

Through the window of the train traveling north, you could see this church in a field. I want to say it was a little church, but churches aren't ever little, are they, not when you get up close to them. Only in that landscape of fields and hills, away it seemed from any village or town, it looked small. Built in the familiar yellow-grey stone, a church such as a church of any imagination would be, rugged and enduring, ancient of days, obdurate, a sharp, insistent spire pointing forever to the absent reality of heaven. I would tell you the style in which it was built—words like gothic and perpendicular, phrases like Saxon arch and barrel vaulting move in my mind like vague shapes of sheep grazing in fog at the edge of a ditch. But I don't remember them now, and I can't recall their meaning. I would tell you just where to go to find that church in the field so you could see it for yourself—I remember that I noted the place so carefully and told myself I would search for it along the lanes there someday. But I have lost it now. I don't know the place anymore, nor even if I was traveling to York or to Liverpool.

I remember only that I saw it through the window of the train hurrying north—leaned forward in my seat to see it as long as I could. A church standing in a green field with no other building nearby. A border of wall or hedging, quite high, protected the field and the church inside. I have forgotten which it was, but I remember it gave a sense of safety, hedging about that sanctuary so it should be utterly safe, a place perhaps wherein one might at last find peace.

And I know I wanted to be there more than anything; that

Penelope Wilcock

I believed if only I could find the way there, and stay there, it would be a shelter and a resting place. I cannot remember the place from where I saw it, and I do not know the way; but in some sense what it was has lodged inside me, and is obscurely, I think, a source of hope.

ONE

Esme held this piece of paper in her hands and read what she had written so long ago. Back in the days when she wrote those words, her soul had been full of searching, of yearning—and these imply always hope. Then the church had stood for something full of quiet and mystery: heart's desire, homecoming, belonging.

Possessed in those days by a fierce hunger and hunting her miracle like the gospel story of the woman twelve years with an issue of blood, Esme had wriggled and elbowed her way through the press of life and people to find a place where she might stretch out her hand and touch the hem of the garment of Jesus; and so it might bring the restlessness of her soul to peace.

An oddity in her family, Esme had the sense of being less respected than kindly tolerated. Church attendance had been an unquestioned element of her upbringing, and her family had been established figures in the large parish church that

Penelope Wilcock

occupied the center of the affluent village where she had grown up. Equally unquestioned had been the expectation of material success, and with a combination of personal confidence and conscientious application, Esme's brother and two sisters had solidly achieved this in their lives. The youngest child of the family, Esme had dithered, occupying herself with temporary secretarial posts on the strength of a six-month intensive course when she finished high school. She knew she was looking for something but didn't know what. Above all she hungered for a plain and authentic spirituality, sufficiently free of aesthetic pretension to pierce the conventional mold that had nurtured her. She thought she had found this when, in her early twenties, she began to attend a Methodist chapel pastored by a young and zealous minister, fresh out of college, with a fire in his belly for witness and mission and a political edge to his preaching.

Inspired, Esme involved herself in the Methodist church. She fell in love with a young man in the worship band, a budding executive in a Christian music publishing company. His lean good looks and brooding eyes appealed to her sense of romance. His sharp and fashionable style impressed her. So did his perpetual air of busyness and preoccupation, and the various electronic gadgets necessary to support the maintenance of his extensive social and business contact network. His interest in her gave her an unaccustomed sense of sophistication. He was widely regarded as quite a catch. He himself felt the importance of choosing a wife who could be relied

THE CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY

upon not to let him down. Esme was flattered to be chosen. He went about his romance with characteristic intensity and focus, securing Esme as a bride in a matter of months. Her family, perplexed by her tendency to drift, felt relieved to see her settled. Her mother hoped she would have a baby, but Esme's new husband decided they should prioritize the acquisition of a house and a car more suitable for his professional image. Esme didn't really mind; she was happy to go along with his plans. She admired him, she enjoyed the status that marriage conferred on her, and his romantic attentions made her feel treasured and adored.

Yet something restless inside her still persisted, and she began to feel positively trapped. All her upbringing drew her toward material consolidation, but a rogue element in her soul fretted to be free, as the stars and the wind and the clear cold light of morning were free.

She burrowed further into the spiritual teachings of the Gospels. She began a daily routine of meditation and prayer. She felt drawn to a closeness with Jesus, and in her heart grew a desire to find the paths where he walked and follow his footsteps into the wilderness and the hills.

