

## Hands in Home Position

For my Grandma

May 2016



Hands in home position.

Everyone, sit up straight. Fingers curled.

Miss Mae, I asked for everyone to sit up straight.

Yes Mrs. Boyles.

This is just a preliminary test. It will give you a good estimation of your speed and accuracy. Your final exam will be a week from today. Now girls I implore you to do your absolute best. You know that the orphanage does not allow you to stay after the eighth grade. With a certificate from this program you will be able to secure employment and help support your families.

Ready. Begin.

The clackey clack and zing zing dings of the typewriters did nothing to encourage Mae to increase her speed or worry about mistakes. Her mind drifted, her anger simmered. When the timed test was complete, she yanked out her paper and marched to Mrs. Boyles' desk.

Thank you Mae. Are you getting the street car back to the orphanage?

It's not right that they make us leave after the eighth grade.

I agree. But luckily the orphanage received enough donations to send you and your classmates here to Boyles College. Office work is becoming very important. Every business will need someone who can use a typewriter, take shorthand, understand bookkeeping and accounting. You will have these skills Mae.

“You will have these skills,” Mae whispered under her breath as she grabbed her coat from the coat rack and marched along the hallway, huffing all the way down the stairs until she pushed open the school doors and raced to meet her friends.

We thought you were going to miss the street car.

For five miles Mae listened to her classmates talk about the jobs they hoped to get after receiving their certificates. Their hopes were to work at a bank or a law office or Western Union.

Sister, I don't want to leave.

Mae, we have had this discussion. You are acquiring skills so you can help support your family. At the end of the term your father is coming to get you and your brother and you'll be able to get a job.

He's a lousy old drunk who dumped my brother and me at the orphanage after our mama died of the cancer. Why can't I stay here and go to high school like other kids? Why do I have to learn to type and take shorthand? I'm only 13. Why can't a family from Canada take me like Anne Shirley in *Anne of Green Gables*? She gets to go to college and become a teacher.

Mae, you are an excellent reader and learn quickly. The sisters have taught you how to sew and crochet, how to plan a meal and shop, cook and do laundry. You are also very good with the children and babies in the nursery. It's been five years since you and Howie arrived and now your father is able to provide you with a home.

I don't want to go. I want to become a Catholic. I like going to church here.

Mae, you know your father forbids you becoming a Christian. You are Jewish. Your mother was Jewish. Your grandparents are Jewish.

My mother is dead and my grandparents live far away. Why can't I go to a Catholic church if I want to?

This is a discussion you will have to have with your father.

My father's no good. He's just coming back to get us so he can put me to work. Why do you think my big brothers skedaddled when they could? Joe's in the Navy now and David's out California way. They don't want anything to do with him.

Tiny though you are Mae, you are a strong young woman. I know you can take care of yourself and Howie. Even though you cannot live here any longer does not mean you cannot visit. The doors will always be open to you.

It's not fair Sister.

Mae, you will pass your exams and receive your certificate and find a suitable job. You will be a good daughter and a good sister to Howie and one day have a family of your own.

Not me Sister. I'm never getting married. And I'm never having kids.

Mae, I think it's time you go help in the kitchen and knock that chip off your shoulder.

Sister. Please, please let me stay.

The Sister turned her back on Mae and headed toward the dining room to oversee the evening's dinner.

You'll be sorry, Mae whispered and stomped to the kitchen to help with dinner.

When Mae wasn't darning socks, mending the nuns garments and helping with the cooking, cleaning and laundry, she worked in the nursery. She didn't really love babies and she especially did not love changing diapers, but she liked singing lullabies and reading to the toddlers.

Good morning. I'm Sister Marianne. I arrived last night from the Sisters of Mercy in Chicago.

I'm Mae. I'm in eighth grade and I have to leave at the end of the term. I've been working in the nursery since I was 10. You're pretty even in all that garb. I do a lot of mending for the nuns.

You sound very helpful Mae. It's nice to meet you.

Which baby is yours?

I'm sorry. What did you ask me?

Which baby is yours?

I'm a nun Mae. I have chosen to devote my life to God and social justice.

That's what all the real pretty young nuns say. But they always arrive a few weeks after we get a new baby.

I think you are drawing conclusions from coincidences Mae.

Why do adults think we're stupid and don't notice things? How old are you? You don't look that much older than me. I read the newspapers in case you are interested. I read about the unwed mothers, the "penitent girls who have no special disease, who have met with misfortune." I know about the place they built in Milford. I am not stupid even though my father thinks I am.

I didn't mean to upset you Mae.

So do you want to know which is the newest baby? It's little Tommy, he's in the crib over there.

Mae watched Sister Marianne follow where she was pointing and look at the crib.

I'm not stupid, Mae whispered.

Maybe you can introduce me to all the children.

After she introduced Sister Marianne to the children and let her hold little Tommy, she told her that she was going to run away and not take her final exams.

Mae did not get far. Sister Catherine found her sleeping under a pew in the Church with only her pillow case, containing a change of clothes, and her only books, *Anne of Green Gables* and *The Scarlet Letter*.

Please don't make me go with him. Please Sister Catherine. You know how helpful I am. I can stay and work here. All the sisters say my sewing and mending is the best. They say they can't even tell that there was once a hole in their stockings.

Mae, we cannot keep you, anymore than we can keep Howie. Your father has shown that he can take care of you. There is nothing more to discuss.

I'll flunk my exams. He won't want me if I flunk my exams.

The school has already arranged job interviews for you and your classmates. Mrs. Boyles has told me that you are her best student. Bright. Quick. Helpful to your classmates. You are constant in your grooming and you are not afraid of hard work.

