

To You I Come, Before You I Stand

The rumor started as a whisper; a fleeting recollection perfumed by chalk dust. Fourth period, Thursday, March 8, 2001, Holy Redeemer High School. Señor Dwyer's Spanish verb conjugation, Sr. Paulette's discussion of early Roman saints. The gossip about Agnes Zinke and Mr. Giulio was candy to our ears. She was in the courtyard when she should have been at class, her back flat against one of the pillars, one knee bent, chest puffed out. He was leaning into her, you know, *leaning*. Like he knew all her secrets.

That day, the beginning, it didn't matter if it was true. We ate up this salacious gum drop and multiplied it in the hallways. Reactions buzzed: "Not true," "Fuck yeah!" "Bullshit," "Never doubted it for a second." Someone said the junior in her carpool had seen Mr. Giulio and Agnes a few times in the faculty parking lot. Someone else had seen them get in a car. *Backseat, windows up, that's the way you like to f*—we left out the profanity as we thought the song lyrics. The profane became flashing images instead—pile driving, blow jobs, faces clenched in ecstasy. Agnes might be more experienced than us now, actually know what those words meant.

In a few years, we wouldn't spread things around. We hadn't learned not to at 15.

None of us really knew Agnes before all this happened. She lived in her head more than in the halls of Holy Redeemer Catholic, all-girls school. She had a way of looking at you but not, as if what she could see between you and her was a fairy tale.

We did know some things. Her mother had died. Agnes only had her mom, who'd taught high school French and loved Havanese dogs. One day, her mom was chubby faced in Christmas sweaters, bringing oatmeal raisin cookies to the bake sale; the next her skin was gray, pulled tight across her bones.

Those of us whose parents were really religious made us go to the funeral. We sat in silence, a whole row of us in our skirts and blazers, with the icy pews chilling the backs of our thighs. The priest droned on about the scourge of cancer and sending a faithful sister to her eternal home. When we went up for communion, Agnes was in the front pew in a black tulle skirt, a mourning ballerina. Next to her sat a guy with a gray beard, maybe an uncle. Waxy lilies surrounded the shiny white coffin and the thick smoke of incense coated our nostrils.

Later, we thought about what we could have said or done. Instead, we knelt in the hard wood pews and folded our hands like shields.

On the night of Thursday, March 8, the rumor mill continued by phone. This is when we had landlines, with cords that wound through kitchens and bedrooms, concealing what we'd never be able to say in person.

The story mushroomed. Someone heard Agnes talking about a "special friend." Someone else had heard her say, "Nothing feels better than being safe in someone's arms."

"Ugh!" The exclamation was unanimous. The fact that someone could think *anything* about Mr. Giulio. It wasn't that he was bad looking. Everything about him was long—legs, arms, fingers—except his hair, which was buzzed and brown. He could have been cute, we agreed, had it not been for his terrifically pale skin, tiny round glasses, and patchy goatee. If he had been our age, he'd have dressed all in black with a swath of hair thrown over one eye, playing guitar in an emo band. Instead, when he stood in front of us gesturing with the yard stick, his wedding ring catching the light, sometimes his pits sweat. And he had this tick where he stuck his tongue out and licked his upper lip when someone was reading aloud.

At that point, we'd had virtually no experience with anything sexual. Sure, we were hit on by creepy old men, or whistled at on the street. There were clumsy encounters in grade school coatrooms involving hands fumbling at bra straps, spitty kisses, and boners pressed against our thighs. We knew our fluttering hormones contained a mystique, an energy that others wanted, but we didn't understand why. We wondered about men like the 24-year-old chemistry teacher the year before, whose hand shook and lip trembled when he gave the senior girls communion at mass. Oh, the senior girls. We were in love with them, too.

Mostly, we wondered what it must be like to be a man. To have something swinging between your legs. To take possession of anything you wanted.

We watched Agnes all the next day, Tuesday, March 9. And Mr. Giulio.

We half expected that Agnes wouldn't be in school, but she was. Her penny loafers slapped the concrete as she walked up the steps of our school, past the rose bush with just the hint of white buds, the statue of the Virgin Mary in blues robes with outstretched arms. Unlike so many of the Mary statues we'd seen whose gazes cast humbly downward, this one stared right out, eyes unflinching. As if she was saying, "See this crown on my head? I earned it." Our Lady of Perpetual Yearning, we called her.

