

Bad Angels Stand So Good Angels Can Sit

It sat majestically at the top of a hill, perhaps by design, or maybe it was just meant to be there to establish its significance in the hierarchy of my life. You couldn't see it right away, because its presence was hidden by the tall trees and the lush green foliage of Jamaica Estates, the elite neighborhood you entered upon crossing Hillside Avenue in Queens, New York, but the closer you got, the stronger its presence became.

The institute of learning during my formative years was an elementary school run by the strict Catholic standards and practices of the Sisters of Saint Joseph. It was appropriately named the Immaculate Conception School and housed grades one through eight. The architecture was beautiful and enduring, considering the original structure looks the same today as it did when it was built in 1938.



Immaculate Conception School, Jamaica, N.Y.

Attending a parochial grammar school in the 1950s was a unique experience, and it provided a foundation for the values that have remained with me for over half a century. But

that's only half of the story. The rest of those memories can trigger any number of flashbacks ranging from humor to the absolute unthinkable. But trust me, they happened!

Is a five-year-old too young?

Most people do not have vivid memories of their early childhood. They might recall a birthday, a significant event, or a special individual in their early life, but if you ask someone to list just five things they can describe accurately before they turned six, most would fail to name even two. So why was I different?

During the first five years of my life, I was rarely alone. My mother was a stay-at-home Mom while my father went off to work, and on weekends, we visited my grandparents. Since both sets of grandparents were alive and part of my upbringing, I always felt a sense of security. Constantly interacting with adults along with children my age was part of my pre-school education. Families were different then, and if you've read some of my previous stories, you would recall that I had a younger sister, and *we* were my mother's full-time job. Since my birthday fell in July, my parents had to make a decision about when and where I would start school. That decision should have been simple. Five-year-olds should go to Kindergarten, but the closest public school was not within reasonable walking distance of our house, but there was a Catholic elementary school that was. Remarkably, my mother managed to enroll me in the first grade even though that registration should have taken

place a year later, and that was where my formal schooling began.

My mother had prepared me for that day as best she could. She held my hand the entire time we walked up the hill as we approached my first school's entrance. I do remember the stairs and the tall woman in a strange black and white outfit who greeted us. I would later learn that her name was Sister Mary Charitas, my first-grade teacher. What I didn't remember was that I would not let go of my mother's hand and that I cried hysterically as she started to walk away.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Guise, most children cry on their first day of school," said Sister Mary Charitas. "I promise we will take good care of your son."

That was my mother's account of how embarrassing I was on that first day of school. Looking back, I know it wouldn't be the last time she would use the word "embarrassing" to reference my behavior. At this point, you are probably wondering how I remembered the name of my first-grade teacher because you probably don't remember yours. Well, I clearly remember her name because as my new classmates and I entered her room, she spent the entire morning repeating her name and asking each one of us to do the same both individually and as a group. It was like that song you couldn't get out of your head. I must have had recurring nightmares about singing that seven-syllable name . . . *Sister Mary Charitas!* Repetition was a key to the learning process in my early education. That's why there are some things time cannot erase.

I had attended Immaculate Conception School for grades one through eight. Those were the grade levels for elementary schools back then. You simply attended elementary school for eight years and then went to high school. The overall enrollment at the school was approximately 240 students, so there was always a degree of familiarity with everyone who attended ICS. That student base came from a loosely defined two-square mile radius which included Jamaica, Jamaica Estates and Hollis. The local public elementary school (PS 95) was a few blocks to the west and south, and served as the alternative for the parents who elected to have their children receive a secular education. With that type of proximity, it assured us of seeing fellow classmates on the streets, in local stores, and in the playgrounds. We were literally neighbors.

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Because of the way the school was constructed, every classroom was the same and virtually indistinguishable. The size and symmetry of each was remarkable from the black chalkboard in the front and side of each room to the open coat closet in the back. A heavy wooden teacher's desk occupied a large portion of the room between the blackboard and those stationary rows of wooden student desks. Above each chalkboard was a series of cards depicting the printed and cursive alphabet each in a style we were required to emulate. Hanging in the corner and elevated above eye level was an American Flag. It was

suspended limply on a thin, black rod that was no more than four feet in length. A cork surfaced bulletin board was just to the right of each classroom's front door.

