

Chapter 1

Room 204

“Disturbers Row!”

The five boys in the classroom’s back row didn’t respond to the two words, which were an order that they leave their seats and walk quietly to the enclosed cloakroom at the room’s front end to get their jackets and sweaters, or “wraps,” as the nun called them. Instead, they sat and laughed amongst themselves, proud of their refusal to obey even the slightest order that the old, wrinkled, angry nun gave them.

“Disturbers Row!” Sister Mary Zita spat out with even more than the usual contempt she had for the five, who were driving her crazy with their lack of respect for her authority. They were brazen and bold, disrupted her classroom to no end and shamed the very idea of what seventh grade, Catholic schoolboys should be. They were challenging her again by refusing to get their wraps for the lunch hour dismissal, and as she half sat on the front edge of her wooden desk at the front of the room, Sister Zita made ready to respond to the challenge by grabbing her favorite weapon off the desk: a four-foot-long, rubber-tipped wooden pointer.

That Zitabug, as they called her, was getting angrier, made the boys laugh out loud. Those laughs seared her ears. She considered them a direct assault on her role as a representative of God and was even more determined to wipe those taunting smiles off their twelve-and-thirteen-year-old-year-old faces. They stayed in their chairs, reveling in the glory that they knew would soon be theirs.

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They stayed put and laughed harder. That was enough for Sister Zita. The old nun, pointer in hand, launched herself off the desk and hobbled, half bent over, as best she could, across the wooden floor and past the rows of Room 204’s good kids: the kids who always did their homework, never talked in class and always obeyed

her orders, the kids who succumbed to authority's every effort at control and who made the Disturbers sick.

The five had once sat amongst those annoying, properly behaved kids, but they could never keep their mouths shut and they couldn't help but bust out laughing every time Zita gave an order or even spoke. The poor woman couldn't pronounce "geography," she called it "gergerphy." She used silly phrases like "Mister Big Stuff," and "You are as bold as brass and even bolder" to try to embarrass kids who goofed off in class, and she said "D'wuhh?" every time she tried to say "What?" or "What did you say?"

And so, within the first few weeks of classes at Our Lady of Grace grammar school on Chicago's northwest side, Sister Zita had identified the five— Gary Kolba, Dave Ruchinski, Bob Kurkowski, Richard Bozeman and Dennis Domrzalski— as problem students, put them together in the back row and labeled them "Disturbers" in an attempt to shame them into conformist behavior. The move had the opposite effect. The boys wore the title "Disturber" as a badge of honor and felt it compelled them to be even more disruptive and antagonistic than they already were.

It had long been that way for Sister Zita. She was old— at least sixty or so, but exactly how old was a mystery— and had long ago lost the ability to control a classroom. For the past ten years the rowdier boys who went to OLG prayed to get Zita as their seventh-grade teacher. If they did, she obliged their rebellious instincts by making them Disturbers.

There had been some legendary Disturbers in the past— Steve Domrzalski, Frank Hopkins and Tommy Tamkin— who brought disturbing to new heights of rule-breaking, disrespect, scholastic irresponsibility and contempt for classroom decorum.

They were heroes in the neighborhood, and the current batch of Disturbers admired them. But they were individuals. They had acted alone and separately and were never able to bring the full concentration of their combined prowess to bear on the hapless nun.

This year's Disturbers were different. There were five of them who had the benefit of history, and who knew that Zita would soon be retiring. They were fully aware of the opportunity they had to become the greatest group of Disturbers in OLG's sixty-year history.

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To claim that coveted honor they realized that they not only had to take disturbing to a new level, but that they had to disturb as a unit, as one.

That they did. During those first few weeks they had all already been beaten several times by Zita— slapped by her dried, scaly hands, cracked with the pointer and clubbed with the “rung of a chair,” a foot-long, half-inch-square, solid piece of wood that formed the cross-supports for the legs of their wooden classroom chairs.

The beatings fueled their desire to do even more harm in the classroom and made them heroes to themselves. With every back of Zita’s hand, with every punch from her bony fist and with every thump from her chair rung they laughed harder and disturbed more.

When Zita attacked— disciplined— one, the others stormed into action and raised ruckuses in other areas of the second-floor classroom. Sometimes they antagonized other students, sometimes they ran around the room screaming and laughing and stomping their feet, and sometimes they raced up to Zita and taunted her. No matter what they did, it always worked. Zita would stop beating her original target to chase them, and what had started out as a small-scale disturbance usually turned into a classroom-wide riot.

It was happening again. Zita, the four-foot-long, standard-issue nun’s rosary dangling from her belt, and the starchy stench of her full-body, black and white linen habit smelling up the room, was charging toward Disturbers Row.

