Lucía Berlin, A Manual for Cleaning Women (2015)

El Tim

A nun stood in each classroom door, black robes floating into the hall with the wind. The voices of the first grade, praying, *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with Thee.* From across the hall, the second grade began, clear, *Hail Mary, full of grace.* I stopped in the center of the building, and waited for the triumphant voices of the third grade, their voices joined by the first grade, *Our Father, Who art in Heaven*, by the fourth grade, then, deep, *Hail Mary, full of grace.*

As the children grew older they prayed more quickly, so that gradually the voices began to blend, to merge into one sudden joyful chant . . . *In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*

I taught Spanish in the new junior high, which lay at the opposite end of the playground like a child's colored toy. Every morning, before class, I went through the grade school, to hear the prayers, but also simply to go into the building, as one would go in a church. The school had been a mission, built in 1700 by the Spaniards, built to stand in the desert for a long time. It was different from other old schools, whose stillness and solidity is still a shell for the children who pass through them. It had kept the peace of a mission, of a sanctuary.

The nuns laughed in the grade school, and the children laughed. The nuns were all old, not like tired old women who

clutch their bags at a bus stop, but proud, loved by their God and by their children. They responded to love with tenderness, with soft laughter that was contained, guarded, behind the heavy wooden doors.

Several junior high nuns swept through the playground, checking for cigarette smoke. These nuns were young and nervous. They taught "underprivileged children," "borderline delinquents," and their thin faces were tired, sick of a blank stare. They could not use awe or love like the grade school nuns. Their recourse was impregnability, indifference to the students who were their duty and their life.

The rows of windows in the ninth grade flashed as Sister Lourdes opened them, as usual, seven minutes before the bell. I stood outside the initialed orange doors, watching my ninth-grade students as they paced back and forth in front of the wire fence, their bodies loose and supple, necks bobbing as they walked, arms and legs swaying to a beat, to a trumpet that no one else could hear.

They leaned against the wire fence, speaking in English-Spanish-Hipster dialect, laughing soundlessly. The girls wore the navy-blue uniforms of the school. Like muted birds they flirted with the boys, who cocked their plumed heads, who were brilliant in orange or yellow or turquoise pegged pants. They wore open black shirts or V-neck sweaters with nothing under them, so that their crucifixes gleamed against their smooth brown chests . . . the crucifix of the pachuco, which was also tattooed on the back of their hand.

"Good morning, dear."

"Good morning, Sister." Sister Lourdes had come outside to see if the seventh grade was in line.

Sister Lourdes was the principal. She had hired me, reluctantly having to pay someone to teach, since none of the nuns spoke Spanish.

"So, as a lay teacher," she had said, "the first one at San Marco, it may be hard for you to control the students, especially since many of them are almost as old as you. You must not make the mistake that many of my young nuns do. Do not try to be their friend. These students think in terms of power and weakness. You must keep your power . . . through aloofness, discipline, punishment, control. Spanish is an elective, give as many Fs as you like. During the first three weeks you may transfer any of your pupils to my Latin class. I have had no volunteers," she smiled. "You will find this a great help."

The first month had gone well. The threat of the Latin class was an advantage; by the end of the second week I had eliminated seven students. It was a luxury to teach such a relatively small class, and a class with the lower quarter removed. My native Spanish helped a great deal. It was a surprise to them that a "gringa" could speak as well as their parents, better even than they. They were impressed that I recognized their obscene words, their slang for marijuana and police. They worked hard. Spanish was close, important to them. They behaved well, but their sullen obedience and their automatic response were an affront to me.

They mocked words and expressions that I used and began to use them as much as I. "La Piña," they jeered, because of my hair, and soon the girls cut their hair like mine. "The idiot can't write," they whispered, when I printed on the blackboard, but they began to print all of their papers.

These were not yet the pachucos, the hoods that they tried hard to be, flipping a switchblade into a desk, blushing when it slipped and fell. They were not yet saying: "You can't show me nothing." They waited, with a shrug, to be shown. So what could I show them? The world I knew was no better than the one they had the courage to defy.

I watched Sister Lourdes whose strength was not, as mine, a front for their respect. The students saw her faith in the God, in

the life that she had chosen; they honored it, never letting her know their tolerance for the harshness she used for control.

She couldn't laugh with them either. They laughed only in derision, only when someone revealed himself with a question, with a smile, a mistake, a fart. Always, as I silenced their mirthless laughter, I thought of the giggles, the shouts, the grade school counterpoint of joy.

