

ART APPRECIATION

Mrs. Slack, the school's art teacher, was revered by the junior high faculty for her unyielding dedication to her profession. Drawings from students coated the walls and were initially intriguing, but I eventually found them boring after spending an hour there every Wednesday. I should have been relieved since this colorful room offered a break from the usual classroom offerings. I appreciated art about as much as spending my free time memorizing the periodic table. My lack of enthusiasm stemmed from those early years when I relied on stick figures that resembled drawings from prehistoric cave walls. My unparalleled progression had made it all the way to pathetic renderings in the "paint by numbers" category.

The only thing the students knew about Mrs. Flack was that she was the mystery shopper for the Waffle Houses in the area. She had legs like the left guard on the Chicago Bears and she wore enough cologne to float a battleship. But she's on my stink list for a different reason. I got into serious trouble in her class once, and it wasn't my fault. Well, not exactly.

We usually worked on individual projects while grouped four to a table, two students on each side. On one fateful day, our session focused on artistic handwriting using a fountain pen. I surprised myself by being utterly captivated by this assignment.

I would dip my pen into a shared ink bottle stationed in the center of the table and write my name in large letters, calligraphy-style. As the period progressed, I became completely transfixed on the marvelous creation unfolding right before my eyes. I pictured myself on a sidewalk in New Orleans with a crowd gathered on all sides, eagerly anticipating my latest visceral and intellectual representation. Spectators would gaze in awe at my powerful creations,

with professional reviewers appearing stunned by how my color choices modulated the near neutrality of cosmetic hue without abandoning the significance of inspiration.

Or as Jeremy seated across from me said, “Lookin’ good, Cory, reeeal good.”

Once again, I immersed my pen into the bottle, intent on completing my capital *J* with a design radiating true feelings. However, this time, my pen held too much ink, which would surely jeopardize the emerging masterpiece. While sneaking a peek at the offerings by my three tablemates and convinced I had mastered the assignment, I removed the excess ink before returning to my creation.

Elaine Vogel, the classmate seated inches to my left, let out one unbelievable, ear-piercing shriek, which miraculously did not leave me deaf. Turns out, attention to my *tour de force* had so captured my interest and my complete concentration that I had wiped the excess ink on her sleeve. One glimpse at her ink-smearred, cashmere sweater and I couldn’t believe what happened. But the smoking gun, rather, pen, was still in my hand.

This was more than an “oops, sorry” moment. Elaine’s scream undoubtedly rivaled tornado alerts in central Oklahoma. Mrs. Slack jumped in before reality registered in my numb brain.

I apologized to Elaine, Mrs. Slack, and any action news crews now in the area. I envisioned the New York Times mobilizing their top reporters, converging on the scene, searching for a chalk outline on the school floor.

Despite my remorse, Mrs. Slack marched us to Mr. Theodore Doubtfire’s office, the Assistant Principal, feared throughout school as the interrogator from hell. I was toast. Attorneys fantasize about presenting witnesses like Elaine. She was attractive, fashion-minded, and intelligent.

I was in trouble. I struggled to wipe the blood—make that ink—off my hands. I could see myself hanging by my fingers from a steep cliff: kowtowing to the entire faculty, beating the chalk out of their erasers, and licking all their chalkboards operating-room clean.

We took a seat inside a bleakly-furnished, windowless room, and waited in silence for Mr. Doubtfire. I surveyed the surroundings, envisioning gargoyles protruding from the walls. I pictured long forgotten students screaming for mercy, groveling remorseful pleas, showering tears that would fill a bucket. Perhaps I was reading too much into the enormous amount of calcified chewing gum I discovered while running my hand along the underside of my chair.

Mr. Doubtfire marched in, footsteps echoing against the bare walls, ceiling, and floors—floors layered with paint—undoubtedly to hide the bloodstains.

Without saying a word, he slid behind a large, old wooden desk. His chair was higher than ours, which provided him with an intimidating position and psychological advantage. His dark, beady eyes scanned the participants through reading glasses fit for a hanging judge. He sat there imperially glaring as he brushed his hand against a well-trimmed mustache—a facial feature that would have made Vincent Price cringe with envy.

Mrs. Slack introduced Elaine and me to Mr. Doubtfire, a formality adding tension to this already unsettling event. I recognized him because he worked as a sales clerk during the summers at a local department store. His rumpled suit displayed a dull shine, and a frayed shirt collar revealed better days. It was obvious he hadn't been using his employee discount.

He listened to Mrs. Slack describe the incident and assertions that I had deliberately hatched some diabolical plan, suggesting I'd turn into a serial inker.

