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The Nun 's Story

By Robert Anderson

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"He that shall lose his life for me
shall find it.

"If thou wilt be perfect...

"go sell what thou hast
and give to the poor...

"and come follow me. "

Each sister shall understand
that on entering the convent...
she has made the sacrifice
of her life to God.

Well, are we off?

-Whenever you're ready, Father.

-Let's not wait for that.

Your hat's on crooked.

I tried to put it on without a mirror
to get used to....

There.

Marie didn't want to say goodbye.

And I'd rather not see Louise.

She'll be so upset and....

There's no chance. I'll wait outside.

Now, Louise, I left some things upstairs
for you and Marie.

Divide the dresses, but you keep
the blue ones because blue is your color.

Take good care of Father.

And don't let him

do too many operations in one day.

Why do you have to go, anyway?

Pierre.

Come along, Gaby,

I ordered the table for 1 :00.

I wish you all as happy as I am.

Gaby, I can see you poor,

I can see you chaste.

But I cannot see you, a strong-willed girl,
obedient to those bells.

In the Congo, Father,
they'll be calling me to work I love.

You may never get to the Congo.

You certainly can never ask for it.

You know that, don't you?

Your personal wishes cease to exist

when you enter that door.
Maybe it would be easier
if I went in alone, Father.
You're not an orphan.
Or going without your father's consent.
Please remember this, Gaby.
Remember, if you ever decide
this is not right for you...
there is no sense of failure
in coming back home.
Sister William.
-Dr. Van der Mal?
-Yes?
My name's Pascin.
You operated on me five years ago.
-Oh, yes. Left lung, wasn't it?
-No, the right.
-May I present my daughter, Simone?
-And my daughter, Gabrielle.
A great day.
-Dr. Van der Mal?
-Sister.
I am Sister Margarita,
Mistress of Postulants.
Welcome.
Of course you know Sister William
from the hospital.
Sister William and I
have shared many an anxious hour.
Sister William says Gabrielle
will be a truly great nurse.
I know you are largely responsible for that.
-I'll miss her in my laboratory.
-We'll put her to good use in ours.
Real spirit, I think.
Well, we call it stubbornness.
You may, too, after a few weeks.
We'll be going in shortly.
-Good afternoon, Doctor.
-Good afternoon, Sister.
I suppose Sister Margarita
is what they call a living rule.
What's that?
They say if the holy rule of a convent

were destroyed...
it could be recaptured by studying
the behavior of such a perfect nun.
-Doctor.
-Sister.
The dowry, I think, Father.
Oh, yes, of course.
Thank you, Doctor.
Goodbye, Father. I'll miss you.
I'll do my best.
I want you to be proud of me.
I don't want to be proud of you.
I want you to be happy.
I am happy.
Gabrielle, your number is 1,072.
Thank you, Sister.
You are blessed to have this number.
It belonged to Sister Marie Polycarpe.
She was a nursing sister in the Congo.
When you have your things, you will
form two columns and face the door.
From now on, your place in line...
is determined by your age
in this community.
The first admitted is the oldest.
That is Yvonne Duval.
Here.
Yvonne Duval. Henrietta de la Croix.
Simone Pascin. Cecile de Planer.
Gabrielle Van der Mal.
Helen de Rode.
Your hands must learn to stay still.
And out of sight.
Except when they're needed
for nursing or prayer.
I'm so glad you're here, Sister William.
When you go through that door,
I'm not here.
For the six months
that you're a postulant...
and the year as a novice...
we may not speak to each other
except in matters of work.
I didn't know.

Do not fret about your veils.
You will soon learn to dress
without mirrors.
As you will learn tomorrow
when we start studying the Holy Rule...
which governs our life
here in the community...
one of the first conditions
is the rule of silence.
Exterior and interior silence.
We observe the Grand Silence
from after chapel at night...
until after chapel in the morning.
We will go now into chapel
for evening prayers.
Dear children, you will have five days
of instruction and preparation...
before you are formally admitted
as postulants by the Superior General.
We constantly strive toward perfection
by inner silence.
The ultimate goal of this silence...
is to make possible
constant conversation with God.
Therefore, we do not talk loudly...
nor do we engage
in useless conversations.
We close doors quietly.
Whenever possible,
we use a kind of sign language.
This means,
"May I have permission to speak?"
This means, "Excuse me."
Shall we try it?
We do this to attract a sister's attention.
Just the sleeve.
We never touch another sister, of course.
We use signs, particularly during meals.
We, of course,
never ask for things for ourselves.
Each sister is alert to the needs
of her fellow sisters.
In walking, dear children,
we never saunter...

as though we had no place to go.
Nor do we hurry.
When we walk
through halls and corridors...
we practice humility
by walking close to the walls.
Now.
Tomorrow, in the chapter hall...
the Superior General will admit you
formally into the congregation.
And you will begin
your six months' terms as postulants.
The Reverend Mother Emmanuel
represents Christ among us.
And as such she is loved
and obeyed by us.
What do you ask, my children?
To be admitted into this congregation.
Arise in the name of God.
Dear children, it is not easy to be a nun.
It is not a life of refuge from the world.
It is a life of sacrifice.
In a way, it is a life against nature.
It is a never-ending struggle
for self-perfection.
Some of you will have
more trouble than others.
Poverty, chastity, and obedience
are extremely difficult.
Each of us here can assure you of that.
The sacrifices that are required
of us are bearable...
only if we make them with love.
Just as in the world
we can do impossible things...
with a glad heart for a loved one...
so it is with us.
We can endure greater sacrifice...
because the object of our love
is our Lord Jesus Christ.
In order to come into closer union
with our Lord...
you will be submitted
to exercises and tests...