If anything, Agnes looked more childlike. Her blonde hair was braided into pigtails and her lips glistened from strawberry lip gloss. Had she always carried that Hello Kitty pencil case? Agnes may have looked unconcerned, but she knew what was going on. It was the dismissive way she wouldn't look at us, the way she intentionally avoided our eyes.

In Mr. Giulio's class, we were reading *The Scarlet Letter*. We were not impressed by this book, this cock-tease tale that only had allusions to what we really wanted—graphic details of how Hester got impregnated by Rev. Dimmesdale.

“Symbolism,” Mr. Giulio exclaimed that day in class. He liked to shout out one word and let it reverberate. Our jaws circulated in unison as we chewed our gum.

“Let's turn to the third gallows scene,” he said. “There they were, our three characters—Hester, Dimmesdale, and little Pearl, standing on the wood planks of that doomed platform. What happens next?” He paused, waiting for a hand.

“Didn't they burn women, not hang them, back then?” Courtney H. blurted out. He ignored her.

“Who read last night?” A grin tickled his lips. We wouldn't give him the satisfaction of landing a joke. He clasped his fingers in front of his chest. “Ok, fine, I'll humor myself. They join hands. And what shape do they form as they stand there?”

We yawned. The fluorescent lights hummed.

“An A!” he practically shouted. He ran to the chalkboard and drew stick figures with little bonnets and pilgrim hats. He outlined the A shape over and over, the lines of chalk building, the edges blurred and terrifying.

“Um, Mr. Giulio?” Katie B.'s hand was raised, wrist tight, one finger a comma. “You mentioned symbolism?”

“Yes, Katie?” Mr. Giulio turned. “Do you have more examples?”

She flipped the book to a page her finger held. “I was thinking of this quote: ‘No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face himself and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true.’”

“Yes, from Chapter 3. How is that symbolism, Katie?”

“I was thinking of what’s going on in actual life. Because in order for it to be symbolic, it has to be relevant with what’s going on now, right?” Was she baiting him? That possibility thrilled our ears. “I mean, there’s lots of examples of that. There’s politicians . . . parents . . . teachers . . . “

Mr. Giulio stayed rigid. Our eyes turned to Katie, back to Mr. Giulio, to Katie, their eyes locked in a standoff. The bell rang.

That was the start of our power; we’d had a taste of what we were growing into. We began to understand what it was about the senior girls that made us love them so much.

Has there, will there, ever been anything as incredible as a senior, Catholic school girl? Queen of the hallway, she who forces priests to shudder, nuns to make the sign of the cross. They streaked their hair blonde, waxed their eyebrows to an exclamation, and smelled faintly of nicotine. They didn’t wear shorts under skirts and had water bottles filled with vodka in lockers. Songs have been written about them/us, waxing poetic and profane about our wildness, our ability to rebel. Except it’s all over in a year.

When the senior girls encountered one another, their fingers intertwined, arms encircled waists, and elbows, always elbows, leaned against shoulders. The terrazzo rang with their murmurings, but we could never decipher more than snatches of words. “Like yeah,” was a phrase we heard Eve Fitzgerald say, and for months after we wore it out with frequency. Instead, we imagined what they said—details of fingertips on the small of backs, the thrumming of pelvises, the sour, sweet taste of mouths pressed together.

Now, we see each other in parking lots, loading grocery bags into minivans, and we remember, just for a minute, before the world calls us back. For this one moment we were queens. Before life and everything else caught up to us.

On Thursday, March 10, everything blew up. Courtney H., who told lots of half-truths, had seen Agnes in the faculty parking lot, looking “lost and scared.” Another girl, a junior, said Agnes got out of Mr. Giulio’s sedan, crying. We doubted and believed everything.

In the hallways, the whispers and eyes followed Agnes, whose white freckled skin seemed even paler. Next, the assistant principal, stood in the doorway of Sr. Phyllis’s French class and motioned for Agnes to follow her. As they walked the length of the third-floor hallway and down the stairs to the first floor, we jockeyed to catch a glimpse of them through the doorways.

