

Scene 1

TERESA (offstage)

Are they here, yet? What's that? They're waiting? Waiting for me? Well, let them wait. Waiting is an important part of our work. Let them learn what it means to WAIT. They'll be here for YEARS. That's right – years. IF they're lucky.

We hear the phrase of a tune, perhaps a bit of Plainsong.

Now don't chide me, Mother; you know I like to sing. It helps me to relax.

She sings again.

Mother, if you keep interrupting me, I will never get ready.

Short phrase. She stops abruptly.

Oh, very well. If you insist, I will go out and greet the new novices. I'm sure they're just so excited...

Teresa enters.

...to begin cleaning the refectory.

She stops, sees the audience. Then, a little less aggressive.

Aren't you? Aren't you all just thrilled to start cleaning the refectory? Am I right? Oh, perhaps you'd prefer to clean out the stalls? Ummm? I can't hear you. What did you say?

She listens. Then laughs.

No, no, not the CHAPEL stalls; those stay remarkably clean. No, I was speaking of the COW STALLS. Then there are the HORSE STALLS. Then, well, you'll find out soon enough. Perhaps you noticed the stalls on your way here? No? Well, then, you certainly smelled them. Animals. Yes, we have animals here. How do you think we feed ourselves? Managing a convent takes a great deal of labor. You'll learn that soon enough.

Beat.

But enough of that.

She sits.

Now, then. Here you are. This is your home. It will be your home for the rest of your lives. IF you are fortunate. This home of yours is, first of all, a place of prayer. Prayer is what we do. We pray constantly. We pray six times a day. Together. Then, of course, we are responsible for our own private prayers. They take many more hours. You will learn to pray without ceasing. To pray continually. It will take you all awhile to get it right, but I know you will. And if you make mistakes now and again, God will forgive you. God always forgives us when we approach Him with a contrite and penitent spirit.

She sees something. Rises

You there. Yes, you; the one that's talking. I saw you. You must always remember that when the Novice Mistress speaks, you must be absolutely silent; silent and attentive.

Beat.

What's that? What did you say? God will forgive? God will forgive us when we approach Him with a contrite and penitent spirit. Very clever. Yes, God will forgive. But I won't...at least not right away.

She sits again. Checks a list.

You, you and you – will clean the refectory. You, you and you – the chapel stalls. I know, they stay fairly clean. But, then, there is Sister Genevieve. Ah, well. She requires absolute cleanliness. Let's see, oh yes, you there - the one that God forgives; you will clean the stalls – the OTHER stalls.

She stands and claps her hands.

Now, off to work with you. Go. Go!

She watches them leave. She turns to go herself, but something catches her eye.

My, my. How remarkable.

She reaches out her hand, as if to touch a vision.

How remarkable...You. And you. And all of you. I can see you. I suppose you have been there all the time, haven't you? I have heard that such things happen, but I did not think it was given to me to...well, to SEE you. To see into another world – to see into God's future world. You and I are separated by so much. But here you are. Praise God!

She crosses to the audience.

Forgive me. I have been so intent about our new group of novices, I didn't take time to see – to really see who was here. We do that, don't we; never take the time to really see who is here? Right here beside us; brothers and sisters in Christ. But I can see you now. And you can see me.

She becomes more lively.

My name is Teresa. Welcome to my home. It is a little different from your own I am quite sure, but it is mine. And I love it.

She gestures expansively.

We really do pray together seven times a day. Communal prayers. And there are the private prayers. Prayer becomes like breathing – like breathing with God. It becomes part of us. And then, over time, we become the prayer. We become one; we and the prayer join together in such a wonderful intimacy. I believe that is the way God wishes us to be.

Seriously.

But it doesn't come easily. Oh, no. The language of prayer is very difficult to learn. It is a little like learning any language; but there are very few rules. Yes, we have our common prayers. But that is only part of it. Then, there is the language of our personal prayers. That must be learned over time. And it is a lot of work.

Shyly.

I would like to show you how I learned to pray. I really would. (Whispers) It's very embarrassing. But it is my mission and God has called me to teach you about prayer. So,

I must ask you all to promise – to solemnly promise – not to laugh. Will you promise? Will you?

She receives the response she is looking for. She suppresses a chuckle.

