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INTIMIDATION

SHOWDOWN AT ROSEMONT ELEMENTARY

The most frightening person in my childhood was Mr. Guy, a mountain of a man who was, for several crucially formative years, my public school principal. It was a long time before I even knew his first name—Alec—but still now, decades later, as I write this, he can never be anybody but Mr. Guy to me.

It's ridiculous, I know. At my ever-advancing age, people should be calling me "Mister." Except now, when they do, I tend to take exception, particularly if they're under thirty and say it with that knowing sneer that says, "Man, are you old or what?" Not that sort of "Mister" one uses for Mr. Gordie Howe, Mr. Nelson Mandela or Mr. Barack Obama. More like a "Mister, we know you're an over-the-hill, short, balding, insignificant, mild-mannered and with just the hint of a paunch, elderly person." In some ways, "Mister" has become a loaded pistol that depends at whom you are pointing it. Pointed at me, my first reaction is to duck.

But I digress. Mr. Guy was a large man in every sense of the word, his prodigious height matched only by a girth of comparable impressiveness. Mr. Guy was the Black Angus of school principals, the Clydesdale of the teaching profession, the Tyrannosaurus Rex of academic endeavour. His large bulbous head sat directly upon his shoulders. There was no neck to speak of, at least not one which could be immediately discerned. His chin just started where his chest ended. It was a large double chin which sat comfortably between ample cheeks that reddened to a brilliant scarlet when he was angry, which, when one has four hundred rowdy youngsters in one's charge, seemed to occur with alarming frequency. At those moments, the colour of his face mirrored the receding shock of red hair which always sat dishevelled atop his head as if he had just emerged from a bare knuckles dust-up behind the gymnasium. He prowled the halls in a tie and white shirt, the sleeves rolled up halfway to the elbow, revealing memorably massive arms covered in fine red hair. He made a softball look like a ping-pong ball when he grasped it in his meaty mitts, and we all wondered if he could crush a full can of beer, or maybe a recalcitrant child's head, with the squeeze of one hand.

What I remember most is his key ring, one of those shiny round metal key rings, roughly the size of a hockey puck, that he wore around his belt at the waist like a set of policeman's handcuffs. From the key ring, dangled an enormous collection of keys that unlocked every room in the school attached to a retractable cord, much like a carpenter's tape measure, which he would draw out with great solemnity to open any door he wished and then allow to snap back with a dramatic flourish.

The mantra of every student at Rosemont Public School, and apparently shared by the teachers as well, was "Avoid Mr. Guy at all costs." I can still recall standing in front of Mr. Guy one unfortunate day, quaking with fear, not because I had necessarily done anything untoward, but simply because I happened to be walking down an empty hallway when he emerged from his office next to the classroom where he taught eighth grade. His presence seemed to fill the entire corridor blocking off all possible exits of escape. He was like that. He could intimidate without threatening, without even speaking, for that matter. You were drawn like a magnet imperceptibly to his stern silent gaze from on high. Resistance was futile. You knew that you were within seconds of dying on the spot if you so much as twitched the wrong way.

My eleven-year old head was roughly level to Mr. Guy's ponderous waist. Standing before him, I found myself suddenly nose to nose with the shiny surface of that enormous key ring, momentarily distracted by the distorted image of my face reflected back at me from its convex surface. My doppelganger had an enormous bulbous nose which spread across the middle of my face like a huge misshaped mushroom planted between two ridiculously buggy eyes. The rest of my face was pulled back precipitously, my cheeks trailing away to two tiny ears on either side, a huge shiny forehead swept back regally to a spiky tuft of brown crew-cut hair at the top, and my chin disappeared entirely into a pencil-thin neck without so much as a bump. I couldn't help but laugh, but I froze in mid-chuckle as the consequences of laughing in Mr. Guy's presence jarred my thought process.

"Mr. Stanssssfield," the Voice of God boomed, the middle "s" hissed from between his teeth like an incoming heat-seeking missile. "Sssssomething funny?"

“No sir!” I burst out, a little too loudly perhaps. There was a roaring in my ears. I was losing control of my bodily functions. My bladder groaned suddenly. Oh no, not that! PLEASE NOT THAT! The walls of the corridor began to undulate and fold back upon themselves.

“Come with meeeee.” He turned and vanished into his office without bothering to see if I followed. He knew I would. Everybody did.

My knobby young knees nearly gave way. I may have just as well been sentenced to death by firing squad. A trip to the principal’s office was equivalent to a final voyage down the river Styx. Only doomed souls were invited to join Mr. Guy in his inner sanctum. It was where miscreants of all stripe were summoned for the administration of justice, usually punishment of the corporal nature. That is to say the laying of the leather strap upon one’s exposed extremities.

I had seen the toughest of the school’s hard-boiled eggs emerge from that room in tears, much to their eternal humiliation. Dougie Budge, previously the toughest kid in the school, now on his second go-around in grade eight, packet of smokes and Brylcreem-laced rat-tail comb constant companions in the back pocket of his jeans, was reduced to quiet sobbing in the boys’ bathroom for all to see, his reputation ruined forever. Dieter Baumgartner, my hero, star athlete, chick magnet, king of the woodworking class, emerged glassy-eyed, white-faced and grimacing as he fled silently down the corridor, holding his reddened palms in supplication. Even bad girls were not immune to Mr. Guy’s frontier justice, as over-ripe under-achiever Georgia Dunwoody learned, if her shriek after each well-placed thwack from behind his partially-closed door was any indication.

