

Non Nobis, Domine by Cassie Ingaben

*En icest siecle nen at parfite amour:
La vide est fraiele, n'i at durable onour;
Ceste ledece revert a grant tristour
La vie de Saint Alexis*

Anno Domini 1307

The midnight darkness of the chapel was broken only by the dim light of the tabernacle candles, casting a wavy pattern of lights and shadows on the little, apparently deserted, room. In the variable light, a movement was suddenly amplified into a thousand eerie shapes, and as suddenly stopped again—a human form, kneeling in front of the altar, had thrown himself face down on the cold stone pavement; a suffocated sound, not quite a sob, escaped him. A pause, then broken murmurs wafted up, strains of prayer in a low, anguished voice.

The chapel door opened silently, and another figure entered the holy place, looking for the solace and quiet of the round vaulted room. He stopped short: instead of the usual comforting silence he was seeking, a low wail was rending the cold air. Hesitant, the newcomer advanced, between curiosity and respect for the brother who was evidently intent in a distressed colloquy with God.

On recognising the prone figure, the man halted, his heart so loud in his chest that he thought, for a horrible moment, he would be heard by the very man who was at the origin of this nocturnal visit to the chapel. Shorn hair still trying to wave and curl, wiry body covered in the everyday brown robe, Brother Raymond was lying in bitter penitence, voice

breaking on the *pater noster* "deliver me from evil", which he seemed to have been repeating for a while, judging from the hoarseness of his tone.

Raymond's faith was vast and unquiet like the winter sea, everyone knew that—and the other man felt a longing, and almost an envy for it. His own faith felt such a puny and dry thing when compared to it, unable to move him to grand gestures such as the harsh fasts and penitences that were Brother Raymond's trademark.

The man could remember when his father had destined him to the Poor Knights of Christ; he was still a boy then, and his fancy had taken to an adventurous future in the Holy Land, where he would finally recapture the Holy Sepulchre and wash in blood the dishonour of defeat at Hattin and Acre. The reality of a monastery in France, with little of no hope of ever there being a new crusade, had been a bitter blow to him. He still remembered the dreadful day, barely two years before, when all his remaining hopes had been crushed: the Commander has read and explained them the Papal decree rescinding King Philip's crusader vow, thus signifying the end of any serious attempt to recapture the Holy Places where the Temple once had ruled.

He was no longer a child, as he had been the day the Poor Knights had been forced out of the Holy Land by the overwhelming power of the Infidels, and could not delude himself any longer that one day he would actually see Jerusalem. Yet he had tried to live up to his vows, honour them as the most precious thing for a knight, the daily effort drying him up until he felt old and jaded and moved only by obedience. And then Brother Raymond had come along, his holy fire a wonder and a source of new sap, and the man had looked up to such lofty counsel, hoping for a spiritual renewal—until the warmth and joy of their brotherly closeness had somehow changed into strange yearnings, confusion and disquiet; such as tonight, when sleep had

proved elusive and the need to reflect and pray had brought him to the chapel.

Raymond's murmured prayers suddenly stopped. The silence brought the other man back to reality, a sinking sensation in his belly. Brother Raymond jumped up, green eyes wide and wet, realising somehow he was not alone anymore, and gasped on recognising who had interrupted him: "Brother Andrew!"

Andrew put his hands forward in an apologetic gesture: "I am sorry to disturb you, Brother Raymond. I had come to meditate and did not expect you were here. I will leave you to your devotions."

"Devotions? Ah, you do not know—" Raymond burst out, then he stopped, the effort in restraining himself patent. He seemed frightened, pale and drawn, dark smudges under his eyes witnesses to the rigours to which he submitted his penitent body. He stared at Andrew for a while, as if fascinated by something invisible, then spoke again: "I used to hear the voice of the Lord in my heart, once—but he is silent now, and I am troubled and lost, and prey to demons—" he stopped, trembling.

Andrew felt his heart squeeze painfully in his chest, a thousand conflicting impulses warring inside, and a pervading guilt that his own sins were somehow being visited on his cherished and holy friend. He said in a low, deep voice: "I am not worthy, but I will pray for your peace to be restored. God knows my faith is not as great as yours, but I wish—" he stopped, floundering: what did he wish, exactly? He knew only that his heart was aching for Brother Raymond, and had been for a long, disquieting time. He realised that all his thoughts and worries of late had been centering on Raymond, and was speechless, his blue eyes growing very dark and wide, gazing at the man in front of him. He moved forward a few paces, almost daring Raymond to lower his eyes, unable to stand still in the face of so many incomprehensible emotions. "Help me Brother, help me understand—I am troubled also, and cannot see."

Raymond made a strangled sound, jerked and fell to his knees: "We must pray to be strong, and resist the devil—punish our earthly base desires and rise to our vows—" He hid his face in his hands, swaying slightly. Unable to resist, Andrew knelt in front of him, and put forth a steadying hand. Raymond recoiled as if burnt, a sharp cry of anguish escaping him, then he started to recite the *pater*, fast and desperate. Andrew stayed in a rigid kneeling position, lips moving in unison with the prayer but no sound escaping them, eyes dilated and fixed on the man in front of him—praying yet somehow knowing that they had ventured into forbidden territory, and they were lost.

The following day Brother Raymond collapsed in the refectory. Andrew had left him before dawn, still praying in front of the altar, and was not there in time to witness the incident: on hearing of it, he found that the numbness of his heart, crept on him in the small hours of the night, as he prayed on his knees in front of his own very Hell, shrunk and fled and was replaced by a deadly worry for his Brother's life. He went straight to the chapel, that was cold and empty, and bargained with God for Raymond to be spared. Later in the day, news came that Brother Raymond had taken sick because of his fasting, but that the Commander of the House had ordered him to eat and that he would probably recover.

That night the Devil reared his head with a force Brother Andrew had not experienced since his youth, and woke him before the first call to prayer, his manhood hard and aching. No amount of will managed to make the swelling subside, and to his shame and damnation Andrew entered the chapel for the early morning prayers in the same sorry state. He shed his mantle, hoping that the morning cold would help rein his sinful body in, but his sheepskin

undergarments' heat and friction made that attempt useless. He was now in pain, all but squirming, any remaining attention on his prayers gone; surely his torment must soon end, he thought—but nothing had prepared him to the sudden flare and spending when Brother Raymond hobbled in, unsteady on his legs but determined to rejoin the daily routine of prayers.

