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Anna Efimenko

The architect



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Аннотация

The Life of Anselm, an architect, is rich in events and images against the background of a quaint medieval city. What inspires the protagonist? Disregarding his life at a horizontal landmark level for the sake of creating his own Vertical of Spirit. Does he make his soul like a rock trying to turn his body into bloodless stone? Like a medieval European minstrel's song, the novel plunges the reader into a whirlwind of flamboyant situations.

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The architect

Anna Efimenko

In memory of Heinrich Nemirovsky

Olga Simpson *Translated by*

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Chapter 1.

The Weed

“God is the great architect of the Universe, *causa causans* of everything, as St.Thomas Aquinas said,” our Abbot used to say.

I didn't know who my benefactor was, and how much Jorge was paid for my everlasting obedience. But there was not a single person dearer to the Abbot than me among the fraternity, and there was not a single person among the fraternity whose taking of monastic vows had been delayed for so long. As an illegitimate son of a count, I was getting ready for this worldly life. To avoid being an obtrusive embarrassment to the family, I was sent to the Benedictine monastery without title to save face; unable to acquire wealth, but thankfully I was not burdened with having to take vows. Nearby, in Graben, my alleged parent's castle towered above, aloof and dismal. Jorge used to set me on his shoulders and point at its wonders with his old speckled hand: the fortified courtyard turrets, the drawbridges lying over the moat, the gate structures, the keep, a grand citadel, appealing with supposed patrimonial pride (Don't be under any illusion, I will not inherit any patrimony or treasures at the end of this book). Jorge wasn't to blame for my bastard blood. Moreover, he cherished his fosterling's talents, focusing

on calligraphy, translations, and working with the manuscripts in the scriptorium.

One dark evening towards the end of the summer, a delivery man from Graben took me to the monastery on the top of the hill and handed me to the Abbot (“in a sac, like a captive Turkish kid,” as Jorge retold later) together with a purse full of gold. Since then, my birthday had been set in August, at the last roar of a lion, according to the astrological signs calculated by a young fair-haired Prior Edward, who had a pathologic tendency for magical (or so) teachings. Sometime later, during the late summer days, I was christened Anselm, and soon started to learn reading the Holy Writ. And while other boys ran errands helping the cellarer in the kitchens, Jorge took me to the Black Gardens.

Cultivated by the Abbot, the Eden was fenced off from the rest of the abbatial lands on the western side by a wall of the inky vine; future wine designated for our Eucharists and daily repasts grows here, coiling as ringlets.

I see myself lying on the ground, staring at the enameled blue sky while Jorge is tying the vines. Lily-white bushes are in bloom all around. I climb up into the deepness of a shadowy bird-cherry tree, and there, in my secret hideaway, amongst the white blossom branches, I can watch the Abbot’s every movement. Motionless, I wait till an angular shadow calls, “Anselmo!” on the Spanish way, and suddenly jump down, right in front of Jorge. We build small windmills, which can rotate in the wind, we play

“one, two, three, let’s run down the hill!” and “chicky vine curls”. I watch ants and squirrels, leaves and clouds. After the summer goes through its mid fiery daze, it’ll be time to enjoy the results of our work.

“What is Our Father’s home?” I ask, flattened out on the fallen white petals, poking my finger up into the sky. “Look!” Jorge shows me the pheasants, hovering under azure dome. Then, he folds his hands like a bird’s wings flying upwards, flapping its feathers, rising, flying upward towards the sky, flying higher and higher above – above the clouds, towards Our Father’s home. Jorge loves the sky most of all.

Peter, the cellarer, has stored the clay pots ready for the fruits and berries; I gather the crop grown by Jorge. Peter holds the rough metallic barn key, the metal keeps the heat of the sun for the day; the sun is about to tumble down behind plains and lowlands, behind fields and meadows, behind their summer green sheets. Between complin and night prayer, I doze on the Abbot’s strong shoulders; sometimes he takes me to bed in my cell, and at the back of my mind, the very notion of home comfort will always mean high domed spaciousness, cold stone, and silence.

Peace is created by cold stone and silence.

Silence lives in the father’s icy chamber (Don’t be under a delusion, he will not turn up to be my real father at the end of this book). The sky looks through the elongated narrow window, giving everlasting supervision. Jorge has a bed and a chest, and there is a wax candle, and books piling up on it.

While the rest of the world smokes of tallow candles, we light our church up only with wax candles; the sacred wax, made by the sacred bees in our beehives, those bees can whisper a prayer straight to Lord's ear. Enormous flat multi-horned lamps are lit, a bright light lightens up the dome – and I like this brightness. I am going to like it here till someone will groan that beeswax is a luxury.

“What is luxury?” I asked.

“Luxury?” Jorge wrinkled his forehead into a frown, and took me to the kitchen and hugged me. “Let brother Peter take some rest, and I'll show you what luxury is.”

Letting the cellarer go, the Abbot opens supply chests, one after another, looks into the baked goods storage, makes a fire in the oven, as I stare at this scene fascinated.

Jorge cooks

We need white bread and leeks for a luxurious meal. Jorge slices the white parts of the leeks, putting aside the rest for a daily pottage. He puts sliced rings of leeks to simmer in olive oil and white wine, adds salt, just a pinch. At the same time, the father is toasting the pieces of bread on the open fire. When the bread is crunchy enough, the soft pieces of mulled leeks are poured onto the pieces of bread. After taking some time for the liquid to absorb the bread, a sumptuous meal is ready!

Shooting up, I tirelessly delve into all kinds of the manuscripts our library has to offer and while reading, I try on different roles from the Lives of the Saints, from the works of the ancient

sages. Having seen my growing passion for books, the Abbot announced me as an assistant of the library keeper, leaving Paul the keeper, a lame brother no choice but to enroll me into his retinue hitherto vacant. This gave rise to all sorts of rumors, considering that I hadn't taken my vows yet.

Thus, copying the texts and binding them together into books became my major activity. Also, we were taught seven Artes Liberales, and trivium of logic, rhetoric, and grammar inevitably prevails against quadrivium. And again, I filled this gap in the library, where I could find magnificent manuscripts besides the collections of poetry, describing Sectio Divina – Golden Proportion, and Euclidian geometry. It fascinated me much more than poetry. The works of astronomy – the science of celestial bodies – were kept in the adjoining hall. Prior Edward, who was the most frequent visitor made Paul, the gimpy, fleeing in terror.

