the “permissive will of God.” He was vowed to God for over forty years now and saying “yes” to God’s permissive will came easily to his mind. Carrying that same “yes” out when life happens was another matter, but Brother Francis usually landed on his feet.

He shook his head, pulled his habit out of the folds of the chair and thought of Velcro again. This time it might really be a ripping of clothing if he was not careful.

The monastic walked to the far end of the Hermitage, prepared for bed, and flopped down in his small cell.

The buzz of his little silver travel alarm woke him at five o’clock. The gloom and doom homilist from his nephew’s church came to mind. The Salesian Rule suggested that the monk or nun focus on thoughts of the Resurrection of Christ when rising from sleep. He did his best every morning but those thoughts didn’t come naturally. Usually it took about a half hour for his thoughts to turn a least a little spiritual—later and in the Oratory.

This was Brother Francis’ usual time for rising but today he had to sit on his suitcase, more importantly get it to close, and drive to the Lehigh Valley International Airport about thirty-five minutes away by car.

Lights were going on in the main building and it looked like someone was already in the Oratory. That was probably Sister Scholastica. She was very faithful to her times of mental prayer and meditation throughout each day. He thought of her unique background, the life she

lived before entering the monastery. The members of the community were very good at keeping confidential matters confidential. He had no idea what she had shared with any of her monastic sisters or brothers, if anything. That's the way he left it.

The sixty-some year old moved easily through his rising and travel preparations. His suitcase screamed for mercy as he closed it. He thought of his sister, who was a Sister of Saint Joseph. She often fooled with the contents of her suitcase, trying to garner a little more room inside. The truth be told, his sister traveled lightly, not like her brother.

On a pilgrimage to Israel, Brother Francis' sister got her little suitcase all packed and re-packed and then got into the twin bed next to the Sister she was rooming with in the hotel and shut out the light. About one minute later a thud reverberated throughout the room. The suitcase somehow fell off the bureau and landed on the floor scattering the precisely packed contents all over. The story goes that the roommate showed little sympathy—and actually laughed herself to sleep.

The Abbot walked by moonlight over to the main house to get a quick breakfast and check in on Brother Benedict. His brothers and sisters were quietly stirring in their rooms and would soon gather in the Oratory to celebrate the Office of Vigils, keeping watch for the God who was with them throughout the dark of night and who would break into the day at dawn, and again at the end of time.

Brother Benedict was breathing softly and sleeping peacefully. *Might this be the last time I'll see him alive?* The Abbot reflected on the much younger man who wrote him from Connecticut at the suggestion of a Trappist monk friend of Brother Francis. The Trappist thought that Brother Benedict might do well in a small monastery rather than a large Abbey. His

personality was larger than life at first but over time the new monk mellowed, for which the community was grateful.

The microwave beeped as Brother Francis closed Brother Benedict's cell door. Hot cereal was his usual breakfast—seven grain—and purchased right down the road at the local produce stand. The Abbot was a Doctor of Natural Medicine so he kept the use of the microwave to a minimum, knowing that it denatured the enzymes in food, thus depleting whatever was cooked in a microwave of most if its nutrition. He was especially careful not to microwave anything covered with plastic wrap, understanding that molecules of plastic can easily enter into the food during that process.

A generous garnish of walnuts, raisins, and cinnamon raised the nutritional value of his cereal. *Yin and yang, our goal is a life of balance in body, mind, and spirit.* The Abbot had several of his high blood pressure patients on a regimen of cinnamon capsules along with a form of meditation developed by a cardiologist named Herbert Benson called the "Relaxation Response." Between the two approaches, his grateful patients typically did very well.

The frequent flyer monk, as he had been called once or twice, went back to the Hermitage, picked up his suitcase, and made a brief visit to the Oratory. He knelt in the back of the little chapel for a few minutes as the community gathered in the dark for the first common prayer of the day, Vigils.

The roads were clear of ice and snow and by the time he reached Lehigh Valley Airport the sun was starting to peek up from beyond the mountains. People in Colorado or Asia would call these mountains "hills" but folks in this part of Pennsylvania called them "mountains." Friends and relatives in Philadelphia referred to Brother Francis as someone who lived "up the

mountains.” They also went “down the shore” during the summer if they could afford a vacation.

CHAPTER 4

“Excuse me, sir. Did you know that your flight has been cancelled?”

Francis pulled himself out of his half sleep and sat up on his white wooden rocker. A pleasant female ground attendant from United Airlines was making sure that anyone waiting at this gate for a plane to Washington DC, where Brother Francis was to change planes and continue on to San Francisco for the first legs of his journey, knew that the plane would not arrive.

“No I didn’t,” he responded groggily. Thoughts of delays and an unplanned overnight somewhere flooded into his brain before he could stop them. “What do I need to do?”

“You need to go back to the ticketing desk and rebook your flight, maybe all of the flights you have scheduled if you are flying beyond DC. Where is your final destination?”

“Kauai Hawaii.” He said, trying to keep his voice even and his spirit in the present moment.

She rolled her bright blue eyes up toward her silvery wig. “You have a wonderful trip in store, sir. I’m sure re-ticketing won’t be a problem. Enjoy your flights.” She was gone.

At least it wasn’t a call from the monastery saying that someone died. Now I have to go back out to the United desk and back in through security. Got through the first time without

making anything beep or having to be frisked within an inch of my life. Can I do that a second time?

“So,” the ground agent said, “you are in luck. Not only were we able to re-ticket you through Chicago, Los Angeles, and on to Kauai, but you will actually get there a little earlier than you would have with your original itinerary.” The frequent flyer monk thanked her, and God, and headed back through security.

Am I being followed? No, maybe just a little paranoia generated from having my schedule disrupted. Then again, those two men were at the gate, now they are here. Maybe they needed to be re-ticketed too. My gut says no. It's something more than that.

“Brother Francis O’Neil?” a male voice questioned.

The Abbot turned and the two mystery men were right behind him, within inches of his face.

“May I ask who you folks are?” he responded.

The forty-something man took out his badge and flashed it discretely in the monk’s direction. The just about thirty-looking guy looked on.

“We know that you have a plane to catch, Brother. All we need is a few minutes of your time. We had planned to visit you at the Salesian Monastery today but became aware that you were leaving for Hawaii this morning so we headed over here from the hotel.”

“I get my alphabet soup mixed up easily,” the Abbot replied. “FBI, CIA, CCD, RCIA, who do you work for again?”

“We are with the Central Intelligence Agency, the CIA. This is about Leone Striker.”

“Oh I see.”

They non-verbally agreed to sit at a little plastic table near a Subway Shop where travelers could purchase a quick egg sandwich and a coffee on the run.

“We want her back,” the older of the two said. His gray eyes became hard. He had transitioned from a gentleman to an all business professional.

“That’s not up to me gentlemen. She’s a grown woman, and very competent as you know. You are free to speak with her but I really wish that you would give this futile project up and let her alone.”

“Can’t do that, Abbot Francis.”

“I’ve got to get myself through security and on to my plane. Good day men.”

He got up and began walking toward the downward escalator which would take him to security. The men followed at a distance. Brother Francis got in line, so did the CIA agents. As the line moved along, Brother Francis took off the silver profession cross given to him when he took his first vows over forty years ago and placed it in his backpack. His watch, wallet, keys, and some loose change followed. He was dressed in dark blue pants and a cowl shirt, a tunic-like gray garment with a navy blue hood, but would wear more casual attire when appropriate during the trip--especially during the relaxation time between engagements.

An older gentleman at the podium scrutinized his government-issue Doctor of Naturopathy Registration (he liked the photo on this document better than the one on his driver’s license) and the airline ticket. It was in his wallet with his other licenses and photos and issued by the District of Columbia. Maybe his CIA buddies had influenced his choice of identification. “Have a nice trip Brother,” smiled the man as he waved the Abbot through.

“Yes, have a nice trip Brother.” Their voices faded as the two men behind him turned and melted into the crowd, and then disappeared.

The world continues to hound us, even when we simply wish to live a life of prayer and service to others. I love that alphabet soup line. Dealing with health care professionals I see lots of alphabet soup and can sort it out pretty well. Just wanted to throw them off a bit.

He was close to the conveyer belt now. Monastic sandals came off and went into a large and battered gray vinyl bin. Off went his belt and into the bin. The Transportation Security Agent slid the bin onto the moving belt and a large silver box ate it up in order to view the contents of Brother Francis' belongings.

Through the doorframe-like metal detector he went. No beep again! *Wow, that's two times in the last hour. I'm creating a new record. My profession cross, and sometimes my Office Book, does not always make it through the X-ray machine. Let's see what happens this time around.*

A TSA agent smiled as Brother Francis picked up his backpack and put his pocket items, belt, and sandals back in place with a look of relief, or was it triumph, on his face. He couldn't resist it. "I guess we can all get dressed again," Francis announced. It broke the mild tension surrounding the security checking experience.

It was a good thing the monk ate an early breakfast because he wasn't getting anything to eat for a while. He went right to his gate and got in line, boarded, found his seat and fastened his seatbelt. Within minutes the flight attendant, a large *Latino* man, locked the door to the small plane and began the usual announcements.

Someone told Brother Francis that the hand and arm movements flight attendants make when pointing to exit doors and emergency aisle lighting really means "I'm getting out of here before you are."

He took his new Creative Zen MP3 player and earphones out of his backpack, along with a few pieces of candy. Sweets were his favorite vice. Brother Francis' niece by marriage had given him a glass jar filled with little Dove chocolates. *These things are worse, or better, than potato chips, depending on your point of view.*

The rich chocolate melted in his mouth as the monk read the little saying printed inside the foil wrap of the candy. "Laugh uncontrollably...it clears the mind." How Zen!

Monastic life had not robbed Francis of his sense of humor. Quite the contrary, he had developed it into a fine art. He had to control his speech sometimes, for fear of hurting someone. It seemed that the more comfortable the monk was with someone, the more that person became the target of his good-natured quips.

His thoughts went back to a time when he was Postulant Director of his large religious order, before his transition to a more monastic lifestyle in a small community. One postulant actually came to his office and complained that Brother Francis never insulted him. "You cut other people up, why not me?"

Truth be told, Francis had unconsciously been very nice to the young man. His sixth sense told him that the postulant might not take his humor in good spirit. Sometimes no approach works! Such is life—religious or otherwise.

The chocolate candy Zen *koan* or Asian riddle that helps to pull the mind out of its rigid thought patterns, evoked a more archetypal memory. Though he laughed easily, there was one day in his life when he laughed uncontrollably for several hours of it—and met a person who had been dead for over fifty years.

CHAPTER 5

Meanwhile, back at the monastery as they say, Brother Benedict took a turn for the worse. The Veteran's Administration Hospital in Wilkes Barre Pennsylvania had been providing excellent care for the ailing monk. Some VA hospitals, and such is the case with all hospitals, are better than others. Brother Benedict was only in his early seventies but it was beginning to look like he may have seen his last birthday.

He and his Abbot had discussed the possible chemotherapy and radiation treatments offered as standard of care in his case. He had already had major surgery. The Abbot tried to be objective as he let his monastic brother discuss the pros and cons of treatment.

Given his weakened condition, that sort of treatment will probably kill him, and make his life miserable in the process. I don't want to influence his decision but he does need to discuss his options. I've done this hundreds of times with patients; I can do it for him too.

The older monk eventually decided to forgo further treatment, other than possible palliative care. The younger monk had long ago opted to avoid such conventional therapies, but knew that one never knows until he or she is actually in a life and death situation. Brother Francis' years of working with cancer patients had given him a lot of experience upon which to base his choice.

The monk doctor had recently watched a DVD called "Healing Cancer" which contained a great deal of hard data offered by well credentialed professionals. A plant based diet was the way to go, for cancer and for most other illnesses also.

The VA hospital had admitted Brother Benedict and from there he was admitted to a nursing facility. Sister Jane de Chantal visited him in both places. The nursing facility was hard

to find and not at all pleasant. She was working with the social service people there to arrange a transfer to a nursing facility closer to the monastery—one that she and the community had seen and liked.

The Abbot, the Prioress, and the monk in question all knew that some decisions might have to be made while the Abbot was away. All three were as comfortable as possible with the situation. Good communication within the community had helped greatly.

Brother Matthew, Sister Scholastica, and Clare had recently watched as Sister Jane de Chantal drove out of the driveway with Brother Benedict “riding shotgun,” as he would say. He was on his way to the VA hospital and the little community wondered if he would ever return. Clare reflected on recent events. Even though a major illness and possible death are hugely challenging, the members of the monastery were dealing with it very well. They had deep feelings, but a deep and practical spirituality also.

Now it looked like he would return to the area, but not to his monastic home, at least not for a while. The Prioress asked for the input of the community as steps were taken to provide the best possible care for their brother, but ultimately she was in charge. She kept them informed and thanked them for their prayerful support.

It was time to call the family. Brother Benedict had an unusual background for a monk. He had been in the military, married, and had a grown daughter. He was the youngest of a large brood of children and his only living sibling lived in the South. She was the oldest.

Sister Jane dialed the phone and connected with his sister. Faith was a very kind person and spent most of the conversation trying to assure Sister Jane that she was grateful for what the community was doing and that she would find a way to get to the monastery. She also volunteered to call Brother Benedict’s daughter.

“And I want my rocking chair at the new place. What’s it called, Pleasant Valley or something like that?”

“That’s right Brother Benedict. It’s called Pleasant Valley, just like the local school district, and we will have the rocker from your room there to welcome you.”

“That’s great Sister Scholastica. Great name, hope it lives up to it! I’m feeling a bit livelier today. Maybe I’m just motivated to get out of this old and dreary place and into the newer place closer to the monastery. Whatever the reason, I’m glad for it! Have you heard from the Abbot?”

“Not yet, Brother. He’s probably recovering from his three airplane rides. I’m sure that he will be in touch soon. I was going to call him about your situation but you asked me not to.”

“That’s right. You’re the boss, but I’d let him rest first. There’s not much he can do from Hawaii anyway and you’re doing a bang up job!”

“Well thanks. What a monastic thing to say.”

“You know what I mean Sister.”

“It’s my pleasure to help. Get some rest now and I’ll talk to you tomorrow. By the way, I spoke with your sister and she’s going to let your daughter know what’s happening. Maybe they’ll be by for a visit.” She tried to share this news in a light and casual way but wasn’t sure that she was pulling it off.

“I hate to bother them but I suppose it had to be done,” he responded.

“They have not seen you in some time and are looking forward to a visit. Rest well now, Brother.”

“Bye.”

She let out a sigh of relief. The phone conversation had gone very well and Brother Benedict seemed somewhat improved. *Hopefully he will stay that way, which will help his family members feel better in his presence.*

Two men in dark heavy woolen coats drove into the monastery driveway. They appeared to know just where they were going. Sister Jane sighed once again, this time not in relief. She needed a little time to herself and wondered where Brother Francis got the energy to do all he does. *It's probably qigong. He's good at it. I hope that his teaching schedule, the retreats and workshops he gives, won't turn that healing and relaxing Chinese art into just another job for him.*

The nun continued to look out of the little window in the kitchen area to the right of the sink. The unannounced visitors walked from their car, which was parked at the top of the driveway in front of a large outdoor cross of telephone poles, to the main monastery building at a right angle and to their left.

I hope it's not those religious people again. They must get more points for converting a monastic she joked to herself. The last time the religious folks came by with literature, Sister Jane told them that she respected their good work and handed them some Salesian materials. That was six months ago. *Guess I'd better find another copy of the "Golden Counsels of Saint Francis de Sales."*

She walked through the little foyer to the front door, which was really the back door because the first owner and builder of this house said the sun shines in the back and that this arrangement would help keep the steps from icing. It did help but there was still ice and snow to

deal with in the winter time. Perhaps the best part of the front door being in the back was the privacy and, not facing the road, a little extra quiet.

The door bell was ringing as Sister Jane de Chantal opened the door.

The older of the two men gave her his name with a smile and did the talking. The nun thought the smile to be a little phony and mentally castigated herself for judging someone without having any real basis to form an opinion.

“Good afternoon Sister. We would like to see Leone Striker.”

“Who are you looking for gentlemen?”

“Her name is Leone Striker. I think you know her.”

The Prioress didn't know who they were talking about at first; then she felt an old memory activate in the back of her tired mind. The name sounded familiar but the memory was coming from a far away place. Then the pieces started coming together.

CHAPTER 6

The frequent flyer monk was pretty good at letting go of problems and responsibilities when he flew, and even when he moved from patient to patient during his busy days. He pushed aside the thought of the approaching new year and the endless paperwork he would need to fill out again for the federal government. Accounting was not his strong point. Once he got beyond Quicken, the bookkeeping program on the computer, he was lost—sometimes even before.

The Abbot once wondered if it might be better, due to the yearly paperwork and his ineptitude with it, to let go of the federal legal status the monastery held and remain a simple

Pennsylvania corporation missioned to live the monastic life and do good work for others. No one had any private bank accounts anyway. Everything went into the common fund and they did pay school, real estate, Medicare, FICA, and other taxes. One comfort was that Saint Jane Frances de Chantal didn't like administrative duties either.

Then he remembered the dream, or vision, or whatever it was he once had. Abbot Francis was struggling to fill out the necessary forms for the previous tax year and had been up until after three in the morning. He dragged through the next day with the help of prayer and qigong, saw his patients, and made it to the various monastic exercises in the community schedule.

