

## Preface

*“Know thyself.”*  
The Delphi Oracle

My name is Jean Moreau, a monk in the Abbey of Kervernec in Brittany, France, and I have a question for you. In the Western world, how does one judge success? What is it to which most people aspire? What is it that they think they will have, or be, when they finally have it? What would you say?

I think often it is connected to the “four Ps” — position, possession, power, and prestige. While I do not mean to disparage the world’s idea of success, I will submit that it does not contain the seeds that will bear the fruit of contentment.

Visitors here at the abbey are often very successful. What has made them successful in the world’s eyes — a degree, parenthood, business success, becoming a leader, a teacher or an authority of some kind — might no longer hold its appeal or perhaps it no longer plays a principal role for them. While the lives they have led as successful people in the world have brought them some satisfaction, something is still missing. They hunger for more in life. They are not sure what that “more” is, but all evidence tells them that these “four Ps” are not the stuff of happiness — at least not all by themselves. They have yet to find the path to Awareness, to Spirit, which is the only place that one will find real meaning and fulfillment.

As you will see, much of what I will profess in these pages will be what you would expect from a monk, but I assure you that some of it will most certainly surprise you. Mine has hardly been an orthodox path, sometimes pitting myself against my own religion; but, religion and spirit are regrettably often not the same thing. As a monk I have found Awareness through trial and, especially, through error. I have been spared none of what life and the world can deliver, despite being who and where I am.

I’ll start my story with a look at how an abbey functions – a mystery to many. Then I’ll tell you a little about my origins, family and how I got here, before getting into the meat of my story – a tale of temptations, ups and downs, moments of pure glory as well as moments of near despair. Woven in between, I will share with you tools I use to further my ultimate purpose and ours as humans...our destiny – connecting with the Divine.

By telling my own story, with its conflicts and doubts, with its moments of transcendence and vivid emotion — all that is human — I hope to show that when connected to our Source, life takes on new meaning. All of us are heirs to this astonishing Kingdom of peace and fulfillment. We must only reach out and touch it!

## Part One

### *My Home in the Monastery, My Roots, My Friend*

#### **Kervennec and the Rhythm of Abbey Life**

*“I have freed my soul.”*

– *Abbé Bernard of Clairvaux, Letter to Abbot Suger*

I remember the first time I really noticed the beauty of Kervennec. I hadn't been here very long. It was in the early winter — December, I think. I was walking back to my room after breakfast and the abbey stones had begun to show their golden hue at the dawning of the day. Accompanying first light was some haze, which gave the ancient walls an otherworldly look. I remember smiling to myself and thinking how perfect the moment was and imagining how that scene had repeated itself day after day, season after season — century after century — and here I was, another witness to it, and caught short by it all.

As I continued my walk that morning, what I could not have imagined was what was waiting in the wings for me here — how the love of a woman would bring me to my knees and how my indiscretions nearly had me removed from this place that I love best. But God and my angels never let me fall that far. In fact, it was through that turmoil that I found a more perfect Union with my heavenly Father/Mother. With God's help, my redemption has been complete. That is the story I am about to relate.

Going back in my memory to recall those early days, I remember the first time I really heard the music here, too. I had been so busy trying to learn my parts in each song that until that revelatory instant I had not really heard it. What a moment it was when the chant finally did find its way into my consciousness — a moment that I will never forget. We were singing one of the Divine Offices. It was Vigils, our first service of the day. On that particular day, instead of just reading and singing my part, something seemed to take hold of me and to distance me from the physical. It was as if I were transported to someplace where I was watching the whole of the proceedings from another vantage point. My ears were suddenly open to the wonder of the unmistakable sound of our chant. It was resonating with the words of the Psalms, words far older than our abbey walls. The chant's purity and sonority and its depth of feeling came home to me, and it has been that way ever since; simple and ancient as those melodies are and as ever-present as they are in our worship, chant still has the power to move me emotionally and to lift me spiritually. When I sing, I imagine the hundreds, no, the thousands of brothers who have come before me here chanting these very same melodies with their eternal texts. I find myself, as I did

that day, readily able to connect to my spiritual ancestors, my spiritual roots. It is a magical feeling and floods me with a wonderful sense of continuity and community.

What is my motivation, my “mission,” for being here at Kervennec? I will tell you simply that my mission here in the abbey is to make the effort to know myself — my true self. Why? That true self shares in the divinity of God. Being united to Him is where all true joy lies, so that is the connection that I seek. It is only after I have come to understand my true self and my authentic nature in Spirit that I will be able to know and enjoy a fulfilling relationship with my Father/Mother in heaven. Without that intimate knowledge about myself, I can never have an intimate knowledge of my Creator.

