

Cageball, Poker, and the Atomic Wedgie



—And other tales of Catholic school mischief

By Valentine J. Brkich

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Dedicated to Cassie, the love of my life.

Introduction

Cageball, Poker, and the Atomic Wedgie: A Tale of Catholic School Mischief started out as my senior project in college. Over the next few years, in order to pass the hours of various mind-numbing jobs, I worked on it until, in 2003, I decided it was ready for publication.

Unfortunately, the publishers didn't agree.

Undaunted, I decided to go the pay-to-publish route, and over the next few years I managed to sell around 3,000 copies, forcing them on my friends and relatives, people at weddings, my coworkers, the cashier in the grocery store, etc.

As the years passed and I honed my writing skills, I cringed anytime I glanced at my typo-riddled book. The following revision is my attempt at a better, cleaner version. I've edited it quite a bit and took out anything that I felt didn't really fit. Also, instead of one fictional tale based on true stories, this version is a collection of mostly true stories with a little fiction sprinkled in.

I think this format works better, and I hope you do to.

Valentine J. Brkich

March 2012

PS: *If you find any typos, please don't tell me. I don't think I could take it.*

If there were no schools to take the children away from home part of the time, the insane asylums would be filled with mothers.

—Edgar W. Howe

No one can look back on his school days and say with truth that they were altogether unhappy.

— George Orwell

How Lovely

By the time I was 13 years old, Saints Peter and Paul Catholic School—or S.S.P.P., as we called it—was like a second home to me. I was in my eighth and final year at the institution. Somehow I'd survived through seven long years of temperamental nuns and despotic rule, and finally I was on the brink of freedom. I was under the impression that S.S.P.P. was just like any other school. As far as I knew, everyone had nuns for teachers and had religion as a daily class. Little did I know that just up the street at the public school there were kids who had never even *seen* a nun. Lucky them.

Catholic school: two words that together conjure up images of plaid skirts, white button-downed shirts, and not-so-saintly nuns bruising knuckles with the swift stroke of a ruler. This wasn't the case at S.S.P.P. Don't get me wrong, we had our share of ill-tempered teachers. But when you misbehaved, they didn't hit you with a ruler. Instead they would scream and yell at you

and send you out in the hall, where there was a chance you'd encounter Sr. Peggy, the school principal, which was never a good thing. And we didn't have any mandatory uniforms, but there was a strict dress code. Luckily, it didn't involve plaid. We were required to wear what people today refer to as "business casual," i.e., no tennis shoes, t-shirts, shorts, or jeans. This may seem perfectly reasonable to you, but to us it was an infringement of our civil rights. If we were going to be stuck in school for six long hours a day, the least they could do was let us wear something a little more comfortable.

Of course, we were used to all of this by now. We were the eighth-graders; the elders of the school; the elite, both mentally and physically. Somehow we had survived through seven-plus years, and now we were in the homestretch. It was a wonderful feeling, walking down the hall with your head held high, the other kids looking up at you in awe. Soon we would be moving on to high school—land of jeans and tennis shoes. We just had to survive a couple more months of this nonsense.

Of course, the teachers didn't see it that way. To them we were just a bunch of immature, hyperactive children, who required a daily regimen of strict discipline. This disparity of opinion led to an ugly struggle of wills between teacher and student.

Take music class, for example. When you're 7, 8, or even 9 years old, public singing is totally acceptable; in fact, it's a lot of fun. When you're that young, you have no inhibitions, and you don't get embarrassed if you're a little off tune or if you forget the words to a song.

But somewhere along the line everything changes. Suddenly the last thing you want to do is sing your heart out in front of

your peers. This takes on special significance for a 13-year-old boy, surrounded by other 13-year-old boys, who are salivating at the chance to pounce on the slightest imperfection. At that age, attempting to hit a high note could end in disaster, leading to years of alienation, shame, and ridicule. And our music teacher, Mrs. Peterson, didn't exactly get her selection of songs from the Billboard Top 40. "Big Rock Candy Mountain" and "Puff—the Magic Dragon" are all fine and dandy if your favorite TV show is *Sesame Street*. But when you've 13, "John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt" loses its appeal as quality entertainment.

One particular morning, Mrs. Peterson introduced us to a new song that would haunt me for years to come.

"Good morning everyone," she said as she entered the room. Never one to waste a moment of class time, she immediately made her way over to her dusty and slightly out-of-tune upright piano. "Okay, let's open our books and turn to page 15, bottom of the page, 'Loverly', from *My Fair Lady*. Let's see what you can do with it."

Loverly? What kind of word was *loverly*? If she thought we were going to sing this stupid song, she had another thing coming.

As Mrs. Peterson began to play and sing, we were perplexed by her strange accent. "Awl I wont is a room somwayer, fah awhy from the cool noight ayer..." I looked around at my classmates who tried to hide their snickering. Of course there were your typical teacher's pets and kiss-ups who sang aloud, totally oblivious to the humiliation they were bringing upon themselves. Others were simply mouthing the words and pretending to sing—a good trick if you could pull it off. But most of the class was just standing there, mouths clamped,

unwilling to sing a single note.

It didn't take long for Mrs. Peterson to lose her patience. "What's wrong with you people?" she said, banging her fists on the keys. "You used to sing so beautifully. Are you too *cool* to sing anymore? Is that it?"

Of course, no one was actually stupid enough to answer her. Instead we just stared into our books, struggling to hold in our laughter. The last thing you wanted to do was to make eye contact with her and be singled out. The best defense was to try to blend in with the crowd.

"OK, let's try it again," she said, turning back to the keys. "And this time I better hear all twenty-five of your voices. Is that clear?!" Once again she started in with that embarrassing accent, playing the piano with one hand and using the other to direct us like some sort of conductor.

We continued our protest, however, for the remainder of class. We weren't going to sing this ridiculous song no matter how mad she got. We had our reputations to consider. For the next thirty minutes Mrs. Peterson kept playing the song over and over until "Lovely" was forever ingrained into our brains. To this day, every once in a while, I find myself singing it in my head for no particular reason. It's torturous.

You know what would be *lovely*?—If I could just get that song out of my mind.

Deal Me In

I couldn't stand English. It was such a boring class. Why did we need to take this class in the first place? It seemed like such an enormous waste of time. Didn't we already speak English? To make matters worse, this dreary class was taught by Sr. Margaret.

I don't know about you, but when I hear the word "nun" I envision a petite older woman with a gentle, quiet disposition. She's wearing a traditional black habit and holding a Bible in one hand and a rosary in the other. Sr. Margaret was not your stereotypical nun. First off, she was physically intimidating. She was tall and heavysset. Her hands were thick and rough like those of a mason or a lumberjack—not what you'd expect from an elderly woman who has devoted her life to prayer and education. She was probably somewhere in her early sixties, but to us she seemed older than dirt. Years of dealing with insubordinate children had turned her face into a permanent

scowl, which made her resemble a big, wrinkly bulldog. On top of all this, her utter inability to relate to us on our level made her seem all the more ancient.

Sr. Margaret also had a number of strange personality quirks. She was always complaining about some pain or ailment she was suffering from. Every day it was something different: her feet, her back, her throat, her stomach. Basically, the poor woman just never felt good.

Her wardrobe was nothing to write home about either. She would always wear these unusual floral-pattern dresses that resembled nightgowns or pajamas. And she always wore orthopedic shoes that resembled bedroom slippers. It was like she just rolled out of bed.

Sr. Margaret always had a large plastic cup on her desk, too, that she would go to regularly. She claimed that the cup was filled with water. It was a popular rumor, however, that it was actually vodka.

Looking back now I suppose she wasn't all that bad. As long as we did our homework and behaved during class, Sr. Margaret was pleasant and easy-going. She could actually be rather sweet at times.

More often than not, however, we chose not to do our homework and not to behave in class. Therefore, it was just a matter of time before she would be steaming with anger. She would always start off the class with a calm, almost pleasant tone. But soon her patience would run out, and she would be yelling and screaming like a lunatic, sending people out into the hall like it was her job.

Sr. Margaret had a low threshold of patience and could easily be pushed over the edge. So of course, like good little

Catholic students, we would work very hard to locate her last nerve and jump all over it.

“Good morning, children. I was wondering if you could open your books to chapter five. Could you please do that for me?” What a sweet old woman! Too bad we felt so compelled to torment her. “Nathan, would you please read the first paragraph about superlatives?”

“Sure, Sr. Margaret,” Nate answered politely. “Super...*LA*-tuh-tives are words that...”

“No, no Nathan,” Sr. Margaret interrupted, “it’s *su-PER*-latives, not super-*LA*-tuh-tives. Try it again.”

Nate began again. “Super-*LA*-tuh-tives are words that...”

“No, no, no! Not super-*LA*-tuh-tives! Again, the word is *su-PER*-latives...*su-PER*-latives. The accent is on the *per*, and there are only *four* syllables. Understand? Please, let’s try it again.”

By this time it was clear to everyone—everyone, that is, except Sr. Margaret—that Nate was screwing with her. It was also clearly evident that Sr. Margaret was becoming frustrated, which is just what we wanted.

While all this was going on, I whispered to my friend Joey to deal me into the secret poker game that had just started. Beans, as I called him, was a longtime friend of mine. We had a lot in common. We had gone to the same kindergarten, played on the same Little League team, and we both enjoyed screwing around in class.

Beans passed me my five cards as he made sure Sr. Margaret wasn’t looking. I looked at my hand: jack of clubs, nine of spades, seven of diamonds, and a pair of deuces—hearts and clubs. “Hey...Beans...” I whispered, “...give me two.” I handed him back the nine and the seven and waited for my new

cards.

While the poker game continued, I tried to figure out how far along Nate was in the text. Even when you were fooling around you had to pay attention to what was going on in class. If it was your turn to read, you'd fold and jump in on the next hand. It was pretty easy to pull off. But of course, sometimes things would go terribly wrong.

"Joey! It's your turn to read," Sr. Margaret snapped. "What are you playing with over there?" Unfortunately, some people would forget to keep one eye on their cards and one eye on the teacher.

"What? Oh, uh...nothing, Sr. Margaret." Beans quickly shoved his cards into his desk.

"Continue where Nate left off." Sr. Margaret waited as Beans found his place. Clearing his throat, he began.

"Super-*LA*-tuh-tives can be used to...."

Sr. Margaret had finally had enough. "*Su-PER*-latives! For the last time the word is *su-PER*-latives! Four syllables, not five!" A large throbbing vein appeared on her forehead and her eyes looked as if they would pop out at any moment. We all giggled as she took a drink from her cup.

After Beans was finished reading, he went back to being the dealer. Meanwhile, Sr. Margaret read the rest of the chapter herself, allowing us to resume our hand of poker. Just my luck, I got nothing from the discard and had to play the deuces. Beans had a full house, kings and tens. Seeing we were beat, the rest of us decided to fold. "Yes!" said Beans, slamming his cards down on the desk, forgetting that class was still in progress.

"Joey!" Sr. Margaret yelled. "What in the world are you doing?" The old nun scowled from her desk.

Beans looked stunned. "Sorry, Sr. Margaret. It was an accident."

"That's it," she said, "I want no more shenanigans! Is that understood? I swear you kids are going to send me to the funny farm."

If only, Sr. Margaret. If only...

The Science of Mischief

Mrs. Frag, our science teacher, was one of Saints Peter and Paul's several *regular* teachers. By that I mean she wasn't a nun. She was just your regular, run-of-the-mill teacher, just like they had down at the public school.

Mrs. Frag was easy to talk to. She was young, smart, and didn't feel the need to brandish her authority in order to gain our respect. It was actually quite refreshing to have someone who could relate to you and understand what you were going through.

This wasn't always a good thing, however. Since she understood kids so well, Mrs. Frag was also familiar with how devious we could be, which made it a little more difficult for us to screw around in class. Of course, this never stopped us from trying.

I remember one particular class when our fondness for tomfoolery nearly led to disaster.

“Today we're going to learn about the atom and its parts,” Mrs. Frag said as she erased the chalkboard. “So please get out your texts and open them to Chapter 7.”

Fantastic. We were going to learn more exciting facts about the atom. What a great idea. Neutrons, electrons...blah, blah, blah. How were we supposed to concentrate on such nonsense with the delicious aroma of pizza burgers and french fries rising up from the cafeteria far below?

One of our favorite ways to pass the time during class was to annoy the teacher as much as possible. This wasn't very difficult to do, but it demanded a little bit of ingenuity to pull it off. The trick was to drive the teacher crazy without incurring any unwanted wrath. So, as Mrs. Frag jotted her notes on the board, we secretly began our games.

One of our traditional favorites was the Shave-and-a-Haircut Game, based on the old musical couplet. The rules were simple. One person would start by tapping his pencil on his desk: “Tap, tap, tap-tap, tap...” Then, about ten other kids would follow up with a “tap, tap” in reply.

After about three rounds of this, Mrs. Frag was visibly irritated.

“The next person who taps anything on his or her desk is getting sent out in the hall! Is that clear?” She threw us a dirty look and turned back to the board. Usually a threat like that would scare us into submission. Getting yelled at was no big deal, but getting sent out into the hall was a serious penalty. You were never exactly sure how it would turn out. If you were lucky, you'd spend a few peaceful minutes alone in the hall. But if the school principal, Sr. Peggy, you'd have a lot of explaining to do.

We were feeling quite brave this particular day, however, and chose to simply disregard our teacher's idle threat. Although Mrs. Frag had momentarily stopped the tapping, her troubles were far from over.

Next we resorted to another old favorite passed down from generation to generation—The Coughing Game. One person would cough, another would sneeze, and yet another would clear his or her throat. This irritating and disrupting cycle would continue repeatedly until the teacher could stand no more. Mrs. Frag showed a lot of fortitude by lasting through two whole rounds before losing her cool.

"If I hear one more sneeze or cough, or any noise, for that matter, I'm going to give you tomorrow's quiz *today!* Is that clear?" Yeah, right. Did she actually think she could bluff us? We weren't finished yet—not by a long shot.

Now it was time for The Humming Game. This tricky game required a little bit of acting. The trick was to quietly hum while looking around as if the sound was coming from someone else. Since I was a renowned expert at the art of covert humming, I decided to begin the game. Others soon joined in the fun.

Give us the quiz today? Ha! I'd just like to see her try.

Moments later we were taking the quiz. Now, if I had been keeping up with my reading, I'm sure I would have had no problem with the ten true or false questions. But since I hadn't even looked at the book in a couple of weeks, I knew I was in deep trouble. These little quizzes weren't big enough to make or break your grade, but then again I couldn't afford to completely bomb one either. This situation called for drastic measures.

Looking over at Jon in the next row, I could see he too was in no way prepared for this quiz. No words were spoken; I could

just tell by the panicked look in his eyes. Without uttering a word, we both knew what we had to do. We'd have to resort to one of the oldest tricks in the book.

Whenever she gave us a quiz, Mrs. Frag would always have us correct the test of the student sitting in the next row. Knowing this, all we had to do was answer each question with something that looked a little bit like a "T" and a little bit like an "F". Then when it came time to correct each other's quiz, we would simply complete the partial letter and make it into a "T" or "F" as needed. It was risky, but Jon and I both knew we had no other choice.

Mrs. Frag quickly read aloud the ten true or false questions, and within minutes we were finished. I was pretty confident with half of my answers. The rest I left up to Jon to fix during the checking phase.

"All right, exchange quizzes with the person next to you." Mrs. Frag gave us our directions and waited as we swapped papers. "Everyone ready?" she asked. Jon and I smiled at each other. Everything seemed to be falling into place. "Number one—true...number two—false..."

As Mrs. Frag went through the test, Jon and I adjusted each other's answers accordingly. It was beautiful. True teamwork in action. Once again we had found a way to outsmart the teacher.

"Val and Jonathan!" Unfortunately, our master plan wasn't as foolproof as we thought. We forgot to keep an eye on Mrs. Frag and didn't realize that she had sneakily made her way behind us. "Unless you both want to fail this class, you better stop cheating right now!"

It was an embarrassing moment, but it could have turned out much worse. Luckily, it was just one little ten-point quiz.

But in the dog-eat-dog world of elementary school,
sometimes you just had to cut your losses and accept defeat.

Hunger Pangs

Lunchtime at Saints Peter and Paul was a unique experience. Heck, just getting down to the cafeteria was a challenge. Approximately two hundred hungry, hyperactive kids had to be herded all the way down to the cafeteria on the first floor. And it was up to the teachers to escort this crazed mob in an orderly fashion. Therefore, they had us follow a strict set of rules.

After going to our lockers for our lunches, we would first form a single-file line at the door. We then had to fall completely silent. Only then would the teacher begin to lead us down to the cafeteria. Sometimes, if we took too long to shut up, the teacher would allow another class to go ahead of us. This was torturous. Nothing was more painful than watching the other kids laugh and make faces at you as they walked by. You never wanted to be the last to get to lunch. It was paramount that you get there as early as possible so that you'd have first crack at the prime seats way in the back. Otherwise, you'd be forced to sit up front with

the dorks, nerds, and other dregs of S.S.P.P. society.

