

CHAPTER ONE:

The Bejeweled Sword

Click, scrape, clickety-click, scrape, clickety-click, scrape. The sharp metallic sound of horseshoe taps, a rhythmic cadence on the polished marble floor of the old school, reverberates down the heavy, oak-lined hall leading to the door of Mr. Kline's English class, heralding the advent of a lone student. Horseshoe taps have become quite the rage among the young men here at Central Catholic High and on those days where the drab khaki ROTC uniforms are not required, a cacophony of clicking taps pervades the halls of the school in that brief interim between classes as students move from one classroom to another. Today is not a uniform day. While Central Catholic is exclusively a school for young boys, the absence of pubescent teen girls is no deterrent to Michael Donato's personal dress code. Principal to the code are his Thom McCann loafers, the ones with the inset lightning bolts down the side, the ones he applied the horseshoe taps to. It wasn't just a fashion statement but also his identity, his affiliation with other like boys of his age. Every detail must be considered and consequently the prized loafers must only be worn with white socks, sharply defining the outline of the cutaway in the vamp of the shoe while at the same time echoing the white of the lightning bolts. This was the inviolable style for all teen boys in 1960.

Moving upwards from his shoes, his highwater pants permitted the white socks to draw full attention to his loafers. His jeans were so tightly pegged that it was a wonder that his ankles had been allowed to pass through the leg openings. Around his waist he wore the skinniest of belts, a sliver of shiny silver that served more as a fashion accent than structural support. His short sleeve shirt, a necessity

in Texas weather, was a bold pattern of bright purple colors, putting the finishing touch on his ensemble with a balance of compositional aesthetic interest, attraction at both poles. On Friday, Central's football team, the "Buttons," would be taking on the Saint Gerard "Royals" and Michael, like so many others that day, was wearing a rah-rah, school-spirit ribbon advocating "bashing" the "Royals." It would have been just another typical day, had he not been sent down to the principal's office by Mr. Kline.

The wiry Mr. Kline, with his corkscrew hair and severe features carried himself as a man with something to prove. His effeminate demeanor was insufficiently camouflaged by his stern approach to the students. Instead of winning cooperation by the strength of his personality, he spoke as a man not to be trifled with, who in so doing bared his Achilles heel. He had little concern for the niceties of a smile or an occasional supportive glance, which might have provided a small respite in the onslaught of his tedious English lessons. Inevitably, he was ridiculed outside of class and trifled with whenever a public opportunity presented itself that could not be prosecuted. He was a civilian casualty, collateral damage in a school staffed with intractable Jesuit zealots and hard-core military NCO's relegated to manage disruptive children rather than serve an honorable assignment of manly duties prescribed by the needs of a real war. Mr. Kline was the obvious choice for abuse, an easy foil, a proxy for the pent-up resentment harbored by students with no other way to vent, such was the discipline at the school.

An hour ago, Mr. Kline's customary intense focus was short-circuited when he abruptly stopped his lesson on "The Red Badge of Courage." He could see the class was disengaged, a swamp of inattentiveness. Sitting there in the middle of the room, clearly in his own world, sat Michael Donato, not a ringleader but an

instigator and a repeat offender, absorbed in drawing on the cover of his three-ring binder with a felt tip marker. For the other students with half-closed eyes, Donato clearly displayed contempt for the lesson but more importantly, as seen by Mr. Kline, it was a stark sign of disrespect. This impertinence could not be tolerated. It was a challenge to his management of the class, a loss of control, a penetration of his camouflage to the depths of his insecurities. Neither the starched-shirt military men nor the black-clothed Jesuits he worked alongside would countenance a queer working among them. He would be seen as less of a man, and worse yet, a perverted sinner. Fired and excommunicated, discovery would be his demise. A confrontation was required.

Suddenly, as if for no apparent reason, Kline had placed the book he was reading aloud to the class on the desk and stood up. That action alone seemed to have no effect on the students. It was as if this moment in time did not exist. He was invisible. This came as no surprise. Kline understood his charges. These were all problem boys with disciplinary issues, surrendered to the school by exasperated parents for remediation. With grave intent he advanced dramatically towards Donato, oblivious to his approach. He would make him an example for his frustrations. In a moment of pregnant silence he stopped and looked down on the drawing in progress, not something he recognized, but an icon of popular car-culture, the “Rat-Fink,” often found in the back pages of “Hot-Rod Magazine” or in a T-shirt booth at custom car shows. Rat Fink is a character invented by Ed Roth, a custom car builder and airbrush artist. An over-sized, hairy, slob of a monster, Rat Fink is usually portrayed emerging from the top of a hot-rod automobile while driving with one hand on the stick-shift, but in this iteration, he was standing butt-naked, defiantly flipping the bird, under the banner headline “EAT IT RAW.” Now, this had made it personal, or at least that’s how Kline saw

it. He properly interpreted that the phrase “eat it raw” was a colloquial command for a blow job, a sort of “go fuck yourself” put in gay terms. It was therefore only logical that he might suspect that Donato had seen through him. He perceived it as the crack in the dam of his secrets. Left unattended, it would signal weakness, a capitulation in the battle for minds to a winning symbol of defiance. No, he could not let this stand.

