

THE PARABLE OF THE VEIL AND THE FOOTPRINTS

God is not owned as a certainty, but known as a pattern

by DOW

PROLOGUE

And it came to pass that there was a city built upon speech, and the people made their mouths into altars. For some said, “God is unknowable,” and they loved the veil; and some said, “God is knowable,” and they loved the name.

And both houses contended, and called their contention reverence.

Now the Veil Keepers built a Hall of Mystery, wherein no man might speak plainly of the Lord, lest he be found arrogant. And they made humility into a law, and they punished certainty; and they said, “Who can know?” and they called their not-knowing holiness.

And the Name Holders built a Hall of Doctrine, wherein every man must confess the Lord in approved words, lest he be found rebellious. And they made certainty into a coin, and they stamped words as though they were bread; and they said, “We know,” and they called their knowing righteousness.

And the two houses hated one another, yet they were alike; for both built thrones from the same timber: the desire to be excused. The Veil Keepers were excused from lifting burdens because they could not be sure; and the Name Holders were excused from lifting burdens because they had procedures for lifting that belonged to them.

And there fell upon the city a season of thinness, and the winter came early.

And the burdens of the people grew heavy: hunger in the belly, cold in the bones, sickness in the lungs, loneliness in the mind, and fear in the heart.

And the city learned that opinions do not warm a child.

Now in those days there came among them a stranger, and his face was covered with a simple veil; and he asked no permission, and he took no coin. And he spoke little, yet he walked much; and he walked at dawn and again at dusk; and his feet carried him always toward the least among them.

And some followed him with their eyes and said, “He is holy.” And others said, “He is dangerous.” And the two halls rose up to measure him, as men measure a thing they wish to own.

For the Name Holders said, “Let us establish the number. How sure art thou that this stranger is of God?” And they brought forth tablets of wax and wrote scores, and they called the score discernment.

And the Veil Keepers said, “Let us establish the prohibition. If any man claimeth to know him, he sinneth.” And they wrote rules upon parchment, and they called the rules humility.

Yet the stranger did not give them his name, and he did not ask their score.

He only walked, and where he walked, burdens were lifted.

And a child of the city—small and unappointed—saw that the two houses argued about the answer, but never asked what instrument they were using. For they held their instruments as idols, and called them truth.

And the child said in his heart, “If I cannot see his face, I will watch his footsteps. For a face may be hidden, but a path is revealed.”

CHAPTER 1 — THE BASELINE NUMBER

And it came to pass that the Name Holders sent forth an officer, and he carried with him a chain of little seals; and he stood in the marketplace and cried, “Come ye, and be numbered. For we will measure your certainty, and certify your worship.”

And men came, desiring safety; for in a season of fear the tongue seeks permission. And the officer asked each, saying, “How sure art thou that the stranger is of God? Speak, and we will stamp thy answer.”

And some said, “I am not sure,” and the officer smiled, for uncertainty is easy to govern. And some said, “I am sure,” and the officer frowned, for certainty is dangerous unless it be purchased.

And the officer set numbers beside their names, and he called the number a baseline; and he said, “Now we have established discernment.”

But the child looked upon the numbers and perceived a thing: the numbers did not warm the hungry, and the stamps did not carry the sick. And he said, “This is a market for words.”

Now the stranger passed through the market, and he did not look upon the seals. And he saw a woman whose hands were cracked with cold, and a child upon her hip whose breath was shallow. And he set his cloak about them, and he walked with them to the fire of a neighbor, and he asked the neighbor nothing but this: “Wilt thou share?”

And the neighbor opened, for the stranger did not make him an object; he made him a participant.

And the Name Holders murmured, saying, “He hath done good, yet he is unauthorized.” And they sought to capture him by praise.

Wherefore they sent men after him with parchment, saying, “Declare thy name, and we will proclaim thee. Submit to our hall, and we will enlarge thy work.”

But the stranger answered them not, and he went on. And the Name Holders were offended; for men are offended when their permission is refused.

And the Veil Keepers also murmured, saying, “Behold his boldness. He acts as though God may be known.” And they sought to bind him by caution.

Wherefore they sent teachers after him with gentle voices, saying, “Do not presume. Do not claim. Stay thy hand, lest thy hand become pride.”

And the child saw that both halls, though opposite in speech, sought the same thing: to make the stranger a possession.

CHAPTER 2 — THE NAME MARKET

And it came to pass that the Name Holders, seeing that the people were drawn to the stranger’s path, made a market of the name. And they said, “If the people desire holiness, we will provide it.”

Therefore they sold approved prayers, and stamped confessions, and weighed repentance by syllables. And they set a price upon peace, and they called the price a tithe.