Once you were on your way downstairs, there was no guarantee that you were home free, either. Complete silence had to be maintained the entire way down to the lunchroom. If not, the teacher would turn the class around and take you all the way back upstairs. But eventually, if everyone in your class could keep their trap shut for a few minutes, you would finally reach the Promised Land.

Cradle of chaos and tamer of wild hunger, the cafeteria was a welcome refuge for the restless and weary. It was a brief sanctuary from the boredom of classes and a refueling point for the remainder of the day.

The room itself had been used as the Parish church years before. It was a large rectangular space with thick block pillars scattered about and a green and black checkerboard of industrial tile on the floor. Towards the front, the old altar and podium still remained as the focal point of the room. Religious statues hung on the front wall – Jesus on the Crucifix to the left and Mother Mary on the right – ever-present reminders of our Catholic faith.

If you chose to buy your lunch, you'd have to wait in a long line that sometimes stretched out the door. On the days they served pizza burgers – by far the most popular lunch – the line could get so long that by the time you got your food you would only have a few minutes or so to choke it down. At the front of the line, Mrs. Mucha would be waiting to take your money. Behind her on the wall were paintings of various food-inspired mascots, some named after members of the S.S.P.P. family: Monsignor Meatball, Paul Pea, Sister Celery, and so on.

If you brown-bagged it, however, you could buy your milk, find a seat, and commence stuffing your face. The milk was sold

at a little outpost-type place right when you walked in. Back then, a half pint was just a quarter, and you could either pay for it on the spot or sign for it by putting your name in the spiral notebook. Then, at the end of the month, they'd send the bill home to your folks. I usually brought my lunch but rarely remembered to bring a quarter; so most of the time I'd just sign for it. Occasionally I'd sign my own name, but most of the time I would sign Eric Figler's name instead. Most of my friends would do the same thing. It was always great at the end of the month when Eric's parents would get his milk bill and be shocked at how much he owed. Little did they know they were supplying half of the class with its daily dose of calcium.

Many exciting stories had come out of the lunch period. At no other time in the day was there more of an opportunity for mischief, and I guess you could say we took full advantage of the moment.

There was the famous Twinkie Incident of '84 that ended with a yellow snack cake stuck on the face of the statue of Jesus. On a dare, one of the more rambunctious students took a bite out of a Twinkie and chucked it towards the garbage cans. His throw was off target, however, and the cake flew over the cans and landed right smack on Our Lord and Savior's face. Unfortunately for the culprit, Sr. Peggy had seen the whole thing and dragged him off to her office by his ear. He was never seen or heard from again.

Then there was the infamous Condom Caper of '87, which involved some milk, a prophylactic, and several very upset girls. In this case, another one of the school's more exemplary students had decided it would be a good idea to bring some condoms into school and put them on other kids' sandwiches. He even filled

one up with milk, poked a hole in the end, and ran around spraying girls as they screamed in terror. The latex-wielding miscreant ended up staying after school for a month washing chalkboards. I don't know if he actually thought he wouldn't get caught or whether he just didn't think? There seemed to be a lot of kids like that at S.S.P.P.

And who could forget the time when that fat kid broke the milk-chugging record? I don't remember his name, but I do remember that he was about five times my size. For some reason he had chosen to show off his consumptive prowess by downing twelve milks, one after the other. It was both astounding and disgusting. Unfortunately his milk-chugging title was revoked later on in fifth period, when he regurgitated all twelve.

Back in the fourth grade the lunch period had been the site of my first and only fight. We had just returned from Christmas vacation and every kid had brought in one of his favorite new toys for Show and Tell. I had brought in my brand-new Transformer, Optimus Prime, leader of the benevolent Autobots, who protected mankind from the evil Decepticons. Optimus Prime had the incredible ability to transform from a robot into a tractor-trailer. It would always take me a good twenty minutes or so to perform this transformation, but it was still impressive, nonetheless. Needless to say, I was the envy of every kid in school, and I took my prized possession wherever I went, including the cafeteria.

As I ate my lunch on that fateful day, I set the robot on the table to guard my bag of Oreos. Then, as I went to take a drink of milk, Rob, who was sitting next to me, grabbed the toy and began to tinker with it.

“Hey, how does this thing work, anyway?” he asked, as he

twisted and forced the robot's parts in awkward directions. Horror washed over me as I saw my favorite toy being handled so carelessly. I tried to stop him, but before I could get the words out, I heard a loud crack and saw one of Optimus Prime's parts drop to the floor.

"OH NO!" I said, "You broke it, you idiot!" I snatched the damaged robot from Rob's hands.

"Chill out," he said. "It's fine. It's not broken." I examined the toy carefully and could see that he was right. One of the detachable parts had just come loose and fallen off. But such careless treatment of my property could not go unpunished. The idea of having my favorite Christmas present nearly destroyed right before my eyes had stirred within me a primitive anger.

So, grabbing the collar of Rob's shirt, I pulled him close. Then, staring him directly in the eyes I gave him a stern warning: "Keep your hands off my robot...GOT IT?!" It was a bold statement but one that had to be said in the wake of such carelessness.

Rob was unmoved. "Get your hands off of me!" he said, slapping my hand away from his neck. I retaliated by pushing him back in his chair. He quickly responded by nearly knocking me out of my chair with a powerful blow to the chest. Seconds later, we were at each other's throats.

As fate would have it, Sr. Peggy turned the corner at that exact moment while leading a group of visiting nuns on a tour of the school. As you can imagine, she was less than pleased. She swooped in like an eagle, grabbed each of us by the ear, and dragged us out into the hallway.

"What's going on here!?" she demanded.

Rob and I met each other's eyes. We both understood the

seriousness of the situation. “Uh...nothing,” said Rob.

I followed suit. “Yeah, Sr. Peggy...we were just foolin’ around.” But I’m sure she knew we were lying. It was common knowledge that she could read minds. It was just one of her many mysterious powers.

Luckily for us Sr. Peggy was too busy at the moment to drag us up to her office. Instead, we only had to endure a few moments of ear-splitting vocal discipline before we were allowed to return to our table. We knew how close we had come to come to complete annihilation.

For the rest of the lunch period, we sat quietly and ate our lunches, just happy to be alive.

Saving Our Souls

Religion was the one subject that separated us from the kids down the street at the public school. It was a serious subject for a bunch of kids who could rarely be serious about anything. Of course, we were all practicing Catholics. But in the complicated world of the eighth grade, to openly discuss your personal religious beliefs was strictly taboo.

Unfortunately, the way Sr. Margie chose to conduct religion class was in direct conflict with this rule. For one, she liked to have us sit in a circle around the room so we could have a face-to-face discussion. This circular setup was conducive to open conversation, but it also increased your self-consciousness. Sr. Margie didn't understand the delicacy of this subject, however, and was only concerned with saving our souls.

Not being one to beat around the bush, she would always kickoff this uncomfortable class with a bang.

“Okay...first of all, do any of you have anything that's been

bothering you or that you've been thinking about lately that you might want to get off of your chest?" As if any of us would actually be willing to divulge such sensitive information in front of the entire class.

"I have something to say, Sr. Margie." Apparently Mary Margaret was game. "I hate to admit it," she said, "but I fell asleep watching "The Ten Commandments" on TV the other night, and I didn't get a chance to say my Rosary." A round of gasps filled the room, followed by a round of giggling.

"Oh that's nothing to be ashamed of," replied Sr. Margie. "It's not a sin to be tired. I'm sure God's glad that you say the Rosary at all."

As you've probably figured out, Mary Margaret wasn't your average 13-year-old. She didn't wear makeup, she wasn't concerned with the latest fashions, and the only piece of jewelry she owned was a silver crucifix she got for her First Holy Communion. Mary Margaret focused all her energy on being as holy as possible. She had been that way as long as I can remember, and we were all certain that she would become a nun some day. She wasn't at all ashamed to pray in public, and she even sang aloud in church. Compared to the rest of us, she was a saint.

Mary Margaret was the only one who was willing to play along with Sr. Margie. So, as an uncomfortable silence filled the room, Sr. Margie decided to try something new. "All right," she said, "if no one else has anything they would like to talk about, let's move on. I have a little activity I'd like us to try today." Oh joy. An activity. Could she possibly make this situation any more uncomfortable? "Let's go around the room, and I'd like every person to say something nice about every other student."

Well, Sr. Margie had certainly outdone herself this time. She had managed to take an already awkward situation and make it much, much worse. My mind immediately focused on Eric Figler. How could I say something nice about my fiercest of enemies? He's a great guy to make fun of? He's easy to antagonize? Give me a break. Besides, I'm sure he had a whole list of nice things to say about me as well. But I knew what Sr. Margie was trying to do. She used to have a plaque on her desk that read "Kill your enemies with kindness." This little nice-fest wasn't just some spur-of-the-moment idea. She had been planning this activity for a while now. She was well aware of all cliques and groups in the eighth grade. This "nice" activity was just an attempt to teach us a lesson. She thought if we went around the room and focused only on each person's good qualities, it would break down the barriers between us. Fat chance.

One by one each kid had his or her moment in the spotlight to receive compliments from the other students. As you can probably imagine, the "nice" things we came up with weren't all that sincere. For the most part, it was all a big joke. When it was Eric's turn, we just blurted out a bunch of generalities.

"He's a nice guy. Really nice."

"He has nice hair."

"He's really smart. And nice."

"He has nice clothes."

"He's nice, and he's good at sports." Yep, it was just one big nice-o-rama. I was anxious to see what Eric was going to come up with to say about me. Finally, it was the moment of truth.

"Val is...um...funny," he said. "Yeah...he's really funny." Funny? What did he mean by that? He had never laughed at any

of my jokes before. Then again, they were usually aimed at him. Oh well. It was all a bunch of baloney anyway.

One by one we all got our chance to say something polite about each other. It was all so touching. A real puke-fest.

Sr. Margie probably thought she had broken down some barriers, but we weren't buying into it. We preferred belittling one another at every turn. It's what we did best.

Exercising Demons

For the first semester of my eighth year at Sts. Peter & Paul, Gym class was led by Ms. Cafferty, a kind, quiet, soft-spoken woman. In other words, a she was real pushover. The poor woman didn't have a bone of authoritative power in her body and therefore got little respect. Because of this, every class was chaos as she tried in vain to gain some control.

Ms. Cafferty's problem was that she always had some juvenile activity planned for us, like as Duck-Duck-Goose, Hopscotch, or relay races. These were just fine for kids in first, second, or third grade. But we were older and more mature. We needed something a little more challenging to satisfy our competitive tendencies.

"Good afternoon, everyone," she'd say, as we emerged from the locker room. "I thought that today we could have some relay races. Could someone please go and get the cones and scooters out of the storeroom?" Of course, we would simply ignore her

and dash into the storeroom to grab hockey sticks, basketballs, or whatever else we felt like playing with. It was all very unorganized and out of control, with each person doing his or her own thing. Helpless, Ms. Cafferty would usually just get out of the way and wait for class to end.

Ms. Cafferty abruptly left S.S.P.P. halfway through the year. It was rumored she walked into Sr. Peggy's office, had a nervous breakdown, and quit on the spot. We all thought it was hilarious that we had finally gotten a teacher to quit, and we openly boasted about it. None of us felt a bit of remorse whatsoever. No teacher was gonna push us around.

A few weeks later, Mrs. Roberts became S.S.P.P.'s new physical educator. Unlike her passive predecessor, Mrs. Roberts was a true authoritarian. She was more like a drill sergeant than a gym teacher. She was loud, large, and she wasn't about to put up with any of our crap.

Her first day on the job, Mrs. Roberts let us know who was in charge. "All right!" she said. "Listen up! When I call out your name, come over to the chin-up bar. Today we are starting the President's Physical Fitness Test, and I'm going to count how many chin-ups you can do in a minute. The rest of you divide up into two teams and play dodgeball." And with a blast of her silver whistle, we were off!

The President's Physical Fitness Test was meant to encourage fitness through a series of physical tests and challenges. It was a good idea, in theory. In reality, all it did was showcase your lack of athleticism in front of a captive audience of your peers.

The first of these grueling and embarrassing tasks was the chin-up test. This was more than a test, however. In the eighth

grade, strength was a measure of your manhood. Nobody understood this better than my nemesis, Eric Figler. Eric enjoyed nothing more than bragging about his superior strength. Being a year older than most of the other kids, he had a physical advantage over many of us. I, on the other hand, being just under five feet tall and maybe ninety pounds, soaking wet, had to look for alternative ways to further my social standing.

So, as the dodgeball game got underway, my devious mind went to work. "Hey guys, come here for a second." I huddled up with my friends in order to plan our attack. "Look, forget everyone else for now and just go after Eric, okay?" Then, breaking the huddle, we took our positions and prepared for battle.

With another blast from Mrs. Robert's whistle, the dodgeball war was underway. Eric stood on the other side of the court, completely unaware of the conspiracy against him. As the first shots were fired, my team quickly gained possession of all the balls. Immediately, all sights focused in on Eric. He was taken out by two direct hits, one to the head and one to the stomach, the second one knocking him hard to the floor.

"See ya later, Eric!" I yelled, as he scowled back at me. Picking himself up off the floor, he slowly made his way over to the bleachers.

While the game continued, one by one we were called over to the chin-up bar. The guys had to do at least ten chin-ups in a minute. The girls, however, just had to hang there without letting go for the same amount of time. I never thought this was quite fair, considering some of the girls were probably as strong as me, maybe even stronger. Of course, when it was my turn, I only managed to do seven before my scrawny arms gave in.

“Eric, let's go!” said Mrs. Roberts. “It's your turn on the bar!” As Eric made his way over to the bar, I got back into the dodgeball game. I looked around at my teammates, and I knew we were all on the same page.

My friend Nate was already a step ahead of me.

“Hey, let's hit Eric while he's doing his chin-ups,” he said. Some kids just seem to have a knack for finding trouble. That was Nate. Whenever there was trouble, it was a safe bet that, when the smoke cleared, Nate would be right smack in the middle of it.

Back in the fifth grade our homeroom teacher was Mrs. Gomery. At one point during the year, pens and pencils were mysteriously disappearing from kids' desks and backpacks in her room. I'm not talking about just one or two here; I'm talking about dozens of pens and pencils simply vanishing without a trace. Mrs. Gomery wasn't amused. As the number of missing writing instruments grew into the hundreds, she decided to launch an intense investigation. First, she went around the room checking each of our desks. Although this initial search turned up empty, she did find several other contraband items including one issue of *Playboy*, three M-80 firecrackers, and 17 super-bouncy balls.

Next Mrs. Gomery expanded her search, going from locker to locker inspecting our pencil cases and book bags for any sign of the stolen items. This invasion of privacy may sound a little questionable nowadays, but back then it was normal procedure. Sts. Peter & Paul was like a separate state with its own set of laws, not unlike the Vatican. There was no such thing as privacy. Your business was everybody's business.

The locker search was looking like another wild goose chase.

Then Mrs. Gomery reached Nate's locker. She had barely opened the door when pens began to fall to the floor. As she opened the locker completely, she found Nate's book bag bursting with pens and pencils. The bag was packed so tightly it looked as if it could explode at any moment, sending a wave of plastic and wooden shrapnel in all directions. When Mrs. Gomery asked Nate for an explanation, he just stood there and shrugged, trying hard to hold back a smile. The next thing we knew, Nate was off to the principal's office—a place he was quite familiar with.

As Eric easily pulled himself up to the chin-up bar again and again, Nate and I grabbed the dodgeballs and took careful aim. Then, simultaneously, we fired our foam projectiles at our target and watched as they soared through the gymnasium air.

Unfortunately, Nate's ball veered way off course as it began its rapid descent. We watched in horror as the ball missed Eric completely and struck Mrs. Roberts directly in the head. The force of the collision caused her to drop her clipboard and fall back against the concrete wall. To make matters worse, my shot landed just close enough to Eric to draw his suspicions. Clearly dazed, Mrs. Roberts attempted to regain her composure as she ordered us into the locker room to get changed. Nate, however, had to remain until he could explain the freakish accident.

Inside the locker room, everyone laughed about what had just happened. Well, *almost* everyone. As I finished tying my shoe, I turned to find Eric towering over me.

“Hey! Val!” he barked. “You think that was funny? Throwing those balls at me?”

I tried to remain calm as I scrambled for a believable explanation. “What are you talkin' about, Eric? I wasn't tryin' to hit you. I was aiming for Mrs. Roberts. Duh!” I hoped he would

buy my explanation long enough for me to make a hasty exit from the locker room. As my heart raced in my chest, I casually grabbed my backpack and started to walk out. But as I attempted to leave, Eric blocked the doorway.

"You're not goin' anywhere!" he said.

I racked my brain to think of a way out. *I'll just duck down and dart under his arm*, I thought. That attempt failed, however, as I found Eric's knee embedded in my chest. For a moment, as I stood bent over, clutching my chest, I thought my luck had finally run out.

