

Observed

“Hey, where you going? We’ve got lots more fun stuff to do here today,” Bob McCauley said as I stood up from one of the eight-sided tables in the Faculty Lounge of Stradford High School. He had been planning on saying something he thought was funny, and there were still a few minutes left in our lunch period.

“Gotta go to the office,” I said, “I got a message in my box.” I pulled a piece of paper from my shirt pocket. “See me, TLJ, Prin,” I read.

“You gotta go to the office, you gotta go to the office!” Bob sang. “Na, na na, na, na na!”

Others looked up from their lunches and newspapers. “Let him wait,” Bob said, “It’s not important.”

“When I get called to the office,” I said, “It’s always important.” Great exit line. I exited the Lounge.

A grown man getting called to the office. I felt like an elderly Beaver Cleaver being summoned to Ward’s study as I walked the polished terrazzo hallway. “Beaver, your mother and I are concerned about you...”

Actually it was a routine follow-up meeting. I had been observed last week, which is teacher-speak for the Principal had watched me teach a class. Now he wanted to talk to me about it. Or maybe my fears were justified, and he had been stalking me.

I wondered how Thomas L. Jakubisin, Principal, would conduct the follow-up. Would he be imperious and stay on his side of the desk like Gale Stevens used to, or make me feel collegial and come around and sit next to me on one of those leather chairs he had in his office?

Betty Temple was behind her desk in the main office. “Is he in?” I asked.

“I think so, do you want me to buzz?”

“I’ll just buzz on back there myself,” I said from in front of my mailbox. “He called for me.” I brought the mail with me, because Callaway always says better to have a prop in your hand. Makes them think you’re doing something.

“Mr. Jakubisin?” I peeked through the open door and started to knock. His back was to me; he was facing his PC. The room smelled of Old Spice as it always did.

“Come on in,” he said. “Just finishing up here. Make yourself at home.” I sat in one of the leather chairs and watched as he stood up, closed his office door and sat down next to me.

“You called me, B’wana?” I put my mail on the edge of his desk to let him know I felt collegial too.

“Yes, it’s the follow-up to your observation.”

He smiled.

I nodded.

“You know, before I get to the paperwork itself,” he gestured to the pink, green, yellow and white forms on his desk, “I just want to say how much I enjoyed your class the other day.”

I looked at the gold balls spinning in the dome of a walnut-cased clock on the bookshelf behind him and tried to remember which class it had been. German IV, no V. What were we doing? The reports, the kids were giving history reports.

“I was amazed at the quality of the class, I really was. It was really a quality class.”

I wondered which quality it was.

“It sounded to me like the kids were actually speaking German.”

And now he’s going to say that they could actually understand it.

“And the way they were all paying attention, it looked to me like they could understand each other.”

I looked back from the clock to his face. He’s accusing me of teaching a class where there is communication going on? And the communication is in a foreign language?

“It was quiet except for the speaker, and the other students were taking notes.”

“They were supposed to be,” I said.

“Really, a quality class,” he said.

“Thank you, it was a good class.” They had done a nice job, though that particular period hadn’t been their best. “They did better last Thursday actually. That class really worked.” They had gone from quietly taking notes to considering what the other kids were saying. Some had even argued with each other.

“Well, I don’t know about that,” he smiled, “but the class I saw was very good.” He picked up the multi-colored observation form from the desk. “There’s just one thing,” he said.

There’s always just one thing. The balls stopped rotating to the right and slowly started back to the left.

“Let’s see, how should I put this--“ He was a tall man, a little too tall for the chair. The tasseled loafers on the ends of his long legs reached across the carpet towards me. The ridge over his eyes knitted together.

“Brilliant, outstanding, merit raise?” I tucked my feet under my chair.

His smile almost matched the concern in his eyes. “No, I sure wish I could, but no, what I want to know is, well, what exactly was your role during the class?”

“Pardon me?”

“What were **you** doing while this class was going on? While the children were speaking to each other.”

Teaching, you moron. “What do you mean?”

“Well, it seemed so easy, you were sitting there with the kids in a circle, and it seemed like, well this is difficult to say, but it seemed like you weren’t doing anything.”

“I was speaking to them.”

“Well, yes, you were.”

“In German.” I had no idea where he was going with this.

“Yes,” he pointed to the form. “I’ve got that annotated here.”

“I was communicating with the kids in a foreign language. And for the most part we understood each other.” I looked again at the V-shaped ridge over his eyes.

“But it didn’t look like teaching, you know, like a classroom.”

“What does teaching look like, Mr. Jakubisin?”

“Now I recognize, there are different styles and all that--“ He gestured vaguely to his right.

“This was a student performance class.” I knew better than to interrupt him, but I couldn’t stop. “They had prepared, and they were demonstrating what they could do. Their skills.”

“--and I know that your style is sometimes, how shall I say?”

“Scintillating?” He hadn’t heard me at all.

