

FIRST COMMUNION

By

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When my father moved out of our family apartment for the third time in as many years, my mother bought a television set. This was an expensive item for the nineteen fifties, but worth the price as it temporarily distracted my brother and I from the fact that our father no longer lived with us, and came with the bonus for my mother of irritating our father, who believed that television contributed to the decline of the art of conversation.

My brother, Andrew was six, and adorable in every way, while I had inexplicably turned chunky over the summer, bursting through the seams of my shorts and blouses. I had not increased my eating and was as bewildered as my parents by my new pear-shape and the fleshy bumps that had appeared on my chest that my mother insisted did not mean I needed

a bra.

Every afternoon we sat transfixed on the living room couch for hours watching westerns and comedies like, “Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House,” while our mother laid abed crying on the telephone to one of her sisters about her ruined marriage, and I tried to pretend that Cary Grant was my father, and not the strict disciplinarian who came to claim us every Friday night. One day after school, a movie was shown about a young shepherd girl about my age, who has a vision of the Holy Mary and amazes her family and town.

My parents were not religious. I had only attended church once, or twice to see a cousin confirmed, but from that day on, I became obsessed with having a personal interview with the Holy Mother; believing that such a vision would unite my family and make my mother happy again. Or, at least, get my mother to leave her bedroom and take care of us. Andrew was getting tired of eating the boiled hotdogs I made for dinner several times a week.

Not being a shepherdess didn't discourage me. Living only a block from Central Park, every day on my way home from school, I climbed the jagged rocks, squinting into the sheep meadow, where there were no sheep, searching for a vision of holiness.

On Sunday mornings riding my horse, Peanuts along the bridal path next to my father astride his white stallion, I was alert to the possibility of the appearance of the Holy Mother, and allowed my horse to drift.

“Pay attention,” my father said. “Don't let her lead you. Keep her head up. ”

“I don’t want to hurt her,” I protested. I knew the bit hurt Peanuts mouth.

“You have to direct her. “Sit up.” He reached for my reins. Peanuts shied and took off across the field with me leaning over her neck holding onto her mane.

My father caught up with me under a bridge, grabbing the reins.

“Do you see how important it is for you to control your horse?”

“I can’t do it.” I felt sick to my stomach at his disapproval.

His handsome face darkened. He folded my hands over the reins hands.

“Never say, ‘you can’t’ do something.” He wiped sweat from his brow with an embroidered handkerchief he carried in his pocket. “You can do anything.”

I bit my lip. Tears started down my face.

“Don’t cry, or I’ll give you something to cry about.”

I knew he would make good on his threat. My throat ached from the struggle to hold back grief. I wiped away a renegade tear.

My mother wanted my father back, but sometimes I wondered if it was such a good idea. I quickly brushed aside dark thoughts. He was my father and I loved him.

After weeks of not seeing a vision of holiness, I began to suspect a lack of religious education was the reason I had not made divine contact. I needed guidance from those in the know about these things. I fervently believed that receiving my First Communion would give me an inside track to the Holy Mother and began a campaign to right the deficiency in my religious

upbringing. I pointed out to my bewildered parents that at ten, I was older than all my cousins who had already been confirmed. I pleaded with my mother to enroll me in Catechism class, a kind of basic training for my First Communion.

Neither my mother nor father were enthusiastic about the idea. My upwardly mobile parents considered the church a melting pot for poor working-class people. Exactly the kind of people they had been in the not so distant past. They didn't want to tempt misfortune by having their daughter going to church with the Irish janitor's children. For while my parents were not religious in the conventional sense, they were superstitious.

I had one thing in my favor, as a child, as a child, my father had been an altar boy. He believed in the value of learning about one's religious heritage, though not necessarily in practicing it.

"It might be a good thing for her to attend church," my father said.

I stood between them on a Sunday night, having just returned from our weekend visit. He still wore his beige jodhpurs and black riding coat. He looked like a prince as he sipped a Martini my mother had made him.

Her hair was piled high and she wore make-up. She wore the silvery dressing gown with the plunge neckline he had given her on their last anniversary together.

"What is the good part?" She had waited all afternoon for him to arrive, for him to pay her a compliment, or at least acknowledge that she was alive.

"She could rub elbows with the common people and appreciate her position in life."

“Don’t be an ass, “she snapped. “We are the common people.”

Reddening my father glared at her, then deliberately placing his Martini glass on the foyer bar he said to me.

“Go to your room, your mother’s being crude.”

“Stay where you are,” she commanded. I froze between my parents.

“We’ll discuss this when you’re in a better mood.” He said to my mother, and opened the front door. He stepped out, closing it behind him.

My mother flicked her chin with the back of her fingers, cursing him in Italian.

“Go take a bath,” she said to me. “You smell like a dog.”