All right, then, let's begin. This is the way it was. We are going to travel back in time to when I was a young novice. Long ago. Well, not that long ago.

She alters her costume a bit to suggest a new novice. Her voice becomes more youthful.

I knew I needed to pray, but I wasn't quite sure how to go about it.

She adopts a position of prayer. She appears very awkward. She adjusts herself into several different postures. She coughs. She clears her throat. She clasps her hands together. She unclasps them. She clasps her hands together. She unclasps them. She looks at them very carefully. She shakes them out. She looks at them again. She sniffs them. She makes a face. She turns to the audience.

Oh, go ahead and laugh. God has a sense of humor.

She looks up.

Don't you?

She appears surprised.

Did you hear that? Did you?

Beat.

She laughs.

-5-

Relax. He didn't say a thing.

Beat.

Sometimes He doesn't answer for months at a time. But He always listens. Now, then,

where were we? Oh, yes, my first time in prayer.

She adopts what she considers to be a reverent posture.

(tentatively) God?

She listens.

Hello? God? Are you there?

She listens.

God? Sir? Master?

She listens. Then, to herself.

I don't think I'm very good at this.

She looks up, startled.

You don't either?

Wide-eyed, she looks at the audience.

Sometimes He does answer. And right away, too.

She becomes serious, more vulnerable.

You must...I mean...Please help me. I need your help.

Pause. She rises. She reaches upward, slowly.

-6-

Thank you.

She turns to the audience.

And that is how it started. A simple request for help. And a simple thank you. Sometimes, that is all that is necessary.

Beat.

She prays very earnestly for a moment, her face squeezed in an atmosphere of intense concentration, she quickly mouths the words. Then, she crosses herself, rises. She exhales, as if she has just completed a race.

Prayer is sometimes very hard work.

She looks around, making sure she is “alone.”

There is another way that I pray. But you must promise never to tell. Oh, I know there are no secrets. Especially where God is concerned. But there is one very special secret that I have. It is so secret that no history book has ever recorded it. Don't bother looking for it; it simply isn't there. You see, I have a very particular talent.

She looks around here again... Satisfied that no one from the convent is listening, she comes very close to the audience.

A particular talent given to me by God. And I will let you hear it. Let's say it is a little gift...for both of us to share.

SONG MOMENT #1

She begins her song very quietly, pianissimo. It is a simple bit of plainsong, perhaps, but it will serve to introduce Teresa the singer to the audience.

Teresa acknowledges the audience response.

Thank you for receiving our gift.

-7-

She hears something.

Yes, Mother. I am here.

Then, to the audience.

I'm sorry, we've just gone back in time to the first days I was at the convent. I had such a difficult time learning to pray. Oh, it was such a chore.

She hears something.

What's that, Mother? Praying? Yes, Mother, I am praying. I have been praying. I have been praying all day long.

To the audience.

I know. I know. But it's just a little lie. God forgives all things.

There is a loud crash of thunder. Teresa screams, blesses herself. She quickly adopts an attitude of fervent prayer.

Yes, I know it was thunder. It startled me. (sotto voce) It was the timing; it's always the timing.

She prays earnestly, if a little stiffly.

Amen!

She looks around to see if "Mother" has noticed.

TERESA

Oh, there you are, Mother. I didn't hear you come in. Yes, Mother, I will be glad to help. Yes, Mother, I will most certainly clean the...horse...stalls.

She looks up to heaven.

Please, oh please. Let me not ever clean the horse stalls again. I pray. I really pray. I pray

-8-

so hard my eyes seem to strain out of my head. I pray so hard I turn blue. I pray. I am praying. I AM PRAYING.

She stops. She looks up. She listens for a response.

A lot of help you are.

SOUND CUE: a crash of thunder.

Teresa screams, then laughs nervously.

Oh, it's just thunder.

SOUND CUE: crash of thunder.

A scream. She runs toward the exit.

Coming, Mother.

Just before she exits, she looks up and mouths the word: "sorry."

SOUND CUE: crash of thunder.

A scream. Teresa exits.

LIGHT CUE: Blackout or fade.

MUSIC CUE: Gregorian Chant during the transition.