I know that some think that an abbey is just a retreat from the world. I can tell you that it is hardly that. It is, in fact, quite the opposite. It is an embracing of life in all of its depth, in all of its complexities. What can be more difficult for a person than to be alone with him or herself without distraction, hour after hour, day after day? I search for myself and for God in the quiet of prayer and meditation. I also search for these things in my relationships with my brothers in the abbey. Think about what challenges there are in living in close proximity to the same group of men, private and enclosed, for life. I can tell you that there are many — as in any family. But these challenges, if we do not shy away from them, allow me and my brothers to get to the heart of things; things like self-knowledge, brotherly love — Jesus’ second commandment — and understanding. They build character. They are opportunities. Through them, I have come to understand in mini-steps what makes me “tick” and what God wants of me to make His imperfect creature as perfect as he can be in this lifetime. I want to know the emotional man, the rational man, and ultimately, by the grace of God, come to know my eternal self, my spiritual man. When I have accomplished those things, then I can come to know my Creator. In knowing God, I will be complete, wanting for nothing.

Let me tell you more about everyday life here. Our days in the abbey are always busy and productive. It’s not all work though. Everyone knows that all work makes us not just dull boys, but not very balanced human beings. None of us want that, so we combine work and prayer with personal and community time in a very satisfying way. This method of living each day has come down to us with very little change from St. Benedict, who conceived it and encoded it in his *Rule*, now known as *The Rule of St. Benedict*, fifteen hundred years ago!

St. Benedict. God raises up the right men at the right time — and the right time was the fifth century, when stability was a disappearing dream after the Pax Romana. He was a man of astounding wisdom, stuck as he was in the abyss of the Dark Ages. The genius of St. Benedict is embedded in the wisdom of the *Rule*. It is comprised of many parts, but perhaps the most enlightened is the concept of the structure of the abbey day. St. Benedict was very specific about how the day and the responsibilities of work and prayer should be organized. We Benedictines have the motto “Work and Pray.” It is anything but an empty credo, that I can tell you, and every year I appreciate its brilliance more and more.

Here is a little about the structure of our day: We start our singing of antiphons (short verses of scripture) and Psalms from the first moment we gather every day. During the whole waking

day, we sing six Divine Offices and celebrate a Mass. An Office is a time of prayer and adoration as a community. St. Benedict knew the power of worship as a community, and he also knew the discipline it brings to the contemplative life. In that act of coming together, we strengthen our spiritual resolve and challenge ourselves to grow in brotherly love and patience. In the Offices, we have the prayer structure we need to thrive as men on earth but live with one foot in Paradise.

St. Benedict knew that any life devoted to God had to be practical as well as contemplative. Everyday life as it exists on earth cannot be ignored. The *Rule* lets us immerse ourselves in the work and affairs of the life of the senses, within a structure that gives us ample time for the development of our immortal souls. We need time daily to appreciate who we are, why we are, and Who made us, to worship and commune with our God. We also need to provide for ourselves and our bodies. We are not many of us constructed to be hermits. Thus, our community gives us what we need to thrive on every level.

Each monk is expected to attend all of the Offices and to be on time, but Père Abbé, head of the abbey and our spiritual Father, can grant someone a special leave should one of us have a duty that requires missing an Office. I myself love our rituals so much I feel empty if on occasion I might miss one.

We perform most of the Offices in the abbey church. Vigils is our first Office. Vigils is often sung in the dark or at dawn in our abbey, depending upon the season. It is an especially beautiful service. It is the time of day when the earth seems new and the spirit and its energies most palpable. It is the time of day when the distance between our world of activity, life on earth as it were, and the peace and incisive wisdom of the next world, that of the spirit, is lessened. At that hour, the “veil is thin” between the two worlds.

Following Vigils we have some time for ourselves, individually, or for sharing a cup of coffee and a snack with our brother monks, before heading back to the church to start the next Office, Lauds. The Latin meaning of that word translates into English as “praise.” This Office, along with that of Vespers in late afternoon, are my next two favorites. Lauds is full of chanting the praises of God in its selections of Psalms and antiphons. For me it is a second beginning to my day. Lauds is one of the longest services, lasting a half hour or more, but it is a most beautiful one.

If you picture in your mind the “choir” in our church, which is situated on the altar side of the communion rail, you can picture how we gather. We sit in two groups, facing one another. We have nineteen monks on each side. Our iterations of the songs are sung as if by two separate choirs. One choir, or “side,” sings a certain number of the verses of a Psalm. Then the other side continues singing the next few verses, and so on. At certain times, we sing together, usually at the conclusion of the Psalm. This echo effect is very nice and it is also wonderful to be able to face our brothers while chanting. There is a heightened sense of community and intimacy in performing our services like this. We feel as one band, one brotherhood, united there before the Lord enjoying the rapture of these prayers and melodies.

