

Talk To Me

I have called you by name, you are mine. ... I will be with you; they shall not overwhelm you; *Isaiah 43:1-3*

Her high school graduation photo showed a frightened girl, fiercely looking into the camera, eyes filled with hurt and anger. The face today revealed a painful life.

The path leading from the woman's childhood to my high school French class must have been long and arduous. Sister Piaculum ... called Sister Pecker behind her back ... still had that furious look in her eye, and she obviously did not like teenagers. I sometimes wondered if she had been forced at gun point to teach this class of Catholic hooligans. More likely, she willingly embraced the mission to reduce a future sentence in Purgatory. "Do the time here," I imagined she said to herself. "Suffer the little children."

Sister Pecker had a slight French accent, and she had spent a number of years overseas. The poor woman got upset over trifles, and would hiss out a stream of French like a stoker on a freight train headed for Marseilles. We never understood this forbidden vocabulary, of course, but the vehemence of each outburst assured us she wasn't saying Hail Marys.

"I found Sister Pecker's picture in an old Yearbook in the Library." whispered Mary Ellen Callabrese in Biology class one morning. "Was she naked?" I asked, just to be funny. "She's 34 years old and her name is Betty." Then she added, "And nuns can't take their clothes off."

I was surprised Pecker was a local girl. I wondered if her anger stemmed from being stuck here in Utica and this school. I might have sympathized with her, but I had little empathy at that age. The woman seized every opportunity to belittle me over my lack of study, I thought, and she deserved her obvious hell on earth. I often daydreamed of revenge.

At lunch, I sat with Billy O'Reilly, an excitable kid who once said he was certain Bishop McIntyre was the Anti Christ, because he'd seen the prelate cross his fingers while giving the blessing. Told of Mary Ellen's find, Billy became animated. "Break her anonymity," he cried and slammed his fist down on the lunch table. He knew every Alcoholics Anonymous phrase by heart ... from around the supper table, I guess.

So, a plan formed in my mind. This would surpass the time my friend George and I put signs up all over the school announcing the first annual Saint Elmo Stiffie Award. "Please submit the name of any young woman who, to the best of your knowledge, has not inspired a single impure thought during the entire school year."

George and I had served hours of time after school for that one. His mother had told him to stay away from me afterward, reportedly saying I cared only for myself and my mischief. She wasn't far off.

But the outing of Sister Pecker was irresistible and it could be foolproof. If everyone in the French class took part, the nun wouldn't be able to punish all of us. Everyone was in agreement when lunch was over.

As the afternoon French class began, Sister Pecker wrote the day's conjugations on the board, her back to the class. Seated near the front of the room, I turned toward the students, raised my arms and mouthed, "One, Two, Three," like a young John Phillip Sousa striking up the band. On the downbeat, most of the class shouted out in unison, "Betty!"

The room went silent. Very silent. Betty Suzanne Piatek slowly turned to the class, her jaw now

slack, the brutal expression in her eyes replaced by utter surprise. Her shoulders wilted and she walked to her desk and sat down behind it, folding her body into the chair. She put her face in her hands. As I watched her, time seemed to slow to a stop, as it often does during a disaster.

Isn't it strange, I thought, that I could hear the little clock on her desk ticking away the seconds. A slight creak came from the back of the room as someone lightly stirred. The air got perceptibly heavy.

The sun cast its warming rays through the tall old windows, creating a mellow glow in the classroom and burnishing the old wooden desks to a lustrous golden color. How sweet the world appears, just before the end. It's like the hideous contrast of gazing out a window at the dentist's office on a gorgeous summer afternoon, waiting to be called to the chair and the screaming drill. Short of getting up and running for your life, there's nothing you can do to avoid the inevitable unfolding of your fate. Sister Pecker's shoulders began to rhythmically rise and fall with sobs. I was in very deep shit.

It occurred to me the entire class's participation would not guarantee my anonymity. Every pair of eyes in the room would turn to me when she asked who was responsible for this outrage. Out on the limb, I could hear a saw stroke away behind me. Sister Pecker raised her eyes and looked around the room. Then her gaze fell directly on me. How the hell had she known?

"Young man," she said, as she stood up, "come with me."

