

Nuns Don't Cry

G.L. Graber

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I Am, I Said
Written by Neil Diamond
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Foreword

In my limited knowledge of life, I had believed that unpleasant events were either to be borne as a cross or escaped. I did not realize that these events are often the very ones that eventually lead to our happiness. I discovered this truth in Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys, a treatise on the levels of development that a soul meets on the ascending mystical path to union with the Beloved.

In the Valley of Knowledge, Bahá'u'lláh illustrates the idea of accepting even the worst conditions in life as the Will of a personal God who has our best interests at heart. The story describes a lover who has been, by some misfortune, separated from his beloved for many years. He searches for her every day, often neglecting to eat or sleep, and finally in desperation, he breaks the curfew and wanders the streets after dark looking for her. The city watchmen begin to chase him, and he complains that this latest suffering is beyond his endurance. On top of his personal misery, his fatigue and physical weakness, he is now forced to run at full speed to escape the watchmen. He scales a wall, and there on the other side, to his utter astonishment, he finds his beloved in the garden, looking for a ring she has lost. Bahá'u'lláh ends the story with the lesson that had the lover known what awaited him, he would have blessed the watchmen in the beginning. It is in this sense that I relate my story with a blessing for all those watchmen who have chased me toward the eventual fulfilment of my dream.

1. An Ending

My mother called from the bottom of the stairs in the gentle sing-song voice she reserved for us when we were sick, “Can you hurry, Geraldine? We’re leaving in exactly twenty minutes. We have to use the bathroom too you know.”

I knew her last remark was meant to be playful. Playfulness too was reserved for very special occasions, like this one. I pulled my green chenille bathrobe over my slip and hurried to my room at the end of the hall. Keeping Mama’s rule of protecting our brothers from seeing our underwear was a habit. I did it automatically even though I was the only one upstairs.

In my room, I took a last fond look at my yellow bat-wing sweater lying over the back of the old green chair, and my jeans, my shape still visible, hanging on the closet doorknob. I hurried to dress but was careful not to get the white angora from my sweater onto my forest green suit skirt, a wonderful hand-me-down from my oldest sister. Curlers out and deposited in the Don’t-Need bag, a good brushing of my thick and stubborn chestnut hair into a page boy, and I was ready to slip on my black leather pumps. Coral lipstick and black mascara were small enough to fit into my purse, and they could be thrown out later.

I chose a green kerchief for hair protection. Green matched the suit, but I also knew it would bring out the green in my eyes. “A Lebanese Madonna,” Father Keene had once remarked, and I noticed how much I resembled my mother’s Jewish side. It did not matter anymore that I would have preferred Ellen Reedy’s turned-up nose and Irish baby face. I put on my camel swing-back coat, picked up my suitcase, and took one last look in the mirror. I

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was sixteen but tall, and I looked like a grown woman. I needed to. I was on my way to the convent to become a nun.

Raindrops beaded up on the freshly washed and polished green 1948 panel delivery Ford waiting at the curb. My father's name and occupation stood out in yellow and black lettering: ANTON GRABER, CONTRACTOR.

How proud he was of that Ford and especially that title, 'contractor'. It represented victory over the co-workers who had ridiculed him as a foreigner with a German accent and a Catholic with too many children.

I felt happy for him. At forty-five, he owned his first vehicle, he had his own business, and now he would have his own nun. He was in high spirits as we departed for the train station. He ushered my two young brothers, Frank and Willie, and little sister, Josephine, onto the makeshift bench in the back of the Ford and ordered me to sit in the front beside him for the last time. We waited for Mama to climb in the back doors. Dad pushed her coat in after her, slammed the doors, and with a great flourish started up the engine.

The cold emptiness of that grey January evening was mirrored in the marble Canadian National Railway (CNR) station in Vancouver. It was 1954. A few sailors returning home from the war in Korea and a few salesmen carrying briefcases eyed the group of nuns waiting for me.

The boyish-looking Father Keene stood behind them. I was glad he'd been chosen as chauffeur for the nuns, and not the serious old pastor, Father La Rouche. The ends of Father Keene's black curls, wet from the rain, dripped onto his face. He wiped his eyes with his coat sleeve and grinned. He had only succeeded in spreading the drops. I smiled. He could not know that he was the object of my affection in my daydreams. Whenever my brothers had altar boy practice, I used to find an excuse to accompany them just to gaze at young Father Keene and find something to say to him, anything, and thinking all the while in Little Red Riding Hood fashion, "My, Father, what beautiful green eyes you have; what beautiful white teeth you have." I had studied his every move and feature. I looked at him now as my inspiration to sacrifice everything for God—especially the chance to have a husband like him.

