Tintjournal

Short Story

And Then There Were Nuns

by Maria Valenzuela Frangakis

We moved to Río Hondo from our small village of San Jacinto in the heat of summer in 1962. I'd been hearing about this impending move for as long as I could remember, but it was one of those things that would happen "after the next harvest." Well, the harvest had tanked that year, but we were moving anyway, even though our house was unfinished.

In September, my sister Lupe and I began attending *el Colegio* Santa Teresa de Jesus, the private Catholic school for girls. I was going into fourth grade and Lupe into sixth. Papá was not a religious man but wanted us in Catholic school mainly to avoid exposing us to the crassness of public school boys. And, who knows? We might pick up a good thing or two. Besides being strict, *las monjitas*, as Papá called the nuns, taught good moral principles.

Lupe and I had to walk twenty blocks to school. My mother warned us to walk together no matter what. My sister knew the way very well and pointed at various landmarks so that I could start learning the way for myself: the crumbling-down house, the house with the beautiful garden, and the house of *all the diseases in the world.* Lupe said somebody had died of TB in that house and suggested I avoid breathing the germs as we went by. I'd hold my breath several steps before we got to that house and continue holding long after we'd passed it by, until I felt I was dying myself.

We were doing well in school. "Surprisingly well," considering we were coming from a village school, Madre Asunción, the Mother Superior, said to my mother. "They are like 'diamonds in the rough,' but we'll make sure they get polished here."

Madre Asunción was the sweetest person I'd ever met. I always tried to impress her when she came to our classroom to quiz us. She often called on me, looking over her spectacles with an expectant smile. When I answered correctly, she would grin, her eyes squinting just a bit, something I learned to take as a sign of approval. I loved it when she patted my head after I held her hand to help her up the stairs. Her hands were amazingly soft and always warm.

Every morning, while we lined up from shortest to tallest in the school's courtyard, Madre Luz María, the fourth-grade nun, checked our fingernails, shoes, and socks as well as our uniforms' hemlines, pleats, and overall cleanliness. She marked these off in her black notebook while the principal, Madre Elisa, greeted us and made the announcements from her microphone. We then marched to our classrooms on the second floor to the beat of *La Marcha de Zacatecas.*

On Mondays, we had "Homage to the Flag." The eight best students from our upper school formed the honor guard. They solemnly marched carrying the flag, then they stood at the center of the courtyard while we sang the national anthem, placing our right hands on our chests. Once a month, Madre Elisa randomly pulled a report card from each class and read it before the entire school. I felt sorry for many a girl who had the misfortune of having a less-than-adequate report card pulled out and read by Madre Elisa. I wished with all my heart that one day she would pull mine, but I was never so lucky.

With fifty students and only one nun per classroom, half my class would get to the upper hallway while the other half, and the teacher behind them, were still on the first floor. Being one of the youngest, and short for my age, I was second in line right behind Gisela. We had to wait quietly outside the classroom upstairs until the entire class and the teacher joined us.

One day, a few of the girls already on the second floor got quite rowdy. Not knowing exactly who the troublemakers were, Madre Luz María called out the first ten from the line. Then she made us kneel at the back of the classroom. One by one the troublemakers apologized and got to sit back at their desks. I couldn't believe that all they had to say was "I'm sorry, *Madre*, I won't do it again," and all was forgiven. They didn't even look like they meant it. I couldn't abide being punished for the behavior of others; I got plenty of that at home, thank you very much.

Gisela and I remained kneeling until the break when she decided she'd had enough and apologized too. I couldn't bring myself to say I was sorry. First of all, I didn't want to apologize for something I hadn't done. Secondly, the way the troublemakers apologized was, in my book, a mockery, and third, I'd never heard anybody apologizing at home. Not my father for missing our school activities and not my mother for the whippings she so liberally dispensed.

During recess, I leaned back on my legs to rest my knees, but as soon as I heard the class coming back, I knelt properly again, my head held high as if I'd been in that position the entire time. Madre Luz María asked me if I was ready to apologize. A knot in my throat the size of a toad had formed, and I couldn't bring myself to say a word. After the bell, when everybody had left, Madre Luz María invited me to apologize to her in private. I just couldn't. She shook her head and told me that I was not giving her any other choice but to bring in Madre Asunción.

When Madre Asunción came into the classroom, she was surprised to find me in such dire straits. "Sofia," she said, looking over the rims of her spectacles. "You've always been such a good girl. I can't believe you are letting the devil get a hold of you. Pride is a real sin, Sofia, much worse than whatever you are accused of doing."

I really, really wanted to say something, but I could only manage to look down while the words stayed stuck in the knot in my throat. Undeterred by my silence, she said, "Sofia, darling, don't you know that Jesus died for the forgiveness of our sins? He has already forgiven you." I couldn't understand why if Jesus had already forgiven me, the nuns hadn't.

