

Tying the Knot with No End

Ascending the holy hill up from the parking lot, Abby and her partner walk past vacant craft-fair tents and ease themselves past all the “No” signs: “No parking,” “No picnicking,” “No further driving.” Very Catholic, Abby thinks. She has chosen the place, her late mom’s favorite site, for its serenity. Abby’s face is flushed and, hoping to draw her companion to the moment together, her hand gently brushes his, then withdraws.

At the top of the climb, they pass the decorative birches and Abby is stolen away by her thoughts. Since his return, life has been a connubial renewal and retreat, trying to decipher his interest in renewing their old life together. Especially now.

By the Olde Monastery Inn atop the hill, the scent of greasy french fries draws her back.

“Zak,” she says, “let’s eat before we walk.”

The smell of Joe’s Apple Pie fills the air inside. They will eat lunch amid the red-tulip and yellow-daffodil tablecloths. Abby tries to read Zak’s signals as they dine. *It’s like the Horn Pipe set-dance—he’s flung me out into the crowd of other dance partners. Will we find our way back to each other?* Across the table, his shoulders slump (though he is in his young thirties) and he has more the look of lost hippie at the rave.

Lunch comes with a sweet calmness like dining before romance, but there is no matching conversation. In their silence, she glances over at a middle-aged woman and an older man with dyed blue-black hair at a nearby table, both casually dressed, talking intently about a piece of music. Abby can’t figure out if they’re a couple, a brother and sister, or Monk and Sister. A monk and a nun, Abby decides.

While Zak is finishing his Georgia Peach dessert, Abby is anxious to get going. Signage blocks the usual way out: “Do not use this exit; stairway is in disrepair.” Abby wonders, are all things going to be so contrary today?

They leave the way they came, climbing the steep outdoor stairs up to the great church. Back indoors they wander down corridors, past display cases of the site’s history—pagan vortex, plundered Potawatomi graves, immigrant chapel, shrine, minor basilica—not sure where they are.

“It’s fascinating to see men devoting their lives to women,” she says, almost flirting. “The Virgin Mary, *sainte Therese d’Avila*, Kateri Taketkenitha.” She whirls around in her flutter-sleeve blouse and scans the hallway for any living embodiments: “Are there any women Carmelites?” she challenges.

“I think just the guys are here,” Zak replies.

“They probably have the women in to clean.”

“The guys sure can bake.”

In a drafty hall with high ceilings, Abby notices the blond hair on Zak’s lower arms stand up. She reaches to complete the spark, a miniature lightning to oak. But the wind rattles metal service doors, startling them both. A passageway of Holy Mary paintings beckons them.

The paintings are strangely ornate to her practical upbringing—raised for duty, passionate for ideas, but fervent in a lower register. Zak once told her that in high school he was more afraid of being embarrassed than beaten up. So, with trepidation—she knows his adult faith is in disrepair too—they enter the passage. Abby ponders, do we even have faith in each other anymore? In the Holy Mary gallery, the pastel symbols entice and comfort them:

Health of the Sick (a fountain),

Refuge of Sinners (a lily opens to a flame),
Cause of Our Joy (a harp and a flower).

Great tattoos, Abby thinks, but not that open-chest, gory Sacred Heart stuff she can't stand.

Then more Mary panels:

Virgin Most Faithful,
Virgin Most Merciful,
Virgin Most Powerful!

Zak recalls, "If you won't drink with the people you're organizing, Narciso told me, just say you made a promise to the Virgin not to, and you'll be OK." Zak was doing hard time for aiding and abetting immigrants along the southern border when Abby's mother died.

Dazed by the iconography, Abby circles and Zak follows, and they walk back into the cavernous hall. Only the stained glass and holy cards of her youth ever held such ardor. "A Goddess religion if I ever saw one," Abby ventures. *A woman clothed with the sun . . . upon her head, a crown of twelve stars: A Glorious Mystery.*

Zak says, "The friars are discalced, not defrocked and sent away for following women." But Abby doesn't get it, if it was humor.

Eventually they find their way back into the main church, often used for Mass in Spanish for the area's Mexicans and for High Mass, a favorite for the area's Irish—both only an hour's pilgrimage from Milwaukee. Today, the shrine-chapel interior is empty and imposing, unctuous, merely a place to snap a tourist shot or to glimpse from afar and move on. The sign:

"Confessions will *not* be heard after Mass has begun . . ." But at last, an affirmation with it:

"You can still buy one hour of adoration."

"Let's go in here instead," she says, leading him into a little chapel just off a side aisle.

Sunlight is spelunking through the stained glass and tracing colors like flickering votive candles. Crutches are laid up against the wall, signaling someone's release to freedom. *From her Mexican children, a prayer to Mary whom we call Guadalupe*, says the prayer card Abby holds. The chapel is dark with marbled columns that remind Abby of the cave shrines that they once saw in Mexico. But she is crestfallen at the memory of poor Indian women moving on their knees across stone church floors.

Genuflecting, an old but odd impulse, Abby suddenly feels embarrassed and quickly rises to leave the chapel. Zak follows her until she finds a door to the tower and they begin climbing the steep, metal steps. Halfway up, Abby and Zak pause at a landing, striving to catch their breath together as couples are counseled to do. Next to the barred window, some touring pair has drawn their names inside a heart. The narrow rectangular openings whistle up an easterly wind. Nearby, catbirds are keening, *kedeka-kedeka*, for the highbush cranberry.

