

The Headmaster

When I look back to my public school years, I can say that nearly all of my teachers were solid and capable educators. I can remember one or two who were perhaps in the wrong profession; but the majority were conscientious and caring, and seemed to enjoy their jobs. There were also a couple of exceptional ones who rose above the crowd and left a lasting positive impression on me.

But there is one teacher who looms large in my memory for all the wrong reasons. For the sake of this story we will refer to him only as the Headmaster.

He arrived sometime during my 4th Grade year as a replacement for Mrs Thornton, one of our regular teachers who had moved away. My homeroom teacher was Mrs Fenzl, and I have no idea for which subject I trooped across the hall to the new man's room—but it doesn't much matter. He and I started off on the wrong foot with each other, and continued along these lines for the extent of our association.

I must begin by saying that I was not entirely blameless in the matter. I was a chronic classroom daydreamer, prone to drifting away into Never-land instead of paying attention to the teacher. I spent a good deal of my school time staring into space, my thoughts far away from the lessons at hand. This I freely admit.

Added to this was the fact that the Headmaster had a somewhat thickish voice and an indistinct manner of speaking that I found hard to understand. His voice always sounded muffled to me, like he was speaking from the other side of a closed door with a bag over his head. Sometimes I wished he was.

A final contributing factor was my unfortunate seating position. Our desks were arranged around the room in a U shaped pattern, with the open end nearest the teacher's desk. I was seated along one of the sides, right next to a boy named Greg.

There was nothing wrong with Greg—he wasn't part of my small circle of vagabond friends, but he was a decent enough chap. The problem was not with the boy himself, but with his name. Let me explain this:

In school I was usually addressed as Ray (a name I have always disliked). I hope someone will agree with me that the two names, Ray and Greg, can sound similar under the right circumstances. And if you are a student who tends to daydream in class, like I did, and if your teacher speaks in a thick mush-mouthed sort of voice, like he did, then those two names, Ray and Greg, can sound remarkably alike.

So the Headmaster, from his desk at the front of the class, might look down the row of students on our side of the room, and call upon either Ray or Greg to answer a question. And if I wasn't being suitably attentive, I might suddenly find myself jerked out of a reverie to see the teacher gazing expectantly in my direction.

Startled into action, I would attempt to answer a question meant for the boy next to me. Greg, being more mentally alert and knowing that the teacher had actually called upon HIM, would also be

answering the question. This would result in both of us hesitating in confusion; and the teacher, now definitely looking straight at me, saying:

“Ray, what do you think you’re doing? I wasn’t talking to YOU.”

And, of course, the opposite happened as well, with alarming frequency. Hearing what I was certain was the name “Greg”, I would remain serenely silent while the class waited for me to realise that the teacher was calling upon “Ray” this time.

Far too often I found myself the center of unwanted attention, with the Headmaster staring fixedly at me, an incredulous look on his face. It seemed that his voice began to take on a sardonic tone whenever he addressed me.

“Well, Ray, are you just going to sit there sleeping all day, or would you like to join the rest of the class?”

The result of all this was months of confusion, misunderstanding and embarrassment. By the end of the year I’m sure the Headmaster had me written off as an unusually dim-witted clod.

For my part, I thought that he was being a real beast about the whole thing, and I grew to dislike him intensely. If the man would just speak clearly like a normal person and address me as Raymond, then everything would be fine.

Or if he would just move Greg or myself to the other side of the room. It was such a simple solution—and if *I* could think of it, then why the devil couldn’t *he*?

Summer vacation brought a welcome end to my tribulations. I practically sprinted out of the room on the final day of class, my heart leaping with relief and joy. The mortifying ordeal was over and I would never have to see the Headmaster again.

Little did I know that, after finishing his partial year in 4th Grade, the Headmaster transferred to a 6th Grade position. While I was preoccupied with navigating the murky waters of 5th Grade, the scoundrel had jumped ahead and was lying in wait for me.

