

The Bachelor and The Nun

by Philip Wyeth

One day an American man in his thirties appeared at the entrance of a convent in the mountainous Italian region of Umbria and demanded to speak to the mother superior. When the gatekeeper refused on the grounds that no strange men were permitted to enter their sanctuary, he buckled at the knees and begged that if the mother superior would only hear his tale she would understand why he had come. The gatekeeper asked why indeed and after regaining his composure the man replied, "I intend to marry a nun from this order."

She slammed the gate in response to this obscene proposal but as the man continued to pace back and forth outside she soon reappeared with a shovel in her hand and repeated that he would do best to go away.

"Ma'am, I have traveled thousands of miles and know a great deal more about the state of the world than you. If I leave here without my bride it will be a bad omen for mankind."

"Sir, how dare you threaten us in this way? I ask you one last time to leave peacefully."

Even as she raised the shovel he lunged through the gate and gasped, “But I must warn you about the scourge of Vitamin P...”

He awoke in a small room suffering from a terrible headache. When he tried to rub the side of his head he found that his hands were tied to the bedposts. An elderly nun sitting in the corner rose, brought him a sip of water, then left the room.

A short while later an impressively fastidious woman in late middle-age entered and closed the door softly. She pulled a chair beside the bed and sat down.

“Sir, you have made a shocking spectacle of yourself at our quiet seminary. You wished to speak to the abbess? Well, here I am.”

The bound man adjusted as best he could in order to address her properly, then said, “I sincerely apologize for disturbing your church. I would not have done so were the situation not so grave and with seemingly no other recourse.”

“Perhaps, but let me say that I am appalled by the scandalous reason you gave for coming here. Marry one of our sisters? This is a very serious institution and way of life. You have five minutes to explain yourself.”

The man nodded at his hands. “Could you please untie me first?”

The abbess reached over and did so warily.

“Thank you, kind lady. My story is tragic only in that it is far from unique today...”

He proceeded to describe Vitamin P, a new drug which in less than a decade had addicted a large percentage of women in the western world. The high filled users with the sensation of being desired but it was short-lived, and when the crash washed over them they were frantic to quell the deficiency with another dose.

“Please clarify for me,” the mother superior said. “Is it taken as a pill or a potion?”

The man explained that the “P” stood for “praise” and was delivered psychically via social media applications on mobile phones and computers. Vitamin P preyed on a girl's vanity by unlocking an endless vista of adoring men who would compliment and promote her around the world.

“Like a celebrity and the paparazzi?”

“Exactly! And here’s the most destructive aspect. Picture a young man trying to date a woman he fancies. Before Vitamin P

he had only to compete against maybe one or two other local men. But now there are fifty thousand, sometimes a million men in different countries telling this woman how wonderful she is every day. How can an imperfect man compete against an army of digital admirers who ask nothing and only serve to inflate her sense of self-importance to impossibly unrealistic levels?”

The mother superior tapped the tips of her fingers together and inhaled. “But what does this fame do for women when they aren't in the film or music business with a product to sell?”

“They *are* the product!” he exclaimed. “The perfect pictures, the calculated smiles. They promise so much to the world and yet everyone remains thirsty.”

With increasing passion he laid out how the female instinct to be provided for, which had once inspired men to build the world and rewarded them for it, was now unmoored from the practical confines of community where everyone was judged and required to participate. Vitamin P addicts were trapped in a terrible loop where they could receive infinite dosage without actually having to engage in real life—and like lab rats frantically pushing a button for treats they spent their days

sculpting and refining an ever more exciting avatar while trying to outrun the empty existence behind the facade.

The abbess had heard enough and waved a hand.

“You are American, yes?”

He nodded.

“Then you have a problem in your country. Of all places in the world how did you end up at our gate?”

“My great-grandparents come from Spoleto. I was so distraught by this online opium den that I took a vacation to Italy hoping to reconnect with my roots. I wanted to use my hands working on a vineyard and hike the rugged trails of my ancestors. In the back of my mind I wondered if I might meet a nice simple farm girl here. But my God, even in the small towns the women buried their heads in front of a screen all day. They were just as hooked as the girls back home!”

“So instead you come here expecting to seduce a nun? Your time is running short, sir!”

