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A JOKE BUT NOT A JOKE

by

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Jason parked at the brook and started his last beer of the day. He thought of all the needy people in the world, then of the the lucky ones like himself, who had beer to drink and a truck to sleep in and friends to work for. Moonlight rippled on the brook. Saint Francis would have received the stigmata on a night like this. Jason shut his eyes and saw the saint in his humble cassock, the back of his head shaved, hands raised to a hologram of the crucifix. Surely he'd been praying for the downtrodden and hadn't sought his own glory. Jason finished the beer and slid down from the truck. He knelt on the ground. He whispered, *Let me be like you, Saint Francis*. This wasn't funny. The tiniest sign, a scratch, even some discoloration, would have presented an overwhelming challenge. He

raised his hands to the sky, palms out to receive. He dared himself. Maybe just one of the five? One from the four nails driven through hands and feet, one from the lance cut between the ribs? Another bad joke. The stigmata were bestowed upon the devout, not the half-hearted, not the deluded or deranged who starved their way into visions and willed or faked the wounds. Inside the truck cap he inspected his hands under the dome light. Nothing, naturally.

Jason zipped himself into his sleeping bag and bent his body around buckets of tools and recyclables. He'd been sleeping in the truck for weeks now. A house sit would turn up, but he wouldn't pray for it. No self respecting saint would ask God for a bodily comfort. Jason's prayer tonight took the form of a remembrance, how he and Millie lived in that cabin on Larry Moore's orchard. How they'd pruned together and painted houses and did odd jobs when nothing else was available. Jason heard the brook whisper through the truck bed and curled up as if he and Millie were sleeping together. He pictured their days of raking leaves, stacking wood, climbing apple trees, all before the cancer took her down. He nursed her until she died then moved out of the cabin and never took a place of his own again.

In the morning he stopped at the general store. Jean Darsie had set out the coffee and muffins and was sitting on a high stool watching the classic movie channel. Jason went directly to the bathroom and gave himself a sponge bath. Jean didn't mind.

"Still sleeping by the brook?" she asked, her voice hoarse from the chemo. Jean had ovarian cancer but seemed as lively as ever. She opened the store every morning at six and worked a full shift in a pulled down cap to cover her hair loss. Time and the cancer had squared a once heart-shaped face which now displayed prominent moles on

each cheek. Jason remembered when she was young and smooth skinned, sunbathing by the brook, flat on a rock with her bikini top off. That was how long he'd been living here.

"It's temporary," he said.

"The cold weather's coming."

"I'll find something."

"You ought to have your own place, you know that."

"That's what everybody says."

Jean let it go. Jason's refusal to change his ways was an endless topic of discussion among his friends. Everyone wanted him to have a permanent place, to pay taxes and sign up for government benefits, to drink less beer, to charge more for his labor. Jason would have none of it, and his friends had come to accept that, unless he didn't have a house to sit. Then they tried to push.

Jason drew himself a small coffee as a way to drop the subject. He added milk then drank half the container and filled it again. Jean knew that he took a cup and a half and paid for a cup, but this was her way of giving. Jason put two dollars on the counter and took a muffin. That would last for the day. Later on he'd visit his friend, Tim, who usually had leftovers. If not, he didn't need to eat.

Jason sipped his coffee and studied the movie with its old time Hollywood types, men with pencil moustaches and women in silk blouses buttoned to the neck, the dialog witty and fast. To please Jean he made a remark about how the old films were better than the new ones. The old films kept her spirits up, and Jason liked to encourage her interest. He was disappointed that she hadn't said, as usual, 'They don't make them like that any

more.' Maybe she was losing energy. Jason had never told Jean that Millie died from the same kind of cancer. That wouldn't have helped.

"Do you need anything?" he asked.

"I'm fine."

"I can stack your wood."

"That's so nice, but my son's coming over."

"Any time," Jason said. "You don't have to pay me."

"Where are you working today?" Jean asked.

"In the kitchen."

"How's it going there?"

"Crowded."

"How many these days?"

"Now, well over a hundred. Two years ago it was never more than thirty or forty."

"Sons of bitches," Jean said.

Jason drove to town and parked at the First Baptist Church. The shelter was in the church basement and so was the kitchen. The shelter was closing now and the homeless were filing out, some with containers of coffee dispensed at the door as a strategy to get them moving so the room could be prepared for the noon meal. The shelter could house about three dozen, and the basement floor was taken up with mattresses. There was a separate room for women. The homeless flowed onto Main Street with their backpacks and plastic bags, a few pushed supermarket carts. The men were bearded or unshaven, caps pulled tight in the cool morning, their clothing layered for warmth. There were a few women, familiar faces like the men, all known by the police and at the library where they

would read and catnap in the heat of a south facing window. Budget cuts had forced the library to open later in the day now, so the homeless headed for the malls where they could wander in the box stores or sit in fast food places.

