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# The Convent

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Those whom God wishes to destroy he first makes mad. Sister Lucía, the young novice, was late leaving for the city and in her hurry to get to the car did not notice the old suitcase until she had reached the bottom of the steps. It was a leather suitcase with brass corners, a wooden handle and locks covered with rust, while on its lid, which bore the signs of an unhappy life spent travelling the world, someone had cut several big round holes. At first she thought that it would be full of clothes for the poor, which people often donated to the convent, but when she looked through a hole she was so terrified by what she saw that she let out a cry and ran back inside.

At that time Sister María Inés, mother superior of the convent of Our Lady of Mercy, had finished her correspondence and sat at her desk with her eyes shut to purge her mind of mundane thoughts. Even on a bright day like this the windows barely let enough light into the room, which was both her office and living quarters. In one corner were a narrow bed with a very thin mattress and a small table with a burning vigil lamp. Several religious icons hung on the wall among patches of crumbling plaster, while in a niche stood a statue of a praying Virgin. The rest of the room was filled with chairs, armoires and other pieces of furniture that served no practical purpose: Sister María Inés had few belongings and even fewer visitors. When the young novice walked into the room the Mother Superior opened her eyes and looked at her with disappointment.

Sometimes she wished that she were with the Carthusians so that she would not have to speak. She had tried to make her nuns commit themselves to solitude and silence, but had been

less successful than she would have liked. She had taken her own vows at the turn of the century, before the advent of the telephone and the radio, when it had been easier to lead a life devoted to God. Since then she had witnessed life becoming less calm and contemplative even there in the convent, despite the fact that their only means of communication with the outside world was the weekly trip by car to the city many miles away. Sister María Inés was the first to admit the benefits of progress, but she still believed that humankind had been given perhaps more intelligence than was necessary. With only a hint of reproach, she acknowledged the young novice and asked: 'Is it the Wandering Jew again, Lucía?'

In the past year the girl had claimed to have seen him five times, and had rushed to ring the bell in the chapel. She had been mistaken on every occasion. They had turned out to be solitary hunters who had lost their way in the sierra or intrepid gypsies who had come to sell the nuns merchandise that no one wanted to buy in the city. The girl shook her head: it was not the Wandering Jew. Sister María Inés came to the window and looked at the bottom of the steps. A moment later she was there. She opened the locks of the old suitcase, raised the lid with a trembling hand and saw a baby lying naked on a thick layer of cotton wool that was damp with bodily fluids, for the big holes in the lid had allowed the baby to breathe but not relieved him from the late-summer heat. It was a boy. His umbilical cord had been cut carelessly and the shrivelled piece hung down from his belly like a deflated balloon. Despite the heat and the blazing sun, he was asleep and did not even wake up when Sister María Inés lifted him out of the suitcase and carried him to her room, followed by the young novice. She wrapped the child in a clean towel and laid him on her bed. Then she said: 'Tell me what happened.'

'I was on my way to the car,' the nun said. 'The suitcase was at the bottom of the steps, Reverend Mother. I didn't touch it.'

Sister María Inés had taught the novice to drive after Sister Beatriz, the nun responsible for driving to the city once a week, had asked to be excused from that duty. For the past month it was Sister Lucía who travelled on the road to the city more than thirty miles away to buy provisions, collect the post and keep the nuns up to date with the latest gossip. Their car, a very old Model T Ford with a retractable roof and acetylene headlights, used to belong to the Bishop, who had donated it to the convent after buying a new one.

The Mother Superior asked: 'Did you see anyone leaving the child there?'

'No, Reverend Mother.'

'Who else knows?'

'No one. I came straight to you.'

The Mother Superior observed the child for a moment, still unable to believe what she saw, and then dismissed the novice with a strict tone of voice: 'Now go. And I will decide when to tell the sisters.'

When she was alone, she sat on the edge of the bed and continued to watch the sleeping baby in silence. This was one of the rare occasions in her life when she did not know what to do. She had joined the convent of Our Lady of Mercy a year after the man she wanted to marry had died in a place on the other side of the world, and had never doubted that she had made the right decision. His portrait, in white uniform, hung on the wall among the grave faces of the saints, who seemed to look at her with disapproval. She knew it verged on blasphemy, but she did not take it down even when the Bishop visited the convent to celebrate Mass with the nuns one Sunday a month. He did not mind: apart from that little lapse, Sister María Inés was an excellent servant of God. She wore the same habit as the day that she had taken her vows, and it was still in good

condition, with some commendable wear at the knees after years of daily prayers. Under it she wore a simple loose garment, which neither kept her warm in winter nor cool in the summer, but protected her soul from the temptations of vanity. The soft leather soles of her shoes allowed her to appear in a room as if out of nowhere, a skill that always surprised her nuns and made Sister Lucía think of her as a closet saint with preternatural powers.