The minutes were hours. When class ended, we scurried to our lockers, eyes scanning. No Agnes. We waited, fumbling with our books, dropping pens so they rolled down the hall. Teachers came out of classrooms shouting, “Girls, get to class!” We lolled, stretching the time, watching the office. Just as the classroom doors began to close, she appeared, flanked by two helmet-haired, beady-eyed nuns.

Agnes’s face was swollen and red and she kept rubbing her nose. Did we try to call to her? It’s hard to remember. The nuns led her to her locker. Into grocery bags went a plastic-framed magnetic mirror, posters, binders, pencil cases, notes folded into stars. The nuns took her books. She put on her rain jacket, her chin quivering. We stood silent, hoping we would blend into the walls.

She locked eyes with each of us. Katie B. reached out and grabbed her hand, but the nuns pushed Agnes' shoulders forward. "Girls, detention, all of you," one nun shouted. "Don't think we won't remember." The glass doors onto the street opened and the icy spring air rushed in.

The man with the beard from her mom's funeral waited on the sidewalk. Agnes stepped in line with him. As she passed the statue, Agnes touched Our Lady of Perpetual Yearning's foot, as we always did. For good luck.

We watched at the open doors until they were out of sight. A breeze blew, stirring up the leaves on the rose bush, then flying through the hallway fast and hard. A piece of paper from Agnes' open locker fluttered into the air. Katie B. snatched it up. It was a sketch of our mascot, the lioness. She stood on her hind legs, dwarfing our school. Teeth barred, claws extended, about to pounce.

In detention, we made plans. Courtney H. said something about a party after one of the boys school's games. It was always about the boys.

As the sun set, we slipped into thong underwear, rubbed edible glitter on our shoulders, flat-ironed our hair until it shimmered like varnish. We glossed our lips into mirrors and spritzed perfume on the spots where our heartbeats bumped. We covered our crop tops and low-slung jeans with x-large T-shirts and slipped out the backdoor to Courtney H's sister's car.

Now that we have children, we've become our parents. Some of us also don't care about drinking as long as it's in the basement. We ask the same questions—Where are you going? Who are you going with? Be home by midnight? When our children leave, we feel a catch as they reach the door. A pull of an invisible line, a fishhook burrowing in our skin. We were once them; we know what comes next.

That Friday night, we watched from the sidelines, squinting under the bright stadium lights. Their bodies were covered in pads and helmets, but we imagined collarbones, armpits with open caverns of hair. V-shaped pelvises we'd only seen on ken dolls. Every once and a while, when one lifted a shirt, egg cartons of muscles rolled up their stomachs.

Our own husbands will never be as steamy to us, barrel gutted as they are with hair in all the wrong places. We shudder at their bodily noises, at the stink that remains when they leave the bathroom. We can hardly remember when we imagined what their dripping sweat, their saliva, would taste like.

It started to rain and we scurried to a dry spot under the bleachers in our chunky heeled sandals. Angeline L. had had enough. She was impossibly tiny and her family owned a chain of jewelry stores, so she was used to saying what she wanted. "Why are we watching this?" She shouted. No one looked at her. "This sucks, there are a million better things to do." She stomped off, leaving us huddled in a group. No one followed. If we stayed, we might hear more about the party. The tall tales surrounding them trickled into our lives every weekend—luxury houses, always with a pool. Pill bottles and backpacks filled with liquor and raised eyebrows alluding to certain activities in closets, bedrooms, the garage.

They were never as exciting as all that. This one, once we'd coordinated rides in third-hand station wagons and someone's Jeep their dad bought them, was in the basement of a subdivided home. We had to sneak through the side gate so we wouldn't wake the neighbors. We were handed warm bottles of Budweiser and clustered in a group by some guys in sagging pants and tie dye who sucked smoke out of a bong. Public school kids connected to us Catholic schoolers through friends.

Another group arrived, the boys slapping hands, the girls giggling and hugging and lighting cigarettes. Then, one of us whispered, “Hey, isn’t that Agnes?”