Jason waited in the truck. One of the homeless women had white-blonde hair pinned back with pink barrettes. She carried a shopping bag in each hand. Her name was Abby, and at noon meals Jason tried to connect with her by offering bigger helpings when she came through the line. He would hold the serving spoon over her plate and wordlessly ask if she wanted more, a signal she always ignored. Despite the dusty and wrinkly look she was handsome, her face unblemished and well featured. Her pale but brilliant white skin, which matched her hair, reminded Jason of the porcelains he'd seen in Florence as an art student. Working in the kitchen, Jason came to understand the homeless. Their damage was total. They muttered and trembled, they displayed facial scars or twisted features from injuries or birth defects, they depended on drugs, they seemed ready to implode from anger or depression or voices inside the brain. Jason knew about these voices because he heard them when he was a teenager and his parents committed him to a mental hospital.

Jason stepped out of his truck and waved tentatively at Abby. She ignored him and continued on, lugging her shopping bags like buckets of water. He watched until she blended into the file, then he let himself into the basement with a pass key. The room had a small stage and an upright piano at one end. The night volunteer had gone home and Jason threw on the lights and went around pulling up the shades. The air was pungent with the odors of the unwashed. Jason told himself that the smell was something Saint

Francis would have tolerated and even welcomed. He dragged the mattresses into one corner of the room and stacked them up, not holding his breath against the dust clouds.

Dottie Rouse came in and turned on the exhaust fan. She was a short, solid looking woman who spoke with a rough German accent. “I don’t know how you can stand the smell,” she said.

“I’m trying to save electricity.”

“You always tell me that, but people have to work in here.”

Dottie was in her mid-seventies and had been supervising the noon meal at the church for years. Jason followed her into the walk-in cooler and picked up a carton of chicken legs and thighs which he carried into the kitchen. Dottie followed with a box of hot dogs. More volunteers came in, all older women and church members. Jason was the only male and the youngest volunteer and so the heavy work fell to him. He began setting up the trestle tables. Ray Crowder, a retired lawyer, showed up with donations from the supermarkets, day old bread and rolls, containers of milk with expired dates, a crate of acorn squash – all of it too bruised to sell and partly rotten, but still salvageable. “Just cut away the bad parts,” Dottie said. She didn’t waste anything. After the tables were up Jason carried out the folding chairs. There wasn't enough seating now, and people were told to leave as soon as they'd eaten. After setting each place with a napkin, knife, and fork, Jason helped Dottie cut the legs and thighs into separate pieces. She coated the roasting pans with spray-on margarine and after packing in the chicken she sprinkled it with salt, pepper, and paprika. Everyone worked quickly now. Someone set up the free table with the day old bread and whatever dry cereal and canned food could be spared from the cupboard. There was never enough for the free table. Food donations from

charities were swept up as soon as they came in, and donations from food drives tended to lack proteins like peanut butter and canned tuna. Even spaghetti was in short supply. People donated Macaroni and Cheese, popcorn, and instant soups full of salt. That was their concept of the poor.

Using a meat cleaver and hammer, Jason began splitting open the squash. He scooped out the seeds, cut away the rotten parts, then quartered the halves and placed them in a colander pot to steam. He put another pot on slow boil for the hot dogs, which would be cooked if they ran out of chicken.

Toward noon the people gathered outside the door in a line stretching to the sidewalk and along Main Street. These were the usual homeless but also the unemployed and working poor. Just before mealtime the Pastor came down from upstairs accompanied by an old man in a faded shirt with broken buttons and a guitar with a length of clothesline for a strap. This was Cowboy Bob, who'd never been west of Vermont. The brim of Bob's straw hat was folded up on both sides and the curve of the crown from front to back gave the impression of a cowpoke who'd labored hard in the prairie sun. A volunteer opened the outside door and the crowd pushed in, halted by Dottie at the serving table. The help also gathered, Jason and the other women who'd prepared the meal.

“Cowboy Bob will sing Grace,” the Pastor said.

Bob strummed the guitar and began a tuneless version of the standard meal prayer, *We thank the Lord for these thy gifts*. The volunteers bowed their heads and folded their hands reverently as the line from outside swelled and curved like a worm pushing into a wall. Jason said to himself, *Thank the Lord for what? For your poverty,*

for the job you don't have, for your twisted face or mental defects, for your inability to be hired? Thank God for the voices you hear while you wander through WalMart?

Jason took his place in the serving line next to Dottie, who always managed the main ingredient. She had no qualms about refusing anyone who wanted a thigh instead of a leg. "You take what we have," she would say. Jason served the squash, which he'd mixed with apple sauce for flavor. Abby came through toward the end of the meal, but with the press of people, and with Dottie next to him, Jason couldn't offer a second helping with his usual gesture. He wondered whether she could share her life with anyone, including him, whether she could be like Millie and live with him in other peoples' houses and work where he worked. And if she could talk, what would come out? The disconnected thoughts of the mentally ill? Or something coherent. Jason still believed that someday she'd acknowledge him. Each time they crossed paths his soul went out and he imagined saving her from the homeless life.

He felt Dottie's elbow in his ribs.

"Cook the hot dogs, we're running out."