"Get out of the way, Eric!" Jon's voice broke the silence as he grabbed my arm, easily pushed Eric aside, and safely escorted me out of the locker room. Eric, recognizing he had been out-muscled, decided not to take any retaliatory action. Jon was one of the few boys in the class who could match up to Eric, physically, so he was a good person to have on my side. And since he couldn't stand Eric either, he was more than happy to step in when I needed a little assistance.

This was nothing new, however. Many a time I had been cornered by an angry Eric, only to somehow escape unscathed. Once again it looked as if I had dodged another bullet.

Of course, as we made our way back to class, I made sure that Jon was following close behind, just in case.

Sweet Freedom

Each day, as the final bell signaled the end of classes, our weary hearts would fill with joy. In an instant, our tired bodies were rejuvenated as we were freed from captivity. Returning to our homeroom, we would wait with great anticipation for our busses to arrive. These were always an anxious few minutes. We were so close to freedom we could taste it.

Finally, the loudspeaker would begin to crackle with activity, and Mrs. Mucha would announce the latest arrival. "Attention! Attention please! Bus 13! Bus 13!"

Then, like a pack of runners hearing the blast of the starter's pistol, we would grab our book bags and take off down the hallway. We weren't allowed to run, of course, so we had to slow down as we passed each classroom and then speed up in the sections between. Reaching the end of the hall, we would blast through the doors and rumble down the steps like a herd of wildebeests. You had no choice but to run with the pack. Lag

behind and you could get crushed in the stampede. Our pace would slow only when we were within view of Sr. Peggy, who was always waiting for us near the front door.

“Good night,” she’d say as we exited the building. “Be careful. Watch your step.” Sr. Peggy, who rarely showed emotion, always had a pleasant air about her as we left for the day. She was probably happy to get us out of her hair and send us back to our parents.

Walking out of school I always felt like a newly paroled prisoner, who, after years of incarceration, has gained a newfound appreciation for the outside world. It was wonderful. The same dirty yellow bus I had dreaded seeing in the morning was now a golden chariot waiting to whisk me away to paradise. When I finally made it to my seat in the back of the bus, I’d plop down and let out a sigh of relief. There was nothing better than knowing the school day was officially over.

The prime seats on the bus were in the back. Usually the oldest kids would claim the last row and everyone else would fight to get as close to the back as possible. The further back you sat, the cooler you were. That’s just how it was. Plus, the farther away you were from the bus driver, the better. Years of driving a bunch of screaming, paper-throwing animals to and from school had made him into a volatile and unpredictable person. He was like a volcano, lying dormant for years, slowly building up pressure with every squeak of the bus door. Everyone knew that whenever that time bomb went off, and it occasionally it did, it was in your best interest to be hidden behind as many rows of green vinyl seats as possible. When the bus driver got angry, no one was safe. He wasn’t concerned with trivial details like who did what or why. If someone was screwing around, and you just

happened to be nearby, you could get into trouble, too, just for being in the general vicinity. And getting in trouble with the bus driver was serious business. One false move and both your parents and Sr. Peggy would be receiving a discipline report. Then you'd be in trouble on two fronts.

Riding the bus to school was a completely different experience than riding it home after a long day of classes. On the way to school we were usually too tired and depressed to fool around. It was always a quiet and somber ride. I usually passed the time listening to my Walkman or trying to catch a couple minutes of shut-eye, anything to savor a few final moments of freedom.

The ride home, however, was a zoo on wheels. All the energy we had built up during the day was unleashed the minute we got on board. Kids would holler to each other from opposite ends of the bus. Fights would break out. The occasional paper airplane would zip past your head, barely missing your eye. And every once in a while you would find some random kid crawling around under the seats on the greasy bus floor.

Sometimes, when we'd get a little too rowdy, the driver would threaten us. "I'll turn this bus around right now!" he'd say, glaring back at us through the large rearview mirror. This would calm us, momentarily. Minutes later we'd revert right back to our normal hijinks.

On the days when we felt really daring, like the last day of school, we would do something we called Seat-Surfing. Keeping one eye on the bus driver, you'd straddle two of the tall green seats and remain standing as long as you could. The game would end only when the bus driver saw you in his overhead mirror or when the bus hit a pothole and send you falling back

to the seat like a surfer wiping out in the curl.

The ride home was always a lot of fun, but it was nice to be one of the first kids dropped off. After all, the sooner you got dropped off, the sooner you could start playing. Luckily, my stop was the first on the route. As the doors of the bus squeaked to a close, my sisters and I would head home, making our way through a series of backyards and alleyways. Most people didn't mind us cutting through their yard as long as we stayed off of their petunias. You just had to make sure you knew where all the killer dogs lived, so that you could avoid any canine confrontations.

Soon we'd see our familiar red-brick ranch house at the end of First Street. Walking down the private drive, we would always pass our neighbor, Mr. Lewchenko, sitting on his front porch smoking a pipe.

"Learn anything today?" he'd say.

"Not really, Mr. Lewchenko!" we'd reply, his mouth dropping open in feigned surprise.

Then, when we finally got home and stepped into the kitchen, my mom would ask a similar question: "So, how was school today?"

"Fine," I'd mumble, making a b-line to my bedroom. I always hated that question. It's like asking someone how their root canal went. How was school? It was awful. It was always awful. I had just wasted half the day diagramming sentences and doing long division. The last thing I wanted to do was recall every agonizing detail for my mother.

Besides, I only had about six more hours until bedtime, when the whole process would start over again. And I wasn't about to waste a single moment.

Fine Dining

After surviving an excruciating day of classes, I always looked forward to sitting down to a delicious home-cooked meal. By the time I'd get home, the strange, meat-like substance they served at lunch in the cafeteria had already been digested, and my stomach would be ready for a refill. Most of the time, I was okay with my mother's dinner selections. Sometimes, however, she would surprise me with something less than delectable.

"Hey Ma! What's fer dinner?"

"Meatloaf and scalloped potatoes," she'd reply, pulling the steaming food from the oven. And with those four little words, my enormous appetite would vanish. Meatloaf. Ugh. I couldn't stand meatloaf. Who came up with the brilliant idea to make a log of meat and call it dinner? And scalloped potatoes—what sick-minded individual was responsible for this revolting

creation? I never quite understood why someone would purposely make meatloaf and scalloped potatoes when it would be much easier to toss a couple pizzas in the oven. Why take so much time to make something that tasted so awful?

Regardless of how much I hated the food, I knew I would have to stuff it all down before I'd be allowed to do anything else. If I wanted to go outside and play, I would somehow have to find a way to make the food on my plate disappear. And I couldn't feed it to my dog, considering she wasn't much bigger than the common rat. Somehow I would have to find a way to ingest all of this so-called food, no matter how hard my body tried to kick it back out.

One solution was to wash it all down with plenty of liquids. When done correctly, I could usually eat my entire dinner without tasting a single bite. The trick was to have a drink in the one hand and your fork or spoon in the other. Then, the moment the food hit your tongue, you'd have to immediately follow it with a drink. The idea was to overpower and eliminate the disgusting taste, as if you were dousing a fire with a bucket of water. Throughout the course of dinner, I could easily down about ten cups of water, Kool-Aid, or milk—depending on the food and the level of nastiness.

But this technique didn't always work. Sometimes all the grape Kool-Aid in the world couldn't overpower the flavor of the meal. In these cases, dinner could easily become a marathon-type event, lasting well into the evening.

My family's dinnertime ritual was pretty much the same every day. My sisters and I would take our seats around the dining room table and wait as my mom put the finishing touches on the meal. Then, right around 5 o'clock, my father would pull

into the garage as our little dog yipped away to announce his arrival. As soon as Dad set down his briefcase and took his seat, my mother would bring the food to the table, and dinner would officially commence.

“Oh, I almost forgot—” she’d say, “the green beans!” Oh no! The dreaded trifecta—meatloaf, scalloped potatoes, and green beans! In the history of dinner, there had never been a more repulsive offering. I despised green beans. I don't know why, considering how love them now. But back then I couldn't even be in the same room with a green bean without gagging.

I actually recall the first time my mom gave me green beans for dinner. I must have been about five or six years old. I remember asking her to identify the strange green objects on my plate, as I pointed at them with my fork, careful not to get too close.

“Just eat them,” she said. She promised me I would like them, that they were very good, and that I “wouldn't even taste them.” I always thought this a strange rationalization. First of all, I could very well taste them and they were revolting. Secondly, how could something be delicious and at the same time have no taste? My mom also mentioned something about them having a nice texture, which only confused me further. Who the heck cared about texture? I wanted something that tasted good. I could care less what it felt like on my tongue.

Nevertheless, my mother is the kind of person who likes almost anything, and I guess she wanted us to be like her. I know now that she was just trying to be a good mother and make sure that I ate my vegetables. But that first time I must have sat there for at least three hours until she finally gave in and sent me to my room.

Every time my mother served green beans I'd wrack my brain for a way to get out of eating them. But in the end, I knew it was hopeless. As the sun would drift towards the horizon, I knew I'd just have to hold my nose and shove the beans in. I had no other choice. With the great outdoors beckoning me to come out and play, I couldn't let a little vegetable keep me from my appointed rounds with my friends. So one by one I'd choke them down, gagging and nearly hurling with every bite. I'd go through almost an entire glass of Kool-Aid for each bean, which was usually somewhere between five and seven.

Next, I'd move on to the meatloaf. First I'd dump a half a bottle of Heinz on my plate and then cover the meat itself with even more. Then I'd coat each bite with a layer of ketchup. This portion of the meal would require an additional glass or three of Kool-Aid.

Finally, I'd move on to the scalloped potatoes. By then, everyone else had already finished, and I'd be the only one left at the table. The potatoes were cold and hard by this point, making them even more unpalatable. So, as with the meatloaf, I'd douse them with ketchup before attempting to consume them. It usually took me at least an hour to finish my meal.

"Here you go, Mom," I'd say, handing her my empty plate as she stood at the sink washing dishes. I was always so happy to be safe from green beans, meatloaf, and scalloped potatoes for another month or so.

Hopefully the next day's dinner wouldn't be left-overs.

A Change of Tune

Once again it was time for music class, and my fellow classmates and I were dreading the next 40 minutes. What embarrassing songs did Mrs. Peterson have in store for us today? “*Loverly*,” her mind-numbing musical selection from the previous class, had been stuck in my brain like a tick for the last 24 hours, and I was beginning to go crazy. I could only imagine what horrors she had in store for us today.

As Mrs. Peterson entered the room and closed the door, we quieted down and took our seats. Once again we were prepared to stay strong, hold our ground, and not sing a single note. She may have been the irresistible force, but we were the immovable objects. With such opposing factions, each determined to stand firm, you could be sure that things were about to get ugly.

“Good morning class,” said Mrs. Peterson. “Today I was thinking we could try something a little different.”

Oh, great. Whenever the teacher said that she was going to

“try something a little different,” it always turned out to be something worse than usual. Even though we hated the standard songs, at least we always knew what to expect. We were completely comfortable with the status quo: Mrs. Peterson teaching us stupid songs from her favorite musicals, and us staunchly refusing to sing them. It was a good system in which both sides understood their part. Any deviance from the norm was unwelcome.

As we wriggled apprehensively in our seats, Mrs. Peterson walked over to her desk and pulled a black guitar case out from behind it. She wasn't lying — this really was something different. I didn't even know she could play the guitar. Come to think about it, I didn't know much of anything about Mrs. Peterson. This was shocking. Could she really play an instrument that was so — dare I say — cool? We were caught completely off guard. Quiet chatter rolled across the room as Mrs. Peterson pulled the guitar from the case and began to tune it.

Throughout the years we had become accustomed to Mrs. Peterson leading us in song with the help of her dusty old upright piano. Its ancient wires hadn't been tuned in years and, consequently, it sounded like one of those clanky old Wild West saloon pianos. I have to admit, it was refreshing to hear the silky tones of the guitar as she strummed a few practice chords. Anything was better than the sound of that dreary old piano.

We were still a little uneasy, however. A guitar was definitely an interesting switch from the norm; but then again, change wasn't always a good thing. We always felt more comfortable when we knew what was coming. That way we could prepare a solid course of action or, in our case, non-action. So although we were intrigued, we still had absolutely no

intention of participating.

Setting her guitar down, Mrs. Peterson walked over to her desk and picked up a stack of paper. "Here are some new songs I'd like you all to learn," she said. "I think that if you just give them a chance, we can really have a lot of fun."

Great. What prehistoric tunes was she going to try to get us to sing now? As I scanned the titles, I was pleasantly surprised to find a whole batch of new songs with titles like "I'm Being Eaten," "Groundhog," and "Charlie and the MTA." They definitely sounded different from our normal assortment, and they sure didn't sound as if they came from some stupid musical. Of course I was still a little hesitant. The titles still sounded rather childish for my taste. I'll give it to Mrs. Peterson, it was nice attempt at livening things up. But there was still no way she was going to get us to sing. She couldn't fool us. We were way too smart to fall for one of her sneaky tricks.

"Okay everyone," she said, "let's try 'I'm Being Eaten.' A one and a two and a..."

As Mrs. Peterson started to play, I was sure she would be greeted with a roomful of silence. But within the first few strums of her guitar, a strange, alien sound began to fill the room. It was a sound I had not heard in years: the sound of my classmates singing.

Appalled, I scanned the room to identify the cowardly individuals who had given in so easily. Like always, Mary Margaret and Nancy Featherton were singing aloud without apprehension. But I was stunned to see several others singing as well, as if it were no big deal! It actually looked as if they were *enjoying* themselves.

I turned to my friend Joe for an explanation.

"Hey..." I whispered. "What that heck's going on?"

"They're singin', I guess."

"Duh. I can see that. But why?"

"How should I know?" he said. "Let'em make fools of themselves if they want."

Joe never sang in class either. Like most of the guys, he thought it was just a little too feminine. He was the only one of my friends to have grown up on a farm. Actually, his was a goat farm, which made him even more unique. While I was at home playing video games on my Atari 2600, he was out milking goats, bailing hay, or digging postholes. I guess you could say, for a boy, he was a real man's man. Surely he wouldn't give in and start singing.

"What do you think we should do?" Joe asked. "Are you gonna sing?"

"What?" I replied. "Are you kidding me? No way! That's just what she wants." I couldn't believe what I was hearing. What the heck was going on here? Was Joe actually considering giving in?

This was exactly what Mrs. Peterson wanted. Couldn't they see this whole guitar thing was just an elaborate ruse—a trick to get us to sing?

As the song continued, however, I began to catch some of the crazy lyrics. It was actually a pretty funny song about some dude who is slowly being devoured by a gigantic snake, and there's nothing he can do about it. As the song goes on, the snake swallows him little by little, until he's finally swallowed up whole. Maybe it was kind of childish, but then again, anything was better than "Lovely."

Reluctantly, I joined in with the others, at first just quietly

mumbling the words. But pretty soon I found myself singing louder and louder, laughing out loud as I went.

For the remainder of the class, we went from song to song, singing a bevy of ridiculous tunes: one about some guy named Zaccheus who climbed a Sycamore tree; another one about fat groundhogs sitting on logs; and still another about some guy named Charlie who got stuck on the subway because he didn't have the correct change to get off. They were all generally silly and didn't make much sense, but—and I hate to admit this—we were actually having a great time.

As class came to an end, Mrs. Peterson was smiling from ear to ear as she placed her guitar back in its case. I'm sure she was happy that for once class hadn't been a struggle. It was the first time in a long time that she didn't have to spend the entire 40 minutes yelling at us. The funny thing was, we were glad she was happy. It made us feel good.

Heck, we had to take it easy on them every once in a while.

The Way the Ball Bounces

English class in the sixth grade was probably the most excruciating class of my entire academic experience. It was taught by Sr. Margaret, a grumpy, lumpy, temperamental old woman who resembled a Shar-Pei and whose entire wardrobe consisted of nothing but old-ladyish nightgowns. Every class always followed the same pattern: Sr. Margaret would have an agenda, and we'd throw things completely off course by misbehaving. Then she'd become irate, throw hissy fits, and toss kids out into the hallway by the dozens.

She brought this chaos on herself, of course, by always having us do something mind-numbingly boring.

"Good morning children," Sr. Margaret would say. "Would you open your books to Chapter 5, please?"

Oh God, I'd think to myself. What new horrors would be

unveiled in Chapter 5?

"Today," she'd continue, "we're going to diagram some sentences."

And with this, a group moan would roll across the classroom.

"Now, children! That's just about enough of that!" Sr. Margaret's brow would wrinkle further, and her face would flush with anger. "I don't want to hear anymore moaning or complaining. Now, I want the first two rows at the board. Let's go!"

As the unfortunate students arrived at the board, Sr. Margaret would read a sentence aloud and instruct them to diagram it. Her level of frustration would steadily rise as she walked along the chalkboard inspecting each student's work.

"No no, Charles!" she'd say. "*Pretty* is an adjective, not a verb! Use your brain, for once." Her outbursts would grow louder as she made her way from person to person, finding one mistake after another. "No—not that way, Becky! It goes subject, verb, and *then* the object. You should know that by now!"

