

My First Day at Saint Leo's

It was my first day of school. Ever.

I was up most of the night before, being so inclined to severe nose bleeds brought about by stress, or if I were to eat an excessive amount of Hershey's chocolate bars. As such, I was stressed out that I had eaten too many Hershey's chocolate bars. A restless bloody insomnia, finally punctuated by the exclamation of my mother's morning call of "School!"

Within minutes, I would be a First Grader at the big red brick Catholic School of Saint Leo's Church, across the street from my house in Ashley, Pennsylvania. The year was 1968.

I walked down the stairs all grown-up in my white button-down short sleeve shirt (which I hated for being buttoned and white, for reasons I will not share with the reader here), a maroon clip-on tie, poop-brown sport coat and somewhat matching plaid slacks, yellow socks and shiny black shoes. At the bottom of the stairs my mother greeted me, "Oh, aren't we the cat's pajamas?"

I couldn't get the visual reference.

She placed her hand on my shoulder and we walked together to the kitchen. I had a bowl of Fruit Loops for breakfast while my mother had coffee and a few Salem 100's. I didn't finish the milk in the cereal bowl because all the different food colorings of the Fruit Loops had combined to make the color of the milk the same as my sport coat.

"Let me style your hair," my mother said. My mother fashioned herself the neighborhood amateur beautician, and would routinely do our elderly neighbor's do's. The look of the day, among the Polish, German, Slovak and Irish Catholic women in my coal mining town, was mostly curlers with lots of Aqua Net, occasionally finished with an old European babushka. My mom gave special *wash rinse and sets* using Genesee Beer from Rochester, New York. The beer rinses made certain the hair, once set, would stay in place for weeks, requiring neither washing nor combing. Maybe a change of babushka if needed, but this was optional. Typically, two 6-packs of the red and white cans of beer were needed for such an evening, along with a pack or two of the Salems.

Anyway, on this special morning, the style for my hair would be the "Dippity-Doo Wave." A generous handful of industrial strength Dippity-Doo, and repeated scalp-lacerating combings with the famous Ace unbreakable black plastic comb, would leave me with a saturated oily head and a monstrous wave, parted perfectly like an opened book, from my right side over to the left.

"You are just adorable as Hell," mom said.

She finished my hair styling and placed a nickel in the corner of my handkerchief and tucked it in my brown suit coat pocket. The coin was for buying a white milk later on that day during my lunch. She gave me a little brown bag with a boiled ham sandwich and a twinkie in it. Then she handed me a huge leather case with straps and buckles and locks. It used to belong to my older brother when he went to Saint Leo's Catholic School. It was called a "book bag" and it was for carrying my books, homework, pencils and rulers and stuff, to and from school. Now it was mine. Empty, it weighed 25 pounds.

I looked down at my shiny black shoes and burst into tears.

"Come on now, you're not going to start crying. You're a big boy, not a crybaby," my mother said, the ash of the Salem growing as long as the white part, dangling from the corner of her mouth. "I wish I had it so good when I was your age. You'll be meeting new friends and learning things and reading and ..."

I tried to stop crying, but I suddenly became terrified of the possibility of getting a nose bleed. I knew the subtle series of events that led up to getting one, and sobbing in a suit and tie in the middle of the kitchen before 8 am was definitely a catalyst.

"Please God don't let my nose bleed... Please God don't let my nose bleed..." I silently repeated in my head like a prayer.

Before I knew what happened, I was on my way to school, dragging my brother's leather book bag down the street. My shirt collar was tight. I wasn't used to wearing a tie, especially the clip-on type. It was hard to breathe. It was hard to see. Please God don't let my nose bleed. I was exhausted from being up all night. I could feel my forehead sweating tiny beads. Maybe the Dippity-Doo was dripping. I turned to wave goodbye to my mother, still standing on the front porch, smoking. She flicked the butt into the street and waved back. I was on my own.