Fortunately for Brother Andrew, everybody's attention was on Brother Raymond's unexpected appearance, and his brief breathless shuddering, cheeks aflame, went unnoticed—Andrew, however, was not aware of his surroundings anymore, divided between deep shame and utter confusion. He hid his face in his hands, cutting out the sight of Brother Raymond's grim and determined face staring at the Crucifix on the altar, and floundered for a prayer, any prayer, that could somehow make amends for the desecration he had committed. It was useless—worse, Brother Andrew's thoughts fled to memories of his youth, in the rickety stable of his old family house, the comforting smell of horses and hay in the mild summer days before he knew shame in his body, his older brother's whispered secrets as he told him of the servant girl's lilywhite skin, the intimacy and warmth cherished even after the bitter knowledge of the sinfulness of their talk.

But why such memories of days long gone, now? He had been just a boy, still half-misunderstanding those tales of excess, and even then somehow aware that he was bound to a different destiny, to a life of abstinence in the Church. He had never had first-hand experience of carnal conjunction, so why should he be so beset by it now? And why was the Devil so unceasing, that the mere sight of Brother Raymond would have affected him so?

The prayers over, Brother Andrew escaped with relief to his duties in the stables. The horses needed attention; he could concentrate on the well-liked activity and hopefully divert his mind from his sinful meanderings. On his way to the stables, however, Brother Andrew was stopped by none other than the Commander of the House, who beckoned him towards the parlatorium. The Commander, an elderly man with a pudgy face and a bald head, sat on a bench and cleared his throat a couple of times.

"Brother Andrew, a problem has come to my attention; it is a delicate question, and I trust you will understand what I am referring to. You know Brother Raymond d'Oyles—"

Brother Andrew's downturned face went crimson, and his heart stopped for a second, guilt making him think, impossibly, that his shameful secret had somehow been discovered; he was ready to fall to his knees and beg for pardon, but the Commander went on:

"—Brother Raymond is gifted by God of a most uncommon faith, and he brings sanctity on our House. I am most grateful to the Lord for our Brother's excellence, and as such I have been loath to intervene so far; yet I am growing concerned that Brother Raymond's zeal will exceed the frail limits of his earthly body, which after all is the Lord's property and only loaned to our care. As you see, this is a delicate matter—I do not intend to interfere with Brother Raymond's devotion; yet I, as his Commander, have a responsibility that he does not curtail his existence by his extraordinary ardour. I am already allowing him a much harsher regime than I ordinarily would, but I am now bound to intervene, albeit discreetly."

The Commander interrupted his tirade for a moment, and Brother Andrew looked up, puzzled: where was the man heading? Was the Commander so unaware of their closeness, that he did not try and break it as it should be his duty? He tried to concentrate on the

question, so that he would not dwell too long on the growing worry for Brother Raymond's health, which must be bad indeed for the Commander to intervene. The elderly man went on:

"You are wondering why I am telling you this, Brother? I am charging you with a special duty of looking after Brother Raymond. You shall ensure that his devotions are not too harsh a burden on his body, and that his life is not endangered. You understand that this is a sensitive matter, requesting delicacy of judgement: we are not to disturb or waylay Brother Raymond's faith—only to avoid harmful consequences. It is a decision I have taken after much reflection and prayer, and I feel bound to it as my duty of spiritual Commander of the Brothers."

Brother Andrew was now even more frightened, if that was possible. He was being ordered to be near the source of his disquiet and temptation! Yet there was no way he could explain this. He fell to his knees and grabbed the Commander's right hand: "I am not worthy of this task, my lord: how can my little faith judge Brother Raymond's superior spirit?"

The Commander smiled benevolently: "You are not to judge, Andrew—merely to watch lovingly on a dearest Brother. You are steady, and patient, and discreet; your temperament is rather different from that of Brother Raymond, thus providing a counterbalance. That is why I chose you. Do not be afraid of unworthiness, since I am ordering you and you will be bound by obedience to perform your task: there can be no unworthiness in obeying your orders."

The Commander got up, and made for the door. "You will sit near Brother Raymond in the refectory and make sure he eats enough to sustain his devotion; you will work and pray and rest with him, and see—discreetly—that he does not harm the body that the Lord gave him. May the Lord bless you, Brother Andrew."

Brother Andrew mumbled his reply, and was left alone and kneeling in the parlatorium. His mind was reeling, trapped; his body breathing harshly, poised between fight and flight. There was no way to avoid the orders he had been given, not without having to explain—he suddenly sprang up, and ran to the stables. Without waiting for assistance, he saddled his fastest horse, Tancred, and jumped on him, spurring him at breakneck speed towards the open fields. There was nowhere to go, but he had to run or die with heartbreak.

Brother Andrew made it back to the stables barely in time for the main meal, and barely in one piece. The horse was limping, and both he and his rider were muddied and sweaty with their crazy run in the fields and the woods. Andrew left the horse to his orderly and made for the refectory, vainly trying to clean some of the mud from his robes. He located his place near Brother Raymond and sat, pierced by the other man's hostile stare. So he had been told, too, Brother Andrew thought. After prayers, Andrew made as if to talk, but was forestalled by Brother Raymond's hissed words: "What did you tell the Commander, that he should make you my watchdog? I am doing what I have to do to curb my sins, only I cannot tell him that!"

Brother Andrew sighed, his heart heavy: "I was chosen, and did not ask. I tried to refuse, but he bound me by obedience. Please, Brother Raymond, do not begrudge me this. Let us try and fight together—the Lord knows I did not want it to happen!"

Brother Raymond bent his head to look at the untouched plate in front of him, then mumbled: "I cannot see how being near can help either of us, but we can battle temptation together."

