Christ in the Desert

North of Santa Fe and Española, along the flanks of the Jémez Mountains, the landscape turns harsh and wintry. Snow blankets the ground, and dirt roads off the highway slash the world's white membrane, blood oozing from the earth below. Beyond San Juan Pueblo, beyond the volcanic extrusion of Black Mesa, beyond the deserted turnoff for El Rito, the highway follows the Rio Chama, flowing cold and clear over a cobbled bottom. Then, a few miles past Bode's Store, just below Abiquiú Dam, it climbs out of the valley onto Ghost Ranch mesa, and the view opens up. Off to the west, across a sweep of snowy range, I can see the frozen shoreline of Abiquiú Reservoir and, upstream from the reservoir, the mouth of the Rio Chama canyon. Just beyond Ghost Ranch I turn left onto Forest Road 151, paved only here, at the intersection with the highway, and head west toward the canyon.

The road is plowed but snow packed, smoother and faster than I have ever known it. Three miles up it bends north into the mouth of the canyon and begins tracking the river upstream. (A culvert now bridges an arroyo where, seven years ago, I turned back one wet September morning rather than chance a crossing. That morning I encountered at this spot a young woman driving alone into the canyon. Before turning around, I watched her negotiate the tricky washout and continue up the deserted road. Through the years since, I've often wondered if she made her destination.) For the next ten miles the road curves around and dips across tributary drainages, hugging the steep side of the canyon. Except for one sloppy hill where I slide close to the edge before my tires grab and my car waggles back toward the upslope side, it is in remarkably good condition. Finally, thirteen miles from the highway, across from the confluence of the Chama and the Rio Gallina, where the canyon widens into a short valley, it enters onto private land owned by the Catholic Church, by the Benedictine Monastery of Christ in the Desert.

Here at the end of the road I park, get out, and stretch, glad to have made it. The sun is settling toward the rim of the mesa, and the oblique light, transmitted through dry, clear air—air as transparent and hard as cut glass—renders the landscape in exquisite relief and detail. The ocher and mauve strata in the sandstone cliffs appear as sharply-defined, contrasting bands, and each piñon tree on the mesa, each boulder on the talus slope at the base of the cliffs, each cottonwood tree on the bottomland by the river casts a precise, individual shadow on the snow around it. Visually, the effect is of colorful objects, distinct and whole, against a black-and-white

background. Emotionally, I am overcome by a strange euphoria—a desire to embrace this landscape, incorporate it, carry it away with me when I leave.

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My friends wonder why I've come here. Curiosity, I tell them. The voyeuristic impulse. "To hang out with the monks and see what turns 'em on," I say mischievously. And in part that is true. But there are other, personal reasons as well.

Since I moved into Albuquerque from Chaco Canyon two and a half years ago, my work has occupied my attention and kept me in the city much of the time. I have come here to escape that closed, artificial world for a couple of days and reestablish contact with *la tierra firme*. The earth, the land.

I know of no better place to do that. Over the years, through the course of previous visits, the monastery—not the buildings themselves, of course, but the landscape in which they dwell, this lovely, lonely valley—has become, in my mind's eye, an exalted place, a remnant of Eden. And the epitome of the beauty, isolation, and mystery that distinguish the New Mexican landscape.

This particular visit has additional significance. I accepted a job in Arizona recently, and I know now that in a few months I will be leaving New Mexico. Not a big move geographically, perhaps, but one that symbolizes for me a growing up and a leaving behind. And so I have come here to say goodbye—to New Mexico and, at the same time, in a less direct and obvious way, to a person I knew and loved in Chaco, long ago, it seems, in a different life.

