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**Mel Starr, author, *The Unquiet Bones***

# The Hardest Thing<sup>to</sup> Do

PENELOPE WILCOCK



LION FICTION

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FOR  
FATHER TOM CULLINAN

*who is quite unforgettable  
whom I love dearly  
who bound my Bible for the ridiculous sum of £10  
whom I respect profoundly  
whose house is full of loving-kindness  
whose wisdom and gentleness humble me  
who cares for the earth and serves Christ most faithfully  
whose flint has struck my flint at times  
who lives in the most beautiful simplicity  
whose experimental soup whizzer—made with razor blades  
and a coat hanger attached to his drill—was a total failure  
whom I revere absolutely  
whose bicycle is the oldest I have ever seen  
who sees almost every imaginable thing differently  
from the way I see it  
whose face and house and friends and voice and chapel  
and garden are lodged in my memory  
for ever*



*For I am become like a bottle in the smoke;  
yet do I not forget thy statutes.*

*How many are the days of thy servant?*  
**Psalm 119:83–84, King James Version**

*What we need is people who are capable of loving;  
of not taking sides, so that they can embrace  
the whole of reality as a mother hen embraces all  
her chicks with two fully spread wings.*  
**Thich Nhat Hanh**

*The word of God is very near to you,  
already in your mouths and in your hearts;  
you have only to carry it out.*  
**Paraphrase of Deuteronomy 30:14; Romans 10:8**

*Reconciliation can be initiated in an instant.  
It's also a process.*  
**Alice Wilcock**

*All life is but a wandering to find home.*  
**Samuel Beckett**





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# The Community of St Alcuin's Abbey

(Not all members are mentioned in *The Hardest Thing to Do*.)

## Fully professed monks

Abbot John Hazell	<i>formerly the infirmarian</i>
Father Chad	<i>prior</i>
Brother Ambrose	<i>cellarer</i>
Father Theodore	<i>novice master</i>
Father Gilbert	<i>precentor</i>
Brother Clement	<i>overseer of the scriptorium</i>
Father Dominic	<i>guest master</i>
Brother Thomas	<i>abbot's esquire, also involved with the farm and building repairs</i>
Father Francis	<i>scribe</i>
Father Bernard	<i>sacristan</i>
Brother Martin	<i>porter</i>
Brother Thaddeus	<i>potter</i>
Brother Michael	<i>infirmarian</i>
Brother Damian	<i>helps in the infirmary</i>
Brother Cormac	<i>kitchener</i>
Brother Richard	<i>fraterer</i>
Brother Stephen	<i>oversees the abbey farm</i>
Brother Peter	<i>ostler</i>
Brother Josephus	<i>has acted as esquire for Father Chad between abbots; now working in the abbey school</i>

Brother Germanus	<i>has worked on the farm, occupied in the wood yard and gardens</i>
Brother Mark	<i>too old for taxing occupation, but keeps the bees</i>
Brother Paulinus	<i>works in the kitchen garden and orchards</i>
Brother Prudentius	<i>now old, helps on the farm and in the kitchen garden and orchards</i>
Brother Fidelis	<i>now old, oversees the flower gardens</i>
Father James	<i>makes and mends robes, occasionally works in the scriptorium</i>
Brother Walafrid	<i>herbalist, oversees the brew house</i>
Brother Giles	<i>assists Brother Walafrid and works in laundry</i>
Brother Basil	<i>old, assists the sacristan—ringing the bell for the office hours, etc.</i>

**Fully professed monks now confined to the infirmary through frailty of old age**

Father Gerald	<i>once sacristan</i>
Brother Denis	<i>scribe</i>
Father Paul	<i>once precentor</i>
Brother Edward	<i>onetime infirmarian, now living in the infirmary but active enough to help there and occasionally attend Chapter and the daytime hours of worship</i>
Brother Cyprian	<i>porter</i>

**Novices**

Brother Benedict	<i>assists in the infirmary</i>
Brother Boniface	<i>helps in the scriptorium</i>
Brother Cassian	<i>works in the school</i>
Brother Cedd	<i>helps in the scriptorium and when required in the robing room</i>
Brother Conradus	<i>assists in the kitchen</i>
Brother Felix	<i>helps Father Gilbert</i>