On one particular occasion, as I was enjoying watching my classmates get filleted at the board, I noticed a fiendish look in Megan's eyes. It was obvious that there were devious plans afoot.

Megan was one of the more mischievous girls at S.S.P.P. and the de facto leader of the Bad Girls' Clique. Megan was always causing trouble. She was infamous for making fun of the teacher when her back was turned, and she never seemed to worry about getting caught. She loved to push the envelope to see just how much she could get away with.

With Sr. Margaret's attention diverted at the blackboard,

Megan pulled a super-bouncy ball from her pocket. Simultaneously, about five other students did the same. Super-bouncy balls—then just five cents at your local supermarket—were the latest fad at our school and very effective at turning classroom boredom into classroom mayhem. One of the more popular, and risky, class-time games was to take your super-bouncy ball and toss it towards the chalkboard when the teacher wasn't looking. If all went well, the ball would ricochet off the board, bounce once off of the floor and return to the hand of the thrower. At least, that's how it was supposed to go. A super-bouncy ball, however, is unpredictable, and you're never quite sure which way it will bounce once it leaves your hand. Sometimes it will accelerate and take off unexpectedly in another direction. This inherent unpredictability made catching one rather tricky.

Another potential problem with super-bouncy balls was the noise. The tiny rubber balls made a noticeable *thump* as they made contact with the black slate of the chalkboard. Therefore, you had to time your throw perfectly to hit the board only when the teacher was talking, otherwise the sound would arouse her suspicions. It was a risky game, but if it made class even just a little more bearable, it was a chance we were willing to take.

Throwing caution to the wind, Megan wound up and threw her ball towards the board. *Thump!* The tiny ball struck the chalkboard and reversed direction, bouncing once off the floor before returning to her hand as if connected by a string. Perfect execution! Of course, Sr. Margaret was immediately alarmed.

"What was that noise?" she said, whipping her head around to face the class. Of course, we had no idea what she was talking about. We were busy diagramming sentences. The first round of

the super-bouncy ball game had gone off without a hitch.

Fred was the next brave contestant. The tension in the room was tangible as he reached into his pocket and pulled out his multi-colored rubber ball. Fred had always been rambunctious and unpredictable. A magnet for mischief, he always seemed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. When Fred went into action, you never knew what to expect; you only knew you didn't want to miss it.

As Sr. Margaret turned back to the chalkboard, Fred stood up, reared back, and fired a real fastball. He released the ball with such fury that he ended up making an erratic throw. First the ball hit the ceiling, then it shot quickly down to the blackboard and then to the floor, before finally bouncing back in Fred's direction. As the ball hit the floor, however, it suddenly picked up speed, catching Fred off guard. Like a second baseman diving for a hard grounder, he launched from his seat, somehow snagging the ball in mid-bounce before crashing into the desk in the next row.

Sr. Margaret spun around to find Fred sprawled out on the floor, wedged in between the two desks. "Fred!" she yelled. "What in the world are you doing!"

"Ah...um...sorry," Fred mumbled, trying not to smile. "I guess...I guess I fell." It was a brilliant recovery. Most teachers would have recognized this obvious and ridiculous lie, but Sr. Margaret was easily fooled.

As Fred picked himself up off the floor, it was clear that Sr. Margaret was losing control of the class. By this time she was visibly aggravated, and we all knew what was coming next.

"Children..." she began, pausing briefly and closing her eyes, "I love you, I'm interested in you, but I'm getting so sick

and tiiiiired of you!" It was her favorite saying, and it always cracked us up.

Sr. Margaret was getting more and more irritated by the minute, and she was primed and ready to explode. You would think this would be enough to stop us. You'd be wrong. As soon as she turned her back on us, the attack of the rubber balls resumed.

Up next was Maria, who, unsure of her aim, decided to bounce her ball off the floor first, instead of just throwing it directly at the board. This experiment went terribly wrong, however, as the ball missed the board completely, bounced sideways off the chalk rail, and ricocheted directly towards the teacher's desk. We all watched in stunned silence as the ball bounced once more off the top of the desk and landed right smack in the middle of Sr. Margaret's *Annie*-themed cup of water. It was a one-in-a-million shot.

Maria let loose an audible gasp. The rest of us shifted uncomfortably in our seats.

The commotion caught Sr. Margaret's attention. "What's going on?" she asked, turning to face us. But no one dared offer an explanation. "I tell you," she continued, her voice crackling, "I just don't have the strength to yell at you kids today."

Suddenly, the old nun reached for her water. You could see the panic in everyone's eyes as she wrapped her wrinkled fingers around the plastic cup, lifted it to her wrinkled old lips, and tilted it back. It all seemed to be happening in slow motion. What if she swallowed it? What if she choked on a five cent rubber ball and died right there in front of us? I could see the headline: "Nun Killed by Super-Bouncy Ball — Students Implicated."

I could barely watch as Sr. Margaret took three agonizingly slow gulps of water before returning the cup to her desk. But there was no choking, no gagging, no clutching her throat. As she looked out over the classroom, I'm sure we all looked like we had just seen a ghost.

"What's wrong with you people today?" she asked. "Why do you all look so pale?" Somehow she hadn't noticed the rubber ball at the bottom of her cup. It was a miracle!

"Now, I want no more giggling or talking!" she said. "Sit quietly and diagram your sentences."

As class ended, Megan created a diversion by asking Sr. Margaret a question, and Maria retrieved her ball from the cup. Another victory in the never-ending battle of student vs. teacher.

Trade Secrets

Trading was very popular at Sts. Peter & Paul. Whether it was for food, baseball cards, friendship pins, jelly bracelets, or just about anything else under the sun, you were always sure to encounter some serious bartering going on.

The sports card trade was serious business. Everyone collected them. Football, baseball, basketball, cricket, bocce—if there was a trading card for it, we collected it. I still have several shoeboxes packed with cards I collected as a kid. My grandfather used to buy me one pack every Saturday night after church when we'd stop at the Coach Light Deli. Saturday after Saturday, one pack at a time, I gradually built up a pretty impressive collection. I'd sit for hours sorting them first by team and then by popularity. Then I'd put my favorite ones in protective plastic sheets and store them in a special binder. The

rest I would bind up with rubber bands and toss in old shoeboxes. These leftover cards were usually the second-rate players or “doubles” we would use to sweeten a deal every now and then.

Every once in a while the teacher would give us a break when we were free to do as we pleased. It was during these rare moments of freedom that we'd pull out our collections to do some swapping. The bidding would always begin the same way: Someone would throw out a tantalizing offer, and then the other kids would rifle through their collections in search of an irresistible trade. It was pretty exciting. As one kid made an offer, another would attempt to trump it with a more enticing proposition. This bidding would continue at a frenzied pace until an offer was finally accepted. It was organized chaos, much like the floor of the New York Stock Exchange.

Trading was also a big part of the lunchtime experience. No matter what your mom had packed you for lunch, it always seemed like someone else had brought something better. This is where trading would come into play. If you could put together a tempting offer, there was a chance you could get someone to agree to a trade. The important thing was to always come prepared.

Making our way down to the lunchroom, my friends and I would take our usual seats around the table. As soon as everyone was situated, we'd empty out our bags out on the table, and the trading would commence.

Someone always made the first offer, opening the floor to bidding.

“All right, I have an extra thing of string cheese here. Who wants it?” String cheese was a valuable commodity in the lunch

trade. There was nothing more satisfying than a big stick of mozzarella to complement your jumbo sandwich. It was a true delicacy.

“How about a Twinkie?” someone would say, holding up a moist, yellow, cream-filled cake. Of course, the owner of the string cheese would scoff at such a ridiculous proposition. Twinkies were a dime a dozen back then and pretty much worthless on the lunchtime trade market. You see, there was an intricate set of rules to trading, and it was important you abide by these rules or else you could offend someone. Make a weak offer—like a Twinkie—and it could be seen an insult.

“I’ve got an apple,” someone else would chime in. An apple for string cheese? Please. Fruit had little or no value on the trading block. Unfortunately, some kids had nothing better to offer.

By this time, Mr. String Cheese would be growing frustrated with the preposterous bids he was receiving. Meanwhile, the other kids would be ransacking their bagged lunches in search of a better offer. I was never worried, however, for I always made sure to have something so enticing, so appealing, that no kid could possibly resist.

“Hey, how about a Ho-ho?” With that, a hush would fall over the table as I smiled confidently, holding the silver-wrapped treasure in my hand. Few desserts were as highly coveted. But sometimes, right as we were about to complete the transaction, a late bid would come in from the other side of the table.

“Wait a second...How about a bag of Pringles?” All heads would spin around to see the late bidder holding up a plastic baggie of the golden chips. Immediately, Mr. String Cheese

would pull back and reconsider the trade. A chocolaty Ho-ho was a great offer, but a bag of crispy Pringles was nothing to sneeze at.

“Okay,” I’d say, “how about *two* Ho-ho's then? Count'em— TWO!” And with that, the bidding would end as Mr. String Cheese handed me my prize.

When it came to lunchtime trading, it was best to come prepared.

Boys Will Be Animals

After years of silly recess games like freeze-tag and duck-duck-goose, we needed something that coincided with our rising levels of testosterone. We wanted something that would allow us to satisfy our competitive urges and declare our entrance into manhood. Thus, Cageball was born.

Cageball pitted two teams against each other—usually the seventh-graders versus the eighth—each fighting for possession of the ball, usually a Nerf football or soccer ball. The idea was to try to keep the ball away from the other team and maintain possession for as long as possible. Whatever team had the ball when the bell rang at the end of recess would be crowned the Cageball champ for that day. It may sound simple, but don't be fooled. Cageball was also a primitive, savage contest, not for the faint of heart. It was played in The Cage—a small fenced-in area next to the back parking lot where recess was held. The Cage was originally built to be used as a basketball court, but to us it

was the perfect arena for our vicious sport.

The biggest difference between Cageball and regular keep-away was that there were no rules in Cageball. If your team didn't have the ball, it was your duty to get it back. By whatever means possible. You could wrestle it out of your opponent's arms, you could try to intercept it in the air, or you could slam the person into the sides of the metal cage until the pain was so great that he was forced to relinquish the ball, the latter being the preferred method. This was a brutal contest played with animalistic intensity. The Cage itself was quite small, so with about 20 people on each team, it was like being inside an angry hornets' nest.

Being small and somewhat fragile, I had to be extra careful. If I lost my concentration, even momentarily, I could get smashed into the chain-link fence and end up a human waffle. For this reason, I always preferred to be the *slammer* rather than the *slamnee*. Whenever the ball came my way, I would quickly pass it on to someone else before I could get hit. If the other team had the ball, however, I had no qualms about piling on my opponent and callously smashing him into the fence.

Now you might wonder how we were permitted to play such a violent game at school—a *Catholic* school, for that matter. Well, Sr. Peggy wasn't too happy about it, but I think she allowed it in the hope that we would burn off some energy and be less rambunctious in class. Usually, as long as there weren't any fights or injuries, she would just let us have our fun. Of course, people got hurt all the time, but we'd try to keep it quiet so that the game wouldn't be banned. If you got injured, you just had to suck it up and not let Sr. Peggy notice that your arm was broken.

Cageball was just a recess game, but we still took it very seriously. For the eighth-graders, it was a simple matter of pride. We were the kings of the school. We didn't want to lose to the lowly seventh-graders. It would look pretty bad if we let a bunch of younger kids beat us in our own game. Victory was essential, and nothing was more important than retaining the coveted Cageball crown.

One time a representative of the seventh-grade team approached us during lunch and challenged us to a game. We gladly accepted, and as recess began we filed into The Cage, one by one, ready to do battle like Roman gladiators entering the Colosseum. Outside The Cage, a crowd of younger students assembled to watch the much-anticipated contest. As the last person crossed the threshold, the metal gate slammed shut. For a few nervous moments, we moved about the arena, posturing and positioning ourselves for the start of the match. There were never any pregame shows of sportsmanship in Cageball—no handshakes, no well wishes, no friendly smiles. Someone would toss the ball into the air, and the game would officially begin.

Without warning, the violent ballet ensued as I watched the foam football rise high into the air above. It was madness. Bodies smashed into bodies, and boys pushed and pulled at each other, all in a desperate struggle for position. As the ball fell into one of the seventh-grader's hands, he was immediately hit from all sides, causing him to drop the ball. The spectators moaned as they witnessed this first gruesome collision. A mad frenzy ensued as the teams scrambled for the ball on the asphalt surface. It was like a school of piranha tearing into the carcass of some unfortunate creature that had wandered into their river.

Far away from the action and standing safely along the

fence, I was carefully planning my strategy. Only the biggest, strongest, and craziest kids dared to join the initial fracas. We smaller individuals preferred to wait patiently until the ideal moment to enter the battle. The last thing you wanted was to get injured early on and be forced to leave the game.

However, when you're in The Cage, you soon find there is no safe harbor. As I stood off to the side, the ball suddenly shot out of the pile and in my direction. Reaching out to catch it, I could see bodies closing in on me from all directions, and I knew I had to make a quick decision. Instead of catching the ball, I skillfully tipped it towards Chuck—an unsuspecting teammate of mine who was standing with me against the fence. As he caught the surprise pass, Chuck was instantly sandwiched against the fence. He let out an anguished cry as the ball fell to the ground and was immediately pounced upon by a dozen boys. Seconds later, as it popped out of the pile, I quickly snatched it up and again passed it on before I could be hit. Meanwhile, Chuck writhed in pain on the cold asphalt surface.

The battle raged on at a fevered pace as the ball switched from team to team. Kids were beaten, pounded, and repeatedly slammed into the metal mesh of the chain-link fence. Throughout all this I was careful not to be slammed myself, never holding onto the ball for more than a few seconds. Of course, I always enjoyed taking part when someone else was being mauled. At one point, a seventh-grader had caught the ball and was trapped in the corner of The Cage. We were on top of him before he could blink.

Caught in the middle of this hostile scrum, I looked over to see Eric ferociously ripping the ball from the battered boy's hands. Once again he had recovered the ball for our team. It was

one of the few times that Eric was actually on my side. And for once I was really glad he was.

The battle raged on until Sr. Peggy rang the bell ending recess. Instantly, the hostilities ceased, and I saw Eric raise the ball triumphantly over his head. Once again we were victorious.

As we filed out of The Cage, many were showing the signs of a brutal battle. Some had bloody scratches on their faces, others walked with limps, and still others looked ragged, their torn clothing hanging from their bodies. I had somehow managed to emerge from the battle relatively unscathed, save for a few cuts and scratches.

But despite our wounds, we were all smiling.

The Wedgie

Once again we were in social studies, and instead of teaching us about the nomads of Mongolia or the history of the Peruvian empire, Mrs. Peterson decided to spend the entire period telling us about her trip to England the previous summer. Every once in a while she would share stories about her travels as an alternative to reading from the text, and that was just fine with us. Since we knew we wouldn't be tested on the details of her trip, most of us just doodled, slept, or daydreamed, which was always a nice way to spend a class.

But just as she was telling us about her visit to Stonehenge, Mrs. Peterson was interrupted by an announcement from the school P.A. system.

“Attention, please! Attention...” It was Sr. Peggy. “Will the seventh- and eighth-grade boys please come to the Learning Center? Thank you.” Mrs. Peterson seemed confused, but she sent us our way, nonetheless. She knew if Sr. Peggy was willing

to interrupt class, it must be something serious. The rest of us, however, knew exactly what the announcement was all about.

Every day after recess we would make our way up to the third floor for the afternoon session. But before returning to our homerooms, we were all encouraged to first stop in the restroom so that we wouldn't have to be excused once classes resumed. Sr. Margaret was charged with being the bathroom monitor for the boys, and she ruled her porcelain kingdom with an iron fist. Herding us into the boy's room, she would always say the same thing: "Let's go, boys. No fooling around. Just do your business and get out!" Then (and this is the disturbing part) she would stand in the doorway, close enough to see our backs as we stood up against the urinals, as she waited for us to finish. If she thought you were dragging your feet, she would try to hurry you along. "Com'on, boys...let's go! Do your business and get out!" Of course, we would delay as long as possible, just to get under her skin.

This particular afternoon, however, as we'd returned from recess and reached the third floor bathrooms, there was quite a commotion coming from within. My friend Donnie and I had been recapping our recent Cageball victory and were about to walk into the restroom. Just then a bunch of kids came running out, pushing and shoving as they went. Sr. Margaret went rushing in to investigate.

By the time we'd made our way to class, I had already heard the whole incredible story. Something had occurred in the bathroom that day that would go down as one of the most controversial episodes in Sts. Peter & Paul school history.

One of the boys in the bathroom that day was George Winkley. George came to S.S.P.P. back in the fifth grade. His

parents had recently moved from a nearby town where he had been a student at St. Joseph's, another Catholic school in our diocese.

