

Changing the Guard

Outside Stradford High School the wind blew and it was cold, even for February. The new building stood on forty acres of what had been the Banner farm, and with the trees taken down for the parking lots the wind had an easy time driving the lake effect snow up against the cinder block walls. The short warm spell, falling coincidentally as it had on the week of first semester exams, was quickly forgotten when the school returned to its normal schedule and the second semester. For the most part the exams were quickly forgotten as well.

As the bell sounded between third and fourth periods, Principal Greg Mindrivan stepped from his new office into the north hallway that ran the length of the building. The new building felt uncomfortable to him, somehow not right, more like a factory than a school. The old school, now the School Board Annex, was a tall, broad-shouldered structure, with heavy wood moldings and slate boards and the smell of learning. This flat, one-storied place still smelled new, faintly chemical, and not properly lived in. Yes, that was it, this place had not held living beings long enough.

Mindrivan liked to have a spot among the children where he could keep an eye on things. He would rather gauge their mood and prevent trouble, than react after they misbehaved. He had tried several other locations, and today was a few simple steps outside his office.

He was a short man, stocky; he had played and coached football and retained his lineman's build. He knew his voice would carry from here to the far end of the hallway if he chose to use it. Now he wasn't choosing to.

"There's no need for this to escalate, son," he said. He had to look up to catch the eye of the gawky sophomore, but he did, and the kid's shoulders relaxed a bit. "Just pick up your things and get on to class."

"But he pushed me," the kid mumbled, then added quickly, "sir."

"Let me deal with that. Get going now." The kid shot a menacing glance at the other boy before grabbing his books and hurrying away. "The rest of you may continue to class as well," Mindrivan said to the small crowd that had gathered. "Not you," he said, and motioned the other boy to follow him.

They stood in an eddy under the clock where the students turned off the long north hallway into the short hall by the business department or continued on into the cafeteria. The Principal's quiet blue eyes seemed to the boy to never leave his face, and he felt uncomfortable because of it. They never left the stream flowing past them either.

"Well, Carl, what happened? Really now?"

"Nothing." Carl was a junior, thick and muscular. His eyes flickered to Mindrivan's face then away.

"Johnson's books were all over the hall, your shirt is pulled out and you're missing a button." He kept his eyes on Carl and raised his voice to the passing students. "Bell's gonna ring, people."

He dropped his voice and said to Carl, "That is not nothing."

"That's how I do, Mr. Mindrivan." He opened his arms and twisted side to side.

A twinkle touched the corner of Mindrivan's eyes at the expression, but the rest of his face didn't. "You know that's not how we do things, Carl," he said quietly. "Go to Mr. Crandall's office and tell the secretary that you have a Friday detention."

Carl's face hardened and he took a step toward Mindrivan. "That boy done started it and I'm--"

Mindrivan locked the boy's eyes. "You are not going to do anything except serve your detention," he said in a near whisper. "If I have to write you up for another fight, you will be expelled from school."

"Shit, man, that's not right. Johnson, he yanked my shirt and you let him go."

"That's the bell, folks, you're late." He returned to Carl, his eyes now matching his voice. "You have more to lose than he does."

"You're putting it all on me."

"No, I'm helping you graduate. That's the promise you made to your mother."

Carl's fists loosened. He pursed his lips and shook his head. "Not right," he muttered.

Mindrivan ignored it. "Trust me. Young Mr. Johnson will be in my office today."

Carl shuffled away toward the office and Mindrivan looked down the now empty hall. He spotted a wad of paper, stooped, and put it into the pocket of his suitcoat.

Mel Radburn was a tall man, a man who used his height the way a carpenter uses a hammer, or a burglar his lockpick. He liked how gruff his voice sounded after he smoked. He stubbed his Lucky in the ashtray inside his desk drawer, shut it, and waved the smoke away. He coughed to clear his throat and called "Helen" through the open office door.

His secretary hurried in as he was saying "--on his lunch break yet?"

"Pardon me, Mr. Radburn?" Helen said.

Radburn looked at her over his glasses for several seconds before saying, "When I call you, I expect you to come promptly."

"Yes, sir, I came as quickly as I could." She shifted her weight from one foot to the other and watched herself do it.

"You did? Then what was I asking you?" When she didn't answer, he prompted her with, "Well, come on, if you were so prompt, you must have heard."

"I, uh, it was about lunch break, somebody's lunch break."

"Whose lunch break, Mrs. Audi?"

"I, I don't know, I tried to get here, but--"

"Then you weren't so prompt now, were you."

Anger flashed across her face but she was looking at her feet and Radburn didn't see it. She hoped he didn't see it. She raised her eyes and said, "No sir, I was late getting here. I didn't hear who you were asking about."

