
WARM SAND, ENDLESS WHITE

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I did not want that elephant on my roof.

After the monstrous snowstorms of February 2010 in Washington DC, I read that three feet of snow was like having a five-ton elephant on a flat roof. That's why gyms and warehouses had been caving in.

I climbed out of my second-floor window to lessen that weight. As my shoveling built up to a rhythm, my toes started feeling wet and cold inside my shoes. I fought back by imagining that I was standing on fine sand, hued pink by the equatorial sun, and my feet were being caressed by warm, salty water.

How far my feet have gone—6,500 miles and nearly five decades away from the tropical Philippines of my birth to where I stand now, alone, digging snow. I thought of the card sitting on my desk before I got scared of the elephant. It was an invitation to come back:

OLMA 1964–1968 Elementary Class Reunion
Come and meet your former classmates!

That was almost fifty years ago. Do I remember any of them?
What have we all become?

O.L.M.A. Our Lady of Mercy Academy. It was my town's only private elementary school, governed with velvety iron fists by rabidly Catholic nuns. The students came from two kinds of broods: the

well-to-do by blood, which my family will never be, and the well-to-do by material acquisition, which we were trying frantically to become.

The Sisters were benign, as long as we followed all their rules. In addition to the Ten Commandments, there were many. Fall into a straight line. No talking in class. Memorize your English vocabulary. Capitalize the Great Truths when you write: Sin and Grace, Heaven and Hell, Mystery and Faith. Respect your elders. Worship the Lord. And if you stray—confess!

So many of the rules were about our bodies. Keep your fingernails clean. Mind your posture. No tight clothing. Don't show too much skin. And definitely—No Touching. I carefully stayed two feet away from Teresa, whom I had to walk to school every day, paired together by my mother, who fantasized about giving me an early start. Two little kids—No Touching. It was only in high school when I learned that the rule applied not only to others' bodies, but also to my own.

Ricardo became my first buddy. Class days ended at 3:00 p.m. with physical education. Ricky and I evaded PhysEd every Friday by climbing over the wall separating the school playground from the World of Sin. The playground was divided into all boys on one side, all girls on the other. No one—but no one—ever ventured across the red line protecting us from the carnal contact we were not yet capable of imagining, but that preoccupied the nuns. No one did, except when an errant rubber ball had been kicked too strongly in the wrong direction.

My day of damnation came. I kicked the ball into the girls' plot. I ran across the line to retrieve it and heard gasps of fear. The ball landed between Virgie's feet. When I knelt to pick it up, Virgie started squeaking. Sister! Sister! I needed to stop her mouth before Sister Aloysius Marie would hear. But how? It was pure instinct. I raised Virgie's skirt and pulled her panties down to her ankles. She froze, dead silent. "Sister's coming!" I heard from behind me. It was Ricky. He had also crossed the line just to be by my side, to protect me.

By the time Sister Aloysius Marie arrived, Virgie had already pulled her panties up and recovered her poise, the tears welling in her eyes held back by a will stronger than the Rock of Saint Peter.

“And what in the name of the Good Lord is the ruckus here?” Sister purred at Ricky and me with the unblinking glare of a panther bracing to pounce. No one dared tell the story, out of respect for Virgie. Ricky and I got two hours of detention. We were forced to spend the last five minutes kneeling with arms outstretched to our sides, precisely to remind us that we should have been crucified.

That last Friday before Christmas break, Ricky and I could not wait for PhysEd and escaped right after lunch. May we be eternally damned in Hell fire, but the circus had just opened in town, and we had to go. Just like in *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, which we read that morning, we were pulled in a trance to the circus gate by the wafting smells of steamed corn on the cob, cotton candy, roasted garlic peanuts, marinated grilled meats, and caramelized bananaques.

We did not have any entrance money, so we crawled under the wire fence. Our first stop was Adorlek, who ate live chickens on stage, first biting off the head and then spitting blood and feathers at the audience. Whenever a lady viewer fainted, he would sadistically shake the cage of cackling, condemned chickens above his head. Dabiana, the Whale Lady, pressed men’s faces between her three breasts, two willing idiots at a time who lined up to pay for the privilege. Pakito the Prickster swallowed nails; Vulcan Lips breathed fire; Baby Diaper Man stuck safety pins into his flesh. And the magicians! Their tricks hypnotized us into a suspended state of open-mouthed wonder. For the ultimate thrill, we picked up live cigarette butts, wiped the tips dry, and tried a few puffs.

Ricky and I flew for hours on a carpet of luscious images stitched together by the revelry of our forbidden adventures. We had no money to buy food. Since sneaking in was only a minor Venial Sin, but stealing food would have been a serious Mortal Sin, I took Ricky home for a snack of crispy pork rinds washed down with ice-cold Coke. My mother scowled when we dumped our muddy sneakers,

collapsed on the sofa, and demanded instant food like two machos. She asked where we had been, barging in all sticky and smelling like goats. Ricky and I exchanged glances and chirped in unison—PhysEd! Mother was pleased.