At least she thought she was charging. To the Disturbers, she was limping slowly and taking forever to get to there. That annoyed them because they gloried in the attention that a battle with her brought them from Room 204’s other thirty-seven students, especially the girls, most of whom giggled when these riots erupted.



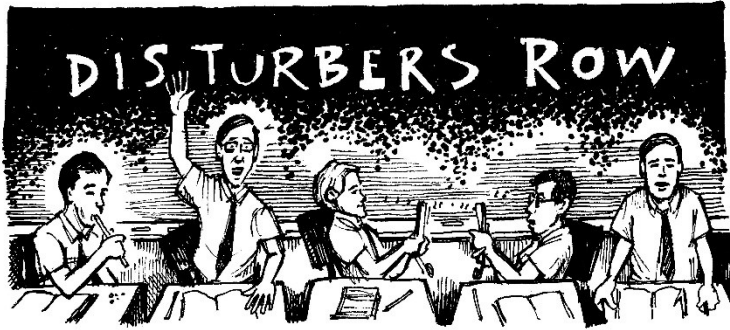
SISTER ZITA.

Zita was at row three, approaching the Disturbers from the classroom's left side. The boys held their positions and laughed louder. As she hit row four, the five-foot-tall nun began raising the pointer that she held in her right hand. The Disturbers started talking to each other, pretending that they hadn't heard her earlier order and that they didn't see her heading back toward them.

The pointer rose high into the air as Zita crossed row five, just a few steps away from Disturbers Row. Still the boys held and pretended not to see her. She walked another two steps and then—Crraaack! The pointer came down and slammed on the wooden top of Kolba's table-like desk. Zita hadn't meant for that. She had swung with the intention of smashing Gary's arms as they lay folded across the desk, but at just the right moment he had jumped out of his chair

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and run to the other side of the room, denying the nun the satisfaction of inflicting physical pain.



THE DISTURBERS.

The other boys had done the same; they had reacted instantly to avoid Zita and her pointer, and she was angry. She shuffled slowly across the back of the room, trying to get to the side where the Disturbers had fled. But the Disturbers were long gone; they had scattered and were all over the room. Kurkowski was already at the front of the room rummaging through the drawers in Zita's desk. Ruchinski had Roger Krask, one of the the nun's perfectly behaved pet students, in a headlock in row two. Bozeman was assaulting another of her pets, Bernard Heller, in row three, and dumping his books on the floor. Kolba was marching around the room, stomping his feet on its wooden floor and shouting, over and over, "We don't have wraps; we have jackets!"

Bozeman had crawled to row five, where he crouched down behind, and readied for an assault on Thomas Dodkin, who annoyed Zita with his habit of loudly blurting out anything that was on his mind. It never mattered to Dodkin what subject was being taught. If it was spelling class and he had something to say about religion, well, he just shouted it out, always to the amusement of his classmates.

Bozeman wound up for his assault on Dodkin by raising his arm behind his back as far as it would go. His right hand held a weapon.

Then he swung the arm forward with full fury and— “Agggghhhhh!” Thomas Dodkin shrieked so loud the world could hear. He jolted up into the air, plopped back down in his chair and wailed again while grabbing for his right buttock with his hand. Bozeman had stabbed him with the pointed end of a steel geometry compass.

Bozeman had let go of the weapon when Dodkin jumped into the air, and now he tried to grab it as it dangled from his victim’s ass. Dodkin writhed and wiggled, instinctively trying to shake the weapon from his body, all the while screaming that he had been hurt. Bozeman grabbed and missed. He grabbed again and missed, and finally, on the third try, he got hold of the compass and— “Agggghhhhh!” Dodkin screamed as Bozeman withdrew the two-inch-long steel point from his flesh and scurried away.

The entire room exploded with laughter, talking and shouting— even the good kids laughed— and Zita now had a general insurrection to put down. She was furious, believed that it was another one of Dodkin’s improper outbursts, and wobbled toward him as he got up and stood next to his desk.

“You think you’re Mister Big Stuff, don’t you, Mister Dodkin?” Zita sneered as she raised the pointer. “You want attention just like they do? Well, I’ll give you attention!”

She began flailing away at Dodkin with the pointer and landed six or seven quick blows to his back and shoulders. The poor boy was no Disturber and was dumbfounded that he was being beaten for having been stabbed. He saw neither the humor nor the opportunity for glory in the situation, and he slumped down into his chair and covered his head and face with his arms to protect them from Zita’s repeated blows.

