

DAMNED IF YOU DON'T  
(1987)

by Su Friedrich

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[Text for BLACK NARCISSUS section. Written by Su Friedrich and Cathy Quinlan.  
Narrated by Martina Siebert]

This is the good nun.

She's being appointed Mother Superior of a new convent set high in the Himalayas.

She's told that she'll have to work with a certain Mr. Dean, the local agent.

He writes a letter of warning: The wind blows seven days a week, the convent was once a palace for the general's concubines, and the highest peak is called the Bare Goddess.

Other nuns are assigned to accompany her:

A gardener

A cheerful one

A strong one

And a bad one

The good nun, being good, doubts the intentions of the bad nun.

She's reminded that she herself might not make a good Mother Superior and she's told, "Work them hard and remember: the superior of all is the servant of all."

And so their new life atop the Bare Goddess begins. And they do work hard, day and night, bringing aspirin and the English language to Indian peasants.

The bad nun doubts the peasant's abilities to learn anything.

The good nun disagrees. They discuss their differences.

Finally, the good nun and Mr. Dean get acquainted.

Hitherto unsuspected emotions arise.

But things aren't going well for the new Mother Superior. The wind's constantly howling, the plumbing's broken, and the bad nun's got boils on her hands and can't sleep.

In a conversation with the strong nun, Mr. Dean's name comes up.

"Maybe he could help?"

"I think not."

But there's a certain inevitability about Mr. Dean.

She asks him why the local people can't be more disciplined, which somehow raises the question of whether or not she likes children.

And now, an interesting moral dilemma and a chance for the bad nun and Mr. Dean to meet coincide: the bad nun saves the life a peasant. If the peasant had died, the very existence of the convent would have been jeopardized. She gets no thanks from the good nun, but Mr. Dean is grateful and shows it.

Now the gardening nun has a problem: it seems you can see too far here. The good nun suggests that she work until she's too tired to think of anything else, and that they pray together.

The good nun tries to pray alone, but suddenly remembers an engagement present from her grandmother.

Sometimes the bad nun gets up earlier than usual to ring the bell.

The good nun doesn't sleep late either.

Neither does Mr. Dean.

But the sound of the bell lifts their hearts once again to God.

After the Christmas service, the good nun explains to Mr. Dean that he's drunk.

"If you have a spark of decency left in you, you won't come near us again!"

He goes off singing: "No I won't be a nun, no I shall not be a nun, for I am so fond of pleasure, I cannot be a nun."

The bad nun has begun to agree with him, so the good nun calls her in for a chat. They discuss whether a fondness for pleasure might preclude being a nun.

Suddenly, the bad nun dispenses with theory and accuses the good nun of wanting Mr. Dean herself.

Feigning coolness, she dismisses the bad nun and tries working until she's too tired to think of anything else.

And now, another crisis: a baby dies while under their care and the nuns' lives seem to be in danger: Call Mr. Dean!

They forgive him for arriving naked, given the state of emergency.

The good nun is finally falling apart.  
He insists that they all leave before something terrible happens.

Something terrible happens: The bad nun has become a bad woman.  
Her dress is red, to match her lips.

That same night, she descends the Bare Goddess to the home of Mr. Dean.  
She loves him.  
He doesn't love her.  
He asks her to go home and be a good girl.  
She agrees to go back.

(at the end, hear Mr. Dean singing, "No I won't be a nun...etc.")

[Commentary by Makea McDonald. Heard during scenes of woman hanging mural and nun making bed.]

"Oh, and I remember one nun, Sister Elsa, 7th grade... She loved to talk about sex to this room full of girls and boys, twelve to thirteen years old...When she was supposed to be talking about religion, she was talking about sex! She would tell us about the...the uh...what actually...the anatomical...uh... what was **done** (laughs). She even brought this guy from Cook County Hospital to give us a talk, and he had all these charts and he was drawing these penises and vaginas and uteruses on the board and we were so...I was so...(laughs)...I didn't know what to do! I mean, we're all sitting there like, hmm, what're we supposed to **do** about this?"

[Text of sermon by priest overheard in church.]

Thanks for this day of days, when all the world seems filled with light and hope and trembling with an expectation it cannot quite name.

We praise you that out of darkness and despair you have brought something new to our world with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Bring it in us too, oh God, and make this a day of resurrection for all of us--a day of new beginnings and of new life.

We confess that many Easters have come and gone and we've celebrated them but felt no sense of resurrection in our lives. We have felt the excitement of Christ's resurrection but have failed to connect it with our own. And on Monday we go back to the same old lives we've known before.

