

Lucia Berlin, A MANUAL FOR CLEANING  
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## Stars and Saints

Wait. Let me explain . . .

My whole life I've run into these situations, like that morning with the psychiatrist. He was staying in the cottage behind my house while his new house was being remodeled. He looked really nice, handsome too, and of course I wanted to make a good impression, would have taken over brownies but didn't want him to think I was aggressive. One morning, just at dawn, as usual, I was drinking coffee and looking out the window at my garden, which was wonderful then, the sweet peas and delphiniums and cosmos. I felt, well, I felt full of joy . . . Why do I hesitate to tell you this? I don't want you to think I'm sappy, I want to make a good impression. Anyway I was happy, and I tossed a handful of birdseed out onto the deck, sat there smiling to myself as dozens of mourning doves and finches flew down to eat the seeds. Then flash, two big cats leaped onto the deck and began chomping away on birds, feathers flying, just at the very moment the psychiatrist came out his door. He looked at me, aghast, said "How terrible!" and fled. He avoided me completely after that morning, and it wasn't my imagination. There was no way I could explain that it had all happened so fast, that I wasn't smiling away at the cats chewing the birds. It was that my happiness about the sweet peas and the finches hadn't had time to fade.

As far back as I can remember I have made a very bad first impression. That time in Montana when all I was trying to do was get Kent Shreve's socks off so we could go barefoot but they were pinned to his drawers. But what I really want to talk about is St. Joseph's School. Now, psychiatrists (please don't get the wrong idea, I'm not obsessed by psychiatrists or anything)—it seems to me psychiatrists concentrate entirely too much upon the primal scene and preoedipal deprivation and they ignore the trauma of grade school and other children, who are cruel and ruthless.

I won't even go into what happened at Vilas, the first school I went to in El Paso. A big misunderstanding all around. So two months into the year, of third grade, there I was in the playground outside of St. Joseph's. My new school. Absolutely terrified. I had thought that wearing a uniform would help. But I had this heavy metal brace on my back, for what was called the curvature, let's face it, a hunchback, so I had to get the white blouse and plaid skirt way too big to go over it, and of course my mother didn't think to at least hem up the skirt.

Another big misunderstanding. Months later, Sister Mercedes was hall monitor. She was the young sweet one who must have had a tragic love affair. He probably died in the war, a bombardier. As we filed past her, two in a row, she touched my hunchback and whispered, "Dear child, you have a cross to bear." Now how was she to know that I had become a religious fanatic by that time, that those innocent words of hers would only convince me of my predestined link to Our Savior?

(Oh, and mothers. Just the other day, on the bus, a mother got on with her little boy. She was obviously a working mother, had picked him up at nursery school, was tired but glad to see him, asked him about his day. He told her all these things he had done. "You're so special!" she said as she hugged him. "Special means I'm retarded!" the kid said. He had big tears in his eyes and sat there scared to death while his mother went on smiling away just like me with the birds.)



That day on the playground I knew that never in my life was I going to get in. Not just fit in, get in. In one corner two girls were twirling a heavy rope and one by one beautiful rosy-cheeked girls would spring from line to jump under the rope, jump, jump and out again just in time and back in line. Whap, whap, no one missed a beat. In the middle of the playground was a round swing, with a circular seat that spun dizzily merrily around and never stopped but laughing children leaped on and off it without a . . . not even without falling, without a change of pace. Everywhere around me on the playground was symmetry, synchronicity. Two nuns, their beads clicking in unison, their clean faces nodding as one to the children. Jacks. The ball bouncing with a clean crack on the cement, the dozen jacks flying into the air and caught all at once with the spin of a tiny wrist. Slap slap slap, other girls played intricate complicated hand-clapping games. There was a tiny little dutchman. Slap slap. I wandered around not only unable to get in but seemingly invisible, which was a mixed blessing. I fled around the corner of the building where I could hear noises and laughter from the school kitchen. I was hidden there from the playground; the friendly noises inside were reassuring to me. I couldn't go in there either though. But then there were shriekings and hollerings and a nun was saying, oh I can't I simply can't, and I knew then it was okay for me to go in because what she couldn't do was take the dead mice out of the traps. "I'll do that," I said. And the nuns were so pleased they didn't say anything about me being in the kitchen, except one of them did whisper "Protestant" to another one.

And that's how it started. Also they gave me a biscuit, hot and delicious, with butter. Of course I had had breakfast but it was so good I wolfed it down and they gave me another. Every day then in exchange for emptying and resetting two or three traps I not only got biscuits but a St. Christopher medal that I used later for a lunch token. This saved me the embarrassment before class started of lining up to exchange dimes for the medals we used for lunch.