which are designed
to root out your faults...
curb your passions...
and prepare you
for acquiring the virtues and grace.
If you question
these exercises in humility...
these steps towards a closer union
with our crucified Lord...
you do not belong with us.
Cloistered life is made up
of an infinity of small things.
You must try to live the Holy Rule
not day by day...
but minute by minute...
in a state of constant alertness
against imperfections.
The perfect nun is one who,
for the love of God...
is obedient in all things unto death.
Remember, dear children,
you can very easily cheat us, your sisters.
But you can never cheat yourself. Or God.
The postulant will learn
strict obedience to the bell...
which is the voice of God.
Stopping whatever she is doing instantly...
when it calls to other duty or devotions.
What is served for lunch, do you know?
It doesn't matter.
They won't let me eat it, anyway.
Twice each day for the rest of your lives...
you will examine your consciences.
And enter in these notebooks...
each and every imperfection
against the Holy Rule.
For example, if you drink
a glass of water between meals...
without asking permission.
If you leave a light on unnecessarily.
If you're late for work, and so on.
I accuse myself of breaking
the Grand Silence.
I accuse myself of

uncharitable thoughts about my sisters.
I accuse myself of having drunk a glass of
water between meals without permission.
I accuse myself of failing
in modesty of the eyes.
I accuse myself of worldly desires.
I accuse myself
of having spoken without necessity.
I accuse myself of laughing
during the Grand Silence.
I accuse myself....
I accuse myself of daydreaming.
-I accuse myself....
-I accuse myself....

Enter.

Yesterday I visited one of our sisters
who is ill in hospital.
And your father was attending her.
He asked about you. And about the Congo.
And the bush station where he thinks
you would like to do your nursing.
I told him it was much too soon
even to think of it.
Of course, Reverend Mother.
-I....
-Well, go ahead.
I just want to become a good nurse
and a good nun...
and to do God's work wherever I'm sent.
First become a good nun.
We select only the very strongest sisters
for our missions.
Your nursing qualifications would
seem to make you a likely candidate.
But you are still very far
from being mature in the religious life.
Maturity is the armor of our missionaries.
And this is not achieved in a day.
Since tomorrow is the day of vesture...
when you receive the habit of a novice...
we must talk today about detachment.
You have already detached yourselves
from family and friends.
Now we have the difficult detachment

from things and memories.
Tonight, when you go to your cells...
you will find parts of your new habit.
And on your tables, the only possessions
allowed you from now on.
A basket will be passed.
And you must put in it,
of your own free will...
any object you still have...
which might call up memories
of your former life.
What do you ask, my daughters?
We ask for the mercy of God.
And for the favor to be received...
into this congregation.
We offer our Lord...
our liberty, our memory, and our will.
And we ask only for His love
and His holy grace.
Are you firmly resolved...
to despise the honors, riches...
and all the vain pleasures of this world...
in order to prepare
for a closer union with God?
We are so resolved, Monsignor.
Do you make this request
of your own free will?
-Yes.
-Yes.
May the Lord, who has begun this...
-bring it to perfection.
-Amen.
Go, my children...
divest yourselves
of the vanity of this world.
And receive for your bodies
the habit of humility.
Yvonne Duval
will be known as Sister Marie Sebastian.
Henrietta de la Croix
will be known as Sister Marie Bernadette.
Simone Pascin
will be known as Sister Marie Christine.
Cecile de Planer

will be known as Sister Marie Joseph.
Gabrielle Van der Mal
will be known as Sister Luke.
Sister, you make a beautiful nun.
Sister.
You're blushing.
It happened to me, too, in my ward.
We shouldn't blush, I'm sure we shouldn't.
How can we help it?
It must mean
some wrong awareness of self.
Must we write it in our notebooks?
I don't know.
Should we write that we talked alone?
I always start it.
Your training as a postulant
has been mostly in externals.
Now, as novices,
you will be devoting the next year...
to the real formation of a nun.
During that entire year,
none of you will leave the Mother House.
We will pay particular attention
to the removal of faults...
the control of passions,
and the acquiring of virtue...
so that you may be born again in Christ.
We will have exercises to develop charity,
forbearance, and humility...
and tests to destroy love of self.
Two of these tests
are the culpa and the penance.
From now on, in addition
to writing in your notebooks...
you will once a week...
proclaim before your sisters
your external faults against the Rule.
And you will be given a penance
to perform in refectory or in chapel.
The degree of humiliation will tell you
how much pride is still alive in you.
Only as your pride slowly crumble...
will you get the first glimpse
of true humility.

If any sister has observed you
in an external fault...
which you have not proclaimed...
it is her duty to proclaim you in charity...
so that you may be aware
of your errors and correct them.
I say my culpa for speaking without
necessity, for being late for chapel...
for letting a door slam without penance.
What do you have to say in charity?
I proclaim my sister for giving in
to the temptation of vanity...
by looking at herself in a glass window.
You will say three Hail Marys
in refectory...
for the sister who had the charity
to proclaim you.
And three Hail Marys
for each imperfection.
And pray God to help you
to perfect yourself.
Mother, I will try to correct myself
with the grace of God.
I say my culpa
for breaking the rule of obedience...
by not stopping work
when I heard the bell.
For having spilled milk
twice in the refectory.
For having spoken without necessity
during Grand Silence.
What have you to say in charity?
I proclaim myself and Sister Luke...
for seeking each other's company.
You will ask God to help you
to overcome this attachment...
and you will kiss the feet of the nuns
and beg your bread in refectory.
Mother, I will try to correct myself
with the grace of God.
Dear Lord...
the more I try,
the more imperfect I become.
I seem to fail in charity,

