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## Running Home

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## Running Home

Raquel Beatriz Cedeno

She took a deep breath as the PA system buzzed with the pilot's announcement of their final descent into Phoenix. She absolutely hated flying so she dozed through much of it but always during the ascent and descent she would pray fervently while staring out the window, visually willing the plane to happily greet the ground, preferably by the tires.

Emmy had told her family and friends that she was taking the spring semester off to revisit a Holy Trinity Monastery she had done a retreat at years ago. This was true, but only a select few knew the whole story. She had left Florida heartbroken because she needed to heal, to think, to plan. Her sister was the only family member who knew of the harsh break up and the double pink line that started the chain of events.

Luckily, a trip to a monastery for a young devout Catholic was quite the norm in the circles she moved in. No one would question it and, according to the last glance at Facebook, no one even knew about the break up yet. In this day and age, if it wasn't announced through some social media then it just hadn't happened yet.

Her brow became furrowed and her gripped hands convulsed before she purposely relaxed them just seconds before the ground was met with a slight bump against the tires. The noise rose within the plane from the wind and the brakes working hard to slow the plane as it eventually made its way into one of the terminals at the Phoenix airport.

She shouldered her stuffed carry-on luggage as she disembarked, bypassing the small gift shops, café markets, and mini restaurants, and headed to the main doors of the

“arrivals” terminal to wait for the elderly woman who she spoke to when arranging her stay. Martha was a retired nurse who had joined the Benedictine’s to help organize their retreats and yearly functions held on the grounds of the monastery. The smell of exhaust quickly overwhelmed Emmy and she had to fight a wave of nausea that made her grab hold of the concrete column beside her until it passed.

Emmy had no way of recognizing Martha since she had had limited contact with her years ago on her retreat but a fair description of the faded gray Camry, and the “Holy Trinity Monastery” magnet on the side, helped to guide her. After ten minutes of watching cars go around, Emmy’s thoughts began to wander back to Florida and her heart began to constrict to the point that she felt compelled to rub her upper left ribs with the heel of her hand as if to soothe out the pain she was feeling. Instead, the action just caused her to react slowly to Martha’s car as it continued on to veer left to loop around and return to the terminals.

Five minutes later, Emmy was safely in the air-conditioned car, adjusting her seatbelt in the worn seats. She had shaken hands with Martha but regretted the formality of her extended hand when Martha had started to stretch out her arms for an embrace. The warmth of that embrace would have felt comforting but her thoughts were so pitiful that even the stewardess on the flight asking if she could get her anything else made her eyes mist over. A hug may have done her in.

The two women had exchanged several phone calls over the last week arranging her impromptu stay which allowed them to be able to make polite small talk easily, though Martha did carry the conversation most of the time. She spoke of the monastery with fondness, how the desert weather fluctuated so drastically from afternoon and

evening temperatures, how the pecan groves were already being primed for harvest, and a comical story of how one of the wild peacocks walked into the gift shop and would not leave from behind the counter for an hour.

As they started to exit the busy highways of Phoenix, the scenery began to change as the shades of brown emerged on either side of the country state roads and the land began to rise and dip in a way that was so foreign to Florida. Like the last time she visited, Emmy found it fascinating how the land contoured in such a way that just before the road dipped, an expansive view of what lay before was offered and shades of clouds could be traced on the brown surface. With each new rise and dip, her perspective was altered. As the road dove down in the valley once again, her eyes gazed ahead at the upward trek that showed very little of the journey. But every once in a while, like life, the view would change and you were offered a brief glimpse of the greater picture, one that allowed the darkness of the clouds to be put into proper perspective as the brightness around them was illuminated. She watched these shadows play upon the cracked earth, speckled with bits of green and dried bushes, as she explained to Martha the benefits of getting a theology degree from St. Thomas University.

Somewhere during the hour and a half drive to the town of St. David, Emmy drifted off to sleep. She was jarred awake when Martha miscalculated and hit the curb as they pulled into the entrance of the monastery, which was flanked by two angled stone walls on either side. She appreciated the distraction since the initial waking moments would often trigger wistful thoughts of Mason, which would then quickly be replaced with the sadness of his parting words to her. The suddenness of being woken and the adjustment to the surroundings eliminated that painful routine this time.

