



photo Ray Giguere

Vision

A knock woke Brother Stephen to a November morning. These two sharp knocks on the oak door of his cell were an alarm clock coming each day at six o'clock. He sat up, taking a deep breath which sounded unnaturally loud in the silence of the dark room. There was no need for light though, for he knew the cell as a blind man knows the coins in his pocket.

Naked, he stood and washed his face in the tin basin; its icy water clearing his head quickly and making him keenly aware of his bare feet on the cold stone floor. He did not feel vexed or oppressed by the austerity of this morning; for the simplicity calmed, and a stone floor reassured with cold dispassionate reality. He removed the wool robe from its peg on the door and wrapped its scratchy cloth around himself. His sandals he took from beneath the cot. A candle was on the table next to the washbasin; the thick plain rod of wax fit well in the palms of his hands.

For a moment he stood before the door and listened to the quiet sounds outside. Then, pulling the cowl of his robe over his head, he opened the door and stepped into the hall. The long, dimly lit corridor was slowly filling with robed men. Silently they formed a single file, waiting, and when all had arrived they began, quietly, to move through the stone corridors where solemn staring saints robed in gold gilt and crimson oil gazed over them. At the door of each chapel stood a single brother with a long burning match. Each member of the file passed before him, lit their candles, and entered the sanctuary.

Gold and silver glittered in flickering candlelight as the quiet shuffling of the monks echoed from the hard stone floor. Brother Stephen breathed the incense of his candle and gazed at the richly decorated walls of the chapel. Then the morning psalms began; each brother softly, smoothly, beginning the plainsong chant.

*Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus.
Dominus Deus Sabaoth.
Pleni sunt caeli et terra
Gloria tua. Hosanna in excelsis.*

Ageless chords of open fourths and fifths resonated and men carefully intoned phrase after phrase, their concentration

total. Stephen was immersed in this sound, his voice joining the chant, his spirit rising to the slow peaceful swell of the ancient music.

*Ave Maria.
Tu, qui es nobis omnia
Nos tua pascat gracia,
Ave Maria. Amen.*

Slowly the echoes died away and the group was silent. Stephen blew his candle out as did the others. When he returned through the halls he tried to retain the resonating core of peace within. Yet try as he might it faded in the subdued clatter of the breakfast table. No one spoke but the subtle sounds of thirty men eating brought him to a less exalted reality.

Across from Stephen sat a greying middle-aged man named Brother Jonathan. They had had their breakfast of warm porridge together now for the past two years. Only a month ago Brother Jonathan had spoken his first words to Stephen; a quiet "Excuse me," when he had spilled a bit of water on the table. It still rang clear in Stephen's memory and he thought of Brother Jonathan and himself as friends. They always nodded to each other whenever they met.

After breakfast work needed to be done and each man set to his habitual task. Stephen got his broom from the closet and went to sweep the wall walk. This was the parapet that ran along the wall surrounding the retreat and this morning it lay beneath two inches of snow. A door let out onto this from their cloisters, where he paused to put on a pair of long woollen socks and wrap a shawl about his shoulders.

Stepping onto the parapet he stopped, momentarily dazzled by the bright winter morning. Under a blue sky fresh snowfall was brilliant in the sunshine. He looked over the wall at the bare trees and white hills where to one side plumes of steam rose from the town while on the other side the frozen river crossed through farmer's meadows. The crisp clean air invigorated him and he began to sweep the parapet with brisk strokes; the stiff straw broom sending white cascades into the empty courtyard below.

He had swept three walks clean and had begun the last when he heard the sound

of childish laughter. It was faint but clear, coming from a distance on the quiet air. Looking over the wall he saw them, two small bundled figures coming through the field at the tree's edge. They were throwing snowballs, and chasing, and laughing, and like joyous spirits they charged snowbanks and yelled challenges to each other. Now Stephen could tell, they were a boy and girl, probably brother and sister and he could clearly see their clumsy but energetic progress through the field of snow.

Suddenly they stopped still and stared at the lone figure watching them from the high stone wall. For a long moment they looked at each other across the expanse of shining white. Then, slowly, the little girl raised her arm and waved a solemn wave. Brother Stephen smiled and waved solemnly back. The children stared for a moment longer and then turned and ran into the trees. Stephen gazed at their muddled tracks for a long while before finishing his work.

Afternoons were spent in prayer and meditation. Some did this in the privacy of their cells. Others, like Stephen, preferred the chapel with its haloed saints and fluttering candles. Here they knelt, silent, and Stephen thought of the children and the brilliant snow sparkling in the morning sun. The cold chill of the stone floor was so different from the crisp vigor of the winter air. He wrapped his robe closer about his legs and began to repeat the litany of the morning, hoping to find peace in that memory.

At dinner that evening he looked across his bowl of soup at Brother Jonathan. The grey man was calmly eating his meal, face downward. Then his eyes, blue and clear, turned up and met Brother Stephen's. Stephen wanted to tell him of the children and the singing and the shining snow. Brother Jonathan waited, looking into Stephen's eyes; waited for thoughts that Stephen would not express. When Stephen turned his eyes back to the table Brother Jonathan waited a moment longer before doing the same.

Geoffrey Jackson

No Reason At All

I am from the White North
Where the snow is eternal
Where the moose hangs in the family room
And there is no reason for my blond hair
No reason for my blue eyes
No reason at all.

Silvano Zamaro

Two Tomatoes

Someone gave me two tomatoes,
smooth-complexioned, pale green,
fresh as spring.
I wondered why they were plucked
at so tender a growth,
but I'll watch them grow ripe and red.

One tomato ripened startlingly fast,
I ate it and wondered if man
grows old so fast like that.

The other tomato refused
to ripen. It sat on
my fruit basket, beaming,
smiling and teasing.
I looked at it in between
my reading,
it gleamed and glowed
with the resplendence of youth.
Twelve days passed and still
it was as green as the first day
it was born.
On the thirteenth day,
I noticed a dull coloring
of the once healthy complexion.
Later in the evening, I caught
a faint suggestion of a blush.
Next morning, to my surprise
it blushed more heavily
like an over made-up face.
By supper time, my tomato
had reached full maturity.
Reluctantly,
I knew I had
to eat it before
it shriveled and shrunk.

Youthfulness! How we treasure,
before old age takes over!

Choo-Choo Kam