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CARY BARBOR

GLASTONBURY ABBEY

I stared out the tiny window of the plane at the guys driving carts around the tarmac. The crisp *bong bong* I heard from the cockpit didn't register right away. I wondered what it would feel like to drive the cart. I wondered how fast they went, how far you could get in one. I could see Boston Harbor off in the distance. Rows of small whitecaps, as in a child's drawing, blew across the surface.

I got off the plane, walked to the main concourse, and spotted the monk instantly: Scotch-tape-repaired glasses; goofy, enthusiastic grin; short. I shifted my eyes away from him and hiked my duffel bag higher on my shoulder. *I could easily slip out sideways*, I thought, *just get on a plane back to San Francisco*. I stood looking at him before he saw me. *This guy* Come on, I urged myself, *just go before it's too late*. I belched loudly—damned indigestion—and looked down, embarrassed.

That was when he saw me. "David? Welcome!" he said, and stretched his arms out into a hug. I stepped back and turned away slightly. He put a hand on my shoulder and sighed. "Welcome," he said again, quietly. "Let's go get your bags."

"Oh no, this is it. I'm all set."

"Really?" He tucked the sign he held ("Glastonbury Abbey") under one arm and rubbed his chin. "Alright. Well, maybe you've got the vow of poverty down already," he guffawed, and held out one arm to guide me toward the parking garage.

From there he drove us to Hingham, a tiny seaside town south of Boston where the abbey was located. From my seat in the car, I could glimpse the ocean. A small firecracker of glee exploded in my chest, dispelling the doubts I had had at the airport. With this kind of location, Renato would have no problem getting out of the country quickly. Fast and easy. The road ahead of us shimmered black with a fresh coat of asphalt.

We pulled in near a small stone chapel. The abbey grounds, pungent with the smell of wet leaves, stretched in all directions. My escort, whose name I had already forgotten, prattled on about life at the abbey, pushing his thick glasses back up on his nose. I interrupted him: "So what time's dinner?"



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After dinner I met with the abbot. Compact and solid with closely cropped white hair, he told me all about the Benedictine order I had just joined, who they were, and what they expected from me. He told me that it was the letter of recommendation from Cardinal McMahon that had fully convinced him to invite me in. The letter was there on his desk. Their census was down, he said, and they were happy to get good people. It got the bishop off his back for a while too, he chuckled. I smiled and nodded, glancing at the letter and remembering how proud my buddy Joey had been when he created the letterhead on his computer. Looking at it now from upside down, I realized that Joey had misspelled "diocese" as "diosese." I looked up at the abbot, my eyes wide. *Did he know? How could he have missed that?*

But he was looking down, putting two folded brown robes in a paper sack for me, and going over the house rules. The abbey takes in guests, he told me, groups of people who come for retreats. One of my duties would be to bring breakfast on big trays out to the guesthouse. I nodded and said it would be my pleasure. *Why don't I just come clean to this guy?* I thought. *Tell him I had a change of heart and walk out now. Simple. He must have seen that mistake on the letter. He's messing with me.* But he gave me a big smile and handed me the sack. Acid roiled in my stomach; I felt nauseous.

A couple of days after I got there, I was on breakfast duty. The Angels had been doing well when I left and I wanted to see whether they were still in the running for the Series. I stopped for a minute in the guest library and sat down with the sports page. Some of the guests smiled at me. I guess I looked funny, a brown-robed monk hunkered over the *Globe* sports section. Well, fuck 'em. They got their breakfast. I turned back to the box scores.

But when the brother in charge of the kitchen happened by, he gave me a withering look. I folded the newspaper onto the table and walked back out through the dining room. I checked quickly to see whether the guests needed anything more. They didn't.

Later that day the abbot called me in for a talk about the joy of serving others. I tried to look contrite. *Does he know I'm a fake?* He held my eye contact a minute too long. It gave me the creeps. I looked down at the rug to avoid him. I kept looking down until he dismissed me.

That day after Mass, I'd gotten down to business, slipping two jeweled chalices and an engraved gold plate out of the sacristy. I'd found a few small Giulio Romano drawings in the guesthouse too. Not a big haul, but at least it would prime the pump; let the buyers know I meant business.

I flashed back to grade school, Sister Mary Joseph catching me stealing in the school store. "Today it's a pack of gum, my boy, tomorrow it may be a car. But either way, the mark on your soul is as black as those scuffed shoes you're wearing." She paddled me after school that day and I'll always remember what she said: "What you're stealing is your own soul's chance at heaven."

Christ, what if she was right? What if there is a heaven and hell? I lit a cigarette. *I'm screwed.* I called Renato to arrange a 3 a.m. pickup. He estimated a fair amount of cash, and I told him to let the buyers know there would be bigger items to come.



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The night was as dark and unforgiving as granite. I met him where the abbey's woods met the main road, way at the back edge of the property. His pickup slid up almost silently. The headlights illuminated young white birches until they seemed to float in the black forest. I withdrew the objects from beneath my brown robe. He inspected them, then wordlessly handed me a small roll of big bills. I tucked the money into my underwear and walked back to the abbey.

One morning the following week, my chore was to organize a closet in an unused wing of the brothers' residence. The monk in charge of buildings and grounds handed me a bunch of keys on a shoelace. A medallion of St. Benedict weighed it down. I took them and nodded. "Thanks, brother."

The closet was about the size of a small bedroom and I could see when I opened the door that there was a lot of junk piled around the perimeter. I flicked the light on and glanced around. Against one wall, ten or eleven paintings were wrapped up in newspaper and stuck in a couple of mover's boxes. *Holy shit*, I thought; *Jackpot*. I looked through them quietly, making a quick appraisal. Probably 17th century. Maybe three or four of them would be worth something. I double-checked the artists' signatures and decided on two Postigliones, one Vasari, and one Badessa. I started boxing them up again — they all fit into the biggest box—and shoved as much newspaper around them as I could find.