He stood up and pushed the black-rimmed glasses higher on his nose. "The Stradford City Schools are the largest employer in the city, Mrs. Audi, and as such we cannot afford to be inaccurate or inattentive, now can we."

"Well?" he said when she didn't respond.

"I didn't know it was a question, Mr. Radburn. No, of course not, we must be accurate at all times. Especially in the Business Office."

His eyes narrowed as he considered whether she was being disrespectful. "Harris," he said after a long moment. "Sean Harris. Is he on his lunch break or isn't he?"

"I'll call over to the garage right now to find out," she said in one breath, spun and ran from the room.

Minutes later Radburn was in front of the school district's service garage, a large Quonset hut that shared several acres with the school bus paddock and the central administration building. Down the service road past the buses he could see the outline of the high school auditorium. It

was cold and he could see his breath as well, but he was not wearing his topcoat. He walked into the high, rounded structure.

How Helen had determined that Harris had carpooled to lunch was beyond him, but there in front of him was Harris' truck, a red Ford F-150, empty. She was good, or she was afraid of him. It didn't matter which. He could use people like that. Behind the truck sat the huge mound of the pinkish-gray salt the district used to treat ice in the school parking lots.

Let's see if I can finally catch that bastard, he thought. His feet crunched on salt crystals as he stepped toward the truck bed and lowered the tailgate. He grunted when he saw the bed was empty, then put a foot on the bumper and climbed in. He dropped to his knees to pick up a piece of salt when he heard a voice behind him.

"Nice truck, huh, wanna buy it?"

Radburn jumped to his feet and caught his balance as the truck lurched on its springs. "Salt," he managed to say.

"That's why you're in my truck, you're looking for salt?" Harris was a heavysset, red-haired man, wearing a quilted vest and an Indians cap over his dark blue Stradford coveralls.

"I found salt, Mr. Harris, inside your truck." Radburn considered jumping down but remained balanced in the truck bed. "This is your truck, isn't it?"

"I work in the garage with the salt. There's salt everywhere." He lifted the cap. "Probably in my hair, too."

"Why is your truck parked inside the garage?"

Harris turned to look through the dirty glass window of the supervisor's office. "Needed an oil change. Daniels, Mr. Daniels, he said I could do it in here out of the cold."

"On company time? That's a violation, too."

"After my shift, you can ask him."

"I don't need to ask him, Mr. Harris, the salt is evidence enough. You were using our salt at your house. Pure and simple."

"No, I was not. I never stole nothing in my life."

As Harris spoke Radburn dropped out of the truck next to him and opened his hand. Two salt crystals lay on his palm.

Harris stepped back and laughed. "That's it? That all you got?" He walked around Radburn and opened the driver side door. "Here you go, here's a piece from the step, and hey, look on the floor mat. Must be half a dozen pieces. I'll get 'em for you."

"The quantity is not the issue." Radburn turned but didn't change the expression on his face. "It's theft, Mr. Harris. It's a termination offense."

"You're gonna fire me for seven pieces of salt? Hell, it sticks to your shoes." He pointed. "Probably got it all over yours. They gonna fire you?"

"No, Mr. Harris, they are going to fire you." He turned and walked toward the overhead door.

"You can't fire me for that! I didn't do anything! Talk to Mr. Daniels! I'll call my union rep!"

"Good luck with that," Radburn muttered without turning around.

Joe Lehrer pulled his mail from his slot in the Main Office and cursed. He balled the half sheet as he spun and tossed it into the wastebasket, and nearly collided with Betty Temple.

"Sorry Betty, I didn't see you."

"But you made your shot," she laughed. "It looked like a three-pointer."

“Wasn’t worth that much,” he mumbled to the secretary. “Why are you in such a hurry?”

“Semester failure notices are due today, and several people haven’t turned them in yet. Not you,” she said as she saw the stricken look on the young man’s face. “You’re fine, but maybe you can do me a favor?”

He shot a quick glance at the wastebasket and was glad that he wouldn’t be reprimanded twice in the same day. “What do you need?”

“If you’re heading down the math hallway, I know you have a class there, could you give this to Mr. Weathers?”

“I have classes all over the building,” he said and took the form. “Happy to help my favorite secretary.”

Joe was a little afraid of Ernie Weathers. The bandy-legged old man was missing a tooth in his lower jaw and most of the hair on his head, but it was the maniacal look in his eyes that intimidated him. That and the whooping laughter that echoed down the hall from his room. The man was nuts, certifiably, yet somehow his students loved him. They fought to get into his geometry classes so much, that, according to Bob anyway, he taught more students than any other math teacher. He turned the corner into the math wing and heard the high-pitched, undulating laugh again. I’ll just drop off the form and get out of there, he thought.