She stood with and apart from the girls wearing a too large windbreaker and too much eyeliner. The longer we watched we realized she was standing that way for a boy in an adjoining group, who was sort of cute with an attitude twice his size. He kept pulling on one of the belt loops of her jeans.

“We should say hi,” Katie B. said, so we shuffled over en masse. When she saw us coming, Agnes looked as if we’d come back from the dead. Then her face relaxed into general ennui. “What’s up,” she said, dragging on her cigarette. Her mouth bubbled into the faintest cough.

We didn’t know what to say. Then Katie B. asked, “What are you doing here?”

“I go to school with them now. And I knew some from grade school.” She gestured with the cigarette before taking another drag.

“The U?” (That was the nickname for the public school.)

“Mmm-hmm.”

“We miss you at Holy Redeemer,” Katie B. blurted.

Agnes looked grateful for an instant before her face hardened. “Yeah, well, if I never see that place again, I’d be happy. Now I don’t have to cause they threw me out.”

“They’re all bitches,” Courtney H. said.

Agnes murmured something.

“What?” we said.

“You’d never believe. Hypocrites. I mean, Christ, wasn’t the Virgin Mary a confused girl, too?”

We didn't know what to say. The guy kept getting closer, more insistent, slapping her hip. Her face scrunched up in mock anger, but her eyes danced. "You ready," he said, not a question, raising his eyebrows. She said, "Gotta go," and stubbed out her cigarette.

As they walked out of the yard, we heard, "POLICE!" People spilled into the streets, and we ran, imagining officers with their nightsticks, their breath on our heels. Headlights shone on the asphalt, the echoes of slamming car doors reverberating in the night air. At the end of the block, the boy yanked on Agnes' arm, and she jumped with him into a car.

Mondays passed. On April 6, we had our customary Catholic brainwashing, as we called it, with pictures of aborted fetuses displayed on poster boards. We sat in the back and played MASH, foretelling our future lives. "Think of Mary, our mother," said the speaker. "She must have been scared when God told her she was carrying our Lord Jesus Christ. But she submitted herself to the greater power of life."

"Psh, whatever." Angeline L. remained in a bad mood. "I bet she was hella pissed."

No one besides us mentioned Agnes, like she hadn't existed or that part of the school year had been erased. Mr. Giulio was even more irritatingly smug; you could even say happy.

We had his class after the brainwashing assembly. He wore a bowtie and his neck was red where it rubbed. We discussed Longfellow's "The Courtship of Miles Standish." "What the fuck is with all these puritans?" Courtney H. asked a little too loudly. We giggled and waited for him to give her detention. Instead, his cheeks brightened and he cleared his throat. He looked amused. Later, when we were writing our own Standish-style epic love poem, Mr. Giulio actually started whistling.

"Weirdo." Angeline L. said. "He's up to some shit, I just know it."

She came up with the idea of sneaking in his classroom at lunch. “If one of the teachers asks, we’ll say we left something in here,” she said. “Then we can get at his desk. I bet he’s got stuff from Agnes.”

Katie B. watched the door while we started on the drawers. They squeaked as we pulled them out and the picture frame with Mr. Giulio, his arm thrown around his wife holding their baby clattered as it fell on the desk. We shuddered.

Some teachers’ desks were covered in papers, the drawers stuffed brimful. Not Mr. Giulio’s. He had file folders placed into dark green liners, each one labeled clearly. “Whoa, he’s got a folder for every student in American lit....and here’s us!” Angeline loud whispered.

“Oooo, what does mine say?” Courtney shouted, and we shushed her.

The thin drawer at the top was locked. “Where do you think he kept the keys?” Katie B. asked, then started to laugh. She bent down to his faded messenger bag and came up holding a jangling ring.

We tried four keys before one fit. Inside was a file labeled “Miscellaneous.” Angeline’s face went white as she gazed inside. “I’ve got it,” she said. We grabbed our purses and books and skedaddled.

We gathered in the yard behind Our Lady of Perpetual Yearning. We passed the contents of the folder between us, reverently, as if they were communion wafers. The love notes, which Agnes had folded into stars like she always did, contained the graphic details. She said she couldn’t stop thinking about him; that his poetry was like water from heaven. She talked about the time at the hotel, the way he touched her that made her feel alive. Courtney H. mimed puking all over the rose bushes.