Then let me work here. I'll live with my pa but let me work here.

Mae, it's time we get you back to the dormitory and into bed. Now. No more talking.

The weekend before Mae was to take her final exams, one of her classmates asked if she could help take care of little Tommy in the nursery. He won't stop crying. We've changed his diaper. He's been fed. We don't think there's anything wrong. No fever. No runny nose. Can you sing to him?

Mae took off her apron and excused herself from the kitchen.

Hello Tommy boy. Why are you in such a rage today my little man?

But even Mae's singing did not quiet him.

Evelyn, can you hold Tommy while I go find Sister Marianne?

Sister Marianne. I don't mean to interrupt your prayers but we can't get Tommy to stop crying. Can you come to the nursery please?

As soon as Evelyn handed Tommy to Sister Marianne he calmed down. There, there little one.

He knows, you know.

What are you talking about Mae?

He knows. He knows that your his ma.

Mae. You must stop talking nonsense.

It could be worse. You could be Hester Prynne on a scaffold waiting to be executed.

What are you talking about?

Hester Prynne, in *The Scarlet Letter*. We read it in school this year.

Yes, I know the story. At least she didn't have to hide.

She didn't have to hide, she was hidden. Just like you. Hester with her "A" and you with your nun's habit.

Sometimes people are at the mercy of other people Mae. Sometimes we don't get to choose for ourselves.

I didn't mean to make you cry.

I think he's sleeping now. We can put him back in the crib.

Sister Marianne and Mae stood by the crib looking at little Tommy finally at peace.

One day a new truth will be revealed.

Now what are you talking about?

That's what Mr. Hawthorne says at the end of *The Scarlet Letter*. Where men and women will be on a surer ground and find mutual happiness.

Mae you are a bold and vexing little creature.

No, no I am not. I am not bold and I am not vexing. I am 13 years old and all I want is to stay here and go to high school.

Mae, I wish I could help you but my fate has been chosen for me. God has led me here and here is where I will give my life.

What happens when Tommy is adopted?

He will be placed with a good Catholic family. He will be loved and taken care of properly. He will not be an outcast.

Just adopted.

There is no indignity in being adopted Mae. You could have been adopted.

You forget. I have a father. And by the way, I did not come here until I was eight. I'm going back to the kitchen now.

At dinner Sister Catherine took it upon herself to say grace. She gave thanks for the food and for the orphanages many benefactors. She gave thanks for everyone's health and hard work. She asked God for his merciful blessings and then she asked that everyone pray for the girls attending Boyles Business College, that they would all pass their final exams and find good jobs.

Mae kept her head down long after she heard the bread being passed and the knives and forks clinking the plates. What good do prayers do? Eighth grade was coming to an end as well as her time at Boyles Business College.

When Sister Catherine received the news that all the girls had passed their final exams, a special celebration was announced. Friends, benefactors, teachers, relatives, members of the Church, all were invited to celebrate the young women who graduated from Boyles Business College.

Mae, it has been decided that after the evening's festivities you and your brother will go home with your father.

Knowing she had no say in the matter Mae bowed her head and stared at her shoes.

Mae, your father requested that I ask one of the Sister's to take you to town and buy you a nice dress for the celebration and some clothes for your new job.

He did, did he? Where'd he get the money?

It's a gift from your grandmother.

That sounds about right.

I've asked Sister Marianne if she would accompany you.

I can make my own clothes you know.

I know Mae. But this is at the behest of your grandmother.

The shopping trip did nothing to life Mae's spirits.

You will outshine everyone at the celebration tonight, that shade of cornflower blue matches perfectly with your eyes.

Don't cry Sister. I haven't told anyone your secret. Maybe no one will want to adopt Tommy and you can watch him grow up.

I'm not crying because of Tommy, Mae. I'm crying because you have your whole life ahead of you and you look so beautiful.

Thank you Sister Marianne. I'll never forget you.



Everyone. Everyone. May I have your attention please. It is with great honor that I introduce Mr. Horace B. Boyles and his wife Anne to give the certificates to our college graduates.

Thank you Sister Catherine. As you may be aware, my wife and I worked as a secretary and stenographer for the Union Pacific Railroad. With my skills I then served as secretary to Governor James E. Boyd and later as a court reporter. This long practical experience is the foundation of the Boyles college courses. I know the things that helped me in business and these are the things I include in my courses. This is a new century with new opportunities requiring new skills. As one of our graduates said, "I would rather be able to understand the science of bookkeeping and modern accounting, use a typewriter and write shorthand, than to be able to translate Horace." For nine months, these young women attended their classes, never arriving late and always prepared. My wife and I are honored to present them with their certificates from Boyles Business College.

Congratulations Mae.

Thank you Pa.

Mr. Miller. It's good to see you again and looking so well. We're all very proud of Mae. She's a fine young woman. And we were pleased to hear that she was selected for the secretarial position with the Carpenter Paper Company.

Thank you Sister Catherine.

Mae. We placed your suitcases along with Howie's in the vestibule. Your father has already taken Howie to the car. He was ready to fall asleep. I know you have said your

good-byes to the sisters and your classmates. Now all that's left is for you to walk out the door and begin your new life.

Before I leave Sister Catherine, I want to know just one thing—what happens to all the chocolate the Knights of Columbus bring at Christmas?

One day Mae you will bring your daughter or your granddaughter here and you will tell them that this is where the Sisters of Mercy taught you to read and write and take care of yourself.

Sister Catherine nodded to Mae's father and returned to the celebration, letting them exit in their own time. She did not want to witness any tears.

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