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After unloading my bags, I walk up the road onto the grounds to locate my room—my monastic cell—and settle in for the weekend. The guest house, the first building I come to, is of typical New Mexican construction, with clay-colored stucco walls and a flat roof supported by vigas of hewn ponderosa pine. A condensation of the landscape. On one of its outside walls an effigy of Christ, delicately carved from cylinders of wood and painted in excruciating, faithful detail, hangs on a heavy wooden cross, its head crowned by thorns, its eyes closed against the pain. A sign under the bell at the gate to the courtyard instructs me to ring for the guest master. I ring once—a hard, metallic tone that doesn't resound through the canyon as I expected, but instead disappears quickly into space. I look toward the chapel, another quarter-mile up-canyon. No sound, no movement. The whole compound appears deserted, so I wander through the gate into the courtyard, open on two sides. A more primitive effigy of Saint Francis, long robed and arms outstretched, stands in the center of the courtyard against a background of mesa and sky. Walking around the portico, I discover the communal bathroom, a gas heater warming its interior space, and, two doors down, a card with my name written on it taped to the door of one of the sleeping rooms. The door is unlocked, so I enter and deposit my bags on the bed.

The cell is bare walled and cement floored, with one small curtained window. It is

furnished, in addition to the narrow bed, with a simple wooden desk, a chair, a wardrobe, and a wood-burning stove. A stack of neatly cut firewood sits in the corner, along with a stack of newspaper and a box of matches. With no electricity, the kerosene lamp on the desk will be the only source of light after sunset. Even now, in the late afternoon, the room is dark and cold, appropriately Spartan.

Taped to the side of the wardrobe is a schedule of the day's office, which begins with vigils at 4:30 a.m. and concludes with compline at 7:00 p.m. Work is scheduled for the morning after terce, and the main meal for the early afternoon after sext. I recall that a friend of mine, a devout Catholic who lives in Gallup, told me that the monks here are some of the few in this country who still observe the complete office every day. "They do good work up there," he said seriously. "Prayer is good work." And he explained the significance of the office to me by observing that all over the world, every day of the year, monks and priests repeat the same words, send the same message of glorification to God, a kind of worldwide hallelujah chorus.

As the hour for vespers is approaching, I begin to walk toward the chapel, still wondering about the conspicuous absence of people and a bit unnerved by the eerie silence in the canyon. Some of my trepidation is caused by the fact that I'm not Catholic, not even lapsed, and have never been to Catholic services or mass. So I don't know what to expect. I also recently saw the film *The Name of the Rose*, and I can't help picturing, only half-seriously (but half-seriously), grotesque-looking monks concealing dreadful secrets and doing strange deeds in their isolated communities.

Close to the chapel, however, I hear, through its carved oak doors, the faint, lovely sounds of choral singing. I open one of the doors, enter a narthex, and make my way forward to an octagonal nave, in the center of which a large marble-topped table serves as an altar. The ceiling of the nave is high and its space airy, and the day's final light pours in through large clerestory windows. Through the eastern windows I can see the top of the cliff and, silhouetted against the sky, a lone cross. Of the nave's eight sides, every other one is walled. Like the western side through which I entered, the one opposite is an exterior passage, and the two on the perpendicular axis extend into closed alcoves, each containing a small altar. Another carved effigy of Christ on the cross—this one painted in rather gruesome medieval fashion, blood dripping the length of its body—hangs on the southeastern wall, cross-hatched by the shadows of the clerestory mullions. An effigy of John the Baptist stands nearby, in a small niche in the northeastern wall.

Low wooden stools line the walled sides of the nave, and a small, dark, bearded man in hooded monk's habit rises and motions me to join him and another monk along the northwestern wall. Each stool contains, on a shelf below the seat, a binder of psalms and another of psalms, hymns, and canticles. A monk sitting along the opposite wall accompanies the singing with a guitar, strummed lute-like. This man, gaunt, bearded, and stern looking, resembling D. H. Lawrence during his Taos sojourn, also instructs us which page of which book to use. The singing is antiphonal, the three of us along the northwestern wall joining the three monks sitting along the northeastern wall, and alternating with the four along the southwestern wall. Along the southeastern wall, under the effigy of Christ, no one sits.

