To Ease Their Passage

Joyce A. Richardson

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FICTION

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As I walked from Superintendent Smith's office, my one thought was: "At least maybe now I can retire with some dignity."

Dr. Sandra had been dignified herself as she murmured my name and shook my hand. She wore a bright red suit with matching lipstick and nail polish. I had gone to her office just to talk and maybe laugh a little about the new state directive. "Does this mean what it says it means?" I pointed to the memo that I had found in my mailbox.

She nodded. "Starting next year, the state will deem each school system either excellent or deficient."

"And that's it?"

"That's it!"

"Nothing in between?"

"Nothing in between!"

"Using what criteria?" I laughed.

"Test scores," she answered. Sandra was not laughing. "Both achievement and proficiency. Also attendance and dropout statistics."

"But my students . . ." if I'd said it once, I'd said it a dozen times. . . "our students," I corrected, "don't give a damn about their test scores." This wasn't true, of course. Some of our students were test conscious, test motivated, particularly after we had pounded it into their heads, just how important the state and now the school deemed them.

"As I've told you before, Karen, we had all better give a damn, as you say. Whether you like it or not, the state has given us these directives, and they are now the law."

"The law," I repeated. A year ago I had been angry. I had seen bright red spots whenever I closed my eyes. Now I was almost reverent. "The law," I said quietly. I remembered my early years at Coaltrain Hills, when our isolated school, resting in the foothills of Ohio, had been a magnet for arts grants, for music, for plays. When our band, a hundred strong, had marched proudly down fields, down main streets. Then, the state had

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Joyce Richardson is a former high school teacher living in Athens, Ohio. Her poetry and prose have been widely published.

cared about our souls. Now they cared about our test scores. "But shouldn't it be the law that all schools should be funded equally?"

"Of course," Sandra sighed.

"But we can't even afford to hire tutors."

She smiled, a wry smile, and I studied her face. Was it time to bail out? I had always said I would retire when I could be assured that someone even wilder than myself would take my place. But that was when I prided myself on my off-the-wall teaching methods, when I would wake up in the morning with fantastic ideas that would either succeed amazingly or bomb spectacularly. "Would you," I asked, "or rather would the district consider early retirement?" I paused, for Sandra frowned. "For me," I added. I could feel my underarms perspiring through my polyester blouse. "In two years I will have taught twenty-five years, and if the district could buy those years, I would save you a lot of money."

"You mean now, as of next year? I don't know what to say."

I was becoming excited at the prospect. "I know I should give more notice, but if you hired someone new to replace me, someone with a bachelor's degree, the district would save at least sixteen thousand in the first year."

Sandra stuttered. "Why, K-Karen!" Then she smiled. And I believed, at that moment, it was a smile of relief. "I'll ask the board," she said cheerfully, "and let you know."

And then I walked out: a little lightheaded, for my blood sugar had hit an all-time low. I checked my watch. Why didn't I feel more elated? I opened the door to the faculty lounge, groped for change with damp palms, put two quarters into the candy machine, and shakily withdrew an Almond Joy from the metal receptacle.

I filled my coffee mug, the one with "Karen" scripted in gold, the one I had used in all my years of teaching Language Arts in Coaltrain Hills, the one I carried from the lounge to the classroom in the morning, gulping the coffee as quickly as I could, the one I carried now, into my quiet, ghostly, soon-to-be-abandoned classroom.

Even my bulletin board—I stared at its symmetry—reflected my new effort at organization. "American Authors," it proclaimed, and I had thumbtacked pictures of three graybeards with three-part names: John Greenleaf Whittier; John in yellow, Greenleaf in green, and Whittier in red. This order of colors carried over to the other two: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and William Cullen Bryant. My favorite, Walt Whitman, was also a graybeard, but his name was two-part and did not go with my new sense of order.

I had tried so very hard.

So what did it matter now? In three more weeks I could leave this alien world behind. I would write the best lesson plans in the world and follow them to the letter. No one would censure. No one could. On the last day of school I would give my students a party and let them bring in their keyboards and electric guitars. Then, then (the bell rang; my class filed in) at my own retirement party, I would get amazingly and spectacularly drunk.

