TriQuarterly

The Sparrows

By: Michael Ryan
Wednesday, July 15, 2015
Nonfiction

I thought school was a pain, but for some kids, like Rich Utz, it must have been torment. Utz was a mountainous child, with a skull as big as a buffalo's, abundant blonde curls, and an unaccountably cheerful expression. He even smiled while he spoke. At St. Boniface, we were taught to stand up straight when we answered a question or read aloud. I never heard Utz give a correct answer, but he'd smile before, after, and during giving the wrong one. He couldn't multiply or spell, he didn't know the capitals of the states or the main exports of South American countries, and he didn't know why God made him. He bumbled when he read aloud, one excruciating word at a time, every *the* a *thee*, every *a* a long *ay*, while the rest of the class giggled in accompaniment. By the time he was permitted to sit back down, his starched white shirt was transparent with sweat and laminated to the crevasses between his fat rolls. "Dicked it again, I guess," he'd say good-naturedly to no one after he was seated again.

Utz was by far the biggest kid in the class, and the oldest (he had already been held back twice), but he was too uncoordinated to play sports. In sixth grade, he shaved every morning before school and still had a tawny five o'clock shadow when the dismissal bell rang at three. Our football coach, Father Kelly, required him to show up at tryouts, convinced he could at least clog up the middle. There wasn't a helmet big enough to fit him; his jersey stopped short above his navel, and his stomach hung over his unbuttonable pants like an enormous, melting marshmallow. When the ball was snapped, all he could do was stand up. "Oof," he'd say as he took another shoulder in the stomach and fell backward. "Just fall forward!" Father Kelly yelled. But Utz was too slow. He couldn't time his movement to the snap. Plus he just couldn't get through his head that he didn't have to stand up before he fell down. His pale, exposed stomach absorbed so many shoulder blocks that midway in the scrimmage he had to run over to the sideline and throw up. "Okay, Utz, you're excused," Father Kelly said, patting Utz's undersized shoulderpad. Which meant he was allowed to go home and never play football again. "Thank you, Father," Utz said, wiping his mouth and smiling.

Utz was a Sparrow. There were about sixty kids in our sixth-grade class, divided into three reading groups: two large ones, the Robins and the Bluebirds; and one very small one, with only six students, the Sparrows. The top, the middle, and the absolutely hopeless bottom. Every year the Robins sailed through the thick, hardbound *Young Catholic Reader* while the Sparrows were still stuck on the third story in June. If the bird names were supposed to cloak the fact that the reading groups were tracked, all else at St. Boniface Elementary School was designed to emphasize such distinctions. The smartest girl sat in the first desk in the first row by the window, the dumbest boy in the last desk in the last row by the door.

The seating was determined by Line Up. Sister Ellen Mary, our sixth-grade teacher, invented Line Up. She was a tiny nun with the face and disposition of a Pekinese. Line Up was a marathon bee in every subject all afternoon every Monday. The first one who missed had to sit down in the last seat in the last row (the Utz Chair), the second in the second last, and so on, and that's where you sat for the rest of the week. Sometimes, to clown around, Utz would simply return to the Utz Chair as he was being asked the first question, putting on a tiny dunce cap he had fashioned out of a notecard, grinning so hard his plump red cheeks made slits of his eyes.

Line Up was soon adopted by all the teachers of the upper grades at St. Boniface, but our school day had always been an unremitting series of tests, exams, pop quizzes, and recitations. We learned by rote and by drill, by punishment and reward, by humiliation and exaltation. We competed fiercely, mercilessly with one another. Hierarchies were established, judgments of character determined, lifetimes of success or failure predicted, envies and anxieties etched into our souls. There were six report cards a year, with letter grades in conduct (Obedience, Self-control, Perseverance, Courage, Cooperation, Orderliness, and Health Habits) and numerical grades in every subject including penmanship. There were annual awards in every subject, and the top award to the top student aptly named General Excellence, the object of shameless ambition among the brightest Robins who could entertain the faintest hope for it. We could hardly go to the bathroom without our output being measured and graphed against a national average. Our IQs represented the quantity of brains God had given us. They were written next to our names on our Permanent Records, which were also cited as the perpetual depositories of our

various misdeeds that would follow us through and beyond our adult lives to the Final Judgment. We weren't allowed to know our own IQs, much less another student's, though rumors of genius and imbecility abounded and Sister Ellen Mary darkly hinted that some of us were sinfully wasting God's gifts. Since these gifts were given at birth, our IQs were permanent and unalterable. I recall taking only one IQ test in my life, in which I had to choose which object was unlike the others among four kitchen utensils and a goose.