“Ma'am, this may not sound polite but at least it is truthful. What I have learned from experience is that gaining access to a woman's body is not a meritocracy. It can be bestowed so randomly in fact as to be perhaps more a matter of timing than

even confidence or charm. If building one's life is to be taken seriously then the only way to defend against our animalistic whims is to find a woman who believes in something greater than herself.”

“God. I understand,” the mother superior said with conviction. “But if so, surely you can find a committed Christian girl back home?”

“I’ve been to church. Nothing holy goes on in there—it's a social scene at best. They seem to let anyone in these days too because if they judged people's behavior no one would show up. No, something immense and new is tearing society to shreds. It may have begun decades ago but ever since we got everything we ever wanted in the palm of our hands with these smartphones it has accelerated exponentially.”

He dropped his head and said slowly, “I arrived at your convent after walking a long road which has opened my eyes to many unpleasant truths. Please forgive that in my darkest hour I naively hoped that if I could marry a devout nun we could do our part to begin restoring the balance.”

The mother superior sat back slowly in her chair and closed her eyes. When she turned back toward the man she told him to

freshen himself so that they might walk through the convent grounds. Shortly thereafter as they strolled among the carefully tended vines and shrubbery down neat gravel paths, she resumed the conversation.

“You have told me how corrupt the women of today are. Even from the seclusion of our small convent I am not blind to the ways of the modern world, but from what you say about this new drug it seems to have also afflicted men if they are the ones lavishing all this 'praise'. Are they not somehow to blame as well?”

“Yes,” the man replied, “but the difference is that while this technology promises that *everyone* can do or be whatever they want, we men are still tied to our traditional roles—every day we are kept in check by life's natural boundaries as we pour concrete and earn our place through courageous deeds. Meanwhile women have all this power without any responsibility and fall into reckless hedonism, until one day they decide they're finally ready to have children but for many it's already too late. Then what?”

“Now, now! Don't parlay this back onto the women, please. For you to be so worldly may I assume that you are not

completely pure yourself? Ah, but I understand that love is not a two-way street: he chases and she submits. And today you seek to enter a more serious phase of life. However, in order to do so you must leave these sinful ways behind.”

The man clasped his hands together solemnly.

“Still,” she continued, “I am not so foolish as to even suggest that one of my novices reconsider her calling for any man who happens to come by with a sad story. No, you must prove yourself by passing a test of your character.”

“Anything you require.”

“Tonight you will stay in a locked room in total darkness with one of our sisters. Resist temptation and in the morning we shall see.”

“I swear to be true.”

That night he was led down a dim hallway and through a side door which opened into a modest sitting room. A nun of about thirty was knitting on the small sofa.

“This is Sister Florence,” the mother superior began. “She will accompany you through the night. At dawn we will know what kind of a suitor you really are.”

The man faced Sister Florence and said, “How do you do?”

She set down her knitting and smiled. Just as he thought he perceived a whiskey flask in her hand the light was turned off and the door pulled shut. A bolt was secured then footsteps could be heard shuffling away.

Next morning after the door had been unlocked and the man escorted to the room where he had previously awoken with his hands tied, the mother superior conferred with Sister Florence in her study. The nun reported that aside from a “good night” the stranger never said a word—he did not respond to her suggestions that he join her for a drink let alone move to touch her. Therefore she had had no need to shake the bell which the abbess had placed on the mantle to signal that she be rescued from the man's filthy clutches.

The mother superior sent her away and had the man summoned.

“You did very well to restrain yourself. Sister Florence is not the youngest chicken in my coop but graceful nonetheless. I think tonight your willpower will be put to a more difficult test.”

That night the man was led back into the same room and came face to face with a petite brown-eyed nun of nineteen.

After they had been shut in she began to sing hymns in a sweet and melodious voice...

At dawn the man was again taken away and the abbess interviewed the young nun. She said he scarcely moved and only knew he was there at all from hearing the occasional creaking of a floorboard as he adjusted himself across the room. Therefore she too had no cause to ring the bell in distress. The mother superior dismissed her and paced in front of the window in frustration.

Just as she had given up hope of finding a way to send this man back out into the world, she saw Lily the local shopgirl down in the courtyard with a delivery. Lily was known as a flirt and a tease so if anyone could properly test the stranger's will it was she.

