

PSALM

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Psalm

DARKNESS ON A CELL. IT COULD BE A MONK'S CELL, OR A PRISON CELL:
WE DON'T KNOW YET. A COUPLE OF WOODEN STOOLS AND A TABLE.
MUSIC. THE LIGHTS COME UP ON A MAN STANDING ALONE, HEAD BOWED.
THIS IS JOHN. HE CONCENTRATES, LIKE A MAN AT PRAYER. AS THE MUSIC
FADES HE LIFTS HIS HEAD AND SPEAKS.

JOHN: It is the Lord who governs me.

There is nothing I lack.

He has set me down in a place of pasture.

A place of pasture ...

He nourishes me with refreshing waters.

For though I walk through the midst ... through the shadow of death, I shall
fear no evil.

For you are with me.

You are with me.

PAUSE. HE SEEMS TO BE IN ANGUISH.

It is the Lord who governs me.

There is nothing I lack.

He has set me down in a place of pasture.

He nourishes me with refreshing waters.

For though I walk through the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil.

You are with me.

Your rod and your staff, they have comforted me.

They have comforted me.

Comfort me.

And then what?

Comfort ... And then what?

HE KNEELS AND BOWS HIS HEAD. THE LIGHTS GO DOWN.

WHEN THE LIGHTS COME UP AGAIN WALTERS IS THERE. JOHN SITS AT THE TABLE, HIS HEAD ON HIS ARMS. WALTERS HAS BROUGHT FOOD AND DRINK. HE ADDRESSES JOHN WHO DOESN'T SEEM TO TAKE ANY NOTICE.

WALTERS: That one I was telling you about, she's still sick. The little one. Alice. Remember?

I got home yesterday and she was on the blankets by the fire, same as when I left. Mary said she hardly moved all day. So I went over and sat by her but she wasn't taking any notice. Maybe she didn't even know I was there.

HE SITS DOWN NEXT TO JOHN AND PULLS THE BREAD INTO BITS.

Anyway, I turned round and the other three were sitting there, on the cot in the corner, the other side of the room, and pretending to look at the floor. Lined up and waiting for me. Usually they're running about outside so I knew something was up.

Mary said, 'You know what they've done this time?'

They just sat there, twisting their fingers together, and they didn't look capable of doing anything much at all.

'Ask them,' she said, 'ask them what they've done.'

So I did and they said they'd been in with Mr Naylor's sheep.

I said, 'What? What did I tell you about Mr Naylor's sheep?' I said, 'What did I tell you about Mr Naylor? Keep away. You're not children, you're dogs,' I said.

'You should be kept outside on bits of rope, all of you. Look at your sister here,'
I said, 'don't you ever think about her?'

HE EATS SOME OF THE BREAD.

So, of course, I had to go and see Naylor who is a stiff-necked man at the best
of times. And that took half the night.

It's a relief to get back to prison sometimes.

HE NUDGES JOHN.

Here. Bread.

NO RESPONSE FROM JOHN.

And ale.

Incidentally, 'he transformed my soul. He led me out on paths of righteousness,
for the sake of his name.'

JOHN LOOKS UP.

Which you missed out.

JOHN: Did I?

WALTERS: Yes. I wonder why. Those particular words, I mean. The paths of
righteousness.

JOHN: I forgot them.

WALTERS: Well, yes.

JOHN: I tried to remember. That's what I was doing.

WALTERS: I heard you.

JOHN: It passes the time. You heard me?

WALTERS: Yes.

JOHN: You were outside the door, listening?

WALTERS: I was outside the door, hearing.

JOHN: But you didn't help?

WALTERS: I'm not qualified, am I?

JOHN: Not qualified?

WALTERS: I mean, we get a lot of godless types in here, which is only natural, and you look like one of them, but even so ... dealing with a man's soul ... you have to know what you're doing, you have to be qualified. And I'm a gaoler.

JOHN: Help with the words.

WALTERS: Oh.

JOHN: I was going through the words.

WALTERS: I thought you were praying. You don't interrupt a man when he's praying.

JOHN: It was a psalm.

WALTERS: Even when he misses something out.

JOHN: One of the psalms we used to say.

WALTERS: Anyway, that is praying. Saying the words. That's what praying is.

JOHN SAYS NOTHING. HE DRINKS. WALTERS GETS UP.

JOHN: What was it, then?

WALTERS: What?

JOHN: That I left out?

WALTERS: I told you. 'He transformed my soul. He led me out on paths of righteousness, for the sake of his name.'

JOHN: The paths of righteousness. Ah, yes.

WALTERS: Which I thought might be very much in your mind just now. The paths of righteousness.

JOHN: They're not for the godless, though, are they? Still, thank you. I've been given bread and ale. And the words.

HE GESTURES ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND EATS. HE BECOMES AWARE THAT WALTERS IS NOT LEAVING.

What?

WALTERS: There's someone to see you.

JOHN: What?

WALTERS: A visitor.

JOHN: Doctor Richards has come?

WALTERS: No –

JOHN: I said he would –

WALTERS: No, John –

JOHN: He wouldn't leave me here –

WALTERS: It's not him –

JOHN: Without doing something about it.

WALTERS: No. It's like talking to my kids, this is. It's not Doctor Richards. It's no one from the university. Because they don't, do they? They leave us to it. If you end up in here, they won't involve themselves. A scholar, maybe. They might come along then, depending on his family. You're not a scholar, though. Are you?

Or are you?

JOHN IS SILENT.

I didn't think so. Not Doctor Richards, then. It's a woman. A sister.

JOHN: A sister?

WALTERS: From St Joanna's.

JOHN: I don't know anyone from St Joanna's.

WALTERS: Of course you don't, and she doesn't know you. But she's come to see you.

JOHN: Why?

WALTERS: Because you're here. Because you're waiting.

JOHN: To be hanged. Waiting to be hanged. Is that what you mean?

WALTERS: People in your position, she visits them. That's what she does. She brings them comfort.

JOHN: She wants to comfort me?

WALTERS: Yes.

JOHN: And you let her in?

WALTERS: Yes.

JOHN: Well ... that is charitable. Comfort for the prisoner.

WALTERS: Yes.

JOHN SMILES.

No. You know what I mean. Comfort for the prisoner. What we're all told to do. 'When I was hungry did you bring me food? When I was in prison did you visit me?' That's what we're told, isn't it?

JOHN: It is.

WALTERS: Then that's what she does. She's come to visit you.

JOHN: And who is she?

WALTERS: Sister Judith. They call her Sister. I don't know if she is really.

JOHN: You mean she's a novice?

WALTERS: No, but she might not be the complete sister, if you see what I mean. She was a lady at one time.

JOHN: A lady?

WALTERS: A titled lady. Family with land. And lined up to marry. Only instead of doing that she ended up at St Joanna's. Whether that means she's fully part of the order or not, well ... who knows things like that?

JOHN: She was titled?

WALTERS: There's probably rules about it.

JOHN: And she gave it up?

WALTERS: So they say.

JOHN: Why?

WALTERS: Nobody knows.

HE EATS SOME OF JOHN'S BREAD.

But I have heard it said she had a brother who was hanged. He was locked up, very like you are, and he went off very much where you're about to go off. Which is why she visits the condemned man in his cell.

JOHN: Because of her brother?

WALTERS: But, as I say, nobody knows this. Where she came from is never mentioned. Understand?