Brother Placidus                    *helps on the farm*  
Brother Robert                    *assists in the pottery*

**Members of the community mentioned in earlier stories  
and now deceased**

Abbot Gregory of the Resurrection  
Abbot Columba du Fayel (also known as Father Peregrine)  
Father Matthew                    *novice master*  
Father Aelred                      *schoolmaster*  
Father Lucanus                    *novice master before Father Matthew*  
Father Anselm                    *robe-maker*  
Brother Andrew                    *kitchener*

**Members of other religious houses resident at St Alcuin's**

Fr. Wm. de Bulmer                *prior of St Dunstan's Augustinian Priory  
near Chesterfield*

# Light ✠ Fire ✠ Ashes

Scribed with care on finest vellum, illuminated magnificently with consummate artistry, bound in leather and clasped with silver, the beautiful Gospel lay closed on the lectern, waiting.

Tomorrow, Ash Wednesday, would be the first day of Lent.





# The First Day

Brother Thomas sat impassively in his stall in the choir: he felt irritated nonetheless. The air was astir from Father Chad's bustling as the prior made his way with exaggerated purpose to the abbatial seat. The energy of his going generated a crack and flap of robes that grated on Brother Thomas's nerves.

*Why can't he just tread quietly? Why does he have to exude this self-importance every blessed time someone gives him something to do? Oh, ye saints and archangels, just sit down, Chad—whatever it is I bet we've heard it all before.*

Ash Wednesday. The smell of the burnt palm crosses mixed with chrism pervaded the chapel.

Prime, then the morrow Mass and imposition of the ashes: "*Memento, homo, quia pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris...* Remember, O man, that dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return... Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel."

Tom rose to his feet, his brow marked with ashes by the prior's thumb. He returned from the altar rail to his stall, where he sank down to his knees again, wanting to repent about Father Chad and not finding it possible to rid himself of baser thoughts: *His voice is annoying. His face is annoying. That little nervous laugh is annoying. The way he says "homo" sets my teeth on edge.*

There exists nothing that God has not made. *Is God annoying?*

*Did Chad spring fully-formed from some irritating, half-baked little crevice unacknowledged in the mind of the Divine?*

Lent is hard. Cormac's bread is hard, but in hard Lent the bread is even harder: just flour, salt, and water, no leaven. No eggs, no meat, no cheese, no butter. Beans and roots and cabbage; cabbage and roots and beans. There are no alleluias in Lent. But the hardest thing to do is to take away every comfort, every grace note from the daily round, and *still* remember not to look at Chad as if you wished he'd crawl right back under his stone.

*Come soon, Brother John. This place needs you. I need you.*

The community filed through into the chapter house to hear the reading of the Rule, the superior's homily, and the daily discussion of community concerns.

"Brothers, there has come unsettling news of a tragedy." Father Chad's voice resonated with the frisson of awful tidings. "One of our guests who was with us on Monday night brought word yesterday of a great fire that has broken out, he said, in a monastery but a few days' ride from here. I pressed him for more detail, but he had heard only rumours—talk of complete destruction, of ashes floating on the wind across the neighbouring country, and many lives lost. When I hear tell of what community has suffered this dreadful calamity, I will bring you news: for now, dear brothers, please keep those stricken in your prayers.

"Please pray, of course, also for our brother who is travelling home to us and will be with us any day, we hold good hope. We beseech God of his great kindness that our brother may be kept in safety from danger, disease, wild animals, and violent men, that he may soon be received under our roof with all charity and rejoicing.

"And we keep in our prayers before God all who are sick and frail, especially Brother Cyprian, whose health is failing."

Father Chad turned to the Rule of St Benedict and the chapter for the observance of Lent, exhorting the brethren to keep their

lives pure and to wash away in this stretch of extra effort the creeping negligences that gradually attached themselves through the rest of the year. The chapter urged each man to seek out some extra offering of his own self-denial—some item of food or drink, another hour of sleep, forbearance from conversation—to deepen the penitential journey of Lent and heighten the joy of spiritual desire for Easter.

