

Hit Me Where It Hurts

By Sarah Hoeynck

Leo couldn't stop thinking about what Brother Nicolas had told him earlier today. Even as he stocked the Lucky Strike cigarettes behind the glass counter of Kowalczyk's Corner store, the words haunted him.

"You're fifteen now and about to age out of the orphanage here. You'll need to go to the boy's home downtown when that happens."

Leaving St. Mary's was the last thing Leo wanted to do. True, Leo didn't necessarily talk to the other boys at the orphanage that much, mostly because he preferred to keep to himself or spend time at the boxing gym on Morganford. Maybe he should ask Jimmy about it next time Leo went to there. Jimmy usually had some good advice to give. Plus, he'd spent some time in group homes when he was younger, some probably just as rough as the boy's home Leo might end up at.

As Leo gazed at the Coca-Cola bottles lining the wooden shelves, he felt a tiny bit of hope. Before Brother Nicolas had wandered back to the refectory, he'd also said, "Don't lose heart just yet, my boy. I'll look into it."

Leo wasn't totally sure what that meant, but one thing was clear—he wanted to stay at St. Mary's. Ever since his mother had dumped him there when he was four, the Marianist priests were the only family he'd ever really known.

When all the cartons were put out, he picked up the empty box and stacked it in the back storage room. Sitting down on a dusty milk crate, Leo pulled a pack of Marlboros from the front pocket of his smock and lit a cigarette. He liked taking his breaks in the cool, cinderblock room,

especially in this summer heat. St. Louis was so muggy in August, and Mr. Kowalczyk was too cheap to buy any fans much less an actual air conditioner. Well, more like too pious than too cheap, always putting his money into the collection plate at St. John the Baptist's. But that was how most folks around here were—giving their money to the Church when they didn't have two dimes to rub together themselves. Leo respected it, but he could never understand it.

Smoking silently, Leo thought about how school would be starting up again soon. Normally, he'd be dreading it, but now, the possibility of having to leave made his stomach tight. He stubbed out his cigarette and grabbed a rag. Before he left for the day, he wanted to wipe off the fingerprints of the kids who liked to touch the counter and ask about the chocolates inside.

“Hey tough guy, what were you doing in there?”

Even with his back to her, Leo could never mistake Marie's sweet but playful voice. He blushed as he closed the door and took a deep breath to try and slow his heart, which always beat quicker around her. All attempts to be calm were unsuccessful as soon as he turned around and saw her in her plaid kilt and white knee socks.

With a teasing grin and her right hip cocked to the side, she said, “You know Daddy doesn't like you smoking in the storage room. He'll have a fit.”

Trying to play it cool, Leo swiped his hands through his greased hair. But he couldn't bring himself to meet her eyes when he mumbled, “Sorry. I saw Tim do it last week. I thought it would be okay. But I won't do it again. Sorry.”

Her laugh was a tinkling of Eucharist bells. “It's okay, Leo. I was only joking. I would never rat you out to my dad. You're the nicest stockboy we have. Way better than Tim. I wouldn't want you to go anywhere.”

At those words, he raised his eyes to hers. They were such a pretty hazel-green. Did she really mean what she said? That she wouldn't want him to go anywhere? Forgetting his perpetual shyness, he gave her a smile. And she smiled back! Not just a pitying or sympathetic smile, but one that lit up her whole face. Another hot blush crept up Leo's neck, but he managed to say, "Thanks."

Then they both just stood there, neither saying anything. Leo wasn't sure what to add. His heart rate crept up again and sweat formed around the collar of his t-shirt. Why couldn't he think of any words? Their smiles became awkward, so he turned abruptly toward the stock room to leave for the day.

After punching out his timecard, he hung up his apron and shoved his arms through his jeans jacket. While he was changing, he heard the jingle of the bell over the door and Marie say kindly, "Hello, Milton. How are you today?"

A child's voice replied, "Good, Marie. Can I get some Lucky's for my dad? And some cans of Budweiser?"

"Sure, buddy. That'll be \$1.75."

Leo came out to see a boy who couldn't be more than ten handing two crumpled dollar bills to Marie. She made change from the old brass cash register and pushed the quarter toward Milton, but he didn't notice. He was crouched down in front of the counter, staring at the candy with wide eyes. As she packed his items into a brown paper bag, Leo knelt next to him.

"Looks good, huh?"

Milton turned toward him, his round face all smooth and innocent under his peaked cap.