humility, and obedience.
Pride has not been burned out of me.
When I succeed in obeying the Rule...
I fail at the same time
because I have pride in succeeding.
Tomorrow you go on retreat
before taking the first vows, don't you?
The Grand Silence doesn't matter for me.
I'm not taking my vows. I'm leaving.
So I can talk without having to say a culpa
or do a penance.
Why?
Mother Emmanuel said,
"Remember, you can cheat us...
"but you cannot cheat yourself or God."
Well, to go on would be cheating God.
-To be a hypocrite.
-We all have our doubts.
-My confessor--
-Of course.
But I know myself.
I could never be like you.
As strong as you.
I'm the weakest of us all.
If you were,
you would not be taking your vows.
Now I've earned you another penance
by talking to you in the Grand Silence.
I'm sorry.
Goodbye.
Pray for me.
"I, Gabrielle Van der Mal,
known as Sister Luke...
"promise to God in the presence
of Your Grace and our Reverend Mother...
"to obey the Holy Rule
of this congregation...
"and to persevere in the life
of obedience, chastity, and poverty...
"for the period of three years. Amen."
Sister Luke, this is the discipline
for penance in private.
You will use it twice each week at night
while you are saying the Miserere.

Remember, it is essentially
a symbol of penance.
Too much is as bad as too little.
Don't forget you are only an instrument.
In yourself you are nothing,
until you are lifted up.
Tomorrow you will leave for the School
of Tropical Medicine in Antwerp.
Excuse me.
Your father's daughter. Excellent.
Excuse me.
Well.
Sister Pauline,
how long were you in the Congo?
Seven years.
You worked quite a lot with the lepers,
didn't you?
-Yes.
-Yes!
Well, that is the bacillus
which causes leprosy!
Thank you, Doctor.
I, too, have lost some of my quickness,
my memory...
from too much Congo sun.
Too much quinine.
If any of you think that the Congo
that you'll find today in 1930...
is anything like the Congo that we found
when we went there 20 years ago...
you will be mistaken.
There are now bicycle paths
through the brush.
Close that window, somebody,
will you? There.
I know you think it's hot.
Wait till you've had your share of malaria.
Don't be selfish, Sister Luke,
help your sisters.
She was brought up
looking through a microscope, you know...
whilst most of you
were playing with kaleidoscopes.
Sister Luke, would you help me with this?

That is the bacille de Koch
that causes tuberculosis.
-I thought it was the leprosy bacillus.
-They are very alike.
Both rod-shaped, both acid-fast...
both with a slight shadow
almost like an enclosing capsule.
But if you look very closely...
you'll see that the leprosy bacillus
is slightly fatter and longer.
Enter.
I'm in trouble, Reverend Mother.
It's Sister Pauline.
My conscience is not at peace because
of my unfriendly feelings towards her.
At the Mother House, we were told
to overcome feelings like this...
by trying to help the person.
For five months I've tried to help
Sister Pauline in the courses.
She needs help.
But she will not permit friendship...
and so I do not know what to do.
Sister Pauline has already come to me.
The feeling you describe is mutual.
She thinks you are full of pride.
She does not believe
that you can ever achieve humility.
I'm ashamed, My Mother,
for her and for me.
All this sounds very childish
when you tell it.
Her dislike, I believe, is based on fear.
She worries that she will
not be able to pass the examination.
Or if she does,
that she will be far below you in grade.
This could easily mean
that she could not return to the Congo.
You have been given a truly great
opportunity to make a sacrifice for God.
You asked what you might do?
Would you, Sister Luke...
be able to fail your examination

to show humility?

My Mother...

I would be willing if the Mother House knows of this and approves.

Then it would be a humility with hooks, as we say.

A humility that takes something back for the sacrifice.

In this case, the satisfaction of knowing that the Mother House knows.

-Courage needs witnesses.

-Yes.

Real humility, on the other hand...

passes unperceived

between God and the soul.

You have heard our phrase,

"Do good and disappear."

How do we know when we are humble?

When we can accept a real humiliation.

Such as this failure.

How can I know God wants this from me?

Go and ask Him.

But remember, you are weighing an opportunity that may never come again.

Out of His eternal time...

God chooses His moment

to offer the most perfect alliance...

with each individual soul.

-Good morning, Sister Luke.

-Good morning, Doctor.

I promised I would call your father immediately after the examination.

I shall defer to my eminent colleagues for the first question.

Sister, the board would like to hear from you...

in what parts of the tsetse fly will the trypanosomes be found.

You may take your time with this question, Sister.

We have been working on them since the 1880s.

They will be found in the....

Perhaps you'd like the question repeated?

In the tsetse fly,
the trypanosomes will be found...
in the gut,
mouth parts, and salivary glands...
in all of which sites they multiply.
We would like to hear a rsum of the special clinical types of pernicious...
as differentiated
from chronic or latent malaria.
Cerebral, algid, bilious remittent fever,
blackwater fever...
and bronchopneumonic form.
I have good news.
All four of our sisters
have passed their examinations.
Sister Pauline will return to the Congo.
Sisters Timothy and Ellen...
will go to the Congo, too.
Sister Luke will leave tomorrow morning...
to join the nursing staff
of our mental sanatorium near Brussels.
Perhaps Reverend Mother feels
you are not yet ready for the Congo.
You must learn to accept with love
whatever comes to you.
It is essential in religious life.
You passed fourth in a class of 80.
Everything they do
is to be accepted as normal.
Sister Agnes, Sister Luke.
Good morning, Mother Christoph.
Our practical nurses
stand a four-hour shift.
Our sisters take unlimited duty,
sometimes from 8 to 10 hours.
These are the cells
for our most dangerous patients.
We try to approach
even our most dangerous cases...
with gentle and persuasive reasoning.
Sister Berthold, this is Sister Luke,
who is to be with us for a while.
-Sister Berthold.
-Sister Luke.
This one thinks