That night he saw a face before him while lying in bed. It didn't frighten him. It took a moment but he recognized it as the face of his brother who had died the summer before. The monk felt a moment of profound peace *and knew that everything would be alright*. Some of the agitation returned the next day, but not as strongly. He called the Internal Revenue Service during business hours expecting to be put on hold but instead was given a clear explanation as to how to complete the monastery form for the past year—rules and regulations which he thought would make his head spin but didn't. He was on and off of the phone within ten minutes and had been given a very simple way to correct what he had been struggling with in the paperwork.

Monks and nuns struggle like everyone else. That's why when something exceptional like this happens Brother Francis hesitates to speak about it. People might get the idea that monastics have a corner on God and get special favors. Sometimes it seemed the opposite to the Abbot. In any case, he knew that he was meant to share this wonderful experience with others. Hadn't his sister-in-law told him only days after the death that she was praying to their brother (in-law) already? It looked to him like they had a saint in the family.

His thoughts transitioned to Brother Benedict. He took comfort in knowing that Sister Jane would take care of things in his absence. He smiled as he remembered her creative way of inviting the door-to-door religious converters not to come by so frequently.

Earphones on and Zen player powered up, Brother Francis lost himself in China. He quietly mouthed the words as he thought them in his mind: *peng2you3,qie2zi,lao3shi1,yi1sheng1*, friend, eggplant, teacher, doctor. He had started studying Chinese about six weeks prior, Mandarin Chinese to be specific. The Chinese medicine doctor knew some Chinese words, mostly body parts and diagnostic terms in Traditional Chinese Medicine, but he was far from being able to hold even a simple conversation.

The monk could mimic the sounds of words and sentences well enough, and was beginning to be able to form sentences for himself. He actually had a dream about Sister Rose Therese, his first grade teacher over fifty years before, who had only recently died. There she was in the front of the classroom with what appeared to little Francis an enormous reading book which was held upright by a black cardboard stand perched on the edge of the stage.

The end of the stage in the school auditorium encroached just a few feet into the classroom, which had no door. The walls of all the classrooms around the main body of the first floor auditorium could be rolled up (if one were a weightlifter) to create an even larger meeting room for the student body.

“See Jane run. See Spot run. See Dick run.” Sister Rose Therese read on and prompted the children to repeat what she said as she pointed to the words in the reader with her black tipped wooden pointer. Here he was at sixty plus doing the same thing again but this time in Chinese.

If little kids can learn this, so can I.

A few more words floated into his ears—two he liked the best—Jia1na2da3 and ka1fe1. These were words that had at least a little resemblance to their English counterparts “Canada” and “coffee.” He wondered if there were any other sound alike words but knew that they were almost nonexistent.

If only I didn't have to say the syllables with their appropriate tones, or sounds. There were symbols for each of the four tones in spoken Chinese, and no symbol was placed over words that were in a neutral tone. The monk had learned the symbols but was also learning to transpose them as numbers because many computers do not provide Chinese fonts and the numbers, on a good day, work just about as well as the tone markings. His teacher told him that the tones could be thought of as music, but the Abbot wasn't buying it.

He checked his watch. How many minutes to Anne Murray and then an audio-book? The monk always did business before pleasure. There was a certain pleasure in his Chinese lessons but it exhausted him. It also strained his throat. Brother Francis was trying to stop his head from bobbing up and down and his arm from waving as he concentrated on the four tones, plus neutral, in which Mandarin was spoken. The movements happened automatically and he thought others might think him possessed by an evil spirit or something. More than likely he simply came across like a bobble-head doll or an orchestra conductor with an imaginary orchestra. He often encouraged people to rise above what people thought. Here was a good opportunity to practice what he preached.

It's like trying to play the piano with both hands, this think about the meaning of the word and the tone at the same time. *It's getting a little better and I'm finding Chinese easier to study than French for some curious reason that escapes me. Maybe age and better study skills have something to do with it.*

Brother Francis mouthed the Chinese sounds in response to the voice in his earphones trying not to disturb the person next to him. Fortunately he was in a window seat so the student could turn his head toward the window while speaking, as if he were enjoying the blue and white swirls beyond the plane window.

The middle-aged lady next to him did sneak a few looks his way but Brother Francis made believe that he didn't notice. Was it his imagination? Did she seem relieved when their plane arrived in Chicago and she could escape this man in a blue monk's cowl and short gray tunic and pants? Here was another opportunity for the monk to rise above what others thought of him. He long believed that the freest people of all are those who are not overly concerned with what others think about them.

His nose led him through the terminal at O'Hare International Airport—directly to a Cinnabon store. The Abbot's blood sugar rose just smelling the sugar and carbohydrate delight. He ordered a Cinnabon and decaf coffee in place of his usual green tea. He asked the girl at the cash register for a side of insulin but she didn't seem to get the joke.

The Abbot smiled as he remembered being stranded in Detroit between planes when returning from a meeting of the Fellowship of Emerging Religious Communities, an organization for small monasteries. A young woman on the van back and forth to the motel where all of the stranded travelers were put up for the night was a cardiology resident on her way back to her hospital in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

The next morning he and the cardiology student doctor were walking through the airport and she said that she would take him to the perfect breakfast place if the monk would swear never to tell that a cardiology resident had taken him there. He agreed. They wound up at Cinnabon!

The next plane awaited the traveler. He boarded with the taste of Cinnabon still on his vowed lips. Chinese studies completed on the earlier plane ride of his journey, he fastened his seatbelt and drifted off to “Just a Little Good News” being sung by Anne Murray. He loved not only the sound of the music but also the lyrics. The song longed for a world where there was less suffering and violence--and so did he.

CHAPTER 7

“I take it you’re not from that church that sends people out to convert us from time to time.”

“Hardly Sister,” responded the older one with something between a smile and thinly controlled patience.

“May I ask who you are?”

They flashed their badges.

“Not good enough gentlemen. Please show me your identification much more slowly.”

This time they opened their wallets and paused so that the nun could examine each badge for as long as she liked.

“Thank you gentlemen. Won’t you come in?”

They entered without response. They were used to getting their own way and rather quickly, and were not impressed by the people associated with this monastery who didn’t seem to operate by *their* rules.

“We have a little sun room where you can make yourself comfortable,” Sister Jane de Chantal said as she led the CIA agents past the wooden refectory table, the old buffet, the stove, and through a doorway into a cheery yellow room complete with DVD player donated by a very kind friend of monastery.

“Have a seat and I’ll see what I can do for you.” She disappeared.

“Strange place,” spoke older agent. “Welcoming but distant at the same time.”

“I had a great-uncle who was a monk,” responded younger agent. “They try to be, how did it go again, ‘in the world but not of it.’”

Older agent: “What’s that supposed to mean? They are more of an enigma than we are.”

Younger agent: “I think it means that they care about what is going on, try to help people and pray for the world, but don’t want to get drawn into the values of the world.”

Older agent: “I’d have to think about that a while, but my first response is that it makes some sense. My second wave of thought is that they ought to focus more on direct service and less on keeping silence and chanting, or whatever else it is that that do.”

Younger agent: “My great-uncle used to say that their prayer life is what kept them going, kind of gave them the strength to do their ministry to others. If I ever had a problem I’d sure want them on my side.”

Older agent: “Wonder what DVDs they watch. Hmmm. Looks like about a dozen Brother Cadfael mystery shows. I think he’s the monk who lived around the year twelve hundred and entered monastic life in his forties. He’s also a doctor of some type, an herbalist I think.”

Younger agent: “Not bad. You are a well-rounded guy. My great-uncle loved those books, and the DVDs which followed. All that history about England and Wales distracted me a

little but I enjoyed the actual mystery plots. What's that phrase they would say about Brother Cadfael again? Oh yes, 'a good man in an evil world.'"

Older agent: "Here are some more DVDs. Monastic life, meditation, Chinese healing. They certainly have interesting taste."

Younger agent: "Hmmm. *Rule of the Salesian Monastic Community*. Maybe this book will tell us a little more about what makes these people tick. Looks like the first part is about the steps it takes to become a monk or a nun, then it talks about the vows they take. The second part is shorter but sounds older somehow. Maybe it's from the time of their founders and the first part reflects the more contemporary situation."

Older agent: "Does it say anything about the Divine Office? I think they call it the 'Liturgy of the Hours' too. It seems to me that those ceremonies are a big deal in a monastery. I understand that the entire schedule of a place like this revolves around their gathering together periodically throughout the day and night to pray parts of the Divine Office."

Younger agent: "Here's something. It's in the back of their Rule, the part called the 'Spiritual Directory.' My great-uncle talked about this."

He spoke more slowly as he absorbed the words. "Yes, these prayers provide the tempo for the entire community, drawing it together from time to time both physically and spiritually."

The younger agent begins to read with a mix of curiosity and reverence in his voice.

Article 3

Liturgy of the Hours

It is especially recommended that the monks/nuns show simplicity and readiness in praying the Liturgy of the Hours. Each time they begin, they should place themselves in the presence of God and, in imitation of Saint Bernard, ask themselves what they are about to do.

They can also use this method in all their other exercises, so that they may bring to each one the spirit proper to do it. They should not have the same deportment and expression at the Liturgy of the Hours as at recreation. In exercises which directly concern the honor and service of God, their spirit should be humble, serious, devout and genuinely loving.

Before beginning the Liturgy of the Hours, the monks/nuns will stir up in themselves similar affections. Then, after the act of adoration, they will offer this action to Our Lord for his glory, for the honor of the Blessed Virgin, Our Lady and Mother, and for the salvation of all creation. When they say:

O God, come to my assistance, they should think that Our Lord answers:
Be attentive to my love.

In order to maintain the proper respect and attention, they should consider from time to time what an honor and privilege it is for them to perform here on earth the same role that the angels and saints fulfill in heaven, and that they are praising the same Lord whose majesty makes the highest seraphim tremble.

Older agent: “Whose majesty makes the highest seraphim tremble! What’s that supposed to mean? Do these people really believe that they are in contact or somehow in union with a heavenly realm?”

Younger agent: “Yes, I believe that they do think that. My great-uncle was a very humble monk and never came across as thinking himself above anyone else. Yet somehow there was an aura about him. He could laugh with the best of us but you knew that he had an inner world which all of us did not have access to.”

Older agent: “Inner world? All I know about is what I can see, touch, taste, and hear-- that sort of thing. Yeah, I have gut instincts and they have saved my life and the lives of others on occasion, but I don’t attribute them to any sort of unearthly being. It’s just how my brain is wired, I suppose.”

Younger agent: “Who wired that brain?”

Older agent: “Don’t tell me you’re buying into this spiritual stuff too. I know that you have your Christian belief system but you don’t let it *really* make an impact on your life do you?”

Younger agent: “I’m not sure. Why bother to have a belief system of any sort if you don’t let it help guide you along? My wife and I are presently struggling with what to do about the religious education of our children. Should we just let them figure it out on their own or would it be helpful to send them to Sunday school for a while to give them a sort of baseline from which to make their own choices later on?”

Older agent, grudgingly: “I guess I see your point to some degree. I had no particular religious upbringing and always feel like I’m on the outside looking in around religious people. Sometimes it angers me but I don’t suppose it’s their fault.”

Younger agent: “Look at the beautiful icons on the wall. What’s it say under them? Saint Francis de Sales, and the other one says Saint Jane de Chantal. I think they lived in the fifteen hundreds in France, at least that’s what I remember my great-uncle saying. “

Older agent: “Were they married?”

Younger agent flipping to the front of the book he held: “No, it says here that he was a Bishop and she was first a contented married woman and mother, then a widow, and finally a nun. They are one of several famous spiritual couples in the history of the Christian contemplative tradition.”

Older agent: “You mean there were other couples like those two?”

Younger agent: “I studied some Spanish in college and Saint John of the Cross was a famous poet we had to read. He was the spiritual companion of Saint Theresa of Avila. Theirs was a more emotional expression of spirituality, while Francis and Jane were more low-key, behind the scenes about it.”

Older agent, a bit annoyed: “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Younger agent: “Francis and Jane believed that spirituality was for *everyone*, not just for monk, nuns, and clergy. We are all called to be holy and we find that holiness by being faithful to our vocation—be it marriage, single life, monastic life, or the clergy.”

Older agent: “You sure know a lot about this stuff. Where did you get all this information?”

Younger agent: “Mostly from my great-uncle. When I was little we would get into the car and visit him in upstate New York. He was a Trappist. We called him ‘Uncle John’ but the monks called him ‘Brother Theophane.’ We stayed in the guesthouse for a few days when we visited and there wasn’t much to do. Uncle John would tell us stories about the saints and he made them sound so real, so down to earth.”

Older agent: “Not like plaster statues? Not like people we could never even begin to imitate?”

Younger agent: “Not at all like that.”

With that Sister Jane opened the folding door to the sun room and slipped in self-confidently. “I can’t find her gentlemen.”

Older agent: “What? We waited here all this time and you can’t locate her?”

“That’s right sir. She isn’t here.”

The older agent glared at the nun. “We’ll be back.”

The younger agent followed his colleague out of the room with a slight nod to the Prioress.

CHAPTER 8

“Just once, how I’d like to see the headline say, not much to print today, can’t find nothing bad to say.” Brother Francis hummed along with the music unashamedly. Anne Murray, in this song and in his opinion, has put the Gospel which really means “Good News,” to music. She captured the heart of that message in the words of her song. The monk prayed for a time when there would be *only* Good News. For now he lived in faith and worked toward that goal as peacefully as possible.

The foil wrapper from another piece of Dove chocolate was sticking out of his blue vinyl binder that held his loose-leaf Mandarin lessons. He smiled as he recalled the words of advice printed on the inside of the wrapper: “Laugh uncontrollably...it clears the mind.”

It was about ten years earlier. He was taking a week long workshop on intuition at the Kripalu Center in Lenox Massachusetts. It was for him, part vacation, part retreat, and part continuing education. About mid-week the leaders of the workshop said that they would be leading the group in a “rebirthing experience.” The monk psychologist had heard of the process. It was popular in the seventies and eighties and the gist of it involved hyperventilating to the point of experiencing psychological phenomena beyond the usual. People often had strong emotional reactions. Sometimes it was a catharsis and at other times vivid memories were relived.

The Abbot was not particularly interested in the process but teamed up with a young woman with whom he would swap roles, first as a coach encouraging his team mate to breathe deeply while lying comfortably under a blanket in a room with about ten other teams of two. The woman experienced a time of fascination in looking back at her past and seemed to gain some insight as to how to decide on future plans. They switched roles.

Thank God for the Vatican II Council. This is not a particularly monastic experience but we are supposed to relate to the world while maintaining our counter-cultural values. Guess I'm doing both right about now.

The coaches knelt or sat beside their partners and encouraged the blanketed clients to breathe very deeply and relax. The two workshops leaders wandered slowly through the participants keeping an eye out for extreme psychological reactions which might need to be contained or managed in some way.

The Abbot tried to give himself to the experience. Gina was a nice young lady and he felt comfortable with her as his coach. He began to hallucinate from the deep breathing, and gave into what he knew was a simple transitory experience from which he could call himself

back at any time. He saw a man floating above him and Brother Francis started talking out loud, describing him more to himself than to anyone else.

“You look familiar. Those arms, I’ve seen them before. I recognize that tee shirt. It’s mine! Most of my clothing has an ad for something on it and I have that tan National Qigong Association tee, complete with frayed collar. Oh my gosh, you’re me!”

“That’s right, I’m you. Who did you expect, Tina Turner? Anyway, I’m just giving you a glance at what others see and feel when they interact with you.”

“You mean I have that kind of humor—Tina Turner indeed. She is great for her age I must admit.”

“Listen Brother, so are you!”

Then the floating image disappeared and something more wondrous happened. Brother Francis felt the light touch of a young woman’s hands at the *dan tian* region of his body, his lower abdomen.

“Who are you? You can’t be Gina because she is kneeling Japanese style right next to me with her hand resting on her lap. One of our instructors? No, your *qi* doesn’t feel like hers.”

His mouth dropped open in awe and he whispered: “You’re my mother.”

“That’s right Francis. I birthed you once and I’m birthing you again, and I’ve always been with you.”

The monk took profound comfort from that point on in the brief but overpowering visit with the woman who died when he was two years old. He met his mother that day for the first time in his human memory.

“No, no, don’t leave me” cried the Royal Canadian mounted police officer under the blanket next to the monk. The man was close to seven feet tall and had the department of the

profession he served in, complete with square jaw. You could almost picture the Smokey the Bear hat on his head and leather strap under his chin.

The morning was coming to a close so the session was gently ended. Brother Francis thought about the Tina Turner remark, which must have sprung from some aspect of his projected unconscious, and he began to laugh. He laughed on and off for the rest of the day!

After lunch the group held a debriefing session and the Mountie laughingly thanked the monk for his humor during his own time of tragedy. The group loved the juxtaposition of comedy and tragedy. An actor participating in the workshop said it reminded him of the laughing and crying masks which symbolize the theater.

“Snack box sir?” asked the flight attendant. The monk came out of his reverie and declined. Five dollars worth of empty calories was not a healthy choice, especially when flying. Besides, he had a few more Dove chocolates left. Was chocolate healthy this week? He’d better read the newspaper. The Doctor of Natural Medicine felt a mild annoyance mix in with his humorous thoughts.

There was so much junk science floating around, even from “reputable” organizations. Many studies are so poorly designed that they really are useless. The tragedy is that the media popularizes the distorted results and confuses everyone. The cholesterol myth, in his experience, was a perfect example of this. There’s no real science to back up the claims that statins help people live longer or healthier lives, or that millions of folks need to be on these medications, yet most people think that there is.

He shifted his mental gears and relaxed. An old movie called “Ground Hog Day” began playing. It was about a man who kept waking up to the same snowy day in a small town in Pennsylvania over and over again—until he improved his mental attitude.