“But Sister,” Dodkin cried after she had hammered him with another ten blows, “somebody poked me with something and it hurt real bad. I think I’m bleeding.”

“Oh, poor little baby,” Zita said with a sneer that said she didn’t believe him. “Where is the little owie?”

“On my ass!”

Whack! Whack! Whack!

Zita went after with the boy with a fury that impressed even the Disturbers, and in just a few moments Thomas Dodkin was sobbing.

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"But Sister!" he kept crying in feeble attempts to gain her sympathy. "But Sister!"

"Don't 'But Sister' me!" Zita huffed as she continued to pound the boy. "You keep quiet in my room. Speak when spoken to! Otherwise, mister, you will get the back of my hand!"

"But Ster!" shouted a voice from the opposite corner in back of the room, "Sterr?"

Zita wasn't prone to answer to the name of "Ster," which was the Disturbers disrespectful shorthand for "Sister," and which infuriated her. But this was a desperate situation, so she acknowledged the summons:

"D'wuhh?"

"Ster! I saw what happened. Thomas is right. Someone poked him with something. I think it was a compass! I think he's hurt real bad. He might need an ambulance! If he doesn't get to a hospital soon, he will die!"

The voice belonged to Dave Ruchinski, one of Zita's chief antagonists and a Disturber for whom the old nun had mixed feelings. She hated Ruchinski's unceasing efforts to humiliate her, and knew he was a Disturbers ringleader, but she didn't think that the boy riled her on purpose. After all, he had a somewhat angelic face, blond hair and a pretty smile, and he could be nice when he wanted to. No, she figured he was mildly retarded, as she thought were many of the working-class Polish, German, Irish, Italian and Norwegian children she taught.

"So, mister pretty boy," she said with more than a hint of sarcasm, "It's so nice of you to help. So sweet of you. So tell me, mister, who did it?"

"Well, Ster, I only saw their outline and so I couldn't make out who it was," Ruchinski said, feigning breathlessness and intense interest in identifying the culprit. "But I saw their outline and I know that it was a big person."

"How big?"

"Not real big, but pretty big. Pretty real big."

"Was it a boy or a girl?"

"It was a boy, Ster. I think, anyway. But maybe not. Boys don't wear dresses. I think he had a dress on, so it couldn't have been a boy."

"What color was the dress?"

"Purple, Ster!"

"No one here has a purple dress."

"You're right. It was green!"

"No one here has a green dress." Zita was right, of course, because no one in the school wore what the nuns considered garish colors. All the students wore uniforms: the girls white blouses and dark blue plaid skirts, and the boys, dark blue pants, white shirts and solid blue clip-on ties.

"I think it was white!"

"Maybe it was yellow, sweetie."

"Exactly, Ster! It was yellow. But Ster, I don't think it could have been a girl. I mean, I really don't think so."

"Why not, pretty boy?"

"Because she had a beard!"

The entire class convulsed with laughter, even Thomas Dodkin, and Zita knew that, once again, she had been beaten. She was furious and determined to exact a terrible revenge on at least one of the Disturbers for her humiliation, and started lumbering toward Ruchinski. Then Thomas Dodkin blurted out through his tears:

"Sister! It was Dennis! He did it!"

"D'wuhh? Mister Ruchinski, is that true?"

"Ster, I definitely saw it, and I cannot tell a lie. Dennis did it," Ruchinski said while laughing about the situation into which he has just put his fellow Disturber.

That was the perfect answer for Zita. She might have had mixed emotions about Ruchinski's disturbing, but she knew that Domrzalski's disruptions were the purposeful work of a mean-spirited youth who was out to get her and who was beyond redemption. In fact, he had come from a family of Disturbers. His oldest brother Wally had disturbed her class in 1962. It was his class that had given her the humiliating name of Zitabug. His brother Steve had been a Disturber in 1965. He was a fiercely rebellious youth who had set new standards of contempt for her. Now it was

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1966 and she had another disturbing Domrzalski in her room, and she finally had the reason she needed to pay him back for all the pain, suffering and humiliation his brothers had caused her. If his parents were set on breeding Disturbers, well, she was determined to beat this one silly.

Already in the short school year she had almost blurted out that Dennis was just like his brothers. But she knew it wasn't true. Wally, although a sneak and a liar, wasn't a career Disturber who was determined to disrupt her class every day. He reacted to opportunities and responded well to beatings. Steve, although a whirlwind of mischief in the classroom, usually calmed down once he lashed out at her and vented his anger. Both seemed relatively normal. But Dennis, a skinny, angry-looking kid with short brown hair and thick, black-rimmed glasses, was bitter beyond his years. He had started kindergarten in 1959 at four-and-a-half years old, and most of his classmates were six months to a year older than he was, which at that age, was a significant difference.