"It sure does."

“You know,” Leo grabbed the quarter and held it up in the air, “you could get something real good from in there with this quarter.”

The boy looked down. “Pa wouldn’t like it. He told me to bring the quarter back.”

A memory tugged at Leo’s mind. His mother buying him a whole handful of penny candy at the drug store before taking him on a bus ride to Tower Grove Park. She’d smiled at him the whole way. He’d felt so loved, unwrapping each sugary bite like it was a piece of gold. This kid deserved to feel that way, especially considering his dad wouldn’t give his son a measly quarter.

Reaching into his pocket, Leo pulled out a silver half dollar and handed it to Milton along with the quarter for his dad. Leo winked at him and whispered, “Go nuts.”

The boy gasped with joy, and when Leo straightened up, Marie was beaming at him. He gave a sheepish shrug. He’d do anything to have her look at him that way all the time.

“Okay, enjoy it kid.” He ruffled Milton’s hair, who flashed a smile before turning back to his chocolate choices. “See you tomorrow, Marie.”

The bell tinkled behind him as he walked out of Kowalczyk’s. Suddenly, a brand new 1954 Chevy Bel-Air screeched to a halt in front of the store and three teenage boys wearing white t-shirts and sporting greased hair jumped out. Leo’s whole body tensed up. He knew these guys from the orphanage, and they meant trouble.

“Hey, Sullenger!” the biggest one named Tony called, “I thought that was you! Long time no see! How do you like my new chariot?” He leaned on the rear fender as his two friends came around the hood. “We found it in some square’s driveway with the keys in it. Thought he wouldn’t mind us taking it out for a joyride. Wanna join us?”

“Uh, thanks. But no, I gotta get back,” Leo mumbled. “You know how they are.”

When Leo was thirteen, Tony had left the orphanage and gone to the same group home that loomed in Leo's future. The older boy had been a menace to the Brothers during his whole time at St. Mary's—drinking, stealing, getting in fights. The last few years had clearly not reformed him.

Tony laughed and clapped Leo on the back. He had cuts and bruises on his knuckles. "Yeah, I got it. I'm glad I got away from those holy rollers." He and his friends moved toward the front door of Kowalczyk's. "Stay cool, kid."

"Yeah, you, too." Leo turned around and stared at the car. It's shiny chrome trim glistened in the early evening sunlight and the leather interior looked so soft. A bunch of empty beer cans littered the floor of the passenger seat. Who knew how much they'd been drinking? He couldn't just leave Marie alone with these guys.

Taking a deep breath, he went back inside.

Tony's two friends were hanging out near the back of the store thumbing through an old copy of *MAD* magazine and giggling like a couple kids. But Jimmy was leaning on the front counter, his elbow propped up on the register as he talked to Marie.

Leo made eye contact with Marie and nodded at her as he moved toward the storeroom. She flashed him a tight smile. Her eyes were nervous as she looked at Tony.

"She's a real beauty, right?" Tony banged on the register and jerked his head toward the car. "Cost me a pretty penny, too. But she's real special. Wanna come out and see her?"

"Gee, that sounds nice, but I'm working now."

"C'mon, this dump won't miss ya. If you ask nice, I might even take you on a ride. How'd you like that?"

The nerve of this guy! As if Marie would look twice at this greaser.

Marie shook her head. "Sorry, but my dad would never allow it."

Tony lowered his voice to a whisper and leaned in toward Marie. Leo couldn't make out what he was saying, so he moved closer. Marie was gripping the edge of the countertop. Leo's pulse raced as he saw the fear in her eyes.

". . . it's real cozy. Really, you'd like it."

"Please, I think you and your friends should leave," Marie insisted.

Leo's hands clenched instinctively into fists. He was only a few steps away from Tony's back now.

"Lemme take you for a spin. I bet you're a real hellcat in the backseat."

Without thinking, Leo grabbed Tony's shoulder, wheeled him around, and swung with all his might. His right hook caught Tony across the jaw. Pain radiated down Leo's arm, but he didn't stop. All his time at the gym had prepared him for this.

Tony staggered backwards, shaking his head and cradling his face. Before he could get his bearings, Leo let loose a series of jabs to Tony's stomach. Doubled-over, Tony tried to defend himself, but Leo pursued like a freight train. Nothing could stop him. He wanted to knock this guy's teeth out to keep him from saying such filthy things to Marie.

