

The Monastery

“We are all just prisoners here, of our own device.”

—The Eagles

The monastery could only be reached on foot. A man in the village had warned me it would be a long trek. A wall surrounded the monastery, but the gate was open when I arrived, so I walked in. The place was deserted. The gardens were full of weeds, the hedges untrimmed.

I followed a winding pathway to the entrance of the main building. It was ancient. An old man was sleeping on the steps outside the door. He must be the gardener, I thought. He certainly didn't look like a monk. He was wearing ordinary work clothes. They were soiled. His hair was long and uncombed, his face a stubble of gray.

“Excuse me,” I said.

The man didn't wake up, so I shook him.

“Excuse me,” I repeated. “I'm looking for someone. His name is Martin.”

The man stirred from his sleep and looked up at me with bleary eyes.

“Oh, yes. We've been expecting you,” he said, slowing getting up. There was the smell of alcohol on his breath.

He took a key from his pocket and unlocked the door to the building.

“Right this way,” he said, ushering me inside. “We don't have many visitors these days.”

We entered a vestibule where there were several old chairs. The walls were stone. They were cold-looking and damp. The room was lit with candles.

“Wait here a moment,” the man said to me. He staggered out of the room and disappeared down a hallway.

I hadn't seen Martin in a very long time. After his wife had died—and so violently—he had simply lost the will to go on. He was disgusted with life, he told me. He only wanted to retire to a monastery, to get away from humanity, from the world. Before he left, he had promised to write me a letter as soon as he had arrived and settled in. I hadn't heard from him once.

The old man did not return. I waited nearly an hour for him, then thought that I would have a look around the place on my own. I walked out of the vestibule and into a corridor, which was also lit with candles. There were no windows, no doors. I wondered where all the monks were and concluded they must be in their cells.

One corridor led to another, with branching corridors to the right and left. I walked aimlessly and soon discovered that I'd lost my bearings. I didn't how to get back to the vestibule. I stopped for a moment and listened. I thought I heard something, the soft footsteps of someone running in a distant corridor.

Suddenly at the end of a hallway I saw a young woman. She was dressed in flowing, gauzy robe and had long black hair. She appeared for just an instant and then vanished. It was as if I'd seen a phantom.

“Wait a moment! Please!” I called out, racing down the corridor after her.

I couldn't see her. Which way had she gone? Instinctively I turned down the passageway to my left and followed it through several turns. She was nowhere to be found. I doubled back, returning to the spot where I had first seen her, and ran down another corridor. She wasn't there either. I ran down several more corridors, fearing I would never find her.

Unexpectedly, as if by magic, there she was, right in front of me. I got a good look at her face. Her skin was pure white, the lips a flaming red. She was mesmerizingly beautiful. I could see her full figure under her gown, her slender waist and the curves of her breasts.

I reached out for her, but she slipped away.

“Help me!” I cried. “I've lost my way!”

I took a few steps, but suddenly felt exhausted. It was impossible to go on. Waves of strange, powerful sensations washed over me and I slumped to the floor unconscious.

When I awoke I was in a dark room, something like a cell, not a monk's cell, but more like the cell

of a prisoner. I was lying naked on a wooden rack. On either side of me were two women who, except for their jewelry, were also naked. Their faces were heavily painted with cosmetics. They were beautiful, but not nearly as beautiful as the woman I had seen in the corridor.

I was groggy. I felt drunk—no, not drunk, but rather as if I'd been drugged. During my sleep I'd had vision after vision. Fantastic visions I could not understand: a man thrusting a spear into the side of a blood-red beast, a woman with no face riding on a horse, a couple copulating mechanically, a skeleton giving birth to a child.

I looked at the woman on my right. She was sleeping. The other woman was gently stroking my chest. Her lips were dripping with semen. I reached down and felt my penis. It was limp.

"Where am I?" I asked the woman.

She continued stroking my chest without answering.

"Why have I been brought here?" I said.

She simply smiled.

I tried to get up but was too weak. I laid my head back and stared up at the ceiling. Why had I ever come here? What had happened to Martin?

Just then I heard a key turn in the lock. The woman who had been sleeping beside me woke up. The door opened and there, standing in the doorway, was the beautiful white-faced woman I had seen in the corridors.

"I am Felicia," the woman said. "I hope you are finding your stay here pleasurable."

"These women have brought me no pleasure," I said.

"Perhaps you do not understand. Heaven is what we make it."

"Only the dead can enter heaven."

"You still have so much to learn!" Felicia laughed. "Indeed, to be alive for one day on earth is better than to be dead in heaven forever."

"What right have you to keep me here?" I demanded.

"The choice was not mine, but yours," she answered.

"But certainly I did not choose to sleep with these women."

"You may sleep with any of the women here whom you like—and they with you. I am the only woman you are not permitted to sleep with."

"Even if you are the only woman I desire?"