From his first day at S.S.P.P., things did not go well for George. On that fateful morning, Sr. Peggy brought him into our room to introduce him to the class. It was obvious he was nervous as he stood shaking at the principal's side. Then, just as Sr. Peggy was introducing him, George began to pee himself right there in front of everyone. Mortified, he ran out of the room to a chorus of laughs and jeers. It was an inauspicious beginning to what would be a long three years for George. From that point on he could never live down that embarrassing moment. Instead, he became a magnet for ridicule and practical jokes.

On this particular day, as he was standing at the urinal "doing his business," one of the other boys came up from behind George, grabbed the waistband of his underwear, and gave him an atomic wedgie. This is no ordinary wedgie, mind you. An atomic wedgie is one wherein the wedgie-giver pulls the unfortunate victim's underwear clear up over the back of his head. Needless to say, it's a painful and embarrassing experience for the recipient.

Of course, news of the wedgie spread like wildfire through the halls of the school, and it wasn't long before the teachers and administration heard about it. When Sr. Peggy found out, she immediately launched an intense investigation to determine the culprit and to bring him to swift justice. This was big. George's mother had even come down to the school to take him home. I can still remember watching out the window as George walked down the street, gingerly, his torn underwear in hand.

Sr. Peggy had never been more enraged. And now she had

summoned us down to the Learning Center in order to weed out the responsible party.

The Learning Center was a large room on the second floor that housed the school's computers and where art class was held. It was the only room large enough to seat all of the seventh- and eighth-grade boys at one time. When we arrived, Sr. Peggy was already there waiting for us.

"Sit down," she said. You could tell she was on the verge of erupting. The tension in the air was thick as we sat down and waited for her to make the first move. Time passed slowly, agonizingly so, as Sr. Peggy, still seated in her chair, silently scanned the room. She was a master of intimidation. Occasionally you could catch her smiling or letting out a careful chuckle, but that was it. Most of the time, she would just leave you guessing. But if she really was angry, she'd be sure to let you know.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, Sr. Peggy broke the unbearable tension.

"Those of you who were in the restroom after lunch, go to the board." Her calm tone masked the undeniable fury brewing inside. Nine terrified boys stood up and shuffled over to the chalkboard. I can't tell you what a great feeling it was to know that I wasn't in trouble. Not only was I getting out of class, but now I could just sit back and enjoy the show. It was like having a front-row seat to an execution.

As the boys stood trembling with their backs against the chalkboard, Sr. Peggy sat patiently and made eye contact with each one. The silence was excruciating. Even though I knew I was in the clear, I still felt a little anxious. You could just tell that Sr. Peggy was about to unleash her wrath on someone, and it

was always a terrifying sight.

Several minutes passed before she began to speak. What she said would go down as one of the most famous quotes Saints Peter and Paul school history.

“I am going to ask this once and only once,” she said.
“Who...gave George...the wedgie?”

There was just something so bizarre—so unnatural—about a nun saying the word “wedgie.” I had to use every ounce of self-control not to laugh out loud as I trembled in my seat.

The pressure was too much for some people, however. I looked over to see Tim’s head drop into his hands as he shook uncontrollably with laughter. When he finally looked up again, tears streaming down his face, Sr. Peggy was staring right at him. “Tim, go to my office,” she said calmly as she pointed down the hall. Tim got up and left the room. Sr. Peggy would deal with him later.

Minutes passed and not one of the implicated boys was willing to admit to anything. Sr. Peggy went from boy to boy, asking each one for his version of the story. However, each one claimed total ignorance. It was looking like some sort of wedgie conspiracy.

Finally, after several stumbling explanations, one of the seventh-graders spoke up. “Well, I just got done washing my hands and I heard everyone yelling and laughing and stuff. That’s when I saw it—George had a wedgie.” Laughter erupted throughout the room.

“QUIET!” Sr. Peggy yelled, smashing her hand down on the table. The impact created a deafening boom that echoed down the hallway.

After a few more agonizing minutes of interrogation, Fred

stepped forward from the chalkboard. "It was me, Sr. Peggy. I did it. I gave George the wedgie." At last someone had finally fessed up. But Fred didn't look very sorry about it. He just stood there smiling from ear to ear, remorseless.

Of course, that was the last thing Sr. Peggy wanted to see. Closing within inches of his face, she glared into his eyes, ready to pounce like a lioness that has just cornered her prey. We watched intently, wondering if Fred would turn into stone. Amazingly, he maintained a rebellious smirk on his face as imminent doom stood before him. Either the kid was fearless, or he had a death wish.

"Wipe that little smile off your face," she said to him, their noses almost touching.

As we were excused from the room, I caught a final glimpse of Sr. Peggy standing before Fred. I wondered if it was the last time I'd ever see him alive. It was one of the few times I was actually happy to be going back to class.

The Rats

Basketball was pretty big at Sts. Peter & Paul. Our school team—The Pacers—was always one of the more competitive teams in the league, and each year we'd battle other Catholic schools for the coveted Diocese Championship.

Back in the sixth and seventh grades, I played on the team as a guard. Well, saying that I *played* might be stretching it a bit. I did wear a uniform and I did attend the mandatory practices. But when it came around to game time, I was mainly there to keep the bench warm. I always thought this was unfair. It wasn't like I was the worst player on the team. Sure, maybe I scored a basket for the other team—*once*—but it was an accident. When you sit on the bench the entire game you have a tendency to daydream, which can lead to you missing out on minor details, like which basket is yours.

After two years of riding the pine, I decided not to rejoin the team in my eighth- grade year. I figured I had better things to do

than sit on my butt and watch everyone else have fun.

One of my closest of friends, Jay, had also decided not to rejoin the team, but he still wanted to be involved in some way. He figured if we couldn't help the team on the court, maybe we could contribute some other way. And that's how The Rats were born.

The basketball players called our gym "The Cellar." This was because our pastor, Monsignor Schultz, kept the gym temperature right around the freezing mark in order to conserve energy and save money. We had the only gym in the diocese where you could actually see your breath during the game.

Jay came up with the idea for a few of us to get together at the games to try to get the crowd going. Since our team played in The Cellar, we decided that The Rats was appropriate name for our team-support group (no, we weren't cheerleaders). We even had black t-shirts made with "Rats" on the front our names embroidered on the back. The plan was to go to the games, make some noise, and try to give our team the home court advantage.

During the first couple of games, we were a little hesitant about making a scene. The five of us just sat on the top row of the bleachers and yelled every now and then. It was more like a joke at first. None of us was really enthusiastic about being a cheerleader (even though that's *not* what we were). If our team made a bucket, we'd cheer; if the other team made a bucket, we'd boo.

Things began to improve, however, right before Christmas break when we hosted our hated rivals from nearby Aliquippa—St. Titus. This was the most important game of the season. Both teams were vying for first place, and the winner would walk away with bragging rights for another year. St. Titus was our

perennial foe. Every year it seemed like we were neck-and-neck in the standings, and this particular year was no different. Victory was essential. The winner of the game would claim sole possession of first place in our division and almost certainly make the playoffs. We couldn't stand St. Titus. They were so cocky. They would actually charter buses to their away games in order to bring as many of their fans as possible. On top of that, they had a large squad of loud, annoying cheerleaders that never seemed to shut-up. They were so obnoxious, and we wanted nothing more than to send them home in tears. I guess that wasn't very Christian of us, but this was basketball, for crying out loud.

Since this was such a pivotal game, I decided that we needed a little more firepower to drown-out the St. Titus faithful. Therefore, I brought along the electronic megaphone I had just received for Christmas. Not only did it amplify my voice, but it also played a bunch of fight songs and inspirational tunes like the famous "Charge!" bugle call. It was the perfect tool for fighting the St. Titus faithful.

As the game got underway, the St. Titus cheerleaders began to pump-up their fans with all the old clichéd chants that cheerleaders are known for. Meanwhile, the other Rats and I watched from our usual spot at the top of the bleachers. We were certainly more vocal than usual, but the five of us were no match for the 12 pom-pom-wielding cheerleaders at the other end of the gym. At one point we tried to get our fans energized by starting a "Here we go Pacers, here we go!" cheer. But not being used to having cheerleaders (again, not that we were), our fans just stared at us, somewhat confused, like we were part of some freak show.

Things were quite the opposite over on the St. Titus end of the gym. Their perky cheerleaders got their fans involved in the game, which, in turn, had a direct effect on the energy of their team, or so it seemed.

And so, at the close of the first half, St. Titus held a comfortable lead.

As the second half was about to begin, we decided that we needed to do something to get our fans more into the game.

“All right, guys, listen up!” Jay said, as the visiting cheerleaders led their fans in a cheer at the other end of the gym. “We can’t just sit here and let them take over The Cellar like this. This is *our* home, for crying out loud! It’s embarrassing.”

“What are we supposed to do?” said Scott.

Jack made a suggestion. “Maybe we should get up and do something?”

And Brian immediately shot it down. “Yeah, sure...like what? A cheer? I ain’t jumpin’ around like no girl. That’s for sure.”

It was a sad scene. A visiting team and their fans were getting the best of us in our house. The situation seemed hopeless.

That’s when it happened. I can’t really explain it, but something inside me just snapped. There was no way I was going to let a bunch of loud, obnoxious, pom-pom-shaking *girls* to come into *my* gym and make *me* look like a fool. So, grabbing my megaphone and dishtowel I’d borrowed from my mom, I ran down to the front of the bleachers and started yelling.

“Okay...listen up!” The surprised S.S.P.P. faithful simultaneously turned their heads in my direction, as my amplified pre-pubescent voice echoed throughout the

gymnasium. It was such a surprise, as a matter of fact, that silence fell over the entire gym. The game even stopped momentarily as the players and referees turned to look. Out of the corner of my eye I saw our coach look at me and roll his eyes.

But I was not to be denied. Whipping the towel above my head, I said whatever came to my mind.

“Let's go, everyone! Com'on! Let's make some noise here! WOO-HOO!!” Beads of sweat formed on my head as I waited to see if anyone would respond to my lunatic ravings.

Then, out of the silence, someone in the crowd joined in. “Yeah! Let's go, Pacers!” Gradually more and more people began to join in as well.

“HERE WE GO, PACERS, HERE WE GO! OOH, OOH! HERE WE GO PACERS, HERE WE GO! OOH, OOH!” It was an incredible scene. The once silent crowd was now cheering loudly as I ran up and down in front of the bleachers waving the dishtowel around in circles over my head.

Then, almost magically, our team began to close the gap on our hated rivals. It was amazing! They were actually feeding off of our energy as we hooted and hollered at the top of our lungs. The St. Titus fans, once loud and boisterous, were taken aback by our sudden enthusiasm and were fighting to be heard above the home crowd's roar. Suddenly their 12 cheerleaders were no match for the energetic Rats and my trusty megaphone.

When the buzzer sounded to end the game, the Pacers were victorious! And for the first time ever, I actually felt like I was part of the team.

Immediately after the game, as I stood near the bleachers reliving the excitement with the rest of The Rats, the coach of the St. Titus cheerleaders came over to talk to me.

“I just wanted to let you know that I thought you were wonderful,” she said. “You really did a great job.” It was a wonderful compliment, and I felt really proud of what we had done.

My pride, however, soon turned to embarrassment as the cheerleading coach took me by the hand.

“I want you to come with me for a second,” she said, as she dragged me over to her group of cheerleaders. Standing in front of the disgruntled girls, I smiled politely as their coach let them have it.

“Do you see this boy?” she asked. The cheerleaders glared at me. “This boy – this one *little* boy – outdid all 12 of you by himself. One little boy! You could all learn something from him.” I could feel my face redden as a crowd of parents and other spectators stopped to watch the public scolding. When she finished her speech, the coach thanked me for my time and let me go on my way.

As I walked away, not really sure how to feel about what had just happened, I looked back and caught one of the cheerleaders sticking her tongue out at me. I flashed her a quick smile and then stuck out my tongue in response.

Another small yet meaningful victory in the game of life.

Mass Appeal

Friday Mass at Sts. Peter & Paul was always an inspirational experience. First we were herded over to the church not unlike cattle being led to the slaughterhouse. This is when the depression would set in. Let's be honest: to a kid going to church rates right up there with going to the dentist; we know it's something we have to do, and we know it's for our own good, but we still hate it, nonetheless.

After walking over to the church, we would systematically file into the long wooden pews that faced the altar. This was a pivotal point of the church experience. It was extremely important that you sit by one of your friends during the service so that you'd have someone to fool around with. Correctly guessing the final seating arrangements, however, was always a little tricky. One miscalculation and you could end up sitting in the worst place possible—right next to the teacher. In order to sit by one of your friends, you had to be both sly and

nonchalant. The teachers knew who shouldn't be sitting next to whom, so the trick was to make it seem as if you had no idea you were in line next to your best friend. If by some miracle you were able to slip past the teacher without her noticing, the hour-long service would be somewhat bearable.

Once all the students were seated, Mass would officially begin. From that point on it was basically a 60-minute struggle to stay conscious, not a simple task for an easily bored kid at 8:30 in the morning. Your best bet was to try to keep your mind occupied on something else.

My favorite way to pass the time was to pretend I was a spy. Sitting in the pew, I'd imagine that various members of the congregation—the old lady with the Rosary beads, the man handling the collection basket, even the priest himself—were actually enemy agents, and I only had until the end of the service to find a way out without being captured. As a big fan of the James Bond series, I already considered myself an expert in the field of espionage. I even secretly carried my favorite cap gun with me on Friday's just to make the scenario that much more realistic.

When I got bored of the spy game, I'd use the bright overhead lights and my hands to cast shadow puppets on the floor. After years of practice, I could make rabbits and dogs and other animals with ease. Most of the time I'd stage a battle between two ferocious hand-shadow dinosaurs. What can I say? I was easily entertained.

Friday Mass was always a spiritually uplifting experience. Throughout the ceremony, my friends and I would try to make each other laugh while evading the watchful eyes of the teacher. In the meantime, our parish priest would go through all the

familiar rituals and treat us to an inspiring sermon about the evils of television, and the imminent nuclear holocaust of our future.

One of the more interesting opportunities available to a Catholic schoolboy was the chance to serve as an altar boy. It gave you the opportunity to actually *do something* during Mass instead of just sitting there twiddling your thumbs. And anything that made church go by faster was a plus in my book. As an altar boy, you got to stand up on the altar with the priest as he conducted the service. It's like being in a show. Granted it's not like you're some rock star performing in front of thousands of screaming fans. But it was still pretty cool to be up there on the altar with the priest, while the entire congregation peered back at you from the pews. It made you feel important.

The best part of the job, however, was the fact you were privy to what happened behind the scenes in the mysterious room behind the altar. At the beginning of each Mass, the priest, altar boys, reader, and a few other robed individuals would emerge from the corridor in the rear of the church. Then, when the service was over, this same group would disappear into this same shadowy corridor. To where did this top-secret tunnel lead? What treasures were stored within? The Indiana Jones in me was dying to explore this highly classified section of the church. So, shortly after my 11th birthday, I signed up to be an altar boy.

My dreams of finding vast riches and extensive labyrinths of secret caverns were soon shattered, however. As it turned out, the passageway behind the altar led only to the sacristy, which was nothing but a couple of rooms—one for the priest and one for the altar boys. The priest's quarters held his various robes, a

few gold-plated chalices, and various books used during the service. The altar boys' room was even less interesting. It was basically a big closet for the altar boy robes, a couple candle-lighter thingamabobs, and the incense burner.

One time my friends and I had been chosen to serve a funeral during school hours. This may sound like a bad thing, but, for an altar boy, a funeral was a pretty good gig. It got you out of class for a while, and it was the only time you actually got paid to serve. Depending on which funeral home was running the service, you could pull in anywhere from 10 to 15 bucks for an hour's work, a small fortune for someone our age.

One of your responsibilities at a funeral service was prepping the incense burner for the priest. This was a pretty popular job because it involved fire. First, you had to light a piece of charcoal on this little Bunsen Burner-type thingy they kept in the altar boys' room. After the charcoal was lit, you would then use a pair of metal tongs to carefully place the charcoal within the burner itself. The final step, handled by the priest, was adding the powdered incense, which burned and filled the air with that distinctive scent.

For this particular funeral, Dave was the lucky one chosen to handle the incense burner preparation. Right before the beginning of the service, he began the proper procedure. Everything was going as planned until he went to transfer the coal to the metal burner. Suddenly the white-hot briquette exploded, sending a shower of fiery ashes to the floor below. The smoldering pieces immediately began to burn into the church rug—the *brand new* church rug, which, from what we had been told, had cost a pretty penny.

Smoke quickly filled the room as Dave frantically tried to

extinguish the fires. The rest of us watched in horror as he tried to smother the burning coals by stomping on them with his penny loafers. Within seconds the hot coals had burnt a number of large black holes in the once spotless carpet. An acrid odor filled the room as we scrambled to think of a way to conceal this disaster.

That's when Monsignor Schultz entered the room.

"What in the world happened here?!" he said, grabbing his head as he discovered the smoking carpet, which now resembled the crater-ridden surface of the moon. "Who's responsible for this?!"