Dennis was smaller than his classmates, which made him feel insecure and stupid, and had been a shy, sullen brooder who was, as the saying went, afraid of his own shadow. In first grade he barely learned how to print because he was too afraid to raise his hand to ask questions about the subject. In second grade he crapped in his pants because he was too scared to raise his hand to ask to go to the bathroom. It took the scared kid until third grade to work up the nerve to raise his hand to ask or answer a question. He was also a little slow, or a slow learner, the nuns said. Sister Mary Concepta, the second-grade nun, had smelled the problem that day and had called the frightened boy to the front of the class, where she quietly asked him, "Have you had an accident?"

Figuring she was talking about a car crash or something, he answered in the negative. The nun, angered by what she thought was a deliberate lie, lost her temper and shouted so the entire class could hear:

"You've had an accident! Go to the lavatory and clean up!"

His classmates knew exactly what that meant, and they giggled and laughed at the shy boy with the leaky bowel. The embarrassment had seared itself into his memory, and he had vowed to someday get

even, if not with that nun, with anyone who wore the black and white habit of the Dominican Order. And so, through the discipline of ceaseless and solitary brooding sessions, Dennis had programmed himself to be a human torpedo whose guidance system was permanently locked onto nuns in black and white habits. Although he really bore no ill will or personal animosity toward Zita— he actually felt sorry for her— Dennis operated under the code that drove many a Catholic schoolkid: antagonize and humiliate them as they have humiliated you.

He had busted out of his shell in third grade, and now, as a Disturber, he was fully prepared to live that code.

“Maybe Mister Domrzalski forgot his dress today,” Zita said, chuckling proudly at her sarcasm. She wheeled and turned to the boy, who had been standing in the back of the room shooting spitballs at the good kids through a plastic ball-point pen tube during the riot.

“No, Ster! I haven’t forgotten it. It’s in the cloakroom. I’ll just go get it and show it to you,” Dennis replied with a smirk. “I think it would look good on you!”

Zita hated being out-witted, especially by a twelve-year-old, and she advanced on Dennis, while her hand that gripped the pointer twitched uncontrollably with a sense of pleasurable anticipation at being able to whack the boy.

“You think you’re Mister Big Stuff, don’t you?” she snarled. “Well, I’ll give you wearing a dress in my room!”

“But Ster! I haven’t even worn the dress!”

“Why not? Afraid they’ll call you a sissy?”

“No, Ster.”

“Then why?!”

“Because you won’t let me go get it.”

“No back talking to me, you little— ”

Zita always started mumbling when she got to the point of calling the boys names. They swore that she swore under her breath, something that, if it could be proven, would have been a devastating embarrassment to the nun.

“Please, Ster. No swearing. God is listening,” Kolba, who had run to a side of the room, said with mock concern. “He’s in this

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classroom, you know. He's everywhere and he can hear you. Please, Ster, set a better example for us."

Zita was torn. She hated Domrzalski and wanted to crack him a few times, but she also despised Kolba for his smart aleck ways. He was the wittiest of the Disturbers, and she couldn't abide it.

"Get to the back of the room, Mr. Kolba," Zita said, hoping to trick him into moving next to Dennis.

"Why, Ster?" Kolba asked, knowing that she wanted him there so she could beat them both at once.

"So I can pray for you two together," Zita said. "It's more efficient that way."

"But Ster, I don't want to stand next to Dennis."

"Why Gary? Are you afraid to stand next to a boy who wears dresses?"

"No, Ster."

"Afraid that you'll get caught up in his pretty boy ways?"

"No, Ster."

"Then why?"

"Because Ster, his dress went out of style four years ago, and I don't want to be near someone who is so unfashionable. It's embarrassing."

Zita went berserk, and fueled by her outrage, she nearly ran to Dennis, shoved him against the back wall and started savaging him with the pointer and punching and scratching him with her free hand. Dennis escaped her grasp and ran to a side of the room to flee. But Kolba and Kurkowski blocked his way and pushed him back toward the nun. He ran to the room's other side, only to be blocked and pushed back by Bozeman and Ruchinski.

Zita pounced on him again. The beating lasted several minutes, during which Dennis and the other Disturbers laughed the whole time. It ended when the school bell rang, signaling the noon hour and lunch time. The nun had no choice but to let him go as the children raced out of the classroom.

Dennis was bruised, and his arms, neck and cheeks were scratched and bleeding slightly, but he was in heaven.

So were the other Disturbers.