

# Contents



Publisher's Note / ix

Editor's Note / xi

Opening Prayer / xv

Introduction / 1

Chapter One:

Longing / 17

Chapter Two:

Silence / 47

Chapter Three:

Unknowing / 67

Chapter Four:

Love / 97

Closing Prayer / 121

Sources / 127

Bibliography / 135

Credits / 137

About Sounds True / 141

# Introduction

## 🌀 The Dark Night of Prison 🌀

**J**uan de la Cruz was twenty-nine years old and madly in love with God.

The great living saint Teresa of Avila had recognized a rare sanctity and brilliance in this humble young friar and placed him in charge of her first reform convent.

Then, late one night, threatened by this movement to return the order to the contemplative path embodied by the Desert Fathers and Mothers, the mainstream Carmelites whisked him away and imprisoned him in Toledo.

His cell was a tiny closet that had formerly served as a latrine. There was not enough room to lie down, and the only window was far above his head. Through it, he could chart the course of three or four stars at a time as they passed slowly through space. Mostly,

he sat very still in the darkness, shivering through the cold months, sweltering in the heat.

Twice a day, the friars took him out and flogged him.

“Denounce Teresa!” they demanded.  
“Renounce the heresy of this so-called reform!”

But he would not betray the dream. The dream of a life of voluntary simplicity, solitude, and silence. A contemplative life based on the Gospel teachings of poverty of spirit and charity of heart. A life of stripping away, rather than accumulating. Of relinquishing power and seeking nothing. Of nothing but loving friendship with the Divine and loving service to his creation.

When he was back in his cell, they would say terrible things in a stage whisper outside his door.

“Did you hear?” one friar would hiss to another. “Teresa of Avila has been arrested and her followers have all abandoned her. The reform has collapsed.”

They were lying.

Other times, they would mock the prisoner: “I guess your friends don’t care about you after all, Father. Not a word from anyone. It appears you have been entirely forgotten, as if you never existed at all.”

More lies.

He was not concerned about being remembered by human beings. But as the months ground by, he began to fear that he had been abandoned by the Holy One. For the first time in his life, he questioned the existence of a God he could no longer feel or remember. And, as his soul dried up, he found he could no longer even conceive of this God to whom he had dedicated everything. Whenever he tried to pray, all he encountered was a cavernous emptiness.

He cried out, “Where have you hidden, my Beloved?”

Echoing from this cry came an outpouring of love poetry to God. He committed each poem to memory and recited them all again and again until they were etched on his heart. His poems became simultaneously

a call to and a response from his Beloved. Little by little, into the darkness of his isolation, the love of God flowed, illuminating his shattered heart and filling him with quiet joy.

At last, one dark night, a sympathetic guard turned the other way as the frail friar made his escape. Taking refuge among the sisters in a nearby convent, he fell into an ecstatic state, from which he never recovered.

### 🌀 A Friar and a Half 🌀

**E**arly in the sixteenth century, Gonzalo, a fair-skinned Spanish nobleman from a family of textile merchants, fell in love with Catalina, a North African weaver-woman, who had come to his door peddling cloth.

The Inquisition was at its pathological height. Purity of European blood was considered a sign of true devotion to the Church. Jews and Muslims, who had been living in Spain in relative harmony with

Christians under Islamic rule for many centuries, were being forced by the Roman Catholic Church to convert or be expelled from their homeland. Those *conversos* caught in the act of practicing their ancestral faith were often executed.

For a wealthy Spaniard to marry a Moor was an act of great courage, and Gonzalo's family disowned him as a result. This particular liaison was all the more risky in light of Gonzalo's own heritage: he probably came from a Jewish family, one that had successfully hidden its dangerous roots.

Juan de Yepes, who would one day be known as St. John of the Cross, was the child of this great love. Born in 1542 in the small village of Fonteveros, near the city of Avila, John spent his early childhood wandering with his parents and his two older brothers in search of work. John's father, who apprenticed with his mother to learn the art of weaving, died of the plague when John was still a small boy. John's middle brother died of malnutrition soon after. Finally, his destitute mother settled

what remained of her family in the teeming market town of Medina del Campo.

When John was twelve, he found work at a local hospital, caring for patients with incurable diseases, including many with syphilis. John found deep purpose and even solace in tending the dying. He bathed their sores, listened to their stories, and sang them the Arabic ballads he had learned as a child. He collected food and funds for the hospital and dedicated his life to embracing the people whom society had abandoned.