We probably should have stood by our friend and taken part of the blame for this unfortunate accident. After all, it could have happened to any one of us. However, with the enraged old cleric standing ominously before us, we all pointed in Dave's direction.

"David!" yelled Monsignor. "What's the matter with you?"

"Uh...uh...well...I..." Dave scrambled for a reasonable explanation.

But Monsignor wasn't interested. "Forget it," he said. "You're fired!" Too irate to say anything else, he stormed out of the room as Dave followed close behind, begging for forgiveness.

The rest of us just stood there in shock, staring down at the charred remains of the carpet. Fired? This was unheard of! Who knew that altar boys could be terminated? It really made reconsider secretly drinking the altar wine and serving Mass wearing nothing but our tighty-whites underneath our robes.

We still did it, of course, but it definitely made us think twice about it.

In English, Please

As we entered Sr. Margaret's English class and took our seats, she immediately called for silence and got down to business. "Good morning, children. Please pull out a piece of loose-leaf paper and listen very carefully to my instructions. We are going to have a little quiz today." You could just see the fiendish joy in the old nun's face as she dropped that little bomb on us. But weren't about to let her take the upper hand.

Sr. Margaret's biggest pet peeve, the one thing that completely drove her up a wall, was the sound of paper being torn from a spiral-bound notebook. That's why she always instructed us to pull out a piece of "loose-leaf" paper. She simply couldn't bear to hear that awful ripping sound or to see those tattered and torn edges. We were well aware of this, of course, and despite her clear directions, we went straight for our spiral notebooks. Nate made the first move.

"Riiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiip!" The distinctive sound of paper tearing

along metal coil filled the room.

Sr. Margaret was not impressed. "What...who did that?" she asked, quickly scanning the room. "Who tore that paper?" But before she could home in on Nate, Brian attacked from across the room.

"Riiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiip!"

Sr. Margaret covered her ears and spun around to the source of the sound. "Brian!" she yelled. "You know better than that!"

"Oh! Sorry, Sr. Margaret," he said, trying to sound sincere. "I forgot."

Then Fred decided to join in the fun.

"Riiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiip!"

Sr. Margaret could take no more. "ENOUGH! The next person who rips paper out of his or her notebook is going to have to answer to Sr. Peggy! Is that clear?" She went right for the trump card. Threatening to send us to the principal's office was about the only thing she could have said to scare us into submission.

Regaining her composure, Sr. Margaret reiterated her initial instructions. "Now, if you would have listened to me the *first* time, I said to pull out a piece of *loose-leaf* paper." This time, everyone obeyed her orders. "Now," she continued, "I'd like you to fold the paper long-ways so that it is divided into three separate sections. When I see that everyone has gotten that far, I'll continue."

Another one of Sr. Margaret's peculiar traits was her inexplicable quiz-numbering method. She always had some intricate technique for folding and numbering our papers that didn't make sense. The easy thing would've been to have us number as we went. But with Sr. Margaret, nothing was ever

easy or normal.

“Okay, it looks like all of you have folded your paper correctly. Now please listen closely...” *Oh boy*, I thought. *Here we go*. “I’d like you to number down the left margin from one to fifteen, down the middle crease from sixteen to twenty-eight, and...” But that was as far as she got before being interrupted by a chorus of questions.

“Wait a second...one to *what* down the first column?”

“Sr. Margaret, did you say fifteen to *thirty-eight* or *twenty-eight* down the middle?”

“Which margin are we supposed to start on?—I’m confused.”

Sr. Margaret was bombarded from all sides. Of course, her instructions really weren’t that hard to follow. We were just being difficult on purpose. And the way that we randomly blurted out questions without raising our hands only added to her frustration.

“Now children listen to me!” Sr. Margaret’s voice crackled as she tried to regain control of the classroom. “I want no more shouting out without permission. If you have a question, raise your hand. Listen, and listen good, because this is the *last* time I’m going to repeat this.” Sr. Margaret paused to take a drink from her cup. “Now,” she continued, “what I said is that I want you to number down the *left* margin from one to *sixteen*, down the *middle crease* from *seventeen* to *twenty-eight*, and down the *right margin* from...” But once again she was interrupted as Joe raised his hand. “Oh,” she said, “what is it, Joe?”

“Well, the first time you told us to number from one to *fifteen* down the left margin. Now you’re telling us to number from one to *sixteen*? So which one is it?”

The frazzled old nun looked confused as she double-checked her notes. "Oh, you children have got me so jittery...I can't even read my own writing. Let's try this once again. One to sixteen down the left..."

"FIFTEEN!" The entire class corrected her in unison.

Sr. Margaret looked more confused than ever. "What? Oh yes, fifteen. One to *fifteen* down the left and..."

After a few more minutes of this nonsense, we finally got around to taking the quiz. All that trouble for a meaningless test on the parts of a sentence. The whole thing probably cut a few years off the poor old woman's life. We should've been ashamed of ourselves for being so nasty to her.

But of course, we weren't.

Things That Go Bump

One day after recess, we were back in our homeroom waiting for the afternoon session to begin when we found ourselves momentarily unsupervised. Mrs. Peterson, our teacher, was busy monitoring the girls' bathroom and had left us to our own devices. Bad idea. Not wanting to let such a golden opportunity slip by, we immediately organized a Bump-Battle Match.

Bump-Battles were one-on-one contests of brute strength. At the beginning of each contest, the opponents—always two males—would stand facing each other about 15 feet apart at the back of the classroom. The rest of the students would gather around to watch the show. Finally, the starter would count down from three and the battle would begin. It was the equivalent of ancient gladiators doing battle in a Roman arena. Only a select few of the eighth-grade boys dared to participate in

this primitive and savage competition.

Like two angry rams fighting over territory, the two combatants would charge each other at full speed and collide with terrible force. The moment of impact was always incredible to watch, as each contestant lowered his shoulder into his opponent and attempted to knock the other to the ground. If no winner was declared after the initial collision—in other words, if both boys were still standing—the two warriors would back off and charge each other again. This would occur repeatedly until one of them was knocked down onto the cold tile floor.

Of course, such activity was strictly prohibited at S.S.P.P. Because of this, one person would have to stand guard at the door and keep a lookout for the teacher. This was an extremely important job. Usually the lookout would have a signal like a special whistle or code word he would yell out if he saw the teacher approaching. You never wanted to just blurt out, “Here she comes!” That was a dead giveaway that we were up to no good. Since I had volunteered to be the lookout this particular day, I decided that the code word would be “wedgie” in light of the infamous atomic one that my classmate George had gotten just days before.

Taking my place at the door, I looked down the hallway and could see Mrs. Peterson way down by the girls' bathroom. “All clear!” I said, giving a thumbs-up as the first two contestants took the floor.

The first match was a super-middleweight undercard pitting Rob against Jay. Neither was very imposing, but their quickness and agility made for an interesting match-up. As the two brave contestants took their places opposite of each other in the back of the room, someone in the crowd started the countdown.

“Three, two, one...go!” A cheer rose from the crowd as Jay and Rob charged at each other at full speed. Lowering their shoulders, they crashed with incredible force. Neither one went down, so they backed off for another go. Once again they charged, slamming together like two locomotives. This time, however, Rob was knocked backward and fell hard into the metal lockers. A roar erupted in the room as Jay raised his fist victoriously.

“SHHHHH! Keep it down!” I said and then checked to make sure Mrs. Peterson was still at a safe distance.

Next up was the much-anticipated heavyweight bout between two of my larger classmates, Jack and Doug. Looking like two angry hippos, they lined up across from each other and prepared to do battle. In the meantime, several of my classmates were making bets on who would win.

Suddenly the signal was given and the two behemoths closed on one another. Colliding together their colossal frames seemed to momentarily converge into one massive body before the force of the impact once again drove them apart. The battle seemed to be in slow motion as the two fighters continually bounced off one another again and again, neither one willing to concede.

Peering down the hallway I could see Mrs. Peterson still standing outside the girls' bathroom. I looked at my watch and figured we probably had a couple more minutes at most. Just then a loud boom echoed through the room, and I looked back to see Doug lying flat on his back. Jack had finally prevailed, knocking his hefty competitor to the floor.

The stage had now been set for the final match—the fight that would crown the Bump-Battle champion for the day.

Jay arose from his seat and took his position across from Jack. The betting was feverish now as the two finalists attempted to psyche one another out with icy cold stares. Jack definitely had the size advantage, but Jay was quick and strong. It was destined to be a battle for the ages.

Just as the match was about to begin, however, I looked down the hall and, to my horror, Mrs. Peterson was nowhere in sight! Somehow in the excitement I had lost my concentration. My mind raced. What should I do? Call off the match? No, I couldn't do that. Mrs. Peterson was probably just inside the girls' bathroom and would be coming out any minute. There was no need to panic.

Then, just as Jay and Jack charged at one another, Mrs. Peterson appeared out of nowhere and surprised me from behind.

"Val!" she said. "What are you doing standing here in the doorway?" Apparently she had slipped down to the second floor without me seeing her and then came up the back stairway, which just happened to come out right next to her room.

Fumbling for an excuse, I just reacted and blurted out the secret code word: "WEDGIE!"

Right then there was a loud crashing sound, and Mrs. Peterson pushed me aside to investigate. That's when she found the entire class standing and cheering at the back of the room.

"What in the world is going on here!?" she demanded. The room fell silent as twenty-some heads whipped around to Mrs. Peterson fuming in the doorway. Luckily, the crowd of spectators formed a human wall, hiding the fact that Jack was sprawled out on the classroom floor just behind them. Jay reached down and helped his defeated competitor to his feet

before Mrs. Peterson became wise.

Suddenly, the bell rang, saving us from having to come up with an explanation for this bizarre scene. Mrs. Peterson appeared agitated and confused but let us leave without any further interrogation.

It was another close escape.

Vengeance is Hers

Dodgeball was one of our favorite gym class activities. There was nothing better than releasing some pent-up energy by knocking your classmates silly with a big rubber ball. Before we could start, however, we first had to first suffer through the dreaded team selection.

First, Mrs. Roberts would select two team captains. If you were chosen, you had a great amount of responsibility on your shoulders, because it was your duty to choose the best players in order to give your team the greatest chance at winning. Of course, it was an unwritten rule that you had to pick your friends first. In fact, it was more than just a team selection—it was a friend selection. Choosing one person over another could signify you liked that person better and, therefore, you had to be careful not to offend one of your friends by picking them in the later rounds.

If your friends weren't exactly the greatest of athletes,

however, choosing them over the more talented players could result in you having a pretty sorry team. A truly effective captain was one who was able to ignore the pleas of his friends and choose his teammates based on skill alone. You could only hope your friends would understand.

If you weren't a captain, the team selection process could be excruciating. If all went well, you would be chosen in one of the first few rounds. But this was never a certainty. There was also the possibility you'd be chosen last, which was a truly humiliating experience. And even if you were lucky enough to be selected in one of the earlier rounds, you could still end up on the bad team and spend the entire period getting pulverized. You just had to leave it up to fate to decide your dodgeball destiny.

I remember this one time when I had been chosen for the better team. Most of my teammates that day were pretty athletic and pretty decent at dodgeball. As an added bonus, I was also on the opposite team as Eric. As I sized up his teammates, it was clear that Eric was the backbone of his team. If we were to be victorious, it was vital that he be eliminated as soon as possible. So, before the game began, I gathered my team into a huddle to prepare our plan of attack.

Mrs. Roberts, however, had other plans.

"All right, everyone—listen up!" she said. "Today we're going to try something a little different. Instead of two balls, we're going to try using *four*." Four balls at one time was a completely new twist on the game, but it sounded like a good idea. The way I saw it, the more balls on the court, the more that could be directed at Eric.

As the game began, however, it became clear there would be

no time to focus on my hated rival. With four balls in play, the action was just too intense. Balls were flying at me from all directions, whizzing by my head at breakneck speeds. Just when I'd jump out of the way of an incoming shot, another would whiz by my head and I'd have to quickly duck to avoid decapitation. I felt like I was caught in the crossfire of opposing armies. It was madness. Kids on both teams were dropping like flies. In such a chaotic atmosphere, teamwork was out the window. It was every man for himself. At one point I managed to catch a ball that was meant to knock me out of the game. In doing so, I turned the tables and my unlucky attacker, who was forced to take a seat on the bleachers.

Now that I was armed, I scanned the gymnasium for Eric. To my delight, I spotted him just as he was struck in the stomach by a speeding ball. It was a beautiful sight. My enjoyment was short-lived, however, as another ball slammed into my right temple. The force was enough to jar the ball from my hands and knock me hard to the ground. As I struggled to get back up, it was clear to me that this was no longer a game; it was a war where only the lucky would survive.

The massacre continued for the entire 40-minute period. Game after game we were pounded and puréed in a chaotic swarm of foam rubber projectiles. Some kids refused to play, simply out of fear. Others let themselves get hit on purpose right at the start of each game, simply to avoid serious injury.

As I fought for my life, I noticed Mrs. Roberts sitting comfortably on the sidelines sporting a devilish grin. That's when it hit me: maybe this madness was her way of exacting a little revenge on us for all the crap we had put her through?

I was stunned. This was our teacher. She was supposed to be

a role model. How could she intentionally plan something so sinister?

As I stood there pondering that question, I was again struck in the head and knocked hard to the wooden floor. Mrs. Robert's grin grew even bigger.

The Great Algebra Scandal

It was supposed to be a great honor to be chosen for S.S.P.P.'s accelerated math program. But we didn't see it that way. It just didn't make sense. For years we had worked hard to get good grades. Now, in our final year before high school, we were being "rewarded" for our hard work by being placed in a difficult class that threatened to ruin what was for many a spotless grade-point average. Those not so mathematically inclined, on the other hand, were spared this fate and instead got to cruise through a normal, much simpler math class. It just didn't seem fair.

But so was life at S.S.P.P. Sometimes there wasn't anything you could do about being selected for particular group. Separations and divisions just seemed to happen naturally. This was true not only on an academic level but on a social level as well. As far back as first grade, the teachers had separated us

into groups according to our reading ability. But these groups became more than just divisions of differing ability; they were more like exclusive clubs. Each group got to vote on a name, and since my group was comprised of the best and fastest readers, we called ourselves The Cheetahs. The middle group chose The Jaguars, and those with most difficulty reading were in the group named The Tigers. Big cats were all the rage back then.

By grouping us like this, the teachers labeled each kid according to his or her reading ability. In other words, it branded you as either smart or stupid right from the start. From that point on, it seemed like we were always dividing into groups. Soon, all types of clubs were popping up. We had so many different clubs, in fact, that you could be a member of three or four at the same time. Some were serious and exclusive; others were just plain silly.

One of the more bizarre ones was the Olive Club. Back in the first and second grade there were periods in class when we were encouraged to be creative either by drawing, writing, or by making things with crafts. Basically, it was a chance for the teacher to take a break. For some reason, the members of the Olive Club would spend this time drawing green olives over and over again on large sheets of computer scrap paper. Using crayons, club members would fill sheet after sheet with nothing but crude sketches of green olives with bright red pimentos. Strange, but true.

Spy clubs were also very popular in our school. For some reason kids just seem to love the idea of espionage. Maybe it's all the cool gadgets or the inherent danger. Who knows? Whatever the reason, there were always several of these secret organizations in existence at any given time. As a member of a

spy club, your only duty was to spy on the members of the other spy clubs in the class. It was considered a great victory if you managed to steal a classified note or discover another club's secret handshake. Each group would devise its own secret code and hold covert meetings to discuss confidential subjects, like who liked who or what teacher smelled the worst.

By the time we had reached the eighth grade, we had outgrown clubs for the most part. However, by that time there were plenty of cliques and social groups to take their place. Unfortunately, it was very difficult to advance from one of the lower groups to the higher ones. So once you were labeled, it was usually permanent.

There were the Bad Girls, who smoked and skipped class, and the Good Girls, whom the Bad Girls would ridicule and torment for being such goodie two-shoes. One of the more tragic groups was the Loners. These unfortunate kids lacked certain social skills and were alienated simply because they dressed differently, weren't very smart, or just preferred to keep to themselves. One of the more fascinating subdivisions of this group was the Dirty Group—individuals who couldn't care less about appearance or hygiene and would wear the same clothes several times a week. You could always pick out one of these kids by the flies hovering around his head.

Even the lunchroom had its own separate groups. Each of the round tables held eight or nine chairs at most, and who sat at what table was a serious matter. For example, only the coolest kids could sit at the back corner table. The rest were doomed to sit at the tables near the front of the room near the watchful eyes of Sr. Peggy.

And if all of these social divisions weren't enough, the

teachers even got into the act, splitting us up into even more groups, like the kids who got to take algebra and those who were relegated to regular math.

Sr. Margie was only in her second year at Saints Peter & Paul. She had come from another school to replace one of our retiring nuns and quickly became one of our favorite teachers. She wasn't like the other nuns. She was smart, friendly, and easy to talk to. Usually the only time you actually spoke to a nun was when she asked you a direct question. Sr. Margie it was different. She was cool. I guess that's why we liked her so much. Of course, once class began, she was all business.

