

Two Odd Ducks

By AmandaK

There was something very peculiar about the two young priests from California, Father Raymond decided, observing them over the rims of his spectacles. Father Dean Parelli and Father Samuel Jerrod had shown up together at the monastery the day before, saying they came for the retreat. They'd arrived late afternoon, barely in time for Brother Jeremy to see them to the guest rooms so they could freshen up before the evening meal.

Though they had joined in with the daily schedule of work, prayer and study easily, they avoided seeking him—or, as far as Father Raymond knew, any of the other experienced priests—out for guidance or counseling, like most visitors would. And there were other oddities in their behavior: Father Parelli kept fingering his collar as if it didn't fit well and chafed him, while Father Jerrod jumped every time someone addressed him by name, giving the speaker a startled, guilty look, like he expected God to strike him down any second over some perceived sin.

They didn't interact much with the other clergy at the retreat either. During the free hours, they kept to themselves. And most curiously, they reminded Father Raymond of an old married couple, bickering over trivialities all the time. Except these two did their bickering in silence, with meaningful looks and half-smirks and barely perceptible shakes of their heads. Yet even so, he could tell there was a deep, mutual affection between them.

Yes, *exactly* like an old married couple.

Father Raymond decided he would go talk to the young priests after supper to see if he could offer his counsel, or if they preferred for their retreat to be a private one. Either choice would be fine, of course, but sometimes people required a little nudge to gather their courage. And it was important to Raymond that the guests knew his door was always open for anyone desiring advice or spiritual guidance.

But once the dishes were cleared and the reading was finished, Father Parelli yawned widely, only covering his mouth with his hand after Father Jerrod jabbed him in the ribs with an elbow—Raymond quirked a brow in disapproval over such unseemly behavior—and claimed he was exhausted and wished to retire.

"Of course," Father Raymond said. "It can wait until tomorrow. Have a good evening, Fathers. May you rest well."

oOo

A distant clamor echoing through the monastery's empty halls rose Raymond from a deep and peaceful sleep. Muted shouts, things crashing and—was that a *curse*? Frowning, the old priest donned his housecoat over his striped pajamas and went to investigate.

By the time he discovered the location of the racket, whatever it was had already ended, leaving the kitchen in a shambles. Pots and pans were strewn all over the place; the refrigerator had been upturned and leaned at a crazy angle against the heavy kitchen table, milk dripping out on the tiled floor. The room smelled of smoke and soot, and a large black smear stained the wall over the stove.

What on Earth had happened?

Father Sam rested on his knees among a scattering of China shards. Egg yolk dripped from his hair and the sleeve of his cassock was scorched. He was shaking his head slowly, like someone just awaking from a deep sleep, gazing around without really seeing. He didn't seem seriously injured, but he also didn't look as if he could explain what had happened and Raymond left him to get his bearings while he explored the wrecked kitchen further.

If Sam was here, Dean wouldn't be far.

Raymond found Father Dean lying limply on his stomach at the bottom of the stairs to the cellar, unconscious and with an ugly-looking lump swelling on the back of his head.

"Call an ambulance!" he hollered at the first person to appear in the kitchen after him.

The Brother scurried off while Father Raymond knelt beside the unconscious priest and waited for help to arrive.

oOo

The next couple of days passed in such peace as was appropriate for a monastery. The paramedics had taken Dean to hospital, and when Father Raymond called them the next morning, they told him they expected him to make a full recover.

"Father Parelli has taken a nasty hit to the head," the nurse on the line said. "The doctor wants to keep him in observation for a day or two. Just to make sure, you understand, Father."

Reassured, Raymond searched for Sam to tell him the good news. But Sam's reaction took Raymond by surprise: the young Father seemed oddly disinterested in his fellow priest's health. Oh, certainly, he expressed sincere relief that Father Dean would be all right. But

seeing how inseparable the two had been during their first days at the retreat, Father Raymond had expected... well, *more*.

In fact, Father Sam seemed perfectly happy to take part in the daily prayers, the work around the garden, and the Bible studies, and he never asked after Father Dean again. He told Raymond he had no memory of what had happened that night in the kitchen, or what he and Dean had been doing there in the middle of the night, fully dressed to boot, in the first place.

He had looked deeply concerned at that so Father Raymond had reached up and patted the tall priest's shoulder consolingly. "Try doing familiar things," he'd said. "And trust in God. It will come back to you. You'll see."

oOo

Three days after the fire in the kitchen, Dean was released from the hospital and returned to the retreat. He looked well-rested and healthy, and nothing indicated that he had suffered a bad fall mere days ago.