"Mrs. Carley!" Christian's high voice broke my reverie. "What are we going to do today?" Christian's mother was from Morocco, and Christian was so beautiful with his dark eyes and curly black hair, that I gasped whenever I looked at him. Irreverent and hyperactive as he was, however, I seldom had the time to contemplate his beauty. It was important to keep Christian busy.

I blanked for a moment, yet I was irritated just the same. Surely my students, especially Christian, were bright enough to see the direction we were going. In the old days, no one, least of all me, knew exactly what was happening. Every day had been an adventure. But that was the old Karen Carley, not the one who was trying so very hard.

"Don't you remember, Christian?" I stalled. It was all coming back. This was a junior-level composition class. "Yesterday you wrote definition paragraphs. Today. . ."

". . . we go to the computer lab!" Christian finished, and my blood rushed dangerously through my arteries.

The computer lab. The Macintosh computer lab. A wonderful thing, I believed most of the time. Superintendent Smith and Mr. Fineline, the geometry teacher, had secured for the school eight computers and two printers, funded by grants, with the stipulation that we make all of the students computer-literate within a two-year period. Mr. Fineline, because of his fine efforts in raising the money, had established computer lab limits, computer lab rules:

NO GUM
NO DRINKS
NO FOOD
NO CANDY
NO CHEW
NO HORSEPLAY
NO STUDENT IN THE LAB
WITHOUT TEACHER SUPERVISION

These rules (I will not argue the point) made all kinds of sense. But there was something about their being all spelled out in large bold type directly

above each computer that brought out a rebellious streak the size of a banner—in my students, at least.

Still, if today was to be the computer lab, then computer lab it was. I walked with my small class down the hallway, asked Mr. Fineline for the keys, and sat two students down at each computer.

"Final drafts!" I announced as I handed their papers back. Then run your comp through the grammar and spell checker.

"What are you doing?" I asked red-haired Shawn. Shawn was my computer whiz. On the plus side, whenever I had problems with the machines, Shawn was always there to help me. On the negative side, whenever he sat down at the computer, he turned the programs inside out, probing and prying into system files where Mr. Fineline said he had no business being.

"Take that gum out of your mouth!" Mr. Fineline would say when he flapped into the room. And in the next breath: "Shawn! What do you think you're doing?"

This time Shawn, his billed cap pulled down over his red curls, his Grateful Dead T-shirt turned inside out (another teacher had found its logo obscene) was into the screensaver program. With a click of the computer's pointing device, Shawn, and just about everyone else in the class (for they were fast becoming computer-literate) could change the spiraling lines into flying toasters, and further into spawning fish and seahorses. But best of all, or rather worst of all, depending on your point of view, he could create a message that floated across the screen again and again and again. "Satan is coming to get your soul!" was Shawn's favorite. "Get your monkey ass out of here!" was Christian's. And once when a board member was visiting, and Mr. Fineline was proudly showing off the lab, "Fuck you, Dog Breath!" skimmed across one screen with all the eloquence of a seventeen-year-old anarchist.

"I promise I won't put in anything obscene, Mrs. Carley," Shawn said, as if he were reading my mind.

Christian's partner at the computer stood up. "Ron!" I said automatically. "Sit down!"

"I can't, Mrs. Carley!" Tall, dark-haired Ron, his restlessness belying his large body and long limbs, paced the room, gesturing wildly. Ron thought on his feet, bullshitted on his feet, and if allowed would wander miles up and down the school's hallways. "I've got to go!" he begged.

"You just went to the restroom at the beginning of the period."

"I don't have to go to the restroom," Ron said. He had a deep voice, perfectly modulated. Its tone was so convincing that I hoped he would acquire enough drive, enough intellectual discipline to go into a journalistic or public relations field after high school. "I know this is asking a lot,

Mrs. Carley," he said. "But could I please go out to my car and bring in something?"

Christian jumped up from his typing. "You brought it!" he exclaimed.

Ron grinned. "Yeah!" Then he turned his troubled eyes back to me. "And I'm kinda getting worried about it being in the car and all."