So it was that Donato found himself sitting in the Principal’s office waiting anxiously for his confrontation with doom. Rather than deal with him directly, Kline had lateralled the problem to a noncombatant for judicial review and punishment. All that was left for Donato to do was to plead guilty and beg for mercy, but that was not to be. If the righteous Jesuits had contributed anything to the molding of their young wards, it was a resolute strength of belief in a cause. There would be no whimpering today. There would be no surrender. Confronted with Donato’s stubborn entrenchment, the principal realized he needed to refer this latest transgression to a higher court, that of his parents.

All children are born as the purest of innocent beings. It is not until they encounter other children that they are swept up in an unconscious struggle to be accepted. At that earliest time in their development when they don’t know any better, they are at their weakest. They emulate one another in an effort to become “birds of a feather.” It’s a form of osmosis. The patina of innocence is eroded and the mantle of conformity to what will be ever-changing standards has been tacitly accepted and proudly worn. Those precious days of innocence would eventually end a few short years later, as the Donatos were transferred to Texas. It was a very different world inhabited by very different people. Unlike residents of any other state, Texans have a pride beyond merit. Because they live in the biggest state in

the union, and ever since before John Wayne died at the Alamo, they have seen themselves as larger-than-life heroic figures. The way they figured it, a rag tag band of ranchers and farmers defeated the Mexican Army of Santa Anna to claim the territory north of the Rio Grande, galloping them into statehood in 1845. Since then Texans have believed they can do anything and have been granted the moral authority to exercise that right by God, himself. This feeling of empowerment is by no means limited to adult Texans, but pervades the thinking of every teenager raised there to be invincible.

But for now, here in Washington, the Donato's problems with Michael seemed much simpler. Michael was not a bad kid. Nancy, his mother, had done an outstanding job raising a sensitive child in the moral code she shared with her Catholic husband, an Air Force Major. It was true that they made their decisions together, theirs was a model marriage, but Nancy spent the most time with Michael, she being a "house-mom" and therefore the most influential in shaping his character. Guided by the innate moral sense of her religion and with assistance provided by Emily Post's "Etiquette" and Doctor Spock's "Baby and Child Care," she plotted a course of development for an ethical young gentleman. By all appearances, he was respectful, always using "sir" or "mam" when answering adults and never using first names in addressing them. It would always be Mr. So-and-so or Mrs. This-and-that. He was never aggressive, avoiding any conflict by way of his acute sense of reason. Violence was not an option for conflict resolution. In short, she had raised him to be compassionate. Thus, when he encountered trouble from without, Nancy understood her son to be the child she had raised. Her support for him was cemented by those early developmental years and she therefore remained unflappable in the face of accusations such as the one she would soon encounter with Principal Gooding.

Michael's father was not so entrenched as she. It was he that led the initiative to place young Michael in a military high school. Put simply, he felt he needed the discipline, but the hard truth was that neither of his parents were prepared to raise a child in the sweeping cultural changes that had transpired since the baby-boom following World War II. They had each been raised during the Great Depression to be the product of solid, loving families. They had learned to do without. Self-sacrifice had been welded in their very being. They gave their very all to Michael. It was the same gift of unconditional love that had been bestowed upon them.

In reality, young Michael's only real problem was that he was easily bored. By the time he was in third grade in Edinburgh, Scotland, it was established that he had an unusually high IQ. In his brief dalliance with first grade, he assimilated an entire year of studies in just two weeks and followed that act with a repeat performance in second grade. The well-meaning Scottish nuns of St. Peter and Paul's immediately moved him to third grade. From that point on, his schoolyard compatriots were always two years older than he. He would always be smaller than the rest, and eventually as puberty graced the other boys, he would be regarded as a late developer. In the race to adulthood, they would always know more. This placed him at a distinct disadvantage with the ladies and thus created a need to distinguish himself in other ways, style being prominent among them. It was for this very reason that he relished the idea of military school. Nothing attracts young ladies more so than the sight of a young man in uniform. Before moving to San Antonio from Washington D.C., Michael dreamt of attending St. John's Academy, a military school that dressed their students in sharp grey woolen uniforms with a dark blue stripe down the pantlegs and oversized emblems of rank

wrapping the sleeves of their jackets, like junior versions of West Point cadets. But disappointment soon followed in Texas when he learned that the uniforms at Central consisted of dull khakis bearing brass insignias that required regular maintenance.

