

MARY BEATRICE SMOOT FRIARLY,SPV

by Gene Wolfe

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Born Beatrice Smoot Friarly, Easter Sunday, 1925, in New Canaan, Massachusetts. According to Sister Mary herself, her birth on Easter was due entirely to the efforts of her mother (Martha Smoot Friarly), who would normally have given birth on Holy Saturday, but who contrived by an uncommon effort of will and with considerable pain to delay genesis until the minute hand of the large clock on the wall of the delivery room was well past twelve.

Mrs. Friarly was undoubtedly hoping for a boy. She did not, however, proceed to raise little Beatrice like one, but like nothing on Earth.

When Beatrice was fifteen she appeared (weeping) one fine June morning at the door of Father John O'Murphy, her pastor. She had spent the previous twenty-four hours in prayer and had concluded that her vocation was real. She begged Father O'Murphy to bring her to the attention of some order that might accept her as a postulant. Muttering that it would at least get her out of her mother's house, Father O'Murphy promised to see what he could do.

Approximately a year later (June 17, 1941), Beatrice entered her novitiate with the Sisters of Perpetual Vigilance, an order of nuns intent on saving their oil for the coming of the bridegroom. Upon completion of the vows, she took the religious name of Mary and took over the Fourth Grade at the School of Saint Apollos the Persuasive.

Her collection of cookbooks was begun somewhat late in her life, when the grateful mother of one of her pupils presented her with a tattered volume that had been passed from one generation to the next for nearly eighty years. That evening, Sister Mary spent half an hour looking it over, and was a collector evermore.

As such, she possessed but feeble means; the prices of all but the most humble dealers were far beyond her reach. But she had a considerable amount of time at her disposal, having discovered long ago that reading did her young charges more good than anything she could say; boundless patience; the good will of thousands of men and women now scattered across the face of the world who looked back upon the Fourth Grade as the happiest year in their lives; and a strange, unassuming suppleness of speech that she attributed (when she was willing to admit that she possessed such a power at all) to nearly fifty years of the most faithful prayer to St. Apollos.

On a sullen summer night not long ago, when black clouds gathered over the Hoosac Hills and the wind stirred like a restless child, Sister Mary completed her evening devotions and retired to bed. It was about nine thirty.

A short time later, as it seemed to her, she heard a knock at the door of the small convent she shared with Sisters Bruno and Evangellica. For a moment or two she lay quiet, waiting for Sister Evangellica, who was much younger, to answer it. Then it came to her (she could not say how) that Sister Evangellica and even Sister Bruno slept on, and would go on sleeping though the knocking continued all night. That they could not hear it and would never hear it.

She rose then, went to the door, and opened it. It was raining, and the rain turned to steam when it struck the cloak of the short, dark man who stood at the doorstep. "Shalom," he said.

"Shalom," Sister Mary replied automatically, and he stepped across the threshold.

"And I mean it," he said. "I come in peace. I'm coming in answer — partly — to your prayers."

"You mean my prayers have only helped to condemn me," said Sister Mary, who had recognized him. "I'd hoped for more. But I'm sure the sentence is just, and I'm ready to obey it."

"So let me explain," the dark man said. "It's not like you think. In fact, I gave up on you a long time ago. Can I sit down?"

"Please do," Sister Mary told him.

"And can I smoke? It won't bother you?"

"Not at all."

He began to smoke, mostly from the groin, but a good deal from the hands and the top of the head. "You've prayed to behold an angel," he said. "Your exact words were 'the least of Your messengers, Lord, would be sufficient for me.' Behold, I'm an angel, and not the least of His messengers."

"Come now," said Sister Mary.

"I'm Lucifer, the Morning Star. A real angel. You haven't read about me? A certain loose liver we both know pretty well said, 'I watched Satan fall from the sky like lightning.' That's nothing to you?"

"All right," Sister Mary said, "you're an angel. But a fallen angel wasn't exactly what I had in mind."

"I'm the archangel in charge of punishments," Lucifer explained. "That's all.

Sure, I've had a lot of bad press."

"Please don't say it's a dirty job, but somebody had to do it." Sister Mary gathered her bathrobe more tightly around her, the unconscious legacy of ancestors who had donned armor a thousand years past. "Then you're say-ing you're not really evil after all?"

"If I were evil, would I come here to ask you to do good?"

"By the way, I didn't know you were Jewish."

"You need time to think, huh? Sure, I'm Jewish. If I weren't, would I cut the kind of deals I do? We're all Jewish. Gabriel, Michael, everybody. Even on Broadway, they know all the best an-gels are Jewish. Now you'll say I don't look Jewish."

"You don't, more Syrian or Greek. What's this about doing good? I thought you'd come to tempt me."

"I have." Lucifer rubbed his hands, which nearly went out. "I've got for you the one proposition you can't turn down — a chance to help somebody who really doesn't deserve it. Me. And do good at the same time. You've got the greatest cookbook collection in the world. You didn't know that?"