"All right..." Sr. Margie said as she entered the room and closed the door behind her. "The big test on the last three chapters will be on Friday. So today..."

"Are we ever gonna get our tests back from the last time?" a loud voice broke in from the back, interrupting Sr. Margie in mid-sentence. It was a voice we knew all too well.

"Eric Figler," Sr. Margie groaned, her eyes rolling in their sockets. "Where are your values? It's rude to interrupt. Don't ask me about that right now. You'll get your tests back when I'm finished grading them." Sr. Margie let out a deep sigh and continued with class.

Eric Figler had once been my best friend. In fact, up until about the third grade, he and I had been inseparable. We shared similar interests (i.e., baseball cards, G.I. Joes, and GoBots), and we both did well in school. We used to love to race each other during a test—we were always the first ones finished—and we always tried to sit by each other in class. He and I had standing invitations to each other's birthday parties, and we always gave each other the coolest gifts. It was a great friendship all around.

At some point, however, things changed. The healthy competition, which had bound us together, eventually ended up tearing us apart. Somewhere along the line we became immersed in a desperate struggle for popularity. One minute we're pushing each other to strive for academic excellence; the next, we're mortal enemies, desperately trying to outdo each other to win over our peers.

I can't say that competition alone put Eric and I at odds. To put it bluntly, he became simply unlikable. Eric was an only child and got used to having his way. He always wore the best clothes, owned the best toys, and he always made sure you were aware of it. Eventually, his arrogance became intolerable.

It didn't help that Eric was also a year older than most of us. His parents had decided to hold him back a year to give him an advantage in school. Because of this, he was bigger and stronger than most of the other boys, and a better athlete as well. If that wasn't bad enough, the kid was good looking, too—at least that's what all the girls thought. With his golden hair, bright blue eyes, and a devilish smile, he could charm just about anyone.

So you can see how easy it would be for a guy like me—a skinny, athletically average, just-okay-looking kid—to learn to hate a guy like Eric Figler. Maybe I was jealous. OK, I was definitely jealous. But I still couldn't stand the kid.

"As I was saying," Sr. Margie continued, "I think today we'll take a look at a couple more theorems we haven't touched on yet." Then she turned to the chalkboard and began to scribble something that looked like Egyptian hieroglyphs. Strange brackets and lines intermingled with numbers and letters in a bizarre, intelligible jumble of nonsense. Meanwhile, as she wrote, Sr. Margie rambled on and on, attempting to rationalize

her elaborate sketches, which only grew more confusing by the minute. “As you can see here,” she continued, “I used the Pythagorean Theorem to determine the length of the hypotenuse.”

Hi-pot-in-what? Confused and crestfallen, I put down my pencil and rested my chin in my hand. There was no use taking notes on something I would obviously never understand. Theorems, variables, hypotenuses—it was way too complicated for my 13-year-old brain to absorb. Heck, I couldn't even remember to zip up my fly half the time. How was I supposed to remember the intricacies of algebra?

“All right, are there any questions?” Sr. Margie set the chalk on the ledge, clapped her hands together to shake off the dust, and waited for a response. Twenty or so students gaped back at her in silence. “Anyone?” She seemed surprised that we weren't bombarding her with questions. Unfortunately, we didn't understand what she was teaching well enough to not understand something.

“OK, then,” she said, “if there aren't any questions, we can move on to something new then.”

Well, that was that—I was doomed. The hardest test of my life was just two days away and I was hopelessly unprepared for it. I felt like an inmate on death row and my only hope was that the governor would call and pardon me before the switch was pulled my academic life. The only thing I could do now was pray for a miracle.

Algebra was an intense class that demanded a high level of concentration. This was especially true when we had a big exam looming on the horizon. If any of us hoped to pass it, we had to

remain focused and soak up as much information as possible. There was no more time to fool around. Now it was time to hunker down and get serious about learning.

Math was the source of 99.9 percent of the anxiety in my life. The only other things I ever really worried about were the coming nuclear war and my next dentist appointment. Everything else just seemed to fall into place.

Back in the fourth and fifth grades our math teacher was Sr. Rita—the scariest nun this side of the Mississippi. Sr. Rita was quick tempered and dangerously unpredictable. There was absolutely no fooling around in her class. The slightest thing would set her off. If one person didn't do his homework assignment, the entire class would be punished with a double dose the next night. When she was real mad Sr. Rita would grab you by the back of the neck and pull you close as she screamed at you with that hideous, scratchy voice. She was a witch in nun's clothing.

Sr. Rita was constantly drilling us with complicated problems during class, and her tests were legendary for their level of difficulty. Hers was the only class where I actually spent the entire forty minutes in a state of fear. It certainly wasn't the most conducive atmosphere for learning.

In sixth grade we had a different math teacher with the same name. Sr. Rita #2, however, had a much kinder, gentler disposition. Don't get me wrong, she could get just as angry as the original Sr. Rita. But for the most part, she seemed to really enjoy teaching and tried to make things as interesting as possible. She was truly an innovator.

Sr. Rita #2 was usually relaxed and friendly, but she could also be a real firecracker at times. The woman was barely five

feet tall, and probably only weighed around ninety pounds, soaking wet. But despite her diminutive stature, Sr. Rita #2 was a nuclear power plant of energy. Because of this, math class was usually a wild roller coaster ride. As soon as she'd enter the room and shut the door, it was time to fasten your seat belts and keep your hands on the bar.

Sr. Rita #2 liked to use demonstrations as a way to get our attention. One time, in order to make a point about something, this miniature nun lifted a desk filled with heavy textbooks high above her head and held it there like it was nothing. Another time she flipped a desk over, spilling out its innards, simply because she felt its owner was too messy. She was a real hands-on kind of teacher.

One time things got a little scary when Sr. Rita #2 was pushed just a bit too far. She was standing at the board explaining something, when she noticed Megan was squinting at the board from the back of the room.

"Megan," she said, with a tone of compassion, "can you see the board from back there?"

Megan, who always seemed to have some large chip on her shoulder—one specifically for authority figures—answered with brutal honesty. "No," she said. "Your big head's in the way."

After a short pause to let the comment sink in, Sr. Rita #2 briskly made her way back to Megan's desk. Then the irate nun picked up Megan's books and slammed them down to the floor, producing a thunderous boom. I'm not sure what Megan's reaction was; no one dared to turn around and look. I only know that she spend the remainder of class out in the hall.

Luckily, our eighth-grade math teacher, Sr. Margie, was much more stable than her predecessors. She had a calm

disposition, and we could talk with her like we were talking to one of our friends. Best of all, she rarely got angry. We could ask her just about anything.

What we really wanted to ask her was if we could forget about the upcoming test. Unfortunately, no one had the guts to speak up.

The day before the big exam, Sr. Margie entered the room and shut the door behind her, sealing off our only escape. "All right," she began. "As you all know by now, tomorrow we'll be having the big test on the last three chapters. I hope you've been studying throughout the week so you won't have to cram it all in tonight." I began to feel nauseous. It was like she was talking directly to me. "But just in case a few of you haven't been keeping up with your assignments," she continued, "we're going to spend most of today's class reviewing. So if you have any questions or things you want to go over, now's the time."

A review! I was saved! This was exactly what I needed. Maybe if I just asked a few questions and took some good notes, things would get a lot clearer? Sure, I could have done my homework each night and learned it little by little, but why waste my valuable time? Sr. Margie was probably going to go over all the important stuff during the review. Whoever said it doesn't pay to procrastinate?

I remember the first few minutes of the review as Sr. Margie fielded a barrage of questions. It reminded me of a press conference. At first it was all very informative, and most of the questions were ones I had been planning to ask her myself.

I guess it was about 30 minutes later, however, when I abruptly awoke from a daydream and realized I had spent the entire period doodling pictures of spaceships in my notebook.

Somehow I had lost concentration and missed the entire review!

“Okay, does anyone have any other questions?” Sr. Margie asked, wiping the chalk dust from her hands. I panicked. My mind was blank. I couldn't think of a single question. “No?” she said. “Well, those were some really good questions. I hope I was able to clear things up a bit.”

I looked at my notebook. There were no formulas or sample problems to reference; no detailed explanations or shortcuts to help me on tomorrow's exam. Instead, the pages were filled with sketches of spaceships and elaborate scenes of some futuristic world. Daydreaming had always been one of my special talents, but this time my vast imaginative powers had backfired.

I glanced at the chalkboard. It looked like Albert Einstein had stopped in to share some of his latest theories. The entire board was a muddled mess of formulas and overlapping numbers, all of which created a chaotic web of mathematical jargon. There wasn't a single piece of information I could salvage.

For the first time in my life I was actually upset when I heard the bell ring ending class. I remained in my seat as the rest of the kids got up to leave. Usually I'd be the first one out of the room, but not today. Instead I just sat there staring at the board. I needed a miracle—plain and simple. Somehow, in the next 24 hours, I would have to figure out a way to pass this test.

My book bag was a little heavier than usual as we were dismissed that day. I was lugging home my massive algebra text, and along with it, a ton of anxiety. Tonight there would be no time to watch television or screw around with my friends. Tonight it was time to get down to business and learn this

algebra crap.

Immediately after dinner I went straight to my room to study. My Dad, unfamiliar with this bizarre behavior, couldn't help but peek inside to see what I was up to.

"Hey...whatcha doin'?" he asked.

"Studying," I answered, sitting in the warm glow of my desk lamp.

"Oh, yeah? For what?"

"A test."

"What class?"

"Algebra."

"Is it tomorrow?"

"Yes, it's tomorrow."

"Shouldn't have you been studying all week?"

"Yeah, yeah," I said. "I know." I didn't need him to tell me that. But I knew he was right.

Dad rubbed my shoulder for a moment and then left me to my studying. I hunkered down for some serious cramming.

I figured the best approach was to go back and do all of the homework problems we'd been assigned to us since the last test. If I would have just done them in the first place, I wouldn't have been in this position. But of course I had procrastinated, and now it was going to take me half the night to catch up.

It's bad enough when you're dealing with math problems that involve numbers only. But with algebra they throw a few letters into the mix and things really start to get cloudy. Then they hit you with the dreaded word problems, which require you have to be able to read as well—a daunting challenge for someone of the MTV generation. Sometimes I'd have to read the problem four or five times before the words would actually sink

in.

The situation wasn't completely hopeless, though. I still had the rest of the night to get caught up. Heck, I was a pretty intelligent kid. I just had to put my nose to the grindstone and get to work. What other choice did I have?

Just then, the phone rang.

"Val!" My mom yelled to me from the other room.

"Telephone!"

I picked up my phone in my room. "Hello?"

"Hey, Val... what's up?" It was my friend Donnie.

"Not much," I said. "Just tryin' to figure out this algebra crap. I'm pretty lost."

"Geez, you sound terrible."

"Yeah? I guess I'm just not looking forward to staying up all night studying."

"I have the whole test right here," he said. "Every problem, every answer."

For a moment, time stood still. Donnie's words seemed to hover in space as I tried to comprehend what he was saying.

"You what?" I asked. "What are you talking about?"

Apparently earlier that day, Sr. Margie had given a copy of the test to Dave and asked him to go make copies. She wasn't worried about entrusting him with the answers because he was in the non-algebra math class and, therefore, wouldn't be taking the test. Besides, his mother was a teacher. Surely *Dave* could be trusted.

Apparently not.

Dave made one extra copy of the test and then passed it on to Donnie, free of charge. Being the kind-hearted fellow that he was, Donnie then decided to make separate handwritten copies

for all the other algebra students.

Now at first, I have to admit I felt a little guilty about having access to this top-secret information. We went to a Catholic school—guilt was their main weapon in keeping us in line. But this was way too tempting. Who could pass up such a golden opportunity? All I had to do was memorize the answers, purposely miss a question or two during the test, and then sail my way to an easy A. Sure, I knew cheating wasn't exactly the *Catholic* thing to do; then again, giving us such a difficult and stressful test wasn't a very nice, either. Whatever happened to the Golden Rule, “do unto others” and all that junk?

Oh well. I wasn't about to let a little bit of guilt keep me from taking advantage of an unbelievable opportunity. This was too good to be true.

It's harder to cheat in a Catholic school than in your average public school. This isn't because it's more difficult to pull off; it's just that the teachers at a Catholic school have a very powerful weapon in their defense: guilt. What better way to keep kids from cheating and lying than by telling them that they will suffer eternal damnation for doing so?

I can only remember a couple of times when I actually cheated at S.S.P.P. It's not because I didn't want to. Believe me, things would have been a lot easier if I had sneaked a peek at my neighbor's test every once in a while. I chose not to cheat simply because I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I did. I had an incredible problem with guilt. The few times I did decide to cheat, my hands would sweat and my heart would pound with such intensity that I thought it might explode within my chest. Guilt was my Achilles' heel.

When Donnie called me with the answers to the test, I was conflicted. This was maybe the biggest test of my life. Should I do the honorable thing and just study my butt off? Or should I take advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity? This was going to take some serious thought.

After five minutes of serious deliberation, I told Donnie to read the test to me over the phone. I had no other choice. How could I let everyone else breeze their way through the test while I slogged my way through it? It was either cheat or fail—and in my family, failing just wasn't an option.

So, over the next half-hour or so, I copied the entire test and the corresponding answers as Donnie read them to me over the phone. It was the easiest night of studying I ever had.

When I woke up Friday morning, I felt like a new man. The birds were singing, the sun was shining, and I could just sense it was going to be a great day. Now that I had the test and all the answers in my possession, there was nothing to worry about anymore. I was just anxious to get to school and get it over with. I still didn't feel completely comfortable about the idea of cheating, but I really didn't have any other choice.

When I finally made it to homeroom, I was surprised at how calm everyone was. By that time, I'm sure every kid in the algebra class had a copy of the test. Usually when we had a test of this magnitude the anxiety would hang in the air like a foul odor. But not today. This morning the air was clear and everyone seemed calm as a cucumber as we headed over to church for the morning service.

Shortly after coming back to school, the 10 o'clock bell rang throughout the halls. Finally, it was time for the big test. This

was it—the moment of truth. Crib sheets in-hand, we made our way over to Sr. Margie's room and took our places.

As I looked around the room, the calmness I had witnessed earlier in the morning had been replaced by nervous tension. Eric was gnawing furiously at his fingernails while his knee was bouncing up and down like the needle on a sewing machine. Jon was taking deep breaths and stretching his neck as if he was preparing for a heavyweight boxing match. Donnie, the human Xerox machine, sat with eyes closed, his head resting in his hands like he was meditating or maybe even praying. This wasn't going to be any walk in the park. Even though we had the ultimate cheat sheets in our possession, it was still going to be pretty hard to pull off. The potential for disaster was substantial. Twenty-one kids all had a copy of the test. That means there were twenty-one chances that someone could screw up and blow it for the rest of us. One mistake, one careless slip, and our secret plan could end with cataclysmic results.

As far as I know, every single kid had a copy of the test. Donnie had worked diligently throughout the night making handwritten copies to make sure no one was left out. Taking one final glance at my copy, I crinkled it up and threw it into the trashcan. I felt confident that I had memorized the test, and I wanted to make sure to destroy any incriminating evidence.

There was no way to turn back now. I doubt if any of us had spent more than a few minutes actually studying for the exam. We had passed the point of no return; cheating was our only option.

Finally, Sr. Margie walked into the room. "Good morning, everyone. Make sure you have a piece or two of scrap paper, and then we can get started."

As Sr. Margie began to pass out the exam, it was obvious that everyone was extremely tense. "Boy, you guys sure are quiet this morning," she said. "You must be tired from being up all night studying." She gave us a little wink. "Don't worry. I'm sure you'll all do fine. These problems should be nothing new to you."

If she only knew...

Sr. Margie went from desk to desk passing out the exam. Receiving my copy, I immediately went to work while my memory was still fresh. Eventually, she made her way over to Jon, who had foolishly hidden his test copy within a rather excessive pile of scrap paper on his desk. Instead of one or two pieces, he had more like 20.

"Jon, you don't need all this scrap paper," said Sr. Margie, as she went to grab the superfluous pile of paper. That's when Jon panicked. He lunged forward, grabbed the pile of paper, and held on for dear life. The rest of us watched in horror as Jon was suddenly involved in a scrap-paper tug-of-war with the teacher.

"Jonathan!" Sr. Margie snapped. "What's wrong with you? Let go!" It was an incredible scene. Back and forth they went, neither one willing to give in. The battle probably only lasted a few seconds, but to us it was like an eternity. It all seemed to be happening in slow motion.

Then, with one final tug, Sr. Margie ripped the pile of paper out of Jon's hands. She immediately began to rifle through it and soon found his bootleg copy of the test.

"Jonathan!" Sr. Margie gasped. "What is this? I can't believe you!" She looked stunned as she stood over Jon's desk holding the cheat sheet. The rest of us tried to appear equally shocked. There was no loyalty here. At this point it was every man for

himself.