Our actual desks deserve a place in the Smithsonian Institute along with other vestiges from the middle of the twentieth century. Compared to the open environment of



today's classrooms, those fixed rows of desks served as a stark contrast to modern teaching methods and

techniques. Our desks were practical for post-depression era students because each desktop had a hollow cutout in its upper right corner for an inkwell. (Ballpoint pens were yet to move into the mainstream as tools for business and education.) Each year, as my schooling progressed, I moved up the educational ladder from the first to the eighth grade, and from the first floor to the third. The stark symmetry of those classrooms remained consistent throughout the school building. Students at ICS always looked small in comparison to their surroundings. Perhaps it was someone's belief that the natural growth patterns of young children would eventually justify the bulk and size of those heavy wooden desks.

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*Heigh Ho, Heigh Ho, it's off to school we go
From nine to three its misery
Heigh Ho, Heigh Ho, Heigh Ho, Heigh Ho, Heigh Ho
It's off to school we go
From nine to three its mis-er-eee . . .
Heigh Ho, Heigh Ho!*

It didn't take long for my friends and I to learn why the older students sang this little ditty to the theme of the 1937 Wald Disney movie *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Nobody aside from our parents told us that school would be fun. At some period between the first and the third grades, we learned that there was a strict set of rules that some of us learned earlier in the process than others. At the Immaculate Conception School, those rules were strictly enforced by the black and white attired enforcement team commissioned by God himself—the Sisters of St. Joseph.



As an impressionable and relatively isolated child, I assumed everyone my age was taught by nuns, because in my world, that was all I knew. From grades one through eight, there was always a no-nonsense and imposing authority figure dressed in black and white standing at the front of my classroom. That was how I learned to read, write, and master the disciplines of a strict and proper education. It was the Sisters of St. Joseph's version of a

proper Catholic education, and explains most of what you are about to read.

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The first few weeks of September were always warm and pleasant in New York. Summer vacation was still resonating, and most days weren't even sweater weather



because the temperature rarely dipped below sixty degrees. Dressing for school was simple and easily became a matter of routine. While we didn't wear actual school uniforms, we did have a dress code: White shirts, ties, long pants and dress shoes for boys, and a skirt and blouse or a simple dress for girls. I can categorically remember my early collection of ties. While it was true that they looked like ties from afar, they weren't *real* ties. They had metal clips behind the knot and were fastened above the top button of my shirt so they would always stay in place. As I look back, I believe it was sometime around my freshman year in high school that I learned how to tie a *real* tie. I think it was during my time in the third grade that I noticed that not all the boys wore ties like mine. Raymond Cotè (a classmate we called "Cootie" for reasons we thought were obvious because all of us had cruel and sometimes demeaning nicknames) always wore a bow tie.

Hail Mary and the Pledge of Allegiance

Our mornings began in the school yard unless it rained or snowed. The “yard” was almost a perfectly rectangular fenced-in sector of concrete bordered on the west and north by the school itself and the convent of the Sisters of St. Joseph on the east. To the south was a grassy knoll separated from the school yard by a short chain-linked fence. Midway up that knoll was a



life-sized statue of the Blessed Virgin who apparently was in charge of watching over us as we played and burned off excess energy before school and during recess breaks. It was there that we sought out our friends and socialized before we heard the bell that the nuns used to signal the start of our school day. It wasn't an ordinary bell; it was a heavy brass instrument that had a large wooden handle and a heavy ball-shaped clapper we called “the clangor” (for obvious reasons) inside. That combination produced a loud and distinctive sound.

