

Father Junípero's Confessor

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ONE



NUEVA CALIFORNIA, 1784

I rose at dawn a humble conqueror. Here, a thousand leagues north of the landfall of Cortés, the Bay of San Francisco was alive with birds, giant flocks passing before the sun like veils. The briny aroma of the marshes rose to the window of my lodge, along with the cloying odor of acorn porridge.

The earth's newest Catholics were stirring.

I had convinced the neophytes of the rightness of tortillas at supper, but their allegiance to *atole* in the mornings was unshakeable. To me it seemed cruel, not to mention unwise in a time of uncertain provision, to forbid such an innocuous privilege. I myself had sampled the acorn gruel, and to the best of my knowledge it was not intoxicating, nor poisonous in any way. The taste was another matter. The acorns were ground and reground on the women's stone *metates* until the tough fibres of the acornmeat gave way to coarse meal. My children used no herbs in seasoning the dish, nothing but creekwater.

That morning I selected two neophyte boys to serve as runners and translators on the journey to Carmel. Neither gave even the slightest hint of pleasure when I called his name, for it was the habit of this tribe to suppress all outward signs of emotion. In the two

years I had lived among them, I had only on rare occasions seen a smile, and then only from a baby.

After breakfast we waited for the last member of our traveling party, a soldier from the presidio. I had no reason to expect that we would be bothered on our journey, particularly with the two neophyte boys in my company, but the custom required that we be attended by a soldier. The king's soldiers were dull men, deficient always in some way, for why else would one be posted here at the wildest frontier of all Christendom? As we waited for the tardy soldier, I joined with my companion, the Reverend Fray Vicente Santa Maria, in singing a Mass for the safe completion of our travels and for the healthful recovery of Fray Junípero.

"Kiss the hands of His Reverence," implored Fray Vicente, "and assure him that the work goes well in this quarter."

"That news will cheer him more than a thousand kisses," I said.

My companion nodded knowingly. The little bird-boned Galician was right to anticipate that Fray Junípero would ask first about the mission. I would be lucky if His Reverence gave me five words about himself, so fully did our work consume his thoughts.

"But you will kiss his hands for me?" Fray Vicente's brow creased above his weak gray eyes.

"I will, brother."

The soldier arrived just as the boys finished saddling our mule, and we four joined the trail before the sun had burned the dew from the grass. While arduous, the fifty leagues' journey between my mission on the Bay and Fray Junípero's at the edge of the great Southern Ocean was a tonic for my nerves. The hills were dry at this time of year, and in every direction they rolled out like golden waves, studded here and there with live-oaks, manzanitas, prickly-pear cactuses and other camels of the plant kingdom, each guarding its hoard of water deep within the earth. In some places, there had been no rain since Easter. But even arid land provides fodder for the senses: there was the sage and anise scent of the chaparral—like

the *maquis* of my native Mallorca—clinging to the grades too steep for the oaks. There was the rustle of oak leaves, stiff as fish scales, in the breeze. Hawks screeched on their high circuits, waiting for the rustle of the serpent or the vole. And always the steady clop-clop of the mule. His plaintive snort, the soothing words of the boy holding his rope. The grunt of the soldier on his horse, stomach aching from last night's tipples. And my own breathing, always in my ear, the only constant companion all these years.

In the great valley south of the Bay, the air was warm and dry, like the draft of a giant stone oven. Extending my arms on either side of the trail, I brushed the whiskers of yellow sunburned grass. Before the governor forbade it, the Indians burned the hillsides once a year to clear away the dead grass and flush out game. In spring, fresh shoots would grow, turning the hills green for a while. The oldest Indians said that the hills were never as green as they used to be, as though we Spaniards, with our unfamiliar tongues and customs, had brought curses rather than the light of Christ.

These people, the *costanoans* as we called them, were kin more to the beasts of field and forest than to the European man. They compared unfavorably also with their southern cousins, the descendants of the *aztecas* and *mayas*, who had been, when Cortés found them, skilled with tools and accustomed to rule by hierarchy. These northern tribes lacked even the most rudimentary understanding of human society. Agriculture, pottery, stonemasonry, metallurgy—all of these were as foreign to them as the Spanish tongue. Without crops of any kind, they lived an irresponsible life, gathering acorns and various wild grains, relying on the vagaries of nature for their sustenance. Their poor nutrition made them ugly, short, lumpish, and ungainly. The women went about in skirts made of rabbit skins laced together by sinew thread. The men and children were altogether naked. To mask their physical shortcomings, or perhaps to distract the looker, they marked themselves—men and women—with pigments smeared into wounded skin. We forbade scarifica-

tion among neophytes residing at the missions, but the practice continued beyond our perimeters. Some pagans had even adopted the cross into their designs—a development which cheered Fray Junípero even as it horrified the rest of us. “The skin is only the beginning, Paco,” Junípero had said. “Soon the Holy Cross will be etched into their hearts. All is progress, my son! Love God!”