Jason put three dozen dogs into the boiling water, two per person. He microwaved some frozen rolls and came back out with the hot dogs inside of the rolls. He brought out squeeze tubes of ketchup and mustard. More people were coming. Dottie took Jason's place on the line while he cleared the tables to make new settings. Abby was cutting the meat from a leg bone with a butter knife.

Jason said, "I'm sorry I couldn't offer you seconds today."

Abby continued working on the chicken leg, managing to isolate a sliver of meat and pushing that aside with both utensils as if it wasn't supposed to be eaten. Jason

wanted to offer her a hot dog, but that was against the rules. He wanted to say that there wasn't much chicken on a leg bone but that wouldn't have helped.

“Next time,” he said.

When she didn't answer Jason said, “I'll try to give you more next time.”

“Back off!” she whispered. “Do you hear me?” She spoke without looking up.

Jason shouldn't have been surprised. Many of the homeless were angry, and the women could be as surly as the men. Despite her anger, he was encouraged by the coherence. The 'Do you hear me?' meant that she could finish a thought. He wiped the table around her, then went away.

After finishing at the kitchen Jason stopped at Tim's shop. Tim was feeding a planer which screeched every time a board went through. He was wearing ear plugs and safety glasses and Jason didn't want to disturb him while the machine was running. He waited just inside the doorway as the planer peeled off layers of wood the thickness of tissue paper. Jason loved Tim's shop and often slept here in cold weather. The shop was always warm and he loved the smell of wood shavings and the honest feel of the fancy chisels Tim used for furniture work.

Tim turned off the planer switch and the machine wound down as Jason went around to the front. The humming sound diminished and the planer slowed to a halt. Tim removed his ear plugs and glasses. He was one of Jason's oldest friends, and now he lifted his cap and wiped his bald scalp with a handkerchief. He studied Jason and shook his head.

“This is your lucky day.”

“What does that mean?”

“First tell me where you slept last night.”

“By the brook.”

“You could have slept here.”

“I like the brook. I have good dreams there. The water puts me to sleep.”

“And this winter, when it gets cold?”

“I’ll find a house sit.”

“You still don’t want your own place?”

Jason didn’t need to answer, and Tim couldn’t press an argument he’d already lost. This was Jason’s lucky day because something had turned up. Tim began stacking the planed boards on a rack. They were cherry wood for a cabinet he was making for some friends in Massachusetts. Jason knew about these friends. The husband was a judge, the wife a public defender.

“They need help,” Tim said. “She was in a car accident.”

“Bad?”

“A head-on at low speed,” Tim said. “She messed up her hip and her head was thrown back so fast that she now has a mild concussion. She’s lost some of her memory and motor skills. They need somebody down there.”

Tim waited for Jason to respond. He’d told the friends about Jason already, but he wasn’t sure this would work. Jason needed his privacy. He’d sleep in snow to preserve it. He had his routine, work, sleep, a certain amount of alcohol.

“What do you think?” Tim asked.

“I don’t know.”

“You don't have a place now. This would be full time. You live there, help her do what she can't right now. The husband's not a bad guy, but he doesn't have the patience.”

Tim saved the best part of his pitch for last. “You wouldn't have to stay in the house with them. They have a shed, kind of a greenhouse where you can see the stars and live in saint-like solitude. It's set off from the house so you'd be completely private.”

“How long do they want me?”

“Until she can function on her own. Right now she can't drive a car and can't work because her long term memory got messed up. She also limps. One thing they need is somebody who can cook and garden.”

Tim looked down at Jason's sneakers repaired with duct tape, at his paint stained work pants and the flea market shirt with the buttons missing. Jason's chest hairs were showing.

“Find some decent clothes and go down to meet them. See if you like the set up. Not that money matters to a saint in waiting, but they'll pay you more than you charge the people up here. They're firm on that.”

“So you told them all about me?”

“Not everything, but your soup kitchen job is a plus. Diana thinks you sound interesting, that's her word. She was working as a public defender so maybe she's a kindred spirit, and don't worry, I left out the Saint Francis part.”

“You know I don't care.”

“I'll let you explain it when you take the job.”

Jason drove down to the Longmeadow home, a clapboard colonial with extensions on either side and sitting well off a secondary road. A perimeter wall of dry

laid stone held border shrubs and flowers which screened a patio and pool. The house occupied a larger acreage with several old variety apple trees which Jason observed needed a good pruning. When he entered the living room, Paul, the husband, was gripping the handles of a wheelchair in which Diana sat with both hands on the crook of an aluminum cane. She had a narrow, athletic face, and her upper arms showed tendons along the front. Her reddish, gray streaked hair was pulled into a short pony tail that stuck up like the stem of a squash. After looking Jason up and down she set the wheelchair brake and pushed the foot rests aside with her cane. With both hands on the cane crook she stood up, twisting away from Paul when he tried to help. The gesture was abrupt, and Paul exchanged a look with Jason to register the level of Diana's frustration. With a second twist of her shoulder to further avoid Paul, she limped toward the kitchen and motioned for Jason to follow.

“Use that cane,” said Paul.

“I’m through with it,” she said, and turned to Jason. “Can you cook?”