From there to the parsonage had been a long slog, not what she imagined at the beginning. Applying to become a lay preacher, training, taking exams; trial services and tutors; others weighing her in a balance hung from the safe height of their established accreditation. Then—local preacher status under her belt along with years of service to the church in

Penelope Wilcock

Sunday school, Girls' Brigade, coffee mornings, pastoral visiting, committees, and Ladies' Fellowship meetings—she offered herself for ordained ministry: more exams, interviews, trial services. Booklists and references and medical examinations were required, her knowledge tested and her opinions examined. Psychological screening and police checking and theological allegiances were sought. Her financial status and her relationship with her husband were inquired into. And at last acceptance, then training, then probationary ministry. Then the ordination ceremony and the reception into the Full Connexion of the Methodist church, and two more years finishing her probationary appointment.

“Formation in ministry” they called those years of testing and training; and certainly she had found them formative. It had changed her. The difference between a vocation and a career blurred confusingly. She had to polish her social and professional skills. She had to study time management and people management and develop a circumspect persona of encouraging but noncommittal affability.

Somewhere along the way, her husband, after fourteen years of marriage, had found the authority and status of her new role undermining to his sense of masculinity and deserted her for the gentler contours of a hotel receptionist's companionship. He had left her with no children (for which she felt grateful now), and a deep, unexamined wound of

THE CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY

bereavement in the middle of her, which the passing of time flowed around and washed over but did not seem to make whole. She let their house go to him, since she had a parsonage to live in—her family expressed misgivings at this lack of prudence, but Esme couldn't bear the idea of a legal wrangle.

Her sense of herself as a desirable woman seemed to have been cauterized by this parting. She chose to throw herself with determination into her work and to ignore the helpless, frozen center of her being. The time of tears and anguish soon passed. After it came a deep sense of vulnerability. Realizing that she had nobody but herself to rely on, Esme developed a nagging anxiety about material security. She had very little in her savings account at the bank, and no home but the parsonage provided by the church for her working years. She pushed this uncomfortable feeling of vulnerability to the back of her mind and immersed herself in the myriad daily tasks of her occupation. She got used to ignoring the empty spaces in her soul and the deprivation of companionship. Her colleagues had lives as full as they could manage, and allowing her congregation to see her insecurities and her loneliness was unprofessional.

Esme turned forty. More self-possessed, easy in her production of words suitable for public occasions, more sophisticated in her religion, she had grown less trusting of other people and chronically weary. On the journey she had developed a kind of spiritual irritation, an eczema of the soul, which itched and tormented her mercilessly as she sat in the

Penelope Wilcock

homes of the elderly members of her congregation, listening patiently to their interminable, tedious conversation, their stories of the war and the details of their surgical operations and the descriptions of their infirmities and the progress in lives of their grandchildren.

She repressed this successfully—hid it almost even from herself—so that she was approved and even loved as a pastor, and her congregation said their good-byes with tears when the time came for her to move on from her probationer appointment, extended a further three years by unanimous reinvitation.

It seemed such a very long time ago now that the call to serve the church as a minister had been the expression of Esme's desire to creep as close as she could to Jesus. Her soul indefinably bleeding inside, she had thought that if only she could get close enough, near enough to touch the hem of his robe, healing would come for that half-ignored persistent inner sense of loss. Ministry had seemed like a spiritual thing, holding out the possibility of a connection to the presence of Christ. Then.

Now, so much later, it seemed just an impossibly complicated tangle of demands and expectations. A balancing act of appeasements and accomplishments. A muddle of paperwork and meetings, crumbling properties and aging, lonely, ailing people waiting with ever-decreasing hope for her to produce what they thought any good pastor should be able to manifest—a replication of the 1950s, with fresh-faced

THE CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY

young wives' groups laughing as they prepared huge chapel teas, and devout businessmen willing to decorate the premises and calculate the chapel accounts in their ample spare time; and cheerful youth clubs happy with campfire songs and table tennis. Only with computer literacy, sophisticated child-protection administration, and high-profile ecumenical relationships as an add-on.

She was caught in the throng and press of the crowd that stood around Jesus. It didn't look big but it knew how to jostle and shove. She'd exchanged the relative calm of the periphery for the struggle of the thick of things, apparently without getting any closer to the hem of his garment at all.

And there was something else, which no one knew but Esme, and of which she felt every day most deeply ashamed.

Back in her student days at ordination school, immersed in the Christology of St. Luke's Gospel and the anti-Semitism of St. John's; Deutero-Isaiah and demonology and docetism; the narrative theology of the Hebrew Scripture and liberation theology of Latin America; the empowerment of inclusive language in liturgy, the dark night of the soul, and the option of God for the poor, Esme had understood one vocational reality above all else.

Her college principal, scholarly, wise, and gentle, whom she loved and admired, insisted on the pastoral centrality of prayer.

The day Esme went for her interview to the improvised