I adored Jorge, who kept extracting elder-berry juice while ruling the monastery with an iron fist; who granted me an unlimited access to different texts, ruffling up my dark mop of hair not shaved in tonsure yet.

“Do you know why they call me abbot, Anselmo?”

“Of course! Because ‘aba’ means ‘father’ in Hebrew, and it is precisely who you are.”

And Jorge adored me back.

One night a pilgrim came to the monastery and stayed for lodging. He had recently visited the tomb of St. James in Campostela. He put his walking stick and a hat decorated with

seashells in the corner, placed himself near the fire and began telling stories about his travels all night long. While reaching the description of a castle of a nobleman, who hosted him in Castilla, the traveler began describing the family's crest in detail, clearly making up stories as he went along. He named and combined the colors wrongly and improperly, and so I interrupted him there.

"No, it can't be! It's incorrect to combine sable with sinople!" I blurted out all of a sudden, and I instantly engaged all eyes.

I paused in fear.

"It's only a symbol," Prior Edward wanted to reassure me, though I noticed sparks of curiosity in his eyes.

"Wouldn't you agree that a symbol is sometimes more important than reality?" I was suddenly anxious to be in the limelight, my cheeks flushed. The brethren snuggled up to one another on the benches, uneasy. "Is the Piscatory Ring, holy relics or Seal of Ruler of no effect separately, equal to personalities, who created them?"

"Since when did you become a philosopher, Anselmo?" Jorge's voice thundered over the hall. "Knowing heraldry and speaking your mind, as if you own the place?"

"Since you've given me access to all the treasures of the library, Father," I shot back.

"All right then. In that case, you're going to Graben to purchase cereals tomorrow morning, and Prior Edward will explain to you what should be utmost in a novice's mind."

"But Jorge . . .," I began protesting, making the Abbot seriously

angry,

“Don’t you dare to address me like this! Have you ever heard of humbleness? Do you think that not taking oaths allows you to do anything you like and act as a layman? Well, hurry up straight there – straight to the world, to the market, tomorrow morning, the first thing!”

The position of the assistant to the library keeper was vacant again. And from now on, I was exiled to run errands for a light-haired magician.

Prior Edward was the biggest mystery of our small world. Born an Englishman, he was known as Edward Kelly, and he didn’t have any ears. Without ears, he cunningly concealed the absence with his long golden locks. Some impressionable minds took him for a voodoo priest and only the glory of his position protected him from explicit condemnations.

Once, when I was very young, we were all picking strawberries in the Black Gardens, and while playing I chased Edward. He approached the barn, and when I caught up with him, he suddenly slammed the door, catching my hand. I whimpered in pain as the strawberries fell out of my purple fingers. Edward, white as a ghost, took me to Jorge, and Jorge carried me to the fermery, where they bandaged my hand and I was banned from work for several weeks. From that day, the prior avoided me, whether that was due the abbot’s instructions or his feelings of guilt I wasn’t certain. He rarely approached me, avoiding to look at me with his deeply set brown eyes. He stayed away from us when we

were working with Jorge in the monastery vegetable garden, and moved away from the others in the refectory and scriptorium.

And now, Edward became my guide for earthly things. Strolling along the row of stalls on the market, we looked up at a great variety of goods, eyes wide open: there were tools, such as cleaving axes, wimbles, sickles; animal skins, cross-grained leather products, and fabrics for all tastes – from rough half woolen tiretaine to luxurious drap fin. They were also selling furniture, food, and cattle.

Passed towards the market, the prior left me to watch a festivity show of the turlupiners – wicked jokers, who turned out to be not so amusing. Edward strictly told me to stay at the show and wait for him to come back and went purchasing. In fact, he tried to get rid of me as usual. After one hour or so, watching intently the sundial on a tower wall, I heard him strolling along merrily. He rewarded my long waiting with a terracotta toy-a whistle in the shape of a partridge.

Since then, we came down to the market every week, everything recurred.

Eventually, I was very curious where the prior kept going. Following him at a safe distance, along filthy narrow streets, funny broken-backed buildings set on wooden frames filled with pieces of bricks, I saw my mentor getting into some rickety ramshackle dwelling with closed shutters.

I asked an old man who was passing nearby the house. The man looked at me suspiciously,

“A brothel, brother. You’re not supposed to know, I believe, and you’re too young, anyway...”

Having got the answer to my main question and trying to remember the unfamiliar word, I hurried back to the square, so that Edward wouldn’t notice my absence.

“What is a brothel?” I asked the Abbot first thing that evening.

After that, neither the prior nor I went to Graben again.

I was in my tenth or eleventh year when Jorge was called for some business to another town. When he was getting his things ready for a trip, he couldn’t get rid of me, as I was literally grabbed holding the flaps of his cassock, pleading to take me with him. Finally, Jorge gave up. He placed me in the cart, and the two of us set off for Chartres.

Chapter 2.

Chartres

The cart creaked and groaned with its wheels swaying as Jorge and I rode southwest on and on breathing in the scent of tired fields and dried cornstalks. Ice cold water, scooped up from a creek in the palms of your hands, opened by a ladle of prayer, with a throat full of road dust filled with silver ice. Father Jorge missed a right turn to the river several times, although, he said, he had once known every tree here. Hence, we had lost our way and stopped to take a rest beside a mountain stream.

“My eyes are not the same as before,” Jorge complained while scooping up water for the journey ahead.

Having strayed a little, we finally discovered the right road and dismounted beside the river for the second and last time.

Having set eyes on the Chartres Cathedral, I was blown away.

I hadn't seen anything like it before. The cathedral appeared before my eyes like an arrow directing itself straight up to the sky, elegant, light, and at the same time, insanely high. The facade, decorated with sculptures, looked as if it had been squeezed by strong massive towers from two sides, covered with the finest lancet tents. Magnificent, noble and exquisitely beautiful, that's the way it appeared to be, the true House of Lord.

“What is it?” I pulled at Jorge's sleeve.

“It’s a beauty, it’s not for nothing that they talk so much about it,” the abbot narrowed his eyes, looking at the solemn building. “A terrible fire happened, only the under-croft with the facade remains of the old church. And those bits would have not survived, but for the Veil of the Virgin...”

“Is it housed here?”

