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A Little Lavabo

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For the nuns of St. Merci's parochial, a spic-and-span look was a big deal, and the strictest of the crew was Sister Mary Mundare, second grade. Sister Mundare used to tell us that “Godliness is next to you-know-what, boys and girls.” She was a tall woman and a completely clean and neat nun. She was also what my mother, after taking one quick look at her in church, called, in Spanish, “a fastidiosa type,” which was true; she was very finnicky about her students’ appearance. Inside her desk, which was brown and broad (and clean), she kept a twelve-inch ruler for discipline and a huge magnifying glass for inspections. The glass, round and long-handled, must have weighed about five pounds, but Sister Mundare was a strong woman and could wield it with one hand, as if it were no heavier than her lightweight wimple. Every schoolday morning at nine she made the rounds of the room with that Sherlock Holmes apparatus and gave us, twenty-five boys and girls of mixed descent and Catholic homes, a special private-eye going-over. She didn't magnify all our protrusions and crannies; she couldn't; some were covered, private, so that some things could be filthy and she'd never know. But we were all sufficiently terrified by her threats to scrub our privates before leaving our apartments in the morning. At least I was. I was a pretty clean kid from the time my mother kissed me off to church at 8 A.M., till 3 P.M., when the big electric clock over the classroom door sent us home—loosed us to filth, sweat and swearing.

What Sister inspected were the obvious things: heads, ears (in and out), necks, shirtd collars, hands (both sides), fingernails, skirts, blouses (the outside only), socks and shoes, pants, and sometimes our teeth for signs of greed fungus, and our noses for the sight of yellow snots. She didn't miss a thing that wasn't supposed to be missed. That was part of her job as a teaching nun. But if you, the student, didn't look after your own hygiene, you were what she called “purged.” Pigs were punished on the spot. If your offense was minor, you got brow-beaten and tongue-lashed in front of the class. If it was major, your knuckles were purged with the metal-edged ruler. She didn't always draw blood from you, but if she did, there was a bottle of iodine inside her broad brown desk to kill any germs that might move in on your knucks during the day.

After the 9 A.M. inspection, Sister positioned herself erectly behind that desk and handed down hints and rules on specific topics like fingernail maintenance and ear-wax removal. We were warned about sticking “foreign objects”—like hairpins, paper-clips, toothpicks and fingernail files—into our ears. What she prescribed for that problem was something called a “water syringe.” One day she handed out a mimeographed note addressed to our fathers and mothers, urging them very strongly to purchase one of those rubber water bubbles, “if you don’t have one already, for the sake of your child’s hygiene. Every decent drugstore carries them.” We had to bring her back the notes signed by both parents, a checks-and-balances precaution. My father bought me one for Thanksgiving, “a special gift” for that feast-day, he said, pleased as all hell that he was doing my ears a big favor. But I didn’t use the syringe much because ear-wax accumulation wasn’t one of my problems. Also, the few times I did use it, both my ears got flooded with lukewarm water that wouldn’t flush back out, and for three solid days I went around hard of hearing and terrified that the waterbugs in our bathroom would crawl inside my ears in my sleep and devour my brain.

Fingernails: Sister Mundare said we should trim them regularly and clean them, with a fingernail brush, daily. An itchy head: a sure sign that you hadn’t washed it properly, if at all. The sight of someone scratching his or her head was “unpleasant and repulsive. Don’t scratch it with your fingernails. You’ll turn those into breeding grounds for germs and other bacteria.” Dirty fingernails were “a symbol for soiled souls.” She rapped her desk when she said that. Picking one’s nose “in public” was the most disgusting thing one could do. You could go to hell for that, that’s how bad it was: “grievous,” in fact.

I was seven then, still too young to tell whether my soul had teeth, ears, nostrils or fingernails, but I knew enough not to chance it. So I took to scrubbing my fingernails with a three-row Py-Co-Pay my father had dropped into the garbage when its bristles got too soft for his hard teeth. Before using it the first time, I boiled it for some fifteen minutes—while my mother was busy in one of the backrooms: she wouldn’t have appreciated the sight of a used toothbrush cooking inside one of her well-scrubbed pots.