Breaking away from my family, I rushed to greet the nuns. The superior who had commanded this coup did not restrain her joy. She gave us a rare, full-toothed smile. My homeroom teacher and two of my elementary school teachers—the earliest to groom me

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for this moment—welcomed me prematurely into their community of the Sisters of Mary Immaculate. Finally, they congratulated my parents, who had been humbly waiting for their attention. Father Keene moved forward into the group.

Everyone began to recount little episodes about me from their lives, as if this were my wake and I an absent saint. In his German accent, still noticeable after twenty-five years in Canada, my father leaned close to the Sisters as if sharing a confidence. “I had my doubts there for awhile when she plastered her wall with movie star pictures.” He laughed and added, “But she has a strong will. She always told me she’d go.”

I noticed Mama’s irritation. She winced at Dad’s boisterous laughter. She did not need to say it aloud. She had said it often enough for me to know what she was thinking. *Just look at him prancing around those nuns like a rooster. He’d flirt with anything in skirts, even long black ones.*

I took her attention away from him and explained that since I was last in line of the five older girls, and nobody else seemed to be willing to do the job, it was up to me to go to the nunnery. I was only half-joking. Nothing could deter me, not even Phil. Phil may have helped to speed up this decision.

Resounding in my ears every time I went to a movie or a dance or a party were my mother’s words: “God doesn’t want you when you’re manhandled.” It was the armour of those words that shielded me from advances. “Catholic girls don’t do that” was my personal anthem. Phil heard the rules and respected them for our four months together as friends.

Although Phil was a Protestant, and should have been without morals if Dad’s judgment was correct, he admitted he was having much more fun without the pressure of sex. The friendship could have developed at its own pace except that he began to talk about preparing for marriage in two years, after his stint in the air force. It was time for me to bail out.

Bringing me back to the moment, Frank spoke up. “I just wish you could’ve waited ‘til my French exams were over. Who’s going to help me now?”

I tell him to pray because God knows French better than I do. I got the laugh I expected.

Father Keene winked at me. “Father La Rouche thinks God *is* French.” He got a bigger laugh.

It was hard to get a word in with all the laughing and banter going on. Hoping for a dramatic moment to remind everyone that she too had a role to play here, Mama cleared her throat and announced, “You know I nearly lost her at seven months. I think she was a miracle.”

What was really a miracle to me was that I was boarding this train. Two and a half months before, I was a high school girl in grade eleven. Just before my sixteenth birthday, the Mother General, head of the religious community in Toronto, had come to visit and was interviewing girls who were interested in becoming nuns.

There was a school retreat going on at the time. Ignoring my classmates’ whispered jokes and note passing in church, I prayed fervently. Jesus had always been my best—and sometimes only—friend. From the time I was so young that I thought the keyhole in the tabernacle was a peephole for Jesus to see me, I shared every fear and desire with Him. I cherished the Bible readings at Mass about His love: “I am the Good Shepherd; I lay down my life for my sheep; O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered you under my wings as a hen does her chicks....”

The nuns belonged to Him. I envied them. From my first meeting at school with these semi-divine creatures, I was attracted to them. They smelled of soap and serge and spoke in soft voices. They smiled at me and encouraged me. They listened to me and showed their trust in me by giving me responsibility. They assured me that God watched over me and that Jesus was always with me. I could bear being teased as ‘teacher’s pet’ as long as I had their approval. When I earned my mother’s rage and slaps for staying too late after school, I dreamed of staying with them.

“Sister said... Sister wanted...!” I hear my mother shout. “Well you can go and live with Sister. See how you’d like that!”

“I’d love it,” I’d mutter to myself.

In the interview with the Superior of the whole community, Mother Immaculata, I described my life-long wish to be a nun. I told her how I used to play nun when I was six and seven years old. I wore my older sister’s skirt, long on me, and draped a dish towel over my head as a veil. I lined up all the dolls and stuffed toys in the house on the bed pillows and played the organ for my choir on the foot of the brass bed. When I was about nine, I played another game when I went to our shed for coal. If all the chunks fell off the shovel into the bucket, and none dropped outside it, it was a sign

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that God wanted me to go to the convent. Then I would purposely be very careful to make all the coal fall in.

After the make-believe and superstitious periods, came the time of idealism and real determination. The Korean War was the global trouble spot at the time; disarmament was a constant topic of the high school debates. Our Lady of Fatima's warnings were as common a topic of table discussion as the weather. Only prayer could prevent global catastrophe. The world was a hostile place. I longed to escape from it. I believed I could help to save it by praying.