Eventually, a church was found. It was rumored the Kennedy family attended service there, and while they were Irish and therefore considered beneath us, Kennedy’s oldest son had been killed in the war and another badly wounded, which to my parent’s way of thinking, offset their unfortunate heritage.

My mother enrolled me in Catechism class that Autumn. With any luck, I thought, clutching my white palm-sized catechism book with the tortured Jesus imbedded in the cover, I’d be walking down the aisle in a white dress by Spring. I confidently began my pursuit, not just for communion, but for holiness itself.

The young nun looked regal in her black habit. Her face framed by a white collar made her appear angelic. I’d heard horror stories of student disciplined by nuns, but I never saw it. She

spoke in a quiet, childlike voice teaching a version of the gospel that was not to be found in the Bible and had nothing to do with the divine mysteries of life that as a child was a natural part of my domain. Instead, she voiced political views that confused me.

“The Jews killed our Lord, because they’re atheists,” she said firmly. But I thought the world had fought a war to free the Jews? “All communists are atheists. Every one who lives in Russia is an atheist,” she continued. “Julius and Ethel Rosenberg are communist spies, and they will find out what happens to them when they die and spend an eternity burning.”

Two of my playmates were sisters whose last name was Goldstein. Their mother was one of the people who believed that Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were being scape-goated – a word I originally thought was scrape-goated, which made no sense at all, until I learned that the word meant someone who was being blamed for what someone else had done – sort of like Jesus.

“The Chinese don’t believe in God and are heathens,” the Nun said, pointing to China on a wall map. In her opinion, anyone who wasn’t Catholic had a one way ticket to Satan’s fiery basement. My father had been teaching me to think for myself, and I had numerous questions for the nun. I knew Jesus had been born a Jew, so how could Jews be anything but good? When I asked about this, the nun’s face turned red. She whirled and went to her desk where she sat and wrote a note. Calling me forward she handed me the paper.

“Give this to your parents. You may not return without your parents.”

“But, Sister, Why? What have I done wrong?”

“Do you understand me?”

I didn't, but nodded as if I did.

The following week, my parents and I sat in the classroom where I had disgraced myself. My mother, delighted that my misbehavior had provided her with an opportunity to be with my father, had spent an hour dressing for the meeting. She wore her hair piled high, had smeared make up on her face like a French prostitute and put on a clingy black knit dress. My father, who had left work early to be there, looked tense in his traditional business suit, while I tried to breathe in the hideous print dress my mother had bought for me that no longer fit over my child's belly and pudgy legs.

The nun put her hands together in a prayerful gesture and made her case against me. I stood accused of that most disagreeable childhood sin: curiosity. She testified that my questions in class verged on being disrespectful: a venal sin, as distinct from a mortal sin like killing someone.

My parents, neither of whom had seen the inside of a church since my brother's baptism years earlier, and who were currently living apart due to my father's inability to keep his wedding vows, displayed an almost miraculous conversion to piousness in the nun's presence. My father even mentioned having been an altar boy; a story my mother could not top, though she managed to squeeze in that she was the oldest of eleven children, implying that my grandmother had been obeying the dictates of the church rather than just careless.

I was at once overjoyed and confused. Did their new enthusiasm mean my parents were

getting back together? Would we start going to Mass Sundays? So many questions I dared not ask for if the nun discovered my parents were considering divorce, the church authorities would ask me to leave because the church held that a child of divorce would contaminate other children.

The Sister declared that if I would control myself, I could continue my studies. I agreed to be silent in class. My father wrote a check to the church and winked at me. Or was it at the nun?

In the hallway outside of the classroom, my father who'd been so rakishly charming for the nun, turned cold as stone. He grabbed my arm in a viselike grip and pulled me along the corridor toward the door.

"Never let me be called to school again," he said.

"But you told me to think for myself," I cringed trying to pull away.

"Don't me repeat myself," he warned, in a voice that made me want to wet my pants.

"I won't, I promise," I said, my mind in chaos. Why had he told me one thing but want me to act another?

"Damn right," he said.

"She's a child. Don't make a scene," my mother scolded as we reached the outside door.

My father narrowed his eyes and spoke in barely a whisper, "Don't tell me how to behave. "

Please don't fight over me I thought. Please.

The three of us walked home along Central Park like a walk on death row.

When we passed the building's doorman, and were riding in the elevator my mother asked my father, "Will you stay for dinner?"

"We'll see," he said.

"It would be nice for the children."

He raised his eyebrows in silence. The elevator doors opened at our floor.

We entered the apartment. The maid stood in the foyer using the mirror there to pin on her hat. She was a large Irish woman whose white uniform made her arms look like sausages.

"Good evening, sir," she said acknowledging my father with a smile. Women always liked him. "Dinner is almost ready," she said to my mother

"Aren't you staying to serve it?" My mother asked.

