

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

She May Be a Nazi, But She's Hot

September 24, 1987

Without the benefit of Pornhub, I pieced my sex education together from a variety of unreliable sources, ranging from my father's anecdotes and sly asides, the *Truly Tasteless Jokes* book series, locker room talk before and after gym class, '80s and '90s sex thrillers written by Joe Eszterhas and Scott Turow, and religious instruction at Saint Luke's Roman Catholic Church. Each Thursday night, Catholic public-school kids attended three hours of after-dinner religious instruction in preparation for receiving the Sacrament of Confirmation and becoming "Soldiers of Christ." Kids who attended the church's K-12 private school got all the theological drilling they needed during regular school hours. They were ready. Us heathens needed remedial religion before we could stand before the bishop and be anointed with oil of Chrism.

Miss O'Sullivan, the petite, twenty-one-year-old religious instruction teacher, had short, curly blonde hair, sparkling blue eyes, and perfect white teeth. She wore the same outfit each week like a uniform: a figure-flattering ankle-length gray skirt over black high-heeled shoes, a frilly white blouse buttoned up to her neck, and a plain gold cross hanging just above her bosom. She appeared serene, but her aura of tranquility flickered each time she expressed a terrifyingly doctrinaire religious belief or was challenged by a saucy student. Our first lesson with Miss O'Sullivan fell three days after I discovered the joys of being tortured by students, teachers, and administrators alike on day one of sixth grade. After taking this shocking abuse, I was primed to be Miss O'Sullivan's perfect victim. All she needed to do was smile, and I would be hers.

Ten minutes into the first lesson, the luminous reactionary produced a pristine white handkerchief from her purse and held it open for the students to examine. "I don't agree with the modern Catholic Church's decision to downplay the existence of hell. I don't approve of hints that salvation may not just go to Christians. In fact, one of our own parish's priests, a certain Jesuit who shall remain nameless,

comes dangerously close to espousing Origen's heresy of Apocatastasis. They call it 'Universalism.' I believe in real Catholicism, which teaches that your soul must be as pristine as this handkerchief the moment of death, or you will burn forever."

"This bitch can burn forever," Christina Gelormino whispered to Nancy Boyle.

Nancy nodded her massive head of dark brown teased hair. "She's a real asshole."

"A whole ass." The duo sat behind me in matching gray over-the-shoulder sweatshirts.

Like Fr. Charles Coughlin speaking through *Sesame Street's* Elmo, Miss O'Sullivan was a sexy woman giving a cute fire-and-brimstone sermon — the spoonful of sugar needed to make the Inquisition palatable again in the twentieth century. "The moment you commit a mortal sin, you must repent. Run to confession. Unburden yourself. Do your penance. Sandblast the stain off your soul. If you do not return your soul to a lily-white state, you will *definitely* go to hell."

I'm doomed. My handkerchief must be covered in all kinds of boogers by now. I know exactly what my specially tailored room in hell will look like: me chained to a chair — forever immobile — forced to watch impossibly fit women doing yoga.

"Asshole." Nancy confirmed.

"Whole ass," Christina repeated.

Even Miss O'Sullivan's stern, disapproving looks were charming. "In our increasingly permissive society, we practice 'free love.' 'Free love.' What an absurd term. Love isn't free. There's always a price to be paid. It is all fun and games until we get AIDS. Or we become pregnant and are tempted to abort the baby to avoid reaping what we sow. We, as a society, are taking the bullet train to Hades. Someone needs to hold the line on morality. It won't be anyone in the secularist and morally bankrupt Democratic Party, that's for sure. For some hope for our collective future, we need to look to the Republicans as our guiding light. Only the wisest within our church have come to this inescapable conclusion. It is a small number, but it is growing. Make no mistake: on Election Day, any *real* Roman Catholic will *always* cast a ballot for the pro-life candidate. Anyone who votes for

the pro-choice candidate votes for a Culture of Death.” Somehow, she could make us *hear* the capital letters she spoke. Feigning a casual air, she passed a glossy photo around the classroom without describing it first. I started when it fell on my desk.

