

SOMETHING ABOUT LOVE

“You mean we have to *walk* it from here?” He looked dubiously through the car window at the sloping ramp-like steps. They wound upward along a sun-splashed wooded hillside to disappear beyond a bend.

“I don’t think it’s very far, Harry,” she said. “There are others walking it – look, there’s even an old lady returning. If she can do it you can.”

He stared at the black-clad old woman picking with a twisted cane at the cobblestone steps. “Yeah,” he conceded. “I guess. But ask someone how far it is. I’m not taking any three-mile hikes.”

Marjorie got out of the car and approached the woman, who was now hobbling across the gravel toward a waiting bus.

“*Scusa*—“ She hastily corrected herself: “*Scusi, Signora, quanta distanza è – al monastero?*” She waved toward the steps.

She smiled, revealing gray toothless gums. “*Americana, eh?*” Marjorie nodded, reddening. In a cracked careful voice the woman answered “Not— even—a—kilometer, *Signora.*”

She thanked her and returned to the car. “About half a mile, Harry.”

“Yeah?” He got out, slipping the strap of his camera-case around his neck. “All right. I guess we can walk that.”

“It’ll do us good,” she said. “To walk, I mean. It seems like we’ve been in that car since we got off the airplane.”

“So what’s wrong with that?” he demanded as they stepped onto the path. “You see more that way. And we’ve only a week to see Italy.” He paused. “You know, Marge, when you’re touring you’ve got to make priorities. Now was it necessary we see this—What the hell place is this, again?”

“The convent of St. Benedict,” she said, exhibiting a weary sigh. “He’s my natal saint. I want to see where he lived as a hermit for three years. Don’t forget, I *am* a Catholic.”

“How could I?”

They walked a moment in silence. She murmured “You are too, Harry.”

“Oh, yeah.” He sat down on a stone bench shaded by a tree. “But that was ten years ago. I probably did it only because I was in love with you.”

At one time, she thought with self-conscious misery, she would have trusted his reply to the light challenge “was?”. Tears started to her eyes and she swallowed hard. “You needn’t have converted, to marry me.” She stood, looking down at him.

“It seemed important to you.. It seemed important to me too, at—“ He stopped. “—and so I converted.” He glanced up at her. “Now Marge, don’t look at me like that. I attend Mass with you every Sunday, I’m letting you bring the kids up Catholic, I’m doing every damned thing expected of me. What more do you want?”

“You believed, once,” she said, voice near to breaking.

“What makes you think I don’t now?” He smiled up at her.

“Let’s go.” She abruptly moved away.

He rolled his eyes, then rose and followed her.

“I don’t understand you,” he said when he had caught up. “You weren’t hyper-religious when we were first married. Nowadays, it’s all Mass and holy water and Communion with you. You’ve turned being Catholic into a career.” He chuckled. “Thirty-three is a little late to turn nun, isn’t it?”

She glanced sideways at him. Voice hard, she said “And thirty-six is a little late to turn priest, isn’t it?”

He flushed. “You have a nasty tongue.”

She shrugged.

They walked a short way in silence. He erupted “I’d been working hard. I was tired when I come home at night; but even so, you know damned well I’m no priest. He paused. “And if *you* don’t know it, there are others who do.”

“Oh I’m sure there are,” she said, voice brittle. “I’m sure I’m the last to receive your..your favor. Don’t think I’m blind to how your eyes proposition

every girl you see – you must succeed sometimes.” She had been glaring at him while she spoke, but she now fixed eyes straight ahead.

“What a hell of a vacation,” he neutrally observed.

She made no reply and they continued up the path for several minutes, walking side by side but not touching. They rounded a final curve and stalked on to the end of the path. A narrow passage hewn in the rocky hillside rose before them, an iron gate rusted open at its entrance.

He stared at the steep flight of worn stone steps and snorted “That lying old witch! We’ve already walked a mile at least!”

Having ascended the steps they came out on a rise that looked down on a narrow canyon, which widened at this point into a small valley. Across the valley, midway up the almost vertical mountainside, clung the rambling stone monastery, its massive stone-arch foundations footed in the talus-mound on the valley floor, its two storeys of apartments hanging in suspense over the terraced vegetable gardens and orchards below. The monastery gave the impression of having grown from the mountainside, itself part of the living rock.

“Say-y,” he said. “That’ll make a good picture. Just a minute.”