But each year we were given a nationally standardized reading test to determine our Reading Level. These tests made the nuns nervous, because, along with each student, the class and the school as a whole were ranked. Sister Ellen Mary appealed to our St. Boniface Wildcat school spirit. She exhorted us to do our best, to get a good night's sleep, and to bring two Number Two sharpened pencils to school (every year Utz forgot his). She warned us about trick wordings. She told us to read carefully, but not too slowly. "Pace yourselves," she said to the Robins. "It's up to you to pull up our overall score." We prayed aloud as a class, asking the Lord to make our minds alert so that we might do greater honor to St. Boniface. During the test Sister paced the aisles, her gown swishing, the cinched rosary around her waist clacking (the beads as big as marbles), as we labored over the multiple choices of Vocabulary and Comprehension. A Bluebird who improved his or her Reading Level on this test might be promoted to the Robins, and the lowliest Robin might be demoted to the Bluebirds, but for a Sparrow there was about as much possibility of upward movement as in the caste system at the height of British rule in India.

In my memory of sixth grade, when the Sparrows are called to their reading lesson, it's a gray afternoon in February, the sleet outside coating the big classroom windows, the fluorescent lights humming, the moisture sucked from the air by the ancient radiators, the air itself a distillation of the gaseous byproducts of sixty cramped, restless, hormone-crazed bodies that, due to the weather, were not let outside at lunch or recess—the boys in white shirts and identical blue ties, the girls in uniform blue jumpers and white blouses, boys on one side, girls on the other, four rows each. I see the scene from above the blackboard in front of the classroom as in a dream I'm inside of and also watching. Sister Ellen Mary calls the six Sparrows to gather at the first three desks of the two rows by the window, and they arise from their lowly places in the back like The Damned at the trumpet of doom. The occupants of the first three desks in the two rows by the window—Robins all—gather their Personal Property with singular efficiency, because the slowest one will end up having to switch with Utz, whose desk reeks of liverwurst and onions, his favorite sandwich. Sister tells the rest of us, Robins and Bluebirds, to take out our phonics workbooks, and there is an orchestral squeaking as sixty desk lids are raised on their hinges, and phonics workbooks rummaged for amid the used textbooks, secret notes, dirty Kleenex, finger puppets, pimple balls, Popeye Pez dispensers, dysfunctionally bent Slinkies, flattened brown bags of Ding Dongs and tuna salad sandwiches, and unique items particular to their owners.

One such item was Monica Calliope's cat hat, Pussy Puss, a cat face with a Cheshire grin she attached to the back of her head with bobby pins. It was as big as her head so, at a distance, when she was walking away from you, she looked like a cartoon cat walking backward. Standing in line behind her was like having a deranged person smile steadily at you from a foot away. Pussy Puss was banned for classroom wear as a violation of the uniform dress code, but Monica Calliope kept it on top of the books stacked in her desk so that every time she raised the lid it grinned maniacally at her, and she pinned it on at the dismissal bell as we sat waiting for our busses to be called.

Monica Calliope was the only female Sparrow. She read as badly as Utz, but she was probably the world's foremost uncredentialed expert on cats. How she gathered this information with her limited reading skills (and before Public Television, much less Wikipedia) was a mystery. She knew every species and their countries of origin, the more exotic the better, and gave the class a learned report on the role of cats in the culture of ancient Egypt. She informed us that the Pharaohs were buried with their cats. The cats were also made into mummies. Little mummies the size of a hoagie. Monica Calliope held her hands a foot apart to demonstrate. While approving of the Egyptian devotion to cats, she criticized the cruelty of this practice. Why should the cats have to die just because the Pharaoh died? she wanted to know. Why weren't they given a new home? Surely other responsible owners could have been found. The class discussed this at length. We decided that the Egyptians did such cruel things because they were Pagans. At the end of her presentation, she displayed her collection of cat paraphernalia. Besides Pussy Puss, which she was allowed to wear during the presentation, she owned cat stickers, cat buttons, cat playing cards, and a cat lunchbox. We passed the cards around the room while she showed us her Halloween outfit, which was—surprise—a cat costume, with a humorously bent, wire-reinforced tail. She took out a makeup mirror and eyebrow pencil, and right in front of the class drew three shaky cat whiskers like a large bow tie above her lip and across her cheeks, licking the tip of the pencil with the sharp pink point of her tongue, itself very much like a cat's. It was a remarkably intimate moment, as if we were watching her behind a one-way mirror when she thought she was alone. In high contrast to Pussy Puss's grin, Monica Calliope's habitual facial expression was posthumous. She had the affect of a speed bump. She almost never

spoke to anyone, and if you tried to talk to her, her eyes glazed, as if she couldn't follow what you were saying, anyway, so why should she not just take a little internal vacation? But while she was giving her report, she came alive. When she had drawn her whiskers on, she grinned at us maniacally, exactly like Pussy Puss. It scared the pants off me. Holy moly, I thought. Sister allowed her to wear her eyebrow-pencil whiskers for the rest of the day, but she did have to remove Pussy Puss before she returned to her desk.