But in the broader lesson to be accepted, he had learned to overcompensate. When his childhood friends stood fearful, he embraced the risks they balked at. He would be the first to jump off the roof with his homemade Superman cape of a bath towel. He accepted any dare. He could not allow himself to be called “chicken.” He was the fastest runner in the school and on the playground he could not be caught in Tag or hit by a well-directed Dodgeball. But above all, he was outspoken, even challenging adults to parry with him. He fashioned a persona of fearlessness, all the while feeling inadequate except for that one cherished quality. He knew he was smarter than the others. He was also smarter than the adults. He just required a formidable enough foe to establish his identity, a proper challenge. Kline was such a foe.

As his father saw it, by ninth grade Michael had already established a history of behavior that well documented a deviant proclivity, an unhealthy interest in sex. He failed to understand it within the context of undue influence on a child perennially two-years younger than his friends, with an obvious need to be accepted. Rather than treat the cause, the Major focused on the result. By so doing he arrived at a solution placing Michael in a school populated with children remanded there for discipline issues more advanced than Michael's. It was an environment that amplified the factors influencing his effort to emulate others and it escalated unacceptable behavior mutually on an entire group, brethren united by

persecution. Like the prison system, it was a training ground for minor offenders to become major offenders.

The first blemish to his record, one that can be easily remembered, occurred while Michael was in fifth grade. It was not school related, but occurred at home. Michael was enamored of “Mad” magazine, both its satirical posture and the caricatures. Concurrently, he was an avid fan of the television series “The Untouchables,” a show about how the FBI battled gangsterism during the prohibition era. Perhaps it was there that he learned the phrase “bath-tub gin.” His next artistic effort manifested as the fusion of these two influences into a singular work. Michael had been keeping a large photo scrapbook and used one of the two-page spreads for an ambitious drawing of a bath-tub gin party featuring gangsters complete with naked women. Unfortunately, his talents for rendering facial details had not yet matured enough to satisfy his own critical eye, so he solved this problem by cutting out the faces of the neighborhood girls with whom he traded school wallet photos, and pasting them on the naked bodies.

As every artist requires an audience for their work, Michael shared his scrapbook with his best friend, Jimmy who borrowed it and took it home. In short order, Jimmy’s mother discovered the book lying on his bed and in an enraged fit of moral indignation stormed his parents with the evidence of his perversion and the corruption of her son, little Jimmy, in actuality the true ringleader.

Mark number one in the Major’s black book.

Now to any outsider, Michael’s guilt would seem to be incontrovertible, but consider this, another incident that occurred in fifth grade that shines a bright light

on Michael's inability to understand the deeper implications of his drawing. He had no idea what he had done. In Catholic terms, he was free from sin.

Mount Calvary was a school run by nuns in black habits, often described by detractors as penguins, unlike the Scottish nuns Michael experienced at St. Peter and Paul's who sported the white winged-headwear of the Sally Field variety, made famous on her TV show, "The Flying Nun." It was a feature of the school's building that the lavatories for both the boys and girls were on the basement floor of the three-story structure because of required access to the nearby playground. One morning as Michael's fifth grade teacher, Sister Mary Margaret, was lurking outside the entrance to the boys restroom, Michael happened down the hall on his way to the playground. Little did he realize that she had been waiting for him by the door. She signaled him to come to her.

"Come with me," she whispered as she took him by the hand, pulling him into the restroom. Michael was confused, petrified with fear, a complete loss of comprehension. All he knew with certainty was that nuns were women and that meant they were not allowed in the boy's restroom. He knew he lacked the compass to guide his behavior under this unchartered circumstance. What was this about? What was expected of him? The lack of an immediate answer to this question only served to add to his confusion. How should he behave?

Mary Margaret took him by the wrist and led him to one of the bathroom toilet stalls, a sign that portended imminent dangers. His intuition told him that he was in trouble, but for what exactly, he did not know.

"What do you do here?" she asked.