“What you see before you,” Miss O’Sullivan continued, “are the bloody remains of aborted babies, small enough to hold in the palm of your hand, but definitely human and definitely murdered. Recall these images every Election Day. And on prom night.”

I passed the photo backwards. Christina Gelormino took the world’s briefest look at the photo and came close to gagging on her watermelon gum. “What the fuck?” she said between chews. She turned the photo face down and passed it to Nancy. “If I were you, I wouldn’t look.”

“I shouldn’t, right?” Nancy’s teased hair shivered.

Christina’s hooped earrings shook back and forth.

“Everything all right back there, Miss Gelormino? Miss Boyle?” asked O’Sullivan.

“Peachy keen,” Nancy grinned.

Christina raised her hand enthusiastically. “Miss O’Sullivan! I have a question.”

Miss O’Sullivan looked dubious. “What is it?”

“Is it considered a mortal sin if I have an aborted third-trimester fetus pickled in brine in a mason jar on my nightstand?”

Miss O’Sullivan paled. “What did you just say?!?”

Christina blew a tiny bubble and burst it with her teeth, making it pop loud as a gunshot.

“No chewing gum in class,” Miss O’Sullivan admonished. “Throw that away, now.”

Christina gulped the gum down. “It’s gone.”

“No more gum chewing.”

“Aye, aye, Cap’n,” she saluted. By high school, Christina would need surgery to remove from her stomach all the gum she swallowed over the years to dodge teacher anger.

The three-hour marathon class continued, and the heckling girls remained silent for most of it. Still, the ears of all thirteen students rang with Miss O’Sullivan’s hyperbolic and reactionary rhetoric. Her

most bizarre yarn concerned François Chanceux, a virginal, nineteenth-century Frenchman dragged to a brothel by his debauched friend, Auguste Connard. Feeling guilty for caving to peer pressure, François prayed a decade on his rosary before having sex with the prostitute. Then he paid his tally, lost his purity, and slipped into a satisfying, post-coital sleep. Unbeknownst to the slumbering François, Auguste said no prayers on his rosary before fornicating with two prostitutes at once. At midnight, Auguste wandered out into the street, raging drunk, and got himself run over by an out-of-control horse-drawn carriage. Three hours later, a knock at the bedroom door awakened François. The former virgin stumbled out of bed, barely able to see in the pitch darkness. He opened the door, finding himself face-to-face with the mangled, blood-spattered Auguste. The gory apparition prodded François' shoulder with a bony finger. "It is a good thing you prayed your rosary, François. We were *both* meant to die in the accident that claimed my life. Our Lady cast a sleep spell over you, saving you from my grisly fate." From that day, François never visited another brothel or went anywhere without a rosary.

Christina raised her hand. "I don't get it. The moral of the story is we need to pray the rosary before we commit a sin, or we'll become a zombie?"

"I've never wanted to go to a whorehouse," Nancy said thoughtfully. "I guess if I go, I need to be sure to bring my rosary, amirite?"

Miss O'Sullivan flashed an insincere smile at the hecklers. "I think the moral is obvious."

The girls made me more aware of the absurdities of the story than I would have in their absence. Still, I gave credence to it. I had grown up learning to trust people who stood in front of a classroom. The fable also had the advantage of being the kind of cool horror story I always enjoyed, with echoes of *Tales from the Crypt* and "The Adventure of the German Student" by Washington Irving. Dad's Aunt Irene would laugh at me for believing any of it, but I couldn't help myself. I was gullible enough to buy Miss O'Sullivan's complete line of bullshit.

Brothel-goer or not, I gotta get me a rosary. Knowing what a screw-up I am, I'm sure I'll need a "Get Out of Jail Free" card sooner rather than later.