Tom noted the enriched timbre of Father Chad's voice as he read from the Rule: "Let each one, however, suggest to his abbot what it is that he wants to offer, and let it be done with his blessing and approval. For anything done without the permission of the spiritual father will be imputed to presumption and vainglory and will merit no reward. Therefore let everything be done with the abbot's approval."

Tom considered the possibility of humbly asking Chad's permission to keep out of his way for six weeks—for the good of his soul. Then he felt a sudden stab of shame at his lack of charity.

Father Chad had proposed that the admission of their new abbot be incorporated into the Easter festivities as a grand and joyful occasion. Brother Thomas had seen things differently. "It's not for show; it's not about the pomp and ceremony!" he had wanted to say, but had stood in silence, biting back the flood of criticism that had wanted to tumble out, until the prior asked him, "Yes, brother?"

And with an effort he had kept his words honest and simple. "Father, I think Brother John likes things done quietly. I think the receiving of our new abbot is a private, family thing. I beg to offer that we do this simply, just among ourselves, and let Easter have the glory that belongs to it, without us trying to gild the lily."

Father Chad had nodded thoughtfully, alert to the quiet stir of assent that reached his ears.

"That sounds like wisdom, dear brother," he conceded.

He hesitated, then added, “We shall be empowered to do this because the bishop has given us permission to admit our new abbot as soon as he arrives among us. *I* am permitted to act as the bishop’s commissary.”

Tom nodded, keeping his eyes lowered. He understood what he was hearing. Chad had no confidence in himself, no natural authority. He swung between the paralysis of hopeless inadequacy and preening himself on account of borrowed authority. He was not the abbot of this community and felt the deepest relief to know he never would be. He entertained not even a fantasy of becoming a bishop. Responsibility frightened him, administration confused him, and pastoral ministry frankly terrified him, but to pull borrowed rank occasionally restored his self-esteem.

That was settled then. Their new abbot would be installed privately, quietly, simply, as soon as he had come back home to them.



“Brother Conradus, you’re late.”

This was undeniably true and not atypical, but Father Theodore understood how to soften the rebuke. Only recently clothed in the habit of the Order, still relying on friendly hands to steer him into the right place at the right time, the short, plump, young novice clung to his name in religion and the right to be a brother of this house, as a consolation amid chronic weariness and bewilderment. *Brother Conradus*—the words brought exultation, even when they were normally a mere preliminary to correction.

He fell to his knees before the novice master seated in the teaching circle. “I confess my fault of tardiness, my father, and I ask forgiveness of God and of you.”

It never felt hard to ask Father Theodore for pardon. Even as Conradus kissed the floor in penance, the gentleness of the novice

master's voice—"God forgives you, and so do I, my son; I do know you are trying your best"—brought comfort and the feeling of being understood. It was not impossible to make Theodore angry, but that happened only when deserved. Theodore could see the difference between human weakness and human sin. He was ready with a hand to lift you up when you stumbled, which was very often in Brother Conradus's present reality. It was not easy to get used to plain food made awesomely plain in Lent. It was almost impossible, having tossed and turned on the lumps of a straw mattress on a February night and having finally fallen into an exhausted sleep, to waken at the clamour of the bell, then leave a blanket still barely warmed and join the subdued line of tired men stumbling down from the dorter at 2 a.m. for Matins, to pray for the king and the dead—the situation of either seeming infinitely preferable. The silence, the work, the unquestioning obedience—Brother Conradus thought everything was as difficult as he'd been warned and maybe more so. But he thought the hardest thing to do was holding it all together, trying to remember everything he'd been told and asked, where everything was and where he was meant to go.

Eager for Father Theodore's morning lesson, Conradus took his place in the circle with the others, and peace settled upon him. Conradus did not know that when Theodore had passed through the novitiate the novices had sat in rows facing their master at the front. He did not consider Theodore's reasoning in arranging the stools in a circle; even so, he was not insensible to the atmosphere of community in this room. Here was a place where people learned together, and everyone felt included.

The young monks and their novice master, all now gathered, sat without speaking in the circle—another innovation of Theodore's. Invariably late to almost everything as a novice himself, his memories were of lessons begun and half missed: he used to miss the start because he was late, miss the next bit

because he was overcome with bitter humiliation and self-rebuke, and miss most of the rest because he couldn't quite make sense of it, trying to imagine what the bits he had missed might have been.

