

BOB MCCAULEY

"I'm not a man given to hyperbole," Bob McCauley said, "but this levy thing is the biggest screw up I have ever seen. I mean, how can the school district be that far in the hole?"

He was in fact a man given to hyperbole, but I had to agree. The Stradford City School District was broke, at least said it was, and we were feeling it.

"And now they want to put the levy up in August. Nobody votes in August," Bob continued. "Doggone it, nobody in this town is even home in August. You ever notice that? They all go to the islands or Naples, or Hawaii or some damn place. I bet, really now, wait a minute, I'll bet that only half the people who live here, are actually in Stradford, in August, at least not here for the whole month."

Besides hyperbolic, Bob was tangential. And he would set up odds on nearly anything. One of his favorites was to see how many student lockers he would try before finding one that opened. I'd lost money to him on that more than once.

"Ok, so here's the bet," he continued. "I say that no more than half of this entire city is at home, here in Stradford, for the whole month of August." He had a notebook open and a pen in his hand. "Come on, Nancy, what do you think?"

Nancy Turner lowered the "Living" section of the *Plain Dealer*. "That's about the dumbest thing I've ever heard. How in the world could you even start to determine that? I mean, that is just too stupid." She snapped the paper back up in front of her face.

"So you're in, huh, Nanc? You think I'm right, don't you?" He wrote in his notebook, "One-for-me. Ok, who's next?"

McCauley was the Stradford High School Faculty Lounge Terrorist. Unappointed, unofficial, and unappreciated except by me. I loved the way he bounced from one victim to the next, from one topic to the next. I was never sure whether he meant to be like that, deliberately being a jerk, or if he was like Emma Peel, a highly talented amateur.

"Whitney, Whitney baby! What do you think? Am I right, or am I right?"

"Politically? You're somewhere to the right of Osama Bin Ladin."

"A joke! Yes, a joke! You heard it everybody, Whitney, the-world's-greatest-art-teacher Schwartz, made a joke!"

"A political pun at that," I added.

"Yes," Bob said, "a political pun! Hey, I've got that, too! Wait a minute." He fumbled through his notebook. "Yes, sports fans, yes! On February 17th, I bet that Whitney Schwartz, see, right there--" He elbowed Roberta Andracsik "--actually **had** a sense of humor. Yes I did, it's right there, in the book, in your face, right on, hey baby!"

"So who did you bet?" I asked.

"Whom, direct object, objective case, not nominative," said Nancy from behind the newspaper.

"Whom did I bet? Not youm," Bob said, now assured of an audience. "Let's see. Hmm. Ok, on February 17, 1990, I bet Betty Temple that Whitney Schwartz really did have a sense of humor. Betty of course didn't think so, and--"

"No wait, I never said that! Bob!" Betty brought both hands down to her lap and exhaled through her nose. "Whitney, really, I never said that."

"No, maybe you're right, I have it here in the book, you said that she was 'dull and boring' huh? 'Dull and boring.' That's the same thing!" He laughed, slapped the table and looked around the room.

Betty was horrified, blushing and looking at her hands clasped in her lap. Whitney shook her head, and said "Bob, Bob, Bob." I kept quiet and watched Roberta take the bait.

"Wait a minute, give me that book!" She swiped at Bob but missed. "It doesn't say anything about Whitney in there. It doesn't!"

Somebody got up and left, somebody else laughed, and I watched them fight over the notebook. I

knew there was nothing about anybody's sense of humor in the notebook, I knew it wasn't even a notebook at all. It was a scratch pad that Bob had picked up free at the vocational school.

"See, Betty," he was saying, "there's nothing really in it. We all know that Whitney has a highly refined sense of humor. A rapier-like wit, as it were." Betty was smiling now, Whitney was still shaking her head, Roberta was happy and Nancy was still listening from behind her newspaper. Peace had returned to the Stradford Senior High School Faculty Lounge.

But questions still remained. Why had Bob provoked everybody? For fun? To take a shot at Whitney? To bring Betty, a secretary, into the faculty circle? Just to get the conversation away from the levy?

The whole staff, clerks as well as teachers, was worried. The levy hung over the heads of those whose jobs would be lost, it hung over the heads of those whose programs would be cut, it hung over the heads of those whose supplemental contracts would be lost.

It had gotten worse since the first levy had failed last April. Tempers had shortened as the days warmed up. The usual anticipation of graduation, the end of the school year and summer had been replaced with resignation. Not anger, really, or indignation, but resignation and bitterness. The weather, while warmer, was clearly not spring-like. It too, was sullen.