“Why would he save all these?” Katie B.’s voice was soft and heartbroken.

Angeline shook her head. “Twisted motherfucker.”

A white envelope was last, containing a thin piece of paper folded in half. We unfolded it and a shiny black photograph fell out. “It’s a receipt,” Katie B. said. “Planned Parenthood?” We all knew the clinic five blocks down, where the Pro-Life club protested.

We stared closer at the photograph. Black with shadows of white in a circle. An ultrasound. At the top, tiny white letters read “Agnes Zinke.”

It knocked the air out of us. The blob in the center was in Agnes’s body. Had been.

Those nuns. They’d punished Agnes for taking action instead of suffering for nine months, lying about the father, putting the baby up for adoption, whatever. Our first experience understanding that we are part of a cycle, one where certain people always prosper. Never women like us. Never women like Agnes.

“That fuckhead! It gives him jollies, I bet, seeing what he ruined.” Angeline stood up and started kicking the base of Our Lady. The statue wiggled violently on her pedestal. We grabbed Angeline by the arms, held her tight. Courtney steadied Our Lady, clutching her foot.

The Spring Fling was one of the only nights of the year when we got away with short and tight. When our parents expected us to go to parties after. On Saturday, April 28, we waited outside Courtney’s house in beds of purple crocus with pink dogwood blossoms overhead. Before the customary photo shoot, we swallowed shots from flasks and blue squares of Xanax. We wobbled in our heels, our vision blurring at the edges, supported by the arms of our dates. They were boys we barely knew but whose roles signified a closeness, an intimate possibility.

“These are the best years of your lives,” one of our moms called, wine glass in hand, as the boys’ cars pulled out. We rested against the cardboard arms of our dates’ suit jackets, fiddled with bobby pins. Even then we didn’t want to believe her.

The Holy Redeemer gym was a maze of bodies and sparkling colored light. Our classmates were Barbie versions of themselves, makeup magnifying their eyes and lips. Shoes lined the doorway, discarded by frenetic dancers who pressed closer and closer to the speakers and away from the eyes of the nuns and their persistent cry, “Leave room for the Holy Spirit!”

We didn’t feel like dancing and clustered on the bleachers. “You guys are a buzz kill,” Courtney H.’s date said. She smacked his arm. “Just chill, there’s a party at this chick Heidi’s afterward. Like not that far away.”

When the lights came up, we grabbed our dates, took down our hair, slipped out of our heels. More shots from the flask made the car swerve, provoking peels of laughing. What were we laughing at exactly?

The party was a few blocks away in a gorgeous old house that reminded us of *The Great Gatsby*. It wasn’t like the lame-ass ones; it was wild. People pressed into every room, the basement, the yard. Our hearts fluttered because the senior girls were there, sweatshirts thrown over their dresses, ornamenting their dates’ laps. “Hey, why are you guys all dressed up?” a kid we didn’t know shouted as he and a line of people stumbled down the stairs. Courtney H. gestured toward the end of the group. “Look, Agnes is here,” she said.

She was with a different guy, and we instantly wished that we’d brought jean skirts and tiny tube tops like the ones she wore. Katie B. patted Agnes’s arm, and when she turned around, she smiled so wide that her eyes shut at the corners. “Hi girls,” she said, her words sliding together. She reached out her arms and we hugged her, conscious that we supported her weight.

When we separated she was still smiling. “You know what, fuck Mr. Giulio!” she yelled, throwing her fist in the air.

“That’s right, girl, fuck him!” Angeline called back.

Agnes started to laugh, a bubbling that came from deep within. She rocked back and forth and one of us reached out to steady her. “I gotta go, but I’ll be back soon,” she said as the guy handed her a bottle of vodka and pulled her towards the back yard.

Courtney H. started macking with her date in the corner. Angeline went to find drugs and came back with white pills that we took halves of. Katie B. got chatted up by some dude with orange hair. We kept shooting her eyes but she didn’t get the hint. When he finally moved away, she said, “Let’s go find Agnes.”

We ran through the house in our bare feet, through the haze of cigarette smoke, the sticky spilled beer, breaking in on bodies clenched together in bedrooms. We couldn’t find her. Voices began to sound like they were underwater. One gurgled up through all of them, said something about some dudes getting it with a girl.