The next hour rushed by in a blur as Emmy was reacquainted with the surrounding buildings. The small adobe-like main chapel stood at the center of the monastery, about 60 feet northeast of the chapel was the gift shop, which was fairly close to the entrance. Behind that, if you followed the worn dirt, stood the kitchens and dining hall. South of the dining hall were small cottages, for individuals who wanted to stay for extended amounts of time, which eventually led to the library with the only limited internet access. All of the buildings were of a clay-brown adobe façade that blended with the desert. The one area of the monastery that stood out as an oasis was a small reflection garden just to the side of the chapel. It had a small fence that separated it and patches of actual grass, small desert bushes and desert roses were sporadically planted along the fence line. In the center was a circular pond, about 12 feet in diameter, which held a half dozen huge goldfish. To the west of the chapel was the actual monastery where the brothers and priest lived, and further down the road were the trailers for visitors. Even though she wasn't part of a larger group of retreatants, she was still assigned to one of the smaller trailers.

Once she had emptied her bags into wiped down drawers, she grabbed a quick shower to wash away the travels. She lingered as the water pelted her head and back, vaguely surprised over the strong water pressure. As she let the water flow over her, she allowed her tears to mix salt into the shower water. Suddenly she felt her heart lurch violently and she doubled over as her body began to rack with the force of her sobs. She quickly reached and turned off the water, realizing that when she lingered over any task, her mind and heart wandered. So she kept moving, meticulously brushing out her long hair, which had turned a rich medium brown since she hadn't been in the sun for some

time. This had made her normal olive tanned skin to become pale, exposing her uneven complexion and a slight ruddiness in her cheeks. She pulled on her jeans, a comfortable t-shirt and some Converse, and then quickly applied lip balm and SPF face lotion.

After locking up the door to her new home, she turned around and was determined to throw herself into whatever work she was assigned. She turned the corner of the trailer to head towards the kitchens and she practically ran into Martha.

“Emmy! You gave me a fright. Where were you headed in such a rush?”

“Martha! You scared the crap out of me,” Emmy chuckled, the sound catching her by surprise. “I was heading to the kitchen to see if I could get something to eat and then find you for what work I’ve been assigned.”

“Well, let’s just walk together then. Tell me, is the cottage to your liking? Did you get a chance to settle in; you look refreshed, dear.”

“The cottage is nice, I stayed in a bigger one the last time I came for the Campus Ministry retreat. This one is still even a little big just for me but it’s comfortable. I’m not sure I’ll actually be using the kitchen but the fridge will be good for drinks or snacks. I did get a chance to unpack and take a quick shower,” she said as she flipped her damp braided hair over her shoulder.

They made their way to the kitchens as Martha chatted on about some of the seasonal retired people that came back year after year who volunteered their time as service to the monastery as well as the married couple who had signed on close to two years ago to help maintain the entire facility. Martha explained that her main responsibility was to schedule groups of retreats and individuals who wanted to rent for a week.

“I spoke with Dave and Carol, the couple I was mentioning to you, and they actually would most need you to serve in the kitchens. You will be needed for all three meals, but you’ll get to eat all three meals for free. Plus you’ll get a small stipend if you manage to help out with other chores. It’s not much but it will allow you to do something small on the weekends or purchase some extra groceries.”

“That will be nice, just in case I decide to explore the area a bit.”

“You’ll have to be up early preparing the kitchens, but everyone gets to take a break during morning and evening compline, as well as morning mass. So you will certainly be busy, but you won’t be missing out on the important things. I know that money was a concern to you, so I spoke to Father Jeanne and he felt that the kitchen assignment demanded a lot, so that the price of the accommodations has been greatly reduced.”

“Oh, you guys didn’t have to do that.”

“It’s already been taken care of, dear. You won’t have to worry about anything. Father Jeanne did want to see you though. He said he will be preparing for evening compline soon and can meet you in the chapel.”

Martha’s thin hand swung open the heavy kitchen doors, revealing strength behind her boney and aged frame. Inside, a hefty man in his fifties was rearranging some tables in the dining hall while a tall, round-faced woman was sweeping the floors. They had a small radio that brought in more static than actual music but when the music did resonate, distinctly Christian lyrics were being pumped through the aged speakers.

“Dave. Dave!” Martha’s voice had risen but the clatter of the tables and noise from the stereo easily drowned out her voice. “That’s Dave and Carol. Dave sometimes

has a hard time hearing,” she said to Emmy as she walked up to the stereo to lower it significantly. The couple glanced up from their work when they realized that the music had been lowered, Carol had raised her head first, Dave realized it a second or so later.

Greetings were exchanged and the couple’s easy charm was apparent. But with her current mood, Emmy had to force herself to be gracious and not annoyed. Carol gently grabbed hold of Emmy’s small shoulders and steer her from behind through the double swung doors and into the kitchen. Preparation was well underway for dinner as two sisters bustled about. Carol had a good 5 inches on Emmy and was efficient at turning her shoulders to weave around the large metal island in the middle. Pots, pans, silverware, spatulas, casserole dishes, cups; cabinet after cabinet, drawer after drawer was open to reveal everything a cook could need.