“I can cook,” Jason replied, as he entered the large kitchen space with a ceramic tile floor, stainless steel appliances, and a spacious butcher block counter. An overhead rack held glasses and cookware, all within reach.

“Can you use a chef's knife? Can you dice an onion?”

“I work in a soup kitchen,” Jason said. “I can do that.”

“Saute? Braise?”

“If he works in a kitchen I'm sure he can do that,” Paul said impatiently. He was small and trim, bald on top and shaved clean on the sides. He had the healthy glow of someone who exercised regularly.

Ignoring Paul, Diana said, “Tim told us you're a house sitter. He told me how many families depend on your help. What will you do about them if you decide to stay here? What about your kitchen job?”

“I could always take a leave.”

She said, “That’s perfect!” and moved toward him until they were so close that she almost fell onto him. She didn’t seem to care that Paul was in the room, and Jason realized that she wanted much more than somebody who could dice an onion.

“Tim said that you garden,” Paul said.

“He thinks we need somebody for that too,” Diana said to Jason as she moved toward the kitchen. “Paul wants to dig up all the plants and shrubs around the stone wall, a job that doesn’t need to be done.”

“They’re all overgrown, and it’s a good project for Diana.”

“He thinks working in dirt will fix my brain.”

“There’s nothing wrong with her brain,” Paul said.

“It still doesn’t need to be done.” She stopped and turned, speaking directly to Jason. “We can just cut everything back if it makes him feel better.”

“No problem either way,” Jason said, realizing he’d just been hired without his or even Paul’s consent. He looked from one to the other and wondered if he should work for people with such obvious differences.

“Fine,” said Paul. “Any way you two want it. I'm just trying to help.”

Diana said to Jason, “This is what I need, somebody to do what I can't right now, drive a car, use the stove, shop for food, even carry a plate. You can garden whenever I don't need you. Your real job is to do everything I do, but with me at your side.”

“We need somebody,” Paul said, explaining that he was a family court judge whose work required him to spend long hours in the courtroom and to read and write every night.

“Don’t think he’s complaining about his work,” Diana said. “It’s all he likes to do, except play racquetball and follow the Yankees.”

Paul took Jason out to the garden shed, set on the far side of the orchard and hidden from the house. The shed had a Plexiglas roof and glass all around. It smelled inside of moist soil and fertilizer, and a long table held a row of glazed ceramic pots. Paul showed Jason a wall heater which kept the space well above freezing, a reading chair, dormitory fridge, and a cot covered with a quilt, extra blankets, and pillows.

“What do you think?”

“It looks fine,” Jason said.

“Will you be comfortable in here? Tim told us how much you value your privacy. Both Diana and I can understand that, and it’s clear that she wants you to take the job.”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

“Do you think you can work with Diana? You see how she was in there. The lack of patience with anything I said? Did you see all that?”

“She’s probably frustrated because of the accident.”

“I hope it’s temporary because I’m losing patience myself. That’s why we need your help.”

Jason remembered Tim’s description of Paul as “not a bad guy,” and he wondered what that meant. He listened as Paul talked about money, full time pay for seven days a week, flexible hours at double the rate Jason charged back home. Jason was still taking

everything in, trying to balance this uncertain situation against the comforts before him, a private place with a view of the sky, a person who needed help.

“We could really use somebody, and Tim gave you a great recommendation.”

“I’ll give it a try,” Jason said, and they shook hands.

He took a leave from the soup kitchen and moved to Longmeadow under the condition that he'd stay until cold weather set in. By then he would be needed back in Vermont. He spent early mornings in the gardens, then helped Diana for the rest of the day. True to her word, she had no need for the wheel chair or the cane, and was able to get in and out of the car without help. Jason drove her everywhere. They shopped for food and worked side by side in the kitchen. From her recipe files he recited the ingredients for her favorite dishes in hopes of jogging her memory. He was patient with her attempts to replace pots and glassware on the overhead rack. At first they would hold the items together and he would guide her hand. When she insisted on doing things alone, he stood close by. At times they could have been dancing, heads and hands together. Her closeness excited him, and he tried to tell himself that all this touching was simply her desire to improve.

On weekdays they ate lunch together, sometimes at home, but more often in the coop where they shopped for food. Over second and third cups of coffee they spoke about their lives. Little by little, Jason told her everything, his breakdown at seventeen, the year in art school where he met Millie, and then her cancer. From Millie he learned that real love was giving and sacrifice, and this led him to Saint Francis.

“You’re a caregiver just like Saint Francis,” Diana said. “That’s why I’m attracted to you.”

Before Jason could respond she said, “Don’t you want to know what I mean by that?” She looked around to make sure she wouldn’t be heard, then leaned toward him. “Let me tell you a secret. Before you came to Longmeadow I was going to get in my car and drive away to some coast, east or west it didn’t matter. I was right on the edge, a bag packed and my bank account emptied. If that car accident hadn’t happened I would have done it. You came and saved a life that I still don’t want.”

“Did Paul know what you were planning?”

“I never told him. The accident happened and that changed everything.”

“And the kind of life you want?”