Just as Leo was about to deliver his final punch, a set of arms wrapped around his neck and cut off his breathing. Leo gasped and tried to squirm away, but Tony's friends wrestled him to the ground. Unable to use his fists, Leo was powerless. One boy kicked him in the ribs while the other held him down by his throat. He couldn't breathe, and the pain from each kick exploded in his chest like a kaleidoscope.

From far away, he could hear Marie shouting, "Stop it! Stop it! Please stop!"

The next kick caught his head, and bright flashes swam into his view. Blood pooled in his mouth. Just as darkness was about to fall over Leo's eyes, the bell on the door jangled.

"What in God's name is happening in here!"

The kicks stopped. Sneakers squeaked on the linoleum. From his vantage point on the floor, Leo saw the two boys pick up Tony. A set of worn but nicely polished brown dress shoes chased them to the door.

"Get outta my store you hooligans!"

An engine roared to life outside followed by the squeal of tires peeling out. Bright spots still clouded Leo's vision and the rusty taste of blood coated his lips, but he knew he needed to get up. Mr. Kowalczyk would want an explanation. Pressing himself up, a sharp ache ripped through his chest. He'd cracked a rib at the gym before and knew what it felt like. This was just as bad. With much difficulty, Leo brought himself to his feet.

"Are you alright, sweetie?" Mr. Kowalczyk was behind the register and hugging his daughter.

Tearstains ran down Marie's cheeks. When she looked at Leo, her face had none of its usual warmth. Instead, there was only fear. Leo's heart fluttered with shame. Did she think he was just as bad as those boys?

"Mr. Kowalczyk," Leo croaked, "I'm so sorry. I know what it looks like—"

"Don't." Mr. Kowalczyk turned around, fiery anger burning in his eyes. "I don't care what they did. I took a chance on you, a boy from the orphanage. But you're just like those animals. Fighting and spilling blood in my place of business."

"But, sir, please. They were hounding Marie. I had to."

Marie's face softened into a sad smile.

“I don’t care,” Mr. Kowalczyk said. “Get out and don’t come back. I won’t have such un-Christian behavior in my presence.”

“I’m fired?” Leo asked softly. How could this be happening?

“You heard me. Go.” Mr. Kowalczyk turned back to Marie and took her hands.

The fight drained out of Leo’s body. All that remained was the thunderous ache from the beating—and his own shame. With his shoulders slumped, he walked toward the door. Looking over his shoulder, he and Marie exchanged one final glance. His face was all apology—hers was all regret. Why hadn’t he ever told her how he felt?

Beneath the jangling of the bell, he could just make out Marie saying, “Really Daddy, it wasn’t his fault. If you would just . . .”

The hot summer air felt cooler as the sun sank toward the west. He touched his lip, wetting his fingers with warm red blood. Bending over, he grabbed his ribs and started down the sidewalk. Long purple shadows from the shop roofs stretched across the pavement. He didn’t want to go back to St. Mary’s just yet, so he stumbled through the waning afternoon sunlight with no destination in mind.

What had possessed him to lose his temper? All day, every day, Leo tried to keep his cool. People in this neighborhood were just waiting for him to fail. The orphan kid who liked to fight—no one believed in him. And why should they? His mother had abandoned him, and he’d never met his father because he had died in the war. And from what the Brothers had told him, his dad’s parents lived somewhere around here, but they wanted nothing to do with him. He was just an unwanted mongrel, like the dogs he saw skulking around the back-alley dumpsters looking for scraps. Despite his injuries, Leo’s quickened his pace. He wanted to outrun what had just happened. His frenzied, fast footfalls reflected the turmoil in his heart.

All the hope he'd felt earlier that day was gone. Brother Nicolas's words had made him believe that perhaps there was a better situation out there—maybe a job or even placement with an actual family. But that was impossible now. Mr. Kowalczyk would tell everyone about the troublemaker Leo Sullenger defiling his holier-than-thought store. No one would want to take him on. He was headed straight for the downtown boys' home.

While he walked, Leo studied his hands. They looked like raw hamburger. The knuckles were scraped up and starting to bruise—just like Tony's hands. Maybe he didn't deserve something better anyway. If he couldn't keep himself from clocking those jokers, then maybe he belonged in the same place as them. As he stared, a few hot tears dripped onto his palms. He shoved his hands back into the pockets of his jacket and wiped his face with his shoulder.