The first day's travel was routine. The only excitement came when the neophyte boys spotted on a distant hillside a small flock of *cierdas*, which are a kind of antlered deer found in this country. Being well-provisioned and impatient to reach Carmel, I denied the boys' request that we stop and hunt. We spent the night at the southernmost reach of the valley, laying our mats under an oak as wide as the apse of a cathedral. I spent a restless night worrying after the condition of my master, and after a breakfast of cold *tamales*, I could wait no longer for news: I sent the two neophyte brothers ahead to Monterey with instructions to return like Noah's doves with news of His Reverence.

Thus I was alone on the trail that second day with only the pitiful young soldier, my escort, for company. Astride his sweltering horse, he scratched his groin constantly and complained too often of thirst. Several times I tried to engage him in conversation but gained only that he had been raised in the diocese of La Mancha. The doltish lad had no thoughts on God, art, or politics. I resolved that we would walk in silence, and I occupied myself in imagining that the ridgelines of the hills were the spines of giants buried beneath the earth. “Cervantes would have loved this country,” I said out loud, trying one final time to engage the boy. He said nothing, being either unwilling or unable to reply.

We followed the trail over the crest of the coast range onto the sandy plain formed by the delta of the Rio de Monterey. The river had been named San Elizario by Fray Juan Crespí—may his soul rest in Christ—but had been changed subsequently to match that of the nearby presidio, which served as the administrative capital of New

California. The fog normally enshrouding the basin was out to sea that day, and late in the afternoon I was able to see our returning messengers some distance down the trail. They called when they saw my mule inching gingerly down the slope.

“*Amar a Dios*,” I replied in the usual fashion. “What is the news of Fray Junípero?”

Pánfilo, the elder of the brothers, gave the report: “When we arrived, he was seated at a workbench outside his cell, cutting a bolt of cloth with . . . scissors.” The neophyte spoke carefully-measured Spanish, pausing only briefly at the end before remembering the word for the odd cutting implement, *la tijera*.

Watching the boy struggle with the Castilian tongue, I recalled how Rigoberto, my first neophyte son, had once described the unfamiliar sounds of our language: *The tongue is like a minnow, father, snapping insects from the surface of the pond*. Like these boys, Rigoberto had once gone ahead. But he had never come back.

Pánfilo’s younger brother could not contain the thrill of finally laying eyes on the famed Fray Junípero Serra. Switching to his native tongue—which I spoke only haltingly but understood well—he went on, “There was a line of women, father, waiting to receive the cloth. Some had been baptized in Christ, and some not. Some were heathen women from the villages. But it did not matter—His Pater-nity made each kneel and recite a prayer to Our Lady.”

I knew that if a heathen woman came to Fray Junípero on any feast of Our Lady, he would allow her the same amount of cloth as a baptized woman—so long as she knelt and listened to a prayer sung over her by the matron of the convent. I pictured these women clearly: they would be dressed as Spanish peasants in loose-fitting robes, sun-bleached linen blouses, *huaraches*, and wide straw hats. Their unbaptized cousins stood in their rabbit waist-tunics, waiting patiently to see the friar who required only that they hear a song to receive his gift of woven cloth, a commodity more dear to these people than gold.

The report of His Paternity engaged at his usual work gave me hope that he had been premature once again with his boding. Indeed, when we arrived at Carmel around dusk, he came all the way to the road to greet us. With him were Father Fray Matías Noriega, his companion at the mission, and a crowd of not less than one hundred neophytes, or nearly all the population in residence. They trailed behind their father in perfect discipleship, bearing candles and boughs of fragrant cedar. It was a clear evening, and the sun was just then setting over the ocean, bathing the scene in a warm orange light. As always, Fray Junípero beamed with the favor of Christ, arms spread wide in welcome. My soldier escort was so moved by the sight that he spurred his horse so that the beast would not tarry on the last decline.

Our animals' feet churned up an unfortunate cloud of dust. Taking a lungful, Fray Junípero began to cough: a bitter, painful noise. He lifted an arm to cover his face. I ran to his side and was joined there by Fray Matías and Junípero's boy, Juan Evangelista José. Junípero pushed us all away, preferring to make his own way, unaided, back to the dormitory. We remained in the road, careful not to move for fear of stirring up more dust. When His Reverence disappeared inside, Fray Matías touched my arm.

"Fray Francisco, I apologize for not contacting you sooner, but the Father President insisted that I keep his secret."

"You should have written."

"I beg your pardon, but he reads my correspondence."