The sound is lovely, the monks' voices high, soft, and quavering, gentle and almost

feminine. Between songs we pause for a moment in silence, and during those moments the chapel fills with that hushed absence of sound so characteristic of holy places, chambers of worship. “The kind of quiet you hear only in church,” a friend of mine once wrote, recalling childhood Sunday mornings in church with his long-dead father. “A clean contained sound that must be just the element for communicating over great distances.” Toward the end of the office one of the monks offers aloud a prayer for “all of our brothers who are away” and another for Father Aelred Wall, the monastery’s founder, and “for all of our other brothers who have passed beyond this world”; and as we respond in song to the latter, it seems to me that at this moment the veil between the here and the hereafter is thin indeed.

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The monks exit the eastern passage, but the one who instructed me where to sit, Brother Gabriel, the guest master, tells me to wait outside the western entrance until the bell is rung, signaling that I may enter the convento, the adjacent building, for the light meal.

“We eat in silence,” Brother Gabriel says with some haste, his eyes darting back and forth like a sparrow’s, “except for the reader. When the prior strikes his gavel on the table, the reading will stop. Take your time but finish your meal. Then leave your dishes on the table.” He turns quickly and goes to catch the other monks.

I wait outside with the man who sat next to me during vespers, who introduces himself as Father Gregg Tipton, from the village of Mora. Like me, he is a visitor here, staying for a week. He is a young priest, in his thirties, and, like all of the monks, sports a healthy beard. He has removed his habit and now is wearing a down jacket on top of jeans and lug-soled hiking boots. He could be a salesman in a camping equipment store. I must confess that I feel very funny addressing him as “Father” but don’t know what else to do. So “Father” it is.

“I admire the monks so much,” he says gravely. “They give up so much to be here. Society, civilization, even their families. Of course,” he adds, apparently to reassure me, “they may go home for two weeks each year to visit. But they give up so much. They’re trying to go back to the old ways of the Benedictine order. Living simply and primitively. Eating vegetarian meals. They’re living in the wilderness, for God.”

He pauses for a minute, then decides to leaven the mood. “The monks may seem staid and serious,” he says, “but when they’re just sitting around together, they’re cutups. Oh yes.” He chuckles but doesn’t offer to elaborate.

I ask about the man who was leading the singing, the one who looks like D. H. Lawrence, a man who was—Lawrence, that is—enchanted by the flesh.

“That’s Father Stephen. He’s the prior. He’s the only priest in residence now. He’s been here a long time. Probably . . . hmm, probably about fifteen years. He’s gone a lot these days. To Washington, to Rome. He’ll be leaving for Mexico Sunday morning. The sister monastery at La Soledad is having a hard time, and Father Stephen is going down to welcome a new monk.”

I begin to have a sense of the church hierarchy, even here, which prompts me to ask if all

of the monks are equal, of the same degree of monkhood.

"Oh no. They're in various stages of commitment. The ones in the full black cowls—Timothy, Marcus, and William—have taken their final vows. One of the brothers, Christian, is in Rome now, studying for the priesthood. Gabriel's been here about three years; I think he's taken his simple vows. Richard is a postulant; he just arrived in November. And Father Luke is visiting from Ireland.

"There's also a hermitess living here," he continues. "Ellen. The monastery received special dispensation from Rome for her to stay in one of the houses by the river. Sometimes she comes up to pray with the brothers. She may come up to mass in the morning."

My curiosity is piqued. How long has she been a hermitess?

"Oh, two or three years. Before she came here, she raised twelve children in California. Then she felt the calling and made the decision to leave her family. Her husband comes to visit a couple of times a year. I've met him several times during my visits."

He senses my interest. "Of course, they no longer may have intimate relations but must live as brother and sister."

As I ponder the life of a hermitess, Father Gregg asks me if I've visited the monastery previously.

Yes, I tell him, several times, but never overnight, and I've never attended prayers with the brothers.

"Are you Catholic?" he asks suddenly.

I admit that I'm not. In fact, I admit that I find the whole subject of religion very confusing.

"Ah, you're searching," he interprets.

I say nothing, weighing my answer, reluctant to mislead him or evade his question but also reluctant to be completely honest about my idiosyncratic beliefs.

He senses my discomfiture. "Just Christian then," he says with a nervous laugh.