Ernie Weathers’ classroom confirmed Joe’s misgivings. Desks were in no perceptible order: scattered in groups, standing alone, facing a wall, facing the window, one alone in the corner. The 30 or so kids were strewn about as well, many on the floor, several at the board, one for sure asleep at his desk, and four boys standing in the middle yelling at each other. Inside the room Joe was amazed that Weathers’ laughter could even be heard over the din.

Above the students, the room was a virtual spider web. Joe had to duck after taking three steps to avoid the colored strings that crisscrossed the space. Attached by thumbtacks or masking tape or wads of gum, lines of string stretched from the light fixtures to the tops of the blackboards, from the clock to the flagpole, from what looked like the midpoint of the ceiling to the pencil sharpener in the corner, and somehow the kids seemed to be avoiding them. Maybe that was why so many were on the floor.

Weathers himself was on his hands and knees with a large wooden protractor measuring the angle of red and green strings stretched across the floor. “Obtuse or acute?” he said to Lehrer.

“Office gave me this form,” Joe stammered. “Failures. Semester failure notices.”

The old man wadded the form and pitched it toward the wastebasket on top of a desk several feet away. None of the kids reacted to the paper wad, keeping their eyes on Joe. “Obtuse or acute?”

“It’s, uh, acute.”

“Why?”

“It’s less than ninety degrees.”

“Correct,” Weathers said and grabbed the shoulder of the kid on the floor next to him. “See, everybody knows, even the German teacher.”

The kid took the protractor and crawled to another intersection of lines on the floor.

“The form is kinda important, I think,” Joe said. “Due today.”

Weathers tossed a textbook up to him and Joe caught it without thinking. “Section 14-C, page 187, problem 3. On the board,” he said, and crawled away. “Make it snappy.”

The corners of the textbook were worn and the binding wiggled in his hand. Joe noticed it wasn’t the same book the kids on the floor had, nor the same as the one the arguing boys held in their hands. He found a spot at the board and grabbed a piece of chalk.

“That’s an easy one, Herr Lehrer,” the girl next to him said. “I can help you if you get stuck.”

“Danke, Kate,” he said. “Sorry, I’m kind of dazed by all this.”

“It’s not as weird as it looks,” she said.

“It can’t be.”

Weathers had joined the debate with the kids in the middle of the room, firing questions, arguing, gesturing to the board and various line segments, all while calling out assignments to other kids around the room.

Problem 3 was about parallel lines and alternate interior angles. Joe worked the proof, then said to Kate, “What do you think?”

“Not bad, but kind of long. I think you can cut out these two steps by using this theorem here.” She pointed to her book.

“That’s a different book than mine.”

“That bothered me at first too,” she whispered quickly, “so I asked him. My book is like ten years old. He said it’s all geometry.”

“It’s all Greek to me,” Joe said.

“Mr. Weathers said that too.” She was a serious looking girl, her blond hair pulled into a tight ponytail.

“Wait, you asked a question in class? You don’t do that in my class.”

“Your class is different.”

Weathers appeared between them. “Well, Mr. Lehrer, are you done?”

Joe turned to see much of the class facing him.

“I am. I think I remembered the answer from my high school class. Kate helped me with it.”

“No, I didn’t Mr. Weathers,” Kate said quickly. “I checked it like you told us, and I showed him how I would do it, but it’s his work.”

Weathers nodded at her and motioned Joe away from the board. “Not bad, a little wordy, but not bad at all,” he said after studying the proof, then raced across to the opposite blackboard. “Try the next one, both of you.” Heads swiveled to follow him. The two kids at that board had been unable to solve their proof. Weathers opened the problem to the class. They debated the process and suggested several alternatives. The two went back to work, and Weathers loped to another group, this one at his desk. On the way he slapped the head of the sleeping kid, who looked up, dazed. “Page 88, 9-B, the evens for tomorrow, Sanderson,” he said without breaking stride.

“Is it always like this?”

“Usually,” Kate said. “You ought to see test days. He brings in a box full of tests and tosses them on the ground. We all run up and grab one, and they’re all different.”

“He gives different tests to different kids?”

“They’re not all different, but he probably has four or five versions, and the weird thing is, nobody complains. It’s like he knows which person needs which test.”

“It’s random? The kids choose their tests?”

“He goes around and sees who has what and sometimes makes kids trade with somebody else. I don’t know how he does it.” She turned back to the board. “I want to get my work done,” she said.