“Something like yours.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Maybe not exactly like yours because I’d need a roof to count on. But right now all I know is that I want you to stay as long as possible. I don’t want you to leave me because you’re keeping me sane.” She stretched her hand across the table and took one of his, squeezing it, kneading his fingers in a gesture so explicit that Jason blushed and pulled his hand away. He studied his salad and fiddled with the food he couldn’t finish, shredded root veggies with a scatter of tofu cubes. He wanted to ask what she saw in him, and whether he was just a catalyst for her own dissatisfaction, but that would worsen the situation. He was in deep already and would have to keep his distance, or leave.

As the days went by Diana revealed more about her marriage. She’d met Paul at law school. He was two years ahead and at the top of his class. She’d been drawn to his intelligence and accurate perceptions about people. He’d been an attentive father, but

now, as their children were grown and out of the house, he immersed himself in his work and they'd grown apart.

“Paul's not like you. He's changed since I met him. He's too involved with his own work. He couldn't handle it when my body failed. Sure, a little gardening and your memory comes back! This really means that he can't give up his routine. He was an only child, spoiled by his mother, he admits that. She had his dinner on the table at the same time every night, his laundry done, his clothing cleaned and pressed. I don't need to elaborate. He was an attentive father when the kids were still at home, but when they left he withdrew into his own world. You're not like that. You engage people.”

“I have my own world too,” Jason said.

“But your sensitivity to others is your world. That's how you live. Paul doesn't have that quality any more.”

“He's a family court judge. I'm sure he's aware of others.”

“I'm sorry for complaining,” she said, holding his eyes in a way that belied her words.

As Diana's memory and coordination improved, Jason tried to keep at least a physical distance. With the garden work done they were left with shopping and cooking, and Jason followed orders without prolonging any of his tasks. He drove, he carried, he spoke less about himself at lunch time, and at night he returned to the shed when the dishes were done. Sensing his withdrawal, Diana became more directive, almost hostile, especially in the kitchen where her favorite recipes were coming back. Jason now had to be even more exact, from the size of the dice to the measure of ingredients and the cooking temperatures. She became quick to admonish, but he never protested, in fact

smiled as he peeled and chopped because her willfulness was a sign of her independence. He loved pleasing her despite whatever ulterior motives she might have.

Every night they served the meal at seven o'clock when Paul arrived fresh from the racquetball court. He kept a strict routine, up at dawn to the click of a preset coffee machine, then to his study to prepare for a day on the bench, resolving custody battles, rendering opinions and meting out punishment, decisions thought out in his study.

One night after dinner Paul said, "The gardening job looks great."

"Jason did most of it."

"Diana helped," Jason said.

"That's fine."

"I'm glad you're happy now," said Diana. "That was what you wanted, to fix my brain."

"Please, there's nothing wrong with your brain."

"He thinks I'm irrational," she said to Jason.

"I never said that!"

"Maybe not, but it's what you're thinking."

"You don't know what I'm thinking. All I said was that I liked the gardening job."

"And I said I'm glad you're happy."

"I'm glad *you're* happy," he answered while moving to the doorway, once more pleading wordlessly with Jason to acknowledge Diana's irrationality.

When he left the room Diana said, "Did you see that? Did you see how condescending he was?"

“I see that you're both angry.”

“He just wants everything to go smoothly so he doesn't have to step out of his world. Now he'll be upstairs all night, and do you know what? I like it that way. I'm just sorry you have to witness this, but you don't seem to care anyway.”

They were standing on opposite sides of the counter. Diana placed her elbows down and cradled her face in her hands. She waited for Jason to extend the conversation, and when he didn't she pleaded, “Don't you see what I'm going through and why you need to stay?”

“I see it, but it's between the two of you.”

“No, you're in it too, no matter how much you might deny it.”

Jason tried to understand how a woman like Diana could be attracted to someone like himself, technically homeless, with a twenty year-old truck and clothing from the secondhand store. A man over fifty with limited skills and a small footprint who'd built his life around a network of friends who gave him work and food and shelter. That night he sat in the shed and drank his beer, pleased that his alcohol consumption was way down since he'd been here. He couldn't very well maintain the old drip while driving Diana around or working with her in the kitchen. He drank less, but he'd fallen in other ways. He and Diana were almost living together. Every weekday morning after Paul left for work she came outside and called him in for breakfast. He showered and shaved in a downstairs activity room, something done every day now. He came up to find the table set with French Press coffee and bowls of yoghurt topped with fruit and granola. Life was too good here, and he remembered something Millie had told him, that men were slow to

recognize other women's affections. Maybe he hadn't been that slow, but maybe it was time to leave before there was trouble.

The next day he was about to sauté some onion and garlic when she turned off the burner and slid the the pan away. She took the cutting board from his hands and tried to set it on the counter. When it fell to the floor she said, "Leave it!" and placed his hands round her neck. Eyes closed, she seemed to rise from under water as she met him for the kiss he knew was coming. She made an *Mmmmm!* sound as if tasting good food, then kicked the cutting board out of the way. Saying, "This is what you don't understand," she pushed him into the counter, and pressing her face against his she opened his mouth with her tongue. He gave in and gave back despite the cloak of fear that suddenly covered him. They were tongue to tongue, and Diana had that trick of melting into him like Millie had, melting until they were one.