I had known Fray Matías many years and had always found him candid and trustworthy. All of our band of missionaries agreed that he was an exemplary friar. Indeed, that is why Fray Junípero had chosen him to replace our friend Fray Juan Crespí (may he rest peacefully in Christ) as his companion at Carmelo. Now, though, I wished Fray Matías had been perhaps less exemplary in his devotion. I resented what the soldiers might have called his "weak spine."

"You could have sent word another way," I said. "A runner, perhaps."

“He is much changed since Fray Juan passed.”

“That was two years ago, brother.”

Fray Matías bowed his head. Though a decade younger than I—not yet into his fiftieth year—his head was entirely bald, save for a gray corona at the rear. “I only know what I have seen, Your Reverence. I have prayed many times for God to give Fray Junípero the strength to mourn, but I assure you his grief persists unabated. I know I could never replace Fray Juan, but it seems as if there is an obstacle in his heart.”

“Fray Juan will never be replaced,” I said, measuring my words like a chemist mixing a powder. “Even so, you must not burden yourself with Fray Junípero’s suffering.”

The idea of anyone bearing the suffering of our Father President—this man who beat himself with iron chains, who smashed stones against his breast until his skin was torn and bleeding—was sufficiently inconceivable that it struck both Fray Matías and me as a kind of joke. He smiled and said, “I suppose you are right.”

It was now nearly dark. The neophytes had gone back inside the walls of the mission, and the gate would soon be locked for the night. Fray Matías and I were alone in the road, feeling a change in the air. Mission San Carlos Borromeo is located on a bluff above the Rio Carmelo, and in the evenings, the fog rolls onto the marsh below the bluff, filling it up like a lagoon.

“He wrote also to the brothers at San Antonio and San Luis Obispo,” said Fray Matías. “But he asked that I hold the letters until you arrived. I was not to tell anyone the extent of his suffering.”

We walked together as far as the door of Junípero’s cell, where I asked Fray Matías to leave me alone to compose myself. I had a sudden feeling of dread, caused not by the failing health of my dear beloved friend, but by an old jealousy, something I thought I had put behind me long ago.

I took a deep breath and knocked. A moment passed in silence, and then came the familiar voice: “Who is there?”

"Your Reverence, it is Fray Francisco."

Another pause. "Come in."

I had not been to Mission San Carlos in over two years—not since Fray Juan's requiem Mass. Much had changed at the site since then, most noticeably the construction of the stone church building, which was now nearly three-quarters complete. Fray Junípero's cell was exactly as I remembered it: four bare walls, unplastered so that one saw the pebbles and bits of straw in the adobe bricks. The earthen floor was neatly swept. There were no furnishings but a wooden bedframe, a stool caned with tule reeds, and a low table for writing. A single candle burned in a pewter cup on the table.

Fray Junípero sat on the stool, fingers clasped about his rosary. He made no effort to rise as I entered, but only said, in his usual high-pitched, grating voice, "*Amar a dios*, brother."

"Always," I replied.

He looked, in a word, diminished. His eyes had retreated into their ashen sockets, and his mouth turned down slightly at the corners. Although short in stature—never more than five feet, crown to sandals—Fray Junípero had always maintained an uncomfortably straight posture. Now he was hunched like a cobbler. Both sleeves of his habit, I saw, were crusted with mucus from coughing. Around his neck hung the usual wooden crucifix, an enormous object, one of the only possessions he had brought with him from Mallorca those many years ago. At bedtime he removed the crucifix from its cord and placed it on his chest, where the horizontal beam stretched nearly the width of his breast.

I stood awkwardly for a moment, before my Father pointed to the bedstead, indicating for me to sit. "Oh, Paco," he said, "would you please close the window? I am so cold."

I went to the far wall, where a portal about the width of a man's forearm opened onto a garden of roses and pink gillyflowers. I myself had planted this plot, before the founding of Mission San Francisco called me north. In my time at Carmelo, I had never had

the pleasure of witnessing the roses in full bloom. I could not see the colors in the darkness, but the smell confirmed success.

I pulled the casement shut.

“Thank you, brother. Please sit.”

There was no mattress, only a thin wool blanket spread over the slats. Many years ago, I had wondered how a man could sleep on such a pallet. That was before I discovered that His Paternity did not sleep.

“I came as soon as I received your letter.”

“Remind me, brother, which letter is this? I have sent you so many. And each time . . . each time you remained at your mission.”

“Your Reverence, I am here now.”

“I suppose you want to discuss the supply ship.”

“As you wish.”

“One never knows when there will be a supply ship. You recall the time at San Diego when Governor Portolá was ready to march us all back to México? And he would have, were it not for the intercession of Santa Barbara. On the ninth morning of our novena, there it was—the blessed *supply ship* cleaving the mist in the harbor. Do you recall that, brother?” As Junípero spoke, his fingers continued to move slowly along the beads of the rosary.

