

Francisco

By C. Forrest McDowell

I have always felt like a monk resigned to do his work in the world. The monk's life appeals to me immensely. Perhaps a previous life found me in such service. Today, I reflect upon who or what I might like to be in my next lifetime. The answer is simple: I'd like to be a cat in a monastery.

“My Brother,” Bro. Phillip addressed me as he gestured toward the door, “we have a friend visiting this morn.”

“Not really,” I responded, “she is seeking entrance into the Order.”

“But you know this is not allowed,” Bro. Phillip pressed. “The Abbot will surely disapprove. And if he finds we have knowingly permitted its stay without his approval, we will be punished.”

I addressed the Brother’s concern: “I will take responsibility for the creature. And besides, what shall his holiness have me do - mop extra floors, pull more weeds, pray longer? What sweeter punishment!”

So it was that the furry stray cat our Order named Francisco came into hiding, at least for a short while before her discovery. A few weeks into her stay bits of black fur began to appear in mugs of milk, all of which alerted the Abbot that something was amiss.

One evening, while our Brotherhood was in prayer, a distinctive "meow" pierced the silence. Francisco appeared from beneath my robe, perhaps a bit too warm for her liking. My Brothers peered in my direction aghast, but none gazed more horrified than Abbot Bernardino. Three months later now, I reflect about the turn of events in our monastery since Francisco's discovery. The details are too numerous to cite, but one auspicious event is worth sharing.

It was about a month after Francisco's discovery, after I had fully and predictably paid my dues for her secrecy, that Abbot Bernardino fell violently sick. The Brotherhood was cast in turmoil without the watchful eye of our leader. For two weeks our benevolent concern for the Abbot thrust our duties and prayers into chaos. We seemed like children without direction.

Francisco, however, was untouched. She lay at the beloved Abbot's side the whole time: sleeping his sleep, dreaming his dreams. Because my Brothers saw me the wiser in

herbs and healing, I was permitted to sit at the Abbot's side as well, relieved of all other duties. The room breathed heavy with doom. Sweat poured from my body beneath woolen robes. The dim light smelled of rosemary and sage and juniper. And all the while the only sound emitted was that of the content purring of Francisco.

Late one evening, after many motionless days, the Abbot's hand suddenly lifted and, as if it guided by some strange force, came to rest upon Francisco's furry back. For three long affectionate strokes the aged hand coaxed the cat.

On the first stroke, Francisco's body responded with a subtle reception of arched back. On the second stroke, she lifted her head toward the elder with half-closed eyes. On the third stroke, Francisco seemed obliged to respond with a tender "meow." It was then that the Abbot gave out a long sigh - as if some great insight or blessing had been received. Or perhaps, the simple surrender of human to creature had finally created a land in the heart for both to dwell. I do not know for sure because the Abbot died in that sigh.

Now, after two weeks of lying by Abbot Bernardino's side, Francisco finally rose from her deathwatch. As she arched her back in one great renewing stretch, she seemed to peer more earnestly at me than before. I cannot explain it, but her eyes suddenly seemed to reflect more wisdom than I might have previously imagined. Then she carefully leaped to the floor and meandered out the door.

I followed Francisco to the garden, to the bench sculpted from an ancient fallen yew. It was the bench Abbot Bernardino fondly sat upon daily, watching the blue hour of twilight fade to darkness. Without hesitation I sat next to Francisco. Her furry body emitted indifference at my touch. But as she gazed into the unfolding darkness - into the great mystery of life and death - I glanced at a tear distinctly pooling in her one eye, and I could not hold back any longer.

We two monks cried together until we were healed.

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