"What does Saint Francis have to say now?" Diana asked.

"You know what he'd say."

"I want to go back with you to Vermont. When you leave I want to go with you."

Jason didn't answer.

"Say something!"

"It won't work. It can't."

"It will, you're just afraid."

For the rest of the evening they barely spoke, and when Paul retired and the kitchen was clean Jason went out to the shed. He rocked back and forth in his chair as if he could find the truth that way. For all those years since Millie died he'd mortified his flesh. Desire had ebbed like a tide, naturally and without regret. He'd loved Millie and

had taken her through the dignity she lost day by day and which he tried to convince her that she still possessed. To Hospice and morphine, all in that cabin heated with apple wood, the stove with its endless inhale, and finally the light in her eyes receding to the palest blue as she left the world. But here was Diana stirring the blood of desire as if Millie had never existed, as if what he had with Millie he could have again except that you get something like that only once. And if Millie couldn't have it then he didn't want it, and if Saint Francis could throw his naked body into a thicket of thorns to resist temptation, he could surely refuse an impulsive woman who didn't know what a good life she had.

She came out and asked him to sit by the pool.

“Don't let me have a sleepless night.”

They sat in two facing chairs. The night was chilly and Jason didn't want to look at her. He shifted his eyes from the empty pool with its coil of drain hoses at one end to the light in Paul's study. How much did he know, and what could Jason ever say to him?

In a low voice Diana said, “Do you think you'll ever change your life? Would you change it for me? I'd change mine for you. Is that so crazy? You see an image but you don't see me. You see an ex-professional and all the signs of wealth, somebody above your social class. Can you get over that? Can't you see that I'm no different than you, that I'm nobody special. I didn't have to be a lawyer. I could have been a waitress or a secretary. I could have worked in a greenhouse with dirt under my nails. So what's the problem?”

“The problem is the way I live.”

“Maybe I’m not the one who isn’t thinking straight. All that house sitting and Saint Francis business just means that you won’t let go. You want to suffer and avoid the responsibility of living.”

Jason wanted to jump out of the chair in response. It was *she* who hadn’t listened to *him*. Was his life an avoidance of responsibility? His desire to please her? His work to help others? The soup kitchen? His few pleasures and the awareness of a saint’s vow of poverty that he could barely approximate but still try to observe? Why was all this an avoidance of life? He realized that the qualities he most admired in Diana, her drive and determination, were those he found most threatening.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she said. “You want to escape, maybe even this minute. But if you leave I’ll follow you and Paul knows it because I already told him.”

The next morning Jason packed up before breakfast. Paul came out and said, “I’m not as bad as she makes me out. I’m not callous and unfeeling.”

Jason said, “I know,” and stuffed some clothing and a hand crank radio into a bucket that held his pruning tools. He’d been planning to work on the apple trees, but that was impossible now.

“I suppose she told you,” Paul said, picking up the bucket and sliding it onto the truck bed.

“That she’d follow me, and that she told you already?”

“What are you going to do?”

Jason climbed into the truck and said, “Nothing, go home.” As soon as he spoke those words their meaning blurred. Home was a town, and within that a barn or a wood shop. It was already too cold to sleep at the brook. As for the word ‘nothing,’ the

meaning of that wasn't clear either. What if she showed up in Vermont, or worse, followed him to Tim's place right now?

"I think she'll keep her word," Paul said.

Jason said, "Don't worry," and left it there. He wanted to apologize but couldn't find the words. Some saint! He'd prolonged those lunches. He'd let her sidle up against him in the kitchen, held her hand while hooking pots and pans onto the overhead rack. He didn't turn away when she kissed him and in fact had matched the kiss with his own. Now here was her husband in pain and what was he supposed to do about that? Talk to him about Saint Francis?

A few weeks later Diana sent him a letter at the general store. She was separating from Paul and wanted a meeting. Meanwhile Jason had found a house sit and was back at the soup kitchen two days a week. So readily had life resumed its old routine that he was able to paint those Longmeadow days into a still life. He threw himself into his work, morning to evening seven days a week. With winter coming on there was more than he could handle. Suddenly everyone needed him to tighten their houses, store grills and lawn furniture for the winter, stack wood and clear brush from the edges of fields to make for easier mowing. And with the cold weather came his favorite occupation, pruning apple trees.

He also liked his house sit, where he slept in a sun room with a view of the night sky. After starting the wood stove he would repeat the ritual at the brook, something he hadn't been able to do at Longmeadow despite the privacy. Now on those nights when he felt worthy of the saint he raised his palms to the sky, expecting nothing but happy to try. He fell asleep to thoughts of Millie and how they would put two ladders up on the same

apple tree to saw a limb – he was strong enough to climb with a chain saw then. After he made the undercut Millie would pull on the limb just hard enough so the saw wouldn't bind, then release it gently so it fell to the ground with minimum damage to the other branches. At the end of each day they gathered the cuttings into a burn pile, and every other year they lit the pile with a hay bale soaked in fuel oil. They burned in the dead of winter, always with snow on the ground, tending the fire through the night, drinking beer and throwing back the half burned cuttings as flames shot into the black, starry sky and gusts of skin-hurting wind fanned the fire to an angry blaze with a steamy smoke smelling of apples.

