

Edward P. Kunzman

Donatello Juan

Father Hubay's younger assistant, Father Chester, was not-so-secretly admired by every girl in the eighth grade. Every time he passed by them on the sidewalk or in the hall, Mary Beth would fan her face with her hand, Sheila Markovich would coo, and my cousin Peggy would fling her long hair behind her shoulder flirtatiously. Even the most reserved ones, Tina Cubierta and Willa Wysocki, would blush from ear to ear. Before his once-a-week visits to our classroom, Sister Alicia would remind the excited bevy of teenage hopefuls that it was a sin to "make eyes" at a celibate priest. "If you paid half as much attention to your studies, girls, you'd all be Rhodes scholars—and you could save your mindless panting for phys. ed."

On Veterans Day, Father Chester arrived ten minutes late. Sheila applauded when he finally stepped through the door, and two or three other girls joined her. Sister Alicia, who had been drilling us on spelling during the seemingly endless wait, jumped to her feet. "Ladies, this isn't The Ed Sullivan Show and Father Chester isn't toting an electric guitar!" she barked. "If you can't control your hormones, I will help you. Up, up, up! Come with me to the chapel where we will pray a rosary on our knees for chastity and temperance." The moaning rose to a fever pitch before the teacher picked up her pointer and smacked the side of her desk. Tina leapt a foot off the ground and Willa shrieked.

"Girls, we shall proceed in silence or we shall skip phys. ed. this afternoon and return to the chapel for further reflection. If the price of chastity is bruised knees, far be it from me to spare you the pain!" The short, but intimidating, drill sergeant studied her disgruntled troops from atop the

wooden platform. “And don’t you boys look so smug. We might all spend the last hour of this school day—and every remaining school day of 1969—on our knees, pleading for the gift of self-control.”

Suddenly you could hear the ticking of the big clock over the chalkboard. No one dared smile, not even Father Chester, whose long fingers covered his mouth—although there was no masking the laughter in his eyes. “I believe they’ve chosen phys. ed., Sister Alicia,” he said very quietly. “Girls and boys alike.”

“The day’s still young, very young,” she returned with a mighty frown before motioning the girls to precede her out of the room. “Use the time wisely, Father. These smug males are no more innocent in their hearts than the panting females. Quieter, perhaps, but their eyes are always roving like King David’s.” Before closing the door behind her, she added, “I swear, Father, they watch too much television.”

“Undoubtedly,” he concurred with a deferential nod, then tossed his overcoat over a vacated desk by the door and rubbed his hands together. “Well, gentlemen, in honor of Veterans Day, I was hoping to chat with you about one of the church’s veterans, St. Martin of Tours, whose feast we celebrate today. However, I believe your esteemed leader wishes me to give you a lecture on sex.” His ruddy face scanned the half-empty room. “Where shall we begin?”

“Who’s King David?” Don Niccolo blurted out. “What TV show’s he on?”

As the place went up for grabs, Mike Kulicky turned to confront his inquisitive classmate. “Donatello!” he exclaimed, the only one besides Sister Alicia with the nerve to call the pest by his baptismal name. “You’ve never heard of ‘The Son of Jesse’?”

Niccolo shook his head. “What channel’s it on?” he said before realizing he’d fallen into another of Kulicky’s snares. His nostrils flared when hoots broke out on all sides.

The young priest whistled and held up his hands like a traffic cop. “Isn’t it the custom in this room to raise your hand, wait to be acknowledged, and then stand before you speak?” he challenged us. “I don’t mind a little less formality, but I won’t put up with pandemonium. Can you act like adults if you’re treated like adults?” He searched our eyes for agreement and then nodded. “Okay. Now, let’s return to Don’s question: Who’s King David? And I’ll throw in a bonus question: What does he have to do with sex?”

When no one raised his hand, Father Chester approached Mike’s desk. “You’re always quick with your gibes, Mike. How quick are you when it comes to knowledge of the Bible?”

Rising, Mike stood as straight as a new recruit in the army. “Very quick, Father. My mom was raised a Lutheran, not a Catholic.”

“Oh, I see.” The assistant pastor chuckled, crossing his arms across his chest. “Who was King David then?”

