

F R O M
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Brooklyn

Fiction, Poetry and Drama

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The Sinner

by Jessica Oswald

On May 10, 1983, at the age of seven, I was scheduled to confess all of my sins. The day after, I was to receive the body and blood of Our Lord. Sister Carney had been preparing the second-grade class at St. Anthony's school for five months. That had been her job for fifty-two years. Once a week we would practice at church - kneel, stand, sit... kneel, stand, sit. God help the "sinners" who rested their butts against the pew as they knelt - if caught you would have to kneel on the cold, hard tile floor for fifteen minutes. Sister would tack on an extra two minutes if you even winced.

Sister Carney was a mean old lady. No one knew exactly how old she was, but we guessed she was at least a hundred and two. We were convinced she knew Jesus personally and had stayed alive just long enough to "save our sinning souls." She wore the same white habit and gown to class every day. We knew that because Billy Shannon once stuck his pink Bubblicious bubble gum to the end of her dress. Every day we checked to see if she'd changed her clothes. She never had. It was then we realized that nuns were not allowed to undress - for fear that someone might see their naked bodies.

However, there was something else that perplexed us. How did Sister keep her uniform as white and pure as her soul if she never took the damn thing off? It took us a whole day to come up with the answer. I said she changed very quickly in a dark closet with no mirrors; Josie thought someone cleaned the dress while she had it on - but who? God?... Yes! God came down from heaven and cleaned Sister Carney's

dress so that we would never have to see a nude nun. Because surely that would send you straight to hell.

Along with Sister's holy gown, she wore a silver cross that began in the middle of her absent cleavage and ended where there *might* be a belly button. Once when she was standing in front of the class, I saw, reflected in her cross, little Robby picking his nose in the back of the room.

Every Tuesday at ten o'clock we walked half a block to church in two straight lines, no touching or talking, to practice our Hail Marys and Our Fathers, the Apostles' Creed and the Ten Commandments. Sister would position herself at the head of the pews and tell us, one by one, to stand up and recite whatever it was that she asked for. Margaret was chosen first to say the Lord's Prayer. She walked to the front, bowed before the altar and gave a perfect performance. We all hated her. I especially despised the pink ribbons in her long blond hair and her patent-leather Mary Jane shoes. "You are a child of God, an angel in the making!" Sister Carney exclaimed.

I was the last to be called. I was so nervous I chewed my nails. Sister saw me. "'Tis a nasty thing to do in the House of God," she said. She'd saved the Ten Commandments because she needed to embarrass one of us - and it was usually me. Sister wasn't fond of my coal-black hair or my lack of enthusiasm for wanting to be a good Catholic.

"Miss Hunt" - she never called me by my first name - "come to the front and recite for the class the Ten Commandments." I did the Wedding March two-step as I walked up the aisle. Her scowl told me she

didn't find that amusing. I was so caught up in left/right, right/left that I forgot to kneel and bless myself before the altar. Sister's face turned red, then purple. Her mouth tightened; when it opened, spit flew all over me.

"What kind of ignoramus are you?" she roared, her false teeth clapping so loud that I thought they were going to fall out of her mouth. She asked me if I knew what happened to children who never received the body of Our Lord. "Yeer sad, tormented soul will remain in limbo forever," she answered her own question. I wanted to giggle, as I imagined my soul dancing under a giant pole with hundreds of thousands of others'. Sister caught me trying to stifle my laugh; she pulled me to the front of the altar by my ear and told me to kneel and beg "Jasus" for forgiveness.

When she decided I had been forgiven she gathered the class into a circle and showed us how to receive Communion. She held in her cold withered hands a bowl of wafers that weren't blessed yet. Sister said it was a sin to handle Jesus's body; our dirty little hands would make it unholy. We had to stick our tongues out as far as we could, but not too far. We did not want to contaminate the priest's hand with our saliva. Once the wafer was in our mouth we could not let it touch our teeth - we'd go straight to hell for that. Sister would watch to make sure we swallowed it whole. After no one choked on the pretend host, we were told to go home and think of all the sins we'd committed throughout the seven years of our lives, because we would be confessing them the next day at noon.

Once Sister let the class out, I ran all the way home to wash Jesus down with a glass of milk. He made my stomach grumble and growl,

so I fixed myself a bowl of Lucky Charms. (It was the only cereal my grandmother would let me have. I'd shown her the leprechaun on the box and claimed the stuff came straight from Ireland. It worked.)

As I reached for a second bowl my grandmother said, "Is it a rich person ye think I am? Go aisy." She walked into her bedroom and came out with a hollow, plastic version of Mother Mary. She wanted me to go back to the church to fill her bottle with holy water - which meant that I would have to see Sister Carney again. I was going to miss a brand new episode of *Inspector Gadget* because I had to fill the Blessed Mother with water.