Scene 2

Teresa enters. Lights rise. She sings the chant along with the recorded music. Recorded music fades as her song crescendos.

Teresa's song ends.

-9-

TERESA

Some kinds of prayer are easier for us. For some of us, prayer just comes naturally. We join our voices with others in common prayer. Or we retire to our cells and simply talk with God for hours at a time. We can meditate on a passage of Scripture endlessly. Prayer comes so easily to some of us.

She sighs. Sits.

Some of my sisters just seem to have been born with a special gift for prayer. It was so easy for them. They loved the act of praying. I was so jealous of them. So...angry. Sometimes, I wanted to scratch their eyes out! I wanted to dash out their brains against the altar stone! Oh, I was so fiercely jealous. Does that surprise you? But it has happened to you, hasn't it? Don't deny it; I know your hearts. And so does God. And I was once very young. Such feelings are common among the very young. It is only when

we travel a great distance with our Lord that we learn to let go of such jealousy, the jealousy that would wound the children of God.

She sees something. Claps her hands.

There you are. Come in. Come in. It is time for your lessons. Novices must have their lessons.

She sits. The teacher.

You have been here for three weeks. It is time to take stock. Now, then, what have we learned? Speak up.

She pauses. Listens.

I'm sorry, I don't seem to be able to hear you. What is it you have learned?

Pause. Listens.

Let me ask you one more time: WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED?

She points.

-10-

You! Over there! What did you learn cleaning the chapel? Mmmm? Nothing, you say; you learned - nothing. Cleaning the chapel is only a chore. A CHORE? You will meditate upon your answer and see your confessor forthwith. You, there, what have you learned preparing the food in the refectory?

Teresa makes a dismissive gesture.

-10-

Yes, yes. The food could be better. I will grant you that. And that is all you have learned? I see. Well, I suppose it is something. You, my dear, will memorize seventeen recipes. One for every sister who prepares your food.

She studies the group.

You, there, the one that God forgives. What have you learned cleaning out the horse

stalls?

She laughs.

You have learned to pray for better chores. I like that. It is very practical. It sounds very familiar somehow.

She claps her hands.

Off you go, now. To your chores. And stop that groaning; be cheerful; you are doing God's work. Go on. That's it.

Brief pause.

Just a moment. You. The one that God forgives. Wait just for a moment. Please, sit here.

Teresa sits.

I liked your answer. You may be surprised to know that it is very pleasing to God. You don't believe me? Oh, but it is true. But, tell me. Tell me about your prayer life. How is it that you pray? Tell me.

-11-

Teresa listens.

You are correct. It is a drawing closer to God. Yes. A desire for a closer connection with God. An embrace of God's love. It is living and moving to the life and motion of God's grace. Yes. How lovely. How lovely indeed. You have grown so much in such a short time.

She muses.

Living and moving to the life and motion of God's grace. Thank you, my young friend.

A beat. Teresa seems lost in thought for a moment, then recovers her composure.

Off you go, now. There are chores to do. As you well know.

She stops the novice.

Your chore? Your chore will be to pray. It is your vocation. You have discovered it so soon. It rarely happens quite so quickly. You are truly fortunate. But tell me something. Your name. What is your name?

A pause. Teresa considers.

Thank you. It is a lovely name.

Teresa stands, as if watching the novice exit.

Prayer comes so easy to some of us. It is such a rare gift. But there is my way of praying. And I do hope that it is pleasing to God. I pray, dear God, that the song of my heart may draw me closer to you.

Song Moment #2.

You do want to know her name, don't you?

-12-

Blackout.

SOUND CUE. Gregorian Chant.

Scene Three

Teresa enters. She looks around her as if she were entering a cavernous church or cathedral.

TERESA

My. This space is huge. Much larger than our convent chapel.

She looks out to the audience.

I have come here to visit the Abbot. He is a very powerful man. He can help me to open my convent. It is my dearest wish. I believe God has called me to this very special task. And so, I have come to this...enormous house of God. I must be strong. I must be clear. I must...get my way. I will not be intimidated by any man. Of course, he is a...Oh, here he comes.

Suddenly, she appears very submissive.

She clears her throat.

Good morning, your grace.

She giggles, shyly. The blushing schoolgirl.

Yes, your grace...Very true, Your Grace...