Once a week I laughed with the ninth grade. On Mondays, when suddenly there would be a banging on the flimsy metal door, an imperious BOOM BOOM BOOM that rattled the windows and echoed through the building. Always at the tremendous noise I would jump, and the class would laugh at me.

"Come in!" I called, and the knocking would stop, and we laughed, when it was only a tiny first grader. He would pad in sneakers to my desk. "Good morning," he whispered, "may I have the cafeteria list?" Then he would tiptoe away and slam the door, which was funny, too.

"Mrs. Lawrence, would you come inside for a minute?" I followed Sister Lourdes into her office and waited while she rang the bell.

"Timothy Sanchez is coming back to school." She paused, as if I should react. "He has been in the detention home, one of many times—for theft and narcotics. They feel that he should finish school as quickly as possible. He is much older than his class, and according to their tests he is an exceptionally bright boy. It says here that he should be 'encouraged and challenged.'"

"Is there any particular thing you want me to do?"

"No, in fact, I can't advise you at all . . . he is quite a different problem. I thought I should mention it. His parole officer will be checking on his progress."

The next morning was Halloween, and the grade school had come in costume. I lingered to watch the witches, the hundreds

of devils who trembled their morning prayers. The bell had rung when I got to the door of the ninth grade. "Sacred Heart of Mary, pray for us," they said. I stood at the door while Sister Lourdes took the roll. They rose as I entered the room, "Good morning." Their chairs scraped as they sat down.

The room became still. "El Tim!" someone whispered.

He stood in the door, silhouetted like Sister Lourdes from the skylight in the hall. He was dressed in black, his shirt open to the waist, his pants low and tight on lean hips. A gold crucifix glittered from a heavy chain. He was half-smiling, looking down at Sister Lourdes, his eyelashes creating jagged shadows down his gaunt cheeks. His black hair was long and straight. He smoothed it back with long slender fingers, quick, like a bird.

I watched the awe of the class. I looked at the young girls, the pretty young girls who whispered in the restroom not of dates or love but of marriage and abortion. They were tensed, watching him, flushed and alive.

Sister Lourdes stepped into the room. "Sit here, Tim." She motioned to a seat in front of my desk. He moved across the room, his broad back stooped, neck forward, tssch-tssch, tssch-tssch, the pachuco beat. "Dig the crazy nun!" he grinned, looking at me. The class laughed. "Silence!" Sister Lourdes said. She stood beside him. "This is Mrs. Lawrence. Here is your Spanish book." He seemed not to hear her. Her beads rattled nervously.

"Button your shirt," she said. "Button your shirt!"

He moved his hands to his chest, began with one to move the button in the light, with the other to inspect the buttonhole. The nun shoved his hands away, fumbled with his shirt until it was buttoned.

"Don't know how I ever got along without you, Sister," he drawled. She left the room.

It was Tuesday, dictation. "Take out a paper and pencil." The class complied automatically. "You too, Tim."

"Paper," he commanded quietly. Sheets of paper fought for his desk.

"Llegó el hijo," I dictated. Tim stood up and started toward the back of the room. "Pencil's broken," he said. His voice was deep and hoarse, like the hoarseness people have when they are about to cry. He sharpened his pencil slowly, turning the sharpener so that it sounded like brushes on a drum.

"No tenían fé." Tim stopped to put his hand on a girl's hair.

"Sit down," I said.

"Cool it," he muttered. The class laughed.

He handed in a blank paper, the name "EL TIM" across the top.

From that day everything revolved around El Tim. He caught up quickly with the rest of the class. His test papers and his written exercises were always excellent. But the students responded only to his sullen insolence in class, to his silent, unpunishable denial. Reading aloud, conjugating on the board, discussions, all of the things that had been almost fun were now almost impossible. The boys were flippant, ashamed to get things right; the girls embarrassed, awkward in front of him.

I began to give mostly written work, private work that I could check from desk to desk. I assigned many compositions and essays, even though this was not supposed to be done in ninth-grade Spanish. It was the only thing Tim liked to do, that he worked on intently, erasing and recopying, thumbing the pages of a Spanish dictionary on his desk. His compositions were imaginative, perfect in grammar, always of impersonal things . . . a street, a tree. I wrote comments and praise on them. Sometimes I read his papers to the class, hoping that they would be impressed, encouraged by his work. Too late I realized that it only confused them for him to be praised, that he triumphed anyway with a sneer . . . *"Pues, la tengo . . ."* I've got her pegged.

Emiterio Perez repeated everything that Tim said. Emiterio was retarded, being kept in the ninth grade until he was old enough to quit school. He passed out papers, opened windows. I had him do everything the other students did. Chuckling, he wrote endless pages of neat formless scribbles that I graded and handed back. Sometimes I would give him a B and he would be very happy. Now even he would not work. *"Para qué, hombre?"* Tim whispered to him. Emiterio would become confused, looking from Tim to me. Sometimes he would cry.