And whoso could pay was declared sound; and whoso could not pay was declared disorderly. And they called this fairness, for fairness is often the name of a gate.

And the sick came to the Hall of Doctrine and said, “We are weak.” And the

Hall answered, "Speak the words." And the sick spoke and received a paper; yet their burden remained upon them, for paper is light and cannot carry a body.

And the poor came and said, "We have nothing." And the Hall answered, "Then receive instruction." And instruction was given in place of bread, and they called it charity.

Now the child watched and understood: if holiness may be bought, then holiness is a throne. And if holiness may be sold, then mercy has become a profession.

And the child followed the stranger again at dusk and saw his footsteps turn not toward the hall, but toward a narrow lane where men slept in heaps for warmth. And the stranger did not ask, "Art thou worthy?" but asked, "Art thou willing?"

And one man, ashamed, drew back, and the stranger did not drag him; for Mercy without consent becomes custody. But the stranger returned the next dusk, and again the next, and his patience was his authority.

And the child said, "This is the pattern: he lifts burdens, he does not buy them; he invites consent, he does not seize it; he returns, he does not tally."

And the child began to imitate the path. And he carried water and bread, and he held a hand, and he listened; and he learned that burdens are common, though men build many names to hide it.

CHAPTER 3 — THE VEIL AS EXCUSE

And it came to pass that the Veil Keepers, fearing the Name Market and also fearing the stranger, gathered the people into the Hall of Mystery and spoke softly.

And they said, "Behold the danger of certainty. Who can know the Lord? If ye act too boldly, ye may do harm. Therefore do nothing but ponder."

And the people loved this saying, for it made them righteous without cost.

And they called their waiting wisdom, and their caution compassion.

Now a family came unto the hall, and the father said, "My child is sick." And

the hall answered, "We cannot know what God would will. We must not presume."

And they offered the father a candle and a poem.

And the child of the city, seeing this, said in his heart, "They have used the veil to cover their hands."

And the stranger passed by the hall, and he did not enter to debate; for debate is often the devil's shelter. Instead he walked toward the family's house, and he sat with them, and he warmed water, and he asked neighbors to share watch through the night.

And the Veil Keepers cried after him, "Thou art arrogant!" For when a man's excuse is threatened, he calls the threat pride.

And the Name Holders cried also, "Thou art rebellious!" For when a man's throne is threatened, he calls the threat disorder.

Yet the child followed the footsteps and learned another thing: the Lord is not known by a face that can be proven, but by a way that can be walked.

And the child wrote this in his heart: "If I call God unknowable to avoid the

pattern, I lie. If I call God knowable to build a throne, I also lie. God is recognized by the fruits of the path.”

And the winter deepened, and the city’s speech grew louder; yet the footsteps continued, quiet, toward the least.

CHAPTER 4 — THE FRUITS TEST

And it came to pass that the child followed the footsteps for many days, and began to discern a rule that could be tried as men try a tool. For he said, “If the path be of God, it will lighten burdens. If it be not, it will increase them, though it speak sweetly.”

Wherefore the child began to mark the places where the stranger walked, and he counted not words but weights: the weight of hunger, the weight of cold, the weight of loneliness, the weight of shame. And he perceived that wherever the stranger went, these weights decreased; not by enchantment, but by participation.

For the stranger did not lift alone. He asked the neighbor to share, and the neighbor shared; and he asked the strong to carry, and the strong carried; and he asked the ashamed to consent, and the ashamed consented. And thus the stranger multiplied his hands without appointing a throne.

Now the Name Holders heard of this and said, “Behold, he hath a method. We will test it with our instruments.” And they sent inspectors with scrolls, and they measured kindness by signatures, and they called the signatures fruits.

And the inspectors found a widow whose roof leaked, and they said, “Sign here that thou art in need.” And the widow signed, and they said, “Now thy need is established.”

Then they returned to the Hall of Doctrine, and they made a record, and they debated who should be assigned to the widow, and they argued over fairness, and they stamped the record with a seal; and the widow’s roof leaked still.

And the child saw and said, “Their instrument measures need but does not meet it; and their record weighs nothing yet burdens the poor.”

Now on the third day the stranger walked again by the widow’s house, and he saw the leak, and he called to a neighbor and said, “Hast thou a ladder?” And another he called, saying, “Hast thou spare boards?” And another he called, saying, “Wilt thou watch her children?”

And they came, not because they were certified, but because they were invited. And the roof was mended before the inspectors finished their meeting.

And the widow wept, and the stranger did not ask for praise. And the child wrote in his heart, “The fruit is the roof that no longer leaks.”

