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Irreconcilable Differences with God: On "The Monk Downstairs" by Tim Farrington

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IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES WITH GOD
ON *THE MONK DOWNSTAIRS* BY TIM FARRINGTON

The Monk Downstairs is an easy read about God. It seriously ponders the split between the contemplative life and life in the world while describing the most bedeviling aspects of simple survival on the secular plane. Rebecca is the single mother of a bright six-year-old girl, whose ex is a pothead surfer who never grew up and still needs her to bail him out when he gets into trouble. She rents out her in-law apartment downstairs to a monk, Michael Christopher, a man who has spent the last twenty years in a complex, sometimes contentious relationship with God and his brotherhood. In a series of letters he continues to argue with his former friend and fellow follower, Brother James, who believes monks need to remain active in their community to alleviate suffering and properly answer their calling, while Michael suffers over the very idea of God's existence, obstinate ways, and the abiding mysteries of faith.

You ask what prayer is for me now. I used to have so many lovely answers. Prayer is communion, adoration, praise; it is the practice of the presence of God. Prayer is abiding in love. I had a catalogue of ready definitions through the whole of my novitiate, all substantial and high-sounding, an impressive array. But all that holy busyness seems like a kind of sand-castle building to me now, and the zeal of my answers is a heap of soggy kelp left by the tide.

There is a prayer that is simply seeing through yourself, seeing your own nothingness, the emptiness impervious to self-assertion. A prayer that is the end of the rope. A helplessness, fathomless and terrifying. No matter how holy or well meaning you were when you started out, no matter how many fine experiences you had along the way, by the time you reach the point of this prayer, you want only to get out of it.

And God? God is that which will not let you out of it.

Rebecca is too self-centered, or too caught up in her responsibilities, to engage very much in these kinds of dialogs, with herself or with her tenant. A nonbeliever in God and burned by love, she no longer seeks after love or God's potentially redemptive powers, so she initially resists the concept that she might be falling in love with a man whose "other woman" is an invisible force. Inexperienced and several decades out of touch with the physical world that love necessarily inhabits, the monk similarly resists.

Yet proximity dictates that they keep meeting, then needing to connect with one another just to keep the tenuous ship that is their current existence afloat. Rebecca gets caught at work and asks the monk to get her daughter from daycare; the monk needs to take a job at McDonalds as his resume has a large gap in the work history area; bills must be paid, the child fed, surrounding relationships with co-workers, family, ex-loves tended to. Funnily enough, Rebecca and the monk both smoke cigarettes and find each other over and over on the back steps sneaking puffs after the child is asleep and the day's mundane problems are a swirl in their minds. It is during these moments of vice that their most sacred dialogs take place.

"God, twenty years. I've never done anything in my life for twenty years."

"I was no marvel of stability. Sometimes it seems to me that all I really did was keep my costume on and attend the events. But it does set up a certain tension."

... *"Why did you leave?"*

"It's a long story."

... *"I suppose it's a little like a marriage breaking up."*

"I suppose it is," he said glumly. "Apparently, I've got irreconcilable differences with God."

Does Love happen?

Does God exist?

They ask and discover the answers in the midst of life's needs, not apart from it, rising from "downstairs," solitude, and doubt to engage with crises and ordinariness, calling on Love and God where appropriate and joy-giving, meshing their lives and otherwise tending to business.

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