I made it to the chain link entrance. Saint Leo's was a SCHOOL. First thru 6th. The rest of your life. Forever. Female Linebackers from the Immaculate Heart of Mary Convent, dressed head to toe in black, carrying rosaries and metal-edged yardsticks in their kielbasi-fingered hands. These were not women: These were NUNS. Childless, Amazonian, self-loathing NUNS. The paved school yard buzzing with running laughing sugar-addicted children. All the boys from the town, most of whom I'd never played with before. Oh, and of course, the girls. Thank God for the girls. I loved the girls.

And they were all there. Debbie Olsheski. Kathy Lewzinsky. The twins, Andrea and Audrey O'hara. Lisa Kamanski. Rosemary Meshinski. Dora Petroski. Joanne Shimansky and Donna Washevich. Donna Washevich. How the image of her in that green and brown plaid Saint Leo's Catholic school girl uniform stays with me to this very day. But that, indeed, is quite another story...

I never knew there was a difference between girls and boys. I mean, a *real difference*, y'know, down there, until earlier that past summer. To me, we were all the same, down there, for the most part, pretty much, give or take.

Sometimes, during a sacred childhood moment of actually being alone in the house, or if my mother was asleep on the sofa following one of her hair-styling appointments, I would excitedly go thru the clothes hamper, find a bra and panties, a garter or girdle, anything lacy or frilly, and put them on in the best manner I could figure out. Then I would dance around, looking at myself in the mirror, posing, wondering when I would develop breasts like the girls on T.V. and mom's mail-order catalogs.

Earlier that past summer, my best pal Jesse Chorba showed me these pictures in magazines he found in his dad's bedroom. Pictures of girls. Girls without any clothes on. Naked. Really naked. Naked with their legs spread open. I thought, "What happened to their dick?" and "How come their guts don't all slide out?" It was a miracle, it was. I felt I was in on the biggest, scariest, craziest secret in the whole universe, and everything would be different now. I was ready.

Jesse Chorba was new to my street. He lived a few doors up on the other side with this old guy who he said was his dad, although the old guy looked more like a grandfather than a father to me. Jesse was an overweight kid with thick porcupine

hair and thick-lensed filthy glasses, which magnified his eyes so that they appeared unnaturally large. He looked like a living cartoon. All my mom had to say about Jesse was "Stay away from that Chorba boy," which of course, inspired me all the more to seek out his company. Jesse was what we called "special" back then.

Although he was about 2 years older than me, he didn't know half the stuff I knew, but the things he did know were fantastic! For example, he could fart on command. He would eat things on a dare. Caterpillars. Snot. Even dog shit, I shit you not. He was as strong as the "Incredible Hulk," and had the same terrible temper tantrums as well. When he got pissed off, he would grab hold of his ears and do this weird little dance, or jig, and start throwing stuff and breaking things and curse and not think twice about it. He knew the really bad words, too. The bad words that if ever allowed to slip out of *your* mouth in front of *your* parents would bring about *your* violent and horrible death. In other words, the GOOD bad words. Safeguard in the mouth. Pepper on the tongue. Father's leather belt repeatedly walloped across your bare little ass until it bled. Back then, for us Catholics, it was a sin to curse, but apparently child abuse was just hunkie-dorie with God.

Jesse's father seemed afraid of him, in a weird "Twilight Zone" kind of way. Sometimes, I would hear Jesse and the old man screaming in their house from *inside* my house! Sometimes the cops came. Sometimes an ambulance. Nobody said anything about it. Everyone had their secrets, y'know?

Jesse Chorba. The girls. The big secret. My first day at Saint Leo's, right...

Soon I was inside the school sitting at a shellacked yellow wooden desk. Previous inmates had carved initials, nick-names, hearts with arrows, peace signs and swastikas into the top of it. "Fino is a Rat" was expertly engraved on mine. My brother's book bag rested beside me in the aisle on the floor like a patient obedient fat hound.

There was a NUN in black at a big oak desk at the front of the room. She had a sort of white bandage wrapped all around the outside of her face, and that was squared off in a black headdress that was folded a special way which hung down behind her massive shoulders. She said her name was Sister Mary Grace. She was obviously insane. She seemed younger than the other

NUNS, although how anyone could tell anything about a person dressed like that is beyond me.

We had to say our names out loud in the order we were seated. I was the last person in the first row, nearest the exit. Four other first graders announced their names, and then it was my turn.