Homing in on memories of her mother, Abby recalls how they loved to harvest grapevines together, even after fights when they weren't yet speaking again. Or on vacations, they'd walk in sight of each other, picking out scallop shells in the sand. *Did I spend so long arguing and trying to be different from her that I'll end up being just like her—no partner in middle age?* Abby is glad Zak is back, in body anyway.

"I'm reminded of the story of the first children of Ireland," Abby attempts. "This guy, First Man, was walking through the woods and he came upon a woman who beckoned him to come and lie with her. Now, being a good Irishman, he couldn't refuse a woman's request. So, he went and lay with First Woman on a bed of ferns. When she finally awoke in the shade of an ancient elm, she probably took a drag on First Cigarette. Then First Woman opened her legs and out came all the children of Ireland."

“Why are you bringing that up?” Zak says.

“Well, you know, the Irish have no actual creation story,” Abby replies. “Their history is like a Celtic knot, no beginning and no end.” Abby pauses.

“Like, ‘Every child a welcome child,’” she gently adds, “my aunties used to say.”

Meandering down the stairs is easier and getting outside is a relief—clouds breaking, the wind a natural music in the trees.

“Should we do the path through the woods or the open trail?” she asks.

“I haven’t had to make decisions in a long time . . . Let’s take the shade by the Stations of the Cross.”

She answers, “I’ve been trying all these years to get you to have an opinion about something besides politics.” *His Catholic overlay.*

“And sex,” he adds.

Now the path outside turns and rolls in the woods. The Stations of the Cross are tableaux hooded in weathered fieldstones. Abby wonders if Zak wants a new love, pure and unhampered, a virgin love? Abby thinks of the affairs she passed up when Zak was gone—an underground cadre who resurfaced to find a political woman. Or the doctor without any borders. She feels guilt even now—her Catholic template —just for considering adventure.

On the floor of the forest there is a scent of old bread, brittle leaves just before rot, slightly cinnamon. Abby’s mother died of brain cancer, the thorn that couldn’t be lifted. “Why all this distress?” she asks, plaintively. “How can you base a religion on being nailed to a bloody cross?” Tears are welling up.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t around when your mother died,” Zak says. “I tried to pray, but prayers don’t work in prison.”

“You can’t take on everybody’s suffering. You have to discover life again.” *Time for the pacifist to be less passive.*

Protectively, the suffering grottos mark the way through the wild like tree-letter markers in the old Irish alphabet. Zak says, “I couldn’t hang out with the Latino guys in prison. Everybody saw me as white. Christ, Abby, the skinheads had swastikas tattooed in the middle of Celtic crosses!”

As they proceed by the altars of pain staked out in the woods, the branches over them stave the sunlight. Abby feels the breeze quicken. At Station Nine, the pockmarked stones look like giant, deformed tubers. Clown faces and grotesque masks stare out from dinosaur molars and big Mr. Potato Head ears. The grotto rocks are skulls of buffalo piled up on the old prairies. These strange images in the holy mounds, the agonies encircling them, and the flickering aspen leaves, all begin to whirl.

Reaching to help her regain her balance, Zak lightly touches the back of her hand. “I can’t feel the difference,” he says, “between being close and desperation.” They walk on his silence.

Suddenly, an elderly couple appears from somewhere behind them, breaking their reverie. The elders, in mismatched Ivy League sweatshirts, nod but say nothing. They look retired, calm. As they round a curve, they seem, in the corner of Abby’s eye, to pirouette and disappear into a thicket of fir.

At Station Thirteen, a grieving Mary is cradling her son down from the cross: A death followed by rebirth, Abby thinks. *Better I should visualize my flowering-yellow gorse tattoo, in my special place.*

Tenderly, Abby takes her partner’s hand and leads him down into a clearing. When she needs to, she can still have that confident, modeling tilt to her shoulders.

“What do you have in mind?” Zak asks. But it is a cemetery, plotted in squares like a quilt of tombstones, bordered by tiny, white-clustered flowers of lady-never-fade.

Engraved into the monk’s gravestones: *With zeal have I been zealous for the Lord God of Hosts*: How else could you be zealous? Abby thinks. But she says to Zak, “When I first met you, I took you for quiet and zealous.” Their first Wilco concert together had sealed the deal.

A lone marker to the souls of unborn children rests in the midst of gilded maple leaves, flecked like caraway seeds. “You’d be a great father,” Abby says. “It might be a better way to heal the world than political organizing.” Zak swallows his gasp.

Underneath yews, cemeteries in Ireland shelter. Here only the sun. Abby is serene, not quite smiling, thinking of a dollhouse with miniature wicker furniture, a tiny doll child in every room.

“I’m not ready for so much now,” Zak says.

Maybe I’m pregnant already, Abby thinks. She says, “Moving forward, let’s just do small steps for now.”

Banners for the weekend craft fair wave together with the autumn leaves. They have circled back to the trees where they began.

“How about dinner at *Fox and Hounds*?” she asks.

Agreed.