

II.

From that moment on, I became obsessed with everything to do with monastic life. It seemed proper, fitting. I was fascinated with the holy orders and everything they contained and offered. I talked with Father Wilson about it often, ad nauseum, but he always treated me tenderly and with a charitable grin, either directing my attention to a book he owned or was in the Church library, or an article or website.

I delved into the abundant literature, online, in print, whatever I could get access to. I read many a volume about monks and their lives, including those about Saints' lives, cover to cover.

I read my Bible daily, and many a Church Father's works, theological scholastic work and treatise along with devotional texts, deepening both my academic as well as spiritual knowledge of the Faith. I was always moved on a profound level as I learned ever more about the inner machinations and practices of many an order.

I felt a pull, a longing, a *calling*.

At age fourteen I began my freshman year of secondary school at St. Thomas Aquinas School, the parochial K-12 associated with my parish. I had become a precocious student, arguably more knowledgeable in Church history, Theology, liturgics, and dogma than any of my school mates. My father, tall, lean, and with a salt-and-pepper beard and wrinkles just beginning to show around his eyes, would comment often that I probably knew more about those subjects than most parish priests!

I excelled in History, Theology, Science, Philosophy, and Writing. I would answer questions in these courses with enthusiasm and often, to a varying degree of chagrin and amusement on the part of my fellow classmates. I joined the school Debate Team, and within the first few months became its captain.

I loved arguing in academic debates and could out-logic anyone in a formal, forensic setting. I loved the Ontological Argument of St. Anselm, his logical proof for the existence of God. I marveled at its simplicity yet validity on the logical grounds of antiquity. It was perfect. It was a shining gift from above, I just *knew* it.

And I wielded it, shaping my own arguments for various conclusions from premises, structuring my own debates against my opponents in the image and likeness of St. Anselm's great argument. I blew most of my would-be scholastic adversaries' arguments out of the water, even causing the reigning State Champion, a talented debater from one of the area's public schools, to drop his jaw when he heard me present my case, and realized his crippling, resounding defeat.

Life then was not without its struggles.

I struggled with my own passions, my own demons.

Anger.

Sometimes it consumed me.

That dreaded demon of spite would come upon me and torment me and agitate me and I would become so flustered in those days! My, oh my, my *anger* sometimes!

My one academic weakness was mathematics.

Quite simply put, I was terrible at it! I could not do math beyond basic arithmetic to save my life, from Kindergarten forward, I am afraid. For this, I had to meet with a Special Education Teacher, who put me through a battery of tests periodically and had my mother and father sit in on boring meetings about me every so often. I pity Angela Garcia now; she only wanted to help me. She was so nice, so bright. Encouraged me, even when I did not believe in my own abilities or my confidence faltered. What I put that poor lady through! I am afraid I must confess I was, well, less than compliant with her and her efforts to assess me, most of the time!

I *loathed* the meetings. And the testing. I would sit during our periodic testing sessions, arms crossed, rolling my eyes, tapping my foot, eyes darting to the clock.

"Can this get any more boring?" I would ask, and sometimes give intentionally incorrect but plausible answers, or mock the very basis of the tests themselves.

On one occasion, Angela sat before me, her short, cropped dirty blonde hair fluttering as the overhead air conditioner in the moth-ball filled old musty school kicked on, her green eyes narrowed on me, her sole focus.

"You know what? Screw this test!" I said, "God loves me unconditionally! He requires no test to be loved, valued, or otherwise be accepted! Only man and society require these inane standards! I will answer no more questions!"

Angela frowned slightly and was silent. She gave me a piercing "teacher stare."

"You are right, Andrew. God does not require a test to be loved or valued. Neither do I. Far be it from me to require any higher standard than our Lord's! But life is itself a sort of test to prepare you for glory, is it not? And it is my, your mother's, your father's, your priest's, your brothers', and all our aim to help prepare you so that you may pass *that* test!"

I was stunned. My mouth now hung agape, like that of my academic competitor not long before then. I had been beaten by a water-tight argument, and by none other than someone whom til this moment I had detested being in the presence of. Until that moment, I had never noticed the light shining through her, the love pouring out from her.

I gulped. I sat silent for a few moments.

Then, "forty-two." I said, begrudgingly offering my teacher an answer to the math question she had asked before my tirade, not mentioning another word about my dissatisfaction with having to be here engaged in this objectionable inquisition with her.