My throat struggled against the collar of my white button down shirt and clip-on tie. I could feel my ears burning red. Fruit Loops. Dippity-Doo. My black leather shoes. I opened my mouth and out bleated my name.

In the movie version of this scene, now playing in my head, every one in the class turns around to look at me. But of course that was not the case. We were all in the same boat, and we were all scared shitless. The names of the others were spoken by their owners, and somewhere in there, I heard *his* name. The cartoon boy who moved to my street the beginning of this past summer. The second boy in the sixth row. My best pal, the very *special* Jesse Chorba!

Jesse (who I sometimes simply referred to as "Chorba," or "Chorb," which was the custom... that is, to call kids by their last names or variations thereof, especially when the sound of their last name was potentially funny or unpleasant) and I hung out together all summer long. We named it "Summer of the Bugs." We mastered the art of sneaking up on a bug with a coffee can and its matching plastic lid, slamming the can down over the victim, then cautiously sliding the lid between the bug and the ground, trapping the creature in the can. Then you could shake it and kick it, or slowly drip household chemicals into it, until the bug gave up and stopped moving. Sometimes this took all day. Bees were the coolest to torture because they deserved it, and, of course, the element of danger was constantly present. You knew if that bee got out, he'd go get his buddies and they would find you and attack you and sting you to death. Bees, wasps, hornets and yellow jackets all deserved the cruelest of Chock full o'Nuts tortures.

Jesse took the torture process a little bit further.

One sunny July afternoon, following an exhaustive can rolling session of some grasshoppers, we let them out to carefully observe the last agonizing flickering twinklings of their insect lives. Jesse began laughing and making these high-

pitched "eeee..." sounds. I knew by that sound he was about to do something *evil*.

He removed his jumbo glasses, positioned them in just a way, about 12 inches or so above the ground, and focused the sunlight thru the lenses into an intensifying descending white cone of heat, ending in a small brilliant hot dot of light on one of the grasshoppers. The bug quickened and began kicking its back legs and flipping, spitting up bubbles of brown syrup as the tiny point of light smoldered and burst with a crack, consuming the curling up grasshopper like fast forwarding a filmstrip of a frying piece of bacon.

It was the coolest thing I had ever seen.

Sister Mary Grace called the class to attention. She said something about our being her first class ever, and how *special* that was, and how *special* we were, and how *special* Jesus is. She would be passing out our special reading books, which were called My Religion Book, and we were to each come up to her desk to get our copy. She called one by one each of the 4 kids in my row, and then me. I walked up there, smiled, and got the book. I walked back to my desk, and tripped over my brother's 25 pound book bag, falling flat on my Dippity-Doo face with a distinctive splat. Now the other kids were looking at me. They were laughing. I had made a first-class fool of myself.

Sister Mary Grace was over me at once. She turned me on my back. I was limp and helpless as a carp out of water. A look came across the shiny surface of her well scrubbed face. I felt the warm slow stream of fluid down my lips and chin. I tasted the familiar bitters. I knew exactly what had happened.

O God I gotta nose bleed! O God I gotta nose bleed!

She maneuvered me up and sat me at my desk with my head tilted back in the chair. I knew the procedure. I shoved my white hanky up against my nostrils. I don't know what happened to the nickel. Somewhere in all this madness it must have rolled loose. Forget I ever mentioned it. I applied pressure with my red and white dalmatian hanky while the class was lectured about laughing at the adversity of others. You could cut the hush of guilt with a knife. I just kinda settled down from the loss of blood and looked around the room awhile. I noticed Jesse. He was glaring at me and frowning. I looked away, shamed.

On the wall near me were some framed pictures. There was a photo of the Pope, with a crown, sitting on a throne. His hand

was held up in either a wave or the "Heil Hitler" salute I had seen on the TV comedy "Hogan's Heroes." I couldn't tell the difference. There was also a framed portrait of the assassinated Catholic President, John F. Kennedy. Between the Pope and Kennedy hung a reproduction of a painting of Jesus Christ in a robe sitting on a rock with a bunch of little kids in togas or bathrobes or something. I remembered hearing all about how much Jesus loved children, and how He said unless everybody was like a child, they wouldn't get into Heaven when they died. I wondered about Jesse. He was a child, sort of, but I couldn't picture him in that painting playing with Jesus and the kids. Did Jesus know about Jesse? Did He know about the *Secret Difference* between Boys and Girls? Did Sister Mary Grace? The NUNS? My God, did anyone else?