She laughs.

Very funny, Your Grace. Your Grace has a wonderful sense of humor.

She laughs again, more loudly. Then, she stops abruptly.

-13-

Of course, it is a very serious subject. Prayer. Prayer is a very serious thing. Very serious.

She listens.

Why? Oh, why have I come here? Why am I disturbing your very busy day? Why indeed? No doubt your day is exceptionally busy...Hmmm? The point. Yes, of course.

She clears her throat. Takes a deep breath.

Your Grace, I have sent you a letter. I trust that you have received it (nods) and that you have read it (nods). Good, very good...And that you are prepared to discuss it with me.

She flutters her eyelids coquettishly.

She awaits his answer.

She shifts in her chair, nervously.

She changes her position. Then does it again.

Thank you, Your Grace. I have been told that I have excellent penmanship. Now, then, to the substance of my letter.

She listens.

A woman. “You are a woman.” Am I quoting you correctly? I am. Well, your grace, I am glad we agree on that fact. I am indeed a woman. I am reminded of that fact every day, sometimes several times a day. Whenever I need to know the realities of my gender, I have only to...Your Grace, we are certainly in agreement on this fact. What bearing does it have on the substance of my letter?

She listens.

I see. You have considered this carefully. Of course you have. And you have reached your answer. After much consideration. And here it is.

-14-

She pantomimes taking a letter.

A letter. A decree. Thank you, your grace. I will read it very carefully. Goodbye, your grace.

She begins to exit, then turns back.

What is that, your grace? You have a question for me? A very important question. Yes, your grace, I will do my best to answer it truthfully. I answer all questions truthfully. Knowing that God hears all things.

She listens.

You want to know about my prayer life. You want to know how I pray.

She turns to the audience.

People with power. Oh, what a role we must play. He holds our very existence in his hands. In little words on a piece of paper, he may help us or destroy us. He may decree our life – or our death. With the little mark of his pen. It is too much power for a human to have.

She looks at the letter in her hands. She is reluctant to open it.

What can it say? Oh, I can't.

She holds the letter away from her, freezes a moment, then slowly opens it.

TERESA (reading)

“...it is granted to the person who has petitioned this archdiocese for the privilege of opening and managing a convent in the city of Avila. Teresa, the religious member of our diocese is granted this privilege and named Prioress of the convent at Avila.”

She stops. She can't believe what she has just read.

“...is granted this privilege...”

-15-

She looks up.

GRANTED. IT HAS BEEN GRANTED. Praise God! Oh, Praise Him!

She looks at the document again.

It has been granted.

Song Moment #3.

St. John scene (optional)

Theresa sits at her desk, writing a letter. She is very intent.

TERESA

My dear friend,

Without looking up, she tells the audience what she is doing.

[I am writing a letter to my friend, John. You might know him as John of the Cross. I know him as just plain John]

I thank you for permitting me to read your manuscript. Your book which is called “The Dark Night” has moved me deeply and I wish to discuss this with you at the soonest dispatch. It is a wonderful expression of the way the soul develops. Yes, the soul must travel through the dark night in order to come into the fullness of its being. The soul in its immaturity is so like a willful child, a child that feels it is indestructible. But, oh, the

sadness the child encounters as it grows – as it becomes itself. The Dark Night can be fearsome indeed, filled with spiritual dangers. But the Dark Night is quickly spent, is it not? It ends suddenly and without warning, as if emerging from a dark cave into the bright sunlight. One should never dwell for long within the Dark Night, else one will be lost.

But, oh, how your poem has moved me. I recite it often. It excites my soul.

She recites.

-16-

One dark night,
fired with love's urgent longings
– --ah, the sheer grace!-
--I went out unseen,
my house being now all stilled.

In darkness, and secure,
by the secret ladder, disguised,
--ah, the sheer grace!--

John appears. He recites with Teresa.

TERESA AND JOHN
in darkness and concealment,
my house being now all stilled.

TERESA
“my house being now all stilled.” It is as if you were present even now.

Slight pause. John clears his throat. Teresa notices him for the first time.

But you are here. You are here indeed. John!

She rushes to embrace him. He reacts.

