

## CHAPTER 1

## GOD TAPS ON MY SHOULDER

## —I IGNORE HIM

I would have had the perfect childhood if not for the adults in it. I had moved into a new colonial home in an mobile-y upward neighborhood called Foulk Woods; I was attending a brand spanking new school, Hanby Jr. High, (where I had my first kiss by a locker), and I had a new father, “Rocky.” The last part I was struggling with horrifically. “You’re not my dad,” I would yell as I rushed out the door: Slam. Fifteen year olds can be quite good at the running and slamming thing. They can also be rather adept at calling out adults, “Grownups are such hypocrites!” This was one of my new favorite words to use. I think Holden in *Catcher in the Rye* used the word phony something like thirty five times. Every adult authority was a ‘phony’ in that novel. “Watch your attitude,” my mom would yell after me. But I didn’t understand what an attitude was or how a person could watch one. I would just look at her as if she was sprouting green horns on her head. After all, wasn’t everything her fault?

I was quite an expert on phonies, because I had just been ‘kicked out’ of Ursuline Academy, the Catholic private school on Pennsylvania Avenue Wilmington. The brick building with its ivy encrusted exterior and the school campus lined with gnarled oaks and leafy pachysandra beds looks a little like Hogwarts. Harry and his friends might be found flying through its long hallways and by its tall windows after the lights flickered off, and the nuns went home to remove their habits. Or did they sleep in those stiff cardboard looking robes? I was

never really sure where they slept or how. I could not see nuns as human beings; they were more like Grim Reapers lurking in the cavernous Ursuline chapel with their hands tucked inside their robes as if they were hiding rulers in there. As I look back on this it wasn't just that I was a troubled 'trouble with angels' adolescent, but they had nothing in common with me, their wayward charge. They were not mothers, soccer coaches, or soap opera stars, but they were frustrated old women in my view. Poor Sister Rita Marie, my 7th *and* 8th grade teacher - we gave her beaucoup reasons to be flummoxed.

I wasn't exactly 'kicked out' - that sounds so harsh even now buried deep in one of my trauma puke buckets, but rather I was 'asked to leave.' Yes, that's better. "Eileen doesn't belong here; she would be better suited for public school," said Sister Mary Bee up her Butt. My friend Angela, who was tiny and mischievous as a troll, and I used to bounce a super ball when the nun had her back to us, but the day it rolled under her habit we had pushed things a little too far.

Then there was stifling our laughter in Mass. When the offering bells rang and the chapel grew dead silent after the last sneeze and cough then that was our call to start smirking and sniveling, but then we could not - for the life of Christ -STOP. If you've ever fought back giggles at a moment when you are supposed to be serious then you know what torment that can be. It's that feeling of losing control like vomiting in a hallway in front of a star quarterback. My own children did this laughing fit thing at my mother's funeral mass. I was giving a little speech about what a great mom she was, how she drove me endlessly to doctor's appointments and the orthodontist, and I glared at them sitting in the front pew like three ducks that I was ready to pop off with a BB gun. Laugh ding. Laugh ding. Laugh ding.

Or maybe Sister Mary Bee B wanted me to leave because at the end of 8th grade my class - those hilarious clowns - had voted me "Most Likely to Become a Nun." Maybe as principal of

the high school she had to get me the hell out of there before something like that actually occurred. But this was the middle of the ninth grade - it was Christmas break, for heaven's sake. It felt sort of like being disowned by one's parents, or unadopted by Jesus Christ. Talk about trauma. The principal had even made my mom call the public school and make arrangements right there and then!

“Mom, why didn't you say something?” I could never understand why she didn't stick up for me. Isn't that all a 15 year old really wants from adults? Someone to go to bat for them. Someone to say, “You do not know what you are missing out on by not having my wonderful daughter as part of your school.” Why couldn't she just say that? Or how about this: “Well, if you would focus on making school interesting maybe she would not have cause to be rolling super balls around the classroom.” Instead, she just walked out with me in tow, cowered mom tail tucked between her legs.

It was no secret between my sister and me that my mom preferred the boys in the family; They were after all named after apostles. I can still hear the shrill scream, “YOU GIRLS!” resonating throughout my childhood home. My sister was named Mary Theresa like Mother Mary and as a hell-child she could not have been more ill-suited for her name. First there was her looks. She had been fighting with my brothers and banged her head on the coffee table, so there was a scar across her eyebrow that made her look like a mini Al Capone. In one picture she has frizzy permed hair and teeth missing so that she looks like a Halloween witch. And she forever had her hands on things - like chopping off the hair of little neighbor kids, or holding pet bunny rabbits by the ears as she waddled down the street. But I'll admit, every family should have that one nightmare child that they can tell horror stories about at holiday meals – the kind that make the parents chuckle and wonder, *How did we live through that one?*

And speaking of ears, once after coming home from a party (Good God, she was probably bombed!) she dragged me out of bed and said, “I’m piercing your ears.” She sat me on the toilet, put ice cubes on them and stuck the needle through while I winced in pain.

“Ouch, Mary you’re hurting me.

“Stop being such a weakling.”

She often called me that when she was irritated – either that or she just grabbed at me with her fingernails.

And to think that this person went on to become a nurse! These were the very ears that got me in trouble at Ursuline.

“Eileen, go to the girls room and take your earrings out and fix your skirt.”

The nun’s yardstick was pointing in the direction of the hallway and her face was beet red, but then again she was Irish. The era of Beatles and mod fashion was making a splash on the teen scene and we were forever rolling up the waistbands of our plaid uniform skirts to make them shorter. And I had a more permanent decoration given to me by my sisters: scars on my forearms. For some reason older sisters really don’t like having their clothes ‘borrowed.’