Help us to break out of this pattern, oh God. Help us to experience your newness and live with a daily vision of what our existence could mean in the light of your purposes for us. Resurrect in us some new hope, some new behavior, some new dream.

[Introduction to text adapted from the book IMMODEST ACTS: THE LIFE OF A LESBIAN NUN IN RENAISSANCE ITALY by Judith C. Brown. Read by Amy Sillman over images of book.]

Sister Benedetta was the Abbess of a convent in Italy. From 1619-1623 she was under investigation for alleged misconduct. After the trial she spent 35 years in a prison within the convent, where she finally died.

One of the nuns implicated in the scandal was Sister Crivelli, who lived with her. She testified against Sister Benedetta and managed to escape punishment. What follows is some of her testimony.

[Narration of text by Cathy Quinlan--CQ--with several interruptions and conversations between SF and CQ. Heard during scene of woman planting rose and nuns walking around.]

CQ: *Because Sister Benedetta was in pain at night...Oh shit, I did my toe, so let me do it again. I don't know why I pop my toe, I never realized I did...Because Sister Benedetta was in pain at night, I went to stay with her in order to help her. She had violent pains in her heart and often throughout her entire body. She would ask me to put my hands on her heart, because she seemed to feel less pain that way, and while my hand was there, it felt as if a dagger were hitting it. I would often work so hard that I would sweat. When she had the pains, she moaned softly and kept her mouth closed...*

SF: Yea, but see, you're not going to say "kept her mouth closed".

CQ: Oh, I'm sorry, I thought I was supposed to say that whole sentence then.. I can still do it, but I can't I just start with...?

SF: Yea, after "a dagger were hitting it" you can say...

CQ: Okay...I should say "a dagger were hitting it"?

SF: No.

CQ: *Okay...When she had the pains, she moaned softly and kept her mouth closed. They lasted two years, for 9 or 10 hours a night, but during the day she did not have them. On the second night of Easter, her heart was removed by Jesus. I was present and heard her say, "I see Jesus approaching, but it might be the devil's work--pray for me." Shortly thereafter she began to laugh and became all happy and spoke to him. Then she laid down on her back and suffered a great deal of pain and I heard her say, "Oh my Jesus, show it to me. Yes, that is it. No wonder I felt such pain." And then she said, "How can I live without a heart now? How will I be able to love you?"*

SF: Say that more as a question.

CQ: Instead of...a statement? "How can I live without a heart now?!" (laughs)

SF: Well why not?

CQ: Really? You know, I just had a funny idea that Sister Crivelli said this millions of times too. At a certain point, she was just reading the fucking testimony!...*And I saw all these things because I was hiding beside the bed. I realized that she was not herself because she seemed like one who dreams. Then I went to her and put my hand on the side of her heart, and there seemed to be a hole there. She remained lying there...* I think I should just say "there seemed to be a hole". Because now it's awkward to say "she remained lying there" in the hole...

SF: Right, that's true...

CQ: *She remained lying there, apparently out of her senses. I made the sign of the cross and knew that for God it is possible to live without a heart. She was without her heart for three days, and I was present when Jesus put it back in. I had gone to see if she needed anything but she said I should go to bed. I didn't want to leave and indeed I couldn't leave, feeling as if I were being held. I pulled the curtain of her bed and placed myself behind it and shortly thereafter I heard her say, "Oh my bridegroom, did you come to give me back my heart?" And she remained thus, a bit quiet.*

*Then she opened her arms and cried out, "My Jesus don't show it to me because I will lose my sight," and she turned her head in the other direction, saying that it was so beautiful that she couldn't watch it. Then I heard her say, "Put it back in the same place you took it from." And she uncovered her side and I saw that it was larger and redder than at other times.*

*Then when he put the heart inside her, I began to see that the flesh rose up, and she moved slowly...slowly...and all the ribs which I could see were lifted up. It was so large that one could see it would never fit, and it raised her flesh. And when it arrived at the place where the heart belongs, it stopped. And she turned slowly with her forehead bent down and the heart re-entered its place. Then she covered herself up again, but before she did I touched it, and it felt so large and so hot that my hand could not stand it.*

*And I heard her say, "Oh my Jesus, what greater gift could you give me than to have given my your own heart?" And she was completely happy.*

*While I was there watching, I did not have any fear, but rather felt deep contentment.*

[Commentary by Makea McDonald. Heard during scene in which the nun visits Coney Island.]