With that the bell rings, and we make our way to the convento. On the way to the dining room we walk through the monastery's library, comparable in size to a small high school's and smelling faintly of lamp oil and old books, a heady elixir. My curiosity is aroused, and I decide to set aside some time tomorrow to investigate.

For the meal we sit on wooden benches around the outside of a U-shaped wooden table. Two of the monks serve us homemade bread, butter, broccoli soup, and hot tea, and as we eat by flickering candlelight, a gray-haired, gray-bearded, scholarly-looking monk with wire-rimmed glasses sits at a side table reading aloud from a book called *Treasures in Earthen Vessels: The Vows*. It is a serious book about spiritual commitment and the temptations of the flesh, and I am surprised by its frank discussion of the evils of, among other things, masturbation. The monks seem to listen attentively and absorb the message, and I again find myself imagining all kinds of sordid goings-on in the monastic cells, everything from pornography to self-flagellation. I also recall once meeting a woman who, when she was younger, had been a nun for seven years. "For those seven years," she said, summing up her experience, "I thought about nothing but men." I laughed at the time, thinking she only confirmed what I already suspected. But, it occurs to me

now, perhaps the consuming desires I impute to the monks are just a projection of my own personality and life, just the predictable thoughts of an admittedly impure inhabitant of the world, corrupted by lurid movies, twentieth-century agnosticism, and the complicated pleasures of sex. And perhaps there is a purer, simpler way. Perhaps. In fact, I'd like to believe so. I really would. If not for me, at least for others.

After dinner I return to the guest house. On the walk back an owl hoots eerily in the talus, and snow crunches underfoot. A cold night along the Rio Chama. Juniper smoke from the monks' chimneys drifts down-canyon—a powerful distillation that will always evoke for me, no matter where I am, winter nights in northern New Mexico. I make my way to my cell, stoke a fire in the stove, and climb into my sleeping bag. I close my eyes as if to pray, but sleep overtakes me quickly.

* * *

I awake at dawn, dress hurriedly in the cold room—the fire in the stove long dead—and make my way to the chapel for lauds and mass. Ellen is there, a tall, attractive woman in her late fifties, dressed in a drab, full-length habit and wearing a head wrap that completely hides her hair. Brother Gabriel surprises me by offering, after the prayer for Father Aelred, a simple prayer on my behalf. I'm touched. Then, although I have some qualms about doing so, I go through mass and take the Eucharist with them. They seem not to notice my hesitancy or not to care, and after the ritual each person briefly embraces every other and wishes them heartfelt "peace."

Breakfast is self-serve. Afterward I take a few minutes to browse through the library, which consists of a mixture of hardcover and paperback volumes, some donated, some purchased. Housed on homemade wooden shelves, the collection is eclectic and of uniformly high quality: Aristotle, Aquinas, Merton, *Primitive Christianity*, and various commentaries on the Bible; Dostoevsky, Camus, and Walker Percy; Marx, Freud, *African Genesis*, and *The Dragons of Eden*; *Blue Highways*; *Milagro* and *Tijerina and the Courthouse Raid*; field guides and foreign language dictionaries; on a reading table, recent issues of *National Geographic*, *Newsweek*, and *The Christian Science Monitor*; on a rack labelled "Recent Acquisitions," a book titled *The AIDS Cover-Up*.

Because I've offered to help with the daily work, as guests are encouraged to do, one of the monks—Marcus, a handsome young man with blue eyes and sandy hair and beard, who has shed his cowl and now is wearing blue jeans, a down jacket, and high gum boots—finds me in the library and asks if I'd be willing to help him, William, and Timothy unload a fifty-five-gallon drum of kerosene off a truck. We walk outside and farther into the monastic compound, where visitors normally aren't permitted. The monks have backed one of the monastery's four-wheel-drive pickups through knee-deep snow close to a small wooden platform, on which the tapped drum will rest so that the residents can refill their lamps. William could be a darker version of Marcus, with a vestigial Southern accent. Deep South, from the sound of it. I can't help thinking that he and Marcus, both in their thirties and both endowed with boyish good looks, belong somewhere else, on a university campus or in a Colorado ski town. Somewhere with other young

people and at least the potential for normal social interaction. Somewhere out in the world.

