

JAMES KOSALINSKI, YOU'RE A HEARTLESS CREEP!

"I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about," sniffed James. Liz Simonelli turned away from her classmate in disgust, and George returned to staring out the window, oblivious to whatever they were fighting about and not really caring. He had certainly had his fill of "Obnoxious James" debates last semester.

Victory by annoyance, thought George. James' usual style. But he decided not to let it bother him this time. It was the first day back at John Paul 2 High after Christmas break, and he was still in an upbeat holiday mood. The six other students in the rundown classroom were wasting time, waiting for theology class to start.

"Ignore him, Liz. You know he just likes the attention," said Allie Weaver, voicing George's thoughts exactly. He would know that voice anywhere, even if he hadn't turned to look right at her. In fact, he had been stealing glances at her all day. She had been on his mind 24/7, ever since they'd hung out last week at the Costains' New Year's party.

She was wearing her long, blond hair in a ponytail, like she had that night. George realized that it really made her face stand out, especially her blue eyes. Even wearing the plain white shirt and black skirt that passed for their school uniform, George was sure she was the most beautiful girl he had ever known.

And at the party . . . she had looked so great, and she was laughing and happy in a way he had never seen before. He admitted to himself he'd been attracted to her ever since she arrived at JP2HS after her parents had

pulled her out of public school, but her attitude had always put him off. It was like she was afraid to be herself.

But now, somehow, all that had changed for the better, and his attraction for her had turned into a crush. Even when they'd had their problems with her boyfriend Tyler . . . *ex-boyfriend*, he remembered. *She's unattached now*. He turned back toward the window so no one would see him smiling.

He was barely aware that Mr. Costain, the principal and head teacher of the school, had come into the room. Brian Burke had already raised his hand. He probably had a question about the Christmas break reading assignment, but George didn't think he would have much chance of getting it answered since, as usual, J.P. Flynn was trying to stall class—and any attempt at serious study—by peppering Mr. Costain with his own irrelevant questions.

“But you haven't answered me!” J.P. was saying, his messy red hair flopping around. Sometimes he reminded George of a rooster. “What if you're in a situation where justice wasn't done—say, where you got beaten up and, like, *really* humiliated by someone, and they never got in trouble for it? Do you still have to, like, turn the other cheek?”

George, estimating that J.P. would be able to keep Mr. Costain distracted for another good five minutes, returned to his daydreaming.

The snow had been falling steadily for most of the morning, covering the grass and turning the forest next to the school building into a postcard photograph, all still

and white. George wondered if Allie might like to go for a walk through the woods to the SpeedEMart convenience store after school. It would be a good place to talk about how he was feeling.

He cringed a little at the idea, but he wasn't one to shrink from a good opportunity. *Allie Weaver must know that I like her.* And if she liked him back, which he was pretty sure she did, it would be as good a place as any for a first kiss: a snowy forest by a frozen brook, under a gray sky and winter pine trees . . . girls loved that sort of thing.

J.P.'s voice rose urgently. "But suppose you DID turn them into the proper authorities, and they still didn't get in trouble?"

"Then you'd have to entrust the situation to God," Mr. Costain said, mildly amused. "Now if we could—"

J.P. refused to be dissuaded. "I mean, suppose, hypothetically, this jock and his two friends ambushed you, tied you up, locked you in a closet, and left you there?"

George's attention was wrenched and his face grew hot as he realized what was being discussed. Celia and Liz were casting covert glances at him, and he could see that Brian's ears were red despite his dark skin. And George couldn't even glance in Allie's direction.

J.P. kept pushing. "And then all that happens to those guys is that they get kicked off some stupid wrestling team. No detention, no jail time, no public beatings, nothing! You're telling me a guy couldn't do anything about it? I mean—"

Celia, George's best friend, leaned over and punched J.P. hard on the arm.

“Ow!” he yelled.

“Thank you, Celia,” Mr. Costain said, but he looked quickly at George.

