

## Episode 5: Particular Friendship

**ERIKA LANTZ:** Before we start, I want to let you know that in this episode we discuss the topic of sexual abuse. Listener discretion is advised.

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**MARY JOHNSON:** I really wanted that life that Jesus had of really living poverty, chastity, obedience, service.

**COLETTE LIVERMORE:** You vow for life ...

**SISTER KATHLEEN HUGHES:** Vows of poverty, chastity, obedience ...

**JOAN WURSTER:** Vows of poverty, chastity and obedience ...

**COLETTE:** Poverty, chastity, obedience ...

**SISTER KATHLEEN:** And the Missionaries of Charity have a fourth vow: wholehearted and free service to the poorest of the poor.

**MARY:** Mother Teresa was very concerned about the vow of chastity, almost to the point of paranoia. You're never supposed to get too close to one sister.

**COLETTE:** You were married to the crucified Christ.

**MARY:** There was so much fear around anything connected with human connection.

**COLETTE:** "Hail mistress of Earth, hail heavenly queen, hail Virgin of virgins, all chaste and serene."

**MARY (in flashback of previous episode):** *"You know there are some very decent sisters here, and you are the best."*

**MARY:** There were regulations against what was termed "particular friendship." And I didn't really catch the subtext at the time.

**MARY (in flashback of previous episode):** *She said she wanted to get to know me better. And she's asking about my family.*

**MARY:** If you're going to give up intimate relationships by a vow of chastity --

**(Overlapping) MARY, SISTER KATHLEEN, COLETTE:** Chastity ...

**MARY:** You must not have any particular friendships.

**ERIKA:** From Rococo Punch and iHeartRadio, this is "The Turning." I'm Erika Lantz. Part Five: Particular Friendship.

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**CHHAVI SACHDEV:** So, I've just gotten into a cab. And I'm heading to -- I'm not really sure where, because I've spoken to a couple of the sisters on the phone, and they have been ridiculously vague about where I can find them.

**ERIKA:** Chhavi Sachdev is a reporter in western India. We hired her to find a woman who used to be a Missionary of Charity and is still a sister, but with a different organization.

This woman we're trying to find, I tried calling the house where she lives several times before I was able to get her on the phone. But once I started to explain why I was calling, she quickly ended the conversation. Now the other sisters in her group don't want to tell us anything -- even where they're located.

**CHHAVI:** They won't tell me where I can reach her. They won't tell me where I can find her or when. They won't give me the address of their residence and where their order works out of.

**ERIKA:** The woman Chhavi's trying to find is Niobe -- the bold nun transferred to Mary Johnson's convent in Rome. The nun who told Mary, "I love you."

**CHHAVI:** I've got two envelopes with me. There're two versions of the letter.

**ERIKA:** She has two drafts of a letter for Niobe, in case Chhavi can't talk to her. One of them's intentionally vague, if we have to hand it to someone other than Niobe who might read it.

**CHHAVI:** The second letter is more explicit in the allegations, and that I have put in an envelope that says "Strictly confidential" on the outside.

**ERIKA:** This woman we're trying to reach, Niobe, she first entered Mary Johnson's life in 1987.

**MARY:** She walked in with this presence that was so unlike what most of the Missionaries of Charity had, and so she caught my attention.

**ERIKA:** Mary was 29 years old. Niobe was 39. Niobe's not her real name by the way.

At this point, Mary had been with the MCs for a decade -- and for all those years, she'd been doing everything she could to center her life on love. Love was the point. It's why she joined the MCs in the first place. It's what she believed people needed most.

**MARY:** And I think maybe because I had felt excluded in many of the different places I was and while my family was a very loving family, when I was growing up, there wasn't a lot of like, "I love you." There was doing things together. There was doing things for each other. I had that kind of like ... hole a little bit like many, many people do I think, you know, we all long to be loved, to be appreciated, to be seen, um, and not just for the things that we can do, but for who we are.

**ERIKA:** Then, one day while Mary hung her clothes to dry, Niobe whispered in her ear, "Sister Donata, I love you."

The clothespin fell from her hand.

