



“My Mobile Home”

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The minute I stepped into the little room high above the Pacific Ocean, I knew I’d come home. A rabbit was scuffling through the undergrowth in my small walled garden. The sun was burning on the flat blue plate of the ocean, extending for fifteen miles far below. Birdsong rang out in the silence and then within me, as it never seemed to do elsewhere. For someone who had always found his deepest home alone – recovering whatever lay deeper than the chattering self that skittered through the world – the simple retreatant’s room in a hermitage high above the sea became the truest hearth I could imagine.

I know that solitude is not where we are meant to find our richest fulfillment. But I also recognize that one can’t bend the truth to fit one’s sense of right and wrong. I’m an only child; I grew up on planes, traveling between my parents’ home in California and monastic, medieval boarding schools in England. My nearest relative six thousand miles away, I came to find all the fun, the diversion, the sense of company and adventure I needed, alone. So to discover a place where solitude appeared to involve a dissolving of self, rather than a consolidation, and where isolation opened out upon a horizon as wide and radiant as the blue ocean all around, felt like coming upon the home that had been waiting for me since birth, thirty-three years before.

Eight months earlier my family “home” had burned to the ground in a forest fire. I’d sat in a car, trapped on our mountain road, and watched the flames systematically pick apart our living room, our library, my bedroom, everything I and my parents owned. When I walked up the road the following day, past exhausted firemen scattered along the sidewalk, I’d come upon a wasteland of ash – cars reduced to hubcaps, bronze statues nothing but debris – and then a vast emptiness where my life had been.

Fire is an antagonist, I came to feel; the devastation of everything I understood by a physical home made the flames associated with a hearth seem threatening, malign. There was a “he” at the center of “hearth,” and an “art,” but I could not for the life of me find a “we.”

Now, though, stepping into this simple room, which pulsed with everything that wasn’t there, I forgot about the past. The future, too. The many arguments (with myself and others) I’d spun out on the long drive up, my anxieties about next week, this ambition and that little idea: I was seeing the world with a transparency that felt like original sun. This was what I was when all thought of “I” was gone. And this was what the world looked like when I was truly inside it, wholly present, not clouding the scene with thoughts or projections.

I warmed my heart at the monastery – returning again and again – and knew that this was a hearth I could carry with me wherever I went. On a broken castle wall in Ethiopia one bright day at the end of December, I saw in my mind the Pacific Ocean stretched out, quite motionless, in Big Sur, California, a candle flickering in one corner of the chapel I visited when nobody was there, and felt restored and anchored.

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And then, fully twenty years on, long after I'd grown used to seeing my private hearth, the monastery, as sanctuary and hermitage, the strangest thing occurred. To celebrate the twelve hundredth anniversary of their Camaldolese order, the fifteen white-hooded men within the cloister convened a small assembly, along the sea, thirty-five miles or so north of where they live, and invited maybe a hundred and fifty of their friends to join them. Old men, young ones, women, girls flew in from Santa Fe and upstate New York and Singapore and down the road. We heard the future prior give a concert, singing infectious Hindu chants, accompanied by tabla and sitar, to honor the fact that the order maintains an ashram in southern India. One of the fathers, from South Africa, spoke with luminous intensity about how the entire Camaldolese congregation had shrunk to barely thirty a century before, yet still the fire kept sparking, refusing to give out. As the most contemplative order within Catholicism – so committed to silent prayer and meditation that sometimes the brothers are hard to tell from the Zen monks with whom they often sit – the Camaldolese have always been radical and on the edge. They are watched over with vigilance by Rome and largely overlooked by the world.

And as the days in community went on, something began, at a monk's slow pace, to shift inside me. I saw that what I had taken to be singular was in fact shared, a collective practice that brought me closer not just to friends but to strangers, too. Our whole large group took one long lunch in silence, and when we met afterward, along a sandy path, we found ourselves exchanging smiles or wishes for loved ones far away in pain.

I'd never quite seen how solitude in unison becomes a network greater than the sum of its parts. I'd never quite fathomed that everyone I met in silence was there for the same reason as I. Very soon, it became irrelevant to talk of "he" or "she" or "you" or "me." Identities dissolve if the hearth is strong enough and the night is dark and deep.

I stopped off at the hermitage on my way home and noticed that I was looking at all my old friends in the new light of bodies gathered around a hearth. I realized that shy Joshua had been bringing lunch to the kitchen since before my father died, a generation earlier. I'd seen Father Robert serve out his time as prior, and move to another monastic house in Berkeley, and then come back, in his late seventies, to encourage his brothers to friend him on Facebook and join him for a Sunday night screening of *Henry IV, Part 2*.