And the child taught another child, and another; and they began to test all claims by the same rule, saying, “If it lighten burdens with consent, it is clean. If it build a throne, it is counterfeit.”

And thus the city received a measuring stick that could not be sold; for any could see whether hunger was fed and cold was warmed and shame was relieved. And the child said, “A face may be hidden; a path cannot.”

CHAPTER 5 — MIMICRY

And it came to pass that the Name Holders perceived that the people were turning from the market of the name, and they feared the loss of their authority, for authority is a mouth that hungers.

Wherefore they said, "We will also lift burdens." Yet they desired not the burden to be lifted, but the people to be bound.

Therefore they sent forth helpers with bright garments, and they spoke the stranger's phrases, and they said, "We are here to serve." But they carried with them forms and chains, and their service had a hook in it.

For they came unto the poor and said, "We will help thee, but first prove thy need." And they came unto the sick and said, "We will aid thee, but first submit to our plan." And they came unto the ashamed and said, "We will shelter thee, but first confess to our officer."

And the people, being desperate, complied; and the Name Holders called this consent. Yet it was not consent, but leverage.

And the helpers built lists and schedules, and they called the schedules mercy. And they began to assign worthiness, and they called it safety.

And whoso questioned the lists was called ungrateful. And whoso refused the plan was called resistant. And thus help became a leash, and they called the leash wisdom.

Now the child saw that the Name Holders had learned to counterfeit the footprints. For their words sounded like lifting, but their actions increased dependency; and their gifts were not gifts, but contracts.

And the child remembered the stranger's manner: he asked, "Art thou willing?" and he offered a hand without a trap. He returned without tally. He did not demand confession to buy bread. He did not make the hungry prove hunger. Wherefore the child taught the people a second test: not only whether burdens decreased, but whether thrones increased. For a burden may be lifted today and replaced tomorrow with a chain.

And the child said, "If help installeth ownership, it is not mercy. If mercy requireth leverage, it is not clean. If a plan is used to capture a person, the plan is a prison."

And some were offended, for men love their cages when the cage is called care.

Yet the footprints remained: quiet, repeating, toward the least—without selling, without stamping, without claiming.

CHAPTER 6 — THE COLLAPSE TEST

And it came to pass that a hard week came upon the city, and many burdens gathered at once, as storms gather upon the sea. And a sickness spread, and the fires burned low, and the night was long.

Then the Veil Keepers assembled and said, "We must be cautious. We cannot know what to do. If we act and harm, the guilt will be ours." And they called their fear humility, and they chose stillness.

And the Name Holders assembled and said, "We must be orderly. We cannot allow disorder. If we help without forms, we will be overwhelmed." And they called their forms safety, and they tightened their gates.

So the Veil Keepers waited, and the Name Holders gated, and the city's

burdens multiplied.

Now the stranger walked as before, and the child walked with him, and a small band walked also; and they did not claim to know the stranger's face, yet they knew his direction.

And they made no hall, and they made no market; they made only a route. And they divided the work: one fetched water, and one gathered wood, and one sat with the lonely, and one carried the sick to warmth, and one translated shame into consent.

And the child said, "We need not save them all; yet we must not save none.

And we must not save one and stop; for Mercy is not a tally, but a way."

And as they walked, the stranger did a strange thing: he refused spectacle.

For when men cried, "Show us a sign," he showed them a neighbor sharing bread. And when men cried, "Declare thy name," he declared a burden lifted.

And the Name Holders were angry, for they could not sell this; and the Veil Keepers were uneasy, for they could not excuse this.

And the city began to whisper, saying, "Perhaps God is known." And another said, "Perhaps God is unknowable." But the child answered in plainness, "He is not owned by thy certainty, nor hidden by thy doubt. He is known by the fruits."

And the stranger passed by the Hall of Doctrine and by the Hall of Mystery, and he did not bow to either, for he was building neither throne nor fog. He was building a way.

And the week broke, and the sickness slowed, and the fires rose again; and many praised the halls with their mouths. But the child remembered the footprints, and chose the path again at dawn.

CHAPTER 7 — THE ONE-AND-DONE TRAP

And it came to pass that the child, having followed the footsteps and lifted burdens with a small band, tasted a sweetness in his own heart. For he said, "Behold, I have helped." And pride rose up quietly, as leaven in dough.

Now the child carried a sack of bread unto a man who had been turned away from the Hall of Doctrine because he could not pay, and turned away from the Hall of Mystery because no one wished to presume. And the child sat with him and fed him, and the man wept.