Our charade did not fool Sr. Margie, however, who began to make her way around to each desk. First she approached Nate who tried in vain to remain calm and conceal his copy at the same time. Nate had foolishly hid his copy within his desk, and it was hanging out and resting on his lap. Sr. Margie quickly snatched it up and continued on to the next desk.

The now irate nun made her way around to each person, finding copy after copy of the exam. Fortunately, I had already thrown mine away. But by this point it was obvious that this was a mass conspiracy. Sr. Margie needed no further evidence. She cancelled the test on the spot.

“I can't believe you people!” Sr. Margie glared in disappointment at us from the front of the room. “You're supposed to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation in a few weeks, and here you are lying and cheating! I can't tell you how disappointed I am in each and every one of you! Put your heads down and be quiet while I try to figure out what I'm going to do about this.” Clearly devastated, she exited the room.

For the next few moments I sat in disbelief. This was a nightmare. What would I tell my parents? What gruesome punishment would we have to face for planning such a sinister crime? Prison? Exile? A really hard spanking with one of those wooden paddles with the holes in it? It was all too terrible to imagine. How could this have happened? How could we have been so stupid to think we could get away with such an elaborate scheme? It all seemed so surreal. I even felt a slight kinship with Eric as we exchanged glances from across the room. At that moment we were no longer enemies; we were co-conspirators. For the first time ever, I saw fear in his eyes. We

were both in the same boat now, and it was sinking fast. I could only imagine what would happen once Sr. Peggy found out...

“All stand! The honorable Sr. Peggy presiding!” The bailiff’s voice announced the judge’s arrival.

“Please be seated.” Judge Sr. Peggy studied the room. “First let me say that I have never seen such a display of dishonesty and a lack of morals in all my years,” she said. “Not only was this a cowardly act, but it was also one which demonstrated deplorable laziness. I have never been so disappointed in the state of our youth and in its ability for making intelligent, moral decisions.

“Before I pass sentence, do the defendants have anything they wish to say for themselves.”

“I do your honor,” I said rising from my seat. “I do admit that I glanced—briefly—at the test. However, unlike my co-defendants, I threw away my copy long before the test actually began. I studied very hard for this exam, and I don’t think that I should be grouped in with these common criminals.

“Sit down, Mr. Brkich!” Judge Sr. Peggy snapped. My co-defendants glared at me as I took my seat. It was too late for excuses now anyway. The prosecution’s case was simply too solid. I would have to respect the judge’s decision and accept my punishment with dignity.

Finally, she read aloud our sentence.

“In considering all the evidence, I have come up with a sentence that I believe to be fair and just. For the crime of cheating, you will all be required to return next fall and complete the eighth grade...ALL OVER AGAIN!!!”

The courtroom exploded with activity at this unprecedented sentence. People gasped and cried out as the judge pounded her gavel, trying to regain control of the room. I sat back in my chair as the reality

of the situation hit me like a load of bricks...

“Val! Hey...Val, are you alright?” Slowly, I emerged from my daydream as Beans shook me back into reality. “Com'on, man,” he said, “it's time for lunch.”

The nightmarish sentence was just a figment of my imagination. But it still didn't change the fact that we had been caught and would be punished accordingly. I could only hope that my daydream wouldn't become a reality.

Hours later there was still no word from Sr. Peggy. We weren't really sure what to make of her silence. But the way we saw it, no news was good news. What was the big deal anyway? It wasn't like we were the first kids ever to get caught cheating. I'd seen kids get busted hundreds of times before, and they had all lived to tell about it. Heck, the teachers probably *expected* us to cheat. Surely they didn't think we could absorb and comprehend all of this complicated information without a little extra help every now and then. We were just kids, for Pete's sake. We didn't know any better.

Besides, they should have been proud of us for nearly pulling off such an elaborate scheme. Personally I think it showed quite a bit of ingenuity and teamwork. Other kids might have just given up and failed the test. Not us. We used our resourcefulness and creativity to find a solution to the problem. It was really a thing of beauty. So we cheated — big deal. Maybe Sr. Margie would open up her mind and see things from our point of view? Maybe she would realize that we had no choice but to cheat? Maybe it would all be forgotten?

Maybe not. No sooner had we begun to relax when an announcement confirmed our worst fears.

“Attention...attention, please. Would Sr. Margie's algebra class please go down to the library at once.” Sr. Peggy's voice blared from the public address system. Obviously she had been debriefed of the situation. We were in for it now.

I felt helpless as I arose from my seat and headed out the door. This was it—the beginning of the end. All hopes of this incident being forgotten melted away as we marched out the door toward our inevitable doom. First we would receive our punishment from Sr. Peggy. Then, if we survived, our parents would be notified, and it would be the end of happiness altogether. My parents would never understand what I had done. No explanation I could conjure up would justify my actions. They would never see that cheating was my only option. I would have to spend the rest of my childhood in hard labor, isolated from all that was important to me: my toys, my friends, and, most important of all, television. The thought of it was almost too much to bear.

Walking down to the library, my mind raced. By this time I had already convinced myself that I was innocent. Sure, maybe I had glanced at the answers, momentarily, but I hadn't been caught red-handed like the others. I still would've had to work through the problems on my own. The other kids...they were the real criminals here! Why should I have to suffer the same fate as them? Surely Sr. Peggy would see that I was an innocent bystander.

Still, as we approached the library, I couldn't help but become overcome with panic. My palms sweating, my heart racing, I felt like at any moment I could black out. For a brief moment I actually thought about running. It would be easy. I could take off down the hall, burst through the front door, and

leave all this behind me forever. Then I could hop a freight train out of town and go somewhere far away where they wouldn't know me or care that I had cheated on some stupid test. I could start a brand-new life, living off of the land and saving money until I was old enough to go to Astronaut School. Soon I'd be a famous astronaut, exploring distant planets and far off galaxies. Years later, while sitting safely in my space capsule, sipping on a cool glass of Tang, I could look back and laugh at Sr. Margie, Sr. Peggy, and anyone else who worried about trivial things like algebra tests. All I had to do was turn and run.

But I just didn't have the guts to go through with it. It was a great plan, but I couldn't just leave my family and friends behind. Besides, who would take over my paper route when I was in outer space?

Soon the entire algebra class was seated in the library. Trembling with fear, I waited for Sr. Peggy to walk into the room. It was an anxious few minutes. We all knew that she'd be angrier than we had ever seen before. My only hope was to somehow convince her I had been falsely accused.

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps—slow and steady, like clockwork. They could only belong to one person. We immediately perked up in our seats and held our collective breath.

Sr. Peggy emerged from the darkness and appeared in the doorway. She was such a powerful figure. Thick and sturdily built. Her hair, short and practical. Her hands, clamped firmly behind her back, a stern look upon her face. She had never looked so intimidating, so frightening.

We sat like statues, frozen in our seats. No one dared move or make a sound. Sr. Peggy began to pace back and forth in front

of us like a pit bull, her right index finger pressed against her pursed lips. She scanned the room as she made eye contact with each one of us. We knew that, at any moment, her powerful voice would burst our eardrums, like the blast of a mighty elephant just before charging.

Finally, she broke the unbearable silence.

“What did you think you could accomplish by cheating?” It was a clear and simple question. Of course, no one dared to speak. We knew there was no good answer it. Any response could be fatal.

“In all my years as principal,” she continued, “I have never seen such blatant disrespect and dishonesty.” My heart pounded, each beat stronger than the one before. So far Sr. Peggy had remained calm, but we knew this would not last. The fuse had been lit, and this powder keg was about to explode.

Sr. Peggy made her way over to the door of the library, which was still open at the time. For a moment she just stood there, motionless. Suddenly, she grabbed hold of the door and with one swift motion slammed it shut, creating a deafening boom that was heard three counties over.

“What made you think you could get away with something like this!?” she yelled. Once again, no one was brave enough to answer her.

Moving in front of Joe, she smashed her hand down on the wooden table. “I want an answer...NOW!” Joe, however, remained silent. Did she honestly think any of us were crazy enough to...

“I guess we weren't thinking.” A voice broke in from the other side of the room. Unbelievably, Dave had somehow built up the nerve to answer her.

"Excuse me?" Sr. Peggy replied, swiftly making her way over to him. "What did you say, Mr. Peterson?" Don't answer her!

"I said...I guess...um...I guess we just weren't thinking." Dave repeated his answer, now obviously regretting his words.

"You weren't thinking?" Sr. Peggy pondered his answer. "You weren't thinking?" She turned and walked to the front of the room.

Seeing that things weren't going very well, I felt it my duty to intercede and explain our actions before Sr. Peggy got even more upset. So, against my better judgment, I slowly raised my hand and waited. It took a few seconds, but eventually Sr. Peggy noticed me. She nodded her head in my direction, saying nothing.

"Sr. Peggy," my voice cracked as I tried to remain calm, "I think I can explain what Dave was trying to say."

The nun's eyebrows rose as she crossed her arms and leaned on the table behind her.

"Oh you can, can you?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Well then, please, by all means, Mr. Brkich...go right ahead." I could tell by her tone that she was quite anxious to hear my explanation. Now, if I could only think of one...

"Well," I began, "I think what Dave was trying to say...was that we just weren't thinking when we did what we did." There, I thought. That cleared things up. I confidently awaited Sr. Peggy's response.

But as each second passed without her saying a word, I felt more and more tense. Maybe I hadn't made myself clear. "Sr. Peggy..." I began again, but before I could get another word out,

she exploded.

"Put your hand down, Mr. Brkich!" Apparently she didn't appreciate my explanation. "You weren't thinking?" she asked. "Is that it? You weren't thinking?" This time she didn't wait for a response. "Well...think about this: Each and every one of you will be receiving a failing grade for this test! No exceptions!"

Ouch. Although we all probably knew it was coming, actually hearing it didn't make it any easier to accept. It was a devastating blow.

"And as for Confirmation..." she continued, "I will leave that up to Sr. Margie's discretion." And then she was gone.

I felt terrible. Even though we always acted like she was some dreadful tyrant, we all knew how much Sr. Peggy really cared about us. Now we had let her down like never before.

Sr. Margie had been standing off in the corner of the room, observing. Now she stepped in front of us to speak. "Well," she said, "I think you all got off pretty easy. I hope you all saw how hurt Sr. Peggy was by your actions. She's known most of you since the first grade, and she cares about all of you very much." Sr. Margie wasn't making us feel any better. "I think you all owe her a big apology.

"As for Confirmation," she continued, "I don't know what to do." My heart stopped. I could think of a million ways to explain a bad grade to my parents, but not being Confirmed...that was a different story altogether. How could I explain that I had done something so deceitful, so criminal? It was too terrible to imagine.

"However," Sr. Margie continued, "I don't think it would be very fair to your parents to take this wonderful occasion away from them simply because of your poor judgment. I just hope

you guys have learned your lesson.”

Hallelujah! It was a miracle! No paddling, no detention, no expulsion—we got off with a slap on the wrist, so to speak.

“Holy cow, Val!” said Donnie. “I can't believe they let us off so easy!”

“Are you kiddin' me,” I said. “I knew they wouldn't do anything to us. I mean, com'on, we're the eighth-graders—we rule this place.”

Epilogue

Confirmation night was one I'll never forget. The ceremony itself was held over in the church, with a reception immediately afterward in the cafeteria. I don't think any of us realized it would be the last time we would all be in the same place at the same time. To us, it was just another boring hour in church. Instead of embracing the moment, we all just stared at our watches and prayed for the time to go by quickly.

Forty-some kids had spent eight long years together learning, sharing, and growing as one group. Now these same kids were moving on to different towns, different high schools, and different futures. Of course, we're too young to comprehend the significance of these changes. We didn't think things would be any different when we moved on to high school; in reality, our lives would never be the same. We would never again be part of such a tightly knit community like Sts. Peter & Paul; a place where your friends and teachers know you so well, it's like one big family—a dysfunctional family, but a family nonetheless. It was more than just a school to us. It was

our second home. It was the place where our first friendships were forged, and where our personalities had developed and evolved. Our teachers at S.S.P.P. were the first to teach us about the world around us, and they gave us the necessary tools to function within it. At the time, we may have thought they were trying to torture us with boring homework assignments and impossible tests. But now we know they were just trying to give us the best possible education. The teachers knew us almost as well as our parents did. In some ways, they knew us even better. I think that's what made it such a special place.

It's ironic how we were in such a hurry to get out of there. We had no idea that one day we would actually miss those temperamental nuns and grouchy teachers. We had no understanding of the challenges and the changes that awaited us. After eight long years, we were just glad we had survived.

As the ceremony concluded and people were making their way out of the church, I spotted Eric standing with his dad in the aisle. When I turned and saw him standing there, it looked as if he had been watching me, waiting for me to see him. We came together by the door as we waited in line to exit the church.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey," he replied. For what was supposed to be a celebration, Eric looked pretty down.

"Are you heading over to the reception?" I asked him.

"No," he said. "My parents are taking me out for dinner." He flashed a half-hearted smile. Mr. Figler had stepped off to the side. I guess he wanted to give us a chance to say goodbye.

"Oh, yeah," I said. "That's nice."

Of course, it wasn't nice. It was awful. We just stood there looking at each other for the last time, neither one of us knowing

what to say. At that moment, for the first time ever, I actually felt sorry for all the crap I had put Eric through over the years. It was strange. This was my greatest rival and worst enemy. In all the years we were at odds, I never felt bad about anything I had ever said or done to him. Now I couldn't help but feel bad. Eric had also once been my best friend. We used to be so alike. I never could figure out what went wrong. All I knew was I was on my way to celebrate a great accomplishment with my friends. But not Eric. He couldn't. He didn't have any friends. Suddenly, everything we had ever fought about seemed trivial. Part of me wanted to reach out, shake his hand, and apologize for everything. I wanted to let him know I was sorry for always being on his case. I wanted to forget the past and go celebrate our achievement together, as friends.

Deep down, though, I knew that was impossible. He and I weren't friends. We hadn't been in a long time. And now it was too late for apologies.

"Hey...well, uh...take it easy," I said as we walked out the door.

"Yeah," he replied. "Take it easy." Then Mr. Figler put a hand on Eric's shoulder and the two of them turned and walked away. Later that summer, Eric's dad got a new job, and they moved away to another state. I never saw him again.*

The summer that followed our final year at S.S.P.P. went by quickly, just as they always did back then. Days were spent riding bikes, climbing trees, and cooling off in my parents' swimming pool. At night we'd play Release and stay out as long as possible. Sometimes we'd lie on our backs, stare up at the stars, and dream about the future. It was my last truly free

summer.

By that autumn Sts. Peter & Paul was a distant memory. Everything I had become accustomed to since I was six years old was now lost within the sea of confusion that was public high school. Instead of 250 students, there were 1,200. Instead of all female teachers, we now had men in the mix. Instead of religion class, we had Home Economics. It was all very strange.

The hardest part was getting used to all the new faces. For the most part, my old classmates were nowhere to be found. Eric had moved away to some other state, a few of my friends ended up going to different schools, and the rest just seemed to dissolve into the crowd as they made new friends and took different paths.

To make things even worse, we had gone from the top of the ladder at Sts. Peter & Paul to being on the bottom rung as high school freshmen. Our entire world had been turned upside down. As eighth-graders, we were the elite. But as high school freshmen, we were nothing. We were the bottom feeders. The lowest of the low. It was a difficult transition, and most of us were terribly unprepared for it. We had run out of S.S.P.P. as fast as we could, only to find ourselves longing for the comfort and security we had once taken for granted.

But of course, our homesickness was only temporary. As the seasons changed, we did too. By the end of that first semester, we had pretty much gotten the hang of things as each of us got comfortable in our new surroundings. Most my closest friends were still around, and we helped each other adjust to the changes of high school life. We still sat together at lunch, and if we were lucky enough to have the same class, we'd sit by each other and screw around just like always. Only now, if we got in

trouble, we wouldn't get sent out into the hall, we'd get detention—a punishment worse than anything we could have imagined at Sts. Peter & Paul. Getting your head screamed off by Sr. Peggy was pretty bad; having to stay after school... now *that* was painful.

Throughout high school I made a lot of great new friends. I always felt closest, however, to those from Sts. Peter & Paul. Over the years we had gone through so much together. They were there when my life revolved around baseball cards, and then when it started revolving around girls. They were there when I first learned to add and subtract, and then when I learned my first theorem. They were there with me for eight long years, when I learned so much about life and friendship, and about myself.

They're not just my friends; they were and forever will be my brothers.

** "Eric" and I actually reconnected recently, thanks to Facebook, of all things. I apologized to him for all the trouble I caused him back when we were kids. It seems silly, after all those years, but it was something that truly bothered me, once I got older and looked back on my childhood. Eric was sincerely grateful for the apology, which made it all the more meaningful. An old college professor of mine pointed out that he thought my collection of stories was, in itself, sort of an apology. And I agree.*

I'm just glad I got to rid myself of a little more of that Catholic guilt.

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