Timothy, on the other hand, seems the picture of a real monk. I can't guess his age: fifty-five, sixty, sixty-five. He looks like Merlin, or what I've always imagined Merlin to look like. Long, wiry white hair pulled behind an old T-shirt wrapped around his head and a long, wiry white beard floating on his chest. Ruddy cheeks that give his face an angelic aspect and blue eyes that dance with energy and intelligence. An air of contentment, but without the infuriating smugness exhibited by most people who think they know the answer. Here, it seems to me, is the genuine article. A man of God, truly. But as well he has that unmistakable look of someone who has been around the block, who is (or was) well acquainted with the devious, factitious, seductive ways of the world. And who willingly gave it all up.

We wrestle vainly for a few minutes with the drum of kerosene, which I figure weighs close to five hundred pounds, but the four of us working together finally slide, scrape, and bump it onto the platform. Then, as I turn to walk back to the guest house, Marcus asks if I'd be willing to help Richard—the scholarly looking man who was the reader at the light meal yesterday afternoon and who has just appeared at the platform—with the week's communal laundry. I agree, and for the next three hours I help Richard sort and load the laundry into the monastery's 1948 Hotpoint washing machine, rinse and wring it, and hang it on the clothesline.

Richard is close to retirement age for most professions but came to the monastery as a postulant just two months ago to begin his monastic life. He is scheduled to stay for six months, then leave for a short time while he and the community decide independently of each other whether he should take his simple vows and return on a more permanent basis. Before coming here, he worked in upper management for the Palmer House Hotel, for Illinois Bell, and, most recently, for a large insurance company, all in Chicago. But he has long been drawn to the simplicity and rigors of monastic life. He doesn't mention a wife or children, and I infer that he is a lifelong bachelor.

Five years ago, after his father died—releasing him, as he puts it, from his "final parental obligation"—he began to heed his calling seriously, visiting monasteries in Vermont, Indiana, Minnesota, and Colorado before deciding to come to Christ in the Desert. Although he is for the most part a relaxed and friendly sort, he speaks about his decision to come here intently and with some zeal, like a trial lawyer summing up his case.

"Christ in the Desert is absolutely unique among American monasteries because of its adherence to the basic principles of Benedict, its primitiveness, and its isolation. I checked into the other monasteries fairly thoroughly, but all of the signs pointed here. This is where I was headed."

I ask about the principles of Benedict.

"The basic tenets are three: prayer, reading or study, and physical labor. And of course," he adds with some pride, "all of the monks take vows of poverty." (A few minutes later, as I hang a load of clothes on the line, I discover with some amusement that although most of the monks' personal clothing is plain and well-worn, one of them wears Calvin Klein jeans.)

Richard chuckles. "We try to live simply out here, but the irony is that living simply requires a lot of time and work. Just this month both of our electric generators went out in the same day, and then when Marcus was towing one of them back from town, the trailer tipped over about

five miles up the road. It took us all day to get the trailer upright and in here."

What about the division of labor?

"Oh, we share the day-to-day chores. Each person cooks one day of the week. We eat mostly vegetarian meals, but the Rule of Benedict only prohibits the consumption of `four-footed animals,' so we may eat fish and fowl. We have two turkeys in the freezer right now. Marcus is cooking today, so we'll probably have Mexican food.

"But everybody has a special vocation too. Marcus woodworks, Gabriel is in charge of maintaining the vehicles, and Timothy is a good all-around handyman. I guess I'm in charge of the laundry," he notes wryly.

What about funding?

"The church helps support us. And we get donations. And our craft sales help, especially Marcus's woodworking. He has a backlog of commissions from well-to-do people in Santa Fe."

I tell him that the monastery's library is a real asset.