“It is, Anselmo! That’s what saved the Lord’s House. It was rebuilt on donations. They say, the inhabitants delivered stones from the surrounding quarries...”

For the first time ever I was not concerned about Jorge at all.

How impressive the cathedral was – it could just be seen as something completely immaterial, separated from this world, from people hardened in sin. All its space was striving upward so vigorously as if the cathedral was heartily sick of mortal life; that’s why it decided to give this life up for good, to be focused only in heaven.

Unfairly playing the second fiddle in my daily life for ages, quadrivium was embodied in this cathedral with its geometric and arithmetic bizarre configurations. It epitomized the divine order, and kept sacred secrets. The soul was going up into the sky, following eye motion. It was the universe, it was everything. It was the single line, which dominated over the entire world – the great and noble vertical.

It could scratch, injure, or run through me.

It struck me to the heart. From that very moment, I was convinced that I would never be a monk.

Oh, unattainable heaven, I desperately aspire to you whatever it takes.

Growing up on the earth, I join real life only in heaven. I look tragic acting on impulse. I seem to be a poet carried away by inspiration. I throw away the reality, which I hate and see – myself! – being the House of Lord, high and beautiful.

I came to the monastery quite obsessed with this cathedral.

Prior Ed was finally caught red handed during one of these evil moonless nights. I hunted him down in the Black Gardens sprinkling ashes on balls of wool and trampling the crucifixion with his feet. Suppressing fear and disgust, I tried to scare the blasphemer by using my already sufficiently low and roughened voice,

“Edward Kelly, are you calling the devil?”

He might have accepted these words at that very moment as the greeting of Satan. Whatever it was, while turning around and seeing me in the dark, his deathly white face was distorted by immeasurable fury and anger. Accepting his own defeat and most probable exposure, bearing in mind I had been close to Father Jorge, he reluctantly put the cross again on his neck, taking a few steps to meet me and uttering with a pretense of repentance,

“What shall I do to make us forget about this episode?”

His guilty slanting brown eyes were trying to avoid my glance – icy and arrogant. I had never felt so powerful before. Now I was in control with that cunning being. And there was only

one thing I wanted.

“Bring me the one who can teach me how to build.”

“I have called a craftsman to restore the western part of the building,” Edward announced to Jorge when the joint prayers were over after twelve o’clock.

Both senior monks shifted their gaze at me.

“What’s up?” I pretended to be unaware.

“Get his chambers ready and provide him with a welcome treat!” the Abbot ordered and then added, suppressing a chuckle, “Don’t let him mess up sable with sinople!”

One side of the building was cluttered with pieces of wood and ladders. Walking back and forth around the monastery yard, I was vainly trying to casually run into the architect to take him to the chambers. However, he had already set himself to work, examining the wall and making some calculations, keeping away from everybody. It was then, I decided to wear him down.

“Sir! Your name is Mylo, isn’t it? Will you work with our house?” having my folded palms at the mouth, I loudly called out to the man who had climbed up the scaffolding and was carefully studying the walls from up there.”

“I will, brother, and who are you?” he looked down towards me.

“I am Anselm, a novice,” I said and grasping up more air, I lifted my head even higher and roared with all my might, “Why does the Cathedral in Chartres have such high arches?”

The man was surprised by this unusual question and decided

to descend from the scaffolding and come towards me. There was his bundle with tools left on the ground. I glared at them, although I didn't even know what to call them.

"Such arches arise due to the use of arc boutans, based on buttresses."

"Butt... resses," I repeated in a singing voice.

"I bet, its arches look lighter than yours. But their structure is much stronger."

"How?"

"Blocks on the top are pressed against each other inside, but not down."

Our conversation stopped before it started.

"I can't get a thing, Mylo."

He shrugged his shoulders,

"What good will it be for you?"

"Because I don't want to be a monk. I want to be like you."

The craftsman pursed his lips and left to untie his bundle. I stayed where I was. Once he was back, he handed me a device consisting of two sharpened sticks fixed at the top using a metal piece incurved neatly. Milo stepped aside enjoying his primitive joke, and clapped his hands.

"Done! You are like me now. Carry on with your praying."

I threw up my hands,

"What are these things?"

"A pair of compasses and a set square."

A pair of compasses and a set square.

A pair of compasses and a set square.

A pair of compasses and a set square.

I met Ed on the way to the dortoir. I exclaimed with my voice breaking,

“God bless you, Prior Edward!”

“What’s the matter?” he recoiled.

“No, I’m serious! You have brought this builder for us. I can’t believe it, Ed. Thank you, Ed, I am really in a bind here.”

“The main rule while constructing small size churches is using a preset proportion.” Mylo started to introduce me to the subtleties of the craft. “Where walls thickness should be of a certain proportion of the interior space. You understand?”

I shook my head.

The architect took me into the yard and asked me to draw a square on the ground,

“Imagine that the square is inside the church nave, and take it as a unit. And now circle it around.”

We drew around the square clockwise, drawing a smooth line with a long stick.

“There,” the craftsman raised his forefinger. “The widest part of the circle outside the square will specify the thickness of the walls.”

And he drew dashed lines from the four points, signifying the future silhouette of the building.

I looked differently at our abbey from now on. There was also enough beauty here: capitals were decorated with figurines

of human beings and animals, images of the Vices and Virtues; spirals, zigzags and other geometric patterns were carved on columns. But everything seemed to be too thorough, dull, and heavy. This solid look made me choke.

From now on, the main goal was like an arc in Chartres. *to look lighter than the others, but being stronger structurally,*

Mylo teaches

The whole weight had been placed on the walls before. They were supposed to be thick and heavy, with small windows. To expand the structure seemed to be impossible because of the horizontal thrust of masonry vaults giving pressure on the walls, and the length of beams installed in the floor. The church space became more and more cramped. There wasn't enough room, and then the architects decided to use the intersecting vault – the gravity moved to the lateral supports off the walls. But it was also required to reduce the weight of the vault.

Nervures (“ribs” or “veins”) are the arches located in intersecting vaults, fixing naves. Each large square of the main nave carried two side-aisles, smaller sized on the cathedral ground plan. The walls were getting rid of gravity: the easier the pressure was on the walls and posts, the higher and sharper was the arch.

Buttresses (“counterforts”) are exterior supports, located outside the cathedral. It was them which invisibly carried the enormous weight of the vault. It is due to them the cathedral rose up to an incredible height.