**MARY:** Does she mean like, I love you the way I'm supposed to love all the sisters? Jesus said, "Love one another as I have loved you." No, I don't think that's what she means. She's looking at me with this big smile in her eyes, and she's waiting for an answer. She's what she --- oyyyy! And she picks up the clothespin that I dropped, and her arm brushes my arm. And I feel like this electric shock kind of thing going through me ... and she goes away. And I'm looking all day long at the big, blue sky and listening to the sounds of the birds and everything feels like new. (laughs)

**ERIKA:** So you were happy.

**MARY:** I was happy. I was confused. I was happy, I was ... but you know, what do you do the first time somebody says "I love you" in a way that sounds romantic and meaningful and personal? Um, eh -- that felt good. (laughs)

**ERIKA:** One afternoon, the sisters were drinking tea, and Niobe slyly leaned over and told a joke in Mary's ear. When they all stood to pray, the superior gave Mary a weird look.

Now this superior wasn't just any MC. Her name was Sister Joseph Michael. She was highly ranked in the order and pretty tight with Mother Teresa. In fact, Mother Teresa reportedly saw Sister Joseph Michael as a possible replacement for her one day.

Now Mary started to worry. Had the Superior seen something between her and Niobe?

Later that afternoon, Sister Joseph Michael called Mary to her office. She told her to close the door and started pacing. Finally, Sister Joseph Michael spoke, slowly and tentatively. She said she had a special job for Mary: revise the Constitutions -- the mission and guidelines of the Missionaries of Charity. Mother Teresa's path to holiness.

**MARY:** And I was so totally floored, because we are always told that the Constitutions are the voice of God. Mother Teresa had written the Constitutions, the story goes, on her knees by candlelight, after all the other sisters had gone to sleep.

**ERIKA:** Mary's job was to update the Constitutions to reflect current Canon law -- Canon law is basically the Catholic Church's internal legal system. When a new Code of Canon Law is issued, Catholic orders review and update their own sets of guidelines. Mary was updating the MCs guidelines after Pope John Paul the Second made revisions in the 1980s. These Canon Law updates don't happen very often. Pope Francis actually just released new canon law revisions in 2021, and those were the first in nearly four decades.

Every day, Mary wheeled a portable typewriter out into the garden and worked her way through the Constitutions. A new word here. A new paragraph there. She couldn't make big changes. But editing changed her. Maybe this rule book was as human as it was divine. If Mary could change the wording of the rules, maybe she could tweak them in her own life, too.

This was the backdrop of Mary's relationship with Niobe. While Mary typed, Niobe would peek her head into the garden and say, "Have a good day." Sometimes she winked.

**MARY:** And when I was with Niobe, I finally felt myself as lovable and loved. This kind of thing I was trying to do for everybody else all the time: to make them feel seen. This was the center of what I was supposed to be doing. And for the first time, I was feeling it for myself!

**ERIKA:** In the weeks that followed, Mary talked to God about her predicament. She also thanked God, because Sister Niobe felt like a gift.

**MARY:** How can this not be from God, if it's making me feel how God wants us to feel? God wants us to feel loved. How could that not be from God?

**ERIKA:** As time passed, Niobe got bolder. She dropped the "sister" and just started calling Mary "Donata."

**MARY:** She's not saying Sister Donata the way we were always supposed to do, so just dropping that sister was so intimate.

**ERIKA:** She'd brush past Mary in the hall, touch her foot under the table. This made Mary nervous -- really nervous. There was no privacy in the convent: everyone knew everyone's business. But Niobe didn't stop. And Mary didn't stop her.

**MARY:** We would bow down and touch our heads to the floor of the chapel. It was a tradition that was adopted from India. And it was really bad, because sometimes she would get right behind me and she would grab hold of my feet when she'd bow down. And again it felt kind of delicious, and at the same time, if anybody saw that, that that would be a *horrible* -- it could be awful!

Because I had been having this crisis of conscience, because even though her love felt so good and it felt so much like God, and part of me believed it was a gift from God, another part of me knew it was wrong and that I shouldn't be having any sort of special relationship with a sister or what we were sharing was dangerous and against my vows. And I had actually determined that I was going to tell her that.

**ERIKA:** But she didn't have the chance. Sister Niobe came with her own news. Niobe had been instructed not to tell anyone, but she was being transferred -- that same day. She had a new assignment in Napoli.