Surprised that she wanted to get back to work, and on her own, Joe looked at the room again. Maybe it wasn’t as chaotic as he had thought. For the most part, the kids were working,

most in groups, some alone. Sanderson was yawning and opening his book. Weathers himself was in constant motion, calling out page numbers, prodding, probing, slapping backs, irritating. How did he keep track of all that was going on?

Joe placed the textbook on Weathers' desk and maneuvered his way through the kids and the strings toward the door. "Gut gemacht," Weathers called, and raised a hand without turning around. "Auf Wiedersehen!"

Bob reached his arm past Joe toward the paper plate full of potato chips. "Gotta keep up my strength."

"You gotta get out of my way," Joe said and neatly placed his hip between his friend and the food.

"Nice box out," Bob said and stepped away. They and the rest of the Stradford faculty were filing into the Media Center for a staff meeting and filling their plates with snacks provided by their Principal.

"Be sure to pick up an agenda," Mindrivan said over the muted conversations. These were teachers in a library and it wasn't very loud. "And maybe a brownie, too."

"Got a match with old Ernie today at the Nut. He'll pound on me if I'm not ready to play."

"He can beat you? An 87-year-old who only uses four clubs?"

"And he carries them in a paper bag." Bob shook his head ruefully. "Beats me like a drum. I don't care if he's 100, he can putt. Hickory Nut is his home course. I think maybe he lives there."

"No, he lives in the back seat of his car."

Bob snorted pieces of Cheeto. "I told you that. Maybe he lives in his car in the parking lot at the course."

"Ok, people, I'd like to get started. I promise I won't keep you long."

They made their way to an empty table as the room fell quiet. Mindrivan stood behind a small podium atop one of the tables. "Most of this you can read for yourselves," he said, "you're big boys and girls." That got a laugh as it usually did.

"There are several points I believe we should consider this afternoon. First, a thank you for your good work on the semester exams and grades." He removed his glasses and gestured with them to his staff. "I read all your tests, your exams, and I'm very glad I didn't have to take them. They were rigorous indeed. Short answer, paragraphs, reading comprehension, good old memorization." He jabbed his glasses. "You did a good job, thank you."

Joe felt an elbow in his ribs. "Hey!"

"Look who's here," Bob whispered. "Darth Vader."

Joe looked behind them. Mel Radburn stood in the far corner, half obscured by a rack of books. "Why you think he's here?"

"Lurking. He's a lurker. That's how he do."

"Thank you also for the paperwork," Mindrivan was saying. "Submitting your grades properly, and all those darned forms, the book lists and the failures, well, you know what I mean. We really appreciate you doing all that in a timely manner. That helps us in the office, it really does."

He looked down at the podium, then up as if struck by a thought. "Which reminds me of another thank-you. The Winter Formal. I'm overwhelmed, frankly, pleasantly overwhelmed. I asked for a couple volunteers to chaperone, and my goodness, so many of you attended and

pitched in. It was really kind of fun I have to say, and the youngsters, with your help, managed to comport themselves with a reasonable amount of dignity.” He smiled at the staff. “Thank you.

“All of which brings us to the final piece of business for us today.” Mindrivan put his glasses back on and shuffled some papers on the podium. “Yes, here I found it.” His eyes were larger and bluer as he looked through them. “After the installation of the new members of the Board of Education the first of the year, following the election last November, they have issued a declaration of sorts. I don’t know what to call it. A manifesto?”

He raised a handful of paper, 30 or 40 pages thick. “With this document, the Board is instituting a new way of doing business.” Mindrivan dropped the packet to the podium. It thudded against the microphone, and he flinched. “Maybe you remember some of the rhetoric during the election,” he said. “I don’t pay attention to that stuff.” He shook his head.

“Anyway, what it all means to us at the moment is unclear, but I am here to tell you that there will be some changes made. How exactly that impacts us in this building, again, it’s unclear, but I thought I ought to warn you.”

Gene Phillips raised his hand. A round, balding man, he was the current Teachers Association President and Chairman of the Social Studies Department. Mindrivan recognized him with a nod. “Gene?”

“The rumor mill is rampant, Mr. Mindrivan,” he said. “We are hearing that there will be changes in policies, building level procedures and even personnel.”

“The policy changes are in this volume,” the Principal said tapping the document on the podium. “That much is clear. As to the other issues, some of them are covered in the contract with the teachers, so of course I can’t speak to that.”

“Staffing levels in the buildings, personnel changes in the administration? That’s what I’m hearing,” Phillips said. “I don’t wish to dredge up the last year, but--”

“But it did take an inordinate amount of time for me to hire a football coach, didn’t it?” Mindrivan shook his head. “Too many cooks spoiled that broth, I have to say.” He sought out Coach DeCarlo and nodded. “Although in the end we got the right man.”