Then there was Paul, nine years my senior, who my Dad called ‘Butch,’ Andy, who we called ‘The Professor’ because he was so damn smart, and Matt who Mary nicknamed ‘Monkified’ because he was the baby who acted - well, cry-babyish. Matt had a tendency to be a sore loser at games, so we took full advantage of that, creaming him at Clue and Monopoly and even Snakes and Ladders. But life gave Matt a healthy scooping of poetic justice since we elder sibs have jealously observed his concert going, dancing, and traveling while griping about our bunions and hammer toes.

But back then, Matt's crib was in my and Mary's bedroom and he would pull himself up to a standing position and rock the sides of the crib back and forth back and forth. Squeak. Squeak. Squeak. He was soothed by the rhythm of it - for hours on end. And it was a good thing because as the fifth child he was ignored for hours on end. Crib safety was unheard of in the 1950s. The only thing we feared were measles and polio. There were no seat belts, no leashes on dogs, no filters on cigarettes - my grandmother smoked those 'coffin sticks' until she landed in her coffin at age 94. And don't even get me started about the diet.

It was white bread death: peel off the crust, then smoosh the white part into a ball until its texture changes into rubber and looks like silly putty, then run out the door with it. All summer I had skinned knees and a stubbed toe and did not come in until I heard the last exasperated, EILLLLLLNN echoing through the neighborhood. Our house was at the end of a cul de sac, so it's not like I could get very lost. But I refused to come until the sun was dropping, a dusky orange ball in an amber sky. For dinner I would eat a bite of lamb chop and a few peas. Meat larger than a lamb chop was too big to chew and I would hide it in a napkin.

When our dog Tony entered our family after a year of my begging, he was my saving grace. A child does not live on food alone; they need love. In our family the only type of love that could grow shoots through the torpid ancestral undertow was doggy love. And Tony loved me unconditionally - especially those scraps I fed to him under the table. The poor dog lived only on Gains Burgers because they were easy for us to unwrap and throw in his dish. Our family was lazy in the food prep department. And besides, dogs were not fully human like they are today, but Tony did adopt one of the living room chairs as his own, even parking his little face with the sad brown eyes on the arm rest. For years he observed all of our family's turmoil, our comings

and goings, parties, proms and graduations then he died when Matt went off to college. As if he knew - his job was done.

So back to 8th grade and the silly end of the year game we were playing. We were voting for Who Was Going to Do What in the future, counting up paper votes and writing names on the board. I can't imagine there were too many options to be voting about for young women in the year of 1968. Would we have written Doctor, or CEO, or Lawyer, or real Estate Agent on the board? I think not. The categories were probably more like this: Movie Star, Teacher, Housewife – Disney Princess. But I do remember the peals of laughter when the girls chose me **Most Likely to Become a Nun.**

Even though I once got caught drawing caricatures of the nuns on my paper! It was probably a math assignment. I hated math and nuns – a double whammy. Sister Rita Marie had this Fu Manchu mustache (which was fun to draw). Sometimes she would just sit pensively staring out the window at the colored leaves falling hither and yon, stroking her mustache and wondering what to do about us. But this time, it was my turn to stare out the window. The sun, high in the sky was beating on the pane; summer was coming, and I wondered if the universe was playing a cosmic joke on me. Even at that young age I knew something about the ironies of life - its twists, turns, and reversals.

I thought back to an experience I had when I was five years before the brutal move from our sweet little neighborhood, Galewood. There was a log cabin in our backyard and a dainty pink dogwood tree that marked the edge of the woods. The neighborhood kids spent hours in there holding fort judging contests. I would mark off a living room, a dining room and bedroom by stomping down weeds. I often played by myself, but I never felt alone with my imaginary animal trees. The thin trees were contorted and stooped into various shapes, ropey vines hanging

from their ‘necks’. I would shimmy up one and hang on as if I were riding an elephant or a camel – off on an exciting imaginary adventure.

One day as I was exiting the woods, right before I was to set foot in my yard, I leaned against a tree and gazed upwards through the leafy canopy. The earth felt as sacred as a cathedral, blue sky and white clouds the stained glass windows. I felt a surge of warmth in myself that emanated all the way up to a beckoning beyond. At that moment of being I felt connected heart to heart, mind to mind with something greater than myself. I had a tiny urge to make a pledge: *When I grow up I want to be a saint for you God. That’s what I’m going to be.*

Maybe the seedling idea was implanted in me from stories about Tom Dooley and the leper colonies or from our Catholic church. In that innocent time, before school had landed me a harsh reality check, I was awestruck by nuns. And this supernatural someone ‘up there’ felt as real as my animal trees. I would toss around the phrases of the *Our Father* in my mind trying to memorize them. *Our Father who Art in Heaven, Hallowed be Thy name, Thy Kingdom come...Thy Kingdom come....Thy Kingdom Come?*

Nascent childhood memories are tucked into our adult minds like the soft snugly we lugged around as toddlers. Before All the Bad Things Happen. One might weep that such innocent impressions are gone, or maybe they nestle in there bringing comfort. But if I had known what was coming, I would have taken a step backwards into the woods where I felt safe and never exited at all. Never crossed the boundary from transcendental to reality. For just as the other shoe drops, the hard things rain down on us, like nails on the cross. Our feet are tied, our hands outstretched; we are at the mercy of forces we cannot control.

As I sat there that day in my 8th grade classroom, squirming in my seat, I was secretly hoping that God had forgotten about that little pledge, but I was feeling a premonitory dread like

a tap on the shoulder that whispered to me: *Think again*. However, poor God, He was going to have to drag me to this kingdom of heaven on earth place kicking and screaming.