Brother Andrew breathed out, relieved despite himself that Brother Raymond was not angry and opposing him, dimly

wondering if that was a licit or an illicit thought. He immediately fell to his duty, insisting that his companion eat at least the bread if not the roasted rabbit they had been given. His insistence won him the result of Brother Raymond eating a piece of bread and drinking a little wine. After the final prayers, they went to the stables, Brother Andrew to look after his horses and equipment, and Brother Raymond to help with lighter tasks. The day went by in relative peace, their usual work duties interspersed with prayers, mass and dinner, though Brother Andrew grew progressively worried as night approached, and with it the time to rest. Given his health, Brother Raymond had been assigned a private space—a little niche off the main body of the dormitorium, closed off by draped hangings: easier to warm, and quieter. The comparative isolation of the arrangement scared Andrew.

Brother Raymond was evidently in the same predicament, as he grew pale and nervous, and absolutely refused to eat any supper. After compline, as they got out of the chapel and headed towards the dormitory, Andrew could see that Brother Raymond was trembling, and his gait was uncertain; midway along the long corridor, Raymond stumbled, and would have fallen but for Brother Andrew catching him by the waist and propping him against the wall. As Raymond weakly tried to struggle away from the contact, Andrew exclaimed in surprise: on sustaining his friend, his hand had found hard lumps and a sticky wetness where flesh should have been. Andrew grabbed Raymond by the shoulders, looking hard at his face, but the light of the corridor was too dim to distinguish anything, eyes hidden in shadowed eyesockets, a shuttered, obstinate expression on the mouth. "What is this? It smells like blood!" questioned Andrew, but as there was no answer, he propelled Brother Raymond towards the dormitory, anxiety for this mystery replacing his concerns and scruples.

Andrew dragged the unresisting Raymond to his pallet in their niche, uncaring of the very few brothers already in the dormitory and intent to their routine, and started to fumble with the man's robe. Ignoring the angry whispers of "Leave me! What are you doing, Andrew? Are you insane? Don't touch me!" and easily restraining the now suddenly flailing arms that tried to push him away, Brother Andrew opened Raymond's robe on his chest, looking for the unexpected lumps he had felt in the corridor. As he managed to look at his friend's chest, Brother Andrew let out a strong exclamation, and allowed in his surprise to be pushed away.

Instead of the light rope loosely bound around the waist that the Rule imposed for the brothers to remember their vow of chastity, Brother Raymond was wearing a cilicium made of several lengths of thick, rough rope, tightly wound and knotted in big lumps that excavated waist and chest. The flesh was covered with sores and burns, and each movement drew fresh blood which seeped on the rope and the robes. Appalled at the harshness of the penitence, Andrew also realised how the cilicium had prevented, together with Raymond's round face and wide shoulders, from appreciating the extent of his body's emaciation.

The stupefaction that had seized Brother Andrew allowed Raymond to move away from the searching hands, and refasten his robe, ashamed that his secret devotion had been discovered, and mightily discomfited by their bodies' proximity. He curled up on his pallet, and gathered a coverlet round him, wanting to declare the incident closed. Brother Andrew hesitated, yearning to reach for the thin, suffering body, and held back by awe and shame alike. He settled for lying down on his own pallet, face turned towards the bundled figure next to him.

"Brother Raymond? I am sorry, I did not mean to pry ... I was worried that you were wounded, and needed help. I have a duty to look after your well-being, you

know. Please, Brother Raymond, don't be angry — "

"I am not angry. I am saddened that I am made a spectacle for gaping curiosity!" Came a muttered reply.

Brother Andrew gasped. "Oh, no, not curiosity! On the contrary, I am awed by your sacrifice. And to tell the truth, I am worried that you are dealing your God-given body too harsh a treatment—your sores could turn poisonous and you would die, did you consider that?"

Brother Raymond snorted spitefully: "The body is a creation of Evil, and a burden to the soul. God cannot have made such a verminous receptacle!"

Andrew bolted up in alarm, worried that anyone had heard the blasphemy: "Brother Raymond! Do you know what you have said? The Cathars were burned at the stake for this heresy!"

Raymond sighed, but lowered his voice nevertheless: "And I am afraid the punishment of God is on us Templars for being accessory to the Cathars' ruin ... Can't you see how the Papacy is corrupted, Andrew? King Philip rules the Pope, and who knows if the Cathars were heretics after all!" Raymond dismissed the panicky gestures of denial that his friend was making. "Oh, I wish my sin were of heresy, for that would be a nobler way of erring! I am sunk low by the flesh, and always have been; I cannot consider it a divine work! Do you know how I came to the order, Andrew? I was conceived in sin, because my father is a wicked and confirmed lecher—my same existence a vice of the flesh—"

Andrew interrupted him, confused: "how can your birth be irregular, if you are in the Order?"

Brother Raymond's voice was bitter and scornful: "oh, my birth is regular enough by the letter of the law: I was born inside a regular wedlock—but he, my father, was lustful and overindulged indiscriminately in the flesh not only of my mother but of all the female servants—and he drank and swore and never listened to the Church—but he

destined me to be a Brother, so that he could bargain his salvation through a pious offspring; and more, he chose the warrior order despite my contemplative inclinations, for it was prestigious—still a choice for base earthly desires, and it was punished! See this face of mine? I was learning to fight, and I was wounded—I almost died, and as I lay sick and delirious, I had a vision—God was smiting my flesh to purify the soul! I saw Christ's wounds bleeding, and his blood gathered in the Holy Chalice—Can't you understand? The flesh has to be shed, bloodily, to free the soul from damnation! The flesh is damnation! And as I grew complacent of my sainthood, admired by all brothers, God punished me again, and allowed the Devil to tempt me with you — "

Brother Andrew felt lost. He had nothing to counteract the inflamed thoughts of Brother Raymond—he was content to follow the doctrine and his superiors, and had never suspected that someone he knew could be a heretic. But then, he supposed, that came from their sinful state—and despite it all, he was more awed than ever at the greatness of Brother Raymond's disquieted soul, and fiercely yearned to protect it. After all, wasn't it his mission, to protect the sanctity and devotion of holy pilgrims? He sighed, and rose from his pallet to approach the huddled figure of Brother Raymond, who had ceased his speech, overcome, and had covered his face with his hands. Andrew kneeled next to his friend's pallet, and tentatively put a hand on Brother Raymond's shoulder, waiting to be rebuffed.

