

THE WOUNDS OF GOD

The Wounds of God

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LION FICTION

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Published by Lion Fiction
an imprint of
Lion Hudson plc
Wilkinson House, Jordan Hill Road
Oxford OX2 8DR, England
www.lionhudson.com/fiction

ISBN 978 1 78264 141 4
e-ISBN 978 1 78264 142 1

This edition 2015

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound in the UK, January 2015, LH26

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The Community of St. Alcuin's Abbey

*For my friend
Margery May*

Monks

Brother Edward	<i>infirmarian</i>
Father Chad	<i>prior</i>
Father Columba	<i>abbot – known as Father Peregrine</i>
Brother John	<i>infirmary</i>
Brother Gilbert	<i>precentor</i>
Brother Cyprian	<i>porter/infirmary patient</i>
Father Matthew	<i>novice master</i>
Brother Walafrid	<i>herbalist/winemaker</i>
Brother Giles	<i>assistant herbalist</i>
Brother Michael	<i>works in the infirmary</i>
Brother Andrew	<i>cook</i>
Brother Ambrose	<i>cellarer</i>
Brother Clement	<i>scriptorium and library</i>
Brother Fidelis	<i>garden</i>
Brother Peter	<i>cared for horses, built wheelchair</i>
Brother Mark	<i>beekeeper</i>
Brother Stephen	<i>responsible for the farm</i>
Brother Martin	<i>porter</i>
Brother Paulinus	<i>gardener</i>
Brother Dominic	<i>guestmaster</i>
Brother Prudentius	<i>farm</i>
Brother Basil	<i>elderly brother, assists in guest house</i>

Father Bernard *cellarer in training*
Brother Germanus *farm*
Father Gerard *almoner*

Novices and postulants

Brother Thomas *abbot's esquire; also works on the farm*
Brother Francis *works in a variety of locations*
Father Theodore *works mainly as a scribe and illuminator*
Brother Cormac *kitchen*
Brother Thaddeus
Brother Bernard
Brother Richard
Brother Damian
Brother Josephus
Allen Howick *becomes Brother James*

Sick or aged brothers living in the infirmary

Brother Denis
Father Aelred
Father Anselm
Father Paul
Father Gerald
Father Lucanus

Deceased community brethren mentioned in

The Hawk and the Dove

Father Gregory *previous abbot of the community*

Assistants to the community

Martin Jonson *lay worker in infirmary*
Luke *kitchen assistant*
Simon *kitchen assistant*

About These Stories

I will never forget my friend Maggie dying. Word came to me on the Saturday afternoon that there had been a fire at her house and she was in hospital. I cancelled my plans for the evening and went straight there. I was not allowed to go in to her, the doctor was with her, so I sat down to wait in a room where chairs and bits of furniture were stored. Presently a plump, fair-haired, rather anxious-looking priest appeared in the corridor, looking for a nurse. He turned out to be Father Michael, one of the priests from the church Maggie attended. We sat in the small, cluttered room together, waiting, exchanging what news we had, what little we had heard, giving details to a nurse to fill in a form about Maggie; the sparse pitiful details of her lonely life.

Then we saw a nun walking briskly along the corridor, her veil flowing behind her. She marched straight up to the door of the intensive care unit. Maggie was there, and she intended to be with her. It was Sister Kathleen, the Irish nun, one of Maggie's friends from the convent. They wouldn't let her in, so all three of us sat together and waited, bound into a strange intimacy by the tension of the situation.

The doctor came to see us. She was very poorly, he said. She had seventy, maybe eighty, percent burns. The right leg—most of the right side—was gone. He suggested we should not go and see her. The nurse agreed with him. It was not a pleasant sight,

she said, even for a nurse. I felt glad enough to go along with the advice. What could we do, after all? She was unconscious. The priest, also with some relief, agreed with me. Sister Kathleen said nothing. The doctor went away, saying he would bring us more news later. Not until he had gone did Sister Kathleen speak: 'Should you not anoint her, Father?'

Of course. Of course he had to. We found the nurse again and explained. There were prayers that must be said: she must be anointed, blessed, absolved, before she died. Sister Kathleen said firmly that she would like to be there at Maggie's bedside to join in with the prayers. Me too. I knew it then. Just to creep away would not do. The nurse said she would go and ask. Where did Father want to anoint her? The forehead, he explained, was the usual place. The nurse looked doubtful. There's not much of her forehead left,' she said.

She went away and returned a moment later. Yes, there was a little place. It would be possible. The priest and I looked at each other. He did not speak, but there was a sort of barely perceptible wobbling about his face. I think he felt the same cold nausea of horror that I did. I don't know what Sister Kathleen was feeling. We trailed in the wake of her intrepid resolution, through the ward into the sideward where Maggie lay on her back under a sheet. Only her face was showing, and she was attached to all the tubes and drips of intensive care.