**MARY:** I was so relieved because I had been -- it kind of like solved my problem, even though I knew I was going to miss her and all of these different things whirling through my head at once. And she comes close to me and she says, "Never forget our secret. Never forget that I love you." I told her, "I love you, too" -- the last words I said to her before she left.

**ERIKA:** Mary finished updating the Constitutions. But now she craved something those rules didn't allow. Something small. Even just a hand on her arm.

**MARY:** You know, even like the sign of peace at Mass where people would normally shake hands, we do that kind of namaste sort of thing where you'd join your hands in front of your chest and bow to each other. So really nothing, nothing, as far as touch goes.

**ERIKA:** One day, a van from Napoli showed up at the convent with supplies, and when Mary went to greet it, Niobe was there, unpacking the boxes. Mary was thrilled. She asked Niobe to come inside with her.

**MARY:** And I said, "You know, I've been thinking about something, and I want to ask you something." And she says, "Sure, ask." I said, "Will you hold me?" She says, "Hold you?" I say,

"Yeah, just, just put your arms around me for a minute." And she kind of looks at the windows, and I maneuver us into a place where nobody will see us and close a couple blinds. And then she puts her arms around me and it feels so good and she leans over and she kisses the top of my sari-covered head. (laughs)

I could hear her heart beating. I could feel her arms around me. It was like, like everything inside me is melting. She held me just a second more -- and then, she went away.

**ERIKA:** Niobe got back in the van and left. It would be three years before Mary saw her again.

## MIDROLL

**KELLI DUNHAM (in stand-up video):** So, uh, like most of you, I used to be a nun. Very relatable. That's very relatable in stand-up comedy -- to get up and start talking about how you used to be a nun. And I used to be a nun with the outfit and everything.

**ERIKA:** Kelli Dunham followed her calling all the way from the Missionaries of Charity to the stage.

**KELLI:** So the first question is, um, "Oh, like 'The Sound of Music'?" Uh, no, there were less children in matching outfits and less Nazis in my story.

**ERIKA:** Kelli lives in Brooklyn. She lasted about two years as a sister with the MCs. To use her words, she flunked out. She had the hardest time with the vow of chastity. Not the sex part; that wasn't it. It was the way the MCs took the vow so far -- avoiding all friendship.

Initially the order sounded like a fantasy: women working together toward a common goal of caring for others. Instead, Kelli says she would be asked to leave her humanity behind.

But it definitely makes for good material.

**KELLI:** One time we got up in the morning and Sister Milagro told us that if we really, really love Jesus, we would mortify ourselves by going to the bathroom only once a day. Now I thought she was kidding, so I laughed and said, "OK, just call me Sister Mary Bladder Infection." (laughter) She didn't think that was funny. (laughter)

**ERIKA:** Kelli joined the order for idealistic reasons. But when she looks back, she knows she was a little different from the stereotypical MC. First off, she didn't grow up Catholic. She was raised as an evangelical Christian.

**KELLI:** I'm also, you know, like a very queer person, even though I did not know it then; I just knew I didn't fit in very well.

**ERIKA:** She first got involved with the Missionaries of Charity in 1990, as a volunteer in Haiti. Most aid organizations in Haiti frustrated her. They didn't seem to give *Haitian* people a voice. But as she saw it, the MCs listened to what locals had to say. She loved how the sisters looked in their saris. How they worked so hard. How strong they were.

**KELLI:** By that spring, I was in love, not with, like, one sister, but, like, with all of them.

**ERIKA:** Before she could join the MCs, she had to convert to Catholicism.

**KELLI:** As it turns out, um, they kind of insist on that thing.

**ERIKA:** While Kelli was becoming a Catholic she volunteered with the sisters in Miami. And eventually, she got word the MCs had accepted her. She would start her training in New York. So the sisters in Miami had her over for tea to say goodbye.

**KELLI:** And they made me this card. You know, I open it up and it was like, "Welcome to your beautiful vocation." And it said something like, you know, "Your love of Christ must destroy you completely." And then it had like little pictures, little like red drops off the words, and they're like, "Oh, it's the blood of Jesus." (laughs) I was like, "Wow, this is so gruesome."

**ERIKA:** Your love of Christ must destroy you completely. One of the professed sisters pulled Kelli aside.

**KELLI:** She said, "If at some point you feel like they're really breaking your head, then you just leave. Just run. Just go."