Madre Asunción seemed to have reached the end of her patience and was now taking things to a higher power. Turning her eyes to heaven, she said with a sigh, "This girl truly has *el diablo* inside!" Then looking back down at me, she said, "I'll be right back." She left the room as I remained there, wondering what she'd do next.

I immediately thought she was going to come back with some sort of weapon because, at home, any drama was solved with a beating. Mamá usually used my father's old belt, but without men living in the convent I discounted the belt as an option. To my surprise, Madre Asunción returned with a small bottle of Holy Water in her hands, which she proceeded to sprinkle on me as she mumbled something in Latin, ending in *saecula saeculorum.*

It was more than I could take. Exhausted, I broke down in sobs. Then she blessed me and sent me home where I'd have a real whipping for getting there so late; Lupe had already had hers for leaving me behind at school.

Gradually, over the course of three years at Santa Teresa's, some things I'd been oblivious to at first, became evident. I became fully aware of the meaning of belonging to a lower socioeconomic class. Ironically, in San Jacinto, where our two-room house lacked running

water and electricity, we were considered rich simply because my mother had a cedar wardrobe and a wood-burning stove. Now that we lived in a seven-room house with indoor plumbing and attended a private school, all of a sudden, we were poor?

I began to notice the small details that made me different from the rest of the girls. My uniform, for instance, never looked as clean and crisp as those of other girls. I had two white shirts to go with the one navy-blue pleated jumper. Every night, I washed the shirt I'd worn that day and ironed the one I would wear the next morning. When my mother had time, she washed the navy blue jumper on weekends; it was made of a thick material that required time to dry and then more time to press all the pleats. It looked nice only on those Mondays when it had been washed during the weekend. As the week progressed, spots of various colors and textures began to appear on the fabric. To me, however, the nuns' biased attitudes were always far more noticeable than the spots on my uniform.

In fifth grade, I had Madre Delia, a young nun with a mean streak. Every morning during line-up, when she checked us from head to toe, marking in her black book, I could tell what kind of mark she'd given me just by the look on her face. She reserved her sweetest voice and widest smile for Maria Isabel Dominguez, whose father was a millionaire and the school's biggest benefactor. It was rumored that he began his fortune by getting involved in the opium trade, then a nascent industry in my state of Sinaloa.

Then there was Yolanda Espinoza whose father owned all the brothels in the red-light district. His occupation was common knowledge in Rio Hondo. People mockingly referred to him as *el buho,* the owl, but the nuns looked the other way because of the large sums he gave to the school's building fund.

And then there was me. My father not only did not attend school functions but also never contributed money to any fund. To make matters worse, unbeknownst to him, my mother begged the nuns for scholarships every year, citing financial difficulties. It was no wonder then, that by the time Madre Delia came around to me, her smile had transformed into a grimace.

Gisela Castro became my best friend at Santa Teresa's. Her father owned a shoe and clothing business that sold our uniforms, shoes, and socks. To his credit, Señor Castro provided shoes to the nuns free of charge. Although our nuns belonged to the order of the Discalced

Carmelites, which means barefoot, they wore nice, comfortable shoes, courtesy of Señor Castro. Then, at Christmastime, he organized a toy drive for poor children.

My mother sent me and Rafa, my little brother, to the toy drive that year to see what we could get. We stood the entire morning in front of Gisela's father's store surrounded by a crowd of peasants. In those days, Mexican people had yet to discover the benefits of forming a line, crowding against each other in the hopes of getting to the front faster. I thought I'd suffocate squashed in the middle of that mob, with the ripe smell of armpits all around me. Then, to my dismay, every time the crowd pushed against us, a man behind us began to fondle me. I stood there too ashamed to do or say anything. Tired and hungry, Rafa and I walked home despondently holding our meager stash: a yellow rubber duck for me and a small plastic replica of some late-model car for him. Neither of us ever took the toys out of the wrap they came in.

When classes resumed after the New Year, Gisela asked, "I saw you and your brother at the toy drive from the balcony. What were you two doing there? It's for really poor people, you know." I prayed she wouldn't tell anybody else about it. She didn't.

For all the nuns' tendencies to play favorites with the rich girls, when it came to academics they took notice of me. Every few years, government officials visited religious institutions to make sure that students met the academic requirements. For three days they checked our progress in reading, writing, and math. Since our Constitution forbade religious instruction, we had to hide our catechisms and religion textbooks to avoid penalties.

It was at inspection time in fifth grade that Madre Delia finally acknowledged my presence. When the inspector requested someone solve a square root problem on the blackboard, Madre Delia called specifically on me. She gave me a long, brand-new piece of chalk. As the inspections progressed, I had a strange feeling that Madre Delia actually liked me.

