Darlene’s Story

by Larry Zacharko

 It was my first year teaching and I was lucky enough to get the job. Work was scarce. I’d written everywhere, I mean everywhere, and fifty dollars of stamps later all I had were four replies—none of them positive. So I went to every one of the school Principals within driving distance and personally gave them a resume: and told them I would do anything—substitute, playground patrol, take the tough kids, anything. I guess I was pushy, but, heck, I was all raring to teach. But no replies. So I was filling out applications for any kind of work. It was when I was dropping one of these applications off at a major fast food chain that I came across St. Jude Junior High. And about a week after I’d dropped in on them, they called me for an interview. Before the end of the month I had my very own grade 7-8’s—thirty three of them. Thirty two. And a “Parents Meet the Teacher Day” only a fortnight away.

 What an awkward age they are at grade seven and eight, all elbows and glands gone into acceleration—the girls faster than the boys. Not all of the, mind you. In one of my faux pas early on I mistook Pauline Pechanec for a boy and had marked her absent a whole week. I also was well into a broken Portuguese/Italian/English hand-gesturing scolding of Frank Salvi’s father—for reaching for the strap too often—when I realized I was talking to poor George Augelle’s father [and George even knew Latin as well as Italian] at the meet-the-parents evening. But, all in all, that first month went surprisingly well. Mind you, I hit all the shocks a new teacher touches—like planning a day’s work one whole evening and not even getting past the second item on the agenda. Or they do everything you can think of doing that day—and it’s not even eleven a.m. Or the fact that no one tells you Monday mornings or Friday afternoons you sometimes find yourself merely trying to contain that tornado of energies so at least the begonia and the gerbils will be spared. I may have been sincere, but I did stumble about pretty much. The teacher I’d replaced—they said she’d gone to have a baby—didn’t leave anything in her day plan. Nothing on where they were in their books, or what specific problems each student had—not even an up-to-date day plan. And the attendance was sloppy.

 They were sharp kids, though. They liked puns. Television is their speed. You just don’t know how some of them cram so much into their spare time—dance, sports music—and how they can’t remember that the essay was to be in this morning after daily reminders for a month, yet the can tell you all of the stats for the “Double E’s”.

 And they’d tell you a dirty joke, and laugh, but they weren’t quite certain what about the joke made it dirty. I remember one Remembrance day, as I watched them working hard, in groups, finishing off their “Looking At War Another Way” project. Randy Batog was helping Stephanie Risen –these two never talked to each other [ I always pictured Randy growing up to become a season’s ticket holder to everything but work and Stephanie as the first female president of the stock exchange]—and there was an unmistakable hum of creativity in action.

 You notice the loud ones first, and troublemakers. It’s impossible not to; we all know that they often are the quicker students, but not always. Then you jump to the other end of the spectrum and worry about the ones who score zero on the math test, or social studies. Was the test too hard? Was the question worded correctly? Am I going too fast? Too slow? Are they getting enough sleep? And there always is the slight worry that you might, completely without knowing it, bruise their egos when they needed strengthening. Then there’s the regulars—they give you exactly ten lines if the question says answer in ten lines. They follow the rules and take care of themselves more or les. Just regular, normal adolescents.

 I don’t know why it took me so long. I don’t know and that’s hat. It was when I was marking the Christmas exams that I came across it for the first time. I was checking their scrap book—they had to be halfway through the four seasons, but the seasons were their choice. As usual, Sonia handed in what would have been a complete book by any of the other pupil’s standards and Reneta had two pictures and a drawing—but it was one beautiful drawing. Sonia, her regular A plus; Renetta a C instead of a C minus. Some of the pictures the students had found were gorgeous. I’m always afraid of that. I have nightmares about being called up by the Public Library to bail out one of my students for cutting up a rare Audubon original for her social studies project.

 Teddy Nema. I’d just given him a b plus. He most regularly managed B plusses and this was another. I had gone on to James O’Regan [B] Paula Bouska [A minus] and Bety Stuperski [C plus] when, for some reason, I looked back at Teddy Nema’s paper. Teddy Nema. I couldn’t seem to put a face to the name. His face. Or hers? No, his face. Teddy, must be a boy. Maybe it’s one of those in the back; no, that’s Brian Deprachuck. Hmmmmm. Ohhhh, boy, I thought. I’m only away two weeks and already I’m forgetting their names an faces! What’ll it be like when I get back?

 But when school was recalled I’d forgotten that little whatever it was—a moment of amnesia?—and handed out the scrap books and didn’t notice anything peculiar or out of place. It wasn’t until I was adding up the weekly attendance that I remembered about Teddy. When I called the roll, I looked up to see the face…but no one answered. The kids said he was sick. I tried calling Teddy’s home, but the line was always busy. The next week I missed, spending the time in bed imitating a chipmunk after having my wisdom teeth removed. When I returned, the substitute teacher had marked Teddy present every day, but when I called his name Sonia said Teddy was at his grandmother’s funeral. Then we had a professional development day. I used it to my best advantage by studying the office files on Teddy’s history. It told me nothing much more than he was an Air Force child who’d already lived in six different countries and a dozen different air bases an been to four schools in the last two years. But that was about all there was on him. I wasn’t even sure it was a him because the form was smudged. I broke out into a sweat. I pictured me getting to the office door and the Principal walking in and asking me how Teddy was working out. What would I say? “Fine. Can you give me a hint on what he looks like? Or is this some kind of a test?”