**ERIKA:** There's one story that really sticks out for Kelli. It's one her mistress told over and over again as this inspirational tale: A superior walks into a chapel of praying sisters, and instead of saying anything, she writes a message on a chalkboard.

**KELLI:** "Please pray for the father of Sister Mary whoever. He's very ill." And then, that's how she found out that her father was sick. And then, 15 minutes later, the superior came in, um, wiped that off the blackboard and wrote, "Please pray for the father of Sister whoever. RIP." So that's how she found out her father died.

**ERIKA:** The superior didn't say anything else. The end. That's the story.

**KELLI:** That just seems needlessly cruel. And she said, "That sister just really trusted Jesus and really trusted her superior that much." Like, those are the stories you hear when somebody wants to, like, tell you an inspirational story! That's whacko for an inspirational story.

**ERIKA:** In another story from her mistress, a sister finds out her entire family was killed in the Rwandan civil war. After a few tears, she never mentions it again.

**KELLI:** And that is held up as kind of the gold standard: that she trusted Jesus so much that she never had an emotional expression about it after that. But I think the Missionaries of Charity, like your feelings were just supposed to be irrelevant and were not giving you information; they were just things that you pray to get rid of. But people have feelings, and the feelings actually are information, and it's just so not compatible with the way humans are.

**MARY ANDERSON:** I'm really good with kids. It's one of my strengths.

**ERIKA:** This is Mary Anderson, not to be confused with Mary Johnson. There are a lot of Marys in this story. Like the other Mary, this one worked with kids as part of her service work.

**MARY ANDERSON:** And I love them, and I connected with them, and I would play with them.

**ERIKA:** And she skipped with them.

**MARY ANDERSON:** And I was told that that was wrong. I wasn't conducting myself as a proper nun. And *surely* Mary, the Mother of God, never skipped. And I remember thinking "That's rubbish!" Like skipping is joyful, and why should I be, you know, having to do penance, like hitting ourselves or kneeling on hard floors or, you know, because I was skipping? And I was just so torn up by those things. And yet, to be constantly told that, "Well, you have to not trust what you think and feel. You have to think the way we do and what you think is wrong." And you know, I was getting the message over and over: "You cannot trust what you think. Your thoughts are not very good, because they're not right." You know?

**ERIKA:** Not every former MC sister sees detachment as a bad thing. Joan Wurster says it's incredibly valuable.

**JOAN WURSTER:** I think I got a great relationship with God through all of this. Even though there was some suffering involved, I feel like it was the best experience of my life. The main thing was not having anything; that was tremendous for me. Because I have no attachment to anything at this point in my life. It taught me so much for detachment. Even --

**ERIKA:** From objects?

**JOAN:** From objects, from people. I always say this to people, and I think it's hard for people to understand this, where I say, "I love people. I love my husband. I love my children, but I'm not attached." My life journey is my attachment to God -- totally. So while I appreciate and love, I'm just not attached. If that makes sense.

**ERIKA:** I think so. That's such an interesting concept for me, and I think I'm probably pretty attached ...

**JOAN:** But I can -- the thing about love, for me, is I can love so much more, because I'm not attached. If I have my husband for as long as I have him, if he were to die, my life would not change. It would change in what I would have to deal with -- you know, depression or sadness -- but it wouldn't change my love for him. You know what I'm saying? So that way, it's kind of like uh -- for me, it's a release of life, but I get to live the life.

**ERIKA:** It sounds peaceful.

**JOAN:** It is.

**ERIKA:** But many former sisters we spoke to think this forced detachment is crippling. They say it's a contradiction to be asked to love and help others and also remain emotionally distant. They struggled with this rule against friendship -- or what's called "particular friendship."

**KELLI:** Which is like kind of the euphemism for like nun-on-nun action. But even when people had kind of platonic friendships, they'd often send people away, because they just didn't want people to be connected to each other.

**ERIKA:** Kelli says MCs weren't just worried about "particular friendships." Appearance and demeanor were also scrutinized.

**KELLI:** They have a lot of talk about like how “Our Lady was very feminine,” you know? They’d say like, “Oh, Our Lady, she was a real lady,” you know, whatever.