Michael carefully considered all the possible answers to the question and discounted each one by one. How does an eight-year-old boy answer that specific question posed by a nun without using the word “shit,” or the milder synonym, “poop?” He was frozen and could not respond. After several queries, all the same, she could see he was frightened and resorted to a different approach.

With all the cunning at her disposal, she proceeded on, “What do you do here, number one or number two?”

Now, young Michael understood this to be a real serious problem. It was clearly a multiple-choice question, where the two choices were undefined. Perhaps her number one and his number one were not used to refer to the same anatomical function and there was this added problem that even his eight-year-old mind understood. His anatomy and hers were different. He knew that much, but number one and number two, huh? Picking one over the other was an invitation to suffer the failure of chance, and yet the very nature of the question gave rise to the fear that she may not have known that both functions were exercised upon the toilet. Could nuns be that ignorant? The question itself was wrong. There was no proper answer to “either or.” It was both.

Undeterred, she moved to modify the question, “What do you do here, number two?”

It seemed a simple yes/no question, but it posed the same issue as the previous. It remained possible that they might not agree on the proxy number

representing a specific body function never to be discussed in real terms with a nun. He remained frozen, but she would have her answer.

She grabbed his wrist for the second time, unaware that this would be interpreted as a sign of aggression and further inhibit his answers. She dragged him to the urinals where once again she posed the original question, “What do you do here, number one or number two?” There could be no answer. It was the same problem.

At her wit’s end, she decided to use a formal anatomical term to define her question, unfortunately one that required some medical comprehension. “What do you do here, move your bowels?” Now to be sure, young Michael had never heard that term, nor did he know how his body functioned to remove waste excrement. She could see that he was still frozen, unable to respond, and thus she continued repeating the question over and over again in a vain attempt to arouse an understanding.

Fifth grade was the first year of Michael’s American education. He arrived from Scotland with the thickest of Scottish accents and to him, the vocal inflections of this American nun possessed certain vagaries. He did not know the regional sources, but he fully understood that American English suffered many different accents. The only explanation he could muster regarding this mystery word he now encountered was that perhaps Sister Mary Margaret was slurring the word “balls.” He heard “Bowels” as “baa...aalls,” an odd Southern drawl for a Northern nun, making a multi-syllabic word into a monosyllabic one. But at last, they could come to an understanding, for he had no awareness of the dual functionality of his wee-wee. He associated his balls with the process of peeing.

Predictably, she repeated the question one more time, and this time he nodded “yes.” It was a sad comedy of errors.

She sent young Michael off to the playground and scurried down the hall to proudly report the result of her investigation to Mother Superior who later took to the school intercom to revel in their mutual victory. It was common knowledge among the children in all grades that someone had been shitting in the boy’s urinal. It had become a running joke throughout the entire school, evolving into taunts on the playground and the unsubstantiated incrimination of the less-favored, the outcasts among them, typically nerds and those regarded as “retards.” So as a matter of concern, Mother Superior deemed it necessary to make an announcement on the intercom informing the frenzied students that the perpetrator had indeed been caught. You could almost feel the huge sigh of relief as nuns throughout the building could now terminate their joint investigation. Mary Margaret was rightly proud of her accomplishment. The keen efforts and perseverance she exerted had uncovered the answer to a perplexing mystery.

The intercom announcement having been made, Mary Margaret’s whole class was tittering with suppressed laughter. They had immediately ascertained that the culprit had to be Eddie Boetcher, who was known to have a weak bladder and occasionally pissed himself. Without considering that the activation of either of the two numerical functions had anything to do with the urgency of the other or the means of relief, the blame was being placed. The class was already pointing and snickering at Eddie, who clearly felt the pain of their abuse. Mary Margaret did not take kindly to this unruly display and immediately rose to Eddie’s defense.

“Now class,” she asserted, “perhaps we should understand that the child responsible for doody in the urinal may have come from a foreign country...” Michael silently wondered, “Who could that be?” She continued, “...one where the plumbing may be different.”

She pleaded for understanding but it was too late. Michael never understood that he was the only child in the school who arrived there from a foreign country. After all, he was an American. He failed to comprehend that his encounter with Mary Margaret in the boy’s restroom had resulted in this conclusion. He was just that naive. He would forever be branded as the kid crapping in the urinal, but more importantly it should have been obvious to his parents that whatever motivation lay behind his gin-party collage, he was incapable of the crime Jimmy’s mother had accused him of. He knew nothing. He meant nothing. There was no ill intent. He was simply emulating his influences. If they had known better, perhaps his parents might have confiscated his “Mad” magazines or better yet, regulated his TV viewing, but as it was, he got a stern talking to and was restricted from playing with Jimmy.