Arc boutants bounded the external buttresses with the internal

vaults. These inclined arches gave to the construction of the sleek, weightless look. The feeling of general elegance was complemented by pinnacles – exquisitely decorated turrets mounted on the tops of buttresses to firmly press the giants to the ground, to fix them in a stable state. Two round arches were called ogives, which were an indispensable part of the construction of a vault along with four pointed arches.

Thus, cross vault laying was succeeded by the use of ribs, and the arc boutans supported the building to make it stable. Being finally free from weight, the walls were decorated with huge colored stained-glass windows. From then on, the cathedrals became incredibly tall and dazzlingly light.

Mylo let me into all aspects of the construction plan, mentioning the stones being laid onto a small amount of mortar. They could mix everything and anything between the blocks in the past. For example, the Romans used limestone mortar mixed with ground volcanic rock or he told me that there was not so much stone in the north, so it was convenient to build out of bricks. The bricks had been big and thin, and now they were very large and filled with holes to make the burning process easier.

Mylo kept the drawings on wooden tablets – wax-coated diptychs. The waxed surfaces were placed one upon another, and the tablets were tied up securely. I meticulously copied the diagrams of compound piers, windows, and drawings required for shaping stone profiles on the church parchment.

Saturated with the initial greed for knowledge and my desire to solve the puzzle I became occupied using all my free time.

“But everything stands out from general in Chartres!”

Mylo sat down on the ground next to me.

“What does the building express? Think about it.”

“Strength. Reliability. Confidence.”

“Fine. What does the Chartres Cathedral express?”

“Challenge and takeoff! But a very... nervous challenge and takeoff!”

Mylo gave me a thoughtful look,

“And what is the reason it takes off?”

I was able to formulate the idea after a few moments,

“To turn everything material into spiritual weightless.”

“Make it simple.”

“To destroy the reality and break through beyond.”

“Where?”

I remembered Jorge, turning his palm into a flying bird.

“Up to the sky.”

“What for?”

“To the light!”

Mylo and I managed to draw a plan for the cathedral in Chartres together. Having already learned the foreign terminology, I summed up that the building was a cross with a three-aisled transept and a deambulatory at the top of the cross. “Write it down that it had been most likely made from durable sandstone,” added the architect after some thought.

“And the steeple? What is this huge needle made of?” This question was torturing me most of all.

“A log coated with lead,” my mentor shrugged his shoulders. “At least, I think so... Remember, the main thing is a masonry vault. About two or three hundred years ago, the vaults were not entirely made of stone, they were mixed from sand, lime and stone ground as in your building, for example. But now the stone replaces everything else. It’s cold and strong, there is future behind it.”

When the work in the church building was complete, Mylo collected his belongings. He left some of his tools and drawings. Finally, the architect gave advice when we were in the fraternity.

“Go and learn building. With your own hands. Are there any masons down in the village?”

Edward answered instead of me,

“Yes, I know Jean. He has built half of the local houses,” the Prior winked. “I’ll introduce you to him when we go down to the village.”

I immediately lost heart,

“Jorge will never again let us go to Graben due to your whores.”

“Trust me,” Edward stated quite firmly.

A few days later, I secretly joined Jean the Builder with his apprentices. Mud appeared under the calligrapher’s fingernails. I decided to go ahead from the start and began studying the “soul of the stone”, helping masons voluntarily. I rough-hewed

stone block as an initial stage at stone quarrying. Fine processing was carried out later, in special workshops, and from there, the cart went to the construction site where Jean and his team of apprentices finally polished it in barns and storage sheds.

I stayed with Jean on the construction sites for days on end, and gradually the tools became a continuation of my fingers. Being with the masons, I had started using a set square for shaping the stone. Then I got a level to check the horizontal position, and a plumb-rule to check the vertical one.

Back at the hill, after the compline, I came up into Jorge's cell, always so spacious and cold, and read him the Gospel or the writings of the blessed Augustine at night. The Father could hardly read himself, as his eyesight was relentlessly fading. He continued losing weight, and I tried to entertain him as much as I could. I invented new illustrations for books, which I could hardly find time to copy. I carved the statue of Our Lady on Easter and gave it to Jorge. Having persuaded the three brothers to help me, I managed to erect a number of nice colonettes in our monastery and ennobled the doors, windows and bigger columns.

I could handle almost everything after a couple of years. But "Chartres' melancholy," as I called it, didn't calm down. The system of light and graceful arc boutans, drawn by Mylo didn't get out of my mind. The stone in my hands could depict anything, expressing nothing at the same time. Did this mean that I hadn't put enough effort into it?

"How did you convince Jorge to let me go to Jean?" I asked

the Prior one day.

“I read him the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians by Paul the Apostle that night.”

It began to dawn on me,

“If any would not work, neither should he eat?”

“Exactly. And then I hinted that you could start looking for a profession since the father didn’t want to see you among the brethren.”

That was what I called a little bit unexpected,

“He doesn’t want me to stay here, does he? But he loves me so much!”

The Prior waved his hand, “Forget it,” and hurried off.

I had been preparing myself for a long time to the fact that sooner or later I should leave the monastery, but I couldn’t believe that the abbot decided everything ahead of time. Being offended at Father, I couldn’t explain the course of his thoughts, and, as a result, I simply accepted the words literally. It was then I decided to stop eating.

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Chapter 3.

Gula ¹

After all, you can always starve yourself to death.

I don't know where I'm going, but I'll try to come to the kingdom if I can... If I am strong enough, I will take great pain to step in like a harbinger of a new era of completely different sculptures and buildings but not like a stranger. I will be an urban architect of boundless kingdoms – there is a dame in every house. If I am strong enough, because I'm still here, lying on a cold, wet ground, smeared with tears and snot; I can hear nothing but noise and rumble tumble in my ears, and I am gazing with blurred eyes at the piece of holy communion consumed, and now extorted from my own body along with bile...

In my boyhood, I was all legs like a lanky rod, skinny and black-haired, with transparent grey eyes and high cheekbones. I hadn't become a monk yet and visited Graben regularly to work with stone, which made my fingers scored, much to Jorge's displeasure. "Such a good copyist has been wasted! Had I known what the trip to Chartres would end up with, I'd have never taken you with me!" he once grumbled, but I could feel a clear hint of fatherly pride in his words. But the abbot was happy deep in mind that I would have the opportunity to apply my skills to the

¹ "Gula" is one of the seven deadly sins. *Latin*

world, but not in the Abbey. He was still stubbornly delaying my tonsuring. I had been really upset about all that. However, I could feel the advantages of being free from making vows, helping Jean the Builder to make a house for another family of a third-rate merchant.

