

Mina

My fourth grade classmate and why I wrote about her in a previous essay.

When I was in the fourth grade at Our Lady of Lourdes School in Utica my life was a mess. I didn't know why, of course. Those who work with children know even a very earnest 9 year old will seldom realize his internalized problem may really be outside himself.

I had been on the move that year as my father struggled with his own demons and relocated us first out of town and then back to another part of the city, all in the period of a few months. I lost my best friend and my back yard garden. My school work got messed up. And school work was the only thing I excelled at. Our home atmosphere could best be described as tense. I'll never forget the afternoon my mother appeared really upset...near tears...and told me to hide a hat I had scorched while attempting to use it as a substitute lamp shade. She was afraid the discovery of my wasteful mistake would send my father off into his money worries once again. In fact, just about anything would do that. But such deception

in our family was completely foreign and it stunned me.

During my sojourn in the suburbs, I went to a public school and I hated it. My teacher was a wonderful woman who took a special interest in me, probably realizing I felt very much out of it. But my fellow students were frankly crude. They swore all the time, told sordid stories and made fun of anyone who wore an "I Like Ike" button. Not only that, some of them ate meat on Friday. That's a quick sketch of my fourth grade level of sophistication.

So when we moved back to Utica and I was again enrolled in a Catholic school, I was just happy to be back in a more orderly environment where kids would never dare to even think of sassing back a nun and living to tell about it. Little man that I was, I appreciated someone being in control. Whatever weapons were used rulers or blackboard pointers..... it didn't matter to me. What did matter was a predictable environment I could enjoy for six hours each weekday.

At my new school, I quickly became lost in an ocean of children. Fourth grade teacher Sister Clementia managed 56 children in a classroom built for 30. That's not a typo; fruitful Catholic parents, heeding their Church, were hard at it procreating in those years and the schools were bursting at the seams. Mothers were worn out and fathers worried about money, but the Bishops were evidently happy.

Sitting near me in our second floor classroom was a girl named Mina (she pronounced it My-na.) She was quite thin, her school uniform was threadbare and she always wore an old ratty cardigan sweater buttoned up to her neck, even in warm weather. For some reason, she interested me. Not really in a girl-boy sort of way...I was still in my boyhood latency...but there

was something about her I couldn't quite name. Of course, it was easy to think pleasant and rather confused thoughts about a pretty girl like Bernadette in the first row, third seat back from the front. But Mina really wasn't cute. She was just somehow intriguing. I remember being rather canonical for my age and one day I



repeated something of a religious nature that sounded good to me, a burgeoning 9 year old theologian. Mina just looked at me with a rather wry look. I didn't even know what the word wry meant, but her look told me she was wise beyond her years. Or at least, my years. I found her a bit scary, but I nevertheless admired her courage. To have an opinion outside the lock-box of our Catholicism in those years held a certain disturbing fascination. Simply put, she was thinking for herself and I gained a measure of respect for her. I couldn't quite grasp the nature of the attraction then, but I would look for that quality in a woman for the rest of my life.

After school, as I walked home I would pass the House of the Good Shepherd, a Protestant orphanage that, by the looks of it, had seen better days. I always wondered if Mina lived there. I had heard there were a few Catholic children who lived there and attended our school. I suppose I could have asked her where she lived. But it seems our lives are full of those times when we didn't ask. Or of things we never said. Or wishes we never revealed. The orphanage was later torn down and replaced by an office

building and a bowling alley, perhaps a testament to our priorities in the 1950's.

So Mina and the House of the Good Shepherd have been buzzing around in my head for years. I suppose I projected my own loss and confusion onto Mina. And the orphanage would certainly be an apt symbol of these things. I'll leave it to the psychologists to figure out all the implications, but I know something of her has stayed with me for a long time.

I have no recollection of ever seeing her after the fourth grade. I don't now what might have happened to her or if her life turned out well. I hope it did. Even though the circumstances of the Mina in my essay, "The Good Shepherd," were probably far different from what the real Mina experienced, I guess one purpose of my writing the piece was I wanted the little girl in the ratty old sweater to grow up to be a strong woman who would bless those around her, give purpose to others and find the desires of her heart. I pray she did.

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