She sat down on a bench nearby and watched with secret scorn as he pointed a light meter at the monastery, adjusted the camera, aimed it, and snapped a picture. He moved about the rise snapping several more, then replaced camera and light meter in their cases. Gesturing to a stone bridge that spanned the canyon, he said “Well, let’s go see it.”

They crossed and entered a gallery driven in the rock, its outer wall a rock face pierced by arched windows. Both walls were thickly covered with names and dates and multilingual obscenities.

“I wonder why people do that,” she exclaimed, pointing to the graffiti. “You’d think they’d be more...more reverent.”

He was examining them with interest. “Well, maybe they do because they are,” he said, apparently without thinking.

She made no reply, obscurely irritated by his comment.

He continued to examine the walls as they walked. “Say; look here, Marge.” He stopped, pointing. “Here’s a heart with our initials in it!”

She looked over his shoulder to see scratched in the stone a crude valentine enclosing the initials HR and MC. It looked old and worn, and over it others had

carved messages dealing with the same subject but of more direct nature. It was, she thought, barely visible.

“Quite a coincidence, huh?” he said.

Quite a coincidence, she thought. She stared at the heart, fancying that over it the graffiti grew malignantly denser, thinking that at one time it had been sharply-etched and new and bright, to then be casually soiled by dirty hands and damaged by deliberate defacings. She wondered if Harry had seen in it what she was seeing. As she turned away she saw him chuckle over a sketch of a couple in an improbable sexual position and she thought, *Not likely*.

“This monastery holds some surprises!” he said, pointing to the sketch as they moved on.

At the end of the gallery they entered a shadowy chapel with richly frescoed walls, their warm reds and browns glowing in the soft radiance shed by a few candles and votive lights. A staircase behind the altar led downward, and to one side an open door revealed a glimpse of gray cliff and green plant life. When she had dutifully crossed herself with holy water and genuflected before the altar they walked to the open door.

They were in a narrow courtyard, pressed on one side by the menacingly fractured overhanging cliff, enclosed on its other sides by the monastery. A life-size marble statue occupied the center of the court, facing the cliff, one arm extended with palm vertical. Its base held a Latin inscription and she walked over to examine it.

“I don’t understand all the words,” she said in answer to his question, “but it’s an invocation to Saint Benedict to keep the mountainside from collapsing.”

His eyes followed the cliff. It was studded with boltheads from which dripped dark-red rust stains, surface manifestations of great steel pins driven into the rock. He laughed shortly and pointed to them. “Looks like the monks don’t put much faith in Saint Benedict.”

“Perhaps,” she said, sure it her duty to answer him, “that only symbolizes that faith *and* works are necessary for salvation.”

“Good *answer*,” he admitted smiling. “But I’d settle for the works.”

“Without faith though,” she persisted, uneasily aware that she was transferring the argument to another ground, and wondering if he would catch her

out, “the monastery wouldn’t be here and no one would care if the cliff fell or not.”

He shrugged for reply. They crossed the court, threading their way through a group of visiting relatives talking with a brown-clad monk as he paced to and fro taking his exercise. On the other side, Harry leaned on a railing that overlooked a smaller sunken courtyard, vacant though several doors gave onto it from the central body. Above one door was inscribed *Clausura*. He wondered aloud what it meant.

“Behind that door,” she explained in portentous accents, “live the monks who never leave their cells.”

“Yeah?” His voice was incredulous. “Who keeps them there?”

“Nobody,” she replied, with vague satisfaction. “They remain there to meditate. It’s love – love of God – that makes them *want* to remain.”

“They must be neurotics. What normal person would want to stay all closed up all the time – for love of anybody?”

“I don’t think they feel ‘all closed up’. If you love, your love isn’t a prison – it’s a liberation.” She raised her chin and met his eye, but he smiled.

“Sorry. To me, a prison is a prison. And whether you label it ‘*Clausura*’ or ‘love’ it’s *still* a prison.” He straightened and glanced about the court. “Is this all there is to see? Just this court and that statue – and those boltheads?”

She shook her head. “Somewhere here we should find the grotto where Saint Benedict lived for three years.”

“Ask him where it is,” he said, jerking a thumb toward the strolling monk. “We’ve got lots to see, and I don’t want to waste the whole day here.”