After a while, Raymond lowered his hands: his lips, dry from fasting, were swollen and cracked, pink and bleeding in parts, and Andrew could not stop staring at them. He lifted a hem of his robe, wet it in the water jar at their bedside and daubed very lightly at the bloodied lips first, then moistened the heated face. Raymond moaned, his expression crumpling, murmuring very

low: "You are very kind to me ... I despise myself for my impure thoughts, for corrupting our friendship, and dragging you down with me ... Yet I pray that your soul be spared, for I am the one who deserves punishment. You are simple and untroubled, humble and content, and I am afraid I envy you and desire to be like you ... "

Brother Andrew's heart was beating very fast, a strange inopportune joy stealing round their misery at the idea that Brother Raymond of all people looked up to him: "I am honoured, but do not deserve your admiration. I am also victim of carnal temptation, and guilty of not being able to overcome it. You are a holy spirit, and the torment of temptation is sent to temper your mettle and make you worthier of Heaven—I am a simple knight and my lot is miserable ... But now you have to rest, Brother—I am privileged to be watching over you, and will see that you can sleep. Besides, I fear we might attract too much attention with our strange talk."

Andrew gently pushed Brother Raymond down till he was more comfortable for sleeping, then he sat on the floor, taking Raymond's hand in his, determined to watch vigil on his friend, and pray for his troubled soul. Brother Raymond said nothing, but gazed into Andrew's face for a long time, eyes burning and brilliant in the dim candlelight the Rule imposed, lest enemies surprise the monks unawares.

Slowly, Raymond's eyes closed, and he slipped into an exhausted sleep. Andrew slowly lowered his forehead till it rested on their joined hands, struggling to pray and tormented by the awareness of his sin. It was quite clear, by now: he was perverting and defacing the holy brotherhood and friendship that were between him and Brother Raymond. He sighed: why couldn't he be a devoted and selfless comrade of his Brother, but had to drag him into the mud of sin? They

should have ridden together in the dusty hot plains of the Holy Land, *gentler than lambs and fiercer than lions, living in one house, with one soul and one heart*, as the Rule said; fighting the Infidels and praying near the Holy Sepulchre, their souls pure and cleanly washed by the Light of God—not here fumbling in the darkest sin, useless and careworn, irremediably barred from the Holy Land, their weapons rusting and their spirits dulling ...

Andrew raised his head with a start, as he felt his hand being squeezed and pulled. Brother Raymond was evidently in the clutches of a nightmare, sweating and restless, lips moving even though no sound escaped them. Brother Andrew gently released his hand from the other's grab, and Raymond woke with a start, panting.

"You had a dream, brother?"

"Oh... " Raymond closed his eyes, and shook his head as if to clear it. "A strange dream, and it left me startled ... God has mysterious ways ... I dreamed I was praying in the chapel, and I saw a figure of Christ—I was crying, and desperate, and that was strange because I should be overjoyed at beholding the Son of God—and he was smiling at me, sweetly; and he said nothing, but there was a great splendour, and then the purest rays of light were coming from his mouth and his heart and his belly—and they pierced mine and I cried and was senseless—his face was looming over me even after I had fainted, and such a beautiful face it was, my heart ached: but different from the face of Christ as you can see it in the Holy Relic of his Shroud—his hair was very dark, and his eyes the deepest blue—indeed he looked much like you, Brother Andrew—" Raymond stopped, stricken, and his face crumpled for a brief moment, then he went on. "I must go to the chapel now. Pray, rise from the floor, it must be cold. You can sleep now; I will not be back, but see you at dawn for the morning prayer."

"But you have scarcely rested!"

"Sleep? Sleep, to pamper the body and soften the spirit? I need to pray, and meditate on the dream I was given."

Mightily discomfited by the reminder of that uncanny night in which he had met Brother Raymond in the chapel, Andrew refrained from following him, and tried to sleep instead, for he was cold and tired indeed, and sick with dread because of the dream Brother Raymond had recounted earlier.

Alone in his narrow pallet, Brother Andrew fell into a half-sleeping reverie: his mind wandered back to the day he had first met Raymond. The House had been waiting to receive this famed, saintly Brother, and everyone was astir. Yet the same day of Raymond's arrival Andrew had been curiously unmoved, almost irritated by the electricity in the air: after the midday meal and prayers, he had thankfully escaped to his duties, for they allowed him to spend time outside, or looking after his horses.

It was a beautiful late spring day, and the fields smelled sweetly of new grass and grain, their hue an inextricable mixture of green and pale yellow, pied here and there with early poppies and cornflowers. The sun was shining, and a light breeze made simple breathing a pleasure. Andrew's mind supplied a memory from his childhood readings of the chronicles of the great king Charlemagne; as the Paladins rode towards Roncisvalles, their thoughts fled back to their *Douce France*. *Douce France!* Sweet France indeed, thought Andrew, sure that the Paladines' last battle had taken place in a day as glorious as this one, Roland and Olivier riding side by side, their armours shining in the sunlight...

His sandals creaking on the fresh straw lining the area near the stables, Brother Andrew rounded a corner, and saw a Brother he did not know, slowly pacing as if in admired meditation over the beauty of the day. He was giving his

shoulders to Brother Andrew, head slightly bent forward, curly hair gently moving in the breeze, his thin limbs moving with graceful ease.

As Andrew approached, the strange Brother turned swiftly, revealing oddly shaped features, a marred cheek and large greenish eyes. For a moment, Andrew could see an obstinate, hard set of the full mouth; then a sharp, sudden smile appeared, transforming those features into something as sweet as the day of Roncisvalles. The stranger offered his greetings:

"God be with you, Brother."

"And with you, too."

The newcomer looked up, and made a gesture as to encompass their surroundings: "A day like this, sings the glory of God to all his creatures."

Suddenly unable to take his eyes off the stranger's features, Andrew nodded: "Beautiful, indeed." He paused, not wanting to indulge in idle talk, yet unwilling to continue towards the stable, and also curious as to the identity of that odd-looking Brother. He finally said, a little hesitantly: "I was just going to take the horses for a ride: are yours in need of one too?"

"My horses are tired from the journey, and need rest. I just arrived today, and was looking for some quiet place to render grace to God for delivering me from the dangers of the road."

Andrew blinked, realizing who the stranger was. "You are Brother Raymond, aren't you?" The stranger smiled again, the light tangling into his hair, and nodded slightly, almost shyly. After a couple of seconds of silence, the other man remembered his manners, and offered his name: "I am Brother Andrew. I heard of you; we were all waiting..."