At the appointed hour, late morning, he waited in McDonald's. Diana was on her way, and it was no coincidence that Abby occupied a nearby booth with her shopping bags on the table. Jason stared until she looked up, then he turned away. He saw that she was talking to a Teddy Bear nestled inside one of the bags. This evidence discouraged him. How skillfully she'd carved that chicken bone with a butter knife, a sign of upbringing and probably education. She also cared for her appearance, displayed by those pink barrettes and a white down jacket that looked expensive even though soiled the color of dirty snow. She might be one of those with money somewhere, but seeing her speak to the Teddy, the notion that he could rescue her was more unrealistic than ever.

A scraping noise from outside alerted him to Diana's Lexus turning in so fast that its front end bottomed out. She parked next to his truck, pushed through the door, and limped toward his booth. Jason felt himself weaken, at the limp, yes, but also at her ability to move as if the limp only made her stronger. She slid into the booth and put both hands on the table. Her keys on a silver chain were wrapped around a wallet and cell

phone. She sat forward, lean and tan, her pony tail tightened with a rubber band. Jason worried that he might give in.

“I’m all packed.”

Jason said nothing even as she opened the wallet and thumbed through a wad of hundred dollar bills. “There’s more here,” she said, patting her vest. “Even more in my savings account.” She leaned forward. “Can’t you see that I want *you* and not just a change?”

He didn’t know whether that was true, but to challenge her would worsen the situation. “It won’t work” he said.

“It *can* work! We can rent a place. You can still have your life, but we can have a place of our own.”

“I don’t want a place of my own.”

“Why? Is it because of Paul? We talked it out. He’s sure I’ll come back, but he’s wrong.”

“Maybe he’s not wrong.”

She toyed with the keys, wrapping the chain around the phone and wallet one way and then the other. “You’re not even tempted?”

“I am tempted.”

She took a breath, looked around, and moved up in her seat. “You think you’re some Jesus out in the desert, don’t you, some saint who needs to punish himself.”

“Maybe I do.”

“You’re so full of maybes. You’re really saying that you’re afraid to change your life.”

“I’m choosing this life,” Jason said.

“You don’t deserve a better one, is that it?”

“Is that what you want, to give me a better life?”

“To give *us* a better life. What’s wrong with that”

“I don’t deserve any more than I have.”

“And how about me, what do I deserve?”

“More than I can give you.” Thinking that he’d won the argument, he looked over to Abby, who was now sleeping. Abby in her soiled jacket, Abby with her Teddy Bear, Abby so handsome yet doomed by some genetic flaw. He had no hope for Abby, but here was Diana with her fleece vest and a ton of money and yes he was tempted in the way any holy figure was tempted. And if he gave in? Slept with her – and he could visualize that - ate with her, paid his taxes? Collected what meager social security the government owed him? Yoghurt and fresh fruit for breakfast with granola on top, a mountain of nutrition. No more anchorite with someone else's house for his cave, no more mendicant with his begging bowl.

“Think about time,” Diana said. “Think about how much we have left and how best to use it. Wouldn't you like to spend it with someone who cares about you?”

“Yes, but it can’t work.”

“Don’t say that again!”

Diana raised her voice and Jason looked to see if anyone had heard her. Abby had closed her eyes. A fat man across the aisle chewed a mouthful of food and stared into nowhere. Jason turned to the parking lot where Diana's Lexus sat next to his pickup. He was happy to drive that old Toyota held together with flashing and pop rivets, an

inspection sticker scraped from a junkyard wreck, his radio antenna a wire clothes hanger. Diana's Lexus was a steel gray monster with some crazy voice response system and a TV screen on the dashboard with a GPS feature Jason had never mastered.

“You should never have hired me,” Jason said.

“You were cheap and had good recommendations.” She reached for his hand. He let her take it. “Don't be a pessimist. You need to see me as I am, not some dysfunctional accident victim from a rich town, not some ex-lawyer. I can work alongside you and make your life better.”

Jason pulled his hand away. How could he explain that *better* to her meant *worse* to him. Get into the system? Wasn't it better to live on leftovers, better to sleep in a place where he could hold his hands up to the sky even if it was unrealistic, better to preserve what he had with Millie?

“I can work with my hands,” she went on. “I can garden and paint and plaster too. My leg won't hold me back. If you make a life that way, we can do it together. We can have our own place. You won't have to house sit anymore.”

“And Paul?”

She pushed some buttons on her cell phone. Jason heard Paul say, “Where are you?”

“Talk to Jason.”

He took the phone but didn't know what to say.

“She wants to do it,” Paul said.

“I told her it wouldn't work,” Jason said, tired of saying the words that Diana now waved away as if clearing smoke from the air.

