Lanterns in the Cloister

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Introduction

I write these lines by a window of wavering glass, where the world beyond our wall becomes a watercolor of fields and sky. The wax is low, the hour late, and still the page calls like a bell in fog. Those who think a cloister is only silence have never listened to parchment breathing under a blade, to ink settling into the grain, to the minds of women moving as quietly and surely as tides around a moon. In our house we learned to hear with our hands, to read the weight of a letter, to feel the fervor of a

thought pressed into vellum by a patient quill.

When I first crossed the threshold, I believed obedience would make a straight path through my days: rise, pray, labor, rest. I thought humility meant lowering the eyes. But the prioress, Mother Avice, taught me otherwise. On my second week she led me by lantern-light not to the chapel, but to a cupboard behind the sacristy. There, with a key on a woolen cord, she opened a wooden mouth and drew out a bound thing swaddled like an infant. “Not all food passes through the lips,” she said, and placed the book in my arms. “Some feeds the conscience.”

The text within was both herb and fire. It asked questions that unlatched doors I hadn’t known were there. Who is permitted to interpret the Word? What is a vow if it strangles the gifts it was meant to consecrate? The pages, cramped with a hand unlike any I had been taught to revere, smelled faintly of someone else’s courage. I could not decide which shocked me more: that such a volume existed, or that our prioress had hidden it where only the curious or the faithful would ever find it.

In those years, the road outside our turnstile was a river of rumor. Masters from distant towns argued with bishops; traders packed marvels with their linens; a fever of books—copied, carried, hunted—ran like weather across the land. We were a quiet convent with a modest scriptorium, yet news reached us folded in loaves, stitched into hems, murmured at the grille between gifts of honey and skeins of blue thread. Men with learning came to the guesthouse and spoke to us as if we were wind, yet their words eddied and settled in our rooms. Women with sharp needles and sharper memories passed along more than patterns.

It would be a comfort to say we were only recipients of such currents. But that would be untrue. Our hands were not idle. The sisters who stitched altar cloths could hide a line of cipher in a vine; the one who ground our pigments knew how to temper vermilion so it blazed without cracking; the youngest among us, whom they called Sparrow, could copy a page so faithfully that even the hesitation of a letter was reborn. We were taught to keep our heads bowed, yet we learned to tilt them just enough to see past the margins. If you think of a cloister as a closed circle, imagine instead a lantern held within a hood: light kept safe so it can be carried elsewhere.

The choice that found me — obedience or dissent — did not arrive as a trumpet at the gate. It came in the soft scrape of a knife thinning a sheet, in the prick of a ruling line, in the knowledge that the words we hid could either heal a wound or open one. Mother Avice’s secret bound us together, yet it also divided us, for a secret is a kind of fire that asks to be fed. Some sisters feared we warmed our hands at a blaze that would bring ruin. Others believed we had been chosen, not to hoard, but to steward a dangerous mercy.

This is, then, the story of a house of women who learned to read the world as if it were

a manuscript — to lift the lamp, to peer beneath erasures, to note what was added in a later hand. It is a record of hands ink-stained and steady; of nights when the bell for Compline tolled over whispers and scratching pens; of visitors in rough cloaks and polished boots; of a bishop’s ring flashing like a threat; of pages passed palm to palm with the same reverence as relics. It is also the story of how words can weave a net between cells, towns, and hearts, binding those who believe that thought is a form of prayer.

If, in these chapters, I sometimes speak more of margins than of text, it is because the margins were where we lived. The Rule gave us lines; we wrote our lives between them. What we dared to copy, to conceal, to carry, and to illuminate — these became our lanterns in the cloister. And though light draws notice as surely as it dispels darkness, I would choose it again, even at the cost we paid, for the night is long and some of us were born with wicks inside our ribs.

CHAPTER ONE: Vespers in Ink

The bell for Vespers rang at the same hour it had rung for three hundred years, give or take a few lean decades when the wars swallowed our brothers in the next valley and we kept the hours ourselves. I had long since stopped counting the strokes. There were twelve, each one descending like a stone dropped into still water, and by the time the last trembled into silence, every sister in the house had set down whatever she carried — a spindle, a bread knife, a half-trimmed wick — and turned her face toward the chapel door.

I find it difficult to describe the sound of women walking in single file without making it sound dull, and yet it was not dull at all. It was the sound of sandals on worn flagstone, some pairs quick and others slow, the faint rustle of wool, and beneath it all a kind of breathing together, as though the house itself inhaled. We moved along the cloister passage where the columns threw long blue shadows from the last of the afternoon light, and I remember thinking, as I did most evenings, that I had never been so aware of my own footsteps as I was the moment I stopped hearing them.

Mother Avice led from the front, naturally, though she would have denied it. She was a tall woman, narrower than she had been in her youth, with hands that seemed designed for holding things — books, birds, the jaw of a wayward novice. Her wimple sat so precisely that I suspected she adjusted it in the dark, by feel, the way a scribe finds the ruling line on a page already written. I watched the back of her head as she walked. She wore her hair so tightly bound that not a strand escaped, and there was something in that discipline I both admired and feared.