I set the box with my paintings near the closet door and continued working, straightening up the rest of the things in the closet and burying the rest of the painting boxes behind some rolled-up carpets. The dust from the room clung to the skirts of my robe.

As I moved things around, I uncovered nests of dust that sent me into a raucous coughing fit. I stepped into the hallway and into the next room, which had a door to the outside. I opened it and stepped outside to get a little air. I thought I would break a rib, I was coughing so hard. I gulped a few breaths of the cool air and coughed some more.

If I were still in school, I'd think this was punishment for the stealing, I thought. I coughed some more, and felt some stomach acid back up in my throat. I tried to take a deep breath, and launched into more coughing.

What happened to my life as a debonair art thief? I thought bitterly. This sucks. I could just move the paintings back inside and leave. Get out of here tonight with the cash I have.

I went back into the closet and did one last overall straightening and sweeping. That set me off on another coughing fit, but a shorter one. I stood at the closet door and looked around. The place looked clean and organized. I carried my box into the next room and through the door to the outside. I patted the ground to make sure it was dry. I set the box down just outside the door. I'd move it later, when everyone was in evening vespers. I took another big gulp of air to clear my



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lungs, but that only caused more coughing. I leaned over and put one hand on the wall, coughing and feeling as though I might throw up. After a few minutes I stopped. I hocked up a big gob of spit and shot it to the ground. I stood up straight, breathing shallowly, tentatively, and headed back inside.

Back in my room, I called Renato. Reached him on the cell—excellent luck—and arranged to meet him that night. Again at 3 a.m., same place. When I told him what I had, he dropped the phone. I could hear him lighting a cigarette, trying to stay cool, but he and I both knew this was hot shit. He offered me the price I expected. A little more, actually. I took off my dirty robe and put a clean one on over a t-shirt and jeans.

At dinner, no one had much to say to me, which was just as well. After I ate, I found the abbot and told him I wasn't feeling well—I'd have to miss evening vespers. He laid a hand on my shoulder, smiled sadly, and told me he'd say a prayer for me. I took a few steps, then turned back to look at him again. *Did he know?*

I went to my room and lay on the narrow bed. I opened up the window and smoked a couple of cigarettes while I waited for them all to go. It was perfectly pitch dark out now. I stubbed out my last cigarette on the windowsill, shut the window, and left my room to walk down to the abandoned wing. I opened the door to the outside, and found the box of paintings, just where I'd left it. I propped the door open with a thick branch so I could get back inside. The box was heavy and clumsy to carry through the woods, even the short distance to the gardener's shed. Especially in the damn robe, which I kept tripping over. The door to the shed was open, of course. They never locked anything in this place; it killed me.

I stuck the box along a side wall. I knew it would be undisturbed until later tonight. I closed everything up again and headed back to my room to wait and smoke. On my way back I saw a log, lying on the forest floor, decomposing. I nudged it with my foot and busted open a nest of termites, industriously destroying the thing. I drew my foot back sharply and walked back to my room.

That night, just as we'd planned, I met Renato and his pickup out at the edge of the woods. He wouldn't give me the cash until he looked over the paintings, which he had to do by headlight. Anyway, he saw the artists' signatures and was satisfied. He handed me another roll of bills—much fatter this time. He drove away with the box propped up beside him in the passenger's seat like an anxious kid peering over the dashboard. I pulled the brown robe over my head, balled it up tight, and chucked it to the base of a tree. The smell of wet leaves—fertile and rotting—overcame me. I walked by the side of the road a ways, bending damp twigs into the soggy ground with my feet. I felt for the lump of cash in the back pocket of my jeans, shoved my hands into my front pockets, and walked.



CONTRIBUTORS' BIOGRAPHIES

Elizabeth Arnold

Elizabeth Arnold grew up in northeast Florida and attended Oberlin College, the University of Chicago, and the MFA writing program at Warren Wilson College. She has taught at the University of Chicago, the University of Montana in Missoula, Warren Wilson College, and, now, the University of Maryland. She has received a Whiting Writers Award and fellowships from the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe, the Fine Arts Work Center, Yaddo, and the Bread Loaf Writers Conference. Her poems and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in SLATE, TRIQUARTERLY, CHICAGO REVIEW, ANTIOCH REVIEW, POETRY DAILY, KALLIOPE, SAGETRIEB, TIKKUN, and CAROLINA QUARTERLY. While researching her Ph.D. dissertation on the British poet, Mina Loy, Arnold discovered a complete, unpublished manuscript of Loy's novel, INSEL, which she edited for Black Sparrow Press in 1991. Arnold's first book of poems, THE REEF, appeared in 1999 from the University of Chicago Press.

Cary Barbor

Cary Barbor lives in New York City. Her first published story, "No Shoes in the Ashram," was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She was recently a Knight Journalism Fellow at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, where she studied malaria in western Kenya and botulism in Alaska.

Mark Brown

Mark Brown grew up in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, an ex-industrial city in the north east of England, before drifting southwards, eventually ending up in Deptford, south east London. At present he divides his time equally between writing, being unemployed, and editing for ABCtales.com, the UK's most popular creative writing website.

Renee Howard Cassese

Renee Howard Cassese has lived on Long Island her whole life. Presently residing in Seaford with her husband Frank, who is an artist and chef, she is eagerly looking forward to the second half century of her life. After fifteen years as a special education teacher, Renee now works in education administration, but she is writing fiction and personal essays and aiming toward making freelance writing her full time job. She has two adult sons, Jesse and Rob and a lazy beagle named Lady Samantha.