

The Expiation That Pleaseth the Lord

And lo, we awoke in the miry darkness of a ditch as black and filthy as the soul of man. My shoulder leaked with pus and I rejoiced, for we are taught that the suffering of the flesh leaches away sin and purifies the soul. Still, as I looked down at my body, adorned in its ragged burlap robe, pale, pig-bristled legs, bones poking through skin like half-buried tombstones, I despaired at the thought of another day in this foul cage. Dear Lord, I prayed, may my skeleton be bared to the sun and my soul, unburdened at last, carried to you.

Brother Fell announced that the judgement of dawn was nigh, and we assembled in a rough line. Shivering and striped with muck, we gathered together for the Assignment of the Cross. He walked up and down our threadbare row, his thin, creased face impassive, even as Brother Quentin fell to his knees before him.

“Please, Brother Fell.” Brother Quentin clasped his quivering hands before his chest. “Let me bear the Rough-Hewn Cross today. My soul is sick with sin, and I need a mighty medicine to heal it.”

Brother Fell looked down at him for a long moment, while the rest of us held our breaths. A hell-born hope arose in my breast that Brother Quentin’s wish be granted. The Rough-Hewn Cross itself, massive and splintery, lay against the wall of the ditch, ready to loose its glad tidings of suffering on the lucky sinner that drew it.

“No,” Brother Fell said after a pause. “No. Today I think it is the Willow Cross for you.” Brother Quentin’s face collapsed in despair. The Willow Cross is smooth and light, and brings little pain in its bearing.

“No,” Brother Fell continued. “I think today the blessings of the Rough-Hewn Cross will be granted to . . .” He paced up and down our rank, stopping finally at Brother Thomas. “To you, Brother Thomas. Rejoice, for you receive a surfeit of grace.”

My heart leapt and gamboled in an ecstasy of sin, and another insidious thought entered my head: the Willow Cross was gone, but the chance remained that the Maple Cross or the Burnished Cross, nearly as comfortable as the Willow, would be given to me. I knew that the pain of the body is the expiation that pleaseth the Lord, and yet my degraded soul still yearned for comfort.

I glanced back at Brother Thomas, who must have been equally led by the Enemy, for he did not greet his assignment with the joy that it deserved. His jaw tightened, and he stared down at the ground.

“What tidings, Brother Thomas?” Brother Fell asked. “Will you not give your thanks to the Lord Our God for the bounty that has been vouchsafed you?”

There was a lengthy silence. The men in line began to fidget nervously.

“I had it yesterday,” Brother Thomas finally said. “Yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before that. I’ve had it for a week and a half.” He pulled his robe off to expose his shoulders—mottled, ulcerated red, wonderfully streaked with blood and infection. “Look at me,” he said. “Look.”

Brother Fell clenched his fists, and his arms trembled with a holy passion. He drew himself to his full height. He was a tall man, and very thin, but at moments like this his virtuous emaciation had the strange effect of making him seem even larger and more terrible. He did not shout, which made us quiver all the more. “It is a gift, Brother Thomas,” he whispered in his soft, caressing voice. “A gift from on high, a gift that your brothers,” he motioned at us, filthy, tremulous, thin, “would exult to bear. Has the worm Lucifer burrowed so deep into your heart that you cannot see this?”

We waited, hardly daring to breathe. Brother Thomas looked up, meeting Brother Fell’s terrible gaze for a moment. He dropped his head and walked to the Rough-Hewn Cross. With a noise halfway between a grunt and a moan, he hoisted it onto his shoulder.

The distribution went quickly after that. I received the Hickory Cross, which was heavier than the Maple Cross and not as smooth as the Burnished Cross, but I was happy nonetheless. Thus Cross-burdened, poor imitations of Our Savior, we formed a circle for a short prayer and then climbed up the adjacent embankment and found ourselves confronted with all of the fury and desolation of this mortal life.

We had slept next to the parkway, which stood before us now. The air stank of gasoline fumes, and a constant roar filled our ears as cars hurtled to and fro with demonic abandon, the faces of the drivers blurs of frantic haste. The parkway circled the city center, and its towers rose in the near distance as vainglorious as the Tower of Babel.

There was a traffic light a few hundred yards away, and a few of our brothers began to trudge toward it. But Brother Fell would have none of it.

“Hold, my brethren,” he called over the traffic noise. “Hold.” He waited until he had our attention. “Do we follow God’s laws or man’s?”

“God’s laws,” Brother Quentin said. “His laws alone. All else is a product of the pit.”

“Indeed,” Brother Fell said, nodding approvingly. “Indeed.” He motioned toward the torrent of cars. “These are your baptismal waters, my brothers. May they wash away your sins.”