By the time he reached seventh grade, Michael’s reading interests had expanded beyond comic books to include science fiction, especially novels about space travel. He was a consummate junky. The classrooms at Mount Calvary were outfitted with the typical uni-desk of the period, a combined wrap-around desktop writing surface and attached seat with enclosed storage beneath. Reading science fiction was a shared passion among his classmates and it had become customary for these students to gather and exchange books. Books they were currently reading were stored in the space below the seat of the uni-desk along with their books on geography, history, math and English.

One weekend, Sister Mary Norman saw fit to explore the trove of books stored in the many desks of her classroom. She must have gathered up at least thirty books, but for whatever reason she zeroed in on Donato's. He had three books in his desk and she promptly set about reading them. By Monday, she had uncovered all the evidence she needed to undertake prosecuting him for the offense of being a "dirty little boy," but there was one last thing she needed before sharing her findings, confirmation from his own mouth, preferably an admission of guilt. Before class that day, she confronted Michael with her concerns and asked him to step out in the hall where she could conduct her interrogation in private. Michael was clueless regarding the inquiry. There was an air of determination in her stern approach. Her otherwise cheerful face bore a blank expression that betrayed nothing of the reason for this singular honor. He had always had a good relationship with Sister Mary Norman. He was the brightest and the youngest and even though he was unaware of it, too cute for words. In fact, he was the "teacher's pet." Donato sensed a real foreboding.

Once in the hall, she asked him about the books. She specifically asked him about sex portrayed in the one specific novel she maintained she had read. Michael was unaware of any such element in his books. Truthfully, he was unaware of any sexual encounters in that story. It may have been that he misunderstood what had been written, or perhaps it was just alluded to, but in the mind of his teacher, that book was a bad influence leading down a deviant path of sin. More likely, Michael had skipped over those parts of the story, as they were of no interest to him. He was focused entirely on the space travel. In the book in question, the crew on a Mars mission was staffed with both men and women. A central part of that story was the conflict that occurred when the heroine gave birth during the long flight to

Mars. As we all know, a live human birth cannot happen without prior sex, but that is not to say that to include a sexual encounter in a story of the first manned mission to Mars is more prurient than relevant. It depends on how it is described and the disposition of the beholder. The bottom line in this approach was that it was going nowhere and a change of strategy was required.

“Tell me a dirty joke,” she demanded

Donato was stunned. This was not going to happen. It would never happen. It would be a violation of his moral code and a clear indication of disrespect. It's not to say that he did not know any dirty jokes or was against repeating them. But there is a time and place for everything and this was neither the time nor the place to be telling a dirty joke. It was something done casually with friends not with Sister Mary Norman. Mary Norman was unrelenting and it became clear to Donato that there would be no escape. He needed a compromise position.

He had several dirty jokes in his repertoire, none suitable in this situation. His experience with this type of joke had been more one of acquisition than repetition. He found himself at a disadvantage because he seldom repeated any. He always felt awkward about it. He understood them well enough to share a laugh, but his part in the telling of dirty jokes was that of a listener.

As Sister Mary Norman continued berating him, he scanned the back of his eyeballs for a joke mild enough for the occasion, perhaps even one he might be able to dilute to a form of acceptability.

“I know you know a dirty joke and you are going to tell me one or we are not leaving this hall,” she maintained.

“Are you listening to me mister?”

The inclusion of the moniker, “mister,” rather than the use of his name signaled that she would be increasing the pressure. It betrayed her frustration was developing into anger.

“So what’s it going to be? I know you will tell me a dirty joke, so let’s get it over with.”

“OK Sister. OK,” he replied

“Ya’ see there was this woman who was going to the doctor because she was pregnant and the baby would not come out. The doctor gave her some silver pills and told her it would solve the problem. But it didn’t. When she returned he gave her some gold pills with the same instructions, but that didn’t work either. When she came back again, the doctor knew something unusual was going on. He pressed his stethoscope to her belly and shouted to the baby, ‘Hey baby, why won’t you come out?’ and the baby answered back, ‘Are you kidding? I found a gold mine in here.’”