One April morning, a peasant girl, who was selling poultry in the market, where we delivered sheep's wool for sale, stepped out to meet me,

“You haven't been here for long. I was looking for you among the brethren in vain.”

I asked then,

“We are all dressed the same. How could you tell it was me?”

“You are the skinniest,” the girl smiled, “and the cutest ever.”

Later, I went fishing with Jorge. I left the old man alone fishing, and proceeded to walk around the hill, where the river made a turn and there was a quiet place where, having risen on a round stone, I quickly threw off all my clothes, dumped them on the grass of the bank and gazed at my reflection on the watery surface.

I suddenly saw the second component of Chartres Cathedral's miracle which was as clear as a day. The first component was grandeur, and it had a purely metaphysical nature. The second ingredient of the architectural masterpiece was looking at me from the water.

Emaciation.

“To live out this divine plan, the Chartres Cathedral is

satiated with, in addition to zealous praying and constant spiritual perfecting, it would be necessary to strictly limit myself taking meals, punishing my body with severe asceticism for all its inherent sins.” So I expressed myself on the back of my main treasure, a detailed drawing of a Burgundian architectural element, a pointed arch, left to me by Mylo, who had finally infected me to be anxious for an architectural path.

I was in a hurry to bring this idea to life.

In line with the Statutes, I could have a meal once a day in the afternoon in autumn and in winter, including dawn-to-dusk fasts. Morning meals were permanently excluded, and we should also abstain from eating on Wednesdays and Fridays, mindful of The Holy Passion.

That was too much.

The fast isn't a time limit, but a mode of existence, becoming way of life – blessing fast, the mystical universe, angelic dreamland, opening the unnaturally rolling out goggled eyes on a dried face under lurid eyelids; the fast that ennoble the appearance to be attractive to the opposite sex. *my*

It takes a day to survive without food, and vision and hearing became sharper, the choir's singing and the prayer of the community rose straight to Lord; everything is forgiven, everything starts slowly to be absolved. On the second day, when saturation is rejected, appears in your mind, and if has settled inside you, you will never part from each other, no matter how much food you have and whatever kind of life you decide to have

in the future. *it it*

was little divine herald, the one who drew the line between the human world and the abode of highly spiritual beings. isolates you forever, separates you from material nasty things. The true power of the spirit is in the constant mortification. *It It*

Canvas is warmed up, my body is a parchment, my body is Your parchment. Have a look at the mesh that carries the blood, and where the heart is locked up in prison, in a cage made of ribs; try how solid they are and how they stick outward, almost piercing the skin. Beind made in the image and likeness of Yours, I will confess to You, O Lord, with my whole heart, unto the ages of ages, see how it drives the blood, like a scarlet apple in my chest, in a bone box; it drives the blood so that it knocks already at the top of the watchtower, it beats the alarm, it has already climbed to the bell tower and calls everyone for dinner, so how it hammers in temples.

I always liked to put my restless fingers somewhere, especially into my throat. Oh, of course, Brother Miguel said at night that even a venerable abbot could not be thinner than me – he said so to make me feel happy. I didn't believe him, because he could be in collision with the prior, who, in turn, ganged together with Jorge, who demanded "to stop turning the fast into a tool of narcissism", and he definitely consulted with the Bishop, who instructed Jorge to force me to eat in his heavenly letters. And, how should I know, Edward was also familiar with the village seller, and she called, she, yes, there you go!, she called me a fool,

and later I poured some soup into a bowl, next to nothing!, ‘hey, I’ll kick out your shoulders!, hey, just have a look – Nobody is more beautiful than me,” the girl looked at me and darkened. She said, she had noticed, of course, but now I was really crazy. And I had already pushed the spoon into my mouth. And I was so annoyed, the heavenly hosts. She said that I was a fool. And I got up from the table. So far, I did it for the first time, somewhere in October; and the senior monks considered themselves guilty, and they all started to exchange glances. I carried on playing with Jorge, of course, who had tried to deceive me. I deceived him in return, inventing colourful dinners at Graben’s construction sites.

I had almond milk at the Graben’s construction sites filling with lighting, like a high transparent cathedral. While those ones, weak in spirit, silently chewed in the fraternity, listening to the reading.

I took a hard decision to nullify my own life in the name of something really worthy. At least I knew exactly what I would always like to be until a certain idea appeared. I decided to stop eating. On the way, I had to learn a lot of tricks – for example, I used to run away from dinner under the excuse of some urgent work I had to do for Jean, hiding food in the sleeves, then giving it to beggars, and, at the worst, spit it out in a house at the back, at the lavatory where no one could notice, except Jorge, who was hugging me every time before going to sleep and frowning at such moments, “What are you stinking of, Anselmo? Holy saints.”

Sleep was gone as well as hunger. Getting up before the midnight mass, I was trying to overcome dizziness, pain in the creaking bones and aching joints, me – being fifteen years old, and at these moments I felt like a real man, a great martyr, a future genius. I felt no less than Jesus Christ's son.

The market girl should have seen changes that had occurred in my appearance, gradually being carved out in the image and likeness of Thy Lord. When I came up to say hello to her, she put a handful of nuts into my hand, without uttering a word. Having allowed myself to eat two of them on the way to the mountain, I took out a tooth from my mouth that had rolled under my tongue. The fallen molar of a fifteen-year-old, look, my Lord, what a delicate ascetic is growing out of this rough log, from this body, being recently full up and filthy.

After Holy Communion, I managed to scratch my throat so that a piece of obley jumped out onto the rainy mud and clay, while I was convulsing with colic. Prior Edward – this unexposed mystic – worried that I had been melting away during the recent months, ordered the little Miguel to keep an eye on me; and now the monastery was gathering beside the crap-house to witness my shame, my skinny face bespattered with spittle, my holey fingernails and to top it all up, the undigested sacramental bread on a slush right under their feet.

Jorge, fierce and angry, leaned over me. He snapped at my face, distorted with horror,

“So what, do you feel like Jesus' son? Do you feel now like

a man?"