**ERIKA:** As sisters in Kelli’s training class progressed to the next level, Kelli says she was held back.

**KELLI:** The specific problem that they said that I had was that I had too much self-esteem and insufficient docility. Even when I managed to say the right things, they would say that my body language was like I walked like my shoulders were angry, is how they said it. Which, you know, I think that could mean a lot of things, too.

**ERIKA:** What do you mean by that?

**KELLI:** Like, I remember one time she lent me her prayer book, and it had a little list of the things she was praying about, and one of them was me. And she said that I was scary. And I was like, nobody in my life has ever called me scary. But I think that there was something about me that was maybe threatening to her. Maybe it was about sexuality. I don’t know.

**ERIKA:** All Kelli knew for sure was that she was stressed. So stressed that she says she got her period for four months straight.

**KELLI:** Which I think was my body’s way of being, like, “Get out, get out!” You know, and we used like non-disposable, um, menstrual stuff, right? Like, really, they just handed us diapers, you know like the cloth diapers that we folded up, and then we had to wash them by hand. So one day we were cleaning the women’s shelter in Harlem, and there was a tampon sitting on top of one of the dressers. And I was like, “Oh, I’m going to borrow that.” And then, I put it in my pocket, and then I was walking away, I was like, “I’m not going to borrow it; I’m not giving it back.” And that was kind of the moment where I was like, “You know, this is not making me a better person.” Like I don’t know who I am, maybe, you know? But I know who I don’t want to be. And that’s a person who steals a tampon from a homeless woman. And I don’t think I’ve ever been as stressed as I was in that situation.

**ERIKA:** She had to walk away. Kelli turned in her sari.

**KELLI:** It’s sad, ‘cause I did see sisters, even sisters who seemed like they were pretty happy with the life, just being destroyed by this constant need of mistresses and superiors to destroy the bonds between people.

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**RONALD REAGAN:** The advance of human liberty can only strengthen the cause of world peace. There is one sign the Soviets can make that would be unmistakable.

**ERIKA:** In the late 1980s, big changes were underway. The world was spinning. The Soviet Union was reforming. President Ronald Reagan gave a speech in front of the Berlin Wall.

**REAGAN:** Mr. Gorbachav, tear down this wall! (cheers)

**ERIKA:** Meanwhile, the Missionaries of Charity expanded into the eastern bloc. They opened a mission in Moscow -- something unthinkable a few years before.



Mary Johnson wanted to explore places she'd never been. To be part of the mission out in the world.

**MARY JOHNSON:** I wanted adventures, I wanted to go places and see things, and the constraints that had been placed on me had, perhaps, been done so in a loving manner, but they were constraints nonetheless.

**ERIKA:** She lived mostly in Rome. She studied theology, she did some clerical work. She sometimes visited a prison or helped at a home for expecting mothers.

By 1990, she moved up the ladder again. Mary became a mistress for nuns nearing their final vows -- the vows for life. But when she saw who was on the list of sisters she'd be responsible for, her heart stopped: Niobe.

**MARY (in flashback):** *Never forget our secret. Never forget that I love you.*

**ERIKA:** Mary hadn't seen Niobe for three years. Now they'd be living under the same roof again, only this time, Mary would be her mistress.

**MARY:** That was something I had never envisioned, never imagined -- that Niobe would be someone I would be responsible for. And I knew that I was just going to have to really make it very, very clear to her that our relationship could not continue as it had.

**ERIKA:** Hmm.

**MARY:** OK this is getting a little intense, Erika. I'm just going to go and come back in like a minute?

**ERIKA:** Sounds good.

**MARY:** OK.

**ERIKA:** Mary had told me before that our interviews affected her more than expected. Old nightmares returned -- nightmares about her time as an MC. The kind of nightmares where you feel trapped. We actually took a break from interviews for a few months, and I thought maybe we'd need to end this interview early.

**MARY:** OK, here we go. Let's see. I didn't sleep much last night. (laughs)

**ERIKA:** How are you doing?

**MARY:** Oh, it, it comes in waves. (laughs) It's it's, it's kind of intense, it's OK. OK. So when Niobe actually arrived at Tertianship, she was pretty good in the beginning. You know, she kind of sat near me at the table a few times, but when a new sister came, that was kind of normal, so not a big deal.