“This is Sister Mary Martha and this is sister Mary Rosa,” Carol introduced as each nun nodded slightly with a smile. “They are Benedictine sisters but they have taken a vow of silence when they work. But just see when they’re done, how they gabber on like little girls,” she whispered to Emmy.

She started to relax her shoulders and cracked a smile at that, when Martha peeked her head through the double doors. “Don’t forget now, dear, that Father Jeanne wants to meet with you.”

Emmy walked out into the sunlight, softened by the day and made her way towards the chapel. She saw to the south high mountains and knew, from experience, that just past those mountains, within an hour or so walking distance, was the Mexican border. She saw the sunlight play through the bare branches of the large pecan trees and thought she saw someone walking through there and head towards the library, but Emmy

wasn't overly curious and so continued on to the chapel. She opened the large wooden door and was greeted with the peacefulness of Gregorian chant. The interior was air conditioned and dark, the warmth of the wood inviting after her eyes adjusted. Just past the alcove was the body of the church, wooden pews and stained glass windows were on either side, above was a basic and functional lighting system, everything was kept very simple. The Benedictines, like the Franciscans, did not believe in excess adornment.

She instinctively reached for the Holy Water font and gently dipped her fingers. She genuflected in the center of the aisle and blessed herself with the Holy Water. As she proceeded up, she prayed the same broken prayer she had been saying for weeks. *God, please take this away from me. Jesus, I trust in you. God, please take this away from me. Jesus, I trust in you...*

Her eyes were fixed on the small tabernacle below the statue of the risen Christ but her head whipped to the left when she heard a clatter. "Father Jeanne?"

"Yes, yes, give me a second, child." She heard books being restacked and finally she saw the priest as he stood up. He was wearing the plain, cream color habits that the nuns were wearing. His older loafers squeaked when he walked. "Come, let's sit here." He gestured to the front pews and sat a couple of feet next to her. "I am Father Jeanne and you must be Emily. What is it that brought you here?"

"It's, ah, Emmy, Father. My full name is actually Emerson, but it's ok. I was here years ago on a little retreat through my undergrad university's campus ministry program. It was the only place that made sense to go. I am going through a lot of personal issues. A

relationship just ended abruptly and I just need to heal. Prayer, distance, and service; I thought this would best help me serve God and give me the time to heal.”

“I see,” he said as he folded his hand and brought them to his chin and stared ahead at the tabernacle. “And this relationship has left you heartbroken and lost?”

“It has. We had been talking about marriage. We were both active in our faith and young adult communities. We did a lot of ministry together. We didn’t always succeed in walking the right way but we always turned to God and felt called to marry one day.”

“So you had put a lot of trust and faith in this man?”

“I certainly trusted him and I did have faith in the relationship.”

“Well I will certainly be happy to minister to you but no one can do it better than Jesus. You’re welcome to join us for all prayers; they are open to the public, and daily mass. God will heal you in His time, but He will give you strength. This will be a nice respite for you. The cottage is yours for the next week and I suspect Martha already told you about the kitchen assignment.”

“Yes, Father. Thank you. I was curious about the library and when it’s open.”

“Usually Carol has it opened with some volunteer helping at around 10 and then it stays open until about 3 but you can always ask Carol if you need something. She is very helpful and has done so much for the monastery.”

“Was it her idea to commission those paintings in the gift shop?”

“No actually, we have a hermit who lives here. She is pretty elusive but she is actually the one who paints those original acrylic paintings.”

Emmy scratched her nose using her forearm and resumed scrubbing the large casserole dish. She prayed while she worked because if she didn't she would wonder whose idea was it to make meatloaf and not line the pan? The two sisters had finished their chores and were off in a corner chatting about a new book that was just introduced by a popular theologian while they nibbled on a cookie and sipped their tea; this made them Emmy's prime suspects for not lining the pan. Emmy decided that soaking overnight just might do the trick.

She hung up her apron in the same spot she had been for the last 5 weeks and stretched her back. Her dreams of Mason had subsided after she had gotten here but they had returned the last two nights. She would wake up feeling slightly dizzy with the dramatic imaginings that if she breathed too deeply, the shards of her heart would shift and jab at her in new ways. She knew that it was no coincidence that the last email she received from her sister three days ago mentioned that he had called her looking for Emmy since she had kept her phone off since the plane had taken off.

