

III.

Throughout my third year of high school I learned to control my rage. I talked to and confessed with Father Wilson often. I prayed about it with a fierce devotion, beseeching my Lord to help me squelch it for good, that fiery struggle of mine.

I saw an anger management counselor as well, in addition to a therapist. I humored the therapist, much preferring Father Wilson's conciliatory nature, wrapped charitably and safe in the blanket of the Holy Sacrament of Penance.

In my spare time and when my parents had weekends free and could afford it, I traveled to monasteries to visit. Father Wilson would make a phone call or send out an introductory letter for me first, then after hearing back from an Abbott and talking to them about my calling towards the monastic vocation (I am unsure whether he ever told them about what he considered to be my gift) would recommend I go for a visit. My parents and I would load up in the car and go and stay at whatever guest house for lay people the monks had on their campuses. It was an educational and enjoyable time for me, getting into the element and seeing what it was like on the inside, life at a monastery, getting a feel for if I thought I could truly fit at one.

First, we travelled to a Cistercian monastery, St. Bernard's in Western Ohio. At this particular establishment I stayed in a guesthouse for men with my father, while my mom staid in another house for visiting women at the far end of the campus. We attended mass early in the morning each of the three days we were there. The campus was large and out in the vast, rolling Ohio prairie. It was late Fall when we visited, and the grass was becoming more yellow by the day as old man Winter came knocking.

The second day we were there I helped with chores around the campus after mass, sweeping in the kitchen, pulling weeds up in the campus garden alongside quiet monks. After that I had an arranged meeting with a monk. With each weed I pulled I envisioned a sin I was plucking out of the garden of my soul. I whispered a prayer each time I uprooted a weed, asking God to purify, strengthen, and prepare me for this meeting, about which I was admittedly rather nervous. I had never been in the same room alone with a monk for a serious conversation. Would he like me? Was I good enough?

I met him at 1 o'clock in the monastery library, a small, kitchen-sized room of the house that sat in the center of campus that had been converted into wall-to-tall bookshelves loaded with books on theological topics, treatises of the Apostolic and Early Church Fathers, and various books on Church dogma.

It was my kind of room, and I looked at the spines of the books and took in as many titles as I could. Some of them I had read, many of them had not. Nerding out, I did my best to commit some of the unfamiliar titles to memory so that I might purchase my own copy or check it out from the local library or otherwise get my hands on them from interlibrary loan at the local college and read them. I had become quite enthralled with the books, and even my dad gazed about, his mouth ajar in awe, that I did not notice the monk I was meant to meet had entered the room and was now seated at its very center.

"Ahem."

I whirled around. There he sat, in a short, brown wicker chair, both feet planted firmly, with perfect, stiff, upright posture, his hands folded neatly in his lap. He had smooth, pale skin and short-cropped gray hair. His chiseled facial features made him appear akin to Caesar, or perhaps a bust of Emperor Constantine. He had deep-set, dark brown eyes, so dark the irises nearly looked black. Clad in his white robe, the habit of the Cistercians, he looked vaguely angelic, as if the only piece completing the ensemble were a pair of feathered wings.

“Andrew, is it?” he asked in a high, cold tone.

I nodded. He beckoned at the other wooden and wicker chair sitting vacant opposite him.

I felt ripples of anxiety flowing through me in waves as I approached this figure in the middle of this book-filled space. Sitting there, staring at me with what felt like a soul-piercing stare, he was a tad intimidating.

Walking across the book-filled room I sat down and faced him. He nodded at my father, who exited the room, looking back a couple of times as he went. The door shut and it was just me and the monk.

I sat before him and asked him questions I had prepared. I asked him all about what becoming a monk, being a monk, the prayerful, contemplative life, and what living in this monastery were like.

He answered my inquiries with mostly one-word answers, simple and curt.

Monks are not the loquacious type to begin with, forsaking idle talk in favor of thinking and praying about life’s mysteries and deeper things. However, this man used words even more sparingly than I had expected or experienced since my family and I had arrived here.

Speaking more to him, I eventually learned his name was Jude.

Brother Jude answered most of my queries with a simple “yes” or “no,” and commented with the occasional “ah,” especially when I told him about works I had read.

He continued in this pattern of answering my questions until finally I inquired about St. Anselm’s ontological argument for the existence of God in his famous *Cur Deus Homo?* When I mentioned this work, the monk appeared to visibly grimace for a moment.

“Have you read it, *Cur Deus Homo?*” I asked the statuesque monk.

“I have.” He said, lips curling slightly in the corners of his mouth now. Was it a smile? “Long ago.”