Angela failed at trying to suppress her satisfied smile as she licked the tip of her pen and scribbled my answer in her test booklet.

Math.

The bane of my existence!

I understood most everything conceptually. The trouble was when I looked at my paper outside of class my brain would empty, then I would desperately grasp for concepts in the void, begging them to return to my conscious mind. My head would spin. My brain would race.

This was especially true during math tests. I would stare at my paper and the numbers on it would dance! I would blink and they would be still again.

I could hardly complete a single, miserable calculation.

I remember in 10th grade, my first semester marks:

History: A

Theology: A

Art: A

Biology: A

Phys. Ed.: A

Geometry: F

Oh, how despondent I was! Math, that most accursed of subjects, was the only thing keeping me from the Honor Roll!

I bemoaned my first semester grades. I stayed in my room the first day of Christmas Break and would not come out, not even to eat, until the next day when I could stand the hunger no longer. My parents were worried. I could find no joy in my other academic accomplishments whatsoever, no consolation in the fact that I was remarkably strong in other areas. My failure in math was my single most, solitary, and narrow focus.

Then, the catalyst!

My brother Tom, of whom I thought the world, my big brother, came into my room one night.

He offered kind words of consolation.

I would hear none of it.

Frustrated, Tom rolled his eyes.

“Who needs dumb old math, anyway?” Tom asked, making a goofy, cross-eyed face. I knew he was only trying to make me feel better. It did not. “You know, counting coins, bills, paying bills? Ha! Damn, paying bills, who wants to do *that*, anyway?” he continued.

I could feel myself becoming annoyed.

Then he started singing a song:

“Andrew, Andrew

Why the frown?

Don't let stupid math

Get you down!

Math sucks,

It's a bore,

So what if you can't count to four?"

This unhinged me.

"SHUT UP!" I hissed.

Tom abruptly stopped, looking stunned.

"... sorry." my brother said.

"It ISN'T funny."

"I'm sorry.... I just thought..."

"NOT helpful!"

"Sorry."

"Get out."

"Fine."

Tom turned to leave and had no sooner planted his left foot on the one-stair stoop leading down into my bedroom consisting of the carport-turned-den, when he started whistling the song to himself!

He must have thought he was nearly out of the room and I could not hear.

He must not have meant any ill, just had the tune stuck in his head.

I did not care.

I was enraged, my mind ablaze with emotional fire.

Reflex took me and I grabbed the deodorant stick sitting on my bedside dresser, the nearest object my hand found. I wrapped my fingers around it, picked it up, and chucked it in Tom's direction as hard as I could.

"WOE TO YOU, DOUBTING THOMAS!!!!!" I cried.

The deodorant stick smacked Tom square in the back of the head, directly in the soft spot where his neck met his skull.

He went down, landing face first on the floor with a hard thud.

I screamed, immediately horrified at what I had just done. I sprang out of bed to look at the damage I had done. Tom lay sprawled there, motionless. My heart raced. So did my thoughts.

I was sure I'd killed him. I had killed my brother.

A sharp shock of terror streaked through my being, followed by tremors, trembles, panic.

I could hear my parents rousing, their footsteps getting closer to my bedroom door.

"I am Cain." I thought.

"I have killed Abel."

Clomp.

"I am Macbeth. Banquo is dead."

A hand on the doorknob. It jiggled.

"I am *Hitler*."

The knob turned. I bounded back across my room and threw open my bedroom window. Leaping out into the dark, cold night and landing in the flower bed beneath the window, I sprinted down the street, into blackness. Tears filled my eyes and blurred my vision. I ran and ran and ran, ignoring the pleading calls of my parents from the still open window now far behind me.

I felt beyond terrible.

I did not know where to go.

I only knew I was the worst human being alive.

I was unforgiveable.

I was surely going to hell.

Then I stopped. My chest heaved with belabored pants.

What was I doing? Where was I going. I needed to turn myself in. That was the only option. I needed forgiveness. I was willing to *beg* for it.

But where? Home? No. I could not go there. Not yet. Possibly never again. My brother would never forgive me if he were still alive. Especially if he were alive and paralyzed or something because of my actions! I started running to the only place I knew to go.

I reached the Church campus, ran up the rectory stairs, and pounded my fists on the priest's door repeatedly.

"Come out, Father! Come out!" I begged. "PLEASE!"