“That’s not fair!” J.P. complained, rubbing his arm. “See? This is just what I mean. Your own daughter is beating me up and you—”

“Support her thoroughly,” Mr. Costain interrupted him. “But,” he said with a faint smile, “for future reference, Miss Costain: no hitting in class.”

Celia was instantly apologetic. “I’m sorry.”

“Accepted. But—”

“Wait a minute!” J.P. interrupted. “*I’m* the one who got hit! She should be apologizing to *me*.”

“As we know from our studies,” Mr. Costain continued undeterred, “sorrow for wrongdoing doesn’t remove the need for repercussions. As a punishment, Celia, you have to give up leading the class Rosary tomorrow. Mr. Flynn, you will lead it in her place.”

“No!” Celia and J.P. said together.

That got a little grin out of George, despite his anger. He’d heard that good fathers made good teachers, and George knew that, at least in Mr. Costain’s case, this was true.

Mr. Costain cleared his throat. “Well then, let’s get on with class. There’s a break in the schedule because our new chaplain, Father Borgia, is going to officially bless the school. I expect everyone to be on their best behavior,” he added, looking directly at J.P., whose peeved expression was replaced by a look of wide-eyed innocence. Mr. Costain nodded, and then turned to George.

“Mr. Peterson, Father asked if we had any altar boys who could assist him, and I volunteered you. I hope you don’t mind.”

“That’s fine,” George said.

“Will he be doing an exorcism?” James asked, raising his hand afterwards in feigned courtesy. Despite being the oldest student in the school, he rarely paid respect to class rules. Perhaps more annoying to George, James was rarely rebuked for his rude, and at times even antisocial, behavior.

“But I already did an exorcism last month,” exclaimed J.P. “How many demons can one school have?”

“That depends,” said James, “on how many of your family members have gone there.”

J.P. opened his mouth in feigned shock. “Well,” he said, trying to sound disgusted, “you’re just a spiritual glutton, that’s all. Two exorcisms in three months. What’s next, hourly confession?”

Mr. Costain cleared his throat again. “Take out your copies of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and turn to page 554.”

George opened his book mechanically, and couldn’t help glancing down at his wrist as he did so. The rope burns from being tied up by Tyler and his friends had faded away, but sometimes it felt like they still hurt. The memory of that humiliation was stronger than he liked to admit to anyone, even himself. And J.P. was right— Tyler *had* gotten away with it.

He finally looked at Allie, who was staring at her *Catechism*, brow furrowed as she looked for the correct

paragraph. She was a good student, but right now, she looked distracted. Was she thinking about last semester? She had broken up with Tyler the day before he had attacked George, and she and George both knew that Tyler's actions were partly motivated by vengeance.

And he got away with it. George couldn't get the thought out of his head. To make matters worse, there was some other idiot, probably one of Tyler's buddies, who had been hanging around with a hacksaw, acting like some psycho from a B-movie. *I'd like to pay that guy a little visit too. I'd tell him what he could do with that hacksaw.*

He was still preoccupied an hour later, when the kids were cleaning up the classrooms in preparation for the school blessing.

Celia approached him as he was moving his desk against the wall. "You okay, George?"

Her round face, framed by her dark brown curly hair, was flushed from exertion. Celia always worked the hardest when it came time to clean up the school. She set her desk down next to his and sat on it. "I mean, about the whole Tyler thing? J.P. isn't very tactful, is he?"

"I'm fine," he said brusquely, then immediately felt bad for brushing her off. "I don't really want to talk about it. So what's this about Father Borgia being our chaplain?" he said, trying to change the subject.

"He called up and volunteered right after New Year's!" Celia exclaimed exuberantly, forgetting her question. "I guess when you borrowed his cassock for our All Saints' Party, he got interested in the school and talked to

your mom about it. When he found out we didn't have a chaplain, he said he'd be happy to take the job."

