

THE WISEWOMAN'S GIFT

This is the story of a convent which had fallen upon hard times. Once a great order, as a result of waves of anti-monastic persecution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the secularism of the nineteenth along with a loss of Spirit, it had become decimated to the point where there were only five nuns left in the mother house: the Mother Superior and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly, it was a dying organization.

In the deep woods surrounding the convent there was a little hut which an old wisewoman from a nearby town used as a hermitage. Agonizing over the imminent death of the convent, it occurred to the Mother Superior to visit the hermitage and ask the wisewoman if by some possible chance she could offer any advice that might save the convent.

The old woman welcomed the Mother Superior at her hut. But when the Mother Superior explained the purpose of her visit, the wisewoman could only commiserate with her. "I know how it is," she exclaimed. "The Spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one goes to worship anymore." So the old Mother Superior and the old wisewoman wept together. Then they read sacred texts together and quietly spoke of deep things. The time came when the Mother Superior had to leave. They embraced each other. "It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years," the Mother Superior said, "but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?"

"No, I am sorry," the wisewoman responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

When the Mother Superior returned to the convent her fellow nuns gathered around her to ask, "Well, what did the hermit say?"

"She couldn't help," the Mother Superior answered. "We just talked and wept and read together. The only thing she did say, just as I was leaving – it was something cryptic – was that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what she meant."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old nuns pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the hermit's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could she possibly have meant one of us nuns here at the convent? If that's the case, which one? Do you suppose she meant the Mother Superior? Yes, if she meant anyone, she probably meant Mother Superior. She has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, she might have meant Sister Ruth. Certainly Sister Ruth is a holy woman, a woman of wisdom and light. Of course, she couldn't have meant Sister Josephine! Josephine gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though she is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Josephine is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the wisewoman did mean Sister Josephine. But surely not Sister Mary Agnes. Mary Agnes is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, she has a gift for somehow always being there when you need her. She just magically appears by your side. Maybe Mary Agnes is the Messiah. Of course the wisewoman didn't mean me. She couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person.

Yet supposing she did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that important, could I?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old nuns began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that each nun herself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the convent to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed this aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old nuns and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the convent more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger women who came to visit the convent started to talk more and more with the old nuns. After a while one asked if she could join them. Then another. And another. So within a few years the convent had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the wisewoman's gift, a vibrant center of light and Spirituality in the realm.

An adaptation of "The Rabbi's Gift" by Gay Hapgood.