Father jerked me up from my knees and told me to go to the dortoir. The brethren condemned. You can't help me anymore, brothers, go away. If they decided to lock me in here, I would never be able to carry on building, roofing, erecting walls, or carving figures. They will decide to break my back over the knee, dead easy, even the weakest knee, and I would fall apart alive. But if they were after breaking my will, nothing would come out of it. After all, you can always starve yourself to death. It's white. O Lord, how white it is, and light, light is everywhere; you can hear, my heart is setting itself free from the body cage and is flying away forever, everything around me becomes white. The outlines are getting dim, and I am fading, finally grabbing at the branch, for someone's cloak, for the air. Praise to Him! I'm almost dead now and praise you, Lord, that I'm not scared, and praise the Lord that I don't care.

I'll turn myself inside out just to attract their attention.

Jorge was getting older. Sometimes, he was put in bed to be treated for several weeks, and had poultry (another reason to see a girl in the market). He could no longer have fasts.

I used to read to him, sitting next to him in the fermery, while he was telling his beads. They say, there was a town, far from us, where the carvers of coral beads were bound apprentices for twelve years to become craftsmen... And there were other cities, Paris, and – Saint-Denis behind it, with its royal tomb. In Suger, the abbot was the first to create

a building like Chartres Cathedral, combining the traditions of Burgundy (pointed arches) and Normandy (ribbed frame). Mylo told me that Suger had been inspired by Jerusalem – place of the divine light. He wanted to give the same light to an ordinary stone building. To do this, it was required to figure out how to make a high vault, and arrange huge windows instead of walls. “Dilectio decoris domus Dei”, this was what Suger said about Saint-Denis. I didn’t really believe in such fairy tales. I asked Mylo, “Who they were, that person named Suger and his brethren.” “Also Benedictines, like you,” the master replied... ²

Jorge interrupted my thoughts,

“Are you eating well now?”

“Sure! I’ve even stolen a piece of a fried duck, going along with your health guidance! Father,” I leaned over and hugged him, “what else can I do for you?”

“Ora et labora.” ³

“That’s what I keep doing! Jorge... you don’t like me being a builder, do you?”

Leaning back, Father remained silent for a long time, then answered in a small voice,

“Do whatever you want. But at least, eat occasionally, please, for god’s sake.”

* * *

² Latin “the House of God should be thus beautified”

³ Latin “Work and pray,” Benedictines’ logo.

* * *

Chapter 4.

Jorge

The rag on the floor turned out to be a corpse. There was a wolf in a lamb's skin in the dark. We would find him only by morning, already stiff in death for good.

I had been working with the scripts all night, trying to rewrite for a couple of hours what I had fallen behind with for a week due to hanging upside down on the Graben construction sites. The letters came out ugly and sloppy written by ink-smearred broken fingers, which had been picked up frames of future buildings, cobblestones and tiles for a week. There were scuffing steps at the entrance to the scriptorium, and I turned round by instinct. Focusing my eyes on the column shafts, I noticed that dark marble was used to enhance the effect of the ornament. There was no one to be afraid of behind these columns. Everyone was asleep, except for me and brother Miguel, petty and caulked; his forehead was burning, with his messed up hair sticking out.

“You sick?” I managed to grab Miguel by his elbow before he fell on the bench beside me.

“No... I was going to the kitchen to get some water, and I saw a light here, and then you,” he answered, hardly able to recover from broken uneven breathing.

“And I thought that you had a fever.”

The monk looked down.

“What gives you the greatest pleasure, Anselm?”

I hesitated for a moment. While the truth was piling up in my head by the last edge that separated me from everything around – scriptorium, brethren, texts, liturgies; and I was able to spit it out into a world, very clearly shaped,

“Working with stone.”

Miguel was clearly disappointed with my answer. He went back to sleep, never getting water from the kitchen. He would be back by morning, when I flew over the wall, flaunting regulations anew, prohibiting me to spend the night outside the monastery walls, and under the sun of the seasons, I would supervise the lifting of construction material with a “wolf’s paw” or “wolf”, special tongs that left biting footprints on the stone.

Shortly before this, on May 1st, several men, the merchants’ representatives wanted to discuss the upcoming fair with Jorge. It was to be held on the territory of the abbey, and we relied on it for a certain fee. However, father was too weak. His condition hadn’t improved with the coming of spring, so the prior was entrusted to distribute trade places and solve all other issues at the fair.

On the way home, I would see the future trade rows. Edward had a cunning intuitive mind and was a natural in sales, so they were going to trade everything one could wish for. Merchants would untie their bales with squirrel, rabbit, cat skins, red and grey. Fishermen would display their harvesting of barbel, sturgeon, lamprey with alose. They would bring something less

sophisticated such as wafers and pies, chestnuts and figs, butter, sour grape juice, partridges and capon, all wines varieties.

On the way home, I would meet Miguel once again, running down from the mountain, with messed up hair, overexcited, all in tears. He would slap me on my chest, I would pull him back and have a look at the small, painful grimaces that had distorted his plump face, I would lead him across the bridge of the nose, asking in a deliberate harsh toned voice that became lower and lower every day,

“What’s wrong?”

Miguel would raise his eyes wrapped in a veil of tears, and tell the other truth, formed like a stone,

“The Abbot is dead.”

Once we used to play “one, two, three, let’s run down the hill!” at this very place. And he, lining down the bottom of the basket for berries, could crush me in one movement, like a bug, which he was telling me about. The bee was called a bee, and it worked for honey and wax, midges could cover the whole fist stinging it in far away places, it could be unbearably hot over there. Raspberry, blueberry, wilds of bird cherry trees, where I was hiding from him, when he could easily finish me. But he talked about beekeepers, crops, kings, archangels, plowing, Aristotle, marsh drainage, lenders, Lord, who could also crush me at any moment with one sweep. If father allowed it.

He gave me a piggyback ride instead, then put me in a cart, taught me how to drive a horse-drawn vehicle. He was happy

when I began to master the language, and he never took seriously the striving for architecture. You need your eyes to be sharp to work in the scriptorium, which was smoked by candles, ground on the letters, getting blunt around the corners of the parchment. So, he mixed up carrots with garlic to make the eyes of a book copyist tenacious; and we ate, so that we could look through into the depth of the text.