But then one day we were having rule class, and she always looked very intently at me when I was teaching about the rules, especially. And she followed me into the office, and she shut the door behind herself, and she says, "What a great rule class." And I tell her, "It's good to know

that you're getting something out of the class, and thanks for the encouragement," and she says, "Well, yes, you're a natural. And I just want to give you a big hug."

And she wrapped her arms around me, which had been exactly what I wanted a few years before that, but *not then*. Because now I was in charge of her preparation for her vows. And so I said, "No, no, I don't think we should be doing this. I appreciate the gesture, but you know, no hug." And she held me, and I just had my arms down at my sides, trying to give her the message this is not all right. And then I told her with words, you know, "We just really, we can't do this anymore. I am your Tertian mistress. You are a Tertian. We are going to keep all the rules. We can't do this anymore." I told her, "Sister Niobe, we can't do this."

And she says, "All right, all right. I can bear anything, but I can't bear you calling me sister!" And she left.

And I thought, "Well, she's going to have to get used to it, because I'm calling her Sister Niobe from here on out. We have to make this boundary."

**ERIKA:** That night, Mary hit herself harder with 'the discipline.' And in the morning, she pulled the spiked chains extra tight around her waist.

#### MIDROLL

**ERIKA:** Mary had never been in a relationship before, and navigating boundaries is never easy. Especially the first time. Especially for a nun.

Her firm response to Niobe seemed to work for a few days. Sister Niobe gave her space, but not for long. She says one time Niobe shoved her into the office and held her against the wall, pressing on her chest. Another time, she followed Mary into the dormitory and tried to untie her bodice. Mary kicked her in the shin to make her stop.

**MARY:** And it started to feel very manipulative. It started to feel very abusive, even though I didn't have the word for it at the time. I just knew it wasn't right. I just knew it wasn't love. And I knew that she wasn't stopping! It just became totally out of control.

**ERIKA:** By now, Mary felt like she was pouring all her energy into keeping Sister Niobe at bay. And she had 27 other sisters to manage. She needed to take care of all of them.

**MARY:** And at the same time, this part of me that wanted to be loved, but this didn't feel like love. And -- it was, it was awful. It was so confusing. It was horrible.

**ERIKA:** How would you characterize it now? You said abusive. Do you feel like she was assaulting you?

**MARY:** I do feel it's abusive. I do feel it's an assault. But clearly I was not giving consent. I made that really clear over and over and over and over again, and she just wasn't hearing any of it. Finally to the point where she kind of wore me down.

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**CHHAVI SACHDEV:** Okay. Ciao. Thanks. All right, according to the map I have reached my destination.

**ERIKA:** At first, Chhavi thinks she found the soup kitchen where Niobe works. Turns out, she hasn't. She's in a residential neighborhood -- clearly not the right spot. So, she starts asking around.

**CHHAVI:** Hello? I'm looking for the soup kitchen ...

**WOMAN:** You're looking for what?

**CHHAVI:** The soup kitchen. I was told that this is the address...

**ERIKA:** Here's why we're going to such lengths to deliver this letter: These are Mary's memories, as she expressed them to us. With intimate personal experiences like this, especially in an insular religious community, it's hard to substantiate all the details.

I'm also aware of the power dynamic between Mary and Niobe. Mary became Niobe's mistress. Mary was in charge. And right now, we only have her version of events. So I want to reach Niobe.

When I spoke with her on the phone, she ended the conversation before I could explain everything about the story. I want to get her as much information as possible to give her a chance to share her experience.

**CHHAVI:** The municipal office is on my right or ...?

**WOMAN:** Can I give you a number?

**CHHAVI:** Yes, please!

**ERIKA:** Thankfully, Chhavi randomly meets someone in the wrong neighborhood who knows where to go.

**CHHAVI:** And she said, 'Ask anybody, 'Where are the mothers giving free food?' And they'll tell you.'" So, off I go.

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**CHHAVI:** How are you?