“Again, we are in a state of flux. I don’t know myself. I would tell you if I knew,” Mindrivan said. “And I will tell you when I do know something definitive.” He paused and it looked to Joe like he was going to say something and decided not to.” That’s it, folks,” he said, “thank you.”

“That’s why Darth is here,” Bob said. “Something is up.”

“Mindrivan’s not leaving,” Joe said. “He can’t afford to. Gene told me he needs three more years for full retirement.”

“Well, I’m leaving.” Bob waved a hand across the room to Weathers, who stood up and waved a bony arm. “Gotta go get my ass whipped.”

“Gonna miss the raffle?”

“Won the ‘Sham Wow’ last week. Nobody wins back-to-back,” Bob said.

Mindrivan was selecting 3 x 5 cards from a stack in his hand and gesturing to the shelf behind him. “Constantine? Is Tony here?” On the shelf were Stradford Stallion T-shirts, coffee mugs, sleeves of golf balls, an umbrella and several envelopes that probably contained gift certificates for local restaurants or oil changes. “Melrose? Shirley?”

Joe waited as 15 or so names were called. The room returned to its previous noise level as teaches chatted and gathered their things to leave. When he looked into the corner, Radburn wasn’t there.

We should have met outside school district, Radburn thought as he slammed the car door shut. He looked over his shoulder twice as he crossed the parking lot, but no one was there either time. Still it paid to be safe. What the hell, he thought, I'm eating at the best place in town.

Shelby's Country Inn had been precisely that. As the first permanent structure in Stradford, the residence of Dr. Emmett Stradford had been at various times a hospital, a school and, according to some, a stop on the Underground Railroad. Radburn figured it was a lie because every old building in every small town in the Western Reserve claimed the same thing, but he did admit they had done a nice job in refurbishing the old place. The red brick had been pointed and tucked properly, and the green trim on the shutters and double brackets under the deep eaves gleamed even in the weak winter sunlight. Trees now bare surrounded the two-storied cubical main section, the lower kitchen around back and the patio on the street side. He had heard something about a large metal cistern in the attic that collected the rainwater and served as a fire containment system, but he didn't believe that either. Another suburban myth.

He knew that Harold was a suburbanite, too, but that was different. Harold he could use, and even if nothing came of this meeting, at least the lunch would be free. He stopped halfway through the parking lot and again turned to look behind. 'Free lunch, Carmelo,' his Daddy had always said. 'There's no such thing.' He shook the thought and the feeling away and continued toward the steps. Fat bastard didn't know what he was talking about.

Cal Harold, Carlton Edward Harold III, was also thinking about his father as he waited for Radburn inside the restaurant. Junior, though of course Cal had never called him that, had always said that you needed the right club to hit the right shot. They hadn't always agreed when they worked together at the insurance agency, but Father was right more often than he was wrong, especially about business matters. Radburn would be more than enough club for the job he had in mind. He put on his business smile as the waitress brought the Stradford Schools Business Manager to his table.

Pleasantries aside and their meals delivered, Harold said, "As they say in the movies, I suppose you're wondering why I called this meeting."

"I supposed you were hungry," Radburn said. The younger Harold shared the same broad shoulders and widow's peak as his father, and the same thick farmer's hands, but his voice was softer, more city than farm.

Harold wiped his lips with the large green napkin and examined the man opposite. Everything about Radburn was sharp, angular. His chin and nose, especially so when he thrust his face forward to make a point. They had met at the January Board meeting, but now sitting at the same table, he was surprised how large the man appeared. "I'll get right to it. It's time for Stradford to step up, and we want you to be a part of it."

Radburn pulled the last bit of meat off the rib and finished chewing before he spoke. "Who's we?"

Slow moving and slow talking Crawford had warned him, doesn't show his cards. Asks about who not what. "The Board, the new Board of Education. We feel it's time to bring Stradford into the 20th century. Hell, Sputnik was launched 22 years ago."

Suburbs and guided missiles. Russkie missiles at that. "You want my help?"

"Help? No, Mr. Radburn, we want you to lead. We want you to be the face of the new, improved Stradford schools."

Radburn concentrated on tearing off the corner of the handy wipe package. "You want me to be the Superintendent of Schools? I don't have the correct license for that."

Harold saw the look in the other man's eyes, felt his presence, and changed his laugh into a cough. "No, not that, quite yet that," he stammered and reached for his iced tea. "Principal, we want you to be the new Principal of the High School."

'One step at a time,' Daddy said, 'push, but know how hard.' "I do possess the proper accreditation for that position," he said aloud.

