

Carmel

Father Junipero Serra holds out his hands in a gesture of supplication. His face is serene. The 100-year-old sculpture is green from oxidization, but the dedication of the artist to the heroic founder of the California missions cannot be eroded by time. I step back from the imposing life-size figure and allow my gaze to trace an arc around the courtyard of the Mission. There are a few weekday tourists, retired folk, pointing at features of interest in the Mission pamphlet, or clutching their recently purchased statuettes of Our Lady, Made in China.

I walk across the dusty yard to the fine bronze water fountain. Tiny droplets of water splash from the gurgling stream, cooling my face in the weak breeze that struggles up from the ocean. A bent, ancient nun smiles serenely at me as she walks slowly past, her frail body encased in the dark heavy cotton of her traditional habit.

Inside the chapel, it's cool and dark. The thick stone walls absorb all sounds from outside. My eyes adjust slowly. First I see the flickering votive candles in their transparent red holders. Next to them is a slot for donations. The Stations of the Cross, salvaged from the original mission chapel, are dark and faded. Jesus' travails are poorly illuminated here.

Close to the altar, a solitary figure kneels bent in prayer; his forehead rests on clasped hands. I ponder the mystery of Faith. The greatest mystery to me is that it can exist at all. Walking slowly past sturdy wooden pews, I approach the man. On crossing the aisle, I have to resist the temptation to genuflect to the altar, as the power of my childhood training momentarily reasserts itself. There's no room for that, though. Not here, not today.

The man hears my footsteps and looks up. He is quite old, perhaps 65. His eyes look older, as though they have seen centuries of suffering. I nod at him. He smiles, questioningly, a little nervously. I kneel next to him and speak quietly in this tranquil place of worship.

"Roberto?" I ask.

"Yes. Raymond sent you?"

"Raymond. Yes."

"He gave you the money?"

"Yes."

The man nods. "He is a good friend," he says.

"What were you praying for?"

"For my wife, Bonita."

"Oh."

"She died. Every day I pray for her soul. Pray for the day when I'm reunited with her."

"How long... how long have you been praying?"

He pauses and stares at the prayer book tucked into the pew in front. I wonder if he is ever going to speak.

"Twenty-seven years. She was taken very young. She was a beautiful woman, so gentle, so loving. Twenty-seven years I wait to see her again. It's a long time."

"I understand," I tell him. "I have something for you."

I hold the transparent plastic envelope containing a tiny golden pellet in the palm of my hand.

"What is it?"

"Potassium cyanide."

"And it will be quick."

"Very."

He smiles calmly, and for a second reminds me of Father Serra.

I have to ask him a question.

"Why now? Why after all this time?"

He exhales a sigh that comes deep from within, the sigh of a man who has endured twenty-seven years of heartbreaking loneliness.

"I'm tired. Tired of waiting for my body to release me. I'm cursed with a healthy body. I can't wait any longer. There's nothing left for me here. My child is grown, moved to Los Angeles. I want to be with Bonita now. I've made my peace with God. He understands. He forgives me. He will reunite us."

I give him the envelope.

"Please wait until I've left the chapel. Put the capsule between your teeth and bite down hard. I promise it will be very quick."

I rest my hand on his shoulder. His eyes brim with tears and they seem to be looking far into the distance, perhaps searching for his beloved wife.

He takes my hand and kisses it, and says, "Thank you."

The setting sun stings my eyes as I emerge from the dusky chapel. I glance one last time at Junipero Serra's outstretched arms, and say my own silent humanistic prayer for Roberto and Bonita.