that she is the Archangel Gabriel.
So we call her that.
Good afternoon, Archangel.
She's a schizophrenic and very dangerous.
She has perfectly sane periods when
she talks intelligently about her farm.
A sister is forbidden to open the door
of any of these cells...
unless there is another sister with her.
Or a practical helper.
One ought to be able to get through
to someone like her.
-Hello.
-Hello, Archangel.
This is the room where we give
the treatment for the violent cases.
We keep them four to eight hours
in baths...
maintained at a constant temperature.
The sound that you hear are their heels...
beating up and down against the tubs.
Sister Marie is on duty.
She generally remains there
from eight to 10 hours at a time.
Sister Luke.
It isn't one of my pleasantest duties...
opening and reading
other people's letters, but...
sometimes it does allow me to help them.
As you see,
your father asks an angry question.
Why should you waste
all these months of your time here...
after your strenuous courses
in tropical medicine?
I must apologize for my father.
Your father's a very great man.
But I don't think he understands...
that the colonies are only for sisters
perfected in the religious life.
He asks what you could possibly learn
in this place.
When I'm permitted to write to him
I will tell him what I can learn here:

obedience.

Perhaps that's what Mother Emmanuel
had in mind.

That this would make
an excellent proving ground.

I shall try.

And I shall try with you...
since your soul is in my care
while you are here.

Thank you, Reverend Mother.

-Yes?

-I am so thirsty.

May I have a drink of water, please?

A terrible thirst.

The fish was so salty.

Oh, God.

God.

Oh, God.

The Archangel.

Pride. Pride and disobedience.

Always disobedience.

Don't try to talk. I would probably
have done the same thing.

I accuse myself also of pride in thinking
I could handle the Archangel myself.

I accuse myself of using personal
judgment in not ringing the bell for help.

I accuse myself of a sense of heroism.

Mother, in the three days

I've been lying in the infirmary...

I have accused myself

of almost every possible imperfection...
against the Holy Rule.

They are always such glaring faults.

At the School of Tropical Medicine...

Mother Marcella offered me the chance
to show true humility...

-by failing an examination.

-I know.

Mother Marcella means well...

but she was very wrong

to make that suggestion to you.

My child, I don't underestimate for
a moment the seriousness of your faults.

But you mustn't destroy yourself
with guilt and remorse.
You must learn to bend a little
or you'll break.
Long before I entered the order,
I had a rule of my own:
All or nothing.
I want to be a good nun or....
You will be a good nun, Sister Luke.
I thought one would reach
some sort of resting place...
where obedience would be natural
and struggle would end.
There is no resting place. Ever.
But you must have patience with yourself.
Unhappy saints are lost
from the beginning.
Ask for God's help and guidance...
and I know you will make your final vows.
"I, Sister Luke...
"promise to God in the presence of
Your Grace and of our Reverend Mother...
"to persevere in the life of obedience...
"chastity, and poverty...
"until death. Amen."
I declare you from today...
the bride of Jesus Christ,
Son of Almighty God.
I declare you from today...
the bride of Jesus Christ,
Son of Almighty God.
-Mother, pray for me.
-My daughter, may God give you peace.
Don't be proud of me, Father.
This is really flight.
It will be so much easier in the Congo
to remember I'm nothing.
There will be no worldly associations
in a bush station, in the jungle.
Please, God, let me do some good.
Where's Mother Mathilde?
We are very fortunate in Mother Mathilde.
-Mama Augustine.
-Kalulu.

-Welcome home, Mama Augustine.
-It's good to be back.
Ilunga. This is Sister Luke.
This is Kalulu.
He practically runs the convent.
Sister Augustine. Welcome back.
Welcome.
-This is Sister Aurelie.
-Sister.
Sister Luke.
Now, a short boat trip across the Congo
and you're home.
And there's the Congo.
Drums tell your arrival, Mama Augustine.
Yours, too, Mama Luke.
What are the drums saying, Kalulu?
Mama Augustine, she can read drums.
Sister Luke....
I thought it might amuse you to know
what the drums said about you last night.
The way Kalulu laughed,
it must be something very funny.

They said:

"Held hands with Big Mama Mathilde
on way back to Sister House...
"therefore esteemed.
Talks little, looks much.
"Young enough to bear children."
We call her the Novice.
But like all little novices,
she's still imperfect in discipline.
Come along with me now on my rounds.
We'll start with the native hospital.
How we've needed
this extra pair of hands.
"Yambo"means hello.
But of course you know that.
-You've been studying.
-Yes.
-Mama Luke.
-Yambo, Mama Luke.
Only one generation ago,
their fathers were savages in the forest.

We couldn't run the hospital
without them.
You'll notice
we haven't converted them all yet.
Some still wear the witch doctor's fetish
around their necks.
That is our surgeon, Dr. Fortunati.
He spends half his time here.
The rest of the day
he operates in the white hospital.
I'm afraid she's too fast for me...
but nursing them every day, I'll learn.
I see our chaplain, Father Andre, is here.
He is greatly loved.
Even the non-Catholics
hold their children up to him...
to be blessed when he passes.
Father Andre...
you have a new soul to look after.
-Sister Luke.
-Sister.
-Father.
-We're so glad you are here.
We do need another pair of hands.
The barber's been itching
to get at that beard for years...
but the natives
have a picture of God with a beard...
so priests have to wear beards
in the Congo.
No beard, no converts. Excuse me, please.
We're only beginning to persuade them
to come to hospital to have their babies.
Not all of them trust us, yet.
Many of them still prefer
to deliver themselves in the bush.
They scoop out a hole and that's it.
That's how they call
our children to school.
-Sister.
-Sister.
Sister is teaching the mothers
how to wash their children.
You know,