Out the classroom door she went. When I got to the hallway, she was halfway along its length, headed toward the double doors and the walkway leading to the nuns' residence next door.

"Sister, I'm sorry," I called. She didn't stop, and I broke into a trot to catch up with her. Flinging herself into the Sisters' House, she swept down the dimly lit corridor as I followed. The smells of floor polish and cooking cabbage came to me as I rushed behind her into a small sitting room. Sister Pecker swung around, grabbed me by the

shoulders and literally threw me into a chair. She locked the door from the inside and came to sit on a couch opposite me, a small coffee table between us.

"Sister," I began again.

"Shut up!"

"Yes, m'am." This was going to be difficult. Her fingers drummed on the end table next to the couch and I saw her hand find an ash tray and begin to fondle it. Wincing, I visualized the heavy glass object speeding toward my head. I briefly thought of picking up the coffee table to use as a shield. She sighed deeply and, as I watched with something akin to horror, Sister Pecker reached up to her head, pulled out a few bobbie pins and removed her "flying nun" headpiece (called the Cornet.) She placed it on the coffee table, while I tried to avoid looking at her short blonde hair. She loosened her starched collar at the neck and, reaching deep inside her robes, brought out a pack of Camels. A match from somewhere flared and she sucked in a deep lungful of smoke. I *so* wished she would offer me one.

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Mary Ellen Callabrese pulled away from me and sat up straight in the front seat of my father's 1957 Buick Special, a car made large enough for any romantic pursuit you could imagine, whether you were ready for it or not. We weren't. Crickets chirped in the dark air outside the steamed up windshield, and a breeze stirred through the open windows to somewhat cool our ardent desires. Two months had passed since Sister Pecker had "dragged me over to the convent," the phrase I used to describe the episode. "Told me I'd be expelled if I didn't promise to spend the year painting the entire inside of the convent, except the bedrooms, of course." I had told that tale to everyone. Mary Ellen didn't believe it. It scared me a little, to know someone recognized my bullshit.

"So, c'mon, Rick, what did she say to you?" Why Mary Ellen raised this topic after each time she licked my earlobes was a mystery to me. We'd been dating only a few weeks, and she

constantly brought it up. In the dim light I could see her turn toward me.

‘I know something happened,’ she said.

‘Yeah, I got punished.’

‘Paint the whole convent? For being one of 27 kids who yelled out her name? Come on!’

‘OK, OK. she shared a secret.’

‘What?’

‘Nuns really do take off their clothes.’

She stared at me.

‘In private, of course.’

She kept staring at me, the moonlight glinting off her glasses.

‘Look, Mary Ellen, Pecker told me some things about when she was a kid. How her parents treated her. Never agreeing with her father and how she fell apart when he died, and joined the nunnery, and Africa andwell, she told me a lot of stuff.’

‘Why?’

‘I didn’t want to hear any of it.’

Mary Ellen continued to stare at me.

‘She smokes, you know,’ I said.

‘A lot of ‘em do.’

‘She finally gave me a cigarette to calm me down.’

‘Tell me now! What the hell did she say to you?’

Betty Suzanne Piatek told me her life story. I sat there transfixed by the sheer bizarreness of the moment, listening to how unhappy she was. About her early life and her parents and never measuring up to her father’s expectations. How she hated him. How she wound up a nun, how she’d spent 6 years in the Belgian Congo and come back broken by an experience that only later did I realize most likely involved rape, and maybe worse.

Betty took a deep breath, as if to say more, but then looked at me as though realizing for the first time her audience was a 16 year old boy.

‘David, I know it’s crazy for me to be telling you all of this.

‘Well ...,’ I responded lamely.

‘Something happened today and you played a major part in it,’ she said.

Didn’t I know it! At this point, I was just hoping she wouldn’t turn violent.

Betty continued her story. Now returned to the company of mostly older women who had been her school teachers twenty years ago, Betty found it impossible to relate to them, woman to woman. She was a hardened missionary who had lived her life in what was essentially a war zone in Africa, complete with terrible experiences and nightmares that would last forever. But to the collective mind of the convent, she remained the little girl they had known and taught all through her school years. She played an adult role in the school, of course, teaching and doing all the chores like any other nun. She even helped the older nuns to die when their time came, a beautiful and awful task, but she was never truly a sister. She was everyone’s daughter. It was like living with your aging mother, except this Mother never died, time and again replaced with another one.