I'd grown old with these men, lost hair, seen mutual friends die. I'd come here more than seventy times, through a hundred seasons, sometimes for three weeks on end in a silent trailer overlooking the sea. And yet the quiet I sought, the truth that is the deepest kind of hearth, was never quite so solitary as I had foolishly imagined.

A few days after I wrote those words, I found an e-mail in my spam queue from a name I didn't recognize. Either an offer of expensive virtual sex, I assumed, or a scam from West Africa. Not long before, I'd suffered through a whole lost day by clicking on a message from a stranger that led to courteous Indians on the other end who called themselves "David" and "Michael" and, after helping me almost repair a computer they'd all but destroyed with their virus, asked me to fork over \$270 for their pains.

This message, however, came from @contemplation.com, so I clicked on it, and found a letter from a ninety-year-old woman I'd occasionally seen at Sunday lunches in the hermitage. Thirty years before, she and her husband, both French-Canadian, had been permitted to live out their lives in a little hut in a valley beside the monastery, to see if fresh blood might open out the



community a bit. After her husband died, the monks had honored their promise to protect their old friend by tending to her, day and night, wheeling her into the chapel for Mass, coming down on hot September afternoons to fix her screen door so the flies wouldn't attack, joining her at Christmas as she placed lanterns in the trees around her house to create a festival of lights.

Now, suddenly, she was writing, with graciousness and humility, to say that she'd come across an old book of mine whose very title seemed to speak to her: *The Lady and the Monk*. She would be happy, she wrote, if I might stop by to say hello on my next visit.

A few days later, that next visit evaporated – my bedridden mother had to go into the hospital again for surgery. But if I didn't move soon – the fire had reminded me – my new friend, even less young, might disappear.

So I drove along the narrow coastal road, and turned off at the narrow path that snakes up the mountain, and asked my way to the very back of the "Enclosure," where a tough road leads down to a little trailer in the forest.

My hostess was waiting for me, with ginger cookies that she'd baked for the occasion. She urged me to take some cookies home for my mother. She handed me a cool, moist towel to refresh myself after the long drive. She'd set out a chilled little bottle of water and a glass for each of us. She'd gathered two CDs to share, and two diaries she kept.

On a yellow legal pad, she'd written down all the points she wanted to share with me, so she wouldn't forget.

As we began talking, she glimpsed the prior through the window, hastening down the slope, white robes flying all about him, to join us. Somewhat briskly, she told him, "We have a project!" as soon as he came in, and sent him on his way. Later, a withered-looking worker from the Enclosure, unsteady on his feet, and flashing a grin with no teeth, came down to help with a plugged toilet, then disappeared again.

"When I got your message," my elegant friend said to me, eyes shining under her bright red Alice band, "I felt as if I was being pierced – pierced! I haven't had a very turbulent spiritual life; I'm not an emotional person. But when I read your book, I felt, 'God knows me. He understands me. Someone sees me.' And when I got your e-mail, it was like a sword of light coming through me. That's never happened before."

She looked up at me, eyes moist.

"I'm sorry. You're a busy man, I know. I don't want to take away from your time in silence. But I felt I had to say this, and I couldn't say it in an e-mail. This morning I had my English, but now..."

"Nothing could be a greater gift." I didn't know if I was talking about the sense of being known – understood – or what she'd just said, and the way something in my life had touched something in hers.

"You can have a lifelong love affair without touching," she said. "A liaison" – her French gave the word a lovely timbre – "of the heart."

"Yes," I answered. When I'd found myself at the same table as her at Sunday lunch, the simple truth of her few sentences, drawn from the silence in which she lived, had struck me as one of the great teachings this community of men had to offer.

"I'm sorry," she said again, eyes brimming. "I don't want to keep such an important man..."



“You’re the important one,” I said. “Or we all are.”

She didn’t try to say anything else, but I realized that what she had wrought in this solitary place was a kind of quiet revolution, and now she was giving me a fresh set of principles by which a hearth could be defined. She was reminding me how women were traditionally kept out of monasteries, even though – or perhaps because – they could warm the place up and bring a different kind of light. How male hearths are often very isolated and can leave you shivering a little. How the white-bearded former prior, nine weeks from his death, had seen that having a woman live near the community might be a godsend, not a threat, since he caught the spirit of belief and not just the letter.

I took my leave of her – “My health is well balanced,” she said, with a bright flash in her eyes, “but I’ve had falls. I don’t know when I’ll be in my next home” – and I clambered up the rough slope toward the prior’s office. My portable hearth, I realized – the “heart” in it at least as important as the “earth” – was durable precisely because it contained so many others, with the same loves, the same losses, the same flames. I’d never thought, sequestered in my little cell, that many hands reaching in the same direction may in the end become one. Even – especially – if they never touch at all.