Raymond shrugged, dismissing the undertone of awe in Andrew's tone, then looked around again, as if restless, or in need of something. Andrew hastened to interpret this, "Did you see the Commander, or are you just arrived? Do you need food?"

Brother Raymond smiled a small, private smile: "No, no food, thank you. I have met the Commander, and about half of the Brothers of this house. All I want now is to have a quiet look at the place." Raymond hesitated, then went on, as if surprised himself of his words: "would you mind showing me the stables, since you are headed there?"

Brother Andrew smiled, eager to be useful, and proud too, for he could show Brother Raymond his beloved horses. He gestured towards the stables, and in a moment they passed from the fine light of day to the warm, rich shade of the interior. The horses' stalls smelt like home to Andrew: a mixture of the animals' tangy warm breaths scented of straw and apples, the rich fertile manure, the minty oily note of liniment, and the pungent leather of saddles and bridles tempered by the metallic bitterness of the weaponry. He happily walked towards Tancred, his favourite horse, and soothed the animal's inquietude at the unknown Raymond by whispering into its ears; then Andrew moved to the grey mare Gwenthuyr, small but fast, and the sturdy brown Gawain, alternately addressing the horses and his guest, a feeling of marvel and joy slowly stealing upon him as Brother Raymond talked back to him, admired Tancred's black shiny pelt, even laughed when Gwenthuyr snuffled at him. Brother Raymond, who should have been so much the very opposite of him, was indeed a kindred soul, matching him in age and agreeable in speech, and gracious to be with.

The first day of their acquaintance had ended with Andrew offering, and Raymond accepting, to exercise their horses together on occasions. Raymond's company had been, to Andrew, an un-hoped for relief from the many empty hours their un-warlike state warranted: and a source of spiritual rejoicing, giving him at last a true sense of knightly brotherhood. He had told Raymond about the long hours of daydreaming in his childhood, fed by the tales of Paladins,

of their glorious deaths in battle; hesitantly quoting the most memorable lines of Roland's agony as he roams the bloody and corpses-littered field to embrace his dead, trusted companion Olivier. Then Andrew had listened in impressed silence as Raymond recalled his own favourite story, of how Saint Alexis had given away his riches, and renounced his wife, as his affections were completely turned towards God, and ended up pilgrim in the Holy Land, to venerate the Holy Shroud—a circumstance that had much helped Raymond's interest towards the Poor Knights of the Temple, as he had ardently hoped to be able to worship, one day, at the places where the Lord had been. Even now, Raymond had said, when they all knew that such a wish was not to be, he still prayed and dreamt that his ardour and mettle might be somehow tried in the battle against the Infidel—and then he had sighed, and fallen silent, his mouth a thin, drooping line.

Andrew had blushed, then, as he also, during his childhood, had thought of the Holy Land—but for him it had been the popular tales of the knights looking for the Graal; and even more shamefully, a song his mother had loved, the sad story of a troubadour joining the Crusades to see the Countess of Tripoli, whom he had loved without ever even seeing her; and his dying upon reaching the shore, barely able to see her; and he then laid to rest with the Brothers of the Temple, and she become a nun out of grief. He could still hear his mother's voice singing, *Love from a faraway land, for you my heart's aching so.* Throughout the reverie, half remembrance and half dream, Andrew was progressively invaded by that same marvel and intensity of that first day of their meeting, and it was with a smile that he hovered on the brink of real sleep, recalling and mingling in his mind the many long days of that past spring, Brother Raymond often joining him for a walk or a ride, sweetness and joy falling brightly upon them, as one day Raymond

had put it, *like the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion, where the Lord commanded the blessings.* Slowly, gently, Andrew fell asleep.

When he woke up the following morning, jarred awake by the bell calling the Brothers to prayer, Andrew could not remember his dreams; but, as he struggled to untangle himself from the intricate, sweat-rancid knot formed by his garments and covers, he realized with deep shame that he must have spent his seed overnight. A mute desperation etched itself on his face as he hurriedly cleaned his sticky thighs, and hastened towards the chapel. As he entered the round, vaulted room, he could see the same expression on Brother Raymond's rigid features, and feel the same guilt in the ruthlessly kneeling pose of the emaciated figure.

A fortnight had passed in this way: Brother Raymond would snatch a few hours' sleep, often perturbed by dreams and imaginings, then he would leave to pray; sometimes Andrew followed him stealthily, fearing to be seen, and thus witnessed the agonizing praying and crying that went on till the arrival of the morning and of the Brothers. Some other times, ashamed of witnessing such an intimate, anguished fight, Andrew stayed in his pallet, or even on the cold floor, for fear of temptation, and vainly tried to put his heart into long, empty prayers.

One morning, Brother Andrew entered the chapel with the flow of other Brothers, ready for their early devotions, and scanned the room for the familiar figure of Brother Raymond. To his surprise, Andrew could not see him anywhere. His brow furrowed: as usual, Brother Raymond had left his pallet a few hours ago, heading for the chapel to wake and pray. He should be here still, limbs trembling with lack of sleep but face intent on the Crucifix—yet Raymond was

nowhere to be seen. A sudden foreboding took Andrew, an unknown dread: he silently slipped out of the chapel, for once uncaring of disapproval on being seen (he was doing his duty of looking after Brother Raymond, after all), and headed back for the dormitorium. Raymond could have easily gone back through the refectory's corridor, after all; maybe he had been ill, or exhausted, and he would now be sleeping, hunched and pale in his pallet—yet the unnamed dread would not leave Brother Andrew, and he started running.

Breathless, Andrew entered the now deserted dormitorium and went straight to their niche, realising that the curtain he had left open was now carefully drawn. He hurried past the hangings, and gave a choked scream at the sight in front of him. Yes, Brother Raymond was in the niche: he was kneeling on the floor, turned sideways from the curtains, his robe unfastened and his undergarments in a heap on the floor. A sliver of light caught the blade of the large knife he was holding, dazzling Andrew: for a moment, time stood still, allowing him to take in the minutest details of the whole scene—the ragged, noisy breathing of Raymond that seemed to fill the room; the shockingly purple hue of Raymond's manhood as he held it in his other, trembling, hand; the dripping noise as a drop of blood from the first cut just above his pubis hit the floor; the downwards movement of the knife as it went to complete his work—time resumed his run as Andrew jumped on the knife and wrestled it from the hand of the startled Brother, growling: "What are you doing, what are you doing? Are you insane?" Raymond's rattling breath was deafening in Andrew's ears as the man's body thrashed convulsively in his grip, almost covering the clatter of the knife as it landed away from them, under a pallet.