Behind her came the older sisters, whose names I had not yet memorized in full, and behind them the younger ones, among whom I counted myself, though I was neither the youngest nor the newest. We had been six novices that year, but one had fallen ill to a fever in the autumn and two others had proved temperamentally unfit, which was the prioress's gentle way of saying they could not stop talking during Lauds. So we were three left, three among twenty-odd professed nuns, and I was the most uncertain of the three.

The chapel was cool. It always was, even in the thick of summer, because the walls were so thick that the seasons arrived here secondhand, like letters from a distant cousin. The stone smelled of something older than religion — of water and mineral and the slow patient work of time. We took our places. The nuns who had professed ten years or more stood along the left side, nearest the windows, where the fading light made a kind of gold stain on the flagstones. The newer sisters stood to the right, near the door, which meant we were closest to the exit and, should any emergency arise during the singing, were in the best position to achieve a swift and dignified absence.

I did not yet know how to sing the psalms as the others sang them, with that flat unwavering tone that seemed to come not from the throat but from somewhere deeper, as though the words were being dredged up from the belly. My own voice wavered, climbed, sometimes landed on a note that made the sister beside to me shift her weight as if standing on a loose stone. For this reason, I was given a task during Vespers that no one explained but everyone understood: I was to follow the text and move my lips, and if my voice did not match the others, at least my lips would show the effort.

It was while following the text that I first noticed the thing that would change everything, though I did not know it at the time. We were singing Psalm 119 — a long psalm, a wandering psalm, full of pleas and declarations that seemed to argue with themselves — and I was watching the words move under the prioress's careful direction when I saw that her book was not the same as mine. Her antiphonary was old, its covers soft with use, the ink faded to the color of rain. But where my book had clean margins and evenly spaced text, hers had notes in the margins so dense they resembled a second text, and several leaves bore corrections in a hand so different from the original that it might have belonged to a different century entirely.

I was not supposed to stare. I knew this. And yet the eye does not always consult the will before it alights on something, the way a bird does not consult the wind before it changes direction. I saw that one of the marginal notes was underlined twice, and beside it a small mark — not a cross, not a star, but something I had no name for, a shape like a candle flame leaning in the wind. I committed it to memory, because that was what I did then. I memorized things. Not out of any scholarly ambition, but because remembering was the one thing I was reliably good at, and in a house where

so much was prescribed, a reliable talent is both a gift and a danger.

Vespers ended as it always did, with the Magnificat, and the sound of our voices — imperfect, uneven, some of us reading ahead, some lagging — rose into the vaulted ceiling and met a silence there that seemed not to welcome us but merely to tolerate us, the way a large old house tolerates the footsteps of small inhabitants. Then the final prayer, the concluding versicle, and the slow dispersal. I fell into step with Sister Clemence, who was old enough to remember the prioress before Mother Avice, and who spoke about the previous one in the tone one might use to describe a season that had been too wet.

"You sang well enough," Sister Clemence said, which I understood to mean that I had not disturbed her.

I thanked her and said nothing more. She was not a woman who invited conversation, though she was generous with practical instruction. She had taught me how to hold a quill so it would not cramp my hand during a long copying session, and how to sharpen a reed pen against the stone in the scriptorium without taking a layer of skin from your thumb. These were the skills that mattered in our house, more than singing or Latin or the ability to read the night sky, useful as all those things were.

It was after Compline, the last office of the day, that the real work began. The others retired to their cells or gathered in the warming room to speak in low voices about the bread, the weather, a letter that had arrived that afternoon with the merchant from Lyon. But I went to the scriptorium. It was a room east of the cloister, reached by a passage so narrow that two people could not walk abreast, and it smelled of oak gall and lamp oil and the particular dusty sweetness of vellum. The windows were set high, and in the evening they caught the last light so that the room seemed to float above the ground, a bright box suspended in the gathering dark.

Our scriptorium was modest, as I have said. We had no workshop for the manufacture of pigments, as the larger houses did, and our gold leaf came to us in small packets from a supplier in the city, wrapped in oilcloth and accompanied by a bill of exchange that Mother Avice examined with the expression of someone counting teeth. We did what we could with what we had. Our inks we made ourselves — lampblack and gum arabic, sometimes with a tincture of oak gall for sharpness — and our pens we cut from goose quills obtained, at some personal risk to the lay sister who handled the transaction, from the poultry market on market days.

That evening I took my place at the bench I had been assigned, which was the third from the window, and I arranged my tools with the ceremony of habit. A pen knife, freshly sharpened. A pot of ink, still warm from the mixing. A sheet of pricked vellum, prepared the previous day by stretching and scraping until it held the faint ghost of the ruling lines beneath. And a text to copy — today it was a passage from a homily by

an early church father, assigned by Mother Avice herself, which suggested either that the prioress trusted me with important work or that she had simply run out of other novices willing to do it.

I dipped the pen. I tested the flow on a scrap. I began to write.