"We know you do, we've checked," Harold said, exhaled, and leaned his forearms onto the table. "We like how you're brought accountability to the Business Office, and the way you handled that theft case. When you get right down to it, you have the proper mindset for the job."

Radburn nodded, satisfied. "But we have a Principal. Mr. Mindrivan is a good man."

"Yes he is," Harold said, "and you are as well. The problem is where Mr. Mindrivan fits in the new administration. Where his skill set would be of maximum advantage to the community."

Radburn narrowed his eyes. "You don't want to fire him."

"Want to. Can't. Too much trouble. All the above." Harold opened his hands. "It's a battle we don't wish to fight. At this time anyway."

"But you are willing to fight."

Smarter than he looks, Harold thought. No, shrewd, that's the word. He glanced at the snow-covered hydrangea centered outside the narrow window. "We have the votes to do what's best for the District, but we don't want to fight until we have to. The guy's a legend. Here we have the perfect solution." His words sped up as he got to the meat of the meeting. "It's 1979, it's not about a one-room school house, it's not good old rural Stradford. We're an up and coming community and we need new blood."

"Where do I fit in?"

"Like I said, at this point Building Principal. We need someone who understands numbers, first and foremost, a guy who gets the black and the white, the right and the wrong."

"The bottom line."

"Abso-fucking-lutely!" Harold said and smiled broadly. "A man who doesn't mind getting his hands dirty. Are you that man?"

Radburn held his gaze for a moment or two like his Daddy told him. "Yes sir," he said slowly, "I believe I am."

As the bell rang ending his fifth period Geometry class, Ernie Weathers caught the eye of Kelly Kaestner as she passed his open classroom door. She nodded to him and started running. He bolted through his students leaving the room and caught a glimpse of her turning the corner at the end of the hall.

Weathers ran down the hall the other way, weaving through the flow of students and dodging open locker doors, to the exit. He crashed the door open and onto the frozen snow between the math wing and the gym. The crust from last week's warmer winds and the cold snap on Monday grabbed his shoes and slowed him. But he crunched through, knowing he could cover the twenty-five yards faster than Kelly could navigate the south hallway.

He knew also that the door to the gym would open because he had stuffed a piece of cardboard backing from a yellow legal pad between the latch and the door frame. He yanked the door and sprinted up the short hallway into the gym. He paused a second on the mat to wipe the water from his shoes, his cuffs would dry off later, and cut the gym floor diagonally. He burst through the farthest door beneath the basket and into the hallway opposite the cafeteria. He

glanced to his left and saw Kate's blond head stuck in a mass of bodies in the hallway. He steadied his breath and winked.

She shook her head as she reached him. "You won again."

"It's not about the winning, young lady, it's about the race," he said and patted her on the back. "And the grilled cheese sandwiches."

"Next time," she grinned and continued into the maze of cafeteria tables.

Weathers waited for the traffic in the halls to thin, bought his lunch and then made his way back down the hall to the Faculty Lounge. At the door he carefully balanced the tray with the tomato soup and grilled cheese on his left hand, slapped the door loudly with his right and laughed maniacally.

"How we doin' today, fellas?" He set the tray on the table where Bob was giggling and Joe was wiping soup off his tie. "Got you again, did I? That's why I take my tie off when I eat." He slipped the loop over his head without untying the knot and hung it over a nail in the wall. It was a skinny black tie, maybe dark blue, wrinkled and shiny from wear. "Then if I do slop a little on my shirt, well the tie just covers it up. Yessiree."

"This is your favorite part of the day, isn't it," Joe said.

Bob stopped laughing long enough to wipe the tears from his eyes. "Of my life," he managed. "You jump every time he bangs the door. Every freaking time."

Joe looked once more at his shirt. "At least I know enough not to play golf with him. He takes your money every time."

Ernie dunked the sandwich into the soup and bit off a chunk. "You should play," he said to Joe, "you could probably putt. This guy can't putt a lick."

"I can't putt a lick," Bob said. "I beat him tee to green every hole, but he kills me with the flat stick."

"Geometry," Ernie said, or something like that, it was hard to understand him with his mouth full. "Joey here sees the big picture, you see about two feet in front of your nose."

"You ought to go into his class someday," Joe said. "It's wild in there."

"No way I'm gonna make a fool of myself in front of the kids," Bob said. "I barely passed geometry."

Ernie grabbed Joe's arm. "See, see this spot here?" He aimed a gnarly finger at a spot of orange soup on his white shirt. "Perfect."

"Why is that perfect?" Bob said.

Ernie winked at Joe. "That's right where my tie will cover it," he crowed. Seconds later he had retrieved it from the nail and bolted from the room.