"Leave me! Leave me Andrew! I have to—"

"—to kill yourself? To raise your hand against God's command?"

"Only to eradicate the cause of my despair—if a limb offends thee, pluck it away, says the Lord—and this gross body of mine is making me despair of God!" Raymond was talking quickly and frantically now, fighting with his words as with his body, his sentences punctuated by heaving gulps of air: "I am in despair, the worst sin of all—God has forsaken me, I cannot see him anymore—all I see is your face, your face has obscured the face of God, just like in my dream—I have to destroy the source of my sin! Pluck away my manhood and his impious desire!"

Andrew's mind was caught in a whirlwind, and all the while his body fought to hold Raymond still, to examine the wound and staunch the blood—a corner of his mind noted with relief that the slit was very superficial, evidently Brother Raymond had probed experimentally and no harm had been done yet. Suddenly, Raymond gasped and went inert in Andrew's arms: not quite senseless, yet nerveless, eyes brimming with unshed tears. Andrew laid him down on the floor slowly, with infinite care, and wiped the remaining blood from the wound with a shaky hand. Before Andrew could move away, Raymond's arms suddenly gripped him with grim force, and dragged him down next to him: "Why you, Andrew? Why is it you that makes me forsake my God? I am so cold, and full of despair, Andrew—help me!"

Head spinning, sprawled on the floor next to the other man's semi-clothed and still aroused body, Andrew gave a helpless whimper of defeat, wanting above all else to heed Raymond's plea, stave off the despair and impotence that had enveloped them both: he yielded to Raymond's frantic embrace, blindly seeking a refuge from the deathly cold in his heart. As their bodies made contact, a frenzy came upon Brother Raymond: he threw himself on top of Brother Andrew, howling very low in his throat, rubbing frantically against him, his manhood hard

and urgent and hot between them, the cilicium rope biting and burning Andrew's flesh. His mind abandoned Andrew, and he fought to reach the lips that had been obsessing him for so long, pulling Raymond's hair with force until Raymond raised his head from Andrew's shoulder and surrendered to a kiss that was almost a bite, eyes tightly closed and streaming tears, hiccuping sighs in time with the thrusting of their hips.

Somehow, Andrew had shed his clothes, and he could feel their skins in contact as they both blindly pushed their bodies against each other, and there was nothing but their flesh and the hardness between them, a searing heat that kept growing and growing and then—someone was screaming and Andrew couldn't tell who of them it was, and he was spending his seed and Raymond was convulsing too and for a few moments there was nothing.

Brother Andrew opened his eyes slowly and blinked: a deep numbness was inside him, where a thousand screaming voices should have been. He was flat on his back, staring at the ceiling, idly following the patterns of cracks in the plaster. It occurred to him that maybe the noise they had made might have attracted someone, but he thought it unlikely—everyone was in the chapel, intent in the long morning devotions. Slowly, he turned his head to the left, looking for Brother Raymond. His heart suddenly froze, and he jumped up, numbness gone—Raymond was shaking convulsively, his half-closed eyes turned backwards to expose only the whites, a trickle of white foamy saliva escaping his lips. Andrew scrambled around, gathering his disarranged clothes, and felt Raymond's forehead: it was very hot. Calling and prodding had no effect, as Raymond seemed totally unconscious. Panic flared into Andrew, till it focused in a desperate clarity: he quickly rearranged

Raymond's clothes, wiping away the evidence, then did the same for his own. Next, he dashed towards the chapel to call for help.

As he had thought, everyone was still there, praying quietly. He accosted the Commander, panting his plea in a voice as low as possible: "Brother Raymond is very ill—found him on the floor, delirious—need a physician immediately!" With minimum fuss, the Commander sent an orderly for a physician then followed Andrew to the dormitorium. Andrew noted with a somewhat abstracted satisfaction that the Commander seemed to find nothing amiss, and together they decided to lift Brother Raymond and put him on his pallet.

"So you noticed he was missing from prayer, went to look for him and found him this way?"

Brother Andrew nodded slowly: the numbness was returning, ambushing him with a mortal weariness. He sat next to Brother Raymond's pallet without being told by the Commander. The older man let the little disrespect pass, pressed by greater concerns.

"Did you notice any signs that he was sickening, in the past few days?"

Andrew shook his head: "he was eating little, but not less than his usual. I always insisted that he ate ..."

"Do not accuse yourself for this, Brother. The Lord Giveth, the Lord Taketh. I will see that the physician arrives. Stay and watch. I will send an orderly to help you."

Andrew did not notice that the Commander had gone, his brain was trapped in an inextricable maze: did he have to tell the physician what had happened? Had it caused Brother Raymond's state? For the first time he wished he knew more of the ways of the flesh. And then the Commander's sentence coalesced and made sense in Andrew's brain: The Lord Taketh? Was Brother Raymond mortally ill? Suddenly, Andrew wanted to be sick. If Brother

Raymond died without confession, with their sin upon him, he would be eternally damned! Andrew looked at Raymond's ashen face, eyesockets deep and dark, the nose sharpened and deep lines around the mouth, a mouth no longer pink and soft but grey and cracked—yes, he might die. Die and go to Hell. Something broke inside Andrew, like a great dam, and thoughts and feelings he did not know or understand invaded him. He slid on his knees to the floor, clutching the bedcovers, burying his face in them, air burning his lungs as it swooshed in and out on each half cry, half sob.

When the physician arrived, followed by the Commander and an orderly, the storm inside Brother Andrew had almost spent itself, and for all to see he looked like he was praying, the tears a sign of the worry and maybe guilt that he, as watcher of Brother Raymond's, must naturally have felt.