 And then I couldn’t remember if I’d met Teddy’s parents a that Meet the Teach night—but my card said I’d had. I have notes from the meeting.

 While correcting the exams they’d done for me, wouldn’t you know there was one handed in by Teddy Nema. My god, I thought, I’m going crazy. How could I have totally blanked out one of my students? I tried to picture every one of the students in my head.

They were a sharp class, brought, from immigrant families, mostly, but with a fair smattering of inner city kids. Much like my own class in grade eight. In fact this classroom, still from the fourties, was like my classroom. What was I like in grade even? I remember my friend spending most of her time in the hallway for cracking up the class, but I liked to erase the blackboards. Not that we sucked up to teachers. In fact, we were the class that broke down more substitute teachers than any one in our district. One thing that always worked; we’d put a piece of cardboard or something in the drawer, turn it upside down and close the drawer, then pull the cardboard out. When the teacher opened the drawer everything would fall to the floor. We used to---the penny dropped!

Practical joke! Of course. They were playing a practical joke on the new teacher and I was going out of my mind thinking I was going out of my mind. That’s what they’re ding. They had created a fictitious student, and I fell for it, hook, line and sinker. Why the little--!!

 I think I turned as read as a fire engine at first. Good thing There was no one in the house. Here I was a qualified, at least degreed, university graduate being out foxed by a gang of puberts! How dare they! I got very mad. I fired off a stinging lecture on ethics and the difference between a practical joke and bad taste. I took it out o the sofa, the chair, the rug and the cat. I lectured every one of the plants as if they were the class I was going to face I the morning, when all of a sudden, I bust out laughing. I mean, you have to give them some credit. And it’s my own fault anyway, for being Miss Know-it-all. All right. But two can play at that game. Like I said, I as in grade seven once, too.

 I would ignore them. I’d just play along. I’d include Teddy in group projects, so that they would have to double the work if Teddy was in their group. I noticed that when I took attendance, if I kept my eyes on the sheet of paper, someone would always call for Teddy, but if I looked up, they’d say he was absent. I would shrink the circle. I hand them a math test and I’ve counted out thirty-two of them. I personally give one to each student at their desk and pick them up when the bell rings. I put the tests in my briefcase, lock it and go home. When I open the briefcase and correct the tests, Teddy Nema’s is in the middle of the pile! How did they do that?! How did they do it? I try again with another test. Then another. A test every day and there was always one handed in by Teddy.

 Then real panic set in. I’ve been sending report cards, attendance, everything through the main office—when are they going to find out about little Teddy. And when they do, what will they do with me? “You see, they were playing a joke, you see, and I was just playing along with it, and I’m sorry if this affects tax rates and everything….”

 What if they’ve already found out at the school board office? Then I thought I caught a glimpse of Teddy once or twice. This was taking quite a bit out of me, I guess, because when Mrs. Belicki—she teaches 8-9 right next door—walked into my room after classes, I didn’t notice her at all until she said, “Hello, and I let out a scream and almost hit the ceiling, apologizing all the way back down. No need to, she said, she’d seen burnout before. I was just exhausted, needed to take it a bit easier. She seemed to know what she was talking about, and before I knew it, I’d blurted out my whole Teddy experience. I was afraid it was getting out of hand and maybe she knew a simple way of correcting the situation.

 She immediately asked to look at the personal files which I gave her and which she studied in minute detail. I showed her all the tests, the artwork, the essays, everything this B plus regular student had done and she read it all without a word. After looking at everything she said, “What do you mean there’s no Teddy?” I said the kids have made it all up. She said they may have made up the artwork and all, “But my goodness, you can’t tell me a grade sevener could falsify documents like these—and so precisely! Get a grip on yourself, girl! I’ve told you you’re spending far too much time here. Just like the last girl.”

“What about the last girl?”

“Oh…she had a baby. Didn’t you know?”

“Is that true?”

“Darlene, calm yourself. Now I suggest you take a day off, give yourself a nice long weekend, go as far away from here as you can possibly do and relax. You will have a much clearer perspective when you come back with a fresh approach. Believe me, I’ve lost track of kids myself. Sometimes I get a student mixed up with an older brother I’d taught and all of a sudden I’d blurt out ‘What are you doing here?’”

 I could see in her eyes that should probably say a rosary for me that night. But I took her advice. I phoned up a university friend who’d just happened to be looking for a fourth for a canoeing weekend so off I went and forgot the whole school business.

 And when I came back to St. Jude, I realized the nonsense I’d been filling my head with. Of course the student is there if they are on the card. Teddy kept on handing in average work for which Teddy received average marks…and at the end of the year, I passed Teddy—into Mrs. Belicki’s Class.