Movies on planes were like sleeping potions to the monk. He drifted in and out of sleep and had his own personal Ground Hog Day experience, except that times and places jumbled together as they wished.

Leone was talking with him at this point in his twilight sleep. What a career she had in those days! She seemed sincere enough—but those skills she had trained in and used in strange places! Would it work?

Later, a mix of snow and rain was falling. He was on his way to meet with the Bishop of Scranton. Much to his surprise, he didn’t get lost on the drive there so he had some extra time. He used it by spending a little time in meditation in the Cathedral of the diocese which was across the street from the Bishop’s office. He opened a beautifully printed booklet from the Abbey of the Genesee, a Trappist monastery of monks in upstate New York. His eyes landed on a quote from Isaiah the prophet promising that the snow and rain sent from above would not return there without bearing fruit.

With that he left the cavernous church and was welcomed by the Bishop to transfer from his public vows in a large order to private vows as a Salesian monk. The entire process would take three years but the Bishop’s approval was the lynchpin which facilitated everything.

The years which followed were a mixture of snow and rain—and sunshine too. It was hard to learn the skills of balancing a checkbook and keeping a house in repair. The surprise was in the escalation and expansion of his ministry. He became a Salesian monk who was deeply

involved with Jesus and all the people of the earth—from East to West—attending as best he could to the body, mind and spirit of each person sent to him by God.

The scene switched back to Leone. Her longing was great, but so was her fear at times. Could she learn to do all through love and nothing through fear? Was she being totally honest?

He lay on the floor, cowl up over his head as the Litany of the Saints was being sung. He had made his vows twenty-five years earlier and now was celebrating his silver jubilee and renewing his vows as a monk of the Salesian family, not part of his original order but a more autonomous monastic. He relied more and more on God and less and less on what others said or thought. Major superiors, spiritual directors, canon lawyers, and bishops were all involved in the transition.

A new Bishop is appointed and the Church is being rocked with scandals. The monk still has his vows but is now even more on his own. The new Bishop doesn't want to be affiliated with anyone or any organization beyond what is absolutely necessary, which includes the Salesian Monastery and Abbot Francis. He had longed for a simple and primitive monastic life for years, a life like the early monks had. Now he had it. Be careful what you pray for...

CHAPTER 9

Mid-fifties and in an attractive sky blue silk dress and delicate silver chain around her neck with a small cross attached to it, Madam Wu didn't look that much different from many of the Western women in the audience in the hotel ballroom. She smiled warmly as she pointed to

a woman at a table in the back of the room. The lady put down her coffee cup and pointed to herself mouthing: “You mean me?”

“That’s right, the lady in the white outfit with the silver hair. I can see three other people around you. Two women and a man. They all departed this life within the last six months or so and you are here in Hawaii for a kind of healing retreat.”

The silver haired lady trembled.

“May I continue? I don’t want to be a source of pain to you, but rather a source of healing.”

“I suppose so,” the lady in the back responded hesitantly.

“Thank you. What I am trying to say is that although these dearly departed people have left this earth physically, they are still with you in spirit. Christians might call this the ‘Communion of Saints.’ We are all connected and will one day be together again fully. Do you understand any of this?”

“Yes,” the lady responded with greater energy and courage. “I am a Christian and believe that we will be together again one day. Thank you for reminding me that my mother, father, and brother, who were all killed in a terrible accident, are still with me in spirit. My grief causes me to forget that at times.”

“That’s true for most of us dear. God bless you.”

“There’s a gentleman in the room who recently lost a child of about five years of age. Would you be willing to stand up? If not, please do not do so.”

A sandy haired man in his early thirties at a table near the front of the rectangular room rose. He didn’t speak.

“May I ask if you just experienced such a loss sir?”

“Yes, my son died three months ago.”

“I am truly sorry for that. Will you tell me your name?”

“It’s Craig.”

“That makes it more personal. Thank you. Craig, some might say that your surfer looks give you away to me, but I will still say that you come from California. More importantly, you are here on business and feeling guilty because you are enjoying the ocean, sun, and hotel during your free time. Correct?”

“That *is* correct Madam Wu. My wife is at home mourning and I’m very conflicted about having even this little bit of happiness here after work.”

“So very human. Your little guy wants you and your wife to be happy and I believe that you will be again. Your son can never be replaced but peace can return. I’ll pray for that for you.”

Madam Wu struck a thoughtful pose for a minute. “Let’s see what else is touching my heart. Actually folks, I think some of you are wondering about what I do and where it comes from so I’ll tell you. I believe that any ability I have is a gift of the Holy Spirit so I always use it for good and never charge for any personal consultations.”

The woman was warm and very likeable. She made friends easily wherever she went and had a husband who adored her.

She became thoughtful once again. This time her serene countenance took on a look of fear, then pain. She mumbled something about an impending death and fell to the floor, her head thudding loudly on the planks of the wooden stage.

“It was a mild concussion but she will be alright Mister Wu,” the doctor explained. “Just keep her quiet and we will run some tests in the morning at the hospital. My greater concern is just why Madam Wu collapsed in the first place.”

“Why she was frightened of course,” her husband said.

“Apparently so, but what caused the fright?”

“My lovely wife is a very positive person but sometimes her gift gives her information that is not so positive. This time she picked up on an up-coming death. I have not been able to get more details from her and don’t want to risk upsetting her right now.”

“Good thinking sir. That can all be clarified later. See you in the morning.”

After the doctor left the hotel room, Mister Wu gently questioned his wife again. She was hesitant to discuss the matter further but encouraged her husband to take his usual nightly walk along the beach. He hesitated but she assured him that it would be best for both of them, a way to break the tension.

Mister Wu said that he would take a shorter walk than usual and pocketed his cell phone and placed Madam Wu’s cell phone on the night stand right next to her. When he returned ten minutes later--she was dead.

The same doctor returned, along with a dozen or so police officers and several emergency vehicles with flashing lights. They seemed to be attracting the attention of everyone they could.

The cause of death was obvious; there was a wound to her left temple.

Newspaper reports noted that the police were suspicious of Mister Wu, asking about his whereabouts during the time prior to his wife’s death. The alibi of a quiet and solitary walk along the beach seemed flimsy at best. He was asked not to leave the Island of Kauai for any reason. The man agreed.

Two suites down the hall “David the Illusionist” was preparing for his act, which alternated early and late evening time slots with Madam Wu’s. His phone rang. The management wanted David to do his act twice an evening until further notice due to the unfortunate death of Madam Wu.

“Very well,” he said with trembling voice when he heard the news. “I’ll do my best. I need to dust off a few extra illusions that I had not prepared to use on this trip and will need the use of the ballroom auditorium to practice in when no other functions are going on.”

“Whatever you need David,” replied the manager. “You will be rescuing us from disaster. Not only did we lose Madam Wu but the bad press and disrupted schedule is not good for business. Madam Wu’s death, certainly, is the prime concern here, however.”

“How did she die, may I ask?”

The manager became businesslike and actually evasive. “That is not entirely clear at this point. I’m sure Mr. Wu will release a statement at the proper time.”

After they hung up, David searched his mental files. *Let’s see, shall I saw a woman in half? Maybe I’ll make someone levitate. Card tricks? I know; I’ll raise someone from the dead.*

The next day he read and re-read the photocopy of the note found in his wife’s Bible the night before by the police. The newspapers knew that the police had Madam Wu’s original document, and that the authorities had provided Mr. Wu with a copy out of respect for his loss-- and perhaps out of a desire to observe the widower’s reaction when they offered it to him.

My dearest Tian,

Now that things have calmed down a bit I want to share with you the fact that the reason I collapsed on stage this evening was because I had a premonition of a murder. A second wave of the premonition washed over me shortly after the first, and I realized that the one about to be murdered was me. I felt a third wave of the premonition stirring my heart but collapsed before I received the information that might very well save my life. If anything happens to me, please know that I love you very much and will be in touch with you from the other side, God permitting.

Your loving and grateful wife, Effie

His wife's spiritual gift was very real. Many believed in her ability to read hearts and minds, some didn't. It was much the same with the other person whom she loved, Jesus. Mister Wu was a devout Daoist. Much of his life was spent trying to live the principles of the great spiritual classic, *Dao De Ching*.

Much like the Gospels and other scriptural writings, it is not completely clear just who wrote down this Chinese classic. It is attributed to the Chinese philosopher *Lao Tse*, born around 604 B.C. Again, much like the Gospels, the *Dao De Ching* might well be the product of more than one author but in the *spirit* of *Lao Tse*.

The slim volume of eighty-one brief chapters is a type of manual for the practice of virtue and good living. Living in harmony with the cycles of life and nature is very much the goal of Daoists. Thus the practice of virtue and a life in harmony with nature, along with a strong belief that everything springs from and returns to the *Dao*, leads many to become monks and nuns in this tradition. Others live according to the *Dao* in whatever state of life they choose. Mr. Wu did this as a married man.

Scholars have translated the *Dao De Ching* many times over. At least one version of the Chinese spiritual classic juxtaposes its verses with Christian texts side by side in a single volume.

There are those who see a similarity between the primal chaos of the *Dao*, out of which everything else springs, and with the *Rhuah* or the breath of the creating God in the Book of Genesis. Still others compare the *Dao* with the Holy Spirit of the Christian tradition.

Many would hold that the *Dao* is less a person and more a creating force, whereas in the Judeo-Christian tradition, God the Creator and the Holy Spirit are *Persons*, as was the God-human Jesus. All of this is shrouded in mystery, but mystery is exactly what a mystic deals with and where that concept gets its name.

Mr. Wu was now dealing with life and death, creation and destruction on some level at least. Their marriage was based on mutual respect and inner freedom. Within this atmosphere, their spiritual paths were lived out and mutually supported.

Now everything was so very different.

CHAPTER 10

Our traveler was now in the third airplane of his outbound journey. He barely had enough time to do a little qigong and yoga in the airport between planes. Fortunately his spiritual practices teach him to transcend what other people think about him. He could do his “moving meditations” just about anywhere at this point in his life.

He sometimes joked to his students that when you start to look like you need to be carted off to a hospital for psychological treatment you are probably on the verge of becoming a qigong

master. The master under discussion actually did slow down while power walking past an ice cream parlor on his way to the gate for the third plane but time did not allow him to stop. His tastes were not always in the transcendent category!

In actuality, Brother Francis knew that one must move beyond the opinions of others to find the true self, and doing some simple movements that others didn't quite understand was one way of moving beyond the ego need for approval. Such was also the case for not eating meat out of respect for other living creatures, though most people supposed he refrained for health reasons. If that was his motivation, he would do better by refraining from dessert now and again.

He was captivated by recent studies which suggest that while toxins from the environment, smoking, and the like are very unhealthy, it's actually eating meat that really ignites cancer. Thus, toxins are the seeds, and meat is what makes them grow. Probably the hormones and toxins in the meat, he reasoned.

Sleep mixed with snippets of the in-flight movies accompanied him all the way to Kauai. When they landed and Brother Francis exited the plane, he immediately was overtaken by the aroma of flowers. There was a light mist of rain in the air and the hint of a rainbow painted the sky. Dusk was approaching. The whole experience was like healing balm for the weary traveler.

He found the car rental agency with ease and felt very grown up as he picked up the car he had reserved. He had asked for a small one but the agency gave him a larger one, thinking that they were doing the monk a favor. Brother Francis let his taste in the matter go and accepted the car in the spirit of one of the Salesian maxims: "Ask for nothing, refuse nothing." He wondered once again why most people left the third phrase off of that famous French quote when saying it in English: "desire nothing." Maybe that really wasn't too much of a mystery.

The son of a bus driver, but someone who had not inherited his father's sense of direction, Abbot Francis followed the directions to Lily and Dominic's retreat house. They assured him, like many before them, that "you can't miss it." Little did they know!

Would darkness fall before he got to his destination? Maybe he really did need to get a cell phone—he had been holding out on that concession. The ocean surged to his right and green mountains rose majestically to his left. So far so good. He made the left turn off the highway as directed and knew that he was not too far from the retreat house.

The sun was sinking fast and the roads were smaller and not well marked at this point. Finally he did what any self-respecting male would do—he pulled in behind a FedEx truck parked on the side of the road and asked the driver for directions. A Hawaiian gentleman with a bright smile and large belly suggested he follow, adding that he "couldn't miss it." This time it worked.

Brother Francis recognized the red-roofed octagonal building in which retreat meetings and conferences were held. He parked the car near the main house. No one was home. Within five minutes Lily and Dominic drove up in their gas guzzler of a truck—their other vehicle was a motorbike—one extreme or the other they had told him.

Lily greeted him with a radiant smile and placed a lei of vibrantly colored orchids mixed with other flowers around his neck. She explained that an old Hawaiian lady made it specifically for him. After hugs all around, they entered the apartment on the lower level of the main house. Fresh flowers graced the table in the kitchen. A newspaper also sat on the table, opened to a story, complete with photo, about a monk from Pennsylvania coming to the island to give a workshop and to speak at the ecumenical Martin Luther King celebration later in the month.

Lily handed him a pink phone message slip. *Wonder if Brother Benedict is okay. Maybe it's those CIA guys again.* Neither was the case.

“Two old friends from Lehigh University called you,” Lily explained. “Vick and Ellen said that they had not seen you in about thirty years and then saw your photo in the paper. They are here vacationing. It almost caused some marital discord.”

“How so?”

“Ellen was reading the paper and told her husband that she went to Lehigh with the person in the photo. He grabbed the newspaper and told her that she did not, but that *he* went to Lehigh with the person in the photo. They finally figured out that each of them was in class with you but that they didn't know each other in those days. You were a sort of missing link.”

“The story of my life!”

Dominic and Lilly roared with laughter.

“I was originally in a research and teaching doctoral program at Lehigh and studied and taught undergrads with Ellen. I transferred to another program at Lehigh because I wanted a more clinical education and that's where I met up with Vick. The slip says that they want to take me to lunch. That will be a delight.”

“It's a delight having you here,” Dominic said. “We'd better let you get some sleep.” Stop up in the morning for breakfast and we can organize ourselves a bit.” The hypnotic aroma of the flower-filled mist intensified as they opened and closed the door upon leaving.

The visiting monk put the tea kettle on and went into the bedroom to unpack while the water heated. Like a thunderclap it came to him that this was the room where a friend of his had stayed and had an almost constant sense of ghosts being present. She told him that the person who lived in the room before her, a visiting monk from China, had a similar experience. Brother

Francis wanted to have a little fun with ghosts but nothing was happening yet. *Maybe things will start popping around the witching hour, midnight.*

It was actually about three hours after the witching hour when Brother Francis woke from the sleep of the dead with a start. Strange sounds alerted him to something unusual in his environment. It took several moments before he remembered that he was in Hawaii. It took several more before he realized, with disappointment, that the sound which woke him was the crowing of roosters. He had seen chickens and roosters all over the place during his car ride from the airport. No ghosts had yet appeared in his room, nor did he have any sense of them in his gut—his usual barometer for intuitive information.

Returning to sleep did not seem like it was going to happen so the monk rose, washed up, and began to pray the Office of Vigils from the Liturgy of the Hours. This was a perfect time for this prayer service since it was created centuries ago to keep watch for the God who is with us throughout the night. He followed Vigils with an hour and a half of meditation out on a peaceful back patio. The meditation turned into sleep and when he awoke it was dawn. His Office book still at hand, the traveling monk then celebrated the Office of Morning Prayer, the Latin name for this part of the Office being “Lauds” or “Praise”.

He climbed the outer wooden stairs to the upper residence and saw through the window that Lily was hard at work in the kitchen. She saw him and beckoned him in.

“I’m making up some meals to take over to the lovely older lady who made your *lai*. She’s not as spry as she used to be so I just put them in her freezer and it holds her over for a week or two.”

Lily's family had moved from China to Canada many years ago. People were not always friendly to them, which can happen anywhere people live, but she always remained friendly to others.

The pair discussed the crowing of roosters as they shared a simple meal of oatmeal, dried fruit, and tea. Lily explained the some years before, a violent hurricane had roared through the island. In its wake came the freedom of all sorts of caged animals, including roosters, hens, and their little ones.

Once the fowl had attained their freedom, they were not going back into cages. So they populate the island, adding color and sound from one end of it to the other. Brightly colored feathers can be found just about anywhere and the largest Easter egg hunt in history is a perpetual opportunity if you are so inclined. You would need to dye them yourself, however.

That freedom the fowl claimed, they both agreed, is a reflection of the freedom all humankind longs for, and the very goal of spirituality. The monk psychologist thought about the late Victor Frankel, a Jewish psychiatrist who was held in a concentration camp during the Second World War. He wrote a famous little book entitled *Man's Search for Meaning* wherein Frankel outlined his thoughts as to why some people lived and others died in the camps, all experiencing about the same level of cruel conditions. Those who kept a hope or believe beyond the concentration camps alive were also the ones who kept themselves alive.

Frankel developed an entire system of psychotherapy based on his experience and observations, which he called "Logotherapy." The point of this treatment is to instill, or perhaps unearth, hope in the patient. Such is the purpose, as Lily and Brother Francis saw things, of the Gospel, the Torah, the Koran, and Daoist and Buddhist writings too. Most writings drawn from

a good heart, and sometimes in an altered state of consciousness, led the reader back to inner freedom. The lives of the two friends breakfasting together exemplified this.

“Dominic is in town, trying to hire some workers to help him put the final touches on the Watsu pool. Are you familiar with that technique?”

“A little Lily, can you tell me more?”

“Certainly. Watsu is a combination word from the words for water and shiatsu, or Japanese finger pressure massage. The treatment is done in water which is heated to about ninety-five degrees and the client is always physically supported by the massage therapist. It allows the person to relax and stretch in a way not physically possible on land, so to speak.”