When she had put her conscientiously phrased question and received the reply, they returned to the frescoed chapel and descended the stair into a gloomy corridor, one side of it the native rock of the mountain. They walked without speaking, the only sound their echoing footfalls, toward a splash of candlelight ahead and arrived to find there a small cavity in the cliff wall, perhaps three paces deep and as many wide, not as high as a man is tall. To one side knelt a statue, a part resting on the rocky floor of the cavity and a part on the pavement without. Its white marble hands were folded in an attitude of prayer. Near it several flickering candles burned, providing the only illumination. A monk stood to one side, and she approached him.

“*Frate, è—*“ Her words were caught up by the grotto and reflected into the corridor, echoing and re-echoing there as if spoken from the bottom of a well.

She finished her question in a whisper: “—*questo il grotto di San Benedetto?*”

He nodded, whispering in a neutral tone “*Si Signora, questa è la grotta.*”

Blushing at the implied correction, she turned to her husband. “This is it, Harry.”

“This is—what?” He too was compelled to lower his voice after an initial attempt to speak normally.

In a tone of affected patience she replied “The cave in the mountainside where Saint Benedict spent three years meditating.”

“This?” He surveyed the tiny hollow with disbelief.

“...this?...this?...this?...” the echoes said.

“*This?*” he hissed. “Why, there wasn’t room for him to turn around in!”

Nodding, she selected a candle from a rack near the statue. She dropped a coin into a slotted box, lighted the candle at the flame of another, and set it in a hole in the rack. She crossed herself and stood a moment next the statue of the saint, hands folded. She thought she was praying that Harry again find his faith.

As she lowered her hands he asked “How far are we above the valley floor?”

She asked the monk.

He shrugged, lifting an eyebrow. In a bored voice he muttered “*Dieci, quindici metri forse. Chissa?*”

“Perhaps ten or fifteen yards, Harry.” Who knows? she impatiently thought with the monk. And what did the statistics matter anyway?

“Yeah?” He shifted his feet noisily on the stone pavement. “So we’d be standing in thin air, if the monastery weren’t here, eh?”

“That’s right, Harry.”

He was silent a moment. “And he lived *three years* here? In this hole in the cliff?” His tone was impressed.

She nodded.

His face turned sly as he asked “How did he eat?”

“I’ve read that a hermit who lived on the clifftop lowered a basket on a rope every day,” she promptly replied.

“I’ll be damned,” he said, shaking his head. “When did he do all this?”

“Sixteen hundred years ago.”

They stood staring at the grotto. She shifted her weight once, scraping her feet loudly on the stone. After what seemed to her like minutes, he broke the silence. Stroking his jaw, he said thoughtfully, “I wonder why?”

“Love,” she intoned, forgetting to lower her voice. The word echoed hollowly between grotto and passage. “Love of God,” she whispered.

“Yeah.” His voice was abruptly flat. “Why’d he leave then, if he was so full of love?”

“He had a vision.” Her voice was equally flat. “God told him to leave and found the Benedictine Order.”

“Any excuse to escape, eh?” He chuckled.

“If he could stay three years,” she snapped, “don’t you think he could have stayed a lifetime?”

“I don’t know. Nothing lasts forever—not even love. Not even of God.” He shuffled restlessly. “What else is there to see?”

They continued down the corridor, from time to time descending short steep flights of steps. They came out on a small sombrely lighted veranda a yard or so above the canyon floor, in deep shade cast by the main body of the monastery above. The only other door off it was padlocked. To one side a monk was lecturing in halting English to a group of four female tourists, one a lushly-curved blonde girl of twenty-five or so. Marjorie and Harry moved closer to the group, she to listen.

“Yess, yess,” the monk was excitedly saying as he gesticulated to a rose garden below them. “Those rosa don’t carry thorn no more; San Francesco commanded, seven—hundred—years ago, that they not carry thorn, and to these-a day there is notta no thorn...”

The tourists murmured formula exclamations and followed the monk off the veranda. Marjorie watched her husband watch the blonde girl undulate into the corridor. Surprised by a twinge of physical pain she glanced down, to see her fists doubled, nails digging into the flesh of her palms.

He now turned back to her and pointed to the rose garden. “Was he talking about *those* roses?”

“I don’t see any others.”

“Do *you* believe that—about the thorns?”

She thought. "Yes," she said at length. "I do."

"Why?"

"Perhaps...perhaps because I want to. You have to want to believe, to believe." She paused, and said less certainly "And if you want to, you do."

"I think you're less gullible than you'd like to be!"

"In some things," she agreed, looking at him aggrieved and making her voice reproachfully bitter.

They gazed off over the gardens. Here and there a monk was busy, weeding, spading or strolling in the spring sunshine.