And the child felt warmth in his chest and thought, "Surely I have proof. Surely I am clean."

And the Name Holders, spying this, came unto the child with smooth garments, and they said, "Thou hast done well. Come, and be certified. We will place thy name upon a list, and the people will honor thee, and thy work will be enlarged."

And the Veil Keepers also came unto the child with soft voices, and they said, "Thou hast done a kind thing. Now be careful. Act not as though thou knowest. For to act too boldly is pride. Thou hast done enough."

Thus both halls tempted the child with the same fruit: that he might stop.

For one offered him a throne, and the other offered him an excuse. And both would have ended the footsteps.

Now the child went home and slept, and in the night he dreamed that he stood

before a gate and held up a loaf of bread and cried, "Behold my proof." Yet the loaf grew stale in his hand, and the gate did not open.

And when he awoke at dawn, he saw in his mind the footprints turning again toward the least. And he understood: Mercy is not a tally, but a way.; and proof is not a trophy to be carried once, but a life to be lived daily.

Wherefore the child rose and went again, not to purchase a name, and not to hide beneath a veil, but to lift where he could.

And he said, "I need not save them all; yet I must not save none. And I must not save one and stop."

CHAPTER 8 — THE SUMMONING

And it came to pass that the two halls, seeing that the footsteps endured and that the people were learning the fruits test, grew afraid together. For though they hated one another in speech, they loved the same dominion. Wherefore they sent messengers unto the stranger, saying, "Come unto the square, and declare thy name before the people."

Now the stranger came in plainness, and his veil was still upon his face. And the square was full, and men stood upon boxes to see him, for men love spectacle.

And the Name Holders stood at the front with seals and scrolls, and the Veil Keepers stood beside them with parchments of prohibition. And for a moment their hands touched, and they were united in the desire to own what they feared.

And the Name Holders cried, "Declare thy name, that we may proclaim thee. Submit to our hall, that we may certify thy works."

And the Veil Keepers cried, "Declare that thou canst not be known, that the people may cease from presumption."

Thus one demanded a name to sell, and the other demanded a veil to excuse. And both demanded speech in place of burdens lifted.

Now the stranger looked upon them, and he spoke not as they wished. He said only, "Come."

And the Name Holders were offended, saying, "This is not an answer." And the Veil Keepers were offended, saying, "This is a claim."

Then the stranger turned from the square, and he walked toward a narrow alley where a woman sat with a fevered child. And some laughed, and some followed, and the halls shouted, "Return!"

But the stranger did not return. And the people, seeing his direction, began to divide: some toward speech, and some toward burdens.

CHAPTER 9 — THE FALSE PROOF TRIAL

And it came to pass that the Name Holders, angered by the stranger's refusal, proclaimed a trial. And they said, "If he be of God, let him prove it by our instruments."

Therefore they built a platform, and they set upon it a chair and a table and an inkpot. And they prepared questions as nets, for men who desire dominion prepare nets.

And the Name Holders said, "Recite the approved confession. Speak the words,

and we will open the gate.”

And the Veil Keepers said also, “Prove thy humility. Do nothing. Keep silence. Withdraw. For to act is to claim, and to claim is sin.”

Thus one demanded certainty to build a throne, and the other demanded uncertainty to build a fog. And both offered the same reward: permission to be excused.

Now the stranger stood upon the platform, and he did not recite, and he did not withdraw. He only looked upon the people and said, “Follow.”

And the halls cried, “This is rebellion,” and “This is arrogance,” and the crowd murmured, for men are uneasy when a net is refused.

Then the child—small and unappointed—came forward and said in plainness, “Your proofs are made of speech. His proof is made of burdens lifted.”

And the Name Holders scoffed and said, “Show us thy instrument.” And the child said, “The hungry fed, the sick warmed, the ashamed invited—these are the instruments. The roof that no longer leaks is the witness.”

And the Veil Keepers said, “Who can know?” And the child answered, “A face may be hidden; a path cannot.”

And the people began to look away from the platform and toward their neighbors, as though they had awakened from a spell.

Wherefore the Name Holders grew wrathful, for their market was threatened.

And the Veil Keepers grew fearful, for their veil was torn by action.

And the stranger stepped down from the platform, and he walked toward the least again. And a few followed, and more watched, and the halls contended; yet the footprints continued.

CHAPTER 10 — THE DOOR WITHOUT A SIGN

And it came to pass that after the false proof trial, a darkness gathered in the city, not of night only, but of accusation. For the halls contended more fiercely, and they sought whom they might devour.

