

“It wasn’t me!” protested Nicky, after being confronted by his mother at the front door. “Augie Rizzo kept pestering me...asking me questions and stuff. What was I supposed to do? He’s the one that did it...got us in trouble.” Right in the middle of explaining it all, the phone on the kitchen wall rang. Mrs. Castagno spoke into the receiver while eyeing her son:

“I understand, Miss Alice, if he and the Rizzo boy were misbehaving, you had every right to keep him.” She even resorted to calling her neighbor *Miss Alice* to underscore the seriousness of the matter. “It’s quite all right...I only sent Bobby in to see what was keeping him.” A pause. “I know just what you mean...you can’t leave them alone for two minutes. Well, thanks for calling and letting me know.”

Mrs. Castagno hung up the phone and peered at her son’s face. “When are you going to learn?”

“*What?*”

“Don’t give me *what*! You know damn well what. That was your teacher. And wipe that smirk off your face...as if I don’t have enough to deal with, now I’m getting calls from your teacher. Honestly, they ought to give that woman a medal...having to put up with you kids.”

“But everybody in class was talking and stuff.”

“Don’t give me that! She said you and the Rizzo boy were out of your desks. And I don’t care what everybody else was doing. If everybody else jumped off a bridge, would you do it, too? And what’s that on your shirt?”

Nicky looked down the front of his shirt and pulled at the cloth marked with a small blue stain. His mother leaned in for a closer look. “Is that ink? How did that get on there?”

Nicky shrugged and continued to stare at the stain.

“Well, it didn’t get there by itself! I’m not sure that’ll come out. Now you might need another shirt for school. I swear, Nicky, you’d try the patience of a saint.” Mrs. Castagno checked her anger long enough to let the dog out the back door.

“And I better not find dirty clothes all over your bedroom floor,” she scolded as Nicky tried to slink off. “If I have to pick up your clothes *one more time*... Put them in the hamper! Is that too much to ask? I tell you until I’m blue in the face, and it doesn’t make a bit of difference.”

“Hee hee hee.”

“Oh, that’s funny, is it? Keep it up, Nicky...you just keep it up. Honest to God, I might as well talk to the wall for all the good it does.”

“Hee hee hee.”

“OK, Buster! We’ll see how funny it is when your father gets home.”

All of a sudden a different alarm: “Is that a bug?”

“Where?” Nicky spun around and his eyes made a random sweep of the floor. Peggy pointed to a spot next to her son’s foot.

“There!”

“It’s just a little piece of dirt,” reported Nicky, happy for the change of subject.

“Are you sure? That better not be an ant. I don’t want bugs in here.”

“It’s just a little piece of dirt,” Nicky repeated.

“Well, pick it up and throw it away.”

Nicky left the kitchen fully aware of the fate awaiting him. “Boy, are you gonna get it.” His brother wanted to make sure of it.

Nicky went upstairs to change out his uniform pants for some heavier blue jeans. But then again, maybe he would get lucky. Maybe his father would be in a good mood, had a good day, solved a big case. So he raised a little ruckus in school—boys being boys. A stern warning, that’s all that’s needed. As insurance, an entreaty to Jesus was offered, a solemn oath to do better if the big Man could get him off the hook this one time. But why try to kid himself? Nicky knew the score. That phone call was embarrassing, a humiliation. He’d have to pay a higher price, and in transactions like this, his father only dealt in hard currency.