The mother superior had her brought up to the study and, after a few polite formalities, asked if she would be willing to help rid the convent of a pest. It would be easy work for her and she would be paid extra for her time. When Lily agreed she laid out the plan: the girl was to don a nun's habit, lock herself in the room with the handsome foreigner, then employ all the wiles and tricks which had previously made her a cautionary tale

within the convent—and tonight God would not judge or condemn because she was serving a worthy purpose.

“But what if he doesn't nibble?” Lily asked with a giggle.

“The night is long, my dear. I trust you will be able to break down his resistance. And,” the abbess whispered to herself, “I'll be sure to remove that warning bell. Let nature run its course and this nuisance of a man will leave here in shame!”

So again on this third night the man was brought before a nun, this time coming face to face with the hazel-eyed “Sister” Lily who he noticed sat more casually than the previous two. After the lights had been turned off and the door secured she began her seduction, creeping slowly toward her prey as she asked tender but probing questions.

When the abbess went to open the door the next morning she braced herself for the shocking sight of these animals in each other's clutches, but the smile of victory for having passed God's latest test faded when Lily threw herself into her arms and bawled hysterically.

“I am an awful creature, Mother Superior!”

“But why, Lily? What have you done?”

The mother superior moved past her into the room only to find the man fully clothed and without a hair disturbed on his head.

“Expecting a different scene, perhaps?” he said, leaning calmly against the wall. “I suggest you have a chat with Miss Lily and then you will no doubt grant my wish.”

She turned about, grabbed Lily by the wrist, and dragged her into the study.

“Silly girl! How could you not achieve something you were seemingly born to do?”

“But I tried, ma'am!”

“My God, do you know what I'm obliged to do now? Did you *really* try? He looks fresh as a flower!”

“I said lovely things, I did. All the naughty fun we could have, our little secret. But every time I got near enough to touch him he leaped away. And then just when I had him cornered he began to speak.”

“Oh yes? What did he say?”

“Ma'am, it's terrible! I never realized what men go through in life. I'm just having fun and games with the lads but now I see what he means when he says, 'All waters flow into the female

ocean.' They are our mules, working so hard for a smile or a little kiss. Oh, but I do love to tease them, and they give me such nice presents, then I make them fight over me even when I don't care who wins.

“But we've pushed too far! Men are waking up. They're talking to each other all over the world on their computers about how they've been used. They're like slaves planning a revolt, but we mustn't let them run off! Give him what he wants so we can put out this fire before it spreads. Yes, yes, we girls will have to be more careful and give a little ground but then we'll still hold the leash—otherwise we could lose it all!”

The abbess's head was spinning. She thought she had neatly sized up this whole situation but now the dominoes were falling back and forth across her mind—until suddenly the camera lens of her consciousness fully opened and she saw it. This tumultuous new chapter which was being written in the age-old book of love was but one symptom of the monumental forces of change that were rapidly pushing the species toward an uncharted precipice—one that might even portend a glorious resurgence for the church!

And if all one could do in life was to tend her garden, the mother superior reasoned that she would do her small part right now to help guide the lost sheep in her midst—both male *and* female, Lily's speech being of course so shortsighted and self-serving.

After sending Lily home with a generous tip in exchange for her discretion about all that had just transpired, the abbess instructed her secretary to summon the members of the order of marriageable age who had not yet taken their perpetual vows. Rumors had already circulated within the convent during the past several days and now as the five women were brought in their faces belied hints of curiosity, dread, even mirth.

“Ladies,” the mother superior began, “no doubt you are aware of the strange goings on here in recent days. I assure you that not only have I been convinced of the grave message imparted by our male guest, but also young Lily the delivery girl has given me profound insights that lead me to the following conclusion: mankind faces an existential crisis which it has never seen before and therefore has few means to defend against. And because of this, now all of a sudden in an era when the church has lost influence either through scandal or neglect

the opportunity arises to honor our commitment to God by leading our brethren out of the coming darkness—however unorthodox the method may seem.”

Her eyes flashed.

“This evening you will stand before the stranger and he will choose one of you to be his bride...”

At hearing these words a murmur could not be suppressed even by such serious and austere young women.

“He will select you,” the abbess continued, “and together you shall 'be fruitful and multiply' as our Lord once commanded. Now, if any of you so vehemently opposes this assignment that you insist upon being excused let me assure you that were I a younger woman I too would waver but ultimately have faith that *my* mother superior would not lead me astray. Indeed by leaving this room you would in essence walk out on me, and though you may still reside among me physically it shall be your married sister who is nearer to my heart. So I ask, which of you refuses to serve God's inscrutable will?”