“Sounds great. Do you do that treatment?”

“Not me. I do have a bodywork studio not far from the meeting hall. It’s a little hut and quite comfortable. Folks can choose either type of treatment. Dominic does the Watsu and loves it. I think he actually benefits by giving the treatments too.”

“My bodywork teacher often said that to give a good treatment is to receive a treatment in the process,” the Chinese medicine doctor responded.

“So many traditions take us back to a similar place. Yet your Christian and my Buddhist philosophies differ also. Our mutual respect and openness to learning has helped us both, I believe, to deepen our own belief systems. Do you agree?”

Brother Francis reached for a piece of dried banana. “Completely my dear friend, completely.”

CHAPTER 11

Brother Benedict's extensive and angry-looking surgical wounds were healing. Pleasant Valley Manor was a much easier placement for everyone concerned—including the woman stepping off the plane at the Lehigh Valley International Airport. Her dark and round Jackie O. glasses shielded her eyes from the sun and surrounded her in an aura of mystery. Her large-brimmed blue hat added to the effect.

She rescued her small suitcase from the conveyer belt at Baggage Claim and hopped into a cab with the practiced ease of a seasoned traveler. In forty-five minutes the mystery woman was paying the cabbie and walking through the automatic glass doors of Pleasant Valley Manor.

Her attitude became more pastoral as she transitioned from the role of traveler to that of a hospital visitor. "May I visit with Brother Benedict please? I understand that he was recently transferred here."

"Certainly, but do you have his family name so that I can look his room number up on the computer and let him know that you are here Ms....?"

"Of course. Let's see. It's been a while since.... Kelly, that's it, Kelly!" she said with triumph. "it is now Brother Benedict Kelly." Memories of their early years flooded into her mind. Their mutual decision to go their separate ways was right for both of them, but also bitter-sweet.

"Your name again?"

"Oh yes. Can you just say an old friend is here to visit? We told one another long ago that if the other was in need that 'an old friend' would be a little code phrase we would use. One never knows."

The receptionist looked a little stunned but had seen many strange events in her work at the Manor and smiled wanly. Then she nodded to the visitor, looked up Brother Benedict's room number and went off to tell him about the mysterious visitor who wheeled a floral suitcase behind her.

The receptionist returned. Her face said it all. "Brother Benedict is delighted that you are here. Just give the nurses a few minutes to make him a bit more presentable. He's rather weak and not at his best, just so you know."

The blue hat bobbed up and down. "I expected as much. Thank you for your kindness. May God bless you." She sat down on the less than comfortable couch in the lobby and drifted into a light sleep almost instantly. A nurse in a white smock with pink hearts all over it touched her hand.

"You can visit with Brother now, ma'am. He's really perked up since learning that you are here."

"Thank you so much, nurse. I admire your profession greatly. It seems to me that doctors sort of 'do it and run.' You folks stay in for the long haul and are on the front lines."

"We all do what we can. Please follow me."

She lifted herself up off the couch with some effort, fighting against jet lag, general fatigue, and a headache. They walked down a hallway with large windows which flooded the building with sunlight. The place did not have the often encountered smell of strong disinfectant straining to mask foul odors. Perhaps the sunlight helped. Her stomach tightened. This probably would be the last time she would ever see George.

The nurse stopped at a doorway and nodded her head toward someone lying in a bed within the room and hurried off to her many other duties. Obviously she had slowed down her pace out of consideration for the visitor but now it was time to pick up the tempo again.

He was railing thin but his smile was a sure sign that she had been lead to the right person. “Hello George, or shall I call you Benedict? Are you reasonably comfortable? Can I do anything for you??

“Yes,” he murmured weakly, “Hush up. I’m as good as can be expected and much better now that you have come to visit. It’s just the way we said it would be when we parted over twenty years ago. Even though we dated, we both knew that our vocations lay elsewhere—mine in monastic life—and yours using the gifts God gave you.”

She took his emaciated hand in hers. It was bruised from medical puncture wounds. “Of course, dear old friend. I’ve kept an eye on you over the years. Abbot Francis saw to it that I remained on the monastery mailing list so I received a newsletter about the community twice a year. I was with you in spirit with every step you took on your monastic journey, from Postulancy through Solemn Profession.”

“It’s about time for me to go to glory old girl. You’ve got work to do here yet but I believe that mine is completed.” He smiled wistfully.

“I tend to agree dear Brother. Please remember me to our Good God, and please tell me if I can do anything to ease your transition.”

“You can my dear. You may remember how very much I love the Liturgy of the Hours, the prayers monks and nuns chant in the monastery or sometimes say privately. Even when said alone, they are the public prayer of the Church and we celebrate the Hours in the name of the entire world, remembering the needs of all God’s people.”

“I do indeed. It’s one of the things that attracted you to monastic life and, in a sense, away from me.” She teared up. “It was right, however. We both followed the paths we were led to and no one can do better than that.”

“Quite so. It’s moving toward sunset and so am I. My eyes and mind are tired, not to mention even my arms. Will you pick up that Office book on the windowsill and pray Vespers out loud so that I might join you in spirit?”

“I would consider it an honor and will do so with great joy.”

She fumbled with the four brightly colored ribbons which served as book markers. She found the right marker for Sunday Evening Prayer I of Week I in the four week cycle of prayer services. The Solemnity of Sunday actually begins on Saturday evening, a tradition inherited from those of the Jewish tradition. Their Saturday Sabbath begins on Friday evening.

She whispered the opening verses with a jumble of feelings. “O God come to my assistance. O Lord make haste to help me.”

The dying monk made the sign of the cross over himself as is the custom during the opening verses of each Hour or part of the Divine Office. His friend continued on through the recitation of three parts of the psalmody and a reading from the late Trappist monk Thomas Merton. Intercessions for the needs of the world, both local and beyond, were prayed. Mary’s Song of Praise from the Gospel of Luke was recited in thanksgiving for the graces of the day just passing into evening.

She dabbed behind her Jackie O. glasses with a tissue as she completed the simple service about fifteen minutes later by praying a final blessing. “May our Good God bless us and our world, protect us as we strive to protect others, and bring us all together one day with the Risen Christ forever. Amen.”

Brother Benedict had silently made his transition.

CHAPTER 12

The brown bottle containing a crystal clear liquid sat on the nun's bureau. She took a swig, approximating the teaspoonful she had been instructed to place under her tongue for about thirty seconds prior to swallowing. The years she spent in other countries, sometimes in rather primitive circumstances, made her grimace at the thought of ever taking medicine again—especially natural medicine.

Sister Scholastica trusted Abbot Francis and had long since found the use of doctor strength colloidal silver to be of great benefit for her health. God only knew what viral and bacterial creatures lurked within her.

When the Abbot started to tell her about the many such organisms that inhabit all of us she asked him to stop. He assured her that a healthy immune system kept them all in check. It was only when immune function was too low that these creatures were set free to cause symptoms of one sort or another in the human body.

The doctor monk explained to the very bright nun that all sorts of symptoms and syndromes might be caused by infection. “Syndromes” sounded worse than “symptoms” so she didn't ask for a clarification ten years back, but had come to understand the word as representing a *set* of symptoms, not just one. In any case, eyes, ears, nose, mouth, gums, throat, skin, nails, and the various systems which function within the human body can all become imbalanced by the nasty invaders within the body.

When a nun or monk of the Salesian Monastery rises in the morning and is preparing to gather with the community in the Oratory, the monastic's thoughts are supposed to be on God and the things of God. In the early morning, brief thoughts about the day ahead, asking the help of God for anything which might be thought of as difficult, and making a plan of action to deal with it, are to combine in a brief and simple exercise to prepare for the events of the day.

Today, however, Sister Scholastica had a slight sore throat and felt as if she were "coming down with something." She was taking colloidal silver as a preventive. The suggested dose for acute or sudden situations was seven teaspoons a day.

Her thoughts naturally turned back to her Postulancy days when she first entered the monastery and when her health was not at its best. Her brother in monastic life, and her Abbot, introduced her to colloidal silver and she became a huge fan of the ultra-pure water which contained miniscule particles of silver suspended in it.

It was originally foreign for Sister Scholastica to think of the human body as one big colloid—a body of liquid with all sorts of things, good and bad, suspended in it. Today she took that concept for granted. The liquid was stored in bottles so as to avoid any contamination which might inactivate the silver particles. Colloidal silver was actually an old-fashioned health treatment, but recent research made the product much better understood.

The wonderful liquid was a natural antiviral and antibiotic. Such potions were used in the ancient worlds of the Romans and Greeks—by Hippocrates himself! If it was good enough for the father of medicine, it was good enough for her. The thought of drinking something containing silver was daunting at first, but after she thought about some of the things she ate and was exposed to her in her earlier career, she got over that.

Monastery visitors had told the community members that there was a blue-skinned man appearing on the television talk shows who had turned the color of Papa Smurf by using colloidal silver. Even so, he continued to take the medicine regularly because he believed it was the source of his vibrant health. It was later revealed that the man was making his own colloidal silver at home and that it was impure, thus resulting in Argyria, the blue skin condition.

Well-documented studies, highly detailed and beyond the interest of Sister Scholastica, confirmed that the colloidal silver she was taking would not turn anyone's skin blue. The cold weather might, however, because the nun was not fond of that. Many of her earlier years were spent in warm climates—not in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania.

She reeled her thoughts back in and did a brief Preparation of the Day and then made her way in silence to the Oratory. The bell calling them to prayer was ringing, and for a monastic this was the voice of God calling. She was the last person to enter and she made the usual bow from the waist while placing the palms of her hands on her knees. She sat in her choir stall, a simple wooden podium made of pine wood, which contained a shelf for her Office book and perhaps a few other books or spiritual papers of one sort or another.

Brother Benedict had made those choir stalls, along with the altar and the ambo from which the Word of God was proclaimed. The two benches which lined each wall of the sanctuary area of the Oratory were also of his creation.

She was saddened by the news of his death last evening. Sister Jane de Chantal had rung the community bell at an odd hour and at the beginning of Grand Silence. It was only for the gravest of reasons that this period of silence between the end of Night Prayer until after breakfast the next morning was broken.

The Prioress had explained to the community last evening that Brother Benedict slipped away around sunset and that they would gather then next day to make preparations for his Liturgy of the Resurrection and burial. The community experienced a mixture of sadness and relief that their brother was now truly free.

The Prioress rapped on the rough wooden wall next to her choir stall with her knuckles and the community rose and traced a small cross over their mouths as she intoned: “O Lord open my lips.” They responded: “And my mouth shall proclaim your praise.”

A series of psalms and readings were celebrated and the Office of Vigils culminated with the Church’s great song of praise, the *Te Deum*—in English these days. This community liked the Liturgy in the local language of English, the vernacular.

Some people asked the members of the Salesian Monastery if they said their Office in Latin or English, sometimes looking for a more traditional community. This monastery traced its roots back to the early Church. They explained that they were not limited to the last five hundred years of church history but went back even further. This made them a mind boggling mix of modern and ancient attitudes which confused some while delighting others.

Vigils ended with Sister Jane de Chantal quietly proclaiming: “Come Lord Jesus.” This last line of the Bible was also a reminder for the community to keep watch for the God who breaks into each day. It was an invitation to mindfulness and recollection as the day became busy. At the moment, it also signaled the beginning of an hour of meditation, mental prayer.

Some community members stayed in the Oratory, others went back to their rooms, and still others slowly walked about on the monastery grounds. Sister Scholastica went to the sun room and sat in a creaky old rocking chair. She read a page or two from *My life with the Saints*, comforted by the very human characterization of the holy people portrayed in the book.

She began to talk to Jesus about her gratitude for life in general, a feeling heightened by the loss of Brother Benedict. In time-warp speed, the bell began to peal for Morning Prayer and she returned to the Oratory to greet the God of the morning and pray for the needs of all God's people.

After a silent breakfast of coffee, toast, and hot cereal, the community members cleaned up the kitchen area and went their separate ways, happy to have some time to themselves on this beautiful Sunday morning.

One of her pet peeves was that sometimes no one answered the doorbell, each person thinking someone else would. It rang as she was heading in that direction anyway so she answered it. A woman in a wide-brimmed blue hat and dark glasses stood before her.

“Good morning. May I help you? I'm Sister Scholastica.”

“Yes, I know.”

As soon as the visitor answered, the nun knew who she was. “What a surprise to see you. Please come in.”

The woman entered and they made their way to the sun room where not long before Sister Scholastica had meditated.

“I realize that it has been years since we have seen one another and that we do not know each other very well, but I felt the need to express my sympathy to this community on the death of George—Brother Benedict.”

“How very kind, but it is certainly a loss for you as well.”

The woman smiled sadly. “Yes, but we released one another long ago to follow the paths

that God had called us to as you know. Through that mutual agreement much has been accomplished, even to the point of leading *you* here.”

Sister Scholastica had a far away look in her eyes as she remembered when the man who ran the hobby shop in New York City sold it in order to enter a monastery. She sometimes purchased leather crafting materials from him and used them as a way to relax and de-stress.

She made more moccasins and leather book cover than she could ever use. She went to the simple profession of his temporary monastic vows a few years after he entered and gave him a hand-crafted leather Office book cover. Eventually she entered that monastery herself. She liked its simplicity, the primitive Rule it followed, the fact that it included both men and women, that the community did not necessarily exclude people if they had a physical challenge. If so, Clare might not be among them right now.

“I appreciate your time and I won’t stay long. There was a need for me to reconnect with the past and this is a marvelous way to do it. I had a sort of near death experience recently and it has made me more grateful than ever for life. It’s nice to see that the spiritual friendship Brother Benedict and I had has been fruitful. My own marriage and life work is quite satisfying.”

The nun thought of the founders of her own spiritual family—Saints Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal. They remain a magnificent example of spiritual friendship in the Christian contemplative tradition. They were busy and happy, loving God first, then one another.

“May I spend a few moments in the Oratory, Sister?”

The two women walked over to the little barn-like structure which was the heart of the monastery. Sister Scholastica led the visitor to Brother Benedict’s choir stall and explained that this was where their friend and brother had prayed day in and day out for the last fifteen years or

so of his life. They hugged, connected by a bond deeper than the meager knowledge they had of one another. The bond of love is stronger than death itself.

CHAPTER 13

His workshop at Dominic and Lily's retreat center was very well received. Brother Francis interacted with a group of about fifty people each day for five days. He cycled through the classic five elements, discussing one each day. Thus Fire, Earth, Air/Metal, Water, and Wood were presented consecutively. He included the physical organs related to each element, actually each *energy*, and commented on the sense organs, tastes, positive and negative emotions, healing sounds, and psychological archetypes that were associated with each element of Chinese medicine and cosmology.

The monk never ceased to marvel at how unified Chinese medicine is. There is absolutely no distinction between physical and psychological medicine. After his talk, the monk taught the group a qigong movement for the element being presented that day. By the end of the workshop the participants were familiar with a complete qigong form, one set of moves for each of the five elements.

The people paid for the workshop on a sliding scale as they were able. The monk's favorite "fee" was a pineapple given to him by a smiling man who seemed to have little in the way of material possessions but who radiated a quiet joy—which no money could buy.

The visiting monk read the twelve pulses of some of the participants--one pulse for each of the twelve ordinary meridians. (The pulses for the eight extraordinary meridians, discovered

later in history, are not typically read or treated in the same way as the more frequently mentioned ordinary meridians.)

He really didn't need to read the pulses by pressing the wrists at this point in his ministry. Most of the time the monk simply sensed the pulses of the meridians in his *dan tian*, or lower abdomen. This area is considered the center of the human person in classical Chinese medicine.

The very last person to have his pulses taken before the workshop ended evoked a deep reaction in Brother Francis. The monk felt strong pulses, especially the one associated with the heart meridian. He intuited that the man had recently lost an adult son in an accident. Brother Francis had the sense that the son wanted his parents to know that he was grateful to them and that he was well. The monk told the man just that as gently as he could, and a woman in the first row wept bitter sweet tears in response.

The workshops ended with lots of smiles, hugs, and some private sessions with the doctor monk. It was time for Brother Francis to move to a small motel on the beach for about five days of quiet and study prior to the Martin Luther King ecumenical service in which he had been invited to participate.

He never tanned in his life—lots of sunburn though. In recent years his skin was less likely to burn to the point of pain. Brother Francis was now taking supplements, including doctor strength multivitamins and minerals. He attributed his more resilient skin to that.

Meditation, walks on the beach, quiet writing, reading, and study were like heaven to the monk. Just below his second story room was a mound of dark boulders, each about four to five feet wide. The mound itself stretched out to a circumference of about twenty yards all around. A simple wooden sign posted on a two-by-four driven into the ground in front of the rocks contained a brief account of some local history.

“HAUOLA (“Dew of Life”) is the name passed down from ancient times for this place at the mouth of the Wailui River. Historical accounts suggest that this was a place of refuge where one could escape punishment and find safety during war.”

History relates that if a Hawaiian had done something that was forbidden, or if someone belonged to a defeated army, that person could gain entry to a sanctuary such as the one outside of Brother Francis’ room. After going through some sacred rites, the person was then permitted to return home safely.

Peace and pain radiated from that hallowed spot--and into the *dan tian* of the monk. Most of the time he could ignore it, but once each day the monk stopped and prayed for everyone who had ever had any association with that sacred place of refuge. Then it was back to fun!

The closest Brother Francis ever got to any sort of regular recreation was when someone gifted him with a free month long subscription to Netflix. He ordered some movies on DVD for the community and watched one or two on the computer in his office as well. It was great fun but a month of that was more than enough.