Sister Ellen Mary gave Particular Attention to the Sparrows, and tried to impress upon us that, although they couldn't read or multiply or spell two-syllable words, they each had a Special Talent. Monica Calliope's talent was quite obvious to all. Rich Utz's special talent was a little harder to identify, but he was the only boy in our class who could reach the top windows with the hook-tipped pole, so Sister said without Rich Utz we wouldn't have any air in the room to breathe. With the same pole, which was propped all day in the corner next to the flag, Utz also opened the transom in the morning and closed it in the afternoon, and he cheerily fetched the bucket of horrifically scented green sawdust from the janitor whenever anyone had "an accident" during class: upchucked, power barfed, blew his lunch, parked his cookies (we had a wealth of idioms). Utz was preternaturally attuned to the distinctive splatting sound of vomit on linoleum tile, and was out the door and back with the bucket before the rest of us realized what had happened.

But far and away the most specially talented Sparrow was Little Georgie Deeble—that was his Professional name. As Utz was the largest kid in the class, Georgie was the smallest. Next to Utz he looked like a toy. We loved to hear him read aloud. It was possible to tune out Rich Utz or Monica Calliope when they tried to read aloud, but when Sister called on George Deeble, everyone looked up expectantly from their phonics workbooks. Deeble knew the dumb kids read slowly and the smart kids read fast, so he read fast, too, in fact twice as fast as anyone else. The problem was he had no idea what he was reading. He would substitute words, phrases, even whole sentences for the ones on the page. "Bonnie and Bob went to the store" became "Bonnie and Bob went on the floor." The entire class would explode into laughter, which made Deeble read faster to get through it, inventing ever more eccentric behavior for Bonnie and Bob. Sister Ellen Mary would scream at the class, her pinched Pekinese face nearly bursting her wimple. Nothing fueled her righteous anger more than our laughing at a Sparrow's mistakes. Then, for the eight-millionth time, she'd gently tell Georgie to slow down, which he would do, but it made no difference. He still couldn't read what was there. The more we tried to hold it in, the harder we'd have to laugh. Finally Sister, exasperated, would make Georgie sit back down, which he did, humiliated, his neck scarlet. Everyone thought he was stupid. He thought he was stupid. In fact, he was probably dyslexic (a term unknown to St. Boniface Elementary School in 1958).

But Georgie's greater misfortune was to have a mom who was grooming him to be a child star. She was a short, plump woman with thick makeup and hair dyed the color of a fireplug. She picked him up every day after school in her fire-engine-red Cadillac convertible, double-finned and as long as an aircraft carrier, whereas almost everyone else took the bus or walked. Georgie could tap dance and sing show tunes (very badly, we critics thought). He did all right in the middle register, but when he hit the high notes his voice cracked like Alfalfa's. He looked sort of like Alfalfa, with huge eyes and freckles, only instead of Alfalfa's patented cowlick, he had a generous, meticulously coiffed pompadour. That year he performed on a children's talent show broadcast live on a local TV station at 9:00 a.m. Sunday mornings. Although he was twelve years old at the time, to get him onto the show his mom said he was six. The announcer introduced him as Little Georgie Deeble Only Six Years Old. Someone in our class saw the show, and spread the word, and Georgie never lived it down. He claimed his mom made him do it. She greased his pompadour down flat and got him up as a miniature Eddie Cantor in a check sportcoat and bow tie. He sang "If You Knew Susie," rotating his eyes and patting his white-gloved hands together in time to a shuffle step. She also made up his eyes with mascara so they'd look even bigger, and he had to wear it all the way to the TV studio. He told us he wouldn't get out of the car until she pulled him out by his ear. "There's none so classy / As this fair lassie / Oh, oh, oh, what a girl," we'd sing to him in the schoolyard. It drove him crazy, but he was too little and too light to stop us. His fists felt like ping-pong balls against your chest. I'd put him in a headlock and give him a Dutch rub, the way my older brother did to me. Rich Utz, although he could have bearhugged any of us into unconsciousness, never participated in these schoolyard tortures. And Monica Calliope was always off in a corner by herself, playing with her cat finger puppets, silently mouthing the words of cat epics about cat dynasties, acting out the heroic adventures and passionate loves of cat kings and cat queens and cat princesses.

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