There is a particular silence in a scriptorium that is not the absence of sound but the presence of attention. You can hear the scratch of quill on vellum, the faint whisper of turning pages, the occasional clearing of a throat or shift of a bench. You can hear, if you listen closely enough, the breathing of the other scribes, and in that breathing a rhythm that matches your own, so that you become part of a single living instrument. It was in this silence that I felt most at home, most myself, most free of the anxieties that plagued me during the hours of prayer when my mind wandered to the fields beyond the wall and to the life I might have led had I not walked through the convent gate seven years before.

I was fourteen when I came here. My mother wept. My father did not weep, but he stood very still at the door of the antechamber and held my shoulders for a moment longer than was necessary, and I understood in that grip that he was not releasing me so much as entrusting me. He was a carpenter, a man of sawdust and square edges, and he believed that a convent offered what the world could not: stability, purpose, a roof that would not leak. He was not wrong about the roof. The first winter, a beam in the infirmary cracked and let in a column of rain that soaked three beds before anyone found a bucket, but the roof over the scriptorium held firm, as it had for centuries, and that was enough.

By the time I took my vows at twenty, I had learned the hours, the fasts, the dozens of small observances that composed the architecture of a religious life. I had learned to genuflect without thinking, to eat without choosing, to walk without hurrying. I had learned to sew, to clean, to carry water from the well without spilling it, though I spilled plenty in the first weeks and Sister Clemence, who oversaw the novices then, watched me with an expression that suggested I was a failed experiment in human formation. But I had also learned to read, and to write, and to copy — and these three skills, modest as they seemed, placed me in a position within the convent that was both useful and uncertain, like a candle set in a window where the wind could reach it.

The homily I was copying that night was a commentary on the nature of divine wisdom, and the passage before me contained a sentence that stopped my hand mid-letter: "The wise soul seeks not the approval of the world but the quiet testimony of an informed conscience." I read it twice. I read it a third time. The words were not remarkable in themselves — this kind of language was common enough in the Church fathers — but placed where they were in the text, surrounded by passages about humility and submission, they struck a note that was almost dissonant, a single bright thread in a fabric of somber color.

I copied it exactly as it stood, and when I had finished the page, I set down the pen and pressed my hand against the vellum as if to feel the words through the skin. This was one of the things I had learned in the scriptorium: that the act of copying was not merely reproduction but a kind of conversation with the author, a way of thinking the same thought twice, of living a sentence inside your body before releasing it back onto the page. It was, I would come to understand, a form of intimacy — not with God, though that was the stated purpose, but with the minds of other people, other hands, other times.

The candle on my bench flickered. I adjusted the wick and the flame steadied, casting a circle of light that illuminated my page and not much else. Beyond the circle, the scriptorium dissolved into shadow, and in the shadow I could hear the other sisters breathing, scratching, turning pages. We were eight scribes that evening, the full complement, because Mother Avice had announced that we were to complete a commissioned manuscript before the feast of Saint Hildegard, and the deadline was close enough to make everyone irritable.

The commission had come from an abbess in the south, a woman of considerable influence who wanted a copy of a particular commentary on the Rule of Saint Benedict, annotated with marginal glosses that she specified in a letter written in a hand so fine it could only have been produced by a professional scribe or a very ambitious nun. Mother Avice had accepted the commission because it brought coin into the house, and coin paid for the vellum and the ink and the small but essential expenses of keeping a convent running in a world that was increasingly expensive to be pious in.

The commentary itself was unremarkable. The annotations, however, required a familiarity with several other texts that I did not have, and I spent a good portion of the evening consulting the convent's modest library, which occupied a room above the chapter house and contained perhaps eighty volumes, some incomplete, some damaged, and at least three that no one could identify because their title pages were missing and the handwriting inside was older than anything else on the shelves.

I brought a volume of Gregory's homilies back to my bench and placed it beside my work. I cross-referenced, checked, copied. The work was slow but satisfying in the way that slow work sometimes is, when each letter is an act of attention and each word a small achievement. I did not notice the hour until the bell for the night office sounded from the chapel tower, a single stroke followed by silence, and I realized that the scriptorium was empty except for me and one other sister, whose back was to me and who was writing with such concentration that she did not acknowledge my presence.

I gathered my tools. I blew out the candle. I stepped into the corridor, where the darkness was so complete that I had to reach for the wall to find my way. The stone

was cold under my fingers, and the sound of my own breathing seemed enormous, as though I had become the only living thing in the house. Somewhere below me, in the kitchens, a fire still burned, and I could smell woodsmoke and the faint sour sweetness of the last batch of beer fermenting in its cask. I climbed the stairs to the dormitory, undressed by touch, and lay down on the narrow cot that would be my bed for the next five hours.

I did not sleep at once. I lay in the dark and thought about the sentence from the homily, about the phrase "informed conscience," and what it might mean to have a conscience that was informed by something other than what we were taught. I thought about the marginal notes in Mother Avice's antiphonary, the flame-shaped mark I had seen, and the pressure of the key on the woolen cord she wore at her waist. I thought about the world beyond the wall, where books moved like weather and men argued in towers and the truth of a matter could depend on who had copied it last.

Then I slept, and dreamed of vellum.