Oh, I am sorry. So sorry. I forgot myself for a moment. You do not touch women. I forgot. Please forgive my impulsiveness.

John holds up his hand. He speaks solemnly.

JOHN

God forgives all things.

TERESA

Yes, yes He does. Doesn't He. God forgives all things. It is very comforting, is it not?

-17-

JOHN (solemn)

Very comforting.

Beat.

TERESA

Yes, well...You are here. I am so glad...I have enjoyed your book very much.

JOHN (brightening)

Have you?

He sits.

Tell me more.

TERESA

Well, it was extremely moving to me. The journey of the soul is just a remarkable thing. And you have put it so well – so...inspired it was.

JOHN

Yes...I know.

TERESA

And I could feel my own experience as I travelled the mystical path. The journey is so remarkable. But so difficult; so challenging every step of the way. And then, of course, there is the dark night.

JOHN (gloomy)

Yes, the dark night.

Pause. He emits a long, mournful sigh.

TERESA

But the dark night doesn't last forever. It does come to an end.

JOHN

Does it?

-18-

TERESA

Well, of course. I have come through it.

JOHN

You are truly fortunate.

He stands suddenly.

I must be going.

TERESA

But you have only just arrived.

JOHN

I must return to pray. I am due in my cell.

TERESA

As you wish.

JOHN (correcting)

As I must.

TERESA (nervously)

(humming an upbeat little tune)

JOHN

But I have brought you something.

TERESA

Oh?

He takes an envelope from his habit.

JOHN

I have answered your letter.

-19-

TERESA

Oh...Thank you.

She takes the letter. He turns to go.

Must you go?

He turns back to her. His look says it all. Teresa, who can think of nothing better to do, curtsies quickly. John crosses to the exit, then turns and looks at Teresa.

JOHN (solemnly)

Goodbye.

TERESA

Goodbye.

John exits.

Teresa turns to the audience.

That man has no sense of humor. But let us see how he has responded.

She opens the letter.

To my dear correspondent,
Jesus be in your soul, my daughter in Christ.

It was such a joy to be with you Sunday last. Sharing the presence of Christ with a dear friend is so necessary to the spirit. I do hope I wasn't too talkative during my visit. I have often been told that I talk too much and I am working to improve myself.

Teresa looks at the audience, a puzzled expression on her face.

But I have read your spiritual writings. They are, without exception, among the finest

writings on the journey of the soul that I have ever read. They are truly transcendent, a remarkable gift of the spirit. In these passages, I truly discern God's presence. Such

-20-

knowledge and insight can only come from a deep devotion to God the Father and to a rich and many-dimensional life of prayer. Bless you for your work, your friendship...and especially for your dedication and love to God and to His holy church. I will pray to the Blessed Mother, asking her to protect you always – and to shelter your holy work. Bless you always, my dear dear friend.

Teresa pauses. She holds the letter to her, deeply moved.

She seems on the verge of tears. Then, very quietly.

That man has no sense of humor. Forgive me, Blessed Mother, I am unfair to my dear friend...

She stops, looks up, listens.

Blessed Mother? What did you say? “That man has no sense of humor.” But he does pray to you. Every day. Thank you, Blessed Mother.

Music segues.

Song Moment #4. “Ave Maria.”

TERESA

There is so much more to tell you. But the time is so very short. Here...inside. Inside all of us...there is the wonderful world of our souls. A world that God has given us. And how my heart leaps to think of it. How my heart is warmed by the very thought of God's presence with us. And I am brought to a wonderful moment of prayer.

A beat.

A final word for you all. So simple, yet so important: Never leave Christ in whom the human and divine are joined, and who is always one's companion. He is the one through whom all blessings come. He is always looking at you; can you not turn the eyes of your soul to look at him?

A beat.

Yes, you know a little of my world now. A little of the world I have grown to love. Oh, there is one thing I have forgotten. Remember that novice...the “one that God forgives?” I never told you her name...Teresa. Just like me.

A bell rings.

There it is. It is time. Time to pray. A wonderful time in the day.

She starts to the exit.

I am here, my Lord. I will be with you soon.

CURTAIN

copyright c Brian R. Marsh, 2010

CAST

TERESA, a nun

JOHN, a monk

SETTING

Sixteenth Century Spain

A Convent