The monk enjoyed life, but when he had to stay in a hotel or was treated to something special, it eventually felt like he had eaten too much sugar. He enjoyed the experiences to the hilt but then needed to stop and reflect upon what had happened—digest the adventures in a sense.

Abbot Francis had just moved into the hotel so he was not feeling cloyed yet. He made a reservation for the show a popular magician was to perform that evening. It was being touted as

an extra special event. It seems the magician was now telling the reporters that he was going to exercise a little known gift, the gift of communicating with the dead.

The mystery monk had no idea if the magician was simply playing with words, doing a little public relations stunt, or if he actually meant that he was going to communicate with someone from the other side in his act that evening.

Since Catholic Christians believe in life after death, Brother Francis believed that he communicated with the dead regularly. Sometimes he prayed to God through the intercession of various saints—holy folks whom the Church publicized as role models for the faithful. Wasn't that communicating with the dead? He carried on a non-verbal dialogue with Jesus throughout the day, another example of communication with the dead in one sense.

The local newspaper, *The Garden Island*, was still echoing with stories about the death of a psychic woman who used to alternate with the magician who called himself "David the Illusionist." She collapsed on stage during her act—which really wasn't an act in her mind. Madam Wu considered her ability to read the hearts and minds of others as a gift of the Holy Spirit. It was given to her to be used for the good of others she believed.

The psychic died in her hotel room several hours later due to a wound to her left temple. No one was certain if the wound was a result of her collapse on to the hard wood stage, inflicted later on in her room, or both. Rumors abounded.

The sleuth in Brother Francis was stirred up by the articles. Anything was possible but he was not about to get mixed up in this series of events—or was he? His community had told him to take some time for himself and to relax between giving his workshop and presenting at the Martin Luther King ecumenical celebration. Additionally, the local Bishop back in Pennsylvania had gently asked him to try to keep a lower profile.

True, the monk did wind up in the middle of bizarre scenarios at times, but he didn't seek them out. They sort of came to him. This time he was just going to mind his own business. Unfortunately, that's what he always did and it never really stopped the course of events that eventually led to articles in the media about this semi-cloistered mystery monk.

Intuition was one of Brother Francis' strongest gifts and he had an intuition that he had met the late lady in the newspapers at some point in his life. He didn't remember the name "Madam Wu" but did have an inner sense that their paths had crossed somewhere along the line. Modern physicists say that once two objects are connected, they stay connected on some level forever. He had met her somewhere, but where?

CHAPTER 14

"That's right, that's right," barked David the Illusionist to the strong and patient stage hands. His tall and lanky body didn't look quite as handsome or mysterious in cut off denim shorts and a torn gray tee shirt as it did in the tuxedo he had rented to perform in this evening. He raked his boney fingers through his thick black hair. "Just make sure that the scrim is pulled tightly so that it works properly under the lighting."

The sometimes transparent piece of cloth was stretched between two poles which were connected to it with rings at the top and bottom of the cloth. The scrim took up the entire back of the stage, leaving a few yards behind it for people and props. Most of the stage was thus left for the performers in front of the scrim.

When the stage was illuminated from the front, the scrim looked like a wall of light blue, and when lighted from the rear the audience could see whatever was placed behind it. The material was porous enough so that machine-produced fog could be blown through it, and underneath it, in order to create a surreal effect as needed.

The crew tested their handiwork. A worker in a dark blue jumpsuit and tool belt—which strained at his gut—stood behind the scrim. His colleague turned the back lights on and there he was—visible to everyone. When the lighting switched to the front stage lighting he disappeared.

“Great job guys. Now just keep your mouths shut and everything will be fine.”

Mister Wu dialed the front desk. He was restless and afraid. Maybe there was ‘a doctor in the house’ as Westerners would say—as his dear wife had said in the past. The pleasant and almost too perky young lady at the desk said that a Christian monk from the mainland, Pennsylvania she thought, was some sort of natural doctor. Would she like Mister Wu to call the monk for him?

Mister Wu felt better already. Being Asian himself, and very comfortable with the old ways, he was partial to Eastern medical care. Monastics of any tradition were also people he liked to be around.

Brother Francis was out on his little balcony just above the boulder field which made up the sacred pace of refuge. He was luxuriating in some extra meditation. This was not everyone’s cup of tea, but it certainly was his.

He had a deceased Jesuit friend who once said that he didn’t believe in reincarnation, but if he did he would like to come back as an old Italian lady’s cat. He just wanted to sit in the sun,

be petted, and lap up some milk. The monk felt like that cat. He was beginning to unwind from a busy life. Then the phone rang.

“Brother O’Neil? Brother Francis? I’m sorry. I’m not sure what to call you.”

“No problem. Brother Francis is fine. O’Neil is my family name. It’s used for legal matters but that’s about all. We emphasize our Baptismal names as monks these days. Years ago we took a new name when we became novices, symbolic of our new life, but not so today. Now *I’m* sorry. I told you more than you needed to know and you must be a busy lady.”

“Not at all, Brother Francis. It’s fascinating. One of our guests is in need of a little medical attention. It’s not an emergency or anything, so I wonder if you might take a look.”

Brother Francis felt a little hesitation in his gut. It was not because he did not want to minister to someone in need, but he *did* want to honor the advice others had given him about slowing down. He also had a sense that he might be drawn into something bigger than a headache or upset stomach.

“I would be happy to help, but isn’t there a house doctor available?”

“There is, Brother, but this is what you might call a special case. You see, the man in need is the husband of the late Madam Wu. Perhaps you’ve read about her in the newspapers.”

“Indeed I have.”

“Well, he’s a very gentle spirit and I think he might actually need your clinical psychology skills as much as your Chinese medicine.”

“You seem to know a lot about me. How’s that?”

“Well,” she sounded embarrassed, “I read about you in the *The Garden Island*. I’m sorry if I disturbed you. We usually don’t make such requests, but somehow this one just seems right. You know?”

“No problem at all. It’s good to listen to one’s intuition—usually. I would be happy to see this gentleman. What is his name and room number?”

The girl gave the monk the needed information and he called Mister Wu’s room and then went to pay him a visit.

Mister Wu’s dark eyes shifted nervously up and down the corridor as he let Brother Francis into his hotel room. He combed back his thinning dark hair with his fingers and smoothed out his multi-colored Hawaiian shirt. His navy blue shorts revealed skinny dark legs.

“Please sit down dear Brother. It is so kind of you to do this.”

“It’s my pleasure Mister Wu. I’m sorry that you are not up to par but let’s see what we can do about that.” While he was speaking, Brother Francis unobtrusively and automatically, performed the “Four Diagnostics” of Chinese medicine.

He interviewed (asked the man about his symptoms and took some general history), observed (the color of Mister Wu’s skin, whites of his eyes, and his fingernails), he listened (to the sound and quality of the patient’s voice and breathing), and he touched or palpated (simply by shaking Mister Wu’s hand and patting him on the back).

The monk learned that Mister Wu was hyper-vigilant, found it difficult to sleep, had a long-standing headache, and was finding it increasingly difficult to turn his “monkey mind,” or thinking brain, off. He noticed a reddish flush on his patient’s face and eyes. His nails appeared normal. Mister Wu spoke in a slightly high pitched and quavering voice, probably higher than his normal tone.

Brother Francis pressed on Mister Wu’s wrists, taking the twelve pulses of Chinese medicine. He then held the man’s wrist up to his nose and sniffed. The heart pulse was elevated and the aroma emanating from the man’s skin smelled bitter and sweaty. All of these indicators

suggested an excess of the Fire element. The obsessive thoughts (referred to as “over thinking” in the Chinese system) suggested an elevation of the Earth element also.

The doctor monk pulled a few bottles of *An Shen Bu Nao* out of the black bag he used to carry his medicine in, especially when traveling. He often found that the most ancient Chinese formulas worked very well and very quickly. The patient price was usually only about five dollars a bottle and there were just about no negative side effects.

This particular formula was fashioned into little pills and had a Western name, but Brother Francis forced himself to think in and use the Chinese name. His hope was that maybe in a few decades he would be able to speak Mandarin with more ease.

The medicine contained *Fo ti*, dried root tuber, *Polygonatum* rhizome, *Licustrum* fruit, *Dong Quai* root, *Polygala* root, Silk tree bark, *Eclipta*, and *Jujube* seed. What’s not to like? After instructing the ailing man to take three pills three times daily on an empty stomach he went to the sink and filled a cup with lukewarm tap water, opened a bottle of the medicine, and handed Mister Wu three pills along with the water.

Once his patient had consumed his medicine, Brother Francis taught him a simple qigong move used to enhance the Water Element, thus dampening the excessive Fire Element burning within this man.

“Visualize the color blue, Mister Wu. Color, like sound, is comprised of various wavelengths, so technically, it moves. Let that color move or vibrate within you and around you. Western physicists are presently calling this concept of vibration ‘string theory’ but the Chinese have known about it for millennia”

This instruction was not lost on the gentle little man. He closed his eyes as he leaned forward raising his hands to the heavens and scooping imagined water from above and letting it

pour down over him as he leaned back. He enveloped himself in a sea of blue color through the gift of his mind. His smile was like the dawning of a day, slow, steady, and eventually quite bright.

“It looks to me as if you are getting some relief,” Brother Francis observed.

“Quite right Brother. I continue to believe that if I were hit by a bus I would want Western medicine, but for most other things I look to the East—and maybe now to Pennsylvania too!”

“You are very kind sir. If you feel up to it, would you like to join me tonight to see David the Illusionist perform?” Just as soon as he said it, Brother Francis remembered that the auditorium where the performance would take place was most probably the ballroom where Mister Wu’s wife had collapsed less than a week earlier.

The Asian man slowed down his qigong movements and said with some courage: “Yes Brother. I think that I must face a few things that may happen there this evening.”

“Wonderful. Please get a little rest now and I’ll meet you in the lobby in about two hours. In the meanwhile I will pray to Jesus for your continued healing, and reverence the Dao as I do so.”

CHAPTER 15

The community celebrated the Office of the Dead for the repose of the soul of Brother Benedict. They began with Vespers, Evening Prayer, the day after he died and continued through with the various liturgical ceremonies of psalms, readings, intercessions, closing prayers,

and blessings that made them up from rising through night the next day. It reminded each monastic that everything in this life is passing and to keep focused on what is really Real.

The following day a Resurrection Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist was celebrated at the local parish church. Technically, monastics do not belong to a parish but monasteries often enjoy a good relationship with a local parish. Such was the case with the Salesian Monastery, and the local pastor was only too happy to allow them to use the parish church since it would accommodate many more than their little monastic Oratory.

Clare, living with the community for several weeks now and considering actually entering the monastery, signed the words of the ceremony from a lectern to the right of the altar. Hearing-impaired but having learned both lip reading and American Sign Language (often referred to simply as ASL), she was fluent in that language and made sure people understood that it is a very real language right next to English, Spanish, Chinese, etc..

Her graceful movements were like dance as she proclaimed the words of the Alleluia verse prior to the Gospel reading: "I am the Resurrection and the Life, says our God. The one who believes in me will not die but will live forever." Even though no one in the congregation was fluent in ASL, they were wrapped in awe and wonder as Clare spoke with her hands. The exact words were not obvious but the spirit of each phrase was clear with a meaning deeper than words.

Brother Matthew thought about the concept of reincarnation. He was a Christian and did not subscribe to the thought that our souls return over and over again in other forms, human or animal, until we collect enough good karma and burn away all bad karma from past negative actions. He felt exhausted just thinking about it. The girl he broke up with to enter the

monastery was now dead and he felt a certain peace believing that she was now with God in the fullness of Life. He believed that he would one day join her and all of his loved ones.

His Abbot had explained to the young monk that he thought that the many dyings and risings we go through during this life were perhaps a Christian version of reincarnation. In order to explain the fact that people report receiving information from past lives, the Abbot subscribed to the famous Swiss analyst's concept of the "collective unconscious."

We can all dip into a collective memory bank. Perhaps some are better at this than others. It was all too much for Brother Matthew. He revered all traditions and knew that we are all trying to make some sense out of things, especially life and death issues. His mind was drawn back to the ceremony by the familiar voice of Sister Jane.

The Prioress, Sister Jane de Chantal, eulogized Brother Benedict while standing in for Abbot Francis who was between engagements in Hawaii. Brother Francis had shepherded Brother Benedict through the many phases of his vocation and now was content to memorialize him in his heart from Hawaii. This was especially appropriate since Brother Benedict was in the habit of periodically asking his Abbot to "get some rest." The nun spoke of Brother Benedict's time in the military before entering monastic life. She spoke of the work of his hands which graced the monastery buildings and grounds in so many ways.

The five foot beeswax paschal candle flickered at the foot of the coffin—the same type of candle blessed each year in the darkness of the Easter Vigil, symbolizing Christ bringing light into the world. It was the same type of candle which burned at Brother Benedict's solemn profession of vows not many years prior. It symbolized the Christ who had accompanied him throughout the various phases of his life and whom he was now seeing in glory.

The church was filled with a mix of people, many from the local area. One silver haired woman proudly whispered to the man next to her: “Brother Benedict and I exchanged many a recipe in the aisles of the supermarket on Friday mornings.” A young man who looked to be chemically tranquilized sat next to a male nurse in whites. The community, in a spirit of reconciliation, had responded positively to the young man’s request to attend the funeral when an administrator from a New Jersey state hospital called them. He had tried to murder their Abbot at one point but they believed that Brother Francis would have allowed this also.

Pastor Kathryn from the local Lutheran church attended the ceremony. She was a good friend of the community and her presence was an example of the ecumenical bond the monastery had with people of all faiths.

Father Ignatius was “state side” from Asia and attended as well. He was not fond of concelebration, of vesting in special garb and standing in the sanctuary with the other clergy. Rather, he sat simply and quietly in the pews with the rest of the People of God.

Flo, a joyful and generous Registered Nurse supported the community by her presence as well. She had accompanied Brother Francis and about a dozen other people to the mysterious land of Tibet and wished to maintain a connection with the community.

Krishna, originally from India but now working as a family practice doctor in the States, flew in for the funeral too. He was disappointed in not being able to see his old friend Brother Francis but was confident that they would meet again before too long. Perhaps they would go back to Asia together again. They had done that several times before. Hopefully the next time would be a more peaceful and less dangerous trip. We live in hope!

Two CIA agents also attended.

After the liturgy, many from the church gathering proceeded to a military cemetery where a gun salute and taps expressed the phase of life that was not so apparent to the people who knew the sixty-something monk in more recent years.

Forensic and Clinical Psychologist Doctor Chantal Fleur and Detective David Gold, her husband, wiped their eyes as Sister Jane prayed the final prayers at the cemetery. Great friends of the community, they had shared many a meal cooked by Brother Benedict at the monastery-- and solved several mysteries with the help of his rather “black and white” thinking. While others were busy spinning all sorts of theories, Brother Benedict stated the obvious, which was often missed. This always brought them back to the facts and to a more focused approach to crime solving.

In the Salesian tradition, in addition to the usual monastic vows of Conversion of Life (which includes Chastity and Poverty), Stability, and Obedience, there is the option of taking a private vow of charity. This can be done with the permission of the Abbot or Abbess or one’s spiritual director. Though gruff in his exterior deportment, Brother Benedict had taken this vow even as a novice.

Lord Jesus Christ, out of love of you and in the embrace of your cross, I vow for life that I will do nothing contrary to brotherly/sisterly charity in thought, word, or deed.

Help me, O Lord, through the Blessed Virgin, your mother. Glory to you, Source of all Being, Eternal Word, and Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

The community drove back from the cemetery in companionable silence, stopping at the Cracker Barrel restaurant for a luncheon treat in the old-fashioned eatery. Dressed in their blue and gray habits, they put up with a few stares from some of the patrons. The habit was worn to remind them, and sometimes others, that there is something more to life than what we can see and touch. Wearing the “right” clothing is the least of life. It’s fine to enjoy such things from time to time, their saintly founders taught, but don’t get hooked on them—even though the founders might not have put in quite those words.

It had been a long illness and the community needed some rejuvenation. They were a resilient lot and were already bouncing back.

CHAPTER 16

Abbot Francis had a few hours prior to the planned magical evening so he decided to visit the local museum. He found the building with ease, a feat which never ceased to surprise him. Brother Francis was pretty good with the inner landscape of people’s lives when they sought his help, but not so with the outer landscape.

His dear friend Father Ignatius often told him that he could not find his way out of a paper bag. As a confirmation of this, the monk had dozens of little maps in his files, often drawn on paper napkins over dinner with his Jesuit friend. Maybe he would need them again if he were to return to a place that he and his friend had visited, so he simply kept them.

He parked the embarrassingly large and new rental car and entered the museum. It was a moderately big two story building not far from the local municipal buildings for the island of Kauai. The light and airy architecture of the establishment immediately contrasted with the feeling the monk experienced as he entered. Large windows dominated just about every space in the building. Each room was filled with sunlight. In his soul, however, the Abbot felt something quite different.

Brother Francis was not comfortable in the place but forced himself to tour the museum anyway. He perused room after room of ancient Hawaiian artifacts. Everything from canoes to kettles was on display. Each display had an explanation of the origin and use for the various utensils, pieces of furniture, and the like. After about an hour he made his way to the gift shop. He wanted to purchase a book of *obake* stories. Since no Hawaiian ghosts had made their presence known in the apartment he stayed in when giving his workshop at Lily and Dominic's retreat house, he thought that he could at least read about them.