The rest of our conversation (if you could call it that) went forward in a similar fashion as before. We wrapped up in a matter of mere minutes, which I found a bit disturbing, but not before he leaned forward finally in his chair, looked at me in the eye and said,

“I want to be very clear about something, young man. Being a monk is *not* easy. Think long and hard about it before you commit to anything. Be sure you want to do it. Because going and doing it and then stopping would be a grave, grave sin.”

These words froze my blood. I was completely taken aback and did not know what to say. Speechless, I sat back in my chair.

Brother Jude rose swiftly then, crossed the room, opened the library door, and left, leaving me alone and the door to the space hanging ajar. As he walked, before he disappeared out of the room and around the corner, I noticed a slight shuffle in the back of his robe, in two distinct places on either shoulder blade. I did a slight double-take and shifted in my seat, something that I hoped he did not notice, but could see no traces of the fluttering movement upon further inspection. The monk rounded the corner and departed that part of the house. I thought fleetingly about this, then quickly dismissed it as a trick of the light in that room, as it poured through the window hugged on all sides by books, dancing over so many particles of dust, bending and refracting on its path from the sun, through the window, and into my eyes.

I was considerably stunned.

My first interaction, *real* interaction with a real-life monk was not at all what I had expected. This person had been entirely different from my parish priest or any priest I had ever met. Brother Jude's apparent disinterest or perhaps better put *distaste* for theological tomes! This was astonishing to me. Did this behavior, this reaction to my questions come from a prayerful, quiet life, a byproduct of separating oneself from the distractions of modern life and all its noise and becoming dispassionate? Was he simply not social and used to interacting with his fellow humans? Then there was his indignation over St. Anselm of Canterbury's work! What exactly was his beef with such a great scholastic theologian and by all accounts, good, saintly man?

Had Brother Jude perhaps shown a moment of weakness, a lapse back into humanity, where, in this environment of spirituality and theology, even he himself, a monk, tired of it sometimes?

I sat there motionless for a few moments longer pondering just how strange this first contact with a monk had been for a few moments longer, then rose myself, traversed the space between me and the door, exited the library, and rejoined my father, who waited in the living room in an armchair. I was admittedly happy to see him again, relieved to return to his company.

Later that evening, a few minutes before the sunset service, I stood outside the confessional in the chapel, waiting for my turn. The next morning, we would attend mass again one final time before heading home. This monastery followed an older practice, requiring confession for all participants prior to communion each time, and did not allow one to commune more than once a day.

So, I sat awaiting my opportunity to confess with an ordained monastic minister in the chapel inside this monastery.

When my turn finally came, I entered the confessional and sat down.

I immediately recognized the voice of Brother Jude on the other side of the screen.

"Bless me Father, for I have sinned." I said.

"Indeed. We all have." said the cold, high voice on the other side.

I paused. The silence felt like it dragged on for eons after this monk's odd, atypical words. The butterflies churned in my stomach as my worried mind raced, shaken considerably by the man's unusual introduction to our exchange.

We went on from there. I confessed my sins to the man on the other side of the veil.

It was the most awkward, painful confession I ever made. I was used to Father Wilson's compassion, his understanding, his arm familiarity with both myself and my struggles, as well as the human condition.

This monk seemed cold, distant, and detached by contrast.

At one point he told me that the sin I had committed, some mis-thought or another I had had, one any typical teen would have, was a grave affront to our creator. His tone of voice was harsh and condescending, yet there was a hint of amusement in it. (Perhaps he found satisfaction in telling off a worldly young person of my generation?)

Finally, it was over.

To my surprise, the monk merely recited the prayer of absolution, forgiving my sins. He offered no penance, no prescribed prayers on the rosary or otherwise. Nothing. I was taken aback.

There was another uncomfortable, pregnant pause. I rose to leave.

"So. You have really confessed all you've done, then?" Brother Jude asked.

I froze.

"What?"

"Any more sins? Grievous ones? Were you truthful with me?" the monk asked.

"Yes, I was."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

My mind raced again. Why was the monk behaving in this manner? I had already confessed to him! He had read the prayer! It was over.

"Not even something..."

I felt odd as he spoke those words, like a wave of energy, a ripple of static came over me. Almost as if I were being *scanned*.

"...of an *academic* nature?"

My heart dropped into my stomach. I felt as if I had suddenly stepped outside of warm home and hearth and into the middle of a blizzard, for so cold and clammy I had become.

"What?" I whispered.

“Oh, you know...” the monk hissed, “maybe an important test? One maybe.... hmm.... yes....in *math*, was it?”