Throughout the encounter Michael was careful to avoid eye contact with Sister Mary Norman. To do so seemed an invitation, an open door to devastation. Rather he averted his eyes to the floor. Enhancing the confrontation with eye contact would only worsen his situation, so he found staring at his shoes to be

helpful. These shoes were new. In fifth grade the preferred style was black oxfords but with a newly designed twist. The addition of a mechanical clip tongue had replaced the use of laces to secure the shoe to the foot. Now in seventh grade a new style had emerged to replace the clip-ons, brown combat boots. That is what his friends referred to them as, but in reality they were not the basic combat boot design. Technically they were paratrooper boots, laced up three quarters of the way and topped by a four-inch wrap-around collar secured by two straps with small buckles. Today they are largely regarded as motorcycle boots, black being the dominant color. This style that offered Michael extreme ankle support had been drafted on this occasion to another duty now expired. Michael raised his eyes to meet hers. He needed an affirmation. Did she accept that joke? Had he fulfilled the demand?

Perhaps it was simply that Mary Norman sensed he would not fully relent, so after ten unproductive minutes in the hall and an increasingly disruptive class waiting just a few feet beyond the door, she took the off-ramp provided her and dispatched Donato on his first long walk down the locker-lined hall to Mother Superior's office. Catholic schools of the day lacked a cafeteria. Lunch was in the lockers, stored in metal, television-themed lunchboxes, thermoses and paper bags packed by caring mothers, that conspired collectively to create an amalgam of smell; ripe bananas, oranges, peanut butter and Tuna fish, that is eternally recognized as the undisputed smell of grade-school.

To Michael this whole thing seemed ridiculous compared to the very real behavior problems he witnessed the nuns wrestle in the classroom as their students transitioned to teens. His classmates were forming out-of-school alliances, joining gangs and wearing their colors to school. Openly identifying them as the Apollos,

the Little Apollos, the Viceroyes, the Top Hats, the Dukes or the Squires were the corduroy jackets they sported. This colorful array of jackets, purple for the Apollos, and gold, red, green and blue for the others, filled the coat hooks in the back of the classroom. The rear of each jacket bore a large embroidered emblem of the gang's name, applied much like a baseball uniform, and on the front over the left breast was their first name, Linda, Darla, Steve, Butch et cetera, the girls having the added distinction of two embroidered red hearts on the curled ornamental embellishment underlying their name. Teen pregnancy had not yet afflicted the girls of Sister Mary Norman's class, so Michael was oblivious to her possible motive in protecting them. She could easily see by their jackets that they were at risk, but she had chosen the wrong target to allay her fears. Perhaps there was another motive. Perhaps she wanted to protect Donato, her defacto pet. Even he recognized that she had taken a special liking to him and in those days he was eager to please. He was at the top of his class, never any trouble, a perennial volunteer, so as he made that long walk down to Mother Superior's office, none of this made any sense to him.

Fortunately, he felt he was in good standing with Mother Superior. She was a kindly woman, unlike the brutal Mother Superior in his Scottish school, whose customary punishment was whipping the back of bared knees with a leather belt. The traditional uniform in Scottish grade-schools was short pants and knee socks, leaving the knees exposed and vulnerable. He had more than once seen the red welts on a teary-eyed Stephen, his friend, who had been punished for crossing the painted playground line separating the boys from the girls. Nothing he could imagine could ever be as bad as that. And besides, he knew Mother Superior liked him. She had told him as much. He had enough time to formulate his defense on the long walk to her office but concluded he had nothing to worry about. His joke

wasn't really dirty. The book was about space travel and better yet he knew that Mother Superior liked him. She would give him a fair hearing.

It was clear that Michael admired his father, a man in uniform. Osmosis and the need to be accepted can work across generations as well. From a very early age, Michael had displayed an attraction to military uniforms. It may have been what propelled him to join the junior police or become a school street-crossing guard. School supplied him with a white belt that ran diagonally from his right shoulder down to the white belted waist. Upon the diagonal strap he wore the shiny silver crossing guard badge where everyone could see it. In the mornings he commandeered traffic on the boulevard, permitting children safe crossing, and afterwards followed that with duty as a safety officer on the playground. It was in that capacity that he first encountered Mother Superior and established a relationship that he now felt he could fall back on.

A playground incident had occurred months ago when an all-too-rambunctious young girl had been catapulted from her swing and skidded across the playground ripping a hole in the crotch area of her pantyhose, displaying a small bloody wound. Screaming at full volume, the terror-filled child ran to Donato for medical assistance and he in turn walked her to the station just inside the door where his medical kit was stored. He took one apprehensive look at her complaint and quickly determined that this was not a wound he could attend to. He was far too modest. He quickly carried her to Mother Superior who summoned the school nurse. He had done the right thing by avoiding even the semblance of interest in her tushy. Mother Superior was deeply grateful. Now he must leverage that incident to his advantage for good purpose.