The word "*obake*" is often translated simply as "ghost" but it means much more. The word is drawn from the Japanese language and actually suggests the phenomenon of shapeshifting. In this process a being can change into another person, an animal, or even an inanimate object. A sex change is nothing—no hormones or operations needed. These were interesting folktales, nothing more, for Brother Francis. This was a glimpse into Hawaiian and Japanese culture.

He picked up a small plastic bag of Hawaiian seasoning salt as well. It looked like just the thing to perk up some of his vegetarian dishes back home. The red finger-nailed woman at the cash register gave him a strange look when he handed her his purchases.

“You might be questioned at the airport if you pack this in your luggage. That is, if you are returning to the mainland soon.”

The monk was confused. “Yes, I’ll be heading back within the next two weeks. Do you mean that this book on ghosts will draw the attention of airport security?”

She tried to make light of the matter. “No, not the book, the seasoning salt will. You see, it can’t be x-rayed very well and they will probably ask you what’s in your suitcase or make you open it.”

“It’s worth the risk to help my bland cooking.”

She now appeared to get to the real reason for striking up the conversation. “Do you have an interest in *obake*? It’s an unusual topic and a little frightening.”

“I just thought that the book would be a little light reading for me, a form of entertainment. I certainly believe in the supernatural and the hereafter, but I’m not very convinced about shapeshifting. It’s just for fun.”

She smiled uncertainly. “From time to time I am forced to work here in the evening all alone. Bookkeeping, that sort of thing. Sometimes there’s quite a racket.”

“What do you mean by ‘racket?’”

She wasn’t sure that he would believe her but she continued anyway. “I saw your picture over at the open-air mall and know that you will be speaking at our Martin Luther King ecumenical day next week. Thus, I also know that you are a monk. By the way, your photo doesn’t do you justice.”

He couldn’t resist. “You’re just saying that because it’s true.”

She became more at ease and then laughed. “Well, sometimes at night I hear thumps, bangs, drums playing, rattling sounds, pots and pans clanging, and God knows what all. It scares me to no end.”

The monk’s pastoral skills started kicking in. “Why do you stay?”

“I need the job.”

He nodded knowingly.

“Actually, Brother Francis, I think the din emanates from the ancient artifacts that this place is filled with. I’ve learned to turn on the Christian radio station to stop it. A few bars of ‘Amazing Grace’ and things quiet down. I’m not sure if it’s a result of my change in attitude or the radio, but since I learned that, I’ve been fine.”

“I see by your nametag that your name is Marci, may I call you that?”

“By all means.”

“I’d rather call you Marci.”

She relaxed a little more.

“I felt a strange and foreboding feeling as soon as I entered this building today so I can believe your story very easily.”

“Brother, would you walk through the place and give it a mental blessing or something?”

“All that is good comes from God, Marci, not from me, but I would be happy to ask God to bless this establishment and you.”

“Here comes a customer. I’d better wait on her.”

“I’ll zip through the rooms again as I leave and pray a blessing.” He reached over and made a small Sign of the Cross on her forehead with his thumb. “Peace be with you Marci”

Brother Francis returned to the hotel in time to work out in the hotel gym and get in a brief nap and shower. All he needed was about fifteen minutes nap time and typically he was ready to go again. This was probably from years of seeing patients on week nights. After his morning and early afternoon patients, the monk often did some qigong, napped briefly, and did his afternoon meditation prior to gathering with the community for Evening Prayer, Vespers. After dinner he went back to work.

Mister Wu waited nervously in the lobby of the hotel. His face was awash with relief when Brother Francis entered the lobby, which was really not much more than a large open-air pavilion with a registration desk and some shops along two side walls.

“I hope that I didn’t keep you waiting Mister Wu.”

“Not at all, Brother. I’ve been enjoying the evening air. It’s much better for us than air conditioning, as you well know.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Much improved, much improved indeed.”

The doctor monk wasn’t sure if it was the medicine, the qigong, or the fact that the man now had someone to talk with and relate to that made the difference. Probably all three he reasoned, having observed over the thirty plus years of his practice that most illnesses and their resolutions are multi-factorial. He also thought that Mister Wu may have tried to arrange things so that he would have company for the show this evening.

“Can you tell me anything about David the Illusionist? I’ve only read snippets in the newspaper.”

Mister Wu's eyes misted over. "Yes, he and my late wife alternated performances here for the last few years or so. They are, *were*, both big attractions here. My Effie is a Christian and believed that her ability to read the hearts and minds of others is a gift of the Holy Spirit. She takes no money for it during private consultations, and only takes a fee when working with a large audience in a place like a hotel. Even then, the readings she does from the stage are free to all who are in the room."

"And David?"

"He's a bit different. To be quite frank, and because I trust *you* Brother Francis, I must say that I never quite trusted *him*. There's just something about him."

"Sounds like your wife was not the only one with the gift of intuition."

"Perhaps."

The lights in the lobby area flickered off and on several times, which indicated that the entertainment was about to begin.

"Shall we go in Mister Wu? I'm happy to spend this time with you but if you are not comfortable with our plans I am also happy to change them."

"Be it done unto me according to your word."

The monk was confused on a human level by the scriptural reference, but gaining insight on a deeper level. They entered the auditorium not quite sure what would happen next.

CHAPTER 17

This time the lights in the high chandeliers and wall sconces flickered and stayed out. They were in darkness for about thirty seconds then a man's voice pierced the stillness.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to our show. We hope that it will add enjoyment to your evening and to your stay on our island if you are visiting. First we have some local culture in the form of our Hawaiian dance troupe. After that we will be entertained by David the Illusionist. He assures me that we have a very special treat in store from him tonight. And now, on with the show.”

The lights on the stage brightened revealing eight beautiful young women dressed in brilliantly colored Hawaiian sarongs. Their graceful dancing and hand movements told the story of Haoula, the “Dew of Life” place of sanctuary and reconciliation outside of Brother Francis’ room. By the end of their performance everything and everyone was reconciled. Would that it were so in real life.

The small orchestra was made up of men and women in such bright floral attire that the Abbot couldn't help but wonder if they were given free batteries with their outfits. These days they were probably rechargeable. A drum roll sounded along with applause and the hidden announcer proclaimed in a velvet-throated voice: “Mahalo (thank you) lovely ladies. And now, performing for the first time his most recently re-created act, we give you David the Illusionist.”

The audience thundered applause. David was very popular here, as had been Madam Wu. The lanky man in a navy blue tuxedo strode on to the stage with a confident air bordering on defiance. Brother Francis thought so at least, but tried not to rash judge the man.

“Mahalo my friends. It is my pleasure to be with you this evening. I would like to clarify one thing. Our announcer just referred to what I will be doing shortly as an “act.” I will

be transitioning to a more psychic type of program from this point on in my career, thus the things I do will become less and less illusions and more and more spiritual manifestations.”

The audience became a little confused by his verbiage but pretty much ignored it, waiting for his “act” to begin in earnest.

“From now on I will no longer be called “David the Illusionist” but rather “David the Psychic.”

More confusion and a little discomfort.

David moved through a variety of illusions which involved cards, pigeons, rabbits, young ladies, hoops, and fire. He was an accomplished showman and the audience responded with awe and gratitude to his entertaining illusions.

He became even more defiant, cocky, or whatever one might call it. More people were beginning to sense the change in the attitude of the performer whom they had seen year after year for about a decade now.

The Illusionist asked for the lights to be dimmed. There was now just a spotlight on David. A round table with a flickering candle in a hurricane glass was brought out stage right by the two stage hands / technicians who had helped him prepare the lighting and scrim earlier in the day. They added a large Chinese vase overflowing with wild flowers to setting and then departed.

Lying on top of the white table cloth was a silk purple cape. David put it on with a flourish.

Brother Francis thought about Milton Erikson, the famous master of clinical hypnosis. Now deceased, the best clinicians in the world have tried to capture and impart his skills to others. The monk had studied with such people. He remembered that Doctor Erikson had been

color blind and that the only color he could truly see was purple. A voice brought him back from his reverie.

“I am going to attempt to contact the departed. This is where my illusions become reality. Please be very quiet and very still. My inner guide tells me that I may be able to communicate with the late Madam Wu. I am sorry if this is upsetting for anyone in the audience and suggest you leave now if it is.”

About a dozen people left the auditorium. Brother Francis turned to Mister Wu who spoke:

“It’s alright. David is an illusionist. He does not have the gift my wife has. While it is painful to hear her talked about I would rather stay and see what he’s up to.”

The monk patted the older man’s arm in a gesture of support.

The orchestra began to play some nondescript music, mostly on stringed instruments. David faced the center of the stage, extended his open arms to the heavens, and asked that the spirit of Madam Wu manifest herself. There was no supplication or courtesy in his voice, rather, it was commanding.

Nothing happened.

He waved his arms violently. The people in the audience were now becoming extremely uncomfortable. Some people whispered to one another, questioning if the man was having some sort of breakdown.

Then it happened.

A Western woman in her mid-fifties dressed in a lovely sky blue silk dress slowly appeared. She wore a delicate silver chain around her neck with a small cross attached to it.

Members of the audience rubbed their eyes. Were they seeing things? Was this an illusion or was this truly an apparition from beyond the grave? Sacred sites abound on the island, and tales of spirits were very much a part of the local culture. It could be true.

Brother Francis was a scientist. He was particularly good at research design and controlling for extraneous factors which would contaminate outcome data. More simply put, he could ferret out what was really going on. This was especially helpful in reading research studies on natural medicine, the results of which seemed to change weekly. One week butter and vitamin E, for example, were okay and the next week they were not. The monk could sort out the good research from the bad and guided his patients accordingly.

He squinted as he looked at the stage and figured out that there was a scrim at the back of stage and that when it was illuminated in a certain way, whatever was behind it was revealed. In this case it was the lady in blue.

The monk doctor was torn. He wanted to check out Mister Wu's reaction but his eyes were riveted on the *persona* of David the Illusionist. David was clearly confused, perhaps frightened.

The performer stumbled over his words as he explained to the audience that he would now attempt to converse with Madam Wu. He asked the woman her name.

"You know me very well David. I'm Effie Wu, the woman whom you alternated shows with for many years right here on this very stage."

David began to sweat profusely.

"No, no, no you're not. You can't be."

The people in the audience didn't know what to think. Some whispered that the woman was a dead ringer, so to speak, for Madam Wu. Why would he deny that it was Madam Wu's

spirit when he had just tried so hard to convince the several hundred people in the room that he was going to conjure up Madam Wu?

The illusionist walked closer to the back of the stage—toward the scrim. She moved closer to him. He backed away from her with a lurch, knocking over the table with the burning candle on it. He put both palms over his face and moaned from the bottom of his soul: “No, no, no.” Then he ran.

CHAPTER 18

Clare loved to walk. She was moving at a fast pace along Frantz Road and drinking in the brilliant sunshine of the early morning. It was Sunday and, as much as she was growing to love the community she was living with, she also enjoyed having some space from them. It appeared to her that such was the stuff of community life—a coming together and a going apart. Each time that cycle happened there was an individual and communal renewal—something like breathing.

Her arms moved up and down in wide arcs with each step. She was a silver blur with short blond hair. Two chocolate Labrador Retrievers barked and wagged their tails as she passed a familiar home.

Once in a while the battery on the collar of one or the other dog would die and the animal would be free to move beyond the electronic fence which kept them in their yard when there was no such power outage. When that would happen the dog, or dogs, always appeared on the monastery grounds a good half mile away. Maybe they thought it was a Franciscan monastery!

The *other* Francis (of Assisi) was the one who loved the animals. The Francis of the Salesian Monastery (de Sales) was more focused on finding God in the ordinary and the universal call to holiness.

The two men in business suits called to her from behind after she passed them at an intersection. She appeared to ignore them. They tried again: “Miss, Miss. May we speak with you?”

Now they were annoyed. They walked up behind her at a fast pace and called again. Again she did not respond. Just as they were along side of the woman she jumped with a start and screamed. A lady wheeling in her large vinyl trash can looked up in fright.

“What’s going on over there? You leave her alone you hear? Go away now or I’ll call the cops.”

“We’re sorry but we *are* the cops.”

“Prove it.”

The two CIA agents took out their wallets with their identification as they walked toward the older woman. The two dogs a few doors away barked wildly. The woman’s husband came out of the house. “What’s all the ruckus about, Sophie?”

“These two are bothering Clare. They scared her half to death.”

“We didn’t mean to. We only want to speak with her,” the older of the two agents explained as he showed the husband, the wife, and Clare his badge.

The husband remembered. “Oh yeah, she’s the lady who’s living at the monastery these days. Maybe she’ll become a nun.”

“Listen gentlemen. If you want to speak to someone you go to the door, identify yourselves, and then do so. Don’t just appear on the road and expect people to take kindly to you. Did you know that Clare doesn’t hear too well?”

“No ma’am, we didn’t,” the younger one said sheepishly.

By now Clare had her wits about her again. She was following the conversation pretty well and began to speak for herself.

“What do you want with me?”

“We have some questions for you about Leone Striker,” continued the younger person.

She squinted towards his mouth. “Who?” He didn’t have facial hair, a feature which can make it difficult to lip read, but Clare couldn’t quite understand the name the agent was saying.

“Leone Striker,” repeated the older agent.

The married couple and Clare all seemed at a loss.

Older agent: “You mean to say that you don’t know her?”

“I’ve never heard of her. I can’t recall anyone in my life with either that first or last name.”

They didn’t believe her and it showed.

“Come on in for a cup of tea, honey. You guys get out of here and if we see you around again we will press charges. The very idea!”

The two CIA agents walked back to a dark maroon car parked on the side of the road as Clare and the older couple entered the house.

“They were at the monastery recently. I’m sure of it. I don’t know why and didn’t ask because it was none of my business.”

The man of the house spoke up. “Well now it *is* your business Clare. We’ve stopped in to join in the prayers of the community many times, feel like the extended family of the monastery, as many of the neighbors do around here. Ask the Abbot about the matter.”

“He’s away right now but I could speak with the Prioress, Sister Jane de Chantal.”

“Good idea,” added the mistress of the house. “She’s a good egg and I’m sure that she’ll tell you whatever she can.”

They drank their tea in silence for a few moments and munched on lemon poppy seed muffins. “Hope those two so-called cops don’t come back. I understand that poppy seed makes drug tests positive.” They all laughed at Sophie’s joke and began to feel more at ease.

This spontaneous tea party was the sort of thing that attracted Clare to the small and simple Salesian Monastery. There were many large monastic communities to choose from. Most of them were all male or all female and sometimes too large to keep people honest and growing. A small community of both men and women was much like a family, a family with good neighbors.

“Thanks to both of you. I’m sorry to have been a bother.”

“No such thing,” answered Joshua. I have much to be grateful for. Your Brother Francis has been a big help to me. You see, I was getting a little forgetful but panicked because I thought it might be Alzheimer’s disease. I made an appointment with your natural doc and he explained the difference between age-associated memory loss and Alzheimer’s. What a relief! Even though I have less neurons firing in my brain and it sometimes takes longer to recall things, I’m basically fine.”

“I wouldn’t go that far dear.”

“Now Sophie. Anyway, Brother Francis put me on a natural formula called ‘NeuroRelief’ which I take twice daily when I eat my breakfast and supper. The bottle is right here on the table. Let’s see, it contains Carnitine, Glutamine, Ashwagandha, blueberry, *Ginkgo Biloba*, and lots of other good stuff. I guess they’re the things that help our brains work better. All I know is that what the monk called ‘tip of the tongue’ syndrome is happening much less frequently. You know, when you know something but it just won’t come to mind when you want it to.”

Brother Francis also suggested that I take up doing crossword puzzles or some number puzzles called “*Sudoku*.” At first I thought he meant *Karaoke*, you know, when you sing into a microphone and a machine plays music and projects the words for the singer to sing from. Anyway, I understand that *Karaoke* is from Japan and that *Sudoku* was created in America, but later became popular in Japan.”

“Enough already! He really *is* much better now Clare. Now he’s telling *me* to make an appointment!”

Everyone joined together in laughter.

Joshua spoke again. “Not to change the subject, but in part to demonstrate my good memory, I want to let you know that we are sorry for your loss. The Mass of the Resurrection for Brother Benedict was just beautiful.” In the midst of speaking it came to him. “Come to think of it, I believe that those two cops were at the funeral. That sound right to you Sophie?”

“You know Joshua, for once in your life I think you’re right.” She laughed good naturedly. “They were there, or it was two men much like them. They sat in the back and didn’t mix.”

“I’ll speak to Sister Jane. I’d like to keep this as low key as possible. I don’t want to get thrown out of the monastery before I even get in.”

“You mean you’re going to sign on the dotted line dear?” the woman asked.

“I’m leaning in that direction. Entering monastic life is a long process. It’s up to our Good God.”

The older man commented. “They strike me as a healthy lot, I mean in terms of head things. They are down to earth, humorous, and kind. You’d fit right in. Go for it.”

Clare give them each a little hug and continued on with her walk. She was a little shaken and somewhat confused.

“Yes Clare, how can I be of help?” asked the Prioress. They were sitting in the sun room. Clare was on an old wooden rocker that squeaked too much and the Prioress sat on an orange wing back chair that may have been older than Clare. Brother Benedict used to take the rocker apart now and then and re-glue it. Maybe Brother Matthew would carry on the tradition.

The retreatant explained the events of her morning walk. Sister Jane looked very concerned. She unnecessarily tucked her graying hair in at the sides of her blue veil.

“Yes Clare. Those men *were* here. They won’t harm you, and I wish that I could tell you the entire story. I’m going to ask you to trust us just a little bit longer. When Abbot Francis gets back I think the whole thing may be explained to the community. Can you be at peace with that for now?”