He kept walking, but a familiar sound halted his rapid steps. The flat whack of bulk connecting with bulk. The shuffling of boots on bare concrete. Men's voices grunting and laughing. Leo looked up to find himself outside the entrance of the Morganford Boxing Gym. The doors were flung open to let in the summer air.

A couple men leaning against the brick building nodded at Leo. "Hey kid, you okay?" One pointed to his own lip.

"Aw, it's nothing. Is Jimmy around?"

"Yeah, he's in there."

Leo nodded and walked in. The scent of tangy sweat floated in the close air of the tight space. A small ring for sparring sat in the center of the room, created by posts with ropes stretched around them. A few heavy punching bags wrapped in faded, cracked brown leather hung from the ceiling around the ring. Beat-up blue lockers and a couple long benches lined the far wall. Jimmy sat on one of them, smoking a cigarette and talking to an older guy with a grey

moustache. He wore a brown newsboy cap over his sandy brown hair and scratched the scar on the right side of his lean face.

“Hey Jimmy,” Leo said as he approached, “wanna spot me?” He took off his jacket, grabbed the tape off the bench, and started to wrap his aching knuckles.

“Whoah! Kid, what happened?” Jimmy jumped up and grabbed Leo’s face.

Leo yanked his jaw away, but Jimmy gripped Leo’s shoulder.

“Was it someone at St. Mary’s?” Jimmy wouldn’t let go.

With a wince, Leo pushed himself away and kept taping his hands. “I don’t wanna talk about it. I just wanna hit the bag a couple times. Will you spot me?” Because of his injuries, Leo knew he would need some counterweight.

“Are you sure?” Jimmy’s face was creased with worry.

Rather than answer, Leo finished taping his hands, walked over to a bag, and waited.

Jimmy didn’t show emotion much, so on any other occasion, his concern would be rather touching. But right now, Leo didn’t need comfort. He just wanted to hit something.

After putting out his cigarette, Jimmy came over and stood behind the bag. Leo’s first punch was a monster. His ribs screamed in pain, and it felt like a vice was squeezing his hands, but Leo didn’t want to stop. Instead, he let everything fly—the frustration, the hurt, the anger. Each time his fists made contact, memories flashed through his mind.

Marie’s tear-stained eyes. *Thwack!*

Mr. Kowalczyk’s mouth set in a hard line of disappointment. *Thwack!*

Brother Nicolas embracing him when they first met. *Thwack!*

His mother handing him the quarter for his penny candy. *Thwack!*

How her fingers felt resting on his neck while they rode the bus. *Thwack!*

The way her face looked when she turned around and left him forever. *Thwack! Thwack!*
Why couldn't he ever be good enough? Why didn't anyone want him?

The memories kept coming, each more painful than the last. Rather than absorbing his pain, the bag was simply deflecting it. All Leo was doing was hurting his body even more, so he stopped punching. Breathing heavily, he ripped the tape off his hands, threw it on the ground, and collapsed on one of the benches. The pain in his ribs came back in force. Sweat dripped down his temples and mingled with the dried blood on his lip.

Jimmy sat down next to Leo and offered him a cigarette. Leo took it, and the two smoked in silence. As they sat, Jimmy put a hand on Leo's shoulder, squeezed softly, and kept it there. The familiar weight was more comforting than winning any fight. But soon, Jimmy's support would be gone, too. There was no way Leo could make it to this part of town if he was living so far away. He couldn't afford bus fare every day.

For a second, Leo considered asking for Jimmy's advice changed his mind. It wouldn't make any difference anyway. Instead, he stubbed out the cigarette with his foot and said, "See ya around, Jimmy," as he stood to leave.

"Kid, seriously, what gives? You can talk to me you know."

Leo just shook his hand and left the gym.

"Leo! Hey, Leo!" Jimmy called after him.

Leo didn't turn around.

On the walk back to the orphanage, he passed all the familiar places—the drug store with its syrupy sweet soda fountain drinks that he couldn't afford, St. John the Baptist Church where he went to Mass some Sundays, Richard Brothers Tailoring where Brother Nicolas had bought Leo his one and only suit. He was going to miss them all, even the school, whose playground and

outdoor benches were abandoned now that it was summer break. But maybe he didn't deserve such a great world. Maybe someone like him deserved what was coming.

Before he knew it, he arrived at the familiar front doors of the three-story brick building. Would this be the last time he slept there? What would his new home be like? Not as nice as this. Probably filled with people like Tony. Despite the evening heat, he shivered as he went in.