"That is precisely why you may not sleep with me," Felicia replied.

The two women had already gotten up from the rack and begun dressing.

"You'd better get dressed, too" Felicia said to me. "The ceremony will begin shortly."

The women helped me to my feet and handed me a robe similar to the white gauzy robes they had put on. I slipped it over my shoulders.

"You would like it very much if you could take Martin back with you," Felicia said as she led me down a stairway, the two other women supporting me on either side.

"Yes," I said. "Is he here?"

"Oh, I thought you'd already seen him." She seemed surprised.

"No, I haven't," I said.

"Well, I'm quite certain you will see him today. But I'm afraid your hopes are in vain. It is quite impossible for him to leave."

"And myself," I asked. "Am I permitted to leave?"

Felicia looked at me quizzically. "*Permitted* to leave? I'm afraid you still don't understand."

We exited the door. The two women were still trying steady me, but I was suddenly feeling better and brushed them aside. They departed down the corridor to the right, while Felicia led me through the corridor on the left. She walked quickly ahead without looking back. We descended several long stairways, going deeper and deeper underground. I followed her. What had she meant? I desperately wanted to escape. What exactly was it that prevented me from leaving?

In front of us was a great light. The passageway opened out into a large chapel. The monks had already assembled and were chanting. I had never heard any of the chants before, but their beauty was haunting. Incense filled the room. The air was thick with it. Smoke from burning torches rose in great spirals, collecting at the ceiling. A priest was standing in front of the altar. His vestments were black. When he turned to face the assembly, I saw that he was wearing a hideous mask.

Felicia and I took our places in the congregation and the ceremony began. A young boy, bound in

ropes, was brought in. He was followed by a man, who must have been his father. The man, weeping, reached out to touch the boy, but was held back by two guards. The chanting continued, growing louder and louder.

The altar was at the exact center of the chapel. When the party reached it, the priest lifted the boy and placed him on the altar. The man tried to grasp onto the boy's dangling leg but was held back.

"Please," the man sobbed. "He's my only son!"

His voice was loud and distinct. It could be clearly heard above the din of the chants.

On a small table beside the altar, along with various other ceremonial implements, was a knife. The priest picked it up and handed it to the boy's father. The man took the knife, his hand trembling.

The chanting ceased. The priest made unintelligible gestures with his hands. All eyes turned to the father. He held the knife in his hand but simply could not bring himself to thrust it into the boy's heart. The priest stood there watching the man with increasing agitation.

"Kill him!" he shouted.

"I can't!" the man cried.

The priest turned to the assembly: "Whatever God commands we must do without question."

There were murmurs of agreement among the congregation.

Then, turning back to the man, the priest said gently, "Obey."

The man raised the knife above the boy's head and, with what seemed to be a prayer to heaven, let it plunge deep into the boy's chest.

When the ritual was over everyone filed out silently. I was led back to my own cell. The door was locked behind me.

There was nothing in the room. The rack was no longer there, so I lay down on the floor and tried to sleep. The scene of the man killing his own son repeated itself over and over in my mind. I was nauseated. Even though I'd had nothing to eat, I felt like vomiting. The woman had said I would see Martin, but I hadn't. I'd carefully scrutinized the faces of all the people present at the ceremony and hadn't seen anyone who even remotely resembled Martin. The only face I hadn't seen was the face of the priest with the mask.

I must have dozed off. I was startled when I heard the door to my cell open. Someone was standing over me. It was too dark for me to see who it was.

"Hurry up!" a voice said. "We haven't got much time."

The voice was familiar. I recognized it immediately. It was Martin's!

I sprang to my feet and reached out my arms to embrace him. Then, in the light from the candles, I saw that it wasn't Martin after all, but rather the old gardener I had first met at the entrance. How could I have mistaken him for Martin? The gardener was now clean-shave and completely sober. He motioned for me to follow him.

"Why did you ever leave the vestibule?" the old man whispered to me harshly. "You're a damn fool!"

We walked on tiptoe so no one would hear us. I followed the man around this corner and that as he wove his way through the corridors. I knew that I never would be able to find the way out on my own and was relieved when we finally reached the vestibule.

"Now get out of here!" the man said. "The gate's closed, so follow the wall until you come to a tree. One of the branches hangs down over the wall. You can climb up the tree and down the branch to the other side. I'm the only one who knows about it, but make sure you're not seen."

I looked at his face. He gave me a curious smile. There was something in his features which reminded me of Martin. But no, this man was simply too old, too wizened to be Martin.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" the man said, sharply turning his head away. "You'd better leave while you still have the will to do so."

"Won't you come with me?" I asked him.

He looked back at me, straight in the eyes, and said without the slightest waver, "Why should I?"

I slipped out of the door and entered the garden. It was night. The air was crisp, the moon bright. Ah, to think of the secrets of men, all the secrets that will never be revealed.

I turned back for one last look at the man. He was gone.