"I've got a very good one," Sister Mary acknowledged. "I've put in shelves in the attic. They're mostly up there."

"The best. I've checked out every-body's. Now in that collection, you've probably got a lot of recipes for what you might call spiritual or mystical dishes, don't you? Like how to make sacramental wine, for instance?"

"You can hardly expect me to tell you that."

"Oh, I know. I was just for-instanc-ing. But you've got it?"

"Certainly," Sister Mary replied with some pride. "I know how manna was baked. Do you want to know the broth simmered in the Cauldron of Cerrid-wen? I can tell you. And I can give you the recipe for the dish of bitter herbs into which Judas thrust his hand."

"I know him," Lucifer said. "A real loser, believe me. No, my problem is I've got a dish I don't know how to cook. I've boiled it, I've baked it, and I've roasted it, but nothing helps. Would you have a look at it and see if you can help out? Wait a minute — before you answer, let me say right off you won't find my kitchen an unpleasant place at all. You won't get burned, or anything like that. And what I'm trying to do — this is orders from On Top, you un-derstand. You want to help Him

out, don't you?"

"Yes," Sister Mary said.

At once the convent vanished, and she was surrounded by the leaping flames of Hell.

"Hey, don't be so panicky," Lucifer told her. "Didn't I say you wouldn't get hurt?"

"It's just that it was so fast."

"I like running tollgates — a little hobby of mine. Come on, I'll take you to see him. Hey, what's the matter now?"

Sister Mary was looking at herself. "For one thing, I'm nude."

"Everybody is. That's the rule here. For you I'd like to bend it a little, but I can't."

"And for another thing, I seem to be about eighteen again."

"Nice-looking, too. You should be proud, and I'm not saying that just because I'm in the business. See, everybody here looks the right age to give other people the most pain. I'm naked too, you've noticed."

"But you've got more hair than I do, and it's much better positioned. I'm not stirring a step until I get some clothes."

"All right," Lucifer said, "I know I don't have the rep, but I'm really a generous guy. Here's the entire habit the SPV was wearing when you joined. The black skirt, the wimple, the whole schmeer."

For a moment, Sister Mary could see it just as it had once hung in her closet at the convent.

Then the cloth vanished in a flash of fire. The wire hanger melted to something like quicksilver and splashed the smoking stones of Hell. "I've been very foolish to allow you to bring me here," she said.

"Listen, if you could wear that stuff, everybody'd stare. This way, nobody'll notice. You want to get out? Come on."

They walked down a narrow valley where every ledge was occupied by a writhing figure. "I didn't know Hell was this crowded," Sister Mary said sadly.

“For people who don’t like crowds, it’s crowded. For people that do, lonely. Hey, there he is. We’re in luck; some-times he wanders around.”

The man was tall and muscular. His face was expressionless, his skin a dull red.

“So look at him,” Lucifer complained. “I’ve fried, I’ve chopped, I’ve boiled, and just look. That’s agony?”

“Well, he certainly isn’t smiling,” Sister Mary said.

“He isn’t anything. I work my tush off, but does he give one damn? Hell, no. You’re the expert; you’re going to tell me what I should do? Go ahead, I’m listening. You think marinating might help? I’ve tried it. Sulfuric acid.”

As if on cue, a dickens appeared. “From Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Chairman says so where is he?” the dickens announced. “It’s line seven. Should I tell him out to lunch?”

“Get out of here, you little schmuck.” Lucifer made Sister Mary a little bow. “I got to go. Look him over, okay? I’ll be right back.”

Sister Mary nodded, and he vanished in a puff of evil-smelling smoke. When it had drifted away, she said softly, “He knows what I’m going to do, you know. He knows exactly what I’m going to do. I find that encouraging, exciting, and disturbing. The universe is not as we thought.”

The red-skinned man nodded slow assent.

“Or perhaps this is not the universe at all,” she said. “Just the corner of a bad dream. But I know how to end it. Take my left hand.”

“My hand burn you,” the red-skinned man grunted. He extended it neverthe-less; and when she clasped it, it did not. It was a man’s hand, living and strong. She held it and knew she had lived her entire life for this moment. And that it had been worth it.

Then she crossed herself.

On the morning she awakened, there appeared in New Canaan a tall, swarthy man whom the people of the town have decided is a Micmac Indian. He does very little work, and sometimes he drinks too much. But he does no harm either (which is much the same as not working), and he is very strong, so they leave him alone. Besides being an In-dian, he had another peculiarity, which is that he whistles softly whenever he sees Sister Mary.

Sister Mary no longer looks eighteen, and from time to time she slaps the boys' fingers with her ruler as she has for nearly fifty years; but now she has a peculiarity too. It is that on sullen summer nights when lightning flashes in the west and black clouds gather over the Hoosac Hills, she joins Man-on-Fire, the Micmac Indian, on his park bench and talks with him in tones too low to be overheard. She has told Monsignor O'Murphy, the pastor emeritus, that she is compiling a volume of Indian recipes.