I don't know what I expected to see. I thought she would look like a piece of toast from what they said. It was Maggie, that's all. Maggie, with her face swollen and her hair singed, some of her skin burned away, the rest of it discoloured. But it was Maggie. I could see her soul. I don't mean my eyes saw a shining thing or anything like that. I mean that my spirit perceived, knew, beheld, the childlike, sweet reality of Maggie's real self, radiating from the still, burned body on the bed. Father Michael anointed her, and we said the prayers, and went home.

She was still alive in the morning. I was angry with myself for not having stayed with her. Maggie, who was so afraid of dying alone. I went back to the hospital and asked to sit with her.

'You can hold her hand,' said the nurse. 'Sit on this side. There's a bit more of this hand left.'

Again the cold, sick clutch of horror. What would it look like, the remains of that hand? The nurse lifted the sheet, and there it was, Maggie's hand. That's all it was; it was her hand. Burned, yes, and a lot of the skin gone, but it was Maggie's hand, and I held her hand till she died.

I have always been grateful for the clear-headed courage of that Irish nun, not discouraged by medical professionals or intimidated by unfamiliar territory and the instincts of fear and dread, remembering the human essentials. Maggie needed us; she needed us and she needed God, and in some strange way those needs were not separate but the same.

I walked away from the hospital down to the sea, wanting to be by myself, not ready to go home yet. I watched the waves crashing onto the pebbles as the tide came in, seeing and yet not seeing the foam and surge of the sea; half there and half still standing in the presence of death's mystery; fear, reverence, awe ... My lips still remembered the cold, dead brow I had kissed in farewell. My eyes still saw the sharp outline of her face, no longer softened by colour or blurred by the constant undercurrent motion of breath, pulse, life. Once, just once, the fingers of her hand had moved while I held it, while the respirator still held together the last shreds of her life's breaking thread. Had she heard my voice? Talking so quietly, not wanting the nurse to hear: 'Forgive us, Maggie. Oh forgive us.' Maybe things would have turned out differently if I had stayed with her, been there to avert the last fatal stupidity: the spilt brandy, the dropped cigarette. I didn't know. I wished I still had my mother to talk it over with. Mother always understood my questions, spoken

or unspoken, and my grieving—even this grief all numbed by regret. I remember how I used to come home to her with my troubles when I was a girl, and she always understood. I picture her now in the kitchen, washing up maybe, or slicing potatoes, or stirring custard. She would listen quietly, and as often as not she would ponder my words for a few moments, then say, ‘I know a story about that.’ She would tell me stories, wonderful stories, that teased out the tangled threads of my heartaches and made sense of things again.

It was a monk Mother used to tell me stories about; a monk of the fourteenth century called Peregrine du Fayel. He was a badly disabled man with a scarred face and a lame leg and twisted, misshapen hands. He was the abbot of St Alcuin’s Abbey in North Yorkshire, on the edge of the moors. He was a man whose body was shaped by the cruelties of life, but his spirit was shaped by the mercy and goodness of God. He couldn’t do much with his broken hands, but he discovered that there were some precious and powerful things that could be done only by a man whom life had wounded badly. He was loved and honoured by the brothers who served God under him, and there were many stories told of his dealings with them, the things he said and did. These stories were never written in a book, but they have been passed down by the women in my family, from one generation to another.

The one who first collected the stories was a woman like him. In actual fact, although he kept this to himself, she was his daughter. Before he entered monastic life, he had a love affair, and unwittingly left his sweetheart expecting a baby. The baby, Melissa, was brought up by her mother and stepfather, and not until she was a young woman did she accidentally come across Abbot Peregrine, her real father. Finding him brought her a sense of completion and belonging, and she used to visit him in his monastery, and grew to love him very much, treasuring the stories about him that she gathered from the monks.

One of the stories they liked to tell her was the story of his name. His name in religion, the name his abbot had bestowed on him when he took his first vows and severed himself from all that he had been up until then, was ‘Columba’. It is the Latin word for a dove. The abbot had been named ‘Peregrine’ by his mother, because even as a baby it had been evident that he was going to inherit his father’s proud, fierce, hawkish face—and he did. The brothers of Abbot Peregrine’s monastery found the incongruity of the name ‘Columba’ very amusing. They called him ‘Peregrine’, his baptismal name. They thought it fitted better. Melissa liked that story too, but she liked it because she saw both in him, the hawk and the dove. He was fierce and intimidating at times, it was true, but there was also a tenderness and a quality of mercy about him that he had learned in the bitter school of suffering. ‘Columba’ had been a good choice, after all.

My name is Melissa. It is a family name. There has been a Melissa every now and then in our family for hundreds of years, since Abbot Peregrine’s daughter. The last one before me was my mother’s great-grandmother. She died the year I was born, and Mother didn’t want the name to die out in our family, so I was christened Melissa too. I don’t know what she’d have done if I’d been a boy.

The stories and the name were passed down through our family, grandmother to granddaughter, all the way to my mother’s great-grandmother: hundreds of years. My mother’s great-grandmother told them to my mother, and Mother loved the stories. She told them to me in my turn, when I was fifteen.