**NUN:** Evening. Evening.

**CHHAVI:** So you're here every day?

**NUN:** Every day. Only Sunday holiday, ma'am.

**ERIKA:** Eventually, Chhavi finds the soup kitchen.

**CHHAVI:** So, I have a letter for her.

**NUN:** Okay, give. We will give her. No problem.

**CHHAVI:** You know, they've asked me to make sure she gets it.

**NUN:** **Yes**, surely we will give it. Surely we will give it.

**CHHAVI:** (laughs) No I don't -- it's not that I don't trust you, of course.

**NUN:** (laughs)

**CHHAVI:** But I mean, they've asked *me* to make sure that I hand it to her.

**NUN:** Who is that person? Let me know.

**CHHAVI:** Her name is Erika.

**NUN:** Erika.

**CHHAVI:** And they are in America.

**NUN:** America.

**ERIKA:** Chavvi speaks with the sister for quite a while. She asks if she can speak to Niobe directly.

**CHHAVI:** She said she doesn't want to talk to anybody.

**NUN:** No. Anybody. So ...

**ERIKA:** Finally, Chavvi hands over the letter.

**CHHAVI:** OK, but nobody else will read this letter. Because it's personal, right?

**NUN:** Nobody. Nobody. Phone number is there?

**CHHAVI:** Yeah. We just need confirmation that she's received it. Then whatever she chooses to do is up to her.

**NUN:** OK. Thank you. God bless you.

**CHHAVI:** Thank you. Bye.

**NUN:** Have a nice day.

**CHHAVI:** Thank you. Bye.

**ERIKA:** That's the last we've heard. We don't know for sure whether Niobe was given the letter. We haven't heard from her.

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**ERIKA:** As Mary tells the story, she was worn down. Exhausted by the secret and the relentless back and forth. Niobe's pressure. She wanted it to stop.

And then Mary says Niobe approached her with a proposition. Just one night together.

**MARY:** She was going on and on about how she wanted just one night to make me feel really good. And she promised that she would stop after that night. I wanted that more than anything. I wanted her to stop! (laughs) I wanted her to stop.

**ERIKA:** Mmm. So what ended up happening?

**MARY:** I went to her one night and I said, "OK, this is the night."

**ERIKA:** After the sisters went to bed, Mary left her cot and crept to where Niobe slept. She touched Niobe's shoulder and whispered, "Tonight. I want it tonight."

She went upstairs and waited in a small room that wasn't being used. Then Sister Niobe arrived.

They lay on the bed -- Niobe on top of Mary, face to face. Her weight was comforting. So were Niobe's lips on Mary's forehead, then her cheeks, then her lips. "I love you," Niobe whispered to Mary. "I want you. I need you."

**MARY:** And she made me feel things I had never felt before. She ... it was my first experience of that sort of sexual relationship. And it did feel really good. Of course it did. It was like, if this is a human love, how much bigger must God's love be? But the biggest thought I was having was, "OK, so now it's going to be over."

**ERIKA:** But it wasn't over. Mary says Niobe ignored their agreement. She didn't stop. Not at all.

**MARY:** She wanted more and she's like, "You must want more, too. Of course you want more." And, of course, part of me did want more, but part of me didn't and just again, this whole confusion, because what happens when a human being who hasn't felt loved, who has very little idea of her sexuality suddenly starts to discover those things? Of *course* you want to know more. You want to understand what this is all about. But at the same time, this same human being who's beginning to discover these new facets of life, has vows which say those are sinful, and you've given that up, and that's OK for other people, but it's not OK for you. You are a *nun*. Come on now, wake up!

**ERIKA:** Mary says she didn't know what to do. Niobe wouldn't leave her alone now. She couldn't go to the superior, because she'd have to admit she broke her vows. She didn't see a way out.

One day, her superior approached her. She told Mary she needed to share a story in confidence. It had happened at a General Chapter meeting, the meeting for MC leadership. Mary's superior said the sisters were all discussing the matters of the day, and at one point, one of them read an anonymous letter aloud.

**MARY:** The sister who wrote this letter claimed that there was another sister who had forced herself on her. Followed her around, had touched her in ways she didn't want to be touched, wouldn't listen to no.

**ERIKA:** Immediately Mary thought of her own experience.

**MARY:** She said that this sister had done this from the time she was a novice -- before she took her first vows. That she found sisters in the novitiate who were more senior than her, and she was doing similar things.

**ERIKA:** Finally, the superior revealed that the letter was about Niobe. She thought since Mary was Niobe's mistress, she should know.

**MARY:** And after this letter was read, Mother stood up.

**ERIKA:** And Mother Teresa was more angry than the superior had ever seen her. Mary assumed she was angry at Niobe.

**MARY:** Oh no no. Mother wasn't upset that the sister was behaving this way. Mother was upset that anyone had written it and then even that it had been read out loud at the chapter. What mattered to Mother was that someone's reputation had been destroyed.