So he initiated the practice of starting the time together in silence.

“In silence we enter the room, brothers. In silence we take a place in the circle—*any* place, not *my* place or *your* place, not the same place always, for place is nothing to be possessive about. We sit quietly then and take in where we are. Sit with your eyes open or shut, it matters not; but be aware. Know that being a monk is not about withdrawal but about community, and feel the community here. We listen to our brothers... see them... smell them... [that usually brought a laugh] and we stay open to what else we can notice. Restlessness? Weariness? Friendship? Peace? Every day is different in community, and we are made more sensitive to the differences because every day is the same.”

Conradus liked to sit with his eyes open and rest his gaze on the circle of his brothers, because he had noticed that this was what Father Theodore usually did. Sometimes, like today, a sigh escaped from somewhere deep in his body, as he began to relax in this accepting circle. He looked at the smudges of ash on the faces of his brothers. The acceptance belonged to every day; but this was the day of ashes, and that set it apart.

Into the silence Theodore spoke quietly about miracles of transformation.

“A miracle alters the normal course of things, turning what comes naturally into something new. In the everyday world, we take a flint and a rag, or take a taper to a candle, and we make a light. We take the light to the hearth and start the fire. When night comes down and we cease to feed it, the flames die away, the embers grow cold, and all that is left is ashes.

“A vocation can be like that, or a marriage, in the everyday.

Someone sets alight something new, it flames up warm and bright. But with time and neglect, it dies down, dies out. As the years go by while you walk this way, you will sense among your brothers those of whom this is true.

“The psalmist says, ‘*Quia factus sum sicut uter in pruina, justificationes tuas non sum oblitus. Quot sunt dies servi tui?*’ For I am become like a bottle in the smoke, yet do I not forget thy statutes. How many are the days of thy servant?”

“And when it is like that—as it can be for any of us at times—the going is so arduous. As you walk this path, my brothers, if you see that... if you see that your brother has become like a bottle in the smoke, just the used remnant of what must once have been a vocation, oh, do not judge him. One day it might be you.”

Brother Cedd lifted his head, his face troubled. Father Theodore caught his eye, his face kind.

“But the miracle starts here,” he said, and he sounded so certain that Brother Cedd felt reassured. “A miracle is not the everyday way of things—*light, fire, ashes*. A miracle changes everything, challenges the order we know. In a miracle God smiles and says, ‘Try this for a change: *ashes, fire, light*.’ Inside a soul, when all is ashes—when a brother has become as grubby and unattractive as a bottle in the smoke—the secret fire of the Holy Spirit arises out of the kind desire of God, burning away the dross and the sin, kindling again the precepts, the statutes, the rule of life. Fire is painful, oh, God, it is painful; there is nothing warm and cozy about the mercy of God as it burns away coldness and indifference. But the flowering of the miracle is luminous; there comes light that is evident to everyone who has eyes to see; the inner light of peace betokening the house where Christ lives again: resurrection, I suppose.

“That bottle in the smoke—the empty, clouded, burned-out vessel—you notice the Latin word for it is *uter*—something we use, a useful container—but growing also into the word for a

womb, the place where new life begins. The jar lying forgotten in last night's ashes can be the womb of a new beginning.

“So the slow, painful journey of Lent takes us from ashes, through fire, to Easter light: reversing our tendency to fall asleep and neglect the flame, to let the fire go out.”

Theodore stopped speaking. His novices, shifting a little on the uncompromising wooden seats, glanced up to see what might follow and traced his quizzical, amused gaze to Brother Robert, who furnished a helpful illustration as he nodded off to sleep.



## The Second Day

John sat up, frowning. The house was quiet. He had slept longer than he meant. Kicking off the woolen blanket they had given him, he looked down at his shins covered in flea bites and gave thanks that his stay did not extend to a second night, for his hosts knew of a carrier's wagon travelling north this day, if he didn't mind a delay at Chesterfield.

John stretched his body free of stiffness. Everything ached. This damp weather had got into his bones. Tired of unfamiliar places and hospitality begged of strangers, he longed for home. A slight sound caught his attention. He looked up to see Goodwife Jenny in the doorway, watching him.