Entering 6th Grade was already traumatic enough; I was still reeling from the anxiety and terror of landing in the notorious Mr Bertha’s homeroom. (He turned out to be a big softie, but I didn’t yet know that.) So my emotions, when I trekked down the hall for Social Studies and Reading and beheld none other than the Headmaster looming up before me, can well be imagined.

Righteous indignation was one: What, him *again*? This was too much to bear. It was intolerable. It was inhumane and unfair and just plain wrong. Was the wretched man going to dog my footsteps all the way to 12th Grade?

I tried to be hopeful. Maybe he had mellowed. Maybe he had turned into a kind and genial fellow like Mr Rinaldo had been last year in 5th Grade. But within a day or two it was obvious that the

Headmaster was just the same. If anything he was even worse. That smug superior grin and mocking mush-mouthed voice—oh yes, it was all there.

It was soon evident that he remembered me, too. Our seats were once again arranged in a horseshoe shape around the classroom, with the teacher's desk at the head of the open end and a blackboard behind the other end. My seat was near the door and the Headmaster's desk. This made me a convenient target for his snide little witticisms. I just knew we were in for a long and unpleasant year.

What made things infinitely worse this time around was that my eyesight started going bad on me. Nobody had prepared me for anything like this. I had been cautioned about the various dangers and hazards I would meet in life: to look both ways before running across the road and to wait half an hour after lunch before jumping in the swimming pool—these and other important things had been sufficiently impressed upon my mind.

But nobody ever told me that gradually the world around me would recede into a fuzzy indistinct blur. It was bewildering and frightening.

And, being a timid soul, I was afraid to tell anybody. For some reason I felt ashamed of my failing eyesight, so I tried to keep it a secret. This wasn't very difficult to do at home: I could still pedal my bike around the yard with little danger of hitting anything; and indoors I generally sat too close to the TV anyway.

School was far more troublesome: it became a series of daily obstacles that I attempted to bluff my way past. In Mrs Wollenberg's Arithmetic class I was seated near the front, so with a great deal of squinting I was able to make out the numbers on the blackboard. Occasionally I had to resort to sneaking a peek at the papers of my fellow students.

Not that this did me very much good in the end, as I was utterly hopeless in arithmetic to start with. Poor Mrs Wollenberg probably ran a few pens dry of red ink trying to mark my papers. But I managed to squeak by. I handled my other subjects in much the same manner.

My real problem was with the Headmaster's Reading class. The actual reading part itself was a breeze—I always had my nose in a book and I was a natural speed reader. I could zip through a reading assignment at home in no time, and be well ahead while the rest of the class was still struggling through the first chapters.

But the blackboard proved to be an obstacle I could not fake my way around. I was seated at the wrong end of the room—the board was just a dark blob far away at the opposite end. It was inevitable that I would be found out.

And one day it happened, in the worst possible way.

The Headmaster had written a long list of words on the blackboard, several columns wide. He then worked his way down each column, randomly called upon students to give the definition of each word in turn.

I hoped and prayed he wouldn't call on me. I couldn't see anything he had written; I had no idea what was up there on the board. I shrank far down in my seat and tried my best to be invisible.

“Ray, next one!”

With those words my doom came upon me.

It's important here to note that “Ray, next one!” were the exact words the Headmaster said. I know that now. He was calling on me to define the next word on the blackboard. That brief sentence—“Ray, next one!”—will remain etched upon my brain forever. It will go with me to the grave.

Because that is not at all what I THOUGHT he said. My ears clearly heard the following:

“Ray, export!”

Honest to goodness, I thought he was giving me the next word in the list, the word “export.” All I had to do was reel off a suitable definition. Breathing a silent prayer of thanks, I began an attempt to define the word “export.”

“To take, uh, things out of a country . . . to take . . . to take them to, to take them into another country.”

Not such a horrible effort for an eleven year old, but before I got very far I sensed something was wrong. The entire class was staring at me. The Headmaster was staring at me. I halted, perplexed, and then tried again. I thought I knew what “export” meant, but maybe I was not clarifying it very well.

