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EXSANGUINATION

Parochial school education was thriving in my community in the late 1950s. Many options were available to grammar school students from the Irish to the French to the catch-all Catholic schools. My parents selected St. Peter's, an all-girls' school ruled strictly by semi-cloistered, Dominican nuns right off the boat from Paris. My experiences there left an indelible imprint--terror of semi-cloistered anything, for one; obedience in the extreme; endless guilt; and semi-skilled penmanship. My mother was one of two lay teachers at St. Peter's. She was as fierce as the nuns in that setting, a combination that set the stage for my proclivity to overachieve.

Both of my parents were bilingual, proficient in English and French, and my father spoke German fluently from his time stationed in Bremerhaven during World War II. Oddly, though, we only spoke English in the family, until my well-advanced and well-adored brother, my only sibling Billy, studied Russian when he was 12 to communicate with a comrade in St. Petersburg he befriended over the ham radio set he had constructed from scratch. A story for another time...

The consequence of not speaking French at home became evident when I entered a curriculum in which every subject was taught in French, except English and spelling. Math, science, geography, history, and religion were all conducted in precise and unyielding Parisian French. So, at six years old, I wandered into a strange and incomprehensible land.

To add to the foreignness of my circumstances, I was diagnosed with "a lazy eye", which was only to be strengthened by wearing a patch of my flesh color prescribed by an ophthalmologist. I did wear the patch dutifully for a year, though the adhesive, to which I have long been allergic, left a reddish raccoon ring around my eye, pronounced and needing ointment with the hygienic change to a new patch at the end of each week. My version wasn't quite as ominous as a pirate's patch, to be sure, but with my glasses on, it did prompt repeated "three-eyes" cat calls from scoundrels across the way at St. Peter's School for Boys.

It was only many years later that we learned the patch was all for naught since I suffered from an astigmatism rather than a lazy eye. The misdiagnosis caused much levity in my family--"Ha, ha, ha, and she didn't even need to look so ridiculous," quipped my brother, and, from my mother's perspective, the suffering provided a "moment" of needed character building.

During this period of my mini-buccaneer appearance, my mother sought to convince me that the blue plastic cat-eye glasses that I needed for my other, only somewhat good eye, concealed all manner of sins. The beret she insisted I wear with my black uniform, white plastic collar, and two-tone buck shoes only added insult to injury.

In the meantime, Mere Marie Patrice, a kindly, youthful nun, took pity and devoted untold hours to getting me to the point at which I could

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speaking, reading, and writing French. The instruction came easily to me. That turned out to be, in the end, not my struggle. The real struggle was yet to come.

Little “three eyes” in the beret, you see, also suffered from regular nosebleeds, or epistaxis, which finds its origins in Greek, meaning “the dripping”. I dripped prodigiously. In truth, the nuns quietly spoke of the devil working his way through me, not wanting to suggest to their colleague, my mother, that I was possessed, but believing every episode of a nosebleed was a visitation from Satan. My pockets bulged from Kleenex that my mother routinely stuffed there in anticipation of another “visitation”. These episodes occurred almost daily, often at school, but at home as well, where Billy, in fits of disgust, would yell to my parents: “She’s getting blood all over everything again. Make her stop!”

I became quite sanguine, which is ironic, given that among Hippocrates’s four humours, sanguinity, a temperament characterized by cheerfulness and optimism, was thought to be due to the predominance of blood coursing through one’s veins, not spilling out of one’s nose. Still, I remained hopeful that I was just going through a phase, and fortunately I wasn’t frightened by the repeated blood loss. At six, you come to think it’s just an odd feature of growing pains.

One day at recess in the school yard, when I bent down to tie my bucks properly before careening about with friends, I began to hemorrhage from my nose. There was an immediate consultation among the nuns and off one of them went to find Mother Superior, Mere Marie Laurent. She made the decision to have me brought to the basement, near the girls’ bathroom, where I was seated upon a bench with my head tilted backward. There they hoped to find the custodian, Monsieur Cloutier. A man of mature years, Monsieur Cloutier was believed to have healing powers. I had never seen evidence of this directly, and even at age six I was skeptical, but the stories swirled about the school and rather aggrandized Monsieur in their retelling. Clearly, the nuns thought, it was time for Monsieur to intercede in my case.

Mere Marie Laurent, Mere Marie Patrice, and Mere Marie Zelia, the second grade teacher, surrounded me, though not too closely, as Monsieur approached the supposed demon child. My mother arrived upon the scene just as Monsieur Cloutier was placing his hands upon my face, and specifically my nose. My attention was completely absorbed in trying not to swallow too much blood, which would have resulted in vomiting, I was quite sure, and to keep breathing, as his hands covered my nose and mouth. He said a prayer or two over me in this way, but my nose continued to gush blood.

Suddenly, Monsieur Cloutier jumped back and without concealing his disdain said loudly, “Tu ne crois pas! C’est vrai?” “You don’t believe! It’s true?” The nuns peered at me intently, and I looked to my mother for some sign. Should I lie or tell the truth? If I lied, I was convinced my nose would bleed so much that I would have none left in my body, an exsanguination that could only lead to premature death. If I told the truth, this would confirm what the nuns suspected all along: I was in Satan’s grasp. Hushed grumbling ensued when I lowered my head and shook it in the negative. Now, I wasn’t saying in that moment that I didn’t believe

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in God, or Catholicism, or penance, or heaven and hell, or the virtues of semi-cloistering, for heaven's sake, only that I didn't believe our custodian could heal my affliction. It was then that my mother sprang into action. "Enough of this," she asserted firmly. "I am taking my daughter to the doctor. Someone must watch my class until we return." She grabbed my hand and escorted me, with two crimson tissues flapping breezily from each nostril, out of the basement and into the light of day. When I looked back, a prayer circle had formed.

Dr. Brilliant, true to his name, was a highly regarded ENT whose office was within walking distance of our school. In those days, it was not uncommon to walk in with an emergency, not having called to schedule an appointment in advance. He saw me promptly and recognized the problem immediately. He summarily dismissed demon possession in favor of weak membranes lining my nose. Though I was uncomfortable for a few minutes, Dr. Brilliant cauterized my plugged proboscis and stopped the bleeding permanently.

I returned to school that day bloodied, but renewed. Monsieur Cloutier frowned at me from that time forward until I left St. Peter's School. Equally obvious, the nuns crossed themselves whenever I came near. My new claim to fame gradually became First Honors and intense battles with Rachel Pinette, the funeral director's daughter, for first in the class. I maintained a 99.9 average for the duration of my time at St. Peter's, not 100 only because the nuns refused to acknowledge perfection in a student's work, even though I answered all the questions correctly. Only God's love is perfect and freely given, even to a six-year-old heathen sporting a strange eye patch under blue plastic cat-eye glasses and a jaunty beret.