“I have heard the story many times, Your Reverence.”

He looked up suddenly. His eyes met mine, and I felt the hair stand up on my arms. “Ah, but how careless of me! It was Fray Juan, not you, who was in San Diego with me. How thoughtless of me to confuse you!”

There was a long pause as Fray Junípero’s fingers continued along the beads. He did not move his lips as he prayed, and he did not look down at his hands. Instead, he searched my face with his eyes—those hard owl eyes, which had penetrated the souls of heathens and viceroys alike.

When his fingers reached a decade on the rosary, he spoke again: “If you would be so kind, Father, I should like to confess my sins.”

I had been Junípero's confessor for thirty-four years—since 1750, when we left Mallorca for New Spain. The sacrament came easily between us. This time, however, I made much of my preparations, arranging the candle on the table, the blanket on the bedframe, and asking God to give me a gentle ear, as if the penitent were yet a stranger.

"Have you seen the church, Fray Francisco? My children have been busy."

With great trouble, His Paternity rose up from the stool. Quickly removing myself from the bedstead, I offered my arm, but he refused to take it.

"If the Lord wants me in His house," he said, "He will give me the strength to walk there."

The neophytes keeping vigil at Fray Junípero's door scrambled away when I opened the door. A choir assembled in the plaza began a low *Te Deum* as they saw His Paternity emerge from the cell. On the side of the yard nearest the church, a neophyte man in a simple blouse and trousers fussed over a torch, trying to light a candle from its flame. As we approached, I saw the *ofrenda* from the heathens in the nearby village—a collection of pine-bough torches arranged like flower petals above a small altar. Brightly-colored baskets adorned with feathers and beads steamed in the evening cool. I smelled acorn gruel.

Two boys stood by with baskets of rose petals, which they cast on the ground before us as we walked.

The church loomed as a shadow against the sky. Its walls were composed not of adobes but of massive stone blocks the neophytes had quarried nearby. The church was already as high as four men; I wondered how much taller it would get before the carpenters raised the roof.

Inside, the moon shone directly onto the floor. As a boy, in Palma, I had played in the ruins of a Roman counting-house not far from my family's home. The unfinished church put me in mind of that

place—though of course this building was at the opposite end of its life. We stepped around a water-trough. A line of masonry tools hung neatly along its lip. On the other side of the trough, I tripped over an oak branch lying on the ground. The noise frightened a hen sheltering with her chicks under the trough. Without turning around, Fray Junípero clucked softly under his breath, and the chicks returned to their mother. Soon enough, they were silent. The mellow tones of the choir came to us on the breeze.

Midway down the nave, Fray Junípero paused at a tall wooden box and began examining the ornamentation along the edges with his fingers. This would be the new confessional. In the old wooden church next door, confessions had been held in the open, with the penitent kneeling behind a screen. I waited for His Paternity to finish his examination and step aside, so that I might enter the booth and resume my preparations.

Instead, Fray Junípero motioned for me to follow him to the far end of the structure. In the spot where the sanctuary was to be located, the earth was surrounded by a rope. Looking down, I saw that a grave had been dug in the dirt floor.

“I want you to bury me here,” he said, “beside Fray Juan.”

Fray Juan Crespí had been buried in the sanctuary of the old wooden church. Presumably his remains would be moved when the stone church was done.

I said nothing.

“This is my final wish, Fray Francisco. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Father.”

I followed His Paternity back to the confessional. Again Junípero fingered the curls and filigrees carved into the wood. “The love of God will save these people,” he said. “Look at what He has done for them already.” Turning to me, he exclaimed, “Why, brother—you have turned pale!”

“Forgive me,” I said, trying to hide my eyes, which surely betrayed me.

“Was it my instruction? I have also sent orders to the carpentry for a casket, you should know.” He paused and stared at me. “Let us be clear about one thing, Paco. It is not for you or me to know when I shall pass from the Earth. It is for God alone to decide. When He is ready, he will take me.”

“I understand, Father, but—” I stood at the door of the confessional, poised to step inside and hear what would likely be my dear friend’s last earthly reconciliation with his Lord. All of a sudden, it seemed as though all of my sixty-one years—and especially the forty-four spent in the Seraphic Order of San Francisco—had been but a prelude to this moment. This was the act for which I had trained all my life.

And yet I could not step inside. The moonlight shone directly in my face. I could not hide my tears. “It will be done, Father. You shall be buried as you wish.”

His Reverence stepped into the light. I could see that his eyes, too, were filled with tears. He reached out to touch the confessional, so that his arm formed a gate between me and door of the confessor’s chamber.

“Francisco, *mi condiscípulo*.” He took my hand. “Paco—”

“Yes, Father?” I stood as straight as I could, fighting the trembling of my legs.

“My friend—perhaps we should switch places.”