



1.34. The Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, fresh off the train from Germany in 1950. One of my first crushes was on Sister Clare Marie, the angelic nun with clasped hands.

St. Anne's Catholic School did not have enough Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception to go around, so they were carefully parceled out, according to stature, with the kindergarteners getting the littlest one. Sister Mary Stefana, herself no taller than a child, claimed she was able to keep discipline in her flock with the help of her children's guardian angels. Whatever her trick was, she was adored by all the kids in the school.

Each primary grade had a lay teacher and a nun teaching the two separate classes. The lay/nun pattern was cast for the next six years depending on whether a student got the ecclesiastic or secular representative in first grade. I stayed with the same class, so the other children in my grade, on the other side of the hall, were practically strangers throughout the years. I started with a lay teacher, represented by the kindly Mrs. Toal, a pleasantly round matron who barely fit into her tiny, red, three-wheeled BMW car that opened from the front. We affectionally called her Mrs. Toad. The other first grade was run by Sister Mary Clarice.

Even in first grade, I knew that in second grade I would get the saintly Sister Clare Marie, who hid an enchantingly slim figure under layers of flowing robes cinched together at the waist with a simple rope belt. Her beautiful face was tightly framed by the starched white wimple

that covered her neck, forehead, and shoulders. Combined with the black veil over the top, the headdress created both visor and blinders to help her and the other nuns stay on the straight and narrow path of their vocation with the Lord. All the nuns had exchanged their birth names for variations of Mary, the Mother of God, but we were told they were all married to Jesus, so they were like Mary Junior, married to the son of their Father in Heaven. It was all pretty confusing, but Jesus could not have had a lovelier wife than Sister Clare Marie. I adored her even before she became my teacher and suffered terrible guilt in second grade—especially after attaining the age of reason—over the irrefutable logic that I was essentially coveting one of God’s wives. Even worse, I was sure that even though millions of nuns all over the world were married to Jesus, he would have gladly exchanged all the others for Sister Clare Marie. I was surely playing with fire by coveting, and threatening to sully with my impure thoughts, her chaste and eternal spiritual bond with the Lord.

By stark contrast, after working out the simple math, I knew that third grade would sentence me to a year with the dreaded Mrs. Hansen, who, despite her claim to laity, was not wholly of the Earth, unless one includes within its 7,900 mile diameter the subterranean depths of Hell.



1.35b. Sister Damien bore a remarkable resemblance to actor Randy Quaid in his younger days

Fourth grade would bring the stern but fair Sister Mary Damien, who I can now say bore a remarkable resemblance to actor Randy Quaid in his younger, less weird days. Rather than being a vision of heavenly delights, like my second grade teacher, this promoter of scapulars, dispensations, and indulgences was more like a toll collector in Purgatory.

Fifth grade served up the pimply but attractive lay teacher, Miss Costa, whose first name also happened to be Mary, like all of the nuns. I saw Miss Costa’s pimples as being like red freckles, and was not put off by them at all, and was quite taken with her, especially when she

read us stories. When I was seventeen, I journeyed back to Midland in my first Volkswagen bug and spent an evening in her company, both of us tempted but also dismissive of the possibility of sharing some forbidden fruit.

The Mother Superior was a fallen angel, still dressed in the garb of Heaven, but certainly

hell-bound, if there be a Hell. Even though she wore a rope as a sign of poverty, she still managed to find a leather whipping belt when a ruler across the knuckles would not suffice. Somehow, it never occurred to me (nor was it ever spoken of) in those post WWII years, when I, and nearly every other boy I knew were constantly killing imaginary Nazis in the trenches around our neighborhood, that the stomping mare of our childhood concentration camp was speaking with a German accent.

Nevertheless, I have a photograph of the nuns getting off the train that had carried them across the country after they crossed the sea from Germany. Between rounds of painstakingly restoring the photograph, especially the image of Sister Clare Marie, I located the last remnants of the order, and discovered that all the nuns I had known had long since retrieved their original, mostly German names, taken to wearing ordinary clothes, and had presumably already fulfilled their lifetime vows of poverty and self-denial in exchange for the promise of a better world. I couldn't help but ask specifically about Sr. Clare Marie, who being only 14 years older than me, was probably still alive at the time I made the inquiry. I wanted to know everything about her life after I was her student, but I didn't have her original or her restored name, and they couldn't help. As for the ones who had already departed, they left behind their meager possessions, including their rings, which, as it was explained to me as a guilt-ridden child beset with impure thoughts, were symbols of their betrothal to their heavenly Spouse. These bands of "conjugal fidelity" bore an engraving of two hearts representing the Immaculate Heart of Mary, and the Sacred Heart of Jesus pierced by a single sword. Inside the ring was the Latin inscription, *Ego te sponsabo*—"I wed thee."