"Leo, you're here! Wonderful!" Brother Nicolas was standing in the front foyer and grinning widely. "I have something to tell you," he exclaimed with excitement. But when he got closer to Leo and saw his injuries, he grew worried. "What happened? Are you alright?"

Grateful to be home and feeling exhausted from the day's events, Leo unloaded the whole story, emphasizing how scared Marie was and how he had just wanted to help her. By the end, he was crying again. "Honestly, I know Mr. Kowalczyk won't forgive me. But I'd do it again. If I had to."

Nodding, Brother Nicolas pulled out a handkerchief and used it to tenderly dry Leo's tears and then pressed it to his injured lip. "Although violence is never the way, I'm proud that you stood up for your friend. I'm sure she's very happy you were there, and I'm sure Mr. Kowalczyk will see it that way eventually. I'll talk to him."

"I doubt it. And don't bother anyway. It's not like I'll be working there after I leave."

Brother Nicolas's face lit up. "Ah! Perhaps not. That's what I wanted to talk about."

The hope from before fluttered somewhere in Leo's chest.

"I've found you a foster family!"

Leo's breath stopped. This had to be a joke. Who could possibly want him?

Brother Nicolas continued, “They’re members of St. John’s. They go most days to Mass. Actually, it’s my sisters’ family. Her name is Anne. Her husband is a carpenter and they’ve got two kids, a boy and a little girl. I told them all about you.”

Oh, now he understood. Brother Nicolas probably forced them to take him on with promises of piety and God’s good will—with some religious guilt thrown in as well. Well, Leo didn’t need that kind of help. And he definitely didn’t need it from a family who probably felt obligated to do a good deed. No way.

“I don’t know.” Leo shuffled his feet. “I think it might not work.”

“What? Of course it will! I know you don’t belong at the downtown boys’ home. This is an ideal solution, and they’re wonderful people.” Brother Nicolas put his hands on Leo’s shoulders. “Why are you talking this way?”

Leo shrugged but didn’t say anything. The minute they met him they’d probably see him for what he was. Better to stop it before he got his hopes up. No, he knew what he deserved. Where he belonged.

“Well, you’d better change that attitude because they’re here. And they’re very excited to meet you.”

“What?” Leo’s heart thumped against his aching ribs.

Before Leo knew what was happening, Brother Nicolas was pulling him through the front archway, down the main hallway, and into the dining room. A tall man with thick black hair and a thin woman wearing a flowered headscarf sat at the long wooden table. Once he and Brother Nicolas entered, two children peaked out from behind their parents’ chairs. The boy wore short pants and had to be around eight or nine years old, and the girl had long blond hair and wide blue eyes that stared at Leo. She toddled out to get a closer look at him.

Without realizing it, Leo smiled at her.

She smiled back. She was missing one of her front teeth.

“Anne, Valentine, this is Leo.”

The adults looked at him with kindness and curiosity. Valentine stood up and shook Leo’s hand. “Son, good to meet you.”

Anne did the same. “My brother’s told us so much about you.” She peered a little closer at his face.

Leo flinched and turned away, ashamed of his appearance.

“Gracious, dear, what happened?” Anne asked.

“It looks like you tangled with someone,” Valentine added.

Leo looked at Brother Nicolas with fear in his eyes. Here it was—the moment they realized he wasn’t fit to be around their kids.

But then Brother Nicolas encouraged, “Go ahead. Tell them what you told me.”

“I . . . it was a fight. But it’s not what you might think. I was protecting someone. Someone who means a lot to me. A girl.” Leo looked down at his feet, and his next words came out in a rush. “I understand if this changes things. If you don’t want me anymore.” He closed his eyes, steeling himself for their rejection, ready for the final blow.

After a few agonizing seconds, a warm hand squeezed his. He opened his eyes to see their daughter standing next to him, her gaze full of frank sweetness.

“I’m Mary,” she said.

“Hi, Mary.”

“Mommy and Daddy said you’re my new brother.”

“I, well, maybe.”

He looked at Valentine and Anne, who were both smiling at the scene.

Valentine added, “Looks like you’ve got someone new to protect now.”

Gratitude washed over Leo, and the pain in his ribs became a distant memory. His chest filled with an incredible warmth that made his heart beat faster. Even though he’d never really known this feeling before, it felt like belonging. It felt like home.

He crouched down next to Mary and pulled a quarter from his pocket.

“Hey kiddo, do you like penny candy?”

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