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*Standing in the bright sunshine by the gardens of the chapel, Mason's light eyes had looked shuttered, haunted even. "We don't work well together and we never will...I'm not sure God wants us in this relationship, I'm not even sure He wants me in a relationship at all right now...I just don't want to lead you on."* These all seemed like definite statements. He hadn't wanted to work on things but now he was calling concerned? It probably had nothing to do with her and more about what caused the actual

break up. She turned from these depressing and perplexing thoughts and headed to the chapel, where Father Jeanne had asked to meet her when he saw her at morning mass.

She exited the dining hall and walked over to the chapel, breathing in the cool, dry air. How different it was from the Florida weather. Even in March the weather had already turned hot and humid, like a wet blanket had been thrown on you the second you left the house. But here, the air was cool in the shade but the sun could warm you easily. She wore her old comfortable jeans and a baseball t-shirt she just picked up yesterday when she made a run into town for her and Martha.

She looked up into the cloudless sky and closed her eyes briefly to try to shake her sadness away, but instead accidentally tripped over a rock. She braced her hands in front of her and felt the sting of the hard ground against her palms. She looked around to see if anyone had seen her but the only being she saw was a woman in the distance leaving one of the hermitages. She stood up and dusted off her jeans as her heart began to slow down and resume a steady thud. She hurried along the rest of the way, this time keeping her eyes focused around her. She remembered hearing a speaker once say that when the Bible said that we need to be in the world but not of the world, that means we can't have our eyes focused up while ignoring what is going on in front of us.

She let out a slight chuckle over the literal application of that parable as she pulled open the doors to the chapel. She saw Father Jeanne right away, as he shuffled through a pile of papers. She walked up to the front pew and said a quick prayer as she heard his squeaky loafers make his way over. He breathed deeply as he settled into the pew, always a few feet over.

“Emily, my child, how have you been?”

“Father Jeanne, I’ve been doing wonderful. I feel so much better since the last time we’ve talked last week. God has been good and He has been healing me. A little bit at a time, but it’s been wonderful,” she said, ignoring for the three dozenth time that he called her the wrong name.

“That’s wonderful, child. Praise God. I would imagine that you would be ready to go home and resume your responsibilities, your schooling.” He had asked her this question every week since she had gotten here.

“Father, no, I’m not ready yet! I know God has healed me but I feel like it’s not time yet.”

“Ok, ok, don’t work yourself up. Whenever God calls you to go back home, but Emily, you will have to go back home eventually. You have been here for five weeks. Just pray about it, God calls us to prayer but never to run from things.” With that, Father Jeanne got up and continued shuffling through papers and began to organize them into piles for evening compline.

Emmy left the chapel. She felt restless with what Father Jeanne had said. She wasn’t ready to go back home. She needed more time before she could go back and face her family and friends, before she could face Mason. She started to head towards the library but decided to walk towards the mountains. She passed through the hermitages, most she knew were empty, and continued to walk in a meandering way. Her heart felt like it was speeding with the idea that Father Jeanne had been encouraging her to go back home. Martha had made mention of a similar suggestion just last night when she had gotten back with groceries for her.

She kept walking, practically in a half circle when she stepped on some papers; a small lined page with flowing script. She bent down to grab it and then saw another, she ended up walking hunched over as she noticed another and then another. She collected all that she saw and then noticed that the furthest hermitage had its door slightly opened.

“Hello?” She called towards the crack of the door, and then proceeded to knock. The door creaked open slightly so Emmy debated whether or not to just drop off the pages and secure the door closed. She looked around and saw no one so she opened the door slowly, calling out a greeting again.

As she stepped foot inside she noticed the bed which was tightly made, but then she saw a small bassinet and piles upon piles of tightly rolled up diapers that had been discarded. An entire trashcan was full of them. Empty baby bottles were neatly lined on top of the dresser and a changing station had been situated to one side. The entire room was organized, almost in a military way, especially the baby items. She knew there were no children at the monastery at this time. She walked up to the bassinet, which she had always found creepy ever since she stupidly watched *Rosemary's Baby*, and peeked inside. Emmy saw a tattered bear wearing a diaper and a small shirt. The bear even had the small mittens that newborns wore to keep them from scratching themselves.

A feeling of anxiety started to overtake her so she quickly left the hermitage and broke into the freedom of the sunlight. She breathed the fresh air and leaned against the side of the small home. She looked down at the pages in her hands and picked some words out of the florid handwriting. *Despair, hate, murderer, un-forgiveness, damned.* She shuffled the pages and thought about just leaving them under a rock by the door. She started to look when she heard footsteps. The woman that walked towards her was not

anyone she recognized but by the wear of the room, she knew she had been here a while.