"Yes, it is," he agrees, staring out the window of the laundry room, thinking. Then, without my prompting, he adds, "But this is not an intellectual place. No, not really an intellectual place. Though some here value the mind. Both Stephen and Timothy are very well-read. Timothy is a delight. An old-time monk. He simply glows with the Lord. And he's at peace with himself. You can see that. He's also very funny. We've become good friends in the time I've been here."

As he seems willing to talk about the other monks, I ask about their backgrounds.

"Marcus graduated from seminary. And William too, I think. Both of them became monks shortly after they got out of school, and both have spent sixteen or seventeen years now in monasteries. They're not worldly men," he says matter-of-factly.

"William's leaving, did you know that?" he continues, musing aloud. "Tomorrow morning. Seventeen years in monasteries, including seven here, and he's leaving. He says he wants a more activist ministry, so he's going to help a friend of his in Winnipeg who's starting a community worship center. I don't understand William. I don't think he knows what he wants," Richard says without explaining what he means, although it seems perfectly reasonable to me that a man still young might want to experience more of the world after seventeen years of cloistered devotion.

What about political or community involvement on the part of the monks, either locally or, through the church, farther afield.

"Not much really. Monasteries, of course, are not primarily political institutions. But we keep up with current events through magazines and newspapers. We don't get television or radio out here. Because of the monastery's isolation, it would be difficult to have regular interaction with any other community. This place is isolated," he says again with a certain amount of relish.

Gabriel appears in the door to ask if he may borrow the truck Richard has been using in order to jump-start another one.

"I hope I do it right," he says to me with a shrug. "They just put me in charge of vehicles two weeks ago."

Gabriel seems bewildered by his new duties. He does not strike me as someone with innate mechanical ability.

Richard asks him the name of the postulant who left the monastery last year.

Gabriel thinks for a minute. “I think his name was Jim. Yeah. Jim Baca.”

Richard turns to me, smiling. “He completed his postulancy, then left to tell his girlfriend that he was going to take his vows and remain at the monastery. Well, before he could tell her, she told him that she was leaving him—beat him to the punch—and we haven’t seen him since.”

Gabriel cackles. “Yeah, if they see their girlfriends, they’re gone. The world gets ’em.”

As Gabriel leaves, Timothy drops off an old, filthy jump suit with straw and twigs hanging on it.

Richard laughs. “Timothy gets more mileage out of clothes than anybody I know. He gives new meaning to the words ‘monastic poverty.’”

I ask about the number of monks who have resided at the monastery over the years.

“They were up to eleven at one time, but we’re down to six now, counting myself and Christian, who’s in Rome studying for the priesthood. And Stephen is here less and less of the time. He’s very busy these days.”

Although Richard doesn’t say so, I get the impression that Stephen would like to leave. Over the long term, living out here would be a wearing endeavor, regardless of the vigor of your spiritual commitment. Visiting is another matter altogether.

“This is a beautiful, wondrous place,” he says. “It really is. People drag in here looking absolutely beat—the world’s got their number. They come here, some Catholic, some not, some not even Christian”—and here I feel him look at me out of the corners of his eyes—”to stay a week or ten days. And they leave revived and invigorated, ready to face it all over again. You can see it in their faces. This is a magical place.”

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After sext and main meal—enchiladas, beans, rice, and flour tortillas—during which Marcus reads aloud from a more programmatic, less provocative book called *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, I spend an hour in the gift shop at the guest house, inspecting the wares. An aphorism, painstakingly inscribed in a piece of sandstone leaning against the outside wall, sets the context and mood: “Crafts speak of an age when dignity lay in silence and beauty in subtlety.”