I had hoped to go to the bush station...
but seeing all of this,
I'm very happy to be here.
But Mother Emmanuel sent you a cable,
didn't she?
Yes, that I was to be here with you.
With us, yes,
but not at the native hospital.
Across the way, at the white hospital,
with the Europeans.
One of the nurses here got TB
and we had to send her home.
TB makes further service
in the Congo impossible...
so you'll have to hold down
two jobs over there.
Supervising the nurses
and assisting Dr. Fortunati.
I'm sorry...
but it's a lesson
we all have to learn, isn't it?
Disappointments.
We'll go there now.
-Good morning, Mama Mathilde.
-Ilunga, this is Sister Luke.
-Good morning.
-Good morning.
Ilunga will be your deputy here
at the hospital.
Good.
You will be assisting Dr. Fortunati here.
He is a genius and a devil.
He works himself to exhaustion...
and his nurses, too.
I'm used to doctors. My father....
I'm sorry, I forgot.
Your father is a great surgeon. I know.
You must always leave surgery
the moment operations are over.
You must never linger to discuss a case.
You will be tempted to
because he is a marvel.
But remember, he is also a man...
a bachelor...

and I'm afraid an unbeliever.
Don't ever think for an instant, Sister,
that your habit will protect you.
Now, I leave you
to look over your equipment.
Yes, Mother.
You will say six A ves and a Pater Noster
for that bit of vanity, Sister.
I'm Dr. Fortunati.
You must be the new sister.
-Yes, I'm Sister Luke.
-How do you do?
-How do you do?
-Well, the drums were right.
I see somebody told you what they said.
I believe I'm to assist you
in the operating room, Doctor.
Yes.
I hope you bear up longer
than the last sister.
I can only try.
These summer months this room gets
like a bake-oven by 9:00 in the morning...
so I operate at 5:00.
That means you get up at 4:00.
I'll be here.
And sometimes I operate
right through the time of your mass.
So you'll get used to taking communion...
at that door there, on those occasions.
I'll have to ask permission
of Reverend Mother.
Reverend Mother is not in charge here.
This is a government hospital.
-Still, I'll--
-You're paid by the government...
and therefore, you're responsible to them.
They don't pay you to pray,
but to assist me.
-I understand that.
-It's all right.
The Reverend Mother's
given permission to the operating sisters.
I can't have my nurses running off to mass

in the middle of an operation.

5:

Have you ever assisted
at an operation before?

Yes. My father's Dr. Hubert Van der Mal.

I see.

You'll say another five A ves
and beg your soup...

for that little display of pride, Sister.

These boys had better be trained to do...

more than just stand around
dropping things.

Yes, Doctor, I'll work with them.

Tighter.

Don't you faint on me.

I won't.

I asked Mother Mathilde
to let the operating sister...

have something to eat before she came in
the morning, but she won't.

-So if you faint on me--

-I won't faint, Doctor...

if you promise not to eat garlic again
the night before an operation.

All right, I promise.

All right, go on.

When you've been at this longer,
I'll explain what I was doing.

Your being the daughter
of Dr. Van der Mal...

I expect you could instruct me.

Please don't mention
my father again, Doctor.

-Good morning, Reverend Mother.

-Good morning.

I wouldn't say their hands are as gentle
as Sister Luke's...

but then whose are?

This is certainly a great step forward.

I'd like to borrow Sister Luke
to organize our boys in the textile mills.

Just a moment, Sister Luke.

I had a telephone call

from the Bishop last night.
He had read your name in the paper
and heard your name on the drums...
about making some innovations here.
He asked me what I knew about it.
I had no answer.
It didn't occur to me to ask for permission.
He also asked me why one of my nuns
was trying to singularize herself.
I've failed you, Reverend Mother.
A superior must know what is happening
in a hospital entrusted to her care.
You have done something very important.
Your only fault
is in not telling me in advance...
and saving me the embarrassment.
-Mama Luke.
-Yes, Emil?
Where are your husbands?
I don't understand, Emil.
Where are the husbands
of the white mamas at the house?
Have you asked Mama Mathilde
about this?
-Yes.
-What did she say?
Something about you all being
the wives of one man.
But I know that can't be right.
Father Andre says it's wrong
to have more than one wife.
Well, it's not easy to explain.
I can understand some of the others
not having husbands, but not you.
The fact is, Emil, I have one.
-Well, I thought you would.
-But he's in Heaven.
I'm sorry, Mama Luke.
I'm very sorry.
Can you do without me
for a few days, Sister?
-What do you mean, Doctor?
-Well, I think we both need a rest.
I'm going up to Lake Kivu

for the weekend to do some fishing.
I see.
Give you a chance
to catch up on your prayers.
If there's an emergency?
Well, send for one of the doctors
in the town.
Keep up the morphine
with the terminal cancer.
But don't touch the dressings
on the skin graft.
You'd better get some rest yourself.
I've been working you pretty hard
in the last few months.
I'm all right. Have a fine weekend.
Did you ever go fishing?
It's impossible to talk to somebody
who's not allowed to remember.
See you on Monday.
Sister, the mission just called.
Father Andre has had a bad accident.
They're bringing him here.
See if you can still find Dr. Fortunati,
please, Sister.
Call one of the town doctors
for surgery immediately.
-Is the leg very bad?
-It's shattered.
The doctor will have to amputate.
They can't reach a doctor.
I left one of the boys to keep trying.
In that case, we'll have to do
the best we can to save the leg.
I'd like to save you from the sin of pride,
Sister, but I'm afraid I can't.
This may take nearly a year
to mend completely.
But you've saved the Father and his leg.
Mother Mathilde and Sister Aurelie
assisted me.
Yes, and all the other nuns praying
for you back at the Mother House. I know.
But you were the one who did it.
It's a photograph of a final x-ray