"I am such a goof!" Christina called out. "I was expecting a zombie-free lesson. I should have guessed you'd tell us a haunted cathouse story! I want to put in a request for a story about Scilla and Cariddi next week. They're sea monsters who live off the coast of Sicily."

Miss O'Sullivan smiled beatifically at the two girls, but her eyes told a different story.

Nancy called out, "Yo! Tell Miss O'Sullivan the story you just told me about your dad!"

Christina feigned reluctance, though her eyes shone with mirth. "Oh, I couldn't!"

"You should!" exclaimed Nancy.

Miss O'Sullivan knew it was unwise to be interested but couldn't help it. "What story?"

Christina said, "Last night at dinner, my dad let out this enormous fart. My mom waved the air away from her nose and said 'pew.' But my dad is Italian, and in Italian, the word 'piu' means 'more.' So, Dad farted *again*!" Christina laughed infectiously. I joined in.

"Thank you for sharing that with us," Miss O'Sullivan said.

Nancy smacked Christina in the arm. "Not that story, waistoid! The other one."

"Oh! I know the one!"

Miss O'Sullivan held both hands up. "No, please. One story is enough."

"My dad made a toast at a formal dinner welcoming some Japanese businessman to America and he ended by saying 'cin cin,' which is Italian for 'cheers.' The problem is, the word means something different in Japan, and they thought he was saying 'penis penis.'"

"Okay, that was vulgar," Miss O'Sullivan protested.

"It was *cultural*!" Christina insisted.

"That's enough out of you two!" Miss O'Sullivan yelled.

When O'Sullivan wasn't looking, I whispered, "Both stories were cool."

"Aha! You aren't a total loss after all, Damien," Christina declared. "Good!"

After class, when the other students had gone, I lingered to speak privately with Miss O'Sullivan. I couldn't stop myself from tearing

up. "Sorry. That was a disturbing photo."

Miss O'Sullivan placed her hand gently on my chest, feeling my heartbeat through the fabric of my Spider-Man t-shirt. "You have a beautiful soul. You bleed for the world."

I blinked away my tears. "I don't understand why things are the way they are. Everyone is so mean and selfish. I try not to harm anyone."

Miss O'Sullivan's touch felt warm. She left her hand in place. "Remember, women are as much a victim of this horrifying Nazi ideology as the children they are coerced into killing."

I frowned. "I'm part German. I don't want to be tricked into becoming a Nazi like past generations of Germans were. It is a thing with me."

"Yes. Oppose fascism, even if it cloaks itself in calls to protect women's rights. You need to change the world. Make it a kinder place." Her hand remained on my chest, over my heart.

"That's what I've always supported. A kinder world."

Miss O'Sullivan's ice blue eyes shimmered. "You will become a saint one day, Damien."

I gave her an aw-shucks smile. "Oh, well, that can't possibly be true, Miss O'Sullivan. And you can't know that when we've only just met."

She smiled radiantly. "That is *exactly* what a saint would say. I can see into you, through your eyes. Keep being yourself. Be kind. Fight fascism. Make no compromises."

Tired and grumpy, Dad walked in. "Every car but mine left already, but we're still here?"

Flushing, Miss O'Sullivan removed her hand from my chest. "Good night to you both."

"Night, Miss," Dad said. His mood must have softened when he got a better look at Miss O'Sullivan and saw her hand on me. I picked up my raincoat and fedora and followed Dad outside. As we got into our blue Cutlass Ciera, Dad asks slyly, "What was *that* all about?"

I shrugged. "She was being nice to me."

"Did you notice that she's not wearing a wedding ring? I think you can make it work."

"Dad, I'm eleven. She's gotta be . . . twenty-four? That might not even be legal!"

Dad shrugged. "Wait five years and ask her out."

I cleared my throat. "I don't know how I feel about this conversation."

"Maybe I'll ask her out," Dad said to himself.

I shot my father a dark look.

"I knew you wanted to slip her one!" Dad laughed. "I was baiting you."

I pulled a face. "Very clever."