“Yes,” he said, “Humorous, different. It wasn’t a traditional class. You weren’t at the board and the students weren’t in rows. Having them sit in a circle was really very interesting.”

“It’s hard to communicate when you’re looking at the back of somebody’s head,” I said. “We sit in a circle most days.”

“That’s good, but getting back to what I said before,” Jakubisin paused and made a note on a legal pad, not on the observation form. “What I mean is, we do observations to evaluate the teacher, it’s part of the Negotiated Agreement.”

“Yes. I know that.”

"It's not like you weren't doing anything, I don't mean to imply that, but you were sort of out of the way."

"I wasn't the most important part of the class."

He considered. "Yes, it was more like you weren't really in control." He seemed pleased to find a name for his concern. "I didn't see any evidence of you being in control."

Evidence. What can I give him for evidence? I don't think I speak bureaucratese. "Well, part of the control you didn't see was there, but in German."

"Are you saying you disciplined them in German?"

I looked back at the clock to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. "I speak German."

"Yes I know, but--"

"And their German is good enough for me to," I took a breath to calm myself, "keep them under control. When I need to. If I need to."

"Ok, so part of the control," he looked down at his notes, "the invisible part, is in German. The rest of it?" He brought his gaze up to mine.

"The rest of it," shit, I thought, there is no rest of it, that's how I do it. "A large part of it." I stopped as he stood up.

"Keep going, I'm listening." He carried the forms around the desk and sat down behind it.

"Yes, well, the rest of the control is the residue of what we've done in the other years of the course. The kids know what is expected of them."

"I see." He steepled his elbows and rested his chin on his hands. "Again, as you well know, the Board is observing you, not the children." He returned the forms to the file and closed it.

"Don't I have to sign those?"

"You will sign the forms when we're done. As per the Negotiated Agreement." All traces of collegiality were gone from his voice and his eyes. He must have left it on my side of the desk.

"But the observation is done."

"Not entirely." He looked away and feigned the weight of an agonizing decision. "We need to show the Board that you are in control of the class, not the children, so I will have to observe an additional class."

"You can't do that."

"You and the Teachers Association re-negotiated the entire evaluation procedure, Mr. Lehrer. You know that I am clearly within my rights as Building Principal."

I forced myself to look at the golden balls rotating away from me before I responded. "Did you see any lack of control? Did any of the kids in the class misbehave?"

"I didn't see any evidence of control whatsoever. And who knows what they were saying to you. It was in German."

"What if I didn't need to exercise control?"

He ignored my question and said instead, "Or what you were saying to them either, for that matter. You're the teacher, you have to be in control."

I stared at him.

He tried his earlier tone. "Look, it's *pro forma*, one more observation, no big deal." He finished with a smile and open palms.

"You da man," I said.

I took some shit from Bob and the Lounge crowd when word got out that I had to have a second observation, but it wasn't the first time, and I handled it. The problem was trying to find out which class Jakubisin was going to observe; I didn't want to have to re-arrange all my classes. I knew he wouldn't risk an upper level class again, and I talked with the other people in the department to see when he planned on hitting them. And I schmoozed Betty Temple.

Two minutes into my German II class the next Thursday, I heard someone fumbling with the

door. I crossed from the whiteboard and opened it.

“Thought it would open and I could just sneak in,” Jakubisin said.

“Security Memo #14,” I said and pointed to an empty desk in the back where I had left an extra textbook and a copy of my lesson plan.

I continued with my presentation on parsing, which meant I was speaking most of the time, in English, and moving back and forth from the board to the classroom. It also meant that since I knew few of them understood what a Noun was and that even fewer would understand what an Indirect Object was, I was in full-blown infomercial mode. I made jokes, asked questions, cajoled, tossed around my nerf Direct Object ball. I commanded, demanded, listed, and well, basically taught my controlling little ass off.

And all the while I kept moving through the room. Because it was a presentation/lecture class, I had faced all the desks toward the front, in five rows, each with five desks. I had seated Jakubisin in the back, opposite the whiteboard, where he could get a good view of the ‘five-finger’ layout, but couldn’t see any face except mine.

The key to infomercial mode is to engage the student. Like it is every day, sure, but when the topic is grammar, I have to make it easy for the kids to ask dumb questions. I know the questions aren’t dumb, but the kids think they’re dumb for having to ask, so I create an environment where they don’t feel dumb. Or an environment where they feel as dumb, or not quite as dumb, as the next kid. That works too. In effect I was controlling their learning environment, and since control was the reason Jakubisin was here, that’s what I did. And I had taken the same teaching strategy workshop last summer that he had.

