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Holly Goodrich
Concordia University - Portland

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SARCASM AND SUNRISE

Holly Goodrich

“Must...stay...awake...” It’s 2:00 a.m., and I am sitting on my bed reading *The Quest of the Holy Grail*. The only thing that keeps my eyes open is the horrific specter of a failed British lit quiz which will be the inevitable result of sleep. Unfortunately, my eyelids have been transmuted into lead and keep shutting. As a result, the words of the *Quest* are not making much sense. Am I reading about a monk lecturing Lancelot on his many sins, or something about the Devil appearing in the form of a beautiful maiden to tempt Percival? My eyes shut again... Dong

“What the...” my half-awake mind strains to make sense of the unusual sound.

Dong

“Stupid alarm...go away...I want to sleep.”

Dong

“Um,...my alarm is supposed to turn on the radio...”

Dong

Yeah, that noise would be a church bell...crap. I force my eyes open. Looking around, I notice thick stone walls dripping with moisture and brightly-colored stained glass windows. I stand up and, using my well-honed detective skills that clearly rival those of Sherlock Holmes, I deduce that I am in a medieval chapel. Following this brilliant realization, I attempt to unravel the deeper mystery of how I got here. The last thing I remember is desperately fighting the particular form of drowsiness that results from the lethal combination of medieval literature and early morning hours. Obviously, I have lost the battle. I am now dreaming of my homework when I should be doing it, which incidentally hardly seems fair.

I look up towards the ceiling of the soaring chapel and sigh. This is certainly not historically accurate—if I’m going to be stuck in this stupid dream, I wish my mind would come up with something a little less cliché.

I hear a sudden gasp. Turning around I see a short guy in brown robes who looks suspiciously like a monk. Oh great, another cliché—my wish is not to be granted it seems. The monk’s brown eyes appear as if they were about to part company with his pale face.

“She-devil, be gone from this holy place in the name of God!” he shrieks while making the sign of the cross with shaking fingers.

“I’m not a she-devil,” I halfheartedly attempt to explain, knowing full well that this will not work; monks in dreams never believe sleep-deprived time travelers.

“You must take me for a fool,” he predictably snarls. “Of course you are a she-devil or worse, a woman who has abandoned all decency. One has only to look at your apparel to see that.”

I glance down and note that I am wearing a navy blue, V-neck t-shirt and boot-cut jeans. I also note that I have on my silver hoop earrings, the ones I have been told small birds could perch in. I make a mental note of my imagination’s horrible and distorted sense of appropriate fashions for medieval times.

“No woman of noble character would dress in such a way!” The monk announces with all the confidence and excitement of someone who has been transported to heaven and received direct revelation from God. “Those rings in your ears bespeak a woman completely given over to vanity and the transitory luxuries of this fleeting world! Surely they are the sign of one completely devoid of spiritual feeling. For—”

I feel the irritation building deep inside me; this sounds far too like the four years of lectures I endured in my religious high school. I can still see myself sitting in the back row as the principal went on and on about how girls must dress modestly. In his world, no guy could handle the sight of the skin below a girl’s collarbone or her bare midriff without being driven mad with lust. As a result, we were supposed to wear baggy shirts that would cover all of these areas, as well as shield our stomachs from view if we performed the normal everyday tasks of stretching our arms out as far above our heads as possible or of bending completely over with our knees straight, which, of course, we all did for long periods of time every day. Only this would keep us from leading ourselves astray.

“—that however is not all that condemns you...”

The monk hasn’t even noticed I’m not listening, and his
ongoing sermon is dredging up more memories of my education, key features of which were important moral lessons. For example, we were taught that it was evil to dye your hair, wear jeans to chapel, enjoy secular music, or consider dating. Uttering a swear word would be as well received as confessing that you enjoy slaughtering small children in your spare time.