I kept the brush hidden behind a box of Epsom salts in a top-shelf corner of our medicine cabinet, out of my father’s failing eyesight. My mother’s eyes were in good shape—20-20—and one day, during a fit of household cleaning, she found the Py-Co-Pay and dumped it. At bedtime that day, I found the spot behind the salts empty and threw a red-faced tantrum. My nose threw out so much mucus that I almost choked on it. That scared her and she promised to buy me a brand-new brush, a “real” fingernail brush, next day, adding that I was acting like a spoiled little girl, because even girls, “normal ones,” didn’t give that much of a damn about a dumb brush. In the meantime, she said, I should use my regular toothbrush on my precious fingernails and scrub my teeth with the tip of my index finger. I did. You could never tell when Sister Mundare might waylay us with a tooth-inspection.

This had taken place in class one morning during Catechism:
Sister M.: Miss Meléndez, why did God make man on the 6th day of Genesis?
Miss Meléndez: Because the Catechism say it, Sister.
Sister M.: Your teeth need brushing. Miss Meléndez. I can almost
taste your B.O.
From then on, Miss Meléndez’s breath smelled bleachy.

When I got home from school next day, no nailbrush. Nothing. My mother said it was because the grocer, whose store was ill-stocked and smelly, was out of brushes. “Not even shoe brushes,” she said, throwing up her arms for dramatics. My face turned red again, and I reminded her that the grocer didn’t sell brushes; the druggist next door to the grocer did. I added that if Sister Mundare murdered by knuckles next day, in front of 24 students, and kept me after class for four or five hours, it would be her fault, not mine. At that point my nose broke down again; I wiped the mucus off with the back of my hand and wiped the hand off on my pants. Instead of swiping me on the head for that nasty gesture, she shook her head, clucked her tongue, and promised to enter the brush down on her shopping list for the following day: item Number One; I watched her write it down. She walked off to invent some household task, anything to get away from me and my whining. I felt like a slob. But what could I do? I hadn’t sentenced myself to seven years in that school. She and my father had. Our next-door neighbor had talked them into sending me to St. Merci’s; they didn’t know what it was like; but ignorance, as Sister Mundare said, was no excuse.

A little later she came inside my bedroom and gave me two quarters for the brush. “Run down and get it fast,” she said, “and if you get change back, keep it for candy.”

Mr. Cohen’s Farmacia was crowded with customers on their way home from work; nobody noticed me standing timidly behind a fat man, between a phone booth and a dusty display of underarm deodorants. I wasn’t sorry no one had seen me posted there, feeling silly. If they did, they might tell Mr. Cohen or one of his pharmacist sons to take care of me first because I was just a little boy with a runny nose who’d been waiting and waiting, poor thing, such a long time. Then they’d probably have a good laugh when I opened my mouth—if I could bring myself to—and ordered, of all ridiculous things, a nailbrush. I could anticipate Mr. Cohen or son saying:

“A what did you say, kid?”
And I, blushing, “A brush for the nails.”

And the customers, winking at one another, as if I’d just asked for a pack of Trojan condoms, junior size: “Did you hear what he asked for?”

“Pues, of course I heard. But Mother of God, I can hardly believe it. At his age, too. Carajo! Santa Madre de...”

“That’s the Malánguez kid, ain’t it?”

“If it ain’t him, it must be his ghost.”

“Or his sister wearing boys’ clothes.”

“Coño, what the hell’s this block coming to?”

Something like that; something humiliating.

Guango González and his boys, the Turbine Tots, were on hands and knees outside the drug store, fishing for change people had dropped through Cohen’s grating. That was what they did after school, that and ambush hicks like me, who needed toughening up so we could eventually join the Tots and thereby qualify as bona fide Americans. I had no interest in joining Guango’s club at that time and always kept myself a safe distance from them; because they were nasty, especially Guango, whose father had been beribboned by the Army for losing both legs to a Japanese grenade in World War II. He now spent most of his time sitting in a wheelchair in front of his stoop, cursing out dogs, drunkards, hookers, cruising cop cars and traffic in general, and haranguing Guango: “Don’t never let nobody push you around or I’ll send you to a corrections home. You’re
my son, you little punk, and I’m a war hero.” Guango tried his best to live up to that counsel, and he wasn’t doing too badly for a nine-year-old. He went to public school.