“Good morrow, Father. You have slept well.”

“I've slept late, Jenny, but I've a bone to pick with you. I have three sheepskins here for a bed, keeping me warm and comfortable. Now, I'll wager someone in the family has gone without, so I could sleep soft. Am I right?”

Her face illuminated in her sudden wide grin. John counted one, two, three teeth missing.

“You have my fur there, and my man's, but that's no matter after all you've done for us. Father, I have some gruel on the fire when you are hungry, and the carrier is nigh on ready for off. But, my lord...”

“What? Don’t call me ‘my lord.’ I’m not anyone’s lord. I’m a monk, Jenny, poor and simple. Say straight out what you want, and I’ll help you if I can, only I have no money.”

“Nay, Father, it’s not that. And we know you tell truth about the money, for Robin went through your bag while you were sleeping. It’s for Janet, my neighbour. She’s been throwing up and had the trots this five days, and the babe’s not well, his eyelids are all swollen. I only thought, if you might make haste in rising now you’re awake, you could maybe take a look at her and tell us what to do: what physic she needs and how we must take care of her, like you did for the rest of us.”

John stood up. “Take me to her, Jenny; I’ll see what I can do. While your mind’s on herbs, a handful of lavender and bedstraw wouldn’t come amiss in here. You have the fleas.”

“Fleas?” She frowned, puzzled. “Everyone has fleas.”

“They do not. There are no fleas in our abbey infirmary; I give you my word.”

Jenny shrugged. “Well, I expect it’s a big place with room to shake things out and brush everything down. What can I do here in all this cold and wet? We’ve all to keep in this small house and the five of us with the goats and all at night. Do you room in with your goats in your infirmary?”

John nodded, resigning himself to reality. “I hear you. It’s not that you’re careless; I didn’t mean it so. Lavender. Lady’s bedstraw. It’ll help.”

In Janet’s house, which was even more cramped and dark than Jenny’s and full of smoke and the sour smells of flatulence and vomit, John squatted by the bed of Jenny’s friend.

“Put out your tongue. Just four drops, there. That’s myrrh; it’ll stop this in its tracks and give you a little rest, but not for long. Jenny, you must clean the house up for her. Wash out any bowls where she’s been sick, and stand them outside in the fresh air. Shake out her bedding, and strew some herbs;

rosemary will do, or anything you can beg. If there are any nettles at all starting in the hedgerows yet, make her a tea with the tops. Janet, have you a bowl I can use—a *clean* bowl?”

He took from his bag a square of linen and spread carefully on it his little packs and phials of herbs and oils. Janet sat up in her bed, and Jenny stood over him, the two watching as he mixed, in the bowl Jenny washed and brought him, wormwood, mint, and aloe, with oil of roses. The odor of the house began to improve. Jenny sniffed appreciatively as John carefully dripped his precious rose oil into the small pile of powdered herbs. “That smells so lovely,” she said.

“I have no more linen strips to spare. I am so sorry. I must just spread this on your belly, and you’ll have to keep it in place as best you can. It’s all I can do. It’ll help anyway. And, Janet, when you must relieve yourself, do it away from the house, away from your beasts, and away from the place you get your water, or the sickness will return and spread in your household. Now, where is the child?”

They brought him the baby, a poor little scrap with red eyes swollen shut, and John made a tisane of chamomile and lavender, having heated water over the fire until it boiled.

“Let this cool now. Bathe his eyes with it, three or four times in the day. Keep him clean; keep his eyes clean. If you have a cloth that will serve, lay him to sleep in a hammock slung from a stick; not on the floor where it’s dusty, and—if you can help it—not in the drift of the smoke. God bless you, God keep you, good ladies; peace be upon you, peace and healing to your house.”

So it was that John made his way slowly up-country, finding lodging wherever hospitality was offered him, travelling with whoever could take him another day’s journey north.

He had spent a year at Cambridge, preparing for the greater responsibility of the abbacy, under commission of the brothers’ unanimous vote, and now priested and educated he was making

the long, patient journey back home. He had no horse and no money, but his healing skills and small store of herbs and simples earned him gratitude and goodwill enough to supply his needs for food and shelter, friendship and transport. The most direct route was not always available, and at this time of year, after the hard rains and slow-melting snows, some roads were mired beyond passing. Delays were commonplace. But he had made it to Nottingham in ten days and had high hopes of seeing the moors north of York within a fortnight.