After staring at the child for a long time, Sister María Inés emerged from her contemplation and became herself again. The first thing that she had to take care of was his food. She went to the kitchen, where the nuns were preparing lunch, and asked for boiled milk, cream and sugar. The women were intrigued: Sister María Inés always warned them that eating between meals was the first step on the path to gluttony. But when they dared to ask her about the food, she silenced them with only a few words: 'Nothing that should concern you at the moment. I will make an announcement after vespers.'

Back in her room, she mixed in a bowl a little of the milk with some of the cream and sugar, thinned the mixture down with water and added, with good sense, a few drops of cod-liver oil to fortify the newborn's delicate health. Then she took him in her arms and began to feed him. She had never given birth herself but knew how to look after children and the sick. After she had taken her vows, she had asked to be posted in Africa, where she had spent three years in a mission hospital. She had begun as an untrained nurse, but in her spare time had studied the principles of medicine and become indispensable to the doctors. It had been gratifying work, and perhaps she would have been there still if the unexpected consequences of a malaria attack had not forced her to return to Europe at a time when Africa was starting to feel like home to her.

When she finished feeding the child, she held him against her

chest and patted his back until he brought up wind. Then she put him on the bed to sleep and turned her attention to the suitcase. She examined its old locks, the lining made of the kind of cotton wool that could be bought in any pharmacy, the holes in the lid that had been cut as if the child's life depended on them, but found no clues to the mystery. Whoever had left the suitcase on the steps of the convent had planned it well, and Sister María Inés thought with leniency that if perhaps that person had not loved the child enough to keep him, he or she at least cared that he survived.

The bell began to ring, and she considered quickly what to do. In all her years in the convent she had never missed prayers. She looked at the child for a moment and, satisfied that he would stay asleep for a while, she decided to go. She made sure that the sunlight through the windows would not fall on him, and walked softly away so as not to wake him up. When she opened the door, she came face to face with Sister Beatriz. The nun blushed.

'What are you doing here?' Sister María Inés asked.

'I was on my way to the chapel. I stopped to remind you that it is time for prayer. Did you hear the bell?'

Sister María Inés looked at her with reproach. She said: 'My ears are big enough. I do not need to be reminded. I have no intention of failing in my duties for as long as I can walk.' She closed the door behind her softly and walked towards the stairs. She said: 'I am glad you are joining us in prayer.'

'I apologise.'

'A nun is not a nun unless she prays regularly.'

'I prayed in my room, Reverend Mother.'

'In your room,' Sister María Inés repeated. 'I am pleased to hear it.'

When Sister Beatriz had come to the convent, a few years

earlier, it was not to join the Order but to escape the terrible influenza epidemic that had spread across the world, killing in one year more people than the Black Death in the Middle Ages and even more than the Great War. The Mother Superior had been impressed by the young woman's humility and diligence. So when her parents later died in the epidemic, Sister María Inés suggested that she take the veil. The young woman had agreed. The next time that the priest visited the convent, the Mother Superior spoke to him. At the end of the Mass, he called the girl to the altar and asked her whether she was willing to die to the world, renounce all pomp and vanities and put on the habit of the sisters. To all these questions the young woman had answered affirmatively, and rising from the altar steps she walked down the aisle and out of the chapel to receive her habit. She had reappeared wearing the white dress and veil of a novice, and after repeating her vow she had been given the name by which she was to be known ever since: Beatriz.

Two years later she had knelt before the priest again and taken her permanent vows. Sister María Inés had no reason to fear that the young woman would turn out to be anything but an exemplary nun. Sister Beatriz carried out her duties with great enthusiasm, and if she ever missed prayers the Mother Superior blamed it on the religious zeal with which all her nuns committed themselves to their duties and the practice of fasting. She often reproached them for not taking care of themselves and indulging in meaningless mortification of the flesh, which made them pass out during prayers and drop to the chapel floor. Then Sister María Inés had to interrupt the service and give them a sniff of smelling salts to bring them round.

The two women went downstairs and crossed the cloistered courtyard towards the chapel. The clock on the bell tower showed five minutes past midday. The Mother Superior quickened her

pace, and Sister Beatriz followed behind. In the chapel the other nuns sat on the pews waiting. When the small congregation heard the two women, they turned round and stared at the door. Sister María Inés lifted her habit and climbed the steps to the chapel with a stern expression. At the door she stopped to dip a finger in the stoup and cross herself.

'I apologise,' she said, entering the chapel and looking straight ahead. 'Sister Beatriz delayed me.'