If I went out there by myself, they’d stop me and search me, shove the brush down my throat, and send me home with a slew of lumps on my head, my nose trickling red, and my lip fat and split. Because if there was one animal they detested, it was an anemic, parochial-school punk: a category I belonged to.

My father, looking as though he’d just lost his only pair of powerful eyeglasses (he had them but wouldn’t wear them in public), entered the farmacia on the way home from work. He was probably coming in for another bottle of Bayers or Pepto Bismol; he bought those two articles regularly because his head & stomach were always out of whack. He was squinting; he was always squinting at that time of day. His job, what he called la pega, at the American Combining Co., Inc., Brooklyn branch, did that to him, he said. He called his headaches jaquecas; his eye doctor called them meigraines. His stomach problem he called gases, my mother called them leras. He worried too much about inconsequential things, like the “bad” neighborhood we lived in and its possible effect (bad, too) on his children’s morals.

The second I stepped him I stepped inside the nearest phone booth and shut the glass door behind me. If he saw me, he’d start asking some tough questions: What was I doing there so close to sunset; had I finished my homework; had I washed my hands and face when I got home from school.... I wasn’t about to tell him what I was doing there; he wouldn’t understand, even if I explained that the brush wouldn’t be so much for the good of my fingernails as for the life of my knuckles. But I had to choose between facing him or Guango and this Tots by myself, unless they quit fishing before he was finished shopping.

I heard him order a bottle of Bayers and a tube of toothpaste, and when I saw him walking towards the exit, I stepped out of the both, caught up to him and asked for his blessing. It was getting dark and the Tots were still fishing. He gave me a startled look and then the blessing. Guango and company looked up from their work when we started to step around them and sized us up. Guango glared at me, hawked up mucus, and stuck a filthy finger in his fat nose. He ballooned his cheeks and blew the mucus at my feet: missed. Maybe on purpose, a hint that he and his boys were going to get me alone again one of these days. My father didn’t notice a thing, probably because his head was throbbing from another post- pega jaqueca. Then Guango rolled the snots he’d just fished out of both nostrils between his thumb and index and flicked the slob at me, or at us. My father didn’t see that either. Someday, I swore silently, I was going to spit Guango in the face.

“Children,” Monsignor McCullough, Pastor of St. Merci’s Church, had said from the pulpit one Sunday, “there’s a time for homework and a time for playing; everything in its own good time, Tempus fugit. That’s right: everything in its own good time....” It took me a long time to forget that; the rhyme helped my memory. There was a time for running from the Tots. I told myself, and a time for getting Guango back. And Sister Mundare, too, for that matter. I typed them together.

“Anyway,” Papi said, because he hated walking with anyone without saying something weighty, “what were you doing in there so late, Santos?”

“Weighing myself. Pesandome.”

You should pesar yourself at 3 o’clock. "Don’t wait till the sun is going down. Just look at those hoodlums. They’re filthy and they fight like animals over pennies.”
Next morning, during the Lavabo part of the mass, when the altar boy was pouring clean water from a cruet on Father Donohue’s hands, I got bored and fell asleep. When I woke up, I had a finger up my nose. That was a bad omen. The last time I’d done it absentmindedly was in the Aguilar Public Library, and when I stepped out with an illustrated copy of *Robin Hood and His Merry Men*, a hoodlum more or less my age, but bigger, stronger and probably illiterate, snatched the book from me, burled it into the gutter, and kicked me down the steps after it. I made my quick escape from his turf with a few scrapes on my limbs and the strong conviction that somehow, if I hadn’t picked my nose minutes earlier, the hood wouldn’t have been waiting for me on the steps of Aguilar. In part I blamed the incident on Sister Mundare because she had made it mandatory for all her students to take out library cards and to bring our borrowed books to class every other week. Those books were housed in a bad block, and she either didn’t ‘know it or didn’t give a damn.

So that morning, when I woke up with a finger in my nose right after the dull Lavabo, I should have anticipated trouble. Since I had no handkerchief or tissues on me, I wiped the offending finger off on my pants, but I did a poor job of it. If I’d been really smart, devious, subtle, I would have dipped the finger in the holy-water font on the way out of church, and kicked me down the steps after it. I made my quick escape from his turf with a few scrapes on my limbs and the strong conviction that somehow, if I hadn’t picked my nose minutes earlier, the hood wouldn’t have been waiting for me on the steps of Aguilar. In part I blamed the incident on Sister Mundare because she had made it mandatory for all her students to take out library cards and to bring our borrowed books to class every other week. Those books were housed in a bad block, and she either didn’t ‘know it or didn’t give a damn.