The swallowing of my blood and the ponderous weight of my carnal knowledge was unbearable. I suddenly felt like I was going to be very sick. My swooning was suspended quickly by some commotion on the other side of the room. I looked over and saw Jesse trembling in his chair and going "eeee..." The desk and chair went flying out from around him and Jesse ran up to the blackboard with his hands clenched about his throat. Something was sticking out of his mouth where his tongue should be. It was his tie. It was the clip-on type.

Sister Mary Grace tried to grab a hold of him but Jesse was in his Hulk mode. He was too strong. His glasses flew off and I could see that his eyes really were gigantic! They were bulging out of their sockets! His face was turning purple and he was wheezing and writhing and cursing like a crazy person.

The other kids were getting out of their seats and backing away. Some were crying. Peter Kubicki, another "special" friend, was laughing. Donna Washevich was passed out on the floor. I looked up her skirt.

The Sister had Jesse by his sport coat collar. He had a hold of her headress thingie. They were dragging each other as if caught up in some fierce mythic battle toward the exit door. They passed beneath the pictures of John F. Kennedy, Jesus with the Innocent Children, and the Pope. As they struggled by my desk, Jesse looked right up at me through his porcupine hair and winked. He smiled that goofy wet Chorba smile of his, and winked! Jesse was faking it! It was a goof! A con! He winked!

"eeee..."

An ambulance came. They took Jesse away. We were dismissed early. We never saw Sister Mary Grace again. No one did.

I walked home sick to my stomach. I told my Mom all that happened. She gave me a juice glass of Rock and Rye to help calm my nerves. Jacquin's Rock and Rye was the all-purpose medicine in our household. Headaches. Toothaches. Earaches. Bellyaches. Even sunburn and bee stings! Finding the numbing effects of alcohol a very pleasant thing indeed, I came up with innumerable complaints during my childhood of physical ailments only the Jacquin's could relieve. For now, I spent the rest of the afternoon sipping my remedy and flipping through the illustrations in My Religion Book, which I brought home in the hazardous book bag.

A picture of Adam and Eve, naked. Eve's long hair, a branch and the head of a deer covered all the naughty places.

A picture of God throwing Adam and Eve out of Eden.

A picture of Cain killing Abel.

God making it rain for 40 days and nights until every living thing drowns in the Big Flood except Noah and his family and, of course, the animals in the arc.

God destroying the cities of Sodom and Gomorra in fire and brimstone. This guy's wife turns around to take a look at what's going on and God turns her into a pillar of salt.

Abraham, with a knife and torch in his hand, about to make a sacrifice to God. Isaac, Abraham's "legitimate" son, tied to a pile of sticks, waiting to be stabbed then set on fire. But an angel tells Abraham, "Don't do it! God changed his mind," and so instead he kills a ram or a moose or some damn thing.

The Plague of Blood. The Plague of Frogs. The Plague of Lice.
The Plague of Flies. The Plague of Cattle. The Plague of Boils.
The Plague of Hail. The Plague of Locusts. The Plague of Darkness.
The Killing of all the First Born Babies throughout the land...
And this is all before the Red Sea comes smashing down on the Egyptians! What a terrible idea for a first grader's reading book, I thought. I closed the book, finished the Jacquins, laid on my bed and took a nap.

I had a deep sleep. A Rock and Rye comatose. A six-year-old's perfect peace. And I had a dream. In the dream, I'm walking down the upstairs hallway in my house, very quietly, slowly, so as not to wake my mom with the squeaking of floorboards shifting beneath my bare feet. Then floating. I am floating thru the darkened house, downward, downward, until I am in the basement in front of the furnace.