Titus, Father Wilson's shaggy dog, barked. A light came on inside.

Father Wilson opened the door with a creak. A long, bright line of light from within encompassed him and illuminated me. He stood there clad only in striped pajamas and a night cap. His eyelids drooped with the wrinkles of sudden awakened slumber. We wore a look of concern on his face as he took me in, wide-eyed and hysterical in the middle of the night and standing on his doorstep.

“What in the world has happened, my boy? What is it? Are you okay?”

After I had stuttered, stammered, and burst into tears several times, Father Wilson finally managed to help me de-escalate, offering me soft words of encouragement. I pet Titus, who licked me, panting nearly as frantically as I was. The dog pushed himself up against my legs. His warmth and soft fur brought me comfort.

Father Wilson returned inside his home while I waited on his front stoop. He dialed my worried parents and told them where I was, and to come get me. He then told me he'd hear my confession.

And he did. Right then and there in the dark of the night on his front steps, a mug of tea he'd microwaved me piping hot and steaming in my hands. I would daresay it was the most unconventional confession he'd ever heard in his life!

I told him everything.

I was *so* sorry.

I hoped my brother was alive

He was, Father assured me. My parents had told him so. He would have a nasty welt on the back of his head but would be okay.

I wept. I was truly, bitterly remorseful.

Father Wilson told me what I had done was serious, that my feelings of anger were valid and understandable about my shortcomings in math, but I had let them control me and done harm to someone I loved, and who he knows loves me very much, too. He told me to seek my brother's forgiveness as well as my parents'. He told me to go out of my way to do helpful, kind things for Tom and my folks the next few days. He told me to say four Our Father's and ten Hail Mary's on my rosary.

Just before his benediction, Father Wilson told me one last thing.

“Don't fret over your struggles with Math. Our Lord knows all our struggles and He does not ignore them. Give it your best. That's all he ever asks. And he made you the way you are on purpose. Nobody is perfect. Everyone has flaws. Me, I'm terrible at directions and get lost on road trips! But that's beside the point. God made you the way you are on purpose. He made you bad at math on purpose, but so very good at other things. And he did so on purpose, to whatever end. Glorify him always in the good and the bad! In health and in sickness, in happiness and in sorrow. He calls us all to glory and sainthood, flaws and all, and very often teaches us through our failures and imperfections far more than in our successes and strengths. Don't fret young one, He loves you very much, unconditionally, whether you be good at math or not.”

I was at that moment that I truly felt better.

I heard a crackling of gravel and saw a blinding light from my parents' car as they turned their minivan into the Church lot. Mom, Dad, and Tom stepped out of the minivan. I ran to Tom, fell to my knees, and hugged him around the legs, pressing my teary face into his kneecaps.

Taken aback, he stumbled for a second, possibly dizzy from the wound I'd inflicted on him earlier.

“I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry, oh I love you Tom, I’m sorry, I’m so glad you’re alive!”

Tom, who had been frowning when he arrived and looked deeply disgruntled, smirked at the edges of his mouth, then full-on smiled. He regained his balance then returned my embrace.

“I forgive you, little bro. I’m just glad you’re okay. You had us all worried.”

After a short exchange between my parents and Father Wilson including many a thank you, we climbed into the minivan and headed home. As we left, I looked back and watched Father Wilson wave, smiling, then return inside the rectory with Titus the shaggy dog.

At last we arrived back at home. I returned to my bedroom, finally at peace, no longer in trepidation over my failing math grade.

I closed my eyes and slid into sleep.

At once, the old man’s face hovered before me. My heart leapt with delight. I had not seen him while dreaming for weeks, and especially not while I was so occupied by my mark in math class. He stood there, totally silent. His whole being beamed radiantly, and I felt the light of his countenance shining on me. As it did, I felt as though my flaws, my faults, my earthly limitations were all melting away. He smiled at me and as I met that grinning gaze, I felt truly, fully, unconditionally loved and embraced.

Eventually, the dream shifted. It seemed as if everything, the man, our surroundings, were becoming over exposed and growing every brighter, whiter. The entire dreamscape became a bright, white, blank page, and I my troubled mind finally rested, thinking no more. I felt nothing but an innate, pure serenity, and spent the remainder of that night emerged in that light filled bliss. I have no other recollection of that dream save for that feeling of contented, satisfied serene bliss, such as I have never experienced in any waking moment on this earth.