“He quietly sat, as if waiting for prey, Mr. Doubtfire, gripping a pen saturated with ink in his bare hand, a crazed look on his face as poor Elaine’s scream shot through the halls.” Mrs. Slack’s tearful eyes looked on the verge of popping blood vessels.

“I rushed to save her as fast as these old legs would carry me, practically throwing myself on the table, unable to mitigate the damage, but at least in time to stop any further carnage.”

How could I have missed all this?

She might as well diagram my severed body on one of her full-sized easels. It was obvious her art appreciation had reached the advanced stages of degenerative imagination.

Mr. Doubtfire’s questions followed in a back-and-forth interrogation between Elaine and me, focused on motive, and any past or present transgressions, which she denied. Her words flowed out as soft as a baby’s breath, creating a scene of youthful perfection, and solidifying her as an innocent victim.

“No, I’ve never encountered any problems with Cory. He always seemed nice,” her voice delicate as she weaved her fingers through her hair, tucking it behind her ear, parting her lips with a subtle look of wanting to please her interrogator.

Mr. Doubtfire loosened his tie and wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

My thoughts retreated to elementary situations in life, when “I think I hear my mother calling” would have eliminated the problem. Clothed in nervous apprehension and trembling in quiet desperation, I interjected a heartfelt plea intended to diffuse the intensity of Mrs. Slack’s accusations and Mr. Doubtfire’s grilling.

“I became fixated on this wonderful project of expression through the beauty and aesthetic truth found in art. Since starting this enlightening course, I pondered taking advanced studies in the evening, with the eventual goal of attending an art academy and becoming an understudy for Picasso, Warhol, or Pollock. What happened had to be the result of a total

surrender of my every thought as a wave of perfection swirled throughout my head. I don't know if I experienced a momentary break from reality, suffered something akin to short-term memory loss, or something serious like a teenage brain freeze.”

Mr. Doubtfire stared at me, skeptically, and back at Elaine, his mind seemingly engaged in the search for justice. He crossed his legs, leaned back in his swivel chair, wire springs stretching, providing an unnerving, screeching sound. He displayed shoe soles with holes—telltale signs that represented a lifetime of patrolling the hallways. Then after a long moment of silence, he stood, slowly, as if carefully weighing his decision.

“Elaine, you've presented a compelling case. It clearly illustrates your understandable frustration in this unfortunate event.”

I sat quietly, resolved to accept my fate. I figured Mr. Doubtfire, the school's designated executioner, wasn't going to let my careless mistake slip by under his watch as I momentarily wondered what horrible fate awaited me.

As he spoke, though, I noted a distinct contrast in his presence, his image—compared to Elaine's preppy, high-maintenance look, a salad of fashionable apparel: custom jewelry, platform sandals, eye-catching mini skirt, trendy Valerie Bertinelli hairstyle, and freshly waxed legs.

Mr. Doubtfire continued, “In summarizing my findings—sometimes, life's episodes unfold in mysterious ways and are best described in two words: shit happens.”

With my nerves already shattered, I'm not positive those were his exact words.

Had justice triumphed, or do decisions get tangled in the person wielding power? I was convinced one never knows the road another has walked, let alone if this morning he or she woke up and sprang from the wrong side of the bed perched perilously close to a wall.

Although I was decreed innocent, Elaine didn't look at me. She treated me as though I was invisible once we left the interrogation room. I didn't want our session to end with ill feelings between us, even though she appeared to be grinding her pearly whites into dust.

"The stain will disappear if you rub bleach on it," I said, forcing an awkward chuckle.

Mom occasionally eliminated stains in my underwear with bleach and I felt confident my tip would solve her problem. At least it let her know I wanted to be helpful since her sweater now resembled a pathetic attempt at tie-dyeing. She gave me an expression that looked as if it could annihilate runways at the Chicago O'Hare Airport.

I relayed the incident to Mom and Dad during dinner that evening.

"Doing the wrong thing, intentionally or unintentionally, can lead to unfortunate consequences," Dad said as he focused on my dinner plate, still half-full of vegetables.

"Remember the time you left your lunch box outside in the snow, and someone broke it when they stepped on it?"

Licking the remains of fried chicken off my fingers, I nodded, being careful not to wipe them on my pants.

"You should consider this a learning experience. I can't emphasize enough why it's imperative you stay alert." He gave me a reassuring grin while snatching the last drumstick from the serving plate.

There was a time when I brought my works of art home and Mom told me how she really like them.

"Hey, Mom. What ever happened to my drawings that you always attached to the refrigerator throughout the years? They always seemed to disappear by the beginning of the following year.