“I’ll certainly try to be, Sister. This is really the first unsettling thing that has happened to me here but something was bound to happen. Perhaps it will help me to shake off this

honeymoon feeling I've had and allow me to take a closer look, and to make a more informed decision about entering the community."

"Yes, God uses very ordinary events to speak to us, especially we who try to live the Salesian charism. How's your vocation discernment going Clare, if I may ask?"

"Just fine Sister Jane, and of course you may ask. I'm grateful for your concern. I'm fairly certain that I will request to return, or simply stay on as an Observer."

"You have the freedom of God's daughter, Clare, but that does sound right to me. Abbot Francis gave me permission to accept you as an Observer for a month if you choose to take that step. Shall we talk again next week?"

"Yes Sister. I feel a little more like a real community member already."

The fifty-something woman hugged the thirty-something woman. They parted quietly, each left to her own thoughts, and each desiring something of the solitude the monastic life calls one to, especially on a Sunday.

CHAPTER 19

Two Kauai police officers were stationed at each exit of the hotel auditorium. The door that David the Illusionist, during his frenzy, chose to run out through was an emergency exit. A deafening siren began to wail. People panicked and stampeded out of every available exit. The house lights were turned on in the ballroom revealing a smiling Madam Wu confidently parting two panels in the scrim and walking through it to the front of the hardwood stage on which she had earlier fallen to her death.

The psychic walked over to the upturned table with its flaming tablecloth and picked up the undamaged vase. She pulled out the flowers and poured the water on to the flames, partially extinguishing the fire. As she did so, the sprinkling system kicked in and jets of water squirmed down from the ceiling. She laughed out loud as she ran over to the open arms of her waiting husband.

Brother Francis, often seen as a wisdom figure, was lost for words. Too much was happening. Some of it was sad, some of it happy, and some of it hard to piece together.

David was in handcuffs and being escorted to a waiting police car. A reporter from *The Garden Island* newspaper, who was at the hotel to review David's latest illusion, was busy snapping photos and talking at rapid speed into a hand-held recording device.

Mister Wu introduced his wife to Brother Francis. The monk recognized her but could not remember from where. She smiled knowingly.

"Let's go outside to get out of the rain and I'll tell you where we met, Brother."

They exited through the door that David the Illusionist had earlier escaped into the arms of the waiting police officers through. People stood around in small groups trying to put the puzzle pieces together. They stared at the trio leaving the building. Then someone shouted: "It's Madam Wu. She's truly returned from the grave!"

Some people cheered, others screamed, and several people fainted.

"I fear that we are creating a stir. Perhaps it would be best to talk in our room," the almost always serene woman said.

The gentlemen agreed and they walked in silence along the outside of the auditorium, through the open-air lobby, and into the main part of the hotel. The man behind the reception desk stared open-mouthed.

“This is getting to be a bit much,” Madam Wu mumbled. “Let’s go directly to the room.”

They were in the Wu hotel room in a matter of minutes even though the little trip felt much longer. After they had dried themselves off with bath towels and sat down, the psychic explained things.

“We met at George’s—I mean Brother Benedict’s--Simple Profession of vows some years ago. You received the vows and had lots to do that day so I’m sure it is difficult to remember the several hundred people who crowded into that little country parish church you used for the ceremony.”

“I remember your beautiful eyes,” the monk stated from his reverie. “You and Brother Benedict were going together and eventually released one another so that you could each follow the path you believed God was calling you to, correct?”

“Exactly so, Brother. He had been through enough in his first marriage and probably would have been better off in the monastic life years before we met.

“I had the good pleasure of visiting your little monastery once again very recently.”

“Really Madam Wu? I don’t remember the visit.”

“You weren’t there. You were *here*. It was just a few days ago—while I was dead, so to speak.”

“Did you get to visit with Brother Benedict before he died?”

“Yes Brother, I did. I was praying Vespers, Evening Prayer, for and with him because he was so weak that he could barely pick up his Office book and read the psalms and other prayers making up that service. As I was concluding I knew that he had passed over. I rang the call bell by his bedside and a nurse’s aid came in. She materialized a doctor who pronounced him dead.”

Brother Francis was moved with deep emotion. He had been torn between returning to the mainland for the funeral or staying put to complete his business here on the Island. Beyond that, he had even been torn between going on this trip in the first place or staying with Brother Benedict. In the end he knew that life must go on and that the future was unpredictable—unless you were Madam Wu that is!

Mister Wu sat quietly, grateful that their ordeal was just about over. He got up and poured them each a large glass of sparkling water and then returned to the low lime green chair he had vacated a few minutes before.

“I believe in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, but how did *you* come back to life, if you don’t mind me asking.”

“Not at all, dear Abbot. You see, I was performing here about a week ago. It seems like a lifetime ago. Anyway, during my trance I saw that someone was going to attack me and try to kill me. It overwhelmed me and I fainted.

“After I was carried back here to my room and made comfortable, the police left and my husband went for a brief walk along the beach, for maybe ten minutes or so. It was during that time that my premonition came to pass. Because I fainted prior to seeing my attacker I did not know who it would be. My gifts do what they want. I’m not in charge.

“David the Illusionist tapped on the sliding glass patio door and, still dazed, I let him in thinking he was there to support me in some fashion. He picked up a paperweight and clobbered me with it. I was knocked out but not killed. When my husband returned he revived me and called the police again.”

Mister Wu stifled a moan.

“Now Tian, please don’t continue to blame yourself. We all thought the situation was well in hand when you took your brief walk.”

“I know, I know.”

“We did *not* know David’s motivation for the attack, though I had a theory. We wanted him to confess and hopefully that’s what he is doing right about now. The police had me write a letter to Tian about my premonition that he would supposedly find after my death.

“We banked on David’s ego getting in the way of clear thinking. I was certain he would pull some kind of stunt related to my death. That was a premonition of sorts.

“Did you ever suspect that the police are not really much into premonitions, Brother?”
She gave an impish grin.

“I left the Island and visited the Salesian Monastery in Pennsylvania, returning when David had designed his greatest illusion—resurrecting me from the grave.

“The woman who was to play me in the scene was told about our little scam just before show time. I took her place behind the scrim. When David realized that it was really me he simply had a meltdown.”

“The police will probably book him for attempted murder,” Brother Francis added.
“Pride cometh before the fall, as the Bible says.”

Mister Wu mentioned that they still had no clear picture of David’s motivation for attempting to kill Madam Wu.

“In all my years practicing clinical psychology,” the monk responded, “most crimes of passion, and just plain stupid thinking and stupid choices, are related to the ego somehow.”

“Please tell us more,” Mister Wu asked.

“When we are overly concerned about what others think of us, it draws *qi*—vitality—away from the issue at hand. That could be a decision about a job, a marriage, purchasing some article, just about anything. Our judgment gets clouded and we make choices based more on how we will look in the eyes of others rather than on the practicality of the actual choice.”

“I’ve seen it often, Brother. Please continue,” Madam Wu prompted.

“Sometimes the ego manifests itself in the form of jealousy or insecurity. We can actually begin to hate others because they have something we don’t have. It could be a material thing such as a super duper car, but more likely than not the hatred can be provoked by a boyfriend or girlfriend someone wants and another person has, so to speak.

“We all struggle with the ego to some extent but when it gets out of control, a person may even murder someone.”

Brother Francis made that statement before he realized just how relevant it was. The three people sat in stunned silence for a few moments. A quiet little drip from the bathroom sink seemed to tick away the seconds hypnotically as each person pondered the situation.

“My prayer is that David confesses that he tried to kill me. Then he may be able to get the help he needs. If he doesn’t confess, it’s simply his word against mine.” Madam Wu looked a little worried.

The ringing of the telephone startled the trio. Mister Wu answered and returned to his companions with a sad look on his face.

“That was the police station. They said that David denies attempting to murder you. They are holding him on inciting a riot because he created a panic tonight in the auditorium. He will probably be out by morning. They wanted us to know for our protection.”

Brother Francis promised to support the Wu's in any way possible, said a little prayer for peace with them, and returned to his room.

CHAPTER 20

Sister Scholastica loved to hike in the Delaware Water Gap, even in the dead of winter. Some of the other community members did as well. In place of her blue and gray habit and navy blue veil, the nun was wearing jeans and an orange down parka. The relatively mild winter left the trails almost free of ice. The day was crisp--bright and sunny.

Her sisters and brothers in community did not like her to hike alone but she assured them that she was well equipped to take care of herself. Somewhere along the line the nun had taken some martial arts training. No one could quite pin down where and when that had been. She had one of the community cell phones attached to her belt, right next to a small canister of pepper spray.

The Salesian nun lingered on an old wooden bridge, gazing up at a small waterfall which fed the stream rushing just beneath her under the bridge. The roar of the falls was soothing, washing away recent stresses. She prayed to Our Lady of Good Deliverance, a French title for the Blessed Mother Mary. It was through the intercession of Our Lady of Good Deliverance that Saint Francis de Sales was healed of a physical and emotional illness that could have ended in death.

He was a young student in Paris at the time and got caught up in the theological debate about predestination which was in vogue during that era. Was he already destined for heaven or

hell from birth? His love of God far outweighed any fear of hell but he longed to be with the God whom he loved when he would die. Wandering into a church, the feverish, emaciated, and confused young man prayed before a statue of Our Lady of Good Deliverance and indeed was delivered.

In a blinding moment of insight he understood that he didn't know about such things as predestination and that all he had was "right now" to love God and that is what he was going to do. Thus, life in the present moment became a cornerstone of Salesian spirituality. That same "present moment" philosophy continues to be a link between Christianity and most Asian spiritualities.

Sister Scholastica took solace in the fact that both of the founders of her Salesian spiritual family, Saint Jane de Chantal and Saint Francis de Sales, went through at least one major crisis. She could get through this one too.

The roar of the falls had deafened her to the approach of two men. One silent male stood on either side of her now. She became aware of them with a jolt.

"Hello Leone. How are things in the monastery?"

Anger and relief washed over her with a force stronger than any waterfall.

"Hello Calvin. What brings you to my neck of the woods?"

"John, I'd like you to meet the illusive Leone Striker, or Sister Scholastica, as she is now known in monastic life."

"Hello Sister. It's nice to meet you. I'm sorry if we gave you a start."

"That's okay Agent. Calvin has a way of doing that to me. It's been going on for years but I thought that it had stopped. Guess I was wrong"

“Leone was one of our very best agents, John. She could sort of shape shift, if you know what I mean. One moment she was a demure administrative assistant and the next she was giving someone a *karate* chop. She’s been just about everywhere in the world but chose to lock herself away in a little monastery for who knows what reason.”

The trio walked to the other side of the bridge and sat on a solid old bench fashioned out of slices of timber from the forest. The falls were further away now. The roar was quieter but their beauty remained.

“What will it take for the CIA to leave me in peace?”

“Two things. The first is to convince me that you made a healthy choice by entering monastic life, and the second is to find someone to replace you that has at least half the skills you have. I question everything about the ridiculous choice you made.”

John was in awe. His boss was talking to the nun in a way that indicated Sister Scholastica had really been an exceptional agent. He’d never seen his boss do that before and probably never would again.

“The very nature of monastic life is to focus on things that are not seen, on values that transcend this life, that move beyond the ego, that make the monastic herself, along with others, question things. If we fit in as well as anyone else and don’t evoke questions we are probably not very good monastics.”

“Did you learn that as a novice?” Calvin questioned mockingly.

“I learned *theory* as a novice. I came to understand deeper realities by living the life. At first I suppose my motives were mixed. I entered partially to get away from all the death, deception, and destruction that my life seemed to attract. True, much of what I did made the world a little better. I give God the credit for that.

“As time went by my motives purified. Under the more superficial motivation for monastic life was, I now see, a true vocation to the vowed life.”

“They let you enter under those conditions?” John questioned.

“Yes John. You see, the Abbot and the Director of Novices are very wise people. They have years of experience in dealing with new vocations to the monastery. They probably saw more in me than I was able to see in myself.

“Also, there is a saying in monastic life that if the life is not right for a postulant, a newcomer, that the cell will cast him or her out.”

“The *cell*?” John responded.

“We call our sleeping quarters a ‘cell.’ They are small and simple rooms. I know that it makes a monastery sound like a prison but I assure you that it is harder to get *into* a monastery than to get out of one.

“Calvin, do you remember me telling you that I almost entered the convent when I graduated from high school but that my father asked me to go to college first?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I was not cut out to be a teaching or nursing Sister so that would have been a mistake. Instead I finished college with a degree in international relations. I did an internship in a government facility and one thing led to another and before I knew it my life was being run by adrenalin and the government. It was wonderful and exciting but my true call was monastic life.

“Becoming a nun is different from being a Sister in a more directly apostolic community. Sisters are a gift to the world and are usually integrated into it by their work to some degree. Nuns are more cloistered, spend more time in silence, and their day is lived around the rhythm of the Liturgy of the Hours, the Divine Office, which punctuates their days with prayer.”

“This conversation is nothing like what I thought it would be,” the sometimes naïve John stated. “Let me risk my boss’s ire and say that it seems pretty clear that Sister Scholastica has a genuine vocation to monastic life. My great-uncle was a monk so I am immensely qualified to say that.” He laughed warmly. “There’s something more here though. Here goes nothing. Calvin, were you in love with Leone?”

“What kind of a question is that?” Calvin stopped abruptly and went quiet. “Guilty.”

“It’s time to let it go Calvin. We’ve got other work to do and you’ve got to get on with your life. Besides, you’re married to the CIA.”

Calvin threw up his arms in frustration and yelled: “I surrender.”

“But listen Leone. You passed the first test; your vocation is probably genuine. You still need to provide the Agency with a replacement. That’s my second requirement, remember?”

“I do and I’ll try. Jesus never gives us more than we can handle even though it feels like it many times. Give me a little time, okay?”

“Okay my old friend. Abbot Francis will be back next week. You have until then.”

Calvin held no jurisdiction over the nun and all three knew it. It was more about processing old wounds. She prayed that his wounds might be glorified the way Jesus’ wounds were after the resurrection.

CHAPTER 21

Brother Francis awoke with a start. The ringing of the phone was confused in his head for the sound of the bell calling the community to the Office of Vigils at the monastery. When

he realized that he was in Hawaii he picked up the phone wondering what bad news might come through the wire to him.

It was the local police. “Doctor O’Neil, this is Captain Kamiana. We see from the newspaper that you are a clinical psychologist visiting from the mainland.”

That newspaper article again. It’s a blessing and a curse. “That’s correct Captain; can you tell me why you are calling?”

“Certainly. Do you do any forensic psychology work Doctor?”

Typical sleuth. Never answer a question directly but turn it back on the other person and try to ferret out more information. “I do from time to time. Once in a while I wind up in court testifying as to the mental status of someone. There are also times when I am deposed— someone comes to my office and videos my testimony. I swear to the statement and then don’t have to sit in a court waiting my turn, a wait which can last for days sometimes.”

“Yes Doctor. We have a situation here. A man known professionally as ‘David the Illusionist’ is in our jail. He will be released this morning unless we can find an honest way to charge him with the attempted murder of Madam Wu. I believe that you are very familiar with the case.”

“That’s right Captain. I spent most of the evening with Effie and Tian Wu. I can appreciate that she might be in some danger if David was to be set free, but I don’t understand how I can help.”

“We would like you to interview him for us. Perhaps your background as a monk and clinical psychologist will soften him up to the point of confessing. I believe professional help would be more beneficial to him than prison but that’s up to the courts. There is a police cruiser *en route* to your hotel as we speak and the officer will drive you to the station.”

This man is used to getting his own way. I suppose you have to be manipulative in his profession. My two brothers were police officers so in their honor I'll say yes to his request.

“I really don't think that I can be of much help Captain, but I'll meet the officer in the lobby in about twenty-five minutes.” Brother Francis' keen sense of time knew that it would take about that long to get himself together before doing his work of mercy, visiting the prisoner.

In place of celebrating the Office of Vigils the monk was whisked off to the local police station, less than fifteen minutes from the hotel.

Captain Kamiana shook his hand as the men met. The Captain was nut brown, with a thick head of black hair edged with a hint of silver. He had a slight Asian cast to his brown eyes. His smile was brilliant but it conveyed a message: “I'm nice but I'm in charge. If I'm not in charge I'm not nice.”

David was seated in an interrogation room behind a two-way mirror. A microphone in the room allowed the observers in an adjacent room to listen as well as view whatever took place.

Brother Francis entered the interrogation room. “Hello David, I'm Brother Francis even though I don't look much like a monk in this orange tee shirt and sandalwood colored qigong pants. These were the handiest things to put on when I was called to come here to visit you.”

“You were at my performance last evening. You sat in the front row right next to Tian Wu. What do you want with me?”

“I would like to see if you need any help and then find a way to get that for you. If you've broken any laws I'd rather see you get some treatment rather than simply go to prison.”

David became agitated. “What laws would I have broken?”

“Madam Wu believes that you tried to kill her. Is that so?”

“Not at all. Why would I do that?”

“I’m not sure David, but sometimes under stress we do all sorts of things. Even though we regret them later we still need to deal with the consequences of our behavior. Our culture today is very much focused on blaming others for our problems. Spill hot coffee on yourself at a fast food restaurant and sue the restaurant, that sort of thing.”

“Madam Wu didn’t spill any coffee on me.”

“Probably not, but perhaps you were jealous of her for some reason.”

Zing. Brother Francis could feel that he had struck a nerve.

Anger. Wariness. “Jealous of what?”

This is just a little hypothesis. You’ve spent your life creating illusions, and you are excellent at it.”

“Thank you for that.”

“Madam Wu believes that she has a gift from the Holy Spirit to read the hearts, and sometimes the minds, of others. She does not present this as an illusion, but as a reality.”

