

Circles: Buffalo Women's Journal of Law and Social Policy

Volume 1

Article 13

4-1-1992

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Recommended Citation

O'Brien, Susan (1992) "Sister Mary Immaculata Doesn't Explain Anything to Us," *Circles: Buffalo Women's Journal of Law and Social Policy*. Vol. 1 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/circles/vol1/iss1/13>

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Sister Mary Immaculata Doesn't Explain Anything to Us

Cover Page Footnote

Art: "Goodnight Marlena Series" by Jackie Felix

SISTER MARY IMMACULATA DOESN'T EXPLAIN ANYTHING TO US

by Susan O'Brien

October, 1957

Wearing our pleated plaid uniform skirts, starched white blouses, white buck shoes, and perfectly serene smiles, we silently filed into Bethlehem Hall for the regularly scheduled class on "Marriage, the Sixth and Ninth Commandments." This was the content of religion for one semester of eleventh grade at our convent boarding school and was taught by the infamous Sister Mary Immaculata. As we entered the room, Sister, also an avid gardener, began barking.

"Don't sit there, dear; the philodendron needs that light. Judith, don't move that ivy; that is its desk for the day." We had become accustomed to the fact that the plants were more real and alive to her than we were. We chose seats which were not already peopled with plants and sat quietly.

"Now girls, seat yourselves in the V-formation so that I can see all of your faces. I must see all eyes. Over, over, dear, no dear, not you dear, you dear. Deborah, over to the right. Jane, back a little. Now can you all see me? Well, then, it is time to begin."

Sister paced to and fro looking for all eyes upon her. She was a commanding presence: five feet, ten inches, very sturdy build, with a huge elephantine face and light blue filmy eyes which ran. She often took her handkerchief from her sleeve, used it to wipe her eyes or blow her nose, examined its contents and replaced it in her sleeve.

"Before I begin, let me remind you that we will have no giggling. Anyone too immature to discuss these topics will please leave the room now. Pencils poised for notes. The topic for today is sublimation. Sublimation is a psychological phenomenon whereby we may channel all of our pent-up, sexual, bestial desires and energies into a more useful, higher purpose." Sister cleared her throat, adjusted her corset, and continued. "Sublimation is what gives us power to be real Brides of Christ and Mothers of all." She glanced out the window.

"Here comes that big black crow again. He is going to ruin my camellias. Now, where was I?"

"Sublimation, mothers, brides," we responded.

"Yes, sublimation gives us the energy and drive to spend all of these countless hours teaching all of you rather than having just one husband and a few children and . . ."

Sister was about sixty, and the rumor was she was getting senile. She would often trail off in the middle of a thought, but we became experts at taking notes verbatim, and then, while studying together, we played "guess the missing word."

"Yes, sublimation is what gives us the energy and power to love God with our whole heart and soul and...class."

"Our neighbors as ourselves," we chanted in unison.

"Now, oh no. Sharon is looking down. Are you too immature for this subject dear? I want all eyes forward, all pencils poised. Since it is Friday, we will have free questions and answers over the content of this unit. We will have no silly questions, please. All right, Margaret."

"Sister, why are french kisses a mortal sin?"

Sister had paced over to one of her plants and was examining its leaves carefully. "Oh, no, mealy bugs." she muttered. "What was that?"

"French kissing," we blurted out.

"Yes. It is a mortal sin. Did you ask why? It is entry into part of the body. It leads the boy all the way." She began drawing on the board. We glanced at each other sideways, not steam engines again. "The boy's animal instincts are like steam engines," Sister sputtered. She was getting very excited. "Once he is aroused, he must go all the way. That is why it is the girl's duty to avoid the near occasion."

I received a note from the back of the room that said, "nose picking is entry into part of the body. Is it a mortal sin?" I stifled a chortle and wrote in response, "How about sticking it in your ear?"

"Next question, Jane."

"Sister, if a boy parks the car and begins kissing me, how do I keep him from getting too aroused?"

I looked at Sharon who was rolling her eyes heavenward. Jane bulged out of her size sixteen uniform, and residue of sulfuric acne medicine clung to

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her cheek. We could not imagine a boy getting his steam engine off with her. Sister was glancing out the window again but apparently found this question more interesting than the camellias. She answered quickly.

"Just think of what the Blessed Mother would do, dear. Say your rosary with the boy. Hold your clutch purse always in front of your bosom so that only your lips touch and . . ."

"Where was I?"

"Lips," he yelled.

"Yes, lipstick makes boys think of some other lips you have and, crows, are those crows again? Well, you know that necking and petting are sins . . . so . . . Are there any questions that are not immature? Just a moment, it is time to move the Creeping Charlie. Yes, Pearl."

"Sister, yesterday you said that it was a sin to wear patent leather shoes. Why?"

"Dears, that should be obvious. Boys can look up your dress and then . . ."

The note arrived from the back of the room again saying, "Guess who is the only person in here with shiny shoes?" I stifled a giggle, wrote, "I know spit shined for Jesus," and passed it on as I glanced at all of the freshly powdered white buck Spauldings in the classroom.

"Martha, are you next?"

"Yes, Sister. Why do you always wait before sitting down?"

"We must always sit on a cool chair; a warm one is too stimulating. Yes, Joyce. I hope you have a mature question."

"Sister, are hickies a mortal sin?"

Sister rose up, straightened her corset again, sucked in her breath and said, "Of course, my dear. My stars, what will you think of next? You see, kissing is sharing your breath. Oh, yes, pencils poised. Write this down: sharing your breath with the man you are going to marry, to show that you are going to share, well, everything. But sucking, you see, is just bestial, and . . . well, no more questions. Review all of your notes. We will have an essay exam on Monday. And what will you do if a boy calls and asks you what you are doing on Saturday night? Tell him you are taking a bath. Class dismissed."

Over the weekend Colleen and I went to a department store, put on maternity clothes stuffed with purses and took pictures of ourselves. We turned them in the next week for our marriage reports, for "extra credit," but Sister was horrified.

I often had dreams about French kisses never knowing exactly what they were, but if they made a boy's steam engine go all the way, I wanted some.



"Goodnight Marlena Series," by Jackie Felix