Ricky came to my house often. Our favorite game was to kill each other. We sliced off the tops of avocados, carved out the seed, filled the cavity with fine dust, reattached the tip, etched grid lines on the green skin outside, and called them grenades. Ricky would throw a grenade at me, breaking open and searing my face with dirt. I would collapse and expire. Then I would rise again, in my own reenactment of Christ's Resurrection, and take my turn to kill Ricky.

Our friendship ended very suddenly. Ricky and I had just finished a juicy snack of crimson papayas. He wanted to return to his own house. My mother overheard me begging Ricky to play some more. Leaning unsteadily against a wall, she flew into a rage: "If he damn wants to go home, let him go home." The longer my father was away, the more she took strange pills that turned her into a different person. Ricky lost face and left in shame. As he passed our avocado tree, he pointed two forefingers upward, then made a throwing motion at me. I threw an invisible grenade back. We smiled and waved at each other. I lost my partner in mischief and snack buddy that Friday, our last together ever.

To straighten my ways and convert me into a true Child of God, Sister Aloysius Marie taught me how to be an altar boy in their convent's small chapel. After half an hour of lessons, she half-chanted ominously: "Now we enter the most solemn part of the Mass. This is when ordinary bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ, and He comes down from Heaven to be right here with us, in our midst, with you, with me."

I trembled with mystical anticipation of meeting God face-to-face. "You! Pay attention! The priest will say, 'This is the Body of Christ.' When he raises the Host, take the bell with your right hand and ring it continuously. With your left hand, raise his

chasuble— that colorful outer garment covering his white inner garb. Do you understand?” Then in a shrill voice like she was gargling hot ginger water, she aspirated:

“EVERYthing! EVERYthing must go up. Up! Up! UP to the Lord!”

“Now let’s practice. Ready?” She slowly intoned: “This is the Body of Christ.” I got so scared of the blasts of wind, torrents of lightning, and God Himself appearing in front of me that I totally forgot the bell, took the hem of her silky habit with my two hands, and raised all the way up to her waist all the clothing that covered the lower part of her body.

Up to the Lord, I thought, all the way up to the Lord!

I was jolted by her screams. She ran after me around the chapel, almost tripping as her floor-length skirt worked its way back down her thighs and legs. I weaved around the pews and darted through a side door that led to the back of the convent, where my face hit wet fabrics hanging from long wires. It was the nuns’ laundry area. To escape, I had to flap through a forest of freshly hung holy panty hose.

I was in the principal’s office with my mother the next day to face the threat of suspension. My mother pleaded, citing my hardheaded stupidity. I remarked that it was hereditary and got pinched. To win sympathy, she confessed that she forged my birth certificate to add one year so that I could qualify as old enough for daily kindergarten because I was impossible to control at home.

This time, I was suspended.

After Ricky, Thomas became my new playmate. Tommie could sing, dance, and imitate foreign accents. He was more cultured and spoke better English than everyone else, maybe because he was half-American and white, not brown or yellow like us natives. He often talked about our classmate Rex, how handsome he was, and—ooh, Rex!—how he should just simply skip high school, build muscles, and become a movie star.

While obsessing about Rex, Tommie still had enough gluttony left to become jealous of me and my backup friend Lance, especially

after I told him that Lance would grasp my whole body from behind with his arms and legs, and with the combined weight of our enlaced torsos, we would pull sugarcane from the open backs of huge trucks as they idled at street intersections waiting for the green light.

While Lance and I sucked juice from woody cane stalks that we steeped languorously inside our mouths, Tommie would hover, his neck arched like a swan, his eyes staring at Lance and me with one accusative eyebrow slightly raised, as if we were all bonded by a secret and would someday be accused of the same crime.

Handsome Rex was the school bully. Taller than me by six inches, he teased me during recess, calling me Shorty. He gesticulated that he wasn't referring to my height, but to the bird between my legs. I ignored him. This made him scrutinize Tommie and me malevolently, searching for some kind of connection that he could exploit. He edged near me, both fists deep inside his pockets, bulging under his zipper. Thrusting his hips forward, he cooed:

"Hello, pretty."

That enraged me. Especially when he added: "Woo-hoo. Look, buddies, he, I mean, she's blushing." Good and Evil divided quickly on the playground, my good apostles hugging around me, his evil dogs circling behind him.

"Didn't you hear me? I said hello, cutie pie," he persisted, feigning a kiss on my cheek.

"Repeater!" I answered, remembering that he had to repeat quizzes he couldn't pass. That lame retort was all I could think of.

"Woo-hoo-hoo! REE-peat-er, REE-peat-er," he taunted me in a high-pitched voice, hands high on his waist, grinding his hips one full hula round at the REE.

I felt fire in my earlobes. I needed to hit him back with something humiliating to show everybody who was in control.

"You have the flat nose and dark skin of a dumb peasant family!" Ethnic inferiority, flawed genetics, low social rank, wounded vanity. I hit the bull's-eye.