Inside are displays and arrangements of crucifixes and small icons, incense and censers, homemade greeting cards, Pueblo Indian pottery, and shawls and scarves woven by a monk named Jeremy, evidently now gone. A binder holds photos of Marcus’s furniture, the work of a craftsman’s hands. The selection of books includes, in addition to a Paulist Press series called *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, an anthology titled *Poets of Nicaragua* and several volumes of poetry by Daniel Berrigan. And many books by Thomas Merton, the famous modern interpreter of monastic life. On a table near the door I find a typed sheet containing an excerpt from an article Merton wrote in 1968 about the recently established Monastery of Christ in the Desert. In that article he said:

> The monastic life in Christianity is a life of hope and hardship, of risk and penance in the sense of *metanoia*, a complete inner revolution, renunciation of ease and privilege in order to work with one's hands, in the insecurity of a place remote from one's original home and even from civilization itself. . . .
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> [The monastery] remains a sanctuary where both monks and retreatants, Christians, believers in other faiths and those with no religious belief at all may experience something of that `peace which the world cannot give.' But even if no one else knew of the existence of such a place, the monastery would still fulfill the purpose of its existence by singing the praise of God in the wilderness. . . .
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> [The Monastery of Christ in the Desert] seeks only to keep alive the simplicity of Benedictine monasticism: a communal life of prayer, study, work and praise in the silence of the desert where the word of God has always been best heard and most faithfully understood.

On another table an open wicker basket contains several hundred dollars in cash and personal checks. A sign above the table requests that guests calculate the total amount of their purchases, add state sales tax according to a posted tax table, and make their own change.

Before leaving, I peruse the guest register. During the last two years about seven hundred people have visited the monastery. Although California and Colorado are well represented, more of the visitors have been local, coming from the small Hispanic towns that dot the mountainous countryside of northern New Mexico: Ojo Sarco, Ojo Caliente, Gallina, Coyote, Cañones, Canjilon, Tierra Amarilla. I don't recognize any names, but as I am about to leave, my eyes fasten on the signature of a woman who came to the monastery from Santa Fe last Easter Sunday. I smile at her name and hope that the person is as lovely as it is. I smile at the name of Angelica Luz.

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After vespers and light meal, after compline, after darkness has overtaken the canyon and the monks have retired to their individual cells, I go for a long walk out the deserted entrance road. Although the surface was sloppy during the warm afternoon, it is frozen solid now, providing good traction and easy progress. The nighttime air is as clear and cold as ice, and innumerable stars glitter sharply overhead, each a pricking in my eye. Orion dominates the southern sky, and a moon one night past full rises over the mesa, its light reflecting off the snow and illuminating the landscape in ghostly brilliance. Across the white surface of a snowy flat, the dark shapes and shadows of juniper and piñon trees seem to conceal wonderful, terrifying mysteries. The world is soundless but for the steady crunching of my footsteps and, where the road passes close enough to its banks, the rush of the river. At one point I hear, far off, a spall of sandstone clatter in the talus, probably pried loose by moisture freezing in a hairline crack in the cliff.

A silent world of rock, snow, and stars. An ethereal, inhuman realm. One that impresses on me, as might be expected, the immensity and exquisite beauty of creation and, at the same time,

its frightening impersonality. Forces me to confront the "benign indifference of the universe," as Camus put it. My thoughts, however, are not all so rarefied. As I walk farther and farther along the road, I find myself drawn back, as if by some strange gravity, to our tiny planet, the only home we will ever know—the place where we were born, where we carry on the private struggles that are the measure of our human lives, and where we will die; and earthbound again, I find myself melancholy and cathartically self-indulgent, taking advantage of this peaceful moment to remember long-ago nights in Chaco Canyon, a person I loved there who is gone forever, and a time when the world was a heartbeat younger and life simpler and all things seemed possible.

Late at night I make my way back into the cold, silent compound, back into my cell—dark but for the moonlight filtering through the window curtain—and slip into my sleeping bag without so much as striking a match.

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Upon waking I begin to pack. After seeing the road yesterday afternoon, I've decided to get an early start before the slop thaws. Although the morning is gray and cold, breaks in the clouds promise another warm afternoon. I load the car, then walk slowly back to the chapel to spend a final few minutes in its sanctuary. Sitting on my now-customary stool, I study the image of Christ on the southeastern wall, his face tortured and redemptive. The interior space over which he presides seems empty and eerily quiet. As when I arrived, the monks are again invisible. I leave the payment for my room and meals in the wicker basket in the gift shop.