But something *had* changed between the two priests from California; Father Raymond could see it clear as day. Gone was their silent communication, the sense that even when they didn't utter a word, Fathers Sam and Dean were speaking to each other in a secret code nobody could understand but they.

Raymond watched Father Dean as he stood in the doorway and gazed across the garden. His green eyes were riveted on Sam, who was helping put in a new kitchen window to replace the broken one. A worried furrow creased the young priest's otherwise smooth brow, and as soon as Father Sam moved near him, Dean snatched his sleeve and said something to him in a voice too low for Father Raymond to hear.

Sam shot Dean a bewildered look, but then he nodded and followed inside.

Father Raymond let out a sad breath. To take the vows, to give up one's life to the Church and the service of God was hard on anyone, and all the more so on young men in the bloom of their life. If a Father found a friendship in which he could trust and confide, that tended to make their calling a little easier. Whatever it was that had come between Sam and Dean, Raymond hoped they could work it out.

He followed the two priests inside, and headed for the sacristy. It was almost time to celebrate Mass, and he had to begin preparing himself.

At the sacristy, Brother Jeremy was waiting for him, nervously dry-washing his hands.

"What is it, Brother?" Raymond asked with concern. Lately, too many strange things had been happening at the monastery, the kitchen disaster only the last and most destructive in a long line of curious events.

Much to his relief, Jeremy merely informed him that Father Nathors was indisposed and would not be able to attend Mass. Raymond pondered for a moment, mentally going over the list of priests present in the monastery.

"Brother Jeremy, please run along and find Father Jerrod. Tell him I would like his assistance."

Jeremy gave a quick dip of his head. "Yes, Father."

The way a priest served at Mass told a lot about his character, Raymond knew. Having Sam assist him would give him the opportunity to take the young man's measure. And with a little luck, he might gain Sam's trust enough that he could offer some spiritual guidance and help with whatever was troubling him.

A few minutes later, Sam came in. He looked flustered and a bit winded, as if he had run hard to get to the sacristy. There was a desperate look in his eyes, though, that Raymond didn't like much. If asked, he'd say Sam was... spooked.

"Is everything okay?"

"I'm not sure," Sam said. "I have...disturbing memories...all out of sequence and they don't seem to make any sense."

"Memory is a funny thing," Raymond assured the young priest.

He determined to keep a close eye on Father Sam, however, as he began to fear that Sam might have hit his head harder than anyone suspected. Maybe he should have been taken to the hospital as well. "We can only give it time and hope it comes clear in the end."

Sam nodded and reached for the vestments. "I should only be a few minutes."

Father Raymond smiled. "Trust your heart, Samuel."

oOo

Well, Raymond thought an hour later, might be that the young priest's memory had been impaired by a blow to the head from an unknown cause, it certainly hadn't taken his

recollection of how to celebrate Mass. In fact, Sam's assistance had been a joy to experience: he never missed a beat, his Latin pronunciation was flawless, and he performed every gesture just right.

But before Raymond could tell him so, or ask who had been his teacher, the young Father was gone again, along with Father Dean. "Ah, to still be young and agile," Father Raymond murmured with a wistful sigh as he hung away the vestments in the closet.

His talk with Father Sam could wait a while.

But somehow, Father Raymond never got the chance for his heart to heart. And two days later, the two priests disappeared without a word—along with most of the contents of the newly restocked refrigerator and half a dozen rosaries. And although they'd left the collection box alone, strangest of all: they had drained the receptacle of its holy water as well.

Yes, he had been right, Father Raymond thought as he blessed the font refilled with fresh water. There *had* been something peculiar about the pair. But although he felt a little like an old fool, having been taken in by what now appeared to be a couple of fake priests, he didn't feel anger towards them. Despite their ruse and the sin of impersonating men of the cloth, or the theft of food and holy water, he did not think their intent had been to do evil. In fact—

He paused in the middle of the rite of blessing, struck by a sudden understanding. In fact, things had been peaceful and quiet ever since the night the kitchen burned. There had been no further reports of flickering lights, objects moved by unseen hands, or strange noises keeping the guests up in the middle of the night.

Father Raymond finished his prayer and walked deeper into the church. Mayhap the two unknown thieves had served a higher purpose. Who was he to judge such things?

After all, God tended to work in mysterious ways...

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