When Lauds is finished, we go to breakfast. Benedictine monks eat well! This was a strong mandate written into the *Rule* by St. Benedict. Men in the abbey need to eat wholesome and

filling foods, with as much of it as possible being produced by the men themselves from the farms, orchards, and gardens. Much like an army, a monastery marches on its stomach, and our cooks do their best to give us interesting and tasty meals. We eat in silence after the abbé sings a prayer, but we always have — or should I say, we usually have — an interesting reading that is chanted by a brother throughout the meal. It can be something written by a monk or saint, books or letters, and it is often quite humorous. We sit on the perimeter of the dining room at long tables in assigned places. The meals in our refectory are for monks and male visitors only, who eat at a table reserved for them. If families or women wish to come and stay with us, we welcome that. We have another nice area where they can be served.

After breakfast we have free time until Mass at ten o'clock. Mass generally lasts about an hour. We follow the Roman Catholic Church's liturgical calendar of feast days and seasons. After that celebration, many of us have specific duties to attend to, such as working at the monastery shop or farm, or administrative duties to perform. Time can go quickly and before we know it we're gathered again in the church for Sext, the short Office that concludes our morning worship and is followed by the next community gathering at lunch. We have another brief Office together after our lunch called None before we breakup to continue our work for the day.

My work has consisted of helping at the shop, general cleaning, and offering help on the farm in season. I have always been good with numbers, so I have also helped on the finance side a little bit.

I mentioned Vespers earlier. It is celebrated in late afternoon. The sung liturgy is exquisite, rivaling Lauds. It is at this time that we see the greatest number of outside visitors of any service. It is a lovely way to wind down the day and prepare for evening, especially in winter. We emerge to a dark world and I find the sense of community heightened then. I also think we are at our finest voice at that time of day, which enhances the liturgy. An hour or so later finds us back at the refectory for dinner, and then we finish the day at about 8:45 p.m. with Compline, our last Divine Office for the day.

People often wonder if we are allowed talk to each other at the abbey. That is a great question, to which I answer, simply, yes, we can talk. Monasteries all differ on how they treat silence, however. At Kervennec, we have certain times reserved for silence — from 8:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. and at meals. We have one quiet time after recreation in the afternoon, prior to Vespers. At all other times, the idea is just to not make unnecessary conversation. I don't find these rules difficult to follow.

All in all, it is a most pleasant and efficient organization of the day and allows us to fulfill perfectly St. Benedict's monastic vision "to work and to pray." There is nourishment of the soul, mind, and body, beautifully intertwined. While this kind of life is not for everybody, if the world could take the best parts of our lifestyle — working, praying, and living in peaceful community — wouldn't it be a beautiful world?

## My Room

*“All men’s miseries derive from not being able to sit in a quiet room alone.”*

– Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

The idea of being alone is so far separated from being lonely. I love my time alone. For me, being alone is a time of reflection and of peace — a time of really getting to know myself. In the monastery, we are alone quite often, but we feel a loving community around us, and that energy comforts us and works to reinforce our intent to know ourselves and our God.

We monks each have a room in the monastery that some on the “outside” refer to as a “cell.” What a dreary sounding place — lonely, cramped, and solitary! Nothing could be further from the truth. It is a wonderful place — a place of inspiration and prayer and I never tire of it. Its energetic warmth and its familiarity constantly nourish and comfort me. It is not a retreat from the world, but a place to go into myself and into the midst of the spiritual forces that constantly and lovingly swirl within and around us.

I have read how the physical space around some holy men, their lodgings and their places of prayer particularly, take on the positive energy of that person. My room possesses a soul — part of mine, certainly, but also traces of the dozens of others who have lived in this space in the centuries before me. Anyone can feel it, though the degree to which its power is communicated depends upon each person. This kind of energy can be appreciated for what it is by those who can fully comprehend its nature but it can also be appreciated by the uninitiated for its warmth of feeling. I always sense it. I use that energy and benefit from what it has to give me by tapping into it in my meditations. Sometimes I think it must be so hard to find peace for those who do not have this private luxury — those in the outside world who lead much different lives with their many different kinds of distractions. To have and honor a private place in one’s home or in one’s mind and to still live in the world can be done, certainly, but the effort is great. He or she who can achieve that is destined for great peace and contentment in this world, and receives a taste of the unimaginable contentment and beauties of the next one. How I admire and continue to pray for those outside who are working to build upon their spiritual leanings.