And that was kind of devastating to me.

**ERIKA:** Mary was angry. She thought, "No wonder Niobe keeps getting transferred. No wonder Sister told us not to ask about the trouble Niobe had at her last convent." And when Mary learned who else Niobe targeted, she realized these sisters resembled *her*: joined at a young age. Not likely to have had sexual experiences. More senior in the congregation, so if they were found out, Niobe wouldn't be blamed.

**MARY:** And sure enough, Mother said, "It can't be this sister's fault, because the sister who is more senior, she's the one who should have the responsibility. She should know better. She should say no. And then, of course, if a senior sister says no, the junior sister will always obey that. And of course Niobe wasn't like that at all. And though Niobe was my junior and at that point was even under me, she was 10 years older than I was, and far more experienced in so many ways.

**ERIKA:** The more Mary thought about it, the more upset she got. Why had no one stopped her? How could superiors look the other way? How could Niobe have been allowed to take her first vows? Wasn't anyone watching?

**MARY:** I think there was definitely a trend in the Missionaries of Charity and actually in the Catholic church as a whole of not paying attention to problems, denying problems, not wanting to see that they're there. You know, wanting to blame them on an individual's weakness and therefore saying, "Well, we're all weak and so let's be forgiving. Let's be merciful." And of course, mercy and love and forgiveness *are* the things that can change people. Love is one of the most powerful things, so yes, we should love. But at the same time, there is a responsibility when you admit someone into a community. And the responsibility is not just to that person, but you have to look at how that person is affecting the entire community.

**ERIKA:** What Mary did next was risky, but she says she had to stop Niobe from harming anyone else: She wrote to Mother Teresa and put her vocation on the line. She told her they'd broken the vow of chastity. That she firmly believed Niobe shouldn't take her final vows.

After Mary sent the letter, a sister flew from Germany to Rome for the sole purpose of talking to Mary. It was one of the most influential sisters in the order, known for being strict.

She sat at Mother Teresa's desk and scolded Mary. For breaking her vows. For not setting a good example. Mary agreed to every point. She said she was sorry. "Sister," the other responded, "I am sure God forgives you. Jesus forgave even Mary Magdalene."

In the end, nothing changed -- Mary kept her position. Niobe took her vows. Mary never felt so powerless.

After a few months, Mary couldn't take the pressure of the convent anymore. When a sister in her house needed to go to the hospital, Mary volunteered to take her. She realized this was her chance.

**MARY:** This little plan was forming in the back of my head.

**ERIKA:** The two of them got in a car with a driver, and they drove toward the coast, where the hospital was.

**MARY:** And there were palm trees! And there was this sky! And you could see the water off in the distance! It was like a breath of *freedom*. It was like -- like a way to breathe again. And I just wanted more and more of that air. That freedom. That life. That light.

**ERIKA:** When the sister went in for her appointment, Mary sat in the waiting room and reviewed her plan. She knew the facility. She tried to remember where the lost and found was -- that's where she'd find normal clothes. She would change out of her sari, then make her way to one of the empty beach houses nearby. She would escape.

**MARY:** I thought, "This is my chance. I just have to take it."

**ERIKA:** But just then, the doctor and sister reappeared. The checkup was already over.

Soon Mary was in the car, heading back to the convent.

After that day, she often gazed out the convent window. She stared at the back corner of the garden. She imagined digging a hole, crawling in and covering herself with dirt.

She wrote in her notebook: "Trapped. Trapped. Trapped."

## **CREDITS**

**ERIKA:** "The Turning" is written by Erin Lantz Lesser and me. Our producers are Elin Lantz Lesser and Emily Forman. Our editor is Rob Rosenthal. Andrea Asuaje is our digital producer. Fact-checking by Andrea López-Cruzado.

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Our executive producers are Jessica Alpert and John Perotti at Rococo Punch and Katrina Norvell from iHeartRadio. Our theme music is by Matt Reed. For photos and more details on the series, follow us on Instagram @rococopunch. You can reach out via email, too: [theturning@rococopunch.com](mailto:theturning@rococopunch.com). I'm Erika Lantz. Thanks for listening.