"It's my night off," she replied. "I'll be here in the morning. Good night," she said walking toward the kitchen to let herself out the back.

My mother turned to my father. "Well, shall I set a place for you?"

"Yes," he said, taking off his suit jacket, he rested it over the bar in the entry way. "Make me a drink, will you?"

My brother came running into the hall. "Daddy," he cried in delight and threw his arms around my father's legs.

"Not now," my father said, pushing him away. "Carol, go to the bedroom." He didn't have to tell me which one. While my mother's temper could erupt suddenly, she was more of a screamer and thrower than a hitter. A shoe aimed at our heads, whether it made contact or not,

seemed to do the trick. Her punishments lacked the spectacular drama of my father's, which no matter when the offense transpired, whether earlier in the day or during the week while he was away at work, always took place in my parent's bedroom and required me to be prostrate across the bed, my bottom bare to his strap.

"Is this really necessary?" my mother asked, moving behind the bar.

"She has to learn." He gave me a shove.

I regretted I'd worn a dress, and not play pants which were a thick denim. It wouldn't have mattered anyway because as soon as we entered the bedroom he told me to get undressed.

"Everything?" I asked, praying silently for a miracle to save me from what I knew was coming.

"You know the answer," he said.

"I really won't do it, again. Honest, I promise," I pleaded, "I'll never ask the nun a question again."

"You're argumentative. You have to learn to respect authority. Hurry up. Lay on the bed."

I pulled my dress over my head feeling the seams pinch my underarms, and pulled my panties down, always the most humiliating part. I climbed on my stomach on my mother's bed, smelling her perfume in the covers and grabbed a pillow. I tried to imagine Jesus, cradling me in his arms.

I heard the whoosh of my father's belt and felt leather on naked flesh. Pain seared my

buttocks and I cried in outrage. Again the belt snapped. My cries should've raised the dead but didn't. Neither did the Virgin Mary, nor Jesus appear to save me.

"I have to go to the bathroom," I wailed. The threat made my father hesitate. He had no hesitancy at beating the devil out, but was apparently reluctant to beat the crap out of me.

"Okay," he said, "but you better be telling the truth."

"I am," I yelled scooting off the bed and running into the bath room. The toilet seat felt cool against my bottom. I prayed I could produce something that floated.

"I'm listening," he said.

In the past, if I stalled long enough, his rage would subside, but he seemed anxious and kept looking in the door at me. "I'm pushing as hard as I can," I said, pulling my undershirt down to cover my private parts.

"Are you going to take your punishment, or act like coward?" he sneered.

Shame twisted my bowels, but I took the second choice. "I've learned me lesson," I said.

"I really hate liars" he said, which was kind of ironic because he did so much of it.

He left the doorway, and contemplating the bleakness of my immediate future, I felt relief in my lower colon.

When I came back to the room, my father sat on the edge of the bed looking tired. His hands were empty. The belt on the floor.

"Let me see," he said.

I turned my backside to him.

His fingers touched the welts his strap had left on me. I jumped away. He turned me around. His face was wet with tears. “Why do you make me do this?” he cried pulling me into arms.

“I’m sorry, daddy.” I wailed filled with remorse. Sorry I had made him cry. Sorry I had been born. Sorry the Rosenberg’s were going to be executed and leave their children orphans. Sorry my mother was unhappy. Sorry for everything. “I promise to be good.”

But I knew this was a lie. The little shepherd girl had made her parents proud. She never had to be spanked. She didn’t make her father fall to his knees in despair. I was not good, not worthy, and at the same time I felt a deep sense of unnameable injustice.

“I never want to have to do this again,” he said. Then why did he? I thought, knowing better then to ask. My father pulled back abruptly, grabbing the front of his pants. He twisted away gasping and sank forward to the bedroom floor.

“Daddy?” I was horrified, thinking I’d given him a heart attack.

“Go help your mother,” his muffled voice commanded.

I scrambled into my dress, wanting to get out of there before he changed his mind, or worse, wanted me to shower with him as he sometimes did during our weekend visits. I pulled the dress over my head in such a hurry that it tore under my arm.

I glanced back at my father. He lay breathing on the floor heavily. I pulled the door open and saw my younger brother sitting on his haunches in the hallway, his face a misery.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I’m sorry,” Andrew said, penitently.

“It’s not your fault.” I walked toward the living room, anxious to get away from the bedroom. Andrew followed.

“Did it hurt?”

The pain wasn’t so much to my body that was already healing, but to my heart. Where was the Holy Mother when I needed her? I vowed never to return to Catechism class.

“Yes.” I remembered the humiliation.

Andrew took a piece of lint-covered candy from his pocket. “Here, I saved this for you.”

Taking my brother’s love-offering, I placed it on my tongue and licked the chewy lint from it. I sampled the clean, cherry flavor in my mouth. I had my first communion.