“To take out of a country, like on ships, . . . and, um, in order to . . . in order to sell it in another country.”

At this point I was interrupted by an exasperated explosion from the teacher's desk.

“Hold it! Hold it! Hold it! What on EARTH are you talking about??”

I was struck dumb. I didn't know what to say. I was talking about “export.” What else was I supposed to be talking about?

“What does ANY of that have to do with the next word? Do you even KNOW what the next one is?” He waved towards the blackboard. “It's right there in front of you!”

So that was it. I had misheard him and was trying to define a word that wasn't even on the list. It was the single most embarrassing moment of my Elementary School career. I flushed crimson to the ears and tried to sink through the floor and disappear.

There was a hushed silence that lasted an eternity. Then the Headmaster, with a dismissive wave of his hand, called on another student to define the next word on the list. I was left to writhe in my misery for

the rest of the exercise.

Eventually, a long time later, the class ended. I tried to be the first one out the door. I wanted nothing more than to run away and hide somewhere. But the Headmaster wasn't through with me yet. He called me to his desk, and we waited as the other students filed out the door, each one whispering and glancing our way as they went.

Then he asked me bluntly, "Are you having trouble seeing the blackboard?"

I must give him some credit for divining the truth, but at the moment I was in agony. My shameful secret had been discovered. I had no choice but to admit it.

"Y-yes."

"Well, why didn't you tell me?"

I had a ready answer for that. If I had been bold enough, I would have said something like:

"Because I'm afraid and embarrassed to tell anybody that I can't see. And anyway, I hate your guts. Why would I tell YOU anything?"

But I could never say such words to a teacher, so I simply hung my head in unhappy silence. I feared what would happen next. Would he haul me off to the Principal's office? Would I be sent home?

To my relief I was merely dismissed to my next class; but afterwards the Headmaster must have made a phone call. A week or so later I found myself at the optometrist, being fitted with a pair of hideous black plastic spectacles. I recoil now at the memory of these abominations, but I wore them all the way to 9th Grade. Only then was I able to get a pair of frames that were more in step with the styles of the late '70s.

Meanwhile, back in 6th Grade, the Headmaster moved my seat to the front of the classroom nearest the blackboard. He could have done it without comment, and I would have been grateful. Instead he had to issue a biting "Can you see the board NOW?" from his end of the room as I settled into my new chair.

Yes, I can see the board now, thank you very much for broadcasting it to the entire class.

That should have been the end of it. The school year was almost over, and it should have been allowed to finish without further incident. But the unkind fates had other plans for me. The worst episode of all was still to come.

I can still see the classroom as it was on that dreadful day. I see the rows of desks, the faces of my classmates, even the sunlight streaming in through the windows. The Headmaster was in a jocular mood that day, entertaining us all with a fund of witty remarks. But one of his crude little quips was aimed directly at me. It was pure ridicule, a spiteful low-brow wisecrack, entirely at my expense.

School children can be awfully cruel to each other. They can callously, even cheerfully, inflict wounds upon each other that may take a lifetime (or the writing of a book) to heal. But when a teacher is found guilty of some injustice towards a student, the kids often forget their own grievances and unite together against their common foe.

There were a few hesitant titters from the class, but they quickly died away into an uncomfortable silence. Everyone knew that the Headmaster had gone too far.

As for me, I was simply burning with rage. If I hadn't been such a wimpy little twerp I would have jumped up and cleared that smug grin off his face with one solid punch.

I had to settle for muttering a suitable reply under my breath. It was not quite loud enough for the teacher to catch; but Tony, the amiable lad in the seat next to mine, heard it and turned to me with a shocked "Raymond!" A few other nearby kids also heard; they gasped and waited for the the sky to fall.

The Headmaster knew I had said something. His smile faded away and he directed a level stare at me for a moment of ominous silence. I kept my eyes focused on my desk; I couldn't meet his gaze. The classroom was deathly still. Nobody dared to breathe. It seemed that something terrible was about to happen.