We had a big coal furnace, and that was the one forbidden place. It was black and hot and dangerous and dirty, and I was never ever to go anywhere near it. We had two coal bins, always full of coal. Our backyard was a coal heap. A "culm bank" it was called. We lived a stone's throw from the Blue Coal Company's coal breaker, up the road in Ashley, the coal town that was built around the coal breaker, where everybody's grandparents, at one time or another, were employed, suffered and died. You could stick a shovel in the ground anywhere and come up with chunks of anthracite. This made a small group of people not from Ashley very very rich. "Rich as a pig in shit," my mom would say, whatever that meant. As for the rest of us...oh, nevermind.

When I was alone, I used to tip-toe into the basement, turn the iron handle on the furnace door, open it, and let the intense radiance of heat come over my face until I couldn't stand the pain any longer. This door was where you shoveled the coal in, which would burn and keep your house warm. I would peer into the hot burning lake of fire and throw all kinds of things in there, just for the glee of watching stuff melt and burn. Stuff like my G.I. Joes. My army guys. Lincoln Logs. Hot Wheels racing cars. My mother's highball straws. The Genesee 6-pack plastic carriers. I loved the 6-pack plastic carriers the most cuz they went "zot-zot-zot-zot" as they were dripping from the heat! I called that particular game "making zots." My brother's original Beatles 45's. (Son-of-a-Bitch!) The dream. Sorry...

So in my dream I'm there, right, I'm turning the iron handle, opening the furnace door, heat on my face, and I see, in the red orange flames, all the kids from my first grade class. They are naked and in agony! Screaming in pain. Peter Kubicki in flames. The twins. Donna Washevich. Sister Mary Grace. My mom. I start to cry. I'm pulling shoelaces of blood from my nostrils like a bad magic act. Dark wine colored rope. I piss myself. I try to run away but I can't. The furnace gets bigger and seems to have gravity. It's pulling me in. The furnace looks like a face. It's Jesse! The venting portals are his big bulging eyes! The coal feed door his mouth! The damper his nose and the pipes

and plumbing is his choppy porcupine hair! The Chorba furnace is laughing, making a scary high pitched "eeee..."

I am barking strange guttural sounds when I awake in my mother's arms. It is dark outside. I have slept well into the evening. My mother comforts me and reminds me that my favorite T.V. program is on. We go downstairs together to watch "The Dean Martin Show." I loved that show. Oh, the girls. The "Gold Diggers." Dean Martin sure knew how to have a good time! He was drinking a drink and smoking a cigarette and singing "Get Happy" with Petula Clark when the phone rang. Mom answered the phone. I got up and turned the sound knob down on the television set so I could listen to what my mom was saying.

"Oh my God," I heard her say. "Jesus, Mary and Joseph." and "Holy Shit!" This couldn't be good. She got off the phone, made a highball and lit up a Salem 100. I followed her into the kitchen.

"Mommy what's wrong?" I asked.

"That was Mrs. Blight from Coal street. Her daughter Helen is a nurse at Saint Francis Hospital. Jesse Chorba is dead!"

What? I couldn't believe it. No. He was faking it. He had to be faking it. He winked at me! When I tripped over my brother's book bag and got the nose bleed, he got jealous cuz I was getting all the attention. He couldn't be dead. It was only a joke.

"What happened, mommy?" I asked.

"According to Mrs. Blight, they wanted to keep Jesse overnight for observation. A little Jewish boy sharing his room had been in a coma for 3 or 4 weeks, and came out of it tonight. Jesse had some kind of incident with the boy, and had to be moved to a private room."

"How did Jesse die?"

She took a drag on the Salem 100 and snuffed it out, unfinished, in the over-flowing ceramic ashtray. "Well," she said, "one of the nurses doing rounds went to check on him in the private room after hearing a crash. Some commotion. His dinner and clothing were thrown all over the room, and he was just laying on the floor. The nurse thought he fell, but then

the Doctor figured that he choked to death. They found a tie in the back of his throat. It was the clip-on type."

My Religion Book had nothing in it about something like that. Mom poured us each some Rock and Rye, and we both sat down at the kitchen table and took sips. Tomorrow would be another day. Everything would be different now.

I was ready.

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