I kept eye contact with the kids, which forced them to pay attention to me as they followed my movements and listened to what I was saying. Tossing them the ball every now and then helped them focus, and helped me, too. My movements were not as random as they appeared. I walked down the outside of row one, then crossed between the third and fourth desks. I stopped and talked to a kid, then I moved through the second row, again between the third and fourth desks. Another kid asked a question and I moved up the aisle between rows two and three and answered it at the board. I returned down the aisle between rows three and four. I tossed the ball to the kid in the third desk of row four. She caught it and flipped it to her friend next to her in row five. I followed it, crossing through her row and row five between desks three and four. I stood outside the desks, got their attention and summed up my point. I re-traced that same path several times.

Periodically I glanced at Jakubisin as he made notes, and tossed him the ball once. He dropped it and that got a laugh. He was cataloging which kid I spoke to, whether s/he or I instigated the exchange, and whether the comments were questions, statements, expletives, off-point, whatever. The Principal was also keeping track of where I was walking. The class went reasonably well, and a few minutes before the bell rang Jakubisin left the room.

Two weeks later I was again in his office. This time he started on his side of the desk.

“What happened to the leather chairs?” I said, and the collegiality along with it.

“Board meeting tonight, they’re in the conference room.” He shuffled the paperwork. “Just sit down, Mr. Lehrer.”

I did so. He opened the file folder, withdrew the observation forms and turned them towards me. “You know where to sign.” He gestured to the pen in the stand with his nameplate.

“I thought we needed to address the control issue, Mr. Jakubisin. Isn’t that why we had the second observation?”

He stared at me across the enormous oak desk. He had double-Windsored a maroon tie with school crests over a pink pinstripe shirt. A dark gray blazer hung from a tree behind him. I couldn’t tell if he had had his nails professionally done.

“Fine. For the record. I have now observed both aspects of your teaching style.” He held up the

pen. "Three copies, yours, mine and the Board's."

I looked at the paperwork, confused by his dismissive attitude. Then I looked more closely. "This is only the paperwork from the first observation. Where's the stuff from the second?"

"Just sign it, Mr. Lehrer, I have a meeting to attend."

"All dressed up, I figured it wasn't the cafeteria."

"League of Women Voters, actually, not that it is any of your business."

I could have left it alone and signed, but I said, "No, Mr. Jakubisin, my business is teaching, and you implied the other day that I didn't have things under control. That I didn't in fact know my business."

He looked up and said sharply, "So I have gone back to the original observation. I haven't changed anything, the marks are, as you can see, positive for the most part."

He had rated my class mostly Satisfactory, though there were a couple Outstandings in the student/teacher categories, and the usual NI's. "Nicked me in Lesson Plans again, I see. Did my plan in the second observation need improvement? I thought it was pretty clear."

"This is only about the first observation."

"Then the second one was a charade or a waste of time."

He slammed his hand onto the desk, and I admit I jumped. His face was red and the furrow above his eyes an abyss. "You made a fool out of me," he spat.

"You accused me of incompetence."

Somehow the classroom map from the second observation appeared in his hand. "I can't submit this form! Look at it!" He slammed it down and the desk boomed again.

"Is something the matter, sir?" An obviously frightened Betty Temple cowered in the doorway. "The noise, I was scared--"

"No, damn it, no," he shouted. "Leave us alone!" She scuttled out.

He jabbed a finger at me. "This is on you!"

I looked down at the form and settled back into the chair. It was not as comfortable as the leather one. "No, this is on you."

"That's an obscene gesture! Look at the form! You gave me the finger!"

"There was no need for the second observation, because there was no evidence that my first class was anything other than well behaved and 'under control'." I held up my fingers in quotation marks like he does at faculty meetings.

He pushed the form closer to me. He was practically lying on top of the desk. "These two fingers are down, the middle one is up, and the last two are down! It means 'fuck you!' I can't submit that, these forms have to go to the Board office."

"Because the second observation is an official document, you have to submit it. Your name and your markings are all over it. It's definitely your handiwork." The balls were spinning merrily in their place beneath their glass dome in the walnut clock behind him. "Section two, paragraph six, lines three and four of the Negotiated Agreement cover it, if I am correct."

"Damn you, you wouldn't." He fell back into his chair.

"I got to hand it to you, Mr. Jakubisin." I exhaled. "You were right, this was about control, but not classroom control. Maybe this is about getting beaten at the bargaining table, or this is about 'turf,' or your own control issues, I don't know. But you made me go through all this crap to put me in my place, and you used the kids to do it."

"That's enough," he said, but his heart wasn't in it. His face had grayed and he looked sick to his stomach before he turned his head away.

I told myself that I had used the kids too, but hadn't abused them. "Ok, the second observation never happened." I signed the original observation form and stood up. "Just one thing."

He returned his gaze from the window and sat up a little straighter. "What's that?"

"Hand it over." I took the classroom map from the desk and put it in my pocket.

“That can’t get out,” he said.

“The helping hand will never see the light of day,” I said.

By the time I calmed down Betty and the secretaries my planning period was over and it was time to go back to class. I would have to wait until tomorrow to tell the story in the Faculty Lounge, but if I could tell it right, at least it would be funnier than one of Bob’s.

The End

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