Furthermore, we were taught that questions and doubts were things stupid people entertained despite the fact that my infallible, completely-free-of-contradictions key features of which were important moral lessons. For attitudes. It contained such gems as “NASA proved that the story of the sun standing still in the Bible was true,” a statement only exceeded in absurdity by the world geography book’s assessments of life in South Africa. Supposedly, it had been a country “founded on Christian principles where all the races lived in harmony.” The actual facts of physics and apartheid were apparently unimportant as all this was justified by the infallible, completely-free-of-contradictions Word of God, which contained all you would ever need to know. Clearly, doubting was a great sin.

“...Furthermore, that shirt looks very soft and not the least bit bristly.”

“Well it is cotton,” I say, trying in vain to relieve the bubbling tension simmering inside of me with a sarcastic comment.

“It matters not what the fabric is called in your heathen tongue, for it is soft and thus not conducive to holiness. I entreat you to follow my example, confess your manifold sins, and clothe yourself in a hair shirt. Perhaps then even one such as you may be saved from the fires of hell.”

“So you’re trying to tell me that wearing an itchy shirt makes a person holy? If only I’d known it was so simple I never would have gotten rid of all those baggy, scratchy sweaters!”

“You dare to mock the holy mysteries of God.” His voice took on a somber note; he sounded as if he were preaching to a congregation of thousands. “Such is the evil of this time,” he intoned with righteous indignation. “None seek for good and truth; all are lazy, disobedient and unwilling to turn from the path which leads to destruction.”

I just can’t take it anymore; the small sarcastic comments can’t extinguish the anger flaming inside me fuelled by one final cluster of memories. When I got to college and discovered that they had lied to me, my world shattered. I felt lost, like I was sailing in the middle of the Pacific, with all sight of land obscured by waves crashing around and over me, my voice lost in the howling winds. This gave me a strong intolerance for lectures on rules and how no one looks for truth, especially from a monk in a dream.

“Shut up!” I shout, using my gift of eloquence. “I’ve heard this before,” I continue, determined to make this guy suffer through my lecture. “Don’t swear, don’t watch R-rated movies, don’t listen to non-Christian music, or read any kind of fantasy literature, blah, blah, blah. Follow all the rules and above all be sure you’re always perfect, so you can tell everyone else how much they’re sinning. After all, what is true should be obvious, especially to those fortunate enough to see your life!”

The monk tries to continue, obviously unsettled by my anger yet still attempting to convert me. “You speak the words of one who has never traveled the path of righteousness. You are lazy, weak and care nothing for good. You—”

“How dare you tell me what I am!” The explosion that has been coming for years finally bursts out of me and the words come spilling out in a furious torrent. “I’ll tell you what I have done. I’ve discovered the real world in which you can rise early and pray, or wear an itchy sweater, or search for truth everywhere but it wouldn’t get you closer to God or holiness or anything else! Guess what? I’m tired. Tired of trying to look for truth when I’ll never be able to find it. Never! I’m sick of rules and lies. I give up. Do you hear me? DO YOU HEAR ME? I GIVE UP!” The scream I have held in for so long finally comes out.

The monk is shocked beyond words; his face is completely blank. The fact that I just screamed at a monk in a medieval church reminds me that I’m dreaming and brings me back to reality—well, as close to reality as you can get in a dream.

I look at the monk and know that it’s not really him I’m yelling at. I am screaming at everyone who ever lied to me and at myself for falling for all of it, for believing. The bell tolls again and I feel its hollow ring inside me. Clearly it is time for me to leave.
As I turn away, the monk says nothing; he is relieved to see me go, no doubt. I sigh inwardly as I push through the heavy wooden doors and let them slam behind me.

So, where do I go now? I look up and see a bleak horizon dominated by the black skeletons of mountains. Should I go there? Where do you go when you're lost in a dream and you yell at a monk? I sigh and sink down on the steps completely confused and wishing I could just wake up. I hear a creak and turn around to face the last thing I expected to see. It's the monk again.