Sometimes I sit in my room in this old comfy chair of mine and look up at the light passing through my window. It frequently falls into my room as a golden ray with surprising warmth even in the dead of winter. There is a softness but also an intensity about it. I love the contrasting shadows it creates and the specks of dust that seem like contented angels flitting and floating in the air. This light often appears most glorious mid to late morning, depending upon the season. The world seems to slow to a crawl, everything more vivid at those times. I was born just before noon and I’ve read that all of us are more sensitive to things at the time of day that corresponds to the time of our births. Late morning seems to be a time of greater physical energy for me, so maybe that is true. I have felt my subtler energies, those that I touch in prayer and meditation, to

be heightened at this time. It's like the world of the unseen is more near. It is a place of calm, this old room, in a thousand small ways.

It's important to feel that world of the unseen. We all can do it. We only need to stop in the busy-ness of our day or at any other time that suits us and go into the Quiet that is within us all. There we will find it. It is there, in that quiet spot, where we really get to know the truth of all that is around us and within us. With that knowledge comes a serenity not found anywhere else, I can promise you that. I will come back to that whole subject, which is really that of Awareness, very often in this story. It is our goal to become aware, the first step on the way to fulfillment.

One thing that I like to do in my quiet time here is to read or even recite silently from memory any Psalms that come to me. These are, for me, the jewels of religious literature. The Psalmists, in their litanies of "whys" and "thank yous" and "how could yous," state the case for a loving and attentive God even in the face of a deck often stacked against them. They cut to the quick and tell the whole and unvarnished truth of the human condition. How many times have I read or recited them? Thousands? Tens of thousands? It doesn't matter. No matter how many times I have read them or sung them or meditated upon them — season after season, year after year here during the monastery services — they never lose their power to inspire me and to move me.

I now feel like I know personally those writers of old. I am in awe at how my fellow human beings' cries from the heart and shrieks from the soul could be expressed so simply and so effectively in their writings. At nearly every reading there is something — their imploring, their confidence, their remorse, their utter despair, their praise, their sense of ultimate triumph — that moves me and brings me closer to my Creator. The Psalms, in the end, show us how a little grain of faith can flower. Sometimes after I read them or recite them privately, especially early in the morning and just before bed at night, I write down my own prayers and poetry that come from my own heart — my own shrieks from the soul. It helps me clarify how I feel about so many things.

The Psalms remind me so often of the person most dear to me, besides my parents. That was my first abbé, Abbé Paul, a man of great warmth and love who is so often on my mind. He is now enjoying his heavenly reward. He was also a man of much learning and wisdom. It was he who taught me so much about everyday living — how to bring the spirit into my daily life, how to know what Jesus meant with his sayings, how not to judge, how to love myself — well, the list could go on and on. How I miss his presence here in the earthly life...yet I know he watches over me from his celestial home!

One thing he used to tell me, and which he mentioned that the Psalms pointed out repeatedly, was that the Enemy was never far. I often recall the discussion I had with him about that long ago at the beginning of my monastic career. It went something like this:

"Who is the Enemy, the Adversary?" We were walking together after a morning Mass and the question came out of the blue from Abbé Paul.

"The Enemy is Satan," I remember responding.

"Ah, yes, our old friend Satan, my well-trained priest. That's a good answer — at least

according to the Catechism. But now I will ask you, my young friend, what does the word Satan mean, other than Adversary? Who or what is Satan? Who or what is the Adversary, and do those terms really get us any closer to who that Enemy really is, what defines him, what his essence is or what it tells us about life, about ourselves, about our spirits? Do you think that it does? Well, I don't.

“What is it that separates us from God?” he then asked.

I remember being afraid to spew back the answer that I had learned in Catholic school and seminary. It was sitting now at the tip of my tongue — sin.

“Mon Père Abbé, I know the answer I would like to give you, but now it seems so inadequate and nondescript. I want to hear what you can tell me, how you can guide my thinking.”

Père Abbé chuckled and said, “No doubt you were going to say ‘sin.’ And you would be right, Jean. Any good Catholic schoolboy would be correct to respond that way. But then again, what is sin? What is it really, Jean? Give me a good definition. Is it just the list our Heavenly Father is keeping of, shall I say, our less than optimal decisions or attributes?”

Abbé laughed that time as he said that. His joy in life was apparent. I remember that laugh especially. I started to laugh, too, because his laugh was infectious. As he laughed, he put his arm around my shoulder and we walked in the garden for a while. He loved all of his charges, this was true, but there was something special that he saw in me and I knew it.