My car cranks and warms slowly, and I begin the long drive back to Albuquerque. The road is frozen and deserted, making for easy passage and leaving me free to enjoy the landscape and reflect on my visit. I think mostly about Marcus and William, two men my own age who have spent all of their adult years in isolated monastic communities, their lives devoted to God and devoid of the pleasures and complications of normal human society. During their long days of labor and solitude, what thoughts occupy their minds and what feelings their hearts? Can I, so different from them, even imagine such things? I think about William, leaving this morning for a new life in Winnipeg. How will he respond to the perils and temptations of the world? How will his experiences change him? Once he is gone, will he ever return to this Edenic place? This place of innocence and possibility?

As the road emerges from the canyon and crosses the new culvert over the arroyo, I remember again the cool, damp September morning seven years ago when, coming the other direction, I stopped my car and got out to examine the stream flowing across the road in the bottom of this same arroyo. At the time I was on month-long furlough from my job in Chaco, feeling young and unencumbered, on my way to visit friends in Colorado. As I stood on the embankment, in the process of deciding not to continue, a brown Honda Civic station wagon pulled up and stopped behind my car, and I turned and walked back to talk to the driver.

She rolled down her window as I approached. She was a pretty woman in her early thirties, with creamy skin, green eyes, and shoulder-length hair the color of oak wood. And wearing a dark

green wind parka, a beige turtleneck sweater, and blue jeans. Her car was packed full, with boxes and clothes piled up in back.

We began to talk, first about the road and the prospects for making it to the monastery, and then about other things: the monastery itself; Chaco, where she had never visited but wanted to; the fact that she was leaving that morning for Montana after having spent the summer in Santa Fe. Moving back, she said. And something about a man—either leaving or returning to him. She spoke vaguely, and I wasn't sure which.

"I try to come out here every Sunday," she said. "Sometimes I take mass with the brothers, sometimes I just wander off by myself. I think this is my favorite place in the world. I come out here when I need to think things through."

She looked down and smiled self-consciously. "I need to get to the monastery this morning."

Soon after we began to talk, she turned off her car's engine. In the mouth of the canyon, with the sandstone walls looming over us, the morning was suddenly very quiet and still, sepulchral. As I stood by her car in my sweatshirt, I kept my hands in my pockets to warm them, and as we spoke, our breath left wisps of vapor hovering momentarily in the damp air. The smell of sage enveloped us.

There was something intimate about our surroundings and our conversation, and something vulnerable about her. Her cheeks were downy—a child's—her voice quiet and brittle. But she wasn't afraid of me, wasn't apprehensive, as she had a right to be, meeting a strange man on a deserted road. On the contrary, she seemed to sense, as I did, that there was something mutual between us, a preexisting connection. And that somehow our meeting wasn't merely accidental. How else explain our presence on the road that morning, the myriad invisible forces that had brought each of us there, the complementary nature of our genders? She looked me in the eyes as we spoke, and I thought about leaning down and kissing her, brushing the down on her cheek with my lips.

We talked for twenty or thirty minutes before our conversation lulled. I asked her then if she was going to continue out the road. Yes, she said, staring distractedly through the windshield, she needed to get to the monastery.

Then she turned her head toward me partway and looked up shyly. "I have a tow rope," she said, smiling. "Let's go together. If we get stuck, we can pull each other out."

I looked up the canyon, considering what she said, and for a moment the world was full of possibility, and I almost answered yes, yes, of course, let's go together . . . But I was due in Boulder that evening, and I had bad feelings about the road ahead. The first three miles had been sloppy, and the mud would only get worse as it wound upriver. So I told her I wasn't going, that the venture seemed too risky, but that I would wait to make sure she got across the arroyo before I turned around. And I smiled at her then, sharing the promise of the moment.

I walked back to my car and moved it off to the side, and she passed by on my right. As I stood on the embankment, she drove slowly down into the arroyo, maneuvered her car into the stream, and forded it. She revved the engine to climb out. As she accelerated up the opposite

embankment, on her way, she leaned out of the window and looked back and waved. She smiled and shouted something to me. She smiled and waved.

"Piece of cake," she said.

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