"You suppose they spend all their lives here?" He glanced about the veranda. Its central paving stone bore a carved skull and crossbones, a thick iron ring inset in it. "Some do, I guess," he said, nodding to the tomb.

Between it and the padlocked door stood a small stone altar bearing a Latin inscription; he pondered it, then asked if she could read it.

"For when we think voluptuously" she translated.

He leaned on the altar. "I suppose," he said, smiling, "when the monks see a girl like that..." he gestured toward the corridor. "...they rush in here and kneel right down and pray like hell, huh?"

"I suppose," she said, voice even.

"Or for that matter," he continued, looking critically at her, "a woman like you."

"Oh?" She met his gaze. "Do you think I could excite a monk, at least?"

"Sure," he said, then added "And *he*'d probably even proposition you!"

"I don't think I want to pursue," she said, "this conversation any further." She lowered her gaze from him to the altar. She noticed now two deep cup-shaped holes, a hand's-breadth apart, worn in the stone plinth under it. Feeling the chill of the shade, she shivered convulsively. She stepped to the door and he followed.

"Well," he said, glancing back, "I guess they're human too."

"Of course," she said, waving a hand around her. "Otherwise, none of this would have any meaning."

"Does it anyway?" He snickered.

She wanted to answer hotly *Yes, it does!* but hesitated, apprehensive of the question that might follow.

They walked back up the dark corridor. As they passed Saint Benedict's grotto Harry hesitated, then stopped and remained gazing at it. She paused too, but glancing idly about. The candle flames flickered and danced in a draft from some unknown cleft, lending a spurious play of expression to the monk's immobile face. Harry stood gazing a moment more, then turned away.

"Huh!" he whispered. "Hard to *believe!*" He frowned as the echoes caught up his emphasized word and hissed it back at him.

"Love is," she said. In her haste to catechize she failed to lower her voice and the echoes mixed their words in all permutations.

They had climbed half the stairs to the frescoed chapel when he snapped his fingers. "Damn it! How could I have forgot to shoot that grotto?" He turned to go back, but she caught his arm.

"You can't anyway Harry. I saw a sign saying photographs weren't allowed inside the monastery."

"Yeah?" He shrugged. "What the hell. There's nothing there to take a picture of, anyway."

"That's true," she agreed. But not the way he meant, she thought.

"You know," he explained, "it wouldn't look like much, on film."

They climbed the rest of the steps, walked through the chapel, continued on through the stone gallery and across the bridge, and were back on the original rise from which they had first glimpsed the monastery.

Harry pointed to the bench and suggested they sit down and smoke a cigarette. A monk was seated in its center, gazing ahead, his eyes following several tourists taking pictures.

She nodded and they walked there. "*Permesso?*" she politely asked.

An old man looked up at her. His hair was a grey circlet about his skull, his features hidden in an arabesque of wrinkles. His brown Benedictine garb hung loosely on a spare body. He smiled and moved down, courteously saying "*Prego, prego.*"

She sat down next the monk, who had resumed gazing ahead. Harry sat down next her and took out cigarettes.

As they smoked in silence the group they had seen near the rose garden crossed the bridge. She watched Harry's eyes follow the blonde girl.

“Don’t you think,” she said, straining to keep her voice even, “you could refrain from ogling her when you’re with me?”

He glanced at her, half-smiling. “Oh, yeah. Sure. Sorry.” He threw down his cigarette. “But that sure is a girl to fall in love with!”

Her gaze was direct into his eyes as she said “Tell me—what is your definition of love? Fucking?”

He glared back and said levelly “Yes. Now you ask, I guess that’s it – somehow, I’d gathered it was yours, too.”

“You don’t understand how I love you!” she hissed. “You don’t understand *anything* about love! Not *anything*...” Her voice clogged with tears; she paused to choke them back, then spat “You don’t even speak the language!”

“I ought to by now,” he sneered, lighting another cigarette with shaking fingers, “after having lived with an expert on it for so God damned long!”

She turned her face abruptly away to see the monk shift eyes from her to a point before him. The horrid suspicion that he understood English assaulted her, and she squirmed internally. She reviewed the conversation just held with Harry and felt her face flame red. Suddenly, urgently, she wanted to talk with the monk, to reassure herself that he had not understood. She cast about in her mind for a pretext to open a conversation, then leaned toward him.

“*Scusi frate, ma quanti voi vivete qua?*” She gestured to the monastery.