When I entered his cluttered office, Mr. Guy was already seated in a massive leather chair behind a large wooden desk which had seen better years. I saw that the top of the desk was covered in carved initials. I wondered if they were the handiwork of previous principals of the school. I also wondered if each of them had themselves been strapped afterwards.

Speaking of the strap, two of them hung on the wall behind him, just over his head. I couldn’t take my eyes off them. Those holiest of leather holies. Those instruments of torture. Those miserable minions of right and wrong. Those vicious purveyors of pain and regret.

One of the two was faded and worn at the edges as if it had been in regular use since the Riel Rebellion. Its companion was an unmarked glossy brown, as if fresh from the factory and eager for the taste of its first victim. My mind was a blank until it occurred to me vaguely that Mr. Guy was speaking.

“Rrrrronald,” he rumbled in his deep baritone, dragging out my wretched name to make it sound not unlike the burbling hypnotic drone of a giant bee hovering menacingly before me. Cripes, he knew my first name, too. What else did he know? My mind raced wildly, I imagined Mr. Guy-trained stoolies planted in every classroom, listening behind every closed door, lurking silently in every adjacent washroom cubicle.

Mr. Guy’s fat red lips were barely moving. I stepped toward the desk, straining to hear.

“Yourrrr homeroom teacher has sssspoken to me.”

That’s it, I thought. I’m a dead man. It never occurred to me to wonder what I had done. All that was important was that Mr. Guy knew it, and I was about to be summarily executed. I wondered if one passed out with the first lash. Visions of my favourite pirate movies flashed through my mind, where the films’ heroes were always tied to the ship’s wheel to receive forty lashes from the cat-o-nine tails in the hands of a burly dirty barrel-chested one-eyed first mate. Each time the unfortunate soul passed out, the evil captain would roar “Revive him!” and a pail of frigid water would be thrown over him and the flailing would continue. I mused how many I was in for, and moreover, how many more I would be in for when news of my as-yet-undefined transgressions reached the ears of my parents. I sensed the situation was heading south very quickly. I began to hyperventilate as I felt my asthma kicking in. Maybe I would suffocate before the first blow fell. I prepared to check out of this life.

“Sssssooo, what do you think?” Mr. Guy stood, placing his fists on the desk and leaning forward to hover over me like a gigantic buzzard. I still had no idea what he was talking about but was too petrified to ask.

“W-w-well, I, um, don’t know...” I stammered, killing time. What? What? I wracked my foggy brain. What had I done that merited a

dreaded visit to his office?

“Nothing to worry about, Rrrrron.” He almost smiled. “You just have to relax. The first time is always the worst, but it’s never as bad as you imagine. It’ll be over before you even think about it. And it won’t hurt a bit.”

Bloody easy for you to say, I thought to myself. You’re not going to be on the receiving end. I could feel the very flesh being ripped from the palms of my hands by those damnable straps. I had heard from other kids that if you put chalk on your hands, it wouldn’t hurt as much. Bugger! Why didn’t I carry some chalk as a contingency? Why would I? I answered myself. I haven’t done anything. Well, ok, maybe I laughed at his key ring a little. Who knew that was a capital offence?

Chronic asthma had reduced my breathing to a high-pitched wheeze. It was the only sound in the turgid air of the room. I capitulated. Slowly presenting my outstretched arms, palms upward, preparing for the first volley, I took a jagged deep breath and said, “I’m sorry.”

For the first time in my life, I saw a confused look pass across Mr. Guy’s face. He frowned for a second, then those fat red lips parted in a coarse guffaw. That massive body erupted in laughter. His right palm slapped the desk loudly enough to make me jump. I could hardly imagine he enjoyed doling out physical pain to such a degree.

“Well, young man,” the Voice of Doom roared, “we seem to have a slight misunderstanding.” I somehow doubted that, but was willing to continue the dialogue in the hope of postponing the pain, albeit temporarily.

“Miss Allen feels you express yourself very well in class and has recommended you represent the school at the Regina school board public speaking competition next month. So, are you up to it?”

I felt faint as the excess adrenalin surged through my veins. I needed to sit down, but didn’t dare as long as Mr. Guy remained standing. I couldn’t speak. His large fingers tapped the desk impatiently.

“Well? Speak up. For someone ssssupposedly ssssuited to elocution, you’re not saying much.”

“Well,” I hesitated, still struggling with the sudden turn of events, “I’ve never made a speech before, but if you think so, I would be

happy to try.”

“Good boy!” he cried out, “You’ll do fine. Now Miss Allen has all the details.” He waved his left hand dismissively. I took that to be a signal to make my escape. I bolted for the door, but just as I grabbed the door knob, I heard him say, “And be ssssure you do the school proud. I’m counting on youuuu.” I was sure I heard veiled menace in that last sentence.

I turned to respond, but the words froze in my throat as I saw he was taking down one of the straps from the wall. I shot through the door and down the hall like a bullet in full flight with nothing to stop it but open Saskatchewan prairie.

As I departed, I heard the buzz of his intercom as he called to the school secretary outside.

“Missss Edwards, please have Doug Budge ssssent up to my office.”