“The second king of Israel, Father, the son of Jesse and the father of Solomon.” Mike peered over at King David’s son’s namesake. “Not Solly Davenport, of course, but the Solly who built the Temple.”

“Impressive, Michael. You may be seated.” Our weekly visitor walked to the other side of the room. “Now who can tell me why Sister Alicia mentioned King David’s roving eyes? Don’t any of you Catholic boys read the Good Book?”

I dropped my face to hide my embarrassment. Aunt Agatha had told me the story of King David shortly after Dad’s lecture on the birds and the bees, undoubtedly fearing that the shocking information might have excited some uncontrollable longing in me. “Even holy men can stray when it comes to...sex,” she had whispered. “It’s a sad, sad fact, Nephew, a sad, sad fact.” Her warning must have been effective, for the thought of a naked Bathsheba still unsettled me. Once I had even had a nightmare about having to scrub her pink back.

“Dresser and Kulicky are friends,” Smartly burst into my meditation with an audible smirk. “Maybe they read the Good Book together, Father, when the rest of us are doing homework.”

A succession of snickers followed this intrusion, but Father Chester seemed to miss its mean spirit. “Christian, do you know about Kind David’s roving eyes?” he queried me. “Is that why you’re blushing?”

Looking up at Mike and rolling my eyes, I stood up. “One day King David was walking around on the rooftop and saw a beautiful woman named Bathsheba in her bathtub. He ordered his servants to bring her to his bedroom, and he...he took advantage of her, even though she was married to someone else. Then he had her husband killed so he could have her as his own.”

“Is that right?” Randy Bonduran asked, staring at me, his mouth and eyelids wide open, his big body limp with disbelief.

“That’s the Reader’s Digest version,” the priest affirmed. “Thank you, Christian. Maybe you and Mike should invite these pagans to join your book club. I think Randy’s very eager to sign up.”

“That’s because that’s as close as he’ll ever get to a naked girl,” Smartly quipped with a snort of self-satisfaction. This time the cruelty didn’t escape Father Chester’s notice. “So, Brad, tell us: How many naked girls have you been with? Perhaps you and I should spend some time in the confessional after class?”

Smartly squirmed in his seat for nearly a minute. “None, Father,” he admitted at last, looking at the floor. “Except in your dreams, right?” the priest returned.

My humbled classmate threw his head back in surprise. “What! Is that a sin too?”

Father Chester laughed and ran his hand through his moderately long brown hair. “Now we come to the crux of the matter: sex and sin. We Catholics have a bad habit of

thinking that all things sexual are sinful. What King David did was obviously sinful: adultery and murder. What Mr. Smartly didn't deny—a sexual dream now and then—is not. There's a big difference between a sexual being, which we all are by God's design, and a sexual predator or a sexual pervert, which, pray God, none of us will ever become."

"I don't think Sister Alicia even wants us to be sexual beings," Solomon observed. "She gets riled up if we spend too much time with 'someone of the opposite sex.'"

Leaning against the wall, the youthful priest joined his hands and crossed one ankle over the other. He grinned. "Sister Alicia's no fool," he said, "but young men who have recently gone through puberty often are. Sex is a drive, like hunger for food, and until we get used to its power, we're likely to do many foolish things." He lifted his eyebrows several times, as if daring us to challenge him.

"Like wanting to kiss a girl?" Lee Bentley asked rather timidly.

"What rock did you crawl out from under, Bentley?" Don cried. "I want to do more than kiss a girl!"

I couldn't believe my ears. I looked first at Mike, who sat uncharacteristically speechless, and then at Solomon, whose dark eyes stared in astonishment at the loudmouth in the next row. Clearly, I hadn't misunderstood. After such a brazen remark, Sister Alicia would have either fainted and fallen off her platform or grabbed her pointer and threatened Niccolo within an inch of his life. Father Chester, however, seemed untroubled. His calm, confident presence soothed my nervous stomach.

"The sin is not in the wanting, boys," he clarified, walking to the head of Niccolo's row and leaning over the empty desk in the front row. His handsome face gleamed under the fluorescent lights. "The sin is in the doing before we're ready, before we've made a commitment." He held up his large, strong hands, as if in prayer at the altar. "Even I want to do more than kiss a pretty woman sometimes, but I

make another choice. Otherwise, I'd be as guilty of sin as King David."