"Later" I told her.

"Jasus, Mary and Joseph," she said, "if I were to drop dead an hour from now there would be no holy water to sprinkle me with. Get off your lazy arse and go!" As I was walking out the door she yelled, "And pick me up some fags on yeer way home."

I had to find Sister Carney to fill the holy water bottle, because to do it yourself was a venial sin. I abhorred being in church alone: the statues and the smell of the incense made me shiver. Sister was upstairs in the rectory, which meant I would have to walk all the way past the altar. I tiptoed up the aisle, trying not to look at any of the statues. I knew if we made eye contact they would guess every one of my sins, and I didn't want to go to hell. Jesus hanging on the cross, his head crowned with thorns, made me feel especially guilty because he'd actually died for the bad things I'd done. I was careful to avoid him, too.

I made it upstairs with all my sins intact, but Sister did not seem to be on the first floor of the rectory. I called her name, there was no

answer. I wandered around a bit, hoping to find her quickly - thinking I might be able to catch the end of *Inspector Gadget*. I walked up another flight of stairs to the living quarters. I was not supposed to go there. A bright light shone through one of the doors. I heard someone mumbling. The door was slightly cracked and I inched my way over to peer in. I was definitely going straight to hell; a one-way express ticket provided by God himself. There she was, Sister Carney in her slip. Not a full slip either, but a half-slip.

And I saw her hair. I was doomed.

She had the slip pulled up to her underarms, so that her breasts were pretty much covered. Her saggy bottom hung beneath the hem. She appeared of great age. Her face looked as if it had collapsed, because she didn't have a tooth in her head. Her forehead was low, narrow and scored with a thousand wrinkles; her long silvery gray hair fell in matted locks. She looked like a banshee. Sister was standing over her bed, trying to remove the gum from the bottom of her gown. As she scraped and scraped, she cursed every last kid in the class.

I thought sure I was going to lose my sight - God would blind me as punishment for seeing Sister Carney buck-naked. I turned and ran down the marble staircase and threw open the door leading to the altar. There, staring at me, were all the statues. They locked eyes with me. They knew.

I told my grandmother the church was out of holy water. She didn't fuss too much; she could tell something was wrong with me. I was pale, sweating and out of breath. She had dinner waiting on the table: fried liver and potatoes. Too sick to eat, I ran to my bedroom, jumped into bed and pulled the covers over my head to hide from

Nana's icons. I didn't know what to do. My first confession was coming up, and I'd have to tell a priest that I'd seen a nun without her clothes on. He'd throw me out of the box. Disgrace me. I wouldn't make my first Holy Communion. I stayed awake all night.

On the morning of the big day, Sister separated the boys from the girls, for fear that we might commit more sins. The girls were whispering their horrible transgressions to each other. They were all the same: everybody had lied, cheated, stolen a dollar from her mother's purse, said a bad word. But I had a sin that no one else had committed, and I would not share it with them. Sister gave me a thump on the back and said it was my turn. I couldn't decide whether I should confess face-to-face with the priest or be an anonymous sinner. I went the invisible route, not wanting Father to know I was holding back.

I walked into a dark, red, velvet-walled cubicle. A wooden panel slid back and I said, "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. This is my first confession." I told him I had lied and cheated, just what he wanted to hear; I was not going to be the cause of his having a heart attack. He told me to say one Hail Mary and three Our Fathers and I would be absolved of all my sins. I walked out of the confessional trembling, because I'd lied to a priest. I said my prayers, but I knew there was no way I'd be forgiven.

Your Holy Communion day is supposed to be the best day of your life. My grandmother woke me up at five-thirty in the morning to curl my hair with hot wet rags. After she was done spitting on my head, then tugging and twisting, she made me what she called "a proper breakfast": fried bread, fried tomatoes, blood sausage, bacon and eggs.

I took one look at that heap of food and gagged, but I had to eat it. When we were done, Nana went digging around in her closet and pulled out a miniature-sized wedding gown. “Sure, ye’ll wear this,” she said with a dreamy smile. The dress looked like it had barely survived the famine in the old country. It was too tight and it made me itch.

“Ye look like an angel sent from heaven above,” my grandmother said.

Before I knew it I was standing in line with all my classmates, waiting to receive the body and blood of Our Lord. When it was my turn I closed my eyes, said *Amen*, and stuck my tongue out. I chewed Jesus. I didn’t care. I was already going to hell, right? So what difference would it make. Sister Carney saw me do it but she couldn’t say anything, because this was a holy moment. I walked back to the pew in silence, my head bowed low. At last I was officially “a sinner.”