They gently moved Andrew from the pallet's side and the physician examined Brother Raymond. The discovery of the cilicium caught the general attention, and the physician immediately started to remove it. After some futile efforts to undo the knots, tightened by blood, he had to cut the ropes away, muttering angrily in a low voice against the pride of crazy Templars. He then inquired about Brother Raymond's eating and sleeping habits, and his expression became angry, too. "You say he only ate a piece of bread and slept two hours a day?"

"Sometimes three hours, and had a glass of wine" responded Andrew automatically.

The physician snorted disdainfully. "It is clear to me that the privations have caused this inflammation of the brain. But whatever the cause, there is nothing I can do. The fever might pass and he wake up, or not. Take good care of him, and above all pray—and he might just make it. But I suggest you give him the Sacraments and the Last Rites." He then proceeded to dress and bandage the

wounds left by the cilicium and left, clearly not impressed.

The rest of the day went by in a blur: Brothers coming to pray in muted awe and grief; the priest administering the Last Rites; frustrating attempts to induce Brother Raymond to swallow a few spoonfuls of broth; finally, night and silence, the orderly assigned to assist them discreetly waiting outside. Andrew had not moved from his seat, giving a minimum of attention to the world, apart from watching closely Brother Raymond's rising and falling chest.

The moon rose and its rays entered the tiny room through the slitted window, making Raymond's face whiter than chalk. Brother Andrew realised that the sick man was shaking with extreme cold, despite the covers piled up on him: Andrew slowly rose from his chair and went to the pallet, laying down next to Raymond to warm him with his own body. He was way past caring what any onlooker might see, and Raymond needed the warmth. He carefully arranged his body so that it was enfolding Brother Raymond's, giving him as much protection as possible. Andrew's mouth came to rest very near Raymond's temple, and he stared at the thin, translucent skin, the pattern of blue veins visible even in the moonlight. The skin was so beautiful and delicate, yet so near dissolution and death: Andrew lightly accosted his lips to Raymond's temple, feeling the pulse beat, fast and irregular with fever, and felt that such a little area of skin and flesh was the most important thing in his universe. Andrew thought of Raymond's desperate words, saying that he had forsaken God for him, and knew that he had done the same, and for good. His faith, never great to start with, had withered and died, and all that was left was the certainty of retribution. He wondered if they would be allowed to see each other in Hell: because if Raymond

died without waking up and confessing, his soul would be lost as well. Even though he had received the Last Rites, their sin was so great that there was little hope for salvation: or at least Andrew's desperation was inclined to think so, his grasp of the fine points of doctrine never a profound one at best.

Yet Raymond's body was warm now, and its pulse still beat—surely he could not die! The warmth of the two of them holding close was so sweet and so tender—Andrew had never felt such a sense of belonging before, and the thought of this ending was unbearable. Yet it would end, one way or another: Raymond would die; or if he woke he would for sure regret their folly, confess and do penance and never want to see him, Andrew, again. Raymond had a great soul, full of faith—Andrew wished ardently that he could be the same, and that somehow they could purge their souls and raise them into a holy brotherly love, purified from the indecency of the fleshly corruption that had enfolded them and brought them low—but it could not be so, he could not cease to see Raymond's flesh as beautiful, ignore the beating of his heart and the heat of his body, and the lunar translucent beauty of his skin in the moonlight. God had nothing but the whip of the stern and hated master to win Andrew to him now.

The air coming from the slitted window was at its coldest before dawn, and the first birds had barely begun their morning song. Andrew woke up: in growing despair, he had watched Raymond for two long days and nights, warming him when he was cold, bathing him with wet cloths when he was hot, and had finally fallen asleep on the third night, holding the fevered body to his. The room was silent as ever, but something was different, waking him abruptly. Confused, it took Andrew a moment to realise that the body next to

him had changed, his temperature cooler, his breathing less laboured. Brother Raymond was conscious now, his eyes open and looking at him. His lips moved, but he was evidently too weak to speak. With a suppressed exclamation, Andrew leapt up and went for the water pitcher next to the pallet: he wet a cloth and pressed it to Raymond's lips, squeezing a few drops that the man drank avidly. Raymond's eyes sparkled, and he tried harder to speak, but Andrew prevented him, delicately stopping his lips with his fingers: "Shhh, don't say anything—you are too weak yet. I am sending for the physician now—"

A crashing noise suddenly interrupted him, screams and confusion, and a loud commanding voice yelled: "In the name of the King, surrender! The King orders the Knights of the Temple to be seized and arrested on suspicion of heresy!"

The cell was dank and it reeked, the floor covered in shallow pools of filthy water where small animals crawled, the only light entering from a narrow slit in the ponderous wall, so that the tiny place was immersed in twilight at the best of times. The occupant of the cell, however, was in no condition to appreciate his surroundings: Brother Andrew was lying on the scant heap of straw that passed for a pallet, naked and senseless. His body was covered with burn marks and his arms hung at an impossible angle from having been dislocated by the violent, jerking pulls of the strappado; his testicles were still tied up with the strings to which the torturers had attached weights, to increase the agony of being suspended from the ground by the arms and jerked up and down.

The iron door of the cell creaked open and a black and white clad Dominican priest limped in, kicking away the rats that scurried up and down the floor. He stopped next to the unconscious man and contemplated him in pensive silence for a

few moments, then he passed his hand over his sparse sandy hair and sighed; he bent cautiously and stiffly, favouring his left leg, and shook Brother Andrew awake.

Andrew came to with a choked scream, consciousness renewing the agony of his battered body. As he recognised the Inquisitor at his side, his expression rapidly closed, and he stared stonily at the ceiling.

The Inquisitor crossed himself: "In nomine Patris, Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Now, son, I have come to talk to you informally, as you see, because I have worried much about your stubborn behaviour; all your brothers have confessed their errors and are now free, yet you persist in silence and sin and I am much fearing for your soul."

Andrew spoke, feebly but clearly: "I have nothing to confess to the Inquisition—or the King."

The older man was silent for a while, then said, almost compassionately: "Brother Raymond has confessed everything about the two of you. You are gaining nothing from your silence except punishment."

Brother Andrew's face became even more inexpressive, if possible; then he said, haltingly: "How is he? He was quite ill when we were arrested ..."

The Inquisitor shook his head: "His bodily health is failing, but his spirit is near God. He is praying for you."