"But, yea, definitely, I think growing up Catholic has a lot to do with it....I remember I had this affair...well, actually I lived with him, for about a year, with this guy, and every time...I mean, it's not that I didn't want to have sex--on the contrary, I did--but every time I did, it was like, well, I kept hoping, 'Well, this time it's going to be different. Let me keep doing it till I get it right or something.' I would just, like, split out of my body...I would be...my spirit or something would be sitting over there watching all of this going on. I could not stay in my body and perform this sexual act...

But I never told anybody except my therapist. I said, 'Well, you know, I can split off,' and she said, 'What do you mean by that?' and I said 'Well, if things get too rough I can just sort of go away and I'll sit over there and watch all of this going on.'

I think it also has to do with not feeling safe, and if you're in a situation...at least with me, if I'm in a situation where I don't feel safe and if I can't physically get out of the situation, I'll just open the door and let the spirit out."

[Commentary by Makea McDonald. Heard during the scene of the nun in her room saying the rosary. Also heard: SF's voice asking her questions or talking.]

SF: Can you still say the Hail Mary and the Our Father?

MM: Yes.

SF: Okay, say them.

MM: Okay. Hmm...Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death, Amen. Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us...I say it every Sunday, God, I can't remember it!...Hmm...For thine is the kingdom and the power...I could sing it!...and the power and the glory, forever, amen...something like that...

SF: Okay, sing it. I'd like to hear it, because I don't know how it is in music.

MM: (singing)...And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever, Amen.

[Narration by Cathy Quinlan from IMMODEST ACTS. Heard during scene in which woman sews the embroidery of Christ's face.]

*For two continuous years, at least three times a week, after disrobing and going to bed, Sister Benedetta would wait for me to disrobe also and then call me over for help. When I would come over, she would grab me by the arm and throw me by force onto the bed. She embraced me, put herself on top of me, and kissing me as if she were a man, she would speak words of love to me. And she would stir on top of me so much that both of us corrupted ourselves. And thus by force she held me, sometimes for one or two or even three hours. And she did these things during the most solemn hours, especially at dawn.*

*Sister Benedetta, in order to have greater pleasure, put her face between my breasts and kissed them and wanted always to be thus on me. Also at that time, during the day, pretending to be sick, she grabbed my hand by force and putting it under herself she would have me put my finger on her genitals, and holding it there she stirred herself so much that she corrupted herself. And she would kiss me and also by force would put her hand under me and her finger in my genitals and corrupted me. And when I would flee, she would do the same with her own hands.*

*Many other times she locked me in the study and making me sit down in front of her, by force she put her hands under me and corrupted me. And up to twenty times she kissed my*

*genitals by force.*

*She always appeared to be in a trance while doing this. Her angel, Splenditello, was really the one doing these things, appearing as a boy of eight or nine years of age.*

*Splenditello called me his beloved; he asked me to swear to be his beloved always and promised that after Benedetta's death he would always be with me and would make himself visible. He said, "I want you to promise me not to confess these things we do together. I assure you that there is no sin in it." And many times he said to me, "Give yourself to me with all your heart and soul and then let me do as I wish."*

*Jesus also spoke to me through Benedetta several times. The first time, he said that he wanted me to be his bride. At another time, it was in the church, when I was disturbed by all these things, and he held my hands together and told me that there was no sin involved whatsoever and that Benedetta while doing these things had no awareness of them.*

*All these deeds I confess with very great shame.*

[Commentary by Makea McDonald. Heard while woman puts on black dress.]

"Oh, I remember this one, Sister Carol, oh, she didn't go by 'Sister', you just called her Carol. She was the head of the drama department and senior year I was in "Godspell", and oh, she was wonderful...God, I used to get all these crushes on these nuns, I can't believe it! Before, I used to remember all the awful parts, but now I'm remembering all the wonderful parts! She and Sister Carmel...they still do...they have this white house...they don't live in where the other nuns live, they have their own house on the campus and Sister Carmel is head of the Art Department. They have to be lovers....I mean there's no...I mean especially when they're at parties and they start drinking and they get really friendly with each other...so you know. Oh, she was wonderful, I loved her."

[Commentary by Makea McDonald. Heard while the nun paces her room.]

"And, oh, there was this other nun, Sister Mineev, who taught music lit. Oh, she was wonderful. She left the convent that year, and I still remember the stuff that she taught me. Oh gosh...She was the first one who said, 'You have to rely on your own instincts; you know a lot more than you think you do.'"

(End)