As Betty wrote the conjugations on the board that afternoon in the classroom, her back to these children she had vowed to care for and educate, but whom she would have preferred to take out into the wilderness and feed to the lions, she pleaded with her creator for any kind of sign. Her life had turned out so wrong, she thought. It was as if she had found herself in the wrong movie, an actor without the script. She longed for direction, but doubted any advice from her well meaning sisters in the community.

‘If I only knew You were listening!’ she prayed.

Betty heard the room grow quiet with the rhythmic ticking of the clock. A warm ray of sunshine touched upon her back and the room began to glow with a golden color. The air felt heavy.

That’s when the voice of God spoke to her. A breath broke from her chest as the chalk squeaked on the board and her hand came to a stop. Her soul screamed, ‘Do You hear me? Do You know me?’

And God shouted, in a voice that came from those in the wilderness behind her, ‘Betty!’

Immediately, she knew she was not alone in the universe. Knew it, not believed it. There was a physical feeling of buoyancy so strong she feared she would fall over as she stumbled to her desk. Suddenly, absolutely nothing was clear, but everything became possible. Loneliness and questions dissolved into hope. Fear into trust. The world now seemed expectant with promise, and she wondered if a pregnant woman felt like this. Her shoulders rose and fell with her sobs as her mind came back to the classroom. She wiped the tears away from her eyes with her fingers and looked around the room. The little bastards were still in their seats, each adrift in a wilderness no different from hers at that age, no different from hers now. Betty saw the look of compassion gracing each beautiful face. Except for one. His was full of guilt. The face she had hated all year and that reminded her so much of her father, a sword twisting in her heart. Betty knew it was time to finally tell her dead father she wanted her own life. It was also time to apologize to this youngster and steer him off his selfish road toward the creation of another man like her father. And the time to do it was now. Right now!

As the night air began to cool, Mary Ellen sighed, a girlie sigh that portrayed a remaining doubt. "I still can't believe the punishment ... painting the whole convent."
"Well " I said. "Promise me you won't tell this to a soul."
"I won't, honest."
"Betty ... I mean, Sister Piaculum ... is leaving the sisterhood at the end of the year. She has no money to get started and the sisters don't have any to give her. But they did have a fund set aside to pay a painter. The place really needs it. I took the job. But I've given the pay to Betty."

"Let me get this straight," said Mary Ellen. "Rick, The Great Himself, The Center of His Own Creepy Universe, is helping to spring a nun from the convent?"
"Well, sort of."
"And I can't tell this to anyone?"
"No."
"Then you really are selfish! You're so god damned self centered, you can't share this with anyone!"

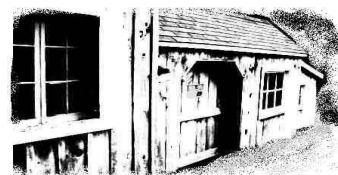
Mary Ellen was right. I knew it would be tougher to let my deed become "our" deed than it was to take on the chore in the first place. I would have rather spent the rest of the year being a martyr, than to seek help and share the task. "Me" needed to move over a bit to make room for "us." Lots of us.

So, painting every room in the convent became a group effort on the part of Sister's Piaculum's French class. The younger nuns loved the idea, but the older sisters were annoyed with students running around the convent banging paint cans and playing ghost with the canvas tarps. "I can't get away from you junior criminals, even after school," carped old Sister MacAdam, the same nun who told Betty she hoped to meet Saint Elmo Stiffie in heaven one day.

At the senior graduation ceremony in June, after Bishop McIntyre had crossed his fingers and pronounced the dismissal, and just as the graduates were about to process from the hall, a youngish woman in a business suit mounted the podium and asked for our attention. I looked up to see the most radiant ex-nun imaginable. Her face had so changed from only a few months before. Maybe to ensure her recognition, she flew into a happy French fillip. If she cursed us, I'm sure she did it with a laugh.

She had risen to say goodbye, creating her own place on the program. She took a deep breath, "Hi, I'm Sister Pecker."
Everyone laughed.
"But I am called ... to be Betty."

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