"I want to see him."

"Brother Andrew, you are in no position to make any requests. Your denial in the face of evidence puts you in the same essential category as a relapsed sinner. This forces me to deliver your body to the flame in the hope of saving your soul."

"And if I confessed?"

"Then you would repent and receive pardon and we would set you free."

"Could I get back to the House?"

"There is no House anymore. His Holiness the Pope has disbanded the Order. Maybe you could find refuge among the Hospitaliers, if they would overlook your impure state."

Andrew closed his eyes, the enormity of all that was happening too much to accept or comprehend. The Order disbanded! A life among their worst rivals the Hospitaliers—he could imagine the humiliations and the ridicule only for having been a Templar—and then worst of all, his adoration of Brother Raymond made object of public condemnation ... How could he repent of something he did not regret? He knew they were wrong, that they had gone against God—but he could not be sorry for it because that was still the way he felt, and if he was given the choice he would do it again. He was evil, he accepted that—he had known for a long time that he was not really worthy of being a Templar because he had no true faith—but his feeling for Brother Raymond was not and could not be eradicated, just as his sins did not contaminate the Order. His yearning for a sacred brotherhood in Christ was just and pure: it was only his own personal failure to contain his base animal nature that soiled and perverted it. In the same way, why would the Pope disband a good order because of a few sinners in it? The Order that had fought bravely in the Holy Land, the Order of Holy Knights, the pride of Christianity!

Bitter tears welled up in Andrew's eyes, and he stammered: "The Templars are innocent and have been unjustly condemned. How can you be accessory to this gross injustice, Dominican?"

The old man straightened his spine, and uttered solemnly, as if a challenge: "There is no injustice in defending the Church against heresy! I am an Inquisitor and my task is to smite the error so that the purity of the Faith is preserved. I have to fight the Eternal fire of Hell with the fire of the stake. Nothing is unjustified if done to accomplish this greater end. I am responsible only to the Pope and to God."

Andrew thought of Raymond's bitter words when he doubted that the Cathars had been really guilty. He had been a trusting fool, he knew now—only, it was

too late, and the Templars would be eradicated—but this time, without his acquiescence. He would not confess, he would claim the Templars were innocent: because they were, no matter what his personal sin.

So far, he had fought hard to avoid thinking of Brother Raymond's confession, but now his mind brought him there. Andrew had had no illusion that Raymond would repent and regret their carnal sin—but was Raymond now full of revulsion for him, and did not think of him well? Was he praying for his soul as if he would pray for the soul of an enemy, or was he still his friend?

He had to know, and therefore he had to see him—even if it required playing games with that old fox of an Inquisitor. Andrew said: "Let me see him, priest. He will help me understand my sin and maybe confess it."

The old man looked quite unconvinced, yet he took the challenge. He cleared his throat, and said: "So be it. But this is your last chance, Brother. I will arrange for you to be brought to him, he cannot be moved." And with that, he limped to the exit, slamming the heavy door in his wake. Andrew closed his eyes, and in his exhaustion let more tears flow from them.

They had to use a litter to carry him, since his legs refused to obey him, and it was of course impossible to hold him by his arms. Long corridors and stairs passed by in a haze, every movement of the litter an agony for his dislocated limbs; they finally arrived at a small room. Brother Raymond was lying on a pallet on the floor, and a priest with an orderly were keeping wake next to him. Andrew's litter was deposited on the floor near the pallet, so that the two Templars were face to face. Dim twilight gave the room a feeble and soft light, yet the shadows on Brother Raymond's traits left little doubt as to his condition. Andrew

found himself quite dispassionately cataloguing the signs of incipient death on the unconscious face, then interrogating the nature of the vague sense of relief that was flooding him. Was he relieved that he had come in time, or that everything was going to end soon? He wished he could move his arms and touch Brother Raymond's face.

The litter bearers and the orderly shifted to another side of the room, together with the priest, who nevertheless watched the Templars like a hawk, ready to catch any impropriety; the noise woke Raymond from his torpor, and he sighed, then he whispered with an almost inaudible voice: "I dream again that I see you and implore your pardon ... you seem so real, Brother—I never wanted to soil you with my indignity ... I remember, when I took my vows, the Brothers sang the psalm, How Good and Happy It Is to Dwell Together as Brothers ... *fratres in unum*, they said ... I am praying that you pardon me for corrupting you ... you are a good knight of the Temple ... I will soon present myself in front of the Highest and plead for you ... Brother ... "

Raymond's eyes closed again, and he relapsed in his torpor, despite Andrew's efforts to call him back; his breath was already rattling in agony. The dreadful sound brought Andrew's attempts to rouse him to a frenzy, and the bearers, nonplussed at the scene, quickly lifted him and brought him away, his screams of "You never soiled me, you are not indignant" echoing in the corridor.

The fire was smoky and blew hot scorching air in his direction. Andrew's eyes watered and he coughed, but he otherwise felt nothing. The stench of burning flesh and the screams from the other brothers tied with him and nearer to the flames barely registered. Andrew had said nothing since he had been brought back to his cell, and after a harrowing scene of anger the Inquisitor had

delivered him to the stake as confirmed and unrepentant sinner and perjurer. Raymond was dead. The Templars were finished. He was already dead, burnt meat.

He closed his eyes and thought, once again, of the beauty of Brother Raymond's moonlit face, the translucency of his eyelids, the pale patterns of veins underneath. The sweet warmth of his body as he slept, and slept and slept, till death robbed his face of shape and colour and his blood went cold. The wind blew stronger, and the flames rose higher, hiding the screaming bodies of the burning Templars from view. The crowd cheered.

Finis
Spring-Summer 1998

**First published in *Second Variation on the Theme of B and D*
*Keynote Press 1999***

**Contact the author at
*cassieingaben@yahoo.co.uk***

Author's Note:

The title is a quote from Psalm 113, *Non nobis, Domine, non nobis, sed nomine tuo da Gloriam* (Not unto us, Lord, not unto us, but to thy name glory), which was the service mark of the Templars. The epigraph is a quote from the Old French poem "The Life of Saint Alexis", and it means:
For in this world, there is no perfect love;
Life is fragile, nothing is eternal.
See, already this joy is turning into great sadness.