Because of my back I was allowed to stay in the classroom during gym and recess. It was just the mornings that were hard, because the bus got there before the school was unlocked. I forced myself to try to make friends, to talk to girls from my class, but it was hopeless. They were all Catholic and had been together since kindergarten. To be fair, they were nice, normal children. I had been skipped in school, so was much younger, and had only lived in remote mining camps before the war. I didn't know how to say things like "Do you enjoy studying the Belgian Congo?" or "What are your hobbies?" I would lurch up to them and blurt out "My uncle has a glass eye." Or "I found a dead Kodiak bear with his face full of maggots." They would ignore me, or giggle or say "Liar, liar, pants on fire!"

So for a while I had someplace to go before school. I felt useful and appreciated. But then I heard the girls whispering "Charity case" along with "Protestant" and then they started calling me "Rat trap" and "Minnie Mouse." I pretended I didn't care and besides I loved the kitchen, the soft laughter and murmurs of the nun-cooks, who wore homespun nightgown-looking habits in the kitchen.

I had of course decided to become a nun by then, because they never looked nervous but mostly because of the black habits and the white coifs, the headdresses like giant starched white fleur-de-lis. I'll bet the Catholic church lost out on a lot of would-be nuns when they started dressing like ordinary meter maids. Then my mother visited the school to see how I was getting along. They said my classwork was excellent and my deportment perfect. Sister Cecilia told her how much they appreciated me in the kitchen and how they saw to it that I had a good breakfast. My mother, the snob, with her ratty old coat with the ratty fox collar the beady eyes had fallen out of. She was mortified, disgusted about the mice and really furious about the St. Christopher medal, because I had gone on getting my dime every morning and spending it on candy after school. Devious little thief. Whap. Whap. Mortified!



So that ended that, and it was a big misunderstanding all around. The nuns apparently thought I had been hanging around the kitchen because I was this poor hungry waif, and just gave me the mousetrap job out of charity, not because they really needed me at all. The problem is I still don't see how the false impression could have been avoided. Perhaps if I had turned down the biscuit?

That's how I ended up hanging out in church before school and really decided to become a nun, or a saint. The first mystery was that the rows of candles under each of the statues of Jesus and Mary and Joseph were all flickering and trembling as if there were gusts of wind when in fact the vast church was shut tight and none of the heavy doors were open. I believed that the spirit of God in the statues was so strong it made the candles flutter and hiss, tremulous with suffering. Each tiny burst of light lit up the caked blood on Jesus's bony white feet and it looked wet.

At first I stayed way in the back, giddy, drunk with the smell of incense. I knelt, praying. Kneeling was very painful, because of my back, and the brace dug into my spine. I was sure this made me holy and was penance for my sins but it hurt too bad so I finally stopped, just sat there in the dark church until the bell rang for class. Usually there was no one in the church but me, except for Thursday when Father Anselmo would go shut himself in the confessional. A few old women, girls from the upper school, once in a while a grade school pupil would make their way, stopping to kneel to the altar and cross themselves, kneeling and crossing again before they entered the other side of the confessional. What was puzzling was the varying time they took to pray when they left. I would have given anything in the whole wide world to know what went on in there. I'm not sure how long it was before I found myself inside, my heart pounding. It was more exquisite inside than I could have imagined. Smoky with myrrh, a velvet cushion to kneel on, a blessed virgin looking down upon me with infinite pity

and compassion. Through the carved screen was Father Anselmo, who was ordinarily a preoccupied little man. But he was silhouetted, like the man on Mamie's wall in the top hat. He could be anybody . . . Tyrone Power, my father, God. His voice was not like Father Anselmo at all but deep and softly echoing. He asked me to say a prayer I didn't know, so he said the lines and I repeated them, grievously sorry for having offended thee. Then he asked about my sins. I wasn't lying. I really and truly had no sins to confess. Not a one. I was so ashamed, surely I could think of something. Search deep into your heart, my child . . . Nothing. Desperate, wanting so badly to please I made one up. I had hit my sister on the head with a hairbrush. Do you envy your sister? Oh, yes, Father. Envy is a sin, my child, pray to have it removed from you. Three Hail Marys. As I prayed, kneeling, I realized that this was a short penance, next time I could do better. But there would be no next time. That day Sister Cecilia kept me after class. What made it worse was that she was so kind. She understood how I would want to experience the church's sacraments and mysteries. Mysteries, yes! But I was a Protestant and I wasn't baptized or confirmed. I was allowed to come to their school, and she was glad, because I was a good obedient pupil, but I couldn't take part in their church. I was to stay on the playground with the other children.