of Father Andre's leg.
It's just to remind you
what an excellent nurse you are.
Mother Mathilde's making a trip...
up the river next month
to visit the bush stations.
I'm going to send you along, too...
to make the annual leprosy check
on Father Vermeuhlen.
-I see you don't know about him.
-No.
Well, he's known as
the White Saint of the Leper Colony.
The trip will do you good.
And meeting Father Vermeuhlen will, too.
Religion hasn't made him
tense and disciplined.
-A nun is a disciplined person.
-Yes, but not necessarily tense.
As a surgeon, it's not my business
to probe into the mind...
but I'd say that tension is a sign
of an exhausting inner struggle.
The Grand Silence?
Do you realize
that every time you talk to me like this...
I should go down on my knees
before my sisters and proclaim my fault?
I'm sorry.
There's Father Vermeuhlen.
Father Vermeuhlen was
one of the first missionaries in the Congo.
He lived all alone in the bush.
One day he disappeared,
they thought he was dead.
But years later they found him.
Living with a native.
As penance for his sins...
he asked to be allowed to devote
the rest of his life to the lepers.
Well, I'll show you the rest of the station.
It's a makeshift,
but at least they're being cared for.
If left in the forest with their tribes,

they'd be abandoned to die.
Do they realize how ill they are?
Somehow we're all of us
protected from full realization.
How's that rascal Fortunati?
He gave me complete instructions
about you.
All the tests I must make.
Well, we can forget about the tests.
I know they're a nuisance,
but that is the real reason for our trip.
He always said
it was just a matter of time.
Reverend Mother, I'm sorry to ask again...
but may I have permission
to be absent from vespers?
There are some slides I must--
Thank you, Reverend Mother.
What are we going to do about you?
We operated at 5:00 in the morning.
It's now after midnight
and we operate again at 5:00.
I'll be there.
But how many more days
will you be there?
What'll I do if you're not?
You comfort your patients
by listening to their troubles.
Who listens to yours?
I'm responsible for the health
of the patients in this hospital.
And for your health, too.
You go to bed.
I don't know what to do, Doctor. I have TB.
Who says so?
Who told you that?
I just made a test.
It will mean my going back to Europe.
But you're the only one
in the whole Congo I can work with.
I can't lose you.
Let's have a look.
I'm not allowed.
I should call another sister.

Let's have a look.
I'm ready.
You're never wrong,
but let's hope this time you are.
Take a deep breath.
And again.
And again.
And again.
Now cough.
Breathe.
Cough.
Breathe.
We're lucky, Sister.
It's a small summit lesion,
and I think we've got it in time.
You can stand the gold treatment.
It's a bit rough on the kidneys,
but you're strong.
I'll take the responsibility.
-I'll have to tell Mother Mathilde.
-Why?
Obedience. I must.
They'll send you home if you do.
I know.
You're afraid you won't be able to
stand the convent if they send you back.
I'm going to tell you
something about yourself, Sister.
I've never worked with any other kind
of nurse except nuns since I began.
And you're not in the mold, Sister.
You never will be.
You're what's called a worldly nun.
Ideal for the public, ideal for the patients.
But you see things your own way.
You stick to your own ideas.
You'll never be the kind of nun
that your convent expects you to be.
That's your illness.
The TB is a byproduct.
I can cure the byproduct,
if you want me to.
I want to stay.
All right, leave it to me.

I'll tell the Mother Superior in such a way
that she can't send you home.
We'll put you up in the little pavilion...
where you'll be sleeping
practically in the treetops.
-How long?
-Five, six months, perhaps.
But remember,
I'm only working on the byproduct.
The main illness is for you to cure.
I'll try.
Anything you knew before I did,
keep under your bonnet if you can.
That is, unless your pride...
as a genius of the microscope
doesn't get the better of you.
I'll take an x-ray in the morning.
Come in.
His name is Felix and Mother Mathilde
said you might have him.
Really?
Ilunga gave him to me.
I'd rather he'd given me that fetish
from around his neck.
This reminds me of a tree house
that I had when I....
Anything you want, you ask for it.
Because Dr. Fortunati says
you're to be pampered.
Isn't it wonderful?
Thanks for Felix.
Refuse nothing. Ask for nothing.
It's a prairie oyster. Swallow it quickly.
Each night at 10:00 you'll be awakened
with sandwiches and two glasses of wine.
I see.
The drums have already started
passing the word...
so by tomorrow we'll be swamped
with food and drink for Sister Luke.
Don't cry.
Don't think too much. Relax.
Live life as it comes. From day to day.
I want you to drink

as much of this Belgian beer as you can.
Unless you want to come out
of this gold dust cure with ruined kidneys.
How can I drink so much--
It's all right, there's nobody
to see you here except him.
And you know about monkeys.
That's right. It's good to see you laugh.
You keep laughing, Sister.
I will.
I said rest. Absolute rest.
Thank you, Mother.
I don't know if I'm well yet,
but I feel so well.
So completely well.
It's strange that I had to fall ill to learn
to take each day and each night...
as a gift from God. Without struggle.
It seems impossible,
but when I say my culpa to you next...
I don't think I'll have any imperfections
against the Rule to proclaim.
Except that tonight
you talked during the Grand Silence.
That's a whole week of normal.
You're allowed to have pride, Doctor.
Take pride in your cure.
Are you cured?
The slides and the temperature seem to....
-It'll be good to have you back in surgery.
-It'll be good to be useful again.
Don't rush it, Sister.
It's not going to be easy
to return to the community.
Even to this select little gathering
here in the Congo.
I'm going to miss this.
Well.
At least he's curious.
If I could only get him
into the chapel Christmas Eve.
Well, what do you think of it, Ilunga?
It's for the chapel.
Christmas Eve.