He sat quietly in the outer secretary's office as his apprehension built. This would not be a sure thing. He could see through the textured glass door window to Mother Superior's office that she was dealing with another student problem. Beyond, the muffled tones of the indistinct words filtered through the wall, her raised voice said all that was needed to understand the meeting. He wondered silently what infraction that student had committed. Surely it was worse than his. He began to speculate that he might get off with a penance, like those in confession, maybe a few "Hail Marys" or "Our Fathers," maybe even a Rosary or two. That seemed fair enough to him.

When the door finally opened and the tearful student left, he heard Mother Superior summon him into her office by name. He tried to maintain his false smile as he entered.

"And what brings you into my office today, Michael?" she opened.

"Sister Mary Norman sent me." he replied

"I see. And just why is it that Sister Mary Norman saw fit to send you to my office?" she further explored.

"I dunno," was his tepid answer.

"Surely you must know. I have not known Sister Mary Norman to be one to take action without motive," she countered.

He was trapped without wiggle room. All that remained was to express the least egregious reason he could conjure up, but truly there was none.

“I told her a dirty joke,” he timidly replied.

“YOU WHAT?”

There was a long silence. She could wait forever if need be. He understood he had to move the conversation forward. So he repeated his answer.

“I told her a dirty joke.”

This incensed Mother Superior beyond her limits but she maintained control.

“And what in heaven’s name, gave you the idea to tell Sister Mary Norman a dirty joke?”

“She asked me to,” offered Donato.

That did it! “She asked you to,” she incredulously repeated his explanation.

“Yes.”

Slowly, her right hand slipped over on to the desk where she had placed an incongruous oddity, a plastic Roman sword sheathed in a plastic scabbard encrusted with fake rubies and emeralds. In one swift, lightning move the palsied old woman sprung to life and withdrew the sword, flashing its hot neon orange

blade as if fresh from the blacksmith's anvil and proceeded to flail Michael all about the head and shoulders in a chaotic series of uncoordinated strokes rather like Keith Moon on a drum fill.

“You are a liar and a filthy, filthy little boy,” she uttered as the flailing continued. “Sister Mary Norman would never have asked you to tell her a dirty joke. This is preposterous. You will pay for this sin,” still manically flailing him about the head with the floppy-bladed sword. Truth be told, her performance was more impressive than the flogging. Michael had raised his arms to cover his face as she first lunged across the desk at him, and blows of the flaccid sword were ineffective on his clothed shoulders. In the end it was nothing more than a humiliating display. The real consequences would begin with his parents.

On Saturday the Donatos put their son in the family Studebaker and departed their home on Mason Street to drive to the Convent along Marlboro Pike for a meeting with Mother Superior and Sister Mary Norman to confront their allegations. This being the most direct path to the school and convent, it was ironic that the journey should follow the course of teen violence that dominated the local news. At one end was Forestville, the location of their home. At the other end was District Heights, stomping ground for the many gangs whose colors hung in Mary Norman's classroom. Shoplifting, car wrecks, gang fights and stabbings brought notoriety to the Marlboro Pike corridor, and yet here were the Donatos, a church-going, God-fearing family, who had shielded their transplanted son from all this, had raised a sensitive child, who were reporting to the good sisters over a deportment issue about questionable reading material, unaware that in his classroom he was surrounded with far greater issues than his choice of subject matter for reading.

Together, the family climbed the concrete steps to the front door of the convent where they were greeted by a young novitiate. Through the open door Michael could detect the overwhelming smell of beef stew. It was the signature smell of the convent much as the amalgam of lunchbox smells defined the school. Perhaps it was Dinty Moore, a convenient stew in a can. If it was not, the kitchen nuns had mastered it's replication. His parents were invited in, while Michael was asked to wait outside on the steps. That is how he will remember that day, alone on the steps with the lingering smell of canned beef stew.

On their return nothing was said, not on the ride home, not in the house. This was unexpected. Michael had expected a severe talking-to at the very least, but no, nothing. Truth was that his mother had defended him calmly, secure in her belief in the son she had raised, while the Major listened to both sides of the argument quietly. As far as they were both concerned, the nuns had fulfilled their obligation to them by reporting the incident, but no remedial action was required. While the Major backed his wife, they differed silently in their concerns.

This was Mark Number Two in that little Black Book stored in the Major's subconscious. A pattern was established.