At this point everyone was listening; and, as I looked at my watch, I realized we had used twenty-five minutes of our fifty-five minute period. "Get back to work!" I said to the typists in front of the computers. And to Ron, "What is this thing that's so important?"

"Please, Mrs. Carley, it's kind of a secret."

I didn't want to stand there arguing with him. "This thing you want to get—won't disturb us too much, will it?"

"I promise you, it's not illegal."

I threw up my hands. "Just go," I said.

There was an electricity in the room after Ron left. The typing went faster; the melodic tones of the grammar and spell checkers rang merrily. In the heightened atmosphere, I imagined my impending retirement and drew, in my visualization, sparkling canoe trips on Mirror Lake, woodland romps on the ridges, sharing wine with my back-to-nature friends.

Then I tried to imagine Ron's surprise. Ron was into more various activities outside of school than any student in my recent memory. American Indian dancing. Maybe he had made another headdress. Fortune telling. That was something he and I shared. Music. He owned a Suzuki keyboard. That must be it. That's why Christian was so excited. Ron had finally gotten his mother's permission to bring in the keyboard. In fact, I was going to tell him to bring the keyboard and play for a special celebration the last week of school. Only three more weeks. Just three more weeks.

Ron came into the computer lab, carrying a folded burgundy sheet under his arm, and a cage draped in chenille. "Stand back!" he sat the cage "Zachariah!" Ron corrected. "You've been with him, Christian. You know how temperamental he is."

"He always poops when he gets nervous." Christian told me, his tone dark and serious.

That was all I needed to know. "You shouldn't . . ." I began.

Ron began making the preparations. "Don't worry about a thing," he assured me. "See, I've got a sheet. He won't do anything bad."

" 'S dark in here!" the covered cage squawked.

The students rose from their chairs, from their computers. For my part, I could feel my laughter coming, as it did, low and wonderful.

"You heard Zachariah," I said to Ron. "Don't leave him in the dark."

Ron raised the carefully-hemmed piece of chenille bedspread from the cage. "Whatsa matta!" said Zachariah.

"He's beautiful!" I said.

"From the Amazon. You can tell by his tail. He knows what he's saying too." Ron reached into the cage and brought the parrot out, clinging to his finger.

As if on cue, the blunt-tailed green-yellow-red Amazonian, looked around at all of our staring faces. "Whatsa matta!" he exclaimed.

"Polly wanna cracker?" Christian asked.

Zachariah cocked his head and impaled Christian with his eye. "Motherfucker!" he said, clearly and distinctly.

All the students looked at me, then looked at Ron, who had the good grace to blush.

"I swear, Mrs. Carley, I didn't teach him that."

"Make him laugh!" Christian said.

"Wait a minute." Ron transferred the bird to his back and spread the burgundy sheet onto a long, empty table. Then he gently placed Zachariah on the table where the bird promptly pooped.

"He always poops when he gets nervous," Christian said again.

"What's going on in here?" Mr. Fineline swooped into the computer lab, his long arms waving. The composition students lined up in front of the sheet-draped table.

I opened my mouth.

"Whatsa matta?" the parrot asked.

The geometry teacher looked at me. I grinned.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

And from behind me came the most God-awful shrieking laughter I've ever heard in my life. I could not contain myself and neither could anyone else. The whole class broke their straight-line formation as they bent to hold their sides, the bird's laughter echoing each of theirs, soprano and alto, chuckle and giggle, even my can't-catch-my-breath-because-I-just-can't-help-it silly wheeze.

Then it all passed in front of me, what I was going to do and what I was not going to do. Even if Mr. Fineline scowled his terrible scowl, I would not apologize. When the day ended, I would walk back to my classroom and add Walt Whitman to the collection of graybeards frowning out of my bulletin board. Maybe I would even turn him upside down just for the hell of it.

I would then go to Superintendent Sandra Smith's office and tell her I had changed my mind about retirement. I had many reasons, but this was the main one: That as long as parrots could still appear in places where you'd least expect them, I wanted to be there to ease their passage.