“I will tell you who the Enemy, Satan, the Adversary, or whatever you want to call him really is. The Enemy is, in a phrase, all things that block one's way from finding or connecting with God and entering the Kingdom of Heaven right here on earth. The Enemy is anything that separates us from God. That is a big list of things! There are lots of opportunities for the mortal blows that he can deliver under many different names and guises.

“Remember those references in the Psalms to an advancing army?” he continued. “They are not to be taken literally because they are nothing more than an action or omission or even a way of life that threatens to obstruct the soul's connection to the Godhead. The more we engage in the untoward, the lower our defenses become going forward. The Psalms are warning us that the Adversary is always advancing and preparing for his attack on the integrity of the soul, and that this Enemy attacks from within. It's a constant battle with him to make the right choice and avoid the destructive choice as we work to advance to an evolved spiritual state.

“You know, Jean,” he said, “there is always that choice of advancing or of stepping backwards. But the Enemy — the Adversary, Satan — is very clever. He operates one-on-one, exposing weaknesses, testing, and so often succeeding in separating man from his peace, from God. He can and does also operate within groups, including tribes and nations. Anger and fear are his principal weapons but the Enemy can bring another type of obstacle that is so very difficult to fight — despair. We must never despair. The cries of the Psalmist were desperate, but not despairing; how easy it can be, however, to fall into a feeling of hopelessness, then or now.”

I remember how we talked of many things that day but that concept of the Enemy and the definition of his success and our death — being cutoff from our Heavenly Father, from our

Source, to be where “His face no longer shines upon us” — is what has stood out for me over time.

Abbé Paul went to his heavenly home many years ago, but I feel his presence and his smile often. I frequently think about what it means to have daily triumphs over the Enemy. A triumph for me is maintaining a connectedness to God and a sense of His presence, particularly in the face of difficulty. Connectedness by its very nature will eventually become Understanding, the recognition first of the possibility and then of the reality of the temporary nature of life on earth and its sufferings and the recognition of another dimension. That is Awareness. Awareness is that place where Love and Compassion begin. It is the place from which one can really begin to experience the Godhead, Who encompasses those virtues. Under the fire of the Enemy are forged man’s noblest characteristics, or greatest failures. The tempering of the earthly man through his many difficulties and challenges is where he can learn to connect to his own soul, his Higher Self, the Divine within. It is this connection to the Divine that gives humanity its only true possibility for happiness in a world incapable of delivering it by itself. We eventually come to realize that earthly life should not be taken too seriously, and that all works for our good.

Divine connection — there cannot be happier or more satisfying moments in any human experience. The peace that pervades us is not of this world. It is a contentedness, a lack of fear or anger, a state of complete satisfaction. It is the prelude, a glimpse of what we can expect in our coming life in Eternity. It is for “those who have ears to hear,” the Pearl of Great Price, the one thing that a person should sell or renounce everything to possess. It is nothing less than the Kingdom of Heaven itself and as Jesus said, it is there, available to all of us. We can lose our “gloom and doom” — we can learn to live. That is the promise of the Good News!

## Elena

*“What is a friend? A single soul dwelling in two bodies.”*  
– Aristotle, quoted by Diogenes Laertius

Elena! Where do I begin? I want to tell you everything about her, this kind and blessed human, my soul mate...and by far my greatest challenge in life to date, which I will describe in much detail in the coming pages.

Elena is a woman who has intrigued me all of my adult life. I can hear you saying to yourself, “A monk with a female soul mate?” It is true. This radiant soul and I had a bond that we felt from the beginning of our acquaintance. We met at university in Brest. She just had that “way,” that something that attracted me from the start. It has always been exciting just to see her, anytime — after class, around town, on outings, at the monastery. I can’t put it into words, really. The best I can do is to quote a young visiting novice. We were in discussions about sexuality and its lures and attractions, among other things. As he spoke about a woman he had once been very attracted to, he said, “She just rattled my cage.” I haven’t found a more apt description of the “process” yet! It was an attraction that grew into much more than a physical one. We think the same about things, we enjoy the same things, we love our God the same way, passionately; and, we love each other.

At university, we did not meet until late in our last year. But it took just those few months for us to learn so much about each other and to come to know each other’s intimate thoughts like we had been lifelong friends. It was a very sad day when we parted, me for the monastic life, It was a very sad day when we parted, me for the monastic life, eventually, and her for her artist’s dream. But, we knew our choices were the correct ones, no matter how painful it might be for each of us for a while, and painful it was for some time. I had the sense that I had lost the one person in whom I could confide, and I was starting on a path in life that could be quite lonely at times. I didn’t enter the monastery right away, but took a job as a salesperson with a travel agency in Angers, still not quite convinced about my vocation. Elena was based in Brest but traveled quite a bit in Europe for her inspiration.