Not one turned to leave and slowly each sank to a knee to kiss the abbess's hand as she walked past.

Several hours later the bachelor was led from his room out into the courtyard where he saw the five young nuns surrounded by the rest of the order. The circle broke ranks to allow him and his elderly escort to enter, where she bowed to the mother superior and withdrew.

The abbess looked at him gravely and said, “Sir, you have proved your honor by passing my tests. Here before you stand the women of my order suited for this task. Choose wisely. Look not at the color of their cheeks but into the depths of their souls for God's guidance in selecting your bride.”

The man nodded and as he turned to survey the line he felt the scrutiny of the order which was about to sacrifice a sister. He looked around the circle and was startled when he saw one of the taller nuns staring intently at him.

He leaned toward the abbess and whispered, “Does that nun there not perhaps resemble a man?”

“Oh, yes,” she replied. “Indeed that is Sister Michaela, our trans sister. What, you don't believe yourself to be the first desperate man to reach our gate at his wit's end? His—excuse me, *her* choice was to renounce rather than fight or bargain over the mountain of expectations modern society puts on men.”

The bachelor felt his legs turn to jelly. He saw Sister Michaela gesture warmly toward the young nuns who stood with such graceful poise. He closed his eyes and said quietly to himself, “This journey is nearly over. Do not let outside distractions undermine your resolution.”

He clenched his fists and walked down the line of prospective brides, looking each in the eye as the mother superior had instructed. The first nun immediately cast her eyes down. The second briefly met his gaze then also looked away. The third put a hand over her mouth and furrowed her brow. The fourth offered a small smile with her lips closed. The fifth gently tilted her head toward him.

He could perceive no qualitative difference among them. Each was noble, healthy, and modest. He circled around to walk the line again.

“What is your name?” he asked the first.

“Sister Antonia, sir.”

“And yours?” he asked the second.

“I am Sister Josefina.”

Thus he went down the line and received polite responses also from Sisters Maria, Fortuna, and Emilia. Again sensing no

distinguishing characteristics between these honorable ladies he closed his eyes for a moment to seek the right question from God.

When he turned around again he addressed the group by saying, “I know that you aspired to serve God as Jesus' wife. Are you able to serve mankind in its time of need by instead taking me as your husband in this life on earth?”

The first four nuns each gave the same answer: “I am devoted to God and do not question his ways. Therefore I shall do as He wishes.”

But the fifth nun, Sister Emilia, replied, “Do not doubt my resolve, sir. Although you have proven that you can resist temptation of a night, are *you* able to serve God over many years?”

He replied, “All I ever sought was an accountable partner with which to face the future.”

Then he stepped back and kneeled before the abbess. “I choose Sister Emilia to be my bride.”

The mother superior motioned for Sister Emilia to approach and the man rose to stand beside her.

“Sister Emilia,” the abbess began, “no one ever knows what work God will put before us. All we can do is serve by doing what is asked faithfully. You have the courage and blessings of our entire order behind you.”

Sister Emilia bowed her head.

“And as for you, sir,” the abbess continued, “I warn you not to feel haughty after getting what you came here for. You have taken on a responsibility far greater than simply the role of husband and one day father. If all that you have said about society is true then surely the present course cannot hold. The madness that follows may at first be horrific but when people are forced into humility it binds them back to God.

“And during this time you will help lead mankind's rebirth as the decent restore the best aspects of culture. Oh yes, life will be much harder tomorrow than the seemingly intolerable state of affairs which drove you here to us, but at least you will find meaning in this noble struggle. God bless you both...”

And as the last rays of the sun eased away from this ancient convent where such extraordinary events had taken place, the American bachelor who had returned to his ancestral homeland

looked deeply into the expectant eyes of his bride-to-be. There was so much unknown between them as well as what lay ahead.

But long before this fateful couple would embark upon the virtuous work of leadership and replenishment there loomed a much more immediate gauntlet of travel visas, immigration interviews, and reams of bureaucratic paperwork for them to contend with.

Soon Emilia would even need a cell phone. The man shuddered within himself and prayed to God—whether for strength or imminent chaos we will never know.