Paul said, "I can't tell you what to do. She's a free agent."

"That's no help."

"You're a free agent too. We both want what's best for her."

"Living with me? Living the way I live?"

"It's more like she'll make you live the way she lives. Maybe you can do that, and maybe you can't."

"What do *you* want?" Jason asked. He couldn't believe he was asking this question to a family court judge.

"I want her to come back. But I think she has to do this first. It won't work out, but she needs to have her chance."

He gave the phone back to Diana. She turned it off and said, "Well?"

"Your husband's the saint."

Diana said, "I need a coffee," and went to the counter. Jason studied a pair of crows in the parking lot hopping toward a trash bin and pecking at morsels on the way. They symbolized something but he didn't know what. Abby was asleep, and some wisps of hair having escaped the barrettes now floated free. He compared her to Diana, in her well fitting jeans, her hair pulled into that girlish pony tail with every strand in place. Paul was right. She would change his life. She would keep records of his work hours and increase his rate. They would eat greens and beans, chicken and fish, super grains and delicious pastas, lie under a duvet instead of on top, burn plenty of wood. Couldn't he just give in and forget the Saint Francis that everyone joked about, including himself? Couldn't he set Millie aside and forget his dubious vow of poverty?

Diana returned with her coffee, lifted the lid, and blew across the top as if to make a path for her next words. “That day in the kitchen,” she said.

Jason knew what she wanted him to say, that the rebirth of desire was the ultimate proof, but of what? He looked past Diana to Abby, awake now and waving a finger at the Teddy as if he'd been naughty. He turned back to Diana, who now ripped him with a searching gaze, and he thought of Millie's eyes when their color dimmed in those last moments. Diana's eyes were the opposite, dark and probing, intense and quick. They tried to strip him down to his bare motives as if she knew them but he didn't.

“So, will you live in other people's houses until you're too old to work? And when you can't barter your labor for shelter any more, what then?”

“What does anybody do? Just keep going somehow.”

“And that's your answer?” She replaced the lid on her coffee container, running a thumb all the way around for a seal. She couldn't have done that when they first met, but Jason didn't think it wise to point that out. He slid toward the aisle as a signal to get up, but she reached across and held him back.

“You think I'm irrational don't you, both you and Paul, as if I haven't recovered from the accident.”

“That's not it.”

“What is it then?” she whispered. “You kissed me, held me, wanted me. I felt it from you to me. You opened your mouth and let me inside, do you remember that? I felt your response from head to toe. Doesn't that mean something?”

Jason wanted to flee from her words, and Diana paused as if searching for the answer to her own question. “Oh, I forgot, Saint Francis.”

“I took care of you,” Jason said. “That's what you and Paul hired me for. What happened that day in the kitchen shouldn't have happened.”

He slid out of the booth and they went outside. A bright green duffel bag occupied the rear seat of the Lexus. Abby was crossing the parking lot and heading for Taco Bell next door. She was wearing new sneakers with pressure lights in the heels that blinked when she put her foot down.

“Look at that,” Diana said. She was holding the coffee container and the key chain in one hand. The other was thrust into her vest pocket and moving around as if clenching and unclenching a fist. “Do you know her?”

“She's one of the homeless around town.”

“You kept looking at her back there.”

“She comes to the soup kitchen.”

“But do you know her?”

“Not really.”

“Why did you keep looking at her?”

Jason didn't know what kind of a response Diana wanted so he said, “I wasn't sure whether she recognized me.”

Diana lifted her coffee container in Abby's direction almost as if toasting her. “It's obvious that you're more attracted to her than you are to me.”

Jason considered this remark as Abby made her way over the uneven ground to Taco Bell. He willed her not to fall as Diana lifted the coffee container to her lips and stared at him over the lid. She was waiting for his reaction, and when it didn't come she went on.

“Maybe you don't see it.” Her eyes flickered from Jason to Abby, now in the Taco Bell lot and gaining the highway.

“What don't I see?”

“That you always take the easy way.”

She opened her car door, set the coffee into a cup holder and used a grip handle to lift herself onto the driver's seat. “I don't think you have enough left,” she said. “Maybe it was Millie, and maybe it was something else, but you don't have enough for me.”

She pulled the door shut, started the motor, then lowered the window for a brief goodbye which Jason couldn't hear over the motor noise. She backed out, then circled the takeout line and accelerated onto the highway. She turned to look at Abby as she passed. Jason wondered what her ride home would be like. Probably angry but full of resolve. Tonight she and Paul would go out for dinner and talk about Jason the way his friends talked about him. They would try to figure out why he didn't have his own place, why he didn't get into the system, and whether Millie and his early breakdown had caused the fixation with Saint Francis. All that talk would change nothing. Abby would come to the soup kitchen and have no idea that she'd ended the story. Diana was going back to Paul, and Jason was rooted to the spot. His book was written. Now he could prune some apple trees and eat Tim's bean soup warmed up in the microwave. Tomorrow he'd awake at daybreak and see his breath but he wouldn't start the stove. He'd wash up with cold water, then drive to the general store to check on Jean and drink his morning coffee.