We knew, of course, that we could write to each other. But I had a premonition that that would not last with our respective careers developing. I was right and our correspondence soon petered out. Writing could not replace what we had experienced in person during those intense few months. We never became intimate but it was on my mind and I am sure that it was on hers. She didn’t need to say it. I could see the longing on her face; and I could make no secret of my physical desires. Still, I knew it was for the best to leave that as it was, knowing that my life might soon change. And if I had pressed it, she would have resisted, I believe, to spare me the task of confessing it when I would commence my priestly training. She was, and is, so unselfish.

A lot of our time together we spent out of doors. She is a lover of nature, as am I. It is there we feel God really resides on the physical plane. Nature offers us a chance to get back to our roots, no pun intended! There is no pressure from others or from daily life, no interruptions in our thinking or our meditating about things, just a sense of oneness and unity that is hard to experience anywhere else. I wish sometimes that I had made a fastidious record of all that we discussed. Some of it, in light of life's experiences, would now seem trite, I am sure; but there were bits of wisdom here and there that would be fun to see now. Such a diary would serve, if nothing else, as a history of a friendship, with its serious side, its inanities, its insights, its humor, and mostly, its connection.

Our story recommenced a little more than a year ago. Out of the blue she contacted me. What a surprise it was! She had written to me and asked if she could come and see me: Would I be available one day so that we might catch up on things, talk about old times, and get reacquainted? I was delighted to have heard from her so I naturally said yes. We quickly fixed a rendezvous for later that same week. She would come to the abbey to meet me. I had decided that if the weather were nice, we could have a walk around the grounds and maybe take a sandwich and have a picnic.

The day arrived and fortunately it was a beautiful Breton day. The wind was fresh and bright clouds were rapidly pushing past high in the azure sky. Elena arrived right on time. As she approached the *accueil*, or welcome center for the abbey, I could make out the familiar shape of her face and her tall, slim body. She cut a lovely figure. As she approached, it seemed to me that she had hardly aged. Tall and angular, with only a hint of gray now invading her long dark hair, she was still striking in appearance. I remember that I suddenly became conscious of my own appearance — something that hadn't concerned me in quite that way for years! I let that thought go — fortunately, my cassock hides a multitude of sins!

I met her enthusiastically and gave her kisses on each cheek. She responded in like fashion and smiled warmly.

“Hello, Jean! Or, should I say, ‘Father’?”

I smiled and then chuckled a little. “No, Elena, I think I’ll always be ‘Jean’ to you!”

As I was speaking, I couldn't help but stare at my beautiful friend. In fact, I couldn't take my eyes off of her — all of those years, and now, here she was, here we were, together again.

“How did you find me, hermit that I am?” I asked, trying not to be nervous.

She smiled that big smile and responded, “Well, I’ll tell you. I was reading one of our university newsletters last week and you came into my mind. It got me to thinking more about you. To be honest, I have thought of you so many, many times over the years. We were so close and I missed you, but I knew that you were otherwise ‘occupied’! But after getting that newsletter and with you fresh on my mind, I became more and more curious about where you had ended up. I wasn't sure if you were still in this area, so I decided to call around a few parishes in Brest a couple of weeks ago. One priest there said that he recognized your name and thought you were here at Kervenec.

“I had come out here a month or so ago to get some ideas for a project I am looking at

doing, and also just to visit the place. Of course, I had no idea that you were here. Funny, but I hadn't ever been to Kervennec before, even though it's not that far. I had a nice walk around and toured the church and the other buildings. Crazy to think now that you were here so near to me.

"Anyway, I wrote to you and, voilà, here you are, an hour from Brest — not quite as 'hermity' as you'd like to think!"

There it was — that sassy sense of humor. How I had missed it!

"Well, okay, you got me there — I'm not quite a hermit," I admitted. "But it must have been your feeling my vibrations here during your first visit that aroused your curiosity!"

"No doubt!"

Back and forth we went like that for a while. I remember how I enjoyed gazing at her thoughtfully as she brought me up to date on common friends and other happenings. She seemed calm and confident to me. She had a look in her eyes, in her regard, that was very peaceful. There is something about her face and eyes that has always conferred a softness about her. She also has what appears to be a sort of perpetual half-smile on her mouth that gives her a look of approachability.