Celia was beaming. George knew how much it meant to her and her dad to have the support of a priest for their new little Catholic school. Mr. Costain had been trying ever since they'd opened to have a priest bless the school, but most of the priests in the diocese seemed to regard JP2HS as a renegade school and stayed away.

"That's great," George said, and it really was great. He didn't know the retired priest well, but he liked him. Father Borgia was sometimes referred to as the "Pirate Priest" because of the eye patch he wore, and George always thought the old man *could* have been a pirate in his younger days. Even in his late sixties, Father Borgia still looked powerful enough to hoist a few sails, and he definitely had a rogue's wit. George remembered how disappointed he had been when, in fifth grade, his mother had told him that Father Borgia wasn't wearing the eye patch because he had lost an eye in a knife fight, as popular grade school gossip said: the old priest had glaucoma.

George grabbed his backpack and went to get dressed for the ceremony. As he left, he could hear Brian and J.P. still arguing about the validity of the exorcism J.P. had done last semester.

"J.P.," Brian was saying, "if you were really an exorcist we'd probably all be possessed. A true exorcism requires specific phraseology, in Latin, and special blessed items and rituals. All you did was shout and wave your arms around and do a silly dance while the prowler ran to his car and got away."

"Shows what you know," J.P. shot back. "Nothing's fallen apart here lately, has it?"

"That was more because of your computer alarms than your 'exorcism'."

"At least I did *something* to keep this school on its feet."

"Sure," said Liz, who was standing on a chair nearby pulling Christmas decorations off the wall, "After you nearly destroyed it with your little practical jokes. Besides, if you were any good at anything, you would have caught the guy instead of just scaring him away like a spazz."

"Liz!" Celia interrupted. "What are you doing? Those don't come down yet!"

Liz stopped and stared blankly at Celia. She looked down at the rather tattered Christmas tinsel and ornaments strung across the coat closet on the side of the classroom. "Why keep them up? Christmas is over. Heck, New Year's is over. Learn to let go, Celia."

"No," said Celia. "Christmas decorations stay up until Epiphany."

"Epiphany?"

"You know, the day when the three kings came to visit the baby Jesus," Celia said. "It's tomorrow."

"Epiphany's when the *Protestants* take down their Christmas decorations," broke in James. "Traditionally, Catholics considered the Christmas season to last from Christmas Day to Candlemas."

"Candlemas? What? Okay, fine, Captain Catholic," said Liz in frustration. "When's Candlemas?"

"February second."

“Of course,” said J.P. “What *do* you do to celebrate Groundhog Day if you aren’t taking down Christmas decorations?”

“James is technically correct,” Brian added, stopping his wiping of desks to adjust his glasses. “The traditional celebration of Christmas commemorated the period of time when Christ was born to the point forty days later when He was presented in the Temple.”

“Okay, fine, fine. Sorry for starting a holy war,” Liz said. She started getting down from the chair.

At that moment Mr. Costain opened the door. “People, Father’s ready to start if you’re all done in here.” He stopped, catching sight of Liz still holding some of the tinsel in her hand. “Are you taking down all the Christmas stuff? It’s not even Epiphany yet.”

“Candlemas,” James corrected.

“This will be the best Groundhog Day ever!” J.P. said.

“Okay, *okay*,” said Liz. “Look. I’m putting them back up. We’ll have Christmas until February. Now *everyone’s* happy!” She began randomly tacking decorations back on the wall.

Man ultimately remains a question and a deep mystery to himself.” –*The German Catechism*

Dad had posted the quote at the back of the classroom only yesterday. Celia read it again. *That’s sure right*, she thought. *I’m a mystery to myself. Who am I, really? The principal’s daughter? The perky one? The good Catholic? That’s who others think I am. But who is Celia, really?*

Those were questions she didn't know the answer to. Lately it just seemed as though she were watching someone else go through the motions of her life.

God, who am I? Who do you want me to be? The prayer sounded hollow in her mind: she'd been praying it so often it seemed like it almost didn't mean anything anymore.