Having to live in the West Texas was a form of penance to both lay and clergy alike. Midland, a town built on the oil business, was on the *Llano Estacado*—the Staked Plains, which, while being on the southern end of the Great Plains (once known as "The Great American Desert,") it is also one of the largest mesas on the North American continent. Two nearby towns are called Notrees and Levelland, which pretty well sums it up. The Spanish conquistador Francisco Coronado, the first European to cross it, in 1541 described it thusly: "I reached some plains so vast, that I did not find their limit anywhere I went, although I travelled over them for more than 300 leagues...with no more land marks than if we had been swallowed up by the sea...there was not a stone, nor bit of rising ground, nor a tree, nor a shrub, nor anything to go by."

Except for the town, and the jack pumps that swarmed around it like a plague of giant grasshoppers, that is just how I remember the godforsaken place. Officially, it was said that Midland was so-named because it lay midway between El Paso and Ft. Worth, but locals joked that it got its name because it was between Hell and Nowhere.

Mrs. Hansen, my third grade teacher went with the territory. Mrs. Hansen swept through our classroom like a Blue Norther slicing through a barbed wire fence. Her stringy, blunt-cut pageboy and her constant scowl gave us the shivers. Even though she was probably in her 50s, she seemed so old to us that, as first graders, we were convinced she would probably die of old



1.36. Mrs. Hansen and her spy glasses, about to tear off the railing bar and beat me for the sin of pride. In front of St. Ann's Catholic School. September 1961

age before we got her. We had no such luck, and after one last summer filled with dread, she was our teacher.

Mrs. Hansen maintained discipline in the classroom even with her back turned. She claimed that her wing-tipped glasses were outfitted with tiny rear view mirrors to catch any shenanigans going on behind her, and it seemed to be true, for no one got away with anything. Periodically, her judgmental eye would fall on one of us and she would drag that child to the front of the class. There, she would stab daggers of shame into the quaking object of ridicule by criticizing his terrible posture, or his inability to keep tooth from fingernail. One of her favorite procedures was to force a miscreant to stand facing the chalkboard. She would then draw a chalk circle on the blackboard at forehead level and order the child to stand on tippy-toes to keep his or her nose in the circle.

My sister, Michele, got Mrs. Hansen the following year. Along with suffering the chalk board torture to the point of exhaustion, Michele was also forced to wear a dunce cap and spend all day in a baby bed in the hallway because she was slow in math. Michele credits



1.37. My drawing of a tree for Mrs. Hansen's third grade class.

several decades of rebellious behavior to the humiliations heaped upon her by this teacher.

Etched indelibly in my memory is the English lesson where she scratched the giant letter "I" onto the freshly washed blackboard. Because there was still some water on the blackboard and because of the force in which she gratingly forced chalk against board, the letter hauntingly remained in phantom form long after she had erased it. "That!" she said, stabbing in our direction with her chalk, "is the tiniest, yet ugliest word in the English language!"

She seemed to be giving me, in particular, what we called "the hairy eyeball" as she hissed: "The worst disease of man is I-itis! You might as well throw the word "I" out of your vocabulary, because no one wants to hear about you and your petty little problems. You're always talking about yourselves instead of others, and God is as sick and tired of hearing about it as I am."

The indictment fell hard on me because it seemed she was right, at least in this regard. I did say I a lot. Even when I was not talking about myself, I was thinking about myself and pleading with God to let me into Heaven so I could be on summer vacation forever, never grow old, and be free from Mrs. Hansen, my parents, and all of God's other human intercessionaries.

While Mrs. Hansen was cruel to many of the children, including my best friend Kellan and my sister Michele, she went relatively easy on me.

It became clear she was showing favorites after she hung up my drawing that depicted spring in a place that looked nothing like Midland. Pointing out the tree leafing out, the swing hanging from one of its branches, the distant farm and the mountains still covered in snow, she told the class that my drawing was the only one worthy of being hung. Being a meticulous documentarian, I still have the drawing, so obviously some pride accompanied the embarrassment of realizing that my picture may just as well have been a sign saying, "Mike Arth = Teacher's Pet."