After a bit, we decided to take a long stroll around the monastery grounds and we continued to talk. She was a little reluctant to speak too much of herself at the start but she asked me lots of questions about my lifestyle now and what had transpired for me over the last twenty-plus years. I told her things of a general nature — how I feel here, what a typical day is like, a little about some of my brother monks...things rather banal. We were sitting in one of the monastery's public gardens when she decided to open up a little more about her own life those past two decades. Her story was like many others these days, full of hope and then disappointment, a modern world sometimes grown cruel.

"I got married at twenty-five. Not too long after university, really," she explained. "I had lost contact with you then, Jean. You must have been here already. Those years were a sad time for me. I was only married for four years before divorcing."

I was curious how someone so mature and assured could be linked to that kind of personal disappointment, even failure, as I know it seemed to her.

"What do you think happened?" I asked her.

She sighed and said, "During the last two years or so of our marriage, I sensed a great change coming through me. I realized that I had a real need to explore my existence, my spirituality, my whole sense of who I am and where I come from. I think I had a midlife crisis!" she said, lightening her tone just a bit. "But seriously, I started to read a lot and attended many talks and gatherings in the city attached to things spiritual. I found myself opening up to new thinking and exposed to new and different ideas, and I liked it."

"That is wonderful, Elena. It sounds like a real awakening. That does change a person. What did your husband think of all of this — didn't like it too much?"

"That's just it, Jean. Julian found the 'new' me very disquieting and he even tried to forbid me from continuing to attend things that he considered threatening to him or 'evil.' But, you know, Jean, by then I had gone much too far and I was not about to stop the one thing that was

fulfilling me and that was bringing me to another level of awareness. Our marriage had never been a strong one, so I left. At the end, I didn't think there was any hope."

"Wow, Elena, that had to be tough."

"That's not the half of it," she continued. "I felt very bad, of course, as you can imagine, but he was distraught. We had no kids and thus no reason to keep seeing each other, and I wanted a fresh start and really didn't want to talk to him anymore about any of it or even to see him. There was no point. It was finished. Then the other shoe dropped. Julian died two years later — a rare form of cancer. It was all so sudden, so quick. It really stunned me. But, he was gone and the finality of it all struck me. I thought, 'I really am on my own.' I got used to it eventually but it was hard to live through."

"I am sorry you had all of that sadness, Elena." I could see a touch of that sadness was still there all these years later — it had crept into those lovely eyes.

"Thank you, Jean," she said. "It's okay now. It's been a long time, more than fifteen years. It gave me a chance to redefine who I am. And also to continue my studies of the spirit and the energetic world around us...how it all manifests. That continues to be exciting to me."

As usual that afternoon we were on the same wavelength about so many things. I was happy to hear that part about her spiritual self. Everyone's journey to that place is different, but all of us can get to that place where we become seekers, regardless of our situation in life or the point of view we may have been taught or have developed, whatever life throws at us.

I then wanted to break the spell of that sad story and change the topic a bit — there was still a lot I wanted to know about my dear friend.

"What do you do for fun?" I decided to ask.

"I visit priests in old abbeys."

"BORING!" I shot back.

"Oh, it's not that bad. It depends on the priest! Some are very interesting, I know, and very good-looking."

"Present company excluded, no doubt!"

"Oh, you always were handsome, Jean, and you know it! There were some broken hearts in Brittany when you entered the seminary..."

"Too bad I didn't know about it — I might have been swayed!"

It was after saying this that some uncomfortable thoughts started to reveal themselves to me. Maybe it was more uncomfortable feelings than thoughts. I was smiling outwardly as if taken in by my own funny remark, but I knew in an instant looking at Elena how much my last words might contain a truth that I didn't want to own at this time.

"I don't think so — you are happy here, I can see it," she replied.

I was listening but not concentrating, still aware of those new feelings I was experiencing.

After a little hesitation, I replied. "You always had a brilliant mind, Elena. You hit the nail on the head. I couldn't have chosen better." Suddenly that statement felt a little forced with the state of mind I was in.

I went on anyway, though a little off-balance. "But you still haven't answered my question

— what’s fun for you? It’s about time you tell me tell me about what YOU do all day!”

“Yes, I do have a real life...” she replied.

“Then tell me all about it. I’d be shocked if someone of your talent and charm did not have a ‘real life’ and an interesting one at that. By the way, how do you fight the guys off?”

As I said this, I wasn’t convinced I was asking only out of polite interest — I realized that perhaps I was more invested in her answer than I should have been. A spark of jealousy came out of nowhere before she even spoke. I wasn’t sure I even wanted to hear what she had to say.

“Jean...whoa...sorry, but men – who needs them!” She let out that hearty laugh of hers. Then she quickly added, “Just kidding — I know there are some really good ones out there. I’m talking to one.”