Then I got stronger, stiffened, took not a feather, but compasses, took a brick, took a jeding ax, controlled the substance, and I had to wait until my father took a breath when we occasionally went to bring some water together, and he had less and less strength. Jorge fainted and fell on the flagstones.

The rag on the floor turned out to be a dead man – and these blockheads were scared to miss the service.

What did I know about Jorge? He arrived to our land from Burgos. However, there was nothing Spanish in him, but his name. When he was a little boy, it was roughest for him to tolerate hunger in the family – he couldn't even fall asleep because of it. Jorge was once black-haired, and then I remembered him being grey.

The body was put in the church for a day so that everyone could say goodbye. Later, we would be able to find his final resting place in the cemetery marked by planted yew trees. From ancient times, high trees had been indicated the burial place, even if the sanctuary was destroyed nearby. The height has always been visual and noble. It strives up into the sky following the

gesture of the father.

Jorge was going to the grave in his black cassock, taking away the secret of my origin for good. Skinny Jorge of Burgos, the blind man, the Abbot, my beloved father, rugged abbot, iron discipline, empty stomach, the gerent of the brethren and the thunderbolt of the community, a vine grower, Jorge, bony hand, Jorge, glassy eyes – our eternal head was going away into the grave pit, and we had nothing left but to pray for his soul.

All the angels and wizards, kind and evil, lit candles in remembrance of Jorge, while I could hardly stand on my feet during this nightmarish farewell ceremony, and then kept crawling, sprawling vertically along the damp wall, and climbed up, and eventually crawled up to Ed's cell, where I was crying all night into his straw hair, felted, wet, covering his tense brain, which was sleepless, trying to figure out variants of his own rising to the rank.

If I had come across an overexcited Miguel in scriptorium, I would not have run away to Graben, but would cheat time, and Jorge would be alive again. But time could not be deceived. It was continuous like space. It belonged merely to God, hence you could just experience it.

I buried my father – there was nowhere to grow up further.

The prior called me for a conversation, not otherwise than making amends for a magic ritual that once was disrupted. Having crossed myself and taken a deep breath, I came into his cell.

“When I become an abbot,” Edward began, as if this was already settled, “the first thing I would do is take your tonsure.”

“But then I’ll have to leave the monastery...”

“That’s why I’m in such a hurry,” the Prior quickly looked out into the corridor, making sure that no one could hear us. “Just for you not to get rotten in these walls like me.”

My earless patron had arranged everything as always, so that fate put me in the right direction. Everything had solved itself out, and wandering around the labyrinth of a pious life, I was again pushed out, spat out, thrown away into the maddening world of human ambitions and sins, squeezing compasses and a set square in my hands.

“Hey, Anselm!” the prior called me when I was already at the door. “Take it!”

He threw me a leather bag, stuffed with gold coins. Catching and hiding it in my chest, I asked,

“What is it?”

“Greetings from Jorge.”

Straight after the morning prayer, at dawn, I asked the gatekeeper to let me out from the monastery.

“Back to Graben? How much can you run over there?”

“Not anymore I’m going to the Town. They say, there is a shop of masons and sculptors...”

“For good?”

I just nodded in response.

“Are you not even saying goodbye to your brothers?”

“I didn’t even say goodbye to Jorge,” I could hardly manage to hold the tears.

The lad was astonished.

“Are you really going to build houses and castles?”

“If they allow me,” I checked the money inconspicuously, finding the purse at my waist.

“Godspeed, Anselm. Godspeed!” the gatekeeper shouted, closing the gate of the Abbey behind me.

I ran downstairs. One, two, three, let’s run down the hill!

I asked the girl from the market to get me some clothes that layman was used to wearing. While I was hiding away in the poultry house of her parents, she purchased what decent young men were used to wearing who didn’t commit themselves to God, loosening the purse strings of my “assets”.

Clothing for Anselm

The chemise was sewn from flax. It was a shirt hanging on my lean body, with a wide neckline and a rear vent making it easier to move. Then, there was a cotte, a tunic that was knee-length or lower. It was made of fine woollen cloth and coloured red. The cotte covered my legs to the ankles. Above all, it I was supposed to wear a surcoat, a long robe without sleeves, which was my favorite bright blue color to make a growing contrast to the cotte. I put on comfortable and soft, embroidered leather shoes with pointed toes instead of worn sandals. Finally, the image of a townsman was complete with a light cap with ties at the sides.

I had to throw off the monastic vestments and leave it on the

floor as a closed chapter, the last era, be past the point. I felt embarrassed in front of the girl.

“Turn away, please.”

“What for?” she was amused with my request.

“Because I can’t...”

The girl came closer, and, passing her hand around my neck, grabbed the hood.

“Can anyone ban you now? Your old moron, the Abbot went into the pot, you don’t take a back seat for anyone.”

My ears started dinging.

“What?... What did you call Jorge?”

My heart was thumping quietly inside my head. Suddenly, I wanted to kill the bitch. To grab and strangle, while no one was around. How dare was she to say such things?!? Was the whole world full of such people of low moral, no honour, and no conscience? And how could I resist them all? Trying not to come in contact without need?

The same action had to be repeated twice during the day. Breaking free from the hugs of an ungodly saleswoman, I left the house and silently left her yard. I left Graben in silence.

The Lord saved me from temptation. I was so happy not just to kiss her pink face. I was so happy not to belong to her.

They were probably already going to an evening prayer service at the top. God’s grace! I hated this senseless gathering of people being lost!

I was so happy not to sing with them voluntarily. I was so

happy not to be with them anymore, and I was so happy not to upset the father with such decisions. Their sorrowful chorus sounded false, put-one and empty, but absolutely canonical part of the service. My lonely mourning for Jorge was ongoing by foot along the dusty road to the Big Town. How many judges, foresters, prévôts and road rangers would I have to drag through your last gift?

Who did you leave me with, Jorge, why didn't you wait? The worst thing that could be done was tiling the roof early in the morning when my father was leaving us. No, we had to pray, think about the highest justice, help the cellarer with farming, but just not to be involved in our own affairs! Nothing would ever come out, it wasn't on time; I was in a hurry to get out of here, away from Graben, from the Abbey, from myself. Don't be so judgy, Father. "What did you get dirty with?" Mortar, Jorge pronounced the word as "motor." "Your 'motor' is always all over the place, even on your underwear. Shame on you."

The evening enveiled the valley. I was moving to the Town. And where did Jorge go?