But the moment passed. Possibly the Headmaster realised that things were threatening to take an ugly turn, and decided that the matter shouldn't be pursued further. He moved on to other subjects and the entire class relaxed again. But to me what he had done was unforgivable—and I did not forgive him.

Mercifully the year ended. I went on to endure the terrors of junior high school, and the Headmaster went straight to Hades. Or so I hoped. At the least I wished to never set eyes on him again.

For the next six years until I graduated—and even though we were still under the same roof—I never caught even a glimpse of him. That was fine with me. The sooner I could forget he had ever existed, the better I would like it.

And yet his shadow followed me down the years. I kept coming across reminders of him, long after I fled those sacred halls of learning. Any time the subject of "least favorite teacher" came up, no matter the context, his name sprang instantly to mind. I couldn't drive past the old school without picturing myself back in his classroom, wincing beneath his jibes. I feared that he would continue to haunt me for the rest of my life.

To conclude this story we must go back to those final unhappy weeks of 6th Grade, and then jump forward a full thirty years to a Sunday afternoon in the Spring of 2007. I was attending the Somerset Historical Society's annual farm festival at the Babcock House on Lake Road. After looking at the antique tractors and steam engines, and watching the teams of work horses plow the nearby field, I ended up at the farm animal exhibits.

I was leaning idly against a railing of the sheep pen, gnawing on a piece of celery (left over from my chicken barbecue dinner) and watching a couple of ewes with their lambs, when I heard a man's voice

speaking close by. My ears perked up. I knew that voice.

It's funny how we can instantly recognise something, like a voice or a scent or a sound, no matter how much time has passed since we last encountered it. I hadn't heard it in more than 30 years, but I knew who that voice belonged to.

I turned to look—and sure enough, it was Mr Rinaldo, my 5th Grade homeroom teacher. He was older and gray-haired now, but I had no trouble recognising his dark features.

I remember Mr Rinaldo as being very laid-back and easygoing. He didn't smile much, but there was nothing stern or strict about him that I can recall. He embarrassed me only once, unintentionally. I was seated near the classroom door, and one day he motioned for me to close it. He didn't say anything, but just sort of casually nodded and waved his hand.

I misinterpreted his gesture and thought he was asking me to move my desk. I shifted it forward a bit, not sure if that's what he wanted or not. He repeated his hand motion. Puzzled but eager to please, I attempted to shift my desk a little further. At this point the girl in front of me got up and closed the door.

Oh. That's what he meant. He could have said as much. A simple "Close the door" would have worked.

But I didn't hold the incident against him. Mr Rinaldo was a nice guy and a good teacher, and it was interesting to see him again after so long.

Then I glanced at the person he was talking to.

It was him: my old nemesis—the Headmaster himself. And at the sight of him, all of the painful memories of thirty years ago came bubbling afresh to the surface.

I looked him over. He was also gray-haired and aged, but he still had that cocky self-satisfied air that I remembered so well. I noticed with interest that I was taller than him. Hmmm—yes, taller and younger, and stronger, too. Our positions had been reversed. I was the dominant one now.

As I shot sidelong glances at him, my ever-present daydreaming tendencies took over; and a wild fantasy began to take shape in my mind. I gave thought to how I would confront this former tyrant. I saw myself striding forward and towering over him.

“Aha!” I would cry, causing him to leap with fear. “We meet again, my old adversary. But now you see that the advantage is mine! Gaze now upon me. Do you know who I am?”

He would stammer: “Well . . . uh, w-well . . . oh, is—is that you, Greg?”

“No!” I would thunder. “It is not Greg! It was never Greg! And it is not Ray either! I am Raymond! Raymond who stands before you with retribution in his hand! Raymond who brings forth the hour of judgement! Shrive thyself, sir, for long have I awaited this day!”

Then I would parade his sins before him, counting them off one by one. Oh, how I would make him tremble and quail! How he would cower, groveling at my feet and begging for a crumb of forgiveness!