Wherefore the stranger led the small band away from the square, not to a hall, and not to a platform, but to a house at the edge of the city that had no banner and no inscription. And its door was plain wood, and its threshold was worn, as though many weary feet had crossed it.

And the child said, “Is this thy temple?” And the stranger answered, “This is a hearth.”

And when they entered, they found not a market for words, but rest for bodies: a fire, water, bread, clean cloth, and a quiet corner for those who shook.

And the stranger said, “My House is for My laborers to find rest. It is not a wage for one kindness, nor a trophy for one proof. It is a shelter between labors, that ye may go again.”

Now the band was astonished; for they had been taught that holiness must be gated, and that rest must be earned by performance. Yet here was rest given to the weary without a stamp.

And it came to pass that the Name Holders discovered the house, and they were offended, saying, “Where is the sign? Where is the authority? Where is the certification?”

And the Veil Keepers also discovered it, and they were offended, saying, “Where is the proper silence? Where is the prohibition? Where is the confession that none can know?”

Thus both houses hated the door without a sign, for it could not be owned by their instruments. And they said among themselves, “If the people learn this, our halls will become empty.”

Therefore they came to the threshold and demanded entry on behalf of their office. But the stranger said, “Enter as laborers, not as lords.” And many would not stoop, for thrones do not kneel.

And the child perceived another test: the house did not reject the halls by anger, but by posture. For whoso desired to rule could not receive rest, because he had not laid down his crown.

CHAPTER 11 — THE VEIL LIFTED A LITTLE

And it came to pass that in the morning, as the city watched the house, the stranger stood upon the threshold, and the veil was still upon his face.

And the people cried, “Show us thy face, that we may know.” And others cried, “Hide thy face, that we may remain humble.” And both cries were chains, though one was forged of certainty and the other of doubt.

Now the stranger lifted the veil a little, not to satisfy the market, and not to feed the fog, but to teach a measure.

And behold, his face was ordinary, weathered by wind and work. And the people were troubled; for they had desired either a monster or a monument. Yet he was neither.

And he lowered the veil again, and said, “Ye seek a face that ye may possess it. I give you not a face to own, but a way to follow.”

And the child asked, “Art thou the Lord?” And the stranger answered, “If I say ‘I am,’ ye will build a throne. If I say ‘I am not,’ ye will build a veil. Therefore I will not feed thy instruments.”

Then he stretched forth his hand toward the street and said, “Look.”

And the child looked and saw the band preparing again: one tying sandals, one filling a pitcher, one folding cloth, one writing nothing, and one lifting a neighbor’s burden. And the stranger said, “This is the proof.”

And the child understood: God is not owned as a certainty, but known as a pattern. Not a name to be bought, but a way to be walked.

And the stranger said, “A face may be hidden; a path cannot.”

CHAPTER 12 — VERDICT AND INVITATION

And it came to pass that the two halls gathered a final time, for they desired a final word. And they said, “Judge between us.”

And the stranger stood in the doorway without a sign, and the weary sat behind him, and the hungry were fed, and the sick were warmed, and the ashamed were invited by consent.

And he said unto the Veil Keepers, “Ye have called Me unknowable, that ye might not be commanded. Ye have hidden behind mystery that ye might pass by. Ye have used the veil to cover your hands.”

And he said unto the Name Holders, “Ye have called Me knowable, that ye might

command. Ye have seized certainty that ye might sell it. Ye have built a market of the name, and called it worship.”

And he said unto them both, “If thou callest Me unknowable to avoid My pattern, thou liest. If thou callest Me knowable to build a throne, thou also liest.”

“I am not owned by thy tongue. I am recognized by My way. I gave thee not My face to purchase, but My footsteps to follow.”

I invite; I do not seize, for Mercy without consent becomes custody.

“For proof was not a doctrine to be recited, but a burden to be lifted. Mercy is not a tally, but a way.”

“Keep tools to labor, and bread to return again; yet keep not abundance as a witness against the hungry. A rope kept for tomorrow is wisdom; a rope kept while a man dies today is sin.”

“Therefore lift where thou canst, again and again, until thy days are full.

And when thou canst lift no more, then rest in My House. For My House is for My laborers to find rest; but if thou art intent on building a throne unto thyself, thou hast no need of My House, for thou art building thine own.”

And the halls were silent; for the stranger had not chosen a side in their speech, but had exposed the root beneath it.

Then he turned toward the people and said, “Whoso will follow the footsteps, follow. Whoso will buy a name, buy. Whoso will hide behind a veil, hide. But know this: I am known by My works. Go, and do likewise.”

And he stepped from the threshold and walked at dusk toward the least again; and his footsteps were simple upon the dust, and many saw them, and a few followed.