Each student at ICS learned early in the process how we were to interpret *the bell*. Four “clangs” meant to stop what you were doing. That ring also implied that we were to remain absolutely quiet and motionless. (Each “clang” was really two separate dings of the bell—*Da-ding, da-ding, da-ding, da-ding*.) What followed a few seconds later was a single *da-ding* which was the signal to line up

single-file and in size order according to our grade. There were times when the interval between the initial four clangs and the single clang seemed like an eternity, especially for those of us who pretended to be in a state of suspended animation and could not move until we got the signal.

The System Didn't Change – We Did

What I recall about that daily routine was the fact that it remained the same for my entire tenure at ICS. It made little difference to the sisters of St. Joseph if you were a new first grader or someone who has been through the system for seven years. Everyone lined up according to your grade level in the schoolyard before school and waited for your teacher to lead you into your appropriate classroom.

Our seats were always assigned, and there were several methods the nuns used to achieve that order. The first, and the most obvious was alphabetical order. Peter Abt always sat in the front row while Mary Zimmermann was relegated to the last row. (It was a good thing she had 20/20 vision!) My fourth-grade teacher once used our numerical report card averages to determine who sat in the coveted front seat to her left. (I never earned that privilege, but I was never seated near the musty smelling coat closet in the back either.)

From the beginning, I was conditioned to hear and obey simple but effective commands. Sometimes they were polite, but mostly they were authoritative and

demanded a programmed and immediate response. The terms *yes Sister* and *no Sister* were required whenever we were asked if we understood a question.

No talking! That was simple. *Pay attention!* was frequently used, particularly if there was an undercurrent of attempted social interaction between several students during class. You always raised your hand if you needed to ask a question. Using the restroom at any time other than the mid-morning or afternoon group breaks required an altogether different strategy.

I remember one particular incident when I really needed to use the bathroom. I was a timid third grader at the time, and I was feeling rumblings and reverberations from things traveling through my system in search of an exit. Looking at my teacher, I slowly raised my hand.

“Yes, Robert?” said Sister Dolorita.

“Sister, I need to use the bathroom.”

Her response was impassive and unemotional. After acknowledging what I said with a nod, she turned around to face the blackboard and uttered as she continued writing, “You will remain in your seat. The class will be taking a restroom break in thirty minutes.”

I guess that was the solution. Remain seated and any problem you had that didn’t affect the entire class would go away. That afternoon I mentioned that incident to my mother. She was the one who did our laundry at home and offered a suggestion.

“The next time you have to go to the bathroom really bad, tell Sister that it’s *urgent*.”

Urgent? That was a new word for me, and I didn't totally understand its meaning or realize just how powerful it was until I actually used it one afternoon. My personal "situation" wasn't anything that would qualify as truly urgent, but I thought I would give it a try. I raised my hand.

Again, Sister Dolorita said, "Yes, Robert?"

This time I confidently and convincingly said, "Sister, I need to use the bathroom . . . and it's *urgent!*"

The expression on her face immediately changed to one of concern. This was the same nun who ignored my plea to use the restroom just a few days before as internal rumblings that possibly registered on the Richter Scale as a minor earthquake worked their way through my stomach and intestines. She stood in the front of the classroom with a piece of chalk in her right hand and an eraser in her left and said, "Please attend to that now! And make sure you come right back."

It worked. But even then, I was smart enough not to abuse my new powerful word by using it too often.

Sister Mary Robertson's Rosary Beads

Fifth graders generally aren't tall. While there were exceptions, most of us were on the south side of sixty inches in height. In comparison, Sister Mary Robertson's presence was further enhanced by her large and rotund body. I always remembered her as being the largest nun. Not only was she taller than the other sisters, but she probably tipped the scales at over 200 pounds. In reality,

she was probably no more than five-foot eight. (Here we need to note that in the case of most accounts of childhood events, things are always remembered as being much larger, meaner, grumpier, and scarier than they really were.) Sister Mary Robertson was not only big, she had the reputation of being the strictest and meanest nun in the convent. Her reputation for sternness and discipline



was further enhanced by several neighborhood friends who had endured her methods of teaching and discipline several years ahead of my class. There were stories of her telling a young boy who committed the crime of talking during

class to place his hands palms down on his desk while she raised a metal ruler above her head and brought it down “machete-style” with the force and precision of legendary lumberjack Paul Bunyan as he wielded his axe toward the base of a tree. At the last second, the boy flinched and managed to move his hands slightly before the ruler came crashing down. The wounded desk was still there somewhere in room 205 as an ominous reminder of what could have been. Rumor also had it that the strange and oddly shaped beads on Sister Mary Robertson’s rosary were indeed severed and withered bones from the fingertips of little boys who misbehaved in her class.