The woman stopped short when she saw Emmy.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t...I was looking for you. This is your cottage? I wasn’t sure if I should just...I’m sorry,” Emerson said as she shielded her eyes from the lowered sun but the hermit just stood there studying her. “I’ve been at the monastery for five weeks,” she paused, hoping the woman would say something, “My name is Emerson...”

“I know who you are, I’ve heard you talking to yourself on your walks. Why have you been waiting here for me?” The hermit’s voice was unmistakably feminine with no hint of cracks or stiffness from her lack of communication with others.

“Well I usually walk this way after I clean up the kitchen from lunch but today I - I stepped on one of these papers and saw there were more. Your door was open slightly. I didn’t know what else to do. I was going to just collect them and put them back in the cottage but...” her voice faded off.

“You went in? What did you see?” The hermit’s voice rose slightly.

“I didn’t really see anything,” she lied.

“Did you read these?”

“No, of course not,” she replied and then amended, “I glanced at them.”

“Thank you for returning them. I’ll take them back now,” she said, holding out her hand expectantly. She sighed, “I don’t know what you want, I can’t answer your questions. Please just give me back my entries.”

“How long have you been here for?” Emerson finally asked.

The hermit lifted her head slightly, as if to listen to some divine instruction. She looked knowingly at Emmy’s fatigued eyes, flushed pallor, and loose shirt. “I’ve been at

the monastery for 32 years, but I was wandering in a different kind of desert for years before that. There was a time when I was a different person. My skin glistened when I would laugh.” A faraway look entered the older woman’s eyes but was quickly extinguished. “I married a little late in my time, I was 22, but I had no regret. Richard was the only man I had ever loved. We had a wonderful honeymoon year. But there was this fog that crept in—light and dreamy, not quite real at first. But if you don’t pay attention, it can become thick and your vision becomes threatened. Our fog, our preoccupation, was children; we wanted to have lots of children. By the time I was 30, I finally conceived Samuel. He was perfect. We named him after Samuel in the Bible, because of how Hannah had prayed for him and God finally answered. After he was born, I never felt right. Postpartum Depression; now there is a term for it. Before, no one talked about it.” Hints of anger rose in her voice, bemoaning the changing times.

Richard became distant. One afternoon I decided I wanted to surprise Richard with getting dressed up so I drew a bath during Samuel’s nap. Before I was able to get into the tub, my mother in Kansas called. I didn’t even know Samuel was able to climb out of his crib at that point. He hadn’t even turned two. I sat there, on the phone with my mom, talking about Princess Diana’s wedding gown. Her wedding gown!”

Emerson’s hand fluttered to her abdomen before she checked herself and scratched an imaginary itch by her navel, but the hermit’s slight nod made her feel transparent.

“This desert—the cracked earth, the small bushes, the shades of brown—this is more fertile, more alive, than my heart, than my womb. When I lost Samuel...he was God’s gift to me and I couldn’t even treasure that properly.”

They both glanced away to inspect some aspect of their environment while their emotions and thoughts were gathered in and smothered down.

“There is something so healing about this place. It’s the desert but also the simplicity of the monastery. God doesn’t have to speak too loudly to be heard. The way the earth is renewed through the seasons, the way the pecan trees grow heavy before harvest and then bare in the winter, it’s the same message God gave Noah of renewal and rebirth. This is how I still feel life in me. That and through my paintings, the only thing I can still participate in creating.” Turning her gaze directly at Emerson she said, “Whatever it is that brought you here, it shouldn’t be what keeps you here.”

Emmy ran back to her trailer, holding back her tears. She opened the door and sobbed her way to her room and pulled open her drawers and then reached under the bed for her duffle bag and pulled out the small, white stick that still seemed to glow from pink lines in the window. She couldn’t keep running; she shouldn’t be paralyzed here and not face life. She tossed it back in and buried it under the piles of clothes that she stuffed into the bag. She zipped it up and collapsed, allowing for the first time to let her entire emotions out. She finally allowed for the full force of her heartache, fear, and stress to manifest in hot tears and gasping breath. Yes, Mason had left her after finding out about the pregnancy. Yes, he was really gone. Yes, she may have to raise this child alone. Yes, this was going to be difficult. Admitting this finally allowed for her to squeeze the last bit of darkness out of her heart.

Her breathing started to slow and become more even. She lay there for about 30 more minutes before she got up, grabbed her bag, and headed to Martha’s to ask for a ride back to Phoenix. She had been running and now it was time to run home.