Rex scowled at me. His breaths were shallow, lips tight, fists clenched, legs apart. Tommie slinked over and leaned on my shoulder. I wished Tommie hadn't done that. I sensed from the glint in Rex's eyes that he would say The Word, and none of us would be healed. Rex regained his arrogant cool, sneered with reeking disdain, and hissed in his lowest register with a thread of saliva dripping from his lower lip:

“Faggot.”

I lunged my whole body toward his chest. His right palm gripped my forehead and pushed me back. Using his basketball player height, he held his right arm straight out, which kept me about three feet away, unable to reach him with my thrusting fists and kicking feet.

The tribes of Good and Evil were both cheering. Then suddenly, we heard a piercing sound. We all froze. It was Tommie. He planted himself outside the ring, knees pressed together, elbows stuck to his ribs, forearms whisked outward, fingers flailing. He was totally bent as he belted one shattering scream.

Everyone was watching. This scene was entirely new. What would happen next? Unexpectedly, Rex released me and ran away, followed by his rotten minions. But all my ardent followers ran away too. No doubt, only one Terror of Terrors could make everyone take cover—

Sister. Aloysius. Marie.

But she never came. With Tommie and I alone, I held both of his hands and told him, much to his obvious delight:

“Oh, Tommie. God has blessed you with His plans. Someday you'll be a diva.”

Graduation was about to come, and we wanted to give Sister Aloysius Marie a loving surprise. Six years of Catholic elementary school education taught us that the other face of intense fear could be submissive love. How else could we adore a God who so terrified us with His anger?

I hatched the idea and Tommie was the accomplice. We decided to do it during music class on the last school day. Sister Aloysius Marie used a pitch pipe before allowing us to sing. She would blow out a middle C, and we had to hum that one note, just to be sure we all sang on the same scale. Sure enough, she started class by piping out a middle C. But instead of just one note, we regaled her with a full C chord. I hummed the middle C, Ricky the E, Lance the G, and Tommie the dizzying high C. We recruited classmates to join in humming each of our assigned notes. Rex's satanic baritones participated, perfectly complementing my angelic tenors. Tommie was the soprano.

Sister Aloysius Marie was stunned. She kept her reserve by pretending that nothing foolish was happening. Fighting the smile escaping from her lips, she regained control by blowing an insistent middle C into the pitch pipe.

This time, Tommie's artistic direction took over magically. After Sister's middle C faded, the whole class belted out a full C chord, then an F chord, and finally another C chord capped with a high G, which Tommie screeched out with beaming ecstasy. We blended it with a wondrous legato, crescendo-ing as we scaled the heights, sounding almost like the first bars of Wagner's "Also Sprach Zarathustra." Only the timpani was missing. At last, after six years of rancor and mischief, here at the moment of graduation, we were all joined like a bouquet of cherubims clustered on just one cloud, intoning from on high a cathedral of harmonious sound.

Sister Aloysius Marie sprinted out of the room. Her shoulders were trembling from the fit of giggles that she could no longer hide. She was not able to say "thank you" for our many hours of secret practice during recess and PhysEd. But we could all swear we gave her a taste of Heaven that day.

Virgie visited me once in Washington DC. We were already in our early fifties and had not seen each other for almost forty years. She became a fulfilled rural doctor who found joy in her supportive

husband and a horde of children, many of them adopted. We had a heartwarming two hours together at lunch, but I made sure to avoid any playground reminiscences.

It was not as good for the rest.

Handsome Rex died of a heart attack while jogging on his treadmill at home. Bully-turned-Saint, he finished medicine, raised a big family, and had become a renowned pediatrician at the time of his death.

Sugarcane Lance died of a heroin overdose in college.

Comrade Ricky committed suicide. To mask the family's shame, his daughter says he was shot for owing lots of money he couldn't pay.

Shimmering Tommie died of liver failure in San Francisco, where he had lived since finishing high school. The righteous among our classmates speculated that he died of AIDS, and cheered at how blessed they were for conforming to God's design.

And the Crocodile Nun? Sister Aloysius Marie, who mastered the skill of surging stealthily from nowhere to catch anyone in the act, suffered through senility during much of her old age. She died in peace at the nuns' retirement home.

I had allowed my mind to wander too far back in time, slowing my shoveling. I looked at all the snow still left to remove from the roof. It felt like the five tons of elephant were now the nostalgia and loss of childhood friendships weighing upon my shoulders— those early moorings that taught me to believe without questioning, to dare without fear, to be willingly taken by powers greater than myself.

Where did the prankster in me go? As I molded myself into the strictures of adulthood, did I allow him to die?

The cold hounded me as I went back inside the house, leaving a trail of slush and muddy footprints on the hardwood floor. Its emptiness felt ruthless and unforgiving.

I read the elementary school reunion invitation one last time and crumpled it. Was anyone going to be there who made me feel like

I was wiggling my toes in warm, pink sand whenever I thought of them? No one.

As I looked out the window, cursing the cold, I rubbed the itch off my dry skin and heard the muted laughter of faraway children. I wished for them to come and lift me on a luscious carpet back to the carefree revelry of my distant home. Across the silent snow. Away from this endless sheet of blinding white.