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Classroom Chores

From nine to three each school day, we were a family, and like most families, the adults (and the only adult in the classroom was a nun) made the important decisions. It always was to your advantage to get on her good list. Students on the good list got to do the really neat things. At the top of the list for boys was clapping the erasers just before the end of the school day. For girls, it was washing the blackboards. Both chores easily beat picking up and taking out the trash, removing pictures from the bulletin board, and sharpening pencils. Yes, all of this was child labor, but you could really have fun doing some of them, especially if the chore you were picked to do took you outside the confines of the classroom. Clapping erasers was at the top of that list!

You have to remember that in that era, blackboards were black, and sticks of white chalk were used to write on them.

During the course of a typical day, a teacher would start out with several pieces of chalk that were anywhere



between three and four inches long. If the lessons taught that day included diagramming a complex sentence for English or in the case of Richie Dolan, writing the words

“I will be good” twenty-five times on a side board, those long pieces of chalk would be reduced to fragments. It was the job of the “eraser clappers” to remove all pieces of chalk from the chalk ledges, discard the tiny fragments, and return the usable pieces to the teacher’s desk drawer for use the next day.

It must have been late October or early November when I was teamed up with Kevin Lanigan, and Raymond “Cootie” Cotè to clap the erasers. Because the temperature outside was starting to drop, we were told to put on our coats, collect the erasers and clap them just outside of the school yard entrance. To accomplish this, we would have to scurry down the stairwell three floors and push open the handle on the double doors that led to the fenced-in school yard. Temporary freedom! That day our erasers were much chalkier than usual (if chalkier is really a word). Sister Josepha must have done a lot more erasing than usual, and that presented a true eraser cleaning challenge. I remember that when I clapped the first two of my erasers together that afternoon, they produced a huge white cloud that seemed to hover in front of my face for a few seconds. That cloud of chalk dust made me cough. Kevin was a bit smarter. He took his erasers and started tapping them on the brick wall just beneath the windows outside the cafeteria. He almost spelled his name when that set of erasers ran out of chalk. That technique seemed to work, but before I got to try it, I saw Kevin casually walk by the Cootie and slap his second pair of erasers on Raymond’s back leaving two distinct rectangular marks on the shoulders of his black

coat. The Cootie reacted quickly and took two of his erasers and planted them on the back of Kevin's head. "Ha, Lan-i-goona, you've got white hair!" he exclaimed.

You can imagine what happened next with three unsupervised eighth graders who were destined for some serious "stand in the corner" time. Within a minute, all three eraser clappers were covered in white dust. The erasers were clean, but we weren't. That was the last time we were picked for the "coolest boy's school chore ever."



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Weapons in the Classroom

Stories about nuns and their stringency in the Catholic educational system abound, and most centered around their unorthodox disciplinary procedures. Nuns were absolute authoritarians, and there was no doubt about the extent of their power. (It came directly from God, didn't it?) In the classroom, it was absolute. If you were singled out because of something you did, a cold, emotionless stare by a nun followed by a few seconds of deafening silence would let you know that whatever you were doing, it would be in your best interest best to stop. Nuns never gave a second warning.

Most of the good sisters were armed with an arsenal of armaments. While those weapons would not be considered conventional arms by the Geneva Convention because they generally would not be used in crimes, conflicts or wars, but in the classroom, they were extremely effective. Those contrivances included pointers, rulers, paddles, and several variations of pinching, pulling, and lifting techniques by their surprisingly strong fingertips usually applied to an unruly student's ear lobes.