But I would be pitiless. I would gaze down on him from my lofty height and laugh him to scorn.

“Can you see the board now? Can you see the board now?” I would cry, mocking him as he had once mocked me.

But even as this imaginary scenario rose to ever more ludicrous heights, something happened that changed everything and brought my flight of fancy to a dead stop. The Headmaster had been holding a paper cup. He now tossed it towards the nearest trash can . . . and missed. The cup tumbled lightly to the ground.

And before my disbelieving eyes, the Headmaster proceeded to throw a good old-fashioned temper tantrum. Muttering peevisly and shaking his head in irritation, he stomped over to the trash can, swept the cup from the ground with a violent scything motion, and hurled it savagely into the can. He then stomped back, red-faced and glowering.

I stared at the man. Did he just throw a hissy fit over a paper cup? Even Mr Rinaldo seemed taken aback. “Hey, take it easy,” I heard him say. Both men suddenly looked very unhappy.

I peered closely at the Headmaster, as though seeing him for the first time. Conflicting thoughts chased each other through my mind. Who was this man, really? Was he still the petty little despot of my school days? Or was he just a sad and miserable old has-been?

Maybe that was it. Maybe that’s all he was now: an aging and tired, frustrated old teacher, shuffling through the twilight years of his career, doggedly going through the motions day after day with waning strength. I thought of him stuck inside that same old classroom, as the long years rolled on, while the times and the culture slowly turned against him.

Of course, maybe that was all wrong. Maybe his teaching career had been very fruitful and rewarding, the best part of his life. Maybe his only regret was that it would soon be over, and he would have to put down his textbook and walk out of his beloved classroom for the last time.

I had no way of knowing the answer. I had only unhappy memories of 30 years ago to work with. But in a flash of sudden insight I realised that it didn’t matter. I looked at him again with new eyes—and I saw now what he was:

He was the same as me . . . human. He was just a person, like everyone else: flawed, imperfect, and subject to the weaknesses and frailties common to us all. It was as simple as that.

And now I put myself on trial. I compared the two of us. So he lost his temper and threw a paper cup. Didn’t I once, in a flash of impatience, slam shut the glove box of my pickup truck so hard that the hinges broke? Was there any difference?

It's true that the Headmaster had, at times, treated me abominably in his class. But he was still young then; maybe he was simply immature and insensitive. And had I been such an innocent victim? Didn't I spend most of my time daydreaming, gazing out the window, barely paying attention to his lessons?

And hadn't I too at times been immature and insensitive? Didn't I once—as a teenager and quite old enough to know better—didn't I once reduce a small child to sobbing ruin by snatching up his security blanket and shoving it down the laundry chute for my own cruel amusement?

Who was I, then, to condemn this man? Who was I to harbor such a bitter resentment against him for so many years? Yes, he ridiculed and humiliated me. But that was a long time ago. I was only a boy then; maybe we both were. Was I still such a boy?—or could I now be a man about it.

I felt subdued and chastened. My idiotic fantasy of revenge vanished like a puff of smoke. I stole another glance at him, standing there now looking embarrassed and ashamed.

And somewhere deep down inside—Heaven knows I didn't go looking for it—I felt a flutter of pity. Something that had long been held captive suddenly broke free; and I discovered that I was capable of forgiveness after all.

In that moment it seemed as though far away in time a distant door quietly closed, and a dark spirit was finally laid to rest. It was not a victory, or even a truce. It was simply a belated laying down of arms on the edge of a long-deserted battlefield.

I can't say that I felt particularly happy about it; those bad old memories would remain with me. But they would no longer be a burden. I could live with them.

The two men walked on, but I didn't watch them go. I turned back to the sheep pen to find a ewe gazing thoughtfully up at me.

“Yes, you're probably right,” I said to her. “It was wrong of him to treat me so, but it was also wrong of me to hold a grudge for so long. Shall we call it even then, do you think?”

The ewe didn't answer, but continued to look calmly at me. I finally relented and gave her my piece of celery, the real object of her attention all along.