

Sister Maria Was Tough And Didn't Take Any Nonsense

I was about to do some devilment when the strangest feeling came over me. I looked around to see what was wrong when I caught a glimpse of a very familiar figure. It was Mama. She had come down to the school to talk with Sister Maria.

I could only hear bits and pieces of their conversation. "Mrs. Adams, will you help us with the costumes?" Sister Maria was asking Mama.

Mother gushed forth, "Surely I will."

Sister Maria's eyes peered in my direction. She muttered, "Nate is growing up to be a big man. He ought to be good in this year's Christmas play."

Mama wanted to know the nature of the show. As the two ladies headed out of the classroom, I thought I faintly heard them say that there would be a lot of dancing. My heart exploded with joy because I loved to dance and, I was about the best darn dancer in the school. Maybe I was the only one who knew it, but that was okay.

While I was still day-dreaming, Sister Maria came back into the classroom. We always chuckled when she came into the room. That old door's shriek reminded us of the old wives tale about the ghost of Saint Joseph's mission who supposedly could laugh. The shriek was accompanied by a bit of plaster falling to the floor from around the archway. I sometimes got caught staring up at the cracks in the ceiling. We hated to look straight ahead because the times' tables were posted across the top of the blackboards which covered the entire front of the room. Sister Maria's desk was positioned in the center of the blackboards. This was her domain, a fact no one would dispute.

When everyone was seated, Sr. Maria stood in front of her desk looking as if she were the town crier. She called out, "Let me have your attention!" We all looked up. We all knew that Sister Maria was tough and didn't take any nonsense from anyone. She went on: "For this year's Christmas program I want us to put on a lot of dance routines. I think it will be good to see everyone dance for God for a change." She then gave everyone his part. Like a bard I sat quietly waiting for her to call upon me to lead the dancers. But to my dismay, I was passed over.

As the school day came to an end, I could not find the power to forgive Sister Maria for not letting me dance. She knew that I was



Sherman

the best dancer in the school. I felt I had been mistreated, and I was determined that she would not get away with this.

That night I could not fall asleep until I came up with a good scheme to make her pay.

Practice started the next day right on time. Sister Maria gave everyone their lines to learn. She made each person read them aloud. When she got around to me, she said, "Nate, I want you to be Saint Joseph and guard the baby Jesus." I just remained quiet and listened attentively. I made a point of not cracking a smile and stood there like a stone statue.

By the time the second day rolled around, however, I could not control my anger any longer. I began to make the other kids feel stupid by calling their lines "silly". Since we lived by the strict ghetto code of silence, I did not worry that the kids would tell the teacher. No one could remember their lines, and Sister Maria did not know what to do. I got great pleasure watching her sweat. I thought she was going to pull off her habit in utter disgust.

I felt good that weekend knowing I had made Sister Maria suffer for her "sins" against me. I recalled telling my best friend Preston how well I was getting my revenge.

"Boy, you don't know I am," I said to Preston. "I got that nun where she can't move."

"You're crazy, man," laughed Preston. "Keep coming down on that teacher and you'll find yourself in a bind. By the way, what did you call that lady?" asked Preston.

"She's a nun. A nun!" "Hey, man, I got to break camp", muttered Preston.

As Preston left, I convinced myself that he didn't understand the situation since he was in public school. I spent the rest of the weekend planning my next move. By Sunday evening I knew I had come up with an ingenious plan that ought to blow Sister Maria's mind. On Monday morning I

was the first child to dash out of the house to catch the schoolbus. This was to be my triumphant day. I had figured that this would be the day that I finally put Sister Maria in her place.

When practice rolled around, I said to Sister Maria, "I don't want to be in the Christmas play."

"What's the problem, Master Adams?", Sister asked.

"I don't want to be in this play; I would rather spend my time studying."

Sister Maria's blue eyes seemed to look right through me. Her stare made my stomach boil. She murmured, "It's important that you play Saint Joseph and protect the baby Jesus."

"I don't want to stand there like no statue," I complained. "I'm a dancer, and I know I can turn this play out."

"Someone must be Joseph and we think you are the best person. Furthermore, I will not hear of your refusing to take part in this play!" demanded Sister Maria, her face reddening as she spoke.

I knew I had better show humbleness or she might make me stay in after school and then I'd have to explain coming home late to Mama and Papa. I reluctantly went up on the stage. I acted as if she had put a shotgun in my back.

When the practice got underway, some of the mothers who helped to prepare costumes came by to see how they fitted. They often stayed to watch their

children perform their routines. Sister Maria asked me to come down to try on my costume. I replied, "I'm too tired."

She called out, "Nate, come down here right now!"

I didn't move. I was going to show her who was boss. I turned away from her and looked at the stage. A sudden stillness filled the room.

Feeling I had put her down publicly I suddenly heard footsteps getting louder and louder. They seemed to stop directly behind me. I continued to boldly stare away, waiting to see whether Sister Maria was really all that rough.

Suddenly I felt a hand grab the top of my pants and begin to twist. I froze. But I was not going to let Sister Maria think she could bluff me. I found myself violently jerked around, seemingly by an iron hand from heaven. I thought my head was going to come off from the sudden yank on my pants. A stinging sensation quickly covered my whole body. The pain was so intense I thought I had died and gone to hell. The way the blows came, I knew it could be only one person.

When the pain finally slowed down a bit, I looked around to see who had hold of me. The voice cried out, "Don't you ever again let me hear tell of you even thinking showing your tail in church. If I catch you acting like a fool again, I'll cut you in half with this hickory switch." Mama let

me go and walked off that stage like nothing had ever happened. All I could think about was Mama had seen the whole thing, and what would she tell Papa? I could hear my brothers and sisters chanting, "I'm going to tell Papa and you're going to get it."

I was an angel for the remainder of that practice. But when I got home, I felt the full brunt of Papa's wrath. He didn't miss a lick. However, the real punishment came from those kids laughing in the school yard. I wanted so badly to beat up a couple of them, but I was afraid to risk another encounter with Sister Maria.

The play went off fine. I stood there like I enjoyed the dancing and singing. No one had the least idea that I might have been unhappy. However, on Christmas Day Mama always talked with us just

before we dashed out to visit the neighbors' houses. A big part of the Christmas celebration included our sharing the neighbors' holiday food. I was the last child Mother summoned. When I got there, I laid my head in her lap. She whispered, "How is mother's love?"

I always melted inside when Mama spoke those words to me. I knew Mama wanted to talk about the Christmas play.

When Mama finished talking, her face radiated an angelic glow that I cannot describe. Her words echoed throughout my mind so loudly there was no doubt that I had made a fool of myself and hurt the family name. I dashed out the front door and ran down the street calling out "Merry Christmas!" to everyone who crossed my path.

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