"Nobody else like him in the world," Bob said.

"Every school needs an Ernie. Keeps the place on its toes."

"Hey, I saw Darth again, looming, what did we call it?"

"Lurking. Yeah, I saw him, and actually talked to him."

"Whoa, you talked to Lord Vader?"

"You never really talk to him, you know how it is, he interrogates you."

"What did he want?" Bob furrowed the brows of his pink Irish face. "He always wants something."

"I want to know why he's always around here. Doesn't he have an office someplace?" Joe tossed his plastic spoon into the Styrofoam soup bowl on the plastic lunch tray. "It was about Ernie actually."

Bob narrowed his eyes with concern. It was a contrast to the lower part of his face, which since he started wearing a brushy mustache, looked like Capt. Kangaroo's.

"Wanted to know what was going on in Ernie's classroom. Why I was in there, what I was doing, what Ernie was doing."

"What did you tell him?"

"I don't know, I started babbling like I always do around him, you know, but then I kind of held back. Gave him a bunch of generalities. I mean, if he wants to observe Ernie, he should just do that."

"That's not his job. He's got no business doing that."

"Try telling Radburn that. He sticks that big long chin of his into everything," Joe said. "I wonder why Mindrivan lets him hang around in here."

"Guy's just too nice," Bob said.

The bell rang. "So anyway," Joe said, "I didn't tell him much. I don't think so anyway."

"Ernie must be tenured, so they can't fire him," Bob said. "No big deal."

"This isn't an official meeting or anything like that, just an informal get-together," Terry Crawford said. "A sit-down with friends." He nodded to Cal Harold and smiled at Greg Mindrivan. They were seated around a small table in the Escadrille, the bar in the new Holiday Inn over by the Interstate.

Mindrivan glanced at the Fokker D-VII dog-fighting the Sopwith Camel under the ceiling above him and let out a breath. "What is our agenda?" He had been listening to meaningless small talk, most of it from the stocky insurance man, for several minutes.

"Well, first, as we've been doing," Harold said, "we've been getting to know one another. You can't build a good working relationship with people unless you know them."

Mindrivan fixed them with a look, and Crawford said, "Our agenda was delivered to the high school and all the schools, I believe, last week. I hope it was," he laughed shortly. "And we thought, Cal and I, since we're the new kids on the block, on the Board, we thought we should talk about that a little bit."

"So there's no misunderstanding," Cal added.

"So we know where everybody stands."

"Another round, gentlemen?" The waitress was dressed as a WWI nurse, with a peaked white cap, white blouse, and a blue and white striped coverall with a very short skirt. Mindrivan recognized her as Becky Lampkin, and wondered if she had dropped out of Wooster College or graduated. "Iced tea, for me," he said. The other two ordered re-fills.

"Where we stand is, well I don't quite know how to say it," Crawford said and again looked at Harold.

"I've read your manifesto." Mindrivan looked from the brutish Harold to the more polished Crawford and wondered again which of this unmatched pair was the lead dog. A great choice that, the fat farmer or the slippery insurance man.

"Then you know the main point," Harold said. "We want to modernize the schools, bring them up to where schools in the '80's ought to be."

"In order to do that," Crawford said with his hands, "we need to, I don't know, streamline the operation, cut out some of the waste."

"You want to get rid of some teachers," Mindrivan said.

"That's about it," Harold said.

Crawford looked at Harold and lowered his voice. "Maybe there is no other way to say it. This Weathers character for one. He's got to go."

The bartender rang a bell for receiving a tip by spinning the propeller on the nose of a biplane flying out of the wall behind the bar. As incongruous as an insurance man and a farmer making educational decisions. Mindrivan shook his head no. "There is no reason to let Mr. Weathers go. He is a fine teacher."

"Actually, there are several reasons." Crawford was disappointed in Mindrivan's reaction, but continued. "Remember this is merely an informal meeting. Maybe this meeting never happened, I don't know. We just want to tell you where we're coming from."

"We know you'll do the right thing," Harold added.

"You always have." Crawford nodded and smiled like he did on his TV ads. Mindrivan realized that was why the man referred to himself as 'The Only Honest Insurance Man in North East Ohio.'

"What are your reasons?"

"First of all he doesn't look like a teacher. This isn't 1965 anymore." Harold spread his beefy hands wide apart. "We have dental insurance, and does the guy even bathe? And that time he ran all around the Square chasing exam papers or something?"

Mindrivan pushed back from the table. "That's enough."

"Cal, I told you not to say that," Crawford said quickly. "Mr. Mindrivan, we have discovered that he doesn't cash his paychecks. The treasurer has to call him constantly, every two weeks, to remind him about it. That makes more work, unnecessary work for the staff. He won't give us a home address. We don't really know where he lives."