“Outside?”

“Yeah! Fuck, what the hell, must be real wasted.”

We knew, but we didn’t really. Our search became more urgent, but the throng was thicker. We pushed and pressed. “Gang bang.” “Three guys.” More laughter.

The mood shifted. It became, “Fuck, she’s passed out, it’s not good.” The thud of running feet, whole parts of the crowd heading in the opposite direction from us, getting out. We lost our dates, even the senior girls fled. We kept moving forward.

We found her body on the edge of the yard among the shrubby grass. We wiped vomit off her face, swollen like a watermelon, flicked the dirt out from underneath her nails. Pulled her skirt down, her underwear up. Without a word, we circled her, and each of us holding an arm, a leg, a part of her trunk, lifted her body up onto our shoulders and carried her out of the yard. The few onlookers left parted to let us through.

We were silent. We walked the five blocks this way, none of us complaining about the weight. When one of us grew tired, we adjusted, gently. We all seemed to know where we were headed. There was nothing to say.

At Holy Redeemer, we rounded the corner by the roses and stopped at Our Lady of Perpetual Yearning. We laid Agnes at the feet of the Virgin, she who absolves all suffering. “Hail Mary,” Katie B. began, “full of grace, please be with her. Blessed is she among us. She should never have to worry about the fruit of her womb.”

We all joined in—“Holy Mary, Mother of us all, pray for us, women like you, now and forever. Amen.”

Agnes didn’t move. She was on her back, facing the sky, eyes closed peacefully. We noticed the lipstick smeared across her cheek, and two of us moved to smooth it. Bruises were blossoming on the inside of her thighs.

It’s not clear who moved to the rose bush and plucked off the thorn, but suddenly, there it was, being handed to each of us, and we pierced the insides of our palms, the space between the heart and life lines. We held our hands over her, let the blood drip down onto her ripped jean skirt, her cropped tube top. In the distance, so faintly that some of us swear it didn’t happen, a rooster began to crow.

We felt the calmness two days later. Monday, May 1, May Day. The nuns had placed a crown of flowers on Our Lady of Perpetual Yearning's head and the morning air was crisp and sharp. We'd gotten to Holy Redeemer early, carrying shopping bags of supplies. In the hallways, faint glimmers of smiles formed on our lips. We didn't have to say anything; we simply gathered in a circle, on the first floor, outside of Mr. Giulio's room. We held the unfolded flowers of love letters in our hands.

Katie B. had called the ambulance that night, from a pay phone in a nearby gas station. We left before it arrived. We spent all the next day taking turns calling the hospital. Agnes had checked out late that night.

Mr. Giulio wasn't in his room, and we gathered in the space, moved the desks, distributed the papers between us. We arranged them on the floor as we'd agreed. We placed the ultrasound photo, the receipt, and Agnes' drawing that we'd saved the day she left on Mr. Giulio's desk. On the drawing, we'd written in our blood—"The lioness is coming for your ass."

Katie B. took the can of lighter fluid and dribbled along the papers in a pristine line; Angeline took the stick lighter from the chapel and flicked its switch. The flame was brilliant, warm, terrifying.

When she bent and lit the papers, at first the fire wavered, sparkled, but didn't catch. We hung in that moment, in the space before everything engulfed. Before the expulsions, the boarding schools, addictions, marriages, divorces. Before the A appeared, scarlet, in flames.

The fire was instantly hot, and smoky, tickling our throats. Courtney Z. cracked a window, but the breeze fanned the blaze and it roared. Everything happened quickly. One of us jumped back when we saw the fire growing and knocked over a desk. The wood caught in the flames. The smoke alarmed screeched and the nun's footsteps tremored the hallways.

Later, we remembered how everything slowed. Katie B. yelled, “Fire extinguisher!” and it banged against Courtney’s leg as she picked it up. Before she sprayed out the torrent of white foam, Angeline pulled her arm. Amid the sirens and screams and, “Mr. Giulio, stay back, your room is on fire!” we linked hands. We stood in a circle around the blaze we’d created, awed by its roaring power. Before it all went out.