Vehicles whizzed by us at terrifying speed as we stood looking at one another, waiting for someone to make the first move. Brother Fell

coughed suggestively, and finally Brother Gabriel cast his eyes to heaven. “Oh Lord,” he said, “please spare this poor sinner.” He took a deep breath, grasped his cross a little bit tighter and, after waiting for a brief gap in the traffic, stepped out into the road. A great screeching and howling of tires erupted as cars swerved and skidded to avoid him. The air filled with the outraged shrieks of car horns as traffic ground to a halt. Our hearts serene and our gazes upon God, we walked like the Israelites across the Red Sea until we were delivered to the relative safety of the capacious median, where Brother Quentin proposed that we pause to pray.

“Yes. A prayer,” Brother Fell said. He laid a hand on Brother Quentin’s bony shoulder. “When others waver, I can always count on you, Brother Quentin. You are a lodestar, beckoning us always toward the holy.”

“Kiss-ass,” muttered Brother Thomas, who, burdened mightily by the Rough-Hewn Cross, was, as usual, bringing up the rear. He spoke quietly, but even the subtlest murmurs of the heart are heard by the Lord.

The traffic had recovered from our passage and was again moving at a daunting speed. Even as the insolence left Thomas’ lips, a BMW, its horn blaring, bore down on him and his cross, the prodigious rear of which still projected slightly into the far-left lane of the road. Brother Thomas’ eyes widened, and for a moment it seemed that the oncoming car would clip the Rough-Hewn cross with a tremendous force, throwing Brother Thomas a great distance and almost certainly causing him grievous injury. With a frantic grunt, Thomas heaved his burden up onto the median, then fell to his hands and knees under its weight. The driver lowered his window as he passed and threw a coffee cup at us, drenching Thomas in a scalding shower of what smelled like an above-average caramel macchiato.

Brother Thomas, his skin steaming in the cold morning air, looked slowly around, as if seeing the scene—the traffic, Brother Fell, the rest of the Holy Host—for the first time. “That’s it,” he said, getting to his feet and pausing to pick a few bits of gravel out of his knees. “That is fucking it. I’m done.”

Brother Fell, his voice deep as the grave that awaits all sinners, said, “I have spoken to you before, Brother Thomas, about profane language in the midst of our sacred assemblage. Be careful lest your transgressions be not overlooked on that final day. Verily the Lord guided my hand when he caused me to assign you the Rough-Hewn Cross this morning. Go pick it up.”

“No.”

Several of the brethren gasped. Nobody had ever defied Brother Fell before.

“Pick it up.”

“I’ll carry it,” Brother Quentin said eagerly. “It would fill my heart with joy.” He walked over to it and, grunting, made a valiant effort to lift it.

“Oh, stop it,” Thomas said. “We all know that you volunteer for all of this bullshit just so Fell won’t actually pick you.”

Brother Quentin issued a few more ejaculations consistent with herculean effort and then returned, downcast to the fold. “Holy tribulations have rendered me weaker in the flesh than in my spirit,” he said. “Again, the foul body betrays the soul.”

“I’m done with this crap,” Thomas said. “I’ve been with you guys for three months, and you know what? I don’t feel any fucking closer to God than when I started. My shoulders are all fucked up. I lost two teeth last week. They just fell out. I’m hungry all the time. All I think about is food. You’re all assholes, and Bernie here,” our eyes widened at the utterance of Brother Fell’s forbidden given name, “is just a sadistic control freak. Fuck you, Bernie, and fuck the Rough-Hewn fucking Cross, and fuck the brethren, and . . . and fuck God. I’m taking the bus home.” His eyes lit with ecstatic fervor. “A bus,” he said dreamily. “Heating. Vinyl seats. God, remember busses? Busses are fucking awesome.”

“Demon spawn!” hissed Brother Fell. “Heretic! Vile, weak, hellbound sinner!”

Brother Thomas took a few, tentative, unburdened steps down the median. “Wow,” he said, wonder in his voice, “It’s so easy. I’d totally forgotten what it’s like to walk around without a cross.”

“Stop,” Brother Fell shouted, his face tight with rage. “In the name of the Lord God, I command you to stop!”

It was as if Brother Thomas hadn’t heard him at all. He wandered away from us, the rents in his robe occasionally parting to show us his emaciated buttocks and knobby legs. With a mixture of pity and revulsion I watched him leave, a sinner walking joyously through the welcoming gates of hell. Brother Fell cleared his throat. For the first time since I first met him, he appeared unsure of himself, and his uncertainty awoke a terrible anxiety in me.

“Brothers,” he said, and then glanced about the group and hesitated.

“Perhaps,” Brother Quentin ventured, “now is the time to turn our gaze toward the infinite.”

“Of course,” Brother Fell said. “Of course, Brother Quentin. And I feel . . . I feel . . .” He closed his eyes and his upper body began to quake—a sign that a divine vision was upon him. “I . . . I feel the touch of the wings of angels.”

We kneeled in grateful prayer as Brother Fell collapsed, convulsing, onto the pavement. While the others focused on Brother Fell and his visitation, I found my gaze still drawn in the direction of the Brother Thomas. I half expected to see him reduced to a smoking pyramid of ash, victim of the mighty wrath of God, but his gait springy and light, he moved on, unchecked by divine fury. My heart, willful, wicked organ that it is, followed his path with a great longing.