"Everyone in the cafeteria for the school blessing!" J.P. pounded down the halls, waving his arms wildly. "The UNNECESSARY school blessing—"

She sighed. Time to get back to life. "Sorry J.P.," she said, "but your blessing didn't count."

"Oh, Celia," he said with mock condescension, "you know the school has been blessed by my mere *presence* the entire year."

She had walked into that one. "Okay," she said after she had stopped laughing, "let's get going."

The students all gathered in the middle of the small cafeteria with Mr. Costain, who handed everyone a pamphlet with the words of the blessing prayers on it. The two volunteer teachers, Mrs. Simonelli and Mrs. Flynn, were already there. Celia automatically found herself looking for George. Was he really okay? Maybe he was more hurt by J.P.'s jabs about Tyler than he had seemed . . . but before she could slip out and go looking for him, she remembered that he was going to be serving as the altar boy.

A moment later George, wearing a cassock, followed Father Borgia into the cafeteria as the priest chanted a prayer in Latin. George, James, and some of the others responded in kind. Celia relaxed, and glanced down at

the pamphlet her father had been handing out. It had the English prayers on one side and the Latin translation on the other.

She wasn't familiar with the Latin; her parents had always been more into the charismatic movement, but she could appreciate the reverence and sense of the sacred that the priest's language and formal gestures brought about. *Funny, it's almost like hearing him pray in tongues*, she thought to herself, and smiled. James, who was standing piously at the end of the row, would not have been amused at her thoughts.

Mrs. Simonelli, standing beside James, looked displeased. She was part of the local charismatic prayer group along with Celia's parents, but unlike the Costains, she disliked "old school" practices like Latin. Celia had heard her going on about how it was too formal and uptight and not "pastoral" enough, which was also a little funny, because Mrs. Simonelli was one of the most formal and uptight persons Celia knew.

Well, I'm glad we're having a traditional blessing. I think it's cool, Celia thought to herself. After several prayers and responses, Father Borgia set down his book on a nearby cafeteria table that also held a small golden bowl and sprinkler. There was a metal stand next to the table with a censer hung on it. George took the bowl and sprinkler from the table and held them out for Father. The priest took the sprinkler and, resuming a Latin prayer, shook it vigorously at the class.

Next, Father sprinkled the room itself, giving special attention to the windows. When he was done, he motioned

to George, who lit the censer, lifted it from the hook, and handed it to the priest. Father lifted the censer and swung it gently several times, so that the small container with the incense clanked against the chain. Finally, he handed the censer to George, picked up the golden bowl and sprinkler, and swept out of the room.

George trailed behind him, still holding the smoking censer, and they were both gone from the cafeteria for several moments before it dawned on Celia and the rest that maybe they were supposed to follow.

She hurried along with the others into the hallway, where they found Father standing before an open classroom. He made the sign of the Cross over the room and repeated the sprinkling and incensing, then moved on to the next classroom. Everyone followed him from room to room with . . . not exactly bewildered expressions, but it was clear that this was a little new to everyone. Except perhaps James, who was looking at Father with cool approval, as though to say, *Well, at least the man knows the proper way to bless a place.*

Once every classroom was blessed, Father went to the front doors, took out a piece of chalk, and started writing on the upper lintel. First he wrote a few letters that Celia couldn't make out, then the first two numbers of the year on the left side of the letters, and the last two to the right. *Wow, Celia thought, really cool. I'll have to ask Brian what this means later on, in case Father doesn't explain.*

Finally Father handed the bowl, the chalk and his vestment to George to put away, then the priest pulled a hat

out of his pocket as though to leave. Celia realized after a moment that the blessing was over. The teachers gathered around to thank Father while the students all started to make their way tentatively back up the hall.

All except for J.P., Celia noticed, who joined the line to thank the priest. When he reached Father, J.P. shook his hand and asked politely, “Does this count for my Sunday obligation?”