So it was that upon their move to Texas, the Major sought to place Michael in a military school, where these behavioral issues could be addressed and dealt with. But he was completely unaware that the gang climate in San Antonio was far worse than that of Forestville, Maryland and that Central Catholic might be more a jeopardy than a solution. Teen violence in San Antonio had swelled to such proportions that a citywide curfew for all teens had to be enacted. Robberies and

murders regularly occurred along San Antonio's famed river walk and the nightly "Lone Star News" featured stories of gang activity, with shots of tables full of weapons confiscated by the police in vehicular searches conducted during the curfew hours. It was out of control. Not that any public school was immune to the teen problem, but it might have seemed that Central Catholic was a hub for a serious group of major offenders whose parents had the same intent as the Donatos. Putting other distinctions aside, Americans of Italian and Mexican heritage share a common religion, a common morality and a common sense of family. The Latin that originated with the Romans, like their religion, was carried far and wide as the Romans conquered the various regions of Europe, and Latin eventually metamorphosized into Spanish, Portuguese and French. It created a common bond. The Latino parents of San Antonio shared the very same teen dilemma as the Donatos. Perhaps their sons were placed there for greater cause. Perhaps they were closer to the violence on the streets, but these good people all sought the same thing for their children.

By the time he became a cadet corporal, Donato understood the military discipline at the school to be a farce. Once a week, the entire student body met as a battalion on the tarmac behind the school. Commands cascaded down from the battalion commander to the company commanders to the platoon leaders. Inspections were followed by marching exercises that were the regular substance of the outdoor activities. On entrance to the school, students were issued two uniforms that consisted of combat boots, khakis, two trouser-leg blouse hoops, rank insignia epaulettes, collar brass, and a web belt with a brass military buckle. Correct maintenance of the uniform was the student's responsibility. Khakis were delivered to a professional launderer and returned stiff as aboard with starch so heavy as to make the shirt pockets unusable. It was expected that students would

learn how to make a spit shine polish on the toes of their boots, resulting in a mirror finish like patent leather, a technique Donato never mastered. The protective finish on the collar brass and belt buckle had to be removed to allow cadets to polish the underlying metal to a shiny gloss with “Brasso.”

Cadet officers were graced with a yellow fourragere, while the marching band wore white and the drill team, black. The yellow braid on their shoulder only further marked the cadet officers for abuse. These were honor students who attained their rank through their studies, not by their ability to command young men. In that regard, they were hapless. They lacked that certain swagger of military confidence. For the most part, they were nerds, geeks whose high pitched voices had not yet settled into maturity, making their squeaky commands all the more ridiculous to the rabble they presided over. To this system the Donatos had commended their son.

Sitting there in the Principal’s office they were unaware of the consequences of their decision. They presented themselves with the full confidence that they had done the right thing for Michael. The Principal began the conference by revealing the notebook to his parents. He handed it across the desk where it was received by Nancy, who, oblivious to the cover, opened it and perused the contents. The Major remained detached. The principal explained that they were going to have to expel Michael from the school for his bad behavior, but it seemed to his mother that the degree of his offense was not explicitly defined, but she did not know that the Principal had assumed the mere sight of the offensive cover would suffice for explanation. He had not calculated that Michael’s unwitting mother would be ignorant of the meaning. Consequently, there was never a contest regarding the offense. All further debate centered on the punishment.

Nancy made a plea that he be allowed to stay in their school but the principal argued that, “There is no room in our school for the type of behavior he exhibits.”

His ever agile mother was ready for this. She countered, “Is it not your responsibility to correct this behavior, to instruct him on the proper way to live, the proper way to conduct himself? Would your religion abandon his need?”

The major broke his silence, “That’s why we sent him here.”

And Nancy dealt the final blow, “If not you, then who?”

The principal had been humiliated into submission. Michael would stay in school and Nancy left the office carrying the offending notebook.

Decades later, after Michael was married and had children of his own he was visiting his parents in Connecticut over the Christmas holidays when the infamous notebook surfaced once more. While sitting at the kitchen center island, enjoying the selection of Christmas cookies his mother ritually baked, he was surprised to see his old notebook prominently placed on the counter. “Hmmm... ” he thought, “how odd.”

“Mom, what are you doing with my old notebook,” he inquired. “I would have thought you would have thrown that away a long time ago.”

As he turned the pages within, he realized for the first time the depth of his mother’s naïveté. She had taken this old relic of his teen folly and embraced the

title “Eat It Raw“ as the suitable cover for her recipes. When Donato’s sister saw it, she loudly chastised their Mother for keeping the offending binder. She had never understood the gesture or the headline “Eat It Raw.” Apparently, she thought it perfect for her recipe binder. After a good laugh, and now informed, she continued using it anyway with full knowledge. She was just that thrifty.