Except for certain days in the Faculty Lounge. Not whole days, but certain periods the clouds of bitterness and resignation parted for a time, and laughter burst out.

The bell rang and the lunch period ended. Nancy folded her paper neatly and placed the sections back in order. She left the paper on the table and said, "Some of us have to teach." She smoothed her skirt, checked her jacket for crumbs, and marched from the room. Bob and Betty rose from the table and returned their lunch trays to the rack. They tossed their trash into the container and entered the hall together, laughing.

Roberta looked up at me. "He is really impossible, isn't he?"

"Highly unlikely, at least," I said. She gathered her things and left. I had my planning period next, and stayed to finish eating.

So what the hell is going to happen in August, I thought. If the levy doesn't pass, the German program is dead. I'll be back in English, but I'll still have a job. So will Bob, and Nancy and Whitney and most of those here last period. How many teachers will we lose? Ten in the district? Twenty? What about Betty Temple? Had she been here long enough to stay? Maybe she'll just get moved back to an elementary building; that's where she'd transferred from. Was there a list somewhere? Does anybody really know?

"All right, everybody, listen up! Settle down, people!" The next lunch period was arriving and Wayne Black was trying to speak. "Does anyone really know, if there is a seniority list coming out, or if it's available now or what?"

"We won't need it," Terri Dieken said, "it'll pass easy this time. Only lost by couple hundred votes in April."

"Yeah, and you're tenured, what do you care?" Wayne shot back.

"As you are."

"But come on, isn't there supposed to be a list in case there has to be staff cuts? You know, where they list people in terms of what they can teach and how long they've been here? Jan, you're the SEA rep, what have you heard?"

Jan Coulter was one of the four Stradford Education Association reps in the building. She had just come back from her second maternity leave and I wondered how that affected her tenure.

"It's supposed to be coming out this week," Jan said. "At least that's what they told us at the meeting."

"Told you?" Wayne demanded. "Who told you?"

"Sorry Wayne, I'm not going to fight about that today. Howard was at a meeting with the Superintendent and they're working on it."

"Who's doing the list, us or them?"

"Together, Wayne. The Board has all of our teaching certificates on file."

"They're **telling** us?"

"No, Wayne, we're working together, the Association and the Board. Didn't I just say that?" She

turned and said something to the person sitting next to her. Wayne looked like he had heartburn.

Us versus them. The essence of the relationship between the professional educators in Stradford, Ohio. I had kept out of the political loop for some time, but it hadn't changed. Not since Gene Phillips and I had negotiated the first master contract.

Wayne was one of those big-mouthed little guys who knew everything. Except how to volunteer to work on an Association committee.

"So the list is due out this week sometime?"

"That's what I just said," Jan said. "If you're going to ask questions, how about listening to the answer? And while you're at it, there's plenty of Association work to do. How about giving us a hand, Wayne? You did join this year."

"No, thank you. You people are doing just fine. All I wanted was some information from my elected Building Representative. No need to get personal." He put his hands up in front of his face, palms out, like he was deflecting a ball or a punch.

"It's people like you, Wayne--" she began. "But I'm not going to get into it and spoil my lunch."

I looked around the Lounge. It's amazing how different these lunch periods are, I thought as I stood up. Bob wasn't here to lighten the mood and I didn't need to hear Wayne's story again.

"Somebody's gotta do some work around here," I said, as I left the room.

So I did some work; I still had most of a planning period left. I picked up my mail, dropped off tomorrow's tests to be copied and began grading a set of papers at my desk. I had two more classes to teach, and this would be my chance to reduce the load I'd bring home.

It had been decreed several years ago that teachers should work eight-hour days, regardless of how long students were in the building. I'd have 30 minutes after classes were over before I could leave the building, but I usually used that time to decompress. Like a diver avoiding the bends. Eight hours was what normal people worked, and if the citizens of Stradford could see that we worked eight-hour days, then they would learn to appreciate us and respect us. And they would vote for our levies.

The term "Work Day" was of course a misnomer. We all had work to bring home, so the official eight hours was short, laughable in the face of how many hours we worked in a week. We graded tests during NFL games on Sundays, we carried home boxes of term papers, we gave up Friday nights.

The difference was appearance. Eight-hour days could be demonstrated to the public. Our bodies were officially on display, like visiting hours in a funeral home. It was something concrete that could be understood by those who didn't understand teaching. Besides, if you really had to leave a little early, you just had to ask the principal, and be sure to leave after the school buses pulled out. That way no one would see you.

