

Sister Everard's silence

We thought her only stern and rigorous and dry—until one afternoon in October.

by [Brian Doyle](#) in the [October 12, 2016](#) issue



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I was in sixth grade. The teacher was Sister Everard. She was a slight but imposing woman. She was ancient beyond measure: 40. If you misbehaved or got lippy or were unprepared in class, she would lower her eyebrows and glare at you and you would feel that glare like a crisp ringing slap. She was stern and somber and orderly and firm and rigorous and organized and blank and unemotional. I cannot remember that I ever saw her smile, which is a remarkable thing to say of a person I saw nearly every day for a year, but that is so. I cannot remember that she laughed or cried or lost her temper or sneered or snickered or cracked a joke or offered a sidelong wry remark or skipped or giggled or twirled her rosary for effect or groaned melodramatically at the profligate idiocy of her young charges, as some of the other sisters did. I suspect now that she had learned to manage her class by incarnating the quiet discipline she wished to instill and evoke in us; but that is the present conclusion of a man much older than she was then. Back then we thought her only

stern and rigorous and dry as a skittered leaf—until one afternoon in October.

We were in the brambly thicket of mathematics, as I remember, and someone had just asked Sister the difference between arithmetic and mathematics, and Sister Everard had glared at the questioner, suspecting that the question was offered as a distraction, and the boy next to me was, I noticed, drawing, in green ink, on the wooden surface of his desk, the Green Hornet and his friend Kato, when the classroom door opened, without anyone having knocked hesitantly, as was school custom, and in walked the monsignor. He didn't come into the room more than a step, though, and he made a slight gesture to Sister, who walked down my aisle to the door. When Sister walked past you could smell the faintest trace of lavender and talcum and chalk and something that might have been pine; the closest I can get to identifying the scent is to say it is the scent of vacation cabins in woods where there is a great deal of snow in winter.

The monsignor inclined his head to Sister and whispered something and then he put his hand on her shoulder and they stared at each other for two or three seconds. Of course we had all turned around in our chairs to see all this. Then the monsignor stepped out of the room and closed the door gently and Sister did not walk back to the blackboard but instead walked up the third aisle and put her hand on the shoulder of a girl whose father was very sick and prayers had been said for him at every mass for the last six weeks.

All the rest of my life, I think, I will remember the way the girl didn't look up at Sister for a few seconds. She just stared straight ahead at the neck of the girl in front of her. Sister didn't say anything and her hand stayed there gentle on the girl's shoulder as if it was a young sparrow quite comfortable on that narrow perch. Finally the girl stood up, still without looking at Sister, and we heard someone start to sob, but it wasn't the girl, it was Sister Everard. No one moved an iota or an atom or an eyelash. We think that time is a very shadow that passeth away and flees from us except in faint and fading memory, but I deny this, I deny it adamantly, for here is the girl who has just discovered she is fatherless, holding Sister Everard's head under her chin, and here is Sister sobbing quietly, a sound we had never heard before and never heard again. But you and I are hearing it right now, right in this sentence, which is a miracle. Everything that happened is happening then and now. How this can be I do not know, yet it is so, and it is holy and terrible. Finally the girl and Sister walked out of the classroom together. The rest of us sat silently until the bell rang a few minutes later. We sat so still and quiet that you could almost hear

the silence. Some silences have great weight.

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