I bristle. His face is a puzzle. It's almost as if he is embarrassed and confused, but that can't be. He must need sermon material. I can hear it now: "And then despite the abuse hurled on me, I followed the lost soul out of the church and convinced her to follow the path of righteousness..." Yeah, that's how he'll tell the story.

Having no wish to become an illustration of the importance of persistence, I spring to my feet and prepare to run.

"Please wait."

The softness of the request shocks me. I turn with surprise.

"How may I help you?" I say, still keeping up the sarcasm.

His eyes do not meet mine as he walks over and stares at the mountains, which moments before filled my vision, as if he were searching them for answers. "Well, I realized that perhaps I, I was overzealous during our discussion and I wanted to—"

"What? Come marching out here and pretend to understand my frustration, thus fulfilling your spiritual duty?"

"No, you misunderstand."

"Then what is it you want to say?"

"Look, it's not easy being a monk," he blurts out, then stares at the ground and takes a deep breath. "People expect me to be spiritual. They expect me to lecture them and tell them how wrong they are. If I didn't they would get angry with me; they would tell me I'm not teaching them the Biblical way and never listen to me at all. They might even burn me at the stake. So I have to say all those things. But deep down I know just as well as you that I can't ever live up to all the expectations. I know I seem like an arrogant hypocrite and it's not without justification. I am, but I am also forced to be that way. What else can a medieval monk in a dream be but a complete stereotype? I just hope that every once in a while I break free of the cliché and actually say something true."

"That's really heartbreaking. Maybe you should see a therapist and—" I stop my sarcastic rant mid-sentence. True, I don't like what he's saying but what could I expect him to be really? Perhaps his intentions were once as good as mine. Perhaps he really tried to follow all those rules and by the time he realized he couldn't it was too late to change. He was trapped inside a role he could never live up to. I almost felt sorry for him.

"Look it wasn't really you I was yelling at, it was—"

"God," he finishes my statement to my surprise.

"Yes."

"You are not alone."

I stare at him in amazement.

"But you're a—"

"Do you really think that makes a difference? Believe me, I've tried harder than you to find the truth. I've studied, prayed, even fasted but still have gotten no closer. People come to me expecting me to have all the answers when I have none. So I tell them what I know, which isn't much, and I try to help them. That usually doesn't work, so sometimes I pretend; I go along and do what they expect of me and tell them what they want the rules to be, while I secretly scream inside."

"Why haven't you given up? Surely it can't be worth all that just to keep a job in a drafty monastery. I mean, the food sucks, you have to wear a hair shirt and then there's the whole celibacy thing. I mean, what's the point of all this?"

He sighs. "I don't know really. But something will not let me go. No matter how much I scream inside, no matter how hard I try to leave it all behind, I find I cannot. So I stay. Half the time I'm a lecturing hypocrite and half the time I'm a hardened skeptic shaking my fist at the clouds, but still I stay."

He pauses for a moment and then says almost to himself, "Perhaps I stay because underneath all the rules and the hypocrisy and the lies there is something beautiful worth fighting for. His love, you see—Christ's, I mean. It transcended all else. Every time I'm ready to quit, I catch a glimpse of it. My rules, my lectures, my words are nothing compared to Him. It is He who will not let me go though I hide from Him behind my mask of pretensions or run from Him in rebellion. He is why I
stay. I know that sounds strange, even contradictory on some level, but that is my reason. It's all I have.”

I am stunned into silence by this confession. Not knowing what else to do I look up at the barren mountains. The rising sun bathes them in a golden and rose embrace. Then the sun peers above the horizon in a flash of diamond bright light that pierces me. It kindles a fire inside my eyes it seems, for I can see nothing but a golden white sea. Though I close my eyes, the fire does not die. It is still there burning in the core of my soul in a place beyond thoughts, where mere knowledge suddenly seems pale and insipid compared to this penetrating warmth. Is this what the monk was talking about?

In a daze, I turn and ask, “Is this a vision?”
He laughs for the first time.
“No, this is the dream which begins the Quest.”

I awake with a start to a room bathed in sunshine.