Tom surveyed the wood yard balefully. Brother Germanus looked apprehensive. Tom had been Father Peregrine's esquire, and helped out wherever a wall had tumbled down or extra help was wanted with the beasts or a rick needed building. Now, waiting for their new abbot to settle him to the obedience that would occupy his days, Brother Thomas had far too much time on his hands for Brother Germanus's liking. Tom still grieved for Father Peregrine. He continued to tend the abbot's lodging; and the work of the farm and the building repairs, along with any number of odd jobs around the place, kept him busy, but he had a space in his heart for something to care about. That left him restless, and irritable.

"The hand axe is rusty as well as blunt. The kindling's got wet. Were you hoping to start a fire with this lot? Brother, who's been looking after this woodpile? Is it you?"

Brother Germanus said nothing and dropped his gaze.

"How could you let it get in this state? Everything here is a sleazy, slipshod mess! The fire won't catch, and when it does, it will smoke. Oh, for heaven's sake, you don't need me to tell you all this!

"Sharpen the axe and rub it down and oil it. Don't leave it out

in the rain like this. Take the kindling under cover. What's the matter with you? Is that so hard to do? How could you do such a shoddy job as this?"

He stood glaring for a moment at Germanus's discomfited silence, then turned on his heel and walked away. The care of the wood yard was not Brother Thomas's obedience, but he had offered as a favour to get the firewood up for the novitiate that day.

He took the basket of soggy kindling up the novitiate stairs and dumped it by the fireplace. The supply for the warming room and the abbot's lodge had been brought in ahead of time and dried before a fire already lit; it was only the novices shivering.

Tom found Theo alone in the novitiate, his charges having been turned out on a walk for their health, since the rain had given way to sunshine for a wander. He had directed them toward the river: "Let the clarity of the water and the strength of the great trees find a place in you, restore your souls."

"I have your kindling here, and split logs will follow, when I recover my good humour and the incompetent Germanus is out of sight of the wood yard."

"Good afternoon, brother. What has Brother Germanus done to upset you?"

Tom snorted, indignant. "Have you not seen the state of the wood yard?"

"No. Is it bad?" The news set Theo more on alert than Tom had expected.

"Bad? Shiftless! Untidy! Neglected! It's a god-awful shambles, a total careless mess! Don't grin at me like that!"

"I see. Well, thanks for our kindling. I could fetch the logs, in truth, because I've a little while to myself now before None. But what's Brother Germanus got to do with all this?"

"Isn't he caring for the wood yard?"

“I don’t think so. He’s been working in the kitchen with Brother Cormac since Advent, hasn’t he? Brother Conradus has been overseeing the wood yard, but if he’s been doing it badly I shan’t fall over in amazement. He’s managing his passage through the novitiate as neatly and gracefully as you did or I. Living on bread and water and leniency at the moment for his daily fare.”

“Not Brother Germanus? Germanus is in the kitchen?”

Theodore nodded.

Tom ran his hand over his tonsured head in a gesture of embarrassment and uncertainty. “Why didn’t I know this?”

“Brother, I have no idea! Would you normally know everything?”

Tom gazed at him hopelessly, shaking his head. “I shall have to go and ask his pardon for what I said. Oh, Theo, we’re in such a mess! The left hand doesn’t know what the right hand’s doing. The wood yard’s not a big deal, but it shouldn’t just be left to the care of a novice! Not in the winter! Oh, come *soon*, Brother John, before we slump into complete chaos!”

Theodore smiled. “You tore Brother Germanus off a strip for his mismanagement of the wood yard?”

“I did.”

“And he didn’t correct your mistake?”

“That’s right.”

“He may even have been sheltering poor Conradus from your wrath?”

“I guess so.”

“Well then, my brother, it seems we have not forgotten everything we’ve learned. Things may not be so bad as you fear.”

Tom nodded slowly. “I’ll bring your firewood up as I promised, Theo. And I’ll do a little tidying up down there, maybe sharpen and oil the axes. I’m sorry I was so hasty.”