I felt like he was reading my mind. My racing mind flashed to images of my older brother Tom sitting in front of the family PC, taking my math test online for me. I was enrolled in the terminal course for high school. I was seriously considering Jesuit University of Illinois, my dream school, but needed a good math grade to get in. Oh, how I looked forward to a senior year without having to take math!

Tom, out of love and wanting to see my dreams come true, and who was strong in math beyond my wildest dreams, had essentially been taking the class for me. It was mainly online. By passing the quizzes and tests with B's and the occasional A so as not to arouse suspicion, my brother was using his prowess to help me pass.

The images of these occurrences flashed over and over, in rapid succession. Somehow, I knew the monk was doing it, making it happen, tapping into my brain, my psyche, and making my memories appear before my eyes and his like an old slide projector that was stuck clicking the same ring of pictures to life over and over.

I fought it. I focused and strained intensely.

“Stop.” I said.

The reeling images slowed under my strain.

I heard the man scowl. The images sped up. My head hurt. The pain reached a crescendo, and I was sure I would soon pass out.

“Lord, have mercy on me.” I prayed.

Immediately, it all stopped. The images vanished.

I heard a loud thud, followed by a scrambling, then the swinging open of the confessional door on the other side, followed by its slamming.

I took several deep breaths before collecting myself and exiting to rejoin my parents in the congregation once again. They gave me an odd look, having evidently seen Brother Jude storm out of the confessional looking ruffled.

After mass let out, we bid the other monks farewell (Brother Jude was nowhere among them) and got on the road.

I told mom and dad everything that had transpired. They were visibly perplexed. Needless to say, we cross that monastery off the list of prospective places I may reside in the future.

I felt terrible.

Had I been wrong about my life's calling? Had Father Wilson? He assured me neither of us was wrong. He encouraged me and suggested visiting another monastery with my family again after some time had passed, this one a Trappist monastery, with whom he put in a call ahead with the abbot

personally. He put in a good word with me and felt better about this one. I felt better, too, because Father Wilson did.

Sacred Heart monastery was an altogether different experience.

I felt welcome, accepted, and loved from the moment I arrived til the time I departed. Not all, but many of the brothers there were committed to vows of silence. This did not, however, prevent them from smiling and waving at me cheerily. I got the sense that the monks were genuinely happy to see me, to have me visiting them with interest in the monastic vocation.

The campus itself was remote and small, and tucked into the mountains of West Virginia. It had a homey, warm feel to it.

The monks were down to Earth, even if they were incredibly prayerful and intensely dedicated to their vows. Nervous, I confessed with an ordained member of the brotherhood, but this time nothing like what I had experienced previously happened. It was just a normal, honest-to-god confession and penance.

I felt welcome and wanted here.

I also felt that the place had an appropriate balance of modern and ancient, old-country and American. We visited near Christmastime and there was tinsel and holly everywhere. The halls were veritably decked, yet the focus was upon the coming of the Christ child and making oneself prepared and worthy of him.

One day, I confessed, *truly* confessed the sin of cheating on my math with my brother to the abbot. He told me that yes it was a sine, and was wrong, but that he understood some of my history and troubles with math. God is understanding. And compassionate and judges the heart. What we did would not be acceptable to make a habit of, but the intention was pure, especially on my brother's part.

The abbot told me to apply and pray about Jesuit U., to go if I got in and major in Theology, and to beg God for forgiveness for this sin and in all things, daily. After I graduated there would always be a pace for me at Sacred Heart.

I did exactly what he told me and prayed and prayed and prayed.

On Christmas night, after my family had gone to bed, I fell to my knees in my room and asked the Christ child himself for a blessing and for admittance into the university. If it were his will, in his plan, and would benefit creation, mankind, and fit into the overall purpose and teleological end of the universe.

To my elation a few days after Christmas I received a letter from Jesuit University of Illinois. The department chair himself had read an essay I'd written for English class comparing *Beowulf* with the Crucifixion and Resurrection narrative of the Gospel of John. He was incredibly impressed and conveyed that he wanted me to study under him. I showed my parents, who leapt for joy. As fate would have it, Tom had just gotten a call from Ohio River Valley College's baseball coach offering him a scholarship for the following academic year. I had to share the good news, celebrate wonderful Christmas joys for us both with my brother! I ran down the hall toward Tom's room, but he was already standing there, arms folded, smiling, and nodding his head.

“Right on, little bro!” Tom said, smiling and bumping my fist. “We’ve got it made!”

“We sure do, Tom!” I agreed.

“Of course, you know who you need to tell next?” Tom asked.

I did. I pulled out my cell phone and dialed the rectory to break the good news to Father Wilson.

“Hello, parish rectory?” asked a shrill, cold voice.

It was not Father Wilson’s voice.