The following Monday, the students who had represented each grade during inspections were called to march with the honor guard. I was to represent my grade. Unfortunately, this was one of those Mondays when my uniform hadn't been washed during the weekend. Rather than embarrassing our class, Madre Delia sent Maria Isabel Dominguez out there. Maria Isabel Dominguez, who despite not being called upon to answer any of the inspector's questions could always be counted on to wear an impeccably clean uniform.

In sixth grade, I realized I needed to overcome my issues with *Conducta* and *Aseo* (cleanliness) if I wanted a perfect report card. Being a bit too talkative got me written up at times, and my nails, like my uniform, were never as clean as they should be. We were graded on a scale of five to ten, with six being the minimum to pass. I disliked the way those "eights" in conduct and cleanliness looked amidst the row of "tens" on my report card. Madre Florencia helped me achieve my goals when she made me the head of the class.

My duties included writing up those who talked in class whenever she had to leave the room. I had to be quiet and pay attention in order to catch those who talked. I also helped her check uniforms, socks, and shoes, so having to check the appearance of others made me more aware of my own. For the first time, I experienced the thrill of getting perfect "tens" all the way down my report card.

We spent a great portion of sixth grade studying the Nine Commandments. Strangely, the booklet's title was The Ten Commandments, but we somehow always skipped the Sixth: *No Fornicar*. Back then the commandments were numbered in a specific order. For instance, we learned what the Fifth Commandment commands, *No Matar*, Thou Shall Not Kill. The nuns taught us that there are other ways to kill a person that don't involve dying. When we say something mean or spread rumors about someone, it goes against the Fifth Commandment because, in some way, a little bit of that person dies. What about the Seventh? *No Hurtar*, Thou Shall Not Steal. We learned that copying someone's work, during a test, for instance, was indeed a form of stealing. As was spending on candy the twenty cents my mother gave me for the Sunday collection tray. Although Rafa also spent the money on candy, I was the only sinner of the two because he didn't go to Catholic school like me, and he was not studying the Nine Commandments as I was.

I never knew what the Sixth Commandment was about. Maybe the older girls who wore brassieres in the sixth grade had figured it out, but I'm certain it wasn't the nuns who explained it to them.

Our sixth-grade graduation ceremony was to take place at *Cine Granada*, the local movie theater. Beatriz Carrera's mother, the owner, would make the theater available for graduation ceremonies at no charge to the school. Of course, Beatriz was another favorite.

Medals for all achievements were always awarded at graduations. The highest anyone could aspire to was the *Medalla de Excelencia,* for the one student who had demonstrated the highest level of achievement in all areas. There were also medals for *conducta,* for attendance, for punctuality, for craftsmanship, and for sports. That year, a new medal was instituted; *Medalla de Fidelidad*, for those who had attended Santa Teresa's since the first grade. Being a transfer student, my fidelity to the school was questionable; I had calculated the odds of winning any of the medals and *Fidelidad* was the one medal I knew I didn't stand a chance of winning.

I felt particularly important on graduation day because my father was in the theater sitting next to my mother. He looked so distinguished in his dressy attire: dark pants and a long-sleeved shirt, made more formal by the absence of his cowboy hat.

After the National Anthem, all students took the stage for the award ceremony. One by one, students were called to receive their medals, beginning with the medal of fidelity. With so many categories, even those students at the lower academic rungs were poised to receive a medal. Despite my improvement in *Conducta* and *Aseo,* I didn't think I could win the *Medalla de Excelencia b*ut my odds were good in several other categories. Every time a new category was announced, I was certain my name would be called.

So when it was only Maria Isabel Dominguez and I standing on that stage, my heart began to race so hard I felt it jump out of my chest. As always, Maria Isabel looked impeccable in her uniform. But I knew she wasn't the top student to deserve the *Medalla de Excelencia.* It made sense that the nuns had decided to give the coveted medal to the two of us. Taken together, Maria Isabel and I made up for each other's shortcomings.

In the end, despite my diploma displaying "tens" for all my grades, I was the only student left standing on the stage without a medal.

The next thing I remember is sitting in my father's truck, his voice, kind and soothing. "I'm sure that *las monjitas* made an honest mistake," he was saying as he took my diploma from my hands. Looking it over, he rubbed his chin, perplexed, trying to find an explanation. My mother had a look of embarrassment and couldn't bring herself to say anything. "Look, *m'hijita*," my father continued, "I know how hard you've worked, I've been signing your report card every month, but you know what? A medal pinned to your uniform means only

so much. In a few years, you won’t even know where it went. Knowledge, however, stays right there with you, it continues to accumulate, and it will take you places others may only dream of.”

I had to take my father’s words to heart. In the eleven years I’d been on this earth, he had never been wrong about anything.

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