Ohio is one of the states that require school boards to put funding issues before the people. In some states the Boards could just levy the tax, but not here. In Ohio we have to give every yahoo the opportunity to vote no. What other taxes do they get to directly vote down?

Bitter, bitter, bitter, Bob would tell me, and maybe I was. But the schools can't please everybody, and as soon as a person is unhappy, he votes no. Doesn't like the principal, no! Thinks his kid should be a starter on the football team, no! Says the former board treasurer messed up the budget, no! Doesn't believe in Acid Rain, no!

I looked down at my tests and noticed I was grading the answer sheet instead of the kid's paper. It was not the first time I had done that, and I recognized it as a clue: it was time to stop grading tests. The bell rang and I taught my two classes.

They went well. The kids participated and we were all pretty upbeat as we filed into the hallway. Wayne Black was making his way toward me; I figured he wanted to vent some more. I avoided him by turning away, but he brought me back down.

You would think people would remember the good things that happen in a school. They all went to school, they should know. But because they went to school, they think they know all about schools. They remember how much they screwed around when they were students, how much time they wasted, how little

they learned. They saw how easy it was to be a teacher. They remember teachers standing around, some even sitting, telling kids what to do. The kids did all the work, so what's the big need to pay teachers? The place is air-conditioned, quiet, there's nothing to it. And they get the summer off.

The best thing about talking to yourself is that you get to play all the parts. I could be the righteously indignant professional educator, the fed-up taxpayer, and the underpaid teacher working next door to an overpaid teacher.

I stopped at the window by the Attendance Office and looked out at the hills in the distance. Spring was trying to break through but hadn't quite made it. It was warm but not really springtime warm. Green shoots were struggling but still losing to the worn-out winter-gray grasses.

It's the same outside as it is inside, I thought. They don't know what we do, they think they do, and they think it's nothing. No wonder I'm depressed. Throw in too many taxes, throw in no trust for any elected official, throw in some my-kid-is-perfect-ness, and we are really in trouble.

I turned away from the window and headed for Bob's office. If the levy doesn't pass they'll make all those cuts, but the kids will show up in August and their parents will expect us to educate them.

Bob grabbed me before I could enter his office. "Come here," he said, "look at this! The belly dancer called back!"

"Nancy dances, too?" I asked and sat down.

He laughed hard. "Now that's a picture! Can't you just see it?" He laughed some more and slapped his hand on the desk. I laughed too, even if it was my joke. When we could speak I said, "So what's this really about?"

"It's gonna be great!" he said, "but it would be even better with Nancy." He paused and enjoyed a picture of Nancy twirling before his eyes. "Anyway. We got this belly dancer lined up for the next faculty meeting."

"You're bringing a belly dancer to the faculty meeting?"

"Yeah," he said, "it's Jakubisin's birthday."

"You're gonna have a belly dancer do 'happy birthday' for the Principal? Like Marilyn Monroe and Kennedy? You're nuts!"

"How can he get mad if it's for his own birthday?"

"Good point."

"Andy's gonna videotape the whole thing. He won't get mad on tape." I laughed. "But that's not the best part." He got up and shut the door.

"It's a secret?"

"Sure, but I'll let out some of it beforehand to hype it. Give it some Big Event status. You know."

"The Don King of faculty entertainment," I said.

"Except for the hair. Yeah, but only you and I know this part. I have to tell somebody. The belly dancer is really a guy!"

"What?" I choked. "A female impersonator?"

"Complete with appropriately sculpted foam rubber. God, I love that. 'Appropriately sculpted'." He leaned back in his chair. "So, what do you think?"

"Damn glad you have tenure, Bob."

"Merely the pre-requisite. But think of it. We're all in the faculty meeting falling asleep." His eyes glazed over, his hand traced a faraway horizon. "Jakubisin is droning through his agenda. Wayne's in the back row complaining about something. Dirty Walt is whispering off-color jokes."

"It's warm enough to sleep."

"Exactly! And into this gloom breaks a bolt of light."

"With foam rubber in all the right places."

"Yeah," he laughed. "Bells tinkling, hips undulating--"

Bob always stops at the word 'undulating'. I waited.

"I'm ok now," he said. "Whoa, it's gonna be great!" He looked at his watch. "Hey, gotta go. Tennis

practice." He leapt up and beat me out the door.

I felt better as I walked through the nearly empty halls to my office. I gave Nancy a larger than usual smile, said goodnight to Roberta, picked up my jacket and left.

In the parking lot I heard a bird sing. I fished my sunglasses out of the glove compartment and rolled down the window. It was a quick ride home.

The End

DAVID ALLEN EDMONDS