"He rents a room on Fetzer St.," Mindrivan said. "He has for years. His home is down in Barnesville."

"You may know that, but the Business Office doesn't. When they ask for his address, he gives his license plate number."

The tip bell rang, the German plane rained fire onto the English, and Becky leaned over another table to set down a tray of drinks. "Mr. Weathers doesn't teach for the money."

"Do we even need to pay him then?" Harold laughed.

"These are bookkeeping matters," Mindrivan said looking at the farmer. "I can get the information you need."

Crawford lowered his voice again and looked to Harold for confirmation. Mindrivan wondered again whether this was for show or if the man was unsure of himself. "There is the other matter," Crawford said, "and the real reason we wanted to keep this meeting unofficial." He paused. "Weathers is touching students inappropriately."

"That is outrageous!" Mindrivan slammed his hands onto the table. "I wish I had more like him. The kids love him, and their state test scores are well above average."

Harold waved his beefy hand dismissively. "That's your business. All I know is he touched that girl."

Crawford looked around the room and spoke in a whisper. "We have reports, corroborated by other administrators, by teachers, and by students themselves. This cannot be tolerated."

"If it is true, of course not." Mindrivan's mind raced. "What exactly are you talking about?"

Crawford referred to the folder he had opened on the tabletop. "Touching arms, shoulders, backs, and," he looked up, "breasts."

“That is not possible. I have known the man for 27 years. I do not believe that. Not for one minute.”

Crawford sighed as if troubled. “October 24 and November 17 of last year, and just last week, January 29th.”

“What happened on those dates? Exactly. Where, and what happened?”

Crawford read from his notes. “Mr. Weathers contacted the hand, the shoulder and the chest of the student, female, fifteen years old. I have the name if you want it. I don’t think we should mention it if we can avoid it.”

“Where did that happen?”

“Right in front of the school,” Harold said loudly, then dropped his voice, too. “On the sidewalk by the front door of the school, for godssake. There are witnesses, several of them. We have the names.”

Mindrivan wondered where they had found their information. Radburn was a source surely, but which teachers were there? It was a shame to put the kids through all this. “Was there any mention of a car in your report? A compact car, a VW perhaps?”

“What does it matter?” Harold said. “The old goat touched her boobies.”

Crawford looked at the page. “Yes, here it is, a blue VW.”

“I am familiar with the incident. There was nothing inappropriate about it. Not one thing.”

Crawford’s face lost its charm. “You knew of this? Why didn’t you report it?”

“There was nothing to report. He touched her, and several of the boys, with his own chest.”

“What? That makes it ok?”

“He was racing a kid to the lunch room. He does it all the time. It turned into one of those crazy bets of his, where he said he could get there faster than they could and he would run over the top of the car. He did, and he won, then they all chest-bumped. That’s what it was, a chest-bump. Nothing sexual, nothing inappropriate at all. The other touches I am sure were pats on the backs.”

“Did you see the incident?”

“Which time? I’ve seen it several times. It’s quite funny actually.”

“This time, the October date.”

“I’d have to check my calendar, but no, the last week of the month I was in Columbus for a conference I believe.”

“So you have no first-hand knowledge.”

“Not of this time, no. I have seen him do this several times.”

Crawford closed the file. “If word of this gets out to the community, we’ll never pass another tax levy. He has to go.”

If it were true it would be worse than that. Mindrivan waited before saying, “Don’t you have a niece or a nephew in Mr. Weathers’ class?”

“My sister’s oldest, Brittny, yes.”

“What does she have to say about Mr. Weathers?”

“She says he’s weird, smells funny. Unorganized.”

“So that’s what this is about. He smells funny, his teeth are bad. I’m sure she noticed that as well. How is she doing in his class?”

Crawford shook his head. “Fine, I guess, I don’t know--”

“-- she has an A.” Mindrivan bore his eyes into him. “So you're going to railroad a good man for how he looks, not how he teaches.”

Crawford closed the folder and looked away. “No, you are. It’s not the Board’s job to administer the staff, it’s yours.”

“If I don’t, you’ll trump something up on me, like you did here,” Mindrivan said quietly. “Then you'll find a bully to replace me.”

“You’re jumping to conclusions, Mr. Mindrivan. For one thing, this is, again, an informal chat. For another there doesn’t need to be any confrontation. We know how much you’d like to spare the community that. That’s the kind of person you are.” Crawford’s face regained its luster. He nodded to Harold and said, “For example, there could be a resignation and perhaps a re-organization. It’s really up to you.”

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