Intense anger radiated from the Illusionist. Brother Francis could smell the stress hormones in the sweat of the lanky tired man in front of him in the small room. The florescent lights above them hummed as they emitted harsh cold light.

“Perhaps your jealousy got the best of you and you wanted to get rid of Madam Wu so that you could be number one, so to speak. You did mention in your show last evening that you were now transitioning from illusion to the use of spiritual gifts.”

David raised his six foot five inch frame off of the turquoise plastic chair he was sitting on, grabbed the back of it and raised it into the air as if to clobber the monk with it. The two officers in the viewing room barged into the interrogation room.

Brother Francis motioned to them to stand back by the door through which they had just entered. David stood, chair upraised, like a statue.

“So before God, David, you are saying that you did not attempt to murder Madam Wu.”

David looked confused. He lowered the chair ever so slowly. “No, I can’t say *that*. My parents taught me never to use the name of God in vain in any way. I could never swear *before God* that I didn’t attempt to murder Madam Wu.”

He whispered: “The fact is that I *was* jealous and tried to kill her.”

“Thank you David. Now we can help you.”

A confession was typed up. All the starch had gone out of David by that time so he silently signed it and it was witnessed.

“What made you ask him to swear *before God*, Doctor O’Neil?” asked the Captain while personally driving Brother Francis back to the hotel. “That’s what triggered the confession and closed the case.”

“Do you remember several incidents of people finding hypodermic syringes in Coke cans while drinking their soda? This was about twelve years ago on the mainland--Pennsylvania and New Jersey.”

“Sounds vaguely familiar.”

“Well, I knew the forensic psychologist called in on the case. The first incident triggered several other such incidents. The young man who first claimed he found a syringe in the can had been interrogated many times and always denied that he put the syringe in the Coke can himself.

“When the Doctor of Psychology interviewed him, he was getting the same response. On the way out the door and without much thought, he asked the man if he would swear before God that he had not created the situation himself.

“The perpetrator responded much like David. He said that he was raised never to swear by God in vain. He confessed and the copy cat crimes stopped too. I guess the syringe in the Coke can was a way to get money or attention. In any case, I just tried the same thing. Not all of my education comes from books; a lot of it is from clinical work over the years. Sometimes it’s just plain luck.”

CHAPTER 22

The Prioress held Chapter, a meeting of the community. In accord with custom, a chapter from the *Rule of the Salesian Monastic Community* was read at the beginning of the gathering. It was Brother Mathew’s turn to read.

Chapter III *Evangelical Counsels (Vows)*

The Vow of Charity

Statue 92: Our Salesian heritage provides us with the opportunity of taking a private vow of charity with the consent of the Abbot/Abbess and one’s spiritual director. This vow is never binding under serious sin, and the formula is as follows:

Lord Jesus Christ, out of love of you and in the embrace of your cross, I vow (for a week, for a month, or longer) that I will do nothing contrary to brotherly/sisterly charity in thought, word, or deed.

Help me, O Lord, through the Blessed Virgin, your mother. Glory to you, Source of all Being, Eternal Word, and Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

Everyone spent a few moments in prayerful silence, pondering the depths of the reading. The Rule of a monastery is a very sacred thing to the members of the community. Through it in large part, the will of God is manifested to the nuns and monks. It was struggle enough for them to understand what God might be asking of them at a given time. Having the Rule eliminated much of that, especially on a day to day basis of living what in some ways was a rather ordinary life.

When the bell rings, it's the will of God to stop what one is doing and head to the Oratory for the Liturgy of the Hours. During recreation time, one is expected to recreate, and so goes the day, the month, and year—and the years. Salesian spirituality is eminently practical. If necessity or charity dictates otherwise, the monastic is dispensed from the usual response to the bell and finds the will of God in the emergency or charitable deed.

The Rule was to be a help along the way, not a burden. Now it called them to this Chapter meeting. God's will came through the Prioress in this instance, who convoked the gathering.

“My sisters and brothers, you may have seen two unknown men on our property in recent weeks. You may even have been questioned by them. Sister Scholastica, known in the world as Agent Leone Striker, would like to share some things with you from her past which may help you to understand recent events.”

Sister Scholastica had shed her usual reserved *persona* and was now all business, like in her old days perhaps.

“Dear friends” she began. “You are all truly my dear friends as well as my sisters and brothers in monastic life. My vocation here has been one filled with great joy and much peace. There was, however, a *missing* piece in a sense. I have been very quiet about my background in the world. Certainly our Abbot knows all about it, and to some degree Sister Jane, but the rest of you know nothing.

“You may remember that in the Chapter we held prior to Abbot Francis’ going to Hawaii I started running on about various aspects of Hawaiian life. I spoke about the Garden Island of Kauai and about Mother Marianne and Father Damian’s great work with lepers there. All of a sudden I caught myself saying too much and stopped talking.”

Brother Matthew smiled and nodded silently. Clare looked at the nun quizzically. She was starting to wonder about the appropriateness of joining the community. Secrets were manifesting themselves and Clare did not like secrets. Perhaps some of her sensitivity was a byproduct of being hearing-impaired.

When people laugh or react in other ways, hearing-impaired people do not always know why. They can wonder if the joke is about them. Fully-hearing people can do the same, but the hearing-impaired are more at risk for this.

Silvery clouds floated in the bright blue winter sky. The window in the great room where they sat looked out on to the Pocono Mountains, now a mix of huge green pine trees and rugged brown branches.

“I stopped talking because I was about to ‘blow my cover’ as we used to say in the Central Intelligence Agency where I worked for about ten years. It was for that reason that I studied martial arts—to protect myself. I didn’t want to use the gun I carried if I could help it.

“Perhaps it is a gift of God, but I’m rather good at blending in and even assuming various *personae* as needed. Sometimes my cases would take me to or through Hawaii, but I often found myself in Asia as well, not much in Europe. I would be a little old lady, royalty, a nun, I even pretended to be mute once or twice.”

Clare was not sure what she thought of that just yet.

“Throughout most of my life I was drawn to Religious Life. Over time my vocation clarified itself and I realized that it was *monastic* life that I sought. I struggled to be released from the CIA, both internally and with my superiors. As an aside, let me tell you that they are not nearly as easy to get along with as monastic superiors.”

Sister Jane de Chantal laughed out loud.

“The CIA wants me back, and so does my former boss. He has mixed motives. He’s probably in love with me. He and his associate are the two men who have appeared here from time to time recently and who questioned Clare on the road yesterday.”

Part of this information was lost on some of the members. Others knew something about the event. Even monasteries have grape vines—hopefully charitable ones.

“I think that I convinced my former boss, Calvin, that I truly belong here and that I’m not simply running away from responsibilities or shapeshifting, as he calls my ability to perform

various roles when I investigate things. Now he wants me to come up with a replacement. If I find someone who will work for the CIA and who has some sort of skills or gifts in that direction, he may let go of this semi-obsession he has about me.”

“Where would people like us come in contact with the sort of person you describe,” asked Clare.

“We usually don’t Clare. By the way, I would like to apologize publically to you for what you had to go through on what was supposed to be a peaceful walk yesterday. In the old days monastics used to kiss the ground before apologizing. Would you like me to resurrect that old custom?”

Clare looked alarmed. “Please don’t Sister. Everything is fine, believe me.”

“Thank you my sister in the Lord.”

“There you have it, my dear ones. I’m your sister and there are no more secrets. Please forgive me one and all. I needed to handle this in my own fashion and thanks to your charity I have. I’m free.”

The community burst into spontaneous applause. With that the Chapter ended and the members walked in reflective silence to the Oratory to chant Compline, the night prayer of the Church.

CHAPTER 23

It was time for the ecumenical Martin Luther King Day celebration. Representatives from various religions and philosophies were going to offer a talk, sing, or in some other way try

to strengthen the bonds among all peoples. The Hawaiians had their own pain to deal with. They were a part of the United States but had a beautiful history apart from and before that union occurred.

Brother Francis dealt with a little pain himself. One of the reasons he was asked to present at the MLK day was because the organizers had a difficult time finding a Catholic representative who was available. It had nothing to do with the theme of the day, just business and perhaps a lack of fire about the ecumenical movement.

Brother Francis, on the other hand, had lots of fire about mutual respect and harmony among religions. He actually belonged to Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, a world-wide association of Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian monastics and lay folks. The association was in good standing with the Vatican and the members did not try to convert one another, but rather they tried to help one another go more deeply into their own traditions.

The day was glorious. Lily and Dominic picked up their old friend outside the hotel. It was only a few days prior that a police car picked up the monk. Things were looking up!

A large outdoor mall was bedecked with flowers. Colorful and aromatic blossoms were tied to every pole that supported the roof and flowers graced every folding table. The aroma from the food being prepared for the lunch which would follow the talks blended with the perfume, creating a heady mix.

Hundreds of people of every hue seated themselves at the tables as the master of ceremonies, a disk jockey from the local radio station, invited them to pay attention. The red light on each of the three TV cameras mounted on platforms throughout the crowd started to glow.

A Kahuna, Hawaiian elder, was introduced and invoked a blessing on the day. A Baptist choir filled the air with a joyful noise unto the Lord, a group of Buddhists chanted for world peace, a Jewish woman explained some of the mysteries of her tradition, and Dominic and Lilly led the group in some simple qigong movements.

Brother Francis was called to the stage and a succulent *lai* of orchids was slipped over his head by the Kahuna. He bowed and whispered, “*Mahalo,*” thank you.

The ecumenical Abbot spoke about the need to put a face on our diversity. If we know people of various faiths, colors, traditions, then we will think of them as *people*, not as a group. Our brain, he continued to explain, creates mental shortcuts in order to chunk and code information in an efficient fashion. The down side of that efficiency is that if one is not mindful, everyone in a group can be painted with the same brush.

The monk’s doctoral dissertation research in psychology was on prejudice and religious values. He was horrified at such a mix even as a teenager. He avoided the dry and technical data in his talk but rather focused on the outcome of his years of research.

Extreme letter of the law people tend to be the most prejudiced, and the reverse held true for spirit of the law people. It was not a denominational issue. This same pattern emerged in every religion studied. If we communicate and get to know one another, less prejudice is likely to result. Also, if we remain mindful, in the moment, our awareness of the *person* we are with, not the group, becomes central.

The crowd applauded. He had touched a relevant chord in a practical way.

The ceremonies concluded with a reading of a portion of the Rev. Doctor Martin Luther King’s famous “I’ve been to the Mountaintop” speech delivered in 1968. A twelve year old girl

had selected the passage because she thought it caught the meaning of the day. She was also asked to read it. Her voice boomed through the speakers. She had conviction.

Now, what does all of this mean in this great period of history? It means that we've got to stay together. We've got to stay together and maintain unity. You know, whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt, he had a favorite, favorite formula for doing it. What was that? He kept the slaves fighting among themselves. But whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh's court, and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together, that's the beginning of getting out of slavery. Now let us maintain unity.

The Abbot had always believed that the central message of the Gospel has to do with inner freedom. Doctor King had summed it up beautifully—and died for it. Such was the case with others Brother Francis had researched, those who were most free of prejudice were often too much for us to take—Gandhi and Jesus are two more who represent many in that group.

A communal meal is the height of sharing both in the scriptures and in most cultures. The food was delicious but the conversation was even more nourishing.

Brother Francis reflected back on his life choices, some of which were difficult or could be misunderstood. *What an honor to be here.*

CHAPTER 24

He was up before the sun, celebrated the Office of Vigils, meditated, and spent an hour in the hotel health club on the treadmill. Breakfast was always his favorite meal and the breakfast buffet supplied plenty of everything. The monk made sure to eat lots of protein in preparation for his journey. The cheese omelet melted in his mouth—which had been watering while he watched the chef prepare one just for him.

A cranberry muffin topped with honey helped the natural medicine doc rationalize that he was eating health food. The rationalization broke down completely when he overdosed on a lemon Danish and coffee. He rarely drank coffee, preferring green tea for both health and taste reasons. Coffee tasted just right with pastry every now and then. This was a “now.” There would probably be a “then” between here and the monastery. Airports made him hungry. He hoped that it was not the subliminal seduction of advertising, but maybe it was.

A shower and a nap topped off the morning. He checked out and drove the short ride to the airport, turned in the rental car, and went through security. The monk got busted for having an apple in his backpack. He ate it and tried again.

This time he was questioned about the Hawaiian seasoning salt he had purchased in the museum shop. The woman in the shop had been correct. She said he would be and he was. Fortunately after he told them that he had seasoning salt in his luggage they permitted him to move on and into the airport.

The three flights back to the monastery blurred into one. Brother Francis’ brain had started preparing him for re-entry. Thoughts of their potential new postulant came to mind. He so admired Clare’s powerful intuition, probably a byproduct of her hearing challenge. When he

saw her use her sign language, which was rare, his mind would drift back to graduate school at Catholic University of America, where some of his graduate training had taken place.

Gallaudet University was not far from CUA, both institutions providing quality education for many years in the District of Columbia. CUA had one of the oldest psychology departments in the country; Gallaudet specialized in education for hearing-impaired students. The monk visualized the many classes he attended in which Gallaudet students and companions would sign the words of the professor to one another.

He also remembered the many Friday evening charismatic prayer meetings held at CUA. About five hundred people would fill a campus auditorium and praise God for several hours. Gallaudet students would sign the words of the lively guitar-accompanied hymns as people sang.

Yes, Clare might well fit in with the monastery. Yet he had an intuition that she was presently feeling unsettled about things. Some of that is natural, but something else seems to have happened. He would soon find out.

Brother Francis traded in the crunch of sand under his feet for the crunch of snow under his boots. He had returned to his monastery of profession in Pennsylvania.

CHAPTER 25

After lying low for a few days and shaking his jet lag, the Abbot rang a bell at the dinner table and joyfully shouted “*Benedicamus Domino*,” to which the community responded “*Deo Gratias*.” This monastic ritual meant that the community could speak at dinner rather than listen to someone read from a book or listen to a CD lecture as they ate.

The conversation was animated and the food nourishing and plentiful. They had lots to be grateful for. They were all back together again and Brother Francis had mentioned that he had some good news to share.

The good news really came from Clare. At Brother Francis' invitation, she told the community that she had requested permission to make an official one-month Observership in possible preparation for entering the community as a postulant. Everyone applauded and the community members closest to her at the table gave her hugs. Clare shed a few tears. She had come through a confusing time but was now stronger and more realistic about life at the Salesian Monastery.

"It is so fitting that Clare consider a Salesian community. Francis de Sales, you remember, is the patron saint of the hearing-impaired." Somehow Clare had missed that piece of information and the shock made her weep all the more.

"How did that come about Brother Francis?" she queried.

"Francis de Sales befriended a young man who was hearing-impaired and gave him a job taking care of the residence Francis lived in. Our co-founder created a sign language so that he could communicate with the young man. It's that simple."

Brother Matthew covered a laugh with a cough.

"What?" Clare asked.

The young monk looked at his Abbot, who was also laughing. "Did you ever see those comic book type publications they print on the saints? There's one on Mother Theresa I think. Well, there's one on Saint Francis de Sales too."

"I think so," Clare responded with a mix of mirth and wariness.

“Well, the one on Saint Francis de Sales has a word omitted under the drawing of Francis and the hearing-challenged young man. It is supposed to read something like: ‘And Saint Francis took the young man in to his home and gave him a permanent job.’ Instead it read: ‘And Saint Francis took the young man into his home and gave him a permanent.’ So, quite naturally, I decided that our dear Saint Francis de Sales, Doctor of the Church, is also the patron saint of hair dressers!”

The community enjoyed their brother’s offbeat humor.

“Such a simple act as that is all it takes to make a difference,” Clare responded. Her own future ministry might well lie in ministry to the hearing-challenged, but that possibility was indeed a long way off. “Maybe I’ll take up hair dressing as a ministry. The Rule encourages us to use whatever gifts we have for the good of others.”

More laughter.

The Abbot next directed his words to one of the professed nuns. “Please don’t give me a *karate* chop or anything in response, Sister Scholastica, but I have a message for you.”

“Wow, for me? I hope it’s not from another ghost from my past,” she said laughingly. The community had lost that little bit of caution they once had around her since she revealed the story of her past work with the CIA, or at least some of it. They joined in with her laughter.

“Only indirectly, Sister. I understand that you had a visit from Madam Wu in my absence. Even though you met only once, at Brother Benedict’s simple profession, Madam Wu was very impressed with you. She had an intuition that you would somehow play an important role in influencing the course of her life at some point in time.”

“She implied as much when we had our brief meeting the day after Brother Benedict died, but for the life of me I can’t see how. Folks like you, Madam Wu, and Clare are the intuitives; I’m pretty much a logical black and white thinker.”

“We need both kinds of thinking to keep us balanced,” Sister Jane de Chantal interjected.

“The message from Madam Wu is that she says yes.”

Sister Scholastica was confused. “Yes to what?”

“Why, to whatever you are going to ask her to do.”

Sister Scholastica gasped. “It only came to me this afternoon--that I might ask her to meet with my old boss Calvin and possibly work for the CIA. Her intuitive gifts and sharp mind would be a Godsend to them. How could she know the question before I even formulated it in my own mind? You’ve not been in touch with her since leaving Hawaii have you Abbot?”

“Not even by phone,” he responded mysteriously. “But I think we will probably be seeing more of her down the road.”

It was time to do the dishes and celebrate Night Prayer, Compline. A peaceful rhythm had once again been restored and everyone was grateful. Here’s hoping it lasts, at least for a little while.

Anoai kou ala hele!

(May your way be blessed!)