

RIVER STYX 68



A CROSS FOR SISTER MARY JOSEPH

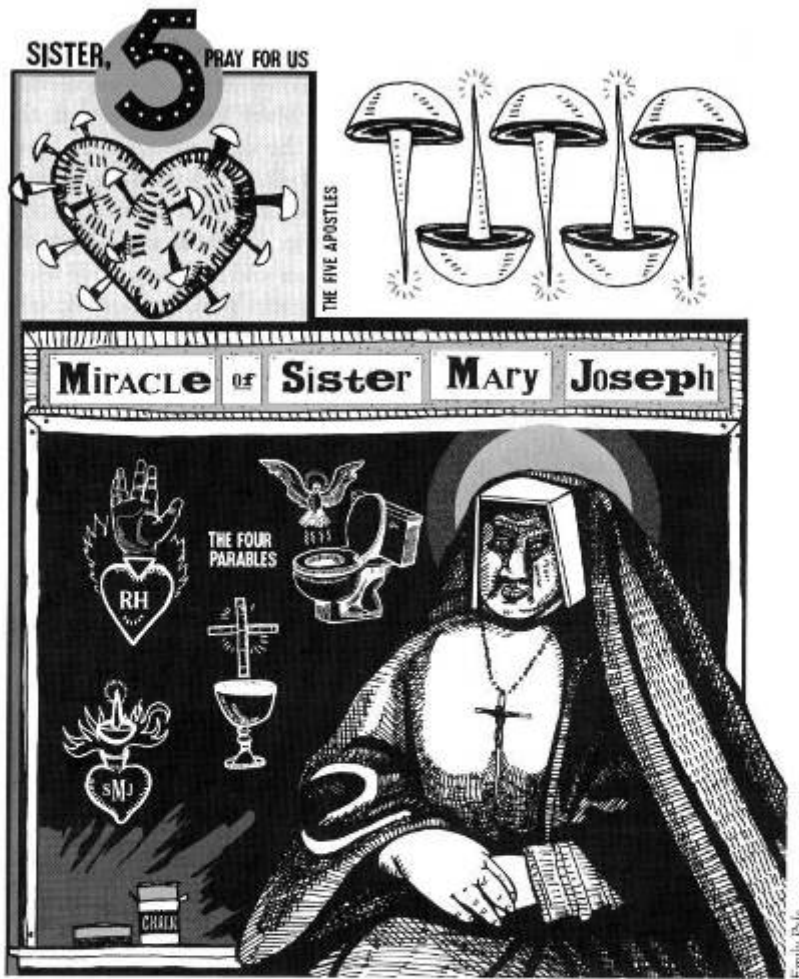
Sister Mary Joseph had an enormous ass like the lower half of a giant, overripe pear, draped like a bustle by her stiff, rustling habit, which covered all of her but her blue-white hands and face, her stiff, white cardboard wimple pressing her eyebrows down into a permanent, dimpling frown. Every day, before the end of class, fifth graders stood in a long line up the middle row to her desk, fretting about our penmanship or the short paragraphs we'd written on our upcoming First Communion or the difficult math problems the sister was always making us do over and over again until she'd pronounced them correct and perfect, the heavy silver crucifix of the suffering Christ dangling from her neck like a dagger.

Annie Schumaker, the smartest girl in St. Jude's, sat in the desk to my right along the back row. Waif-like and beautiful, like a water nymph in a fairytale, she had long hair to her waist that always seemed wet with a grackle-black sheen, draping her shoulders like the long black veils of the Sisters of Mercy, and she always needed to go to the bathroom, raising her hand so often in the middle of class that Sister Mary Joseph refused even to look at her, always calling on her favorite, Randy Duncan, even when Annie's hand was most often up in the air with the correct and perfect answer. This time, the sister called on me, the boy who was always weeks behind and who kept his shoulders humped low over his desk and never raised a hand, the left-handed boy with freckles and the worst penmanship in class—*Sinister!* she called me in Latin when her ruler across my knuckles couldn't save me by switching my writing hand to my right.

"And He sits on the right hand of God," she'd pronounce in the middle of our First Communion lessons, walking straight down my aisle to the back and pressing her fingernails into my neck.

Two days before our First Communion, Annie Schumaker waited in the long line to the nun's desk at the end of class, me in line right behind her, her ankles shivering in her patent leather shoes, as she stood almost to her toes, waiting, her gray plaid dress rustling around her slender knees like Sister Mary Joseph's habit rustling around her ass as she walked up the chapel aisle for communion. Annie's hands were folded, too, as the sister had taught us all to fold them kneeling before the priest for our First Communion, her fingernails pressing straight up into her chin. When it was finally Annie's turn in line to the nun's desk, Annie said what she always said, "I need to go, Sister. Sister, may I go?" and the nun didn't even bother to look up from the words she was scratching out in red.





“You can wait until the final bell,” the sister told her. “Now go back to your seat and wait.”

Standing behind Annie, I heard a slow, steady hiss and watched the yellow pool of piss forming around her shoes as she cried.

Sister Mary Joseph leapt from her desk and said, “Stop that. You stop that crying, right now, little girl. Jesus, Mary, Joseph. Now look at what you’ve done.”

* * *



Sister Mary Joseph leapt from her desk and said, "Stop that. You stop that crying, right now, little girl. Jesus, Mary, Joseph. Now look at what you've done."

When Annie still hadn't shown up for class the day before First Communion, I waited until Sister Mary Joseph had left the room, the only moment she gave herself all day for whatever private thing even a nun must do, and I stood in my desk seat along the back row and took down five white thumbtacks she'd pressed into the

cork lining along the top of the chalkboard, where she'd hung the script of Annie's perfect penmanship, and while no one was looking, I arranged the tacks pin-up in Sister Mary Joseph's chair. A moment later, when I'd stepped away from her desk just in time, she returned to the room, smoothing down her habit, and she told us all to get into our seats for the last of our First Communion lessons. I sat waiting in my desk, my fingernails pressing into my palms, hoping for her to leap from her seat as she sat, but she just settled herself heavily into her chair as she always did, like a hippo's bum into mud, then began our last lesson without even a flinch.

Following her in the long line of fifth graders to the chapel for our last practice, I watched her demonstrate the correct way for us to walk down the aisle in our First Communion procession, fingernails pressing up piously into our chins, but when she turned to the altar and began her slow, rustling walk, her enormous rump stuck out like a camel's hump, with five white domino dots, three across and three down and one in the middle, pinned there to her ass in the perfect shape of a cross. ✂



"A Cross for Sister Mary Joseph," *River Styx* 68, 2004: 76-78.

No reproduction without permission, for education purposes only.

If you wish to request permission to reproduce, please [email lex@utep.edu](mailto:lex@utep.edu).