Helplessly, I watched the growing confusion of the class, the confusion that even Sister Lourdes could no longer control. There was not silence now when she entered the room, but unrest . . . a brushing of a hand over a face, an eraser tapping, flipping pages. The class waited. Always, slow and deep, would come Tim's voice. "It's cold in here, Sister, don't you think?" "Sister, I got something the matter with my eye, come see." We did not move as each time, every day, automatically the nun buttoned Tim's shirt. "Everything all right?" she would ask me and leave the room.

One Monday, I glanced up and saw a small child coming toward me. I glanced at the child, and then, smiling, I glanced at Tim.

"They're getting littler every time . . . have you noticed?" he said, so only I could hear. He smiled at me. I smiled back, weak with joy. Then with a harsh scrape he shoved back his chair and walked toward the back of the room. Halfway, he paused in front of Dolores, an ugly, shy little girl. Slowly he rubbed his hands over her breasts. She moaned and ran crying from the room.

"Come here!" I shouted to him. His teeth flashed.

"Make me," he said. I leaned against the desk, dizzy.

"Get out of here, go home. Don't ever come back to my class."

"Sure," he grinned. He walked past me to the door, fingers snapping as he moved . . . tsch-tsch, tsch-tsch. The class was silent.

As I was leaving to find Dolores, a rock smashed through the window, landing with shattered glass on my desk.

"What is going on!" Sister Lourdes was at the door. I couldn't get past her.

"I sent Tim home."

She was white, her bonnet shaking.

"Mrs. Lawrence, it is your duty to handle him in the classroom."

"I'm sorry, Sister, I can't do it."

"I will speak to the Mother Superior," she said. "Come to my office in the morning. Get in your seat!" she shouted at Dolores, who had come in the back door. The nun left.

"Turn to page ninety-three," I said. "Eddie, read and translate the first paragraph."

I didn't go to the grade school the next morning. Sister Lourdes was waiting, sitting behind her desk. Outside the glass doors of the office, Tim leaned against the wall, his hands hooked in his belt.

Briefly, I told the nun what had happened the day before. Her head was bowed as I spoke.

"I hope you will find it possible to regain the respect of this boy," she said.

"I'm not going to have him in my class," I said. I stood in front of her desk, gripping the wooden edge.

"Mrs. Lawrence, we were told that this boy needed special attention, that he needed 'encouragement and challenge.'"

"Not in junior high. He is too old and too intelligent to be here."

"Well, you are going to have to learn to deal with this problem."

"Sister Lourdes, if you put Tim in my Spanish class, I will go to the Mother Superior, to his parole officer. I'll tell them what happened. I'll show them the work that my pupils did before he came and the work they have done since. I will show them Tim's work, it doesn't belong in the ninth grade."

She spoke quietly, dryly. "Mrs. Lawrence, this boy is our responsibility. The parole board turned him over to us. He is going to remain in your class." She leaned toward me, pale. "It is our duty as teachers to control such problems, to teach in spite of them."

"Well, I can't do it."

"You are weak!" she hissed.

"Yes, I am. He has won. I can't stand what he does to the class and to me. If he comes back I resign."

She slumped back in her chair. Tired, she spoke. "Give him another chance. A week. Then you can do as you please."

"All right."

She rose and opened the door for Tim. He sat on the edge of her desk.

"Tim," she began softly, "will you prove to me, to Mrs. Lawrence, and to the class that you are sorry?" He didn't answer.

"I don't want to send you back to the detention home."

"Why not?"

"Because you are a bright boy. I want to see you learn something here, to graduate from San Marco's. I want to see you go on to high school, to . . ."

"Come on, Sister," Tim drawled. "You just want to button my shirt."

"Shut up!" I hit him across the mouth. My hand remained white in his dark skin. He did not move. I wanted to be sick. Sister Lourdes left the room. Tim and I stood, facing each other, listening as she started the ninth-grade prayers . . . *Blessed art Thou amongst women, Blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus* . . .

"How come you hit me?" Tim asked softly.

I started to answer him, to say, "Because you were insolent and unkind," but I saw his smile of contempt as he waited for me to say just that.

"I hit you because I was angry. About Dolores and the rock. Because I felt hurt and foolish."

His dark eyes searched my face. For an instant the veil was gone.

"I guess we're even then," he said.

"Yes," I said, "let's go to class."

I walked with Tim down the hall, avoiding the beat of his walk.