I felt pleased. But the feelings wanted to know more. What if I had followed up on this wonderful relationship with Elena? What if I hadn’t gone to become a priest, but instead shared my life with her? I remember the unmistakable thrill of goose bumps running up my spine and down my arms as those thoughts materialized.

It had all passed through my mind in a millisecond and I gave her a look like she was a naughty girl and said, “Let’s not talk about me anymore, you charmer. Tell me more about your ‘real life.’” I wanted to move on.

“Well, I am an artist, or didn’t you know?” she replied with some energy.

“I knew you liked painting...but, pray tell, what have you been doing with your talent?” I tried to stay light and loose.

“Something close to your heart as a priest I am sure — stained glass!”

“Ufff, I don’t like a lot of stained glass. It makes me think of sad old dark churches with a heavy, heavy feeling and saints being chopped up into bitty pieces as martyrs, and...”

“Stop, already, Jean, for heaven’s sake! You’re making me hate it, too!” she laughed. “But, you know, my dear prelate, there are some motifs running through stained glass that are a bit lighter. And, believe it or not, my fine churchman, some stained glass is not for religious consumption!”

“Well, I’d have to see it to believe it!”

“Stop up and see some of my etchings sometime,” Elena teased me.

When I heard her say that, I must confess that my feelings got the better of me. I felt things in a sexual way I had not felt for years. I found a lot of enjoyment in it, and, unfortunately, I didn’t try to stop it. There were warning bells ringing in my head. I recovered as best as I could by saying, “You haven’t changed a bit, Elena!”

She smiled and continued. “I don’t know if you even knew that, besides my painting, I had started some stained glass work towards the end of university. I probably never mentioned it as I really didn’t get heavily involved in it until after graduation. Anyway, I really liked it and continued that while I was doing odd jobs and studying painting. I really love doing it now and consider it my dream job. I have been able to launch a career in stained glass. I am even getting commissions now!”

“Commissions...that’s great, Elena!”

“Yes, and maybe even a big one,” she went on. “The nuns at the Abbey of St. Michel are looking for someone to redesign their church windows in stained glass. They’ve asked me to make a presentation.”

“Aha, they’ll have you enlisted in their abbey before you know it! Sister Mary Elena, resident saint...and artist!”

That broke the mounting tension for a moment.

“I’d be a tough nut to crack, Jean. Of course, I am sure they’d never have me — with my checkered past!” She laughed again. “But, you know, having said that, the peace and the quality of the people I have met at abbeys makes me think and feel that something great is going on with that lifestyle.”

“And now you’ve met me and I’ve spoiled it all for you!” I said, starting to feel a little more like my normal self.

“You’re such a goofball,” she replied. “I love that about you. But, yes, you’re right!”

After that we decided to take another long walk through some of the orchards and gardens. The time went quickly. I wanted the afternoon to go on and on but when Elena glanced at her watch and saw how late it had gotten, it was time for her to think about leaving, so we walked back. We stopped just before the abbey gate.

“Elena, I want to tell you how glad I am that you took the trouble to find me and to come visit today. It was great fun to see you again and talk of so much.”

I remember then adding, as much more than just a polite gesture, “I hope we can do it again soon.”

“Me, too,” she responded.

I was thrilled in one sense to hear that. In my other ear, I could hear my guardian angel whispering a little warning. We walked to her car.

“I’ll see you soon, Padre,” she said with a warm smile and a kiss on the cheek.

Then she left.

That’s how it all got started once more.

I realized as I walked back to my room that Elena’s type of feminine presence was exactly complementary to my masculine energy. I missed it. Our meeting that day was the thing that started a chain of events I shall relate that brought me so much pain — but it also brought me much wisdom. It all seems to go together. We need the one to kick-start the other; and so it has always been for man on this beautiful planet. I can tell you that those events forced me to deal with things brought up very rudely from my subconscious to my conscious mind that needed my attention. Though I hardly would wish to experience a challenge like that again, with God’s help and love I am the better for it now, this I know. She was the catalyst for that growth — and how grateful I am to her for that.

I remember also on that walk back to my room feeling exhilarated yet befuddled. I was feeling a kind of excitement about life that I had not felt in some time...and I was feeling the stirrings of desire. Being with Elena once more had evoked these things.

I had time after she left before the Office of Vespers, so I sat in my beloved chair in my

room and closed my eyes, trying to understand my real self and its needs and desires, but also, I confess, savoring the feeling of her. I certainly then hoped that we would see each other again soon — little did I realize then what complications lay ahead for us. But more on that as my story unfolds.