Don Alonso, the hospital administrator, was impressed by the young man's intelligence and sensitivity. In hopes that John might become a priest and harness his gifts in service to humanity, Don Alonso paid for his education at a Jesuit college and later at the legendary university of Salamanca. After completing his studies at age twenty-one, John joined a community of Carmelite friars, where he took the name John of the Cross. He was inspired by the example of the early thirteenth-century Carmelites of

the Holy Land, an order whose rule of life flowed from a vision of contemplative prayer and voluntary simplicity. He was ordained as a priest in 1567.

But the sixteenth-century version of the Carmelite order had drifted far from its desert origins. Like other branches of the Roman Catholic Church, the Carmelites no longer placed primary emphasis on silence, stillness, and poverty. Convents were endowed by the dowries of wealthy nuns who couldn't find husbands, while the monks competed for who could perform the most spectacular penances. Quickly disenchanted by these realities, John was poised to leave the order and flee to the mountains to live as a hermit when a singular event changed the course of his life.

He met Teresa of Avila.

Teresa, the mother abbess of a Carmelite monastery, was twice John's age. Like John, Teresa longed for a return to the contemplative way of life lived by their forebears at the foot of Mount Carmel. Teresa was actively engaged in reforming the order when she



heard of this fiery friar who shared her yearning for a community based on the cultivation of silent prayer and a direct relationship with the Divine.

Malnourished by childhood poverty, John's growth had been stunted and, as a twenty-five-year-old man, he stood barely five feet tall. After her first thrilling encounter with him, Teresa declared that, while he might be small in stature, John of the Cross was great in God. She referred to him as a "friar and a half" and considered him to be the father of her soul. John was the only man who ever fully understood Teresa, and she rested deeply in his understanding. John of the Cross joined Teresa of Avila's cause, and she immediately made him confessor to the nuns of her first convent.

John paid a high price for his devotion to Teresa and her reform movement. At twenty-nine, he was captured by a group of mitigated Carmelite friars. After nine months of incarceration and torture, he made a miraculous escape, tying shreds

of knotted cloth into a rope and lowering himself through the tiny window of his cell and down the monastery wall. Uncertain where to go, he followed a dog who led him to a nearby convent of Teresa's nuns, who joyfully gave him sanctuary.

John of the Cross spent the next two decades in dedicated service to the vision he shared with Teresa, returning the attention of the monks and nuns he guided to the radiant stillness of their own souls. He was happiest when he was most invisible, praying alone in the chapel of nature, or addressing the spiritual yearnings of the nuns who adored him with humble lucidity.

Twenty years after his prison ordeal, John died of a recurring infection from the wounds he had sustained there. But during the period in between, he lived in ecstatic relationship to the Beloved. Love poetry flowed abundantly from his pen, and he radiated the bliss of perpetual union with the Divine, touching everyone in his sphere with his deep stillness and playful wisdom.

## ❧ The Darkness That Is Light ❧

*Even though this holy night darkens the spirit, it does so only to light up everything.*

— St. John of the Cross,  
*Dark Night of the Soul*

Sometimes in the spiritual life, if you are very lucky, the Holy One slams the door shut and plunges you into darkness.

This may occur when you are at your best, basking in the glow of tender feelings of devotion in prayer and practice, when, all at once, the ancient teachings of the masters make perfect sense. You find your old ego has become less cantankerous and is giving you more moments of peace. You are beginning to entertain notions of being a guide to others. People seem to be drawn toward your natural equanimity and inspiring way with words.

But, suddenly, God bores you. Suddenly, you do not have any idea who this God even *is*.

Spiritual practice turns out to be more tedious than a teeth-cleaning, and just about as holy. Studying sacred literature feels like reading an economics textbook from the 1950s. Where not long ago you sat in the cathedral singing to God, tears of joy streaming down your face, now your heart has turned to stone and you have stopped going to church. You used to be able to meditate for an hour and it felt like five minutes. Now you watch the clock as the minutes limp by and finally decide to get up off the cushion and go back to bed.

What's happening here? You suspect you have been very bad and God is punishing you, if he even exists at all, which is beginning to seem more and more unlikely. You resign yourself to abandonment. If you were God, you would give up on you, too, worthless wretch that you are.

You decide to confide in a couple of spiritual people you know. They smile knowingly and assure you that everyone grapples with periods of dryness and