Geography was a subject that didn't make the three Rs, but it was in the top ten of things we needed to know and learn. Aside from large flat maps that graced our bulletin boards and classroom walls depending on which country, state, or region we were studying, most classrooms also had a globe. All globes at ICS were made by a company called Replogle . . . a name nobody could

pronounce. What made these globes so memorable was that they were relatively large, and showed each country defined in a different color. They were also positioned on a stand that allowed the earth to spin on its simulated axis. The globes themselves didn't spin, we had to turn them manually to simulate night and day. Some classrooms had well-maintained globes. Sister Mary Dolorita's class had a globe that squeaked when anyone spun it. Hence a potential problem.

Richie Dolan was one of my best friends and a classmate through my years at Immaculate Conception School. One of the things I remembered about Richie was his off-beat sense of humor. He was always joking and had the ability to find humor in the strangest things. Much of his humor was manifested during class.

During one of our geography lessons, several students were asked to come up to the globe and locate a particular country which was part of a previous day's lesson. We were studying Europe.

Sister Dolorita said, "Richard, can you please locate Italy on the globe?" I was seated in the second row and could clearly see the familiar "boot" of the Italian peninsula sticking out in sharp contrast from the blue of the Mediterranean Sea. All Richie had to do was to walk up to the globe, point at Italy, and get Sister Dolorita's approval. Richie and I both knew that the globe needed to be oiled at its base because even the slightest movement left or right would set off a loud series of squeaking sounds. As Richie approached the globe, I knew by his expression what he was going to do so, I made a

conscious effort to suppress my laughter. I was right. Richie looked at the globe as if he were searching for Italy and gave it a spin that would make Vanna White of the Wheel of Fortune proud. The classroom erupted in short-lived laughter that was abruptly quieted way before the globe stopped its squeaky spinning. In those few seconds, Sister Mary Dolorita had her index finger and thumb firmly gripping Richie's right earlobe. She made him stand in the corner for the rest of the afternoon. During that eventful walk to the back of the room, with each step they took, she tightened her grip and applied more upward pressure to Richie's ear. I often wondered what Richie's earlobes would have looked like if Sister Mary Dolorita were six feet tall.

The Eighth Grade Spelling Bee

It was the boys against the girls . . . that was the way it was always done for any form of academic competition. I'm not sure why this particular event stands out. We always had spelling bees. Perhaps I remember this one because I actually made it to the finals. In our spelling bees, the rules were simple. All students lined up along opposite walls of the classroom, and as usual, the girls were on the right and the boys were on the left. We were given a word to spell. In replying, we had to say the word, spell it, and say the word again. If that spelling was correct, we would be allowed to remain standing and

Sister Josepha would direct her attention across the room and ask the next contestant a different word.

For some reason, the contestants were dropping like flies. Frederick Bartoli (who everyone knew was the smartest kid God ever created) missed early and had to sit along with Philip Giris and Joseph Chiaramonte. All the really smart guys were sitting because they had missed some very difficult words. On the girls' side, Susan Pisiri was still standing. She was the female version of the smartest kid God ever created. I couldn't believe it! It was Susan Pisiri against me, and all I needed was for her to miss a word. I was silently spelling all of the other contestant's words in my mind and was getting them right! This one was meant to be.

"Robert," said Sister Josepha, "your word is *apostrophe*."

Gulp!

The word sounded familiar, but I really didn't know what a *postrophe* was.

"Postrophe . . . P O S T R O F I E . . . postrophe?" I hesitantly replied.

"No, Robert," she said with a condescending look. "That is incorrect. But because you are the last boy standing, you will get another chance if Susan misses her word. OK?"

I nodded in silent disappointment because deep down, I knew Susan could spell anything—even words that haven't been invented yet. At that point, I slowly drifted into my personal state of withdrawal. Moments later, I learned that Susan got her word right. I think it was *fish*,

cat, or something simple, because she was the spelling bee champion again that day!

