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WOMEN



CHILDREN

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UQP

THE NUNS WHO RAN OUR Lady's School shared the same first name. Mary. The head of school was Sister Mary Josephine, followed by her deputy, Sister Mary Agnes. Next in line was the head of junior school, Sister Mary Bernadette. And on it went. At the commencement of each school year the nuns paraded into the school hall, each wearing a starched white habit with a set of black rosary beads and silver crucifix drawn around the waist. With the arrival of the colder months of the year, the starkness was discarded for a dull brown colour, more appropriate for a school existing perpetually in the shadows of the church of the same name next door.

The church and school had been built in the late nineteenth century, indestructibly, from slabs of bluestone rock. Our Lady's Church sat in the middle of

an inner-city suburb with a reputation for hard men and their crimes, from robbery and menace on the street to family violence behind closed doors. It was also a suburb of sectarian boundaries, with the Catholic community in no doubt that they lived under siege by Protestant leaders who dominated local government and business. Police were more likely to be Catholic, which produced mutually beneficial relationships between local crime bosses and the constabulary. Religious dedication was largely an affair of women and children. Most men never bothered with a conversation with God, leaving it to their families to attend mass and pray on their behalf for their numerous sins, at least until the men aged and became more concerned about the afterlife awaiting them. It was only then that they attempted a peaceful exchange with God.

The doors to the church had been shaped from lengths of heavy timber and were secured with brass hinges and locks. The building resembled a jail more than a house of worship, accurate to the point that the state's prison, north of the city, had been built from similar bluestone tablets. The stained-glass windows in the church were long and narrow and let little light into the building. The school itself looked as foreboding and drove fear into the hearts of children before they'd entered the schoolyard. Each classroom had a raised

platform and blackboard at the front of the room, where the collective Sister Marys paced in a military fashion, keeping a watchful eye on their pupils, ready to pounce on any student who transgressed.

To the right of each blackboard sat an identical framed image of Jesus Christ. His hands were placed to an open heart and were cuffed in a reef of bloodied thorns. The image ensured that each generation of Our Lady's students were left in no doubt that Christ had not only suffered for their sins at the time of his death, but that He continued to bleed for them. In receiving the story of Christ's pain, children were taught that they owed a duty to God and his son. If they were to enjoy the glory of ascending to Heaven and avoiding the suffering of Christ, their single duty was to cleanse their bodies, both physically and spiritually, of sin. Consequently, Heaven was rarely spoken of by the nuns. Whereas Hell was an ever-present fear.

Sister Mary Josephine often reminded pupils what to expect were they to die with the stain of sin on their souls. At weekly assembly, each Monday morning, she demanded that students close their eyes and consider the extent of suffering they'd experience were they to place a hand into an open fire and leave it to burn for one minute. Sister would then ask that pupils imagine

the intensity of pain were the heat of the fire increased one thousand times.

‘Consider this,’ she would call across the hall in a shrill voice, ‘that not only has your hand been placed in the flames, but your entire body has become engulfed by the ferocity of the fire. Think of this and never forget it.’

She would calmly add that the suffering of Hell would never end. It would be experienced for an infinity – *forever*. ‘You must imagine this,’ she would announce, with many of the younger children in tears, ‘that there will be no relief. Although you may beg for it to occur, your body will not be incinerated, and it will continue to burn. The experience of Hell will be far worse than anything you can imagine standing in this hall today. Therefore, you have an obligation to protect yourself against sin. As soon as you become aware that you have sinned, those of you who have taken the sacrament must immediately attend confession, beg forgiveness, and accept your penance with grace.’

The power of confession to redeem a person’s soul was highlighted by a modern-day parable, a story of a criminal who had been miraculously saved from the fate of Hell. The tale often repeated was that of a notorious gangster who remarkably found his way to Heaven. It was a favourite story among students

living on streets where crime competed with religion for ultimate authority. The gangster in question had been involved in crime throughout his life, including committing several murders, which, of course, were mortal sins. During a bank robbery the gangster was shot in the heart by police and lay bleeding to death in the gutter. A priest was called, the gangster confessed to his life of sin and last rites were administered. In that moment the slate was wiped clean, the gangster died, went straight to Heaven and was received by God.

Joe Cluny, a wide-eyed eleven-year-old boy in year six, listened to Sister Mary Josephine's sermons and stories of redemptive sinners with the conviction that he would struggle to get to Heaven unless a priest happened to be close by when he was near death. While trouble trailed some children at the school, it resided in Joe Cluny's back pocket. Although he never actively sought out mischief, Joe appeared unable to avoid finding himself on the wrong side of the nuns or the parish priest, Father Edmund, a severe man who ruled over his flock with a face so stern and frightening, he rendered students mute by his presence alone.

Joe had a dark birthmark covering his left cheek, which gave the appearance that he had forgotten

to wash his face. Other children teased him over the birthmark, and he was quick to retaliate. The comments he received were sometimes playful but could also be cruel. During the holidays two summers earlier, his mother, Marion Cluny, had placed Joe with a local childminder, two streets away from their home. The woman was a chain-smoker with nicotine-stained teeth. She was also wafer-thin. Joe's older sister, Ruby, once said that the childminder reminded her of the raw chicken necks she'd seen in the front window of Garrett's butcher shop on the main street, an image that caused Joe to shiver with fear.

The morning that Marion left her son at the house the woman pointed at Joe's birthmark and told him that there had to be a *mongrel* in the family's past. 'Could have been an Abo. Or even a monkey,' she said, 'that come to your mother in the night and did her. Let's see if you have a tail.' She cackled and tried pulling Joe's pants down. He ran around the room until the childminder caught him and slapped his darkened cheek.

Joe touched his cheek and thought about the words of his late grandmother, Ada, who had once stood him in front of a mirror in her bathroom, placed the dark skin of an arm to his birthmark and said, 'That's the best of you, Joey. You and me both.'