She waited until I was fifteen, because they were not children’s stories. They were stories of men who had faced disillusionment and tasted grief and struggled with despair. Mother waited until I came to that time when I was no longer satisfied with the convenient and the pleasant and the comfortable; when I had seen enough of the shifting sands of appearances and

wanted to stand firm on the truth, and then she began to tell me the stories that long ago Melissa had remembered and treasured about Abbot Peregrine, her father. He was an aristocrat, the son of a rich nobleman, and I must confess I liked that too: it's been a long time since we had one of those in our family. My own mother and father never had two ha'pennies to rub together, but that might have been because, with more faith than wisdom, they had five children.

When I was fifteen, my sister Therese was sixteen and my little sisters Beth and Mary were eight and six. My youngest sister Cecily was only three then, but she certainly made her presence felt. Daddy said she was like an infant Valkyrie, and words failed Mother to describe her adequately. She would just shake her head in silence. All three-year-olds are a force to be reckoned with when they get going, but I've never met anyone like my sister Cecily. She's not all that much different now, actually.

We lived in a small terraced house near the sea, which is the place my mind goes back to when I tell these stories, the stories Mother first told me there, the year I was fifteen. My sisters liked stories too, but not as much as Mother and I did. We lived with one foot in reality and one in fantasy, and sometimes we forgot which foot was which. I still do.

I went to school at a girls' High School. I have heard it said that ' schooldays are the best days of your life', but the best of my schooldays was the day I walked out of the gate for the last time and turned my back on it for ever. I used to feel as though my life was made up of weekends separated by deserts of weekdays, a bit like the beads on a rosary that come in clumps separated by bald stretches of chain. Perhaps I was a difficult person to teach—well, I know I was, they left me in no doubt about that—but if I gave my teachers trouble, it was nothing to the misery they caused me.

Have you ever been given one of those horrid joke presents, a big, inviting, exciting box, which when you open it contains only

another box, and inside that another box, right down to the last one which has nothing at all inside? That's how my schooldays were. Day led onto day, a meaningless, hollow emptiness, the promise of learning no more than academic exercises wrapped around nothing.

I can see my headmistress' face now, the permed waves of grey hair rising from the domed forehead above those eyes that so remarkably resembled a dead cod, and the sort of embossed Crimplene armour she wore under her academic gown.

I learned very little. I have no idea where the Straits of Gibraltar are, and not until last weekend did I learn the square root of 900. But the day I opened the last package in the sequence and found it was an empty joke, I mean the day I pulled up the drawbridge of my soul forever, and never learned another thing from those teachers (though I was at the school two years more) was the day I got my English exam result. I was not good at many things at school, but I was good at English and I *knew* I was. I tried my best in the exam, and I hoped I'd done well. When the results were given out, I got 54%, which just scraped a pass. I can remember it now, sitting in the classroom; the wooden desks with their graffiti, the high Victorian windows, and the teacher explaining to me that she had given me no marks at all for the content of my exam. She had given me marks for my punctuation and for my spelling, but that was all, because the content was, she felt, immoral. She had thought, she said, when she began to read it, that it was going to be a love story, but it turned out to be about God.

It seems funny (odd, I mean, not amusing) to think how that hurt me, then; how the shutters of my soul closed for good against the school that day. I know now what that poor, starved woman cannot have known, that not only my essay but the whole of life is a love story, about a tender and passionate God.

So my life was lived in the evenings and at weekends, and the

greater part of my education was not geography or mathematics, but the wisdom my mother taught me, wrapped up in stories her great-grandmother Melissa had taught her.

Here are some of those stories.

CHAPTER TWO

Who's the Fool Now?

Stories and songs are for wet days and evenings, and for camping. You could offer me a mansion with central heating and every luxury; top quality stereo systems, colour televisions and ensuite bathrooms, and I would not exchange it for my memories of campfires under the stars.

I remember my little sisters, Mary and Beth and Cecily, dancing to the music of Irish jigs piped on a recorder, their silhouetted shapes leaping and turning in the firelight. I remember Mary's eager smile as she stretched up towards the flying sparks that floated high in the smoke. Fire-fairies, she said they were. I remember their breathless voices as they sang 'Father Abraham had many sons ...', hopping and jumping the actions to the song.

Round the fire, sitting on the big stones that ringed it, were friends and family. Mother and Daddy, Grandma, my uncle and auntie, Grandad sitting in his camp chair with a pink towel draped over his head to stop the midges biting him. Familiar and commonplace in the daylight, as the dusk fell and night drew on they became folk-tale figures, mythological beings from another age. The kindly light of the fireglow hid the irrelevances of whether Grandma's anorak was blue or white and Auntie's trousers were fashionable, and revealed different things: the kindness of Grandad's face, and the serene wisdom of Grandma's. Daddy's face with its long beard looked like an Old Testament story all by itself.