Two memorable events occurred in regard to Ms. Hansen. The first event occurred in the spring of 1962. It started with a ground-hugging sandstorm that struck at noon, plowing along the edge of a dry norther. The wall of churning sand swept over Midland at near-hurricane-force intensity, knocking down trees, power poles, and signs that humans had dared to plant in such a place. School was dismissed and mothers who had not already shown up were called. Crying children were dispatched to run squinty-eyed through a gauntlet of blowing sand from the main entrance to the cars pulling up on West Texas Avenue. Michele and I each soaked a paper hand towel, punched two holes for our eyes, and held it to our faces.

When Mom pulled up, and it was our turn to run, I could see that the lay teachers were already being pushed out the door by nuns eager to retreat to the convent. The next day we got word that, as Mrs. Hansen had entered her house, she had been struck in an eye by a TV antenna that had fallen from her roof. The irony that she was smote in her critical eye with a pointed message from Above was not missed by us third-graders. We openly prayed that she would not return—even in front of the substitute teacher, who tried to quell such talk. Furthermore, we were mightily annoyed with the Almighty when the battle-axe returned to her post only two weeks later. She was unchastened and both eyes were intact.

Not long after her return, we began to notice that she kept a Mason jar of peaches on her desk, which would disappear after lunch. She finally explained that her husband was a paralyzed invalid at the Midland Memorial Hospital, across the street from the school, and every day she would take him the peaches and feed him. One day, the substitute teacher again showed up, and told us that Mr. Hansen had died. An announcement over the intercom a few mornings and later informed the entire school that we would all be attending his funeral during our lunch break. There was a flurry of whispering during the service from the kids, including myself, because instead of crying, Mrs. Hansen was smiling broadly as she walked up the aisle behind the coffin. We took this as undeniable proof of her general evil temperament, and even speculated that she had incapacitated, and slowly killed her husband with poisoned peaches. We asked one of the nuns about it, and were told that Mrs. Hansen was relieved and happy that her husband was now with God in Heaven. After Mrs. Hansen returned, we looked for potential benefits from her new-found happiness. She did seem a tad less burdened than before, but her old habits returned soon enough. She continued to lecture

about the sin of pride, and the disease of I-itis, and tell us that we were spoiled, rotten little ignoramuses who would all probably burn in Hell forever.

Most creative work like art and writing is done alone, while being completely self-absorbed in one's own world, with the result being that a creation may or may not become interesting to others. It was partly Mrs. Hansen's voice nagging at the back of my mind that later caused me to set aside a burgeoning art career, and embark upon a path that eventually led me to help others through broader civic activities like urban design, community activism, and policy analysis. For a while, I kept thinking that I would put in my time, as a form of public service, and then get back to my art and writing, which does not always require thinking too much about how everyone can get their fair share of the world's bounty. After all, it is easier to serve oneself, or to find a niche into which to crawl, than to try to change the world.

Instead, along the way I found that using my talents to work for the greater good is just as creative, but even more fulfilling, than just being an artist. Ironically, even though I thought I was being self-indulgent when I was making a living as an artist, for decades after I had put aside certain accoutrements of my trade—paintbrushes, etching tools, nitric acid, and copper plates—I still got the same questions: “Are you ever going to get back to your art?” usually followed by, “I'd like to get some of your prints. Are they still available?”

Admittedly, it is impossible to really be unselfish because if I want to do something, it is by definition selfish. If I do something I dislike, even if I am trying to do good and be unselfish, few people will appreciate it, and I will probably do a poor job of it. Eventually, I had to admit that the move from two-dimensional art to three-dimensional architecture, construction, and urban design was fueled primarily by my (selfish) desire to recreate my environment in three dimensions as a practical form of livable sculpture. Friends could understand that explanation, but the move into politics was perplexing to them.

“I never thought of you as a politician,” said one of my loquacious ex-girlfriends when I ran for governor. “I hope you aren't going to turn into one of those assholes we all despise... But don't worry, if you become rich and famous, I'm not going to sell my story to the tabloids about how badly you treated me. Ha, ha, just kidding. By the way, when are you going to get back to making etchings and paintings—something people can hang on their wall?”

I have not always been successful in aligning my little self with the Big Self that comprises the public good. When it is not the words of the late mythologist Joseph Campbell exhorting me to follow my bliss, it is the spirit of Sister Claire Marie, a sweet, ageless goddess in flowing robes, who I never saw get old (or out of habit) simultaneously luring me toward goodness and impure thoughts. As for you, Mrs. Hansen, it's lucky for you there is neither Hell nor reincarnation.