Randy Bonduran was shaking his head. "But you're a priest, Father?"

"I'm a sexual being first, Randy, like you, like all of your classmates." Once again, he scanned the whole room with his penetrating blue-green eyes. When they met mine, I nearly cooed like Sheila Markovich. "Who of us can honestly say that he's never had a desire, dream, or fantasy about"—his warm smile made my heart thump a little faster—"a pretty female?"

Pow! The question seemed like a punishing jab from God, a thunderbolt from heaven aimed directly at my racing heart: What are you doing making eyes at the assistant pastor? Oh my God! I was as bad as the girls who "couldn't control their hormones"—worse, for I was a boy whose eyes should be fastened on Bathsheba and not on King David. I clamped my teeth to dam up my confusion and keep the scary truth from leaking out.

"Christian, you'd never make a good liar, would you?" Father Chester was laughing at me. "Your face is a wide-open window."

"What!" I yelled, nearly vomiting in fear. "What...what do you mean?"

"I mean you'd rather talk about anything but sex, wouldn't you?"

"Uh...yes, Father, I would."

"Don't worry, kid. Pretty girls make us all dizzy, sometimes even sick to our stomachs. Just be patient with yourself, okay?"

I bit my tongue and prayed for deliverance. "Okay, Father."

From behind me, Brad Smartly snorted. "Don Juan, we call him. No woman can resist his dark sin and black eyes."

"That's Donatello Juan to you, Bradford," Mike

jumped in, just as someone rapped loudly on the door and pulled it open. There, directly under the lintel, Sister Alicia stood with her arms akimbo, ready to reclaim her turf. “Our session’s over, boys,” Father Chester announced the obvious. He picked up his overcoat and gave us a military salute. “We’ll see you next week, boys, you and the girls. Sweet dreams.”

As the females were herded back into the classroom like sheep, I laid my head on the desk and thanked God for the return of the drill sergeant. Spelling, grammar, history, civics, geography—or even the Beethoven sonata that I was learning. Anything but sex! My nights were confusing enough: I needed clarity during the daylight.

[Sheila]

Dear Christian,

Peggy told Mary Beth, and Mary Beth told Cynthia, and Cynthia told Becky, and Becky told me—and apparently everyone else—that Father Chester thinks the reason you’ve been acting funny lately is YOU’RE IN LOVE! All of us girls were SURPRISED! We talked about you and your SECRET LOVE AFFAIR all during PE—when Miss Hully wasn’t listening, of course. No one’s sure who your PRETTY SENORITA is, but we’re betting she’s ONE OF US. You didn’t fall for someone in HIGH SCHOOL, did you? Or worse still, someone at the PUBLIC SCHOOL? GOD FORBID! Anyway, I volunteered to solve the BIG MYSTERY—like Nancy Drew with her spyglass and notebook.

As I see it, Peggy is out of the running because SHE’S YOUR COUSIN (so to speak), Mary Beth is out because SHE’S TOO PLAIN, Cynthia is out because SHE LIKES BOOKS BETTER THAN BOYS, Tina is out because SHE’S A SCAREDY-CAT, Willa is out because SHE DOESN’T HAVE A PERSONALITY, Becky is out because SHE’S GOT A BIG MOUTH, Vera is out because HER HAIR LOOKS LIKE WET SPAGHETTI, Michele is out because

HER TWIN BROTHER LOOKS LIKE A CHIMPANZEE and you might end up having UGLY CHILDREN with her (ugliness might be one of those recessive genes, you know). I don't need to go on, do I? There's ONLY ONE who is QUALIFIED to be your SECRET LOVE, and she's:

Stunning

Honest

Excellent

Intelligent

Lovely

Anxious to hear from you!

Tell me I'm wrong and I'll hand over my detective's badge (BUT ONLY TO YOU).

I'll hold my breath until I get your response. PLEASE DON'T KEEP ME IN SUSPENSE if you want to see me ALIVE again.

Forever yours,

Sheila Rose Markovich

PS: In case you didn't know:

- 1. I like MUSICIANS AND ARTISTS. Any boy can shoot a basketball, right?*
- 2. At Thanksgiving dinner, I always ask for DARK MEAT.*