

## Mother Superior

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When sober, in a good mood, my father was both funny and generous. He was so magnanimous that he bought the apartment building where Mommy's mother lived, so she could live there rent-free. And he made us all collapse into laughing fits when he did impersonations or imitated the goofy comedy of Mel Brooks.

But trying to be like him always got me in big trouble.

I positioned my feet in the foot-wide red stripe on the right side of the linoleum, careful to follow St. Norbert's strict rule: Walk only on the red lines. I started hopping from red square to red square, playing hopscotch in my imagination. The game distracted me from my fate, but I quickly arrived at the Office. There, I knew, only scolding and shame awaited me. When I knocked on the door, my heart thumped in my throat and my hands were clammy.

After handing my slip to the secretary, I sat in one of three chairs outside Mother Superior's looming portal, my little legs swinging. When the door opened her bulk filled the space. She called my name, "Richarda Marie West! In here." I skulked in and stood still, head bowed, in front of her desk. I got a lecture on obedience. Another on respect.

"Your duty as a Catholic student is to obey, honor, and respect your teachers," she said. A tall, bulky woman, wrapped in layers of dark blue nun's habit, she was standing behind her desk, both palms flat on its surface, leaning toward me. I stared at my feet, feeling my little heart going hard, my anger building. "Look at me when I am speaking to you!"

My eyes snapped up but Mother Superior's gaze burned like strong sunlight. I looked away again. "Your behavior is irresponsible and sinful. I will not tolerate this in my institution."

I hated that woman. Tears tried to form in my eyes but I squinted to hold them back. I didn't want to give her the satisfaction of making me cry. "You have consistently misbehaved in this school and disrespected your teachers." She banged on the desk with her palm. "This time you must be taught a lesson. You are suspended immediately!"

My eyes shot to her face. Was she serious? I was a straight A student!

I was really scared. I had never been suspended before. She sent me out to the anteroom, where I had to wait with the secretary until one of my parents arrived. I knew Mommy would be furious with me, but I didn't know what to expect from Daddy. I was lucky it was sober Daddy who came to get me.

"Wait here and be quiet," he said to me in the outer office. He looked plenty mad. Then he went into Mother Superior's sanctum. Through the door I heard him say, "What harm did she do? Do your teachers have no respect for the children? I am taking my daughter home now, and out of this school at the end of the year." I couldn't believe my luck. Instead of agreeing with Mother Superior he was defending me!

In the car home he said I had to quit getting in trouble because it upset Mommy. He didn't actually punish me. He told me to hide out in my room until it all blew over. I wondered if Daddy approved of my impersonation because he loved comedy. And I began to understand that he did not approve of bossy nuns because he was secretly an atheist.

“They peddle this nonsense about God and obedience,” I heard him complain to Mommy at home. “I don’t see why we should support that institution anymore,” he told her. “It’s not good for the kids.”

I finished fourth grade at St. Norbert’s knowing I would soon escape. Knowing my Dad had my back, as I had his. For the first time, I saw him as a person with his own view, independent of the Church. That put a few cracks in my Catholic-shaped worldview. Maybe the dogma wasn’t all true. Maybe obedience to the Church was not required.