Oh, I didn't want to know that.

The oaks settled their wide leaves, bragging, hissing in the wind along the oak woods – They say "stop", "fear", "strange", "wasp". It would bite right away. And everything was spinning, spinning, spinning, a great late afternoon on the wheel of the year. Jorge was in the garden, on monastic garden beds. A horrible burnt house, do you remember? You always speed up,

passing it, when you climb a mountain, into a forest, to a spring.
Don't pull the reins so hard, Anselmo. Eat well, Anselmo.
Harness. Take it to the altar. Put benches. Run to the cellar, you
stupid fool. Well, quickly, well, whom I speak to. Stop, strange
fear, wasp caught your hair! Wave goodbye to me. Farewell on
the high window. *ssssss, ssstoy!*

The trees asked, "Where are you going, strange boy?"

And I answered,

* * *

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* * *

"I need,
I really need to,
Truly, I really need
to go."

Chapter 5.

Bread

The gardens were grabbing me with their meager arms begging, ladies grabbed at me in heavy dresses with their speedy hands, zealous raving girls with rouged in the cheeks, licking their lips. Noblemen hired me to build strong castles, to the criteria of their smarting vanity; creaking doors of dark confession boxes being slammed grabbed me, and the empty eye-sockets of graves being dug invited me – but I continued to look up but not down.

The Town had always been corrupt.

Enclosed in its walls, streaked with narrow streets, where multi-story buildings squeezed and pressed each other all around, with brightly colored facades heaping out, patches of vegetable plots and floral gardens were nestled between the houses seen in the daylight. The town hadn't taken risks crawling outside its tight fortress wall boundaries.

The town was just a town. People living here stuffed themselves with meat, drank diluted beer pounding on the table with their fists, taking part in the festivities in the square playing with dice and tablets tirelessly; the tables were carved from wood or ivory, laid out on the table de brelan. As for me, who had played nothing before with my brothers but rounders or squash,

I was incredibly curious gazing at the whole universe created by the excitement, money and food. Pork carcasses were spinning on a roasting-jack, fat sizzled, making everybody's mouth water for everything in the town.

“Please, give some bread for the blind from the Rotten Field!”, “Please, give some bread for the lepers from the Blossoming Field!” The Town begged, pleading, the Town was constantly hungry.

My hunger strike turned into a symbol of struggle against a new lifestyle. Having had a plentiful dinner, I would gulp down a few buckets of water inside my belly to vomit.

I wasn't interested in girls, because anyone could call Jorge ‘an old jerk’. The interest in sensual delights, no matter how brightly I was inflamed, could never prevail over the striving for something spiritual – as much as a young man of my age could bear it. I was also in no hurry to make friends, getting closer only with Carlo, a local young bishop, so that I could stay close to the church and continue to get sacraments.

I kept sending letters to Graben Abbey several times a year, but received no answer to any of them.

In the new world, some crafts were considered worthy of others, and independent sloggers could only rely on temporary earnings, so I started looking for a master.

Jean-Baptiste, head of the construction shop, accepted me for the price I had taken away from the monastery. As the number of ‘internal’ family students could be any, and all the

sons of Jean-Baptiste were already in his service, only one student was supposed to be taken ‘from the outside’. To get into this loophole, I had to give out all the coins in front of the master. Finally, in the presence of two jurors and four masters, we signed a written contract, stipulating the amount of fees, duration of apprenticeship and the terms of my accommodation, in accordance with, I would be on full board at the teacher’s house, getting clothing and meals from him. After a number of years, I would become an apprentice.

“There are two ways of overlapping,” Jean-Baptiste started teaching, “using a flat arch and a round arch.”

And I rolled up my sleeves.

Lucia brought a basket of bread each Sunday Mass, and on the way back, passed the nearby workshop, to watch me carefully, always being among the first ones keen to get back to work. “*Ita missa est*” was a password for her, allowing her to stare at me shamelessly.⁴

“Who is she?” I asked Jean-Baptiste.

Lucia, the daughter of the most dominant figure in the Town. On Sundays, she helps the poor by bringing them bread and clothing.”

“A charity girl?”

The master shook his head.

“She is the money girl. One of those whose ancestors have been just regular, though diligent craftsmen two hundred years

⁴ Latin “Go, it is ended.”

ago. Now they are like gentry, and would like to get their bit of admiration as if they were really noble.”

A week later, I stayed late at the church, discussing some urgent tricky issues with Carlo. As soon as I saw Lucia, I immediately went back to the bench to take a look. Would she dare to bother me here?

Something bumped into my shoulder, it was a bread basket. The smell of fresh baking was driving me crazy.

“Would you like some?” Lucia gave me some bread.

“Panem nostrum quotidianum da nobis hodie? I broke off a small piece, giving back the rest.”⁵

“Not only are you beautiful, you are also literate,” she started with flattery. It was pretty good.

But I was firm,

“Everybody knows prayers.”

“Everyone knows, but not everyone prays,” Lucia smiled and left the temple.

And then a month later, she came along to Jean-Baptiste with her father, a red-skinned, bulky Aubrey, to make a deal to mend their stables. As night came, Lucia was sent home. I sneaked around the corner of the house and with haste followed her along the bylanes. Strands of hair loosened out of her hairnet, not fastened by scarlet ribbons, not restrained by veils, fluttered to the rhythm of her rapid gait. But I remembered – oh, I remembered! – what an ardent look she threw at me before

⁵ Latin. Bible. “Give us this day our daily bread.”

leaving. And I had to keep an eye on her burgundy surcoat with roses, gold brooches, brown hair. I followed her along the wasteland, cautiously stepping on the rough ground further, to the market square where the towers were asleep, where the beggars were sleeping, where the shuttered windows were asleep. She knew that I was around, and was intentionally slowing down, adjusting the fabric of her clothes, tidying her hair. And I was embarrassed by these thoughts, confused and my left leg was cramped until we both stopped in the stuffiness of the coming night.

“I followed you a few blocks, but you didn’t turn around. But you were aware that I was following you, weren’t you? You did know and deliberately didn’t look back, didn’t you, Lucia?”

And she threw herself into my arms.

“Come tonight, my chambers are on the first floor on the left,” an invitation was stuck in a piece of an onion pie, which Lucia brought to the workshop after the weekly gifting of the afflicted on the porch.

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