Guardian Angels or Jiminy Cricket?

One of the most treasured beliefs held by numerous people is that each person has an appointed guardian angel to watch over them. This is God's way of helping people like me who sometimes lack the prerequisite amount of common sense to consistently make good decisions. The good Sisters of St. Joseph reminded us daily that we had a guardian angel. That angel was there to help us do the right thing and avoid the evils of temptation. While I've never seen my personal guardian angel or heard him speak, I have seen Jiminy Cricket!

Well, not really.

Movies and television really don't qualify as reality. Images captured on film and played back by means of animated clips may look real, but they are products of human imagination. They can sound convincing too. Jiminy Cricket was the voice of reason in the Walt Disney movie, *Pinocchio*, serving as Pinocchio's conscience. As a young elementary school student, I found it much easier

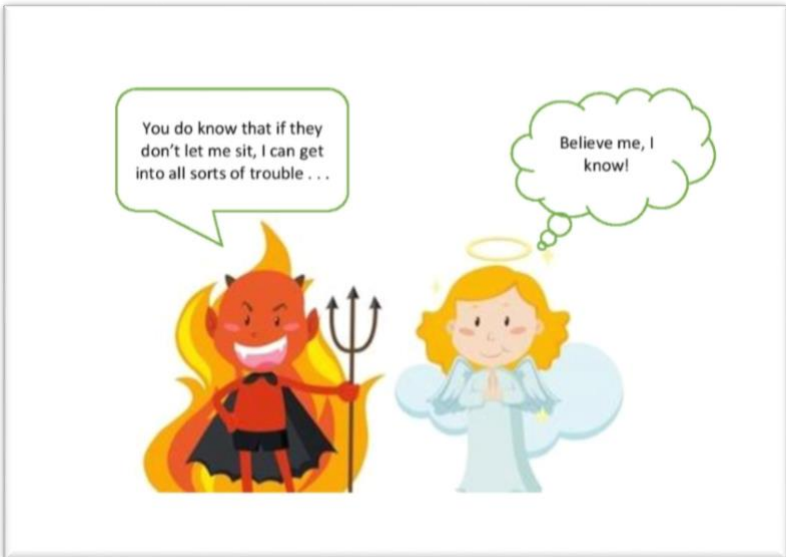


to identify with Jiminy Cricket than the concept of an invisible and silent guardian angel. At least the cricket conscience said things out loud that made sense to me when it came to determining right from wrong. “Let your conscience be your guide” Jiminy Cricket would say. Funny, I remember my mother telling me that exact phrase. (Looking back, my mother was *really* smart!) But I never heard anything from my guardian angel . . . or my bad angel either.

Don’t tell me that you don’t know about bad angels? Yes, they do exist. Lucifer started out as one of the good guys until he committed the ultimate sin of self-pride. Lucifer apparently became so impressed with his own beauty, intelligence, power, and position that he began to desire for himself “what belonged to God alone.” And that (PUN ALERT!) was one “hell” of a mistake on his part. The term *bad angel* seems like a contradiction of terms . . . something like a square circle, but I can assure you that my strict Catholic school education included a lesson that incorporated just what bad angels can do. They are the ones that constantly try to lure you into temptation and do things you know are intrinsically wrong. These temptations are in effect balanced by the good intentions and directives of your true guardian angel. Perhaps Sister Maria Coletta said it best as we were taking our seats before class one day.

“Children, when you sit at your desk this morning, make sure to move all the way to the left in your seat. This way, you will make the necessary room for your good guardian angel to sit next to you on your right. That

bad angel to your left will have to stand.” She then walked around the classroom making sure our posteriors were planted as far to the left on our bench-style seats as possible. I remember thinking *It’s a good thing I am right handed. Poor Joan Shields has to curl her left hand across the top of her desk to write.* I also wondered if left-handed people had their “bad” angels on the right . . .



Could all of this be the reason my car’s steering wheel is on the left?

Temptations—they’re the wrong things that seem right at the time.

- Jiminy Cricket