“*Siamo in tredici,*” he replied.

Illogically relieved, she turned to her husband and said, falsely conversational, “Thirteen live here, Harry.”

“In this big pile?” he said, evidently as relieved as she to be rid of the quarrel. “Only thirteen? Ask him why,” he added. “Ask him why they come here.”

She turned to translate, but the monk said “Are you English?”

She furiously blushed, bereft of speech.

“No,” Harry said. “Americans. What do you do here?”

“Very simple things,” the monk replied. “We pray; we meditate; we work in the gardens.” He smiled. “That is all – very simple things.”

“How long have you lived here?” she asked, wishing to smother her embarrassment in neutral numbers, to take refuge in statistics.

“Twenty years. Some others, not so long. They come, and they go away again, to places closer to the world. We stay only so long as we please.”

“But why?” Harry asked. “Why bother to come here at all?”

The monk looked quizzically at him, but answered quietly. “Many reasons. As many as there are that people marry. Some of us, to seek a profounder love, a deeper belief, and others...” He paused. “...and others, because they are infatuated by the *thought* of seeking.” He shrugged philosophically. “They are lost first.”

Silence fell. The monk now asked “Why did *you* come here?”, looking at Marjorie.

“My husband and I are Catholics. We wanted to see my natal saint’s monastery.”

“Ah.” The monk nodded. “And did you?”

She looked narrowly at him. “How do you mean?”

He raised a hasty hand, as if to disclaim any intention of offending. “I sometimes ask that of visitors. I suppose I ask because I observe so many tour our monastery with puzzled eyes; they seem to ask ‘what is the meaning of this?’ ‘Why does the guidebook say we must see it?’ But they find no answer to their questions, and they leave, without understanding...”

He paused; she opened her mouth to reassure him, to say “Oh, but *I* understand,” but he was speaking again:

“Oh, they might make a gesture toward it. Perhaps they carve their bewildered messages on its walls, or they burn a candle to its saint, or they make a photograph of it, as if, somehow, to prove that they understood. But their expressions betray them.” He smiled to Harry’s camera. “I notice you are making no photographs – that is wise of you. I think those who make photographs are the most bewildered; it is as if they would capture its meaning on film when they cannot with their minds. You can almost hear them thinking ‘If I could find exactly the right point of view, perhaps I would see.’ He shrugged again. “It is sad, to see them so far from seeing.”

Harry fidgeted. “Well,” he said truculently “then how are you supposed to ‘see’ its meaning? What do *you* think its meaning is?”

The monk gazed at him. “It is an act of love, and therefore totally meaningless – unless *lent* meaning through being seen by a loving heart. And either a heart sees...or it does not.”

Marjorie realized she had been leaning toward him, holding her breath to hear his answer. She now relaxed, disappointed that that was all, and feeling threatened.

Harry uneasily laughed. “Well...I guess my heart must have missed something then, along the way.”

She smiled, grateful to him but rejecting it.

“Surely you did not miss the grotto of San Benedetto?”

“No,” she answered for Harry. “We saw it.”

“Ah.” He smiled. “And did you pass it by, completely unmoved?”

They both were silent. “No,” Harry said at length, reflectively. “No, I guess I didn’t.”

The monk rose and clapped him on the shoulder. “Then there is hope for you! – you can yet find your way.” He took a step away, then turned back to look at Marjorie. “Do you know on what San Benedetto meditated, while he was sitting alone in his grotto those three years?”

She shook her head, in confusion.

“No one does,” the monk said. “But I believe he meditated on how he might best serve. *Not* on how much he loved.” He smiled ambiguously at her and, excusing himself, walked across the bridge and into the monastery.

They slowly descended the path, from time to time pausing to step aside as other pilgrims, and several tourists, ascended. Harry was walking hands in pockets, looking down.

Abruptly he looked up and said “What did the old double-talker mean, ‘I could find my way yet’? I didn’t know I was lost.”

Lost in thought, at first she didn’t answer; then she focused eyes on him and forced a thin smile. “I don’t know. Perhaps all he meant was only that you would become a better Catholic...”

She paused, reflecting on her spoken words. “Or, perhaps he meant that since you could grasp *something* about love, no matter how slight it was, that

eventually you might grasp more, and more, until—“ She caught herself, and sighed, thinking bitterly, *It isn't fair. It isn't fair!*

“Well, until what?”

She shrugged. “I don't know,” she said, dry with the lonely anguish of the left-behind, “myself.”