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The second consequence, the heavy one, came a little later in class, during Sister Mundare’s hygiene inspection. Her reaction, when she magnified the finger, was spontaneous and public: a loud “ugh!” followed by a damning frown, a furrowed brow and various grimaces that spoiled her more-or-less good looks. She didn’t let me have it then and there; she decided, instead, to inspect the rest of the class before purgating me. In the back of the classroom was a white, antiseptic porcelain sink which we weren’t allowed to use without permission. There was something sacred about it, like the holy-water font back in church, or like the tabernacle which, under lock and key, housed the Host. Its only flaw, the work of old age, was a tangle of fine cracks all over its surface; these cracks were filled with something dark like dirt, which was embedded and, it looked, indifferent to Ajax, Babo and bleach. Otherwise Sister would have wiped them off.

Francisco Beltran, a big worrier, got chewed out for biting his nails. Sister threatened to smear them with iodine if he didn’t cut it out. Blanca Cuevas was put down for letting her own nails grow too long. “Next time,” Sister told her, “I’ll trim them for you myself, right here in class.” Then she trained a mean frown on me, and I felt my legs going soft. She told me to stand up fast; I jumped up. She ordered me to go to the sink and scrub my filthy finger; I set off double-time. It was a long walk from my seat to that antiseptic sink, and while I was trekking it, she was telling the class that maybe I was the kind of boy who needed to have cotton stuffed up his nostrils to keep his fingers out of them. A few students laughed at this, but she said she didn’t see what was so funny, and shut them up with a five-second “Shhhh...!”

I started the ablution off without any trouble: turned on the faucet (no hot water), grabbed the bar of Ivory soap from a stainless-steel soapdish, and began scrubbing my hands. Then somebody coughed, and then somebody else, and in no time everybody was coughing: a plague of throat-clearing. That’s why the wet soap slipped out of
my hands. It somersaulted, bounced once on the floor next to my feet, slid in a straight line down the long aisle, and came to a spinning stop when it collided with Blanca Cuevas’ patent-leather shoes, right down there under her hairless legs. I froze in front of the sink, my hands dripping soap-suds and water, and waited for Sister to start screaming insults at me. But she contained herself and only asked me if I’d done that on purpose. I shook my head and said that “I just was trying to wash my hands, Seester.”

“Well, go and pick it up, then.”

Blanca reached down and made a move to pick it up for me, but Sister stopped her: “Keep your hands off that soap, Blanca Cuevas! Malánguez dropped it, and Malánguez will pick it up without your help.”

So it was going to be Malánguez all by himself. I could have spent the rest of the morning on all fours, right under there. Easily. It was a little dark, and the smell of Blanca’s legs, which she twisted to one side to give me room, was sweet. By mistake, I got a one-second peek at her white panties, which for no reason made me think of steaming pancakes in butter and syrup.

When I finally retrieved it with my dirty hands, the bar of soap was as filthy as the floor from which it had picked up the street crud our shoes brought in every morning. It needed its own washing, but there wasn’t time for that; Sister Mundare ordered me to wash up “quickly! quickly!” She pulled her train conductor’s fob watch out of her robe’s placket, looked at it, and reminded the class that we were now ten minutes behind schedule, that I bad ruined a brand-new bar of soap, which was (in some way she didn’t explain) “a sin,” and added, very slowly so as not to have to repeat it, that I was going to stay in class at three to clean it. Also, she said, I was going to “do a little writing” for her in class.

We were 12 minutes behind when I got done washing up, and Sister, normally self-controlled, turned into one grouchy, grumpy nun that morning, thanks to me and my index finger. She must have told her fellow-nuns all about it in the cafeteria at 12:15 (she made up for our lost twelve minutes by stealing them from our lunch period), because they kept swivelling their heads in my direction and shaking them in what looked like disapproval. Later, I was sure, they were going to tell their students all about what some little pig named Malánguez had done in Sister Mundare’s class: let that be a warning to them. That might cost me the few acquaintances I had in school. But I’d asked for it, hadn’t I? I had no call to feel mistreated, which I didn’t; I blamed it all on myself.