Come in. Come in and have a look at it.
I'm afraid not this year.
I would give anything
if I could convert him.
You spoil them, Sister.
It's one of our building boys
who's come for first aid.
You think if you bandage their fingers,
you'll get their souls.
Well, maybe you're right.
No, inside. Dispensary.
No, inside.
Ilunga, help me lift her.
Ilunga.
She is dead, Reverend Mother.
Ilunga.
If you're on your way to contagion,
please take these to Sister Raphael.
-I don't understand.
-What?
You're not angry with us?
-There's no place in our hearts for anger.
-But this killing, Mama Luke.
Not even then.
Why did he do it, Ilunga?
A witch doctor told him
that if he killed a white woman...
he'd be rid of the ghost of his dead wife.
I feel sorry for him.
If such a death happened with us...
we'd tie the murderer to a stake
and cut his body for fish bait.
But we would not.
We've been taught to forgive.
That's what you must try
and make the other boys understand.
Tell the boys we hope they'll all come
to chapel Christmas Eve.
Maybe even you, Ilunga.
Sometime this afternoon
we'll discuss the Englebert case.
I want to give you instructions for the trip.
-The trip?
-Yes. Hasn't Mother Mathilde told you?

What?

I have to send you back to Belgium.

With the Englebert case.

You are the only one qualified.

The only one we can possibly send.

He is important to the colony.

And we can only avoid

a complete mental breakdown...

if we get him to a sanitarium

with proper facilities.

Of course, Mother.

I hope the Mother House

will return you to us as soon as possible.

In the meantime, at long last...

they are sending me another sister

with qualifications similar to yours.

Dr. Fortunati will give you instructions

about the case.

We shall all miss you.

You'll have native guards to help you

on the train as far as the coast.

After that, the ship's doctor

will share the responsibility.

I'll give you a supply of sedatives

in case he needs them.

Do you think they'll send you back here?

I don't know.

-There's going to be a war in Europe.

-I know.

They tell me somebody else is coming out

to fill in for you or take your place.

-Yes.

-Somebody else will have to train her.

I'm taking a long vacation

when you leave here.

I couldn't help it.

Englebert's an important man.

There was nobody else, I had to send you.

I understand.

I wish I could keep you here.

As much for your sake as for mine.

Supposing they keep you

indefinitely in Belgium?

You seem so sure

of your religious strength, but I'm not.
Once you set foot in the Mother House,
the walls, the discipline, the silence--
Will you indicate the dosage
for the sedatives?
But if they keep you indefinitely,
will the strength be enough?
Yes.
You're sure it's not
that ferocious will of yours?
I'm sure.
But when you get there,
you're going to wish that you--
Doctor, a nun is not a person
who wishes or desires.
But you're going to feel that you can't....
When you're ready to discuss the case,
please ring for me.
I'm coming back, you beautiful thing.
Do you hear me? I'm coming back.
Come in, Mama Luke.
This is for you.
Tell them thank you.
-How is your health, my child?
-Very good, thank you, Reverend Mother.
So many fine letters
from colonial families...
and missionary fathers
about your good work.
You were liked and respected
by everyone out there...
including your native boys, I see.
Do you wish me to give it to your father?
I would rather it be kept in
the congregation to which it belongs.
When I return to....
When I leave here, it will be good to know
it is in the Mother House.
That is very generous of you.
You will be a splendid example
for our postulants and novices here.
And I think they will be good for you, too.
The more we are looked to for example,
the better examples we become.

-Don't you find that true?
-Yes, Reverend Mother.
So, you will stay here with us then.
Now, you must have a good rest.
You must not worry about anything.
Simply enjoy being home again.
Couldn't I help at the hospital,
Reverend Mother?
No, my child, not now.
You must have a few quiet months
to renew your spiritual life.
This will look very nice in our museum.
Gaby.
You look thin, Gaby.
-You always say that, Father.
-It's always true.
No, it isn't.
Of course...
I don't believe that rubbish about
your having had TB in the Congo.
Don't believe it then.
One just doesn't survive
and have TB in the tropics.
Here I am.
You must've had a good doctor.
Exceptional.
I suppose they'll be sending you back
after a little rest?
I don't know.
If there's not a war.
They talked about nothing else
on the boat.
Your brother's in the army.
-Little Pierre?
-Oh, it's big Pierre.
Your sisters?husbands
are in the army, too.
Marie and Louise
will come to see you soon.
There can't be a war.
How are you, really, Gaby?
I'm very well, Father.
Would you like to see the x-rays?
I mean in here.

How are you in there?
Still very lonely for you.
You know, Jean never married.
Father, you're an incurable romantic.
Jean isn't in my thoughts anymore.
I finally had to take a hand
in training your successor...
but she'll never replace you.
She has no rebellion in her.
That girl was born to be a nun...
something you could never be
in a thousand years, Reverend Sister.
You're not in love with him,
are you, my child?
No, Mother, of course
I've not fallen in love with him.
I admire him deeply
for his skill and selflessness...
when there is a life to be saved.
I think always he's very close to God...
in those unearthly hours
when he operates.
Dear Lord,
help me to detach from these memories.
How can I be a good nun
if I cannot get the Congo out of my blood?
Suppose you're detained
in the Mother House indefinitely?
Will your strength be enough then?
Ordinarily, I would advise you
to go on a retreat...
to try to regain your inner silence.
I have done nothing
but pray and meditate.
Many years ago, I came back from
the missions to the quiet of this house.
I know what you are feeling.
There can be no comparison,
Reverend Mother.
I've been remembering you especially
in my prayers...
knowing the agony
you've been going through.
For weeks, each tap on my door,

I thought it would be you.
I know it would have been the greater
perfection to have stayed here quietly.
And the greater danger in your case.
I can't send you back to the Congo
with the talk of war.
But there is an important post
as Assistant in Surgery...
at our hospital on the Holland border.
Thank you, Reverend Mother.
I have just received a telephone call
from our Reverend Mother Emmanuel.