I had a terrible thought, pulled from my pocket my four Saint cards. Every time we got a perfect score in reading or arithmetic we got a star. On Fridays the pupil with the most stars was given a Saint card, similar to a baseball card except the halo had glitter on it. May I keep my Saints? I asked her, sick at heart.

"Of course you may, and I hope that you will be earning many more." She smiled at me and did me another favor. "You can still pray, dear, for guidance. Let us say a Hail Mary together." I closed my eyes and prayed fervently to our Mother, who will always have Sister Cecilia's face.



Whenever a siren sounded outside in the streets, near or far, Sister Cecilia had us stop whatever we were doing, lay our heads down on our desks, and say a Hail Mary. I still do that. Say a Hail Mary, I mean. Well, also I lay my head down on wooden desks, to listen to them, because they do make sounds, like branches in the wind, as if they were still trees. A lot of things were really bothering me in those days, like what gave life to the candles and where the sound came from in the desks. If everything in God's world has a soul, even the desks, since they have a voice, there must be a heaven. I couldn't go to heaven because I was Protestant. I'd have to go to limbo. I would rather have gone to hell than limbo, what an ugly word, like dumbbo, or mumbo jumbo, a place without any dignity at all.

I told my mother I wanted to become a Catholic. She and my grandpa had a fit. He wanted to put me back in Vilas school but she said no, it was full of Mexicans and juvenile delinquents. I told her there were lots of Mexicans at St. Joseph's but she said they came from nice families. Were we a nice family? I didn't know. What I still do is look in picture windows where families are sitting around and wonder what they do, how do they talk to one another?

Sister Cecilia and another nun came to our house one afternoon. I don't know why they came and they didn't get a chance to say. Everything was a mess. My mother crying and Mamie, my grandma, crying, Grandpa was drunk and went lunging at them calling them crows. The next day I was afraid Sister Cecilia would be mad at me and not say "Good-bye, dear" when she left me alone in the room at recess. But before she left she handed me a book called *Understood Betsy* and said she thought I would like it. It was the first real book I ever read, the first book I fell in love with.

She praised my work in class, and commented to the other students every time I got a star, or on Fridays when I was given a Saint

card. I did everything to please her, carefully scrolling A.M.D.G. at the top of every paper, rushing to erase the board. My prayers were the loudest, my hand the first to go up when she asked a question. She continued to give me books to read and once she gave me a paper bookmark that said "Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death." I showed it to Melissa Barnes in the cafeteria. I had foolishly believed that since Sister Cecilia liked me the girls would begin to like me too. But now instead of laughing at me they hated me. When I stood up to answer in class they would whisper Pet, pet, pet. Sister Cecilia chose me to collect the dimes and pass out the medals for lunch and when each girl took her medal she whispered Pet.

Then one day out of the clear blue sky my mother got mad at me because my father wrote me more than he did her. It's because I write to him more. No, you're his pet. One day I got home late. I had missed the bus from the plaza. She stood at the top of the stairs with a blue airmail letter from my father in one hand. With the other she lit a kitchen match on her thumbnail and burned the letter as I raced up the stairs. That always scared me. When I was little I didn't see the match, thought she lit her cigarettes with a flaming thumb.

I stopped talking. I didn't say, Well now I'm not going to talk anymore, I just gradually stopped and when the sirens passed I laid my head down on the desk and whispered the prayer to myself. When Sister Cecilia called on me I shook my head and sat back down. I stopped getting Saints and stars. It was too late. Now they called me dumb-dumb. She stayed in the classroom after they had left for gym. "What is wrong, dear? May I help you? Please talk to me." I locked my jaws and refused to look at her. She left and I sat there in the hot semidarkness of the classroom. She came back, later, with a copy of *Black Beauty* that she placed before me. "This is a lovely book, only it's very sad. Tell me, are you sad about something?"



I ran away from her and the book into the cloakroom. Of course there were no cloaks since it was so hot in Texas, but boxes of dusty textbooks. Easter decorations. Christmas decorations. Sister Cecilia followed me into the tiny room. She spun me around and forced me to my knees. "Let us pray," she said.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus . . . Her eyes were filled with tears. I could not bear their tenderness. I wrenched away from her grasp, accidentally knocking her down. Her headdress caught in a coat hook and was yanked off. Her head wasn't shaved like the girls said. She cried out and ran from the room.

I was sent home that same day, expelled from St. Joseph's for striking a nun. I don't know how she could have thought that I would hit her. It wasn't like that at all.