Mother Immaculata had already received reports of my frequent attendance at Mass and devotions. She mentioned my appointment as president of the Sodality of Mary. She was satisfied that I had a true vocation, a true calling from God to join the Sisters. All that was left to do was decide when I would go.

It would take a couple of months for me to make the money for the dowry and clothing I would need if I went to work immediately. Two other girls from Vancouver had left before their final year of high school, so the precedent had been set. I would join the winter group of postulants.

"We accept girls from the west rather young," Mother Immaculata had explained. "We find that if we wait for the end of high school or the start of careers, the girls never enter the convent at all."

"Like my sisters," I agreed.

Marriage was a dark and nebulous mystery to me. Songs promised unspeakable happiness, and movies showed fairy tale endings where lovers finally found each other. In real life, I saw only my parents' disappointment with each other. I was afraid that I might find myself drifting into marriage like a sleepwalker following some unknown course, as my mother and sisters seemed to have done.

"I'm sure I won't change my mind, Sister, but I also don't want to take that chance," I told her. "I want to go now."

Mama's protests focused on money. The family could not afford to send me. She was silent as she listened to the superior's assurance on the telephone. All I needed was a hundred dollars for the dowry and ten dollars a month for the two and half years until vows. About what I would cost at home, Sister Superior told my mother. Evidently I did not cost ten dollars a month at home. I worked at the hospital and bought everything I needed, except

food. I could work for the dowry, but it took Dad to convince Mama that the investment was worth it.

I can hear him pleading, “Anna, of course we can afford ten dollars a month. This is what we prayed for every night in the rosary. Finally we have a vocation in the family.”

Seeing Dad in the station now, warm and jovial, one could never guess how he terrorized the family with his outbursts of rage. It seemed strange to think of the power these two people held over me. At that moment, they looked small and insignificant with Sister Superior and the high school teacher towering over them.

Dad gave me his customary peck on the lips and an affectionate hug. He was laughing through his tears. Mama wiped her eyes and spoke appropriate parting words: “I’m losing another daughter.”

“Yes, but you’re gaining another hour for the bathroom,” I retorted. I wanted to relieve her from her pretended sorrow at having fewer children at home.

She pressed a box of chocolates into my hand and whispered out of the hearing of the Sisters, “I wanted you to have one last box.” Out of character, she joked, “The last temptation.” We laughed, knowing I could eat an entire layer in one sitting.

Father Keene stepped forward and handed me his gift, *The Imitation of Christ*. He reached out awkwardly, embarrassed to be seen holding my hand in public, and asked me to pray for him. He apologized for his boldness, “And I hope you don’t mind that I signed this to remind you.”

I was glad to take something familiar with me, even if it was only his signature in my new book.

The family stood back respectfully on the platform to let the Sisters accompany me onto the train. A howling sob from my little sister, Josephine, rang out like a shot hitting me in the back of the head. The cry stopped at my ears and did not penetrate my brain. Momentarily stunned, I could not turn around. The script I had written for myself called for joy and piety. Not pity. Not regret. Not sorrow.

I found my berth on the train and exchanged the kiss of peace on both cheeks as the nuns departed. I pressed my face against the window to wave good-bye to the family, and my hand froze in midair. There was the scene from the dream that had puzzled me six years before.

In the dream, my family was lined up for a photograph. My father was standing in the row closest to the camera, smiling

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broadly; lined up behind him were my mother and sisters and brothers, all smiling—in front of my coffin.

The train pulled out slowly, leaving the figures on the platform waving like ghosts through the darkened glass. Or was I the ghost? My body felt far removed from that place. I was only an observer somewhere beyond myself watching my spirit depart from the world, the train car becoming a coffin for the Geraldine I had once been.

I knew that my sacrifice would buy prestige for my poor immigrant parents among the well-established Irish families of the parish. It would finally pay off the debt of gratitude to the French pastor who had held the mortgage on the condemned house purchased for my father to renovate. Most of all, it would be a sign of God's forgiveness and the end of punishment for some secret sin that had driven my father to six o'clock Mass every morning for as long as I could remember.

With each passing scene in the frame of the window, pictures flew by in my mind in rhythm with the gathering speed of the train. Gone. Gone. Gone. Gone...gone. Gone. Gone. Gone. All of it gone. Gone the setting, gone the stage, gone the roles I had performed. Gone the dangerous emergence of my own sexuality.