Without slowing down, she took her place at the altar and began the oration: '*Deus in adiutorium meum intende.*' The nuns stood up and responded, crossing themselves: '*Domine ad adjuvandum me festina.*' Sister María Inés was usually pleased to be in the cool, dark chapel, where the nuns assembled eight times a day to pray, but today she felt with shame that she could not concentrate. Nevertheless, she had stood at the altar long enough to be able to carry out her duties without anyone noticing that her mind was on other things. Hoping that God would forgive her this rare moment of weakness, she put on her glasses, took a breath that seemed to rise from the bottom of her soul and opened the medieval lectionary. The lesson that day was from Genesis. She read the long sentences in a clear and confident voice, without drawing breath, which was another of her frightful supernatural skills, and only when she finished and breathed again, calm and commanding and satisfied with her performance, did she realise that she had read the wrong passage. She shut the heavy book and stared at her congregation. Even though no one said anything, she felt miserable about her mistake. But she could not stop thinking of that morning's extraordinary event. Gradually the smell of candle wax helped her to concentrate. She was about to begin another hymn when a distant sound travelled into the chapel and ruled out any chance of ending the prayer in peace. It was

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a sound that had never before been heard within the walls of the old convent, but in the solemn silence it was impossible to mistake it for anything less terrifying than what it was: the gentle sound of a baby crying.

Time had given the convent of Our Lady of Mercy a mystical appearance. Built in the sixteenth century as a place of calm and contemplation, it stood on top of a hill in an otherwise uninhabited part of the sierra among dense pine forest. In the middle of the convent was a big courtyard with a splendid cloister of pointed arches and twisted columns. On one side of the courtyard was the chapel with its tall bell tower, where in the nineteenth century a clock held by two stone angels had been installed with money given by a widowed merchant in memory of his wife. The interior of the chapel was decorated with beautiful but now faded frescoes that depicted the Stations of the Cross. On the other sides of the courtyard, connected via the cloister, which offered a sheltered passage from the elements, were the Mother Superior's house, the dormitory for the nuns and the refectory, where the nuns assembled after vespers for recreation until the bell rang for night prayer.

Also facing the courtyard was the old school for novices, which had not been used in many years and had been left to stand derelict. These days the only novice in the convent was Sister Lucía, whom the Mother Superior taught in her office. Lucía participated in the full canonical hours and spent the morning reading the scriptures, while the other nuns busied themselves with the upkeep of the convent. The Mother Superior taught her Latin, set her spiritual exercises and tests of humility, heard her confession and gave her Holy Communion against the rules of the Church: only a priest could do that. When she was not taking instruction, the young novice made competent embroideries of religious subjects, which added to the modest income of the

convent. In the afternoons the Mother Superior took her for long walks in the orchard, and they discussed the creation of the world, how many nails were used to crucify Christ and other important doctrinal matters in between brief rests in the shade to admire the beauty of nature. Sister Lucía paid attention to the older woman, asked questions of elaboration rather than disbelief and memorised everything. Although she was not very bright, she was pious, and the Mother Superior, who had guided many girls through the noviciate, had no doubt that one day Lucía would enter the kingdom of Heaven.

The guesthouse behind the old school for novices was rarely used, but was kept in good order by the nuns, who prided themselves on their hospitality. It was here the Bishop had slept on the few occasions that he had stayed the night during his monthly visits. Tempted by the splendid mountain views from the balcony, he would sit with a glass of cold lemonade to watch the sun disappear below the pine trees and make small talk with the Mother Superior, their discussion punctuated by the calls of the wise owls living in the roofs of the convent.

A corridor from the refectory led to the kitchen, the bakehouse and the buttery, where the provisions brought by car from the city were kept: sacks of flour, pulses and grains, barrels of salted fish, an icebox made of wood and insulated with cork for those rare occasions when they bought fresh fish.

Every morning, at five o'clock, the sound of the bell woke the nuns, and the first thing they did was to kneel before their beds and pray for the suffering of humankind. Then they washed, dressed and hurried to the chapel, where the Mother Superior was ready to start the dawn prayer. They had time for tea with a slice of bread and a piece of fruit in the refectory before they made their way back to the chapel for the office of prime. After

the prayer they assembled in the courtyard, where the Mother Superior allocated them their tasks for the day. The women received their instructions with a bow and went to their posts in silence.

Every three hours they broke off to return to the chapel and pray. Before lunchtime Sister María Inés did her round of the convent to inspect their work. With her hands clasped under the sleeves of her habit, she asked questions, helped solve problems and was generous with her praise, but did not leave without reminding the women that the continuing existence of the convent as well as the salvation of their souls depended on the quality of their work. At one o'clock, they ate lunch without speaking to each other, while a sister read aloud from a book of prayers. Afterwards they had a little free time to write letters to relatives and do odd jobs for themselves.

After the mid-afternoon prayer, they resumed their work until it was time to assemble for supper, which began with each nun having a reluctant spoonful of that cod-liver oil. It was a practice started by the Mother Superior, who was aware of its health benefits from her missionary days. When supper finished, they had an hour of recreation, which they spent doing needlework, reading or, once a month, watching the magic lantern show which the Mother Superior would put on in the refectory with slides ordered by post. It was followed by vespers, and then the nuns were free until the night prayer and the Great Silence. In the middle of the night they left their beds to attend nocturns.

On the eastern transept of the chapel was the library, filled with religious manuscripts and printed books that had not been banned by the Inquisition. There were two gardens in the convent, one where the nuns grew the vegetables and herbs they used in the kitchen and one for the flowers they sold in the summer to a florist in the city to supplement their income. Behind the chapel