At three-o-something, right after the class lit out for home in a noiseless double-file, I stayed in my seat, as ordered by Sister Mundare; and then I almost scrubbed the entire bar of Ivory out of existence. I did it with a small floor-scrubbing brush Sister had fished out of her desk drawer. She kept it there as a threat: if we didn’t take care of our fingernails and teeth, hands, etc., she would. But she never had and probably never would. She wasn’t our mother.

After the soap-washing, she told me to sit in the center seat of the first row to execute the written part of my punishment. She chalked it on the board in large, Catholic-school script:

PICKING ONE’S NOSE IN PUBLIC IS A SIN. Why not in private? I couldn’t ask her that; she might give it to my knuckles with her twelve-incher, for being a wise-guy.

I copied and re-copied the message, each repetition numbered down the margin, twenty times a side, forty times a page, for a total of three full pages, or 120 repetitions. She in the meantime sat behind her desk correcting homework and plotting out next day’s labors. Every
two minutes, while my writing hand worked up a cramp, she'd take a break from her own drudgery and check me out. It was after school, which meant she could smile without violating the school's rules, but she didn't. I was glad she didn't; I couldn't have smiled back if she had. Every time my eyes met hers, always by accident, I'd feel embarrassed, my writing hand would start shaking, and I'd shift my attention back to my one-line message. I'd hunch over the writing arm of my seat and dig in, trying to keep my script straight, or risk having to do it all over again for sloppiness.

At five, she put her work inside her vinyl valise and shoved her chair back a little. "That's enough, Malánguez. It's dinner time almost."

“One more, Seester,” I said, and meant it. Somewhere on page 2, I'd gotten carried away with the message and wanted to fill up all three pages. “Four more words,” I added, though I really needed six.

“Go ahead, then,” she said. “But fast.” She checked her fob against the class clock. “...nose in public is a sin,” period.

I gathered up the three sheets, my name on each, and held them out to her. She was on her feet now, and she took a quick step back, as if something invisible and bigger than her had given her a good hard shove: an over-sized demon, maybe. For a moment, I thought she was going to topple over; she was tall and not too stout. She had the look of a statue whose sculptor hadn't spared the stone: big bones, big wrists and hands, a strong jaw, a fine, firm nose, a marble slab of a forehead. She wouldn't have been out of place in Central Park, where sparrows and pigeons could nest in her hood.

She didn't want my three dull sheets of work; she just looked at them in my hand and nodded. “You keep them, Malánguez, to remind yourself—next time you come in here with your fingers like that. I'll wear white gloves in class.” She said she had a special pair back home in the convent and wanted to know if I'd like to wear them from nine to three five days a week. I shook my head, and she said fine, fine. “Now go on home before your father and mother start missing you.”

I picked up my books and moved fast, before my father got home and started in on me with a bag of questions on my lateness. I'd have to lie to him; the truth might get me shut up inside my bedroom after school for a couple of weeks. He'd already threatened me with house arrest for not being—presumably—the best-behaved kid on the block.

Just as I got to the classroom door, Sister Mundare said to my back: “Your handwriting hasn't improved much, Malánguez.” I nodded at the corridor and kept moving.

On the corner of Madison, on the iron grating over a smelly, narrow little alley that collected lost coins, mucus, spit and dog's droppings, Guango and the Turbine Tots caught me coming out of Mr. Cohen and Sons' Farmacia and surrounded me with smiles and a string of unpleasant compliments to my ancestors and my unnatural sexual practices, which were still nonexistent, but they didn't ask me about that, and I didn't straighten them out on it. When they got tired of the put-downs, they took a nickel from my pocket and sent me home with bumps on my head and spit all over my face. But they didn't find my nailbrush and a pack of bubble gum because, anticipating their ambush, I had sneaked inside one of the farmacia's phone booths and alipped my purchase inside my shirt, then zippered my jacket all the way up to the neck.

At home I locked myself inside the john while others ate—my father had beaten me home—and pulled out the gum and brush before scrubbing my face for the dinner table. Before I was finished, my father began knocking on the door. He said he wanted to talk to me.