"At 3:

"many thousands killed.
"Belgium was bombarded at 5:00.
"The country's system of sluices
had been put into operation...
"and certain main roads are already blown
up to prevent the German advances."
I tell you this
only that you will be prepared.
Our work must go on
as if nothing has happened.
It will be your responsibility
to set the example of courage and calm.
And to retain in your hearts
the spirit of charity for all.
Even the enemies of our country.
"Brussels fell to the enemy today.
"All of Holland is in German hands.
"The Maginot Line has fallen...
"and Northern France has been occupied."
"The Belgian Army,
the British Expeditionary Forces...
"and the Ninth French Army...
"are fighting with their
backs to the sea at Dunkirk."
King Leopold has signed a surrender.
He asks the population to behave
with dignity and discipline.
The sisters are urged not to take sides...
and not to participate in any activity
against the forces of occupation...

so that the orderly life
of the community is not disturbed...
and so that our hospital work
may go on without confusion.
I can only say again, monsieur,
that Mademoiselle Lisa...
cannot accept telephone calls
while on duty.
All right, Father, just a moment.
Someone who says he's Father John.
Sister Luke, may I have permission
to go into town for an hour?
My uncle is sick.
Now, Lisa, you've used that
"sick uncle" excuse twice in the last week.
-Have I?
-Yes.
-I have to go, Sister.
-Then tell me why.
You say you want to become a nun.
Well, one of the first things to learn
is obedience to....
We are hiding our soldiers who escaped.
We're hoping to get them to England.
-The underground--
-That's enough.
-Your brother may be one of the boys--
-Please.
I have to go.
Please, may I?
If ever I can be of help, tell me.
Hurry.
Did you mean that, about help?
Dear Lord, forgive me,
I cannot obey anymore.
What I do from now on
is between You and me alone.
I have a letter for you, Sister Luke.
Then I'll have to show it
to Mother Superior.
Don't.
If such a death happened with us,
Mama Luke...
we'd tie the murderer to a stake

and cut his body for fish bait.
But we would not.
We have been taught to forgive.
Oh, Father!
Father, I no longer belong in a convent.
Why do you say that, my child?
I am a hypocrite in the religious life.
I wear the habit of obedience,
but I flout the Rule.
I wear the cross of Christ
above a heart filled with hate.
You must try, my child.
These times are sent to test us.
I wonder if I'm even a good Christian.
When I think of my father,
I can't forgive the enemy.
And this is only one of my faults.
You must pray to God
to deliver you from revenge in the heart.
Today, a German war nurse died here...
and try as I would, I couldn't regret it.
My whole lifework
has been dedicated to saving lives...
and I almost rejoiced.
Perhaps it is too much to ask.
Father, I don't believe that.
It is not too much to ask.
I simply cannot obey...
--and if I cannot obey, then--
--You're so hard on yourself, my child.
Father, please lay my case
before the Cardinal.
I am no longer a nun.
You solemnly promised
to obey unto death.
You should seek God's pleasure
and your own joy...
in keeping faith with your vows.
Sacrifice is the only test
to thy love of God.
You will make a novena
to our Blessed Virgin.
She always works miracles.
Haven't you noticed?

All right, Father, because you ask me.
Reverend Mother Emmanuel
is paying a visit in a week's time.
Please wait and speak to her.
I do not want to see Mother Emmanuel.
Are you afraid
she'll dissuade you from leaving?
It isn't that.
Please lay my case before the Cardinal.
Won't you wait a little longer?
Father, you must forgive me...
but if you do not put my case
before the Cardinal...
I should do something that would kill me.
I shall leave without permission.
Why did you make me ask for you,
my child?
Didn't you know
that I'd been aware of your struggle?
It is too late for discussions,
Reverend Mother.
I'm at the end of my struggles.
Your sisters love you...
the doctors trust you...
and your students
respect you enormously.
You can cheat your sisters...
but you cannot cheat yourself or God.
Have you struggled long enough to say
surely that you've come to the end?
I think I've been struggling all these years,
Reverend Mother.
In the beginning, each struggle
seemed different from the one before it.
But then they began to repeat...
and I saw
they all had the same core: obedience...
without question...
without inner murmuring.
Perfect obedience as Christ practiced it...
as I no longer can.
Yes?
There are times when my conscience asks
which has priority.

It or the Holy Rule?
When the bell calls me to chapel...
I often have to sacrifice
what might be the decisive moment...
in a spiritual talk with a patient.
I'm late every day
for chapel or refectory or both.
When I have night duty,
I break the Grand Silence...
because I can no longer cut short a talk
with a patient who seems to need me.
Mother, why must God's helpers
be struck dumb by five bells...
in the very hours when men in trouble
want to talk about their souls?
You entered the convent to be a nun,
not to be a nurse.
The religious life must be more important
to you than your love of medicine.
Won't you make one more effort for God?
And for me as His instrument?
I have tried, Reverend Mother.
When I go from here,
I shall take you with me in my heart...
and keep you each day in my prayers.
-Lisa.
-Sister.
Lisa, you often talked
about entering the convent.
Yes, Sister. I'm going to.
You're not entering because
of any personal feeling of admiration...
you might have...
for any of the sisters?
No, not really. I don't think so.
I just wanted to know, Lisa,
because I'm going out.
I felt you were going to.
I'm glad you're coming in.
Is it certain that you're leaving?
I have asked.
What happens now?
I have no idea.
Here's an address.

The underground needs nurses.

-We shall miss you.

-And I shall miss....

You'll be a fine nun, Lisa. Not a failure.

As a representative of the Archbishop,

I must ask you, Sister Luke...

if you are doing this of your own free will?

Yes.

Sister, have you really considered
the seriousness of what you're doing?

Yes.

There are these three papers
to sign, Sister.

One copy is for you, one is for us...
and one is for the papal archives.

Have you somewhere to go?

Yes.

Sister, is there nothing we can do?

Nothing.

From here

you will go to the portress?room.

She will give you further instructions.

You may leave your keys on my desk.

And in conclusion, the dowry
your father gave when you entered.

You must take it.

Go through here to Room 12.

Everything is ready.

Press the button when you are finished
and I will open.